

THE IRISH CONSCRIPTION CRISIS OF 1918

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ABSTRACT

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The British government's decision to extend conscription to Ireland in the spring of 1918 had implications far beyond the scope of the First World War. The anti-conscription movement in Ireland, led by a coalition of nationalist politicians, the Catholic Church, and the organized labor movement, galvanized tens of thousands in resistance and paved the way for Irish independence, declared by Sinn Féin in January 1919. The development of Irish nationalism throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries combined with the crises of war, creating a unique and significant moment in the Conscription Crisis. First-hand testimony of the Conscription Crisis from the Bureau of Military History shows the power and significance of the anti-conscription movement by providing authentic, and oftentimes quite candid, accounts of the months spent opposing conscription. These testimonies, combined with an examination of the development of Irish nationalism and the impact of the First World War in Ireland, demonstrate the significance of the Conscription Crisis to the larger story of Irish independence.

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The British government extended conscription to Ireland in March 1918 after excluding them from previous conscription efforts. They did this on the heels of the Easter Rising of 1916 and despite strong public objection in Ireland. This decision galvanized tens of thousands in resistance across Ireland, paving the way for an overwhelming victory in the 1918 elections for Sinn Féin, an uncompromising Irish nationalist party, and thereby for the declaration of Irish independence in January 1919. The link between these developments and the Conscription Crisis demonstrates the power of the anti-conscription movement, as well as its significance in the larger story of Irish independence.

By the spring of 1918, the true nature of the First World War was known. Gone were the days of patriotic fervor that characterized the war's outbreak in the summer of 1914. The absence of military progress on the Western Front and the awful brutality of the fighting itself had changed the tenor of the war dramatically over those four years. The German spring offensive of March 1918 all but necessitated a fresh batch of soldiers, and it was in this moment that the British government extended conscription to Ireland, even in the face of robust public objection.

People across Ireland met the British proposal with fierce resistance. The anti-conscription movement brought together nationalist political parties like Sinn Féin and the Irish Parliamentary Party, the Catholic Church, and the organized labor movement in coordinated opposition. They went on strike, held rallies, and disseminated anti-conscription pledges and literature for months, stymieing the British proposal before it could ever truly take hold. Although the British military never drafted anyone from Ireland during the war, the mere threat of conscription engaged tens of thousands in protest and resistance.

The development of Irish nationalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, combined with the crises of the war, greatly influenced the conscription crisis. Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic emancipation in the 1820s was an early example of mass politics in Ireland and served as a model for political engagement for future nationalist leaders. Beginning in the 1870s, the debate over Home Rule increasingly polarized Irish politics, both between Irish nationalists and Unionists, as well as within the nationalist movement itself. This increasing polarization led to the Home Rule Crisis and the increasing militarization of Irish politics, creating many potential flashpoints for armed conflict between competing groups. The contemporaneous Gaelic cultural revival fueled cultural nationalism and ingratiated young people with Irish nationalism, fostering a politically engaged generation that came of age in the years leading up to the Conscription Crisis.

The Easter Rising of 1916, in which a small group of Irish republicans launched an insurrection against the British in Ireland, also foreshadowed the success of the anti-conscription movement. Although it was a failure by all tactical measures, the Rising swayed public opinion against the British due to their harsh repression of it, in which they executed sixteen of the leaders and arrested thousands of others. The leaders of the Rising entered the pantheon of Irish nationalism, hastening the radicalization of Irish politics and the future success of the anti-conscription movement and Sinn Féin.

After the failure of the Easter Rising, the Conscription Crisis afforded Sinn Féin another opportunity. Their success in the by-elections of 1917 showed that anti-British sentiment was on the rise in Ireland and their reputation following the Rising as the foremost anti-British force in Ireland allowed them to take advantage of this sentiment. The British government decided to

extend conscription to Ireland in March 1918 in spite of these conditions, unwittingly catapulting Sinn Féin to an overwhelming victory in the elections that fall.

The Conscription Crisis proved to be a watershed moment for Sinn Féin, in which they transformed strong public objection to conscription into political support. While others like the Irish Parliamentary Party also opposed conscription, Sinn Féin's public image as *the* anti-British force in Irish politics following the Easter Rising allowed them to reap the benefits of the anti-conscription campaign's success. Deeply rooted in the development of Irish nationalism during the 19th and early 20th centuries and the Irish experience during the First World War, the Conscription Crisis was a significant moment in the story of Irish independence and would later be canonized by the young Irish republic as an essential step in their long march towards self-determination.

I. History of Irish Nationalism

Catholic Emancipation and the Rise of Fenianism

The general turmoil of the 19th century in Ireland spawned many political, social, and cultural movements that contributed to an emerging national consciousness separate from the British Empire. This growing sense of a shared national identity among certain groups in Ireland continued to gain momentum during the early 20th century and proved integral to the popularity, and ultimate success of the independence movement in 1921. The fight for Catholic emancipation, the Young Ireland Rebellion, the Home Rule movement, and the Gaelic cultural revival all helped to reorient the political and social

debate in Ireland around independence and create a more politically engaged and mobilized society, which the anti-conscription movement took full advantage of.

Many equate the period of strong British control over the politics and economy of Ireland from the establishment of the first Plantations in the 16th century to the middle of the 19th century with the disenfranchisement, impoverishment, and persecution of Roman Catholics in the country. From London, the British government enacted laws that essentially wiped out the political and economic influence of any Catholic in Ireland, in an effort to force their acceptance of the Church of Ireland, an Anglican Church.¹

Although they aimed at Catholics in the British Empire, the Penal Laws varied greatly and impacted many facets of people's everyday lives. For much of the 18th century, the law prohibited Roman Catholics from voting or holding any public office, including the legal profession and the judiciary.² Roman Catholics in Ireland represented a significant percentage of the British population, and their absence from the political arenas in London and Dublin only exacerbated their struggles at home.

The restoration of full civil rights for Catholics was not a prime political issue until the 1820s. While some believed that the Acts of Union of 1800, which brought Ireland into the United Kingdom, would pave the way for a traditional, peaceful emancipation process for Catholics in Ireland, it became clear by the 1820s that the British government had no intention of passing any comprehensive emancipation legislation through Parliament on their own. In response, Daniel O'Connell established

¹ T.A. Jackson, *Ireland Her Own, an Outline History of the Irish Struggle for National Freedom and Independence*, p. 163, London: Cobbett, 1946.

² *Ibid.*, 164.

the Catholic Association, a mass political organization that intensified and consolidated the campaign for Catholic emancipation under one banner.³ Within six years, they had forced the hands of the Duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel, and King George IV, resulting in the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829. The Catholic Association was an early example of political engagement in Ireland, and the mass political movement against conscription harkened back to the days of O'Connell's overflowing rallies and fiery speeches.

O'Connell and the Catholic Association are notable for engaging the poor tenant farmers, who made up a majority of Ireland's population, in a nationwide political movement. Many of them also supported him financially however they could, often only sparing a penny per month. Their fervor showed at rallies, where over 100,000 people came to hear O'Connell and other Catholic Association leaders speak.⁴ These large and public shows of support not only kept the British authorities and political establishment at bay, but also gave cover to the slightly wealthier Catholics to support pro-emancipation politicians, in defiance of the land and business-owning Protestant upper class.⁵ O'Connell's creation of a mass political movement that inspired turnout among the working classes of Ireland and drew its primary power from their support would provide a model for anti-conscription movement nearly 100 years later, as well as for Irish nationalists more broadly.

³ Ibid., 168.

⁴ Ibid., 169.

⁵ Ibid., 170.

Repeal Association and Split

In 1830, the year after successfully codifying Catholic emancipation, O'Connell founded yet another political movement, the Repeal Association, which aimed to repeal the Acts of Union of 1800 and return Ireland to a state of quasi-independence.⁶

O'Connell hoped to harness the power of an expanded electorate, which had now grown to include Catholics and had less stringent property requirements, to force Parliament's hand once again. However, the Repeal Association proved to be less successful than the earlier Catholic Association, never winning more than 45% of the Irish vote, and dissolved in 1848.⁷

O'Connell's ideas about repeal stemmed from his views on constitutionalism and the rights of Ireland and Irish people *within* the British Empire. These views put him at odds with a growing faction of the Repeal Association that advocated a more romantic, culture-based view of Irish nationalism and independence. O'Connell's movements for Catholic emancipation and the repeal of the Acts of Union did not explicitly seek independence as an end, but certain groups that arose out of them co-opted the core tenets of these movements and used them to push for full independence. A number of members of the Repeal Association formed a group called Young Ireland in 1842, a movement committed to full independence for Ireland by any means necessary, including force. Young Ireland formally seceded from the Repeal Association in 1847.⁸ The divisions that developed within the Repeal Association by the late 1840s, and the ultimate split within

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ Ibid., 11.

the organization, are emblematic of the friction between constitutional action and violent rebellion that would define the political and social debate surrounding Irish nationalism and independence for the next 80 years.

In the summer of 1848, the Young Irelanders rose up against the government, inspired by both their own philosophy and by the string of revolutions that took place that year across continental Europe. However, the Young Irelanders fared much worse than their continental counterparts and were quickly dispersed by British police forces, which resulted in two deaths.⁹ The potato famine of the 1840s had thrust the Irish peasantry, a group already living hand to mouth, into an existential crisis, and it reached its most destructive point in 1847; these conditions, along with the ideological differences and personal animosities within Irish nationalist circles may also have forewarned the Young Irelanders' failure.¹⁰

Although the rebellion failed, certain key leaders of the Young Irelander movement escaped to the relative safety of continental Europe, the United States, and Australia, where they continued to stoking support for their movement for decades.¹¹ One of these men, James Stephens, returned to Ireland in 1858 and founded the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret oath-bound organization dedicated to Irish republicanism.¹² That same year, John O'Mahony traveled to the United States and

⁹ R.B. McD, "Young Ireland and 1848." *The English Historical Review* (January 1, 1951): 158.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹¹ Alvin Jackson, "The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, by M. J. Kelly The IRB: The Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Féin, by Owen McGee." *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 2 (January 2008): 308.

¹² *Ibid.*, 308.

founded the Fenian Brotherhood, which served as the American sister organization to the Irish Republican Brotherhood.¹³

These organizations, whose ideology and tactics became known as Fenianism, continued to influence Irish politics and society throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. They raised money by selling bonds whose terms to maturity were to begin six months after the establishment of an independent Irish republic, which proved especially popular among Irish immigrants in the United States.¹⁴ Fenianism served as a political foil to the Home Rule movement that came to prominence during the 1870s and exercised its influence on Irish politics from outside the halls of Parliament, while the Home Rule movement chose to work within the existing government. Just like the internal debates in the Repeal Association during the 1840s, the struggle between Fenianism and the Home Rule movement exemplified the friction between constitutional action and violent rebellion in Irish politics.

