

IRISH INDEPENDENCE 1918-1923

Introduction

On 21 January 1919, an independent Irish Republic was unilaterally declared by an assembly of Sinn Fein MPs elected to the UK parliament in the general election of December 1918 on a platform of refusing to take their seats at Westminster. 10 years earlier such an event would have seemed all but fantastic. Before WWI republicanism in Ireland was a marginal political movement. The political mainstream was dominated by the Irish Party, a parliamentary nationalist group aiming to secure Home Rule, devolved government within the UK rather than an independent Irish republic. Under the leadership of Parnell in the mid 1880's it had sent 86 MPs to Westminster where they briefly held the balance of power.

The oldest republican movement was effectively a small oathbound secret society and modelled on Freemasonry. After adopting a formal constitution (1873) it became the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) with its members known as Fenians – indicating an attitude of defiance as much as an organisation. Republican ideas were not new – there was a United Irish movement in the 1790's who were allies to the French Republic and every June a pilgrimage was made by republicans to the grave of Wolf Tone in County Kildare.

Republicanism for most was about separation from the UK rather than implementing any concrete political programme. Michael Collins on becoming president of the IRB Supreme Council in 1919 articulated this position. Fenians therefore became defined by their means (physical force) rather than their ends. This position was attacked by the Irish Socialist Republican Party (founded by James Connolly in 1896) who insisted that sovereign independence was nothing without social change.

The third Home Rule Bill introduced in 1911 with the backing of the Parliament Act would seem to have won the day for the constitutionalists but instead it set Irish republicanism on to a new course. Resistance to Home Rule was led by Sir Edward Carson who incited quasi-military resistance (a craze for public drilling and shooting) in Ulster. Almost half a million people signed the Ulster Covenant – pledging resistance to the “conspiracy to set up a Home Rule parliament” by “all means which may be found necessary”. In 1913 a formally organised citizen militia, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) approached 100,000 in strength.

In turn, nationalists were mobilising with the formation of the Irish Volunteers (IV) – less well funded and supported than the UVF but with membership touching 100,000 by 1914 (many of whom would have supported Home Rule, but the leadership was predominantly separatist). Connolly's socialist republicans marched in Dublin and formed the Irish Citizens Army in 1913.

In Ulster, the British army officers declared that they would resign their commissions rather than confront the UVF. There were therefore real fears of an imminent civil war!

With the start of WWI many Fenians felt that “England's difficulty” would be “Ireland's opportunity”.

Dublin, Easter 1916 brought the republic to centre stage with the IV and Irish Citizens Army fighting together as the Army of the Irish Republic and they issued a proclamation asserting the Irish people's right to “national freedom and sovereignty”. The rebellion was suppressed with the republican leaders executed by the British. The military commander responsible was quick to warn Prime Minister Asquith of the more revolutionary nature of the latest generation of Irish nationalists.

Whether Asquith could have responded to this warning we will never know as at the end of the year he was forced out of office and replaced by David Lloyd George. After, Lloyd George held further Home Rule negotiations, which merely forced the nationalist party to acknowledge that some form of partition was inevitable and accelerated its loss of prestige. WWI was still to be won and once again Ireland was forgotten about by the British government with Home Rule suspended for the duration. And so, to 1918

The Imagined State: 1918-1919

The tide of regime change that would transform the post-war world had started with the collapse of the Tsarist empire in Russia. In January 1918 President Woodrow Wilson unveiled the “fourteen points” on which the new world order would be based – the most notable of which was national self-determination. This had a massive impact on the British Empire and even the UK. The Union of 1801 between Great Britain and Ireland had never been accepted as legitimate by Irish nationalists. Ireland sent 105 MPs to Westminster, the sole source of Irish legislation, yet the 100 years of union were littered with exceptional legislation that Ireland was “different”. Parliament was not interested in Ireland and there was rarely a coherent Irish policy. The government of Ireland was exercised through an awkward arrangement in which a lord lieutenant (the “viceroy”) in Dublin and a chief secretary in London shared power. The Irish administration, “Dublin Castle”, was dysfunctional and the attempt to integrate Ireland into the UK had failed.

Home Rule was being introduced to give Ireland autonomy while preserving the UK state. It was designed to placate unionist fears, but it served to create the most severe crisis in the history of the modern British state. It was then suspended for the duration of WWI.

Until the crushing of the Easter 1916 insurrection the political climate was relatively stable with the Irish nationalist party (supporters of Home Rule) dominant having lost just a handful of local elections to Sinn Fein who had 3 MPs.

100,000 Irishmen were serving in the British army but after Easter 1916 resentment grew with opposition to recruitment a cause bringing nationalists and revolutionists together under Sinn Fein. The Irish tricolour was springing up everywhere as the Sinn Fein flag. Three “Sixteeners” fought and won byelections in 1917.

The death of the 1916 leader Thomas Ashe on hunger strike (imprisoned for anti-recruitment campaigning) had unleashed a huge emotional reaction.

Separatist mobilisation quickened and the increased radicalism was demonstrated by the president of Sinn Fein stepping aside to be replaced by Eamon de Valera (who had commanded an Irish Volunteer (IV) battalion during the 1916 rebellion) - this signalled the fusion of the military with the political organisation.

Conscription and the rousing of the country

As WWI continued British military resources became more stretched and in Ireland the introduction of compulsory recruitment (conscription) was explosive – following the 1916 rebellion conscription was excluded. It was felt that enforcement would require more troops than it would produce. However, this position was unsustainable after the 1918 German offensive on the western front. Responsibility for conscription fell on army and police in Ireland. The real control over Ireland was with the armed 10,000 strong Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) – a centrally commanded semi-military force covering thousands of local stations. In the capital the unarmed Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) provided support. Every aspect of Irish life was closely monitored - agricultural yields/prices, weights/measures, dog licences and fishing permits.

In April 1918, the British government decided that the Lord Lieutenant would be responsible for enforcing conscription with Ireland governed by three commissioners (military, civil and legal). Lord French had been appointed for military responsibilities and he was a notorious hardliner. He tightened controls on the press, arresting people for “spreading discontent and sedition”. Much of the Catholic clergy were engaged in the national movement and became sympathetic to Sinn Fein following the introduction of conscription. This fusion of the clerical and political leaderships over conscription transformed Irish politics. The Catholic Church provided a framework for mass mobilisation that was beyond the resources of any political organisation in April 1918. The new Irish National Defence Fund was formed to support families of those arrested for opposing military service (a branch in each parish run by the local priest). On Sunday April 21, a day of masses and pledge signing was dramatic - backed by a surge in Volunteer activity and drilling.

Combating German intrigue

Facing the storm of protest the government put conscription on ice from May 1918. Whilst stressing that this was only a deferral the government added further fuel to the fire by arresting more nationalist leaders. 73 Sinn Feiners were picked up on a single night and immediately deported and more followed. The justification was that Sinn Fein was actively conspiring with Germany. However, whilst there were pro-German attitudes, actual links with Germany were hard to identify. Harassment of Sinn Fein continued throughout 1918 but whilst it was temporarily subdued in the long term, the actions of April/May 1918 rebounded on the British government. Most of the leaders arrested were moderates with the more covert, radical and dangerous in the IV all remaining at large.

“The movement”

The British government and military leaders misread and underestimated the new resistance which many activists referred to as “the movement” rather than any specific group label. Sinn Fein’s early flexibility enabled it to pick up many strands of nationalism. Before 1916 its founder, Arthur Griffith had elaborated a political strategy based on abstention and civil disobedience. The aim was to achieve equal partnership within the British Empire (on the basis that Britain could never accept the ideal of a republic. This condemned him as a monarchist in the eyes of many republicans.

There was a huge growth in local Sinn Fein clubs after election victories in early 1917. However, radicalism was far from rampant with many socially conservative views dominating including attitudes towards women. Social questions such as housing, land division, public health and education were seldom discussed with debates limited to the “England’s difficulty, Ireland’s opportunity” variety. The movement’s activism thrived on public defiance.

The growing membership of Sinn Fein in 1917-1919 came primarily from the old Irish Party.

Agrarian issues

Food shortages in the severe winter of 1917-18 were brought about by increased exports to Britain. This revived bitter memory of 19th century periods of famine and the Ranch War after 1906 (fierce resentment from where large pieces of land had been leased to “graziers” or “ranchers” for cattle at the expense of smaller arable tenant farmers which led to direct action in the form of cattle-driving by crowds of landless men dispersing herds). This renewal of the Ranch War by Sinn Fein in early 1918 was mostly in the west of Ireland often with marching military style crowds of 500 occupying land “in the name of the Irish Republic” – the posting of placards in fields was the first public appearance of the counter-state.

Civil resistance

Boycotting the RIC became widespread and the process of levering the police apart from the community was accelerated by conscription. The term boycott originated from Captain Boycott, a British officer in Ireland shunned by the local community in the late Victorian era. Anyone who drove the RIC or provided them with supplies became liable to attack themselves. After the 1916 rebellion the RIC were viewed traitors to the national cause.

Preparations

There was an explosion in the use of tricolour flags in 1917-1918.

The IV organisation had been decapitated by suppression of the 1916 rebellion. Local companies would seldom meet, and drilling resumed only in remote places. However, the release of prisoners quickened the pulse of citizens militia and boosted its prestige. Internment camps and big military prisons like Wandsworth encouraged a military ethos through their surroundings and activities (guard duties, escorts, inspections, cooking, sanitation and military routine generally). Gradually through grassroot organisers the IV was rebuilt.

There was a focus on building up stocks of rifles and ammunition and the public tended to co-operate when called upon, especially after conscription. However, in Ulster 20,800 guns had been surrendered to the police by January 1919 and 100,000 were handed in between 1918 and 1920.

The supply of guns was never enough but manpower was less of a problem. The Volunteers tended to come from the younger generation – a median age of 23 (for officers 25) with less than 5% over 40. Protestants were under-represented (especially in Belfast) and they were even outnumbered by atheists.

The Volunteers

In one sense the Volunteers were an authentic revolutionary army: they elected their officers.

Cumann na mBan (the women's wing of Sinn Fein and unlike the Volunteers, was always known by the Irish version of its title) was perhaps the least disrupted by 1916. It played a semi-combat role in the rebellion and led an impetus to gender equality. It became both more feminist and republican. It was in the frontline of the anti-recruitment campaign and police boycott.

The ideal of freedom

As the nationalist movement radicalised and mobilised in late 1918 there was little sign of ideology. National identity always trumped political ideas and children were socialised into this worldview through family and school. Separatist Republicanism was primarily constructed in moral and, in the case of Ireland, religious rather than ideological terms.

General Election

The General Election at the end of the war was a showdown not only between Sinn Fein and the Irish party, but also between radical and moderate republicans within Sinn Fein. The physical-force men of the IRB and Volunteers displaced the moderates from the party platform and the promise not to attend Westminster had more appeal to Republican supporters. A further complication was the initial involvement of the Irish Labour Party. Some of its leaders wanted a pact with Sinn Fein whilst others denounced the lack of any revolutionary principle in the Sinn Fein programme. Eventually Labour agreed to stand aside and allow national unity on the self-determination issue to be demonstrated – raising the profile of Sinn Fein in the process.

The election was a historic moment. The Irish electorate had trebled since the last election (1910) as a result of the 1918 Representation of the People Act. Women (over 30) were able to vote and stand for election for the first time and Sinn Fein's Countess Markievicz became the first woman elected to Westminster. The result was one of the greatest electoral landslides of the century in western Europe.

Volunteer activity was by now well established and they offered protection to Sinn Fein candidates and voters and resisted loyalist intimidation in places like south Armagh. They also enthusiastically canvassed in Dublin. The election largely passed off peacefully.

When the results were declared on December 28 Sinn Fein swept the old Irish Party away. The "first past the post" system favoured them but their share of the vote (just under 48% - increasing to 68% by excluding the 6 counties in the north east of Ireland) was impressive. It now had 69 MPs (43 of whom were in gaol). 25 seats were not contested but this was nothing new in Irish elections (41 had been uncontested in 1910). There was some evidence of intimidation and voter fraud but these were not new to Irish elections.

Post-Election

The available Sinn Fein MPs met on 7 January 1919 and they pledged to "work for the establishment of an independent Irish Republic". It was the constitution of the Dail (parliament) that was being considered:

- A single-chamber parliament
- An internal cabinet type executive
- Reflecting the British constitutional model
- A one-party assembly

The proceedings of the first public session of the Dail Eireann on 21 January were opened with a prayer by a priest (who was also the Vice President of Sinn Fein) and conducted soberly in Irish. This confirmed, in unionist eyes, that the

Republic was a Catholic project. It was accepted that the President of the Ministry (not the Republic) would be elected by the Dail. Cathal Brugha was elected President of the Ministry *pro-tem*.

International situation

The times looked propitious for the new-born Republic, as the world's statesmen assembled in Paris to settle the new global order based on national self-determination.

