

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 208

### “1919 – Ireland II”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*I met with Napper Tandy and he took me by the hand,  
And he said, “How’s dear ould Ireland, and how does she stand?”  
She’s the most distressful country that ever yet was seen,  
For they’re hangin’ men an’ women there for the wearing of the Green.*

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 208. 1919: Ireland, part two.

Last week, we looked at the situation in Ireland through the beginning of 1919. By this time, the recently elected Sinn Féin members of the British Parliament met in Dublin instead and organized themselves as the Dáil Éirann, the parliament of the Irish Republic. That same day, Irish Volunteers (I might as well just as well start calling them IRA fighters from now on) ambushed and captured a shipment of gelignite and detonators, also killing two Irish police officers.

Both of these events took place on January 21, 1919. In our time, most histories draw a line here, at this date, as marking the beginning of the conflict that will lead to Irish independence. But that’s with the benefit of hindsight. At the time, it was fully possible to dismiss both events as insignificant. Sporadic outbreaks of violence by radical Irish Volunteers were nothing new. The attack had not even been sanctioned by the leadership of the Volunteers. The police were on the case, and one might reasonably expect they will recapture the gelignite and arrest the killers at any time.

As for the self-proclaimed Dáil, well, any group of MPs can get together and declare whatever they want. Doesn’t mean the rest of us have to take it seriously, does it? And so most people saw

this as just another day's news. Two police killed in County Tipperary, a bunch of extremist politicians made a declaration. How about turning to the sport section and telling us who won yesterday's football match?

But in hindsight, that January 21 is usually marked as the beginning of the Anglo-Irish War, or the Irish War of Independence. It's generally called one or the other of those things, but the name can be deceptive. This is not a full-fledged war as we usually understand the word. The Irish Rebellion of 1798, now that was a war. Even the Easter Rising of 1916 had the look and feel of a war, with trenches and barricades and snipers. This war will be more of a guerilla war against an occupying army, if you are an Irish nationalist. But it also had some of the character of a guerilla civil war, with Irish folk on both sides of the conflict.

The government of the United Kingdom ruled Ireland through the Chief Secretary for Ireland, who at this time was the 38-year old Scottish Liberal MP, Ian Macpherson and the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, or Lord *Lieutenant*, if you're British, who functioned as the King's representative and thus effectively the Viceroy. At this moment, that role was held by Lord French, he who was formerly known as Sir John French, who, you'll recall, commanded the British Expeditionary Force in France during the chaotic days of the German offensive of 1914, during which he did not exactly cover himself in glory.

British administration in Ireland was headquartered at Dublin Castle in Dublin. You will often see the name *Dublin Castle* used as a metonym for the British administration in Ireland, in the same way that *The White House* is often used as a metonym for the US President's administration. The administration in Dublin Castle did not exactly cover itself in glory, either. It had a reputation for bureaucratic incompetence.

After the end of the Great War and the demobilization of the British Army, there remained in Ireland a total garrison of about 17,000 British Army soldiers, most of whom were from Great Britain. They were there to defend the island and to support the police, if needed. By way of contrast, there were only about 14,000 garrison soldiers stationed on the much larger and more populous island of Great Britain. By the end of the conflict, there would be some 50,000 British soldiers in Ireland.

The principal law enforcement agency in Ireland was the Royal Irish Constabulary, which was also about 17,000 strong and provided policing everywhere in Ireland apart from Dublin, which had its own police force, the Dublin Metropolitan Police, which numbered a little over 1,200. The Dublin police were organized into seven divisions. Divisions A through F were uniformed patrol officers assigned to various districts within the city. G Division were the plainclothes detectives, numbering 17 in all, who worked out of a central office. G Division were responsible for criminal investigations, but were also tasked with collecting intelligence on the IRA.

British military intelligence had been highly effective during the Great War, but in contrast, G Division were largely ineffective during this conflict, and seven of its members would be

identified and killed by the IRA in 1919 and 1920. It emerged later that four members of G Division were secretly working for the IRA.

