IRELAND

1922

INDEPENDENCE,
PARTITION,
CIVIL WAR

— A LEVEL EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES —

Published with key support from the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media under the Decade of Centenaries 2012–2023 Programme.

An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán
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Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The year 1922 in Ireland was pivotal; it witnessed three major events that ushered in the final phase of Ireland's revolution – the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty leading to the establishment of the Irish Free State, the final confirmation of partition when Northern Ireland opted out of that Free State settlement, and the outbreak of the Irish Civil War.

This teaching resource is based on *Ireland 1922: Independence, Partition, Civil War* (edited by Darragh Gannon and Fearghal McGarry, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2022), which consists of fifty concise and illustrated essays, each of which addresses a particular event that took place in 1922 to explore a broader theme related to the Irish revolution or its legacy.

This resource has been designed for the A Level history course in Northern Ireland and supports A2/2 Option 4: 'the Partition of Ireland 1900–1925'. It consists of three topics from *Ireland 1922*, with each resource comprising two historiographical interpretations for comparison, an exam-style primary source question, additional primary sources for classroom discussion, and suggested further reading. Interpretations from *Ireland 1900–25,* CCEA A2 Level History by Russell Rees have been generously provided by Colourpoint: https://colourpointeducational.com.

These resources provide supplemental material and new perspectives for students and teachers studying the Partition of Ireland; they allow students to explore the contemporary and historical issues raised by events that took place throughout Ireland in the year 1922 and build upon the course material's emphasis on the interpretation of secondary source material and primary source analysis.

KEY DATES

- 6 December 1921: Signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty
- 7 January 1922: Dáil Éireann passes the Anglo-Irish Treaty
- 14 January 1922: Establishment of the Provisional Government
- 21 January 1922: First Craig–Collins 'pact'
- 24 March 1922: McMahon killings
- 26 March 1922: Meeting of the IRA 'Army Convention'
- 30 March 1922: Second Craig–Collins 'pact'
- 7 April 1922: Special Powers Act passed by the Northern Ireland government
- 14 April 1922: Seizure of the Four Courts by anti-Treaty IRA garrison
- 2–20 May 1922: Joint Free State Army–IRA 'Northern offensive'
- 20 May 1922: Agreement of election 'pact' between pro- and anti-Treaty Sinn Féin
- 1 June 1922: Establishment of the Royal Ulster Constabulary
- 18 June 1922: Pro-Treaty Sinn Féin candidates win the general election
- 22 June 1922: Assassination of Sir Henry Wilson by anti-Treaty IRA in London
- 26 June 1922: Kidnapping of Free State General J.J. O'Connell by Four Courts IRA garrison
- 28 June 1922: Firing on Four Courts IRA garrison by Free State Army
- 28 June – 5 July 1922: 'Battle of Dublin'
- 5 July 1922: Killing of Cathal Brugha by Free State Army in Dublin
- 31 July 1922: Killing of Harry Boland by Free State Army in Skerries, Co. Dublin
- 10 August 1922: Capture of Cork city by Free State Army
- 12 August 1922: Death of Arthur Griffith
- 22 August 1922: Killing of Michael Collins by anti-Treaty IRA in Cork
- 28 September 1922: Army (Special Powers) Resolution passed by the Dáil
- 24 November 1922: Execution of Erskine Childers by Provisional Government

- 6 December 1922: The Irish Free State constitution becomes law
- 7 December 1922: Northern Ireland 'opts out' of the Irish Free State
- 8 December 1922: Execution of Rory O'Connor, Liam Mellows, Dick Barrett and Joe McKelvey by Irish Free State in Mountjoy Prison
- 10 April 1923: Killing of Liam Lynch by Free State Army in Tipperary
- 27 April 1923: Formation of Cumann na nGaedheal
- 24 May 1923: IRA Chief of Staff Frank Aiken orders ceasefire

The Northern Ireland Community Relations Council's Decade of Centenaries timeline provides an overview of events in Ulster until 1925, with accompanying illustrations and primary source material: http://centenariestimeline.com/index.html

1.
THE TREATY DEBATES

INTRODUCTION

The truce of 11 July 1921 ended the Irish War of Independence, paving the way for the establishment of formal peace negotiations between the British government and Sinn Féin; the Treaty negotiations took place in London between 11 October and 6 December 1921.

In the face of a renewed threat of war from Prime Minister David Lloyd George, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed on 6 December 1921. The seven-member Dáil cabinet voted to recommend the Treaty to the Dáil by a margin of four to three: Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, Robert Barton and W.T. Cosgrave voted in favour, while Éamon de Valera, Cathal Brugha and Austin Stack voted against.

As the Dáil debated the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the mood in the University College Dublin lecture theatre at Earlsfort Terrace in Dublin's city centre became incredibly tense. The Dáil debates have long been seen as a climactic point in the history of the Irish revolution; they were the moment when the camaraderie of the republican movement was fractured and the bitterness and divisions of the Civil War began.

