

British Atrocities in Afghanistan

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Since Britain withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, there has been practically no discussion in Britain of the atrocities that were committed by British soldiers in Afghanistan.

Instead, the focus has been almost entirely on the limited improvements that NATO made in Kabul, whereas the plight of the rural areas in Afghanistan that were the [victims](#) of NATO occupation have been totally ignored. American soldiers committed [horrendous atrocities](#) in these areas, ranging from [systematic rape and sexual assault](#) to [massacres of civilians](#). Australian soldiers also committed similar atrocities, [such as](#) tying up children and slitting their throats. British soldiers also [committed atrocities](#) in these areas, most of which are simply not known, because the findings of the British government’s official inquiry into these atrocities, Operation Northmoor, have been [classified](#). Thus, we can only rely on information disclosed in those rare cases that have made it to court, and on information leaked by British military detectives and revealed in media investigations.

Despite these limitations, there is some information available in the public domain about [serious atrocities](#) that British soldiers committed in Afghanistan. This article will focus on the information that is currently available about how British soldiers abused and murdered Afghan children in 2011 and 2012; this information ought to be kept in mind when [the Conservative Party](#), [the Labour Party](#) and [the media](#) vociferously defend the NATO occupation of Afghanistan, and laud the role that Britain played in occupying the country.

Child Abuse

On 18 January 2012, The Sun [reported](#) that British soldiers in the Mercian Battle Group had allegedly abused two young Afghan boys and had filmed the incidents, and that they then [showed](#) the videos of the alleged abuse to their colleagues on their laptops, which led to the Royal Military Police (RMP) opening an [investigation](#) into the incidents. The details of the alleged abuse in each of the incidents were not disclosed in the media at the time, although it was [reported](#) that the abuse was sexual.

The Afghan Presidential Palace released the following [statement](#) in response to the

allegations: “The government of Afghanistan is immensely disgusted by the rise in recent incidents of immoral nature among foreign soldiers that clearly undermine public confidence and the Afghan people’s cooperation with foreign troops”. The statement also [called on](#) the British government to launch an immediate investigation into what happened, and to punish those responsible. The RMP’s Special Investigations Branch subsequently [arrested](#) the soldiers allegedly responsible for the abuse, interviewed them under caution and then released them. The soldiers were subsequently charged with several offences, and were subject to a court martial in Sennelager, Germany on 4 June 2013.

One soldier, Soldier X, was [charged](#) with ‘Disgraceful conduct of an indecent kind contrary to section 23(1) of the Armed Forces Act 2006’. The particulars of this offence were as follows: “On 12 day of December 2011, pulled the hand of an unknown Afghan male child towards his crotch area saying words to the effect of ‘touch my special place’, whilst on patrol in Helmand Province”. [According to](#) the BBC, video footage of the incident was shown at the court martial, which took place near a checkpoint and showed “the former serviceman with a child surrounded by other soldiers and laughing as he repeated “touch my special place” several times”.

[According to](#) The Express, the child in question was 5-years-old, and the incident was investigated because Lance Corporal Mawson, a female member of the RMP, spotted Soldier X “being filmed near a checkpoint while telling a young Afghan boy to touch his privates and pulling on his hand”. Soldier X was also [charged](#) with one count of ‘Conduct to the prejudice of good order and service discipline contrary to section 19(1) of the Armed Forces Act 2006’. The particulars of this offence were as follows: ‘Between the 16th day of October 2011 and 6th day of January 2012, used insulting language towards an Afghan child’.

[According to](#) the BBC, video footage of this incident was also shown at the court martial: “A second piece of video footage shown in court, which the former soldier filmed himself, showed him being approached by an Afghan boy, smiling and offering to shake his hand. Soldier X was heard swearing at the boy before the child turned back in surprise”. The Express [reported](#) that this boy was 10-years-old, and that the video footage showed him coming up to Soldier X while “smiling and offering to shake his hand”; Soldier X responded by shouting at the boy to “fuck off” and calling him a “fucking cunt”. The boy then “turn[ed] backed in surprise”. Soldier X pleaded guilty to both offences.

Bizarrely, the Judge Advocate who was presiding over this case [told](#) Soldier X at the sentencing that “we accept completely that there was no sexual motive behind what you did”, in relation to Soldier X pulling the child’s hand towards his crotch while repeatedly saying “touch my special place”. The most that the Judge Advocate [conceded](#) is that this clearly sexual act “could be interpreted as having a sexual connotation”.

With regards to the second offence, which the Judge Advocate [described](#) as Soldier X “shouting offence [sic] language at a young Afghan boy [which] clearly caused offence”, the Judge Advocate did [acknowledge](#) that “It was gratuitously unpleasant and again a total unacceptable form of behaviour from a soldier in uniform on operational patrol”, but also [accepted](#) Soldier X’s excuse that it was “an ill-judged attempt at humour” and [stated](#) that “fortunately, it did not affect the situation on the ground at that time” (i.e. it did not disrupt the British Army’s operations in Helmand Province; it is unclear why this is relevant).

The Judge Advocate further [confirmed](#) that, when deciding upon the sentence, the fact that

the offences were committed 18 months ago, and the fact that Soldier X had moved on with his life, were taken into consideration: “We take account of the passage of time since these events; 18 months have passed, your life has moved on, you have been out of the army for six months and you are now in full-time employment here in Germany”. He also [informed](#) Soldier X that “we have carefully considered the reference provided by Captain Charlesworth, who describes you as having the utmost professionalism and being one of his most trusted soldiers”; it is unclear how Soldier X’s abuse of children is compatible with that description.

