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BEYOND THE BELFAST PEACE WALLS: EXAMINING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THEIR DEMOLITION ON SOCIETY

Abstract

The city of Belfast, historically marked by sectarian conflicts, is home to a unique urban feature—the peace walls. These tall barriers, initially erected as temporary protective measures, have evolved into deeply rooted symbols of the city’s historical and religious divisions. Erected during the Troubles, these structures physically separate Catholic/nationalist/republican communities from Protestant/unionist/loyalist communities. These walls have become integral parts of every tourist tour in Belfast. While tourists view the walls as attractions, some consider the walls to be responsible for ingraining the differences between the Protestant and Catholic communities, reinforcing two distinct identities, and portraying the profound antagonism between these communities. The year 2023 was supposed to be pivotal since it was the year when all the peace walls were supposed to be demolished and the communities around them united. However, the majority of the walls still stand, and the citizens of Belfast seem reluctant to give them up due to feelings of insecurity, fear of new confrontations between the two communities and lack of protection. The aim of this paper is to provide an in-depth analysis of the peace walls and their role in shaping Belfast’s society. The paper will explore their origins, the consequences of their existence, community perspectives, and various initiatives aimed at fostering peace and unity. Current efforts to dismantle the walls in search of avoiding a post-walls crisis and finding lasting peace will also be mentioned.

Keywords: Belfast, peace walls, segregation, crisis prevention, identity

1. Introduction

The period from 1968 to 1998 in Northern Irish history is known as the Troubles. It was a conflict between two sides—the loyalist/Protestant side and the republican/Catholic side. It ended with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. One of the ways with which the people of Northern Ireland coped with crisis situations during the Troubles, and which is definitely the most visible one, is building walls between communities to keep the other side out and to feel safer. Even 26 years after the Good Friday Agreement, most of these walls still stand today, and the most prominent ones can be found in the cities of Belfast, Derry and Portadown. Jonny Byrne and Cathy Gormley-Heenan argue that the walls contradict the popular narrative that Northern Ireland is a normalized society because if the conflict is over and there is no longer a need for barriers, then why are they still standing in numerous locations in Belfast (448)? If the peace process was truly successful, there should be no need to further separate the communities. Madeleine Leonard states that the popular representation of Belfast nowadays as a post-conflict city conceals the true state of it (2). Most of Belfast's working-class neighbourhoods are still divided by massive constructions known as Peace Walls or Peace Lines. These walls have become an integral part of any tourist tour of Belfast, but while tourists view the walls as an attraction, Neil Jarman (2023) argues that it is the walls that are responsible for establishing the differences between the Protestant and Catholic communities, for strengthening two different identities and portraying a deep antagonism between these communities.

Jarman (2008) states that “there has long been some uncertainty about the exact number of interface barriers across Belfast” (22). This is probably due to the unusual shape of the walls—they are not one continuous wall that divided the city e.g., like the one in Berlin, but rather individual structures that divide certain parts of the city. The walls that separate the Catholic from the Protestant communities are up to 12 meters high and consist of several levels—the first is cement on which metal structures are placed and are necessarily reinforced with barbed wire to prevent climbing on the walls and crossing from one side to the other. However, despite their size and the amount of time they have been standing, Leonard notes that the walls are not recorded on any maps (2). When it comes to the violence around the walls, Peter Shirlow mentions that exactly one third of the total number of victims killed in the 30 years of the Troubles were killed within 250 meters of one of the walls, while about 70% of all deaths

during the Troubles occurred within 500 meters of the walls (78). Even in these times, rioting and violence occurs quite frequently in the interface areas which Leonard explains to depict the weaknesses of the peace process (2).

Although initially intended as a temporary protection for the citizens of Belfast, they are still standing and have been upgraded on several occasions in the recent past, and some sections of the barriers are still locked in the evening and unlocked in the morning. In 2013, plans were presented stating that the walls will be completely removed by 2023, but until this year only one wall has been demolished, and there is no talk of further demolition at all.

