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'An Irish Louvain': memories of 1914 and the moral climate in Britain during the Irish War of Independence

EDWARD MADIGAN*
Royal Holloway, University of London

ABSTRACT. *When the British government declared war against Germany in August 1914, a great drive to gain popular support by presenting the conflict to the public as a morally righteous endeavour began in earnest. Stories of German violence against French and Belgian civilians, largely based in fact, were central to this process of 'cultural mobilisation'. The German serviceman thus came to be widely regarded in Britain as inherently cruel and malevolent while his British counterpart was revered as the embodiment of honour, chivalry and courage. Yet by the autumn of 1920, less than two years after the Armistice, the conduct of members of the crown forces in Ireland was being publicly drawn into question by British commentators in a manner that would have been unthinkable during the war against Germany. Drawing on contemporary press reports, parliamentary debates and personal narrative sources, this article explores and analyses the moral climate in Britain in 1920 and 1921 and comments on the degree to which memories of atrocities committed by German servicemen during the Great War informed popular and official responses to events in Ireland.*

On 11 November 1920, two years to the day after the killing finally ended on the Western Front, the Unknown Warrior was laid to rest at Westminster Abbey. Selected at random, in a highly ritualistic ceremony, from the remains of men who had lost their lives in Belgium and France, this unidentified dead serviceman instantly became the focal point of national mourning. Immense, silent crowds lined the streets to observe the passing of the gun carriage that carried the warrior at the head of what one paper would refer to as 'the simplest but most impressive procession ever seen in London'.[1] As it made its way to the abbey, the cortège paused so that George V could unveil the newly-permanent Cenotaph in Whitehall. The great imperial architect, Edwin Lutyens, had quite consciously designed the Cenotaph as a secular memorial, dedicated to the sacrifices made by those of all faiths and none. It was thus somewhat in competition with the more conventionally religious setting and symbolism of what would become the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior.

* *Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, edward.madigan@rhul.ac.uk*

[1] *Yorkshire Post*, 12 Nov. 1920, cited in Neil Hanson, *The Unknown Soldier: the story of the missing of the Great War* (London, 2005), p. 368.

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And yet these outwardly very different memorials resonated so intensely with the public because they both reinforced a similar consoling narrative about the war and those who had died in the fighting. The Cenotaph, originally erected as a temporary wood and plaster structure for the post-Versailles victory parade in July 1919, gave the bereaved an enormous blank canvas onto which they could project their grief. Its scale, its simplicity and its public prominence in the heart of the capital all seemed to confer profound meaning on the almost overwhelming losses of the war years.[2] Importantly, moreover, the brief but unambiguous inscription on the side of the monument – 'The Glorious Dead' – reflected and endorsed the popular belief that the fallen had not died in vain because their sacrifices had been redeemed by victory. The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior offered the bereaved a similar message of consolation but presented it in a more conventionally religious light. Its inscription also provided those in mourning with a more detailed and arguably more pointed interpretation of the cause for which their loved ones had died. They had given their lives, according to the permanent gravestone that would soon be placed over the tomb, 'for the sacred cause of justice and the freedom of the world'. Crucially, as Adrian Gregory has observed, the warrior served as a 'surrogate body' for the millions of men and women across the United Kingdom whose loved ones were buried in the former theatres of war and was especially meaningful for civilians in mourning for men whose final resting places were destined to be forever unknown.[3] It would be difficult to exaggerate the degree to which the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior resonated with the bereaved and the wider national community in post-war Britain. Indeed, Gregory has claimed, quite persuasively, that the unveiling of the tomb 'touched the nation in a way that few other events have ever done'.[4]

On 26 November, just over two weeks after this second ever Armistice Day, another military funeral procession wound its way through the same London streets. On this occasion, no fewer than nine dead servicemen were being honoured, and their names and identities were known to their loved ones and reported in the press. Six of the dead were carried to Westminster Abbey, while the other three, being Catholic, were taken a short distance further to Westminster Cathedral. After services were said at each place of worship, the bodies lay briefly in state before being removed to be privately buried by their families.[5] Unlike the Unknown Warrior, the dead men had not been killed by enemy fire in what was now widely regarded as a bloody but necessary war for civilisation. Instead, they had been assassinated in Dublin on the morning of what would quickly become known as Bloody Sunday.[6]

The occurrence of these two very different funeral processions in such quick succession captures something quite significant about the jarring moral dissonance that British observers detected in the violence of the Irish War of Independence.

[2] On the symbolism of the Cenotaph, see especially Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: the symbolism and politics of remembrance* (Oxford, 1998), pp 141–9.

[3] Adrian Gregory, *The silence of memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (London, 1994), p. 23.

[4] Ibid., p. 26.

[5] For newspaper reports of the processions of the British dead of Bloody Sunday, see *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Nov. 1920; *Daily Mail*, 26 Nov. 1920.

[6] For a detailed account of the killings and the men that were killed, see Jane Leonard, '"English dogs" or "Poor devils"? The dead of Bloody Sunday morning' in David Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Terror in Ireland, 1916–1923* (Dublin, 2012), pp 102–40.

