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Death Squads and Diplomacy:

An Investigation of British Attitudes Towards Sectarian

Assassinations in the 1970's

Hannah Nelson

School of International Training

Ireland: Transformation of Social and Political Conflict

Fall 2012

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Abstract:

I conducted my research for this paper during a three-week internship at the Pat Finucane Center in Derry. I gathered evidence from a series of declassified British government documents provided to me by the center. I focus my study on the British government's attitude towards sectarian assassinations, particularly committed by loyalist paramilitaries, in the first part of the 1970's. I examine the issues of responding to international pressure, framing the problem, evaluating security force effectiveness, and screening strategies. I find that in the public sphere, the British government hid information to downplay the severity of loyalist-led murder campaigns and instigated policies that did little to curb the violence. I also analyze the role the Pat Finucane Center played in shaping my work and argue for the utility of conducting research in an activist environment.

Acknowledgements:

I would first like to thank Paul O'Connor and the staff of the Pat Finucane Center in Derry immensely for their help in my project. I would like to thank them for sharing their space with me and helping facilitate my wonderful experience conducting research in the Pat Finucane Center. I am very thankful to Paul O'Connor for providing me with the materials I needed for my research as well as his advice and help throughout my project. I would also like to thank my project advisor, Bill Rolston, for his guidance and advice throughout my project. Additionally, I would like to thank the Lyttle family for sharing their home with me while I worked in Derry. Finally I would like to thank Aeveen Kerrisk, my academic director, for her help organizing and shaping my project, editing my paper, and facilitating my study abroad experience in Northern Ireland.

Introduction:

It was 6:10 pm on a dark January evening in 1976 in Whitecross, South Armagh, and Anthony Reavey was watching television with his two brothers in his living room when a man holding a machine gun burst through the hall door and opened fire. His brothers, John Martin and Brian, were killed immediately, but Anthony was able to escape to another room. He died of a brain hemorrhage a month later. The gunmen left after searching the house for more victims. Just twenty minutes later, a few miles away, three masked men burst into the O'Dowd family's living room as a group of family members were gathered around a brother playing piano. The men killed three and injured a number of other family members¹.

Attacks like these were shockingly common in Northern Ireland in the early 1970's. By the time these murders occurred in 1976, sectarian assassinations had already taken the lives of hundreds of civilians, most of whom were Catholic. While the British government officially condemned all sectarian murders, suspicions arose that the government was colluding with, or at the very least tolerating, loyalist paramilitaries. Families of murder victims endured not only grief, but also frustration and distrust when the government's depiction of events did not match what they believed to be the reality. '

The Reavey and O'Dowd families felt the British government grossly mistreated the murders of their loved ones. According to a statement the family presented with the Pat Finucane Center, the British government framed the attack

¹ "Interim Report on the Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Bombing of Kay's Tavern, Dundalk." *Tithe an Oireachtais*. (Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights, July 2006. Web. 27 Nov. 2012).

as the result of a feud between republican and loyalist paramilitary groups, when in reality the victims were innocent civilians. They claim as well that security forces and British army were involved in the murders². Along with feelings of loss, the families have harbored deep skepticism and resentment towards the British government for decades.

With the help of truth recovery groups such as the Pat Finucane Center, families like the Reaveys and O'Dowds have reinvestigated murders during the Troubles and have provided an alternative telling of history that includes details they believe were purposely excluded by the British government. As time passes, more academics, grassroots organizations, and investigators research alleged injustices committed by the British government, particularly during the most violent years of the Troubles. Some of these investigations have resulted in public apologies by the British prime minister, such as the investigations into the murder of the solicitor Pat Finucane, whose human rights inquiries served as the inspiration for the Pat Finucane Center.

In this paper I broadly examine the attitude and strategies of the British government regarding sectarian murders in the early to mid 1970's in Northern Ireland, particularly in relationship to the international community. The research is drawn almost entirely through declassified British government documents found and provided to me by the Pat Finucane Center. I begin by outlining my methods for conducting my research, both through formally analyzing documents and informally

² "Statement from the Families of Those Murdered at Donnelly's Bar, Silverbridge, outside Kay's Tavern, Dundalk and in the Reavey and O'Dowd Homes." (The Pat Finucane Center, 9 July 2007. Web. 27 Nov. 2012).

volunteering at the Pat Finucane Center. The analysis section of this paper begins with a background context for the information I gathered. Next it discusses the British government faced in disclosing assassination statistics in the face of pressure from the international community, particularly the Republic of Ireland. Additionally, I examine the debate within the government regarding defining sectarian assassinations as well the debate over which individuals were to blame for them. The analysis section ends with an examination of the British government's discussion of the success of security forces in handling the problem and the nature of the solutions the government tried to pursue as a response.

In the second part of my analysis, I consider how my research was conducted and its impact. I frame my research within the context of the Pat Finucane Center and illustrate how working with activists like Paul O'Connor shaped the work and the pros and cons of doing research outside of an academic environment. I go on to discuss the utility of my research through the lens of transitional justice and end this section by reflecting on my personal experience doing this project.

, The documents suggest that while explicit evidence of collusion or encouragement of loyalist paramilitary violence does not exist in the documents. However, there are strong patterns of inconsistency and apathy in the way the issue of sectarian assassinations, particularly committed by loyalists, are portrayed internationally and dealt with on Northern Ireland's soil. I also find that while it may lack the impartiality and distance of an academic environment, conducting research among activists has unique advantageous in motivating the creation of useful information.

Methods:

Conducting the Research

I conducted my research in the Pat Finucane Center, a nonpartisan organization that advocates for human rights and conflict resolution in the context of Northern Ireland. The Pat Finucane Center engages in a wide variety of activities. These include, but are not limited to, investigating individual cases of murders during the Troubles, exposing British government collusion with paramilitary activity, working with the Historical Enquiries Team and Police Ombudsman to accurately recount the past, and cooperating with various NGO's on human rights projects and research worldwide³. My initial goal was to work on individual cases with the center but was too limited due to confidentiality reasons.