2. Historical Context

Divisions between these communities existed even before the 1960s. According to the National Archives of Ireland, Catholics mostly inhabited southern and western Belfast, while Protestants settled in the rest of the city, which would mean that Belfast was a divided city even before the Troubles. However, that was not uncommon for those times since people of similar beliefs tended to huddle up together. The barricades and walls that were built later, only confirmed those boundaries. After the Bombay Street fire in 1969, in which loyalists burnt down all the houses and evicted the residents, Byrne says the residents of that part of town took matters into their own hands and built their own barricades using burnt-out buses, cars, furniture and debris from destroyed houses. This reminded the Stormont government that they had no control over these parts of the city, and after the escalation of violence between Catholics and Protestants in the late 1960s, they decided to build walls of peace. The first wall was built by the British Army as a temporary preventive measure in West Belfast in September 1969 following riots between two communities in that part of the city. Then the number of incidents decreased sharply, which gave the communities a sense of security and convinced them that these walls were the solution to their problems.

Byrne describes how the barriers initially consisted of barbed wire and fences placed between abandoned houses separating loyalist and nationalist neighbourhoods and that they were designed in such a way that they could be easily and quickly removed after the cessation of hostilities between the two communities. However, Byrne adds that as ethnic and religious divisions grew more entrenched over time, the peace walls became permanent structures—built with

durable materials like brick, concrete, iron fencing, and wire mesh—and were designed to seamlessly blend into the surrounding landscape. James March claims that even more walls have been built since the Good Friday Agreement, despite relatively peaceful conditions.

3. Symbolism and Impact on Society

These walls have become powerful symbols of Belfast's divided identity, and they also reinforce the social, cultural and economic separation between communities, perpetuating a cycle of mistrust and hostility. The most obvious symbolism of peace walls is the physical separation they represent. They are a powerful reminder of the deep-seated divisions between the Catholic/nationalist/republican and Protestant/unionist/loyalist communities in Belfast. The walls symbolize the historical and religious tensions that have affected Northern Ireland for decades and represent the ongoing fear and mistrust that exists between communities as they reflect the belief that residents on both sides still feel threatened or unsafe without them. Leonard mentions that in order to establish peace, previously divided spaces should be rebuilt and reimagined but in Belfast, "interface areas walls, flags and political murals continue to reproduce and transform space and place into territory as each community signifies to the other its local ownership of place" (58). In some way, all these are constant reminders of the division and have a predominantly negative impact on the society in the vicinity.

Research from 2016 titled "Residential segregation, dividing walls and mental health: a population-based record linkage study" conducted by Anne Maguire et al., shows that peace walls affect the mental health of people who live near them. The research specifically stated that residents living in the area divided by the peace wall are more likely to take antidepressants (19%) and even more likely (39%) to take anti-anxiety medication (851). In addition to anxiety, the walls also teach those people who did not experience the Troubles that it is normal to have separate communities. Children grow up believing that behind the wall there are people who are completely different from them, and animosity develops without reason.

The existence of peace walls affects everyday life, including education, employment and social interactions. Education in Belfast is still largely segregated. Catholics go to one school, Protestants to another. Butterly states that only

8% of students attend integrated schools, and even those integrated schools are not really integrated because they should enrol at least 40% Catholics and 40% Protestants, while in reality they enrol slightly less than 20% Catholics or Protestants, which means that one group is still in the majority. Completion of secondary education is quite rare in communities surrounded by walls of peace. These are communities that are among the poorest in Belfast and this affects children's education. Adults in these communities are poorly educated, which affects their children's thinking that they do not need to have a higher education either. Owen Hargie et al. have discovered that young people are reluctant to decide to go outside their own community because of the fear of what lies "on the other side of the wall" (883). This has led to the bubble syndrome in which lack of education and unemployment is passed down from generation to generation and is considered the norm.

The fear of what is on the other side of the wall also affects the spatial movement of the inhabitants of these communities. Due to fear, they will adjust their trips and the places where they perform their daily tasks such as shops, banks, and post offices in order to avoid parts of the city that belong to the other community (Shirlow and Murtagh 19). People have clear mental maps of where they belong within these spaces, often influenced not only by peace walls but also invisible markers of division such as language, gestures, or community-specific activities. The walls prevent contact between the two communities because the city lacks common spaces that would be safe for everyone, so residents feel safer in their closed communities and don't try to get in touch with the other side (Shirlow and Murtagh 22). Luciana Lang and Ian Mell state that public parks which are located near or around peace walls are not just recreational spaces but are charged with political and cultural meanings, impacting how different communities interact within them (510).

