The Irish War of Independence, 1919-21
A Short History

Senior Cycle
THE 1918 GENERAL ELECTION

The electorate had expanded hugely since the last general election in 1910. All men over twenty-one and women over thirty now had the right to vote. The number of voters in Ireland had almost trebled (1,931,588 in 1918 compared to 698,098 in 1910), and approximately two out of three of those on the register were first-time voters. The total poll on 14 December 1918 was 1,011,248. The Sinn Féin party won 46.9 per cent of the vote - seventy-three of the 105 seats across the island. Unionists secured 28.5 percent (twenty-six seats) and the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) won six seats with 21.7 percent of the votes.

Labour stood aside to allow Sinn Féin a clear run and Sinn Féin candidates were returned unopposed in twenty-five constituencies where its support was strongest. Unionists secured twenty-three of the thirty-seven Ulster seats, and gained the Dublin district of Rathmines. The Irish Parliamentary (Home Rule) Party won four seats in constituencies where Sinn Féin candidates withdrew to avoid dividing the nationalist vote and facilitating a unionist victory. Sinn Féin was defeated by Home Rulers only in Belfast Falls and Waterford City, and were victorious against Home Rule candidates in forty-three other constituencies. Irish Parliamentary Party leader, John Dillon, was defeated by Eamon de Valera in East Mayo. Constance Markievicz of Sinn Féin, one of only two female candidates, was the first-ever woman elected to the UK parliament. Sinn Féin’s victory was so decisive that its MPs could now plausibly claim the right to establish a Dublin-based parliament.

THE FIRST DÁIL, 21 JANUARY 1919

On 21 January 1919 twenty-eight men who had been elected as Sinn Féin Members of Parliament in the general election of December 1918, met in public session in Dublin’s Mansion House to proclaim Dáil Éireann as a legislative assembly for Ireland. Eamon de Valera was elected President of the Dáil, the symbolic head of the Irish Republic and the recognised public face of the independence movement. Like many of the sixty-eight Sinn Féin MPs – or Teachtaí Dála (TDs) – elected in 1918, de Valera was in prison in January 1919 and Cathal Brugha acted on his behalf. Other notable absentees included Michael Collins and Harry Boland, who were in England organising de Valera’s escape from Lincoln prison.

By the end of the session, the members had approved a short, provisional constitution, appointed three delegates to the post-war peace conference, and issued a Declaration of Independence, a message to the Free Nations of the World, and a Democratic Programme.

THE CABINET

Eamon de Valera escaped from Lincoln Jail on 3 February 1919 and when the remaining ‘German Plot’ prisoners were released in March, the President of the Dáil was able to return to Ireland without danger of arrest. He presided at the second
meeting of the Dáil on 1 April at which Ministers were appointed to the Departments established in January 1919.

Arthur Griffith - Minister for Home Affairs
Count Plunkett - Minister for Foreign Affairs
Cathal Brugha - Minister for Defence
Eoin MacNeill - Minister for Industry
Countess Markievicz - Minister for Labour
W.T. Cosgrave - Minister for Local Government
Michael Collins - Minister for Finance

A Distinct Department of Publicity was created in March 1919. The first Minister for publicity was Laurence Ginnell, replaced following his imprisonment by Desmond Fitzgerald. A veteran of 1916, Fitzgerald was successful in making contact with foreign journalists and encouraging them to publicise the work of the Dáil and later, during the war of Independence, the ‘acts of aggression’ by the police and military in Ireland.

Other than W.T. Cosgrave who had served on Dublin Corporation since 1908, few of the Ministers had any serious political experience. The constant harassment of the Dáil and its members, particularly after it was suppressed in September 1919, also hampered its ability to work coherently. Many of its members had other civilian and revolutionary commitments. The survival and continuity of the revolutionary Dáil owed much to the ability of its few permanent civil servants such as Diarmuid O’Hegarty, the secretary to the Dáil cabinet and clerk of the Dáil. He was responsible for taking the minutes of the Dáil sittings, organising its secret meetings and facilitating correspondence between the ministers.

