

Question Marks Raised Over Events on “Bloody Friday”. Belfast, July 1972

The work of researchers at Paper Trail has uncovered an unaccountable lack of action by the British army when warned of bombs planted in Belfast on July 21 1972

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“The UK government has embarked on a course of action that runs a very significant risk of eventually being found by domestic courts and/or the European Court of Human Rights not to be compliant with the convention.”

Damning words from **Dunja Mijatovic**, human rights commissioner for the Council of Europe on the controversial Legacy Bill, which is currently going through Parliament.

The sense of panic to get this legislation into law has been hastened by the brilliant work of organisations like Relatives for Justice and the Pat Finucane Centre, which have been a tremendous help and support to victims and families of the Troubles.

Also the recovery of information by Cairan MacAirt at Paper Trail, who has consistently published information supporting the allegations of collusion and cover-up by agencies of the British government.

Recently uncovered documents by Paper Trail highlight missed opportunities that could have saved more lives on what was one of the most frightening days of the Troubles.

It was a little over 50 years ago when the IRA rocked Belfast with 19 bombs across the city. Labelled by the media as Bloody Friday, the bombs on July 21 1972 claimed the lives of nine people and injured 130 others.

All of the fatalities on that awful day occurred at two of the explosions: the Oxford Street bus station where six people died at 3.02pm; and Cavehill Road shops at about 3.15pm where three people lost their lives.

However, Paper Trail discovered documents including British military logs which calls into question the account given by the British army on that terrible day.

The IRA alleged at the time that warnings were given via the Public Protection Agency (PPA) which had been set up by the British government to field complaints of intimidation and attack.

However, on July 30 1972, the Sunday Times published an article under the heading "Mystery of Bloody Friday's Lost Warnings."

This article highlighted the discrepancy between records kept by the PPA and public reports by the British armed forces.

The PPA said its log showed it had passed the IRA warnings to the British army immediately. The warning for Oxford Street at 2.40pm, 22 minutes before the explosion and at 2.07pm for Cavehill, one hour and eight minutes before the bomb exploded. Regardless of this revelation, the British army remained adamant that no warnings were given.

The Historical Enquiries Team (HET), which was initially set up in 2005 and operated until 2014 to look into unsolved murders committed during the 30 years of the Troubles, reported that 19 explosions occurred (from 21 planted bombs) on Bloody Friday.

Paper Trail researchers scrutinising these files and others concerning Bloody Friday, discovered a warning against the Europa Hotel via its manager at 6pm the night before Bloody Friday to say a threat was imminent within the next 24 hours.

The threat against the Europa Hotel was considered serious enough for the Welsh Guards, the British army regiment detailed with responsibility for that area, to ask units of the Military Reaction Force (MRF), a covert unit of British soldiers that dressed in civilian clothes and appeared to operate outside of the rules that governed British forces in the North of Ireland, for their assistance.

The MRF confirmed its allocation of six covert operators from 11.59pm on July 20 to 3am on the 23rd and in addition requested a "sniffa team."

Further evidence of a threat on the Europa hotel was found when the Welsh Guards informed the British army's 39 Brigade that "journalist reports he has been warned to keep away from the Europa Hotel from 1500 hrs today."

The HET report confirmed a warning had been passed to the British army at 2.42pm for the bomb located at the bus station in Oxford Street.

The bomb exploded 20 minutes later while members of the Welsh Guards were tasked with the duty at 2.40pm of trying to find it and clear the area.

However, records obtained by Paper Trail show 39 Brigade logged a warning from the PPA of a 200lb bomb at Oxford Street bus station between 2.25pm and 2.30pm, and not 2.40pm as reported by the PPA, 32 minutes before the bomb exploding at 3.02pm.

With regards to the explosions at Cavehill and Limestone road, Paper Trail again found discrepancies. Despite bombs at both locations being recorded as "No-warning bombs," the

“British army Brigade and Headquarters Northern Ireland” logs show warnings were given for both locations.

Files for Headquarters Northern Ireland also record a message from its exchange regarding the car bomb in Cavehill. In addition, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) liaison officer was informed of the Cavehill bombing at 2.08pm but that had already been reported by the RUC to Brigade at 2.06pm.

At 2.06pm 39 Brigade logged a warning from the PPA regarding a car bomb at Limestone Road. The report was very informative and contained the make, model and full registration number of the vehicle.

At the same time, the log also shows a warning of a car bomb located at Cavehill received from the RUC. Again, the vehicle’s registration number was included.

This information suggests that by 2.06pm, both the RUC and the British army were aware not only of the location of the bombs but the registration of the cars that contained the bombs.

However, neither the RUC nor the British army recorded any action taken to clear the area or deactivate the bombs at Cavehill or Limestone Road.

Instead, the bombs were left to explode. The Limestone Road bomb exploded approximately 44 minutes after the warnings (again, the reports of the bomb differ with the British army recording the explosion at 2.50pm, while the HET logs it at 2.40pm) while the Cavehill bomb was left in situ for approximately 69 minutes before it too exploded.

Understandably, the families of those who had relatives caught up in the explosions, some left with life-changing injuries, like a woman who lost both legs in the blast, and a child who lost a leg will rightly blame the IRA for planting the bombs.

They may also want answers to why the bombs were classed as “no-warning bombs,” and understandably feel there were missed opportunities to save more lives and prevent casualties.

Families would also be right to question why they and the coroner were provided with false information by the authorities.

No-one can argue with the fact that the actions of the British army, despite being stretched to breaking point that day, still saved many lives, but so too did the actions of one 14-year-old boy.

Stephen Parker was rightly described as heroic after he lost his life as he attempted to clear people from the local shops after spotting the bomb in Cavehill.

His father, a local minister, was only able to identify his son’s body by the box of trick matches in his pocket. A task no parent should have to do, and which should serve as a reminder of why the peace process must not be allowed to be jeopardised by any British government.

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Featured image: A dark cloud of smoke drifts across the centre of Belfast, as firemen hose down the remains of Oxford Street bus station on the day which later became known as Bloody Friday in 1972 (Source: Morning Star)

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