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Article: The division of Ireland and its foes: the centenary of resistance to partition

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Abstract

Critics of partition argue that it contributes to the perpetuation, rather than the amelioration, of territorial conflict. This paper engages with the theoretical debates on partition, focusing on the particular and illustrative case of Ireland. The island has been partitioned into two polities for a century. Opposition to the partition of Ireland has existed from the outset to the contemporary Brexit context. The argument is that while hostility to partition has experienced different forms -namely political and violent- and different degrees of intensity, there is a historical continuum of contestation against partition in Ireland. While the territorial issue was calmed by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Brexit has reanimated the border question, providing political momentum for those who aim to challenge the territorial status quo.

Introduction

Ireland has been partitioned for one hundred years. Yet resistance to partition has been evident throughout that century and has taken peaceful and violent forms. This paper aims to shed light on the centenary paradigmatic case of Irish partition, detailing the multi-faceted opposition towards it. The paper's value lies in its comprehensive theorization of partition, its century sweep, its detail on various forms of opposition to partition on the island of Ireland throughout the century, and its consideration of the import of the contemporary shift in the configuration of borders inspired by the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU).

The article is framed by an initial consideration of the theoretical debate on partition involving supportive and critical perspectives. The paper proceeds by examining waves of resistance to the partition of Ireland: from the early years of political and violent opposition; to the shifting site of resistance from the South to the North; through the post-Good Friday Agreement "calming" years; to the reanimation of partition as a major political issue on the island of Ireland sparked by the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

Theoretical considerations

Simply put, partition is a technique applied to ethnically divided territories with the aim of solving conflicts that are perceived to be intractable (Dubnov & Robson, 2019: 1). However, far from being a panacea, this practice often comes with a price in the shape of long-term, multifaceted and often unforeseen consequences. In Ireland, for instance, partition has shaped the political dynamics of the island since its imposition a century ago. It has also contributed to the articulation of the most salient ideology on the island over the past century: Irish republicanism. Last but not least, it has fundamentally contributed to the perpetuation of a territorial conflict. Prior to presenting this case study, it is important to discuss some theoretical considerations regarding partition.

It is not uncommon for partition to be confused with secession. The vague conceptualisation of partition used by some authors, such as Downes who simply defines it as “separating ethnic groups into independent states” (2001: 62), has contributed to fostering such confusion. It is important to note that while both terms bear a considerable amount of resemblance, not least the fact that they both involve the transformation of pre-existing state borders, partition can be distinguished from secession.

Secession has been defined as “a process of withdrawal of a territory and its population from an existing state and the creation of a new state on that territory” (Pavkovic & Radan, 2016: 1). In contrast, O’Leary conceptualises partition as an “externally proposed and imposed fresh border cut through at least one community’s national homeland, creating at least two separate political units under different sovereigns or authorities” (2001: 54). As can be inferred from these two definitions, one of the fundamental discrepancies between the two concepts is agency.

It can be argued that while partition is often a result of an imposition by empires and states, secession is generally conducted by subnational entities that aim to form independent new polities, usually advocating the principle of self-determination. Contrary to what it may appear at first glance, in the case of partition, self-determination does not necessarily play a significant role. In fact, partition has arguably little to do with self-determination and is driven instead by the strategy of an outside power that aims to “divide and rule” (Kumar 1997; Dubnov & Robson, 2019). This practice can also have more spontaneous origins and, therefore, is not necessarily an exogenous imposition. As Johnson claims, partition is not always a by-product of foreign-led machinations but can also be “an unexpected outcome of civil wars” (2015: 46). At any rate, partition is susceptible to being used as a tool by states (and colonial powers) against a seceding region or a national liberation movementⁱ (O’Leary, 2007b: 894).

Take the illustrative case of India, for instance. In 1947, it seceded *from* the British Empire and, quasi simultaneously, it was partitioned *by* that very colonial power (Kumar,

1997). The example of India is particularly useful as it shows that there can be a correlation between partition and secession as one of the two phenomena may occur subsequently -and consequently- after the other. Partition has been described as a “very British” solution on the grounds that this former colonial power was directly and indirectly responsible for several partitions, including India, Ireland and Palestine, during the twentieth century (Milton-Edwards, 2009: 59). The particularity of the Irish case, as will be explained below, is that unlike India and Palestine, the UK continued to rule a part of the partitioned territory.

The debate over partition has generated a large body of literature, which tends to be polarised between advocates (Kaufman, 1996; Downes, 2001; Johnson, 2008; Pischedda, 2008) and critics (Fearon, 2004; Horowitz & Weisiger, 2009; Jenne, 2009, 2012; Dubnov & Robson, 2019). The main justification for partition, at least according to its advocates, is that it provides a solution, probably the *only* solution, to ethnic conflict (Downes, 2001; Pischedda, 2008). The fundamental ethos of the argument is that there is no solution without separation for territories that have experienced ethnoterritorial wars. The central component of that solution is, in effect, the separation of ethnic communities into two -or more- different political entities given that all possibilities for ethnic cooperation have been extinguished by the war itself (Kaufman, 1996: 137). The logic is that creating differentiated spaces of power fundamentally contributes to reducing the potential for conflict (Andersen & Castan Pinos, 2015: 27).

If that argument holds water, the repercussions in terms of theory and practice are enormous. If *partitionists* are right, it is not possible to develop an alternative in the shape of a consociational agreement, where all groups can be represented through a power-sharing institutional assemblage. This is precisely Pischedda’s argument when he categorically claims that “power-sharing strategies aiming at creating institutional arrangements in which ethnic groups previously engaged in violence against each other share political authority over the same territory are doomed to fail” (Pischedda, 2008: 105).

