The Toxic Legacy of the Northern Ireland Troubles

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The 50th anniversary of the day that British troops first deployed to Northern Ireland offers an opportunity to reflect on the legacy of Operation Banner, and whether the security forces contributed to the troubles or prevented them.

On 14 August 2019 the 50th anniversary will be marked since British troops were first deployed onto the streets of Northern Ireland. Some 250,000 service personnel were deployed in Operation Banner between 1969 and their withdrawal in 2007, the longest continuous involvement of the military in support of the civil authorities in the UK in modern times. In total some 1,441 troops died on operational service in Northern Ireland of which 53 were outside the Province, including 775 killed in hostilities. It was the largest loss of military lives in all of Britain’s post-war conflicts, except for Malaya (1948–60), during which 1,442 troops died. Half a century on is a good vantage point to reflect on the successes and failures, as well as the lessons and legacy of military operations in one of the world’s most deeply divided societies.

Background to the Conflict

The outbreak of intercommunal conflict between Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists in the summer of 1969 had been building up for several years. Four years earlier, a handful of right-wing unionist politicians were busy recruiting extremists into a terrorist group known as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), which had been mobilised in the face of a feared resumption of hostilities by militant Irish republican separatists in the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In reality, the IRA was moribund following the failure of their border campaign, known as ‘Operation Harvest’, between 1956 and 1962. Republican violence had been met with a determined counterinsurgency strategy led by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the local police force, and a small garrison of British troops based in the Province which had recently returned from operations in Kenya. Although a resurgent IRA threat did not materialise on the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, in 1968 the minority Catholic community flocked to the banner of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, which was protesting against discrimination in jobs, housing and employment. Confrontation with the RUC soon followed, leading inevitably to sectarian clashes between Protestants and Catholics.

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Overwhelmed by the sheer scale of civil disturbances, the RUC requested assistance from the British Army, which deployed onto the streets on 14 and 15 August 1969. Over the next two-and-a-half years the army launched a series of high-profile operations, including the Falls Road curfew of 3–5 July 1970 and internment without trial on 9 August 1971. The heavy-handed nature of the army’s counterinsurgency strategy, however, soon proved to be a liability. On 30 January 1972 British paratroopers opened fire on a civil rights protest march in the Bogside area of Derry/Londonderry, killing 13 people, an event that became known as ‘Bloody Sunday’. Simon Winchester, The Guardian correspondent in Northern Ireland at the time, captured the mood in the city best when he reported how the Bogside ‘had all the appearance of Sharpeville’.

In the wake of the killings, the government of Prime Minister Edward Heath came under enormous international pressure and by late March 1972, London had prorogued the unionist-dominated government in Belfast. By the end of the year, there had been a total of 10,631 shooting incidents, along with 1,382 bombings and 471 devices neutralised by army bomb-disposal officers. 497 people lost their lives in that year and ten times as many were injured. Politically, most of the 1970s were spent searching for a solution to the violence. For the time being, however, the army was placed in charge of all security forces operations.

British Counterinsurgency Operations

As far as the military were concerned, most of the violence in the early 1970s emanated from republican paramilitaries. The IRA had split in the 1960s into two separate organisations, the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA. The former was motivated by a socialist-leaning ideology and called a ceasefire in late May 1972, while the latter were motivated by a more traditional nationalist – and sectarian –
A British Army soldier on lookout in the Falls Road area of Belfast, 15 August 1969. Courtesy of PA Images.
outlook. The Provisional IRA began its operations with the strategic objective of defending Catholics from Protestant attacks and later progressed to the broader objective of seeking British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. Tactically, its violence took the form of open confrontation with the security forces and orchestration of large-scale rioting. In a very short space of time, the Provisional IRA grew in size, becoming increasingly proficient in the means and methods of terrorism.

