

Tiocfaidh ár lá: A Critical Examination of British Counterinsurgency Operations in Northern Ireland 1969-1998

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by
Major Terrence L. Soule
United States Army**



**School of Advanced Military Studies
United States Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas**

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MAJ Terrence Soule

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School of Advanced Military Studies
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Research consisted of an examination of the origins of the Anglo-Irish conflict and the chronological evolution of the British operational approach during three distinct periods of the conflict characterized by varying levels of violence, operational characteristics, intelligence apparatus development, and intelligence integration. It specifically focused on key British actions taken in each period and compared them to those of the PIRA in order to assess their impacts on PIRA operations.

Even though it took some 20 years to develop, it is apparent that the cumulative effect of Britain's operational approach was instrumental in forcing the PIRA to abandon militarism and embrace a political settlement. In its final manifestation, this approach employed sound COIN principles, crippled the PIRA as a relevant insurgent organization and paved the way for the peace process to begin.

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Approved by:

George S. Lauer Ph.D.

Monograph Director

Derek D. Basinger, LCol, Canadian Army

Second Reader

Thomas C. Graves, COL, IN

Director,
School of Advanced
Military Studies

Robert F. Baumann, Ph.D.

Director,
Graduate Degree
Programs

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Abstract

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Introduction and Literature Review

“We have always found the Irish to be a bit odd. They refuse to be English”

-Winston Churchill

At 1600 hours on 14 August 1969, after weeks of destructive rioting and sectarian violence, the government of Northern Ireland officially requested military assistance from the British Home office. Less than twenty-four hours later British troops deployed to the urban centers of the six counties marking the beginning of the Troubles (1969-1998). The activities of British security and intelligence services against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) during the Troubles in Northern Ireland are some of the most controversial aspects of the 29-year conflict. Some argue that the actions taken by these forces were critical in eroding the PIRA's operational capabilities and were instrumental in forcing it to seek a political solution in 1994. While others contend that the questionable methods employed by the various intelligence agencies involved, and the often heavy-handed operations executed by the security services were of dubious legality, undermined civil liberties, and were ultimately counterproductive in achieving an acceptable political settlement. Additionally, it is important to note that the bulk of the conflict occurred against the backdrop of significant British operational commitments including preparing for the defense of Europe from the Soviet threat, the Falkland Islands War, and the first Gulf War.

This bodes the question: Did the operational approach taken by British security forces against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) during the Troubles in Northern Ireland effectively support its stated strategic aim of a lasting political settlement acceptable to both Republicans and Unionists?¹

¹ The terms Republican and Unionist refer to the two main conflicting ideologies in Northern Ireland. “Republicans” support the reunification of the six counties with the remainder of the Irish Republic. Unionists are those who believe that Northern Ireland should remain part of

This monograph will evaluate the effectiveness of the activities of the intelligence and security forces operating in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. These forces used an operational approach that evolved over time and combined lethal direct action, maneuver denial, and police integration that some maintain effectively undermined PIRA capability and ultimately forced it to seek an acceptable political solution. Research will consist of an examination of the origins of the Anglo-Irish conflict and the chronological evolution of the British operational approach during four distinct periods of the conflict characterized by varying levels of violence, operational characteristics, intelligence apparatus development, and intelligence integration. These periods are as follows: Peacekeeping and wide area security (1969-1972), the intelligence war (1973-1977), Police Primacy (1977-1985), and “Shoot to Kill” (1985-1994). Research will focus specifically on key British actions taken in each period and compare them to those of the PIRA in order to assess their impacts on PIRA operations. Supporting information will come from a number of sources and will include historical facts, statistical data, firsthand accounts, and official British Government reports and publications.

Throughout the course of research for this monograph, the author faced a number of limitations. The most significant of these was the inability to gain access to official British military records, which remain classified due to a statutory 30-year moratorium, and/or they contain sensitive information regarding informer networks and British intelligence penetration of the PIRA. Additionally, most of the major PIRA participants are major players in the Northern Ireland political establishment and the British government has determined that excessive airing of dirty laundry from the Troubles is counterproductive to maintaining the tenuous peace that exists today.² The clandestine nature of the PIRA also makes it difficult to assess accurately the

the United Kingdom. Republicans typically are Catholics and Unionists are primarily Protestant that contributed to the sectarian nature of the conflict.

² Edward Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002), xx-xxi.

motivations of its leadership outside of the published propaganda documents. Lastly, the emotional nature of the conflict, coupled with its relatively recent conclusion has resulted in a body of primary and secondary sources that is susceptible to bias and incomplete and/or questionable analysis.

The majority of the literature on the subject falls into three major categories: Journalist derived sources, military and security focused technical literature, and conventional historical works. Of these categories, journalist sources are by far the most prevalent. First hand coverage of the conflict from its inception by prominent journalists including Ed Moloney, David Mckittrick, and Tim Pat Coogan has led to the development of a large body of works produced during or in the immediate wake of the conflict based on their individual reporting. The result has been a body of literature that is historically accurate in terms of facts, figures, dates, places, and people, but one that lacks the requisite academic rigor to back up some of the more controversial assertions made by the authors in question. For example, there are significant differences in the manner in which Tim Pat Coogan's *The IRA: A History* and Ed Moloney's *A Secret History of the IRA* assess the impacts of the British Operational approach. While Moloney's account is widely viewed as more accurate, it is important to consider that both works are subject to the effects of the authors' personal biases, incomplete access to official information and narrow appreciation of the broader conflict.

The Troubles also gave birth to a large body of literature that explored the technical and legal aspects of the conflict from a military and security apparatus perspective. The most prominent of these works is Mark Urban's *Big Boys Rules: The Secret Struggle Against the IRA*, which offers one of the first comprehensive analyses of the development of the British security/intelligence apparatus in Northern Ireland, along with an objective assessment of its overall effectiveness. Desmond Hamill's *Pig in the Middle* offers a similar analysis for the British Army and tracks the development of its tactics, techniques, and procedures in response to increasingly sophisticated PIRA operations. These works provide excellent insight into the

effectiveness of British security forces from a strictly military perspective. However, they make only limited attempts to consider security operations within the larger social, political, and cultural contexts of the conflict.

By far the smallest body of literature that deals with the Troubles is conventional historical works. This is a result of the relatively recent nature the conflict, the fact that the key players are still alive and active in the current government of Northern Ireland, the still unsettled nature of the peace, and the lack of available primary sources. Nevertheless, there have been a few attempts to provide a comprehensive history of the conflict. Richard English's *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* is one of the best examples of this. *Armed Struggle* provides a complete history of the IRA from the 1916 Easter Rising all the way through the 2003 decommissioning process. Historians consider it one of the first successful attempts to produce an objective history of the conflict that provides rich context without the insertion of sectarian biases or unsupported assertions.

Taken separately, each of these categories of sources provides only a limited picture of the conflict and the implications of the actions taken by the key players. Considered together however, these three categories provide the researcher with a thorough appreciation of the inherent complexity of the conflict, allows him/her to evaluate the impacts of the actions taken by each side, and identify and mitigate source bias. The outcome is a body of work that is imperfect, but one that a researcher can use to develop an accurate picture of the conflict that is devoid of emotional bias, anecdotal evidence, and conjecture.

Section 1: Origins of the Anglo Irish Conflict

The Troubles represent a particularly dark time in both British and Irish history characterized by seemingly random violence, questionable tactics, and sectarianism. To the casual observer it seemed senseless but to those involved it made perfect sense. An appreciation for Anglo-Irish history is required in order to understand the Troubles and the actions taken by both sides. Only through an examination of this history is it possible to understand the roots of Anglo-Irish animosity, the events that led to the partition of Ireland and the Catholic/Protestant sectarianism that were the primary causes of the conflict and continue to plague Northern Ireland to this day.

Origins of the Anglo-Irish Conflict

The origins of the Anglo-Irish conflict date back to the Norman Invasions of the late 11th and early 12th centuries. In 1170, the Earl of Pembroke led an invasion of Ireland supported by the Pope and English nobility seeking to expand their land holdings.³ By 1250 the Normans were in control of almost the entire island and established a feudal system that supplanted the Gaelic traditions and institutions practiced by the natives. Early on, the Irish proved a difficult people for the British crown to control due to their fiercely independent nature and the logistical difficulties associated with maintaining control over far-flung territory. Over the next 50 years, the Gaels fought a guerilla style war that eventually reduced the Norman footprint on Ireland to a small planter's colony in the area of what is today modern Dublin.⁴

From 1300 to 1494, the British halfheartedly attempted to maintain control over Ireland using a series of laws designed to prevent Irish political autonomy and the intermixing of English

³ Kevin Kelly, *The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the IRA* (Westport: Laurence Hill & Co, 1982), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

settlers with Gaelic natives.⁵ This effort culminated with the Poyning's Law, which brought the Irish parliament directly under British control. Nevertheless, it is apparent that English influence was on the decline and that the native Gaels using a mixture of coercion and intermingling had effectively, albeit unofficially reestablished control over most of Ireland. This changed in 1541 when Henry VIII declared himself ruler of Ireland. Henry's aggressive assertion coupled with his very public split from the Catholic Church and British identification with the early Protestant movement represent the genesis of the sectarianism that exists today.⁶ From 1560-1579, Queen Elizabeth I attempted to forcibly convert the largely Catholic Gael population to Anglican Protestant. The native Gaels, who had converted to Catholicism in the mid fifth century rejected these attempts and actively participated in intermittent guerrilla war throughout Elizabeth's reign. This resistance culminated in 1580 when they actively supported the Spanish landings at Dingle. The Irish saw the Spanish, who were at war with the British at the time, as potential Catholic allies who could assist them in overthrowing crown rule.⁷

The Irish support of the Dingle landing proved to be a disastrous miscalculation. The British quickly defeated the invading Spanish and exacted harsh reprisals against the Gaelic population. Immediately following the war, the British killed thousands of Irish and economically marginalized the remainder through the seizure and/or destruction of property and livestock.⁸ Harsh British reprisals and subsequent economic marginalization led to significant unrest within the Gaelic community that came to a head in 1594 with the Ulster uprising and nine years of war. Ulster, despite British attempts to establish control of the entire island, remained largely under the control of two major Irish Clans, the O'Neils and the O'Donnells. Both of these clans recognized

⁵ Kelley, 3.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

the larger implications of British rule in Ireland and in 1598 began a general uprising that would last until 1607 when they were finally defeated and their chieftains forced into exile.⁹

In the immediate aftermath of the nine years war, the British recognized that Ulster with its large strongly traditional Gaelic population was the center of gravity for the Irish resistance movement. In order to address this, the British began transplanting Protestant Scottish settlers to Ulster and by 1640, they had successfully transplanted over 100,000 adding to an indigenous population of approximately one million.¹⁰ These Scottish Presbyterian settlers formed the basis of a larger Ulster Protestant population loyal to crown rule and are the ancestors to a significant portion of the current Protestant population. The Irish responded to this forced resettlement with the rising of 1641 which marked the beginning of sectarian violence in Ulster. During the conflict, the native Irish population targeted Protestant settlers due in part, because they represented most visible consequences of crown rule. The ensuing bloodshed led to the development of the siege mentality among Ulster Protestants that exists today and equates crown protection with their survival among the “Catholic Savages.”¹¹

By the time the English Civil War broke out in 1642, the British had established control of Ireland and had effectively pacified the bulk of the native Gaelic population. However, once the war began the Irish took advantage of the ensuing turmoil to launch a series of uprisings that raged until 1649. Following the execution of the King in 1649, Oliver Cromwell brought his “New Model Army” to Ireland and brutally crushed Irish resistance. In the aftermath of the war, Cromwell exiled the bulk of the Catholic population to the furthest reaches of the island, and by 1652, he had reestablished British control of Ireland with the leadership of his Model Army

⁹ Kelley, 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 4.

forming the basis for new Anglican Protestant nobility.¹² Cromwell also seized the property of all those who participated in the rebellion compounding the already significant economic marginalization that existed within the Catholic community. By 1652, the percentage of Irish land in Catholic hands had fallen to 22% from a prewar level of 59%.¹³

The prospects for the Irish seemed to improve with the restoration of the Crown in 1685 and the establishment of King James II as King. James, who was a Catholic, offered a glimmer of hope to a thoroughly disenfranchised Irish Catholic population. However, the Dutch Protestant Prince William the Orange quickly deposed James in 1689 and he fled to Ireland.¹⁴ Once in Ireland James sought to reestablish himself on the throne with the support of French troops by defeating William's Irish Protestant allies. In 1689, his army besieged the town of Derry in Ulster along with its 35,000-Protestant inhabitants.¹⁵ Protestant forces would eventually break the siege and set the conditions for James's final defeat by William the Orange at the battle of the River Boyne in 1690. The defeat of James II by William further exacerbated existing sectarian tensions and put Protestants firmly in control of Ireland both militarily and economically.¹⁶ It also gave rise to organizations like the Orange Order, which continue to be a major political force today and has consistently undermined Catholic/Protestant reconciliation efforts.

Wolfe Tone and the Birth of Irish Republicanism

It is ironic in light of the current conflict that Irish Republicanism was born in the Protestant community. By the mid to late 18th century, a large Protestant Irish bourgeoisie had emerged that was dissatisfied with British mercantile economic policies. There was also

¹² Kelley, 4-5.

¹³ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

significant unrest within the Catholic community, which, the British had now completely disenfranchised politically and economically with the Penal Laws.¹⁷ This dissatisfaction gave rise to a number of prominent Irish Protestant figures calling for economic reforms, Irish unity and questioning the legitimacy of British rule. The most important of these figures was a Protestant Barrister named Theobald Wolfe Tone. Tone recognized that any successful revolutionary movement would have to have Catholic support to succeed and was committed to Catholic equality. He formed an organization called the United Irishmen and reached out to Catholic organizations like the Defenders highlighting areas of common interests between the Catholic peasantry and the equally poor Presbyterian working class.¹⁸ Tone was able to capitalize to a limited extent on the synergistic effect of the unrest that existed within both communities with the Catholic relief act of 1793 that repealed the most draconian Penal laws.¹⁹ Nonetheless, he was never able to achieve the unity he sought due in large part to Anglican organizations like the Orange Order that used a combination of rhetoric and violence to deepen sectarian divisions in order protect their privileged economic status. Tone continued to push for a united Irish revolution and travelled to Paris in 1798 to enlist French support. The French initially committed, however when the time for action came, French support never materialized and Tone's 1798 rising failed. The ensuing British reprisals resulted in the death of over 50,000 Irish and Tone's

¹⁷ Seumas MacManus, *The Story of the Irish Race* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1967), 454-456.

