

# Ireland and the Great War

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After the flag waving and pageants that the Irish state indulged in to celebrate the centenary of 1913 Lockout, the first in a decade-long series of centenaries, the hundredth anniversary of World War I is upon us. Each centenary is celebrated in isolation, in effect to depoliticise these events and present them as a historical theme park where the great and the good are wheeled out to reflect on the past as if it has no consequences for today.

If we are to heed the Irish media it seems that having a grandfather or relative who fought, or preferably died, in the Great War of 1914-18 is the latest must-have fashion accessory for the readers of the Irish Times and the Irish Independent. In these features the poems of Francis Ledwidge and Tom Kettle are invoked to present the heroic sacrifice of the 200,000 who answered the call to arms and the 50,000 who died that Catholic Belgium might be saved from the 'Hun'. If 'saving Balgium' did not entice young men to enlist then self interest was tried - one poster enjoined the farmers of Ireland to 'join up and defend your possessions'<sup>1</sup>. The reality for those who enlisted was appalling. This was killing on an industrial scale. Half of the men who died have no known grave. High explosive shells turned many of the dead into dust. Even the term commemoration is an injustice to what happened - the First World War was a catastrophe and the losses so horrendous that it overshadows in our memory the losses of World War II. The invention of the machine gun made a mockery of the concept of tens of thousands of soldiers charging the enemy lines as if in a re-enactment of the Battle of Waterloo a hundred years later. On

the first day of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 almost 60,000 British soldiers were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. By the end of the Somme offensive in September over one million men had perished and the front line had been pushed forward by five miles. The 36th Ulster division was one of the hardest hit; it suffered over 5100 casualties with approximately 2100 dead.



Farmers of Ireland, Join up & defend your possessions

## Origins

The debate over the origins of the war is as old as the war itself. Even before the first shots were fired Europe's imperial leaders were constructing narratives depicting their opponents as barbarians and warmongers. The debate has produced a literature of unrivalled size with at least 30,000 articles in English alone on the subject. This was the age of imperialism when the great empires clashed in the rush to expand and dominate in Africa, the Middle East, and the Baltic. It was inevitable that these clashes would eventually lead to war. A series of crises had raised tensions between the major European powers in the decades leading up to the war; the Moroccan crisis of 1905, the Bosnian annexation in 1908, the Baltic wars of 1912 and 1913

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1011-ireland-and-the-great-war/>

- anyone of these could have pushed the imperialist powers into war. In addition internal crises resulting from the rise in working class militancy, nationalist movements looking for independence, and the suffragette movement had created tensions in the heartlands of the major European powers.

The Great War killed at least ten million young men, and wounded at least twenty million more. It destroyed four empires; the Russian, the German, the Austro-Hungarian, and the Ottoman. It paved the way for the Russian Revolution of 1917 and changed the course of Irish history. It was, as the historian Fritz Stern put it, 'the first calamity of the 20th century from which all other calamities sprang'.<sup>2</sup> But this inconvenient truth of Irish participation in the Great War was not acceptable to the rapidly developing nationalist narrative of the late 1920s. The historian Roy Foster has suggested that the First World War 'should be seen as one of the most decisive events in modern Irish history'.<sup>3</sup> Here, Foster is only partially correct, the political trajectory in Ireland would have led to clash with Britain with or without the Great War. But Foster is right to suggest that the amnesia that has affected Ireland on the issue of the war needs to be corrected.

A total of 206,000 Irishmen served in the British forces during the war. Of these, 58,000 were already enlisted in the British Army or Navy before the war broke out. Another 130,000 men were volunteers recruited from Ireland for the duration of the war. Of these 24,000 originated from the National Volunteers mainly from the south of Ireland and 26,000 joined from the Ulster Volunteers. The voluntary recruitment figures for Ireland were: 44,000 en-

listed in 1914, 45,000 followed in 1915, but this dropped to 19,000 in 1916 and 14,000 in 1917. The 1918 figure has been given as between 11,000 and 15,000. The recruitment rate in Ulster matched that of Britain itself, while that of Leinster and Munster were about two thirds of the British rate of recruitment, while Connacht lagged even further behind them in the number of volunteers who joined up. Several factors contributed to the decline in recruitment after 1916. One was the heavy casualties suffered by Irish units in the war. The 10th Irish Division suffered very heavy losses at Gallipoli in 1915, while the 16th and 36th Divisions were shattered at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. The Munster Regiment and Irish Guards' experience was typical of the decimation of the British Army in the campaigns of 1914 in France and Belgium. By the end of 1914, those regiments deployed in the original British Expeditionary Force had been shattered by very heavy casualties. On average, in each battalion of 1,000 men, only one officer and 30 men remained unscathed.