These debates have been the focus for many historians, with particular attention being paid to the constitutional arguments both for and against the proposed treaty, and the gender dynamics, with the majority of female speakers in opposition, and, latterly, the class dimensions of the treaty split. Partition was not a principal concern – it had already become a reality in May 1921 under the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 – except in regard to the exact geographical boundaries of the new Free State and Northern Ireland. Alongside these questions, however, the most noted feature of the Treaty Debates was the tone of the exchanges.

Ultimately, on 7 January 1922, the Dáil voted to approve the treaty by a vote of 64 to 57 but its opponents refused to accept this result; this caused a split in the republican movement that spread from the Dáil to Sinn Féin and then the IRA, eventually leading to the Irish Civil War (28 June 1922 – 24 May 1923).

INTERPRETATIONS

Interpretation A

Extract from *Ireland 1922: Independence, Partition, Civil War* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2021): Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, 'Emotions in the Treaty Debates'*

> The rhetoric of the treaty debates would form a significant part of how the Irish public learned about the emerging split in the republican movement. Despite the bitterness which was the abiding memory of the debates, the emotion most frequently expressed in the debates was a love of Ireland, and of each other, whilst fear was present in the background in the chamber. The prospect of a split and of sundering the political community which had been forged through the revolutionary process was in the minds of most members of the Dáil. The bitter tone and anger of many of the speeches have been remarked upon, such as Brugha's accusations against Collins, where clearly his personal dislike fuelled his political opposition, whilst Arthur Griffith's bad-tempered responses throughout the debates led to his dismissal of Erskine Childers as a 'damned Englishman'. A feature of the disintegration of republican unity in the months leading up to the outbreak of civil war was the atmosphere of recrimination, anger, and accusations of bad faith that dominated the Treaty Debates in both public statements and in private conversations. This complex mixture of emotions can be easily identified in the public statements made by both sides as Ireland slid towards a divisive conflict amongst former comrades following the aftermath of the treaty debates. Historians have suggested that the Treaty Debates were a decisive moment in the emotional history of the Irish revolution. This interpretation emphasises the importance of how emotions were expressed and used as a means to support or to undermine different political arguments, throughout the revolutionary period by both sides of the debates.

Interpretation B

Extract from *Ireland 1905–25*, Volume 1 by Russell Rees (Colourpoint, 1998)

> In opposing the Treaty, Éamon de Valera dwelt on symbolism, such as the Oath and the role of the King, and his attack on the Treaty lacked the clarity of some of his anti-Treaty supporters. During the Treaty Debates de Valera was supported by Brugha, Stack and Childers and some of the women deputies whose romantic vision of an Irish Republic remained a powerful emotion. The most important contribution in favour of acceptance came from Collins with his pragmatic approach and he argued that the Treaty would ultimately give Ireland the chance to achieve freedom from Britain. This speech made a powerful impression within the Dáil, whilst Collins used his influence to encourage support for the Treaty from the IRB and the IRA. By January 1922 the Catholic hierarchy and the press had clearly given their support to acceptance of the Treaty which influenced public opinion in Ireland. In January 1922, Collins now suggested that deputies opposed to the Treaty should abstain in the vote on the Treaty which would uphold their

*Because of the nature of the editorial process, extracts in this document may differ slightly from corresponding passages in the published book.

republican principles and avoid a damaging political split. Despite some pressure de Valera rejected the offer from Collins and instead introduced his own alternative, Document No 2. When Griffith released the earlier version of Document No 2 to the press, he undermined the position of de Valera. To defend his position, de Valera raised political temperatures with an emotive speech to the Dáil on 6 January 1922 as the Treaty Debates drew to a conclusion.

Exam-style question:

Study Interpretation A and Interpretation B

Using the interpretations and your understanding of the historical context, which of these different interpretations of the Treaty Debates do you find more convincing?

Guidance on evaluating interpretations:

- Assess and evaluate what the historians are saying, stating strengths and weaknesses of each interpretation
- State whether you agree or disagree with their interpretations and explain why
- Use relevant knowledge to support your arguments
- Present clear and substantiated conclusions concerning which interpretation is more convincing
- Don't be afraid to challenge a historian's point of view using relevant contextual knowledge to support your argument.

Questions for discussion:

- What role do you think emotions play in creating a watershed moment such as the Treaty Debates?
- Why were the Treaty Debates so divisive?
- What made the Treaty Debates the watershed moment in the lead-up to the Civil War?

PRIMARY SOURCE EVALUATION

Source 1

Extract from a speech made by Kathleen Clarke, Sinn Féin TD and widow of Easter Rising leader Tom Clarke, during a debate in the Dáil on the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 22 December 1921 (Dáil Éireann: www.oireachtas.ie)

> I rise to support the motion of the President to reject this Treaty. It is to me the simple question of right and wrong. It is a surrender of all our national ideals [...] Arthur Griffith said he had brought back peace with England, and freedom to Ireland. I can only say it is not the kind of freedom I have looked forward to, and, if this Treaty is ratified, the result will be a divided people; the same old division will go on; those who will enter the British Empire and those who will not, and so England's old game of divide and conquer goes on. God, the tragedy of it! [...] there is not power enough to force me into taking that Oath [...] I took an Oath to the Irish Republic, solemnly, reverently, meaning every word. I shall never go back from that.

