

THE  
INTELLIGENCE WAR  
AGAINST THE  
IRA

THOMAS LEAHY





## The Intelligence War against the IRA

The exposure of two senior Irish republicans as informers for British intelligence in 2005 led to a popular perception that the IRA had 'lost' the intelligence war and had been pressurised into peace. In this first in-depth study across the entire conflict, Thomas Leahy re-evaluates the successes and failures of Britain's intelligence activities against the IRA, from the use of agents and informers to special forces, surveillance and electronic intelligence. Using new interview material alongside memoirs and Irish and UK archival materials, he suggests that the IRA was *not* forced into peace by British intelligence. His work sheds new light on key questions in intelligence and security studies. How does British intelligence operate against paramilitaries? Are its methods effective? When should governments 'talk to terrorists'? Does regional variation explain the differing outcomes of intelligence conflicts? This is a major contribution to the history of the conflict and of why peace emerged in Northern Ireland.

Thomas Leahy is a lecturer in British and Irish politics and contemporary history in the Politics and International Relations department at Cardiff University.



# The Intelligence War against the IRA

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108487504](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108487504)

DOI: [10.1017/9781108767033](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108767033)

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First published 2020

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Leahy, Thomas, 1987– author.

Title: The intelligence war against the IRA / Thomas Leahy, Cardiff University.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019038702 (print) | LCCN 2019038703 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108487504 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108767033 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Ireland – History, Military. | Irish Republican Army – History. | Political violence – Northern Ireland – History. | Counterinsurgency – Northern Ireland – History. | Northern Ireland – History, Military. | Great Britain. Army – History. | Ireland – History – 1922– | Intelligence service – Ireland – History – 20th century. | Intelligence services – Great Britain – History – 20th century. | Informers – Ireland – History – 20th century.

Classification: LCC DA914 .L43 2020 (print) | LCC DA914 (ebook) |

DDC 363.325/1530941–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038702>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038703>

ISBN 978-1-108-48750-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-72040-3 Paperback

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To Sara



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## Acknowledgements

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There are many people whose time and efforts have assisted this book's creation. This book is based on my PhD thesis, which was completed at King's College London. I thank my thought-provoking supervisor Ian McBride (now at Oxford University) for encouraging, advising and developing my ideas. I also thank other academic staff at King's College London including Paul Readman, Frank Foley, Tim Stevens, Stephen Lovell and Michael Kerr for their valuable feedback during the PhD process. I also appreciate the constructive reviews by the two referees for Cambridge University Press, whose input has significantly contributed to the formation of this book.

I am particularly indebted to Huw Bennett of Cardiff University. Huw has provided valuable feedback regarding how best to develop my thesis into a book. He also assisted me during my first academic position lecturing on the Northern Ireland Conflict at Cardiff University. Huw's knowledge on the British military, the Northern Ireland conflict and the world of academia has been invaluable. The same words echo in relation to the feedback and support of Niall Ó Dochartaigh of the National University of Ireland Galway. His innovative angle on the conflict also inspired me as an undergraduate student to further develop the existing research on the conflict.

Various colleagues and PhD students at Cardiff University and the National University of Ireland Galway have supported the creation of this book. These include: Claudia Hillebrand, Jon Kirkup, Ian Stafford, Branwen Gruffydd Jones, Stephen Thornton, Pete Dorey, Gary Hussey, Noémi Farkas, Anna Tulin Brett, Giada Lagana and Maciej Cupryś. I am grateful for the help of all academic staff in the Politics and International Relations department at Cardiff University. The department has assisted this research by providing funding to update the PhD thesis. Students that I have worked with at King's College London, Cardiff University and NUI Galway have also provided ideas that have developed the arguments in this book. I apologise for any names that I have missed.

I am very grateful to all the interviewees for participating in my research, and to all of those who helped to arrange interviews. The interviewees were generous with their time and patience on such a sensitive topic.

Special thanks goes to the Institute of Historical Research. Their Scouloudi Historical Research Award in 2016 allowed me to update the research from my thesis. Whilst I was pursuing my PhD, King's College London provided me with research grants and a King's Continuation Scholarship to support my research.

Michael Watson, Emily Sharp, Lisa Carter and Stephanie Taylor at Cambridge University Press, and Frances Tye as the copy-editor, have provided crucial guidance on academic publication.

The staff at the following institutions kindly granted permission to quote from their material and related archives: Imperial War Museum Sound Archives; King's College London's Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives; the London School of Economics Library Archives; the Hardiman Library's special collections at the National University of Ireland Galway; the Linen Hall Library's Northern Ireland Political Collection in Belfast; the Bodleian Library's Harold Wilson papers at Oxford University; the Labour History Archive and Study Centre in Manchester; and the National Library of Ireland. I appreciate the time and kindness of their staff.

I also thank Brian Reynolds, William O'Donnell, Lucy Dale, Daniel Orders, Ari Orders, Elizabeth Leahy, Christopher Leahy, Non Williams, Dewi Williams, Sheila Leahy and other family members for their support. In particular, I thank my now-deceased relatives Danny Leahy, Mary Hastings and Patrick Hastings for sparking an interest in Irish history and politics.

This book is dedicated to my wife Sara, whose support over many years has ensured that I have been able to complete this book.

## Abbreviations

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14 Intelligence Company	Undercover surveillance unit for the British Army
CLF	Commander of Land Forces (British Army)
DCI	Director and Coordinator of Intelligence Northern Ireland
E4A	Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch section conducting surveillance operations
E4B/HMSU	Headquarters Mobile Support Unit, a Royal Ulster Constabulary special support unit
FRU	Force Research Unit
GHQ	IRA General Headquarters Staff
GOC	General Officer Commanding (British Army)
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army
MI5	Military Intelligence Section Five, the UK's internal intelligence agency
MI6	Secret Intelligence Service, the UK's external intelligence agency
MILO	Military Intelligence Liaison Officer
MRF	Military Reaction Force
OIRA	Official Irish Republican Army, a Marxist rival to the Provisional IRA
Old IRA	The original Irish Republican Army

Provisional IRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary, the former police force for Northern Ireland
RUCR	Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve
SAS	Special Air Service
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
RUC Special Branch	Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment. Incorporated into the Royal Irish Rangers regiment (RIR) in the 1990s

