The Troubles

Senior Group Documentary

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Lasting nearly three decades, the Troubles was a period of sectarian violence between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists in Northern Ireland. Erupting in 1968 after a series of civil rights marches, the conflict reflected rising distrust along ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic lines and led to an era of fighting over borders. Fortified frontiers went up between Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods, enforcing segregation and inciting division. There would be over 3,500 deaths before the Good Friday Agreement, a permanent ceasefire, was signed in 1998. However, in the 21st century, many of the physical frontiers separating once integrated Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods remain.

The seventeenth century marked the expansion of British colonization across the globe. In 1601, England sent Scottish settlers to Ireland in hopes of replacing the Catholic majority with a Protestant one. These colonizers viewed the native Gaelic population as inferior and took control of their land, creating the Plantation of Ulster in Northern Ireland. In 1649, after a series of Gaelic rebellions, British General Oliver Cromwell led a re-conquest of Ireland with the intent of erasing Irish people and culture from the island.

After three centuries of British oppression and Catholic impoverishment, the newly formed Irish Republican Army (IRA) declared independence and with the December 1918 election of Sinn Fien, a nationalist political party, a breakaway government in Ireland was established. After three years of the Irish War of Independence, known for civilian casualties and guerilla tactics, the Republic of Ireland won its autonomy. As a result of the war-ending Anglo-Irish treaty, Great Britain partitioned six counties of the majority Protestant Ulster, establishing the province of Northern Ireland. The borders for the annexation were drawn without the consultation of any of the residents of the region, 36% of whom identified as Catholic. In 1921, Northern Ireland saw a border go up between it and the newly free Irish Republic.

In 1956, the IRA began a military campaign aimed at re-unifying Ireland. At the time, the IRA was largely made up of volunteers from the Republic of Ireland who still had strong ties in ideology to the fighters of the 1920s. In response to the 1957 assassination of a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officer, the government of Ulster instituted a policy of internment which allowed anyone suspected of involvement in the IRA to be jailed without trial. With the operation's failure, the IRA was largely disbanded, however not before the organization's presence and focus shifted to Northern Ireland.

After the violent tactics of the Border Campaign proved ineffectual, a new generation of liberal nationalists organized to create change using methods mirroring those of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was formed in response to electoral, employment, and housing discrimination against Catholics.

Housing across Northern Ireland was largely segregated by religion and the city of Londonderry, whose Catholic majority was an anomaly in the region, was no different. On October 5, 1968, NICRA organized a march through Londonderry's Protestant controlled downtown to protest housing inequality. The procession of primarily Catholic protesters were violently beaten back from the road by RUC officers, who were over 97% protestant and notorious for their policing tactics. The events in Derry were broadcast across Northern Ireland and years of uneasy coexistence between Protestants and Catholics began to shatter.

After the conflict in Londonderry, tensions around Northern Ireland continued to intensify. During the marching season when members of Protestant societies paraded through city streets, Catholic agitation often resulted in rioting. As a result, in 1969, British military forces were deployed to Northern Ireland as peacekeepers. Their presence was originally welcomed—Protestants hoped it would mean an end to conflict during their marching season and Catholics hoped the soldiers would be a neutral policing force, unlike the increasingly sectarian RUC. These hopes were dispelled in 1972 when 26 Catholic civilians were shot, 14 of whom were killed, by British soldiers at a protest organized by NICRA in Londonderry. This event, known as Bloody Sunday, became a turning point in the conflict. Support for NICRA began to decline and membership in both Protestant and Catholic paramilitary groups rose. The Ulster Defense Association, an umbrella organization of Protestant paramilitaries, increased its sectarian assassinations, and the Provisional IRA, a more violent faction of the official organization, began a campaign of car bombings in the capital, Belfast. Frontiers between Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods became the battleground for a guerrilla war. In Belfast, where Catholics and Protestants had once lived on the same block, districts became segregated as bombings and army raids increased. Beginning in 1970, physical barriers labeled peace lines began going up along informal borders of Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods, quickly becoming militarized checkpoints. During the following 30 years, 67% of deaths in Northern Ireland occurred within 500 meters of these frontiers.

Following the intensification of the conflict in the 1970s, largely along the now fortified frontiers between Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods in Belfast, the IRA turned to new methods of agitation. Tensions escalated with the attempted assassination of UK prime minister John Major in 1991 as the conflict crossed borders to England. Both nationalists and unionists began to recognize that violence was not delivering a solution. In 1994 leaders of Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the two main nationalist parties, began negotiating peace talks with British officials, that included a ceasefire and the release of IRA prisoners jailed under internment. In 1998 the Good Friday Agreement was ratified after a popular vote in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, with a slim majority of 52% of Protestant Northern Irish voting for the compromise. The agreement established a devolved government in Northern Ireland and officially recognized the disputed border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The three-pronged agreement implemented diplomatic relationships through the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and set up cross-frontier cooperation with Northern Ireland, England, and the Republic of Ireland. This agreement marked the movement toward reconciliation for both Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland and the future of the territory as a shared republic.

Following the British exit from the European Union, a move a majority in Northern Ireland voted against, tensions between nationalists and unionists were reignited. The frontier with the Republic of Ireland became an international checkpoint, and the unity between the two countries, and the ability for goods and people to move between them, was called into question. Resentment is still there for the Northern Irish who see continued control by the British as a threat to their democracy. On the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, there are more peace walls dividing neighborhoods in Belfast than during The Troubles, many of which were constructed in the early 2000s. Demilitarized, these walls have become tourist attractions because of the political murals that decorate them. Debates continue on whether these physical frontiers should be permanently taken down to build unity between still predominantly segregated neighborhoods. These physical frontiers remind Belfast of the lasting impact of The Troubles on Northern Ireland—fragile peace.