Returning Irish Prisoners of War: The Forgotten Civil Resettlement Unit and the British Government's Use of "Soft Power"

By Jonathan Harper

Abstract: The Civil Resettlement Units (CRUs) were a scheme created during the Second World War to help British prisoners of war (POWs) return to civilian life and assist families and communities during their readjustment. These voluntary units, which operated from 1945 to early 1947, were to act as a "bridge" between army and civilian life and would work extensively with communities to achieve successful readjustment, an aspect deemed essential to the process. However, resettlement in Ireland would be set against the complex relationship with Britain, regional and national identities, and communities divided by sectarian ideologies. With the return of a Labour government in Westminster, traditionally critical of Northern Ireland, there was great uncertainty for unionism in Northern Ireland. The CRUs would not only provide a practical solution to demobilising returning POWs, but also demonstrate the benefits of a social programme to the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), which remained suspicious of Britain's "socialism". Additionally, the scheme would fulfil the moral obligation many in Britain felt towards an estimated 1000 Southern Irish POWs. Eire had done little to prevent large numbers of volunteers from joining the British war effort, and recognising these men would complicate its official stance of neutrality. Resettlement would be further complicated as Eire was a sovereign nation; any resettlement scheme required consent and cooperation from Dublin. Resettlement in Ireland would therefore need to navigate the complex diplomatic situation in both nations and grapple with the struggles POWs had in how they identified their service within their communities. This article analyses how resettlement was handled, the CRU's success in this role, and how the British government deployed "soft power" to influence change through persuasion and political negotiation in assisting these men.

Introduction

The CRUs had broad support from the wartime coalition, sharing many principles in line with both Labour and Conservative manifestos. For Labour, with the support it offered men and the community, it mirrored social welfare programmes, and its support in returning men to work was in line with its commitment to full employment. For the Conservatives, it was a limited assistance

programme that emphasised giving returned men the tools to succeed by themselves rather than continued state intervention or expensive welfare support. With the upcoming general election in July 1945, support of the scheme would allow both parties to showcase a vision of post-war Britain and a commitment to change that was sought. However, the creation of the CRUs was not certain, with the War Office only agreeing to establish a voluntary scheme to assist POWs readjust to life in Britain in February 1944.

Following the 1945 General Election, however, there was great uncertainty for unionism in Northern Ireland. With the return of a Labour government at Westminster, traditionally critical of Northern Ireland, and the decision by nationalist MPs to abandon their campaign of abstention and take their seats at Stormont and Westminster, Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom was unclear.[1] By locating a Civil Resettlement Unit in Northern Ireland and by setting policy towards repatriation along the same line as Westminster, the Labour Party was not only addressing a practical problem, but also showcasing the benefits of a social program to the UUP, which remained suspicious of a Labour government and Britain's "socialism". By supporting the CRUs, the UUP would also send a strong signal to those opponents who had accused them of being slow to respond to the challenges set by the war. The CRU scheme, therefore, indirectly strengthened the case for continued Unionism by demonstrating that without British aid, the living standards in Northern Ireland would fall below the rest of Britain. Despite the UUP's fear of socialism, the CRU scheme helped the UUP in accepting the ambitious social policies put forward by the Labour Party.

Additionally, the Labour Party, honouring plans made during the coalition government regarding a post-war POW resettlement scheme, would also seek to reward the estimated 1000 Southern Irish volunteers who were held as POWs during the Second World War. During wartime, both governments had chosen to ignore the problematic nature of these volunteers, yet, during peace, for Eire to recognise these men would be tantamount to admitting that Irish neutrality had favoured Britain.[2] While Eire had been quick to declare neutrality, it had also done little to prevent the vast number of volunteers joining the British war effort. If such numbers were to be believed, Eire's contribution to Britain's war effort would be out of all proportion to belligerent nations such as Canada, Australia, or South Africa (Girvin 2006, 260), hardly the act of a supposed neutral nation.

To meet these challenges, CRU planners would therefore plan for twenty units to provide coverage for all areas of the United Kingdom, including North-

ern Ireland.[3] Yet, skipping forward to February 1946, within the pages of "Settling Down in Civvy Street" (1946), a leaflet given to all repatriates advertising the scheme, on the list of CRUs, a unit that would cover Northern Ireland, is notable for its absence. However, earlier newspaper articles from *The Times* dated July 1945 had clearly stated that a unit would be open in Northern Ireland "within the next few weeks" (*Resettling War Prisoners*, 4). Articles from the *Belfast News-Letter* and the *Belfast Telegraph* both confirm that one such unit did indeed exist in Northern Ireland, No. 5 CRU Ballymena, opened on 2nd August 1945 (*Bridging Gap "tween Army and Civil Life"; Aiding War Prisoners*). This unit, therefore, remains shrouded in mystery, and its existence has remained relatively unknown.

