

## THE IRISH WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

By Mike McPhee

Officially, the Irish War of Independence or *Cogadh na Saoirse* took place between January 1919 and July 1921 but most historians see that later struggle as a continuation of the Easter Rising of 1916. While that operation can be viewed as a dismal failure that lacked popular support, the fact remains that the rebels held their positions for five days against overwhelming British troop numbers and weaponry, suffering considerably fewer casualties than they inflicted. However, Irish public opinion was quickly galvanised by the harsh repressive measures that followed the surrender of the newly-named Irish Republican Army.

Even before almost the whole rebel high command were court-martialled and executed, there had been an arbitrary round-up of some 3500 suspected sympathisers, most of whom were subsequently released without charge. There were also atrocities committed by British forces during the 'mopping-up' process, which led to one officer being tried for murder and discharged on grounds of insanity. Some 1480 men were interned at Frongoch, in Wales – mostly active participants in the Rising, such as Éamon de Valera, Cathal Brugha, Michael Collins, Terence McSwiney and J.J. O'Connell, but also the totally uninvolved *Sinn Féin* leader, Arthur Griffith. All of the leadership were released under an amnesty in November 1917, along with any others who had not been freed earlier.

If the imposition of martial law was not a sufficient irritant, the success of the German offensive in April 1918 caused Westminster to attempt to introduce conscription in Ireland. This was universally opposed, even by the pro-Union Irish Parliamentary Party, and precipitated a national General Strike which was widely supported. The British viceroy, Lord French, then had de Valera and Griffith arrested on charges of conspiring with the Germans – a claim that was not taken seriously, even in Britain.

In the General Election of December 1918, Sinn Féin won 73 out of the 105 Irish seats – 25 of which were uncontested – having declared in advance that they would not take up their seats in Westminster but would form their own *Dáil Éireann* (Assembly of Ireland) in Dublin. This they did on 19 January 1919 at the Mansion House, home of the Lord Mayor of Dublin. Only 30 of the elected members were able to attend, as the others were either in prison or in hiding to avoid arrest.

Despite that, the First Dáil ratified the Proclamation of Independence of 1916, declared itself the government of the Irish Republic and elected a ministry under the chairmanship of Cathal Brugha. The members of the IRA were declared to be the armed forces of the Republic. However, the Dáil did not declare a state of hostilities with the United Kingdom or its administration in Dublin Castle, but merely demanded the withdrawal of British forces and sought diplomatic recognition from the nations of the world.

Nevertheless, armed conflict did break out on that very day, when an IRA detachment attacked some officers of the Royal Irish Constabulary at Soloheadbeg in Co. Tipperary, killing two but without capturing their consignment of gelignite. There were further attacks on government property, raids to obtain arms and funds, and assassinations of prominent members of the British administration, but the War of Independence was really a low-level guerrilla action with surprisingly few casualties on both sides.

The IRA succeeded in freeing Éamon de Valera from Lincoln Prison in England in February 1919, after which he became leader of the Dáil Éireann. He tried to argue that conventional warfare, as opposed to guerrilla tactics, would legitimise the new republic in the eyes of the world. However, the more practically experienced Michael Collins and the broader IRA leadership opposed that proposal as unrealistic.

Incredibly, the British administration regarded the Dáil Éireann as harmless cranks and took no action even as they were starting to create 'a state within a state'. In April 1919, it declared a policy of ostracism of the Royal Irish Constabulary, who numbered 9700 men stationed in 1500 barracks throughout Ireland. This proved successful in demoralising the force as the war went on – often the RIC were reduced to buying food at gunpoint, as shops and other businesses refused to deal with them. The rate of resignation and retirement went up and recruitment dropped off dramatically.

As in 1916, the IRA's violent tactics were unpopular with the Irish people, at first, and it took the heavy-handed British response to popularise it among much of the population. In April 1919, two RIC men were killed in Limerick and the authorities declared the whole city a 'Special Military Area' that could only be entered with a special permit. The Trades and Labour Council called a general strike and took effective control of the city for four days. That event ended bloodlessly but, in September 1919, two hundred British soldiers burned and looted businesses in Fermoy, Co. Cork, after one of their number was killed.

The Dáil Éireann was outlawed on 12 December 1919 but it continued to meet in clandestine locations. IRA attacks continued, leading to the abandonment of up to 400 isolated RIC stations, which were burned on the Easter weekend of 1920 along with almost 100 Inland Revenue offices. The Irish Republican Police were founded under the authority of Cathal Brugha in the countryside, where British authority had all but collapsed, and the Dáil Courts administered justice. Rather than pay taxes to Inland Revenue, people subscribed to the 'National Loan' scheme set up by Michael Collins, in his capacity as finance minister. The substantial funds raised at home were more than matched by donations from Irish-Americans.

