Unprepared and Ultimately Unpopular: Struggles of the British Army Early in The Northern Irish Troubles

By: Julian Hernandez
Department of History

Abstract

This paper examines the British Army's early involvement in Northern Ireland during the onset of the Troubles (1969–1972), arguing that the force was fundamentally unprepared and institutionally misaligned for the counterinsurgency mission it was tasked with. Drawing upon primary sources such as the British Ministry of Defence's 2006 Operation Banner report and secondary scholarship, including Paul Dixon and Rod Thornton, the study contends that the Army's posture, shaped by Cold War imperatives and recent imperial withdrawals, left it ill-equipped for operations within the United Kingdom itself. The British Army lacked the training, doctrine, and strategic guidance necessary for effective internal security operations against British citizens. Early operational failures, including the Ballymurphy confrontation, the "Rape of the Falls," the reintroduction of internment, and the Bloody Sunday massacre, critically undermined public perception and fueled insurgency, particularly among the Catholic nationalist population. The paper situates these failures within the broader context of British counterinsurgency theory, specifically the neglected principles of the "Hearts and Minds" approach, and demonstrates how military missteps between 1969 and 1972 contributed to the protracted nature of the conflict. Ultimately, this study offers a cautionary narrative about the strategic risks of deploying conventional military forces to address complex domestic unrest without adequate preparation, political clarity, or civil-military coordination.

In times of civil unrest, disturbance, and violence, governments have often resorted to employing the armed forces as a way of restoring order and control. The British Government was no exception when the Troubles in Northern Ireland (1968-1998) spiraled into widespread violence. The decision to deploy the British Army in significant numbers to the streets of Northern Ireland in 1969 would ultimately redefine the Troubles. What in 1968 began as an organized push for civil rights by large segments of the province's Catholic population, who had long perceived widespread discrimination at the hands of the Protestant ruling majority, transformed into an armed conflict largely characterized by paramilitary violence on both sides and the government's military response to quell the violence.[1] However, the purpose of this paper is neither to vilify nor vindicate the actions of any party involved in the Troubles. Rather, it is to show that the British Army of 1969 was neither prepared nor postured to take on the mission assigned to it starting in August of that year. Ultimately, that lack of preparation would lead to missteps early in the campaign (1969-1972), tarnishing public perception of it for the remainder of its duration.

State of the British Army in 1969

An often-undermentioned aspect of the military considerations during the Troubles is that most of the conflict occurred during the context of the Cold War. The British Army of 1969 was primarily postured to respond in case of a land war between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact on the European continent. According to information released by the Ministry of Defence (MOD), the British Army consisted of 179,00

[1] Wallenfeldt, Jeff. "The Troubles." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last updated August 23, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/event/The-Troubles-Northern-Ireland-history.

troops in 1969.[2] As of 1967, at least 53,000 soldiers (almost a third of the Army's total strength) were stationed on the European continent as part of the British Army of the Rhine.[3] The British military presence in West Germany and a possible confrontation with the Soviet Union continued to be the primary focus of the United Kingdom's defense strategic thinking into the 1980s.[4] British forces had engaged in multiple counter-insurgency campaigns since the end of the Second World War, but this would actually lead to a false sense of confidence when the time came for British leaders to evaluate the readiness of the Army to respond in Northern Ireland.[5]

An MOD report filed in 2006 summarized the state of the British Army in 1969 as part of its analysis of Operation Banner, the official Army name for the campaign in Northern Ireland lasting from 1969 to 2007, and the longest deployment in the history of the British Army.[6]

> In 1969 the Regular Army was a highly experienced force. It had fought a number of campaigns in the long withdrawal from Empire after 1945, mostly against insurgent forces in former colonies. Campaigns had been waged in Malaya, Kenya, Aden and Cyprus. These had rarely involved over a Division, a relatively small proportion of the Army of the time. Many soldiers who had served in the Second World War were still in the Army until the mid-1960s. In addition, standards of individual training were somewhat lower; for example, attendance by NCOs at tactics courses at the School of Infantry only became mandatory in the 1980s.[7]

[2] United Kingdom Ministry of Defence. "An Annual Time Series for the Size of the Armed Forces (Army, Navy, and RAF) since 1700." Defence Statistics, April 28, 2017. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81d66740f0b623026996e1/2017-04440.pdf. Response to a Freedom of Information Act request on the size of the armed forces broken down by service and year.

