Sinn Féin and the Easter Rising

Zachary Densmore

In May of 1916, the *New York Times* published a story titled "Killed Ten Policemen and Captured Forty: 400 Irish Rebels in Meath Ambushed Force Sent to Round Them Up."[1] This skirmish was part of the Easter Rising of 1916, an Irish insurrection to separate from England. The rebels in this article were branded as "Sinn Feiners," members of a nationalist group called Sinn Féin. The *London Times* coverage made the same generalization, and one would expect that two prestigious newspapers would accurately attribute responsibility for an armed insurrection.

In fact, Sinn Féin's founder Arthur Griffith opposed armed insurrections. Sinn Féin's organizational policy was to express dissent with methods that were legal according to English law but did not recognize English authority. Essentially, Sinn Féin did not need to break laws to reject English rule. This excludes military rebellions, and it would seem the *New York* and *London Times* published inaccurate coverage. Meanwhile, less prestigious Irish newspapers coverage was more accurate and drew some distinctions among the several groups involved. Before one criticizes the *New York* and *London Times'* coverages of the Easter Rising too harshly, it is important to note that Ireland's political landscape was complicated, featuring several prominent nationalist groups with similar but different ideologies. Blurring the distinctions, Sinn Féin sought to unify all nationalist efforts as they strove to become independent of British influence in all aspects of life. It was a confusing environment for even the most discerning of outsiders. Although branding the rebels as "Sinn Feiners" was a misnomer, it is not entirely inaccurate.

In 1903, a Dublin-based organization of Irish nationalist groups formed the National Council. Arthur Griffith led the organization in its first annual convention on November 28, 1905. The National Council, the nationalist Cumann na nGael, and the separatist Dungannon Clubs attended the convention,

[1] "Killed Ten Policemen and Captured Forty: 400 Irish Rebels in Meath Ambushed Force Sent to Round Them Up," *New York Times* May 3, 1916.

and together they formed Sinn Féin.[2] Sinn Féin is often translated as "ourselves" and sometimes as "ourselves alone." The title highlighted that Ireland would only look within to accomplish its goals.[3] Griffith understood that Ireland has a long and diverse history of nationalist traditions. He claimed that Sinn Féin was "the declaration of Irish Protestant parliament and Protestant volunteers of 1782, and it was the declaration of the Irish Catholic Parliament and Catholic army of 1689, as well as the meaning and justification of every Nationalist movement in Ireland since 1172."[4] Griffith strongly appealed to the Irish nationalist traditions of diverse backgrounds, methods, and even religions, arguing that Sinn Féin in 1905 embodied the common reason for every Irish nationalist movement since 1172. In this way, Sinn Féin was the culmination of centuries of tradition. Consequently, Sinn Féin was meant to be a universal organization designed to be the umbrella that all nationalist groups have used and will continue to use to resist the showers of the English reign.

Sinn Féin's activism rested on claiming pre-existing rights, not tearing down an existing regime and replacing it with something new. They believed "that national development could be secured through recognition of already existing rights and duties of citizenship and with the aid and support of all movements originating *within* Ireland."[5] Again, the emphasis on collaboration with all Irish movements highlights Sinn Féin's goal to unify all nationalist efforts. Sinn Féin leaders understood that the cause of independence was not only the cause of Sinn Féin but also of all of Ireland. The rights they claimed were nothing new. Instead of fighting for new rights, they were reclaiming old ones. The Irish did not need an armed insurrection to build a new system of rights because they could peacefully claim the rights they already had. That is why Sinn Féin could boast that "its principles did not violate a single clause of English law."[6] In summary, one

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[2] Sean Luing, "Arthur Griffith and Sinn Fein," in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916,* ed. by F. X. Martin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), 55-66.

[3] Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 11.

[4] Luing, "Arthur Griffith and Sinn Fein," 57.

[5] Maureen Buckley, "Irish Easter Rising of 1916," *Social Science* 31, no. 1 (1956): 49.

[6] Buckley, "Irish Easter Rising of 1916," 49.

did not need to break laws to obtain freedoms that existing laws should guarantee. Sinn Féin was merely holding its English government accountable to enforce existing laws. An armed insurrection would violate English law, and Sinn Féin would oppose actions like the Easter Rising because they were unnecessary. An armed insurrection would be a setback that would justify oppressive political actions against them.

