“All the touts we need”: HUMINT experience in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of human intelligence in the conflict in Northern Ireland, identifying how republican and loyalist terrorist sources were handled by the security forces and the lessons applicable to current counter insurgency conflicts. This is done by analyzing the context of operations, initial deployment of troops, and the development of the intelligence process throughout the conflict. The conflict in Northern Ireland presents many lessons for the use of human intelligence, including effective training of handlers, recruitment tactics, and using informers to potentially influence organizational behaviour. While republican and loyalist terrorist organizations were investigated by intelligence agencies, a policy of civilian police primacy for operating informants in loyalist organizations led to both perceived and actual collusion. It may have made operational sense, especially at the beginning of the conflict, to utilize local knowledge, but gathering intelligence on all terrorist organizations should have operated along identical policies.

1 INTRODUCTION

The 30-year conflict in Northern Ireland that began in 1969 has been a frequent source of study, especially relating to the use of intelligence. As a well-studied, relatively recent, and long-running conflict, it offers numerous angles for analysis. This paper explores the uses of human intelligence collection, how policies around this practice were built through the period, and how the security forces handled the existence of two competing armed groups. This paper will begin by contextualizing insurgencies and the unique conflict in Northern Ireland before exploring the role of intelligence more broadly in counterinsurgency conflict. This context will then be followed by a more in-depth analysis of the security forces, intelligence agencies, and terrorist organizations involved in Northern Ireland to best track policy development and implementation.

Question

The core question of this paper is, were intelligence practices implemented the same way against republican and loyalist paramilitary groups? This paper will attempt to examine the question whether human intelligence led to a different outcome if intelligence originated from a loyalist or a republican source, or if the security forces approached those two groups with the same mindset regarding intelligence collection. Examining the role that sources of human intelligence have helps to better understand how the information provided was used to influence the outcome of the conflict and the impact of intelligence policy and infrastructure.

Format

In order to explore these themes this paper will begin with the context. To understand the uses of intelligence in this conflict it is useful and necessary to first examine counterinsurgency more generally and the important role that intelligence plays in this type of campaign. To situate counterinsurgency within the context of Northern Ireland the paper will then explore the issues that escalated from civil demonstrations to violence in 1969. The paper will then explore a selection of the paramilitary groups involved on either side, as well as the agencies of the British state that were tasked with collecting intelligence on these groups. There are a number of players involved on all sides of this conflict, and their nature, as well as the nature of the forces opposing them, shifted throughout the conflict.

Concern

It is important to note here the limitations placed on this paper by sources. Due to the fact this conflict ended recently, a significant amount of information remains classified. As of 2019 MI5 was still declassifying and releasing documents relating to the First and Second World Wars (National Archives 2019). There are similar delays in declassification relating to files held by the British Army related to Northern Ireland. These policies are of course in place to protect the identities of those who provided information to security forces. Until more information is released and declassified, the human intelligence activities of the security forces will remain, to a large extent, unclear and full assessments are difficult.

1.1 Current Insurgencies

Insurgencies differ from state-on-state conflict in that there is usually a civilian population heavily involved, and it is often difficult to distinguish friend, civilian, and enemy. Insurgent

conflicts have been constant over the history of conflict, from Roman operations in Judea to the Boer War, and conflicts throughout the Cold War. They are rarely simple. “Counter-insurgency is a multi-faceted, multi-agency mission that entails the integration of security, political, social-economic and information activities toward the common goal of protecting and winning support of the ‘center of gravity’ (the population)” (Charters 2009 pg. 66). The recent post 9/11 deployment of American and NATO forces to Iraq and Afghanistan highlights the significance of the counterinsurgency campaigns in those countries. It is important to note that “intelligence can only allow the security forces to impose some degree of order that will buy time for political leaders to make decisions” (Charters 2009 pg. 66). Intelligence can supplement and support effective policy, but it cannot win conflicts on its own.

Canada’s support to the NATO mission in Afghanistan lasted from 2001 to 2014 and more than 40,000 Canadians served in the country during that period (Veterans Affairs Canada 2020). The Canadian Army’s manual for Counter-Insurgency Operations released in 2008, in the middle of the deployment, and places a large emphasis on the role of intelligence in counterinsurgencies and the important role of intelligence staff:

> They must come to understand and describe for the commander power structures and the relationships between these systems and their overall influence on the successful outcome of the campaign. If the objectives of a COIN (counterinsurgency) campaign are in general to gain support of the population and address the underlying causes of the insurgency, these can only be achieved if this broad knowledge base is created.
> (CAF 7-1)

The Canadian military response to counter-insurgencies considers intelligence to be pivotal. The role of intelligence is to understand the operational environment to allow commanders to make effective decisions and provide information for the troops operating on the ground. This includes understanding the tactical environment, key players within a given region, and levels of support among the civilian population.

Western countries are not the only countries fighting counterinsurgency campaigns. Pakistan has recently conducted a counterinsurgency campaign in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which unfolded over decades in a rugged, mountainous area. The recent adoption of clear and hold tactics combined with the incorporation of the FATA into a neighbouring province have destroyed insurgents militarily and removed a section of their political support (Akhtar 2019). This campaign included the application of lessons that are constantly being relearned. These lessons include the importance of effective intelligence as “better use of human intelligence enabled a more judicious use of force to protect the civilian population” (Akhtar 2019 pg. 706). Intelligence helps counterinsurgency campaigns to better distinguish insurgents from innocent civilians and allows security forces to carry out effective operations while limiting the civilian causalities that might create support for insurgents.

Counterinsurgency campaigns are not the only recent ways in which intelligence has proven useful. Intelligence has also been a major factor in foiling terrorist attacks, which are similar to attacks carried out by insurgent groups if not a direct extension of their policies. Human intelligence is one of the most useful sources of information for stopping terrorist attacks (Dahl

2011). Success does not usually come from the deep-cover agents penetrating groups but is rather "HUMINT of a rather prosaic kind at work: intelligence gathered through the use of informants, and from tips received from members of the public" (Dahl 2011 pg. 630). Of 89 averted domestic terror plots in the United States (U.S). Dahl coded 66 foiled attacks as involving some form of human intelligence, and similarly coded 14 of 39 overseas attacks (2011). Counter-terror and counterinsurgency campaigns share a reliance on effective human intelligence.

1.2 Northern Ireland

Ireland and the United Kingdom (U.K.) have had a tumultuous historical relationship. The most recent phase of that relationship began following the Irish War of Independence when six counties in the north of Ireland were partitioned from the Republic of Ireland and remained part of the U.K. While the scale of the eventual conflict in Northern Ireland may be relatively unique in Western Europe, part of why that conflict's eruption was so surprising and unexpected is because the history of Ireland is not unique. As Walker's 2007 article describes:

> Some have viewed historical developments in Ireland as the result of a special colonial situation, but others have rejected this approach and emphasized the European dimension. Arguments that Ireland's history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was especially troubled or deprived do not stand up to a European comparison. (pg. 105)

Northern Ireland was not on a predetermined path towards the Troubles and conflict was not an inevitability. One important distinction that separates Ireland from other European countries

divided along national or religious lines was the role that concepts of religion and political allegiance played in reinforcing the other as “nearly all Protestants were unionist and nearly all Catholics were nationalist” (Walker 2007 pg. 106). This political divide worsened in Northern Ireland after partition. The majority Protestant population elected a majority Unionist government and “along with the absence of real political influence for nationalists went inequalities in cultural, economic and social areas” (Walker 2007 pg. 106). The series of post-partition governments entrenched pre-existing inequalities between Catholic and Protestant communities, and by extension nationalist and unionist communities.

