

Britain's Not So Distant History of State Sponsored Assassinations

Britain's self-righteous tone when denouncing Russia for the alleged assassination of Sergei Skripal ignores its own not so distant history of engaging in state-sponsored assassinations.

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With the eyes of the world focused on the alleged nerve agent attack on Sergei Skripal, the Russian who worked as a British double-agent before being exiled to the UK in 2010, since he and his daughter were found slumped on a Salisbury public bench last Sunday, one can't help but notice the hypocritical reaction of the British political establishment to the attack.

Addressing the House of Commons on Monday, Prime Minister Theresa May alleged Kremlin involvement in the incident due to 'Russia's record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations'.

These words were spoken in a self-righteous sense, one that suggested the UK held the moral ground over Russia and would never go so far as to conduct assassinations of political opponents on foreign soil.

Anyone with even a basic knowledge of British foreign policy towards Ireland however, would know that this patently isn't the case.

In 1989, the north of Ireland was at the height of a bloody conflict in which Irish Republican militants were waging a guerrilla campaign on Crown Forces in a bid to end British rule in the region.

In order to counter the threat posed by the IRA and other such groups, Westminster had long decided that anyone charged with Republican activity in the occupied six counties would be brought before a non-Jury 'Diplock' court; thus maximizing the chances of conviction and imprisonment.



Photo: Max Blumenthal/Twitter

One human rights Lawyer from Belfast however, would quickly gain prominence for successfully defending Republicans charged before these courts.

Pat Finucane first came to public attention through his campaigning for Republican prisoners during the 1981 H-Block hunger strike.

He would quickly become a thorn in the side of the British establishment by representing Republicans in several high-profile cases throughout the 1980s, with the final straw coming in November 1988 when he successfully defended an IRA Volunteer in a case related to the deaths of two British soldiers.

On the 12th of February 1989, a pro-British death squad burst into Pat Finucane's home and shot him 14 times as he had Sunday dinner with his wife and children.

The death squad in question, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), was a then-legal organisation under the control of the Force Research Unit (FRU), a covert British military unit tasked with turning the UDA into a more 'professional' organisation.

British state involvement in the killing went even higher than the military, with then-Home Office Minister Douglas Hogg lamenting in the weeks before Finucane's death that there were Lawyers in the north of Ireland who were 'unduly sympathetic to the cause of the IRA'.

The murder of Pat Finucane was not an isolated incident however, and not even a tactic confined by the British to intense periods of conflict in Ireland, such as the 1980s were.

Ten years after Finucane's killing, the level of conflict in Ireland had decreased significantly following the 1998 surrender agreement between the Provisional IRA and British government.

This 'peace' however, was and still is maintained by the threat of violence from the British state should anything upset the status quo.

This is what ultimately led to the murder of Rosemary Nelson.

A human rights lawyer, like Pat Finucane, Rosemary had also risen to prominence through her successful defence of Republicans in high-profile cases.

However, it was her representation of the family of Robert Hamill, a young Nationalist beaten to death by a Loyalist mob in 1997 whilst in full view of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) the north of Ireland's pro-British police force, that drew the most ire from the British establishment.



The remains of Solicitor Rosemary Nelson's BMW car (Source: Belfast Telegraph)

On the 15th of March 1999, Rosemary Nelson was killed by a car bomb outside her home in Armagh, occupied Ireland. The attack was claimed by the Red Hand Defenders (RHD), a breakaway faction of the UDA.

In the days following her murder, it emerged that members of the RUC's covert Special Branch had been involved in a surveillance operation close to Nelson's home the night before her death, ostensibly to monitor suspected members of the IRA.

Despite the intense surveillance of the area surrounding Nelson's home, no Special Branch members reported seeing the RHD team that carried out attack; like Pat Finucane, Rosemary Nelson had also become another victim of Britain's bloody record of state-sponsored assassinations.

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