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**Chapter 6: 'It's up to you now to fight for your own country': Ireland's Great War veterans  
in the War of Independence, 1919-21**

*Steven O'Connor*

**I. Introduction**

About 210,000 Irish people served in the British armed forces during the Great War. During their absence Ireland changed dramatically. The short-lived rebellion against British rule, launched in Dublin by a tiny minority of physical-force republicans during Easter 1916, ended in the execution of its leaders and the mass arrest of suspected republicans. In the aftermath of the Rising the Irish Parliamentary Party, representing the Catholic and nationalist majority, tried and failed to reach an agreement with Irish unionists, the opponents of Irish self-government who were predominantly from the north of Ireland and Protestant, and the British government in order to implement 'Home Rule' in Ireland. British repression combined with the failure of moderate nationalists, mounting Irish casualties on the western front and the British government's threat to introduce conscription in Ireland gradually transformed Irish public opinion. In the British general election of December 1918, the separatist *Sinn Féin* party became the dominant voice of Irish nationalism, winning 73 of the 105 seats in Ireland. The newly-elected deputies refused to take their seats at Westminster, instead setting up a rival parliament in Dublin called *Dáil Éireann* and declaring Ireland an independent republic. During 1919, as an estimated 98,600 Irish ex-soldiers and sailors began returning home following their demobilisation, Ireland became engulfed in the early stage of a republican insurgency, later to become known as the Anglo-Irish War or the Irish War of Independence.<sup>1</sup>

The historiography on these returning Great War veterans has tended to focus on either republican violence against them, or the economic and social problems that they faced.<sup>2</sup> This

has given the impression that veterans played a passive role during the Irish War of Independence and that they were largely the unfortunate victims of an intensifying war of terror and counter-terror. Yet some Irish veterans had an entirely different experience of the War of Independence, being active participants as members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). Contrary to popular opinion, the additional forces raised by the RIC to quell the insurrection, ‘the Black and Tans’ and the Auxiliary Division, were not composed purely of British ex-servicemen recruited from cities in mainland Britain. Out of the 14,000 personnel recruited by the RIC during the conflict, which started in January 1919 and ended with the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921, there were at least 1,496 Irish ex-servicemen, representing 10.6% of all recruitment.<sup>3</sup> It has also been calculated that several hundred ex-servicemen joined the IRA, at least 16 of them died during the conflict.<sup>4</sup> Using mainly the Bureau of Military History witness statements and military service pension records detailed information has been gathered about a sample of 121 ex-servicemen who were members of the IRA.<sup>5</sup> In addition, a list drawn up by the National army in 1923 provides information about a further 105 ex-British soldiers who served in the IRA during the War of Independence.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the IRA counted at least 226 ex-servicemen in its ranks during this period. It is also worth noting that after the War of Independence larger numbers of ex-servicemen joined the National army of the newly-established Irish Free State and that thousands of Irish people continued to enlist in the British army.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first will attempt to answer three questions about the sample of ex-servicemen who joined the IRA. Who were they? Why did they join the British army and subsequently the IRA? And what did they contribute to the IRA’s military campaign? The second part will examine the backgrounds, motives and performance of ex-servicemen who joined the RIC. A number of sources make this analysis possible. There were

two main sources for identifying ex-servicemen who joined the IRA. First, the military service pensions collection at the Irish Military Archives.<sup>8</sup> These pensions were awarded to the men and women who the Irish state recognised as being members of the IRA and associated bodies, who were on 'active service' between 1916 and 1923. These records contain information about the activities of individual IRA members and in general they are considered reliable sources, including references from senior IRA officers substantiating the applicant's claims which the pensions' board investigated. Second, the Bureau of Military History (BMH) was established by the Irish government in 1947 to collect material relating to the history of the independence movement from the formation of the Irish Volunteers (the forerunner of the IRA) on 25 November 1913 to the truce between the IRA and British forces on 11 July 1921. Over 11 years the BMH collected 1,773 witness statements, including from 15 ex-servicemen who served in the IRA.<sup>9</sup> These provide much information about the ex-servicemen and their experiences in the IRA. Yet some caution must be exercised in their use. The interviews took place 30 years after the War of Independence and thus there is a danger that the passage of time distorted the interviewees' recollections and that their subsequent experiences impacted upon them. Their testimonies may also be influenced by a desire to protect their reputation or to tell the investigator what the interviewee thinks he/she wants to hear. Finally, while the investigators made efforts to corroborate the witness statements, they also censored them: in general, controversial statements were expunged from the record. These considerations limit the value of the BMH collection and the approach of this chapter has been to try to corroborate evidence from this source with archival sources and newspapers.

One other feature of the BMH material is worth noting. Out of the 15 ex-servicemen who provided witness statements to the BMH, it is striking how little the majority say about their service in the First World War. One did not even mention that he was a veteran but was

identified by other sources.<sup>10</sup> This could be attributed to the interviewees regarding their Great War service as irrelevant or peripheral to the subject of their experiences in the Irish revolution. However, considering what they had been through during the war their service must have left a deep mark on them and, what is more, their military service enabled them to make a useful contribution to the IRA. Therefore, it is significant that in their statements they chose to marginalise their First World War service identity. It demonstrates how well established the official republican narrative was, that Irish freedom was won by those dedicated nationalists who had stayed at home while those Irish men who served had been duped into joining the British army.<sup>11</sup> The sample indicates how these ex-servicemen who joined the IRA did not want to disrupt that narrative, their silence leading them to become forgotten soldiers in the history of the First World War and the Irish War of Independence.

