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Ireland: A Country Divided

Stephen Sandford

It is a paradox of history that Britain's declaration of war on Germany in August 1914 probably averted a civil war in Ireland.¹ In the mainly Protestant north-eastern counties 85,000 men of the Protestant Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) an armed paramilitary force was committed to resist the imposition of a Home Rule parliament on the nine counties of Ulster. Trained, equipped and organised on a military basis the UVF had been formed in 1913 to enable the unionist leadership to co-ordinate and control a number of independent groups training throughout the Province.² Opposing this force was the larger but less well organised and equipped Irish National Volunteers. Together these armed paramilitary militias outnumbered the total strength of the British regular army stationed in the United Kingdom. In the view of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and his colleagues, if 'these two large forces should come into conflict (...) [it] may require the whole of our available forces at home to deal with'.³ This crisis had largely been brought about by the Liberal Party's need for the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party to remain in government and the price of that support was Home Rule for Ireland.⁴

Two previous attempts to grant Home Rule to Ireland had failed to obtain sufficient support in both chambers of parliament, but the last legislative impediment to its implementation, the House of Lords veto, had been removed by the *Parliament Act 1911*. The unionist response was to adopt unconstitutional methods to ensure their exclusion from governance by a Home Rule parliament. They were even threatening to establish a secessionist government in Ulster.⁵ The third *Home Rule Bill* was introduced by the Liberal government in the House of Commons on 11 April 1912 and, without the Lords' veto, it would become law in 1914. To demonstrate the extent of their opposition, unionists organised the signing of a mass petition

¹ I would like to thank Professor Keith Jeffery for commenting on earlier drafts of this article.

² Estimate furnished by police of the strength of the Ulster Volunteer Force, 31 March 1914, The National Archive (TNA), Kew, CAB, 37/119/60.

³ A memorandum by the military members of the army council on the situation in Ireland, 4 July, 1914, TNA, CAB, 37/120.

⁴ A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis* (London 1967).

⁵ R. McNeill, *Ulster's Stand for Union* (London 1922) 49-51.

on 28 September 1914 to which signatories pledged themselves to employ 'all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland'. Committing themselves 'to stand by one another in defending for ourselves and our children our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland', this Ulster Covenant was signed by 471,414 Ulstermen and women.⁶

A drift towards military confrontation

In January 1913, in recognition that numerous Orange lodges and Ulster clubs were already in military training, the Ulster Unionist Council decided to unite these disparate groups into a single body to be known as the UVF. Membership of this organization was to be limited to 100,000 men between the ages of 17 and 65 who had signed the Ulster Covenant. As a citizen army containing members from every strata of Ulster unionist society, the UVF were organised along similar lines to the British army in which many of its senior officers had served. Commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir George Richardson, late of the Indian army, by the time recruitment closed at the end of February 1914, almost 90,000 men had enrolled in UVF battalions, with thousands more enrolled in ancillary units such as the UVF Motor Car Corps and Ulster Signaling and Dispatch Rider Corps.⁷ Women played an important role in support of the Ulster Volunteers, not only as nurses but also, over a year before the Great War, as motorcycle dispatch riders, signallers, cipher-clerks and ambulance drivers.⁸

It was not until November 1913 that nationalists responded to the formation of the UVF by the creation of their own paramilitary militia to ensure the implementation of Home Rule. On 1 November, an article entitled 'The North Began' written by Eoin MacNeill, a professor at University College Dublin, appeared in *An Claidheamb Soluis*, the newspaper of the Gaelic League, 'threw down the gauntlet to nationalists to follow the

⁶ Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, 62, 66.

⁷ Ibidem, 128; Lists of commanding officers and unit strengths, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), D.1327/4/20.

⁸ Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, 86-87.

lead given by Ulster unionists'.⁹ The driving force behind the formation of the Volunteers was not the constitutional nationalists of Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party but the militant Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB).¹⁰ On 11 November 11 prominent nationalists, including Sean MacDermott and Eamonn Ceannt, both members of the IRB and destined to be executed for their part in the 1916 Easter Rising, met at a Dublin hotel to discuss its formation.¹¹ By the outbreak of the Great War membership of the Irish Volunteers had increased to 188,000.¹²

On 14 March 1914, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Paget, the Commander in Chief in Ireland, was warned by the War Office that reports had been received that 'evil-disposed persons' intended to raid government arms and ammunition stores in various parts of Ireland.¹³ Because the arms and ammunition stores named in the letter were all in Ulster, Paget could have been in no doubt who these unnamed 'evil-disposed persons' were. Paget was instructed 'to take all proper and necessary precautions for safeguarding Government property and maintaining law and order, in view of the special circumstances of the present time.'¹⁴ On the same day the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, in a bellicose speech at Huddersfield, declared 'that bloodshed no doubt was lamentable, but there were worse things than bloodshed, even on an extensive scale (...) Let us go forward together and put these grave matters to the proof.'¹⁵ It appears therefore, that certain elements within the Government were not adverse to the idea of provoking a confrontation with the Ulster Unionists. Sir John Seely, the Secretary of State for War, would later claim that a unionist coup was imminent in Ulster, although no evidence to support this claim survives.¹⁶

⁹ D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000* (London 2004) 122.

