

# The prospects for dark (troubles) tourism in Belfast, NI

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - *The purpose of this article is to investigate the prospects of Belfast as a Tourism City with a special focus on dark (Troubles) tourism.*

**Design/methodology/approach** - *We use two surveys - one for overseas-based potential tourists and one for Northern Ireland residents; one focus group with potential tourists; and three interviews, one with a Belfast MP and two with tour-guide operators, one from each side of the Northern Ireland divide. This paper is less theoretical than exploratory*

**Findings** - *Generally, there is strong and widespread support for the concept of Troubles tourism. Stakeholders must ensure that Troubles tourism is intelligently and sensitively handled and builds up communities.*

**Originality** - *This is a relatively new and under-researched area. Belfast has been rarely looked at in urban-tourism studies. Findings have applicability for other post-conflict and divided countries, such as the countries of the former Yugoslavia..*

**Keywords** *Belfast, Dark tourism, Northern Ireland; Troubles tourism*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

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## Author Biographical Statement

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## **1. Introduction and historical background**

### **1.1 General introduction**

The Northern Ireland issue has interested and confused the world for decades, as many outside observers cannot quite comprehend why tension and animosity have been so strong between two groups of people which are both white and both Christian. In 1977, the black Euro-Caribbean vocal group, Boney M, released a song called "Belfast", which, whilst compassionate, remarked that Northern Ireland must explain to the world why it is divided by hate. These facts suggest an ongoing interest in the Troubles, and this extends beyond those with family or ancestral ties to the country. This could potentially mean that the Troubles may be able to serve as a site for dark tourism, a type of tourism which is popular but not quite "mainstream" - it is designed more for single adults and families without children than for the traditional family market (Hartmann, 2014, p. 169). It does *not* require a voyeuristic or bloodthirsty attitude from participants - it can result in learning and healing (Ashworth and Isaac, 2015, p. 322; Lemelin *et al.*, 2013, p. 260; Light, 2017, p. 290; Poria *et al.*, 2006), and a better study of time, place, intentions, ambitions, politics, and human relationships. For example, tourism involving the Jack the Ripper murder sites in East London might provide participants a window into an important time and place (East London, 1888, at the height of Empire) and foster an attitude of compassion for the victims (Ashworth and Isaac, 2015, p. 322; Stone, 2006, p. 152). It might encourage participants to follow up on their initial interests and even go on to undertake formal studies in history, criminology and/or sociology. Indeed future academic researchers might well be spawned from such humble beginnings.

There is a dialectical relationship between tourism and study. Several Amazon reviewers of serious history books on the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia

commented that they bought the books before travelling as tourists to Dubrovnik. They wanted a more in-depth contextual understanding of the history of the place than could be found in sanitized guidebooks and were willing to engage with the darker themes presented. It would be unwise to pass moral judgements on these tourists - in fact, empathy works best when based on complete knowledge.

The primary aim of this article is to investigate the prospects for Troubles tourism in Belfast through a study of the attitudes of both potential tourists and residents towards the phenomenon. A secondary aim is to provide a sociohistorical overview of the Troubles. This aim is largely fulfilled in this Introduction section. We view Troubles tourism, in the Northern Ireland context, as a part of dark tourism, as defined in Lennon and Foley's classic *Dark Tourism* text (Lennon and Foley, 2000), and further explained by Stone (2006) and others. A highlight of our article is that we follow Duncan Light's (2017, p. 296) suggestion to seek out the views of dark tourism providers, those represented, host-communities, and potential tourists. In fact, two of our three interviewees fit into all of the first three categories - they are tour-guides now and were former active participants in the Troubles. Lastly, again following Light (2017, p. 290), we report in our Results section about the demographics of non-visitors and suggest why some are not attracted to Troubles sites. We conclude this present section with a summary of recent Northern Ireland history, commencing in 1971 and ending with the Good Friday Agreement, which brokered peace. This summary responds to Light's (2017, p. 295) suggestion to pay "[b]roader attention to the political and ideological context of places of death and suffering".

## **1.2 Research questions**

In order to achieve the study's aims, we attempted to answer the following two research questions: (1) What are potential visitors' views towards Northern Ireland as a potential tourist destination, including Troubles tourism? And, crucially: (2) is it time for Northern Ireland to accept its past and embrace Troubles tourism?

## **1.3 A dark past – Operation Demetrius and Bloody Sunday**

As a response to the growing paramilitary threat in the province, the British and Northern Irish authorities enacted internment-without-trial in August 1971. The authorities interned 352 men in the first sweep of Operation Demetrius on 9th August. However, most people view Operation Demetrius now, as they did then, as a resounding failure. The poor intelligence surrounding the operation led to many innocent Nationalists being arrested. According to McGuffin (1973, n.p.), the Provisional Irish Republic Army (IRA) had “known of it for some time and as a result virtually every senior IRA man was billeted away from home”. Internment had backfired - instead of quashing the paramilitary threat it caused an increased support for both IRA branches (Official and Provisional). Furthermore, violence increased, “[i]n the two years leading up to internment 66 people were murdered, while in the first 17 months after internment 610 were murdered” (Dixon and O’Kane, 2011, p. 30, cited in McCleery, 2012, p. 416). On Sunday, 30 January 1972, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) organized a peaceful anti-internment march in Derry. Between ten to fifteen thousand men, women and children attended that peaceful anti-internment march on that blue-skied Sunday. Witness, Fr. Andrew Dolan, even described the atmosphere as “carnival” (Reed, 2005, p. 11). Then the

British army opened fire on the crowd. Thirteen civilians were shot and injured, a further thirteen were shot and killed on the spot, and another died in hospital because of his injuries. Bloody Sunday represented the culmination of a process of radicalization of the minority (McLoughlin, 2006). This then led to a move by Nationalists away from the peaceful NICRA towards the much less peaceful IRA. Thus, many described Bloody Sunday as a “pleasing trauma” for the Provisional IRA’s cause (Baumann, 2009, p. 179). After Bloody Sunday, Westminster took control of Northern Ireland, hoping to increase stability in the North. However, 1972 still went down as the bloodiest year of the Troubles.