The idea for the project presented in this paper arose from discussions I had Paul O'Connor, from the Derry office of the Pat Finucane Center. He informed me that he and his colleagues on several occasions had traveled to the National Archives to search through and make copies of useful documents that had been declassified by the British government. He provided me with a set of documents he had gathered in the spring of 2009 that he thought should be investigated further and shared some potential ideas for a project. The documents involve the issue of sectarian violence, primarily from the year 1975.

During my last two weeks in Derry, I read approximately 75 declassified British government documents, searching for evidence of any British government

³ "Core Activities." (The Pat Finucane Center, n.d. Web. 27 Nov. 2012).

attitude towards sectarian assassinations. I made note of any instance that the government mentioned a position on sectarian assassinations, kept useful quotes from every document, and later sorted through them to find patterns and contradictions in the findings. Through this process I developed the argument for this paper.

Going through the documents was only one portion of my research, however. As I mentioned earlier, my research was part of an immersive experience in the Pat Finucane Center and Derry. Thus, a portion of my research experience focused on the role my environment played in process of creating my project. Just as my initial topic grew from a conversation with Paul O'Connor, I had many other informal conversations with Paul about his opinions on my topic, often as we walked home from the office. I tried to make notes of the way our conversations impacted my work. I also volunteered with various tasks in the center and observed its activities. Doing so taught me about the functions and goals of truth recovery and human rights oriented organizations. I began to understand the objectives of the center and some of the challenges in accomplishing them. I kept daily notes of my observations as well as my opinions and how they changed and progressed during my time at the center. I reflected on how these opinions and my observations could affect my research. I also tried to reflect on my research process, what challenges and rewards came from interpreting primary sources. Additionally, I had informal conversations with other employees and visitors to the center about life in Derry and the Republic of Ireland now and during the Troubles, which I kept notes of as well. I found that

experience in the field of the Pat Finucane Center deeply influenced the shape and goals of my project, the results of which I discuss further on in this paper.

While gathering my research, I came across a few challenges that should be acknowledged at the beginning of this paper. First, my documents were selected by, and my research was conducted in, an office of activists, dedicated to exposing British government collusion. It is important to recognize that my environment had an impact in shaping and directing this paper. Despite this, all the evidence in this paper is drawn directly from British archives without manipulation and I do my best to interpret it objectively without any predetermined political goals. However, they are by no means supported or representative enough to make definitive statements about what occurred during the Troubles. I attempt to present my evidence in a way that acknowledges these limitations without drowning them in academic caveats and constraints that stifle their rhetorical power completely. I believe that these interpretations can be useful, even if they come from a more activist than academic environment, a sentiment revisited later in this paper. Therefore, I would like to reiterate that my insights, though void of any political goals, are influenced by activists and in no way incorporate all perspectives on the issue. Another challenge to my work involves documentation. The research gathered by the Pat Finucane Center in 2009 did not include reference numbers. My method of citation, therefore, includes all information I know about the documents but lacks specific National Archive's reference numbers in some instances.. This may hinder the ability to revisit the documents, though it does not inhibit it completely. The exact titles for

some British officials composing or receiving letters in this paper are not known as well.

An extensive body of literature already exists concerning British government collusion and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. It would be impossible to review even a fraction of the literature in the length of this paper. However, a substantial summary of the issue was done by the Center for Civil and Human Rights at Notre Dame Law School⁴. The panel involved investigated 76 murders during the Troubles and found that the British government had colluded with loyalist paramilitaries in 74 of them. The panel also claims that by 1973 senior officials were aware of collusion happening within the security forces in Northern Ireland. The report concludes that collusion did occur in the early 1970's in Northern Ireland and that it was a widespread problem. The report also claims that the past and current investigations were inadequate at exposing these injustices. Many articles and investigations have resulted in similar findings.

Some investigations of the British government's behavior have gone deeper into specific cases. One of the most famous examples of this is the murder of the Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane. Finucane handled a series of high profile cases involving human rights in the 1980's including the Hunger Strikes, Casement Park Trials, and a prisoner's rights case involving solitary confinement. He was repeatedly harassed by RUC members and civilians for his work and received a series of death threats. At 7:25 PM on February 12, 1989, Finucane was shot in his

⁴ Cassel, Douglas, Susie Kemp, Piers Pigou, and Stephen Sawyer. *Report of the Independent International Panel on Alleged Collusion in Sectarian Killings in Northern Ireland*. (Rep. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Law School, 2006. Print).

home more than a dozen times in front of his wife and children. The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights calls for further investigations into the murder, especially as new evidence has come to light. They argue that there is a chance the British government colluded with loyalist paramilitaries for the murder⁵. Cases like the Pat Finucane murder were fairly common during the Troubles but the Finucane case has garnered a particular amount of international recognition.

A few cases have been investigated with the help of declassified British government documents. One example is Paul O'Connor and Alan Brecknell's investigation of loyalist infiltration in the UDR. They argue that UDA and UVF members joined the UDR, largely to acquire weapons. The British government did little to investigate or intervene with this problem, meaning the state was essentially fueling loyalist paramilitaries that were responsible for gruesome sectarian violence. O'Connor and Brecknell's piece is an example of how clues from various declassified documents can be compiled to reveal injustices and shortcomings on the part of the British government, particularly in the early 1970's⁶. The piece is fairly specific to the UDR. To my knowledge, a study of general attitudes towards sectarian assassinations, through declassified documents, has never been done. Therefore, my argument can help provide a context and background for some of the more specific cases.

