NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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On the day after Britain announced it was at war with Germany, Lord Craigavon, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, declared that 'the whole of the resources' of the province would be placed at the disposal of the imperial parliament. The loyalty of the Stormont administration was hardly in question during the period 1939-1945, but its ability to effectively organise and deploy resources, manpower and military support came under increasing scrutiny and exacerbated existing tensions within the province.

Northern Ireland's war began slowly. A number of British commentators noted that the province differed markedly from the rest of the country in its cavalier attitude to the crisis, and many contemporary reports suggest that life went on largely as normal. A Blackout order came into force in September 1939 and preparation for rationing food, petrol and other items followed soon after, but a lack of urgency characterised the government's initial approach to placing the province on war-footing. Industry and agriculture were particularly slow to adjust: the rate of unemployment actually grew over 1940 as the economic opportunities offered by the war were slow to arrive. No new factory had been built by the end of 1940, and the munitions industries had the worst record of production in the United Kingdom during the early months of the war. It proved initially difficult to incorporate Northern Ireland's economy into the United Kingdom's, and perceptions of the region as remote, under-skilled and expensive further hindered such integration.

A Ministry of Public Spectrum founded in 1940 began to coordinate public defence more effectively, but devastating German air raids of April-May 1941 only increased the impression that Stormont had not prepared sufficiently for the worst. The air raids cost the province dearly: at least 1,100 people died during four raids and many thousands were injured. The raid on Belfast of 15-16 April alone resulted in the United Kingdom's highest casualty rate in one night's bombing. The Blitz revealed a severe deterioration of public morale as over 200,000 fled the capital and many others were made homeless by bomb damage. The realisation that Northern Ireland was *in* the war, as opposed to merely a bit player in a larger drama finally began to bite, but it also fuelled still more criticism of the administration as the hopeless deficiency of the emergency services was exposed.

Economic Development

Many initial difficulties were, however, increasingly overcome as the reality of war sank in and the government began to respond quickly to new demands: the unemployment rate dropped rapidly after the end of 1940 and full employment – unimaginable in recent years - was achieved by 1944. Female employment in particular, grew rapidly during the war, expanding by over 8000 by 1943. Demand for items including tents, parachutes, shells, bombs, planes and radar equipment stimulated the economy, as did the construction of military bases and airfields. Harland and Wolff, for example, one of the United Kingdom's biggest shipyards and a pillar of Northern Irish industry, more than tripled its workforce by the end of the war, becoming an important manufacturer of ships, tanks and landing crafts. Between 1940 and 1945 the Belfast shipyards produced 140 warships, 123 merchant ships and repaired or converted at least 300 ships. The Short and Harland aircraft factory produced 1,200 Stirling bombers and 125 Sunderland flying boats as well as repairing many aircraft at its site. Between them, the province's munitions producers turned out over 75 million shells and many smaller firms across Northern Ireland contributed through their production of numerous parts, fittings and equipment.

The linen and textile sectors had a harder time adjusting to wartime production as shortages of raw materials impeded manufacture. But they did produce 200 million yards of cloth for the armed services, turning out over 30 million servicemen's shirts and diversifying successfully into the production of important commodities including parachute webbing. In addition, one third of the War Department's requirement for ropes was met by Belfast rope works. The agricultural sector made a valuable contribution too, doubling total acreage under the plough by 1945.

Industrial Unrest

Economic improvement did not, however, insulate the unionist administration from a rising tide of criticism, not least because of its perceived failure to deal with widespread industrial unrest. The rate of industrial action stood at three times the average in Britain between 1941 and 1945 (523 strike days for every 1000 workers as opposed to 153 in Britain). In other words, while Northern Ireland provided only 2 per cent of the nation's workforce, it provided 10 per cent of the United Kingdom's days lost to strikes. It also experienced a very high level of absenteeism. Workers were determined to secure for themselves the best possible wages and conditions while the province's economy uncharacteristically boomed: they knew only too well that their economic security was both unusual and quite likely temporary and took advantage of their relative power. Trade unionists were also alarmed by the enthusiasm with which the Northern Ireland legal and judicial establishment took to wartime legislation which outlawed strikes and lockouts, and this too prompted a great deal of protest.

Conscription

The question of conscription also plagued unionist administrations throughout the war. Fearful of alienating Catholics, both in Éire and in Northern Ireland, the British government's Compulsory Military Training Bill exempted Northern Irish citizens from compulsory military service, but it did reserve the right to extend it to the province at a future date. Craig and his cabinet wanted it extended at once, but opposition from De Valera, the Catholic hierarchy and even some Belfast trade unionists was swift and resolute. Mindful of the dilemma caused by Irish resistance to conscription during the Great War, public opinion in Britain largely backed the government. Undermining, as it did, strongly-held unionist notions of the rights and duties of British citizenship, this came as a blow to the Stormont administration. The issue was resurrected in the aftermath of the bombing blitz, but the British government – no doubt again influenced by a vocal anti-conscription campaign – once more refused to conscript Northern Irish men.

The government's failure to have implemented one of its most deeply held policies was humiliating, especially as London's view that extending conscription to Northern Ireland was more trouble than it was worth seemed to vindicate the nationalist opposition campaign. The lack of conscription made it impossible for Stormont to disguise the fact that, despite vigorous claims of loyalty – the citizens of Northern Ireland simply failed to join up in impressive numbers. In the early months of the war, recruitment was lively, but by mid-1940, it had declined to less than 1,000 per month. Local recruitment drives had little obvious impact and notwithstanding periods of increased recruitment (after Dunkirk, for example), numbers remained low. About 44,000 in total volunteered from Northern Ireland, compared with about 45,000 from the neutral South. Memories of the horrific losses experienced by the Ulster Division in 1916 may have played a part in this, and sectarian tensions almost certainly did as Catholics were much less likely to join the forces than Protestants. But some historians have also suggested that poor recruitment levels, dissatisfaction with the government and high levels of labour unrest also suggest that Protestant Ulster's loyalty may have been much more contingent and pragmatic than was once assumed. A unionist government which since partition had presided over a divided and impoverished society could hardly hope to induce men and women to risk their lives for the Empire, let alone for Ulster.

