



HOW

PEACE

Came to Northern Ireland

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration efforts were shaped to fit the situation

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The effective disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of groups that previously supported violence is key to the long-term resolution of any conflict, especially the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The DDR process is meant to give breathing room to political actors by taking violence — and the means to carry out violence — completely out of the equation. In Northern Ireland, the intent was to disarm paramilitary organizations and to take previously violent individuals and reintegrate them peacefully, economically and politically. As described by Alpaslan Ozerdem of the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University, the official end of hostilities to a conflict does not guarantee a lasting peace, but rather it signals the beginning of

a long and complex peace-building process. The process creates a significant number of former combatants who must be reintegrated into society, and many societies, including Northern Ireland, lack the economic strength to successfully reintegrate such large numbers into the workforce. Ozerdem also states that if left without a job or a new role in post-conflict society, restless former combatants can threaten stability and increase the possibility of the resumption of hostilities. This is especially valid in Northern Ireland, given the large number of former combatants compared to the relatively small population. The danger of failing to reintegrate former fighters is evident in conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

DDR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

In Northern Ireland, the decommissioning process was negotiated and implemented through the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD). This organization was established in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and in subsequent legislation by the Irish and United Kingdom governments. It was headed by retired Canadian Gen. John de Chastelain, Finnish Brig Gen. Tauno Nieminen and Ambassador Donald C. Johnson of the United States. The IICD monitored the implementation of DDR in Northern Ireland from 1998 until the final report was submitted on March 28, 2011.



Former Irish Republican Army paramilitary fighters walk out of Northern Ireland's Maze Prison on July 28, 2000, under terms of the Good Friday Agreement, which freed more than 80 convicted terrorists from both sides of the conflict. REUTERS

Prior to the IICD's creation, weapons decommissioning was a major obstacle to progress, as loyalist parties — the Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party and the United Kingdom Unionist Party — demanded decommissioning prior to continuing negotiations, according to George J. Mitchell in his book *Making Peace*, and remained an obstacle in the negotiations prior to the Good Friday Agreement. Mitchell was a former U.S. special envoy for Northern Ireland and major architect of the agreement. The incentive to keep talking prevailed, given the threat of resumed large-scale violence. Decommissioning remained an obstacle because possession of weapons was in itself one of the greatest negotiating tools. Without them, groups would lose leverage. Neil Jarman, director of the Institute for Conflict Research, found this

was especially valid in the case of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), which was arguably more resistant to decommissioning than other paramilitary groups because their weapons, along with their demonstrated capability to inflict violence on targets both in Northern Ireland and the rest of the U.K., were very effective bargaining tools that could not be replaced. The PIRA also wished to keep its weapons to ensure that the peace agreements were in fact stable and permanent and that other parties were equally committed. Turning in weapons too soon could leave them vulnerable to attack. Similar logic applied to other republican-affiliated groups, such as the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), as well as to loyalist groups. However, unlike the PIRA, these groups were not closely tied to a political party such as Sinn Féin, so the likelihood they would join any future government was low to nonexistent.

Verifying the quantity and location of paramilitary-held weapons was problematic for a number of reasons, including the passage of time and the splintering of groups. The lack of accountability for weapons represents a continued challenge, especially in regard to ongoing violent dissident republican (VDR) activity. According to the IICD's report in 2011, "Decommissioning is still incomplete in that armed and active paramilitary groups still possess a variety of arms." In addition, there are differences between republican and loyalist groups and their ability to effectively account for weapons remaining in their possession. As stated by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and a former member of the PIRA, much of republican paramilitary groups' weaponry was supplied by the regime of former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, and could therefore be more easily inventoried and accounted for. Loyalist groups did not enjoy the same sort of state sponsorship, and members often had to acquire their own weapons and munitions. Loyalist Colin Halliday, a former Ulster Defence Association (UDA) member told this author: "Before we went to disarmament, we had to get together and talk to people ... because we had units and weapons all around the country. It wasn't like the British Army. You didn't know what people had. People were able to acquire things on their own."

The PSNI and former members of both republican and loyalist paramilitary groups have confirmed that weapons remain in Northern Ireland. Remaining arms serve not only as a potential future insurance policy for the groups that have them, but also could inadvertently fall into the hands of violent dissident groups, posing a significant security challenge. This is not to say that decommissioning was done in bad faith, but rather that to decommission the totality of weapons stockpiles from the conflict was not entirely possible or necessary to move the DDR process forward. Instead, decommissioning, though incomplete, served as the first step that enabled the rest of the process.

