

# Chapter 1: The Origins of Northern Ireland, 1920-1945

## Introduction

Northern Ireland was established in 1920 following the **Government of Ireland Act**, which partitioned Ireland into two separate entities. This division reflected the deep **political, religious, and economic differences** between **unionists and nationalists**. Unionists, mostly **Protestants**, wanted to remain part of the **United Kingdom**, while nationalists, mostly **Catholics**, sought a **united Ireland**. The partition created a **unionist-dominated Northern Ireland**, leading to political tensions, economic struggles, and sectarian divisions that shaped the state's early years.

## 1. The Background to Partition

### The Home Rule Movement and Unionist Opposition

- The **Act of Union (1801)** meant Ireland was governed from **Westminster**.
- Irish **constitutional nationalists** sought **Home Rule**, meaning an Irish parliament for internal affairs while still under British control.
- The **Third Home Rule Bill (1912)** was passed but delayed until after World War I.
- Unionists strongly opposed Home Rule, fearing:
  - **Political Loss:** They would be ruled by a Catholic-majority parliament in Dublin.
  - **Religious Discrimination:** Slogan “**Home Rule is Rome Rule**” expressed fear of Catholic control.
  - **Economic Damage:** The **industrial northeast** relied on British trade and feared Dublin would focus on agriculture.
  - **Cultural Differences:** Unionists identified as British and Protestant, while nationalists saw themselves as Irish and Catholic.

### Unionist Resistance to Home Rule

- **Ulster Solemn League and Covenant (1912):** 470,000 unionists pledged to resist Home Rule.
- **Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF, 1913):** Paramilitary group prepared to fight against Home Rule.
- **Larne Gun-Running (1914):** 20,000 rifles and 3 million rounds smuggled in for UVF.
- In response, nationalists formed the **Irish Volunteers**, increasing tensions.

### The War of Independence and the Government of Ireland Act (1920)

- After the **1916 Rising and 1918 Election**, **Sinn Féin** replaced the Home Rule Party.
- The **War of Independence (1919-1921)** intensified nationalist demands for full independence.

- British PM **David Lloyd George** proposed **two Home Rule parliaments**: one in **Belfast (for Ulster)** and one in **Dublin**.
- **Unionists** accepted a **six-county Northern Ireland**, rejecting a nine-county Ulster due to high Catholic populations in **Donegal, Cavan, and Monaghan**.

## *2. The Creation of Northern Ireland (1921-1925)*

### *Establishment of the Northern Ireland Parliament*

- **Opened on June 7, 1921**, with **James Craig** as **Prime Minister**.
- **Unionist Party dominated**: Won **40 out of 52 seats** in 1921 election.
- **Nationalist MPs (Sinn Féin and Nationalist Party)** **boycotted Stormont**, refusing to recognize partition.
- Stormont controlled **education, health, policing, and industry**, but Westminster controlled **defence and foreign policy**.

### *The Boundary Commission (1925)*

- The **Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921)** promised a review of the border.
- Nationalists hoped for territory transfers to the Free State.
- The final report recommended **only minor changes** (less than 2% of nationalists transferred).
- To avoid conflict, the British, Free State, and Northern Irish governments **agreed to leave the border unchanged**.

## *3. Unionist Rule and Nationalist Discontent*

### *Unionist Political Dominance*

- Craig declared, “**A Protestant Parliament for a Protestant State**”.
- **Gerrymandering** ensured **unionist electoral control**, particularly in Derry.
- **Proportional representation was abolished (1929)**, making it harder for nationalists to win seats.
- Nationalists were systematically **excluded from government positions**.

### *Law and Order*

- The **Special Powers Act (1922)** allowed internment without trial and severe punishment for possession of weapons.
- The **Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)** and the **B-Specials** (armed auxiliary police) enforced Protestant rule.
- Nationalists saw these forces as **tools of oppression**, increasing resentment.

### *Discrimination Against Catholics*

- **Employment:** Catholics faced **job discrimination**, with unionist politicians openly calling for hiring Protestants first.
- **Housing:** Catholics were denied public housing in certain areas to maintain Protestant majorities.
- **Education:** Catholic schools received less funding than Protestant schools.

#### *4. Northern Ireland's Economy (1920s-1930s)*

##### *Economic Challenges*

- Northern Ireland relied on **shipbuilding, textiles, and engineering**.
- **Great Depression (1929)** led to economic decline:
  - Shipbuilding **collapsed** as global demand fell.
  - **Unemployment rose to 30%** in Belfast.
  - Many **Catholics were laid off first**, worsening nationalist grievances.

##### *The Protestant Business Elite*

- **Unionist policies favoured Protestant business leaders**, strengthening their economic dominance.
- Catholic workers were often **excluded from skilled jobs**.
- **Trade unions united Protestants and Catholics**, but sectarian tensions weakened worker solidarity.

#### *5. Northern Ireland During World War II*

##### *Support for the War Effort*

- Unlike **neutral Ireland**, Northern Ireland fully supported **Britain's war effort**.
- **Shipyards, aircraft factories, and munitions plants boomed**.
- Unemployment **fell below 5%** as wartime production surged.
- **38,000 Northern Irishmen volunteered for the British Army**.

##### *The Belfast Blitz (1941)*

- **German bombers attacked Belfast** in April-May 1941.
- Over **1,000 people killed** and **56,000 homes destroyed**.
- **The Unionist government had failed to prepare defences**, increasing criticism of Craig's leadership.
- **Many Northern Catholics remained neutral**, seeing WWII as Britain's war.

##### *Impact of WWII on Northern Ireland*

- Strengthened **Northern Ireland's ties with Britain**.
- Increased reliance on **British economic subsidies**.

- The war **deepened divisions** between unionists (who supported Britain) and nationalists (who remained distant).

### *Conclusion*

- **Partition created a divided Northern Ireland**, with unionists controlling the government and nationalists facing **discrimination and exclusion**.
- **The Stormont government operated as a Protestant-dominated state**, marginalising Catholics politically, economically, and socially.
- The **economy struggled in the 1920s-30s**, but **WWII temporarily revived industry**.
- **By 1945, sectarian divisions remained deep**, laying the groundwork for future conflict.

### *Key Terms*

- **Government of Ireland Act (1920)**: Established two Home Rule parliaments, creating Northern Ireland.
- **Ulster Solemn League and Covenant (1912)**: Unionist pledge to resist Home Rule.
- **Larne Gun-Running (1914)**: Unionists smuggled weapons to arm the UVF.
- **Stormont**: The seat of the Northern Ireland government.
- **Gerrymandering**: Manipulation of voting districts to ensure unionist dominance.
- **Special Powers Act (1922)**: Gave the government extreme legal powers against nationalists.
- **B-Specials**: A Protestant auxiliary police force used against nationalists.
- **Belfast Blitz (1941)**: German bombing of Belfast, causing mass destruction.

