

# Creative Centenaries

Remembering the Future

Activity

03

## West Belfast 1912—1922 Post War Troubles

### In this section you will investigate

- Why sectarian violence broke out in Belfast in 1920
- Examples of tragedies and atrocities carried out in Belfast in 1920—22
- How people reacted to the Troubles and pointed the 'finger of blame'.

A Decade of  
Anniversaries

Schools  
Resource

A Prototype Local Study: **West Belfast 1912—1922**

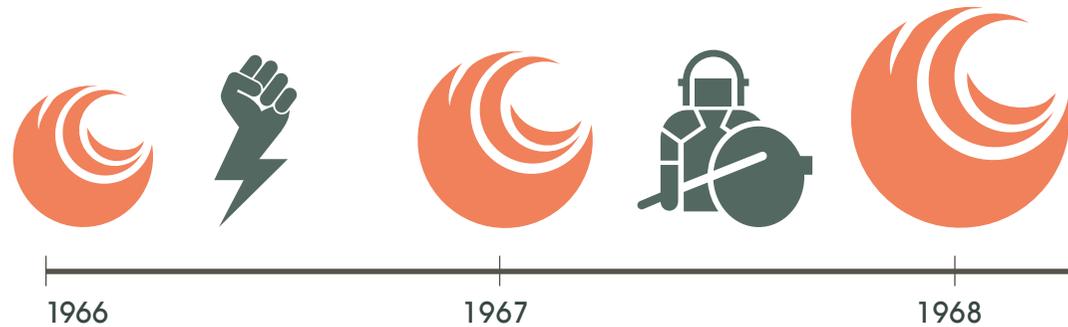


## The Troubles: 1960s—1972



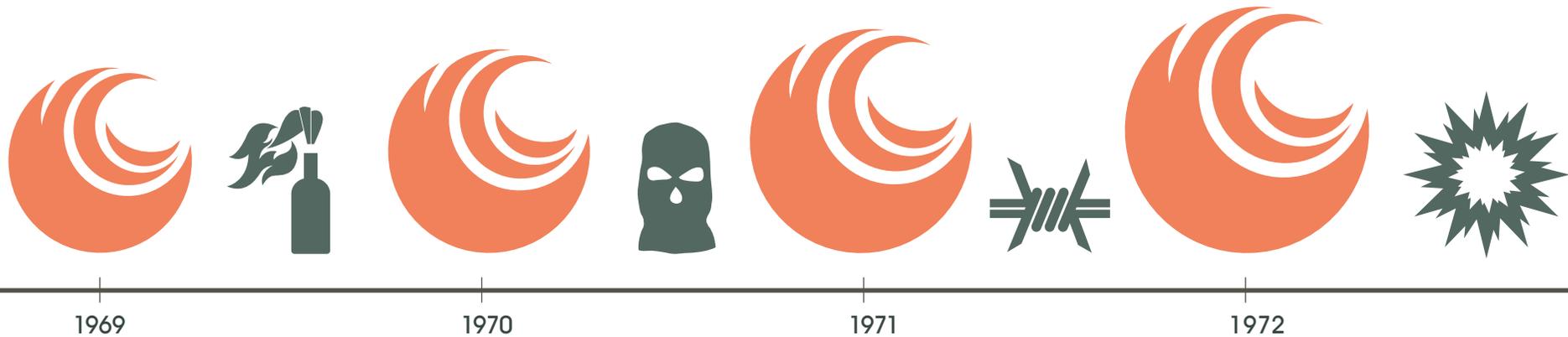
The period from the late 1960s until 1998 in Northern Ireland is known all over the world as “The Troubles”. During these three decades violence on the streets caused 3600 deaths and 50,000 injuries. The legacy of this conflict continues to affect people’s lives today.

However, Northern Ireland had another previously endured another period of “Troubles” during 1920—22. Your task is to compare how these conflicts erupted to identify any similarities and differences.



1966 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. The commemorations include parades, pageants and street decorations. For many Nationalists, these events are an encouragement to assert their rights more forcefully and to become more active in their campaign for an end to Unionist rule in Northern Ireland. The Unionist government allows the commemorations to take place; Prime Minister Terence O’Neill has been trying to avoid antagonising Catholic/Nationalist citizens. Many Unionists are deeply unhappy with these “disloyal” commemorations. Their reactions include organising counter-demonstrations. A few even “re-form” the UVF as a secret paramilitary group, “declare war” on the IRA and murder several innocent Catholics.

From 1967 the civil rights movement develops in Northern Ireland. Although aiming for social justice for all, it is Catholics who face most discrimination in Northern Ireland. The movement therefore attracts more Catholic support, including some quite extreme elements. Many Unionists view civil rights as a “front” for aggressive Irish Republicanism. Several demonstrations take place in defiance of government, and face a heavy-handed reaction by the police. In one case a march is attacked at Burntollet by a loyalist mob which includes off-duty policemen.



In August 1969 severe rioting breaks out when the Protestant Apprentice Boys of Derry try to march through the Nationalist Bogside area of Londonderry. Spreading to other areas, especially West Belfast, the violence leaves eight dead and two thousand people driven from their homes. Army units are deployed to try to restore order. Initially welcomed by Nationalists for the protection they offer, their popularity soon diminishes due to their intrusive and heavy-handed methods.

Within the Northern IRA, many members feel that the organisation is not providing effective leadership in the midst of the increasing violence. In December 1969 they break away to form the Provisional IRA and the "Provos" soon become the biggest Republican paramilitary group, aggressively attacking the British Army. At this time the various loyalist paramilitaries are also growing and becoming more active. In August 1971 the Unionist Government reacts to the escalating violence by introducing "internment" – imprisonment without trial. Badly handled and directed disproportionately against Nationalists (there are many examples of innocent Nationalists being mistakenly arrested, and very few loyalists are interned), this measure enrages Nationalists and increases support for the IRA.

In January 1972 a riot erupts at a civil rights march against internment in L'Derry. British soldiers open fire, killing 13 unarmed civilians. This event, "Bloody Sunday", convinces the British Government that the Unionist Government in Northern Ireland has lost control of the situation. In March the Unionist-dominated Stormont Parliament is suspended and Northern Ireland comes under "Direct Rule" from London. An attempt is made to negotiate peace between the British Government and the IRA, but when it fails the Troubles become even worse. 1972 becomes the most destructive year of the troubles, with almost 500 deaths and 6000 injuries. This includes the IRA's Bloody Friday bombings in Belfast and the emergence of the "Shankill Butchers" murder gang.



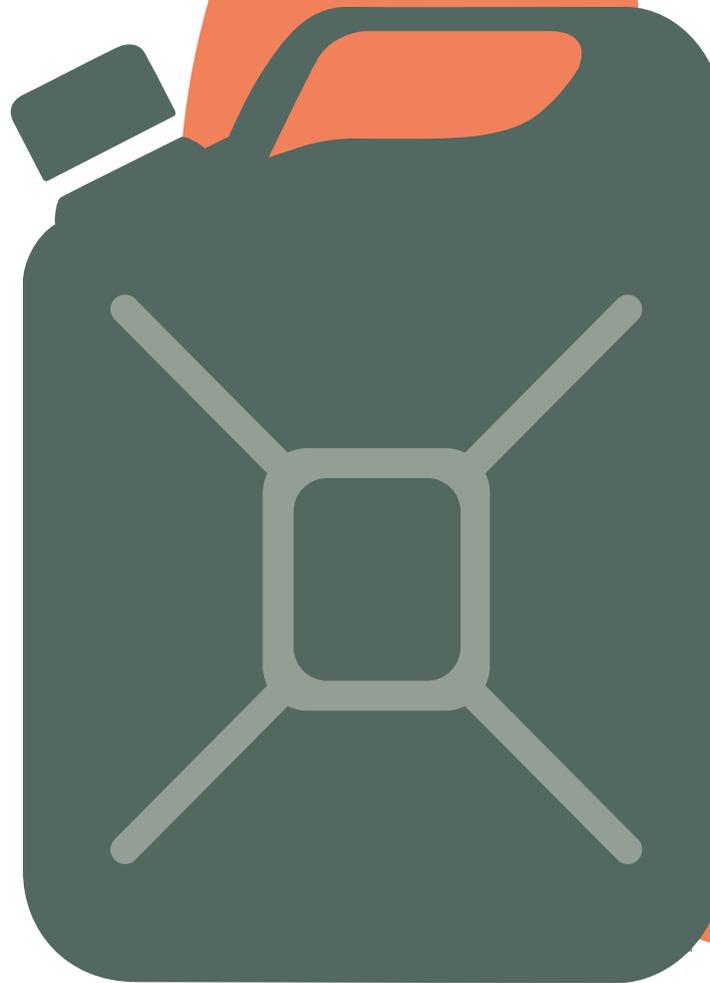
# What fuelled this outbreak of “Troubles”?

