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The Social Geography of Violence During the Belfast Troubles, 1920-22

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Abstract

Between 1920 and 1922, the city of Belfast, Northern Ireland was the location of intense violence between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists arising out of the broader political conflict engulfing the island. Approximately 500 people died within the city as a result of these tensions. There existed marked spatial variation in patterns of fatality during these original 'Troubles' which accompanied the creation of the Northern Ireland state. This paper will present findings from research into this period which makes use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technology to analyse the spatial distribution and impact of political and sectarian deaths in the early years of the 1920s.

The Social Geography of Violence During the Belfast Troubles, 1920-22

Introduction

The Troubles in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s through to the end of the twentieth century have been the subject of intense academic debate across a range of disciplines in addition to much wider public attention.¹ The 'original' Troubles, on the other hand, which accompanied the traumatic period spanning the partition of Ireland after World War I have received comparatively far less attention; indeed, it has been accurately defined as the 'forgotten conflict'.² Part of the reason for this may lie in the fact that, in contrast to the more recent political conflict in Northern Ireland, the Troubles of the early 1920s were, for all their ferocity, relatively short-lived. Nevertheless, the intensity of the early- 1920s should not be underestimated. In 1972, the worst year of the recent Troubles, 298 people died in Belfast as a direct result of the political situation.³ However, in the first six months of 1922 alone, 285 fatalities could be blamed on the contemporary security situation. While the scale of killing clearly indicates that it is a subject worthy of attention in its own right, it also provides the potential to contrast patterns of political deaths in the city over the long-term. This paper will use Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technology to address these issues.

Contexts

It is important to firstly establish the broader context of political developments across the island at this time because they have profound implications for patterns of deaths in the capital of the new Northern Ireland state. It is in within this complex context that various authors have attempted to interpret the cycles of violence which engulfed the city in the first three years of the 1920s.

By the start of 1920, the War of Independence between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the forces of the British Crown was intensifying.⁴ The British Army and civil police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary, (RIC) found it increasingly difficult to deal with the guerrilla tactics of the IRA, deployed with particular effectiveness in the south-western counties of Cork and Kerry.⁵ In response to this, the British government raised an auxiliary force, composed largely of veterans not long demobilised from the World War I to support the hard-pressed RIC, who became better known as 'Black and Tans' due to the colour of their fatigues.⁶ They were widely regarded as ill-disciplined with a reputation for indiscriminate civilian attacks, the most infamous being a retaliatory arson rampage through the centre of Cork in December of 1920 which resulted in extensive destruction of the city centre area.⁷

Meanwhile, at a political level, the British had introduced the Government of Ireland Act in the same year, which effectively provided for an independent 26 counties in the south, with an option for the six northern counties to opt-out of the home rule arrangements within a window of one month.⁸ These provisions were ignored by southern nationalists of the Sinn Fein party, which had swept the board in elections and refusing to recognise British jurisdiction formed their own parliament, or Dáil.⁹ Against the backdrop of escalating violence in Ireland, the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, called a summit in London and a party of plenipotentiaries was sent from the new Dáil, which included Arthur Griffiths and the IRA Director of Intelligence Michael Collins. On 6 December the delegates signed the Articles of Agreement between the British and Irish governments, which crucially conceded that the island would be (at least in the short-term), partitioned between a southern Irish Free State and a new Northern Ireland.¹⁰ However, more problematic was the failure of the delegates to secure a full republic; arriving back in Dublin with dominion status within the United

Kingdom and the British monarch remaining as titular head of state was seen as an abject failure by republican die-hards like Eamon de Valera and Liam Lynch.¹¹ The Dáil subsequently split between those opposing and those supporting the new treaty and when it was approved by a narrow margin of 64 votes to 57, de Valera and his supporters withdrew and the Irish Civil War subsequently broke out in June 1922.¹² Throughout this period, Collins had continued to support a covert IRA campaign focussed on the new border, but also sending arms and volunteers to Belfast, partially in defence of the heavily-pressed Catholic nationalist population of the city but also in an attempt to destabilise the nascent state.¹³

The earliest attempt to quantify the numbers of dead and injured over the course of the three-year period was a contemporary account by a young Catholic priest called Fr. Hassan, who published *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogroms, 1920-22* immediately following the general decline in hostilities in the second half of 1922.¹⁴ Hassan's title is indicative of the fact that the book is generally seen as a nationalist reading of events, and while Catholics certainly did suffer in numbers disproportionate to their share of the overall population of the city, to describe the events of those years as a 'pogrom' neglects the reality that a great many Protestants were also killed and displaced from their homes during that traumatic time.¹⁵ Nevertheless, even with those riders, Hassan's record still provides a valuable tool for cross-referencing individual victims of the 1920s Troubles.

As noted in the introduction, Alan Parkinson's *Belfast's Unholy War* remains the only monograph solely dedicated to the upheavals of the period 1920 to 1922 in the city.¹⁶ Nevertheless, due to the significance of levels of violence in Belfast, and the fact that such events cannot be divorced from the wider political conflict raging across the island at the time, the 1920s Troubles do feature prominently in works by historians covering this turbulent period.

The work of the late A.C. Hepburn is considered authoritative on the history of Catholic Belfast and he has written widely on the experience of conflict in the city.¹⁷ In *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland* he presents the true duality of IRA activity in the city; it was by turns, both defensive and aggressive, and moreover, could not be seen in isolation from republican activities elsewhere in Northern Ireland, but particularly on the border.¹⁸ The latter is the central focus of Patrick Buckland's attentions, who presents the violence of that period as largely the result of IRA incursions into Northern Ireland and the partial rapprochement between pro- and anti-treatyites in the Free State as they sought to divert attention from the divisions which existed between the two over the Anglo-Irish Treaty settlement.¹⁹ The most notable example of IRA aggression was the incursion of republican forces into the strategically vulnerable and remote Pettigo-Belleek salient of western Fermanagh.²⁰ This is highly convincing, although perhaps less so is the assertion that many Catholics who died in Belfast in this period were the victims of indiscriminate IRA 'friendly' fire from within their own enclaves; this may be adequate to explain a minority of fatalities, but is probably not satisfactory to stand as a general characterisation.²¹ As will become clear, the years 1920 to 1922 in Belfast were largely emblematic of a bloody sectarian battle fuelled by political imperatives, and that contrary to Buckland's interpretation there were in fact many, '...deliberate attempt[s] by Protestant and loyalist forces, official and unofficial, to exterminate Catholics', as indeed the inverse was just as true.²²

The late Canadian historian Peter Hart has provided some of the most enlightening and controversial scholarship on this period to have emerged in recent years.²³ His work was focused on the activities of the IRA in west Cork, about as far as it possible to travel from Belfast within the island of Ireland. A consideration of his work is highly pertinent here though as while the spatial propinquity of events in rural Cork and urban Belfast is by no means apparent, the temporal linkages are. Over two consecutive nights in late-April of 1922, ten Protestants were killed in and around the small village of Dunmanway.²⁴ Within the previous fortnight, at least thirty people had lost their lives due to the tensions in Belfast,

nineteen of whom were Catholic. For Hart, these events cannot be understood in isolation, and the West Cork murders were, in part, a form of reprisal for the killing of Catholics north of the border.²⁵ This is a theme which can also be found in the work of Donald Harman Akenson. In *Small Differences* he echoes the earlier point that while the Belfast Troubles of 1920-22 could not be considered a 'pogrom' in the true sense of the word, Catholics did come off worse, and this was simply a product of their demographic inferiority within the city.²⁶ Like Hart, he draws some parallels between the experiences of the island's two minority populations: i.e. Catholics in the North and Protestants in the South.²⁷ In a very balanced analysis of the period, which offsets violence in the city against republican actions elsewhere in Northern Ireland, Bardon concludes that what had occurred in Belfast had been a 'vicious sectarian war' but had given way to a period of 'remarkable calm' that would shape Northern Ireland in the twentieth century, for better or worse.²⁸ However, he is also clear that the price of that peace had disproportionately fallen on Catholic shoulders and had it not been for the fortuitous advent of the Irish Civil War, that price would probably have been even higher.²⁹

