

# [Historiography of irish nationalism](https://assignbuster.com/historiography-of-irish-nationalism/)

#### Discuss how the historical debates of the Irish Revolution 1916-23, reflect the evolution of Irish Historiography since 1920’s, 1930’s, 40’s 50’s 60’s etc

There have been and remain various historical debates concerning the Irish Revolution of 1916-23 that reflect the evolution of Irish Historiography in the following decades. Historical debates have attempted to discuss, explain and evaluate the Irish Revolution from different perspectives that have altered in the light of contemporary events and opinions as well as the evolution of Irish Historiography. The main perspectives of the historical debates outlined below will relate to the main actors during the Irish Revolution, the British government plus the Police and the Army, the Ulster Unionists and finally the Irish Nationalist and Republican movements. All played a part in either promoting or resisting the Irish Revolution, their roles having been opened to historical scrutiny and evolution in Irish Historiography or when apt other sources. Historical debates have tended to concentrate on the causes of the Irish Revolution, whether it was a success or a failure and whether it could have been defeated. Historical debates have not remained the same over the decades; the passing of time can change people’s opinions of historical events. As people that lived through the Irish Revolution grew older and started to die out their viewpoints have been passed down the generations sustained as much by myth as by an understanding of events.

The Irish Revolution in a relatively short period of time came close to ending several centuries of English or British involvement in Ireland. Britain in 1916 despite the strains of fighting in the First World War was the world’s foremost Imperial power, it seemed unlikely that it could lose the whole or the majority of Ireland when it ruled a quarter of the globe. However the First World War altered many things and gave those that wished for an Irish Revolution opportunities that had not arisen before (Schama, 2002, pp. 447-48). The desire for Irish independence was nothing new to the period of the Irish Revolution. There had been serious rebellions in the 1590’s, 1642 and 1798 yet none of them had succeeded in England and later British rule. The nationalist and republican cause was helped by the myths about those heroic failures. The Ulster Unionist were on the other hand reinforced in their determination to remain part of the United Kingdom by the myths surrounding their successful resistance of James II before the Battle of the Boyne (Wilson, 1989, p. 3). Not only did being British protect their Protestant religion it also provided economic markets for their linen and work for the Belfast shipyards (Mulholland, 2002 p 15). Ireland was and remains divided by two different visions of nationality that conjure up heated debate on the ongoing political situation as well as providing the spur for historical debate about the Irish Revolution and other key events in Irish history. The partition that followed in the wake of the Irish Revolution seemed to intensify the divide between both states in Ireland (Fitzpatrick, 1998, p. 4).

Ireland had formally become part of the United Kingdom with the 1801 Act of Union yet Irish Nationalists and R had either wanted to gain concessions from Westminster or cede from the Union completely. Moderate Irish Nationalists had campaigned tirelessly for Home Rule. Gladstone had not been able to deliver yet Asquith had finally got the Home Rule legislation passed in 1914. However that provoked resistance from the Ulster Unionists, the outbreak of the First World War put Home Rule on ice (Kennedy-Pipe 1998, pp. 10-11).

Whilst the Irish Nationalists fought for Britain alongside Ulster Unionists, Irish Republicans aimed to launch revolution whilst the war continued. Moderate Irish Nationalists died in their thousands on the war front whilst the Irish Revolution started by the military naïve yet politically potent Easter Rising of April-May 1916. The suppression of the Easter Rising and the execution of some of its ringleaders proved a recruiting boom for Sinn Fein and the IRA (Carver, 1998, pp. 138-39). Those that started the Irish Revolution were fighting for a united Irish republic whilst the British government was determined not to give in to terrorists. The British government would if pushed agree to the partition of Ireland whilst for the Irish republic compromising with the British government caused a dilemma and had caused much historical debate since. Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins represented Sinn Fein/IRA in the peace talks with the British government accepted a partitioned Ireland and the forming of the Irish Free State, a dominion rather than a republic. Pragmatists saw it as the best deal available whilst more hard line republicans saw it as a betrayal of everything they believed and fought for. Divisions over the peace treaty resulted in civil war in the Irish Free State, with more summary executions than the British had carried out since 1916 (Moody & Martin, 2001, p. 273). David Lloyd George is said to have threatened sending British Army reinforcements to persuade Griffith and Collins to accept partition (Jenkins, 2001, p. 364). Both sides realised that the brutal fighting caused by the Irish Revolution would not produce a total victory for either side. The British Army reckoned that only a garrison 250, 000 in strength could ensure crushing the Irish Revolution, not a feasible option for a war weary and financially stretched country (Carver, 1998, p. 147).

