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AN IRREGULAR FAMILIARITY : DOMESTIC INSURGENCY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Exercise Solo Flight

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**AN IRREGULAR FAMILIARITY: DOMESTIC INSURGENCY IN
NORTHERN IRELAND**

By Lieutenant-Commander Peter Sargeant

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AN IRREGULAR FAMILIARITY: DOMESTIC INSURGENCY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Introduction

The complexity and history of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland presented new lessons in counter-insurgency operations to a 1970s British military that was more familiar with guerilla operations in colonial deserts, jungles, and other outstations abroad. This struggle possessed a “strong value-based ethno-nationalist dimension...always likely to be problematic as a counter-insurgency campaign”¹ that was further compounded by the multifaceted military, civil, and sociopolitical factors commensurate with conducting domestic operations on home soil and among fellow citizens. There is a convincing argument that sending in the army was the best course of action available to the British and Northern Irish governments in 1969, as recent experiences with insurgencies across the colonial empire instigated the political perception that, given these experiences, the army should know best how to deal with them.² The army was, however, unprepared for this challenge. The solution was not formulaic; compounding the complexities when planning approaches from insurgency to insurgency was the different methodology needed when moving from colonial to domestic operations, as factors within the domestic sphere will often render colonial approaches unacceptable, unwieldy, and inappropriate. This left the British army with limitations on the tactics it could employ, and exacerbated the effects of any errors or mistakes on their part. Misconceptions about the depth and basis of the conflict, the anticipated length of deployment, and the follow-on effects of

¹ Tuck, Christopher. “Northern Ireland and the British Approach to Counter-Insurgency.” *Defense & Security Analysis* 23, no. 2 (2007), 168.

² Thornton, Rod. “Getting it Wrong: The Crucial Mistakes Made in the Early Stages of the British Army’s Deployment to Northern Ireland (August 1969 to March 1972).” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 1 (2007), 77.

backing one side at the expense of another limited the army's influence from the start, as did seemingly obvious mistakes such as having no functioning Public Relations system³ and blatant cultural insensitivities while conducting operations within a province in which the government in standing relied upon "discrimination, gerrymandering and intimidation for its survival".⁴ One could be tempted to attribute these oversights to lack of preparation, or perhaps an unwillingness to engage in a problematic area with the hopes that the locals would sort it out themselves, but that the perception that the army could be deployed, restore order, and then be quickly removed⁵ could persist in a state for which its "eventual breakdown ...seemed inevitable leading up to 1969"⁶ is indicative of the low level of preparedness of the army and its supporting political leaders in the time period prior to its deployment to the streets of Derry. That these preconceptions and oversights lasted well into counter-insurgency operation remains a pertinent issue in the present day, as British success in bringing an end to the conflict has "enhanced the credibility and renewed interest in the British model of counter-insurgency"⁷ and it is now being studied in the context of contemporary insurgencies. This raises the importance of studying the failures as well as the successes, and this treatment will focus on the less successful attributes of that conflict. Through citing examples of British policy imbalance and omission, fundamental oversights with respect to the employment of local civil defence forces and the deployment of the British Army, and British misunderstandings of the local population, this essay will argue that Britain's approach to the insurgency in Northern Ireland was avoidably ineffectual and served to prolong rather than to curtail the insurgency.

³ Thornton, 100.

⁴ Newsinger, John. *British Counterinsurgency: From Palestine to Northern Ireland*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, 152.

⁵ Dixon, Paul. "Hearts and Minds? British Counter-Insurgency Strategy in Northern Ireland." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 3 (2009). 466.

⁶ Newsinger, 152.

⁷ Dixon, "Northern Ireland", 446.

The Policy Vacuum

The lack of preparedness in Britain's response to the Northern Ireland insurgency was evident in the scant policy that existed at the beginning of the conflict, and through the various policy initiatives and re-writes that occurred through the conflict, which ultimately had a detrimental effect on the outcome and length of the conflict. Universally accepted military doctrine dictates that military actions "...cannot be divorced from political considerations"⁸ and that "the ultimate aim of contemporary warfare is the political object."⁹ An insurgency is no different, though in Northern Ireland the linkage between the armed forces and their political leaders was poorly delineated and poorly practiced. This was largely due to a lack of political plan and policy to address the insurgency. Reports indicate that Westminster was satisfied to allow the Stormont parliament complete political control over operations in Northern Ireland until direct rule was imposed in 1972.¹⁰ This in itself served to fuel the conflict, as "this Protestant-dominated body saw the solution to the disturbances in Northern Ireland as a hard-line security response."¹¹ It appeared that the political end-state favoured by Stormont was simply to quell the minority rebellion through force, and was not fostering the necessary political reforms that could address the problem at its root.¹² The introduction of the army into this prejudiced environment further clouded existing policy, as the General Officer Commanding (GOC) Northern Ireland was then responsible to three masters: the MOD, Home Office, and Stormont and thus a "unity of command" was not established.¹³ In absence of a clear and unified political

