The political changes in Ireland of 1921–22 meant not only the establishment of new polities in Ireland but also the creation of two important minorities. The outcome of these arrangements left a Protestant and predominantly unionist minority in the Irish Free State and a Catholic and very largely nationalist minority in Northern Ireland, both in states not of their own choosing. The subsequent fate of these minorities has been the subject of considerable debate among both historians and political commentators, past and present. In this comparative study of the two groups, we seek first to describe the position in which the two minorities found themselves after 1921. How did they respond to their novel and unwanted situations and what were the immediate consequences? Next, the political and social fortunes of these minorities over the following half century must be investigated. Attention focuses then on some key aspects of both communities. What can we say about the particular identity of these two important minorities? How did their identities relate to the mainstream identities in each state? From this study it may be possible to arrive at a better judgement about their treatment and fate.

There have been strong divisions of opinion about how the two groups fared in the 40 years after 1921. In the case of Northern Ireland, critics have claimed that the Catholic and nationalist minority was treated badly, facing discrimination in employment and public housing, and political marginalisation. This has been contested by others who have pointed out that the numbers of the northern Catholic minority increased over these decades, proportionally more than any of the other main communities in Ireland, north or south, a fact that has been seen as contradicting this picture of poor treatment. As regards the Irish Free State/Republic of Ireland, critics have argued that the
Protestant and unionist minority fared poorly, as seen in the reduction of southern Protestant numbers from some 10 per cent of the population pre-independence to 5 per cent in 1961. On the other side, commentators have drawn attention to the election of southern Protestants to high office, namely Lord Glenavy as the first chairman of the Irish senate and Douglas Hyde as the first president of Ireland, to provide evidence of the fair treatment of the minority. This debate has concerned not just academics but also politicians who have seen the fate of these minorities as important for their contemporary nationalist or unionist positions.

The situation in which these two minorities found themselves after 1921 was not unique to Ireland. Elsewhere, in Central and Eastern Europe, in many of the new polities established after the First World War, significant groups found themselves in states where they felt that they did not belong: at the same time they looked to elsewhere as their national ‘homeland’. Often religious, language or cultural divisions were involved originally in this national conflict and these would continue to be important. Only two-thirds of the inhabitants of Poland spoke Polish, while Czechoslovakia contained large numbers of Sudeten Germans. In Yugoslavia, where religious and cultural differences were very important, the population was sharply divided between Croats, Serbs and Bosnian Muslims. There was a large Magyar (Hungarian) minority in Southern Slovakia. Such inherent problems between the majority and minority groups in each country tended to become more difficult over time as the majority ‘nationalising’ section sought to develop the mainstream national identity and to strengthen the new state in its own liking. In many of these countries, therefore, the position of these national minorities was not just a matter of their social and economic situation but also of their place in the new societies and of their identity in relation to the increasingly exclusive dominant identities. In Ireland, both north and south, differences in identity, embracing a wide range of political, religious and cultural dimensions, remained critical for the relations between majority and minority communities.

Early days

The two new states that were established in the early 1920s contained substantial minorities whose national and religious identities differed greatly from those of the majority of the inhabitants of the societies in which now they found themselves, against their wishes. In Northern Ireland there was a significant Catholic and nationalist minority while