

3.IRL The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition | Sample answer

During the period 1912-1920, which factors contributed most to the partition of Ireland? (2017)

The years 1912 to 1920 were a period of political and social unrest. There was a lot of conflict between Nationalists and Unionists during this time. The Nationalists wanted independence from Britain as they felt that the ties to Britain were hindering their progress in all aspects of life. On the other hand, Unionists feared that if they left Britain, Ireland would be run by the Catholic Church. This was known as "*Home Rule is Rome Rule*". Britain had a tough task of trying to maintain the integrity of the North and protecting Unionists while, at the same time, placating the demands of the Nationalists.

The Third Home Rule Bill was introduced by Henry Asquith into the House of Commons in 1912. After two unsuccessful attempts to introduce Home Rule for Ireland it looked inevitable that this third attempt would be successful. Unlike previous occasions when the veto of the House of Lords guaranteed that the Home Rule Bill would fail, the House of Lords could now only delay the Bill for two years due to the Parliament Act of 1911. The introduction of the Home Rule Bill led to Unionists launching a campaign to resist its implementation. This was undoubtedly the first step towards the partition of Ireland in 1920. The campaign was to contribute to clear divisions between North and South and play a role in the eventual partition of Ireland.

In response to this Home Rule Bill a man named James Craig, a leading Unionist MP, and Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1940, set up a number of protest rallies against Home Rule. Unionist leaders decided that Unionists should sign a common oath declaring their opposition to Home Rule. This oath became known as the 'Solemn League and Covenant'. It was signed on the 28th of September 1912 by some 220,000 men, and after a few days it had more than 470,000 signatures. Some even signed it using their own blood to show how strongly they believed in the cause. Approximately 230,000 women signed a separate document. The Covenant, drafted by Edward Carson, condemned Home Rule as "*disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as the whole of Ireland... and perilous to the unity of the Empire*". This

covenant was a key factor in the partition of Ireland as it directly opposed the idea of Home Rule which the south was fighting so hard to get the British Parliament to agree to.

Along with the 'Solemn League and Covenant' the Unionists set up a paramilitary force to resist Home Rule. This force was known as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). It was a very professional organisation that regularly practised military drilling and rifle practise. The UVF was far more professional than their Southern Nationalist counterpart, the Irish Volunteers. The Irish Volunteers was set up by the respected academic Eoin MacNeill. He had praised the UVF as he believed that it showed the Unionist's dedication to their cause. Some 3,000 men signed up immediately to join the Irish Volunteers, including future leader, Éamon de Valera. Women were not permitted to join the Irish Volunteers. In April 1914, leading nationalist women formed 'Cumann na mBan'. The organisation's main activity was raising money to buy weapons for the Irish Volunteers. The conflicting aims of these organisations was a key factor in the partition of Ireland.

When WW1 broke out the implementation of Home Rule was postponed. Many UVF members joined the army as a sign of loyalty to Britain. John Redmond of the Irish Volunteers also offered nationalist support. In a speech at the House of Commons in August 1914 Redmond said: *"Catholics in the south will be only too glad to join arms with the Protestant Ulstermen in the North"*. This was a foolish speech that destroyed Ireland's opportunity to trade participation in the war for the immediate enforcement of Home Rule. Many Irish Volunteers joined the British Army in the hope of convincing the British and the Unionists that the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) could be trusted to govern the entire island from Dublin. It is estimated that some 200,000 Irishmen, from both North and South, fought in the wartime forces. The postponement of Home Rule was to contribute to partition because the situation in Ireland had dramatically changed by the end of the war.

The 1916 Easter Rising was probably the event that solidified the partition of Ireland. WW1 went on for much longer than anyone expected. Home Rule was a distant hope. The extreme nationalists of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) began to plan an insurrection. They felt that the war was *"England's difficulty and Ireland's opportunity"*. The rising was a failure. A lot of Irish people were angry about the rebellion. A lot of the city was destroyed and nearly 500 people had died. However, the execution of key leaders like James Connolly, Patrick Pearse, Joseph Plunkett, and Thomas Clarke under the orders of General Maxwell caused outrage. Irish Nationalists were no longer happy to accept Home Rule, they wanted a full Irish Republic. This was the beginning of

the separation of Ireland. Unionists saw the Easter Rising as an act of treachery during the war and it demonstrated to them that Nationalists could not be trusted. The Easter Rising made Unionists more determined to have the six counties excluded from Home Rule.

By the end of the war, Sinn Féin had replaced the IPP as the main nationalist party in Ireland. In July 1917, Lloyd George, the British PM set up the Irish Convention to try to accommodate nationalist demands for Home Rule. The Convention was attended by representatives of Government, the IPP, Southern Unionists, Ulster Unionists, and a few independent MPs. Members of Sinn Féin did not attend – they were no longer interested in Home Rule, they demanded full independence from Britain. The Convention ended in April 1918 without any agreement being reached. In the 1918 General Election Sinn Féin won by a landslide. The Home Rule Party took only 6 seats while Sinn Féin won 73. This was a seal of approval from the Irish people of Sinn Féin's policies. They began to set up their own Government in Ireland which directly led to the War of Independence.

The War of Independence lasted just over two years and resulted in the death of about 2,000 people. It further reinforced Unionist support for partition. The demand for full independence was used by unionists to pressure the British government to introduce partition. Eventually the British government introduced the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 which allowed for the creation of two parliaments in Ireland, one in Belfast to rule the six north-eastern counties and one in Dublin for the remaining twenty-six counties. This Act finalised the division of Ireland into two separate states.

Through 1912-1920 there were many factors that led to partition. The militant reaction to the Third Home Rule Bill, the postponement of this bill because of WW1 and mishandling by the British of the 1916 Easter Rising. Had General Maxwell dealt with the situation more diplomatically there wouldn't have been such a backing for Sinn Féin, and the War of Independence could have been all together, thereby avoiding the permanent division of Ireland. That division still exists to the present time.