

Ireland: The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition, 1912 - 1946 | Sample Answer

How did the government of Northern Ireland deal with economic problems and/or threats to security, 1920-1945? (2012)

The Northern Irish State was established under the Government of Ireland Act 1920. The act was introduced by the British Minister, Lloyd George, as a way of solving divisions between nationalists and unionists that had emerged following the Ulster crisis that followed the Third Home Rule Bill 1912. This act proposed the creation of two Home Rule governments in Belfast and Dublin. To which the Ulster unionist party accepted and the Sinn Féin party rejected. Over the following years, the Northern Ireland government faced considerable amounts of economic problems and threats to their security, the sectarian divisions and problems being the main threat to their safety. In this essay, I will be discussing just how the newly established government tackled these challenges.

In 1914 the six counties in Northern Ireland were more economically advanced than the rest of Ireland, one of the main reasons for unionist opposition to Home Rule was the claim that Ulster would suffer economically under parliament in Dublin's rule. However, after a brief post World War One economic boom, Northern Ireland's economic facade began to crack. It was hit by a severe recession that crippled both shipbuilding and textiles industry. Unemployment rose to about 25% and stubbornly stayed there for much of the inter-war period. In the shipbuilding industry, the demand for new vessels fell due to the surplus of merchant ships and Belfast's overseas customers developed their own shipbuilding industries. Changes in fashion lowered demand for textiles. Women's dresses became shorter and petticoats were not worn. The

demand for linen to cover aircrafts' wings steadily declined with the arrival of new all-metal aluminium designs. The state was forced to fall back on its agricultural sector.

Northern Ireland's economy was integrated with that of Great Britain's. As such, its government could not pursue an independent economic policy. However, Northern Ireland's specific needs were often ignored by Westminster. For instance, Craig's government was not consulted before Britain decided to return sterling to the Gold Standard in 1925. This greatly damaged Belfast's export industries and unemployment. From 1923 onwards, the state's income was falling and its expenditure rising and so Stormont became more and more dependent on grants from Westminster, to which Craig kept a secret from his party and the wider population.

The North's economy prospered once again during WW2. In 1941 Britain could no longer produce enough war materials and re-located all war-related industries to the North of Ireland. 140 warships and 123 merchant ships were built. Harland and Wolff produced tanks and aircraft parts. Shorts built 1,200 bomber planes. Likewise, the North's linen mills boomed. They had orders for uniforms, tents and parachutes. Later in the war, American troops stationed in Northern Ireland, which also helped to boost employment. Unemployment dropped below 5%, a dramatic reduction from the pre-war period. However, Belfast paid a big price for their help in the war effort with the Belfast bombing in 1941.

The sectarian strife in Northern Ireland caused serious threats to security. The Orange Order played a big role in these threats. They were an organisation set up in 1795 to protect Protestantism. In 1935, with tension mounting over employment and discrimination, riots broke out on 12th July as the Orange Order held its annual parades in Belfast to commemorate the Battle of the Boyne. The rioting didn't end until August, by which time 11 people, the majority of whom were Protestant, had been killed and up to 2,000 Catholic families driven from their

homes. The Belfast riots highlighted the strained sectarian tensions in Northern Irish society, and how easily violence could erupt.

The IRA in Northern Ireland was another organisation that caused threats to security. The IRA revived in Northern Ireland in 1937 during protests against a visit by the newly crowned King George VI. Internment was imposed in 1939 after they set off bombs in Britain. Over the next year up to 700 IRA men were locked away. The IRA became more active in 1942 because of new leaders. Throughout the spring and summer, it killed 5 RUC members. After one killing, 6 IRA men were captured. Internment both north and south made it difficult for the IRA to remain active for long. By the end of the war, the IRA were seriously weakened.

The Belfast bombing in 1941 was a significant event which caused threats to security. The Belfast shipping industries and linen mills contributed greatly to the war effort for Britain during WW2, and because of this, the city was an obvious target for the German attacks. Yet little preparations were made to defend the city. Many of the politicians believed that the German Luftwaffe would be unable to bomb Belfast as it was too far away and their planes would run out of fuel. However, on the night of 7th April 1941, the Germans attacked Belfast, 13 people were killed and Shorts factory was badly destroyed. Between the days 15-16th April Belfast was bombed again by the Germans, for what is known as the Easter Raid. It killed 900 people and wounded almost 1,500. The raid highlighted just how unprepared the government had been and it shattered the sense of security many had felt in their city. Thousands of people fled to the countryside to seek safety.

Economically, the Northern Ireland government relied heavily on the industries that produced war materials for their main source of income, and this can be seen as a very negative aspect of their policies. If the government invested in other industries it would have been likely that they wouldn't have suffered a large economic depression after both WW1 and WW2. Likewise, I believe if they had taken better action to combat the very serious sectarian divisions, the safety of their state would have been better.