A second important factor was the Catholic Church's condemnation of the war in July 1915. The Pope Benedict XV issued an encyclical calling on all powers to end the war and come to an agreement. As a result, the Irish Catholic bishops publicly called on Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party to withdraw Irish support for the war. Also, it appears that Irish troops in the British Army were treated with particular harshness. They constituted just two per cent of the army, yet they were the recipients of eight per cent (271) of all death sentences imposed by court martial.

There are many reasons as to why opposition to the war hardened in Ireland.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in 'The First Calamity', *London Review of Books*, 29 August 2013, p. 3

<sup>3</sup>Roy Foster, quoted in *Ireland in the 20th Century*, Charles Townsend, (Hodder Arnold, London, 1999), p. 68.

The Easter 1916 Rising in Ireland and in particular the suppression of the rebellion and the execution of the leaders of the Rising changed the political atmosphere in Ireland leading to the rise of Sinn Fein, the virtual destruction of the old Irish Parliamentary Party, and a dramatic fall in support for the war. The remarks attributed to National Volunteer and poet, Francis Ledwidge, who was to die in the Third battle of Ypres in 1917, perhaps best exemplifies the changing Irish nationalist sentiment towards enlisting, the War, and to the Germans and British. 'I joined the British Army because she stood between Ireland and an enemy of civilisation and I would not have her say that she defended us while we did nothing but pass resolutions'. In the aftermath of the 1916 Rising and the execution of the leaders he said: 'If someone were to tell me now that the Germans were coming in over our back wall, I wouldn't lift a finger to stop them. They could come!'<sup>4</sup>

## The War in Ireland

In the decade before the war the United Kingdom experienced a series of crises that were almost unprecedented in modern times around the struggle for constitution reform in the House of Lords, the series of strikes that were part of the 'great unrest', the fight for the vote for women and the issue of Irish Home Rule. In Ireland the crisis was at its most extreme. The rise of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union under the socialist leadership of James Larkin and James Connolly had brought the working class on to the stage of history. The terrible defeat during the Lockout of 1913/14 had set the movement back but had not destroyed the organisa-

tion and incipient militancy of Irish workers. The British Officer class in Ireland had effectively mutinied in March 1914 on the issue of whether they would obey orders to suppress armed resistance to Home Rule by the Ulster Unionists. The country was awash with arms; three civilian armies were drilling and armed, and as the sun set over the last day of July 1914 it appeared that the rival parties were on a collision course.

The Third Home Rule Act was placed on the statute books with Royal Assent on 18 September 1914. However, the operation of this Bill was, suspended for the duration of the war. Moreover it was resisted fiercely by Unionists, concentrated in Ulster. In 1913, they had formed an armed militia, the Ulster Volunteers, to resist the implementation of Home Rule or to exclude Ulster itself from the settlement. Nationalists in response formed a rival militia, the Irish Volunteers, to defend the constitutional rights of the Irish people, and to put pressure on Britain to keep its promise of Home Rule. Conflict between the two armed groups looked possible in the early months of 1914. However, the outbreak of the war on 4 August engulfed Britain in a crisis that dwarfed its problems in Ireland. Prime Minister Asquith shelved the problem by putting the Home Rule bill on the statute books, but postponed its implementation until after the war ended. He also provided that the bill would not be implemented until statutory provision has been made for the exclusion of the Ulster counties. In this way he managed to appease both the constitutional nationalists and the unionists. But as FSL Lyons noted; 'It was, of course, an illusion. The Irish problem had been refrigerated, not liquidated. Nothing had

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<sup>4</sup>Francis Ledwidge, *Cornhill Magazine*, London, No. 288, June 1920, p. 698.

<sup>5</sup>FSL Lyons, 'The developing crisis, 1907-14', *A New History of Ireland*, 9 Vols., (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989), Vol. 6, p. 144.

been solved, and all was still to play for'.<sup>5</sup>

On 3 August 1914 on the outbreak of the war John Redmond in the House of Commons in London pledged Ireland's support for the British war effort and suggested that the defence of Ireland should be entrusted to the Irish and Ulster Volunteers in order to free up British troops for the war, provided the volunteers would not be required to take the oath of Allegiance or serve overseas. The Unionist leader Edward Carson had promised immediate Unionist support for the war effort. He was motivated in this by two main factors, one being genuine identification with the British Empire, the other being a desire to demonstrate the loyalty of Unionists to the British government, despite having formed an armed militia in defiance of it over Home Rule. Redmond's speech on the 3rd of August may have been controversial but when Redmond made an impromptu speech on 20 September at Woodenbridge in County Wexford offering the Irish Volunteers for service in France, his actions caused a crisis within the Volunteers:

Go on drilling and make yourself efficient for the Work, and then account yourselves as men, not only for Ireland itself, but wherever the fighting line extends, in defence of right, of freedom, and religion in this war.<sup>6</sup>

The organisation split into two factions, the larger, comprising about 170,000 stayed with Redmond, and was the re-named National Volunteers; whose sole function was to supply a stream of recruits for the war in Europe. The minority about 11,000, comprising the most militant and republican section split off to form a new organisation, while retaining

the name of the Irish Volunteers. In the first months of the war Herbert Kitchener was raising a New Service Army in support of the relatively small pre-war regular Army. The Unionists were granted their own Division, the 36th (Ulster) Division which had its own reserve militia officers and its own symbols. It was largely recruited from the Ulster Volunteer force and had a strongly Protestant and unionist identity. Redmond requested the War Office to allow the formation of a separate Irish Brigade as had been done for the Ulster Volunteers. The British Government, however, was suspicious of Redmond after he declared to the Volunteers that they would return as an armed and trained Irish Army by the end of 1915 to resist Ulster's opposition to Home Rule. Eventually he was granted the gesture of the 16th (Irish) Division. Unlike the 36th (Ulster) Division, the 16th was led by English officers. In one of those historical contingences the first British engagement in Europe of the War was made by the 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards on 22 August 1914. They encountered several German cavalymen on patrol near Mons, when Corporal Edward Thomas had the distinction of firing the first British shots in the War.

Both political camps, the nationalist and unionist, entered the war expecting the gratitude of the British administration for their willingness to sacrifice themselves and the rank and file of their parties. Neither foresaw that in the First World War, all special interests would be expendable.

## The Road to 1916

Shortly after the outbreak of the war the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) had decided to organise a rebellion in Ireland before the war ended. In effect the IRB now controlled

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<sup>6</sup>F X Martin, *The Irish Volunteers*, (James Duffy, Dublin, 1963), p. 145.

the Volunteers, but the more conservative elements in the leadership of the Volunteers still commanded considerable support. Both factions hoped to profit from the war on the continent. The IRB faction of Clarke, Pearse and McDonagh were determined to organise a rebellion while Britain was otherwise occupied. The MacNeill/ Hobson group wanted to build up the volunteers into an effective army, who would be joined by thousands of demobbed and disillusioned Irish veterans of the war who could then demand Irish independence. Neither side believed the war would be protracted; less than a year at most, hence the need to implement their plans as quickly as possible. But, in the meantime they were prepared to fight using guerrilla tactics if the British tried to suppress the Volunteers or introduced conscription into Ireland. The IRB faction in the Irish Volunteers made contact with Germany requesting weapons and also sounded out the possibility of a German force landing in Ireland in the event of a rebellion. Despite the British propaganda of a 'German plot' in fact German assistance to the Irish revolutionaries was minimal - a few thousand ancient rifles and a shipment of arms that never arrived in the days before the 1916 Rising.

The question as to whether the Irish Volunteers or the Citizen Army should fight a defensive or an offensive war was a political, tactical and moral question that divided both organisations. Francis Sheehy-Skeffington a pacifist and member of the Citizen Army Council wrote to Thomas McDonagh of the Volunteers in May 1915 warning him of the danger that the 'movement could be used for aggressive rather than defensive purposes'.<sup>7</sup> In

contrast to Sheehy-Skeffington's position, Connolly's position was political rather than moral, whether the rebellion was a defensive or offensive war was just a tactical question. If the British intervened to disarm the Volunteers or the ICA, or introduced conscription in Ireland then he would fight a defensive war that would have mass popular support. Connolly was a Marxist and supporter of the Socialist International. In 1907 the congress at Stuttgart had passed a resolution that in the event of an imperialist war the duty of socialists was to do all in their power to stop the war, and use the crisis to overthrow capitalism. Connolly was determined to turn the imperialist war into a class war. As he told Cathal O'Shannon: 'I have missed the opportunity before, but I won't miss it this time'.<sup>8</sup>

The rebellion in April 1916 was dominated by the nationalist politics of the IRB and the more conservative politics of the Irish Volunteers. But, this was leavened by the support of James Connolly and the Irish Citizen Army who saw the opportunity to light a flame that might inspire socialists across Europe to oppose the war and turn their guns on their own ruling class. Despite the failure in military terms of the 1916 Rising, almost eighteen months later the Russian working class did precisely that. The war in Europe was one of the decisive factors that pushed Connolly and the nationalists into an armed conflict with the British state. In doing so Connolly had won a place for the working class in the emerging struggle for Irish independence.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Marnie Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2009), p. 176.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in DR OConnor Lysaght, 'The Irish Citizen Army: 1913-1916', *History Ireland*, March/April 2006, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 20.

