

The short term significance of the easter rising history essay



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The short-term significance of the Easter Rising is evident through the new public and political philosophy, which was subsequently adopted amongst the majority of the Irish population. The revival of a nationalist opinion, complemented by a new emphasis on direct action naturally led to a political shift, which saw the rise of a new Irish Nationalist party: Sinn Fein. The adoption of direct action thus saw the creation of the IRA and this in turn allowed the creation of the Dail Eireann. Indeed, the increasing levels of physical confrontation forced the British Government to seek negotiations with Sinn Fein in regards to their demands for an Irish Republic. Yet, it is important to note that other factors contributed to the revival of an Irish nationalist opinion; for instance, the severe punishments, which the British government commissioned reversed public opinion towards the rebels and a growing anti-British sentiment emerged. However, as elucidated through several sources, I will argue that, whilst, of course, the Easter Rising cannot be viewed as the isolated factor that led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the rising did see Sinn Fein adopting similar tactics to that of the rebels. Ultimately, the rising was a ' blood sacrifice' in that it revived a nationalist opinion and acted as a template for Sinn Fein whose persistence in the use of direct action led to Dominion status for Southern Ireland.

The Easter Rising's significance is apparent through its symbolic value. Certainly, many pondered over what could be achieved if the majority united in the quest for Home Rule, especially after a small and seemingly insignificant rebel group had achieved so much. As a military event, it was, however, vastly unsuccessful. Yet, as implied by Pádraig Pearse, a leader of the rising, the event was always doomed to defeat- " we pledge our lives and

the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom.” Indeed, Garret Fitzgerald, who reflects upon 1916, in which his parents played an active role, backs up this notion: “ It was their hope that if it failed, it would nevertheless revive a dying national feeling.” Of course, because of his upbringing the opinion expressed is likely to be subjective; however, it does give an accurate view in the context of the time. Both sources allude to the symbolic act of the Rising and establish that ultimately, the rebels knew they were going to lose against the resourcefulness of the British Army.

Nevertheless, to “ revive a dying national feeling” an event such as the Easter Rising was necessary; as many revisionist historians argue a ‘ blood sacrifice’ was needed. Thus, accentuating the symbolic value of the act in changing public opinion, this subsequently led to a demand for a nationalist outlook in political ideology.

The notion that the Easter Rising was able to bring about a complete reversal in public opinion to an Irish nationalist perspective is evidence of its significance. However, it is possible to argue that this reversal to a nationalist opinion is a consequence of the British government’s harsh policy towards the rebels after their arrest. This concept is reiterated through the way in which the rebels were originally met with deep disdain and condemnation off the public, yet within a matter of days, the hatred had been reversed towards the British government. Indeed, on the 4th May the Irish Independent reported that “ the ruin around... is of the common enemy”; yet, by the 10th May the Irish Times stated, “ Mr Redmond asked the Prime Minister to put an immediate stop to the execution of rebels in Dublin. His demand reflects the attitude of the official National Press and of

some of the leading Liberal newspapers in England.” Certainly, these sources show how public opinion was beginning to change extremely quickly due to the draconian punishments and apathy displayed by Asquith’s government. The national press would normally represent the general opinion, and therefore it is perhaps an accurate representation. Also, the fact that English, albeit Liberal, newspapers were supporting immediate stoppage of further executions implies that, in reality, the government was reckless and played into the hands of the rebels. The latter article is, therefore, perhaps more objective than the article written six days before as consideration of other emerging factors and events would have been taken into account. Significantly, though, it does pinpoint the moment where sympathy for the nationalist movement is qualified and their drive for self-rule becomes legitimate. This implies that the rising alone would not have been enough to change public opinion toward an Irish Nationalist opinion and would not have lead to the detriment of the I. P. P.; other fundamental factors also contributed to the revival of a nationalist opinion. The Easter Rising did, nevertheless, catalyse this new nationalist opinion- of course, without it, it is arguable whether the reversal in opinion would even have occurred. What is more, the rising achieved everything the rebels had anticipated; it was a ‘ blood sacrifice’. Ultimately, their aim was to achieve a nationalist feeling in Ireland, and even though other factors contributed, in this respect they were wholly successful.