The Declaration of Independence was felt by some to have been a strategic error internationally. The Peace Conference was no longer being asked to investigate and adjudicate a national claim, but to recognise an already existing republic approving an act hostile to a great power. The Dail's three conference delegates (Plunkett, Griffith and de Valera) were not even granted visas to travel. Appeals were made to President Woodrow Wilson but when an Irish American delegation eventually met him to say that the Irish delegates should be heard by the conference, he explained that the Big Four (USA, Britain, France and Italy) had agreed that no delegations would be accepted without their unanimous consent. Efforts in Europe for recognition continued as well as attempts to secure membership of the League of Nations but all was to no avail.

Despite the setbacks Sinn Fein's mainstream still had an international outlook and its founder Arthur Griffith felt that an Irish consular service would enlarge Irish commerce as well as foreign understanding of Ireland, teaching the world that it was distinct from Britain. Envoys were appointed to Paris, London and Rome (to the Papacy). America and Russia were targeted for external recognition, but the US would never directly dispute Britain's view of the position in Ireland. De Valera's 20-month American mission (after being sprung from gaol) was the most high-profile effort to set the Republic on the international stage. However, there were constant differences between de Valera and the Irish American group leaders, and little was achieved outside of cheers and parades and fundraising through the US\$5m Dail Loan subscribed to by 250,000 Americans – although much of the money failed to reach the Republic (50% remained in US banks through the 1920s) it transformed the counter-state's resources. But formal US recognition remained elusive.

"Don't argue, but shoot!"

Politicians were displaced by soldiers in the Dail and leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising had taken an oath to fight until they had their freedom. Volunteer activity had become violent in early 1918 with attacks on the RIC and British soldiers as well as the seizure of gelignite and weapons. Despite this, confrontation and public drilling receded with the removal of the conscription threat.

The language was becoming more openly belligerent. In mid-September 1918, the GHQ journal (the Irish Volunteer) advised its readers "don't argue but shoot!". If conscription were imposed, martial law "would be imposed *on both sides*". It basically said that a state of war would exist and was a call to all republicans to look to the Irish Republic for light and leadership. Under military rule civilian pursuits and conventional political methods would be suspended. A month later the journal published an article entitled "Ruthless Warfare" warning of the coming struggle. This, in turn, launched a series of radical statements as declarations of intent. Fiery editorials were backed up by information on military actions including the use of mines and bombs (as hand grenades were often called). Sabotage (including large-scale railway demolition) was to play an important part in disrupting British action.

In 1918 Seamus Robinson was a Brigade Commanding Officer and later he claimed to have by then developed a clear vision of the kind of military campaign that should be fought: "It became abundantly clear to me that we could hope to survive and win only if we were a ghostly army of sharpshooters operating all over the country combining to deal with small bodies of the enemy and making Ireland too costly to hold; always choosing our own ground, and our own targets". One of the first incidents was a successful ambush of gelignite escorted by cart by two RIC constables who were both killed. Eight men and a single rifle (a Wild West-style Winchester repeater) with a miscellaneous collection of pistols were used as they lay in wait behind bushes and a ditch. Later targets were stronger, and attacks required more sophistication, but this first incident already had demonstrated a strategic purpose. The reaction of the police and army, confirmed the credibility of the republican challenge. Michael Collins (who had been released from prison in December 1916 and was by now one of the key leaders of Sinn Fein and the IV) wrote in June 1919 "as they pass on so to speak from the police patrol to the military lorry, they positively put more and more weapons in our hands".

The killing of policemen provoked criticism not just from unionists and moderate nationalists, but also from many within Sinn Fein.

There was pressure for a civil war to commence from brigades in the south of Ireland, but the military and political leadership were more cautious at this point. De Valera and two others were sprung from Lincoln gaol in February 1919 in a well organised escape which was a brilliant success. However, its aftermath was less impressive. Collins wanted to arrange a “state entrance” into Dublin for de Valera with the Lord Mayor receiving him at the gates of the city. The police picked up a Sinn Fein announcement and, recognising the tremendous symbolic force of this project, the British authorities moved swiftly to ban it. The Chief Secretary berated the Lord Mayor for his intention “to receive, as His Majesty alone should be received a man who claims unlawfully to be the President of the Irish Republic.” Collins felt this was a moment not to be intimidated, but the Sinn Fein Executive led by de Valera turned down his plan as it would be unjustified in risking the lives of citizens.

“This invisible state”

Sinn Fein had prepared its plans for civil disobedience – its founder Arthur Griffith and like-minded people had already been exploring ideas about a new Irish society for half a lifetime. The passive-resistance policy had to not only involve the refusal to co-operate with the authorities but also to try to replace them. In April 1919, the Dail confirmed the boycott of the RIC, and Constance Markievicz achieved one of her many periods of imprisonment by publicly urging the ostracism of the police. The boycott took a more violent form when enforced by the IRA.

The Dail ministry was remodelled in British Cabinet style in April 1919 with de Valera as President. Home Affairs went to Griffith, Defence to Brugha, finance to Collins, foreign affairs to Plunkett and local government to W T Cosgrave. In general, the British press shared its government’s dismissive view of the separatist movement’s prospects. However, perceptions began to change; in November 1919, the radical commentator H N Brailsford said that Sinn Fein “in its own amazing way has obtained a positive result despite the stranglehold of the army of occupation. It has boldly declared that the Irish Republic exists, and faith is realising this invisible state”.

The Dail Cabinet and the Volunteer GHQ continued to meet weekly at secret locations surviving several narrow escapes when raided by police.

“To make the Irish Republic a living fact”

A crucial issue that arose when the Dail Government was established was its relationship with what was known as “the army”. The formula eventually reached was that every Volunteer would swear not to yield support to any pretended Government and defend the Irish Republic and its Government (the Dail Eireann) against all enemies, foreign and domestic. It was at this point when many in the army were told: “they were no longer Volunteers but soldiers of the Irish Republican Army. Make no mistake the IRA were going to fight and make the Irish Republic a living fact.”

Sinews of power

As Finance Minister, Michael Collins had no access to taxation. Friends of Irish Freedom in the USA had raised over US\$1m by mid-1919 but little of it reached Sinn Fein. The Dail raised Bonds to the value of £250,000 in sums of £1 to £1,000 and on 10 April de Valera increased it to £1m with £500,000 offered to the public for immediate subscription. Half was to be subscribed at home and half in the US. The stated aim of the loan was to develop sea fisheries, reforestation and industrial effort, and to establish a National Civil Service, National Arbitration Courts and a Land Mortgage Bank. It was to stop emigration by providing land and work for those in need. Unfortunately, most of the money was returned to subscribers and only £12,000 reached the Dail government in 1919. The conflict with the British authorities was escalating with suppression of the Dail and the press, and the seizure of correspondence and bond prospectuses. In the USA, a judge had noted that as the Irish Republic did not exist in law, its bonds had no legal status. Undercover bank accounts used to conceal the Republic’s funds were investigated and Collins responded by having the principal investigator (Alan Bell) hauled off a Dublin tram and assassinated in March 1920.

Eventually the finance situation improved with loan money flowing in from across Ireland to cover the significant bills that had been run up.

Projecting the virtual state

Propaganda had become a big political business in the war with Britain's chief operator being the press baron Lord Northcliffe. By comparison, the Dail was slow off the mark and its Director, Ginnell, was arrested in May 1919. The foreign press became the target audience and they had got their Irish news stories from London correspondents, so reporting tended to follow the British line.

Gradually through newsheets and pamphlets the republican message started to get through. A major coup was in November 1919 when the Archbishop in Dublin contributed £105 to the Dail Loan. He emphasised his action in a public letter to Cardinal O'Connell in Boston declaring that "the press had dared not publish his support, that the country was living under martial law and that there were threats from the British to the press". Although the Bishops tended to remain aloof from politics, a large proportion of the lower clergy supported Sinn Fein. In January 1920, the Catholic hierarchy issued a statement holding that the British Government by "disregarding national feelings and rights", was responsible for the "dreadful confusion and disorder of the country." Whilst this helped to delegitimise the UK state in Ireland it fell far short of formal recognition of the Republic.

"A condition of veiled insurrection"

Home Rule had been due to come into effect at the end of WWI but Lord French (Viceroy of Ireland) stated that Ireland was unfit for it "now or in the very near future". The unionists of the north east of Ireland had been promised some (yet unspecified) special treatment. Lloyd George's government set about reframing the Home Rule Act (which had promised an Irish Parliament and substantial legislative powers) and worked on a formula to outline the relationship between London and Dublin with the exclusion of Ulster from Dublin's authority. In the meantime, French and Macpherson (Chief Secretary) had to find a way to control the situation. French wanted martial law (never possible) and eventually settled for reacting to local challenges with tightened controls on movement and assembly. French had been wanted to ban Sinn Fein (in the coalition government the Liberals were reluctant and the Conservatives less squeamish) and in July 1919 Sinn Fein, the Volunteers, Cumann na mBan and the Gaelic League were all declared illegal in Tipperary laying the ground for a blanket ban of all separatist organisations throughout Ireland in September. This included the Dail, a body whose members had been elected by the British democratic system.

The weakness of the police increased as the boycott steadily drove them away from the community.

French continued to press against the Cabinet's view that the powers available to them in peacetime Ireland were limited. He claimed to have lived amongst the Irish – a people "who nourish secret sedition and are in a constant state of veiled insurrection." In November, the Cabinet agreed to the replacement of jury trial in Ireland, in serious criminal cases, by a special court of three high court judges. French (in cahoots with the notorious Unionist, Walter Long) seized the opportunity to reconstruct the police in a way that would have huge repercussions on the legitimacy of the British state in Ireland. At the end of 1919, an order was issued, in the name of the Inspector General (Joseph Byrne) of the RIC, authorising recruitment of non-Irish personnel into the constabulary. French had been pushing for this radical step against Byrne's dogged resistance and was keen to remove him from his position. Byrne was sent on leave for the benefit of his health and in the New Year the first British recruits arrived: the notorious Black and Tans were born. French continued to criticise the running of the RIC and was convinced that Sinn Fein and the IV could be put down and order restored. He commented that "the Irish are an impulsive and quick witted, but not deep-thinking people; they had no will of their own and were simply intimidated and mentally paralysed by Sinn Fein". According to French, the country was never in favour of a Republic or any form of separation.

"The inculcation of the principles of guerrilla warfare"

There was not that much Volunteer military activity in 1919 – limited to occasional arms raids and training. One of the more adventurous attacks was by the North Cork Brigade in Fermoy in September 1919 when 15 British troops on their way to Sunday worship were rushed and disarmed. The project had been submitted to GHQ for approval which was only given on condition that there would be no loss of life – suggesting an anxiety about the public reaction to violence. As GHQ would have suspected, the condition could not be met despite the restriction of lethal weapons (30 men carried 6 revolvers with the rest "short thick clubs") and 1 soldier was killed in the affray. GHQ's caution may look excessive, as at

the inquest the local coroner's jury refused to describe the death a murder on the grounds not only that the intention was to disarm and not kill but also that the attack had been a regular act of war. This indicated some public acceptance of, if not enthusiasm for, the escalation of the conflict. The furious reaction of the military garrison to the verdict, charging into the town and wrecking the shops of some of the jurors, was the first serious "reprisal" of the conflict – this may have cowed as many people as it antagonised and perhaps illustrates the kind of escalation that GHQ had feared. On the same day in the Cork area another attack resulted in the capture of several rifles and bicycles. GHQ's restrictive attitude began to ease over the next few months. In October Liam Deasy of West Cork went to Dublin for meetings with national leaders and whilst with Collins, Mulcahy and Brugha he commented "it was clear that military efficiency was the target to be aimed at and that the inculcation of the principles of guerrilla warfare was to be an essential part of all training".

Just before Christmas 1919 an attempt to assassinate French failed with one of the attackers killed.

In late 1919 several units tried to rush their local RIC barracks. Although mostly unsuccessful these triggered a radical shift in policing strategy. Vulnerable police stations were shut down with resources transferred to other stations for defensive purposes and for patrols to be strengthened.

Assaults on a much more serious scale began in Cork early in January 1920 with the capture of a semi-fortified police station – this was one of three attacks on the same night (one failed and one was aborted). For Mulcahy, looking back later, this attack closely followed by an attack on the barrack at Kilmurry, marked the transition to "war" or "the beginning of the nationwide offensive in reply to the suppression of the Dail.

Two Governments: 1920

In 1920 guerrilla warfare was relatively new and its potential was only just emerging (Lawrence of Arabia's Arab revolt against the Turks in 1916 being an example). By reversing conventional military logic, dispersing rather than concentrating their forces, taking their time and getting people on their side, insurgents could seize and retain the initiative. It was for now though, a case of trial and error.

