Bloody Sunday is almost universally recognised as 'unjustified and unjustifiable'. But lessons must be drawn for peace in Northern Ireland, and for counterinsurgency more generally

Jan 30 2012

Jim Hughes *writes that the events of Bloody Sunday and the 'shock' of concentrated violence in the early phase of the Northern Ireland conflict reverberated and shaped the conflict for the following decades. However, the violence also led to the start of a process that would result in the Good Friday Agreement.*

Today marks the fortieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972, when British paratroopers shot dead 13 unarmed civilians and wounded another 13. They were engaged in a protest march about internment without trial, introduced in August 1971, and to highlight state infringements of the rule of law. The Widgery Tribunal enquiry of April 1972, which exonerated the paratroopers, is now widely regarded as a state "whitewash", or deeply flawed to use parliamentary language.

The Saville Enquiry, a new investigation into Bloody Sunday agreed as part of the Northern Ireland peace process and Good Friday Agreement of 1998, took twelve years and cost 200 million pounds – one of the most expensive enquiries ever conducted by the UK. It's devastating findings – that the army had lost discipline and control and was fully responsible for the killings, that soldiers had consistently lied – led Prime Minister David Cameron to state: "There is no doubt, there is nothing equivocal, there are no ambiguities. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong". It was the first official apology for British state wrongdoing during the twenty-five year "Long War" that was the Northern Ireland "Troubles". No British soldier, or other official, has ever been charged with any crime for what occurred on Bloody Sunday.

It is generally accepted that the "shock" of concentrated violence in the early phase of the Northern Ireland conflict – the period 1969-72 – reverberated and shaped the conflict for the next two and a half decades. The breakdown of law and order, the collapse of the Unionist state in 1969, sparked a wave of anti-catholic riots and pogroms in Belfast in which police and protestant mobs cooperated. From this period emerged a newly vibrant form of "physical force" Irish nationalism under the Provisional IRA, itself only founded in January 1970.

The polarization of positions between unionists and nationalists was only circumvented from the mid 1980s by bilateral British and Irish government agreements that were then steadily imposed in top-down fashion on the protagonists in Northern Ireland, and reinforced by external pressures from the USA and the EC/EU. The standard account holds that this process of "imposing" an agreement, mainly on the unionists who resisted power-sharing, is what led to the "Belfast Agreement" of 1998.

Part of this standard account, from the very outset of the conflict, is that the British state acted as a "broker" in the conflict. Home Secretary James Callaghan's first major speech to the House of Commons on the Army's deployment in August 1969 stated that the first objective was to "keep the peace between the communities". This benign gloss was promoted by successive generations of British politicians and senior military officers in a cross-party consensus on Northern Ireland, and was also popularised by the British media. However, this does not explain why the violence persisted for a generation, nor does it contribute to any prospect of critical thinking about the British

state's role as a protagonist in the dirty war in Northern Ireland.

The radicalisation that occurred in Northern Ireland, in particular the rise of PIRA and its support base in the catholic community, was largely reactive to the overreactions of the violent British state security response in the period 1969-72. The British security response transformed what was, in essence, a peaceful democratic movement for reform and civil rights into a formidable nationalist cause. Moreover, the state violence was in character and form shaped by decades of British military experience in repressing anticolonial movements.

There is no doubting the genuine sense of relief among catholics at the British government's decision to deploy the British Army on August 14-15 to "restore law and order". Most accounts of the violence in Northern Ireland accept that there was a "honeymoon" between nationalist/catholic communities and the British Army in the immediate aftermath of the intervention. The consensus dissipates over the question of what explains the breakdown of the "honeymoon," and the nationalist resurgence in the form of communal support for the PIRA insurgency.

There were a number of epiphenoma punctuating the radicalisation of the catholic community and British journalists were acute observers of the trend in the early 1970s. Crude crowd control technology, for example, such as CS gas, was used in massive quantities and represented a de facto collective punishment on built up residential areas. From July 1970 the army shot petrol bombers on sight, as so-called "rubber bullets" (baton rounds) and other riot gear became standard issue only in late summer 1970. Many accounts see the Falls Road Curfew of early July 1970 as the turning point. Imposed by the British Army on a catholic area of Belfast that had experienced the brunt of the interethnic rioting in summer 1969, the curfew involved several thousand troops, a major gun battle and the firing of hundreds of CS gas canisters in a small confined area of dilapidated Victorian-era streets. Gerry Adams (later a commander of PIRA in Belfast), noted that the curfew was a key event in both the expansion of PIRA and the legitimation of "physical force".

