

NORTHERN IRELAND HISTORY SECOND WORLD WAR 1938 TO 1945

1938

9 February 1938

General election: Lord Craigavon wins another term. Unionists 39; Independent Unionist 3; Nationalists 8; Labour 1; Independent Labour 1.

March 1938

Annie Chamberlain, wife of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, opens Sydenham aerodrome in east Belfast.

March 1938 *The launch of HMS Belfast from Harland and Wolff's Belfast shipyard.*

Improved SOUTHAMPTON-Class heavy cruiser ordered on 15th August 1936 from Harland and Wolff at Belfast under the 1936 Estimates on with sister ship HMS EDINBURGH from Swan Hunter in Newcastle. The ship was laid down on 30th December 1936 and launched on 31st March 1938 as the 1st RN ship to carry this name. Build was completed on 3rd August 1939 and she joined the Home Fleet for working-up before outbreak of war.

25 April 1938

Craigavon denounces the ceding of the 'treaty ports' of Lough Swilly, Berehaven and Cobh by Britain to Eire.

16 May 1938

The Westminster government agrees to provide additional revenue to maintain Northern Ireland social services at UK level.

September - 244 letters received by the Ministry of Commerce. Most of these requests are from Austrian Jews to settle in Northern Ireland. Almost all of these requests are rejected.

29 September 1938

The leaders of the Allies, Britain and France, alarmed at Germany's expansionism and rising tensions in Europe, meet Hitler and the Italian leader, Benito Mussolini, in Munich. At what became known as the Munich Agreement (please see full text of Munich Crisis on separate menu), they conceded the Sudetenland, part of Czechoslovakia, to Germany. Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister famously returned from the Conference with the Agreement, which he said would guarantee 'Peace in our time.'

22 December - Sir Richard Dawson Bates, Minister of Home Affairs, introduces internment. 34 are detained under the Special Powers Act.

1939

16 January 1939

The start of the IRA's bombing campaign in England.

March 1939

Hitler occupies all of Czechoslovakia.

May 1939

Following discussions with Chamberlain in London, Craigavon reluctantly accepts the decision not to impose conscription on Northern Ireland in time of war.

September - Since the beginning of the year, Short and Harland have built 11 Bristol Bombay's and 4 Hereford bombers. Hitler invades Poland, rapidly overrunning its armies and dividing the country with the USSR, who invaded from the east. On September 2, Britain and France declare war on Germany.

3-5 September - Anti-war incidents in west Belfast: blackout order defied and the RUC record 12 incidents including the lighting of bonfires and gas street lamps, the burning of gas masks, the shooting of an army reservist in the stomach, two soldiers stripped of their uniforms, and the painting of hostile slogans such as 'ARP for slaves, IRA for the Irish'.

4 September - Craigavon says at Stormont: 'We here today are in a state of war and we are prepared with the rest of the United Kingdom and Empire to face all the responsibilities that imposes on the Ulster people'.

November - 21.7% unemployed. The number of men and women out of work in the region has risen by more than eight thousand since the outbreak of war.

1940

January - Food rationing is introduced throughout the UK.

Spring - In spring Germany occupies Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg and begins to move on France. In Britain, a coalition government under Winston Churchill is formed.

May - Edmond Warnock resigns as parliamentary secretary, describing the government as 'slack, dilatory and apathetic'.

June - John MacDermott appointed to join the cabinet as Minister of Public Security.

June - Decision to build aerodromes at Long Kesh, Nutt's Corner, Magheraberry, Eglinton, Ballykelly and Kirkistown, and a seaplane base on Lough Erne at Castle Archdale.

26 June - Craigavon sends a cipher telegram to Churchill protesting at the British government's offer to make a declaration in favour of the reunification of Ireland in return for British use of the 'treaty ports', returned to Eire in 1938.

July - A scheme adopted to evacuate 17,000 children from Belfast to the countryside. Only 8,800 were to turn up over the next six weeks, and more than half of these are to return to the city by the spring of 1941.

