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HISTORY OF THE IRISH TROUBLES: THE PEACE WALLS AFTER 50 YEARS

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INTRODUCTION

In 1969, Catholic civil rights protests in Northern Ireland over political, economic, and religious grievances against the country's Protestant majority devolved into violence, igniting what became a thirty-year guerilla war. While “the Troubles” was, in large part, a fight between two religions in Northern Ireland, it also reflected deeper hostility based on national heritage and political orientation. Republican Catholics viewed themselves as Irish nationals, and argued that the British partitioning of Northern Ireland during the 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty was illegitimate¹. Meanwhile, Loyalist Protestants claimed British heritage and were concerned that a potential Irish reunification would reduce them to a small political and religious minority. At the heart of the debate was the question of whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the British Crown or join the Republic of Ireland. In response to the protest marches, counter-protest demonstrations, and violence between groups, the government of both Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom tried to quell rising violence through the utilization of the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) local police, deployment of British troops, and erection of “Peace Walls” or “Peace Lines,” intended to temporarily separate Republicans and Loyalists. While some argue that these reactionary tactics helped mitigate fatalities during the height of the Troubles, the truth is that they escalated tensions in the long term and did nothing to address the underlying disputes that fueled the violence. As the most visible remaining relic from the Troubles, the Peace Walls have ensured that sectarian division has remained part of the physical and cultural landscape of Northern Ireland for generations.

¹ *The Partition of Ireland And the Troubles: The History of Northern Ireland From the Irish Civil War To the Good Friday Agreement*, Charles River Editors, 2018, Collins [photograph], London chapter.

PART I: THE TROUBLES BEGIN

The first thing that happened to me was my father being shot dead when I was two and a half....My mother went in for electric treatment. She was in hospital for two years... and she on these nerve tablets and stuff ever since... There's absolutely no counseling or psychiatric help for anyone...My mother got electric treatment, just to shut out part of her brain, but then, about six years ago, my mother started remembering the part that was shut out. She forgot a load of stuff. She was like a zombie to a degree. And she started remembering all the stuff - wee details, things my dad said just before he was shot, my dad falling to the floor, me standing looking at my dad with blood running down the floor. All these memories started flooding back to her and nearly screwed her up about six years ago. Her heart went.
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-Young Man in North Belfast

When Northern Ireland was formed, it was clear the Church of England (Protestantism) would be the dominant religious party. Northern Ireland's leadership took specific actions to ensure the underrepresentation of Republican Catholics. Sir James Craig, the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, celebrated this discrimination, saying, "We are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State. It would be rather interesting for historians of the future to compare a Catholic State launched in the South with a Protestant State launched in the North and see which gets the better and prospers the more."³ During the twentieth century, Northern Irish Catholics cited two central pieces of evidence of their political disenfranchisement: (1) election boundaries for parliament and local races were gerrymandered, favoring Loyalist candidates⁴ and (2) a small number of Loyalists in Northern Ireland—about one and one-half percent of the population—who owned significant property, dominated local elections because they had multiple votes, while many tenants, primarily Republicans, were barred from voting.⁵ In 1929, The United Kingdom also passed election reform laws that changed proportional representation in the election process and implemented a "first past the post" model, meaning candidates needed only a plurality to win their individual races, and aggregated party votes had no value. While this law only slightly reduced the number of seats that Republicans held in Parliament, the more significant effect was to deepen political entrenchment in Northern Ireland.⁶ The new Parliamentary districts were cleanly divided into Republican and Loyalist areas which strengthened the already existing divisions.⁷ Given the historical discrimination Republicans experienced, limiting the franchise benefitted Loyalist politicians. By 1961, more than a quarter of adults could not vote in local elections because of property requirements.⁸ Furthermore, in local elections, many Republican areas were

² F. McKenna (comp.), *Do You See What I See? Young People's Experience of the Troubles In their own words*, Derry, Incore, 1998, A Scene of a Shooting [photograph], <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/violence/cts/dyer.htm>.