¹⁰ O. McGee, *The IRB: The Irish Republican Brotherhood from The Land League to Sinn Féin* (Dublin 2005) 353-354.

¹¹ A. Ó Snodaigh, 'The Irish Volunteers Founded', *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 26 November 1998.

¹² D. Fitzpatrick, 'The Logic of Collective Sacrifice: Ireland and the British Army', *Historical Journal* 8.4 (1995) 1017-1030: 1028-1029.

¹³ *Correspondence Relating to Recent Events in the Irish Command*, Cd. 7329 Part I, No.2. (London 1914).

¹⁴ 'Crisis in the Army', *The Times*, 23 March 1914.

¹⁵ 'The Plot that Failed', *The Times*, 27 April 1914.

¹⁶ R. Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French* (London 2004) 176-178.

On 18 March 1914, Paget attended a Cabinet committee meeting in London chaired by the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, at which it was decided to move additional troops into Ulster.¹⁷ The meeting resumed the next day without the Prime Minister and reassured that he would have whatever military support he required, Paget returned to Dublin to brief his senior officers. Before leaving however, Paget had been instructed by Sealy that officers who refused to follow orders to act in support of the civil powers, should not be allowed to resign but were to be dismissed from the service, although if officers with homes in Ulster requested not to take part in such an operation, they might be allowed to absent themselves from duty.¹⁸

Churchill meanwhile gave orders for two light cruisers to embark a company of infantry from Kingstown and proceed to Belfast Lough, where they were to reinforce the troops guarding the ammunition and stores in Carrickfergus Castle, and to assist in its defence by use of naval guns if the necessity arose.¹⁹ The Third Battle Squadron was also ordered to proceed to Lamlash on the west coast of Scotland where it was to be joined by eight destroyers from the Home Fleet.²⁰ As A.T.Q. Stewart observed in *The Ulster Crisis* ‘these preparations suggested an operation far more ambitious than the mere safe-guarding of depots against the UVF or other “evil-disposed persons”’.²¹

On 20 March, Paget met with his senior officers to outline the outcome of his meeting in London. Believing that they were being asked to suppress opposition to Home Rule in Ulster Brigadier-General Hubert Gough and 60 officers of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade indicated that they preferred to accept dismissal if ordered north.²² Although this incident has come to be known as the ‘Curragh mutiny’ technically no mutiny took place as no orders had actually been given. Summoned to the War Office, Gough later confirmed that if a direct order had been given to move against Ulster he would have obeyed. Informing the King that Paget had exceeded his

¹⁷ Sir J. Fergusson, *The Curragh Incident* (London 1964) 46-47.

¹⁸ Seely to Asquith, 19 March 1914, quoted in: I. Beckett, *The Army and the Curragh Incident* (London 1986) 62.

¹⁹ *Correspondence Relating to Recent Events in the Irish Command*, Cd. 7329 Part II, No.2. (London 1914).

²⁰ *Correspondence Relating to Recent Events in the Irish Command*, Cd. 7329 Part II No.1 and No.5. (London 1914).

²¹ Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, 148.

²² Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal*, 386.

orders Asquith's government backed down, claiming that the events at the Curragh had arisen from 'an honest misunderstanding'.²³ Gough however, requested a written 'assurance that we shall not be asked again to enforce on Ulster the present Home Rule Bill'.²⁴ Realising that the written assurance he had obtained from Asquith fell short of Gough's requirements, Seely added two paragraphs which stated that while the Government had the right to use 'the forces of the Crown in Ireland or elsewhere to maintain law and order (...) they had no intention whatsoever of taking advantage of this right to crush political opposition to the policy or principles of the Home Rule Bill'.²⁵ Gough, however, seeking further clarification wrote 'I understand the reading of the last paragraph to be that troops under our command will not be called upon to enforce the present Home Rule Bill on Ulster, and that we can so assure our officers' – to which Sir John French, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, appended the words 'This is how I read it'.²⁶ The government, however, repudiated the guarantee given to Gough stating that those involved had no right to amend the original document, and as a result, Seely, French and the Adjutant-General Sir John Ewart were forced to resign.²⁷ Nevertheless, on 27 March, a Special Army Order was issued by the Army Council stating that 'No officer or soldier shall in future be questioned by his superior officer as to the attitude he will adopt, or as to his action, in the event of his being required to obey orders dependent upon future or hypothetical contingencies'.²⁸

Throughout 1913 the UVF had made numerous attempts to smuggle weapons and ammunition into Ulster with varying degrees of success.²⁹ Such uncoordinated operations, however, were unlikely to meet the needs of an army of over 90,000 men. On 26 February 1914, Fred Crawford, a former British artillery officer, agreed to purchase 20,000 rifles and 2,000,000 rounds of ammunition from Bruno Spiro, a German arms dealer.³⁰ To cover the landing of the arms, a test mobilisation of the UVF

²³ Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal*, 183-184.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 185.