Data & Methods

The research underlying this paper makes extensive use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technology. A GIS is commonly thought of as a mapping system, but this is, Gregory and Healey have argued, an oversimplification of its potential role and capability in historical research.³⁰ They argue that it can more usefully be thought of as a database technology, in which a wide range of media can be stored, visualised and analysed with reference to their spatial context.³¹ It is this definition which helps us to understand the possibilities of using GIS in an attempt to gain a better understanding of patterns of conflict in Belfast during the Troubles of the early-twentieth century. The data used in this paper came from a variety of primary and secondary sources, and it is the ability to not only store, query and represent that data both spatially and statistically which is vital, but also the capacity to integrate different types of material.

The data on Troubles fatalities in Belfast during the period 1920-22 was gleaned from a variety of sources. In the first instance, this was compiled from analysis of daily newspapers, principally the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Irish News*, but the Dublin-based *Irish Times* and *Freeman's Journal* also provided good coverage, the former having useful summaries of events during the previous seven days in its weekly incarnation as the *Weekly Irish Times*. The *Belfast Telegraph* and *Irish News* were both frequently consulted, particularly with reference to some of the most traumatic events of the period, such as the Weaver St. playground attack, in order to provide a sense of balance in analysing responses to particular occurrences; this is because the *Irish News* has always been aligned with nationalist political opinion and has historically had a predominantly Catholic readership, while the *Belfast Telegraph* has been seen to represent unionist political interests and has always been favoured by the Protestant population. In addition to these materials, early police reports from the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland were also consulted. Historical scholarship naturally tends to favour primary and contemporaneous documentary evidence over secondary and other resources. However, in the case of attempting to understand sectarian and/or political deaths in early-twentieth century Belfast, this is not necessarily the best paradigm to adopt. It is impossible to arrive at a definitive answer for the exact number of casualties of the political conflict in this period based solely on primary evidence, as the information is so often partial, contradictory and, indeed, missing. This is not to say that the material has limited utility; on the contrary, it is the absences in the dataset which are often most revealing. Take for example, the Arnon Street murders of April 1922, when four Catholics were killed by police in retaliation for the shooting of one of their fellow officers.³² More frequently, the names of individuals as well as the circumstances and locations in which they were killed were incorrectly reported, and subsequent reports may provide updated information, but this could often be quite different to the event as originally reported. This

process made it difficult to be completely certain that the same people were in fact being referred to. This was a particular problem in the most intense periods of conflict, principally during parts of the first six months of 1922. As a contemporaneous account, Hassan's *Belfast Pogroms* is prone to some of the same sorts of error, in addition to conveying a firmly nationalist conception of the events of that time and their causes. Nevertheless, it is still a useful resource.³³ However, Alan Parkinson's *Belfast's Unholy War* has been the single most invaluable source of information on fatalities during the early Troubles, conveying circumstantial and spatial details as well as how these deaths related to the conflict as whole, not simply within Belfast alone, but also well beyond.³⁴

The majority of deaths tended to be located to individual street or street intersection level. Sometimes a specific building was provided. In a minority of cases Hassan's *Belfast Pogroms* provided the home address of the individual and other contextual evidence would indicate that the victim died in their own home, often when answering the door, as was the case with William Kerr, a Catholic of 47 Old Lodge Road.³⁵ Another example of the ability to discern extremely specific locations for events was with the death of William Hunter, a Protestant that the *Irish Times* correspondent reported as being killed at the junction of the New Lodge Road and Fountain Street North.³⁶

In the case of William Kerr, the ability to link fatalities to particular properties was premised on the availability of broadly contemporaneous large scale mapping of the city. 'Broadly contemporaneous' would seem to be a rather unsatisfactory requirement; it would be reasonable to assume that the most useful maps would be those compiled nearest in time to the events in question. In fact, pre-World War II maps of Belfast, while extremely detailed at 25" to the mile (1:2,500), do not provide a vital piece of locational data that post-war revisions reveal. The later series of 25" maps, updated in the 1950s and '60s also included the numbers of individual houses and other buildings at intervals of approximately every 3-4 properties. This meant that it was now possible to very accurately locate people to given buildings where such information existed.

The ability to use these later maps is based on two reasonable assumptions. The first is that there was limited change in the urban fabric of central Belfast in the period between 1922 and the early-post war years. This is self-evidently the case given that in no circumstance did a street mentioned in the early 1920s not appear in the later maps. Belfast was to see radical change in the built environment of the inner-city after a long-awaited slum clearance programme finally began to transform much of this area.³⁷ However, this process did not start to occur until the mid- to late-1960s and really gained momentum in the 1970s, after these maps were produced.³⁸ When Belfast did feel the full force of comprehensive redevelopment policies then in vogue across the western world, the effect was indeed dramatic, and the entire Old Lodge area where William Kerr lived, effectively disappeared under an urban motorway called the 'Westlink'. The second sound assumption is that houses were not subject to any sort of systematic renumbering. Given the continuities we have noted in the city's housing stock over the inter-war period, there was clearly no logic for such a reorganisation, and indeed, any number of logistical, statutory and personal reasons not to do so.

The final major data source employed in this piece of analysis are the individual census returns from the 1911 enumeration, the nearest available record to the Troubles of 1920-22. The National Archives of Ireland (NAI) has recently completed a major programme of digitisation which has made all the original returns freely-available to the public via their website.³⁹ Through these remarkable records and the large scale maps it is possible to effectively repopulate the city as it 'existed', at least as recorded through the lens of the census in 1911. The possibilities and practical challenges in such an ambitious goal are considerable, but this article does at least, showcase the potential of this material for historical scholarship by piloting a sample repopulation of the Old Lodge, the part of the city which

witnessed the greatest number of fatalities at the conflict's height during the first six months of 1922.