At the other end, anti-partitionists highlight the weaknesses and inconsistencies of partition. One of the common critiques is that partitions do not *end* ethnically-driven conflicts, they merely *transform* them (Jenne, 2012: 255), or even worse, they perpetuate and exacerbate them (Kumar, 1997; Anderson, 2008; Jenne 2009). In other words, what was an internal conflict in the past may become an inter-state or a reinvigorated new internal conflict within the freshly designed boundaries. The Indian example illustrates this argument in a particularly dramatic fashion. While the architects of the partition of India may have hoped that it would prevent religious violence, partition did not put an end to ethno-religious violence. Quite the opposite, it caused around 200,000 deaths and the ethnic cleansing of approximately 5 million people, thus transforming the conflict

into a seemingly intractable inter-state dispute between two nuclear powers (Anderson, 2008: 96).

There is no scholarly consensus regarding the desirability and validity of partition as a strategy to solve violent ethnic conflict. With a focus on the Irish case, we side with critical authors that partition is, in many cases, unable to offer a long-lasting solution, merely transforming the nature of the conflict without addressing its structural causes. In effect, in Ireland, partition did not solve the conflict but instead it generated “new political antagonisms” (O’Leary, 2019: 1). The new political antagonisms, as the following section will explain, did not take long to materialise.

Finally, it must be noted that partition does not emerge in vacuo. Instead, it is historically rooted. Dubnov and Robson situate the origins of partition immediately after World War I in a context where great powers attempted to remake the global order with the aim of containing nationalist discourses and strengthening imperial ambitions (2019: 2). This is precisely the context in which the partition of Ireland was enacted.

The rationale behind the partition of Ireland

The partition of Ireland was initially triggered by a bill of the British Parliament: the Government of Ireland Act of 1920. The main rationale of the bill was to grant autonomy to both nationalists and unionists through the establishment of two different parliaments; “Southern Ireland” (which never materialised) and “Northern Ireland” (O’Leary, 2007b: 896). Despite the recognition of autonomy, the Act explicitly made clear that the British King would continue as the major political authority across the island: “[T]he executive power in Southern Ireland and in Northern Ireland shall continue [to be] vested in His Majesty the King” (British Parliament, 1920a: 8). However, the Act viewed partition as a temporary settlement and envisioned the creation of all-Ireland institutions such as a Parliament and the “Council of Ireland” (British Parliament, 1920a).

According to Anderson and O’Dowd, all the main actors, particularly Irish republicans, underestimated the longevity of partition (2007: 944). The division of Ireland became consolidated with the Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed in 1921, a year after the Act, between the British government and a delegation of Irish rebels that included Michael Collins, a key figure of the Irish Republican Army (IRA)ⁱⁱ and a Teachta Dála (member) of Dáil Éireann [Irish parliament]. That parliament ratified, with a narrow margin, the Anglo-Irish Treaty and hence the political division of the island. The Treaty (after a Truce in July 1921) ended the Irish war of independence (1919-1921), a guerrilla war with two chief belligerents: the IRA and the British Army. The most significant institutional effect of the partition of Ireland was the creation of two separate polities: Northern Ireland (NI), which would remain as part of the UK, and the Irish Free State -established a year after the Anglo-Irish Treaty- which would eventually become the Republic of Ireland in 1948.

Partition was, therefore, a policy implemented by the British government that was seemingly aimed at accomplishing two parallel objectives. On the one hand, it would allow London to keep its presence, military and otherwise, and influence in one part of Ireland. On the other hand, it was perceived as an opportunity to defuse (pre-partition) ethnonationalist tensions on the island. While the former goal was accomplished the latter was not and, instead, partition led to the perpetuity of ethnonationalist fractures which have lasted, in different shapes, for a century.

It should be noted that partition was not only driven by external factors in the shape of British imperialism, but also had local agency. Indeed, a contributing *internal* factor explaining partition is unionism, an ideology initially cemented in the defence of British rule in Ireland and subsequently -and perhaps more pragmatically- in the defence of such rule in NI, a six-county Ulster territory where the unionist majority had long opposed Home Rule and Irish statehood. During this period, unionism was not pro-partition. Edward Carson, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party at the time, advocated for an 'Ireland one and undivided' as long as Ireland remained loyal to the United Kingdom 'and loyal to the Empire' (British Parliament, 1920b). Colin Reid argues that during this convulse period, unionism became '*Ulsterised*'ⁱⁱⁱ, shifting 'from an all-island political organisation and perspective to an Ulster-centric body' (2017: 213). In turn, this process of *Ulsterisation* contributed to fomenting the idea, at first mostly within unionism, of the *two-nation theory*, that is, the notion that 'the island of Ireland contains an Irish nation and an Ulster nation' (Gallagher, 1995: 727). Unionism's defence of partition can, therefore, be seen as a consequence of the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, which was perceived as being disloyal to the Union and the Crown despite the fact that the Crown was part of the Free State's Constitution. It has been argued that unionism reluctantly embraced partition not as the ideal option but as the only option to protect British rule in the one part of Ireland where such rule was possible (Hennessey, 1996).

The Irish Boundary Commission, which was proposed in the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921), began work in November 1924 to precisely determine the delineation of the Irish border. The Boundary Commission presented unionists in the new Northern Ireland with the immediate threat of losing territory to the Irish Free State (Kennedy 1988: 73). Chaired by Robert Feetham, a South African judge, the Commission conducted informal meetings, as well as official hearings with over 500 witnesses interviewed. However, its 1925 report, which recommended only modest adjustments, was suppressed in order to neutralise growing unrest after newspaper forecasts of its findings (Laffan, 1983: 103). Instead, the existing border was confirmed in the Boundary Agreement (3 December 1925) by the leaders of the Irish Free State, Northern Ireland, and the British Government (Laffan, 1983:105; Leary, 2016: 35-39). Northern nationalists' abandonment was palpable when the Dáil passed the Agreement on 15 December 1925 (Keogh, 2005: 28). Mar-

garet O’Callaghan (1999) concludes that the border became ‘copperfastened’ as a result.