7 July - De Valera rejects the British government's offer on reunification.

November - 71,000 unemployed even though 14,000 have gone to seek work in Britain since the start of the war.

24 November - Craigavon dies in his armchair while listening to the Six O' Clock News.

25 November - John Andrews becomes Prime Minister.

30 November - From a single unobserved plane the Germans take high-definition aerial photographs of Belfast.

December - Harold Wilson in Northern Ireland on behalf of the Manpower Requirements Committee reports to Churchill that after fifteen months of war 'the province had become a depressed area', which had 'not seen the construction of a single new factory'.

1941

January - Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK to exceed its quota for increasing land under the plough - an additional 270,000 acres including golf courses, the Stormont estate and Queen's University front lawn. 17,000 gallons of milk were being shipped from Northern Ireland to Britain every day.

24 March - MacDermott warns Andrews that Belfast is likely to be bombed: 'The period of the next moon, say, the 7th to the 16th April, may well bring our turn.'

7-8 April - A small squadron of German bombers raid the Belfast docks and completely destroy the four-and-a-half acre Harland and Wolff fuselage factory, reducing a major timber yard to ashes, and delivering damaging blows to the docks. Thirteen people are killed. One of the German aircraft is shot down over the Irish Sea.

15-16 April - 180 German bombers drop 203 metric tons of bombs and 800 firebomb canisters on Belfast between 10.40pm and 4.00am. The densely populated area north of the city centre suffers most. At least 900 people are killed - no other city in the UK, except London, lost so many lives in one air raid. The same night, two parachute bombs are dropped on Derry, killing 15, and 5 die when Newtownards airport is bombed.

16 April-3 May - 6,000 people from Belfast take refuge in neutral Dublin; 40,000 are put up in rest centres; and 70,000 meals have to be served to Blitz victims every day.

4-5 May - 200 German bombers attack Belfast over three and a half hours dropping 95,992 incendiaries and 207 metric tons of explosives. 191 people are killed. The docks area and the city centre are hit hardest: two thirds of Harland and Wolff's premises are destroyed. The 'Fair Head' and three corvettes are sunk. By now 53.5 % of Belfast's housing stock is either destroyed or badly damaged. In the German newspapers, Belfast is headline news.

5 May - Broadcasting House, Northern Ireland's finest Art Deco building, is formally opened despite the Blitz, just hours before.

5-6 May - Three German bombers attack east Belfast. 14 people in Ravenscroft Avenue are killed.

12 May - The imperial war cabinet in London proposes the extension of conscription to Northern Ireland.

13 May - Tommy Henderson, Independent Unionist MP for the Shankill, declares at Stormont: 'The Catholics and Protestants ... are sleeping in the same sheugh, below the same tree or in the same barn. They all say the same thing, that the government is no good.'

25 May - Mass rallies against conscription proposal is led by Nationalist politicians.

27 May - The British government decides against conscription for Northern Ireland.

31 May - By now 220,000 have left Belfast for the countryside and at least 20,000 sleep in the open every night on the Cave Hill and in fields outside the city. Around 100,000 are left without homes.

June - Germany, having already occupied Greece and Yugoslavia, open what became known as the Eastern Front when it invaded Russia having given up on its plans to invade Britain.

30 June - 362 American 'civilian technicians' arrive in Derry to build an anti-submarine base, starting with Lisahally Quay, even though the USA is still not in the war.

December - The Japanese bomb the United States Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, and declare war on the United States of America and Britain. News of the 'sneak attack' is broadcast to the American people and the US and Britain declare war on Japan the following day. Germany and Italy then declare war on the US, and Japan overruns the Philippines.

4 December - Harry Midgley of the Northern Ireland Labour Party wins Willowfield, previously a safe Unionist seat.

1942

26 January - The first American troops in Europe step ashore at Belfast's Dufferin Quay.

5 February - The US Naval Operating Base in Derry is officially commissioned. The American forces' area HQ is transferred from Liverpool to Talbot House in Derry. \$75 million is spent by the Americans to create the largest anti-U Boat base in the North Western Approaches.

