

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 207

“1919 – Ireland I”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Most histories of the Irish War of Independence date its beginning at January 21, 1919. On that date, the recently elected Sinn Féin Members of Parliament convened in Dublin as the first Irish Parliament, or Dáil, to declare Irish independence.

But that’s not the reason this day is usually considered the beginning of the war. It’s because on this same day, a hundred miles west of Dublin, in County Tipperary, a group of ten Irish Republican Army fighters ambushed a shipment of explosives, killing two Irish police officers and making off with 160 pounds of gelignite.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 207. 1919 – Ireland, part one.

Ireland has already gotten quite a bit of attention in this podcast, but the events of the past twenty years have merely set the stage for this moment in Irish history, when Ireland wins its independence.

The Irish War of Independence is a difficult subject to discuss, and that’s even true in our own time. Passions still run high; historical interpretation of the events of 1919 to 1921 can still be controversial and can depend heavily on who is doing the interpreting. In Great Britain, there’s a tendency to look away, as if in embarrassment, and not to think too hard about the relationship between Britain and Ireland. In Ireland, it is hardly possible to think about anything else. If there is criticism to be made of British historiography of these times, it is that the British minimize its significance. If there is a criticism to be made of Irish historiography of these times, it is a tendency to see the whole fabric of Irish history as one continuous struggle against the English.

For the past fifty years or so, at least from the Fenian Rising of 1867 through the Easter Rising of 1916 (episodes 126 and 127) Ireland has been for the most part peaceful and prosperous. An outside observer might well be lulled into thinking that Ireland had become fully integrated into

the United Kingdom, and that its citizens now enjoyed fully all the rights and privileges of the King's British subjects. That's what most people in Great Britain thought. The idea of Ireland exiting the UK and becoming an independent state was for them unimaginable.

But within Ireland, it was different, particularly among the predominantly Catholic inhabitants of the south and west of the island. The kings of England have claimed lordship over Ireland since 1177. At that time, England was as Catholic as Ireland was, and the English king was merely Lord of Ireland, not King, that lordship having been granted by the Pope. There was no "King of Ireland" *per se*, and Ireland was not referred to as a kingdom. For the most part, the Lord of Ireland reigned but did not rule.

This situation changed during the reign of Henry VIII and the English Reformation, and it's worth underscoring that wasn't the Irish who walked out of the Church they had shared with the people of England for almost a thousand years. It was England that turned its back on Rome while Ireland remained faithful. Parliament granted Henry VIII the title "King of Ireland" and he and his heirs fought to force the recalcitrant lords of that island to accept their rule. But when Ireland did take up arms, as it did against Cromwell and later against William of Orange during the Glorious Revolution at the Battle of the Boyne, these uprisings were not led by people who disputed the right of the King of England to reign also as King of Ireland. Rather, they disputed the right of the English Parliament to depose Charles I and later James II. These were not battles for Irish independence.

But the Protestants of Britain viewed matters differently. British Protestants rejected Catholicism not only for theological reasons, but because Catholicism to them meant Mary, Queen of Scots. It meant the Spanish Armada. It meant the Gunpowder Plot. The Catholic Church was less a church to them than it was a conspiracy, orchestrated by the Pope and led by Catholic monarchs of hostile states like Spain and France that worked in league with treasonous Catholics at home to overthrow the King and put England back under the Papal yoke. Thus, any Catholic in our country was a potential traitor. Hence, anti-Catholic laws such as the ones that denied Catholics the right to own property, which made the Irish Catholic majority in Ireland into tenants of Protestant landlords.

Legal restrictions against Catholics disappeared by the 19th century, but there remained a sense in Ireland that the Irish, and especially Irish Catholics, would never be fully embraced as equal subjects within the United Kingdom, while in Britain the attitude was that, yes, there had been injustices in the old days, but we've moved past all that now. The legal impairments have been eliminated; what is the problem?

Then there were the Irish émigrés, most of whom emigrated to the United States in the early part of the 19th century, in the aftermaths of the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and the Great Famine of the 1840s. These émigrés, many of them perhaps better thought of as refugees, fled either British retribution following the Rebellion or British neglect during the Famine. In either case, these

were people quite convinced that the misfortunes of Ireland were the fruits of British rule and that only through independence could Ireland ever know peace and prosperity. It certainly contributed to their revolutionary thinking that they had made their new home in the United States of all places, a nation whose self-identity is also firmly rooted in armed uprising against British rule. It was the only answer for America; it is the only answer for Ireland. Thus, the most radical, revolutionary elements in Ireland could always look to their cousins in the United States for funding or for refuge.

