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[**Review of “Lethal Allies”, Anne Cadwallader (Cork: Mercier Press, 2013)**](http://arkivni.wordpress.com/2013/11/14/review-of-lethal-allies-anne-cadwallader-cork-mercier-press-2013/)

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***Blaming the Brits***

*Lethal Allies British Collusion In Ireland* by Anne Cadwallader and the Pat Finucane Centre has received, if a knee-jerk rejection by some Unionists is left out, a largely positive response.  The *Irish News* commentator Fionnuala O Connor raised the issue of the book’s ignoring the effects of IRA violence in stimulating Protestant rage and the descent into criminality and collusion but praised the book’s research and findings of security force collusion with loyalist murder gangs in the so-called  ‘Murder Triangle’ during the mid-to-late 1970s. In the *Irish Times* Susan McKay’s only criticism was that by looking for the source of murder and collusion in Britain’s colonizing history, Cadwallader failed to locate its true origin in the paranoid sectarianism of Unionism, loyalism and the Orange Order. However simplistic and reductionist this explanation it does at least have the virtue of avoiding the ‘Brits are behind it all’ mentality of which *Lethal Allies* is the latest example.

As the book’s blurb admits  there is nothing new in claims that loyalist gangs intent on murdering innocent Catholics were being helped by members of the RUC and the UDR. What is new about *Lethal Allies*, it is claimed, is that it is based on research in state archives and on the reports of the much maligned Historical Enquiries Team (HET) created by the PSNI to investigate deaths during the Troubles.

Without the HET material there would be little to distinguish this book from a number of others that have claimed to uncover an over-arching British state policy to use the counter-insurgency tactics learned in Africa, the Middle East and Cyprus to deal with the IRA. In his *A very British jihad: collusion, conspiracy and cover-up in Northern Ireland* ( Beyond the Pale Publications, 2004) Paul Larkin claimed the existence of a 30 year old strategy by the British state and its intelligence services to promote and support a campaign of anti-Catholic  terror by loyalist gangs.

*Lethal Allies* also resurrects the ‘Wilson Plot’ thesis of an MI5 conspiracy to overthrow the Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, after he returned to power in 1974. ‘Hawks’ in the Ministry of Defence and MI5 are accused of ‘spoiling for an all-out fight with the IRA’ and colluded with the loyalists and their RUC and UDR supporters  to kill more Catholic civilians to provoke the Provisionals (p.166). The evidence for this are the well-known allegations of dirty tricks by the Security Service and other sections of the intelligence community made by Colin Wallace an MOD information officer from 1968 to 1975 and Fred Holroyd who had served for a year as a military intelligence officer in Northern Ireland in the mid-1970s. In his history of MI5 (*The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, 2010) the Cambridge historian, Christopher Andrew, devotes a chapter to the Wilson plot allegations and concludes that they are without foundation. But, as he points out, ‘old conspiracy theories never die’.

Unsurprisingly there is no reference to Andrews’ book in the bibliography which also ignores most of the serious historical work on the British state and Northern Ireland which has been published over the last decade. Nowhere in the book is there any clear identification of what British policy/policies towards Northern Ireland were in the 1970s. In the conclusion it is argued that there was a ‘confluence’ between the loyalist gangs and British policy: loyalist terror wore down the Catholic working class which made it more likely to embrace the political ‘solution’ cooked up in Westminster and Whitehall.  In fact Catholics did not need to be terrorized into supporting  the sort of deal between Unionists and the SDLP based on power-sharing and an Irish dimension which both the British and Irish governments supported at Sunningdale in 1973. In the elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1973 they voted en masse for the SDLP, which supported the Sunningdale strategy.

Contrary to the book’s analysis the relationship of the British state to loyalist violence and collusion was not based on its alleged sponsoring of counter-gangs. British policy in the early 1970s had lurched from reform to repression; to secret talks with the IRA; to a Sunningdale type deal involving Dublin; to contemplation of withdrawal and then into a prolonged period of talks with the IRA. In 1974/75 there was widespread speculation that after the UWC strike British withdrawal was on the cards. It was in this atmosphere of fevered speculation and fears of betrayal that loyalist gangs went on the rampage. This essential political context is missing from the book. No mention is made of the fact that the British government and security apparatus, claimed to be waging a surrogate war against the Catholic community in order to defeat the IRA, was involved in negotiating an IRA ceasefire that lasted for most of 1975. The ceasefire is not mentioned in the book although it helps to explain why 1975 was the only year in the decade when loyalists killed almost as many people as republicans.

