

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

To what extent was the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 1921, responsible for the Irish Civil War?

Following the July 1921 truce that brought to an end the War of Independence, it was clear that now was the time for diplomacy rather than militarism. However, less than a year later, Ireland would again be at war after the controversial Anglo-Irish Treaty led in large part to a bloody Civil War. To understand the extent to which the Treaty was responsible for the outbreak of war, we must first analyse the atmosphere at the time as well as what made the Treaty so divisive and how these and other issues resulted in the violent fallout.

It must be said that the Treaty is not completely responsible for the Civil War. The attitudes of the time in Irish republicanism arguably made it inevitable. When Eamon De Valera travelled to London for preliminary talks shortly after the truce, it was quickly made clear to him that an Irish republic was never an option for the British. The strategic importance of Ireland militarily as well as the significance of losing the closest part of the Empire meant Lloyd George's position very straightforward, independence was an impossibility. And that is all that would have satisfied some hardline republicans such as Liam Lynch, Cathal Brugha and Austin Stack. Anything less than full independence would have been too much of a compromise in their eyes and they would return to war. In this way, it could be argued that even before the Treaty talks began, Civil War was inevitable because of the complexities of the situation and the attitudes of hardliners.

The controversy surrounding the Irish delegation also played a part in the eventual outbreak of war. Eamon De Valera surprisingly announced he would not travel to London and would instead remain in Dublin so the delegation would have to report back without agreeing to anything. However, historians such as Ronan Fanning and Tim Pat Coogan support the widely-held view that it may have been because he knew a satisfactory deal was impossible and those who went were to be sacrificial lambs. De Valera abstaining meant whatever deal returned would be contentious because there would inevitably be suspicions that the nation's best diplomat would have secured more. This exacerbated the divisiveness of the Treaty and is another extenuating circumstance that led to the Civil War.

There were further controversies surrounding the delegation that would later increase the outrage at the terms of the deal. The delegation was given the title of plenipotentiaries by the Dáil meaning they themselves could sign any agreement without consultation. However, they had been ordered by De Valera to report back to the cabinet with any and all developments before signing anything. The inexperienced team led by Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith came up against famed negotiators such as Lloyd George, Winston Churchill and Lord Birkenhead who used the confusion surrounding the role of the Irish delegation to their advantage. Lloyd George threatened “immediate and terrible war” if they didn’t agree to the final terms of the Treaty and did not allow them to return to Dublin. War weary, Collins, Griffith and their team signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty on December 6th 1921. The fact that they had not consulted with Dublin proved a thorny point during the Dáil debates. Allegations that they had been duped by the British made the deal all the more unpopular and was another cause of Civil War.

The terms of the Treaty itself are obviously the primary causes of the Civil War. The Oath of Allegiance for TD’s as well as the replacing of the Republic declared in 1916 with a dominion of the Commonwealth were the at the forefront of debates. Many republicans who had fought so intensely during the War of Independence and had seen so many killed in the fight for freedom refused to accept the Treaty. In the more Republican province of Munster, the deal was particularly unpopular and here is where a significant amount of the fighting in the Civil War took place. While any compromise at all would have been too much for some, such as Liam Lynch or Austin Stack, the details of Ireland’s new status was unacceptable for many and they prepared to go to war.

The Treaty Debates also played a part in strengthening the divisions caused by the Treaty and thus a part in the outbreak of war. People up and down the country discussed the issue in a variety of forums and the intensity of these debates deepened the division between those for and against ratifying the Treaty. In the Dáil too, the debates were impassioned and often became quite tense. Arthur Griffith was accused of being tricked by the British by Cathal Brugha while others called the signing of the Treaty without consulting with the cabinet treason. The narrow margin of the eventual vote, 64 to 57 in favour, made the Treaty even more contentious in the eyes of the public.

The actions of Eamon De Valera are also unquestionably responsible for the Civil War. Although he did try to put an end to the war once it began, there’s little doubt he was a

primary cause of it. Immediately following the vote on the Treaty, De Valera resigned as President and led a number of his supporters out of the Dáil in protest. Such a dramatic move was a signal to those against the Treaty across the country to turn to militarism. He then went on a controversial tour of Munster where he spoke of “wading through Irish blood” towards freedom. Historian Ronan Fanning concludes that De Valera’s cardinal sin was the “rejection of the Treaty and his consequent culpability for the civil war”.

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. The blame for the violence does not lie squarely with the Anglo-Irish Treaty, though it was the primary cause. The actions of Eamon De Valera, the controversies surrounding the Irish delegation as well as the attitude of hardline republicans also played a part.