

## Setting the Scene

Ireland had been under British rule in varying degrees since 1169 when the Normans invaded, but the discontent of the Irish people came to a head in the 19th century. It began with the Irish rebellion of 1798. After that was put down, Prime Minister Pitt abolished the Irish Parliament and placed Ireland under the representation of the British Parliament at Westminster. In 1801, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was established. This angered many Irish people, who continued to rebel, notably in 1803, 1848 and 1867.

The potato famine from 1845 to 1849 increased resentment of British rule. The British government failed to respond properly. It spent only around 8 million pounds on relief efforts. Though the potato crop had failed, Ireland was still producing grain, meat and other vegetables, which continued to be exported to England. Meanwhile, a million people died from starvation and famine-related diseases and many more emigrated. All in all the population was cut in half over the following 50 years. This event increased tension between England and Ireland.

In order to appease the Irish, Prime Minister Gladstone proposed a Home Rule Bill, which would grant Ireland a level of autonomy. The bill was defeated by the British Parliament in 1886 and again in 1893. A similar bill passed in 1912, but with the outbreak of World War I, Home Rule for Ireland was shelved until the war was over. Once again, the Irish people were angered. The Irish Volunteers were urged to enlist in the British Army to serve in the war and the movement split; most of the Volunteers did serve, but some refused. As the war went on and England contemplates conscription, unrest grew in Ireland and set the conditions for The Rising.

## The Participants in The Rising

The Rising was planned by the Military Council of the **Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB)**, a secret revolutionary fraternity founded in the mid-19th century. They believed that the resolution of the Home Rule issue and the decline of Irish cultural identity had nearly extinguished true Irish nationality and would make them acquiescent subjects of the United Kingdom.

In 1914, the antiwar **Irish Volunteers** split off from Redmond's Volunteers. They were led by Eoin MacNeill, who opposed the idea of the rebellion. However, the Volunteers were essential to any large-scale insurrection so



the IRB planned The Rising without his knowledge. The Volunteers who participated in The Rising were led by Patrick Pearse.

The **Irish Citizen Army** was a small socialist paramilitary organization led by James Connolly. The women's organization **Cumann na mBan** also played a role. In total there were approximately 1200 active participants in the fighting.

## Planning The Rising

In order for The Rising to have a real chance of challenging British military control of Ireland it required two things.

First, the Irish needed a large supply of arms and ammunition. Some Irish nationalists saw Germany as a powerful ally against a distracted England during World War I. Roger Casement went to Germany to ask for assistance and they sent a ship of weapons to Ireland, but it was intercepted by the British Navy on Easter Saturday. Second, it required the successful mobilization of the Irish Volunteers. Their leader, MacNeill, discovered the plans the day before The Rising and, concerned with the inevitable loss of life for a hopeless cause, he took out an ad in the Sunday paper and declared the plans "hereby recalled or canceled". In the ensuing confusion, few members of the Irish Volunteers or the Irish Citizen Army showed up to fight.

The leaders of the rebellion knew that their plans had been exposed, but they considered death preferable to failure and hoped that their sacrifice might revive Irish separatism. Despite the many setbacks, the rebels were able to hold the center of Dublin for six days.

## April 24, 1916, Easter Monday

### Liberty Hall

Liberty Hall was the headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. The participants of The Rising gathered here and then marched to their assigned positions around the city. The plan was to occupy a number of defensible sites around the capital and hold out until there was a general revolt throughout the country. Liberty Hall was actually left empty during Easter week, but the British were unaware of that and bombarded it from the river, destroying the building.

### The General Post Office (GPO)

The Proclamation of the Irish Republic was read out at the GPO. Pearse and six others declared themselves representatives of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic and signed the Proclamation. All were later executed for their role in The Rising.

### Dublin Castle and City Hall

The rebels were unable to capture Dublin Castle, the seat of British government in Ireland. The first man to be killed during The Rising was an unarmed member of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Members of the Irish Citizen Army led by Connolly did succeed in occupying City Hall, located just beside Dublin Castle. This site saw heavy fighting and many lives were lost on both sides.

### Mount Street Bridge Area

This is where the rebels inflicted the most damage on the British forces. It was quiet until Wednesday, when Volunteers led by Eamon de Valera blocked the path of the British troops heading to the city center.

### Four Courts Area

Four Courts was strategically significant, as it stood on the main route between the British military barracks and the rebel headquarters at the GPO. Four Courts was largely undamaged during The Rising but was later virtually demolished by the Civil War in 1922.

## The Aftermath

After the British burned the GPO, the rebels moved to **Moore Street**. From here, Pearse issued the surrender of the Military Council of the newly proclaimed Irish Republic to "prevent the further slaughter of the civilian population and in the hope of saving our followers, now hope-



lessly surrounded and outnumbered". They were vastly outnumbered by a British force of almost 19,000 men. The rebels had held the city for six days.

Most Irish people were appalled by the death and destruction unleashed by the rebellion, and the defeated rebels were jeered by onlookers as they were led through the streets of Dublin. Over 450 people were killed and 2600 were wounded during The Rising; over half of the people who died were civilians who had been caught in the fighting that occurred in the densely-populated slums on Dublin's north side. The British Army accounted for about a quarter and the rebel forces only about fifteen percent of the casualties. However, more than a third of the British military fatalities were Irishmen because Royal Dublin Fusiliers, Irish unit of the British Army, had been the first to respond.

The Cork Examiner wrote in criticism of The Rising "let the thoughtless and unreasoning on this occasion be confined to a handful of our misguided countrymen". The British response eventually turned the tide of public opinion against Britain.

All of those arrested were taken to **Richmond Barracks** for processing. The court-martials were held in the gymnasium building and the 16 leaders of the rebellion were sentenced to death, including the seven signatories of the Proclamation. They were executed by firing squad at **Kilmainham Gaol** and their bodies were buried in a mass grave at **Arbour Hill**.

General Maxwell, sent to Ireland to suppress The Rising said, "Irish sentimentality will turn these graves into martyrs' shrines." But it was Britain's harsh response that was to blame. The British forces committed many atrocities during The Rising. Twelve civilians were shot near Four Courts and a well-known pacifist was executed without trial. After The Rising, over 3000 men and women were arrested, many of whom had been entirely innocent, and over 1400 were imprisoned. England imposed martial law throughout the entire country.

England's iron fist provoked indignation and sympathy for the rebels and turned the rebels into heroes.

In the general election of December 1918, the Irish decisively rejected the Irish Party in favor of the new Sinn Fein party, which identified with the rebels of The Rising. The Easter Rising was the central event in transforming Irish nationalist opinion.