While the political struggles within Irish nationalism certainly reflect this to an extent, it would be naïve to frame Irish history in this simple binary. The definitions of political violence and constitutionalism in the Irish context remain ambiguous, and simply assigning different people and movements within Irish nationalism to either camp creates a false sense of simplicity. It also leads to the simplistic mischaracterization of constitutional action as inherently weak and inevitably futile. Both common sense and history tell us that the supposed binary between violence and constitutionalism was

¹³ Ibid., 308.

¹⁴ Ibid., 309.

actually quite fluid and that many of the Irish nationalist heroes evade definition in this framework.

Home Rule, Divisions, and Mobilization

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the “Irish question”, referring to the debate surrounding the relationship between Ireland and the British Empire, dominated British politics. Among a subset of Irish nationalists and British members of Parliament, Home Rule for Ireland became a popular proposal and gained political traction over the years. Home Rule called for legislative independence for Ireland while leaving national defense and foreign policy largely to the British parliament in London. Despite its popularity, Home Rulers, as its supporters came to be known, faced opposition from British Conservatives in Parliament, Irish Unionists in Ulster, and radical Irish nationalists who felt that their proposals did not go far enough. Although Home Rule never took effect in Ireland, the prospect of it mobilized politically oriented groups on both sides of the debate and contributed to the engaged political culture in Ireland that gave rise to, and contributed to the success of, the anti-conscription movement in 1918.

While serving as a member of Parliament in 1870, Isaac Butt introduced the proposal for Home Rule in Ireland to the British political scene. That same year he founded the Irish Home Government Association, a political pressure group, which evolved into a full-fledged political party by 1873.¹⁵ The new party, the Irish Home Rule

¹⁵ Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: An Irish History, 1800-2000*. Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 30.

League, won 60 seats in the 1874 general election and nearly 75% of all the seats where it fielded a candidate. Despite losing the popular vote in Ireland to the Conservative Party, the Home Rule League won nearly twice as many seats as the Conservatives on the island, giving them an outsized voice in the incoming Conservative government.¹⁶

Although variously interpreted throughout the years, the concept of Home Rule that the Home Rule League espoused called for a quasi-federal relationship between Ireland and the British Empire. However, unlike the relationship between the federal government of the United States and an individual state like Massachusetts, any potential Home Rule solution in Ireland would be a legislative measure, unprotected by any overarching constitution and subject to repeal and revision. The Home Rule League called for an Irish parliament with control over domestic affairs and a level of autonomy from the parliament in London, was reminiscent of the Parliament of Ireland in the late 18th century, which, from 1782 until 1800, had the power to pass legislation independent of the British parliament while retaining the British monarch as their executive. The Acts of Union, passed in 1800, merged the two parliaments and stripped the Irish members of their legislative autonomy.¹⁷

Following the Fenian Rising of 1867, a failed rebellion staged by the Irish Republican Brotherhood and its American fundraisers and supporters, committed Irish republicans began to cooperate and coordinate with the faction of constitutional nationalists dedicated to Irish Home Rule.¹⁸ Until 1876 the Irish Republican Brotherhood

¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷ Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule, 1867-1921*. New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 1998, p. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

expressly supported the Home Rule League, a rare détente between competing forces advocating for violence and constitutional action within the broader Irish nationalist movement. However, by the late summer of 1876 the Irish Republican Brotherhood had grown impatient and disillusioned with the Home Rule League and its lack of tangible political results.¹⁹ They forced their members to stop supporting Home Rule and resumed the struggle within the broader Irish nationalist movement between violent revolution and constitutionalism.

Rise of Irish Unionism

The Unionist movement, dedicated to a complete union between Ireland and the British Empire, came to prominence alongside the Home Rule movement. Unionism thrived as a major political movement in Ulster, the northeasternmost of Ireland's four provinces and home to the largest Protestant population in the country.²⁰ Despite the association of Irish unionism with Protestantism and Irish nationalism with Catholicism, this may paint an overly simplistic image of both movements and brand their conflict as religious while downplaying the political motivations of those involved. Unionists most feared that Home Rule, as proposed by the Irish Parliamentary Party, would lead to Catholic domination of Irish politics and leave them an oppressed minority, both political and religious.²¹ In addition, Unionists felt it was in their economic interests to preserve

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁰ Alvin Jackson, "Unionist Politics and Protestant Society in Edwardian Ireland." *The Historical Journal* 33, no. 4 (December 1990): 840.

²¹ J.C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923*. New York: Knopf, 1966. pp. 398

the existing relationship with the British Empire and had come to self-identify as British after many years of British rule in Ireland. Many Protestants in Ulster were directly employed by the British government and military, and many more enjoyed the logistical and commercial benefits of the Empire in their private businesses. Ulster was more industrialized and economically integrated with the British Empire, and its textiles and shipbuilding industries relied on the protection of the British Empire, and access to its markets, to succeed.²² The growing threat of the Home Rule League, which later developed into the Irish Parliamentary Party, and their British Liberal allies in Parliament in the late 19th century hastened the mobilization of the Unionist movement in the years to come.²³

The Protestant working classes also feared an influx of Catholic workers from the south willing to work for pennies on the dollar and organized to protect their jobs. This fear resonated with workers in the large industrial cities of Britain, where Irish Catholics also immigrated in search of work. Nativism, and in this context, its tacit anti-Catholic sentiment, emerged in both Ulster and Britain in the late 19th century.²⁴ This development not only illuminated the political struggle between Unionism and Irish nationalism, but also underscored the religious, political, and economic tensions between Ulster and the southern counties of Ireland.

²² Ibid., 381.

²³ Ibid., 843.

²⁴ Ibid., 401.

Success, Crisis, and Mobilization

Despite the opposition from both Unionists and more radical elements of Irish nationalism who advocated full independence, the Home Rule movement enjoyed a degree of legislative success in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Charles Stewart Parnell became the Home Rule League's leader in 1880 and oversaw its reform into the Irish Parliamentary Party, which he led until 1891. The hung parliament of 1885 gave Parnell and the Irish Parliamentary Party enormous influence over the Liberal Party's platform and Parnell should be credited for the Liberal Party's adoption of Home Rule as a part of their platform. Two efforts to pass Home Rule legislation in 1886 and 1893 failed, but in 1914 the house of Commons passed the Third Home Rule Bill, months before the outbreak of the First World War.

Many Unionists in Ulster considered the Third Home Rule Bill a betrayal by the British and an order to live under the will of the Catholic church and the most radical elements of Irish nationalism.²⁵ Prepared to defy the impending order, militia units that had been drilling since 1911 came together in January 1913 to form the Ulster Volunteer Force, which soon grew to nearly 100,000 members. Its prominence prompted the creation of a nationalist counter force, the Irish Volunteers.²⁶ Both of these forces were extremely well-armed; in March 1914 the Ulster Volunteer Force smuggled around 20,000 rifles and 3 million rounds of ammunition from Germany into Ireland,

²⁵ Lindsey Flewelling, "The Ulster Crisis in Transnational Perspective: Ulster Unionism and America, 1912–14." *Éire-Ireland (St. Paul)* 51, no. 1 (2016): 118.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

demonstrating the severity of the situation²⁷. The heavy presence of these citizen militias in Ireland not only inflamed political tensions, they raised the threat of a prolonged armed conflict over the implementation of Home Rule.

Historians like Ronan Fanning take the rhetoric of the Unionists in Ulster seriously and believe that, had the Third Home Rule Bill been implemented, an armed conflict in Ulster would have been inevitable. Aside from the sheer manpower of the Ulster Volunteer Force, Fanning argues that the Unionist movement had real support from the British Conservative Party.²⁸ With this support in Britain, the Unionists may have been legitimately preparing for a civil war in the face of Home Rule. Fanning suggests that Gladstone's Liberal governments of the late 19th century had made the unrealistic and impractical promise of a united Ireland to nationalists. Fierce Unionist resistance to the Third Home Rule Bill proved this idea was not feasible.²⁹ He also suggests that the considerations of British electoral politics further raised the temperature of the Home Rule debate. The Conservative Party and its allies refused to broker a compromise on Home Rule because it would resolve their most potent electoral issue; the Liberals likewise refused to compromise because they feared losing the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party, which often serve as the swing faction in a hung parliament.³⁰

²⁷ George Dangerfield and David Marsland. "The Guns of Larne." In *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, 352. 1st ed. Routledge, 2011.

²⁸ Francis M. Carroll, "The Art of the Possible (Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution 1919-1922)." *Irish Literary Supplement*. Irish Studies Program, 2014.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

This debate largely shaped Irish nationalist and British imperial politics for almost fifty years, from the early 1870s to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. It laid bare the divides in Ireland between Ulster and the southern counties, as well as those in Britain between the Liberals and Conservatives. Although initially conceived as a compromise position between full independence and a continued union, Home Rule became a divisive issue. The political gridlock that accompanied it led many within the Irish nationalist movement to become disillusioned with not only the prospect of Home Rule, but with the tactics and philosophy of the Irish Parliamentary Party. This frustration came to a head during the Conscription Crisis and the elections that followed it, which strongly rebuked the nationalist status quo in favor of Sinn Féin.

The Gaelic Cultural Revival

In addition to its political and economic consequences for Ireland, British rule also eroded the distinct Irish language and Gaelic culture. By the late 19th century, English had become the dominant spoken and written language in Ireland, while the Irish language struggled to survive even in the most rural and isolated areas of the country. To combat what they viewed as an encroaching English cultural hegemony in Ireland, many politicians, writers, artists, musicians, and athletes advocated for the revival of traditional Irish culture. The Gaelic revival, as an expression of cultural nationalism, contributed to the growing associational culture in Ireland, while also clearly delineating the differences and distinctions between Great Britain and Ireland.

Many individuals and cultural associations comprised the Gaelic revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They promoted a diverse revival, ranging from the renewal of traditional Irish sports by the Gaelic Athletic Association to the establishment of a national theater promoting Irish playwrights and actors. Although it can hardly be described as a unified or uniform movement, many people were members of multiple cultural associations and understood that they, by and large, appealed to the same sense of cultural nationalism. These associations generally viewed British rule as more than political and economic subjugation. The “Anglicization” of the day-to-day life of people in Ireland warranted real fear that their traditional culture would simply disappear with time. The Gaelic cultural revival also created divisions in Irish society between those who embraced the revival of traditional culture and those who favored British culture in one way or another. The cultural revival and the prominence of cultural associations gave credence to cultural nationalism in Ireland and shaped the younger generation coming of age during the Conscription Crisis.

