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Bloody Sunday: the 'defining story' of the British army in Ireland

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Aftermath of Bloody Sunday, when the British army massacred unarmed civil rights protestors in Derry, Ireland, January 30, 1972.

The publication of the Saville Report, the inquiry into the British army massacre of 14 civil rights protestors in Derry in the north of Ireland in 1972, confirmed what the victims' families had always known — that those shot had been unarmed and posed no threat to the British Parachute Regiment.

The victims' families welcomed the report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, handed down on June 15. The inquiry was chaired by British law lord Mark Saville and launched in 1998. They were joined by thousands of supporters in a march to Derry's Guildhall — symbolically completing the march route begun by thousands of civil rights activists on January 30, 1972.

The official British line for the past 38 years, repeated by the media and “confirmed” by the inquiry chaired by John Widgery in 1972, was that those shot down — half of them teenagers — had been armed with guns and nail-bombs, and had opened fire on the paratroopers.

The Widgery cover-up said that the paratroopers' behaviour had “bordered on the reckless”.

In contrast, Saville said there was no justification for opening fire and that all the soldiers who testified, bar one, had lied to the inquiry.

Saville referred to one person who was shot while “crawling away from the soldiers”; another shot “when he was lying mortally wounded on the ground”.

Bloody Sunday was a defining moment in the recent history of Ireland. The civil rights movement that had emerged in 1968 in the sectarian Northern Ireland statelet and demanded equal rights for the Irish nationalist and Catholic minority communities was literally shot off the streets.

The British military had been deployed in 1969 to support the discredited Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) after the explosion of the civil rights movement and the sectarian pogroms against Catholics that followed.

The British government claimed that its forces were being deployed to “keep the peace” between two warring communities — the mainly Catholic nationalists, supporters of Irish unity, and the mainly Protestant Unionists, supporters of British colonial rule. But in reality, troops were sent in to prop up the crumbling statelet and maintain its union with Britain, something that quickly became clear to the nationalist community.

Civil rights activists in Derry on January 30, 1972 were protesting against the army's introduction of internment without trial in August 1971. By the time of the Bloody Sunday march, more than 2000

people, almost all of them nationalists or republicans, were interned without trial in prison camps. Following the massacre, the British government introduced direct rule from London.

Bloody Sunday is largely regarded as the decisive factor that convinced a generation of young people that the only means to resist the oppressive Unionist state was to fight an armed struggle against the British army and RUC.

The tenacity and determination of the Bloody Sunday victims' families was applauded as "inspirational" by speakers in Derry as the report, that was supposed to be published in 2006, was finally released. Thousands of supporters from across Ireland and around the world have joined the families each year to march in Derry on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, demanding justice for those killed.

Palestinian flags flew among the crowd outside the Guildhall in Derry. Tony Doherty, who was nine years old when his father was shot dead, said the victory of the Bloody Sunday families should be shared by those who had died struggling for justice everywhere: "Sharpeville. Grozny. Tiananmen Square. Darfur. Fallujah. Gaza. Let our truth stand as their truth too."

Unionist politicians and British military spokespeople have reacted angrily to calls for the prosecution of the individual soldiers responsible for the Bloody Sunday killings.

But prosecuting the soldiers would not deal with the fundamental issue — that the killings were part of official state policy.

In response to fresh calls by British military officials for the prosecution of Irish Republican Army members and leaders for historic actions, Junior Minister in the Stormont [Northern Ireland Assembly] Executive and former IRA prisoner Gerry Kelly pointed out that the British state has until now acted with total impunity.

"The difference is that 15,000 IRA prisoners served more than 100,000 years in jail," he said.

Speaking from Westminster following the report's publication, British Tory prime minister David Cameron said the shootings were "indefensible". His apology on behalf of the British government was welcomed in Derry.

However, he then went on to say: "Bloody Sunday is not the defining story of the service the British Army gave in Northern Ireland from 1969-2007."

West Belfast MP and president of Irish republican party Sinn Fein Gerry Adams rejected this claim, saying: "The British Army's actions at that time were part of a deliberate tactical decision designed to intimidate the wider nationalist community by killing citizens."

One British soldier present on Bloody Sunday, identified as Soldier 027, who has been in a witness protection program for the past decade, testified to the Saville inquiry that his unit was encouraged to "get some kills".

The significance of the Saville Report is that it challenges the official view of the role of the British military in Ireland and elsewhere. It exposes its real role as an imperial killing machine. It adds weight to the campaigns for justice by other victims of British state killings, and to calls for a withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the 36 hours after the introduction of internment in August 1971, 11 people — 10 men, including a local priest, and a mother of eight children — were shot dead in Ballymurphy, west Belfast, by the

same British Parachute Regiment later to be unleashed in Derry.

British military forces in Ireland and the RUC killed at least 363 people since 1969, most of them civilians. Pro-British death squads killed more than 1000 people — mostly Catholic civilians — often acting with the sanction or aid of British military intelligence and RUC's Special Branch.

From the open military repression and martial law tactics of the early 1970s to the running of loyalist murder gangs throughout the following decades, the British government's actions had the same aim throughout the conflict: to terrorise and demoralise the nationalist population and crush their aspirations for democratic rights and a united, independent Ireland.

Speaking at a press conference in west Belfast on June 17 with the Ballymurphy massacre families, Adams said: "All of these families deserve the full support and encouragement of the community, and of the Irish government, in their efforts to secure an independent, international investigation into these deaths."

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P.S.

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