A critical political component of Sinn Féin's ideology was challenging the legitimacy of British rule. How could Sinn Féin challenge their government's authority without breaking English law? First, it required not recognizing their illegitimate rule, and this required withdrawing "Irish MPs from Westminster to establish a national assembly with or without British consent."[7] Since Britain's reign was illegitimate, Ireland needed to withdraw its Members of Parliament, and consequently its support of British rule. Irish representation in the British government meant they were part of the British government; therefore, Ireland recognized British sovereignty. Naturally, a nation cannot be independent of another nation if they have representatives in that foreign nation's government. Ireland was voluntarily subordinating itself to Britain.

Sinn Féin's claims about the illegitimacy of British rule rested on the 1783 Renunciation Act. What brought on the Renunciation Act was Britain's attempt to monopolize the Irish economy and destroy competition in the markets. Essentially, Britain attempted to subject the Irish economy to British interests. Many objected to it, and the Irish Volunteers retaliated with the Nonimportation and Nonconsumption Agreement. Arthur Griffith, in his widely distributed pamphlet, *The Resurrection of Hungary*, explained that "by this patriotic agreement the Irish Volunteers bound themselves not to import any goods of English manufacture which Ireland manufactured, or was competent to manufacture, and not to consume such goods."[8] Essentially, if the Irish people made or could have made a specific good, they should not purchase that good from the English or even use it. The agreement grew in popularity and success, which prevented Britain from benefiting from the monopoly it imposed, and the British issued the Renunciation Act in 1783. The law stated that Ireland would only have to follow laws enacted by the current English monarch or the

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[7] Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 11.

[8] Arthur Griffith *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland* (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., 1904), 87.

parliament of Ireland, not the British parliament. Under this arrangement, the English monarch was still supreme, but the Irish legislated for themselves. Unfortunately, Griffith states that the Renunciation Act was forgotten, and the Act of Union was passed in 1800, which combined the Irish and British parliaments resulting in the subordination of Ireland. Griffith argued that although Ireland recognized British superiority, that did not negate the Renunciation Act. Griffith claimed the remedy was to reclaim the Renunciation Act.[9] Recognizing the Renunciation Act would necessitate removing all Irish Members of Parliament so Ireland could legislate for itself. Consequently, Ireland would be free to pursue its interests without serving Britain's agenda.

However, Sinn Féin's activism was not only political but also cultural. Sinn Fein rejected not only Britain's reign but also the British influence on Irish culture. Moreover, Sinn Féin employed varyingly safe forms of social activism to achieve its ends. Sinn Féin "offered a smorgasbord of variously risky or risk-free ways of resisting, subverting or simply ignoring British rule;" for example, "people could refuse to buy British goods, refuse to pay taxes, play English games, attend English plays, or indeed to speak English."[10]

In many ways, Sinn Féin was more than a political movement; it was also a decidedly Irish lifestyle that rejected English influence. Generally, if a small group of people decides not to buy English goods, play rugby, or attend the nearby theatre's production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, they will not suffer physical harm and experience only minimal social ostracization depending on the community. These actions could not graphically illustrate one's commitment to an Irish way of life but instead to quietly practice an Irish lifestyle in small ways that add up when entire communities adopt these commitments. Such commitments could have the impact of the Nonimportation and Nonconsumption Agreement.

In addition to these consumer or personal actions, Sinn Féin members also took riskier actions at public events. Just over a month before the Rising broke out, the *London Times* reported that a group of Sinn Féiners disrupted a recruitment meeting in Galway County. The *Times* claimed that "a body of about

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[9] Griffith *The Resurrection of Hungary,* 88, 90.

[10] Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 11.

60 Sinn Fein Volunteers interrupted the meeting, and, though warned more than once by the few policemen who were present, insisted on marching through it."[11] This act could have easily been branded as treasonous. Sinn Féin was directly interfering with their government's war efforts. It would have been simple to imprison or otherwise discipline this group of activists legally. Although the article also complained about British leniency in Ireland, these Sinn Féiners had to acknowledge that interfering with a military event was inherently risky.

In addition to social and political independence from Ireland, Arthur Griffith sought economic freedom from Britain. Many nationalists blamed Ireland's connection with Britain for the poor state of their economy. Specifically, the Act of Union of 1800 merged the British parliament with the comparatively small Irish parliament. The Irish Members of Parliament were a minority and could not pass economic reforms to benefit Ireland in a prominently British assembly. Arthur Griffith, born in 1871, spent his childhood in Dublin. By then, areas in Dublin that the previous generation remembered as prosperous before the Act of Union had declined into slums. Griffith believed economic improvement would not be spontaneous, but it required independence from English interests. An acquaintance of Griffith wrote, "the Nation could be saved only by effort, only by the slow rebuilding of the national life in Ireland itself, a rebuilding of individual and group effort."[12] Ireland, individually and collectively, would need to build an economy for itself, which could only be accomplished independently of Britain.