Post-partition, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) a violent republican group, conducted several campaigns against the British government, attempting to force the union of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. The border campaign of 1956-1962 was the most recent before 1969 and the IRA planned “to use flying columns from the Republic of Ireland to attack targets in the north and, hopefully, to set up liberated areas” (English 2012 pg. 73). This was an ambitious campaign and included sending organizers in advance “to train Volunteers, to do intelligence work, to select targets and report back regularly to Dublin” (ibid). The campaign settled into a series of bombings and targeted attacks along the border but ultimately failed to motivate political support in either state. Northern Ireland was not new to violent attack and the short-lived and ultimately failed campaign that ended in 1962 was what most officials would have been prepared for seven years later.

Whether gained by surveillance, informants, or communication intercepts, intelligence is a necessary element to a successful counterinsurgency strategy. The situation in Northern Ireland

from 1969-1999 represented an important period in the history of the development of British military intelligence collection and use. This period saw the development and growth of a variety of covert military units tasked with collecting information on the violent groups in the province. These security forces will be discussed in more detail, but they include the Force Research Unit (FRU), 14 Intelligence Company, and elements of the Special Air Service (SAS). Due to the nature of the conflict, the intelligence collection effort was not solely military, but also consisted of sections of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), especially the Special Branch (SB), and the national intelligence services.

This mix of agencies was given the daunting task of collecting, disseminating, analyzing and acting on information collected on not only violent republican groups, but also violent loyalist paramilitaries that arose during the conflict. Republican groups included the IRA and its splinter group the Provisional IRA (PIRA), as well as the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). Loyalist groups included the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). All of these groups, according to a 2015 report, “have continued to recruit and all of the paramilitary groups maintain a relatively public profile in spite of being illegal organisations,” (Northern Ireland Office pg. 1). These groups have shown a capacity for violence once and have not gone away as evidenced by the Northern Ireland Office’s 2015 report describing how they continue to recruit and maintain public profiles.

As this conflict took place largely within the territory of the U.K., the purpose of intelligence gathering was not collecting evidence for military search and destroy missions to destroy an enemy with overwhelming kinetic force. Rather the intelligence collected on these groups was

used for a variety of purposes, including tactical military support, evidence in criminal investigations, or support for policy makers in the U.K. Even tactical support can take many forms; either passively routing a patrol away from a known ambush location, or actively conducting a raid on an arms cache. This military focus says nothing about the intelligence collected by the military and police that was used for traditional criminal investigations and prosecutions.

1.3 Relevance

Exploring the policies and practices that connected military, police, and intelligence agencies during the conflict in Northern Ireland is relevant for several reasons. It is a way to both better understand Northern Ireland's specific situation which is certainly more peaceful, but not necessarily resolved, and to better understand this type of situation more broadly.

The Good Friday Agreement was a peace agreement signed in 1999 as the culmination of a political peace process. However, the established paramilitary groups have not gone away, and "official police records suggest their presence has been on the rise since 2007" (Haverty 2019). Paramilitaries continue to actively threaten politicians and journalists (Moriarty 2020). There have been numerous concerns about how the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union could inflame tensions in the region again (Independent Reporting Commission 2020).

The resurgence of paramilitaries in the region has shown that the Good Friday Agreement has not brought complete peace:

> The New IRA is now the most severe paramilitary threat facing Northern Ireland. It was formed in 2012 after a collection of smaller republican groups amalgamated inside a single command structure. Under this new leadership, it has carried out a string of high-profile attacks eerily reminiscent of Troubles-era violence. (Hagerty 2019)

The resurgence of violence is not automatically connected to Brexit, so the fact that Brexit is more settled now may not equate to a decrease in any paramilitary activity. The continuation of this threat makes it important to better understand the historical decision making to help develop a more detailed understanding of the historical conflict with these groups.

The Troubles also provides an example of how to manage intelligence in a complicated environment, balancing competing needs, requirements and agencies. This is the type of conflict environment that militaries appear increasingly likely to be involved in, as seen in Afghanistan, where multiple agencies from different countries as well as local officials and resources were involved.

While the situation in Afghanistan is obviously different in many respects, there are still valuable lessons that can be applied. Collusion between security forces and the Taliban has been alleged multiple times in Afghanistan, including a 2011 prison escape, and an attack on a hotel that same year (Sarwary 2011a & Sarwary 2011b). Beyond alleged collusion, at a more basic level Northern Ireland may provide a blueprint for navigating an environment with several threat actors with multiple goals and ambitions.

This is a possible case study in how to develop effective informant training and policies. It involves the joint development of these policies by the military, the intelligence community, and local police forces. The history is relevant both to any future violence in the region and to counterinsurgency conflicts currently being waged around the world.

2 INTELLIGENCE

2.1 Importance of intelligence in counterinsurgency

Intelligence is an important tool for an effective counterinsurgency campaign because it allows for effective implementation of other tactics. “In order to be successful with hearts and minds policies in counter-insurgency, reliable intelligence has been deemed crucial. Twentieth-century thinkers are almost unanimous in their appreciation of the role of intelligence in counterinsurgency” (Duyvesteyn 2011 pg. 453). Successful intelligence operations are needed to “determine the threat…and the influencing environmental factors so that the commander may develop a plan to bring about a successful mission and ultimately conclusion to the campaign” (CAF 2008 7-2). In counterinsurgency, intelligence is what enables the military to both isolate threats from civilians and to determine the most effective way to eliminate those threats. This intelligence can be gathered from informers, conversations with civilians on the street, observations and reconnaissance or communications intelligence regarding terrorist communications.

The importance of intelligence in counter-insurgency operations has been understood for years. A British military scholar noted the relation between intelligence and counter insurgency before the beginning of the Boer War, a war that saw a long period of guerilla conflict:

> As long ago as 1896, in what was arguably the first counter-insurgency manual, British Army Major General Sir Charles Edward Callwell noted that, ‘in no class of warfare is a well organised and well served intelligence department more essential than in that against guerillas’. (Grob-FitzGibbon 2011 pg. 72).

Intelligence provides the forces conducting a counterinsurgency campaign with information that can be used for a number of purposes. First and foremost, intelligence can help security forces to isolate insurgents from the wider community, making them easier to eliminate and arrest (Duyvesteyn 2011). Intelligence also provides security forces with information that can help them to understand the political desires of the population that might be driving the insurgency.

Intelligence and counterinsurgency efforts operate in tandem with effective use of intelligence generating a more secure environment. That in turn "forms the foundation for building personal relationships with the population which can produce reliable intelligence. This secure environment often needs to be ensured by means of force and this force can compromise the willingness of the population to come forward with information" (Duyvesteyn 2011 pg. 456). Managing that relationship with the local population is an important cornerstone of counterinsurgency and so discriminating in the use of force and using the minimum amount of force is important to maintaining the willingness of that population to provide information.

Creating a secure environment is particularly important for counterinsurgency intelligence because these campaigns rely on human intelligence. This is the information "harvested from the human intelligence (HUMINT), investigative, and analytic capabilities of organic military intelligence and police forces, and from local, indigenous police forces in the area of operations" (Clark 2006 pg. 2) The relationship between military forces and local forces was a focal point for the campaign in Northern Ireland, as the RUC as the local police force and the Ulster Defence Regiment increased their role and presence throughout the conflict. Police organizations have a

uniquely challenging role in counterinsurgency. In a 2006 article Colonel David Clark describes the role of the police as:

> The business of the police in counterinsurgency operations is to extract, analyze, and disseminate information gathered from the public and captured hostiles for use in the apprehension or elimination of known insurgents. This is complex detective work involving surveillance, the recruitment and management of informants, informal questioning and solicitation, detainee operations, and the formal interrogation of suspected insurgents and their associates. (pg. 15).