Ex-servicemen who served in the RIC were identified from the force's general register.<sup>12</sup> The entries in this register record useful biographical information about recruits to the police, including date and place of birth, religion, marital status, previous occupation and career details. However, aside from indicating that the recruit was an 'ex-soldier', 'ex-sailor', or 'ex-officer', the register gives no further details about their military service. Once the ex-servicemen had been identified from the above IRA and RIC sources, however, their names could be searched against the First World War service records, the Medal Card Indexes and the *London Gazette*.<sup>13</sup> Collectively, these sources enabled the construction of the samples used in this chapter, building a picture of the First World War servicemen and their transition to insurgents and counter-insurgents in revolutionary Ireland.

## **II: Irish Ex-servicemen in the Irish Republican Army**

Analysis of the sample of 121 veterans who joined the IRA provides several indications about who they were. First of all, the sample is entirely male, which is not to suggest that there were no Irish female veterans. The British military had organised auxiliary services staffed by women, these included Irish women and some of them may have become involved in the War of Independence through *Cumann na mBan*, the nationalist women's organisation that supported the IRA.<sup>14</sup> However, research conducted to-date has yet to establish the presence of ex-servicewomen of the First World War within the IRA. Second, the veterans in the sample were young when they joined the British forces. While 28% were aged over 20, 34% were aged between 18 and 20 and 38% were younger than 18.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that many Irish recruits were in fact underage when they enlisted with the British forces during the First World War. Officially, the lower age limit for enlistment was 18 and for service overseas the minimum age was 19, but standards were relaxed considerably during the war. There were tens of thousands of under-age boys who were accepted into the British army.<sup>16</sup> Third, as can be seen in Table 1, a majority of the sample (54%) were from the southern province of Munster. This means that Munster was enormously over-represented among ex-servicemen in the IRA, considering that the same province represented only 23% of the Irish population and only provided 16% of the recruits to the British army during the First World War. How can this disproportionate Munster presence be explained? The answer lies in the fact that to a large extent the War of Independence was fought and possibly won in Munster, with Dublin providing an important secondary theatre. The rest of Ireland experienced much lower levels of IRA activity. Peter Hart confirms this trend, his research showing that Munster was the most violent province and that the IRA in Munster had the highest number of members on active service. Therein he pointed to a strong correlation between the level of IRA violence in the province and enthusiasm for the nationalist ethos, the latter being measured by the number of primary

schools teaching the Irish language in Munster. That number was higher than in any other province.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1: Native province of ex-servicemen in the IRA, compared to the Irish population in 1911 and Irish recruits to the British army, 1914-1918.<sup>18</sup>**

Province	Ex-servicemen in IRA	Population, 1911	Army Recruits
	%	%	%
Connacht	9	14	4
Leinster	20	26	26
Munster	54	24	16
Ulster	8	36	54
Unknown	9	-	-

The majority of the ex-servicemen in the IRA came from working class backgrounds. Table 2 indicates that 44% were unskilled or semi-skilled workers and 23% were skilled workers. Farmers and farm labourers were significantly under-represented considering their share of the population. Lower middle class occupations, such as shop assistants and clerks, which composed up to one fifth of the IRA's members, only represented 5% of the ex-servicemen in the IRA.<sup>19</sup> The predominance of the urban working class in this sample also indicates that ex-servicemen in the IRA came from the same social demographic as most recruits to the British army. David Fitzpatrick has found that the majority of Irish recruits to the latter were unskilled

workers and skilled workers, while the recruiting authorities complained that very few clerks, shop assistants and farm workers were enlisting.<sup>20</sup> In order to understand what made them different from the majority of veterans who returned to Ireland after the war, it is necessary to examine the individual service motives of these men who would later take up service in the IRA.

**Table 2: Occupations of ex-servicemen in the IRA, compared with the distribution of occupations in the 1926 census of the Irish Free State.<sup>21</sup>**

	Ex-servicemen in the IRA	Census, 1926
Farmer	5	49
Farm labourer	10	17
Unskilled/semi-skilled	44	10
Skilled	23	9
Shop assistant/clerk	5	4
Professional	8	2
Merchant	-	4
Student	5	1
Other	-	4

In the sample of 121 ex-servicemen there was a number in service before 1914 or who were reservists mobilised after the outbreak of war. These recruits were generally unemployed or casually employed before joining the army. Their motive was mainly economic: for them the army provided reasonable pay and stable employment. For example, prior to his enlistment in 1912 Peter Gough had been employed for ten weeks as an assistant gardener on a landed estate



in Dublin.<sup>22</sup> Gough was representative of many unskilled labourers who found it difficult to secure regular employment and chose the army to avoid poverty. After the outbreak of war, the risk of death outweighed the economic benefits of serving in the British army. However, the army still found many Irish recruits. Moderate nationalists encouraged recruitment believing that such a demonstration of loyalty to Britain would ensure the application of Home Rule after the war. They established the Irish National Volunteers and at least 31,500 of its members enlisted in the British forces.<sup>23</sup> Patrick J. Paul, who later had a long career in the Irish army, was living in Waterford at the time. Waterford city was the constituency of John Redmond MP, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, and Paul admitted that he was influenced by the party's appeals:

In 1915, being then nineteen years of age, I knew little or nothing about the Volunteer movement. A lot of what had taken place before this had rather passed over my head and at this time, when I first became conscious of the Volunteers as a national movement, the Irish Party leaders were appealing to the Volunteers and to Irishmen generally to join the British Army to fight in the war then raging in France... The catch-cries raised at the time by the Irish Party in support of this recruiting campaign – ‘the fight for small nations’ and ‘by fighting in France we were fighting for Ireland’ - I accepted unquestioningly, and so I conceived it to be my duty to join the British Army in obedience to the appeals of the Irish Party leaders.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, some Irish recruits were very young and testify to their ignorance of political ideas. These recruits often had a naïve conception of war, seeing it as an opportunity for heroism and adventure.<sup>25</sup> Tom Barry, who later rose to fame as the commander of the IRA's West Cork flying column, was one such youth. Joining the British army in 1915, aged

seventeen, he explained that he was not influenced by the Home Rule movement, indeed he recalled that at that time he had not even understood what that meant. Nor did he fight to save 'little' Belgium: '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 a grown man. Above all I went because I knew no Irish history and had no national consciousness'.<sup>26</sup>

