Between 1917 and 1921, Irish republicans engaged the Royal Irish Constabulary and British military in a conflict to establish their own state. Though it was primarily a guerrilla war fought in small actions in rural counties and urban centers, it was also a struggle by both sides to win the hearts and minds of the Irish people and the support of the international community. The fighting ended with a truce between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and government forces in July 1921, but the propaganda battle continued. During the ensuing months, republicans and British officials negotiated the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Throughout these lengthy discussions, both sides continued to disseminate their points of view through the press in attempts to convince international populations that their view of the settlement was just. While the large Irish diaspora raised global interest in Irish affairs at all times, the importance of international opinion grew significantly after the First World War. The global perspective of the war itself, the prospect of an international peace conference at its end, and cooperative projects like the League of Nations made civilian populations aware of how their opinions and actions could exert moral influence over governments of other countries.\(^1\) Significant opposition to British government policies, either from dominions such as Canada or from allies like the United States, could force it to alter those policies. Newspapers were among the prime shapers of public opinion in this period. British writer Sydney Brooks said of his country and the U.S., “The Press with us not only disseminates news, but shapes the thoughts of the nation more constantly and with greater effect than any other instrument.”\(^2\)

---


While contemporaries recognized the press as an increasingly powerful shaper of public opinion, there was a widespread idea that journalists had a duty to support a sitting government in a time of war. During the First World War several of the belligerent states enacted press censorship of some form or degree.\(^3\) Brooks asserted of censorship in 1914, “the British papers, without exception, have voluntarily submitted to its imposition with patriotic patience and self-denial.”\(^4\) A *Times* editorialist asserted on behalf of the paper, “We welcome a censorship as a valuable support to the Press in time of war,” citing its efficacy in preventing sensitive information from falling into enemy hands.\(^5\) Some newspapers eventually chafed at their restraints.\(^6\) However the British government found a pliant press so useful that, though the First World War ended in November 1918, official censorship remained in place in Ireland until the end of August 1919.\(^7\) The next month the government followed this with a wave of unofficial censorship, as they labeled seventeen newspapers across the island seditious and forced them to close for various periods of time.\(^8\) The idea that the press had a patriotic duty to support political authorities survived the First World War, and found ample expression in the British administration’s treatment of the Irish press.

This paper will argue that the viewpoint consistently portrayed in the Canadian and U.S. mainstream press during the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations was identical to that of the British government. Despite Irish republicans’ efforts to broadcast their own views, which were largely successful during the conflict, after a truce was agreed journalists consistently accepted official interpretations of events with little or no attempt at analysis. British government officials misunderstood political demands emanating either from separatist republicans or Irish unionists, those people who wished to maintain Ireland’s status as an integral part of the United Kingdom.\(^9\) Thus, press acceptance of

---


\(^5\) *Times* (London), 1 Sept. 1914.

\(^6\) *Irish Independent* (Dublin), 17 July 1917.

\(^7\) *Nenagh Guardian*, 30 Aug. 1919.


official interpretations led to a lack of comprehension of events in Ireland on both sides of the Atlantic.

During the War of Independence, Irish republican political party Sinn Féin was keenly aware of the evolving international climate after the First World War, and determined to leverage worldwide pressure to convince the British government to withdraw its presence from the island. Sinn Féin established a propaganda organ, the *Irish Bulletin*, and ensured its distribution to foreign news correspondents in Dublin and abroad. Of particular interest to Irish republicans was reaching potential sympathizers in North America.\(^{10}\) Irish nationalists had long looked to Canada and the United States as sources of moral and financial support. In addition, moderates in Britain and Ireland looked to Canada’s status as a dominion within the British Empire as a potential model for settling the Irish question.\(^{11}\) British legislators were also concerned with maintaining the alliance with the United States, forged during the tumult of the First World War, if only to attract American capital to rebuild Europe.\(^{12}\) Widespread American sympathy for Irish independence brought significant pressure to bear on British officials to treat the Irish question gingerly. British MP John Clynes went so far as to remind the House of Commons, “We cannot consider the Irish situation without specially noting the ill effects of that position upon the relationship between America and this country.”\(^{13}\)