There is hardly a better description of the role of the RUC from 1969-1999 and this highlights the different skills that were needed for those officers working against paramilitaries in contrast to traditional criminal branches.

2.2 Types of Intelligence

Intelligence is a both a verb and a noun, described by the U.S. Department of Defence as:

> 1. The product resulting from the collection, processing, integration, evaluation, analysis, and interpretation of available information concerning foreign nations, hostile or potentially hostile forces or elements, or areas of actual or potential operations. 2. The activities that result in the product. 3. The organizations engaged in such activities. (2020 pg. 107)

Intelligence then is many things, defining the process, end result, and those who collect it. There is an important distinction between the raw information and the evaluated and analyzed intelligence that arises from it. Information must be contextualized and fitted into the wider picture of a conflict or situation before it becomes useful. There are also numerous sub-categories of intelligence. The Department of Defence lists over twenty possible forms of intelligence ranging from acoustic to technical (2020 pg. 107).

In our increasingly connected world "intelligence derived from foreign communications" or COMINT is an important asset, appealing to multiple clients as it applies to all forms of foreign communication (DOD 2020 pg. 44). Communications intelligence can assist in trade negotiations or military planning. COMINT is one aspect of signals intelligence, or SIGINT, in concert with electronic intelligence and foreign signals intelligence (DOD 2020 pg. 196). This is the intelligence arising from tapping phone lines or accessing computer networks. It played a role in intelligence collection in Northern Ireland, but due to the limited spread and amount of technology available for much of the period it did not play as substantial a role as in counterinsurgencies in recent years.

This paper will focus on human intelligence, in its simplest form "a category of intelligence derived from information collected and provided by human sources" (DOD 2020 pg. 98). Human intelligence relies on what conversations sources overhear, what they see, or what information they have access too. Human intelligence, or HUMINT, can be collected through a variety of means in a counterinsurgency. This can include "clandestine operations which employ government agents to infiltrate the insurgent network, posing as insurgents" or the "attempt to

persuade a captured insurgent or defector to conduct espionage against his own organization" (Clark 2006 pg. 18). Informants within an organization provide critical information, and the concern for agents can require insurgents to waste organizational resources be spent on mole hunts rather than on planning actions. Interrogation can provide counterinsurgency forces with "critical, first-hand information about the capabilities and intentions of the insurgent movement" (Clark 2006 pg. 18). While all of these methods were used in Northern Ireland, the focus of security forces was on cultivating informers and effectively using interrogation. As will be explored later the two often operated in tandem, with interrogation providing an ideal environment to recruit an informant.

SIGINT and HUMINT are two forms of intelligence collection. There are also important distinctions that must be made regarding the finished product of intelligence. Counterinsurgency campaigns require multiple forms of intelligence to meet the needs of the soldiers on the ground, commanders at the regional level, and policy makers at the political level. Strategic intelligence is "required for the formation of policy and military plans at national and international levels" (DOD 2020 pg. 204). This was the information that policy makers in Whitehall needed regarding the willingness of the IRA to continue the conflict or whether they could be brought to the negotiating table. There is also the tactical intelligence that tells soldiers on patrol where an active service unit cell has set up an ambush that day or planted a bomb.

Commanders will not always know what intelligence they need. In those cases, current manuals recommend that "the intelligence staffs have the responsibility of giving guidance to commanders on the kind of intelligence that they will require" (CAF 2008 7-12). The

intelligence estimate compares the military plan with existing intelligence to identify gaps and areas of potential focus. In the initial stage of deployments, there "will be a shortfall in intelligence, with more basic intelligence than current intelligence available" (CAF 2008 7-12). Basic intelligence could be background high level intelligence, such as on the history of a region or the broad history of a insurgent group. Current intelligence would be more actionable and more timely. The intelligence estimate and intelligence preparation of the battlefield are needed to prepare soldiers for the environment they are entering and the intelligence staff for what work needs to be done.

Intelligence is only useful if it meets the needs of its consumers, providing them with the information they need to act in a manner that helps them further their goals. The conflict in Northern Ireland required intelligence on multiple levels to provide a complete picture and to enable the military to eliminate insurgents and to understand the eventual political end to the conflict.

2.3 Why Human Intelligence

This paper focuses on human intelligence. Human intelligence continues to be used, providing insights into groups around the world and remaining pivotal despite the increase in communications on the internet and accompanying rise in signals or communications intelligence (The Interagency OPSEC Support Staff 1996). HUMINT remains particularly important for operations where close proximity with a civilian population makes it difficult to differentiate friend from foe. In this environment "sophisticated intelligence sensors, crucial in general war, normally cannot match the HUMINT agent, the informer, surveillance from

observation posts or the reports from routine police or army patrols" (CAF 2020 7-2). Eyes on the ground are the best tools in this form of campaign to understand the population and describe the complicated environment and provide context for the words captured by a signal interception or surveillance pictures.

Human intelligence, like every other form of intelligence collection, has strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of HUMINT lie in the constant ability of an operative to collect information. Unlike the limitations of a satellite or drone, there is no requirement for good weather or specific windows of opportunity (Pigeon, Beamish, & Zybala 2002). Humans can more quickly and easily be tasked with new assignments for collection and can use their own initiative in the collection process (Pigeon, Beamish, & Zybala 2002). Human sources can also give a real-time interpretation of the situation on the ground, minimizing errors caused by analysis by a far-off expert reading images. However, there are downsides to human intelligence. The cultivation of sources can take a long time, as sources are recruited and gradually gain the access that will make them valuable (Johnson 2010). The reliability of sources is always in doubt as a source could be a member of a foreign intelligence service providing false information (Johnson 2010). Human intelligence can thus potentially be very powerful, while requiring both agent and handler to navigate a complicated environment. Like other forms of intelligence gathering, human intelligence is not immune to errors of misinterpretation, mistranslation, false assumptions, cognitive biases of the agent and handler.

Human intelligence collection was the most common method in Northern Ireland and "by the 1980s, informers had become the primary source of intelligence for all of the security forces"

(Charters 2009 pg. 66). Sources were developed across the spectrum of paramilitary groups by a variety of security forces and operated for the length of the conflict to varying degrees of success.

Human intelligence during the Troubles highlights both the potential and weaknesses of the practice. Security forces in the region initially had problems “such as running the same agents without telling each other and different views on the purpose of their intelligence operations” (Charters 2009 pg. 66). After initial difficulties were overcome, the situation changed and there was so much information being provided by informants that “it was the constant ability of the security forces to undermine internal morale by forewarnings of operations, intercepting arms shipments or knowing the names and identities of all key players” (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 556). That informants were doing as much damage by their existence as any information they passed on highlights the multi-faceted impact that human intelligence can have. The lessons of human intelligence in Northern Ireland remain relevant, not just in the region but to intelligence efforts more broadly.

3 NORTHERN IRELAND

3.1 Society in 1969

The deployment of the British Army to Northern Ireland in 1969 was not an inevitability; instead it was the result of sectarian violence and the inability of local police forces to respond that violence. Beginning in the 1960s a civil rights movement emerged which was “modeled after the African American nonviolent struggle against segregation and discrimination”, as a result of which the “Irish-Catholic minority seriously challenged the unionist status quo in Northern Ireland” (De Fazio 2020 pg. 1693). The following year, 1969, saw a series of civil rights demonstrations by the minority Catholic population demanding “liberal reforms, including the removal of discrimination in the allocation of jobs and houses, permanent emergency legislation, and electoral abuses” (Barnes 2005 pg.58). These demonstrations and protests were frequently met by violent counter protestors and “the RUC often failed to defend the civil rights protestors from loyalist attacks and at times even participated in those attacks” (De Fazio 2020 pg. 1702). Both the government and the RUC could have made political concessions to the movement and potentially removed future support for more violent means.

