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The Irish Question

13 October 2024

The Changes in British Policy towards Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1979: A History of Violence

At the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1990s, there was a conflict between Britain and Ireland regarding differences in political and religious ideas. This conflict is also known as "The Troubles." The issues during this time were primarily about the debate of whether or not Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom or join the Republic of Ireland. The Troubles resulted in multiple tragically chaotic historical events, such as protest marches, bombings, and other forms of violence, which caused changes in British Policy towards Northern Ireland during that time.

For example, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association held civil rights marches in different Irish cities in 1968. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, informally known as the NICRA, was formed in 1967. It is said that the NICRA was inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States of America, as the United States of America was also having a nationwide issue with discrimination. The United States of America's civil rights movement was about confronting discrimination due to the color of one's skin, more specifically to black people during the time. Although both movements were about facing discrimination, the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association was confronting discrimination due to one's religion, mainly Catholicism in Northern Ireland. Protestant individuals were believed to have had more power in Northern Ireland as that was the more widely practiced religious denomination within

Christianity in the area. The NICRA had various goals they wished to achieve in Northern Ireland to combat discrimination, two of which were basic human rights for all individuals (regardless of religious beliefs and background) and ending discrimination in the workplace and housing market.

Furthermore, although the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was formed in February 1967, they didn't have their first march until August 24, 1968. "The march began in Coalisland and ended in Dungannon. It was organized to protest at Dungannon Council's decision to allocate one of its council houses in the village of Caledon to a 19-year-old Protestant woman rather than a large Catholic family." ("The Campaign for Civil Rights - CCEA", "First March"). Council houses were housing units dispersed by the government. Many Catholic families were evicted from the council houses and some of them couldn't even get a home. There was outrage because of this, and that is why the NICRA held its first protest march.

Although the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association had support from various sections of Northern Ireland's public regarding housing issues and other issues alike, they faced opposition. More specifically, many Unionists feared that the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was the Irish Republican Army disguised under a different alias. The Unionists were (predominantly Protestant) individuals who wanted Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, while the Irish Republican Army was made up of people who wanted Ireland to become free from the United Kingdom's rule. Amongst the Unionists' ideologies, at the time they also feared that the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association's campaign wasn't working toward equality for everyone, rather they believed they only wanted to help the Catholic population, versus the Protestant and other religious populations. According to the British Broadcasting Corporation, this would "weaken Protestant control of Northern Ireland, thus

leading to a united Ireland." ("The Campaign for Civil Rights - CCEA", "Reaction to NICRA - Opposition"). The Unionists didn't want to lose the Protestant power in Northern Ireland, so they continued their efforts in order to maintain it.

One of the most famous efforts that were put in place was the Belfast Peace Walls. The Belfast Peace Walls were put up in 1969, in North Ireland's capital of Belfast. These walls were deemed as an act of safety, security, and division. The Belfast Peace Walls are about 30 miles long and still stand today. Carleton College's Robert Healy says "Their role in the fabric of Belfast's culture and political discourse cannot be understated. During the Troubles, around 70% of those killed in Belfast were killed within half a kilometer of a peace wall (Leonard and McKnight 2011)." (Healy, Paragraph 2). The British Army created these walls so the violence between the Catholic and Protestant populations would cease, or at least be reduced. There were riots and protests, fueled by anger from the workplace and housing discrimination against Catholics. These marches and protests continued throughout this time and into different parts of Ireland as well, spreading violence along the way.

In January of 1972, another violent event in history occurred in Londonderry. On January 30th, 1972, thirteen civilians were shot amid an illegal civil rights demonstration. This day would be written in history books as "Bloody Sunday." It is said that this tragedy was "taking Catholic Nationalist fury to new peaks." (Walker, Page 194). Later in the year 1972, the troubles continued. In March 1972, the British Government put a pause on the Northern Ireland government and they took direct control. "But in the belief that the lack of law and order powers would deny them essential credibility, the Northern Ireland cabinet duly offered their resignation, which was accepted on 24 March." (Walker, Page 196). Since the resignation was in place, the British government created a direct rule for Northern Ireland. This direct rule was supposed to be

a temporary fix to the problems of Northern Ireland. “When direct rule was imposed in March 1972 one commentator suggested that it would take between three and six months to put the house back in order.” (Aughey and Morrow, Page 19). The British government took control of Northern Ireland and they still have control over Northern Ireland today. The one-party rule over Northern Ireland had disappeared because of this.

