

Witness

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An Uneasy Peace

Northern Ireland's Search For Resolution

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The Good Friday Peace agreement of 1998 brought a great deal of hope to the residents of Northern Ireland. After three decades of violence and civil conflict, a great sigh of relief resonated throughout the islands of the United Kingdom and Ireland. More than 3,700 people had been killed and over 100,000 were injured between 1969 and 1998. This period is euphemistically referred to as “The Troubles.” On the day of the accord, Bertie Ahern, the Republic of Ireland leader, was quoted as saying, “Today is about the promise of a bright future. A day we hope a line can be drawn under the bloody past.” Others, from the differing parties within the conflict, expressed similar thoughts.

However, today Northern Ireland finds itself precariously perched atop an unsteady peace. Instability continues to plague the region followed by repeated outbursts of riots and violence. The sectarian conflict that affected the two communities of Protestants and Catholics has evolved. For many, life is better, but there is no lasting peace.

The deal, which took years to broker, created a semi-autonomous government comprised of both Catholics and Protestants. It called for the disarmament of all of the paramilitary groups and the release of jailed combatants. Northern Ireland would remain part of Britain until a majority of its citizens voted otherwise.

Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble stated at the time, “I see a great opportunity for us to start a healing process.” However, the healing is a slow process. Even as former members of the Catholic/Republican/IRA and the Protestant/Loyalist/UFV/Pro-British paramilitaries try to develop paths of reconciliation, the communities remain splintered.¹



South Belfast, a typical working class family neighborhood.



A double-decker bus filled with tourists travels in front of a peace wall.



Over the last decades, Belfast has been considered the epicenter of The Troubles. Throughout the city, symbols of the sectarian divide can be seen everywhere. British flags fly from Loyalist houses as Irish flags hang throughout Catholic neighborhoods. Brightly colored murals decorate the walls of homes in both communities, many depicting paramilitary gunmen and martyrs of the fighting. These symbols of the conflict serve more to reinforce the ideologies that tore apart the past rather than unite them for the future.







East Belfast in preparation for a gigantic bonfire set alight every year on the night of July 11/12th. July 12th marks the date William of Orange conquered Ireland. Loyalists place Irish flags on the top of the bonfires and banners with offensive notes targeting Catholics (“Taigs”).



Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) station at Grosvenor Road in the centre of Belfast. The fence is nearly ten meters tall and equipped with cameras to protect the Police against the attacks.

Another source of tension are the so-called Peace Walls. These walls were first erected in 1969 following the outbreak of riots. They were built as temporary structures meant to last only a few months, but over time they have become wider, longer and more permanent. Today they stretch over twenty-one miles of city streets. Some of them have gates and are opened in the morning and closed at night; many are manned by the police or community workers designated to oversee these control points.

The walls were built to separate the two communities from each other for safety purposes. Instead, what they ultimately do is continue to reinforce the city's entrenched sectarian divisions. Many believe that removing these walls and desegregating the population would be a way to open up dialogue and accelerate the peace process.



Peace walls were constructed to protect the communities against each other.



In the eyes of many, the biggest obstacle to peace is the high unemployment rate among Northern Ireland's youth. More than 20 percent of the population lives in poverty, and stark income discrepancies remain between Catholic and Protestant communities. The combination of young people with no place to go

and few opportunities for good jobs to build a better future creates a situation where anger and frustration are easily exploited and unleashed. Too often, that anger takes on the form of riots and violence.



Bar 'Rex', Shankill Road, loyalist heartland. No Republican will enter the place because this is still a venue where UVF members meet (Ulster Volunteer Force, an outlawed organisation).



Bombay Street, Belfast. Monument and gardens commemorating the riots in 1969.



South Belfast. UVF's territory. The Ulster Volunteer Force is an outlawed loyalist organisation.



Londonderry/Derry. A march commemorating Bloody Sunday. Catholics commemorate the killing fourteen demonstrators by the British army in 1972.