³ *The Partition of Ireland And the Troubles*, Introduction.

⁴ J. Whyte, 'How Much Discrimination Was There Under the Unionist Regime, 1921- 1968?' in T. Gallagher and J. O'Connell (eds.), *Contemporary Irish Studies*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1983, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/discrimination/whyte.htm>.

⁵ T. Gallagher and J. O'Connell, *Contemporary Irish Studies*, Manchester University Press, 1983, p. 4.

⁶ P. Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances: Devolved Government in Northern Ireland, 1921-39*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1979, p. 226.

⁷ T. Gallagher and J. O'Connell, *Contemporary Irish Studies*, p. 4.

⁸ S. Elliott, *The Electoral System in Northern Ireland Since 1920*, Belfast, Queen's University, 1971, p 792.

strategically deprived of leading several councils where they had a majority of electors.”⁹

Due to the mounting frustration regarding the political disenfranchisement of Republicans, the civil rights marches of the late 1960s eventually led to broader confrontations. These protests, often driven by the younger generation of Republican leaders, posed a direct challenge to the power dynamic in Northern Ireland. More specifically, they also led to the growth of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), a splinter group of the historic Irish Republican Army that had played a significant role in forcing the British to recognize a new Irish Free State (later renamed the Republic of Ireland) in 1921.¹⁰ The Provisional IRA’s objective of protecting Catholic neighborhoods and communities in the early days of the Troubles quickly changed as it began to lead an offensive battle against Loyalists and British forces.

1. PEOPLE’S DEMOCRACY MARCH

The People’s Democracy March was organized by students at Queen's University in Belfast in 1969. Inspired by the 1966 Montgomery March in Selma, Alabama, the march leaders hoped to either win their right to protest with police protection or expose the government for not being even-handed in addressing the growing tensions within Ireland.¹¹ In preparation for the event, the government and various sectarian groups engaged in dialogue about limiting the threat of violence. The leader of the Derry Citizens Action Committee later described his conversations with the planners of the march, saying, “I expressed the view that the march would lead to sectarian violence. I thought they agreed with this, and as far as I know, they went back and argued that the march be not held.”¹² However, the march continued as scheduled during the first four days of January 1969. While this long procession started on a non-violent note, things deteriorated on the final day when over 200 Loyalists attacked the marchers on Burntollet Bridge, seven miles from Derry, leaving 13 people hospitalized. The marchers were attacked again once they reached their destination, this time in a heavily fortified Protestant area of the city. Most of the participants felt that the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers present at these incidents did not do nearly enough to protect them or quell the violence.¹³ The RUC was formed in 1922 to protect the general citizens, although Catholics believed it to be a sectarian police force.¹⁴ The bloody events that unfolded on Burntollet Bridge further solidified this perception.

Due to the violence that unfolded, the People’s Democracy march proved a polarizing event, as it moved Loyalists and Republicans further apart, allowing power to concentrate among extreme elements in both camps. A summary report called *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, written by a commission of governmental leaders after the event, stated, “We are driven to think that the leaders must have intended that their venture would weaken the moderate reforming forces in Northern Ireland.”¹⁵ Thereafter,

⁹ J. Whyte, ‘How Much Discrimination Was There Under the Unionist Regime, 1921- 1968?’ in T. Gallagher and J. O’Connell (eds.), *Contemporary Irish Studies*, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk>, 1983, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/discrimination/whyte.htm>, accessed January, 2023.

¹⁰ R. Kee, *The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism*, London, Penguin Books, 1972, p 699.

¹¹ M. Melaugh (comp.), ‘The People’s Democracy March: Summary of Main Events’, *CAIN*, 1976, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/pdmarch/sum.htm>.

¹² P. Arthur, ‘Extracts from ‘The People’s Democracy 1968-73’, *CAIN* [website], 1974, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/pdmarch/arthur74a.htm>, accessed 1 November 2022.

¹³ M. Melaugh (comp.), ‘The People’s Democracy March: Summary of Main Events’.