The consequences of the Irish Revolution produced much historical debate most noticeably from those with a national or republican perspectives for much of the 1920s and 1930s there was debate about whether the IRA/ Sinn Fein and the Irish Free State should have carried on fighting for a united Ireland. However the brutal fighting of the Irish Revolution meant that many ordinary wanted peace not more bloodshed. With hindsight Griffith and Collins return from Downing Street with dominion status was probably the best result for them, yet it sparked off civil war (Moody and Martin, 201 p. 258). During the 1960s and 1970s Irish Nationalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland tried different approaches for achieving their different objectives. The Nationalists formed a civil rights movement similar to the Black movements in the US yet the methods were also constitutional like those of the Home Rule movements that had their dreams of a peaceful Home Rule wrecked by the First World War and the Irish Revolution. The Ulster Unionist reaction was similar to that of 1912, they took to the streets and protested. However, the Ulster Unionist had used Home Rule in Northern Ireland to their advantage, controlling the special branch police reservists that reacted brutally to the violence. The majority of Ulster Unionists did not need the evolution of Irish historiography to tell them that Home Rule had allowed them their own state within Britain that had been for them and not for the Nationalist and Republican communities (Fitzpatrick 1998 p. 24). The Ulster Unionist hostility towards the civil rights movement in the 1960’s caused the intensification of sectarian violence and ultimately the troubles. The troubles came as a surprise to the British government who took little notice of the evolution of Irish history that clearly showed that the partition of Ireland following the Irish Revolution had not solved the Irish Problem on a permanent basis. That complacent attitude was shattered by the events of 1968-69, which forced the government to send in the British Army to protect the nationalist and republican communities, an unusual situation that nobody could have anticipated. The renewed sectarian conflict showed that the complexity of the Irish situation had not gone away with partition, instead it was concentrated in Northern Ireland. Historiography could be used to justify the present by vindicating the actions of the past. All sides in Northern Ireland claim to be upholding the truth yet use propaganda for their own means just as they did during the Irish Revolution (Stewart 2001 p. 181).

For Irish nationalists and republicans the evolution of Irish Historiography had been regarded with greater interest than by British governments or the Ulster Unionists who were happier with the partition of Ireland. The Unionists believed that Home Rule gave them protection from further advances towards a united Ireland and made it harder for British governments to let them down (Wilson 1989 p. 51). For Irish republicans the very existence of Northern Ireland was testament to the unfinished aims of those that had started the Irish Revolution. The Irish Revolution was intended to sweep away British culture and influence as well as political control of the whole country. Some 90 years on from the start of the Irish Revolution Irish Historiography shows that Ireland is still influenced by the English-speaking peoples particularly Britain and the United States (Stewart 2001 p. 162). The IRA started bombing campaigns in the 1930’s, 1940’s and 1950’s to force the British government whilst imposing a united Ireland upon the Ulster Unionists. These campaigns were no where near as effective as those organised by Michael Collins during the Irish Revolution. Some of those in the Republican Movement argued that only organising and effective armed struggle could achieve their aims whilst others sought constitutional means of doing so. In the 1960s the official IRA had debated abandoning armed struggle leaving its members in Northern Ireland without any weapon supplies contributing to the breakaway of Provisional Sinn Fein and Provisional IRA (Kelleher, 2001 p. 339).

The Provisional IRA soon became an effective fighting force with the aim of bombing the British out of Ulster. Its recruitment of volunteers was increased as a consequence of Internment without trial and Bloody Sunday in 1972. However the British Army had more experience of counter terrorist operations and the backing of the governments unwillingness to compromise to terrorists than had been the case during the Irish Revolution. When these factors are combined it is no wonder that the Provisional IRA would refer to the troubles as ‘ the long war’. The failure to force Britain to withdraw during the 1970’s led the provisional Sinn Fein to change its strategy combining the armed struggle with taking part in more elections (Mulholland, 2002 p. 96). Its electoral support was increased due to the death of Bobby Sands and other hunger strikers in 1981(Ardagh, 1994 p. 350). The troubles in many respects revived interests in the Irish Revolution and how the evolution of Irish historiography could explain how the troubles had developed. Perhaps the Belfast Agreement of 1998 has striking similarities with the way in which the Irish revolution ended, all sides realised that done of them could win yet they carried on fighting in the hope that one lucky strike could grasp victory from nowhere. The most valuable lesson of historiography should be if that a conflict is in stalemate then its time to talk rather than carry on fighting. Yet that is very difficult when both sides believe that the other side has no right to exist (Stewart 2001 p. 182).

Therefore there are areas of debate concerning the Irish Revolution that have been influenced by the evolution of Irish Historiography in the subsequent decades. As with other areas of Irish history the revolutionary period has inspired myths that have continued to the present and reinforced prejudices and religious or political divisions. One area of debate has been over why the Irish Revolution was more successful in removing British rule than previous rebellions yet failed to deliver a united Irish republic. Perhaps the main point shown through the evolution of historiography is that the Irish Revolution was able to survive the British attempts to defeat it through some favourable circumstances and some astute political and military tactics on the part of the IRA and Sinn Fein. The whole process was set in motion by the Easter Rising of 1916 that created the myth of republican martyrs dying for their nation’s liberation rather than a badly organised group of terrorists as the British government would have considered them. It is widely agreed that the First World War gave the Republican movements their chance to expel the British from Ireland.

The evolution of historiography can be seen as helping to explain why partition became the most practical solution following the outbreak of the Anglo-Irish War and the IRA’s guerrilla tactics. Partition was only accepted once the IRA realised they could not defeat the British Army and then subdue the Ulster Unionists. Whilst the British government wanted to keep all of Ireland under its control it was not prepared to send the number of troops to Ireland that would have been needed to crush the revolution. The 26 counties were given their freedom in order for Britain to keep the 6 counties that gave it the most loyal support and were an important economic and strategic part of the United Kingdom. The inability of Sinn Fein and the IRA to expel the British from the whole of Ireland caused civil war as those pragmatic enough to support the partition took on those that had wanted to carry on fighting. Griffith and Collins were correct in believing that the Irish Revolution would to an Irish republic yet were killed in ambushes by their former colleagues before that was achieved.

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