²⁵ *Correspondence relating to Recent Events in the Irish command*, Cd. 7318 (London 1914) 4.

²⁶ The Hon. G. French ed., *The Life of Field Marshal Sir John French* (London 1931) 194.

²⁷ Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal*, 190-192.

²⁸ Hansard 5 (Commons), lxx, 785.

²⁹ For fuller coverage of this period see: Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, 88-104.

³⁰ Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, 178.

was held throughout the province on 24 April, during which control was taken of the port of Larne, where the guns were to be landed. As a decoy the *SS Balmerino* sailed into Belfast where it was met by 500 members of the Ulster Volunteers, which attracted the attention of a large force of police and Customs officers anxious to examine its cargo.

At Larne, all access to the town was cut, including telephone and telegraph links, while 500 motor vehicles assembled to distribute the expected cargo.³¹ No attempt by the police was made to interfere. At 10.30 p.m. the *SS Clydevalley*, renamed *Mountjoy* for the occasion, entered the harbour where 11,000 rifles, each with 100 rounds of ammunition were landed and transferred to the waiting vehicles. Further bundles of weapons were offloaded onto smaller ships for transportation to Belfast and Donaghadee on the southern shore of Belfast Lough. By 2.30 a.m. all the weapons and ammunition on the *Clydevalley* had been unloaded, with the exception of those intended for Bangor, where the ship was to recoil and water.

As at Larne, local UVF units had taken over the town of Bangor, situated 15 miles from Belfast but only six from a major army barracks at Holywood. The late arrival of the *Clydevalley* at Larne delayed its arrival in Bangor to 4.15 a.m., nevertheless, Colonel T.V.P. McCammon commanding the Ulster Volunteers assigned to unload the ship was able to report at 6.12 a.m. that 40 tons of munitions had been unloaded and that the refueled *Clydevalley* had sailed.³² At 7.20 a.m. the last of the motor vehicles transporting the weapons left Bangor and the operation was complete.³³ At dawn on 25 April Customs officers were finally granted access to the *Balmerino's* cargo which was found to be, as its manifest stated, coal. Except for a coastguard who died of a heart attack caused by overexertion no casualties occurred.³⁴

The nationalist response to the Larne gun running was to organise a similar shipment of arms for the Irish Volunteers. At the end of May Erskine Childers, the author of the novel *The Riddle of the Sands* and a British civil servant, accompanied by Darrell Figgis, purchased 1,500 Mauser

³¹ Spender to McNeill, note dated, PRONI, MIC 103; 'Landing the Cargo', *The Times*, 27 April 1914.

³² Col. T.V.P. McCammon 'Report on the Operations at Bangor, 24/25 April 1914', PRONI, D.1327/3/8.

³³ F.P. Crozier, *Impressions and Recollections* (London 1930) 153.

³⁴ Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis*, 211-212.

M1871 11 mm calibre single shot rifles and 49,000 rounds of ammunition from the Hamburg arms firm of Moritz Magnus der Jüngere. In order to purchase the weapons, Childers had informed the arms dealer that their final destination was Mexico and to cover their real destination arrangements were made for delivery of the consignment to be taken at sea. On 12 July 1914 a German vessel rendezvoused with Childers' yacht *Asgard* and another yacht the *Kelpie* off the mouth of the Schelt estuary, where 900 rifles and 29,000 rounds of ammunition were transferred to the *Asgard* and the remainder to the smaller 26 ton ketch, *Kelpie*.

Unlike the Ulster Volunteers, whose operation was undertaken at night and with a degree of subterfuge to mislead the authorities, the landing of the weapons from the *Asgard* was undertaken in daylight and close to the centre of British administration in Dublin Castle.³⁵ Shortly after noon on 26 July, Childers sailed the *Asgard* into Howth harbour where its cargo was unloaded by uniformed members of the Irish Volunteers and boys of Na Fianna Éireann.³⁶ The Fianna was a youth organization established to provide its members with military training and instruction in nationalist ideology.³⁷ Although Childers had, given the funds available, envisaged the gun running as a symbolic response to the UVF's much larger operation in April, the leadership of the Irish Volunteers sought to use the undertaking as a propaganda coup, hence the number of Irish Volunteers present with the intention of marching armed through Dublin.³⁸ The landing, as intended, had not gone unnoticed and the Harbour Master at Howth informed the authorities at Dublin Castle of the situation, who dispatched a contingent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police commanded by Assistant Commissioner William Harrell to disarm the Volunteers. Reinforced by a company of the King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB) Harrell attempted to negotiate the peaceful seizure of the weapons but during the negotiations the Volunteers managed to spirit the arms away. Whilst returning to their barracks, however, the troops encountered a hostile, but unarmed crowd. At Bachelor's Walk, Dublin, the Borderers were stoned by a crowd on whom

³⁵ A. Jackson, *Home Rule - An Irish History 1800-2000* (London 2004) 136.

