

Dedication

The History Journal senior editors thank Dr. Molly Wood for her continuous guidance and support of the senior class as they finish their years in the history department at Wittenberg. Dr. Wood, we appreciate the time and commitment that you have shown to the class of 2016 in all that you do.

Half-Peace: The Successes and Failures of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland

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On April 10, 1998, lawmakers in Northern Ireland attempted to put a stop to thirty years of sectarian violence with the Good Friday Agreement. Over the past three decades, Catholic Republicans and Protestant Unionists engaged in heavy fighting that turned the streets of Belfast into a battleground. The policy sought to reverse many of the injustices ingrained in the Northern Irish state. However, while the current peace process created progress towards relieving the tension on an official level, the contradictory communal identities within the state have remained intact, resulting in unresolved prejudices.

The Troubles in Northern Ireland stem from an issue of conflicted communal identities. Catholic views towards Unionists were jaded by decades of socio-economic oppression and by a government that was explicitly forged to serve Protestant people in a Protestant state. Throughout the Troubles, civil rights advocates complained that it was difficult for them to gain proper representation or to “maintain the balance of parties in Parliament” because of “the distribution of religious denominations throughout Northern Ireland.”¹ At the same time, Northern Irish Protestants felt their way of life threatened by the possibility of Catholic emancipation and integration into the government. By the time the Good Friday Agreement was signed, each group had developed its own mythology of hate towards the opposite group, an oral history of tragedy that sustained the anger.

In theory, the arrangement that the negotiators wrote would create policies to bridge this hatred and solve these problems. The Agreement called for a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to provide a Northern Irish government in which both Republicans and Unionists would have the opportunity to work together. Throughout the negotiation process, tensions between the Northern Irish and British governments eased. Now, many government officials in Ireland and the United Kingdom, notably David

Cameron and Enda Kenny, believe “Anglo-Irish relations are at an ‘all-time high.’”² While tensions still exist, the efforts of the North-South Council and British-Irish Council have helped the two governments find commonalities on which they can forge their relationship.

However, the Assembly was ineffective in the long run. Continuing IRA activities caused Unionist leadership to refuse cooperation, preventing any major decisions from taking place. The British government stepped in several times to continue the state’s functioning. By the time the Assembly was formed, the Northern Irish people were split at the roots in national identity. Politicians struggled to convince their voting base that agreement was in their best interest. Indeed, much “of the antagonism between the two communities was based on preconceived notions of the other.”³ While the peace process that set up this assembly made an effort toward finding common ground between these two groups, the result was not effective in providing a long-term solution.

This is the key to understanding the effects of the Good Friday Agreement. While living conditions have become markedly better for citizens of Northern Ireland and the warzone-like quality of the cities has ceased, officials’ efforts have been unable to completely eliminate the community’s discriminatory ideology. Even by 2013, “Northern Ireland [had] not carried out any socio-economic justice to redistribute resources between the two communities.”⁴ The process of the economic reform left many working class individuals with just as few opportunities as they would have had during the conflict due to hardened beliefs of social norms. With the lack of forced dialogue between the Republican and Unionist groups in the community, “it has become apparent that sectarian feeling has not only failed to dissipate but may even have hardened in some districts” and that the contrasting communal identities remain a strong part of Northern Irish society.⁵ Political antagonisms remain rife and factional allegiances

within the community continue to be strong. Instead of the hoped outcome, the contradictions and judgments between the two communities persist.

The Good Friday Agreement was able to produce some success in alleviating relations between Republicans and Unionists within the government. However, attempts to remove tension within the community itself through civil rights reform has not managed to cure the North of the deeper prejudices that sparked much of the conflict in the first place. Instead, this discrimination upon which Northern Ireland was founded has remained intact. While the peace process made advancement towards addressing the contradicting views within Northern Ireland's government, it failed to break down the differing communal identities between Catholics and Protestants, leaving deep fissures remaining in the state.

Endnotes

¹Thomas Hennessey *A History of Northern Ireland, 1920-1996* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 1997), 52.