⁸ Craig, Gordon A. "Delbrück: The Military Historian." In *The Makers of Modern Strategy*, edited by Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986, 349.

⁹ Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*. Michael Howard and Peter Paret eds. and trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, Book 1, 227.

¹⁰ Tuck, 167.

¹¹ Tuck, 167.

¹² Tuck, 167.

¹³ Thornton, 77.

agenda that army was forced to operate in a policy vacuum and “hold the ring”¹⁴ until such time that Stormont and Westminster consolidate their goals to address the insurgency. What little policy did exist through much of the conflict was frequently interrupted by contradictory political initiatives and was “repressive enough to complete the process of alienating the Catholic working class but not repressive enough to actually defeat the Provisional IRA.”¹⁵ Weak policy further exacerbated the conflict when government negotiations with the IRA not only indicated to the insurgents a lack of political resolve and will to defeat the IRA, but also provoked the opposing loyalist paramilitaries into more aggressive action as the Unionist base saw this policy, as the government ceding to Republican demands, and thus this policy vacuum and lack of political will created problems on both sides of the conflict.¹⁶ If a lack of political will causes the respective populations on each side think that the government, or the army in this case, will lose, then even moderate members of the population may well side with the expected victor,¹⁷ be it Republican IRA or Unionist paramilitary. These factors influenced the resolve of both the local population and of the army dispatched to address the conflict, and hindered the ability of the army to gain the trust of the local population. Thus, the convoluted political organization to which the army was forced to report and the resulting lack of clear policy and goals served to delay an appropriate response to the insurgency, and ultimately prolonged the conflict.

¹⁴ Dixon, “Northern Ireland”, 448.

¹⁵ Newsinger, 163.

¹⁶ Dixon, “Northern Ireland”, 450.

¹⁷ Dixon, Paul. "Hearts and Minds: British Counter-Insurgency from Malaysia to Iraq." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 3 (2009), 358.

The Army

It was into this policy vacuum that the British counter-insurgency force was deployed, and while they were clearly thrust into a difficult situation and suffered from a lack of political guidance from the start, the army's own decisions and actions were often to the further detriment of the situation, and also served to prolong the conflict and fuel aggressive sentiments on both sides. Deployed into the situation with little preparation, responsible to multiple political masters, and being forced to now employ the civil defence forces on station and to "pick a side" compounded these difficulties. The army was understandably reluctant to battle an insurgency on two fronts, and thus was forced to side with the existing civil authorities,¹⁸ namely the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC). However, once deployed, the army was used more frequently to act as "the strong arm of the Stormont regime"¹⁹ and was thus less able to be seen as an impartial counter-insurgency force. This impacted the Catholic minority's perception of the army, and is a critical factor in the sentiments of the local population and the resultant effects during the insurgency. It is worth noting that when the army was deployed in 1969 the IRA was largely passive and not deemed to be a problem²⁰; the arrival of the British forces was to quell civil unrest between the minority Catholic and majority Protestant working classes. Until early in 1970 the Catholic community thought of the troops as their protectors,²¹ and the army certainly acknowledged the importance of this relationship in the early stages of the conflict. Realizing the importance of the minority local population's support and the risk of further aggression and extremism should they become more isolated, and subscribing to the edict that, during an insurgency, troops must be prepared to act as "...a social

¹⁸ Dixon, "Northern Ireland", 468.

¹⁹ Newsinger, 161.

²⁰ Thornton, 80.