⁵ *Beyond Collusion The U.K. Security Forces and the Murder of Patrick Finucane*. Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights, 2003. Web. 1 Dec. 2012. <http://rfjusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/beyond_collusion.pdf>.

⁶ Paul O'Connor and Alan Brecknell. "British Counter-insurgency Practice in Northern Ireland in the 1970s- a Legitimate Response or State Terror?" (*Counter-Terrorism and State Political Violence: The 'war on Terror' as Terror*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012. N. pag. Print.).

Analysis:

In the first part of this section, I analyze the documents through a historical and political framework. I incorporate events of the time and the political context into my interpretations of the motives and meanings behind the documents. The second part of this section involves a more contemporary framework of truth recovery and post-conflict healing on an individual and community level. I look at the factors that impacted my research and how my work has unique role in contributing to collective understanding of the Troubles and bringing a sense of justice to those impacted by the conflict.

The early 1970's were an incredibly turbulent time in Northern Ireland. The civil rights demonstrations of the 1960's and the increased British presence as a response fueled recruitment into both republican and loyalist paramilitary groups. Violence peaked in the early 1970's as sectarian assassinations were becoming more frequent and gruesome. The nationalist community had become inflamed over the shootings that occurred in Bloody Sunday. Pub bombs and disappearances were shockingly common and the violence was beginning to garner international attention. The British governments actions, particularly regarding detaining republican prisoners, were being questioned by the European Court of Human Rights⁷.

Decoding the Documents*Mounting International Pressure*

⁷ *Beyond Collusion The U.K. Security Forces and the Murder of Patrick Finucane*. Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights, 2003. Web. 1 Dec. 2012. <http://rfjusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/beyond_collusion.pdf>.

By 1975, declassified documents reveal that critics were becoming increasingly vocal about the British government's actions in Northern Ireland, particularly regarding sectarian assassinations. A news article from the Irish Times dated April 14, 1975 states that, "Cardinal Conway and the nine Northern Irish bishops yesterday condemned the 'campaign of sectarian murders' and said that altogether insufficient attention was being devoted to them"⁸. In the article, the Cardinal and bishops criticize the British government for tolerating the violence and allowing the organizations that they believed were responsible to remain legal. There are further records of the Cardinal's criticism in the note of the meeting between Minister of State, Mr. Roland Moyle, and Cardinal Conway Held at Armagh on April 9th. In the meeting the Cardinal claims it is "a broad aim of British Government police to appease the Unionists", which is reflected in the fact that very few loyalists and no British soldiers had been convicted for sectarian murders⁹. The British government discredits his remarks, arguing that the Cardinal "is very much the child of his own environment- he hails from the Falls Road- and he has shown little flexibility in his attitudes"¹⁰. Nevertheless, meetings with the Cardinal and the media attention they received indicate that by 1975 the British government receiving pressure to deal with the issue of sectarian assassinations in Northern Ireland.

⁸ "Cardinal, Bishops Condemn 'Ghastly Campaign'." *The Irish Times* [Dublin] 14 Apr. 1975: n. pag. Print.

⁹ Note of a Meeting Between Mr. Roland Moyle MP, Minister of State, and Cardinal Conway Held at Armagh, April 9, 1975, 11:00 AM. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found May 27, 2009).

¹⁰J. N. Allan, Letter to A G L Turner. (1 May 1975. The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

Perhaps even more influential than the Cardinal's criticisms were those of the Republic of Ireland. A draft of a letter from British official B M Webster to the Chief Constable and Grand Officer Commanding (GOC) and Chief Constable dated May 15, 1975 lists these concerns. He states that the Republic has expressed concern to Great Britain that, "the majority of victims are Catholics, the murders of Catholics are less enthusiastically investigated than the murders of Protestants, and when charges of murder are brought they are not pursued diligently to convictions"¹¹. Given these suspicions, the Republic of Ireland requested that the British government provide them with statistics on sectarian assassinations. In a letter to G Authur, G W Harding discusses a meeting he had with the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin on December 12, 1975. He states that the Republic of Ireland asked that Britain give them a sectarian breakdown of the convictions and arrests made for sectarian assassinations¹². This was one of multiple occasions listed in the documents that the Republic of Ireland requested sectarian statistics involving violence and security in Northern Ireland. The declassified documents paint a picture of the position Britain was in by 1975. Media reports had sounded an alarm to the issue of sectarian assassinations, sparking outrage particularly amongst those with connections to the Catholic community. Britain found itself forced to answer difficult questions and produce evidence concerning an issue that might have damning consequences to its international reputation.

¹¹ B.M. Webster, Draft of letter to Grand Officer Commanding and Chief Constable. 15 May 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

¹² G. W. Harding, Letter to G Aurthur. 13 December 1974. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

The British Response

The British struggled to compose a strategy of how to respond to these criticisms and demands. Most of the government's initial response, according to the declassified documents, was shrouded in discussions of how to define sectarian assassinations. Publicly, the government of Great Britain repeatedly made the argument that sectarian assassinations are difficult to classify, making it impossible to create a precise statistical breakdown of sectarian assassinations in Northern Ireland. A Northern Ireland Office press notice on June 11, 1975 states,

“Secretary of State Mr. Merlyn Rees MP, was asked in the House of Commons today (11 June) by Mr. A W Stallard what the security forces in Northern Ireland have done to combat the problem of sectarian assassinations? The Secretary of State said in a written reply: Sectarian assassinations is a much abused term in Northern Ireland. It should be restricted to cases where this is knowledge, not just suspicion”¹³.

