

The breakdown that ignited the ‘war of brothers’

Ciara Stewart

Tensions between pro- and anti-treaty factions reached boiling point in 1922, when the battle at the Four Courts marked the beginning of the Civil War



One of the most famous quotes to emerge from the Anglo-Irish Treaty Dáil debates came from Michael Collins on December 19, 1921, when he claimed that the treaty “gives us freedom, not the ultimate freedom that all nations desire and develop to, but the freedom to achieve it”. For many Republicans, the limited terms of the treaty were viewed as a betrayal of those who had fought and lost their lives for independence. Yet for others, like Collins, it was accepted as a stepping stone in the path for unified and fully independent Irish republic. What transpired from this division was months of tension, violence and distrust, culminating in the battle at the Four Courts in June 1922 and the beginning of the Civil War.

In January 1922, the treaty was passed in the Dáil and a Provisional Government was set up to oversee the establishment of the Irish Free State. Anger and uncertainty ensued immediately with the resignation of Éamon de Valera as President of the Republic. In the months following this, it became increasingly difficult to maintain stability, with many nationalist institutions splitting on the treaty question.

The first to fracture was Cumann na mBan, the women’s auxiliary group to the IRA. These women played a vital role in the War of Independence and many felt abhorrence towards the treaty. In February 1922, a special convention was held to vote on its terms. Aine Ni Rian, a member of the organisation, noted that “feeling ran very high” and that the meeting was “practically entirely against the treaty”. Some senior members did support it, including Josephine Ryan, Jennie Wyse Power and her daughter Nancy. Ni Rian remarked: “There was awful bitterness; I remember them when they were going out passing bitter remarks.”

The pro-treaty women formed their own group, Cumann na Saoirse, in March. The anti-treaty side became involved in protests and militancy. Brigid O’Mullane, a member of the executive, recalled when she and a

dozen other members protested at a meeting of the new Provisional Government in College Green. This meeting had “prominent” pro-treaty members present and O’Mullane detailed how they “rushed the platform” to remove the republican flag, much to “the consternation of the people on the platform”.

The women’s involvement in anti-treaty activity was met with scorn from some pro-treaty politicians and press, with the *Dundee Evening Herald* referring to them as “hussies” and “daredevils”.

SPLINTERED BROTHERHOOD

The Irish Republican Brotherhood, which had considerable influence over the IRA, was also splintering. Given that Collins was president of the Supreme Council, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority voted to support the treaty. This, however, did not include rank-and-file members such as Liam Lynch, Harry Boland and Austin Stack. Some

of those on the anti-treaty side believed that the IRB and Collins had used their influence to enable the treaty to pass in the Dáil. Ultimately, the organisation was divided on the treaty question and from February 1922 onwards, the IRB no longer functioned on a national level as divisions tore through the organisation.

The GHQ staff of the IRA, composed mostly of IRB members, also largely supported the treaty, aside from Cathal Brugha, Liam Mellows, Rory O’Connor and Seán Russell. Florence O’Donoghue, who joined the anti-treaty side from March to June, noted that “national unity was broken at the top” and nothing could “prevent the split from spreading downwards”.

Breakdown within the IRA was imminent and Collins had already begun to build a new National Army composed of pro-treaty IRA members. Meanwhile, as early as January 11, 1922, senior IRA officers such as Oscar Traynor and Liam Lynch requested that a convention

be held to discuss the treaty. They proposed that the IRA remain loyal only to the Irish Republic and repudiated the terms of the treaty and the authority of the Dáil in passing them. The pro-treaty officers insisted that the IRA must obey whatever the Dáil decided.

When the IRA convention was held on March 26, 1922, the anti-treaty side decided they would no longer be answerable to the Dáil but instead to the Army Executive, which was elected at the convention. They formally rejected the treaty and the IRA was divided.

Regarding this split, Seamus Babington of the IRA Tipperary Brigade believed the long debates on the treaty had not helped as they gradually developed into “bitterness” and the “hatred let loose spread all over the country”.

There was confusion among IRA branches on a national level and morale was increasingly shrinking as disunity spread and members questioned who their military training would now be used against. Before this, there was

unity in fighting a common enemy. Now it was unclear who the enemy was.

By May 13, 1922, the *Ballymena Telegraph* reported that a “sombre shadow of civil war is hovering heavily” over Ireland. That same month, pro- and anti-treaty officers met at the Mansion House in an attempt to avoid the looming threat of civil war, or as Seán Pendergast of the Dublin Brigade coined it, the “War of Brothers”.

This resulted in Collins and de Valera agreeing to a pact in which Sinn Féin would run both pro- and anti-treaty candidates in the June general election, with the aim of forming a coalition government afterwards. This would prevent the electorate from expressing their official stance on the treaty.