Source 2

Extract from a speech made by Arthur Griffith, Minister for Foreign Affairs, during a debate in the Dáil on the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 7 January 1922 (Dáil Éireann: www.oireachtas.ie)

> Does this Treaty give away the interests and the honour of Ireland? I say it does not. I say it serves the interests of Ireland; it is not dishonourable to Ireland. It is not an ideal thing; it could be better [...] You can take this Treaty and make it the basis of an Irish Ireland. You can reject this Treaty and you can throw Ireland back into where she was years ago, into where she was before [...] the sacrifice that the dead men have made raised her up; the men who died for the last four or five years made this Treaty possible; without them it could not have been done. You are going to give away the fruits of their sacrifices, and to condemn the other young men of Ireland to go out on a fruitless struggle [...] I can see no better way than this Treaty; no better way for the Irish people.

Exam-style question:

> 1(a) Use Source 1 and Source 2 and your knowledge of this period.
> Which of the sources would an historian value most as evidence in a study of the causes of the Irish Civil War?
>
> 1(b) Use Source 1 and Source 2 and other evidence you have studied.
> How far do the sources support the view that divisions within Sinn Féin caused the Irish Civil War?

Guidance on analysing sources:

Think about who / what / when / why:
- Who wrote it?
- What does it say?
- When was it written: close to the event or some time after?
- Why was it written? To persuade or inform?
- Think about the strengths and weaknesses of the sources

For further guidance on evaluating primary sources, see CCEA GCE History Student Guidance, A2/2: https://ccea.org.uk/

PRIMARY SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION

Source A

Extract from a speech made by Patrick McCartan, Sinn Féin TD, during a debate in the Dáil on the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 20 December 1921 (Dáil Éireann: www.oireachtas.ie)

> What are the objectionable features of the Treaty? That the Republic was betrayed. It was betrayed when it was publicly stated we were not doctrinaire Republicans. Another objectionable feature is Partition [...] Ulster was betrayed. The Nationalists of Ulster were betrayed before the delegates ever went to London, and the Cabinet, one and all, are responsible [...] The Republic of which President de Valera was President is dead. I submit it is dead, and that the men who signed the document opposite Englishmen wrote its epitaph in London. It is dead naturally because it depended on the unity of the Irish people. It depended on the unity of the Cabinet. It depended on the unity of this Dáil.

Questions for discussion:

1) Why does McCartan claim the Republic is dead?
2) How, according to this speech, was Ulster 'betrayed'?
3) Who does McCartan blame for this 'betrayal'? Why?
4) What were the other central 'objectionable features' of the Treaty?

Source B

Extract from a speech made by Margaret Pearse, Sinn Féin TD, during a debate in the Dáil on the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 4 January 1922 (Dáil Éireann: www.oireachtas.ie)

> I rise to support the motion of our President for the rejection of this Treaty. My reasons for doing so are various, but my first reason for doing so is on my sons' account. It has been said here on several occasions that Pádraig Pearse would have accepted this Treaty. I deny it. As his mother I deny it, and on his account I will not accept it. Neither would his brother Willie accept it [...] Even the Black-and-Tans alone would not frighten me as much as if I accepted that Treaty; because I feel in my heart that the ghosts of my sons would haunt me [...] Pádraig Pearse would not have accepted a Treaty like this with only two-thirds of his country in it. No matter what anyone says I feel that I and others here have a right to speak in the name of their dead.

Questions for discussion:

1) How does Pearse invoke the memory of past revolutionaries to support her point?
2) Why does she believe her son would not have accepted the Treaty?
3) What role does gender play in how Pearse presents her criticism of the Treaty?
4) Are impassioned speeches such as this effective in making a point?

Source C

Extract from a speech made by Liam Mellows, Sinn Féin, during a debate in the Dáil on the Anglo-Irish Treaty, 4 January 1922 (Dáil Éireann: www.oireachtas.ie)

> I stand definitely against this so-called Treaty and the arguments in favour of acceptance [...] The plenipotentiaries had no mandate to sign away the independence of this country as this Treaty does [...] We are hearing a great deal here about the will of the people. The will of the people, we are told by one of the Deputies who spoke here, is that this Treaty shall be ratified. The will of the people! I found that the people who are in favour of the Treaty are not in favour of the Treaty on its merits, but are in favour of the Treaty because they fear what is to happen if it be rejected. That is not the will of the people, that is the fear of the people. The will of the people was when the people declared for a Republic.

Questions for discussion:

1) How does Liam Mellows explain public support for the Treaty?
2) Why does he label it a 'so-called' Treaty?
3) What does this speech reveal about the divisions within the Dáil?
4) How persuasive is Mellows' argument about the will of the people?

