

The Bloody Sunday Massacre 50 Years Ago: The Damned Lies of the British Military

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The massacre of innocent Catholic civilians on Bloody Sunday in Derry 50 years ago became a turning point with tragic consequences for Northern Ireland communities and British soldiers alike, writes RICHARD RUDKIN

“WHAT happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong — what happened should never, ever have happened.”

These words formed part of David Cameron’s speech in Parliament in June 2010, when as British prime minister, he apologised for the murder of innocent civilians by the British army on Bloody Sunday.

It had been a long hard slog by the relatives of the victims, but finally, 12 years after it began, the Saville inquiry published its findings that placed blame for the killings squarely with the British army.

Shockingly, Saville concluded that many of the former British soldiers lied, stating: “Many of these soldiers have knowingly put forward false accounts to seek to justify their firing.”

While Cameron as prime minister rightly apologised for the actions of the British soldiers, what neither he nor any British prime minister since has done is accepted responsibility for the role that agencies of the British government played for the escalation of violence on both the island of Ireland and in Britain.

I say this because if the British government is serious about finding a way forward for all those who suffered during the Troubles, as it claims to be, a good start would be to acknowledge the failings of these agencies, before, and most certainly following the events in Derry on January 30 1972.

The clearest admission of the impact Bloody Sunday had on the Troubles came from the prime minister at the time, Edward Heath, when he told the Saville inquiry: “The tragic

deaths in Londonderry on January 30 1972 outraged the Catholic community, increased support for the IRA and destroyed the prospect of a political initiative.”

A fact confirmed by former president of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams, who wrote in his memoirs following the events of Bloody Sunday: “Money, guns and recruits flooded into the IRA.”

Further confirmation came from a Catholic priest who was present when the shooting began.

Derry priest Fr Edward Daly will be remembered by those who watched events unfold on TV, waving a white bloodstained handkerchief in the air, as he walked with civilians carrying the dying body of John Duddy.

Years later Daly wrote: “People who were there on the day ... saw what happened and were enraged by it and just wanted to seek some kind of revenge for it” and went on to say: “Young people I visited in prison told me quite explicitly that they would never have become involved in the IRA but for what they witnessed and heard of happening on Bloody Sunday.”

Three different people, two politicians with opposite opinions of the Troubles along with a man of peace, all saying the same thing.

The killings and the lies that were subsequently told by the British army to justify the killings were a major factor in the escalation of the Troubles.

It’s worth remembering that before Bloody Sunday, many members of the Catholic community had remained indifferent to the British army on the streets.

At that time, there was no instant access to news, therefore the Ministry of Defence (MoD) was able to spin the “facts” surrounding shootings or bombings to the media in its favour with little fear of being challenged.

If the British army claimed it had shot an IRA gunman after coming under fire, then it was accepted and regurgitated as fact by the media.

A good example of media spin by the MoD occurred following the deaths of 11 people, in a 36-hour window, in the Ballymurphy area of West Belfast in August 1971, which left 57 children bereaved of a parent. The MoD claimed the victims had been shot after the British soldiers first came under fire.

Similar to the families of Bloody Sunday, it took decades of campaigning before they cleared the names of their loved ones.

Finally, in May 2021, coroner Mrs Justice Keegan, who presided over the inquest into the deaths, concluded: “What is very clear is that all of the deceased in the series of inquests were entirely innocent of all wrongdoing on the day in question.”

Unlike Ballymurphy, the events on Bloody Sunday were caught on camera and beamed around the world. So too was the British army officer who told the waiting press that the paratroopers came under fire and responded.

When asked how many weapons had been recovered, he replied none at present. Just like Ballymurphy, no weapons were ever recovered, because no weapons ever existed.

With the opportunity to correct the appalling events in Ballymurphy ignored by the military commanders, the same parachute regiment was sent into Derry where, as we know, they went on to kill and injure more innocent victims.

Today, because we are fully aware of the facts surrounding the deaths of unarmed innocent civilians, should we be surprised that many people decided to support the IRA?

We don't have to condone their decision, but we should be able to understand why they made that choice. But this is only part of the problem.

Up and down the country, young soldiers (like yours truly) who had watched the events of Bloody Sunday on TV, believed what occurred in Derry was a gun battle between the IRA and British soldiers.

This belief was reinforced by those trusted with training them, warning them when serving in the North of Ireland to never trust members of the Catholic community.

This warning was reinforced with horror stories that turned out to be completely untrue, such as the story of the British soldier Paul Carter.

In September 1971 Private Paul Carter was shot dead by the IRA on the Falls Road. Carter's relatives were told that members of the local community had tried to run off with his body and steal his weapon.

However, in 2012, the Northern Ireland Historical Enquiries Team discovered nothing could be further from the truth. Far from trying to steal his body, local men ran to his aid and carried the soldier to the Royal Victoria Hospital. At no time did anyone attempt to steal his weapon.

With military personnel adding to the cocktail of violence with suspicion, fear and hatred of the Catholic communities with stories like the one described, together with the killing of innocent civilians by British soldiers, is it any wonder that 1972 turned out to be the bloodiest year of the Troubles with just under 480 deaths, of which 130 were British soldiers?

Those who say the victims of Bloody Sunday were in the wrong place at the wrong time, couldn't be more mistaken.

Patrick Doherty, Gerald Donaghey, John Duddy, Hugh Gilmore, Michael Kelly, Michael McDaid, Kevin McElhinney, Bernard McGuigan, Gerard McKinney, William McKinney, William Nash, James Wray, John Young, along with all those injured both physically and mentally on that day, were exactly in the right place at the right time and doing what they believed to be the right thing by supporting the march for civil rights.

No. It was those who pulled the trigger that did the wrong thing, at the wrong time, in a place, arguably they had no right to be.

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Richard Rudkin is a former British soldier who served in Northern Ireland.

Featured image: A silent crowd form a cordon 10 or more deep, lining both sides of the 250 yards of road leading from St Mary's Church, Creggan Hill to the cemetery, to watch the funeral procession of the 13 who died on 'Bloody Sunday', February 1972

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