

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conscription, rural populations and the dynamics of war and revolution in Ireland (1914–18)

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Abstract

Drawing on secret witness reports from Intelligence Officers of the Royal Irish Constabulary, and diplomatic correspondence from France's representatives to Dublin and London, this article seeks to complement recent historiography and qualify our understanding of the period 1914–18 by engaging fully with the issue of compulsory military service from the outbreak of the conflict. It contemplates how fears of conscription contributed to the radicalisation of rural communities and demonstrates that opposition to conscription formed a solid political foundation for Sinn Féin. Britain's determination to implement conscription to Ireland frightened civilian populations, gave rise to nationwide discontent, and attracted towards Sinn Féin populations likely to be drafted into the British Army. That study seeks to be a re-examination of the dynamics between the Irish revolution and the conscription scares and maintains that fears of compulsory service in Ireland significantly contributed to the victory of Sinn Féin candidates during the four electoral contests in 1917.

Introduction

On Easter Monday 1916, with barely no weapons, a handful of badly organised rebels with little real hope of success, undertook to defeat the British Army and proclaim an Irish Republic.¹ Except for children cheering and waving at the rebels,² Dubliners' reaction to the Easter Rising was generally hostile³ and it was only when British authorities responded with coercive measures that insurgents gradually shifted from pariahs to martyrs in the public opinion.⁴ When General Maxwell (Ireland's Military Governor) ordered the execution of fifteen of the ringleaders, he transformed the hatred towards the insurgents into compassion.⁵

While acknowledging the radicalising impact of these executions, the claim according to which they were the only tipping point is less persuasive: change was equally the consequence of subsequent British security and political policy decisions.⁶ Anti-government sentiment was channelled by defiance, resentment and a series of political blunders in the aftermath of Easter Week 1916.⁷ Furthermore, Sinn Féin's ability to reorganise and federate the various dissident factions while developing a new rhetoric for self-determination paved the way for its political success during the 1917 by-elections,⁸ and gradually triggered the fall of the Irish Parliamentary Party.⁹ Ireland's transformation has been somewhat dissociated from the wider stage of wartime politics, haunted by the spectacular after-effects of Easter Week 1916. Yet for a proper assessment of the Irish revolution in the light of the global conflict, it appears vital to engage with the issue of compulsory military service.

The April 1918 Conscription Crisis has received particular attention from scholars. Adrian Gregory concludes from House of Commons debates prior to the introduction of the Military Service Act in April 1918 that 'the constitutional nationalists were sacrificed to appease the

British public demanding a sacrifice'.¹⁰ Conor Morrissey goes a step further in arguing that both the death of the Irish Parliamentary Party and Sinn Féin's December 1918 political victory were largely caused by the April 1918 Conscription Crisis.¹¹ Existing historiography convincingly demonstrates that Easter Week 1916 radicalised the Irish nationalist populations and that the Conscription Crisis saw republican ideology strengthened at the expense of the Irish Parliamentary Party. A recent groundbreaking study has revealed that the threat of conscription was first raised shortly after the outbreak of the war.¹² However, beyond mentions of the sporadic 'conscription scares' from August 1914 onwards or of actual conscription from April 1918, historians have failed to envisage conscription as a transformative factor in Irish history between 1914 and 1918.

This article seeks to determine how significant conscription was in transforming Ireland, and how conscription radicalised rural populations during the First World War, with anti-conscription sentiments being articulated in early speeches by the Irish Party and Sinn Féin. First of all, I will examine how compulsory service resonated all over the island from the outbreak of the conflict until the end of 1916. Drawing on secret reports from British Intelligence Officers and Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) Inspectors, newspaper articles and private correspondence from France's representatives to Dublin and London, this first section will reveal that a series of 'conscription scares'¹³ crystallised anxiety, yet without initially undermining the Irish Party. The second part of this article will illustrate how the anti-conscription message became a vital component of Sinn Féin's narrative during the four 1917 by-elections. Most importantly, as this section will endeavour to reveal, rural populations dreaded conscription and looked towards Sinn Féin as a new safeguard against any military service bill. A third section will deal with another direct consequence of the 1918 Conscription Crisis, namely the increasing number of Sinn Féin clubs, and how the threat of conscription hung over the Irish until the December 1918 General Elections. All in all, this article hopes to demonstrate that fears of a military service bill generated discontent from the very first weeks of the war, captured the attention of nationalist populations, undermined the Irish Party (even though they clearly stood against it) and contributed to the future transformation of Ireland.