Founded in 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association proved to be one of the most influential cultural groups of the time. Although its official mission was to promote traditional Irish sports such as Gaelic football and hurling, it also politicized these sports, portraying them in direct opposition to “foreign”, or British, sports.³¹ Their unflinching promotion of anything Irish and denigration of all things British further fostered a unique modern Irish cultural identity, especially among the youth, many of whom came of age

³¹ Paul Rouse, “The Politics of Culture and Sport in Ireland: A History of the GAA Ban on Foreign Games 1884-1971: Part One: 1884-1921.” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 10, no. 3 (1993): 333.

during the Conscription Crisis. Even into the 1970s, the G.A.A. continued to “ban” foreign sports by barring from membership anyone who played them or even attended games.³² That these practices continued for so long shows how deeply the ethos of the G.A.A. *was* Irish nationalism.

The Gaelic League, founded in 1893 by Douglas Hyde to promote the Irish language at home and abroad, served as another pillar of the Gaelic cultural revival. Like the founders of the Gaelic Athletic Association, Hyde saw British rule as a cultural threat to Ireland, not in the form of rugby or cricket, but rather in the hegemony of the English language in education, business, and politics. Thus, the League published periodicals and newspapers in Irish, promoting the language. Aside from the intrinsic benefits of reviving the Irish language, using it in lieu of English served as a pointed protest against British rule and cultural hegemony.

Douglas Hyde’s address to the Irish Literary Society in 1892 is often cited as the ideological founding of the Gaelic League. In his address, Hyde focuses on the seemingly contradictory and ironic position of Ireland at the time, noting that they “hate the English, and at the same time continue to imitate them”.³³ His insistence on the Irish language and the idea that Ireland had a unified cultural self-image prompted appeals to cultural nationalism by politicians.³⁴ This cultural depiction of a Gaelic Ireland translated

³² Ibid., 333.

³³ Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland.” Speech, Dublin, November 25, 1892. Irish National Literary Society.

<https://www.thefuture.ie/wp-content/uploads/1892/11/1892-11-25-The-Necessity-for-De-Anglicising-Ireland.pdf>.

³⁴ Bruce Stewart, “On the Necessity of De-Hydifying Irish Cultural Criticism.” *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 4, no. 1 (2000): 23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20557628>.

into the political self-image among some politicians of Ireland as a unified, independent country bounded together by a common culture and language.³⁵

Associations like the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League attracted people with a broad range of political views and facilitated relationships between many of the leaders of the Easter Rising, the Conscription Crisis, and the war of independence. Arthur Griffith, founder of the nationalist newspaper *United Irishman*, established Sinn Féin in 1905. The name Sinn Féin means “we ourselves”, and the Gaelic League had used it as a slogan throughout the 1890s.³⁶ The Irish Volunteers counted many Gaelic League members among their ranks, which promoted and solidified its ideological cohesion. Patrick Pearse, a leader of the Easter Rising who the British government executed in its aftermath, served as the editor of the Gaelic League’s newspaper from 1903 to 1909.³⁷ The crossover between these cultural associations and nationalist political organizations like the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Irish Volunteers, and Sinn Féin led to a synergistic relationship between them.³⁸

Many people joined cultural associations without necessarily endorsing nationalist ideology or tactics. This associational culture nonetheless brought piece of nationalist ideologies into the cultural mainstream and helped erode the social tax of endorsing them. Associational culture created a generation that was more politically and culturally self-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁶ Brian Feeney, *Sinn Féin: a Hundred Turbulent Years*. Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2003, p 19.

³⁷ Bruce Stewart, "On the Necessity of De-Hydrifying Irish Cultural Criticism." *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 4, no. 1 (2000): 25. Accessed February 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20557628>.

³⁸ R.F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923*. First American edition. New York, N.Y: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015, p. 360.

aware than those that preceded them. Its sometimes ambiguous, but ever-present relationships with nationalist political organizations and militias also licensed young people to join up in large numbers, giving them levels of political and social influence that had previously seemed impossible.

The rise of associational culture, a more fervent cultural nationalism, and the way in which the Irish Parliamentary Party's grip on power began to loosen all reflect a generational shift in Ireland. Accompanying these forces, feeling that institutional change was necessary in Ireland began to appear outside the circles of known political radicals.³⁹ John Redmond and his Irish Parliamentary Party came to represent the status quo in the hearts and minds of the younger generation who regarded them, however unfairly, as out of touch and corrupted by their years in London.⁴⁰ W.B. Yeats, in the nationalist newspaper *United Irishman* in 1901, wrote of the coming of a new age, where neophyte revolutionaries overthrew the decadence of modern society, personified largely by the British Empire but also by the Irish Parliamentary Party.⁴¹

The politicization of the younger generation, their engagement with the cultural nationalism that accompanied the Gaelic cultural revival, and the rise of citizen militias, both nationalist and Unionist, created lots of points for potential conflict. The generational shift in Irish society brought with it a feeling that something new was happening. That these feelings were not strongly defined or articulated is beside the

³⁹ Ibid. 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 2.

⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

point; their undefined nature is precisely what made them powerful. To a younger generation in a rapidly evolving and dynamic political landscape, anything was possible.

The struggle for Catholic emancipation, the Home Rule movement, and the Gaelic cultural revival all shaped the Irish nationalist movement of the early 20th century. Daniel O'Connell's mass politics helped define the ethos of nationalist movement, the Home Rule movement fed political polarization between nationalists and Unionists, and the Gaelic cultural revival gave the nationalist movement a new, powerful angle into the hearts and minds of the Irish people. These factors, combined with the looming crisis of the First World War, set the stage for the Conscription Crisis and the declaration of independence that followed shortly after.

II. War, Crisis, and Opportunity

The First World War and the Easter Rising of 1916

The outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914 raised fundamental questions about the nature and of the imperial powers at its forefront. The British Empire's position as the world's greatest economic and military power at the turn of the twentieth century can be largely attributed to its large, diverse empire that at one time ruled over one out of every five people on Earth. However, the fabric of the empire was beginning to tear, both in Britain and in the colonies, as the empire entered what was to be one of the most destructive conflicts in world history to date. The response to the war in Ireland varied and evolved over the course of the war, showing their readiness to assist

the British war effort as well as their frustration with both the war and British rule in Ireland.

Despite passing the Third Home Rule Bill in 1912, conservatives in the British government and Unionists in Ireland managed to stave off its implementation for years. As the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, the British government postponed the long-awaited realization of Home Rule in Ireland until the end of the war. Despite the palpable political frustration, John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, encouraged the Irish Volunteers to join the British Army and go “wherever the firing line extends” to defend the promise of Home Rule.⁴² As the data shows, the Irish contribution to the British war effort was substantial, even as the British government continued to move the goalposts on Home Rule.

Irish soldiers had long served with distinction in the British military. During the Napoleonic Wars, Irish soldiers and sailors played key roles in decisive engagements like the Battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo.⁴³ Napoleon himself lauded the bravery of the Irish regiments in the British service, saying “anything to equal the stubborn bravery of the Regiment with castles in their caps I have never before witnessed”.⁴⁴ Irish soldiers also served in the British colonial campaigns in India and Africa, often with the same zeal as English soldiers despite their own quasi-colonial status.⁴⁵

⁴² “Redmond Urges Irish Volunteers to Join the British Army.” Century Ireland, n.d. <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/redmond-urges-irish-volunteers-to-join-the-british-army>.

⁴³ A.E.C. Bredin, *A History of the Irish Soldier*. London, 1987: Century Books, n.d.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

The enlistment data of Great Britain and Ireland from 1914 and 1915 at first glance suggests that the Irish contribution of around 200,000 soldiers was meager in comparison to Britain, which raised some 5 million soldiers despite having a population less than ten times that of Ireland.⁴⁶ Ulster, the Protestant stronghold in Ireland, essentially matched the enlistment rates of Britain during the early stages of the war, while the southern, and largely Catholic, counties lagged behind

However, the lower enlistment numbers are not an indication of a disloyal population. It may be tempting to broadly characterize these different rates of enlistment as emblematic of the Protestant-Catholic and Ulster-South dichotomies in Irish society. The underlying patterns of enlistment in Ireland tell a slightly different story. The economic and social differences between Britain and Ireland in 1914 help to explain some of the disparity in enlistment. Ireland in 1914 was still largely a society of small-scale farmers, and the sons of family farmers were less likely to enlist in the army than young industrial workers. In heavily industrialized Britain, more young men were likely to sign up. When these differences are taken into account, it shows that the enlistment rate in Ireland was actually about two-thirds of that in Britain⁴⁷.

The Home Rule crisis of 1912-14 also affected the Irish response to the war. The ongoing conflict between nationalists and Unionists over Home Rule called the loyalty of both sides to the British into question as they became increasingly militarized. Unionists used the war and the initial high enlistment rates among Protestants in Ulster as evidence

⁴⁶ David Fitzpatrick, "The Logic of Collective Sacrifice: Ireland and the British Army, 1914-1918," *The Historical Journal* 38, no. 4 (December 1995): pp. 1018.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1019.

of their commitment to the British, while also disparaging the nationalists for the comparatively low enlistment rates among Catholics.⁴⁸ However, in other provinces Catholics enlisted at rates that exceeded their share of the population, suggesting that the Unionist narrative of the willing Protestant and the reticent Catholic was inaccurate. Enlistment rates did not neatly map onto the traditional religious divisions in Ireland, and by extension the political ones, and the responsible factors remain somewhat elusive.

Paramilitary organizations like the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteers also used the war to display their own martial power and organization. By late 1914, the Ulster Volunteer Force numbered around 100,000 soldiers, along with a veteran officer corps that gave them an air of professionalism; the Irish Volunteers recruited nearly twice as many men but lacked organization and equipment.⁴⁹ Both of these organizations and their political backers saw the potential benefits of a British victory, specifically one to which they contributed. Edward Carson, one of the most prominent Unionist leaders, saw the war as an opportunity to prove the case for Ulster's exclusion from a Home-Ruled Ireland, while the leaders of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Parliamentary Party viewed participation in the war as the final hurdle to Home Rule.⁵⁰

The overall Irish contribution to the British war effort was more robust than is often portrayed, but it changed over the course of the war. As the fighting dragged on and the progress of both armies stalled, many grew weary of a war that seemed to have no end in sight. Hoping to take advantage of these conditions, the Irish Republican

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1025

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1028.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1028.

