

# Northern Ireland Conflict

Northern Ireland. One of the most contentious and defining conflicts of the twentieth century and one whose impact is still felt today. What caused it?

## **Pre-Twentieth Century**

The origins of problems in the region stretch centuries back to the Anglo-Norman intervention of Ireland in 1167, when England first laid roots in the area. Despite some intermingling of the English and Irish population, the two were never completely united. As a result, two disparate populations, with differing interests, found themselves living in a small island side by side.

These differences became more marked during the reign of Henry VIII. His break from Rome placed him at loggerheads with Catholic Europe and introduced religion into Irish politics for the first time. Resistance to the British Crown came in 1534 when the Kildare heir, Lord Offaly, led a Catholic revolt against the Protestant English King in Ireland. It was swiftly put down and those involved were executed.

Elizabeth I continued her father's legacy in Ireland. A bid for independence by Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, was ultimately defeated by the Queen's army, with a harsh post-war settlement impeding future uprisings from the Catholic majority.

All the while, plantations were being established throughout the country. Lands occupied by Irish landowners were confiscated, especially in Munster and Ulster. They were distributed to colonists, commonly known as planters, who came in large numbers from England, Scotland and Wales. The final official plantations sprung up under Oliver Cromwell's English Commonwealth during the 1650s, when thousands of Parliamentary soldiers were settled in Ireland.

The plantations altered the demography of Ireland. Large Protestant English communities were created, whose identity was at odds with the Roman Catholic Irish inhabitants.

Cromwell's name is not just synonymous with the establishment of plantations in Ireland, but with brutality in general. The Battle of Drogheda maintains particular resonance. In September 1649, Cromwell laid siege to Drogheda, a town on the East coast of Ireland, which had been garrisoned by a coalition of Roman Catholics, Confederates and Royalists in their quest to expel the English from Ireland. Showing no compassion, all 2,800 of Drogheda's defenders were massacred.

By the late seventeenth century, against a backdrop of battles and disputes, which further mired relations between the two populations, the position for Catholics was incredibly compromised. Indeed, the Battle of the Boyne (1690), in which the previously deposed Catholic King James II was defeated by the Protestant King William III, ensured Protestant supremacy. The passage of 'penal laws' limited Catholic property ownership even further, alongside restricting their right to

education and to bear arms, and driving out the clergy. Even for those seemingly unaffected by the laws, the fact that ultimate control of their land lay in the hands of Westminster was a mockery. Consequently, a reform movement of 'patriots' emerged, that began to lobby for representation in Parliament. The first sounds of Irish nationalism were being made.

England could not afford to ignore Ireland's calls for independence. After all, the mood was ripe for unrest, with both America and France already experiencing revolution in the latter half of the eighteenth century. As a concession, the penal laws were relaxed.

But this did not extinguish opposition; in 1798 a rebellion broke out in Ireland, organised by the United Irishmen, a revolutionary republican group, who had been inspired by the revolutions of France and America. The rebellion lasted for several months. Despite successes in the south-east county of Wexford and the assistance of the French, it ultimately failed. In January 1801 the Act of Union was passed, which made Ireland and England one state, as a result of the rebellion convincing William Pitt that this was necessary for national security. Out of this act the United Kingdom was created, the Irish parliament was abolished and the Church of Ireland and England were united. 100 Irish MPs entered the House of Commons and 32 Irish peers entered the House of Lords.

In response to the Union, the Catholic Association was formed by Daniel O'Connell, who turned it into a national movement campaigning for Catholic emancipation. In his debate, Ulster (Northern Ireland) was singled out as a special case for the first time.

The British government's laissez faire approach to the 1840s potato famine exacerbated the situation. By 1851, the Irish population had dropped by two million as a result of death, disease and emigration. The desire for an autonomous Ireland took on even more intensity and violence. Within this context, British politicians recognized that a resolution to problems in Ireland was paramount. The formation of the Home Rule League in 1870 acted as a further catalyst for Prime Minister William Gladstone to put forward bills for Irish self-government. Gladstone never got to see his wish for Home Rule come to light – both his 1886 and 1893 bills were never passed. But the turn of the century ushered in an age in which Ireland was firmly on the British political agenda.

### **Early Twentieth Century**

The beginning of the twentieth century saw a cultural renaissance in Ireland. Groups sprung up throughout Ireland, which aimed to preserve native Irish pastimes and language, such as the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League. In 1905 Sinn Fein ('Ourselves Alone') was established and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was revived. Not all favoured an independent Ireland, however. Home Rule met opposition both from within Parliament and outside of it. The Protestant population of Ulster were particularly keen to remain part of the British Empire.

As tensions mounted, private armies of 100,000 plus men arose to represent the interests of both sides. Protestants formed the Ulster Volunteer Force, while nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers. As it became evident that it was no longer a matter of if but when for Home Rule, tensions mounted and the unionists pressed the importance of an exclusion for Ulster.

With the advent of World War I, Home Rule was pushed to one side in Britain. And a distracted Britain offered the perfect setting for the Military Council of the IRB to plan an uprising.

The Easter Rising of 1916 did indeed catch the British off guard. Nevertheless, the rebellion was swiftly crushed and the key figures rounded up. Britain had won the battle. But they had not won the war – the subsequent brutal execution of the key figures turned these men into martyrs and the cause gained further momentum. The Easter Rising was especially fortuitous for Sinn Fein, whose popularity surged. With the 1917 election of Eamon de Valera, one of the surviving leaders of the uprising, to the Presidency of Sinn Fein, all groups working towards an independent Ireland were unified under a single leadership.