As a side note, the members of G Division were sometimes referred to colloquially as “G-men.” As an American, I can’t help but take note that in the United States, Federal law enforcement agents, especially the FBI, are also called “G-men.” In the US, this term first appeared in the 1920s, just after this conflict in Ireland, and I can’t help but think it somehow got ported over from Dublin, although I’m not sure I could explain how, and I can’t find a source that backs me up on this, so who knows?

Being a G-man in the Dublin Police was a very hazardous occupation in 1919 and 1920, although the uniformed officers, who patrolled the streets of Dublin on foot and unarmed, just like their counterparts in Britain, generally did not disturb the IRA and escaped attack, which is a little surprising, given what easy targets they would have made. It seems the IRA regarded them as keepers of the peace, not as agents of British rule.

The same most definitely can not be said of the Royal Irish Constabulary, or RIC. The rank-and-file constables of the RIC—and the Dublin Police, for that matter—were overwhelmingly native Irish Catholics, about 70% of them. The officers who commanded them, on the other hand, they were majority Protestant. The two officers killed in the Solohead Beg ambush we discussed last time were Irish Catholic. Nevertheless, the Republican struggle to overturn British rule in Ireland would focus on the RIC, who were depicted by the Republicans as a foreign occupation force. And that’s where we ended last time, with the leadership of the Irish Volunteers, despite not sanctioning the violence in County Tipperary, declaring the RIC to be comparable to an invading army.

If the Solohead Beg ambush demonstrated the determination and the reach of the Republicans, an even clearer demonstration came less than two weeks later when IRA fighters broke Sinn Féin leader (and British MP) Éamon de Valera out of Lincoln Prison in Lincoln, England. That was February 3. In March, the IRA struck again, attacking Collinstown Aerodrome, a Royal Air Force base outside Dublin, where they captured 75 rifles and several thousand rounds of ammunition. Five of the thirty raiders were well acquainted with the base, since they worked there.

On April 1, at the second meeting of the Dáil, the official government of the Irish Republic was reshuffled. Éamon de Valera, now free from prison and in hiding from British law enforcement, was named President of the Dáil, effectively prime minister of the Republic. Among the seven other members of the cabinet were a couple other names we’ve run into before in the podcast: Eóin MacNeill, titular leader of the Irish Volunteers at the time of the Rising, although he was not himself involved, and Constance Markievicz, veteran of the Rising and first woman to be elected a member of the UK Parliament, though she is now serving as the first woman member of the Irish Dáil.

Also in the cabinet: Arthur Griffith, the original founder of Sinn Féin, back in 1905, and Michael Collins. Collins was the titular minister of finance for the government. These Irish government ministries were largely pro forma; at most they were one or two people working out of someone's home, but as finance minister Collins organized a bond sale that raised hundreds of thousands of pounds to finance the new government. But his role in this story is far larger than that. The 28-year-old Collins was also a veteran of the Rising, where he fought with Patrick Pearse at the Dublin Post Office, the headquarters of the rebellion, which made him something of a protégé of Pearse's. By this time, he was one of the leaders of the Irish Volunteers and part of the team that had busted de Valera out of Lincoln Prison. He would soon be elected president of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which in the eyes of the IRB made him the President of the Irish Republic. Whatever the government of the Republic was on paper, in fact Michael Collins was one its most important leaders, a rival of de Valera's for leadership in the fight for Irish independence, and these two did in fact butt heads many times over questions of strategy.

Collins would also be named Director of Intelligence for the IRA. He and a group of assassins known as "The Squad" were responsible for attacks on British informants. This is the group that would kill those seven G-men of the Dublin Police over the next year. He was probably the most wanted man in Ireland, but British attempts to apprehend him were hampered by the fact that they had no photographs of him and didn't know what he looked like, which allowed Collins to move about Ireland openly and in relative safety, which was a boon to his intelligence gathering and strategizing.

De Valera meanwhile, eventually left the British Isles for the United States, once it became clear that the Irish Republic's campaign for international recognition and a place at the Paris Peace Conference had failed. He spent the next year and a half in America, safe from arrest by British authorities, where he campaigned for US support and recognition for the Republic, unsuccessfully, and raised funds for the new Republic. He was much more successful in this second endeavor, raising over five million US dollars from the Irish-American community, a figure that exceeded all expectations.

Meanwhile, back in Ireland, the Dáil passed a resolution calling on the people of Ireland to resist British rule by ostracizing members of the Royal Irish Constabulary, and this would become a key tactic in the Irish struggle. Police and their families were shunned. Merchants were pressured not to do business with them. One undertaker's hearse was destroyed by the IRA in retribution for his providing funeral services to the family of a dead constable. Police were known to buy their groceries at gunpoint, as that was the only way to get the shopkeeper to sell to them.

And attacks on police became routine. The RIC had hundreds of what were called barracks across Ireland, though this was a rather grand name for something that was more like a small, unfortified house in which typically four to six police would live and work while on duty. Many of these barracks were in remote locations, making them easy targets for organized raids. In the early months of the fighting, constables were more often than not given warning before the

shooting began, and many surrendered without resistance, after which the IRA fighters would simply confiscate their firearms and leave. But by autumn, winter, and into 1920, the conflict became increasingly bloody and bitter, and killings of police constables by ambush became the norm.

Given these circumstances, life as a constable became very hard. Many were single young men who could no longer get a date, since any girl who dared be seen in public with them was subject to harassment herself. Some got their heads shaved for the crime of fraternizing with the declared enemy. Officers with families were in an even more difficult situation, as living at home with the wife and kids became practically impossible. Many sent their families away and lived full time in the barracks.

By autumn 1919, as the conflict became increasingly vicious, the Republican enemy remained faceless and elusive, and police acts of extra-legal retribution became as common as IRA attacks on police. This retribution could and did take the form of violence against IRA sympathizers, or presumed IRA sympathizers, or civilians who happened to look at the police the wrong way, or be in the wrong place at the wrong time, including women and children.

The cycle of violence and retribution took a particularly ugly turn on Sunday, September 7, in the town of Fermoy, in County Cork. That morning, a group of local IRA fighters commanded by Liam Lynch ambushed a group of eighteen British soldiers who were on their way to Sunday services at the local Methodist church. The goal was to capture their weapons, which they did, but in the melee, one British soldier was killed and three others wounded. The IRA group succeeded in capturing the soldiers' weapons and escaping the scene. This was the first IRA attack directly on the British Army; it would not be the last.

The following day a civilian inquest was held, but the inquest refused to return a verdict of murder, on the grounds that the killing of the soldier was unintentional. This infuriated the British troops and that night a mob of about 200 soldiers, many of whom had been drinking, took their revenge on the town, breaking windows and looting shops, with particular attention paid to properties owned by members of the inquest jury.

The Republicans publicized this incident for propaganda purposes, referring to it as "The Sack of Fermoy," which was rather overstating the incident. But in any case, this would be the first incident of retribution against Irish civilians and Irish property by British soldiers ostensibly assigned to protect law and order. It would also not be the last.

The British Army leadership had a lot of other irons in the fire in 1919, as we've already seen. There was unrest in Egypt and in India. British soldiers were on occupation duty in many places, including areas in the former Ottoman Empire. This was in addition to demobilizing the BEF and shrinking the Army back down to peacetime numbers. The violence in Ireland hardly registered until the ambush in Fermoy, and even then, British officials were reluctant to move large

numbers of British soldiers into Ireland; this would only serve to confirm everything Irish nationalists ever said when they described Ireland as a nation under British occupation.

But with the IRA growing more brazen, with attacks on small, rural police barracks becoming routine and now a daring strike against the Army itself, something needed to be done. British Army numbers in Ireland would be beefed up, but the British administration in Ireland was still reluctant to put the Army on the front lines of this struggle. And so in early 1920, they began recruiting new police constables in Britain to send to Ireland to augment the numbers of the RIC. Most of these new recruits were young English or Scottish men recently discharged from the Army. Because the RIC was short on uniforms, these new recruits typically wore outfits that were a mish-mash of the dark green of the RIC and the khaki of British Army surplus. Hence their nickname: the Black and Tans.

Most of them were veterans of the Great War. They'd fought in France and they'd seen some stuff. Their training in civilian policing, on the other hand, was rudimentary. Thus the Black and Tans tended to be hard men, unsympathetic, often violent, and too often prone to the same sort of reprisal violence that was seen at Fermoy, against civilians assisting the IRA or believed to be assisting the IRA or suspected of sympathizing with the IRA, which, face it, that last category could be just about anyone on the island.

There was a second group of recruits from Britain, distinct from the Black and Tans, or maybe a distinct group within the Black and Tans, depending on your point of view. These were the RIC Auxiliaries. They were also recruited mostly from former British soldiers, but these were from the officer corps, and whereas your ordinary Black and Tan was meant to serve as a regular constable, the Auxiliaries were officers, who were meant to command and were meant to take the war to the IRA. These Auxiliaries were the most feared of the forces fighting for the British and were responsible for more than their share of extralegal violence and killings.

Unlawful violence by the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries became all too common. The official British position was to deplore such acts, but little was done to rein these ex-soldiers in, leading many people on both sides of the conflict to conclude that the reprisals were unofficial British policy. One political figure in Britain quipped that as far as he could tell, the government position was that Black and Tan reprisals were not happening...but they were also a valuable tool in quelling the unrest in Ireland.

In truth, they probably did more than anything else to drive the Irish public into supporting the Republicans.

[music: "The Wearing of the Green"]

In January 1920, local elections were held in the United Kingdom. In Ireland, Sinn Féin won control of a number of local councils. These nationalist-controlled councils continued to operate as local governments and collect local taxes—known in the UK as “rates”—but refused to

cooperate with the national government in Westminster. Soon the British effectively lost control over portions of Ireland, especially in rural areas. Attacks on the small and weakly defended rural police barracks were becoming commonplace, as were killings of off-duty police constables, leading the RIC to withdraw from many of its most remote and difficult to defend barracks. The first week in April, 1920, hundreds of these abandoned barracks were torched by the IRA to prevent them being reoccupied. Tax offices were also destroyed to deny Irish tax revenue to the British.

By the summer of 1920, the courts and the legal system in Ireland had all but collapsed. Judges were also among the IRA's targets, and local people simply refused to serve on juries. This further hardened the attitudes of the police, who were fighting and dying in order to bring in lawbreakers who then went unpunished because the courts weren't functioning. This further radicalized the RIC and especially the Black and Tans, who took it as a sign that their only recourse was to take the law into their own hands. Retaliatory and extrajudicial violence and killings soared.

In August, the British Parliament passed the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act, meant to address the breakdown in civilian law enforcement. This act was effectively an extension of the Defence of the Realm Act in Ireland, allowing courts martial to replace the now inoperative civilian judicial system. By January 1921, martial law would be declared in six Irish counties.

Meanwhile, the British government had to wrestle with the troubles in Ireland and what they meant for Irish Home Rule. Remember that there was already a Home Rule law on the books, enacted in 1914 and then suspended for the duration of the war. The Act granted Home Rule in Ireland with the exception of six counties in the northeast, in Ulster. The Act had remained controversial even so, with the exact nature of the exception for the six counties unclear, and in particular whether it was to be temporary or permanent. The most ardent Irish nationalists were opposed to any arrangement that exempted any part of the island, though more moderate nationalists were willing to discuss some kind of temporary or transitional arrangement for the six counties. On the Unionist side in Ulster, though, any talk of Home Rule in the six counties was unacceptable. Not now. Not later. Not ever. The Unionists wanted to remain as fully a part of the UK as was any county in Britain.

In Ireland, the violence continued. Killings of police by the IRA or vice versa happened two or three times per week. Irish republicans sentenced to prison under martial law went on hunger strikes, attracting international attention, and some of them died, including the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney. At the end of October, ten people were killed in County Kerry, others wounded, and buildings burned in a series of attacks and reprisals between the IRA and the Black and Tans.

