

WINNING THE WAR: THE MEMORY AND REALITY OF  
THE I.R.A. IN WEST CORK

by

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The history of modern Ireland is a history of resistance, spanning from the storied 1798 rebellion to the current reverberations of the sectarian insurgency in Northern Ireland. Every part of Ireland has been touched by the long history of conflict, but perhaps nowhere more than West Cork. A historical redoubt of Irish freedom fighters, it has been the scene of epic struggles in its rough foothills and shining bays, although today its people and landscape reflect an outward tranquility at odds with its past. Before the wilderness of Kerry rises from the Atlantic in the West, the settlement of Skibbereen guards the foothills of the Ring of Kerry and Roaringwater Bay. The gentle River Ilen flows through the valley town: off to the south and north are increasingly rough hill country, with the ancient route east now paved by a modern road. Looking westwards, Mount Gabriel rises sentinel over the Mizen and Sheep's Peninsulas and the hazy outline of the mountains guarding The Kingdom of Kerry.

Skibbereen is linked to the world by the N71, a modern name for the artery that for centuries has pulsed the bodies and ideas of Western Irish people across Ireland and the world. Historical plaques mark important sites, and the hard work of local historians

has recently uncovered the dark past of the iconic town as a haunting example of Famine suffering and the subsequent birthplace of modern Fenianism under O'Donovan Rossa. The Maid of Erin stands in the center of town, inscribed with the dates of the Irish insurrections, though little other visible evidence shows the marks of resistance in Skibbereen. The history of Skibbereen, and the town's role in modern resistance, is hidden beneath the face of modernity in Ireland - though it is still remembered by popular memory and a handful of personal accounts. This piece is an attempt to break the silence about Skibbereen's importance in shaping Ireland as a nation, and the important place of her experience within the history of modern resistance.

Like much of Irish history, the history of the Irish Revolutionary Period (1916-1923) has been obscured by post-war revisionism, enduring community divisions, character aggrandizement and fear. The dominance of figures such as Eamon deValera, Michael Collins, Cathal Brugha, Tommy Barry and the Hales Brothers in the discussion of the period has overshadowed the stories and accomplishments of ordinary men and women. In Skibbereen, the embers of Fenianism were coaxed to life by through the nationalist Irish Volunteers and stirred by the echoes of battle on Easter 1916. Skibbereen, and the rest of West Cork, became the epicenter of the military struggle during the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921) under the Irish Republican Army. The signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) and the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, despite being the image of the liberation of the Irish people and the end of 700 years of occupation, did more to injure Irish communities than any other event in modern Irish history.

Political motives infected the portrayal of events and the savagery, brutality and deep sadness of Irish Civil War (1922-1923) marked both its witnesses and future

generations. This work seeks to piece together the experiences and accomplishments of local actors, through the use of personal interviews, with the documented history of the Anglo-Irish War to uncover the importance of Skibbereen's wartime experience in explaining the reasons behind the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and the bloody Irish Civil War.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Professor Dracobly, Braun and Peixoto for helping me to fully examine the specific topic and consider the various perspectives and contexts related to this subject matter. The dedication of their time, energy and expertise cannot be understated in its importance to this final product. Though difficult and time-consuming, their patience with myself and the material can only be expressed by my sincerest gratitude.

I would like to also thank Terri Kearney, without whom none of this would be possible. Her mentorship, along with Philip O'Regan's, were the only reason I was able to produce this. Their energy, passion and love for history and the stories of the Irish people were inspirational throughout the entire process. They - along with every employee of the Skibbereen Heritage Centre – made the entire process not only invigorating but meaningful.

To my family, not enough can be said. From the first seeds of ideas to final drafts, they gave me feedback and support. More importantly, they continue to remind me why this work is vital - not only to Irish communities, but Irish families as well. If all credit was due them, another 100-page document would be in the works. Of my interviewees: their hospitality and generosity to myself, and devotion to remembering the forgotten men of the 4<sup>th</sup>, was truly humbling. I hope that this does them, and the veterans of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, justice.

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## Introduction

On a foggy day in 1921, an Italian steamer caught sight of a rocky Irish headland. Signaled by flashing lights, several small vessels began rowing out to the boat and ferrying the steamer's cargo to awaiting horses and carts. Breathing plumes of steam, working horses hauled their heavy payload north, down country lanes brightening in the early morning light, to several villages and hamlets. Laid in pits and hollowed field walls, the entire load of that mysterious Italian steamer was hidden by nightfall. The British Marines and Navy personnel watching the coast never saw or heard a thing, the heavy fog dampening the sight and sound of the clandestine endeavour.

The British administration in Ireland was completely ignorant of what had just happened, until it was made suddenly and rudely clear. The Irish Republican Army had just offloaded the largest weapons payload yet landed in Ireland by Irish revolutionaries. Up to 100,000 Austro-Hungarian rifles with ammunition, dozens of machine guns and assorted small arms were now dispersed to operational areas to frontline units of the Irish Republican Army. Attacks in Limerick, Galway, and Cork begin in earnest and British strong points fall like dominoes to a concerted and invigorated Irish Republican assault.

The fact that this never occurred reflects little in the impact of the story itself. A truce came into effect before any Italian ship ever left port, but this false history is vitally important in understanding the mindset of individuals who experience conflict. The men who planned and prepared tirelessly for the outline of that weapons' ship on the horizon are the men of this story - men whose efforts and ambitions came to

nothing, and their potential never realized.

This piece is focused on the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921), examining pre-war Irish Republican preparations through to the post-war effects of the conflict - particularly on the impact of revisionism and local memory. The purpose of this examination is to form a clearer understanding of the military and civil affairs in the area under the control of Skibbereen I.R.A. in order to identify repressed memory and the root causes of later violence. The revolutionary activities and accomplishments of the local 4th (Skibbereen) Battalion of the Irish Republican Army are retrieved through personal interviews and archival testimonies of local participants and their relatives. This picture, in turn, illuminates larger truths about the Irish Revolutionary Period (1916-1923) and the reasons for lasting violence in Ireland.

Beginning officially on January 21st, 1919, the Anglo-Irish War was a conflict typical of revolutionary struggles. Irish separatists, envisioning an Irish Republic, fought against the combined police, paramilitary and military forces of the British Empire. Working through secretive and underground organization, like the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood and the illegal Dáil Éireann government, Irish separatists worked diligently to undermine the British administration. Simultaneously, these Irish Republicans began a military struggle against British power in Ireland as well. Formed first into the Irish Volunteer militias, and then into the Irish Republican Army, Irish independence fighters developed two forms of warfare. The first consisted of a counter-intelligence campaign, carried out most intensely against the British intelligence system in Dublin Castle. The second was a dismounted, column-mobile form of guerrilla warfare. Used predominantly in the rural areas in the south and west of Ireland, these guerrilla fighters assaulted barracks, burned buildings, and ambushed British forces

relentlessly. Finally, in July of 1921, a ceasefire came into effect, followed by the acceptance of an Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) that partitioned the country and created an Irish Free State. Igniting a bloody, year-long civil war in Ireland, the end of the Anglo-Irish War was by no means the end of intense violence in Ireland.

There is always difficulty in approaching the history of any conflict, as by nature, the history is imbued with the memory of violence and its manipulation by those who claim victory. The Irish Revolutionary Period, at this writing remembered and reflected on in the midst of its centenary, is no exception to this difficulty. If anything, the enduring violence and political-religious animosity in parts of the country as a result of those years makes its discussion difficult, uncomfortable and vitally important. A well-established understanding of modern post-conflict societies is that open and free discourses about past trauma can help heal communities, and reconnect individuals with a healthy sense of community and heritage. In a place like Ireland, which still feels the shocks of political violence today, there is a vital role in illuminating the roots, causes and motives behind historical violence. History, heritage, and memory have all been claimed as political tools in Ireland to advocate violence, and if the remembrance of past violence is not holistically investigated and examined then history will continue to be used as a tool for political purposes.

Following the end of Irish Civil War hostilities in 1923, Republican prisoners were slowly released and their leaders assimilated into the political structure of the Irish Free State. Chief among these reconciled Republican headmen was Eamon deValera, a veteran of the 1916 Easter Rising and President of Dáil Éireann before leading the Anglo-Irish Treaty opposition into exile alongside the anti-Treaty faction of the Irish Republican Army. DeValera would recover from the period he spent on the run across

the desolated countryside of Munster and Connaught, and go on to dominate Irish politics. His political rebirth began when he founded and became leader of the Fianna Fáil Party in 1926 and, building upon his image as a nationalist icon, deValera became Leader of the Opposition the next year. Eamon deValera went on to hold both the offices of Taoiseach and President of the Republic of Ireland for 14 years each. Finally stepping down in 1973, deValera had shaped the face of modern Irish politics and governed the Irish people.

The influence of his politics and presence were central in shaping the modern historiography of Ireland, especially concerning the documentation of the Revolutionary Period. Testimonies and interpretations were stored and sealed, and though “there is hardly any documentation of discussion of the subject, it is probable that de Valera and others were nervous about any investigation of the Civil War”<sup>1</sup> as potentially damaging to deValera’s image as the head of state. The political atmosphere of Ireland fundamentally shaped how the Revolutionary Period was portrayed, as “Fianna Fáil was determined to play a role in how the revolutionary period was remembered, but it was also understood that the project would have no credibility if it was mistrusted or boycotted by Fine Gael.”<sup>2</sup> Fine Gael, led by deValera’s old Free State opponents from the Civil War, would not accept a historiographic pardon of the Civil War Republicans and subsequently the understanding of the Revolutionary Period was reduced to a series of larger-than-life characters and political power moves that ignored the more complicated motives of the men and women risking their lives in battle.

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<sup>1</sup>Diarmuid Ferriter, "in such deadly earnest" Edited by Brendan Barrington. (The Dublin Review, Autumn 2003), <http://thedublinreview.com/article/in-such-deadly-earnest/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ferriter, "in such deadly earnest".

The history of the Irish Revolutionary Period has since been dominated by the interpretive lenses used by historians and politicians. The post-war revisionism was dotted with the personal memoirs of figures like Tom Barry and Ernie O'Malley, whose accounts revered the martyrs of the struggle and the idealism of Romantic Nationalism. Recent reinterpretations of these works, however, communicate a "revulsion on the part of significant sections of a new generation of historians against the consequences of the Gaelic republican triumph"<sup>3</sup> which glorified the I.R.A.'s violence and the utopian vision of the Irish Republic. The history of Revolutionary Ireland, especially after the end of deValera's rule in the 1970s, then fundamentally shifted to include the "important and pioneering works published in the 1970s and 1980s which did examine both labour and agrarian conflicts during the revolutionary period."<sup>4</sup>

One of the most controversial figures of this period is Peter Hart, whose post-revisionist approach re-examined the Revolutionary Period with a critical lens. Arguing that sectarianism ran through West Cork communities and that the I.R.A. systematically targeted Protestants, Hart relied on Irish and British revisionist evidence - which was either anti-Republican or reductionist memoirs and documents - and sparked heated debates about the enduring role of religion in modern Ireland. Hart's arguments have also been the cause of significant backlash from Irish historians, especially after serious questions of the validity of Hart's sources were raised. The current stage of Irish Revolutionary historiography has been led by collection of essays on the Irish Revolutionary Period, which unfortunately "maintained no systematic study of either

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<sup>3</sup>David George Boyce, and Alan O'Day, *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996), 108.

<sup>4</sup>Fergus Campbell and Kevin O'Shiel. "The Last Land War? Kevin O'Shiel's Memoir of the Irish Revolution (1916-21)." In *Archivium Hibernicum* 57 (2003), 170.

the extraordinary wave of strike activity in Ireland between 1917 and 1923 or the dramatic outbreak of agrarian agitation in the West of Ireland” despite criticism for its return to the “pre-occupations of ‘high’ politics and ‘military struggle’”<sup>5</sup>. This new wave of historical study was formed as a resistance of its own against the divisive nature of Peter Hart’s ‘sectarian motive’ image of Irish Republicans.

The recent release of the Bureau of Military History Collection, featuring the testimonies of thousands of participants in the Irish Revolutionary Period, has for the first time made it possible to look at the perspective of local actors in the conflict. Collected between 1947 and 1957, the Collection was organized was organized by a concerned group of historians and social documentarians. At its origin, the Cork historian P.S. O’Hegarty suggested that projects like the Collection could “counteract the insidious views of ‘social ideologists’ who were attempting, in his view, to perpetuate a ‘post-insurrection ideology’” that undermined the reality of the conflict for many Irishmen and women.<sup>6</sup> Founded as a tool to more accurately portray the experience of conflict, the Collection “succeeded in collecting a huge and extremely diverse body of source material on the revolutionary period that is of international importance, [but] it failed to secure the cooperation of many survivors of the 1913-1921 period who subsequently rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, many of whom perceived it as a ‘Free State’ project.”<sup>7</sup> The Collection was certainly impacted by the revisionist interpretation of the Irish Revolutionary Period, but it’s image as a project from the Free State capital in Dublin dissuaded many rural Republicans from

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>6</sup> Ferriter, “in such deadly earnest”.

<sup>7</sup> “Guide to the Bureau of Military History.” The Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921. <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/about.html>.

participating in the Collection. Despite lacking the testimonies of important figures like Tom Barry, who represented a staunch Republican interpretation of the conflict, the Collection in fact contains the testimonies of most officers in the I.R.A. unit operating in Skibbereen.

The combination of the Bureau of Military Archives, alongside the diverse historiography of the Irish Revolutionary Period, provides one picture of the conflict as it played out in West Cork. However, the aforementioned caution of some Republicans in approaching the Bureau makes it difficult to reliably conclude a comprehensive picture of events. In order to resolve this, the folklore of the region concerning the Irish Revolutionary Period was collected in a series of interviews. In combining folklore with formatted testimonies, documentary and secondary sources, this work builds on the work of former historians to provide the format for future research as a synthesis of these histories. Political and social factors in Ireland have divided and categorized historical interpretations, developing factions of interpretative theory that prevents an objective or holistic picture of the reality the Irish Revolutionary Period.

With the documented history of the Anglo-Irish War warped and shaped by political influences, the local histories of rural areas can help to piece together a personal, local and regional view of the conflict. Reflecting larger trends, simply stories or event are crucial in reconstructing an accurate understanding of the conflict. The testimonies and interviews of both participants and carriers of folklore histories reveal the reality of the situation, as told by the veterans and witnesses who have not yet been heard. They are undoubtedly the crucial missing piece in the history of Revolutionary Ireland, as the stories of witnesses and veterans with information that were considered controversial remained alive in the stories told around dinner-tables, through doorways

and windows, over pints and cups of tea and beneath the scrutiny or judgement of a tumultuous historiography.

Collecting oral history is a delicate process. In this case, interviews were conducted either in the Skibbereen Heritage Center or in the homes of interviewees. The interviews themselves hinged on eight central questions:

1. Did you have any relatives involved in the War of Independence, either with the British forces or the I.R.A. and Cumman na mBan?
2. What role did those relatives play and in what area were they involved?
3. Do you know of any involvement by those relatives in the Skibbereen Battalion area, between Leap and Baltimore roughly?
4. Do you know of any other stories from the Battalion area?
5. Have you heard of a planned landing of Italian arms at Squince, near Union Hall?
6. Do you have any information about Sam Kingston or Neilus Connolly?
7. Do you have information or stories about the Republican Courts, Republican Police or Cumman na mBan?
8. In your personal opinion, do you think that the I.R.A. in Skibbereen - or West Cork - area achieved a victory? Put another way, were they able to prevent the British from controlling the area or establish in part or in whole the Irish Republic they envisioned?

The main purpose of these interviews was gaining any basic information about events, dates and prominent individuals that could be cross-referenced with the Military History Bureau's Collection, with a focus on gaining a broad picture of the folklore's view of the conflict. Every interview contained information not covered by these questions or their answers, as interviews were purposefully made as conversational as possible. Many blunders have been made by outside historians in collecting oral histories from local inhabitants, the gravest being an air of pretension or 'airs' that shut down free discourse. These interviews were surprisingly full of detail, and in most cases



were able to cite the dates of events and full names of participants. Coupled with testimonies from the Military History Bureau, a fuller picture of the independence struggle and its legacy is possible.

It is absolutely necessary here to bring in the complexities of gender in this study. Women were active and crucial actors during the Irish Revolutionary Period - yet no comprehensive history of their experience and effect has yet been established. This work is, unfortunately, not a large contributor to such a history. The folklore and discourse of the period in Ireland tend to occur in gendered spaces, and hence, largely inaccessible to myself. It cannot be understate the necessity of the study of women's histories, especially the brave and courageous Irish women who served in the women's paramilitary organization Cumann na mBan during the Irish Revolutionary Period. Acting as scouts, spies, couriers, smugglers, medical and command staff, and soldiers, the women of Ireland bore the strain of war with grace and distinction. No Republican account of the period that I have read fails to emphasize the importance of these women in the struggle for independence. Though pieces of Irish history can be recovered in absence of this history, no comprehensive understanding of the conflict in larger terms can be achieved with any accuracy. Until a women's history of the Irish Revolutionary Period is written, at least half of the Irish experience remains uncovered.

A short examination of contemporary folklore and the tradition of Irish story-telling is necessary to show the strengths and weaknesses of collecting this kind history in Ireland. Structured forms of folklore pre-date Christianity in Ireland in the form of the ancient Druid's specialization as proto-historians and story-tellers, later adopted by both itinerant and local *seanchaithe* who stored and compiled histories as respected members of the Irish community. This tradition of story-telling has been adapted and

modernized, with a great number of families and individuals across the area dedicating time and effort to compile, save and record local histories. Compared to the established historiography, these local histories have largely been preserved through folklore and oral histories largely untouched by academic and political posturing. In the post-war period, Republican leaders often “depicted anybody who wasn’t supporting them as being pro-British...Well...There was always a big middle ground...and all those would have been constitutional nationalists and not pro-British as would have been depicted,”<sup>8</sup> and revisionist and post-revisionist historians focused on either supporting or these depictions through supplemental data. Historians are now turning to these story-tellers and local folklore, as they realize that “statistics cannot properly recreate the variations of individual experience” and folklore “material forms the basic starting point for coming to grips with the diaspora [of Irish historiography]. It also represents an attempt of modern scholarship to provide a fuller description of Irish communities. Such work thus far is not consistent in its findings and is sometimes controversial.”<sup>9</sup> The controversies surrounding the resilience of memory, and the validity of these sources in the historical discussion, are resolved in this work through the use of mutually supplementary and supportive secondary and documentary material.

The use of such material in investigations of Irish history are vital, especially when dealing with the painful memory of the Irish Revolutionary Period. As a tool for post-conflict reconciliation and forgiveness, folklore is critical in forming a legitimate and inclusive memory. Especially where violence directly affects communities, a

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<sup>8</sup>Author’s Personal Collection, “Interview 6”, (Interview transcripts, notes, and M4A audio files, Skibbereen Historical Society, Skibbereen, Co.Cork, Summer 2016).

<sup>9</sup>Boyce, and O’Day, *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*, 196.

comprehensive history allows for the input of community members as carriers of folklore, balancing perspectives and prejudices. Irish communities that experienced long-term violence, like Skibbereen, are vulnerable to re-interpretations of conflicts that speak for one faction or another; risking divisions, animosity and potentially violence. Fundamentally, the collected folklore of Skibbereen seeks to achieve Kevin Whelan's description:

The work of memory (*travail de memoire*) is to establish a proper balance between mourning and melancholia.<sup>10</sup>

A short mention of the use of language in this piece is also necessary, especially given the nuanced form of political language that has dominated the discussion of the Irish Revolutionary Period. For example, the use of 'Anglo-Irish War' as opposed to 'Irish War of Independence' is purposeful here. Whereas the latter insinuates complete freedom from British rule, the former is an alternative that recognizes the longevity of the Anglo-Irish conflict. Though fundamentally separating the struggle for independence in the northern and southern counties of the country, the term Anglo-Irish War is used to describe the hostilities between Irish and British forces between 1919 and 1921. Though a study of the Republican side of the conflict would obviously engender a Republican-friendly bias, the aim of this piece is not to advocate or support a political purpose but instead to attempt to understand the reasons for violence in a post-revolutionary society.

The ultimate purpose of gathering and examining the oral histories of the experience of

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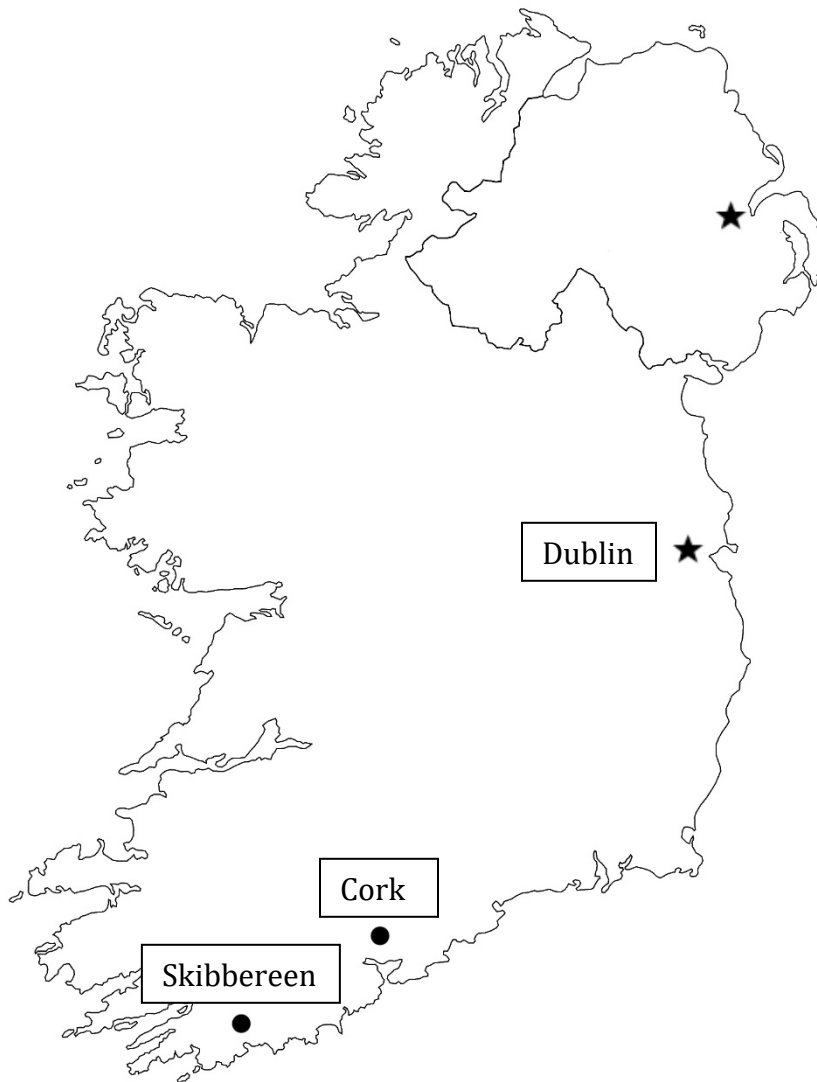
<sup>10</sup>Kevin Whelan, "Between Filiation and Affiliation: The Politics of Postcolonial Memory", In *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, edited by Clare Carroll and Patricia King, (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 92.

war in West Cork was to illuminate a new perspective of the conflict. Using local oral histories alongside testimonies from the Military History Bureau's Collection, the local successes of units like the 4th (Skibbereen) Battalion of the I.R.A. that have been suppressed or repressed by the historiographical dominance of an 'Irish Free State' memory can be uncovered and investigated. It is this suppressed memory that helps to explain the civil conflict in Ireland between Free Staters and Republicans during the Irish Civil War.