Political and violent resistance to the partition of Ireland

After the copperfastening of partition in 1925, different instruments were employed by Irish nationalists and republicans aimed at its undoing. The centenary of contestation has experienced different levels of intensity and has taken political and violent forms.

In modern Ireland constitutional and violent revolutionary paths have been intimate bedfellows. For Irish nationalists the constitutional path often coincided with the threat of violence. Daniel O’Connell’s peaceful ‘monster meetings’ for Catholic emancipation, between 1843 and 1845, implied violent threat. Charles Stewart Parnell’s association with the Land League’s mobilisation of the Irish peasantry later in the nineteenth century blurred the line between political and violent revolutionary paths (Nic Dháibhéid and Reid, 2010). On the unionist side, the threat of violence to support political opposition to Home Rule for Ireland was clearly demonstrated by the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and its connection to Edward Carson’s Ulster Unionist Party^{iv}. So much so that an authoritative book on the UVF is entitled *Carson’s Army: The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-1922* (Bowman, 2007). Later in the twentieth century Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Leader, Ian Paisley, was tempted to repeat the trick, most conspicuously at the launch of the loyalist paramilitary organisation Ulster Resistance (Bruce, 1995).

To a certain extent, Ireland’s two main political parties, Fianna Fáil (founded in 1926) and Fine Gael (founded in 1933), were the products of violent revolutionary politics of the early twentieth century. Two Fianna Fáil leaders and Taoisigh (Prime Ministers), Éamon de Valera and Seán Lemass, had been active IRA insurgents. However, Sinn Féin’s ‘Armalite’ and ballot paper’ rallying cry of the 1980s, reflecting its intimate relationship with the IRA, was the most explicit contemporary expression of ‘the voice and the sword’ in Irish politics (Nic Dháibhéid and Reid, 2010). In the specific context of anti-partitionism, Sinn Féin became the sole standard bearer of this dual strategy. However, as revolutionary violence took hold in Northern Ireland after 1969, a partitionist constituency became perceptible in Southern society with a 26-county Irish state nationalism figure-headed in the 1970s and 1980s by the public intellectual Conor Cruise O’Brien^{vi} (O’Brien, 1972, 1980; O’Halloran, 1987; Bowman, 1989: 333-336; Hanley, 2018; O’Callaghan, 2018).

The first traces of opposition towards the partitioning of Ireland occurred immediately after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and led to the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) between those nationalists and republicans who accepted the truce -and hence partition- and those who did not. According to O’Leary, the survival and continuity of the IRA in

1922 was due to two main grievances: the fact that the Free State was not fully independent since the British King continued to be the head of state; and the partition of Ireland which was seen as a curtailment of the right to self-determination (2007a: 189). In the North, political and sectarian violence underscored the birth of the new Northern Ireland with 636 lives lost between July 1920 and July 1922 (Lynch, 2008: fn 9).

For those who opposed the agreement, such as anti-Treaty republican leader Éamon de Valera, the issue of the North/Northern Ireland had to “remain a question for the Irish people themselves to settle” as Irish republicans could not “admit the right of the British Government to mutilate our country” (1921). This idea of “mutilation” of the nation carried out by an alien (colonial) power has remained a constant amongst those who oppose the partition of Ireland. For instance, in 2017, after the Irish national broadcaster, RTÉ^{vii} showed a map of Ireland with the North greyed out, the deputy leader of Sinn Féin at the time Mary Lou McDonald complained irately using the same metaphor: “Who in RTÉ took it upon themselves to mutilate the map of Ireland?” (cited by Clarke, 2017).

It has been argued that the missing ingredient of the “colonial mutilation” narrative is that agency is denied to Ulster British unionists in Northern Ireland. According to Lynch, Irish republicanism has tended to view unionists as secondary actors, as “aliens” serving the interests of the British empire or, at best, as a group which had been fooled and could be “converted” into the republican cause (2019: 51). At the same time, discourses which explain partition exclusively in the context of irreconcilable differences between the two ethnonational groups on the island - Irish nationalists and Ulster British unionists - also miss a point: they ignore British imperial interests which shaped the conflict and ultimately maintained partition (Coakley & O’Dowd, 2007: 883). O’Leary attempts to solve this apparent contradictory dichotomy with regards to the partition of Ireland by arguing convincingly that it had both colonial and ethnonational dimensions (2007b: 900). It should be stressed that unionism was a driving ideological force in Ireland but also in Britain, where the Tories (unlike the liberals or the Labour party) enthusiastically embraced it (Fanning, 1985; O’Leary, 2007a). However, the Tories’ support of unionism had a different logic than that of local Irish unionists and was arguably driven by pragmatic political (imperial) interests and considerations.

While the negotiations between the British government and Irish republicans were taking place to end the Irish war of independence, both the Ulster unionist political elite and the pro-union armed militias, most notably the UVF, vehemently opposed the idea of an independent united Ireland. In fact, the main *raison d’être* of this paramilitary militia founded in 1912 with tens of thousands of members^{viii} was precisely to block home rule and to “ensure that Ireland (and especially the northern province of Ulster) remained part of the UK, with the parliament at Westminster serving as its only representation” (Grob-Fitzgibbon, 2006: 2).

