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Citation:

Moran, J (2023) The Killing of the New Lodge Six in February 1973. *Justice, Power and Resistance*. pp. 1-8. ISSN 2635-2338 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1332/ihxc7981>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in *Justice, Power, and Resistance*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Moran, J. (2023). *The Killing of the New Lodge Six in February 1973. Justice, Power and Resistance* (published online ahead of print 2023). is available online at: <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/view/journals/jpr/aop/article-10.1332-IHXC7981/article-10.1332-IHXC7981.xml>

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The Killing of the New Lodge Six in February 1973.

Dr Jade Moran

Leeds Beckett University

Abstract:

Six unarmed men were shot dead by the British Army in the New Lodge area of Belfast in the North of Ireland on the 3rd and 4th of February 1973. Collectively, these men are known as the New Lodge Six. There has never been a public inquiry into how or why they died. Eyewitnesses were not interviewed and there was a terrifying absence of police investigation into why six unarmed men were killed by British forces. No British soldiers were ever prosecuted in relation to this case. This intervention outlines what happened to the six unarmed men and how the British Army claimed the New Lodge Six were involved in a gun battle with troops. The intervention has three interlocking aims. Firstly, the aim is to draw attention to the case following the 50th anniversary of the shootings. Secondly, the intervention calls for a public inquiry into New Lodge Six killings, which share troubling similarities with the shooting of unarmed civilians on Bloody Sunday twelve months earlier. Finally, the aim is to position the case within the context of other conflict-related killings and to highlight the injustice of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, which is currently making its way through the British Parliament.

Key words:

New Lodge Six; British Army; North of Ireland; unarmed victims, legacy killings.

Word count:

3,805

The Killing of the New Lodge Six in February 1973

Introduction

During the weekend of 3rd and 4th February 2023, residents and families gathered in Belfast to mark the 50th anniversary of the killing of six unarmed men shot dead by the British Army in 1973. Collectively, these men are known as the New Lodge Six (McCann, 2023). During the commemoration, a short film about the killings was projected on to the exterior wall of the high-rise flats. The film features archive footage, eye-witness accounts, and testimonies from bereaved relatives about the shootings fifty years ago. In one devastating account, Billy Campbell, the older brother of Tony 'TC' Campbell describes visiting the hospital mortuary after the fatal shooting. Billy wanted to see the injuries on his brother's body, so he lifted the mortuary sheet to look at the gunshot wounds. He recalled, "I had to see the damage. There was a lot of damage. He was hit seventeen times, so he was. And basically, he had no stomach at all...I found out later that his spine was shattered" (Campbell, 2023).

The fiftieth anniversary of these deaths is a significant milestone. It invites deep reflection precisely because these were state killings committed by the British Army against six unarmed men. Furthermore, these are *unsolved* killings. It is not known why the six men were shot dead (Ó Muirigh Solicitors, 2021). Each of these factors has been a catalyst for this intervention, which has three key interlocking aims. Firstly, the principal aim is to draw attention to the case of the New Lodge Six. Outside of Belfast and the North of Ireland, scant attention has been paid to how the six men died, why they were killed, and why the British soldiers involved have never been held to account for killing unarmed citizens. Apart from a pioneering community inquiry (New Lodge Six Report, 2003) and key publications by victims' organizations (Relatives for Justice, 2023a; Droichead an Dóchais, 2005), there are very few published sources on this case.

Secondly, this intervention calls for a full public inquiry into the case of the New Lodge Six. The killing of the six unarmed men has never been properly investigated even though the bereaved families, friends, and neighbours of the New Lodge Six have campaigned for justice for over a half a century (Relatives for Justice, 2023a; New Lodge Six Report, 2003). It is crucial that the remit of a future public inquiry should be determined in full consultation with the surviving relatives of the six men.

Finally, this intervention positions the case of the New Lodge Six within a broader context of 1,186 unsolved conflict-related killings (Winter, 2018; also see McGovern, 2023:59). This case does not exist in isolation from other legacy killings, particularly those involving state violence. For that reason, in addition to exploring the New Lodge Six killings, the intervention also draws urgent attention to the grave injustice of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, which is currently being tabled in the British Parliament (Dawson, 2023). If this bill becomes law, hundreds of bereaved families seeking truth, justice and accountability will be denied access to legal investigations including inquests and civil actions. The Legacy Bill will grant amnesties for all conflict-related killings (Dawson, 2023).