In January/February there were 19 attacks on RIC barracks across several counties which created a sense of purpose and momentum. Following a successful attack at a police station in Ballytrain 6 small stations in Monaghan were abandoned by the RIC leaving much of the county unpoliced. The same happened elsewhere – sometimes even when an attack failed where building damage had been inflicted from a mine. In Mayo in 1920 police garrisons fell from 47 to 23 and in Tipperary 18 out of 61 barracks were abandoned. The situation was quite different in the north (no stations in Co. Londonderry were abandoned). On the night of Easter Saturday GHQ decided to burn down 300 vacated barracks and it had a striking public impact. On the same night Income Tax offices in the main cities were raided with records destroyed and by July over 400 vacated barracks had been destroyed with nearly 50 courthouses.

At this point there was a serious lack of military experience, discipline and professionalism as well as a shortage of weapons. However, by May there was a sense that Volunteer's military capacity was firming up with an increase in the tempo of attacks on occupied barracks – by July 16 had been destroyed and 29 damaged.

"Two Governments waging war"

January 1920 saw the first round of local elections and by now, Sinn Fein had a strong tradition in local government and they fielded just over 700 candidates for the 1,816 seats at stake – more than Labour or independent candidates. The British government had decided to adopt PR to deter Sinn Fein but the tactic backfired with 9 out of 11 municipalities and 62 out of 69 councils now under the control of republican-Labour coalitions. Cork and Limerick corporations pledged allegiance to the Dail (the Irish Times wrote that this represented "deliberate and audacious declarations of war") and Dublin Corporation followed in May, symbolically flying the tricolour over City Hall.

As Local Government Minister in the Dail, Cosgrave was arrested and replaced by Kevin O'Higgins. The British government demanded allegiance to the Local Government Board (LGB) but the councils rejected the ultimatum. This

action was not without risk in that at the very least there would be a loss of central funding, with no immediate available alternative source.

In rural elections in June, Sinn Fein underlined its dominance. On the platform of a properly local policy – expanding public housing, health and education – the party and its allies gained control of 29 of the 33 county councils. At the same time, the party was becoming militarised with the Volunteers more prominent in the election than they had been in January – they were happy to resort to intimidation of rival nationalist candidates where necessary. Many councils had to meet in secret (protected by Local Volunteer companies) and were unable to use council offices and many elected were “wanted men”.

At the beginning of March, the Irish Volunteer magazine noted that a French newspaper had just described the situation in Ireland as “two governments waging war with one another”. The Irish Bulletin produced 5 days a week was important as it permanently disputed the British version of news and depicted the conflict as a foreign invasion of an independent sovereign state.

“An illegal government has become the de facto government”

The Dail reviewed the current legal system and concluded that the logic for creating a national court system was persuasive but the cost was daunting. The idea was approved in November 1919 and in the meantime, courts were being set up on a local basis, with prominent people (often priests) acting as judges. Eventually a system of Parish and District Courts with criminal jurisdiction in areas the Home Office Minister thought suitable, together with a Supreme Court was introduced by the Dail in June 1920. The new legal system was a critical success for Sinn Fein with even the hostile Irish Times admitting “the Sinn Fein tribunals were jostling British law into oblivion” and the British press wrote favourably on the subject. Lord Dunraven, a prominent unionist told *The Times* that “an illegal government has become the de facto government”.

“A panic measure of raising 8,000 scallywags”

Britain, even with 40,000 troops in Ireland, was struggling to cope with the republican guerrilla campaign. Peacetime law made the use of military force problematic. With pressure for martial law from French and the closure of smaller police stations and an under resourced RIC, in January 1920 the British army launched an intensive programme of raids and arrests using police intelligence information. 315 had been arrested by mid-April and 250 interned. Hundreds were deported (the biggest contingents being 83 from Cork, 41 from Tipperary and 21 each from Limerick and Dublin).

However, the army later admitted that the impact was limited – “Sinn Fein outrages (as classified by the police) went on climbing through 1920. Police intelligence information was poor, and the army realised it would have to construct its own intelligence system which would take months if not years. Restrictions of movement were introduced and in Dublin a curfew between midnight and 5.00 a.m. was introduced from 23 February. The RIC was quickly neutralised, and the intimidation of families of policemen was common. RIC resignations increased but so to a small extent, did recruitment. British policy failed to rescue the RIC; by delaying Home Rule it had undermined its main Irish political ally, the Irish party. It now also undermined its own “army of occupation” – firstly by turning the RIC into something much more like the “army of nationalist propaganda”, and secondly by political steps that multiplied the force’s pessimism and removed the restraints on its behaviour. Changes in personnel followed with a strengthening of the Dublin Castle Civil Service. The new GOC (General Officer Commanding) General Sir Nevil Macready who turned down a joint role to also lead the RIC having decided that they were past saving.

The new British RIC recruits were distributed across the country in small groups to reinforce barrack garrisons. The new chief of police, Major General Hugh Tudor (a friend of War Secretary, Winston Churchill) supplied the RIC with much more military equipment and planned to set up a separate, special counter-insurgency force. Higher military authorities were horrified at the idea (which may have come from Churchill) of creating an Irish “gendarmerie” from ex-soldiers – the Chief of Imperial General Staff describing it as a “panic measure of raising 8,000 scallywags” – expressing dismay at what levels of discipline, cohesion, team spirit, training etc would result. Fortunately, this idea was successfully headed off and instead Tudor’s appointment was as “police adviser” and he eventually set up the Auxiliary Division of the RIC (ADRIC).

“Your country suffers from cancer”

British policy contained a fatal contradiction – it was committed to Irish self-government, but it required that the Irish people follow British rules of constitutional behaviour. It assumed that the great majority of Irish people remained law-abiding moderates, who would accept a Home Rule settlement that fell far short of independence. Militant opposition was dismissed as extremist with the Volunteers always described as fanatics, gunmen or thugs. The British assumed that the arrests would cripple the Volunteers, yet little was done to encourage moderate nationalists. Under the Home Rule Bill, partition was to give the 6 north eastern counties equal status with the other 26. This dealt a heavy blow to nationalist expectations. The devolved powers to both Irish parliaments were also disappointing (Westminster was to retain control of not just defence, foreign policy, judiciary and income tax, but also postal services, transport, agriculture and health) leaving them as glorified local councils.

The new Chief Secretary, Hamar Greenwood had limited ability and tended to focus on security rather than conciliation. In fact, as head of the civil government he was a greater believer in force than the head of the army (Macready) who was pessimistic about the viability of any repressive policy. Macready was directly opposed to Henry Wilson (Chief of the Imperial General Staff and an aggressively unionist Ulsterman). In May 1920 he wrote to Wilson: “In one sense you are right in saying we must go deeper down, and hit harder, before we get to the root of the matter. But I feel very strongly that your country suffers from cancer, and though you may operate severely upon it, it grows again in worse form later.”

In the meantime, a hunger strike of republican prisoners was launched in Mountjoy gaol, Dublin on 5 April. The strikers demanded P.O.W. status which would incorporate “proper” food, separation from “criminals”, no compulsory work, access to books, a weekly bath and the right to smoke as well as 5 hours exercise in the open air each day. The strikers turned down an offer of “ameliorative” treatment, and by 9 April 90 men were on hunger strike. With fatalities imminent the pressure mounted and warnings that any individual’s death would mean the murder of Ministers. 5,000 to 10,000 keening women demonstrated outside the prison with troops unable to hold back the crowd. Dublin was also paralysed by a one-day labour strike. 66 men were certified as being in immediate danger and with the government rattled, French (who had dismissed the demand for POW status) and Macready decided to release them on parole. The official who wrote the release order failed to note that half the parolees, as sentenced men rather than internees, were not entitled to parole. The result was a dramatic republican triumph and a correspondingly staggering blow to the morale of the forces of order. The impact on the behaviour of the police was to be far-reaching.

“Throttling the railway system”

On 20 May a group of Dublin quayside workers declared that they would not handle “certain war material” being brought into Ireland. Dockers and railwaymen then joined but at this stage the ILP (Irish Labour Party)/TUC and its affiliated unions did not recognise the Dail government for fear of British retaliation. The railway companies responded to the embargo by dismissing all those who had taken part – over 1,000 of them were out of work by August. The action had spread across Ireland (except Belfast) in June. The transport workers had sided with the Dail who contributed to the worker’s fund and Sinn Fein organised collections to boost it. In some places the Volunteers arranged alternative transport for civilian passengers stuck on immobilised trains. Intimidation played a part too with railway workers knowing it was less safe to work government traffic. Blacklegs were arrested, held in custody and made to give an undertaking that they would not reoffend. Some drivers who had driven troop trains were tarred and feathered. Publicly, the government maintained that the railwaymen were “bitterly opposed” to the action but they were being intimidated. Privately, it stepped up the policy of “throttling the railway system”. Pressure to abandon the embargo was mounting in the mainstream nationalist press. On 15 December, the ILP/TUC Executive blamed the British authority for blocking food and fuel supplies and imprisoning without charge members of the Food Committee. Two days later a party of armed troops was carried for the first time and on 21 December the railwaymen voted unanimously to return to normal working.

“It would be difficult to shake their belief in the reality of a republic”

The positive appeal of the republican courts coupled with the intimidation of jurors and witnesses had brought the British court system to a virtual standstill. By August 1920 over 300 magistrates had resigned, either out of patriotism or

fear. In Mayo, the badged IRA Republican police patrolled towns and regulated flour supply and licensed premises. In Roscommon, a resident reported the republican courts seem to have “impressed the people to such an extent with the power of the Dail that it would be difficult to shake their belief in the reality of a Republic”.

“Stamping out terrorism by secret murder”

With RIC morale low and the boycott spreading, as mentioned previously, Churchill’s friend Tudor had been planning to employ a counter insurgency group. The Munster Divisional Commissioner, aware of the idea, noted that this was “the stamping out of terrorism by secret murder”. Whether such a group existed is open to question, but the police never bothered to investigate certain murders which is suggestive that it did.

With the first British RIC recruits arriving from March, stocks of uniforms soon ran out and the makeshift use of some khaki kit led to them being christened “Black and Tans”. They were non-Catholics and in contrast to most of the RIC, were mainly men of the urban working class. The name “Black and Tans” stuck to the British Recruits as well as the auxiliary force formed by Tudor in August.

“The night can sweat with terror”

The stresses on the RIC were immense with death and injuries at around 10% (not excessive by military standards). Of policemen caught up in fighting 24% were killed and 42% wounded. Where the boycott was applied systematically with shopkeepers refusing to serve police, it threatened them with starvation and gave them no option, but to take supplies by force. They would pull themselves pints in pubs and sit alone in silence. Volunteers kept information on those associated with the police. When a Cork undertaker allowed his hearse to be used at the funeral of an RIC man it was set alight on the way back from the cemetery. The intimidation had become so intense that unsurprisingly they were at times provoked into retaliation whilst others opted out. In September in the worst of several incidents, 50 houses were burnt down, and two suspected Sinn Feiners were killed. Black and Tans were involved but they acted at the command of their Irish officers and sergeants. Whilst the authorities thought they had neutralised the hostility they were to find out that in the competition of terror, the rebels could easily outbid them. When the British military finally initiated “official reprisals” in 1921 the policy of systematic republican retaliation took off. Thereafter the policy’s attraction would wane.

While reprisals were officially condemned, the condemnation was limited to indiscriminate “bad” reprisals – targeted assassinations were encouraged. The auxiliary “Tans” were particularly violent operating separately from the regular RIC and some appalling atrocities were committed. Women were sometimes targeted having their hair cut off with razors or scissors – in a mirror image of Volunteer assaults on women who had been seen with soldiers.

Police brutality converted countless moderate nationalists into separatists. The poet W B Yeats in response to the Black & Tan murder of Ellen Quinn (who was 7 months pregnant) in front of her three young children wrote “When a drunken soldiery/Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,/To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;/The night can sweat with terror” – as if we had never “pieced our thoughts into philosophy.”

“The first direct attack made upon the Irish Republic”

There was a sharp divide in the north with the Protestants and Catholics divided politically and socially. Sinn Fein had not devised a coherent northern policy, beyond an insistence that unionists had no right to secede from the “Irish nation”. Ulster was the only province where Sinn Fein failed to bring down the old Irish party in the 1918 election. The strength of unionist opposition forced it into an electoral pact with the Irish party under which the 8 marginal seats were divided equally between them. The Dail had no Belfast deputies, and only three leading Sinn Feiners came from the north. In the 1920 local elections the city of London/Derry was brought back under Catholic/nationalist control for the first time since 1690 – a huge shock to the unionists which undermined their claim to exclusion from Home Rule. In April there was rioting between youths and soldiers in Derry with Catholic clergy patrolling the streets to enrol volunteers to keep the peace. In June 19 people (15 Catholics and 4 Protestants) were killed in more serious violence. GHQ were averse to activities in Belfast for fear of reprisals on the Catholic population. The income tax offices of Belfast were burnt down at Easter which triggered the revival of Carson’s pre-war Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Tensions were

racked up further on July 12 and the RIC Munster Divisional Commissioner was assassinated in Cork (a long way from the north but his funeral took place in his hometown there). Catholic property was attacked, shipyard workers met, and a purge of Catholics and socialists was launched by apprentices and “rivet boys” at Harland and Wolf. With gunfire across the city 18 were dead. Within a week 5,000 Catholic workers had been driven out from the yards and factories. Mixed residential areas were purged with people forced from their homes – the longstanding religious geography was more sharply etched.