Here, in a public forum, the Secretary of State deflects questions about British policy by focusing on definitions of sectarian assassinations. He also attempts to convey that the problem is not as concerning as it appears, because the terminology is exaggerated and overused. The report goes on to state that the British government could not provide accurate statistics on sectarian murders because many assassinations thought to be sectarian could in fact be interfactional (within the community) and it is incredibly difficult to distinguish between the two until the case had cleared. According to information conveyed to the public, the British government could not fulfill the Republic of Ireland's request to comment on, and

¹³ Northern Ireland Office Press Notice. 11 June 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

relay statistics concerning sectarian assassinations because it was impossible to define and classify such crimes.

Interestingly, documents between British officials reveal quite a different story. A letter between three British officials, Mr. Hill, Mr. Chesterton, and Mr. Webster dated July 25, 1975 states, “The RUC keep statistics since the 1 January 1972 on ‘sectarian and interfactional assassinations’ and since the 1 January 1975 on ‘sectarian and interfactional murders’¹⁴. This indicates that there was in fact a protocol in place to collect statistics that differentiate between sectarian and interfactional murders. The letter implies that the British government had statistics with the sectarian breakdown that the Republic of Ireland was looking for. This is confirmed in a report composed by B M Webster in August of 1975. At the top, he indicates that he “would like to say again that this information is based on intelligence assessments and is therefore for internal consumption only¹⁵. The report goes on to reveal highly detailed statistics about sectarian vs. interfactional murders and what groups were responsible for the murders within each sect. Mr. Webster’s report exposes that the British government did indeed have a very comprehensive and sophisticated idea about the nature of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, supported by statistical evidence. It is clear, however, that these statistics were to remain amongst officials and out of the public eye. The contrast between what the British claimed they knew and what they had recorded reveals

¹⁴ D. A. Hill, Letter to Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Webster. 25 July 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

¹⁵ B. M. Webster, “Killings Since the Beginning of the Ceasefire”. August 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

that the government must have found it highly disadvantageous to disclose all the information they had on sectarian assassinations.

The question then becomes, why did the British government downplay what they knew in the face of international pressure? The reason provided by many officials in the declassified documents is that it would provoke greater loyalist violence. In a letter from Mr. Webster to Mr. Brown and Mr. Moyle on May 23rd, 1975, he writes that, “If we released sectarian statistics or condemned the murder of Catholics alone, they would be picked up by publications like “Loyalist News” and encourage perverted minds”¹⁶. Additionally, in a letter from Mr. Webster to Mr. Bampton on August 8, 1975, he argues that, “the publication of a sectarian breakdown might encourage one side or the other to increase its activities to prove that it is not ‘lagging behind’ in ‘protecting’ its own people against attacks from the opposing community”¹⁷. He seems to be concerned that publishing sectarian statistics could provoke either community to engage in revenge-related violence. However, as I have discussed with Paul O’Connor, this theory has received a great deal of skepticism, particularly amongst members of the community in Northern Ireland. It is likely that those belonging to the community at the time that were willing to engage in revenge murders of their friends, relatives, colleagues and neighbors were already aware of the assassinations before they were published in any official government statistics. It is unclear within the documents if Britain’s

¹⁶ B. M. Webster. Letter to Mr. Brown and Mr. Moyle. 23 May 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

¹⁷ B. M. Webster. Letter to Mr. Bampton. 8 August 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

concern is legitimate or rather an excuse to justify inaction towards sectarian assassinations.

Another, perhaps more pessimistic, explanation for the British governments behavior can be found in the declassified documents. Various correspondences among officials indicated that the government feared for its international image after the Republic of Ireland received statistics. A letter from Mr. Janes to Mr. Harding on May 22, 1975 states that the government was reluctant to pass any information over the Irish because, "it is too easily misinterpreted"¹⁸. Officials in the British government were concerned that statistics revealing a high number of assassinations of Catholics would suggest that the British government was tolerating loyalist violence. A letter from D. J. Trevelyan dated on May 28, 1975 to Secretary of State confirms this by arguing,

"There is also no doubt that Dublin want the figures merely to try and cause us embarrassment: total figures show that the IRA are responsible for great majority of the deaths in Northern Ireland but if the "Sectarian murders" can be separated out, then Dublin hope that it can be shown that loyalists are more responsible than the Republicans (although the latter are far from blameless)"¹⁹.

The letter further indicates that the British were worried that the Irish would portray disproportionately high Catholic assassinations as the fault of the government, which the author admits would hurt Britain's image internationally. As time progressed, British officials continued to refuse to disclose statistics. In a letter from Mr. Webster to Mr. Bampton on August 8th, he argues that publicizing a

¹⁸ J. W Janes. Letter to G. W Harding. 22 May 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

¹⁹ D. J. Trevelyan. Letter to Secretary of State Merlyn Rees. 28 May 1975. The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009.

sectarian breakdown would provide the impression that the security forces were biased in handling the issue of assassinations. He also notes that, “a sectarian breakdown of a particular figure may be advantageous to the Government at the time of publication but at a later date may work against the policy we are pursuing”²⁰. This illustrates that the decision of whether or not to release statistics was part of an overall government strategy to manipulate the presentation of the status quo in Northern Ireland. Doing so would help cultivate a certain perception and storyline about its role. This information sheds light on the British attitude and strategy towards sectarian assassinations in the early 1970’s. While the government had very exact statistics it claimed to know much less than it did and discussed in secret that knowledge of these numbers would be very damaging to them. This does not automatically indicate that the British government was associated or outwardly tolerated loyalist paramilitary violence, but it does imply that the government felt insecure about confronting the situation. It reveals that some of what the British government publicly stated was in direct contradiction with the truth and that the British government was willing to lie to the international community to save its reputation. Finally, it shows the beginning of a trend seen throughout this paper of the British government manipulating the story involving sectarian assassinations and avoiding it instead of directly handling the issue.

Who is to Blame?