FURTHER READING

Kathleen Clarke, *Revolutionary woman: my fight for Irish freedom* (edited by Helen Litton) (Dublin, 1991)

Linda Connolly (ed.), *Women and the Irish Revolution: feminism, activism, violence* (Dublin, 2020)

Diarmaid Ferriter and Susannah Riordan (eds), *Years of turbulence: the Irish Revolution and its aftermath* (Dublin, 2015)

Frank Gallagher, *The Anglo-Irish Treaty* (London, 1965)

Jason Knirck, *Imagining Ireland's independence: the debates over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921* (Plymouth, 2006)

Jason Knirck, *Women of the Dáil: gender, republicanism and the Anglo-Irish Treaty* (Dublin, 2006)

Sinéad McCoole, *No ordinary women: Irish female activists in the revolutionary years, 1900–1923* (Dublin, 2003)

Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (eds), *Irish women and nationalism: soldiers, new women and wicked hags*, 2nd edition (Dublin, 2019)

Liam Weeks and Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh (eds), *The Treaty: debating and establishing the Irish state* (Newbridge, 2018)

2.
THE BELFAST 'POGROMS'
THE McMAHON MURDERS, 24 MARCH 1922

INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of partition and the intensification of the War of Independence in the South, sectarian violence erupted in Belfast in the early 1920s, with almost 500 people killed in the city between July 1920 and July 1922.

Unlike in the rest of Ireland, however, the violence in Belfast consisted largely of urban rioting, with almost 80 per cent of the victims being civilians, as opposed to members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or the security forces. Attacks by the IRA on the security forces were frequently met with vicious reprisals from loyalists who targeted Catholic communities in Belfast.

Despite the signing of the truce on 11 July 1921 between the IRA and the British Crown forces, violence intensified in Belfast that summer, the brunt of it borne by the local Catholic community, which constituted 25 per cent of the city's population. While Belfast's middle-class leaders of constitutional nationalism hoped that a policy of 'recognition' of the Northern parliament and its government would result in an end to this violence, this view was entirely out of step with the experiences of Catholics in working-class areas of the city, given events on the ground.

Of these events, the attack that shocked contemporaries most was the murder of a prosperous Catholic publican, Owen McMahon, together with four of his sons (aged between 15 and 26 years) and a barman who was present during the attack at the family's home in north Belfast in the early hours of 24 March 1922. The killings were seen by many as a reprisal for the shooting of two policemen (of the Ulster Special Constabulary) the day before. News of the attack reverberated throughout Ireland and beyond.

KEY DATES

- 30 March 1922: Second Craig–Collins Pact
- 7 April 1922: Special Powers Act is passed
- 1 June 1922: Royal Ulster Constabulary begins operations

This is a useful timeline of events in Ulster: http://centenariestimeline.com/index.html

INTERPRETATIONS

Interpretation A

Edited extract from *Ireland 1922: Independence, Partition, Civil War* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2021): Laurence Marley, 'Class and Killing in Belfast: the McMahon Murders'

> Winston Churchill himself had urged the arming of Protestants in Ulster as a means of defeating the IRA. This led to the formation of the state-sponsored Ulster Special Constabulary, the most notorious section of which was the B-Specials. What was unleashed by this new strategy in 1922 were concerted attacks on republicans and Catholics generally, much of it directed in Belfast by RIC District Inspector, John Nixon It is generally accepted that it was this unit that planned and executed the McMahon attack. Joe Devlin, MP for West Belfast and leading nationalist politician in the north, had been protesting about Crown force involvement in the killing of Catholics, mainly in Belfast. The attack on the McMahons stands out. There seems to be little doubt that it was principally designed to send out the unambiguous message that even a Catholic of Owen McMahon's social standing and wealth was no longer off limits as a target. No matter how shocking the McMahon attack was in terms of scale, it was the class dimension that gave the attack its real significance, and the rationale for those who planned it. Speaking in the House of Commons on 28 March 1922, Joe Devlin MP declared that the assassinations had 'shocked almost the entire world'. He even read from the leading unionist paper, the *Belfast Telegraph*, which described the deed as 'the most terrible assassination that has yet stained the name of Belfast'. The funeral of McMahon and his sons attracted at least 10,000 mourners, among whom were members of the Catholic political and clerical elite. Protestants, particularly from the business community, were also in attendance. This murder served as a rallying point for a Catholic community that was now more fearful than ever. Only in one part of the United Kingdom, where the minority status of Catholics derived from the crude demographic and sectarian arithmetic of partition, were McMahon's rights of citizenship not assured nor protected by political leaders in London.

Interpretation B

Extract from *Ireland 1905–25*, Volume 1 by Russell Rees (Colourpoint, 1998)

> With the transfer of security powers, the new Unionist Government had inherited an explosive security situation with the new state facing a serious IRA threat by the end of 1921. The first six months of 1922 witnessed very serious levels of sectarian violence which claimed the lives of 236 people, much of this sectarian violence took place in Belfast. Catholic losses roughly outnumbered Protestant losses by two to one. Attempts by James Craig and Michael Collins to deal with the worsening situation in the North failed as their pacts of January and March 1922 collapsed. There were a series of attacks in February during which 31 people lost their lives, many in Belfast, with Catholics bearing the brunt of this sectarian violence. In March 1922

alone 60 lives were lost in Belfast alone as the political situation worsened. This included the infamous attack on the McMahon family in which the police were widely alleged to have been involved at the time. Four members of the prominent business family were gunned down and killed in their own homes, whilst their youngest child only survived by hiding in the kitchen. In the week following the McMahon murders a bomb was thrown into the home of a Protestant family in Belfast, killing a man and his two young sons. Concerned by this sickening wave of violence, Winston Churchill brought Craig and Collins together again at the end of March 1922, without success. Collins blamed the security advisor to the new Unionist Government for the persecution of Northern Catholics since his appointment in February 1922. Sir Henry Wilson MP had been given this post by his friend Craig. The Unionist Government responded to the growing security crisis with the introduction of the Special Powers Bill on 7 April 1922.