And then there were the Protestants of Ulster. Ironically, there was a time in Irish history when Dublin was the center of English rule and Ulster was the hotbed of opposition. But times have certainly changed. Irish lords in Ulster were deprived of their lands, which were given to loyalist settlers from Britain. From Scotland, really, for the most part. These Scottish-Irish Protestants tended not to be Anglicans, but rather Presbyterians, a result of their Scottish heritage. The established Church of Scotland is Presbyterian, but not in Ireland, which makes Presbyterians a dissenting church there. The unique status of the Ulsterfolk as a dissenting Protestant minority within a dissenting Catholic minority within an established Protestant majority led to a unique world view. The Protestants of Ulster have traditionally been the British Sovereign's most loyal subjects, if not necessarily the most obedient, and a disproportionately large share of soldiers and officers in the British Army have come from Ulster Protestant families, to the point that Ulster Protestants have been called the British Army version of the German *Junkers*, those Prussian aristocrats for whom service in the German Army was an essential part of their identity, and who in turn served as the backbone of the German Army's officer corps.

We've traced the long and agonizing history of the Irish Home Rule movement through the late 19th and early twentieth centuries. The Irish Parliamentary Party stuck to the principle of winning home rule constitutionally, through the parliamentary process. This required a Liberal government, since the Tories were adamantly opposed to Home Rule. But if the Liberals were strong enough to control the government on their own, without Irish support, as they were from 1906-1910, they were inclined to table the Home Rule issue as well. What was required was a Liberal government that needed Irish support to stay in power. Then Home Rule could be the price demanded in exchange for that support.

We already saw how the first time this was attempted, it split the Liberal Party, brought down the government, and led to a new Conservative one. The second time, it was vetoed by the House of Lords. The third time required first a years-long political struggle to strip the House of Lords of its veto power. But by 1914, the obstacles had been removed, and Home Rule was practically a done deal.

Except it wasn't. The Ulster Protestants had opposed Home Rule fiercely from the beginning, deriding it as Rome Rule, since under it they would become a Protestant minority within a majority Catholic country. They only wanted to continue to be governed in the same way as His Majesty's subjects in Great Britain. Why was the British government so solicitous toward the

wishes of Irish nationalists and so unmindful of the wishes of Irish unionists? We're the people who have remained most loyal to you, yet you turn your backs on us.

If you recall the dramatic events of the July Days of 1914, episodes 77 and 78, the Home Rule debates were the focus of political debate in the UK even as the chain reaction of events that would lead to the Great War was playing out on the continent. But even though Home Rule passed through Parliament, received the Royal Assent, and became the law of the land, the debate did not end. Amendments were proposed at once that would exempt parts of Ulster from the provisions of Home Rule. But which parts of Ulster? And for how long? Permanent partition was unacceptable to the nationalists; temporary wasn't good enough for most Unionists.

The commitment to resolve the Home Rule question within the framework of British constitutionalism was put under strain when the Ulster Volunteers were formed in 1913, a militia that vowed to resist Home Rule by force of arms, even going so far as to illegally import 24,000 rifles from Germany. Irish nationalists responded by creating the Irish Volunteers, who vowed to enforce home rule and also imported illegal arms. Perhaps the most disturbing incident took place in Curragh in March 1914, when a group of British Army officers vowed to disobey any order to take military action against the Ulster Volunteers.

This incident is sometimes called the Curragh Mutiny, although that is perhaps too grand a name for a mere threatened mutiny, but the incident reflects the prevalence of Ulster Protestants among the British Army officer corps. Many of these officers were Ulster Protestants; many others had friends and colleagues who were.

No similar threat was made to refuse orders to use force against Irish nationalists.

This was the state of affairs when the Great War began. The question of who will decide Ireland's future was shifting from "those with the most votes" to "those with the most guns." It may well have been that Ireland was just days or weeks away from civil war when the Great War began. The war froze the Irish political situation in place for a time. Parliament passed the Suspensory Act, which postponed a final reckoning of the Home Rule question until after the war. In 1914 most people believed that would be a time scale measured in weeks or months, not years.

Easter Monday 1916 saw the beginning of the Easter Rising in Dublin. The Rising was the work of a relatively small group of radicals, driven by fear and hope. Their hope was that the British Army would be too entangled in the war on the Continent to respond, while the German military might be able to intervene to assist in the fight for Irish independence. Their fear was that the Great War had inspired such a surge in patriotism among the Irish that unless the Brotherhood acted soon and went big, Irish nationalism might fade forever from the collective memory.

