

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

ANTI & PRO-HOME RULE CAMPAIGNS

Edward Carson MP

Before the outbreak of war in 1914, Ireland was divided over the issue of Home Rule which had created huge tensions between unionists and nationalists. Edward Carson was a recognised political figure in Ireland and Westminster as the leader of Ulster unionism. Throughout the anti-Home Rule campaign, Carson travelled throughout Ulster rallying locals to the unionist cause. In 1913, Carson travelled to Ballymena as part of a speaking tour where he addressed locals at Ballymena show-grounds. After, Carson stayed with the Young family of Galgorm Castle, Ballymena.

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John Redmond MP

John Redmond was also a major political figure in Ireland and London as the leader of Irish nationalism from 1900-1918. Redmond campaigned for the granting of Home Rule, but firmly believed in the continual link with Great Britain. Due to the level of unionist opposition in Ulster towards Redmond's vision for a devolved government in Dublin, by 1914, Ireland was on the brink of civil war. With the outbreak of war during August 1914, Redmond on 20th September at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow, encouraged the Irish Volunteers to join the war effort.

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Eoin MacNeill and the Irish Volunteers

Eoin MacNeill was born in Glenarm in 1867. MacNeill studied at St Malachy's College, Belfast, and the Royal University of Ireland. In 1887, he started work as a clerk in Dublin. MacNeill took up the study of Irish language, history and culture and developed a theory of Irish identity which stressed culture over politics.

In 1913, MacNeill published an article, 'The North Began'. He praised the Ulster Volunteers and called for the formation of Irish Volunteers on the Ulster model. MacNeill was approached by members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) who asked him to organise a Volunteer movement. The Irish Volunteers were founded in Dublin in 1913, their numbers quickly reaching 170,000. Similarly to the UVF, the Irish Volunteers armed themselves during July 1914, landing 900 rifles at Howth.

The purpose of the Volunteers was declared as:

'to secure and maintain the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland.'

The First World War led to a split, when John Redmond, leader of the Irish Nationalist Party, encouraged the Volunteers to fight on the British side. Although, the majority of Volunteers sided with Redmond, those who remained with MacNeill were committed republicans. Patrick Pearse and other IRB members planned Volunteer manoeuvres for Easter Sunday 1916 as cover for insurrection. Learning of this, on Easter Thursday, MacNeill told Pearse that he could not allow a half-armed force to be called out. Pearse told him that a German ship bearing arms was landing at Kerry. When he heard that the ship had sunk on Saturday evening, MacNeill countermanded the order for manoeuvres. Although MacNeill took no part in the Rising, he was court-martialled and sentenced to life imprisonment after its suppression. He was released in June 1917 under the general amnesty.

When serving as Speaker of Dail Eireann in 1921, MacNeill told of the circumstances that led to his countermand. He also stated:

'Much was going forward that I knew nothing of, determined at secret meetings at which I was not present. Not until after it was all over did I come to learn the momentous decision reached by seven men who signed and published declaration of the Irish Republic.'

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Roger Casement

Roger Casement was born in Dublin to a Protestant family in 1864. By the time he was 13, both his parents had died and John Casement, his uncle, who lived in Magherintemple, Ballycastle, became his legal guardian. During his time at Ballymena Diocesan School (now Ballymena Academy), he stayed with his great uncle Francis Casement and with his relatives, the Youngs of Galgorm Castle. Throughout his life, he retained strong links with these areas.

In his 20s, Casement worked in Africa, initially for the International Association, which was controlled by King Leopold II of Belgium. From 1892, he helped British consul appointments in Mozambique, Angola, the Congo and Brazil. In 1904, he came to national and international prominence for his humanitarian work, producing a hard-hitting report exposing atrocities in the Belgian Congo. Later he investigated alleged colonial abuses in South America. His humanitarian work earned him a knighthood in 1911.

When at home, he was heavily involved in Irish cultural activities, including the 1904 Glens Feis and the Gaelic League. In 1913, he resigned from the British Foreign Office to focus on Irish politics. In November 1913, he helped Eoin MacNeill to found the Irish Volunteers and travelled to the United States to raise funds to arm them. In July 1914, he ran guns into Howth and a few days later, on the outbreak of war, he identified a new political ally in Germany, who could support an Irish rebellion. He then departed the United States and travelled to Germany via Norway to commence negotiations.

In Germany, he tried, with little success, to recruit captured Irish soldiers to an 'Irish Brigade' to fight in the planned insurrection at home. Eventually he secured a German consignment of arms, which was shipped on board the 'Aud'. He travelled with two others on a submarine and landed on Banna Strand, in Kerry, on 21st April 1916. Plans to use these arms in the Easter Rising were ruined when the Royal Navy intervened. The 'Aud' was sunk and Casement was captured. Casement was tried for treason in London, convicted and stripped of his knighthood. His execution was carried out on 3rd August, 1916.

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Ulster Volunteer Force

The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was established in January 1913, as tensions between unionists and nationalists intensified over Home Rule. Men who belonged to the Unionist Club Movement and had signed the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant the year before were encouraged by unionist leaders to join for their religious freedom and loyalty to the British Empire. By the summer of 1914, the UVF totalled approximately 100,000 men. Many men who belonged to local Unionist Clubs throughout the Mid-Antrim and Causeways areas joined UVF companies which collectively formed local battalions and regiments. In 1914, these men armed themselves by smuggling 25,000 rifles into Larne from Germany. With the outbreak of war in August 1914, the Ulster Volunteers were encouraged to support the war effort. By September 1914, the 36th (Ulster) Division was established primarily to recruit men belonging to the UVF.

Other Nationalist Uprisings in 1916 - Russia and Middle-East

By 1916, the Easter Rising dramatically transformed Irish nationalist demands and ultimately diminished support for Home Rule and Redmond. Elsewhere, nationalists in other imperial countries and territories involved in the War mobilised. These included Indians, Arabs and Russians, who combined constitutional politics, armed revolt and revolution in attempts to achieve self-governance or full independence from imperial rule.