³⁶ 'Fight with Volunteers for Rifles' *The Times*, 27 July 1914.

³⁷ M. Hay, 'Moulding the Future: Na Fianna Éireann and its Members, 1909-1923', *Studies* 400 (Winter 2011) 441-454: 442.

³⁸ L. Piper, *Dangerous Waters: The Life and Death of Erskine Childers* (London 2003) 122; Jackson, *Home Rule*, 136.

the soldiers opened fire killing three people and wounding a further 38.³⁹ The arms carried by the *Kelpie* were landed at night without incident at Kilcoole, south of Dublin, on 1 August.⁴⁰

Ireland's influence on British foreign policy

The potential impact of the situation prevailing in Ireland in 1914 should not be evaluated solely in the context of either Ireland or the United Kingdom. In 1912, the German Embassy in London reported to Berlin that the re-emergence of the Home Rule issue 'would weaken England as a world power because of the influence the Irish exercise in America'. While in November 1913 it was the opinion of the Embassy that 'so long as Ireland is in the foreground of internal policy, England's parties will be compelled to manage their foreign policy cautiously and with discretion'.⁴¹ It is apparent therefore that as early as 1912 Germany viewed the Irish situation in terms of its own possible advantage.

The destabilising effect of the Irish situation also concerned some members of the British establishment. Arthur Nicolson, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, expressed his exasperation on the Government's partisan policy on Irish Home Rule in a letter to Sir Louis Mallet, the British Ambassador to Constantinople:

I cannot find words strong enough to express my opinion of the conduct and attitude of the Government. What distresses me is the pitiable exhibition which we are presenting to foreign powers and the fact that it must before long seriously affect our position in Europe.⁴²

Some astute politicians, in both the Lords and the Commons, saw the impact of the Ulster Crisis on Europe and the encouragement it might give to Germany. Austen Chamberlain became convinced after a visit to Europe 'that British domestic difficulties were encouraging Germany in her policy of aggression'.⁴³ A view with which Lord Cromer, the former High

³⁹ 'The Dublin Inquest', *The Times*, 31 July 1914 and 1 August 1914.

⁴⁰ P.B. Ellis, *Eye-witness to Irish History* (New York 2004) 207.

⁴¹ F. Prill, *Ireland, Britain and Germany, 1871-1914* (Dublin 1975) 113.

⁴² Nicolson to Mallet, 30 March 1914, TNA, FO800/373.

⁴³ Sir C. Petrie, *The Life and Times of Sir Austen Chamberlain I* (London 1939) 342.

Commissioner to Egypt, concurred when he wrote to his friend Lord Milner, a firm supporter of the Ulster cause, informing him that 'The Germans are always on the look-out with a view to taking advantage of any dissensions which may occur in this Country.'⁴⁴

Britain's preoccupation with Ireland was also obvious to its allies. On the eve of war, Baron Beyens, the Belgian Ambassador to Germany, informed his government that as far as the Germans were concerned Britain was 'paralysed by internal dissensions and her Irish quarrels'.⁴⁵ In Paris too there was concern that the situation in Ireland was drawing the British army away from its commitment to support France in the event of a German invasion through Belgium. On 20 July 1911 Brigadier-General Henry Wilson, Director of Military Operations, had agreed with General Auguste Dubail, Chief of Staff at the French Ministry of War, that in the event of British intervention on the continent, an expeditionary force of six infantry divisions and a cavalry division would be landed in France between the fourth and twelfth day of mobilisation.⁴⁶ Although deeply involved in the 'Curragh mutiny' Wilson was still capable of seeing the greater picture and rushed to Paris to reassure the French military authorities that the British army's commitment to his agreement with Dubail was unimpaired.⁴⁷ French concerns, however, were not without some foundation for on 4 July 1914, even before the landing of rifles for the Irish volunteers at Howth, Sir Charles Douglas, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, informed the Army Council that:

If the whole of our Expeditionary Force were used in Ireland and to maintain order in Great Britain we should be quite incapable of meeting our obligations abroad, and in this connection India and Egypt must be specifically borne in mind. It seems to us at least possible that unrest in India and Egypt may follow the commencement of such operations, whilst certain countries in Europe may take this opportunity of creating trouble.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Cromer to Milner, 10 March 1914, Milner Papers, G17 (Bodleian Library, Oxford).

⁴⁵ D. Gwynn, *The Life of John Redmond* (London 1931) 349.

⁴⁶ G.P. Gooch and H.W.V. Temperley ed., *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914* VIII (London 1927) No. 640.

⁴⁷ K. Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, A Political Soldier* (Oxford 2006) 127.

⁴⁸ A memorandum by the military members of the army council on the situation in Ireland, 4 July, 1914, TNA, CAB. 37/120.