A recurrent and obsessive concern

Historians have long identified the threat of conscription as contributing to the growth of Sinn Féin in the post-Rising period. It has indeed been argued that from July 1916 onwards, 'the threat of conscription [was] like a sword of Damocles over Ireland'¹⁴ and that fears of conscription during the 1917 by-elections channelled discontent all over Ireland.¹⁵ Recent groundbreaking research has nonetheless revealed that several 'conscription scares' plagued the island as early as August 1914.

Following Great Britain's entry into the war, rumours spread within Ireland claiming that the British government expected to implement the 1793 Militia Act,¹⁶ with *The Independent* contending in an article on 13th October 1914 that London was secretly plotting to enforce the Act.¹⁷ Rural communities in County Sligo read that the Militia Ballot Act was about 'to be put into force at one . . . and to apply to Great Britain and Ireland'.¹⁸ As hearsay developed, daily newspapers faithful to the Irish Party immediately countered this misinformation, and lambasted the 'scare-mongers who, on their own responsibility, ha[d] been threatening conscription for some time'.¹⁹ The *Freeman's Journal* deplored 'the circulation of the malignant concoction about conscription',²⁰ arguing that no such thing had ever been mentioned in the corridors of Westminster. Nonetheless, it was enough to infuriate rural populations.²¹ All over the country, young men in their hundreds fled the island out of fear of being drafted,²² highlighting how alarming an issue compulsory service could prove in some districts and localities.²³

Later on, in spring 1915, another 'conscription scare'²⁴ gangrened the island. Its direct impact on recruitment was plain for all to see; instead of being forcibly taken away from their homes,

'some [men] joined up with friends and family and got into units of their choice'.²⁵ Rumours of a forthcoming military service bill forced organisations and societies faithful to the Irish Party to intervene and clarify things. Across Ireland, branches of the United Irish League voiced the Irish Parliamentary Party line and argued that the British would never seriously think about applying conscription to Ireland simply because '[there was] not even a sufficient number [of men] to till the land, and there was, therefore, no danger of any man being brought into the army against his will'.²⁶ In Ballinaglera (County Leitrim), the local United Irish League guaranteed that 'there [was] no danger of conscription and the young men should remain at home and put down their crops'.²⁷ Great Britain needed to be fed and sustained during the conflict, and agricultural production remained a key component of the war effort. In addition, even in the most remote localities, communities knew too well that 'no matter how the Irish Parliamentary Party were talked of, and no matter how they were criticised, they were all against conscription'.²⁸

During heated House of Commons debates in January 1916, when conscription was about to be voted for Great Britain, John Redmond successfully hampered any possibility of conscription for Ireland.²⁹ His rhetoric turned him into the saviour of Irish youth, the man who had defeated conscription by wisely arguing that Ireland had been contributing greatly to the war effort since August 1914. Ireland's exemption from the Military Service Act was regarded as the final chapter in the ongoing gossip-mongering in daily newspapers loyal to the Irish Party.³⁰

Nonetheless, Easter Week 1916 revived concerns.³¹ Home Rule in Ireland had already been debated and agreed upon at Westminster, even though it had been postponed for the duration of the war.³² In the aftermath of the rebellion, when Asquith undertook to find a solution to the Irish Question, he faced the uncompromising and unified opposition of Irish Unionists and British Conservatives.³³ In order to hammer out a compromise, he suggested that six of the nine Ulster counties should be excluded from Home Rule. The permanent or temporary exclusion of these six counties³⁴ met with nationwide protest³⁵ in what would soon become known as the July 1916 Crisis. Traditional historiography draws a parallel between this July 1916 partition crisis, the radicalisation of civilian populations and the growing popularity of Sinn Féin.³⁶ Nonetheless, does the infuriation of nationalist populations necessarily prove that they were ready to adopt a more radical stance? Partition has long been associated with the growing popularity of Sinn Féin but insufficient attention has hitherto been given to threat of military service. Indeed, what would most likely embitter rural populations: a possible partition of the island or being forced into the British Army? I argue that a distinction has to be drawn between concerns over partition (likely to infuriate the Irish Party, Sinn Féin and élites in general) and anxiety at having to fight on the Western Front (likely to alarm rural populations).