Defence of territory

Threatened erosion of Unionist position

Intolerant voices from leaders

Feelings of victimisation



Emergence and growth of paramilitaries

Security considerations

Assertion of rights

One-sided government

# 03.1

## Why did Ireland (and especially Belfast) erupt into violence after WW1?

**In May 1921, Ireland was partitioned into two states – a situation which remains to this day. 6 counties in Ulster became “Northern Ireland”, while the rest of Ireland became independent and cut its links with Britain.**

For Belfast, the creation of Northern Ireland came about in the midst of a period of intense sectarian violence involving Catholics, Protestants and ‘Crown Forces’ (the police and army). The events of 1920—22 were known as “The Troubles”, until even greater Troubles broke out in the 1960s.

Although many events of the “Troubles” were unique to Belfast, the city and its people were also affected by what was happening elsewhere in Ireland. In fact, the period 1919—22 was marked by severe hostility and violence throughout the island. Explaining how the fighting came about, and how it led to the divided island we know today, has challenged many historians.

# Activity 03.1a



The timeline below records key events of the period in the dark green boxes. Key events which took place in Belfast are shown in light green.

From the timeline, select 6 key events which explain why the “fire” of violence grew hotter and hotter in Belfast during 1920—22. Remember that unlike 1968—72 (outlined above), in 1922 the violence decreased and eventually stopped.

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| Apr – May 1916 | The Easter Rising in Dublin. Planned by the IRB and carried out by the Irish Volunteers, it has virtually no public support – until the leaders are executed. Many people are shocked by this brutal response and begin to sympathise with the rebels’ cause. For decades to come the rebels’ “blood sacrifice” will inspire Republicans to follow their violent methods to achieve independence for Ireland.  |
| Jan 1919       | In the United Kingdom’s first general election since 1910, the result in Ireland shows a huge rise in support for Sinn Fein, a Republican party which represents the objectives of the Easter Rebels. Although Joe Devlin remains MP for West Belfast, only five other IPP candidates are elected. This massive shift in Nationalist support away from the IPP and towards Sinn Fein is due to widespread sympathy for the executed Easter Rebels, and Nationalist outrage at the British Government’s attempt to impose conscription in Ireland in April 1918. The Unionists win 26 seats (23 of them in Ulster) and Sinn Fein win the other 73. The Sinn Fein MPs refuse to go to London. Instead, without asking permission from the Government, they set up their own Irish Parliament, called the Dail, in Dublin.<br><br>Around the same time the Irish Volunteers (now renamed the Irish Republican Army – IRA) ambush and kill two policemen in County Tipperary. This marks the beginning of the War of Independence between the IRA and the police/army. |
| June 1920      | After sectarian riots the previous month, L’Derry erupts into open warfare between Nationalist and Unionist gunmen. 1500 troops are sent in to restore order. The fighting dies down two months later, by which time around 40 people had been killed.   |

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| July 1920       | In a speech at the 12th July Orange Parade, Sir Edward Carson warns “We in Ulster will tolerate no Sinn Fein... those are not mere words. I hate words without action.”<br>On the 21st July, after a mass meeting, 5000 Unionist shipyard workers go on the rampage expelling Catholic workers (and “rotten Protestants”) from Harland and Wolff. The violence quickly spreads to other areas and industries of Belfast. Over three days of severe rioting, about 20 people are killed, 100 injured and thousands are driven out of their homes and workplaces.   |
| Aug 1920        | A senior police officer, DI Swanzy, is assassinated in Lisburn by a team of IRA men from Belfast and Cork. He is gunned down as he leaves church on Sunday morning. This act provokes a further outbreak of rioting in Belfast – 25 die in the next 5 days. Army authorities place Belfast under curfew.  |
| Sept – Dec 1920 | The War of Independence intensifies as Government forces carry out severe reprisals after IRA guerrilla attacks. These destructive reprisals are primarily carried out by ex-soldiers recruited into the RIC. These “Black and Tans” (they wore a mixture of police and army uniforms) and “Auxies” (Auxiliary police) gain a reputation for reckless brutality, culminating in Bloody Sunday in Dublin in November 1920. After the assassination of 15 British agents by the IRA, on the same afternoon Auxiliaries fire into the crowd at a Gaelic football match, killing 14.<br><br>Because their actions mainly took place in the South and East, Auxies and Black and Tans did not usually operate in Ulster. |



# Activity 03.1<sub>b</sub>



|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Dec 1920            | The British Parliament passes the Government of Ireland Act (it replaces the Home Rule Act, which was never enforced). Following pressure from Unionists, the Act creates two separate states (Northern and Southern Ireland) partitioned by a border. Southern Ireland will have its own Parliament, as will Northern Ireland, even though it remains part of the United Kingdom.   |
| Apr – Aug 1921      | <p>A period of intense sectarian violence in Belfast, involving the IRA, the the police, vigilante groups, rioting mobs and individual extremists. Some of the worst atrocities are rumoured to be carried out by a secret “murder gang” of policemen.</p> <p>In the midst of the violence, an election takes place for the new NI Parliament. In a big victory for the Unionists, they win 40 seats. The Nationalist and Sinn Fein Parties (both anti-Partition) win 6 seats each.</p>                                |
| Dec 1921 – Jan 1922 | <p>After a Truce ends the War of Independence in July 1921, Sinn Fein and the British Government hold talks to try to reach an agreement about Ireland’s future.</p> <p>The resulting Anglo-Irish Treaty, signed in London in December 1921, makes Southern Ireland into a new independent country called the Irish Free State. The Dail votes to accept the Treaty, but only very narrowly (64-57). Many Republicans are unhappy that the Dail has accepted a Treaty which does not make Ireland a full republic.</p> |

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| Mar 1922 | The violence in Belfast increases throughout the Spring of 1922, but March is the most notorious month of all. More than 60 people are killed, including the infamous massacre of six male members of the Nationalist McMahon household.  |
| May 1922 | The Unionist Government of Northern Ireland passes a Special Powers Act and interns hundreds of suspects (mostly Republicans) without trial. The Government’s attitude to Unionist violence becomes tougher.  |
| Jun 1922 | Civil War breaks out in southern Ireland between the pro-Treaty Government and anti-Treaty members of the IRA (known as the Irregulars). Many IRA men (those who aren’t already interned) leave Belfast to join in the civil war in the South. Over the summer the city gradually becomes more peaceful, and the Troubles finally end in October. |
| Apr 1923 | Defeated by the Irish National Army, the IRA stops fighting and the Civil War is over.  |



Activity

# 03.1<sub>b</sub>

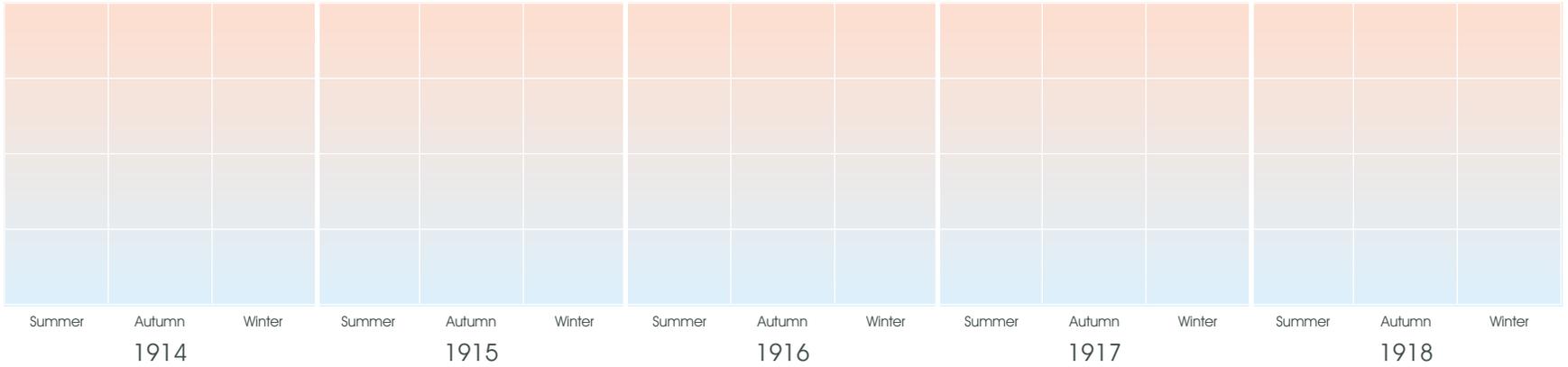
Plot the 6 key events you have chosen, 1914—22 on the temperature graph



