

Northern Ireland: How an island separate in 2 because of religion.

Anyone who has ever traveled through Ireland knows how pleasant the country can be. You pay with the euro, almost everyone speaks excellent English, you can enjoy a traditional pub with a good pint of beer, and as a citizen of the European Union, you can travel there easily with just an identity card.

Yet something changes when you travel farther north on the island. Suddenly, you are no longer paying with euros, but with British pounds. You are no longer within the European Union, and British flags fly everywhere instead of the Irish tricolour. You have arrived in Northern Ireland, a region that is politically and historically very different from the rest of the island.

How is it that one island is divided between two countries today? Why did Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom when the rest of Ireland became independent? And why do religion, identity, and history still play such an important role there?

In this article, we will take a closer look at the origins of this unusual border and discover why Northern Ireland is one of the most unique regions in Europe.



Flag Northern Ireland. Source: wikipedia.org

Origine of Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland, as its name suggests, is located in the north of the island of Ireland. The region is roughly one-third the size of the Netherlands and has a population of more than two million people. The creation of Northern Ireland is closely connected to religion, politics, and national identity.



For a long time, the entire island of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. Following the Acts of Union in 1800, England, Scotland, Wales, and all of Ireland formed a single kingdom.

Within this kingdom, England played the dominant role. Political power was concentrated in London, the British monarch resided there, and English became the main language of government and administration. As a result, the traditional languages of the other parts of the United Kingdom came under increasing pressure.

However, this has changed in recent decades. Regional languages such as Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic, and Welsh are increasingly being protected and taught. The different parts of the United Kingdom also maintain their own identities in sports. For example, England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland often compete with separate national teams in sports such as football and rugby, even though internationally they remain part of the same kingdom.

Meanwhile, the desire for independence grew in Ireland. Many Irish people felt strongly connected to their own culture, language, and history and saw British influence as a threat to their national identity. Because Ireland is also separated from Great Britain by the Irish Sea, a strong independence movement developed that would eventually lead to one of the most complex political conflicts in modern European history. Religion would play a decisive role in the eventual partition of the island.



The current United Kingdom. Source: geografie.nl

In 1919, the Irish War of Independence broke out. Until 1921, Irish nationalists fought for independence from the United Kingdom. The signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty brought an end to the war and allowed most of Ireland to become self-governing.



However, not everyone was satisfied with this outcome. Ireland had a large Protestant population, particularly in the northeast of the island. This community generally felt more closely connected to Great Britain than to an independent Ireland and wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Even before the end of the War of Independence, the British had attempted to find a political solution. The Government of Ireland Act 1920 divided Ireland into two administrative areas: Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. Both were given a degree of self-government within the United Kingdom. In practice, however, this solution proved insufficient, as tensions between the predominantly Catholic nationalists, who wanted an independent Ireland, and the mainly Protestant unionists, who wanted to remain loyal to the British Crown, continued.

Following the Anglo-Irish Treaty, most of the island was given the opportunity to separate from the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland, however, exercised a provision in the treaty that allowed it to remain part of the United Kingdom. This was possible because the Protestant unionists formed a majority in six counties of the historic province of Ulster.

These six counties together formed Northern Ireland, which has remained part of the United Kingdom ever since and continued to pledge allegiance to the British Crown. The remaining 26 counties eventually developed into what is now the Republic of Ireland.

The partition of the island did not resolve the tensions, however. On the contrary, the religious and political divisions between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists would continue for decades and eventually develop into a violent conflict known as The Troubles.



**POBLAUGHT NA H EIREANN,
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.**

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty, six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge, our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government,

THOMAS J. CLARKE

SEAN Mac DIARMADA, THOMAS MacDONAGH,

P. H. PEARSE, EAMONN Ceannt,

JAMES CONNOLLY, JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

Irish proclamation in the year 1916. Source: wikipedia.org

The Troubles

But how did it happen that Protestants became the majority specifically in Ulster, while the rest of the island remained predominantly Catholic? The answer can be traced back to the Plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth century.

After several Irish uprisings against the English Crown, the English government decided to confiscate large areas of land in Ulster from the Catholic Irish nobility. This land was subsequently granted to Protestant settlers from England and Scotland. The aim was to strengthen English control over Ireland and prevent future uprisings. This colonization dramatically changed the demographic makeup of Ulster. Four centuries later, its effects are still visible: it was precisely in this part of the island that Northern Ireland would eventually emerge.