Spatial and temporal patterns of conflict fatalities

In total, 491 deaths have been calculated in Belfast over the two-year period from 21 July 1920, when the first fatality was recorded, through to 29 June 1922 with the last entry. Of these victims 83 percent were male. It has been possible, according to the records, to assign religions to the victims in just over 95 percent of cases, and of that figure Catholics made up 56 percent while Protestants totalled to 39 percent. Of the 491 victims, 30 or 6.1 percent were children of up to and including sixteen years of age. Remarkably, this share of fatalities is extremely close to that recorded for children who died in Belfast over the much longer period of conflict from 1969 to 2001. Of the 1541 political deaths recorded by Malcolm Sutton as having occurred in the city during the later Troubles, 91 or 5.9 percent were of people aged sixteen or under.⁴⁰ In terms of gender ratio however, there is some divergence in trends between the Troubles of 1920-22 and those of 1969-2001. A smaller proportion of the victims in the later Troubles were women with 133 female deaths recorded over the thirty-two-year period from 1969 to 2001, equating to 8.6 percent of the total figure. Yet in just under two years between July 1920 and June 1922, seventy-eight women died in violent incidents directly accruing from the political situation in the city.⁴¹ So, in summary, when we consider Belfast alone as a zone of conflict, the period between 1920 and 1922 represents by far the most intense period of ethno-national or sectarian killing in its history, a significance which is generally understated, even by its lone dedicated chronicler.⁴²

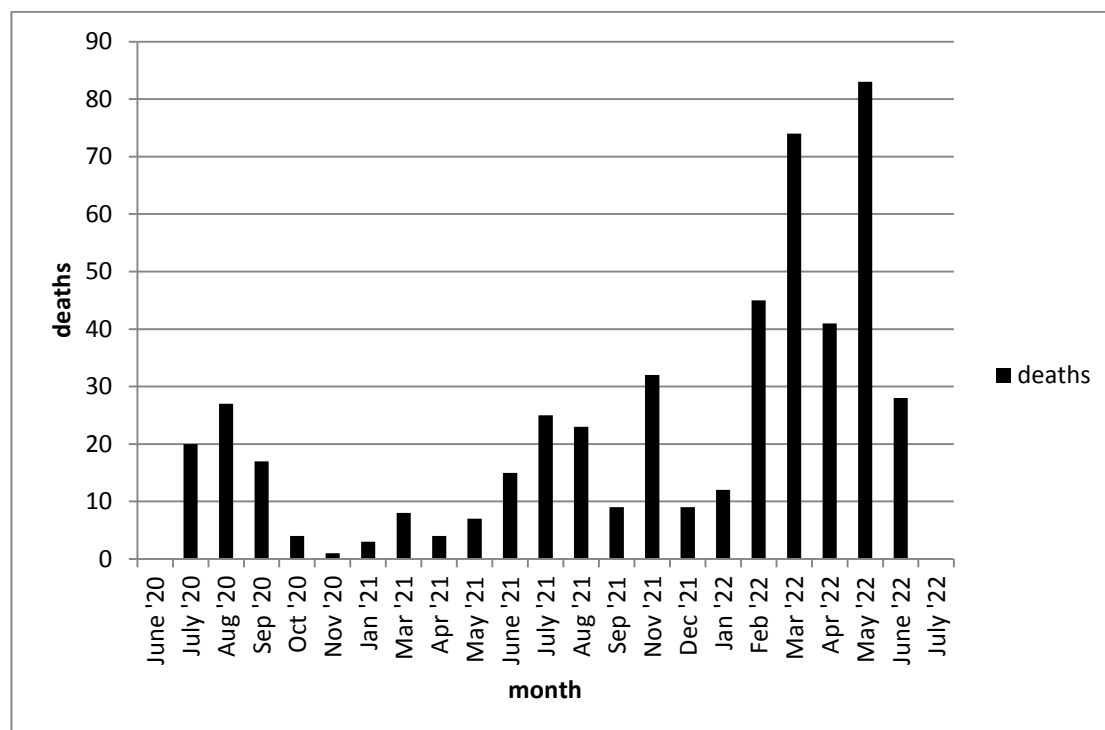


Figure 1: Deaths per month

Even within this relatively short period of conflict however, the distribution of deaths was heavily skewed in both spatial and temporal terms. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of fatalities per month. Over the course of the two years, violence tended to be highest in the summer months and was frequently provoked by confrontations surrounding the annual 12 July celebrations in which the Orange lodges, and Protestants in general, celebrate the victory

of William III over the Catholic Stuart king, James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.⁴³ This was and remains a perennial circumstance, and the 12 July celebrations have historically and continue to be associated with increased tension between the two communities in the city and across Northern Ireland more generally.⁴⁴ However, it was the first six months of 1922 which witnessed an unprecedented increase in the levels of violence in the city, a cycle which began not in the hot, tense days of July but in the altogether chillier month of January, then continuing with increasing ferocity through the first half of the year before tailing off rapidly by the summer.

While the impetus behind conflict in the city between 1920 and 1922 was political, it was in the industrial arena that the initial tensions of July 1920 emerged. Immediately following the return to work of Belfast's Protestant shipyard workers from their annual July 12 holidays, much of the Catholic workforce was expelled from the city's major industrial concerns, such as Harland and Wolff. This followed a mass meeting which denounced the activities of the IRA elsewhere across the island and called for the removal of 'non-loyal' workers from the yards.⁴⁵ This came against a background of an escalating conflict in the South, where the deployment of the Black and Tans had served only to harden support for the IRA.⁴⁶ The response of the South's Aireacht or Provisional Government in January of 1921 was the Belfast Boycott, which as Laffan has stated was, '...an understandable reaction to the discrimination and attacks suffered by the nationalist minority in the north-east, but the measure failed to take account of economic realities and was self-destructive in its effects'.⁴⁷ The violence of the early 1920s not only came against the political break-up of the island, it also occurred against a background of post-war economic decline; even had the Northern unionist administration been more willing, it would have been politically unacceptable to have restored Catholics to their former positions in a contracting labour market.⁴⁸ Not only was the project ill-conceived it was also largely ineffectual in anything other than polarising Protestant opinion still further against the South. Ernest Blythe, a Presbyterian from Lisburn, was a Sinn Féin T.D. for North Monaghan and Minister for Trade and Commerce in the Dublin cabinet. In August of 1922, he provided both a damning and astute analysis of the futility of the policy of economic war against Belfast,

Economic pressure against the North East gives no greater promise of satisfactory results than military action...Nothing that we can do by way of boycott – the economic weapon heretofore in use – will bring the Orange party to reason. A boycott cannot hit the agriculturalists who in the Six Counties as in the Twenty Six, represent the most important economic interest. Their market is not in our territory. No boycott that we can impose can hit the Belfast shipbuilding industry. We control no orders for ships...Our boycott would threaten the Northern ship-building industry no more than a summer shower would threaten Cave Hill.⁴⁹

The Belfast Boycott was proof that while the North and South had become increasingly economically disengaged, politically they had not. Political events across the border were still certain to have profound consequences in the new Northern Ireland. And just like Cave Hill, the basalt cliff dominating Belfast's northern approaches, the only other certainty arising from such a policy would be that it would be the Catholics of the city who would pay the ultimate price for such hubris.⁵⁰

