

## **Aphrodite Stamboulos – Essay Winner 2021**

Following the attempt by Irish rebels to gain independence through an insurrection known as Easter Rising, the British incarcerated and/or executed anyone remotely involved. This reaction caused the Irish public opinion to change from one of resentment towards the rebels to overwhelming support for independence as shown by the election of many members of the Sinn Fein party (whose goal was Irish independence) to local and national positions. Protestant loyalists, who sided with the British, became angrier as they saw many members of Sinn Fein win in local elections in primarily Catholic areas of northern Ireland. This anger resulted in much violence throughout 1920 and continued throughout the Irish Revolutionary War, with many Catholics viewing the repeated attacks by Protestant loyalists as a pogrom against them. On July ninth, 1921, a truce was signed between the British government and Sinn Fein, temporarily abating fighting between British forces and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Unfortunately, this did not end the bloodshed over Irish independence in northern Ireland, especially in Belfast. The violence in Belfast on Bloody Sunday and in the following months was initially caused by discord between loyalists and nationalists, who were primarily Catholic, but quickly became more about religion than independence.

One of the first violent events following the signing of the truce was 1921's Bloody Sunday. When the truce was signed on July ninth, "[t]he timing, coming just before the annual 'Twelfth' commemorations in the north, could not have been worse – to loyalists, it seemed that the IRA was reaping benefits from its violence of the previous eighteen months" (Glennon). 'Twelfth', which celebrates the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II, coinciding with the truce seemed to be a proverbial slap in the face to the loyalists because a moment of ethnic pride for them became about settling differences with their enemies,

the Catholics. By effect, this truce was no different than pouring gasoline on an already raging fire. Within hours of the truce being signed, it was broken in Belfast when an ambush of the IRA by the police went awry, resulting in an officer killed and two other officers injured (Glennon). The following morning, July tenth, there was “a ferocious reaction to the ambush” by both sides, resulting in the death of ten Catholics and five Protestants (Glennon). This event became known as Bloody Sunday and as each side began pointing fingers at the other over the violence, matters went from bad to downright disastrous since “[b]y the end of the week, twenty-three people had been killed in Belfast, hundreds more wounded, two hundred homes destroyed and a thousand people made homeless” (Glennon). The fact that a weekend began with a truce and ended with increased violence in northern Ireland shows how deep the anger ran between not even the loyalists and nationalists, but Protestants and Catholics. This level of unfettered anger is further highlighted by southern Ireland’s ability to press pause on their fighting with British forces once the truce was executed. It can be surmised that the lack of Protestant presence in the south made the fighting more of a political nature than of a religious one. Therefore, the events of Bloody Sunday illustrate that the hatred between loyalists and nationalists is edging more towards a religious than a political motivation.

Furthermore, since this genuine hatred existed between Protestants and Catholics, violence continued in Belfast, especially towards the Catholic minority. Throughout “1920 and 1921, the IRA made frequent incursions over the border into Northern Ireland... [and] often attacked the local Protestants” causing “many Protestants scapegoated Catholics for the IRA violence” (Johnston). These acts by the IRA, which were tied to the same independence movement as the Sinn Fein party, evidently deepened the association between them and Catholicism in the minds of Protestant loyalists. This change into more religious-based fighting

and attacks can be seen by the fact that “[v]ictims and perpetrators are categorised by religion,[and] rarely by membership of a paramilitary organisation” (Hughes). The police force taking note of religious affiliation instead of political affiliation further shows this association between politics and religion people made in their minds. This was true even if religion and political affiliation did not align as one might expect for a person. Furthermore, “most Catholics were either actively or passively hostile to the IRA, the Catholic population as a whole is framed as exposed, vulnerable, and (reluctantly) in need of republican protection from Protestant[s]” (Hughes). Since Catholics were targeted regardless of their political affiliation, they needed protection and the only people who would give it was the IRA, which unfortunately fed into the stereotypes that played a role in why they were targeted. Thus, this association between Catholics and IRA created increased targeted attacks towards Catholic people, stemming from existing anger by loyalist Protestants.

The cause of violence in Belfast can be boiled down to animosity between nationalists and loyalists that began due to differing beliefs on independence but continued because of religion. As seen with the events previous to, and on Bloody Sunday, much of the fighting that occurred in northern Ireland was related to the movement throughout all of Ireland for independence. However fighting continued even years later because of this association between Catholicism, nationalist ideology, and the IRA still lived in the minds of the Protestant loyalist majority