In analysing secret reports from the Royal Irish Constabulary and files from France's representatives, it is undeniable that in the last six months of 1916, conscription was the trigger behind brewing political agitation. Should the British government implement conscription, France's Consul to Ireland, Jean des Longchamps, maintained that this 'would certainly lead to a general uprising'.³⁷ His evaluation mirrored the concerns of the British Authorities in Ireland, and in October 1916, a secret report was sent to the Cabinet Office in which it was stated in no uncertain terms that 'young men would probably take to the hills and would have to be rounded up by the police assisted by soldiers'.³⁸ British military figures in Ireland such as Lord Wimborne (Lord Lieutenant for Ireland), H. E. Duke (acting as Chief Secretary), General Byrne (Head of the RIC) and General Mahon (Commander-in-Chief), all objected to the implementation of conscription.³⁹ Similarly, France's military attaché to London, Colonel de la Panouse, claimed that conscription would be a political blunder and 'would lead to disastrous consequences'.⁴⁰ Both British military authorities in Ireland and France's representatives to Dublin and London recommended not implementing conscription unless Home Rule was granted first, arguing that men of military age would resist, local populations would help them escape, and violent uprisings could ultimately endanger the security of the island.

More worryingly, compulsory military service ‘would enable Sinn Féiners to denounce another gross mismanagement of Irish affairs by the British government’,⁴¹ as one constable argued. It would even ‘kill the Constitutional Party’,⁴² another wrote in October 1916. Perceived British government mismanagement could moreover directly threaten the legitimacy of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Judging from RIC reports and diplomatic correspondence from France’s representatives, it was an evident concern that conscription would discredit Britain’s Irish allies in parliament and widen the gap between constitutional nationalism and the Irish.

Among the military, a feeling prevailed that conscription was gradually embittering nationalist Ireland, a feeling shared by the five French bishops who visited in Ireland in October 1916. Between 7th and 14th October, the bishops came to Ireland in order to discuss the possibility of recruiting more men for the war effort with their Irish counterparts.⁴³ During their mission, they witnessed how anti-conscription sentiments lay at the core of political unrest: ‘Conscription would be considered as repression.’⁴⁴ At that time, farmers, shop assistants and artisans in Kilkenny were worried at the idea of being conscripted,⁴⁵ while in West Galway, rural communities dreaded the idea of serving on the Western Front.⁴⁶

By the end of October 1916, all over Ireland, police inspectors claimed that ‘the fear of being taken from comfortable homes to fight under any flag’⁴⁷ was channelling discontent. In the Southern District, local newspapers ‘[were] carrying on active opposition against conscription’.⁴⁸ One of them had warned the Irish that the British hoped ‘to sweep the few thousands of young men left here into the military maw and send them to be slaughtered. They want the flower of the Irish manhood wholly exterminated in order that later on they may more easily rule Ireland.’⁴⁹ More rural and agricultural populations equally dreaded being drafted into the British Army, and in the Northern District, an Intelligence Officer named Captain Whitfield testified that ‘the feeling against conscription [was] strong, and there [was] a real fear of it’.⁵⁰ Sedition was ‘limited almost entirely in the country to the sons of farmers, and in the towns to shop assistants, the former largely through fear of conscription’,⁵¹ precisely those populations that would be the first to be conscripted in the eventuality of a military service act for Ireland. In addition, it must be remembered that existing factories had brought considerable economic benefits to Ireland,⁵² and that the war had generated an unprecedented level of prosperity among farmers and shopkeepers.⁵³

Yet by the end of 1916, it seems that nothing could quash the toxic rumours about compulsory military service. Daily newspapers published feverish anti-conscription motions from the United Irish League and members of the Irish Party but it was not enough to reassure local agricultural populations. Some MPs publicly claimed that they would never accept ‘a man to be taken’,⁵⁴ but such narratives did little to dampen down suspicions. In East Galway, one District Council publicly reminded the Irish Party that men were needed to ‘till the land and produce food for the nation’,⁵⁵ warning Redmond to be vigilant: although he was still regarded as the only safeguard against conscription, many doubted he could prevent the British from conscripting the Irish in the longer term. This being said, from August 1914 to the end of 1916, Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party remained the only bulwark against compulsory military service.