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Initially the army’s tactical response to IRA violence was to lean heavily on the colonial experience of what it called ‘Internal Security’ operations. The focus of ‘IS drills’, as they were referred to colloquially by troops, ranged from riot control tactics to escalating force in urban areas, from firing on suspected ringleaders of violence to using heavy weapons to clear areas of insurgents. Since the end of the Second World War, Britain had fought insurgencies in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and Aden. At times, however, this heavy-handed approach was applied in inappropriate ways. For instance, the shootings on Bloody Sunday by the 1st Battalion of the Army’s Parachute Regiment would be followed by the ‘pitchfork murders’ of two Catholic civilians by soldiers from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders later in the same year. Both regiments had previously been in action in Aden in South Yemen in 1967. Battle-hardened, the troops struggled with the concept of fighting a terrorist enemy in the relative domesticity of Northern Irish streets. As historian Edward Burke contends, the ‘Army neither employed a successful “hearts and minds” approach nor did it clamp down as it had done in the colonies’. Indeed, Burke has challenged previous analyses that have compared Northern Ireland to colonial settings, crediting Heath’s government with having faced down military demands for the introduction of martial law.

By the late 1970s, the IRA had shifted its strategy from placing a premium on guerrilla-style attacks to one that focused on cellular-based terrorism. It formed what it called ‘Active Service Units’ (ASUs), small cells that had developed specific expertise in gun or bomb attacks. These ASUs or ‘squads’ ambushed security force patrols with heavy-calibre machine guns while seeking to devastate parts of Northern Ireland and Great Britain with high-powered explosives and mortar bombs. The IRA also began to attack high-value targets, notably British diplomats, politicians, army commanders, military barracks, and even royalty.

**The Intelligence-Led Policing Response**

Following the IRA’s killing of 18 soldiers at Warrenpoint and its assassination of Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Queen’s second cousin, in County Sligo in the Republic of Ireland on the same day in August 1979, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher appointed the recently retired intelligence chief Maurice Oldfield as Northern Ireland Security Co-ordinator. Oldfield’s role was to ensure that the police, the army and the Security Service, MI5, worked more closely together in their intelligence-led approach to combating terrorism. Unsurprisingly, given his professional background, Oldfield believed that intelligence-led operations were the best way to ensure greater success against the terrorists.

Throughout ‘the Troubles’, the security forces gathered intelligence in three principal ways: surveillance; interrogation; and the use of agents and informers. Some commentators have since described intelligence collation as operating on a number of layers, with uniformed members of the security forces gathering details about suspects’ lives, a range of technical intelligence sources providing greater surveillance capability, and covert human intelligence sources (often known as ‘agents’ and ‘informers’) inside terrorist groups. Former RUC Special Branch officer William Matchett has suggested that ‘at any one time up to 15 “well placed” agents may have been active within the IRA’. These human sources typically supplied background information about the membership and structure of terrorist groups and specific information on their plans for attacks. By building up a more complete picture of the individuals involved in terrorism, as well as their supporters, sympathisers and wider communities, the security forces were able to take effective steps towards deterring terrorism, reassuring the civilian population and, ultimately, capturing and convicting terrorists. Only occasionally did the security forces use lethal force against their opponents as their ambush of eight armed IRA members at Loughball, County Armagh, in May 1987 attests.

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However, it would take another decade before army operations were fully geared towards supporting the RUC. It could be argued that the initial work of Oldfield and his successor, Brooks Richards, only really began to pay off in the early 1990s with the formation of the Province Executive Committee (PEC). The PEC was jointly chaired by the RUC’s Deputy Chief Constable and the British Army’s Commander of Land Forces Northern Ireland and was charged with implementing the British government’s security policy as set down by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and carried forward at the strategic level by the Chief Constable and the General Officer Commanding. The ultimate responsibility for directing the fight against terrorism in Northern Ireland...
Ireland lay with the Tasking and Co-ordination Groups (TCGs), an integrated hub which fused all security forces intelligence and operations on the ground.