## Introduction

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Intelligence has been a crucial aspect of modern counter-insurgency strategy.<sup>1</sup> It has played, for example, a prominent role during the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians,<sup>2</sup> and decolonisation campaigns involving the British state since 1945.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, academics have debated the impact of agents, informers, electronic intelligence and special forces on modern conflicts.<sup>4</sup> British forces have been fighting various insurgent and paramilitary groups since 1945. As a result, there is a growing literature on the effectiveness of British intelligence in small-scale conflicts. Christopher Andrew details the use of informers by the British during the Cyprus Emergency in the 1950s. British intelligence recruited informers from the Greek-Cypriot EOKA<sup>5</sup> and the Turkish-Cypriot population. Their information enabled British security forces to capture and kill a number of leading EOKA rebels. Andrew argues that this 'intelligence-led' effort was one important factor enabling the British government to create a political compromise between Greek and Turkish Cypriots.<sup>6</sup> Huw Bennett describes how informers and other sources of intelligence also helped the British to end the Mau Mau campaign in Kenya during the 1950s.<sup>7</sup>

Based on these recent experiences, the British state once again used intelligence in Northern Ireland. British intelligence deployed various methods against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) from 1969 including informers, electronic intelligence and special forces. Similar to the EOKA, the IRA hid within specific communities to conduct its campaign. British forces required inside information from the IRA or the republican community to disrupt IRA activities. The IRA were under no illusions about the importance of this secret intelligence war, and knew that it would play a part in determining their success or failure. The republican newspaper *An Phoblacht* commented in 1974: 'the greatest weapon England has is that of the informer. Without [them] it is possible that the people of Ireland would have had full control over their country a long time ago.'<sup>8</sup> A brief survey of previous conflicts between Irish republicans and the British state shows that there is some

truth to this claim. Informers hindered the United Irishmen rebellion under Wolfe Tone in 1798. Following infiltration, spies set up the arrests and executions of rebel leaders.<sup>9</sup> The Fenians in the 1800s also faced disruption to their activities following infiltration.<sup>10</sup> British intelligence did not have similar success in Ireland between 1919 and 1921. The original Irish Republican Army (old IRA) achieved the secession of twenty-six counties from the United Kingdom. Aided by electoral support for republicans, IRA attacks and counter-intelligence operations encouraged the British government to negotiate in 1921.<sup>11</sup> The Provisional IRA knew from the past that its success partly depended on resisting British intelligence strategies.

The impact of the British intelligence war on the Provisional IRA has become the subject of fierce debate. One of the main catalysts for this debate is the top IRA informer code-named Stakeknife. The man behind this name is alleged to have been Freddie Scappaticci from Belfast. From the late 1970s, Scappaticci supposedly worked for the British Army's Force Research Unit (FRU). The FRU's job was to recruit agents and informers within the paramilitary groups. Scappaticci also allegedly operated as a chief spy-hunter within the IRA's internal security unit.<sup>12</sup> Scappaticci denies that he was 'Stakeknife'. He also denies involvement in IRA activities.<sup>13</sup> However, a range of Northern Ireland conflict participants and observers claim that the allegations are true. Those who support the allegations include Martin Ingram, a former FRU officer, as well as various Irish republicans, journalists and academics.<sup>14</sup> Danny Morrison, the former Sinn Féin director of publicity, claims that he was later made aware that Scappaticci had set up his arrest in 1990. Morrison's conviction was later quashed. Morrison argues: 'Scappaticci was the [UK] Prime Minister's man murdering weak ... and compromised IRA Volunteers, and civilian supporters, in order to perversely elevate his reputation as an IRA spy catcher.'<sup>15</sup> At the very least, there is a consensus from various sources including former British intelligence operators that a high-level agent called Stakeknife existed, regardless of that person's true identity. Further revelations of high-level infiltration of the republican movement (the IRA and Sinn Féin) arose in late 2005. Denis Donaldson from Belfast went on Irish television to announce that he had been an informer since the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Donaldson had been in the IRA since 1969 and was interned with senior republicans during the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> After his release, Donaldson stood for Sinn Féin in the Westminster elections in 1983. Despite failing to be elected, he would be an important 'cog' within Sinn Féin until 2005.<sup>18</sup> Acquiring this man as a long-term informer was a major coup for British intelligence.

Before the Stakeknife revelations in 2003, commentators were aware that the IRA suffered a degree of infiltration.<sup>19</sup> But the exposure of Stakeknife and Donaldson as ‘high-level’ informers prompted many conflict participants and observers to reconsider why the IRA had ended its campaign.<sup>20</sup> Various journalists concluded in 2003 that Stakeknife’s position within the IRA meant that he significantly disrupted the IRA’s operations, and helped to bring republicans to the negotiating table.<sup>21</sup> Former IRA spies, British intelligence and military personnel have also emphasised that British intelligence efforts were crucial in bringing peace to Northern Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Anthony McIntyre, a former republican prisoner, argues that Stakeknife and Donaldson facilitated the defeat of the IRA.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, leading republican supporters of the peace process, including Danny Morrison, reject this view.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the emergence of this divisive debate, there remains no extensive academic account that evaluates the effectiveness of the intelligence war against the IRA. Yet most academic and journalistic accounts available argue that the British won that war. These authors believe that that defeat was one of the factors that forced the IRA into peace in the 1990s. The standout example of this view is the work of Martyn Frampton. Frampton argues that senior spies in the IRA, including Donaldson and Stakeknife, prevented many IRA operations from being carried out successfully, from the 1980s onwards.<sup>25</sup> Frampton concludes that ‘the republican capacity for ‘war’ was greatly curtailed’ and ‘[i]t was ultimately for this reason . . . that the IRA opted for peace . . . the security services had won the intelligence war’.<sup>26</sup> *Talking to Terrorists*, co-written by Frampton and John Bew, reaches a similar conclusion, stating that ‘extensive’ high-level infiltration ensured: ‘the IRA’s operational capacity had been steadily undermined. The result of this was that it was the IRA who came to the British seeking negotiations, not *vice versa*.’<sup>27</sup> This is not to argue that Frampton and Bew provide a monocausal account for the IRA’s decision to end its campaign. The authors dismiss the ‘primacy of military “solutions”’. They provide multiple reasons to explain the republican movement’s peace strategy in the 1990s. These include the declining political momentum of Sinn Féin and the increasing ability of loyalist paramilitaries to target republicans. They also admit that the evidence surrounding infiltration of the IRA remains ‘incomplete’. Basing their argument on the evidence currently available, however, Bew and Frampton maintain that informers and agents had pushed the IRA’s campaign into a trajectory of decline by the 1990s. They argue that the intelligence war ‘had a decisive impact’ on republicans’ decision to opt for peace.<sup>28</sup>