Though weapons remain in the possession of various paramilitary groups, the development of trust between all conflict participants is arguably more important than the complete success of decommissioning. According to Michael Culbert, a former member of the PIRA and now director of Coiste na nArdmáiríochta, a community-based organization, many republicans thought, “What’s the big deal with the weapons? We can get more. For over 30 years we constantly got weapons in ... RPGs, SAM missiles, heavy machine guns. There is no issue getting weapons, but the issue is using them. This is where trust comes in. So the British government trusted the republicans they were dealing with.” This sentiment was echoed by former members of the INLA, Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and UDA, who all stated that weapons were in fact quite easy to acquire, even if original stockpiles were decommissioned or forgotten over time, as each group had cultivated lasting networks and simple know-how that would not be eliminated by any peace agreement. Furthermore, many former paramilitaries stated that though, in their opinion, weapons were not as significant as many believe, they were and remain significant to those who risked their lives and imprisonment to maintain and protect the weapons stockpiles.

In addition to trying to decommission entire weapons stockpiles, the IICD made great efforts to respect the wishes of individual groups as to their public exposure in the decommissioning process:

- Whether the group wished to carry out decommissioning in public or in private.
- Whether the group wished cameras or witnesses to be present.

- Whether the group or the commission should be the first to announce an act of decommissioning publicly (noting that we had an obligation to inform the two governments when such an act took place).

All but one of the groups chose to decommission privately, according to the IICD. A high priority was placed on the safekeeping of information. Given the fact that weapons stockpiles remained, the continued activity by dissident groups and potential for renewed violence, the IICD felt that providing this information could potentially lead to attacks on groups that had risked participating in the peace process, deterring future decommissioning efforts.

Five years after the Good Friday Agreement, the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) was created to assist in the DDR process — to address issues unresolved by the Good Friday Agreement. The IMC was founded by the British and Irish governments in April 2003, following a joint declaration, and began operating at the beginning of 2004. There continued to be relatively high levels of violence, a lack of trust in the newly established institutions and genuine questions regarding the long-term realization of the agreement. Additionally, as of 2004, paramilitary groups had still not decommissioned their weapons. The IMC essentially served as a

way to push the DDR process forward and instill confidence in the Belfast Agreement. Over the course of its existence, the IMC issued 26 reports divided among two categories — paramilitary activity and security normalization. Ultimately, a final peace agreement was not signed until 2007.

Though the situation that necessitated the IMC was dire, not all of the events that took place were negative. For example, both republican and loyalist groups largely accepted and carried out decommissioning, and accepted the judicial and policing legitimacy of the Northern Irish government. Sinn Féin’s statements regarding this matter in January 2007 were especially significant. Despite these positive steps, violence remained; however, its nature seemed to change, as sectarian violence by paramilitary groups was redirected toward individuals deemed to be involved in “anti-social” behavior, such as drug dealing. In this regard, measured levels of violence were higher among loyalist groups than republicans, and the violence was focused within their own communities, rather than outside. The IMC also observed a difference between loyalist and



Members of the International Commission on Decommissioning, who were responsible for overseeing the disarmament process in Northern Ireland, announce on September 26, 2005, that the Irish Republican Army had destroyed all its weapons. From left are Finnish Brig. Gen. Tauno Nieminen, Canadian Gen. John de Chastelain and Ambassador Donald C. Johnson of the United States. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Doves are released in Belfast on December 2, 1999, in celebration of the new power-sharing government formed as a result of the Good Friday Agreement. EPA

republican groups in how they adjusted to the new environment, with the loyalists, in effect, less able to adapt to change than many republican groups. Former loyalist paramilitaries confirmed these findings, describing the difficulties of adapting to new realities after the Troubles ended.

To a large degree, the IMC's observations were consistent with the facts on the ground. The political wing of the republican movement — specifically Sinn Féin — enabled the PIRA and associated groups to effectively rechannel their efforts into the political process. Their military structures made this easier to execute and maintain. Many loyalist groups did not have the same political “off-ramp,” into which the energy and efforts of its disaffected members can be

channeled, nor did they have the community sympathy, at least not on the same scale as the republicans. Therefore, rechanneling energy into politics failed, or was never attempted, leading many groups to divert into crime or vigilantism. In addition, local executive powers were re-established via devolution, which the IMC noted was largely due to the large-scale decrease of violent paramilitary activity, which by default lessened tension among Northern Irish political parties.