Brotherhood planned an uprising in Dublin during Easter Week 1916. They hoped to occupy key parts of the city and establish an independent Irish republic by force, in stark contrast to the constitutional approach favored by the nationalist movement, in the form of Home Rule, for the previous 40 years.⁵¹

Despite holding out for nearly a week, the rebel forces led by writers like Patrick Pearse and trade union leaders like James Connolly fell to the much larger and more advanced British Army. The Easter Rising was initially unpopular among many people in Ireland. Some saw it as a betrayal of the British, and by extension, a betrayal of Irish soldiers serving in the British military. It also complicated the status of Home Rule in Ireland, which the British government had passed before the war but postponed.

In the weeks and months following the Rising, the British government arrested thousands of participants and executed sixteen of its leaders. This harsh treatment, along with the casualties and destruction that accompanied British artillery strikes in Dublin, contributed to a shift in public opinion against the British.⁵² Consequently, support for parties like Sinn Féin that took a hard line in favor of full independence, as opposed to Home Rule, grew and set the stage for the Conscription Crisis almost exactly two years later.

The harsh British response to the Easter Rising drew a strong rebuke from John Dillon, the future leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. He delivered an impassioned speech on the floor of the House of Commons, blaming the British for erasing years of

⁵¹ Max Caulfield, *The Easter Rebellion* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 18.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 22.

progress towards a peaceful Home Rule resolution through the executions and arrests following the Easter Rising:

It [the Easter Rising] is the first rebellion that ever took place in Ireland where you [the British] had a majority on your side. It is the fruit of our life work. We [the Irish Parliamentary Party] have risked our lives a hundred times to bring about this [Home Rule] result. We are held up to odium as traitors by those men who made the rebellion, and our lives have been in danger a hundred times during the last thirty years because we have endeavored to reconcile the two things, and now you are washing out our whole life work in a sea of blood.⁵³

Dillon and the Irish Parliamentary Party were no friends of Sinn Féin, lending even more credence to his criticism of the British response. To people in 1918 and beyond, his prediction that the work of the Home Rulers would be destroyed in part by the British response to the Rising must have seemed prophetic. He almost seems to resign himself to this fact, realizing that the British response to the Rising had made the ascent of Sinn Féin and the decline of the Irish Parliamentary Party imminent. Sinn Féin's rise could already be seen in the 1917 parliamentary by-elections, when they unseated four members of the Irish Parliamentary Party from constituencies across Ireland.

Sinn Féin's success in the by-elections of 1917 proved that their anti-British message and public image could lead to electoral success. All of the victorious Sinn Féin candidates had been involved in or associated with the Easter Rising. Three of them, Eamon de Valera, W.T. Cosgrave, and Joseph McGuinness, had gone to prison for their roles in the Rising; the fourth, George Noble Plunkett, was the father of Joseph Plunkett, once of the leaders of the Rising that the British executed.⁵⁴ These elections reinforced

⁵³ "John Dillon Savages British Government Response to Rising." Century Ireland, n.d. <http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/john-dillon-savages-british-government-response-to-rising>.

⁵⁴ F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1885-1918*.

Sinn Féin's position as *the* anti-British force in Irish politics and foreshadowed their electoral success following the Conscription Crisis the following year.

The response to the First World War in Ireland is emblematic of the power struggle within the nationalist movement. On the other hand, enlistment rates in the first two years of the war were high, suggesting that many in Ireland were still invested in and committed to the constitutional path to Home Rule and a new role for Ireland within the British Empire. On the other hand, the Easter Rising shows that a more violent and uncompromising republicanism still inspired many people. The war exposed the fraught relationship between these two paths and was essential to laying the groundwork for the Conscription Crisis.

The slog of the war had also taken its toll on the Irish population. The stalemates on the Western Front and brutal nature of the fighting contributed to a general sense of war-weariness, and there still seemed no end in sight by 1918. The war, the Easter Rising, and the British repression of that Rising should be viewed as a series of compounding crises. Each amplified the effects of the other and creating the political atmosphere responsible for the Conscription Crisis.

1918, Conscription, and the Beginning of the Crisis

On April 9, 1918, David Lloyd George introduced a new conscription bill entered the British Parliament. The effects of the Military Service Bill of 1916, which had introduced conscription in England, Scotland, and Wales, were beginning to wear off and the British armies on the continent needed reinforcements. Unlike the previous bills, this

bill extended conscription to Ireland. Lloyd George made a cautious gesture of reconciliation, declaring that “we intend to invite Parliament to pass a measure of self-government in Ireland” in the meantime.⁵⁵ The Third Home Rule Bill had already passed in 1912, however, so Lloyd George’s “offer” to the Irish nationalists seemed like something between a bribe and a threat. The British government’s stubbornness on the issue of conscription, as well as their doomed attempts to appease all the involved parties, may explain why they would ever go down such an obviously perilous road.

The First World War in the spring of 1918 had taken on a markedly different shape and character than the earlier years of the war. Mutinies in the French Army in 1917 exemplified the frustration with both the lack of military progress and the brutal nature of the fighting. The Bolsheviks had seized power from the tsar in Russia and exited the war by March 1918, largely ending the nightmarish two-front war that the German armies had been fighting. From the perspective of the British government, the political situation in the spring of 1918 was a far cry from the patriotic fervor that engulfed Europe in the summer of 1914.

The German armies on the Western Front launched a large-scale offensive, beginning in late March 1918. The Russian exit from the war buoyed Germany’s forces and they made their deepest advances into Allied-controlled territory since the summer and fall of 1914. Their progress during the months of March and April 1918 influenced and expedited the British government’s decision to extend conscription to Ireland.

⁵⁵ Alan J. Ward, “Lloyd George and the 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis.” *The Historical Journal* 17, no. 1 (1974): 114.

The attempts by Lloyd George and his government to please everyone in Ireland and Britain is exemplified by the response of Edward Carson, the Irish Unionist leader in Parliament, to the new conscription bill:

You ought to have made up your mind: was Conscription possible in Ireland under present conditions or was it not? If you made up your minds it was, and that it was right, then you ought to have passed it. If you made up your minds it was wrong, you ought not to have tried to pass it by a bribe, and by throwing over those who have been faithful to you in the past. You have tried, I suppose, to please everybody, and I believe in the long run you will please nobody.⁵⁶

Carson's final prediction, that "in the long run you [Lloyd George] will please nobody", now seems prophetic. Following the vote in the House of Commons, which passed the Conscription bill 301 to 103, the Irish Parliamentary Party walked out of the British Parliament and returned to Ireland to oppose conscription on the ground.⁵⁷ On the one hand, members of the Irish Parliamentary Party, along with Carson and senior civil servants and military officers, all warned the British government about the potential dangers of extending conscription to Ireland. On the other hand, the British government also feared alienating public opinion in Great Britain itself. The act passed in 1918 was the third round of conscription legislation and now extended conscription to all men under the age of 51. To continue to exempt Ireland from military service would damage the morale of the soldiers currently serving, alienate possible future recruits, and irreparably harm the British war effort.

The Irish Parliamentary Party left the British parliament following the extension of conscription to Ireland and returned there to oppose it "on the ground". Extending

⁵⁶ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 114.

conscription to Ireland had implications for the British far beyond the war, creating a political moment in which the Irish nationalist movement, now spearheaded by Sinn Féin, gained enormous traction on the road to independence. Despite their failure during the Easter Rising, the Conscription Crisis offered Sinn Féin another opportunity to rally against the British by pushing back against conscription, which was wildly unpopular in Ireland. The British government had, perhaps due to the strains of the war or a futile attempt to please all parties, started Sinn Féin on the road to victory by extending conscription to Ireland.

III. Testimony of the Crisis

The Conscription Crisis of 1918 and the Bureau of Military History

The Bureau of Military History is an archive of almost 2,000 witness statements collected between 1947 and 1957, recounting the period between 1913 and 1921. It is one of the largest archives of testimony about both the Conscription Crisis of 1918 and the revolutionary period in Ireland, defined by the Bureau as the years between 1913 and 1921. The statements were collected by the Department of Defence since extensive records of applications for military pensions made it possible for them in 1947 to reach many veterans of the revolutionary period. These pension records, which were collected between 1924-34 and contained the records of over 80,000 applicants became one of the Bureau's most important tools for locating potential interviewees. Without access to the pension records, the scale, scope, and character of the Bureau would have been much

different. A collection that relied solely on volunteers coming forward with their testimony would have attracted only the zealous few. The tens of thousands of pension applicants allowed the Bureau to cast a wide net among veterans, eventually collecting almost 2,000 witness statements. However, its reliance on military pension records to document the history of the revolutionary period certainly obscured other voices. The Bureau of Military History is one of the largest, most authoritative sources on the revolutionary period, and its methodology places the military at the forefront of this history. While it calls itself the Bureau of *Military* History, it highlights military history and veterans' testimony, perhaps to the detriment of a broader social history of the revolutionary period.

The Bureau sent out current soldiers to collect the statements. It is easy to envision people being uncomfortable with the idea of being interviewed by armed, uniformed soldiers. An interviewee may have been hesitant to testify about the negative aspects of their service to a current soldier, perhaps for a fear of repercussion. Those being interviewed had also often been through extremely traumatic experiences in the war and speaking with current soldiers may have influenced how they remembered them. While it is impossible to know how the collection might have been different had statements been collected by civilian professionals, we can speculate.

The same military pensions that enabled the scale and scope of the Bureau's project also complicated it. Many veterans were upset with the initial pension application in 1934, where 80 percent of applications were rejected. Rejected applicants alleged that the government, at that time led by Fianna Fail, systematically turned down applications

from veterans who had fought on the pro-Treaty side of the Civil War and favored anti-Treaty veterans at their expense. This bitterness carried over into the Bureau's collection of testimony. On the one hand, some who had seen their applications rejected refused to cooperate. On the other, some resentful veterans used the platform offered to them by the Bureau to air their grievances with the military or the government in 1947 that they felt was playing politics with their pensions.⁵⁸ They wanted to underscore that the pension boards had devalued their contribution to the struggle for independence and the founding of their country, a point of pride and likely a central part of many veterans' identities. Their testimony, then speaks to how the period between 1913-21 was written about and viewed in 1947, at the time they were interviewed. It also gives us a glimpse of some lingering resentments and contentious issues at the time the interviews were collected.

Although the Department of Defence collected the witness statements between 1947 and 1957, the Bureau of Military History did not open to the public until 2003. This was done to protect the confidentiality of the witnesses themselves, who often "named names" with the understanding that their statements would not be made public in their lifetimes. While these restrictions may have frustrated historians for many years, the entire project would lose credibility had they broken these promises of confidentiality.

