

What was the impact of WWII on Ireland, North and South? (2017)

The beginning of World War II had a major impact on the economy and society, both North and South. The North prospered, entering a boom period, whilst the South suffered the economic stagnation of neutrality. Partition of the two states had been solidifying throughout the 1920s, made officially permanent on 3 December 1925 by the Boundary Commission. It strengthened in the 1930s as the Ulster Unionist Party grew in power in the North and a Catholic, Gaelic state developed in the South. This led to WWII having such drastically different effects on both states, despite both feeling the impact of the war on everyday living standards and work practices. The Irish Free State's neutrality, led by Eamon de Valera, was made possible by the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1938, Britain relinquishing its ports, giving the Free State control of its waters. Meanwhile, in the North, loyalist ideals were strong, hence leading to strong involvement in the war. Despite experiencing incredible economic growth, the North's participation in the war meant it faced levels of significant destruction, especially in Belfast, that the South managed to escape.

At the outbreak of war, on 3 September 1939, de Valera announced via radio broadcast that the Free State would remain neutral. He detailed the reasoning, citing its vulnerability as a small nation and the continued existence of partition as a large factor in the decision: "...with a part of our country still unjustly severed from us, we felt that no other decision and no other policy was possible." Their neutrality was also a stark symbol of their newfound independence. They backed up their neutrality for the duration of the war with a wide-ranging system of censorship. They wanted to ensure that the public only received limited and supposedly balanced reports of Europe and beyond. They had many reasons for this heavy censorship. Ireland was poorly equipped for a war, so it made sense for the Government to limit reporting on the military. They also hoped that the heavy censorship would prevent republicans promoting the old adage of "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity", threatening neutrality. This became especially relevant after the movement of the IRA to support the Nazis in direct opposition to Britain, quashed by de Valera with the creation of a camp in Curragh to intern those involved which had the impact of the IRA being severely weakened. Frank Aiken, the Minister of Defensive Measures was given the task of overseeing the censorship. It was organised into three divisions: postal, telegraph and press. Each division was controlled by a Chief Censor. Censorship also banned all reference to the tens of thousands of Irishmen fighting in the Allied Army. These actions had an impact on the relationship between the government and the public in Ireland for years to come despite the end of censoring in 1945.

De Valera and his government maintained a public presentation of the policy of neutrality as fair to all the countries involved in the war. This was reinforced by no public weather forecasts and de Valera giving his condolences on the deaths of both Roosevelt and Hitler in 1945. In private defiance of this, however, weather reports were secretly given to the British. Additionally, Ireland allowed infringement of Irish airspace over Donegal by British flying boats and US planes and British boats were allowed into Irish waters for air-sea rescue. This helped to reduce the impact of the foul relations between Britain and Ireland, in spite of Ireland having refused to allow their Treaty ports to be regained by the UK for use during the war.

Sean Lemass was appointed Minister for Supplies and introduced rationing, issuing ration books in late 1939. The war ended in 1945 but rationing continued in Éire until 1951, highlighting the economic struggle that they suffered through due to the war. By early 1940,

rationing had been applied to goods such as tea, petrol, and coal. The so-called 'Glimmer men' inspectors from house to house to check that no one was wasting fuel. Initially, shortages in Ireland were relatively low; it was only after the Nazi takeover of France that serious shortages began to appear. It was also around this time that the British prime minister Winston Churchill made de Valera a deal: end neutrality and Britain would end partition. De Valera's refusal prompted a bitter Churchill to respond by subjecting Ireland to a crippling supply squeeze. Supplies of tea, coal, oil, and fertilizer were low – 74,00 tons of British imported fertiliser in 1940 had dropped to zero by 1940. This affected Irish agriculture heavily, and led to high prices and queues outside shops, as well as the establishment and growth of black markets. In addition, many types of consumer goods, such as clothes, furniture and electrical appliances became almost impossible to buy. There was an overall shortage of raw materials. However, food supplies remained adequate throughout the war.