Image 1: Remembering the War I

The memory of the conflict, which touched every resident of the area, is still visible today. Local inhabitants of the Skibbereen area, devoid of a structured way to remember their Republican family members, collected and stored artifacts of the conflict. Above is a picture of a former Dublin Metropolitan Policeman, who served with the I.R.A. in West Cork and the medals he received for his service from the Irish government. Source: Author's Personal Collection.



Map 1: Map of Ireland

Ireland, lying close to Great Britain and controlling vital trade routes to the rest of the Empire, has been the historic site of repeated risings and insurrections against the British government. With the prospect of Home Rule looming, the island threatened to erupt into all-out war. Source: Author's Personal Collection.

## Historical Background

The Home Rule Crisis that was born from the efforts of the United Irishmen, who were influenced by the republican revolutions in France and America, was the political catalyst for modern revolutionary activity in Ireland. Despite a failed armed uprising in 1798, the United Irishmen's ideals would survive to shape the work of the Fenians of the 1840s and the subsequent modern nationalist movements in Ireland. As the 19-century came to a close and the Irish Parliamentary Party (I.P.P.) achieved unprecedented constitutional victories in Westminster, nationalist movements developed the "doctrine of republicanism, expounded by the United Irishmen in the 1790s, [that] gave Irish nationalists a distinct political goal, embodying complete independence from Great Britain and a workable alternative government."<sup>11</sup> With the dawn of a new century, Irish Nationalists came to embrace an internationalist perspective of the Irish struggle for self-government and used the period to consolidate, recruit and train revolutionary groups. Irish Nationalists embraced the use of "subversive expressions of solidarity or joint inspiration...as captured in Daniel O'Connell's often repeated 1840s slogan, 'England's Difficulty is Ireland's Opportunity', which was revived by Irish nationalists in 1899 to broadcast their support of the Boers."<sup>12</sup> As the I.P.P. gained power as a tie-breaker against Irish Unionists in Westminster, Irish Nationalists prepared for political upheaval.

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<sup>11</sup>Mike Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, (Master's thesis, Georgia State University, 2011), 1.

<sup>12</sup>Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9-10.

To begin with, Irish Nationalists needed a political platform to validate their struggle against British rule. In 1905, Arthur Griffith founded the Sinn Féin political party with an emphasis “as its name suggests, on self-reliance and self-development expressed in non-violent resistance, parliamentary co-operation, and the cultivation of local culture and the Irish language.”<sup>13</sup> The pitch of the Home Rule Crisis took on new dimensions as the Protestant Unionists in Ulster armed and organized to resist what they saw as Catholic Papism under the guise of Home Rule. The organization of the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers in 1913 was secretly headed by the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.) was intended to counter the formation of the Unionist Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.). The outbreak of war in 1914 led the leader of the I.P.P. to pledge the Irish Volunteers to the British war effort, causing a split in the organization between those in favor of Constitutional Nationalism and Revolutionary Nationalism. Unknown to either Irish Parliamentarians or the British administration, the radical I.R.B. had successfully and thoroughly infiltrated the Irish Volunteers, Sinn Féin and the Irish Citizen Army. As a revolutionary organization, “the I.R.B. was dedicated to the establishment of an Irish republic and generally endorsed violent, conspiratorial means to achieve this goal.”<sup>14</sup> With Home Rule suspended until the end of the conflict, the I.R.B. saw its opportunity to strike and did so during Easter Week, 1916.

The I.R.B. intended to seize and fortify points across Dublin, while the Irish Volunteer units across the country rose up and moved to strategic points to strike British

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<sup>13</sup>Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>14</sup>Jason K. Knirck, *Imagining Ireland's Independence: The Debates over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 17.



reinforcements. Organized by an internal cadre of I.R.B. officers, their plan for the Easter Rising was thwarted by the failed landing of German arms on the southern Irish coastline. Deciding to go ahead with the planned seizure of Dublin city centre, without the mobilized support of the rural Irish Volunteers, the organizers of the Rising prepared for battle. The Rising, according to the Romantic Republicanism of key leaders within the movement, was intended as a blood sacrifice to awaken the political power of the Irish people. The failure to mobilize the rural Volunteers and the overwhelming force of the British military certainly meant that the Rising's hopes at military success were dim.

Occupying vital buildings in the heart of Dublin city, the Easter Rebellion held out valiantly against overwhelming British manpower and a devastating artillery barrage. Isolated and entrenched, the leaders of the Rising eventually surrendered to the British forces and were executed by the British administration in Ireland. Though imprisoned or on the run, the I.R.B. organizers of the Easter Rising succeeded in “inspired the next cadre of guerrillas-to-be, particularly in Munster, to seek a second rising. They, like their heroes, faced considerable opposition from moderates within I.R.B. and Volunteers ranks - and from Sinn Féin as well. Ultimately, as in 1916, this was a struggle they won by purging or outmaneuvering their enemies and taking direct action on their own.”<sup>15</sup> The independent and localized nature of the Volunteers during this period would form an early split with the Republican command in Dublin. While leaders and commanders reimagined their strategy and operational focus, Republican elements in Ireland prepared - largely of their own accord - for war. Quickly recovering

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<sup>15</sup>Peter David Hart, *The IRA at War: 1916-1923*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 85.

from the decapitation of its leaders in Dublin and building on the focus of the British administration with conditions in the capital, the Irish Volunteers began to reorganize.

The Irish Volunteers, particularly unaffected by the post-Rising British crackdown in rural areas in the west and south, elected new officers and began training again. Separated from their dead or imprisoned leaders, the re-organized Irish Volunteers were trained by the veterans of the Easter Rising who were gradually being released. It was within this early period that the Irish Volunteers were renamed the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.), illustrating their organized and military form. The I.R.A. fell under the Republican government-in-hiding in Dublin and as war loomed, Republican leaders and politicians returned to the capital to direct the struggle from there. Winning a spectacular electoral victory in 1918, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army - Sinn Féin - had succeeded in rousing the anger of the Irish population over the brutal execution of the 1916 Easter Rising leaders.

The war would take the form of a revolutionary struggle, with parallel military and civil campaigns being launched by Irish Republicans in order to destabilize, destroy and replace British organs of power in Ireland. In Dublin, the I.R.A. leadership focused on the complete destruction of the comprehensive system of spies and informers assisting the British intelligence service headquartered in Dublin Castle. Across the country, I.R.A. units formed into fast-moving guerrilla groups that struck at the British security forces in Ireland. By 1921, the I.R.A. had destroyed much of the British ability to control the country and the Republicans had successfully engaged British military and intelligence forces.

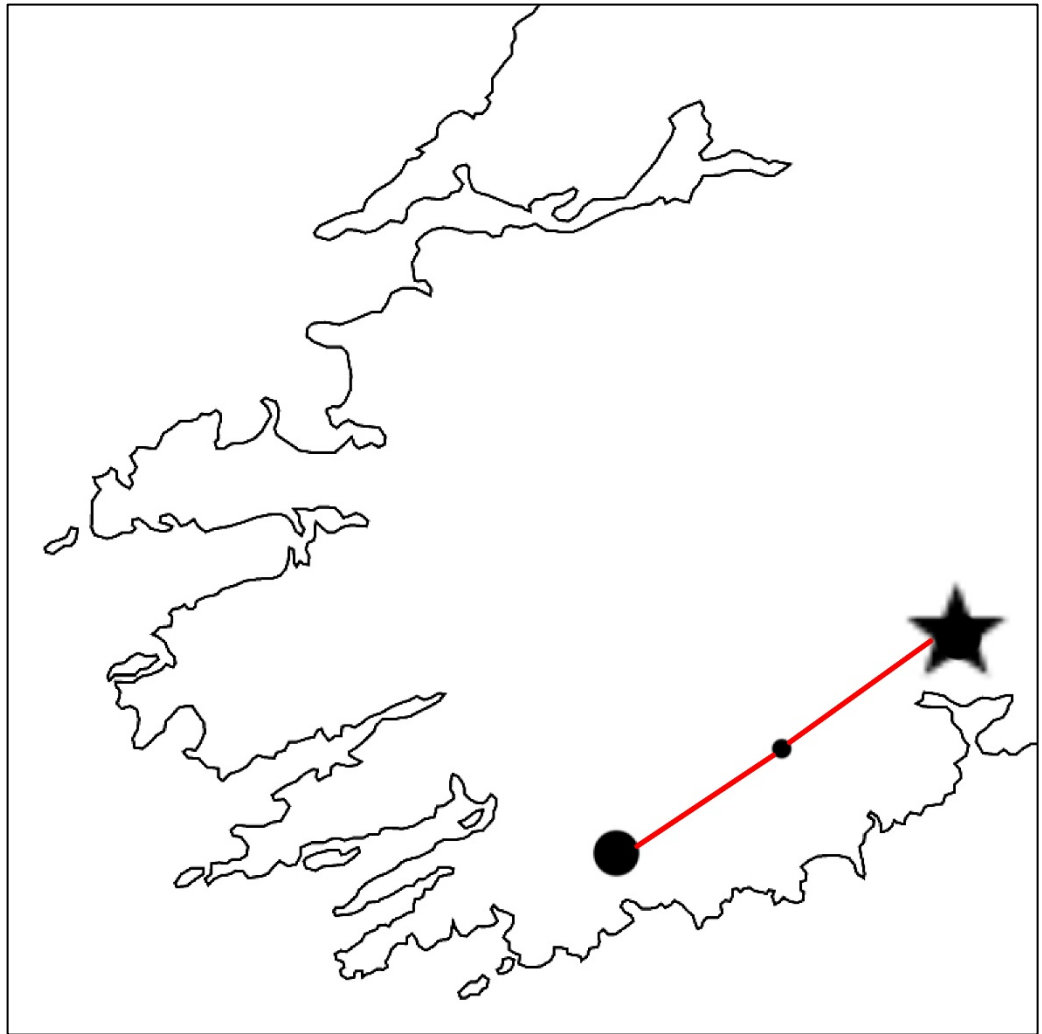
The dominant ideology of the Irish revolutionaries was Gaelic republicanism,

with a number of sects with different interpretations on how to achieve Irish autonomy. Nationalists, particularly Parliamentary Nationalists, were moderates in Ireland. They tended to support the civil resistance to English occupation, and had achieved substantial representation in the Westminster Parliament. Republicans, often further identified as either Romantic or Revolutionary, were more committed to armed resistance. Romantic Republicans followed closely the teachings of the 1916 Easter Rising leader Pádraig Pearse, while Revolutionary Republicans were devoted revolutionaries - and believed in the necessity for a revolution to achieve a united and independent Irish Republic. In identifying Republicans in this piece, this subdivision will not be used as Republicans of the time did not self-identify as such. There are, however, other distinctions to that are necessary to point out here.

When the Easter Rising failed and the British occupiers shot the ringleaders, surviving Republicans were left with a legacy of action and ambition. Opening with an ambush in Soloheadbeg in Tipperary, the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921) crescendoed into a pitched battle for the control of Ireland. I.R.A. Brigades, on their own initiative, formed Flying Columns of rapid, foot-mobile guerrillas. By 1920, the British had reinforced their military and paramilitary Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) garrisons. These reinforcements, the Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans, gained lasting notoriety in Ireland for their vicious and brutal atrocities committed against the Irish population. Two of the most famous encounters happened in Cork County, at Kilmichael and Crossbarry. Crossbarry saw the annihilation of an entire Auxilary convoy, and Kilmichael was the site of the heroic defense of a crossroads by 104 Flying Column men of the 3rd (West Cork) Brigade who faced over 1,200 British troops. Events in Dublin developed separately from the rest of the country, which seems to be a repetitive

characteristic of the city. Operating mostly against the intelligence and command systems of the British administration in Ireland, the Dublin I.R.A. were experienced urban guerrillas.

Following an unsuccessful attack on a central icon of the British administration in Ireland - the Customs House in Dublin - a Truce was announced on July 11th, 1921. Meeting secretly in London, I.R.A. delegates had signed an Anglo-Irish Treaty on behalf of the Irish Republic. On returning, many of their comrades were horrified by the terms of the agreed Treaty. It created an Irish Free State, not an Irish Republic. It partitioned the country, gave Treaty ports to the Royal Navy, and required members of the Irish government to swear allegiance to the English King. The Treaty exploded tensions that had been growing within the I.R.A. leadership, effectively splitting them between pro- and anti-Treaty Republicans. Despite negotiations and attempts at peacemaking, the two factions entered into armed conflict following the withdrawal of British troops. The Irish Free State, fielding new conscripts and pro-Treaty I.R.A., overcame the anti-Treaty I.R.A. in the western and southern edges of the country. By 1923, the Irish Civil War was over and thousands of anti-Treaty I.R.A. men were interned in their own country.



Map 2: Map of West Cork

This map shows not only the area of operations for the Munster Brigades, but the main route between Skibbereen and Cork City, passing through the Loyalist stronghold at Bandon. The coastline, though offering a broad southern flank, is difficult to navigate except to local fisherman with knowledge of its treacherous shoals and rocks. The route of the main road also illustrates the rough and mountainous terrain to the north and west. Source: Author's Personal Collection.

## Preparing for War

Founded in 17th-century, Skibbereen grew into a substantial town with a number of successful businesses thriving on the intersection of the highway linking Cork City and the bustling harbors in the West of Ireland. The Great Potato Famine (1845-1852) struck Skibbereen viciously, and the thousands of bodies interred in surrounding mass graves are but a fraction of the population loss suffered by the parish. The negligence of the British administration in dealing with the horrifying conditions of the Irishmen and women, though bound as subjects to the British Crown, led to the revival of Irish resistance under the influence of local men like O'Donovan Rossa. Skibbereen, as a node of Gaelic revivalism and the birthplace of O'Donovan Rossa, was greatly impacted by this period of revolutionary development. The defeats of violent insurrections and the victories of parliamentary separatism and land reform were met with the Third Home Rule Bill. Despite having been accepted in Westminster, the Bill implementation of Home Rule in Ireland was deferred because of the Europe conflict that threatened to engulf the 1914. Skibbereen's Volunteers sided with the revolutionary element, thanks to Cork's "strong traditions of Fenianism and of opposition to John Redmond, leader of the moderate Irish Parliamentary Party in favour of Home Rule. By 1915, Cork boasted the strongest Irish Volunteer unit outside Dublin, with companies established across the country. Similar initiative was apparent within the Cork Cumann na mBan, the nationalist women's organization."<sup>16</sup> Following the defeat of their leaders in Dublin, some saw the Volunteers as doomed. In Skibbereen, however, the local

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<sup>16</sup>John Borgonovo, "Ireland's best-organised guerrilla fighters." In *The Revolution Papers* (Dublin September 6, 2016, 36th ed).

Republican units were preparing for a rigorous campaign against British rule in Ireland.

Before the outbreak of the Anglo-Irish War, the I.R.A. in the Skibbereen area organized into a structured Battalion and increased the intensity of preparations and training for a decisive resistance campaign against British forces in West Cork. The preparations made before combat operations began demonstrates effective command at the battalion and company levels, and the development of a diverse and decisive resistance doctrine. Though the Cork Volunteers mobilized “when the Easter Rising erupted, confusion over events in Dublin rendered that republican machine inactive. The failure of Cork Volunteers to resist in 1916 had unintended benefits later. While post-Rising government suppression smashed republican networks in Dublin, Galway and Wexford, Cork separatists retained their organisation, From this foundation, they rapidly formed new Volunteer units and replaced officers who were reluctant to engage in armed resistance.”<sup>17</sup> Avoiding open confrontations and violence, the newly formed 4th (Skibbereen) Battalion gained experience in military affairs while it focused on removing or incapacitating the means of British administration in the area.

This doctrine, encompassing both military and civil affairs, was the basis for the operational activities of the I.R.A. in West Cork until the Truce. The early successes of the Republican movement in Skibbereen furthermore help to frame an understanding of the wartime experience in the Skibbereen area, as well as the goals and aspirations of Republicans in the area. The pre-war period can be seen in three distinct phases, which illustrate the broad campaign to be launched against the British forces in Ireland: the reorganization of the Irish Volunteers and Nationalist institutions, the political

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

mobilization to support a Sinn Féin victory in the 1918 elections, and the training of the Irish Republican Army for direct action against the forces of British administration in Ireland.

Much of the study of the Irish Revolutionary Period has focused on seminal events, like the Easter Rising or the devastating I.R.A. ambush on British forces at Kilmichael. While serving to legitimize an Irish interpretation of the conflict, separate from the dominance of British historiography in the written record, past studies have overlooked the wealth of information available in the ‘micro-histories’ of the period. Whereas larger events have been revised and examined in detail, the post-revisionist focus on local histories demonstrated that these micro-histories could be used to draw conclusion about larger trends in Ireland. Post-revisionist conclusions, like those of Peter Hart, uncovered the breadth and importance of the civil struggle for independence. When examining the military histories of I.R.A. units, which operated as mobile and flexible guerrilla formations, the same micro-histories can be used to identify larger realities about the Irish struggle for independence. Interviews and testimonies can be used to investigate local realities, which can be expanded to reflect larger truths. Cork County as a whole is ideal for this kind of expansion of local histories, as one of the most active areas in Ireland during the Irish Revolutionary Period.

As the dust settled in Dublin after the Easter Rising, the next step in the Irish resistance to British rule was already underway. Throughout West Cork, the Irish Volunteers “were beginning to recover from the devastation of the Rising. National and local structures had been re-established, a new leadership was in place and the country



was moving noticeably in a more republican direction”<sup>18</sup> by the end of 1917. This reorganization has heavily supported by the nationalist organizations developed in the pre-war period, which were especially prevalent in Skibbereen given the town’s role in the early Irish Nationalist movement. In West Cork, “the significance of cultural nationalist organisations raises the question of how important political ideology was as a factor in the conditioning of republicans and revolutionaries in the Ireland of the 1910s. Ideological inclinations were often reinforced by specific events. In this regard the Rising appears to have galvanised many young men into joining the Volunteers in 1917 and 1918.”<sup>19</sup> As post-revisionist histories make clear, the Irish struggle for independence was highly politicized - contrary to the British portrayal of the Irish independence movement as haphazard and dominated by gangsterism. The Irish Volunteers throughout the country were undoubtedly affected by this political atmosphere, and were active participants in many Nationalist organizations. The pre-war consolidation of these nationalist organizations was substantial and effective in bringing together a myriad of Nationalist organizers and resources present. As early as 1914, the Royal Irish Constabulary was reporting “that the Hibernians had ‘practically absorbed the functions of the various branches of the U.I. League, though they still, when it suits them make use of the latter’s name’.”<sup>20</sup> The testimony of Sam Kingston shows how the tradition of Irish Republicanism in Skibbereen impacted the organization of the Volunteers and the development of a comprehensive resistance

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<sup>18</sup>Marie Coleman, *The Irish Revolution, 1916-1923*, (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 36.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>20</sup>David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913-1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), 82.

strategy:

Previous to the first World War and, in fact, before the Volunteers were ever started my interest in the Irish-Ireland movement was in being a member of the A.O.H. (Irish-American Alliance). There was a branch formed in Skibbereen and though it did not number many it was an organisation which had an Irish-Ireland outlook and prepared the way, at least for some of us, for what was to follow. The idea was to support home manufacture and home industry and keep before our minds that we were ruled by a foreign power.<sup>21</sup>

Kingston, who later served as Commanding Officer of the 4th Battalion of the Irish Republican Army, had a clear understanding of Nationalist operations - for obvious reasons - in the Skibbereen area and beyond. The United Ireland League, the Hibernians and the Irish-American Alliance were all Irish-American organizations aimed at supporting the Irish bid for independence. By providing the supportive manufacturing and capital necessary to expand the civil struggle for independence, Irish-Americans became an off-shore supply line for civil - and later limited military - support. It was for this reason that the Irish President, Eamon deValera, chose to travel to America during the Anglo-Irish War: firstly to pressure the American presidential administration into openly supporting the Republican struggle, and secondly to reinforce civil ties between the Republican movement and Irish-American organizations. The formation of Irish-American republican bonds dates to 1840s, with the first appearance of an 'Irish Republican Army' taking part in a set of ill-fated invasions of Canada in an attempt to establish an 'Irish Republic in Exile'. American support for republican activities in Ireland continued throughout the Irish Revolutionary Period, clearly demonstrating that American contributors were willing and able to provide the funds and manpower to

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<sup>21</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 620", (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

establish the means for autonomous Irish manufacturing.