Exam-style question:

Study Interpretation A and Interpretation B

Using the interpretations and your understanding of the historical context, which of these different interpretations of the circumstances surrounding the McMahon murders do you find more convincing?

Guidance on evaluating interpretations:

- Assess and evaluate what the historians are saying, stating strengths and weaknesses of each interpretation
- State whether you agree or disagree with their interpretations and explain why
- Use relevant knowledge to support your arguments
- Present clear and substantiated conclusions concerning which interpretation is more convincing
- Don't be afraid to challenge a historian's point of view using relevant contextual knowledge to support your argument.

Questions for discussion:

- How important are the McMahon murders in helping us to understand the nature of sectarian violence in Belfast in the early 1920s?
- How accurate is the term 'pogrom' that is used to describe the sectarian violence in Belfast, 1920–22?
- To what extent was London rather than James Craig to blame for the failure to solve the political problems the North faced between January and April 1922?

PRIMARY SOURCE EVALUATION

Source 1

Sir James Craig, Prime Minister of the Northern Irish State, speaking in the Northern Irish House of Commons, quoted in the *Irish News*, 29 March 1922

> I cannot allow the charge to go out against the great Protestant community in Belfast that they are involved in these murders. The long and short of it is, they are not in any way to blame. They have been loyal to the Crown and Constitution, and I cannot allow charges to be made against them as a whole when they have stood provocation unparalleled in the history of the whole world. Therefore, do not let these very easily criticised and individual cases be made so much of in the press. If those people only knew of the provocation [endured] – did they think for a moment what it meant for two of our gallant men observing the peace of the city to have assassins steal up behind them in broad daylight, pull the trigger, and leave them lying on the ground. Sir, the less said about these things the better.

Source 2

'Extermination Plan in Belfast', *Irish Independent*, 22 April 1922, quoting a telegram from the Belfast Catholic Protection Committee to Winston Churchill and Austen Chamberlain

> "Belfast Catholics being gradually but certainly exterminated by murder, assault, and starvation. Their homes burned, their streets swept by snipers, making life unbearable, military forces inactive and the Special Police hostile. Northern Government is either responsible or inefficient. Your Government saved the lives of Armenians and Bulgarians. Belfast Catholics are getting worse treatment. Last two days here appalling" [...] More than 200 Catholic houses have been burned or looted; hundreds of Catholic families have been compelled to abandon their homes or business premises or both under threat of death. Members of respectable Catholic business families have been assassinated in their shops or private residences. A Catholic father, who was certainly not a Sinn Féiner, and five sons were taken from their beds and shot in their own home during curfew hours, when only Government forces had access to the streets.

Exam-style question:

> 1 (a) Use Source 1 and Source 2 and your knowledge of this period.
> Which of the sources would a historian value most as evidence in a study of the reality of violence in Belfast, 1920–22?
>
> 1 (b) Use Source 1 and Source 2 and other evidence you have studied.
> How far do the sources support the view that the McMahon murders were widely perceived as the worst witnessed in Ireland in the period?

Guidance on analysing sources:

Think about who/what/when/why:
- Who wrote it?
- What does it say?
- When was it written: close to the event or some time after?
- Why was it written? To persuade or inform?
- Think about the strengths and weaknesses of the sources.

For further guidance on evaluating primary sources, see CCEA GCE History Student Guidance, A2/2: https://ccea.org.uk/

PRIMARY SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION

Source A

Joseph Devlin, MP for West Belfast, speaking in the House of Commons on 28 March 1922 (House of Commons Hansard)

> I intend to-night to take advantage of this opportunity to raise the whole question of the appalling conditions in Belfast, the massacre of innocent and unoffending Catholic citizens, the continued bombing of women and children, the establishment of a system of wholesale terrorism amongst the Catholic minority in the city, culminating in the cold-blooded assassination of Mr. McMahon and his family, which has shocked almost the entire world [...] He was a leading merchant in the City of Belfast. He was a man who, if you were to go through the whole city would be regarded as the most unoffending citizen. He took no part in politics [...] at 1 o'clock in the morning, a band of assassins entered Mr. McMahon's house, dragged his wife and little niece out and forced them into a room, and murdered him and four of his sons and mortally wounded two others.

Questions for discussion:

1) Why was the murder of the McMahons deemed so shocking?
2) Is Devlin's description of the violence as a 'massacre' accurate?
3) Who does Devlin hold responsible for the murder of the McMahons?
4) Who were the 'band of assassins'?