Boiling



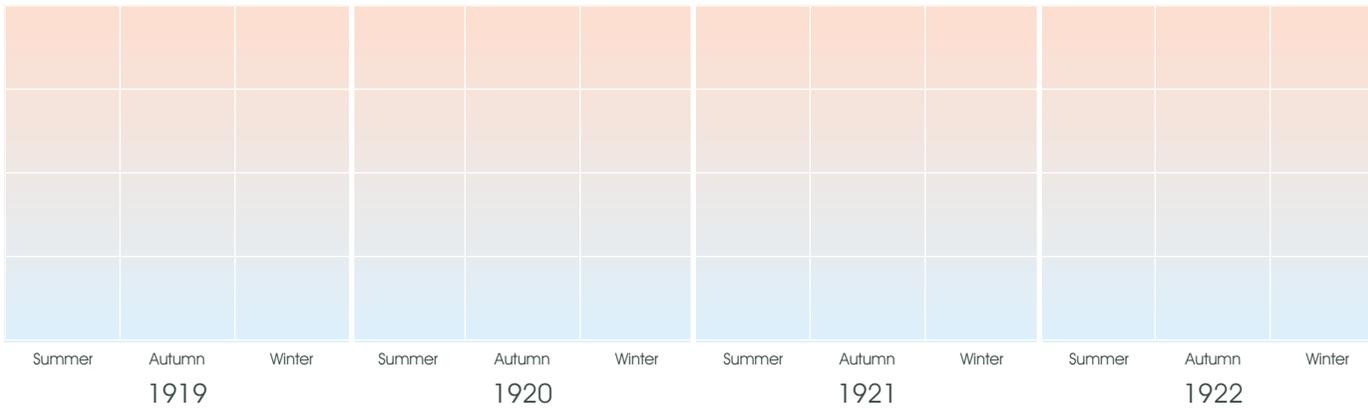
Chilled



Boiling



Chilled

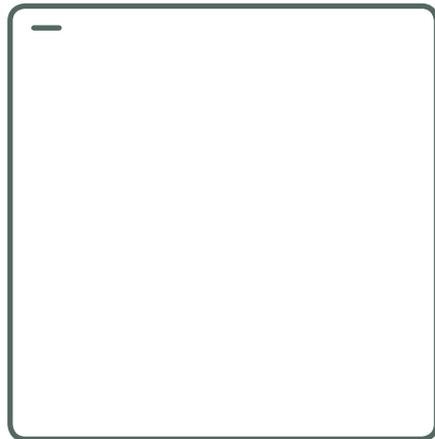


Activity

# 03.1<sub>b</sub>

What was the 'fuel' that caused the 1920s Troubles to flare up?

**Clue:** think about the "fuel" ingredients that started the later "Troubles" in the 1960s.



## Belfast's Bloody Sunday

**You have probably heard of Ireland's two famous "Bloody Sunday" events (which took place in Dublin in November 1912 and in Derry~Londonderry in January 1972). However, did you know that West Belfast has its own Bloody Sunday?**

Belfast's Bloody Sunday occurred on 10 July 1972. It began with the "Raglan Street Ambush" at midnight. This successful IRA ambush killed one policeman, wounded several others and destroyed a police lorry. The following day was the city's worst of the Troubles period, with 17

more people killed, 40 injured and 161 houses destroyed. In the West of the city rival mobs threatened each other and gunfire sounded continuously. 3 more people were killed the following day. All the deaths occurred in West Belfast.

The 21 victims of Bloody Sunday can all be identified on the following map. Use the information from the map to fill in the table.

# Belfast's Bloody Sunday

**Ernest Park**  
**Protestant**, 16 years old  
 Shot as he carried a kitten to a neighbour's home in Moyola St (probably by the same sniper as W. Baxter)

**David McMullan**  
**Protestant**, 19 years old  
 Shot in Lawnbrooke Av

**William Baxter**  
**Protestant**, 12 years old  
 Shot by a sniper on his way to Sunday School, Ashmore St

**Alexander Hamilton**  
**Catholic**, 21 years old  
 Former soldier (Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers)  
 Shot in Cupar St

**Peter Markey**  
**Catholic**, Fell off a wall and broke his neck while trying to escape from night-time intruders

**Francis Robinson**  
**Protestant**, 65 years old  
 Killed as he lay sick in bed. Hit by stray police bullets which came in the bedroom window

**Patrick Hickland**  
**Catholic**, 46 years old  
 Beaten and shot by a Loyalist mob in Boyd St

**Henry Mulholland**  
**Catholic**, 49 years old  
 Shot in Cupar St

**James Ledlie**  
**Catholic**, 19 years old  
 Shot as he tried to rescue a neighbour's furniture from a fire. He was an IRA squad commander

**James Lenaghan**  
**Catholic**, 48 years old  
 Former soldier (Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers)  
 Shot at the corner of Falls Rd/Derby St

**Mary McGowan**  
**Catholic**, 13 years old  
 Shot as she crossed the street with her mother outside their home. The bullets were fired by B Special policemen from a passing armoured car

**William Brown**  
**Protestant**, 45 years old  
 Shot in David St

**Daniel Joseph Hughes**  
**Catholic**, 50 years old  
 Former soldier (Leinster Regiment)  
 Shot in Durham St

**William Mullan**  
**Protestant**, 50 years old  
 Died in Royal Victoria Hospital from gunshot wounds

**Frederick Craig**  
**Catholic**, 22 years old  
 Former soldier  
 Shot as he walked down Clonard St

**Const. Thomas Conlon**  
**Catholic**, 28 years old. Victim of the "Raglan Street Ambush" when the IRA ambushed and destroyed a police lorry.

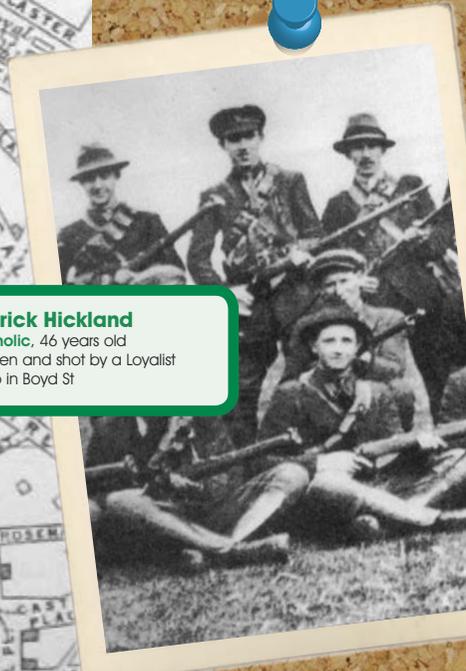
**James McGennis**  
**Catholic**, 35 years old  
 Shot in Durham St while going to fetch his child

**Bernard Monaghan**  
**Catholic**, 70 years old  
 Shot by his front doorstep, Dunville St

**William Tierney**  
**Catholic**, 56 years old  
 Killed looking out the window of his living room in Osman St

**Patrick Devlin**  
**Catholic**, 27 years old  
 Wounded in Albert St, died from his injuries 9 months later

**Daniel Hughes**  
**Catholic**, 28 years old  
 Shot by a sniper as he ran home with his children to McCleery St



# Activity 03.2<sub>a</sub>



The 21 victims of Bloody Sunday can be identified by exploring the map. Use the information from the map on the previous page to fill in the table opposite.



| Bloody Sunday: 10—11 July 1921   |                           |   |
|--|---------------------------|---|
| Total number killed  | —                         |   |
| Number of Catholics killed   | —                         |   |
| Number of Protestants killed   | —                         |   |
| <b>Number killed</b>   | Aged 0-18 (children)      | — |
|  | Aged 18-40 (young adults) | — |
|  | Aged 40-60 (middle-aged)  | — |
|  | Aged 60+ (elderly)        | — |
| Number of ex-soldiers killed   | —                         |   |
| Number of confirmed combatants killed (i.e. people who were definitely members of armed groups, the police or the army). | —                         |   |



# 03.2

Ireland's other  
"Bloody Sundays"  
are very famous:

- Bloody Sunday 1913 – Fierce rioting broke out in Dublin when police attacked a trade union rally. Two men were beaten to death and many were injured.
- Bloody Sunday 1920 – In the morning 15 people were killed by IRA assassins in Dublin, including 8 British secret agents. In the afternoon British forces fired into the crowd at a Gaelic football match at Croke Park, killing 14.
- Bloody Sunday 1972 – British soldiers opened fire on protesters in Derry~Londonderry, killing 13.