The ability to provide employment and economic liberation were central to republican strategy, which hinged upon the dissolution of the British socio-economic system in Ireland. Resistance leaders in Skibbereen were heavily influenced by the tradition of Irish Republicanism, and sought to create a comprehensive Republican strategy of domestic and militant resistance for the next stage of the Irish Revolutionary Period. After the 1916 Rising, West Cork and Skibbereen Volunteers effectively “established the central importance of [the] province of Munster in the framing [of] the character of the revival and hence modern Ireland.”<sup>22</sup> Cut off from their leaders now interned in Wales, the re-organized Irish Volunteers adopted the name Irish Republican Army. The organization’s name change illustrates the ideological shift of Irish separatists from Nationalist to Republican, with the aim of achieving the Irish Republic proclaimed in 1916. The transformation of the Irish Volunteers into the Irish Republican Army was “intended to increase the military capacity of the burgeoning Irish Republican Army or advance republican political goals”, locating the preparatory and organizational period after the Easter Rising as the beginning of the conflict<sup>23</sup>.

While the First World War drew to a close, Irish republicans were busy organizing their forces, consolidating commands, training troops and stockpiling war materiel. This preparation would allow for decisive and coordination action on the part of Republicans in the Skibbereen area once the war began. As previously stated, the

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<sup>22</sup> Boyce and O'Day, *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*, 112.

<sup>23</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 15.

<sup>23</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1481”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

pre-war period saw an immense amount of preparation on the part of Irish Nationalists. Skibbereen and her environs were no different, With the Irish Volunteers in Skibbereen creating their own functional battalion for the area, assisted heavily by the Republican organizations and traditions there.

Skibbereen's newspaper, *The Skibbereen Eagle*, is famously known for its internationalist perspective and the town was the site of a rally in solidarity with Polish resistance against the Russian Tsars. Skibbereen town was home to *The Skibbereen Eagle*, whose Parliamentary Nationalist voice dominated as a media source in West Cork. The publication was firmly against the revolutionary ideology of the I.R.A., and refused to support or publish Republican writing. The focus of denying the British administration hegemony over informational media is evident, as "early in 1918 the plant of "Skibbereen Eagle" a local newspaper was destroyed by the Volunteers."<sup>24</sup> As one of the earliest actions of the Skibbereen I.R.A., the burning of *The Skibbereen Eagle* shows that Volunteers prioritized their limited manpower and armament on dominating the public sphere; the first in a series of actions aimed at winning the support of the local population. With the help of local Republican organizations, the Skibbereen I.R.A. succeeded in replacing *The Skibbereen Eagle*:

About the same time "The Southern Star" another local newspaper was purchased by the supporters of Sinn Féin in the area. It was utilised to propagate the Sinn Féin policy throughout the area and the province of Munster. As far as I can recollect this paper was edited, at one time or another, by Seán Hayes, Ernest Blythe and Peadar O'Hourihane. The former pair had taken part in Easter Week, while Peadar O'Hourihane was a Gaelic League organiser and a native of the district.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 1481", (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

Republican publications emerging in Skibbereen demonstrates the autonomy and independent thinking of Republican leaders in the area, as well the apparent need that Republicans felt to provide their own publication in the remote area. Though eventually silenced by British authorities as violence escalated later, *The Southern Star* was the last voice of print media to be heard by the people of Skibbereen. Its replacement as the dominant form of print media following the destruction of *The Skibbereen Eagle* was crucial in informing the local population of Republican ideals and aims. Printers, contributors and editors of *The Southern Star* gained experience in media production and would be useful advisors to the later development of Republican military communications in the area.

The rapid targeting of media and the effective use of propaganda in the Skibbereen area shows the early realizations of the politico-military struggle. By commanding control of dissident presses, the local civil and political atmosphere could be dominated by the message of the Irish Republic. Before combat operations began in earnest, Irish Republicans had already established the means for effective domestic communications.

One critical reason that the Volunteers re-organized during the pre-war period with such vigor and energy was the upcoming election in 1918. With the release of the veteran leaders of the 1916 Rising, the Republicans in Skibbereen benefitted from the leadership connections the town had with Republican icons in Dublin. At the earliest stages of re-organization, the Republican leadership in Dublin showed a keen interest in the development of the resistance movement in Skibbereen and West Cork. The Skibbereen I.R.A. were prepared and organized when “the first public parade of the Company took place in June 1917 when Count Plunkett and Michael Collins came to

Skibbereen to address a public meeting on behalf of Sinn Féin.”<sup>26</sup> This was to be the first of many such visits by high-level leaders of the Republican movement during this preparatory period. The publicity of the Volunteers drilling at such meetings helped to undermine British claims to authority in Ireland and demonstrate Republican power. The expansion of I.R.A. units and organization allowed for Sam Kingston to prepare “a cavalry parade of Volunteers at a monster meeting held in August, 1917, at which Count Plunkett attended. I was on horseback that day.”<sup>27</sup> It was during this period that the command structure of the Skibbereen I.R.A. was formed, eventually becoming the 4th (Skibbereen) Battalion of the 3rd (West Cork) Brigade. The visitors of Skibbereen included Eamon deValera himself, and Cornelius Connolly recalled that “Sam Kingston was in charge...on the occasion of a big parade, which took place in December 1917 when De Valera visited Skibbereen.”<sup>28</sup> Soon to become commander of the 4th Battalion, Sam Kingston’s preparation and participation in parades gave him vital experience in organizing that would assist the 4th Battalion in becoming an efficient and operational force. In many cases, visits by Dublin leaders were a cover for recruiting officers into the I.R.B. and creating communication networks among commanders. One way that the Dublin-based I.R.B. command asserted control over these local units was swearing in local I.R.A. officers into the Brotherhood.<sup>29</sup> Just as when the I.R.B. recruited leaders of Nationalist groups before the 1916 Rising, the clandestine organization recruited staff officers and Sam Kingston “was one of the first

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<sup>26</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1481”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

<sup>27</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 620”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

<sup>28</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1481”.

<sup>29</sup>Peter David Hart, *Mick: The Real Michael Collins*. (1st ed. New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), 142.

members of the I.R.B. in the Skibbereen locality.”<sup>30</sup> As the election approached, I.R.B. members used I.R.A. channels to communicate among I.R.B. officers:

On St. Patrick's Day, 1918, there was a monster meeting at Leap. I was O.C. Breadagh Company then and I took the Company to this meeting. From that meeting an important despatch was taken in by me for Michael Collins to Bantry. It was given [to] me by Gearoid O’Sullivan.<sup>31</sup>

The last of these ‘monster meetings’ carried out by the Skibbereen I.R.A. occurred in the coastal town of Leap, a town that would become vital in the I.R.A.’s wartime strategy. Guarding the main route eastwards and surrounded by rough terrain, Leap would be a focal point for depriving British forces easy access into West Cork and the Skibbereen area. The parade in Leap, coupled with early attacks against coastal R.I.C. garrisons by I.R.A. units further west, allude to the attention given to the wide coastline dominating the I.R.A.’s southern flank. This attention would grow and develop as the conflict expanded. With the election results of 1918 coming in, the Republican leaders who had shown so much interest in the West Cork I.R.A. withdrew to Dublin to organize opposition and resistance. The decreasing presence of these figures from West Cork would continue until the end of the conflict, leaving behind their established systems of resistance and I.R.B. command structure.

Parades and drills conducted throughout the area, in urban and rural areas, were key in demonstrating the legitimacy of the I.R.A. to the local population. Moreover, the ability for the I.R.A. to organize and carry out such blatant violations of British law seriously undermined British assertions of control over the situation in Ireland. The attention paid by high-level Republican leaders to the organization of the 4th Battalion,

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<sup>30</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 620”.

<sup>31</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 620”.

shown through their attendance of I.R.A. parades and recruitment of officers in to the I.R.B., mobilized Volunteers to support the political struggle during the 1918 election and prepared Volunteers for the coming conflict. These forms of communication and organization, however, were by nature localized. Without a functioning command in Dublin, these independent-minded Republican organizations developed an early sense of their own capabilities. Though sworn members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the developing atmosphere of the independence struggle would see the divide between the southern I.R.A. units and the Dublin command widen. The localized or regionalized nature of the early phases of the conflict allude also to a localized or regionalized view on the part of Republican commanders, whose perspective of the war in Skibbereen would be vastly different from their commanders and politicians in Dublin.



<b>Constituency</b>	<b>Successful Candidate</b>	<b>Results</b>
Cork City	James Joseph Walsh & Liam de Roiste	Sinn Féin ( <b>45.8%</b> )
Cork County East	David Rice Kent	Sinn Féin ( <b>Unopposed</b> )
Cork County Mid	Terence Joseph McSwiney	Sinn Féin ( <b>Unopposed</b> )
Cork County North	Patrick O’Keefe	Sinn Féin ( <b>Unopposed</b> )
Cork County North-East	Thomas Hunter	Sinn Féin ( <b>Unopposed</b> )
Cork County South	Michael Collins	Sinn Féin ( <b>Unopposed</b> )
Cork County South-East	Diarmuid Christopher Lynch	Sinn Féin ( <b>Unopposed</b> )
Cork County West	Sean Hayes	Sinn Féin ( <b>Unopposed</b> )

Table 1: The Election of 1918 (Cork Consituencies)

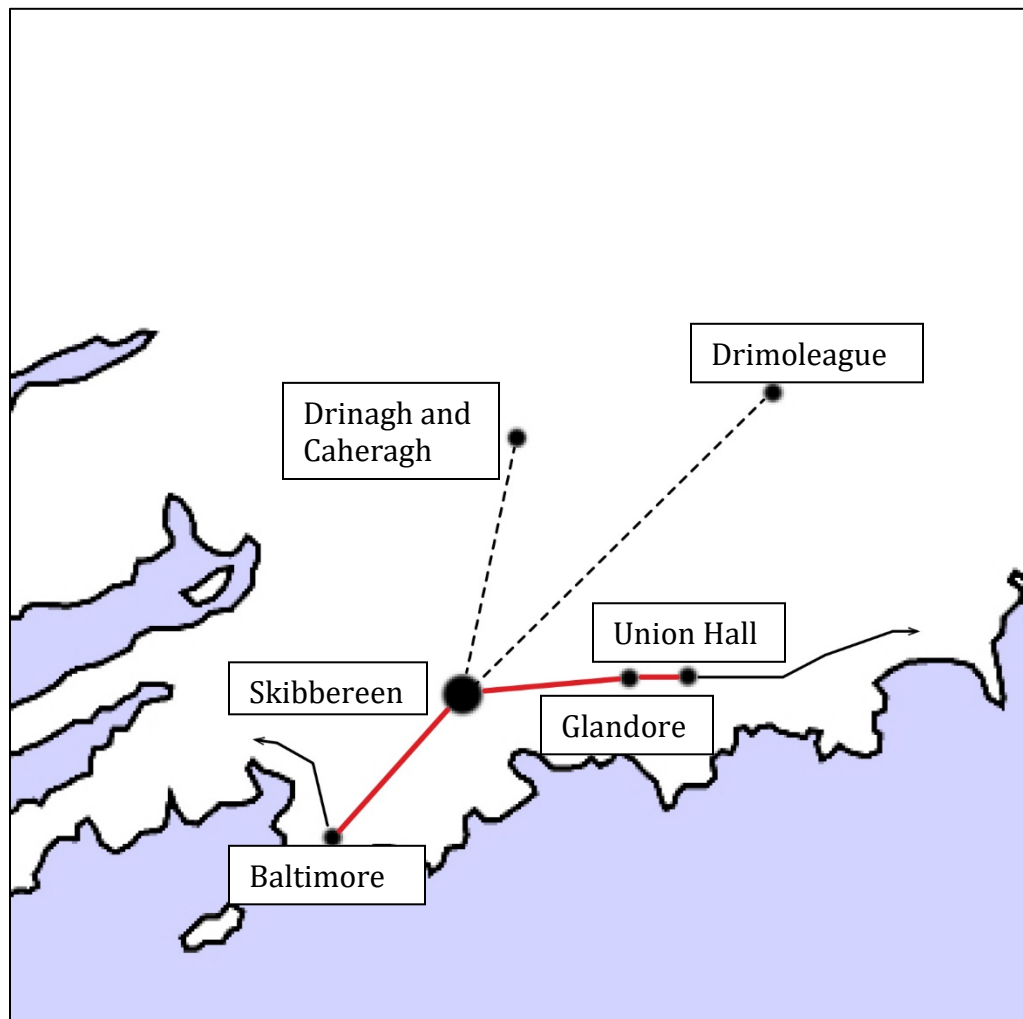
The above table illustrates the political hegemony of Sinn Féin in Cork County by 1918. Of all the constituencies, only Cork City was challenged by any other political parties. The dominance of Sinn Féin during the election, and the subsequent refusal of elected members to attend Westminster, was a decisive political victory for the Republican movement in Ireland and paved the way for the expansion and escalation of the struggle for Irish independence. Source: Whyte, Nicholas. "The Irish Election of 1918." *The Irish General Election of 1918*. March 25, 2006. <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/h1918.htm>.

The 1918 election culminated in a sweeping Sinn Féin victory, whose representatives refused to take their seats at Westminster. This political strategy of abstentionism reflects the more belligerent status of Sinn Féin. This unprecedented Republican victory boosted morale in the I.R.A. and “while Sinn Féin may not have set out to support a violent revolution, once again violence would play a major part in the Irish independence effort. The 1918 general election results provided some physical force adherents with both a sense of impetus and legitimacy for conducting a full scale

revolt against British rule.”<sup>32</sup> The development of the political struggle can be seen, therefore, as parallel and mutually supportive of the military struggle for independence. The political vindication of the physical-force Republicans now training with the I.R.A. would prove problematic later, as the political situation in Dublin evolved and reacted in isolation of the I.R.A. units in the south. As intermittent violent I.R.A. attacks began erupting across Ireland during 1918 and 1919, the 4th Battalion began training for an intense guerrilla campaign aimed at expelling British forces from Ireland, and establishing the Irish Republic in the areas under their control.

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<sup>32</sup>Francis J. Costello, *The Irish Revolution and its Aftermath, 1916-1923: Years of Revolt*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003), 39.



Map 3: Map of the Skibbereen Area

This map shows the area of operations of the 4<sup>th</sup> (Skibbereen) Battalion. The River Ilen, feeding into Roaringwater Bay from the east, forms a valley that saw extensive activity and operations on the part of the I.R.A. Note the inlet at Leap and Union Hall, which would provide the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion a chokepoint along the vital route west towards Bandon and Cork City. The peripheral outposts at Dunmanway, Drimoleague, and Union Hall were some of the first attack, isolating Skibbereen for a later Republican assault from surrounding safe areas. Further west lies the peninsulas of Kerry, which provided safe haven for Volunteers in danger. Source: Author's Personal Collection.

The summer of 1919 was used mainly for seasoning the new recruits of the West Cork I.R.A. Training and execution of maneuvers were the focus of this period, as the I.R.A. prepared to being operations to seize weapons and attack R.I.C. barracks. The deployment of British military forces across West Cork provided further impetus for the I.R.A. to engage the enemy. With a Republican political victory achieved, the earnest preparation of Republican military forces for combat could begin. Having demonstrated the strength of the Nationalist organizations, and certainly emboldened by the support from within their own communities, the Volunteers saw the escalation of the political struggle as the signal to begin training for war against the British administration in Ireland. This period saw the last appearances of vital G.H.Q. officers in the southern areas, whose message of violent resistance and comprehensive guerrilla struggle stayed with the Volunteers. The Volunteers' preparations would have to be intensive and conducted earnestly, if they intended to take on the strength of the British Empire.

Chief among these preparations was the organization of training camps. Designed to bring together I.R.A. officers to train them in guerrilla tactics and field skills, these training camps were vital to developing the I.R.A. as an effective fighting force. Sam Kingston, now the commander of the 4th Battalion, and his second-in-command, John 'Bernie' O'Driscoll, represented Skibbereen at a massive training camp organized at Glandore.<sup>33</sup> Located near the town of Leap, Glandore's position put the assembled I.R.A. dangerously close to nearby R.I.C. barracks and without a route of withdrawal should British forces in Leap, Union Hall or Rosscarbery mobilize to trap them. Sean Cotter, an officer in the adjoining Bantry Battalion, provides a clear

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<sup>33</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 620".

description of events at the training camp:

Dick McKee (O.C., Dublin Brigade) was in charge of the camp. Amongst the other officers of the Dublin Brigade present was Leo Henderson.

The camp was assembled on Saturday, 9th August, 1919. Representatives from all Battalions in the West Cork Brigade were present. The training officers were all from the Dublin Brigade. Those attending the camp were trained in the care and use of arms, map reading, use of compass, and lessons in tactics. Training went on each day from dawn to dark. Nearly all lectures were given by Leo Henderson.

When the Camp had been in progress about four days, we all woke up one morning to find that the camp had been surrounded by a strong force of British Military and R.I.C. We were all rounded up, paraded for identification, and searched. Four members of the party - Gearoid O'Sullivan (G.H.Q.), Bernie O'Driscoll (Skibbereen), Seán Murphy (Dunmanway) and Denis O'Brien (Kilbrittain) were arrested, as some documents or notes were found on them....

...The men arrested were removed to Cork and later sentenced to terms of imprisonment. I was also arrested on this occasion, but released after identification by the local R.I.C. ...

...Training continued after the raid for some days, but we were billeted in various houses in the area and not concentrated in one spot. The camp concluded on Saturday, 16th August, 1919.<sup>34</sup>

Though Michael Collins presided over a Brigade Convention in Caheragh, near Skibbereen, the arrest of Gearoid O'Sullivan marked the beginning of the I.R.B. leadership's withdrawal from West Cork. As their notoriety grew, it is no surprise that important members of the upper-echelons of the Irish resistance movement were hesitant to risk arrest by journeying outside of Dublin. Irish leaders were recognizable after the 1918 election, but the urban environment of Dublin allowed for better concealment and evasion from British intelligence and military forces.

For the 4th Battalion the arrest of the second-in-command, Bernie O'Driscoll,

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<sup>34</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 1493", (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

necessitated his replacement by Cornelius ‘Nelius’ Connolly. Connolly would go on to lead the 4th Battalion throughout the most violent period of the Anglo-Irish War. After a solid week of training, the officers of the West Cork I.R.A. had learned the basics of guerrilla warfare and were ready to disseminate their tactical and operational knowledge to the rest of their men. The large and intensive training camp at Glandore was vital in training the I.R.A. fighters in modern guerrilla doctrine and tactics and the presence of high-ranking I.R.A. officers and I.R.B. members at these camps alludes to the focus paid by the I.R.B. and G.H.Q. to the Skibbereen area. Given it would be some of the last direct contact between the southern I.R.A. officers and their commanders in Dublin, it is no surprise that the Dublin command’s focus on the West Cork I.R.A. as a developed and dangerous military force would make an impression on the men in the area. Given their training and organization, the Dublin command largely withdrew from the organization of military affairs, leaving local I.R.A. units to arm and operate independently.

From this point on, the 4th Battalion would begin operations to concerted seize and stockpile weapons. Earlier efforts had been largely fruitless and Cornelius Connolly testified that “in April and May, 1918, we commenced raiding for arms. With Tadgh O’Sullivan and Paddy O’Sullivan (no relation), the latter of whom was Battalion Quartermaster, we carried out raids principally on loyalist homes. We got some shotguns and no ammunition.”<sup>35</sup> Until ammunition could be manufactured, the 4th Battalion was forced to use shotguns, pistols and inherited Irish Volunteer rifles. In order to

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<sup>35</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 602”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

protect these precious weapons from seizure by the R.I.C. and British military forces, hidden caches and dumps were carefully constructed across the area. Although small and dispersed, the skills developed by the Skibbereen Battalion in concealing and protecting their arsenal would be used later in conflict with great effect. There were numerous complaints from southern officers to their Dublin command over the ammunition shortage in rural Battalions, and in the end, the southern I.R.A. units took this to mean that they were largely on their own when it went to procuring arms. The only real stockpiles of weapons in the region, however, were located in the fortified barracks and blockhouses of the paramilitary Royal Irish Constabulary. Again, the distance between Dublin and the Skibbereen I.R.A. units created a sense of operational sovereignty and devotion to the military escalation of the conflict.



Image 2: Guerilla Fighters

Volunteers, long after the end of the war, show a cleverly concealed weapons cache. Not only did the rough terrain greatly help the guerrilla tactics of I.R.A. units, it also helped to disguise meetings between Volunteers and the hiding places of their precious weapons. The contribution of civilians and Volunteers alike to the construction and planning of such caches illuminates the broad nature of the struggle, and the operational centrality of the arms shortage facing the I.R.A. Source: Author's Personal Collection.



In order to practice the skills taught at the Glandore Training Camp, the 4th Battalion organized maneuvers and set up ambushes for the R.I.C. in their area of responsibility. One farmer living near Leap recounted a story to his son of his cart being stolen in the night. Afraid to venture outside in case any trigger-happy soldiers thought he would interfere, he waited till morning:

**Interviewee:** “He went to investigate, secretly, to kind of recover his cart and so on like, and he heard a cough up in the bushes in a hill overlooking it and he got the message - “Get lost”.

**Interviewer:** So they’d been waiting in an ambush, obviously.

**Interviewee:** Yes, but whoever they were waiting for never came. So eventually, they came to the conclusion that they must be gone, and they went and recovered their property and so on. It came to nothing, but that was set up within 40 yards of our house in Gortroe. Where there was a kind of a bend in the road and high rock, it would be place where you would take people by surprise there, there was even a slight double bend there.”<sup>36</sup>

As it turns out, the cart had been used as part of a reinforced road-block and was retrieved by the farmer after the I.R.A. had departed. Such early attempts at organizing ambushes reflect the dedication of the 4th Battalion to escalate the violence in the area, as well as the cooperation of the local population with Republican activities. While attempting any large-scale ambushes of the R.I.C. or British military had no hope of success without arms, the 4th Battalion continued to drill its men in the use of the limited weaponry it had. The training that the Volunteers received focused largely on close-in encounters with enemy forces, in order to minimize the effect of the guerrilla’s firepower inferiority. The effect was to create a large-number of men capable of

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<sup>36</sup>Author’s Personal Collection, “Interview 6”.

operating with few weapons, confident in their own abilities to arms themselves and engage the enemy successfully.