#### ***1.4 A dark past – The hunger strikes***

During the height of the Troubles, Westminster imprisoned paramilitary prisoners affiliated with the Provisional IRA in Long Kesh; they viewed themselves not as prisoners, but as freedom fighters for the Republican cause. Their goal was full political union with the South. In 1976, Westminster had abolished the special category status for anyone found guilty of terrorist crimes. By September of that year, many prisoners had started a “blanket protest” - the refusal to wear the prison uniform. The blanket protest evolved into the “slop out” protest, where prisoners tipped the contents of their chamber pots into the prison hallway, and eventually the “dirty protest”, when prisoners smeared their own excrement over the walls of their prison cells. At the core of these protests was the desire for Westminster to reinstate special category status. Despite these protests, the status of the prisoners was not changed. In addition, by the dawn of the 1980s, a hunger strike had started within the prison. After 57 days, strikers called off the strike due to the false belief that Westminster and its adversaries had reached an agreement. Bobby Sands led the new hunger strike, which commenced on 1 March 1981. The constituency of Fermanagh South Tyrone then elected Sands to the Westminster Parliament. Sands died on 5 May 1981, 66 days into his hunger strike (Scull, 2016). Westminster granted no concessions until the strike-leaders called off the strike in October 1981.

Because of the hunger strikes, the Provisional IRA witnessed another incident of “pleasing trauma” and support for the Provisional IRA surged. Furthermore, the political wing of the Provisional IRA, Sinn Fein, could see the success of Bobby Sands’ electoral victory and so they adopted the Armalite-and-ballot-box strategy - the idea of standing in elections while persisting in the use of violence in order to achieve its aims. Importantly, Sinn Fein proved, with the election of Bobby Sands,

that it had a mandate. This fact sent shockwaves through the establishments of both London and Dublin.

### ***1.5 New beginning? The peace process***

Against the backdrop of Sinn Fein's armalite-and-ballot-box strategy, the governments in London and Dublin signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. In the simplest terms, the Treaty aimed to end the Troubles. Crucially, the Agreement recognized that "an Irish dimension and an agreed devolution are necessary to complete the reform of Northern Ireland" (O'Leary, 1987, p. 5). Unionists felt betrayed by the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher; they believed that the Agreement actually weakened Northern Ireland's union with Britain. According to McKittrick and McVea (2012, p. 8), "Unionists saw the agreement as a victory for constitutional nationalism, and constitutional nationalism agreed with them." Unionists were particularly bitter about the Republic of Ireland (hereafter "the Republic") having a role in the governance of the North and were fearful that this was a step towards a united Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) organized a campaign focused on dismantling the Treaty. Unionists generated further support by encouraging Unionist MPs to resign from Westminster, creating civil disobedience and organizing mass rallies. The outcome of the Treaty was not the end of the Troubles, nor did it reduce the incidents of political violence in the province. Furthermore, Unionists abandoned their efforts to destroy the campaign, as they began to open talks with Westminster ministers less than two years after the agreement, in September 1987. Nonetheless, the actions of both Dublin and London in 1985 were arguably the first steps towards the peace

process. Both governments recognized that only they, acting collectively, could and would solve the Northern Ireland problem.

The Downing Street Declaration 1993 argued for the right of people in Ireland to self-determination, and that a United Ireland would only come about if there were a majority in Northern Ireland who were in favour of such a move. The Declaration signalled London and Dublin's move towards a policy of inclusion - enticing the IRA away from violence by bringing members of Sinn Fein to the political table, with the hopes that it would have a domino effect on Loyalist paramilitary groups. Unlike the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, both the British Prime Minister John Major and the Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds now focused on not isolating the Unionist community. Politicians in both countries recognized that, if Northern Ireland was to achieve peace, both Protestant and Roman Catholic communities needed to be on board and feel valued. Because of the Declaration, the Provisional IRA announced a ceasefire on 31 August 1994. The armed struggle of the IRA, which had been in place since the early-1970s, was over, on the condition that Sinn Fein would be included in political talks. The world welcomed the ceasefire. On 13 October 1994, Loyalist paramilitaries, such as UDA (Ulster Defense Association) and UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), announced their ceasefire. The road to peace was underway, and, in the following year, both governments published a framework for the peace process.

The renewal of the Provisional IRA's ceasefire in July 1997 allowed Sinn Fein to enter into political talks that September. After multi-party talks and numerous walkouts, the relevant powerbrokers concluded the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. The Agreement established a framework and created three strands dedicated to formally building a trilateral relationship between the communities within Northern Ireland, the relations with Northern Ireland and the Republic, and Northern



Ireland and Great Britain. Strand 1 laid out the details of devolution, a new 108-member power-sharing assembly, and the use of proportional representation. This was seen as being “light-years” away from the old Stormont regime, due to the fact that parallel consent was essential for all key decisions. This ensured that no one community could dominate the other. Strand 2 dealt with North-South institutions, formally structuring Northern Ireland’s relations with the South. Strand 3 encouraged the positive accord in the East-West institutions, Westminster and Northern Ireland. Alongside the formation of these institutions, the Agreement also secured the release of all political prisoners jailed during the Troubles. The deal’s powerbrokers asked paramilitary groups on both sides to decommission their weapons; this was in order to allow peace to thrive in the province. Furthermore, the Republic agreed to alter the 1937 Irish Constitution, whereby it would modify its constitutional and territorial claims to Northern Ireland. The 1998 Agreement focused on the people of Northern Ireland’s right to self-determination - to identify themselves as either Irish or British or both. On 22 May 1998, powerbrokers organized simultaneous referendums on both sides of the border. In the South, 94% of votes supported the amendments to the Irish Constitution (19th Amendment). Crucially, the people of Northern Ireland also voted to endorse the Good Friday Agreement.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Destination image and perception**

