

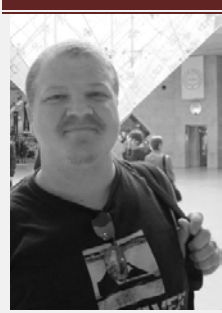
A Declaration of War

The Press and the Irish Conscription Crisis of 1918

Daniel Joesten

Abstract

During the first four years of World War I the British sustained heavy losses at the front. The desperate need for more troops led them to conscript men not only from Britain, but from their dominions as well. One exception was Ireland. By 1918, Ireland had sent volunteers to fight in the trenches but conscription was not enacted. In fact, previous attempts to extend conscription to Ireland were rejected in the House of Commons due to the delicate home rule situation in Ireland and the tenuous relationship between the two countries. However in April of 1918, seeing no other alternative to the troop shortage, the House passed the Military Service Bill that extended conscription to Ireland. The passage of the bill directly led to what was called the Irish Conscription Crisis. The Crisis was marked by protests, strikes and political polarization that further alienated the Irish from the British. The choice by Britain to package conscription with home rule in Ireland effectively changed the dynamic of the Irish question by creating a stronger separatist movement in Ireland. The Crisis had the effect of uniting many of the different political factions within Ireland, who, despite their differences, were able to come together in order to protest conscription and further the Military Service Bill had some unlikely consequences such as alienating British support in Northern Ireland.



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In mid April 1918, the Irish Nationalist representatives to the House of Commons decided to leave London and return to Dublin, having suffered a defeating vote at the hands of the British members of Parliament. The vote was for the Military Service Bill, which after four long and bloody years of the Great War finally included a provision to extend conscription to Ireland. Prior attempts to conscript the Irish were rejected in the House due to the delicate home rule situation in Ireland and the tenuous relationship between the two countries. However, after four years of overwhelming losses at the front, the British were in desperate need for manpower. In addition, Prime Minister David Lloyd George was under tremendous pressure from British citizens and allied forces to do something to replenish the troops. The Bill passed with a staggering majority (with the Irish representatives and a few British objectors being the minority) despite heavy Irish objection and warnings of a new war front in Ireland. Having no further reason to stay in London, the Irish representatives left for Dublin to decide amongst the Irish the best possible way to protest conscription.

The passage of the Military Service Bill in April directly led to the Irish Conscription Crisis that permeated Ireland over the next couple of months. The Crisis was marked by protests, strikes and political polarization that further alienated the Irish from the British and became a contributing factor in the outbreak of the Anglo-Irish War in 1919. The choice by Britain to package conscription with home rule in Ireland effectively changed the dynamic of the Irish question by creating a stronger separatist movement in Ireland. In addition, the Crisis had the effect of uniting many of the different political factions within Ireland, who, despite their differences, were able to come together in order to protest conscription.

Although the Conscription Crisis had many direct effects in Irish political and social history, there were less obvious consequences as well. After the passage of the Military Service Bill, Irish and British newspapers went to work to cover both the debates surrounding conscription and the protests that broke out in Ireland. The articles that emerged in newspapers on both sides of the Irish Sea contain language that better articulates the state of affairs than events do alone. In fact, throughout the Conscription Crisis, both the Irish and British newspapers demonstrated that there was a vast disparity in how each country viewed their relationship with the other and this divide was both a cause and a byproduct of the ensuing protests.

Many historians have treated the Irish Conscription Crisis as a small event in a long chain of events that led to the Anglo-Irish War of 1919-1922. Other more prominent events such as the Easter Rising, the Home Rule Crisis, and the General Election of 1918 tend to take precedence over the relatively small, failed attempt by the British to conscript the Irish. The Conscription Crisis, lasting only months with hardly any bloodshed and no real physical consequences to Ireland, has taken a back seat to other, more watershed moments of the Irish Revolution. Some historians do consider the Crisis significant; however, and relate its importance to the larger events that led to Irish independence. For example, Thomas Hennesy relates the protests surrounding conscription to the growing distrust of the words of British politicians and (like historian Caoimhe Nic Dhaibheid) demonstrates that in the months following the Crisis membership of the radical Republican Party Sinn Fein doubled.¹ Some, like Peter Hart, link the Crisis to a jump in the membership of the IRA.² In addition, Historian Tom Bowden suggests that the Crisis had the effect of polarizing political factions in Ireland.³ Others, such as Deirdre Lindsay, argue that the Conscription Crisis led to a greater prominence of the Irish Labour Party in the South as they were chiefly responsible for massive strikes and resistance rallies, which, consequently alienated them from their support base in Ulster.⁴

Historians have also placed the Irish Conscription Crisis in context with British Politics and the European war effort. Alan J. Ward blames the blunders of the Conscription Crisis on Prime Minister David Lloyd George whom he claims, “failed to control, understand, or inform himself about Ireland.”⁵ Historian Adrian Gregory (like John McEwen) would go so far as to suggest that perhaps Lloyd George had no intention of ever enforcing conscription in Ireland and only enacted it to quell the growing pressure from the British public.⁶ Moreover, Gregory implies that this

¹ Thomas Hennesy, *Dividing Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1998), 220-228. and Caoimhe Nic Dhaibheid, “The Irish National Aid Association and the Radicalization of Public Opinion in Ireland 1916-1918”, *The Historical Journal* (Vol. 55, No.3, September 2012), 706.

² Peter Hart, “The Social Structure of the Irish Republican Army 1916-1923”, *The Historical Journal* (Vol. 42, No. 1, March 1999), 219.

³ Tom Bowden. “The Irish Underground and the War of Independence 1919-1921”, *Journal of Contemporary History* (Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1973), 11.

⁴ Dierdre Lindsay. “Labour Against Conscription”, in *Ireland and the First World War*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Co. Westmeath, Ireland: The Liliput Press, 1988), 77-89.

⁵ Alan J Ward. “Lloyd George and the 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis”, *The Historical Journal* (Vol. 17, No. 1, March 1974), 107.

⁶ John McEwen. “The Liberal Party and the Irish Question During World War I”, *Journal of British Studies* (Vol. 12, No. 1, Nov. 1972), 109-131.

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could have also been a way for Lloyd George to rid himself of the “Irish Question.”⁷ There are also claims that Lloyd George acted in response to the depletion of troops on the front lines and pressure from outside forces such as France to replenish men along the front lines.⁸

In each of these cases, historians have linked the Conscription Crisis to the bigger picture of Irish Independence. In Irish Revolutionary History, the Crisis contributed to the radicalization of political thought and the abandonment of a Home Rule Parliament. In Britain, the Crisis is linked to the desperation surrounding manpower needs and the growing public outcry for more troops in addition to the failures (or genius?) of Lloyd George to understand the political climate of Ireland. However, by concentrating on just the time period surrounding the Conscription Crisis and focusing on the political debates and press coverage, a clearer picture emerges of the language used by both Britain and Ireland, and through this language it becomes evident how great the divide was in how the British and the Irish viewed their relationship with one another.

An Irish Unification

Prior to the passage of the Military Service Bill in Parliament there was a growing fear in Ireland as to how conscription would affect the already fragile political stability. There were Unionists who supported continued membership in the United Kingdom. There were also Nationalists who wished to have home rule and local autonomy, represented by the Irish Nationalist Party. Finally, there were separationists, represented by Sinn Fein, who desired a sovereign Irish republic. These groups had a tenuous peace in Ireland and many feared that any more pressure from Parliament would cause tensions to boil over. Before 1918, most of the Irish were under the impression that the British would not attempt to conscript them because “it was believed that the Government would be afraid to defy the Nationalist Party and to risk the prospect of serious resistance from the Sinn Feiners.”⁹ By April of 1918 however, the “pressures of public opinion in Great Britain” had “become very strong” leading to the prospect of Britain enacting conscription in Ireland.¹⁰

⁷ Adrian Gregory. “The Decision to Conscript the Irish” in *Ireland and the Great War: A War to Unite Us All?* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 128-129.

⁸ Elizabeth Greenhalgh, “David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, and the 1918 Manpower Crisis,” *The Historical Journal* (Vol. 50, No. 2, June 2007), 397-421.

⁹ “Irish Manpower,” *The London Times*, April 9th, 1918.

¹⁰ Ibid.

In Ireland, the Nationalist Party stood to lose the most politically from conscription. They represented Ireland in the House of Commons and were instrumental in making peaceful progress with the home rule movement in Parliament. They were also vehemently opposed to conscription. In an eerie foreshadow of things to come, the *Nationalist Press* claimed, “that to try to enforce conscription would be an act of insanity, that it would kill every chance of a political settlement, and that it would create a new war front in Ireland.”¹¹ The Nationalists were worried that everything they had worked for in Parliament would be undone, though they also feared that the enactment, but not *enforcement*, of conscription would drive up support for their political opponents, Sinn Fein. The London Times reported, “On the one hand the enactment of compulsion for Ireland in the teeth of their opposition in the House of Commons would strengthen the case that Nationalist representation at Westminster is a fraud. On the other hand, the Government’s refusal to enforce the enacted principle through fear of physical resistance would allow Sinn Fein to boast that it and it alone had saved Ireland from conscription.”¹² For the Nationalist Party, Irish conscription represented both an external and internal risk. However, as the reality of conscription unfolded, it became clear to the leaders of Ireland that a unified front would be necessary in order to defeat it. This meant setting aside political differences for the greater good of Ireland.