Over the next 2 years more than 450 would be killed (over two thirds of them Catholics) and over 8,000 driven from their homes. Over 600 houses and business and business premises were destroyed. This was a working-class war, but with just one exception no trade union made a single attempt to discourage it. It was also more than crudely sectarian. It was intensely political, formed by national symbols such as the republican flag.

“It was easy for linen to burn”

In Dublin, the nationalist members of Belfast Corporation urged action to stop the “war of extermination being waged against us”. The members claimed that the Dail had a responsibility because the violence against them was a consequence of the establishment of the Republic and that this represented “the first direct attack made upon the Irish Republic”. They wanted the Dail to enforce a boycott in the form of a blockade of supplies to Belfast. It was not immediately introduced as it was felt to be counterproductive and, with pressure mounting 5 days later the ministry authorised a boycott of banks and insurance companies with headquarters in Belfast. It was soon expanded to other towns in the north as well as to goods supplied from Belfast. Delivery vans from Belfast would be set alight and Protestant stores picketed. The boycott of “Belfast goods” was intended to emphasise the city’s dependence on its Irish hinterland. In political terms though, “it was easy for linen to burn”, the bonfires had the opposite effect, heightening the unionist sense of isolation and accelerating the process of partition. In Lisburn on 22 August RIC District Inspector Swanzy was assassinated for his part in a murder of a Volunteer leader. As a result, nearly all the Catholic population was driven out of town with over 300 of their homes left in ruins. The Volunteers in the north were hopelessly isolated and under-resourced.

After the assassination, the idea of a special constabulary in the north gained momentum with Churchill’s support and a separate under-secretary was placed to lay the groundwork for a six-county administration. The Ulster Special Constabulary (USC) was inaugurated in October and it was planned to provide 32,000 men, three times the strength of the old RIC – it had a 3-tier structure (A=full timers, B=part timers and C=elderly reservists). The UVF had reappeared in July and many of its members joined the USC. The B class recruits were mainly younger and potentially more violent (the B Specials of “the Troubles” era).

The Army of the Republic

The oath of allegiance to the Dail was important symbolically in cementing the claim of the Volunteers to be the Irish national army. The biggest change for the army was the transition from brief local actions by part time forces to elite mobile operations by full time units (which were to become known as “flying columns”) – standing troops would be retained as an auxiliary arm to the remainder of the Republican Army. This move was driven by the RIC concentrating their forces in more substantially defended barracks.

The intelligence war

The most effective special service created by the Volunteers was intelligence. This was defensive in nature to counter the information built up by some authorities, notably the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP); British intelligence agencies only had a fragile grasp of the republican movement’s inner structure. The Volunteers had virtually no intelligence system in 1916, but their successors soon saw the need, when considering the type of conflict, they were about to enter. Collins took over as GHQ Director of Intelligence in 1919 enabling him to use his phenomenal networking skills, tireless activity and prodigious memory. They accumulated practically all names, addresses and history of clerical workers and typists working for the most important departments of the “enemy”. Armed with this information through their agents, they were soon able to find many who agreed to work for them. As a result, they obtained agreement to execute those individuals responsible for identifying the 1916 rebels. A handful of men (who became known as the

Squad) agreed to the shooting of enemy agents. Their first action was to assassinate Detective Sergeant Patrick Smyth in July 1919 and this was followed by a steady sequence of shootings through the rest of the year and into 1920.

In neutering the British capacity to get at the republican organisation, the most successful action was the assassination of Alan Bell in March 1920. He was President of the Irish Banks Court and was burrowing into the network of concealed bank deposits housing Republican Loan funds. His investigations were effective and so he was targeted. Despite two previous attempts to kill him he continued to take the tram to work. He was dragged off the tram and shot in the head and chest. It brought the pursuit of republican finances to a permanent halt.

"Another martyr"

In October 1920 the first hunger striker (MacSwiney, a senior Volunteer officer) died in Brixton Prison. 11 other prisoners in Cork were also on hunger strike and there was no concession made – the humiliation of the Mountjoy releases was still fresh in official memory. The death of MacSwiney had a huge impact as his hunger strike had already become a global media event. The funeral at the Catholic cathedral in Southwark was turned into a great republican manifestation. The emaciated corpse was laid out in his Volunteer uniform and the bier was draped in the tricolour. Afterwards a huge crowd followed the funeral procession across London. At Henry Wilson's insistence the body was rerouted to Cork instead of Dublin (to prevent much greater demonstrations). As it was a requiem mass at Cork cathedral and the lying-in state ensured another major event to commemorate MacSwiney's "heroic sacrifice". This precipitated Yeats to publish his poem, "Easter 1916" four years after it had been written. Its validation of the 1916 leaders was a potent indication of the way nationalists were becoming increasingly "republican".

On 20 September in Dublin a second notable death followed. Volunteers attacked a military ration party collecting bread at a bakery. After calling on the troops to surrender their weapons a brief blaze of fire broke out before the attackers ran off. Three soldiers were killed, and one attacker was captured – Kevin Barry an 18-year-old student. He was court martialled and sentenced to hang. Of course, the deaths of the young soldiers had no resonance in Ireland, but the death of Barry resulted in a republican ballad and the Archbishop and Lord Mayor of Dublin led a campaign to secure a reprieve. The British authorities stood firm and he was duly hung, and it was left to an anonymous balladeer to ensure that Kevin Barry would become "another martyr for old Ireland".

"A campaign that did not seem to be leading anywhere"

There was a perception of a shift in power to the British in November 1920. Ammunition was found abandoned by rebels and there was a successful raid on the Republican stores. There was a growing sense of frustration at the lack of weapons in rural areas and some were wanting to move from guerrilla to conventional warfare. On one trip to Dublin to meet Collins a representative of them stated "a good many of the crowd were not prepared to carry on a campaign that did not seem to be leading anywhere". Collins did not take the request seriously.

Local units were encouraged to produce their own weapons and to an extent the Dublin Brigade showed what could be done. Ammunition was manufactured and by mid-1920, a team of engineers and a workshop was producing 100 grenades a week. After a failed attempt to produce mortars output of grenades was doubled before the workshop was discovered.

"The very air is made sweeter"

In November 1920 on "Bloody Sunday" at around 9.00 a.m. 8 addresses were visited by armed Volunteers. 12 British officers were killed in their lodgings and several wounded. 2 Auxiliaries who found themselves at the scene and tried to run back to their depot for help were also killed in the street. In the same afternoon, Croke Park Gaelic football stadium was raided by Crown forces on the assumption that some of the attackers would be there for a big game between Dublin and Tipperary. Before the game and before a military cordon had been set up the Auxiliaries drove up to the entrance to order spectators to leave the stadium. At that point, claiming gunshots had come from the grandstand, the Auxiliaries fired into the crowd – for 3 minutes, until "the attackers" fire was silenced, according to the official account. According to the military enquiry a military machine gun fired off 50 rounds and at least 220 shots were fired by the Auxiliaries. 12 people died and 11 were seriously injured. The army blamed the Auxiliaries, and the Auxiliaries blamed

the regular police. The whole operation to many people looked like a reprisal. Finally, in the early evening 3 high profile Volunteer officers who were being held in the Dublin Castle guardroom were killed – officially “shot while attempting to escape”. Whilst this was possible, as in other cases it was never clear why they had to be killed.

The Dublin Brigade’s response to the arrival of the Auxiliaries had been ineffective. The Squad was the only full-time striking force operating in the capital and morale was beginning to slip. A joint meeting of the Dail and GHQ (the only one before the Truce) is said to have taken place to approve the Bloody Sunday operation. Each man on the target list was said to be an accredited secret service agent of the British government. Many claims were exaggerated as to the “paralysis of the military intelligence system”; nonetheless the Bloody Sunday attacks did have a huge public impact. Big crowds (reverent and quiet according to one British reporter) lined the Liffey banks as the bodies of the dead officers were taken on their way to London where the victims were given a state funeral with a procession to Westminster Abbey. The reaction no doubt generated an impulse for revenge in some but also strengthened the views of others seeking peace.

Collins found “the very air is made sweeter” by Bloody Sunday morning, though in the end the day’s outcomes were less agreeable. The afternoon killings formed a grim kind of balance to those in the morning. For the British it marked a step-change as a new military programme was launched – large-scale searches, roadblocks, curfews and internment on suspicion. Military personnel were no longer allowed to live outside barracks and 500 arrests were made by the army inside a week. Fortunately for the Volunteers, the intelligence service on which the British campaign was still less efficient than theirs.

“They shot the whole lot of them off?”

In November in West Cork a Brigade flying column attacked the Auxiliary company stationed in Macroom Castle. Like elsewhere, the local auxiliaries had inflicted a high degree of casual brutality on the community during their intensified patrolling. As a result, according to the County Inspector, the area had been transformed from what was “practically a state of war” into “about the quietest part of the country. Fatally, their most serious error was not to vary their patrol routes. According to IRA documents two lorries of Auxiliary Police were ambushed near Kilmichael and 16 were killed with one wounded who escaped. They also captured 14 rifles, 5 bayonets, 17 revolvers, 719 rounds of ammunition with equipment and the 2 lorries, which were burned out. The IRA lost one man killed in the fight and two who died of their wounds. An IRA enquiry Fr. John Chisolm was told that no surrenders were accepted, “they shot the whole lot of them off?” Chisolm asked, “they did” was the reply. It is likely that there was never any intention to take prisoners but that would not have been admissible in public as the Volunteers claimed to observe the laws of war.

“A more definitely military character”

There was no reprisal after Kilmichael but on 1 December the British government decided to introduce martial law because “the recent outrage partook of a more definite military character than its predecessors”. Against the wishes of hardliners such as French and Wilson (who wanted it imposed nationally) it was only introduced in 4 counties (Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary) from 11 December and 4 more counties were added in January 1921 (Clare, Waterford, Kilkenny and Wexford).

The first result of martial law was a reprisal on a scale beyond anything yet seen. An Auxiliary patrol was ambushed in Cork remarkably close to the barracks. That evening a group of the newly arrived company went into the city centre setting fire to the main shopping street, as well as the City Hall and Carnegie Library across the river. In subsequent inquiries the army blamed the RIC Auxiliary, and the higher authorities were blamed for sending in a raw unit to such a dangerous area. A third inquiry tried to shift the blame from the police. The inquiry reports were suppressed.

War and Peace – Trials of the Counter-state: 1921

With martial law, Britain’s Irish policy was delicately balanced between repression and concession. Martial law was the legal extreme of repressive policy with conciliation pushed into the wings since the summer surge. The Government of Ireland Act (the “partition act”) reached the statute book on 23 December 1920. Whilst it had evoked extraordinarily

little nationalist enthusiasm it stoked Ulster unionist fears of betrayal. The elections to two Irish parliaments would be a showdown where limited devolution would be tested against the republican claim to independence and the effectiveness of martial law against the strength of republican armed resistance. Lloyd George wanted a truce but conditional on the Volunteers surrendering their arms. The elections were set for May 2021.

“If it is war we must have a virtual dictator”

The British were now able to deploy 51 battalions of infantry, but most were understrength and were raw recruits – stretched to the limit with incessant guard duty, little sleep and patrolling under constant threat of ambush. Persistent shortages of reliable, modern equipment continued and, more serious was the army’s painfully slow adaptation to the military environment created by the republican campaign. In the short-term martial law, produced cooperation from the public leading to discoveries of arms dumps but this did not last. The generals pressed for “full” martial law to introduce heavy fines for carrying arms or harbouring rebels, internment, restrictions on movement, control of the press and especially “unity of command”. Even Sturgis, the Old Etonian Assistant Under Secretary at Dublin Castle, noted “if it is war, we must have a virtual dictator” – he was, however, in a minority.

On 29 December 1920 after an ambush near Cork, 6 houses were destroyed together with furniture with people given an hour to get out with their other possessions. Over 30 more official reprisals (blowing up and burning of homes) were carried out every month over the next 5 months alienating many more people in Ireland than their direct victims. It naturally served to encourage the Volunteers to carry out their own counter-reprisals.