Although the Easter Rising itself may not have been years in the making, an armed insurrection was. That is because the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a militant Irish nationalist group, "had a majority on the governing committee of the Irish Volunteers and determined, within a month of the outbreak

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[11] "Mischief In Ireland," *Times* March 4, 1916.

[12] Colum Kenney, "'A Man Who Has Both Arms': Arthur Griffith, the Economy and the Anglo-Irish Treaty Agreement 1921," *Irish Economic and Social History* 49 (2022) Open access: https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/IES/0/0

of hostilities between England and the central powers, to rise in arms before the war ended."[13] The IRB had the will and the means to start an armed insurrection. Additionally, Irish residents had other concerns. The *London Times* summarized the poor results of a recruiting campaign in Ireland. Although its writer conceded that Irish underperformance was not a major military setback, it impacted "the future of Anglo-Irish relations, [and] that nationalist Ireland should not in such a time as this be a conspicuous laggard."[14] As the Irish failed to meet military expectations, rumors circulated that "compulsory service is about to be established, and hundreds of men, even at this time of year, when emigration is usually at its slackest, are leaving their farms and rushing off to the United States."[15] Beyond the passionate plans of Irish nationalist groups like the IRB, the *Times* indicated that Irish farmers were concerned about compulsory service in the British army and were willing to take drastic actions to avoid it. Those who could not have emigrated likely resented British authority, adding another ingredient to the boiling pot of nationalist fervor.

Prior to the Easter Rising, Sinn Féin and separatist nationalism were synonymous. Therefore, it only made sense that an armed uprising to separate from Britain would initially be called the Sinn Féin Rising.[16] The *London Times*, reporting on political conditions in Ireland just over a month before the Rising, used the term Sinn Féin to refer to the ideology of the whole of anti-British newspapers. A sub-heading was dedicated to "The Disloyal Press" and reported, "In any back street in Dublin you may collect within 10 minutes copies of at least a dozen weekly newspapers dedicated to the propagation of Sinn Fein principles."[17] Before the war, English readers were already used to associating Sinn Féin with nationalist separatism. They did not need any explanation of what Sinn Féin was, and it was easy to use the umbrella organization's name to describe all Irish separatist nationalist writings. Additionally, the usage of Sinn Féin

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[13] F. X. Martin and Eoin MacNeill, "Eoin MacNeill on the 1916 Rising," *Irish Historical Studies* 12, no. 47 (1961): 228.

[14] "Recruiting in Ireland," *Times* October 31, 1914.

[15] "Recruiting in Ireland," *Times* October 31, 1914.

[16] Luing, "Arthur Griffith and Sinn Fein," 63.

[17] "Mischief In Ireland," *Times* March 4, 1916.

to describe the ideologies of all the other newspapers in the Dublin backstreets illustrates the prominence of Sinn Féin. Beyond the fact that Sinn Féin was meant to be an umbrella organization and that its ideology was anti-English, English readers were already associating Sinn Féin with Irish separatist nationalism. Therefore, it would not make sense for the *Times* writers to distinguish among the many groups that were a part of the separatist Easter Rising.

It is interesting to note that before the Rising, newspapers drew some distinctions between the various militant and non-militant nationalist groups. This distinction was not made after fighting broke out. In the same *London Times* article describing the disloyal Sinn Féin press, the militant Irish Volunteers' activities are clearly distinguished. It was reported that Sinn Féin's "newspapers are sold in every small general shop in Dublin, and throughout the country" while "there is no sort of concealment about the marching's and drillings of the Irish Volunteers. Although the importation of arms into Ireland has been strictly prohibited, the Volunteers declare publicly they are getting all the arms they need."[18] Here, Sinn Féin is associated with free, though seditious, speech, while the Irish Volunteers are associated with militant and illegal activities. Later in the article, the journalist describes the Irish Volunteers practicing street fighting. Throughout the article, Sinn Féin is associated with the press and the Irish Volunteers with militant activity. However, this distinction was lost once fighting broke out. The *New York Times* reported an incident where "400 Irish Rebels in Meath Ambushed Force Sent to Round Them Up."[19] The police force in question was only an eighth of the rebel forces. The rebels knew they were coming and were able to lay a successful trap. Once the trap was sprung, the police "sought refuge behind the cars and in deep ditches at the foot of the long, sloping bank upon which the Sinn Feiners were intrenched." The skirmish continued for hours, and eventually, the police force tried to push through and escape "under cover of a deep ditch, but the movement was seen by the Sinn Feiners." The Rebels ultimately won, and "the Sinn Feiners treated

[18] "Mischief In Ireland," *Times* March 4, 1916.

