

The Politics of Conscription in Northern Ireland, 1938–1946

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Abstract

Between 1938 and 1946, political actors in Northern Ireland argued over whether military conscription should be extended to the territory. Drawing on Belfast cabinet papers, parliamentary debates, diplomatic correspondence, and the contemporary press from Northern Ireland, Éire, and Great Britain, this article reads those debates as a sustained public argument about political membership: about who owed military service to which state, and what such obligations implied for rights and recognition. Unionists demanded conscription as proof of equal standing with Great Britain even as they defended local hierarchies that treated Catholics as suspect citizens; the campaign ultimately split their movement. Nationalist spokesmen cast conscription as an imposition by a foreign state on members of the Irish nation. Britain's repeated refusal to impose conscription tacitly conceded that the obligations of Northern Ireland's population differed from those of other subjects of the Crown—and, by war's end, had pulled the territory's politics in opposite directions: encouraging Nationalists toward British institutions even as it unsettled the Unionist coalition that had demanded enforcement.

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1 Introduction

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement recognized ‘the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both.’¹ With that sentence, Catholic and Protestant leaders, together with the British and Irish governments, ended the thirty-year conflict known as the Troubles. The agreement established power-sharing between Nationalist and Unionist parties; the question of national belonging it left open.

That formula had a long prehistory. This article examines one moment when the substance of the choice was argued out with unusual clarity: the debates, between 1938 and 1946, over whether military conscription should be extended to Northern Ireland. The conscription question compelled key actors to state their views on political membership more systematically than perhaps at any time since the territory’s formation in 1921. Nationalist spokesmen argued that Catholics belonged to the Irish nation and that conscription would therefore force them into a foreign army. Unionist leaders argued that leaving Northern Ireland out of conscription law would breach the uniform obligations binding the territory to Great Britain.

Neither side got quite what it wanted, and this article argues that the outcome itself—Britain’s repeated refusal to compel—reshaped Northern Ireland’s politics in two contradictory ways. Because the government declined to impose mandatory service, Catholics grew more willing to engage with British institutions over the course of the war; and as Unionists weighed conscription’s consequences, they found it harder to sustain the dichotomy between ‘loyal’ Protestants and ‘disloyal’ Catholics on which their rule rested. The case shows how a state can earn a measure of legitimacy from a suspect minority by conspicuously declining to enforce an obligation—and how the same forbearance can destabilize the majority coalition that demanded enforcement.

Who demanded the obligation and who refused it tracked the deeper division. Partition in 1921 left Northern Ireland with a Protestant majority, descended mainly from Scottish and English settlers, that considered itself British and organized politically as Unionist; roughly one-third of the population was Catholic (Elliott 2000), and its political leadership—Nationalist in name and allegiance—looked to the Irish state established in the south (Ruane and Todd 1996; Lynch 2019).

Describing what these communities contested requires a word on terms. ‘Citizenship’ in this article is my category, not the actors’. The people who argued over conscription spoke of loyalty, allegiance, rights, and nationhood; in law, nearly all of them were British subjects, for no status of United Kingdom citizenship existed before the British Nationality Act of 1948. Irish law complicated matters further: the 1937 Constitution claimed the whole island as national territory, yet under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1935, birth in Northern Ireland did not by itself confer Irish citizenship; entitlement could instead depend on descent or registration (Daly 2001). I therefore use citizenship in its sociological sense, as shorthand for claims about the obligations people owe a state and the rights and recognition they may demand from it (Marshall 1950; Brubaker 1992). ‘Loyalty’ and ‘allegiance’ were the actors’ words, and where the sources speak I preserve their vocabulary; but left alone those terms obscure what was contested through them—the reciprocity of obligation and recognition—and that is what citizenship names. Political scientists have treated conscription as the sharpest test of a state’s claim to obedience,

1. Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations (Belfast Agreement), 10 April 1998, Constitutional Issues, para. 1(vi).

and military service as a currency in which excluded groups claim standing (Levi 1997; Krebs 2006); Northern Ireland presents the rarer case of a state that hesitated to make the claim, and of (some) subjects who demanded it.

That anomaly has a substantial historiography—but only as an episode, more rarely as a focus of argument. John Blake’s official history chronicled the territory’s contribution to the British war effort and treated the absence of compulsory service chiefly as a problem of manpower (Blake 2000). Robert Fisk placed conscription within the triangular diplomacy of London, Belfast, and Dublin, reading the crises of 1939 and 1941 as tests of Éire’s neutrality (Fisk 1983). Joseph Rosenberg examined the 1941 conscription crisis in the context of Anglo-Irish policy; his remains the only standalone article devoted specifically to the 1941 crisis (Rosenberg 1979). Brian Barton used the issue to chart the weakness of the devolved government, a weakness that culminated in the fall of J.M. Andrews (Barton 1995). Philip Ollerenshaw set it within the wider story of economic mobilization and the war’s transformation of state capacity (Ollerenshaw 2013).

In these accounts, the conscription debates figure as episodes—of diplomacy, administration, or mobilization. I read them instead as a sustained public argument about political membership. That is, read as a problem of manpower or diplomacy, Britain’s repeated refusal to compel looks like prudence to avoid unrest. Read as a problem of membership, it redrew the boundary of obligation between the state and 1.3 million of its subjects. The autumn 1938 mobilization against conscription and the 1945–46 retreat from it have received little sustained attention; this article brings them together in an extended account.

In a broader context, Sonya Rose has shown how the Second World War made citizenship an object of public argument in Britain—an argument over what the ‘good citizen’ owed the wartime state (Rose 2003). That account has not been tested in the one part of the United Kingdom where the identity of the state itself was in dispute. Northern Ireland extends and complicates this theory: there the argument concerned not only the terms of citizenship but its addressee. Clair Wills and Bryce Evans have re-examined Éire’s wartime experience (Wills 2007; Evans 2014), Guy Woodward has read the war as an interregnum that destabilized Northern Ireland’s cultural life (Woodward 2015), historians of the Blitz have restored Belfast to the home-front story (Douds 2011; Barton 2015), and Diarmaid Ferriter and others have traced partition’s afterlives with an urgency sharpened by Brexit (Ferriter 2019; Nic Dháibhéid, Coleman, and Bew 2022). Yet, the conscription controversy still awaits such treatment—one this article supplies for two audiences at once: historians of wartime Ireland, and students of how divided polities apportion the obligations of citizenship.