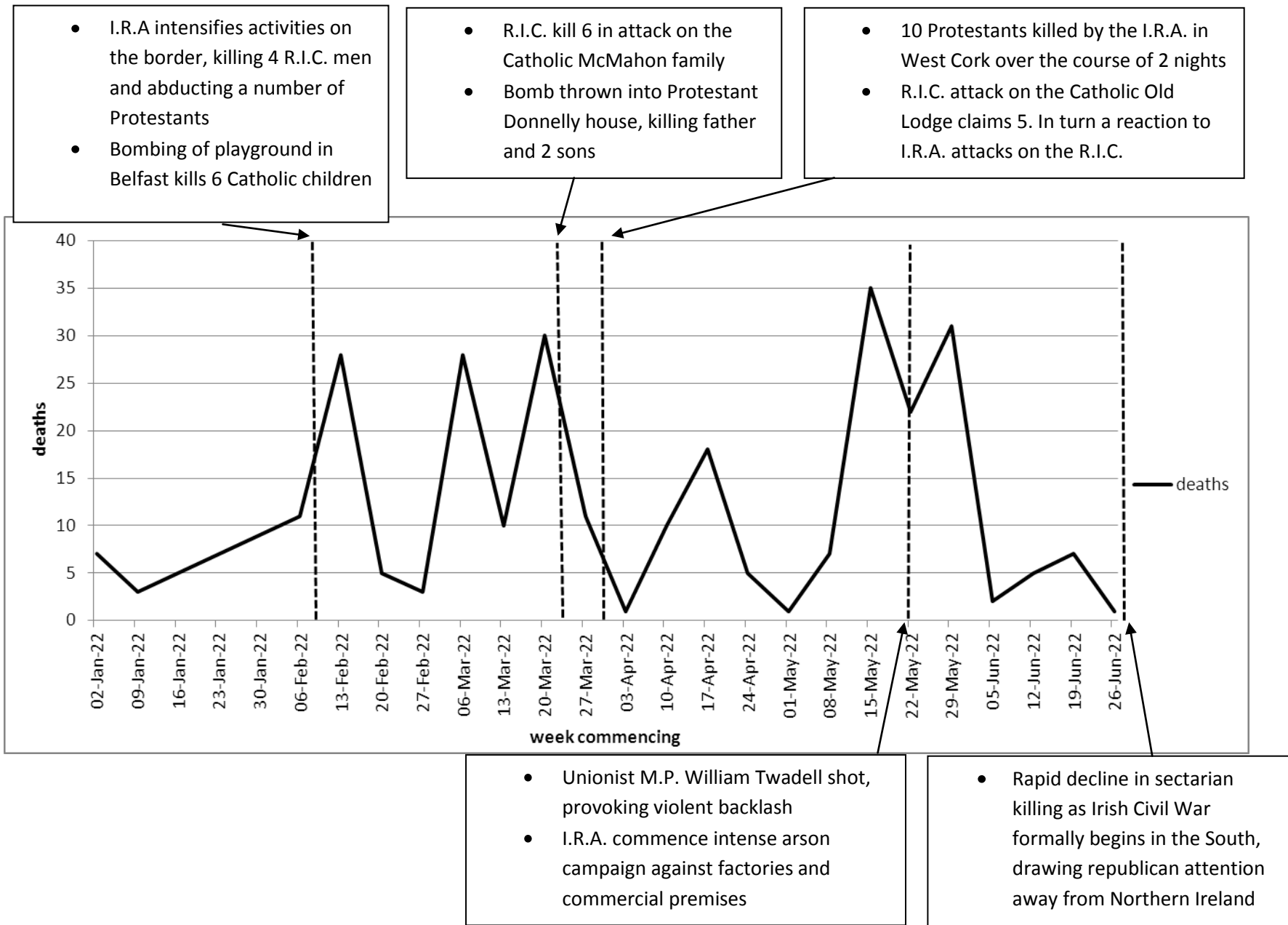


Figure 2: Deaths per week in 1922 and major events

Blythe was not alone in drawing such a conclusion. In February 1922, as the killings approached their apogee, Bishop Joseph MacRory, whose diocese included Belfast, wrote in an encyclical to his flock of how they were paying the price for the activities of the IRA elsewhere in Northern Ireland in a cycle of violence he referred to as ‘the doctrine of vicarious punishment.’⁵¹ Some of the key events of this deadly period are illustrated in the timeline in figure 2. We cannot infer causality solely from the chronological ordering of massacres during this period, but the central point is that within this six month period the dynamic of inter-communal bloodshed intensified. This was in part due to the activities of the IRA, but it was also a clear product of the highly sectarian nature of the newly-formed civilian police force, the Ulster Reserve Constabulary, which was almost completely Protestant in composition.⁵² Members of this body were responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the entire period, which included the aforementioned retaliatory attack on the Catholics of Arnon Street which claimed the lives of five, including that of a man bludgeoned to death in front of his own children, as well as the massacre of the Antrim Road publican Owen MacMahon and four other members of his family. So profoundly divided was the newly-formed polity on religious lines that there was no possibility of the gulf being bridged, even by the most shocking of incidents. This is evident in reaction to the killing of six schoolgirls, when a bomb was thrown into a playground in the small Catholic enclave of Weaver Street, just off York Road.⁵³ Churchill described it in a telegram to Collins as ‘...the worst thing to have happened in Ireland in the last three years’.⁵⁴ Yet despite the particularly heinous nature of the bombing it did not even merit mention at the next meeting of the Northern Ireland Cabinet, but the site for ‘Stormont egg-laying competition’ evidently did.⁵⁵ Churchill’s description incensed the unionist leader Sir Edward Carson, who recorded in his diaries,

Yesterday’s division went very badly for us. Churchill’s speech the day before was abominably clever. It was absolutely wicked of him to speak of the killing of those Belfast R.C. children by a bomb as “the worst thing that has happened in Belfast in 3 years”. There is no evidence whatever, at present, that it was thrown among them on purpose, all we know is that a bomb went among them. But even supposing it was done purposely, it’s a wicked, outrageous crime, it is only one, among how many on the other side?⁵⁶ [Original emphasis]

While this may have seemed a markedly factional viewpoint, it was one not without some justification. Either the IRA or simply armed Catholics had also been responsible for many appalling attacks on Protestant civilians, particularly in areas where the latter formed the minority, such as with the attack on the Donnelly family.⁵⁷ Or these attacks took place when Protestants were passing through Catholic areas on trams, where, given the highly sectarian nature of most of the city’s residential structure, the religion of the riders could clearly be discerned as Protestant based on the route or destination. Such an indiscriminate bombing claimed the lives of three shipyard workers passing through the Catholic Docks area on 22 November 1921.⁵⁸ Therefore, Catholics and Protestants effectively died in the same places and the following maps show just how incredibly compact was the area which witnessed the greatest numbers of fatalities.

