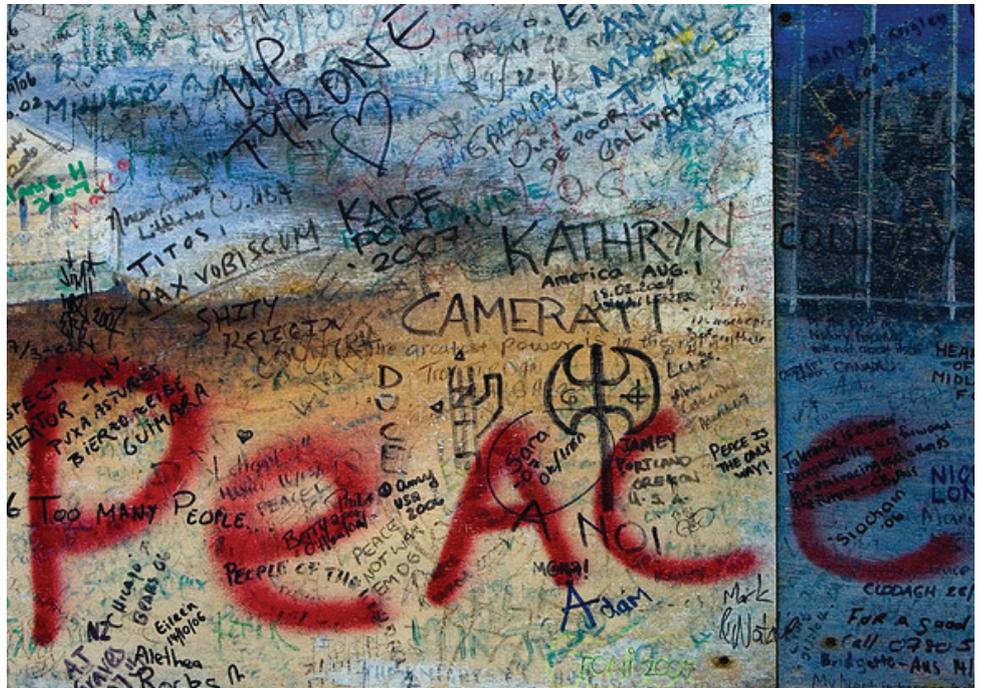


Belfast erupts in worst violence for a decade

Mobs in Northern Ireland this week have been attacking police and each other with guns, rocks and petrol bombs. It's a return to a sort of violence which many hoped had been laid to rest.



ART & DESIGN
HISTORY & POLITICS



Graffiti on a wall in Belfast calls for peace but these latest riots reveal the fragility of Northern Ireland's calm.

Police stationed on the Lower Newtownards Road in Belfast had no idea what was coming. Suddenly, a large group of young men emerged from the Protestant neighbourhood of Castlereagh Street and advanced towards the Catholic enclave of Short Strand.

Officers tried to intervene, but they were disastrously outnumbered. Soon, a full-scale battle had broken out. Bullets slammed into the side of a police Landrover. Petrol bombs whirled overhead, exploding on the pavements in bursts of flame.

The next evening, the pattern repeated. A police officer was blinded with a laser pen. A press photographer was shot in the leg. One man was hit by a flying brick and suffered a fractured skull.

The worst injuries, however, were not physical but mental. For many inhabitants of this divided city, news of the fighting was a nightmarish reminder of the bad old days of the 'Troubles', when hundreds of lives were lost in a

murderous conflict between Catholic 'nationalists' and Protestant 'loyalists'. Atrocities were carried out on both sides, and Belfast was torn apart by religious and political hatred.

Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods were like countries at war, except in Belfast the enemy was two streets away. Roads like Lower Newtownards became heavily guarded borders. In some areas, 'peace walls' began springing up – lines of concrete and barbed wire that snaked through the city, dividing the battling communities.

But those days are meant to be over. In April 1998, the various warring factions and parties of Northern Ireland signed a landmark peace agreement. Paramilitaries laid down their weapons. A new political assembly gave voice to previously disenfranchised minorities, and militants were slowly persuaded to talk rather than fight. In fact, the 1998 Good Friday agreement was held up as a model for other peace processes around the world.

BURIED HATREDS

Police suspect that these latest riots were organised by a small group of loyalist extremists. Representatives from all communities are lining up to condemn the riot as the work of a tiny minority, with no support from the wider population.

If that's the case then perhaps these riots are just a freak occurrence – a short hiccup on the road to peace.

But the truth may be darker than that. Although this is the first major riot in a decade, sectarian attacks have been on the rise. Meanwhile, the peace walls that sprang up during the troubles are not coming down. Worst of all, among young people – who don't remember the Troubles themselves – the old violence is increasingly glamorised, and admired.

The 1998 agreement may have solved some of the political disputes, but there are worrying signs that the underlying hatred still remains.

Q & A

Q What exactly is everyone fighting about in Northern Ireland?

A It's a long and complicated story with a political side and a religious side, although the two are tightly bound together.

Q Well what's the political side?

A Northern Ireland is part of the UK, and

a majority of its citizens (called 'loyalists') wants to keep it that way. The large 'Irish nationalist' minority, however, wants to join with the Republic of Ireland to form a unified Irish nation.

Q What about the religious side?

A That goes back hundreds of years, to the time when English Kings encouraged Protestants from England and Scotland to settle in Ireland, taking land from Irish Catholics.

There's been tension and discrimination between the two religious groups ever since.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Humans are naturally warlike – we'll always find something to fight about, however much we look for peace.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?