Another way of securing peace between communities on each side of the walls was by closing the streets they share during the night. Even now, there are gates on some parts of the walls. Some of them have not been open since they were installed, while others which are still open every day, are used by both communities for their everyday activities and then are closed every day at 7 p.m., as some residents have pointed out (Anderson and Conlon 38).

In the last few years, as a way to bring the two communities closer to each other, many initiatives have been launched, one of which is wall painting. In

2008, educators and activists decided to encourage children from both communities to create a joint mural modelled after the mural created by children in Hiroshima on the 50th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb (Anderson and Conlon 36). Unfortunately, only two years after the creation of that mural, riots broke out again right near it. However, Terry Anderson and Brian Conlon are persistent in their intention to try to create better living conditions through the cooperation of the two communities (41).

4. Opinions of Communities

The opinions of the communities living directly next to the peace walls are crucial to understanding the impact of the walls. For many years, various interviews and surveys have been conducted on whether the walls should be torn down, and analyses of these surveys reveal a complex range of emotions, from those who see the walls as necessary for security reasons to those who see them as obstacles to progress.

In 2012, the University of Ulster conducted a survey with residents of cities where peace walls still exist about the reasons for building these walls, their effects on the communities they divide, and their potential demolition. According to that survey, 87% of respondents, regardless of which community they belonged to, believed that the walls had been built to make the residents of the area feel safer, while 82% of residents thought that the walls helped reduce tensions between the two communities (Byrne et al. 11). When looking at communities separately, Protestants believed more that walls allowed them to celebrate their culture more freely (around 60%), to protect their identity more easily (around 42%) and that without walls their community would disappear (around 42%) (Byrne et al. 14). Despite these considerations, the majority of respondents (82%) believed that the walls were ugly and gave the wrong image of Northern Ireland (Byrne et al.13).

The survey results also revealed that the majority of respondents wanted the walls removed. However, there was a visible difference between Protestants and Catholics—Catholics were the ones who were more vocal about tearing down the walls (43%), while Protestants were not convinced that it was a good idea (26%) (Byrne et al. 19). On the other hand, a big problem was the opinion of the majority of respondents (78%) who claimed that community segregation existed even in areas where there were no walls (Byrne et al. 27). From the survey

results it can be concluded that members of one group would never go to the territory of another, regardless of whether there were barriers or not, and that the divisions moved from the interface areas further into the communities.

A large number of residents predicted that, if the walls came down, there would not be constant incidents between the two communities, but that there would be significant incidents only during certain celebrations, marches and anniversaries, such as the processions for the celebration of July 12 or the celebration of St. Patrick (Byrne et al. 21).

However, it is an interesting fact that the population that wanted the walls to come down did not want it to happen at the time of the survey, but at a certain time in the future (Byrne et al. 20). Thus, emphasis was placed on the younger population and the need was expressed for the education of young people and their integration.

It is clear that the cause of mistrust among adult community members is the fact that they most likely grew up in a hostile environment, but young people born after 1998 only know about the Troubles from the stories of their elders and some isolated incidents. Consequently, Leonard and McKnight conducted a separate survey of 14- and 15-year-olds' thoughts on peace walls in Belfast (573). Research showed that young people were more optimistic than adults and most said that the walls would be able to come down. At the same time, they were cautious in this optimism, and 35% of respondents said that the walls would be demolished in a period of 2 to 5 years, and 22% that they would be demolished within 10 years (Leonard and McKnight 576). On both sides, young people agreed that the process of demolishing walls could not be rushed, and that people should be prepared for their demolition (Leonard and McKnight 577). Some young people even mentioned that it would take generations to overcome the territorial division of Belfast, because the influence and stories of older generations influenced the thinking of young people too much, and they mentioned that most of these boundaries were actually not physical but psychological (Leonard and McKnight 579).