¹⁴ *The Partition of Ireland And the Troubles*, Wilson chapter.

¹⁵ The Hon. Lord Cameron, ‘Disturbances in Northern Ireland’, *CAIN* [website], Her Majesty’s Stationery Office Belfast, September 1969, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/proni/1969/proni_HA-32-3-2_1969-09-09.pdf.

groups like the Derry Citizens Action Committee lost much of their power as stabilizing forces in their communities. Ultimately, this march created a clear division within the Civil Rights movement and laid the foundation for the troubles

2. THE BATTLE OF BOGSIDE AND BRITISH ARMY ENGAGEMENT

In August of 1969, Northern Ireland was rocked by violence stemming from another Londonderry parade. “The Battle of Bogside” resulted in days of fighting that extended into Belfast and ultimately resulted in the deaths of eight people. The RUC police force lost control of the city, despite being actively engaged at the scene. In one RUC unit alone, 43 of 59 men were treated for injuries.¹⁶ Given the extent of this fighting, more than 1,800 families decided to leave the city of Belfast for safety elsewhere.¹⁷ Northern Ireland had crossed the Rubicon, and even the direct British rule that followed could not quell the violence in the streets. Unfortunately, there were no moderate groups on either side of the sectarian debate who had enough power to push for a political solution, or even a cease-fire, that could divert Northern Ireland from its deadly course.

Immediately following the Battle of Bogside, Britain deployed troops to Northern Ireland,¹⁸ and it became evident the British army was not suited to handle the policing duties it had been asked to assume. By remaining on the streets, the British army inevitably became involved in the conflict. In 1970, the British army sealed off the Lower Falls of Belfast and conducted house-to-house searches for IRA weapons. During the process, there was significant damage caused to personal property, and three residents were killed, none of whom had connections with the IRA. While the army’s presence had initially been supported by the Republican minority in the hopes that it could provide security, these events convinced Republicans that the British military was actively fighting against their cause.¹⁹

3. BLOODY SUNDAY AND FRIDAY

Sectarian violence escalated over the following years as Belfast became ground zero for terrorist-style assaults by Republican IRA militias and Loyalist paramilitaries. Republican citizens began to put up improvised barricades for protection and, in doing so, isolated themselves from the larger Loyalist areas.²⁰ The height of sectarian fighting occurred with two horrific events in 1972. The first occurred in the early evening of January 30, 1972, when the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) began a march in Londonderry, where the government had banned formal marches due to the history of local violence. The purpose of this event was to protest the government’s recent policy of Internment, arresting suspected terrorists without a formal trial.²¹ The situation on the ground quickly escalated out of control, and British soldiers fired their weapons indiscriminately into the crowd during the ensuing chaos, killing thirteen civilians. The horrific loss of life was referred to as “Bloody Sunday” and

¹⁶ D. McKittrick and D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: A History of The Northern Ireland Conflict*, Fully Revised and Updated, London, Viking, 2012, p. 62.

¹⁷ D. McKittrick and D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, p. 64.

¹⁸ National Army Museum, ‘Ireland The Troubles’, *National Army Museum* [website], <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/troubles-1969-2007#:~:text=The%20British%20Government%20ordered%20the,the%20traditional%20Protestant%20marching%20season,accessed 2 March 2023>.

¹⁹ D. McKittrick and D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, p. 71.

²⁰ D. McKittrick and D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, p. 64.

²¹ D. McKittrick and D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, p. 78.

generated condemnation from not only Republicans in Northern Ireland but also the Republic of Ireland, where a full day of mourning was held. After days of protests there, many people in Dublin celebrated loudly as the British embassy was set on fire and destroyed.²²

A wave of anger had radicalized a significant portion of Irish nationals and Irish descendants against the British, with many proclaiming, “We are all IRA now.”²³ Bloody Sunday generated a recruiting boom for the Republican cause unlike any that had been seen previously, convincing more young men to join the IRA than any other action taken by the British.²⁴ The IRA utilized its newfound resources by leading its own deadly attack just a few months later, planting 20 bombs and killing nine people on what became known as Bloody Friday.²⁵ 1972 was the deadliest year of the Troubles, making it clear that peace was nowhere on the horizon. Fighting by both sides continued over the ensuing years, and the IRA effectively employed hunger strikes to raise international awareness for their cause and attempt to gain the moral high ground. It was not until The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that a political resolution for Northern Ireland was signed through the active engagement of multiple parties, including the United States. In total, more than 3,500 people died as a direct result of the Troubles between 1969 and 1998.²⁶

PART II: DID THE PEACE WALLS CREATE PEACE?