Consequently, it can be argued that partition became embedded with two coercive elements. On the one hand, the intimidation from pro-union armed paramilitary groups that were ready to defend the territorial status quo with violence. The sectarian riots, initiated by unionist/loyalist^x elements in Belfast in 1920, when nearly 500 people died, are testimony of this *power* to generate turmoil and instability prior to partition. This pre-partition violence sent clear signals to the British government that unionists were not willing to peacefully accept territorial changes without their consent. On the other hand, British Prime Minister Lloyd George had made it very clear that if the Anglo-Irish Treaty was not signed under the terms demanded by the British government the British army would immediately resume its belligerent campaign in Ireland (Anderson & O'Dowd, 2007; Hopkinsons, 2010; Gibbons, 2015).

Irish republican negotiators were, therefore, between a rock and a hard place and that dilemma prompted the divisions of the Irish republican movement between the pro-treaty pragmatists and the anti-treaty idealists. The former constituted themselves militarily as the National Army and the latter, the IRA, continued their militant struggle for a united Ireland. The IRA's military defeat in the Civil War (1922-1923), therefore, did not end the violent contestation of partition. Despite the repression it suffered in the aftermath of the Civil War, with thousands of imprisoned militants, the organisation continued to exist, albeit in a clandestine fashion, targeting British interests in Britain and Northern Ireland and to a lesser extent in the Irish Free State.

The armed challenge to partition experienced a new turn in January 1939, when the IRA issued a statement declaring war on Britain, giving the British government four days to withdraw "all British armed forces stationed in Ireland" (cited by McKenna, 2016: 28). In a statement that followed that declaration, the IRA used partition as the main argument, denouncing that it "divided [Ireland] into two parts with two separate Parliaments subject to and controlled by the British Government. The armed forces of England still occupy six of our counties in the North" (cited by Dáil Éireann, 1939).

Partition was therefore the main *casus belli* that, in the eyes of the IRA Army Council, justified a bombing campaign in Britain which lasted for fourteen months and caused 300 explosions and 10 deaths. Perhaps naively, the aim of the campaign was to force the British government to open negotiations on the ending of partition by inducing fear in British society (Smith, 1995: 63). That goal clearly failed as the Prime Minister at the time, Neville Chamberlain, simply ignored the IRA ultimatum.

In parallel with the violent campaigns led by the IRA, important political developments took place in the South challenging partition, at least at a symbolic level. In 1926, de Valera founded a political party -Fianna Fáil- based on the principles of Irish republicanism and, therefore, anti-partitionism. It would become the most influential party in Ireland in the twentieth century. Fianna Fáil has often been criticised for using Irish unity

as an illusion, that is, as a persuasive electoral trick to capture votes without implementing any measures to realise the ideal (Kelly, 2013). While this argument may contain an element of truth, the party (and de Valera in particular) played a key role in legalising the main republican postulate in the Irish Constitution of 1937. According to its Article 2, Ireland's "national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and the territorial seas" (Constitution of Ireland, 1937). This bold anti-partitionist affirmation was, nonetheless, watered down in Article 3 which acknowledged that it is not possible to exercise jurisdiction over all the claimed territory using the realistic yet hopeful formula "pending the re-integration of the national territory" (Constitution of Ireland, 1937).

Political opposition to partition was also evident north of the border. It became manifested in the Irish Anti-Partition League that emerged from a convention of Irish nationalists in Dungannon, County Tyrone in November 1945. However, internal divisions were evident from the outset and rested mainly on the question of abstention from the Northern Ireland Parliament. The collective will of the League was thus compromised and its energy and support began to fade by 1951. Most abstentionists had left by 1953 and the organisation disbanded in 1958 (Purdie, 1986).

While the 26 counties of the South had been the main target of the anti-treaty republicans since 1921, that reality changed significantly in 1948 for two key reasons. Firstly, through the Republic of Ireland Act of 1948, the Irish Parliament officially declared Ireland a Republic cutting all ties with the British Crown (Dáil Éireann, 1948). That effectively meant that one of the two IRA grievances - Ireland not being fully independent - was no longer valid and, therefore, only one remained: partition. In parallel, that same year, the IRA issued a resolution which explicitly forbade its militants from taking any military action -even of a defensive nature- against the Southern institutions, *de facto* recognising the legitimacy of the Irish state (Bowyer Bell, 1997; O'Leary, 2007a). Provided that partition was the one and only cause left it is not surprising that the IRA reoriented its operation towards the institutional embodiment of partition: Northern Ireland.

The crystallisation of that new strategy was the ambitious -perhaps over-ambitious- border campaign (1956-1962), which according to an IRA document was aimed at breaking down "the enemy's administration until he is forced to withdraw his forces. Our method of doing this is the use of guerrilla warfare within the Occupied area and propaganda directed at the inhabitants" (cited by Smith, 1995: 67). This Maoist-inspired guerrilla operation involving around two hundred IRA members failed (once again), mainly due to two factors: on the one hand, the South was not a sanctuary, the Irish government actively collaborated with the British security forces by arresting IRA militants, and on the other hand, most of the Northern inhabitants -over two thirds were unionists in that period- openly abhorred to the idea of being "liberated" by what many perceived to be a gang of terrorists and bandits (Smith, 1995; Bowyer Bell, 1997).

In addition to political anti-partitionist initiatives this section has detailed the three violent anti-partitionist campaigns conducted by the IRA after the war of Independence against different actors: the Irish Free State (1922-1923), Great Britain (1939-1940), Northern Ireland (1956-1962). The two common elements of these violent campaigns are the fact that they were all aimed at abolishing partition and that they all failed abruptly in their military objectives. Despite the failure of the latter, the border campaign (1956-1962) established an important pattern: from then onwards the violent struggle for Irish reunification was to be fought primarily in the North.