My sources primarily capture public argument, not private conviction. Cabinet papers and departmental files at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland show how officials reasoned about conscription; scholars have worked through many of these files, but the files from autumn 1938 and from the 1945–46 retreat from conscription have drawn comparatively little analysis. Newspaper editorials, reports, and letters show the arguments that circulated publicly in each community: the nationalist *Irish News* and the unionist *Belfast News-Letter* and *Northern Whig* in Belfast, alongside the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *Catholic Herald*, and *The Times*. I read these papers as organs of organized opinion: the *Irish News* and the *Catholic Herald* spoke for strands of political Catholicism—not for Catholics as a whole—and the unionist dailies for the other community’s public case. Parliamentary debates at Westminster and in the Dáil, and the published *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, anchor the official record on all three sides. A Mass-Observation

diary kept by the Belfast Protestant Moya Woodside supplies one contemporary’s running commentary; I use it to illustrate, never to generalize. Claims below about ‘Catholic’ or ‘Protestant’ views concern the public positions of each community’s political and religious spokesmen.

I focus on the years from 1938, when conscription first surfaced as a political question in Belfast, to 1946, when Unionist leaders conceded that it would not be applied in post-war Northern Ireland. I rest the account on records produced within that span, which show how actors argued while the outcome remained open; retrospective testimony raises distinct questions of memory and subjectivity (Beiner 2018) that lie beyond this article’s scope. The article first situates the debate—who could decide it, and why exclusion was anomalous within the United Kingdom yet familiar within the Empire. It then follows the Unionist campaign from Craigavon’s demand of 1939 to the retreat of 1946, and next the Nationalist campaign, asking in whose name opposition was voiced—parish, party, Dublin, the IRA—and how the absence of conscription drew Nationalist politicians toward institutions they had shunned. A conclusion asks what the controversy changed.

Table 1: Chronology of the conscription question, 1938–1946

Date	Event
Sept. 1938	Nationalist mobilization against conscription amid the Czechoslovak crisis—months before the issue enters the Unionist agenda (Jan. 1939).
26 Apr.–May 1939	Chamberlain announces conscription for Great Britain; Craigavon: Northern Ireland should “naturally fall in line”; the bishops warn imposition “would be disastrous”; Dublin calls it “an act of war”; the Cabinet excludes Northern Ireland.
Apr.–May 1941	German air raids on Belfast; renewed Stormont pressure for conscription.
25–27 May 1941	Parish pledges revive the 1918 formula; the Dáil protests in special session; Churchill: enforcement “would be more trouble than it is worth.”
Apr.–May 1943	Wickham’s report questions enforceability; the Unionist Party ousts Andrews; Brooke becomes Prime Minister and renews lobbying.
Apr. 1945	Brooke urges extending post-war conscription to Northern Ireland.
Aug. 1945	Nationalist MPs end abstention and take the oath of allegiance at Westminster.
Feb. 1946	Police reports unanimously advise against enforcement; the Cabinet and Ulster Unionist MPs conclude conscription is “not a practical issue.”

2 Equal Obligations, Unequal Citizens: The Terms of the Debate

Throughout the Second World War, Unionists were divided between hardline and moderate factions, which differed in how openly they voiced anti-Catholic sentiment. No systematic opinion polling existed in Northern Ireland in this period, so the balance between these factions must be inferred from party records, the press, and cultural sources (Walker 2004; Parr 2017). Hardline Unionists nevertheless dominated public discourse, for they mobilized cohesively against their opponents (Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 1979, 90). At first glance, the two factions may seem to correspond to two traditions of Unionist thought about political membership—Ulster loyalism, in which full membership in the British

state is (explicitly or implicitly) linked with Protestant religious allegiance, and Ulster British ideology, in which civic loyalty to Britain undergirds citizenship (Todd 1987). But later scholarship emphasizes how extensively the two traditions overlapped (Farrington 2001, 56; Ruane and Todd 1996). Hardline Unionists controlled the Unionist Party and the Northern Ireland legislature, while the factions exchanged executive power.

Whatever their views, Unionist leaders addressed three audiences at once as they debated conscription: British ministers, who alone could extend mandatory service to Northern Ireland (the devolved government at Stormont had no power over national defense); their own Protestant constituents, to whom leaders had to explain how the absence of conscription squared with unionist ideology; and competing factions within unionism itself.

James Craig (created Viscount Craigavon in 1927), Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from the territory's formation in 1921 until his death in 1940, was among the first Unionists to open debate on conscription, arguing for the measure with reference to uniform obligations between the inhabitants of Northern Ireland and Great Britain. When British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced the coming introduction of conscription on 26 April 1939, Craigavon declared that, 'as part of the United Kingdom,' Northern Ireland should 'naturally fall in line' with Great Britain. Craigavon stated that care must be taken to 'round off certain points,' but insisted, 'no special legislation would be required' to distinguish citizens in Northern Ireland from those in Great Britain.² Meeting with Chamberlain in May, Craigavon referred to the 'desire of the people of Northern Ireland to be called to bear the same obligations as their fellow citizens' in Great Britain.³ The Cabinet chose exclusion nonetheless—Chamberlain told Dublin's envoy, 'We shall of course be much abused for this decision'—and Craigavon acquiesced, a concession one Ulster MP would recall in 1941 as 'one of Lord Craigavon's few weak acts.'⁴

The exclusion Unionists feared was anomalous within the United Kingdom but familiar within the Empire. Westminster routinely legislated separately for Northern Ireland—statute after statute carried a clause exempting the territory from its provisions—and the Military Training Act of 1939 added compulsory service to the list of exceptions.⁵ Beyond the metropole, comparative histories of wartime mobilization across the British Empire show that British governments had long calibrated military obligation to judgments about allegiance: the dominions decided conscription for themselves, India's wartime army—some 2.5 million strong—remained formally voluntary, and colonial administrations weighed compulsion against the risk of resistance (Jackson 2006; Killingray and Plaut 2010; Winegard 2012; Khan 2015). The most relevant precedent came from Ireland itself: the 1918 attempt to extend conscription united nationalist organizations against compulsion, even amid substantial Irish support for the Allied war effort, showing that coercion imposed on a population of contested allegiance could cost more than it raised

2. *The Times*, 27 April 1939.

3. Transcript between Jack Beattie and Craigavon, 4 May 1939, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), CAB/4/416/1. Craigavon's public message used the same formula: *Belfast News-Letter*, 28 April 1939, 7.

4. Dulanty to Walshe, 3 May 1939, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, vol. V, no. 317; *Northern Whig*, 22 May 1941, 2. Chamberlain's public explanation of the exclusion: HC Deb, 4 May 1939, vol. 346, cc. 2104–05. The fullest narratives of the 1939 decision remain Fisk 1983 and Barton 1995.