The interviewers asked witnesses to speak about events that had happened 30 years earlier – and in some cases, even longer. As time passes and the sharpness of detail fades from an individual's memory, the emotional associations and personal significance of the

⁵⁸ Eve Morrison, "Bureau of Military History Witness Statements as Sources for the Irish Revolution," n.d., <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/about/historical-essays/>.

past start to share the spotlight. Inconsistencies surrounding events, dates, names, etc. are likely not conscious distortions, but rather a salient feature of memory. The methodology of the Bureau reflects this understanding; the investigators were instructed to not attempt to reconcile conflicting stories.⁵⁹

Collecting “official” military histories became increasingly popular following the Second World War and the Bureau of Military History effort belonged to this international trend. Both France and the United States launched military oral history projects about the Second World War during the 1940s, aiming to provide comprehensive accounts of *their* histories during the war. Undertaking a similar project gave Ireland credibility on the world stage; it associated the Bureau of Military History with projects in the United States and France. For the former revolutionaries leading the Irish government during the 1940s, a project like the Bureau of Military History could fulfill several functions. It created an official archive of this crucial moment in the formation of an Irish nation, a moment that foregrounded the role of those then in power in Ireland in 1947. It cemented Ireland’s status as their status as a nation and created an official repository of testimony of the nation’s founders.

The collection of testimony from the Bureau of Military History paints the Conscription Crisis as a unique moment of solidarity, both between the nationalist movement and other parts of Irish society as well as within the nationalist movement itself. On this score, the Conscription Crisis stands in sharp contrast to previous

⁵⁹ ‘Taking of evidence. Instructions to representatives of the Bureau’, 10 May 1948 (BMH, S 851).

nationalist campaigns against the British, which usually featured a small band of nationalist vanguards fighting hopelessly against modern armies and police forces. The unified front of the nationalists, the Catholic Church, and organized labor, almost unique in the history of the Irish nationalist movement, during the Conscription Crisis was essential to its success in halting conscription.

The testimony from the Bureau of Military History also shows the link between the Conscription Crisis and Sinn Féin's success in the 1918 elections. Unlike the Easter Rising, which initially lacked strong public support, the testimony from the Bureau shows that public objection was strong against conscription from the beginning. The Conscription Crisis gave Sinn Féin another opportunity to rally against the British after the failure of the Easter Rising; they used the Conscription Crisis to transform that public objection to conscription into political support, charting their course to an overwhelming victory in the 1918 elections. Within the nationalist movement itself, conscription resistance also seemed to unify competing factions. While the divides between the uncompromising republicans of Sinn Féin and the Irish Parliamentary Party had deepened since the Easter Rising and its repression, the two parties opposed conscription and came together to fight against it. In spite of this moment of unity, the Irish Parliamentary Party lost a huge amount of support during and after the Conscription Crisis, losing their dominant electoral position to Sinn Féin in the 1918 elections. The downfall of the Irish Parliamentary Party during and following the Conscription Crisis stemmed from its association with the political status quo among young people as well as the frustration with Home Rule, their signature policy

The unity among Irish nationalists proved short-lived. After the Conscription Crisis and victory in the War for Independence, divisions over the treaty that settled the conflict plunged the newly independent Ireland into a civil war from 1921 to 1923. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 divided Ireland into the Irish Free State, the newly independent country covering most of the island, and Northern Ireland, which was formed from most of the counties in Ulster and remained a part of the United Kingdom. Despite the Civil War's relative brevity, the political divides at its heart continued to define Irish politics for decades after. The dominant political parties in Ireland in 1947, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, trace their origins to the opposing sides of the Civil War. Despite their similar political ideologies, the parties remained bitter rivals, demonstrating the lasting scars of the Civil War on Irish politics.

For those assembling the Bureau of Military History in the young, polarized Irish republic, the Conscription Crisis recalled a halcyon moment of unity in Ireland. A united front against *anything* seemed a relic of a bygone era and the government, comprised of the former revolutionaries, seems to have been eager to push these moments to the forefront of Irish history. The soldiers traversing the country collecting statements were on strict orders to talk with people about the years between 1913 and 1921, and those years only. By categorically rejecting anything from the time of the Civil War, the Bureau of Military History sought to avoid the political contentiousness and lingering shame of the period and highlight those brief moments of unity and solidarity.

Nationalist Unity

The testimony of Captain John Gaynor of the Irish Volunteers illustrates one common theme in the witness statements. In Gaynor's account, the Conscription Crisis created an unprecedented moment of unity in Ireland. Gaynor recalled:

The supporters of the Irish National Party [Irish Parliamentary Party] and that of Sinn Féin united to oppose the application of conscription to Ireland. Even some of the Unionists joined in this opposition. Never before was there such a unity of purpose in the country.⁶⁰

This "unity of purpose" among political adversaries is evidence of the magnitude of the threat of conscription. Gaynor's description of the anti-conscription campaign as a unifying moment among Irish nationalists (and even among some Unionists) also underscores its uniqueness in the history of the revolutionary period. That there was "never before...such a unity of purpose" draws attention to the other moments of division such as the Home Rule Crisis, the Easter Rising, and later, the Civil War. While Gaynor presents the Conscription Crisis as a moment of unity among Irish nationalists, it was also a watershed political moment for Sinn Féin and the final nail in the coffin for the Irish Parliamentary Party.

Capt. Liam McMullen, also of the Irish Volunteers, made the point about Sinn Féin's gathering power forcefully:

The first incident which roused the people was the Conscription Menace in the early months of 1918. We all got into line preparing for resistance to Conscription. Nationalists of all denominations and many Orangemen [Protestants] were united in the determination to resist the conscription of Irishmen by the British Army... the threat of conscription and the organisation got together by all sections of the people to fight it created a situation

⁶⁰ John Gaynor, *Activities of Balbriggan Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Eastern Division, and of Brigade Active Service Unit. 1917-1921*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1447.pdf>.

which enabled Sinn Féin to progress by leaps and bounds. We had no trouble in getting recruits after the anti-Conscription campaign.⁶¹

Unity, in other words, paid political benefits for Sinn Féin, and Sinn Féin's "progress by leaps and bounds" was at the expense of the Irish Parliamentary Party. McMullen also reported an influx of recruits to the Irish Volunteers, the paramilitary group philosophically aligned with hardline nationalists like Sinn Féin, additional evidence of Sinn Féin's elevated position in the wake of the Conscription Crisis. The Irish Volunteers had essentially become a wing of Sinn Féin, blending the military and political goals and philosophies of the two groups and creating a synergy between them.

Several factors weakened Sinn Féin's main rival, the Irish Parliamentary Party. Although Parliament passed the Third Home Rule Bill in 1914, the outbreak of the First World War had postponed its implementation for nearly four years by April 1918. The Irish Parliamentary Party, staunch supporters of home rule, lost the faith of many people in Ireland as it became clear that the political victories of 1914 would be postponed. Additionally, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond, died in early March 1918. He had been the Party's leader since 1900 and his sudden death weakened their internal organization and damaged their public image.

The Conscription Crisis served as a moment of reckoning for the party and its supporters. Rev. Monsignor Michael Curran, an aide to a powerful archbishop and a strong anti-conscription advocate himself, described conscription as "the brutal shock

⁶¹ Liam McMullen, *National activities, Co. Antrim, 1908-1924*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0762.pdf>.

that woke them [former supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party] up to political realities”. For even its strongest supporters, the Conscription Crisis unmasked the “unreliability of the Party” and its “hopeless impotence” in fighting for Ireland in the face of British imperial interests.⁶²

By the early 20th century, the Irish Parliamentary Party had largely become a single-issue party. Although it stood for other policies such as land reform, it lived and died with Home Rule. A lack of charismatic leadership after Charles Parnell’s death and a reluctance to embrace the cultural nationalism popular among young people in Ireland at the turn of the century diminished their political standing and public image. The Party’s continued efforts to center Irish politics around Home Rule despite decades of frustration and a lack of tangible progress working within the British system also contributed to their waning success. This combined with the compounding crises of the war, the Easter Rising, and the Conscription Crisis, creating a vacuum in Irish society readily filled by more radical republican and nationalist groups.

While Irish Parliamentary Party had lost the support of the majority of the Irish people in early April 1918, it was far from clear which groups would fill the void. In his recollection, Curran juxtaposed the public anger at conscription with the lack of a coordinated political response. The country, he remembered, was “galvanized into life” upon the announcement of conscription, yet still disorganized outside the ranks of Sinn

⁶² Rev. Msgr. Michael M. Curran, *His recollection of Irish national affairs, 1912-1922*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0687.pdf>.

Féin. We were “all were agreed on resistance but in what form, by what means, under what leaders?”⁶³

Role of the Catholic Church

Monsignor Curran and his fellow clergy members began to fill that leadership vacuum. On April 9th they released a declaration of the Bishop's Standing Committee. By coming out strongly against conscription, Msgr. Curran says that the Catholic Church “established the moral basis of resistance, set a headline of national policy and, to a certain degree, provided a leadership”.⁶⁴ The declaration was eye-catching, and the Catholic church in Ireland had enormous cultural and political power.

Leaders like Curran moved the Catholic Church to the forefront of the anti-conscription movement and validated the strong public objection to conscription. The Catholic Church in Ireland served as a powerful social institution, from which many people derived their sense of morality and community. The public position of the Church against conscription, and, increasingly, in favor of Irish nationalism removed the psychological and social barriers to demonstrating that support publicly. The Catholic Church in Ireland became a surrogate for Irish nationalism during the Conscription Crisis, ultimately reflecting the opinion among the Irish public that the demands of the war had become unacceptable and the British Empire had become an abusive authority. Local priests were often respected and revered figures in their communities, and their

⁶³ Ibid., 252.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 252.

efforts were integral to the anti-conscription campaign. Michael O’Leary, a veteran of the Irish Volunteers, remembered an encounter with a particularly charismatic parish priest.

I remember before Mass in Kilgarvan on that day speaking to the local parish priest, the late Father Time Murphy, and suggested to him that he should come out strongly on the pulpit regarding the question of conscription. This he agreed to do. In fact, his denunciation regarding the measure [conscription resistance] we were to take was so strong that his name was mentioned in the House of Commons later and excerpts from his sermon quoted by Lord Curzon for the manner in which he had advised his flock to resist conscription.⁶⁵

O’Leary’s testimony is evidence of the importance of the local parish priest to the anti-conscription campaign. Father Murphy’s notoriety in the House of Commons shows how a local parish priest was important to the anti-conscription campaign. Local priests leveraged their authority and social importance and their relationships within their communities in the fight against conscription. Lord Curzon was a prominent British Conservative member of Parliament, colonial administrator in India, and perhaps a keen observer of anti-colonial sentiment. That he warned of this firebrand priest captures the public, and intimidating, power of the clergy.

