

5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland

| Sample answer

What was the impact of Republican and Loyalist terrorism on Northern Ireland? (2013)

Republican and Loyalist terrorism had a hugely detrimental impact on Northern Ireland. Mainly, the Irish Republican Army on the Republican side and the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association, among others on the Loyalist side, waged infamous campaigns of destruction on the province which had terrible social, economic and political consequences. From the shocking death toll to the economic stagnation of the region, the actions of these groups left their mark on the North in numerous ways which will be explored in the following essay.

The most immediate and obvious impact of terrorism on Northern Ireland was human suffering and the loss of life. It is estimated that upwards of 3,200 people died between 1966 and 2000 as a result of the Troubles. Tragically, almost two-thirds of this total were civilian deaths, with 1,236 Catholics perishing and 701 Protestants being killed. Though the British Army had its role in increasing the mortality rate, it was primarily the heinous actions of Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups that resulted in such an alarming death count. The violence that played out over the last third of the twentieth century in the North took the form of shootings, bombings of public and private settlements, and on occasion, the use of land mines. Consequently, the people of Northern Ireland inhabited a world of fear, uncertainty, and suspicion. This atmosphere had impacts both on a personal level for citizens, and had wider societal repercussions.

Undoubtedly, the mental health and wellbeing of individuals was affected by the on-going violence at this time. Given the thousands that were murdered, consider the further thousands beset by grief having lost a loved one or the stress and trauma afflicted upon those hurt or maimed by the violence. Daily life was interrupted by terrorism, be it the impacts on the world of commerce, or civil society in general. Also, survivors of the conflict report a desensitisation to the frequent bombings and shootings. Many have noted becoming habituated to the actions of terrorists, perhaps a surprising reflection to those of us living in a more peaceful context.

One notorious impact of ongoing violence led Brian Faulkner's government to introduce internment. This move was both disastrous for those accused and detained, and ultimately disastrous for Faulkner's government. On August 9th 1971 it began and meant that suspects could be detained without trial. British soldiers and RUC detectives focused on areas across the North, but targeted Nationalist communities like the Falls Road in west Belfast with more vigour. In fact, though Loyalist paramilitaries had caused numerous deaths by this time, Republicans made up 90% of the arrests under this policy. In total 2,357 people were detained, but 1,600 were released without charge. The policy of internment was designed deescalate violence by removing paramilitary members from the community, but given how the policy was carried out, the opposite of its aim occurred and IRA membership surged.

Terrorism had a direct impact on the economy of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Prior to the 1960s, the region was the most prosperous part of the island. But due to terrorist acts from Republicans and Loyalists, Northern Ireland had to treble its dependence on finance from Westminster. With widespread bombing campaigns across Ulster economic progress was stifled. Factories were shut, foreign investment essentially stopped and unemployment in industry rose significantly. A survey from 1983 showed that 60% of 460 leading US, British and German businessmen were unwilling to invest in Northern Ireland as the risks were seen to be too great. In fact, at this time, Northern Ireland placed 19th out of 20 for a possible location of industrial plants in Western Europe. Foreign industries had created over 11,000 jobs between 1966 and 1971 but between 1972 and 1976 only 900 were created by foreign businesses.

By 1991 employment in industry had fallen to 27% of total employment. Unemployment increased steadily from 9% in 1979 to over 18% in 1986. Catholics were worse affected with over 30% of men out of work in 1981 compared to 12% of Protestant men. All of the violence had a literal impact in terms of destroying real estate, particularly in urban areas like Belfast and Derry. Not only were lives lost through this violence, but the destruction of commercial properties was financially very costly in terms of loss of sales and the price of repairing the damage.

One notable impact of the terror being waged across Northern Ireland was the government's response to deal with it by expanding the security services. From the mid-70s onwards local

Protestants were primarily recruited to fill posts in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Ulster Defence Regiment and positions in the prison services. When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, security in Northern Ireland was one of her main concerns and investment in this sector grew. There was a cost to this as increased expenditure in dealing with the threat of terrorism meant spending on health and education decreased.

Continuing actions of terror negatively affected the education sector in general. The so-called “Protestant brain-drain”, referring to Protestant students leaving the North to study abroad (mainly elsewhere in the UK), meant that large numbers of capable young people often left Northern Ireland to contribute to societies other than their own. Many of these people never returned to the region, favouring the stability and opportunity of other locations. It is worth noting all the skills and expertise that these people could have offered the province, not to mind contributions in the form of tax and revenue, had terrorism not been such a deterrent to remain.

Further knock-on effects of terrorism in the North are seen in looking at population distribution. Given the sectarian nature of the violence people perceived it as unsafe to live in areas different to their cultural background. According to the 1991 census of the region most people lived in areas that were either 90% Catholic or 90% Protestant. Barriers were constructed, known as peace lines, mainly in working-class areas of Belfast and Derry. It is clear that Northern Ireland had become one of the most segregated societies in the EU, such was the terrible influence of terrorism.

There are other impacts worth considering. For example, the financial cost of compensation packages paid out by the government. Also, this quote from journalist Peter Taylor shows how the terrorist groups in question themselves helped terrorism grow: “In the end it was the IRA that helped create the loyalist paramilitaries.” An unusual impact of the terrorism is seen in the expertise of doctors and hospitals in the region. The health service in Northern Ireland had to respond to all sorts of injuries from explosions to gunshot wounds, putting pressure on the system but also necessitating growing expertise in dealing with such atrocities. Art and literature was influenced by paramilitary actions too. Murals like those of the Ulster Freedom Fighters in West Belfast show how revered such terrorist groups became by some. Yet poems like ‘As It Should Be’ by Derek Mahon show equally how others condemned the violence. The actions of loyalist paramilitaries in response to the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973-74 (contributing to its collapse) further show that terrorism affected all dimensions of life in Northern Ireland.

To conclude, it is important to state that though the impacts of terrorism described above were truly awful in Northern Ireland, one consequence was successive governments, both British and Irish, sought to overcome the terror through peaceful means. Indeed the violence waged had a fracturing effect on Northern Irish society, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1995 and Downing Street Declaration of 1993 showed that there can be also positive responses to terrible actions.