THE DÁIL COURTS

The fear that social unrest would detract from the national question led Sinn Fein to set up a system of arbitration courts. First suggested by Arthur Griffith in 1906, Sinn Fein began to set up arbitration courts in 1917 to settle land disputes. In 1919 they were brought under the jurisdiction of the Dáil and extended beyond land to deal with all legal matters in an effort to replace the existing crown courts. The establishment of the Dáil courts coincided with the decline of the RIC as an effective police force as a result of the IRA campaign of intimidation and assault. At the end of 1919 the RIC closed many of the small rural barracks and became increasingly unable to prosecute crimes or enforce judgements. The republican courts played an important role in maintaining law and order and made the Dáil a reality in the minds of many proving itself capable of effectively governing the country.

THE DÁIL LOAN

To finance Dáil Éireann and its ambitious foreign policy, government departments, republicans raised a national loan, whereby citizens could purchase bonds payable to be redeemed later by the newly-declared Irish Republic. Organised by Minister of Finance Michael Collins, the Dáil Loan sought to raise both badly-needed funds and public consciousness on behalf of the independence movement. Republicans launched a modern media campaign, incorporating slick newspaper advertisements, imaginative public events, door-to-door canvases, and even a short propaganda film covertly shown in Dublin cinemas. A bond drive was also launched in the US in January 1920. Collins hid the money and bonds in banks where the managers were sympathetic to the republican cause. From 1920 when the War of Independence intensified, most of the Dáil’s budget was sent on the Department of Defence.
THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

The post-war Paris Peace Conference was convened at Versailles in January 1919 to redraw international borders and settle questions of national sovereignty at the end of the First World War. Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh and George Gavan Duffy served as the Irish Republic’s uninvited representatives at the Palace of Versailles. They hoped to gain international recognition of Ireland’s right to her Independence and her right to join the League of Nations as a constituent member.

US President, Woodrow Wilson, made it clear that the issue of an Irish republic was a British concern and not an international one. The conference refused to admit the republicans. Ireland’s claim was only one of several unsuccessful national appeals rejected by the conference, as questions of global power trumped principles of self-determination. Failure at the Paris Peace Conference removed the likelihood of a peaceful resolution to Irish independence aspirations.


After the failure to gain a hearing in Paris, the focus of the Dáil’s foreign policy shifted to America. In June 1919- four months after his escape from jail, de Valera travelled to the United States to gain support for Irish self-determination and to raise funds to bankroll the revolutionary government at home. Arthur Griffith was appointed acting president of Sinn Fein and the Dáil in de Valera’s absence, and Minister for Defence, Cathal Brugha, was acting president of the IRA.

De Valera’s arrival in the US was followed by a highly-publicised fund-raising campaign which lasted eighteen months and collected a publicly-subscribed $5.5m ‘loan’ for the cause.

Criss-crossing the country he addressed a series of mass rallies, met with public officials, and was received as a visiting dignitary at multiple state legislatures. He filled major venues such as Madison Square Garden (New York), Fenway Park (Boston) and Wrigley Field (Chicago, but also visited less obvious Irish communities of the period, such as Scranton, Savannah, New Orleans, Kansas City, Montana, and San Francisco.

Poster issued by Dáil Éireann declaring support for de Valera’s work in the United States and endorsing Griffith’s stance with regard to Irish-American attacks on de Valera’s authority as President of the Irish Republic.

[Source: National Library of Ireland, EPH F237]
THE IRISH WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

PHASE I: JAN 1919 - MARCH 1920

The first phase of the War of Independence consisted mainly of isolated incidents between the IRA and the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). From the beginning of the conflict, the British government refused to recognise the Irish Republic or to admit that a state of war existed between this republic and the UK. The violence in Ireland was described as ‘disorder’ and the IRA was a ‘murder gang’ of terrorists and assassins. For this reason, it was the job of the police rather than the 50,000-strong British army garrison in Ireland to deal with the challenge to the authority of the British administration. British soldiers would later become heavily involved in the conflict, but from the beginning the police force was at the front line of the conflict.

