



Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History . By Niamh Gallagher

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***Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History.* By Niamh Gallagher.**

Ireland and the Great War: A Social and Political History. By Niamh Gallagher. Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2020. xvii + 258 xvii pp. ISBN: 978-1-78831-462-6 (hardback). £85

Gallagher investigates Catholic responses to the war effort during the global conflict, doing so through a thorough analysis of the home front in Ireland. In this first ever-published social history of Ireland and the Great War, she argues that Catholic Ireland supported the British and Allied war effort, therefore questioning the anti-war picture often projected onto Catholic Ireland and challenging the view that the Great War was not Ireland's war. In this, she distances herself from Charles Townshend (and many other historians) who contended that the Irish had adopted a 'mental neutrality' during the conflict (*Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*. London: Penguin Books, 2005).

The book opens (Chapters 1 & 2) with a concise historiographical account of how Irish (and British) narratives have engaged with Irish society in its relation to the Great War. Gallagher signals that vocal anti-recruiting activities of advanced nationalists during the conflict, coupled with the outcome of the 1918 general elections, were (wrongly) seen as evidence that Catholic Ireland had not supported the war effort. Chapter 3 illustrates how Catholic and Protestant middle-class women mobilized and organized war-relief associations on the home front. From knitting socks to running support homes, ordinary people took the lead in organizing moral and humanitarian support, cared for injured personnel in local hospitals and volunteered to accommodate Belgium refugees in October 1914. Chapter 4 (certainly the most valuable in the book) powerfully demonstrates that the German naval campaign had a profound impact on Irish life. As Gallagher reveals, the year 1915 is central as the Irish gradually measured the direct consequences of the conflict. Following the sinking of the *RMS Lusitania* in May 1915 local newspapers printed images of dead passengers

washed up on the Irish shores, laid out in their coffins, thus heightening the visibility of the conflict in Ireland. (On this point, it must be stressed that the incorporation of a series of harrowing photographs greatly contributes to the reader's visualization of what local populations knew about this dramatic event.) This, with the loss of the 10th Division at Gallipoli during the summer 1915, heavily contributed to the portrayal of Germany as 'a menace that had to be defeated' (p. 90), while boosting support for the Allies. In Chapter 5, Gallagher shows that in the minds of diasporic nationalist communities living in the British Dominions the conviction that Germany was threatening civil liberties was a sufficient incentive to convince them of Britain's *jus ad bellum* and spur them to 'rally the Empire's defence' (p. 105). Chapter 6 highlights that in Ireland people from all social and religious backgrounds supported the Allied war effort from August 1914 onwards through humanitarian initiatives, fundraising and a general moral support.

One important aspect of Gallagher's work is how she debunks the myth that Easter Week 1916 operated as a turning point, when it comes to popular responses to the war effort. The study (rightly) downplays the impact of the uprising, arguing (against David Fitzpatrick's *Politics and Irish Life 1913–1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1998) that support for the war effort did not fade away following the insurrection. At home, people continued to offer assistance to the wounded, the work of wartime committees remained unchanged, and cross-confessional support remained intact. This is a crucial statement. Instead, it is contended here that the 1918 Conscription Crisis acted as a catalyst that triggered a shift in the allegiances of nationalist communities. On this point, Gallagher argues that protest against enforced military service was not a protest against the war. As she puts it, by conscripting Ireland, the British 'had negated the consent of the Irish people' (p. 151) and this explains why (and when) nationalist communities decided to

sever entirely their ties with Great Britain. (Gallagher does not however address the issue of the rising popularity of Sinn Féin in 1917.)

If Gallagher's goal is to rehabilitate (and rightly so) the place and memory of Catholic communities, this, at times, has led to some rather sweeping generalizations, to the effect that *all* the Irish (with the exception of a marginal group of extremist or 'advanced' republicans) actually backed the war. The study focuses mainly on urban areas. Gallagher maintains however that 'the efforts of rural Ireland to cultivate more tillage in early 1917 were an important means by which those who lived in agricultural areas responded to the demands of war' (p. 81). This can leave historians somewhat perplexed. Indeed, rural support for an increase in agricultural production and tillage in early 1917 (though directly linked to wartime concerns) cannot be flagged as evidence of Irish farmers' support for the war. What was at play here was merely the instinct of survival and of immediate interest in a vulnerable peasant society. If the Great War has acted for the last twenty years as a 'vehicle for reconciliation' (p. 19) between Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, this must not be detrimental to historical accuracy. In rural Ireland, some were not concerned by the war at all, as is amply evidenced by police reports available at The National Archives London (essential primary sources, that are too often neglected in the study) and in research by Jérôme aan de Wiel (*The Catholic Church in Ireland 1914-1918: War and Politics*. Dublin: Irish Academy Press, 2003). Similarly, (and Gallagher later acknowledges this) the visit of the Irish-Canadian Rangers to Ireland in 1917 and the hospitality they received cannot be used as a pretext to assert that local populations unreservedly supported the war effort. At times, the book speculates on what *might* have happened to support its arguments. That (in the aftermath of the uprising) anti-demonstrations *could* have been expected when the Irish-Canadian Rangers toured Ireland because advanced nationalism was in a phase of consolidation (p. 127) does not lend support to the contention that rural communities backed the war effort. A crucial

distinction between voluntary enlistment and compulsion is also being made. However, it would seem that among those who supported the war effort some did so only because they would not have to fight it! Compulsory military service (but this is recurrent in the historiography of Ireland) is being dealt with only in relation to the 1918 Conscription Crisis. Analysis of how fears of conscription infuriated civilian populations and played a major role in the four 1917 by-elections could have strengthened Gallagher's argument. Finally, when dealing with the issue of food shortages, it is surprising not to see any reference to John Borghonovo (*The Dynamics of War and Revolution: Cork City, 1916-1918*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2013), who was the first to shed light upon how fears of famine infuriated rural populations in Cork and what was undertaken to ward off the risk of starvation in the country.

This apart, Gallagher uncovers what are crucial aspects of nationalist responses to the war effort. The book thus provides a stimulating contribution to research, in the current context of the Decade of Centenaries.

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