This argument is widely accepted in Troubles literature. Ed Moloney presents a similar argument, following the exposure of Stakeknife and

Donaldson.<sup>29</sup> Thomas Hennessey also suggests that the intelligence war contributed to the IRA's 'strategic defeat' in the 1990s.<sup>30</sup> Bew and Frampton agree that the IRA was 'strategically defeated'. This term suggests that the IRA's armed campaign was being 'contained' by the British forces. As a result, these authors believe that the IRA could not influence British policy towards Northern Ireland in the 1990s. In their view, the intelligence war is a crucial factor in explaining why the Provisional IRA ended its campaign and had made political concessions by 1998.<sup>31</sup> The view that the IRA lost the intelligence war is also predominant within war and intelligence studies literature. Michael Kirk-Smith and James Dingley argue: '[o]verall the RUC, in cooperation with the [British] army, developed . . . highly effective intelligence systems that fundamentally defeated the PIRA'.<sup>32</sup> Both Jon Moran and Bradley W. C. Bamford agree that a primary reason for the IRA ending its campaign was heavy infiltration and SAS operations against the IRA.<sup>33</sup>

This dominant interpretation differs from the consensus view that had existed before 2003. According to this previous theory, the IRA and other conflict participants *all* realised they could not defeat each other. *Everyone* compromised in 1998. There was a military and political stalemate.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, these authors were writing before the recent revelations about IRA and Sinn Féin informers and agents took place. Frampton is right that we must review previous arguments in light of these new developments.<sup>35</sup>

However, some recent research has begun to question the dominant argument that the intelligence war helped force the IRA into peace.<sup>36</sup> Niall Ó Dochartaigh suggests that high security costs caused by the IRA and a sizeable minority of political support for Sinn Féin led to the British government accepting peace talks involving republicans by the 1990s. In this account, both the British and IRA had agreed to peace talks by the 1990s. The peace process did not emerge because the British pushed the IRA to the negotiating table.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, Ó Dochartaigh was writing about negotiations and not specifically the intelligence war. Richard English argues that a crucial explanation for the IRA's political compromise was their inability to win a majority of Irish and Northern Irish electoral support. But English does not suggest that the IRA achieved nothing. He argues that republican violence and politics prevented a political settlement on unionist terms. It also ensured 'that Sinn Féin would be involved in . . . implementing . . . a new Northern Ireland deal'. He believes that the IRA could have continued their armed campaign. However, he suggests that 'they had been damagingly infiltrated'. For English, the intelligence war also encouraged the IRA to end its campaign. The trouble with accepting this latter point is that English

(understandably given this topic was not the focus of his work) does not provide extensive analysis about the outcome of the intelligence war.<sup>38</sup>

This book provides the first detailed assessment of the intelligence war against the IRA. This intelligence war primarily used agents, informers, special forces, surveillance and electronic intelligence. I evaluate the regional nature of the intelligence war against IRA units across the island of Ireland and England between 1969 and 1998. This regional analysis enables us to explore the overall outcome of the intelligence war against the IRA. I suggest that British intelligence efforts had not contained IRA activity to any significant extent when the IRA called prolonged ceasefires in 1972, 1975 and the 1990s. In south Armagh, north Armagh, Belfast, Derry City and England, the IRA's campaign was never in a position of terminal decline because of the intelligence campaign against it. It does appear that the IRA was facing greater containment by the 1990s in east Tyrone and Newry. But elsewhere the organisation was able to restart its activities following temporary containment. British intelligence did not 'win' the intelligence war. Neither does this book suggest that the IRA won the conflict. Instead, the conflict ended in a stalemate situation.

Three principal aspects of the IRA's structure explain why it was not in a position of terminal decline in the 1990s. All three of these features meant that the IRA was difficult to infiltrate and restrain. First, many rural IRA units were elusive. Second, the IRA had adopted a small cell structure in Belfast and Derry City after 1975. Finally, the IRA leadership remained isolated from the rest of the movement. One reason for the change in British political policy towards republicans in 1975 and 1989 was the inability of the intelligence campaign to restrict IRA activity to an 'acceptable level of violence'. Between July 1972 and May 1974, and 1976 and 1989, I suggest that the British government's aim of reducing IRA activity to a level at which it caused minimal disruption to political, social and economic life in Northern Ireland did not succeed.<sup>39</sup> Instead, the British government began to try to encourage the IRA and Sinn Féin towards a political compromise in both 1975 and in the 1990s.

I also examine growing evidence that the IRA leadership wanted to negotiate a political settlement from the early 1980s onwards. In the meantime, the IRA aimed to pressurise the British government to return to talks. Republican leaders envisaged doing this by persisting with IRA activity and by increasing Sinn Féin's electoral mandate.<sup>40</sup> The IRA's capacity for further conflict by 1994 shows that its leadership fulfilled their aim of survival and persistence. Yet that leadership also accepted the need to negotiate a political settlement by 1994. They agreed to talks primarily because Sinn Féin was unable to win a majority of electoral

support across the island of Ireland.<sup>41</sup> But the republican leadership only agreed to a ceasefire in 1994 because of the political limitations and opportunities at that time showed that there was no more to be gained through IRA activity.<sup>42</sup> Political factors played a greater role in producing peace than did the intelligence war. This argument matters, because various commentators and governments – rightly or wrongly – look to Northern Ireland for ideas on how to create peace in other conflict zones.<sup>43</sup>

The book's three parts mirror the main periods of conflict that occurred between prolonged IRA ceasefires. The first period was between August 1969 and June 1972, the second between July 1972 and December 1975, and the third between 1976 and 1998. Each part considers whether or not the IRA's prolonged ceasefires in that period emerged because of the intelligence war. Each part has three chapters. The first chapter in each of the three parts details British political, military and intelligence strategy against the IRA in the different time periods. The second chapter in each of the three parts considers the effectiveness of the intelligence campaign against regional IRA units in each period. These regions include republican heartlands within Belfast, Derry City, south Armagh, north Armagh, east Tyrone and Fermanagh. The IRA's operations in England are also discussed. The third chapters in both Parts I and II consider whether or not the IRA called prolonged ceasefires because of the intelligence war. The only slight variation in this structure is in [Part III](#), where there are four chapters because of the greater volume of material to discuss between 1976 and 1998.