Another case of youthful naivety was Joseph Clancy, who claimed that he joined up aged sixteen. Clancy was from Kilkishen, County Clare, the youngest son of a carpenter. After leaving school he had worked with his father before deciding to run away and join the British army in 1915. Clancy went on to become a first-rate soldier, earning the distinguished conduct medal which he proudly mentioned in his BMH witness statement. After the war he applied his military skills as a training officer for the IRA's East Clare Brigade.<sup>27</sup> However, Clancy's story highlights the need for caution when using the BMH because, when compared with other sources, some discrepancies appear. For example, Clancy claims he was sixteen and a half when he enlisted, giving his date of birth as June 1899. Yet both the civil register of births and the 1911 census indicate that he was born in June 1896 and therefore would have been eighteen or nineteen when he joined up. This may simply be a lapse of memory. However, we must recognise that it could be a deliberate exaggeration, for the benefit of a republican audience, his youth being used to mitigate his service with the British as opposed to an adult knowingly serving the British cause.

The question, however, remains as to why men like Clancy, with sometimes excellent First World War service records, would end up joining the IRA. The main reason seems to have been peer pressure. Hart's analysis of the social structure of the IRA noted how IRA members did not tend to join as individuals but rather that they joined in groups linked by family,

neighbourhood, friendship or workplace. The existence of these informal networks created a collective pressure to be one of 'the boys'.<sup>28</sup> Many of the ex-servicemen in the sample clearly conformed to this pattern. Joseph Clancy's older brother, for example, had not joined the British army during the First World War, instead becoming an officer in the local Irish Volunteer company. Gradually Joseph was pulled into his activities. Indeed, Joseph reveals that on two occasions he supplied arms and ammunition to his brother while he was home on leave.<sup>29</sup> Peter Gough, meanwhile, served for four years in the Middle East where he was wounded several times. After demobilisation he was given a job building houses for ex-servicemen in Dublin and he was also receiving a pension from the British government for his war injuries. Gough thus had much to lose by joining the IRA yet despite this he was not able to ignore the risk of incurring family disapproval:

On being demobilised from the British Army following the 1914-1918 war, my brother, who had already been in the [Irish] Citizen Army, suggested to me that I should join the [Irish] Volunteers. He said, 'You have been fighting for a foreign country long enough. It's up to you now to fight for your own country.' As a result of my brother's suggestion, I joined the Volunteers [later renamed the IRA].<sup>30</sup>

Gough was part of the IRA team which captured a British armoured car and drove it into Mountjoy Prison in Dublin in a failed attempt to rescue Sean MacEoin, the commander of the IRA's Longford flying column. Gough was chosen for this mission precisely because of his previous military experience with machine guns: in the British army he had been a no. 1 gunner in a machine gun company. It is apparent that the British government never found out about Gough's IRA activities. Incredibly, in the 1930s Gough was still finding employment on the basis of his status as an ex-serviceman. In 1937 he wrote to the War Office via the Soldiers and

Sailors Employment Bureau on South Frederick street, Dublin. He explained that he had lost his discharge certificate and asked the War Office to send him a replacement. He ended his letter with tongue firmly in cheek: *'I have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servant, Peter Gough'*.<sup>31</sup> Finally, Patrick Keane had served in the Royal Irish Regiment for three and half years. When he returned home to Cashel he found that the situation had changed dramatically. Most of his school friends were in *Sinn Féin* or the Irish Volunteers and he decided to join with them. Later, he disguised himself and took part in his first raid for arms for the IRA.<sup>32</sup>

Other enlisted Irish servicemen were converted to the republican cause by the 1916 Rising and the British reaction to it. Tom Barry was serving in Mesopotamia when the first news bulletin of the events reached his unit in May 1916. According to his account he was shocked to read about rebels being killed in Dublin. Subsequently, Barry claimed he became disillusioned with the war. News of the rebellion had set in motion a gradual process of radicalisation, similar to what was taking place in Ireland, or as Barry explained: 'It was a rude awakening, guns being fired at the people of my own race by soldiers of the same army with which I was serving. The echo of these guns in Dublin was to drown into insignificance the clamour of all other guns during the remaining two and a half years of war'.<sup>33</sup> Patrick Paul recounts a similar experience. He was serving in the Balkans when his unit started receiving bulletins about the Easter Rising:

One such message, I remember, was to the effect, 'Rebels still holding out', and the receipt of this brought about a spontaneous cheer throughout the camp... Most of the men were men who, like myself, had joined up for the duration of the war and in the belief that they were serving Ireland by doing so, and so their sympathies were entirely Irish and swung towards the Insurrection in Dublin.<sup>34</sup>

Familial influence again proved to be a significant tipping factor. Paul explained that he received letters from his parents who sympathised with *Sinn Féin* and encouraged him to vote for the party's candidate in the 1918 general election. Not all Irish soldiers, however, sympathised with the rebels. Emmet Dalton, serving in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, took a hostile attitude towards the Easter Rising. It was only when Dalton returned home after the war and discussed the situation with his brother, who was serving in the Dublin IRA, that he changed his mind and joined the IRA.<sup>35</sup> He became an important lieutenant to Michael Collins and was later the Director of Military Operations in the National army.