“The National Army of Defence”: Republican Army and State

The British counter-insurgency effort at the turn of 1920/21 was the heaviest and most sustained pressure yet exerted on the republican structure. GHQ insisted that it could point to several achievements in fighting the RIC and British in 1920. The Volunteers movement and the counter-state Sinn Fein government were dependent on each other. The Dail had still not assumed public responsibility for the army although, the IRA had taken an oath of allegiance to the Dail. Following his return from the USA, de Valera was now pushing for greater political control over military policy and was determined to link the military campaign with the governmental mandate of the Dail. De Valera wanted to send Collins to the USA as the representative of the Republic to impose order on American finances, open agencies, encourage the boycott of British goods etc. Collins stalled on the offer but there was some success in importing Thompson machine guns – although a much bigger order was discovered as a ship was about to sail.

Women’s work

The armed conflict revolutionised the role of women in the republican movement and in the most active areas Cumann na mBan was recast to mesh more closely with the Volunteers. Most of their functions were concerned with military matters – first aid, dispatches, carrying arms, transferring arms, intelligence etc. running into serious risks. At the height of the guerrilla struggle they were probably closer to full equality than ever before.

“Tinkering with the honour of the nation”

In March GHQ set out to assess “the war as a whole”. It divided the country into four – the “War Zone” (the area under martial law in the south-west), the secondary country areas, the Dublin area and Ulster. Despite the relative strength of its forces in the south-west it felt that the priority must be to focus on Dublin as that was where power was won and lost. Many country brigades were inefficient and were not producing results. Mulcahy (IRA Chief of Staff) severely criticised some units – he excoriated the “whole story of incompetency and slovenliness” revealed in Offaly No. 2 Brigade’s reports, for instance, telling the brigadier that “work of this kind is simply tinkering with the honour of the nation and playing with the lives of men acting under you”.

Healthcare was poor with scabies, nits and foot infections common as GHQ tried to issue instructions for improvements.

Roads and bridges were systematically blocked or broken and the IRA attacks continued through 1921 with widespread use of bicycles for couriers, scouting (sometimes by women) and ambushes.

“No Irishman has a right to a position of neutrality”

The commitment of the Irish people to the IRA was by no means universal. Many things, from political disagreements to cuts in communications or fears of reprisals could set local people against republican forces. The Volunteers need for funds was bearing more heavily on local communities and in May the Waterford Brigade imposed a levy on farmers and businesses. Most paid up but where a farmer refused, local commanders would take cattle in lieu of payment and used the cattle to feed the men. People did not resist the British demands that they repair the damaged roads, and this threatened to nullify the advantages gained by cutting roads. GHQ issued an appeal for public support through its newspaper declaring that “no Irishman has a right to a position of neutrality”. The military campaign was not universally popular even within Sinn Fein with many disliking violence on either principled or pragmatic grounds. Dissent could carry a high price and most involved have remained silent since 1921.

“Drastic action was taken”

In 1921, as many Volunteer units became alarmed at the apparent seepage of information to the Crown forces, a neurosis about “spies and informers” spread across the organisation. A systematic approach of fines, expelling or killing them was to be introduced. Where more vital information was involved, action taken was increasingly coercive. A Cork intelligence officer noted that “civilian spies were considered by us to be the most dangerous of all. They were acquainted with IRA men in the different localities in which they operated” and might create havoc in our organisation”. “Drastic action was taken to put a stop to their activities”. Two men in South Roscommon who gave information to Volunteers disguised in “enemy uniforms” were summarily executed. As a further example, Cork No.3 Brigade killed at least 10 suspected spies in January/February 1921. Notices such as “Convicted Spy. Informers Beware. IRA” would be pinned to the corpse underlining the linkage of the concepts. A court martial would normally take place and Priests were used to obtain confessions. As well as executing, the houses were burned and their lands and stock “confiscated to the government of the country”. Women spies were almost always exiled rather than killed.

Republican Law

The Republican justice system was struggling to continue in marginal areas like Donegal and Sligo.

Emigration was a problem for Volunteers; it had been restricted to 3,000 in 1919 but had grown to 30,000 in 1920. Men were physically stopped from boarding a ship in Dublin and shipping agents had to sign an undertaking that they would not sell tickets to anyone without an official emigration permit.

Church and Counter-State

At the turn of 1920/21 Bishop Colahan of Cork (having previously supported Sinn Fein) spoke out against the “murder” of RIC men and the burning of barracks was simply “the destruction of Irish property”. He went on to say that the reprisals and counter-reprisals had become “a devil’s competition” and ex-communicated all murderers. He refused to recognise the proclamation of a Republic by the Sinn Fein MPs. Colahan, as a nationalist said, “when you come to me with an army that is able to fight the enemy and defend the weak and unprotected, I will act as Chaplain.” When the nationalist *Cork Examiner* endorsed the decree, the Volunteers smashed its presses. Whilst Colahan was not representative of the Church leadership, any prospect of direct recognition of the Republic by the Church remained a distant one.

It was the threat of papal intervention condemning the republican military campaign that did most to bring the Church and counter-state into line. Whilst the Irish bishops feared the British influence in Rome, in the event, the Pope’s letter proved to be a study in even handed condemnation of violence. “We do not see how the bitter strife can profit either of the parties” when “on both sides a war resulting in the death of unarmed people, even of women and children, is carried on”. From the British government point of view this was a publicity disaster, as it put them on a par with the IRA who they regarded as a “murder gang”.

The Republic’s first General Election

Churchill, now Colonial Secretary, stressed the importance of getting a respite and was concerned at the British reputation in and relationship with the USA. There were more hawkish views expressed in Cabinet and it was already too late for a truce to affect an election.

The republican government had decided to use the Government of Ireland Act machinery – risking the appearance of recognising the British right to legislate for Ireland as well as partition. Sinn Fein had been side-lined by the army's priorities and was a shadow of its former self. Its clubs were in no state to dispute the Volunteer's primary role in selecting candidates (who all turned out to be senior officers).

No candidates were put up against Sinn Fein in any but 4 of the 128 seats in the "Southern Parliament" (the 4 Dublin University seats were conceded to unionists). The Irish party had disappeared from the political picture, and Labour (based on its opposition to the Government of Ireland Act), continued to stand aside. It decided to stand in Ulster alone where it polled weakly winning only 2 seats (Sinn Fein only won 6 there) against 36 unionists.

In the south there was a resounding endorsement of the Republic but the new Dail was different in that under British electoral reform, numbers were increased; Sinn Fein now had 125 MPs (nearly a third were Volunteers). Of 77 MPs currently at liberty, 52 were on the run. These MPs (TDs), unlike those in Belfast and Westminster, were unpaid but several held paid posts in the administration or in the army.

"The military balance"

The Crown Forces believed that they were getting the upper hand. In late April in Dublin successful raids had netted 4 machine guns, 30 rifles, 150 revolvers and over 20,000 rounds of ammunition in the space of a few weeks. At the end of the month 40 Volunteers were captured in a raid.

RIC Auxiliary police discipline had continued to be a problem as the pattern of reprisal and counter reprisal continued. Eventually on June 3, reprisals were abandoned but the violence escalated and in the first half of 1921, 94 soldiers and 223 policemen were killed. Early in June, the Dublin Volunteers attacked a military motor transport depot (known as the "Shell Factory"), destroying 40 vehicles (including 5 of the new Peerless armoured cars) and other stores to the value of £88,000. Nobody was killed so this was not a headline-grabber, but it was a real success, and showed how a great deal of expensive damage could easily be inflicted.

Internal politics and the shortage of key munitions remained a crippling problem to the Volunteers across the country. One reason for the increase in British casualties was the increase in military action – more searches, more encounters etc. In June, the British added 17 infantry battalions together with a "mounted rifle" brigade – an increase of a third within the space of a month. Activity increased especially in Dublin and the Martial Law Area.

"In dealing with the Irish you must show that you mean to go on"

The failure to achieve unity of command, and the persistent divisions between military and police, now threatened to wreck British policy. King George V spoke for many in his dislike of police methods and of the police chief himself - telling Wilson that he wanted to "abolish all Black and Tans". However, Lloyd George and Churchill were more supportive of the RIC. Even with reinforcements the troops were being stretched to their mental and physical limits – much more so than in conventional warfare.

The King opened the Northern Parliament appealing to "all Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation". Lloyd George felt this was helpful saying "in dealing with the Irish you must show that you mean to go on". That afternoon a military raiding party unknowingly arrested de Valera in Blackrock, in possession of IRA operation reports. He had given a false name (Crown forces had general orders not to arrest him) but when he arrived at Portobello barracks, he announced he was the "President of the Irish Republic". As Sturgis then put it, "in the sort of absurd farce that happens in this country, his Dublin Castle senior civil service colleague Cope had been seeing three Bishops to persuade them to see the said gentleman today and urge peace!" The "said gentleman" was hastily released, although not before the military authorities had tried to launch a prosecution for high treason. Cope had been on a peace-keeping mission since his arrival from England in the spring of 1920.

The departure of Lord French in April 1921 was an indication of a shift in political atmosphere. Although he had long since lost his influence on policymaking, he was still a symbol of military coercion. He did not go willingly and his house in Fermanagh had been destroyed by the IRA. His replacement Viscount Fitz-Alan was a Unionist, but he believed that

coercion had gone too far. He was also a Catholic (the first to hold the lord lieutenantcy) and this was intended to be a statement, adding to speculation that the hardliners were losing ground.

In June, Cope and MacMahon (joint Under Secretary at Dublin Castle) were enlisting Cardinal Logue's aid to arrange a meeting between de Valera and the Prime Minister elect of Northern Ireland, James Craig.

"To lie down and be kicked by murderers"

After the Northern Parliament had been opened the British felt ready to deal with the rest of the country. On June 24, Lloyd George sent invitations to de Valera - "as the chosen leader of the great majority in Southern Ireland" - and the new Northern Ireland Premier, Craig to come to London "to explore to the utmost possibility of a settlement". Over the next few days several republican leaders, including Griffith, were released from prison. The unionist Lord Midleton received a telegram from de Valera for him "to come to Dublin with three other representatives of the "Loyal South" to discuss the answer to be given to the Government. At first, he assumed this was a hoax and showed the telegram to Lloyd George who urged him to go to Dublin. So, the Dublin meeting was arranged.

De Valera was, as he told Lloyd George a few days later, consulting with what he called his "political minority" before responding to the Prime Minister's invitation. He had invited Craig as well as Midleton and three other prominent southern unionists, but Craig turned him down. On 1 July, the Dail met and decided to put forward the truce terms they had outlined in December. The Lloyd George invitation had avoided any mention of a truce. After two days of negotiations in Dublin, Midleton went back to tell the Prime Minister that unless he agreed to "stopping all fighting", it was useless to continue the discussions. The "rebels" required that, if there was no truce, "the troops should be confined to barracks and not show in the streets of Dublin" After objecting Lloyd George wrote back to Midleton "conceding the point".

On 5 July, General Jan Smuts (PM of South Africa) arrived in Dublin as an "unofficial intermediary" and met de Valera and Griffith, with Duggan (former IRA Director of Intelligence and just released from prison) and Barton (Sinn Fein's Director of Agriculture). They told him that they had made up their minds to refuse the invitation because "Ulster" would not be involved. Smuts advised them that they had "no force but a certain measure of public opinion", which they would lose if they refused this olive branch. Griffith seemed to agree with him but de Valera "spoke like a visionary", Smuts noted, "spoke continually of generations of oppression and seemed to live in a world of dreams, visions and shadows". They did agree though that if they were granted a republic they would be bound by limitations. Smuts warned them that his experience with the "limited Republic" of Transvaal produced continual disputes culminating in breakdown. He hoped to persuade them to accept Dominion status (Canada style) but de Valera insisted that the British government "should make a great gesture" to show that it did not distrust the Irish people. "The conflict is only hardening the spirit of our people". Any settlement "must be an everlasting peace".

When Smuts reported this to the Cabinet the final phrase was warmly greeted by Churchill who acknowledged the failure of force. Most of the ministers were in favour of conciliation. Eventually in Dublin a formal truce was agreed on 8 July. When Macready (C in C) travelled through the crowd to the talks, he was cheered. He was the only soldier present as the Irish negotiators (de Valera, Brugha, Barton and Duggan) came from the "state" rather than the "army" side. No truce document was signed by both sides and Midleton seemed to have been content with an oral agreement. Macready thought that he had agreed to five terms - the cessation of raids and searches, the restriction of military activity to supporting the police in "normal civil duties", the removal of curfew restrictions, the suspension of reinforcements from England and the replacement of the RIC by the DMP in policing Dublin itself - while the republicans agreed to avoid "provocative displays", to "prohibit the use of arms" and to "cease military manoeuvres of all kinds". The Sinn Fein Irish Bulletin produced a slightly different version of terms and the IRA another. These latter two sets of terms reflected the concerns of each side as much as actual formal agreements.

At the political level, the Truce was a dramatic step-change for the Republican counter-state with "the Republican Government" face to face with the UK authorities on an equal basis. In London Lloyd George managed to overcome the reservations of some of his colleagues.