²¹ Newsinger, 162.

worker, a civil engineer, a schoolteacher, a nurse, a boy scout”,²² the army played its part well by engaging in civil projects which would benefit the local population within three months of being deployed.²³ This supportive relationship was not to last, however, as actions taken by the army such as the illegal Falls Road curfew, searching, arrests, and internment quickly eroded their rapport with the Catholic community.²⁴ These events and the resultant change of sentiment among the locals then increased the recruiting opportunities for the IRA and facilitated the PIRA launching its military campaign in the summer of 1970, which fueled the flames of the insurgency and “provoked fierce popular resistance that they were able to use in order to intensify their campaign dramatically.”²⁵ This situation, though detrimental, was not entirely unavoidable given the tools and information that the army had to work with. A lack of intelligence was prevalent in the early stages of the operation; as the RUC was disappointed at having to hand over command of their civil responsibilities, it was thus reluctant to pass on any of their intelligence to the army.²⁶ The lack of intelligence was a critical factor, and resulted in mistakes on the part of the army in the action that ensued. This shortcoming forced the army to carry out wide-ranging activities such as the Falls Road Curfew and Internment to gather intelligence, but these tactics were perceived as an attack on the entire Catholic community, for which the only concrete result was the precipitation of a collective disdain for the army. Heavy-handed actions such as these only confirm the insurgency resistance agendas and propaganda and gain them recruits,²⁷ as insurgents seeking to gain public support will be “encouraging over-

²² Boot, Max. "The Evolution of Irregular Warfare: Insurgents and Guerrillas from Akkadia to Afghanistan." *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 2 (March/April 2013), 109.

²³ Dixon, "Northern Ireland", 463.

²⁴ Newsinger, 161.

²⁵ Newsinger, 165.

²⁶ Thornton, 91.

²⁷ Freedman, Sir Lawrence. "Regular and Irregular War." *Strategic Datalink*, no. 1 (August 2008).

reaction by security forces as part of their general strategy.²⁸ In this case the over-reactions, whether justified by a lack of intelligence or not, were forthcoming. Widely accepted counter-insurgency doctrine dictates that to defeat insurgents, a force must focus “not on chasing guerillas but on securing the local population,”²⁹ which would have yielded more benefit than the tactics selected by the British Army. A willing population can assist with intelligence gathering, and by isolating the Catholic minority the army missed this opportunity. An example of the criticality and effectiveness that the support of the local population can bring is well documented in the success that the IRA had employing the same local community once their faith in the army as their liberators failed, as “most Republicans recognized intelligence of potential value so that its collection was almost an unconscious process requiring little formalization. Sympathizers could easily pass on this intelligence to the IRA either directly or through a network of family or associates.”³⁰ Basic intelligence, gathered locally by the population thus served to fill most of the IRA’s intelligence needs.³¹ The British army, through their heavy-handed tactics, isolated themselves from this intelligence source and subsequently suffered the consequences through the actions of the IRA. These oversights on the part of the army served to empower their insurgent adversary and ultimately prolong conflict in Northern Ireland.

The Police and the Local Population

Progress against the counterinsurgency in Northern Ireland was further impaired through what should have been a logical and positive step, that is the movement towards police primacy

²⁸ Thornton, 100.

²⁹ Boot, 112.

³⁰ Ilardi, Gaetano Joe. “IRA operational intelligence: the heartbeat of the war.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 2 (2010), 335.

³¹ Ilardi, 335.

and the engagement of other locally recruited forces to battle the insurgency, but this too was carried out in a manner that was initially more detrimental than good. The attraction of police primacy was obvious; they were more familiar and thus more suitable intelligence gatherers in their respective areas of operation,³² they had permanent roots and a clear, long-term stake in the outcome of the conflict, and this approach was favoured by British counter-insurgency doctrine.³³ However, police primacy in Northern Ireland came with historical prejudice against law enforcement that was not unwarranted; in early 1969 a Catholic civil rights march from Belfast to Derry was subjected to continual loyalist harassment, and when the march was ambushed and attacked by members of the Protestant population, the marchers' RUC escort "either stood passively by or even joined in."³⁴ This followed a similar pattern of repression and experienced by the minority group through the preceding years and decades, and this event "demonstrated beyond any doubt that the RUC was a sectarian force that would not enforce the law impartially,"³⁵ and confirmed to the Catholic community that it would have to protect itself.³⁶ Thus, police primacy as enforced by the unionist and majority-Protestant RUC served to fan the flames of the Catholic nationalist insurgency. The requirement of the British counter-insurgency force to pick a side to back in order to avoid the "nightmare scenario" of "a war on two fronts"³⁷ led them to side with the RUC and, by association or perception, the unionist paramilitary groups well. This alignment was detrimental to the insurgency effort, and was evident on many fronts. In spite of such events as a loyalist backlash that "manifested itself in a vicious campaign of murder by loyalist paramilitaries,"³⁸ only 107 of the 1981 people interned

³² Dixon, "Northern Ireland", 448.