²⁰ B. M. Webster. Letter to Mr. Bampton. 8 August 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

In the conversation over the nature of sectarian violence, controversy also rose regarding who was to blame. According to the declassified documents, officials in the government for the most part acknowledged that loyalists primarily committed sectarian assassinations. In the previously mentioned draft letter by B M Webster, he states, "Waves of sectarian assassinations seem to start from the Protestant side. When Protestants feel threatened (particularly those in the poorer areas of East and North Belfast) they turn to a campaign of murder"²¹. He reiterates his point in a letter to Mr. Bourn dated May 9th, 1975 by noting, "Sectarian assassination has a loyalist spring. When the loyalists feel threatened, they turn to murder"²². It seems to be common knowledge within the inner workings of British government that loyalists were largely responsible for sectarian assassinations.

However, in public contexts, Britain did not always acknowledge this fact. In Mr. Jane's previously mentioned notes on his meeting with Cardinal Conway, he writes that the Cardinal had criticized the British government of prosecuting far more Catholics than Protestants over the issue of sectarian violence. In the meeting, Mr. Janes replies by saying that the police service was responding excellently and that, "we were continuing to do so and had picked up a substantial number of arms and rounds of ammunition about equally divided between Protestant and Catholic. I thought, however, that we had picked up rather more explosives from Catholic

²¹ B.M. Webster, Draft of letter to Grand Officer Commanding and Chief Constable. 15 May 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

²² B. M. Webster. Letter to Mr. Bourn. 9 May 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

houses”²³. Here, when publically under criticism from the international community, Mr. Janes attempts shift the discussion to portray that Protestants were the primary responsibility holders for sectarian violence. He even implies that the Catholic community was more to blame. This illustrates another example of where the British government contradicted what it knew privately with false public statements. Instead of tackling the issue in the international realm, government officials tweaked the public story. By diverting attention away from the issue of overwhelming loyalist sectarian murders, the government hoped to dodge any conversations that would incriminate them by suggesting tolerance or even encouragement of loyalist paramilitary action.

Assessing the Status Quo

In the face of international pressure, Britain was forced to go beyond simply defining and qualifying sectarian violence. The declassified documents reveal several correspondences that discuss the security forces’ current responses to sectarian violence and their success. Within these documents I found further contradictions and discontinuities. In public interactions, particularly regarding the international community, British officials insisted that the security responses were up to par. This is seen in the previously mentioned letter from J D W Janes discussing his meeting with the Irish ambassador after the he criticizes Mr. Janes for Britain’s inactivity in the face of sectarian murders. Mr. Janes writes,

²³ J.W. Janes., Letter to G. W. Harding. 18 April 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 24 June 2009).

“There were no grounds for saying that we were being inactive. We had indeed increased the Arm patrolling on the interface between Catholic and Protestant areas and this had led to protests from the IRA that we were breaking the ceasefire”²⁴.

Publically, he denies any weaknesses on the part of the security forces, blaming the violence on an IRA response to increased police activity. Additionally, in a draft of letter from J Hickman sent to the Republic of Ireland, he includes a copy of the brief on sectarian murders used by the Secretary of State in his talk with the Irish Foreign Minister in Dublin on April 19th, 1975²⁵. The brief provides statistics to argue that both detention and conviction rates steadily rose from 1969 to 1975. In these two documents, the British government defends the success of the security forces. Both involve public correspondences to the Republic of Ireland, who had been previously accusing Britain of tolerating and have inadequate responses to sectarian assassinations. These letters suggest that it was the British government’s strategy to convey publically that the security situation involving sectarian murders was well handled and under control. The government seems unwilling to concede any sign of weakness on the issue, particularly to their critics.

That is not to say, however, that weaknesses did not exist. In fact, the primary sources I examined suggested multiple instances of doubt regarding the security forces’ ability to combat sectarian violence. A UK Eyes Only document containing notes for the record done by P Haulmann on May 29th, 1975 illustrates these concerns. The notes record the discussions during a meeting with the

²⁴ J.W. Janes., Letter to G. W. Harding. 18 April 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 24 June 2009).

²⁵ B.M. Webster, Draft of letter to Grand Officer Commanding and Chief Constable. 15 May 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

Secretary of State of Northern Ireland with several prominent British officials. In the meeting, those present concluded that,

“the RUC were hampered in dealing with sectarian assassinations by the shortage of CID staff; fears about their own safety if they pressed their enquiries too vigorously in hard loyalist areas; the inadequate degree of interchange of information between the CID and the Special Branch; and the greater constraints which the Courts and the CPP in Northern Ireland placed on the Police in terms of the preparation and treatment of offenders”²⁶.

This is as particularly telling document for a few reasons. First of all, it involves high ranking individuals that would have the power and be responsible for making overarching decisions regarding strategy of security forces. If deficiencies in RUC capability came to their attention, they were likely credible concerns. Additionally, the document is labeled “UK Eyes Only”, meaning it would only have been shared amongst members in the British government and would be secret even to officials of the RUC. Finally, it lists a variety of different barriers to RUC success in combating sectarian assassinations. Some of them are resource based, such as staff shortages, while some were structural, such as legal and communication barriers. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, some were social. The document indicates that the RUC was unsuccessful in deterring sectarian assassinations because they were worried about blowback from loyalist areas. This means that prominent government officials were acknowledging that to some degree loyalist paramilitaries had enough influence to convince the RUC not to investigate or prosecute sectarian assassinations. This is a strong diversion from the public message to the Republic of

²⁶ P. Haulmann. UK Eyes A Notes for the Record done K J Jordan. 29 May 1975. The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009.

Ireland that security forces were highly successful in tackling sectarian assassinations. These findings contribute to an overall pattern seen in these declassified documents. The British government continuously presented an oversimplified, rosier picture of the events of Northern Ireland in the public realm that hid unsavory aspects of their strategies and shortcomings.