Political concessions were unlikely however as “Protestant fears of a general Catholic ‘emancipation’ resulted in a wave of sectarian violence” (Bamford 2005 pg. 582). This violence included the burning of homes, and a large movement of both Catholic and Protestant families across Belfast, as they moved into communities more heavily populated with their own religious group for security.

It was this violent response that required the deployment of the British Army, “introduced in a peacekeeping capacity to maintain law and order and to stave off a civil war by keeping the two warring communities apart” (Bamford 2005 pg. 582). The violence led to loyalist groups that “wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom and made no secret of their intention to violently resist any attempt to unite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland” (Bamford 2005 pg. 582). It also provided the IRA with a fresh purpose to “violently oppose British rule in Northern Ireland…unify Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland” (Bamford 2005 pg. 582). Groups on all sides in 1969 saw political developments they could take advantage of.

The RUC initially had little intelligence on republican groups. Despite the creation of the Joint Intelligence Committee Ulster Working Group in 1969 the RUC had a year’s backlog of paperwork, no sources in Derry, and little funding to pay informants (Moran 2010). At this time the Official IRA was still a Marxist-Leninist group striving to create a revolutionary socialist vanguard and recovering from the recent failed border campaign (Rekawek 2008). Organized loyalist paramilitary groups would not arise for some time, until they came to see the army’s deployment as a failure to protect unionist interests.

Several of these emerging paramilitary groups will be examined in the next section in order to contextualize the complicated operational environment and illustrate the key players involved. All of these organizations operated their own intelligence organizations and were “constantly monitoring the work of Special Branch…and developing counter techniques” (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 554).

3.2 Republican Paramilitaries

OIRA

The republican paramilitary groups active in Northern Ireland held different political views but were united in their desire to unite the six counties of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland and expel what they viewed as occupying British forces. Examining in detail the political affiliations and alignments of every single republican group is out of the scope of this paper. Rather a brief survey of the landscape of violent republicanism is offered, examining two groups identified as still being active in 2015 by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the IRA and the INLA (Northern Ireland Office).

If the Troubles created an environment for dramatic organizational restructuring, then the IRA is an extreme example of that. Over the course of three decades no less than three different versions of the IRA would emerge, each claiming to be the true representatives of violent republicanism, and occasionally fighting with each other for that title. The 'Official' IRA (OIRA) was the oldest of the three iterations and was largely left behind as the conflict went on (Rekawek 2008). This version of the IRA was responsible for the unsuccessful border campaign of 1956-1962, and unlike later iterations it had a socialist fixation on "class politics and non-violence in the extremely violent reality of Northern Ireland." (Rekawek 2008). The OIRA viewed violence as a tool to create spaces for political negotiation (Bamford 2006). A focus on gaining political power, and an older Marxist-Leninist approach is partly why the OIRA became less relevant as the Troubles continued.

The OIRA also declined in power because it lost space to other groups. The electoral success of the Worker's Party forced pressure on the OIRA from within socialism, while their members agitated for the use of violent methods like their contemporaries in the PIRA (Rekawek 2008). This led to the OIRA signing a ceasefire with the British Army in 1972, following its use of violence to protest the internment policy (Rekawek 2008). The case of the OIRA is an illustration of the complexity of the conflict, as groups were in danger not only from security forces but also from being isolated by their communities if their politics could not keep pace with changing realities on the ground.

PIRA

The violent republican space that had been occupied by the OIRA was gradually filled instead by the Provisional IRA (PIRA), beginning after the 1969 Belfast riots, when it established itself as an alternative form of government within sections of Belfast and Derry (Bamford 2005). This transition was possible as communities viewed the OIRA as lacking the ability to defend them from the sectarian riots at first and then from the implementation of internment policies. The PIRA sought an end to what they viewed as British occupation of Northern Ireland and wanted unification with the rest of the island (Bamford 2005).

As the principal republican group over the course of the Troubles the PIRA had become relatively professional. In 1971 it established an "engineering" branch to create explosives, conducted dry runs of important attacks, and operated a powerful intelligence section (Ó Faoleán 2013, Ilardi 2010). The PIRA was initially structured along similar lines to the British Army brigade system, with "brigades" given responsibility for a geographic area. This model was

replaced in the late 1970s with the cell structure that created smaller cells of members to better contain information and theoretically make it harder to infiltrate (Bamford 2005). The core of the cell structure was the "Active Service Units" (ASUs), who actually carried out actions, and were provided with intelligence and other support from outside their cell. As part of the peace process that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement the PIRA did officially disarm.

RIRA

The Real IRA (RIRA) is the last branch of the IRA that will be examined in this paper. The RIRA emerged in the 1990s and it "rejects the peace process and remains committed to the original PIRA goal of a united Ireland," (Bamford 2004 p. 738). This group was responsible for the Omagh bombing in 1998 that killed 29 people, and in the early 2000s they carried out attacks in England, including one against the BBC in March 2001 (Bamford 2004). There are a number of other IRA splinter groups continuing to recruit and use violence, including the Continuity IRA and the New IRA. The existence and growth of these groups further highlight the ongoing nature of this conflict.

INLA

The other republican paramilitary group that will be explored is the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). This group is presented to further round out the operational environment and to provide another example of how populated the militant landscape of Northern Ireland was during this period. The INLA emerged in the mid-1970s, was created by former members of the OIRA, and served as the militant arm of the Irish Republican Socialist Party (English 2012 pp. 177). "The INLA gained a reputation for a potent mixture of hard-left politics and ruthless

violence…The political wing, the IRSP, epitomized socialist republicanism of an aggressive kind," (English 2012 pp. 177). The INLA then carried on the violent left-wing ambitions of the OIRA before it faded from power. Member of the INLA joined the blanket protests and hunger strikes in 1981 that included the death of Bobby Sands (English 2012 pp. 198). The group was also responsible for a car bomb attack in London that killed Conservative politician Airey Neave in 1979 within the "precincts of the Houses of Parliament" (English 2012 pp. 244).

Republican conclusion

The factional divides among the IRA branches, the political differences between IRA groups, and more socially radical groups like the INLA constituted the environment that had to be navigated by security force members operating human sources in these groups. The security forces were not combatting a single monolithic entity but instead a range of groups covering a broad political spectrum.

3.3 Loyalist Paramilitaries

UVF

The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) is the oldest loyalist paramilitary group in Northern Ireland. It has roots back to 1912 but the current version arose in 1966 (Silke 1998). The UVF was a smaller organization than other loyalist groups, having 2,000 members at its peak in 1972 (Silke 1998). "The group was particularly good at attracting ex-Army personnel into its ranks, and it attained a lasting reputation for being the most disciplined and professional of the loyalist groups" (Silke 1998 pg. 333). The strategic position of the UVF was informed by "notions of Britishness that translate into a paramilitary mindset requiring the defeat of the PIRA to maintain

their ultimate value of loyalty to the crown and preservation of NI as a part of the U.K." (Harris 2012 pg. 5). Loyalist groups often targeted Catholic civilians in revenge for attacks on Protestants. One of the most infamous attacks carried out by the UVF was the bombing of McGurk's pub, "a single violent act which killed 15 Irish Catholics, the single most deadly bombing to take place in Belfast throughout the Troubles" (De Fazio 2020 pg. 1700).

UDA

The Ulster Defence Association (UDA) was the largest loyalist paramilitary group, founded in 1971 through the amalgamation of several smaller defence associations (Silke 1998).

