ABSTRACT

For my project, I am analyzing women’s involvement in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) from the early nationalist movements in the 1700s until the disbanding in 2006. I will address the contributions of eleven women: Matilda Tone, one of the first Irish Republicans; Mairéad Farrell, a member of the Provisional IRA (PIRA) and prisoner in Armagh; sisters Dolours and Marian Price, also members of the PIRA; the five McCartney sisters and Bridgeen Hagan, who were responsible for the downfall of the IRA’s long violence and Jean McConville. Women were always prominent in the IRA because of the roots they held in shaping Irish nationalism and their willingness to engage in IRA street protests and to lead an uprising in Armagh prison. Eventually, it was women who called for the IRA to lay down their weapons and cease their violence.

BACKGROUND

In 1912, Home Rule (self-government) was passe in Ireland but later deferred because of World War I. Many Irish joined the war, hoping that Home Rule would be enacted once again as a thank you for their part in the war. A small number of Irish nationalists, weary of the British government, took another route in the war, seizing several key locations in Dublin in April of 1916, which would become known as the Easter Rising. Although this rebellion was quickly halted by the British military, the agenda shifted from Home Rule to an Ireland, completely free from British rule. This resulted in a military stalemate but sparked the Irish Civil War, lasting for just under a year. This time the fight was between the Irish Free State, supported by the British military, and the Anti-Treaty IRA, fighting over the Anglo-Irish Treaty which declared that Ireland would become a commonwealth nation under the British Empire.

The British would remain until 1948, when the Republic of Ireland Act of 1948 was enacted, declaring it the Republic of Ireland and removing the British from the 26 counties in the Republic. However, six counties in Northern Ireland remained under British rule. The IRA continued their fight to reestablish the six remaining counties in Northern Ireland under the Republic. They would see The Troubles occur, the Provisional IRA emerge and the eventual cease of violence in 2006.

PROFILES

Matilda Tone, 1769-1849, an Irish Republican.
Jean McConville, 1934-1972, a Belfast woman kidnapped and murdered by the PIRA, she is the only women documented to have been one of the “disappeared” by members of the PIRA.
Bridgeen Hagan, the partner of Robert McCartney, along with The Five McCartney sisters (Donna, Claire, Gemma, Catherine and Paula), they fought the IRA back after there was a huge coverup over her partner’s murder. These six women were able to compel the IRA to cease their violent agenda and turn to more of a peaceful and democratic approach.

GENDER

In 1921, Condon na reibek (The Women’s Council), was founded. This was an all-female military faction which supported the all-male IRA. It would be the precursor for women in the IRA and female nationalists. The symbol of the “rebecker” is very significant in Ireland. Women are meant to symbolize the nation, but also religion. Women losing their sons in the war/other conflicts, symbolize the sacrifice endured by the Virgin Mary upon the death of Jesus Christ. At time went on, the image of women in Ireland shifted. Of course, being a Catholic and conservative country, women still engaged in their typical duty of wifehood and motherhood. However, during the Troubles, a nationalist conflict lasting nearly thirty years, the role of women in the nation shifted to a nationalist ideology, similar to that of their male counterparts.

Women were able to use their gender for “honeytraps” and to evade suspicion of British soldiers. The women examined in this project exemplify female republicanism (Matilda Tone), Provisional IRA members (Mairéad Farrell and Dolours and Marian Price), one woman who fell victim to the PIRA’s armed struggle (Jean McConville) and those responsible for fighting the IRA back and thus compiling the organization to cease their armed struggle (Bridgeen Hagan and the McCartney sisters).

SIGNIFICANCE

One may question why historians may address gender in an armed organization more than 20 years after their ceasefire. This is an amazing part of Irish history and gender studies. In a Catholic and conservative country, women joined up in arms aside their male comrades and fought for a united Ireland. For some women, there was no question about joining the cause, for Dolours and Marian Price, their father, Arthur, was an Irish Republican and former member of the IRA. Irish Republicanism was in their blood.

To study such a rich history like this, historians can learn why people make such decisions and how these women gave other women an opportunity to defy their biological destinies and open a new door for gender studies.

SOURCES

The sources used in this research project were articles, academic journals, interviews and books. At first, there was difficulty finding any information on women in the IRA, but once I discovered a few figures, I was able to delve deeper. By the end of this project, I had over 30 sources. Patrick Reddin’s “Keefe’s book Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland” was a very helpful source, going into great detail about the Price sisters and their involvement in the disappearance and murder of Jean McConville. Another source was the interviews with Mairéad Farrell with the Springfield Community House in Belfast. This was a primary account of her experiences, along with other women, in Armagh Prison. Other sources included articles surrounding Robert McCartney’s murder, photographs and academic articles all pertaining to Matilda Tone, armed feminism and Mairéad Farrell, particularly her murder and those tried for it. Although difficult at first, it was a slow process to finally be able to uncover that these women indeed have an importance regarding women involved in the IRA and their influence on the world of gender studies.

"A woman’s place is not at home
The fight for freedom it still goes on
I took up my gun until freedoms day
I pledged to fight for the IRA"
~ "The Ballad of Mairéad Farrell"
"army or nothing"
~ Dolours Price