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Background Facts and Related Links

Learn more about the political and religious history of Northern Ireland and how a conflict that came to be known as "the Troubles" began.

[Northern Ireland: Uneasy Peace](#)[Credits](#)[Reaction](#)[About Rough Cut](#)

Northern Ireland: A Profile

Northern Ireland is the six counties that sit in the northeastern tip of the island of Ireland and it is ruled by Great Britain. The other 26 counties make up the Republic of Ireland, which succeeded from Great Britain in 1922.

Outside Belfast and Londonderry, Northern Ireland is mostly rural, and its grasslands support dairy and beef operations that form the bulk of the agricultural economy. The country first became known for its shipbuilding and high quality linens.

English is the primary language, but Irish, also referred to as Gaelic, is also recognized. Ireland, or the Emerald Isle, has been inhabited for more than 7,000 years; Celtic invaders first came in the sixth century B.C.E. It is said that Saint Patrick began converting the Irish to Christianity in A.D. 432.

In the 19th century, Irish peasants' dependency on potatoes brought disaster when blight devastated an entire year's crop. In 1856, death and emigration caused a decrease in the population of the island, from 8 million to 6 million. Today the island's population is less than 6 million, of which 1.68 million are in Northern Ireland.

The 2001 census reported that 53 percent of the population of Northern Ireland is Protestant and 43 percent is Catholic. The majority of the people -- 59 percent according to a 2004 survey -- want to remain part of the United Kingdom. But a significant minority -- 22 percent -- wishes to become part of a united Ireland. These sentiments fall largely along religious lines, with the Catholics, or Nationalists, generally desiring to unite with Ireland, and the Protestants, or Unionists, preferring to remain a part of the United Kingdom. Protestants are mainly descendants of Scottish and English settlements. Catholics descend for the most part from a population predating those settlements.

An impressive 79 percent of Northern Ireland's young people continue schooling beyond the age of 16. But the long-standing conflict between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has hurt Northern Ireland's economy; investment levels are low, and unemployment levels are higher than in any other part of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland also has more unskilled and skilled manual labor than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Since 1997, however, millions of pounds have been invested in Northern Ireland's economy by companies convinced the peace process will work.

Political History

After suppressing several rebellions, the English finally conquered Northern Ireland in the 17th century. They then sent Scottish and English Protestants to settle the area. They primarily settled in Ulster, in the north, setting this

region apart from the rest of the island, which was predominantly Catholic.

In the 19th century, economic differences further separated the north and south of the island. In the north, industry and manufacturing flourished, and the standard of living rose markedly. The south struggled with the unequal distribution of land and resources -- Anglican Protestants owned most of the land, and the large Catholic population's standard of living declined.

In 1920 the British passed the Government of Ireland Act, which divided Ireland into two separate political entities. Ulster Protestants in the north tended to approve of the act, whereas the southern Catholics continued to demand total independence for a unified Ireland. The Nationalist Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought the British forces. In 1921, a treaty was signed, creating the Irish Free State from 23 southern counties and three counties in Ulster. The remaining six counties of Ulster combined to form Northern Ireland, which remained part of the United Kingdom. In 1949, the Irish Free State became the independent Republic of Ireland.

History of the Conflict

The 1921 treaty between the British and the new leaders of the Irish Free State government lessened hostilities between Catholics and Protestants for several decades. But under the Protestant-dominated Stormont government, in place between 1921 and 1971, Catholics responded to discrimination against them by forming the Nationalist civil rights movement of the late 1960s. When this non-violent movement met with violent opposition, the dormant IRA re-emerged to defend Catholic neighborhoods. The clash between the IRA and the Ulster Police and Protestant paramilitaries grew into a conflict known as "the Troubles." Bloody riots first erupted in 1969, in Londonderry and Belfast. British troops were brought in to restore order and were initially welcomed by many Catholics as peacekeepers. But the conflict only intensified, especially after British paratroopers shot and killed 13 Catholic demonstrators in an incident known as "Bloody Sunday." IRA and Protestant paramilitary groups began carrying out bombings and other acts of terrorism, the worst of which occurred between 1968 and 1994. To date, more than 3,700 people have died in the conflict.

Extremist groups on both sides of the political spectrum were responsible for the violence. The Provisional IRA has fought to end the British presence. The British army and Loyalist paramilitary groups have fought to remain loyal to British rule. In 1972, the situation became so untenable that self-government was suspended. Since the mid-1990s, a cease fire has suppressed the violence, but the process of disarmament has faltered many times, and both sides have broken the cease fire.