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Unsurprisingly, the regular army officers who had been killed on Bloody Sunday were lauded in the British press for their gallantry and dedicated service while the members of the Irish Republican Army who had carried out the killings were denounced as murderers.[7] Indeed, the *Daily Mail* insisted that 'these gallant men gave their lives every whit as honourably and unselfishly as that Great Company whose sacrifice the nation has but recently commemorated at the Cenotaph and in the mystical interment at Westminster Abbey'.[8] Yet over the course of the preceding two months, the dead men's comrades in the Black and Tans, the Auxiliary Division, and in units of the regular army had been publicly condemned in the strongest possible terms by a very diverse range of British commentators. Much of this commentary consciously drew on perceived parallels between British reprisals for I.R.A. activity and German atrocities in Belgium and France in 1914, and censured British servicemen in a way that would have been simply unthinkable during the Great War.

In the now rich and extensive historiography of the Irish War of Independence, the machinations of the British state and the motivations of various British actors have often been touched upon and occasionally analysed in some detail.[9] Over the past ten years or so, Michael Hopkinson, D. M. Leeson and Anne Dolan have also explored and contextualised the experiences and mentalities of the British officers and men who served with the crown forces in 1920 and 1921, and have done much to even out the overwhelmingly Hiberno-centric scholarship on the conflict.[10] Historians have had comparatively little to say, however, about popular British responses to the escalating levels of violence in Ireland from the first deployment of the Black and Tans in the spring of 1920 to the truce of July 1921. Two very notable exceptions to this are D. G. Boyce and Maurice Walsh. In his pioneering 1972 book, *Englishmen and Irish troubles*, Boyce offers an absorbing account of the way the war was publicly discussed and interpreted by British commentators and highlights the emergence of something very close to a 'protest movement' against the policy of reprisals from the autumn of 1920.[11] Walsh's *The news from Ireland*, published in 2008, focuses on the international press coverage of the war and features a particularly insightful chapter on moral criticism of the retaliatory violence perpetrated by the crown forces.[12] And yet while both of these studies have greatly enriched our understanding of British popular engagement with the Irish War of Independence, neither fully considers the

[7] A striking pictorial tribute to the dead men was printed in the *Illustrated London News* on 4 December 1920 under the heading 'Victims of "the murder gang" – officers killed in Dublin'.

[8] *Daily Mail*, 24 Nov. 1920.

[9] See, for example, Charles Townshend, *The British campaign in Ireland, 1919–1921: the development of political and military policies* (London, 1975); Ronan Fanning, *Fatal path: British government and the Irish Revolution* (London, 2013), pp 188–246.

[10] Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin, 2002), pp 47–66; D. M. Leeson, *The Black and Tans: British police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence* (Oxford, 2011); Anne Dolan, 'The British culture of paramilitary violence in Ireland' in Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds), *War in peace: paramilitary violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford, 2012), pp 200–15.

[11] D. G. Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish troubles: British public opinion and the making of Irish policy, 1918–1921* (London, 1972), pp 43–60.

[12] Maurice Walsh, *The news from Ireland: foreign correspondents and the Irish Revolution* (London, 2008), pp 57–82.

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degree to which British moral interpretations of the conflict were informed by the still very raw experience of the First World War.

This article seeks to build on this material by considering British responses to the violence of the Irish War of Independence in the context of the widespread understanding of the world war that preceded it as a profoundly moral endeavour. Drawing on contemporary press reports, parliamentary debates, and personal narrative sources, it explores and analyses the moral climate in Britain during the Great War before considering the degree to which memories of atrocities committed by German servicemen informed popular and official responses to events in Ireland from the autumn of 1920. It will be demonstrated that the crown forces' escalating campaign of violence against Irish civilians engendered serious anxiety among a diverse range of British commentators for whom Britain had stood very firmly on the high moral ground in the war against Germany.

I

As it attempted to mobilise for war in the summer of 1914, the British state faced a number of distinctive challenges that were not shared, or not shared to the same extent, by the other belligerents. All European states experienced a degree of internal dissent in the years before the war, but the United Kingdom had been the scene of a wave of popular and increasingly militant protest that, for the British, was unprecedented in the modern era. The escalating militancy in Ireland prompted by the home rule crisis from 1912 posed the most direct threat to stability in national life, but the women's suffrage movement and the various organisations that represented labour were also well-organised, vocal and occasionally violent in their demands for reform.[13] The existence of such profound social and political division complicated the task of persuading the populace that it should come together to pursue victory in a major international war. Also, and importantly, the absence of a system of military conscription, combined with the fact that Britain was highly unlikely to be invaded and the conflict could not therefore be presented as a defensive war, meant that persuasion would have to be central to British mobilisation. The business of persuading the public that the war was worth fighting and worth winning was thus both very challenging and very necessary in Britain. Ultimately, however, this process of 'cultural mobilisation' was remarkably successful, and while there were certainly some dissenting voices, an extraordinary amount of political and cultural consensus was generated in the first few months

[13] Although his classic 1935 study of the acute challenges these groups presented to the Liberal government from 1910 to 1914 has been criticised in recent decades as overly impressionistic, George Dangerfield's *The strange death of Liberal England* still offers an indispensable portrait of British society in the years before the war. For an account of the move toward more extreme measures on the part of the Women's Social and Political Union from 1912, see C. J. Bearman, 'An examination of suffragette violence' in *E.H.R.*, cxx, no. 486 (Apr. 2005), pp 365–97. For a case study that highlights the significant levels of industrial unrest in Edwardian Britain, see Matt Vaughan Wilson, 'The 1911 waterfront strikes in Glasgow: trade unions and rank-and-file militancy in the labour unrest of 1910–1914' in *International Review of Social History*, liii, no. 2 (Aug. 2008), pp 261–92. On the home rule crisis and its impact, see Alvin Jackson, *Home rule: an Irish history, 1800–2000* (Oxford, 2003), pp 106–40.

