

Only one UK soldier to be prosecuted for Bloody Sunday 47 years on

By Steve James
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Nearly five decades have passed since soldiers of the British Army's Parachute Regiment shot 28 peaceful civil rights demonstrators. The Bloody Sunday atrocity killed 13 people on January 30, 1972, in Derry, Northern Ireland. Another victim died later.

Last week, the director of Northern Ireland's Public Prosecution Service (PPS), Stephen Herron, concluded there is only "sufficient evidence to prosecute one former soldier, Soldier F, for the murder of James Wray and William McKinney, and for the attempted murders of Joseph Friel, Michael Quinn, Joe Mahon and Patrick O'Donnell."

Soldier F remains anonymous and will receive the full backing of the British government. Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson offered "full legal and pastoral support to the individual affected by today's decision."

Soldier F, a former lance corporal, is one of 21 members of the Parachute Regiment who fired their weapons on the day. No one else, of any rank, has ever been prosecuted.

The PPS decision shocked relatives and supporters of those killed, who were anticipating that three or four soldiers would be charged. Four soldiers, only known by the letters E, F, G and H, by their own evidence are responsible for at least seven deaths.

John Kelly, whose brother Michael was killed, told the *Belfast Telegraph*, "When I heard that no one was to be charged with my brother's murder I was totally devastated. I couldn't take it in. It was as if I wasn't there and it was a dream.

"I looked around at my family—my eight sisters and my brother—all sitting around the table listening to this and they were all devastated."

Bloody Sunday is one of the most notorious crimes of British imperialism. The massacre took place three years into Operation Banner, the deployment of tens of thousands of British troops to Northern Ireland to prop up

the Unionist government by violently suppressing a powerful movement calling for civil and democratic rights, jobs and better housing.

An estimated 10,000–15,000 people attended the Derry march, demanding an end to anti-Catholic discrimination in the North. Most worrying for the ruling class, the demand for civil rights was accompanied by calls for greater social and political equality in all areas. What was posed was the overcoming of the sectarian divisions that had been fostered by British imperialism over centuries in its oldest colony. The movement developed at a time of an escalation in the class struggle internationally between 1968 and 1975, during which a revolutionary upsurge of the working class shook bourgeois rule to its foundations.

In the early 1970s, as tensions in Northern Ireland rapidly escalated, the Parachute Regiment was repeatedly unleashed against demonstrations and working-class areas deemed sympathetic to the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

In August 1971, the regiment murdered nine of ten people killed in the working-class Catholic estate of Ballymurphy in Belfast during Operation Demetrius—the internment without trial of hundreds of people accused of supporting the republicans.

An inquest into the Ballymurphy Massacre only opened last year and is still hearing evidence. Eighteen people were interned from Ballymurphy, while others were shot down during two days of protests and shootings. One woman, Joan Connolly, a 45-year-old mother of eight, was shot repeatedly in the head.

Outrage at internment and army violence triggered mass opposition resulting in demonstrations, rent and labour strikes. Sectarian violence escalated to the extent that 7,000 people, Catholic and Protestant, were forced from their homes. Thousands of Catholics fled to refugee camps in the Republic of Ireland. Hundreds of people interned suffered months of brutality and torture at the hands of British forces.

The protest march of January 30, 1972 was an expression of powerful opposition to the repressive savagery of British and Ulster governments and was targeted for repression by the Conservatives under Prime Minister Edward Heath. The PPS decision to allow only one prosecution is consistent with the approach taken ever since by the British and Northern Ireland authorities. Those directing the most egregious acts of state orchestrated violence, murder, torture, brutality, spying, entrapment and infiltration have gone unpunished because they have been following the policy of successive British governments.

Immediately after Bloody Sunday the Widgery Tribunal, which reported in April 1972, defended the soldiers, accusing them only of recklessness while falsely insisting that some of those shot had been “firing weapons or handling bombs.” The report was finally conceded to be a whitewash in 1998, when the British government agreed to another inquiry as part of discussions around the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

The subsequent Saville Inquiry, which heard evidence for five years and took another five to report, only continued the cover-up in a different form. Lord Saville accumulated a great deal of evidence, including from Heath himself, but the inquiry concluded that soldiers “losing their self-control and firing themselves, forgetting or ignoring their instructions and training” lay at the heart of the killings. Saville once again exonerated the army top brass and British government. Heath conveniently suffered memory failures when asked to comment on any discussion in a 1971 cabinet committee on the use of guns against unarmed demonstrators.

The belated prosecution of Soldier F, who must now be at least in his sixties, follows this pattern. The Tory government aims to close down any prospect of further trials over partially completed or paralysed investigations into atrocities of the Britain’s “dirty war.”

Besides the Bloody Sunday and Ballymurphy killings carried out by uniformed soldiers, there are other ongoing “historical enquiries”—particularly into British agents operating in both loyalist and republican paramilitary outfits. The most notorious and potentially damaging of these is Freddie Scappaticci, known as “Stakeknife,” who is alleged to have run the IRA’s internal security operation for many years and carried out large numbers of murders, including those of IRA members falsely accused of being British spies. “Stakeknife’s” activities are the subject of a police investigation, Operation Kenova, whose primary concern is to hide the role of

Scappaticci’s controllers and political masters.

Earlier this month, the government’s Northern Ireland secretary, Karen Bradley, insisted to the House of Commons that the 10 percent of Northern Ireland killings directly attributed to “the hands of the military and police were not crimes.”

Bradley’s comments were calculated to mollify the ultra-right Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland, on whose votes Theresa May’s government depends in order to pass through British Parliament the Withdrawal Agreement she has agreed with the European Union to exit the bloc. She was quickly forced to apologise for the “tone” of her comments following complaints from Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney that her “timing couldn’t be worse,” but the content was not retracted.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson agreed, bemoaning the fact that proposed changes to retrospectively protect soldiers from “spurious” criminal charges would not be ready in time to cover those accused of Bloody Sunday.

During a visit to BAE’s warship yard in Barrow in Furness, England, Williamson made clear that he opposed any prosecutions for Bloody Sunday and for other past and future war crimes. “It’s not just about Northern Ireland, but about Iraq and Afghanistan, conflicts before that and in the future,” he said.

In conditions of immense class tensions, with advanced preparations for civil unrest particularly in the event of a “no deal” Brexit, British imperialism is preparing new Bloody Sundays, internationally and in the UK itself.

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