> These defence associations had been organised throughout Northern Ireland with concentrations in Belfast, Lisburn and mid-Ulster. Consisting of groups that had formed spontaneously in the loyalist community, the associations were by and large open and democratic with the central *raison d'etre* of defence of Protestant areas against republican/IRA attack. (Crawford 2003 pg. 24)

These local defence associations viewed themselves as on the defensive, reacting to the actions of what they viewed as civil rights demonstrations tied directly to IRA violence. The mindset of loyalist paramilitaries can be difficult to understand as the extrajudicial killings they conducted undoubtedly created problems for the state they were claiming to defend. It is perhaps most effective to attempt to view these organizations as they viewed themselves and understood their own role. As Crawford describes "Even more fundamentally the UDA had been formed as an army of last stand, to fight the civil war in Ulster, which for many loyalists at the time appeared

imminent" (2003 pg. 23). Their mindset was reactionary, first pushing back against the peaceful civil rights movements and then taking up the mantle of "defending" their communities when they felt the British government could not or would not.

For the first two decades of its existence, the UDA did not claim responsibility for actions directly, but used the name Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), "a transparent ruse that nevertheless protected the organization's legality until 1992" (Silke 1998 pg. 332.). The UFF was formed after tensions between military organization and democratic organization became more apparent in day-to-day operations. As a result, in 1973 the UFF "was formed as a special operations group within the UDA, to be deployed in paramilitary activity. The UFF identified its role as that of maintaining a balance of terror" (Crawford 2003 pg. 25). This distinction mirrors in some respect the separation between the OIRA and PIRA. In the case of the UDA, however, there was no doctrinal split or disagreement, but the UFF became a more active sub-unit or sub-organization controlled by the UDA higher leadership but separate from the regional structures of the UDA.

The UDA, and indeed all paramilitaries throughout the conflict, became involved in organized crime or expropriated organizational funds for personal ends. The connection between political violence and regular crime provided a challenge to security forces. In his 2003 book compiled from interviews with imprisoned loyalist paramilitaries Crawford describes the efforts against them:

> The level of policy activity directed at the UDA was usually commensurate with the level of paramilitary activity in the command are of the local UDA battalion or company. A

> militarily active UDA Commanding Officer in a given location could therefore expect to be arrested or placed under close surveillance by the police on a regular basis, whereas a military inactive CO would not attract much police attention. Similar a CO involved in criminal activity could expect the security forces to attempt to 'turn' him into becoming an informer or agent. Thereafter, he would be allowed to carry on his UDA activities relatively undisturbed by security force attention, as a reward for deflecting UDA volunteers from conflict-related activity as criminal activity increased. (2003 pg. 27)

The UDA's strategic theory or approach lay in "the desire to maintain cultural practices and the need to defeat the PIRA to ensure the ultimate core value of the defense of 'their' communities" (Harris 2012 pg. 5). The UDA presented itself as having the goal "to terrorise the terrorists" (Crawford 2001 pg. 15). In practice however the most common victims of their attacks were innocent members of the Catholic community. One of the most high-profile attacks carried out by the UDA/UFF was the murder of solicitor Patrick Finucane "shot at his home in February 1989" (Cochrane & Monaghan 2012 pg. 34). The murder of Finucane was the spark for three enquiries led by Sir John Stevens into collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and security forces.

3.4 Security Forces

RUC

The most important local force in Northern Ireland through the Troubles was the RUC. This was the police force responsible for Northern Ireland from partition in 1922 until it was replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2001 following the Good Friday Agreement (Switzer &

Graham 2009). Over its 80 years in operation the RUC was responsible for both protecting the state from subversion and investigating ordinary crime. The threat of state subversion was focussed on republicans "with the result that Catholics/nationalists in general could be subject to aggressive policing" (Switzer & Graham 2009 pg. 155). Beginning in 1970 the RUC was supplemented by the locally raised Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and both forces occupied a more central role in security through the 1970s as part of an 'Ulsterisation' of the conflict (ibid).

The RUC as a whole was responsible for security, but protection from subversion fell under the mandate of the RUC Special Branch. Special Branch played an important role in operating sources, particularly in loyalist organizations, as the conflict went on (Moran 2010). This was the dominant branch of the RUC when it came to intelligence collection during the Troubles.

Military Forces

The British Army deployment to Northern Ireland was quite large. It grew from three battalions in late 1969 to over 28,000 soldiers before the launch of Operation Motorman to enter republican controlled areas of Derry and Belfast. Over 250,000 soldiers would serve in Northern Ireland over the course of the conflict (U.K. Ministry of Defence 2006). This was a force with recent experience combatting insurgencies in Kenya, Malaya, and Aden (Sanders 2013). These campaigns provided tools that were used in Northern Ireland, especially in intelligence where "perhaps more than any previous British counter-insurgency campaign, *Operation Banner* (the Northern Ireland campaign) eventually became 'intelligence-led' and intelligence-driven'" (Charters 2009 pg. 64). Participating in these wars made the British Army one of the best equipped in the world at the time to fight a counterinsurgency.

The British Army began to recognize the value of intelligence in counterinsurgency after its withdrawal from Palestine in 1948. This understanding was folded into formal military education by General Hugh Stockwell, a former commander in Palestine who became commandant of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (Grob-Fitzgibbon 2011). These ideas and education were further expanded during the Malayan Emergency, which saw the British Army work with MI5 and local police forces (Grob-Fitzgibbon 2011). The initial response to the Malayan Emergency closely resembles the situation two decades later in Northern Ireland and many of the same reforms were introduced. These included the expansion of the police force, Special Branch in particular, as it was the only force that had the intelligence necessary to fight the war (Grob-Fitzgibbon 2011 pg. 75). In 1952 a single position was created to "exercise general authority over all intelligence collection in the territory…through chairmanship of an all-encompassing intelligence committee" (Grob-Fitzgibbon 2011 pg. 75). This position was a precursor of the post held by Maurice Oldfield as coordinator of intelligence in Northern Ireland. The High Commissioner and Director of Operations in 1952, General Gerard Templar promoted the idea of physically bringing together "the 'sharp end' of the Special Branch, the 'sharp end' of the deputy director of operations headquarters, and the intelligence elements of the secretary of defence's office" (Grob-Fitzgibbon 2011 pg. 77). This was similar to the Tasking and Co-ordination Groups established in Northern Ireland that brought together the military, intelligence services, and RUC at the brigade level.

While the British military did have extensive counterinsurgency experience, those operations had been conducted at the edge of a declining empire. Operating within the British Isles and against

British citizens would prove to be a more complicated set of circumstances. This is exemplified by the two times that units “purportedly unfurled a banner calling on rioters to disperse, only to discover that the warning was written in Arabic” (Edwards 2010 pg. 312). While amusing, this does illustrate that despite their experience the British military was not well equipped for a counterinsurgency campaign closer at home. The civic society in place, and the proximity to British media and voters would place the military’s efforts under much more scrutiny than previous operations.

The regular army was rarely directly involved in informant cultivation beyond making initial contact to determine someone’s willingness to talk to security forces. Over the course of the conflict the military created several forces responsible for intelligence collection, although some authors have suggested that there is more continuity than this model suggests and that it is better to view these as rebrands of the previous force than something entirely new. The earliest military sources were being recruited and handled by spring 1970, at that point by plain clothes branches that would be formed into the Military Reaction Forces (MRF) (Charters 2018). MRFs were responsible for clandestine intelligence collection and did so through a number of methods, including operating a laundry company for a period as a false front to gain access to republican neighbourhoods (Charters 2018).