Reluctant to deploy the regular army in greater numbers, the British authorities set up two paramilitary units to aid the RIC. One was the notorious 'Black and Tans', so named because of their uniforms, 7000 of whom arrived in March 1920. Mostly unemployed ex-soldiers who had been demobilised after World War I, they rapidly gained a reputation for drunkenness and violence that did great harm to the government's moral authority in Ireland. In response to IRA actions during the summer of 1920, the 'Tans' burned and sacked numerous small towns around the country, including Balbriggan in Co. Dublin, Trim in Meath and Templemore in Tipperary. They were joined in July by the Auxiliaries, a corps of 2200 former officers who were just as brutal but whose discipline rendered them more effective in combat.

In August 1920, the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act was rushed through the British Parliament in response to the collapse of the Assize Courts in the south and west of the country, due to the lack of willing jurors. The Act suspended all coroners' courts, which had served a large number of warrants on members of the Crown forces, replacing them with 'military courts of enquiry'. Further, the military courts martial were empowered to try civilians, impose the death penalty and intern suspects without trial. Finally, the government suspended payments to Sinn Féin local governments – which almost all of them were.

This clearly meant that Westminster had no intention of negotiating with the Republicans, so the IRA stepped up their attacks. These included a raid on the British army barracks in Longford and the destruction of the Coast Guard station in Enniscrone, Co. Sligo. For the rest of 1920, hardly a week went by without at least one IRA action, often followed by savage reprisals. While the Chief of Staff, Richard Mulcahy, directed operations around the country, Michael Collins targeted the elite G-division of the Dublin Metropolitan Police with his secret group, known as 'the Squad'. On 21 November 1920, they killed 14 of those intelligence agents and wounded five others.

In response, the Auxiliaries drove trucks into Croke Park during a football match and fired into the crowd, killing 14 people and wounding 65, in an event that became known as 'Bloody Sunday'. A week later, an ambush at Kilmichael in Co. Cork killed all but one of an 18-man Auxiliary patrol, resulting in Cos. Cork, Kerry, Limerick, and Tipperary being put under martial law. The centre of Cork City was burnt out in December 1920 by Crown forces, who then prevented firefighters from tackling the blaze.

The following eight months saw a spiralling of the death toll, with 1,000 RIC, British troops, IRA volunteers and civilians killed between January and July of 1921. This represents about 70% of the total casualties for the entire three-year conflict. In addition, 4500 IRA personnel (or suspected sympathisers) were interned in this time. In March of that year, the Dáil formally declared that a state of war existed between Ireland and Britain. IRA attacks became larger and more audacious – in May 1921, several hundred men from the Dublin Brigade occupied and burned the Custom House in the city centre, though five of them were killed and more than 80 captured. While this constituted a serious setback, it did not prevent the Brigade from carrying out roughly 100 attacks per month after that.

In May 1921, elections were held for the long-promised parliaments in Dublin and Belfast. Sinn Féin won 124 of the 128 seats unopposed, but its elected members again refused to take their seats and formed a new Dáil, instead. By now, though, British leaders were coming to realise that Ireland was an ungovernable and costly quagmire, so secret contacts were made to seek a truce. On 22 June, in a speech at the opening of the Stormont Parliament in Belfast, King George V called on “all Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and to forget, and to join in making for the land they love a new era of peace, contentment, and good will”.

This was done with the foreknowledge and approval of the prime minister, David Lloyd George, who then issued an appeal to de Valera for negotiations. The two men met and agreed to a truce that took effect from 11 July, to be followed by a negotiated settlement. For some months, the British government insisted that the IRA first decommission its weapons, but this demand was eventually dropped and it was agreed that British troops would remain confined to their barracks. Michael Collins then led a delegation to London for the protracted negotiations that are a story, in themselves. De Valera declined to attend on the grounds that he was the Irish head of state and his counterpart, King George V, would not be participating.

The resulting Anglo-Irish Treaty made the Irish Free State a member of the Commonwealth, with status similar to that of Australia, including a Governor-General, with the carefully-worded difference that Irish citizens were not British subjects. Ireland was to accept its share of the British national debt and the UK retained naval bases in all of the new nation’s major ports. For twelve months, the Free State government co-existed with the former British regime while the handover progressed at all levels, for which reason the Treaty needed to be ratified by the Dáil Éireann and the fabricated Southern Irish Parliament before it was confirmed in Westminster – all of which was completed by January, 1922.

Most importantly, the treaty allowed Northern Ireland to opt out of the Free State if it wished, which it duly did and a Boundary Commission was then created to decide on the precise location of the border between the two regions. The Irish negotiators had only agreed to this under duress, expecting the nationalist voting patterns of 1920 to gain them Cos. Fermanagh and Tyrone, plus enough of Cos. Armagh and Derry as to leave the remainder of the province unviable. While Collins’ team undoubtedly got the best terms that could be expected when dealing with a vastly more powerful country, many Republicans found the Treaty unsatisfactory in major ways and it was passed in the Dáil by only a slender majority of 64 votes to 57.