Searching for Solutions

The contradictions I found regarding solutions to sectarian violence differ from previous patterns, but are perhaps even more concerning. Just as amongst themselves British officials thought Protestants were largely responsible for sectarian assassinations, there seemed to be a consensus that any policy to stop sectarian assassinations must be directed at loyalists as well. In Mr. Webster's letter to Mr. Bourn dated May 9, 1975 he adds at the end,

“The RUC must know and understand these people. Policing of the ‘difficult’ Protestant areas is the key to this problem and they must tackle it. I am sure that this is where our effort in this field must be concentrated. The green areas are of secondary consideration by comparison”²⁷.

Here Mr. Webster explicitly states that dealing with the loyalist community must be prioritized over the nationalist community. In a letter from Sir Frank Cooper to Lt Gen Sir Frank King dated May 15, 1975, he states that the Protestant community is the source for most sectarian murders. He notes that, “The major problem that we face is how to deal with these springs of violence at their source, to secure the

²⁷ Webster, B. M. Letter to Mr. Bourn. 9 May 1975. (The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009).

rejection of violence by their communities and to gain their greater assistance in enforcing the law”²⁸. In order to truly make an impact, Mr. Cooper argues that the issue must be addressed at its root cause, which he believes to be the loyalist community. The declassified documents that those informed of the situation in Northern Ireland within the British government all advocated for policies that directly targeted loyalists in order to curb sectarian assassinations.

One solution instigated by the British government to curb sectarian assassinations and other violence was to increase the amount of screenings to catch suspicious personnel that may have been responsible for or may in the future commit sectarian violence. The British kept record of such violence, which can be seen in Appendix A. The statistics collected are immediately very puzzling. In the time period from January 1st to March 22nd in 1976, 30 shootings and 37 bombings were apparently carried out by what the British refer to as “Protestant extremists” and “Catholic extremists” carried out 20 shootings and 34 bombings. This means that, according to these statistics, during these three months Protestants were more responsible for sectarian violence, though the numbers are relatively similar. However, the same document indicates that from September 1975 to March of 1976, 1,876 Catholics were screened and 118 Protestants were screened. This means that of the people screened, 94% of them were Catholic though Catholics were only responsible for 40% of the shootings and 48% of the bombings. Findings from other time periods show similar patterns. In my opinion, it is highly unlikely that these

²⁸ Sir Frank Cooper. Letter to Lt Gen Sir Frank King. 15 May 1975. The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Found 27 May 2009.

statistics occurred simply by chance. To create such discrepancies there was likely inequalities in the ways the security forces carried out the screenings. Even when just looking at screenings for March of 1976, 63 Catholics were screened and 2 Protestants were screened. The document states that 9 were handed over to the RUC. While it does not indicate which of the 9 were Catholic and Protestant, it is safe to assume from the screening statistics that more Catholics were handed over than Protestants.

These findings, however, only show the end result. They do not indicate at what level were orders or policies created to cause these results and thus blame cannot be placed definitively on any singular party. However, these results do indicate a few key pieces of information. First, inequalities in screenings and arrests have evidentiary support, and are not just legends or opinions of the Catholic community. Second, the government acknowledged that dealing with loyalists was the solution to sectarian assassinations. Yet at the implementation level, at least when it came to screenings, nothing was done to seriously target loyalists and discrimination towards Catholic seems to prevail. As mentioned earlier, contradictions in British government attitudes moved beyond diplomatic rhetoric and affected how the situation was dealt with on the ground level. Finally, consistent with the rest of this paper, no declassified documents provide a direct order to perpetuate loyalist-led sectarian assassinations. However, the generally slack attitude towards arresting loyalists, even when they were acknowledged to be the problem, seemed to have that result.

Contextualizing the Research:*Immersed Amongst Activism:*

At the end of the discussion of my research, it is important to acknowledge the profound impact that my environment played in motivating and shaping my project. As I mentioned previously, I conducted my research in the Pat Finucane Center in Derry. The context of my research was one of intense activism instead of academic impartiality. My idea for the project grew from discussions with Paul O'Connor, who is highly active in exposing human rights abuses and British government collusion in Northern Ireland. Mr. O'Connor is passionate about highlighting injustices that negatively affected his community during the Troubles. He has done a great deal of research using declassified documents, particularly to expose British attitudes and connections to loyalist paramilitaries through the UDR. He gave me background information on atrocities committed by loyalist paramilitaries in the 1970's and examples of government injustices that occurred. More of our conversations surrounded these issues than any other aspect of the conflict. In addition to helping me with my initial project direction, our discussions sparked ideas of British strategies and motives to look for when I did my research. Mr. O'Connor and his colleagues also selected the articles I had access to from the national archives for the purpose of exposing injustices committed by the British government. I did not have access to every document issued during the time period I studied, only those selected by Mr. O'Connor. Thus my work did not start from an objective collection of research done by impartial academics. I acknowledge that, while the information I gathered was not inaccurate, the material chosen and the

conversations that motivated and guided my research came from sources with activist goals. As a result, not all perspectives and issues are equally raised in my work.

Beyond the advice I received for my work, the places and people I interacted with influenced my research. Simply doing research in the office of the Pat Finucane Center, surrounded by activity and materials for work on human rights abuses, undoubtedly influenced my way of thinking. I was working amongst people who are deeply angered by injustices during the Troubles and had been or knew people that were personally victimized by the conflict. Through observing the center, I saw the strategies and challenges to fighting these injustices. I believe being immersed in such an environment led me take my paper in the direction I did. I became motivated to be critical of the mainstream telling of history and to look for clues that might unearth a different perspective. Additionally, talking to my host family in Derry, as well as the staff members of the Pat Finucane Center who grew up on Derry, gave me a better idea of the conventional understandings and assumptions of the people in the community. I found myself taking those assumptions and trying to substantiate them with evidence from primary sources. I also found that the more I spent time in the Pat Finucane center, the more invested I became in the issues I was studying. Those that work with the center are not just interested in an academic topic. They are passionately working on issues that resonate deeply with themselves and their community. I find it is impossible to engross oneself in such a space, even for only three weeks, without taking on a similar spirit and goals to some extent. I am aware, however, that the perspectives and stories I heard are not

a comprehensive account of what occurred during the conflict in Northern Ireland, and therefore the mindset I carried with me into constructing these arguments is not completely impartial.