The final word on the impact of the Irish situation in terms of the events being played out in Europe during July and August 1914 can best be left to the British wartime Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, who writing of the period in retrospect claimed:

The long drawn-out and wearisome tragedy of the relations between Great Britain and Ireland played an important part in the World War. There can be little doubt that the expectation on the Continent that Britain had for the moment sunk so deep in the quagmires of the Irish bog as to be unable to extricate her feet in time to march eastward, was one of the considerations which encouraged Germany to guarantee Austria unconditional support in her Serbian adventure.⁴⁹

The coming of war: unionists and constitutional nationalism unite

As war in Europe approached both unionists and nationalist saw political advantage in supporting the government. For the unionists in particular it provided an opportunity to demonstrate that their loyalty was not just a rhetorical illusion, thus strengthening their case for exclusion of any Home Rule settlement. On 1 August, Sir Edward Carson declared that a large body of the UVF were willing to provide their services for home defence, with many others willing to join the colours to fight wherever required.⁵⁰ John Redmond was more limited in the support forthcoming from the Irish Volunteers, telling the House of Commons on 3 August that the government 'may tomorrow withdraw every one of its troops from Ireland'.⁵¹ In light of the changing mood amongst unionist and nationalist politicians, Sir Edward Grey, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was able to inform parliament that 'the one bright spot in the whole of this terrible situation is Ireland'.⁵²

⁴⁹ D.L. George, *War Memories I* (London 1938) 416.

⁵⁰ 'Sir Edward Carson's Offer of Troops', *The Times*, 1 August 1914.

⁵¹ Hansard 5 (Commons), lxxv, 1829.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 1824.

Although Ireland had been a fertile source of recruits for the British army throughout the 19th Century and the proportion of Irishmen in the army had peaked in the 1830s when 43 of serving soldiers were Irish, it had fallen back to approximately Ireland's proportion of the British population.⁵³ Nevertheless, in 1914 some 21,000 Irishmen were serving in the ranks of the British army, with a further 30,000 reservists subject to recall.⁵⁴ Unlike in other parts of the United Kingdom there was no sense of popular enthusiasm in Ireland for the declaration of war, although some more aware than others, such as Captain George Berkeley of the Irish Volunteers, recognised that war in Europe meant peace at home.⁵⁵ Even so, Ireland, both nationalists and unionist, seemed determined to give the departing regiments and reservists a good send-off; even the King's Own Scottish Borders, so recently vilified for the incident at Bachelor's Walk, were given 'rousing send-off' as they marched to the docks to embark for France.⁵⁶ The recall of reservists to the colours had an immediate effect on both the Irish and Ulster Volunteers, as both depended on former soldiers and reservists for instructors. David Fitzpatrick, Professor of Modern History at Trinity College Dublin, estimates that of the members of the two volunteer movements who would eventually enlist that some 25 per cent (7,600) of the Irish Volunteers and fifteen per cent (4,350) of the Ulster Volunteers were reservists.⁵⁷ In Omagh, in a scene that would have been unimaginable only weeks before, reservists of the Royal Inniskilling Fusilier were given a guard of honour provided by the local units of the Irish Volunteers and the UVF, accompanied by the Volunteers' band and the pipe band of a local Orange Lodge.⁵⁸

Despite a general belief that the war would be 'over by Christmas' on 7 August Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, called for 100,000 volunteers to join the colours, authorising the creation of six New Army divisions, including the formation of a division in Ireland to be designated the 10th (Irish) Division.⁵⁹ Analysis of recruitment in Great

⁵³ H.J. Hanham, 'Religion and Nationality in the mid-Victorian Army' in: M.R.D. Foot ed., *War and Society* (London 1973) 159-181: 178.

⁵⁴ D. Fitzpatrick, 'The Logic of Collective Sacrifice', 1017.

⁵⁵ G. Berkeley, 4 August 1914, National Library of Ireland (NLI). MS 10923.

⁵⁶ A Dubliner's diary, 15 August 1914, NLI, MS 9620.

⁵⁷ Fitzpatrick, 'The Logic of Collective Sacrifice', 1020.

⁵⁸ 'Reservists Depart', *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 10 August 1914.

⁵⁹ *Army Order 324 of 1914* (London, 21 August 1914).

Britain shows that, the ‘first rush’ to volunteer can be almost precisely dated to the period of 25 August to 15 September 1914.⁶⁰ The upper line in Figure 1 below shows total recruitment in the United Kingdom for the period 23 August to 31 October 1914. Ireland’s population in 1914 was approximately 9 per cent of the total United Kingdom population and the lower dotted line in Figure 1 indicates the level of recruitment that would have been anticipated from Ireland if enlistment levels similar to rest of the United Kingdom had been achieved, while the graph’s solid line shows Ireland’s actual recruitment for the period.

