An Acceptable Level of Violence: Assessing the Development of the British Government's Security Approach to 'The Troubles' From 1969-79

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Abstract

Those seeking to engage in warfare against organised governments in the 21st century are increasingly relying on such governments being unable to respond in an appropriate manner. The latter half of the 20th century in Northern Ireland is a perfect example of a ruling authority modifying its approach to the security issues it was confronted by throughout the conflict. "The Troubles", as the three decades of guerrilla warfare has now become known, was dealt with by the British establishment through three specific policies – all of which saw changes implemented during the first ten years of the landmark conflict. These were: the implementation of Direct Rule, the so-called "Normalisation" of asymmetric warfare, and the reliance on the local paramilitaries over the British Army. All of these policies can be seen to have failed in particular ways, although careful examination shall explain the logic behind these shifts in British reactionary policy and their effects in the regions of the province of Ulster affected by the conflict. Being a very brief survey of this conflict, this paper does not address other policies enacted – nor does it encompass every aspect of the evidence available. It merely aims to act as an overview.

Keywords: The Troubles, conflict, policy

'The present conflict between the opposing forces in Ireland has its roots in the failure of English statecraft and administration to rule Ireland.' – G.K. Cockerill, Memorandum on Ireland 1919-20 (Cockerill Papers in Hopkinson, 2004).

Although written half a century before the thirty-year conflict between the Irish Republican Army and the British forces threatened to engulf Northern Ireland, these words of a British Conservative MP were to

remain ever relevant. With faults beginning to appear in Ulster's Parliamentary apparatus, an economic pressure to abandon dying trades, and a resurgent unionist movement led by Ian Paisley, the Northern Irish government was still dependent on the United Kingdom for power and legitimacy (McKittrick and McVea, 2002). A brief period of peace and stability enjoyed in the 1960s soon gave rise to the civil rights marches – and the campaigns for an end to the sectarian discrimination and violence gained impetus. By 12th August 1969, hundreds of civilians had been wounded in what was now termed the 'Battle of the Bogside' (Smith, 2002, pp. 78-9); two days later, the British Army was called in to Belfast and Londonderry. Warfare is increasingly taking an asymmetric tone in the 21st century; an understanding of this period of Northern Irish history is therefore ever more crucial in understanding the methods that a government may use to tackle such warfare. As one of the first examples of the more modern trend towards this style of warfare, there are lessons to be learned from the governmental response to the problems which arose throughout. Therefore, this brief study shall identify and assess three key methods which the British establishment used in its approach to the security issues in Northern Ireland during the first decade of this truly asymmetric conflict.

Context to the Troubles

For those reading without knowledge of this period of recent history, it is worth clarifying what is meant by the term "The Troubles". The thirty year stretch of history in Northern Ireland referred to by this name was a period of guerrilla warfare which took place between the two sides in the region's political landscape, concerning the future of Britain's role in its governance. The Republican cause was for Northern Ireland to secede, and to join the Republic of Ireland; the Unionist cause was for Northern Ireland to remain tied to the United Kingdom. Along with the partisan nature of the issue, the religious dimension further exacerbated the already fraught situation;

traditionally Catholic communities of Ulster were mostly in favour of uniting with its cultural and geographic neighbours to the south, whilst traditionally Protestant communities were mostly in favour of remaining tied to Britain (Kelly, 2018). A complex socio-political climate, and one which is owed far more explanation than can be granted here. However, hopefully this summary has aided the readers in their understanding.

Above, it has been decided to name the Battle of the Bogside as the starting point in the conflict: it is usually accepted that the main hostilities ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 but, with so much of the conflict to analyse if taken up until that point, it has been decided to restrict this analysis to the first decade alone.

An explanation of the factions involved is also necessary. The cause for Irish Republicanism, and secession from the United Kingdom, was mainly championed by three factions – the Official IRA (OIRA), the Provisional IRA (PIRA or *Provos*), and the Irish National Liberation Army (NLA). All three aimed to force the UK government to enact a withdrawal from Northern Ireland, however, their methods differed. The OIRA had acted as stewards on the civil rights marches and so, frustrated with the lack of action, the PIRA had formed their own faction (Yardley, 1996). The OIRA did continue to carry out violence, but specifically against British troops. The Provos and NLA did also attack those serving under British command, but regularly would cause civilian deaths in addition to the military casualties; approximately a third of the deaths inflicted by the IRA were non-military (Lavery, 2002).