However, for the front-line Crown forces, the Truce came as a severe shock. General Strickland complained that “the flaunting of Sinn Fein flags everywhere is trying the temper of the Police rather highly”. He felt that it would successfully provoke them saying “it will be beyond human endurance for some people to lie down and be kicked by murderers”. There was certainly a lot of anger and frustration amongst officers and troops who believed that they had been on the brink of quelling the rebellion.

Republicans were ecstatic with tricolours waving in every window. After a period of contention on the streets, troops and police were mostly pulled back into barracks to avoid confrontation, which seemed like a further defeat to many.

“There should be no question of vacation or half-time work”

Under the Truce some units were diverted to training camps. GHQ issued instructions confirming that under the terms of the Truce trenching roads was suspended but that “munitions supply was to be increased to the fullest possible extent. There should be no question of vacation or half-time work on the part of anybody engaged in this department.” Munitions shortages had always been the biggest single handicap to the Volunteer campaign, and this was an attempt to change the status quo. It was also a breach of the Truce although clearly not in the view of GHQ.

There was a dramatic numerical expansion of the IRA after the Truce – from 34,000 in July to 75,000 in December and well over 100,000 by the following spring.

“Collections pure and simple”

One cause of friction with the public was the longstanding practice of paying for the Volunteer campaign by public levies – not entirely voluntary but the level of pressure varied from area to area. During the Truce such methods came under sharper public scrutiny and criticism. “Will you please have it hammered into the heads of all O/C’s”, GHQ wrote, “that Truce time collections must be collections pure and simple, and neither loans nor extortions.”

Negotiators: Purists and Pragmatists?

Differences in the military were among a series of disputes which gradually fractured the solidarity of the republican leadership. A spat over ranks and appointments coincided with the process of selecting the Republic’s delegation to London and setting out its negotiating stance. Lengthy correspondence over July/August between de Valera and Lloyd George had got nowhere. The gulf between them was only bridged after Cope had persuaded the British Cabinet in September that, if Britain insisted on allegiance to the Crown as a precondition for talks, there would be no negotiations. At the end of the month de Valera finally agreed to negotiate based on Lloyd George’s formula – to work out “how the association of Ireland with the community of nations known as the British Empire may be reconciled with Irish national aspirations”. De Valera decided not to be part of the delegation and Brugha and Stack refused to go, so Collins reluctantly attended.

“Our Civil Functions”

During the London negotiations de Valera told Collins it was “very important that you stipulate our civil functions – police, courts etc go on”. The republican justice system had been brought to a near-standstill on the last 6 months of guerrilla conflict. Under the Truce though, the courts revived and by mid-August they were operating across the country. However, they had to close again due to British pressure.

“The Celts never were republicans”

Once de Valera opted out, the Irish team may appear politically inexperienced. On the British side Lloyd George led a group of political heavyweights – Austen Chamberlain (Leader of the House), Birkenhead (Lord Chancellor) and Churchill. Missing and on the side-lines was Bonar Law who had pushed the Conservatives to the brink of civil war during the 1912 Home Rule crisis – and who was to lead the Tory revolt against the Treaty and bring Lloyd George down. Ireland’s unity and allegiance to the Crown were not resolvable issues. Irish unity was never going to be possible with Britain already accepting there could be no “coercion of Ulster” and so, partition was already a reality. Most British ministers disliked it, but it was effectively irreversible except by bilateral agreement between Dublin and Belfast.

Ireland's sovereign status was essential to Republican aspirations and they rejected any concession as "going into the Empire" – a phrase that assumed that the Irish Republic was already an independent state.

Griffith and Collins both took the view that the concept of more limited sovereignty (suzerainty) was acceptable; to them, separation was a practical rather than symbolic project.

It was said at the earlier meeting in July that when presented with a document in Gaelic, Lloyd George asked "what is the Irish word for Republic?". De Valera and his colleague were unable to provide a satisfactory answer, allowing Lloyd George who had been making a great show of Celtic affinity with his Irish visitors, to ask "must we not admit that the Celts never were republicans and have no native word for such an idea?".

Lloyd George fixed on the label "Free State" as one he could do business with - avoiding the term "dominion" as its undertones sounded different to British and Irish ears. He famously said, "the life of the Government is put in issue by our proposals" and Chamberlain urged his Irish counterparts "not to press it too far I beg. You are not aware of the risks we are taking with our whole political future". Within 2 years of signing the Treaty, Chamberlain's distinguished political career would be wrecked along with Lloyd George's. Long before that Collins would be killed in the internecine fight over the Treaty terms.

The Republic Fractured:1922-1923

"The Treaty as it is drafted is not acceptable to us"

The London negotiations had produced a roughly agreed draft Treaty and the Dail Cabinet met on 3 December 1921 to discuss it. The Treaty would create a 26 county Irish Free State with "Dominion status". From a republican point of view, what was striking about it was the powers this state would lack. It would not possess full fiscal autonomy; it would have no independent foreign policy; its defences would be substantially in British hands. Some were ready to break over these issues – Barton believed that fiscal independence was vital and achievable. Childers felt that Articles 6 and 7 effectively committed Ireland to join all Britain's wars by giving Britain the right to defend the Irish coasts (including the occupation of several ports) and would deprive the "Free State" of national status.

The majority seemed able to live with the terms, but the discussion was inconclusive. Two other issues threatened sharper division – partition and the "oath of allegiance" to the British Crown. Nobody (including the British) imagined that partition could be permanent.

The meeting became more acrimonious and finally de Valera drafted a second document accepting partition, dropping neutrality in favour of the "free state" concept. In London, Barton and Duffy were still holding out for British recognition of Irish independence in principle as a prelude to accepting Dominion status. British negotiators furiously walked out of talks when Duffy said that "our difficulty is to come into the Empire." The Irish delegation tried and failed to get the oath of allegiance amended to "to the constitution of the Irish Free State" which would have implied rather than specified the Crown. Under pressure from Lloyd George (who had threatened war within 3 days if they did not sign and waved two letters asking which one should he send to Craig), Griffith forgot to consult the Dail before signing.

The Dail Cabinet was divided over the Treaty with Cosgrave clinching the majority in favour and this division spilled over into the Dail and beyond. The terms of the Treaty came as a shock to many sincere separatists.

De Valera issued a public letter on December 9 stating that he was unable to "recommend acceptance of this treaty." The next day, the most important military unit spoke out against the treaty. The brigadiers of the of the 1st Southern Division met in Cork and resolved that "the Treaty as it is drafted is not acceptable to us "

The IRA concluded that they did not have the strength to drive out the British if there was a return to war conditions. Mulcahy felt that acceptance of the Treaty was "a quicker way to complete independence" than was rejection of it.

"In one year or ten Ireland will regain that freedom which is her destiny"

The first Dail public sessions took place shortly before Christmas and the shape of the “Treaty debate” emerged. For those against, it set principle against compromise; for supporters, it pitted reality against fantasy.

In the New Year of 1922, the military reaction became more outspoken against the Treaty. In the Dail, in support of Collins “steppingstone” argument (ultimate freedom to aspire to and immediately seeing the back of the British army), a Cork TD put it as “it is to be a jumping off point; in one year or in ten years, Ireland will gain that freedom which is her destiny.” Collins had said in the Dail “they have made a greater concession than we. They have given up their age-long attempt to dominate us.” His famous assertion was that the Treaty gave freedom – not the “ultimate freedom” but “the freedom to achieve that end.

The Truce Christmas

During the Christmas recess public support for the agreement became more assertive and the press and the Church were broadly in support too. By the end of the recess, verbal violence was becoming more personal and on return of the Dail (3 January) this was reflected in the personal insults used in the debate. When the final vote was taken the Treaty was approved by 64-57. Opinions were unstable and de Valera lost a vote on the presidency by a margin of 2, after which, his supporters walked out of the Dail, and the clash of ideas intensified.

Early in February de Valera launched a new party, Cumman na Poblachta – aiming to “safeguard the position of the Republic” while ensuring the country remained “governed peacefully”.

Human structures of the split

The second Dail was a one-party assembly and unrepresentative even of Sinn Fein – it was dominated by the militant Volunteer side of the republican movement. Socially it was even less representative, with commercial, agricultural and industrial backgrounds swamped by clerical and professional ones. The slender Dail majority in favour of the Treaty was certainly narrower than in the country at large. Teachers, the biggest identifiable occupation group in the Dail divided 8-7 in favour of the Treaty. Among 1916 veterans it was 23-24 against the Treaty. Local government people divided 50/50. The average age of the Treaty supporters was just under 38 against the irreconcilables nearly 42. 9 out of 13 GHQ staff were in favour but 11 out of 19 divisional staffs against as were 70-80% of brigades. All 6 women TDs voted against the Treaty and their women’s movement mobilised against the Treaty. At a special convention it rejected the Treaty 419-63 and the pro Treaty members were “requested to resign”. Women’s prominence in the anti-Treaty resistance became, more marked as the resistance became more uncompromising and, ultimately, violent.

The Brotherhood

Many of the pivotal republican leaders had been on the IRB Supreme Council (its principle was that this was the provisional government of the Republic) – Collins was president in 1921.

The Supreme Council met to discuss the Treaty at the same time as the Dail Cabinet (where its president, Collins was). It debated the form of the oath and argued for demotion rather than removal of the King from it. It rejected partition absolutely. When they met again on 10 December, it seemed to find the final form of the oath was acceptable and, even with the inclusion of partition, a majority appeared ready to give the Treaty a trial. Under pressure from Lynch’s fierce opposition, officially the IRB took a neutral position but unofficially a note was issued to TDs who were members of the brotherhood that the Council had decided that the Treaty should be ratified. Technically it was a free vote in the Dail. After the ratification vote in the Dail the IRB held an unprecedented meeting of provincial Centres with the Supreme Council, which showed it was as split as the rest of the country. Under the pressure of disagreement over the Treaty the IRB steadily disintegrated.

The “Year of Disappearances”

An overwhelmingly positive picture of the struggle for independence has passed into public memory and that the dark deeds were not carried out by the IRA but by the Black and Tans. That there might have been a seedy side to revolutionary violence was not something to be dwelt on by future generations. More recent studies have shown that there was a much darker side with some of the IRA victims killed for sectarian rather than political reasons. The worst case of this was the "Bandon Valley massacre" in West Cork. Three men in a single street were woken in the middle of the night and shot in the face. Over the following nights ten more were killed and one injured. As one of them was killed his wife heard the killers say, "take that, you Free Stater". All the victims were Protestants and hundreds of them went into hiding or fled their homes. The killings were carried out by "committed republicans", members of the anti-treaty IRA, probably acting on their own initiative in the knowledge of local units who must have known what was going on. The victims were not informers because, as Protestants, they generally had no information to give. The sense of a gradual (if still partial) lifting of a veil of silence pervades Gerard Murphy's *The year of disappearances*, a large-scale investigation of "political killings" in Cork in 1921-22, presented a personal journey of discovery into his community's history. Murphy, one of the many schoolboys who had "marched dressed in Volunteer uniforms for the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising", found that the "new perspective on the IRA" his inquiries revealed "did not fit with the image of brave flying columns fighting impossible odds that we had celebrated in 1966". "It gradually began to dawn on me that the truth of the time had never been told". The truth, he says, is that dozens of men "disappeared" in Cork in the year after the Truce and were buried in "killing fields".

Northern Ireland

In the nationalists' view, sectarian violence was something that happened in the north, and they were its victims. The Belfast Volunteer Commander Roger McCorley said that during the Truce they had official relations with the RIC and British military but open warfare with the "B Specials". The Catholic community were under a continuous armed onslaught from Orange gangs and for the local Volunteers it was a fight for their existence.

Northern nationalist opinion welcomed the Treaty, particularly in the border areas. The Catholic Church in the north was firmly against de Valera. The northern IRA also seems to have taken a broadly positive attitude to the Treaty. From the 1922 New Year the Northern Ireland government instructed its security forces to lift any restrictions on "the enforcement of the law" and cancel all liaison arrangements with the Sinn Fein authorities. The situation descended into a shooting war.

The 3 governments cobbled together an agreement labelled the "Craig-Collins pact." Bringing the two together stemmed from the British view that Collins was someone they could do business with and someone who understood the British government's perspective on the northern issue. Collins was prepared to end the Belfast boycott if there was an end to the discrimination and persecution that had provoked it. When Collins met Craig on 21 January, Craig agreed that expelled shipyard workers should be reinstated in return for the abandonment of the boycott, and even proposed an all-Ireland convention to determine the relationship between north and south. The two agreed to replace the Boundary Commission by a direct bilateral agreement. However, within a few weeks, it was clear that the outstanding differences remained as wide as ever. The all-Ireland conference was dropped, and Craig was forced to reassure the Ulster Unionist Council that he would not agree to any boundary change that left "our Ulster area any less than it is".

