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British Army in Northern Ireland, The. British troops were deployed on the streets of Derry on 14 August, 1969 and in Belfast a day later following a few days of intense violence, the culmination of several months of gradually escalating violence.

From the beginning there was a tension between the army's perceived role as a guarantor of the reforms demanded by the CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT and its function of supporting the RUC and re-establishing the authority of the Unionist government. The 'Honeymoon' period, during which British troops were welcomed and widely accepted within Catholic communities, gradually came to an end as the reform programme faltered and troops became involved in clashes with Catholic crowds. The army had fought a series of colonial conflicts prior to 1969 and in many respects the army treated this as another such conflict, making it much easier for Irish Republicans to portray the conflict as an anti-colonial war. The first soldier to die was Gunner Robert Curtis, shot in Belfast in February 1971 by the PROVISIONAL IRA, the first of around 450 regular soldiers to be killed. In the course of the conflict around 300 people have been killed by the army. On BLOODY SUNDAY in Derry in January 1972 13 civilians were shot dead by troops. The army suffered its greatest single loss of life in the conflict at Warrenpoint in August 1979 when 18 soldiers were killed in an IRA bomb attack. Beginning in the mid-1970s the British government began to scale back the army presence. Under a policy which came to be known as 'Ulsterisation' the size of the RUC and of the UDR were greatly increased and the number of regular British troops was significantly reduced. Nonetheless the army continued to play an important role and when violence escalated in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s, extra troops were brought in from Great Britain and deployed on the streets. In the wake of the IRA ceasefire of 1994 (which subsequently broke down) and the renewal of that ceasefire in 1996, the British army presence was scaled back considerably, in tandem with the reform of the RUC. This process of 'demilitarisation' involved the withdrawal of troops and the physical dismantling of border posts, watchtowers and bases, many of which had been in place since the early stages of the conflict. This 'demilitarisation' was an integral component of the peace process and represented a tacit official acknowledgement that the British army had been widely perceived by Irish nationalists and republicans as a combatant force in the conflict rather than as a neutral peacekeeping force. **Niall Ó Dochartaigh**

Desmond Hamill, *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland, 1969-1985*, London, 1985.