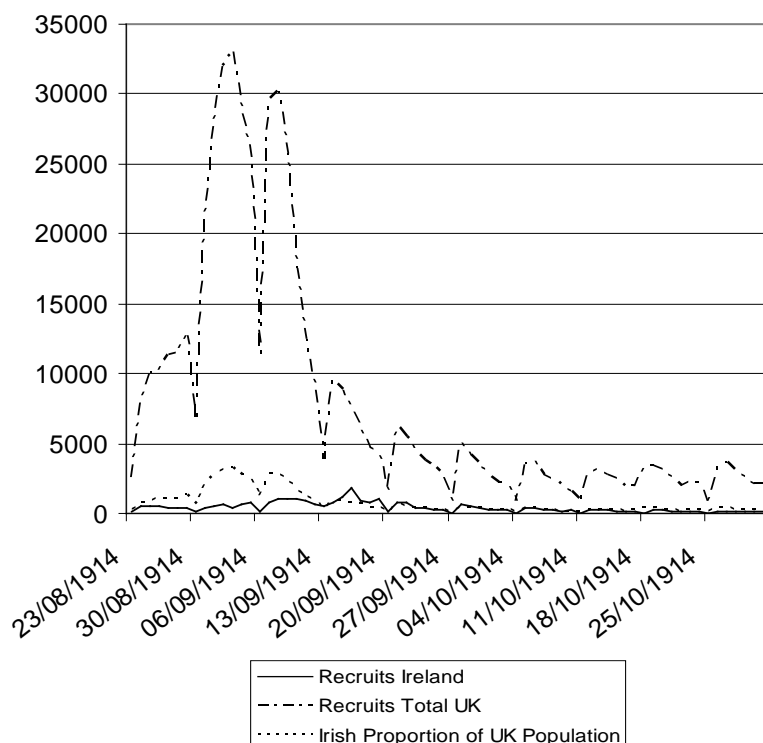


Figure 1: Daily recruitment in the United Kingdom and Ireland 23 August to 31 October 1914 (Source: TNA, NATS 1/398).

⁶⁰ I.F.W. Beckett, ‘The Nation in Arms’ in: I.F.W. Beckett and K. Simpson ed., *A Nation in Arms* (London 1985) 2-35: 7.

The graph clearly shows ‘the first rush’ to enlist in Great Britain and that no similar rush took place in Ireland, indeed only when organised recruitment by the UVF commenced in September did Ireland achieve daily levels of recruitment equivalent to that of other parts of the United Kingdom.⁶¹

During the first week of the rush to enlist over 63,000 men joined the colours throughout the United Kingdom, with recruits from large cities making a major contribution to this figure, with London producing 10,334 recruits, Birmingham 3,516, Glasgow 2,200, Cardiff 1,544 and Liverpool 1,469. By contrast, during the period only 398 men enlisted in Dublin and 1,006 in Belfast.⁶² Consequently when on 5 September the other five New Army divisions had exceeded their full complement, the 6th Royal Irish Rifles, raised in Belfast and its hinterland, was the only battalion of the 10th (Irish) Division at full strength.⁶³ As a result the decision was taken to bring the division up to strength with men surplus to the requirements of other divisions. Bryan Cooper, the division’s unofficial historian, would later claim these drafts were largely men of Irish extraction living in England, there is little evidence to support this claim.⁶⁴

The declaration of war had an almost immediate effect on the Irish economy, particularly in the industrialised north-east. On 6 August 1914 the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* reported the introduction of short time working in the linen industry amid fears regarding supplies of flax from Belgium and Russia. Even the Belfast shipyards were not exempt from the impact of war, when following the departure of skilled workmen for England to hurry the completion of warships being built there, pay offs were announced.⁶⁵ Short time working and redundancies had a positive effect on recruitment, as did the promise by many employers to continue to give half-pay to the dependents of employees who enlisted.⁶⁶ By mid-August some 400 employed in the linen mills of one town alone had enlisted and thus

⁶¹ Daily recruitment in the United Kingdom and Ireland 23 August to 31 October 1914, TNA, NATS 1/398.

⁶² Ibidem, Daily recruitment figures for cities, 23 to 29 August 1914, TNA, NATS 1/84.

⁶³ Statistical abstract on information regarding the armies at home and abroad, 365, TNA, WO 394/20.

⁶⁴ B. Cooper, *The Tenth (Irish) Division* (London 1918) 12-13.

⁶⁵ Belfast Shipyard Pay Off, *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 14 August 1914.

