
Forgotten Soldiers : Ireland's Great War Veterans in the Irish Revolution 1919-21

Steven O'connor*†¹

¹Trinity College Dublin – Irlande

Résumé

About 200,000 Irish people served in the British armed forces during the Great War. In 1919 an estimated 98,000 of them returned to Ireland after demobilisation. Current historical scholarship on these Great War veterans has tended to focus on either republican campaigns of violence against the veterans, or the economic and social problems that they faced. This focus 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.

This was not the case. Irish veterans actively participated on both sides of the conflict. Contrary to popular opinion, the additional forces raised by the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) to quell the insurrection – ‘the Black and Tans’ – were not composed purely of British ex-servicemen recruited from British cities. About 10% of the 14,000 personnel recruited by the RIC during the conflict were Irish ex-servicemen. On the other side, several hundred ex-servicemen joined the Irish Republican Army and at least 16 of them died during the conflict.

The question this paper will attempt to answer is who were these forgotten soldiers? Based on the service records of a large sample of veterans this paper will examine trends in their social and military backgrounds. It will explore their motives and whether they had been radicalised by the violence they had witnessed on the battlefields of the Great War. In terms of identity, the existence of these veterans challenged the advanced nationalists' belief that Irish identity should be constructed in opposition to Britain. The veterans were a reminder that in many communities around Ireland a tradition of service to the crown was as prominent as the tradition of resistance, if not more so. Therefore, these veterans represented the shared experiences and connections of Britain and Ireland, and in giving a voice to this forgotten group this paper will highlight the alternative definitions of Irish identity that existed in post-war Irish society.

*Intervenant

†Auteur correspondant: