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Pre-war Paramilitary Mobilisation (Great Britain and Ireland)

By Justin Dolan Stover

Several distinct cultural, political, and class-based groups organized paramilitary militias in Ireland prior to the First World War. Though never exchanging fire, their rhetoric and rapid military organization foreshadowed a potentially violent civil war. Unionists, who sought to maintain protestant cultural traditions and political union with Great Britain, were ostensibly unified behind resistance to Irish Home Rule, under which Ireland would remain within the United Kingdom but a devolved parliament would be established in Dublin. Nationalists, predominantly Catholic supporters of Home Rule, enjoyed support from various Irish cultural organizations, as well as labour leaders and radical separatists, though an all-encompassing movement failed to materialize. The outbreak of the First World War ultimately defused the threat of civil war in Ireland, with both Unionists and nationalists enlisting in great numbers for the war effort, an act that ultimately split the nationalist movement.

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Introduction

A unique domestic crisis preceded the United Kingdom's entry into the First World War. Two general elections held in 1910 exposed the Liberal Party's inability to form a decisive parliamentary majority following the introduction of a redistributionist budget the previous year. In exchange for political support from the Irish Parliamentary Party, which would secure a majority, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1852-1928) agreed to revisit the issue of Irish self-government, or Home Rule. An Irish Home Rule Bill was accordingly introduced in 1912. This was the third such bill since 1886 but, under the terms of the 1911 Parliament Act, the House of Lords had lost its power to veto bills that had been passed in the Commons and was rendered impotent as a Unionist political safeguard. Recognizing Home Rule's apparent inevitability, Unionists mobilized to resist its implementation and the religious, political, and cultural domination they feared would follow. This determined opposition to the threat of Home Rule was especially strong in Ulster, Ireland's ancient northern province, where the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a Unionist militia, was formed in 1912.

Anticipating that this Unionist show of force would delay, alter, or negate hard-won political gains, nationalists responded in kind by forming an opposing paramilitary group, the Irish Volunteers, in Dublin in November 1913. Recruitment quickly spread throughout Ireland, aided by the Irish Parliamentary Party's established political network and nationalist-affiliated groups, such as the United Irish League (UIL), a grassroots land reform group formed in 1898, and the Gaelic League, a cultural organization that promoted the Irish language. More radical elements also joined the ranks, namely, the small but influential Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), which had gone underground in the late 19th century.

By the summer of 1914, both the UVF and the Irish Volunteers had expanded their respective memberships and arsenals, and Ireland seemed poised for civil war. Ultimately, however, the outbreak of the world war in August cooled Irish domestic tensions. Home Rule was shelved for the duration of the conflict, and enlistment in the British army reimagined by Unionists as a display of steadfast Unionist loyalty to the Crown, and by nationalists as evidence of a self-governing Ireland's compliance with broader imperial affairs. However, the diverse composition of the Irish Volunteers, which included radical separatist elements, interpreted the war as an opportunity to strike for political autonomy beyond the limited scope of Home Rule.[1] To some, calls for nationalist Volunteers to enlist in the British army for the war effort justified this view, and the movement split. The vast majority, rechristened the Irish National Volunteers, supported enlistment and war service; a rump minority broke away under their original name, the Irish Volunteers.

The Ulster Volunteer Force

Shortly after the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in 1912, the Unionist opposition announced that it would resist a Catholic-dominated, Dublin-based system of "Rome Rule" by any means necessary. An alternative regional government and a defensive war were steps Sir Edward Carson (1854-1935), a Dublin-born solicitor and chairman of the Irish Unionist Parliamentary Party, and his

followers appeared willing to take in order to maintain a distinct cultural and political identity. Approximately 500,000 men and women, including political, religious, and civic leaders, celebrated "Ulster Day" on 28 September 1912 by pledging themselves to Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant, a declaration of resistance to Home Rule. Timothy Bowman's work explores how localized militia groups sprang up alongside this political protest and coordinated into the Ulster Volunteer Force in January 1913. Ulster Volunteers armed themselves with outdated British pattern rifles and imported further stock from the continent, delivered to Ulster docks by private yachts and boats. One contingent, the Loyal Dublin Volunteers, organized themselves in the capital under the command of Colonel Henry McMaster, a Dublin Grand Master of the Orange Order, a society formed in the 18th century to safeguard protestantism's cultural and political dominance in Ireland.[2] By May 1914 the membership of the UVF in Belfast alone numbered 24,509, with the organization as a whole boasting over 50,000 rifles distributed throughout Ulster.[3]