Their hopes proved to be overblown. The Rising failed. But their fear that the Irish public would simply forget their Irish identity also proved to be overblown. In particular, the heavy-handed

British response during the Rising and afterward, when the Rising's leaders were tried before courts martial and executed in a matter of days, aroused a greater revulsion among the Irish people than the presumptuous revolutionaries of the Rising itself had. The British government and military saw the Rising through the lens of the Great War and saw the Irish republicans as traitors in a German conspiracy. But in Ireland, even those who opposed the extremism and violence of the Rising understood it full well to be a product of homegrown Irish nationalism and not the end result of some devious German plot.

I should note here that all of the UK was under martial law during the Great War, pursuant to the Defence of the Realm Act, which we discussed in episode 159. Britons were also imprisoned under the terms of the Act, including most famously Bertrand Russell. Ten people were executed in Great Britain for violations of the Act, but all of them were foreign nationals. None were British subjects. Contrast that with the situation in Ireland, where martial law was being applied not to foreign nationals, but to His Majesty's Irish subjects. This stirred resentment.

I should note here that a similar situation was developing in India, where the corresponding Defence of India Act was also being applied primarily to dissidents within India. Forty-six people were executed in India under the provisions of that Act during the Great War. Every one of them was a native Indian.

In 1917, the Lloyd George government declared an amnesty and released most of those imprisoned after the Rising, in an effort to placate Irish outrage. But as you'll recall, 1918 saw the German spring offensive on the Continent, which led to political trouble for the British government at home when questions were raised about why the British Army in France wasn't any stronger or better prepared, which in turn led to a new round of conscription and a row in Ireland when the government proposed conscription there. Ireland had previously been exempt from the conscription laws in force in Great Britain.

Most of the nationalists who had been arrested following the Rising and then released during the amnesty were arrested and imprisoned once again for engaging in anti-conscription activities. And as you know, in a matter of weeks, the tide turned on the Western Front. The German offensives failed, the influenza pandemic hit the Western Front, and the United States ramped up its transport of soldiers across the Atlantic to the point that Irish conscription became moot, and not a single Irish person was in fact conscripted. To put it another way, the British government suffered all the political backlash that conscription engendered without the British war effort gaining any of the potential benefit.

The triple whammy of first, Ireland finding itself on the verge of winning Home Rule only to have it snatched away once again, this time by the Great War, and second, the Easter Rising and the harsh British response, and third, the Conscription Crisis of 1918, had done much to radicalize Irish opinion. You can add on top of that four and a half years of British propaganda that framed the war effort as a defense of small nations like Belgium and Serbia against

domination by their large and powerful neighbors like Germany and then Woodrow Wilson's lofty declaration of the right of all peoples to self-determination. If freedom and independence and self-determination were a moral imperative for Belgians and Serbs and Poles and Czechs...hello?

What about us?

[music: traditional, "'Tis Not Your Gold Would Me Entice"]

The political party Sinn Féin had nothing to do with the Easter Rising of 1916. It was a more moderate party whose stated goal was to model the relationship between Britain and Ireland along the lines of Austria and Hungary within the Dual Monarchy. After the Rising, more radical elements joined the party and steered it in a more radical direction. In the general election of 1918, episode 173, Sinn Féin campaigned on a manifesto promising that party members elected to Parliament would instead convene in Dublin and create a government for an independent Ireland.

The party leader going into the election was 36-year old Éamon de Valera, who was one of the most important figures of the Easter Rising to escape execution. This was for a number of reasons, including that the United States consulate in Dublin took an interest in his case and raised the question of whether de Valera was a US citizen. The British were at that time eager to see the US enter the Great War and were reluctant to antagonize the American government. De Valera already held a seat in Parliament that he won from the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1917. He was also in prison. Like many veterans of the Rising, he had been released in the 1917 amnesty, then arrested again during the Conscription Crisis.

Sinn Féin won a resounding victory in the 1918 election, winning 73 out of the 105 parliamentary constituencies in Ireland, or about 70% of the seats. This on a total of about 47% of the votes cast across the island. It was enough, given that the opposition to Sinn Féin was divided between the Unionists and the Irish Parliamentary Party. Unionist candidates of various parties took 26 seats, while the Irish Parliamentary Party won just six, down from 73 in the previous election.

True to their manifesto, Sinn Féin went ahead with plans to convene their members in Dublin and set to work creating an independent Irish government for an independent Irish state. Sinn Féin invited the other 32 MPs elected in Ireland to participate. One member of the Irish Parliamentary Party and one Unionist wrote back to decline the invitation; the other 30 did not respond at all. All 32 of them traveled to Westminster to attend sessions of the British Parliament.