Using the unit at Ballymena as a focal point for POW repatriation in Ireland, this article explores the complex relationship returning Irish POWs had with identity, how this affected their resettlement, and the part CRUs played in negotiating the complex political and social environment of Ireland. Ultimately, this article argues that the deployment of "soft power" – the ability of both CRU planners and the British government to influence change through persuasion and political negotiation – played an important role in POW repatriation in Ireland, shaping demobilisation and post-war relations between these countries. These relations were somewhat cool with Stormont distrusting the newly elected Labour government, which had been traditionally sympathetic to Irish reunification, and whose post-war policies were seen by many in the north as dangerous socialism. Meanwhile, relations with Eire were somewhat damaged after incidents such as Churchill's victory speech on 13th May 1945, in which he launched a scathing attack on Irish neutrality, even suggesting that Britain had considered invading when denied the use of Irish ports (Kelly 2012, 182).

There is currently little written on POW repatriation in Ireland, and the role that CRUs played in this is omitted in the current literature, which only refers to the twenty units located in England, Scotland, and Wales. This article, therefore, contributes important research about demobilisation in Ireland and how the POW experience was factored into this. Many works relating to the role of Ireland during the Second World War discuss the wartime service of Irish regiments or the relationship between Irish soldiers and the British Army, but not of demobilisation. Richard Doherty (2021) and Neil Richardson (2012) explore the wartime service of Irishmen and women but offer little in the way of the experience of POWs. Other authors, such as Geoffrey Roberts (2000) and Ian Wood (2010), offer a broader analysis of the Irish experience and cover the post-war politics and social policy of the region, yet it is only Bernard Kelly (2012) who explores the Irish experience of demobilisation in any detail. Beyond more

generalised histories, journal articles by Steven O'Connor (2015), Philip Ollerenshaw (2007), and Emmanuel Destenay (2021) provide a more focused approach to the experiences of Irish servicemen and explore Irish identity during the Second World War and the social and political situation of the region. Despite this literature, there is still little written on the POW experience, and this article fills this omission, adding to the historiography of post-war Ireland through the POW experience.

Volunteers from Northern Ireland and the Ballymena CRU

Resettlement in Ireland would be set against the complex relationship with Britain and regional and national identities, with communities divided by Unionist and Nationalist ideologies. This added a further difficulty in resettlement, and persuading repatriates from these differing backgrounds to attend a CRU would be challenging. As Steven O'Connor suggests, the spirit of unity achieved in Irish regiments during wartime may not have stayed with the volunteers once they returned home (O'Connor 2015, 431). Bonds forged when facing a common danger had obscured the political and religious differences, and a degree of self-restraint had always been present, with Sam McAughtry, a protestant volunteer serving in the Royal Air Force, stating that it was "an unwritten law that the Irish problem should stay in Ireland" (431).

In addition, service within the British Army could be the cause of disruption and disturbance in the home. Many returning POWs, especially from nationalist backgrounds, were cautious to identify with their wartime service, and this may well have influenced CRU attendance from these communities.[4] Jack Harte, a returning POW, writing about his experience returning home, noted the shouting matches that would erupt between him and his brother. While his brother was glad Jack had returned, he was "barely able to keep his Republican views in check… and couldn't understand how three of his brothers could have joined the British Army" (Harte 2007, 233). He would suffer further insensitive comments when he returned to work at the Guinness Brewery, with some employees making fun of the fact that he had spent two years as a POW (Kelly 2012, 39).

The verbal abuse towards ex-servicemen was not uncommon, and there were scattered reports of animosity, which could even include close family members. Stephen Kennedy, who had served with the Royal Tank Corps, remembered the reaction he received from his uncle, who had said that "I like a good Irishman, and I like a good Englishman, but I don't like an Irishman who fights for England" (Kennedy 1999). The dominant reaction to returning servicemen in both

states was that of indifference, and the difference between wartime experiences had the potential to affect the resocialisation and resettlement of returning repatriates. A report by Mass Observation summed up the apathy in Northern Ireland, stating that "anyone who is keen on the war effort is liable to feel uncomfortable in Ulster" (FR1309 1942, 3), with some government ministers such as John McDermott stating that Northern Ireland was "only half in the war" (Barton 1995, 24).

Even within the Protestant community, support of the war was not as strong as expected. The rate of voluntary recruitment to the British Army had been disappointing, with voluntary recruitment declining from 2500 per month at the start of the war to just 600 by December 1940 (Ollerenshaw 2007, 174). These levels marked the region out as the least mobilised in the United Kingdom for the duration of the war. Additionally, it was suggested by a Mass Observation report that Northern Ireland was psychologically "cut off" (FR 1309 1942, 3-4) from the war, having not experienced the widespread upheavals of bombing, evacuation, conscription, or the masses of military camps to the extent that England, Scotland, and Wales had – An observation made despite Belfast being bombed heavily during the Belfast Blitz of April/May 1941 and experiencing the largest loss of life in any single night raid outside London (Wood 2010, 177).