In 1994, the first official meeting between the IRA and the British government took place. Sinn Fein, the political arm of the IRA, pushed for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. British officials countered with the demand that the IRA give up their weapons before the Sinn Fein be allowed to negotiate with other parties. The issue of IRA disarmament became a sticking point.

Multiparty peace talks opened in Belfast in 1996. But because the IRA cease fire agreement was broken earlier in the year, Sinn Fein was denied involvement. The cease fire resumed in July 1997, and several months later, full-scale peace negotiations were initiated. Great Britain attended, as did most of Northern Ireland's political parties, including Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the largest Protestant political party in Northern Ireland.

The historic talks resulted in the Good Friday Agreement, or the Belfast Agreement, signed by the main political parties on both sides on April 10, 1998. The agreement granted minority Catholics a share of the political power in Northern Ireland and gave the Republic of Ireland a voice in Northern Ireland's affairs. In turn, Catholics were to give up the fight for a united Ireland unless the largely Protestant North voted in favor of it. The agreement created an elected Northern Ireland Assembly and a power-sharing Northern Ireland executive body.

The Good Friday Agreement brought hope for a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. The Nobel Peace Prize was jointly awarded to John Hume, leader of the Social Democratic and Labor Party, and David Trimble, leader of the UUP in Northern Ireland.

But in 2001, the fragile peace process once again faltered as sectarian violence broke out in Belfast. Protestant youths stoned schoolgirls and their parents as they left a Catholic primary school. Rival mobs rallied around the

incident, throwing gasoline bombs and bottles and burning cars. The violence came during the annual "marching season," when Protestant groups march in remembrance of victories over the Catholics.

In 2002, the joint power-sharing agreement was suspended because Unionists were unhappy with the lack of separation between the IRA and Sinn Fein. The peace process continued to take several steps forward for every step backward, with the issue of disarmament continuing to rear its ugly head and disagreement over interpretation of the Belfast Agreement.

Later that same year, international weapons inspectors announced that the IRA had retired more stockpiled munitions, bringing another wave of hope. But another wave of violence broke out in response to the announcement.

In 2002, the IRA issued its first apology to the families of the 650 civilians killed by the group since the 1960s. The group did not disband, however, and Trimble announced he and other Unionist leaders would resign, thereby forcing the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly, unless the IRA disbanded by the end of the year.

A few months later, the situation had not improved. Allegations of an IRA spy operation within the Northern Ireland Assembly pushed Britain's Northern Ireland secretary, John Reid, to suspend the power-sharing government for a fourth time, with Britain once again taking full political control of Northern Ireland. However, it later emerged that British Intelligence had been involved in the spying activity. The IRA responded by cutting off the arms inspectors who were overseeing disarmament.

By early 2003, negotiations to reinstate the Northern Ireland Assembly were once again under way. But evidence of IRA criminal activity, along with the IRA's persistent refusal to give up its weapons, has continued to strain relations not only in Northern Ireland and Britain, but also in the Republic of Ireland.

In July 2005, the IRA released a statement saying that members had been "instructed to assist the development of purely political and democratic programs through exclusively political means" and that "all IRA units have been ordered to dump arms" and "to complete the process to verifiably put its arms beyond use." The IRA declared an end to its campaign and laid down its weapons in cooperation with the 1998 Belfast Agreement and under the surveillance of the International Decommissioning Body.

Earlier this year, in February 2006, a watchdog agency monitoring paramilitary groups in the region reported that the IRA seemed to be keeping its promise, but that some dissident paramilitaries were still engaged in violence.

Sources: BBC; CIA World Factbook; Wikipedia; Infoplease; National Geographic Society; PBS.

Links

[The Belfast Telegraph](#)

This is the online version of The Belfast Telegraph, one of three large daily newspapers in Northern Ireland. The Belfast Telegraph is published in the evening and has a moderate conservative and Unionist outlook, although it attempts to appeal to a broad spectrum of readers.

[The Irish News](#)

The Irish News is another leading daily newspaper in Northern Ireland. It has a more Social Democratic outlook and appeals to Irish Nationalists. It is also available throughout the Republic of Ireland.

[News Letter](#)

News Letter is the oldest newspaper still in publication in the English-speaking world. It is published every day but Sunday in Northern Ireland and has traditionally had a strong Unionist perspective.

[Behind the Mask, the IRA and Sinn Fein](#)

Frontline's 1997 broadcast *Behind the Mask, the IRA and Sinn Fein* includes a rich store of online materials. The Web site offers exclusive interviews with key players within the IRA, songs and poetry inspired by the conflict, excerpts from the diary kept by Bobby Sand during his hunger strike, and other original materials.

