



Arming the Irish Revolution: Gunrunning and Arms Smuggling, 1911–1922

by W.H. Kautt.

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In his latest book, historian William Kautt (US Army Command and General Staff College) continues his earlier work¹ on the “Troubles” in Ireland that bracketed World War I. He concentrates here on the little studied supply problems Irish republican forces faced as they mounted attacks against British rule; this rebellion ended with the Anglo-Irish truce of 1920 but morphed into a still more bitter civil war.

Remarkably, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in the northern counties ran the first and best gunrunning operation of the conflict. They dreaded the prospect of home rule for Ireland, fearing that northern Protestants might fall under the rule of a Catholic-majority parliament in Dublin. Absent any real opposition by the coast guard, police, and customs officials, the UVF mobilized thousands of men in April 1914, bringing over fifty thousand guns ashore by year’s end. The National Volunteers (pro-home rule) had 8,947 weapons, while the more radical Irish Volunteers (pro-independent republic) had only 2,273 mostly “overpriced and old ... heavy, first-generation bolt-action weapons that used low-velocity black-powder cartridges” (31).

Kautt spends little time on the republicans’ initial failures, an aborted landing of rifles and ammunition by a German ship, and the foolhardy “Easter Rising” in Dublin (both April 1916). But once the Irish Volunteers stopped believing the people would follow them spontaneously, they took up arms and became the Irish Republican Army. Raids against the Royal Irish Constabulary and even the British military provided some weapons, but most came from outside the country. Irishmen in Britain and America were the primary sources, though in time the IRA network of arms dealers extended from Argentina to Germany and Italy. Some of the gunrunners were comically unfit for their task: in 1919, Harry Boland apparently purchased cartridges chambered for the antiquated 45/70 Springfield from the Spanish-American War, thinking they would fit the Colt M1911 pistols and Thompson submachine guns being sent to Ireland (122).

Michael Collins coordinated the smuggling from General Headquarters in Dublin, a bureaucracy as intricate as any in today’s US military. So too, a complex homegrown munitions industry manufactured hand grenades and mines for the IRA. One table lists fourteen shops, factories, and homes in Dublin alone devoted to the manufacture and assembly of explosives, at considerable risk of discovery or death by misadventure (81).

The war ended with a truce in July 1921. Kautt wisely skips the talks leading to an Irish Free State (a British dominion by another name). He believes, however, that republican smuggling and local manufacture continued at a high enough level that, by the end of 1921, the IRA could have called the British bluff and returned to the fight. In fact, they did just that—in the form of a civil

1. Viz. *The Anglo-Irish War, 1916–1921: A People’s War* (Westport, CO: Praeger, 1999); *Ambushes and Armour: The Irish Rebellion 1919–1921* (Dublin: Irish Acad Pr, 2010); and *Ground Truths: British Army Operations in the Irish War of Independence* (id. 2014).

war, in which anti-treaty republicans fought Free State forces. That struggle cost more lives—including Michael Collins's—than did the rebellion that preceded it. Diehard republicans did not “down arms” until May 1923; indeed outlaw remnants of the IRA hold out to this day, over a century after its inception.

“Ultimately,” Kautt concludes, “the real victor in Ireland was neither the British nor the anti-treaty IRA nor the Free State,” but a force he calls “the constitutionalists.”

The constitutionalists got an Ireland much as they envisioned.... It was not perfect and did not include the whole island, nor was it very stable at first, but it was an independent Ireland.... It was not all that large numbers of republicans wanted, but it brought about the Republic within the lifetimes of many of those who fought for it. (209)

True enough, but the author elides the most important constitutionalist, the American-born Éamon de Valera, who had led the anti-treaty IRA during the civil war. In 1932, he established a political party called *Fianna Fáil* (Warriors of Destiny) and entered the Free State government with the intention of replacing it. Over a five-year period, de Valera erased all remnants of British dominion, oversaw the adoption of a new constitution, and became *Taoiseach* (prime minister and head of government) of the Irish Republic in 1937, twenty-one years after being sentenced to death for his role in the Easter Rising.²

2. Of 3,430 men and seventy-nine women arrested after the Rising, ninety presumed leaders were sentenced to death; fourteen were executed in May 1916. De Valera may have escaped because of his US birth.