*I think the shot came from the Walls. The position I was in, the bullet went in the left side of my leg, came out at my foot, the right side. There was no Saracen. It must have come from Derry Walls.*²⁷

-Daniel McGowan (citizen testimonial)

1. TEMPORARY STRUCTURES BECOME A “NEW NORMAL”

When the violence started in 1969, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland announced that a “peace line was to be established to separate physically the [Catholic] Falls and the [Protestant] Shankill communities” in Belfast.²⁸ Despite the permanence that concrete and barbed wire suggested, on September 10, 1969, Army Chief Lt. General Sir Ian Freeland famously said, “The peace line will be a very, very temporary affair. We will not have a Berlin Wall in this city.”²⁹ Throughout the next decade, some three dozen walls were constructed across the city as a reaction to the continued violence.³⁰ The city of Londonderry also built its first barricades in 1969 to establish “no go” areas, which were patrolled by rogue groups. These walls were now used for displaying propaganda, such as the famous Catholic slogan, ‘You are now entering Free Derry,’ which was first painted on a prominent gable wall in the

²² D. McKittrick and D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, p. 78.

²³ D. McKittrick and D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, p. 90.

²⁴ R. English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, London, Pan Books, 2004, p. 217.

²⁵ R. English, *Armed Struggle*, p. 224.

²⁶ M. Sutton, ‘An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland’, *CAIN*, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/index.html>, accessed January, 2023.

²⁷ F. Grimaldi, *Blood in the Streets*, Guildhall Press, Derry, 1998, cited in ‘Extracts from ‘Blood in the Street’ by Fulvio Grimaldi’, *CAIN* [website], <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/bsunday/grimaldi.htm>.

²⁸ S. Grattan, ‘Northern Ireland Still Divided by Peace Walls 20 Years After Conflict’, *The World*, 14 January 2020, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/proni/1969/proni_HA-32-3-2_1969-09-09.pdf.

²⁹ V. Cosstick, *Belfast: Toward A City Without Walls*, Newtownards, Colourpoint Books, 2015, p. 43.

³⁰ Belfast Interface Project, ‘Interface Barriers, Peacelines and Defensive Architecture’, Belfast Interface Project, Belfast, 2017, p. 10.

Bogside.³¹ The need for these defensive lines was easy for all groups to justify based on the chaotic fighting amidst the civilian population.

Over the next few decades, peace walls sprung up throughout Belfast in a haphazard manner, largely in response to new battlefields that emerged in and around the city. 13 walls were built between 1970 and 1979, 33 more walls were created over the next 15 years until the 1994 ceasefire, and 32 additional walls were completed after the ceasefire was signed.³² Since then, only six have been removed.³³

The Peace Walls were occasionally incorporated into the army's fighting tactics. According to the reports of Brigadier MacLellan of the British army, the army's goal during violent confrontations was to trap rioters between the army and the rubble barricades.³⁴ By the time of Bloody Sunday in 1972, Londonderry had 29 barricades in existence, 16 of which were impassable to one-ton armored vehicles.³⁵ At the time, many British army analysts talked about the importance of taking down these rubble barricades as one of the key components for establishing true peace. Unfortunately, this goal was never achieved.

These imposing, physical walls were a short-term band-aid to stop the violence that, over time, turned into a symbol of the country's ongoing division. As a peacekeeping tool, the walls were ineffective because they did nothing to redress the broader reasons for the violence. During the height of the Troubles when these walls were built, the minority could point to the fact that no new laws were passed to protect them as evidence that the government was not willing to work towards a sustainable solution.