A number of key themes emerge from this book. The hitherto underappreciated regional nature of the conflict is explored. I compare the intelligence war's impact on different IRA units by examining levels of republican armed activity in each region. In 1990, John Whyte called for more research on the regional element of the Troubles. With a few notable exceptions, this area remains underdeveloped, particularly for the post-1970s period.<sup>44</sup> I explain how local variations in violence influenced overall British and IRA strategies at leadership level. Assessing the intelligence war's regional impact can enhance our understanding of the conflict.<sup>45</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas argues that too much research on political violence focuses on armed groups in the cities, partly for logistical reasons. He argues that the 'urban bias . . . distorts data'. Kalyvas suggests: 'incorporating the local dimension . . . almost always uncovers the plurality and lack of uniformity of . . . experiences and outcomes . . . What is needed . . . is a way to connect the local and the national, the view from below with the perspective from above.'<sup>46</sup> I explain why the IRA was not

facing terminal decline by the 1990s by considering the intelligence war's effect on the IRA in urban and rural areas.

Divisions within the state is another reoccurring theme. Cooperation between state agencies was crucial to achieving British political, military and intelligence objectives. Sir David Omand's *Securing the State* emphasises that the coordination of government, intelligence and security structures is essential to the state's effective response to terrorist or paramilitary attacks.<sup>47</sup> I provide examples whereby multi-agency cooperation led to intelligence success. For example, there was some progress for British forces and intelligence against the East Tyrone IRA in 1987. But evidence also shows that rivalries between state institutions partly restricted intelligence achievements against the IRA. Furthermore, the intelligence war led to the rise or demise of certain intelligence agencies such as MI5, the Metropolitan Police Special Branch and the Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch. The book explains why MI5 became the dominant intelligence agency against the IRA in the UK.<sup>48</sup> In addition, I suggest that divisions within the state influenced when talks with the IRA would emerge throughout the conflict.<sup>49</sup>

This book also considers how various British prime ministers used intelligence to achieve policy objectives against the IRA. *The Black Door* by Richard J. Aldrich and Rory Cormac evaluates how effectively British prime ministers used secret intelligence to achieve their aims in various situations. I will test the validity of their arguments by comparing how each government performed in the intelligence war against the IRA.<sup>50</sup>

A further theme explored is whether the intelligence war targeted the IRA without radicalising the republican community. Omand suggests that progress against an adversary requires reassuring 'the communities in which terrorists seek support'. The state should not alienate these communities.<sup>51</sup> Frank Foley has compared British and French security policies since 1998. Foley agrees that successful security and intelligence strategies must not antagonise the communities from which armed groups operate.<sup>52</sup> I explore these arguments in relation to the intelligence conflict against the IRA. I will show that particular intelligence activities, including the use of the SAS in rural areas in the 1980s, often achieved only a short-term reduction in IRA activities. In the long term, controversial intelligence incidents could radicalise the local republican community. In the regions where these incidents occurred, the IRA's campaign often continued or escalated. Of course, the British state may not have focused on winning support away from the IRA in some republican areas. But *Operation Banner*, the post-Troubles report published by the British Army in 2006, suggests that the British state wanted an 'acceptable level' of IRA activity before 1998. It describes this as 'a level

at which normal social, political and economic activities can take place without intimidation'.<sup>53</sup> In other words, the British state wanted to reduce and contain the IRA's campaign. Controversial intelligence incidents contradicted this objective in the long term. They created further toleration, if not support, for IRA activity in republican areas. At times, such incidents made the violence worse. As Foley argues, these actions were tolerated partly because Northern Ireland was viewed as a 'place apart', where traditional UK liberties did not always apply.<sup>54</sup>

The IRA was not the sole focus of British intelligence during the Troubles. British and RUC intelligence efforts were also directed against loyalist paramilitaries as well as smaller republican groups such as the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the threat posed to the British state by the IRA was far greater. For this reason, my book investigates the intelligence war against the Provisional IRA.<sup>56</sup>

### Definitions and Terminology

The British government sets their own security and intelligence policies. It is the intelligence services who work with them to gather, analyse and act on secret information. The intelligence services gather this information primarily by covert means. However, the government have the final say over how to act on intelligence.<sup>57</sup> In Northern Ireland, there was an intelligence war waged against the IRA. Whilst British agencies tried to gather and use covert information, the IRA resisted. Omand explains how covert intelligence differs from overt security measures. Intelligence aims to 'pre-empt' terrorist and paramilitary activities. Omand summarises the primary sources of obtaining pre-emptive intelligence: 'the recruitment of human sources (HUMINT) and the interception (and where necessary deciphering) of communications (COMINT) . . . that together with radar and electronic intelligence (ELINT) makes up the broader category called signals intelligence (SIGINT)'.<sup>58</sup> In relation to Northern Ireland, Omand's definitions, with his emphasis on secrecy, human intelligence and signals intelligence, are favoured over competing definitions, as these were the primary sources of intelligence used.<sup>59</sup> Open-source intelligence (OSINT) will also be discussed. This refers to intelligence gathered from open sources of information. In Northern Ireland, OSINT included gathering reports on republican meetings and strategies from sources such as *An Phoblacht* and Sinn Féin speeches.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the use of covert intelligence to set up special operations against the IRA such as SAS ambushes is one of the intelligence methods evaluated in this book.

The key component of the British intelligence war against the IRA was the recruitment of informers and agents. George Clarke, a former RUC

Special Branch officer, writes: 'even mechanical gathering has to have a starting point, and that brings me to the informant. Surveillance teams needed to know where to go. What houses to target. What vehicles to follow.'<sup>61</sup> William Matchett, a former RUC Special Branch member, argues:

approximately 60 per cent of all intelligence gathered in the Troubles was from people giving information or what [RUC] SB called agents. Of the rest, approximately 20 per cent was technical (telephone intercepts, and eavesdropping on buildings/vehicles of known terrorists), 15 per cent surveillance and the last 5 per cent almost evenly split between framework operations (routine police and Army patrols that interacted with the public) and open sources (local newspapers, community/parish bulletins).<sup>62</sup>

Despite the emergence of sophisticated electronic intelligence-gathering methods, agents and informers remained crucial to British intelligence operations against the IRA.<sup>63</sup>

