

Irish Soldiers (Nationalists and Unionists) in World War I

Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow.

II. Why did these men join up?

Home Rule had been the aspiration of Irish nationalists for fifty years and, finally, in 1914 it appeared that the deed was done. On 18 September 1914 the third Irish Home Rule Bill became law, although its operation was suspended for the duration of the war. On 20 September John Redmond made a celebrated speech at Woodenbridge, county Wicklow, in which he said that 'the interests of Ireland, of the whole of Ireland, are at stake in this war'.

'This war is undertaken in defence of the highest interests of religion and morality and right, and it would be a disgrace for ever to our country, a reproach to her manhood, and a denial of the lessons of her history if young Ireland confined their efforts to remaining at home to defend the shores of Ireland from an unlikely invasion, and shrinking from the duty of proving on the field of battle that gallantry and courage which have distinguished their race all through its history.'

Stirring words indeed, and words which clearly found a response among many young Irishmen.

Another factor was a simple desire for *adventure*. For many at home the war offered excitement and the chance of glorious opportunity. Tom Barry, later to become a leader of the IRA in Cork, enlisted in June 1915. Seventeen years old, he said he

'Had decided to see what this Great War was like ... I went to the war for no other reason than that I wanted to see what war was like, to get a gun, to see new countries and to feel like a grown man.'

And if Irish nationalists were responding to their '*patriotic duty*' as articulated by John Redmond, so Irish unionists, too, in Ulster and elsewhere, also joined up for patriotic reasons. Having pledged their loyalty to the Crown and the link with Great Britain, they could hardly stand back when the 'Mother Country' was in its hour of need.

'We do not seek to purchase terms by selling our patriotism', said Carson. 'England's difficulty is our difficulty.'

There were also *economic motives* for joining up, as there always had been. Service in the army, after all, was a steady job, and one with a pension at the end. Even in wartime, with the heightened risks of military service, many men were undoubtedly attracted by the rates of pay which the military offered (and the family allowances which accompanied them). The August 1914 rush to the colours was also boosted by the fact that across Ulster many factories laid men off, or put them on short time, when war broke out because of uncertainties in the economic situation. Irish linen mills specialised in the quality end of the market—fine table and bedlinen, high quality shirting and so on—just the sort of products which people might stop buying (as they did) because there 'was a war on'. Export markets in continental Europe and the USA were disrupted. Thus, just at the moment when there was a stirring and insistent call for troops, many workers were put out of a job, evidently making enlistment more attractive than might otherwise have been the case.

Some men enlisted through *family tradition*, for others it was merely a kind of *emigration*, though one which was not necessarily so permanent as going to America. Looking especially at big urban centres like Belfast, it is also evident that many men joined up in groups, with '*peer pressure*' carrying them into the army with friends and work mates. By one account, Francis Ledwidge, the poet from Slane (and a socialist and nationalist), enlisted 'on the rebound' from being rejected by a sweetheart. Whether true or not, it adds another possibility to the wide range of motivations to joining up.

Where did they serve?

The 10th Division was the first to see action. In August 1915 it landed at Suvla Bay in Gallipoli in Turkey. By the end of 1915, the division had been moved to Macedonia, and in 1917 to Egypt and Palestine. In November 1917 they fought in the battle of Gaza and participated in the capture of Jerusalem in December that year.

The 16th (Irish) Division and the 36th (Ulster) fought on the Western Front, in places more familiar to us. The most famous engagement they were involved in was, of course, the Ulster Division at the battle of the Somme, where they suffered appalling casualties on the first day, 1 July 1916. This was the first major battle they were involved in. The 16th Division had, in fact, gone into action before the 36th. In April 1916, during the same week as the Easter Rising in Dublin, they had suffered a bad gas attack at Hulluch, north of the Somme. The 16th Division also took part in the Somme battle itself, though not until September 1916. Both divisions fought together, sometimes alongside each other, at the battle of Messines in June 1917 and at Langemarck, part of the battle of Passchendaele, in August 1917. The following spring both divisions fought against the great German offensive in March 1918, which proved to be the last big German attack of the war.

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The war and remembrance.

John Redmond claimed that *'Ireland's highest interests' lay 'in the speedy and overwhelming victory of England and the Allies'*.

'North and South', he added, *'have vied with each other in springing to arms, and, please God, the sacrifices they have made side by side on the field of battle will form the surest bond of a united Irish nation in the future'*.

Irish soldiers returned home to a more definitively nationalist Ireland, where many hearts had been thrilled by the valour of the men of 1916, there was no triumphant welcome home. It was as Tom Kettle, a former nationalist MP who was killed on the Somme serving with the 16th Division, had predicted.

'These men' (the 1916 leaders), he wrote, 'will go down in history as heroes and martyrs; and I will go down—if I go down at all—as a bloody British officer'.

So it was to be. Many veterans returning to nationalist areas met grudging acceptance, hostility, or even physical violence. For all of them the high public honour and celebration with which they had departed contrasted sharply with the changed circumstances of their return.

For Unionists, from the early 1920s annual 1 July parades were staged to mark the Somme anniversary. There were Ulster Division memorial services, and after the Lurgan war memorial was completed in 1928, wreaths were laid at it on 1 July as well as 11 November. Orange banners quickly emerged with illustrations showing the 'First day of the Battle of the Somme'.

Source:

<https://www.gub.ac.uk/sites/irishhistorylive/IrishHistoryResources/Articlesandlecturesbyourteachingstaff/IrelandandtheFirstWorldWar/>

- 1. Make a list of the reasons men joined the British Army to fight in World War I?**
- 2. Why do you think Redmond encouraged the Irish Volunteers to go fight for the British in WWI?**
- 3. Why might Irish recruitment into the British army have become sluggish after 1916?**
- 4. Why might the National Volunteers involvement in WWI have helped the separatist movement in Ireland?**
- 5. Write a paragraph on how Irish soldiers in WWI affected the political landscape in Ireland in relation to Home Rule.**

Remember: WWI caused a split in the IVF; those that supported Redmond became known as the National Volunteers and those that supported O'Neill remained the IVF.