Source B

Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, speaking in the House of Commons, 28 March 1922 (House of Commons Hansard)

> It is impossible to describe more powerfully and more horribly the massacre of the McMahon family than has been done in the quotations from a Unionist newspaper [the *Belfast Telegraph*] [...] I think one would have to search all over Europe to find instances of equal atrocity, barbarity, cold blooded, inhuman, cannibal vengeance—cannibal in all except the act of devouring the flesh of the victim—which will equal this particular event. But I can find other instances in other places in

> Ireland equalling it in horror [...] If we are to paint these horrors in lurid terms, with all the resources of powerful descriptive rhetoric, they will have to be painted on both sides.

Questions for discussion:

1) What is the significance of the murders being denounced in a Unionist newspaper?
2) Why does Churchill refer to other instances in Ireland 'equalling it in horror'?
3) What effect does focusing attention on other events have on the McMahon murders?
4) Does this document give a clear idea of the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland?

Source C

Ulster Herald, 1 April 1922

> Our Dublin Letter. – The Belfast atrocities have aroused the Irish capital to a deep sense of indignation [...] It is evident to everyone that the Belfast Government is either unwilling or unable to save the lives and property of the Catholic people. The murder of Catholic men, women and children has run into hundreds since the Pogrom first began, yet not a single Orange assassin has been brought to justice. The appalling brutality of the McMahon murders, while shocking the civilised world, has stirred the people of the twenty-six counties beyond anything that has previously happened in Ulster [...] It speaks well for the toleration of the people of Dublin that many prominent members of the Orange Order residing [there] have not suffered as a result of the revolting deeds of their brethren in Belfast.

Questions for discussion:

1) Why did the McMahon murders concern those in the 26 counties more than did previous events?
2) Who are the 'Orange assassins' to whom the newspaper refers?
3) Why does the *Ulster Herald*'s Dublin correspondent claim that the Belfast Government has not looked after its Catholic people?
4) How does the newspaper compare the inhabitants of Belfast and Dublin?

FURTHER READING

John D. Brewer, Chapter 3: 'Northern Ireland: 1921–1998', in *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600–1998: the mote and the beam* (Basingstoke, 1998). Available online through CAIN: https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/sectarian/brewer.htm

Kieran Glennon, *From pogrom to civil war: Tom Glennon and the Belfast IRA* (Cork, 2013)

Robert Lynch, *The Northern IRA and the early years of Partition* (Dublin, 2006)

Alan F. Parkinson, *Belfast's unholy war: the Troubles of the 1920s* (Dublin, 2004)

Eamon Phoenix, *Northern nationalism: nationalist politics, partition and the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, 1890–1940* (Belfast, 1994)

Margaret Ward, 'Gendered Memories and Belfast Cumann na mBan, 1917–1922' in Linda Connolly (ed.), *Women and the Irish Revolution: feminism, activism, violence* (Dublin, 2020)

Tim Wilson, '"The most terrible assassination that has yet stained the name of Belfast": the McMahon murders in context', *Irish Historical Studies* 37/145 (May 2010), 83–106

3.
THE ASSASSINATION OF SIR HENRY WILSON

INTRODUCTION

At 2.20 p.m. on Thursday, 22 June 1922 Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson MP, chief security advisor to the new Northern Irish government and former Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was shot dead on the doorstep of his Belgravia home in London by IRA Commandant Reggie Dunne and Volunteer Joe O'Sullivan. Wilson's was the first assassination of a Westminster MP since Spencer Perceval in 1812 and it both shocked and gripped public attention.

It also hastened the onset of the Irish Civil War as the British government placed responsibility for Wilson's killing on the anti-Treaty sections of the IRA, who had been occupying the Four Courts in Dublin since April 1922 in defiance of the pro-Treaty Provisional Government led by Michael Collins. Winston Churchill warned Collins that British troops would move against the IRA leadership at the Four Courts, whose presence there he considered a violation of the Treaty, if the Provisional Government themselves failed to act.

Reluctantly, Collins ordered Free State troops to attack the Four Courts on 28 June 1922, with the aid of British artillery. Fighting ensued in Dublin and the conflict quickly spread to the rest of the country – this is generally regarded as the start of the Civil War in Ireland.

INTERPRETATIONS

Interpretation A

Extract from *Ireland 1922: Independence, Partition, Civil War* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2021): Fearghal McGarry, 'An Irish tragedy: the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson'