Loyalists protesting the removal of the Union Jack flag from Belfast's City Hall.

Added to this toxic economic environment, there has been a dramatic increase in the use of drugs and alcohol, particularly in the poorer areas of the city. This combination of factors is a recipe for explosive reactions among the populace. This often plays into the hands of extremists from both sides that do not want to see peace achieved. These individuals prefer to incite riots and paralyze Belfast to show the government and the police that they are still in charge of the city.

Now that the IRA has joined the provisional government, many Catholic youths feel that they were sold out. New Republican splinter groups are moving in to fill the vacuum. The situation reverses when the Protestants conduct their parades that celebrate William of Orange's defeat of the Catholics in the seventeenth-century. When the route crosses into Catholic areas, tensions escalate significantly, frequently resulting in riots. According to, Dr. Martyn Frampton, Ph.D., a terror specialist at Queen Mary University, "By about 2006, many Catholics were coming to feel that the peace process wasn't advancing the Republican objectives and they needed to return to the pure form of the faith." In other words, a continuing struggle.



A march for the families of the victims killed during Bloody Sunday.



Derry/Londonderry. At the infamous IRA-controlled Creggan Estate, youth gather just before the march commemorating Bloody Sunday. On January 30, 1972, fourteen people were killed by the British army. In 2011, the Saville Report stated that British soldiers were responsible for the killings.



Londonderry/Derry. March commemorating Bloody Sunday.



Bloody Sunday Memorial March.



Above left & right: Ulster Covenant Centenary Parade in Belfast. Thousands take part in commemorations to mark the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant.

Bottom right: In the aftermath of the highly controversial voting that took place over the display of the Union Flag on the mast at the Belfast City Hall, Loyalist protesters rushed in to express their dissolution with the latest developments. The protests have cost police £15 million so far.





These demonstrations and marches continually antagonize the opposing parties. This usually results in a riot the following day.



Young Republicans gather on the street during riots with the police in the Catholic section of Ardoyne in Belfast.



Every year the Orange Order (staunch Protestants and Loyalists) organizes parades marching through the Catholic districts. They always end up with the street disturbances between the locals and the Police as Catholics see the marches as a sign of tribalism and territory marking. The riots can go on for several days.

Dr. Martyn Frampton believes that, “What it reflects is that certain hard line communities ... appear to have fallen under growing levels of control by the dissident Republican fraternities.” Due to this trend, there has been a resurgence of shootings and bombings.²

In a BBC interview Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin leader of the political wing of the IRA, once stated “one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.” This mentality is beginning to resonate more and more in the hearts of some of these angry youths.



Water cannon is used against the Loyalist rioters from East Belfast. It is unclear as to what started the riots during the Loyalist flag protest in Belfast.



Catholics riot after an Orange Order Parade.



Once the riots begin, they can go on for days. The nights can become very dangerous.



Bottles filled with gasoline and ignited are thrown at the police. The fires create a great deal a damage.



Suicide Prevention March in Belfast. People from all over Belfast, regardless of their denomination, came together in front of the City Hall to show their solidarity with the relatives who are victims of suicides. The numbers are growing every year.

In some residential areas of Belfast, cross-community patrol groups are seeking to counterbalance these alarming developments. They have created interfaces. The goal of these interfaces is to bring Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods together to talk. They organize community events that present both sides of any issue without prejudice or stereotypes. They apply for government grants in order to develop programs that introduce youths to the job market and allow them to take part in a variety of vocational courses. They also set up self-help groups to provide support to eradicate drug and alcohol problems in the community.

“It can be a challenge,” says one community worker from East Belfast who prefers to be unidentified. “I would never enter a certain Republican area in South Belfast. The man that killed my brother lives there. I just cannot do it. I do not understand these people.”





The South-West Action Team (SWAT) is comprised of Loyalist and Republican community watchers. Their goal is to interface and talk with young people who are about to throw bottles and stones at each other.