However, the religious and political divisions remained and escalated into a violent conflict in the twentieth century known as The Troubles. The conflict lasted roughly from the late 1960s until 1998 and claimed the lives of more than 3,500 people.

A brief timeline:



- 1966 – The loyalist paramilitary organization Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) carries out its first attacks. The group claims to be protecting the Protestant community from the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which sought a united Ireland.
- 1968 – The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) organizes peaceful demonstrations against discrimination against the Catholic minority in areas such as housing, employment, and voting rights. The protests are frequently dispersed violently, causing tensions to escalate further.
- 1969 – Serious riots break out in Derry, known as the Battle of the Bogside. Catholic neighborhoods are attacked, and the British government eventually sends troops to Northern Ireland. Initially, many Catholics welcome the soldiers, but this attitude changes in the years that follow.
- 1972 – During Bloody Sunday, British soldiers shoot and kill fourteen unarmed demonstrators in Derry. This leads to a huge increase in support for the IRA. Later that same year, the IRA carries out Bloody Friday, in which dozens of bombs are detonated across Belfast.
- 1981 – Republican prisoners begin a hunger strike demanding to be recognized as political prisoners. Ten prisoners, including Bobby Sands, die. The hunger strike attracts worldwide attention.
- 1998 – The signing of the Good Friday Agreement, also known as the Belfast Agreement, largely brings the violence to an end. Among other things, the agreement provides for a Northern Irish parliament, cooperation between Ireland and the United Kingdom, and the gradual disarmament of paramilitary organizations such as the IRA and UVF.

Although the violence has declined significantly since 1998, the consequences of The Troubles are still visible. In cities such as Belfast and Derry, there are still neighborhoods where Catholic and Protestant communities largely live separately, and identity remains an important political and social issue in Northern Ireland.

Nowadays

Today, tensions on the island of Ireland are fortunately much lower than they were during The Troubles. Although political differences still exist, they are now mainly addressed through democratic means rather than violence. That does not mean, however, that the identity of Northern Ireland is no longer a subject of debate.



Despite being part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland still has a large Irish nationalist community. Moreover, some recent polls have shown that support for a possible reunification with Ireland is gradually increasing, although there is currently no clear majority in favor of a united Ireland. Whether Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom in the future or eventually joins Ireland will ultimately depend on its people. The Good Friday Agreement provides for a referendum on reunification if there is sufficient political evidence that a majority would support it.

One of the particularly notable provisions of the Good Friday Agreement is that people in Northern Ireland are free to choose how they identify. They can hold a British passport, an Irish passport, or even both. This makes Northern Ireland one of the few places in the world where residents can officially hold two different national identities.

Although Northern Ireland has historically been predominantly unionist and British-oriented, there has also been increasing space for Irish culture in recent decades. For example, St. Patrick's Day, celebrated on March 17, is widely observed in many places regardless of political or religious background. The Irish language and other cultural traditions are also receiving increasing attention.

The differences between the two communities have certainly not disappeared, but the willingness to live together peacefully has grown considerably since 1998. Northern Ireland therefore remains one of the most fascinating regions in Europe: a place where two national identities, two traditions, and two political visions have existed side by side for more than a century.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland is, in many ways, a unique case within Europe. It is a region whose creation is closely intertwined with religious, political, and national divisions. The separation between Northern Ireland and Ireland largely arose from the divide between Protestant unionists, who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom, and Catholic nationalists, who sought an independent and united Ireland.

Yet the situation today is very different from what it was during the 1960s and 1970s. Since the Good Friday Agreement, violence has largely disappeared, and the two communities are increasingly working together.



In addition, religion plays a less dominant role in the daily lives of many Western Europeans than it did half a century ago.

As a result, there is increasing discussion about the future of Northern Ireland. Some see eventual reunification with Ireland as a logical step, while others want to maintain its ties with the United Kingdom. What that future will look like remains uncertain. Under the Good Friday Agreement, a referendum on reunification can only take place when there is sufficient evidence that a majority of the population would support it.

Whatever the outcome may be, Northern Ireland will remain one of the most fascinating regions in Europe. Few places demonstrate so clearly how religion, history, and national identity can shape the borders of a country. For precisely that reason, Northern Ireland is a fascinating example of how historical decisions can remain visible on the map of Europe more than a century later.

Did this article spark your curiosity, or would you like to read more unique stories like this? Then take a look at my other articles on the website www.achterdewereldkaart.com