[3] Parliamentary Debates, "Defence (Army) Estimates, 1967–68, Vote A," col. 1214. https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1967/mar/06/defence-army-estimates-1967-68-vote-a#S5CV0742P0_19670306_HOC_566.

[4] National Army Museum. "The British Army and the Falklands War." Accessed April 27, 2024. https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/british-army-and-falklands-war#:~:text=Of%20the%20160%2C000%20soldiers%20in,of%20supply%20and%20re%2Denforcement

[5] Thornton, Rod. "Getting It Wrong: The Crucial Mistakes Made in the Early Stages of the British Army's Deployment to Northern Ireland (August 1969 to March 1972)." Journal of Strategic Studies 30, no. 1 (March 22, 2007): 73–107, 77.

[6] United Kingdom Ministry of Defence. "Operation Banner: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland." AC 71842. London, 2006. https://www.vilaweb.cat/media/attach/vwedts/docs/op_banner_analysis_released.pdf, 1-1.

[7] UK Ministry of Defence, 2-17.

From this representation, it can be easy to come away with a sense the Army was prepared for the deployment to Northern Ireland, however, even a cursory examination of the campaigns mentioned shows those operations did not offer the direct parallels which might have helped Army leaders and soldiers succeed in Northern Ireland. The most glaring difference is that all four campaigns (Malaya, Kenya, Aden, and Cyprus) involved operations targeting British colonial subjects or foreigners, in territories far from the British homeland. The mission in Northern Ireland would pit the Army against British citizens, which significantly deepened the complexity of the situation. Another important distinction is that all four campaigns ultimately ended with British withdrawal from the territories involved, supporting the idea that military solutions to political problems rarely bare fruit. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the deeper tactical and strategic nuances that differentiate the campaigns of withdrawal from empire to Northern Ireland. However, it is a fallacy to believe experiences from those campaigns meant the Regular Army was particularly prepared to succeed during the opening stages of Operation Banner in 1969.[8]

Indeed, it can be argued the failure to implement key lessons from the campaigns of withdrawal from empire, often referred to as "Hearts and Minds" theory, is a significant component of what hampered the effectiveness of British troops in Northern Ireland from 1969 through 1972. In an article published in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, professor Paul Dixon identifies four key elements as the essence of the "Hearts and Minds" theory: [9]

- demonstrating 'political will' to defeat the insurgents as the key to victory
- the importance of 'the battle for hearts and minds' of the affected population
- 'police primacy' over the army in defeating insurgents

[8] Rigden, I.A. "British Approach to Counter-Insurgency: Myths, Realities and Strategic Challenges". Master's thesis, United States Army War College, 2008. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA479660.pdf, 9–11.

[9] Dixon, Paul. "'Hearts and Minds'? British Counter-Insurgency Strategy in Northern Ireland." Journal of Strategic Studies 32, no. 3 (2009): 445–74. doi:10.1080/01402390902928271, 446.

- the importance of civil-military coordination to bring together all

Dixon points out "Hearts and Minds" theory as the "classical British counter-insurgency theory of the sixties", and outlines "good government", "psychological operations", and "minimum force" as three ways to "win" the battle for "Hearts and Minds."[10] As will become evident through examination of events later in this paper, the British government and the Army failed to fully embrace these principles of counter-insurgency in the early years of the Northern Ireland campaign (1969-1972) which ultimately led to a prolonging of Operation Banner and exacerbated the violence.