The repercussions from the violence continues to weigh on the economy even though there have been clear signs of economic improvement. Reuters reported that peace has attracted more than \$2 billion in foreign investment over the past five years, mainly in the financial services, technology, and pharmaceutical sectors. London contributes about \$16 billion annually to the province for public sector spending. Unemployment rates are lower but a sectarian imbalance remains among men. Nearly 12 percent of Catholic men were out of work compared to 7.4 percent of Protestant men, according to the 2011 census released by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.³

In addition to the economic struggles, extremists from both the Republican and Loyalist factions have created organized crime networks that control certain sectors of the city. Jim McAllister, a 65-year-old former Sinn Féin councilman, says that the IRA's paramilitaries have evolved into a powerful local mafia that controls the smuggling of drugs, diesel fuel, and cigarettes from across the border—and tolerates no competition.⁴

The struggle has become more personal for many individuals. For those families who were victims of the violence, it was devastating. Lives were torn apart. Some emotional wounds are still too raw to even begin the healing process. The province carries a psychological burden from its troubled history. It has the highest rate of post-traumatic stress syndrome among thirty countries surveyed by the University of Ulster, and its health services pay twice as much per capita for antidepressants than their counterparts do in England.

Professor Mike Tomlinson of the Queen's University Belfast School of Sociology said that many people at end of the Troubles failed to cope with "the transition to peace." Research conducted at his university found that in the decade after the 1998 Good Friday agreement, suicide rates near-doubled for middle-aged men, who lived through the darkest days of the violence.⁵

"Transition is challenging for people who have been so badly hurt," said Mark Thompson, the founder of Relatives for Justice, which works on behalf of

victims' families. "There's a lot of unresolved hurt in our community."

Alistair Little, a former UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) member who was convicted of murder and spent twelve years in Maze Prison, has become a conflict resolution facilitator. "I live with the consequences of my actions every day. I know what I have lost in terms of inner peace." He presently works with organizations, such as Forgiveness Project, to help people in post-conflict zones learn how to forgive.

Tony Blair stated on the day that the Good Friday Accord was reached, "Today I hope that the burden of history can at long last start to be lifted from our shoulders." For many that burden continues to inflict a tremendous toll as the province seeks a transition toward peace.

1 Smithsonian Magazine, In Northern Ireland, Getting Past the Troubles, Joshua Hammer, March 2009

2 The New Troubles – UK, Journeyman TV, SBS Australia

3 Mohammed Aly Sergie, The Northern Ireland Peace Process, Council on Foreign Relations, October 3, 2013

4 Smithsonian Magazine, In Northern Ireland, Getting Past the Troubles, Joshua Hammer, March 2009

5 The Guardian, Suicide rates higher for people who grew up during Irish Troubles – study, Henry McDonald, July 25, 2012.





Local teenagers wrap an Irish flag around themselves on St. Patrick's Day.

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Mariusz Smiejek

Mariusz Smiejek is a freelance photographer who has been documenting the situation in Northern Ireland since 2010. Born in Poland in 1978, Smiejek has traveled throughout the world as a photographer. His work has been published in many magazines, including: National Geographic, Time, Belfast Telegraph, BBC, Vision Project, Foto Evidence, and others. His photographs of Northern Ireland won him the first prize award in a National Geographic Reportage Competition. Smiejek is committed to long-term projects that focus on social documentary.

Richard Falco

Richard Falco, President of Vision Project/Photographer/Filmmaker. For the past thirty years he has worked as a photographer, filmmaker, and journalist. He has had assignments on four continents in over thirty-five countries and has worked for many major magazines, including: Time, Newsweek, Geo, Life, New York Times, to name a few. There are two published books of Mr. Falco's work: *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community* & *To Bear Witness* / September 11. He is the director of the films, *Crossroads: Rural Health Care In America* and *Holding Back The Surge* and is the executive producer of *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome*. He is presently Coordinator of Multimedia Journalism in the Masters in Communication Program at Sacred Heart University.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical contribution that visual documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in photography, web technology, journalism, video, design, and education.

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