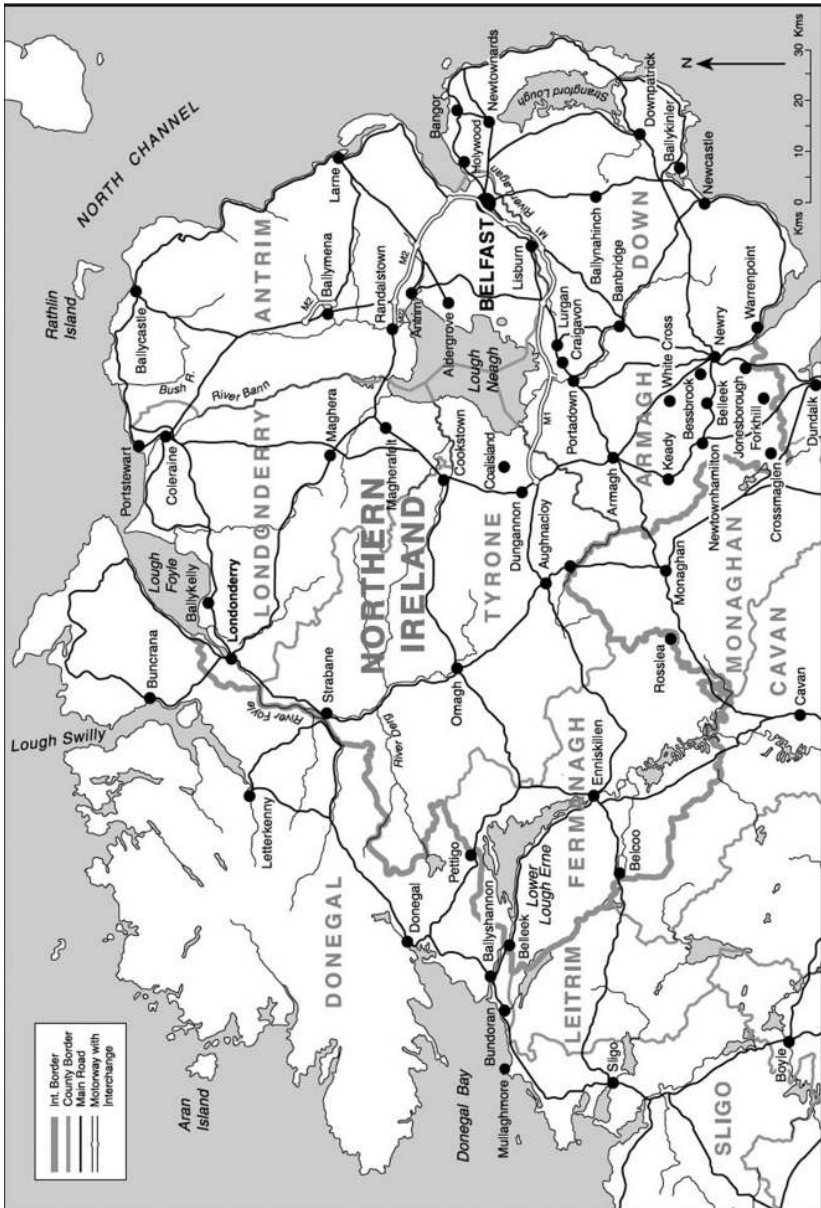


## INTRODUCTION

Perceptions about the British Army in Northern Ireland became fixed in a little over ten minutes on Sunday 30 January 1972. The conflict's most iconic image doesn't feature any soldiers. A hunched-over priest waves a bloody handkerchief as 17-year-old Jackie Duddy is carried away. He was one of thirteen people killed by paratroopers on Bloody Sunday, an event central to how Britain's actions in Northern Ireland are judged. The legacy of that day, like many others marked by grief, is still felt in Northern Ireland's present. What happened, why, and how the past might inform the future, are questions regularly and publicly discussed. More than 250,000 soldiers served in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 2006.<sup>1</sup> (See Map 1.) Yet the campaign is treated in Britain with nervous silence. There is no official history; only passing references are to be seen at the Imperial War Museum and the National Army Museum.<sup>2</sup> In British memories the violence in the 1970s melds into despondency about a decade rife with 'industrial conflict, inflation and unemployment'.<sup>3</sup>