¹⁸ The Defenders was a Catholic organization formed in Northern Ireland to protect Catholic communities from Protestant attacks. They primarily engaged in gang type violence with Protestant groups most notably the "Peep o Day Boys". In 1795, the Defenders engaged in a short street battle with the Peep o Day boys called the Battle of the Diamond. During the fight, several defenders were killed and the organization itself was disbanded in the wake of the conflict following a series of arrests and deportations by British authorities. Thomas Keneally, *The Great Shame and the Triumph of the Irish in the English Speaking World* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 37.

¹⁹ Daniel Hollis, *The History of Ireland* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 81.

death by suicide while in British custody.²⁰ Tone is regarded as a hero in the Republican movement to this day and his legacy would play an important role in the development of the Irish civil rights movement of the 1960's which was born in intellectual societies that bore his name and subscribed to his non-sectarian Republican principles.

In response to the 1798 rising, the British Parliament passed the Act of Union in 1800, which abolished the Irish parliament and put Ireland directly under the control of Westminster.²¹ A series of payouts and concessions to the Presbyterian community accompanied the Acts of Union in order to appease radical elements, assure loyalty to the crown, and establish a loyal united Protestant community to serve as a check to Irish Republicanism.²²

Following the passage of the Act of Union, Ireland sank into a period of economic stagnation as the Britain used Irish agricultural capacity to support growing industrialization. Economic development during this period was limited to the Anglican elite of Belfast who dominated the region's primary industries, shipbuilding and textiles.²³ The Irish potato famine on 1845-46 further exacerbated already crippling rural poverty and by 1856, almost three million Irish had either emigrated or starved.²⁴ Famine, pervasive poverty, and continued British indifference cemented into the Irish consciousness that British misrule was directly responsible for Irish suffering. This led to a rebirth of Republicanism that resulted in the formation of a new generation of Irish political organizations including the Phoenix movement, the Fenians and Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).²⁵

²⁰ MacManus, 525.

²¹ Hollis, 83.

²² Kelley, 12.

²³ Ibid., 13.

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

²⁵ Hollis, 101-102.

The Fenians and IRB sprang from a semi-secret society called the Phoenix founded by Jeremiah O'Donovan in 1856. In 1857, O'Donovan established contact with exiled Republicans in America and formed the Fenians, which was a political cover for the clandestine paramilitary IRB. Many Fenians had acquired military training during the American Civil War and from 1865-1870 the IRB conducted a series of daring attacks against British colonial forces that would culminate with a failed rising in 1867.²⁶ Despite this setback the Fenians and the IRB would continue to function on and off for the next 50 years setting the stage for the Easter rising and the eventual formation of the Irish Republican Army.

The late 1800s saw a series of land reforms in response to ongoing unrest among the Catholic peasant majority. The success of these land reforms gave birth to the first Home Rule movement in 1880. Home rule was introduced in the British Parliament by a block of Irish MPs led by Charles Stewart Parnell and called for the restoration of the Irish parliament and limited autonomy over internal affairs.²⁷ Home Rule proved to be extremely popular throughout Ireland except in Ulster where the Anglican dominated elite saw no advantage in weakening its ties with Great Britain. The Protestant elite in Ulster had come to equate protection of its position of comparative advantage over Catholics with preservation of the Union. There was no market for the textiles and ships produced in Ulster in Ireland and Protestant dominated industries were wholly reliant on Britain for cheap raw materials.²⁸ Additionally, large segments of the British economy profited greatly from trade with Belfast making any sort of split out of the question. As a result, home rule was defeated in 1886 by conservative members of the House of Lords and the

²⁶ Kelley, 19.

²⁷ Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1-3.

²⁸ Kelley, 22-23.

solidarity demonstrated by Anglican elite with the British crown marked the beginning of the Unionism movement in Ulster.²⁹

Following the defeat of Home Rule, Ireland experienced a period of Gaelic revival and growing nationalism. The year 1905 saw the formation of Sinn Fein as a political voice for Irish Republicanism and it was widely embraced throughout rural Ireland. This Gaelic revival occurred in conjunction with a second Home Rule movement that began in 1912 led by Irish MP John Redmond.³⁰ This second movement began in response to fundamental changes in the British political landscape. These changes included the restoration of a liberal majority in the House of Commons and an end to the veto power of the largely conservative House of Lords over legislation, which had stymied the previous attempt.³¹ It became apparent to the Unionists in Ulster that they would no longer be able to prevent Home Rule and began arming themselves in order to prevent full integration in a greater Ireland and to improve their position at the bargaining table. In 1913, Edward Carson formed the 100,000 strong Ulster Volunteer force (UVF) and in 1914 smuggled 35,000 German rifles and ammunition into Belfast.³² Within a few months, the Catholic community responded by forming the Irish Volunteers and by 1914, an armed clash over Home Rule seemed eminent.³³ The outbreak of World War I (WWI) in August of 1914 interrupted any further escalation and the British Parliament approved Home Rule in principle but stipulated that its implementation would occur following the end of the war.

The extraordinary service of Ulster Protestants during WWI firmly cemented the Anglo-Unionist relationship. In 1914, UVF volunteers formed 36th Ulster division. This Ulster division

²⁹ Kelley, 23.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

³¹ Ibid., 26-28.

³² Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9-10.

³³ Kelley, 29-30.

proceeded to fight in almost every major British engagement on the Western front and became one of the most decorated British units of the war, earning nine Victoria Crosses. In contrast, the Irish Catholic community largely decided not to participate in “England’s War.” The service of the Ulster division during WWI and in subsequent wars has made it politically difficult for any British government to withdraw support for Northern Irish Protestants even in the face of widespread internal and external opposition.

1916-1922 Independence and Partition

Once again seeking to take advantage of British preoccupation, the IRB and Irish Volunteers led by James Connelly and Patrick Pearse staged the Easter rising in April of 1916.³⁴ The Easter Rising began with the seizure of the general post office and several other government buildings in Dublin by over 1,000 Irish rebels. Pearse and Connelly declared an Irish Republic and over the course of the next week fought fierce street battles with British forces. The British eventually put down the rising and executed its leaders but it signaled the beginnings of a larger Irish Revolution.³⁵ The Easter Rising spelled the end of Home Rule and ushered in a new era of Irish militarism in which the only acceptable outcome was complete independence from Britain.³⁶ Following the Rising, Sinn Fein became the political voice of militant Irish Republicanism and in January 1919 at the first Dail Eireann it formally declared an Irish Republic, marking the beginning of the Irish War of Independence and the Birth of the Irish Republican Army under the command of Michael Collins.³⁷

The Irish War of Independence raged for almost three years and included a mixture of guerilla warfare, conventional engagements, and terrorist attacks. By late 1921 the British, weary

³⁴ Hollis, 127-128.

³⁵ Ibid., 130.

³⁶ English, 14.

³⁷ Dail Eireann is a Gaelic term used to describe Irish legislative assemblies.

from years of combat in WWI and in Ireland began to seek a political settlement with Irish Republicans. Throughout the negotiations, the fates of the Unionist areas in Northern Ireland remained a point of contention for both sides. Eventually in December 1921, British and Irish representatives agreed on a treaty to end the war that split Ireland into the 26 county Free State south and the six county Unionist north that exists today.³⁸

Free and Protestant states 1922-1962

Hard line republicans however, flatly rejected partition and over the next two years, the IRA fought a bitter civil war with Free State forces. In May of 1923, through military action and by co-opting key IRA members, the newly elected Irish Prime Minister Eamon de Valera was successful in getting most of the hardliners to lay down their arms effectively ending the Irish Civil War.³⁹ Over the next 20 years, de Valera and his party Fianna Fail systematically began the political and economic separation of Ireland from Britain. The IRA continued to operate in a limited manner during this period, attacking Free State, British and Unionist targets. The Free State actively sought to limit IRA operations throughout this period in order to consolidate government power and to prevent British intervention in Free State affairs. During WWII, the Free State remained strictly neutral, even going so far as to deny British use of Irish ports for the duration of the war.⁴⁰ There were some contacts between Nazi agents and the IRA during the war but they produced few tangible results.⁴¹ Following partition, the Unionists consolidated their power in Northern Ireland and formed the Stormont Parliament outside Belfast in 1932. Unlike the Free State, Ulster actively supported the British war effort providing troops and access to

³⁸ Kelley, 30-32.

³⁹ Edward Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002), 47.

⁴⁰ Kelley, 57-60.

⁴¹ Moloney, *A Secret History* , 48-49.

strategically important port facilities. This support resulted in a strengthening of Stormont-Westminster ties and a further solidification of partition.

Following the War the Free State took further steps to separate itself from Britain declaring itself a Republic in 1949. In response, Britain passed the Ireland act, which effectively legitimized the Unionist veto by predicating Irish reunification on the approval of a six county majority.⁴² The IRA also began to reform itself during this period under the direction of its new chief of staff Tony Magan. From 1956 to 1962, the IRA conducted a border campaign attacking British and Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) targets in Northern Ireland. This campaign proved unsuccessful however, due to the preference of Northern Irish Republicans to push their agenda through the political process rather than militarism.⁴³

Northern Irish Civil rights Movement 1962-1969

In 1962, Cathal Goulding became the IRA chief of staff and began to move the IRA in a different direction than his predecessors. The border campaign weakened the IRA both politically and militarily and by 1962, it was generally in a state of disrepair. Funding was in short supply, key leaders were either dead or in jail, and recruitment was not keeping up with operational demand. In response, Goulding began to advocate the limited politicization of the IRA and the adoption of Socialist and Marxist political philosophies.⁴⁴ In doing so, he sought to reframe the struggle along ideological rather than sectarian lines. A renewed interest in the political philosophies of Wolfe Tone accompanied this political shift. In 1963, The IRA in conjunction with other Republican movements convened commemorative committees to celebrate the bicentennial of Tone's birth. From these committees sprang Wolfe Tone Societies beginning in

⁴² Kelley, 68-69.

⁴³ Tim Coogan, *The IRA: A History* (New York: Roberts Reinhart Publishers, 1993), 226-248.

⁴⁴ English, 83-84.

1964.⁴⁵ These societies espoused the values of Wolfe Tone including a unified non-sectarian Ireland and intended to “Foster republicanism by educating the masses in their cultural and political heritage”.⁴⁶ The Wolfe Tone societies advocated a version of Irish Republicanism that stressed Protestant/Catholic solidarity against British rule and rejected partition as an inherently unfair system designed to preserve the position of the Protestant elite and marginalize the working class. It is not surprising that the Northern Irish civil rights movement had its beginnings in the Wolfe Tone societies and in 1966, the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was formed at a joint session of the Belfast and Dublin chapters to serve as an umbrella organization for the fledging civil rights movement.⁴⁷

By supporting and being involved in the civil rights movement, the IRA had unwittingly set the conditions for the formation of the PIRA and the next stage of the Anglo-Irish conflict. The IRA and NICRA quickly lost control of the movement because they underestimated Unionist cohesion and did not fully understand the severity of sectarian animosity in the North.⁴⁸ In 1966, a prominent Ulster Protestant named Augustus Spence reformed the UVF. This new UVF engaged in numerous sectarian attacks killing several Catholics and suspected IRA members between 1967 and 1969.⁴⁹ The spark that lit the fire however occurred in October 1968 when a radical sub group of the NICRA called the Peoples Democracy conducted an ill-advised protest march through Protestant neighborhoods. Various loyalist elements attacked the march spawning an escalation of violence the culminated in the summer of 1969 with uncontrolled sectarian violence and rioting throughout the six counties of Northern Ireland. Catholic communities

⁴⁵ English, 84-89.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 91-92.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 99.

became virtual fortresses as they sought to protect themselves from both the Protestant dominated RUC and Unionist groups.⁵⁰

It is against this backdrop that the PIRA was born. Goulding's politicization of the IRA had rendered it unable to rise to the defense of the Catholic community in the summer of 1969.⁵¹ As a result several prominent members of Belfast IRA units led by Billy McKee and several future prominent PIRA members including; Gerry Adams, Daithi O'Connell, and Seamus Twomey began to question the competence and commitment of the southern IRA leadership. This crisis in confidence came to a head in September 1969 when this group confronted the Belfast IRA commander Liam McMillen at an Army council meeting.⁵² Although both sides were able to reach a tentative compromise, the dissenters continued to prepare for what they viewed as inevitable split from their southern leadership. This split occurred in October 1969 when the IRA Army council under Goulding voted to end the longstanding IRA policy of abstentionism, which prohibited Republican participation in any British or Northern Irish legislative assemblies. Immediately following the vote, the dissidents, led by Sean MacStiofain walked out of the meeting and set in motion the actions that would lead to the formation of the PIRA on December 28, 1969.⁵³ From the beginning, the PIRA embraced the traditional views of the Republican movement reinforcing its support for abstentionism and a united Ireland free of British influence. The PIRA immediately began to back up its militant rhetoric with violence against RUC, Army, and Unionist forces. The explosion of violence that ensued was the modern manifestation of 800 years of Anglo-Irish animosity and would evolve into one of the longest and most costly insurgencies ever, the Troubles.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 101-104.

⁵¹ English, 105.

⁵² Ibid., 105-106.

⁵³ Ibid., 107.

Section 2: Peacekeeping and Wide Area Security (1969-72)

When British forces took to the streets of Northern Ireland in the summer of 1969, the situation had become completely unmanageable for the Unionist dominated Stormont government. Urban centers were in chaos, sectarian violence was rampant, and the ongoing unrest reduced cities to a series of religiously aligned fortified zones. A weary Catholic population eager to see an end to the violence initially welcomed British forces. This reservoir of good will would eventually dry up over the next three years as inadequate political guidance, intelligence failures, a lack of civil military security cooperation, and increasingly heavy-handed British responses to PIRA violence led to a series of poorly contrived operations. By the winter of 1972, the British had completely alienated the Catholic community and were facing a full-scale insurgency with no cohesive strategy to tackle a highly sophisticated enemy in an extremely dynamic and complex environment. Only after a series of hard lessons and the painful realization that they were no longer involved in a peacekeeping mission were they able to regain a semblance of the initiative and begin to effectively deal with the PIRA.