5. The National Service (Armed Forces) Act of September 1939 retained a power of extension by Order in Council for the Isle of Man, but none for Northern Ireland: HC Deb, 2 September 1939, vol. 351, c. 222. See Broad 2006.

(Ward 1974; Gallagher 2019). The Empire supplied the pattern; 1918 supplied the proof. Each year without conscription marked the distance between Northern Ireland's formal place in the Union and its practical one—the very gap that Unionist talk of uniform citizenship denied.

Yet while Unionists demanded equality between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, they reproduced hierarchies of citizenship at home. In May 1939, Lady Cynthia Brooke—wife of Basil Brooke, then Northern Ireland's Minister of Agriculture and later its Prime Minister—argued that, 'under the voluntary system the Loyalists (the majority) would willingly enlist,' but 'de Valera's followers would not.' For Brooke, 'this would mean that in war Loyalists would be leaving their wives and homes at the mercy of just those terrorists whom Northern Ireland has always among her.'⁶

Unionist leaders depicted Catholics as subordinate in other ways as well. Concerning conscription, Basil Brooke held that Catholics served as a 'minority who whilst prepared to share in the benefits of Empire...were either afraid or too despicable to take a hand in the defence of the country who defended them' (Barton 1995, 16–17). As Brooke had stated at an Orange Order rally before the war, 'I recommend those people who are Loyalists not to employ Roman Catholics, 99 percent of whom are disloyal' (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, 33).

Unionists also considered the social implications of conscription: from 1940 onwards, observers noted Northern Ireland's normalcy compared to other parts of wartime Europe. Moya Woodside conceded feeling 'shame' when she compared her experiences with those of Jews on the continent: 'Here in Ireland is probably the pleasantest place in Europe at the present time—we are unbombed, we have no conscription, [and] life is reasonably normal.'⁷ Likewise, *The Times* reported that—although 'great numbers of troops' were present—'there is still some yachting, and crowds enjoy the seaside holiday.'⁸

Some Unionists framed this normalcy as a symptom of apathy that conscription would discipline. For John MacDermott, Northern Ireland's Minister of Public Security, 'nearly all the regulations applying in England, apply in Ulster with one exception'—conscription (Barton 1995, 24). Hence, 'it is the absence of conscription which very largely effects Ulster apathy' toward the war effort. In May 1941, the government itself issued an official statement describing conscription as 'essential to promote the degree of cooperative discipline which is necessary if our people are to withstand the tide of total war.'⁹ The vocabulary was that of Britain's wartime citizenship talk—Rose has traced how official rhetoric defined the 'good citizen' by sacrifice and discipline (Rose 2003)—but in Belfast the language ran aground on a prior question that Great Britain never had to ask: discipline in whose service, and citizenship of which state?

Unionists also discussed the implications of conscription for Northern Ireland's economy. Ollerenshaw treats the absence of conscription as an economic variable, one that kept Northern Ireland short of full mobilization (Ollerenshaw 2013); contemporaries, however, rarely let an economic claim stay economic: arguments about employment and migration doubled as arguments about membership. Pro-conscription Unionists contended that mandatory service would reduce unemployment. Whereas Great Britain operated near full employment for most of the war, Northern Ireland approached this level only in 1944. As Woodside recorded, perceptions 'seem to be that Stormont is clutching at [conscription]

6. *The Times*, 8 May 1939, 10.

7. Diary of Moya Woodside, 1940, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

8. *The Times*, 4 September 1940.

9. Government statement, 21 May 1941, PRONI, CAB/4/475/15.

as a way out of the unemployment problem, to be solved at England's expense' (Barton 1995, 77). For another Protestant, conscription would 'ensure our men of their jobs in the post-war years,' since conscripts received employment guarantees for their return to civilian life.¹⁰

At the same time, Unionists could also use economic arguments to oppose mandatory service. In May 1941, ministers predicted that conscription could cause an influx of migrants from Éire, undermining the employment prospects of Protestants and returning enlistees.¹¹ The historian Ian Wood maintains that fears about employment reduced Protestant enlistment in the British Army: some Protestants worried that, if they joined up, Catholics would take their factory positions (Wood 2010). One *Belfast News-Letter* correspondent welcomed the exclusion in May 1939 lest 'disloyalists would have worked their way into as many jobs as possible belonging to the absent Loyalists'—'What we have we hold.'¹² Consistent with these fears, although enlistment started strong in the autumn of 1939 (with 2,500 enlistees in October 1939 alone), it soon fell to under 1,000 per month out of a total population of 1.3 million. This figure is low given Northern Ireland's persistent wartime mass unemployment (Blake 2000, 537). Blake, compiling these totals for the official history, counted a manpower deficit; set beside the letters above, the figures register something else—a labor market in which enlistment itself was viewed in sectarian terms.¹³ Hence, while some Unionists claimed that the 'loyal young men of Ulster' did not 'require to be conscripted before giving their services,' others expressed dissatisfaction with recruitment levels.¹⁴

Unionists on all sides thus referred to the politics of membership when weighing conscription's economic effects.

3 Unionist Perspectives: Striving for Uniformity and Facing Internal Strains

As Protestants refined their views on citizenship through the conscription debates, divisions between moderate and hardline Unionists deepened into the most serious inter-Unionist dispute since Northern Ireland's formation.

Upon Craigavon's death in November 1940, J.M. Andrews came to office. As Prime Minister, Andrews attempted to distance himself from Craigavon's perceived anti-Catholic legacy. After the German air raids of spring 1941, Andrews noted, 'All classes suffered from the recent barbarous air raids; the bombs made no distinctions' between Catholic and Protestant.¹⁵ He elsewhere stated, 'We all suffer with one another. We are one in heart and purpose.'¹⁶ Catholic observers themselves recognized that Andrews 'favoured moderation.'¹⁷

10. Notes of a debate at the Hamilton Road Presbyterian Church Youth Association, 14 November 1943, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

11. Minutes of Cabinet meeting at Stormont, 21 May 1941, PRONI, CAB/4/475/3.

12. *Belfast News-Letter*, 8 May 1939, 9 (letter of Alexander Blythe).

13. Blake's totals remain the standard series; Doherty puts Northern Ireland volunteers at c. 64,000: Doherty 2021.

14. *Parliamentary Debates* (Northern Ireland House of Commons), cols 583–584.

15. Statement by Andrews to the Northern Ireland House of Commons, 28 May 1941, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

16. *The Times*, 19 April 1941.