The organizing role of the church comes through in the way the campaign developed. Representatives from different nationalist factions such as Sinn Féin, the All-for-Ireland League, and the Irish Parliamentary Party came together, with Labour Party leaders and prominent trade unionists to create the Irish Anti-Conscription Committee.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Michael O’Leary, (a) *I.R.B. Liverpool, 1908 -* ; (b) *Organisation of Irish Volunteers, Ireland – general, 1913 -* ; (c) *I.R.A. Liverpool, 1919 -* . Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0797.pdf>

⁶⁶ Thomas Johnson, *Labour, Trades Union and National activities, 1907-1918*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1755.pdf#page=1>.

On April 18th, the committee met at Mansion House in Dublin to devise an effective response to the conscription order. Largely under the direction of Eamon de Valera, the Sinn Féin leader, the committee agreed to combat conscription “by the most effective means at our disposal.” Shortly thereafter, the campaign received the blessing of the Catholic church.⁶⁷ In short order anti-conscription pledges decorated church doors and were passed between pews the following Sunday morning. They declared the following:

Denying the right of the British Government to enforce compulsory service in this country, we pledge ourselves solemnly to one another to resist conscription by the most effective means at our disposal.⁶⁸

Churches and clergy across the country administered this oath to over 2 million people that Sunday, sometimes leading their congregations in public displays. In Cork, the local bishop and a group of over 1,000 people stood outside the cathedral and took the oath, while a number of congregations in Galway marched into town squares instead.⁶⁹ The anti-conscription movement was largely organized and funded at the local level; it was not a coordinated national effort. Local churches collected over £250,000 and Defense Committees formed to advise local communities on how to best resist conscription.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Padraig Yeates, “‘HAVE YOU IN IRELAND ALL GONE MAD’ - the 1918 General Strike Against Conscription.” *Century Ireland*, July 2015. <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/have-you-in-ireland-all-gone-mad-the-1918-general-strike-against-conscription>.

⁶⁸ Rev. Msgr. Michael M. Curran, *His recollection of Irish national affairs, 1912-1922*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0687.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Padraig Yeates, “Anti-Conscription Campaign Ireland’s Most Complete, and Bloodless, Victory over British Imperialism.” *The Irish Times*, April 24, 2018. <http://web.archive.org/web/20190408012644/https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/anti-conscription-campaign-ireland-s-most-complete-and-bloodless-victory-over-british-imperialism-1.3451682>.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Labor Dimensions

The Irish Anti-Conscription Committee also called for a general strike across Ireland on April 23rd, which Labour Party leader Thomas Johnson referred to as “an outstanding demonstration of labour solidarity in this country”.⁷¹ The scale of the strike was unprecedented in Ireland. Workers went on strike at the railways, factories, shipyards, newspapers, and munitions factories among other places, attacking the heart of the economy.⁷² The strike successfully demonstrated the political power of organized labor and served as a sign of public opposition to British rule. At the Mansion House meeting, the Labour representatives also advocated for the most aggressive anti-conscription agenda. In addition to the general strike, they proposed that everyone pull their money out of the banks and that the railway workers effectively paralyze the transportation system to hurt the British response.⁷³

Although the committee nominally adopted the measures proposed by the Labour representatives, aside from the run on the banks, they were never implemented on a large scale. Ironically, the success of the general strike on April 23rd weakened the unified labor movement. The strike intensified divisions between the industrialized, Protestant areas in the northeast and the largely Catholic and nationalist areas in the southern counties whose economies were more heavily based on agriculture. The Catholic

⁷¹ Thomas Johnson, *Labour, Trades Union and National activities, 1907-1918*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1755.pdf#page=1>.

⁷² Liam Cahill, “The Empire Crumbles.” Essay. In *Forgotten Revolution: Limerick Soviet, 1919*. O'Brien Press, 1990.

⁷³ Padraig Yeates, “‘HAVE YOU IN IRELAND ALL GONE MAD’ - the 1918 General Strike Against Conscription.” *Century Ireland*, July 2015. <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/have-you-in-ireland-all-gone-mad-the-1918-general-strike-against-conscription>.

church's involvement in the anti-conscription movement and its tacit alliance with the nationalists may have also contributed to the disintegration of the labor movement.⁷⁴ The local parish, not the trade unions, became the basic organizational unit in the fight against conscription. Protestant trade unionists, who might have warmed to an anti-conscription message directed at the working classes, were put off by the movement's association with nationalism. rather than the trade unions, the anti-conscription movement alienated who otherwise would have opposed conscription on the basis that it would oppress the working class. The Church's appeal to nationalism may have galvanized many supporters. But the rejection of a purely class-based opposition campaign divided the labor movement along cultural and religious lines.

Conscription as a Political Opportunity for Sinn Féin

In the weeks following the initial meetings and the general strike, Sinn Féin leaders such as Eamon de Valera, who would later serve several terms as both head of government and head of state, spoke at anti-conscription rallies attended by tens of thousands. The rise in popularity of parties like Sinn Féin revealed a growing opposition to conscription on nationalist grounds, in addition to moralistic ones. Sinn Féin was not only *against* conscription, but *for* Irish independence and republicanism; what began as a public referendum on conscription evolved into one on Irish nationalism. These rallies, combined with the support of the labor movement and the Catholic church, solidified

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1.

public opinion against conscription. Membership in the Irish Volunteers grew and units across the country used anti-conscription funds collected at local Catholic parishes to buy weapons and other equipment.⁷⁵

To quell the unrest and protests against conscription, the British government pushed a fledgling conspiracy theory that Sinn Féin and the German Empire were working together to dubious ends in Ireland. One Irish judicial commissioner described the so-called “German Plot” as “the very thing to silence pro-Irish American feeling and so free his [Lloyd George’s] hands for enforcing conscription”.⁷⁶ It alleged, based on scant intelligence, that the Germans and Sinn Féin were conspiring to invade Ireland, an allegation that served as an occasion to arrest many Sinn Féin leaders. Whether truly an mistake on the part of British intelligence or a part of a larger British propaganda campaign against Sinn Féin, the allegations did not spur backlash against Sinn Féin either in Ireland or among the relatively uniformed public in the United States, where Irish immigrants, who were politically prominent, remained supportive of the nationalist movement. The British government arrested 73 Sinn Féin leaders on May 17th, including Eamon de Valera. Those arrests did little to slow the protests and only increased support for the party.⁷⁷ Like the arrests following the Easter Rising two years prior, they further entrenched anti-British sentiment and radicalized public opinion.

⁷⁵ Mark Kenna, *Churchill-Spa Company Irish Volunteers, Co. Kerry, 1914-1921*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1176.pdf#page=6>.

⁷⁶ Kevin R. O’Sheil, *National Activities and Dáil Éireann Land Courts, 1900-1921*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1770%20Section%206.pdf#page=17>.

⁷⁷ Padraig Yeates, “Anti-Conscription Campaign Ireland’s Most Complete, and Bloodless, Victory over British Imperialism.” *The Irish Times*, April 24, 2018.

With every crisis also comes an opportunity, and Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers leapt at the political opportunities that the Conscription Crisis provided them. Michael O’Kelly, the president of Sinn Féin in County Kildare, remembered how the Conscription Crisis turned into a golden opportunity for the Volunteers. As soon as conscription was announced, “Public meetings were organised all over the country.... the proposal was denounced and resolutions passed to resist its enforcement.” The Irish Volunteers, the 200,000 strong nationalist militia:

...went on quietly but steadily reorganising their forces and were not at all disturbed by the Conscription scare. In fact it was welcomed by them as likely to be an aid to their determination to make good the effort and sacrifices made in 1916, in as much as it would put some fight into those who had held aloof from their ranks and secure allies or sympathisers among those who would be moved by a feeling of self-preservation if not by the righteousness of the cause of the Volunteers. It was considered that the anti-conscription committees set up could also be utilised to turn to advantage the Conscription threat by acting as recruiting agencies for the Volunteers. All parties were, for the time being, united in the common purpose of defeating conscription.⁷⁸

O’Kelly’s testimony gives a look inside Sinn Féin’s political calculations and organizing strategies. The Irish Volunteers actually *welcomed* conscription. Conscription was the straw that would break the camel’s back. People who had hesitated to support the Volunteers and Sinn Féin could now see them as the defenders of their sons. While the harsh repression of the Easter Rising may have swayed public opinion against the British, its targets were the most fervent Irish nationalists. Conscription, on the other hand, touched every part of Irish society. The British government now threatened to drag their

<http://web.archive.org/web/20190408012644/https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/anti-conscription-campaign-ireland-s-most-complete-and-bloodless-victory-over-british-imperialism-1.3451682>.

⁷⁸ Michael O’Kelly, *National activities, Co. Kildare, 1913-1922. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History*. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1155.pdf#page=38>.

sons into an unpopular and seemingly endless war, creating a situation that forced people who had tried to stay out of politics or walk some kind of middle road to take sides.

The threat of conscription brought many to the side of Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers. It also persuaded many new recruits to join the Volunteers. Michael Rock, a member of the Volunteers since before the Easter Rising, described this phenomenon:

Early in 1918, the threat of conscription loomed heavy over the country and now every young man in the countryside was clamouring to join the Volunteers. Our strength now increased enormously and there was little to no restriction imposed as regards the qualities of the men who were joining. Our authorities were anxious to demonstrate the determination of the people to oppose conscription. The men who now joined were drawn from all classes including numbers from the upper strata of society who previously only sneered at us and would not be seen associating with us.⁷⁹

Rock's testimony is a perfect example of how Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers leveraged the dramatic shift in public opinion against the British during the Conscription Crisis to their benefit. The leaders of the Irish Volunteers also viewed the increased enrollment in their organization as a way to demonstrate the strength of public opinion. Even people "who previously only sneered at us [the Volunteers]" became eager to sign up as a direct result of the Conscription Crisis.

The turn in public opinion also emboldened the Irish Volunteers to train and demonstrate publicly. Law enforcement, administered by the British, did virtually nothing to stop the Volunteers. James Reilly, describing his time in the Volunteers during the Conscription Crisis, captured the mood of the moment:

⁷⁹ Michael Rock, *National Activities, 1914-1921*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1398.pdf#page=4>.