⁶⁶ *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 5 August 1914.

economic, rather than patriotism alone, may have been a major factor in higher levels of recruitment in the industrialised north-eastern counties in the early months of the war.⁶⁷ Such thoughts may have been behind John Redmond's letter to the Secretary State for Ireland when he drew attention to differences between the industrial north-east and the more rural counties of Ireland:

It must be remembered that the situation of a thickly populated manufacturing land and that of a thinly populated agricultural country is very different. In England or in manufacturing districts of Ulster the dislocation of commerce and industry favours recruiting. (...) In agricultural districts, on the other hand, the case is reversed. There the work in the fields should be doubled. Already before the War more men were required for tillage. Any extensive recruiting in country districts at this time would have left a rich harvest rotting.⁶⁸

While to some extent this is true, comparison of recruitment in Ireland's two largest cities shows that during the period 23 August to 31 October 1914, the daily average recruitment of 219 in Belfast was more than three times that of Dublin.⁶⁹

During the war Irish agriculture benefited not only from increased prices but also from increased tillage which rose by over 1.7 million acres during the war.⁷⁰ Even in industrial areas the dislocation of the early weeks of the war was short lived. Between July and the end of October 1914 the workforce of marine engineers and shipbuilders Harland and Wolff fell from 24,425 to 18,412 but during the course of the war the total manpower of the Belfast shipyards increased to 37,000.⁷¹ The need to produce linen for military purposes led to the number employed in the industry increasing from 76,000 in 1913 to 90,000 by the end of the war.⁷² The war also

⁶⁷ C. Cousins, *Armagh and the Great War* (Dublin 2011) 123.

⁶⁸ D. Gwynn, *The Life of John Redmond* (London 1932) 435-437.

⁶⁹ Daily recruitment figures for cities, 23 to 29 August 1914, TNA, NATS 1/84.

⁷⁰ E.E. Lysaght, 'Irish Agriculture', in *Studies* 26 (1918) 314-319.

⁷¹ M.D. Thomas, 'Manufacturing Industry in Belfast, Northern Ireland', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 46.2 (1956) 175-196: 187; H.D. Gribbon, 'Economic and Social History' in W.E. Vaughan ed., *New History of Ireland, Ireland Under the Union II*, 6 (Oxford 1996) 260-354: 343; J. Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast 1992) 456.

⁷² Bardon, *A History of Ulster*, 457.

provided employment opportunities outside Ireland. John Dillon, a nationalist MP and recruiting official, complained in 1915 that the availability of well-paid jobs in England was making it difficult to obtain recruits for the army, particularly when a government agency was offering £2 10s a week for munitions workers in a reserved occupation compared with the basic shilling a day of an infantry private.⁷³ According to his biographer, Redmond calculated that by the end of 1915 about 40,000 Irishmen were employed in munitions work in Britain and Ireland.⁷⁴

Following a speech by Sir Edward Carson's to the Ulster Unionist Council on 3 September 1914, formal approval was given for members of the UVF to enlist. As a result recruitment returns for September 1914 show that 12,275 men enlisted in Belfast during the month, with a further 1,469 men enlisting in other parts of Ulster. These figures however include all enlistments in the province not just those from the Ulster Volunteers.⁷⁵ The men of the UVF formed the basis of the 36th (Ulster) Division and during the course of the war 31,000 members of the Ulster Volunteers, about one-third of its peak strength served in the British army.⁷⁶ Not everyone, however, supported Carson's decision to encourage members of the UVF to enlist. In County Armagh members informed their regimental commander that they had 'signed the covenant to defend Ulster against a Dublin parliament and any of our commanders who asks [sic] us to leave Ulster or to fight for this notorious government now in office is betraying Ulster men and women'.⁷⁷

Efforts were also made by nationalist politicians to increase recruitment from amongst their supporters. On 20 September John Redmond, in a speech at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow, called on the Irish Volunteers to service wherever the firing line extends, in defence of right, freedom and religion in this war.⁷⁸ As Keith Jeffery has observed however, Redmond did not make this speech in support of enlistment in the British army until after the legislation giving Home Rule to Ireland

⁷³ Hansard 5 (Commons), lxi, 841-842.

⁷⁴ Gwynn, *The Life of John Redmond*, 435-437.

⁷⁵ Daily recruiting returns, 1-30 September 1914, TNA, NATS 1/394.

⁷⁶ Fitzpatrick, 'Logic of Collective Sacrifice', 1028.

⁷⁷ John Hamilton to Major Stuart Blacker quoted in: Cousins, *Armagh and the Great War*, 31.

⁷⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 21 September 1914.

received Royal Assent.⁷⁹ Redmond's speech had a mixed response. Critics were quick to allege that Home Rule was Redmond's reward for 'the promotion of recruiting for the English army in Ireland'.⁸⁰ Analysis shows however, that in the four weeks following Redmond's speech recruitment fell in the three predominately nationalist southern provinces by over 40 per cent compared with the previous four weeks.⁸¹ Redmond's speech had a greater impact on constitutional nationalism however, as the speech split the Irish Volunteers: although the majority remained committed to Redmond and Home Rule through political means, a militant minority left the organisation taking its name and some of its weapons with them. It was this group that formed the nucleus of those involved in the Easter Rising in April 1916, when armed militant republicans occupied key buildings in Dublin and proclaimed an Irish Republic. Nevertheless, those Irish Volunteers who remained loyal to Redmond contributed 32,000 men to the British army, many of whom joined the largely nationalist 16th (Irish) Division.⁸²