While most of the political leadership were willing to accept this compromise, at least for the time being, a majority of the IRA were bitterly opposed. De Valera’s faction, including Cathal Brugha, left the Dáil and threw their support behind the IRA’s self-declared Army Executive, led by Liam Lynch. This repudiation of the elected government was no empty gesture, given that the IRA and their Irish police confreres were already in the process of taking possession of evacuated British army camps and RIC stations, including any weaponry and armoured cars that were left behind.

Indeed, there were soon armed clashes between pro- and anti-treaty IRA men, and 200 militants occupied the Four Courts in Dublin. The prospect of all-out war alarmed the leaderships of both sides sufficiently to call a truce in May 1922, whereupon Collins established an ‘army re-unification committee’. He also formed a pact with de Valera’s faction to jointly campaign in the Free State’s first election in June and form a coalition government afterwards. He also agreed to a republican constitution, but Britain denounced the proposal as contravening the Treaty and threatened military intervention. Thus, the factions went into the election as hostile parties, both calling themselves Sinn Féin.

The pro-treaty party won with 239,000 votes to 134,000 for the anti-treaty grouping, with a further 247,000 people voting for other parties, all of whom supported the Treaty. That should have settled the matter, but the anti-treaty forces held the majority of army bases in the countryside and refused to accept the authority of the new National Army. Collins felt the need to remove the militants from the Four Courts before the British intervened – which they were about to do and the anti-treaty forces wanted that – so, he took command of the army and bombarded the buildings on 28 June 1922. The garrison surrendered after two days and fighting raged in O’Connell Street for a week, during which Cathal Brugha was killed. This dire event marked the official commencement of the Irish Civil War.

When the fighting in Dublin died down, the anti-treaty forces dispersed around the country, mainly to the south and west. Collins moved quickly to build up the National Army, which had been outnumbered by the IRA, and equipped it with far superior weaponry. By August 1922, all of the large towns had been taken with relative ease and a further eight months of guerrilla warfare ensued. However, this was the bloodiest and most bitter phase of the war, commencing with the assassination of Michael Collins at the *Béal na mBláth*, (Pass of the Flowers) in Co. Cork. The Free State began executing Republican prisoners in November 1922, including the former Treaty negotiator, Robert Erskine Childers, and four IRA leaders who had been captured in the first week of the war.

Some IRA insurgents began to surrender from February 1923, but it took the death of Liam Lynch in the Knockmealdown mountains of Co. Waterford in April before his successor, Frank Aiken, declared a ceasefire. Thousands of IRA members, including Éamon de Valera, were arrested in the following weeks, after they had dumped their arms (rather than surrender) and returned home. The Civil War cost up to 4000 lives, mostly those of insurgents, which was far in excess of the total casualties in the War of Independence. About 12,000 Republicans were interned by the end of the Civil War, most of whom were not released until 1924. The futility of their cause was shown in the election of 1923, which was convincingly won by *Cumann na nGaedheal*, as the pro-treaty Sinn Féin party renamed itself.

Historians argue that the human cost of the Civil War was modest in comparison to those of other countries in that era and that the distraction may well have averted a far more disastrous conflict if the IRA had attacked Northern Ireland. (Just on that note, the Boundaries Commission determined in 1925 that all six counties should remain in Unionists hands, and the only compensation was that the money owed by the Free State as part of the UK national debt was not demanded.) Nonetheless, the economic costs to the new state were horrific, not just due to unneeded military expenses but also because of the massive destruction of property, roads and railways. Ireland was destined to have a very poor future in the decades to come.

Éamon de Valera eventually repudiated his recalcitrant confreres and resumed constitutional politics as the leader of the *Fianna Fáil* party, serving as prime minister and, later, president over four decades from 1932 to 1973. During that time, the British governor-general was replaced by an Irishman; the Royal Navy withdrew from the Treaty Ports; and Ireland became a republic outside of the British Commonwealth. During that time, the country was subjected to British trade embargoes and other punitive actions, but the Irish government never gave in. The only outstanding matter, from the viewpoint of Irish Republicans, was and remains re-unification with the Six Counties – for which reason, IRA activity has continued on-and-off in that area until quite recently.

So, what are we Unitarians to conclude from this history? – I really don't know and can only offer some suggestions. We naturally favour non-violent resolutions of conflicts, when that is possible, but we are not so simplistic as to deny the right of a nation to take up arms in order to obtain its independence. Similarly, we would deplore civil wars on general principle and what happened in Ireland certainly vindicates the merits of compromise – if only temporarily, as was Michael Collins' intention. If we see such a tactic as 'bargaining in bad faith', can we condemn the weaker party for that? And can we condemn the so-called 'hard liners' for merely standing by their principles?

I see no simple answers, whether the subject be Ireland or any number of other countries where events like these have taken place. But I do think the Irish people earned their independence, not just through the privations of the 1920s but also through the poverty they endured in the following decades. The price of freedom is not cheap, whether it is measured in blood or in 'sweat, toil and tears', and I think that is too easily forgotten in comfortable modern societies like our own.