Both surveys show that there is still a lot of work ahead for the residents of Belfast on both sides, especially in the areas near the walls. While a part of the population is optimistic and thinks that the walls will be able to come down, there is still a larger number of people who are more cautious about expressing optimism. Among them there is a considerable number of young people, which

is worrisome considering that they are not directly connected to the Troubles but are influenced by older generations. This only shows that in the process of reconciling the two communities, work on the integration of young people will be extremely important.

5. Removal of Walls

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive published a strategy called “Together: Building a United Community,” one of the most important goals of which was to break down the Peace Walls by 2023. At the time, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland and his deputy emphasized the role of communities living near the walls and announced that they would try to find alternative ways to reassure communities that they would be safe without the barriers (O’Neill). Even the mayor of New York at the time, Michael Bloomberg, while visiting Northern Ireland, stressed the importance of breaking down physical barriers, as this would increase the amount of foreign investment in the city (Macauley 4).

In order for the removal of barriers to be successful, Macauley (4) believes that the following conditions must be met:

- a longer period of political stability
- a longer period of significant reduction in incidents, especially during the summer period¹
- contact, dialogue and discussions between community leaders on both sides of the walls
- reaching a ‘tipping point’, i.e., when key stakeholders see more benefits of removing the walls than the benefits if they remain standing
- continuous social, educational and economic development of communities and regeneration of the area around the walls
- effective strategies for working with young people
- supporting the process and involving residents of communities around the walls in the process (including children and young people) and involving elected representatives, state bodies and civil society

¹ The summer period is specified due to the celebration of 12th July in Protestant communities, which often became violent.

- a high level of trust between the residents of both communities so that the result of the process is a permanent improvement of safety, protection and quality of life
- adequate resources to support the implementation of the process.

Unfortunately, the survey mentioned in the previous section indicated that most of these conditions had not yet been met and were not even close to being met. Political stability was still a long way off because of the following reasons: the Northern Ireland Parliament was without a Prime Minister from February 2022 to February 2024, troubling incidents were still occurring frequently, with the most recent ones being ignited by Brexit and COVID-19, education was still quite segregated, and levels of trust between communities was extremely low as fears continued to run deep.

Nevertheless, Macauley optimistically presented 5 stages of demolition in his proposal for the process of demolishing the walls (5). These phases are as follows: mapping, consultation, development of community plans, implementation and support, and normalization. The mapping would include a detailed mapping of all barriers in Northern Ireland, including their type, location, history, recent incidents, etc. (Macauley 5). During the consultation phase, residents of communities near the walls would be interviewed to establish their views and opinions about the walls and how they could be removed (Macauley 5). The third phase would include the development of a five-year plan to improve living conditions in these areas (Macauley 6). After the implementation of the third phase, the demolition of walls would begin, with further work on dialogue and discussions between communities, with a special emphasis on the younger population, which is intended to lead to normalization and a society where barriers between communities with different beliefs do not exist nor are they needed (Macauley 6).

Plans to demolish Belfast's Peace Wall represent a significant step towards reconciliation and a more harmonious future for the city. The plans have been built on extensive community consultation, prioritizing the voices and concerns of those who have lived in the shadow of the walls for decades. The process is approached with caution, recognizing the potential security and safety challenges that need to be addressed. Gradual transformation and the creation of shared spaces, fostering an environment where trust can gradually grow over time are at the core of these plans. International support and expertise are being used

to ensure that this endeavour is carried out thoughtfully and with sensitivity to the historical and political complexities of the region. Building a shared future requires comprehensive efforts beyond the physical removal of walls. Educational reforms, economic opportunities and community initiatives are integral parts of a holistic approach to reconciliation. Ultimately, the plans to tear down the Peace Walls symbolize a commitment to healing the wounds of the past and building a more integrated, peaceful and prosperous future for all Belfast residents, but they will take a lot of work to become a reality.

