

## THE CHANGING FORMS OF CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

by

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More than a year has passed since Lord Mountbatten was assassinated by an IRA bomb in the Irish Republic, and more than a decade since Catholic-Protestant communal violence brought British troops to the streets of Northern Ireland. In his article on the British political initiative of 1979-80 Michael McDowell expressed the view that the situation would not wait long for some definite action on the restoration of self-government to the troubled province.<sup>1</sup> In July 1980 the British Government took a cautious step in that direction. This latest proposal calls for another attempt at power sharing between the two communities: an 80-seat assembly elected on the basis of proportional representation, plus one of several models of executive which would give the Catholic minority a voice in decision-making at the highest level. Westminster, retaining ultimate responsibility for the province, would control taxation, foreign affairs and, above all, security.<sup>2</sup> Reaction from the various political factions thus far has not been encouraging. Clearly, early agreement on this plan or any variant is not likely. If it fails, the long-term problem will remain unsolved, although the immediate effects may be quite small. If agreement is achieved, the province may develop sufficient political maturity and strength over the years to isolate and eventually eradicate the men of violence. The question of Ireland's future, as one or as two communities, could then be discussed in a rational and constructive manner. In the short term, however, a settlement within the framework proposed — which implies the continuation, at least for the time being, of a separate political entity in Northern Ireland — may raise the level of violence, as Irish nationalists attempt to destroy this challenge both to their immediate goals and to their *raison d'être*. Meanwhile, the troops are still on the streets and the conflict continues. This article presents an analysis of the war itself.

### **The Terrorists**

The principal terrorist organization operating in Northern Ireland is the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), although the Irish National Liberation Army and the Protestant para-military groups should not be discounted from the violent equation. The PIRA is closely linked to Provisional Sinn Fein, a legal Republican (Irish nationalist) political party which has its headquarters in Dublin. The strategic objective of the Provisionals (whether IRA or Sinn Fein) is to remove, through the use of violence, the British civil and military presence in Northern Ireland and to reunite North and South as a single "socialist" republic.<sup>3</sup> However, apart from vague references to non-alignment, nationalization of key industries and "a community of communities"<sup>4</sup> the exact shape of the Provisionals' intended socialist state has never been made clear. As Peter Villiers notes, "The niceties of political debate they left, and still leave, to the future."<sup>5</sup> Instead, they have concentrated on the campaign of violence

intended to remove the British, seemingly to the exclusion of all else.

The security forces currently estimate the strength of the PIRA at approximately 350 hard-core activists — the gunmen and bombers and their commanders and staffs — with some 2-3,000 supporters, those who will provide safe houses, steal cars and collect funds for the movement.<sup>6</sup> Up to 1977 the PIRA maintained (largely for propaganda purposes) a pseudo-military structure of brigades, battalions and companies, although these titles bore no relation in terms of strength or organization to conventional military formations. In fact, operations were carried out by "Active Service Units", small teams of usually less than six men. Command and control was in the hands of a Chief of Staff, the Army Council and a headquarters staff.<sup>7</sup> The organization, distributed geographically around the province, originally rested on a solid base of popular support (tempered by intimidation) within the Catholic areas, particularly in Belfast and Londonderry. But after the indiscriminate shooting and bombing of 1972 and the British Army's removal of the PIRA-controlled "no go" areas, popular support lessened. Life under the Provisionals had not been pleasant: ordinary citizens, not the security forces, were the principal victims of violence. British initiatives, such as the ending of internment and efforts to improve housing, may have contributed as well to a shift in public opinion. Consequently, by the mid-1970s the Provisionals had moved their command and administrative base to the South and the security forces were able to penetrate the organization in the North, arresting many remaining members. Defections further depleted the ranks.<sup>8</sup>

Borrowing undoubtedly from the experience of more sophisticated terrorist groups such as the Italian Red Brigades the PIRA adopted in 1977-78 a smaller cellular structure and introduced a more selective pattern of recruiting. This new organization appears to be flexible: in Belfast, for example, PIRA cells are not permanent. Instead the organization draws upon a pool of gunmen to create a new cell, of five to ten men, for each operation. The cell is briefed on its task, no names are mentioned and the cell members disperse after the operation. Nor are the cells tied to a limited geographic area: they may operate anywhere in the city. This smaller and tighter organization has much less contact with the local population and is, therefore, less open to penetration by the security forces.<sup>9</sup>

The relative security of the cellular structure is one of the key factors which will determine the PIRA's ability to sustain a protracted campaign. They seem able to recruit, train and retain a level of membership sufficient to ensure organizational stability and continuity and to preclude early extinction. However, because of the decline in popular support, the PIRA probably cannot expand without endangering its security and structural integrity. The Provisionals may claim as they did in 1976 (presaging perhaps their structural change) that "a revolutionary movement does not depend on a popular mandate as a basis for action. Its mandate comes from the justness and correctness of its cause and therein lies the basis of our mandate."<sup>10</sup> Such arguments may be intellectually satisfying, but the hard fact remains — the smaller organization cannot sustain a level of violence high enough to render Northern Ireland ungovernable and thus force the British Government to relinquish control of the province.<sup>11</sup>

Finance is an equally serious problem. The PIRA has a budget estimated at £2-3 million annually. This pays for members living “underground”, for support of families whose imprisoned relatives are taking part in the “H-Block” protest, as well as for infrastructure support (safe houses, transport and above all, weapons).<sup>12</sup> But both the American and Dublin governments have publically denounced Irish-American fund raising efforts and contributions from America, through the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID), have fallen substantially.<sup>13</sup> This has forced the Provisionals to rely more heavily on purely criminal activities — extortion and armed robbery — to finance their operations, but this has brought problems of its own. Funds raised through extortion and protection rackets have been diverted to the pockets of members, producing a degree of internal rivalry and violence. Furthermore, such methods have done little to help regain support amongst people who might otherwise be sympathetic to the cause. Armed robberies have become more hazardous in the altered security atmosphere of the North. Consequently, the Provisionals have carried out an increasing number of armed robberies in the South. This, in turn, has brought upon them the wrath of the Irish Government.<sup>14</sup>

This does not mean that the PIRA is a spent force. It remains an efficient, dangerous organization, capable of attacking targets effectively. Its members are now well-versed in terrorist techniques and have an adequate supply of weapons. They are becoming more skilled in “intelligence” work, cracking the army’s codes, monitoring their radio channels and tapping the telephone system. As shown by the murder of Mountbatten and of the soldiers at Warrenpoint last year, PIRA bomb-makers have become more sophisticated. The increased technical expertise has been accompanied by a shift in tactics: targeting is more selective. The indiscriminate bombings of the early 1970s have given way to a form of economic warfare — bombing of selected commercial establishments. The one-shot sniper and the electronically-detonated mine have replaced the loose gangs of gunmen who would fire at the security forces from behind a screen of demonstrators. Attacks on the security forces concentrate on prison guards, police reservists and the part-time soldiers of the Ulster Defence Regiment. The PIRA has also extended its operations to Europe, attacking British servicemen in West Germany.<sup>15</sup> In South Armagh, where the Provisionals retain their highest level of local support, the terrorists pose a considerable threat to the security forces. Here the conflict takes the form of a rural guerrilla war, with the terrorists striking at random from across the ill-defined border.<sup>16</sup> But large parts of the province are demonstrably untouched by the war. At the time of the author’s visit in early August, there had not been a shooting in Belfast since May — when a PIRA cell had been captured. Many North American cities would be envious of such a low murder rate. Quite apart from the internal changes in the capabilities of the Provisionals, the reduction in the level of violence is due in large measure to the effectiveness of security force operations.

### **The Security Forces**

The security forces consist of elements of the regular British Army, the locally-raised part-time Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and the police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). There are currently based in the province eleven regular army units, totalling some 11,000 men and women, little more than half the total present at the peak year of 1972. Six of these are

“resident” units, stationed in Ulster for two years, the soldiers accompanied by their families. The remaining five are “roulement” units, deployed into the “hard” areas for 4½ month tours. There they are paired with a resident battalion to ensure continuity in the exchange of information and experience. The regular troops are organized into three brigades, each responsible for a geographic area corresponding approximately to police regional and divisional areas. The 11 battalions of the UDR, totalling some 7,300 men and women, are deployed across the province in the brigade areas. In much of the province (from Northwest to Southeast), the UDR carries in cooperation with the RUC the primary responsibility for security. This frees the regular troops to concentrate on the areas where the terrorists are most active. The RUC, with a regular strength of about 6,700 (and a reserve of 4,600) operates from stations across the province.<sup>17</sup>

For both political and internal structural reasons the RUC proved unable to contain the communal violence which flared up in 1969 and from 1970 the regular army carried the brunt of the war against the terrorists. The RUC in this early period carried out normal police duties outside the “hard” Republican areas and supported the army with intelligence and other functions. As the force recovered its confidence it became more actively engaged, and extended the areas patrolled. In 1977 the security forces adopted the “Way Ahead” strategy, the central theme of which is “police primacy”, that is, the RUC would take over primary responsibility for law enforcement; the army would adopt a supporting role.<sup>18</sup>

This task has been made easier by several developments, the first being the establishment of close cooperation between the police and the army. Such cooperation had not always been present in the past, although it tended to work better at the lower levels than higher up. Intelligence is now pooled centrally and the army and police decide jointly how to exploit it. Joint army/RUC committees meet regularly, the brigadier in each area meeting at least once per week with his opposite number in the RUC. This closer working relationship has been enhanced, first, by the cordial personal relationship between the GOC and the Chief Constable, and secondly, by the appointment in autumn 1979 of a Security Coordinator. After the Mountbatten/Warrenpoint incidents, the British Government offered the security forces a “Supremo” to run the entire political and military campaign. The security forces did not feel such a drastic change was necessary. It would have negated the role of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland — whose political input is important — and the appointment of a “high profile” leader might have created the impression that major political initiatives were afoot, at a time when everyone recognised that movement had to be undertaken cautiously. What they did ask for and received was a kind of arbitrator who, by his independence, could mediate disputes over operational policy and coordinate the army/police response to terrorism. Sir Maurice Oldfield, formerly head of DI6 (Secret Intelligence Service) was called out of retirement to take on this task and, though he was given no executive powers, he was able to exert a positive influence on army-police cooperation.<sup>19</sup>

The second major development has been the great increase in cross-border cooperation between the RUC in the North and the Irish police (the Garda) in the South. Always subject to political whim south of the border, this cooperation is now at an all-time high. One reason for this is the rising crime rate in the

south — a direct product of the cross-border nature of PIRA terrorism — and the consequent casualties to the Garda in clashes with the terrorists. The Irish Government has come to realize that its police force has not been geared to this kind of problem. A second reason may be political. The new Prime Minister, Charles Haughey, faces an election within 15 months. He must do something about the faltering Irish economy and about the rising crime rate. Improving cross-border cooperation with the North could help to solve both problems — if increased police activity reduces the crime rate and the cooperation produced a *quid pro quo* from the British Government on the economic front.

Whatever the reasons, the cooperation takes several forms: the two chief constables meet once per month and both forces have appointed border commissioners who meet regularly. The Garda maintain five squads along the border, two of which are guaranteed to be there at any one time. The RUC and the Garda keep in touch by radio. British army helicopters are allowed to overfly the border in “hot pursuit” of, for example, a suspect vehicle. Furthermore, both governments are enforcing extra-territorial jurisdiction, which means that persons suspected of committing crimes in the north or the south may be tried in either area. The key political factor in cross-border cooperation is that the emphasis is on combatting “crime” — the Garda do not see themselves as helping the British security forces defeat republican terrorism. This “depoliticization” of terrorism makes security cooperation politically acceptable in the south.

For the security forces the operational tasks have not changed a great deal in the ten years of combat with the PIRA. Defeating the Provisionals means first finding them, no easy task where civilian and terrorist can look alike and PIRA reorganization has reduced the flow of information. Thus, intelligence-gathering remains the principal task, carried out by means of observation posts, random vehicle check points and patrols on foot, in vehicles and in helicopters. Constant patrolling allows the soldiers and police to become familiar with the people and routines in their areas, and to develop the very necessary “sixth sense” that will warn them that something unusual is in the offing. Joint patrols with the RUC help to establish a police presence in some of the tougher areas; in quieter parts of the province the police are able to patrol on their own. This visible security force presence, always on the move, also helps to disrupt the freedom of action of the PIRA by increasing the risks that members, weapons and explosives may be caught in transit. But even in the main cities the overt presence has been considerably reduced. The change is most noticeable in Londonderry where only a few years ago several battalions were deployed in the Bogside and the Creggan. Today only one reinforced company is deployed west of the Foyle. The reduction in the scale of the regular army commitment and the shift to “police primacy” had been accompanied by a significant change in operational technique: increased reliance on covert operations, principally for intelligence gathering.

The 22nd Special Air Services (SAS) Regiment, the Army’s elite counter-insurgency unit, has been in the vanguard of the change to covert action. Although not introduced in squadron strength until January 1976, individual members of the regiment served in intelligence staff positions in Ulster from 1972. Specialists in clandestine operations, their skills honed to a fine edge in



Borneo, Aden and Oman, they also trained soldiers from conventional units in the art of "undercover" patrolling and surveillance. Today, these soldiers carry out an increasing share of the covert operations. In 1976 an SAS squadron was introduced into South Armagh. There the ill-defined border and local sympathies gave the Provisionals considerable freedom of action, to the point where they virtually established a "liberated area" and where sectarian murders threatened to produce Protestant reprisals on a major scale. The level of violence fell dramatically after the arrival of the SAS. Usually operating in four man teams, they laid several successful ambushes against the PIRA. The SAS presence was apparently expanded to two squadrons by 1977 and recently covert operations have been extended to other parts of the province.<sup>20</sup>

This change in operational method has not been without its problems. The role of the security forces in Northern Ireland is to restore and maintain the rule of law. Soldiers and policemen are subject to the law both individually and collectively. A soldier cannot shoot an armed terrorist, unless his own life is imminently threatened, without risk of prosecution.<sup>21</sup> But, as I indicated in an earlier study of covert action in post-war Palestine, "special operations by their very nature are conducted in a legal and moral twilight zone; if control or discipline fails, they become merely a guise for counter-terror which reduces the government and the security forces to the status of criminals. Secret police methods make bad propaganda — if the cover is 'blown', and tactical victories may be squandered by a strategic defeat."<sup>22</sup> For both the politician who approves them and the soldier who carries them out, they are dangerous operations. The SAS has "sailed close to the wind" on several occasions, the shooting of teenager John Boyle and the unauthorized crossing into the Irish Republic being cases in point.<sup>23</sup> It is a credit to the high standards of training and discipline within the SAS, and amongst the regular soldiers they have trained, that such dubious incidents have been infrequent. It is also a measure of the success of the covert action program generally that the few lapses have not undermined politically the pacification process.

### **Future Prospects: War Without End?**

Clausewitz's axiom that war is a continuation of politics by other means is central to insurgent conflicts. Nowhere is this more true than in Northern Ireland, where politics and violence are inextricably linked, the one reinforcing the other. Clearly, a military solution to the conflict cannot succeed (short of some kind of Carthaginian peace) without a concurrent political solution. No such event is yet in sight. The social problems, prejudices and polarisation remain. Overcoming these difficulties, by far the more important, is at best a long-term prospect.

What then of the war? Has it not reached a deadly stalemate wherein the Provisionals cannot maintain a high level of violence without risking destruction of their organization and where the security forces cannot reduce them further without overstepping the bounds of legality and legitimacy? The spectre of endless low intensity war is hardly encouraging. One officer offered this assessment during my visit. "No one is saying they see a light at the end of the tunnel. But we are willing to concede that there may be a light there."

## Footnotes

1. Michael McDowell, "The British Initiative in Ulster", *Conflict Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1980), pp. 35-40.
2. *Economist*, 5 July 1980.
3. Irish Republican Publicity Bureau (PIRA), *Freedom Struggle* (Dublin, 1973), pp. I-V; see also "Oration of Gerry Adams at Bodinstown", 17 June 1979; and Adams interview, *Time*, 19 Nov. 1979. Gerry Adams is Vice President of Provisional Sinn Fein.
4. Ruairi O Bradaigh, "Restore Power to the People", *Guardian Weekly*, 24 Feb. 1980. O Bradaigh is President of Provisional Sinn Fein.
5. Peter J. Villiers, "Where Angels Fear to Tread: An Excursion into Irish Politics; in *Royal United Services Institute Journal for Defence Studies (JRUSI)*, vol. 124, no. 3 (1979), p. 53.
6. This estimate was provided by the security forces during the author's visit to the province in August 1980.
7. Peter Janke, "Ulster: A Decade of Violence", *Conflict Studies*, no. 108 (June 1979), p. 17.
8. *ibid.*, pp. 9, 11, 15-16, 18; see also Martha Crenshaw, "The Persistence of IRA Terrorism", revised version of paper presented to Department of State Colloquium (1979), pp. 16, 20-21, 24; Michael Moodie, "The Patriot Game: The Politics of Violence in Northern Ireland", in Marius H. Livingston et al, *International Terrorism in the Contemporary World* (Westport, Conn. 1978), p. 98.
9. Information provided to the author by the security forces.
10. Interview in *Sunday Independent* (Dublin), 19 Sept. 1976.
11. RUC Statistics indicate that violence peaked in 1972, with 10,630 shooting incidents and 1,382 bombings. In 1979 the totals were 728 and 422 respectively. Early totals for the first half of 1980 indicate a continued decline in violence.
12. Information provided to the author by the security forces. See also *Toronto Star*, 29 August 1979. The "H-Block" protest refers to those PIRA prisoners in the Maze Prison who are demanding special status as "political prisoners". They refuse to wear prison uniforms and foul their cells with their own excrement. The European Commission on Human Rights ruled in June that the Provisionals are not entitled to "political prisoner" status. *Guardian*, 29 June 1980.
13. In July 1980 Charles Haughey, the Irish Prime Minister, followed the lead of his predecessor Jack Lynch in condemning Provisional fund raisers in the U.S. He criticized in particular NORaid and the congressional Irish National Caucus. *The Times* (London), 28 July 1980. President Carter spoke out in 1977. Estimates vary on the amount raised in the United States. *The New York Times*, 21 Sept. 1979 reported that contributions had declined from \$750,000 to \$350,000 annually. *Time*, 26 Nov. 1979, stated that NORaid raised about \$200,000 annually.
14. See reports in *Irish News* (Belfast), 30 June 1975; BBC Television, "Nationwide", 17 Nov. 1976; *Irish Times* (Dublin), 9 Sept. 1977. RUC statistics indicate the armed robberies in the North have declined by almost 75% since 1972, and by more than 60% since 1975. *The Times*, 8 Aug. 1980. 434 robberies in 1979 yielded £568,000. Up to 8 Aug. 1980, 186 robberies had netted £104,000.
15. Janke, pp. 14-17; see also *Irish Times*, 29 May, 21 Nov. 1978; *Irish News*, 20 Nov. 1978; *Sunday Times*, 2 Dec. 1979; *Gazette* (Montreal), 18 Dec. 1979; *Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 24 Dec. 1979; *Guardian Weekly*, 9 March 1980.
16. Janke, p. 19.
17. Information provided to the author by the security forces.
18. *ibid.*; see also David Charters, "Intelligence and Psychological Warfare Operations in Northern Ireland", *JRUSI*, vol. 122, no. 3 (1977), pp. 22-27; and Janke, pp. 19, 22-23.

19. Information provided to the author by the security forces; see also RUC, *Constabulary Gazette* (November, 1979). Sir Maurice retired after eight months in office, owing to ill health. He was succeeded by Sir Brooks Richards.
20. Tony Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins: The Story of the Special Air Service, 1950-1980* (London, 1980), pp. 144-52. First deployed for deep patrol action in Malaya, 22 SAS was subsequently active in most of Britain's post-war counter-insurgency campaigns. It now provides Britain's "National Response Team" against any threat which is beyond the capacity of normal police methods and armaments. 22 SAS is organized with a Headquarters and Signal Squadron and four Sabre Squadrons, each consisting of about 80 men in four troops. The total establishment of 22 SAS is probably between 350 and 400 men. The regiment is self-contained and airmobile. High performance is ensured by a rigorous selection and training program lasting some seven months. With the exception of a small command and training cadre the regiment consists entirely of volunteers from other regular regiments.
21. Geraghty, pp. 154-55; for a detailed study of the legal aspects of the conflict see Robin Eveleigh, *Peacekeeping in a Democratic Society: The Lessons of Northern Ireland* (Montreal, 1978).
22. David Charters, "Special Operations in Counter-Insurgency: The Farran Case, Palestine 1947"; *JRUSI*, vol. 124, no. 2 (1979), p. 57.
23. These incidents are discussed in detail in Geraghty, pp. 153-61.

## **A CRITIQUE OF THE URBAN GUERRILLA: ARGENTINA, URUGUAY AND BRAZIL**

by  
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In the two decades since the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the magnetism of revolutionary warfare has attracted many young Latin American radicals, disillusioned with the reformism of traditional Left parties. Though the "lessons" drawn by the continent's combative Left from the Cuban experience were always questionable, armed struggles are still being waged in several countries, stimulated by the Sandinista triumph in Nicaragua last year. The urban guerrilla strategy itself became fashionable in the late 1960s, after the 1967 death of Guevara in Bolivia and a number of rural guerrilla defeats, and soon made an impact out of all proportion to the numbers enrolled in guerrilla ranks. In Argentina, above all, peak individual guerrilla operations by 1975 were characterised by the mobilisation of hundreds of combatants, the extortion of multi-million pound kidnap ransoms and scores of casualties. But in no country did urban guerrilla strategies prosper in the long term and it is the aim of this paper to account for their failure.

"Urban guerrilla warfare" should not be confused with "terrorism", especially when the latter term serves as a pejorative. It can be best defined as "a form of unconventional war waged in urban or suburban areas for political objectives"<sup>1</sup> and differs from political terrorism through being more discriminate and predictable in its use of violence. Its frequent equation with terrorism is facilitated by the fact that urban guerrillas seldom reject terrorism as one of several forms of action, and indeed tend to use it extensively when they