

Assembling armies and acquiring arms

>>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

Assembling young men and women willing to become members of these paramilitary organisations was one thing, the acquisition of arms was quite another. After spectacular large scale arms importations by the UVF and Irish Volunteers prior to the declaration of war, a steady stream of rifles continued to be acquired by nationalists through various methods after the First World War broke out.

In an apparent irony, while it had been illegal to import arms to Ireland at the time of the Larne and Howth gun runnings, the ban on arms importation had actually been lifted upon the outbreak of the war.

One practice that became prevalent during 1915 and into 1916 was that rifles were acquired from British Army Ordnance stores in Ireland.

Soldiers sympathetic to republicanism or just eager to make money by selling arms to persons willing to pay a premium would smuggle rifles out of army stores and remove the brass cap containing its serial number, replacing these with wooden inserts. The government became aware of this practice as late as March 1916, by which point one informant reported that 60 rifles had been acquired in this fashion.

POLICE and intelligence reports from this period indicate official awareness of large Irish Volunteer arms dumps around the city of Dublin. Ten full boxes of ammunition were being stored in Father Matthew Park in Fairview, north Dublin. Similarly, authorities were aware of an arms cache on Connaught Road, near the back of Dalymount Park. This was in the home of Michael O'Hanrahan, second in command to Thomas MacDonagh in the 2nd Dublin Battalion of the Irish Volunteers.

Similarly, in the suburb of Donnybrook, Éamon de Valera, then commandant of the 3rd Battalion, had an arms stash in his house on Morehampton Terrace, and Batt O'Connor, an IRB member who was sent to Kerry during Easter week, stored a vast quantity of arms and especially ammunition at the house he had built for himself on Brendan Road, Donnybrook.

After her husband's death, Batt O'Connor's widow recalled how their house, as well as a builders' yard adjacent to it, were stuffed with munitions; they even kept boxes of cartridges in the hollow kerbs on their fireplaces. A military raid on the premises after the Rising failed to uncover the remnants of the cache.

Mrs O'Connor recalled how, showing them around the adjacent yard, she brought the soldiers 'actually over the places where the stuff was stored but they got nothing.'

Despite official knowledge of these arms dumps and with both Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army carrying out mock attacks and armed parades in Dublin prior to the Rising, there was still an outright reluctance to suppress these movements. Warnings had been received from low-level informants and from America where John Devoy was speaking rather openly about plans for an insurrection in the hope of obtaining funds from sympathetic Germans.

Dismissed as improbable, the Rising that broke out on 24 April 1916 still shocked those in power.

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A Protestant Truth Society's women's meeting protest against Home Rule for Ireland in March 1914 GETTY IMAGES

Home Rule joust laid foundations for insurrection

Paul Rouse on the Irish political landscape of the time

A BILL to give Home Rule to Ireland was put before the House of Commons in London in April 1912 by the British Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party, Herbert Asquith.

The introduction of the Bill was driven by the fact that Asquith's government depended for its majority on the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party, led by John Redmond.

The price of Redmond's support was Home Rule for Ireland.

Ireland had not had its own parliament since the Act of Union, 1801 which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

The persistence of opposition to this Act of Union and the enduring rejection of British rule in nationalist Ireland forced the British Empire — even as its global power was at its greatest — to seek compromise in its governance of Ireland.

Two previous attempts at introducing Home Rule had failed: the first one in 1886 was rejected in the House of Commons; the second one in 1892 was rejected in the House of Lords.

The context in which the 1912 Home Rule Bill was introduced was now hugely different, however, and its successful implementation seemed assured.

Parliamentary reform meant that the



A cartoon from Punch magazine in October 1913 depicting John Redmond having trouble with Ulster, which opposed Home Rule. GETTY IMAGES

House of Lords could delay a Bill for three years — but it could not stop it indefinitely.

On its introduction in April 1912 it was sure to get a majority in the House of Commons and, although it would be defeated in the House of Lords, the Bill could be introduced again after the passage of a year.