When veterans of the British forces approached the IRA post-service it may, however, be reasonably assumed that they would potentially face suspicions which could debar their enlistment and, indeed, could place them in much personal danger. Yet most of the ex-servicemen who left BMH witness statements did not mention any difficulties in being accepted into the organisation. They could be simply omitting uncomfortable memories of hostility but the fact that many of the ex-servicemen were joining the IRA due to the influence of family or friends suggests that there was a reliable republican who could vouch for their loyalty. Yet it would be natural for IRA commanders to be suspicious of former British army soldiers attempting to join their ranks, and cases of initiation tests have been identified. The IRA were weary of Tom Barry when he tried to join in mid-1919 because he had been seen socialising with British soldiers and ex-soldiers since his return to Cork. They gave him an opportunity to prove himself by performing intelligence work and it was after he provided them with valuable information that they began to trust him.<sup>36</sup> Considering that Tom Barry became a successful flying column commander, his Great War service record makes for interesting reading, he did not have a very impressive disciplinary record while serving in the British army. His conduct sheet listed numerous offences including: 'Irregular conduct', 'Late on parade (7

days Fined Pay)', 'Stating a falsehood', 'Disobedience of Battery Order (14 days Fined Pay)', 'Creating a disturbance' and 'Improper reply to an NCO (7 days F.P.)'. In spite of all these offences, Barry's commanding officer wrote on his discharge certificate that he was reliable, intelligent and 'A good trustworthy man'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the IRA were initially suspicious of Chris Conway, an ex-soldier from Clogheen, County Tipperary. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Ryan, a battalion commander in the IRA's 3<sup>rd</sup> Tipperary Brigade, Conway was detained in 1920 by an IRA officer who was convinced that he was a British spy. Under Ryan's questioning Conway explained that 'he had been driven by economic pressure to join the British army' but that he had deserted on several occasions and he wanted to 'fight for Ireland'.<sup>38</sup> Ryan decided to test Conway's loyalty. During an ambush on a RIC barracks he posted Conway to the most dangerous position and kept him under observation, 'with a view to shooting him at once if he showed any sign of treachery in his behaviour'.<sup>39</sup> Instead Conway proved himself to be a 'fearless' fighter and was consequently fully accepted into the flying column, acting as their principal instructor in drill and musketry owing to his military experience.

**Table 3: Roles of ex-servicemen in the IRA.<sup>40</sup>**

Volunteer on active service	30
Instructor	34
Machine gunner	7
Commander	24
Junior officer	5
Intelligence Officer	8
Medical Officer	2

Engineer	2
Other	9

Table 3 reveals how ex-servicemen served in the IRA in many different capacities, yet their most important contributions were in relation to training, leadership and intelligence. Since the IRA was a guerrilla organisation run by civilian amateurs, ex-servicemen were highly valued for their military experience. Unlike the majority of IRA members ex-servicemen had received specialist training in the use of machine guns and grenades, they had practical knowledge of battlefield tactics and they had already been tested in combat. Therefore, most IRA commanders utilised ex-servicemen as instructors so that they could impart valuable skills. It was also because of their valuable experience that ex-servicemen often became officers and rose rapidly through the chain of command. From my sample, twenty-four ex-servicemen became commanders at different levels in the IRA: seven reached the highest level, command of a brigade, while one ex-serviceman, Frank Carney, took command of the newly-formed 1<sup>st</sup> Northern Division in mid-1921. In late-1920 Carney had led a raid on the RIC barracks at Belleek, stealing all the weapons and destroying the barracks without losing a man. One IRA volunteer, Thomas McShea, recalled: ‘The plans for taking over the barracks were gone into in the greatest detail. Every man who was mobilised knew exactly what he had to do and where he was posted. Carney had served in the British. army in 1914-1918 war and knew how to plan an operation and to carry it out.’<sup>41</sup> Tom Barry, commanding the West Cork flying column, carried out one of the most dramatic and best-remembered IRA attacks of the conflict when his unit ambushed a patrol of Auxiliary police at Kilmichael, County Cork on 28 November 1920. Sixteen auxiliaries were killed, another was captured and later shot, and Barry’s column suffered only two deaths.<sup>42</sup> As an ex-soldier Barry understood the importance of speed of movement and the need to attack the enemy at his weakest point. Based on their success in

reaching leadership positions it is revealed that ex-servicemen had a disproportionate impact on the IRA's campaign relative to their actual numbers in the movement. Finally, ex-servicemen often played a vital role in gathering intelligence for the IRA. Ironically, because of their prior service in the British forces, Irish ex-servicemen were generally regarded by the authorities as a loyal section of Irish society and it was not difficult for them to gain the trust and friendship of policemen and soldiers. Ex-servicemen were also given preference for government jobs. Thus, many of them secured employment in government departments, post offices or in military barracks where they had access to sensitive information that could be useful to the IRA. For example, Patrick Mulcahy had specialised in signal communications in the British army. After the war he got a job in the post office in Ennis, County Clare, where he had access to all coded telegraph messages for the police and army. He recalled:

I obtained the key to police, military and, later, to Auxiliary [Division] ciphers and translated all messages passing through Ennis Post Office. When I got this work properly organised, the translated copies of messages were very often in Commandant F. Barrett's hands before the original cipher was delivered to the addressee. Many a message ordering the arrest of a Volunteer was intercepted and the Volunteer warned before the local District Inspector was aware of the contents of the cipher wire... During this time I was assisted greatly by the stupidity of the RIC and military who discussed the most secret plans over the telephone.<sup>43</sup>