6. Youth as Catalysts for Change

As previously mentioned, the emphasis on progress was put on the younger generations which were not directly affected by the Troubles. Even so, there will still be a lot of work to be done since the division is so ingrained in both communities. In a study conducted by Leonard on the views of teenagers about the peace walls, a lot of young people were apprehensive with the idea of demolishing the walls and they were afraid that violence may return to their neighbourhoods (68). The adolescents acknowledged that growing up in Belfast was peculiar and that Belfast was different in comparison to other cities, frequently divided the space in ours and theirs and lastly, saw the need for a wall in order to feel safe and protected (Leonard 68). Some of them also mentioned that there was a reason why the walls were called peace walls and if they were torn down, violence would emerge once again (Leonard 85). The same study asked the young people to explain what should happen in order for the peace walls to be demolished. The responses ranged from violence being stopped and proper peace being established to promoting mutual respect and understanding (Leonard 90). Additionally, sentences such as “adults have to stop living in the past and take the lead in moving forward” (Leonard 89) have also been mentioned. When asked for suggestions on how to bring people from different communities together, the children also had various answers such as “holding pop concerts, having cross-community festivals, having a Belfast day and having Catholic and Protestant swaps just like wife-swap on TV” (Leonard 90).

Various initiatives have been established to empower young people to bridge the sectarian divides and foster a more inclusive society. One of these is the Belfast Interface Project's Youth Intervention Project whose aim is “to deliver a city-wide and strategically focused youth intervention programme with geographically based interface clusters across Belfast” (Belfast Interface Project).

The project seeks to “develop cross-community and cross-sectoral partnerships in specific interface cluster areas, reduce youth-led interface violence, and address youth alienation and disaffection in interface areas” (Belfast Interface Project).

Similarly, the Peace IV program by Belfast City Council has implemented “youth-led grassroots and rights-based campaigns [that] ran across Belfast to create positive social change” (Peace IV Programme). It was reported that more than 40 individuals took part in the project, preparing them to become future leaders and advocates for peace by addressing and promoting issues that cross political boundaries (Peace IV Programme). Niall McCracken reports that the participants of the Peace IV Programme from both sides of the Belfast peace walls have also come together to campaign for the gate on the Peace Walls to remain open later. The gate, which separates the Shankill and Falls communities, currently closes in the early evening, restricting movement and reinforcing division. The youth, many of whom participate in cross-community programs, have built friendships across the divide and see the early closure as an unnecessary barrier. By working together, they have engaged with local politicians, authorities, and the public to advocate for a change in policy. Their efforts emphasise the role young people play in fostering unity and challenging the lasting impact of physical segregation.

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) has also been instrumental in giving young people a voice in the peace process. Established in 1979, the NIYF provides a platform for young people aged 11 to 25 to express their views on social, political, and cultural issues. Through surveys and discussions, the NIYF has gathered insights from young people across different communities, ensuring a diversity of views is represented. This engagement helps to better understand young people’s perspectives on legacy issues, identity, and the future, promoting their voice in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC, which assures children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Northern Ireland Youth Forum).

These initiatives not only provide young people with opportunities to engage in dialogue and mutual understanding but also empower them to take active roles in transforming their communities. By participating in such programs, the youth can challenge the narratives that have long sustained division and work towards a more cohesive society. The younger generations in Northern

Ireland have played and will keep playing a crucial role in the peace process by participating in initiatives that promote cross-community engagement, reduce sectarian tensions, and advocate for social change. Their involvement will be instrumental in fostering a more inclusive society and challenging the lasting impact of the Troubles. As future leaders, their continued engagement and commitment to peace will be vital in ensuring a lasting and sustainable peace in Northern Ireland.

7. Conclusion

The Peace Walls in Belfast stand as a testament to the lasting legacy of the conflict, but also as a reminder of the potential for transformation. Despite the fact that peace walls continued to be built even after the Good Friday Agreement, there are efforts to calm the situation between the two opposing sides, Catholic/nationalist/republican versus Protestant/unionist/loyalist, and to start a new path towards a united Belfast. Of course, given the duration and intensity of the conflict, it is clear that it will probably take just as long to stabilize and normalize the situation. This requires great effort, careful planning, cooperation between communities and the support of other countries that have found themselves in similar situations because they have cities like Berlin, Beirut, Jerusalem and Nicosia that were or still are separated by walls. While the road to reconciliation is filled with challenges, the collective will of communities, along with visionary leadership, can pave the way for a future where walls are just relics of a divided past.

