



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Northern Ireland 1968–98

Executive Summary

The Northern Ireland conflict, or the Troubles, was a national-religious conflict between the unionist forces consisting primarily of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the British armed forces against the nationalist republicans of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (Provos). During the partition of Northern Ireland in the 1920s, the Protestant-dominated Stormont government heavily favored unionist ideologies.¹ This preference institutionalized discrimination policies against Irish Catholics who supported uniting British-held Northern Ireland with the independent republic of Ireland to the south.² The Irish minority responded to the repressive regime with two failed Provos insurgencies in the 1940s and 1950s.³

In 1969, the minority Irish Catholics led widespread civil rights protests against the unionist government. They advocated for equal economic and educational rights in the face of widespread discrimination due to their ethnicity and religious practices. This movement radicalized many Irish, allowing the Provos to recruit to the nationalist cause.⁴ In July 1970, the British Army responded to the rioting and skirmishes by imposing curfews within Irish neighborhoods in Belfast.⁵ This action authorized unionist authorities to search and raid homes and conduct mass arrests of suspected Provos sympathizers. These activities backfired, increasing popular support for the Provos in Irish communities.⁶ Moreover, in 1972, the lack of effective intelligence gathering operations led to a British army unit massacring 13 Irish civilians in what is known as Bloody Sunday.⁷ This event aided recruitment for the Provos, which responded later that year with car bombings that killed 9 civilians and injured 130.⁸

In 1973, the British armed forces launched offensives under Operation Motorman to bolster counterinsurgency operations in Northern Ireland.⁹ These actions had little success and forced a change in strategy. The resulting change in counterinsurgency operations shifted tactics to the elite British surveillance and intelligence services while the army took largely auxiliary roles.¹⁰ The presence of the MI5 and MI6 intelligence agencies provided substantial capacity for the counterinsurgents to recruit informants, interrogate Provos agents, and allow military special forces units to patrol Northern Ireland for cross-border Provos operations.¹¹ The increase in violence by the Provos drew the United States and the Republic of Ireland closer to London politically.¹² Furthermore, in 1987, British intelligence revealed the Provos were receiving weapons shipments from Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi as part of a planned Provos offensive.¹³

By the start of the drawdown in 1993, the British and Irish governments announced the Downing Street Declaration, maintaining a promise that the United Kingdom had no interest in the republic of Ireland's affairs.¹⁴ In addition, 1994 marked a ceasefire agreement between the unionist government and Provos leadership. By this time, Sinn Féin, the dominant Irish Catholic political party, held considerable popular support within the Irish communities of Northern Ireland.¹⁵ Under growing popular pressure on all sides for an end to the violence, the insurgent movement shifted away from armed conflict toward a political agreement. Finally, in 1998, all unionist and nationalist political parties in Northern Ireland,

the United Kingdom, and the republic of Ireland signed the Good Friday Agreement.¹⁶ The agreement outlined in a majority referendum that Northern Ireland could join the republic of Ireland, London would allow a power-sharing devolution, and paramilitary actors would disarm.¹⁷

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. Throughout the early modern period, the centralized UK government based in London used Protestantism and the imperial mission to create the British national identity.¹⁸ The common religious denomination of Protestantism united the nations of England, Scotland, and Wales against the traditional enemy of Catholicism, particularly from France.¹⁹ Furthermore, the defeat of the Jacobites at the Battle of Culloden in 1746 dismantled Scottish national autonomy, establishing the ideology of one United Kingdom. Moreover, the free trade agreements of the eighteenth century within the British Isles drew the nations under one British national identity.²⁰

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. Overall, the United Kingdom government maintained legitimacy from the Scottish, Welsh, and English regions that made up 94 percent of the population.²¹ The devolution of administrative powers to regional authorities of different ethnic backgrounds was a political tactic used by London to appease different national cultures in order to maintain government legitimacy.²² In 1973, London attempted to introduce a devolved power-sharing agreement between the republicans and unionists through the Sunningdale Agreement, however, the negotiations quickly unraveled with an Irish boycott and radical unionist opposition.²³ Furthermore, in 1976, the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention again initiated a devolved power-sharing agreement between the unionists and republicans in Belfast.²⁴ Another Irish boycott of the convention prevented the proposed constitution from passing because it lacked an “Irish dimension.”²⁵ Over the course of the conflict, Provos bombings and assassinations resulted in the loss of 175 lives on the British mainland.²⁶

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s population?