Initially, the odds were stacked against the rebels in the propaganda battle. The major Irish newspapers were all devoted to moderate nationalism, not to republicanism. Many British organs like the London *Times* expounded a conservative ideology, while even liberal publications adhered to patriotic causes in the wake of the World War.\(^{14}\) Toronto’s *Globe* promoted British loyalty and derided the republican attempt to separate Ireland from the United Kingdom.\(^{15}\) Major newspapers in the United States including the *New York Times*, flush with victory in the World War, were prepared to defend a U.S.

---


\(^{11}\) *Freeman’s Journal* (Dublin), 17 Sept. 1919.


\(^{15}\) *Globe* (Toronto), 15 Sept. 1919.
ally despite the wealth and clout of the Irish-American population. Together, these publications represent major contemporary sources of information for people in the English-speaking world. All mainstream periodicals denounced the IRA’s violent campaign against government forces. British and Irish authorities sought to silence Sinn Féin, while using the mainstream press to delegitimize the republican campaign by portraying it at various times as ludicrous, criminal, or terrorist.

Typical IRA actions during the war included assassinations, ambushes, and arson attacks against government buildings. British officials denounced republicans as terrorists and murderers, and their condemnations echoed across continents in the pages of the newspapers mentioned. The Irish Bulletin and the IRA’s official newspaper An t’Óglač countered that Irish republicans were engaged in a legitimate guerrilla war, utilizing language of self-determination and the rights of small nations common to British rhetoric during the World War. While the international press initially derided the Irish Bulletin and An t’Óglač as mere propaganda sheets, these publications gained increasing respectability during the War of Independence. The Irish Bulletin was particularly effective in that, while it consistently advanced a republican agenda, it accurately portrayed events that the authorities wanted kept quiet. Specifically it exposed misconduct among government police and military forces, discrediting the British government and its Irish satellite based in Dublin Castle. Before the conflict ended, newspapers from London to New York were quoting the Irish Bulletin as a legitimate source of news and the expression of Sinn Féin viewpoints.

The war of words reflected the increasing bitterness that characterized the conflict. IRA tactics grew increasingly deadly and its members showed less willingness take prisoners or tolerate suspected informers. Meanwhile government forces took out their frustrations on the Irish populace, destroying private property and beating or shooting civilians. The conflict aroused passions among Irish sympathizers in North

---

16 Times (London), 12 Apr. 1918.
America. Organizations formed in Canada and the U.S. expressing support for Sinn Féin and raising funds to relieve victimized civilians. In April 1920 female Sinn Féin supporters picketed the British Embassy in Washington demanding the U.S. cut diplomatic ties to its ally, and a year later an unofficial American delegation to Ireland blamed the British government for the “unbridled violence” there. T.P. O’Connor, an Irish nationalist representing Liverpool, told the Commons that on a visit to the U.S. he encountered “an anti-English agitation which would prove more powerful than anything we had experienced before.”

During the conflict the press printed confident statements from government officials that they were beating the republicans, but vacillated as to whether these were true. It is clear that many journalists wanted to believe that government forces were defeating the IRA, but ongoing violence in Ireland belied such comforting fictions.

When a truce halted the conflict on July 11, 1921, British officials suddenly faced the uneasy prospect of negotiating a permanent peace with the people they had publicly lambasted for years. British Conservative MP Rupert Gwynne described the republican negotiating team as “four representatives of the murder gang.” Some within the British establishment maintained that the policy of negotiation was inconsistent with public statements that the government was beating the rebels. Belfast Unionist MP Robert Lynn said, “The Chief Secretary often told us that he had got murder by the throat, but now he has got the murderers on his knees and is fondling them as a father would his children.”