The Killing of the New Lodge Six

It is now over fifty years since six men were shot dead by the British Army in the New Lodge district of Belfast in the North of Ireland. One man was also gravely wounded. The events occurred on the weekend of 3rd and 4th February 1973 (Relatives for Justice, 2023a). Once acquainted with the facts, it is easy to see similarities with the events of Bloody Sunday in Derry in January 1972 (Saville Inquiry, 2010). In the context of the New Lodge killings, all those targeted were men. The victims were unarmed and posed no threat to British Crown forces or to the local community. Like Bloody Sunday, the killings were marked by unprovoked state violence in a built-up residential area surrounded by military installations (Relatives for Justice, 2023a:3; New Lodge Six Report, 2003:3). In the immediate aftermath of the killings, the British Army claimed that the six men were members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) involved in a gun battle with 1st Battalion, Queen's Regiment (Relatives for Justice, 2023a:6; New Lodge Six Report, 2003:36). The official British Army narrative insisted that the six men were carrying weapons at the time of their deaths. However, forensic testing for firearms residue has proven this claim to be a lie. No weapons were ever found or seen by witnesses (Ó Muirigh Solicitors, 2021; New Lodge Six Report, 2003: p33).

The first two victims, Jim McCann, and Jim Sloan were members of the IRA. Both were aged 19 when they were killed in a 'drive-by shooting' as they stood outside Lynch's Bar at the top of the New Lodge Road (Relatives for Justice, 2023a). The time was approximately 11.45pm. Eyewitnesses said that they were shot dead by a back-seat passenger who wore

civilian clothes, and yet remarkably the British Army claimed responsibility for the killings, stating that Jim Sloan and Jim McCann had died in a gun battle with British troops (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:36). Evidence indicates both men were unarmed when they were shot. It was an unprovoked attack. The two IRA men were out socializing, and Relatives for Justice believe that it was a targeted killing by undercover British soldiers (Relatives for Justice, 2023a). Why were they targeted? One theory is that Jim McCann and Jim Sloan were deliberately shot in order to “provoke” IRA volunteers out onto the streets where they could be ambushed or drawn into a gun-battle with British troops (Relatives for Justice, 2023a:4; New Lodge Six Report, 2003:33). The first two killings appear to have been committed by undercover soldiers. The next four killings (see below) occurred as people on the streets tried to escape the gunfire or assist the injured. Published sources point to a two-step operation involving soldiers from the Queen’s Regiment who were positioned in high-rise observation posts at the top of New Lodge flats (Relatives for Justice, 2023:4; MacAirt, 2023). According to a British Army officer speaking five days after the shootings, this deployment “was designed to give maximum fields of fire from positions of strength” (Soldier ‘B’ cited in Relatives for Justice, 2023a:4). It was from this position that soldiers claimed to have “engaged targets as and when they appeared” over a two-and-half hour period (Soldier ‘B’ cited in Relatives for Justice, 2023a:4). This high-rise position was further enhanced by the British Army’s use of telescopic night-sights for the first time on the weekend of the 3rd and 4th February 1973 (New Lodge Six Report, 2003: 33).

Telescopic night scopes were used with nearly every engagement that night. A community-led inquiry found that the night-sights gave British soldiers “vastly superior capabilities” when there had been an attempt to draw suspected IRA members out into the open (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:33; Relatives for Justice, 2023a:4-6). All the evidence indicates that the use of night-sights was not unplanned. Existing sources point to it being a “carefully planned and crafted political act” (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:21; Droichead an Dóchais, 2005:5) spear-headed by the drive-by shooting. One further explanation is that the shootings, aided by the night-sights were committed to “strike fear” into communities that were resistant to British occupation (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:29; Droichead an Dóchais, 2005:5). By 1972, the British Army largely perceived Catholics as “troublemakers” indistinguishable from the IRA (Bennett, 2013:279). In this respect, the night-sights

functioned to 'let-the-dog-see-the-rabbit'. Indeed, one local woman, Lily McAuley described how residents were "like rabbits" in the line of fire (New Lodge Six Report, 2003: 33).

What have the British Army said about the killings? For their part, the British Army have always insisted that the people shot were gunmen. They have never retracted the claim that it was a gun battle (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:25). British Army documentation refers to the six men as "terrorist casualties" (cited in MacAirt, 2023). Indeed, five days after the shooting, a British Army officer spoke confidently about how the night-sights had enhanced recognition of targets that weekend. Soldier 'B' stated, "Nearly all firing by Security Forces was done with the aid of night-sights which virtually eliminated the possibility of accidental engagement" (cited in Relatives for Justice, 2023:4). However, if the night-sights eliminated the possibility of mistakes, why were six unarmed men shot dead and another unarmed man seriously wounded? Why did the British Army release information to the media describing the deceased as 'six gunmen' (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:20)? There are serious questions to answer about every aspect of this military operation, and why it led to multiple civilian deaths.