The period between the election of 1918 and the escalation of violence in 1920 did see limited attempts by the West Cork I.R.A. to seize weapons. Surprisingly, Cathal Brugha was opposed to these early and independent escalations as potentially injurious to the integrity of Republican command structures. As early as “March 1918 Volunteers in West Cork infuriated Brugha by raiding a police barracks for carbines without seeking the National Executive’s permissions.”<sup>37</sup> This can be seen as an early split between the provincial elements of the Republican movement, and G.H.Q. and *Daíl* leaders in Dublin. In Dublin, “the executive [command of the I.R.A.] did not agree that the time was right for rebellion, nor did the *Daíl* , nor did the G.H.Q. staff as a whole.”<sup>38</sup> Despite this, independent Battalions and Brigades carried out actions during this early period; the 4th Battalion was able to seize a load of gelignite explosive being transported from the nearby Kilkoe quarries, and disseminate the equipment across the West Cork area. The Quartermaster of the Bandon Battalion, Tadhg O’Sullivan “travelled to Skibbereen three times for gelignite and detonators which [he] got from Neilus Connolly, he being Battalion Commander then, and got them back safe to Timoleague.”<sup>39</sup> The system of communication and supply set up by I.R.B. leaders was operating during this early period, assisting West Cork I.R.A. units in transferring weapons and ordnance. The concerted efforts of the I.R.A. to prepare for military

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<sup>37</sup>Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913-1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), 171.

<sup>38</sup>Hart, *Mick: The Real Michael Collins*, 209.

<sup>39</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 792”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

operations during this period illustrates the operational shift of the resistance movement in West Cork, and Skibbereen, from domestic and political resistance to open, armed revolution.

The early effectiveness of the I.R.A. and I.R.B. in counter-intelligence tactics is evident through the survival of West Cork Republican institutions despite continued British crackdowns. It was “late in July [1918 when] the Chief Secretary was appalled to discover after reading documents captured from arrested Volunteer leaders, that ‘there was a complete military system in the South and West of Ireland’”<sup>40</sup>, and the British administration in Ireland would suffer a rude awakening at the hands of the I.R.A. in the proceeding months. For all of the British administration’s efforts, arrests and police raids created the conditions where “the Volunteers who remained [by 1919] formed a smaller but more steadfast and determined body of young men for whom the accepted duty of fighting for national was a harsh reality.”<sup>41</sup> Culled of doubtful or mindful recruits through the extensive political and civil campaign before the war, the rugged training undergone at the camps, and the threat of arrest and imprisonment by the British, the I.R.A. was now ready for battle. Many important members of the Republican movement would be arrested during the pre-combat period, though this did more to galvanize the free independence fighters in their fight than disrupt or cripple Republican operations.

Though often portrayed as gangsters or criminals by the British propaganda campaign, the I.R.A. in West Cork demonstrated its discipline and dedication in the

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<sup>40</sup>Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913-1921*, 171.

<sup>41</sup>Liam Deasy, *Towards Ireland Free: The West Cork Brigade in the War of Independence, 1917-1921*, (Cork: Mercier Press, 2000), 66.

opening stages of the Anglo-Irish War. During the period between the Sinn Féin electoral victory in 1918 and 1920 “organized violence took place, which cost lives on both sides, and set the pattern for future years of conflict. The fact that republican actions took few lives in this period was a result of their poor armament, rather than a lack of aggression.”<sup>42</sup> It would not take the 4th Battalion long to manufacture the ammunition needed to seize modern rifles from British forces in Ireland. In the meantime, “early successes enabled Cork republicans to gain confidence, develop their guerilla-warfare expertise, and accumulate arms...which made more ambitious operations feasible.”<sup>43</sup> The I.R.A. in West Cork used 1919 as a transition period, testing their capabilities and organizational structures on Battalion and Brigade levels. As the transformation of Republican activity from domestic to revolutionary resistance took place in Skibbereen and “the rugged western fringes of the county, unrest was taking on the semblance of guerrilla warfare.”<sup>44</sup> Trained, organized and armed, the 4th Battalion and the West Cork I.R.A. were prepared to wage an extensive guerrilla campaign against the R.I.C. and British forces. The Republican political messaging of the pre-war period, in tandem with the growing confidence of the fighters while training, meant that few southern Volunteers were unprepared for an intense war against Britain in Ireland. Proven able to act as independent Brigades and Battalions, connected by communication and supply routes, the I.R.A. would prove to be an adaptable and resilient opponent.

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<sup>42</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 45.

<sup>43</sup>Borgonovo, "Ireland's best-organised guerrilla fighters." In *The Revolution Papers* (Dublin, September 6, 2016, 36th ed.).

<sup>44</sup>Peter David Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 107-108.

We can describe the pre-war as three distinct phases: the re-organization of the Irish Volunteers as the Irish Republican Army; the mobilization of Republican organizations in support of Sinn Féin during the 1918 elections; and the development of the Irish Republican Army as a military force capable of escalating the independence struggle. The significant participation of the Skibbereen I.R.A. in all of these phases created confidence in Republican ranks, and was interpreted as the beginning of an ultimate struggle for independence. For its part, the 4th Battalion exemplified the success of this early Republican strategy of preparation by supporting the struggle for political power and actively participating in training exercises and maneuvers that would prepare them for the commencement of hostilities and the test of enemy fire.



Image 3: Sam Kingston, O/C

The training and experience that commanders like Sam Kingston would receive in the early phases of the conflict would be vital in developing the struggle for Irish independence. A respected leader and commander, Sam Kingston would play a vital role in developing Republican control in the Skibbereen area. Sam Kingston's later transferal to the Republican Police exemplifies the 'civil affairs' training he received as commander during the pre-war period. As the leader of numerous parades, he had experience dealing with the public and was trusted by superior commanders in Dublin. Source: Author's Personal Collection.

## **The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion at War**

An examination of the Republican military strategy in West Cork makes it clear that the ultimate objective was the elimination of the British presence in the region. Operationally, this meant that the 4th Battalion was focused on the elimination of periphery outposts of the British administration until enough arms could be acquired and political and physical terrain controlled. Once this was achieved, concerted assaults would be launched against the centres of British power in order to roll up British military and administrative power into populated centres for ultimate destruction. The strategy was fundamentally revolutionary in nature and guerrilla in character. Therefore, viewing the struggle in West Cork as both revolutionary and guerrilla in nature is helpful to understand the larger objectives of Irish Republicans.

Revolutionary struggle is the struggle to completely replace the government in power, aimed at building in its stead a new government based on a revolutionary political concept. In Ireland, this took the form of Irish separatists fighting to replace the British administration with the civil forms of an independent Irish Republic. Guerrilla warfare has been historically viewed as a stepping stone, and often subject to a transition to more conventional means of warfare. For instance, there was a turning point at which Che Guevara's fighters had to descend from the mountains of Cuba and fight the Batista regime in the open. Mao Zedong's communist fighters too experienced a shift between their mobile and guerilla warfare and the massive and bloody battles when they had to fight when finally confronting the remnants of Chinese Nationalist forces. In Ireland, the history of the southern units of the I.R.A. shows the same characteristics of mobile and asymmetrical warfare seen in other guerrilla conflicts.

However, as will become evident, the 4th Battalion was never able to realize this transition - despite having achieved dominance of political administration and the ability to greatly expand the operational capability of every I.R.A. Battalion in Southern Ireland.

The military aims of the Irish Republicans are summarized well by the Irish political writing, James Fintan Lalor, in the 19th-century:

“The force of England is entrenched and fortified. You must draw it out of position; break up its mass ; break its trained line of march and manoeuvre, its equal step and serried array. You cannot organize, or train, or discipline your own force to any point of efficiency. You must therefore disorganize, and untrain, and undiscipline that of the enemy, and not alone must you unsoldier, you must unofficer it also; nullify its tactique and strategy, as well as its discipline; decompose the science and system of war, and resolve them into their first elements.”<sup>45</sup>

Published in a collection of Lalor’s work in 1919, revolutionary writings such as Lalor’s were prominent in literary and politically radical circles. Though not officially adopted as a doctrine by the I.R.A., Lalor’s outline works as a framework for understanding the goals of a guerrilla or revolutionary victory against an occupying enemy force. As will be shown in the proceeding section, the Skibbereen I.R.A. was able to accomplish these goals during the Anglo-Irish War, giving them military and civil dominance of large portions of West Cork.

The purpose of the military arm of the Republican struggle was the removal of British power in the region through the defeat of its armed forces and the destruction of its administrative capabilities. The course of the war in Skibbereen highlights the Republican strategy of first engaging the Royal Irish Constabulary and seizing their

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<sup>45</sup>James Fintan Lalor, *James Fintan Lalor: Patriot and Political Essayist (1807-1849)*, Edited by L. Fogarty, (Dublin: Talbot Press Ltd., 1919), 73.



weapons, doing the same to any British paramilitaries or military personnel where possible, then destroying their fortified barracks in towns and villages, and finally attacking the courthouses, workhouses and other administrative organs of British rule in West Cork. The Skibbereen I.R.A., having largely completed their operational objectives by the end of the conflict and emboldened by the successes of the I.R.A. Flying Columns, proved to be formidable guerrilla fighters and motivated revolutionaries. Whereas revisionist histories see the Republican situation by the end of hostilities as precarious, nothing could have been further from the truth for the Skibbereen I.R.A., whose successes in the revolutionary struggle were significant and visible in the social and political landscape of their communities.

### **Military Affairs**

Beginning in 1920, the Irish Republican Army mobilized in a devastating campaign against the organs of British administration. In the Skibbereen area, the destruction of British institutions crippled the means for effective British administration and effectively allowed for the development for Republican areas of administrative and military control. Across Ireland in Easter 1920, the I.R.A. carried out co-ordinated attacks against tax offices, courthouses and barracks - destroying nearly 350 buildings of the British administration in Ireland - and by the middle of the year had “destroyed 30 courthouses, 343 vacated RIC barracks, 12 occupied RIC barracks and caused damage to a further 104 vacated and 24 occupied police barracks.”<sup>46</sup> The assaults of Easter 1920 demonstrated to the British administration that the Irish Republican

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<sup>46</sup>Coleman, *The Irish Revolution: 1916 – 1923*, (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2013. November 20, 2013), 69.

movement was far from defeated, and the I.R.A. was in fact capable of widespread violence. The selection of sites for attacks in West Cork did not include the major barracks located in larger town like Skibbereen, most likely due to the continuing shortage of weaponry available to the I.R.A. Instead, outlying towns and districts were targeted in order to establish Republican control of vital physical spaces. By 1920, the I.R.A. strategy had already quickly escalated to the removal of British barracks from towns. The achievements of the rural Skibbereen I.R.A. were rapid and early, certainly accelerated compared to other parts of the country, creating an experiential gulf between the I.R.A. and its commanders in Dublin that would widen as the conflict progressed.

The resolution of the issue of arms and ammunitions was prioritized by I.R.A. commanders in early operations, as no armed resistance could be conducted against the modern British military without significant stockpiles of war material. Most attacks carried out in early 1920 were aimed at resolving this issue, and the risks that the men of the 4th Battalion took during these early operations shows their commitment to arming themselves. Patrick O'Sullivan recounts an attack organized for July 4th, 1920 by Brigade and Battalion officers:

The Brigade Quartermaster (Pat Harte) was in the area in the early part of July, 1920, when he arranged to ambush a patrol of R.I.C. near Brade about one mile from Leap on the Skibbereen-Clonakilty road. About twenty men armed with shotguns and drawn mainly from Skibbereen and Leap Companies took up a position behind the roadside fence. They were extended over a distance of about eighty yards. Positions were taken up the early morning. A patrol of R.I.C. to the number of nine entered the ambush position about 11 a.m. They were cycling in pairs and in extended order. They were armed with rifles. Fire was opened the patrol and there was an exchange of shots lasting about five minutes. However, due to the failure of our ammunition much of which did not explode at all we were forced to withdraw. Two members of Leap

Company Patrick and John Dineen were arrested following this incident and were sentenced to two years' imprisonment. In addition to Pat Harte, who was in charge, the following were the only ones whose names I can remember who took part in this operation Sam Kingston (Battalion O/C), Cornelius Connolly (Battalion Vice O/C), Owen O'Sullivan, Patrick O'Sullivan (Witness).<sup>47</sup>

The 4th Battalion had carried out its first attack on the R.I.C. in their area - and it had not gone well. The confrontation ended with "one R.I.C. man only...slightly wounded and the ambush party had to evacuate the position which was done without casualties."<sup>48</sup> Importantly, the I.R.A. had tested themselves and their equipment. The confidence that the early successes against the R.I.C. gave the I.R.A. would only grow, especially as I.R.A. Volunteers had largely resolved the problem of armaments for themselves. With police barracks destroyed and patrols ambushed, the early stages of the conflict saw the Republican forces rout the British police forces. The destruction of British institutions did not necessarily require ammunition, however, and the other attacks reflected the early adaptations of I.R.A. tactics as the conflict evolved.

Since the I.R.A. could not match the R.I.C. or British military rifle for rifle, Battalion and Brigade commanders knew they would have to find a way to deprive the occupation forces of their weaponry. Using the materials at hand, the 4th Battalion responded "when the order to destroy evacuated enemy posts was issued in Easter, 1920, [and] Drimoleague Courthouse was destroyed by fire. This job was carried out by Bredagh Cross Company,"<sup>49</sup> under the command of the 4th Battalion commander - Sam Kingston. Kingston ensured beforehand that "armed parties were put out at three points

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<sup>47</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 1481".

<sup>48</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 620".

<sup>49</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 1352", (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

to cover the demolition party and scouts were out to warn them by the blast of a whistle. This was sounded on the approach of [the] R.I.C. who made themselves scarce when they heard it and the burning was carried out without interference.”<sup>50</sup> Burnings of barracks across Ireland provided I.R.A. units with much needed ammunition, while simultaneously destroying the means of British administration in Ireland and terrorizing the ill-prepared R.I.C. For the entirety of the war, British media would depict the I.R.A. as gangsters and criminals acting on personal vendettas - though coordinated actions like those of Easter 1920 show that the organization was disciplined and strategic. Again challenging both the British propaganda and revisionist portrayal of Republican forces as disorganized gangs or subordinate to Republican commanders in Dublin, respectively, the independent action and initiative of local I.R.A. units shows that neither was the case. The lack of ammunition made the selection of targets vital to maintaining the operational capabilities of the I.R.A., and ensured that violence was limited and focused. While British courthouses and barracks burned across Ireland, the Republican movement was preparing to supersede British governance in Ireland with their own organs of domestic rule.

With the R.I.C. in disarray and Republicans administrating large parts of the country, the British authorities began the recruitment and deployment of more militarized forces to the ‘troubled’ areas of Ireland. The British military was already present in barracks and fortified houses across West Cork, though they were well-armed and difficult to attack during the early stages of open conflict. The introduction of the Black and Tans, and later the Auxiliaries, would almost completely lose the British the

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<sup>50</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 620”.

support that remained in the West Cork and Skibbereen areas. Brutal and callous, both these formations were designed with the simple purpose of subjugating the Irish population through intimidation and random violence. The introduction of these paramilitary groups to West Cork was the result of I.R.A. successes in overwhelming the British security forces in 1919 and 1920. Lieutenant General A.E. Percival remarked that the assigned British military operational areas were “usually much too large to control effectively - for instance - my own Battalion at the beginning of 1920 was responsible for an area stretching from Queenstown to Castletownbere, a distance of approximately 100 miles in length, and the Battalion only had strength of about 600 men!”<sup>51</sup>. The British, reinforcing their police barracks with military personnel and rings of physical defenses, adopted a ‘blockhouse’ strategy. In this case, the British fell back from vulnerable barracks into better positioned ones. These were encased in belts of barbed wire, sandbags and shuttered windows, defended by machine guns and rifles from firing slits in predetermined arcs of fire. Equipped with signal flares and rockets, the barracks were supported by sorties of British military in armored trucks in case of attack. The British sorties were also launched from heavily-defended British centers of control, like Bandon and Cork City, in attempts to either encircle entire formations of the I.R.A. or raid houses and search for arms. The conditions on the ground, however, meant that the British was ill-equipped for the environment it faced in West Cork.

While the I.R.A. was able to concentrate forces in multiple attacks simultaneously, the British forces in Ireland were isolated and under-manned. Linked

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<sup>51</sup>Lt. Gen. Arthur Percival, “Guerrilla Warfare, Ireland 1920-1921 - Lt. Gen. A.E. Percival,” In *British Voices: From the Irish War of Independence 1918-1921; the words of British servicemen who were there*, Edited by William Sheehan, (Cork: Collins Press, 2005), 106-108.

by roads that were ideal for ambushes, British forces began to emerge from their fortified positions less and less. Those that did continue to venture outside their billets did little to help the situation or win over local support. Sorties by the British military and paramilitaries were common, but largely fruitless, as the success of the I.R.A. in keeping Volunteers anonymous and punishing informers made it increasingly difficult to identify fighters. In one instance, the British military was able to ‘round-up’ the majority of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion’s H.Q. Staff, including Cornelius Connolly and Patrick O’Sullivan. As Sam Kingston recounts, however, the British “arrested every useless individual in the town and took them to their Barracks at the Workhouse. None of the useful men were taken.”<sup>52</sup> As late as May, 1921, British forces were still failing to capture and identify I.R.A. Volunteers. Daniel Kelly and some fellow Volunteers “were taken into Skibbereen and interrogated”, but released later that night.<sup>53</sup> Despite attempts at mobility and aggressive operations, the British military had a serious issue in being able to confront the I.R.A. in West Cork on anything but on the insurgents’ terms. The Skibbereen I.R.A. never engaged the enemy, except when prepared. This situation meant the local I.R.A. units were confident that the enemy was isolated, and had seen in evidence their own ability to prevent the British from leaving their barracks, projecting control or engaging the Republican forces. Gradually, such round-ups would become larger and larger in scale as British officials grew more desperate for results – though these large maneuvers were easily detected by I.R.A. pickets and often out-maneuvered or successfully engaged (as at the famous engagement at Crossbarry in March, 1921).

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<sup>52</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 620”.

<sup>53</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1590”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

The British were fighting a losing battle, with Republicans eager to draw Crown forces into positions where they would alienate the local population and the government in London anxious for aggressive results against Irish ‘rebels’. While the I.R.A. did use violence as a tool to gain political and social control, the British reprisals were particularly public and visible, making civilians more likely to give tacit and practical support to the Republican forces.<sup>54</sup> The British paramilitaries were ill-disciplined and often did not even try to differentiate between Irish revolutionaries and civilians. Though this view is expounded by the Irish perspective of the war, British historians are often critical of this view. As with most conventional armies withdrawing from a devastating conflict, the British military certainly had its share of traumatized veterans of the First World War and trigger-happy fresh recruits eager to prove themselves if they missed the ‘Great War’. Put into a situation which they were neither trained in nor familiar with, it is not surprising that even the professional soldiers in the British Army gained themselves a reputation of callous violence and cultural ignorance. The blundering and blunt force of the British paramilitaries ensured that the support for Irish Republicans crossed ancient religious divides. The commander of the Lisheen Company, 4th Battalion, William Crowley, recalled that:

On one occasion when the Lisheen company went to re-open a trench on the Skibbereen-Lisheen road Newcourt, at about three miles from Skibbereen, they were approached on their way by Mrs. Jeanne Daunt a Protestant lady of Newcourt. She informed them that she had seen the military taking up positions in Newcourt Wood and on a hill, a few hundred yards from the cutting. This section of military had a machine gun in position on the hill. I have no doubt, but that for her information, the company would have been wiped out on this occasion.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Coleman, *The Irish Revolution, 1916-1923*, 83.

<sup>55</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1502”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

The I.R.A. strategy of road-cutting was a new phenomenon, and was carried out with increasing dedication of manpower and equipment. Despite interrupting civilian traffic as well, the road-cutting isolated British garrisons from the local population. In many cases, British forces would press-gang locals to fill in ditches dug by the I.R.A. which only made the situation worse. Armed British soldiers watching over gangs of Irish forced labour gangs undoubtedly brought back local memories of the Great Famine, and locals were now confronted with a stark example of the failure of the British administration to maintain civic order and control. The strategy of road-cutting was aimed at depriving the British of the one tactical advantage they still possessed - their heavily-armored columns of mechanized paramilitaries. Overwhelmed by the scale of road-cutting in the area and now almost immobilized, the R.I.C.'s morale plummeted as 1920 came to a close. The 4th Battalion recognized the developing weakness of the R.I.C. as a security force, and decided to take action in 1921 to clear out the British police force in larger towns in West Cork.

The shift in strategy in West Cork from clearing peripheral areas and isolating garrisons to their actual destruction demonstrates important realities about the experience of the war. In beginning to engage the enemy in their barracks and clear them from substantial towns, the I.R.A. had to be confident that it could fill the administrative void in these populated areas left by the final destruction of British garrisons. Moreover, the 4th Battalion now had to prepare to assault Skibbereen. Going up against heavily-armed R.I.C. and British military forces, they would have to have sufficient stores of ammunition and explosives. Roads would have to be cut, sentries posted, assault parties organized and trained, reconnaissance conducted - all without intervention or detection by British forces. 1921, therefore, looked to be the year that



the West Cork I.R.A. would clear out all British presence out of the region. The local I.R.A. - confident of their own abilities without Dublin's interference - therefore understandably began to think that if Skibbereen could be taken, surely Bandon could fall in six months or Cork in a year.