A Utilitarian Purpose

I do not see the lack of complete objectivity in my work as shortcoming, however. In fact, I believe it uniquely enhances the research for a few reasons. First, activists are often inspired to look beyond the conventional knowledge to prove an argument. With a specific goal in mind, or cause to promote, I found that researchers are more willing to go to great lengths to acquire the necessary materials. A goal of the Pat Finucane Center is to expose British government collusion and human rights abuses. This goal sparks the desire to painstakingly search through the National Archives to find relevant information. It pushes researchers to go beyond the existing knowledge and search for clues that might challenge that and help their cause. I believe I embodied that spirit while picking through documents to find evidence of certain attitudes or ideas in the writings. I believe that to gain new, valuable research, one cannot rely simply on the impartiality of academia. The determination and drive of activists often is the necessary component to find new ideas, clues, and perspectives that make the collective knowledge of a topic richer and more comprehensive.

Additionally, research done by activists often has more relevant application to the people the information actually affects. I think it is a detriment to academia that it can often get trapped within an ivory tower. Academics write for other

academics, burdening their research with extra tweaks and stipulations in order to be precise and avoid criticism for generalizing or assuming too much. However, I find, and also discussed with Paul O'Connor, that these works often go unseen. The research done has little power to incite political change or provide any kind of impact of the people of a community. Activists on the other hand, tend to know what issues are important to the community and often do research related to those topics. They utilize their research to push for political change in their communities and it is likely to be seen by the communities. Sometimes, simply being able to support claims with concrete evidence is very useful to communities where these claims are considered just speculation. For example, those who suspected that security forces were involved in a sectarian attack of a family member would very much appreciate evidence that indicated that the British government participated in collusion. Presenting findings in a way that is understandable and visible to everyday people can give research that would otherwise stay amongst academics a utilitarian purpose.

Writing in a more activist context is also less concerned with subtlety in language. The writing style tends to have more of a rhetorical impact, which generates more emotions and in my opinion is more powerful in generating awareness and promoting a cause. For example, the Pat Finucane Center works with people who had family members killed by loyalist paramilitaries. Thus when the center is involved in conducting research and writing, they do it with the benefit of those families in mind, not other academics. Their writing tends to be more attention grabbing, and is distributed to the communities and to those capable of

enacting political change. In order to overcome a dominant political narrative, I think that activists paint their arguments in bolder, broader strokes that challenge existing notions instead of chipping away and tweaking them, like is often done amongst academics. Ultimately, it can be a waste to let research remain amongst elitists and serve no benefit to the people it concerns. Being able to use evidence to help communities enact change I believe is an undervalued goal in academic research.

As mentioned earlier, truth recovery can be a very healing aspect for communities and individuals. Families receive a sense of closure and justice when their views of events are acknowledged, especially when they had been ignored or quieted for decades. Communities are better able to move forwards and trust new regimes and institutions when they feel that their positions have been legitimized²⁹. While the casework done by the Pat Finucane center is healing for individuals and families. Academic research like mine can function the same way on a larger scale. Acknowledgement of British failings and shortcomings, especially when it came to murders of community members gives legitimacy to what I gathered to be a commonplace notion. The more this research is conducted, the stronger the counter-narrative will be to the British claims that they did everything in their power to stop the violence. A strongly supported argument, particularly based in primary sources, is both satisfying for the community and may even promote recognition on the part of the British government. Movements that acknowledge the

²⁹ *Dealing With the Past*. Commission for Victims and Survivors, June 2010. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. <http://www.cvsni.org/images/stories/dealing_past/dealing_with_the_past_final_28.06.10.pdf>.

past I think are highly beneficial for groups of people to trust governments again and move forward.

Finally, I think my research reflects the unique position I had in conducting my research. I was both a participant and an observer. I was an outsider in the sense that I did not work as an activist and was from another country. Yet, I was immersed in the center, which I acknowledge impacted the perspectives in my writing. My writing reflects these two forces. I think while objective academia and activist writing both have their place, more consideration should be placed on work that straddles the two camps. I think I was able to have an open mind in my research due to my objectivity but at the same time the activist influences pushed me to look at unconventional sources to find patterns and draw conclusions. Because I was involved in a more grassroots organization, I could see how research like mine could be seen and appreciated by the community. While the British attitudes in the 1970's may be considered common knowledge to people, using their own documents to support some skepticism held by communities like those in Derry could be beneficial to the process of transitional justice there. My writing could take on some of the advantages the activist writing without perhaps committing to one political camp. Seeing the value that a grassroots utilitarian purpose gives to writing, I think that more academics should immerse themselves in the communities they study and present a more nuanced participant-observer approach.

Personal Reflection

Throughout my project I kept notes on my personal reactions and growth as I did my research. I found analyzing primary documents to be a very challenging, yet rewarding process. In many ways, the research I conducted was a broader and lower-stakes of the work the Pat Finucane Center does, and even the work the solicitor Pat Finucane did. It involves beginning with a notion stated to be true by a government body or perhaps even an issue where no answers currently exist. Then, you must go through vast amounts of information, most of it irrelevant, to locate relevant details and start to put together patterns and trends. This can be challenging because it requires a significant patience and interpretation. I thought of how those investigating government actions during the Troubles must have had an even more difficult time, as the information was even more confidential and difficult to gather. Often, it does not take the direction you expect it to, but allowing the information to create its own complex picture of reality, and not manipulating it for your own goals, is incredibly important.