The unified Irish political opposition to conscription solidified on April 18th at the Mansion House in Dublin. Leaders from the prominent political parties gathered to discuss conscription and reach a consensus on a plan of action. Joseph Devlin and John Dillon represented the Irish Parliamentary Party (Nationalists) at the meeting and, Eamon de Valera and Arthur Griffith represented Sinn Fein. There were also representatives for All-For Ireland Party, Irish Trade Union, and the Labour Party. After deliberation, the men reached a unanimous decision and adopted an official declaration of action. The declaration stated, “The passing of the Conscription Bill by the British House of Commons must be regarded as a declaration of war on the Irish nation. The alternative to accepting it, as such, is to surrender our liberties and to acknowledge ourselves slaves.”¹³ Furthermore, the conference called conscription a, “direct violation of the rights of small nationalities to self-determination.”¹⁴ This statement encompassed what the Irish leaders felt

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Violation of the Rights of Small Nationalities,” *Freeman’s Journal*, April 19, 1918.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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their relationship to the British included. They viewed their relationship as a constant battle to achieve autonomy from the British. For years the leaders of Ireland had made progress towards a free Ireland and to allow conscription to take place would be to acknowledge subservience and lose everything they had worked for. As far as the Irish Representatives were concerned, resistance was the only option.

“A Difference of Military Strength”

In Parliament, the language surrounding the debates about Irish conscription lends some insight into how the British viewed their relationship with Ireland. Prime Minister David Lloyd George argued that, “the character of the quarrel in which we are engaged is just as much Irish as it is English. May I say it is more so – it is more Irish and Scottish and Welsh than it is even English.”¹⁵ He would later state that this was because the Great War was a war for small nationalities. The Irish representatives in Parliament would argue that Ireland is not yet her own nation, since she cannot decide her own fate.¹⁶ However, Lloyd George reached the core of his reasoning when he stated, “The Irish representatives, and Ireland, through its representatives without a dissentient voice, committed the Empire to this war. They are fully as responsible for it as any part of the United Kingdom.”¹⁷ Ireland, he reasoned, is part of the United Kingdom, and therefore responsible for providing men to fight its war. Furthermore, Lloyd George calls it “illogical” and “unjust” that other men within the realm were conscripted and Irish were not.¹⁸ It turned out later that these were some of the words used in Irish protests to describe the British attempt to conscript them. The Irish representatives throughout this debate continued to warn the Prime Minister that he would have another war front on his hand in Ireland because the Irish would rather rebel rather than accept conscription; however, the Prime Minister ignored these taunts.¹⁹ However, the words of Lloyd George reflected the opinion of many prominent Britons as to what the role of Ireland had within the Empire: a source of untapped manpower. Though Lloyd George argued that Ireland has representation in Parliament, there are not enough Irish representatives to carry a decision within the House of Commons, and

¹⁵ HC Deb 09 April 1918 vol. 104 cc1357-62.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

consequently they were at the mercy of the British when voting on issues that concern Ireland.

In an attempt to assuage the blow of conscription on the Irish, Lloyd George proposed a Home Rule Bill in Parliament on the same day as the Military Service Bill, while absorbing further jeers from the Irish representatives. He stated, “Whilst Great Britain is fighting for national rights in Europe with all her reserves of strength, she is prepared to concede the same rights in her own sphere of government.”²⁰ It is unclear if Lloyd George felt this would soften the blow of conscription or make conscription more enticing for Ireland, but for many of the Irish representatives it was too little, too late. Home Rule had already been voted in prior to the start of the war in 1914, but never enacted. To package it now with compulsory service was considered by the Irish representatives to be another act of oppression.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Bonar Law registered his opinion during the debate in which he made clear that the government would not waver on any of the major points of the bill, including Ireland.²¹ *The Times* notes, “(Bonar Law) declared that the Nationalists did not understand what the feeling in Great Britain was on this question and told them that it was a great mistake to suppose that the Government had put compulsion for Ireland in the Bill as a pious opinion.”²² Though it appears that the British government thought Irish conscription through before adding it to the Military Service Bill, perhaps Bonar Law did not understand how the Nationalists or other Irishmen felt about Britain conscripting the Irish. His words illustrate the divide between the Irish and British opinions of their relationship. In supposing that the Nationalists did not understand, Law demonstrates that *he* did not understand the condition of their relationship with Ireland. Law adds, “[the government] believed that it would make a difference of military strength, which made it their duty to face the consequences, whatever they might be.”²³ Once again Law vocalized the popular British opinion that the Irish had a *duty* to serve Britain. *Duty*, to the anti-conscription front in Ireland, would have meant that the Irish had a duty to Ireland, not Britain. Where one’s loyalty should lay and duty to one’s country was a distinction that was at the heart of the Irish conscription debates.