The R.I.C. hitherto have been indomitable and have carried on with fearlessness, courage, and initiative; but recent events point to the breaking point being reached...So far as the R.I.C. are concerning in this Riding, they may be considered to have ceased to function. The most they can do is to try to defend themselves and their barracks. It would seem that the time has arrived for the military to supersede the R.I.C. in this Riding.<sup>56</sup>

This quote, taken from a letter from Under-Secretary to the Chief Secretary of Ireland, chillingly summarizes the situation faced by the R.I.C. in West Cork in 1920. Forced into cramped barracks with paramilitaries and military personnel, the situation remained grim for the R.I.C. at the beginning of 1921. Building on the successes of 1920 and conscious of the deterioration of the R.I.C. in West Cork, the 4th Battalion prepared to clear the police force from Skibbereen town itself. I.R.A. attacks on the R.I.C. had been fruitful thus far, and "resignations from the R.I.C. became frequent by mid-1920. If policemen were not driven by fear of death or at least ostracism, their parents and relatives were urged by Sinn Féin to leave"<sup>57</sup> the ill-equipped and -prepared force. The 4th Battalion had previously avoided confronting the Skibbereen garrisons, due to a notable pro-British population still resident in the town in addition to the narrow and confined streets of the Skibbereen town center.

However, the resignation of Sam Kingston as commander of the 4th Battalion in

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<sup>56</sup>Sir John Anderson, "Sir John Anderson to Chief Secretary Hamar Greenwood, July 20, 1920". In *Sir John Anderson papers*, (CO 904/188. Colonial Office, Dublin Castle Records. London: Public Record Office).

<sup>57</sup>Peter Somerville-Large, *Irish Voices: An Informal History, 1916-1966*, (London: Pimlico, 2000), 35.

February, 1921, left the unit under the command of Cornelius Connelly - a decisively more aggressive military leader. Reassigned to lead the Republican Police, this move demonstrates the Republican strategy for 1921. The command change is a sign of the Republican recognition that their civil forms of control needed to be well-led and organized if they were to expand on the seizure of substantial towns by I.R.A. forces. Cornelius Connolly quickly shifted the strategy of the 4th Battalion to address and confront the British garrisons now isolated in Republican rear areas. So long as British forces attempted to resupply them, there were opportunities to ambush the mobile British forces in their lorries, but their presence along West Cork roads jeopardized I.R.A. mobility and logistics throughout the 3rd Brigade area. Therefore, on February 9th, 1921, a Cumann na mBan volunteer risked her life to escort the 3rd Brigade officer, Tom Barry, through Skibbereen to scout the barracks for a planned attack:

**Interviewee:** Diarmaid McCarthy was her name and they were looking for someone to take Tommy Barry around the town. Tommy Barry was a wanted man. So she did it, she met him over there, where the Train Station is. They walk up town to L and I think around the corner house, the RIC had a barrack. And they walked up High Street and they showed Tommy Barry they were going to blow up the barrack that night, and they showed Tommy Barry and he wasn't happy. And so they went down by the mill.

**Interviewer:** By Market Street?

**Interviewee:** Yes, and around town and back up again to make sure he was alright. Of course, the barrack was blown up that night of course. But the biggest danger was Tommy Barry was known and both of them would have been shot. She was a mad woman surely, and she was only 18.<sup>58</sup>

This excerpt from an interview demonstrates not only the unrecognized courage and

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<sup>58</sup>Author's Personal Collection, "Interview 1", (Interview transcripts, notes, and M4A audio files, Skibbereen Historical Society, Skibbereen, Co.Cork, Summer 2016).

dedication of Irish women in the struggle for independence, but their vital role in providing reconnaissance and communications assistance to the I.R.A. The presence of Tom Barry, commander of the West Cork I.R.A.'s Flying Column, is a sign of the significance of the action and the importance that the clearing Skibbereen's British garrison held in the minds of local Republican leaders. Though the R.I.C. barracks was destroyed by a homemade I.R.A. mine, the British military maintained their positions in the town. R.I.C. survivors of the I.R.A. attack now retreated into the heavily-defended British military barracks, making conditions uncomfortable and cramped. The British military unit in Skibbereen was regarded as largely harmless, especially in comparison to the Essex Regiment in Bandon. Commanded by Percival himself, the Essex Regiment earned the animosity and hatred of the West Cork population through their use of terrorist and torture tactics on revolutionaries and civilians alike.

While post-war portrayals of the conflict cast the participants of the war as diametrically opposed to one another, there were cases where Volunteers and local Crown forces developed delicate relationships. The 4th Battalion and the people of the Skibbereen area looked on the British regiment stationed in town with respect and appreciation, as "it seems that the regiment that was based [in Skibbereen], the British regiment - you've probably heard about the infamous Essex Regiment in Bandon that had quite a tough reputation - but it seems that whoever was in charge here had a different approach."<sup>59</sup> Given the continuous attacks suffered by other British garrisons across the country, the Skibbereen garrison largely escaped any determined assaults - thanks due both to the cessation of hostilities and the decorum and discipline of the

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<sup>59</sup>Author's Personal Collection, "Interview 6".

particular British regiment stationed there. In many cases, this ‘fraternization’ was limited to gentlemanly conduct but sometimes amounted to informal ceasefires. By being able to surround, immobilize and threaten local garrisons, Volunteers were able to focus their forces elsewhere - simultaneously cutting off enemy troops and forcing the British to risk sorties to resupply these distant garrisons. In Skibbereen, it seems that the escalation of violence was entirely in the hands of the I.R.A., as both the 4th Battalion and British garrison regiment seemed comfortable avoiding direct confrontation unless absolutely necessary.

The destruction of barracks in Skibbereen in 1921 shows the reality of the Republican strategy in West Cork at work. Though dedicated to the ultimate expulsion of the British from the area, the Skibbereen I.R.A. were not wildly violent nor aimed to escalate the conflict on anything but their own terms. Having faced the British in the isolated peripheries and in populated areas, the Skibbereen I.R.A. had reason to feel confident that it could not only carry out future actions but could withstand the reactions of British forces in the area.

By 1921, the British administration was struggling to maintain control over Ireland and on December 10th, 1920, martial law was extended to include Cork County. Allowing for the replacement of civil jury courts with military court-martial, the implementation of martial law was intended to simplify the means for trying and prosecuting members and supporters of the I.R.A. The adoption of “trials by military courts made it much easier to imprison suspected IRA members [yet] this increased the gulf between those Volunteers who regarded the IRA as something of an after-work hobby, sabotaging roads or burning vacated police barracks, and the most dedicated members would not hesitate to shoot local policemen. As British pressure increased, the

most committed fighters had to leave their homes and go ‘on the run’.”<sup>60</sup> Taken from a recently-published magazine, this source is one of the first to make use of the Military History Bureau’s Collection. The effect of the Collection is evident; the testimonies of I.R.A. Volunteers has helped to shape a more comprehensive understanding of the Republican war experience. Just as earlier training and arrests had culled the Irish Volunteers’ ranks of the faint-hearted, 1921’s mass round-ups and raids left the 4th Battalion with only the most committed revolutionary fighters. The displacement of Volunteers put pressure on local families, who often relied on the income provided by their young men. In rural areas, this form of warfare was seen as directly targeting the families of Volunteers. Mass arrests took away substantial numbers of the workforce, creating economic hardship for the men’s relatives. This further distance the local population from what were increasingly seen as foreign and occupying British forces. The gradual radicalization of the I.R.A. under martial law would come back to haunt British authorities West Cork, but the 4th Battalion was already planning a solution to within three months of the declaration of martial court in County Cork.

The 4th Battalion had left the Skibbereen Courthouse untouched during the wave of attacks in early 1920, again preferring the open terrain of Skibbereen’s environs and unwilling to alert nearby British security forces. Moreover, the targeting of British courthouses in West Cork had led to their massive reinforcement with armed British soldiers and sandbags - certainly not helping create an air of British rule of law or security for locals. Though reinforcements did reach West Cork, their inability to change the situation on the ground reflects the reactive and desperate situation that the

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<sup>60</sup>Anonymous. "The Flying Column: a fast and furious fighting unit." *The Revolution Papers* (Dublin), August 23, 2016, 34th ed.

British administration found itself in 1921. As attacks against British fortified positions and administration buildings increased, it became clear to both Irish and British that these reinforcements were unable to the I.R.A. from pursuing its operational objective of clearing the British presence from West Cork. Daniel Kelly, an 18-year member of the Skibbereen Company, 4th Battalion describes how in early April, 1921, the Skibbereen Courthouse was burned by the Skibbereen company<sup>61</sup>. Again, using the available materials at hand to conserve ammunition and explosives, the 4th Battalion successfully destroyed the largest symbol of entrenched British rule in Skibbereen town. In coordination with the 4th Battalion, “Tom Barry, with his section of the Column and the men of Bandon Battalion, had been carrying out a similar operation on Bandon Workhouse.”<sup>62</sup> Destroying or damaging important symbols of British rule was naturally beneficial to the Republican revolutionary strategy in West Cork, as it necessitated an influx of participants in Republican courts and domestic institutions. This positive feedback loop, wherein the Republicans would destroy the British governance in order to gain local support in turn expanding the audacity and scale of Republican military actions, would continue to worsen through 1921. In Skibbereen, the dominance of Republican institutions was evidence to Volunteers and civilians alike that the Republican forces were succeeding. The 4th Battalion saw their success in burning the Skibbereen Courthouse as an opportunity to strike a double-blow against the icons of British rule in the area, and selected the Skibbereen Workhouse as the next targets.

It was only within a matter of days after the burning of the Skibbereen Courthouse that “arrangements were made to burn Skibbereen Workhouse to prevent

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<sup>61</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1590”.

<sup>62</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1481”.

its occupation by Major Percival's Column which was moving into the area from the east.”<sup>63</sup> Percival and his dreaded Essex Regiment intended to bivouac in the old stone building during an attempted British round-up of Republicans. Unknown to the British authorities, the Courthouse was to be destroyed before Percival’s arrival by “members of the men of Skibbereen Battalion in co-operation with a section of the Column under Liam Deasy. All patients and inmates in the building had to be removed before the place was prepared for burning. The area was sealed off about 9 p.m. all roads in the area being held by armed parties. When the occupants had been removed to safety the building was sprinkled with paraffin and petrol and then set on fire. It was completely destroyed, all men engaged on the operation withdrew about 4 a.m. on the morning of 23rd June, 1921.”<sup>64</sup> As a symbol of the suffering enduring by the people of West Cork at the hands of the British administration, particularly important because of its role during Skibbereen’s Famine experience, the burning of the Workhouse embodied the complete breakdown of British rule of law in Skibbereen. Moreover, the systematic destruction of potential barracks across West Cork during the middle of 1921, as in Skibbereen, denied the British forces any possibility of establishing new barracks and reconnecting pockets of British troops with larger town and cities - like Bandon and Cork.

The local importance of both the Skibbereen Workhouse and Courthouse, and their burning by the 4th Battalion, linked the contemporary struggle with the tradition of Fenianism and the devastating effects of the Great Famine in Skibbereen. Again, the storied past of Skibbereen was reflected in the actions and ideals of modern Irish

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<sup>63</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1481”.

<sup>64</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1590”.

Republicans. The destruction of the British administrative infrastructure in the area left the I.R.A. as the only source of civil infrastructure, shifting the control of governance entirely into Republican hands.

While the Anglo-Irish Treaty was the primary catalyst for the division within the I.R.A. in 1922, fissures and problems were evident before July, 1921. What must be recognized is the situation in which Volunteers found themselves: they had engaged and defeated their enemies and replaced British power with Republican power in their own communities, yet were confused and divided by the attitudes of the Dublin leadership. The 4th Battalion had carried out a successful guerrilla campaign against the British, largely without contact or control from Dublin, and yet at the cusp of complete control of the Skibbereen area were reined in by a distant leadership. Post-war revisionist histories portrayed the rural I.R.A. as experiencing the war parallel to G.H.Q. in Dublin. The stark military situation in West Cork went unrecognized by the Dublin leadership that signed the Treaty, however, and local Republicans saw this as a dangerous situational ignorance by politicians and leaders in Dublin that could bring their successful for power in West Cork to naught. While this section outlines the military realities facing the I.R.A. in Skibbereen, it is necessary not only to demonstrate the Republican military success, but also the state of civil affairs in Skibbereen during the war, and the means by which Skibbereen Republicans were able to supercede and replace British power altogether.

As previously stated, the British response to the serious demoralization of the R.I.C. and the destruction of their barracks in West Cork was to consolidate British forces in the area. Coupled with an increase in aggressive sorties by British paramilitary forces and the Essex Regiment, the British government decided the best course of action



“was to withdraw Constabulary garrisons from isolated barracks...enabling them to concentrate their forces in larger population centers, but essentially abandoning large portions of the country. At the same time, a system of fortifying the remaining barracks with steel shutters and sandbags began.”<sup>65</sup> This fortification of British garrisons was a serious dilemma for the 4th Battalion, who had some difficulty in making the sophisticated homemade mines necessary to reduce these positions. The 4th Battalion, acting independently of Brigade command, took the initiative in late April and attacked an R.I.C. patrol inside Skibbereen town. Engaging the R.I.C., after their withdrawal to the fortified military barrack in February, was intended to convince the R.I.C. to abandon attempts at maintaining order in the Skibbereen area. Driven first from periphery barracks and then their central position in Skibbereen, the British situation in Skibbereen appeared dire. The capability of the I.R.A. to successfully engage and drive British forces in the streets of the largest local town was more than simply audacious - it was an indicator of a new and decisive phase of the war. On April 30th, 1921, the Skibbereen Company mobilized and secured a vital crossroads in the heart of the town:

All available members of Skibbereen Company were engaged either as scouts on outpost duty or in the main attacking party on a patrol of R.I.C. at the junction of Bridge Street - Island [sic. Ilen] Street about 9.30 p.m. The enemy patrol consisted of 12/14 men moving in extended order on both sides of the street. They were armed with carbines. As the patrol approached the junction of Bridge Street - Island [sic. Ilen] Street, fire was opened on them by a party of about a dozen in our main attacking party who were in position in the doorways on the street and behind a cart which had been pushed into the roadway at the junction. The attacking party's arms consisted of shotguns, two or three carbines and a couple of revolvers. After an exchange of fire lasting about five minutes our party withdrew. The R.I.C., one of whom was wounded, retired to their barracks. Amongst those who took part in this operation were John Leonard (O/C [Skibbereen Company]), Paddy Fehilly, Pat Sullivan,

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<sup>65</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 62.

Paddy Cooney, Paddy Harnedy, William Kelly, John Kelly, Rory O'Connor and Daniel C. Kelly (witness).<sup>66</sup>

The action, involving entirely men of the Skibbereen Company and Battalion, sent a message to the town's inhabitants that the I.R.A. had now entered a new stage of the conflict - one in which populated areas were no longer inaccessible to a confident and veteran force of Republicans. Though there was still some Loyalist support in the town for the British forces, the ambush on Ilen Street clearly demonstrated the inability of the British administration to secure the town of Skibbereen. The R.I.C. - driven back by a numerically inferior force - was certain to lose credibility in the eyes of Skibbereen locals and the British military, and seemed incapable of escaping the predations of revolutionaries even within their historical redoubts. The attack on the Skibbereen barracks was the realization of the second phase of the Republican military strategy; the destruction of British barracks, enabling Republicans forces to roll up British forces into positions in large towns and cities like Bandon and Cork City. The smoldering ashes of the R.I.C. building in the center of Skibbereen was visible evidence to civilians and Volunteers alike that the Republican struggle was escalating and expanding.

The ambushes carried out by the 4th Battalion, especially those conducted in populated areas, demonstrated republican control of public spaces to the local population. By engaging British forces close to their fortified barracks, the I.R.A. turned their enemy's 'blockhouse' strategy against them. Garrisons feared leaving their stations, making counter-raids and maneuvers in the field more difficult, and were often withdrawn altogether from their positions, leaving the town and its population in the hands of the I.R.A. In Skibbereen, engagements within the town were limited by a

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<sup>66</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 1590".

substantial Loyalist population but nevertheless sent a strong message to the town's inhabitants about the skill, scale and audacity of the I.R.A. The British administration in Skibbereen town was now reduced to the solitary military barracks. The burnt ruins of the R.I.C. station, the Courthouse, and the Workhouse sent a clear message of intent - Skibbereen was at the mercy of the I.R.A. This did not necessarily mean that the remaining military barracks needed to be destroyed; its both cramped and isolated condition could easily render its garrison operationally ineffective. For the Skibbereen I.R.A., however, there was no doubt that little stood in the way of complete Republican control of the area.

While the levels of violence escalated rapidly during the early parts of 1921, drawn-out engagements as a rule were rare during the conflict. The impact of the particularly prevalent combat in the West Cork area cannot be understated, however. Opponents and environments were clearly examined and analyzed by the I.R.A. in West Cork, in order to best reap the benefits of engaging the enemy. They made sustained assaults against the enemy, chosen for their strategic importance, while ambushes and burnings drove British forces out of the countryside and achieved I.R.A. military and civil supremacy in physical and social spaces. Though at first operating mostly in rural areas, Flying Columns would increasingly come to engage British forces in their barracks. This shift in Flying Column operations reflects the intent of local Republicans to drive the British entirely from Skibbereen and her environs. The organization of Flying Columns in reaction to British burnings created a mobile guerrilla force which was able to outmaneuver and out-fight their mobile British counterparts - the Essex Regiment and various British paramilitaries.

By 1921, even the Essex Regiment commander, Lt. Gen. Percival was forced to

admit that “the only chance of success was to take offensive action against the IRA. To enable this to be done, it was necessary to economise forces by reducing the number of smaller detachments in existence and accordingly the detachments at Ballineen and Timoleague were withdrawn, those at Bandon and Clonakilty being retained to provide bases of operations”<sup>67</sup> - in other words, a withdrawal of British forces into the last redoubts of British administration left intact in West Cork. While Percival sought to create rapid strike forces to attack the I.R.A. strongholds further west, the Flying Columns were forming with increasing efficiency and effectiveness. Sam Kingston’s brief participation with the 3rd Brigade’s Flying Column reveals the circumstances and strategy that allowed for their creation and operation. He describes in brief detail that he “joined the Flying Column at Granure the night following the Kilmichael Ambush. They had retired to Granure to rest. We stood to arms for over an hour in teeming rain on a warning of the approach of military.”<sup>68</sup> The circulation of Volunteers in and out of the Flying Column meant that it was almost always ready to go into action should the motorized Bandon garrison units sally out, and the organization and assemble of normal Battalion and Company Volunteers in forward position alludes to the creation and sustenance of secure rear areas by I.R.A. Battalions.

Dropping two birds and one stone, the Brigade Flying Columns pooled their rifles in order to “to alleviate the arms situation” and create a compact striking force supplied by a system of dumps across the rugged countryside<sup>69</sup>. The concentration of arms and weaponry in Flying Column allowed for more decisive action of the part of

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<sup>67</sup>Percival, “Guerrilla Warfare, Ireland 1920-1921 - Lt. Gen. A.E. Percival”, 122.

<sup>68</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 620”.

<sup>69</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 104.

the I.R.A. as the nature of the conflict fundamentally changed. Without a body of well-trained and equipped troops, it would be impossible for the I.R.A. to consider confronting the British in a stronghold like Bandon or even advancing on Cork City itself. The specialization of the Flying Column meant that the local Volunteers not directly engaged with the Flying Columns could support their actions with the local stockpiles of shotguns and revolvers<sup>70</sup>. The purposeful disarmament of local Volunteers shows that the I.R.A. leadership was confident of the success of the Flying Column strategy and the inability of British forces to threaten rear areas. The drastically deteriorating situation faced by British authorities after the establishment of the Flying Columns is embodied in Percival's observation that:

...the Military had no powers of retaliation and were entirely on the defensive. In the bad areas, lorry convoys escorted by armoured cars had to be organised, to take supplies to the various detachments and this was practically the only means of communication between one detachment and another.<sup>71</sup>

With military movement impaired by I.R.A. road-cutting operations, garrisons isolated in remote villages in unfriendly territory, the failure of British 'Flying Columns' of lorries and armored cars to locate or engage the I.R.A., and the breakdown of discipline and morale among British paramilitaries and the R.I.C., respectively, the military situation in West Cork seemed precarious to say the least.

In other words, the military force of the Irish Republican Army had achieved what the 19th-century Irish political essayist, James Lalor, had written about defeating the British military in Ireland. The Skibbereen I.R.A. had driven British forces from their entrenched positions. The 4th Battalion had engaged, demoralized and

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<sup>70</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921* , 104.

<sup>71</sup>Percival, "Guerrilla Warfare, Ireland 1920-1921 - Lt. Gen. A.E. Percival", 118.

disorganized British forces in the area, achieving Lalor's vision of the struggle for Irish independence. To local Republicans, a sense of situational success pervaded - only compacted by the visible indicators of the I.R.A.'s campaign in West Cork. What is most impressive is that the I.R.A. succeeded in realizing Lalor's concept of an Irish separatist victory while forming organized, trained and disciplined units of guerrilla fighter. Though the 4th Battalion assumed a supporting role in the 3rd Brigade's Flying Column operations around Bandon, the Skibbereen I.R.A. nevertheless supplied men and equipment in a demonstration of the I.R.A.'s freedom of movement and logistics network. By cycling men through active duty with the Flying Column, the 4th Battalion developed its Volunteers into experienced guerrilla fighters. Every Volunteer played a part in the the actions of the local I.R.A., imparting in the men a sense of broad success and confidence in their own arms and martial prowess. As the war wound to a close though, hidden fractures in the I.R.A. began to appear; later culminating in the Republican shock at the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the subsequent violence of the Irish Civil War.

As has been examined, the withdrawal of G.H.Q. and I.R.B. leaders to Dublin did little to help or develop the struggle in West Cork. In fact, the Dublin leadership did little to assist the 4th Battalion - or any West Cork Battalion for that matter - in their successful completion of their operations. Most damaging to the I.R.A., however, was not the negligence of Dublin but the very structural systems that Republican leaders had pieced together in the pre-war era.

