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From [The Times](#) December 21, 2007

The day terrorists spilt a town's blood with apparent impunity

The politicians called it an act of savagery by 'undiluted fascists'. But who are they? And will they ever be made to pay for their crime?

In all 29 people were killed by the force of the blast from the car bomb left outside a school uniform shop

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Royal Marsden blaze

David Sharrock, Ireland Correspondent

It was a busy Saturday afternoon in August 1998 when the worst single act of terrorism in the long and bloody saga of the Troubles visited the market town of Omagh, Co Tyrone.

In all, 29 people were killed by the force of the blast from 140kg of fertiliser-based explosive attached to a Semtex trigger and packed inside a stolen Vauxhall Cavalier. The car bomb was left outside SD Kells, a

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school uniform shop, about 2pm.

A photograph of a man with a child on his shoulders standing in front of the car was found later in a camera, buried in the rubble of the explosion. Also in the photograph is a group of schoolchildren on a trip from Buncrana, Co Donegal, in the Republic of Ireland.

Young Irish boys and girls were playing host to Spanish exchange students. An English boy, James Barker, was also part of the group. James, 12, was one of those who lost his life.

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Such was the force of the explosion at 3.10pm that James was thrown on to a roof. He suffered broken arms and legs but because his main injuries were internal he was not put into intensive care until three hours after the blast. He died from a heart attack after surgeons removed his ruptured spleen. His friends Sean McLaughlin and Oran Doherty, from Buncrana, also died.

Fernando Blasco Baselga, 12, from Madrid, died after being struck by a single piece of debris. Fifteen of the

victims were 21 years old or younger.

James's parents, Victor, a solicitor, and Donna-Maria, had moved to Donegal only recently, seeking a better quality of life, encouraged by the terrorist ceasefires. It had been a last-minute decision by James to join the tour group that day.

"He would have survived if operated on earlier but they were totally overwhelmed in the hospital," Mrs Barker said. "Our life took a different road on August 15, 1998 – it was as if a bomb went off in our family. I cannot forgive. I should have been there protecting James. We went to Ireland for a better quality of life and look what it did to us."

The Omagh bomb took the lives of citizens of three European nations and three generations of one local family. Avril Monaghan was eight months pregnant, carrying twin baby girls.

They were killed, along with Avril's 18-month-old daughter Maura – the youngest of the victims – and Mary Grimes, Avril's mother. Avril's death left her three remaining children, all under 7 at the time, orphaned.

Elizabeth Rush, 57, died serving customers in her shop, directly opposite the seat of the explosion. Her husband, Lawrence, said after identifying her body: "They have not only destroyed my wife, they have destroyed my life. If they get a life sentence, I have started mine now and I won't



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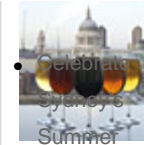


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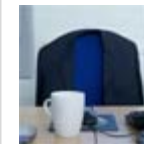
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get any parole."

Over and above the 29 deaths – 31 if the unborn twins are counted – hundreds more people were horribly maimed and scarred, physically and mentally. A few days after the bomb, Gwen Hall wrote an open letter to the Real IRA, the splinter group of the Provisional IRA that carried out the attack, from her hospital bed.

"I will probably never know who you are – but you know. I'll tell you who I am. My name is Gwen. I am the mother of Alastair, who is the bravest person I know. We and all the other victims of your ambush last Saturday would like to know 'why?'"

"I went to Hell and back lying injured in the debris and water and blood, not knowing if my 12-year-old son was alive or dead. By God's grace he survived and that is why I am lying here able to write.

"I wish you could have heard that child crying inconsolably yesterday as he struggled with the pain from his severed limb. That was what ripped at my heart. However, we are two of the lucky ones, for which I thank God. We do have a future.

"You may have broken the bodies of the people of Omagh, but you can never break their spirit. The last line of one of my favourite songs is 'God is watching us . . . from a distance'. You can run but you cannot hide."

Most of the victims were killed or injured as a consequence of the bombers' inaccurate and misleading warnings, putting the device outside the Omagh courthouse, 500 yards away. Police clearing the area herded bystanders towards the car bomb.

The reaction was swift, international and unequivocal. Bill Clinton, then the US President, said: "On behalf of every American I condemn this butchery and hope that the culprits will be brought to justice quickly."

Tony Blair called it "an appalling act of savagery . . . There is total determination to bring the perpetrators to justice."

John Hume, the Nobel peace laureate and leader of the moderate nationalist SDLP, called the bombers "undiluted fascists". Bertie Ahern, the Irish Prime Minister, called it "the most evil deed in years", and pledged to pursue ruthlessly those responsible.

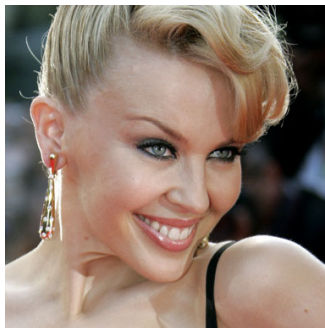
Yet, in spite of the promises, nearly a decade later justice eludes the victims. The role of the security forces before and after the bombing has been mired in controversy. In January 2002, Colm Murphy was found guilty at the Special Criminal Court, in Dublin, of conspiracy to cause the Omagh bombing. He was sentenced to 14 years but his conviction was quashed in 2005 and a retrial ordered. That has not yet taken place.



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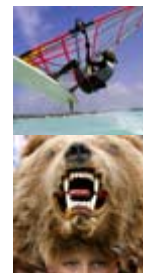


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The Sunday Times



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It was not until 2005 that Sean Hoey became the first person to be charged directly with the murder of 29 people in Omagh.

Michael McKeivitt, one of those named in a civil action being taken by some of the victims' families, became the first person in the Irish Republic to be convicted of directing terrorism in August 2003. McKeivitt was sentenced to 20 years in prison, although the judge emphasised that the offences for which he had been found guilty had taken place after the Omagh bomb.

Nuala O'Loan, in her first report as Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, strongly criticised the police handling of the case, accusing them of ignoring and failing to act upon crucial intelligence. Sir Ronnie Flanagan, the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, was outraged, declaring that he would "publicly commit suicide" if her criticisms were proved to be accurate.

In April next year the Omagh Victims group will finally see its civil action against named individuals whom it accuses of being involved in the bombing reach the courts. But it is likely to be a long legal battle.

Key facts

29 The number of people killed

500lb The size of the bomb, left in a parked Vauxhall Cavalier

2.29pm Time that a first warning was phoned in to Ulster Television

2.31pm Time that a second call was made to UTV, while another caller contacted the Samaritans

3.04pm Time when the bomb went off

56 Days spent on the trial of Sean Hoey, who faced more than 50 charges

Reaction

"Those of us in court today heard a catalogue of events that really beggared belief. It is an awful price we have to pay" **Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan was killed**

"Some of the comments made in that court showed a total disrespect for the families of the deceased"

Victor Barker, whose son James was killed

"I am not overdisappointed, I would not have wanted the wrong man to be convicted"

Lawrence Rush, whose wife, Elizabeth, was killed

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"I'm flabbergasted, dumbfounded. All the resources over the last nine years have not got us anywhere"

Stanley McCombe, whose wife, Ann, was killed

"I want the world to know my son Sean is innocent"

Rita Hoey

I presume you are talking about the dublin and monaghan bombings planned by the British security services and executed by the SAS and their Loyalist auxiliaries. I smell hypocrisy.

james sutcliffe, ho chi minh, vietnam

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