1969, The North blows up

In 1969, the violent territorially-bound conflict which broke out half a century earlier largely left the South and travelled North, though there were a few sporadic loyalist attacks in the South, and republican attacks in Britain and on British military targets on mainland Europe. As will be argued below, for the first time, the IRA leadership as well as the vast majority of new recruits also came from the North. As republicanism gradually became confined to the realm of rhetoric in the South, in the North many Irish nationalists embraced the old republican tradition of militarism for a multiplicity of reasons. With over 3,500 deaths, this conflict based in the North (1969-1997) was the most lethal of all IRA campaigns with at least twice as many casualties as in the Irish war of independence (1921-1922).

In order to understand *how we got there*, we must take into account several considerations, namely the Northern Ireland context in the 1960s as well as the nature -and changes- of the IRA itself. In terms of context, it must be noted that since partition, Northern Ireland had consolidated itself as a “Protestant state for a Protestant people”, wherein Protestant unionists exerted political dominance over the Catholic nationalist minority (Anderson, 2008; McKenna, 2016). This led, for example, to discrimination in the allocation of public sector housing, and in employment, as well as deprivation of political rights with practices such as gerrymandering to ensure unionist hegemony in city councils such as Derry/Londonderry that had an Irish nationalist majority (cf. Cohen, 2007). Such discrimination and inequality contributed to the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, more left-leaning than republican in nature, which organised mass protests and actions of civil disobedience.

The two actors whose hegemony was seemingly being challenged were unsurprisingly antagonised: the unionist political elite and radical hardcore loyalist groups. The violent reaction of the latter to the Civil Rights movement in the form of sectarian riots^x contributed to providing a fertile ground for Irish republicans to “take advantage” of the inequalities and insecurity felt by many Catholics. In turn, the militarisation of Northern Ireland through the deployment in 1969 of the British Army^{xi} was another decisive trigger

that led to the eruption of the most significant armed political conflict in Western Europe in the second half of the twentieth century.

As for the nature of the organisation, it is important to bear in mind that the IRA's ideology in the period 1962-69 had decisively evolved into Marxism-Leninism (Moloney, 2002; Rekawek, 2011), and partly due to this, it "had largely abandoned the goal of a national liberation war" (McGarry & O'Leary, 1995: 259). This was far from being overwhelmingly accepted by all Irish republicans to the extent that such ideological discrepancies "contributed to the 1969 split between the more Marxist-oriented Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), the victorious faction in an internecine split, which prioritised the united-Ireland agenda over revolutionary class politics" (Radil & Castan Pinos, 2019: 11).

The Provisionals or *Provos*, as they were popularly known, built their legitimacy on the ground that the Officials had abandoned - the traditional reunification goal of republicanism. In that regard, the main political objectives of the PIRA diverged from those of the Official IRA they split from, and were very much in line with those of the IRA from the 1920s. According to its first communiqué in December 1969, its aims were to "uphold the sovereignty and unity of the Irish republic" and to "support the establishment of, and uphold, a lawful government in sole and absolute control of the 32 county Irish republic" (cited by Dingley, 2012: 111). Simply put, the Provisional's argument was that the Official's had prioritised working class liberation narratives at a time when *working class* loyalists were burning *working class* Catholic homes. The main critique was, therefore, that the Officials had failed to defend Catholic communities (Hanley, 2013: 685). In contrast, the Provisionals pledged to prioritise such defence against loyalists as well as against the British Army.

This double role summarises the complex dynamics of the Northern Ireland *Troubles*, as the conflict is commonly known. It could be argued that this violent conflict had three main belligerent groups: Republican armed organisations, of which the PIRA was the most significant one, the British army, and Loyalist paramilitaries^{xii}. Republicans were the only actor that had two simultaneous conflict dyads, in other words, the only actor that was fighting two wars at the same time. On the one hand, the struggle against the British army, which was conveniently framed as "anti-colonial". This conflict, which caused the highest number of casualties, was eminently territorial and had the fight for Irish reunification -and therefore against partition- at its very core. On the other hand, we can identify another parallel and simultaneous conflict which could be characterised as ethno-nationalist, and even sectarian, between loyalist paramilitary forces and republicans which produced a considerably high number of civilian victims^{xiii}. In the border region, Mulroe details numerous sectarian attacks by republicans during the 1970s, often in reprisal for loyalist attacks on Catholics (2017: 149-150).

While the immediate causes of the conflict (inequality, discrimination, the Civil Rights movement, IRA re-organisation, unionist reaction and loyalist riots) may not seem to be connected to partition, the political-institutional division of Ireland, enacted half a century earlier by the British government, into two polities lies at the very heart of the *Troubles*. As Drake argues, the core objectives of the warring groups were territorial: “republicans have aimed at achieving a united Ireland by excluding British rule from Northern Ireland, while the loyalists' objective has been to prevent Northern Ireland from being forced into a united Ireland”(1991: 63). The 1920 partition, therefore, did not solve the ‘Irish’ problem, it transformed and perpetuated it. As Coakley and O’Dowd put it, by “reproducing (arguably in more intense form) the problem it designed to resolve, the partition of Ireland contained the seeds of its own destruction, or at least of its reconstitution in a form substantially different from that in which it was initially implemented” (2007: 883-884). The violent conflict in Northern Ireland, therefore, can be interpreted as a long-term effect of partition, as its *reproduction* and *reconstitution* in a different shape, in a specific geographic context (north of the border) and in a different time period. In other words, the 1969 conflict is, in many respects, a by-product of the “imperial legacy” of partition (Anderson & O’Dowd, 2007: 947).