# 03.2.c

# 03.2.d

# 03.2.e



Compared to these events, does 10 July 1921 deserve the nickname "Bloody Sunday"?



What makes Belfast's Bloody Sunday different from all the others?

Compared to the others, Belfast's Bloody Sunday is almost forgotten. Why might both Nationalists and Unionists prefer not to remember their community's role in that tragic event?



# Activity 03.3<sub>a</sub>



Among the countless tragic incidents of the 1920s Troubles, a few stand out as particularly poignant.

The following stories each explain one unique tragedy.

Choose one and create a personal response which could help to make the story better known when its one hundred year anniversary comes up. Your response could be:

- Artwork
- A poem or song
- A blog
- A letter to a local newspaper
- A monument
- A special prize (e.g. a medal, trophy, or scholarship awarded for a community achievement)
- A commemorative event

## **The off-duty soldier: Patrick O'Hare**

Sergeant Patrick O'Hare was a professional soldier – by 1921 he had served sixteen years in the Connaught Rangers and fought in World War One.

In June 1921 Patrick was home on leave with his young family in Urney Street. At this time many Catholic families in the area were being evicted. One evening a Loyalist mob smashed in the O'Hare's door and windows and proceeded to wreck the kitchen. Patrick, wearing his British Army uniform, tried to intervene. He probably expected his attackers to show some respect for a Catholic serving in the British Army, but he was sadly mistaken.

The mob turned on Patrick and dragged him into the back yard while his wife and children, who had been hiding upstairs, were dragged into the street. They told Mrs O'Hare that they were going to shoot her husband.

According to the O'Hare family's own version of the story, Mrs O'Hare sent one of her daughters running to the nearest Army post. Hearing that a soldier's life was threatened, they raced to the rescue and got Patrick released.

When Patrick returned to Army duty in England, his family were living as refugees in an abandoned pub. His wife and youngest children later joined him at an army base in England.

By the time Mr and Mrs O'Hare returned to Belfast a few years later, their two eldest sons had joined the IRA. Although Patrick avoided politics and enjoyed meeting his old Army comrades (Catholic and Protestant), he returned his war medals unclaimed.

# Activity 03.3<sub>b</sub>



## **United in death: John & Eugene Kelly and Thomas Thompson**

Ohio Street, November 1921. Catholic shopkeeper John Kelly was chatting to a customer in his spirit grocery when a Loyalist gunman strode in and fired at him.

The customer was Thomas Thompson, a local Orangeman. Thompson tried to go to Kelly's aid but the gunman shot him too.

Kelly's son Eugene was also targeted in the attack. He died of his wounds the following day.

## **No chance to say 'Goodbye': Jim Kelly**

As a child living on the Falls Road, Jim Kelly's best friend was his next-door neighbour Sam, "a cheerful little fellow with fair hair and a winning smile".

Then one evening in the summer of 1920, groups of men came knocking on the doors of all the Protestant families in the neighbourhood, including Sam's. They were told they must clear out immediately – their homes were being taken over to house Catholics driven out of other parts of the city.

By 11 o'clock that same evening, Sam's family had loaded all their belongings into a coalman's cart and left. The boys did not have a chance to say "Goodbye", and they never saw each other again. Jim later wrote, "As the horse-drawn cart rumbled off down the street I felt heart-sick".

New neighbours moved in immediately. They were an English family, but because they were Catholic they had been evicted from their former home. Jim resented their arrival and longed for Sam's return.

## **The mortuary doesn't choose sides: John Sloan and Daniel Beattie**

Early on Good Friday, 1922, an ambulance ferried two bodies to the mortuary. One was Catholic, Daniel Beattie. The other was a Protestant, John Sloan.

Both victims were ordinary working men trying to do their job: Sloan worked in a bakery while Beattie was a city council labourer.

The two men were both killed in the same area around the same time in the morning. Beattie was gunned down in Geoffrey Street by a Loyalist mob. Sloan tried to flee from his attackers but was shot in Tasmania Street. (It seems likely that his attackers were also a Loyalist gang, possibly the same one that attacked Beattie. If so, Sloan must have been mistaken for a Catholic.)

It is not known if Beattie and Sloan knew each other, but the tragic parallels of their deaths help to illustrate the bitter ironies of the Troubles period.

03.3<sub>b</sub>**A sniper's victims:  
William Frazer and Hugh McAree**

12 year old Protestant William Frazer lived on Mayo Street with his family. On 14 June 1921 the family heard word that a group of Protestant mill workers had been attacked on their way home from the Falls Road. Hearing his mother's concern that his elder sister was among this group, Willie slipped out of the house – he told his friends he was going to “bring Becky home”.

Some time later, a police patrol found Willie lying in Ashmore Street (on his sister's route home). He had been shot in the head by a Nationalist sniper. Beside him was 30 year old Hugh McAree, a Catholic ex-soldier from Sackville Street. He had tried to assist Willie Frazer and been mortally wounded. He died the following day.

The Frazer family had already had their share of tragedy. Four years previously two of Willie's brothers had drowned while trying to save a friend who had fallen through ice into the Springfield Dam.

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03.3<sub>b</sub>**Caught in the crossfire:  
Daniel Rogan**

In 1922 police Sergeant Christy Clarke was near the top of the IRA's hit list: this was because they believed he was a member of a notorious police "murder gang".

On 13 March 1922 an IRA squad ambushed Clarke and another policeman, Constable Caldwell, as they walked down Mulholland Terrace, just off the Falls Road. They were returning from the funeral of two colleagues who had been killed by the IRA.

After a brief exchange of fire, the IRA fled leaving three bodies in the street. Clarke had been killed and Caldwell was injured, but the third victim was Daniel Rogan.

Rogan had not been involved in the gunfight, he was simply an innocent passer-by who was hit in the crossfire. A Catholic, Rogan worked as a dog-racing official at Celtic Park. Rogan was taken to the Royal Victoria Hospital where he died on 19th March.

**The shipyard expulsions:**

In 1920, the annual 12th July parades took place in an atmosphere of high tension. Unionists were outraged at recent national political events such as the formation of the Sinn Fein Dail and IRA attacks on policemen. In a fiery speech at a "Twelfth" parade, Sir Edward Carson declared that "We in Ulster will tolerate no Sinn Fein, no Sinn Fein organisation, no Sein Fein methods".

Thousands of Protestant shipyard workers returned to work two weeks later, convinced that their Catholic workmates were "disloyal Sinn Feiners". Worse, many Catholics were first employed in the yards during World War One, replacing Protestants who had joined the army. Having returned from the war, many of those Protestant workers were still unemployed.

In three days of sectarian rioting, about 10,000 Belfast workers were expelled from their jobs. The expulsions were not carried out by employers; the victims were chased or threatened by mobs of Unionist workers.

The expulsions began in the shipyards on 21 July 1920 and quickly spread to other industries around the city. These actions were often violent as the victims had their shirts ripped off (to see if they were wearing Catholic emblems) or were pelted with 'shipyard confetti' (bolts, rivets and lumps of coal). Although the majority of victims were Catholic men, several hundred Catholic women were dismissed from textile mills by their Protestant colleagues.

1800 Protestant workers were also expelled by Unionist mobs. These men were mostly trade unionists or socialists – the mobs called them 'rotten Prods' because they wanted unity between all workers, whatever their religion or politics.

Workplace intimidation continued in Belfast for two more months, and further outbreaks happened right up to 1922. Over the whole period, approximately 20,000 workers were put out of their jobs.



# Activity 03.4

## The 'RIC Murder Gang' – truths and myths



Pupils to view the Ardoyne Murder Gang mural and to investigate the claims it represents:

- “Peelers, Specials, Cromwell Clubs and informers” – who policed the Belfast Troubles?
- “Worse than cannibalism” – what claims are made about the murder gang?
- “Who owned the dog?” – is there any evidence that the murder gang actually existed?





## “Peelers, Specials, Cromwell Clubs and informers” – who policed the Belfast Troubles?

### **The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC)**

Ireland's police force from 1814 to 1922. The force was representative of the whole island, so recruits came from all counties and were mostly Catholics. Many would also have been Nationalists, although their political beliefs would not have altered their commitment to upholding law and order. Policemen were stationed away from their home county and lived in military-style barracks - ironically, most Belfast “Peelers” during the 1920s Troubles would have been southern Catholic Nationalists.