The Security and Intelligence Apparatus

Security forces in Northern Ireland during the initial phases of the Troubles consisted of two separate and distinct entities, The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and Ministry of Defence forces under Headquarters Northern Ireland (HQ-NI). The RUC was essentially a conventional police force that operated in three geographic districts, Northern, Southern and Belfast that spanned the entirety of the six counties.⁵⁴ A deputy chief constable that answered directly to the chief constable headed each of the regions and police forces were broken into sixteen regionally

⁵⁴ Mark Urban, *Big Boys' Rules: The SAS and the Secret Struggle Against the IRA* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 17-18.

aligned battalion-sized divisions.⁵⁵ The RUC also had an organization called Special Branch that managed police intelligence and surveillance, a criminal investigation division that handled major crimes, a Special Patrol Group (SPG) that received specialized military training and was the RUC's primary anti-terrorism organization and a force of part time police reservists called the B-Specials.⁵⁶

British military forces in Northern Ireland initially consisted of three battalions totaling 2700 soldiers under the UK Ministry of Defence Headquarters Northern Ireland (HQ-NI) which was a joint command headed by a three star General Officer Commanding from the Army (GOC).⁵⁷ By 1972, this number had swelled to three brigades totaling over 22,000 troops.⁵⁸ The expanding scope of the operation forced HQ-NI to augment the existing command structure with a land component command under Commander Land Forces Northern Ireland (CLF-NI).⁵⁹ The addition of HQ CLF-NI freed up the GOC to manage the increased political scrutiny generated by increasing violence. In addition to regular army forces, HQ-NI also commanded the locally recruited Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). Army forces broke Northern Ireland into battalion "patches" or Tactical Areas of Responsibility (TAOR) with regular army forces occupying the more difficult regions and UDR forces operating in areas that were more permissive.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Urban, 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁸ Desmond Hammill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland 1969-84* (London: Methuen, 1985), 118.

⁵⁹ Thomas Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles 1970-72* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 53.

⁶⁰ Urban, 16.

Peacekeeping

From the beginning, HQ-NI viewed British intervention in Northern Ireland as a peacekeeping operation. British forces were on the ground to “act in the aid of civil power” to stop the violence and restore order.⁶¹ Once the army restored order, they would withdraw and allow the RUC to reassume responsibility for day-to-day security. Consequently, operations focused almost exclusively on the physical separation of Catholic and Protestant communities with British forces occupying the streets with orders to “look neutral” and only utilize lethal force in the face of an eminent threat. The barricades erected during the rioting throughout the cities became an integral component of this peacekeeping oriented approach. So much so that when the Stormont government demanded that they come down in Belfast in 1970 the GOC LTG Sir Ian Freedland, had army forces erect their own “peace line” barricades.⁶²

The British also attempted some limited police reform by commissioning the Hunt report in 1969, which examined RUC organization, recruitment, and operations. One of the major recommendations of the Hunt report implemented was the disbandment of the hated B-specials.⁶³ The B-specials had long been the bane of Catholic communities throughout Northern Ireland and Catholics regarded them as little more than organized sectarian death squads.⁶⁴ While this characterization is likely an exaggeration, there is enough historical evidence to support claims that they were incapable of acting as a legitimate, unbiased police force. The locally recruited

⁶¹ Hammill, 16-17.

⁶² Ibid., 18-24.

⁶³ David McKittrick and David McVae, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002), 55-58.

⁶⁴ The B-Specials were directly descended from the “Black and Tans” of the Irish war of independence and throughout the years leading up to the Troubles had a reputation as Unionist death squads who killed Catholics with impunity. This became so bad that Catholic communities developed a simple warning system. Any Catholic would emit a high-pitched cry of “Muurrderr” that would be taken up by the whole neighborhood. Eventually, the banging of pots would join the cries and residents would use of red lens flashlights to direct IRA forces to the location of the B-Specials and would continue until gunmen forced them out of the area. Coogan, 123.

Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR) replaced the B-specials.⁶⁵ Originally intended to be an integrated Catholic/ Protestant force the UDR quickly became Protestant dominated as many Catholics left in the face of growing PIRA violence and increased Republican sentiment in the early 1970's.⁶⁶

PIRA Development

While British forces were desperately trying to restore order in the urban centers of Northern Ireland, the PIRA was gathering its strength and developing a strategy for the coming conflict. The basis for this strategy was traditional Irish Republicanism that viewed the separation of the six counties as an inherently artificial creation formed at the behest of British occupiers. The British became the primary target of the PIRA, which viewed them as enablers of the illegal Stormont government. The PIRA analyzed several successful insurgencies waged against British forces in their colonial holdings and developed an approach designed to generate attrition and create the perception that Northern Ireland was ungovernable. To accomplish this, the PIRA adopted a deliberate strategy that focused on developing a quasi-conventional force structure for the eventual execution of an all-out offensive against British forces. This strategy also called for an extensive information operations campaign designed to spread Republican ideals and turn the Catholic population against the British by inciting disproportionate military responses and leveraging Catholic media sources.⁶⁷

On the ground, this strategy translated into a steady escalation in the frequency and intensity of PIRA violence. Throughout 1970, this violence was characterized by rioting, civil unrest, and limited attacks on security personnel. By 1971-72, the PIRA had increased the

⁶⁵ Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1985) 39.

⁶⁶ Urban, 15-16.

⁶⁷ Kelley, 283.

sophistication of their operations and had transitioned to deliberate attacks on security personnel and a coordinated bombing campaign that targeted economically significant targets.⁶⁸ The most significant of these early bombings occurred in July of 1971, when a bomb went off in the offices of the Daily Mirror plant in Belfast, causing roughly 2£ million in damage.⁶⁹ By July of 1972, PIRA attacks had resulted in over 100 British soldiers killed in action since their initial deployment in 1969 and the Westminster was beginning to reassess existing policies.

Inadequate Political Guidance

The segregation-oriented peacekeeping approach adopted by British forces was indicative of an operation undertaken with inadequate political guidance. Physically separating the combatants represented a simplistic, purely military solution to a problem with political, sectarian, and civil origins.⁷⁰ While this approach did result in an initial reduction in violence, it did not effectively address its underlying causes and demonstrated a fundamental lack of understanding of the operational environment. It also did little to diffuse sectarian tensions and aside from disbanding of the B-specials, the British government took almost no action to implement reforms and/or address the concerns of NICRA and the largely disenfranchised Catholic community. Additionally, by segregating Catholic neighborhoods and creating no-go areas the British ceded the initiative to the PIRA, who capitalized on this segregation to arm, equip, and train unmolested.⁷¹

The violence of the 1970 spring marching season displayed in graphic detail the consequences of Westminster's failure to develop a fully integrated strategy to deal with Northern Ireland. On June 27 1970, the Protestant Orange Order began a series of marches through or near

⁶⁸ Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles* , 100-101.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁷⁰ Hammill, 21.

⁷¹ Ibid., 32.

Catholic neighborhoods throughout Belfast despite calls for their suspension. Angry Catholic crowds met these marches, resulting in extensive unrest as both sides exchanged petrol bombs and gunfire. In response, the PIRA distributed arms from dumps throughout the city for the defense of Catholic communities. PIRA gunmen in the Catholic Ardoyne area of Belfast killed three Protestants and the unrest would continue well into the next day. The violence culminated on the evening of the 27th, when a Protestant mob attempted to burn down St. Matthews Church in the Short Strand area of Belfast.⁷² PIRA gunmen led by prominent member Billy McKee engaged in a pitched five-hour gun battle with Protestant mobs that killed one PIRA sympathizer and wounded McKee. In response to the civil unrest and violence of June 27-28, British forces stepped up weapons searches in Catholic areas. On July 3 1970, British forces moved into the Falls Road area of Belfast, searched three houses and confiscated a small PIRA weapons dump. During the search, angry Catholic crowds descended on them and the situation quickly spiraled out of control. During the 34 hour, confrontation British forces engaged in a significant firefight with PIRA forces and locked down the area implementing a curfew. To the Catholic population, the failure of British forces to stop Protestant marches and the subsequent Falls Road curfew were clear demonstrations of Unionist bias, called into question Westminster's commitment to meaningful political reform, and significantly undermined British legitimacy.⁷³ The Falls Road curfew was a reflexive military response that was not part of a larger national level strategy designed to leverage force in conjunction with civil/political reform and clearly demonstrates the inconsistency of British operations during the early years of Troubles.

⁷² McKittrick and McVae , 69.

⁷³ Dewar, 46-47.

Intelligence Failures

Segregation also made it virtually impossible to gather any meaningful intelligence from Catholic areas. This resulted in British forces having an extremely limited view of the nature, capabilities, and intent of the PIRA during the early 1970's.⁷⁴ This lack of intelligence also made targeting key PIRA personnel extremely difficult. The failure of internment in August of 1971 following a coordinated increase in PIRA violence that included the execution of three off-duty British soldiers is a direct result of systemic intelligence collection shortfalls. The government of Prime Minister (NI) Johnathan Chinchester-Clark had floated the concept of Internment without trial of suspected PIRA members and although it appealed to conservative elements of his party, it did not enjoy widespread support among the Protestant majority. There was a precedent for internment as well. British forces had used it with significant success against the officials during the border campaign of the late 1950's and early 1960's.⁷⁵ After the executions and subsequent escalation in PIRA violence, a more conservative government under Reginald Maulding that was more receptive to internment replaced the Chinchester-Clark government. Stormont endorsed internment in the spring of 1971 and in August of that year, British forces commenced with Operation Demetrius, which was the widespread detention of suspected PIRA members identified by military intelligence and the RUC special branch. Because of poor intelligence the initial internment lists were incomplete and of questionable accuracy. Sweeps by British forces netted only a small portion of the PIRA leadership and historians estimate that of the 342 arrested on the first day less than a third had any real links to the PIRA and were released by British security forces shortly after. British forces would repeat this process throughout internment and by the end of the first six months of the operation authorities had released most of the 2400 people arrested after a short detention. The PIRA's core leadership was left largely intact with key members like

⁷⁴ Hammill, 25-26.

⁷⁵ Coogan, 123.

PIRA chief of staff Seán MacStiofáin and council members Ruairí O’Brádaigh, and Daithí O’Connell remaining at large in the Republic.⁷⁶ This left the remainder with a significant operational advantage in that it provided increased opportunities to engage British forces and the arrests and resulting suspension of civil rights proved an information operations goldmine for the PIRA actively seeking to court the larger Catholic community.

Furthermore, British Intelligence failed to account for the reaction of the Catholic community to the implementation of internment. Operation Demetrius sparked one of the most intense periods of violence in Northern Ireland’s history. During a three-week period, violence resulted in the forced displacement of approximately 2500 people as whole neighborhoods were burned and dozens of Catholics and security personnel were killed.⁷⁷ Internment sparked revulsion among the Catholic community and erased any perception of impartiality on the part of the British. Additionally, internment effectively ended faith in the British/Stormont government to implement any meaningful reform and its commitment to the “principle of equal citizenship”.⁷⁸ The result was an effective block to political progress and a galvanization of the Catholic community in support of the PIRA brand of Republicanism. In short, internment was a political disaster in that produced few military results despite initial claims by British forces that it was a complete success. History would invalidate these claims over the next year, which proved to be the most violent of the 30-year conflict.

Lack of Civil Military Security Cooperation

A lack of civil/military security cooperation hampered early British efforts in Northern Ireland as well. From the beginning, there was little coordination between HQ-NI and the RUC. When British forces occupied critical urban centers in 1969, they did not synchronize their initial

⁷⁶ English, 139.

⁷⁷ McKittrick and McVae, , 69.

⁷⁸ Thomas Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles*, 143-144.

operations with the RUC, which arguably had the best situational awareness at the time. Consequently, army forces were not able to develop a coherent visualization of the battlefield in a timely manner and were engaged piecemeal often in the wrong areas. This was compounded by the fact that there was no joint planning between the two agencies prior to the Army's deployment, despite the fact that growing civil unrest in the previous months made military intervention a real possibility. The Army was acting independently and had effectively supplanted the RUC as the primary mechanism for the enforcement of civil control.

The only coordination element between the RUC and HQ-NI was the Army's Special Military Intelligence Unit (SMIU), which was a collection of approximately 50 officers who had the responsibility of liaising with the RUC at various levels of command. While this arrangement in theory should have resulted in minimal intelligence synergy, it is evident that the SMIU was a distinctly military organization and produced few tangible results.⁷⁹ There was also a mutual distrust between the two organizations. British forces regarded the RUC, especially the B-specials as unprofessional and sectarian. By this rationale, the mere presence of the Army in Northern Ireland was an indictment of overall RUC incompetence and Protestant bias. The RUC had a markedly different perception of British forces and viewed their presence as detrimental to security. They viewed the Army as outsiders who did not have a full appreciation for the dynamic political situation on the ground and alienated the civilian population with heavy-handed tactics. To the RUC leadership it was also apparent that they would not be able to reestablish civil control until police supplanted Army forces. Furthermore, there was very little intelligence sharing between the two organizations with British forces engaging in sometimes very clumsy collection efforts and the RUC unwilling to share information gathered from Special Branch informants viewing it as its only way leverage HQ-NI.⁸⁰ This systemic lack of cooperation failed to produce

⁷⁹ Hammill, 18-21.

⁸⁰ Urban, 18.

a coordinated civil/military response in the summer of 1969 and would eventually evolve into an institutional rivalry that would hinder British operations until the late 1970's.

Heavy Handed British Tactics

As the PIRA stepped up its operations in the early days of the Troubles, British forces began to respond in an increasingly incoherent and disproportionate manner. The difficulties associated with waging an insurgency within your own borders, underneath the scrutiny of the global media and with ambiguous rules of engagement (ROE) were beginning to take its toll on morale and discipline. This manifested itself in operations characterized by increasing violence and questionable use of force as early as 1970. British behavior during the Falls Road curfew, including movement restrictions, arbitrary arrests and destruction and/or theft of private property, exemplifies this.⁸¹ As PIRA violence increased and became more organized British responses became increasingly extreme and counter-productive. The suspension of civil rights associated with internment, the so-called "enhanced interrogation" of suspected terrorists that has been characterized by human rights groups as torture, and collateral damage associated with operations like Motorman and Demetrius completely alienated the Catholic population, facilitated PIRA development, and enhanced PIRA legitimacy.⁸²

The escalation in PIRA violence also led to a revision of the "Yellow Card" which was the ROE for Army personnel. Initial versions of the Yellow Card reflected the initial British perception that their primary mission was peacekeeping. Accordingly, the Yellow card was highly prescriptive and put significant restrictions on the use of lethal force and the ability of Army personnel to apprehend and question terrorist suspects. In 1971 the GOC, Sir Ian Freedland relaxed the rules of engagement in response to increased PIRA activity. Previously, the ROE only

⁸¹ Kelley, 146-148.