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of the conflict.[14] Crucially, more than 2.5 million British and Irish men volunteered for military service before conscription was introduced in January 1916, and while motivations for enlistment were complex this extraordinary figure reflects a marked degree of popular consent.[15]

One of the keys to the success of the mobilisation of mentalities across the United Kingdom in 1914 and 1915 lay in the apparently very persuasive moral force of the British case for war. The German violation of Belgian neutrality provided the Liberal government with a legal pretext for war, and Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and his colleagues trumpeted British obligations to Belgium in the days that followed the declaration of war.[16] But the moral case for war, and, importantly, the moral case for recruitment, rested much more on the conduct of the German forces after the initial invasion.[17] The narrative of German atrocities had a major influence on British interpretations of the war, both during and after the conflict, and would have a direct bearing on the ways in which many British commentators would later respond to the Irish War of Independence. It is thus worth briefly considering what exactly occurred as the German forces advanced through Belgium and France in the first six weeks of the conflict.

On 4 August 1914, the largest invasion force ever assembled, formed of over one million men, began sweeping west from Germany into Belgium. Frustration at their slow progress, combined with the false conviction that they were being attacked by armed Belgian civilians, quickly led to incidents of quite ruthless violence against the civilian population. By 8 August, just four days into the invasion, almost 850 Belgians had been killed in cold blood and some 1,300 buildings had been deliberately burned down.[18] On 18 August, with much of southern and western Belgium subdued, the German forces began pouring over the border with France and similar acts of violence were perpetrated against French civilians. Ultimately, during the first six weeks of the invasion, some 6,500 Belgian and French civilians were killed *hors de combat*, millions of francs worth of damage was caused to civilian property, and several ancient heritage sites were destroyed.[19] The sacking of the Flemish city of Louvain by German troops in the last week of August provoked a notably strong reaction in Britain.[20] The Belgian army departed the city on 18 August and thousands of German troops filed into the town from the east over the following number of days. On the afternoon of 25 August, soldiers in a state of high-alert due to reports of a Belgian counter-attack began randomly firing on civilians, set fire to the university library and much of the rest of the town, and subjected the population to a terrifying forty-eight-hour ordeal. Ultimately, several thousand citizens of Louvain were forced out of their homes, over 1,500 were deported to Germany,

[14] Gerard J. DeGroot, *Blighty: British society in the era of the Great War* (London, 1996), pp 164–70.

[15] Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British people* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 28.

[16] Douglas Newton, *The darkest days: the truth behind Britain's rush to war, 1914* (London, 2014), pp 290–3.

[17] Edward Madigan, *Faith under fire: Anglican army chaplains and the Great War* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 35.

[18] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German atrocities, 1914: a history of denial* (New Haven, 2001), p. 13.

[19] Ibid., p. 419.

[20] Catriona Pennell, *A kingdom united: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012), pp 62, 127, 179.

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and no fewer than 246 – including women and children – were killed.[21] Other incidents of violence against civilians could be explained away or denied by the German authorities, but the destruction of this ancient university town was witnessed by international journalists and provoked intense criticism in Allied and neutral states.[22]

In their forensically researched 2001 book *German atrocities, 1914: a history of denial*, John Horne and Alan Kramer confirm that the stories of German violence against civilians disseminated in the international press in the opening weeks of the war were substantially based in fact. Yet although a number of historians have since noted the influence of this reportage on British responses to the war,[23] German atrocities and the moral fervour they evoked hardly featured in popular British representations of the conflict during the recent centenaries. In 1914 and for much of 1915, however, stories of atrocities, both real and imagined, were absolutely central to cultural mobilisation for war across the United Kingdom. The initial violation of Belgian neutrality certainly provoked much moral indignation in Britain and Ireland, but it was the atrocities subsequently committed by German soldiers in Belgium and France that really allowed public commentators – politicians, journalists, clergymen, trade unionists, women's leaders – to present the war to the public as a great moral crusade.[24]

Indeed, in the weeks and months that followed the declaration of war, political leaders routinely interpreted the conflict in religious terms, thereby reflecting and reinforcing the atmosphere of moral certainty that prevailed across the United Kingdom.[25] In a speech delivered to rapturous applause from a mostly Welsh audience in London on 19 September 1914, David Lloyd George insisted that the British people had been elevated by the war 'to the great peaks of honour we had forgotten – Duty, Patriotism, and – clad in glittering white – the great pinnacle of Sacrifice, pointing like a rugged finger to heaven'.[26] The following day, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond, told a gathering of Irish Volunteers at Woodenbridge in County Wicklow that the war had been 'undertaken in defence of the highest principles of religion and morality and right'.[27] From at least this point on, the war was routinely presented and often understood in Ireland as a morally righteous conflict in which Irish interests were at stake.[28] Several months later, in February 1915, Sir Edward Grey gave a speech in Newcastle in which he offered a stark picture of the war as a great clash between good and evil. 'Our ideals', he said, 'are of God and the Germans' seem to be

[21] Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of destruction: culture and mass killing in the First World War* (Oxford, 2007), pp 6–13.

