

3.IRL The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition | Sample answer

What was the impact of World War II on Ireland, North and South? (2017)

The beginning of World War II had a major impact on the economy and society in Ireland, both North and South. The Northern economy entered a boom period, while the South suffered the economic cost of neutrality. With the enforcement of strict censorship, Irish society, both North and South, felt the impact of the war in arts and literature and on everyday living standards and work practices. The South escaped the destruction caused by war, but Ulster, and in particular Belfast, did not.

For the duration of World War II, the Irish Government backed up its neutrality policy with a wide-ranging system of censorship. They wanted to ensure that the public received only limited and supposedly balanced reports of events in Europe and beyond. They had many reasons for this heavy censorship. Ireland was poorly equipped for a war, so it made sense for the Government to limit reporting on the military. They also hoped that the heavy censorship would prevent republicans promoting the old idea that "*England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity*", which might threaten the county's neutrality. Frank Aiken, the Minister for Defensive Measures was given the task of overseeing the censorship. Censorship was organized into three divisions: postal, telegraph and press. Each division was controlled by a Chief Censor. In public, de Valera and the government presented the policy of neutrality as being fair to all sides involved in the war. In reality, the government was forwarding useful information to the Allies. Censorship also banned all references to the tens of thousands of Irish men fighting in the Allied army.

Seán Lemass was appointed Minister for Supplies and introduced rationing. In late 1939, ration books were issued. By early 1940, rationing had been applied to goods such as tea, petrol and coal. The so-called 'Glimmerman' inspectors went from house to house to check that no one was wasting fuel. Initially, shortages in Ireland were at a minimum; it was only after the Nazi takeover of France that serious shortages began to appear. Supplies of tea, coal, oil and fertilizer were low. These shortages led to high prices, and queues outside shops, as well as to the establishment of

black markets. In Ireland, many types of consumer goods, such as, clothes, furniture and electrical appliances became almost impossible to buy. However, food supplies remained adequate throughout the war.

During the war, wages did not rise in line with prices. This was due to the Wage Standstill Order, 1941, putting a limit on the increase in wages. Between 1939 and 1944, wages rose by 13%, while prices rose by 70%. As a result, the living standards of Irish workers fell dramatically. The government organized a number of measures at the outbreak of war. These included a new emergency budget and a special national loan. Until World War II, Ireland had been heavily dependent on British merchant ships. As Britain required all of these ships for its war effort, there was a shortage of carriers servicing Ireland. In 1941, the government founded Irish Shipping Limited. The company bought eight ships and leased another five to bring goods into and out of the country. The operation proved highly successful; within 15 months they were making a profit. The lack of ships bringing goods into Ireland resulted in a shortage of raw materials. As a result, industrial output fell by 30% and unemployment in the industrial sector rose by 15%. However, the war did not have a long-term impact on the Irish economy, largely because the county did not spend much money on defence.

During the war the Northern Economy experienced something of a boom. The shipbuilding industry rose to meet wartime demands. Some 140 warships were constructed by the world-famous Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast. Shorts Bros built around 1,200 Stirling bomber planes and naval equipment was manufactured in Antrim. The Northern Irish linen industry was greatly disrupted by the war. The German Army invaded Russia, Belgium, and France, which were the main sources of the flax needed for linen production. During the war, around 15,000 acres of land in Northern Ireland were set aside for flax growth. Some 2 million parachutes, hundreds of thousands of uniforms and other equipment were manufactured in Northern Ireland. These were largely made by the high number of women in the workforce. Unemployment fell in Northern Ireland from 30% to just 5%. Northern workers also saw a wage increase, unlike southern workers. As a result, large numbers of unemployed workers from the South travelled North in search of employment.

In 1939, Belfast was removed from the worsening situation in Europe, as it felt under no threat of invasion. Life in Ulster remained largely unchanged. Some measures were introduced within the first six months, such as food rationing, travel restrictions, and censorship. However, in

comparison to other cities, Belfast coped quite well. In 1939 it was described in a diary as “*the pleasantest place in Europe*”. However, in a move which would prove costly, little was done to protect the city of Belfast from attack. Despite the warning, there was a genuine belief in Northern Ireland that the war would not affect them. Commenting on the lack of preparation, Independent Unionist Tommy Henderson remarked at Stormont: “*We are as backward as they are in the wilds of South Africa*”.

In 1939, the Government appointed Major Frank Eastwood as full-time air raid precautions officer. The Air Raid Precautions Act 1939 set up structures to deal with firefighting, gas attacks, the evacuation of children from towns and cities, the building of air raid shelters and the blacking out of the city at night. In the weeks leading up to the war an increasing sense of urgency began to seep into the city. Trenches were dug in public parks and schools in case of surprise attacks. The Ministry of Home Affairs distributed a million sandbags. They also asked the British government for 1 million gas masks for the population of Northern Ireland, but they received only 420,000. There were also insufficient bomb shelters; by the time the war began, only 25% of the population could be catered for in the shelters.

The fears of many came true when on the night of 7th April 1941, the Luftwaffe came to Belfast and dropped bombs on the dockside area of the city. The raid stunned people in the city as the air raid sirens had not sounded to warn of an attack. The attack lasted for about 3 hours 30 minutes and resulted in the death of 13 people. The government tried to reassure the public that it had been well prepared for the attack and congratulated them on how they had “*stood up to the test*”. In reality, there were very few anti-aircraft guns, barrage balloons, or bomb shelters. Only 3000 people were evacuated from the city. Most people did not trust these ‘official’ statements as they did not reflect the fear and anger felt in wartime Belfast.

German bombers came two more times in April and May 1941. The worst raid was on the night of 15/16 April. Ninety bombers dropped thousands of tons of high explosives, which missed the shipyards and fell on tightly packed workers’ houses. Bombs also knocked out telephone cables and water mains, making it difficult for rescue workers and firemen. After an appeal for help, de Valera sent fire brigades from the south, but they could do little. At least 900 people died. Many were never identified and were buried in mass graves. Another raid on May 5th killed fewer people, but more than 200 buildings in the north and east of the city were set ablaze. The Harland and

Wolff shipyard was very badly damaged. Thousands of refugees fled south or to nearby towns and villages. For months, about 100,000 left the city each night and slept in barns and fields.

To conclude, the social and economic impacts of World War II were extensive. The war widened the gap between Northern Ireland and the South; while the North prospered, the south grew poorer. After the war Britain set up the Welfare State. It gave northern people of both Protestant and Catholic communities social welfare benefits that the South could not afford for its people. The damage done to Belfast in the air raids was extensive; conservative estimates show the number of deaths to be 1,100 people, with half the houses in the city destroyed and damage of £20 million done to the city. It would take the North years to fully recover from these attacks.