[19] "Killed Ten Policemen and Captured Forty."

the prisoners with every courtesy and respect, but commandeered their rifles and some equipment."[20] These actions, the ambush, the resulting battle, and the commandeering of arms were not consistent with an organization that insisted they were legally reclaiming rights they already had. Instead, it was consistent with the militant behavior of an organization like the Irish Volunteers, even though it is attributed to Sinn Féin, the voice of separatist nationalism in Ireland.

All the news sources discussed to this point have been foreign, non-Irish newspapers. An Irish American newspaper had a better grasp of the distinctions among the parties involved in the Easter Rising. However, its writers sometimes used Sinn Féin to refer to everyone involved. This was most clear after the Rising. *The Irish Standard*, an Irish American newspaper in Minnesota, ran an article attributed to an anonymous French Statesman less than a month after the Rising's conclusion. He said the rebels were "of two classes—the leaders in Conolly's small Socialist-Labor party...and some of the more ardent from that distinctively Irish body, the Sinn Feins."[21] Although an oversimplification, it is more comprehensive than referring to all the rebels as Sinn Féin. The author also suggested that some militant, "more ardent" members may have been within Sinn Féin. This anonymous "French statesman," named as the source of this piece, also distinguished Sinn Féin's ideology from militant stereotypes. He said they "are not wild-eyed men with knives and bombs, agitating force...Their aim is to revive in Ireland Irish laws, thought, speech, and ideals, as opposed to the past century of Anglicization. Intellectual, not physical, force was the weapon they normally advocated."[22] The author sharply contrasts the intellectual and legal ideology of Sinn Féin with radicals who only want to create chaos. The author accurately summarized the critical points of Sinn Féin's ideology and highlighted its fierce opposition to anything English, or rather, its strong support of Irish customs.

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[20] "Killed Ten Policemen and Captured Forty."

[21] "History, Aims, and Ambitions of the Sinn Fein Organization," *The Irish Standard* May 20, 1916.

[22] "History, Aims, and Ambitions of the Sinn Fein Organization."

Most significantly, the author understood that "Ireland as a whole did not rise last week; most Irishmen have learned the inefficacy of physical rebellions. Yet the Sinn Feins have the personal love, the kin sympathy, open or covert, of 70 percent of the people of Ireland as well of the Irish abroad."[23] The author's reference to Irish nonparticipation during the Easter Rising alongside the love for Sinn Féin, links the two. Beyond the "more ardent" group of Sinn Féin members noted earlier, Sinn Féin was not a part of the Rising. In this case, an Irish American newspaper demonstrated excellent knowledge of Sinn Féin's role (or lack thereof) in the Easter Rising. Ironically, on the same page of this newspaper was an article titled "Irishmen Slaughtered by British are Heroes." It said that "George Bernard Shaw, noted author and playwright," would be "discussing the execution of the Sinn Feiners."[24] Here, Sinn Féin was once again used as a blanket term. In these cases, the usage of Sinn Féin depended on the knowledge and purpose of its writers. The French Statesman's goal was to summarize the history, purpose, and aims of Sinn Féin. He would be more aware of the distinctions among various nationalist groups. Shaw's goal was to offer commentary on the execution of rebel leaders. He would not need to be mindful of the distinctions among groups because he focused on the British act of execution. Writers in Irish newspapers appeared to have understood the distinctions among Irish political groups better than the non-Irish papers.

Irish perceptions of Sinn Féin and its founder were generally favorable before and after the Rising, but Sinn Féin was not without its critics. Before the Rising, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Sinn Féin had many members who were part of both organizations.[25] Additionally, the IRB invited Griffith to join the Supreme Council of the organization. Griffith refused because he did not want his ability to speak on national issues restricted by organizational affiliations.[26] Recall the anonymous French statesman who claimed that "70 percent of the people of Ireland as well of the Irish abroad" sympathized with Sinn Féin.[27]

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[23] "History, Aims, and Ambitions of the Sinn Fein Organization."

[24] "Irishmen Slaughtered by British are Heroes, George B. Shaw Says," *The Irish Standard*, May 20, 1916.

[25] Gerard Shannon, "The Sinn Féin Rebellion? Arthur Griffith's Easter Week 1916," *The Irish Story* April 5, 2015.

[26] Luing, "Arthur Griffith and Sinn Fein," 62.

[27] "History, Aims, and Ambitions of the Sinn Fein Organization."