### **III. Irish ex-servicemen in the Royal Irish Constabulary**

The RIC was an armed police force responsible for maintaining law and order in all of Ireland, except Dublin city which was under the jurisdiction of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Owing



to the British government's refusal to regard the IRA as anything more than a crime problem, the main burden for combating the insurgency fell to the RIC rather than the British army. Indeed, the first victims of the conflict were two RIC constables, shot dead by the IRA during an attempt to steal a consignment of explosives at Soloheadbeg quarry, County Tipperary, on 21 January 1919. At this point the RIC was already understrength due to the shortage of recruits during the war years. Moreover, by the end of 1919, gradually increasing violence and intimidation against the force had caused a growing number of resignations and early retirements.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, in January 1920 the RIC, with the British government's blessing, began recruiting ex-servicemen in Britain. It was hoped this injection of combat-hardened ex-soldiers would make the force capable of dealing with the IRA. Of the 14,106 recruits listed in the RIC's register as joining between January 1919 and December 1921, the majority, 11,153, were from Britain.<sup>45</sup> They began arriving in large numbers in 1920, causing a uniform shortage within the organisation. Hence until the end of the year many new constables were forced to wear a mix of military khaki and RIC dark green clothing. This resulted in the nicknaming of these new policemen as the 'Black and Tans', a term which historians continue to use. However, two misconceptions about the RIC during the War of Independence have become embedded in Irish popular memory. First, the use of terms such as the 'old RIC' and 'Irish policemen' to distinguish from the 'Black and Tans' has given the impression that all the RIC personnel recruited from January 1920 onwards were British. This is a simplification which reinforces the republican narrative that the War of Independence was a straightforward Irish versus British fight.<sup>46</sup> This was not actually the case. Although there was a recruitment shortage, Irish people had continued to join the RIC. From January 1919 to December 1921, 2,953 Irishmen joined, including 577 Irishmen who were living in Britain and are not counted in the 11,153 British recruits mentioned above.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, 20.9% of the RIC's recruits during the conflict were Irish. The importance of ex-servicemen is demonstrated by the fact that half

of these Irish recruits were war veterans. These Irish recruits were not part of the pre-1919 'old RIC', so does that make them 'Black and Tans'? There is no consensus. In the BMH statements some IRA veterans refer to the 'Black and Tans' as exclusively British, while at least one mentions an Irish 'Black and Tan'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, when John Brewer interviewed Irishmen who were recruited to the RIC in 1920-1921 some regarded the 'Black and Tans' as comprised of 'English and Scotch' while one Irish ex-servicemen self-identified as a 'Black and Tan' and another said that the public identified him and his comrades as 'Black and Tans'.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, David Leeson's study of the 'Black and Tans' focused on British recruits. He acknowledges that Irish recruitment to the RIC continued throughout the conflict but excludes them from the 'Black and Tans' category.<sup>50</sup> Second, the 'Black and Tans' have been inaccurately described by some historians as 'temporary constables'.<sup>51</sup> In fact, the Auxiliary Division of the RIC (ADRIC), or the 'Auxies', were the ones recruited on temporary contracts. They were ex-officers, referred to officially as 'temporary cadets', who served in their own distinct units (heavily-armed, mobile columns). There was also a separate group of temporary constables. In contrast, the 'Black and Tans' were permanent constables, recruited on the same terms as constables in Ireland, they were not a separate force but absorbed into the 'regular' RIC (as distinct from the ADRIC) and served in stations all around the country. Given all these facts, 'Black and Tans' as a category of analysis is problematic and it would be more precise to discuss Irish recruits and British recruits to the regular RIC during the War of Independence.

Having established their presence in the RIC, however, the question remains as to who were these Irish ex-servicemen who participated in the British counter-insurgency effort in Ireland? Table 4 shows that the four Irish provinces contributed ex-servicemen to the RIC in line with their share of the population and, unlike ex-servicemen in the IRA, Munster was not over-represented. However, it should be noted that 30% of the Irish ex-servicemen were living in

Britain when they joined the RIC.<sup>52</sup> The recruiting offices in London, Glasgow and Liverpool accounted for most of these recruits. British recruitment to the RIC was also strongest in these three cities.<sup>53</sup> Table 5, meanwhile, shows that 55% of the ex-servicemen in the regular RIC were Catholic while 43% were Protestant.<sup>54</sup> This corresponds to Irish recruitment to the British army during the First World War.<sup>55</sup> However, it marks a departure from the RIC's pre-war profile for, in 1913, 90% of recruits had been Catholic.<sup>56</sup> This weakening of the organisation's Catholic recruitment confirms the transformation in Irish Catholic public opinion, as well as the success of *Sinn Féin's* public condemnation and boycott of the RIC.<sup>57</sup> Among Irish ex-servicemen in the ADRIC we see the inverse, 68% being Protestant and 28% Catholic.<sup>58</sup> As the ADRIC recruited ex-officers, these proportions confirm that Irish Protestants were more likely to become officers than Catholics, explainable by the former's families' long association with the British armed forces and their more elevated social status.<sup>59</sup> Judging from the distribution of occupations in Table 6, ex-servicemen in the RIC, like those in the IRA, were predominantly from the working class. While this conformed to the typical background of an army recruit, it was atypical in the background of those who had previously joined the RIC, which traditionally recruited farmers' sons. In 1913 59% of their recruits came from a farming background.<sup>60</sup>

**Table 4: Native province of ex-servicemen in the regular RIC, compared to ex-servicemen and ex-officers in the ADRIC, 1919-1921 and the 1911 Census.<sup>61</sup>**

Province	Regular RIC	ADRIC	1911 census
	%	%	%
Connacht	14	4	14
Leinster	29	34	26

Munster	22	19	24
Ulster	34	41	36
Other <sup>62</sup>	1.2	2	

**Table 5: Religious distribution of ex-servicemen in the regular RIC, compared to ex-servicemen and ex-officers in the ADRIC, 1919-1921.<sup>63</sup>**

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Regular RIC</b>	<b>ADRIC</b>	<b>1911 census</b>
	%	%	%
Roman Catholic	55	28	74
Church of Ireland	33	54	13
Presbyterian	10	15	10
Other	2	3	3

