

The Irish War of Independence

This was a conflict between the British state (the Royal Irish Constabulary, RIC) and the Irish Republican guerrillas (the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Republican Army, IRA). The war ran between 1919 and 1921, but violence preceded those dates and continued afterwards.

On the political front, the confrontation was between the separatist Sinn Fein party and the British administration based in Dublin Castle.

In the northern province of Ulster (now Northern Ireland) fighting occurred between the majority Protestant unionists who were pro-British and the Catholic Irish nationalist minority.

In the aftermath of the **1916** Easter Rising, Britain tried to smooth over relations with Ireland. They attempted to restart negotiations on Home Rule and released all of the prisoners from The Rising. However, in **1918**, Britain introduced conscription for World War I in Ireland and several hundred Republicans were arrested under charges of conspiring with Germany. Many more were detained under laws banning public parades. These issues helped the new Sinn Fein party decisively win the general election in Ireland in December 1918. They won 73 of the 105 seats and declared the Irish Republic. They established their own Irish Parliament, or Dail Eireann, and named de Valera the president (he had been one of the leaders of The Rising, but escaped execution because he was born in the US).

The first Dail met in **January 1919**, despite the fact that more than half of the members of Parliament were imprisoned at the time. That same day two RIC constables were shot by Irish Volunteers. These are often considered the opening shots of the war, though there had been many deaths in 1918. The War of Independence also relied on passive resistance. Prisoners went on hunger strikes and railway workers boycotted carrying British troops. In rural areas, small farmers attempted to seize parts of large ranches.

In early 1920, the violence intensified. Much of the Sinn Fein political leadership had been arrested. The two leaders of the IRA, Michael Collins and Richard Mulcahy, ordered Volunteer units to raid RIC barracks for arms. Many political figures disliked the use of



violence and the IRA's campaign was only endorsed in 1921. In 1920, Sinn Fein won many local government elections and took over government functions from the state, such as tax collection and law enforcement.

To put down this insurgency, the British Government under Lloyd George proposed autonomous governments in northern Ireland and southern Ireland. He also deployed the paramilitary police from Britain, the Black and Tans and the Auxiliary Division (made up largely of war veterans from World War

I), and passed the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act which granted special powers to the police and military. This only served to escalate the conflict. The new forces sometimes carried out reprisals on the civilian population for IRA attacks and the IRA formed new units which became much more ruthless and efficient at guerrilla warfare. In **November 1920**, IRA units in Dublin launched a massive assassination attack on British intelligence officers, killing 14. In revenge, a force of RIC Black and Tans and Auxiliaries shot 15 civilians at a football match in Dublin's Croke Park in a day known as Bloody Sunday.

Fighting continued to escalate until it was brought to an end on **July 11, 1921**, when a truce was negotiated between the British and Irish Republican forces. The IRA took advantage of the truce to regroup, recruit and train openly. Many believed that this was just a temporary end to hostilities.

The Irish Civil War

In December 1921 an Irish delegation led by Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Treaty disestablished the Irish Republic of 1919 but created the Irish Free State, comprising 26 of Ireland's 32 counties. The Irish Free State had much more independence than the Home Rule Act would have granted, similar to the British Commonwealths in Australia and Canada. Under the Treaty, the British military garrison was withdrawn and the RIC police was disbanded.

However, many Irish Republicans and nationalists viewed this as a step backwards because the Treaty

dissolved the Irish Republic declared in 1919 and the Irish members of Parliament had to swear allegiance to the British monarch. England also retained three naval bases along the coast. For the Irish Republicans, the goal had been to establish a united, independent Ireland and the Irish Free State was neither. The differences over the Anglo-Irish Treaty led to the Irish Civil War.

The Timeline

1922

January – The Treaty was narrowly passed by the Dail (Irish Parliament), but President de Valera and two of his ministers resigned in protest and disagreement over the Treaty split the ranks of the IRA.

February – Michael Collins began building a new National Army from Pro-Treaty IRA units.

March – At the IRA Army Convention, the majority rejected the right of the Dail to accept the Treaty and dissolve the Republic. The two sides almost came to blows.

April – A hardline Anti-Treaty IRA group occupied the Four Courts in Dublin in defiance of the Treaty and the Provisional Government that signed it. Michael Collins organized a pact with de Valera to reunite Sinn Fein, but it broke down over the inclusion of the British monarch in the Free State's constitution.

June – Pro-Treaty Sinn Fein, led by Michael Collins wins the first Free State general election. Under pressure from England, Collins orders Free State forces to bombard the Anti-Treaty group in the Four Courts, sparking Civil War between Pro- and Anti-Treaty groups.

August – The Free State forces had taken back control of all major towns and cities. Later in the month, Michael Collins was killed in an ambush at Beal na mBlath, Cork.

November – The Free State began executing Anti-Treaty prisoners; a total of 77 were shot before the war's end.

1923

April – Liam Lynch, the Anti-Treaty IRA's Chief of Staff was killed in action. His successor Frank Aiken called a ceasefire on April 30.

May – Aiken ordered the Anti-Treaty forces to "dump arms" and go home. There was no official surrender, but this was effectively the end of the war.

1923 to the Present

In 1936, the IRA was declared illegal in the Irish Free State, but it continued underground campaigns.

In 1949, the Ireland Act granted Ireland independence and created the Republic of Ireland in the south. For a time it seemed that even the Catholics in the north were ready to accept this arrangement.

In 1968, Northern Ireland Catholics organized a large demonstration to protest discrimination in voting rights, housing and unemployment. The police crackdown was followed by months of violence and the reemergence of the Republican movement. This time of bloody riots between Protestants and Catholics is known as "The Troubles."

In 1972, British paratroopers opened fire on a group of Catholic demonstrators and killed 14 people. Soon after, Britain disbanded the parliament and imposed direct rule in Northern Ireland for the next 26 years.

In 1974, the Sunningdale Agreement provided a power-sharing arrangement between the British and Irish governments, but the coalition government collapsed.

In 1981, Bobby Sands, an IRA member, died on a hunger strike in a Belfast prison to protest his status as a common prisoner rather than a political one. His death and the deaths of nine other IRA inmates sparked more outrage and riots.

In 1985, the Anglo-Irish Agreement granted the Irish Republic a consultative role on behalf of Catholics in some matters concerning Northern Ireland. At the end of the 1980s, the four men jailed for the 1975 Guilford pub bombings were released after it was concluded that the police had lied and fabricated confessions. By 1989 nearly 3000 people had died in the 20 years of fighting.

In 1992, the Downing Street Declaration invited Sinn Fein and Democratic Loyalist parties to join the talks on the future of Northern Ireland, provided the groups renounced violence. **In 1994** the IRA announced a complete cessation of military operations, but the talks didn't begin until **1997**, after several arguments over disarmament, the cease-fire and a wave of bombings.

In 1998, Northern Ireland's political leaders reached the historic Good Friday Agreement. It established a new form of self-rule that gave minority Catholics a greater voice and met the Protestants' demands to remain a part of Britain. The plan was overwhelmingly approved by voters. Though peace has mostly reigned since 1998, sporadic clashes still occur to this day. The small radical group that calls itself the "Real IRA" is still active, though its numbers have dwindled.