Beginning in 1973 the MRFs were replaced with the Special Reconnaissance Units (SRUs). Trained by the Special Air Service (SAS) over an 11-week selection period, three SRU detachments were created and each detachment was paired with one of the deployed brigades (Charters 2018). The SRU served as the army’s main tool for intelligence collection primarily

through surveillance, and the contact and handling of informers was not a primary responsibility (Charters 2018). The SRUs were also heavily reliant, at least initially, on intelligence provided by the RUC Special Branch. The SRU would change once more, “in the early 1980s, it became the 14 Intelligence and Security Company, a name which eventually morphed in to the 14 Intelligence Company” (Charters 2018 pg. 135).

The most relevant military intelligence force was the Force Research Unit (FRU) established in 1980 “to control the army’s recruitment and handling of agents and informers. This placed the army on equal footing with MI5 (the Security Service) and Special Branch in the domain of agent-running, and in which it achieved some notable successes” (Charters 2018 pg. 135). The establishment of a dedicated military section for the recruitment of informers “was due in part to military unease with the RUC’s Special Branch’s monopoly on intelligence provided by informants” (Cochrane & Monaghan 2012 pg. 32). The FRU emerged as a response to RUC control over intelligence and the Army’s desire for its own channels and sources.

Conclusion of Section 3

This section of this paper conveyed the scale of the conflict and the complicated environment that intelligence collection took place in. This was a conflict with multiple paramilitary organizations, fighting each other and the state for a variety of rationales. The British state’s attempt to reach a military conclusion was carried out by a similar broad range of police, military, and intelligence agencies.

4 INTELLIGENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

4.1 Intelligence Agencies

Both MI5, formally the Security Service, and MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service, were active in Northern Ireland. However details of their activities remain classified. The mandate of MI5 is directed at domestic threats to national security, while MI6 focusses on external threats and intelligence collection (MI5 n.d.). Their largest role was in the formalized intelligence process and structure. That being said, they played a large enough role that in 1993, 44 per cent of the resources of MI5 were directing towards Irish counterterrorism (Northcott 2007). MI5 involvement in Northern Ireland predated the beginning of the Troubles as Security Liaison Officers (SLO) were sent in 1958 and 1966 to report on the situation and preparedness of security forces in the region (Craig 2015). The role of MI5 in intelligence collection declined as the conflict turned into counterterrorism rather than countersubversion, a more traditional role for MI5 (Craig 2015). The security service and secret intelligence service were important not for their role in handling informers but because their senior staff formed an important part of the intelligence handling chain and contributed to the picture of Northern Ireland as a complicated landscape for intelligence collection.

4.2 How Sources were developed

Human sources providing intelligence on paramilitary organizations were recruited through two methods: being approached after careful study by security forces or by volunteering to inform for security services. To provide valuable information these informants “would have to be either in a terrorist organisation or very close to it so that they could easily penetrate into the terrorist group” (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 556). Developing an informer already within an

organization was an easier task than trying to infiltrate a group. Existing informants provided information on who security forces should recruit next: “terrorists who had doubts, wanted ‘out’ or who had compromising personal lives that could be worked on to turn them” (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 556). Informants begot informants.

Every informant had their own motivation for working with security forces. In one case a 17-year-old became an informant “on the promise that the police could aid in providing him with a vehicle and helping him to pass his driving test” (Cochrane & Monaghan 2012 pg. 33). Often “informants were recruited in police stations or Army bases following their arrest” (Urban 1992 in Cochrane & Monaghan pg. 33). These tactics were used against groups on both sides of the sectarian divide. In an interview UDA member Sam Duddy describes how “We [UDA] knew that they’d [the police] slip our guys some money, and if you accepted that they had you by the balls. You were a ‘paid informer’” (Crawford 2003 pg. 60). Recruiters would use “financial incentives, threat of imprisonment, or other, morally questionable, methods such as threatening to expose marital infidelity, deviant lifestyles or exposing or threatening one’s loved ones” (Bamford 2005 pg. 591). Any possible leverage was used, or situations of vulnerability were created that could then be exploited.

Once recruited, informants were paired off with handlers, who would meet informants and process and analyze their reports. Two handlers attended every meeting and “an important agent with good access to information might have two handlers working them alone,” (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pp. 558). This continuity and familiarity “helped to build up confidence and security between the agent and handlers,” (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pp. 559). Not all sources

were treated the same, and policies emphasized greater resources to those informants deemed most valuable either due to the amount or the quality of information they provided.

Informants were not always trustworthy. If they were being paid, “coming up to Christmas they may invent things to make money for Christmas presents. Some may falsely inform on others out of a desire for personal revenge for some extraneous slight” (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 558). Not all information could be taken at face value and it had to be verified through other sources to confirm its validity. Operating informants within terrorist organizations also posed ethical challenges and concerns. As a result of their involvement with terrorists, security forces “had to permit their agents to engage in terrorist actions to maintain their credibility. Several moles run by British intelligence were implicated in murders, having passed intelligence to Protestant paramilitary gangs that allowed them to find and kill suspected PIRA members or sympathizers” (Charters 2009 pg. 65).

4.3 Development of Intelligence Process

Understanding the formal modes of information sharing and coordination is pivotal to understanding how information went from collection to use and became a useful tool to help the British state meet its objectives.

Historically police intelligence in Northern Ireland was based on “a huge number of police stations, with on being based in every village, that enabled close contact and human surveillance” (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 552). The first addition to that and step towards creation of an “intelligence process” for the Northern Ireland situation began in 1969 when the

first MI5 SLO was sent to establish links with the RUC and report to the Joint Intelligence Committee (Craig 2018). In August of that year two important positions were established, the U.K. Representative and the Director of Intelligence, who served under the military official in charge but also worked closely with the U.K. representative (Craig 2018). During the late 1970s "Tasking and Co-ordination Groups (TCGS) were established in each of the Brigade areas: these groups contained representatives of a wide variety of intelligence organisations – Special Branch, E4A, military intelligence, HMSU, MI5, and 14 Intelligence Company" (Tuck 2007 pg. 176).

The TCGs provided a space for local intelligence officials to cooperate with their peers in the same region. This system had the potential to exacerbate the entrenched primacy of tactical security intelligence that was instantly important to those in the group. The TCGs created other problems, as they risked cutting out the pre-established committee system and operated without any form of formal oversight (Tuck 2007).

Security force intelligence improved its communication and information sharing as the conflict progressed. Special Branch in particular established a training system to provide select officers with the skills needed to develop informants. As a result of this training system "it became very effective in the processes of gathering, recording, collating/integrating, analysing, assessing, disseminating and, final, exploiting intelligence geared directly at the terrorist threat" (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 553). Kirk-Smith and Dingley laid out the evolution of Special Branch tactics over the conflict and the impact that intensive new training programs had on

effectiveness. Special Branch's ability to recruit informers paid large dividends as the conflict progressed:

> And it was these informants who became pivotal in undermining the terrorist groups through their constant flow of information concerning terrorist operations. This was vital in the overall counter-terrorism strategy, since it was the constant ability of the security forces to undermine internal morale by forewarnings of operations, intercepting arms shipments or knowing the names and identities of all key players and keeping them under constant surveillance so that the terrorists could hardly move or think without the security forces knowing that really undermined them. (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 556).

Craig argues that the complicated nature of the conflict and intelligence collection led to a "stovepiping" where for much of the conflict security intelligence was separated from the political intelligence necessary to support the ceasefire process (2018). Following the initial troop deployment, the increase in violence drove a need for urgent intelligence that would save lives on the ground (Craig 2018). In fact it took until "the late 1980s, when a more nuanced multi-agency counter terrorism strategy was developed, that another nascent peace process would emerge, and one that would finally bring the conflict to at least a semblance of a conclusion" (Craig 2018 pg. 211).

