

Effects of the war on nationalism and unionism



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The Great War proved to be a catalyst for profound change across the whole of Europe and beyond. Ireland proved to be no exception as the effects of the Great War changed nationalism and unionism in various ways. Some of those changes could have been predictable in 1914, whilst others could not have been. The constitutional future of Ireland had already caused much controversy before the Great War and that controversy did not decline just because Britain and therefore Ireland were fighting a war. Unionism was perhaps a more unified feature of Irish society and politics. In contrast, nationalism was split between the moderates that supported Ireland having Home Rule within the United Kingdom and the republicans that favoured a united Irish republic. The circumstances created by the Great War plus the actions of unionists, nationalists, republicans, and finally the British government all brought changes to nationalism and unionism. These changes will now be outlined.

England and later Britain had been trying to impose its control over Ireland since the 12th century. Nationalism and unionism had been the reactions of the Irish to those attempts to make them obedient, if not loyal subjects of the British State. The nationalists were descended from the Irish who had resented, or even resisted British control. The overwhelming majority of the nationalists were Catholics and formed around two-thirds of the Irish population. The unionists on the other hand were strongly in favour of maintaining the union of Britain. Unionism was strongest in the Protestant dominated counties of Ulster amongst the descendants of the Ulster plantations. Unionism held the advantage of having aims that never changed whilst nationalism had the disadvantage of being divided between

moderates and republicans, even though people with nationalist or republican sympathies formed a majority of the population (Wilson, 1989 p. 21).

Nationalism had failed to achieve Home Rule in the 1880s, yet under the Liberal government that the Irish nationalist MPs backed, Home Rule seemed destined to be implemented after it passed through Parliament in 1912. The House of Lords managed to block its passing for two years, although it had just lost its power to veto legislation after the passing of the Parliament Act of 1911 (Ferriter, 2005 p. 123). However, the move towards Home Rule had provoked a militant unionist response in the form of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) countered by the moderate Irish Volunteers and the more hard-line Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). The UVF, which was led by Sir Edward Carson used all the means possible to prevent Home Rule, and would have proved a formidable force for any Irish government in Dublin to defeat (Stewart, 2001 p. 166). The British were concerned about instability and possible civil war in Ireland during 1912 through to 1914. The first change the Great War brought was that many nationalists and unionists got behind the British war effort. Home Rule was put on ice until after the war finished. The British government could have used that extra support from both nationalism and unionism to its ultimate advantage yet proved incapable of doing so (Ferriter, 2005 p. 111).

Before any of the thousands of volunteers had been sent to the front line the British government's decisions meant that the Great War would change nationalism and unionism. Instead of maintaining the good will of nationalists, the British government clearly showed its preference to those

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unionists who had volunteered for military service. The UVF seemed to be rewarded for its almost treasonable resistance to Home Rule by being enlisted as a whole and as a separate division. The moderate nationalists who had been in the Irish Volunteers were denied their own division. Redmond and the other moderates felt that the nationalists were being treated unfairly, despite supporting the British war effort (Madden, 2005, p. 92).

Nationalism more than unionism started to change once Irish troops started to get killed in the Great War. The Unionists views about remaining within the United Kingdom did not alter, regardless of how many of them were killed in the war. For nationalism, the deaths of so many of its most capable and moderate advocates changed the balance between moderate nationalism and republicanism. However, even as the death toll mounted amongst the nationalist volunteers fighting in the Great War, the majority of nationalists did not favour the foundation of a republic, just the implementation of Home Rule. There was resentment that the unionists received better treatment in the army than the nationalists did. There was also resentment that the unionist dead received more respect, even though nationalists also paid the ultimate price for fighting in the Great War. The Irish Volunteers had split over the issue of enlisting in the British Army. The vast majority of the volunteers did enlist and called themselves National Volunteers whilst only a minority refused to enlist yet kept the name of Irish Volunteers. Between 150, 000 to 158, 000 joined the British Army, whilst 8, 000 to 12, 000 stayed behind to safeguard Home Rule from unionism or a change in British policy (Jackson, 1999 p. 198).

However, it would not be Irish blood spilt in France or Belgium that would change nationalism and unionism during the Great War. In the end it would prove to be Irish blood spilt in Dublin that caused the most dramatic changes. Members of the IRB believed the Great War offered the opportunity to launch a major rebellion against the British whilst the British Army was fighting and therefore unable to concentrate its firepower against any rebellion. Republicans claimed such a strategy was taking advantage of circumstances that might only be available for a short period, if Britain were on the winning side in the Great War such opportunities would be lost. The IRB were joined by Sinn Fein and the Irish socialist movement of James Connolly (Moody & Martin, 2001, p. 256). The plans of a national uprising by the IRB were scuppered by the Royal Navy, which captured the German ship bringing weapons to the rebels. Instead of cancelling the rebellion altogether the IRB uprising still went ahead in Dublin. Slim chances of victory had been turned into no chance of survival let alone victory. The majority of people in Dublin originally saw the uprising as foolish and unjustified (Ferriter, 2005 p. 130).