This disconnect was felt to a greater extent in Eire, as it had declared itself formally neutral, and some veterans would complain of how the Irish public needed to be "shaken badly" (Kelly 2012, 33) to the horrors of the war and were dumbfounded by the ignorance on display. There was a danger that such differences in experience could lead to repatriates experiencing feelings of isolation, with the possibility that this may develop into cynicism and embitterment (*Civilian Attitude Towards Soldiers* 1945, 12). In a period where many still harboured fears of possible violence that returning soldiers could bring, and given the history of the region, it was doubly important for a unit in Ireland to bridge this gap in experiences. A suitably located CRU unit could provide a place where a POW would be surrounded by people with similar experiences and where the impact of this disconnect would be felt less. Advertisements in Irish newspapers were keen to stress this point and the aim of creating "a family atmosphere" which eliminated doubt and worry had multiple mentions (*Bridging Gap "tween Army and Civil Life"* 1945, 3; *Putting Ex-Prisoners on the Road Back* 1945). By providing an atmosphere where the repatriate felt comfortable, they would feel more open to discussing problems, and these issues could be addressed. It is therefore possible that CRU planners believed a unit located in Ireland would act as a key cornerstone for the community in bridging this disconnect.

CRU planners considered engagement with the civilian community as an essential part of the resocialisation process, and without this two-way engagement, the resocialisation process risked failure. The commanding officer of the Ballymena unit, Lt. Col Aveling, in an address to a local rotary club, stated that his unit had faced "greater difficulty about resettlement in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom" (*Rotarians Hear Expert on Civil Resettlement* 1945, 3). Yet, records remain sparse on what the difficulties Lt. Col Aveling was alluding to. Despite what were seen as greater difficulties, evidence suggests that the community did respond and take an active role in the resettlement of POWs. Indeed, in an article written on 31st October, Aveling would go on to thank the local community and praise the unit's success (*Resettlement Unit Closing Next Month* 1945). In this same article, however, the unit's closure would be confirmed, noting that some 200 repatriates had passed through the unit. This number would be confirmed by the CRU's own attendance records, which show that as of 22nd November 1945, 197 repatriates had passed through this unit (*Weekly Statistical Statements* 1945). The unit itself would have a relatively short lifespan, running for only three months.

The CRUs would be open to citizens of both states, and when deciding on where to locate such a unit, planners would need to consider local as well as national politics. With the General Election of 1945, there was great uncertainty for unionism in Northern Ireland. Fear of a successful Labour Party, traditionally favourable to the unification of Ireland, was unsettling for the Northern Irish government, even if such fears proved unfounded.[5] The war had focused the minds on what people wanted to see in a post-war world. The popularity of the Beveridge Report, published in 1942, further showed the interest the public held in post-war reconstruction and the drive for social reform. POW repatriation represented an important test bed for any future government's intentions towards post-war society and was reflective of the expectations of the nation. There was a widely held perception that the Unionist Party had been too slow to respond to the new challenges set by the war, and they had suffered several by-election defeats from 1941 (Ollerenshaw 2013, 174-175, and 189). The UUP needed to put a bold and imaginative post-war programme before the electorate and communicate what a majority government would stand for (170). By providing Northern Ireland with a CRU, the British government could offer the UUP a social programme, necessary to bolster the party's weakened position and address criticisms of its slow response to post-war challenges. Additionally, if Northern Ireland did not implement the scheme, but Britain did, the benefits of the Union would come under scrutiny. Therefore, by allowing the North to differentiate itself from Eire and demonstrating the benefits of a strong social

policy, the Labour Party was not only allaying UUP fears over its post-war social policies, but, as an unintended side effect, strengthening the case for Northern Ireland's future as part of Britain, as Unionists saw Britain as Northern Ireland's anchor both morally and financially (208; Buckland 1981, 86).