March - Trade unions and employers form joint production committees.

25 March - The IRA in the north reorganises under the command of Hugh McAteer.

3 April - The IRA kill an RUC constable and wound another in Dungannon.

5 April - The IRA wound a policeman in Strabane and in Belfast, kill a constable. Six IRA men are captured in Cawnpore Street.

3 May - There are now 37,000 American troops in Northern Ireland.

June - Since January German U-boats have sunk 88 ships a month in the Battle of the Atlantic.

30 July - Prime Minister Andrews makes a detailed statement at Stormont outlining his post-war plans for welfare services, transport and industry. This draws an angry response from Kingsley Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in London, because of lack of prior consultation.

August - A new town is created at Langford Lodge on the shores of Lough Neagh. It serves as a depot for the Lockheed Overseas Corporation, an American firm commissioned to repair and maintain US aircraft. The German offensive stalls at Stalingrad. The battle for the city lasts until January 1943.

2 September - Tom Williams, arrested in Cawnpore Street in April, is executed in Crumlin Road gaol in Belfast. An IRA unit wounds a policeman at Culloville in Co Armagh.

4 September - An IRA unit attacks the RUC barracks in Belleek, Co Fermanagh.

6 September - An IRA unit kills an RUC constable in Clady, Co Tyrone.

10 September - After an exchange of gunfire, John Graham, publicity director of the northern IRA, is arrested.

October - Hugh McAteer, commandant of the northern IRA, is arrested. A major strike takes place at Short and Harlands after two shop stewards are dismissed. A black GI dies in a street brawl between American troops and local men in Antrim town.

1 October - The government suspends Belfast Corporation, found guilty of gross corruption, and appoints three commissioners in its place.

November - The Russians launch a counter attack at Stalingrad and drive the Germans back at a cost of an estimated 400,000 German deaths. 750,000 Soviet troops and an unknown number of civilians also lose their lives. Following this the Russians force the Germans back towards their own borders.

January - The number of women employed in engineering reaches 12,300 (in 1939 only 250 women were employed). Hugh McAteer and another IRA volunteers escape from Crumlin Road gaol.

1943

9-10 January - Secret meeting of Unionist backbench MPs to send to the Chief Whip a demand for a new leader and cabinet changes.

9 February - Jack Beattie, Independent Labour, wins west Belfast in Westminster parliament by-election.

March - 21 IRA internees escape from Derry Gaol through a tunnel.

19 March - Andrews categorically declares that he will not tolerate interference in his selection of cabinet ministers.

April - Allies begin to win Battle of the Atlantic against German U-boats.

13 April - The first of many marriages between US servicemen and Ulster women.

28 April - John Andrews is forced by his own party to resign.

1 May - Sir Basil Brooke forms a new government. Only John MacDermott is retained from the previous administration.

July - A coup in Italy forces Mussolini to resign.

September - The first units of the XV (US) Army Corps arrive in preparation for opening up a second front in Europe and are stationed in the Newry and Armagh areas. A postwar reconstruction committee begins work, led by Sir Roland Nugent. In Europe, Italy surrenders to the Allies.

October - There are now around 120,000 American servicemen in Northern Ireland. Italy declares war on Germany.

November - The Tehran Conference takes place where Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin meet to plan for the end of the war.

7 November - Stormont ministers protest when Bernard Griffin, Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, referred to Catholics being 'persecuted in Germany and Poland', adding: 'I need hardly mention the persecution going on even at the present time in Northern Ireland.'

January - The Allies counterattack in Europe and land in Italy. Following the Battle of Anzio they move north.

1944

25 February - At least 20,000 workers in the shipyard, the aircraft factory and engineering firms go on strike in Belfast. They do not return until 8 April.

February - Brooke forces the resignation of Rev Prof Robert Corkey as Minister of Education for consistently neglecting his duties (he attended his department just three times in 6 months).