English defines terrorism as political violence used against various targets. It has a 'psychological dimension, producing terror or fear among a directly threatened group . . . in the hope of maximizing political communication and achievement'. He admits that it can play a part in wider political campaigns as well. The 'terror' element can be used by state and non-state groups alike. English argues that we cannot define terrorism according to its targets. If terrorism occurs when an armed group targets civilians, he admits that conventional warfare and criminal activity could also be called 'terrorism'. Whilst admitting that the word terrorism has been used for political purposes, he suggests: 'my definition . . . allows us to use the word without assuming that those who practise such violence are necessarily . . . immoral or illegitimate'.<sup>64</sup>

Nonetheless, this book does not describe the IRA as a terrorist organisation, for multiple reasons.<sup>65</sup> Dominic Bryan et al. suggest that the political aims of terrorist violence do not distinguish it from other acts of political violence. Even formal acts of war by states or assassinations by insurgents are political. In addition, the strong psychological reaction encouraged by terrorist violence does not make terrorism a unique form of political violence.<sup>66</sup> The Blitz unleashed on the UK by Nazi Germany during the Second World War is one example. This example also shows why English is right to suggest that terrorism is not defined by the targeting of civilians. States and non-state groups have both killed civilians in conflicts to varying degrees, either intentionally or unintentionally.<sup>67</sup>

The term terrorism also overlooks the nuances in the use of political violence by different regional IRA units. In rural south Armagh, the IRA focused predominately on targeting British security forces. Alongside this

strategy, the Belfast, Fermanagh and Tyrone IRA also attacked loyalist paramilitaries regularly. On occasion, these attacks led to Protestant civilian casualties. In contrast, the IRA in England killed civilians (whether intentionally or not), security-force members and British politicians. Similar to those by the Belfast and Derry City IRA, republican attacks in England also targeted the economy via commercial bombings. The distinct nature of the IRA's campaign in each locality is blurred by applying the generalised term of 'terrorism', rather than describing it as 'political violence' or 'armed activities'.

The final reason for not adopting the term 'terrorism' is that it is 'a subjective, pejorative and politically loaded term' used by states to legitimise or delegitimise – whether rightly or wrongly – armed groups.<sup>68</sup> For example, Hezbollah, the Shia Lebanese Islamic paramilitary, are designated as 'terrorist' by the predominately Sunni Gulf states. But Hezbollah is supported by the Assad regime in Syria and by Shia-dominated Iran.<sup>69</sup> The term 'terrorism' is applied to organisations that certain states oppose, rather than to any organisation that meets a particular set of criteria. 'Political violence', 'paramilitary' or 'armed groups' are terms that do not have the same level of political connotations. For similar reasons, this research uses the term 'counter-insurgency' to describe the British state's response to IRA activity. Insurgency refers to 'an internal struggle in which a disaffected group seeks to gain control of a nation'. Counter-insurgency refers to 'the constitutional, military, political or economic measures that represent the state's response to this challenge'.<sup>70</sup> In this book, I explore the military, political and intelligence measures deployed by the state in its response to the IRA. By not using the word 'terrorism', I am *not* advocating the 'relativist argument that all acts of violence have equal justification or validity'.<sup>71</sup> As English argues, it is open to the reader to 'judge [whether] the violence of . . . the Provisional IRA . . . [has] been justified and legitimate'.<sup>72</sup>

This book uses the widely accepted term 'informer' to describe an IRA member who provides information to British intelligence or RUC Special Branch.<sup>73</sup> Alan Barker, a former Special Branch agent-handler who worked in Derry City, describes an agent as someone 'who was not a member of . . . the terrorist groups . . . [who] had to be carefully manoeuvred along a path whereby he or she could eventually approach or be approached by a particular organization and accepted into it'.<sup>74</sup> Another category is that of the British Army agent. This type of agent is a member of the British armed forces who infiltrates a paramilitary group for the intelligence services.<sup>75</sup> Matchett also recalls the use of various one-off and informal agents from his time in RUC Special Branch.<sup>76</sup> This book is primarily focused on individuals who provided repeated intelligence.

Matchett explains how the persons who provided occasional intelligence remain unknown. Evidence surrounding their activities seldom survives.

Whilst some self-confessed IRA spies have released memoirs, it is impossible to verify their primary motives for becoming agents or informers. Even with agent-handlers releasing memoirs, as in some cases, we cannot confirm what motivated an agent or informant. Available evidence suggests that people inform for a variety of reasons. Motivating factors can change over time.<sup>77</sup> The case of Raymond Gilmour, a former Special Branch agent in Derry City in the late 1970s and early 1980s, supports this view. Alan Barker, his former Special Branch handler, also discusses Gilmour's motives. Gilmour apparently began informing after facing a potential prison sentence for criminal activities. Gilmour said that his other motivations included a distaste for the IRA after they had carried out a punishment beating on his friends for anti-social behaviour, 'a powerful financial incentive' and the prospect of saving lives.<sup>78</sup> Martin Ingram, the former FRU operator, agrees that agents and informers have 'many motivating factors'. These include 'revenge' for paramilitary beatings, ideological opposition, the threat of imprisonment, a longing for excitement and 'status', and 'good, old-fashioned greed'.<sup>79</sup> Academic studies on other conflicts also show that agents and informers have various motives. Stan A. Taylor and Daniel Snow use the term MICE to account for common motives of those Americans informing for the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The acronym MICE stands for money, ideology, compromise or coercion, and ego. The authors add that other influences include excitement and revenge. Crucially, they suggest that: 'no human act is ever motivated by a single factor'.<sup>80</sup> The mixture of motives for agents and informers ensures that there will always be individuals who will inform. Kalyvas also explains that there is a difference between 'political' denunciation and 'malicious' denunciation. The latter is motivated by personal or local grudges. He proposes that malicious denunciation means that war 'privatises politics'. War 'transforms local and personal grievances into lethal violence'. Local or personal disputes can be given a political meaning by the group or state for which a person operates.<sup>81</sup>

### **Sources and Methodology**

This book cross-references accounts from various conflict participants. These accounts come from memoirs and new interview material, alongside new and existing Irish and UK archival material. I have gathered the views of republicans who support the Provisional movement and those who are now unaffiliated,<sup>82</sup> self-confessed IRA spies, former British

security and intelligence personnel and British and Irish political representatives.