Additionally, integrating the research into written work was surprisingly challenging. On one hand, I wanted to continuously acknowledge the limitations of my research. My evidence is not a comprehensive collection of all perspectives on the issue and the activist environment I worked in influenced the direction I took in my paper. I needed to acknowledge that these broader interpretations I make are a product of this limited method of collecting evidence. However, at the same time I found it easy to overwhelm my claims with academic qualifications and stipulations, leaving my conclusions seeming incredibly insignificant. As I mention earlier, I believe that even if a body of research cannot encapsulate all facts and positions,

substantiating any claim or thought within a community with evidence can still be very beneficial. This especially true when the claim traditionally was silenced by a more dominant narrative. On some level, evidence like mine may be healing to these previously silenced communities and I would not want to detract from that by focusing solely on the limitations of my research. Therefore, I found striking a balance between the objective academic goals and utilitarian activist goals of this project very difficult. I can see how it is very difficult for researchers to bring their work out of academia while keeping their language precise and free of over-exaggeration or politicization.

I found doing this kind of research incredibly rewarding, however. First, having to make my own interpretations and conclusions taught me a greater deal about the topic. It was much more satisfying to come to my own conclusions instead of simply basing ideas off of work previously done by academics. I also feel that since I used primary documents, many of which have not been used in academic papers (to my knowledge), my work contributes to a constantly growing body of research about the British government's behavior during the Troubles. Working in Derry at the Pat Finucane Center made me interact with people who feel very strongly about these issues and whose families and communities are connected with them. Even though I am not from Northern Ireland, having worked so closely with people who are, and having been able to create research that even in the smallest way may contribute to a collection of knowledge that helps them, is very rewarding to me. Being able to immerse myself with people and places that are relevant to my

research I think not only enhanced the quality of my work but also helped it resonate with me on a personal level.

Beyond my research, I gathered new perspectives from simply observing the Pat Finucane Center and staying in Derry. Being able to talk about issues with people who are passionate about them, like Paul O'Connor, enhanced my understanding of the conflict a great deal. I not only learned about the facts of the Troubles, but how the issues are still being dealt with today in organizations like the Pat Finucane Center as well. I understand more about truth recovery and what kind of impactful results a strong desire to uncover the truth can yield. Truth recovery can be difficult and there are many obstacles to overcome but I think that it is life changing to individuals and their communities as a whole. As a student interested in studying law and human rights, observing the impact that investigations and uncovering the truth can make was inspiring to me. I believe the lessons I have gathered during my independent study experience transcend the work of this project and will have a long-lasting relevance in my life.

Conclusion:

At first glance, there is no smoking gun in the declassified British government documents. Without a glaring case of collusion or corruption, it is easy to believe the British government's account of sectarian violence during the Troubles at face value. However, upon examining elements of documents like those at the Pat Finucane Center, small details form into larger patterns that provide a more complex counter-narrative that questions and complicates the typical history. In my research I found

that the British government was under severe pressure by 1975 to answer concerns from the Republic of Ireland and provide statistics on sectarian assassinations. Publicly, Britain claimed that they did not have the statistics and that sectarian assassinations were difficult to define when the documents suggest that concrete and specific statistics existed. The government claimed publicly that the problem was not one-sided and that the security forces were extremely capable of handling it while British officials in classified documents admitted that sectarian assassinations were loyalist-led and spiraling out of control. Despite expressing these concerns, increasing screening tactics simply targeted more Catholics. It is important to note that none of this evidence declaratively states that the British tolerated loyalist paramilitary violence. However, it chips away at the notion that the British government honestly did everything in its power to combat the problem. The evidence indicates that the British strategy towards sectarian assassinations was not to attack the problem with all the resources and knowledge they had. Instead, the government relied on deceit, avoidance, and manipulation of facts to tackling the issue.

While my findings may not be found in headlines, they have an important and unique place in Northern Ireland's post-conflict transformation. They take the commonplace notion that the British government did not do everything it could to stop murders of nationalists and provide some evidentiary support to legitimize those frustrations. They contribute to an ever-growing body of research that questions British behavior to give victims of sectarian violence a better sense of

closure and justice. Uncovering the truth helps communities let go of resentment, have closure, and heal.

At the same time, my findings reflect the participant/observer position I held while conducting it. I was neither an activist nor a completely objective academic. However, I believe this position helped me bring an outsider's perspective to an issue but also understand how my research could affect the community and inspired me to write in a way that could be beneficial for the people in the community I studied. Beyond the issue of sectarian assassinations, this paper highlights the potential benefits of incorporating more grassroots perspectives and goals into academic research. Academic research has the ability to uncover powerful truths. I think this power can be a powerful tool in healing communities and helping them transition out of times of conflict and should be utilized in areas all around the world.

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Appendix A:
Sectarian Incidents

Period	By Protestant Extremists		By Catholic Extremists	
	Shootings	Bombings	Shootings	Bombings
1 Jan- 22 Mar 76	30	37	20	34
22 Mar- 29 Mar 76	1	--	1	--

Casualties from Sectarian Incidents

	By Protestant Extremists		By Catholic Extremists	
	Killed	Wounded	Killed	Wounded
1 Jan- 22 Mar 76	27	110	20	35
22 Mar- 29 Mar 76	--	--	--	--

Screening

Period	Grand total	3 Bde		8 Bde		39 Bde		Handed to RUC
		Cat	Prot	Cat	Prot	Cat	Prot	
Sep 75-20 Mar 76	1994	665	21	358	10	853	87	174
Mar 76-27 Mar 76	65	3	--	24	--	36	2	9

Statistics found in The National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office. Tables recreated exactly as they appear in the documents.