Gould and Skinner (2007) conceive place branding as a method for promoting a positive image based on an agreed single national identity. They liken the nation-branding strategy of Northern Ireland to the metaphorical Janus whose nature symbolizes change and transition, a progression from past to future (Amujo, 2012, p. 90). Northern Ireland has had to adopt a complex, double-edged branding strategy, promoting the “Irishness” of the country to Ireland-friendly markets, on the one hand, whilst, on the other hand, promoting “Britishness” to British-friendly markets. To cite Amujo (2012, p. 91) about national rebranding:

It is challenging to rebrand a nation in post conflict or atrocity in the absence of an agreed single national identity, and so nation rebranding in post political conflict, genocide or atrocity should be constructively undertaken with high sense of responsibility to counteract or reformulate the myths, prejudices and stereotypes that result from negative discourse, narratives and ill-conceived judgments about the country.

Because of the Good Friday Agreement, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) became optimistic that more European tourists would want to visit Northern Ireland

### **2.2 Dark tourism**

Hartmann (2014, p. 166) explains that “[d]uring the years 1995-2000, three new concepts were introduced into tourism studies: dissonance in heritage (tourism), thanatourism, and dark tourism. It was, in particular, dark tourism that caught on quickly and found resonance among many researchers and the media”. A dark tourism website was set up in 2005, by researcher Philip Stone, which attracted significant media attention, whilst a dark tourism research centre was established at

the University of Central Lancashire in Preston in 2012 (Ashworth and Isaac, 2015, p. 318; Hartmann, 2014, pp. 168, 171, 174; Light, 2017, p. 276).

The development of dark tourism studies helped researchers interested in the concept overcome the fact that dark sites of suffering and horror were “once considered awkward destinations within the elitist framework of cultural tourism” (Hartmann, 2014, p. 170). The development was a breakthrough as, before this, tourism had been seen as “a light-hearted, even trivial, but essentially harmless activity” (Ashworth and Isaac, 2015, p. 316) and/or simply a vehicle for cross-cultural co-operation. Some sites, such as Glamis Castle in Scotland, attract both “dark” tourists, attracted by the haunting and murder stories, and “mainstream” tourists interested in high-culture. This supports Ashworth’s view (cited in Hartmann, 2014, p. 171) that there are “no dark sites, only dark tourists”, although this seems an extreme position too. There appears to be something incontrovertibly dark about abandoned mental hospitals (as tourist sites) or Auschwitz.

Early examples of dark tourism would include the patronage of Roman gladiator games and public executions from the medieval period up to the nineteenth century (Stone, 2006, p. 147). By contrast, Lennon and Foley (2000), the inventors of the phrase “dark tourism”, put a boundary on the concept so that it only refers to tourist activities which reflect postmodern anxieties and doubts about the modernist project (Hartmann, 2014, p. 168; Light, 2017, p. 278). Troubles tourism may be seen in this light, as it reflects back upon modernist categories which attracted fixed, binary loyalties. These loyalties may be seen as romantic/admirable, but toxic/divisive.

We will look at some early definitions of “dark tourism” first and then go on to supply and demand (motivation) issues. Stone (2006, p. 146) argues that “dark tourism may

be referred to as the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre". Tarlow (2005, p. 48) views dark tourism as "visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives". Therefore, a fan's pilgrimage to the grave of AC/DC vocalist Bon Scott in Fremantle, Australia would meet this criteria, especially as Scott died young for alcohol-related reasons. An alternative term "atrocious tourism" (Light, 2017, p. 279, citing Ashworth) would not work, for Scott's death, as no atrocity or murder was involved and he chose his heavy-drinking lifestyle.

Belfast is no stranger to death and atrocity, which it has suffered due to political unrest and tragedy. Hargie *et al.* (2011, p. 899) state that "[d]uring the 30 years of conflict more than 3,700 people died, over 30,000 suffered serious injury with the result that most people in Northern Ireland know someone who was killed or seriously injured in the troubles". It is primarily for this reason that Belfast and Northern Ireland fall into the category of dark tourism destinations.

Sharpley (2005) notes that it is unclear whether dark tourism is attraction-supply driven or consumer-demand driven, while Stone and Sharpley (2008, p. 576) argue that dark tourism demand motives have not yet been fully explored. Light (2017, p. 278) says, about the Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) book on heritage resources, that "they had little to say about why tourists might be interested in visiting such heritage". This was an early book, and was framed in terms of "dissonant heritage" rather than "dark tourism", but the point remains that dark tourism demand motives remains a crucial topic. In our Conclusion, we suggest several reasons why dark tourism may be attractive, with a special focus on Troubles tourism and Jack the Ripper tourism. Our first survey, of potential foreign tourists, specifically aims to gain

information on the extent of demand for Troubles tourism. The interviews and survey #2 look at contextual factors, including factors related to desirability of supply.

Theorists have speculated about the motivating factors behind the demand for dark tourism. These vary from “a simple morbid curiosity or a malicious indulgence in another person’s suffering” (Stone, 2006, p. 148); through *schadenfreude* (meaning: pleasure derived by someone from another person’s misfortune) (Seaton and Lennon, 2004); to a collective sense of identity or survival “in the face of violent disruptions of collective life routines” (Rojek, 1997, p. 61). We suggest several more in our Conclusion, based on the Belfast and Jack the Ripper cases.