During the first decade of the conflict the PIRA focused exclusively on a military approach. After the republican hunger strikes of 1981, wherein ten prisoners starved to death, the PIRA reoriented its strategy. Its new tactic, which is common among armed groups elsewhere, simultaneously combined violent and political/electoral means. This strategy was conceptualised by Danny Morrison, a Sinn Féin (and PIRA) member, as “the Armalite and the ballot box” (Hannigan, 1985). It meant that the PIRA’s armed struggle had to be complemented with political legitimacy embodied in its political wing -Sinn Féin- a party whose leader at the time Gerry Adams enjoyed international reputation and celebrity status^{xiv}. In the view of McAllister, the rationale of the strategy was that the two means would reinforce each other: PIRA’s military successes would generate votes for Sinn Féin and, reciprocally, electoral gains would further legitimise the military campaign (2004: 128). Reality turned out to be more complicated and in the early 1990s, the PIRA’s actions seemed to be sabotaging, not enhancing, Sinn Féin’s electoral ambitions. The party’s decline in this period could be understood as one of the contributing factors which led Sinn Féin to focus exclusively on the “ballot box” instrument and to advocate for a peace process.

The violent conflict in Northern Ireland ended, at least to a large extent^{xv}, through an uneasy yet successful peace process that was crystallised by the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998. The GFA led eventually to weapons decommissioning principally by the PIRA. The GFA did not just put an end to a violent conflict, it also had a crucial impact in terms of diminishing territorial antagonisms. In effect, the GFA explicitly recognised “the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of

the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Great Britain or a sovereign united Ireland” (Northern Ireland Office, 1998: 3). To a certain extent, this idea had been previously envisioned by the British government, which had maintained that any change in the status of NI would require Stormont’s consent (British Parliament, 1949) or ‘the consent of the people’ of NI (British Parliament, 1969: 3). The novelty of the GFA is that it recognises the principle of self-determination for ‘the people of the island of Ireland’ -not just Northern Ireland- over the future status of the territory, and it explicitly mentions the possibility of a ‘united Ireland’ ((Northern Ireland Office, 1998: 3),

The position of the Irish government also changed in the context of the GFA. Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution were revised to effectively shift the national emphasis from one on territory in the original Article 2 to one on a shared community and identity in the revised 1998 version:

Article 2

It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish Nation. That is also the entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.

(Constitution of Ireland, 2020)

It is therefore possible to argue that since 1998, Northern Ireland’s territorial status quo is built on grounds of consent, not force, nor an inescapable ideology (unionism) nor the “right of conquest”. This acknowledgement comes accompanied by other parallel developments such as the right of the people of Northern Ireland to Irish (as well as British) citizenship, and the establishment of a power sharing government (cf. Taylor, 2006; McGarry & O’Leary, 2016; White, 2018), where both Irish republicans and British unionists share power in Northern Ireland. All these concessions generated an erosion of the “territorial problem”, which gradually seemed to have become a non-issue. O’Dowd and McCall (2008) also emphasise the role of the North-South institutional dimension of the GFA in calming this territorial dispute. In the words of Hayward and Murphy, the GFA had the effect of redefining “relations across these islands in a way that [...] defused the border as a cause for political conflict and violence” (Hayward & Murphy, 2018: 276).

Brexit: the re-territorialisation of Ireland?

The post-GFA era was significant because for the first time since partition, Irish republicans entered positions of power, through the consociational political architecture, in a polity -Northern Ireland- which they had historically considered illegitimate. At the same

time unionists accepted an institutionalised all-Ireland dimension albeit reluctantly. For nearly two decades (1998 to 2017) this consociational agreement was gradually (and sometimes problematically) implemented and developed (Doyle & Connolly, 2019: 83). One of the ingredients for success was the fact that the deep territorial disagreement between the parties in the consociational executive were de-escalated and swept under the carpet.

The Northern Ireland power-sharing government, however, proved to be institutionally fragile. Disputes between unionist and Irish nationalist parties caused periodic suspension of the institutions. A few months after the Brexit referendum, in January 2017, the power-sharing government collapsed again following a corruption scandal (McBride, 2019), as well as disagreements between the DUP and Sinn Féin over the status of the Irish language, abortion rights, and same-sex marriage. In all, the GFA institutions were suspended for three years (2017 to 2020). When the power-sharing arrangement was eventually restored, in January 2020, the new Sinn Féin leader, Mary Lou McDonald, stated that despite the commitment to power-sharing, the party's aim of abolishing partition remained prevalent "we will also continue to work for Irish re-unification and [...] the triggering of an Irish Unity poll" (McDonald, 2020). That anti-partitionist commitment was given political heft when Sinn Féin emerged from the February 2020 General Election in the Republic of Ireland as the South's largest party in terms of first preference votes^{xvi}. While the party primarily focused on socioeconomic issues such as public housing and healthcare during the election campaign, one of the party's key electoral promises was an Irish unity referendum -due to be held within "the next few years" (Sinn Féin, 2020).

Brexit had further consequences for Northern Ireland. Unsurprisingly, in this territory, the focus during the Brexit referendum campaign was on the challenges that a UK withdrawal from the EU would pose for the configuration of the Irish border and, consequently, for the peace process (Hayward & Murphy, 2018: 283). However, in Britain this debate was conspicuous by its absence as the focus was, instead, on issues and problems related to England and English nationalism. As eloquently put by Henderson *et al.*: "Brexit was made in England because of England's population weight in the United Kingdom. And England's choice for Brexit was driven disproportionately by those prioritising English national identity" (2017: 643). More specifically, as McCall claims, the Brexit debate was dominated by security and (re)bordering concerns, which triggered the longing (amongst parts of the English public) for a "hard security border regime in order to prevent the movement of unwanted outsiders to Britain" (2018: 295). Needless to say, this paradigm is in stark contrast to the de-bordering spirit of the GFA.

