

Tory Secrecy Insults the Northern Irish Victims of the British State

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The decision to keep secret the files relating to deaths caused by British army use of ‘baton rounds’ in the 1980s only augments the agony the victims’ families have suffered, writes RICHARD RUDKIN

Just when you think this Tory government couldn’t get any nastier, somehow they always seem pull something out the hat to prove us wrong.

It appears they have now blended in their Tory trademark of “heartlessness” along with a disturbing desire for “secrecy and cruelty” by denying a number of family’s access to vital historic files.

The files that are held at the National Archives at Kew could provide answers surrounding deaths caused by injuries sustained from plastic bullets, also known as baton rounds, during the “Troubles.”

One case in particular is Paul Whitter, who was just 15, when a plastic bullet fired in 1981 by a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) constable in Derry struck Paul on the back of the head causing severe damage. Sadly, Paul died 10 days later.

In 2007, the Ombudsman report into his death criticised the police investigation and concluded that the firing of the baton round was wrong and unjustifiable. No attempt was made to arrest the boy, no warning was given and the bullet was fired from less than the permissible range of 20 metres.

Despite this, the family of Paul Whitters will have to wait until 2059 to access the files.

However, it is not just this family affected by this decision to deny access to files. The Pat Finucane Centre, which has performed outstanding work in helping families bereaved as a result of the conflict, has discovered that other files relating to deaths caused by the use of plastic bullets during the Troubles are to remain closed until 2071.

In a statement made to the BBC, a spokesperson for the Northern Ireland Office stated: "A very small proportion (of files) have to be kept closed because they relate to issues such as sensitive personal information, relations with other countries on National Security."

Understandably, sometimes restricting access may be necessary, but in this case we are talking about a 15-year-old child. Moreover, it raises questions about why the government finds it necessary not just to restrict access but to do so for such a long period of time, thereby ensuring everyone connected to this and similar incidents, where death has occurred from a plastic bullet, will never be questioned on their statements.

Knowing this, it's understandable that many people come to the conclusion that the decision to refuse access to these and other files such as Orgreave, Shrewsbury pickets and many others, including events from the Troubles, has the suggestion of "state collusion and cover-up" running through it like a stick of seaside rock.

What information could these files hold that may not only uncover the truth for the relatives but prove damaging to a government agency if declassified?

Is it possible the answer to the question could be found by comparing documents such as "the guidelines for recommended use of plastic bullets" against statements made by members of the security forces that fired them?

Could the files contain information regarding the condition of the "bullets fired?" Is there anything to suggest in the statements any bullets had been "doctored?"

Do the files contain eyewitness accounts that throw doubt that the victim was hit by accident or contradict statements made by the security forces?

These are just a few questions that the files could provide answers to.

Rubber bullets, if used correctly, are not as damaging as "live rounds," but it is a myth to suggest that they were a "soft option."

Manufactured from hard rubber, measuring approximately 150mm in length, 38 in diameter and weighing approximately 131 grams, they travelled at about 60 metres per second. Although intended to be a non-lethal alternative for use in riot control, used incorrectly, they could cause serious injury or death.

Surprisingly, this obvious danger never appeared to cross the minds to those in command — that is until 1971 when a British soldier committed an act of pure malice.

On a November morning in Belfast, 51-year-old mother of 11 Emma Groves was looking out the window as British soldiers carried out searches in adjoining houses.

Safely in her home, Groves expressed her right to peacefully protest by putting an Irish folk record on her player and turning the volume up loud.

As she returned to look out the window, a soldier standing outside, no more than eight feet away, possibly angered by the music, took aim and fired a rubber bullet that smashed through the glass hitting her in the face. The injury was so severe, Groves lost her sight in both eyes. Despite this, no action was taken against the soldier who fired the bullet.

Having learned nothing from the criminal action that blinded Groves, it was no surprise that just two years later 11-year-old Francis Rowntree would become the first person to be killed by a rubber bullet during the Troubles.

The rubber bullets that were used from 1970 were eventually replaced by plastic bullets in 1975.

Slightly smaller but of similar weight to its predecessor, the plastic bullet was seen as lower risk due to it not ricocheting like the rubber bullet, but this was only a cosmetic solution.

What really needed to change was the method of use. A clear demonstration of the perils of failing to do so occurred later in the same year when Stephen Geddis, aged 10, became the youngest person to die from injuries sustained from being hit by a plastic bullet

The use of rubber and plastic bullets took the sight of Groves and the lives of 17 people, with over half being children.

If a child's life is lost due to an accident, it's tragic, if it's taken by an act of malice, it's criminal and no government should be allowed to make a cruel decision that prevents the relatives from discovering which of the two it was.

If the relatives can't obtain justice because they are denied the truth, how can they possibly find peace?

The answer is they won't and that has to be wrong.

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