No → Yes. Population security was initially slightly below 85 percent due to violence pervasive across Northern Ireland and attacks on English territory, including terrorist attacks on Parliament that led to the Troubles lasting nearly three decades. The sometimes-indiscriminate counterinsurgency response used by the British military led to Irish Republican Army (IRA) retaliation and further targeting of civilians.²⁷ Northern Ireland was less than 3 percent of the UK population, but the exposure of much more populous areas of the United Kingdom to the violence resulted in a greater threat to population security. In 1971, the area of greater London alone had a population more than 7.5 million people.²⁸ The London population and the population of Northern Ireland combined resulted in more than 16 percent of the UK population facing security risks. Furthermore, additional English cities were targeted by IRA violence, such as parts Manchester, resulting in even less population security. In all, the Provos carried out several hundred bombing attacks of various sizes, of which about 60 percent were targeted primarily at British military forces. Although the insurgent violence had a far reach, the attacks on civilians cost the IRA and the nationalist movement a great deal of sympathy from the British public. Republican and IRA nationalist attacks began to cease with a promising outlook for political negotiation in 1998 with the Belfast Agreement, as all parties to the conflict began to respond to a growing public outcry for an end to the violence.²⁹ Eventually, the IRA ended

its paramilitary campaign, and British troops withdrew from Northern Ireland in favor of local police security by 2007.³⁰ In all, the terrorist acts of the Provos claimed 175 lives on the mainland during the course of the conflict.³¹

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. not as defined by the SOIC study (“groups of 10 or more guerillas crossing a land border with their weapons with relative ease in both directions”). The IRA did have significant refuge and covert support, however, in Ireland. The IRA was declared an illegal organization by the republic of Ireland and has been an illegal organization in the republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom for a century.³² The 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act also recognizes the IRA and unionist paramilitaries as terrorist groups. Sympathizers in Ireland, however, provided the IRA manpower and funding.³³ It is estimated that approximately 400 Provos members and another 400 volunteers were active at all times.³⁴ Training grounds were operated by the IRA inside the republic of Ireland (and in Libya).³⁵ Weaponry came from foreign organizations, including Libyan paramilitary groups and terrorists and provided weaponry, but the neighboring republic of Ireland did not. Legitimate governments often intercepted arms shipments before they could reach the IRA groups.³⁶ Civilian support began to shrink as IRA violence increasingly affected civilians, with conflict in the 1970s causing as many as “15,000 families in the Belfast area” to leave.³⁷ The Provos also had significant links to international terrorist groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Greek Cypriot EOKA, and the Basque ETA.³⁸

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The British Army has been a well-trained force for centuries. At the onset of the conflict, the standing Royal Ulster Constabulary paramilitary group acted as the military arm of the Stormont government.³⁹ The group violently repressed Irish civil rights protests and eventually became a major actor within the United Kingdom’s counterinsurgency operations.

Outcome

Government victory. The counterinsurgency strategy reforms of the mid-conflict period that focused on intelligence and surveillance operations crippled the PIRA command structures, operational planning, and armament shipments. By 1977, many Irish neighborhoods in Belfast were effectively police states, and PIRA prisoners were deemed common criminals instead of political prisoners.⁴⁰ This situation shifted the dynamics of the Irish movement to allocate more resources into its political wing, Sinn Féin, because it statistically led to better success in government elections.⁴¹ Although some PIRA radicals continued bombings after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the accord effectively disarmed large portions of the insurgent and paramilitary forces. This case supports the Five Factors theory.

NORTHERN IRELAND 1968–98	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	NO → YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

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