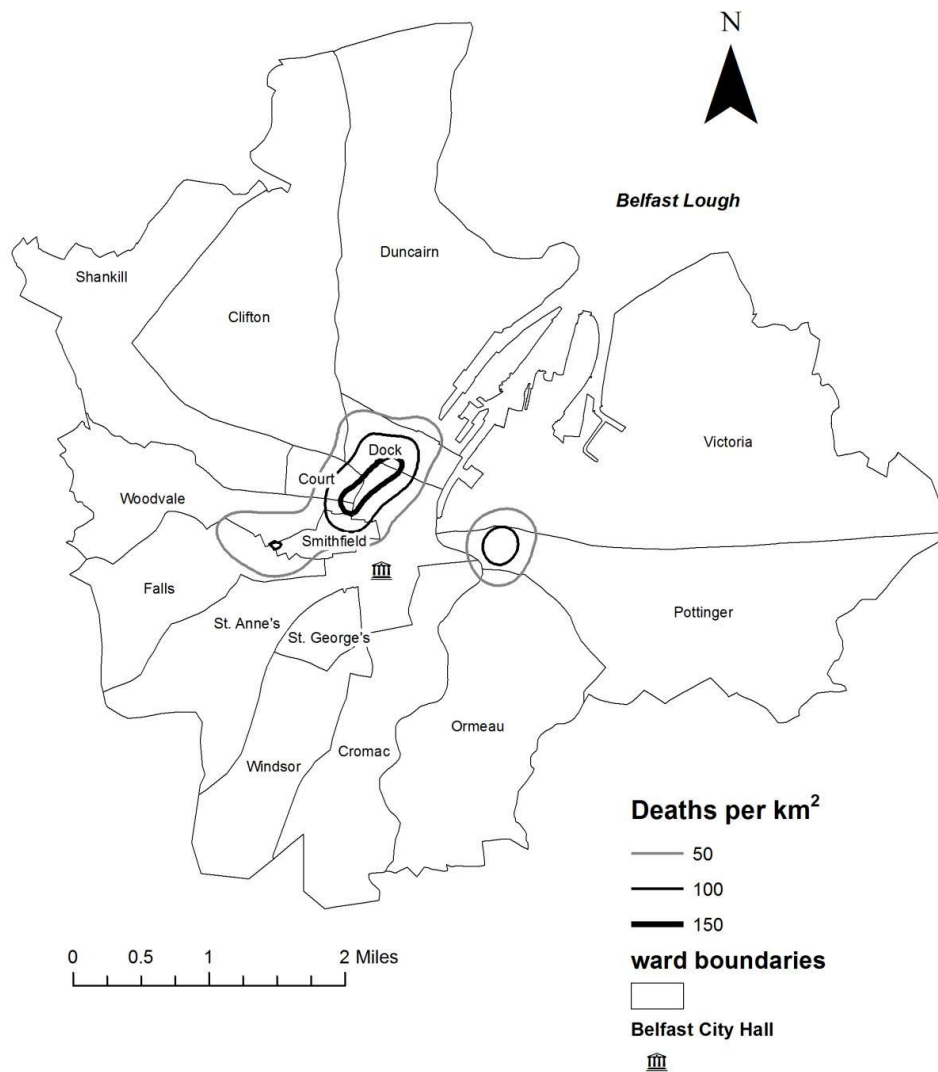


Figure 3: Conflict deaths displayed using kernel density smoothing

Figure 3 uses kernel density smoothing to create a continuous surface image of where deaths occurred during the conflict. This is preferential to using point representation as it can be unclear from using points whether the symbol refers to one death or several fatalities occurring in the same location. Kernel density smoothing takes a value from all of the events within a given proximity and weights those nearer to a given location higher than those

further away, thus providing a continuous raster surface image.⁵⁹ The contour lines were then subsequently derived from this image and these delimit the 50, 75 and 100 deaths per km² ranges respectively. Density smoothing techniques are particularly vital in this context because figure 3 makes it clear just how concentrated fatalities were in an arc running immediately to the north-west of the city centre. Despite the fact that the distribution of deaths was so concentrated, analysis against local government wards needs to be approached with caution as the epicentre of fatalities crosses a number of boundaries but is focussed on Court, Dock, Smithfield and St. Anne's. The last of these is particularly problematic due to its peculiar hammerhead shape. St. Anne's ward covered the entire central business district of Belfast, but a long south-westerly transect meant that it also extended out to the city stopline. Pottinger in the east presents similar problems. The ward saw a very high number of deaths during the first three years of the 1920s, but these were, almost without exception, located in and around the Catholic enclave of the Short Strand at the extreme west of the ward, an anomalous and highly vulnerable area within the overwhelmingly Protestant religious landscape of East Belfast.



Figure 4: Catholic and Protestant conflict deaths displayed using kernel density smoothing

Key to this concentration is that fact that both Catholics and Protestants died in virtually the same places, which acted as battlegrounds or spatial lightning rods for the wider conflict that was consuming the city. This is highlighted in figure 4 which shows Catholic and Protestant patterns of fatality using the same kernel density technique. It should be noted that the area of greatest intensity for Catholics is larger than that for Protestants, and this is logical because, despite being demographically inferior within the city as a whole, making up only about one quarter of the population, they accounted for 56 percent of all victims. Hart has argued that it was simply this outnumbering which largely explained why Catholics died in such a proportion during the conflict.⁶⁰ At another level, this also plays to nationalist readings of the period which present it in one-dimensional terms as a 'pogrom' against their community. Certainly, Catholics were undeniably a minority in the city and in addition to their disproportionate contribution to the death toll many more were also forced from their homes,

with about 2000 seeking refuge across the border in the South.⁶¹ This was something seized upon by a Southern government, desirous to publicise through a sophisticated propaganda machine the sufferings being visited upon Northern Catholics by an iniquitous unionist regime.⁶² While a refugee problem was acknowledged by the British government who paid compensation to the Free State administration for the costs incurred in caring for these families, Lynch makes the point that this was a temporary state of affairs, with most of the displaced returning to Belfast after a period of weeks or months.⁶³ This needs to be balanced by the fact that the killing of isolated Protestants in remote areas such as West Cork precipitated a parallel refugee situation, with the difference being that many of the Southern Protestants never returned to their homes.⁶⁴ This was seized on by leading unionists at the time, but by 1925 there was no further political capital to be gained from the miseries of these two groups by either government, north or south of the border.⁶⁵

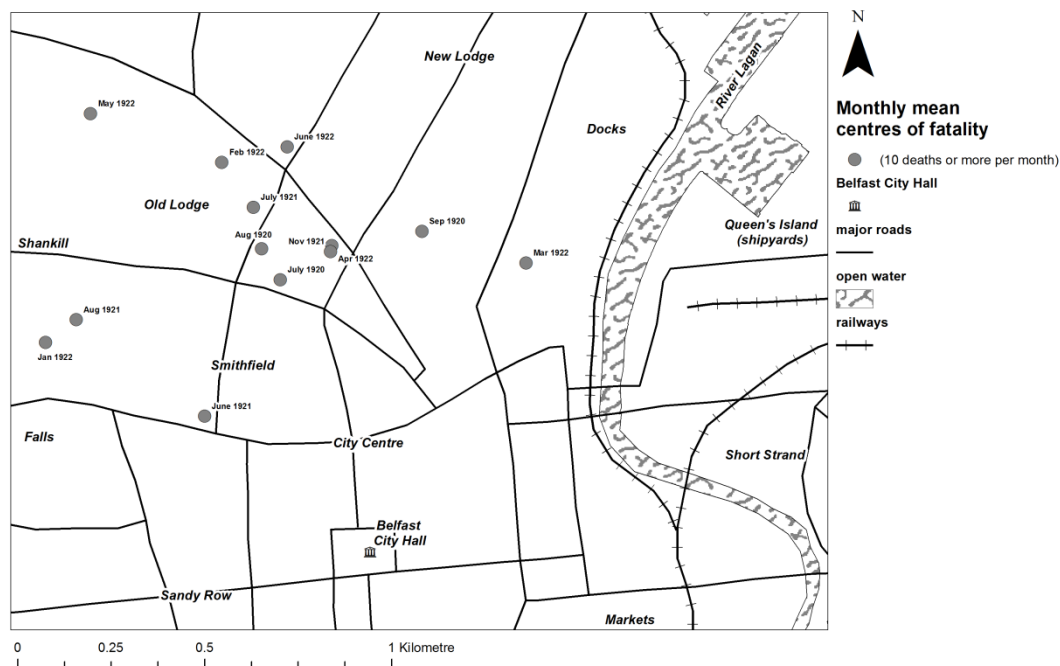


Figure 5: Monthly mean centres of conflict deaths in all months in which casualties totalled ten or more