SOLOHEADBEG AMBUSH

On the same day as the meeting of the First Dáil on 21 January 1919, members of the South Tipperary Brigade ambushed a convoy of RIC at Soloheadbeg. The aim of the operation was to capture the gelignite being escorted to a local quarry, and to intensify hostilities against the RIC. Led by Dan Breen, Séan Treacy and Seamus Robinson, the Tipperary Volunteers acted independently of Volunteers General Headquarters (GHQ), which had forbidden arms raids. The Soloheadbeg ambush resulted in the deaths of two police constables, James McDonnell and Patrick O’Connell. The action was condemned by the church and the attackers reprimanded by Volunteers GHQ.

POLICE BOYCOTT

Eamon de Valera escaped from Lincoln Jail on 3 February 1919 and when the remaining ‘German Plot’ prisoners were released in March 1919, the President of the Dáil was able to return to Ireland without danger of arrest. He presided at a meeting of Dáil Éireann on 10 April 1919 at which the assembly confirmed a policy of boycotting against the RIC.

THE RIC ARE “SPIES IN OUR MIDS… THE EYES AND EARS OF THE ENEMY … THEY MUST BE SHOWN AND MADE TO FEEL HOW BASE ARE THE FUNCTIONS THEY PERFORM AND HOW VILE IS THE POSITION THEY OCCUPY”.

- Eamon de Valera (Dáil Debates, vol. F, no. 6, col. 67)

This ‘social war’ first initiated by republicans in 1917, succeeded in driving a wedge between the RIC and the community and prepared the ground for the actual war that was waged against the force from early 1920.

-Document A -

Brighid O’Mullane, Cumann na mBan Organiser, 1917-1923

In 1919, owing to the officiousness of the local police in supplying information to the British military, Cumann na mBan decided to have an extra activity, namely, the social ostracism of the police throughout the country.

This I put into operation by getting the Cumann na mBan girls to refuse to dance with, or even to greet the police on the street, and further, to encourage shopkeepers to have no business dealings with them. I even got mothers to pull in their children from the doorways of the houses when the policemen were passing. This turned out to be a most effective method of preventing the police from supplying the British army with information.
The RIC was poorly prepared for the conflict. In 1919 the police force did not have the equipment, the training or the young men it needed to fight a guerrilla war. Their distinctive uniforms made them conspicuous and their barracks were often located in isolated rural areas. After a series of sporadic, unsuccessful attacks on police barracks in the second half of 1919, the RIC inspector general ordered the closure of the more vulnerable police stations. The police force was concentrated in more heavily fortified barracks that were better protected against rebel attacks.

As the number of violent incidents gradually increased, the British authorities introduced Special Military Areas where all public meetings were banned. Nonetheless, the RIC who were predominately Irishmen, became demoralised and less effective against the IRA. Many resigned or retired and the strength of the force declined steadily until the autumn of 1920.

THE INTELLIGENCE WAR

The ‘intelligence war’ was one of the most important military aspects of the Irish War of Independence. As IRA Director of Intelligence, Michael Collins built up an effective spy network which included Ned Broy, a member of G Division - an intelligence-gathering unit of plain-clothes Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) detectives. Collins’ intelligence sources also included policemen, clerical staff, typists, waiters, hotel porters, post office staff, bar staff, railway officials and journalists.

Collins established a Volunteers General Headquarters (GHQ) Intelligence Department with offices at 3 Crow Street, only about 200 yards from Dublin Castle. Its personnel monitored British agents and spies, kept records on enemy personnel and monitored their telephone, telegraph and postal communications. Collins’ assistant Joe O’Reilly, called twice a day to collect reports and deliver instructions.

THE SQUAD

Having familiarised himself with the British intelligence system, Collins began eliminating its most prominent officers. In the summer of 1919, he established a special unit of full-time gunmen from Dick McKee’s Dublin Brigade, IRA. The ‘Squad’ established a secret headquarters in a building disguised as Moreland’s Cabinetmakers, Upholsterers and Builders in Upper Abbey Street.

On 30 July 1919 Squad members assassinated their first ‘G’-man, Detective Sergeant Patrick Smyth. This was followed on 11 September by the assassination of Detective Sergeant Daniel Hoey. On the same day, the Dáil was declared a dangerous assembly and soon afterwards Collins went on the run, the Dáil government departments were forced underground, and the British government suppressed Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers. The year ended with the Squad’s failed attempt on the life of Lord French at Ashtown railway station.

