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Emmanuel Destenay takes a fresh look at the rise of Sinn Fein in *Conscription, US Intervention and the Transformation of Ireland, 1914-1918: Divergent Destinies*. A French historian, the author casts doubt on the argument that the Easter Rising of 1916 and Britain’s lethal revenge against its leaders were the engine behind Sinn Fein’s rise to electoral dominance two years later. He proposes instead that fear of the extension of conscription to Ireland became a determining factor well before Parliament proposed taking that step in 1918. Destenay maintains that Sinn Fein’s vocal resistance to conscription coupled with its co-option of Woodrow Wilson’s principle of national self-determination propelled its ascendancy over the politically compromised Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP).

Destenay’s study opens with political biographies of five French representatives in Dublin, London, and Washington. Their reports were a key source for the author. Although not unanimous in their opinions, the officials all desired stability in Anglo-Irish relations. More important, they had greater objectivity than the involved parties about domestic threats to that unity. Use of the reports, which the author translated from the originals in the Diplomatic Archive of the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, constitutes an important contribution.

Jean des Longchamps and Alfred Blanche served in turn as consul general for France in Dublin. The former lost his post after failing to anticipate the Easter Rebellion. The latter arrived in Ireland sixteen months later. Reports from both stressed the extent of Irish alienation. Blanche was specifically worried that a conscription program imposed by Parliament would lead to a confrontation.

Paul Cambon, the ambassador to Britain, was the French envoy most sympathetic to England’s position. He was also the most skeptical about the strength of Sinn Fein’s appeal. Nevertheless, Cambon recognized that many in Ireland wished for greater autonomy than that offered in the Home Rule program of John Redmond’s IPP. The pro-
longed delay in granting Home Rule convinced the ambassador that the decline of the IPP was inevitable.

Colonel (later General) Louis de la Panouse served as military attaché at the French embassy in London. He consistently insisted that the price of continuing Irish support was the immediate implementation of Home Rule for the twenty-six counties of the eventual Free State. He perceived that Sinn Fein’s strength grew with the delay in implementation. De la Panouse warned against considering conscription without first granting autonomy. Jean Jules Jusserand, Paris’s ambassador to Washington, likewise emphasized the necessity of permitting Home Rule before introducing conscription in Ireland. Failure to take that action would undo the improvement of Irish American attitudes toward the Allies’ cause that followed the entry of the United States into the war.

In addition to the novel French sources, Destenay makes considerable use of statements from 1,733 participants in the Irish War of Independence. Between 1947 and 1957, the Republic of Ireland collected those testimonies as well as other documents, photographs, and voice recordings from the period 1913 to 1921. The Military Archives of Ireland at the Cathal Brugha Barracks, Rathmines, is home to the compilation.

Organized chronologically, the core of the volume covers much information familiar not only to specialists in the history of the Home Rule debate but also to those just generally knowledgeable about the Irish past. Each chapter ends with a summary of the author’s main points. An epilogue further distills Destenay’s overall thesis and the evidence supporting it. The more modestly priced but still expensive paperback version ($39.95) of this compact book has the potential to be an efficient tool for providing students with a straightforward narrative about the era as well as with insights into debates over historical interpretation.

Destenay makes a solid argument for the importance of the conscription issue before Parliament announced in the spring of 1918 that compulsory service would come to Ireland if voluntary enlistments did not rise to meet the need for troops. By 1917, Sinn Fein was reinterpreting the Easter Rising of the preceding year as the action that had prevented the imposition of a draft in Ireland. That talking point was disingenuous. In January 1916, months before the incident, Prime Minister H. H. Asquith exempted Ireland from consideration for conscription.

The November 1916 by-election in West Cork was the first to take place after the Easter Rising. A Redmondite won, and the Sinn Fein candidate came in last. The outcome serves as evidence for Destenay that the April rebellion and even England’s reprisals were not the key to Sinn Fein’s rise. As a contrast, the author points to Sinn Fein’s emphasis on conscription in its successful 1917 by-election campaigns in South Longford, East Clare, and Kilkenny.

Conscription was a problem for all of Ireland. Heavy losses of Irish Catholic soldiers at Gallipoli and of Irish Protestant volunteers at the Somme lessened whatever enthusiasm for serving existed among both confessions. Battlefield carnage had a similar impact in Australia, where Cardinal Daniel Mannix led the Catholic opposition to the draft. Conscription was a problem for England as well. Enforcing it in Ireland might require as many troops as the program would raise for service in France. Leaders were ready to take the risk primarily because they feared political repercussions from the British electorate if the Irish remained exempt.

Destenay appreciates the impact of factors other than conscription. The author notes how Wilson’s Fourteen Points enhanced Sinn Fein’s position. They legitimized the party’s goal of national self-determination and made its early call for a seat at any postwar peace conference seem prescient. Prime Minister Lloyd George’s increasingly obvious duplicity on the issue of partition worked to the party’s benefit. The failure of the Irish Con-
vention of early 1918 to resolve the issues still unsettled in the plan for Home Rule further boosted Sinn Fein. The party had refused to participate in the Dublin deliberations.

Important political changes had important effects on the general election that brought Sinn Fein victory in December 1918. Redmond had died in March, and the IPP did not even nominate candidates in twenty-six districts. The electorate grew by six hundred thousand thanks to the new Representation of the People Act. Among the new voters were unprecedented numbers of young people, including some fearing conscription and many frustrated by the war’s constraints on emigration.

In my opinion, Destenay has made a credible argument that opposition to conscription helped Sinn Fein even before the prospect of its imposition in Ireland became imminent in 1918. The IPP also opposed conscription, but its prior endorsement of voluntary enlistment made its efforts less convincing. In stating his thesis, however, Destenay may be exaggerating the extent to which historians currently consider the rise of Sinn Fein from a small faction to a majority an almost inevitable consequence of the Easter Rising and its aftermath.

Explanations of complex issues require the incorporation of multiple factors. No single one is sufficient. Distinguishing the necessary from the ancillary is difficult. Efforts to rank the importance of those deemed essential are the fodder of historical debate. Readers will have to decide where they rank conscription among the many issues discernible through the fog of war.

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