> Dunne and O'Sullivan claimed in court that their actions were a spontaneous response to the Ulster Special Constabulary's reign of 'Orange Terror' against Belfast Catholics, which they (wrongly) blamed on Wilson. Republicans in London believed that the murder of Wilson had been ordered by Michael Collins whether as an IRA or IRB operation, before or after the Truce. Wilson, who epito-

mised British imperial repression in Ireland, was born in Longford. His IRA killers were Londoners. All had served in the British army during the First World War, where O'Sullivan had lost a leg. Dunne, who would lead the IRA in post-war London, enlisted in the British army after the Easter Rising. Addressing his jury, he attributed his actions in part to his role in the war fought for the right of small nations to self-determination. Wilson belonged to a Protestant, landowning, unionist family, and embodied an imperial Irish tradition that would not survive the revolutionary era in Ireland. Wilson's fate exemplifies one of the era's most enduring legacies: the narrowing of identities caused by political violence. Family experiences often diverged sharply from the political narratives which framed the public memory of the revolutionary dead. Although David Lloyd George reminded Westminster of his friendship with Wilson, his ministers were denounced as murderers by Lady Wilson whose diehard husband never forgave their willingness to settle with the IRA. Despite Wilson's regret at the splitting of the Union with Ireland, he was quickly claimed by Ulster Unionists as a 'founding martyr for the Northern Ireland state'. In contrast, and despite numerous appeals from republicans who argued that the Irish government bore 'a certain moral responsibility' for their actions, and the insistence of witnesses across the Civil War divide that they had acted on orders received, neither Dunne nor O'Sullivan's parents were judged to meet the criteria for the allowance paid to dependents of Volunteers who died in military service.

Interpretation B

Extract from *Ireland 1905–25*, Volume 1 by Russell Rees (Colourpoint, 1998)

The Irish people were not to have the final say on the Treaty after the election held on 16 June 1922. The militant republicans did not even wait for the announcement of the election results due on 24 June, by holding an army convention on 18 June. This led to a split within the Anti-Treaty IRA and its more hard-line republican members returned to the Four Courts which they had seized in April 1922, determined to oppose the Treaty and its supporters such as Collins. Events took a further twist with the murder of Sir Henry Wilson MP, outside his home in London on 22 June 1922 by members of the IRA. General Wilson, a former military officer, was also a Unionist MP for North Down and had been acting since February 1922 as a security advisor to the Northern Irish Government. In the opinion of Collins and many other nationalist leaders he was responsible for the many attacks against Northern Nationalists since early 1922. Various suggestions have been made by many historians about the actual decision to assassinate Wilson. Hard evidence is missing because Wilson's two assailants Dunne and O'Sullivan had been quickly apprehended and executed in London. Even during their questioning by the British authorities, they steadfastly refused to reveal the source from where their order to murder Wilson had emanated. The most likely answer was that the attack had been ordered by Collins as a direct response to the treatment of Catholics in the North by the new Unionist Government. Of course, none of this was suspected at the time and the new Provisional Government even issued a statement condemning the murder of Wilson. The British Government was outraged by the Wilson murder and they were quick to blame the anti-Treaty

IRA forces occupying the Four Courts building in Dublin. British Prime Minister Lloyd George gave orders on 23 June 1922 to draw up plans for swift military action against the Four Courts unless the new Dublin Government acted immediately against the Four Courts themselves, in response to the murder of Wilson.

Exam-style question:

Study Interpretation A and Interpretation B

Using the interpretations and your understanding of the historical context, which of these different interpretations of the circumstances surrounding and following Henry Wilson's assassination do you find more convincing?

Guidance on evaluating interpretations:

- Assess and evaluate what the historians are saying, stating strengths and weaknesses of each interpretation
- State whether you agree or disagree with their interpretations and explain why
- Use relevant knowledge to support your arguments
- Present clear and substantiated conclusions concerning which interpretation is more convincing
- Don't be afraid to challenge a historian's point of view using relevant contextual knowledge to support your argument.

Questions for discussion:

- What political developments in both parts of Ireland help explain why Sir Henry Wilson was assassinated in June 1922?
- Why can it be argued that the assassination of Henry Wilson helped lead to the outbreak of the Irish Civil War?
- Historian Keith Jeffery stated that 'in death, Henry Wilson remained a kind of founding martyr for the Northern Ireland state'. Discuss.
- What can this extract tell us about the narrowing of identities during this period?

PRIMARY SOURCE EVALUATION

Source 1

Reginald Dunne's speech, which he was prevented from making from the dock, was later published in the *Irish Independent*, 21 July 1922

> We [Dunne and O'Sullivan] have both been in the British Army. We both joined voluntarily for the purpose of taking human life in order that the principles for which this country stood should be upheld and preserved. These principles were self-determination and freedom for small nations. We came back from France to find that self-determination had been denied to Ireland. We found that our country was being divided into two countries – that a Government had been set up in the Belfast district, and that under that Government outrages were being perpetrated [...] The Irish nation knew Henry Wilson not so much as a great British Field-Marshal but as the man behind the Orange terror [...] He raised and organised a body of men known as the Ulster Special Constables, who are the principal agents in this campaign of terrorism. [...] The same principles for which we shed our blood in the battlefield of Europe led us to commit the act we are charged with. You cannot deprive us of the belief that what we have done was necessary to preserve the lives, the homes and the happiness of our countrymen in Ireland.