Peter Hart points out that "by March 1921, the Skibbereen Battalion's men were not only not showing up for parades, many of the trainee column men had deserted as

well.”<sup>72</sup> What Hart fails to understand is that the conflict had developed in such a way that parades and public displays of military force were useless by March of 1921. Public demonstrations of military and political force by the I.R.A. were a thing of the past by 1921. Especially given the massive and desperate round-ups undertaken by British forces, such political posturing and parades would have been completely counter-productive during the later phase of the revolutionary struggle for West Cork. Hart, by saying this, is attempting to point out a breakdown of discipline in the ranks of I.R.A. - and unfortunately, he is not entirely wrong. By 1921, various units within the West Cork I.R.A - the 4th Battalion included - were having serious difficulties with their command structures. One unit example from the 4th Battalion is the Drinagh Company, whose leadership became so incensed that 3rd Brigade staff officers had to be called in to resolve the issue.<sup>73</sup> The issue was that the policies put forward by GHQ sowed dissension among I.R.A. units, wherein no guidance was given on the integration of the Flying Column command into the Battalion and Brigade hierarchy.<sup>74</sup> In April, 1921, G.H.Q. decided to implement a Divisional command structure that would coordinate the actions of numerous Brigades in a single area. Though designed to increase cooperation among regional units, the Divisional organization another yet another layer to an already complex and unwieldy staff system already facing accusations of nepotism.<sup>75</sup> In fact, G.H.Q.’s unwillingness to accept the changing nature of the conflict into a developing and expanding war meant that the Dublin leadership was eager to re-gain

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<sup>72</sup>Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 259.

<sup>73</sup>Author’s Personal Collection, “Interview 8”, (Interview transcripts, notes, and M4A audio files, Skibbereen Historical Society, Skibbereen, Co.Cork, Summer 2016).

<sup>74</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 145-146.

<sup>75</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 145-146.

control of I.R.A. Brigades operating so successfully.

While G.H.Q. established the Divisional structure, the I.R.B. was busy with another recruiting drive among the new I.R.A. officers who had filled command vacancies during the conflict. The 4th Battalion's Quartermaster, Patrick O'Sullivan "was sworn into the I.R.B. by Liam Deasy in February, 1921. Selected men from the various Companies in the Battalion were also sworn into the Circle. In our Circle, Cornelius Connolly (Battalion O/C.) was appointed Centre and I was his deputy."<sup>76</sup> One explanation for the G.H.Q. and I.R.B.'s insistence on these reorganization efforts is that the Dublin leadership was uncomfortable with the escalation of the conflict in 1921, and sought to rein in more radically Republican I.R.A. officers who were aggressively pushing the military conflict with Britain. Mike Rast observes that, though well-defined on paper, the Republican G.H.Q. set up a variegated command structure that in practice had to relate various units with one another and the national leadership in Dublin while suffering from "issues of personal pride, ambition, jealousy, and safety concerns" that created personal strain between I.R.A. officers.<sup>77</sup> While disputes among I.R.A. units were not uncommon, the serious breaches of discipline necessary for the organization to disobey commands alludes to a larger problem.

The catalyst for the destruction of the I.R.A.'s guerrilla military force was a political event. Agreed between the British and Dublin leadership, with little communication to regional I.R.A. commanders, the Anglo-Irish Treaty ripped the I.R.A. apart. Torn between allegiance to regional and nationalist leaders, local realities and the attitude of G.H.Q., and further complicated by structural command issues, the I.R.A.

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<sup>76</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 1481".

<sup>77</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 137.



stoof little chance of withstanding these internal pressures. The Treaty, by failing to recognize an Irish Republic, flew in the face of every Republican achievement of the past five years. Though this may appear to be a definitional issue, the civil-military synthesis of the Republican strategy meant that by definition the goal of the I.R.A. in Skibbereen had been to achieve an Irish Republic. Incapable of understanding why the Dublin leadership caved to what were seen as British threats of force, local Republicans became increasingly convinced that the sacrifices of the past five years were worth fighting for. Revisionist and post-revisionist histories both portray the disintegration of the I.R.A. as a result of arms shortages or the strategic situation - the I.R.A. split because of internal divisions. In combination with the organizational fragility of the I.R.A. following G.H.Q. reforms in 1921, the Anglo-Irish Treaty effectively destroyed the I.R.A. - and the 4th Battalion - more than the entirety of the British military machine had been able to do in two years of escalating violence. As I will examine later, the I.R.A.'s Treaty split had little to do with military command or organization, but with a pre-existing split in the situational understanding of the Dublin leadership and the I.R.A. in Munster. Not only was the Skibbereen I.R.A. gaining strength and achieving real dominance in the area at the time of the Truce, but the I.R.A. in the south was preparing to once again reshape the face of the conflict and deliver a decisive blow to the British in Ireland.

### **Civil Affairs**

It is vital to note that, reflecting the revolutionary nature of the Republican effort, the civil affairs developed parallel to the military affairs in the Skibbereen area.

The development of Nationalist organizations in the pre-war period gave organizers and activists vital training in what would become the means of Republican governance in West Cork. Though examined and investigated by post-revisionist historians, the civil affairs of the Anglo-Irish War in West Cork cannot be separated from the military. The engagement and final destruction of British forces in the region could only be reasonable carried out if the administrative void could be filled by Republican institutions. Mobilizing civilians, men and women alike, Republicans achieved what can only be described as a mass movement in parts of Ireland aimed at the establishment and support of the Republican civil effort. By achieving dominance of civil affairs and gaining the trust and sympathy of the local population, the civil arm of the Republican struggle made the completion of the I.R.A.'s objective in West Cork possible.

A striking feature of the I.R.A.'s autonomy in West Cork is the successful and widespread collection of funds to support the war effort. Even before the outbreak of war between British and Irish forces, local groups of Irish Volunteers were collecting for a 'National Aid Fund'. With the majority of republican leaders killed or imprisoned following the Easter Rising, local units took the initiative and maintained active in the collection of funds. Patrick O'Sullivan, who would become 4th Battalion Quartermaster in 1920, stated that "[w]hile on my school holidays during the years 1916 and 1917, I assisted in the collection of funds for the National Aid Fund which was being raised to help the relatives of those on the Republican side who had been killed, imprisoned or wounded during the Rebellion."<sup>78</sup> Later interpretations of the period between the Easter

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<sup>78</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 1481".

Rising and the ambush at Soloheadbeg as one of complete re-organization and inactivity on the part of the I.R.A. across Ireland. However, local units were both active and productive during this period - maintaining connections with the local population and practicing maneuvers while simultaneously contributing to finances of the nascent I.R.A. The early dedication to the collection of such funds was the result of Republican concern that “to implement the ambitious agenda set by Sinn Fein policy and the Dail government, the movement would need not thousands or tens of thousands of pounds, but hundreds of thousands of pounds.”<sup>79</sup> Funds took many shapes and forms, though the dominant focus of collections was providing for the families of I.R.A. members killed or imprisoned and an Arms Fund, meant to provide the finances necessary to purchase and import arms and ammunition.

The localized nature of these collections had a number of significant effects. Firstly, it made publicly visible who was supportive of the Republican cause. This created a sense of solidarity and unity among Republican supporters, and an ‘otherness’ for opponents that put them under great social strain in their communities. Secondly, it meant that the local Republican units were connected and communicative with civilians. Contrasted with the heavy-handed British tactics, it is obvious why supporting local Republicans economically was amiable to many in the area. Finally, the collections were done on the initiative of local I.R.A. officers and men, Such much of the money away for arms that never arrived, there was a growing animosity over Dublin’s inability to provide for its southern units. Collections demonstrates to Volunteers that there was a significant possibility that the conflict would escalate and require further armaments, as

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<sup>79</sup> Hart, *Mick: The Real Michael Collins*, 189.

well as showing Volunteers the level of local support and in turn showing civilians that the Republicans now had the power to enforce administrative control in Ireland.

As the pitch and scale of the conflict increased, especially in 1920, the I.R.A. turned to more direct means of collecting funds. Contributions were expected from every sector of West Cork society, and levy collection was extended to include merchants in villages and towns. The calculated expected contribution was “in the case of merchants and others [...] based on the Poor Law Valuation of their premises.”<sup>80</sup> Collections from merchants and people living in population centers were difficult and dangerous considering the proximity of British garrisons, and yet were carried out effectively by the I.R.A. in West Cork. The dominance of dairy agriculture in the region meant that the most effective means for seizing funds and resources was cattle raiding, however. Focusing early on reluctant farmers for cattle seizures meant that Republican forces were seen as impartial to either agrarian or town folk. The development of rural control was the Republican focus early in the conflict, and allowed for entire rural swathes to fall under Republican jurisdiction. Cornelius Connolly, commander of the 4th Battalion, recounts how I.R.A. collection strategy changed; “In December, 1920, those who did not subscribe to the Arms Fund had cattle seized to the value of the levy put on them and which they refused to pay. On that occasion, there were six or seven of the men engaged on this job, for the seizure and the driving of the cattle.”<sup>81</sup> The increased attention given to funds collection signifies the I.R.A.’s ability not only to freely move across the area and project authority over the civilian population, but the organization’s directed efforts to gather the resources necessary to carry out a lengthy

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<sup>80</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1590”.

<sup>81</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 620”.

resistance and establish civil institutions. The selection of Patrick O’Sullivan as a main organizer of collections and the allocation of vital manpower to support the effort shows the 4th Battalion’s dedication to the undertaking. Patrick O’Sullivan describes the process of fund collection, specifically those unwilling to contribute:

A levy of 4/- per cow was fixed on any farmers. About twenty Protestant farmers in the area refused to pay the levy. In the circumstances we were forced to seize stock to the value of the amount of the levy from each defaulter. It was decided to seize all such stock on the night prior to Dunmanway Fair and to drive the stock to Dunmanway where arrangements had been made to dispose of the stock to a friendly dealer. The cattle were seized and driven through the night to Dunmanway a distance in some cases of close on 15 miles. They were sold by me for approximately £200 and the money was lodged in the Bank to the credit of the accounts of Sinn Féin supporters in the area. The friendly cattle dealer, who co-operated in the disposal of the stock, was James Duggan.<sup>82</sup>

Travelling 15 miles with a substantial herd of cattle is no easy task to carry out undetected. In this one raid, the 4th Battalion was able to collect £200 and safely deposit it, speaking to the amount of money collected during the entire period by regular collection raids such as this one. The success of the 4th Battalion in carrying out such seizures speaks to the control already exercised by the 4th Battalion over large swathes of its area of operations. Moreover, the dedication of critical officers to the collection of funds represents the importance of such collections to I.R.A. strategy in West Cork. Relying on military chains-of-command, “the responsibility for the collection of this levy and the transmission of the proceeds to Brigade Headquarters devolved on the Battalion officers in each area. They, in turn, made the Company officers responsible for the collection in their own areas.”<sup>83</sup> GHQ’s lack of support or

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<sup>82</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1481”.

<sup>83</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1590”.

instruction for Brigade and Battalion organizers made it necessary for local staff officers to carry out collections; though taking experienced officers from active service units, this allowed for other volunteers to gain experience organizing and planning as staff officer replacements within the 4th Battalion. Early efforts to collect funds for the Republican 'Cause' were largely successful, even in seizing funds from reluctant residents. Under the nose of the British administration, the I.R.A. were essentially able to levy taxes throughout the area. The finances gathered during these raids, collections and levies later assisted the I.R.A. in establishing judicial courts, as well purchasing foreign weapons and equipment. Volunteers gained invaluable experience with the local population, while simultaneously demonstrating republican autonomy in collecting, seizing or extorting assets to support an Irish Republic. The extent of the local Republicans' early civic efforts has been recognized by post-revisionist historians. By failing to link the collection of funds with the military situation in the south of Ireland, however, those histories fall short. Simultaneously preparing for assaults upon barracks in towns like Skibbereen, the collection of funds for arms - carried out with enthusiasm and success - reflects the enthusiasm of local Republicans over the mutually developing military and civil situations in the Skibbereen area.

The most important effect of the early coordinated attack on the British administration in Ireland was to create zones of Republican control outside the jurisdiction of British authority. The focus on conducting such operations against peripheral outposts forced the British authorities to consolidate their own forces in reinforced barracks disconnected and removed from the local population. The widespread destruction of barracks across the country meant that government services were largely filled by Republican police and court organizations across significant areas

of the country.<sup>84</sup> The conception of this strategy dates to the early formation of Sinn Féin policies in 1906 under Arthur Griffith. In creating supplementary local forms of judicial review, Griffith proposed:

That the Irish National Assembly shall appoint those of its members who by virtue of their positions are Justices of the Peace, but who decline to act as such under British law, to act as judges in the National Arbitration Courts, together with such men of character throughout the country, and such Irish barristers who have not devoted their time to hawking their souls for sale in the Four Courts, as it may be necessary to supplement them with as assessors or judges.<sup>85</sup>

Here, the link between the civil and military struggle for Irish independence is clear. The military forces of the I.R.A destroyed barracks and denied areas to the British administration, creating the conditions necessary to fill the void with Republican organizations devoted the Irish independence. Following the withdrawal of the R.I.C. into populated centers, the Republican organizations in West Cork - supported and guarded by the I.R.A. - established local courts. Mirroring the independent and flexible structure of other Republican groups, rural courts with elected judges were established on local initiative, open operating multiple courts in the same parish.<sup>86</sup> The establishment of these courts, surprisingly, was largely done without the consent of Republican leadership in Dublin. Not only was the military arm of the Republican movement in Skibbereen and West Cork acting in absence of communications with Dublin, but the civil organizations of the movement carried out the political struggle for independence from the British administration in isolation from Dublin leadership.

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<sup>84</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 97-98.

<sup>85</sup>Arthur Griffith, *The Sinn Féin Policy*, (National Council. Dublin, 1906), 22-23.

<sup>86</sup>Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923*, 219.

The expansion and popularity of these ‘land courts’ created a crisis for G.H.Q. and Sinn Féin in Dublin, who acted quickly to assimilate the land courts into a centralized system of courts under the supervision of Dáil Éireann. It is important to note that “the establishment of the Dáil courts, and especially the land courts, illustrated that there was a strong undercurrent of social tension in revolutionary Ireland. Until recently the received wisdom had been that there was no social aspect to Ireland’s political revolution because Ireland already had its social revolution in the shape of the transformation of land ownership from landlords to peasant-proprietors between 1870 and 1909.”<sup>87</sup> The hidden tensions over land ownership had been central to the development of modern Irish politics and was naturally supported by local members of the I.R.A., yet the issues the land courts represented worried the revolutionary leadership in Dublin. Leaders in Dublin were anxious to maintain control of the situation, and as land redistribution had been a historically inflammatory and violent problem facing Irish society, oversight of the rural courts was seen as necessary to prevent widespread violence. Ignorant of the widespread local support for these courts, the Dublin leadership saw the courts as capable of igniting an agrarian conflict far beyond the means of their control. The situation in the spring of 1920 was intended to “implement an immediate and extensive redistribution of land” that could cause serious social upheaval in Ireland, enough that “the leadership of Sinn Féin was seriously concerned that the agrarian conflict might undermine the nationalist state-building project.”<sup>88</sup> In the Skibbereen area, however, the land courts were the only means of

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<sup>87</sup>Coleman, *The Irish Revolution, 1916-1923*, 63.

<sup>88</sup>Campbell and O’Shiel. "The Last Land War? Kevin O’Shiel’s Memoir of the Irish Revolution (1916-21)", 170-171.



carrying out justice in lieu of the barracks and courthouse attacks. The replacement of the land courts with the Dáil system was not always met with gratitude or support in parts of rural Ireland. The original courts had been “set up to prosecute criminals and arbitrate land disputes, some tenants, landless laborers, and small farmers hoped these republican courts would invariably work to break up large estates and redistribute land. While significant redistribution took place, the brand of justice Dáil judges sought to implement was far less revolutionary, and they prided themselves on dealing evenhandedly with landlords, tenants, and small farmers.”<sup>89</sup> From the perspective of the rural communities in the West Cork area, these courts were often seen as accomplishing the hope of Irish tenants - ownership of Irish land by native Irish. Others were well aware that there were no other options for justice in the area with British courts lying in ashes. The civil struggle for independence achieved in the Skibbereen area complete dominance of the judicial system and claimed the participation of the local population - either through political support or due to the lack of any other option.

Though I.R.A. Courts had an *ad hoc* appearance, their popular support and use by the local population shows that republican courts were well developed and organized. By relying on educated community members and existing systems of authority in rural Irish culture, the republican courts appealed to the local population. Republican police units, under the authority of local I.R.A. Judges, protected domestic order in areas where the British judicial system was destroyed or impotent. The existence of these courts, operating extensively and efficiently in West Cork, demonstrates the level of domestic infrastructure created by Republicans. Established

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<sup>89</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-192*, 98.

and operated on a local level, and only brought under Dublin's control when the situation appeared threatening to the leadership's control of the escalating conflict, the Republican Courts and Police demonstrate the local achievements of the I.R.A. which were quickly claimed and reinvented by the Dublin leadership. Replacing British administration in parts of Ireland, I.R.A. Courts realized Republican conceptions of judicial administration in the Irish Republic in liberated areas.



Image 4: The Land Courts

The agrarian make-up of West Cork communities meant that the Land Courts set up by Republicans in the area won over many farmers and agricultural laborers. In hearing complaints and settling disputes fairly, these local courts assured inhabitants that the British hegemony of justice was over. Republican Judges, selected from local communities, were able to rely on respect and community ties to establish legitimacy. It must be remembered that it was working farmhouses such as this one which produced the soldiers, organizers, police and judges of the Republican movement in Skibbereen. The ability of Republican power to support rural concerns and problems was amplified by the local social landscape and the ties that local Republicans had to the population. Source: Author's Personal Collection.

Though domestic trials were numerous and frequent in I.R.A. Courts, criminal punishments - especially espionage or treason - were handled by the I.R.A. One of the major concerns for the I.R.A. was addressing the network of ex-military and Loyalist spies and informers working for the British authorities. The 4th Battalion, as others in

West Cork, was filled with officers trained in counter-intelligence - thanks in large part to the influence of Michael Collins through the I.R.B. channels - and carried out a ruthless campaign against suspected informers and spies. By crippling British intelligence gathering, the I.R.A. in West Cork seriously hindered the ability of British forces to maneuver outside of their strongholds with any kind of confidence and ensured the safety and anonymity of Volunteers.

Sam Kingston, the former commander of the 4th Battalion, was assigned the command of the Republican Police in the 3rd Brigade area.<sup>90</sup> Kingston's reassignment shows the importance of experienced officers within the Republican Police, whose I.R.B. connections made them an excellent counter-intelligence network for unravelling the system of British informers threatening the safety of the West Cork I.R.A. As an early leader in the I.R.A.'s fight in West Cork, Kingston was likely to economize force and materials while working with an established position of respect in the community. While Kingston's Republican Police operated in conjunction with Republican courts, his organization also fell under the command of the 3rd Brigade. Simultaneously fulfilling the role of counter-intelligence and domestic policing, the Republican Police often provided definitive evidence, but in some cases executions were carried out if the suspect was a threat or alien to the I.R.A.<sup>91</sup>, demonstrating the caution and aggression of the I.R.A. in handling suspected spies and informers. The threat of identification by British forces meant the destruction of a Volunteer's home and the suffering of his family, making the violence of the counter-espionage inevitable for the I.R.A.

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<sup>90</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 620".

<sup>91</sup>Coleman, *The Irish Revolution, 1916-1923*, 84.

In order to maintain the support of the local population, executions of suspected spies were often carried out by Volunteers from neighboring Battalion or Company areas. It is an enduring wound of the conflict that “Republicans sometimes hid their victims because they knew that their actions, such as the killing of women, would shock the wider community, or they may simply have wanted to hide evidence of the killing. These ‘disappearances’ were relatively rare: research suggests that the IRA hid the bodies of just 25 of the 184 suspected spies they killed during the conflict.”<sup>92</sup> The bodies of the executed were hidden in order to shield local communities from the recognition of the clandestine war occurring beneath the open military conflict, as maintaining public support for the Republican administrative apparatuses was the source of their legitimacy. Perhaps the greatest demonstration of Republican power in society was their ability to carry out capital punishments. These executions, alongside British propaganda depicting the Republicans as criminals and gangsters, helped to create a lasting air of clandestine and sometimes sectarian violence around the I.R.A. With the British administration in shambles, it is no surprise that the Skibbereen I.R.A. were confident in their ability to control social and physical spaces in the area. Before the establishment of the Republican Police, such executions were investigated by I.R.A. officers and carried out by Volunteers. In October of 1920, for example “when a spy, named James Mahoney, alias Hawkes, who had come into the area from, I think, Clonakilty Battalion, was shot...[I.R.A. officers were] engaged for some days prior to this operation on intelligence work in connection with this job timing and reporting on

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<sup>92</sup>Pádraig Óg Ó Ruairc, "Spying for the Enemy" In *The Revolution Papers* (Dublin, August 23, 2016, 34th ed.).

the movements of enemy patrols to Battalion Headquarters.”<sup>93</sup> What is worth noting in this early example of an execution by the I.R.A. is that the intelligence gathering was done entirely on the Battalion level - indicating a lack of communication between I.R.A. Brigades in the field and Michael Collins’ counter-intelligence network headquartered in Dublin. Given the absence of the contribution of counter-intelligence information concerning spies and informers, the West Cork I.R.A. developed an aggressive counter-intelligence apparatus of its own in order to blind the British forces and confine them to Bandon and Cork.

Another example of the belligerents asserted local control is the systematic burning of homes - an experience well-recorded in the popular folklore and memory of the area. The destruction of homes and farmsteads has a long history in the Skibbereen area, and the burnings echoed with memories of massive displacement of Irish peasantry at the hands of landlords and sheriffs during the Great Potato Famine. The British forces adopted a strategy of intentionally targeting the family homes of Volunteers and I.R.A. safehouses. While local “dairy co-operatives, dependent on ‘a fair degree of rural wealth, community spirit, and organization’, may have encouraged the formation of active I.R.A. units. The British army certainly viewed creameries as nodes of rebellion,”<sup>94</sup> and burnt a number of these large collective and communal pieces of rural infrastructure. In doing so, British forces quickly alienated the farming community in West Cork by fundamentally targeting their means of producing their goods. In retaliation for the burning of Volunteers’ homes and in solidarity with the dairy-farming community, the I.R.A. began burning the large homes of Loyalist

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<sup>93</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1590”.