The Unionist forces were initially led by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the state police of Northern Ireland, and then the British Army, when they were deployed onto the streets of Londonderry. The latter was then supported by the formation of a local regular regiment, the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR).

However, local paramilitaries were also founded, who mainly carried out attacks on Irish Catholic civilians, with a mixture of organisations such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). Both were deemed illegal for large parts of the Troubles (Bruce, 1992, pp. xi-xiv).

The word Westminster will be used throughout this paper and is used to refer to a number of organisations within the British government itself. However, it chiefly refers to the British Cabinet, the British Parliament, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Department of the Home Office based in London. This is as opposed to the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, the Ulster base of the Northern Ireland Department of the Home Office, and the series of devolved assemblies, parliaments, and executives based in Ulster – these are mostly referred to as the Ulster Establishment, or Stormont. Owing to the fact that it was the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, James Chichester-Clark, who requested the intervention of the British Army in 1969 (Sanders, 2018, p. 659), this position has been included in the latter category.

Local Governance

The British government's approach to Northern Ireland changed throughout the Troubles, but particularly in the 1970s was this modified policy most apparent. In particular, Westminster's attitude towards self-governance in Ulster rapidly reversed in the opening years of the conflict.

The initial assumption that the Northern Irish Parliament alone could handle the tide of nationalist feeling surging through the region, and that the Royal Ulster Constabulary was fit for purpose to contain the worst of the rioting, was dispelled almost immediately when the Taoiseach Jack Lynch stated that the Irish government 'can no longer stand by and see innocent people injured and perhaps worse' and asked for the British government to assemble a peacekeeping force in

conjunction with the UN (Byrne et al., 1982, p. 450). The British Army was sent in the following day. They were initially welcomed as an impartial arbiter of peace and, with the Provos unpopular in the Catholic communities they claimed to be protecting, it wasn't until mid-1970 that the Army's popularity diminished in the region. This was, in part, due to their countering of the actions of the PIRA: 'many innocent bystanders' (Wichert, 1994, p. 121) were caught in the crossfire.

However, in 1972 Westminster took an irreversible step, and explicitly made the change in their policy clear. The Northern Ireland (Temporary Provisions) Act was passed in March 1972 – the Stormont Parliament was indefinitely suspended, and the Parliament of the United Kingdom formally assumed 'full and direct responsibility for the administration of Northern Ireland' (Bell, 1994, p. 306). This action by the British Government, of becoming the de jure state establishment in Northern Ireland, is what will now be referred to as Direct Rule. The following summer the Northern Ireland Constitution Act officially abolished the Parliament of Northern Ireland in favour of an Executive to be chosen by the recently founded, and elected, Assembly and declared that the region should not cease to be a part of the United Kingdom without a referendum (Byrne et al., 1982, p. 462). The decision had been arguably taken not to submit in the face of terrorism and was quickly reinforced with legal framework; the Northern Irish Assembly had brought about a forum for discussion, and a potential method for promoting self-governance. It is important to understand, however, that direct rule was still not entirely being considered. The failings of the local government had not yet required such a drastic intervention in the region.

In early 1973 the British government made a proposal for a power-sharing executive organisation, whereby Westminster would retain the majority of its de jure power, whilst the Northern Irish Assembly,

the Dáil Éireann, and the Northern Irish Executive would act in an advisory capacity. In December, the Sunningdale Agreement officially enacted an agreed power-sharing government, based on the above proposal – Nationalists and Unionists would operate the Government of Northern Ireland together. Yet by March 1974 loyalist paramilitaries and politicians, represented by the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC), had made it clear how unequivocal their opposition to the compromise was; the fear of the steps to a United Ireland was palpable (Smith, 2002, p. 106). With a General Strike enacted by Unionist workers at the beginning of May, Sunningdale collapsed by the end of the month. Less than eight weeks later, the Northern Ireland Act 1974 dissolved the Assembly and gave all its executive power to the Privy Council. Home Rule was over – from now on, Westminster would decide Ulster's fate.

