



Assembling armies

The years leading up to the Rising saw plenty of activity as the Irish nationalists began to make long-term plans, writes **Dr Conor Mulvagh**

LOOKING back on the Easter Rising, many in Irish administration and British politics asked why the clear warning signs had not been taken more seriously. In hindsight, the evidence was there to suppress nationalist and socialist paramilitary organisations who paraded and trained unmolested across Ireland but, on the advice of Irish MPs fearing a backlash if the government was seen to act harshly against these groups, tolerance rather than a clampdown was the policy pursued.

Who were these private armies that carried on drilling and arming before and during the First World War, provoking the ire of the authorities? It had begun in the

north, where the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was established in January 1913. The establishment of the UVF actually represented the formalisation of a situation which had been ongoing in Ulster for some time whereby unionists had been drilling and arming in localised and uncoordinated initiatives.

The UVF brought a central command structure to this. Within 11 months, the precedent made by the UVF was deemed worthy of emulation by nationalists. Again, prior local initiatives preceded the foundation of a nationwide organisation for the defence of Home Rule: the Irish Volunteers, founded in November 1913.

Interestingly, although it was perhaps more rhetorical than sincere, the Irish Volunteers maintained that it did not stand in opposition to the UVF or to unionist

Ulster in general. Stressing its non-denominational ethos and how it was open to all Irishmen, the Irish Volunteers openly welcomed cooperation with the UVF, ignoring the fact that the Ulster Volunteers was pledged to resistance to Home Rule, whereas the Irish Volunteers had been constituted with the defence of that same principle as its primary objective.

By the summer of 1914, both the Irish and Ulster Volunteers had swollen their ranks. The Irish Volunteers' numbers peaked at approximately 180,000 and the UVF had between 80,000 and 110,000 members at its height. Both were genuinely mass movements and, with major arms shipments coming in for the unionists in April 1914 and for the nationalists in July of that year, both clearly possessed funds and organisational abilities that made them forces to be reckoned with.

On the outbreak of the First World War, John Redmond, chairman of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster, pledged the Irish Volunteers to the defence of Ireland during wartime. When, on 20 September 1914 he urged Volunteers to fight abroad as the surest means of securing Home Rule for Ireland, he precipitated a split in the movement. Roughly 153,000 sided with Redmond becoming 'National Volunteers'. However, this organisation lapsed into inactivity by the middle of 1915.

Ultimately, only 25,000 National Volunteers had enlisted for service with the British Army by the spring of 1917. Meanwhile, Eoin MacNeill, the founder of the Irish Volunteers, retained the name and 12,500 (seven percent) of the membership of the original volunteer force.

The other thing which MacNeill's Volunteers retained was a concealed cohort of Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) activists. This secret movement had been reinvigorated after 1905 when two northern republicans, Bulmer Hobson and Denis McCullough, took over and revamped the movement.

The IRB had seized the opportunity presented by the vogue for volunteering to infiltrate the Irish Volunteers from its inception. The infiltration went to the very highest echelons of the force. When the provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers was formed in November 1913, 12 of its 25 members were also members of the Brotherhood. Subsequently, other provisional committee members, most notably Patrick Pearse, Joseph Plunkett, and Thomas MacDonagh were sworn into the IRB; their potential having been recognised through their work in the Volunteers.

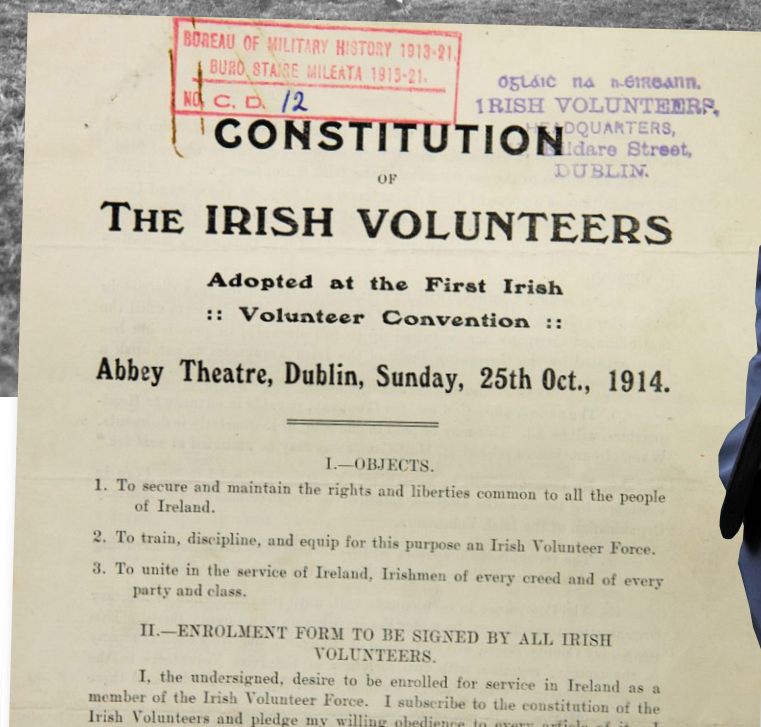
Though by no means as large as the aforementioned Irish, Ulster, and National Volunteers, two other forces — the Irish Citizen Army and the Hibernian Rifles —

