

Tragedy and the Uneasy Peace of the Northern Ireland Troubles

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August 15th, 1988. Omagh, Ireland. At 3pm, a bomb detonated on Market Street, causing storefronts to collapse on customers still inside, killing twenty-one people instantly. A large water pipe underneath the road bursts and water flows down the hill, washing bodies along with it. This was the deadliest occurrence of the Irish Troubles, and it's 30th anniversary was just last year. ¹ August 15th, 2018. A bell was rung in remembrance of the lost, some of which were never found, their bodies blown away by the blast. This was one of many tragedies, in which thousands of lives would be lost in the fight to be freed from British rule. ²

The Troubles, lasting from the late 1960s' to the mid 1990s', were atrocities that cast a shadow on the whole of Europe, though they are often forgotten. The acts of violence by the IRA (Irish Republican Army) as well as the British forces are worthy of our attention, as these events not only resulted in the death of many people, but the conflicting viewpoints continue to rage on, as does the violence. One thing rings true, no side is innocent.

Relations between Ireland and Britain have been tense since the English nation succeeded in conquering Ireland, previously occupied by the Gaels. After years of conflicting monarchies and religions, there was a 'joining of crowns', in which Scotland, Ireland, and England all shared the same monarch, James the I. Under his rein, the Plantation of Ulster commenced in 1609, a process in which the Scottish and British seized land from the Gaels in an attempt to numb a rebellion in the Northern part of Ireland, known to be the most resistant to English rule at the time. The people rebelled against the settlers, starting the Irish Confederate Wars.

¹ The Irish Times. "Omagh Bombing: Key Events before and after the Attack." *The Irish Times*, The Irish Times, 12 Aug. 2018, www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/omagh-bombing-key-events-before-and-after-the-attack-1.3593660.

² "Omagh Bomb: Bell Tolls to Mark 20th Anniversary." *BBC News*, BBC, 15 Aug. 2018, www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-45144511. This source was referenced in the second paragraph in which I talked about the anniversary of the Omagh Bombing.

After switching between Protestant and Catholic religions by way of conquering and switching monarchs, they ended up being ruled by a Protestant majority. In 1707, Acts of Union joined England & Scotland together to make Great Britain. In 1798 there was an uprising in Ireland, inspired by the French Revolution a decade earlier. Worried by prospects of Ireland uniting with France, Acts of Union in 1801 were written and signed to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.³

In the late 1800s, the Irish saw a growing demand for “Home-rule”, or self governance, free of British rule. In 1889, the first Home-Rule bill, called “Government of Ireland Act”, was proposed, but didn’t pass. In retaliation, the Liberal Unionist Party was formed in opposition of Home-Rule, earning themselves the name “loyalists”. There was a second attempt at a Home-Rule Bill in 1893, which failed to pass.⁴

In 1914, a third attempt at a home-rule bill was passed. Unfortunately for the nationalists, World War I had begun that year and the bill was put on hold, as Irish citizens agreed to fight alongside the British in the Great War. On Easter Sunday 1916, the nationalists began a rebellion dubbed ‘Easter Rising’. As Britain’s resources were focused on WWI, nationalist forces striked Dublin General Post Office and other areas in Central Dublin.⁵ Around 450 people were killed in the rebellion, leaders eventually surrendered, and were later executed by British troops, along with everyone suspected of involvement.⁶

³ “Why Ireland Split into the Republic of Ireland & Northern Ireland.” Performance by WonderWhy, *YouTube*, YouTube, 21 June 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCJMqgfHXNI.

⁴ “The Home Rule Movement.” *Discovering Ireland*, Discovering Ireland, 2019, www.discoveringireland.com/the-home-rule-movement/.

⁵ “Easter Rising 1916: Six Days of Armed Struggle That Changed Irish and British History.” *BBC News*, BBC, 23 Mar. 2016, www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-35873316.

⁶ “Easter Rising 1916: Six Days of Armed Struggle That Changed Irish and British History.” *BBC News*, BBC, 23 Mar. 2016, www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-35873316.