This duly happened and in April 1913 the

Bill was again supported by the House of Commons — and again defeated by the House of Lords.

The passage of a further year brought the process to a head. In April 1914, Home Rule was passed by the House of Commons.

The moment marked the triumph of John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party, and was celebrated across nationalist Ireland.

Everywhere that Redmond went, he was feted as a hero. Huge crowds turned out to hear him speak and he was celebrated as the politician who had secured for Ireland its own parliament, even if the powers of that parliament were limited.

While Irish nationalists acclaimed the prospect of having a parliament in Dublin to legislate for the island, unionists were adamant in their rejection of the proposal.

Although led by the Dubliner and Trinity College graduate, Sir Edward Carson, unionist opposition to Home Rule in Ireland centred on Ulster. Massive public rallies of opposition to Home Rule, the signing of the Ulster Covenant in September 1912 by almost 500,000 people and the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force in January 1913 underlined determined opposition to the introduction of Home Rule.

UCD's Dr Paul Rouse
photographed on
the Belfield campus
EL KEEGAN



The pledge by unionists in Ulster to reject any measure of Home Rule for the north of the island received powerful support in Britain from the Conservative Party leader, Andrew Bonar Law.

Against this opposition, nationalist opinion was equally determined that Home Rule would be introduced as planned and that it would apply to all of Ireland.

Irish nationalists held repeated public meetings to demonstrate in favour of Home Rule.

In November 1913 they established a militia of their own to rival the Ulster Volunteer Force. This new Irish Volunteer Force quickly assumed a prominence that confirmed the militarisation of political life in Ireland.

By the summer of 1914, there was a bitter, precarious stalemate as the plan to give Home Rule to Ireland dominated political life in Ireland and Britain.

Plans to exclude certain north-eastern counties from Home Rule were proposed as compromise and were rejected.

Amid unprecedented scenes, there had even been a mutiny of British army officers based at The Curragh, Co Kildare.

Almost 60 British Officers threatened to resign their commissions in 1914 as a result of a decision by the War Office to send extra troops to Ulster.

The sensational development was said to have occurred after officers were presented with the choice of pacifying Ulster, or tendering their resignations.

Led by Brigadier-General Hugh de la Poer Gough, the officers in the Curragh camp declined to obey the orders.

Attempts to downplay the significance of the mutiny were unconvincing; it was clear that a military crisis had been laid on top of a political crisis.

Ulster unionists remained implacably opposed to Home Rule and were threatening armed resistance. Irish nationalists were equally determined that it be introduced across Ireland immediately.

Faced with mounting pressure from all sides, the British government – not entirely sure of its army in Ireland and understandably loath to use it to implement Home Rule in any instance – was paralysed.

It says much for the scale of the dilemma that the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 offered relief from the question of Ireland. Irish politics were at once transformed by events in Europe.

Ulster unionists rallied immediately in support of the war and enlisted in their tens of thousands in the British Army. Their leader, Sir Edward Carson, metamorphosed 'from being a patron of illegality in Ulster to a law officer at Westminster' when he was appointed Attorney General in a national coalition government in London.

Carson urged the Ulster Volunteers to enlist in the British Army and many heeded his call.

John Redmond, too, was offered a place at the cabinet table but, in the tradition of the Irish Parliamentary Party, he refused.

On 20 September 1914, however, Redmond had endorsed the British war effort and called on the 170,000 strong Irish Volunteers to enlist in the army – many of those Volunteers answered that call.

It was a significant political gamble – one which ultimately failed – but that it should have been made at all emphasised the radical transformation wrought by the outbreak of war.

And, of course, this radicalisation was ultimately revealed in rebellion in Dublin in 1916 by a tiny minority of Irish rebels who declined to follow Redmond, but pursued instead a route which saw them take up arms.

They chose not to wait for world war to end – but instead made their own.

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