World War I was still raging in 1918, and by now many thousands of young Cork men had left to fight on the battlefields of Europe, some never to return. Though many had enlisted with the aim of furthering the cause for Home Rule, the political landscape at home had changed during the war years. The concept of Home Rule was dead and there was now broad support for the type of independent state advocated by Sinn Féin.

Right: Zonnebeke by William Orpen

By 1918 many significant improvements had been made to the city’s water and sewerage systems. Nevertheless, contagious disease was still common in the early part of the twentieth century, with many hundreds admitted to the fever hospital on the city’s northside over the course of the year. Typhus, diphtheria and scarlet fever were relatively widespread. With improved sanitation and better water treatment, as well as the clearing of the city’s slums, public health would improve in the city in the years leading up to the Second World War.

The Cork Electric Tramway Company began running electric trams through Cork in 1898. These replaced the horse-drawn trams that had previously operated in the city. By 1918, the lines extended to Blackpool in the north, Douglas in the south and Blackrock in the east. The trams would continue to provide an efficient mode of transport in the city until 1931, when they were phased out due to the rise in popularity of cars and buses.

Below: St Patrick’s Street in the early 1930s

Rationing was implemented in Ireland during 1918. The Irish Ministry of Food had set up a food control committee for Ireland in August 1917. Sugar was rationed under the terms of The Sugar Order (Ireland). Sugar cards were distributed to all households by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Sugar card holders had to register with a grocer for the supply of sugar. Adults were allowed 1.2 pounds of sugar per week, with children allowed slightly more. The public were also urged to conserve bread, butter and milk where possible.

Right: Extract from The Cork Examiner, newspaper of 8 January 1918 reporting on sugar scheme

Left: Example of a sugar ration card issued in Ireland during 1918
Anti-conscription campaign

When compulsory military service for men aged between 18 and 41 was introduced in Britain in 1916, Ireland was not affected. However, in March 1918, facing a major German offensive on the Western Front, the British war cabinet decided to raise the age limit of conscription to 55 years and extend conscription to Ireland. This decision met with vociferous and violent opposition in Ireland. The Sinn Féin party was positioned at the forefront of the anti-conscription campaign, and enjoyed greatly increased support as a result. The campaign marked the beginning of the end for the Irish Parliamentary Party, who had campaigned for Home Rule and who had actively encouraged young Irish men to enlist since the beginning of the war. The Irish Labour Party organised a general strike on 28 April 1918 and this, combined with other protests, contributed to the decision by the British government to abandon conscription in Ireland by June 1918.

The Rise of Sinn Féin

By the time of the December 1918 general election the electorate had changed considerably since the last poll eight years before. All men over the age of twenty-one years were now entitled to vote, as were all women over thirty who owned property. As a result, the Irish electorate had swelled from 700,000 in January 1910 to almost 2 million at the time of the 1918 election.

The conscription crisis of early 1918 provided an enormous boost to Sinn Féin’s support. It has been estimated that Sinn Féin membership rose by over 20% between March and May 1918. The number of Volunteer recruits increased to an even greater extent, as young men anxious to avoid compulsory service in the British Army rushed to join. By the time of the general election in December 1918, Sinn Féin were in prime position to capitalise on their recent gains. Whereas the Irish Parliamentary Party (who had been elected on a promise to deliver Home Rule) appeared to represent a dated, middle-class view of how Ireland should be governed, the policies of Sinn Féin appealed to younger, working-class voters. The Irish Labour Party withdrew from the contest, allowing Sinn Féin to run a great many candidates unopposed and present the election as a vote on a single issue: independence.

ASSOCIATION

The Woman's Franchise

Suffrage Movement

The Representation of the People Act, passed in 1918, extended the right to vote in parliamentary elections to women over thirty, and the general election in December of that year would offer women their first chance to utilise that right. In that election, Constance Markievicz became the first woman elected to the House of Commons.
EMERGENCE OF THE IRA

Cork Brigade Leaders

No. 1 Brigade: O/C Tomás Mac Curtain
Based in Blackpool on the northside of Cork City, Tomás Mac Curtain was a member of the Gaelic League in addition to being a brigade commander of the Irish Volunteers. Representing Sinn Féin, he was elected Lord Mayor of Cork in January 1920. In March of the same year he was assassinated in his home by the RIC.

No. 2 Brigade: O/C Liam Lynch
From Bandon, near Mitchelstown, Liam Lynch was a member of the Gaelic League and the Ancient Order of Hibernians. He joined the Volunteers after the 1916 rising, and was made brigade commander at the start of 1917. He became Chief of Staff of the IRA in 1922, fighting on the Anti-Treaty side. He was killed in 1923.

