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They haven't gone away, you know



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They haven't gone away, you know, the death squad operators, the shoot to kill trigger men of the RUC and the British Army who sustained Britain's 'dirty war' in Ireland. It would be safe to assume that they are carrying on their campaign in the dirty wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The policy of undercover surveillance units trained to 'take out' those considered a threat to the imperial interests of Britain in its many colonial wars were no different during the conflict here than they were in Aden or Oman or Kenya or Cyprus. It was based on the consideration that death squads should use the maximum force necessary provided it did not upset the political status quo.

We have seen the times during the past thirty years when British State forces have considered the use of lethal force to be politically expedient when they wanted to take out those who posed a threat to the State or to put down movements that threatened the status quo. Bloody Sunday was the State's response to mass movement on the streets for not only did it kill innocent demonstrators but it effectively killed the Civil Rights Movement as well. There are many who believe that Bloody Sunday and the ensuing Widgery cover up, probably determined the shoot to kill policy that operated with the imprimatur of people at a high level within the British Government and which has now come back to haunt them.

In retrospect, it was not a coincidence that the British inspired peace movement of the late seventies convinced the British that the time was right for a crack down on Republicans. The appointment of so called 'hard men' led by the appointment of Roy Mason as Secretary of State and Major General Tim Creasey, fresh from his 'successes' in Oman, as GOC was to be the catalyst in the new offensive against the IRA. The aim as was stated at the time was to 'free Northern Ireland from terrorism'

That meant an unlimited licence to British security forces and the RUC to tackle by whatever means, those they perceived as 'terrorists'.

The success of Sinn Fein in the 1982 October elections led to the full unleashing of the death squads in 'Shoot to kill operations. Between 1982 and 1985 twenty three people were shot dead by RUC and British specialist units in covert operations. The majority of the victims were Republican activists. The term 'Shoot to kill,' is in itself a misnomer. In Latin America, the forces who carried out such operations as shoot to kill were known as 'death squads' and reviled all over the world. However they enjoyed the same state protection as their counterparts in the RUC, in that they were unlikely to be brought before the Courts and even if they did, a compliant and sympathetic judiciary would ensure that there would be no convictions. The modus operandi of lies and cover ups was no different to that used by the British Government in the hundreds of state murders of Irish citizens in the past thirty years.

The situation in some Latin America countries is changing and the death squad's perpetrators but more significantly their political masters are now standing trial for their role in political murder. Perhaps the chickens are coming home to roost in this neck of the woods with the re-opening of the enquiry into the murder of Gervaise Mc Kerr who with two other unarmed IRA volunteers was killed by an undercover RUC special unit.

Twenty five years on The Council of Europe, the European Human Rights Court, has told the British Government that they want the case reopened because of their failure to properly investigate the incident at the time.

The British Government has always denied that they operated a shoot to kill policy and it is only three years ago that the House of Lords blocked an attempt to order a fresh investigation into the allegations. The British have now passed the buck to the Police Ombudsman, Nuala O Loan. She has expressed concern that her office may not have the legal power necessary to investigate the matter as three RUC officers were originally charged with murder and acquitted.

In November 1982, Gervaise Mc Kerr was driving his car with two passengers, Eugene Toman and Sean Burns towards Lurgan. An RUC patrol opened fire on the car, killing all three. Some 109 bullets were fired, fifty six of which hit the car. Three members of the RUC were arrested and stood trial for the murder of Eugene Toman. In Court the RUC men claimed that the deceased had driven through a road block and refused to stop and that that when they opened fire, it was returned.

The officers originally denied that they were members of an RUC special unit which had been engaged in a surveillance operation on the deceased volunteers. The story was later changed when Deputy Chief Constable Michael Mc Atamney gave evidence to the Court that the keywords in the training of the accused RUC men, were, ' firepower, speed and aggression'. The principle was 'you shoot to take out your enemy'.

The judge in the trial, Lord Justice Gibson, in acquitting the three RUC men whom he described as ' absolutely blameless' then went on to make remarks which shocked many in political circles and in the legal profession. He commended the RUC men for their courage in ' bringing the three deceased men to justice, in this case, the final court of justice'. He later denied in the face of calls for his resignation, that he had effectively endorsed a shoot to kill policy.

Twenty five years and several enquiries later the spectre of the North's death squads has returned to haunt the British Government and those in the higher echelons of the RUC and for all we know the PSNI. The European Court has decided that the British have a case to answer. They have told the British to sort it out once and for all.

The book in 1988, by the Deputy Chief Constable of the Manchester police John Stalker who was appointed by the British Government to investigate the allegations of a shoot to kill policy, lifted the lid on many of the questions around the activities of the RUC during that period and the reason Stalker was removed from the case.

If the British have nothing to hide, they should publish the Stalker report in full. No matter how thorough the investigations by Nuala O Loan and her integrity to do her job, the smell of another cover up is distinctly in the air.

The full article contains 1112 words and appears in n/a newspaper.

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