6 June - D-Day. 'Operation Overlord' begins on the coast of Normandy in France. After overcoming fierce resistance, the Allies break through the German defences and on 25 August, liberate Paris.

20 October - Brooke resigns his duties as Prime Minister because of a duodenal ulcer. He would resume in January 1945.

November 1944 - Though the Westminster government agreed to pay for construction, Belfast Corporation refused to begin work until building costs had fallen.

December - The workforce at Harland and Wolff reaches its peak of 30,801. Lieutenant-Colonel Samuel Hall-Thomson, Minister of Education, publishes his proposals for reform, similar to the 1944 Butler Education Act for the rest of the United Kingdom.

1945

January - Auschwitz Concentration Camp is liberated.

February - In the Pacific, the Americans reconquer the Philippines and close in on Japan, landing famously on Iwo Jima.

6 February - The creation of the Northern Ireland Housing Trust, with power to borrow from the government to build houses, and to pay back the capital with interest over 60 years (the Trust built 48,500 houses by 1972). The houses, unlike those given out by local authorities, were allocated strictly on a points system.

April - Hitler commits suicide and Mussolini is executed by Italian partisans.

May - The Germans formally surrender to the Allies and the war in Europe is over. This is celebrated as VE (Victory in Europe) Day.

7 May - As news spreads that Germany is to surrender at midnight, tens of thousands gather in Donegall Place and Royal Avenue to celebrate. Bonfires are lit over much of Belfast.

8 May - The Ulster United Prayer Movement holds a victory thanksgiving at Belfast City Hall. The crowd here is the largest in central Belfast since Covenant Day 1912.

13 May - Churchill, in his victory speech, says that 'if it had not been for the loyalty and friendship of Northern Ireland we should have been forced to come to close quarters with Mr de Valera or perish for ever from the earth.'

14 May - A ceremony at Lisahally, Derry, to pay tribute to Northern Ireland's part in the Battle of the Atlantic. Eight U-boats surrender there to Admiral Sir Maxwell Horton and eventually 28 German submarines are towed out to be scuttled at Rockall.

15 June - General election in Northern Ireland: 33 Unionists, 10 Nationalists, 2 Northern Ireland Labour Party, 1 Socialist Republican, 1 Commonwealth Labour and 2 Independent Unionist were returned.

5 July - Westminster general election: 9 Unionists, 1 Independent Unionist, 2 Nationalists and 1 Independent Labour are returned.

29 July - The BBC begins broadcasting again from Belfast (wartime networks had begun on 3 September 1939).

6 August - In the east the Japanese refuse to surrender and, in a bid to end the war quickly, the Americans drop the first atom bomb on the city of Hiroshima, followed three days later by a bomb on the city of Nagasaki. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are killed and the Japanese surrender.

14-15 November - The Anti-Partition League is formed at a convention in Dungannon, Co Tyrone, with James McSparran, Nationalist MP for Mourne, as chairman.

13 December - The Family Allowances Act (NI) provides grants of five shillings to second and further children.

During the war - Harland and Wolff launched 170 Admiralty and merchant ships, repaired or converted 30,000 vessels, and manufactured 13 million aircraft parts, over 500 tanks, thousands of field and anti-aircraft guns, and hundreds of searchlights.

Short and Harland made 1,200 Stirling bombers, 125 Sunderland flying boats and many other smaller bombers. Its workforce reached 23,000.

Mackies made 75 million shells, 65 million parts for bombs, and fuselage and undercarriage components.

The Sirocco Works produced grenades, radar equipment and gun mountings.

The Ropeworks produced one third of all the Royal Navy's rope and cordage requirements.

Despite shortage of flax, the linen industry made 2 million flax-fabric parachutes (mainly in Carrickfergus), great quantities of machine-gun belts, canvas and wagon covers and tent duck and heavy linen 'blitz cloth' for reroofing damaged buildings. Hundreds of thousands of uniforms were made, particularly in Derry.

There were also 270 strikes during the war and productivity was lower than in any other region of the United Kingdom.