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement ended the conflict, more or less, and to general relief. This book helps explain why peace came so late. In the early 1970s the British government feared a civil war with the potential to spread across all Northern Ireland, south through the Republic and over the Irish Sea into cities containing the diaspora population – to London, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow and beyond. In seeking to prevent that catastrophe the army held violence at a level acceptable to the majority of British people – those living in England, Scotland and Wales – without doing enough to make a political settlement viable. British military strategy saved Great Britain from disaster by condemning the people of Northern Ireland to protracted, grinding conflict for decades. Strategic decisions flowed from beliefs about the violent relationships between the British state, republicans aiming to unify Ireland, and loyalists determined to keep their place in the United Kingdom. By 1975 military strategists considered the conflict fundamentally unresolvable. Whether the Troubles qualified as a civil war is debatable. For historians the question is how 'civil war' acquired meaning

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**Map 1** Northern Ireland.  
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for those making strategy.<sup>4</sup> British strategists saw civil war as something looming on the horizon, to be kept at bay, and at times a reason for invoking strategic change.

Soldiers at the sharp end shared the belief in their indispensable presence without always seeing how this might contribute to perpetuating the conflict. Marine Goulds arrived in the town of Newry, astride Counties Armagh and Down, six months after completing commando training:

To say the least I was a bit apprehensive about going over to Ulster. I didn't know what to expect one way or the other and when you get down to facts it is the unknown that induces fear . . . there have been bombings, shootings, arms finds, and two Marines have been killed. Now I believe that Newry is not a normal British town, but a town where the majority of people wish it to be so, but are prevented from leading a normal peaceful existence by a minority of die hard terrorists. It is now my opinion that we have to be here, that if we withdraw all the British forces from Ulster the people of this country would suffer far greater than they have done in the past five years. Because of this we have to stay whether we, or any minority, like it or not.<sup>5</sup>

Historical knowledge about the Troubles has been extracted for various purposes. American officers in Iraq after the 2003 invasion wearied of their British counterparts lecturing them on Northern Ireland – not least because these lessons came from the campaign's endgame.<sup>6</sup> History deserves more careful handling. Controversies surrounding the conflict are perpetuated by a criminal justice approach occupying a space that might better be dealt with by a move towards truth and reconciliation. Despite allegations about veterans being persecuted, since 2011 the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) for Northern Ireland has brought cases against six military veterans for conflict legacy offences, compared to twenty-one against ex-paramilitaries.<sup>7</sup> In May 2021 criminal proceedings against two former paratroopers for shooting dead Joe McCann in 1972 collapsed, owing to problems with the prosecution's evidence.<sup>8</sup> In February 2023 David Holden became the first ex-soldier to be convicted of a Troubles-related killing since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. A judge imposed a three-year suspended sentence for the manslaughter of Aidan McAnespie, who was shot at a check-point in County Tyrone in 1988. The judge criticised Holden for giving 'a dishonest explanation to the police and then to the court'.<sup>9</sup> The prospects for securing convictions in other historical cases are uncertain even as the victims' quest for justice is unimpeachable. Though the conflict is largely over, the major participants continue to fight a 'battle for the historical record'.<sup>10</sup> Anxieties over potential prosecutions mean veterans are reluctant to talk, government

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departments drag out freedom of information requests inordinately and doors are slammed shut by regimental museums who see their primary purpose as upholding reputations rather than facilitating research.<sup>11</sup>

Looking backwards from the Good Friday Agreement age can obscure earlier contexts. Peace at any price was not a universally shared aim during the early 1970s. In December 1971 Reginald Maudling, the home secretary, told reporters that Irish Republican Army (IRA) activities could be reduced to an ‘acceptable level’.<sup>12</sup> By the end of 1975, 1,502 people had died in the conflict.<sup>13</sup> The government’s toleration of suffering on such a scale, even though responsibility must be shared between the belligerents, is perplexing. When mindless killing, like Bloody Sunday or other atrocities, is so prominent, we assume strategy must have been absent.<sup>14</sup> Writings on the Troubles have sometimes deformed our understanding of the violence by reducing it to two basic types: primitive regression (in atavistic, savage terms), or cultural solidarity (referring to cultural collision, or ethnic conflict). Instead, the war should be treated as a political dispute about sovereignty over territory, where each party claimed to hold a democratic right to prevail.<sup>15</sup> There is an alternative to atavistic or cultural interpretations of the violence – strategy, ‘the central political art . . . the art of creating power’.<sup>16</sup> *Uncivil War* asks: how was British military strategy towards Northern Ireland made and what were its implications? Military strategy is ‘the process by which armed force is translated into intended political effects’.<sup>17</sup>