Finally, some criticisms of the word “dark” in the tourism context. Biran and Poria (2012) argue that the word does not translate well into other European languages. However, the French black-metal music collective, *Les Légions Noires*, is revered throughout the world under its French name rather than the English version (see Wikipedia). Ashworth and Isaac (2015, p. 323) claim that the “notion of darkness” is not “embedded in thinking” outside the West. However, Yea (2003) writes about the Comfort Women Museum, just outside of Seoul, South Korea, which attracts both Japanese and Korean visitors, who visit for a different set of motives. She does not use the word “dark” but the concept certainly appears to be present.

### **2.3 Walking and taxi tours**

In and around London’s East End there are guided walking tours that take tourists to visit the nineteenth century murder-sites of five local working-class women Mary Ann “Polly” Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catharine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly. These murders, at the hands of the media creation known as Jack the Ripper (JTR), in the late summer and autumn of 1888, are, by far, the most popular

guided walking tours in the capital with estimates of up to 100,000 people consuming them per year. One must consider the question of why these tours are so popular. Walking is the prime tool for getting to know the mood of the city, its mythologies, for getting in touch with its ghosts, hidden histories, and for making new linkages between pasts and presents (Hansen and Wilbert, 2006, p. 3).

The JTR tours might be viewed as crass and insensitive, although the one I attended in the summer of 2010, with author John G. Bennett as guide, was informative, nuanced and respectful. Bennett situated the murders within the context of East End life during the era under consideration. He did not dwell on murder injuries or brutality, but on the social context behind the murders. However, there are regular calls to close these tours down. The historic Ten Bells pub on Commercial Street in Spitalfields was renamed “the Jack the Ripper” during the 1970s, but this was deemed inappropriate and exploitative. Sensibly the pub changed its name back to the Ten Bells, which was the name of the pub at the time of the murders. The White Hart Pub on Whitechapel High Street, where Martha “Maggie” Tabram and friend drank with two soldiers on a Bank Holiday Monday evening in August 1888, prior to her murder, still exists under the same name and has descriptions and pictures about the murders inside (Fido, 1993, pp. 16-19; Matters, 1948, pp. 20-22; Sugden, 2002, pp. 14, 25-26). Some might say that it is silly and laughable to be staring at walls and pavements where murders took place 130 years ago when those sites have changed beyond recognition. However, the overall area still has a fair proportion of historic buildings from the era (such as on the south side of Hanbury Street) and the mood of the era at night can perhaps still be recaptured. Of course not every series of murders attracts sufficient public interest to generate an associated tourism industry, e.g. the “Hammersmith nude murders” of 1964-65.

Belfast today offers immersive walking tours in the west of the city, taking in the murals at the start of the Catholic-Nationalist Falls Road, before walking through and learning about Nationalist history, often from former paramilitaries who themselves spent time in prison only to be released under the Good Friday Agreement. The guide then hands over to a Unionist tour-guide operating at the crossover gate between the two territories (Skinner, 2016), before heading down the predominantly Protestant-Unionist Shankill Road. Lemelin *et al.* (2013, p. 267) claim that the transformative view of fairness “asserts that it is acceptable for Indigenous peoples to tailor the touristic aspects of the site to challenge and disrupt (if need be) colonial narratives”. By being exclusively in charge of telling the story, about their area, from their perspective, each community can challenge and resist versions presented by the “other side”, the media, and business and political elites. Tourists have access to both sides’ perspectives and hence can form their own conclusions.

Taxi tours delivered by “Black Hacks” are the most popular form of political tour in Belfast. Similar to the route taken by the walking tours, these taxi tours tell a similar story. There is an argument, however, that, unlike the walking tours, these tour operators, although from Belfast, are often from outside the local community and provide only sanitized versions of the past conflict. The suggestion is that these outside tour operators exploit local communities that receive little or no economic benefit from the tours (Causevic and Lynch, 2011).

## ***2.4 Tourism strategy in Northern Ireland***

### ***2.4.1 Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) approach***

Northern Ireland’s tourism promoters have used three approaches as follows: (1) ignore the Troubles entirely; (2) highlight that Northern Ireland is not as bad as

people think; and (3) acknowledge the curiosity factor, or that some tourists are attracted to Northern Ireland because of the conflict (Rolston, 1995, p. 37). The NITB has historically adopted the first approach. More recently, it does appear that the NITB may be warming to Troubles tourism. Jan Nugent of the NITB states that she was not keen when the black cabs started because she thought that people might perceive them as Terror tourism. By contrast, she now sees these tours as edgy things for tourists to do, and it has given communities a real motivation to spruce up their murals and local communities (NI Bauru, 2007, p. 8).

#### *2.4.2 Stormont approach*

In 2008, two members of Sinn Fein, Paul Maskey and Willie Clarke, stated in the House: “That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to bring forward plans to develop tourist infrastructure, particularly in areas of social need and to recognise the significant potential of political tourism” (Hansard, 2008). Maskey and Clarke were looking to promote political tourism predominantly in Maskey’s own area of West Belfast, which is overwhelmingly Irish Nationalist. (His area also covers the Loyalist Shankill Road.) This statement encountered fierce opposition in the Assembly from members of Unionist parties.

People should resist the concept of Troubles tourism in Northern Ireland, maintained UUP MLA Leslie Cree (Hansard, 2008). Cree continued by stating that Northern Ireland was not ready for political tourism as the country was too close to the subject-matter (Skinner, 2016). He closed by saying, “It can be regarded as inappropriate to make a pilgrimage to places individuals lost their lives, especially if the visits are made in order to glorify the murders” (Hansard, 2008). A statement



followed from the late David McClarty, a UUP politician who later became an Independent Unionist:

The practice either brings rejuvenation to and regeneration to deprived and under supported parts of Northern Ireland, predominantly Belfast, or, to paraphrase, it is an unsafe and uncomfortable experience for visitors, freezes local communities in the past, glorifies acts of terrorism, disrespects victims and their families and paints Northern Ireland in a negative light (Hansard, 2008).