With IRA attacks proving impossible to quell and with the plainclothes police officers of Dublin's G Division also under attack, British Army intelligence organized and trained an

undercover unit of about twenty current and retired Army officers to form a special intelligence unit tasked with infiltrating the IRA to gather information and target its leaders, especially the elusive Michael Collins. This group came to be known as the “Cairo Gang,” although the origin of the name is unclear. The sources often say it was because these officers had previously worked together in military intelligence in Cairo, Egypt, during the Great War, but it doesn’t appear this is true. Another story has it that the name comes from their undercover meeting place, the Café Cairo in Dublin.

By June of 1920, the Cairo Gang were deployed to Dublin as plainclothes undercover agents. They spread out across the city, each living alone and separately, while collecting information on IRA members, leaders, and operations. Unfortunately for the Cairo Gang, though they had no way of knowing this, Michael Collins and his own intelligence organization were one step ahead of them all the way. Collins had his own sources, in G Division and among civilian employees of the British Army, who had already tipped him off as to the arrival of the Cairo Gang and their names and addresses. Several of the “informants” that members of the Cairo Gang identified and entered into relationships with were in fact double agents working for Michael Collins. Collins’ Squad also infiltrated a number of the hotels and boarding houses where members of the Cairo Gang were staying, and there they kept the IRA posted on their subjects’ comings and goings.

This cat-and-mouse game went on for weeks, while Collins and his associates drew up a hit list of thirty-five names of members of the Cairo Gang and their informants. The plan was for multiple IRA groups to strike simultaneously and kill every person on the list, or as many as possible, in a short space of time. The date chosen for the strike was Sunday, November 21, 1920, because that afternoon the Dublin Gaelic football team would be hosting Tipperary in a widely anticipated match, and it was thought that the extra crowds and bustle on the streets of the city would make it easier for the IRA groups to move unseen, while also making it more difficult for the police to track their movements.

The hit squads began their attacks at 9:00 AM. Many of the targets were not at home, or the fighters targeting them were unable to find the right location. Even so, about a third of the targets were hit. Fifteen people were killed, including nine British Army officers, one RIC police constable and two Auxiliaries, along with a few civilians. Three others were wounded, at a cost of one IRA fighter wounded and one captured. Other intelligence agents and their informants who had escaped the morning attacks fled to Dublin Castle for their own safety. The British military intelligence operation in Ireland had just been decapitated.

This number of killings by itself would have been enough to mark this Sunday as a particularly bloody day in the struggle, but the day was still young. Word of the killings circulated among the public in Dublin, but the public was becoming accustomed to news of violence between the IRA and the Army and police. An unhappy business though it might be, few Dubliners who were planning to attend that afternoon’s Gaelic football match saw any reason to change their plans.



About five thousand spectators showed up to watch the game against Tipperary, which began at 3:15 that afternoon.

About ten minutes into the game, large numbers of British soldiers, Irish police, and Auxiliaries pulled up, intending to raid the football match. Ostensibly, their goal was to seal off the football ground and search every man as he left. But that's not what happened. The police ran into the grounds and began firing. They claimed to have been fired on first, but there is little evidence to support this. As panicked crowds fled the stands, police fired on them. The shooting continued for about two minutes, and hundreds of rounds were fired. Twelve people were shot and killed; two more died after being trampled in the panic. Dozens more people were injured. The fatalities included a woman, three boys aged 10, 12, and 14, and one of the football players. After the shooting ended, the crowd was searched. The authorities recovered one handgun. No one was arrested.

As if that weren't enough death for one day, later that evening, three IRA prisoners held at Dublin Castle were shot and killed. British authorities said they were attempting to escape, a claim believed by virtually no one.

This day would go down in Irish history as "Bloody Sunday." The events of this day would become headline news worldwide and would be compared to the Amritsar Massacre in India nineteen months earlier. There is some truth in the comparison, although Amritsar saw about twenty times as many people killed.