17. *Catholic Herald* (London), 6 June 1941.

Although Andrews's conciliatory rhetoric may have appeased some Catholics, the conscription question exacerbated divisions within unionism. In January 1943, Unionist officials in government met to express frustrations with Andrews and his Cabinet. According to one attendee, Wilfrid Spender, Andrews and his ministers had failed to 'offer leadership and sacrifice' along the lines of earlier Unionists during the First World War (Barton 1995, 62); those present asked the Chief Whip to plan the ouster of Andrews and his allies.

On 27 May 1941, Churchill announced that, 'at the present time, although there can be no dispute about our rights or about the merits, it would be more trouble than it is worth to enforce such a policy'; Sir Hugh O'Neill asked in reply: 'Will it not make a rather bad impression throughout the Empire that, once again, the Government have had to burke this issue, obviously because of pressure from Southern Ireland?'¹⁸ Andrews admitted that, 'an hour before I had to speak' on this decision, 'I did not know whether I was to bless the application of conscription' unilaterally or yield to Churchill's resolution.¹⁹ Andrews later noted that, 'frankly,' Churchill's decision 'was a wise one having regard to the very serious opposition which there would have been from the sections of our community.'²⁰ For Fisk, Churchill's statement closed a diplomatic episode: Dublin had been heard, and the matter was dropped (Fisk 1983). In Belfast nothing closed. The announcement opened the most dangerous phase of the intra-Unionist argument—over what loyalty had earned, and what Britain owed loyalty in return.

The *Belfast News-Letter* read the decision as capitulation: 'the impression left to-day, as in 1939, is that they have been intimidated, and that the last word on a matter which concerns the United Kingdom alone is with Mr. De Valera'; at Stormont, the paper reported, Andrews 'repudiated, in measured terms, the claim of Mr. De Valera to speak in the name of this area.'²¹ Hardline Unionists, for their part, continually pressed Andrews to intensify pro-conscription lobbying in London. To take one of numerous pro-conscription messages sent to Stormont, Colonel Alan Mulholland, a self-professed 'free Ulsterman,' telegraphed that Britain's position on conscription was a 'DISGRACE TO ULSTER MANHOOD.'²²

In January 1942, a group of Unionists pressured him to present an ultimatum to Churchill stating that, 'unless the demand for conscription was conceded,' the Northern Ireland government 'would no longer be responsible for the administration of that area.'²³ Among those pushing was Edmond Warnock—he had resigned junior office in 1940 in protest at the conduct of the war effort—who pressed the demand over his own name in the unionist press: with the United States in the war, 'the last political objection to its application to Northern Ireland has gone,' and conscription would bring Ulster 'into line with Canada, Australia, New Zealand and those other Dominions which are the bright jewels in the Crown. Now or never, Mr. Andrews.'²⁴ The American entry bound the

18. HC Deb, 27 May 1941, vol. 371, cc. 1718–19. Dublin's record of the same decision reads: the government 'decided it was not worth the trouble' (memorandum by Joseph Walshe, 27 May 1941, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, vol. VII, no. 80). On Churchill's Irish calculations, see Bew 2016.

19. Andrews to Oscar Henderson, 29 May 1941, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

20. Andrews to the Duke of Abercorn, 1941, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

21. *Belfast News-Letter*, 28 May 1941, 4.

22. Telegram from Alan Mulholland, 1941, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

23. *The Times*, 17 January 1942, 2.

24. *Belfast News-Letter*, 16 January 1942, 4. The dominions Warnock named were themselves fighting over conscription on membership terms: New Zealand's Labour ministers, jailed as anti-conscriptionists in 1916–18, introduced conscription in 1940, and Canada withheld overseas service from its NRMA

province more tightly to the Allied war effort, as Topping has shown, but did not change the British calculus on conscription (Topping 2022). Momentum for the ultimatum grew so great that, on 16 January 1942, Andrews issued a public statement denouncing the demand as ‘unthinkable, unpatriotic, and indefensible.’²⁵

As pressure mounted into 1943, hardliners became increasingly dissatisfied with Andrews and his moderate stance. *The Times* attributed the growing restlessness within Unionist ranks to Craigavon’s death and, ‘undoubtedly, the absence of conscription.’²⁶ By mid-April 1943, the Unionist Party called a meeting of its members in the Northern Ireland House of Commons, where attendees debated how they might cultivate ‘more virile and practical wartime leadership.’²⁷ The lack of conscription had helped trigger the first governmental crisis in Northern Ireland’s history. Barton takes this crisis as evidence of the devolved government’s administrative weakness (Barton 1995, 62); in the actors’ own words, it was equally a fight over what loyalty to Britain obliged.

On 28 April 1943, the Unionist Party withdrew its support from Andrews’s government, forcing him to resign. On 1 May, Brooke became Prime Minister in a move denounced by the Nationalist opposition as allowing the ‘perpetuation of the Unionist Party dictatorship.’²⁸ Once in power, Brooke visited Churchill and British lawmakers in an effort to reverse the verdict of May 1941.²⁹

Yet Brooke, like the moderates before him, soon confronted the difficulties of enforcement. In April 1943, C.G. Wickham, Inspector General of the Royal Ulster Constabulary—Northern Ireland’s overwhelmingly Protestant police force—circulated a study, commissioned within the government, on the enforceability of conscription. That such a force should audit a British obligation was itself telling: the government had already routed the Ulster Home Guard through the Special Constabulary; as Butler shows, this made the force overwhelmingly Protestant and discouraged Catholic recruitment, although he rejects the view that exclusion resulted from a deliberate Stormont policy (Butler 2016). In his report, Wickham argued that, without the approval of all political parties in Northern Ireland and without the official backing of the Catholic Church, the enforcement of conscription would remain impossible (Barton 1995, 77). He not only emphasized how the police would face opposition from Catholic groups, but also predicted that Protestant organizations would resist out of resentment against Catholic absentees. He concluded, ‘Unless, therefore, there is a firm determination to see conscription through no matter what it may involve,’ then ‘it should not even be mentioned.’

These arguments appear to have influenced Brooke. After Churchill reasserted in 1943 that British lawmakers would continue to exclude Northern Ireland from conscription laws, Brooke did not petition for the measure again until 1945.³⁰ In April 1945, Brooke privately conceded that the ‘very reasons’ for Northern Ireland’s exclusion would assume ‘greater proportions’ now that Northern Ireland was no longer under direct attack.³¹

When British leaders signaled that they would introduce post-war conscription, however, Brooke resumed pro-conscription posturing, partially because he reasoned that mandatory

conscripts until November 1944: Littlewood 2020.