### **The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)**

Formed in June 1922 to replace the RIC in the new state of Northern Ireland. The core of the force was formed from experienced ex-RIC men who wished to stay in their jobs. Many A, B and C-Specials also joined as full time policemen. Initially the force was very mixed – many of the new recruits were Protestant, but most of the old RIC men were Catholic. The Northern Ireland Government allocated leadership roles very carefully to ensure that senior Catholics and Southerners were fairly represented.

### **The Ulster Special Constabulary (USC)**

The infamous Black and Tans did not operate in Ulster. When it became clear that the RIC in Ulster needed extra support, the “Specials” were formed as a voluntary reserve force. There were three branches of Specials:

- A-Specials were 3500 full-time policemen, paid and armed, who only worked in their own local area.
- B-Specials were part-time volunteers who were given some training and uniforms and paid a small allowance. They performed police duties in their local area when needed, usually one or two nights a week. Local police commanders could decide whether to issue them with firearms. By 1921 there were about 16,000 “B-Men” in Northern Ireland.
- C-Specials were volunteers who would only be called to duty in an emergency. More than 1000 were recruited in 1920.



## Cromwell Clubs

Paramilitary groups of extreme Unionists. Their precise role in the 1920s Troubles is unclear. Unionist politicians are believed to have encouraged the formation of Protestant “defence groups” in Belfast after World War One. Known by various titles such as “Cromwell Clubs” and “Imperial Guards”, these secretive cells attracted sectarian members who were prepared to use extreme force against what they saw as a Sinn Fein/Catholic threat against Ulster. Their numbers are also difficult to estimate - at the peak of the Troubles total membership apparently exceeded 10,000, many of whom had military experience from the War. It is alleged that some club members were sectarian policemen and this gave them access to police intelligence files. In fact, the “police murder gang” is often called the Cromwell Club. Whether following Club orders or acting on their own, Cromwell Club members were probably responsible for much of the worst violence of the Troubles, including workplace expulsions, rioting, sniping and mob murders.

## The Irish Republican Army (IRA)

Developed from the Irish Volunteers who fought in the Easter Rising, these rebel fighters were the “Army” of the Irish Republican “Government” (the Sinn Fein Dail). The Northern IRA usually operated differently to the force in the South (which used guerrilla tactics against the police, army and Black and Tans), but it remained in close communication with the overall leader, Michael Collins. The Belfast IRA assassinated policemen, bombed or set fire to businesses owned by Unionists and defended Catholic areas from Protestant mobs. It was also responsible for several atrocities against Protestants, such as grenade attacks on tram passengers.

## IRA informers

The Belfast Division ran a very successful intelligence network and gathered information which helped Collins organise the IRA campaign throughout Ireland. Much of this information came from IRA agents in public services and pro-IRA informers within the RIC. For example, Post Office workers helped the IRA to ‘tap’ police phone lines to listen to their communications. Details of police security operations and secret codes were passed to the IRA by sympathetic police officers such as Sergeant Matt McCarthy (it was his information which helped the IRA to trace and assassinate DI Swanzy in Lisburn). Another informer was Pat Stapleton who worked as a clerk for the Northern Ireland Military Adviser, General Solly Flood. He passed dozens of top secret files to the IRA and even enrolled as an A-Special.



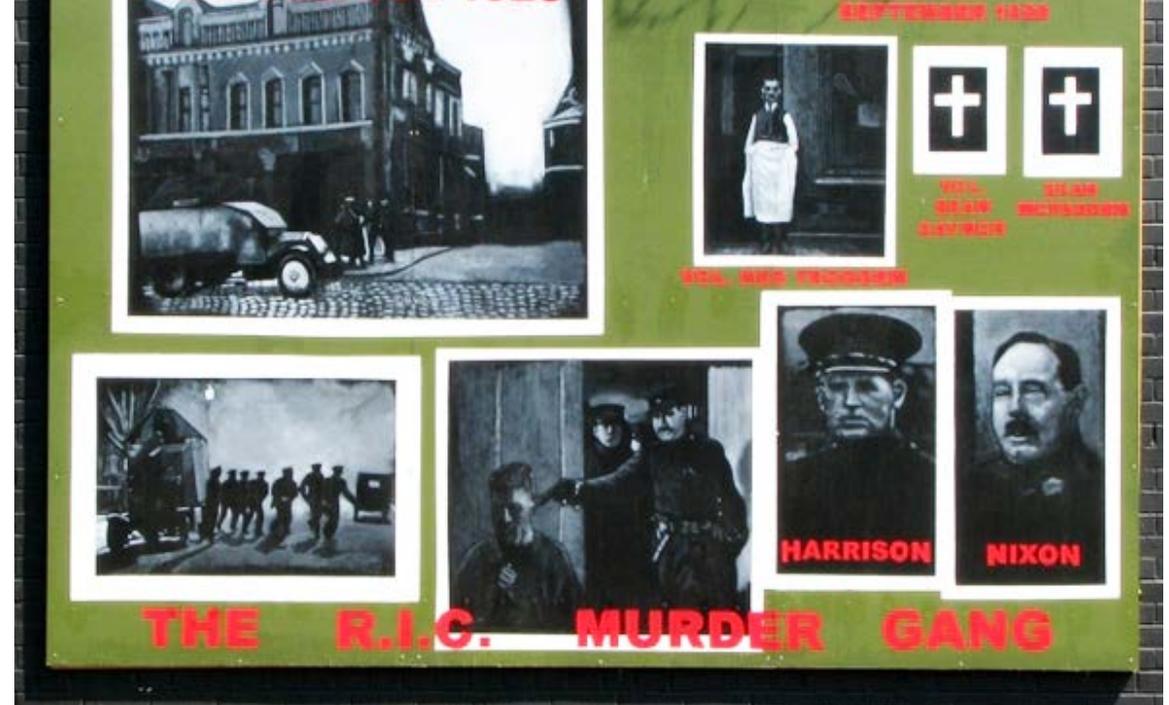
This modern mural shows that memories of these horrific murders are still very much alive in Nationalist areas of Belfast.



## “Worse than cannibalism” – What claims are made about the murder gang?

During Belfast’s 1920s Troubles, it was widely believed (at least among Catholics) that some of the worst atrocities were carried out by a gang of policemen.

Among hundreds of other deaths in Belfast at the time, the “murder gang’s” actions were particularly vicious. Winston Churchill, a senior member of the British Government, described one massacre attributed to the gang as “worse than cannibalism”.



Specific claims made about “the murder gang”:

- It was made up of fanatical Unionist police officers, most of whom were Protestants (however, two Catholic policemen are also claimed to have been members).
- The leader was District Inspector JW Nixon who oversaw all police operations in West Belfast. The head of the Belfast detective force, County Inspector Harrison, is claimed to be the senior mastermind behind the gang’s activities.
- The gang members belonged to secret extreme Unionist clubs called

“Cromwell Clubs”. These clubs had been set up by the Unionist Party.

- Their murder operations were reprisals for IRA attacks on police officers. The most outrageous allegations claim that reprisals were secretly encouraged by Unionist leaders. Some even suggest that on one occasion the gang shot a policeman themselves, to give them an excuse to launch a murderous rampage.
- The failure to arrest or convict anyone for the gang’s crimes shows that senior police officers and politicians conspired to protect the murderers.



# “Who owned the dog?” – is there any evidence that a murder gang actually existed?

**3.4a** Read the crime files and make a list of all the evidence which suggests that a murder gang of policemen did exist.

**3.4b** Make a second list – of all the evidence which suggests that the murders were not carried out by a gang of policemen.

**3.4c** Which list of evidence is more convincing? Should the NI Government have carried out a public inquiry into the activities of certain police officers?

**3.4d** Should Belfast (and Northern Ireland) people try to forget about these murders?





## The crimes:

**26 September 1920**

### Victims:

**Edward Trodden**, age 43  
*Hairdresser, Falls Road*

**John McFadden**, age 40  
*Blacksmith, Springfield Road*

**Sean Gaynor**, age 24,  
*Plumber, Springfield Road*



At 2.15 am, a gang of four uniformed men wearing masks arrived by motor vehicle and knocked on Ned Trodden's door. When his young son opened it, they forced their way past him, rushed upstairs and dragged Trodden out of bed. Taking him to the back yard, they shot him several times in the body and head, then they left.



At 5.30 am, three men knocked on the door of John McFadden's house (which was about a hundred yards away from Springfield Road police barracks). When he opened the door he was shot three times and died instantly. Two men were seen walking away from the house. Both wore trench coats; one wore a hat and the other a cap.