The RIC Auxiliaries who participated in the Bloody Sunday killings at the football match had made their point and had added to their fearsome reputation. But there were leaders in the IRA who not only refused to be cowed, but were grimly determined to meet escalating violence with still more violence. On that very day, Bloody Sunday, a group of 36 IRA fighters in County Cork was organized by a local leader named Thomas Barry. Out in the rural counties, IRA fighters made it a habit to avoid engaging the Auxiliaries, who were deemed seasoned and dangerous fighters. But now Barry began planning a deliberate attack aimed at a local Auxiliary unit that patrolled his part of the county. These Auxiliaries followed the same patrol route each day, which you could view as defiant confidence or reckless swagger. Barry was determined to take the fight directly to the Auxiliaries, both as a reprisal for Bloody Sunday and as a demonstration that the IRA was strong enough to take on the toughest Britain had to offer.

Barry's unit ambushed two lorries filled with nine Auxiliaries each along a rural stretch of road near the town of Kilmichael, at sunset on the very next Sunday, November 28. After a short but vicious firefight, seventeen of the eighteen Auxiliaries lay dead, as did three IRA fighters. The other Auxiliary was gravely wounded and only survived because he was mistaken for dead.

This was some of the worst violence yet, and the single bloodiest day for the Crown's forces. Even some of the IRA fighters under Barry's command were reportedly shaken by the experience. Each side accused the other of underhanded tactics. The British said the IRA had

tricked the doomed patrol by wearing British uniforms. The IRA side claimed they had killed the entire force only because some of the Auxiliaries had feigned surrender, then opened fire on the IRA column when they approached to accept it. Neither claim is given much credence these days.

Less than two weeks later, martial law was declared in County Cork. The IRA was not impressed. The very next day, they attempted another ambush of an Auxiliary patrol, this one in the city of Cork, on a patrol just leaving its headquarters. This attack was less successful. The Auxiliaries were able to drive the IRA off, though twelve of their number were wounded. One later died of his injuries.

Later that night, two IRA fighters, brothers, were tracked back to their home, apparently with the aid of a bloodhound, and were shot dead by Auxiliaries in the middle of the night. But by that time, large sections of Cork were already ablaze. Auxiliaries went up and down St. Patrick's Street, the commercial center of the town, setting fires in shops and homes. Cork City Hall and the town library were also destroyed. Members of the Cork fire brigade reported that Auxiliaries interfered with their attempts to put out the fires by such measures as cutting the fire hoses.

About 40 shops and 300 homes were destroyed that night. That the Auxiliaries executed the burning of these buildings so quickly and methodically argues that an act of retribution against the town was probably already being planned before the latest IRA ambush, probably in retaliation for the earlier Kilmichael ambush.

In the House of Commons in Westminster, the government's Secretary for Ireland denied that Crown forces had any role in the burning of Cork and blamed the fires on the IRA. The Auxiliary unit in Cork was reassigned to a different town; the unrepentant Auxiliaries took to wearing a burnt cork on their hats as a badge of honor.

Get it?

Cork was burned on the night of December 11, 1920. And a Christmas came and went and a new year dawned, and few could argue that the conflict in Ireland was becoming more bitter, crueler, and more bloody with each passing day. In early 1921, Crown forces began a policy of official reprisals, under which IRA attacks would trigger the destruction of homes and property at the site of the attack. If you can remember all the way back to episode 12, the British employed a similar policy of reprisals against ambushes during the Anglo-Boer War. But the official reprisals, like the unofficial reprisals, only seemed to underscore the message that even in the eyes of the British, the Irish were a people apart.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Sean for making a donation, and thank you to Nick for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Sean and Nick help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so I thank them, and everyone else who has contributed for

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we conclude this story of post-war Ireland. David Lloyd George meets face-to-face with Éamon de Valera and tries to find a compromise between abject surrender and ruthless authoritarianism. Peace at last, kind of, maybe, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I'll just note here that the Wikipedia disambiguation page for "Bloody Sunday" lists no less than twenty different Sundays and twenty different events that are referred to as "Bloody Sunday," including two we've already covered in this podcast: the 1905 killings of protesters in St. Petersburg, episode 34, and the Everett Massacre in the United States in 1916, episode 203. The one we've looked at today will be the first Sunday to go down as "Bloody Sunday" in the pages of Irish history. It will not be the last. In fact, we'll be discussing the next one in the next episode. The third won't come into the podcast until we get to 1972.

[music: Closing Theme]