²⁰ HC Deb 09 April 1918 vol 104 cc1362-4

²¹ “Man-Power Bill”, *The London Times*, April 11, 1918.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

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On April 11, *The London Times* published an article that included a statement from British Labour Party member George Barnes in response to the growing inevitability of conscription protests in Ireland. In his statement, Barnes urged Ireland to be patient and hopeful of a peaceful solution.²⁴ When asked if he thought Ireland would fight against conscription, Barnes replies, “I think there is no need for them to fight against conscription. Home rule is right ahead. I know, of course, that in times gone by the Irish people have been led to within sight of the promised land, only to find it disappear like a mirage before their eyes.”²⁵ While Barnes advocated Irish patience in attaining home rule, he also recognized that the previous times that the British had made such promises, they had defaulted on them. This seems to be indicative of the divide between the Irish and British views on conscription. Barnes, a British politician, urged the Irish to show restraint because he viewed conscription as a stepping stone to home rule, whereas the Irish saw it as yet another mandate handed down by the British that impeded their move toward independence.

Though Barnes believed that the Irish should weather conscription, he was also aware that the situation in Ireland was precariously close to revolution. “Ireland is full of combustible material,” he stated, “there is an insurgent people on the one hand and the soldiery on the other. A spark on either side may kindle a feeling likely to create a disaster that would spoil everything.”²⁶ Barnes saw that the tension in Ireland was already coming to a head, but he and other British politicians did not seem to view Irish conscription as anything that would be a tipping point towards an insurrection. Barnes saw the resolution of tensions being in a peaceful, diplomatic solution that would be beneficial to both countries. He echoed the sentiment of other Britons in viewing the future of Ireland and Britain as being one in which the two were linked under the same umbrella of the United Kingdom, with Ireland having local home rule. When asked about separation, Barnes explained, “Separation is not possible, and even if it were, it would be a bad thing for Ireland and bad for England. I believe that the interests of Ireland, as well as the interests of this country, lie in a closer union of sympathy and a desire to compose those differences which have embittered the political life of the United Kingdom for generations.”²⁷ Like many others, Barnes could not dream of the day where Ireland existed independent of Britain. This British notion of a

²⁴ “Impassioned Irish Protests,” *The London Times*, April 22nd, 1918.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

United Kingdom with Ireland was one of the reasons why Britain felt they could conscript the Irish, just as they had done with Canada and Australia. They felt, as part of Britain, the Irish were just as subject to conscription as any group within the Empire.

Outside of Parliament, other prominent British men came out in support of Irish conscription. An article in Dublin's *Freeman's Journal* brings to light the opinion of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, of whom it was claimed exhibits a typical attitude of the British. Doyle argued, "That while Britain is fighting for freedom, Ireland is 'wrangling over her parish pump'."²⁸ The *Journal* explains that this is a common view of Englishmen who see the Irish protests and their persistent clamor for home rule as inappropriate during such a violent war. However, the *Journal* argues that if Ireland is 'wrangling over her parish pump' then "so also are Belgium, Serbia, Poland and Armenia, for in all five countries the issue is precisely the same – a determination to decide their own destinies without interference or intervention by outsiders."²⁹ The *Journal* chastised Doyle for being ignorant of Irish conditions and suggested that instead he reproach England for denying Ireland the right to determine for herself what is best for Ireland. This article showed that it was not necessarily British politicians who registered opinions about Irish conscription, and though he was only one person, Doyle's comments were indicative of how some British viewed the Irish's role in British affairs.

Not everyone in Britain supported conscription in Ireland, and many Britons came forward in the following weeks to speak out against it. *The London Times* reported that conscripting the Irish was not supported by all British members of Parliament, out of the 100 members who rejected the Bill, "sixty eight of the members...were Irish Nationalists of one type or another, and the remainder were chiefly of the 'pacifists' groups."³⁰ In this report, *The Times'* choice of language lumps Irish Nationalists in with the unnamed pacifists, a word which contains the negative connotation of cowardly or weak. The statement also undermined Ireland's contribution to the war that included over 200,000 volunteers by 1918. In addition, the statement negated the real reasons for Irish Nationalist opposition, which an objection to the war was only a small part.

²⁸ "Conscription Menace," *Freeman's Journal*, April 4, 1918.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Man-Power Bill," *The London Times*, April 11, 1918.

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Some well-known members of Parliament spoke out as well. Former Prime Minister Asquith felt that the provision of the Military Service Bill that included Irish Conscription should have been removed. *The Times* reports, “(Asquith) argued that compulsion could not be introduced in Ireland today with any approach to general consent, and went so far as to say that it would be an act of terrible shortsightedness to precede the grant of self-government by imposing upon Ireland a measure which was obnoxious to a very large number of the people.”³¹ When Asquith was Prime Minister, the issue of Irish conscription was debated and rejected on a couple of different occasions. Though conscription had been enacted in other British dominions, Ireland was a different case. As Asquith pointed out, with self-government in the fray, conscripting the Irish would be imprudent.