Gathering oral histories has enabled my research to gather some 'hidden histories', particularly of rank-and-file republicans whose views have not been heard within memoirs. There has been a tendency for the debate surrounding the past within republicanism to be between current and former Sinn Féin leaders and specific unaffiliated republicans, whose critiques are regularly aired via memoirs and blogs.<sup>83</sup> By relying on these accounts, we overlook the multiplicity of views within republicanism on this topic. Gathering these additional opinions broadens our understanding of the debates within Irish republicanism. Paul Thompson, a veteran oral historian, promotes interview research precisely because: '[r]eality is complex and many-sided'.<sup>84</sup>

There are many potential limitations with the source material chosen. One difficulty is that memoirs or interviews may be ideologically motivated. As Trevor Lummis argues: '[c]ontemporary values clearly shape the informant's interpretation of their own past'.<sup>85</sup> In the Northern Ireland context, the debate about whether the IRA lost the intelligence war can be used to support or criticise the peace process and Sinn Féin. Nonetheless, it is important not to overstate how contemporary ideological views might influence some accounts. Various accounts of the intelligence war by interviewees are similar, regardless of which side they are from. To overcome this potential problem, I reference interviews and memoir accounts from multiple and different perspectives. I also check the validity of interviews and memoirs against archival material, statistics and records of events.<sup>86</sup> In reality, the importance of cross-checking sources is applicable to all historical studies, not just research using oral and memoir accounts.<sup>87</sup> Alessandro Portelli, veteran oral historian, makes the crucial observation that even if an opinion cannot be proven correct, it remains 'psychologically true' for a certain person or group, and we need to analyse why that viewpoint is held.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps the greatest methodological hurdle for the use of interview research on the Northern Ireland conflict has emerged in recent years. Between 2001 and 2006, former Provisional republicans and loyalists conducted candid interviews with former paramilitaries. The recordings were part of an oral history project linked to Boston College in the United States. Interview accounts were not to be released until after that interviewee had died. Questions surrounding the project emerged in 2010 when Ed Moloney published *Voices from the Grave*. This book was partly based on the testimony given to the Boston College project by Brendan Hughes, a former IRA commander in Belfast. Hughes claimed that the 'disappearing' (burying in an unmarked grave) of Jean McConville,

a widow from west Belfast, in December 1972 was ordered by Gerry Adams. Adams, the Sinn Féin president until 2018, denies this accusation.<sup>89</sup> In 2010, an interview was also published in the *Irish News* with former Provisional Dolours Price (she died in 2013). The story claimed that Price admitted to being involved in the McConville killing. Dolours Price had also given interviews to the Boston College project.<sup>90</sup> In 2011, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) began legal proceedings to extradite material relating to the McConville case from Boston College. By 2014, a number of republicans allegedly associated with McConville's disappearance had been arrested, including Ivor Bell; these arrests were partly based on their supposed interviews with the project. However, the case against Bell will not proceed. In December 2018, the Belfast Crown Court said that he was unfit to stand trial on health grounds. Ivor Bell denies the accusations.<sup>91</sup> In October 2019, he was cleared of all charges at Belfast Crown Court.<sup>92</sup> In May 2014, Adams was arrested and questioned, but released without charge. Adams denies all the accusations associated with the McConville case, including IRA membership.<sup>93</sup> The fallout from the Boston project highlights the challenges of conducting oral historical research on incidents still under investigation from the Troubles. The Boston College project has also led to potential interviewees being understandably wary of contributing to research via interviews.<sup>94</sup>

However, I have been able to undertake interviews for this book with the willingness and consent of participants. The primary aim of my interviews was to research the general influence that the intelligence war had on the IRA and the peace process. Only information in the public domain was discussed with interviewees.<sup>95</sup> My research has not gathered or captured any revelations or personal experiences of IRA and intelligence service activities that are not in the public domain. This book does *not* attempt to explore whether an individual was or was not an agent or informer, or the specific circumstances surrounding their lives.

It is worth noting that even written sources such as *Lost Lives* present difficulties. Those noted in such material as agents or informers are sometimes only suspected of infiltration. The decision of the intelligence services not to name their sources, whether dead or alive, creates this difficulty.<sup>96</sup> With regard to suspected agents and informers referred to in *Lost Lives* and others texts including memoirs, I am *not* suggesting that the accusations surrounding them are true. Instead, this research recognises that if the IRA was killing people they suspected of infiltration, this would imply that they were facing operational difficulties in specific regions. Their operation difficulties can be investigated by studying IRA activity levels at the time.

A range of archival evidence has been gathered from the UK National Archives, leading IRA members' and intermediary papers held at the National University of Ireland Galway and the National Library of Ireland, the Garret FitzGerald papers at University College Dublin and from political papers held at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast. This range of archival material provides great insight into British and Irish republican strategies and opinions during the conflict. Nonetheless, there has not yet been a full disclosure of all the available material. Studies in intelligence often struggle to precisely prove the effect of intelligence because archival materials remain secret. This has not prevented authors in historical and intelligence studies attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of British intelligence against various opponents in conflicts since 1945. Aldrich, for example, has researched the impact of GCHQ and other forms of intelligence on British political and security policies, including during the Cold War, the Falklands conflict and against the IRA in Northern Ireland. Aldrich produced this research without full access to intelligence sources and archival materials.<sup>97</sup> Even official histories such as Andrew's research on MI5 cannot provide a complete analysis. For instance, official histories analyse British intelligence successes and failures without cross-referencing IRA or Taliban documents (which may or may not exist).<sup>98</sup> All of these books and articles utilise the available source material to present credible assessments of the effectiveness of British intelligence campaigns in various settings. They have advanced the field of intelligence studies and history by doing so. In Andrew's words: 'British historians in a great variety of fields have yet to consider the relevance of Security Service history to their own research.'<sup>99</sup> This quote is not only applicable to studies relating to MI5. Andrew's comments support the methodology used in this book, that of gathering the primary evidence available to evaluate the effectiveness of the intelligence campaign against the IRA. The arguments presented here represent work in progress, since the full details surrounding the intelligence war in Northern Ireland have not been revealed (and probably never will be). Nonetheless, this research sheds new light on the conflict and opens avenues for further research.

*Part I*

The Intelligence War: August 1969  
to July 1972



# 1 British Political, Military and Intelligence Strategy towards the IRA: August 1969 to July 1972

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Between August 1969 and March 1972, the British government focused on supporting unionist-led Stormont in the introduction of gradual political and socio-economic reforms to appease unionists and nationalists. Various factors explain why the British government decided to work with unionist-majority rule at Stormont. First, the British government did not want to trigger a unionist revolt and a civil war that could tarnish Britain's image abroad. At the same time, Northern Irish votes had very little impact on Westminster politics. It was not politically expedient to spend significant time and energy on Northern Irish affairs. Aldrich and Cormac also suggest that Heath's Conservative government became '[i]ncreasingly obsessed with subversion' from 'domestic enemies' including trade unions and the IRA.<sup>1</sup> This fear can partly explain the Conservative government's support for maintaining unionist-majority rule until March 1972. These reasons help to explain why the British state's military strategy focused on defeating the IRA before 1972.