On 21 January 1920 the new Assistant Commissioner of the police, William Redmond, was shot dead and a reward of £10,000 was offered for the information about the perpetrators of violent attacks on Irish policemen in 1919.
From 1 January when 1920, when IRA General Headquarters (GHQ) officially approved offensive action against Crown Forces, the intensity of activities IRA increased all over the country. Unlike IRA operations during 1919, which consisted mainly of arms seizures and attacks on individual policemen, the new year marked the commencement of an all-out assault on the Royal Irish Constabulary.

At Easter 1920, to coincide with the anniversary of the 1916 Rising, IRA GHQ ordered a major mobilisation for a concerted nationwide assault on vacated police barracks, courthouses and taxation offices. Over 300 buildings were destroyed on the night of 3-4 April 1920. By the end of the year, 533 police barracks were destroyed, of which twenty-three had been in use when attacked.

Raids and arrests became more frequent and curfew was introduced. However, some police began resorting to violence outside the law. On 20 January 1920, after an RIC constable was wounded in Thurles, County Tipperary, his comrades rioted, firing in the streets and smashing the windows of buildings belonging to prominent local republicans.

On 20 March 1920, after the Volunteers had killed three RIC constables in three days in Cork city, Lord Mayor Tomás MacCurtain was shot dead in his own home in Blackpool, almost certainly by the police. The conflict was made more bitter by such acts and the reprisals that followed.

**BRITISH COUNTER-OFFENSIVE**

By this time the British government was taking steps to reinforce the demoralised RIC. In December 1919, it initiated a recruitment campaign in Britain aimed at young ex-servicemen with military skills and experience.

Due to a shortage of the dark bottle-green RIC uniform, the new RIC recruits were uniformed in a mixture of police and military clothing; in some cases they wore military trousers and tunic with a policeman’s cap and belt. Within a few months they were nicknamed ‘Black and Tans’, most likely after a famous pack of foxhounds in County Tipperary.

The Black and Tans began to arrive in Ireland in March 1920. They were most numerous in the south, where the fighting was fiercest and police casualties and resignations had been the highest. Like their Irish comrades the Black and Tans also soon became associated with unofficial reprisals.

The Black and Tans were supplemented in July by the new Auxiliary Division of the RIC. The elite corps of ex-British Army officers were paid twice as much as the cadets and the Auxiliary companies were heavily armed with light machine guns and repeating shotguns as well as service rifles and revolvers.
Auxiliary companies were also full motorised, with touring cars for officers, Crossley Tenders (light-duty trucks) for their men, and even armoured cars. They wore distinctive khaki and black uniforms topped with a tam-o-shanter bonnet. The Auxiliary Division soon gained a reputation for harsh treatment of civilians, assassinating known and suspected revolutionaries and burning the homes and shops of their supporters.

**In its attempts to stamp out the ‘murder gang’ in Ireland, the British government had created uniformed gangs of its own, who fought what was, in effect, a political gang war with the IRA until the Truce of July 1921.**


Prior to 1920, direct attacks by the IRA were focused on the RIC and the British Army remained on the sidelines of the conflict. However, as the RIC required greater support, the military presence in Ireland increased. Troops began to take over large local buildings such as workhouses and other public buildings and by the summer of 1920 the IRA and the British army were engaged in a bloody guerrilla war.

By this point it was clear to the newly-appointed Chief Secretary, Sir Hamar Greenwood, and the Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in Ireland, General Sir Nevil Macready, that British authority in Ireland was becoming less effective. On 9 August 1920 the government introduced the **Restoration of Order in Ireland Act**, which gave Dublin Castle the power to govern by regulation. Mass arrests, internment, deportations, courts martial, curfews and executions were implemented as the military situation deteriorated.
THE IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY (IRA)

Nearly every community in Ireland contained an Irish Republican Army (IRA) presence. Some IRA units - frustrated by a lack of arms and ammunition - were largely inactive. Others, particularly those in southern Munster, created sophisticated guerrilla organisations.

In theory, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was commanded by a General Headquarters (GHQ) staff in Dublin. In reality, most IRA brigades governed their own areas with little direct oversight. GHQ offered encouragement and unity to the underground army, especially through the distribution of its journal An t-Óglach edited by Piaras Béaslai.