British organizations also expressed their aversion to Irish conscription. The London Labour Party issued a statement that denounced Irish conscription calling it, “an outrage against the principles of liberty of small nations and self-determination of peoples, and calculated to serious loss of life in Ireland.”³² Though most in Britain supported conscription for Ireland, there were still those who came out in protest. These groups tended to be members of the British working class who had been victims of conscription themselves, who sympathized with the Irish. The London Labour Party mentions the lack of self-determination in Ireland, which is one of the key arguments that the Irish protesters make against conscription. It was not so much that they were opposed to conscription; they believe that Ireland should be able to make that decision, rather than Britain.

³¹ “Man-Power Bill,” *The London Times*, April 11, 1918.

³² “An English Protest,” *Freeman’s Journal*, May 31, 1918.

“By The Most Effective Means at their Disposal”

In newspapers throughout Ireland, advertisements were taken out to promote meetings where men and women could gather to discuss how to protest conscription. The fiery language of these advertisements reflected the way that the Irish thought about their relationship with the British. In the *Nenagh Guardian*, an advertisement labeled “Declaration of War” called for a public demonstration at the courthouse square, stating it was to, “protest against the compulsory conscription of Ireland’s manhood by an Alien Government, and to pledge ourselves to resist it by the most effective means at our disposal.”³³ The phrase “Alien Government” was especially effective because it denoted a government that was foreign, unwanted, and out of touch with the needs of Irish people. Alien also signified that the government in charge was Britain’s government, not Ireland’s government, suggesting that Ireland was not in charge of her own affairs. The advertisement also declared, “Assemble in your thousands and join in the fight against this new act of oppression by the enemies of our country.”³⁴ Whereas the British used such words as “duty” and “obligation” when discussing conscripting the Irish through the Military Service Bill, this advertisement saw the bill not as an act of duty, but an “act of oppression” by “enemies”. The language used in this advertisement obviously targeted a certain audience, Republicans and Sinn Feiners who already had preconceived notions about British rule. It was playing on their already negative views towards the British and equated conscription with an act of war against the Irish. However, looking back to the declaration adopted by the leaders of Ireland, they too called the bill a declaration of war, which demonstrates how well the language of protest permeated the country. While this advert would attract a certain kind of Irishmen, there were other advertisements that were less radical, yet equally effective.

An ad in the *Nenagh Guardian* posted by the Urban District Council also called for a public meeting to discuss protest options.³⁵ This advertisement, however, used more moderate language in order to attract attendees. It called for those to gather, “to consider what methods may be adopted to ensure our cooperation with all of our fellow countrymen in the immediate future.”³⁶ In addition, the ad revealed that, “speakers of

³³ “Declaration of War,” *Nenagh Guardian*, April 20, 1918.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Conscription of Ireland,” *Nenagh Guardian*, April 6th, 1918.

³⁶ Ibid.

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every shade of political opinion have promised to attend.”³⁷ This ad differed significantly from the previous ad in the *Nenagh Guardian* because the wording is much more inclusive of all Irishmen. While the previous ad appeared to polarize the people of Ireland and called for a more radical approach to protest, this ad looked to unify the people of Ireland no matter where their political allegiance may lay. By calling for “cooperation” with others and including speakers from different political parties, the Urban District Council of Nenagh hoped to present a unified front in the protest against conscription. In fact, many of the protests involved constructing a unified Irish front, rather than divisive radicals on one side and more moderate Nationalists on the other. Furthermore, the *Irish Independent* reports that, “the movement for an All-Ireland covenant in opposition grows... Rev. Dr. Foley advises Irishmen to put aside all differences and unite and organize against the threatened danger.”³⁸ Many recognized that a divided stand would make the country vulnerable to conscription while a cohesive protest could be much more effective.

One of the most prominent groups to protest conscription in Ireland were the Catholic priests and bishops, who protested the act on moral grounds. Among the most outspoken members of clergy and leaders of the protests was Cardinal Michael Logue. Prior to the passage of the Military Service Bill, Cardinal Logue anticipated Irish conscription and spoke out against it. In a statement issued April 10, Logue stated, “Since the outbreak of hostilities four years ago the War Office has shown such utter lack of real touch with Irish conditions that it is quite possible something may now be proposed which, if attempted, would only crown the disasters which want of knowledge and want of sympathy have already entailed.”³⁹ Logue not only foreshadowed the events of the next two months, but he also stressed how dated the British government was when it came to the Irish, calling out that a policy of conscription would be enacted because of ignorance of real Irish conditions. Logue adds, “Had the government in any reasonable time given Ireland the benefit of the principles, which are declared to be at stake in the war, by the concession of a full measure of self-government, there would have been no occasion for contemplating forced levies from her now.”⁴⁰ Here Logue got to the crux of an issue that Ireland had with Britain. Had Britain granted Home Rule to Ireland back in 1914 prior to the start of the war, Britain would not be in the predicament that they were in now. Had Ireland had her

³⁷ “Conscription of Ireland,” *Nenagh Guardian*, April 6th, 1918.

