



This year in British politics has been dominated exclusively by the spectre of the Northern Irish Backstop and the dilemma of two juxtapositions. As much as there is nothing more pressing than the 'here and now', and the not-so-distant-future, history is ever pertinent and will forever raise its ugly head, writes Tom Spencer.

In April this year, the notion of history's reach was brutally illustrated by the murder of the aspiring Northern Irish journalist Lyra Mckee in Derry. Given a failure to anticipate the influence of legacy in our country's future, this article seeks to illustrate how past events have far reaching ramifications – as seen in the Northern Irish Troubles.

The historian Demet Mousseau hit the nail on the head - "ethnic ties are deeply rooted in history and pass down from one generation to the next. Ireland's history has 'helped' entangle ethnicity and religion with political persuasions of violent proportions. In other words, the telling of history helped sow the seeds 30 years of conflict and today's political entrenchment.

Point in case: Unionist protestant communities in Northern Ireland annually commemorate the battle of Boyne when the English Catholic King James was defeated by a Dutch protestant King William III. Their 'here and now' has been passed down successive generations and decidedly shaped by perspective from a event that far precedes the Troubles and today's 'Do or Die'

dilemma.

Likewise, Republicanism pursued its an armed struggle during 'the Troubles' with a strong historic sense of the "Irish people." The military wing claimed its principles were in keeping with the tradition of a distinct Irish Celtic identity. Teaching this history adjoined Irish identity with the tradition of resistance to foreign invasion, reinforced the notion of an 'exclusive' ethnicity and the necessity of an armed struggle. And though the Good Friday agreement sought to sign off from history's wicked hangups, the cost of policing Northern Ireland to buffer infighting between opposing sides, persuaded in part by two different takes on past events, underlines the need to invest in objective revision on selective takes on our pasts.

The Irish Republican Army 'morally justified' its members to use violence through an identity orientated history of "resistance to foreign occupation." Both Unionist and Republican were – and arguably remain - ethnically orientated histories selective and at times inaccurate, omitting the period when both Protestants and Catholics co-operated as part of the 'United Irishmen of the 1790s. This historical chapter aside, what can only be characterised as 'primordialism' reminds us that historical misperceptions help divide and instigate the war drum of inter-ethnic animosity. Mis-histories of 'ethnic ties' have helped fostered opposing allegiances, the legacy of which is confronting our political union. Historians, above all, have a role to lead in challenging British communities' populist acceptance of exclusive identities and myopic story telling.

Myths of 'ancient hatreds' have helped to reinforce and nurture this animosity. Opposing political movements in Ireland repeatedly made reference to 'historic ethnic rivalry' when discussing grievances. Dr Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party during 'the Troubles', consistently spoke of 'traditional enemies' in his speeches. Most political leaders and communities also rejected the inconvenient historical traditions of Northern Irish WW1 war commemorations to deter activities of a "partisan character." Reflecting on the Troubles, the historian J.Bowyer lamented that people were killed in Ireland to "history's tune."

And yet comparable peace in a 21 st century Northern Ireland has been enjoyed. The realisation of the Good Friday Peace agreement that withdrew the troublesome hard security boarder also coincided with "changes in historical perceptions" and helped generate a more inclusive identity. A more honest reflection on long standing history in other words helped relative peace and compromise. Unsavoury as it was to see the likes of Republican Martin McGuinness and Unionist Ian Paisley in government together, this new pluralist approach in

Northern Irish politics was underpinned by a more accurate take on Irish history that intended to rightly depoliticise ethnicity. These foundations helped subdue one of 'the Troubles' core drivers, ethnic animosity.

The remnants of historical understandings of identity orientated unionism/nationalism have proven difficult to eradicate entirely. The trappings of renegade paramilitarism entrenched partisan politics of has endured, perhaps in part because we have failed to stamp out interpretations that would fail to stand up to the rigours of Common Entrance Exam historical source analysis. Understanding both legacy and the past – and challenging it - will help us to make head and tail of the sentiments manifested in Northern Irish intransigence the nation now faces. 'Do or Die' - how this will 'help' us to face down the political conflict of a hard boarder is something future historians will have the 'privilege' to explore.

ÂÂ Tom Spencer MSc, UKDF Research Associate,ÂÂ is an analyst and has taught as Head of History at a long-standing preparatory school