Although Sinn Féin carried 73 constituencies, it had only elected 69 MPs, as four of them had been elected in two constituencies each. Of the 69, 34 were in prison and eight did not attend the first meeting for other reasons. That left a grand total of 27 MPs, who met on January 21, 1919

as the first Dáil Éireann, Ireland's first parliament since the dissolution of its former parliament in 1800.

The Dáil conducted its deliberations in the Irish language and ratified a declaration of independence, a constitution, a program, and a message to the international community. All four documents were presented in Irish, English, and French. The declaration of independence identified the Irish Republic as coming into being when the Proclamation of the Republic had been made by the leaders of the Rising back in 1916. I'll just remind you that proclamation was formally approved by no one apart from its seven signatories, every one of whom was executed by the British Army shortly afterward. This endorsement by the Dáil of elected representatives—and more than that, the Declaration also endorsed the fighters in the Rising as the Irish Republican Army and identified them as the military of the Irish Republic—retroactively gave the Rising and those who fought for it the democratic imprimatur they had previously lacked. If you count these 27 people as the democratic representatives of Ireland.

The Constitution was a brief document, laying out a set of ministries to be headed by appointees of the Dáil, a sort of scaled-down version of the British government.

The Message to the Free Nations of the World, as it was called, asserted the right of Ireland to independence and asked other nations to recognize the Republic. It also declared that what it called “the existing state of war between Ireland and England” would only end after a full withdrawal of the British military from Ireland. In this way, the Dáil seemed to be saying that the struggle begun with the Easter Rising had never really ended, in the same way the Republic declared on the steps of the Dublin post office two and a half years ago had not been extinguished.

The force that had fought in the Easter Rising was the Irish Volunteers, or rather a faction of them, some of whom began styling themselves the Irish Republican Army as soon as the Republic had been declared. The Volunteers had been reorganized in 1917, and with the blessing of the Dáil, it seemed they now really were the Irish Republican Army, or IRA, as they would now often be called.

The difficulty here is that if we take the Dáil as the democratically elected parliament of an Irish republic and the IRA as the military of that republic, it stands to reason that the IRA should be subordinate to the Dáil and its ministers. But in fact, the IRA was a separate and pre-existing organization with its own elected leadership. The Dáil appointed it the military of the Irish Republic, yes, and there was some overlap in their leaderships, but even with some IRA leaders also holding seats in the Dáil, the relationship is not clear. Will the IRA subordinate itself to the Dáil, even when its own leadership disagrees?

The attitude of the British government to all this was to ignore it. Meeting together and declaring an independent state could be construed as treason; it could also be construed as a few hotheads blowing off steam. As someone who once served in an elected legislature myself, I can speak to

some of the nuances here. In principle, individual MPs or legislators are simply private citizens. They wield their constitutional authority as elected representatives of the people only when they meet as a parliament or a legislature. Individual members on their own, outside a formal session, have no more right to, say, walk into a government office and start ordering the workers around than does any other citizen. On the other hand, if they meet collectively in session, they can cast votes that can and do compel workers in government offices to change what they do and how they do it. That authority comes from the group, not from any single individual.

So if 27 members of the UK Parliament decide to meet on their own in Dublin, they have as much right to do so as any group of 27 people. They can give speeches and vote on proclamations, if they wish. And indeed, legislative groups, called caucuses, do this sort of thing all the time. But by the same token, this particular group of 27 people had no more constitutional authority than any other group of 27 would. That was the British government position.

So the government in Westminster would ignore the doings in Dublin, for now. And the governments of the other nations of the world would ignore the Declaration of Independence and the new Irish Republic's call for recognition. The Irish Republican government sent a representative to the Paris Peace Conference, who was not permitted to participate or to address the meeting.

Of all the nations of the world, the one you might think most likely to respond with sympathy to the Irish Republic's bid for recognition would be the United States. The US had its own history of rebellion against British rule, a history of which its citizens were and are quite proud. And if that wasn't enough, what about its large population of Irish-American immigrants, who for the most part harbor a deep hostility toward the British and have been funding and supporting Irish resistance to British rule for decades? Add in the fact that these Irish-Americans are a key constituency within President Wilson's Democratic Party, and you might expect the US to be the first nation to recognize the Irish Republic, or if that's asking too much, at least to welcome its representative in Paris, or at the very least to insist on putting Irish self-determination onto the agenda of the peace conference, next to Slovakian self-determination or Armenian self-determination.