In the 1918 UK General Election, the Sinn Fein party, a group of nationalist liberals, won 73 of 105 Irish seats in British parliament, however, they refused to attend meetings and formed the Irish Parliament, claiming the whole island of Ireland as part of the Republic, despite Northern Ireland still being under unionist rule.

Unfortunately, the drastic claim of the Sinn Fein party led to the Irish War for Independence, fought mostly between the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and British troops, which lasted two and a half years (1919-1921). The IRA employed many “guerrilla tactics--including ambushes, raids and sabotage,” according to Britannica. They attacked homes and buildings, killed unionist leaders, and committed many crimes,⁷ forcing Britain to pass another Home-Rule Act in 1920. This particular act partitioned Ireland in two, the Northern area which was loyal to Britain, and Southern Ireland, which was under nationalist rule, as a temporary solution to cease the war.

During this time, Southern Ireland was still part of Britain, though it did have home-rule and a parliament separate from Northern Ireland’s parliament. Regardless, Southern Ireland’s government was not as stable as Northern’s was, and there was still just as much violence. The war continued until a ceasefire was declared and signed by both parties in December 1921.

This treaty reestablished Southern Ireland as a free state within the British Commonwealth, similar to how Canada or Australia were at the time. A rift grew in the Sinn Fein party, resulting in a split between the anti-treaty and pro-treaty groups. In the 1922 Irish General Election, the Pro-Treaty party won 58 seats while the Anti-Treaty party won only 38 of the total seats, which began a small conflict resulting in a civil war.⁸ The Anti-Treaty members of

⁷ Arthur, Paul, and Kimberly Cowell-Meyers. “Irish Republican Army.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 29 Jan. 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/Irish-Republican-Army.

⁸ Arthur, Paul, and Kimberly Cowell-Meyers. “Irish Republican Army.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 29 Jan. 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/Irish-Republican-Army.

Parliament refused to acknowledge the treaty in Parliament, which drove their leader to quit and form a new Republican party.⁹

In 1937, 56.5% voted in favour of a new constitution, and the Republic of Ireland withdrew from the British Commonwealth in 1949, officially becoming an independent country commonly referred to as Ireland. This newfound independence should have ended most conflict regarding Ireland's status as a country and its dominant religions and viewpoints, however, in August 1969, a pocket of Northern Ireland Catholic nationalists began to protest the discrimination stemming from the Protestant majority.¹⁰ The Catholics saw the Protestants as oppressive, and began a Civil Rights movement for equality in voting, housing, and employment, meanwhile the Protestant loyalists saw it as a front for the IRA, continuing the fight for a united Ireland, jumpstarting the Northern Ireland Troubles.

The event that kickstarted the Northern Ireland Troubles began as a Protestant Parade in Londonderry, in which the majority of residents were part of the Catholic minority. They would hurl derogatory terms and insults to instigate violence. Riot police began to step in, which only caused more chaos. According to a BBC News article from the time, the police used batons and water cannons to break up the demonstration, and protestors retaliated with petrol bombs.¹¹ Hundreds of people were injured in this first major clash, now known as the Battle of Bogside. The riots continued for three days, which was when the Northern Ireland Prime Minister asked Britain to send over troops, which separated the civilians and police, effectively putting an end to the riots in Londonderry.¹²

⁹ Gwynn, Denis Rolleston. "Eamon De Valera." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 10 Oct. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/Eamon-de-Valera.

¹⁰ Arthur, Paul, and Kimberly Cowell-Meyers. "Irish Republican Army." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 29 Jan. 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/Irish-Republican-Army.

¹¹ "Police Break-Up of NICRA March." *BBC News*, 5 Oct. 1968.

¹² History, Feature, director. *Feature History - The Troubles (1/2)*. YouTube, YouTube, 11 Sept. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=61JisaFGHFY.