Drilling and training were now intensified and carried out openly under the watchful eyes of the R.I.C. [Royal Irish Constabulary]. That force was, I believe, just as opposed to conscription as we were, and I am sure that their reports to their superiors did not suffer anything as a result. Anti-conscription meetings galore were held, to which we paraded usually at full strength.⁸⁰

The R.I.C., whose ethnic and religious breakdown largely matched the general population of Ireland, had put down many nationalist protests and rebellions over the years, often violently; they were no friends of the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin. That history and Reilly's confidence that they oppose conscription just as much he does seem to be at odds yet are a perfect example of just how unpopular conscription was in Ireland in 1918.

The 1918 General Elections

The elections of 1918 were called to seat the new British Parliament. Sinn Féin, defiant, pledged to send its delegates to Dublin, rather than London, and set up a new Irish parliament called the Dáil Éireann. The atmosphere surrounding the elections was tense, but Sinn Féin won an overwhelming victory. It remains difficult to discern whether Sinn Féin's overwhelming electoral victory in 1918 was due to legitimate support. The Irish Volunteers worked at local polling places to ensure Sinn Féin's victory and sometimes acted questionably. One Volunteers, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Ryan, describing the role of the Volunteers during the election, said:

During the election days, the Volunteers mounted guards on the polling booths to prevent any attempt at hooliganism by any other elements. Volunteer guards accompanied the

⁸⁰ James Reilly, *Activities of Kinnegad Company, Irish Volunteers, Co. Westmeath, 1917-21*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1593.pdf>.

ballot boxes and mounted guard on them during the count, so that, as in other places, the Volunteers appeared to be in complete control of the election.⁸¹

Sinn Féin rode the wave of support from the anti-conscription movement into the general elections in the fall of 1918. As one brigade engineer named Seamus Babbington from Tipperary described it,

the 1918-1919 general election was a walk-over in 90 per cent of the constituencies ... the Home Rule Irish Party put forward no candidate, closely following the attempt to force conscription on the Irish people. The Sinn Féin movement, which was the leading force against conscription, gained remarkable respect, honour and prestige.⁸²

The heavy presence of the Irish Volunteers during the 1918 election may have been a form of voter intimidation, and Thomas Ryan's testimony provides some evidence for this. The Volunteers, almost certainly armed to the teeth, "accompanied" ballot boxes and guarded them during the actual counting, under the guise of preventing "any attempt at hooliganism". A voter who might have wanted to endorse the Irish Parliamentary Party, or anyone besides Sinn Féin, might well be given pause by an armed party of Irish Volunteers, understood to be the military wing of Sinn Féin. Voter intimidation, under the guise of "election security" or something similar, is an unfortunately common phenomenon. From Ryan's testimony, it seems that the Irish Volunteers took steps at the local level to intimidate voters and influence the counting process, all but ensuring a Sinn Féin victory in the election.

⁸¹ Lieut.-Colonel Thomas Ryan, *National and military activities cos. Tipperary and Kilkenny, 1914-1921*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0783.pdf#page=2>.

⁸² Seamus Babington, *Activities of Carrick-on-Suir Battn., Tipperary III Brigade, I.R.A., 1916-22, & Brigade Flying Column 1920-21*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1595.pdf>.

On the other hand, the Irish Volunteers also seemed to have been involved in the 1918 election in other ways, such as canvassing voters and organizing campaign meetings for Sinn Féin. One Volunteer, James Reilly, described the “huge amount of work” done by the Volunteers in the election quite differently from Ryan:

In the end of 1918 a general election was held throughout the country and Sinn Féin, which was the political wing of the movement for independence and which was getting organised throughout the country, decided to contest all the seats against the Irish Parliamentary Party. The Sinn Féin candidates were pledged to not take their seats in the English Parliament but to set up an Irish government in Dublin. Quite a good few of the Sinn Féin candidates were still in jail at this period. The Volunteers again carried out a huge amount of work in connection with the election. They were busily engaged in canvassing voters and in parading to election meetings and so forth. The Volunteers provided Volunteer parties at all the Sinn Féin to protect the speakers from the hostile followers of the Irish [Parliamentary] Party... On the polling day, the Volunteers provided parties for duty at the polling stations to ensure that the supporters of Sinn Féin would be allowed to cast their votes freely. The Volunteers also did an amount of personation on behalf of Sinn Féin. The election went off quietly enough and there were no serious clashes.⁸³

Reilly’s testimony portrays Sinn Féin as under attack from other elements. The jailed Sinn Féin candidates to whom he refers were imprisoned by the British, perhaps as a part of their response to the fabricated “German plot”. For Reilly, the heavy presence of the Irish Volunteers during the election, then, was both necessary and righteous. His jab at the Irish Parliamentary Party and its supporters, who he accuses of harassing Sinn Féin candidates, also paints Sinn Féin and its candidates as the victims of outside, hostile elements, necessitating the presence of the Volunteers to ensure their safety and that of

⁸³ James Reilly, *Activities of Kinnegad Company, Irish Volunteers, Co. Westmeath, 1917-21*. Witness statement. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1593.pdf>.

their supporters. This moment of unity that formed during the Conscription Crisis passed very quickly. is also an example of the swift departure from the pan-nationalist front

The importance of the Irish Volunteers to Sinn Féin's success in the 1918 election is also clear from the testimony of Sinn Féin's political leaders. Nicholas Whittle, the director of Sinn Féin's election campaign in Waterford, a city in the southeast of Ireland, described how the Volunteers pushed Sinn Féin over the top in his constituency.

Understaffed in the weeks leading up the election, Whittle telegraphed the Central Executive of Sinn Féin and to other local offices in search of help. He described the response:

The result of my telegrams was, firstly, a complete election staff came on to us from Limerick city and were a tower of strength in the ensuing campaign; secondly, every other district that got our telegram, immediately assumed that squads of volunteers were required again in Waterford to deal with the Redmondite [supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party] mobs because, by every train coming into the city, squads of men, twelve to twenty strong, arrived. Each man carried a heavy stick, while some carried firearms. Apparently, the fame or ill-fame of the scenes in Waterford during the bye-election of February, 1918, had reached throughout the country, and Waterford had come to be looked upon as one of the principal battle fronts for the Volunteers in the country.⁸⁴

It is a sobering portrait of political polarization. Whittle requested staff, good public speakers and canvassers; the central organization of Sinn Féin and other local offices sent him armed Irish Volunteers instead. They saw Waterford, which was to be one of the contested elections that fall, as one of their "principal battle fronts" against the Irish Parliamentary Party. The democratic contest between political parties had become a

⁸⁴ Nicholas Whittle, (a) *East Waterford Brigade, 1918-1921*; (b) *Election work, Co. Waterford, 1918*. From Bureau of Military History. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1105.pdf#page=29>.

war between themselves and the Irish Parliamentary Party. Whittle acknowledged his awkward situation:

I was in a peculiar position now, as I had set out, in the first instance, to look for good platform speakers and able canvassers as we had in the earlier bye-election. Instead of that, the great bulk of the assistance offered us was in the shape of Irish Volunteers for police duty. To be candid, I quietly winked my eye at the whole thing. I had seen the men from G.H.Q. in the bye-election bring in Volunteers from all over the country to ensure that our supporters could vote as they wished and I came to the conclusion that our only chance of impressing the bullying element, which dominated the Redmondite party in Waterford, was to show them as full a muster of strength as possible... I was sheltering myself behind this excuse until a real showdown would come in the city and I felt that the policy of having a strong detachment of volunteers at our back would speak for itself.⁸⁵

His candidness shows us just how closely Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers worked together during the 1918 election. Echoing the sentiments of the Irish Volunteers themselves, Whittle thought that their presence in Waterford was necessary to combat the “Redmondite mobs” and the “bullying element” threatening the safety of Sinn Féin and their supporters. Whittle’s concerns reflect the polarized and tense atmosphere of the election. The “Redmondite mobs” that he speaks of show that Sinn Féin was not the only party flexing its muscle and riling up its supporters. However, Whittle also “winked his eye at the whole thing”, perhaps implying that he needed or wanted the Volunteers present for more than just protection. He also wanted them in Waterford in the event of a “real showdown”, alluding to the War for Independence, which broke out only a couple of months later in January 1919.

Sinn Féin won 73 of the 105 seats despite winning less than 50% of the vote. In the aftermath of their victory, the Sinn Féin members chose to remain in Dublin, form

⁸⁵ Ibid., 31.

their own parliament, and declare Ireland an independent republic in January 1919. The Conscription Crisis proved to be a watershed moment for Sinn Féin, solidifying them as the leaders of the Irish nationalist movement. Support from other influential parts of Irish society like the Catholic Church and the labor movement during the Conscription Crisis helped rally public support for Sinn Féin, which bore itself out in the elections that fall, showing the immediate political ramifications of the Conscription Crisis. A crisis of empire, it laid the way for the establishment of an independent Irish republic.

IV. Collective Memory

The importance of the Conscription Crisis to Irish nationalism warrants an examination of how it was documented and commemorated by the young Irish republic. After the failure of the Easter Rising of 1916, the Conscription Crisis offered Sinn Féin another opportunity to rally against British rule in Ireland. The unpopularity of conscription among the Irish population combined with growing anti-British sentiment following their harsh repression of the Rising to create a golden opportunity for Sinn Féin. The success of the anti-conscription movement and its impact on Sinn Féin's success in the 1918 elections have given the Conscription Crisis a prominent place in the collective memory of Irish nationalism.

What is collective memory?

The notion of collective memory can be traced to the 20th century French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs. He first posited that a “group memory” exists out of, but in tandem with, the memory of an individual. In his 1925 book, “On Collective Memory”, Halbwachs writes that “the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories”.⁸⁶ The process of collective memory formation is therefore a two-sided process in which both the memory of an individual and that of the group reinforce each other. In forming their memories, individuals draw on the scaffolding framework of memory provided by the group, which in turn incorporates and is fortified by the aggregation of individual memories.

Collective memory is difficult to define; tracking its development over time is equally complicated. The collective memory of a society takes shape through its documentation and commemoration of the past. In 2014, as the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising approached, the Dublin City Council approved a project creating a historical path through the city, leading people to notable locations associated with the Rising and marked with green bricks.⁸⁷ This project is reminiscent of the Freedom Trail in Boston, created in the 1950s to take tourists and residents alike on a walking tour commemorating the American Revolution in the city. However, the Easter Rising Trail in

⁸⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p .40.

⁸⁷ Kayla Hertz, “Dublin’s 1916 Rising Freedom Trail Will Be Based on Boston’s”, *Irish Central*, Dec. 16, 2014.