The British Army’s operations in Northern Ireland have received less scholarly attention than one might expect. The IRA has been subjected to more sustained analysis.<sup>18</sup> *Uncivil War* addresses the imbalance, without suggesting the army played a more decisive role than other actors in the conflict. Military strategy is often understood in relation to grand strategy, the longer-term orchestration of all elements of state power towards achieving political objectives.<sup>19</sup> The British government’s endeavours to coordinate multiple departments of state over thirty years is a topic already ably dissected.<sup>20</sup> Looking closely at the army over a shorter time span brings new insights to the fore. There was no shortage of opinions at the time, as Lieutenant Davies noted in 1972:

Wherever you go in Belfast in uniform, people will always come up to you and put you right on your facts. If it’s a Protestant speaking he will tell you of the doings of the ‘Fenian Bastards’ and if it’s a Catholic speaking you can hear him talk of the ‘Orange Bastards’. And if your luck is really out, he will also tell you what he thinks of the Army and of how the ‘Green Howards’ would have done it.<sup>21</sup>

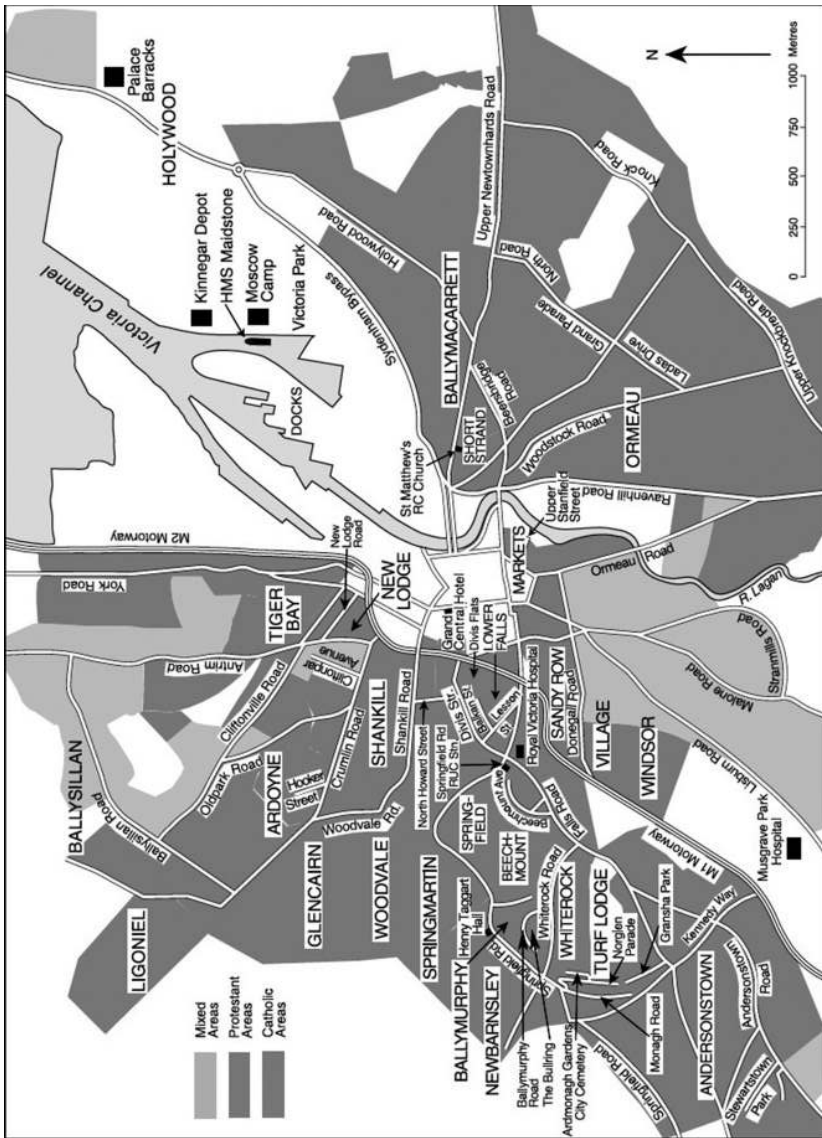
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Military strategy is addressed by existing studies in three ways: as repressive, reactive or missing. Three totemic events make repression the dominant perspective. When a mass curfew was imposed on the densely inhabited Falls Road area in Belfast in July 1970, people saw ordinary streets drenched in tear gas, soldiers kicking down doors and houses trashed in the search for arms. (See Map 2.) In August 1971 the army pulled hundreds of men from their beds to be interned without trial, amidst chaotic street violence and, it soon transpired, brutal interrogation for an unfortunate few. The Bloody Sunday shootings in Derry and the state's failure to hold anyone to account tarnished the army's reputation, perhaps abroad more than in Britain. (See Map 3.) These events appear in popular and academic accounts with a predictable regularity; they are defining moments in the conflict's history. Collectively they are seen to symbolise the British Army's bid to crush rebellion with harsh methods lifted from experiences in the empire, defining a 'colonial strategy' until the police assumed control.<sup>22</sup> By implication these harsh tactics meant an essential continuity between 1969 and 1975.

