

The Aftermath and the Beginnings of a New War Part 3

Growing Public Sympathy

The Irish public's reaction to the events of the Rising was complicated. Statements by Volunteers/Witnesses gathered afterwards by the Free State in the 1940s & 50s suggested that in working class areas, Volunteers were cheered on as heroes. Certainly, in the South Dublin Union, people made several highly dangerous attempts to get much needed supplies into the Volunteer held positions. While in areas near barracks (due to the likelihood of residents having loved ones serving in the British Army) or more affluent areas, the reaction was highly negative, as people came out to taunt the survivors. A lot of Dubliners initially blamed the Rebels for the damage done to their city though this anger began to quickly alleviate.

The unnecessarily harsh punishments handed down by the British authorities to the Rebels began to harden moderate attitudes. After the executions, memorial masses for the leaders became common around the city and began to concentrate minds. Irish Republican flags became more prevalent on the streets. After the mass indiscriminate arrests, the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Dublin Metropolitan Police were treated with hostility. Families came together to support those who had lost a bread winner to the military prisoner camp in Frongoch, Wales, where many of the Irish Volunteers were interned. Numbers of those signing up to the British Army dwindled.

Eventually, as Volunteers were released from prison, the Republican movement would begin to rearm and reorganise. The new surge behind the movement saw its numbers increase greatly, while time in Frongoch itself was used to retrain and to professionalise, giving the camp the name "The University of Revolution".

The Irish Convention, Elections and The First Dáil

Redmond's proposed Home Rule Act came under scrutiny for its lack of executive function (which would remain with the Lord Lieutenant and Privy Council). In addition, the British Government had acceded to Carson's demand of permanent partition for six of Ulster's nine counties, which greatly undermined the Irish Parliamentary Party. John Redmond tried in earnest to stop permanent partition. Beginning in March 1917, the new British Prime Minister Lloyd George organised the Irish Convention to discuss a resolution to Irish Home Rule and in particular, partition. To many this was seen as a method of pacifying the increase in criticism from America on Britain's handling of the Irish Question.

The Convention was ignored by the growing Sinn Féin Party but a small number of Ulster Unionists did attend. A possible resolution was proposed by southern unionists that would see an end to partition. The proposed amendment would give less fiscal freedom to the new home rule legislature in return for the 6 counties. Redmond who wanted anything but partition at this stage accepted this plan but Dillion refused to endorse it believing the new legislature would be essentially, powerless and it was rubbish. The Convention was not a success.

Several by-elections were won by Sinn Féin throughout 1917 and by early 1918, John Redmond had passed away, his party was soon to follow.

At the time of the 1918 General Election, a number of factors had deeply changed the Irish electoral landscape:

1. The franchise had been extended to women (over 30 yrs) and to 21 year old men (18 yrs if they had seen military service) without property qualification. This extended the voting population from 700 000 to 2 million, making it the most democratic in Irish history to that point.
2. The Irish Parliamentary Party was seen as a failure, it had coalesced with the idea of temporary partition in 1914, the Home Rule Acts had failed to be enacted, and themselves did not contain executive function or powers relating to foreign policy or much by the way of taxation.
3. The Irish Parliamentary Party was also seen as an aged party, they were moderate and many had been serving since the turn of the century. The young electorate favoured a more radical, more youthful political force.
4. Republican tendencies had greatly increased following the harsh reprisals following the Rising.
5. The fear of the introduction of conscription had become a justifiable concern.
6. The Irish Labour Party stepped aside in the General Election to allow Sinn Féin gain optimum seats as a plebiscite on Ireland's Constitutional status.

The results of the election saw Sinn Féin return 73 seats (67 seat increase), the Irish Unionist Party return 22 (5 seat increase) while the Irish Parliamentary Party returned 6 (61 seat decrease). As per their manifesto, Sinn Féin sent invitations to all candidates returned on the island to sit at the first Dáil which they established in January 1919. The British Parliament and the Unionist parliamentarians did not recognise this new body. The Dáil proclaimed itself the governing body of the all Island Irish Republic and the Irish Volunteers reorganised as the Irish Republican Army. What would follow next would be a resumption of war with Britain and the beginning of the War of Independence...