At 1.30 am, the Gaynor family heard knocking at their door. Before Mrs Gaynor could reach the door, it burst open and a number of armed men wearing uniforms, caps and dark coats came in shouting, "Where is he?" As Mrs Gaynor and her husband James were forced downstairs, she heard her son Sean say, "My hands are up". As the men continued to search the house, Mrs Gaynor asked her guard where her son was. She was told, "He is alright." In fact, when the men left Sean was found dead in his room. He had bullet wound in his abdomen and another in his head.

Although all three victims appeared to have been murdered by the same gang, the official Government statement about the crimes claimed that Gaynor had been shot "resisting arrest", while the others had been killed by "persons unknown".

**26 September 1920**

**Victims:**

**Michael Garvey**, age 23  
*Chemist's Assistant, Bray Street*

Garvey lay sleeping at his home in Bray Street, near the Crumlin Road. Shortly before 1 am his landlady heard a key turn in the front door and assumed it was her second lodger returning home. Instead she heard three men climb the stairs. A few moments later she heard shots ring out. Dashing onto the landing, she met two men wearing masks (the third had already passed her room). One was wearing a black uniform, the other a Burberry overcoat. Without speaking, they ushered her into her room, closed her door, and left.

From the window, the landlady saw a lorry with six or seven men standing near it. Ignoring her screams of "Murder!", the masked men chatted for a minute, then the group climbed into the lorry and drove away.

When police at the local station were told about the crime a detachment of officers was immediately sent to investigate. They were led by District Inspector Nixon, whom the landlady described as "very sympathetic".



**WHO OWNED THE DOG?**

Up to the present there has been no explanation of the presence in the house after the shooting of a little yellow dog which whined to get out when the men who committed the crime had taken their departure. As already reported, the animal was taken away by a District Inspector and two other members of the R.I.C. who also took a couple of spent cartridges which were found in the house. Nothing has since been heard regarding the dog. How it came to be in the house is a mystery, but the inference is that it accompanied the men who shot the brothers.

**23 April 1921**

**Victims:**

**Patrick Duffin**, *School Teacher*, age 28, Clonard Gardens  
**Daniel Duffin**, *Clerk*, age 24, Clonard Gardens

When the Duffin brothers heard a knock at their door, they assumed it was safe because the police curfew patrol had just passed by. When the door was opened, three armed men in civilian clothes rushed in, shouted "Hands up!" and riddled Pat and Dan Duffin with bullets. They left hurriedly, unaware that the third brother, John Duffin, was also in the house.

Reporting the crime, the Irish News asked, "Who owned the dog?"; after the murder, a yellow dog was discovered in the house trying to get out. It was believed to have accompanied the murderers and been accidentally left behind. After it was taken away by police the next morning, a rumour spread that it belonged to Police Sergeant Christy Clarke and had regularly been seen at Springfield Road police station.



**11 June 1921**

**Victims:**

**Alexander McBride**, age 30

*Publican, Cardigan Drive*

**William Kerr**, age 26

*Barber, Old Lodge Road,*

**Malachy Halfpenny**, age 22

*Postman, Herbert Street*

In each case men arrived at the victim's home in a motor vehicle, demanded the victim by name and then escorted him away. All three were found dead next morning in isolated areas on Belfast's northern outskirts. They had been riddled with bullets and the bodies also showed evidence of torture.

At around one o'clock, Alexander McBride and his wife were woken by men knocking on the door. Although they appear to have worn civilian clothes, they claimed to be police. Responding to Mrs McBride's alarm, they assured her that her husband was only required for an identity parade and said, "We are not the murder gang. He will be back in five minutes".

When Malachy Halfpenny's mother opened the door for men looking for her son, they rushed upstairs and dragged him from bed. Refusing to allow him to get dressed, they threatened to shoot his mother and sister if they offered resistance. It was about 1.20 am when Halfpenny was put in a lorry and driven away.

At about 1.20 am, Willie Kerr's sister opened the door for men seeking her brother. As they departed with Kerr, his sister warned the men that she could identify them. They laughed and said, "You will never see your brother again." As Kerr was put on the men's lorry, his sister ran around the corner of the street shouting for help. She was stopped by a man wearing a trench coat and a mask made from a handkerchief. Pointing a revolver, he threatened to shoot her if she did not return home.

You will never see your brother again.





# The Arnon Street Massacre:

**2 April 1922**

**Victims:**

**Joseph McCrory**, age 45,  
Stanhope Street

**Joseph Walsh**, age 29,  
Arnon Street

**William Spallen**, age 63,  
Mechanic, Arnon Street

**Bernard McKenna**, age 36,  
Park Street



On the evening of Sat 1 April 1922, Constable George Turner was ambushed and shot dead while on patrol on the Old Lodge Road.

During the large-scale police operation to restore order to the district, the Old Lodge area swarmed with police vehicles. Besides the uniformed policemen, there were also armed men wearing police raincoats over civilian clothes, and others not wearing any uniform at all. Dozens of houses were raided.

When Joseph McCrory heard battering at his door in Stanhope Street, he tried to escape out the back with his landlord, William Kitson. The raiders burst into the yard, shouted at McCrory to put his hands up, and instantly shot him. They left without noticing Kitson, who was hiding under a blanket with his two children.

Ex-soldier Joseph Walsh was in bed with his two young children when a party of men drew up in a lorry and smashed the front door. Some were wearing police uniform, some civilian clothes. They asked Mrs Walsh, who was downstairs with her two week old baby, if there were any men in the house. Without waiting for an answer they rushed upstairs. Within thirty seconds the men had finished their work and quietly exited the house and climbed back into the lorry. Mrs Walsh found her husband lying dead in the

bed, the two children wounded beside him. From news reports it is unclear whether Walsh was shot or beaten to death with sledgehammers.

The Spallen household in Arnon Street was already grieving – elderly Mrs Spallen had been buried that afternoon. When three uniformed men and another in plain clothes burst in, Mrs Spallen's widowed daughter told them that only she and her four children were present. However, they searched the house and found her father, William Spallen, in his bedroom. After shooting him three times, they threatened the rest of the family and left.

Bernard McKenna of Park Street was the third man to be murdered in his bed. Again the intruders burst in looking for men in the house and ignored the pleas of a frantic wife. One man climbed the stairs, fired three shots and dashed out. As Mrs McKenna calmed her seven children, she heard another knock at the door. It was a policeman enquiring if everything was alright. Mrs McKenna believed it was the same man who had shot her husband a few minutes before.

The official government statement on the night's events said, "Police carried out searches, and it was afterwards discovered that four men had been shot dead."

**24 March 1922**

**Victims:**

**Owen McMahon**, age 50,  
*Pub Owner, Kinnaird Terrace*

**Bernard McMahon**, age 26,  
*Barman, Kinnaird Terrace*

**Frank McMahon**, age 24,  
*Tailor, Kinnaird Terrace*

**Patrick McMahon**, age 22,  
*Tailor, Kinnaird Terrace*

**Gerard McMahon**, age 15,  
*Kinnaird Terrace*

**Edward McKinney**, age 26,  
*Bar Manager, Kinnaird Terrace*

**Survivors:**

**John McMahon**, age 30,  
*Barman, Kinnaird Terrace*

**Michael McMahon**, age 12,  
*Kinnaird Terrace*

The McMahon family were wealthy and well-respected Catholics with no strong political affiliations, although they were personal friends of Joe Devlin. Owen McMahon ran a pub and was a director of Glentoran Football Club.

At 1 am the McMahons and their lodger, Edward McKinney, were woken by the sound of breaking glass. A gang of five armed men ushered all eight male members of the family downstairs, reassuring them that it was “only a raid”. The females in the household were left upstairs.

When all the males were gathered in the dining room, the leader of the gang advised: “You boys say your prayers.” Then the killers opened fire. Three of the McMahons and Edward McKinney were killed immediately. Owen McMahon died in hospital a few hours later and his son Bernard also succumbed to his injuries within a few days. Only the eldest son, John, and the youngest, Michael, survived.

When police and ambulance crews arrived a short while later the dining room presented an appalling scene. Owen McMahon lay writhing among the bodies and Michael was cowering in terror under the table. Besides the bodies and blood, the attackers had also vandalised Catholic religious paintings which had been hanging on the wall.

The witnesses all stated that the raiders wore police uniforms (or at least police coats and caps) apart from the leader who wore a light-coloured trench coat.



## Detective Inspector John W Nixon



A Protestant from County Cavan, Nixon rose to become District Inspector of the West Belfast police district during the 1920s Troubles. A controversial figure, he advocated ruthless methods against the IRA and was widely regarded as the leader of the so-called police murder gang.