Even among his supporters Redmond's call to join the army was treated with suspicion. Kitchener's comments on the possible need for conscription led many to believe that Redmond's support for the war would lead to its introduction in Ireland. As a result Redmond spent much of the autumn of 1914 denying these rumours despite which, reports of young men emigrating to escape conscription persisted.⁸³ In short, what Keith Jeffery described as the belief that 'worn out politicians' were duping 'misguided Irish youths (...) into taking the "King's shilling"', only for them to be needlessly 'slaughtered in France at the altar of British imperialism' was beginning to be observed.⁸⁴ Few among Redmond's colleagues in the Irish Parliamentary Party shared his commitment to recruitment but rather adopted what James McConnel terms the "mental neutrality" which

⁷⁹ K. Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge 2000).

⁸⁰ Irish Recruiting, *Leitrim Observer*, 19 September 1914.

⁸¹ Daily recruiting returns 23 August to 31 October 1914, TNA, NATS 1/394.

⁸² Fitzpatrick, 'Logic of Collective Sacrifice', 1028.

⁸³ J. Finnan, "'Let Irishmen Come Together in the Trenches': John Redmond and Irish Party Policy in the Great War, 1914–1918", *Irish Sword* XXII (2000) 174-192: 185; Nationalist Loyalty and Patriotism?, *Belfast Newsletter*, 22 October 1914.

⁸⁴ K. Jeffery, Foreword to T. Denman, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War, 1914–1918* (Dublin 1992) 7.

characterized much of nationalist Ireland during the early part of the war'.⁸⁵ According to McConnell this mental neutrality is evidenced in that while 'in many parts of nationalist Ireland was sympathetic to Belgium (...) nationalist sympathy for Belgium did not automatically translate into active support for Britain'.⁸⁶

Both unionist and nationalist leaders appealed to the patriotism of their constituents, however, both Jeffery and Fitzpatrick have shown that motives for enlisting are much more wide-ranging than just patriotism.⁸⁷ Analysis shows that regardless of religion or politics Ulster, with 31 per cent of available manpower, provided 51 per cent of all enlistments in Ireland between the outbreak of war and October 1916, while Munster, with 22.5 per cent of available manpower, only provided 16.2 per cent of Irish enlistments.⁸⁸ Similarly, although Protestants represented only 25 per cent of the population in 1914, they provided 45 per cent of all enlistments in Ireland during the war.⁸⁹

Conclusion

While the declaration of war may have saved Ireland from civil war in 1914, it left a nation no less divided. Despite the continuing threat of a Home Rule parliament, Ulster unionists concluded that 'however we are treated, and however others might act, let us act rightly. We do not seek to purchase terms by selling our patriotism'.⁹⁰ The Government of Ireland Act 1914 providing home rule for Ireland was passed by the United Kingdom parliament on 18 September 1914 but due to the war its implementation was formally postponed for the duration of the war.⁹¹ As the war depleted

⁸⁵ J. McConnell, 'Recruiting Sergeants for John Bull? Irish Nationalist MPs and Enlistment During the Early Months of the Great War', *War and History* 14 (2007) 408-429: 408.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 422.

⁸⁷ Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War*, 10; Fitzpatrick, 'Logic of Collective Sacrifice' 1017-1030.

⁸⁸ P. Karsten, 'Irish Soldiers in the British Army, 1792-1922: Suborned or Subordinate?', *Journal of Social History* 17 (Autumn, 1983) 31-64: 34.

⁸⁹ P. Callan, 'Recruiting for the British Army in Ireland During the First World War', *Irish Sword* LXVI (1987-1988) 54.

⁹⁰ Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson*, III (London 1936) 33.

⁹¹ Jackson, *Home Rule*, 161-164.

the ranks of the UVF more than its nationalist counterparts, it lessened the possibility of a clash between the opposing paramilitary groups.⁹² Even after the Easter Rising there was initially little support for the rebels. However, the execution of 14 of the rebel leaders by the British army changed public opinion thus increasing the support for more militant nationalist activists.⁹³ In the 1918 post-war general election Sinn Féin won 73 of the 105 Irish seats pledging not to take their seats in the Westminster parliament. On 21 January 1919 Sinn Féin members met in Dublin to establish an Irish parliament. On the same day a number of members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) attacked and shot two members of the Royal Irish Constabulary thus triggering the start of the Irish War of Independence.⁹⁴

⁹² L.R. Curtis Jr., 'Ireland in 1914' in: W.E. Vaughan ed., *New History of Ireland, Ireland Under the Union II*, 6 (Oxford 1996) 143-188: 184.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 218-219.

⁹⁴ F.S.L. Lyons, 'The War of Independence' in: W.E. Vaughan ed., *New History of Ireland, Ireland Under the Union II*, 6 (Oxford 1996) 240-259: 244.