

Changes In North-South Irish Relations and The Determination of Borders in The Early 1920s

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Abstract. After the promulgation of the Government of Ireland Act 1920, the island of Ireland entered a de facto north-south division phase, and the signing of the *Anglo-Irish Treaty* in 1921 marked the establishment of an Irish Free State centred in Dublin. In the early days, the Free State adopted a peace policy towards Northern Ireland, hoping that the national forces of Northern Ireland would join the Free State peacefully and achieve reunification; With the intensification of political contradictions and internal differences, the Free State turned to be tough on Northern Ireland and even made a military offensive plan. However, affected by the outbreak of civil war, the British intervention, and other events, the Free State was finally forced to return to the Anglo-Irish Treaty to delimit the north-south border. The separation of Northern Ireland was eventually recognized by the Free State.

Keywords: The Irish Free State; Northern Ireland; international relations.

1. Introduction

A state's boundaries represent a definition of national self-identity. For Ireland in the early 20th century, the demarcation of the north-south border reflected the process of Ireland Island from unification to separation. According to the Government of Ireland Act 1920, the Northern Ireland includes Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone six counties with a Protestant majority, and the parliamentary boroughs of Belfast and Londonderry [1]. Southern and Northern Ireland set up parliaments in Belfast and Dublin respectively, under British administration. Shortly after the establishment of the Irish Free State, Northern Ireland announced that it would not join the Free State and still enjoy the autonomous status granted by the United Kingdom.

In 1949, the Irish established a Republic and withdrew from the Commonwealth. However, no matter how the regime in Southern Ireland changed, Northern Ireland always belonged to the United Kingdom's territory, causing ethnic and religious contradictions that had seriously troubled the British government and the people in the middle and late periods of the last century.

There are several articles that discuss the emergence of the boundary between the northern and southern parts of Ireland. To provide a historical perspective on the context of Southern Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism, Robert Kee's *Ireland: A History* is a valuable resource [2]. In the history of Irish Boundary Commission, K. J. Rankin has systematically combed through the operations of the Irish Boundary Commission and identified the reasons for its dissolution in his work [3]. The "Report of the Irish Boundary Commission 1925", published by Irish University Press in 1970, is also an important historical source detailing the operations of the Boundary Commission [4].

This paper mainly uses diplomatic and legislative archives from both the Irish and British governments, historical books on Ireland, and scholarly perspectives focused on Ireland. It seeks to examine the impact of North-South Ireland relations on the establishment of the final border between these regions.

The paper is structured into four main parts. The first part traces the development clue of the Unionist movement in Ulster, providing the historical background of the emergence of the Northern Ireland boundary problem in 1920. The second part delves into the development of the Free State's relationship with Northern Ireland. It covers the initial phase of their relations from the enactment of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in January 1922 to March 1922, characterized by relative peace. However, from April to August 1922, North-South relations took a downturn as conflicts arose on crucial issues. Subsequently, in 1924-1925, after the civil war, the Free State returned to the framework of the

Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Boundary Commission composed of the Irish Free State, Britain and Northern Ireland established. During this period, the diplomatic approach taken by the Free States played a significant role in the demarcation of the north-south boundary.

The third section explores the operation and findings of the Boundary Commission, with most participants believing that it would resolve the boundary issues. However, with the influence of external factors, such as the UK, the two parts of the island finally confirmed. The final part of the paper discusses the implications of the boundary and offers a conclusion summarizing the key findings and their broader significance.

2. Historical Background of Irish Nationalism and Ulster Unionism

The Ulster is full of Anglicans, unlike the rest of Ireland, where Catholicism holds a slightly stronger position than Protestantism. Since the 19th century, Ulster, especially the Protestant-dominated Six Counties of Northern Ireland, has been staunchly opposed to independence. With the growth of Irish nationalism in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the Ulster Unionist movement emerged, calling for unity with Britain and against Irish autonomy. This set the stage for the conflict between nationalism and unity in Ireland. In 1912, after the British House of Commons passed the third Irish Autonomy Act, nationalists in Dublin cheered, while 250,000 Unionists in Ulster signed the *Solemn League and Covenant*, preparing to concentrate all their efforts to keep Ulster out of the proposed autonomous region [2].

During this period, the majority Unionists in the Northern Ireland feared that Britain would lose control of the entire Irish island, while the majority nationalists in Southern Ireland wanted Britain to give Ireland Island a freer status. After the Easter Uprising in 1916, the confrontation between the British government and southern nationalists became increasingly serious. In order to ease the situation and maintain the rule in Ireland, the House of Commons of the British Parliament passed the government act of Ireland. The promulgation of this act marked the formal establishment of the partition of the island of Ireland, and was a major adjustment made by the British government in response to the inevitable split trend of Ireland.