How effective this policy change was is a complex debate. At first, the trust placed in the regional government gave rioters the initiative; the RUC was forced to deploy riot police and armoured cars, in response to a concerted campaign of petrol bombing vehicles and officers alike and forcing Catholic and Protestant families to flee their homes (English, 2004). Their 'heavy-handed and violent' approach was even captured on film by a Republic of Ireland news crew (Wharton, 2009, p. 41). The damage done then forced the regular army to be sent in, and it was at this point, with violence unavoidable, that the British government was arguably forced to make efforts to achieve peace before the bloodshed escalated further. Clearly the initial attempts at appeasement had failed to satisfy both Unionists and Republicans. This left Westminster facing a protracted guerrilla war fought by either the local police forces, or the trained British Army; and was to be organised by a regional government with little experience in crowd control, or the British establishment.

The decision to impose Direct Rule was therefore the only clear pathway. The Northern Irish government was not in a position to act

as a self-regulatory body, and with the Sunningdale Agreement (a compromise designed to maintain a Unionist majority in the Executive) in tatters thanks to Unionist opposition, Westminster decided that it would have to take unilateral control of the Ulster executive establishment. This led to consequences for both the situation, and the region. Consequences which could have been avoided if the Unionist representatives were willing to compromise; it is likely this unwillingness to accept anything less than total victory is what prevented the conflict from resolving earlier than the late 1990s. British troops had ceased to be merely peacekeepers, and instead became the representatives on the ground of a regime seen to be preventing the 'unity of Catholic, Protestant and dissenter under the common banner of Irishman' (Alonso, 2007, pp. 38-9), and therefore the enemy. This divided communities, and military action was therefore required to prevent the divisions worsening and the Republican movement gaining traction with erstwhile Unionists. The issue of religion was thrust to the fore of the issue; British troops, in combating violence from the Catholic Republicans, began to inflict more collateral damage on the Catholic communities which the combatants came from. However, the steps to direct rule did begin to establish the future solution – in the 1990s, as the peace agreement was being negotiated, it was decided to re-establish the Assembly of Northern Ireland. Two decades later, the decision made in the early 1970s formed the basis for peace.

Normalising the Violence

Another major shift in not only policy, but socialisation, of the Troubles both in Britain and Ulster was the gradual efforts to normalise the situation. The failure of the British government to win over popular support in Northern Ireland, coupled with the attacks on civilians bringing the army into disrepute, led to the acceptance that the problems facing the security services were determined to maintain their presence. To ensure the continued running of day-to-day life in

the region, several key decisions were made in Westminster to return the judicial proceedings to their early settings. This specifically is of note regarding the abolition of the internment of suspected IRA members without trial, an action which even the Americans had termed a 'mess' and had contributed to a lack of appetite for US intervention (MacLeod, 2012, p. 35); and the initial attempts by British troops to protect jurors from intimidation, prior to the introduction of the Diplock courts in 1973 (Peterkin, 2006).

This normalisation was furthered by the efforts made to 'criminalise the violent aspects' (Wichert, 1994, p. 177) of the Troubles which began to occur throughout the early to mid-1970s. Although mostly through work of the British government, this was supported immensely by the efforts of the pacifist movements. This in particular is exemplified by the work of Betty Williams, Máiréad Corrigan, and Ciarán McKeown – co-founders of The Community for Peace People. Inspired by witnessing the deaths of three children in August 1976, Williams began to hold rallies and marches in her quest to bring an end to the violence plaguing her community. By December, not only had she accrued upwards of 15,000 supporters, she had also been given £200,000 for her efforts by a peace convention in Norway (Byrne et al., 1982, p. 472). Williams and Corrigan were given that year's Nobel Peace Prize, although, whether this is a judgement of success in and of itself is a separate question. This growing support for any cessation of hostilities led to a number of ceasefires being instituted. In 1972, the British government accepted an offer from the PIRA to carry out talks in Chelsea between William Whitelaw and an Irish Republican team. Whitelaw later commented that the 'absurd ultimatums' given by the Irish would never have been met: their demand for a unilateral withdrawal of British forces from Ulster was met with disdain, and within days the ceasefire had been broken (Whitelaw, 1989, in English, 2004, p. 158; Casciani, 2003). It is still unclear who was responsible for the ending of the ceasefire.