To this day, Belfast remains deeply divided, as neighborhoods are segregated with walls that divide Republican and Loyalist houses that once stood next door to each other.³⁶ The peace lines are now a physical manifestation of the country's deep religious and political differences. These structures do not foster an environment of healing but instead generate more fear,³⁷ as they remind people of past violence and reinforce the idea that it may return. As one Irish local said, "The reality of the threat becomes irrelevant; the perception is all [that matters]."³⁸ Indeed, there is reason to believe that fighting may again arise between these starkly divided groups. In fact, as recently as 2012, 26 police officers were injured by violence that stemmed from a Loyalist parade in northern Belfast.

To avoid direct interaction, both sides have adopted other, less overt ways of separating their day-to-day lives. An article in *The Economist* about Northern Ireland explains how this division has extended well beyond physical walls, Less evident to outsiders... are the invisible walls that run down the middle of

³¹ The Rt. Hon. The Lord Saville of Newdigate, The Hon. W. Hoyt, and The Hon. J. Toohey, 'Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry', 2010, 122/7.58, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/279149/0029_vii.pdf.

³² Belfast Interface Project, 'Interface Barriers, Peacelines and Defensive Architecture', p. 10.

³³ Belfast Interface Project, 'Interface Barriers, Peacelines and Defensive Architecture', p. 11.

³⁴ The Rt. Hon. The Lord Saville of Newdigate, The Hon. W. Hoyt, and The Hon. J. Toohey, 'Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry', 344/9.362.

³⁵ The Rt. Hon. The Lord Saville of Newdigate, The Hon. W. Hoyt, and The Hon. J. Toohey, 'Report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry', 196/8.145.

³⁶ N. Cunningham and I. Gregory, 'Hard to Miss, Easy to Blame? Peacelines, Interfaces and Political Deaths in Belfast During the Troubles', *Political Geography*, vol. 40, 2014, p. 64.

³⁷ N. Cunningham and I. Gregory, 'Hard to Miss, Easy to Blame? Peacelines, Interfaces and Political Deaths in Belfast During the Troubles', p. 65.

³⁸ M. Di Cintio, *Walls: Travels Along The Barricades*, Berkeley, Soft Skull Press, 2013, p. 223.

some streets in Belfast... these barriers are reinforced by habit – that same route home from the bus stop, pausing at the same shop each time – and by memories of the attacks.³⁹

These invisible walls continue a legacy of distrust in each generation and make it extremely challenging for Republicans and Loyalists to find common ground. One such wall is the segregation of Northern Ireland schools. As recently as 2019, 93% of Northern Ireland school children attend a segregated Protestant or Catholic school.⁴⁰ How can Northern Ireland's culture change if children are taught to see the world through this binary?

2. FUTURE OF THE WALLS

In 2013, President Barack Obama encouraged sectarian healing during his visit to Northern Ireland with the following statement in which he advocated on behalf of the government's proposal to remove the walls fully by 2023: It's within your power to bring about change..... Whether you take a stand against violence and hatred, and tell extremists on both sides that no matter how many times they attack the peace, they will not succeed – that is in your hands. And whether you reach your own outstretched hand across dividing lines, across peace walls, to build trust in a spirit of respect – that's up to you. The terms of peace may be negotiated by political leaders, but the fate of peace is up to each of us.⁴¹