³⁸ “The Storm of Protest,” *Irish Independent*, April 12, 1918.

³⁹ “Disastrous Policy,” *Irish Independent*, April 10, 1918.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

own government and self-determination, there would most likely be more Irish volunteers and perhaps even conscription enacted by Ireland on their own people. However, as Britain chose not to grant Home Rule in 1914 and in 1918 only wished to do so with conscription, the British faced political disaster.

North of Dublin, in Cavan, a gathering of priests and bishops took part in “what was probably the largest demonstration held in Cavan.”⁴¹ Like Cardinal Logue, the message that emanated from this protest was anti-conscription, though it carried a far more radical opinion than the moderate reasoning of Logue. Reverend B. Gaffney presided over the demonstration and reiterated, “It is not a political meeting, but a meeting where men of all shades of political opinion are asked to join hands and ward off a dreadful calamity that threatens our young men and old men, too.”⁴² By dictating it was not a political meeting, the reverend was breaking down any differences in political thought that the attendees might have in the hopes that they could put up a unified front against conscription. This protest stressed the importance of the Catholic Church backing anti-conscription. Nationalists and Republicans alike were Catholic and by breaking down the political barriers, the Catholic Church became a key factor to unifying conscription protests. In addition, by dictating that the meeting was not political, the reverend was confirming the Catholic stance to oppose conscription was on moral grounds. Reverend B. Gaffney adds, “This war was started without our consent and without consulting the people of this country, besides our country has given more than its share of manpower...In justice, no nation under the sun can be compelled to make war against the will of the inhabitants, but that is what is going to be imposed on Ireland by conscription.”⁴³ The Irish volunteers who served for Britain did so of their own free will, as they supported the cause. However, the point the reverend was trying to make is that the act of conscripting the Irish against their will was an immoral action on the part of the British. No matter what political line of thought was taken, the action was still immoral in the eyes of the Catholic Church. The Reverend concludes, “When Irishmen, as a nation, with their own parliament, proclaim war, then you may depend you will have men

⁴¹ “What was probably the largest,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 20, 1918.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

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able and willing to fight, and fight like genuine Irishmen – with all of their heart and will.”⁴⁴

Other members of clergy throughout Ireland confirmed the immorality of conscription in letters and protests. A letter from Reverend P. O’Connell read at the Cavan demonstration stated, “Our bishops declare the conscription of a nation without its consent to be unjustifiable, and...it is immoral, and, therefore resistance is a duty.”⁴⁵ Contrary to the British use of the word “duty” when debating conscription, Irish Catholics saw it as a duty to resist the immorality of conscription whereas the British saw it as a duty as part of Britain to fight, even if unwillingly. Furthermore, the *Irish Independent* reported, “Further utterances by members of the Irish Hierarchy deal with the moral right of the Irish people to refuse conscription imposed by England, and their Lordships again assure their flock that bishops and priests will stand firmly beside them through the crisis.”⁴⁶ Finally, nearly ten days after Cardinal Logue’s original statement, he presided over a gathering of the bishops of Ireland. The meeting culminated with the release of a statement that proposed a unified resolution. It read, “In view especially of the historic relations between the two countries from the very beginning up to the present moment, we consider that conscription forced in this way upon Ireland is an oppressive and inhuman law, which the Irish people have a right to resist by all the means that are consonant with the law of God.”⁴⁷ This statement solidified Catholic resistance to conscription and as it was delineated to the parishes, encompassed a wider group of protesters across the country.

The Catholic Church, more than any other group in Ireland, was responsible for unifying Irish opinion against conscription and rallying people of different political backgrounds to come together in protest. Without the Catholic Church, the protests would not have been nearly as effective as they were. Contrastingly, in Britain, both opposition and support of Irish Conscription was confined to isolated groups and political parties, notably the Labour Party and working class industrial centers such as Liverpool and Manchester. Though public opinion was in favor of extending conscription to the Irish, there was hardly a unified front like the one found in Ireland.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “What was probably the largest,” *Meath Chronicle*, April 20, 1918.

⁴⁶ “Irish Hostility,” *Irish Independent*, April 18th, 1918.

⁴⁷ “Irish Bishops Meet,” *Irish Independent*, April 19, 1918.

