

Europe and the wider world: Topic 3 Dictatorship and Democracy in Europe, 1920-1945 | Sample answer

What was the impact of World War II on Ireland, North and South?

Following the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Eire and Northern Ireland had vastly different reactions. However, the conflict had profound and long-lasting impacts on both nations. In the South, it led to increased government controls and changed dramatically their relationship with Great Britain while the North experienced massive devastation during the Blitz as well as changes to its defence structures and economy.

Germany invaded Poland on September 1st, 1939 and within 24 hours, Dáil Eireann declared neutrality. The Fianna Fail government, led by Eamon De Valera, realised they needed to increase their powers for the duration of the war. The period became known as the Emergency due to the Emergency Powers Bill passed by the Dáil that gave the government a broad range of powers to deal with the issues that could arise during wartime. The First Amendment to the Constitution Bill allowed the government to act outside of the constitution was under threat. De Valera himself barely even consulted the Dáil on many matters. These measures led to a more authoritarian state but, it could be argued, did benefit the public in the long-run.

One of the most crucial elements of the increased government control was censorship. A conscious effort was made by the government to keep the general public in the dark so as to avoid a sense of panic. It's said that Ireland was condemned to live in Plato's Cave where they'd only see the faint shadows passing by rather than the whole picture. F.S.L. Lyons noted that, at the end of the war, "they emerged...to a new and vastly different world". Censorship went as far as to change weather reports if they favoured one side over the other and even saw private letters read and often withheld. These actions had an impact on the relationship between the government and the public in Ireland for years to come despite the end of censoring in 1945.

The war changed irreparably Ireland's relationship with Britain. At the outbreak of war, the British requested the use of the three Treaty ports for the duration of the war but the Irish government quickly rejected this as it would threaten Irish neutrality and cause uproar in hardline republican circles. Winston Churchill, a vocal critic both of neutrality and of Irish nationalism, came to power in 1940 and seemed intent on convincing De Valera to enter the war. He sent Minister for Health Malcolm MacDonald to Dublin and instructed him to offer a

united Ireland in return for participation in the war. This was also rejected as was Churchill's personal offer on the night of December 7th 1941 following the Pearl Harbour attacks. The relationship between the two countries and stubborn leaders was strained further throughout the war. Tensions had not been as high as that since the Truce of 1921.

In the North, they too saw a shift in the dynamic between themselves and England. The help of the six counties, still ruled by the Unionist party only served to strengthen the bond with London. While they were woefully unprepared in 1939, James Craig pledged unwavering allegiance to the cause saying "We are the King's men and we'll be with you to the end". Naval and RAF bases played key parts in the Battle of the Atlantic and later in the preparations for D-Day. Churchill frequently praised the contribution of Northern Ireland and their participation in the war reinforced partition as well as boosting unionist pride.

The most obvious impact the war had on Northern Ireland was the devastation caused by German bombs during the Blitz. While only attacked a handful of times, government complacency and unpreparedness saw the city suffer more than any outside of London. Anderson Shelters had been installed in just 15% of homes that were eligible for it and only 10% of children had been evacuated. Defences amassed to just 22 anti-aircraft guns and public shelters would only be enough for just a quarter of the population. The morgue could hold just 200 bodies. Over the course of the attacks during April and May of 1941, 1,100 were killed, 150,00 were made homeless while 56,000 houses were destroyed. In total, over £20 million worth of damage was done. Marshall Plan money aided in the recovery in Belfast after the war.

Despite the damage caused by the Blitz, industry boomed north of the border during the Second World War. Unemployment stood at 30% before the war but full employment was reached at the height of the conflict Harland and Wolff built 140 warships while the Short Bros. produced 1200 Stirling bombers and 120 seaplanes. The arrival of American troops in February of 1942 sent the consumer economy into overdrive. While wages were at a standstill in Éire, they increased gradually in the North while more and more women entered the workforce. With Britain turning to NI for much of its agricultural production, that industry also thrived. Cattle numbers increased by 22% while poultry increased by 71%. This boom mitigated the damage of the Blitz attacks.

Ireland saw next to no conflict during the Second World War. Dublin and Wexford were each bombed once, both supposedly by mistake and while Belfast did suffer greatly, the city was

under attack for less than eight weeks. Despite that, the war changed the island, both north and south of the border, greatly. Both countries saw their relationship with Britain alter as a result of their war stance. Éire became a heavily censored state while Northern Ireland enjoyed a booming wartime economy.