Despite President Obama's eloquence, a tenuous truce remains. Residents reject the violence and yearn for peace, yet largely accept the idea that the walls are necessary. The University of Manchester published a research extract evaluating both Protestant and Catholic perceptions about the Peace Walls, based on the Government's stated proposal to have them fully dismantled by 2023. 50% of Catholics interviewed either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "The government is right to remove the walls." In the same study, only 39% of Protestants answered affirmatively. Yet, both groups were closely aligned when it came to "Disagreeing" or "Strongly Disagreeing" with this same statement (24% Catholic and 28% Protestant).⁴² Interestingly, the study noted that respondents who had positive interactions with people from the other sectarian group were much more receptive to the government policy of removing the walls. It also found that respondents who resided closest to the Peace Walls were much less supportive of the walls coming down, often citing potential threats of violence from the other side as their rationale. Andre Forsyth, a 31-year-old Protestant who has a Peace Wall in his backyard, spoke for many of these residents when he said, "If we look at (peace walls) in a realistic world, we should not need them, but also in a realistic world it gives me a sense of security."⁴³ A separate research paper found that over 78% of Northern Irish citizens believed that segregation would continue even if the Peace Walls came down.⁴⁴ While perceptions about the Peace Walls are slowly shifting, it is clear

³⁹ 'Still Troubled: Northern Ireland staggers toward normalcy', *The Economist*, 12 April 2006, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2006/04/12/still-troubled>, accessed February 5, 2023.

⁴⁰ A. McGibbon, 'Northern Ireland's Schools Still Aren't Integrated', *The Nation*, 9 September 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/northern-ireland-integration-schools-lagan/>.

⁴¹ 'Remarks by President Obama and Mrs. Obama in Town Hall with Youth of Northern Ireland', 17 June 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/17/remarks-president-obama-and-mrs-obama-town-hall-youth-northern-ireland>.

⁴² J. Dixon et al., 'When the Walls Come Tumbling Down: The role of intergroup proximity, threat, and contact in shaping attitudes towards the removal of Northern Ireland's peace walls', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 2020, vol. 59, p. 933.

⁴³ S. Grattan, 'Northern Ireland Still Divided by Peace Walls 20 Years After Conflict', *The World*, 14 January 2020, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/proni/1969/proni_HA-32-3-2_1969-09-09.pdf.

⁴⁴ V. Cosstick, *Belfast*, p. 35.

that broader challenges remain in order to bring them down.

The failure to find a true solution in Northern Ireland may be attributed to the fact that much of the country's population was alive to witness the Troubles and the construction of the Peace Walls, making the memory and pain associated with sectarian violence slow to fade. One may hope that, over time, those who have been resistant to bringing down these barriers will re-evaluate whether the long-standing physical and invisible walls should remain.

PART III: NORTHERN IRELAND AFTER THE TROUBLES

*If truth is the first fatality of war, perspective is the first casualty of peace. Perspectives are distorted in peace processes by focusing on the difficulties ahead and ignoring what we have actually achieved.*⁴⁵

-Barney Rowan (journalist)

1. ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF THE TROUBLES

The recent uptick in tourism in Belfast, despite helping to grow the local economy, has been a double-edged sword. Visitors come to witness the sordid history of the Troubles in what is often referred to as "dark tourism."⁴⁶ Given the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's approach towards advertising the Troubles, it's unclear what limits have been placed on the commercialization of the country's violent past.⁴⁷ Several tourist groups lead daily walking tours past the Peace Walls to retell the country's complex and challenging past. One controversial group features former gunmen from both the IRA and Protestant militias as guides who tell personal stories about the Troubles. Former enemies, some of these guides have become cordial and now see the challenges of the Troubles through an economic lens.⁴⁸ In this regard, tourism is a good solution because it raises the standard of living for both Catholics and Protestants. While it is encouraging to see that a few of the sectarian fighters have found ways to overcome their differences, such tourism too often reinforces the narrative that Northern Ireland cannot move beyond hatred.

There is also concern that the expense of maintaining the walls may limit the country from achieving its highest potential. Alderman Ekin of Belfast City stated, "...it is worth it to bring (the Peace Walls) down. My passion is as a taxpayer, I am one of the people that pays for these things. And the big issue we need to address is the underachievement of working-class kids."⁴⁹ Economic growth generated from a more unified Northern Ireland would more than offset any losses from the disappearance of the tourist revenue that the walls provide.

2. COLLECTIVE MENTAL HEALTH

⁴⁵ V. Cosstick, *Belfast*, p. 39

⁴⁶ V. Cosstick, *Belfast*, p. 159.