British political and military objectives proved difficult to achieve because the British government allowed Stormont to delay reforms and influence security policy. This dragged the British Army further into conflict with the nationalist population, especially as the Army frequently used the indiscriminate population-control techniques previously employed across the empire. As nationalist anger increased, the non-violent Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) pulled out of Stormont in the summer of 1971. The activities of the IRA increased. Escalating violence eventually forced the British government to suspend Stormont and assume direct rule. By March 1972, the British government had realised that the IRA could not be militarily defeated. Instead, in the words of the British Army's review of the Northern Irish campaign, *Operation Banner*, the aim switched to producing 'an acceptable level of violence'. This situation was one whereby violence would be reduced to 'a level at which normal social, political and economic activities can take place without intimidation'.<sup>2</sup> In order to decrease IRA activity and

support after March 1972, William Whitelaw, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, also followed the advice of the SDLP and reduced British Army activity. But IRA activity continued. Eventually, both the SDLP and Whitelaw realised that the IRA had to be included in negotiations if peace was to be attained in Northern Ireland. Talks between Whitelaw and the IRA commenced in July 1972.

### **From 'Defeating' to Talking to the IRA, August 1969 to July 1972**

Full-scale intercommunal violence erupted in Northern Ireland in August 1969, primarily in Belfast and Derry City. The British Army was called upon ostensibly to 'keep the peace' between Catholic Irish nationalists and Protestant unionists. Initially, restoring law and order was the aim of British security and political policy.<sup>3</sup> In practice, this meant attempting to prevent any more incidents as had been witnessed during the Battle of the Bogside in Derry City in August 1969. There had been street fighting between nationalists, on the one side, and loyalists and some Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) members on the other.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than attempting to 'avoid responsibility', the British Labour government under Harold Wilson wanted Stormont to introduce the reforms that the civil rights movement demanded.<sup>5</sup> These reforms included seeking to end gerrymandered electoral boundaries. According to Whyte, unionists primarily in the west of Northern Ireland (Derry, Fermanagh, Tyrone and parts of County Armagh) discriminated against Catholics in electoral boundaries, employment and the allocation of public housing. The result was that the unionist population could maintain control of a local authority, even when they were in a minority. One example was Derry City Council. There were eight councillors for 14,000 Catholics, whilst the 9,000 Protestants in the city had twelve.<sup>6</sup> In the east of Northern Ireland, in areas such as Belfast, nationalist grievances focused more on other forms of discrimination. For example, the Special Powers Act enabled the RUC to ban nationalist marches, meetings, newspapers and flags.<sup>7</sup>

The first major turning point in British strategy towards nationalists came in early 1970. The British Army became increasingly hostile towards nationalists in working-class city areas, such as west Belfast and the Bogside area of Derry City. This shift in British security policy occurred for multiple reasons. The British government delayed introducing certain reforms because of the negative reaction of unionists. The Hunt Report, for example, was published in October 1969. Hunt recommended disbanding the Ulster Special Constabulary, a back-up

organisation for the RUC. Clashes between the British Army and loyalists followed.<sup>8</sup> British policy switched from appeasing nationalists to pacifying unionism. This change in emphasis was partly based on the British government's fear of getting dragged into the constitutional affairs in Ireland again, and potentially a civil war. The nationalist–unionist divide in Northern Irish politics also meant that there were no electoral seats available in Northern Ireland for Labour, the Liberals and Conservatives.<sup>9</sup> Britain also had its own large Irish-immigrant community. The British government was keen to insulate the ‘mainland’ from sectarian divisions creeping in from Northern Ireland. There also appeared to be the subordinate motive of ensuring as little international publicity as possible surrounding the situation in Northern Ireland. For T. K. Whitaker, an Irish economist and key advisor to Fianna Fáil Taoiseach Jack Lynch, the slow pace of the reforms showed that the British wanted to quietly ‘clean up what they regard as an unrepresentable back-yard’ to avoid international attention.<sup>10</sup> The transition from Wilson's Labour government to Edward Heath's Conservatives in June 1970 initially meant that those engaging in civil or violent disobedience were going to obtain few concessions. In the eyes of Heath and his government, domestic enemies were mounting across the UK, be they the IRA or trade unions. Heath intended to challenge these enemies, not compromise with them. Otherwise, there was a risk of disorder. The trouble with such an approach to Northern Ireland's affairs was that any ‘gains against the IRA came at the cost of alienating the nationalist community’ and increasing violence.<sup>11</sup>

From the summer of 1970, the British government decided to allow political and economic reforms to proceed at a pace that suited the Ulster Unionist Party. At the same time, the British Army used ‘colonial techniques’ of population control to try to defeat IRA violence.<sup>12</sup> In practice, this policy of appeasing unionist Stormont caused the British state problems in its relations with the nationalist community. A review of the British Army's campaign, *Operation Banner*, was produced in 2006. It represented the work of three officers who had gathered the views of retired or serving officers, foot soldiers and thousands of regimental reports from the Troubles. Reflecting on events nearly thirty years later, it recalled:

the British Cabinet saw ... Northern Ireland as being Stormont's responsibility. However, given its [largely unionist] composition, Stormont was ... unlikely to take substantive action [on civil rights issues]. Indeed it would probably have seen that as being contrary to its own interests. Stormont was part of the problem.<sup>13</sup>

The Army now believes that allowing Stormont to influence security policy made the armed forces appear pro-unionist.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, this view was only reached in hindsight. Few British archival documents from the time expressed similar concerns, although individual British military personnel did want the government to alter the political structures in Northern Ireland to keep nationalists on side from 1970.

