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The collusion illusion lets loyalist murderers off hook

(Newton Emerson, [Irish News](#))

On Saturday, the letters page of this newspaper featured a remarkable claim by Clara Reilly, chairwoman of the victims group Relatives for Justice: "We know that more than 1,050 people died as a result of collusion and a further 365 were murdered directly by the forces of the British state," she wrote. "To forget all those who have died would be the worst offence to their memory."

According to the University of Ulster conflict archive, British forces killed 362 people between 1969 and 2001 while loyalists killed 1,020 during the same period. It appears that Ms Reilly has attributed every single loyalist murder up to the present day to collusion.

This, as she adds in her letter, is: "cross-border and cross-community". It includes every Catholic and Protestant killed north and south by every loyalist group. To ascribe all these deaths to British state connivance is a staggering assertion that no credible historical source could possibly support. The claim is also highly partisan. If all murders committed by informers or agents count as death by collusion, which is clearly the very least that Relatives for Justice wishes to imply, then a proportion of the 1,822 people murdered by the IRA between 1969 and 2001 must also have been victims of collusion. Why did Ms Reilly not allow for these deaths in her total?

Ms Reilly's claim mirrors a similar notion floated last month, also in this newspaper, by columnist Jim Gibney. "The UDA and indeed the UVF are not, nor have they ever been, masters of their own destinies," he wrote. "The UDA was set up by the British government in the early 1970s.

"It served their military needs in their war against the nationalist people."

Once again, this is not an assertion with any historical credibility, although it must be noted that Mr Gibney is hardly an impartial historian. Nevertheless, we can safely assume that his writing on this subject represents the party line. Every single loyalist murder of the Troubles, down to the most squalid random shooting by some gormless sectarian savage, was "collusion" because loyalist organisations were set up and run entirely by the British as a

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counter-insurgency strategy. There is no suggestion that Sinn Féin and Relatives for Justice colluded in reaching this opinion simultaneously but their unanimity of thought is certainly a striking coincidence. What we have here, it seems, is a second draft of our recent history – a history of the Troubles according to northern republicans.

In this view, the conflict was a noble military contest by the IRA against the perfidious British state, which fought primarily through loyalist proxies.

There are obvious ideological reasons why republicans would want to claim that the conflict was not merely a senseless and totally unjustifiable episode of tribal bloodletting. But there are also many reasons why apologists for loyalism are happy enough to play along with this rewrite of the recent past.

The late David Ervine enjoyed much favour among republicans for his frequent hints that he was only following orders.

Much talk of the "exploitation of working-class Protestant communities" continues to emanate from loyalist circles – and no wonder. Blaming every loyalist murder on the British state lets loyalists murderers off the hook. Furthermore, it continues to let loyalists off the hook for as long as Northern Ireland remains British. The republican concept of unionist "false consciousness" now apparently includes loyalist "false murder".

The intention, presumably, is that once we are all living in one big happy united Ireland, nobody will ever have been responsible for anything and the future can proceed without any awkwardness. Welcome to Sinn Féin's "truth recovery process".

What a pity that this useful fiction is so obviously absurd, cynical, self-serving, callous, amoral and infantile – although I suppose it is quite an achievement to insult the victims of loyalists, the integrity of unionists and the intelligence of nationalists all at the same time.

Sinn Féin might look forward to some far-off day when we can vaguely blame the Brits for every death.

But relatives really seeking justice need individuals – yes, even loyalists – to be held accountable for their actions.

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