The increasing popularity of Home Rule among the public, which the Easter Rising catalysed, naturally led to a political shift. The emphasis placed on this new Irish nationalist perspective is evident through the demise of the

Irish Parliamentary Party as a result of Redmond's failure to secure Home Rule. Undoubtedly, this highlighted the increasing public demand for an independent Ireland and accentuated the strength of this new public opinion. As one Irish MP noted, "so far as the mass of the people (are) concerned... enthusiasm and trust in Redmond is dead". In reality, though, even if this did represent the opinion of the Irish MP, it would be highly unlikely of the MP to suggest otherwise; to do so, may well have resulted in political suicide. Nevertheless, it does give a representation of the deep dislike towards Redmond and thus, once again, reveals the symbolic capacity of the Rising in that it led to a stark reversal to what was now evidently a deep nationalist perspective. With the notion of Home Rule still in many of the Irish public's eyes, Sinn Fein now occupied Redmond's Parliamentary Party's place as the prevailing nationalist party. It is important to mention, however, that the 1916 Conscription Act also served to harden republican attitudes amongst many of the Irish population. Essentially, the Act was greatly unpopular; the major consensus being that it was 'England's war'. Thus, the only other viable method to oppose it was to turn to Irish Nationalism. Consequently, it reinforces that other factors also aided Sinn Fein's position as the leading nationalist party; it was not just the consequence of the Easter Rising, which led to the resurgence of a nationalist opinion. Even so, without the occurrence of the 1916 Rising, it is arguable that the change of public opinion coupled with Redmond's failure would not have taken place and thus a political shift to Sein Fein would also not have occurred.

The short-term significance of the Easter Rising is exemplified through its ability to inspire direct physical or political action. The creation of the Dail

Eireann was indicative of Sinn Fein's sustained attitude towards the British government; Sinn Fein now wholly refused to recognise the authority of British rule over Ireland. As confirmed through the proceedings of the Dail Eireann, Sinn Fein declared "foreign government in Ireland to be an invasion of (their) national right... and demand the evacuation of (their) country by the English Garrison". The declaration of an independent Irish government logically led to the creation of an independent Irish Army: the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This illustrates the significance of the Easter Rising as a symbolic event, which indicated that little was to be achieved without the use of direct physical action- whether it was political, like the creation of the Dail Eireann, or physical, like the establishment of an independent Irish army. Certainly, it is arguable that the Easter Rising and its capacity to revive a nationalist opinion and inspire direct action achieved more than decades of painstaking negotiations.

This new philosophy of physical confrontation, which essentially emerged from the Easter Rising, led to Westminster's 'Government of Ireland Act 1920', which was an attempt to bring an end to the increasing levels of violence being witnessed in Ireland. Hence, as a result of the new tactics employed, the British government now attempted to negotiate on Sinn Fein's demands; the Easter Rising did, therefore, inspire and lay a model for Sinn Fein to follow- and it appeared to work. Yet, the notion of Home Rule was no longer an option for Sinn Fein; still being in a politically and militarily stable position, an Irish Republic was the only viable alternative in the view of de Valera and many of the Irish population. Certainly, the Easter Rising and the events it subsequently sparked taught Sinn Fein not to settle for second

best. Thus, the prospect of Ireland only controlling internal Irish affairs was an entirely inadequate notion for Sinn Fein. As reinforced by Sinn Fein's earlier statement in the Dail, which indicated "elected Representatives of the Irish people alone (should) have power to make laws binding on the people of Ireland". Similarly, Roy Foster argues that the act was "essentially constructed to solve the Irish problem as it stood in 1914 not in 1920". Significantly, this illuminates the major shift in political attitude, which materialised after the 1916 Rising. Consequently, Sinn Fein member boycotted the new constitutional laws. This, once more, denotes the symbolic nature of the Easter Rising: direct action, albeit not physical in this instance, was being adopted, which was a stark contrast to the previous philosophy of pursuing political discussions. Moreover, the major shift in political attitudes, which occurred in just a period of six years, is exemplified through the act and confirms that in the very least the Rising acted as a catalyst for the subsequent events and that the tactics of the 1916 rebels now acted as a template for Sinn Fein.