The remarkable spatio-temporal intensity of the period is also powerfully reflected in figure 5. This uses mean centre analysis to calculate the central points for the distributions of deaths in every month of the two-year conflict in which there were ten or more fatalities. During that time the mean centres never ranged more than half a mile in distance at their furthest extent. Furthermore, there is little evidence within the analysis of any progressive gravitational pull in terms of events, just a continued oscillation around the same central districts. In part this can be explained by the role of the city centre as a sort of neutral space, in which the territorial ‘ownership’ of the CBD by one community or the other could not be claimed in the same way as it could over most of Belfast’s residential areas. It was nevertheless a sort of sectarian ‘no-man’s land’ where the battle continued to play out. These metaphors from the Great War are by no means without relevance. While the conflict of 1920 to 1922 may have been extraordinary, even by the troubled standards of Belfast, violence had almost become formulaic, routine or obligatory, judging by the observations of one journalist in an article entitled, ‘The lunch hour hate’, clearly echoing the grim banality of trench warfare with

Belfast's principal thoroughfare – Royal Avenue, as a sort of Passchendaele and the war-weary troops transformed into the city's everyday workers.⁶⁶

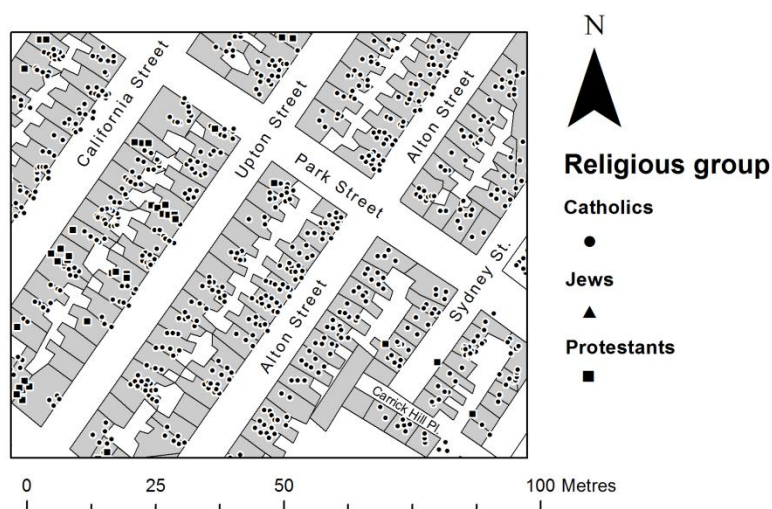


Figure 6: A section of the Old Lodge repopulated according to the 1911 individual census returns

The other reason for this spatio-temporal complexity is the adjacency of highly-segregated residential neighbourhoods to the city centre. One such example is the Old Lodge, an area which has now effectively disappeared as a result of slum clearance and the building of an urban motorway in the 1960s and '70s. This area was the epicentre of conflict deaths in the first six months of 1922, the most deadly period of the conflict. Figure 6 effectively repopulates the area in a GIS using the individual returns from the nearest available census in 1911.⁶⁷ This shows a district that was typical of most of working-class Belfast at this time: an area of densely-packed Victorian terraces dominated by one particular religious group, in this case, Catholics, who constituted 69 percent of the population. However, in many individual streets the levels of segregation were far higher. Take for example Alton Street, which is highlighted in the centre of the map. This had an enumerated population of approximately 200 people and was 100 percent Catholic. Given such a pronounced religious or ethno-national residential geography it is little wonder that place was used so frequently to predict the persuasion of the prospective, and often, random victim.

death rate		
ward	Catholics	Protestants
Clifton	518.68	1330.29
Court	157.51	1064.39
Cromac	5345.00	6140.66
Dock	190.84	398.37
Duncairn	125.14	6183.00
Falls	781.34	484.71
Ormeau	563.83	6097.60
Pottinger	202.41	1751.50
Shankill	301.50	5126.33
Smithfield	513.54	83.07
St. Anne's	235.82	344.94
St. George's	n/a	3401.60
Victoria	265.71	1544.93
Windsor	n/a	n/a
Woodvale	110.57	1016.68

Table 1: Death rates for Catholics and Protestants in the fifteen wards of Belfast

Ward boundaries are rather aggregate measures but they provide some means of assessing the relative risk that minority populations faced from living in particular areas. Table 1 shows the death rates for the two communities across the city's fifteen wards. In general the death rate, and therefore the risk factor, was far greater for Catholics than it was for Protestants across the city, this fact being a combination of a greater fatality rate and a smaller share of the population. Thus the Court ward was actually a far more dangerous place to be a Catholic than the Falls, and this acts as an important corrective to Parkinson's view that the conflict was skewed to the west of the city.⁶⁸ In fact, this was not the case as the spatial evidence shows us that it was heavily concentrated on central and inner-north Belfast and clearly remained there for the duration of the conflict. Mapping provides further potential to explain why this may be the case. Figure 7 shows the infamous Falls-Shankill interface, an area of the city now scarred by a substantial fortified peaceline built in the mid-1970s, which ironically also acts as one of the city's leading tourist attractions. Highlighted on the map are the areas of the interface between the Catholic Falls and the Protestant Shankill which were occupied by industrial premises in the period 1920-22 and it clear from the map that a substantial buffer may have acted to separate the two communities and thus afford each some relative protection. These mills and factories were a buffer because in religious terms, they

constituted an indefensible space, unlike most of the city's residential areas. It is also evident that where deaths did occur, these tended to be towards the contested and dense residential streets around Cupar Street and Kashmir Road where there was no real physical barrier between the two communities. The industrial landscape did not prevent violence from occurring, but it did channel it. Consider the following,

The old red and yellow coloured tramcar swayed, whined and groaned over the rails down the Falls Road. There were certain danger points when it passed Cupar Street, Conway Street, Northumberland Street and Dover Street; long streets leading from the Falls to the Shankill. Across these streets at moments of tension the report of rifle fire rang out as snipers on both sides opened up. The tram speeded and clanked past those streets as the driver crouched down on the deck behind the controls. The passengers took their cue and huddled down on the floor which the Tramways department had thoughtfully provided with a carpet of straw. There were audible signs of relief when the neutral Castle Junction hove in sight.⁶⁹