**Table 6: Occupations of ex-servicemen in the regular RIC, 1919-1921, compared to occupations of RIC recruits in 1913.<sup>64</sup>**

<b>Occupations</b>	<b>Ex-servicemen</b>	<b>Recruits in 1913</b>
	%	%
Farmer	10	59

Farm labourer	1	0.3
Unskilled/semi-skilled	62	22
Skilled	11	3
Shop assistant/clerk	10	5
Ex-army officer	2	-
Professional	2	0.3
Other	2	0.4
None	-	10

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These men had the same diverse variety of reasons for joining the British army during the First World War as those ex-servicemen who went on to join the IRA. As with the latter group, there were underage soldiers. For example, County Tyrone native Joseph Thompson recalled: ‘After school the war was on and I bluffed my age and joined the army. This was the tail end of 1917. I wanted to become a soldier. It was glamorous to me before I joined; the glamour left as soon as I joined. I was sixteen.’<sup>65</sup> Thompson was later to become a policeman in January 1921, according to the RIC’s register.<sup>66</sup> Determining the motives of ex-servicemen who joined the RIC is difficult due to the small number of testimonies from this group. Yet based on an examination of their social backgrounds, the need for employment again emerges as the predominant motive. Sixty-one per cent of the Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC were unskilled workers.<sup>67</sup> As Leeson has previously pointed out, recruits to the RIC in this period were labourers, motor drivers and railway workers. Hence they were coming from the sectors of the economy that were suffering most in the post-war economic slump.<sup>68</sup> The fact that unskilled

workers were not a group that traditionally joined the RIC in large numbers, and the fact that most of them joined after RIC constables were awarded a pay increase in 1920, further suggests strong economic motives. However, some ex-servicemen may have joined believing that their military background made them well suited to the life of a constable in the RIC. Certainly, the RIC had a very good relationship with the Irish Guards and recruited ex-soldiers direct from this regiment.<sup>69</sup> In 1913, the last year of peacetime, eight ex-servicemen joined the RIC.<sup>70</sup> Finally, family tradition played a significant role, about 20% of the ex-servicemen in the sample having had a father either in the RIC or in another police force.<sup>71</sup> Yet even in cases where this factor is present the need for employment remained important. John Fails, an ex-serviceman from Rathkeale, County Limerick, was the son of a sergeant in the RIC. Yet the reason he gave for joining in 1920 was that ‘the police were after getting a big rise of pay at that time... and I then went up with two other fellows to join the police.’<sup>72</sup> Later, when discussing the constant risk of being killed by the IRA in an ambush, Fails explained ‘it was a job and it was the only thing I was able to get, or likely to get, so I just carried on.’<sup>73</sup>

**Table 7: Disciplinary record among Irish ex-servicemen in the ‘regular’ RIC, compared to British RIC recruits, 1919-1921 and RIC recruits, 1913.<sup>74</sup>**

<b>Punishment</b>	<b>Irish ex-service</b>	<b>British recruits</b>	<b>RIC recruits, 1913</b>
	%	%	%
Total punished	17	18	9.6
Dismissed	7	8	1.6

**Table 8: Fates of Irish and British ex-servicemen in the regular RIC, 1919-22.<sup>75</sup>**

<b>Fate</b>	<b>Irish recruits</b>	<b>British recruits</b>
	%	%
Died	3.7	2
Resigned, 1919	0.7	-
Resigned, 1920	9	8
Resigned, 1921	4.9	13
Resigned, 1922	0.1	-
Dismissed	7.1	8
Discharged	1.7	3
Disbanded, 1922	65.9	50
Pensioned	0.3	1
Unknown	6.6	15

The reinforcement of the RIC with British recruits did not give the force the upper hand in its struggle with the IRA. These recruits were unprepared for guerrilla warfare: in the Great War they had participated in conventional battles with a known frontline and a uniformed enemy. In Ireland the enemy dressed like civilians and for the most part combat occurred at a time and place of the IRA's choosing: the frontline was everywhere. As a guerrilla organisation the IRA relied heavily on its members' local knowledge and the support, or at least passivity, of the

civilian population. On the opposing side, a lack of training combined with largely ineffective British intelligence systems meant that the reinforced RIC never amounted to a serious counterinsurgent force. In areas with high levels of IRA violence, RIC discipline often broke down and frustrated constables inflicted indiscriminate reprisals on the local community. While republican propaganda portrayed RIC reprisals and indiscipline as the work of the British recruits, Table 7 indicates that Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC were no more disciplined than their British comrades, seventeen per cent of the Irish ex-servicemen and eighteen per cent of the British recruits were fined for committing an infraction.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, seven per cent of the Irish and eight per cent of the British were dismissed from the RIC. These rates were very high in comparison with rates in the pre-war RIC when, in 1913, only 1.6% of the RIC recruits from 1913 were dismissed.<sup>77</sup> Irish ex-servicemen were certainly less disciplined than pre-war RIC recruits and they were also twice more likely to be dismissed than Irish recruits who came from civilian backgrounds. A sample of 304 civilians recruited to the force during the War of Independence suggests their dismissal rate was 3.3%.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, it seems that Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC were no more effective than British recruits. They did, however, have a higher propensity to see the conflict through to its conclusion. Table 8 shows that in total 14.7% resigned from the RIC whereas the figure was 21% for the British. The most common reasons stated for resignation were to better their position in life, family affairs, dissatisfied with conditions, ill health or to emigrate. It is also noteworthy that while 2% of British recruits died during the conflict, the figure was almost double for Irish ex-servicemen, suggesting that either they were more likely to be targeted by the IRA or that they were more willing to put their life at risk than British recruits.

