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CASE STUDY 4 BACKGROUND: THE END OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN IRELAND

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⚙️ The end of the British empire in Ireland

The first serious English attempts to settle Ireland began in the 1500s, but were not hugely successful. The next settlements were in the province of Ulster, in the north of Ireland, in the 1600s. The settlements were called Plantations. They 'planted' Protestant settlers in Ulster who were loyal to the British monarch. The rest of Ireland remained Catholic and generally opposed to British rule.

There were many bloody wars and rebellions against British rule in the 1600s and 1700s. There were also smaller scale rebellions in the 1830s, 1840s and 1860s. Most of these rebellions were organised and led by the Irish Republican Brotherhood. They were usually known as Fenians, after a mythical Irish army in the past. The Fenians had many members in Ireland and a lot of members, money and support from Irish emigrants in the USA. Despite this, their rebellions all failed.

⚙️ Home Rule



By the 1880s Irish resistance to British rule was becoming more effective, mainly because it was using democratic methods. The Irish Home Rule Party campaigned for Home Rule for Ireland. This meant Ireland would still be part of the British empire, but it would have its own Parliament. The vast majority of Irish Catholics supported Home Rule - they thought an Irish Parliament would treat them better than a Parliament based in London. A number of wealthy Protestant landlords also supported Home Rule. They thought that they would be running Ireland's new Home Rule Parliament. So, in the 1880s and 1890s the Parliament in London voted on whether to give Home Rule to Ireland. Both times the measure was rejected for two main reasons:

- There were a large number of people in Ireland who wanted to keep the Union between Britain and Ireland. Most of these Unionists lived in Ulster.
- Many British MPs felt that if Ireland got Home Rule then the rest of the British Empire would fall apart. If they gave Ireland Home Rule, why should they not give India Home Rule too?

Image 1



An 1880s advertisement for braces. The braces are worn by leading British Unionists Lord Salisbury and Lord Hartington. The ad suggests that these braces were as strong as the Union between Britain and Ireland. The fact that the issue was being used in ads gives a clue as to how important it was at the time.

(PRO ref: COPY 1/81 f.365)

The British government managed to ignore the Home Rule issue until the early 1900s. It passed a number of measures that improved conditions for ordinary Irish farmers and helped them to buy their own farms (which most of them rented). Home Rule did not become a big issue again until 1910. There was an election that year. The Liberal Party won, but to pass any laws they needed the votes of the Irish MPs, led by John Redmond, who wanted Home Rule. Redmond did a deal with the Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. He agreed to help Asquith, as long as the Liberals gave Ireland Home Rule.

There was just as much resistance to Home Rule this time as there had been in the 1880s and 1890s. Unionists in Ireland, led by Edward Carson and James Craig, said they would fight rather than accept Home Rule. Redmond believed they were bluffing and that the British government should force them to accept Home Rule. The Unionists formed the Ulster Volunteer Force and smuggled guns into Ulster. Nationalists in Ireland then formed their own army - the National Volunteers (often called Irish Volunteers). It looked as though there would be a civil war in Ireland by 1914, but then a bigger war came along.

Both sides dropped their claims. Redmond encouraged the National Volunteers to serve in the British Army. In return he expected Home Rule when the war ended. Carson encouraged the Ulster Volunteers to serve in the British Army. In return he expected no Home Rule! Both sides fought with distinction in the war, both in the trenches of the

Western Front and in the Middle East.

⚙️ **The Irish Free State**



From the early 1900s the Nationalist movement in Ireland had two strands. One strand was Redmond's Home Rule Party. He wanted a Home Rule Parliament for Ireland with Ireland remaining as part of the British empire. The other strand was more radical, wanting complete independence from Britain. This strand had a political wing called Sinn Fein and a secret military wing (the Irish Republican Brotherhood).

From 1912-16 these radicals infiltrated the Irish Volunteers. On Easter Monday 1916 they led a small force of Volunteers into the centre of Dublin and declared that Ireland was now a Republic, free of British rule. The British forces then faced a long and destructive week trying to get them out of their strongholds. After a week the rebels surrendered. The British then executed the leaders, which gained the Republicans sympathy and support in America and Ireland. The executions were stopped and the remaining prisoners were sent to Britain to serve short prison sentences. The only senior commander who survived the Rising and the executions was Eamon de Valera. Another (less senior) survivor was Michael Collins.

The release of the prisoners did not bring peace for the British. When the war ended in 1918 there was an election in Britain and Ireland. Sinn Fein won all of the seats outside Ulster. Under the leadership of de Valera, the Sinn Fein MPs refused to sit in the British Parliament in London. They refused to accept British rule and set up their own government, Dail Eireann. Soon radical nationalists (now calling themselves the Irish Republican Army - IRA) were attacking the police and British soldiers. From 1919-21 a brutal undercover war developed in Ireland, with the IRA campaign masterminded by Michael Collins.

By late 1921 both sides had had enough. They called a truce and reached a Treaty. Most of Ireland (26 counties) was to become the Irish Free State. This was to be a Dominion like Canada. The rest of Ireland (6 counties) was to become Northern Ireland, which was still part of the United Kingdom although it had its own Parliament in Belfast. As in India, independence meant the partition of the country. Ireland became a republic in 1949 and Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom.

Image 2



Photo of Talbot Street, Dublin, during the 1916 Easter Rising
(PRO ref: PRO 30/89/16)

BRITISH EMPIRE

The end of the British empire - Ireland



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Background source one

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Background source two

Photo of Talbot Street, Dublin, during the 1916 Easter Rising

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Irish Rebellion, May, 1916.

Talbot Street, Dublin, held against a rebel charge.
Picture taken under fire.

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