Irish Volunteer Response

Irish nationalists, represented at the parliament in Westminster by the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), feared armed Unionist opposition to Home Rule might alter the political settlement and duly adopted the Unionists' methods. Eoin MacNeill's (1867-1945) provocative article, "The North Began," featured in *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The Sword of Light), a nationalist paper published by the Gaelic League, invigorated nationalist sentiment and sparked the foundation of a rival paramilitary organization, the Irish Volunteers, to safeguard the introduction of Home Rule.[4]

The Irish Volunteers were founded in Dublin on 25 November 1913, with over 7,000 people attending the inaugural meeting.[5] The launch of the Irish Volunteers in Galway in December was greeted with equal enthusiasm. Various contemporary accounts suggest attendance to have been inspired both by the opportunity to oppose the Ulster Volunteer Force and to defend Home Rule, as well as the chance simply to participate in a mass meeting. As Patrick Maume, Senia Pašeta, and Tim McMahon have noted, between 1912 and 1918, Ireland was home to multiple nationalist organizations, whose "conflicting aims, personalities and visions for the future" were nevertheless bound by basic nationalist commonalities.[6]

The Irish Volunteers' manifesto certainly encouraged such plurality by ensuring that membership of the organization was open "to all able-bodied Irishmen, without distinction of creed, politics or social grade".[7] The provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers, selected prior to its founding, was similarly diverse. Eleven of its members were also members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, four were associated with the United Irish League and Irish Parliamentary Party, four were members of the moderate Board of Erin branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), and a further eleven had no noted affiliation.[8] Notable unaffiliated members included Patrick Pearse (1879-1916), Eamon Ceannt (1881-1916), The O'Rahilly (1875-1916), Thomas MacDonagh (1878-1916), and Joseph Plunkett (1887-1916) – all of whom would later join the IRB and be killed either during the Easter

Rising or in its punative aftermath. Another key figure in the nationalist movement, the former British diplomat, Sir Roger Casement (1864-1916), travelled to Germany shortly after the outbreak of the Great War to secure support, arms, and ammunition for the nationalist cause.

Influence on Paramilitarism in Ireland

Multiple influences informed the growth of paramiliary groups in Ireland prior to the First World War. Ulster Unionist Council and Irish Unionist Party members promoted UVF enrolment as a means of defending Unionist political interests, while British army veterans, notably Sir James Craig (1871-1940), who had served with the Royal Irish Rifles in the Second South African War, or Boer War, provided legitimacy and a degree of military professionalism.

The Irish Labour movement also contributed to the pre-war process of militarization in Ireland, though its core interests extended beyond Irish self-government toward recognition and defence of Dublin's working class.[9] In August 1913, Dublin became the scene of serious industrial strife when an Irish Transport and General Workers Union strike escalated into a bitter dispute between the city's workers and a group of about 300 employers, led by William Martin Murphy (1845-1919) and others. The rioting, strike-breaking, police brutality, and general violence that ensued prompted Jim Larkin (1876-1945), an English-born trade unionist, James Connolly (1868-1916), a Scottish-born socialist, and Jack White (1879-1946), a trade untionist and former British army officer, to form a workers' militia to protect strikers. The Irish Citizen Army (ICA) shielded demonstrators during a six-month walkout, but the strike was ultimately defeated and transport employees returned to work in January 1914. Despite conceptual divergence and lopsided membership (the ICA numbered approximately 250 men and women), Irish Volunteers' and Citizen Army interests converged in a marriage of convenience, which would be consecrated during the 1916 Easter Rising.