The first shootings on the New Lodge Road caused panic throughout the community. Local people tried to get home as the British Army opened fire. What followed is marked by clear acts of heroism and bravery by New Lodge residents (Relatives for Justice, 2023a:5-7). John Loughran, aged 33, and father to three young children was killed when he stepped out of his house to help the injured and dying just after midnight on 4th February. He was wearing a white cotton T-shirt as he emerged from his house. His boots were unlaced when he died (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:42). It is hardly the attire of a person preparing for a gun battle. Tony 'TC' Campbell was out celebrating his 19th birthday when he ran across Edlingham Street to assist an elderly couple who were trying to open their front door. He was shot seventeen times by the British Army (New Lodge Six Report, 2003). Brendan 'Fat' Maguire was shot whilst trying to pull Tony 'TC' Campbell out of the line of fire (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:15). The sixth victim, Ambrose Hardy, aged 26 was shot dead clutching a white petticoat borrowed from a woman in a local club. He believed a makeshift 'white flag' would give him safe passage back to his mother's house (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:20). Instead, he was shot in the head by a British Army sniper. These men were husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. They were all neighbours. They were all innocent. The shocking

violence of these brutal killings can be contrasted with the joyous nature of the victims' final hours as they partied at a parish disco or enjoyed drinks in a local bar. John Loughran had been at home with his pregnant wife and young family. Jim Sloan, aged 19 had been married for only five weeks when he was killed. He never met his unborn child (Relatives for Justice, 2023a). These were normal lives interrupted by extraordinary state violence.

It is widely known that three of the dead were IRA members, but they were not armed nor were they on active service at the time of their deaths. The six men who were killed presented no threat to British forces or civilians in the area. They were shot dead without warning and there has never been a public inquiry into their deaths (Relatives for Justice, 2023a; Ó Muirigh Solicitors, 2021). The men were attacked without provocation. They died in suspicious circumstances and the suspicion points towards British forces. There was no police investigation to ascertain how or when the men died. No attempt was made to obtain witness statements. There was a clear failure to protect the crime scenes. There was no internal British military investigation into why 286 rounds were fired by British troops in a residential area of one square mile on the night of 3rd and 4th February 1973 that led to the deaths of the six men (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:47).

The British Army have not accounted for any of these killings. There has been no inquiry. There have been no prosecutions. There has been no justice for the victims or their families. The British state failed to investigate the killings (Relatives for Justice, 2023a). Some of the bereaved families were given a derisory compensation following the deaths. This compensation signals the innocence of the deceased because any evidence of firearms residue would annul such pay-outs (New Lodge Six Report, 2003:33). When I spoke to a former British Army paratrooper about the need for prosecutions in these cases, he said, "But what about all the IRA killings?" Such rebuttals are commonplace, but the calibre of this argument loses value when it is recalled that between 30,000 to 40,000 Republican and Loyalist combatants were interned or imprisoned during the conflict between 1969 and 1998 (McEvoy, 2019). Republicans and Loyalists *did* serve time in prison. IRA men like Patrick Magee, imprisoned for his part in the Brighton Bomb of October 1984 received a 50-year sentence for killing five people. Once released, he actively sought to be reconciled with the daughter of one of his victims (Magee, 2021). The British Army struggles to acknowledge or accept that it was an active protagonist in this British-Irish war. There has been no

apology in relation to these killings. There has been no acceptance that the British Army harmed people and their families. The bereaved families can only conclude that there has been a cover-up in the case of the New Lodge Six (Relatives for Justice, 2023a).

Truth, Justice and Accountability

Let it be said that ‘doing something’ about the past involves more than *knowing* about atrocities and suffering. According to Cohen, (2001:125) the “dominant meaning of accountability is *justice*” (original emphasis). This process can involve identifying those responsible and bringing them to legal account (Cohen, 2001:228). While significant advances have been made in terms of truth recovery and reconciliation concerning the British-Irish conflict, it is evident that past atrocities like the killing of the New Lodge Six might never be fully investigated in a court of law. The British government have tabled legislation that seeks to prevent victims of the conflict from accessing justice via legal action (Relatives for Justice, 2023a; Amnesty International UK, 2023). The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill seeks to close investigations into legacy killings, end ‘Troubles-related’ legal proceedings, stop inquests, and control the narrative of future academic studies on these cases (Relatives for Justice, 2023a; Hadden, 2022). The primary objective of this legislation appears to be about giving soldiers immunity from prosecution (Hadden, 2022); however, it is also about protecting British state interests, reasserting the British narrative of the conflict, and removing all rights and access to justice for victims (Relatives for Justice, 2023b). As human rights groups and victims’ organizations emphasize, by forging ahead with this legislation the British government is removing any chance of truth, justice, or accountability for bereaved families linked to 1,186 unsolved conflict-related killings from the past 50 years (Relatives for Justice, 2023a; Amnesty International UK, 2023; Winter, 2018). The Legacy Bill amounts to state-organized cover-up of conflict-related killings (Relatives for Justice, 2023a; also see Cohen, 2001).