It is critical to avoid assuming that, simply because "Hearts and Minds" theory served as the prevailing British view on counter-insurgency in 1969, its core tenets and operating principles were widely known and understood at all levels of the British military and governing structures. In fact, the Ministry of Defence report on Operation Banner openly acknowledges the lack of specialized training for the troops deploying to Northern Ireland stating, "neither the resident nor the first reinforcement battalions [deployed to Northern Ireland] had received any internal security training."[11] The report added, "The first units arrived in Northern Ireland with no special-to-theatre training."[12] In any military operation, proper preparation is vital to prevent poor performance. For troops deploying to "defense support of civil authorities" or counter-insurgency operations, this preparation is even more important as a deep understanding of the volatile situation they are stepping into is vital to avoid misunderstandings and misconceptions which can doom operations of this delicate nature from the outset.

The Decision to Deploy

[10] Dixon, 445–448.

[11] UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 7-1.

[12] UK Ministry of Defence, 7-8.

As political and social strife in Northern Ireland increased leading up to the August 1969 events that would serve as the catalyst for military intervention, British leaders in Westminster and Whitehall displayed a reluctance to become directly involved. J. Brian Garrett was a solicitor of the Northern Ireland Supreme Court, and former chairman of the Northern Ireland Labour Party. In an article titled "Ten Years of British Troops in Northern Ireland", published in the winter 1979/1980 edition of *International Security*, Garrett noted, "prior to 1969, British Governments had been fastidious in their 'let sleeping dogs lie' stance."[13] He added, "In August 1969, however, the sustained and vicious rioting which had occurred in Londonderry and Belfast left an exhausted Northern Ireland police force and destroyed Westminster's convention of non-interference in Northern Ireland affairs. The Northern Ireland dog had shown it was most certainly not asleep."[14]

The decision to call out Regular Army troops in August 1969 came in response to a request for help from the Northern Ireland Government, commonly referred to as Stormont. As noted in the Ministry of Defense report on Operation Banner, Stormont had approved a march for August 12 without fully considering the consequences.[15] Some 15,000 loyalist marchers ended up clashing with thousands of nationalist protesters, leaving the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Protestant-dominated police force for Northern Ireland, "completely overwhelmed".[16] In the 48 hours following the initial clashes, violence quickly spread from Londonderry to other areas of Northern Ireland. On August 14, Stormont officially requested the Army's intervention, prompting the following response from Whitehall: "The United Kingdom Government has received assessments of the situation from the Northern Ireland

[13] Garrett, J Brian. "Ten Years of British Troops in Northern Ireland." International Security 4 (1980): 80–104. https://muse-jhu-edu.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/article/446464/pdf, 85.

[14] Garrett, "Ten Years of British Troops," 85.

[15] UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 2-3.

[16] UK Ministry of Defence, 2-3.

Government and G.O.C. [General Officer Commanding] Northern Ireland and has agreed to this request in order to restore order in Londonderry with the greatest possible speed. Troops will be withdrawn as soon as this is . . . accomplished. This is a limited operation."[17] The perception by British leaders of a short-term commitment (as well as the emergency response nature of the situation) contributed to the lack of preparation for the Army forces ordered to respond. One government spokesman was quoted saying, "[the troops] would be back in barracks by the weekend."[18] It does not require military expertise or genius to see the short-sightedness of this stance. The employment of armed soldiers in almost any context is an inherently escalatory act. British political leaders' inability to foresee the consequences of resorting to a military solution would ultimately result in a lack of strategic vision and clarity for the crucial opening stages of Operation Banner.

The Army Attempts to "Sort This Bloody Mess Out"

The political and strategic ambiguity in the opening moments of the Northern Ireland campaign was clear in the vague instructions British political leaders gave the military. Rod Thornton, associate professor of defense studies at King's College in London, pointed out in a 2007 article in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, "The Army was being told by politicians to 'sort this bloody mess out'. It was not, however, despite the number of available political 'overseers', given any guidance as to how this should be done."[19] It is here political leaders' overconfidence in the Army's capabilities, based on the perceived experience from prior campaigns during the withdrawal from empire, becomes clear. Thornton notes the leadership in London adopted a

[17] Garrett, "Ten Years of British Troops," 85.