Other groups that figured to be instrumental in conscription protests were the working class and labor unions that not only organized strikes and rallies, but also became some of the most radicalized of all objectors. Some, like the Donegal Flaxgrowers and Farmer's Association, protested on the grounds that they needed all available men to grow food for the increased demand of the government, and conscription would rob them of workers needed to do this.⁴⁸ Others, such as the Irish Transport Workers vowed to resist conscription "with all of their might" and predicted a successful protest because, "In England the working classes put up a good fight against conscription, but they had not sufficient backbone, but the Irish working classes would show when the time came that they had the backbone."⁴⁹ Finally, in a meeting with the Navan Guardians, Mr. C. Owens claimed that, "recruiting in Ireland was killed for party purposes in order to kill Home Rule or self-government for Ireland. They would prefer to lose the war with Germany than give liberty to this country."⁵⁰ Since the British were attempting to conscript the Irish in exchange for Home Rule in 1918, Mr. Owens suggested they protest and resist with everything they have because "we might as well die here as any other place."⁵¹ The working class and unions played a similar role as the Catholics in the Irish Conscription Crisis.

In Ireland, the place that could have poised the biggest challenge to unified anti-conscription protests was Ulster. Ulster was predominantly protestant, Unionist, and, in general, supportive of Britain. However, as the Irish Conscription Crisis unfolded, it became clear that even in Ulster, with some exceptions, conscription was unsupported. The *Irish Independent* reported prior to the passage of the Military Service Act, "Even Ulster Unionists do not want conscription... Ulster is just as much against conscription as the rest of Ireland, and the government will be only courting disaster, and making Ireland still more an international question by forcing military service on this country."⁵² The question is: why? Wouldn't Ulster Unionists be supportive of British policies? The answer lay within how British Parliament packaged Irish conscription. The *Irish Independent* reprinted a statement from a Belfast correspondent which reported, "If the Prime Minister had set himself the task of finding the likeliest means to create unrest in Ulster he could not have succeeded better than in his plan to link a Home Rule Parliament with

⁴⁸ "Irish People United," *Irish Independent*, April 10, 1918.

⁴⁹ "Labour Opposition," *Freeman's Journal*, April 10, 1918.

⁵⁰ "A People Who Will Never Be Coerced..." *Meath Chronicle*, April 13, 1918

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² "Position in Ireland," *Irish Independent*, April 6, 1918.

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conscription.”⁵³ Conscription was not necessarily the problem; the problem was Home Rule that would have put Ulster at the mercy of a southern dominated parliament. The Belfast correspondent adds in conversations with “men whose opinions matter” that “all welcomed conscription, but they made it perfectly clear that they do not mean to go under a Dublin Parliament. Ulster’s opposition to Home Rule would be infinitely more dangerous to the Empire than it would have been four years ago.”⁵⁴ Despite the vagueness of the source of this opinion, the statement highlights a key distinction in how the North viewed their relationship with Britain as opposed to the South. In Ulster, where British support was substantial, supporters of conscription felt that the British dishonored their support by attaching home rule to conscription.

Prior to linking Home Rule with conscription, many Ulster Unionists were in fact pro-conscription. There was a unified stance amongst Unionists to support conscription within Ireland. However, upon the introduction of conscription with home rule, many Ulstermen changed their position. The *Freeman’s Journal* argued that, “Their [Unionist] press has solved the problem very ingeniously by declaring that, as Mr. Lloyd George has broken his pledges to Ulster by proposing to introduce a Home Rule Bill, Ulster is free to revise her pledges about conscription.”⁵⁵ Since the British government chose to change its position on Home Rule, Ulster Unionists withdrew their support for conscription.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the *Freeman’s Journal* pointed out, “Orangemen [Irish Protestants supportive of Britain] used to protest loudly against the charge of ‘conditional loyalty’ but...their ‘loyalty’ to the Empire at this crisis is conditional with a vengeance.”⁵⁷ This led to the question of loyalty. Did the British take for granted the loyalty of Unionists through this crisis? The British must have been counting on support from Ulster and therefore concentrated on gaining support from Nationalists in the south by tempting them with home rule. This strategy backfired on all levels and exploded into a political fiasco, yet it illustrates how out of touch Parliament was with the Irish. In an effort to gain support in both the north and south, they ended up with very little support on either side.

⁵³ “Press and the Crisis,” *Irish Independent*, April 12, 1918

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Ulster Tactics,” *Freeman’s Journal*, April 18, 1918.

⁵⁶ Perhaps Lloyd George felt that by including Home Rule, conscription would be better accepted in the south as previously mentioned. Whatever his intentions, Lloyd George ended up alienating both North and South.

⁵⁷ “Ulster Tactics,” *Freeman’s Journal*, April 18, 1918.

It would seem that not all of the Irish in Ulster were against conscription; in fact, many of the most violent protests of the Irish Conscription Crisis took place in the North, as protesters clashed with pro-conscription Irish. A particularly violent protest took place in Belfast on April 18. The skirmish began when a group of young shipyard workers armed with sticks attempted to break up a protest meeting thrown by the Irish Labour Party. Throwing rocks and debris from the road, they were able to effectively disperse the large anti-conscription protest. Then a large group of pro-conscription protesters gathered and listened to a speech which “dwelt on the fact that the Ulster division which was at the front fighting for Catholic Belgium alongside other valiant Irishmen required men to reinforce its ranks.”⁵⁸ Finally, the pro-conscription forces, “at the conclusion of the speech they sang ‘God Save the King’ and ‘Rule Britannia’.”⁵⁹ This scene in Belfast shows that, as opposed to the southern portion of Ireland, the North saw much more conflict with their protests.⁶⁰ The speech, which called for reinforcements, reiterated the British stance that more manpower was needed at the front, an argument Parliament used when voting through conscription in the first place.