⁸² Ibid., 155-156.

allowed army forces to use the minimum amount of lethal force required to protect in the friendly forces, civilians, and/or designated property from an imminent threat.⁸³ The new ROE expanded the eminent threat criteria to include enemy personnel carrying firearms and petrol bombs regardless of intent. This essentially meant that individual soldiers could legally employ lethal force against suspected terrorists even if the personnel in question did not demonstrate hostile intent.⁸⁴ The expansion of the imminent threat criteria, coupled with the ambiguous nature of the “minimum amount of lethal force” requirement, created a situation where the ROE was open to excessive interpretation and almost any action could be legally justified.

The growing frustration among British forces and a wholly inadequate ROE set the conditions for one of the most controversial and tragic events of the Troubles, Bloody Sunday. On January 30, 1972, NICRA marchers moved through Derry in open violation of previously established bans on organized marches. British forces anticipating civil unrest and potential PIRA violence dispatched elements from the First Parachute Regiment to establish barriers and disperse the march before it could escalate into a larger riot. The use of the First Parachute Regiment was in itself questionable. The regiment had a reputation as the most aggressive unit in Northern Ireland and CLF-NI commonly used it as a quick reaction force designed to subdue some of the most violent areas of the province.⁸⁵ In the ensuing confrontation, British forces opened fire on the marchers and killed 13, purportedly after PIRA gunmen opened fire on them.⁸⁶ The event was

⁸³ Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles*, 53-55.

⁸⁴ Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles*, 54-55.

⁸⁵ The decision to use the 1st PARA regiment for the arrest operation on Bloody Sunday remains one of the most controversial of the Troubles. It is evident that the CLF-NI, MG Robert Ford had compelling operational reasons to use them despite their aggressive record. However, many have questioned this decision and have put forth evidence that calls into question his judgment in using such a force for the type of operation in question. Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles*, 260-263.

⁸⁶ Soldiers on the ground during this incident contend that PIRA gunmen fired on them first and they simply retaliated in accordance with established ROE. Eyewitnesses and PIRA sources dispute this claim and maintain that the PARAs simply opened fire on protestors.

single worst civilian loss of life in Northern Ireland since the Troubles began and sparked outrage throughout Northern Ireland, the Republic, and the world. Bloody Sunday spelled the end of British illusions that they could easily reestablish civil control in Northern Ireland, completed the alienation of the Catholic population and signaled the end of the Stormont government.

Outcomes

Bloody Sunday left the British security establishment in Northern Ireland badly shaken and the PIRA seemed on the verge of victory. The violence of 1972 would prove to be the worst of the 30-year conflict and represented a low point for HQ-NI. The PIRA had succeeded in toppling the Stormont government and the British had legitimized the PIRA by engaging its leadership in initial high-level negotiations. It also enjoyed widespread support among the Catholic community giving the PIRA access to an ever-growing pool of recruits, financial resources, and weaponry. Along with this, came the realization that there would have to be a comprehensive review of the British security policy in Northern Ireland in order to regain the initiative and reestablish a viable civil authority acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants.

Available evidence can only confirm that there was likely one shot fired at the Soldiers by a lone member of the Official IRA and assertions by both sides as to who initiated firing are largely unverifiable. Hammill, 90-91.

Section 3: The Intelligence War (1972-1977)

Bloody Sunday and the orgy of violence that followed stunned Westminster and represented a worst-case scenario for the British government. What had initially begun as nothing more than military support to local authorities had morphed into a full-scale counterinsurgency (COIN), on British soil, against a well-financed, armed and motivated enemy. With this realization also came the understanding that the current military and political strategy was wholly inadequate to address the situation and that a whole of government approach that combined meaningful reform, diplomacy, and precise military action was necessary to defeat the PIRA and end the violence. Consequently, after 1972 there was a fundamental shift in the British military's operational approach away from the physical separation of combatants and heavy-handed tactics to an approach that relied on maneuver denial, civil military security integration, and precise lethal targeting. The foundation of this approach, however, was something that the British were severely lacking: meaningful and actionable intelligence. British forces implemented a number of measures to address intelligence shortfalls and developed a methodology that leveraged persistent surveillance, technology and human intelligence to generate and manage the large volume of intelligence required to defeat an insurgent enemy.

Persistent Surveillance

One of the first people to recognize the critical intelligence shortfalls British forces were facing was Brigadier Frank Kitson, who was the commander of the 39th Brigade in Belfast from 1970 to early 1972. Kitson would prove to be one of the most controversial figures in the Troubles due to his theories on COIN derived from his experiences in British colonial holdings, some of which would come to form the basis for British strategy.⁸⁷ As early, as 1970 Kitson saw

⁸⁷ Frank Kitson has written a number of books about counter-insurgency. The most notable of these is *Low Intensity Operations*, which he published prior to his deployment in Northern Ireland. *Low Intensity Operations* advocates the use of a number of methods that some

that there was a need to penetrate Catholic areas in order to gather what he termed as a large volume of “low-grade” intelligence generated from persistent surveillance.⁸⁸ Low-grade intelligence he argued would establish PIRA operational patterns, enable the targeting process and allow British forces to infiltrate and manipulate Republican organizations.⁸⁹ Conventional forces could not accomplish penetration of Catholic areas however, and in 1970, Kitson received permission to employ plain-clothes soldiers organized in a special unit called the Mobile Reconnaissance Forces (MRF) in covert surveillance operations. The MRF employed a number of sophisticated techniques including limited informant running, covert observation posts, and using businesses as fronts to gain access to Catholic communities. Probably the most infamous of these operations was the Four Square Laundry incident. The MRF had established a legitimate laundry service as a front in Belfast that lured customers with discount coupons and pick-up and delivery services. During pick-ups, one plain-clothes soldier would interact with the customer and the other would conduct observation. The MRF would then have the laundry tested for explosives and firearms residue, clean it, and then send it back to the customer. An informant eventually compromised the operation and the PIRA ambushed the van killing one MRF soldier.⁹⁰ The initial efforts of the MRF did yield some useful intelligence but its operations were often clumsy and plagued by a lack of professionalism. The Four Square laundry incident and a series of

argue are of questionable legitimacy within the contexts of a modern liberal democracy. Kitson would remain a controversial figure throughout the conflict and was a favorite target of PIRA propaganda, which claimed that the British sent him to Northern Ireland in order to test his theories. Although this is certainly possible, no evidence exists to support this claim and it is unlikely based on his relatively low position (Brigade Commander) within the HQ-NI command structure. Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peacekeeping* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1971).

⁸⁸ Hammill, 41-44.

⁸⁹ Richard Bulkeley, “War by other means: Lessons of British Responses to Republican Terrorism in Northern Ireland” Canadian Conference of Defence Association (2008): 3, <http://www.cda-cdai.ca/cdai/uploads/cdai/2009/04/bulkeley01.pdf> (accessed December 13, 2011).

⁹⁰ Bradley Bamford, “The Role and Effectiveness of Intelligence in Northern Ireland,” *Intelligence and National Security* 20, no. 4 (2005) 588-589.

botched operations that included a bogus massage parlor resulted in the disbandment of the MRF in 1973.⁹¹ More importantly, however the MRF demonstrated the potential intelligence benefits of covert surveillance and led the British adopt it as a critical component of its collection efforts.

The potential intelligence benefits of covert surveillance demonstrated by the MRF led to the rapid expansion British surveillance capacity in both the military and the police. In 1973, HQ-NI deployed the 14th intelligence company to Northern Ireland.⁹² The 14th Intelligence Company was a highly classified covert surveillance unit comprised of highly trained personnel sourced from both the military and intelligence community. Within the British security forces, its members were regarded as equivalent to elite units including the Special Air Service (SAS) and Special Boat Service (SBS).⁹³ The 14th Intelligence Company had three operational detachments each operating in a specific Brigade TOAR that included two officers and approximately twenty men.⁹⁴ Operations usually consisted of covert static observation posts or mobile observation using unobtrusive civilian vehicles called Q-cars. Despite some miscues, 14th Intel was highly successful in generating intelligence regarding PIRA members and known associates. HQ-NI quickly recognized that due to its highly specialized nature and relatively small numbers that it would not be adequate to address the Army's surveillance requirements. Accordingly, in 1977, Major General Richard Trant established Close Observation Platoons (COP) at the battalion level designed to augment 14th Intel's efforts by providing general information on PIRA activities,

⁹¹ Urban, 38.

⁹² Because of its covert nature, the organization referenced here, as 14th Intelligence and Surveillance Company had no officially recognized unit designation. Throughout the Troubles it went by several designations including Intelligence and Security Group Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Training and Advisory Team (NITAT). Later on, British security forces commonly referred to it as 14th Intelligence Company or 14th Int., which is how the author will refer to it throughout this monograph. *Ibid.*, 38-40.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

patterns, and community atmospherics. The intelligence gathered by the COPs allowed 14th Intel to further refine and focus their targeting and collection efforts.

The success of the Army's covert observation efforts led the RUC to develop its own covert surveillance capacity. In 1976, the RUC established the Bronze section within the SPG, which police officials hoped would give them a capability on par with the Army. After some initial failures and the recognition that the surveillance mission was beyond the scope and capability of the SPG the RUC established a dedicated surveillance division called E4 within Special Branch. E4 was broken up into four sections E4A, B, C, and D. E4A provided covert surveillance much akin to 14th Intel, E4B was responsible for technical surveillance, and E4C and D were responsible for photographic surveillance and exploitation. The RUC's increased surveillance capacity along with a restructuring of Special branch along regional lines resulted in significant improvement in police capability that by 1977 had begun to rival that of the Army's.

The RUC and the Army also made extensive use of overt surveillance to generate low-grade intelligence. Beginning in 1973, the HQ-NI and the RUC shifted resources away from the border region and began to systematically gather and collate basic demographic information reference Catholic no-go areas using small presence patrols, observation posts, and aerial surveillance. These efforts focused on the identification of all pertinent families in the area, information on all males and females of military age, and known PIRA contacts in order to establish patterns of life, focus surveillance efforts and facilitate targeting.⁹⁵ Almost immediately following Bloody Sunday, HQ-NI implemented revised patrolling tactics and training programs for Soldiers assigned to Northern Ireland. These patrolling tactics focused on community policing and emphasized precision and extreme restraint in the application of lethal force. The Army also developed training programs to provide soldiers with the requisite intelligence collection skills including OP management, overall vigilance, and specific information regarding PIRA tactics and

⁹⁵ Hammill, 134-135.

targets. Additionally, British forces made extensive use of vehicle checkpoints (VCP) to gather information and limit the ability of PIRA members to move freely within republican areas. British forces used a number of aerial platforms to gather intelligence as well. In 1973, the British began using Canberra aircraft to provide high altitude imagery of critical urban centers and established the Reconnaissance Interpretation Centre (RIC). The use of aerial reconnaissance assets would expand and evolve over the next decade and incorporate advanced systems like stabilized closed circuit television systems mounted on Gazelle helicopters called “heli-tellys” and fixed wing mounted infrared systems designed to locate roadside bombs.⁹⁶

Technology

Technology greatly aided British collection efforts by allowing intelligence organizations to gather and manage the vast amounts of raw intelligence using sophisticated observation equipment and computer technology. Each observation post was equipped with the latest high-powered optics, night vision devices, fiber optic cameras, Listening equipment and communications gear. Furthermore, the British leveraged computer technology to catalogue and convert raw information into useful intelligence products. In 1974, the Army introduced computerized vehicle records in conjunction with stepped up VCPs as part of an operation called Vengeful.

Vengeful records put critical information regarding specific vehicles in the hands of soldiers on the ground within 30 seconds and put severe constraints on the ability of known PIRA members to move freely even within Republican areas. Although the PIRA quickly recognized this critical vulnerability and took steps to address it including the use of so-called ringer cars, Vengeful significantly increased the degree of difficulty for previously simple operations such as

⁹⁶ Hammill, 116-117.

car bombings and contraband movement.⁹⁷ Another example of security forces leveraging technology is the development and operations of the Army's Weapons Intelligence Unit (WIU) in the late 1970's. The WIU was responsible for covert forensic analysis, sabotage, and bugging of Weapons and/or explosives caches discovered by security forces. The bugging of weapons, called "jarking" by the intelligence services, proved particularly effective, in that it produced several arrests, shed light on PIRA logistical operations, and undoubtedly prevented numerous PIRA attacks with relatively low risk.⁹⁸ Additionally, security forces also made extensive use of WIU forensics data in the identification and prosecution of PIRA terrorist suspects.

Human Intelligence

British forces quickly recognized the inherent limitations of surveillance and the need for higher-grade human intelligence to undermine PIRA operations. Throughout the conflict this intelligence came from primarily from two sources; the interrogation of prisoners and from informers within the PIRA. Prisoner interrogation began in earnest following internment in 1971 and was an integral part of British peacekeeping and COIN doctrine.⁹⁹ Initial interrogation techniques were of a questionable nature and yielded mixed results. Security forces called these techniques "interrogation in depth" and utilized sensory, sleep and food deprivation, stress positions, exposure to monotonous sounds, and generally rough handling to break a prisoner.¹⁰⁰ Although interrogation in depth did produce some valuable information, it was widely criticized by human rights activists and the international community. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that interrogation in depth was torture and that the techniques employed were "inhuman and

⁹⁷ Urban, 115.

⁹⁸ Colin Clarke, "Evolution of British Intelligence and Counterinsurgency Policy Northern Ireland 1969-1998," *Pitt Political Review* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 11.

⁹⁹ Bradley Bamford, 589.

¹⁰⁰ McKittrick and McVae, 68.

degrading.” This criticism also proved to be valuable information operations fodder for the PIRA who used it to reinforce their portrayal of British forces as repressive occupiers. The outrage sparked by interrogation in depth forced British security forces to examine new prisoner interrogation methods. By the mid-1970s, the focus of prisoner interrogations had shifted from trying to extract immediate tactically relevant information to a concerted effort to turn prisoners into informants using a combination of incentives and coercion.¹⁰¹

The development and expansion of the British informer network during the mid to late 1970s produced a significant volume of high-grade intelligence and did much to undermine PIRA operations. Typically, British forces would recruit an informer after arrest by exploiting personal weaknesses, offering financial incentives, and/or the threat of lengthy prison terms. The British also used what some have characterized, as blackmail by threatening to expose extra-marital affairs or deviant lifestyles in order to gain cooperation from a potential informant. Informants offered security forces three primary benefits. First, they provided vital information regarding the organization and leadership of the PIRA. Second, informants had the ability to provide specific information regarding an attack, bombing, and/or the location of a weapons cache. Third, and probably the most importantly they sowed fear and distrust within the PIRA and the republican community.¹⁰²

Informers weakened the organization by undermining organizational cohesion, creating operational uncertainty, and forcing it to divert resources to root out potential touts. They also generated organizational paranoia and led the PIRA to target its own members. IRA members

¹⁰¹ Allegations of torture and prisoner abuse would continue to plague British forces throughout the Troubles. At the center of these allegations was a RUC holding center in Belfast called Castleragh, which was the subject of an Amnesty International report, and subsequent government investigation in 1979 that found significant evidence of both abuse and unlawful coercion. Although the RUC implemented a number of reforms at the facility, it would continue to be a source of controversy up until its closure in 1999. Kelley, 298-300.