Alternatively, authors cast the army as a victim of wicked republicanism, emphasising strategy's reactive nature. By this logic soldiers were on the back foot against terrorists who pursued their goals in a ruthless, cunning manner. The prime suspects are of course the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA).<sup>23</sup> Horrific acts committed by republicans are remembered, such as the Abercorn restaurant bombing in March 1972, when 2 people died and 130 were injured. The sub-field of terrorism studies reifies groups such as the IRA when explaining political violence, with a particular interest in how people become terrorists and how these groups are organised.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars argue that the British government's refusal to abandon reform as the central response to the crisis in Northern Ireland and crack down on the IRA allowed the organisation space to grow.<sup>25</sup> Others claim rivalries within the republican movement promoted violence as groups used attacks on the security forces to attract popular backing.<sup>26</sup> In this genre the British Army is pitied for falling into traps set by devious terrorists.<sup>27</sup>

The third commonplace reading of military strategy in Northern Ireland claims the army signally lacked one. Sophisticated policy analyses have ignored military records.<sup>28</sup> The government is blamed for failing to give the army any strategic direction in the early years.<sup>29</sup> Senior generals have perpetuated this belief. David Richards, who ended his career as Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), records in his memoirs being asked in 1993 to write the first campaign plan for operations in Northern Ireland, suggesting a prior omission.<sup>30</sup> More generally, unpicking British military strategy in the Cold War years is complicated by the need to align national priorities with

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**Map 2** Belfast.  
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those emanating from the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).<sup>31</sup> Whereas the repression motif places blame for suffering in the early years squarely on the military's shoulders, studies framed around reaction to IRA violence or a strategy vacuum end up removing responsibility from the armed forces.

These accounts need to be questioned. By 1971 mid-ranking officers were taught: 'the Army is faced with a situation unlike that previously met elsewhere. ... The Army's previous experience, training and techniques do not fully cover this situation.'<sup>32</sup> The coercive measures applied in the 1970s never reached the intensity seen in the colonies. Forced population movement, executions and collective punishments never entered the army's tactical repertoire in Northern Ireland.<sup>33</sup> The colonial continuity narrative also assumes the army stumbled blindly from one setting into another without any reflection. In reality, officers observed changes to the strategic environment during the end of empire, afterwards, and throughout the Northern Ireland conflict. The repression template cannot account for variation during the conflict, either in time or place. Military tactics in January 1970 were markedly different from those in September 1971; practices in the countryside diverged from those in the major urban centres. Blaming republicanism is equally misleading. It is true that the PIRA leadership launched an offensive against Britain in January 1970, before the Falls curfew, internment and Bloody Sunday. Yet focusing solely on the IRA's part in starting the Troubles ignores how republicans made choices in relation to their own communities and their opponents, not in isolation, as their strategy changed over the years.<sup>34</sup>