But were the shipyard workers who broke up the protest really pro-conscription or were there other motives for their disruption? The *Freeman's Journal* had a converse explanation for the interrupted Belfast Protest. They wrote, “No doubt, we shall hear today that the disturbance at... the anti-conscription meeting in Belfast is a proof that Unionist workers are burning to be called to the colours, and are hanging back only because of the menace of Home Rule. But it is sufficient to point out that the interrupters were an organized body of shipyard workers for whom conscription has no terrors... as they are exempt.”⁶¹ It seems some of the men who were for conscription in Ulster were those who had not volunteered for service and, in fact, had no danger of being conscripted. In addition, it could be argued that their reasons for not enlisting were that there was a threat of home rule that would put them under a Dublin Parliament and hung like a shadow over the North.

Looking at the press throughout the Crisis highlights both the biases of newspapers and the influence they can have on the public. On April 12, 1918 the *Irish Independent* compiled extracts from both Irish and British

⁵⁸ “Violent Scenes,” *Freeman's Journal*, April 18, 1918.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Though it could not be argued that the North was unified in their support of conscription.

⁶¹ “Ulster Tactics,” *Freeman's Journal*, April 18, 1918.

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newspapers, albeit only including the newspapers that were against Irish conscription. The article was assembled in a way to give the impression that opinions in both Ireland and Britain were unified in their protest and that there was indeed significant Irish support throughout Britain. The *Irish Catholic* said that conscription, “will be productive of results of the most disastrous kind, and react injuriously on the future relations between Great Britain and Ireland.”⁶² Meanwhile, the *Northern Whig* debated the effectiveness of pairing home rule with conscription and suggested that the government abandon both because both are bound to create unrest in the North.⁶³ In Britain, the *Manchester Guardian* wrote, “to apply conscription to Ireland, not only without her consent, but in face of her most vehement and determined opposition, would be in the face of all the world to write her down a nation unfree – in servitude.”⁶⁴ In addition, the *Liverpool Daily Post* added, “the beginning of wisdom is to seek such reconciliation as would make Ireland’s participation in the war a free-will offering. On no basis can military assistance of any consequence be obtained from Ireland.”⁶⁵ The British newspapers against conscription viewed the Conscription Crisis as a political and military nightmare for Britain because the manpower obtained from such a venture would not be worth the manpower needed to enforce it. In addition, the application of conscription would be a regression in the talks toward an effective, peaceful relationship with Ireland. The Irish papers reiterated this message. However, one must look at the motivation behind the *Irish Independent* in running this story. Obviously, these were not all of the opinions of British newspapers. The *Independent* selected the newspapers that would help to portray a unified opinion against conscription in both Ireland and Britain, much the same way that *The London Times* selected newspapers from America that were pro-conscription. In an effort to influence public opinion, *The Irish Independent* selected their evidence carefully and created a slightly misleading story. Though it fails to present a complete picture of opinions in Britain, this article does demonstrate that there were many people within Britain who did not agree with Irish conscription.

⁶² “Press and the Crisis,” *Irish Independent*, April 12, 1918.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Epilogue

By early summer of 1918, the Conscription Crisis waned and eventually died out. There was no deciding action, resolution, or any other major confrontation that ultimately decided the fate of conscription. In fact, the British did not once make an attempt to enforce conscription in Ireland. In the end, the Crisis was extremely anticlimactic: it simply ended...

It is not clear whether or not the protests had any effect on the British decision to forget about conscription. There were, however, other factors at play. The British enjoyed a surge in troops due to the arrival of American forces at the front, the ground lost to Germany in the spring of 1918 had been regained, and the overall outlook of the war was favorable to the Allies. What Irish troops the British would have attained through conscription were no longer necessary.

While the British may have seen the Irish Conscription Crisis as inconsequential at the time, it did have lasting effects for Ireland. Later in 1918, a record amount of Sinn Fein candidates were elected in Ireland, membership in the IRA grew, and the hope for a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the “Irish question” was squashed. Ultimately, the decision to conscript the Irish turned out to be one of the largest blunders committed during British attempts to maintain control of the Irish. The British gained nothing (not even troops) from the decision, and ended up losing a tremendous amount of support in Ireland from Unionists and Nationalists, as well as propelling themselves into another bloody conflict that would last the next three years. However, this should be no surprise, because as the newspapers in both Ireland and Britain have shown, the British and Irish could not disagree more on the nature of their relationship.

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