The Easter Rising of 1916 was an unmitigated disaster from a military and strategic perspective that resulted in around 450 deaths. (Madden, 2005, p. 95). From the aspect of turning a majority of nationalists towards supporting a united Irish republic it was success, yet it was not the rebels that died in the fighting that aroused the upsurge in republican sentiment. This upsurge was due to the British government allowing the British Army to execute a handful of rebels after the rising. The executions were a serious blunder as it made the rebels martyrs for the Irish Republican cause and greatly

undermined the British control of Ireland, except for Ulster. The British Army had intended to execute over 90 rebels, yet the death of the 15 rebels it did execute proved disastrous (Madden, 2005 p. 96). The Unionists regarded the Easter Rising as an act of treason; a sign that nationalism in general and republicanism in particular could not be trusted (Wilson, 1989 p. 45).

Perhaps the greatest change to unionism as a result of the Easter Rising was the determination to remain within the United Kingdom, even if that meant partitioning Ireland in to two distinct nationalist and unionist parts. The Great War used up men, money, and resources in great quantities. The British government compounded its loss of support within the nationalist community by contemplating to extend conscription to Ireland. The Somme offensive in 1916 forced the introduction of conscription to the rest of the United Kingdom following the catastrophic losses caused. (Stewart, 2001, p. 167). In all the British Army lost 794, 000 troops killed, wounded and missing in action during the Somme offensive, Irish nationalists and unionists were killed in their thousands (Castleden, 2005 p. 460).

The republicans made further inroads into persuading nationalists that a republican solution was the best way to get the British out of Ireland. The British government did not introduce conscription into Ireland; the republicans in general and the Irish Republican Army / Sinn Fein (IRA) had gained further propaganda successes specifically. David Lloyd George met with both Carson and Redmond, promising Carson a permanent partition, whilst assuring Redmond it would be only a short-term partition (Madden, 2005, p. 99). The Great War offered chances for nationalism and unionism to change, the war itself did not change everything. It was the republicans that

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prospered most from these changes due to Eamon de Valera and Michael Collins taking advantage of the circumstances the Great War had brought, especially after the Easter Rising (Wilson, 1989 p. 47). The Great War revealed the flaws in the political thought and strategy of the moderate Irish nationalists. The Irish Parliamentary Party had seen its greatest achievement of Home Rule suspended by the start of the war. Redmond believed that nationalism could achieve a compromise with British imperialism, a belief shattered by the Great War. Redmond also underestimated the potential of republicanism and misunderstood the aspirations of unionism. It was unionism and republicanism that changed Ireland profoundly after the end of the Great War (Ferriter, 2005 p. 130).

Therefore, the Great War did change nationalism and unionism in various ways. Its first change was to suspend the Ulster crisis of 1912-14 and prevent the possibility of civil war in Ireland at that time. The outbreak of war was initially greeted with enthusiasm within nationalism and unionism. The British government gained a great deal of support from both communities, although it would eventually squander support from the nationalists. Only the republican fringe within nationalism did not support Britain's war effort, regarding the Great War as an opportunity to end British rule in Ireland. Moderate nationalism was greatly changed by the Great War. The finest supporters of moderate were gunned down on the Western Front, whilst unionism increased its influence with the British government, with Carson serving in the war cabinet, whilst Redmond refused to do so. Unionism was proud of the sacrifices it made for King and country whilst moderate nationalism was weakened by being seen as sacrificing so many lives for an

occupying power that did not seem to appreciate those sacrifices. The Easter Rising and its brutal suppression and the unwise execution of 15 rebels was the main catalyst for change with the British government foolishly making martyrs for the Irish republicans. Moderate nationalism was the main casualty of the Great War in Ireland. Republicanism was greatly strengthened after the Easter Rising, whilst unionism was grimly determined to hold onto Ulster. The Great War only delayed civil war in Ireland; the end of moderate nationalism and the misjudgements of the British government would allow extremism to take hold. This cause of events almost inevitably led to the partition of Ireland. Nationalism, unionism, republicanism, or the British government could no longer expect to control the whole of Ireland. The Great War changed things in favour of the republican and unionist extremists, the IRA and Sinn Fein proving especially astute at taking advantage of those circumstances.

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