³³ Dixon, "Northern Ireland", 464.

³⁴ Newsinger, 154.

³⁵ Newsinger, 155.

³⁶ Newsinger, 155.

³⁷ Dixon, "Northern Ireland," 450.

³⁸ Dixon, "Northern Ireland," 452.

through 1971-75 were Protestant/unionist.³⁹ Furthermore, at the lower level there was clear intermingling between the Ulster Defence Force (UDR) and the loyalist paramilitaries, “an overlap that was condoned by the British despite the terrible toll that was being taken on Catholic lives,”⁴⁰ while loyalist paramilitary action often came as a result of intelligence and support from security forces.⁴¹ Such a police structure approach could not hope to pacify the insurgency, and, through the side they selected to back, the army was considered to be equally partial. This was demonstrated on multiple occasions, such as during the Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strikes against a new Labour government in 1974 that resulted in Protestant paramilitaries blocking streets, hijacking vehicles, and erecting barricades, against which neither the army or the RUC took any serious steps to stop or prevent, while similar activities by the Republicans would have resulted in a forceful response.⁴² Events such as this supported both Catholic and Protestant views that the existing security forces endorsed the actions of the Protestant paramilitaries. These factors challenged the establishment of police primacy, as did the fact that there was a pronounced “zero-sum” character to the conflict⁴³; “If Republicans often believed that the British security forces were too repressive, many unionists believed that they were not repressive enough.”⁴⁴ Police primacy failed simply because it sided with only one portion of the population. A more representative police force would have made better inroads with all communities and advantaged both the RUC and the army, as “good policing with the community builds confidence, credibility and legitimacy. Policing with the community buys us the licence

³⁹ Dixon, “Northern Ireland”, 457.

⁴⁰ Newsinger, 178.

⁴¹ Newsinger, 194.

⁴² Newsinger, 174.

⁴³ Tuck, 168.

⁴⁴ Tuck, 174.

to operate in challenging and difficult circumstances.”⁴⁵ Policing with the community would have been a positive step, however, the attempts at achieving police primacy in Northern Ireland was haunted by violent events from the past and did not follow these principles during the conflict, and this had negative effects on the outcome and duration of the insurgency.

Conclusion

Through examples of misguided and lacking policy, an army and local defence force failing to understand and win over the local population, and police primacy failures due to an imbalance in representation, this essay has argued that Britain’s approach to the insurgency in Northern Ireland was ineffectual and served to prolong the insurgency. The history and complexity of conflict in Northern Ireland, as well as the established structure of its political, law-enforcement, and defence institution, and the sentiments of their respective supporters and detractors affirmed that this was not the classic image of a counter-insurgent against insurgent, or even imperial power against national liberation movement.⁴⁶ Influenced by recent counter-insurgencies in colonial territories, British forces and policy-makers applied similar tactics to those employed more successfully overseas, and failed to see that, as a domestic conflict, the scenario was very different. There is little doubt that it was a challenging situation for politicians and security forces who wished to negotiate a peace settlement, as “any attempt to conciliate the Catholic minority alienated the Protestants,”⁴⁷ while the Catholic minority found almost constant alienation from the security forces’ partnerships with the Protestant-majority in power.

⁴⁵ Police Service of Northern Ireland, “Chief Constable’s lecture at Queen’s Belfast: Reflections on Policing with the Community,” last accessed on 8 May 2019, <https://www.psni.police.uk/news/Latest-News/070519-chief-cons-qub-speech/>.

⁴⁶ Dixon, “Northern Ireland”, 448.

⁴⁷ Newsinger, 173.

However, the lack of clear policy from political leaders, the strategic, operational, and tactical misunderstandings on the context of many aspects of the conflict by the army, and the longstanding tensions between the minority population and its civil rulers and enforcers that impeded police primacy added fuel to this insurgency, whereas better policy, understanding, and force structure would have made gains towards ending it more effectively and on better terms. As the British counterinsurgency experience in Northern Ireland is being studied and its lessons applied to modern counterinsurgencies, these lessons should be appropriately heeded and applied.

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