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Two years later, another truce was brokered by the PIRA, with the exception of the January bombings in 1975, this lasted until the following year when ten Protestant workers were ambushed and killed (Hennessey, 1997, pp. 255-6). Again, an assumption was made by the Republicans that the British were prepared to withdraw troops, which arguably led to the failure of the truce. Yet, both sides were willing to talk. After half a decade of conflict, the British and IRA were still prepared to discuss a solution to the problem.

The effectiveness of this campaign of normalisation can be clearly seen. Hostilities continued, and every attempt at a truce failed during this period. The only successful ceasefire enacted was by the OIRA, and was maintained for the remainder of the Troubles. In this sense, the attempts made to resume normal life had failed dismally – it could even be argued that they had, instead, entrenched the violence in the lives of those living in Ulster even further. 1971 saw 130 bombs exploded, and in 1972 more than 10,000 incidents involving shootings took place; with 2000 dead by the end of the decade, the conflict was far from over (Beckett and Chandler, 1996, pp. 350-1; Sutton, online). Of particular focus when studying these statistics is the casualty rate for the British soldiers and Loyalist paramilitaries - the Irish Republican forces inflicted more damage than any other single group, and they showed no signs of letting up by 1979. This famously climaxed with Lord Mountbatten's assassination. This is clear evidence that the objective of reconstruction of the region had not been achieved on either side – and was not going to be.

One can also look to the Rees Constitutional Convention in 1975 for further evidence of a situation with no hope for reconciliation or return to the past. When elections were held to the convention, the UUUC took a slim majority and, buoyed by their domination of 10 of the 11 Westminster parliamentary seats the following year, were out for a majority Unionist rule (McKittrick and McVea, 2002, p. 112). The Republicans were in such a minority that, when the Convention

closed, the report was entirely Unionist in origin (McKittrick and McVea, 2002, p. 114). Westminster was unable to accept such a conclusion and, with no chance of implementing power-sharing following the collapse of Sunningdale, the possibility of a return to a peaceable Northern Irish society was reducing daily.

The Use of Military Force

The last major change in policy enacted by the British government during this period has to be the use of the British Armed Forces, and the increasing reliance on local paramilitaries and local soldiers as the conflict wore on. As discussed above, the initial shock of the violence had required the British Army to be sent in to Ulster to act as peacekeepers and later riot control, codenamed Operation Banner – at its peak in the numbers of British troops deployed reached as many as 22,000 (Bennett, 2013, p. 278). The RUC failed to adequately contain the violence in Derry, instead allowing the action to escalate into a "battle", and further deploying armoured cars. The use of the quasi-paramilitary B Specials, hated for their anti-Catholic fervour, further contributed to the sectarian flavour to the conflict; this led to their abolition shortly after (Morgan, 1992, p. 291). In fact, it could be argued that in the first crucial months, it would have been unwise to not bring in British troops.

The resources brought to bear by this deployment meant combating the bombing campaigns of a determined Republican foe became far more achievable – the redevelopment of intelligence and training, twinned with the direct challenge to IRA controlled "no-go" areas, through Operation Motorman and the precedent it set, meant that gradually the Republican forces began to lose the fight (Beckett and Chandler, 1996, p. 351). Yet not soon enough, as the area soon became known as the most dangerous deployment globally for a British soldier.

This led to the commencement of the "Ulsterisation" of Operation Banner, particularly regarding the increasing actions of paramilitaries. Whilst not employed by the government, these groups, such as the UVF and UDA, were popular amongst those serving on the front line, and politicians. One British officer remarked that 'a lot of what they do is illegal…but since they took over there hasn't been a single bomb at all in their area', with even Northern Irish Prime Minister Brian Faulkner discussing a code of practice to ensure their constructive co-operation with regular forces (Bruce, 1992, pp. 47-8). This allowed the police to focus on crowd control, and the army to focus on counter-insurgency. The other major shift in this campaign of re-establishing local forces at the heart of the Unionist cause was the foundation of the Ulster Defence Regiment in early 1970, with a battalion formed for each county, and one for Belfast. Many of those who enlisted were former members of the B Specials, or the Territorial Army, with over 6,000 enlisting by the end of the year (HMSO, 2004, p. 130).