In further attempts of reconciliation, Collins also proposed a new constitution that would be more agreeable to the anti-treaty side because it would not include an oath of allegiance. This and the pact, however, were

strongly rejected by British politicians and on the day of the election — June 16, 1922 — the new constitution included the oath. The pact between de Valera and Collins also broke down, resulting in hostilities between the pro- and anti-treaty sides.

FOUR COURTS OCCUPATION

What truly signalled the commencement of the Civil War was the battle at the Four Courts that same month. Earlier in April 1922, the anti-treaty IRA executive — which included Rory O’Connor, Joe McKelvey and Liam Mellows — had decided to garrison their men in Dublin. They chose to occupy the Four Courts as their headquarters, which they viewed as “quite suitable”. Not only did this serve a useful purpose, given its large size, but also a symbolic purpose because it was the centre of the Irish legal system and would be integral to the running of the new Provisional Government.



Walking wounded: One of the combatants in the battle at the Four Courts is led away by Free State troops. As well as marking the beginning of the Civil War, the battle caused significant damage to the historic building, left, and its important archives

Éamon de Valera responds to ‘villainous’ editorials

Irish Independent

From the *Irish Independent*, March 23, 1922

To the editor,
Your editorials of March 18 and 20 have been brought to my notice. These editorials, in which you picture me as “encouraging” and “preaching civil war” and indulging in “violent threats” and “in the language of incitement”, I can only characterise as villainous.
Nothing it seems to me, but deliberate and, in the tense circumstances of this moment, criminal malice could so distort the plain argument of my speeches, perfectly clear to all who listened to me and no less clear to all who read even the summarised reports in your news columns with the desire of knowing exactly what I said instead of the desire to distort it. You cannot be unaware that your representing me as inciting to civil war has on your readers precisely the same effect as if the inciting words were really mine.

TWO BARRIERS

My argument was an answer to those who said that the London Agreement [Anglo-Irish Treaty] gave us “freedom to achieve freedom”. I showed that instead of opening the way, it erected in the nation’s path two almost impassable barriers: (1) the nation’s own pledged word, and (2) a native government bound to act in accordance with and to secure, even by force, respect for that pledged word.
The constitutional way was barred and the way of force barred; the latter by the horror of civil war. The Irish Volunteers of the future, if they persevered in the cause of independence, would have to fight not an alien English government merely, but a native Irish government, not English troops, but Irish troops — the forces of their own government — their own fellow-countrymen.

This was the barrier of Irish flesh and blood which those who advocated the acceptance of the so-called Treaty would erect even whilst they shouted that they were securing “freedom to achieve freedom”.

THURLES SPEECH

In your issue of March 18, the part of my speech at Thurles dealing with this question you report as follows: “If they accepted the Treaty and if the Volunteers of the future tried to complete the work the Volunteers of the last four years had been attempting, they would have to complete it not over the bodies of foreign soldiers, but over the dead bodies of their own countrymen.”

“They would have to wade through Irish blood, through the blood of the soldiers of the Irish Government, and through perhaps, the blood of some of the members of the Government in order to get Irish freedom”.

This a child might understand, but you depart from its plain meaning in order to give the infamous lead in misrepresentation which today enables you as a further step to feature such libels of Pádraic Ó Máille TD at Tuam, where he said: “Mr de Valera’s proposal in Waterford and Tipperary was that Irishmen shoot one another down.”

ÉAMON DE VALERA
23 Suffolk St, Dublin, March 22

Editor’s response: We think we made no attempt whatever to distort the plain meaning of Mr de Valera’s speeches, and, taken with certain concurrent circumstances, we believe it is the construction which would be placed on them by thousands of others. We dealt with his language as reported in at least three speeches and we maintain that, taking the particular passages either separately or in conjunction with the entire speeches and the surrounding circumstances, they justified our criticism... We hope that we do not now misrepresent Mr de Valera in assuming that his commentary means disapproval of “preaching civil war” and indulging in “violent threats”. We hope that in view of the above letter Mr de Valera will use his best efforts to discountenance any attempt at civil war in the future.

stored, causing them to detonate. This resulted in horrific destruction to the building and a devastating loss of historical records, the consequence of which is still felt by historians and researchers to this day.

Though violence had already taken place between the two sides before this, the battle at the Four Courts signified the start of an all-out and destructive civil war. Many of those involved, such as Thomas Luckie, lieutenant of the Armagh IRA, would later recall that the outbreak of the Civil War “was a tragedy for Ireland as a whole”.

The conflict resulted in the loss of more than 1,000 lives and would remain a delicate part of Ireland’s history for many years.

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