

The 'Decade of Centenaries' All Island History Competition for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2021/2022

*Post-Primary Category*

Women during the revolutionary period in Ireland:

“Violence and Sexual Violence against women during the Irish War of Independence & Civil War”

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## Violence and Sexual Violence against women during the Irish War of Independence & Civil War.

“During armed conflicts, women’s bodies became battlefields” (S1, P.1).

This statement undoubtedly relates to the atrocities against women during Ireland’s revolutionary period. Across Ireland, many people generally associate the Irish War of Independence and Civil War with military conflict predominantly involving men. Although women also played a significant role during this time, they are often overlooked – much like the gender-based violence which they experienced. Due to the stigma attached to this conversation and the reluctance of society in Ireland to discuss such matters, this topic is unfortunately largely unexplored. However, in Ireland’s decade of centenaries, these women deserve to be written back into the events of this period as enough information has been discovered to prove that these outrages were not rare within the female population of our country.

Following the War of Independence and Civil War Irish society was “stained with violence and remained bitterly divided long after hostilities ended in 1923” (S5, P.1). There is no doubt that women were not as likely as men to be imprisoned or executed but they were considerably more likely than men to be subjected to sexual assault. Evidence suggests that women were “labelled, humiliated, disciplined, stigmatised, controlled, hurt and even killed in different ways throughout this period, through the symbolic and physical realm of their bodies and sexuality” (S1, P.8). Unfortunately, this violence was carried out by both the Crown forces and IRA in an effort to assert their dominance over the female population in Ireland. Parallels can certainly be drawn with today’s society in Ireland where rape still goes under reported or not reported at all. This is due to the reluctance of Irish people to discuss such matters. During the revolutionary years sexual violence was seen as a punishment rather than a crime itself. Irish women dreaded night-time particularly as they “knew that it was during curfew hours, attempts of a sexual nature had been made” (S4, P.2). It was reported that the British army conducted approximately 48,000 raids on private Irish homes during 1920 alone (S3, 11:00) This caused feelings of anxiety, fear and depression among women.

Outrages were conducted to shame women who were seen to be “keeping company with the enemy” (S4, P.1). The sexual assaults which were recorded were “framed as fraternising women *culpable* in their violation rather than Irish women as *victims* of rape as a weapon of war” (S1 P.7). Here lies a big issue surrounding this topic as the people who carried out these atrocities believed that their punishment was fair when it ruined victims' lives. The female Republican group Cumann na mBan had over 800 branches throughout the country by 1921. The members of this group were passionate about the cause for Irish freedom. Many of these activists wrote, “autobiographical accounts of their war-time experiences” (S2, P.77), as they were more “confident, assertive and highly literate” (S2, P.77). It is because of these powerful and determined women that we have primary sources from this time that recount incidents that they experienced. Without these sources, sexual violence wouldn't have been explored as an element of the revolutionary period in Ireland.

It is important to note that assaults of a sexual nature were carried out by both the Crown Forces and the IRA, often to boost their masculinity. Hypocrisy is evident here as either side wanted to depict the enemy as disrespectful and unmanly when in reality, both sides were equally to blame in these case scenarios. Attacks carried out by the British can be interpreted as “an assault on Irish masculinity, undermining the ability of Irish men to defend their home or their families” (S2 P80). Due to the fact that most IRA men were ‘on the run,’ their homes would have been seen to be unprotected and an easy target. This would have weakened the morale of Republican men who were so invested in the cause for independence that they couldn't be present to protect their loved ones.

A common theme among the reports of British raids was that the soldiers were often intoxicated and “images of the ‘drunken Tan’ dominate accounts of military raids and reprisals” (S2, P.82). Kathleen Clarke, the wife of revolutionary Thomas Clarke, had her home raided regularly due to her involvement in Sinn Féin and the republican movement. She described one particular raid by the Black and Tans involving “seven men, all drunk” (S2, P.81). One soldier was so drunk that he could only keep himself standing by resting his rifle on Clarke's chest (S2, P.81). There is no doubt that the mention of the words ‘Black and Tans’ still impacts people in Ireland today, with mainly negative connotations. In Dan Breen's memoirs of the war, he noted that “the words Black and Tans have become a symbol of terrorism” (S2, P.82).

An example of an attack carried out by the British was discovered by historian Ann Matthews as she read through revolutionary period archives. Members of the Crown Forces dragged Wexford woman Mary Kelly through fields far away from her home. The officer proceeded to produce a revolver that belonged to her Republican brother whom he had shot dead (S3, 9:45). Another case described as “fairly typical” (S2, P.79) explains how a woman’s home was entered by masked men who cut off her hair in the middle of the night. The victim named as Miss Babe Hogan was secretary of the local Cumann na mBan, which may have been the reason she was targeted.