¹⁰² Clarke, 11.

generally accepted that informants or “touts” as they were known would be tortured and killed if discovered. During a 14-month period between 1980 and 1981, the PIRA executed six men they determined to be informants.¹⁰³ While the PIRA was successful in identifying some informants it is likely that a sizeable percentage of those targeted were not working with the security forces.

Outcomes

The combination of human intelligence and persistent surveillance severely limited the ability of the PIRA to operate effectively by the mid-1970s. Large portions of its senior leadership including Seamus Twomey and Billy McKee were in jail and its ability coordinate military operations of any kind were substantially degraded. Prominent British/Irish reporter and author, Tony Geraghty described this environment as “The ‘new village’ in Ulster was an invisible cage of electronic and human surveillance thrown around selected homes and neighborhoods, Orwellian in its implications for a liberal society.”¹⁰⁴ Consequently, the PIRA adopted a cellular structure in 1977 to stem the flow of arrests, reduce the impacts of informants, and restore its operational capabilities.

At the center of this structure was the Active Service Unit (ASU) which consisted of four to five operators who worked for a specific handler. There was little or no direct contact between ASUs with senior leadership, support organizations, and other ASUs. Each ASU would receive a specific assignment from a designated handler, receive weapons and equipment from a prepositioned arms cache, and execute the mission as an autonomous entity.¹⁰⁵ The adoption of a cellular structure had numerous benefits for the PIRA. First, it allowed it to shrink its organization and remove members of questionable loyalty thereby mitigating the impacts of

¹⁰³ Coogan, 394.

¹⁰⁴ Clarke, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Kelley, 285.

informants and limiting the exposure of senior leaders to arrest.¹⁰⁶ It also fundamentally altered the operational landscape for British security forces and provided valuable time for the PIRA to regroup.

Despite these obvious advantages, the cellular structure adopted by the PIRA had a number of unintended and detrimental effects. From an information operations perspective it undermined its image as the conventional military manifestation of a popular uprising and moved it into the realm of a terrorist organization. The small size of the ASU also severely limited the scope and nature of PIRA operations. Conventional operations including sophisticated ambushes and attempts to achieve localized parity with security forces became increasingly difficult and forced the PIRA to adopt an operational approach that relied heavily on bombings, assassinations, and smaller scale attacks. Additionally streamlining the organization made the PIRA's senior leadership more susceptible to concentrated surveillance and allowed British forces to focus intelligence collection efforts. It was essentially a "Catch-22" for PIRA operatives, the new organizational structure reduced the net impacts of informers but, in the event that security forces breached the operational security, it was considerably easier for them to concentrate surveillance assets and make arrests.¹⁰⁷

The realities of the operational environment by mid-1977 also resulted in the PIRA reexamining their military and political objectives. This is essentially the beginning of the politicization of the PIRA. The police saturation of Belfast, the steady stream of arrests, and changes in the social and political landscape had begun to push the PIRA away from a purely military strategy. The replacement of senior leadership who had infused the organization with traditional republican ideals with a new generation of left leaning members who had grown up in

¹⁰⁶ M.L.R. Smith, *Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Republican Movement* (London: Routledge, 1995), 145.

¹⁰⁷ Moloney, *The Secret History*, 332-333.

Northern Ireland paved the way for the end of abstentionism and opened the door for a political solution to the conflict.¹⁰⁸ Although the PIRA would continue to pursue a violent military strategy for many more years, the reorganization and political shift that occurred in mid-1977 began a trend of increasing politicization that would continue to gather strength until the end of the conflict.¹⁰⁹

By 1977 that British security Forces had seized the initiative and the PIRA was in retreat after a series of setbacks generated by improved British intelligence. Nonetheless, the PIRA was far from defeated and the transition to a cellular structure continued to provide the PIRA with the ability to execute damaging and often spectacular operations. It also presented security forces with a host of new challenges stemming from having to deal with a clandestine organization within the contexts of a constitutional democracy. Fortunately, for the British, they now had the intelligence framework with which to implement a cohesive civil/military based approach to defeating the PIRA.

¹⁰⁸ Kevin Kelley, 262.

¹⁰⁹ English, 183.

Section 4: Police Primacy (1977-1985)

By the mid 1970's, British security forces had established an effective framework for surveillance and intelligence gathering. However, there was little or no effective coordination between the RUC and the Army due to pervasive organizational rivalries and mutual distrust. The lone civil-military coordination agency, the SMIU, had proven to be a distinctly military organization that did little to improve overall coordination and produced few tangible results other than the de-confliction of kinetic operations. This lack of coordination resulted in the inefficient use of assets, duplication of efforts, and created a general lack of operational cohesion. Additionally, the British had come to understand that the visible presence of military forces in Northern Ireland were of limited utility and were often counterproductive. The transition of the PIRA to a cellular structure and their adoption of a new politically oriented "Long War" strategy also effectively killed the prospect of a negotiated settlement for the near future.

Consequently, beginning in 1977, British forces began a concerted effort to make civilian authorities the primary party responsible for security, criminalize the PIRA, and improve civil-military security cooperation. The theoretical basis for these efforts came in the form of a report generated by an informal committee chaired by a senior Northern Ireland civil servant named John Bourne in January 1977 that consisted of several senior army officers, civil servants, and an MI5 representative.¹¹⁰ The committee produced a report titled "The Way Ahead" that acknowledged the implications of military forces serving in place of civil authority, advocated improved coordination, and outlined a two-pronged policy that advocated what it termed Police Primacy or "Ulsterization" and the criminalization of the PIRA.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Hammill, 184-185.

¹¹¹ Clarke, 10.

Police Primacy

“The Way Ahead” defined Police Primacy in terms of acceptance and effectiveness. Acceptance referred to community recognition of the police as the primary law enforcement entity and effectiveness denotes its ability to fulfill this role. The man most responsible for the implementation of Police Primacy is Chief Constable Kenneth Newman. Newman was one of principle architects of the Bourne committee report and possessed a keen understanding of the challenges facing the RUC stemming from the security environment, military skepticism, and the overall level of professionalism within the force. From the outset, Newman pushed for the rapid transition of security responsibilities from military to civilian control and viewed continued military involvement as counter-productive. One of his first actions was the production of the “Joint Directive” which was a document obtained through a series of negotiations with the GOC that codified the reversal of the roles of the army and police. Thus reestablishing the RUC as the primary civil authority and relegating the army to previous role as acting in support of the police and civil power. It also limited the scope of Army activities to operations generated by police requirements and mandated consultation with the police for searches, arrests, and patrols.¹¹²

Newman also took significant steps to improve the level of professionalism in the RUC by improving the overall quality of police work especially in the areas of forensics, investigation and interrogation. Newman supervised the collection and shipment of over 20,000 fingerprints from crime scenes to England for analysis resulting in several hundred arrests and convictions.¹¹³ He also spearheaded the use of computer technology and advanced scientific equipment for forensic analysis, evidence management and collection, and surveillance.¹¹⁴ The result of these reforms was the transformation of the RUC into an organization with levels of competence in

¹¹² Hammill, 193.

¹¹³ Urban, 29.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

police work on par with any other regional police force in Great Britain with an additional robust counter terrorism capability. This marked increase in professionalism facilitated the implementation of Police Primacy by improving public perception and mitigating army skepticism regarding RUC operational capabilities.

The late 1970s and the implementation of “Ulsterization” also saw a shift away from the military as the center of gravity for intelligence operations and the ascendancy of the RUC Special Branch. The failure of internment and a lack of intelligence gathering capacity forced Newman to reexamine the roles and capabilities of both the RUC Special Branch (SB) and Criminal Investigation Division (CID). In response, he requested a number of external reviews by both MI-5 and the Special Branch of the London Metropolitan Police department. These reviews revealed a number of structural and systemic shortcomings that Newman addressed with a reorganization of several critical departments and the implementation of reforms throughout the force.¹¹⁵

Reorganization focused on clearly defining the roles of SB and CID and ensuring that their activities were fully coordinated. CID became the primary agency responsible for the interrogation of terrorist suspects, which freed up SB to focus on surveillance, intelligence gathering, and managing informer networks. Designating CID as the primary party responsible for suspect interrogation resulted in a marked increase in the quality of information obtained through the interrogations. CID interrogators were highly trained and often armed with extensive dossiers, which allowed them to confront terrorist suspects from a position of advantage and obtain a greater degree of success in terms of confessions, convictions, and informant recruits.¹¹⁶ The final piece of Newman’s reorganization was the development of the Regional Crime and

¹¹⁵ M. Kirk Smith and J. Dingley, “Countering Terrorism in Northern Ireland: The Role of Intelligence” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 20, no. 3-4 (December 2009): 554.

¹¹⁶ Urban, 20.

Intelligence Units. These units consisted of elements from both departments and ensured that timely intelligence sharing occurred and that both departments were operating in a synchronized manner.¹¹⁷

Both CID and SB conducted a series of internal reforms designed to improve their overall capability as well. These reforms included the use of advanced training programs managed by various British police and intelligence services and a dedicated recruitment effort within the RUC to identify the best and brightest officers within the force for service in both departments.¹¹⁸ These reforms resulted in an increase in the operational capability and capacity of both departments, a substantial improvement in operational security stemming from the elimination of questionable officers, and an upsurge in PIRA arrests.

Although an overall increase in RUC proficiency proved to be critical in the implementation of Police Primacy, the most important factor that contributed to its success was a willingness of military and civilian leadership to assume risk. In the spring of 1976, the security environment throughout Northern Ireland, although significantly improved from 1972, was still abysmal. Transitioning primary responsibility for security from the military to the RUC represented a significant risk in the short term in that the PIRA could potentially capitalize on RUC shortcomings and the turbulence generated by the process to stage a series of destabilizing attacks.¹¹⁹ In the long term, it held a number of potential benefits including an increase in legitimacy of both the police force and local authorities within the population, reduced exposure of military personnel, and by creating a perception of normalcy.¹²⁰ Fortunately, for the British, the PIRA was preoccupied during this period with reorganization and combating informer

¹¹⁷ Urban., 21.

¹¹⁸ Smith and Dingley, 554.

¹¹⁹ Hammill, 191-192.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 193.

networks and significant attacks never really materialized. Police Primacy would continue to be a basic tenet of the British operational approach throughout the late 1970s and its validity would remain unchallenged until the 1979 Warrenpoint attack and subsequent assassination of Lord Mountbatten.¹²¹

Criminalization

Criminalization of the PIRA represented the second major component of the British policy of “Ulsterization.” The concept of criminalization had its roots in the development of the so-called Diplock courts that evolved following the failure of internment and was primarily concerned with addressing terrorism within the legal and penal systems like any other type of criminal activity. In December of 1972, The British parliament approved a controversial report generated by Lord Kenneth Diplock who was a prominent British jurist. The purpose of the Diplock report was to outline measures to address the numerous civil liberties related concerns surrounding internment and develop a codified system to deal with the unique quasi-criminal legal landscape in Northern Ireland.¹²² In his report, Diplock pointed to the difficulties associated with conducting a conventional trial by jury in Northern Ireland including jury and witness intimidation, sectarianism, and the security environment. In order to mitigate this he recommended that individuals detained for terrorist related offenses be prosecuted in juryless courts in which a judge or panel of judges determines guilt or innocence based on available evidence.

The report also recommended the elimination of bail for terrorist suspects and that in weapons related cases the burden of proof will shift to the defendant meaning that the defendant would have to demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt he/she is innocent rather than merely

¹²¹ Coogan, 358.

¹²² English, 162.

creating reasonable doubt regarding their potential guilt.¹²³ Westminster incorporated the bulk of Lord Diplock's recommendations in the 1973 Emergency Provisions Act, which marked the beginning of Britain's criminalization policy. The Emergency Provisions Act provided the legal framework for the indefinite internment of terrorist suspects and created an environment where it was much easier for security forces to arrest, detain, and interrogate potential PIRA members.¹²⁴ This "conveyor belt" system of terrorist suspect arrest and incarceration would continue until the end of the Troubles and proved to be a valuable tool for security forces in reducing violence and undermining PIRA capability.¹²⁵

In 1976, Britain began to expand criminalization to the penal system with the rejection of Special Category status for political prisoners. Prior to 1976, The British treated PIRA prisoners much like POWs and they were allowed to openly associate, given access to reading materials, and subject to internal management by their leadership. The 1975 Gardiner report first raised the issue of penal criminalization arguing that by extending special category status to political prisoners that the British government was tacitly acknowledging the legitimacy of the PIRA.¹²⁶ Consequently, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at the time, Merlyn Rees announced that the authorities would no longer grant special category status to prisoners arrested for terrorist related offenses after March 1, 1976. Furthermore, the British began incarcerating those arrested for terrorist related offenses at the newly built Long Kesh detention facility located just outside of Belfast.

¹²³ Kelley, 189.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 189.

¹²⁵ Many have called into question the legality of the Diplock courts and they have been the subject of significant international criticism. Additionally, the PIRA have described them in propaganda publications as an instrument of oppression and have been successful in extracting information operations value from it. However, it is evident that the Diplock system along with its associated arrest and incarceration apparatus was effective in keeping known PIRA operators in jail for extended periods with little substantive evidence.

¹²⁶ English, 188.

