

Anglo-Irish Treaty 1921

A Practical Compromise with a Flawed Implementation

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The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 was one of the most important events in modern Irish history. The treaty was created to bring an end to the Irish War of Independence and to allow for Ireland to receive self-governance. It was influenced by the ongoing violence in Northern Ireland and the dominion system in British colonies. The treaty ultimately caused a civil war over its terms despite granting the Irish government de facto independence.

While support for independence was very common in the majority Catholic regions of southern Ireland, the northern counties had a large Protestant population which often supported British rule and did not wish to be a part of an independent Ireland. When the war for independence began, violence broke out between supporters and opposers of independence. When the war ended and the treaty was drafted, Northern Ireland was allowed to choose if it would join an independent Ireland, and it refused. As such Ireland is divided to this day. The British modeled the terms of the treaty after the dominion system which they adopted in colonies such as Canada in 1867 and Australia in 1901. Under this system, these states could manage their own internal affairs with some British oversight. In a similar manner, the treaty granted Ireland self-government but demanded that the King remained the head of state and that Irish government leaders would take an oath of allegiance to the British monarchy.

There were many negotiators who were involved with the creation of the treaty. The principal British representative was the prime minister, David Lloyd George. Among the British negotiators was Winston Churchill, who served as minister for the army and later as minister for the colonies and dominions. The leading representative for Ireland was Secretary of State Arthur Griffith, and the finance minister Michael Collins was another influential negotiator. Both Collins and Arthur would be killed in the civil war following the treaty. The president of the

Irish Republic, Éamon de Valera, did not attend the negotiations and instead allowed other representatives to draft the treaty.

The treaty had many immediate effects on Ireland. First, it led to the partition of the island since it allowed for the northern counties to remain with the United Kingdom. However, the civil war which it ignited was much more impactful in the early years of the Irish Republic. Those who opposed the treaty were mostly members of the Irish Republican Army which had fought for independence. They believed that it did not grant true independence and devalued their sacrifice by maintaining a political connection to the British Empire. These former soldiers took up arms against the Irish government, claiming that it forfeited its right to rule by signing the treaty. The government and pro-treaty forces were ultimately able to win the civil war and continued to accept the terms of the treaty.

The violence of the civil war could have been avoided if the treaty had been clearer in what it was giving to Ireland. The treaty gave near total independence to Ireland by allowing it to have its own legislative body and removing British soldiers from the Irish Republic. It was viewed as unacceptable because of the nationalist sentiment in Ireland at the time. If violence was to be avoided, the British would need to accept the resistance of the Irish people to symbols of British rule. The oath of loyalty was contentious because it symbolized the centuries of unjust treatment under the British crown, not because it would limit the government to act independently in any meaningful way. If the treaty had not included strong symbols of British rule and only had the technicalities involved with dominion status, far fewer people would have been angry about it. The Irish negotiators should have pushed harder to have symbolic elements such as the oath of allegiance removed, even if they needed to compromise on other smaller

details of the government. The Anglo-Irish Treaty was, from a purely practical point of view, a major step forward for Ireland as an independent country. However, it failed to address the emotional and social conditions tied to British rule and it was the emotional reaction of the population which sparked the civil war.

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