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The Conscription Crisis of 1918

Since the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Great Britain suffered heavy losses and, by 1916, lacked the manpower necessary to continue fighting the war with winning vigor. As a result, David Lloyd George extended British conscription to include men ages 18-51 through the Military Services Bill (1916). Through this bill, the maximum conscription age was raised 10 years, from 41 to 51. Along the lines of this legislation, Lloyd George decided it was only logical to include some Irish men in the draft as well, through the second clause of the bill. This choice resulted in radical Irish reactions—including strikes and rallies—which is now known as the Conscription Crisis of 1918. The Conscription Crisis of 1918 ultimately proved detrimental to Ireland and Great Britain's unity, because it pushed Ireland into the arms of the separatist political party Sinn Féin.

David Lloyd George's initial mistake in passing conscription legislation for Ireland was that he connected it to a new Home Rule bill. Thus, he estranged both Unionists and Nationalists. The Unionists disliked the concept of home rule; they preferred maintenance of current connections with Great Britain. The Nationalists disliked conscription, as they did not feel they had a position in the British parliament representative enough to have consented to the choice. Though the entire Irish Parliamentary Party opposed the bill, it was nevertheless passed by the British government.

In reaction to this new imposed conscription, many different Irish political parties and groups united. They put aside their differences to form a Nationalist front against a common enemy: Great Britain and its conscription efforts. An Anti-Conscription Committee convened. Included in this committee was the radical political party Sinn Féin. This party advocated for

total separation from Great Britain and establishment of an independent republic, by violent means if necessary. The Irish Parliamentary Party, the current ruling party, was also represented in this committee—as well as the All-For-Ireland Party, the Labour Party, and trade unions. The Roman Catholic Church also stood with the committee, against conscription. They opposed the continued mass slaughter of World War I, and they were also alienated by the suggestion that clergymen would be conscripted in non-combat roles. The Church denounced the conscription decree as oppressive and unjust, and it urged its members to stand up against conscription.

Most notably, the unity of the Church and the Sinn Féin political party through this platform provided Sinn Féin a surge of credibility and influence. Clergymen, previously known to be conservative, rose up to support this radical party. The combination of Sinn Féin radicals and Roman Catholic conservatives proved to be a political powerhouse.

As organized by the Anti-Conscription Committee, a one-day general strike ensued on April 23, 1918. The strike was a major success, and it demonstrated the national capabilities of Ireland. Work halted in every industry—factories, theatres, cinemas, railroads, docks, newspapers, shops, even pubs. Anti-conscription rallies were held nationwide. On May 5, 1918, 15,000 people attended a meeting in County Roscommon led by The Irish Parliamentary Party and Sinn Féin. These two parties had previously been opposed in opinion as to whether Ireland should gain legislative or complete independence from Great Britain; however, in light of conscription, the inherently nationalist views of these two parties allowed them to work together. The Freeman's Journal noted this, in describing, “the most extreme differences of political view, assembled in the square to demonstrate their enthusiastic loyalty to the unity in leadership represented by Mr. Dillon [IPP] and Mr. E. de Valera [Sinn Féin], side by side on the platform.” This meeting garnered mass appeal for Sinn Féin amongst previously moderate IPP constituents.

Sinn Féin grew in public perception to be the key instigators of anti-government and anti-conscription feeling. Thus, on May 17, 1918, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland—on behalf of the Dublin Castle authorities—arrested seventy-three Sinn Féin leaders on the grounds of treason. The Dublin Castle claimed that Sinn Féin was working with the Germans on a secret plot against Ireland. However, neither the Dublin Castle nor the British themselves could ever produce credible evidence of this “German plot.” Ireland was immediately critical of this action. The proceedings and lack of evidence seemed suspicious—as though the British Government was just trying to smear Sinn Féin in order to quell Irish political dissent. The Cork Examiner, an Irish newspaper, acknowledged this in reporting, “it is remarkable coincidence that the official statement relative to the existence of a German plot should have been made after Parliament had risen for the Whitsuntide Recess, and that the arrests should have rapidly followed.” The Sinn Féin arrests actually aggravated further Sinn Féin support, because the event was an official acknowledgement of the importance of Sinn Féin in regards to the anti-conscription movement. The party then achieved the bulk of the credit for averting conscription.

This was clear in the 1918 Irish General Election on June 20, 1918. The two major parties competing for control were the Irish Parliamentary Party and Sinn Féin. The Irish Parliamentary Party wanted home rule, whereas Sinn Féin wanted a republic totally separate from Great Britain. Sinn Féin won this election in a landslide.

By the summer of 1918, American forces joined the Allied armies in the war and turned the tide greatly. In light of this, the British government abandoned its plans of Irish conscription and home rule. However, the legacy of the Conscription Crisis remained. The event completely reshaped public support for Sinn Féin and, in turn, made way for Irish independence. After

winning the election of 1918, Sinn Féin established the first Dáil Éireann (the first parliament of the Irish Republic). Under the Dáil Éireann, Ireland fought the War of Independence.

The Conscription Crisis of 1918 caused major support for the Sinn Féin political party. The once conservative Church's support of more radical policy in reaction to conscription gave Sinn Féin much needed party members. In addition, Sinn Féin's meeting with the IPP legitimized the party and extended its appeal to moderates. Lastly, the British government's arrest of Sinn Féin leaders placed Ireland's focus on the party, for these Sinn Féin officials served as martyrs for the anti-conscription cause. Britain's attempt at conscription failed in its original goal to bolster battalions; instead it caused the Sinn Féin to gain power under a united nationalist front, at the cost of both Dublin Castle and even the more moderate nationalist parties in Ireland. Had it not been for the Conscription Crisis of 1918, Sinn Féin would not have controlled Irish politics. Had it not been for Sinn Féin, the Irish Republic would not have been created. In essence, the British government's attempt at conscription resulted in the complete separation of Ireland from Great Britain.