When the IMC was founded, the British Army still maintained vast powers in Northern Ireland — associated with counterterrorism and the maintenance of public order — not afforded it in the rest of the country. In 2003-2004, there were more than 14,000 soldiers stationed in Northern Ireland, occupying 24 bases. In addition, Army personnel were

stationed in multiple police stations, manned watch towers and communication monitoring stations, and the Army had Northern Ireland-specific counterterrorism powers. This was particularly unique, as the Army maintained a combat posture within its own country and possessed powers associated with wartime status, an obvious distinction from its status elsewhere in the U.K. Special judicial powers were granted whereas paramilitaries arrested for crimes committed during this time would be subject to trials without juries, by a single judge. Though it is not clear whether this method was unfair, interviews conducted with former paramilitary members of the PIRA, UVF, UDA and ILNA found that the lack of jury trials exacerbated feelings of unfairness on both sides of the conflict, as emphasized by the former UDA prisoner Halliday, who stated that if he “went in there with 12 ordinary people, [he] might have had a chance.”

The security normalization program was monitored by the IMC and was conducted between August 2005 and July 2007. Through this process, the nature of the British military’s presence and counterterrorism role in Northern Ireland fundamentally changed. Rather than mirroring a combat deployment, the nature of the military presence normalized, both in appearance and operational execution. Most observation points and towers were removed, and frequent helicopter overflights lessened or stopped altogether. Security normalization was probably one of the most significant positive developments in the DDR process because real authority to combat paramilitary and terrorist activity finally transitioned into civilian hands, namely the PSNI (formally known as the Royal Ulster Constabulary). In the end, this was the longest British Army operation in its history, and though widely thought vital to the counterterrorist fight, it had fueled many grievances that contributed to the Troubles and later to the security situation.

Following ratification by referendum of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, paramilitary organizations were generally expected to decommission. Given the PIRA’s connections to Sinn Féin — and because of the political landscape — there was generally more pressure on them to decommission than on other groups. That being said, the PIRA also recognized that their weapons stockpiles were a very useful negotiating tool that they were reluctant to give up, in addition to the fact that it had the semblance of surrender. Therefore, the PIRA did not officially accept decommissioning until 2005 — seven years after the Good Friday Agreement. Until this time, no other group had effectively begun decommissioning their weapons stockpiles either. Later, however, in accordance with an agreement struck with the British government, all groups were given a deadline of February 2010 to decommission — with the concession that these weapons would not be used in ongoing forensic investigations associated with crimes committed during the Troubles. In addition to the PIRA, groups included under this agreement were the UVF, UDA, LDA, INLA and the Official Irish Republican Army. All weapons found after the February 2010 deadline were subject to be used as forensic evidence in ongoing and future criminal investigations.

Given the very real possibility of nondecommissioned weapons stockpiles being discovered, this remains a cloud over the head of many former paramilitaries on both sides of the conflict — both those incarcerated and those never convicted of a crime — as the PSNI continues to investigate past crimes. This was best summarized by Halliday, who said: “How can you go through the full spectrum of DDR when in two years’ time, someone is gonna come around and knock on your door saying, ‘We got you for something 40 years ago.’ That’s not helping the process.”

Though decommissioning was conducted on a large scale by groups primarily associated with the Good Friday Agreement and the ongoing peace process, the fact that paramilitary organizations continued to exist and retained their membership, command structures and overall military nature was not addressed. There was no formal requirement in these agreements for the various paramilitary organizations to disband and, according to Jarman, no incentive for them to do so because the primary focus was on decommissioning. And even if an organization claimed to disband, it is difficult to prove and easy to hide from the authorities. This was confirmed by the PSNI and the British domestic counterintelligence and security service (MI5) in their October 2015 report on paramilitary activity. Though the report confirms the continued existence of paramilitary organizations and their structures, it also states that this does not necessarily translate into capability or combat power, as organizations are likely “unable to resurrect the capability demonstrated at their peak.” Additionally, a group’s ability to generate combat power is affected by its overall cohesion and ability to control and direct its members to action or inaction. This cohesion and secure command and control also affect a group’s ability to commit its members to peace initiatives, which was done successfully in varying degrees from group to group. This is summarized by the PSNI/MI5 report: “There are differing levels of cohesion in the structures of these groups. However, none of the leaderships has complete control over the activities of its members; there is regular unsanctioned activity including behavior in direct contravention of leadership instruction.”

Though the continuing existence of organized command structures might seem a bad thing, they could serve a useful purpose in a DDR process. In the case of Northern Ireland, the PSNI and MI5 think that these structures enabled many groups to ensure their members adhered to the peace process and disarmament. Furthermore, mainstream paramilitary groups are able to address dissent within their organizations and therefore prevent most members from reverting to violence and joining VDR splinter groups. Had the command authority and ability to influence its members been nonexistent, the current threat would likely be much higher. An interview with Police Constable Tim Mairs found that although paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland remain proscribed organizations, the PSNI no longer classifies them as a threat to the peace and therefore does not prioritize resources against them. This amounts to a de facto acknowledgement of these organizations’ role in the maintenance of the peace.

