

Protestant Nationalists and the Irish Conscription Crisis, 1918¹

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The Great War had an enormous effect on Irish politics and society. At least 210,000 Irishmen fought in the war.² There were an estimated 35,000 casualties.³ The outbreak of war in Europe deferred the implementation of the Third Home Rule Bill, which ultimately ruined hopes of a parliamentary solution to the prolonged Irish constitutional crisis. It provoked a split in the Irish Volunteers, which resulted in the smaller faction launching the Easter Rising of 1916. The experiences of the men who fought in the 36th (Ulster) Division became a source of Ulster unionist pride and contributed to a sense of distinctiveness in the northern province. Perhaps most importantly, the war led to the eclipse of the constitutional nationalist movement, the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), by Sinn Féin, the principal advanced nationalist group, which would precipitate the Irish War of Independence of 1919 to 1921, and the Irish Civil War, of 1922 to 1923.

A chief cause of this eclipse was the Irish conscription crisis of 1918. Between April and June of that year moderate and advanced nationalists, the trade unions, local government, and the Catholic Church combined forces in an unprecedented display of unity in opposition to the measure. Despite the cross-party nature of anti-conscription resistance, Sinn Féin took the electoral credit for the successful campaign, which led to the destruction of the once-mighty IPP in the 1918 general election. Another significant aspect of the conscription crisis was the highly-public identification of the Catholic Church, including its hierarchy, in the campaign. As will be seen, the anti-conscription protest initially took on an avowedly confessional nature, which seemed to demonstrate the correlation between Catholicism and nationalism in Ireland. However, one neglected aspect of Irish Great War studies has been the involvement of Irish

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2 David Fitzpatrick, "Militarism in Ireland, 1900–1922", in *A military history of Ireland*, eds. Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (Cambridge, 1996), 388; Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, 2000), 6.

3 Patrick J. Casey, "Irish casualties in the First World War," *The Irish Sword* 20 (1997): 197.

Protestant nationalists in anti-conscription agitation. There is a tendency to view Irish politics as following a binary Catholic/nationalist, Protestant/unionist pattern. The experience of Protestants in the anti-conscription campaign contributes to complicating this narrative.

In 1901 there were a total of 1,150,114 Protestants in Ireland, amounting to almost 26% of the total population.⁴ In Ulster, the northern-most province, Protestants formed a majority: 883,624 individuals amounted to almost 56% of total, with the highest proportion concentrated in the six north-eastern counties.⁵ In the southern three provinces, Protestants formed a small, scattered minority, chiefly comprised of Episcopalians (members of the Church of Ireland), and was disproportionately represented in the landed, professional and commercial classes. In Ulster, where the Protestant community included 424,526 Presbyterians, the group was more diverse, and included a substantial urban working class, centred on the industrial city of Belfast.

The lines of demarcation between religious confession and political affiliation were closely drawn. The vast majority of Irish Protestants were unionists, who supported the retention of the Act of Union of 1800, which abolished the Irish parliament, and instituted rule from London. In April 1912 the Third Home Rule Bill was introduced in the House of Commons, which would create a subordinate Irish legislature in Dublin. The bill was expected to become law two years later. Ulster unionists sought to prevent the imposition of the bill on their province, insisting that the country be partitioned, with Ulster remaining under Westminster control.

Ulster resistance to Home Rule culminated in the creation of the Ulster Volunteers in 1912, a militia which numbered as many as 110,000 members by mid-1914.⁶ On 28 September 1912 a total of 237,368 men signed the Ulster Covenant, which stated that

Being convinced in our consciences that Home Rule would be disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as of the whole of Ireland, subversive of our civil and religious freedom, destructive of our citizenship, and perilous to the unity of the Empire, we ... do hereby pledge ourselves in solemn Covenant ... to stand by one another in defending ... our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and

4 W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, eds., *Irish historical statistics: population, 1821–1971* (Dublin, 1978), 49. Vaughan and Williams' figure includes tiny numbers of atheists, Jews (amounting to 3,771), and those who refused to answer the religious question on the census return.

5 Vaughan and Fitzpatrick, *Irish historical statistics*, 65.

6 Timothy Bowman, *Carson's Army: the Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910–22* (Manchester, 2007), 1.