<sup>94</sup>Hart, *The IRA at War: 1916-1923*, 49.

families in the area. Long symbols of the British colonization of Ireland, the stately houses of aristocrats and the farmsteads of Loyalist families went up in flames together. The audacity of such attacks - specifically against the historic landmarks of British administration - reflects the revolutionary character and confidence of Republicans in the area. As both potential barracks for British forces and symbols of the agrarian struggle in rural Ireland, these 'big houses' were ideal targets for the I.R.A. Unfortunately, this further escalated the level of violence and burnings by British forces continued. The Skibbereen area suffered its fair share of such burnings, and one interviewee recounted the destruction visited on Leap:

It was the fair day, the June fair day in Skibbereen would be the following day, and my father - he was only a young fellow - and his father who was the boss at the time, they were bringing animals to the Skibbereen Fair. They were up very early - they used to leave very early in the morning as soon as it got bright on a summer's morning, as it gets bright around half past four in this country in the month of June - and so they were up and having their breakfast I'd say to drive the cattle by road. At that time they walked to Skibbereen, which was the most of ten miles, with some other neighbors and they said "Connonagh is on fire". There was no point in going down that way, and these other neighbors, they were going to go back and take a circuitous route to Skibbereen, but my father and grandfather decided they weren't going to go at all. But, in fact, it was [just] one house that was burning, that was the smoke they saw, [and] they thought Connonagh was all on fire!<sup>95</sup>

Such burnings, carried out by every branch of the British forces in Ireland, seriously undermined popular support of the British administration. In close-knit and rural communities, such burnings were an attack on the entire community who had to care for and shelter displaced families. If a Volunteer's house was raided or burned by Crown forces, it was unlikely for him to give up the fight. Instead, Volunteers without

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<sup>95</sup>Author's Personal Collection, "Interview 6".

homes to return to often went ‘on the run’ or became full-time members of local I.R.A. units or Flying Columns. Whereas British forces targeted the smaller farms of Volunteers and their supporters, the I.R.A. reacted by burning the large and fortified houses of local loyalists. If there was a ‘battle of the burnings’ to be won, the I.R.A. certainly triumphed: British burnings left the local population bitter and drew members closer, while burnings by the I.R.A. deprived British forces of critical supporters and easily-fortified barracks across the area.

While support for the I.R.A. was widespread in the area, some farmers refused to contribute to the National Aid or Arms Funds. The 4th Battalion used this refusal as a reason to pressure, intimidate or - in extreme cases - execute those unwilling to support the republican cause. One case stands out. After two uncooperative farmers were driven from their land, “the I.R.A. or ‘the Boys’ effectively took over control of both farms and grew corn and fed cattle on them for a few years.”<sup>96</sup> The I.R.A. was therefore willing to and capable of seizing, managing and redistributing land in the area. One witness states “that after the shootings the I.R.A. took over the farm and several neighbouring farmers grazed cattle etc. on the land. An uncle of Tadhg O’Donovan (I.R.A.) a brother of Tadhg’s father, who farmed where Charlie O’Neill is now, took over one of the farms and tried to lay claim to it (I think it was Mr. Connell’s farm). Cornelius Connolly and a group of his companions made him go back home to his own place.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Marty Fitzgerald, *Events around Skibbereen, 1921*, Interview by Teddy O’Regan, (Interview notes. Skibbereen, Co. Cork).

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.



Not only was the I.R.A. seizing land in the area, but the 4th Battalion managed land, and paid careful attention to prevent the unlawful seizure of land being used for communal farming. Even after the conflict, it was not unusual for the I.R.A. to become involved in matters of land ownership. Sales or transfers of land titles were closely controlled by the I.R.A., who “would not agree to [new owners] taking possession for some time until they paid £ 25 as a levy or penalty.”<sup>98</sup> The I.R.A. secured a means for income from seized land, and maintained control of the central problem facing West Cork society since colonization - the ownership of agrarian land. The Skibbereen I.R.A. were in control of an unprecedented agrarian movement, one that threatened to reignite old social tensions and reshape the social fabric of West Cork. The Republicans ability to control agrarian conditions - something that other Irish separatist movements failed to do - gave them confidence that the realization of Republican reforms in West Cork was possible. Specifically taking land from Loyalist families demonstrated I.R.A. control to locals and deprived British forces vital intelligence sources in areas firmly under I.R.A. jurisdiction.

A key problem facing the 4th Battalion was how to realize the land distribution espoused by Irish Republican ideology. Moreover, the established Loyalist aristocracy and their fortified mansions posed a threat to Republican zones of control. Much like the elimination of periphery British barracks, the destruction of defensible Loyalist homes counteracted the British ‘blockhouse’ strategy while simultaneously expanding and consolidating Republican control of rural areas. In response, British forces adopted a strategy of burning the homes and farms of Republican supporters, forcing the I.R.A.

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

to react. The 4th Battalion appears to have instituted limited land confiscation and targeted Loyalist farms and mansions with burnings; a hint at the re-ordering of Irish society envisaged by radical Republicans. Moreover, the ability of the I.R.A. to seize, manage and protect land indicates a concerted effort to realize land reform in West Cork. The dedicated Republican campaign was aimed at reducing the British means of control and replacing them with Republican institutions was more than simply about strategy to local Republicans. For many, the redistribution of land was the dream of their grandfathers, and their success in carrying out agrarian reforms indicated to Volunteers the effect that their military campaign was having on developing and constructing an Irish Republic.

As violence in the Anglo-Irish War quickly escalated in 1921, the I.R.A. in West Cork needed to find a solution the burning of Volunteer homes and Republican safe-houses by British forces. Amidst the chaos, a solution was crafted to eliminate informers and seize land in order to continue the redistribution efforts of the land courts. In the Skibbereen area, two killings stand out as particularly suspicious: the executions of Protestant farmers Sweetman and Connell. The accusation against the two men was that, during the period of funds collection, “Tom Connell and Matthew Sweetman did identify I.R.A. Arms Fund collectors in court.”<sup>99</sup> By testifying in a British court and identifying members of the I.R.A., Sweetman and Connell were likely culpable in the death of Volunteers. However, the treatment of the two men and their families stands in stark contrast to other killings in the area. In January of 1921, before any execution orders for the two were communicated to the Volunteers, “William Sweetman of

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<sup>99</sup>Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923*, 300.

Caheragh was beaten and kidnapped by local Volunteers disguised with rouged faces.”<sup>100</sup> This intimidation may be the result of a personal disagreement between individual Volunteers and the two farmers, or an attempt to convince the men to leave their land and flee. Whatever the case, it was a month later that “orders were received from Brigade Headquarters that two Protestant, farmers in the Skibbereen area - Connell and Sweetman - should be executed and their lands forfeited.”<sup>101</sup> Incidentally, it was only “after the 2 farmers were executed in Lissanahig an order came from headquarters that there were to be no more executions - threats and beatings only allowed.”<sup>102</sup> Again, G.H.Q. in Dublin failed to recognize the seriousness of the conflict escalating in West Cork. While being able to communicate ‘cease and desist’ order to the 4th Battalion, it is puzzling that G.H.Q. was also incapable of communicating and organizing any coordinated action outside the Dublin area after the attacks of Easter 1920. The answer lies in the priorities of the Dublin leadership. Afraid of rapidly and bloodily escalating the conflict, G.H.Q. saw the potential of agrarian violence as more injurious to the republican cause than the lack of military logistics with I.R.A. units. To local Republicans, the fallacy was obvious: How could Skibbereen’s Republicans be expected to achieve their revolutionary goals if they were unable to resolve the greatest issue confronting the rural, civil administration of West Cork.

The story of Sweetman and Connell highlights the impact of religion and land ownership in Ireland, issues that defined Irish politics before, during and after the conflict. By killing both men and seizing their farms, the 4th Battalion was able to begin

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 181.

<sup>101</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 1481”.

<sup>102</sup>Fitzgerald, *Events around Skibbereen, 1921*.

a limited program of collective farming in the Skibbereen area. The I.R.A. would remain involved in issues of land ownership long after the end of the conflict, illustrating the considerable attention and authority directed by the 4th Battalion at addressing agrarian issues.

## Peace and the Treaty

In 1921, Eamon deValera returned from his trip to America to garner international support for Irish Republicanism. On his return, deValera, Brugha and the G.H.Q. staff in Dublin began planning an assault on the heart of British civil administration in Ireland - the Customs House. The attack would become one of the most controversial events of the Irish Revolutionary Period, and “Chief of Staff Mulcahy later said that de Valera and Brugha ‘dragged’ GHQ into the operation. The action cost the Dublin Brigade dearly. Five Volunteers were killed and about eighty captured. Despite the losses, the building was completely destroyed, and republicans claimed a victory.”<sup>103</sup> Though able to destroy the pinnacle of British administrative power, the Dublin leadership was shaken to its very core. Unfamiliar with the escalated level of violence, “the ‘Big Fellow’ [Michael Collins] was understandable greatly concerned, for among those captured were a number of men from his own entourage, some of whom were ‘wanted’ for the Bloody Sunday shootings.”<sup>104</sup>

With the Dublin I.R.A. Brigades in disarray, and most of their arms captured, the British commander Lt. Gen. Percival suddenly felt confident that “at the time of the Truce in July, our tactics of rapid movement and surprise had had such a demoralizing effect on the nerves that in another few weeks the back of the Rebellion would have been broken.”<sup>105</sup> Percival, speaking of the situation in West Cork, was almost certainly

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<sup>103</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 141.

<sup>104</sup>Leon Ó Broin, *Revolutionary Underground: The Story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, 1858-1924*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1976), 193.

<sup>105</sup>Lt. Gen. Arthur Percival “Lecture 2 - Lt. Gen. A.E. Percival,” in *British Voices: From the Irish War of Independence 1918-1921; the words of British servicemen who were there*, Edited by William Sheehan, (Cork: Collins Press, 2005), 130.

emboldened by the failure of the I.R.A. to dislodge his forces from their positions in Bandon and Cork. Much as central barracks and stations had not been attacked while periphery positions were being picked off by the I.R.A., it can be assumed that the I.R.A. did not feel that it could engage those forces on favorable terms - yet. The situation did appear bleak to the Dublin leadership however, and British authorities were delighted with their ability to draw the I.R.A. into surrendering massive numbers of men and weapons during the failed Customs House assault. It cannot be forgotten, however, that the first half of 1921 was the bloodiest period of the war, with 651 police and 304 military casualties<sup>106</sup>.

In West Cork, Bandon district produced 190 casualties - eleven times as many as the whole county of Antrim - and was 128 times as violent per capita<sup>107</sup>. These statistics completely contradict Percival's optimistic outlook, and illustrates the increasing focus that the West Cork I.R.A. was paying larger towns by the end of the conflict. Violence in the Anglo-Irish War had greatly escalated since the beginning of the conflict, and while the I.R.A. suffered due to command reforms pushed by the Dublin leadership, the organization maintained its integrity and discipline until the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

The former 4th Battalion Adjutant Florence O'Donoghue stated that "the whole armed effort was gathering a powerful momentum' and that the south Munster brigades 'held the initiative and felt confident of being able to retain it'."<sup>108</sup> Despite dwindling ammunition and arms, the I.R.A. in West Cork was confident of its positions. Having

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<sup>106</sup>Rast, *Tactics, Politics, and Propaganda in The Irish War of Independence, 1917-1921*, 143.

<sup>107</sup>Hart, *The IRA at War: 1916-1923*, 31.

<sup>108</sup>Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies*, 105.

driven British forces almost entirely back to Bandon, the shortage of ammunition was no surprise seeing the increased intensity of clashes between Irish Republican and British forces. In fact, the 4th Battalion, once again, already had a plan in place to resolve its problem.

## **Landings of Arms at Squince**

The preeminence of the Leap area as a focal point for early 4th Battalion activity remains a mystery in most testimonies from veterans and written material about the subject. Hidden amongst a handful of scattered and obscure testimonies about the area is a clue in the story of why the men of the 4th Battalion, and the Munster Brigades in general, fought so doggedly against their former compatriots in Free State uniforms in 1922-1923. Collected separately from the service testimonies provided by officers of the 4th Battalion were a series of accounts detailing the planning and preparation of a massively important operation that could well have decisively won the war for the Irish Republican Army.

On June 23rd, the night after the burning of the Skibbereen Workhouse, 3rd Brigade officers gathered in Union Hall to discuss the potential of landing a contingent of arms to subsidize their insufficient stockpiles. The gathering was protected and screened by 4th Battalion pickets, though the formation had largely cleared the area of British security forces following the capture of Gearoid O'Sullivan during the training camp in the area. None other than Patrick O'Driscoll, Quartermaster of the 4th Battalion, was assigned the preparation and planning of an arms landing somewhere along the southern coastline. O'Driscoll chose a number of small beaches in the area of Squince, adjacent to Union Hall, to land the weapons:

I arranged for about a dozen strong horses to pull the loads bank to where other horses and carts would be waiting. I prepared about nine or ten dumps in the Company Area, one big one capable of holding up to 200 rifles, the others to hold twenty to sixty each, for any rifles which could not be got away. The big dump was situated at old ruined buildings where there were plenty of big round stones covered with moss and forming a perfect hiding place by reason of their appearance untouched



for years. The others were made by burrowing into the ends of earthen ditches and blocking up the opening with earth and sods to look as if never disturbed.<sup>109</sup>

O'Driscoll's preparations are truly impressive considering the scale of construction needed to be carried out by the Volunteers, the extended time-frame and area that would need to be watched and guarded by the I.R.A. and the distance necessary to transfer the weapons safely into the hands of neighboring Brigades and Battalions. O'Driscoll outlines the route as:

...intended to convey the rifles by means of relays of horses without changing the carts by about two routes through Leap, Conan, Drinagh and towards Dunmanway: the other route, as well as I remember, through Bawnlahan, on to Hooley's Forge and turn off there to the Derryleigh Bridge, across the Skibbereen road towards Drimoleague.<sup>110</sup>

Crossing the major route westward, following the current-day N71 road, the transport of a significant load of arms on a road regularly patrolled by British forces meant that the Skibbereen I.R.A. officers were confident that their forces could prevent sorties from the enemy, or defeat them in a forced engagement. Bringing arms close in to Glandore Harbour also meant that the I.R.A. would have to deal with a small Royal Navy vessel patrolling the coastline. Having earlier destroyed lighthouses, coast guard stations and R.I.C. garrisons in the area, the Skibbereen I.R.A. had effectively blinded British forces to any Republican movement or activity along the coastline. In effect, the way lay open for the I.R.A. to arrange a shipment to slip in undetected, safely offload a cargo, cache the load and protect it by the end of 1921.

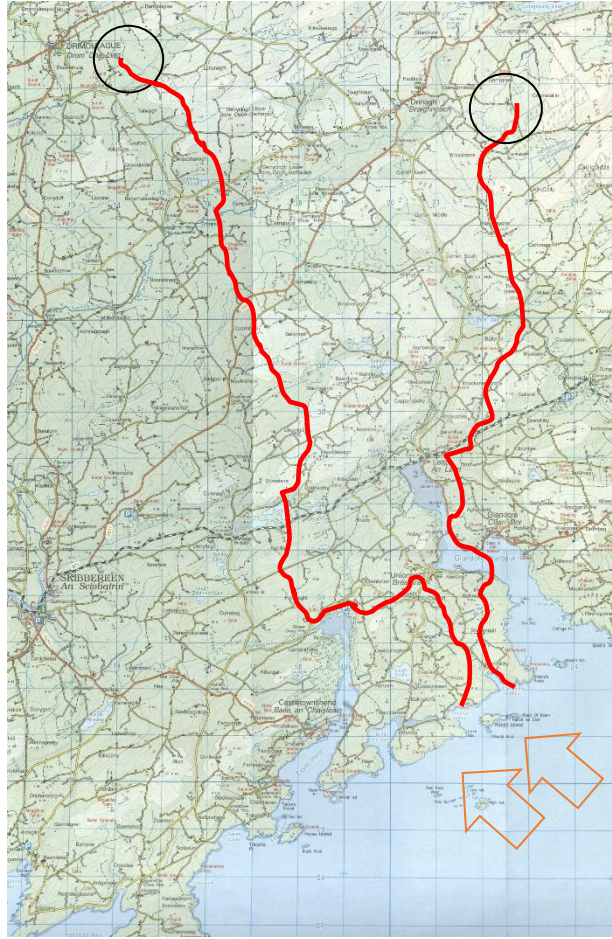
The question of the origin and size of the armament delivery was a mystery,

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<sup>109</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 557", (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

until the discovery of a series of vaguely linked testimonies from Liam O'Brian, Donal Hayes, Sean O'Shea and Michael Leahy fit together a picture of events far beyond the shores of West Cork. The first three gentlemen were secretive I.R.A. emissaries to Italy, their trips paid for and organized by G.H.Q. in order to affect a landing at Squince. Their contacts and connections in Italy revealed a huge potential boost the capabilities of the Irish Republican cause.



Map 4: Landing of Arms at Squince

The above map locates Glandore Harbour, and the inlets to the east (red arrows) intended for the landing of Italian arms. Drimoleague and Drinagh were initial destinations for the arms (black circles), which were to be transported using horses and carts along country roads (routes in red). The distance to be covered, and the various roads that would need to be cut and guarded, alludes to the massive success the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion enjoyed in confining British forces to their barracks. The proximity of Skibbereen to the landing areas and their prepared weapons dumps is testament to the mobilization of I.R.A. manpower and the guerrilla's ability to remain undetected. Source: "Cork." Map. In *Discovery Series*. Series 89. Dublin: Ordnance Survey of Ireland, 1997.

Donal Hayes recounts that on his arrival in Italy, he was sent to inspect a dump of rifles and was told by Italian authorities that the I.R.A. “could get as many rifles as we wished up to 100,000. These rifles were Italian rifles which had been used in the previous war; they were in good condition and only required cleaning. We could also get ammunition.”<sup>111</sup> Captured during the First World War from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Republican emissaries - operating out of the ‘Consulate of the Irish Republic’ in Genoa - organized for “the material would be put on lighters in the Tiber and thence sent out to sea. It was for the Irish to transfer the material to a ship and get it to Ireland and land it there. Such was the proposition Hales had put to Collins and for which he awaited approval or authorisation. This authorisation I had brought him. He would now go ahead with the project with all speed, he told me.”<sup>112</sup>

The landing of 100,000 rifles and their ammunition would have dwarfed the arms landing at Howth in 1914 which fully armed the Irish Volunteers prior to the 1916 Easter Rising. While Brigades in Connaught and Leinster complained of a shortage of arms, the weaponry could have expanded the conflict into these areas in unprecedented levels. Only 7,000 rifles were landed at Howth, and yet the inexperienced Irish Volunteers were able to hold a city center against overwhelming force. The impact of 100,000 rifles on I.R.A. plans to take Bandon and Cork City can only be imagined. I.R.A. officers in the Skibbereen area put the projected shipment at about 20,000 rifles with ammunition, which would still have been nearly four times the weaponry landed to support the Easter Rising. After having completed all the preparations necessary to

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<sup>111</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 292”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

<sup>112</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, “Document No. 565”, (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

bring this massive load of arms into West Cork, G.H.Q. communications with the Irish emissaries in Italy suddenly ceased. The confusion and frustration of Sean O'Shea is palpable in his testimony: "There is no doubt of the success of my mission. The mystery to me is why or how the whole affair petered out."<sup>113</sup> Donal Hayes saw the cessation of communications as intentional, stating for the record that:

My opinion is that the arrangements to procure the arms may have been to bluff England. If the Irish were fully armed they could hold out longer and kill most of the British soldiers here. The idea of getting the arms, I believe, would be to influence England to come to terms with Ireland. Collins may also have had the idea of trying to get in Ulster. Ulster would come in if there was a final settlement.<sup>114</sup>

The hints of the split which engulfed the West of Ireland during the Civil War are evident in Hayes' vilification of Collins and the Dublin leadership. The most haunting is a note, left without a signature but attached to the testimony of Michael Leahy. It reads:

Note.

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One of the main arguments used by those in favour of acceptance of the articles of the agreement for a Treaty was the shortage of Arms and ammunition.

As Collins and some of those closely associated with him were continually engaged in overtures with 'peace' representatives of the British Government from the autumn of 1920 up to the Truce of 11 July, 1921, it is possible that he (Collins) was simply playing for time so that with the people tired of war and the I.R.A. unable to procure any arms and ammunition from Headquarters, the way would then be clear to settle with Britain for something much less than a Republic.<sup>115</sup>

As outlined in the description of the military situation in Skibbereen in 1921, the split in

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<sup>113</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 760", (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

<sup>114</sup>Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 292".

<sup>115</sup> Bureau of Military History Collection, "Document No. 555", (Military Archives, Department of Defence, Republic of Ireland, 2003).

the I.R.A. did not occur because of political or structural issues - though the integrity of the force was certainly undermined. Animosity and violence came when rural I.R.A. units realized that the Irish Republic they could observe in operation in their communities was not to be a reality. On one hand, the situation for the Skibbereen I.R.A. was such that it was obvious to them that major civil and military goals were being achieved. On the other hand, the Dublin leadership saw the precarious logistics and command issues just as clearly. When threatened with a massive escalation of force by the British at the negotiation table, the Dublin leadership claimed to do what their predecessors had done in 1916: call for a cessation of hostilities in order to spare Irish civilians further trauma.

While the leaders in Dublin that were supportive of the Treaty spoke of nobly withdrawing from the conflict for the sake of the Irish people, emphasizing the Treaty's role as a 'stepping stone' to eventual Irish unification and liberation, disillusioned and frustrated I.R.A. officers organized their forces. Confronted with the political ratification of the Treaty by the Dáil in Dublin, armed anti-Treaty I.R.A. forces occupied buildings in Dublin. Michael Collins, once head of the I.R.B., personally oversaw the bombardment of his former comrades in the capital by Free State troops using leased British field guns. The bloody and violent Irish Civil War had begun. It was a war where anti-Treaty forces fought with dogged tenacity against Free State forces determined to maintain law and order in Ireland to prevent a British re-intervention in the country. Eventually, anti-Treaty forces were rounded up, captured or destroyed, leaving surviving Republican veterans from both sides to return to their communities.