25. *The Times*, 17 January 1942, 2.

26. *The Times*, 30 April 1943.

27. *The Times*, 26 April 1943, 4.

28. *The Times*, 4 May 1943, 2.

29. Report on conscription, 28 April 1943, PRONI, CAB/4/542/4.

30. Correspondence on the re-application of the Military Training Bill, 16 March 1944, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

31. Cabinet conclusions, 19 April 1945, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

military service would be needed to justify the post-war extension of aid from Great Britain to Northern Ireland.³² In April 1945, Brooke stated, ‘If some form of conscription is adopted in Great Britain after the war it is my view that it should be applied to Northern Ireland and I think the Government should take their stand on this policy’ (Barton 1995). Brooke also argued that conscription would mitigate the effects of a post-war recession,³³ and that it would ‘establish a principle which we are most anxious to see adopted.’³⁴ The Northern Ireland Cabinet agreed that the limited application of conscription could be done ‘without undue risk’ and that Northern Ireland ‘should definitely be included.’³⁵

Once again, the Inspector General and his counterparts in local police stations blunted the hardline resurgence. In early 1946, Brooke requested that the Inspector General prepare a new report on conscription’s enforceability. In response, the Inspector General asked that his senior officers and county inspectors—almost all of them Protestant—prepare similar reports on the effects of conscription in their districts. Each of the more than fifteen replies in the file concluded that the police would almost inevitably fail in enforcing conscription laws, as each author voiced opposition to the application of mandatory service.³⁶

In his own report, the Inspector General stated, ‘The enforcement of conscription in Northern Ireland now would be no more easily effected—in fact, the reverse—than the case during the years of war.’³⁷ According to Sergeant J.C. Dudgeon, resistance to conscription would permeate both Catholic and Protestant communities.³⁸ For Dudgeon, even the Orange Order—a bulwark of unionism—would present ‘problems.’ Dudgeon predicted that Order members would resist conscription: the Order would argue, ‘as they did before, that Protestant should not go till at least an equal number of RCs [Roman Catholics] have been rounded up—a difficult problem in a 3-1 majority.’ Likewise, for Officer R.T. Hamilton, ‘If Catholics go against conscription there is every reason to believe’ that ‘thickly hot Presbyterians’ will as well. Read as administration, the reports counseled prudence; read as testimony about allegiance, they recorded the state auditing the loyalty of its own citizens—and discovering that the audit failed on both sides of the divide.

Further, these reports challenged the dichotomy between ‘loyal’ Protestants and ‘disloyal’ Catholics. Cracks had shown as early as May 1941, when the Ulster Union Club—a small, avowedly Protestant anti-partitionist society—telegraphed Churchill that it ‘emphatically repudiates suggestion that Northern Ireland is in favour of conscription.’³⁹ By 1946, representatives of the police force had convinced Unionist leaders that some Protestants, too, would resist conscription—and so unsettled the dichotomy between ‘loyal’ Protestants and ‘disloyal’ Catholics.

These considerations led Unionists to halt pro-conscription lobbying. At a Cabinet meeting after the circulation of the police reports, ministers agreed that enforcement could no longer be defended.⁴⁰ At a subsequent meeting between Brooke and Ulster Unionist

32. Memorandum by Brooke, 13 April 1945, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

33. Secret memorandum, 24 April 1945, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

34. Memorandum, Statement A, 1946, PRONI, CAB/9/85/10.

35. Inspector General’s memorandum, 1945, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

36. Attachments to Inspector General’s memorandum, 1945–1946, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2. Barton’s study is principally wartime in scope.

37. Report on post-war recruitment, 22 February 1946, PRONI, CAB/9/85/10.

38. Transcript of a meeting between Ulster Unionist members and Brooke, 26 February 1946, PRONI, CAB/9/85/10.

39. *Irish News*, 26 May 1941, 1. The Northern Ireland Labour Party proposed settling the question by plebiscite: *ibid.*

40. ‘General agreement that the difficulties in enforcing conscription here would far outweigh the

members of the British Parliament, those present concluded that conscription was ‘not a practical issue.’⁴¹ After reviewing the documents, Brooke stated that he was now ‘doubtful whether it [conscription] would be worth while’—Churchill’s calculus of 1941, now spoken from Stormont—a sentiment shared by colleagues such as J. Roger Moore.⁴² Hardliners who had pressed for conscription for seven years let the issue drop.

The shift in Unionist thinking reached beyond conscription. Education reforms announced from December 1944, culminating in the Education Act (Northern Ireland) of 1947, introduced free secondary education where fee-paying schooling had remained beyond many working-class families and educational inequalities fell particularly heavily on Catholics. Disparities endured throughout the twentieth century, but the reform shows some Unionist administrators beginning to act for the entire polity—‘every child in the provinces shall have equality of opportunity to develop his abilities to the full’—and, as Sean Farren observes, withstanding ‘some, if not all,’ pressure from hardline Unionists for the first time.⁴³

For Unionists, then, the implications of conscription were contradictory. At one pole, the debates left hardliners suspicious of the British state: they believed that the British government had betrayed unionism by excluding Northern Ireland from conscription and recognizing the special standing of Catholics. At the other, many Unionists found it harder to perpetuate hierarchies between citizens after reviewing local opinion on the conscription matter. These opposing tendencies were disorienting: as Brooke stated in a letter on conscription, he—along with unionism itself—was ‘unable at present to see the true remedy.’⁴⁴

4 Nationalist Perspectives: Conscription as Foreign Imposition

The debates that destabilized the Unionist establishment also altered the Nationalist landscape. That Nationalists opposed conscription is the least surprising fact in this story—after 1918, no one in London expected otherwise. What the debates reveal is how the case was argued: in whose name, before which audiences, and with what consequences for Nationalists’ later relationship to British institutions. The party described by Phoenix and Staunton—politically marginal, operating in close relationship with the Catholic Church, and chronically divided over abstention—had few instruments besides argument (Phoenix 1994; Staunton 2001). During these debates, Nationalists presented themselves as members of an Irish nation living in an occupied territory, yet they gradually came to see Northern Ireland politics in a more ambiguous light.

At the start of the Second World War, Catholics in Northern Ireland generally viewed British and Unionist control over the territory as illegitimate. Nationalists charged that Unionist authorities manipulated the political system through gerrymandering and denied Catholics free-speech rights to maintain dominance in the contested territory.⁴⁵ Bishop

advantages’: Report on post-war recruitment, 22 February 1946, PRONI, CAB/9/85/10.

