

Why did the Irish Fight April 1916?

The rebellion, which started in Dublin on 24 April 1916, was the outcome of a series of events that had begun with the introduction of a Home Rule Bill in the House of Commons on 11 April 1912 by the British prime minister, Herbert Asquith. This was the third attempt to legislate for self-government for Ireland since 1886. However, this time it appeared the efforts of the Liberal Party and their allies in government, the Irish Parliamentary Party, would be successful. The House of Lords had lost its power of veto on bills from the House of commons in August 1911, and now the way was clear for the enactment of the Home Rule Bill within two years of its passing. The proposed introduction of Home Rule prompted strong opposition in parts of Ulster, with protests concentrated in the four counties in the north-east of the province. The majority unionist, Protestant population there was outraged by what they perceived as a threat to the union of Great Britain and Ireland. On 28 September 1912, Ulster Day, half a million people signed the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant, pledging to oppose the introduction of Home Rule. By the end of the year a volunteer militia, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), had formed to oppose Home Rule, by force if necessary.

The formation of the UVF prompted nationalist in the south of Ireland to imitate the Ulster unionists by setting up their own military force. The Irish Volunteers were founded at a meeting at the Rotunda Rink in Dublin on 25 November 1913. Unlike the UVF, however, their aim was to defend the introduction of Home Rule in Ireland.

The year 1913 had been an eventful one, particularly in Dublin. In August 1913 William Martin Murphy, a major Dublin employer, instigated an industrial dispute when he 'locked out' from their jobs employees who were members of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). The subsequent strike, led by James Larkin and James Connolly, lasted until early 1914, during which time another volunteer militia, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA), was formed to protect the interests of workers.

Tensions were heightened in 1914 as the deadline for implementing Home Rule approached. In April 1914, the UVF landed arms at Larne, an event largely ignored by the authorities. The Irish volunteers staged their own gunrunning in July and August 1914 at Howth in co. Dublin and Kilcoole in Co. Wicklow. Soldiers of the King's Own Scottish Borders, returning to Dublin city Centre after their efforts to prevent the landing of arms at Howth had failed, opened fire when a crowd on Bachelor's Walk began to jeer them. They killed four civilians.

But the event that changed the course of history, and which made the Easter Rising possible, was the outbreak of war in Europe in August 1914. The immediate consequence for Ireland was the suspension of the implementation of Home Rule until after the war. On 20 September 1914 John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, made a speech at Woodenbridge in Co. Wicklow in which he encouraged members of the Irish Volunteers to join the British Army, in anticipation that Ireland would be rewarded with Home rule at the end of the war. This prompted a split in the Irish Volunteers and the vast majority of the estimated 188,000 members followed Redmond and joined a new organization, the National Volunteers. The remaining men, at most 13,500, stayed with the Irish Volunteers and were led by Eoin MacNeil.

The Irish Volunteers formed the nucleus of the men who would participate in the Easter Rising. At a meeting of key figures in the nationalist movement at the library of the Gaelic League on 9 September 1914, it was decided in principle to stage a rebellion against British rule while the war in Europe was ongoing. The old republican dictum ‘England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity’ became the mantra of radical Irish nationalists, including Thomas Clarke, who had long regretted the failure to have an uprising in Ireland during the Boer War, when the British Army was engaged in southern Africa. The planning of the rebellion was carried out by the secret oathbound organization, the IRB. Clarke and MacDiarmada directed the course of events, rejuvenating the IRB with younger members, infiltrating other nationalist organizations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), seeking financial assistance from republican figures in the United States and building a network of like-minded individuals around Ireland. An IRB military committee was formed..... And the rest of the story is part of the information I have covered throughout 2016 and what we covered during the Easter Rising Centennial in April.

16 patriots were executed in 1916, however, I keep returning to Tom Clarke’s statement to the Irish people. I think it pretty much sums up what happened after the Easter rebellion. In fact, his countrymen made the call. Among Clarke’s last words he noted:

“I and my fellow signatories believe we have struck the first successful blow for Irish freedom. The next blow, which we have no doubt Ireland will strike, will win through. In this belief, we die happy.”

Clarke’s vision was prophetic, Ireland did indeed strike “a next blow” and it partially “won through”.