The British specially designed Long Kesh to segregate prisoners and support the implementation of criminalization. Following the Bourne Report the process started in earnest. Prisoners were forced to wear prison uniforms, were no longer allowed to openly associate, and had limited and often solitary recreational periods. PIRA prisoners in Long Kesh rejected British criminalization attempts and began a series of escalating prison protests that culminated with the hunger strikes of the early 1980's. The first wave of prisoner hunger strikes began in October 1980 and continued to December with the strikers breaking their fast after they received signals from British authorities that they would meet a portion of their demands. When the British did not make good on their signals, a second wave of hunger strikes began in March of 1981. On May 5, 1981, Bobby Sands would be the first hunger striker to die in Long Kesh and nine others would follow him before the strikes ended in October 1981.¹²⁷ This second wave of hunger strikes proved to be particularly damaging to British public perception and galvanized the PIRA. Bobby Sands became a hero of the Republican movement and over 100,000 attended his funeral.¹²⁸ Additionally, Catholic communities elected Sands and another hunger striker Kevin Lynch to Parliament posthumously which provided the PIRA and the larger Republican movement with increased political legitimacy.¹²⁹

The Zenith of the British criminalization effort was the so-called Supergrass trials of the early 1980s.¹³⁰ The RUC implemented the Supergrass system as a mechanism designed to convert informer based intelligence into evidence that they could use in criminal proceedings. Usually, it involved the recruitment of a high-level informer following an arrest. The police offered these informers reduced sentences, immunity, new lives outside of Northern Ireland, and in some

¹²⁷ English, 202.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 200.

¹²⁹ Bamford, 585.

¹³⁰ Supergrass is a British slang term for an informer that testifies against former associates in organized crime.

instances substantial sums of money in exchange for their testimony in court against their former comrades.¹³¹ Initially, the Supergrass trials decimated the ranks of both Unionist organizations and the PIRA. In some instances, the testimony of a single Supergrass resulted in the conviction of up to 30 defendants at once.¹³² Historians estimate that by the time the final Supergrass trial concluded in 1986 that a minimum of 25 Supergrasses had provided testimony that resulted in the arrest and incarceration of over 600 suspects.¹³³

Although the British welcomed the initial success of the Supergrass system it soon became apparent that it was fundamentally flawed. By the mid-1980s, the PIRA, Unionist groups, and human rights organizations had called into question the legal validity of the Supergrass system. Most of the supergrasses had been coerced and/or offered monetary incentives to testify which undermined the validity of their testimony. Furthermore, most of the Supergrass informers had extensive criminal records of their own, which served to undermine their overall credibility. Consequently, most of those convicted in Supergrass trials had their convictions overturned and the system collapsed because of systemic shortcomings and increased legal scrutiny.¹³⁴

Warrenpoint, Civil-Military cooperation realized

Despite the considerable improvements in RUC operational capability and the commitment of civilian authorities to the concept of Police Primacy there continued to be extensive apprehension within the Military regarding its reduced security role. This apprehension was a product of continued skepticism within HQ-NI about RUC sectarianism and overall capability. Military skepticism and a reluctance to relinquish responsibility for contested areas compounded the friction that already existed between the military and police. This friction would

¹³¹ Coogan., 393-394.

¹³² McKittrick and McVae, 155.

¹³³ Ibid., 155.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 156.

come to a head in 1979 in the aftermath of the Warrenpoint attack and assassination of Lord Mountbatten. On August 27, 1979, The PIRA detonated a bomb planted on the yacht of Lord Louis Mountbatten as he vacationed in Sligo Bay off the coast of Ireland. The bomb killed all aboard including Mountbatten who became the first member of the British royal family to die at the hands of Republican terrorists.¹³⁵ On the same day, the PIRA executed a complex attack near Warrenpoint that incorporated two roadside bombs and an ambush that resulted in the deaths of 18 British soldiers including a lieutenant colonel.

The assassination of such a respected British public figure and the worst single day loss of life for the British army during the Troubles created a crisis within the British security establishment in Northern Ireland. The attacks prompted a visit to Northern Ireland by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who quickly realized that the state of military/RUC relations was deplorable.¹³⁶ During her trip, Thatcher met with the RUC Chief Constable Kenneth Newman and the GOC, LTG Timothy Creasy. LTG Creasy was never very comfortable with Police Primacy and advocated a more pro-active military approach based on his experiences in fighting the insurgency in Oman.¹³⁷ Creasy proposed a temporary rollback of police primacy and a reestablishment of military operational control. However, Newman continued to defend Police Primacy and in the end, Thatcher decided that it would be politically unacceptable to take such a large step backward in Northern Ireland.¹³⁸ Warrenpoint brought to light the sorry state of civil/military security cooperation in Northern Ireland and prompted a number of reforms. These reforms included the appointment of Sir Maurice Oldfield to the newly created position of

¹³⁵ Coogan, 356.

¹³⁶ Urban, 86-88.

¹³⁷ Coogan, 358.

¹³⁸ Urban, 86-88.

Security Coordinator for Northern Ireland, the eventual replacement of the senior leadership of both the RUC and HQ-NI, and the development of the Tasking and Coordination Groups (TCG).

Sir Maurice Oldfield was the former head of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) MI-6 and was well respected within both military and intelligence circles. He came in Northern Ireland in October 1979 with a planning staff augmented by rising stars from both the RUC and military and began the process of repairing the relationship between the RUC and the Military and a comprehensive examination of British security efforts in Northern Ireland. Although he had no executive powers, he had the ear of influential members of the government and possessed the requisite stature to serve as an effective arbiter in RUC/military relations. Oldfield's stature coupled with his evenhanded pragmatic approach to problems did much to resolve a number of contentious issues and resulted in a marked improvement in civil military cooperation.¹³⁹

The replacement of the Key leadership of both the RUC and HQ-NI also did much to mend the relationship between the military and the police. In late 1979, John Hermon succeeded Newman as RUC Chief Constable. Hermon was one of the principle authors of the Bourne report and helped develop the concept of Police Primacy. Additionally, the Army replaced LTG Creasy in late 1979 with LTG Richard Lawson. Lawson was an unconventional choice for Northern Ireland in that he was an armor officer and had little experience in the British post-colonial COIN campaigns.¹⁴⁰ Lawson was hand-selected by the Ministry of Defence and had a reputation for being intelligent and politically well informed. He was also committed to Police Primacy and advocated a smaller role for the military. Lawson and Hermon developed a very good working relationship as well, which facilitated closer cooperation between the two agencies.

The physical manifestation of improved RUC/military cooperation was the TCG. The British established the first TCG in 1978 to coordinate security activities in Belfast. By 1979,

¹³⁹ Smith and Dingley, 555.

¹⁴⁰ Hammill, 262-264.

they had established two more TCGs regionally aligned with HQ-NI subordinate headquarters. Each TCG consisted of a commander who was a senior SB officer and staff elements from SB, the military, CID, and occasionally outside intelligence organizations like MI-5.¹⁴¹ The advent of the TCG vastly improved the operational synergy of the RUC and military. For the first time since the Troubles began intelligence from informers and surveillance began to flow unhindered between the police and military. The TCGs also allowed security forces to avoid duplication of effort by police and army surveillance, de-conflict kinetic operations, and offer greater protection to informants who might be inadvertently targeted.

Outcomes

Britain's "Ulsterization" policies of the late 1970s and early 1980s produced mixed results. Police Primacy was arguably a qualified success and by the early 1980s, it was apparent that the Army had assumed a secondary role to the RUC. Significant improvements in overall RUC capability and the commitment of the British political leadership made possible Police Primacy and the enhanced legitimacy of the RUC that accompanied it. Furthermore, Police Primacy reduced Army exposure to casualties and other potentially embarrassing incidents, which limited the impacts of war-weariness among the British populace. More importantly, however, the success of Police Primacy and the ascendancy of civilian authority undermined concerted PIRA efforts designed to create the perception that Northern Ireland was ungovernable.

Unlike Police Primacy, British efforts to criminalize the PIRA were largely failures. The Diplock courts and the conveyor belt legal process associated with it did result in a large number of arrests and provided authorities with a legal mechanism to detain suspected terrorists. However, the legality of the Diplock courts was questionable and they remained a source of

¹⁴¹ Urban, 95-96.

controversy throughout the Troubles. This provided fuel for the PIRA's propaganda campaign and supported their claims of British oppression and reckless disregard for due process.

The Supergrass fiasco further undermined British legitimacy. The measures taken by security forces to recruit informers and the questionable, often criminal backgrounds of the informers themselves made it virtually impossible for the Supergrass system to stand up to any type of objective legal scrutiny. What the Supergrass system did do however, was make it apparent to the British that any information provided by informants was much more useful as actionable intelligence than legal evidence. Accordingly, the focus of the informant system shifted away from criminal prosecution to attack prevention and direct action lethal targeting or what historians commonly refer to as the "Shoot to Kill" policy.¹⁴²

Penal criminalization was probably the most damaging component of "Ulsterization" for the British. Britain's refusal to reestablish special category status for PIRA prisoners despite severe potential information operations consequences proved to be shortsighted and ultimately counterproductive. The death of Bobby Sands sparked some of the worst riots of the Troubles and galvanized the republican community in support of the PIRA.¹⁴³ Sands and his fellow hunger strikers became martyrs, thousands attended their funerals, and they became central figures in anti-British PIRA propaganda. This further alienated the Catholic community, increased PIRA support among the populace, and subjected British operations to unwelcome internal and external scrutiny.

Sands death, the prison hunger strikes, and subsequent martyrdom did have some unintended consequences however. The groundswell of support for the PIRA following the prison protests highlighted the utility of political involvement. This led to further politicization of the PIRA, the eventual rejection of abstentionism, and the adoption of the "The Armalite and The

¹⁴² McKittrick and McVae, 153-154.

¹⁴³ English, 200-201.

Ballot Box” strategy in 1981.¹⁴⁴ “The Armalite and the Ballot Box” approach was the first formal acknowledgment that the pursuit of political objectives would be an integral part of future PIRA strategy. Although violence continued to be the primary component of PIRA strategy, the early to mid-1980s saw a significant increase in the importance of political involvement that culminated with the rejection of abstentionism in 1986.¹⁴⁵ The removal of abstentionism and subsequent political involvement allowed the PIRA to influence British policy through electoral politics for the first time and the success of Sinn Fein in general elections contributed to the perception of PIRA legitimacy.

Aside from Police Primacy, the most important outcome of “Ulsterization” was the vast improvement in civil military security cooperation that followed Warrenpoint and the assassination of Lord Mountbatten. The advent of the TCG and the development of both formal and informal coordination mechanisms between the RUC and the Army ensured that security forces executed British strategy in a much more cohesive manner. It also allowed the British to maximize surveillance and intelligence gathering by removing duplication of effort. Improved intelligence coordination put increased pressure on the PIRA, facilitated the targeting process and laid the groundwork for a shift in the British operational approach away from criminalization and towards lethal direct action.

¹⁴⁴ English, 224-225.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 250-251.

Chapter 5: Shoot to Kill (1985-1994)

By the time British courts overturned the final Supergrass conviction in 1986, it was increasingly evident to the British security apparatus in Northern Ireland that they were squandering valuable human intelligence in criminal proceedings. Moreover, the improved coordination between the RUC and the military provided security forces with the tools to begin the systematic dismantling of the PIRA. As a result, 1986 saw a shift in the British operational approach away from criminalization towards a more conventional military model based on lethal direct action by Special Forces and attack prevention. PIRA propagandists and some from within the media famously called this new policy “Shoot to Kill” and it would define the British operational approach up until the beginning of the peace process in 1994.

Lethal Direct Action

The British Special Air Service (SAS) was one of the first fully dedicated special operations units in the world tracing its origins back to the jungles of Burma during WWII. It had a reputation, as being one of the most elite military organizations in the world and played an integral role in nearly every major British military operation since.¹⁴⁶ The first official deployment of the SAS to Northern Ireland occurred in 1976 as part of British efforts to improve surveillance capability and interdict the flow of men and material entering Ulster from the Irish Republic. However, it is likely that the British deployed the SAS to Ulster in a limited fashion as early as 1972.¹⁴⁷ By 1978, they had begun to conduct unilateral covert direct action targeting of Key PIRA members and executed a number of ambushes and abductions of Key PIRA personnel. In spite of some limited success, the SAS assumed a more surveillance-oriented role in 1978 after a series of embarrassing incidents that included the inadvertent killing of a teenager at a PIRA

¹⁴⁶ Raymond Murray, *The SAS in Ireland* (Dublin: Mercier, 1990), 10-13.

¹⁴⁷ Kelley, 248-249.

arms cache and the arrest of two SAS members in the Irish Republic.¹⁴⁸ Between 1978 and 1983, the SAS had no direct involvement in any kinetic operations against PIRA personnel. However, the failure of criminalization coupled with the extensive development of the British security apparatus, which provided timely and actionable intelligence, suddenly made the prospect of lethal direct action much more appealing. It had the potential to weaken the PIRA and provide a war weary British government and populace with tangible operational results.

Historical evidence indicates that as early as 1985 there was a marked shift in the British operational approach. The SAS in particular began making extensive use of newly available intelligence to target key PIRA members. Probably the most famous example of this is the May 1987 Loughall ambush. In April 1987, British security forces had learned that the PIRA were planning to attack the remote RUC station in Loughall with a bomb after breaching the perimeter of the station with a front-end loader. This information had come from sophisticated listening devices planted in the home of a known Republican. The PIRA tasked the East Tyrone Brigade ASU with the mission and the eight-man team descended on the station in the early evening on May 8, 1987. The SAS had established an ambush earlier in the day and as soon as the bomb exploded, they opened fire killing all eight members of the team, which included several prominent PIRA figures. It was the worst single day loss of the Troubles for the PIRA and the operation demonstrated in a spectacular manner the newly developed operational capability of the security forces.¹⁴⁹ Loughall marked the beginning of a concerted attempt by the British to destroy the PIRA forces in East Tyrone, which up until the ambush and subsequent operations had accounted for the bulk of PIRA operations. Between 1987 and 1992, the East Tyrone Brigade of

¹⁴⁸ Kelley, 248-249 and Urban, 63-64.

¹⁴⁹ Moloney, *A Secret History of*, 304-308.

the PIRA lost 28 members to security forces ambushes, which represents a 500% increase per year over all previous years.¹⁵⁰

The British did not limit lethal targeting to Tyrone either. In March 1988, the PIRA dispatched a three-man team to the British territory of Gibraltar to conduct a bombing against British forces conducting a military ceremony. When the team transited Spain, Spanish authorities noticed some passport irregularities and forwarded the information to Interpol thinking that they could be possibly involved in drug smuggling or some other type of illicit activity. One of the members of the team, Mairead Farrell, was a prominent PIRA operator and well known to British intelligence. The SAS was sent to Gibraltar presumably on orders to conduct surveillance and if possible apprehend the team. The SAS made contact with the unarmed PIRA team on a reconnaissance mission and killed all three in an ambush as they made their way back to the Spanish border.¹⁵¹ Although this event and others garnered a significant amount of publicity and international condemnation, the undeniable benefits associated with the elimination prominent PIRA figures prompted the British to integrate lethal targeting as a critical component of their overall operational approach until the beginning of the peace process in 1994.