Unlike the UVF and ICA, various, often conflicting interests influenced the largest of the paramiliary forces, the Irish Volunteers. To maintain an apolitical façade, the Irish Volunteer provisional committee excluded Irish Party members. Many nationalist MPs nonetheless viewed the Irish Volunteers as a de facto extension of the IPP, an organization through which the leader of the Party, John Redmond (1856-1918), could "back up his demands" for Home Rule, as Volunteer excecutive member Michael Judge explained to members of the Gorey Volunteers in Wicklow.[10] Party influence was also indirectly exerted through the UIL and AOH, whose members regularly attended Irish Volunteer meetings.[11] More extreme nationalists, who favoured the physical force tradition and armed insurrection and were often affiliated with the IRB, were also drawn to the Volunteer movement. As companies were formed, IRB members were instructed to infiltrate the organization and capture as many key positions as possible.[12]

The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) carefully and closely observed the growth of the Irish Volunteers. County Inspectors reported local meetings, drilling, and organization in monthly reports to the Inspector General, Sir Neville Chamberlain (1869-1940), who in turn informed the Chief Secretary,

[Augustine Birrell (1850-1933)](#). Returns for November and December 1913 do not identify the Irish Volunteers making any significant progress. Instead, newspaper reports provide evidence of members' enthusiasm and participation throughout Ireland. In early December 1913, the *Irish Independent* questioned whether the Irish Volunteer movement would "flourish in the provinces." Forty-six provincial centres were surveyed to measure general feeling and gauge potential support in rural communities. Twenty-one centres provided positive returns; twelve centres opposed the movement and thirteen were indifferent.[13] (date for Martin cit in fn needed)

The Irish Volunteers expanded exponentially with the endorsement and patronage of the Irish Party, which lent the organization respectability, fundraising capacity, and political access. Of the thirteen provincial centres previously identified by the *Irish Independent* as being indifferent to the Volunteer movement in December 1913, nearly all reported activity in some form following John Redmond's endorsement. He and the IPP gained additional momentum following the Home Rule Bill's third reading, which passed on 25 May 1914, at which time the membership of the Irish Volunteers numbered nearly 75,000. Later that summer, Redmond published an ultimatum demanding the addition of twenty-five Irish Party representatives to the Volunteers' provisional committee. Failure to comply would result in the creation of a "rival authority", organised along the lines of existing Party structures throughout the country.[14] Irish Party influence, and the grandstanding of nationalist leaders, clearly exacerbated internal divisions within the Volunteer executive, but also led to a second wave of recruitment and greatly boosted membership. The *Irish Volunteer* newspaper commented on this phenomenon at the end of June 1914: "The growth of the movement has been so overwhelmingly rapid that some of the corps have not as yet a proper conception of the movement and their duties when they join."[15] Several weeks later, the newspaper conceded that in all social movements there were bound to be undesirable elements among the ranks, and declared, "Let's have the fools".[16]

In a similar fashion to the pre-arranged voting behaviour of Irish Party members at Westminster, Redmond's nominees on the provisional committee acted as a solid block, at times persisting with unproductive motions and disjointed business to frustrate opposition.[17] Patrick Pearse, who would go on to lead the republican forces during the 1916 rebellion, recorded his frustrations in this regard:

> I personally have ceased to be any use on the Committee. I can never carry a single point. I am now scarcely allowed to speak. The moment I stand up there are cries of "put the question," etc after the last meeting I had half determined to resign, but have decided to stick on a little longer in the hope of being useful in a later stage.[18]