One important shift in the use of intelligence was the gradual shift away from shoot-outs and direct violent confrontations with armed terrorists. Intelligence gave security forces the ability to avoid shoot-outs and instead focus on arrests. This was a policy that tried to prevent "shoot outs

in the first place - hence no incidents or blood on the street, no noble martyrs dying for the cause" (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 556). Removing even this form of a propaganda victory away from terrorists was an important step in using intelligence, as it recognized that the military solution of eliminating terrorists through direct force would not be the most effective tool.

4.4 Intelligence Gathering on PIRA

Informants in Republican paramilitary organizations were routinely handled by the RUC's Special Branch, a policy that was formalized after the 1981 Walker Report on the relationship between the criminal intelligence division and the Special branch (Moran 2010). While exact estimates are difficult to determine one author "argues 50 active PIRA individuals were informants between 1976-1987, making one in 30 to 40 of the frontline membership" and according to another estimate "one in six IRA volunteers in Derry worked for the FRU" (Moran 2010 pg. 8). A BBC investigation in 2016 suggested that at any given time security forces were operating 800 informers within the IRA (O'Leary 2016). A source within the security forces highlighted for the BBC that "the figure of 800 is an underestimate, and is closer to the total number of Special Branch informers and agents in Belfast alone" (O'Leary 2016). The penetration of these groups and active service cells likely contributed to a decline in violence over the conflict, as evidenced by "the consistent accounts of bombs and weapons malfunctioning during republican and loyalist attacks" (Moran 2010 pg. 18). An important example of the potential impact of informants is how "The relative stabilization of Belfast and Derry can be contrasted with South Armagh, which by their own admission security forces never penetrated" (Moran 2010 pg. 17).

Part of the story regarding PIRA intelligence is the swing of responsibility between the security forces and intelligence services. MI5 began to take the precedence for collecting intelligence on republican groups operating within England in the late 1990s, following bombings in Manchester and Canary Wharf (Moran 2010). This change "reinforced the process by which MI5 had begun to be more influential in intelligence gathering operations from the early 1990s within Northern Ireland itself" (Moran 2010 pg. 8). This was partly a result of appreciating the need for more strategic intelligence, and as ceasefire negotiations grew between the PIRA and British government so grew the role of MI5 too.

Allegedly the highest placed source within the PIRA was an agent code-named Stakeknife. This agent was a "high level informant in the internal security unit of the PIRA, allegedly Freddie Scappaticci" (Moran 2010 pg. 13). This particular case is full of internal politics and murder, and ties directly into the case of UDA source Brian Nelson. Nelson, the head of UDA intelligence and an FRU source, was supposedly ordered to collect intelligence on potential republican targets, including Scappaticci. When he shared that information with his handlers, again allegedly, they directed him to target instead a former IRA member named Francisco Notorantonio rather than risk their source in the PIRA (Moran 2010 pg. 13). The case has all the details of a tabloid story, but at its core is the fact that the PIRA was so compromised that their internal security unit had informants.

4.5 Intelligence Gathering on Loyalist Groups

There were numerous lower-level sources providing HUMINT to security forces from within loyalist paramilitary groups. An enlightening anecdote is provided by a UDA member named

'Terry' describing his experience in the 1980s. A year after a previous arrest, the RUC was looking for him in Belfast, interviewing family members to track him down. After a discussion with his 'commanding officer' Terry decided to turn himself in for questioning:

> They wanted me to turn informer and offered me £500. They told me about a dog that had come in at (100 to 1) that day and that they could provide me with a bookie's docket that I could show my friends to account for how I got the money. When they realised that I wasn't playing ball, they said, 'Thank fuck, you're saving us money. We've got all the touts [informers] we need in the UDA, you boys can't make a move that we don't know about. We just let you off the lead every now and again but as you know we make sure you don't do any harm.' (Crawford 2003 pg. 110)

One of the most infamous and controversial sources in a loyalist organization was Brian Nelson. A former member of the British Army, Nelson eventually became the head of the UFF intelligence branch, while being operated as a source by the FRU (Crawford 2003). Nelson's handlers assisted him in gaining this high level within the organization by supplying him with intelligence that would ensure his rise to a prominent position (Crawford 2003). That Nelson was handled by the Army is a departure from what had been established policy that the RUC would focus on cultivating loyalist sources. It is unclear why exactly an Army intelligence unit took the lead on this case but it is possibly due to Nelson's history in the armed forces. Following the Steven's Enquiry into collusion in 1989 and the "super grass" trials earlier in the decade that publicized large numbers of informants, numerous arrests swept through the ranks of the UDA and UFF. Nelson was among those arrested as well as "Other UDA commanders who were working as double agents or informers…the arrests also compromised the ability of the security

forces to continue its *de facto* control of the UDA" (Crawford 2003 pg. 30). The high levels of informers occupying important leadership positions in the UDA were able to keep the UDA from carrying out violent acts during the first period of their development. In fact, it was after those arrests that the UDA became more violent towards the end of the conflict, carrying out more attacks and killing more civilians.

4.6 Intelligence in Practice

Near the beginning of the conflict the military intelligence MRF used turned IRA members to operate front companies to collect intelligence disguised as regular businesses (Charters 2009). The most well-known "was the 'Four Square Laundry' which analyzed collected laundry for forensic or other evidence that indicated connections to violent activities (Charters 2009 pg. 65). IRA informers would provide intelligence directing follow-on intelligence collection efforts.

In some cases, intelligence would be used to carry out special operations or covert actions. A prime example of this form of operation in Northern Ireland is the ambush of an attempted IRA attack on the Loughgall police station. Knowledge of the PIRA attack on the station was made known to security forces who "evacuated the police station and brought in RUC sharpshooters and the SAS. They waited until the terrorists had arrived and were moving in on the police station before the security services opened fire, killing all eight terrorists and one civilian that was passing by, but not before the bomb exploded, seriously damaging the empty police station" (Bamford 2005 pg. 596). This is perhaps one of the most spectacular examples of intelligence being used, as it resulted in the deaths of eight PIRA terrorists who had been able to make a bomb large enough to be used in a digger and involved several different branches of the security forces.

4.7 Collusion

It is impossible to write about the intelligence war in Northern Ireland without discussing collusion. “Covering a broad range of activity, collusion spans from turning a blind eye to unlawful or improper action to actively facilitating it. Collusion between the security forces and the loyalist para-militaries in Northern Ireland did happen,” (Cormac 2018 pg. 210). Relationships between members of paramilitary groups and the security forces were prevalent at all stages of the conflict and have been heavily investigated by multiple inquiries, including the three lead by Sir John Stevens. The main conclusion from Stevens third enquiry was “that collusion involving the *direct* support of loyalist paramilitaries by security agencies was low level, based on the circulation of classified documents and centred on the locally recruited and mainly Protestant Ulster Defence Regiment”, (Moran 2010 pg. 19).

While *direct* collusion may have been less common it did exist and the first Stevens Inquiry, struck to investigate the murder of lawyer Pat Finucane and allegations of collusion, “led to the reporting or charging of 59 people” (HMIC 2013). Further inquiries did argue “that the FRU and SB did not pass on information that they had received from informants about killings that were about to take place” (Moran 2010 pg. 20). Even if they were not official actions, the policies and practices put in place made the sharing of potentially lifesaving information more difficult at times.

The Inquiry also identified “the wilful failure to keep records, the absence of accountability, the withholding of intelligence and evidence, and the extreme of agents being involved in murder. These serious acts and omissions have meant that people have been killed or seriously injured”

(Stevens Enquiry 2003). Again, we see that direct action on behalf of the security forces was not necessary for damaging collusion. For example, security forces did not need to share intelligence with paramilitary groups or arm them, but the policies around intelligence handling that developed over the course of the conflict negatively impacted security force accountability and human life.