After debate, in order for the motion to be carried by all parties, the final sentence was amended from “particularly in areas of social need and to recognise the significant potential of political tourism” to the somewhat different “recognise the benefits to local economy of tourism; and seeks to promote Northern Ireland in a positive manner”.

### **3. Research method**

#### **3.1 Research design**

##### *3.1.1 Survey #1 – Potential tourists (non-Northern Ireland residents)*

We created our first survey using the Qualtrics online research tool. We created this survey with the intention of respondents being from outside Northern Ireland in order to gain an insight into the perceptions of potential tourists. We distributed this survey in a number of ways. Firstly, the researchers sent it to colleagues and associates overseas and they then forwarded it to potential tourists.

Secondly, and similar to survey #2, we distributed the survey online. This was again on Reddit through the subfeeds *r/solotravel*, *r/travel* and *r/samplesize*. This survey returned 176 responses.

##### *3.1.2 Survey #2 - Northern Ireland residents*

This survey was also created using Qualtrics. We distributed this second survey in a variety of ways. Firstly, we sent an electronic link to participants who were known to the researchers and they further distributed the link, at the request of the researchers, to colleagues, acquaintances, etc. We also distributed the electronic link online on Reddit, on a closed group called *r/northernireland* in which residents were able to respond. The GPS data from this also identified the location where the subject was responding from to ensure the integrity of the findings.

The second method was to use a QR code; the researchers asked participants to hold their mobile phone camera over the QR code, which then brought up the survey on their mobile phones in order for them to participate.

Finally, in order not to exclude any particular demographic (e.g. those less computer-literate), a paper survey was handed to participants, which was then handed back to the researchers before the results were input manually into Qualtrics .

The second and third methods required one of the researchers to travel to Northern Ireland and conduct sampling in person - this researcher approached respondents and asked them to take part in the study. The survey was successful and returned a healthy sample size of 329. Ten sets of responses were rejected as respondents stated that they were not from Northern Ireland; they were however able to participate in Survey #1. According to Nduna and van Zyl (2020, p. 958), a sample size of 300 is good whilst 500 is very good. By contrast, a sample size of 100 is poor and 200 is fair. Therefore, our survey #1 sample of 176 responses is poor-to-fair, whereas our survey #2 sample of 329 is good-to-very good.

The survey #2 first asked four questions to gain background information: age, gender, county-of-residence, and community affiliation. Affiliation was important to distinguish later whether there was a difference in results between Nationalist and Unionist individuals.

### *3.1.3 Semi-structured interviews*

Following the advice of Dunn and Phillips (2000, p. 259) that qualitative research is preferable for studies in dark tourism, we conducted three semi-structured interviews in person in Northern Ireland in 2018-19. The first interviewee was Sinn Fein MP Paul Maskey who was then an abstentionist Member of Parliament for West Belfast. Mr Maskey has spoken many times about the issue of tourism in Northern Ireland, and has been vocal in the promotion of Troubles tourism. Our 45-minute interview took place at Sinn Fein's office in the Kennedy Centre just off the Falls Road.

The second interviewee was Mr Michael Culbert, a former IRA member, who was in prison during the Troubles. Mr Culbert is currently the Director of Coiste na n-iarchimí (Ex-Prisoners Committee), which is an organization designed to facilitate the reintegration of Irish Republican released prisoners of the Troubles, many of whom now work as tour-guides. Our 35-minute interview took place at Coiste na n-iarchimí's Falls Road office.

In order to gain a mix of perspectives, it was important to have interviewees from both sides of Northern Ireland's divide. The third interviewee was Mr David Name, founder of Sandy Row tours, and a member of the Sandy Row Flute Band. David now operates the tours in Sandy Row from a Unionist/Loyalist perspective. One of the researchers took a tour with David around Sandy Row before we embarked upon a 20-minute interview at the Sandy Row Orange Hall.

#### *3.1.4 Focus group*

One of the researchers held a focus group with various tourists who have travelled to Northern Ireland, with the inclusion of one Northern Ireland resident currently living in Glasgow, to gain an insight into their experiences. The focus group took place in Glasgow and lasted for 60-minutes. It was important that these tourists represented a mix of nationalities. This researcher knew all participants prior to the focus group and they were selected using the convenience sampling technique.

**Table 1 Focus group participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Age/gender</b>
Danielle Thordarson	Canadian	Female, 33
Catlin Semple	Canadian	Male, 34
Daniel Devine	Great Britain	Male, 28
E.R. McCrory	Irish Resident (Northern)	Female, 28
K. Harron	New Zealand	Female, 44

### **3.2 Access**

We negotiated access to interviewees via email and telephone-calls. We sent several emails to various people including Unionist MPs who all declined an interview. They cited various reasons for refusal including the workload the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) had with BREXIT and their opposition to our topic. We also contacted the NITB but they stipulated that an interview was not something that they were looking to pursue, as they did not have anyone who was a dark tourism specialist. The successful interviews were arranged quite easily. However, after an emailed reply, a formal request had to be sent to Coiste na n-iarchimí in order to be approved. After this was done they were happy to proceed.

### **3.3 Ethics**

We made an ethics application to our University Ethics Committee in mid-2018 before collecting any primary-data. This application detailed the chosen samples and provided details of interviewees. With regard to interviews, we stated that we would allow interviewees to decide on the meeting-times and places provided that they were safe for the researcher. The surveys had statements at the start stating that commencement and completion of a survey would count as consent.

At interview, the researcher gave each interviewee a participant information-sheet and a participant consent-form. The researcher also stated that he would record and password-protect all interviews. He later sent each interviewee a transcript of the interview to ensure that he approved. This researcher gave interviewees the opportunity to conduct the interview anonymously under a pseudonym. However, all participants chose to participate in their interviews using their real names. The same was true for all focus group participants.