IRA Chief of Staff Richard Mulcahy oversaw the directors of ten departments including Intelligence, Organisation, Training, Publicity and Engineering, Purchasing, Munitions, and Chemicals. Expertise about bomb building and road destruction was distributed across the organisation, while Michael Collins' intelligence department passed on relevant information to provincial units.

Many of the IRA were not armed due to the short supply of guns. They relied on other weapons such as stealth, resourcefulness, patience and discipline. They were engaged in felling trees or digging trenches to block off roads, scouting and carrying dispatches. Different brigades produced landmines, bombs and hand grenades.

Volunteers with a knowledge of engineering and explosives prepared and planted land mines at strategic points and supervised bridge destruction.

FLYING COLUMNS & GUERILLA TACTICS

After the introduction of the 'Restoration of Order in Ireland Act' in August 1920, more and more IRA men were forced to leave their homes and go 'on the run' to avoid arrest. These fugitive Volunteers banded together for safety and became the nucleus of elite IRA active service units, or 'flying columns'.

"WHAT WE HAD IN MIND WAS AN EFFICIENT, DISCIPLINED, COMPACT AND SWIFT-MOVING BODY OF MEN WHICH WOULD STRIKE AT THE ENEMY WHERE AND WHEN A SUITABLE OPPORTUNITY AROSE."

- Donal O'Hannigan, 'Origin of the Flying Column,' An Cosantóir 6:12 (1946) -

Flying columns were composed of young, full-time, armed Volunteers available for joint operations with local IRA units. After the first columns were formed in Limerick in the summer of 1920, IRA GHQ quickly recognised the military potential of their hit and run ambush tactics and in August encouraged the organisation of additional columns across the country.

Led by men such as Tom Barry, Liam Lynch and Ernie O'Malley, IRA ‘flying columns’ and local IRA units engaged in highly effective form of guerrilla warfare.
Republican Women

Cumann na mBan played an important role as an auxiliary to the Irish Volunteers during the War of Independence. Less likely to be searched by police, female dispatch carriers transported messages from General Headquarters (GHQ) to regional brigades and between Volunteer units. Postmistresses who were in Cumann na mBan played an especially important role in interrupting communications intended for the police and military, and by warning the local IRA of the Crown-forces’ plans.

The women of Cumann na mBan also assisted in the acquisition, storage and transportation of armaments and offered their homes as safe houses for Volunteers on the run. Their training in first aid was valuable in treating Volunteers who were wounded in engagements with Crown Forces.

Cumann na mBan also continued its political work during the period from 1919 to 1921, including advertising and collecting for the Dáil Loan and participating in the Dáil’s boycott of the RIC. When republican funerals, executions, and hunger strikes became more common in the second stage of the War of Independence, republican women frequently organised prayer vigils as a form of public protest. At a time when the Crown forces aggressively dispersed civilian demonstrations, these vigils created a safe space to express messages of solidarity and defiance.

As the conflict progressed, the authorities became more aware of the extent of women’s involvement and they were more likely to be searched, arrested and imprisoned. Approximately forty-six women were imprisoned for republican-related activities in early 1921. Cumann na mBan members also suffered non-judicial repercussions for their actions, such as having their hair cut off.

At the time of the Truce in mid-1921 Cumann na mBan had an approximate membership of 18,000.
REPRISALS

One of the first major reprisals occurred when the Crown forces terrorised the inhabitants of the town of Tuam in Co. Galway. The killing of two RIC constables – Patrick Carey and James Burke – in an ambush at Newtown Darcy, about three miles from Tuam, on 19 July 1920 resulted in a police reprisal in the early hours of the following morning that saw indiscriminate firing and widespread looting and burning of property in Tuam town. In August 1920, Black and Tans burned the Town Hall, Market Hall and the Urban District Offices in Templemore, County Tipperary after the assassination of a Dis-Trict Inspector.