Word spread quickly to Irish nationalists, provoking riots. Loyalists, fearing even more retaliation, began counter-riots with one another, causing widespread violence throughout Northern Ireland. One of the most violent examples of this took place during a 'People's Democracy' march from the location of the Northern Ireland Parliament Building in Belfast to Derry, in which marching nationalists were attacked by loyalists.¹³

In 1970, the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary), a mostly Protestant police force that had been formed in 1922, had been assigned the security of Northern Ireland amidst the riots and violence. The RUC, according to several news reports by BBC News from the time, were forced to use tear gas in many situations, and in one case open-firing on a group of protestors. The Hunt Report made several suggestions on what the Government of Northern Ireland should do about the group, including, "The RUC should be relieved of all duties of a military nature as soon as possible . . ." ¹⁴

Though the RUC began as a neutral force to "quell the violence"¹⁵, nationalists began to feel as though the force wasn't protecting them enough, and so the Provisional IRA was formed, separating itself from the Official IRA. The Provisional IRA was a paramilitary gang, taking matters into its own hands in attempt to protect itself and the Catholic loyalist minority in Northern Ireland. This group was nicknamed "provos", short for Provisionals, and were extremely violent, finding the Official IRA's idea of using parliamentary and political tactics to drive out the British useless, while the provos resorted to extreme violence - terrorism, in

¹³ Dorney, John. "The Northern Ireland Conflict 1968-1998 – An Overview." *The Irish Story*, 9 Feb. 2015, www.theirishstory.com/2015/02/09/the-northern-ireland-conflict-1968-1998-an-overview/#.XF09XVxKg55.

¹⁴ "Inquiry into Northern Ireland's Police Forces." *The Hunt Report*, Oct. 1969.

¹⁵ History, Feature, director. *Feature History - The Troubles (1/2)*. YouTube, YouTube, 11 Sept. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=61JisaFGHFY.

particular - as the only way to drive out the British and unite the entire island of Ireland under the Republic's flag.¹⁶

Many people were reluctant to ask for help from a paramilitary gang, so support for Provisional IRA was low until the Battle of St. Matthews. The clash took three lives and lasted five hours, ending when loyalists withdrew and the British forces didn't intervene. This came as a huge triumph for the provos, especially in regards to propaganda, as the battle was seen as them defending vulnerable Catholics, even though it took place in a predominantly Protestant part of Belfast.¹⁷

This seemed to be a call to arms for British troops, specifically the RUC, as they approached the now infamous Falls Road, which is covered in murals by famous unionist Bobby Sands, as well as many other murals and signs. On July 3rd, 1970, British troops pulled up to the Lower Falls area in West Belfast. There was a tip from a concerned citizen about an alarming amount of weapons in the area, which were "allegedly being stored in case of another 'attack' by the Protestants," according to The History Press.¹⁸

The original search team had supposedly smoked weed and were stoned when they arrived, so backup was sent in, alarming the nationalists into believing this was a major search operation, and possibly a take-down. In a blur, tear gas was used, shooting began, and suddenly, there was a full scale battle in the middle of Falls Road.

Four were killed in battle, while hundreds were injured. Roughly 3,000 British soldiers were involved in the operation which, despite its consequences and public outcry, succeeded in

¹⁶ Arthur, Paul, and Kimberly Cowell-Meyers. "Irish Republican Army." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 29 Jan. 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/Irish-Republican-Army#ref711106.

¹⁷ "Battle of St Matthew's - 27th -28th June 1970." *Belfast Child*, 26 June 2016, belfastchildis.com/2016/06/26/battle-of-st-matthews-27th-28th-june-1970/.

¹⁸ "The Falls Curfew: Reassessing the Past." *The History Press*, 2019, www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/the-falls-curfew-reassessing-the-past/.

taking many weapons, bombs, and tools from the IRA's arsenal. Falls Curfew is an extremely controversial topic to this day; relatives of those lost demand justice, and all demand an inquiry into the operation. Witness accounts claim the backup soldiers were unaware of what they were supposed to be doing, if they were ordered to do so, or even if their actions were legal.¹⁹

After the tragedy at Falls Road, public opinion of the British forces and the RUC were changed forever. Rather than neutral protectors, they were now seen as hasty, heartless murderers of innocent women and children, as well as robbers who stole from people trying to protect themselves.²⁰

There were many more battles seen by the public this way, including Operation Demetrius, which held strong bias, and resulted in public outrage. People were interned and reported being tortured, resulting in the death of two IRA members, and two soldiers.