Republicans denied that their movement had ever been on the verge of defeat. Seán Moylan, a Cork IRA brigade commandant and member of republican parliament

---

26 For assertions that the IRA was on the verge of defeat see: Times (London), 10 Nov. and 8 Dec. 1920; 3 Jan., 22 Jan., and 29 Apr. 1921. For skepticism of this view in the same publication see Times (London), 25 Apr. 1921.
Dáil Éireann, reported “an atmosphere of confidence and victory” in Dublin after the truce. Of the IRA he said, “So far we had accomplished our purpose.”

Following the truce, some newspapers authoritatively reasserted the official perception that the rebellion was weeks away from collapse. A New York Times editorial insisted, “England was too strong to be beaten down by the sword, and the law-abiding and industrious have long been weary of the unequal and barbarous struggle.” Toronto’s the Globe indicated that the truce signaled that the republicans had finally come to their senses. An editor opined, “the great majority of those who have followed the Sinn Féin leaders in the impossible quest for an Irish Republic are apparently ready to follow them also if they advise another solution of the problem.”

Again, republicans on the ground in Ireland held an entirely different view from that pronounced in the international press. Instead of seeing the truce as a retreat from the republican demand for independence, many viewed it as proof that their military campaign and political demands were legitimate. Republicanism represented not just a form of government, but a desire to separate Ireland from the United Kingdom and the British Empire. In this vein, the Irish Bulletin insisted that dominion status such as that of Canada was not enough. The paper declared, “the primary demand, inclusive of all others, is that Ireland should be free. Nothing can satisfy that demand but full national independence.” As late as December 5, U.S. President Warren G. Harding met with a delegation of Irish-Americans petitioning him to recognize the Irish Republic. While the press encouraged readers to expect a settlement that made Ireland a dominion within the United Kingdom, republicans continued to agitate for complete independence. Newspaper correspondents failed to grasp the earnestness of that demand.

Expectations as expressed in the press and on the ground in Ireland also diverged on the issue of partition. The British Parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, while the War of Independence was still raging. The act partitioned six northeastern counties, the majority of the ancient province of Ulster, from the rest of the

---

31 New York Times, 10 July 1921.
32 Globe (Toronto), 11 July 1921.
33 Ireland, Dáil Éireann Historical Debates (22 Dec. 1921), vol. 3, 22 (Liam de Roiste, TD).
34 Irish Bulletin (Dublin), 25 July 1921.
island and created Northern Ireland. The new state was politically dominated by unionists wishing to remain within the United Kingdom. The majority of unionists were also Protestant, while mainly Catholic nationalists comprised a significant minority in Northern Ireland of between thirty-three and thirty-four percent of the population.\(^{36}\) Republican statements and actions show that they expected a reevaluation of Northern Ireland’s status as part of the treaty negotiations. De Valera tried to compel British authorities to recognize the “essential unity” of Ireland as a precondition of the truce, a demand that Lloyd George rejected.\(^{37}\) During the truce, nationalist delegations from counties Londonderry, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh—representing at least sections of five of the six partitioned counties—petitioned de Valera asking that he negotiate their removal from Northern Ireland and entry into the new polity to be recognized by the treaty.\(^{38}\)

There were signs that unionists were prepared, if not to unite with their nationalist compatriots, at least to work with them in governing the island.\(^{39}\) The press was ambivalent about the prospects of Irish unity. The \textit{Globe} denounced unionists who used violent rhetoric against nationalists, but counseled Sinn Féiners that Northern Ireland would never seek to unite with republicans while they pursued separation from the United Kingdom.\(^{40}\) The \textit{New York Times} position on Irish unity was closer to that of the republicans. The paper’s editors were optimistic on eventual unification, even if unionists opted out of an all-Ireland parliament in the short term. A \textit{New York Times} story even claimed that permanent peace “hinged” on some plan for an all-Ireland polity resulting from the negotiations.\(^{41}\)

One area in which the mainstream press, Irish republicans, and the British government agreed was the tenuousness of the truce itself.\(^{42}\) To many members of the

\(^{36}\) The 1911 census showed that 34.4 percent of people in the counties that would become Northern Ireland were Catholic. By 1926 the figure was 33.5 percent. See P.A. Compton, “Religious Affiliation and Demographic Variability in Northern Ireland,” \textit{Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers} 1, no. 4 (1976): 436.