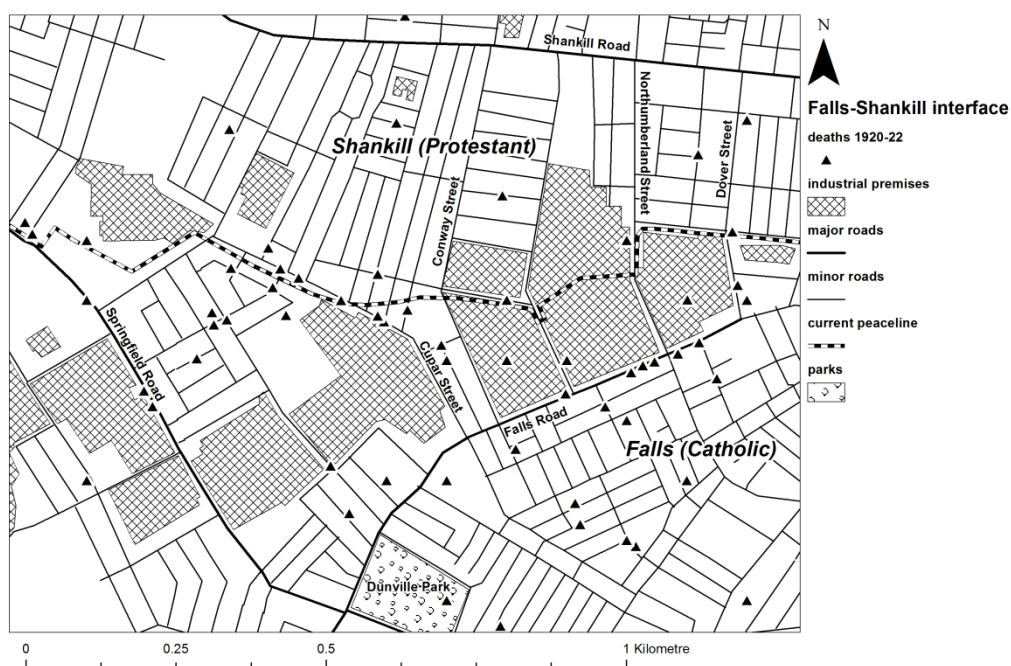


Figure 7: The Falls-Shankill interface and industrial land use

While Catholics in general did face an enhanced level of risk of death during the conflict across wider areas of the city, the group exposed to the highest death rates were actually Protestants living in the overwhelmingly Catholic Smithfield ward, where a figure of one violent Protestant death per every eighty-three Protestant residents was recorded. This is a remarkable figure which underlines the relative nature of the minority-majority paradigm in Belfast and across Northern Ireland more generally as being completely scale dependent.⁷⁰

Legacies

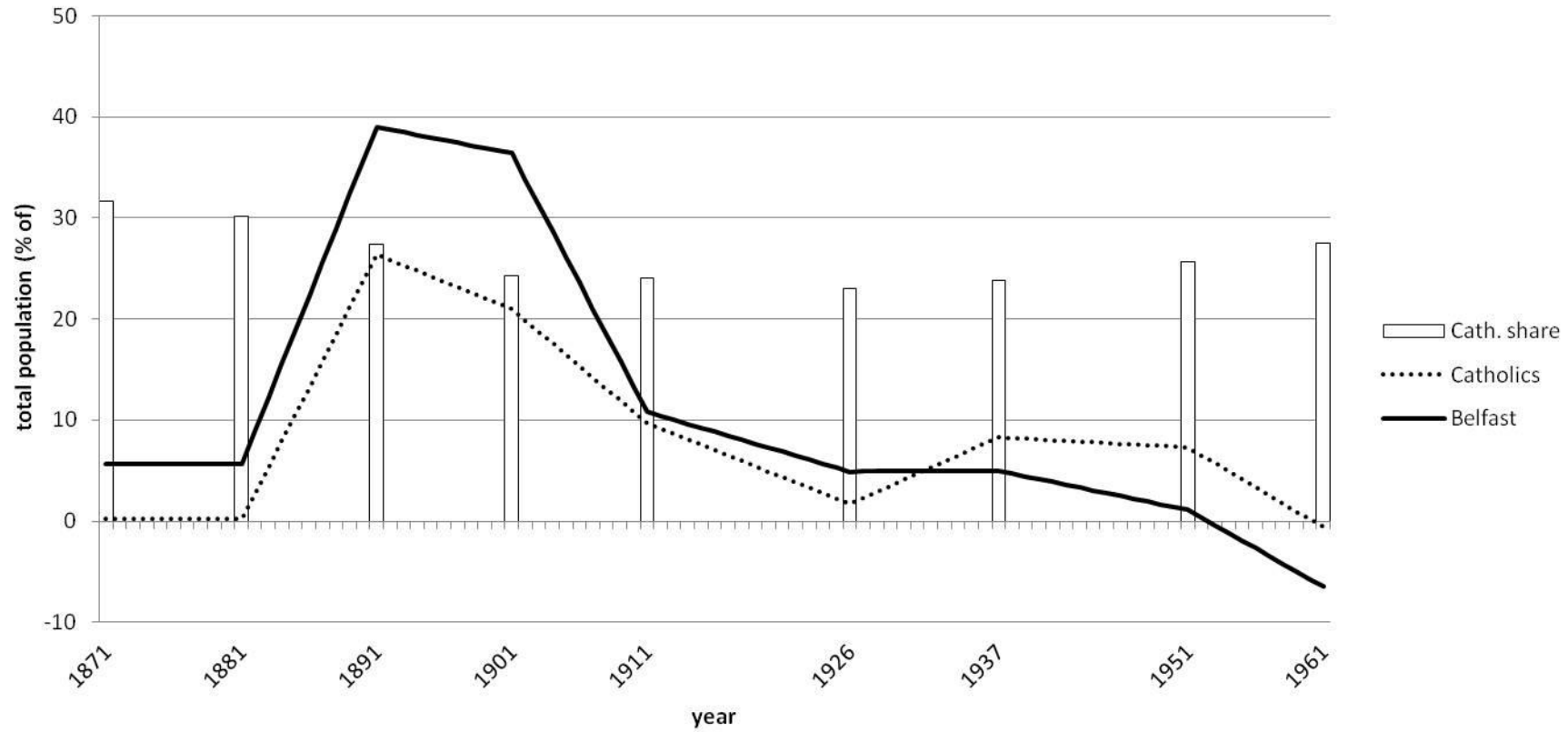


Figure 8: Inter-censal percentage change in the Catholic and total populations of Belfast; Catholic share of the total population of Belfast between 1871 and 1961

How did the trauma of 1920 to 1922 alter the demographic trajectories of the city in the longer term? Between 1911 and 1926 the population of the city was continuing to grow, albeit at a much reduced rate from the heyday of the late-nineteenth century. However, after 1926 Catholic growth rates began to outstrip those of the city as a whole for the first time in its history, a trend which would intensify throughout the course of the twentieth century and therefore increase the Catholic share of the population.⁷¹ This is significant for our understanding of the wider causes of the 1920s Troubles, which Lynch has argued stray beyond the explicitly political and into the demographic.⁷² The perception at least, of a rising Catholic population was, he avers, one of the contributory factors leading to the outbreak of violence. The great irony of this observation being that historically, while the Catholic population of the city had indeed been growing rapidly, it had not been keeping pace with that of the city as a whole. Consequently, as figure 8 shows, the Catholic share of the population was in a gradual long-term decline. It was only subsequent to the trauma of the 1920s that their relative demographic fortunes reversed and Catholics gradually grew their share of the city's population. So, while Catholics were actually not increasing relative to the city as whole there was a perception among Protestants that this was in fact the case, and this was caused, according to Munck, by their over-representation among the lowest socio-economic echelons of the city's social structure, putting them in direct competition with poor Protestants for work and housing, thus limiting the possibilities for a subordination of sectarian imperatives to a unifying class consciousness.⁷³

		Catholic deaths	Protestant deaths	Catholics 1911 (%)	Catholics 1926 (%)	Protestants 1911 (%)	Protestants 1926 (%)
Catholic deaths	Spearman's ρ	1.000	.691**	.745**	.822**	-.693**	-.641*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.004	.001	.000	.004	.010
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
Protestant deaths	Spearman's ρ	.691**	1.000	.433	.479	-.349	-.304
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.	.107	.071	.203	.270
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
Catholics 1911 (%)	Spearman's ρ	.745**	.433	1.000	.971**	-.739**	-.750**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.107	.	.000	.002	.001
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
Catholics 1926 (%)	Spearman's ρ	.822**	.479	.971**	1.000	-.764**	-.764**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.071	.000	.	.001	.001
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
Protestants 1911 (%)	Spearman's ρ	-.693**	-.349	-.739**	-.764**	1.000	.986**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.203	.002	.001	.	.000
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15
Protestants 1926 (%)	Spearman's ρ	-.641*	-.304	-.750**	-.764**	.986**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	.270	.001	.001	.000	.
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15

