

1979 state papers

Diplomats angered by lack of security for Mountbatten

By Staff Reporter

BRITISH diplomats complained bitterly in private about the lack of security provided by the Irish authorities for Lord Mountbatten following his assassination by the IRA, previously secret government papers reveal.

Mountbatten, a distinguished Second World War military leader and an uncle of the Duke of Edinburgh, was killed on August 27 1979 when the IRA detonated a bomb on his boat at his Irish holiday home in Mullaghmore, Co Sligo.

Three other people died in the explosion. Later the same day 18 British soldiers – including 16 members of the Parachute Regiment – were killed in an IRA ambush at Warrenpoint, Co Down, marking one of the darkest days of the Troubles.

In a telegram to Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington – released by the

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Robin Haydon

National Archives at Kew under the 30-year rule – the British ambassador in Dublin, Robin Haydon, said there was a widespread belief the attack on Lord Mountbatten could have been prevented.

He said that the concerns about the level of security provided by the Garda Síochána were shared by people from the area who had “greatly



■ OUTRAGED: The coffin, left, of Lord Mountbatten, above, during his funeral service in Westminster Abbey after he was murdered by the IRA with a bomb on his fishing boat off the west coast of Ireland. British diplomats complained bitterly in private about the lack of security provided by the Irish authorities

liked and respected” the peer.

“For those men and women the horror of what happened was and still is very real and their shame is genuine,” he said.

“The more so because they must share the doubts which we in this embassy have that, had the Garda Síochána been more vigilant and conscientious, the murders might not have happened.”

Mr Haydon also strongly criticised the “apathetic reaction” of taoiseach Jack Lynch who refused to break off his holiday to Portugal to deal with the crisis.

“The taoiseach’s explanation that he kept in close touch with the situation and issued instructions from Portugal about what was to be done, did not carry conviction and showed

remarkable insensitivity to the need for a political leader in a crisis not only to take action but to be seen to be taking it,” he said.

Mr Haydon said that the British embassy had received many letters of sympathy and condolence from ordinary members of the Irish public, some written in “a highly-emotional vein”.

“There has not been one letter that in any way seeks to justify the crimes or to mitigate their horror,” he said.

“In any other country, that last sentence would probably be unnecessary.

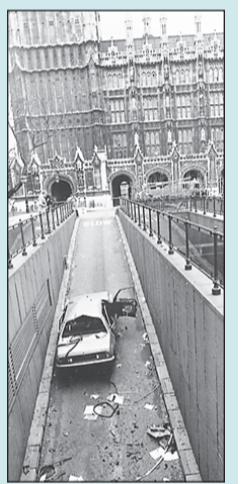
“Here, it has to be said because the Irish have a remarkable capacity for blaming others, especially the British, for their own failings and inadequacies.”

Files on assassination of Airey Neave not released

AMONG significant files from 1979 which have been held back by British government departments include one on the assassination of Airey Neave – one of Mrs Thatcher’s closest advisers in opposition – by the INLA. The Conservative MP, right, was killed on March 30 1979 when a car-bomb fitted with a mercury tilt switch exploded as



he drove out of the car park at the Palace of Westminster, right.



Tensions grew between US and Britain over RUC guns

A SNAPSHOT of the tension between Britain and the US over the supply of guns to the RUC has been disclosed in documents made public for the first time in London.

The US government refused to grant an export licence for Ruger revolvers which were intended for the RUC in July 1979.

The Americans did not want to take sides in the conflict in Northern Ireland and efforts were being made to stop US money flowing into IRA coffers.

The Governor of New York Hugh Carey proposed a meeting between British and Irish officials in New York to discuss the situation but was subjected to a blistering rebuff by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

A note of a conversation between the prime minister and Northern Ireland Secretary Humphrey Atkins on August 23 1979 was among documents released by the British National Archives under the 30-year rule.

It said: “She was not in the habit of discussing the internal problems of the

US with the Americans and they should not attempt to do so with us.

“The Americans must be made to realise that for so long as they continued to finance terrorism, they would be responsible for the deaths of US citizens (as had

“She was not in the habit of discussing the internal problems of the US with the Americans and they should not attempt to do so with us”

happened in the Hilton Hotel explosion in Belfast) as well as others.

“They must realise that while this went on, the British government would attack and condemn them.”

Another section said: “The prime minister said that Governor Carey could come to the UK if he wished to do so – but Northern Ireland was part of the United

Kingdom and she herself would not think of discussing with President Carter, for example, US policy towards their black population.”

The issue rumbled on as British officials tried to find an alternative source of weapons. At a meeting with Jimmy Carter at the White House in December 1979, the US leader insisted that he wanted to approve the sale.

However he said it would be defeated in Congress because Speaker Tip O’Neill had gathered enough support to reject the plan. As she attempted to persuade the president, Mrs Thatcher made a surprising admission.

A note of the discussion said: “She herself had handled both the gun which the RUC at present used and that which was on order. There was no doubt that the American Ruger was much better. It had never occurred to her there would be a problem about completing the order.”

Despite British anger, Mr Carter remained firm on the arms ban and Mrs Thatcher’s aggressive approach failed.



■ THE PRESIDENT’S NOT FOR TURNING: Despite British anger, US president Jimmy Carter remained firm on an arms ban involving RUC guns – and Margaret Thatcher’s aggressive approach failed