

Northern Ireland: Allegations of British collusion in Omagh bombing

By Robert Stevens

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Information has emerged that the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) may have been informed 48 hours prior to the event that the Real IRA was to plant the bomb in the town of Omagh on August 15, 1998 that killed 29 people and injured more than 200. Accusations have also been made that the bombing was the work of a British double agent within the Real IRA.

A former British double agent calling himself “Kevin Fulton” has made the allegations. Fulton was an ex-British army soldier, who says he was recruited by the secret service to inform on the activities of the IRA in the 1980s. He claims to have been an informer up until the IRA cease-fire in 1996.

Fulton has made the allegation to a number of media sources, including Channel Four news and the *Guardian* newspaper.

Fulton alleges that two days prior to the bombing, he met a senior member of the Real IRA—a breakaway grouping opposed to Republican Sinn Fein signing the (April 10) Good Friday Agreement setting up the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly—in a pub in Dundalk. He states that the man told him, “There’s something big on”, but didn’t go into any more details. He added that the Real IRA member was “covered in dust and smelling like fertiliser. He had definitely been making a bomb”. Following this conversation, Fulton said that he informed his RUC handler “within hours” and that his handler had subsequently confirmed that this information “was put into the system”.

On August 17, Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman Nuala O’ Loan announced that the new allegations would be investigated.

A portion of Fulton’s interview with Channel Four reads as follows:

Q: “You think that some of the people responsible for the Omagh bomb were informing at the time?”

Fulton: “Yes, no doubt”.

Q: “And they couldn’t be compromised?”

Fulton: “I don’t think the Omagh bombers meant to kill people. The thing is they did, shit happened.”

Q: “Were the RUC warned about the bomb?”

Fulton: “I wouldn’t say they were warned; they would have known that certain things would have happened, yes.”

Q: And you know that for sure?

Fulton: “Yes.”

Fulton stated to the *Guardian* that he passed on the name of the Real IRA member he suspected of making a bomb to the RUC and also gave the suspect’s car registration number.

The crux of Fulton’s allegations is that the British and Irish security forces allowed the bomb to travel in a stolen car from the nearby town of Dundalk to its final destination in Omagh because if it was prevented it could lead to the compromising and possible exposure of agent(s) within the Real IRA.

Another ex-informer, Willy Carlin, said of the Fulton allegations, “I would believe that the officer put it in the system, and it would have immediately been shared by the security services, by MI5 and MI6. It would definitely been shared with the Chief Constable, no doubt about it. And it would have been shared with the

Garda [the police in the Irish Republic]. And the question is, if it was shared, what happened? And why didn't someone turn up in Dundalk and watch this man for 48 hours?"

RUC Chief Constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan described Fulton's allegations that it had any prior warning about the Omagh as "preposterous". The RUC claims to know who is personally responsible for the Omagh bombing, but has said no action can be taken because of a lack of evidence and the witnesses needed to secure a conviction.

The Fulton allegations come at a time when there is growing frustration about the lack of progress in apprehending and convicting the Omagh bombers. On August 16, the husband of one of the victims of the bombing interrupted a RUC/Garda press conference appealing for more information and said that a "conspiracy" was underway to prevent the conviction of the bombers. Lawrence Rush said to the meeting, "My dear sir, this is a conspiracy. This will come out like the Derry Thirteen [a reference to the Bloody Sunday massacre by the British army in 1972]. This is a conspiracy by the British government and by everyone involved in the administration. This is an example of administrative terrorism

"Why did Sinn Fein close their office the day before the bomb? Why was the army confined to barracks? Why sir, did the RUC have only three men on the streets of Omagh and 24 men in surrounding areas? Tell me that."

Fulton states that he also given the Police Ombudsman a copy of a taped conversation between himself and his RUC handler earlier this year. On the tape Fulton is heard to ask if he can recall the 48-hour warning he gave to him before the Omagh bombing. The man Fulton claims to be his handler is heard to reply, "I vaguely remember, but I'd have to check my notes ... I remember something ... I do remember bits and pieces."

Fulton's solicitor, Imran Khan, has said of the allegations, "He is saying that he gave a warning to the RUC prior to the Omagh bomb. He is not saying that he knew the Omagh bomb was going to go off, but that information wasn't passed on, which could have given the RUC a head start."

Fulton's allegations are backed up by the remarks of another former British double agent, who uses the name Michael Clark. Clark stated on August 18, "It makes perfect sense for the army or the intelligence services to allow the progress and delivery of a device of some nature to preserve and protect the safety of an agent. I believe that is possibly the case".

Other reports have emerged that the same man responsible for the Omagh bombing may have also been involved in the making and planting of two other bombs detonated around the same time. On August 1, 1998 a bomb went off in Bambridge, County Down injuring 35 people. The bomb was estimated to be of a similar size to that of the Omagh bomb and the individual who reported the bomb to the security services used the same code word.

Clark states that he personally informed the British Ministry of Defence that there was a danger that the identity of the bomb maker could be exposed. He said, "We were worried that if there was a possibility that he is an agent, his life has been placed at risk.... I took appropriate action and informed the MoD of the relevant details and passed on the information to the senior officer in army intelligence".

It is not beyond question that a British agent within the Real IRA could have planted the Omagh bomb. Earlier this year more details emerged about the covert activities of the Force Research Unit (FRU), an undercover security operation financed and run by the British state in Northern Ireland for more than two decades.

The FRU was a terror network—involving up to 100 soldiers and double agents—that organised a series of covert intelligence and military operations and authorised their agents to carry out numerous illegal activities including bomb making, murder, and the shooting of RUC officers. The FRU's chain of command reached into the upper echelons of the British state. Fulton himself claims that he became an IRA member on FRU instructions, and took part in a series of terrorist bombings in the 1980s and the early 1990s. These included the 1993 bombing that decimated the town centre in Portadown.

Britain was certainly a political beneficiary of the Omagh bombing. It led to a widespread public outcry demanding an end to more than 30 years of violence and helped isolate the dissident paramilitary groups, both republican and loyalist, opposed to the signing of the Northern Ireland Agreement.

The bombing provided a pretext for the Blair government to introduce new laws before a specially recalled Parliament. These laws, which the Prime Minister himself described as being of a “draconian and fundamental nature”, allow the conviction of someone belonging to a proscribed organisation on the evidence of a senior police officer alone. A defendant’s right to silence was breached, by provisions whereby the refusal to answer a “relevant question” or to cooperate with any “relevant inquiry” at any time will be regarded as corroboration of the police officer’s evidence. The measures also include unprecedented powers to convict people on the basis of conspiring within Britain to commit terrorist offences anywhere in the world, making it possible to criminalise and even ban a swathe of organisations opposed to regimes friendly towards Britain.

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