41. Transcript of a meeting between Ulster Unionist members and Brooke, 26 February 1946, PRONI, CAB/9/85/10. The exclusion outlasted the war: Ulster Unionist MPs unsuccessfully sought Northern Ireland’s inclusion in the peacetime National Service Bill: HC Deb, 1 April 1947, vol. 435, cc. 1883–86.

42. Report on post-war recruitment, 22 February 1946, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

43. *The Times*, 12 December 1944, 2. On the disparity and the reform, Farren 1995; Farren 1992.

44. Brooke to Dawson Bates, 13 July 1943, PRONI, CAB9CD/87/2.

45. *The Times*, 24 July 1939.

Daniel Mageean summed up Nationalist sentiment at the start of the war, describing how ‘Catholics had no status in their native land,’ as ‘liberty of speech was denied them’ and ‘the freedom of the person was grossly violated.’⁴⁶

Politically marginalized, Nationalists pressed their interests through other actors and non-legislative means. Catholic clergy read statements on conscription to their congregations, organized pledges of resistance, and corresponded with British lawmakers. Leaders in Éire, who viewed the Catholic population of Northern Ireland as Irish, worked through diplomatic channels against Unionist rule and for reunification (Girvin 2006). And the Irish Republican Army (IRA) pursued reunification by force: in January 1939—the same month conscription entered the Unionist agenda—it launched a bombing campaign in Great Britain; internment crippled the organization, but observers warned that conscription could renew its support.

Nationalist rhetoric on conscription thus addressed three audiences: British lawmakers to be persuaded against applying the measure, constituents to be mobilized against it, and the government in Dublin, whose continued assistance Nationalists sought to retain.

Nationalists began organizing against conscription in September 1938—a full year before the United Kingdom entered the war, and months before the measure entered the agenda of Unionist lawmakers in January 1939.⁴⁷ The timing tracked the European crisis: the Northern Council for Unity met in Belfast in mid-September, as the Czechoslovak confrontation brought Britain to the brink of war and talk of compulsory service circulated in British politics. The fear had material force: the *Irish News* reported that ‘Hundreds of Donegal men’ were returning early from the English harvest fields that September because, as some told an interviewer, ‘they feared they were liable to conscription.’⁴⁸ The Council drafted a statement decrying the ‘mad rivalries and greed for power of the big nations’ threatening the peace.⁴⁹

The statement then turned to conscription. ‘We are opposed to the suggested enforcement of conscription of the people of the Six Counties [of Northern Ireland],’ which, the Council asserted, was ‘occupied by the armed forces of Great Britain.’ It was ‘superfluous to assert that we are as much opposed to conscription as All-Ireland was in 1918,’ when the British government’s attempt to extend conscription to Ireland had generated severe unrest (Ward 1974). Later in September, ten Nationalist members of Northern Ireland’s Senate and House of Commons held a meeting on the conscription issue. They passed a resolution calling on the British government ‘to evacuate this portion of our land in accordance with the wishes of the Irish people,’ and resolved to ‘do all we can to organise public opinion against it and to oppose it.’⁵⁰ At Armagh two days later, Nationalist representatives and clergy observed that ‘the Powers are seeking peace on the Continent by revising boundaries which violated National rights and aggrieved minorities,’ affirmed that the 1937 Constitution ‘expressed the sovereign will of the Irish people,’ and called on ‘the whole Irish people’ to support ‘our refusal to surrender our persons to the authority of any body save the sovereign Irish nation.’⁵¹

Nationalist activists also sought international backing. In October 1938, the Nationalist

46. *The Times*, 20 February 1939.

47. The autumn 1938 mobilization is absent from the standard accounts of wartime Northern Ireland; the press cuttings and cabinet files cited in this section are, to my knowledge, analyzed here for the first time.

48. *Irish News*, 24 September 1938, 4.

49. Press cuttings, 20 September 1938, PRONI, D/2991/A/4/52.

50. *Irish News*, 28 September 1938, 5; press cutting, PRONI, CAB/4/410/20.

51. *Irish News*, 30 September 1938, 5.

Party contacted Irish-Americans in the United States for support against mandatory military service⁵²—a channel Dublin itself would work in May 1941, when de Valera cabled Archbishop Daniel Mannix in Melbourne to rouse Australian opinion.⁵³ Comparisons between Unionist rule and continental dictatorship had circulated in the Catholic press since the mid-1930s,⁵⁴ and gained an unwelcome endorsement on 28 April 1939, when Hitler himself invoked ‘English measures in, say, Northern Ireland’ to deflect criticism of German occupations.⁵⁵ The comparison outlived Chamberlain: in 1941, opponents seized on Churchill’s description of the partition of Poland as the war’s greatest crime to argue that, ‘In the eyes of the Irish race, the partition of this country is a comparable crime,’ so ‘the British Government has no more right to conscript one Irishman in any part of Ireland than Germany have [sic] to force into her armies the Poles.’⁵⁶

The German bombing of Belfast in the spring of 1941—among the deadliest raids on any United Kingdom city outside London, whose human history Douds and Barton have reconstructed (Douds 2011; Barton 2015)—failed to alter the views of many Nationalists, who convened afterward to counteract Unionist suggestions that the bombings justified mandatory service. ‘No greater degradation of the ideal of Irish nationhood is imaginable than that any of her sons should be compelled to serve a foreign power,’ Nationalists asserted at such meetings.⁵⁷ According to Cahir Healy—a Nationalist member of Northern Ireland’s Parliament interned under wartime regulations in 1941—‘I am not concerned with the war’ except ‘insofar as the peace which will follow may result in the freedom of my country.’ Healy continued: ‘I am a citizen of Ireland.’⁵⁸

Religious officials in the Catholic Church also argued against conscription by invoking the standing of Catholics as members of the Irish nation. On 30 April 1939, Cardinal Joseph MacRory and five other Northern churchmen declared from Armagh: ‘We are convinced that any attempt to impose conscription here would be disastrous.’ ‘Our people,’ the bishops continued, ‘have been already subjected to the gravest injustice in being cut off from one of the oldest nations in Europe and in being deprived of their fundamental rights as citizens in their own land. In such circumstances to compel them to fight for their oppressor would be likely to rouse them to indignation and resistance.’⁵⁹ In another statement, clergymen declared that they would ‘stand with the people’ of Northern Ireland, and that when ‘the British attempt to conscript Irish people,’ it ‘would be lawful to resist.’⁶⁰ Similarly, for Catholic editorialists, ‘It may be said that our people ought to be willing to bear equal burdens, take their share in common defence, and so forth; but these are sophistries.’ For them, ‘No nation on earth endures to be conscripted by another nation. That would be slavery.’⁶¹ However, they remained careful to counteract accusations of Catholic cowardice, writing, ‘Our people are willing to be conscripted by their own nation, and to defend their own country to the last.’⁶²

52. Press cuttings, October 1938, PRONI, D2991.

53. De Valera to Archbishop Mannix, 24 May 1941, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, vol. VII, no. 75.

54. *Catholic Herald*, 29 May 1936.