[22] Ibid., pp 13–15.

[23] Pennell, *A kingdom united*, p. 59; Adrian Gregory, *The last Great War: British society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), pp 40–69.

[24] On British suffragette responses to the war, see Jacqueline de Vries, 'Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and World War One' in Sybil Oldfield (ed.), *This working-day world: women's lives and cultures in Britain, 1914–1945* (London, 1994), pp 76–89.

[25] Madigan, *Faith under fire*, p. 33.

[26] *The Times*, 20 Sept. 1914.

[27] F. X. Martin (ed.), *The Irish Volunteers, 1913–1915: recollections and documents* (Dublin, 2013), p. 159.

[28] Heather Jones and Edward Madigan, 'The isle of saints and soldiers: the evolving image of the Irish combatant, 1914–1918' in Catriona Pennell and Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses (eds), *A world at war, 1911–1949* (Leiden, 2019), pp 108–32.

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those of Satan. There is no room for both.'[29] Perhaps unsurprisingly, this highly moral view of the war was significantly reinforced when British civilians began falling victim to German aggression.[30] In mid-December 1914, the towns of Hartlepool, Whitby, and Scarborough on the north-east coast of England were bombarded by the German navy and within a matter of weeks the first German air-ship raids had hit the south-east.[31] The sinking of the Cunard passenger-liner, *R.M.S. Lusitania*, in May 1915 and the execution of the English nurse, Edith Cavell, in Brussels the following October were regarded as particularly heinous and provided yet more evidence of German 'frightfulness'.[32]

German barbarism in France and Belgium and on the high seas was a constant theme in the posters that urged young men to enlist in the armed forces. Millions of these posters were issued and publicly displayed across the United Kingdom in late 1914 and throughout 1915, and the iconography their designers deployed became more striking and sophisticated as time went on.[33] The idea of German cruelty and aggression toward civilians thus became deeply ingrained in wartime visual culture in Britain. And while many public commentators were relatively restrained in their observations on the war, others seemed determined to demonise the enemy. In a sermon he preached to a gathering of clergymen in the first year of the war, for example, the bishop of London, A. F. Winnington-Ingram, related a story which he claimed had originally been told by a British officer:

> 'There is a young girl naked in my trench. She has been wronged by a German soldier. I have given her my shirt and all I can. I saw another poor girl last night having her breasts cut off by an Uhlan officer. I dropped him at several hundred yards. She is in my trench now, but I am afraid she will die.' What a contrast does the conduct of this German present to the splendid chivalry of our young knights! We are proud that not a single accusation has been made against one of our soldiers of having disgraced himself with regard to the women in the country through which he passed.[34]

The most striking aspect of this passage is not the almost certainly fabricated story of German savagery, but the bishop's confident assertion that British soldiers were simply incapable of aggression against civilians, and women in particular. In the intensely anti-German climate that prevailed on the home front, the British soldier was invariably regarded as self-evidently better and nobler than his battlefield adversary.[35] Writing in mid-December 1914, an English journalist considered the respective qualities of British and German troops, and admitted that the Germans

[29] *Nottingham Journal*, 8 Feb. 1915.
[30] Gregory, *The last Great War*, p. 46.
[31] On the impact of air raids on the British home front from 1914 to 1916, see Susan Grayzel, *At home and under fire: air raids and culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge, 2012), pp 20–63.
[32] On the degree to which the execution of Edith Cavell was used in British and Allied propaganda, see especially Katie Pickles, *Transnational outrage: the death and commemoration of Edith Cavell* (Basingstoke, 2007), pp 60–85.
[33] Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's army: the raising of the new armies, 1914–1916* (Manchester, 1988), pp 98–9.
[34] A. F. Winnington Ingram, *The church in time of war* (London, 1915), p. 55.
[35] Edward Madigan, '"Sticking to a hateful task": resilience, humour and British understandings of combatant courage, 1914–1918' in *War in History*, xx, no. 1 (2013), pp 80–1.

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were disciplined, brave and 'dogged'. He was in little doubt, however, about the moral superiority of the British:

> In one respect the British soldier has a marked excellence as compared with his rival. He is not cruel and barbaric in his methods; above all, he never oppresses and 'savages' the helpless peasant and the unarmed townsman; he does not loot and destroy with a greed and recklessness which in our eyes are dastardly.[36]

It should be noted that British servicemen stationed on the Western Front during the war were occasionally accused and found guilty of raping and, in a small number of instances, murdering civilians.[37] Yet although these cases constituted serious breaches of discipline and were undoubtedly traumatic for the victims and their families, British violence against civilians in France and Belgium appears to have been very limited by comparison with that perpetrated by German soldiers.[38] Crucially, such transgressions that did occur were rarely, if ever, reported on the home front. Thus, in the simple but powerful moral narrative that prevailed in Britain during the war years, German soldiers, sailors and airmen represented contempt for international law, wanton disregard for private property, and murderous cruelty towards unarmed civilians, whereas the British serviceman stood defiantly against these things.[39]