Although the quantitative claim is questionable, it evidences that, generally, this statesman had favorable interactions with others regarding Sinn Féin. However, one noteworthy critic is another leader of the Rising, an IRB and Irish Volunteers member, Patrick Pearse.[28] Pearse was a skilled orator who unleashed that skill on Griffith and Sinn Féin. Specifically, he criticized Griffith's excessive influence on the organization and autocratic leadership style. Addressing Griffith in an open letter in his political weekly, *An Barr Buadh*, Pearse wrote, "You over-estimated your own opinion. You distrusted people who were as loyal as yourself. You would follow no-one's advice except your own. You preferred to prove to the world that no one else was right except yourself… No progress was possible for an association which had that kind of man at its head."[29]

Pearse eloquently accused Griffith of pride while specifying how it hampered his organization. Pearse's readers may have had similar perceptions of Sinn Féin because they chose to read Pearse's work. Perhaps this is a just indictment for any leader of a nationalist organization, especially one that emphasizes identity. Whether or not Pearse is correct in his assessment of Griffith, he highlights that the Irish people did not universally love Sinn Féin and Arthur Griffith.

Arthur Griffith's reaction to the Rising was consistent with Sinn Féin's ideology: he disapproved of it. The Irish Republican Brotherhood worsened the outcome because they kept the plan a secret from him after promising to keep him updated about any developments regarding an armed uprising. Griffith learned about the plans the Saturday before the Rising.[30] Upset, he arrived at James MacNeil's home, where his brother, Eoin MacNeil, the Irish Volunteers chief of staff, was already drafting countermand orders to disrupt the IRB's plans. Griffith fully supported these efforts. Griffith must have thought they were successful because he enjoyed the Easter weekend with his children the following Monday as the first shots were fired. Alarmed, he looked first to the safety of his children, and then he investigated what was

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[28] David Thornley, "Patrick Pearse—the Evolution of a Republican," in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916,* ed. F. X. Martin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), 158.

[29] "The Sinn Féin Rebellion? Arthur Griffith's Easter Week 1916."

[30] Luing, "Arthur Griffith and Sinn Fein," 63.

happening. Evidently, the countermands had failed. As soon as he understood the situation, he sent a message to Sean Mac Diarmada. Mac Diarmada had organized several Sinn Féin branches and was also one of the IRB's primary recruiters.

In his message, Griffith rebuked Mac Diarmada for keeping him in the dark but said he was willing to join the fight. Although it appears Griffith acted hypocritically by offering to join an armed insurrection, he supported the efforts to countermand the IRB's orders and prevent the Rising. When his efforts failed, and an armed movement began to create an Irish Ireland (the primary goal of Sinn Féin), Griffith decided to join. Griffith wanted to help achieve Irish independence, and when an armed rising began for that end, he wanted to help in any way he could. The leaders of the Rising rejected his offer, but not as a result of ideological differences. They agreed "it was more important for Griffith's 'pen and brain to survive' and continue his work, and 'to someday defend and justify them.'"[31] The Sinn Féin leadership greatly respected Griffith's abilities and understood his value to Irish nationalism. They understood Griffith was irreplaceable and did not want to try to fill the crater in the Irish nationalist movement Griffith's absence would create. So, while Griffith disapproved of the armed insurrection, he still had the respect and admiration of its leaders and supported the efforts to separate from Britain.

In conclusion, the Easter Rising, then referred to as the Sinn Féin rising, though a misnomer, is not entirely inaccurate. Sinn Féin's origins as an umbrella organization, its Irish nationalist pride, and its core belief in challenging British authority created a complicated political environment for even the most discerning outsiders. Add these facts to Sinn Féin's established reputation as the voice of Irish separatist nationalism and the respect for the organization and its founder, Arthur Griffith, and distinctions become murkier. Even though Irish newspapers seemed to grasp the distinctions better than other newspapers, the usage of the name Sinn Féin depended on the purpose and knowledge of its writers. Although Sinn Féin opposed the Rising, its ideology and activism contributed to a political climate committed to an Irish Ireland

[31] "The Sinn Féin Rebellion? Arthur Griffith's Easter Week 1916."

and, naturally, separation from England. Even once organizations like the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Republican Brotherhood resorted to arms, Arthur Griffith did not hinder the insurrection once it was in progress, and he offered his help. The legacy of Sinn Féin's participation or lack thereof in the fateful Easter Rising of 1916 is complicated. A century later, the distinctions are still murky. However, they are clear enough to say that even though Sinn Féin's ideology opposed armed insurrections, it supported creating an Irish Ireland, politically and socially, and challenging British legitimacy. Sinn Féin would proudly support many efforts to these ends.

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