[Irish Internet Hub](#)

This site is a useful gateway for exploring the conflict in Northern Ireland from the viewpoints of Loyalists, Republicans and many other organizations. You can link to 17 political parties from the home page.

[The BBC: The Search for Peace](#)

The BBC's in-depth guide to the conflict in Northern Ireland includes archives of historical reports from the region, profiles of key figures and detailed descriptions of major events. Visitors can listen to audio archives of people like Eamon McCann, former civil rights leader, explaining gerrymandering and watch video clips of Prime Minister Brian Faulkner announcing direct rule. This site also provides links to the United Kingdom's BBC broadcast and BBC Radio Ulster.

[Sinn Fein](#)

The official Web site for Sinn Fein, the political party associated with the Nationalist movement, includes a history of the conflict from the Nationalist perspective. It also explains the party's platform and policies. Visitors can subscribe to digital newsletters.

[Conflict Archive on the Internet \(CAIN\)](#)

CAIN, an Internet archive of the conflict in Northern Ireland funded by the University of Ulster, provides a wealth of resources and background information on the region. It includes a well-organized chronological rundown of the major events and an extensive bibliography. There is an index of deaths resulting from the conflict, the original text of the Belfast Agreement, and suggested nonfiction and fiction reading lists. Images of political ephemera -- such as Unionist and Nationalist posters and murals painted during Bloody Sunday and the Hunger Strike -- can be viewed. Numerous maps, such as one showing the percentage of Catholics and Protestants in each district council area, are also archived.

[The Hub of Orangeism on the Net](#)

The Orange Order is the largest Protestant organization in Northern Ireland. It dates back to the 17th century battle for supremacy between the Protestants and the Catholics. The organization's Web site provides a list of official Orange Order parades, which take place every June in several countries. Learn about the history of the Order and find the nearest Orange Order credit union and Orange Order church.

[The Northern Ireland Office \(NIO\)](#)

The NIO was created in 1972 after the Northern Ireland government was dissolved in the face of a worsening security situation. The NIO is responsible for Northern Ireland's constitutional and security issues. Research publications can be searched and downloaded, and the site also provides links to government agencies and news releases from the region.

[Healing Through Remembering](#)

Healing Through Remembering is an extensive cross-community project made up of a range of individual members holding different political perspectives. The organization attempts to bring groups together to focus on the issue of how to deal with the past relating to Northern Ireland's conflict.

[Witness: Personal Stories about people affected by the Troubles](#)

This section of the Victims and Survivors Trust Web site, a charitable organization based in Northern Ireland, contains contributions by people who have been traumatically affected by the conflict. The site also contains articles on the death of Terry Enright's son, who was mentioned in "Uneasy Peace."

[FAIR -- Families Acting for Innocent Relatives](#)

This site contains information on the organization FAIR, founded by Willy Frazer, the Protestant activist interviewed in "Uneasy Peace." The site offers stories about South Armagh, Northern Ireland, and the effects of violence on Protestant victims.

[Coiste na n-Iarchimi: Republican ex-prisoners group](#)

Coiste na n-Iarchimi is an umbrella organization coordinating groups and individuals working for the social, economic and emotional well-being of Republican ex-prisoners, displaced persons and former activists and their

families. The group also offers political tours of the troubled spots of Belfast.

Books

A History of Ulster, Jonathan Bardon (Blackstaff Press, 1992)

The 9,000 year history of Ulster, from prehistoric times to present day, helps give context to the present conflict between Ireland and the United Kingdom. The book gives detailed accounts of the Viking invasions, the rise of Orangeism, the Great Famine and the Troubles of the modern day.

The Irish War: The Hidden Conflict Between the IRA and British Intelligence, Tony Geraghty (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000)

Tony Geraghty -- a veteran writer and former British soldier -- was arrested after the publication of this book for allegedly revealing state secrets. *The Irish War* is a detailed account of the Troubles as well as a history of eight centuries of Irish resistance to British rule. It's also a glimpse into the United Kingdom's intelligence programs. Geraghty has written several other books on Northern Ireland, British defense and terrorism.

The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism, Robert Kee (The Penguin Group, 2000)

The Green Flag focuses on Irish Nationalism and is a useful read for anyone attempting to understand the forces that have shaped Ireland. Robert Kee covers the Protestant Plantations, Wolfe Tone, the Great Famine and the founding of the Fenian Movement.

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