While decommissioning helps reduce the combat power of paramilitary groups, other factors such as aging must also be taken into consideration. It affects the willingness and motivation of fighters to pursue armed conflict not only physically, but mentally, as the toll of years of violence, loss of friends and family, and the negative effects on their communities has decreased their desire to fight. According to Jarman, many former fighters are simply tired of fighting and this will continue to reduce violence — at least in terms of the original paramilitary groups from the Troubles. In addition, many younger people in Northern Ireland are less inclined to violence than their forefathers. They are less likely to have had personal experiences that would inspire them to take up arms and have seen firsthand the benefits of peace as opposed to war. During conflicts, younger people are often motivated to join causes due to personal experiences or true commitment, but without an ongoing conflict this incentive naturally decreases. This does not mean that these organizations have not retained status in their communities — because they have — but the violent aspect has been mostly dismantled. Jarman further notes that instead of pushing young people to join the armed struggle, most organizations now focus on political activity, rather than the criminal or paramilitary activity that is more common among dissident groups.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Multiple themes and conclusions can be drawn from the implementation of DDR and the situation in Northern Ireland. DDR happened in Northern Ireland, though not necessarily how it is doctrinally designed to be executed. Rather than in order — disarmament, demobilization, reintegration — it occurred concurrently or simultaneously following the peace accords and follow-on agreements. It was uniquely applied in a way that fit this particular situation.

In Northern Ireland, DDR was applied to a struggle that was never declared an armed conflict in the sense that many thought it should have been. Former political prisoners, who were not afforded the rights and privileges of prisoners of war during the conflict nor after — as outlined in the Geneva Conventions — felt strongly that they should have been classified as insurgent forces involved in a recognized civil war, rather than as criminals in an internal disturbance. Though this concern continues to resonate within the community of former paramilitary prisoners, it has not reached a threshold to threaten progress made over the last 20 years, and based on the aging population in question, it is unlikely to do so.

Disarmament occurred to a degree acceptable to all parties involved in the peace negotiations, but this definitely did not mean that all weapons were turned in. On the contrary, arms stockpiles maintained by former or active paramilitary organizations remain. More importantly, disarmament — to the degree that it occurred — served more as a trust-building measure rather than a way to decrease the real combat effectiveness of the conflicting parties.

Though fighting occurred in multiple countries, the majority of the action took place in Northern Ireland. This generally meant that the majority of the combatants fought

in the same neighborhoods in which they grew up. In this sense, “reintegration” did not really occur as it would in a conflict where fighters return from a combat zone. For former prisoners, reintegration was different depending on which side the individual was from. Republican prisoners enjoyed a much higher status within their own communities, as well as in the Sinn Féin political machine, which enabled them to redirect their energy into the political process. Loyalist prisoners did not enjoy widespread acceptance by their communities and were often shunned by their families upon release for not pursuing a more legitimate profession such as the army or police. Though they differ, both sides experience frustration with an inability to gain employment, purchase insurance or travel freely due to criminal convictions, which ties into their universal desire to be classified as prisoners of war rather than as criminals.

Acceptance of the peace process was heavily affected by the status of prisoners on both sides. According to Jarman, the total number of political prisoners numbered 400-500, out of an estimated 25,000-30,000 people imprisoned during the entirety of the Troubles, though the vast majority were not classified as political prisoners. Considering Northern Ireland’s population is around 1.8 million, 25,000-30,000 prisoners would affect nearly every family in the country. In addition, those subsequently convicted of crimes committed prior to the Good Friday Agreement received a maximum punishment of two years — no matter the offense. However, they could be released on suspended sentences with the understanding that if they were later convicted of a sectarian-related offense they would be immediately imprisoned for the full term. This has been particularly effective in preventing former paramilitaries from revanchism. Since the creation of the early-release program, very few have committed crimes and had their suspended sentences reinstated. It is important to note, however, that this program is by no means an amnesty. The PSNI still investigates crimes when it becomes aware of them or encounters new evidence — DNA or otherwise — so crimes committed but as yet unprosecuted still hang over the heads of many former prisoners, hindering their full reintegration into society.

In interviews, the former prisoners discounted the VDR threat and the potential for a general resumption of hostilities. Most referred to them as amateurs who were “posers” at best, and not seriously committed. VDRs and dissident loyalist groups are considered to be little more than criminal gangs masquerading as political paramilitaries to gain legitimacy. On all sides of the conflict, it seems that the desire for peace still outweighs everything else — no matter how passionate the political feelings.

Indeed, DDR was executed in Northern Ireland and carried out for this unique security environment. The region enjoys unprecedented peace since the end of the Troubles, and this is certainly due to the process and the hard work of the men and women who sought peace over conflict. Though time will tell, the foundations for peace that were laid through the DDR process will likely endure whatever destabilizing forces come in the future. □