*Uncivil War* uncovers the running discussions between ministers, officials and officers rather than looking for a single plan agreed by politicians and then followed slavishly by soldiers.<sup>35</sup> A Ministry of Defence (MOD) civil servant called the process 'Defence by Discussion'.<sup>36</sup> These debates could be protracted and fractious.<sup>37</sup> Such disputation is normal in armed forces.<sup>38</sup> Yet in the British case a reputation for anti-intellectualism means such debates are sometimes sidelined.<sup>39</sup> Studies specifically about civil-military relations in Northern Ireland remain fixated on a few set-piece turning-points.<sup>40</sup> By exploring strategy in a more dynamic, continual sense this book illuminates the historical contingencies in which strategists made choices, downplaying the sense of inevitability so common to accounts of the conflict.<sup>41</sup>

Moving beyond a handful of decisions by senior leaders brings two further benefits. Firstly, the significance of seemingly mundane events becomes more apparent. Some 250,000 houses were searched in mainly

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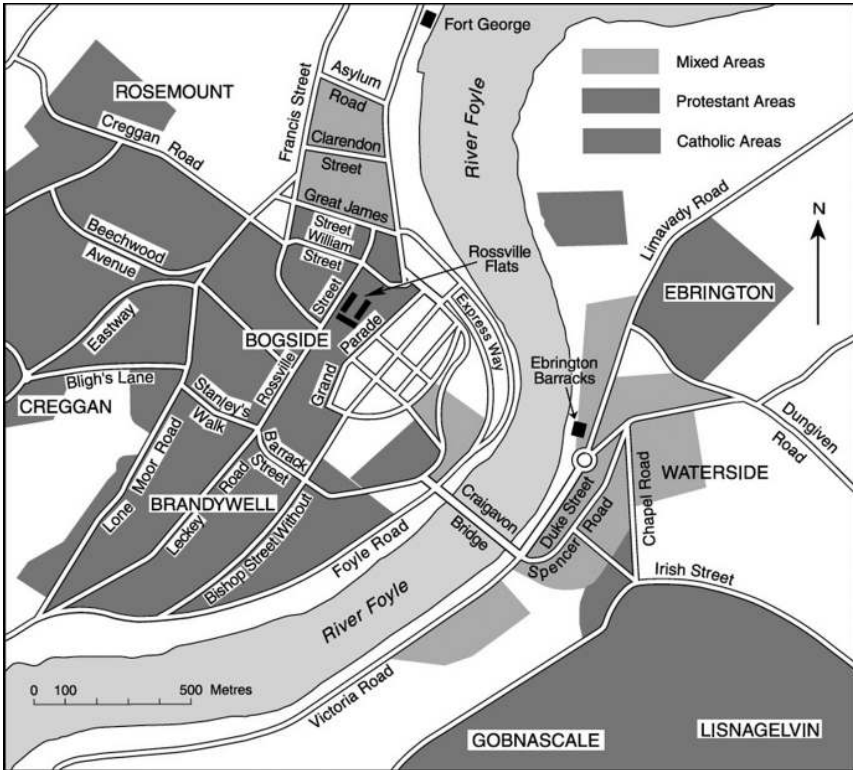
Catholic areas between 1971 and 1976, sometimes accepted by householders with little more than a shrug of the shoulders, at other times met with vitriol as soldiers ripped up floorboards or caused other damage. Each search in isolation made only a small mark on the social fabric. Over years the rancour accumulated.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, because strategy comprises a continual dialogue between the political and military domains, goals are adjusted as implementation on the ground shows what is feasible.<sup>43</sup> *Uncivil War* accounts for the military's ability to push politics from the ground up.<sup>44</sup> Unlike most existing works on the British Army in Northern Ireland, the analysis avoids refracting events through a counter-insurgency lens. Counter-insurgency often falls into an obsession with military technique.<sup>45</sup> By focusing on strategy this book keeps military thought and action within the political parameters of the time.