On September 20, Head Constable Peter Burke was shot dead by the IRA in a pub in Balbriggan, Co. Dublin. Two hours later, a party of Auxiliaries arrived from Gormanstown depot. For five hours, they ran riot in the town. One of their first acts of reprisal was to burn down the hosiery factory, the principal employer in the area. Houses were cleared of inhabitants and burned to the ground. The invaders took John Gibbon out of his house into the street, where they shot and bayoneted him. They also seized James Lawless and took him to the local police barracks, where he was killed.

The capture of Mallow Barracks by a small force of the IRA's Cork No. 2 Brigade led by Liam Lynch on the evening of 27 September 1920, sparked a British reprisal that devastated Mallow town. On the same evening in Trim, County Meath, up to 200 Black and Tans burned homes and business premises owned by suspected republicans as a reprisal for an IRA attack on the town's RIC barracks. The Irish White Cross allocated £277 in relief funds to the town in 1921.

A spate of IRA attacks in Kerry from late October to early November 1920, in which the IRA killed fourteen constables, resulted in the 'Siege of Tralee' - a series of reprisals and burnings of public buildings and business premises. Attacks on property peaked in November–December 1920, when 180 such incidents were recorded, culminating in the burning of Cork city on 11 December 1920. After a rebel grenade attack in Dillon's Cross left one Auxiliary dead and eleven wounded, Auxiliary cadets set fire to part of Cork city centre, damaging or destroying over eighty commercial premises, as well as City Hall and the Carnegie Library.

Reprisals finally became official policy at the end of December 1920 when the British army's military governors began imposing them on districts that were under martial law. The first official reprisal occurred at Midleton, east Cork on 29 December 1920, when six houses were destroyed following an IRA ambush. In the first two months of 'official reprisals' in 1921 Dáil Éireann Publicity Department recorded seventy-nine attacks on property.
MUNITIONS STRIKE

The munitions strike which began in Dublin Port in May 1920, was the most significant example of non-violent resistance during the War of Independence. Dock workers and rail workers refused to handle or to operate trains carrying munitions of war or armed troops and police. The strike seriously disrupted the movements of supplies and troops forcing them onto Ireland’s roads where they were more vulnerable to attack. The railway companies, under war-time government control since December 1916, dismissed workers and closed some Irish railway lines. When the British government threatened to close the entire railway system, a special conference organised by the ITGWU in November 1920 called off the strike.

TERENCE MACSWINEY AND KEVIN BARRY

The war moved into a more ferocious stage in late 1920 with the execution of eighteen-year-old medical student, Kevin Barry and the death of Terence MacSwiney in Brixton Prison, London on 25 October 1920 after 74 days on hunger strike.

On 20 September 1920 young IRA member, Kevin Barry was captured with a pistol in his hand after an attack on a military party drawing provisions from a bakery in Church Street, Dublin. Three soldiers were killed and on 1 November, Barry became the first Volunteer to be executed under the provisions of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act. Sinn Fein actively publicised the execution to gain sympathy for the republican cause.

Playwright, IRA commander and member of the first Dáil, Terence MacSwiney succeeded Tomás Mac Curtain as republican lord mayor of Cork in March 1920. Imprisoned in August on charges of sedition, MacSwiney embarked on a hunger strike which lasted for seventy-four days. Newspapers all over the world carried information on his deteriorating health sparking riots on the streets of Barcelona and a dockworkers strike in New York. Attempts by the British authorities to suppress MacSwiney’s funeral in Ireland only drew further attention to one of the watershed events of the War of Independence.

THE DÁIL PUBLICITY DEPARTMENT

In the context of harsh press censorship under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), the Irish Bulletin, produced by the Dáil’s Publicity Department under Desmond Fitzgerald, was the most important organ of republican publicity during the War of Independence. The daily news sheet, first published on 11 November 1919, highlighted the ‘acts of aggression’ by the police and military in Ireland, and defended IRA attacks on the Crown forces as a war against ‘illegal forces of occupation’.

By 1921, foreign language editions of the Bulletin were being produced to cater for its popularity in Europe where it had gained a reputation as a trusted source. The news-sheet had decisive effect on British and international public opinion in relation to the Irish conflict. Dublin Castle’s Weekly Summary launched in May 1920, responded by attacking the IRA as a ‘murder gang’ and always insisting that the rebels were on the verge of defeat.
November 1920 proved a turning point in the Irish War of Independence. After the events of Bloody Sunday in Dublin and the Kilmichael ambush in Cork (in which seventeen members of the RIC's Auxiliary Division were killed), the hostilities could no longer be defined as simply a police action. It was a military conflict.