But no. In Washington, both houses of the United States Congress passed resolutions calling on the US delegation in Paris to support Irish self-determination. But Woodrow Wilson was unmoved. The British argument, made from Lloyd George on down, was that the United Kingdom was a democracy, therefore the will of the Irish people could be and was freely expressed at the ballot box, as we saw in the 1918 general election. There was therefore no need for the international community to become involved. Wilson and the American delegation in Paris accepted the UK position.

It was possible to ignore the Dáil and to refuse Ireland a role in the peace talks in Paris, but there was another event that took place the same day as the first meeting of the Dáil that could not be so easily ignored.

That story actually begins five days earlier, on Thursday, January 16, in County Tipperary, where the Vice Brigadier of the Irish Volunteers' South Tipperary Brigade, 23-year old Sean Treacy, had gotten wind of a plan to transfer a shipment of gelignite explosive and a quantity of detonators from the British Army barracks in Tipperary Town to the quarry at Solohead Beg, for use in blasting operations.

Treacy recruited a group of Volunteers who took up a position at an abandoned house on the road to the quarry, to set an ambush with the intent of capturing the gelignite for the use of the Volunteers. Both the capture of the explosive and its possession by the Volunteers would surely attract much attention and send a message that the Volunteers were a force to be reckoned with.

Only, the fighters waited all day and no shipment came. They spent that night at the abandoned house and tried again on Friday, the 17th. Also nothing. Some of the fighters couldn't stay, or lost faith in the operation, but the stalwarts remained through the weekend and on to Monday the 20th. By Tuesday, the 21st, only nine of them still remained. That day at noon, a tenth fighter rode up on a bicycle to tell the team at the abandoned house that the gelignite shipment was on its way.

The Volunteers expected the shipment would have a police escort, which was anticipated to be somewhere between two and six police officers. They debated what to do about the officers. Some of the more radical fighters wanted to kill the police on sight; as far as they were concerned, the police were effectively British occupation forces, even if they were native Irish. Others felt the police should be spared if they were willing to surrender.

It was early in the afternoon and pouring rain when the horse-drawn cart carrying the shipment reached the site of the ambush. Sean Treacy, masked and armed with a rifle, walked out into the road, blocking the cart's path. He called out, "Hands up!" There were in fact only two police officers in the cart, along with two local council employees tasked with handling the actual shipment. The police officers apparently believed this was a simple robbery and never considered there would be other gunmen. One of them picked up his own rifle; the other jumped down behind the cart. Treacy began firing; the other Volunteers followed. Both police officers were killed: 36-year-old Patrick O'Connell of County Cork, and 50-year-old James McDonnell of County Mayo, a married man with five children. Both of them were native Irish and Catholic.

The Volunteers confiscated the explosive, the detonators, and the rifles and ammunition carried by the police. The cart was driven off; the gelignite, 168 pounds of it, was divided up and sent to various Volunteer groups across the island. Once the weapons and explosives were spirited away, the two council employees were released unharmed.

This operation was organized and carried out locally. The leadership of the Irish Volunteers had not been consulted and had no advance knowledge of the attack. Neither did the Dáil. The reaction of many newspapers and of Catholic clergy in Ireland was negative. The Catholic parish priest in Tipperary Town described the slain police officers as “martyrs.” The government offered a £1000 reward for the capture of one of the perpetrators, a considerable sum, equivalent to roughly £65,000 or US\$80,000 in our time.

The message sent by the ambush was clear enough, but in case anyone missed it, *The Volunteer*, the organization’s official newspaper, laid it out in print ten days later. It declared that the formation of an Irish Republic government gave the Volunteers the legal and moral justification for “treating the armed forces of the enemy—whether soldiers or policemen—exactly as a National Army would treat the members of an invading army.”

If that wasn’t a declaration of war, it was something pretty close.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Elizabeth for making a donation, and thank you to Jeffrey for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Elizabeth and Jeffrey help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so I thank them, and everyone who has contributed for that. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you’ll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of post-war Ireland, as the IRA targets Irish police as enemies of the Republic, and the Crown forces respond with attacks on Irish civilians, Irish homes and businesses, and...at least one Gaelic football match. Bloody Sunday, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. You can’t help but take note of the fact that the humble and unassuming town and county of Tipperary keep coming up in the narrative of these times. This has not escaped the good people of Tipperary themselves, in particular, that song, “It’s a Long, Long Way to Tipperary,” which is so closely linked to the Great War.

In 1983, in an attempt to change the associations with their town’s name, a group of citizens formed the Tipperary Peace Convention, which holds forums to discuss issues related to peace and awards an annual Tipperary International Peace Award. Past recipients have included

Mikhail Gorbachev, Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, Rafic Hariri, Benazir Bhutto, and Ban Ki Moon.

[music: Closing Theme]

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