By mid-July 1914, as many as 150,000 men had joined the ranks of the Volunteers.[19] The branch structure of the organization showed correlated growth, increasing over 600 per cent over by the summer, and Leitrim, King's County (Offaly) and Donegal all reported rapidly expanding Volunteer activity.[20] Over 2,000 men had joined the Cork (West Riding) Volunteers in July, an increase of twenty branches. In Galway (East Riding) membership expanded from twenty-eight to forty-nine

branches, or from 2,704 to 4,414.[21] In Ulster, the Belfast Volunteers remained comparatively small, boasting 2,100 members, but were very active. In Tyrone, however, Irish Volunteer membership stood at 8,600, double that of its UVF counterpart.[22] Activity in counties Dublin, Kerry, and Roscommon increased following nationalists' landing of arms at Howth in late July, and the subsequent killing of unarmed civilians by British soldiers at Bachelors Walk, Dublin. Kerry Volunteers were particularly embittered by the incident and redoubled their efforts to acquire rifles of their own. Roscommon was similarly stimulated. The County Inspector, G.B. Ruttledge, wrote of the effects of the gun-running and shooting in Dublin: "Nothing I know of has stirred them more for a considerable time and it has supplied any lack of earnestness in the … Volunteers movement that may have existed."[23] Though initially suspicious of the Irish Volunteer movement, by August 1914 John Redmond directed one of the greatest political bargaining chips in Irish history – a nationalist paramiliary militia boasting approximately 180,000 members. The outbreak of war, therefore, proved fortuitous for Redmond and the Irish Party. "Out of this situation", he explained, "there may spring a result which will be good, not merely for the Empire, but for the future welfare and integrity of the Irish Nation."[24]

The Great War and Irish Paramilitarism

In August 1914, it was uncertain how the Irish Volunteers and Ulster Volunteer Force would contribute to the war effort. Highlighting the historic role of the Irish Volunteers during the late 18th century, Redmond assured the House of Commons that the British army could withdraw its reserves from Ireland and allow her shores to be defended from invasion by "her armed sons", catholic and protestant, nationalist and Unionist.[25]

But many Volunteer companies acted independently. British Army reservists, who often directed drill, were called back to the colours, followed by many rank-and-file Volunteers seeking to replicate their Volunteer company's composition within the newly created Irish divisions in the British army. "The mobilisation has however left us in a pinch", wrote Maurice Moore, a retired British army veteran and cultural nationalist from County Mayo: "it takes away in one swoop some 25,000 of our soldiers and most our instructors just when they are most wanted."[26] By December 1914, over 40,000 Irish Volunteers had enlisted, not in the least due to Redmond's address at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, where he clarified that the defence of Ireland should follow "wherever the firing line extends" and thus into the theatres of the world war.

Irish Volunteers split immediately after Redmond's Woodenbridge speech, participation in "England's war" being viewed by a significant minority as counterintuitive to the movement's objectives. Roughly 10,000 men retained the moniker of Irish Volunteers, and were noted by the police as harbouring extreme, seditious views. Irish Republican Brotherhood members within the organization consolidated their influence and began to plan an insurrection, which would be staged in Dublin at Easter 1916 with the help of James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army. Redmond's adherents, who

became known as the Irish National Volunteers, retained the vast majority of men and equipment. The unit pledged itself toward home defence but failed to operate in any significant capacity beyond a brief defensive stint in Cork in 1915. A short-lived revival in 1917 failed to arouse interest and the group died away.

	Lee-Enfield and other recent English patterns	Mauser	Italian	Others	Total
Ulster Volunteer Force (30 November 1914)	29,356	17,597	5,511	2,702	55,166
National Volunteers (10 December 1914)	2,082	1,891	4,264	710	8,947
Irish (MacNeill) Volunteers (10 December 1914)	1,835	242	97	99	2,273
Totals	33,273	19,730	9,872	3,511	66,386

Table 1: Summary of Arms in Possession of Volunteer Forces in Ireland, November/December 1914[27]

Conclusion

Developments in late 19th century politics and cultural revival produced a unique Irish nationalist plurality that matured in the early decades of the 20th century. While the Ulster Volunteers drew inspiration from Unionism's historic rejection of Home Rule, the Irish Volunteers represented elements of a diverse nationalist agenda. Though not initially at the forefront of the movement, the Irish Parliamentary Party provided the Irish Volunteers with a legitimacy and respectability that produced significant membership growth. The formation of Unionist and nationalist paramilitary

