

What was the Impact of WW2 on Northern Ireland?

World War II had a huge impact on Northern Ireland, both positive and negative. Two huge aspects which had a big effect were the Belfast Bombings and the wartime boom within the ship building, aircraft and linen industries. The bombings led to an enormous death toll of an estimated 1,100. The boom led to a complete upheaval of the economy and dropped unemployment levels from 30% to 5%.

The demand for ships and linen once again had a massive effect on Northern Ireland. These two main industries had suffered in the inter-war period due to low demand. The economy in NI had crumbled and many people were living in absolute poverty. The average wage was 60% of the British average. However with the start of the war this changed. After 1941 industries were located in NI to take advantage of the work force and the believed fact that NI was out of the range of German bombs. There was a new enormous demand for shipbuilding. 140 warships were built, including 6 aircraft carriers, as well as 123 merchant ships. The aircraft industry was also set up due to this demand. The company Harland and Wolff built 1,200 aircraft parts. The linen industry was also required to manufacture parachutes, uniforms and tents. All of these growths in industry led to an upheaval in the economy. By 1945 the average wage had increased to 75% of the British average. Agriculture also prospered in this period. Food production tripled between 1939 and 1945. The amount of land under crops went from 500,000 to 800,000 acres. This boom had many positive effects for NI. Unemployment fell and the standard of living improved. However this was a wartime boom and only temporary, to have terrible repercussions after the war. The powerful industries such as Harland and Wolff also made NI, and more specifically Belfast, a target for German bombers.

In 1941 Belfast underwent a number of bombings. The government, believing that NI was out of range and reluctant to spend scarce money had poorly defended the city. When the German bombs came there were only 24 anti-aircraft guns in Belfast, no searchlights and only a few balloon barrages, due to the hesitance of Minister for Public Safety, John MacDermott. The Germans first attacked on the night of April 7th. Shipyards and docks were hit but not destroyed and 13 people were killed. The anti-aircraft guns failed to hit anything and sirens didn't signal the attack until afterwards. People believed that they had little to fear as only a small amount of damage was done and only 3,000 evacuated. The city was hit again on April 15th. The attack was far more devastating this time. About 90 German bombers came in waves at 7,000 feet, out of range of anti aircraft guns. 674 high explosives were dropped, along with 29,000 incendiaries and 76 parachute mines. Most missed the actual targets, the harbour and the docks and hit instead the houses surrounding. 50% of homes in Belfast were damaged. 1,100 were killed. The bombings had a huge impact on human life and was an absolute disaster for the city. However the bombing of housing meant that they had to be rebuilt again to much higher standards, improving living conditions and creating a building boom. Furthermore due to their actions during the war NI was included in the welfare state of Britain, receiving excellent social welfare such as free education and free healthcare.