No. 3 Brigade: O/C Tom Hales
Tom Hales was born in Ballinrobe near Bandon. From a nationalistic family, he and his brothers fought for the IRA during the War of Independence in West Cork. He was captured and tortured by British forces, but survived to fight on the Anti-Treaty side in the Civil War. He later became a Fianna Fáil TD for Cork West. He died in 1946.

During 1918 the Irish Volunteers were reorganising. Michael Collins had become disillusioned with the open warfare tactics of the Easter Rising, and was now preparing for a guerrilla campaign against the British. Local branches were quietly recruiting new members and training. New units were created in places which previously had no Volunteer network, and existing units grew and strengthened. Released prisoners from internment camps in Britain, veterans of the 1916 rising, boosted numbers and brought essential military experience. The conscription crisis of early 1918 also drove the numbers of new recruits significantly. By summer of that year, the numbers in the Cork Brigade stood at 8,000 men. After the start of the War of Independence the Irish Volunteers became more commonly known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

The expanding Volunteer movement required an improved organisational structure. The smallest unit was a company, which represented a parish or townland. Several companies formed a battalion, and several battalions formed a brigade. In early January 1919, the Cork Brigade was split into 3 parts: Cork City and Mid-Cork (No. 1 brigade), North Cork (No. 2 brigade), and West Cork (No. 3 brigade). The Cork IRA brigades formed the main part of the IRA’s 1st Southern Division. Cork IRA brigades accounted for 56% of total Volunteer numbers during the War of Independence, or 17,976 men.

Who were the IRA?

Volunteers were generally male. Catholic, single and aged in their late teens or early twenties. Their occupations varied, as can be seen from the table below (adapted from Hart, 2003).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Officers</th>
<th>Soldiers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmer / peasantry</td>
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<td>98</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farm labourer</td>
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<td>30</td>
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<td>94</td>
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<td>Skilled</td>
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<td>Shop assistant / Clerk</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchant / shopman</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attacks on Crown forces in Cork

On 7 July 1918, Ballingeary RIC prohibited a Gaelic League meeting in Clonakilty. In response to this action, local volunteers ambushed two RIC constables and took their weapons. Earlier in the year, a group of Volunteers had successfully taken weapons from Eyeries RIC barracks. On 12 September, soldiers from Victoria (later Collins) Barracks were attacked and relieved of their weapons. In November 2018 a Volunteer named Denis McNeeius was rescued from Cork County Gaol.

During 1918 intelligence gathering was prioritised by the Volunteers, and they developed an elaborate system of communication, designed to avoid attention from the RIC.
**World War I** ended on 11 November 1918. Britain and its allies won and imposed peace terms on Germany. The conflict took the lives of approximately 7 million military personnel and up to 10 million civilians. 49,000 Irish soldiers died in the war, many of those from Cork. They had enlisted primarily from the basis that their participation would secure Home Rule for their country.

On returning home, however, they would find Ireland had changed utterly. The idea of Home Rule was dead; the public wanted complete independence from Britain and nothing less.

Right: The armistice reported in The Cork Constitution of 12 November 1918.

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**What became of the returning soldiers?**

100,000 veterans returned to Ireland after World War I. The returning soldiers were in many ways out of place in the new order, having spent the previous four years fighting for the British. Though not specifically targeted by the IRA, they would find it difficult to integrate into society in the years immediately following the armistice.

Some, like Tom Barry, joined the IRA. The son of an RIC officer, he had served with the British Army in the Middle East. His combat skills would prove vital to the IRA during the War of Independence. Many other ex-soldiers trained the IRA recruits in the use of firearms.

Other war veterans joined the British forces. Most members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) were Irish, 75% of these were Catholic. Approximately 30% of recruits in the Black and Tans were Irish Catholics.

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**A new political landscape**

The outcome of the First World War caused the landscape of Europe to change irrevocably. Monarchies in Germany, Turkey, Russia and Austria-Hungary were overthrown. The US had emerged as a cultural, industrial and economic world leader. Russia was now ruled by Lenin’s Bolsheviks.

In Ireland, a majority of the electorate now wanted a sovereign state, independent from Britain. The Irish Parliamentary Party saw its support base collapse. Sinn Féin was now more popular than any other political party.

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**Sources used in this exhibition**

**BOOKS**

**NEWSPAPERS & JOURNALS**
Cork Examiner
Cork Constitution