*Uncivil War* assesses continuity and change in military strategy between 1966, when serious disorder became a possibility, and 1975, when the government decided to begin handing over primary responsibility for security to the police. PIRA, intent on killing service personnel, was clearly the main threat for the British government.<sup>46</sup> However, British strategic equations about how to use force always accounted for the expected impact on loyalism. The government believed republican and loyalist violence could mix and combust unpredictably, and so aimed to prevent a spiral downwards into catastrophic civil war. Military strategy produced a level of violence acceptable to the United Kingdom's majority, without reaching a political settlement, thus consigning Northern Ireland to protracted conflict. By 1975 strategists settled for an unending war for three reasons. Firstly, the refusal to repress loyalist violence undermined the prospects for peace and heightened Catholic distrust in the state as a protector. Secondly, military strategists knew a great deal about the IRA but erred in perceiving the organisation as solely offensive.<sup>47</sup> British strategy consistently underestimated community defence as a reason for people joining or supporting the IRA. Thirdly, in seeking protection from the conflict's divisive politics, senior commanders turned the army in on itself, hardening soldiers to the suffering of ordinary people in Northern Ireland. The British Army became increasingly hostile towards the Irish in general and dismissed complaints about the security forces' conduct as propaganda. Consequently the army could not convince Catholics or Protestants that it was there to protect them.

Where did the fear of civil war come from? The army's experience in the English civil war, 1642–51, is widely regarded as the birthplace for a deep aversion to politics. Events at the Curragh in March 1914, when over



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**Map 3** Derry/Londonderry.

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a hundred officers threatened to resign if ordered to suppress Ulster loyalism, further entrenched the lesson.<sup>48</sup> Anxieties about civil war were tied together with a distaste for politics. Most professional soldiers prefer to concentrate their efforts on tactics and avoid the messy political world.<sup>49</sup> By the 1970s the defence community was absorbed by several decades of thinking about a horrendous ‘imaginary war’.<sup>50</sup> The British Army’s primary occupation, affecting about 60,000 personnel, was preparing for war in Germany after a Soviet invasion. The distinction between armour and artillery units devoted to German defence, and infantry formations liable to be pulled out for global emergencies, engendered different ‘mental worlds’ in the army.<sup>51</sup> Yet ideas from the Cold War seeped across into the perceived dangers in Northern Ireland. By the early 1950s both civilian and military strategists expected any nuclear exchange to rapidly escalate into a global disaster. ‘Pure deterrence’ was preferred over the alternative – a graduated

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reaction to a Soviet offensive. These ideas contained deep pessimism about the military's ability to maintain restraint once war began.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the army in the Cold War held to a belief in war's almost uncontrollable descent into catastrophe. Strategy-makers reached decisions shrouded in anxieties about potential future suffering.

The tendency towards escalation in war makes limitation difficult.<sup>53</sup> Limited wars only happen when those involved accept the need to hold back.<sup>54</sup> As 21 Engineer Regiment observed after their tour in 1971: 'Discipline must be firm, even harsh, and the soldiers must understand that this is going to be so.'<sup>55</sup> Apart from a few major atrocities, such as Bloody Sunday or PIRA's explosion of twenty-four bombs on 21 July 1972, all belligerents refrained from using the maximum violence at their disposal most of the time. Despite their radically different visions for Northern Ireland's future, the key actors shared a desire to avoid catastrophic civil war. Thomas Schelling describes limited wars as bargaining situations: 'the ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent to an important degree on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make'. If limitation requires agreement, then conflict can be conceived of as a struggle to negotiate where those limits should be.<sup>56</sup> Existing studies argue that the British government's impetus for restraint derived from Northern Ireland's constitutional position as a province within the United Kingdom.<sup>57</sup> *Uncivil Wars* suggests limitation derived from expectations about the other belligerents' ability and willingness to escalate.

The army certainly faced greater legal constraints than in the colonies. However, the constitutional position does not account for the government's reluctance to expend greater resources on the conflict. In the summer of 1972 massive troop deployments into contested areas significantly reduced violence.<sup>58</sup> The government abstained from such operations earlier, or for longer, due to higher-priority national interests. Preparations for Britain's accession to the European Communities in January 1973 and the subsequent referendum in 1975 consumed a vast amount of the government's policy-making capacity, and Prime Minister Edward Heath's time.<sup>59</sup> Maintaining the troop levels promised to NATO placed serious restrictions on how many soldiers might be sent to Northern Ireland, and how often. In other words, though limitations to the rules of engagement applied because Northern Ireland was within the United Kingdom, resource constraints, intellectual and material, pushed the British government to pursue limited strategic objectives. The goal of preventing a catastrophic civil war was achieved by 1975 largely at the expense of ordinary Catholics, who were forced to endure an 'open-ended militarization of everyday life'.<sup>60</sup>