²"Anglo-Irish Relations 'at Peak,'" *The Belfast Telegraph*, November 3, 2014, accessed January 5, 2016, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/republic-of-ireland/angloirish-relations-at-peak-30083294.html>.

³Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland*, 110.

⁴Kerim Yildiz, *The Good Friday Agreement: An Overview* (London: Democratic Progress Institute, 2013), 53.

⁵Colin Coulter and Michael Murray, *Northern Ireland After the Troubles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 16.

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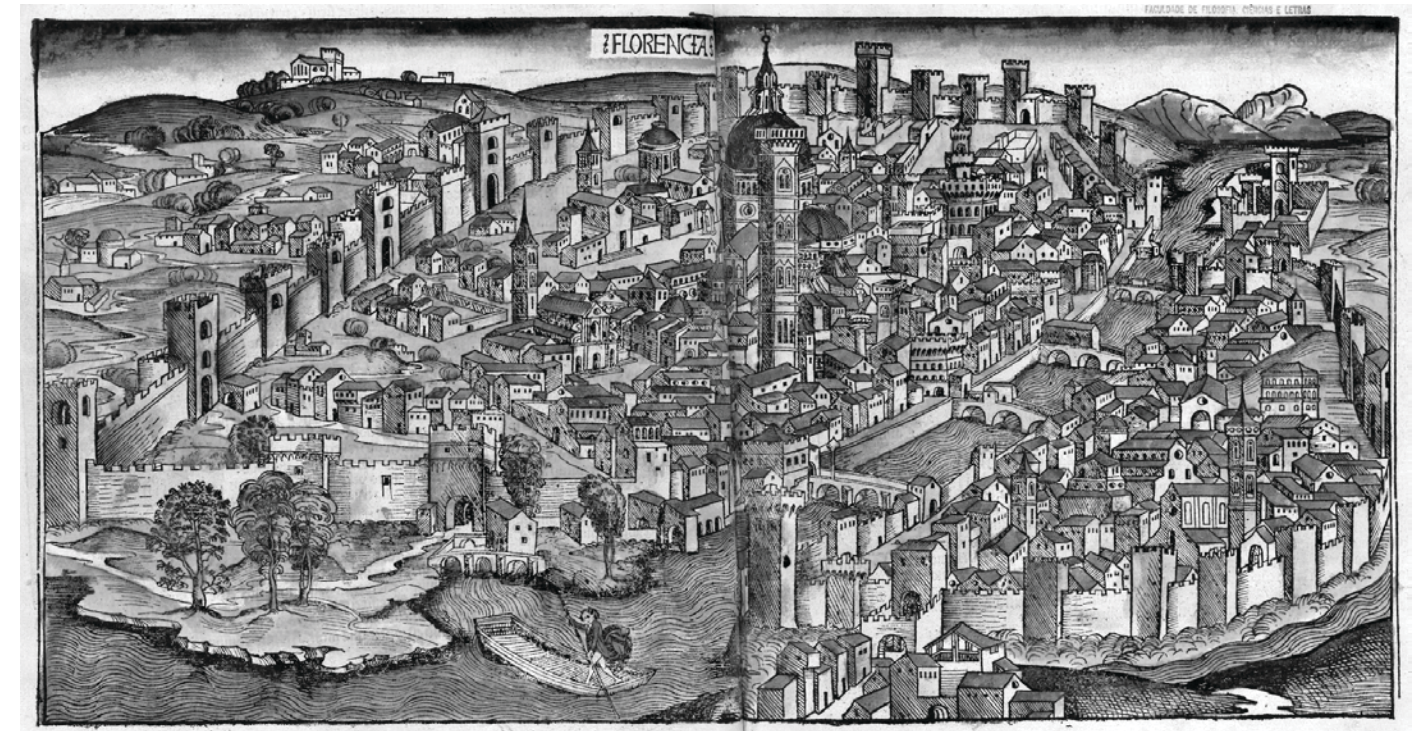
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Section I. Renaissance Reversed: Social Conflicts in Florence



"Florence," Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493.