\(^{37}\) “From Eamon de Valera To David Lloyd George,” 28 June 1921, DIFP vol. 1, doc. no. 136; \textit{The Times} (London), 29 June 1921.


\(^{39}\) \textit{Times} (London), 15 Aug. 1921.

\(^{40}\) \textit{Globe} (Toronto), 30 Aug., 22 Oct. 1921


\(^{42}\) \textit{Globe} (Toronto), 11 July 1921; \textit{New York Times}, 11 July 1921.
IRA, the cessation of violence did not mean an end to the war. The *Irish Bulletin* also downplayed hopes of a permanent settlement, printing a column entitled “The War That May Be Resumed” as early as July 14.\(^{43}\) *An t’Ógláč* constantly warned its readers to maintain discipline and be ready to return to active service if necessary.\(^{44}\) Republican politician and *Irish Bulletin* editor Desmond Fitzgerald later wrote that some militants never intended the truce as anything but a “breathing space,” a chance to reorganize and import arms.\(^{45}\) British officers made plans for continuing the war should the treaty negotiations break down.\(^{46}\) Winston Churchill, a member of the British negotiating team, caused a firestorm of protest from his republican opponents by stating to the press that a renewed conflict would be “real war, not mere bushranging.”\(^{47}\)

After months of mutual tension and threats, the British and Irish negotiating teams signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The transatlantic press was thrilled with the news of a permanent peace agreement. Newspapers carried stories of Dublin crowds rejoicing at the news the treaty had been signed. An ebullient headline in the *Globe* rang out, “Celt and Saxon Join Hands to Mould Empire’s Destiny in British Isles and Oversea.” The paper echoed the British cabinet in describing the agreement as a “Sane Solution” of the Irish question.\(^{48}\) The *New York Times* called the treaty a “world-wide cause for great rejoicing,” and “an agreement for peace founded in justice and common sense.”\(^{49}\) By framing the treaty in this manner the North American press conditioned its audience, many of whom had been sympathetic to republican goals, to accept the agreement at face value. Ireland’s moderate nationalist press approached the settlement cautiously. Eager for peace, they were aware of the agreement’s shortcomings and still hoped for an end to partition.\(^{50}\) By contrast, international newspapers ignored features of the agreement that angered many Irish unionists and republicans.

\(^{43}\) *Irish Bulletin* (Dublin), 14 July 1921.

\(^{44}\) *An t’Ógláč* (Dublin), 22 July 1921.


\(^{47}\) *Irish Bulletin* (Dublin), 21 Oct. 1921.

\(^{48}\) *Globe* (Toronto), 7 Dec. 1921.

\(^{49}\) *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 1921.

\(^{50}\) *Anglo-Celt* (Cavan), 10 Dec. 1921.
The treaty did not recognize an Irish Republic, nor allow separation from the Empire. The agreement specifically granted the 26 counties outside of Northern Ireland the same rights as Canada, that of a dominion. As such, public officials in the new Irish Free State would have to swear an oath of allegiance to the British monarch. The treaty promised a Boundary Commission to review the composition of Northern Ireland, but did not otherwise address partition.\footnote{Laffan, \textit{Resurrection of Ireland}, 350-1.} De Valera, who had decided not to be involved in the final negotiations, condemned the pact just two days after its signing.\footnote{\textit{New York Times}, 9 Dec. 1921.} Northern Ireland’s Prime Minister James Craig also denounced the treaty. He was incensed by the idea of a Boundary Commission that might reduce his state’s territory, as well as a requirement that Northern Ireland opt itself out of the Free State, which seemed to subject his government to that of Sinn Féin.\footnote{\textit{Times} (London), 16 Dec. 1921; \textit{Globe} (Toronto), 16 Dec. 1921.}