## **4. Results and findings**

### **4.1 Survey #1 - Background questions**

This survey was designed to assess the opinions of potential foreign tourists about Troubles tourism in Northern Ireland. The researchers were unable to secure a perfect balance between male and female respondents with 113 (64.57%) of respondents being men and 62 (35.43%) being women. Age is weighted towards Under-35s with the two most common age-brackets being 18-24 (62 people, 35.23%) and 25-34 (59 people, 33.52%). There is the possibility that the results are influenced by the fact that the respondents are relatively young and mostly men. However, the results still indicate that, among this particular demographic, there is widespread support for at least the concept of Troubles tourism. Similar surveys, such as the ones by Poria *et al.* (2006) and Uzzell (1996), also attract a high percentage of younger people. For the sample in Poria *et al.* (2006), 125 people (44.3%) were aged 20-29. For the sample in Uzzell (1996), 35% of non-visitors to Guildford Museum, Surrey were aged 25-34, while 28% of visitors were over-55s.

Concerning place-of-residence, North America had the highest rate of response (75 people, 42.61%) followed by Europe (51 people, 28.98%); Great Britain (26 people, 14.77%); and the Republic of Ireland (15 people, 8.52%). The researchers found it difficult to access respondents from South America (1 person), Asia, (3) Africa (1), and Oceania (2). This set of demographics does, however, mirror historic migration patterns of Irish/British people, and so may represent Diaspora interest.

## 4.2 Findings – Survey #1 and focus group

**Table 2 Q1: Have you ever considered visiting Northern Ireland?**

	<b>Answer</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Count</b>
1	Yes	60.23%	106
2	Maybe	21.02%	37
3	No	18.75%	33
	Total	100%	176

The survey started by asking whether the respondent had ever considered visiting Northern Ireland. Over half of the 176 respondents responded positively with a Yes reply. As the focus group members had already visited Northern Ireland, it was important to understand their main motives for visiting. As K. Harron from New Zealand said: “The first time I went is when I came over to study from New Zealand and just fancied visiting Ireland, my grandparents were from Armagh so I was keen to visit there. With the other stuff, I didn’t bother with Game of Thrones but I did do a walking tour of the Falls Road”. The four respondents from overseas, except one, expressed an interest in Troubles tourism.



**Table 3 Q5: Would you be interested in touring the sights where the (Troubles) conflict took place?**

	<b>Answer</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Count</b>
1	Definitely yes	37.50%	66
2	Probably yes	30.11%	53
3	Might or might not	15.91%	28
4	Probably not	13.64%	24
5	Definitely not	2.84%	5
	Total	100%	176

In Question five (Q2-Q4 results not reported), we asked visitors whether they would be interested in touring the sites where the conflict took place. This question divided the respondents with four of the five options (other than Definitely Not) being popular. Those from Great Britain and Ireland responded very positively, with all Republic respondents stating that they would like to visit these sites. Mainland Europe also responded positively with 64.71% expressing that they would like to visit these sites; a smaller percentage of North Americans (58.66%) also held this view. The number of people responding “Might or Might Not” was slightly higher for Northern Americans and Europeans. However, most interesting is the numbers who showed no desire to visit - 22.66% of North Americans gave a negative answer compared to 13.72% of Europeans. The results from this are quite similar to the media-perception question (not reported here) and a similar argument can be presented, i.e. those further away, in North America, were less likely to have seen the Troubles in the media and hence are less likely to now be interested in Troubles tourism. Others might find the concept either distasteful and/or uninteresting.

We asked the focus group members their opinions on the murals and the conflict sights being included in a tour. The results were all positive, as follows:

I thought it was brilliant; the murals really conveyed the history of those involved in the conflict and some were really, really well painted. The tour guide I had was great too, really informative, and spoke about his personal experiences. I would recommend it to anyone visiting Belfast or Northern Ireland for that matter - Daniel (Great Britain).

I couldn't believe the size of the peace-wall, but the history side of the tour was great to learn about; parts were really sad too but I think it's important people don't forget their history. I felt it was really authentic too, there was no gift-shops, no selling, just total storytelling; it was just quite raw and hard-hitting - Danielle (Canada).

For me it's really quite personal. My parents lived in Belfast and studied [there] during the Troubles and they always spoke of how difficult it was. I'm quite glad we have this, as a Nationalist, I don't think I'd ever have went to these areas and heard the Unionist story, but it's important we learn from the past. The murals make me really proud of where I come from and where we are now - E.R. McCrory (NI Resident).

The unrestrained nature of the tours affected all the focus group members who had done one and they were all positive about their experiences. This would suggest that the tours really do have a positive impact on the image of Northern Ireland, showing a diverse, forward-looking society, which has now embraced the peace process.

#### **4.3 Survey #2 – Background questions**

This survey was designed to assess the opinions of Northern Ireland residents towards Troubles tourism. The survey was able to provide a diverse sample, reaching people from all age-categories. The largest response group was 25-34s (117 people out of 319, 36.68%), which was expected. Three hundred and eighteen out of a possible 319 answered their gender and the figures were 216 men (67.92%) and 102 women (32.08%). We note again here the preponderance of young men in this sample, and admit that this could skew the results in a certain direction. But we have no control over who chooses to respond to an online survey.

The community affiliation question was important to distinguish whether the attitudes that existed with regard to Troubles tourism were different between the two

communities. The options available were “Nationalist”, “Unionist”, and “Prefer not to say”, which mirrors the 2011 Census categories. The parliamentary transcripts suggest that Nationalists often have a positive view of this type of tourism, with Unionists being more likely to disfavour it. The most recent Census in Northern Ireland in 2011 gave an indication that 40.76% of the population was Nationalist, 41.56% Unionist, and 17.68% preferred not to say (NISRA, 2019). Our sample was fairly close to these percentages, in all respects, with us reaching 138 Nationalists (43.40%), 120 Unionists (37.74%), and 60 “Prefer not to say” (18.87%). Our sample was only 2.64 percentage-points more Nationalist than the population.