**BLOODY SUNDAY**

Michael Collins received information that a group of Secret Service officers known as the 'Cairo Gang' had been sent to Dublin to eliminate the IRA Intelligence network. With GHQ approval, Dick McKee and Peadar Clancy were put in charge of the task of 'eliminating' the British agents. Despite the arrest of Clancy and McKee, it was agreed that the planned mission would go ahead on the morning of Sunday 21 November 1920. Just after nine o'clock, separate IRA assassination teams simultaneously struck various locations in Dublin and 'executed' eleven suspected British agents.

That afternoon, Crown forces opened fire on the crowd during a challenge football match between Dublin and Tipperary in Croke Park killing fourteen civilians and the injuring of a further sixty-four. That night Dick McKee and Peadar Clancy and an innocent man called Conor Clune were shot dead in Dublin Castle.

**THE KILMICHAEL AMBUSH**

Perhaps the most notorious of the ambushes during the War of Independence occurred halfway between Dunmanway and Macroom on Sunday, 28 November 1920. At a place called Kilmichael, the flying column of the West Cork Brigade commanded by twenty-three-year-old Tom Barry ambushed and killed seventeen of the eighteen Auxiliaries under RIC District Inspector Francis Crake.

Tom Barry maintained that the Auxiliaries pretended to surrender at one point during the engagement, before resuming the fight. This deception, he said, cost the lives of two of his men who broke cover and the treachery prompted him to take no prisoners. Barry’s critics have suggested that he concocted the false surrender to justify a premeditated massacre. Whatever happened amidst the fog of war, reprisals quickly followed.

**MARTIAL LAW**

Martial Law was subsequently proclaimed in counties Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary on 10 December 1920, - two days before Auxiliaries set fire part to Cork city centre. Martial Law was proclaimed in four more counties – Clare, Waterford, Kilkenny and Wexford – on 29 and 30 December. A system of official reprisals was also introduced in the south-western counties of Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary in December 1920.

A small body of assassins, a real murder gang, dominate the country and terrorise it... it is essential in the interests of Ireland [that] that gang should be broken up .... we have murder by the throat.

- House of Commons, Prime Minister’ Lloyd George’s Statement, 9 Oct 1920 -

Two-tier Military Courts were established in the Martial Law Area (MLA). The Summary Court dealt with less serious cases, trying 2,296 people and imposing 549 sentences of imprisonment. The upper tier was responsible for major offenses against Martial Law. It tried just 128 people between late December 1920 and the Truce in July 1921, sentencing thirty-seven men to death. Fourteen of these men were executed. Military Court trials were held at Victoria Barracks, Cork, New Barracks, Limerick and Waterford Barracks.
PHASE III: JAN 1921 - JULY 1921

The final phase of the war began in early 1921 as the increased British military presence and their military tactics, as well as continuing arms shortages, undermined the capacity of the IRA to perform demanding operations. GHQ's advice was to carry out a larger number of smaller operations requiring fewer weapons and posing less risk to Volunteers. The fighting intensified on both sides with more ambushes and executions.

THE DROMKEEN AMBUSH

After two disastrous months during which twelve Volunteers died, the IRA in Limerick staged the Dromkeen ambush - one of the most decisive IRA actions in the War of Independence. About fifty men from the Mid-Limerick Brigade and East Limerick Brigade active service units carried out the joint operation under the overall command of Donnchadh O'Hannigan. Eleven policemen were killed at Dromkeen - second only to Kilmichael in the number of confirmed British fatalities - and no Volunteers were lost. The policy from the outset was to take no prisoners and two policemen were killed after their surrender.

CLONFIN, CO LONGFORD

County Longford was one of the most violent counties during the War of Independence. Sinn Féin’s victory in the Longford South by-election in May 1917, was the catalyst for the emergence of a strong republican movement, politically and militarily, in the county. The Longford IRA’s most successful engagement with Crown forces was at an ambush at Clonfin, between Granard and Ballinalee, on 2 February 1921, which resulted in the deaths of four Auxiliaries.