Between 3 and 5 July 1970, the British Army conducted a major search operation in the Falls area of Belfast. The search was conducted following an arms find in the Lower Falls on 2 July by the Army, and continuing 'street disturbances' involving republicans. Whilst houses were searched, crowds surrounded the Army personnel. Army reinforcements arrived, but their presence provoked a riot. Local republicans linked to the Official IRA (OIRA) and the Provisional IRA responded by firing weapons and throwing petrol bombs, nail bombs and grenades. Four civilians died, allegedly shot by the Army.<sup>15</sup> The Falls Road Curfew encapsulates the problems with allowing Stormont to influence security policy. The British Army admits that the curfew: 'did not ... discriminate between those perpetrating violence and the remainder of the community ... The search ... convinced most moderate Catholics that the Army was pro-loyalist ... The IRA gained significant support.'<sup>16</sup>

Other indiscriminate British Army operations increased tensions. For example, internment without trial was suggested and implemented by Brian Faulkner, the unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, in August 1971. An estimated 342 'republican' suspects were arrested, compared initially to no loyalists.<sup>17</sup> Many of those initially arrested had no connection to the IRA.<sup>18</sup> During the early 1970s, sociologist Frank Burton learned from his stay in a nationalist community in Belfast how: '[t]he gross physical assault of internment ... had the effect in the [nationalist] community of tilting the balance of allegiance towards the Provisionals'.<sup>19</sup> In intelligence terms, internment did eventually have an impact on IRA activity.<sup>20</sup> But in the short term it inflamed nationalists, who turned against the British state. In the 6 months before internment there were 25 deaths; in the following 6 months after internment, there were 185 deaths.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, in Derry City the killings of civilians radicalised nationalists before internment. The SDLP withdrew from Stormont on 16 July 1971. They did so in reaction to the British government refusing to hold an official inquiry into the killing of two unarmed men. Seamus Cusack and Desmond Beattie had been shot by the British Army earlier in the month.<sup>22</sup> The creation of no-go areas in the Bogside by 1971 demonstrates how many nationalists felt isolated from the British state. Similar nationalist anger towards the British state was witnessed across Northern

Ireland, and led to new IRA recruits.<sup>23</sup> The statistics in *Lost Lives* show that the IRA increased its number of killings from 107 deaths in 1971 to 280 by 1972.<sup>24</sup> When Bloody Sunday in January 1972 is added to the catalogue of British Army disasters in this period, it is clear that nationalist and British state relations had reached their lowest level. According to the recent Saville Inquiry, all thirteen people killed on Bloody Sunday were civilians who were 'not armed or posing any threat of causing death or serious injury'.<sup>25</sup> Thereafter, Stormont was completely discredited, as the SDLP withdrew from its corridors and the violence on the streets increased. The British government was left with no choice but to suspend Stormont in March 1972. Ultimate responsibility for Stormont's failure to reform lay with the British government. It could have prorogued Stormont at any time. But its determination not to provoke a unionist backlash meant that they were reluctant to disturb the Stormont parliament.<sup>26</sup>

Foley suggests that security policies adopted by Western governments are influenced by 'norms'. This term refers to security, intelligence, legal and judicial procedures followed in the past by specific state institutions. The way that the British government approached security in Northern Ireland was influenced by historical norms. This included a sense on the UK mainland that Ireland was 'a place apart'. Foley explains that:

[a]lthough Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, there has long been a strand of British thinking that viewed Ireland as a place apart, more like a colony . . . Traditional English liberties did not apply to Northern Ireland after 1969, as the British authorities contended with the IRA's campaign of terrorism . . . A different set of rules held there . . . which permitted internment without trial, coercive interrogation techniques and repressive operations.<sup>27</sup>

British security policy towards nationalists in Northern Ireland to some extent followed the 'norms' of indiscriminate British military and intelligence efforts against the old IRA between 1919 and 1921. There are certainly parallels: for example, Irish nationalists were targeted indiscriminately during the Falls Road Curfew in Belfast in 1970 and also during martial law in Cork from December 1920.<sup>28</sup> As Northern Ireland was viewed as 'a place apart', tougher security measures adopted in other parts of the empire were deployed. The fact that such measures had been used by British commanders and policymakers to help end insurgencies in countries such as Malaya or Kenya no doubt inspired their repetition in Northern Ireland.<sup>29</sup>

Northern Ireland's close proximity to the UK mainland, however, allowed the media greater access to events. The Irish government could also highlight injustices when it wanted to do so.<sup>30</sup> The level of scrutiny

applied to the more stringent security measures being adopted, alongside the fact that many of these policies inspired rather than resolved violence, eventually saw the British government begin to alter its security approach. As Omand and Foley suggest, the success of security measures depends on drawing the population away from paramilitaries. Foley is right that 'the repressive methods used in Northern Ireland in the past are widely acknowledged in the UK today as having been counterproductive'; they were eventually phased out. Any short-term benefits from security measures such as internment were overshadowed by the long-term propaganda benefit they provided to the republican movement in terms of recruitment. A sizeable minority of the nationalist community turned towards the IRA following such measures.<sup>31</sup>

The British government's decision to maintain unionist-majority rule until March 1972 led to a deterioration in relations with the Irish government. Jack Lynch, the Fianna Fáil Taoiseach between November 1966 and March 1973, and his close advisors, emphasised that peace was first needed in the North before unification by consent could emerge.<sup>32</sup> The Irish government believed that peace could be achieved if the British and unionist governments resolved the political and socio-economic discrimination against nationalists.<sup>33</sup> Lynch supported the SDLP's demands for socio-economic reforms and a place in government for nationalists in Northern Ireland. When substantial political reforms were not forthcoming, and following the Cusack and Beattie killings, the Lynch government supported the SDLP's rent-and-rates strike and its demand for unionist-majority rule to be abolished.<sup>34</sup> Following the introduction of internment against the nationalist community in August 1971, Dr Patrick Hillery, the Irish minister for External Affairs, told Reginald Maudling, the UK Home Secretary, that the British government had to end unionist rule and had to stop 'bashing the Catholics'.<sup>35</sup> Relations between the British and Irish governments only improved after unionist-majority rule had ended and the British state had begun exploring political reforms.<sup>36</sup>

On Belfast's and Derry City's nationalist streets, violence increased. British Army population-control measures were a catalyst for further IRA activities there by 1972.<sup>37</sup> Shane Paul O'Doherty, a former Derry City Provisional, recalls a surge in nationalist anger. The animosity followed repressive measures by the British Army, affecting nationalist citizens of the Bogside, Shantallow and the Creggan. One example was a change to Mass times in those parts of the city.<sup>38</sup> The indiscriminate nature of the security measures adopted mirrors that of some of the techniques that British forces had used in past colonial campaigns. In Kenya, British forces punished and monitored entire villages for Mau Mau activity.<sup>39</sup> In Belfast and Derry City, there appeared to be few attempts being made