#### **IV. Conclusion**



Irish ex-servicemen of the First World War were clearly present within both the RIC and the IRA and, in some cases, played significant roles within the Irish War of Independence. The cohort analysis offered in this chapter, based on samples of ex-servicemen identified in the two organisations has revealed a number of important trends. Ex-servicemen in the RIC differed greatly in background from traditional recruits to the force. They came from all over Ireland, yet 30% of them had been living in Britain before joining up. There was a much larger proportion of Protestants in comparison with the pre-war RIC, meanwhile the majority of the recruits were unskilled workers and not from farming backgrounds. Irish ex-servicemen mainly joined because they needed employment, because of family tradition, or through professional inclination. Often a mix of all these factors directed their decision. They had a similar rate of indiscipline as British ex-servicemen in the RIC, but they were less likely to resign than their British colleagues. Indeed, the majority of these Irish ex-servicemen were still in the RIC when it disbanded in 1922.

Ex-servicemen in the IRA, meanwhile, generally resembled the typical recruit to the British forces: they were young males who came from working class backgrounds. Common motives for joining the British forces included employment, adventure or to secure Home Rule for Ireland. What makes them different from the majority of ex-servicemen, however, was that they mostly came from Munster or Dublin where they had family relations, friends and neighbours who had joined the IRA. Therefore, they were subjected to strong collective pressure to follow their peers. These connections also soothed over potential problems, centred on notions of disloyalty to the revolutionary cause, that could otherwise have been attributed to their service with the British. Once they had joined the IRA, they made a contribution disproportionate to their numbers. They were responsible for training and leading a significant number of the IRA's active service units. They also formed an important

part of Michael Collins intelligence network. It is, therefore, a great irony of history that these men, veterans not only of the First World War but also veterans who had risked so much for the republican cause, became the forgotten soldiers in the new state's narrative of the War of Independence.

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<sup>1</sup> David Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland, 1900-1922', in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds), *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 388, 397, 501n. I would like to acknowledge the Irish Research Council for funding my Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellowship from where this research emanates.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Jane Leonard, 'Getting them at last: the IRA and ex-servicemen', in David Fitzpatrick (ed), *Revolution? Ireland 1917-1923* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 118-29; Leonard, 'Survivors', in John Horne (ed.), *Our War: Ireland and the Great War* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2008), pp. 209-223; Joseph Brady and Patrick Lynch, 'The Irish Sailors' and Soldiers' Land Trust and its Killester nemesis', *Irish Geography*, 42, 3 (2009), pp. 261-92; Brian Hughes, *Defying the IRA: Intimidation, Communities and Coercion during the Irish Revolution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016). Some recent research has challenged the notion that ex-servicemen were targeted by the IRA because of their military background: Paul Taylor, *Heroes or Traitors? Experiences of Southern Irish Soldiers Returning from the Great War 1919-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Pádraig Óg Ó Ruairc, *Truce: Murder Myth and the last days of the Irish War of Independence* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Steven O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21.

<sup>4</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland', p. 400; Eunan O'Halpin, 'Counting terror: Bloody Sunday and the dead of the Irish revolution', in David Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Terror in Ireland 1916-1923* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2012), p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> Steven O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the IRA, 1919-21.

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<sup>6</sup> Irish Military Archives [Hereafter IMA], S/D/G (1), ‘List of Ex-Britishers in Commands and Services, 1923’.

<sup>7</sup> See Steven O’Connor, *Irish Officers in the British Forces, 1922-45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> The collection is digitised, see: <http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection-1916-1923> (Accessed 15 August 2018)

<sup>9</sup> The Bureau of Military History [Hereafter BMH] collection is digitised, see: <http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921> (Accessed 15 August 2018).

<sup>10</sup> O’Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the IRA, 1919-21.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Novick, *Conceiving Revolution: Irish Nationalist Propaganda during the First World War* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 51-71.

<sup>12</sup> The original register is stored at The National Archives [Hereafter TNA], HO 184/37-42.

<sup>13</sup> TNA, WO 363, Records for soldiers in the British army, including enlistment forms, medical history, list of postings and discipline record; TNA, WO 364, Pension records; TNA, WO 372, Medal card index. For those awarded the 1914/1915 Star, the index cards also recorded when the soldier had joined the British Expeditionary Force in France.

<sup>14</sup> Eve Morrison, ‘The Bureau of Military History and female republican activism, 1913-23’, in Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (ed.), *Gender and Power in Irish history* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. 59-83.

<sup>15</sup> O’Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the IRA, 1919-21.

<sup>16</sup> Richard van Emden, *Boy Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Peter Hart, ‘The Geography of Revolution in Ireland 1917-1923’, *Past and Present*, 155, 1/4 (1997), pp. 142-76.

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- <sup>18</sup> Steven O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the IRA, 1919-21; 1911 census; Patrick Callan, 'Recruiting for the British army in Ireland during the First World War', *Irish Sword*, 17 (1987), p. 53.
- <sup>19</sup> Peter Hart, 'The social structure of the Irish Republican Army, 1916–1923', *The Historical Journal*, 42, 1/4 (March 1999), pp. 210-211; O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the IRA, 1919-21.
- <sup>20</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland', pp. 388-9.
- <sup>21</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the IRA, 1919-21; 1926 census.
- <sup>22</sup> IMA, BMH, Peter Gough, witness statement 401; TNA, WO 363, Peter Gough's attestation form.
- <sup>23</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland', p. 386.
- <sup>24</sup> IMA, BMH, Patrick J Paul, witness statement 877.
- <sup>25</sup> See Steven O'Connor, 'The pleasure culture of war in independent Ireland, 1922-45', *War in History*, 22, 1/4 (January 2015), pp. 66-86.
- <sup>26</sup> Tom Barry, *Guerilla Days in Ireland* (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1981), p. 2.
- <sup>27</sup> IMA, BMH, Joseph Clancy, witness statement 1370. Clancy's citation for the distinguished conduct medal appears in the *Edinburgh Gazette*, 2 December 1919, p. 3770.
- <sup>28</sup> Hart, 'Social structure of the Irish Republican Army', pp. 228-9.
- <sup>29</sup> IMA, BMH, Joseph Clancy, witness statement 1370.
- <sup>30</sup> IMA, BMH, Peter Gough, witness statement 401.
- <sup>31</sup> TNA, WO 363, Gough to War Office, 7 March 1937.
- <sup>32</sup> IMA, BMH, Patrick Keane, witness statement 1300.
- <sup>33</sup> Barry, *Guerilla Days*, p. 1.
- <sup>34</sup> IMA, BMH, Patrick J Paul, witness statement 877.