forces, as well as the Irish Citizen Army, illustrate how collective social, cultural, and class identities may manifest when alienated or suppressed. It is ironic, then, that the politically unifying edifice of the First World War prompted nationlist division and radicalization. By encouraging Irish enlistment in the British army for the war effort, John Redmond and the Irish Party effectively forced nationlist Ireland to confront its own supposed cohesion. In the event, the vast majority sided with Redmond. However, encouraging enlistment "terminated", as Bulmer Hobson described it, "the cause of the Irish Volunteers on the lines on which the movement had been originally planned."[28] The Volunteers regrouped behind Eoin MacNeill, though more radical elements soon surfaced to direct the rump minority toward insurrection. Less than two years after their formation, driven in part by the Irish Republican Brotherhood's ideological influence, the Irish Volunteers, joined by the Irish Citizen Army and the Women's Auxiliary (*Cumann na mBan*), staged the 1916 Easter Rising.

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Notes

1. ↑ For an expanded study of this subject, see Stover, Justin Dolan: Delaying division. Eoin MacNeill, John Redmond and the Irish Volunteers, in: Historical Studies 8 (2007), pp. 111-123.

2. ↑ Gaston, Burce: The Loyal Dublin Volunteers. A forgotten organization, issued by Irish History Compressed (9 November 2012), online: https://www.irishhistorycompressed.com/the-loyal-dublin-volunteers-a-forgotten-organisation/.

3. ↑ W.A. O'Connell (Deputy Inspector General) to Under Secretary (Dublin Castle), Insepctor General's Monthly Report for May 1914, 15 June 1914 (TNA, CO 904/93); Summary of arms believed to be in the possession of Unionists in Ulster on the 31st of May, 1914 (NLI, Joseph Brennan papers, MS 26, 154).

4. ↑ Laffan, Michael: The North Began, issued by History Hub, online: http://historyhub.ie/the-north-began. See also, MacNeill to Stephen Gwynn, 20 May 1914 (NLI, John Redmond papers, MS 15,204).

5. ↑ Irish Independent, Freeman's Journal, 26 November 1913.

6. ↑ Ferriter, Diarmaid: The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000. London 2005, p. 36, p. 110.

7. ↑ Manifesto of the Irish Volunteers. Promulgated at the Rotunda meeting, November 25th, 1913 in: The Irish Review (Dublin), iii/34 (December 1913), pp. 503-505.

8. ↑ Bulmer Hobson, Seán McDermott, Piaras Béaslaí, Seamus O'Connor, Eamon Martin, Pádraig Ó Riain, Robert Page, Con Colbert, Michael Lonergan, Peadar Macken and Liam Mellows were members of the I.R.B. John Gore, Laurence Kettle, Maurice Moore and Tom Kettle were associated with the U.I.L. and I.P.P., Peter O'Reilly, Michael Judge, James Lenehan and George Walshe were Hibernians and Patrick Pearse, The O'Rahilly, Thomas MacDonagh, Joseph Plunkett, Roger Casement, Eamon Ceannt, Eoin MacNeill, John Fitzgibbon, Peadar White, Liam Gogan and Colm O'Lochlain were not affiliated with any organisation. Bulmer Hobson (B.M.H., W.S. 51); Hobson, Bulmer: Foundation and growth of the Irish Volunteers, 1913-14, in: Martin, F.X. (ed.): Irish Volunteers, 1913-1915, (Dublin 1963) pp. 30-1.

9. ↑ Sean Milroy to Liam de Róiste, 25 Nov. 1913 (T.C.D., Liam de Róiste papers, MS 10,539/342); Scene of disorder, in: Freeman's Journal, 26 Novemver 1913.

10. ↑ Irish Independent, 8 January 1914.

11. ↑ Joseph Kenny (Seosamh Ó Cionnaigh) recalled that the Bray Volunteers were "swamped" with AOH men, particularly after the landing of guns at Howth. Joseph Kenny (Seosamh Ó Cionnaigh) (B.M.H., W.S. 332); Patrick Garvey (B.M.H., W.S. 1,011).

12. ↑ Peter Paul Galligan (B.M.H., W.S. 170); Thomas Furlong (B.M.H., W.S. 513).