Nonetheless, assaults of this nature were not only carried out by the British. There was a stigma surrounding Irish men who were deemed “too moral to be capable of sexual violence” (S3, 13:35) however, we know this isn’t the case due to the incidents reported at the time in question. Following the revolution, only stories of atrocities carried out by the British forces were allowed to be mentioned. A noticeable pattern is seen in assaults conducted by the IRA. They repeatedly threatened or assaulted women who were seen to be fraternising with the enemy, who were the British soldiers in the case of the War of Independence. One of Eoin O Duffy’s Deputy Commissioners at the time described these women as the “pro-British women of Ireland” (S1, P.7) who “made heroes of their soldiers and ... fools of themselves” (S1, P.7). These ‘punishments’ were used as tools to control so-called ‘deviant’ women in an attempt to warn others not to associate themselves with the British. In terms of the Civil War, the Regulars and Irregulars “carried out such attacks on women who were both on the same and the opposite ‘side’ to them” (S5, P.5).

A frequent method of assault used by both sides, but mainly the IRA, was hair cutting. In ways, this was used as “a sexual policing of women’s bodies for fraternising with the wrong people” (S7). Reports reveal that between 1919 and 1923 six hair-cutting incidents were conducted by British forces, Miss Babe Hogan included, whereas thirty-one “can be attributed to the IRA/Volunteers/Nationalists” (S4, P.6). Haircutting was not only used as a form of punishment but also as a way to humiliate and degrade the woman involved. As Linda Connolly noted, “a woman could ostensibly conceal a wartime rape but not visible cropped hair” (S5, P.3). She would be clearly marked for all to see and for other women to feel threatened that the same could happen to them if they didn’t conform to society’s expectations. One perpetrator reportedly said, “we will make Irish girls have nothing to do with Ireland’s sworn enemies” (S4, P.6). As long hair

is predominately associated with women and is often a symbol of sexual attraction “the shearing of women bears an explicit gendered, if not sexual connotation” (S1, P.12). These assaults were often carried out in isolated areas during the night to prevent interference. For example, Eileen Barker “had her head shaved at gunpoint by members of the IRA” at night because she allowed British troops to stay in her hotel (S1, P.12), despite this possibly being her only source of income at the time.

Despite there being little reason for the reticent women of Ireland to publicise their ordeals, oftentimes their male counterparts felt as though it would be important to highlight their enemies’ acts of brutality. For this reason, cases of sexual assault and rape were used as propaganda to depict the enemy as immoral. The Irish Bulletin was the official gazette of the Irish Government, produced during the War of Independence by the Department of Propaganda. The attacks on women served as a perfect example for the Bulletin to highlight the brutality of the British forces in Ireland. Erskine Childers published an article entitled ‘Military Rule in Ireland: What it Means to Women’ to make the British public aware of the conditions in Ireland at the hands of British soldiers (S2, P.85).

In this article, Childers outlines how British raids on Irish homes were a ‘chief feature’ of hardship for women and children at the time (S.8). Cases are discussed where husbands were arrested based on suspicion and not actual evidence. They were brought to England for little reason while their wives remained at home with the children. He believed that the women of England, who were entitled to vote, should have tried to stop this brutality stating, “women of England, you have votes and power: this is *your* responsibility” (S.8). Childers ends his article with a stark statement; “This is not civilised war” (S.8). However, in 1921 British authorities responded to allegations that soldiers were intentionally targeting Irish women. General Peter Strickland - the officer commanding the [6th Division](#) in Ireland, stated that “the Army was not making a war on women, soldiers never interfered with women, unless they had direct evidence against them” (S2, P.86).

Even if British soldiers had incriminating evidence against an Irish woman, it is still under no circumstances a reason to sexually assault her. It is unsettling that “the need to publicize the brutality of the adversary sometimes outweighed the need to protect female reticence and innocence” (S2, P.90). To me, this highlights how the government

only cared about sexual violence against women when it was benefiting them to make Irish men look better. This is also hypocritical as it indicated that sexual assault was okay for Irish men to use as a punishment but not for British men when the reality is that rape and sexual assault are never okay. One is again reminded of the secondary position of women in Ireland in the early 20th century.

Being from Tipperary, it felt right to tell the stories of the women of my county who experienced this violence. Kate Maher, aged 45 and a mother of 1, was found murdered in Dundrum on the 21st of December 1920 having spent the evening with a group of British soldiers in the local pub. The cause of death was a fracture at the base of her skull. Despite there being evidence of extensive vaginal wounds, nobody was found guilty of her assault and murder (S1, P.19). On June 22nd, 1922, 5 local anti-treaty IRA men proceeded to gang-rape a Protestant landowner near Dromineer. This attack on Eileen 'Harriet' Biggs was publicised in newspapers at the time and referred to by Churchill in a speech at the House of Commons. Eileen was 'outraged' on 8 or 9 occasions while her husband was helplessly locked in a room beside her. The motive for this attack is unclear but it may be because of her family's militarism, or her brothers' involvement with the '5th Battalion, Royal Dublin Fusiliers' during 1916 (S.9). Following this horrific event, Eileen's physical and mental health never recovered, and she passed away in a psychiatric hospital in 1950.