II

The widespread view of the conflict as a moral endeavour persisted after the Allied victory of November 1918 as people across Britain attempted to come to terms with wartime trauma. Indeed, in the years that followed the Armistice, the belief that the dead had given their lives for a great purpose would offer genuinely meaningful consolation to those who had lost loved ones in the fighting. The moment of victory on the Western Front was popularly interpreted as a redemption of the sacrifices made by the dead,[40] and the notion of 'redemptive sacrifice' permeated public discussion of the war in 1919 and into the early 1920s.[41] The inscriptions on the physical memorials produced at this time reveal a variety of sentiments, and while many of them simply list the names of the dead, expressions of gratitude and affirmations that the dead had given their lives defending the cause of 'liberty'

[36] *Midland Daily Telegraph*, 14 Dec. 1914.

[37] Most of the sixty-four British soldiers executed for murder during the war had killed other soldiers, but some of the victims were civilians. See Gerard Oram, *Military executions during World War I* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 47.

[38] K. Craig Gibson, 'Sex and soldiering in France and Flanders: the British Expeditionary Force along the Western Front, 1914–1919' in *International History Review*, xxiii, no. 3 (Sept. 2001), pp 563–4.

[39] Jay Winter, 'British national identity in the First World War' in S. J. D. Green and R. C. Whiting (eds), *The boundaries of the state in modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2002), pp 266–8.

[40] For examples of press responses to the Armistice that highlight the redemption of the sacrifices made by the dead, see 'At last' in *The Times*, 12 Nov. 1918; 'A glorious end' in *Daily Mail*, 12 Nov. 1918.

[41] Gregory, *The silence of memory*, pp 34–40.

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or 'freedom' are quite common.[42] The rhetoric and symbolism of the commemorative culture that emerged after the war thus placed a great emphasis on what the dead had won for Britain and the wider world, and unsurprisingly portrayed the British soldier of the First World War in a heroic, self-sacrificing and deeply sympathetic light.

The commemorative culture that developed across the Irish Sea in the immediate post-war period shared some similarities with its British counterpart, and the dead were certainly accorded a degree of respect and reverence in what would become independent Ireland.[43] Irish interpretations of the war in general, and the image of the soldier in particular, were complicated, however, by the competing narrative of republican martyrdom which had emerged in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, and been reinforced in the political campaigns of 1917 and the resounding electoral success of the Sinn Féin party in the 1918 general election.[44] The increasingly bitter relationship between the nationalist population and the British state would further cloud Irish memory of the world war and set much of the population culturally apart from Britain and unionist Ulster. Importantly, moreover, as paramilitary violence escalated in Ireland over the course of 1920, British responses to the conduct of the crown forces would be directly informed by the still very personal memories and interpretations of the 'war to end all wars'.

The ever-intensifying cycle of violence that would become known as the War of Independence is invariably regarded as beginning on 21 January 1919, the date on which the secessionist parliament, Dáil Éireann, met in Dublin for the first time and members of the Irish Volunteers shot and killed two men of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Tipperary. As Michael Hopkinson has observed, however, the sporadic nature of hostilities in the rest of 1919 'scarcely merits the term "war"'.[45] Without trivialising the violence that took place in the first year of the conflict, it should be noted that the conditions of what could accurately be termed a 'guerrilla war' did not emerge until the months after the deployment of the Black and Tans in March 1920. Importantly, moreover, British moral concern, as opposed to mere interest, regarding events in Ireland was not very significantly aroused until about September of that year, and in the aftermath of the 'sack of Balbriggan' in particular.[46] In response to the I.R.A. killing of an R.I.C. sergeant on 20 September, a unit of Black and Tans descended on the town of Balbriggan in north County Dublin and set fire to numerous homes and small businesses.[47] In

[42] The War Memorials Register, compiled and updated by the Imperial War Museum, offers details relating to the architecture and epigraphy of over 80,000 war memorials located across the United Kingdom. Of the 54,000 that commemorate men killed in the First World War, more than 1,700 bear the word 'freedom'. See https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials

[43] Mandy Link, *Remembrance of the Great War in the Irish Free State, 1914–1937* (Basingstoke, 2019); Jason R. Myers, *The Great War and memory in Irish culture* (Palo Alto, 2013); Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, 2000), pp 109–31; Jane Leonard, 'The twinge of memory: Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday in Dublin since 1919' in Richard English and Graham Walker (eds), *Unionism in modern Ireland: new perspectives on politics and culture* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp 99–114.

[44] Jones and Madigan, 'The isle of saints and soldiers', pp 121–4.

[45] Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence*, p. 25.

[46] Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish troubles*, pp 50–51.

[47] For a detailed and insightful account of the sack of Balbriggan, see Ross O'Mahony, 'The sack of Balbriggan and tit-for-tat terror' in Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Terror in Ireland, 1916–1923*, pp 58–74.

