

Chapter 1: From 1912 to Easter 1916

Introduction

Between 1912 and 1916, Ireland underwent significant political and social upheaval. The period saw the passing of the Third Home Rule Bill, the rise of militant unionism and nationalism, and the impact of World War I, culminating in the Easter Rising of 1916. These events laid the groundwork for the later struggle for independence.

1. The Third Home Rule Bill (1912)

What was Home Rule?

- Home Rule referred to limited self-government for Ireland within the United Kingdom.
- The Irish Parliament (abolished in 1801 under the Act of Union) would be restored, allowing Irish representatives to legislate on domestic affairs such as education and transport.
- However, issues such as trade, foreign policy, and defence would remain under British control.

Key Features of the Third Home Rule Bill

- Introduced by the Liberal government in 1912 under Prime Minister Herbert Asquith.
- Supported by the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), led by John Redmond.
- Passed by the House of Commons but faced strong opposition from unionists in Ireland and the Conservative Party in Britain.
- The 1911 Parliament Act meant that the House of Lords could no longer indefinitely veto legislation. However, it could delay the bill for two years, meaning Home Rule would not become law until 1914.

2. Unionist Opposition and the Ulster Crisis

Why did Unionists Oppose Home Rule?

- Unionists (mostly Protestants in Ulster) feared Home Rule would lead to 'Rome Rule'—Catholic dominance in Ireland.
- Economic concerns: Ulster's industries, particularly shipbuilding and textiles, were closely tied to Britain and might suffer under a Dublin-based parliament.

The Solemn League and Covenant (1912)

- On 28 September 1912, over 470,000 unionists signed the Solemn League and Covenant, pledging to resist Home Rule "by all means necessary."

- Led by Edward Carson and James Craig, unionists organised protests and public demonstrations.

Formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) (1913)

- The UVF was a paramilitary force created to resist the implementation of Home Rule.
- Armed with weapons smuggled from Germany during the 1914 Larne Gun Running.

3. The Rise of Nationalist Militancy

Formation of the Irish Volunteers (1913)

- In response to the UVF, Irish nationalists, led by Eoin MacNeill, formed the Irish Volunteers in November 1913.
- Aim: To defend Home Rule and resist unionist aggression.
- Supported by the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a secret revolutionary group committed to establishing an Irish Republic.

The Influence of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB)

- The IRB, led by figures such as Tom Clarke and Seán Mac Diarmada, sought complete independence from Britain.
- They infiltrated the Irish Volunteers and planned to use the force for a rebellion.

The Curragh Incident (1914)

- In March 1914, British Army officers stationed at the Curragh (Co. Kildare) threatened to resign rather than enforce Home Rule in Ulster.
- Known as the "Curragh Mutiny," this crisis demonstrated the British government's reluctance to act against unionist resistance.

4. Impact of World War I on Ireland (1914-1918)

Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP)

- John Redmond urged Irish Volunteers to enlist in the British Army, believing that loyalty to Britain during the war would ensure Home Rule's implementation after the conflict.
- This led to a split in the Irish Volunteers:
 - **National Volunteers** (over 150,000 men) followed Redmond and joined the British Army.
 - **Irish Volunteers** (around 11,000 men) rejected Redmond's call and remained committed to Irish independence.

The Role of the IRB and the Irish Citizen Army

- The IRB saw the war as an opportunity to strike for Irish independence while Britain was distracted.
- The Irish Citizen Army, led by James Connolly, a socialist paramilitary group, also sought rebellion.

5. The Easter Rising (April 1916)

Planning the Rising

- Organised primarily by the IRB Military Council, including Patrick Pearse, Tom Clarke, and James Connolly.
- Originally planned to involve all Irish Volunteers, but Eoin MacNeill opposed an insurrection unless it was a defensive action.
- Roger Casement attempted to secure German arms, but the weapons were intercepted by the British navy off the coast of Kerry.

Events of the Rising

- Began on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, with approximately 1,500 rebels seizing key buildings in Dublin.
- The General Post Office (GPO) became the headquarters of the rebellion.
- Patrick Pearse read the **Proclamation of the Irish Republic**, declaring Ireland's independence.

British Response

- British forces responded with artillery, destroying large parts of central Dublin.
- After six days of fighting, the rebels surrendered on 29 April 1916.

6. Aftermath of the Rising

Executions and Public Reaction

- Sixteen rebel leaders were executed between 3-12 May 1916, including Pearse, Connolly, and Clarke.
- Initially, the general public was hostile towards the rebels, blaming them for destruction and loss of life.
- However, the executions generated widespread sympathy, turning public opinion in favour of Irish independence.

Political Consequences

- Sinn Féin, previously a minor party, gained significant support as the main nationalist movement.
- The British government imposed martial law in Ireland, further increasing nationalist resentment.

Conclusion

- The period from 1912 to 1916 saw increasing divisions in Irish society between nationalists and unionists.
- The failure of Home Rule, the outbreak of World War I, and the Easter Rising set the stage for the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921).

Key Terms

- **Home Rule** - Limited self-government for Ireland within the UK.
- **Unionism** - The belief that Ireland should remain part of the UK.
- **UVF** - Ulster Volunteer Force, a unionist paramilitary group.
- **IRB** - Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret revolutionary group.
- **Easter Rising** - Armed rebellion against British rule in April 1916.