Channelling discontent over conscription: Sinn Féin and the radicalisation of rural communities

Since the outbreak of the war, recruitment had operated on a voluntary basis; groups of employees within the same company and civilians from neighbouring localities volunteered together, first training for several months in Ireland, then leaving for further instruction in Great Britain.⁵⁶ Between August 1914 and November 1918, no fewer than 134,202 recruits enrolled in the British Army (6 per cent of the entire male population of the island and 3 per cent of the overall population),⁵⁷ not including the 58,000 Irish servicemen already serving in the Crown Forces (21,000 regulars, 18,000 reservists, 12,000 members of the Special Reserve, 5,000 men in the

Navy and a couple of thousand officers).⁵⁸ As military authorities recalled, ‘there was a wave of feeling . . . in sympathy of the Allies in Ireland’ after the war broke out.⁵⁹ Even after Easter Week 1916, men were still enrolling in large numbers.⁶⁰ When the Military Service Act was imposed on Britain in January 1916,⁶¹ Ireland was not incorporated within the provisions of the legislation, given that the British government knew only too well that this could prompt a wave of protest across the island. Political considerations therefore took precedence over wartime imperatives.

Anti-recruitment campaigns took place all over the country⁶² and vocal opposition to recruitment was manifest from the outbreak of the conflict onwards,⁶³ but remained largely confined to a small nucleus as nationalist Ireland backed the British war effort.⁶⁴ Well before the war began, opposition to recruiting had been ‘a central plank’⁶⁵ of Sinn Féin. Unsurprisingly, anti-conscription played a key role in Sinn Féin literature during the war and especially during the 1917 by-elections – for one thing it was something that all factions could unite around. Anti-conscription was naturally a concern for Sinn Féin. When it comes to determining how the denial of the British government’s right to mandate compulsory military service in Ireland was being used as a key early argument in Sinn Féin speeches, it is vital to remember that the transformation of Sinn Féin into an advanced political machine took place at the very beginning of 1917 thanks to George Noble Plunkett.⁶⁶ The fact that the party had not yet been propelled into a political force by Plunkett might explain why pre-1917 opposition to conscription was mainly articulated by the Irish Party and its followers. Indeed, Sinn Féin was largely uncoordinated until 1917; activists distributed leaflets in towns, but their actions were disorganised and isolated.⁶⁷ Only when Sinn Féin emerged as a great rival during the first by-elections in 1917 could it openly challenge Irish Party hegemony.

Regarding the question of ‘what was the importance of the conscription threat compared to other factors’, it is clear that conscription was articulated alongside the issue of partition and the need to secure a seat at the Paris Peace Conference. Sinn Féin had recently elaborated a new narrative, heralding the need to achieve both complete independence and a seat at the conference. So were civilians voting for Sinn Féin in order to achieve complete independence or to protest against partition? Not as far as the British and French authorities were concerned, as they knew full well that ‘farmers had no interest at all in the war’⁶⁸ and that rural populations were concerned primarily with conscription, not partition or independence. It appears (from the weekly reports of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the diplomatic correspondence of France’s representatives to London and Dublin) that conscription played an important part during the by-elections in reminding rural populations that they might one day have to leave their fields for the Western Front. In rural districts, the threat of conscription permeated by-election leaflets, speeches and political manifestos; activists campaigning for Sinn Féin insisted to a man on this very danger.

During campaigning in the North Roscommon constituency, Sinn Féin galvanised crowds by insisting on the dangers of a forthcoming conscription bill in addition to the core manifesto demands of self-determination and a seat at the Paris Peace Conference. Indeed, opposition to conscription acted as a decisive argument, with one speaker at Strokestown urging local communities to cast a vote for George Noble Plunkett. He made clear that, if elected, Plunkett would prevent the young men of Ireland from being drafted into the army.⁶⁹ On 25th January 1917, at another meeting in Tarmonbarry, one clergyman openly lambasted the Irish Party and even admitted that ‘the rebels of Easter Week had saved the country from conscription, and had it not been for them the young men he saw today would be shedding their blood in France and in Flanders’.⁷⁰ Little by little, Sinn Féin developed such rhetoric as a political strategy: in order to prove to audiences that the fate of the 16th (Irish) and 36th (Ulster) Divisions who had been slain on the battlefields of France and Belgium could one day be theirs, the 1916 Rising was repeatedly portrayed as a counter-conscription act. ‘Conscription . . . would have been applied to Ireland but for the Irish Volunteers. If the Irish Party had had the manhood to insist upon complete self-government when John Bull was in a right place and could not afford to refuse it they would have got it’⁷¹ claimed another MP. John Redmond was portrayed as the politician who had sacrificed thousands of Irishmen without even obtaining devolution for the island. In Boyle, it was