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an undeniable echo of the treatment endured by Belgian civilians some six years earlier, the residents of the town, who had been turned out of their homes, were forced to sleep in open fields and two unarmed civilians – John Gibbons and James Lawless – were detained, beaten and killed.[48]

As Maurice Walsh's research demonstrates, British journalists had been covering the evolution of the conflict from the first meeting of the Dáil, through the escalation of the I.R.A. campaign over the course of 1919 and into 1920, and the deployment of British state paramilitaries in response to these events.[49] Nor was the night of terror at Balbriggan by any means the first reported, or the worst, incident of the killing of civilians and deliberate destruction of property by the crown forces. Indeed, the first notable reprisal against the civilian population reported in the British press was perpetrated by the regular officers and men of the Shropshire Light Infantry in Fermoy at the beginning of September 1919, over a year earlier.[50] And yet in the context of British memories of the Great War and moral interpretations of post-war violence in Ireland, the sack of Balbriggan was very significant indeed. The details of the sacking were widely reported in the British press, partly because, as Jon Lawrence has noted, the town was 'unusually accessible' to British and international journalists based nearby in Dublin and partly because the events that occurred there made for a particularly good story.[51] From this point on, while there was disagreement as to the precise responsibility of the Lloyd George government for the policy of reprisals, criticism of the policy itself was virtually unanimous in the press and increasingly vocal in both houses of parliament. Also, and importantly, public commentary on the conduct of the crown forces was now routinely infused with references to the Great War, and to German atrocities in particular. Just two days after the assault on Balbriggan, the *Manchester Guardian* printed a brief but damning editorial under the heading 'An Irish Louvain'. The author, who seems likely to have been C. P. Scott, the owner-editor of the paper, alluded to both Turkish and German atrocities and argued that violence against civilians and wanton destruction of property exposed Britain to charges of hypocrisy from her international enemies:

> They spent the rest of the night in arson and murder, two men at least being lynched, a great part of the town burnt down, and a perfect handle given to every enemy of ours who would like to suggest that when we objected to German methods of keeping order in Belgium and to Turkish methods of keeping order in Armenia we were humbugs who would do just the same as the Turks and Germans if we were similarly tested … While we have all been leading the world in talk about security for Armenians and freedom for little Belgium we have ourselves drifted into a position where our criminal failure to govern a conquered white people stinks in the nostrils of the world worse than any other contemporary scandal of misgovernment.[52]

Less than a week later, on 28 September, in retribution for a successful I.R.A. raid on the military barracks at Mallow in County Cork, cavalrymen of the 17th Lancers

[48] Ibid., p. 64.
[49] Walsh, *The news from Ireland*, pp 58–78.
[50] Ibid., pp 67–8.
[51] Jon Lawrence, 'Forging a peaceable kingdom: war, violence, and fear of brutalization in post–First World War Britain' in *Journal of Modern History*, lxxv, no. 3 (Sept. 2003), p. 577.
[52] *Manchester Guardian*, 22 Sept. 1920.

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subjected the townsfolk to a night of arson and random shooting.[53] The following day, an editorial in the pro-government *Daily Chronicle* defended the policy of reprisals and argued that while wanton destruction of property should be condemned, reports of state violence against civilians in Ireland were exaggerated. The author claimed that as the populations of Balbriggan and other towns and villages targeted by the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries were insignificant, 'comparisons with a great and populous university city like Louvain are farcical'. The piece closed by contending that although reprisals should be deplored 'it seems improbable that many innocent people have suffered by them'.[54]

The *Manchester Guardian* responded with another impassioned editorial, printed under the headline, 'Ireland or Belgium?'. The piece denounced the soldiers who had harassed the populace at Mallow as mutineers, censured the *Daily Chronicle* for seeking to mitigate the actions of the crown forces and defended the *Guardian's* own allusion to Louvain in its reportage on Balbriggan:

> The accuracy of the Louvain comparison is only too painfully complete and there is no use shirking it. The only thing for patriotic Englishmen to do is to insist that the record of 'frightfulness' committed by their undisciplined servants in Ireland should be cut short now, while it is still possible for us to plead that those of the Germans and the Turks are longer.[55]

The use of the term 'frightfulness' was a deliberate evocation of the language with which German violence against civilians had been denounced during the world war and its connotations would have been quite clear to British readers.[56] Nor was the *Manchester Guardian* the only respectable national daily to draw parallels with Belgium when commenting on Ireland. On 30 September, the redoubtable editor of *The Times*, Henry Wickham Steed, roundly condemned the actions of the Lancers at Mallow and the wider campaign of the crown forces in a leader entitled 'A national disgrace'. The policy of reprisals was thus once again unequivocally condemned and sincere anxiety was expressed about Britain's international reputation. Steed also defended the parallel between Louvain and smaller towns and villages in Ireland, and rebuked the *Daily Chronicle* for dismissing it.[57]

By this stage, moreover, the British campaign in Ireland had also become the focus of concerned and often quite heated debate in Westminster. On 20 October, exactly a month after the night of violence at Balbriggan, the former leader of the Labour Party, Arthur Henderson, raised the incident, and the wider policy of reprisals, in the House of Commons. He began by making the unusual move of proposing a vote of censure to the government and the crown forces in Ireland and went on to make a lengthy speech in support of the motion. In the course of his remarks, he asserted that the forces of the state had been conducting a campaign of harassment and often violent intimidation against unarmed civilians in Ireland since 1917. While he felt that the killing of policemen was thus greatly to be deplored,

[53] For an account of the raid on Mallow and an analysis of the complicity of regular troops in reprisals, see James S. Donnelly Jr, '"Unofficial" British reprisals and I.R.A. provocations, 1919–20: the cases of three Cork towns' in *Éire-Ireland*, xlv, nos 1 & 2 (spring/summer 2010), pp 152–97.