Attack prevention

British ability to leverage improved intelligence capabilities to prevent PIRA attacks is an often-overshadowed aspect of this period of the Troubles. Pervasive surveillance and informer networks had penetrated the PIRA to such an extent that it was increasingly difficult for them to execute any type of complex operations. The seizure of the cargo ship Eksund off the coast of France in 1987, which was carrying a large consignment of Libyan arms for the PIRA is one of the most significant examples of this. The connection between the PIRA and Libya had been in

¹⁵⁰ Moloney, *A Secret History*, 319.

¹⁵¹ Coogan, 435-436.

existence since the early 1970s, but the mid-1980s saw a substantial increase in Libyan support for the PIRA as part of Moammar Gadhafi's greater campaign against Western imperialism.¹⁵² The Eksund was part of a series of shipments to the PIRA that contained large amounts of explosives, small arms, mortars, and anti-tank weapons. By the time, the British seized the ship the PIRA had already received over 100 tons of weaponry. The Eksund however was to be the largest portion of the shipment consisting of over 150 tons arms and explosives and containing the majority of the consignment's heavier weaponry.¹⁵³ The seizure of the Eksund also saw the arrest of two important PIRA figures, Joseph Clarke and Anthony Kelly, further compounding an already severe blow to the organization.¹⁵⁴

British forces were also able to prevent numerous other PIRA attacks that in the past would have resulted in significant damage. The foiled PIRA attempt to assassinate British Foreign Minister Sir Geoffrey Howe in Belgium in January 1988 is an excellent example of this. The PIRA planned to assassinate Howe using a remote detonated roadside bomb while he was his way to regularly scheduled NATO meetings in Brussels. On the day the attack was to occur, Howe's car took a different route for the first time in months indicating that British intelligence were fully aware of the operation.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, it was later determined that British intelligence regarding this operation was so accurate that they allowed the ASU involved to escape the Belgium operation so that they could be targeted later on in Gibraltar.¹⁵⁶

Another example of British attack prevention was the aborted Crumlin Road Prison break. In October 1989, the PIRA's Belfast Brigade was planning to facilitate the escape of over 30 PIRA prisoners from the notorious Crumlin Road Prison. The plan involved using explosives

¹⁵² Coogan, 444.

¹⁵³ English, 249.

¹⁵⁴ Coogan, 444.

¹⁵⁵ Edward Moloney, *A Secret History*, 331-332.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

to blow a hole in the perimeter of the prison and then have vehicles organized by the Belfast Brigade waiting to evacuate the prisoners from the scene. When the day of the attack came however, there was a substantially larger security presence making it obvious that the British had compromised the operation.¹⁵⁷ It will never be known just how many attacks British security forces prevented during the days leading up to the start of the peace process as the outcome of prevention is of a negative nature and inherently difficult to quantify. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the security forces had significantly eroded the ability of the PIRA to execute large attacks with the strength and frequency in which they did just three years previously.

Outcomes

PIRA setbacks at hands of British security forces in the late 1980s proved to be disastrous for the organization and undermined their overall strategy moving forward. Adams and the PIRA army council determined in late 1986 that failure of British criminalization efforts coupled with the success of the Prison protests and spectacular attacks like the Brighton Hotel Bombing had pushed the British to their limit.¹⁵⁸ They reasoned that one last military “push” was all that they would need to force the British to withdraw and/or accept a peace process with them in a position of relative advantage. Because of this, they developed a plan for a “Tet” style offensive against British security forces using Libyan arms that was to begin in March 1988.¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, for the PIRA this offensive never really gained any traction because of the damage inflicted on the organization resulting from Britain’s shift to a lethal direct action and attack prevention approach.

¹⁵⁷ Moloney, *A Secret History*, 331-333.

¹⁵⁸ In October 1984, the PIRA planted a bomb at the Brighton Hotel in London, which was hosting the Conservative Party annual conference. The attack was an attempt to kill British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and although it failed in this aspect, it did lead to the death of five people including a Member of Parliament and was the first time the PIRA targeted the core of the British political establishment. McKittrick and McVae, 162.

¹⁵⁹ Moloney, *A Secret History*, 326-327.

The Loughall ambush and subsequent dismantling of the East Tyrone Brigade was a serious setback to the PIRA. SAS ambushes and intelligence driven operations resulted in the virtual elimination of the region's ASUs and the deaths of several experienced PIRA leaders. These leaders represented the cream of PIRA militarism and were to play a vital role in the upcoming offensive.¹⁶⁰ The experience, ideological commitment and operational capability possessed by these men proved extremely difficult for the PIRA to replace and had a substantial adverse impact on its ability to conduct operations for years afterward. The loss of so many PIRA operators also served to shift the balance of power within the organization towards those advocating a political solution.

The seizure of the Eksund was also a serious setback to the PIRA who had planned to use the heavy weapons provided by Libya to target high profile British targets including helicopters, barracks, and naval vessels. Although they had received over 100 tons of Libyan weapons, the bulk of it was older 1960s era equipment that was of questionable use to a cellular style terrorist organization. What Ghaddafi did provide however, was a large amount of the Czech plastic explosive Semtex, which the PIRA would put to use in the bombing campaigns that characterized their operations during the final years of the Troubles.¹⁶¹ The Eksund also demonstrated to the international community including the Irish Republic the potential ability of the PIRA to disrupt the greater stability of the island. Accordingly, Ireland began to take drastic action against PIRA safe havens and support operations taking place in the south making it more difficult for the PIRA to mount larger operations and provide adequate logistical support.¹⁶²

The losses and compromised operations of the late 1980s made it apparent to the PIRA leadership that British intelligence had penetrated the highest levels of the organization. One of

¹⁶⁰ Moloney, *A Secret History*, 305.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 444.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 329.

the unintended outcomes of the transition to a cellular structure was the potential damage that a high-level informant could inflict was vastly increased.¹⁶³ Additionally, British penetration of the PIRA generated pervasive organizational paranoia and increasingly extreme measures to root out informants. The manifestation of this paranoia was the PIRA's infamous Internal Security Unit (ISU). Throughout this period, the ISU employed increasingly severe and brutal methods to identify and target informants earning them a fearsome reputation within Republican circles. PIRA members commonly referred to the ISU as the "nutting squad" ("nut being Irish slang for head) due to its propensity to execute suspected informants by shooting them in the head.¹⁶⁴ Although the ISU did accurately target some informants, it is apparent that the majority was targeted largely based on circumstantial evidence and were not actively involved with British intelligence. In fact, sufficient evidence exists to suggest that British intelligence had penetrated the ISU itself and was actively feeding it misinformation.¹⁶⁵ ISU activities during this period essentially amounted to the systemic dismantling of the organization from within and proved to be particularly damaging to an already weakened PIRA. The seemingly random nature of ISU targeting also had an alienating effect on the Catholic community, which was beginning to see more of their own die at the hands of the PIRA versus the security forces.¹⁶⁶

The elimination of so many senior PIRA operators, lack of weapons, and increased operational security requirements resulting from British intelligence efforts caused the PIRA to engage in increasingly incoherent, uncoordinated, and questionable operations. Any kind of large-scale sophisticated operation was out of the question due to the likelihood British kinetic intervention. This forced regional ASUs to operate almost independently and resulted in a series

¹⁶³ Moloney, *A Secret History*, 332-333.

¹⁶⁴ Urban, 102-103.

¹⁶⁵ Bamford, 592.

¹⁶⁶ Urban, 244.

of attacks that were so abhorrent that the backlash that ensued from within the Catholic community and abroad essentially spelled the end of PIRA militarism. The Enniskillen bombing on November 8, 1987 was the first of these attacks. The PIRA had targeted a Remembrance Day ceremony at the Enniskillen war memorial planting a bomb in an adjoining building. When the bomb exploded, it showered the crowd consisting mainly of Protestant civilians with rubble killing eleven people of six of which were elderly women. The international condemnation and political fallout that ensued was intense due to the nature of the target and its timing. More damaging to the PIRA however, was the story of Gordon Wilson whose heart wrenching account of his final moments with his daughter in the immediate aftermath of the bombing captured global attention.¹⁶⁷ Enniskillen was the beginning of an incoherent PIRA bombing campaign that would result in the deaths of 26 civilians over the year inflicting tremendous damage on PIRA public perception while providing few operational benefits.¹⁶⁸

The damage inflicted on the PIRA in the aftermath of Enniskillen would pale in comparison to that which occurred following the so-called proxy bombing campaign of 1990. On October 24, 1990, the PIRA kidnapped and held hostage the family of Patsy Gillespie and forced him to drive a car loaded with over 1000 pounds of explosives into an army checkpoint killing him and five Soldiers.¹⁶⁹ Gillespie worked as a menial employee at a local army base, which in the eyes of the PIRA made him a legitimate target, but to the population writ large, he was an innocent bystander who the PIRA co-opted in a particularly cold-blooded manner. The PIRA followed the initial proxy attacks several others over the next few months sparking revulsion in both Catholic and Protestant communities. Sinn Fein even went so far as to distance itself from

¹⁶⁷ Moloney, *A Secret History*, 342-342.

¹⁶⁸ English, 260.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

the PIRA publicly stating that it was opposed to the tactic.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the PIRA would continue to use proxy bombings up until the beginning of the peace process in 1994 generating negative publicity and eroding its support base in Catholic areas.

By the early 1990s, attrition, civilian casualties, questionable tactics, material losses, operational incompetence, and the constant specter of British intelligence had the PIRA questioning the value of continuing to use terrorism as an integral part of its larger overall strategy.¹⁷¹ Within Sinn Fein, it was apparent that the negative impacts of attacks had begun to outweigh the benefits due to a combination of increased difficulty in targeting security forces stemming from a reduced profile, the potential for civilian casualties and a greater probability of British intervention. These factors in conjunction with intensified public and international pressure fundamentally altered the dynamic within the Republican movement. For the first time those advocating a political solution had the advantage among the rank and file of the movement and hard-line militants were facing increased marginalization. The manifestation of this shift towards political activism was the adoption of the “Total Unarmed Strategy” (TUAS) by the Republican movement in 1994. TUAS signaled the beginning of the Northern Ireland peace process and although PIRA violence would continue up until the 1998 Good Friday agreement the nature of the PIRA military activity in final days of the Troubles focused solely on improving Sinn Fein’s bargaining position and not military victory.

¹⁷⁰ English., 267.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 260.

Findings and Conclusion

This monograph set out to determine whether the operational approach employed by British security forces during the Troubles was ultimately effective in achieving their stated strategic goal of a durable negotiated political settlement. An analysis of the historical evidence seems to indicate that although it took almost 20 years to develop, the British approach in its final manifestation was extremely effective in eroding PIRA operational capability and pushing the larger Republican movement towards a political solution. By the early 1990s, the PIRA was reeling from a series of operational setbacks resulting from the improved capabilities of British security forces, Sinn Fein was publicly distancing itself from terrorist activities after a series of questionable attacks and there was a clear desire for peace in both the Catholic and Protestant communities. In short, the British operational approach did not result in conventional military victory, as it was likely that the PIRA would have been able to continue fighting indefinitely, but rather it undermined the utility of terrorist activity by increasing its overhead costs and risk while significantly reducing potential benefits. An analysis of this approach and the difficulties the British faced during the Troubles yields several lessons that validate much of existing COIN doctrine. These lessons include the following:

1. The critical nature of intelligence in COIN
2. The impacts of information operations
3. Legal ramifications of COIN/counter-terrorism
4. Seize and exploit the initiative whenever possible
5. Restoration of civilian/host nation authority and civil military integration
6. The utility of conventional military power in COIN
7. Disciplined use of force and operational patience

The critical nature of Intelligence

Intelligence was undoubtedly the most important aspect of the British approach throughout the Troubles. It formed the basis for nearly every kinetic and non-kinetic operation throughout the 29-year conflict by supporting a comprehensive targeting cycle, increasing the potential costs associated with terrorist activities, undermining the morale of the PIRA, and providing operational context through the collection and analysis of low-grade intelligence. Early on, the British recognized that they were facing significant intelligence challenges and that penetrating Republican organizations and the PIRA itself would be exceedingly difficult. As the Troubles progressed, the British intelligence apparatus evolved from virtually nothing into a complex web of centrally coordinated surveillance activities and informer networks supported by a robust analytical capability.

The intelligence coordinating activities of the TCG and subsequent successes in lethal targeting and attack prevention demonstrate the importance of a viable central agency to direct and manage intelligence efforts in a COIN environment.¹⁷² Central coordination ensures unity of effort, maximizes collection capabilities through the efficient management of resources, improves the overall quality of intelligence products, and better supports the targeting process. Terrorist and insurgent organizations are by nature clandestine, relatively small in terms of full time personnel, and have limited operational durability. This makes them extremely sensitive to personnel losses particularly among the senior leadership of the organization and highlights the importance of a comprehensive intelligence driven targeting.

Additionally, coordinated intelligence increases the overhead costs and potential risks associated with terrorist activities by increasing operational security requirements and exposure to arrest. While this does not eliminate the possibility of attack, it does result in reduced attack frequency by increasing the resources required for a successful attack. Furthermore, increased

¹⁷² Bamford, 603-604.

operational security requirements weaken the overall cohesiveness of the organization by forcing it to take on a smaller decentralized structure, which has the potential to result in uncoordinated and often counter-productive activities.

The success of British security forces in penetrating the highest levels of PIRA leadership and the ensuing ISU witch-hunt also demonstrate how coordinated intelligence can adversely affect an insurgent group's morale. The presence of informants within a supposedly clandestine organization usually results in development of organizational paranoia and a non-proportional response that undermines morale. Furthermore, aborted and/or botched attacks stemming from intelligence spillage creates a sense of futility among the members of the organization making them question the viability of the organization as a whole and their personal sacrifice.¹⁷³

An often-overlooked component of the overall British intelligence efforts during the Troubles was the use of low-grade intelligence to provide security forces with operational context and an appreciation of their environment. Initial intelligence gathering efforts followed Kitson's model of collecting low-grade information on Catholic communities in order to discern patterns of life within a particular area. These patterns and the environmental context that accompanied them allowed British intelligence to focus collection efforts on known Republicans, anticipate PIRA operations based on pattern aberration, and gain a better understanding of PIRA structure and organization. The overall utility of this type of intelligence cannot be understated and its inclusion in a comprehensive collection plan is vital in the execution of COIN operations, especially in areas characterized by a high level of ethnic and cultural diversity.