During the war, wages did not rise in line with prices. This was due to the Wage Standstill Order, 1941, putting a limit on the increase in wages. Between 1939 and 1944, wages rose by 13%, while prices rose by 70%. As a result, the living standards of Irish workers fell dramatically. In an attempt to combat this, the government introduced a number of measures, including a new emergency budget and a special national loan. Until World War II, Ireland had been heavily reliant on imports from British ships. When the war began and Britain needed all its ships for the war effort, Ireland had to come up with a solution to the loss of carriers. In 1941, they founded Irish Shipping Limited. The company bought eight ships and leased another five. It was highly successful: within 15 months they were making a profit. Nevertheless, the lack of raw materials resulted in a fall of industrial output of 30% and unemployment in the industrial sector by 15%. Fortunately, the war did not have a long-term impact on the Irish economy, in part because the country did not spend much money on defence.

During the war the Northern economy experienced something of a boom. The shipbuilding industry rose to meet wartime demands. Some 140 warships were constructed by the Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast. Shorts Bros built around 1,200 Stirling bomber planes and naval equipment was manufactured in Antrim. The Northern Irish linen industry was greatly disrupted by the war when the Nazis invaded Russia, Belgium, and France, which were the main sources of the flax needed for linen production. During the war, around 15,000 acres of land in Northern Ireland were set aside for flax growth. Some 2 million parachutes, hundreds of thousands of uniforms and other equipment were manufactured in Northern Ireland. These were largely made by the high number of women in the workforce. Thousands of jobs were created when the North became a base for the US Navy and for training American soldiers. Unemployment fell in Northern Ireland from 30% to just 5%. As a result, large numbers of unemployed workers from the South travelled North in search of employment.

Increased numbers of emigration to Britain – an average of 18,000 a year between 1936 and 1946 – were affected by the work situations but also by how well areas of Northern Ireland were coping, as life in Ulster remained virtually unchanged. Some measures were introduced in the first six months, such as food rationing and censorship. Even so, comparatively to other cities, Belfast was doing well. In 1939 it was described in a diary as "the pleasantest place in Europe". In a move that would prove costly however, little was done to prepare Belfast for attack. There was a genuine belief that the war would continue to not severely affect them. Commenting on the lack of defence systems, Independent Unionist Tommy Henderson remarked at Stormont: "We are as backward as they are in the wilds of South Africa". In direct opposition to this though, British PM James Craig claimed: "Ulster is ready when we

get the word and always will be.” In this, Henderson would prove to be the more insightful of the two.

The insufficiency of British funding in defence in Belfast would come to a head in 1941. There were only 24 anti-aircraft guns, very few of which were manned at night, no searchlights and very few barrage balloons. This left the city very little time to react in situations of attack. Furthermore, the government had not wanted to spend money on public air-raid shelters so there were only 200 in the city, although around 4,000 households had their own private shelters. Regardless, prior to the Blitz, only about 25% of the population had access to a shelter. The Air Raid Precautions Act of 1939 also proved to be a failure, as fewer than 4,000 women and children were evacuated, 80,000 still left in the city.

On the night of 7 April 1941, the Luftwaffe dropped its first attack on the dockside area of the city. It came as a complete shock as the air raid sirens had not sounded for warning. It resulted in the deaths of 13 people. The government attempted to reassure the public, congratulating them on how they had “stood up to the test”. But fear and anger were rampant and distrust in the government grew.

Three more German bomb attacks came in April and May 1941: the Easter Raid (15 April), the Fire Raid (4-5 May), and the Fourth Raid (5-6 May). The worst raid was the Easter Raid, the siege 5 hours long and consisting of 180 aircraft dropping thousands of tons of explosives, mainly targeting the densely populated, working-class areas. The Northern government sent an appeal for help of fire brigades which de Valera sent from Dublin, Drogheda, Dundalk, and Dun Laoghaire. This was a popular move to the Ulster Unionists but was controversial in the South as it threatened Irish neutrality. Unfortunately, by the time they arrived, they made little affect to the devastation Belfast was facing anyway. In total, the four attacks killed an estimated 1,100 people, many unidentified and buried in mass graves. Half the houses in the city were destroyed, as well as the Harland and Wolff shipyard. There was over £20 million of damage.

To conclude, the social and economic impacts of World War II were extensive. The war widened the gap between Northern Ireland and the South; while the North prospered, the south grew poorer. Both countries saw their foreign relations alter as a result of their war stance. After the war Britain set up the Welfare State. It gave northern people of both Protestant and Catholic communities social welfare benefits that the South could not afford for its people. The damage done to Belfast in the air raids was immense - it would take the North years to recover, even with the eventual financial assistance of the Marshall Plan.