Intelligence-led policing produced some major successes, such as the arrest of IRA members on their way to kill the head of the RUC’s Criminal Investigation Department in February 1994. Six months later the IRA called a ceasefire, followed six weeks later by reciprocation from loyalist paramilitaries on 13 October 1994. Exploratory talks between the IRA’s political associates in Sinn Féin and the British government began in 1995, but they broke down when the IRA returned to its armed campaign in February 1996. The arrest of an IRA sniper team in South Armagh on 10 April 1997 signalled the demise of the group’s terror campaign and it renewed its ceasefire on 20 July 1997. Sinn Féin was admitted to multiparty talks in August 1997, which led to the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement on 10 April 1998.

Military Drawdown and Lessons Learned

In the wake of the Belfast Agreement, military commanders came under political pressure to withdraw their forces from the streets and ‘normalise’ in the face of republican undertakings to run down their military wing. On paper at least, the army was committed to support the RUC and its successors in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). In reality, such support was only availed of whenever there were instances of serious civil disturbances. The most notable came in the last of the major Drumcree protests in Portadown in 1999 and 2000. Drumcree was the site of an annual march by Protestant members of the Orange Order, which had been denied permission to walk along the contentious Garvaghy Road area of the town. A year later, in the Ardoyne area of North Belfast, another crisis was brewing, this time in a dispute between local Protestant residents and the Catholic parents of children attending the Holy Cross school, which turned violent in 2001–02. Here, as in Portadown, the army deployed in support of the police and, again, in Belfast in July 2005 and across the city again in September 2005. In the last major incident, some 50 police officers were injured. At the end of the month, the IRA announced it had fully decommissioned and the British government responded by ending Operation Banner on 31 July 2007.

The termination of major hostilities over a decade ago has been widely celebrated. Despite taking a heavy-handed approach to containing terrorism in the first decade of the Troubles, the army soon adapted to the constraints of working within the strictures of a liberal democracy and alongside a police service that developed an evidence-based approach to combating terrorism. As the army itself reported in its analysis of Operation Banner, ‘Security forces do not “win” insurgency campaigns militarily; at best they can contain or suppress the level of violence and achieve a successful end-state’. In theory, the recognition that insurgency and terrorism are not military problems has always been at the heart of Britain’s approach to combating these security concerns. Yet, in practice, a certain amount of tortuous debate, discussion and the learning and relearning of harsh lessons has had to happen first before this is finally acknowledged.

Northern Ireland’s Toxic Legacy

The success in the security response to terrorism in Northern Ireland may have dealt effectively with the symptoms of the violent conflict, but the grievances that gave rise to it have not been comprehensively addressed. The trauma inflicted by the few on the many means that the Troubles will continue to haunt British politics for years to come. Since the Belfast Agreement, there has been a repeated failure to transform Northern Ireland beyond inter-ethnic competition. This has had two major effects. First, it has accentuated the deep schism between the two main communities, resulting in the collapse of the power-sharing Executive. Second, it has facilitated the rise of a toxic discourse on the past. In a practical sense, this toxicity has enabled both communities to weaponise the past to continue to inflict further damage on the other side. When considered in relation to what some experts have called ‘catastrophic levels of mental ill health’, this does not bode well for the longer-term reconciliation promised to the people of Northern Ireland more than 20 years ago.

The decision in March 2019 by the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland to prosecute a former soldier for two murders and two attempted murders on Bloody Sunday has reignited the debate on the legacy of Operation Banner. Many former service personnel are now actively questioning their contribution to help end the Troubles, especially as Irish republicans seek to place them on a par with their own volunteers. The UK’s Defence Secretary Penny Mordaunt said in May that the situation regarding prosecutions of service personnel has ‘dragged on for far too long’ and that it was ‘time for action’. There has been intense debate in Northern Ireland and Great Britain over whether there should be an amnesty for all of those accused of murder during the Troubles. As has been seen in other countries where amnesties have been attempted, the process may bring a speedy end to violence in the short term, but it is ultimately injurious to the long-term search for peace and reconciliation, particularly in those places where mistrust continues to breed division.

In looking back at the Troubles from the vantage point of half a century, it is easy to forget the invaluable contribution of the army, RUC/PSNI and Britain’s intelligence agencies to securing the peace. However, to do so would be to betray the memories of those men and women who paid the ultimate sacrifice so that people in Northern Ireland could have a better future.

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