Just before the Craig-Collins meeting in January an IRA commander was arrested with several of his officers while travelling with a Gaelic football team. Next month the IRA seized 42 local leading loyalists as hostages and took them over the border to Clones. In an armed clash at Clones station, a Volunteer and four Ulster Specials were killed.

The Belfast boycott was finally wound up; there was a growing lobby that maintained it was counter-productive, as it injured the innocent as well as the guilty.

After the Clones incident there was a storm of gunfire in the Kent Street area of Belfast which the local newspaper found "awe-inspiring". Collins protested to Churchill that 3 of the police officers who keep the "peace" in Belfast today were "up to their knees in the crimes of 1920-21. This was quickly followed by the horrific murder of a high-profile middle class Catholic family. It jolted the unionist community's sense of moral superiority and seemed to presage all-out

war. Churchill called another north-south meeting in London and a second Craig-Collins pact was drawn up. Forward-looking proposals such as a 50-50 mix of Catholics and Protestants of Special Police in mixed districts and in committees to investigate cases of intimidation and violence, never got beyond the verbal stage. In just over 2 months from February to April 127 Catholics were killed and 300 injured in Belfast.

“Power wielded by men who have no legal authority”

Legally the Treaty had been approved but not yet ratified: only a new parliament could do this. Until a general election was held the Republic stayed in being, and a dual authority emerged. When de Valera resigned as President of the Dail on 9 January, the proposal to re-elect him as “President of the Republic” was lost by 2 votes. When Collins proposed Griffith as President of the Dail, de Valera insisted that his oath of office would bind him not to subvert the Republic. Griffith undertook to maintain the Republic until the people decided the issue, but de Valera said that his commitment to carry out the Treaty would put him in an impossible position, simultaneously maintaining and subverting the Republic. Before the vote was taken de Valera and the anti-Treaty deputies walked out.

After signing the Treaty, it became clear that there were differences in the British and Irish interpretations of it.

On January 14, the Southern Parliament met to approve the Treaty and elect a provisional government to implement it. Effectively, Collins as chairman of the Provisional Government and Griffith as President of the Dail, set up two parallel governments.

Churchill was responsible for pushing the Irish Free State (Agreement) Bill through a fractious House of Commons and was alarmed by the deteriorating situation in the north. He pointed out that the Provisional Government was operating without any official British sanction and saw it as “fatal to peace, social order, and good government to have power wielded by men who have no legal authority”.

The Provisional Government had to take policing more seriously than the previous republican administration – in order to survive and keep the British off its back. It was not a political option to adopt the old RIC and the republican police had performed badly. The only viable force was the unarmed DMP. In January, the Provisional Government created an unarmed centrally controlled national police force, first named the National Guard and then Civil Guard. In the spring they were to take over the vacated RIC barracks. Initially a mutiny followed due to poor accommodation conditions and too much of an RIC element amongst the instructors. Eventually the situation was resolved.

“Many more of us will die”

From the anti-Treaty group there was now pressure to reassert the independence of the IRA from the Dail and a Volunteer Convention was called for. Liam Mellows predicted that “many more of us will die before an Irish Republic is recognised.” The IRA reached a view that “the Army should revert to its status as a Volunteer force under the control of an elected Executive” (elected by a convention). They formally requested the Defence Minister, Mulcahy, to call “a Convention of the Army” and to debate 3 resolutions – the army should reaffirm its allegiance to the Irish Republic, be under the supreme control of an elected executive and draft a constitution to be considered by a later convention. Mulcahy agreed to hold a conference but reminded them that the “supreme control of the Army” was vested in the Dail.

Mulcahy was forced by Griffith and his Cabinet to reverse his position on the Convention. In March, the Convention was proscribed by the Cabinet as it was an attempt to establish a Military Dictatorship. The Convention met on 26 March to elect an IRA Executive to exercise “supreme control” over the army in the name of the Republic. It repudiated the authority of the Minister for Defence and the Dail itself.

The Takeover

As soon as the British began to hand over military installations the question of who would occupy them became urgent. The transfer of installations was amicable especially when the British realised that the Provisional Government's authority was under challenge. The new Free State could not afford to maintain the number of installations the British had, and closures were inevitable. Beggars Bush barracks in Dublin was the base for the Provisional Government's army.

The RIC left their 5 Limerick barracks on 23 February and a Beggars Bush force under Michael Brennan (O/C and pro-Treaty) was already moving in. On hearing this O'Malley (O/C 2nd Southern Division IRA and anti-Treaty) brought up all the men he could gather to dispute the occupation of the city. A full-scale armed clash was imminent, and Brennan was conscious of his vulnerability with only 300 of his 570 men armed with limited ammunition. Given a 24hour ultimatum to leave he wrote to GHQ appealing for help. Fortunately, the crisis never came to the crunch, but the division was clear.

"A Republic in disguise"

In advance of the general election an electoral pact of the two sides within Sinn Fein was agreed to divide the seats in proportion to the 64-57 Treaty vote. The task was now to draft a constitution which was essentially republican within the terms of the Treaty. British reactions to the Free State constitutional proposals became more rigid as the anti-Treaty threat to the Provisional Government intensified. The drafting committee came up with their proposal and, after Collins and the Cabinet reviewed them, it was taken to London. Lloyd George immediately identified it as a "complete evasion of the Treaty and a setting up of a republic with a thin veneer". The PM protested that the "republic in disguise" made the monarchy look ridiculous, ignored the oath of allegiance and rejected the idea of a Commonwealth foreign policy.

"Not only the end of the Irish Republic, but the end of republicanism in Ireland"

The importance of the June election was clear, but just what it represented is less so. The Free State constitution was published on election day. The PR system produced a decisive majority of deputies accepting the Treaty. The reappearance of Labour as an independent political party broke Sinn Fein's electoral monopoly, and, by polling day, a Farmer's grouping and a clutch of independents had raised the number of non-pact candidates to 51. Only 34 Sinn Fein candidates (half pro- and half anti-Treaty) were able to run unopposed. Pact candidates won 60% of the vote with Pro-Treaty Sinn Fein beating anti-Treatment republicans by 239,000 first-preference votes to 130,000; but the latter were beaten by Labour who polled 132,000 (17 seats). Labour, Farmers and Independents enhanced the pro-Treaty majority to 92 out of 128 with over 78% of the votes cast. There was a striking East-West and urban-rural split. Republicans lost decisively in Dublin and Cork cities and Dorothy Macardle pronounced the result "not only the end of the Irish Republic, but the end of republicanism in Ireland.

A minority split from the IRA Executive over a motion to resume war against the British then resulted in two anti-Treaty IRA's.

"Our boast of civilisation in these islands is stultified"

British inflexibility, rooted in entrenched suspicion of Irish separatism, denied the Provisional Government the political advantage of being able to demonstrate that Collins's interpretation of the Treaty was valid. The British insisted that the Provisional Government take action to crush the republicans. Fatally this confirmed the republican charge that the Provisional Government was a British puppet regime – the British encouraged military confrontation.

In June Churchill bombarded Griffith with "letters pouring into his office" deploring the state of affairs in Ireland: "rich and poor turned out of their homes Scenes are like those of the French Revolution etc etc." Churchill boomed portentously, "until somehow or other we find a means of putting an end to this state of affairs, our boast of civilisation in these islands is stultified". British pressure peaked after Sir Henry Wilson was assassinated by anti-Treaty IRA men in London on 22 June. Lloyd George fired a warning to Collins to the effect that the IRA can no longer be tolerated – operating in open rebellion in Dublin and the Free State, Northern Ireland and Britain.

Though many provincial military garrisons had been withdrawn, British forces remained in strength in Dublin. More belligerent language followed from Lloyd George and Churchill threatening Collins and the Provisional Government.

The anti-Treaty republicans had occupied one of the largest symbolic buildings in Dublin – the Four Courts. The British Cabinet instructed General Macready to attack it with tanks and aircraft (Collins would not have been aware of that).

The Provisional Government now warned the Four Courts garrison that unless they left the building immediately, surrendering their arms, necessary military action would be taken. The British supplied them with field guns and artillery troops to advise on their use. The National Army were largely untrained and unsurprisingly the first day of the attack did not go well with Churchill wanting the use of more powerful shells and air action.

“It’s good to feel myself a soldier again”

The Four Courts building, strong as it was, its complicated interior made it difficult for the 180 men inside it to communicate with each other. Their Rolls Royce armoured car could only drive back and forth in the compound, firing on National troops entering the west wing. The IRA occupied hotels and barricaded the Hammam, with de Valera arriving at the luxurious Gresham to re-join his old battalion as a rank and file Volunteer. With leaders rallying to support the Republic, the internal split within the IRA was over.

Senior officers in the Four Courts debated the idea of surrender for two days before rejecting it as a betrayal of the Republic. Eventually, after trying to tunnel a way out and sustaining repeated shelling, the 130 survivors surrendered on 30 June. The other republican occupied areas and hotels were shelled and on fire on 4 July when de Valera and other leaders left them ordering the survivors to retreat or surrender. Instead, Brugha ran out and was mortally wounded. 65 Executive and Provisional Government troops died in the Dublin fighting, as did an unknown number of civilians – possibly well over 250.

No republican leaders emerged with much credit from these events. There was a sense of relief when the Provisional Government’s ultimatum was delivered to the Four Courts garrison. Liam Mellows made the point explicitly: “it’s good to feel myself a soldier again after all those futile negotiations”.

“We let the Republic go by default”

Liam Lynch had taken over as IRA Chief of Staff - whilst never questioned for his selfless dedication, his ability to direct the Republican campaign has come in for much criticism. He had no policy or liking of politics believing that military action would cut through political complication. O’Donnell (of the IRA Executive) lamented “we were very poorly off politically, we let the Republic go by default”. Some of the IRA leaders acknowledged a hardness in their idealism and an aloofness from ordinary people and were impelled by conviction rather than analysis.

The Republicans began the civil war with a military advantage from controlling most of the IRA and being at least as well armed as the government. Lynch moved GHQ out of Dublin to Mallow before having to move on again. Several senior leaders who had surrendered in the Four Courts, were in prison from that point until their deaths while O’Malley and Lemass had escaped. Lynch had been released on instructions from Mulcahy.

Geographically the IRA controlled almost all the south with the two posts controlled by pro-Treaty forces soon taken. However, when the chance to dispute the control of Dublin was lost, the balance shifted. Hostilities in Limerick began on July 11 with the republicans retreating on 27 July. Waterford was taken by National troops on 23 July and many towns fell without resistance. The resistance fell back from semi-open fighting to disintegrated guerrilla war and the use of small groups. Unlike recent history, most of the people did not support them, and the Church had become openly hostile. O’Malley (an IRA Assistant Chief of Staff) was finally tracked down and arrested following a shoot-out in one of the more affluent Dublin suburbs. There had not been a serious effort to construct a republican administration.

“It is in the public interest that order should be restored”

On paper, the Provisional Government had the best organisational talent among its leaders. The government authorised the recruitment of 20,000 temporary troops on top of the 15,000 regulars. It also aimed to create a military culture replacing the easy-going familiarity of the revolutionary forces. Unfortunately, the same problems that had eaten way at the IRA during the Truce, indiscipline, disorganisation and sometimes mutiny, beset the new army.

Eventually, the steady transfusion of British weapons guaranteed that, even with erratic organisation, the National Army's fighting capacity would increase.

Collins became, in effect, a kind of *generalissimo*, combining military and political supremacy. Griffith and Mulcahy deferred to Collins as a strategist and thinker.

The Home Affairs Ministry drew up a formidable list of the threats to public order – armed robberies, suppression of free speech and the press, extortion etc. It suggested that “whatever differences of opinion may exist, everyone must agree that it is in the public interest that order should be restored, and life and property respected.

“Give them no rest”

Serious fighting had now ended and most of those killed in the Civil War had died in its first 3 months. However, republican guerrilla action continued and in December, Sligo Town Hall was seized with the rebels taking 21 rifles and 1,300 rounds of ammunition. In January 1923 Sligo railway station was destroyed. After a series of republican threats and attacks the local TD in Mayo complained that “failure to deal with the roadblocks gave the people a false impression of irregular strength”. He urged that “there is one way to deal with them – General Lawlor's way – follow them,

In August 1922 the shape and personality of the Provisional Government changed twice in 10 days, when Griffith died on the 12th (a cerebral haemorrhage probably brought on by stress) and Collins on 22nd (when his convoy was fired on, there was nothing to stop his car from driving to safety – other than his desire to show he was a fighting man and not just a pen-pusher). When he reached a village, he got out of his car to halt his convoy with a rifle (against the advice of his colleague, Dalton) – most of the republican ambush party had left but he was shot in the back of his head from an unknown source. His body was returned to Dublin from Cork by boat just before first light. There was a procession of 200-300 people behind his coffin on a gun carriage which was led by a piper – an intensely moving occasion. Mulcahy remained Defence Minister but also became commander in chief. O'Higgins, who had been serving on the military staff, stepped up to a bigger political role as home affairs minister. He proposed that Mulcahy should succeed Collins at the head of the government, but Blythe persuaded his colleagues that this would send the wrong signals. Only then was W T Cosgrave, who had chaired the Cabinet in Collins's absence, formally confirmed as chairman. After the Republic was formally wound up in December, he became a British style prime minister with the title, President of the Executive. Cosgrave confirmed that the Irish Free State would come into being on 6 December (a year after the signing of the Treaty).