### **A Solution?**

The end of World War I did not bring an end to problems for Britain, with issues remaining tense across the shore. During the first election since the war's close, 73 Sinn Fein candidates were elected. All of them refused to attend Westminster, forming their own Irish Assembly, the Dail Eirann. Violent confrontations quickly broke out, with atrocities committed on both sides.

The escalation of violence made an Irish solution urgent. There was no longer time to deal with the 'Ulster Question.' In May 1921 the Government of Ireland Act was passed, splitting Ireland into two. Six predominantly Protestant counties in Ulster become known as the 'North' and the remaining 26 counties formed part of the 'South.' The South was established as the 'Irish Free Zone,' which had dominion status within the British Commonwealth, although not full independence - that was granted in 1937, when a new constitution abolished the Irish Free State and proclaimed EIRE (Gaelic for Ireland) as an independent, sovereign state.

Trouble instantly erupted in the North, in 1921, as the Ulster Volunteer Force was revived to fight in the campaign of violence launched by the Irish Republican Army (IRA). And thus Northern Ireland was born.

### **The Troubles**

Calm prevailed for several decades in Northern Ireland, owed in large part to the rule of Prime Minister Viscount Brookeborough, who was in office for 20 years. His political allegiance with the Ulster Unionists marginalised the Catholic minority both socially and politically.

With the advent of better education as a result of the introduction of the Welfare State and the equal opportunities it entailed, the disparities within the Northern Ireland community were highlighted.

This situation was exacerbated in the 1960s: Northern Ireland, which had been relatively prosperous in the immediate years after the war, now suffered the same economic fate as the mainland, which was in economic decline. Brookeborough fell from power; his inability to deal with the situation causing the members of his own party to turn against him. Former army officer Terence O'Neill was appointed in his place. O'Neill introduced a series of measures to address Northern Ireland's social, economic and political malaise. Amongst his many radical moves, he met with the Republic of Ireland's Prime Minister Sean Lemass, which was the first meeting between the two factions in forty years.

His new attitude raised hopes for Catholics, but was a cause of concern for Protestants. Then on the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising, in 1966, violence erupted. Blood was spilt on both sides.

This descent into violence precipitated the need for armed forces on both sides. By 1969, the Provisional IRA (PIRA) was formed, a breakaway from the main part of the IRA. Like the IRA itself, the PIRA demanded the unification of Ireland, advocated civil rights and represented Catholic interests. Unlike the IRA, it was prepared to use violent means to achieve its ends.

A small force of British troops was also deployed to Northern Ireland. Pitted against the PIRA, the British Army conducted house-to-house searches and imposed a curfew, albeit limited. Rather than diminishing the power of the IRA, in reality more people were driven into its ranks.

This was evident on 30 January 1972, when the army controversially suppressed rioting at a civil rights march in Derry in a day that became known as 'Bloody Sunday.' The resulting death toll of 14 civil rights protestors fed into the hands of the IRA; more recruits flooded into their ranks. In turn, more British troops were deployed to the area.

By 1973, with violence escalating further, plans were afoot for a new Northern Ireland assembly, elected by proportional representation, in which Protestants and Catholics would share power. Known as the Sunningdale Agreement, a reference to the town in Berkshire where the negotiations took place, unionists were split by the agreement since it raised the possibility that the Republic could have a voice in Northern Ireland. Despite staunch opposition to Sunningdale in the form of a referendum in which anti-agreement Unionists won 11 of Northern Ireland's 12 parliamentary seats, the agreement was signed at the end of 1973. Coming to fruition in January 1974, the new government was wrought with weakness, mired by its exclusion of anti-power sharing representatives from the executive. By May of the same year, turmoil had reached a head: The Ulster Workers' Council, a coalition of Protestant trade unionists, called for a general strike in the province and loyalist bombs exploded throughout Dublin and Monaghan, killing 32 people in the worst day of the Troubles. By the end of May, those who had been in favour of Sunningdale resigned. Direct rule was immediately reinstated and would remain so for the next 25 years.

Over the next decade, various different peace initiatives were both suggested and tested, but none led to peace in the region. Relations between the Republic of Ireland and Britain became more strained upon the declassification of paramilitary prisoners from a 'special category' that gave them similar rights as prisoners of war, to simply ordinary criminals. Seen as an affront to their vision that they were fighting a war, something the British government would not concede, PIRA prisoners embarked on a series of protests, most significantly hunger strikes. The strikes were popular, as demonstrated by leading hunger striker Bobby Sands, who won the vacant Westminster seat of Fermanagh in South Tyrone in a by-election. Nevertheless, Margaret Thatcher refused to make any concessions.

Ten hunger strikers died in prison, including Sands who died on 5 May 1981. Despite his death, his election victory encouraged Sinn Fein, the IRA's political wing, to fight in further elections. And in June 1983, Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein, went on to win the Westminster seat for West Belfast.

### **A new Dawn**

Even though Margaret Thatcher was not in a conciliatory mood after narrowly escaping an IRA bomb at a Conservative Party conference in Brighton in October 1984, she could not dismiss the rising popularity of Sinn Fein or overlook the continued violence in the region. Thus in November 1985 Thatcher and Garret Fitzgerald signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which outlined that Northern Ireland would remain independent of the Republic as long as that represented the will of the majority in the North. At the same time, it set up the Intergovernmental Conference, which gave the Republic a voice on security and political issues.

Reaction to this agreement was diverse; it was greeted by huge demonstrations and the likes that aimed to derail the agreement. Nevertheless, it prevailed.

The light had not been turned out on tensions in the region, which resonate to this day. But as a result of several initiatives, most specifically the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which saw direct rule of Northern Ireland being placed in the hands of locally elected government, a much more peaceful era had emerged