CROSSBARRY, CO CORK

On 19 March 1921, acting on reliable intelligence on the location of IRA brigade headquarters, Crown Forces organised an extensive sweep of the area between Bandon and Cork City. Tom Barry orchestrated a bold fighting retreat, inflicting at least ten fatalities on the enemy, while suffering three. This event at Crossbarry, were the closest to a conventional battle in the whole of the Anglo-Irish war.

THE ARMY OF THE IRISH REPUBLIC

In March 1921, in response to the continued British insistence that the IRA was an undisciplined ‘murder gang’, the Dáil clarified that the IRA had been fighting on its behalf and assumed responsibility for the actions of the Volunteers up to that point. In April, de Valera told a newspaper correspondent:

“FROM THE IRISH VOLUNTEERS WE FASHIONED THE IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY TO BE THE MILITARY ARM OF THE GOVERNMENT ... THE GOVERNMENT, THEREFORE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTIONS OF THIS ARMY.”

- Eamon de Valera, April 1921-

TOURMAKEADY, CO MAYO

The ‘Battle of Tourmakeady’, as it became known, was one of the most famous episodes of the War of Independence. On 3 May 1921, an RIC/Black and Tan patrol was ambushed by IRA volunteers in the village of Tourmakeady. Four policemen were killed in the attack with the IRA column taking to the nearby Partry Mountains in the aftermath. The ambush conferred legendary status on the leader of the IRA flying column, the late Commandant Tom Maguire.
THE SECOND DÁIL

The Government of Ireland Act came into force on the day before Eamon de Valera’s return from America to Dublin on Christmas eve 1920. The Act partitioned Ireland along the same lines set out by Lloyd George in 1916 and provided for two Home Rule governments in Ireland. One in Dublin for twenty-six counties and one in Belfast for six north-eastern counties where unionists formed an electoral majority. Provisions were made for the eventual unification of Ireland, but only when, and if, the unionists wanted it. Despite the fact that the act implemented partition, the Dáil and the IRA were still determined to continue fighting for an All-Ireland Republic completely independent from Britain.

Under the terms of the Act an election was held in the twenty-six counties on 19 May 1921 to return members to the Parliament of Southern Ireland. The Dáil rejected the Government of Ireland Act, but decided to use the election arrangements to return members for the second Dáil. Unopposed in 124 of the 128 new constituencies, Sinn Fein swept the boards.

Six days later an election was held in the six counties for the Parliament of Northern Ireland. Unionists won 40 out of 52 seats while Sinn Fein candidates won 6 seats. Sinn Feiners elected in both elections now formed the second Dáil which maintained itself as a parliament of an All-Ireland Republic.

BURNING OF THE CUSTOM HOUSE

Conscious of the criticisms leveled against the IRA, de Valera called for a more conventional military campaign. If not large set-piece battles, then at least something other than ambushes and assassinations. The result was the attack on the Customs House on 25 May 1921.

As the seat of British local government in Ireland, the Custom House was a symbolic target. The burning was carried out by a Dublin IRA party of over 100, overseen by OC of the Dublin Brigade, Oscar Traynor. It proved impossible to set fire to the building and evacuate it before British forces arrived on the scene. Five IRA men died, and dozens were amongst the over one hundred suspects arrested by the Crown Forces. Both the ASU and the Dublin’s 2nd Battalion were seriously weakened as a result and the surviving activists amalgamated into the Dublin Guard.

CALLS FOR A TRUCE

In February 1921 Brigadier-General Crozier commanding the Auxiliaries resigned and made public his disgust with government policy in Ireland. At the Commonwealth Conference in June, the South African Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, persuaded Lloyd George to invite de Valera to London for talks. A breakthrough in negotiations came from an unlikely source. On 22 June King George V opened the Northern Irish Parliament and made a plea for peace:

I appeal to all Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation and to join in making for the land which they love a new era of peace, contentment and good will...

-King George V, 22 June 1921-

Following this plea, Lloyd George proposed a meeting in London. De Valera accepted and the Anglo-Irish Truce came into operation on 11 July 1921. The fighting was over, but an equally difficult battle was about to begin around the conference table.