What is most disheartening about this case is the treatment of one of the apparent perpetrators, a member of the 1st Tipperary Brigade, Captain Martin Hogan who fled Tipperary after the publication of the incident. Hogan was shot dead in 1923 and "to this day he is commemorated heroically on two dedicated monuments in his honour... Eileen Biggs, in contrast, is buried in an unmarked grave" (S5, P.6). This comparison speaks volumes about how sexual violence was overlooked in Ireland at this time and how the men of the revolution were placed on a pedestal despite the crimes they may have committed.

There are several reasons why gender violence was covered up or concealed, never reported or not addressed during this time. Irish society was reluctant to discuss matters involving sex and relationships so when it came to sexual assault it was almost completely ignored in conversation. This made it difficult for women to speak about, let alone report any experience of sexual abuse. Following an act of sexual assault during a

night-time raid, 21-year-old Nellie O Mahony stated, "I was afraid and am afraid to pursue the matter further" (S2, P.89). This fear was instilled in women across the country. For this reason, it isn't easy to find accounts of such violence during these years.

A further reason why this topic is forgotten in Irish history is due to the government and army attempting to cover up and justify men's actions. In the documentary "Cogadh ar Mhná" one historian quoted "We have men of power - politicians, army men and lawyers - all defending other men in power" (S3, 43:10). This stood out to me as it perfectly explains how equality was virtually nonexistent in 1920s Ireland. There was a desire to protect the reputation of these men, some of whom went on to become 'heroes'. This begs the question "Did Ireland of the 1920s lock away, conceal and institutionalise the trauma of the revolution suffered by women?" (S1, P.28)

Following the truce of the War of Independence, comments were made in the House of Commons regarding the high number of women who were injured or killed during the war. Records also reveal that "the assault of women was... a subject of intense discussion at the top level of the army and the government" (S5, P.9) in Ireland. The hard truth is that we will never know the exact number of women who fell victim to rape or sexual assault in Ireland during the revolution. There physically cannot be an official number, yet there is sufficient evidence to prove that this was not rare in Irish society. In the words of Linda Connolly, "The impulse to forget can displace the importance of remembering, especially in the domains of traumatic memory and women's history" (S5, P.5).

It is saddening to think that so many women did not receive justice for what happened to them, so it is important that we recognise these occurrences and keep these women in our collective memory. Some of these women died due to the psychological and physical trauma they suffered after their assault, but these deaths aren't recorded as direct War of Independence or Civil War killings, yet they occurred due to its violence. These women deserve to be rewritten into Irish history having been failed by the authorities and government of Ireland. While the heroic men are deservedly being celebrated and commemorated during the decade of centenaries, I hope organisations in Ireland do more to shed light on this widely concealed topic.

## **Bibliography**

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S.3: 'Cogadh ar Mhná', directed by Ciara Hyland, TG4, 2020

S.4 = Susan Byrne (2020) 'Keeping Company with the Enemy': gender and sexual violence against women during the Irish war of independence and Civil War, 1919-1923'

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S.6 = Linda Connolly (2019): "Sexual Violence and a dark secret of the War of Independence and Civil War", The Irish Times

S.7 = Linda Connolly (2017): "The rarely spoken about violence suffered by women during the Irish revolution", Irish Examiner

S.8= National Library of Ireland Catalogue: 'Military Rule in Ireland', Erskine Childers, 1920

S.9= Linda Connolly (2019): 'Sexual violence and the Irish Revolution: an inconvenient truth?' History Ireland, Features, Issue 6, Volume 27



## **Investigation Process:**

Having been informed by my history teacher that this competition was taking place I was happy to learn that, with a few changes, my Leaving Cert RSR would be a perfect fit under the category of “Women during the revolutionary period in Ireland”. I chose this topic having watched the TG4 documentary ‘Cogadh ar Mhná’ and finding it very interesting. I gathered more sources online. My teacher was very helpful throughout the process and had access to more journal articles which she sent me on Microsoft Teams during lockdown. I printed any sources related to my topic and began to read them in detail while highlighting the parts that I thought would be most useful for my essay. I also ensured to look out for elements of bias or propaganda in order to use the best possible sources in my essay. Despite there being no specific book on my subject matter there were many newspaper and journal articles online. Once most of my research was complete, I discussed potential essay topics with my teacher. My three main aims when I began my project were to discover how common and widespread this violence was, what the motives were behind such violence, and lastly, I wanted to find out why these occurrences were overlooked by the public and the Government of Ireland. Having now completed the project I am satisfied that my essay has addressed these three aims. While creating a plan for my essay I decided on a key point for each paragraph. I then used a table on Microsoft Word to place suitable quotes and information from my sources under a specific paragraph heading. In total, I completed three drafts of my essay, the first over the summer of 2020, which were all corrected by my teacher with helpful feedback being provided each time. Conducting this project undoubtedly helped both my research and ICT skills and I enjoyed working as a historian. Having learned so much about my topic I would like to see it being discussed in school history books in the future as this element of the revolutionary period deserves more attention.