Conclusion

The primary aim of this intervention has been to draw attention to the killing of the New Lodge Six on 3rd and 4th February 1973. The purpose was also to mark the fifty-year campaign for truth and justice by the families of the six unarmed men and join them in calling for an independent inquiry into these fatal shootings (Relatives for Justice, 2023a).

With immense dignity and fortitude, the families have stated that they will never give up campaigning for a full independent inquiry.

There are strong grounds for an inquiry. As this intervention has shown, there are unanswered questions about why deadly force was unleashed against six unarmed civilians in a residential area. There were clear breaches of minimum force rules by British troops (Relatives for Justice, 2023a). Victims were shot multiple times leading to unsurvivable injuries. Shots were fired at people assisting the dying or holding aloft a make-shift white-flag (New Lodge Six Report, 2002). An inquiry would explain why the British Army claimed responsibility for the first two killings even though the perpetrators were wearing civilian clothes. The claim that the six men were armed and involved in a gun battle with British forces has been shown to be without foundation (New Lodge Six Report, 2002:48).

This intervention also points to the deeply flawed investigation of the New Lodge Six killings. There was a police failure to obtain eyewitness accounts of the six fatal shootings (New Lodge Six Report, 2002:48, 60). The car involved in the drive-by shooting was not forensically tested. Vilifying lies about 'gun-battles' and 'shoot-outs' and 'gunmen' appeared in media reports after the killings. There has been a failure by the Ministry of Defence to trace British soldiers involved in the killings, or disclose any documentation about the New Lodge Six, despite repeated approaches from solicitors representing the bereaved families (Relatives for Justice, 2023a; New Lodge Six Report, 2002:45-48). Indeed, the deaths have been marked by a terrifying absence of investigation by the police, the British Army, the Ministry of Defence, and successive British governments. Each of these state institutions have a responsibility to acknowledge bereaved relatives of the New Lodge Six, explain why these shootings happened, apologize to the families and allow them to obtain justice through legal proceedings.

In addition to exploring the case of the New Lodge Six, this intervention has sought to locate these state killings within a "broader architecture" (Lawther, 2010:456) of truth, justice and accountability. The New Lodge Six families are amongst 1,186 families in the UK and Ireland who are seeking justice in relation to conflict-related killings. What is clear is that the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill seeks to end all legal investigations into conflict-related killings. The Legacy Bill is presented by the British government as a vehicle for "reconciliation" that promises "better outcomes for victims,

survivors and their families” (Dawson, 2023). However, it is not supported by any political party in the north of Ireland. People have not voted or consented to this legislation. It is indefensible that one major protagonist in the conflict gets to determine the rules on conflict-related killings, especially when that protagonist has been involved in controversial state killings. As one bereaved relative said of the legislation, “It has been designed to cause and inflict pain” (Kelly, 2023).

Finally, this intervention has highlighted the similarities between the New Lodge Six killings and the fatal shooting of fourteen unarmed civilians on Bloody Sunday on 30 January 1972. The New Lodge Six killings occurred twelve months after the carnage of Bloody Sunday. These killings were not isolated incidents linked to one British Army regiment (New Lodge Six Report, 2002:23). It is known that 170 people were killed by the British military between 1969 and 1974 (Holder, 2019). Indeed, at least thirty-six civilians, including the New Lodge Six, were shot dead by the British Army in Belfast and Derry alone between 1971 and 1972 (Relatives for Justice, 1991). There were no prosecutions, no convictions and hardly any police investigations into these killings (Holder, 2019). There was a clear pattern of civilian killings and an enduring belief that British soldiers would get away with it (Bennett, 2013:289-90). The British Army and Ministry of Defence have largely remained silent about the shooting of six unarmed men in the New Lodge district in 1973. The Legacy Bill will seal that silence forever. It is time for a full public inquiry.

For archive footage and to listen to eye-witness accounts of the killings, readers can access the New Lodge Six 50th Anniversary Documentary available at the following website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYgR00oJPHU>

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