Our respondents resided in County Antrim (130 people, 40.75%), Armagh (33 people, 10.34%); Derry/Londonderry 39 people (12.23%); Down (56 people, 17.55%); Fermanagh (25 people, 7.84%); and Tyrone (36 people, 11.29%). According to the 2011 Census, the population proportions were as follows: Antrim 34.14%, Armagh 9.65%, Derry/Londonderry 13.64%, Down 29.36%, Fermanagh 3.38%, and Tyrone 9.83%, which are comparable to our study. However, we had more people from Belfast (Antrim) because the researcher distributed paper surveys there. The fact that our respondents are very similar, in demographic characteristics of community affiliation (in particular) and county-of-residence, to the population as a whole, reduces the chance of bias creating unreliable and skewed results.

#### **4.4 Attitudes towards Troubles tourism**

**Table 4 Q7: Do you think overseas tourists want to visit murals and take political tours?**

	<b>Answer</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Count</b>
1	Definitely yes	34.80%	111
2	Probably yes	44.20%	141
3	Might or might not	16.61%	53
4	Probably not	4.08%	13
5	Definitely not	0.31%	1
	Total	100%	319

The participants again responded positively to this question, and it appears that there was no real divide based on community or age. Nationalists did, however, respond slightly more positively in higher numbers with “Definitely Yes” gaining 63 responses versus the 30 “Definitely Yes” from the Unionist Community. In contrast, the Unionist community responded marginally higher in the “Probably Yes” option of the survey. Overall, this question shows that both communities believe that overseas tourists will want to visit these murals and take political tours.

**Table 5 Q8: Should these types of tours (political) be promoted by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board?**

	<b>Answer</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Count</b>
1	Definitely Yes	32.70%	104
2	Probably Yes	42.45%	135
3	Probably not	19.81%	63
4	Definitely not	5.03%	16
	Total	100%	318

Other than the Nationalist community responding again in slightly higher numbers in the “Definitely Yes” category, there was no real community divide for this question. This was a surprise to the researchers as parliamentary records tell a different story.

There are several reasons why the results are different from expected. There was a ten-year gap between the year of the parliamentary debate and the year of the survey. Possibly the Unionist community softened its approach to the issue over this time-period. However, in the opinion of the researchers, it is more likely that the constant tit-for-tat opposition in the devolved parliament is not representative of the views of the electorate

When asked directly by the researcher at interview, Mr Maskey responded when asked about promoting Troubles tourism:

I'm a great believer that you can always learn from the past, but learn and move on. Don't go back to the past but learn and move on so you don't make the same mistakes that happened over a historical period, so you're asking me “can the executive do more, and the NITB, Tourism NI?”, absolutely - Paul Maskey MP.

As an MP who represents both the majority-Nationalist Falls Road and the majority-Unionist Shankill Road, when asked, if Troubles tourism were promoted, should it aim at “neutrality” between both communities, he responded by saying:

I think if you tried to sanitise the story it's not fair, plus it's not factual so I think if you have to tell the story you have to tell it where it's known. That's why I said earlier it wouldn't be good for anyone from the Falls to tell the story of the Shankill, they'll have a completely different story to tell and vice-versa. I think that's very important to tell a proper story and you tell it from your heart because you lived through it, it's much more organic, it's true, it's facts - Maskey MP.

#### 4.5 Social attitudes

**Table 6 Q10: How do these tours affect society moving forwards?**

	<b>Answer</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Count</b>
1	Positive Effect	22.57%	72
2	Somewhat Positive Effect	36.05%	115
3	Neither Positive/Negative Effect	21.94%	70
4	Somewhat Negative Effect	14.11%	45
5	Negative Effect	5.33%	17
	Total	100%	319

This was perhaps the most important question in the survey. In reality, there would be no point in promoting Troubles tourism if it did not have a positive effect on the host-community. People emphasize the economic benefits but, in reality, they are less important than the social benefits that this type of tourism can bring to Belfast and surrounds. This question again showed no real disparity between the views of the two communities, and no differing in opinion between those who were older and experienced the conflict and those of the new generation born towards the end or after the ceasefire. There is still some apprehension, as 19.44% responded negatively. However, over half (58.62%) responded in a positive way.

The researcher interviewed Michael Culbert, a former IRA political prisoner who now runs an ex prisoners' organization, Coiste na n-Iarchimí, to help those who were involved in the conflict find work through tourism. When asked how this type of tourism has made the relationship between himself (former IRA personnel) and those of the Loyalist Shankhill community he responded as follows:

It certainly has improved the relationship with us and the former UVF personnel. We do talks together, we go to schools together, well, into schools to talk to students together. In order for young people to know the realities of what life was like,

motivations for doing what was done, visions for the future and more or less explain to them how life is much, much better than it was, some people would contest that not a lot has changed, a lot hasn't changed, but an awful lot has changed, particularly, and basically there's nobody getting killed - Michael Culbert.

We put a similar question to Paul Maskey, his response was:

We started an engagement process between ourselves, myself and the Shankill tourism initiative. We started with Coiste Na I-archimí, which is a Republican ex-prisoners' organization; we went and met EPIC, which is a Loyalist ex-prisoners organization, and from that they end up doing tours, so you would have walking tours down West Belfast (Falls) which were primarily done by an ex-prisoner who would have handed over on the Shankill side to a Loyalist ex-prisoner, so you had, I suppose, combatants who were involved in a fight against each other ... are now working together and doing tours. They also work very closely together not only in tourism but on a wide range of different issues, social issues as well - Maskey MP.