Source 2

Irish Times, 23 June 1922

> Our whole country ought to be in mourning today, not only for the death of a great Irishman, but for the harm and shame which, as we must fear, the manner of it will bring to Ireland. Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson was murdered yesterday in London, and all the circumstances suggest that the crime had its origin in the bitter conflicts and hatreds of Irish politics [...] The murder, whatever its motive may have been, is a cruel blow to Ireland. If it be proved that the assassins are Irishmen, much of the sympathy with which the British peoples are following the course of Irish settlement may be alienated [...] We fear that anger may breed hasty action [...] Until yesterday we had cause for hope that the relations between Northern and Southern Ireland soon would begin to improve [...] How tragically these hopes have been dashed by the murder of Sir Henry Wilson [...] It may provoke reprisals and counter-reprisals until not only Belfast, but the whole country, runs with bloodshed and collapses into a state of civil war. On the other hand, this detestable crime may be a means of stirring into activity all public influences that, realising the peril, are willing to make a last effort to save Ireland from disaster.

Exam-style question

1 (a) Use Source 1 and Source 2 and your knowledge of this period.
Which of the sources would a historian value most as evidence in a study of the historical context surrounding Henry Wilson's assassination?
1 (b) Use Source 1 and Source 2 and other evidence you have studied.
How far do the sources support the view that Henry Wilson's assassination hastened the onset of the Civil War?

Guidance on analysing sources:

Think about who/what/when/why:
- Who wrote it?
- What does it say?
- When was it written: close to the event or some time after?
- Why was it written? To persuade or inform?
- Think about the strengths and weaknesses of the sources

For further guidance on evaluating primary sources, see CCEA GCE History Student Guidance, A2/2: https://ccea.org.uk/

PRIMARY SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION

Source A

The Times (London), 23 June 1922

> Belfast. – General horror and indignation have been aroused here by the murder of Sir Henry Wilson. It is assumed in most quarters that the assassins are associated with the Sinn Féin movement. The *Telegraph* describes the murder as 'IRA's crowning crime'. Should this assumption prove ultimately correct the situation here will immediately become one of extreme gravity which it will tax Sir James Craig to the utmost to control. The daily murders, incendiarism, and other outrages have already inflamed popular opinion to a dangerous degree […] Sir Henry Wilson was universally respected and admired by the Unionists here … The general conviction that he has died for Ulster may, it is feared, result in some uncontrollable sections of the exasperated majority taking revenge upon their opponents.

Questions for discussion:

1) Where is the author of this extract writing from?
2) Who does the extract suggest was responsible for the assassination?
3) What events had already 'inflamed popular opinion to a dangerous degree'?
4) What did the *Times* fear would happen as a result of Wilson's murder?

Source B

Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies, speaking in the House of Commons, 26 June 1922 (House of Commons Hansard)

> A much stricter reckoning must rule henceforward. The ambiguous position of the so-called Irish Republican Army, intermingled as it is with the Free State troops, is an affront to the Treaty. The presence in Dublin, in violent occupation of the Four Courts, of a band of men styling themselves the Headquarters of the Republican Executive, is a gross breach and defiance of the Treaty. From this nest of anarchy and treason […] murderous outrages are stimulated and encouraged […] The time has come […] for us to make a request […] to this strengthened Irish Government

> and new Irish Parliament, in express terms, that this sort of thing must come to an end. If it does not come to an end […] we shall resume full liberty of action in any direction that may seem proper.

Questions for discussion:

1) What events is Churchill referring to when he says 'murderous outrages'?
2) Who does he blame for planning and undertaking these 'outrages'?
3) Why does Churchill state that the Treaty had been violated? What course of action does he propose?
4) What significant event followed soon after?

Source C

Witness statement of Mary McGeehin, Cumann na mBan member (1917–) and Secretary of the Gaelic League of London (1920–), regarding the plan for the shooting of Sir Henry Wilson, dated 14 November 1953 (WS 902, Mary McGeehin, Military Archives of Ireland, Bureau of Military History)

> The story we heard at the time was that he [Dunne] was arranging with the Treaty people in Dublin at the highest level to get rid of Wilson who was torturing the Catholics in the North […] Among the English, feelings about the whole matter were very mixed. They were very embarrassed by the pogroms in the north of Ireland which had been ordered by Wilson […] The expectation was that the two boys would be let off with a life sentence. But the bigoted anti-Irish crowd would not be satisfied with anything less than their execution and the government yielded.

Questions for discussion:

1) What perspective does this source reflect, and how does this effect how we should evaluate it?
2) Why, according to Mary McGeehin, was Henry Wilson targeted?
3) Who reportedly ordered the assassination?
4) What does this document reveal about British views of the event?
   Note: British Pathé has online video footage of Henry Wilson's funeral – this illustrates the scale of the funeral and could be shown to students to demonstrate the impact of his death: https://www.britishpathe.com/video/funeral-of-sir-h-wilson-aka-funeral-of-sir-henry/query/field

FURTHER READING

Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution 1910–1923* (Dublin, 2003)

Keith Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: a political soldier* (Oxford, 2006), especially Chapters 1, 13 and 14

Keith Jeffery, 'Wilson, Sir Henry Hughes, baronet' in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: www.oxforddnb.com

Peter Hart, 'Michael Collins and the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson', *Irish Historical Studies,* 28/110 (1992), 150–170