[18] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 74.

[19] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 77.

mindset of "just leaving it to the Army."[20] He adds, "Much of this mentality, of course, was born of the fact that, since the Army was so used to dealing with trouble spots from previous colonial commitments, they should 'know best'. But the Army was not used to operating in the UK without police support and without a 'goal' or 'carrot' or even a 'plan' established by the civil authorities."[21]

With minimal guidance from the civilian leadership and no clear or realistic political objective, it should not come as a surprise that military leaders were unable to generate a sound strategic plan for Operation Banner. The 2006 Ministry of Defence report notes, "At no stage in the campaign was there an explicit operational level plan as would be recognised today."[22] Out on the streets of Northern Ireland, this meant junior leaders and soldiers were left to "figure it out" as situations and problems inevitably arose. The MOD report states, "Much depended on individuals, their personalities, and how they got on together. Overall, the picture is of generally able and well-intentioned men doing what they believed best with a generally similar common purpose. In practice, too many things that were everybody's job were nobody's job. It could have been better."[23] Given the lack of specialized internal security and counter-insurgency training for the troops deployed in 1969, the assertion of "generally able" is questionable. General soldiering ability and grasp of military fundamentals do not inherently translate to effective defense support of civil authorities or counter-insurgency operations. They are decidedly separate skill sets. What would emerge from this in the early years of the campaign was a theme of pursuing "tactical results", when in fact a "more measured approach" was needed

[20] Thornton, 77.
[21] Thornton, 77.
[22] UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 4-4.
[23] UK Ministry of Defence, 4-4.

for operational/strategic success.[24]

Tactical Decisions, Tragic Consequences

Before analyzing the missteps which would tarnish public opinion of the military presence in Northern Ireland, it is important to note there was a small window of opportunity where the arrival of British troops was viewed positively. Thornton wrote, "Despite the history between the Catholic population of Ireland and British forces, local Catholic communities actually greeted the Army effusively [in 1969]; 'much like the troops who arrived to liberate Paris in 1944'. They were seen as neutral and divorced from the Stormont government and its perceived lackey, the Protestant-dominated [RUC] police force."[25] While taking a considerably more moderate tone, the 2006 MOD report concurs, "Catholics viewed its [the Regular Army] arrival with a mixture of suspicion and relief. Most of them felt that it was there to protect them, but the republican perception was that the British Army was an army of occupation, which reflected myths and legends about the [1916] Easter Rising."[26] To the credit of tactical-level leaders and soldiers, attempts were made in this initial period to build upon this early goodwill with some community relations efforts, featuring "Army-run community centres, taking children on trips to the countryside, running discotheques, delivering 'meals-on-wheels' to pensioners, etc."[27] However, the lack of an overarching civil-military plan to address underlying social and political problems in Northern Ireland ultimately rendered those Army community relations efforts moot.

[24] UK Ministry of Defence, 4-4.

[25] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 77.

[26] UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 2-4.

[27] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 78.

While many military decisions taken between 1969 and 1972 could be critically analyzed for their effect on public opinion, this paper will consider four situations in particular for the scale of their effect, the enduring memory of their significance to the campaign, and the clarity with which they portray a force ill-suited for the task at hand. The Army's response to the March 1970 events in Belfast's Ballymurphy Catholic neighborhood, the July 1970 Balkan Street search (which came to be known in Catholic communities as the "Rape of the Falls"), the reintroduction of internment in August 1971, and the infamous "Bloody Sunday" massacre in January 1972 would all ultimately undermine the Army's credibility and irreparably harm public opinion of Operation Banner.[28]

Serving as one of the earliest examples of Army missteps in Northern Ireland based on lack of preparation and understanding, the March 1970 employment of soldiers in an attempt to prevent violence as a Protestant march passed through the predominantly Catholic Ballymurphy neighborhood in Belfast backfired. When the soldiers (mainly Protestant service members from the Scots Guards) lined the march route facing Catholic protesters, it gave the impression the troops were there to protect the Protestant marchers, not the Catholics.[29] When violence broke out, the outnumbered soldiers employed CS gas (a powerful type of tear gas employed by police and military forces) to break up the crowd, ultimately gassing the whole neighborhood and alienating the Catholic community.[30] Forces with proper internal security training would have been more likely to navigate this situation with the finesse required.

A more substantial miscalculation came only months later in July 1970. Based on a tip, a company-sized element of soldiers (roughly 100 to 150 troops) carried out a house-to-house

[28] UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 2-5.

[29] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 82-84.

[30] Thornton, 83.

search for weapons and ammunition on Balkan Street in the predominantly Catholic Lower Falls area of West Belfast.[31] The operation angered the local Catholic community as the perception the Army did not protect Catholics was now compounded by efforts to seize the only weapons Catholics thought they had to aid in their defense.[32] Protesters quickly flooded the area, prompting a hasty retreat of the company-sized element and triggering three battalions (up to 3000 soldiers) to respond. The reinforcements imposed a 35-hour curfew, made widespread use of CS gas, and conducted a cordon-and-search operation of all houses in the Lower Falls area.[33] The debacle would be named the "Rape of the Falls" by nationalist elements, and marked the first time gunmen from multiple factions of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) were known to have fired on British troops since their arrival in August 1969.[34] The MOD report on Operation Banner concedes that "tactically the Balkan Street Search was a limited success. However, it was a significant reverse at the operational level. The search also convinced most moderate Catholics that the Army was pro-loyalist. The majority of the Catholic population became effectively nationalist if they were not already. The IRA gained significant support."[35]

Whatever Catholic goodwill remained for the British Army presence would wither away in August 1971 with the reintroduction of "Internment (the incarceration without trial of suspected terrorists for long periods)."[36] It must be noted Internment was introduced against the advice of the Army,[37] but political leaders cited historical precedent to justify the move.[38] While

31 Thornton, 86.

32 Thornton, 86.

33 Thornton, 86–87.

34 Thornton, 86–87.

35 UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 2-5.

36 Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 91.

37 UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 2-7.

38 Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 91. Internment had been used to suppress a 1950s IRA campaign.

the Army did not support the decision, implementing it did fall to them. Here the Army failed in two critical aspects: first, they lacked updated intelligence to generate arrest lists which resulted in many arrests of suspected IRA members who were not involved or no longer active, and second, the Army made their preparations for the mass arrests in the open (building internment camps and rehearsing arrests) which meant many targets were gone when the raids came.[39] The MOD report made the consequences clear, "Both the reintroduction of internment and the use of deep interrogation techniques had a major impact on popular opinion across Ireland, in Europe, and the US. Put simply, on balance and with the benefit of hindsight, it was a major mistake."[40]

Labeled by Thornton as "the worst mistake of the Army's entire campaign in Northern Ireland"[41], the events of January 13, 1972, infamously known as "Bloody Sunday", would prove to be the proverbial "final nail in the coffin" for public perception of Operation Banner. Some 7000 Catholic civil rights demonstrators held an "illegal march"[42] in Londonderry, prompting a forceful response from troops of the 1st Battalion, Parachute Regiment, recently redeployed from Belfast to Londonderry and known for their aggressive tactics.[43] The vigorous Paratrooper pursuit of the marchers after some threw stones at the troops led the soldiers into no-go areas. In the ensuing chaos, soldiers shot and killed 14 demonstrators, none of whom were verifiably armed.[44] As the MOD Operation Banner report outlined, "The consequences ran around the world and could still be felt more than 30 years after the event. It is probably the only event in

39 Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 92–93.

40 UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 2-7.

41 Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 99.

42 Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 100. The march was considered "illegal" as Stormont imposed a six-month ban on marching in August 1971.

