UDR Declassified

By AM

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Tommy McKearney 🔖 UDR Declassified by Micheál Smith is, without doubt, one of the most important studies dealing with the recent Northern Irish conflict.

While it explores in detail the record of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), this book is much more than an account of one of the most controversial units in the British army. Providing detailed evidence of grave misconduct by many members of the regiment over the decades of its existence, the reader is nevertheless left in little doubt that real responsibility for the ‘UDR issue’ lay with its master, the British government.

Established in 1970 to replace the Ulster Special Constabulary (B-Specials) the regiment never achieved, nor was it ever likely to achieve, the level of cross community support promised at its formation by Westminster. Even the dimmest of British administrators had to be aware at the time that a British army regiment containing a large number of former B-Specials was unlikely to be attractive to the nationalist community. The fact that all seven of the original battalions were commanded by former B-Special county commandants was more than enough to dissuade any republican and all but the most foolhardy nationalist from enlisting.

Building a cross community force was never a priority for the British government. From the outset it viewed the conflict in Northern Ireland, not as a democratic/civil rights issue but rather in a colonial context and treated it as such. Moreover, London was unwilling to alienate the unionist population and risk UDI at a time when the Cold War was still a reality. As a consequence, Britain adhered in practice to a pro-Unionist position in order to safeguard its immediate strategic needs.

Soon after the regular British Army was assigned to the Six-Counties, armed resistance to Orange violence and by extension the Orange state had become organised and evident. This in turn led the British Army to adopt procedures and thinking that it had acquired and practised during decades of retreat from empire.

Central to this strategy was the recruitment and deployment of a locally based militia, in this case the UDR. The policy had both a political and military logic that cared little for local cultural sensitivities. On one hand it helped assuage Unionist fears of betrayal by Westminster and thus maintain the geopolitical status quo. At the same time it provided the regular army with access to local knowledge and manpower.

However expedient this policy was from the British state’s point of view, it had a decisive and detrimental impact that is felt to the present day. At a stroke, Britain had armed one section of a divided society and authorised it to police the other. A fundamental defect exacerbated by the mid-1970s policy of Ulsterisation. That factor alone would have been enough to condemn the concept as fatally flawed. The problem didn’t end there though. The ease with which loyalist paramilitaries were able to join, access military training and intelligence while siphoning off weapons and ammunition was a well known and disturbing fact. That serving members of the regiment had actively taken part in sectarian murders and colluded in others was and is a matter of record and therefore a major cause of alienation.

To their shame, this situation was well known to the British government and its military advisors. To support his work, Micheál Smith has carried out extensive research in the UK’s National Archives uncovering files from 10 Downing Street, the MoD and the NIO. Among the multitude of documents researched by the author, one will serve to illustrate this point. Entitled ‘Subversion in the UDR’ this unpublished report was compiled in 1973 by military intelligence personnel for the Joint Intelligence Committee which reports directly to the Prime Minister.

Among many startling findings in the document is one that states:

. . . It seems likely that a significant proportion (perhaps 5% - in some areas as high as 15%) of UDR soldiers will also be members of the UDA, Vanguard service Corps, Orange volunteers or UVF.

Notwithstanding this devastating critique, the British government continued to deploy the UDR for a further two decades. This, in spite of the fact that its reputation had scarcely improved. Two decades after the ‘Subversion in the UDR’ report, Metropolitan Police Commissioner John Stevens found reason to order, in October 1989, the arrest of 28 full-time or part-time members of the regiment suspected of involvement with loyalist death squads.

Some readers of this excellent book will undoubtedly view it purely as an indictment of the UDR and its members. Doing so would be a mistake since it overlooks the fact that many thousands served in the firm belief they were upholding the law and defending their communities. It would also ignore the grief and loss suffered by so many members in the course of this service.

What Micheál Smith clearly illustrates in his book, though, is the cynicism of the British state. Arming one section of the Northern Irish community to police the other, no matter the circumstance, was always guaranteed to cause alienation. To compound the error by tolerating an ambivalent relationship with loyalist paramilitaries was inexcusable. Worst of all may turn out to be the callous exploitation by the British state of the UDR itself, as London sought to control its final retreat from empire.

In summary, UDR Declassified makes an invaluable contribution towards a deeper understanding of our troubled history and thus deserves the wisest circulation.

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