[54] *Daily Chronicle*, 29 Sept. 1920.

[55] *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Sept. 1920.

[56] Walsh, *The news from Ireland*, pp 77–8.

[57] *The Times*, 30 Sept. 1920.

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he argued that it only began after an extended period of provocation. Importantly, Henderson explicitly referenced the stance Britain had taken during the war against Germany:

> What does stand out beyond question is that a policy of military terrorism has been inaugurated, which, in our opinion, is not only a betrayal of democratic principles and not only a betrayal of the things for which we claimed to stand during the five years of the great world war, but is utterly opposed to the best traditions of the British people. Such a policy, it seems to me, can only be characterised as being akin to the policy of frightfulness which was associated with the doings of the Germans, and the doings of him whom we described as the Hun during the War, and which all sections of British people most emphatically condemned.[58]

Henderson's language here was drawn directly from the crusading rhetoric that had emerged on the British home front in the late-summer of 1914, and he could hardly have invoked a more derogatory indictment of the Lloyd George government, the military authorities, and the officers and men serving across the Irish Sea. And yet while his statement, and his calls for an independent enquiry, were utterly rejected by the chief secretary for Ireland, Sir Hamar Greenwood, he received much support during the debate, not least from the leader of the opposition, Herbert Asquith. The vote of censure also prefigured an independent Labour Party commission of enquiry into the situation in Ireland, headed by Henderson himself, which produced a detailed and highly revealing report on reprisals in 1921.[59]

The vote was somewhat predictably defeated – by a margin of 79 to 346 – but the association of the crown forces with the German atrocities of the Great War was now very much a matter of public record and political debate. It should also be noted that many of the men decrying violence in Ireland in the autumn of 1920 had been very personally affected by the violence of the Great War. All three of Henderson's sons had served as officers during the war and the eldest, David, was killed at High Wood on the Somme front in September 1916.[60] On the same day, and in the same sector, Herbert Asquith's thirty-seven-year old son, Raymond, also lost his life while serving with the Grenadier Guards.[61]

As the weeks passed and the guerrilla war in Ireland not only continued but seemed to be intensifying, a wide variety of public commentators, including prominent clergymen, weighed in on the matter of reprisals. The British churches had been almost unanimously supportive of the moral case for war in 1914, and while Nonconformist ministers were somewhat muted, Catholic clergymen were often quite outspoken in their condemnation of the cycle of violence in Ireland in the autumn of 1920.[62] The clergy of the Church of England, and Archbishop Randall Davidson of Canterbury in particular, also expressed distinct unease regarding the deteriorating situation in Ireland. Davidson, who had been consecrated as archbishop in 1903, could hardly have been more of an establishment

[58] *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cxxxiii, 926 (20 Oct. 1920).
[59] Labour Party, *Report of the Labour Commission to Ireland* (London, 1921).
[60] Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Arthur Henderson: a biography* (London, 1938), p. 112.
[61] V. Markham Lancaster, *H. H. Asquith: last of the Romans* (London, 2019), pp 236–7.
[62] On responses of the Catholic clergy, see especially Brian Heffernan, *Freedom and the fifth commandment: Catholic priests and political violence in Ireland, 1919–21* (Manchester, 2014), pp 208–25.

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figure. An old Harrovian and Oxford graduate, he had been a trusted advisor and confidante to Queen Victoria during the period when the British Empire was at its absolute zenith in terms of military power and political influence. He was also personal friends with most of the prime ministers who served during his twenty-five years at Lambeth Palace.[63] Although his wartime rhetoric never strayed into belligerent demonisation of the enemy, moreover, Davidson very much supported the British intervention in the European conflagration in 1914 and publicly interpreted the conflict as a just war.[64]

Yet on at least two occasions during the war years – during debates in the House of Lords on the British use of poison gas and reprisals for German air raids – he drew sharp criticism for questioning British military policy and tactics.[65] His unease with reprisals seems to have stemmed from the conviction that the British state should not compromise its moral integrity by stooping to the level of its enemies. This was the essence of an impassioned speech Davidson gave in the Lords on 2 November 1920. He opened by insisting that he was not in any way sympathetic to the Irish republican cause, but ultimately condemned the conduct of the crown forces in the clearest terms. Much of the language in the speech is quite guarded, but the degree to which the archbishop stressed the magnitude of what was unfolding in Ireland is striking:

> We are faced by a series of incidents without precedent or parallel in our history, where the disciplined forces of the Crown appointed to suppress disorder have themselves, though without definite superior authority and command, given terrible examples of the very kind of disorder which they are sent there to suppress … I do not think it is out of place to quote here the grave and solemn warning that you do not cast out Beelzebub by Beelzebub.[66]

The speech was widely reported in the press and no fewer than three Irish nationalist M.P.s, including the leader of what remained of the Irish Party, Joseph Devlin, referenced the archbishop's denunciation of reprisals in the Commons the following day.[67]