While Brexit was not made in Northern Ireland, the consequences of the UK withdrawal from the EU affected this territory in a particular fashion. The uncertainty regarding the future of the Irish border challenged the post-GFA regime, thus re-opening the territorial

debates -and nationalist-unionist fractures- in Northern Ireland. The consensus among scholars is that Brexit, particularly a so-called hard Brexit, challenged, undermined and potentially jeopardised the peace process in Northern Ireland (Brewer, 2018; Hayward & Murphy, 2018; Doyle & Connolly, 2019; Teague, 2019). As explained in previous sections, Northern Ireland has experienced territorially-driven violence in different periods of the twentieth century. The possibility of a “hard Brexit” that led to a return of border checks between Ireland and Northern Ireland had the potential for reigniting *old* territorial disputes. It is, therefore, not surprising that a key challenge of the Brexit negotiations between the British government and their EU counterparts was to conceive of a mechanism that would prevent the hard border scenario on the island of Ireland should a wider agreement fail to materialise.

It seems clear that, with Brexit, open discussions on territoriality in Ireland, including challenges to partition, were revived. For instance, a day after the Brexit referendum, Sinn Féin’s historical figure and Northern Ireland’s deputy leader at the time, Martin McGuinness, explicitly called for a reunification referendum in Ireland (Halpin, 2016). Similarly, former Sinn Féin President, Gerry Adams, claimed in an article in the *New York Times*, published in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum, that the British withdrawal from the EU created “an opportunity” for a referendum where Northern Ireland citizens could decide whether they “wanted to be part of a Britain outside the EU or belong to a unified Irish state in Europe” (Adams, 2016). Irish republicans have built their case for a “border poll” on the grounds of the majority Remain vote in the Northern Ireland: 56 per cent voted to remain in the EU (McGarry, 2017).

In a strategic policy document focused on Brexit, Sinn Féin explicitly states that “[T]he prospect of the North being removed from the EU against the will of the people, and the return of a hard border in Ireland, has brought the issue of Irish re-unification firmly back onto the political agenda” (Sinn Féin, 2016: 1). While the party prioritised gaining a special status which would allow Northern Ireland to remain in the EU, the possibility of re-unification is also contemplated if the former fails to materialise. Similar to Scottish secessionists, the EU or more specifically EU permanence, became a new argument for justifying the political necessity/legitimacy of Irish reunification. In light of these statements, it seems clear that Brexit has prompted Sinn Féin to realign its strategy shifting “from power sharing in the North of Ireland to reunification of the Island” (Brewer, 2018: 171). This “strategic realignment” is probably explained by the fact that the traditional quintessential republican aim of a “united Ireland” was, in the Brexit era, no longer a long-term aspiration but a factual short-term possibility (Doyle & Connolly, 2019: 87). It was encouraged by opinion polls on the subject. In an RTÉ, TG4 and Red C exit poll in 2019, voters in the South were asked “If there was a referendum on a United Ireland tomorrow, would you vote yes in favour of a United Ireland, or no against a United Ireland?”. 65% responded that they would vote “yes” (RTÉ, 2019). In

Northern Ireland, poll results on the question of Irish unity, such as one carried out by Lord Ashcroft Polls in the same year, revealed a fairly even split between supporters and opponents of reunification^{xvii} (2019).

In the Brexit context, the united Ireland agenda was promoted by actors, such as former Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny, who were not strident advocates for Irish reunification. When Taoiseach, Kenny played a crucial role in successfully persuading his European counterparts in the European Council to include a clause which stated that Northern Ireland could automatically enter the EU in the event of Irish reunification. In an unprecedented move that could only be understood in the context of the arduous and tense Brexit negotiations between the EU and the UK, the Council published a statement in April 2017 which, through a GFA reference, explicitly recognised the possibility of a united Ireland, where Northern Ireland would automatically rejoin the EU as a part of that united Ireland: “The European Council acknowledges that the Good Friday Agreement expressly provides for an agreed mechanism whereby a united Ireland may be brought about through peaceful and democratic means. In this regard, the European Council acknowledged that, in accordance with international law, the entire territory of such a united Ireland would thus be part of the European Union” (European Parliament, 2017). It seems unlikely that the EU would have issued such a statement -implicitly supporting of Irish reunification- without the Brexit factor. Thus, it can be argued that Brexit bears a high degree of responsibility for advancing the Irish republican cause at the EU level.

Finally, it has been suggested the Brexit could prompt dissident republican violence (cf. Carroll, 2019). This conjecture of a return to wholesale political violence is however, not supported by empirical evidence beyond sporadic actions of dissident paramilitary groups, which also occurred prior to Brexit. The UK withdrawal from the EU, nonetheless, has the potential to jeopardise stability by deepening the already fragile institutional architecture of NI and triggering territorial polarisation. Not least because, while the UK formally withdrew from the EU, a great deal of uncertainty regarding the Irish border remained (House of Lords, 2020).

Unsurprisingly, Irish republicans led by Sinn Féin opposed a hard Brexit border on the island of Ireland and stepped up the momentum for a united Ireland referendum. Ulster British unionist parties, meanwhile, became exercised by the prospect of a so-called “Irish Sea border” contained in the revised Withdrawal Agreement (British Government, 2019). The DUP’s Brexit spokesperson, Sammy Wilson, for instance, deemed the revised Withdrawal Agreement ‘a betrayal’ to unionism, expressing concerns that it cuts out NI ‘from the rest of the United Kingdom’ (cited by BBC, 2020). The bottom line is that Brexit spawns a zero-sum game which leaves only two irreconcilable possibilities: a hard Irish border, or an “Irish Sea border” resulting from continuing Northern Ireland-EU

arrangements regarding customs and the Single Market. As Teague fatalistically puts it: “there is no Brexit solution that will create a mutual gains bargain between nationalism and unionism” (2019: 697). This zero-sum scenario, which presents a volte-face from the inclusive, debordering nature of the GFA, paved the way for the re-emergence and entrenchment of the territorial conflict in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

The British-triggered partition of Ireland has decisively shaped the politics of this North-western European island over the past century. Critics of partition highlight that one of its negative effects is that instead of being a long-lasting solution, this practice transforms and perpetuates conflict. The Irish case, where partition has been contested by constitutional and violent means over the past century, demonstrates that such criticism is legitimate.