Under this second Provisional Government, counter-insurgency policy was distinctly tougher. Although the republican armed threat had reduced, statutory emergency powers were introduced on 27 September – establishing military courts or committees with powers to impose death penalties on non-army personnel and indefinite detention without trial. Firearms possession was to be controlled by the National Army Council. Cosgrave had always been against the death penalty, but he could see no other way to restore order.

Republican Government

As president of a republic that was disestablished, de Valera was in political limbo. The impossible situation left the republicans the choice of surrender or the repudiation of majority rule.

De Valera was determined to fight for control of the republican funds still resting in the USA. Several of the republican leaders were arguing for the formation of a republican government with left wing policies but Lynch had no time for policies and wanted to focus on the military position. De Valera took the issue up with Lynch explaining that a

republican government must be restored to establish a claim on republican funds. The Executive met in October and it called on de Valera to form a government to preserve the continuity of the Republic. The second Dail reconvened in secret on 25 October to reaffirm de Valera as its president and the Cabinet he formed had an air of unreality. The ministries headed by Stack (Finance), O’Kelly (Local Government) and Barton (Economic Affairs) simply did not exist, while the Defence Minister, Mellows, was incarcerated in Mountjoy gaol.

“Very drastic measures”

Towards the end of 1922 a vicious spiral of violence threatened the restraints which had kept the civil war within bounds. The first executions under the Emergency Powers, of 4 republican IRA men on 17 November were followed by the execution of Erskine Childers, on what many, saw as a trumped-up charge. Three days later the IRA issued a warning to the Speaker of the “Provisional Parliament of Southern Ireland”: “every member of your body who voted for this resolution by which you pretend to make legal the murder of soldiers, is equally guilty Unless your army recognises the rules of warfare we shall adopt very drastic measures to protect our forces”.

The government reacted to this warning by issuing the “Orders of Frightfulness” – identifying 14 categories of people who were to be shot on sight. In early December, the leading pro-Treaty TD and former IRA leader, Hales, was assassinated. Mulcahy immediately proposed that the imprisoned Four Courts leaders be executed, and the Cabinet agreed (the legality of this was questionable to say the least). The killings had a powerful effect, confirming, ironically, the assertions of hawkish British ministers about the value of strong action in impressing the Irish people.

In January 1923, the emergency powers were extended, to impose the death penalty for a swathe of offences such as carrying messages for irregulars, assisting in escapes, using military or police uniforms and desertion from the National Army. It was a striking increase in executions – the British authorities had executed 24 Volunteers up to the Truce, but the Free State executed at least 77 and probably 4 more for political offences. The rate of executions increased in February, and unknown numbers were shot extra-judicially by police and National troops. There were some terrible atrocities carried out in Dublin and across Ireland – only 5 of 32 republican IRA men who died in Kerry in March were killed in combat. The National Army troops were exonerated in a military court, but the submissions made were known to be fictional.

“The Republic can no longer be defended”

In January 1923 Liam Deasy, IRA Deputy Chief of Staff, was arrested, and would no doubt have been executed but he decided that there was no point in fighting on. He signed a statement, drafted by his captors, accepting an unconditional surrender and calling on 16 of his named colleagues, to give a similar undertaking and acceptance. The government published the appeal on 9 February, but no reply came – it was one of several attempts to bring the civil war to a close.

At a 4-day meeting of the Executive between 23-26 March a motion that “further armed resistance and operations against the F.S. Government will not further the cause of independence of the country” was defeated by a single vote. They adjourned and decided to reconvene on 10 April. On the way to that meeting Lynch and a group of his officers were caught in a large-scale search operation and Lynch was hit by a single rifle shot. His colleagues had to leave him as the papers they were carrying had to be saved and brought through at any cost. Lynch was picked up by National troops and died of his wounds that evening. Even with Lynch gone, it was not easy to end the military campaign. Aiken took over as IRA chief of staff and when he took soundings from his commanders all of them confirmed the pessimism that they had previously expressed. A fortnight after Lynch’s death, de Valera issued his order to the “Soldiers of the Republic” Declaring that “the Republic can no longer be defended successfully by your arms.” Military victory “must be allowed to rest for the moment with those who have destroyed the Republic”. On 24 May, Aiken issued the final command to the IRA to dump its arms. There were no negotiations, no truce terms: The Republic simply melted back into the realm of imagination.

Conclusion

“We have declared for an Irish Republic and will not live under any other law.” Lynch’s famous assertion was made before the formal declaration of independence by the Dail. For him, and many others, the Republic was an actual existing entity. The first Republic lasted for 5 days in 1916 and the second for nearly 2 years up to the vote on the Treaty. Many Volunteers believed they owned the independence – the Republic had crystallised around the army and could only function if the army operated successfully. Otherwise, it remained a project of political imagination rather than a functioning political structure.

Paradoxically, the more enterprising “republicans” accepted the Treaty and those who stood most vehemently against it were less committed to making it work and remained hostile to everything that smacked of “politics”. Nobody did more to make the Republic a reality than Michael Collins with his energy and genius of realism.

Ultimately, the will of the Free State to create a functioning structure outweighed the republican will to prevent them.

For many, the response to the civil war was a deep silence. The sole survivor of one massacre never talked about it for over 40 years. No official history of the revolutionary period was ever produced. Even academic historians avoided it as a divisive topic for generations.

The catalogue of blood is grim – 7,500 killed or injured by armed action between 1917 and 1923. In Cork alone over 700 were killed, and 400 of them at the hands of the IRA. Over a third of the dead were civilians. The IRA killed 200 civilians – innocent or not – and 70 of them were Protestants. Many more were driven out by the violence. The biggest measurable social change of the period was the dramatic reduction in the non-Catholic population in the south. There was more to the damage than simple bloodshed. The civil war represented the culmination of a process in which, over 3 years of guerrilla conflict and violence permeated society. Normality was unhinged by continual violence, and Ireland became in a sense a war zone.

The military files are full of personal tragedies with many innocently caught in the crossfire. The collapsed public structures of Ireland were battered out of recognition by rival jurisdictions. At the personal level, the clash was disorienting. When DI Gilbert Potter was killed in Tipperary in April 1921, his widow received a letter from the local IRA commander. “Your husband was charged with and found guilty of waging war against the Republic. We offered to release your husband if the British Government would release Volunteer Traynor who was similarly charged. Personally, I do not believe the offer went past Dublin Castle. Traynor was hanged on Monday, the law had, therefore, to take its course.”

Against the odds the Irish state – however tyrannical it seemed to its republican victims – became a remarkably stable democracy. The Free State having battled the Republicans to a standstill, seemed to have their imaginative horizons shrunk by the experience. Fiscal caution cast a shadow over the early decades of independence.

In 1914 Ireland, like most of Europe, was spoiling for a fight. In 1921, like Europe, it was war weary, and this weariness allowed the “realism” of those who accepted the Treaty to have a purchase on public opinion.

Violence cemented partition. The advance of republicanism after 1916 paralleled the establishment of a northern state. The republicans who took over the nationalist movement were seen by the Protestants as seen as aiming at Catholic majority rule. In 1916, the future of republicanism and partition hung in the balance, but the guerrilla campaign produced a violent reassertion of Ulster identity. There was still a chance of a united Ireland but as the Free State descended into civil war, Lloyd George’s coalition government was overthrown. During the Treaty split and civil war, the partition issue remained secondary to the issue of “the oath”. Only when the Boundary Commission set to work in 1924 did most nationalists realise that partition was there for the longer term.

Republican Sinn Fein fell apart after the civil war and de Valera led a new party (Fianna Fail, the Republican Party) back into parliament. Even after it gained power in the 1930's and dismantled the symbolic structures of Crown supremacy that had been lethally divisive in 1922, de Valera maintained that the Republic could not exist while Ireland was divided. The state he redesigned through his 1937 constitution was essentially republican, but he had to wait until the descendants of the pro-Treaty side returned to power a decade later before it was formally designated a republic. By then, the real political independence of Ireland had been conclusively demonstrated. Britain responded to the declaration in 1949 with the Northern Ireland Act – guaranteeing that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK if most of its population wanted this. The assertion of Irish neutrality during WWII had been maintained despite British (and American) pressure. The old belief that only direct control of Ireland could guarantee Britain's security had been finally scotched. It had proved, as Collins believed, that Britain no longer had the power or the will to coerce Ireland. The fight for independence had, in that sense, been truly won.

Sources:

The Republic, The fight for Irish Independence by Charles Townshend

Appendix



Figure 1 Arthur Griffith



Figure 2 Éamon de Valera



Figure 3 Four Courts shelling



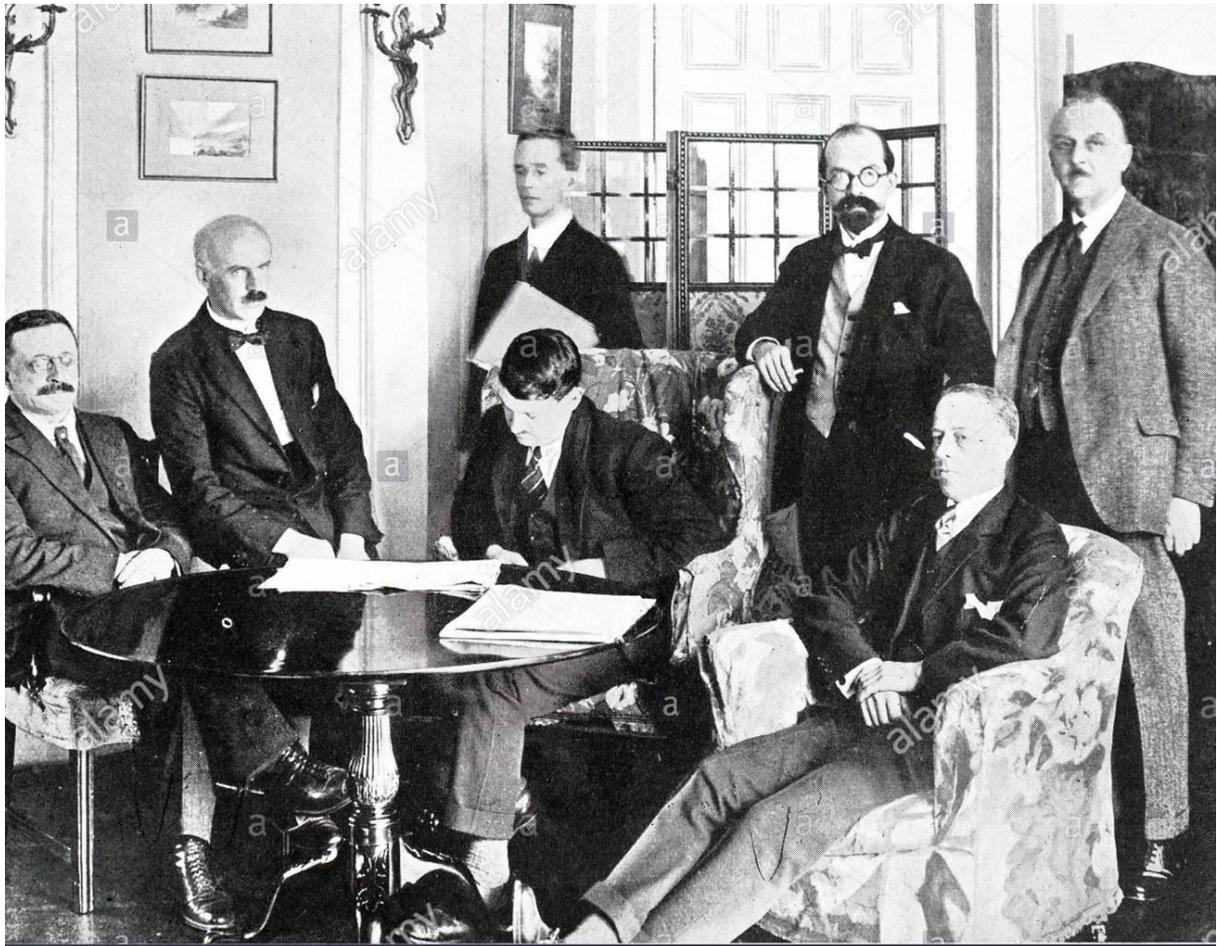
Figure 4 Lloyd George, Churchill & Birkenhead



Figure 5 Lord French



Figure 6 Michael Collins



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Figure 7 The Treaty