

“Soldier F” found not guilty as Bloody Sunday whitewash maintained

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A British soldier, publicly known only as Soldier F, has been found not guilty of the murder of two innocent men and the attempted murder of five more during the British Army’s Bloody Sunday massacre at a civil rights demonstration in Derry, Northern Ireland, on January 30, 1972.

13 people were shot dead, another died later. 15 more, at least, were wounded.

The shootings came three years after the British Labour government launched Operation Banner in 1969 to prop up the Northern Ireland statelet, part of the UK, in the face of mass opposition to anti-Catholic discrimination, Loyalist reaction, and intensifying class struggle across partitioned Ireland. The civil rights movement emerged as part of a worldwide wave of protests, strikes and revolutionary struggles. Ultimately, some 300,000 British troops served in the operation, which lasted officially until 2007.

The January 30, 1972, demonstration was a protest against the mass arrest and internment of civilians suspected, without evidence, of involvement in the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Launched the previous August, the operation saw 342 people arrested initially and dragged off to camps and prisons. Internment lasted until December 1975, by which time 1,981 people had been seized, many tortured and brutalised.

Of these, 1,874 were Catholics or republicans and only 107 Protestants or Loyalists.

The January 30 protest had been billed as peaceful by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association organisers who laid “special emphasis on the necessity for a peaceful incident-free day”. This followed a demonstration the previous week when protestors were assaulted, shot with rubber bullets and attacked with CS gas.

The British government had, however, authorised an attack on the march, with its Belfast Joint Security Committee seeking to “prepare public opinion... for

violent scenes on TV”, noting that their “operation might well develop into rioting and even a shooting war”.

General Robert Ford, Commander of Land Forces in Northern Ireland had drawn up proposals for local youth challenging armed soldiers and armoured cars with stones and petrol bombs to be shot, with the then Conservative government of Prime Minister Edward Heath having previously asked for all options to be considered.

There have been two public inquiries—one, the Saville Inquiry, lasted 12 years—plus countless reviews of the events of the day and a protracted campaign by relatives and supporters of those shot and killed or wounded. 53 years later, Soldier F, now in his 70s, became the only member of the military involved in the massacre to actually face trial.

The primary evidence presented were statements made in 1972 from Soldiers G and H—like Soldier F, members of the Parachute Regiment. Both gave their statements to the Royal Military Police the day after the shootings and to the Widgery Tribunal whitewash, which reported in April 1972.

Soldier G has since died, while Soldier H refused to give evidence for fear of incriminating himself.

Soldier G’s statement claimed at the time that he fired at a number of gunmen. In later statements he said he hit two of those he claimed were shooting at him. Soldier G confirmed that Soldier F had been shooting at the same targets as well as at another individual.

Soldier H claimed he shot at youths “in possession of nail bombs”. His 1972 statement continued, “I cocked my rifle, took aim at the youth in the middle of the group and fired two rounds at the centre of the stomach.” He said that “the other soldiers” had fired rounds “at the other persons” and all three youths “fell to the ground”.

Those killed by the army in Derry were, until 1992, routinely and falsely accused by the British government of being IRA members until Tory Party Prime Minister

John Major was forced to concede that they were neither armed nor in the republican organisation.

It was only after the publication of the Saville Inquiry's extensive report in 2010 that another Tory Prime Minister, David Cameron, allowed an expression of official regret for the "unjustified and unjustifiable" murders on the day. Even then, in what remains the official line, Cameron insisted that the shootings took place because of soldiers "losing their self-control".

Saville also noted of the evidence given by soldiers: "We have concluded that none of them fired in response to attacks or threatened attacks by nail or petrol bombers. No one threw or threatened to throw a nail or petrol bomb at the soldiers on Bloody Sunday."

Saville attacked the credibility of the soldiers' accounts as being "materially undermined" since all bar one responsible for casualties "insisted that they had shot at gunmen or bombers, which they had not."

He continued, "Many of these soldiers have knowingly put forward false accounts in order to seek to justify their firing."

In 2003, Soldier F himself told the Saville Inquiry that he had shot four people but insisted they were all petrol bombers or had a weapon and that he was operating within the army's "yellow card" rules of engagement in force at the time. Under the rules of the inquiry, however, Soldier F was and is immune from prosecution arising from self-incrimination.

The only evidence being presented at Belfast Crown Court identifying Soldier F as having fired a weapon at all on January 30 were statements from Soldiers G and H that were already known to be a pack of lies.

The prosecution case rested entirely on these "hearsay" statements being accepted as consistent with regard at least to Soldier F having shot at people. They were only accepted as admissible by the single judge hearing the case last month, without which the trial could not have taken place at all.

Soldier F's defence pointed to inconsistencies between the statements, noting, for example, that Soldier G said he and Soldier F fired together, yet civilian witnesses noticed only one soldier firing. The judge noted during the trial, "On my calculation, there are eight witnesses who identify one soldier firing but don't talk about a second soldier firing."

Soldier H's statement claims he spotted a sniper behind a pane of frosted glass and fired 19 shots at the window. This was disputed at the Saville Inquiry and the court heard this may relate to another incident entirely.

Soldier F, a lance corporal in 1972, gave a prepared statement claiming he was sure he "properly discharged his duties as a soldier that day" and no longer had "any reliable recollections of those events". He would therefore "not be answering any questions put to me." He spent the entire trial protected from public view by a curtain.

In his verdict, Judge Patrick Lynch concluded that "a number of soldiers, members of the Parachute Regiment, entered Glenfada Park North and immediately, or almost immediately, opened fire with high velocity weapons at unarmed civilians at a distance of 50 metres or less."

But Lynch described the key 1972 statements as originating from two witnesses who "are themselves, on the basis of the Crown case, guilty of murder as, in essence, accomplices with a motivation to name F as a participant in their murderous activities."

Lynch rejected a joint enterprise accusation, stating baldly, after having cited many precedents that could, on the face of it, apply, "I hold that there is nothing to suggest that F and colleagues had any such wide-ranging [murder] plan."

Of course, any serious investigation of joint enterprise would lead inevitably to 10 Downing Street, the then Ulster authorities and the heads of the British Army.

No one following the circumstances leading to the case against Soldier F and the trial itself would be surprised at him leaving the court a free man. But the lessons for today are clear.

Bloody Sunday took place in front of TV cameras and was directed against protestors who were Irish and British citizens. In ensuring that Soldier F got the required verdict, the British authorities and the imperialist bourgeoisie they represent—facing escalating class tensions and deepening opposition to savage austerity, the attack on democratic rights and genocidal militarism—are effectively stating, "We did this in 1972. We did it with impunity. And we will not hesitate to do it again".



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