There was also another violent and tragic occurrence in Belfast on July 21, 1972, which is called “Bloody Friday.” In the afternoon of that day, the Irish Republican Army set off 22 bombs in a matter of an hour and 15 minutes. These bombs managed to kill 9 people and injured over 100 others. Amongst the bombs that were put into place, “there were numerous hoax warnings about other explosive devices which added to the chaos in the streets that afternoon.” (Melaugh’s “Bloody Friday”, Paragraph 3). The security forces were unable to keep up with the attacks as they were searching for the bombs, as well as the hoax devices in order to save as many people as possible. This attack by the IRA (Irish Republican Army) forced the British Army to enter Belfast and Derry so they could combat the impact of the violence that occurred. When the British Army came into the Belfast and Derry areas, it was called “Operation Motorman.” Operation Motorman was a result of Bloody Friday and it is known as one of the biggest British military operations in history. In later years, there were also bombs set off in other British cities, such as London, Guildford, and Birmingham, to which the British military had to respond as well. The Labor government passed an act titled the “Prevention of Terrorism Act” (PTA) in 1974 as a result of the bombing violence taking place across the various cities previously mentioned. This act was supposed to be temporary, similar to the Direct Rule of Northern Ireland, however, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was renewed each year through 1995. “Among its provisions, the most controversial in Northern Ireland was the

introduction of 'internal exile' by which suspected terrorists could be refused entry to England, Scotland, and Wales and returned or expelled to Northern Ireland." (Aughey and Morrow, Page 23). This means that even if someone was not a terrorist, they could be accused of being such and not allowed to leave Northern Ireland. These issues sparked anger in many people, leading to the growth of paramilitary organizations.

A paramilitary organization is a group of people that organize as if they are a military, but are not actually part of their prospective government's armed forces. Although many paramilitary organizations were formed previously, there was a spike in the number of members during The Troubles in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as well. The numbers of each paramilitary organization in Northern Ireland grew substantially throughout The Troubles as individuals wanted to voice their opinions about everything happening in Northern Ireland, anything from governmental standpoints to the violent outbursts of bombings and protest marches. There was an apparent number of these paramilitary organizations, some of which were the (previously mentioned) Irish Republican Army (IRA), and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). There was also the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) were known as the two largest loyalist paramilitary organizations. These loyalist groups were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people.

The Ulster Defence Association, for example, had thousands upon thousands of people within their organization. The UDA was formed in 1971. Hundreds of people have passed away beneath their hands since that year. They were technically a legal organization for about 21 years until they were later banned. The Ulster Volunteer Force, on the other hand, was formed in 1966. The UVF was known for killing approximately 500 people during The Troubles. It is said the

that Ulster Volunteer Force had "also been embroiled in feuds with other paramilitary organizations." (BBC News, "What is the UVF?".) Meaning, indirectly, they had dangerous encounters with other organizations such as the other paramilitary groups previously mentioned.

Due to the violence that had occurred throughout the troubles, the British government created an agreement on April 10, 1998. The Belfast Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement since it was implemented on Good Friday) "addressed issues which had caused conflict during previous decades. The aim was establish a new, devolved government for Northern Ireland in which unionists and nationalists would share power." (Northern Ireland Assembly, Paragraph 1). This meant that the Protestant and Catholic populations would be working together, rather than against one another. The result of The Belfast/Good Friday agreement was that the people could decide through voting whether or not Northern Ireland remained under the British government's rule and part of the United Kingdom, or if they chose for Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland. The people living in Northern Ireland also have the option to become citizens of the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom, or both. Although this is the case, Northern Ireland remains controlled by the British government, making it one of the four countries that are a part of the United Kingdom.

In turn, changes occurred in British Policy towards Northern Ireland during The Troubles. This period resulted in multiple tragically chaotic historical events, such as protest marches, bombings, and other forms of violence. The protest marches, bombings, and other forms of violence are what caused the changes in British Policy towards Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1979, and even in later years as well (as shown through the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.) The outcomes from the violence during the Troubles have impacted hundreds of thousands of people throughout history and the stories of The Troubles are

continuing to be told today, especially since there was such a dramatic impact of the political and cultural parts of life for the people of Northern Ireland.

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