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JENSEITS DER BELFAST PEACE WALLS: UNTERSUCHUNG DER AUSWIRKUNGEN IHRES ABRISSSES AUF DIE GESELLSCHAFT

Zusammenfassung

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Die Stadt Belfast, die historisch von konfessionellen Konflikten geprägt ist, beherbergt ein einzigartiges urbanes Merkmal – die Peace Walls. Diese hohen Barrieren, die ursprünglich als vorübergehende Schutzmaßnahmen errichtet wurden, haben sich zu tief verwurzelten Symbolen der historischen und religiösen Spaltung der Stadt entwickelt. Errichtet während des *Troubles* trennen diese Mauern physisch katholisch/nationalistisch/republikanische Gemeinschaften von protestantisch/unionistisch/loyalistischen Gemeinschaften. Heute sind sie ein fester Bestandteil jeder Stadtrundfahrt durch Belfast. Während Touristen die Mauern als Sehenswürdigkeiten betrachten, sind andere der Ansicht, dass sie die Unterschiede zwischen den protestantischen und katholischen Gemeinschaften verfestigen, zwei unterschiedliche Identitäten stärken und die tief verwurzelte Gegnerschaft zwischen diesen Gemeinschaften verdeutlichen. Das Jahr 2023 sollte ein Wendepunkt sein, da in diesem Jahr alle Peace Walls abgerissen und die angrenzenden Gemeinschaften vereint werden sollten. Jedoch stehen die meisten Mauern noch immer, und die Einwohner Belfasts scheinen zögerlich, sich von ihnen zu trennen – aus Sicherheitsbedenken, aus Angst vor neuen Konflikten zwischen den Gemeinschaften und wegen eines wahrgenommenen Mangels an Schutz. Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, eine ausführliche Analyse der Peace Walls und ihrer Rolle in der Gestaltung der Belfaster Gesellschaft zu liefern. Der Beitrag untersucht ihre Entstehung, die Folgen ihrer Existenz, die Perspektiven der Gemeinschaften sowie verschiedene Initiativen zur Förderung von Frieden und Einheit. Aktuelle Bemühungen, die Mauern abzubauen, um eine Krise nach ihrem Abriss zu vermeiden und dauerhaften Frieden zu finden, werden ebenfalls berücksichtigt.

Schlüsselwörter: Belfast, Peace Walls, Segregation, Krisenprävention, Identität

S ONE STRANE BELFASTSKIH ZIDOVA MIRA: ISPITIVANJE POSLJEDICA NJIHOVA RUŠENJA NA DRUŠTVO

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Grad Belfast, povijesno obilježen sektaškim sukobima, dom je jedinstvene urbane značajke: zidova mira. Ove visoke barijere, prvotno podignute kao privremene zaštitne mjere, evoluirale su u duboko ukorijenjene simbole povijesnih i religijskih podjela u gradu. Podignuti tijekom *Nevolja*, ovi zidovi fizički razdvajaju katoličke/nacionalističke/republikanske zajednice od protestantskih/unionističkih/lojalističkih zajednica. Zidovi su postali neizostavan dio svake turističke ture u Belfastu. Dok turisti zidove doživljavaju kao atrakcije, neki ih smatraju odgovornima za učvršćivanje razlika između protestantske i katoličke zajednice, jačanje dvaju različitih identiteta i prikazivanje dubokog antagonizma između tih zajednica. Godina 2023. trebala je biti ključna jer je bila predviđena kao godina u kojoj bi svi zidovi mira trebali biti srušeni, a zajednice oko njih ujedinjene. Međutim, većina zidova još uvijek stoji, a građani Belfasta čini se nevoljni odustati od njih zbog osjećaja nesigurnosti, straha od novih sukoba između dviju zajednica i nedostatka zaštite. Cilj je ovoga rada pružiti detaljnu analizu zidova mira i njihove uloge u oblikovanju društva Belfasta. Rad će istražiti njihovo porijeklo, posljedice njihova postojanja, perspektive zajednice i razne inicijative usmjerene na poticanje mira i jedinstva. Također će se spomenuti trenutačni naponi na uklanjanju zidova kako bi se izbjegla kriza nakon njihova rušenja i postigao trajan mir.

Ključne riječi: zidovi mira, segregacija, prevencija krize, identitet