In 1922, Nixon joined the new Royal Ulster Constabulary. The Unionist Government was already embarrassed by Nixon's reputation and considered dismissing him for poor conduct (he complained publically that he had been overlooked for promotion). However, they knew he had influential friends among influential Protestants in West Belfast and feared turning him into a "martyr" just as the RUC was starting out. In fact, he was awarded an MBE in 1923.

Unlike the RIC, the RUC allowed its members to join secret societies, such as the Orange Order. However, they were strictly banned from making political or sectarian speeches. Nixon helped to found a policemen's Orange Lodge, the Sir Robert Peel Lodge, and became its leader. In January 1924 the newspapers reported that he had made a speech at an Orange meeting calling on Protestants to give "not an inch" of Ulster to the Irish Free State. This disobeyed a direct order, so Nixon was sacked. Many ordinary Protestants were outraged, and held public meetings in support of Nixon.

Within a year of his dismissal from the police, Nixon had been elected as a city councillor. From 1929 he was an independent Unionist MP for Woodvale (he did not belong to the Unionist Party). He died in 1949.

Allegations continued to follow Nixon throughout his life. In 1925 the Derry Journal newspaper had to pay compensation for connecting him to the McMahon murders. In 1934 he successfully sued the publishers of a book which claimed that one of the McMahon's murderers had become an MP.

During a dispute with Nixon in the late 1920s, the Government received an anonymous tip that he was threatening to create a "bombshell" by publishing details of his involvement in "the McMahon affair". The same letter claimed that Nixon hoped to "renew the religious riots" in order to bring down the Government. Neither of these threats was carried out. During a Parliamentary debate in 1941, one of Nixon's political opponents shouted at him, "You will not murder me."



## Further points to consider:

### Curfew

During most of the 1920s Troubles period Belfast was under curfew. Only police were allowed on the streets. Any drivers or pedestrians caught breaking the curfew would be arrested.

### Motive

Each atrocity attributed to “the murder gang” took place shortly after an IRA attack on police.

### Accusations

- The rumours and accusations linking these murders to a single gang of policemen are very persistent.
- The yellow dog left behind at the Duffin house was alleged to have belonged to Sgt Christy Clarke.
- When DI Nixon called at the home of Alexander McBride to investigate his murder, McBride’s wife is said to have identified Nixon as the leader of the gang which abducted her husband.
- On the other hand, the police file on the McMahon murders states that “There was no suggestion on the part of the McMahons that the police were implicated in the murder... [they] only went so far as to say that four of the raiders wore waterproof coats and police caps.”

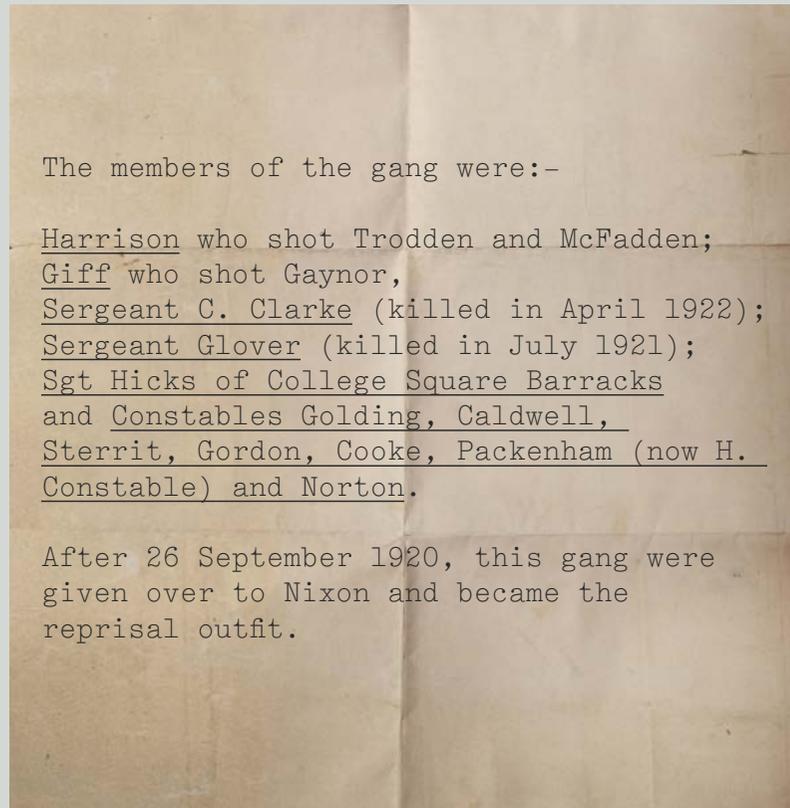




## The Southern Government's 'Murder Gang' File

Dissatisfied by the Northern Ireland Government's investigation into these murders (all remained officially unsolved), the Government in Dublin carried out its own investigation using personnel from the intelligence branch of the Belfast IRA. The result was a special file containing graphic accounts of the crimes together with the names of police officers suspected of involvement in the murders:

Over the last one hundred years, stories of the murder gang have also been remembered very differently by people with opposing political views.



The members of the gang were:-

Harrison who shot Trodden and McFadden;  
Giff who shot Gaynor,  
Sergeant C. Clarke (killed in April 1922);  
Sergeant Glover (killed in July 1921);  
Sgt Hicks of College Square Barracks  
and Constables Golding, Caldwell,  
Sterrit, Gordon, Cooke, Packenham (now H.  
Constable) and Norton.

After 26 September 1920, this gang were given over to Nixon and became the reprisal outfit.

The list was based on statements collected from other RIC/RUC officers who apparently wished to reveal their colleagues' crimes.



### Victims' politics

Only a handful of the victims are believed to have had any connections with Sinn Fein or the IRA.

- Gaynor was a member of the IRA, although his killers were probably looking for his brother Liam, who was a senior IRA leader
- Trodden was a member of both the IRB and the IRA and was believed to host IRB meetings in his shop
- McFadden was rumoured to have connections with the IRA, but unlike Gaynor and Trodden there was no IRA presence at his funeral
- Garvey was described in the newspapers as an "ardent Sinn Feiner"
- At least one of the Duffin brothers was a senior IRA volunteer
- Edward McKinney was an IRA volunteer, although it seems unlikely that his killers or the McMahon family knew this
- The police may have uncovered evidence that Owen McMahon had given the IRA a sum of money. If this was the case, it did not necessarily mean he was Republican – by March 1922 many Belfast Catholics regarded the IRA as their most reliable defenders and offered them assistance for this reason.

### Disguise

Several of these murders were carried out by men wearing complete or partial police uniform. Why then did they (mostly) take few precautions to hide their identity? If they were policemen, there were plenty of witnesses who could identify them. For example, Owen McMahon's young niece Mary Downey assured police that she would recognise the gang leader again, as she "clearly saw his face by the light on the landing".

On the other hand, there were plenty of loyalist gunmen roaming Belfast at the time, and surplus police uniforms were available to buy in Belfast shops. Perhaps the uniforms themselves were a disguise to mislead witnesses?

### Investigation

According to an official file, the witnesses of the McMahon murders left Belfast shortly afterwards. This hampered the police investigation because their friends and relatives were unable (or unwilling) to tell the police where they had gone.





## Contradictory accounts

The available accounts of the murders do not always match up. For instance, the Southern Government's "Murder Gang File" states that all three murders of 11 June 1921 were carried out by one group of policemen travelling in a single lorry. Yet the timings of the raids reported by the newspapers make this single journey impossible.

### DI JW NIXON LED "MURDER GANG"

There was, for example, District Inspector J.W. Nixon, a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Orange Order, a religious fanatic who organised the notorious McMahon murders during the pogroms in Belfast in the early Twenties. Under cover of darkness, Nixon led a squad of masked policemen to the home of Owen McMahon, a prominent Catholic publican in North Belfast. They broke down the front door using a sledgehammer, entered, roused the family from their beds, gathered the male members, including an 11-year-old boy, in the front parlour, allowed a few minutes for prayer, and then began shooting: there were five immediate fatalities. The motive was wholly sectarian.

**Ronan Bennett**, 1998  
Republican writer and dramatist

### SPECIALS BLAMED WITHOUT EVIDENCE

Next day a Protestant murder gang shot seven male members of the MacMahon family, killing four and wounding three, one of them mortally.

This horrible deed was perpetrated as a general reprisal against men who do not seem to have been members of the IRA. Sinn Fein propaganda, predictably, tried, without a shred of evidence, to place the responsibility for this atrocity on the Special Constabulary. The IRA had their revenge on equally innocent people when on 31 March a bomb was flung into a Protestant house wounding Francis Donnelly, killing two of his children and wounding two others.