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<sup>35</sup> Pauric J. Dempsey and Shaun Boylan, ‘Dalton, (James) Emmet’ in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, <http://dib.cambridge.org.elib.tcd.ie> (accessed 2 October 2014). See also Jane Leonard, ‘The reaction of Irish officers in the British army to the Easter Rising of 1916’, in Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experience* (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), pp. 256-68.

<sup>36</sup> Meda Ryan, *Tom Barry: IRA Freedom Fighter* (Dublin: Mercier, 2003), pp. 26-7.

<sup>37</sup> TNA, WO 363, Soldier record for Tom Barry.

<sup>38</sup> IMA, BMH, Thomas Ryan, witness statement 783. During the conflict in Ireland several deserters from the British army joined the IRA. For example, Peter Monaghan, a Scottish private in the Royal Engineers, joined the IRA’s 3<sup>rd</sup> West Cork Brigade and died in action against the British army at Crossbarry on 19 March 1921. The conduct sheet in his British service record is filled with punishments for being away without leave but in the IRA he became an dedicated engineer, making mines for the IRA’s roadside ambushes. See WO 364, Peter Monaghan file and IMA, BMH, Con Flynn, witness statement 1621.

<sup>39</sup> IMA, BMH, Thomas Ryan, witness statement 783.

<sup>40</sup> O’Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the IRA, 1919-21.

<sup>41</sup> IMA, BMH, Thomas McShea, witness statement 782.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), pp. 210-215. See also the controversy surrounding the ambush in Eve Morrison, ‘Kilmichael revisited: Tom Barry and the “false surrender”’, David Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Terror in Ireland 1916-1923* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2012), pp. 158-80.

<sup>43</sup> IMA, BMH, Patrick A. Mulcahy, witness statement 1468.

<sup>44</sup> Hughes, *Defying the IRA*, pp. 21-39.

<sup>45</sup> This figure includes 1,968 recruits to the Auxiliary Division of the RIC.

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<sup>46</sup> See Erksine Childers quoted in D. M. Leeson, *The Black and Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 193.

<sup>47</sup> This data is taken from TNA, HO 184/37-42, RIC General Register.

<sup>48</sup> IMA, BMH, James Maloney, witness statement 1525.

<sup>49</sup> John D. Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary: An Oral History* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, 1990), interviews with George Crawford and Robert Crossett, pp. 112-13; interviews of John Fails pp. 102-3. and Joseph Thompson, p. 110.

<sup>50</sup> Leeson, *Black and Tans*, pp. 23, 244n.

<sup>51</sup> Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland', pp. 399, 404.

<sup>52</sup> Steven O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21.

<sup>53</sup> Leeson, *Black and Tans*, pp. 68-9.

<sup>54</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21.

<sup>55</sup> Callan, 'Recruiting for the British army', p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Steven O'Connor, Database of pre-war recruits to the RIC, 1913.

<sup>57</sup> Hughes, *Defying the IRA*, pp. 21-39.

<sup>58</sup> Steven O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the ADRIC, 1919-21.

<sup>59</sup> O'Connor, *Irish Officers in the British Forces*, pp. 3-11, 42-9.

<sup>60</sup> O'Connor, Database of pre-war recruits to the RIC, 1913.

<sup>61</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21; O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the ADRIC, 1919-21.

<sup>62</sup> Ex-service recruits that were born abroad to Irish parents and moved back to Ireland as young children.

<sup>63</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21; O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the ADRIC, 1919-21.

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<sup>64</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21; O'Connor, Database of pre-war recruits to RIC, 1913. Temporary cadets of the ADRIC have not been included here as the only occupation recorded in the RIC register was 'ex-officer'.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Brewer, *Royal Irish Constabulary*, p. 105.

<sup>66</sup> TNA, HO 184/40, RIC General Register, p. 78.

<sup>67</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21.

<sup>68</sup> Leeson, *Black and Tans*, pp. 74-6.

<sup>69</sup> Jim Herlihy, *The Royal Irish Constabulary: A Short History and Genealogical Guide* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), p.100.

<sup>70</sup> O'Connor, Database of pre-war recruits to the RIC, 1913.

<sup>71</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Brewer, *Royal Irish Constabulary*, p. 101. The RIC register records Fails's date of appointment as 2 December 1919. TNA, HO 184/36, RIC General Register, p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Brewer, *Royal Irish Constabulary*, p. 105.

<sup>74</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21; Leeson, *Black and Tans*, pp. 81-2; O'Connor, Database of pre-war recruits to RIC, 1913. The ADRIC register does not detail punishments for the majority of recruits.

<sup>75</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21; Leeson, *Black and Tans*, p. 81. The ADRIC register does not provide details of the fates for the majority of recruits, making a comparison impossible.

<sup>76</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish ex-servicemen in the RIC, 1919-21; Leeson, *Black and Tans*, pp. 82, 192-4.

<sup>77</sup> O'Connor, Database of pre-war recruits to RIC, 1913.

<sup>78</sup> O'Connor, Database of Irish civilian recruits to the RIC, 1919-21.