

**National LAOH Irish History Writing Contest**

**“The Role of the Irish in World War I”**

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As my Irish eyes see the world today, my Irish soul identifies with what my ancestors suffered in the past. Irish participation in World War I was fueled more by economic conditions depleting Ireland and the need to feed her hungry families as opposed to helping the British.

The ‘Role of the Irish in World War I’ affected people from counties all over Ireland, north and south, who ended up blending together as one during these times. Ireland was part of the United Kingdom when the Great War began and was looming on the threshold of a civil war. The Home Rule, limiting self-government, was seen with disunity (“Through War”).

In August 1914, Germany declared war on Russia; two days later, Germany declared war on France. With British fears of German sovereignty in Europe, Britain then entered the war to defend her interests and allay worries of German domination.

There was pressure in Ireland on those who foremost wanted to contribute to the British war effort and on others aspiring to further Irish independence. As a result of the Anti-Home rule, the Ulster Volunteer Force (mostly Protestant) was formed along with the Pro-Home Rule, Irish Volunteers. These were groups in Ireland preparing to fight for and against independence. Ireland ended up contributing over 200,000 men throughout World War I (Peatfield). “Many Irish men were willing to

fight for the British because it was a paying job” (qtd. in Phelan).

One of the first Irish divisions to be formed was the 10th (Irish) Division in August of 1914 (Peatfield). This unit was one of three Irish divisions to be organized with men from all backgrounds, establishing an element of Kitchener’s first New Army, also known as Kitchener’s Mob. The battle of Givenchy in mid-December, 1914, came after the French encountered complications at Arras, a city in Northern France. The French requested the British to incite an offensive force in efforts to push the Germans farther north. This request followed right after the British strikes south of Ypres, western Belgium, had been successfully fended off with heavy losses (Talarico).

Pope Benedict XV proposed a transitory cease fire of the war for the celebration of Christmas on December 7, 1914. With refusal to plan an armistice, the Christmas Truce has been said to have still taken place December 24, 1914, where troops from both sides entered a type of free zone area.

Arthur Moore O’Sullivan played a small role in orchestrating this from the western frontline with an Irish rifleman being the first to enter ‘no man’s land’ (“Christmas Truce”). Celebration was shared by both the German and British armies until midnight of December 25 when forces began again slowly. This reminds me of the song by the Royal Guardsmen, Snoopy vs. the Red Baron. Wow, I never realized in all my years of hearing this song at Christmas time, this is what they were singing about! Merry Christmas, my friend!

In April 1915, the Irish played another significant role in the Battle of Gallipoli. They landed in Suvla Bay located on the Aegean coast of the Gallipoli peninsula. With failed naval attacks, many suffered severely because of lack of water and deteriorating ground missions. Withdrawal was imminent after months of no success. Nearly half of the 17,000 soldiers of the 10th Division were wounded or missing, and they were forced to withdraw in late September due to unsuccessful efforts to control this area (Deignan).

Moving forward through other battles of the Great World War, another major involvement of the

10th Division began as they were deployed to the Greek port of Salonika in efforts to support the Serbs. The Greek government announced their decision not to attach to allied forces. However, shortly afterward, it granted the 10th Division permission to land and incite war on their most northern border with no cooperation. In December of 1915, the 10th Division, virtually alone, confronted Bulgarian advances at the battle of Kosturino, under Lieutenant General Bryan Mahon (Peatfield). This mainly Irish conflict is recalled by many Irish in family history stories. With almost a year of trench battle, the Bulgarians were held off; however, the Irish had a rough retreat back to Salonika due to few supplies and freezing temperatures.

In addition, the Easter Rising significantly took place right in the middle of this historic time defining Irish history. After the government's ruling to defer the Third Home Rule Bill until post war, most of the nationalists and unionists decided to join the British in war. These men are known as the British's 10th, 16th, and 36th Divisions. With Nationalists realizing the war could continue for years, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, with some Irish volunteer force, strategized an extensive revolution in efforts to overthrow the British and push them out of Ireland.

On Monday, April 24, 1916, rebels led by Patrick Pearse and equipped with German weapons occupied Dublin's Post Office and pivotal city structures claiming the organization of the Republic of Ireland. While displaying the Irish Flag and pronouncing the Proclamation of Independence, an intense conflict arose amid the rebels and the British (Peatfield). Within a week, the rebels surrendered. Deaths totaled 485-- 54% were civilian men, women and children; 20% were under the age of 19 (Hickey). The fight for Independence of Ireland continued years after World War I ended.

During The Battle of The Somme in July 1916, the 36th Division was highly inspired to enlist due to their British attachment. The war was a path for them to reinforce their connection between Northern Ireland and Britain. The 16th Division, mostly Irish National Volunteers, was originally formed to cut off armed resistance in the carrying out of the Home Rule. Their part in the Somme offensive at Guillemont and Ginchy experienced over 4,000 casualties during ten days of

battle (Deignan). They ended up overtaking Ginchy and dismantling German observation compounds that overlooked the entire British frontline. Although this battle is referred to as a graveyard for the original 36th and 16th divisions, the Divisions endured.

In preparation for strikes on Wijtschate and Messines Ridge, in Belgium, both the 36th and 16th Divisions were training together March through May of 1917. On June 7, 1917, The Battle for Messines Ridge launched with success. Wijtschate lies just north of Messines and was taken over shortly after the ridge, allowing the British to advance. Still today, there is a military cemetery outside Messines which displays a memorial Celtic Cross in commemoration of the 16th Irish Division (Burke).

In April of 1918, the Irish began to experience the beginning of the end of British rule. Following British difficulties, they attempted to implement the draft via the Home Rule Bill. Outrage ensued throughout all of Ireland. The Irish Trade Unions Congress implemented a one day strike bringing Ireland to a standstill. The unity of Ireland forced the British to abandon the conscription, never to be heard of again (Deignan).

Throughout World War I, the citizens of Ireland back home held a crucial role as well. Shipbuilding yards were operating in Belfast, with ammunition manufacturers located across Ireland. Ammunition factories employed mostly women in Cork, Dublin, Galway and Waterford, as well as women taking on positions generally performed by men (Peatfield). Irish women also were employed as nurses and volunteers for the Red Cross and other organizations. Although the Irishmen in WWI were treated poorly, it is important to note that they are being recognized for their sacrifices today. The actual number of lives lost is noted between 25,000 and 49,000, with the higher being recorded in Ireland's Memorial Records (Grayson).

A Cross of Sacrifice was dedicated at Ireland's Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin in July of 2014.

President Michael D. Higgins is noted as saying: "We cannot give back their lives to the dead, nor whole bodies to those who were wounded, or repair the grief, undo the disrespect that was sometimes

shown to those who fought or their families . . . To all of them in their silence we offer our own silence, without judgment, and with respect for their ideals, as they knew them, and for the humanity they expressed towards each other.”

In the midst of my research for this short essay, I feel our ancestors should have received more recognition for their suffering and sacrifices. The lives that were changed throughout the world from 1914 to 1918 cannot be fairly estimated.

This year I had the privilege to visit and experience Ireland’s history for the 100th anniversary of The Easter Rising. I toured Dublin, the GPO, Belfast and Galway. It was a rewarding first-hand insight to what I have learned and read about in books; but researching this one particular area in depth was especially enlightening. I am proud of my Irish ancestry, and my family and I keep it alive in our daily lives.



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