**Sir Arthur Hezlet**, Unionist historian, 1972



## Why are we still arguing about the “Troubles” 100 years later?

So much of Ireland’s history is controversial, but the views different people hold about the Troubles of the 1920s remain exceptionally strong today. Even the words used to describe the events are significant – for example, many Nationalists refer to the violence in Belfast as a “pogrom”, while Unionists regard that word as inaccurate.

**3.5a** Look up the meaning of the word “pogrom”. Explain why many Nationalists think it is the **correct** word to describe what happened in Belfast in 1920-22

**3.5b** Now explain why many Unionists think that describing those events as a “pogrom” is **inaccurate** and **misleading**

The problem with people’s strong views about these events is that they **oversimplify** things that were actually quite complex. A good example is the B Specials, the part-time police force created in 1920 which soon became entirely Protestant. It was eventually disbanded in 1970. Consider these views of the B Specials, stated by politicians in the Northern Ireland Assembly during a debate in 2010.

# The Politicians:

**The Stormont debate about the B Specials,  
24 May 2010**

The Ulster Special Constabulary gave gallant and dedicated service to the Province... They were ordinary people who placed themselves to the fore in combating terrorism, and they deserve our thanks.

**Mervyn Storey, DUP**

The actions of the B-Specials bred a fear in the nationalist community. That not only drove many nationalists physically from their homes but many others left Ireland simply because the B-Specials ruled the community in which those people wanted to live.

**John O'Dowd, Sinn Fein**

The Ulster Special Constabulary was made up of ordinary men and women who wanted to serve their country. Their role was vital in the protection of people and property, in counter-insurgency, and in helping the noble RUC, as it was then, to deal with terrorism. Those who stood against terrorists are to be commended for their selflessness in the face of republican brutality. We owe them a debt of gratitude.

**Lord Morrow, DUP**

When Northern Ireland was established in 1921, it faced an immediate and severe threat from its enemies, and we are eternally grateful for the contribution of the Ulster Special Constabulary at that time.

**Thomas Buchanan, DUP**

They were the real terrorists.

I welcome the fact that the B-Specials were disbanded. Everyone in the nationalist community rejoiced at that event.

**Francie Malloy, Sinn Fein**

There is no avoiding the shameful record of the B-Specials force or the fact that it had to be disbanded by the British Government. ...

The British Government of the day made no bones about the purpose of those organisations. They armed unionists to defend the union and partition, and they equipped them with all the weapons of coercion, sectarianism and terrorism.

**Gerry Adams, Sinn Fein**

The B Specials were not sectarian... The peaceful society that we have today is due in no small part to the B-Specials, the Ulster Defence Regiment and other security services. But for their actions, the Province could easily have slid into anarchy many years ago.

**Tom Elliott, UUP**

Within months of their creation, the B-Specials were engaged in organised sectarian violence.

**Dolores Kelly, SDLP**



# Activity 03.5.c



Using the politicians' statements from the debate, complete the table:



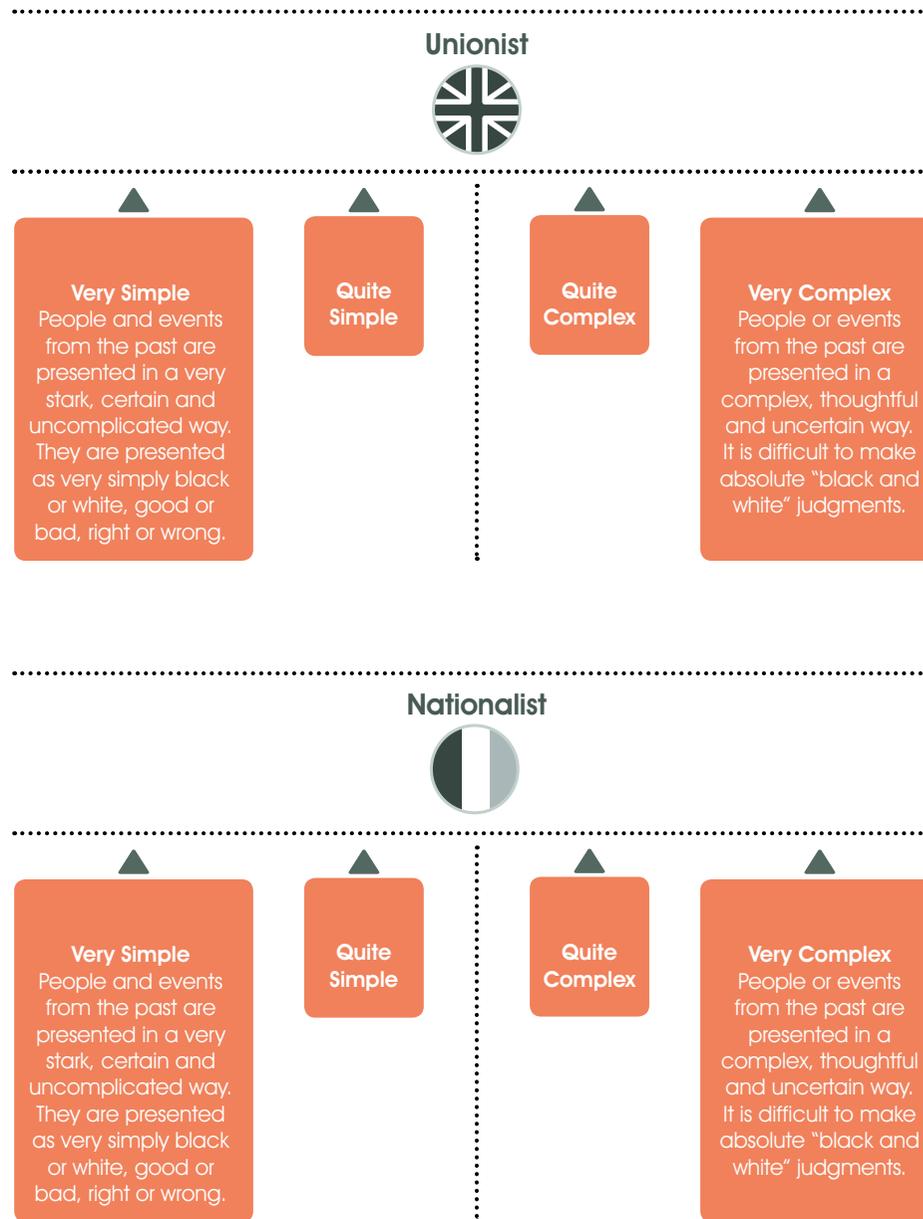
|  |  According to the Unionist Politicians |  According to the Nationalist politicians |
|--|---|--|
| The purpose and actions of the B Specials    | —   | —  |
| The kind of people who joined the B Specials | —   | —  |
| How we should remember the B Specials        | —   | —  |



# Activity 03.5<sub>d</sub>



Place the Unionist and Nationalist politicians' views of the B Specials on this scale:



# Activity 03.5<sub>e</sub>



Is it a problem that politicians often present a “black and white” picture of people, organisations and events from the past? Explain why or why not.



Of course, we expect politicians to disagree about the B Specials, but surely we can expect more?

If the politicians had considered evidence like this, would the Stormont debate about the B Specials have been different?



### Hexlet on the B Specials

For such a hastily raised force their discipline was very good. Obviously, their work made them unpopular with the Roman Catholic population, no-one likes his house being searched and no-one likes being held up in a road block. It was inevitable that most of the searches and inconvenience should fall on the Roman Catholics for it was amongst them that the IRA drew its recruits and its support. There is little doubt that moderate Catholics suffered far more from IRA intimidation than the surveillance of the Specials. Indeed the Specials gave the Catholic population considerable protection. Yet Sinn Fein propaganda was able to reverse this impression and stir up hatred against them.

... Yet the number of cases where [reprisals were] ever alleged in the RIC records, and the RIC was none too friendly, were very small. The Special Constabulary had, in general behaved with great restraint and the

forebodings of Dublin Castle that they would result in civil war were seen to be nonsense.

The feelings against them in the Nationalist population were the results of propaganda and not their behaviour. They were more responsible for saving Northern Ireland from anarchy than either the army or the RIC.

If feuds were being started, it was the IRA with their brutal and callous sectarian murders and outrages that caused them.

### Roger McCorley [IRA] on the B Specials

The Orange mob was provided with uniforms, paid by the British Government and called the Ulster Special Constabulary.

