

“Stakeknife” murders report a cover-up of Britain’s dirty war in Northern Ireland

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17 March 2024

The interim report published this month from Operation Kenova, the police investigation into the British spy “Stakeknife”, confirmed that British agents within the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) committed multiple murders.

The Stakeknife operation is among the foulest episodes of British imperialism’s decades long dirty war in Northern Ireland. Infiltration of the IRA and other republican and loyalist paramilitary groups, by British and Northern Ireland security and intelligence forces, was a central component of the 30-year conflict.

In line with the “Low Intensity Operations” doctrine codified by the British Army’s late General Sir Frank Kitson, infiltration of republican groups provided information allowing arrests, operations to be sabotaged and executions and bloody ambushes set up. Infiltration of, and collusion with, the loyalist, pro-British groups provided them with weaponry and targeting information, allowing them to function as state-sanctioned assassination squads.

For several years up to 1991, for motives that remain uncertain, although money played a role, Freddie Scappaticci, a republican from Belfast, in the leadership of the IR’s Internal Security Unit (ISU), intimidated, tortured, manipulated and murdered IRA members accused or suspected of being British agents. But, from sometime around 1978, Scappaticci was a British agent, feeding information on IRA discussions, operations and members to his British Army paymasters and controllers.

Scappaticci was handled by the British Army’s spy operating Force Research Unit (FRU), while maintaining the image of a tough and violent operator respected by the republican leadership. Scappaticci, whose ISU also vetted new recruits to the Provisionals and maintained a brutal dictatorship in working class areas against youth accused of petty crimes, was outed in 2003 after years of suspicion, following failed operations, regarding the existence of top-level British spies in the IRA.

In his readable 2023 work, “Stakeknife’s Dirty War,” former IRA prisoner and press officer, Richard O’Rawe noted “the road to peace was strewn with dead bodies—many of them ASU [Active Service Unit] members, who were cut down in carefully constructed SAS [Special Air Services] ambushes.”

O’Rawe notes that the late Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, former head of the IRA’s Northern Command, Martin McGuinness, was central to Scappaticci’s rise to head the ISU in 1986.

Scappaticci’s treachery ran parallel with efforts of the Sinn Féin leadership to end their guerrilla war and find terms on which they could integrate themselves into the British government in the North and serve as partners in the exploitation of the working class. Remarkably, although sidelined and widely distrusted in republican circles from 1991 on, Scappaticci continued to live in Belfast, unhindered and unharmed.

When he was first publicly named in 2003, then Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams said he initially accepted Scappaticci’s protestations of innocence “at face value.” Stakeknife came to be identified, not because of republican efforts, but primarily through the work of disgruntled ex-

FRU member Ian Hurst, incensed at the brutal treatment and murder of other British agents, sacrificed to maintain Stakeknife in place.

Scappaticci eventually fled, later in 2003, to unknown locations in the UK, after abandoning efforts to deny his role. He died in April last year.

He only surfaced in public once, at Westminster Magistrates Court, where he was found guilty of possessing extreme animal pornography. His case was heard by Chief Magistrate and Senior District Judge for England and Wales, Emma Arbuthnot, the same judge who spearheaded the legal torture of Wikileaks founder, Julian Assange.

Unlike her treatment of the principled journalist and publisher targeted for exposing imperialist war crimes, Arbuthnot thought well of the brutal torturer and murderer Scappaticci. She told him “You have not been before the court for 50 years—and that’s good character in my book,” handing him a suspended sentence.

In 2003, the Stakeknife revelations threatened not only further damaging documentary and legal exposure of the British state’s murderous and cynical methods, and a large number of murder trials, but also to discredit the Sinn Féin leadership, with grave political consequences for the Good Friday Agreement. Therefore Operation Kenova was not commissioned until 2015, 13 years after Scappaticci’s exposure, and tasked with investigating 24 murders. Scappaticci was not interviewed until 2018.

It has taken another nine years for Kenova to deliver an interim report which does not even formally confirm that Scappaticci was Stakeknife. Instead, Kenova, led by then Chief Constable of Bedfordshire Jon Boucher, names Scappaticci as “inextricably bound up with and a critical person of interest at the heart of Operation Kenova.” Beyond that, the report rests on generalisations.

For example, Kenova identified three types of murders:

- murders committed by agents, including cases in which one agent murdered another.
- murders of alleged or suspected agents, carried out as punishment or deterrence, including cases when the victim was not in fact an agent.
- murders of both categories which could have been prevented but were not.

Kenova came to its conclusions after following up 12,000 lines of enquiry, taking 2,000 statements and interviewing 300 people, including 40 under caution. Eventually 35 files were submitted to the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPSNI). These referred to over 50,000 pages of evidence acquired from official sources including previously undisclosed files. Newly available forensic techniques were deployed.

More detailed and specific reports on individual murders are going to be handed to families at a later date along with a final report which, Boucher claims, “will confirm the truth and set out the full facts.”