As a result of public opinion, the RUC was rolled back into doing riot control and street watching, rather than raids and search operations. In January 1972, during an Anti-Internment March, demonstrators began to throw rocks at the paratroopers, agitating them to open-fire, prompting the crowd to scatter. Fourteen died during the incident, and twenty-eight were shot. According to BogSIDERS in an interview with the BBC, “. . . the troops opened fire on unarmed men - including one who had his arms up in surrender.”

1972 would turn out to be the bloodiest year of the troubles, with the most notable incident being “Bloody Friday”, a series of at least 20 bombings in Belfast and Omagh, resulting in 9 deaths.²¹ The British Troops teared down barricades between Protestants and Catholics.

¹⁹ “The Falls Curfew: Reassessing the Past.” *The History Press*, 2019, www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/the-falls-curfew-reassessing-the-past/.

²⁰ “The Falls Curfew: Reassessing the Past.” *The History Press*, 2019, www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/the-falls-curfew-reassessing-the-past/.

²¹ Melaugh, Martin. “Events: Bloody Friday - Northern Ireland Office News-Sheet on 'Bloody Friday'.” *CAIN*, cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/bfriday/nio/nio72.htm.

Northern Ireland's government was reformed in 1973 so loyalists and nationalists would share equal power, which loyalists were upset by, seeing it as giving into the nationalists' terror tactics.

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The Republic of Ireland was plagued by bombings from the loyalist side, as the IRA began to focus their attention on places outside of Northern Ireland and inside the country of England. Bombs in London, Guilford, and Birmingham would kill a total of twenty-seven people. The British forced Irish people living in England to confess to crimes, leading to seventeen being wrongly incarcerated.

On the nationalist side, some larger crimes committed over the course of the Irish Troubles included murdering one of Margaret Thatcher's friends, one of her cousins, and attempting to assassinate Thatcher by bombing her building; it seems the scare tactics worked. Margaret Thatcher signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which paved the path for the two governments to work together, though bombings and murders still occurred, and didn't stop until the IRA announced that they would no longer continue their attacks. After two years of talks, and several countries involvement, the Good Friday agreement was signed in 1998, allowing for uneasy peace in the new century.²³

The Troubles were a culmination of a 1,000 year love-hate relationship between the Irish and the British, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. Tensions are increasing between the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the rest of Britain, as 'Brexit' draws ever nearer. Brexit, or no-deal Brexit, refers to the UK leaving the EU (European Union) and the European Single Market with few new trade, immigration, or other agreements in place. Despite

²² History, Feature, director. *Feature History - The Troubles (2/2)*. YouTube, YouTube, 11 Sept. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKneNsy8aF8>.

²³

"What Was the Good Friday Agreement? - CBBC Newsround." *BBC News*, BBC, 10 Apr. 2018, www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/14118775

Northern Ireland voting to remain in the EU, they will exit alongside Britain. A backstop was signed by the EU and Britain as a safety net in case the parliament is unable to pass one of the agreements proposed by Theresa May. The backstop is opposed by Brexiteers and some Northern Ireland citizens concerned that it may become permanent. They fear a loss of freedom having to abide by EU regulations and the hard border between all of Ireland and the UK, isolating Northern Ireland from the rest of Great Britain. The Brexit deadline was pushed back until October 31st in a recent vote to allow time to reach an agreement, but few citizens expect a different outcome. The general consensus is that Brexit will be a disaster for not only for the British economy and citizens, but the entire world's economy.²⁴

People still demand answers for actions taken by both sides, some still wish for a United Republic of Ireland, and others wish for peace and closure. Looking closely at the Irish Troubles, we find only one triumph. Both sides are flawed, both sides destroyed families, tortured, and killed, but there were those who found some grace in the Troubles. Doctors, surgeons, and nurses are the unsung heroes of the Northern Ireland Troubles; not only did they go out after Bloody Sunday, collecting people to treat, but they pioneered new, advanced surgical techniques, the 'triage' system, and procedures all while saving lives.²⁵

The Northern Ireland Troubles were appalling, frightening, and deadly. There were no innocents during these trying times. There are stories that have yet to be heard, things yet to see, and inquiries yet to be unraveled. Much is unknown about the atrocities committed, and very few people have been punished for their deeds, while others still prepare bombs to detonate. However, one can always learn something from a tragedy. This is a tragedy, with a small triumph, worth learning from.

²⁴ Vox, director. *How Brexit Could Create a Crisis at the Irish Border*. YouTube, YouTube, 17 Aug. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0xGHf8o-9k.

²⁵ "Bloody Friday: How the Troubles Inspired Belfast's Medical Pioneers." *BBC News*, BBC, 20 July 2012, www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-18886867.

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“Police Break-Up of NICRA March.” *BBC News*, 5 Oct. 1968.

This source was used to illustrate a scene during the clashing riots, and to describe how the British police force was treating the demonstrators.

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This source references a history of the Irish Republican Army, its leaders, its associations, and its actions and the context of those actions. I used this source for everything IRA related, including attack dates, as well as background on the Irish War for Independence.

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This source gives a brief description of the Battle of St Matthews, which I used in passing as I mentioned it as well as for effects that the battle had on the rest of the Troubles.

“Bloody Friday: How the Troubles Inspired Belfast's Medical Pioneers.” *BBC News*, BBC, 20 July 2012, www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-18886867.

This source was used only in my final paragraphs, in which I describe in what ways the Irish Troubles could be considered ‘a triumph’, in the way that it helped people in some way, even if it was only because the innovation was necessary.

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www.theirishstory.com/2015/02/09/the-northern-ireland-conflict-1968-1998-an-overview/#.XF09XVxKg55.

I used this source for more information on the 'People's Democracy' march, one of the earliest demonstrations to go wrong, so I could give an example.

"Easter Rising 1916: Six Days of Armed Struggle That Changed Irish and British History." *BBC News*, BBC, 23 Mar. 2016, www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-35873316.

This was also used for background about the Irish Troubles, in which I searched for what happened after Easter Rising and what happened to those responsible.

"The Falls Curfew: Reassessing the Past." *The History Press*, 2019,
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This source was used for finding information on the Falls Road Massacre, and its effect on the Troubles, as well as the citizens of Falls Road.

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History, Feature, director. *Feature History - The Troubles (2/2)*. *YouTube*, YouTube, 11 Sept. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKneNsy8aF8>.

This source was used for a detailed history in video form of The Troubles.

"The Home Rule Movement." *Discovering Ireland*, Discovering Ireland, 2019, www.discoveringireland.com/the-home-rule-movement/.

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This source was used to gather key-events in the Omagh Bombing, which I reference heavily in the first paragraph.

“Omagh Bomb: Bell Tolls to Mark 20th Anniversary.” *BBC News*, BBC, 15 Aug. 2018,

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This source was referenced in the second paragraph in which I talked about the anniversary of the Omagh Bombing.

Vox, director. *How Brexit Could Create a Crisis at the Irish Border*. *YouTube*, YouTube, 17 Aug.

2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0xGHf8o-9k.

This source was used to understand the consequences and effect that Brexit had on the Irish Border, and what opinions were on the topic.

“Why Ireland Split into the Republic of Ireland & Northern Ireland.” Performance by WonderWhy,

YouTube, YouTube, 21 June 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCJMQgfHXNI.

This source was used to get a brief history of the relationship between Ireland and England so I could explain historical context.

“What Was the Good Friday Agreement? - CBBC Newsround.” *BBC News*, BBC, 10 Apr. 2018,

www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/14118775

I used this source to get a more in-depth look at the Good Friday agreement and the events leading up to it.