Both of these responses highlight how tourism has worked as a peace-building tool to bring the two communities of Belfast together and perhaps close some of the open wounds that had been there for a long time. Maskey further went on to comment:

I actually think it's amazing. I work a lot on the Falls Road and the Shankill and I could be walking out the office to get in my car and go somewhere or coming in from my car, and people will stop you; taxi-drivers will say "oh by the way I'm from the Shankill but this tour group here are from Australia or Canada or America" or wherever and you stop and have a moment or two conversation with them. People love that fact that they're there and they're seeing it, and they realize the drivers from the Shankill and they're talking to a Sinner (Sinn Fein), you know what I mean, which is great. ... I think tourism breaks down barriers, it breaks down social problems; it also breaks down that religious difference divide as well because when people are talking about their history and their story people appreciate it - Maskey MP.

The people who live in these areas are now seeing the benefit of this type of tourism, and it is evident that the tours are helping to build bridges and restore trust.

## **5. Conclusion**

### ***5.1 Conclusions and recommendations***

It is clear that both visitors and residents have an interest in the past and, from the primary research conducted, we conclude that many people in Northern Ireland are ready to embrace Troubles tourism, despite the limited efforts of the NITB and the concerns expressed by several members of the Legislative Assembly. The local MP of both the Falls and Shankill Roads, Paul Maskey, is extremely positive and optimistic about the tours. This tourism has already brought communities closer together and broken down barriers with former combatants now working side-by-side. It is important that stakeholders allow this type of tourism to grow but we hope that it does not become over-commodified (Page and Hall, 2003, pp. 154, 217) and loses its sense of authenticity. It should also be done in a tasteful manner with an emphasis on reconciliation and rebuilding of bridges both within and across communities. But the main message to take from our results is that people want to tell their stories and many potential tourists appear to want to listen.

Some might say that it is too early to invoke Troubles tourism as the events are well within living memory, unlike (say) the JTR murders. This is a valid point. On the other hand, people want to give these tours, at least one MP supports them, and potential tourists appear to be attracted to the concept. It might be argued that Troubles tourism will inspire alienated young people to “take up” violence again. This is always possible, but unlikely as the tours are aimed at foreign tourists and locals would probably need no introduction to the events and places involved. There might be some foreigners who undertake tours for darker motives, but this is not a foregone conclusion, and alternative avenues for radicalization are generally available. The fact that each tour-guide tells the story only from her/his own perspective, and not



from the perspective of the “other side”, is an important feature of the existing tours. It might be argued that, by putting a cosmopolitan and postmodern spin on the events (Stone, 2006, p. 148), via these tours, it moves us further away from the binary, modernist-era logic of the Troubles. Tour-guides, from both persuasions, interact and build new bridges and networks. On the other hand, it could be said that the tours confirm the modernist categories of the Troubles, and hence may assist those tourists who feel somewhat lost amidst a sea of globalization, and prefer to recall simpler times when they perceive that loyalties were largely fixed and binary. The same applies to JTR tourism where a study of late nineteenth century Whitechapel is comforting to those who mourn a lost London and a lost Empire.

We want to set out here our own set of additional motivations for dark tourism, based on the Belfast and JTR cases: (1) to recall a lost Empire (JTR); (2) to explore a simpler time in the face of globalization; (3) to gain knowledge to enrich one’s self and develop one’s empathy and solidarity, prior to a visit or after a visit; (4) to gain knowledge to further one’s cosmopolitanism or international outlook (note apparent contradiction to the second one); (5) to feel superiority over others due to their lack of self-control and civilized politeness (“we are better people”, we think, “than JTR” and some deplore the “primitive” “senselessness” of the Troubles); (6) to admire the carefulness and audacity of JTR in escaping murder sites undetected in built-up areas or to admire the courage and dedication of paramilitary personnel (especially Bobby Sands) (note apparent contradiction to the fifth one); and even (7) to move one beyond a focus on self by considering the greater suffering of others. Stone and Sharpley (2008, p. 587) put forward their view that murder sites sanitize and sensitize death, which “allows individuals to view their own death as distant, unrelated to the dark tourism product which they consume, and with a hope that their

own death will be a 'good' death". These aspects appear credible too, but more on the subconscious level. Some motives may be conscious, others subconscious.

Because we intend this to be an article on city tourism, and not just an article on Ireland, we want to conclude this subsection by saying that the findings presented here should be of relevance to researchers and policymakers in the areas of cities and city tourism more generally. The findings should be of special relevance for researchers on other divided and post-conflict countries, such as post-1987/2006 military coup Fiji, Korea, Cyprus and the countries of the former Yugoslavia. In Fiji, for example, it is important that tourists hear both indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian (Fijians of South Asian descent) interpretations of history and society.

## **5.2 Limitations**

A limitation to the study is that the survey respondents had higher percentages of men and Under-34s than in the general population. There was also a very low number of respondents from South America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. However, the second survey of Northern Ireland residents produced a mix of community affiliations (Nationalist, Unionist and "Prefer Not to Say") and counties-of-residence which were close to those of the general population. Also, the fact that the study's location was in Western Europe limits the generalizability of the results (Poria *et al.*, 2006, p. 325).

## **5.3 Suggestions for further research**

Detailed interviews, with larger samples of interviewees, combined with participation in tours and other events (Dunn and Phillips, 2000, p. 259), as part of an anthropological ethnography, would be very much welcomed and a worthy PhD topic. Even studying only one "side" in the conflict would have the potential to yield

valuable insights. Studies of attitudes and practices within the border regions in the South, where the Real IRA and Continuity IRA have historically been strongest, would also give important information from a whole-of-Ireland perspective. Quantitative studies, with larger samples (Uzzell, 1996) and an equal number of men and women, should also be encouraged in our quest for further knowledge.

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