

Ireland Topic 3: The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition, 1912-1949 | Sample answer

How did the threat and use of physical force affect Ireland during the period 1912-1923?

From 1912 and the introduction of the Home Rule Bill through to the end of the Civil War in 1923, Ireland was marked by conflict and violence. However, the actual use of violence was only part of this. The threat of it alone was often also very effective. The UVF and IVF formed before the First World War while 1916 was of course a pivotal year in the nation's history. The War of Independence, the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations and the Civil War are further examples of how the threat and use of physical force affected Ireland in this period.

The prospect of Home Rule was at the forefront of Irish politics in 1912. Having seen bills fail in 1886 and 1893 due in some part at least to the conservative House of Lords and their ability to veto, it was now closer than ever to becoming a reality due to the Parliament Act 1911 removing their veto. This terrified Ulster unionists and they reacted with the threat of violence. On September 28th 1912, almost half a million unionists signed the Solemn League and Covenant which declared to use "all means which may be found necessary" to prevent Home Rule. This threat became a reality in January 1913 when the UVF were set up and within 18 months numbered over 90,000. The Royal Irish Constabulary turned a blind eye when in 1914 the UVF organised for some 25,000 rifles and 3 million rounds to be shipped into Larne. Physical force was now a very real possibility in Ireland, particularly in the North.

Republicans responded to this by establishing the Irish Volunteers in November 1913. Seven thousand attended the very first meeting at they were 130,000 strong within 6 months. They were however not nearly as well organised as the UVF. They too ran guns in from the continent but could only purchase 1500 rifles and 45000 rounds. Although the Volunteers were initially set up by the moderate Eoin MacNeill and refused to turn to violence in the first manifesto, many leading figures in the IRB infiltrated the leadership and pushed the organisation towards extremism. Ireland was now as close to Civil War as it ever had been and the threat of physical force had become very real. However, the outbreak of WW1 delayed Home Rule and aggression from Unionists eased as they turned attention to the war effort.

However, while the war continued, republicans began to realise that “Britain’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity” and they had to strike. The Easter Rising of 1916 marks the first time that the use, rather than merely the threat, of physical force is seen in Ireland since the 1798 Rebellion. On Easter Monday, over a thousand republicans secured locations across Dublin and declared Ireland a new Republic. The problems surrounding the procurement of weapons and miscommunication as well as the small numbers involved made it a military disaster. 260 civilians were killed and this made the Rising wholly unpopular in Dublin but the swift and brutal executions of the leaders changed public opinion. They were now martyrs of a noble cause and while most had been happy with the promise of HR after the war, now full independence was demanded. While there was little genuine fighting during the Rising, the use of physical force in this instance changed Ireland immeasurably.

Ireland was now on an inevitable path towards war. The British would never allow the country leave the empire and the Irish public were now intent on seeing much more than HR introduced. January 21st 1919 saw the use of physical force return to Anglo-Irish relations when Dan Breen led the Third Tipperary Brigade in an ambush of an arms truck in Soloheadbeg. Two RIC officers were killed with the first shots of the Irish War of Independence. This “guerrilla warfare” method continued to be the strategy of the IRA throughout the war. This made it a very difficult war to fight for the British as they were rarely able to apprehend those responsible for attacks and they were forced to respond with massive shows of strength such as burning homes and businesses in the area. The use of guerrilla warfare in the War of Independence is a clear example of how the use of physical force affected Ireland in this period.

The excessive use of physical force is also important for Ireland in this period. With the RIC failing to deal with the methods of the IRA, the British government recruited former soldiers to help in their fight. These soldiers became known as “Black and Tans” for their distinctive uniform. They were a brutal force and were often responsible for horrendous attacks against the Irish. Bloody Sunday in 1920 saw 14 civilians shot dead in Croke Park in retaliation for the assassination of intelligence officers that mornings while much of Cork City was burned to the ground following an ambush. Such actions only served to strengthen the resolve of the Irish and brought about pressure from abroad about the ethicacy of their actions.

The use of physical force had, by 1921, brought the issue of Ireland to a place where it could no longer be ignored by the British government and a truce was signed. Treaty negotiations

began in October of that year and here is where the threat of physical force returns to the fore. Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith led the Irish delegation and were all too aware of how low on resources their forces were and a return to violence was simply not an option. Suspecting this, Prime Minister Lloyd George threatened an “immediate and terrible war” if they didn’t agree to their final offer of dominion status. Although they knew how unpopular the Oath of Allegiance to the crown and other parts of the agreement were, the threat of war was too great and they were forced to sign the Anglo-Irish Treaty on December 6th 1921.

Finally, the Civil War is another example of how the use of physical force affected Ireland. With deep divisions in republicanism, the Dáil and the public about the controversial Treaty, the country again seemed destined for conflict. In April 1922, Rory O’Connor and his anti-Treaty IRA forces occupied Dublin’s Four Courts. In June, the pro-Treaty forces began shelling the building with weapons received from the British in what was the beginning in earnest of a bitter Civil War. It finally ended in April 1923 but robbed the country of revolutionary leaders such as Collins, O’Connor, Liam Lynch, Harry Boland and Cathal Brugha. It also caused divides in families and in politics that would last for decades. There was also a massive financial cost to the war. The use of force following the Treaty had an immeasurable impact on Ireland.

The period 1912-23 was a time of unprecedented change in Irish history. In 1912, Home Rule was still far from a guarantee but within a decade, Ireland was a Free State with the “freedom to achieve the ultimate freedom” of independence. While it was an era of horrific bloodshed, the use of physical force in the Easter Rising and the War of Independence helped achieve republican aims. The threat of force was also key prior to the start of the Great War and during the Treaty negotiations.