asserted that the action of the young rebels of Easter Week had 'kindled a fire on the hills of Ireland which saved the young men from being conscripts'.⁷² In the mind of the speaker, Easter Week 1916 had freed the country from military service. Numerous speakers pointed out that 'Sinn Féin Volunteers [had] saved [them] from conscription',⁷³ erroneously associating the 1916 insurgents with the Sinn Féin party and using the thorny issue of conscription as a weapon to attack the Irish Parliamentary Party.

Alarmed by fallacious accusations against the Irish Party, the United Irish League (UIL) stepped into the campaign and offered its unflinching support to the Irish Party nominee. Rural populations were reminded that to this day, the Irish Party had been the only political force capable of defending their interest, while also guaranteeing that conscription would not be enforced.⁷⁴ Conscription seems to have been significant enough to compel the Irish Party to stand up against the idea that it would soon be applied to Ireland. It is therefore crucial to stress that the Irish Party did not stand idly by, and planned a series of meetings across the country in order to counter Sinn Féin. 'I tell you that neither the insurrection nor Sinn Féin could have saved Ireland from Conscription if it had not been for the Parliamentary Party (cheers)',⁷⁵ maintained one speaker at a gathering in Swinford (County Mayo). The Young Ireland Branch of the United Irish League held a large meeting in Limerick during which it was publicly asserted that the Irish Party had challenged the British government in January 1916 and had prevented conscription from being enforced.⁷⁶ '[Don't you] be carried away by fudge',⁷⁷ warned one forceful advocate of the Irish Party. During the North Roscommon contest competing narratives rivalised to influence local communities.

The Longford by-election campaign bore similarities with North Roscommon. Sinn Féin portrayed itself as the only political force strong enough to defeat conscription, with Easter Week 1916 supposedly planned in order to oppose compulsory military service. Anti-conscription narratives thus merged with a redefinition of what the 1916 Rising had sought to achieve. On 22nd April 1917, at Carrickedmond, a Sinn Féin representative informed the frightened community that had the uprising not broken out, 'some of the men now listening would be lying rotting in the soil of Flanders as conscription would have surely been passed only for that rising'.⁷⁸ 'John Redmond would have allowed the young men of Ireland to be conscripted for the Home Rule',⁷⁹ argued the newly-elected MP of North Roscommon at a gathering in Ballymahon on 29th April 1917. Sinn Féin propaganda sought to sow doubt in the minds of local populations, encouraging young farmers and labourers likely to be conscripted to grow suspicious of constitutional nationalism, and possibly transfer their allegiance to Sinn Féin. '[E]very young man listening to me would be lying dead in Flanders'⁸⁰ if the 1916 rebels had not struck a blow to the British Empire on Easter Week, one activist certified. France's Ambassador to London and France's Consul to Dublin both reported that Sinn Féin were calling for the need to resist military service at all costs using powerful anti-conscription rhetoric.

By the time of the East-Clare by-election in July 1917, many priests and local churchmen had already transferred their loyalty to Sinn Féin.⁸¹ Following the electoral successes in North Roscommon and Longford, the Catholic Church 'was little by little adapting to a new political environment',⁸² knowing only too well what was needed to conserve the trust (and faith) of its flocks. This explains why local Catholic priests stood side-by-side on platforms with Éamon de Valera during the East-Clare campaign, and why priests conspired against Patrick Lynch (the Irish Party candidate), accusing him of 'having worn England's livery'.⁸³ The East-Clare by-election thus stands as a litmus test of anti-conscription sentiments spreading across the country. 'Is Conscription Coming?' asked one leaflet ominously, simultaneously attacking the Irish Parliamentary Party who were said to be pro-enforcement. Another explained that a vote for de Valera was 'A Vote against Conscription',⁸⁴ while yet another trumpeted: 'Vote for De Valera Who Saved Your Sons from Conscription',⁸⁵ thus re-enacting the narrative that the 1916 Rising was in fact a counter-conscription rebellion. Wartime misadventures and atrocities faced on the battlefields by Irishmen permeated daily newspapers as well as rhetoric on the tribunes:

If the young men of Clare are willing to accept Conscription – if the Clare farmers are anxious to see their sons transported to Bagdad, or Salonika, or shipped to ‘somewhere East of Suez’, then their course is clear and their man is Crown Prosecutor Lynch. If, on the other end, they are not going to have conscription – if they are prepared to fight against it and want a leader who, in their case and in the cause of Ireland, will look death on the face without flinching, then their course is no less clear and their man is Éamon De Valera.⁸⁶

In referring to Irish troops on the Western Front and in Gallipoli, the editor touched a raw nerve. In his confidential report, the Intelligence Officer of the Southern District maintained that of the many motives impelling the population towards Sinn Féin, the fear of conscription which prevailed over the south of Ireland was probably the strongest, especially among the farmers’ sons and the shop assistant class.⁸⁷ Once again, what would most likely lead young men from agricultural districts to shift towards Sinn Féin? Guarantees that their country would be represented at the Peace Conference? Or the consuming and obsessive thought of being conscripted overnight?

In spite of repeated articles published in defence of the Irish Party, it was being increasingly weakened and publicly challenged nationwide. Words uttered by one MP in support of Lynch at a gathering in Broadford spoke for the party’s desperation: ‘[you know] that eight months before the Dublin rebellion conscription for this country had been killed by Redmond and Dillon in the House of Commons. That was an irrefutable fact, and cant or calumny could not overcome it [loud cheers].’⁸⁸ No matter how hard the Irish Party strove to re-establish the truth, its candidate was defeated by nearly three thousand votes on 10th July 1917.⁸⁹ A secret report from a Constable concluded that the fear of conscription prevailing over the South of Ireland had largely participated in the humiliating trouncing of Redmond’s nominee. That conscription appeared as a determining factor in the landslide victory of the former 1916 rebel came as no surprise.

Indeed, the last by-election of 1917 differed little from the three previous electoral contests, when on 10th August 1917 William Cosgrave won Kilkenny City.⁹⁰ Urban populations had been enjoined to support the Sinn Féin candidate. ‘Where are the men today that went to fight for England? Search the plains of Flanders and Gallipoli or the bottom of the Mediterranean and you may find them’,⁹¹ one campaigner had asked. Overarching narratives of the war had afflicted the audience and had modified their perception of the war. In resorting to descriptions of what ordinary soldiers had to endure on the battlefields, Sinn Féin activists explained why the war had broken out and how it changed ordinary lives forever. Such speeches thus modified the way the Irish perceived Easter 1916 by referring to the military insurrection as a political move aimed at preventing conscription in Ireland. De Valera himself called for armed resistance in the eventuality of a military service act. From one electoral platform on 30th July 1917, he incited local populations to resist even unto death:

They talk of enforcing conscription in Ireland. If they try to enforce conscription, it is our dead bodies they will have to conscript, and they will have to take the dead bodies of some of their own too. It is better to die fighting in an Irish trench than to die in a trench in Flanders fighting for our only enemy.⁹²

Conscription thus haunted the minds of local populations during the 1917 by-elections, feeding – and feeding on – their fears and representing a powerful psychological means to hijack traditional Irish Party opposition to the British government. Even though ‘all sections of nationalists, both pro- and anti-war’⁹³ condemned conscription and pledged they would oppose it, Sinn Féin lured the Irish into believing that the Irish Party would sooner or later accept the draft. In addition, the Irish Party wished to secure devolution, not complete independence, which meant that a Home Rule Ireland would remain confined within the framework of British constitutional law, and dependent on the willingness of Westminster. No one can know for sure why so many farmers, shop assistants and clerks cast ballots for Sinn Féin in 1917. However, all sections of rural Ireland

resented being conscripted and France's representatives held the conviction that fears of compulsory military service triggered a definite shift towards the party. In all likelihood, grassroots voters were more likely to support Sinn Féin in order to be saved from conscription.

A ticking time bomb

That something significant was happening in Ireland was not only evidenced by the reports of Constables, Intelligence Officers and correspondence from France's representatives. The increasing membership of Sinn Féin amply illustrated its growing popularity. Whereas between September and December 1914, serving with the Irish Volunteers was said to increase a man's chances of being conscripted,⁹⁴ by January 1918 Sinn Féin stood as a form of buffer and thus attracted men of military age, likely to be drafted into the army.