UCD's
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Clockwise from left: A mounted National Volunteer saluting the flag during a drill at Keash, County Sligo in 1914; members of the Ulster Volunteers practise their rifle shooting in a remote location in Northern Ireland in 1914; the Constitution of The Irish Volunteers published in October 1914.

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and acquiring arms

were also founded prior to the First World War and joined with the Irish Volunteers in forming the combat troops of the Easter Rebellion in 1916.

The Irish Citizen Army had been founded in 1913 to protect the citizens of Dublin from the Dublin Metropolitan Police following notable clashes such as Bloody Sunday on 31 August 1913 in which a DMP baton charge resulted in the deaths of two citizens. Approximately 500 were injured in that incident alone. The Irish Citizen Army numbered no more than 350 members in 1916 but, an impressive 250 of these turned out to fight during Easter 1916.

The Hibernian Rifles was smaller again. So small, in fact, that it has been almost forgotten in the history of the Rising. While the Irish Citizen Army wore its own uniform, distinctive to that of the much larger Irish Volunteers, by 1916, the Hibernian Rifles wore a uniform identical to that of the Volunteers but with 'blue facings on the cuffs and collars and slacks'. Numbering around 50, the Hibernian Rifles was established by a faction of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) known as the Irish American Alliance. Whereas the better known and more populous AOH 'Bord of Éireann' was a key part of the Home Rule electoral and constituency machine, the AOH IAA had, as its name suggests, links to radical Irish America. Around 20 of the

Hibernian Rifles fought during Easter week. The unit suffered combat casualties, most notably when it was dispatched to engage in heavy fighting at the Exchange Hotel on Parliament Street.

Two further organisations were Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Éireann. Cumann na mBan was the women's auxiliary to the Irish Volunteers and Na Fianna Éireann a rebel boy-scouts organisation which long predated the rush to arming and drilling but who nonetheless militarised as the vogue for volunteering swept Ireland in 1913. Both units served prominently during the insurrection.

THE question of gender is an important one. Although entirely gender equal on paper, the Irish Citizen Army has come in for fresh scrutiny in recent years as files in the Bureau of Military History reveal that traditional gender roles perpetuated in the army. Only two female members, Constance Markievicz and Margaret Skinnider, played full combatant roles during the Rising with others confined to cook or messenger duties.

In a climate where all sorts of activities from eating seed potatoes to lighting bonfires were outlawed, the relative lack of suppression, surveillance, and infiltration of these private armies can often appear remarkable to modern observers

By contrast, Cumann na mBan, which was officially an 'auxiliary' organisation to the all-male Irish Volunteers, was an autonomous organisation with its own leadership and command structures.

All five of these bodies: the Irish Volunteers, the Citizen Army, Cumann na mBan, Fianna Éireann, and the Hibernian Rifles fought as part of the rebel army of the provisional government of the Irish Republic declared on Easter Monday 1916.

While historians often dwell on the importance of nomenclature nowadays, Dublin Castle was happy to dub any organisation unsympathetic to the official Home Rule party and to the British war effort as 'Sinn Féiners' and referred to Irish Volunteers as 'Sinn Féin Volunteers'. Strictly speaking, 'Sinn Féin' denoted membership of Arthur Griffith's dual-monarchist party which advocated parliamentary abstention in this period. However, the term features regularly in police reports and Under Secretary's dossiers during the war years with reference to advanced nationalism

and republicanism more generally.

Returning to the British government's attitudes to these organisations, Sir Mathew Nathan had been appointed Under Secretary at Dublin Castle in September 1914, after the First World War had broken out. From then until his resignation in the wake of the Easter rebellion, he was the top civil servant on the ground in Ireland. He reported directly to his Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell, who was a member of Cabinet in London.

Nathan and Birrell were the focus of blame when the Royal Commission of Investigation into the Irish Rebellion reported on 10 May 1916. Although others such as the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Wimborne, and the heads of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Dublin Metropolitan Police, weathered the storm, both Birrell and Nathan resigned thereafter. Inactivity rather than ineptitude was the criticism levelled at them.

Why were large musters of armed citizens allowed to parade and drill in public even after the First World War had broken out? In a climate where all sorts of activities from eating seed potatoes to lighting bonfires were outlawed, the relative lack of suppression, surveillance, and infiltration of these private armies can often appear remarkable to modern observers.

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Assembling armies and acquiring arms

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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.