As the most senior clergyman in the Church of England and a prominent member of the House of Lords, Davidson's views on what was now very much a matter of national interest were likely to be heeded. Indeed, the evidence suggests that counter-insurgency policy and tactics in Ireland were troubling the consciences of English Christians, irrespective of their political views. On 21 February 1921, *The Times* printed a letter from Lady Edith Sykes that criticised the tactics of the crown forces as a transgression of Christian moral law:

> No crimes or bloodshed committed by the Irish can excuse the methods now being employed by the Government to enforce obedience to English rule and to break the national spirit of the people. The accepted laws of Christianity and civilization have been set aside, and in their place an attempt is being

[63] Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London, 1996), p. 132.
[64] Madigan, *Faith under fire*, p. 36.
[65] Ibid., p. 37.
[66] *Hansard 5 (Lords)*, xlii, 143 (2 Nov. 1920).
[67] *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cxxxiv, 350–8 (3 Nov. 1920).

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> made to crush the Irish people by methods identical with those employed by the Germans in Belgium, and universally condemned … It is my firm belief that a cessation of hostilities could even now be arranged, and a truce be entered upon pending negotiations, and that the leaders of Sinn Féin would keep their word. [68]

Lady Edith was the widow of the late Mark Sykes, Conservative M.P. for Hull and army officer who was associated with the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which effectively divided the Ottoman territories in the Middle East into British and French spheres of influence. Up to the time of his death in 1919, Sykes had been a key figure in Conservative circles in north-east England. His wife was also a prominent member of the Yorkshire landed gentry, and, although she and her late husband were Catholics, neither had any personal sympathy with Sinn Féin's aspirations for independence.[69]

On the day after Lady Edith's letter was published, Archbishop Davidson made another speech in the Lords. Echoing some of her sentiments, it was better-informed and ultimately more persuasive than the speech he had made in October. His references to the German atrocities of the Great War, and the need for British people to speak out against injustices committed in their name, are particularly revealing:

> We want to know whether we can rely upon it that these things are now ended. We cannot acquiesce silently in not knowing how these things stand. To know or suspect, and keep silence, is exactly what we blamed the Germans for time after time. When the 'Lusitania' was lost it was a common saying on behalf of those speaking for the Germans, that it was the action of a few naval buccaneers, and that you must not blame the German people. But we answered that the German people acquiesced in it, and did not protest. We wish to protest against anything which will leave us open to the same charge.[70]

The speech was widely reported and had quite a significant general impact, but there was a particularly notable response to it in clerical circles. Just seven weeks later, a strongly-worded letter condemning reprisals in Ireland and calling for a truce was signed by some of the most senior bishops in the Church of England and no fewer than thirteen Nonconformist leaders, and forwarded both to the prime minister and to Hamar Greenwood. The authors of the letter, which was printed in *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* on 6 April, opened by endorsing the stance of the archbishop and then actually went a step further than Davidson:

> With that protest we, the undersigned, desire earnestly to associate ourselves. And we go farther. While not entitled to commit our respective churches, we feel constrained to say that we cannot regard the cruel and detestable outrages which have given rise to the whole reprisals policy … as a mere outbreak of wanton criminality in the ordinary sense. Notoriously there lies behind them

[68] *The Times*, 21 Feb. 1921.
[69] Shane Leslie, *Mark Sykes: his life and letters* (London, 1923), pp 206, 265–8.
[70] *Hansard 5 (Lords)*, cxxxv, 90 (22 Feb. 1921).

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> a long-cherished and deep-seated sense of political grievance which has been aggravated and inflamed by many untoward events and which the concessions of the new Irish Government Act have altogether failed to appease. Hence Dáil Éireann's quarrel with Great Britain and the emergence of a situation fraught with intolerable distress and humiliations to every lover of his country.[71]

The authors went on to plead with the government to arrange 'a genuine truce', insisting that they could not 'acquiesce in any alternative course of action'. The letter was signed by an extraordinary cross-section of clerical leaders, including Bishop Gore of Oxford and several other Anglican bishops, senior Wesleyan, Presbyterian, Methodist clergymen and the London chairman of the British Society of Friends. These prominent religious leaders were not acting in an official capacity, but they represented many thousands of British Christians and were formally and publicly protesting British reprisals in Ireland on the grounds of conscience.

III

By the autumn of 1920, significant sections of public opinion in Britain – including conservative opinion – were set decidedly against the counter-insurgency policy that the British government was employing across the Irish Sea. As the violence in Ireland intensified over the winter and into the spring of 1921, a widespread public desire for some sort of permanent resolution led to calls for a truce, to be initiated, if necessary, by the government. These demands for conciliation were at least partly influenced by the memory of the conduct of German servicemen during the Great War and a profound sense of unease that British men-in-uniform could be legitimately accused of similar atrocities. The reports of the destruction of property and the killing of unarmed civilians committed by the crown forces in Ireland thus presented a very direct challenge to the self-image of British people that had been nurtured by experience and rhetoric during the Great War, and which remained very much alive in the years after the Armistice. Ultimately, the conduct of British servicemen in Ireland in late 1920 and into 1921 threatened to undermine the narrative of British moral righteousness that had been such a crucial element of cultural mobilisation for war in 1914 and 1915, and which remained a significant consolation to the bereaved in the post-war world.

[71] *The Times*, 6 Apr. 1921.

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