

NORTHERN IRELAND

by Ross Mulkern

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Ireland is an island on which there are two countries. These countries are called The Republic of Ireland, which is an independent state, and Northern Ireland, which is one of the four countries in the United Kingdom. But how did this situation happen, and what is the relationship between the two countries today?

Historically the island of Ireland was home to many small kingdoms, each with their own king. Later it was unified under the high kings of Ireland and enjoyed a short period of independence as a single country covering the entire island. Before long, however, the English came with the intention to rule over the Irish. At first the English only controlled some areas of the island, however eventually it came under the complete domination of its neighbour. At first, the country was autonomous, being ruled as a separate state under the King of England. Eventually, however, England took complete control of Ireland and the country was made a part of the United Kingdom along with England and Scotland.

In an attempt to strengthen their power over the island, many Protestants from England and Scotland had were sent to live in Ireland, especially in the north.

Because the Irish were Catholics, they were treated very badly by the English rulers, who by this point were all Protestant. The most famous example of this is the Great Famine, in which potato crops failed and many, many Irish were left to starve. They received very little help from the British government and many were sent to Australia for the crime of stealing such basic things as bread from their British occupiers.

Finally, in 1916 a group of Irish rebels decided that it was time to take back control of their country and started an armed insurrection called the "Easter Rising". The rebellion failed, but it eventually led to the rebels starting their own parliament in Dublin and ignoring British rule. This in turn led to a war between Britain and Ireland.

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Because Britain had been so weakened by the First World War, the rebels were able to fight them to a stalemate – a situation where neither side can win. Because of this, a compromise was reached: Ireland could have independence, but the area in the north where there was a protestant majority would remain part of the UK.

The Irish government accepted this treaty, but it was very controversial. So many people did not like the agreement that it immediately led to a civil war between those who accepted the agreement and those who rejected it.

Eventually, the war was one by the side who supported the treaty, but this was not the end of the conflict in Ireland. From the 1960s until the late 1990s, Britain and Ireland – especially Northern Ireland – were attacked by terrorist groups fighting either for or against the union of Northern Ireland with the Republic. People who wanted the whole of Ireland to be united were called republicans. These people were mostly Catholic. The republican paramilitary was called the IRA. On the other side there were loyalist, protestant terror groups who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK. The most famous of these is the Ulster Volunteer Force. Between them, the IRA, UVF and associated groups were responsible for thousands of civilian deaths.

In 1998 a deal was made in Northern Ireland called The Good Friday Agreement – a compromise between republicans and loyalists which gave both sides some of what they wanted and marked the end of terrorist violence in Northern Ireland.

Today, the situation is much calmer. There are still tensions between Protestant and Catholic communities and neither side has forgotten the crimes committed by the other. Nonetheless, more and more communities of different political and religious beliefs are working together to try and make sure the future of Ireland can remain a peaceful one.