** .Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* .Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: Results of Spearman's Rank correlation of Catholic and Protestant deaths against ward background populations in 1911 and 1926

The notion of the period 1920 to 1922 as a pogrom against the Catholic population has been seriously challenged in revisionist scholarship.⁷⁴ However, perhaps the clearest means of debunking this idea comes not from the reinterpretation of documentary evidence or the uncovering of new material, but rather through assessing the quantitative effect of this violence, for if it was a pogrom, then it was a failed one at most. Deaths are only one metric, albeit perhaps the ultimate measure of hostility which faces a community; there are many other forms of violence such as expulsion from homes and workplaces which had a profound effect on polarising the people of Belfast in this period. Nevertheless, given the highly segregated nature of the city, the spatial analysis of deaths during the conflict does provide us with a powerful means of linking place, people and political or sectarian dynamics. What the results of correlation analysis in table 2 shows is a highly significant relationship between the deaths of Catholics and the Catholic proportion of the background population. Catholics died, unsurprisingly, in overwhelmingly Catholic areas. However, this statistical relationship strengthened between 1911 and 1926, meaning that such areas became more, not less Catholic over time. In effect, the Catholic population of the city responded to the trauma of that period by hunkering down rather than dispersing. For Protestants, no significant similar trend is discernible. This would seem to undermine the portrayal of the 1920s Troubles simply as a pogrom against the minority population, at the very least in terms of its demographic effects, if not in its execution.

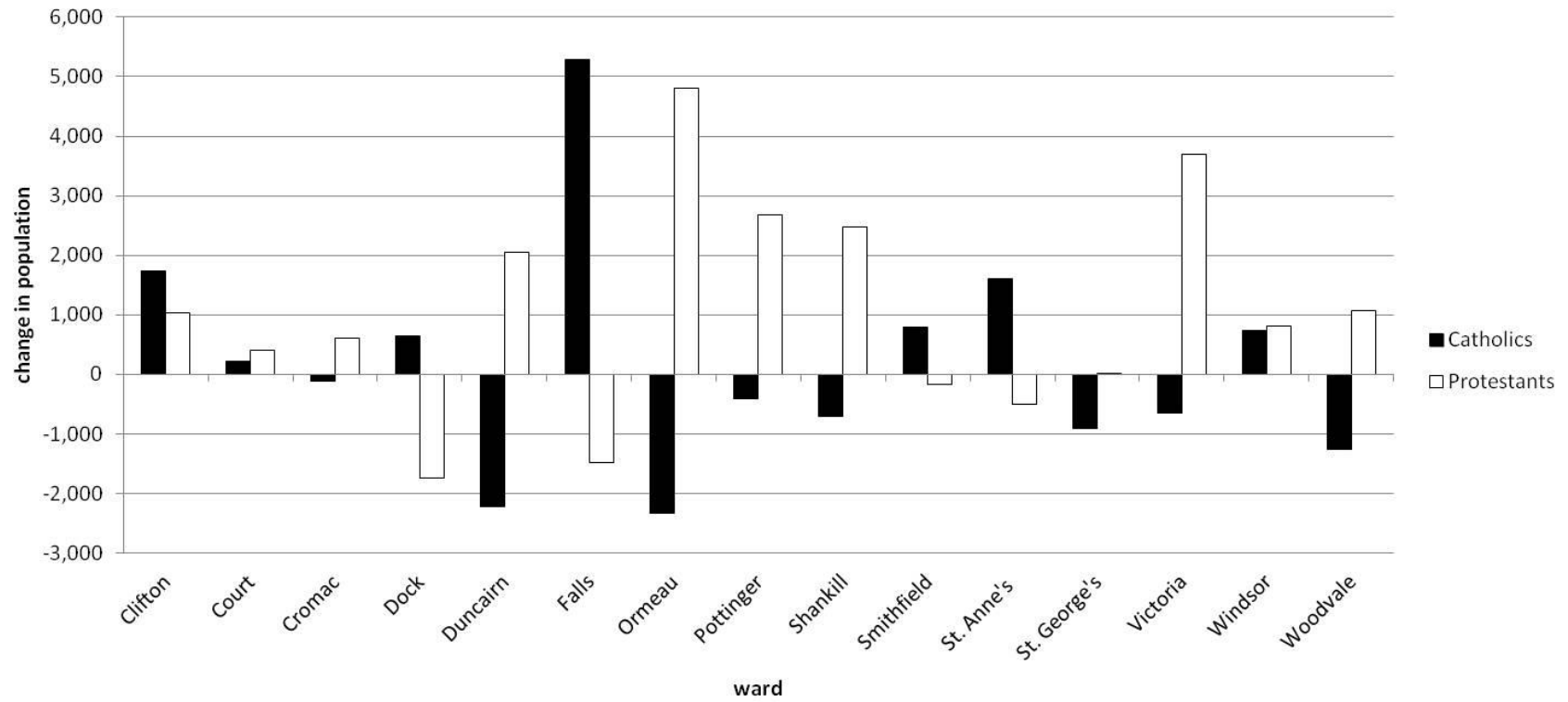


Figure 9: Population change between 1911 and 1926 in Belfast's fifteen wards

The other lasting legacy of the period 1920 to 1922 has been in how it exacerbated segregation within the city. In this respect the 1920s Troubles were not unique; however, in terms of the scale of the sorting process that the deaths, violence, intimidation and sacking of that period initiated, then those three years were without parallel.⁷⁵ If segregation in Belfast is indeed a ‘ratchet’ as Boal has asserted, then the period between 1911 and 1926 probably constituted the greatest tightening of that ratchet in the city’s history.⁷⁶ This sense of a city sorting its population and polarising further is underlined in figure 9, which shows that in only three of the city’s fifteen wards did both the Catholic and Protestant populations grow together, despite the fact that the city as a whole still had a growth rate of five percent in this troubled period. The city was continuing to grow, but it was growing apart. So while the years between 1920 and 1922 were an important milestone, they constituted only one milestone on what has appeared to be a progressive, divergent journey for much of Belfast’s history.⁷⁷

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Notes

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- ³ I.N. Gregory, N.A. Cunningham, C. Lloyd & I.S. Shuttleworth, *Troubled Geographies: A Spatial History of Religion and Society in Ireland Since the Famine*, Bloomington, IN, in press.
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commensurate with the figure arrived at in this analysis given that Hart's period of study runs up to the end of calendar year of 1922.

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⁵⁰ Blythe N.E. policy memo., 9 Aug. 1922, UCDA.

⁵¹ 1922, Lenten Pastorals, MR – VI (JOSEPH CARDINAL MACRORY – PERSONAL)(FOLDERS 1-5), ARCH 11/5/2, Armagh Archdiocesan Archives (hereafter AAA). Hart argues that the West Cork killings were an example of precisely the sort of ‘vicarious punishment’ MacRory’s Lenten pastoral had menacingly foreshadowed not two months previously. See Hart, *I.R.A. and its Enemies*, 277-278.

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