The excerpts from the HET reports do demonstrate a degree of collusion between members of the local security forces in mid-Ulster and loyalist paramilitaries. Some of the reports claim that the investigations of the murders were at times cursory or practically non-existent. The HET investigators  note that applying the standards of contemporary best practise to the chaotic, pressurized and dangerous conditions of the Seventies is anachronistic and unfair but nevertheless  this is precisely what the authors of *Lethal Allies* proceed to do. Just as the political context is missing from the book so is any serious recognition of the massive challenges faced by the security forces and the RUC in particular in the early to mid-1970s. The sheer level of violence needs to be remembered – to pick just one year as an example in 1976 there were 247 deaths, 1900 shooting incidents and over 1100 bomb explosions or defusings. To investigate these incidents there was a police force with under 5000 personnel with little of the technological or surveillance tools that would later be developed. In the two police districts that covered the incidents focussed on in the book J District (Lurgan, Portadown, Craigavon and Banbridge) and K District (Armagh) there were around 24 Special Branch officers to cover an area from Lisburn to Omagh. Faced with a war on two fronts their success rate in arresting loyalist terrorists and rogue security force members was not the unmitigated failure depicted here. Overall during the Troubles the RUC solved 50% of murders committed by loyalists compared to 30% of republican murders.

Much is made of the murderous activities of the former member of the UDR Robert Jackson and the allegation that he worked as a hit-man for British Military Intelligence and the RUC. The basis for the allegation is the claim of Colin Wallace that Jackson was working with the Special Branch. The book provides no evidence for this other than quotes from a memo drafted by Wallace at the time. No attempt is made to verify the claim from other sources. Jackson was not the only case of an intelligent and ruthless director of terrorism of whose activities the RUC was well aware but lacked the evidence to effectively prosecute. A number of leading republicans would also enjoy a charmed life throughout the Troubles without this being seen as the basis for claims of RUC collusion with republican death squads.

When the focus moves up from the local to the levels of the Northern Irish and British state the material is much more patchy and inconclusive. It is legitimate to argue that, given that senior figures in the Northern Ireland Office and the Ministry of Defence were aware of evidence of dual membership of the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries, of the loss of weapons, and other signs of collusion, more could have been done to counter such problems. That London focused most on the threat from republican paramilitaries, given the dire toll exacted by loyalists in mid-1970s, is with the benefit of hindsight, open to criticism. In the longer term perspective of the death toll between 1966 and 1998, when republicans killed more than double the loyalist toll of victims, it becomes more explicable.

However the logic of *Lethal Allies*,which ends up blaming the alleged crimes of the British state and its surrogates for provoking the conditions which led to the Provisional campaign, leads to some strange conclusions. Thus the blame for the Kingsmill massacre is laid at the door of the British state for colluding with the loyalist murder gangs who, by killing innocent Catholics, provoked a response from the South Armagh IRA. Certainly specific British policies and actions such as internment and Bloody Sunday did contribute the radicalisation of Catholic politics and increased support for the IRA. But this does not justify the refusal to acknowledge the active agency of the Provisionals in prosecuting an armed struggle with no democratic mandate. Just as contemporary republicans now depict their campaign of violence as a natural development out of the civil rights movement, Cadwallader and the PFC claim the IRA’s ‘Long War’ was a product of the British collusion and not the result of the Provisionals own decision to recalibrate their strategy and to use violence to prevent any restabilisation of Northern Ireland through a deal between Unionists and the SDLP.

The issues of collusion raised in the book are indeed profoundly serious ones. However, despite the fact that the most significant material in the book is drawn from HET reports the conclusion ungenerously rubbishes the HET’s role in dealing with the past. Instead, *Lethal Allies* argues that the British state owes a debt to the entire Northern Ireland community but is noticeably vague as to what exactly is should do to pay this debt apart from a reference to ‘a truth recovery process that can attempt to lay the past to rest’. (p.372) Whatever that means is left to the reader to work out for themselves. In fact its depiction of the British state as congenitally averse to making its dirty secrets public seem to suggest that this is not really believed to be likely. Rather than making a serious contribution to on-going debates about dealing with the past *Lethal Allies* is but the latest manifestation of a one-sided ‘blame the Brits’ syndrome.