

Blood on the streets



When friends became foes: Free State soldiers fighting against republican forces at O'Connell Bridge in Dublin during the Civil War
PHOTO: GETTY

Why was there a civil war in Ireland? Why did those who had been comrades in pursuit of Irish independence

over the previous four years begin killing each other over the Anglo-Irish Treaty?

The short answer is their irreconcilable differences over the treaty. But that does not tell the whole story.

The oath of fidelity to the British monarch, the Free State's membership of the British Empire, the ports retained by the Royal Navy and acceptance of the partition of Ireland were difficult compromises to sell.

Yet in the Dáil, it was just possible to pass the deal, after angry debates, on January 6, 1922 — though Éamon de Valera and his followers walked out in protest. This split would have caused acrimony but probably not civil war had it not been accompanied by a parallel split among the armed republican organisations.

A generation of young activists had killed, struggled and been to prison and watched their friends die, for the republic declared in January 1919. For them, compromise was for weak-willed previous generations, for the followers of John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party. Compromise meant defeat. Many also believed that Britain had no real wish to fight and that all that was needed to achieve total independence was a strong will.

Such attitudes were most pronounced in the fighting organisations: the IRA, Cumann na mBan and the Fianna, all of which had a majority against the treaty. From February to March 1922, these groups voted one after the other to reject it, in defiance of the Dáil and also of IRA General Headquarters.

At the IRA Convention on March 26, 1922, in Dublin's Mansion House, delegates voted not only to reject the treaty but to assert that, since the Dáil had broken its oath to the Irish Republic, the Republican Army would no longer answer to it, but to its own elected executive.

Contrary to what Michael Collins, head of the Provisional Government and IRA director of intelligence, had hoped, it proved impossible to persuade the majority of militants the treaty was merely a tactical device, a 'stepping stone' to full independence.

John Dorney

Political divisions over the treaty ultimately led to the Civil War, but there were other factors at play

By the spring of 1922 there were two rival Irish armies in the nascent Free State: the pro-treaty National Army and the anti-treaty IRA, known to its supporters as 'executive forces' and to its detractors as 'irregulars' or 'mutineers'.

This contributed to a rapidly deteriorating situation. As the pro-treaty general Richard Mulcahy would later put it: "To put matters bluntly, every criminally disposed person had a gun, either from the Government or from Mr de Valera."

DANGEROUS STAND-OFF

The first clashes between the two factions occurred in March and April 1922, over which side would occupy barracks vacated by the departing British Army and the disbanded Royal Irish Constabulary. A dangerous stand-off occurred in Limerick city in March between several hundred armed men on either side. It was defused only when they agreed to divide up the city's barracks between them. On April 14, the anti-treatyites seized the Four Courts in central Dublin as a base for their forces and the IRA executive.

There was a serious gun battle in Mullingar, Co Westmeath, in late April in which four men were killed; an ambush killing four pro-treaty soldiers in Donegal; and two days of fighting in Kilkenny city when anti-treatyites seized the castle in early May. There were also a host of other shootings and hundreds of post office and bank robberies.

It appeared, then, that civil war was already at hand between the rival factions. Yet compromise was still possible.



collapsing the treaty. The more moderate faction, headed by Liam Lynch, hoped for reconciliation with Michael Collins on the basis of a republican constitution.

In May 1922, there was short-term compromise rather than descent into war. De Valera was talked into re-entering the Dáil. Liam Lynch entered into talks with Collins for "army reunification" and agreed to co-operate in guerrilla operations in Northern Ireland.

Collins quickly found that overt participation of pro-treaty forces in the North could not be concealed from the British and abruptly cancelled their participation in a proposed "joint offensive" in late May.

The British insistence that the Free State constitution — published the day before the general election of June 16 — must contain an oath of fidelity to the British monarch exploded the prospect of political unity.

In the election, pro-treaty parties won about 80pc of the popular vote. Yet even now, civil war was not inevitable. De Valera lamented the election result but stated that his followers would enter the Dáil, where he urged TDs not to ratify the proposed constitution.

In the end, it was the pressure of the British government that forced the outbreak of the Civil War. In the wake of the assassination by IRA members in London of Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson on June 22, an ultimatum was delivered by prime minister David Lloyd George to Collins and the Provisional Government: disperse the Four Courts garrison, or British troops in Dublin — a 6,000-strong garrison supported by air power and artillery — will do it.

The Provisional Government prevaricated for several days, but took an initiative in arresting Leo Henderson, an IRA officer from the Four Courts. When, in retaliation, the anti-treatyites seized pro-treaty General JJ 'Ginger' O'Connell and held him in the courts, it gave the government a more acceptable reason to resort to force than an ultimatum from the British.

So on June 28, with borrowed British artillery, pro-treaty troops opened fire on the Four Courts. The Civil War, long threatened, was now a reality.

● *John Dorney is an independent historian and chief editor and writer of the Irish Story website. He holds an MA in history from UCD and is author of The Civil War in Dublin: The Fight for the Irish Capital 1922-1924.*