Much of Boucher’s interim report is devoted to problems setting up and managing the investigation and his frustrations in dealing with multiple security and legal agencies. These are bound up with the need to draw a line under the dirty war, present all the issues arising out of it as

“legacy” while offering a pretence of legal restitution for families whose relatives were killed.

This has given rise to considerable tensions between police and legal authorities—tasked with formally investigating large numbers of unsolved murders—and the huge intelligence, police and military apparatus and their political leadership in Britain and Northern Ireland. The British government and military have no more interest in investigating their crimes in Northern Ireland than in later and current atrocities in Iraq, Afghanistan and worldwide.

Boutcher, despite repeatedly insisting on his support for the intelligence services work, writes of:

“The lack of any legal or policy framework to guide FRU and [Royal Ulster Constabulary] agent handlers in particular and of any associated oversight or supervisory mechanisms were very serious failings: they put lives at risk, left those on the frontline exposed and fostered a maverick culture where agent handling was sometimes seen as a high-stakes ‘dark art’ practised ‘off the books’.”

He admits:

“Whether a result of cultural obstruction, documents being over-classified or difficulty identifying and locating relevant material held by the authorities, access to records has been a persistent problem and a legitimate concern to families.”

Despite having negotiated agreements and single points of contact with the Security Service, MI5, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), data was still difficult to extract.

The Kenova team, for example, was given logins to the intelligence database, MACER, used by the British Army. It became apparent that the MoD had a different set of logins with access to more records. Kenova was duly given more access, but Boutcher noted that the logins with greater rights had not been available to the series of previous investigations into intelligence activity and collusion in the “Troubles.”

Boutcher complained that MI5 was holding historical material from the Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch and the FRU which remained marked as Top Secret.

Boutcher notes that on the very day Kenova intended to submit its first set of files regarding members of both the Provisional IRA and the security forces, MI5 informed his team that their security credentials on their London building had expired.

He placed his difficulties in the context of a series of investigations into intelligence handling and collusion between loyalist killers and the British state, many remaining Secret or Top Secret.

These include the Stalker report of 1984 into “shoot to kill” allegations against the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), predecessor to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). A follow-up report, Sampson 1986, also remains Secret while a further review into both the Stalker and Sampson reports, the 1988 McLachlan report, is labeled Top Secret.

Sir John Stevens’ three reports into the leaking of targeting information from the security forces to loyalist killers found that almost all loyalist intelligence came from the British security forces. They were only partly released. A central focus of Stevens’ first report, Stevens 1, was the former soldier Brian Nelson’s role as both intelligence officer for the loyalist Ulster Defence Association and an agent for the FRU. Nelson had a role in as many as 30 murders. He was eventually charged and found guilty of 20 crimes, including conspiracy to murder.

Remarkably, Stevens was entirely unaware of Stakeknife despite Scappaticci being handled by the same FRU that he investigated regarding Nelson. Stevens 1 remains Top Secret. A follow up Blleloch report on agent handling was, until Boutcher requested a change, marked as Top Secret, now downgraded to Secret. Boutcher noted, “Lord Stevens said it was apparent that discussions at the highest level in the Army had resulted in the decision to withhold vital information from his inquiry team.” Stevens 2 remains Top Secret. Stevens 3, released in 2003, found that

members of the security forces had colluded with the UDA in loyalist murders including that of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane in 1989.

In his outcomes and findings, Boutcher insists that files handed to the PSNI “contain significant evidence implicating Stakeknife and others in very serious criminality and that this needs to be ventilated publicly.” But no-one in senior government or military positions claimed to have had any knowledge of Stakeknife. Boutcher points to what he euphemistically describes as “conscious lack of professional curiosity from the very senior leadership of the Army” regarding recruitment and running of agents.

Nevertheless, “Our Kenova investigations have established that agents were regularly involved in inciting and committing serious criminal acts” and “It is undoubtedly the case that some FRU and RUC Special Branch agents disclosed their involvement in criminality to their handlers (both before and after the event) and were assured that their anonymity and status would always be protected and they would never stand trial or spend time in jail.”

Shortly before Boutcher’s report was published, the PPSNI announced it would not be taking action against seven people alleged to have been Provisional IRA members and five retired members of the British Army’s Force Research Unit, said to be agent handlers, and more senior army figures. This follows decisions, stretching back to 2020, to avoid prosecuting former Security Service members and a PPSNI prosecutor.

Late 2023, the PPSNI said it would not be proceeding against “civilian suspects” in connection with murders, conspiracy to murder and false imprisonment, one police officer and six military personnel over allegations of perverting the course of justice and misconduct in public office. Earlier last month the PPSNI decided not to proceed against a further two former soldiers and two alleged Provisional IRA members.

Not one of the files submitted to the PPSNI by Kenova has resulted in a single prosecution.



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