Soldier X was [fined](#) £500 for each offence – pulling a 5-year-old Afghan boy’s hand towards his crotch while repeatedly saying “touch my special place”, and shouting verbal abuse at a 10-year-old Afghan boy, causing him to become alarmed and upset, both of which were videotaped. Soldier Z, who was Soldier X’s patrol commander at the time of the offences and was [charged](#) with two counts of ‘Failing to perform a duty contrary to section 15(1) (c) of the Armed Forces Act 2006’, due to allegedly failing to address Soldier X’s abuse of the two Afghan children, despite being aware of it, was [cleared](#) of these charges.

However, Soldier Z was not cleared of these charges because he was innocent of them; according to the BBC, the prosecutor simply decided that it “would not be in the public interest or appropriate to proceed against him in the light of the guilty pleas” from Soldier X. Thus, two Afghan children were abused – in one case, the abuse was sexual, and in the other case, the abuse was verbal – and the soldier who perpetrated the abuse was let off with a fine, while the patrol commander who allegedly allowed the abuse to happen was cleared of all charges, because the prosecutor decided that proceeding against him was not “in the public interest or appropriate”.

Child Murder

An investigation by The Sunday Times and BBC Panorama in 2019 [revealed](#) that on 18 October 2012, a British soldier in the Special Forces murdered three Afghan children – 12-year-old Ahmad Shah, 14-year-old Mohammed Tayeb and 17-year-old Naik Mohammed – as well as the adult brother of Naik, 20-year-old Fazel Mohammed, in the village of Loy Baqh. The civilians were [murdered](#) while drinking tea together in a guest house belonging to Naik and Fazel; the British soldier burst into the guest house and opened fire on all four civilians. Sultan Mohammed, the older brother of Naik and Fazel, [told](#) the BBC: “When I entered the room I saw bones and teeth all over the place. The four of them were lying there, blood everywhere”. His mother, Sabbah, entered after him and [described](#) the scene as follows: “The cups were full of blood. They had shot the boys in the head”.

This massacre was [committed](#) as part of a night raid, which was a common practice of British Special Forces in Afghanistan during this period. Former military intelligence officer Frank Ledwidge [told](#) the BBC: “The night raids, as some people called them, or death squads, as other people might call them – the practice was you were going out whether we’ve a target or not. It’s a sort of perpetual motion machine of killing and capturing”.

Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions until 2010, [said](#) with regards to the night raids carried out by British soldiers: “I have no doubt that overall many of the allegations [of innocent people being killed] are justified, and that we can conclude that a large number of civilians were killed in night raids totally unjustifiably”.

The RMP [investigated](#) the murders of these four civilians, including three children, and the RMP detectives who carried out the investigation [concluded](#) that the soldier in question should be charged with four counts of murder. The soldier [claimed](#) that two of the boys pointed weapons at him through the window of the guest house, and that the other two appeared from the shadows, forcing him to shoot them in self-defence; however, this version of events was [disproven](#) by photographic evidence from the scene, which showed bullet holes in the mud wall of the room, and that most of the shots entered the wall approximately two feet off the ground. This [supported](#) the boys' families' version of events, which is that the soldier burst into the room and shot the boys while they were sitting on the floor, drinking tea. The RMP detectives [concluded](#) that the boys' families were also telling the truth that the boys had no weapons, and further [determined](#) that the officer who commanded the raid should be prosecuted for falsifying documents, and that his boss should be prosecuted for perverting the course of justice.

[As per](#) the BBC: "These were some of the most senior officers in the UK's special forces. They were accused of covering up an incident in which children were killed". Nonetheless, military prosecutors [decided](#) not to bring charges. Former head of the Crown Prosecution Service, Lord Ken MacDonald, [confirmed](#) that given the evidence, this case should be reopened: "The evidence of the bullet marks doesn't seem to be consistent with the account given by the soldier. It is consistent with the account given by the victims' families. And if it's right that there was an attempt to falsify documents after the event, that makes me even more suspicious about what happened in that room". Despite the RMP detectives [concluding](#) that these four civilians, three of whom were children, were murdered during a night raid, the soldier who perpetrated the massacre and his superiors who allegedly covered it up [have not](#) been prosecuted.

Justice Denied

Thus, in the first case, a British soldier subjected two Afghan children to sexual and verbal abuse, respectively, and in the second case, a British soldier murdered three Afghan children, as well as the adult brother of one of the children. In neither of these cases was justice served; the soldier in the first case was let off with a fine, while his patrol commander who allegedly allowed the abuse to happen was cleared of all charges solely because of the former soldiers' guilty pleas, while the soldier in the second case was never even prosecuted, and nor were his superiors who RMP investigators determined had covered up the murders.

Furthermore, these crimes have been almost entirely erased from the national consciousness in Britain, which is evidence that the national outpouring of 'concern' for Afghans when Britain was withdrawing from Afghanistan was largely cynically constructed; where was this concern for Afghans who were being abused and murdered by British soldiers during the NATO occupation? It was only when the occupation was coming to an end, due to the occupiers being defeated, that suddenly much of British society began 'caring' about the plight of Afghans.

For the sake of the Afghan victims of these atrocities – the kind of victims whom Noam Chomsky classes as 'unworthy victims', as they are victims of 'our' atrocities – the very least that we can do is not consign them to George Orwell's 'memory hole'. An Afghan child is no less deserving of human rights than a British child, no matter how many people seem to think otherwise.

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