The significance of the 1916 Rising is clear in the way in which it acted as a precedent for Sinn Fein to adopt a policy of brinkmanship, which subsequently led to Ireland being granted dominion status. Indeed, by early 1921 it is arguable that the IRA knew that the Anglo-Irish War was unwinnable for both sides. Yet, just as the rebels knew that they were to be defeated by the British Army in 1916, Sinn Fein prolonged the Anglo-Irish War in the hope that the British government would be anxious to find a way out; their gamble succeeded. Thus, the Easter Rising may well have acted as

a precedent for Sinn Fein's strategy of Brinkmanship and in this respect the symbolic importance of the Rising is explicit.

It is important to note, however, the wider context of the time. As many revisionist historians argue, Ulster separatism played a key role in persuading the need for a Treaty. The sacrifice of many Ulster Volunteers in WWI served to toughen the British identity in Ulster. Additionally, the IRA's weakening position indicated they could only hold out for a few more weeks- this is emphasised through their acceptance of dominion status as opposed to complete independence-ultimately they had no choice. After all, in a speech to his cabinet, Lloyd George stated that he gave de Valera a " very serious warning... Britain's reduced military commitments... meant that more troops were now available... with a view to repression the rebellion". However, Lloyd George was addressing the cabinet; ultimately, he had to be seen to be taking a firm line against Sinn Fein by applying pressure in an attempt to secure a settlement. Of course, it is possible that many blamed Lloyd George for the previous failure in negotiations with Redmond and Carson; Lloyd George needed to take control of this negotiation. Certainly, he could not be seen to fail negotiations again. Thus, it poses the question of whether this was just an empty threat. There was already a deep distain towards the Black-and-Tans' methods in Ireland amongst the British public. As Henderson, a labour MP reaffirms, " a state of affairs prevails which is a disgrace to the human race". Surely, if Britain were to reengage the war in Ireland it would have resulted in political suicide- it would have been to the detriment of both his and the governments reputation. The significance of the Easter Rising is, nevertheless, evident through the IRA's adoption of

similar tactics. The IRA's persistence in the use of direct physical action made the concept of Dominion status possible- even if other factors did persuade the British Government of a Treaty- without the Anglo-Irish War, Dominion Status would not have been achieved.

Overall, it is clear that many contributing factors led to Dominion status being granted to Southern Ireland. The severely harsh policies applied to the rebels in 1916 led to an overwhelmingly hostile attitude towards the British government; this in turn, sparked a huge shift to a nationalist perspective. This also brought about a shift in political ideology and Sinn Fein now occupied the place as the dominant political party. Nevertheless, the significance of the Rising is clear: without it the shift to a nationalist perspective may not have occurred. Indeed, it needed an event such as the 1916 Rising to spark such an outrage and reinforce the notion that the quest for independence was a legitimate one. Perhaps more significantly, the Rising acted as a model for Sinn Fein and the IRA to follow. The adoption of direct physical and political action- for instance, the boycotting of the 'Government of Ireland Act 1920' and the IRA's persistent use of physical force, added increasing pressure on the British Government and consequently Dominion status was granted. Thus, the symbolic capacity of the Easter Rising is evident through its ability to inspire Sinn Fein to adopt similar tactics. In essence, the rising achieved everything the rebels wished for; of course, it did "revive a dying national feeling" and acted as precedent for change in Ireland.

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