## Conscription Crisis

The 1916 Rising and its aftermath had hammered the first nails into the coffin of the Irish Parliamentary Party, but the conscription crisis of 1917/18 killed it off. But, Sinn Fein was not the only beneficiary of the militant opposition to the extension of conscription to Ireland, and the realignment of the political landscape in Ireland. It also revealed to everyone the potential power of the Irish working class.



Unlike the rest of the United Kingdom, conscription was never imposed on Ireland. However, the German offensive in April 1917 had strained the manpower and resources of the British Army. Sir Henry Wilson, the chief of staff, insisted that conscription must be extended to Ireland despite the complete opposition of all almost all sectors of Irish political opinion. Wilson was determined to force conscription on Ireland even at the cost of civil disturbances. He argued that he needed the men in order to hold the line in France. He was not afraid 'to take 100,000 to 150,000 recalcitrant conscripted Irishmen into an army of two and a half million, fighting in five theatres of war'.<sup>9</sup> The British Govern-

ment hoped to appease moderate opinion in Ireland by linking the issue of conscription to that of Home Rule for Ireland. But this was too little, too late - positions had hardened in Ireland and even the feeble Irish Parliamentary Party felt constrained to withdraw from the House of Commons when the Military Service bill was passed on 16 April 1917.

Predictably, Ireland exploded in anger. Two days before the passage of the bill a demonstration against conscription had mobilised nearly 10,000 in Belfast. On 18 April 1917 at a conference in Dublin, which was attended by the representatives of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC), it was agreed to launch a nationwide campaign against conscription. The de-facto president of Sinn Fein Eamon de Valera declared that 'the passage of the Conscription Bill... must be regarded as a declaration of war on the Irish Nation'.<sup>10</sup> Later that day the Catholic bishops issued a statement which stated that the 'Irish people have a right to resist' conscription.<sup>11</sup>

At the special conference of the ITUC on 20 April attended by 1,500 delegates the trade unions put out a call for a general strike against conscription. However, as Conor Kostick points out, no delegate raised any objection to the executive's identification with the aims of the nationalists, employers, and the bishops:

the general strike was decided upon, but on terms that did not clearly mark out the difference between the aims of labour and the aims of Irish nationalism.<sup>12</sup>

It appeared to many in the North of Ireland that this was just a broad nationalist

<sup>9</sup>See Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland*, (Pluto Press, London, 1996), p. 34.

<sup>10</sup>Kostick, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup>Kostick, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup>Kostick, p. 36.

Catholic block, which allowed the Unionists to portray the ant-conscription movement as a nationalist front. As a result the workers in Belfast played little part in the strike against conscription. Nevertheless, the strike was a magnificent success across the rest of the country. On 23 April all factories closed, transport stopped, even the pubs closed. The success of the strike owed much to the activities of the Trades Councils around the country. Workers took the lead in organising the strike and trade union banners led the marches. The determination of the strikers to resist conscription led the British government to shelve plans for the immediate introduction of conscription to Ireland. However, when Lord French was appointed as Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland in May 1918 he arrived with a simple agenda; to enforce conscription in Ireland at any cost. Despite the repression and mass arrests this was an agenda he was unable to implement. The stalemate was broken only by the signing of the armistice that ended the war in November 1918.

## Conclusion

The Great War was a pivotal moment in modern Irish history that also provided a number of important moments in Irish working class history. In particular during the 1916 Rising and the conscription crisis in 1917, when the national question and the socialist question could have been fused into a mass movement that not only

could have defeated British imperialism in Ireland, but also, could have provided the political basis for an Irish Socialist Republic. But the conservative bureaucracy that replaced Connolly and Larkin spurned the opportunity. This was another moment when the bureaucracy refused the bold stroke at the right moment. We should resist all attempts to glorify or gloss the horrors of the war as some sort of heroic moment that brought out the best in men. This was a horrific war that changed the course of history. That is the lesson we need to learn. In the 1920s people looked back and suggested that this was ‘the war to end all wars’. This was obviously an illusion and the current imperialist tensions in the Middle East and on the Russian borders mean we have to remain vigilant in our opposition to war. We should not let the war-mongers hijack the centenary of the war. The Irish Nationalist MP and poet Tom Kettle who was killed at the Battle of the Somme in September 1916 wrote of how he came to see the war quite differently just before he was killed:

Know that we fools, now with  
the foolish dead,  
Died not for flag, nor King, nor  
Empire,  
But for a dream, born in a  
herdsman’s shed,  
And for the secret Scripture of  
the poor.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>[www.independent.ie/.../lest-we-forget-the-dream-born-in-a-herdsmans](http://www.independent.ie/.../lest-we-forget-the-dream-born-in-a-herdsmans)