Dublin was merely a prelude to the massive military parade held in the city in 2016, the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising. On Easter Sunday 2016, nearly 1 million people gathered in the streets of Dublin to view the parade, which featured almost 4,000 military personnel, along with a fleet of artillery pieces, armored vehicles, and aircraft. These commemorations and ceremonies are the manifestation of the collective memory of the Easter Rising, and they generally reflect the country's reverence for it. These commemorative and ceremonial processes are inextricably tied to the identity and self-image of the group.

Any individual's recollections of past events and their feelings about the past can and do vary wildly. Yet, as we see in the case of the Bureau of Military History, patterns emerge, and the threads that create a collective historical memory become visible at scale. The extent to which a culture can have a uniform collective memory is unclear, especially in a society as large and varied as Ireland. The ability of collective memory to forge cultural identity can sometimes be overstated. The process of memory formation is selective and often unreliable; projection, distortion, and repression are all normal and common parts of this process.

Although collective memory often walks the line between history and cultural identity, it is synonymous with neither. While the study of history must embrace the complexities and ambiguities of the past, collective memory can be tempted to shy away from them. While one could argue that collective memory can be a tool and process for defining and refining cultural identity, it must also struggle with the ambiguities of history, as well as the parts of the historical record that may run counter to an established

societal narrative. In this way, collective memory can serve as a bridge between the daunting ambiguity of history and the desire to anchor our cultural identities in powerful and cohesive historical narratives.

The collective historical memory of Ireland is a traumatized one. Oliver Cromwell's quasi-genocidal invasion in the 17th century began nearly three centuries of English domination, which only came to an end after the First World War. The many years of political disenfranchisement and economic subjugation by the British created a strain of collective historical memory in Ireland that many would consider being defined by this trauma. This strain of the collective historical memory emphasizes the romanticism of failed rebellions like the Young Irelanders and the Easter Rising, the destruction of the Famine, and the erosion of Irish culture and national identity in the face of British colonialism. While it glorifies and romanticizes the heroes and rebels of Irish history, it remains defined by the recurrent traumas of colonialism and the often-thwarted struggle for independence and self-determination.

Nationalism derives its political power not from its philosophical coherence, but rather from the myths that it creates and perpetuates. A self-aware nation has foundational historical narratives that establish it as an actor in history with its own story, not unlike the story of an individual person.⁸⁸ These myths are drawn and spun from the well of a society's collective memory, which is itself a product of the group's documentation and commemoration of its own history. In this vein, the Bureau of

⁸⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, p. 205. London: Verso, 1983.

Military History is not only a historical archive, but a memory project and a powerful political tool.

The Bureau of Military History as a Memory Project

One of the most important archives of testimony about both the Conscription Crisis and the larger independence movement is called the Bureau of Military History. The project originated in 1933 when the Irish Minister for Education Thomas Derrig suggested that the Department of Defence take steps to preserve a record of the Easter Rising of 1916 and the War for Independence (1919-21).⁸⁹ Before entering the government, Derrig fought in the War for Independence and the subsequent Civil War for the anti-Treaty forces, becoming a key political ally of Eamon de Valera. In his cabinet position with the conservative government Fianna Fail, Derrig became concerned with the lack of knowledge of the revolution and independence movement among young people in Ireland's schools. Additionally, Derrig saw a need for a large-scale Irish account of the period to match the British historical narrative, quickly becoming the default in his eyes.⁹⁰ Derrig's attitude in 1933 shows how the archive tells two stories. On the surface it clearly tells the story of the revolutionary period. Under the surface it also tells the story of the archive's formation, the politics of the young Irish republic, and the desire of the young country to establish its credibility and its place in history.

⁸⁹ Diarmaid Ferriter, "In Such Deadly Earnest", *The Dublin Review*, no. 12 (2003), <https://thedublinreview.com/article/in-such-deadly-earnest/>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Commemoration, whether in the form of public memorials or official histories like the Bureau of Military History, has been a major part of public life in modern Ireland. Depending on when you lived, you could have been commemorating the 1867 Rising, the rebellion of 1798, or any number of other people or events important to the national cultural identity and collective memory. The establishment of an independent Ireland meant, among other things, new additions to the cadre of iconic events and people to be commemorated and memorialized; the former revolutionaries now running the government knew this and used the Bureau of Military History as a way of staking their claim to a space in the collective memory of Irish society.

In 1947, the preservation of “old Ireland” was another goal of the Bureau. This aim aligned with other projects like the Irish Folklore Commission, established in 1935 to collect traditional Irish folktales and other parts of folk tradition for posterity. Both the Irish Folklore Commission and the Bureau of Military History sought to preserve stories and other materials for fear that they would be forgotten by future generations.⁹¹ This desire to preserve a piece of “old Ireland”, whether in the form of a folktale from the Irish Folklore Commission or a witness statement from the Bureau of Military History, was another goal of the Bureau and projects like it.

The Bureau of Military history can also be looked at in the context of other government-sponsored “official” histories, the number of which exploded during the

⁹¹ Bo Almqvist, “The Irish Folklore Commission: Achievement and Legacy.” *Béaloides The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society* 45-47 (1977): 6.

1940s and 1950s.⁹² The generation of Irish revolutionaries that took power in the government during the early years of the Irish republic was anxious to preserve *their* side of the story, and more generally a record of *their* war. The witness statement collection efforts of both the Department of Education and the Department of Defence in the 1930s concentrated on military officers, especially those who served in the War of Independence (rather than the subsequent civil war, which arose when certain groups refused to accept the provisions of the Anglo-Irish Treaty), reflecting this hostile political environment still informed by the civil war.⁹³ The somewhat more inclusive efforts of the Bureau of Military History represent a gradual shift away from those lingering hostilities.

While some individuals may have had ulterior motives shaping their testimonies, historian Eve Morrison says that “outright liars and conscious distorters are encountered in oral history far less than has sometimes been suggested”.⁹⁴ The majority of witnesses were, in her estimation, “ordinary, fallible human beings who lost friends and family members to the conflict, and who had themselves taken part in extraordinary, and often highly traumatic events”.⁹⁵ In other words, inconsistencies of facts, dates, etc. in the archive are not a sign of its weakness as a source, but rather a reflection of the nature of memory.

⁹² Eve Morrison, “Bureau of Military History Witness Statements as Sources for the Irish Revolution,” n.d., <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/about/historical-essays/>.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Although there was some initial enthusiasm for Derrig's proposal, it quickly waned due to the controversial military pension program, created in 1934. The government rejected over 80 per cent of all pension applications and many veterans accused them of playing politics with their pensions, favoring veterans of the anti-Treaty forces in the Civil war since Finanna Fail, the political descendants of the anti-Treaty forces, were in government.⁹⁶ The Irish Committee of Historical Sciences was created in 1938 to represent Ireland on the International Committee of Historical Sciences, an association of historians and other scholars from around the world. In 1943, they revived the idea for a national oral history project about the revolutionary period. Despite the time between Derrig's initial proposal and the Committee of Historical Science's newfound interest, the 1943 design for the archive largely matched Derrig's vision of a database of narrative witness statements.

Although members of the committee and its professional historians hoped to administer the collection themselves, the Department of Defence commandeered the project in May 1946, claiming that they were in a better position to carry out the logistics of such a project. They began collecting witness statements the following year. Between 1947 and 1957, the Irish Army collected almost 2,000 witness statements, photographs, and audio recordings. They focused on describing and depicting the period between 1913 and 1921, which historians now describe as the "revolutionary period" bounded on one side by the passage of the Third Home Rule Bill in 1913 and the end of the War for

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Independence in 1921 on the other.⁹⁷ This periodization of Irish history emphasizes the passage, but ultimate futility of the Third Home Rule Bill in 1913, defining it as the beginning of the revolution. The Bureau of Military history is a large archive, containing almost 2,000 witness statements from prominent politicians like Eamon de Valera, labor leaders like Thomas Johnson, and members of the Catholic clergy.

In addition to its value to historians, the Bureau of Military History also served as a social engineering project for the nascent Irish republic. As the generation of young people who lived through the revolutionary period began to give way to a younger generation with fainter memories, the need to reinforce the positive societal narratives that glorified the heroes of the revolution became apparent. While some people involved in the establishment of the Bureau of Military History may have had overt political goals, there was also an understanding among Fianna Fail politicians that cooperation from Fine Gael, the major opposition party in Ireland, was necessary to ensure the credibility of the project.⁹⁸ To foster cooperation among political adversaries, the Bureau specifically stated that its goal was to collect material from “the formation of the Irish Volunteers I 1913 to [the signing of the Truce] 11 July 1921”⁹⁹, effectively excluding testimony about the Civil War. By excluding this testimony, they hoped that the Bureau would have more cross-party credibility in a polarized political environment in large part still based on Civil War loyalties. At a meeting of the Irish Historical Society in 1946, historian and

⁹⁷ Diarmaid Ferriter, “In Such Deadly Earnest”, *The Dublin Review*, no. 12 (2003), <https://thedublinreview.com/article/in-such-deadly-earnest/>.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood P.S. O’Heagarty remarked that such a project was necessary to counteract those advocating a “post-insurrection ideology” that, in his view, reduced the historical significance of the independence movement.¹⁰⁰

O’Heagarty wanted to place the revolution at the center of Irish history, both as a new beginning and a part of a larger redemption narrative; the Bureau of Military History could be used as a tool to solidify that historical narrative and serve as a buffer against new scholarship challenging it. By creating the Bureau of Military History as the official Irish account of the period, the people tasked with creating it had an enormous impact on the collective memory of Irish society. Every choice they made, from choosing who to interview, who to leave out, what to ask them about, and how to present it, affects the way that we are able to study the period today.

V. Conclusion

The Conscription Crisis stands apart in the collective memory as a moment of unity among competing nationalist factions, as well as a watershed political moment for Sinn Féin and the independence movement. Its documentation by the Bureau of Military History demonstrates these phenomena, and its trove of testimony from the period recalls an almost nostalgic moment in an era dominated by Civil War politics. The creation of the Bureau of Military History and its representations of the Conscription Crisis of 1918

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

reflect the desire of those in power in Ireland, themselves former revolutionaries, to cement their place in Irish history and the collective memory of Irish society.

Conscription brought the idea of British abuse in Ireland to the doorstep of every mother and father in the country. The anti-conscription movement transformed mere public objection to conscription into a legitimate (and successful) resistance, all the while priming Sinn Féin to win at the ballot box in 1918 and declare independence. For all of these reasons, the Conscription Crisis is a significant moment in the larger story of the Irish independence movement and occupies a unique space in the collective memory of Ireland.

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