

Chapter 3: The Anglo-Irish Treaty and the Irish Civil War

Introduction

The signing of the **Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921)** marked a turning point in Irish history. While it ended the War of Independence, it also **divided the nationalist movement** and led to the outbreak of the **Irish Civil War (1922-1923)**. The treaty debates exposed deep ideological rifts between those willing to accept dominion status within the British Empire and those who demanded a fully independent republic.

1. The Treaty Negotiations (October-December 1921)

The Irish Delegation

- Led by **Arthur Griffith** (Minister for Foreign Affairs) and **Michael Collins** (IRA leader & Minister for Finance).
- Other key figures: **Robert Barton**, **George Gavan Duffy**, **Éamonn Duggan**.
- **Éamon de Valera**, the President of the Dáil, did not attend, preferring to direct negotiations from Ireland.

The British Delegation

- Led by **David Lloyd George** (Prime Minister of Britain).
- Supported by **Winston Churchill**, **Lord Birkenhead**, and **Austen Chamberlain**.
- Britain aimed to keep Ireland within the **British Commonwealth** and ensure **naval control over Irish ports**.

Key Issues in Negotiations

1. **Ireland's Status** - Would Ireland be fully independent or remain within the British Empire?
2. **Partition** - The future of Northern Ireland and whether the Treaty could lead to unity.
3. **Oath of Allegiance** - Whether Irish politicians would have to swear loyalty to the British King.
4. **British Military Presence** - Britain insisted on controlling Irish ports (the 'Treaty Ports').

The Signing of the Treaty (6 December 1921)

- The Irish delegation **signed without consulting de Valera**, arguing Britain had issued an **ultimatum**: sign or face war.
- **Main Terms of the Treaty:**
 - Ireland became the **Irish Free State**, a **dominion** of the British Commonwealth.
 - Irish representatives had to **swear an oath of allegiance** to the British crown.
 - Britain retained control of **Treaty Ports** (Cobh, Berehaven, Lough Swilly).

- Northern Ireland had the option to remain part of the UK (which it did).

2. The Treaty Debates (December 1921 – January 1922)

Arguments for the Treaty (Pro-Treaty Side)

- **Michael Collins:** "It gives us the freedom to achieve freedom."
- Believed it was the best deal possible and would lay the foundations for full independence.
- Prevented further war with Britain, which Ireland was not prepared for.
- Recognised internationally as an Irish state.

Arguments Against the Treaty (Anti-Treaty Side)

- **Éamon de Valera:** Opposed the oath of allegiance and dominion status.
- Felt it betrayed the republic declared in 1916.
- Believed Britain had forced the agreement under threat of war.

Outcome of the Debate

- **Dáil vote on 7 January 1922:**
 - **64 votes in favour, 57 against** → The Treaty was narrowly accepted.
 - **De Valera resigned as President of the Dáil** and led the anti-Treaty opposition.
 - **Pro-Treaty leaders formed a Provisional Government** under Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins.

3. The Outbreak of Civil War (June 1922 – May 1923)

Growing Divisions

- The IRA split into **Pro-Treaty (Free State Army)** and **Anti-Treaty forces**.
- Anti-Treaty forces seized **Dublin's Four Courts** in April 1922.
- Collins and the Free State Government attempted to negotiate, but divisions deepened.

The Attack on the Four Courts (June 1922)

- **28 June 1922:** Free State Army, using British-supplied artillery, attacked the Four Courts.
- **Anti-Treaty leaders Rory O'Connor and Liam Mellows were captured.**
- This marked the official beginning of the Irish Civil War.

Key Events of the Civil War

1. **Dublin Fighting (June-July 1922)** - Anti-Treaty forces forced out of Dublin.
2. **Guerrilla Warfare (July 1922 - March 1923)** - Anti-Treaty IRA used ambush tactics against the Free State.
3. **Assassinations (August 1922)** - Michael Collins was killed in an ambush in **Béal na Bláth, Co. Cork**.

4. **Free State Offensive (Autumn 1922)** - Free State forces took control of Cork, Limerick, and Kerry.
5. **Execution of Anti-Treaty Leaders (1922-1923)** - Free State executed **77 Anti-Treaty prisoners**, including Rory O'Connor, Liam Mellows, and Erskine Childers.

End of the War (May 1923)

- De Valera ordered Anti-Treaty IRA to surrender.
- The war officially ended without a peace treaty.
- Thousands of Anti-Treaty fighters were imprisoned.

4. Consequences of the Civil War

Political Consequences

- The **Pro-Treaty side (Cumann na nGaedheal)** led the Irish Free State.
- **Fianna Fáil** was later founded by **de Valera** in 1926 as the main opposition.

Social & Economic Consequences

- **Deep bitterness and division in Irish society.**
- Thousands of casualties and destruction of infrastructure.
- Free State government emerged but remained politically unstable.

Conclusion

- The Anglo-Irish Treaty was a **compromise that divided Ireland**.
- The Civil War **cemented a split** between Pro-Treaty and Anti-Treaty factions, shaping Irish politics for decades.
- Despite the war, Ireland remained on the path to full sovereignty, which was achieved in **1937 (Constitution)** and **1949 (Republic of Ireland)**.

Key Terms

- **Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921):** Agreement that ended the War of Independence but kept Ireland within the British Commonwealth.
- **Oath of Allegiance:** Controversial clause requiring Irish leaders to swear loyalty to the British King.
- **Michael Collins:** IRA leader, Treaty negotiator, and later Commander-in-Chief of the Free State Army.
- **Éamon de Valera:** Anti-Treaty leader, later founder of Fianna Fáil and Taoiseach.
- **Four Courts Attack (1922):** Start of the Irish Civil War, when the Free State Army attacked anti-Treaty forces in Dublin.
- **Béal na Bláth:** Site of Michael Collins' assassination in August 1922.