In February 1917, the police inspector of the Midlands and Connaught District warned that anti-military service attitudes spoke for the increasing number of Sinn Féin members.⁹⁵ In May 1917, for the first time in many months, the RIC Inspector of the Southern District warned that 'Sinn Féin [was] progressing rapidly in this district by the formation of clubs.'⁹⁶ In the Midlands and Connaught District, Sergeant Burke noted that:

Sinn Féin clubs continue to be formed throughout the district, and now number close to 100. No county in the district is without them. Sinn Féin appears to attract itself more adherents, for reasons already stated, and especially among the farming class and shop boys as the only safeguard against conscription. The idea that the Redmondite party favoured conscription is one of the causes of its political decline.⁹⁷

In May 1917, young men in rural districts reportedly poured into the ranks of Sinn Féin out of 'dislike to military service and fear of conscription'.⁹⁸ Out of pragmatic interest and by fear of losing their grasp on their populations, active assistance was given to the party by the mass of national school teachers, the majority of younger RC clergy, and some of the older priests.⁹⁹ On 22nd July 1917, about five hundred people gathered at a meeting in the district of Longford, not to listen to seditious talk from released Sinn Féin leaders, but 'out of fear to be drafted into the British Army'.¹⁰⁰ When reporting on the Longford gatherings, the RIC inspector avertefully pointed out that conscription was transforming Sinn Féin into the most plausible opposition force. Paul Cambon, France's ambassador to London, reported in July 1917 that all over Ireland, Sinn Féin clubs and societies were being founded with an increasing number of members.¹⁰¹ Alfred Blanche, France's consul to Dublin, concurred in his conclusions and wrote, in October 1917, that their membership was increasing dramatically.¹⁰² At the time, the Colonial Office numbered 1,039 clubs all over Ireland (with a membership of 66,279).¹⁰³

Yet Sinn Féin clubs did not multiple in the immediate aftermath of Easter Week 1916. With only 166 clubs across the country in April 1917 (approximately eleven thousand men), nothing could support the contention that the failed military fiasco was responsible for bolstering the party. However, by December 1917, Sinn Féin had multiplied total membership by six and counted 66,270 followers.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, not a single club was registered in County Wicklow in early 1916, but by June, four clubs had opened and by December, 561 members were scattered within the fourteen newly-established branches.¹⁰⁵ County Limerick also witnessed the rapid development of Sinn Féin activities: from no clubs in April 1917, seven clubs had been established only one month later, with a corresponding surge in membership. County Leitrim, that 'peaceable and orderly county, free from boycotting, intimidation, and agrarian trouble' had turned into a Sinn Féin hotbed in December 1917 with forty-three clubs totalling 2,248 members.¹⁰⁶ It would be futile to list here every single county and its growing number of Sinn Féin followers. Nonetheless, reports from Intelligence Officers were swift in highlighting the reasons why so many seditious

organisations sprang up in 1917. As far as RIC Inspectors were concerned, no doubt remained as to the reasons why young men had transferred loyalty to Sinn Féin in the Midlands and Connaught District: '[i]n order to avoid conscription'.¹⁰⁷ Sporadic local unrest had been sparked all over the country by March 1918¹⁰⁸ and in certain counties, men had even drilled in defiance against conscription.¹⁰⁹