While the North American press covered these events, it is clear that few in its ranks understood their importance. The \textit{New York Times} consistently downplayed unionists’ desires to safeguard their parliament in Northern Ireland. Days after the treaty was signed, the paper published a quote from the \textit{Belfast News-Letter} stating, “Ulster… will resist to the utmost even the nominal jurisdiction of any parliament but its own.”\footnote{\textit{New York Times}, 6 Dec. 1921.} However the next day a \textit{New York Times} editorial stated optimistically, “Ulster may go her own way if she chooses, but it is evident that great inducements will be held out to her to cast in her lot with the rest of Ireland.”\footnote{\textit{New York Times}, 7 Dec. 1921.} The Toronto \textit{Globe} on the other hand displayed a reluctance to admit the seriousness of the division in Sinn Féin caused by the treaty. The Dáil still had to ratify the agreement, but the paper predicted that only twenty out of the 121 members would follow de Valera in voting against the treaty, thus ensuring easy passage.\footnote{\textit{Globe} (Toronto), 12 Dec. 1921.} In actuality, fifty-seven Dáil members voted against it, and it passed by only seven votes.\footnote{Laffan, \textit{Resurrection of Ireland}, 360.} De Valera and his supporters walked out of the assembly three days after the vote. Instead of recognizing the gravity of this division in Sinn Féin, a \textit{Globe}
editorialist quipped that this was good news and that opponents of the treaty belonged outside the halls of power.\textsuperscript{58}

De Valera’s walkout was not a simple political maneuver. It reflected a split that was dividing both Sinn Féin and the IRA. When IRA members attempted to take matters into their own hands by occupying parts of Dublin and seizing fortifications around the country, the situation devolved into civil war. With urging from the British government, pro-treaty forces, now organized into the National Army, attacked the anti-treaty IRA.\textsuperscript{59}

The international press quickly dubbed anti-treaty forces “irregulars” and accused them of murder and terrorism, just as it had done to the IRA during the War of Independence. By contrast the National Army, many of whom were former IRA guerrillas, were now loyal soldiers fighting on behalf of a recognized state.\textsuperscript{60} Having acted as mouthpieces for the British government during the War of Independence, the mainstream press threw its support behind the Free State during the Civil War. All of the newspapers analyzed here began publishing Free State government statements and reports of military actions with little analysis. The little commentary offered condemned treaty opponents as nonsensical, wantonly destructive, and murderous.\textsuperscript{61}

Major newspapers in Canada and the U.S. misunderstood events in Ireland because they too readily accepted the British government’s interpretations of events. While the Irish War of Independence raged, government officials labeled republicans terrorists engaged in a campaign of senseless violence they could not possibly win. During the negotiations that ended in the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the transatlantic press consistently downplayed both republican resistance to any dilution of their demand for separation from the Empire as well as unionist disdain for the idea of entering an all-Ireland parliament. The press could not deduce much from these ideas because they accepted at face value the statements and interpretations of British government officials, who did not understand these political psychologies either. When tensions within the republican movement sparked the Irish Civil War, the press turned its rhetorical weapons

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Globe} (Toronto), 11 Jan. 1922.
\textsuperscript{59} John M. Regan, \textit{The Irish Counter-Revolution, 1921-1936} (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), 73.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Globe} (Toronto), 3 May, 4, May, 27 June, and 29 June 1922; \textit{New York Times}, 4 July 1922; \textit{Times} (London), 4 July, 7 July 1922.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Globe} (Toronto), 9 Jan., 4 May, and 5 July 1922; \textit{New York Times}, 7 July 1922; \textit{Times} (London), 15 July 1922.
against the opponents of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Free State government made good use of a malleable international press to increase its own authority.

The behavior of the international press during the Irish War of Independence shows the ease with which governments can manipulate mainstream media. Despite the fact that Irish republicans established their own press organs which proved to be reliable news sources, international journalists accepted official views almost without reserve. Government dominance of the press, first by the British and later by the Free State, ensured that anti-treaty views received little or no coverage. Unable to articulate their views, the international press excoriated republicans as lacking reason and easily resorting to violence. While they won the war to the extent of forcing the government to the negotiating table, Irish republicans lost the postwar propaganda battle and therefore decisively lost the peace.