43 Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 98–99.

44 Thornton, 99–100.

the Troubles to be the subject of two Judicial Enquiries."[45] Thornton was more forceful in his analysis, "The fallout from this incident was immense. Further world-wide opprobrium was heaped on Britain and its army. The stock of PIRA rose considerably in a city where it had not previously been prominent. Many young men, this time in Londonderry, flocked to join its ranks. The city was now, despite all the previous precautions, lost to the Army."[46] While impossible to definitively say whether proper internal security and counter-insurgency training could have prevented the incidents examined in this section, these events demonstrate how troops postured for traditional tactical battlefield operations are often ill-suited for the nuanced, measured, and strategic work required in counter-insurgency scenarios.

"Hearts and Minds" Lost

It is clear that by 1972, the British Army, and perhaps more importantly the British Government controlling the Army's operations, had failed to meet any of the requirements set out by Dixon as necessary for success in a "Hearts and Minds" style counterinsurgency campaign. By not providing a clear way forward with a concrete civil and military plan, Whitehall and Westminster had not demonstrated the political will to win. The compounding mistakes by British Army forces between 1969 and 1972 caused irreparable harm to Operation Banner's legitimacy in the eyes of significant portions of the population, primarily Catholic nationalists whose disaffection fueled the growing insurgency.[47] The RUC was far from having "police primacy" over the situation between 1969 and 1972, leaving the Army to take the lead on many operational aspects the troops were not properly prepared for.[48] Most critically, as has been

[45] UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 2-8.

[46] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 100.

[47] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 104–105; UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 8-3.

[48] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 90; UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 4-3.

established throughout this paper, civil-military coordination was ineffective in the early campaign.

Dissatisfaction with Operation Banner extended beyond the Northern Irish population experiencing it firsthand. Dixon notes that in 1971 "a majority, 59 percent, of British public opinion supported withdrawal from Northern Ireland. After 1974, opinion polls suggested consistent British support for withdrawal"[49] He added, "The reason the British public supported withdrawal was out of sympathy with the soldiers, too many had been killed and they were serving no purpose, not to mention the cost to the British taxpayer."[50] Indeed, as outlined in the MOD Operation Banner report, "As late as 1988, an Economist survey indicated that 28% of the mainland population wanted the troops withdrawn immediately, and a further 29% within a pre-set period: a total of 57% favouring withdrawal."[51] These samplings of British public opinion demonstrate the missteps of 1969 through 1972 irreparably tarnished the perception of Operation Banner, even as steps to correct the situation began to take shape from the mid-1970s onward.[52]

Conclusion

From 1969 to 1972, the British Army found itself in the unenviable position of attempting to mediate an extraordinarily complex conflict generations in the making. Even if the troops had received specialized training and adequate preparation, the task was herculean. The decision by British political leaders to employ a force lacking proper preparations and postured for external defense is worthy of scrutiny. The ultimate purpose of the armed forces in any democratic nation is to protect the people. While it can seem appropriate to call on the military to restore order in times of crisis, there are certainly successful instances of it in history,

[49] Dixon, "A real stirring in the nation," 43. Pulled from a 24 September 1971 NOP poll for the Daily Mail.
[50] Dixon, Paul. "Hearts and Minds", 463. September 1978 Gallup poll.
[51] UK Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner," 8-14.
[52] Thornton, "Getting It Wrong," 104–105.

political leaders must exercise careful judgment to know the difference between employing soldiers to contain a crisis and employing soldiers to impose haphazard policy. The deployment of British troops to Northern Ireland in 1969, and their subsequent operations through 1972, serve as a lesson on how extended use of military means during a political crisis often exacerbates tensions. While a political peace process ultimately ended the Troubles in Northern Ireland, at least on paper, it is important not to take this as vindication for the extended deployment of the Army.

Mistakes were made, lives were tragically lost, and conflict was ultimately prolonged because political leaders arguably did not use the right tool for the job.