The majority of collusion was between security forces, usually members of the RUC, and loyalist groups. Cases of collusion include several members of the North Belfast UVF who were "simultaneously employed by the RUC Special Branch – including the commander of the terrorist unit" (Cormac 2018 pg. 211). In another case the UDA presented video footage of a police briefing room with pictures of suspects as evidence of why they had determined one of their victims was in the IRA; the footage they presented had been filmed by UDR soldiers and given to the UDA (Cormac 2018 pg. 212) Several soldiers in the UDR were also members of the UDA, and indeed one of the weapons used in the murder of Patrick Finucane was a weapon sold to terrorists by the UDR (Cormac 2018 pg. 212). In a sense this should not be surprising as Northern Ireland was and remains a small region in both geography and population so the idea that police would know those committing violence makes some sense. However, this relationship highlights a fundamental difference in how intelligence was used and the security force focus. It is impossible to argue that each side of the conflict was an equal priority when security forces were colluding with one side not the other.

As it largely took place between the RUC and loyalist groups, collusion highlights the failure of the intelligence collection policies that developed over the conflict. These policies, that accepted

RUC primacy on matters of intelligence collection relating to loyalist paramilitary groups, should have been challenged, and structures put in place to ensure a more even approach to all violent groups.

4.8 Analysis

It is first important to note that all of the relevant facts will likely never be known in this case. That being said there a few conclusions that can be drawn on this conflict before approaching a wider 'lessons learned'. Informers were numerous in all organizations, at most times and in a variety of positions. After the intelligence deficit was rectified in the 1970s the security forces began to develop sources across the spectrum of violent groups, and this penetration increased to very high numbers throughout the course of the conflict. The penetration of these groups is likely responsible for decreases in violence. That does not imply any form of security force "control" over these groups but rather that the act of conducting mole hunts could be corrosive to morale and operational ability. The increase in violent attacks from loyalist groups following the "supergrass" trials and the incarceration of informers in leadership positions does indicates some amount of success and control. When informers were operating and held positions of power their intelligence could be used to stop attacks, after trials or when they were removed security forces lost their forewarning and violent attacks became more successful. Finally, the impact of informant penetration of the highest circles of organizations is a little unclear. Certainly, the best known examples are Nelson as the head of UDA intelligence, and Scapaticci as head of PIRA internal security, but those may not be the only ones and it is not clear the impact either had on organizational activity as a whole.

The Northern Ireland experience, like every other conflict, is both unique and a broadly applicable. Its uniqueness derives from the length of the conflict in a small area of Western Europe with limited population. It is broadly applicable due to its relationship to other insurgent conflicts before and since. The PIRA have provided an example of operational tactics to many other groups around the world and were an innovative force in their own right, remaining flexible and adapting throughout the conflict. As a result, responding to that threat provides guidance for how to deal with similar threats in similar environments. In fact, Northern Ireland provided the British army with experience collecting intelligence and engaging with civilian populations that has since been put to use in Iraq and Afghanistan (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009).

The first major lesson from this conflict is that the collection of new intelligence in counterinsurgencies must be a priority. When the British Army deployed in 1969 the intelligence made available by the RUC was outdated. This problem was particularly highlighted by the policy of internment when soldiers were given the wrong name many times. The MI5 liaison officers that had been dispatched before the troop deployment relied on RUC reports or reported on the reliability of the RUC itself. Either way they were not generating new operational intelligence. The lack of recent information put the deploying forces behind and made them unprepared for their shift from providing support to the civilian government to conducting a counterinsurgency campaign. This lack of preparedness was compounded by the haphazard development of military intelligence forces. Not only was the military not operating with effective intelligence, but it took until 1972 for a formally trained intelligence branch to be developed, three years into the deployment. An important lesson then is that addressing the intelligence deficit requires training that “is in context and brings the intelligence system up to

speed rapidly" (Kirk-Smith & Dingley 2009 pg. 554). The military was operating in an intelligence deficit with no way to make up the gap until both it and the RUC had overhauled their intelligence collection abilities.

The most contentious lesson to be learned from the intelligence war in Northern Ireland is in connection to collusion, a contentious issue which has remained a source of controversy since the conflict began. Allowing the largely Protestant RUC to mostly maintain control over cultivation of sources in loyalist paramilitary groups was an oversight. The RUC as it existed at the beginning of the conflict was simply too closely connected to these groups to have been placed in that position. The development of policies outlining different methods of intelligence collection for loyalist or republican paramilitary groups essentially opened the door for this behaviour to emerge. There was no acceptable rationale for why loyalist groups were treated differently in that respect by security forces. Simultaneous structures should have been developed by the security forces to investigate both loyalist and republican groups. This could have been the RUC investigating each, or the military focussing on each. But to split up the focus created the possibility for the duplication of work and accidental operations at cross purposes. Having the same type of structure in place for each type of group would have ensured much similar outcomes from the intelligence arising from these investigations. In a counterinsurgency campaign, where the political legitimacy of the government is being challenged, having that split focus opens up the government to the allegation that is does not view each of these threats as being equally serious.

Finally, the most important takeaway is that all forms of intelligence have value and need to be managed. Prioritizing one type of intelligence is harmful to the conduction of campaigns. It is perfectly understandable why the British military prioritized operational intelligence that was saving lives immediately on the ground, but that focus often ignored the advantage that could be provided by strategic intelligence. Balancing demands for intelligence product from both military and political channels can be difficult but the political goal of the conflict for the British state was the cessation of attacks on British civilians while maintaining Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom. The best intelligence product for the government then would have been strategic intelligence, that could more effectively weaken and dismantle all paramilitary groups, weakening them to a point that they could be brought to the bargaining table. The requirements of the end consumer of intelligence have impacts all the way down the chain of collection as producers aim to supply intelligence that will be of value. By creating a focus on tactical intelligence, a message was broadcast down the chain of military intelligence that led collectors to focus their discussions with human sources on that form of intelligence that would be useful to their superiors. It is a difficult balancing act but a necessary one to try to appease all consumers of the product and meet all of their needs instead of just one.

4.9 Conclusion

Northern Ireland provides a well-studied and frequently discussed case study of intelligence operations. The three decades of conflict provide a useful study in how intelligence collection can develop and navigate a complicated operational environment. The complicated but ultimately successful development of the intelligence process is the lesson of Northern Ireland, how multiple security forces can operate human intelligence sources towards a unified purpose

and successful end result. That successful result came from a streamlining and professionalization of intelligence, which put intelligence to good use at the right times. It was also a matter of combining the requirements for strategic and tactical intelligence to bring about a political end to the conflict. As noted in the question at the onset of this paper there were key differences in policies of intelligence collection regarding republican and loyalist groups. This difference in policy towards loyalist groups at the very least gave the appearance of collusion, and likely exacerbated it as well. Having identical intelligence processes for both republican and loyalist groups simply would have been good policy, to ensure more effective use of intelligence and wider public trust in the security forces.

5 ACRONYMS

MI5 – Security Service
MI6 – Secret Intelligence Service
SLO – Security Liaison Officer
HUMINT – Human Intelligence
COMINIT – Communications Intelligence
SIGINT – Signals Intelligence

IRA – Irish Republican Army
OIRA – Official Irish Republican Army
PIRA – Provisional Irish Republican Army
RIRA – Real Irish Republican Army

INLA – Irish National Liberation Army

UVF – Ulster Volunteer Force
UDA – Ulster Defence Association
UFF – Ulster Freedom Fighters

FRU – Force Research Unit
SAS – Special Air Service
RUC – Royal Ulster Constabulary
SB – Special Branch
MRF – Military Reaction Force
SRU – Special Reconnaissance Unit

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