55. Speech by Adolf Hitler, 28 April 1939 (Avalon Project, Yale Law School).

56. *The Times*, 25 October 1941.

57. *The Times*, 27 May 1941.

58. *The Times*, 27 May 1941.

59. *Irish News*, 1 May 1939, 5.

60. *Catholic Herald*, 5 May 1939.

61. *Catholic Herald*, 30 May 1941.

62. *Catholic Herald*, 30 May 1941. Voluntary service was another matter: Irishmen enlisted in the British forces in large numbers throughout the war—including thousands who absented themselves from the Irish Defence Forces and crossed into Northern Ireland to enlist, as Quinn has shown: Quinn 2021.

Some anti-conscription rhetoric contained religious overtones. Pressing the bishops' warnings on Chamberlain in correspondence in May 1939, MacRory reported how they had 'invited the prayers of their people that this calamity might be averted.'⁶³ On the last Sunday of May 1941, Catholic churchgoers marched against conscription. The *Belfast Telegraph* reported how 'several thousand people stood with bared heads' and, 'by uplifted hand'—an oath-taking gesture—'took a pledge to stand together and resist conscription by the most effective means at our disposal.' This resistance could take any form, so long as it remained 'consonant with the laws of God.'⁶⁴ The pledge itself, the *Irish News* noted, was the one 'first issued during the 1918 conscription threat.'⁶⁵ According to the Catholic politician T.J. Campbell, 'in almost every parish in the Six Counties that morning, the same solemn pledge had been taken' by 'several hundred thousand people.'⁶⁶

Officials in Dublin stressed the same connection as they lobbied British officials. Éire's neutrality was, in Wills's account, both a pragmatic wartime policy and an assertion of the young state's sovereignty (Wills 2007); the conscription of Irishmen by Britain—anywhere on the island—would deny precisely what neutrality asserted. In April 1939, Irish High Commissioner John Dulanty conveyed de Valera's grave concern to Chamberlain in writing: 'at least one-third' of Northern Ireland's population 'are [sic] cut off from Ireland against their will.' As a result, 'any attempt to conscript them would be resented as an outrage'; indeed, conscription 'can only be regarded as an act of war against our nation, and will provoke the bitterest hostility to England wherever there are Irishmen throughout the world.' Still, Dulanty sought to counteract claims that the Irish state, as a neutral in the war, remained unwilling to defend its borders: 'in union with our fellow-countrymen in the Six Counties we are prepared to undertake the defence of the whole of Ireland against anyone seeking to get foothold there.'⁶⁷

In one conversation with Dulanty, Chamberlain framed the issue of conscription as a 'domestic question.' Dulanty protested, claiming, 'Nearly half a million of our people had maintained unbrokenly the position that they were in a state of bondage to a Government they detested.' Northern Ireland's Catholics 'had not the rights of free men, and were coerced into separation from their fellow-countrymen in the rest of Ireland.'⁶⁸ In public, de Valera opposed conscription as a violation of political rights. 'There could be no more grievous attack on any fundamental human right,' he told a specially summoned Dáil, 'than to force an individual to fight in the forces of another country to which he objected to belong.'⁶⁹ The Dáil had been convened, he explained, so that the protest would come from the whole house, government and opposition alike; Labour's William Norton put the claim at its starkest: 'The people in the North are Irish—not British: they belong to this nation and they belong to no other nation.'⁷⁰

Dublin's support held even after the German bombings. The persistence is notable: accounts of the Emergency emphasize de Valera's effort to defend neutrality while avoiding

The distinction between chosen and compelled service is precisely the one Catholic spokesmen drew.

63. *Catholic Herald*, 5 May 1939.

64. *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 May 1941.

65. *Irish News*, 26 May 1941, 1.

66. *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 May 1941.

67. Dulanty to Chamberlain, 26 April 1939, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, vol. V, no. 305.

68. Dulanty to Joseph P. Walshe, 27 April 1939, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, vol. V, no. 306.

69. Dáil Éireann debates, 26 May 1941 (Adjournment Motion—Conscription in the North), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1941-05-26/3/>.

70. Dáil Éireann debates, 26 May 1941. Cosgrave, leading the opposition, backed the protest while questioning its tactics—Dublin's front was cross-party but not monolithic.

a complete rupture with Britain (Girvin 2006; O’Halpin 2008), yet on conscription he protested without reserve. After the assaults on Northern Ireland and on Éire itself, some observers assumed that the Irish government would end its opposition to conscription. According to *The Times*, ‘whatever factors the Government take into account in reaching their decision, it may be assumed that objections from Dublin will no longer be among them.’⁷¹

However, de Valera and other Irish leaders continued to campaign against conscription after the bombings. In May 1941, de Valera ‘made representations to the British Government urging as strongly as I could the reasons why the policy which they have hitherto pursued’ toward conscription ‘should not be changed.’⁷² In a message to Churchill, de Valera warned that ‘the imposition of Conscription will inevitably undo all the good that has been done and throw the two peoples back into the old unhappy relations’; the Six Counties, he insisted, ‘have always been part of Ireland, and their people, Catholic and Protestant, are our people.’⁷³ When the American minister in Dublin suggested a conscientious-objector clause for Northern Catholics, de Valera rejected it: those who used the exemption ‘would be branded by their Protestant neighbours as cowards, would be treated as outcasts.’⁷⁴ The rejection shows how national, not individual, the objection was: Britain’s conscientious-objection regime, as Kelly has shown, treated refusal as an individualized claim of sincere conscience (Kelly 2022); de Valera refused the frame itself—not dissenting individuals, but a nation wrongly enrolled.