How effective was this introduction of Northern Irish fighters? The UDA, while popular amongst local people, was considered dangerous by British authorities. The armed wing of the Association was banned in 1973; the only other major Unionist paramilitary, the UVF, which been deemed illegal in the 1960s, had been reformed by Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Merlyn Rees to enable the group to contribute to any peace settlement… only to be banned again less than 12 months later (Byrne et al., 1982, p. 463; Bruce, 1992, pp. 117-9). The illegal practises referred to above also had their consequences. Not only did the violence carried out by the paramilitaries antagonise local populations even further than the British military had – leading to the creation of 'barricaded areas' behind which the IRA had complete control (Leahy, 2015, p. 47) – but by specifically breaking the law in Army occupied areas some became enemies of the British military. One example is the pseudo-war fought over control of Shankill Road in Belfast: 'Loyalist paramilitaries were beaten up,

UDA clubs were raided, and money 'confiscated'… several soldiers were convicted of stealing from Loyalist-controlled businesses and committing other robberies' (Burke, 2015, pp. 666-7). This adversarial situation did not endear either the British squaddies or the Loyalist fighters to the locals.

With regards to the Ulster Defence Regiment, despite the fact that only one of these battalions ever accrued full strength completely, they were a vital component of the British military response. The experience many of them had already in either the police, or army, coupled to their local knowledge and personal stake in the restoration of peace, allowed the unit to project British interests into areas whilst still ensuring that local people did not feel threatened by a "foreign" and hostile force. The initial presence of Catholic recruits, up to half in some areas, further enhanced the intention of the unit as a replacement to the heavily sectarian B Specials – although after the introduction of internment without trial the numbers heavily plummeted (Keegan, 2002).

The important contribution the Regiment made was in allowing the British Army to begin to de-escalate its own involvement. The US had been becoming concerned that the UK would be unable to fulfil its required NATO contributions since 1972, and the amount of military intervention in Ulster had drawn criticism from Washington and from Dublin (MacLeod, 2012, pp. 45-6). In a conflict where the IRA supposedly aimed to inflict more casualties than the Army had suffered in Aden, and thereby force Westminster to withdraw, every British casualty was a victory for the Republicans. Therefore, the increasing use of 'home-grown' peacekeepers robbed the IRA of their righteousness – no longer were they fighting against an evil colonial regime, but instead targeting their neighbours (Smith, 2002, p. 114). The "Ulsterisation" of the conflict was an integral aspect of Westminster policy, and began to set the cultural tone for a restoration of Home Rule.

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To Conclude

The Troubles remain to this day an exemplar both of when political discussion breaks down due to civil unrest, and of how a mismanaged military situation can quickly escalate the problems faced by troops on the ground. As in line with most previous British military experience putting down rebellions, in the 1970s the Ulster and British military establishment failed significantly in an accurate assessment of the threat. However, these failures were specific to the area in that both the initial assumption that local law enforcement would control the problem, and the later deployment of British troops to act as merely peacekeepers in a conflict which had quickly dissolved to counter-insurgency. The overcompensation in response to rioting and low-level paramilitary activity led to one of the largest deployments in post-1945 British military history, and a campaign so long and protracted that it only ended after thirty-eight years, and with over 300,000 personnel having been sent to the region (McKittrick, 2007). It also, more importantly, claimed the lives of over 3500 people – with over half the damage done in the first decade (Dixon, 2001, p. 24; Sutton, online).

However, the elongation of this troubled period in Northern Irish history cannot be solely attributed to British Parliamentary policy. Westminster's approach always had the swift end of the conflict at heart: direct rule was the last resort of a government with little idea of how else to maintain the everyday running of the region; the attempts made to return Ulster to normal life before the violence had fully ended may not have been intentionally malicious; and the increasing desire to use local troops over British squaddies did help to reduce PIRA attacks, through fear of hurting their own people.

 So, in these respects, the solutions offered to the problem were offered in search of a peaceful resolution as soon as possible. But as seen, they did fail on a number of levels to reduce the impact of the

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Troubles – and they failed most by allowing civilians to be caught in the crossfire. The British Government's policy changes were enacted with mixed intentions; yet sadly history has condemned them to act as lessons in failure, while conducting asymmetric warfare.

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