Unionist academics, however, argue that the problem of spiralling violence was not due to heavy-handed military tactics, but on the contrary, was the result of "softly-softly" British security policies that ignored unionist fears and allowed a resurgence of the IRA. This position reflects that of the Unionist political leadership in 1970, which pressured a reluctant Army command to "sort out" catholic "No Go" areas.

The drift to nationalist violence in 1971 seems to be mainly explained as the result of a lack of strategic thinking by the British Army over how to manage security, tactical blunders, inappropriate military/policing crowd control technology, and the failure to speedily address catholic grievances. What is generally overlooked in these accounts is that the British Army was historically a counterinsurgency army with a colonial mindset and this experience shaped its counterinsurgency strategy in Northern Ireland.

Colonial counterinsurgency, historically, was practiced at some distance from the oversight of democratic governments in the UK, usually against non-Whites, and well beyond the glare of independent investigative journalists. Northern Ireland's geographical proximity to Britain and Europe, and its accessibility to the mass media, would present a number of challenges for managing civil disorder there. Many of the senior commanders of the British Army that served in Northern Ireland in the critical period of 1970-72 and thereafter were leading practitioners of what we might term the "British model" of counterinsurgency.

A particularly significant figure in this regard was Brigadier Frank Kitson, who assumed overall command of British forces in Belfast in early 1970 until his removal by Secretary of State William Whitelaw in April 1972 in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. The British Army strategy and tactics that were employed in this critical period were, by and large, those that Kitson had formulated from lesson-learning from the decades of British colonial "small wars." Kitson was among a small group of European military officers (mainly British and French) who advocated a population-centric approach to counterinsurgency. This was packaged in an information war as "winning hearts and minds" and as wars "for the people."

In theory, this should involve resolving political grievances and bringing development and economic opportunities. In practice, the core tenet was control through repression and coercion. As Kitson put : "conditions can be made reasonably uncomfortable for the population as a whole in order to provide an incentive for a return to normal life and to act as a deterrent towards a resumption of the campaign". He also stressed intelligence gathering on a communal level through systematic search, mass arrest and screening operations, as well as "countergangs" or "pseudogangs," which could infiltrate or deceive insurgents in undercover operations.

From early 1970, in addition to the routinization of the security measures outlined above, the British Army also started to develop its card index profiles of every catholic family in the working class areas of North and West Belfast through systematic interrogation of each household. The securitization tactics were not applied to either protestant areas or, indeed, middle class areas with large catholic populations. Over time the British Army and security agencies would develop a systematic computerization of personal and vehicle records.

Other counterinsurgency experiences, including recent ones in Iraq and Afghanistan, suggest that there is a fundamental flaw in the capacity of the military to adopt tactics to win "hearts and minds" of communities, unless it is merely a euphemism for coercion. All the evidence from Northern Ireland and other campaigns demonstrates that counterinsurgency strategy is nearly always about the coercion of communities. It is at the tactical interface between soldiers and communities where military brutality and the consequent alienation of communities occurs.

It was precisely at the tactical level, that the evidence in the public domain suggests, things went wrong on Bloody Sunday. Colonel Derek Wilford (leader of the paratroopers on Bloody Sunday) attracted much of the blame in the Saville report, but it was Kitson who set the counterinsurgency strategy which led to Bloody Sunday. Indeed, as reported in the memoirs of General Mike Jackson, Kitson fumed at commanders who he perceived to be too soft, and it was he whodebriefed and admonished Wilford on the evening of 30 January 1972 because he "didn't go on and sort the whole bloody mess out".

There is a view among some British security experts that Northern Ireland is an example of "good practice", where a counterinsurgency was won. We have to ask ourselves whether a twenty-five year violent conflict, by its very duration, can be considered a success or a strategic failure? Bloody Sunday should be seen as part of a counterinsurgency strategy that was counterproductive, and which escalated the violence and alienated the nationalist community from British policy. There is no evil without something good, according to Pliny the Elder. Bloody Sunday is almost universally recognised as a great wrong, but from it came the role of Derry businessman Brendan Duddy as the back channel ("The Contact") between the PIRA and the British government – a small development which steadily gathered momentum and became the peace process of the 1990s.

 Please read our comments policy before posting

About the author

James Hughes *is Professor of Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics, UK. He specialises in the analysis of contemporary political violence and terrorism, including internal armed conflicts and civil wars that pose international security challenges. His areas of expertise range from the conflicts in the former Soviet Union, to the Balkans, and Northern Ireland.*

You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. Book Review: The Destructors: The Story of Northern Ireland's Lost Peace Process

2. Book Review: Lost in Transformation: Violent Peace and Peaceful Conflict in Northern Ireland

3. How will Northern Ireland vote in 2010?

4. The demise of Northern Ireland's first power-sharing administration offers valuable insights for

conflict resolution and policy worldwide.