13. ↑ Those for included (Leinster): Ardee, Monasterevan, Athy, Bagenalstown, Kilkenny, Wexford; (Ulster): Armagh, Belturbet, Banbridge; (Munster): Carrick-on-Suir, Limerick, Holycross, Waterford, Cashel; (Connaught): Portunana, Claremorris, Carrick-on-Shannon, Ballina, Galway, Boyle, Castlerea. Those against, (Ulster): Dungannon, Ballymoney, Stewartstown, Lurgan, Maghera, Magherafelt, Omagh, Donegal, Derry; (Munster): Thurles, Macroom, Tipperary. Those doubtful or indifferent, (Leinster): Mullingar, Maryborough, Birr, Edenderry, Drogheda, Naas; (Munster): Clonmel, LIstowel, Dungarvan, Ennis, Glin, Fermoy; (Connaught): Ballinasloe. Irish Independent, 1 December 1913.

14. ↑ Hobson, A short history of the Irish Volunteers (N.L.I., Bulmer Hobson papers, Ms, 12,177); Martin, F.X. (ed.): The Irish Volunteers, 1913-1915. Recollections and Documents, Dublin 1963, pp. 141-143.

15. ↑ Irish Volunteer, 27 June 1914.

16. ↑ Irish Volunteer, 18 July 1914.

17. ↑ Tierney, Michael / Martin, F.X. (eds.): Eoin MacNeill. Scholar and Man of Action, 1867-1945, Oxford 1980, p. 141.

18. ↑ Cronin, Sean: The McGarrity papers. Revelations of the Irish revolutionary movement in Ireland and America, 1900-1940, Tralee 1972, pp. 48-49.

19. ↑ Lee, J.J.: Ireland 1912-1985. Politics and Society. Cambridge 1989, pp. 20-21; Irish Independent, 8 July 1914. The *Irish Times* puts the estimate at 153,000, showing an increase of 38,600 men in less than a month. See also, Table showing total number of branches and total number of members as set forth in weekly reports, 6 May-16 Dec. 1914 (N.L.I., Joseph Brennan papers, MS 26,176).

20. ↑ The number of Irish Volunteer branches recorded on 6 May was 191; this increased to 1,424 by 5 August. This yields a total increase of 645.5 per cent. 'Table showing total number of branches and total number of members as set forth in weekly reports', 6 May-16 Dec. 1914 (N.L.I., Joseph Brennan papers, MS 26,176). Numerous witness statements also document the increase in Volunteers due to the influence of the Irish Party. See particularly Michael Leahy (B.M.H., W.S. 94) and Denis Lyons (B.M.H., W.S. 73). County Inspectors' reports, King's county, March, June, July 1914 (T.N.A., CO 904/92-4).

21. ↑ Ibid.

22. ↑ County Inspector's report, Tyrone, July 1914 (T.N.A., CO 904/94).

23. ↑ County Inspectors' reports, Dublin, Kerry, Roscommon, July 1914 (T.N.A., CO 904/94).

24. ↑ Private, unmarked correspondence, 24 Aug. 1914 (N.L.I., John Redmond papers, MS 22,184). Maurice Moore later weighed in on Redmond's gamble: 'The greatest political crisis of the world was in course of evolution, and might decide the fate of Ireland; no one would be sure if England would survive it; Mr Redmond thought she would, and that a victorious England would gratefully grant the freedom she had promised to Ireland.' Moore, Maurice: A history of the Irish Volunteers, 1913-1917, unpublished manuscript, c. 1918 (N.L.I., Maurice Moore papers, MS 10,555/9).

25. ↑ The parliamentary debates, fifth series, House of Commons, lxv (20 July-10 August, 1914), pp. 1828-9.

26. ↑ Moore to Redmond, 4 Aug. 1914 (N.L.I., John Redmond papers, MS 15,207/7).

27. ↑ Summary of Arms in possession of Volunteer Forces in Ireland, November/December 1914 (NLI, Joseph Brennan papers, MS 26, 154).

28. ↑ Hobson, Short history (N.L.I., Bulmer Hobson papers, MS 12,177).

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