Going home, however, was no easy task. in close-knit communities, like those in

the West Cork area, the return of the Civil War veterans meant having to confront the painful realities of internal conflict. With their achievement ignored by those in power and suppressed by the post-war literature, the Republicans who had fought to achieve an Irish Republic were reimagined for political purposes. The memory of the conflict and the experiences of its participants, however, are preserved in the testimonies and documents of the Military History Bureau's Collection and local folklore. By investigating these sources, everyday realities of local military and civil affairs are clarified. Moreover, essential pieces of Republican mythology - like the projected arms landing at Squince - serve to illuminate even deeper truths about the motivations and interpretations of misrepresented participants of the Anglo-Irish War.

## Conclusion

The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 stands as one of the most controversial events in Irish history. Though ending the Irish War of Independence, the Treaty engendered endemic violence in Ireland for the remainder of the 20th-century. The Irish Civil War (1922-1923) tore the country and its communities apart, as pro-Treaty Free Staters fought anti-Treaty Republicans. The 4th Battalion suffered the fate of many post-Treaty I.R.A. units; its commanders and fighters chose to fight for opposing sides. An answer as to why inter-communal violence broke out in 1922 in West Cork despite an obvious victory for the I.R.A. can be found in the history and folklore surrounding the 4th Battalion and Skibbereen. By analyzing the public memory and folklore of the War of Independence and its aftermath, as well as the framework and negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, it is clear that much of the ensuing violence is due to the real or perceived establishment of an Irish Republic in parts of Ireland (West Cork particularly). While the realization of Republican and Nationalist dreams seemed present and real for many civilians and Volunteers, the Anglo-Irish Treaty blatantly ignored any legitimate structure for an autonomous Irish government. For most fighters in the 4th Battalion, the Treaty was unacceptable given the sacrifices that had been made and the situation in West Cork as it existed at the cessation of conflict with Britain.

It may be argued that the ability of the I.R.A. to establish the Irish Republic, or its primitive organs of governance, did not mean that the I.R.A. was in a position to dictate terms of sovereignty to Lloyd George. While the true ability of the I.R.A. to continue the struggle for complete independence - and the possibility of a republican victory - is indeterminable, the Republic was a reality for many of Ireland inhabitants.



Though urban centers remained in the hands of British authorities, Skibbereen - and liberated rural areas like it - lived in an Irish Republic. After the chaos of the First World War, the Easter Rising and the War of Independence, to have to accept a Free State was inconceivable to many. Not only was the Republic judicially, financially, militarily and geographically established, its armed forces seemed successful in the field and gaining momentum. Within the 4th Battalion, shock reverberated at the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Considering the planned landing of arms at Squince, the experience and recent operational successes, and the withdrawal of British forces from various West Cork towns, it is no surprise that many Volunteers felt that the I.R.A. was far from defeated and so was capable of fighting on for independence against British reinforcements.

G.H.Q. in Dublin, on the other hand, saw the conflict through events transpiring in the capital. Lacking the ability to effectively communicate and command the Munster Brigades, shocked at the escalating violence in active areas like West Cork, and crippled by the disastrous attack on the Customs House, Republican leaders in Dublin saw the Republican movement as faltering due to a lack of arms and cohesive structure. Despite attempting to re-organize the I.R.A. Brigades under a Divisional structure, G.H.Q. failed to follow through on crucial arms shipments that could have changed the balance of the conflict in Ireland.

The autonomy and self-sufficiency of provincial I.R.A. units is largely due to the fact that, on the ground, "Volunteer units outside Dublin had been formed locally, elected their own leaders, funded, armed, motivated and trained themselves, planned and mounted their own operations, and succeeded or failed, with very little input from

headquarters beyond demands for dues and reports.”<sup>116</sup> Moreover, the successes of independent yet mutually supportive I.R.A. Brigades did nothing to persuade the Republican leaders that the flexible and adaptable Brigade and Column commands could continue despite command issues. Failing to identify 1921 as yet another transition period for the Republican movement - this time shifting from mobile guerrilla warfare to offensive and aggressive actions aimed at seizing large towns like Bandon, and potentially even Cork City, by Flying Columns of battle-hardened Volunteers - created a disastrous misunderstanding amongst Republican leaders that the fight was lost.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty created an Irish Free State, not an Irish Republic, whose representatives in an Irish Parliament were bound by an oath to the British King. The Treaty partitioned the island, leaving 6 northern counties under direct British rule. On a fundamental level, the Treaty ignored the achievements of the Munster Brigades. The Irish Republic, created in the safe areas provided by units like the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion and in the underground organizations in cities like Cork and Dublin, was effectively a reality for many Irish people despite the Treaty’s ignorance of its legitimacy. By establishing complex systems of domestic governance, making British authorities and administrations impossible to function and securing the means for the expansion of the Irish Republic to large cities, the I.R.A.’s experience and achievements during the Anglo-Irish War were thrown to the wind in the text of the Treaty. Understandably, the Treaty was not received well by units like the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion that had battled hard and long to achieve Irish autonomy in large portions of the country.

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<sup>116</sup>Hart, *Mick: The Real Michael Collins*, 243.

Moreover, the Volunteers were – at the signing of the Treaty – prepared to expand the struggle for independence to unprecedented levels, with plans to land a load of Italian arms that could have armed thousands of Volunteers for assaults on Bandon or Cork.

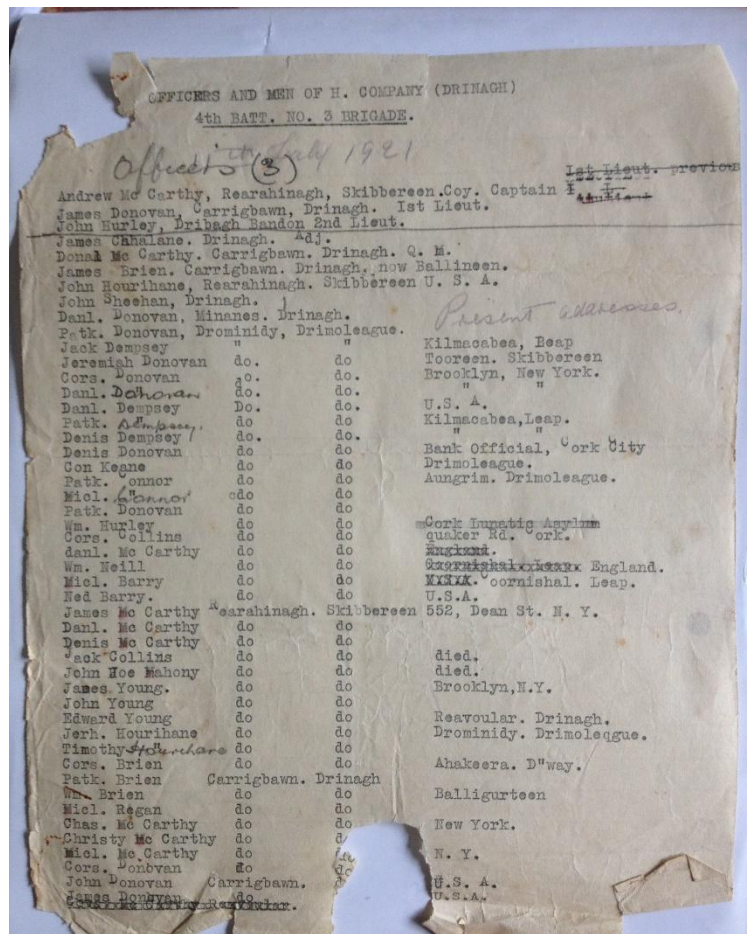


Image 5: Remembering the War II

For many old Volunteers, the memory of their achievements went invalidated. Most of the history recovered of their service to their country is due to their own diligence in keeping personal records such as this one. Here, the commander of the Drinagh Company painstakingly revisited the war - collecting the names, addresses and fates of his men. Without the dedication of such men, renounced for their participation in the Irish Civil War, the history of the struggle of Irish independence would certainly be lost. It is in the folklore and local histories of the people of Ireland that forgotten histories can be reclaimed – documents such as this are evidence to that. Source: Author's Personal Collection.

In the end, it is the perceived reality that shapes the memory and interpretation of events. For the West Cork Volunteers, and the 4th Battalion, the signing of the Treaty was met with shock, disappointment, anger and confusion which fueled the Irish Civil

War. Thanks to the intricate systems of command divided between the Irish Republican Army, G.H.Q. and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Volunteers divided and split based on complex systems of allegiance. After waging war against each other, Irish leaders revised the history of the war in order to cover their interpretive blunder in 192. By failing to recognize the level of revolutionary success achieved by the Skibbereen I.R.A., the Dublin leadership falsely identified the Republican situation in Ireland as untenable. The revised history constructed in the post-war period, however, left their former fellow Volunteers with a bitter memory of war that could have been. Many became alcoholics, or were haunted by the vilification of their role in the struggle for Ireland's independence.

Haunted by the 'what-ifs' of their revolutionary struggle, veterans of the Anglo-Irish War often became political dissidents and physical-force Republicans. Enduring violence in Ireland demonstrates the lasting impact of a perceived unfinished struggle for Irish unification. Whatever their role in the Anglo-Irish War, the reconciliation of the memory of these men is crucial to healing local communities in Ireland; otherwise, a significant portion of Irish society will remain silenced and criminalized by the revisionism of Irish history.

A final folklore story, generously provided by Mr. Johnny French, of the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation:

My blood was boiling that evening. I took no sides so I didn't offend anybody / I was not a man for speech-making. The house was full. I grabbed a chair, and at the top of my voice, I called for order. there was silence. I said:

"There are men here from Bantry, Bandon, Macroom, who when called up, to hell with their country's cause, they left mothers, children, girlfriends willingly and joined up and fought side by side. Each and every one of you need the other, ye all need me and I need each and

every one of you. We are all so proud of your achievements. What hurts me is to see such proud, intelligent, dignified people behaving towards each other. I have my point made, I will now call on anybody who is not friendly with everybody to extend the hand of friendship. We will all be the happier for it.”

It worked, history had been made, the evidence was there. Not a drop was left in the bottom of a barrel or the bottom of a bottle that evening at 7.<sup>117</sup>

Bonded by their struggle against the British during the Anglo-Irish War, the men who fought one another during the Civil War struggled to live in a society damaged by their actions. Throughout my research, evidence of the lasting injuries suffered by veterans come to light. One unnamed Volunteer submitted dozens of applications for a service pension for a seriously debilitating injury he suffered on active duty - he died without the pension, which would have alleviated serious economic strain on his farming family and been a formal recognition of his service for an Irish Republic. Many others turned to drink, and stories still abound of the rough nature of these men exhibited as alcohol and trauma of war took their toll. Without a vindication of their experience, and a concerted attempt to understand the veterans now long dead, the unsettles spirits of the Civil War will continue to haunt both the written historiographies and local communities. Only by recovering the story of the Anglo-Irish War, specifically the experiences and accomplishments of those who fought, can the troubled and ‘defeated’ spirits of the conflict be put to rest.

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<sup>117</sup>Anonymous, 1934, Recorded by Johnny French, (folklore story, Leap, Co. Cork).

## Appendix A - Key Terms and Individuals

**Arthur Griffith** – Founder of the Sinn Féin (see below) party in 1906, Arthur Griffith was a devoted Nationalist and Republican. He participated in the Anglo-Irish negotiations prior to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 as a plenipotentiary for the underground Irish Republic (see below).

**‘Auxiliaries’** – The colloquial name for the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary (see below). A paramilitary force of ex-military British officers, the unit was known for its brutality towards civilians, lack of discipline and fierce fighting ability.

**‘Black and Tans’** – The colloquial term for the Royal Irish Constabulary Special Reserve, a paramilitary unit drawn from Great War veterans and volunteers. As with the Auxiliaries (see above), the Black and Tans earned a fierce some reputation as a ‘terrorist’ force in West Cork thanks to its violent character and callous treatment of Irish civilians.

**Bureau of Military Archives** – A collection of testimonies, photographs and associated material from veterans of the Irish Revolutionary Period (1916-1923). Recently released, the Collection includes an unprecedented number of interviews and experiences of veterans from Ireland’s violent period of early nationhood.

**Cathal Brugha** – A crucial member of the Irish revolutionary cadre, Cathal Brugha served as President of the Irish Republic, Minister for Defence and Chief of Staff for the Irish Republican Army. He and Michael Collins (see below) were often at odds, as Michael Collin’s I.R.B. (see below) connections threatened Brugha’s command of the I.R.A. (see below).

**Dáil Éireann** – The underground government of the Irish Republic (see below), which operated from Dublin. First suppressed, and then illegalized, by British authorities, the organization was the effective government of the Irish Republic (see below). Operating as the lower chamber of the Irish Oireachtas (see below), Dáil Éireann is a representative body tasked with the nomination of the Taoiseach (see below).

**Eamon deValera** – One of the only leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising to avoid a British firing squad, deValera went on to be President of the Irish Republic. Walking out of Dáil Éireann in protest against the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, deValera would return from his support of Republican forces during the Irish Civil War to lead the development of Irish 20<sup>th</sup>-century politics.

**Fenianism** – The ideology developed during the 1840s which espoused the liberation of Ireland from British rule, Fenianism supported the Gaelic revival and was central in the development of militant separatist thought in Ireland.

**Flying Column** – Established on Brigade- and Battalion-level, Flying Columns were mobile and flexible units of between 30 – 100 men designed to strike quickly and withdraw before enemy reinforcements could respond. The Flying Columns of the I.R.A. would prove effective and decisive in the fight for Irish independence, outmaneuvering and destroying convoys of heavily-armed British troops.

**G.H.Q.** – The General Headquarters of the I.R.A., headed by Cathal Brugha (see above). In practice, G.H.Q. was the central command of the Republican forces during the Anglo-Irish War. In reality, the command was limited to organizing arms shipments and funds collections from Battalions and Brigades of the I.R.A.

**‘Hibernians’** – A term widely used to include a wide range of Nationalist and Republican institutions and organizations designed to increase Irish autonomy from British rule. Irish-American organizations and funds played a vital role in developing the system of supportive organizations. The Hibernian groups would come to provide vital domestic support to the expanding struggle for Irish independence.

**Irish Citizen Army (I.C.A.)** – Led by the Socialist leader, James Connolly, the I.C.A. fought alongside the Irish Volunteers (see below) in the Easter Rising. The I.C.A. embodied the radical labor movement developing in Irish cities, but the organization effectively ceased to exist after its destruction in 1916.

**Irish Free State** – The name for Ireland following the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which gave Ireland near-Commonwealth status. Elected members of the government were obliged to swear an oath of allegiance to the British Crown, and the Irish Free State was the result of the partition of the island of Ireland between the autonomous southern portion and Northern Ireland – still under the direct rule of Britain.

**Irish Parliamentary Party (I.P.P.)** – The Constitutional Nationalist party, the I.P.P. aimed to achieve an Irish Parliament within the Commonwealth. Eventually replaced by Sinn Féin (see below) as the dominant political party in Ireland, the I.P.P. enjoyed political success until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

**Irish Republic / Republic of Ireland** – The differentiation between the ‘Irish Republic’ and the ‘Republic of Ireland’ is important to identify, as the ‘Irish Republic’ has existed only as an underground entity. The ‘Republic of Ireland’ – the name of the modern state of Ireland – was only established in the 1940s, after it replaced the Irish Free State established by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921.

**Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.)** – Many organizations have used the name I.R.A., although here it relates to the reorganized Republican militias of the Irish Volunteers (see below). After the Anglo-Irish War, the name would be used by various



Republican groups attempting to continue the physical-force resistance movement in Ireland.

**Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.)** – A clandestine organization dedicated to the overthrow of British authority and the establishment of an Irish Republic, the I.R.B. successfully infiltrated various Nationalist and Republican organizations to coordinate both the Easter Rising of 1916 and the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921). Known colloquially simply as the ‘Organization’, the I.R.B. was headed by Michael Collins during the Anglo-Irish War.

**Irish Volunteers (I.V.)** – Established in 1913, the Irish Volunteers were a Nationalist militia who were mobilized by Patrick Pearse during the Easter Rising to seize a number of vital buildings in Dublin city center. Though destroyed in Dublin, units in the rest of Ireland were reorganized before the Anglo-Irish War to become the I.R.A. (see above).

**Michael Collins** – A giant of Irish history, Michael Collins served during the Easter Rising and headed the counter-intelligence war against Britain during the Anglo-Irish War. As a signatory of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Michael Collins was leader of Free State forces during the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) until his death in his home county of Cork by Irish Republican ambushers.

**O’Donovan Rossa** – A native of the Skibbereen area, O’Donovan Rossa helped establish modern Irish Republicanism as a movement. Organizing the literary Phoenix Society in Skibbereen, and eventually exiled to America, his funeral saw one of the most famous orations in Irish history given by Patrick Pearse. As an inspiration to a future generation of revolutionaries, and a native of West Cork, O’Donovan Rossa played a key role in paving the way for a successful independence movement in Ireland.

**Oireachtas** – The parliament of the Irish Republic, made up of the upper and lower houses and the President of Ireland. Established as an underground organization during the Irish Revolutionary Period, the Oireachtas functioned as a collection of high-ranking Republicans coordinating and commanding from Dublin city.

**Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.)** – The British administration’s police force in Ireland, the R.I.C. was composed mostly of Roman Catholic Irishmen. Redistributed away from their home counties, constables were quick to lose the local support of the Irish people during the Anglo-Irish War. As the main target of the I.R.A. (see above), the R.I.C. effectively ceased to function as a police force in many parts of Ireland.

**Sinn Féin** – Originally a pro-Republican party in Ireland, Sinn Féin came to act as the political wing of the I.R.A. (see above). An illegal political party, Sinn Féin developed the political struggle for the Irish Republic, and achieved a stunning electoral victory in 1918. Refusing to take their seats at Westminster, Sinn Féin representatives were dedicated to the separation of Ireland from Great Britain and were often also members of Republican militant groups.

**Taoiseach** – The head of government, or prime minister, of Ireland. Nominated by the Oireachtas (see above) and approved by the President of Ireland, the Taoiseach must have the support of the majority of the lower house of the Oireachtas. The title is drawn from the Irish word for ‘chieftain’, echoing the Gaelic revivalism espoused by the founders of the Irish government.

## Appendix B – 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Roll Lists

<b>Summer, 1917</b>	
O/C	Sam Kingston
Vice O/C	John B. “Bernie” O’Driscoll
Adjutant	Florence O’Donoghue
Quartermaster	Patrick J. Cullinane
<b>November, 1917</b>	
O/C	John B. “Bernie” O’Driscoll (arrested)
Vice O/C	Denis O’Shea
Adjutant	Florence O’Donoghue
Quartermaster	Denis O’Connell
<b>Early, 1920</b>	
O/C	Sam Kingston
Vice O/C	Cornelius Connolly
Adjutant	Florence O’Donoghue(arrested)
Quartermaster	Patrick O’Sullivan
<b>October, 1920</b>	
O/C	Sam Kingston
Vice O/C	Cornelius Connolly
Adjutant	Dermot McCarthy
Quartermaster	Patrick O’Sullivan
<b>February, 1921</b>	
O/C	Cornelius Connolly
Vice O/C	Patrick O’Driscoll
Adjutant	William McCarthy
Quartermaster	Patrick O’Sullivan
<b>Later, 1921</b>	
O/C	Cornelius Connolly
Vice O/C	Patrick O’Driscoll
Adjutant	Cornelius Bohane
Quartermaster	Patrick O’Sullivan
<b>June, 1921</b>	
O/C	Cornelius Connolly
Vice O/C	Patrick O’Driscoll
Adjutant	Steve O’Brien
Quartermaster	Patrick O’Sullivan
<b>July, 1921</b>	
O/C	Cornelius Connolly
Vice O/C	Patrick O’Driscoll
Adjutant	Steven O’Brien
Quartermaster	Patrick O’Sullivan
Signals	Con Bohane
Dispatch	Patrick Harnedy
Engineering	D. Sheehy
Medical	Jasper O’Brien
Intelligence	Thomas Healy
Transport and Supply	John Leary

Table 2 - Headquarters Staff of the 4th Battalion, 3rd Brigade (1917-1921)

<b>Skibbereen (121 Members)</b>	
Captain	Tim O’Sullivan
1st Lieutenant	John Leonard
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant	Patrick Cooney
<b>Lisheen (Unknown)</b>	
Captain	Dan O’Brien
1st Lieutenant	Bill Crowley
2nd Lieutenant	- Unavailable -
<b>Drinagh (112 Members)</b>	
Captain	Andrew McCarthy
1st Lieutenant	James O’Donovan
2nd Lieutenant	John Hurley
<b>Breadagh (19 - 49 Members)</b>	
Captain	Patrick J. Hourihane
1st Lieutenant	Patrick C. Hourihane
2nd Lieutenant	Timothy Minihane
<b>Corran (41 Members)</b>	
Captain	Patrick Crispie
1st Lieutenant	Denis O’Mahony
2nd Lieutenant	Pat Tobin
<b>Leap (62 Members)</b>	
Captain	Daniel O’Donovan
1st Lieutenant	- Unavailable -
2nd Lieutenant	John O’Donovan
<b>Glandore (66 Members)</b>	
Captain	John Keane
1st Lieutenant	Patrick Fortune
2nd Lieutenant	Patrick Hurley
<b>Myross (62 Members)</b>	
Captain	Patrick Sheehy
1st Lieutenant	Denis O’Donovan
2nd Lieutenant	Patrick O’Driscoll (assigned landing preparations)
<b>Castlehaven (70 Members)</b>	
Captain	Cornelius Buckley
1st Lieutenant	Jas Browne
2nd Lieutenant	Jas Walsh
<b>Baltimore (66 Members)</b>	
Captain	Denis O’Neill
1st Lieutenant	John O’Neill
2nd Lieutenant	John Crowley
<b>Total Strength: 649 Members</b>	

Table 3 - Company Staff and Strength of the 4th Battalion, 3rd Brigade (July, 1921)

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