The British intended to ease the growing Anglo-Irish conflict in Ireland and secure the support of Unionists in the north by passing the act. However, in the south, where the Irish nationalists were predominant, the conflict was not eased. The Catholics nationalist faction that advocated the independence of Ireland, represented by the Sinn Féin Party, used the Southern and Northern Ireland parliamentary elections stipulated in the act to elect a parliament for all-Ireland, making the "Southern Ireland Parliament" established by Britain an empty shelf [2]. By 1921, due to the movement of the Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the British Liberal government was under increasing domestic and international pressure.

On 6 December 1921, Irish nationalists and the British government finally signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which established the Irish Free State legally equal with Canada, Australia, South Africa and other dominions in the British Empire, with its capital in Dublin. After more than five years of confrontation, Ireland achieved a certain degree of independence.

The Treaty granted sovereignty over the entire island of Ireland to the Irish Free State. However, it also stipulated that the Northern Ireland had the right to decide whether to remain part of the Irish Free State. If the Northern Ireland Parliament chose independence, it was specified that the powers of the Irish Free State could not be extended to Northern Ireland. Article 12 of the treaty further stipulated that if Northern Ireland chose not to join the Free State, the British government, Northern Ireland, Ireland Free State would form a boundary commission. This commission, according to the wishes of the local residents, would determine the boundary of Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland based on economic and geographical conditions [5].

It was widely understood that the Unionist-dominated Northern Ireland Parliament could not vote in favour of joining the Free State. Consequently, the treaty in fact prevented the Free State from exercising power in the six Northern Counties, reinforcing the division of Northern and Southern

Ireland. After the treaty, unsurprisingly, Sir James Craig, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Prime minister of the Northern Ireland, announced that Northern Ireland would not join the Free State.

3. Three Phases of the South-North Relationship in 1922

3.1. The Proposal of the Peaceful Settlement

On 23 January 1922, Chairman of the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State, Michael Collins, signed the Collins-Craig agreement after a meeting with Sir James Craig. The agreement stipulated that the Free States would stop resisting the goods from Northern Ireland, while Northern Ireland promised to restore the positions of expelled Catholic workers. Additionally, both governments should try to develop a more effective system than the Council of Ireland to deal with problems across the entire island [6]. The Provisional Government repeatedly stressed its commitment to implementing a peace policy towards the north and valued its non-recognition policy [7]. In the press statement of 3 February, Arthur Griffith reviewed the articles of the treaty and emphasized that the South would not enforce the right to enforce the north and what they wanted is to eliminate the differences between the different political views of Unionist and Republican, summed up to the term "Irish", no matter which city on the island, whether Cork, Belfast or Dublin [8].

During this period, the Irish Free State pursued a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it emphasized the peace policy towards the north. On the other hand, it did not recognize the northern government and called on the North and South Parliaments to jointly form the Ireland Parliament, formulate an All-Ireland Constitution, and achieve reunification. On 4 February, Collins reiterated the policy of peaceful reunification in a statement. He believed that the political landscape on the island would change after the withdrawal of British troops. He expressed confidence that in the new circumstances, there will be a new parliament and a new constitution for the whole island. Moreover, he called on Craig to break the current deadlock, cautioning against the influence of some British politicians and urging that the Irish issue be addressed by the Irish themselves [9].

During this time, Free State political leaders, including Collins, maintained a relatively optimistic outlook about Northern Ireland. They believed that as long as the treaty article 12 were implemented, Tyrone and the other two counties with a large number of Catholic residents would likely join the Free State. This would leave the remaining four predominantly Unionists counties in an unsustainable state, pressuring them to eventually join the Free State, thus resolving the boundary problem [2].

3.2. The North-South Confrontation

However, the north and south situation brought by the Collins-Craig agreement did not last long. Some IRA members and radical nationalists fought guerrilla warfare in Northern Ireland, constantly attacking the Unionists. Some northern militant groups also returned to violence, quickly deteriorating the relationship between the North and the South.

On February 11, when a group of Ulster Special Constables patrolling from Belfast to Enniskillen border, it was attacked by the IRA. In the crossfire, 12 members of the group were struck by bullets, causing four killed and eight wounded. The attackers claimed this action was retaliation for the arrest of five Republicans by the northern authorities. This incident almost triggered a huge conflict between the North and the South until the three battalions of British troops were sent to the border, and IRA released the 26 captured royalists [10]. On March 15, in a speech to the Parliament of Belfast, Sir Craig accused: "Southern Ireland wants to force Ulster citizens to provoke conflict by bombing and attacking our citizens to continue their wars as they can."

On March 24th, the Catholic McMahon family and their hired bartender were murdered in Belfast, and eight unrelated Republicans were shot, six of them died. After the incident, Collins called for an independent investigation, but Craig rejected his suggestion. In response, on March 27, Collins issued a new statement on its relationship with Northern Ireland, emphasizing the Free State had always implemented the Collins-Craig agreement and remained committed to peaceful reunification, while

Craig had not show respect and enforcement for the Collins-Craig agreement signed in January, and still condoned in attacks on Catholics [11].