Anglo-Irish Relations

The complicated fact of Éire's neutrality also placed great strain on the Stormont administration. So keen was the British government to secure Irish co-operation that first Chamberlain in 1940 and then Churchill in 1941 suggested the possibility of Irish unity in exchange for the end of neutrality. Such a suggestion presented a difficult moral dilemma to the Stormont regime which had in any case been watching Anglo-Irish negotiations nervously, fearing that partition might be used as a bargaining chip

by the British. London put tremendous pressure on Craigavon, urging him to participle in efforts to bring Éire into the allied fold. He nonetheless refused to participate in inter-governmental talks until the South relinquished neutrality, angering some of his own backbenchers who appeared willing to accept constitutional change in the broader interest of the Empire and the allied cause. Sir Basil Brooke, Prime Minister of Ireland from 1943 was torn, claiming that a vote would have undoubtedly split the cabinet, but that he would have voted for. The government was saved from having to make such an agonising choice by De Valera's rejection of the offer, but Craigavon's 'little Usterism' added grist to the mill of some of his critics.

Arrival of US Servicemen

The Fall of France amplified Northern Ireland's strategic importance, especially in the context of Éire's neutrality. The north coast provided a significant route for Atlantic convoys during the Battle of the Atlantic and Northern Irish airfields and ports provided important bases for military and reconnaissance activity. The province as a whole became an important base for allied military personnel. Over 300,000 troops saw duty in Northern Ireland during the war, the vast majority of them British or American. The first US servicemen arrived in May, 1942: their number reached a peak just before the Normandy Landings in 1944, at over 120,000. The important presence of so many military personnel brought both opportunity and tension. Allied troops had to be housed, fed, transported and entertained, providing large firms as well as local communities with extra money making opportunities and employment. But the presence of so many men also produced strain, especially in a society which was largely unused to contact with foreigners. This was particularly true for black GIs, some of whom complained about racism. Objections to American soldiers were of course common to many host communities during the war: GIs were accused of being over-sexed, arrogant and over-paid. Nevertheless, while everyday life in Northern Ireland was increasingly disrupted by rationing and shortages, the arrival of so many GIs and the need to provide for them, enlivened some part of the province's economic and social life.

Leadership at Stormont

But tensions in the political arena continued to pose the greatest challenge to the Unionist Party. The unprecedented demands of wartime had clearly placed a burden on the Unionist Party which it at times looked unable to shoulder. At the outset of the War, Lord Craigavon was 69 years old and in poor health. In common with his senior lieutenants, he had been in office for close to 20 turbulent years and the strain was clearly beginning to show. Craigavon died in November, 1940, and was replaced by John Andrews, a senior and experienced Party member. Despite the hopes of some rebellious backbenchers that some new life and vigour might be brought into the Party, Andrews – himself almost seventy years old and in declining health - appointed only one new minister, affirming

the widely-held view that both party and government were antiquated and out of touch with public opinion. Under his stewardship, the party's fortunes continued to decline: the Cabinet remained querulous, by-elections were lost and backbench criticism continued.

The extent of disaffection was made clear in January 1943, when unionist backbenchers met secretly to discuss what they perceived to be necessary changes including the appointment of younger ministers and a change of leadership. Andrews resisted, but further pressure led finally to his replacement by Sir Basil Brooke in May 1943. He brought with him some younger men whose tenure benefitted from improvements in the economy, a greater awareness and recognition of the importance of Northern Ireland's contribution to the allied effort and the fact that the tide was turning in the Allies' favour. Brooke turned his attention to the vital task of healing some of the rifts which had destabilised the party, but he faced a great deal of opposition from within the Ulster Unionist Council and some sections of the press.

Post-War Redevelopment

Despite such ongoing internal strife, thoughts began to turn – as they did in the rest of the United Kingdom – to plans for post-war social improvement. Such improvement was seen as especially vital in the light of the damage caused by German bombs to the province's already inadequate and inferior housing stock and widespread criticism of the Stormont administration's failure to deal with the housing shortage. The publication of the Beveridge Report in 1942 further stimulated discussion, and moves were made by Brooke to investigate thoroughly how Northern Ireland might attain parity with the rest of the United Kingdom in social services. There was resistance from some unionist politicians and functionaries and fears about the return of high unemployment and poverty after the war, and the spectres of socialism and centralism dogged attempts to introduce reform.

Despite this, significant progress was made, not least in the establishment of a housing trust in 1945, one of the few regional institutions which largely escaped accusations of discrimination**.** In 1946, parity of social services between Great Britain and the United Kingdom was agreed. This was only possible because London agreed to bankroll it. This was an expensive arrangement, but for unionists who hoped that it would keep Protestant voters loyal to the party while also helping to chip away at nationalist allegiance to the comparatively impoverished South, it represented a good deal. The immediate post-war period offered real encouragement to the beleaguered Party. The gratitude of both major British parties as a result of its wartime contribution was reflected in the 1949 Ireland Act which endowed Stormont, rather than the people of Northern Ireland, with the ultimate right to decide the constitutional position of the state. This allowed a grateful Unionist Party more constitutional

security than it had hitherto enjoyed and a more secure base from which to pursue its post-war political agenda.