The impact of information operations

The Troubles also demonstrate the power of information operations as a vital component to any COIN strategy. Throughout the 29-year conflict, the PIRA used information operations

¹⁷³ Bamford, 592-593.

extremely effectively to promote their political objectives, present the British in a negative light, and sustain public support. They also were very effective in capitalizing on questionable British initiatives including the Diplock courts, internment, Supergrass trials, and enhanced interrogation. The PIRA was even able to present successful British operations in a negative light. The aftermath of Loughall is a prime example of this. In this case, the British managed to precisely target and eliminate an ASU in the act of engaging in a terrorist attack and PIRA propagandists were able to spin it as just another SAS murder and proceeded to extract substantial information operations value from the ensuing public funerals.¹⁷⁴

British information operations ineptitude further reinforced the impacts of PIRA propaganda. Throughout the conflict, they consistently failed to anticipate and respond proactively to PIRA information operations initiatives and did not fully appreciate the negative information operations implications associated with some of their more questionable operations. The death of Bobby Sands and the 1981 prison hunger strikes clearly demonstrate this. The British doggedly adhered to what amounted to a relatively insignificant component of their overall “Ulsterization” strategy even after it became apparent that the negative information operations implications far outweighed any potential benefits. While it is difficult to quantify the impacts of information operations on the ultimate outcome of the conflict, it is apparent that the PIRA used information operations to sustain public support long after it theoretically should have evaporated and points to the potential impacts of information operations in COIN operations.

Legal ramifications of COIN/Counter-terrorism

Throughout the Troubles, the British struggled with having to conduct COIN against a sophisticated enemy while adhering to its liberal democratic principles. Consequently, its efforts against the PIRA were continually constrained by domestic legal considerations, which

¹⁷⁴ Coogan, 435.

eventually led to the development of its criminalization policy in the early 1980s. Criminalization was destined to fail because insurgents are not criminals and military forces should not be subject to common law while engaging in COIN operations.¹⁷⁵ The mere fact that the government deployed the Army was an indication that civil authority and thus common law was inadequate to address the situation and a modification of the existing legal framework was necessary to restore order. The British continually adapted their legal system to the operational environment throughout the conflict in a manner intended to give military personnel maximum operational flexibility while providing a prudent amount of legal oversight with varying degrees of success.¹⁷⁶ Some initiatives such as the Emergency Provisions Act and the Prevention of Terrorism acts provided security forces with the necessary legal tools to target PIRA operatives while others such as the Supergrass system proved to be complete failures.

Although controversial, the Emergency Provisions Act, which led to the formation of the Diplock courts and the extension of special category status to political prisoners, established a viable legal framework for the prosecution of terrorist suspects. Criminalization of the judicial and penal systems was not so successful. The implementation of the Supergrass system and rejection of special category status for PIRA prisoners backfired in a very dramatic fashion. The failure of the Supergrass system significantly undermined British credibility and exposed critical components of its intelligence network to both public and PIRA scrutiny.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, the rejection of special category status for political figures and the subsequent hunger strikes simply served to galvanize the Republican community in support of the PIRA. The lesson that one can garner from this is that insurgents are not criminals and intelligence is not evidence. In a COIN environment, the existing common law traditions must be subject to modification in a manner that

¹⁷⁵ Dewar, 221-223.

¹⁷⁶ Montgomery Carlough, "Pax Britannia: British Counterinsurgency in Northern Ireland 1969-1982" (Doctoral Dissertation, Yale University, 1994), 197-200.

¹⁷⁷ McKittrick and McVae, 154-155.

balances due process and humanitarian requirements with the operational realities of an ongoing conflict.¹⁷⁸

Seize and Exploit the Initiative Whenever Possible

Counterinsurgencies often evolve into a give and take between the insurgent and government forces with one developing a tactic and the other evolving to address it. This creates a situation where neither side reaps operational gains from the comparative advantage that having the initiative provides. In order to overcome this one side needs to be prepared to pour large amounts of resources into pursuing areas of comparative advantage to inflict the most damage on the other.¹⁷⁹ This can be seen throughout the Troubles in the development of the British operational approach. From 1977, onward British security forces had a marked advantage in terms of intelligence capability that they did not leverage effectively. The failure of the criminalization represented a major setback for the British intelligence apparatus and represents a wasted opportunity. The British eventually rectified this when they implemented a lethal direct action and attack prevention based approach in the late 1980s. In doing so, the British seized the initiative and exploited the comparative advantage provided by superior intelligence in a decisive manner. The result was irreparable damage to the PIRA stemming from intelligence driven operations like Loughall, Gibraltar, and the systematic elimination of the PIRA's East Tyrone Brigade.

Restoration of host-nation/civil authority and civil/military cooperation

Police Primacy was arguably the most successful component of the British "Ulsterization" policy and its success highlights the importance of a rapid transition to civilian/host nation control in counter insurgency operations. The transition to civilian authority

¹⁷⁸ Carlough, 200.

¹⁷⁹ Smith and Dingley, 563.

creates the perception of normalcy among the population and reinforces government legitimacy. Consequently, it is critical that the development and/or maintenance of civilian/host nation capability be a critical component of any contemporary counter insurgency strategy. Restoration of civilian/host nation control also reduces exposure of military personnel to attack making it difficult for insurgencies to undermine national political will through casualty generation. Moreover, the reduced profile of military personnel also reduces the likelihood of harmful collateral damage that typically results in the alienation and/or overt hostility of the population.

The development of British civil military integration following the Warrenpoint attack and assassination of Lord Mountbatten demonstrate the importance of a coordinated civil/military response when combating an insurgency. The intelligence sharing, resource maximization and unity of effort generated by the synergistic activities of the TCGs was one of the deciding factors in the ultimate outcome of the Troubles. Additionally, civil military cooperation is vital in facilitating initial military deployments and in ensuring that the transition to civilian control and/or restoration of host nation authority occurs in a timely manner.

The utility of conventional military power in COIN

Modern Western nations typically design, train, and equip their forces to address a near peer military threat. Doctrine and training focuses on the utilization of superior firepower, violence of action, technology, and combined arms maneuver to destroy conventional enemy forces.¹⁸⁰ However, conventional military operations are typically counterproductive in the execution of COIN operations due to the elusive nature of the enemy and the increased potential for collateral damage. Therefore, conventional military operations are of limited utility in the execution of COIN. This is exactly the situation British forces found themselves in during the early days of the Troubles. The British army at this point was preoccupied with the Soviet threat

¹⁸⁰ Tony Archer, "The Importance of Ethics in Counterinsurgency Operations" (Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2006), 54.

to Europe as part of their NATO obligations and lacked the internal structures and organizations to effectively deal with an insurgency on their own soil. Although they would eventually develop this capability over the course of the conflict it required extensive training for units rotating into Northern Ireland and had to be done while still maintaining conventional capabilities.

Additionally, although British forces had waged countless COIN operations in their former colonial holdings, none of those experiences prepared them for Northern Ireland. British COIN operations in places like Oman were characterized by a heavy reliance on SOF, the use of questionable tactics, a lack of government oversight, little media exposure and enemies that lacked the cohesion, ideological unity, and funding of the PIRA. Northern Ireland was a fundamentally different and more complex operational environment and British adherence to experiences derived from previous COIN operations was a contributor to the incoherent, clumsy, and heavy-handed techniques that characterized British operations in the early days of the Troubles. The Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972 is a glaring example of the dangers of the inappropriate application of conventional force in a COIN environment.

Kinetic operations in a COIN environment must be intelligence driven and executed in a precise manner. This type of operation favors the use of special operations forces supported by a robust targeting apparatus in order to focus violence on the insurgent manner in the most effective manner possible. The British transition to an attack prevention and direct action based approach in the mid-1980s exemplifies this. SAS attacks at Loughall and the targeting of the PIRA's East Tyrone Brigade significantly weakened PIRA operational capability, with little collateral damage, all the while leaving the PIRA with little recourse in terms of effective retaliation. The dichotomy between the effectiveness of regular military forces and SOF points to the overall utility of conventional force and speaks to the potential benefits of intelligence driven SOF direct action in a COIN environment.

Disciplined use of force and operational patience

The Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972, demonstrated to British security forces the potential dangers associated with collateral damage and the disproportionate use of military force in a COIN environment. This realization had a significant impact on the development of the British operational approach throughout the conflict and the disciplined application of force became one of the basic tenants of British operations. Police primacy, criminalization and the shift to attack prevention and direct action are reflective of this. The PIRA inflicted 27 civilian casualties between 1987 and 1989. This was no more than in previous years of the Troubles, the only difference was that they were now killing more civilians than British forces, which had focused their kinetic operations and were applying force in a much more precise and disciplined manner. This coupled with the overall reduced military profile had the effect of making the PIRA appear to be perpetrators of seemingly random violence while the British could retain the moral high ground. It also displays in an unmistakable manner the dangers associated with civilian casualties and the undisciplined use of conventional military force in counter insurgency operations.

Finally, the role of operational patience in determining the outcome of the Troubles deserves consideration when evaluating the evolution of the British operational approach during the Troubles. Some contend that the British simply outlasted the PIRA. Although there is some validity to this argument, it is hardly the sole determining factor. Nevertheless, it is evident that operational patience did play an important role in bringing about a conclusion to the 29-year conflict and is indicative of the time, resources, and operational stamina to win out a counter insurgency fight against a well-funded, ideologically disciplined, and sophisticated enemy.

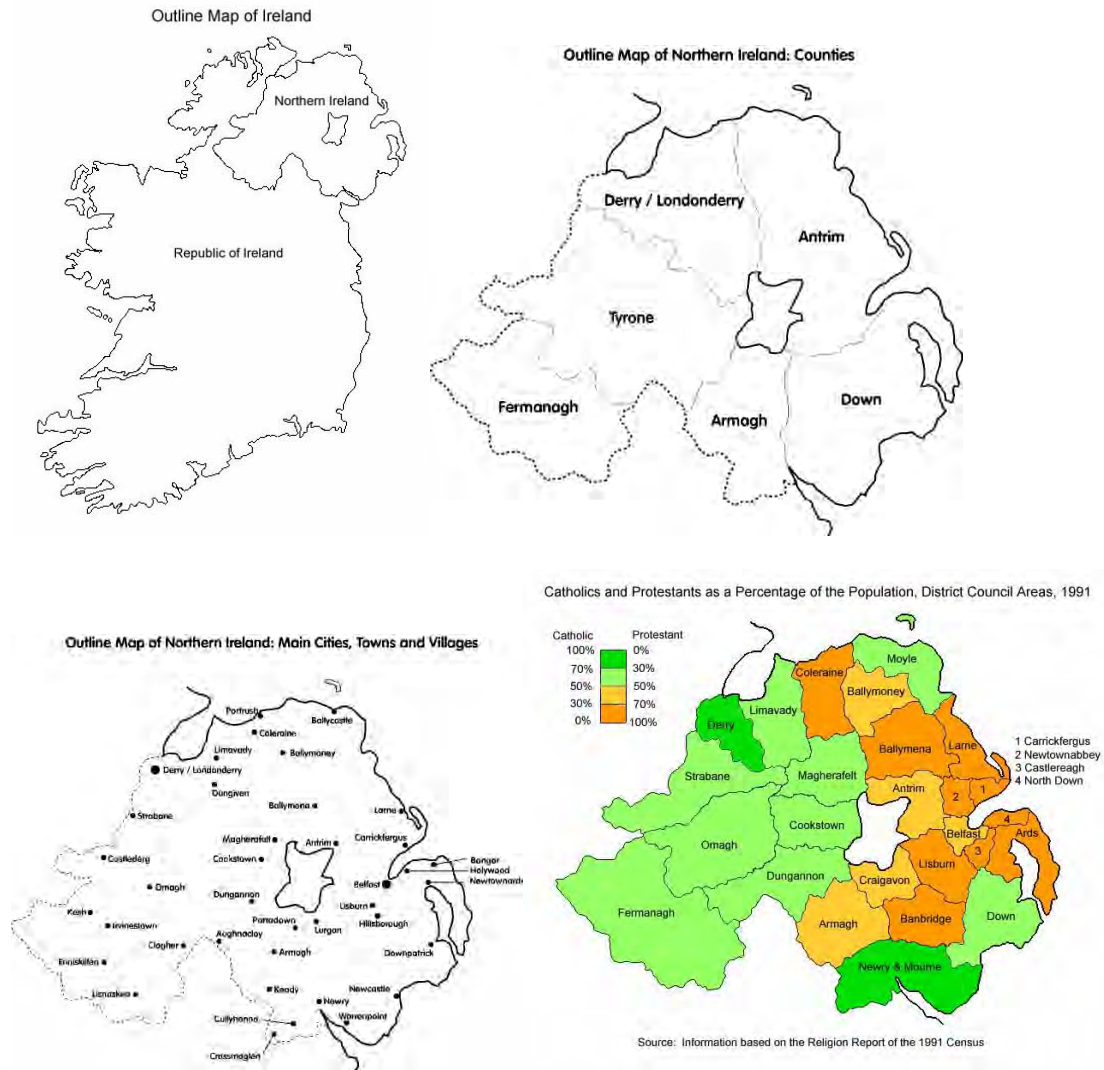
Conclusion

On May 10, 1998, the PIRA convened a special Ard Fheis and endorsed the Good Friday Agreement formally ending the Troubles.¹⁸¹ By the time the conflict ended, it had spanned almost three decades, claimed almost 4000 dead and left thousands of shattered lives in its wake.¹⁸² The Good Friday Agreement and the seemingly durable peace that has ensued is miraculous considering the PIRA's unbending ideology, longstanding Catholic/Protestant sectarianism, and historical Anglo-Irish animosity. Much of the credit for the Good Friday agreement rightfully goes to prominent figures involved in the peace process including Gerry Adams, John Hume, and US Senator George Mitchell. Nevertheless, the reality is that none of it would have been possible if British security forces not been able to militarily force the PIRA to come to the bargaining table. Even though it took some 20 years to develop, it is apparent that the cumulative effect of Britain's operational approach was instrumental in forcing the PIRA to abandon militarism and embrace a political settlement. In its final manifestation, this approach employed sound COIN principles, crippled the PIRA as a relevant insurgent organization and paved the way for the peace process to begin.

¹⁸¹ Ard Fheis is a Gaelic term meaning "main meeting" that Irish political parties typically use when referring to their annual conference. Edward Moloney, *A Secret History*, 562.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 483-484.

Appendix A: Northern Ireland Reference Maps



Source: University of Ulster Center for Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland, "Conflict Archives on the Internet," <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/index.html> (Accessed March 21, 2012).

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