

5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland

| Sample answer

How did the “Troubles” erupt in 1969 and why did they last so long? (2018)

The Troubles erupted in 1969, almost inexorably. The origins of this decades-long conflict lie in the complexities of Northern Ireland’s history, namely its disparate cultures and identities. Eventually, the opposing aims of the divergent Nationalist and Unionist communities and their unresolved grievances culminated in a violent conflict that became known as the Troubles. Arguably, had there been equality for all citizens of the region, regardless of creed or culture, the Troubles would never have erupted as it did. Nevertheless, it did indeed occur at this time and persisted into the 1990s. This essay will examine how the conflict began and why it lasted so long, from the reciprocal nature of the violence to the political failures that meant no solution was quickly found.

Exasperated by inequalities within society in terms of employment, housing, voting rights, education and other aspects of civic life the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was founded. Their justified and peaceful actions stimulated an agitated response from those disagreed with them – Loyalists and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, for example. The sparking ignition to the Troubles came in the form of a housing scandal in 1968 whereby two Catholic families were denied a dwelling in Caledon, Co. Tyrone by the local council in favour of an unmarried 19-year-old Protestant woman. Local MP Austin Currie squatted in the house in protest when the issue, in his view, was dealt with unsatisfactorily in Stormont. On August 24th the first civil rights march took place in Dungannon near Caledon with 2,500 protestors and 1,500 counter-demonstrators opposing them.

Another turning point then came in October 1968 when TV cameras captured police brutality against protestors during a march in Derry on the 5th of the month. MPs Gerry Fitt, Eddie McAteer and Austin Currie were all injured by the police. The Burntollet Bridge incident on January 4th 1969 was a further incendiary event. Prominent rights activists Bernadette Devlin and Michael Farrell

were involved as the protesters came under attack by Loyalists, while the RUC stood by and watched. The summer of 1969 saw increased demonstrations by the NICRA in response to Orange Order marches. Catholic communities were victims of ruthless pogroms carried out by Loyalist mobs with the tacit approval of RUC and the notorious B-Specials. The Battle of the Bogside in August in Derry and the rioting and chaos that followed in the weeks after was proof, for Nationalists at least, that they would need protection in the face of Loyalist violence and police aggression.

A consequence of all this disorder was a reawakening of the Republican movement – a key feature in why the Troubles endured as it did; and it was this context in which the Provisional IRA was born in December 1969. The Catholic public had by now demanded protection from their enemies and so it was not long before the IRA took a central role in the Troubles, viewing themselves as defenders of Nationalist interests. Though the British Army, when they arrived in August 1969 were initially welcomed by most Catholics and were seen as a protective force, they soon became the enemy of Nationalists. In fact, the IRA came to justify acts of violence due to, at first, the presence of British troops, and subsequently, British “interference” as they saw it, into Irish affairs. By 1971 the IRA boasted over 1,000 members in Belfast alone. Equally, paramilitary groups on the Loyalist side such as began to grow. Loyalist groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force had been amassing arms and membership was growing. The ingredients for the conflict to endure were in place.

Violence begot violence during this time in Northern Ireland. It is fair to claim that the tit-for-tat nature of the terror that took hold of the region from 1969 onwards was one of the reasons the Troubles endured for so long. A sample of incidents helps illustrate this “on-going” nature of violence. Between April and June 1972 the IRA carried out 134 serious bombings. Consequently, Brian Faulkner permitted the now present British Army in the North to “shoot with effect”. Indeed, Faulkner’s introduction of internment resulted in the inverse of its aim and IRA membership surged. A key event occurred on the 30th of January 1972 which resulted in the deaths of 14 people at the hands of British soldiers, Bloody Sunday. Gerry Adams wrote of the event in his memoir, as a result of Bloody Sunday “money, guns and recruits flowed into the IRA”. Though the violence lessened with Secretary of State Roy Mason’s approach to security – in 1977 the number of civilian deaths decreased to 55 – further actions by paramilitaries ensured there was no end in sight to the Troubles. Between 1985 and 1988 the UVF and the UDA killed 67 civilians in attacks. The horrific Enniskillen bombing was carried out by the IRA on November 11th 1987 killing 11 and

wounding 60. Violence on one side seems to have relentlessly provoked violence by the other, and even into the early 1990s there was still no end to the conflict. In early 1992 the IRA planted a bomb at Teebane crossroads Co. Tyrone killing 8 Protestants. Only a few weeks later the UDA entered a Catholic bookshop in Belfast and murdered 5 civilians.

Failure to find a political solution must be cited as a reason why the Troubles continued as long as it did. Firstly, the Sunningdale Agreement of 1972-1973, an attempt at establishing a power-sharing executive, did not work. Having only been signed on December 9th 1973 it collapsed in May 1974. The Council of Ireland dimension, where representatives from both the Republic and Northern Ireland would discuss matters of concern, came as an affront to Unionists in particular, but was rejected by the IRA and Loyalists too. The Agreement actually provoked more violence. In March 1974 the IRA bombed the Grand City Hotel and carried out other violent acts. By now the IRA had committed themselves to a long campaign of violence – a strategy that was designed to wear down the British resolve and one that would mean no quick resolution to the Troubles. Loyalists also showed their disdain for the Agreement by bombing Catholic churches and assassinating Catholics.

Further failures such as Humphrey Atkins' proposed round-table discussions from 1979 under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government were rejected by Unionists like Ian Paisley and James Molyneaux, as well as the SDLP, which meant that finding a political solution was unlikely. Thatcher's handling of the Hunger Strike crisis polarised the two communities even more so. It resulted in many moderate Nationalists moving closer to Sinn Fein and IRA ideology. Under her government's rule little was done to equalise the inequities in Northern Ireland, so Catholics still remained second-class citizens meaning on-going conflict was consequently more likely. Even though the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 was seen as more successful than Sunningdale, Loyalists and Republicans in its aftermath continued to commit acts of violence. As mentioned, the IRA was insistent on such a trajectory as long as Direct Rule was in place. Even up to 1993, with the IRA dedicated to a campaign of violence due to the fact the John Major's government refusal to enter talks with Sinn Fein, it is explicable why the Troubles lasted so long.

Overall, the Troubles was a terrible chapter in the history of the island of Ireland. The tragedy of the inequality that lay at its origins and the horror of the violence that occurred throughout its

duration impacted the people of the region permanently. True evidence of this conflict's complexity, described above, is seen in how it came about initially and why it continued for so long.