Nationalists in Northern Ireland welcomed this assistance: in May 1939 they convened to petition Dublin to ‘pledge the entire national resources to the protection of the partitioned area,’ and the Nationalist parliamentarian Patrick Maxwell praised the Irish government’s ‘steps to protect the Northern people.’⁷⁵

The issue remained alive for the IRA as well. After its bombing campaign, Irish and British authorities aggressively pursued IRA suspects, interning thousands (Wood 2010). Among the interned were Hugh McAteer, James Steele, and two other IRA leaders, all of whom escaped from Belfast’s Crumlin Road Gaol in January 1943. On 24 April 1943, McAteer and Steele entered the Broadway Cinema in a Nationalist area of Belfast. To the amazement of spectators, they read the 1916 Easter Proclamation. Before fleeing, they said that, ‘If the British Government attempted to impose conscription in Northern Ireland, the IRA would resist in every way.’⁷⁶ Although British officials had issued a £3,000 reward for the escapees’ capture, the two men entered a public space to voice their opposition to conscription at the same time that they read a central document of Irish nationalism (Coogan 2002).

4.1 Nationalist Repositioning and Engagement with British Institutions

Nationalist politics shifted over the course of the debates.

First, the absence of conscription gave British involvement in the territory greater legitimacy. According to one Catholic commentator, although for ‘five years many Irishmen

71. *The Times*, 21 May 1941, 2.

72. Dáil Éireann debates, 26 May 1941.

73. Dulanty to Walshe, 26 May 1941, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, vol. VII, no. 78.

74. De Valera to David Gray, 25 May 1941, *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, vol. VII, no. 77.

75. *Catholic Herald*, 5 May 1939.

76. *The Times*, 26 April 1943, 2.

were doubtful of their big neighbour's good faith,' during the war, 'relations have bettered beyond expectation.' Not only did Britain 'honourably respect' Éire's 'freedom of decision' to maintain military neutrality, but it, 'furthermore, at least acknowledged our Northern citizens' claim to belong to the Irish nation by refraining from conscription.⁷⁷ The IRA would not mount another campaign until 1956 (Coogan 2002). In the meantime, constitutional Nationalists increasingly worked to secure rights through British institutions (Norton 2014; Lynn 1997). Indeed, the next major Catholic mobilization would be a civil rights movement whose activists included a generation raised during the war.

Second, the failure of the conscription campaign suggested to some Catholics that the political system was becoming more open. One Catholic analyst explained that the absence of conscription gave 'clear signs of a weakening of the Orange-ridden Northern Ireland Government [and its] hold on the people of the North,' dismissing Unionist threats of conscription as 'straws in the wind' designed to obscure the fragility of Unionist rule.⁷⁸

In the months following the war, these shifts translated into practice. Abstention had been the Nationalist Party's standing policy at Westminster: the two members returned for Northern Ireland constituencies had refused to take the oath or their seats, in protest of the continued division of Ireland. By June 1945, however, Nationalists voiced discontent with the policy.⁷⁹ At a convention of the Nationalist Party in August 1945, representatives agreed to end abstention: their members would take the oath and sit. Thereafter, the two representatives 'presented themselves at the Bar of the House of Commons,' and 'on being called by the Speaker they duly took their oath of allegiance and signed the roll.'⁸⁰ The oath affirmed 'true allegiance' to the Crown—a mark of how far Nationalist leaders would now act within British institutions. Norton and Lynn link the turn to the Labour victory of July 1945, which raised Nationalist hopes of a sympathetic hearing at Westminster, and to the growing calculation that attendance would advance the anti-partition campaign (Norton 2014; Lynn 1997).

The wartime experience of conscription belongs beside these causes, and beneath them: a state that had conspicuously declined to compel could be lobbied.

5 Conclusion: Conscription Debates as a Turning Point?

The conscription debates show that the substance of the choice the Good Friday Agreement would recognize as a birthright was already being argued over fifty years earlier, in the vocabulary of loyalty, allegiance, and nationhood. Nationalist spokesmen claimed that Catholics belonged to the Irish nation and therefore owed Britain no military service; whether that belonging amounted to citizenship of an Irish state was a question that Irish law itself left unsettled. The debates reveal a contest over membership, not a settled identity.

For Unionists, membership proved no easier to fix. Unionist leaders agreed that loyalty to the British state defined their community, yet they divided over what that loyalty required—uniform obligations with Great Britain, or the defense of a local order that treated Catholics as suspect citizens. The conscription debates forced that tension into the

77. *Catholic Herald*, 18 May 1945.

78. *Catholic Herald*, 12 September 1941.

79. *The Times*, 21 June 1945.

80. *The Times*, 22 August 1945, 2.

open and, by 1946, had unsettled the dichotomy between ‘loyal’ Protestants and ‘disloyal’ Catholics on which Unionist rule rested. The controversy thus pulled the territory’s politics in opposite directions—drawing Nationalists toward British institutions while leaving hardliners suspicious of the Britain whose embrace they had demanded.

To put the argument in the historiography’s terms: what Blake counted as a manpower deficit, and Fisk read as a diplomatic test, was, in the mouths of the people who fought over it, a contest over membership (Blake 2000; Fisk 1983). The finding supports Rose’s account of the Second World War as a public argument over citizenship, while relocating the argument: in Great Britain the question was what the citizen owed; in Northern Ireland it was which state could ask (Rose 2003). It supports Barton’s picture of a weak devolved government, while suggesting that the weakness had a constitutional root—a government demanding an obligation it lacked the power to impose, on behalf of a population whose duty to bear it was precisely what was in dispute (Barton 1995). And it inverts a pattern familiar from the scholarship on military service and citizenship across the empire, in which excluded minorities claimed standing by claiming the right to serve (Sheffield and Riseman 2018; Caines 2025): in Northern Ireland a majority demanded the obligation as proof of standing, and the state, by declining for eight years to impose it on 1.3 million of its subjects, admitted the difference in practice.

Sharp as it was, the disagreement over conscription modestly eased relations between the communities instead of embittering them, revealing an underlying potential for accommodation. That potential is easy to miss in structural accounts that emphasize the reproduction of communal division and conflict (Lijphart 1975; Ruane and Todd 1996). Recent debate has contrasted ethnic-conflict interpretations with approaches emphasizing political ideas, institutions, and agency: McBride defends the former, while Prince develops the latter (McBride 2023; Prince 2018). The conscription episode supports the latter emphasis by showing how political choices could widen or narrow possible paths. Even in the 1940s, there were opportunities—however fragile—for a more peaceful course of development; the Troubles emerged, in part, as later choices and circumstances closed them off. This is not to say that a different outcome lay within easy reach. It is to say that the future was never foreordained—and that the argument over political membership which the Good Friday Agreement would one day settle in law was already being conducted, in the language of loyalty and nationhood, during the Second World War.

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