The use of violence has been one of the chosen methods to oppose partition in different periods of the twentieth century. The last significant violent campaign against partition was carried out by the PIRA and other Republican groups between 1969 and 1998, the year the GFA was delivered. This paper has argued that by addressing territorial issues, including self-determination, the GFA was able to calm this territorial dispute. That post-territorial consensus, cemented with a consociational agreement which included the wide spectrum of political sensibilities in Northern Ireland, and a North-South institutional infrastructure, was seriously challenged and undermined by the return of territorialism in the guise of Brexit.

Brexit in general, and the possibility of a hard Brexit in particular, challenged the already delicate post-GFA political architecture. Despite the restoration of the power-sharing executive for Northern Ireland in 2020, it was clear that Brexit had unearthed the territorial debate on the island of Ireland. One of the caveats of re-energising such debate is that opportunities arise for those who aim to change the territorial status quo. Following the old Irish republican axiom “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity”, contemporary republicans attempted to take political advantage of the turbulent Brexit climate to revive their anti-partitionist aims. For instance, the prospect of re-joining the EU provides a new argument - and simultaneously a new strategy- to politically promote the goal of Irish reunification. It appears, therefore, that while the violent revolutionary path may have receded, the political contestation of the partition of Ireland has been reinvigorated by wider UK-EU border reconfiguration.

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Notes

ⁱ As the Cold War cases of Germany, Korea and Vietnam illustrate, partition has also been used by big powers to divide, based on ideological lines, their spheres of influence (see O'Leary, 2007b).

ⁱⁱ Contemporarily, this IRA is known as the *old* IRA to distinguish it from more modern versions of the group.

ⁱⁱⁱ In a six county rather than the nine configuration the historic province of Ulster. The latter is one of the four Gaelic provinces of Ireland which are sometimes called 'The Four Green Fields'.

^{iv} Mirrored by the formation of the Irish Volunteers in 1913 with which the Irish Party eventually became involved (Reid, 2010).

^v Armalite refers to "ArmaLite", a US rifle brand which was widely used by PIRA militants.

^{vi} In later life 'The Cruiser', as he was popularly known, became a unionist then a united Irishman.

^{vii} It must be noted that RTÉ systematically uses a map of the island of Ireland, for example in weather forecasts, where the political division of Ireland in two administrative units is not visible.

^{viii} While the UVF in the early 1920s was far from its prime and therefore far from the 100,000 volunteers that belonged to the organisation a few years earlier, it was still able to play a significant deterrent role. It should be noted that in 1966, a loyalist paramilitary organisation in Northern Ireland aimed at combating Irish republicanism adopted the same name as the *old* UVF.

^{ix} The label "Loyalist" is generally given to the most radical elements within Ulster unionism.

^x There were numerous loyalist riots in Derry and Belfast in 1968-1969, which caused several deaths, destruction of private homes as well as population evacuation of thousands of Catholics.

^{xi} The deployment of the British army was originally aimed at protecting Catholics from loyalist mobs and consequently it was welcomed by this community. However, it did not take long for suspicions to emerge (for instance of collusion between the British Army and loyalist paramilitaries) amongst Catholics, many of whom began to perceive the army as an “occupation force”.

^{xii} According to the Malcolm Sutton database, there were a total of 3,532 deaths caused by the *Troubles* between 1969 and 2001. Republican groups were responsible for 2,057 (58%), followed by loyalist paramilitaries 1,027 (29%) and the British Army (10%). Over half of the targets of Republican groups (1,080) were members of the British security forces, whereas 35% of the victims (both intended and unintended) were civilians (721). Less than 3% of Republican victims were loyalist paramilitaries. Conversely, the overwhelming majority (85%) of loyalist paramilitaries were civilians and only 4% were republican fighters. Finally, 40% of the victims from the British army were Republican paramilitaries, whilst 50% were civilians (Sutton, 2002).

^{xiii} As explained in the previous endnote, the majority of loyalist killings were Catholic civilians. While the PIRA, did not officially engage in sectarian killings of Protestants, there were Republican groups (arguably affiliated to the PIRA) which conducted sectarian murders in retribution to loyalist killings. According to Sutton, the PIRA used a *nom de guerre* (Republican Action Force) to commit up to 130 sectarian murders (2002). The number of sectarian murders is considerably higher among Loyalist paramilitaries; they killed 718 Catholic civilians.

^{xiv} Throughout his career as Sinn Féin leader, Adams has met, among others, former US Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, former Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton, former South African President Nelson Mandela and former Cuban President Fidel Castro.

^{xv} With the exception of Irish Republican dissident groups that continue, to this day, using violence to pursue their goals. For example the Real IRA, the infamous author of the Omagh bombing, which killed 29 people in 1998. Their support and level of operations is, however, practically insignificant and in no way comparable to the Provisional Irish Republican Army and other paramilitary groups during *the Troubles*.

^{xvi} A historic coalition government comprising Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Green Party succeeded in excluding Sinn Féin from power in the South.

^{xvii} The results of these polls should, of course, be taken with a pinch of salt, particularly given the high volatility and context-driven nature of the questions.