Nevertheless, Collins and Craig met again on March 31 to discuss to ease the circumstance. Although a new Collins-Craig agreement was signed, some Republican attacks against Unionists did not stop. The north government also responded with violence. On April 27, in a letter to Craig, Collins reprimanded Northern authority for breaching the agreement and conducting ongoing attacks against Catholic residents [12].

At this time, the Free State itself was not stable. With the treaty between the British and Irish recognized the abolition of the Republic proposition, and the preservation of the British king status in Ireland, the army was divided into anti-treaty and pro-treaty factions. Republicans and radical nationalists were ready to initiate a storm in the Free State. To bridge the conflict and save Ireland from a potential civil war, Collins presided over a meeting of the two factions in April. During this meeting, the representatives of both sides agreed to support armed attacks on the North, and the South government began to send a large number of weapons to IRA members in Northern Ireland. In early May, IRA activities escalated in Northern Ireland, with more divisions engaged in attacks on the Northern Irish authorities. In the Pettigo area, the conflict evolved into big confrontation between Republicans and the British, as British artillery intervened to support the Northern Irish police force. Ultimately, the Republicans chose to retreat [13].

3.3. Return to Peace

The interior conflict in the Free State became more serious in the summer of 1922. Some radical IRA members became out of control. Furthermore, the provisional government of the Free States was also reluctant to undermine relations with Britain because of the conflict with the Northern Irish authorities. In early June, the provisional government adopted a policy stipulating that the troops of the official or administrative bodies of the twenty-six counties should not be allowed to invade the six counties of Northern Ireland. The increasingly severe anti-treaty situation in the south also allowed the provisional government to ignore the displaced members of the IRA in the north. A large number of them either returned their homes in the south or were arrested by the northern authorities.

On August 9, official Ernest Blythe's memorandum on Northern Ireland policy showed the will of the Free State to end military operations in the north. In the text, he recognized that the south can never achieve reunification for the whole island by attacking the north government and the British army, because the British can support the Six County Government and make sure the offensive from south will be put off and the IRA members will be arrested. Previous guerrilla operations have proved the failure of the armed confrontation policy, and the Free State should return to the policy of peaceful coexistence and focus on home [14].

4. The Establishment of the Boundary Commission

After Michael Collins dead on August 22, the "Northern Offensive" strategy, which aimed to bring the northern counties of Ireland under the Irish Free State, came to a complete halt. However, the desire to address the status of Northern Ireland did not disappear. In October, to set up a bureau and solving the boundary problem were mentioned in a memorandum [15]. Soon, The South established the Northeastern Boundary Bureau leading by O'shiel. He started to investigate the boundary. Yet, it was not until 1924, when the domestic situation in the South had stabilized, that the government began to formally request the British government to establish a boundary commission which were included in the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

The Boundary Commission was meant to impartially assess the borders and potentially adjust them to align with the local residents' aspirations. However, this process did not go as smoothly as hoped. During the operation of the commission, the situation that Collins had feared at a provisional government meeting in January 1922, "Northern Ireland and British Government representatives united against representatives of the Free States" [7], inevitably appeared. This made any significant

border adjustments exceedingly difficult. After nearly a year of intermittent border negotiations, the South failed to convince Tyrone and Fermanagh to join the Free State. The boundary adjustment was limited to a simple one.

By December 1925, the members finally came to an agreement to amend the Anglo-Irish Treaty. As part of this agreement, the Boundary Commission was abolished, and Britain cancelled part of the financial obligations of Ireland within the empire [2]. The abolition of the commission marked the end of the official struggle to change the status of Northern Ireland in the early days of the new Ireland country.

5. Conclusion

At the end of the 19th century, the Ulster Unionist movement surged in tandem with the Irish autonomy movement, which eventually led to the north-south division of Ireland in 1920. After the establishment of the Irish Free State, the Unionist, represented by James Craig, firmly declared that it would never join the Free State. Between 1922 and 1925, the nascent southern Ireland policy toward the north underwent a transformative process from a period of relative peace to one marked by conflict and war and subsequently return to a state of peace. This relationship without mutual trust affected and exacerbated the north and south division trend of Ireland.

After the Civil War, the Free State called on to organize a boundary commission to implement the provisions of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Through negotiations conducted in the framework of the Boundary Commission, the focus of foreign policy of the Free State changed from the unification of the entire island of Ireland to securing sovereign independence for the southern 26 counties. As a result, the north and the south became separate entities. In this division, the Unionists in Northern Ireland emerged victorious, but the lingering effects of nationalist sentiments continue for a long time, creating problems that persist to this day.

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