By then, a series of wartime episodes were little by little reconfiguring the European geopolitical landscape. On 3rd March 1918, the Central Powers signed the Brest-Litovsk Treaty with the Bolshevik government,¹¹⁰ thus allowing the German Reich to transfer one million German soldiers from the Eastern to the Western Front. From Paris, the British were called on to help contain the march of the German Army¹¹¹ and Britain needed to levy more recruits in order to ensure the French and British armies would not collapse. On 21st March 1918, a strong German offensive was launched with the intention of breaking through the Western Front. This resulted in 38,512 casualties on the British side on that day alone. By the end of the month, Operation Michael had cost the British 177,739 men, the French 77,000 and the Germans 239,800 casualties.¹¹² Alan J. Ward has argued that the British Cabinet took the decision to extend conscription following Operation Michael, given that the British publicly 'objected to further sacrifices on its part without corresponding sacrifices from Ireland'.¹¹³ In a more recent interpretation of the April 1918 Conscription Crisis, it has been contended that the British War Cabinet's desire to pass conscription for Ireland was 'a cold-blood piece of cynicism' needed in order to gain popular support for a new military bill across Great Britain.¹¹⁴ What lay behind the Cabinet's decision was indeed the need to enforce a new conscription policy in Britain. Overnight, the Military Service Act of April 1918 transformed the course of Irish history. After signing the Bill, the government stepped back and postponed the implementation of the Act. Nonetheless, fear of what the government's next move would be, especially as regards conscription, did not fade away¹¹⁵ and even cemented a growing feeling of anxiety throughout the country.¹¹⁶ In order to weaken Sinn Féin, and to restore confidence in the Irish Parliamentary Party, the British government outlined a plan including the immediate establishment of Home Rule and conscription. That did not prevent a General Strike on 23 April 1918 when thousands protested all over the country.¹¹⁷ A few weeks later, the so-called German conspiracy marked a new wave of repression that officially sought to alienate spies and informers but officiously intended to thwart anti-conscription agitation and arrest Sinn Féin ring-leaders.¹¹⁸ Surprisingly enough, after the armistice and a few days before the December 1918 General Elections, some daily newspapers reminded their readers that 'the Conscription Act [was] still on the Statute Book, and Mr. Lloyd George's silence on the subject of conscription in his election address [was] too significant to ignore',¹¹⁹ thus backing the claim that 'conscription would permeate the language of recruiters, politicians, and the press through to 1918'.¹²⁰

Conclusion

From the outbreak of the conflict, conscription haunted the minds of the Irish and gradually became a determining factor in shifting the allegiance of nationalist Ireland from the Irish Parliamentary Party to Sinn Féin. It cannot therefore be rightly dissociated from the success of Sinn Féin at the four by-elections in 1917. Recurrent references to conscription during these contests demonstrated the heightened importance of fears of being drafted into the British Army. Confidential reports from France's representatives in London and Dublin and official reports from RIC Intelligence Officer distinctly maintained that fears of conscription generated anti-British sentiment and gave rise to unrest. When civilian populations heard they could be required to join the British Army overnight, support for Sinn Féin grew even stronger. The Irish Party insisted on their unflinching opposition to compulsory military service and relentlessly countered false accusations, but in vain. If this article has sought to demonstrate that conscription was arguably the most significant factor in radicalising rural populations during the 1917 by-elections, this must

invite historians to assess why Sinn Féin captured more support with its anti-conscription message than did the previously dominant Irish Party.

It is equally important to point out that in 1917, activists gradually deserted the Irish Party in favour of Sinn Féin while members of the United Irish League defected to Sinn Féin at some point between 1916 and 1918,¹²¹ perhaps with the conscription crisis as the catalyst for a mass defection. It has been argued that the Irish Party suffered from its association with an increasingly unpopular war and its inability to deliver a compelling message relevant to the new environment.¹²² Nonetheless, (and this article deliberately chooses not to engage with that aspect in order to focus solely on how conscription modified the post-Rising political landscape), a clear ideological distinction between Sinn Féin and the Parliamentary Party needed to be drawn. Opposing recruitment and dwelling upon the fate of Irish soldiers fallen in Belgium, France and the Dardanelles did not suffice to make a manifesto. Sinn Féin activists needed to discredit devolution and Home Rule. In addition to mere opposition to conscription, a new vision of Ireland in line with postwar international rights was also at stake.¹²³ References to a possible compulsory military service bill intertwined with claims for total independence and strengthened the agenda of Sinn Féin. Whereas the Irish Parliamentary Party, tainted in Sinn Féin propaganda with its prior record of supporting voluntary recruitment, failed in shaping a compelling narrative, and remained confined to the limits of devolution and Home Rule, Sinn Féin vowed to secure the complete independence of Ireland. Sinn Féin reinvented its rhetoric and appealed to the Irish nationalist population thanks to a core narrative in which resisting conscription and fighting for the total independence of Ireland became interconnected with wartime concerns. Further research will therefore have to determine whether fears of conscription and rhetoric of self-determination concurrently fed one another, or whether (as was believed by France's diplomatic representatives) the ideology of total independence was but a cover to mask wartime concerns.

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- 12 Timothy Bowman, William Butler, Michael Wheatley, eds, *The Disparity of Sacrifice: Irish Recruitment to the British Armed Forces, 1914–1918* (Liverpool, UK, 2020), p. 217.
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