⁴⁷ V. Cosstick, *Belfast*, p. 161.

⁴⁸ F. Langfitt, 'Tourists Can Now Experience Northern Ireland's Violent Political History' NPR, 17 November 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/17/564752434/tourists-can-now-experience-northern-irelands-violent-political-history>.

⁴⁹ T. Edgington and T. Kovacevic, 'Brexit: What are the Northern Ireland Protocol and Windsor Framework?' BBC News, 12 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-5372438>.

One under-discussed aspect of the long-standing conflict is the toll that it has taken on the mental health of Northern Irish citizens. The trauma experienced by survivors of the Troubles and their families can be challenging to overcome, particularly when this pain is compounded by the experience of living in a society literally divided in half. Given that tensions still remain so high, it is no wonder that, according to the World Mental Health Survey, Northern Ireland had the highest rate of lifetime Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the world, with 8.8% of the population affected. It also ranks exceedingly high for lifetime occurrences of mental disorders (39.1%), anxiety (22.6%), and mood disorders (18.8%).⁵⁰ According to Sally Smyth, coordinator of the Grace Women's Development Group in Ardoyne, a working-class Republican district in Northern Belfast, the people in Northern Ireland lack the proper tools to come to terms with the impact of this multi-generational conflict. She believes there is an indelible mark left on the broader community.

In Northern Ireland, the level of casualties, the prolonged period of conflict and the market divisions in urban and rural landscapes... make a strong case for arguing that residents have experienced collective trauma, trauma which extends beyond individual suffering to whole communities.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

While the organized violence of the Troubles has ended, the underlying hostility in Northern Ireland that fueled the Troubles still remains. Now, the combatants have shifted their focus to a political battlefield as they struggle over the fate of Northern Ireland's government. Both sides now disavow violence, in large measure, because it failed to help them achieve their goals.

When visiting Belfast just a week before the July 12th Orangeman's Day celebration, this author saw a Protestant contingent build a massive wooden structure that would be lit to celebrate Protestant William of Orange's historic victory over the Catholic King James II at the battle of the Boyne in 1690. Celebrations like this represent a core challenge for the people of Northern Ireland: how to stop looking backward at historical wars of division and instead implement modern-day traditions that unify a fractured country. Many Catholic citizens, including the taxi driver who took me to the airport, planned to leave the city on July 12th and return when the parades were over. Clearly, even though the physical fighting has abated, a struggle of wills continues to this day.

Northern Ireland's society has been frozen in a holding pattern of "no war, but no true peace" since the Good Friday Accords. Whether Loyalists and Republicans can implement common sense solutions that address the broader economic, social, and political challenges that underlie the sectarian strife remains unclear. These challenges are even more complex today due to the shifting geopolitical issues tied to Brexit. Northern Ireland has suffered through sectarian and ethnic strife for nearly all of its history. Well before the civil rights movement and the Troubles that followed, frequent rioting occurred during the period that led to the creation of the Irish Free State,⁵² although the North was not included in this agreement. The county has remained stuck in the collective memory of violence and division, resulting in a tension-filled ceasefire

⁵⁰ V. Cosstick, *Belfast*, p. 95.

⁵¹ V. Cosstick, *Belfast*, p. 96.

⁵² R. Lee, *The Green Flag: A History Of Irish Nationalism*, London, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 728.

What Northern Ireland needs now is a concerted push toward healing. One way to generate this momentum would be to tear down the antiquated Peace Walls. Starting one block at a time, the demolition of these walls would send a hopeful message of unity throughout a country that desperately needs to move beyond its broken past. As Barack Obama pointed out in his 2013 speech, “The terms of peace may be negotiated by political leaders, but the fate of peace is up to each of us.”⁵³ If the people of Northern Ireland want to achieve this peace, the choice they must make is clear: remove these symbols of hatred to create a new sense of unity. Each wall taken down will begin to secure real and meaningful “piece by piece.”

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