There was also a wider backdrop that Britain had not kept to its promises in the past. Within the Unionist community, there had been widespread suspicion among veterans that Britain had not fulfilled its moral obligations after the First World War (Destenay 2021, 644). This was reflected in Ballymena itself, where a promised rebuilding project for veterans had fallen well below what was expected, the few houses built having no provision for a water supply, and tenants had to fetch their water from a well 540 yards away (647). Many Irish recruits had come from working-class communities whose memories of the First World War and the failures of demobilisation ran deep. The decision to site the CRU unit at Ballymena would also, then, take on a symbolic role, showing both Stormont's and the British government's commitment to the community in a place where they had previously failed and that mistakes of the past would not be repeated. Addresses by Lt. Col Aveling to the Belfast Rotary Club highlighted this commitment, and his speech was prefaced with an appeal to "give all help possible, so that the heroes of this war, unlike those of the last, would have something to come home to" (*Putting Ex-Prisoners on the Road Back* 1945, 4). This speech also framed a greater responsibility to help men within the wider community, regardless of background or loyalties, in an effort to engage with unionists and nationalists alike and highlight that all were welcome to attend a CRU. The CRU would therefore act not only to reward Northern Ireland's role in the war effort but also to rectify a perceived wrong. By demonstrating the benefits of a strong social programme and Britain's commitment to its demobilised veterans, the CRUs played an important role in the projection of soft power in Northern Ireland.

The chosen site at St. Patrick's Barracks was a relatively new building, having been constructed in 1940 and used as a staging area for U.S. troops during the war. The site was advertised as one of the most "up to date and best equipped in Britain", having everything except power plugs for razors (*Bridging Gap "tween Army and Civil Life"* 1945). While there had been options to utilise one of many of Ireland's country houses, the past associations of such places ruled them out, with the possibility that they would be seen as places of repression by Catholics and nationalists/republicans.[6] The site at Ballymena, then, would also act as neutral ground associated as it was with American troops and not the British army. For those attending the CRU, a camp was also set up in the Harryville area of Ballymena with machinery installed for the purposes of re-

training (*Aiding War Prisoners* 1945). The town boasted good rail links to Belfast's industrial areas, and the unit received strong support from the local area with nine industrial firms volunteering to help the scheme and local residents inviting repatriates to stay in their homes (*Bridging Gap "tween Army and Civil Life"* 1945; *Rotarians Hear Expert on Civic Resettlement* 1945).

Even with a number of firms volunteering to help the scheme, the economic and employment prospects of the area remained grim. Northern Ireland was dependent to a considerable extent on textiles, shipbuilding and engineering, centred on Belfast. The region suffered substantial structural and cyclical unemployment in the interwar period, and by July 1938, unemployment stood at 29.1 per cent of the insured industrial labour force (Ollerenshaw 2007, 56). Unemployment remained well above the British average throughout the war, and although it fell steeply from spring 1941, reaching a low point in autumn 1944, the regional economy never sustained full employment. Little in the way of new industries had manifested in the area, and Northern Ireland, much like Scotland, missed out on war contracts and the movement of key industries. So few war contracts had been handed out that a batch of propaganda posters exhorting men and women to work harder and including the slogan "Go to it", were seen as an embarrassment, and the Belfast government asked not to display them on the grounds that there was very little for workers to go to (59).

Unemployment, as in the war, continued at a much higher level in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. Such depressed areas made resettlement difficult and could cause further disillusionment for the repatriate and his situation. Ireland would also face the extra issue of possible discrimination along sectarian lines. Protestants were more likely to have access to "steady and sheltered" employment, such as the constabulary, a force almost exclusively Ulster Protestant, and as a result, viewed with great mistrust by Catholics. In the postwar period, there was also evidence that religion was being used as a reason for accepting or rejecting an application for work (191; Meehan 2009, 46-47). This, however, may not have been discrimination, but rather a habit of these communities existing in their own worlds since before 1945, meaning it simply did not occur to businesses to look outside of their own religious circle.

One returning serviceman would recall that "I wouldn't call it discrimination, I suppose if you're moving in a certain circle… it will always brush off" (Kelly 2012, 98). This policy may also reflect the traditional patterns of movement of labour in Northern Ireland and the practicalities involved in hiring people outside their own communities. For example, when applying for a travelling sales job, one repatriate was told that a Catholic would be preferable, not

because of any sectarianism, but because the sales territory was in Galway and it was felt a Catholic would be better received there (98). Long-distance movement of labour was something comparatively new to Irish labour, which had a strong custom of walking a short distance to work, with some in Belfast reluctant to accept employment even a short ride away (Ollerenshaw 2007, 190). This may well have been reinforced by sectarianism and a strong sense of territoriality between working-class areas. Such territoriality would have only increased the aversion to travelling through areas perceived as hostile. Ballymena was situated in a strong unionist area, and this may well have put many Catholics off travelling to this area. This may, to some extent, explain the low numbers of volunteers that the unit at Ballymena experienced. The unit was also closed before plans had been finalised for an extension scheme in December 1945. This limited its outreach to the community, and the assistance it could provide in contacting non-volunteers was limited.

In addition to this, the attitudes of nationalists towards those who had served and the way both communities saw their wartime service may well have affected attendance. Unionist communities enshrined their veterans' collective sacrifice within their commemorative canon and offered both the veteran and the community a way of sharing traumas and remembering sacrifices (Destenay 2021, 635). Unionist veterans could share a common sense of belonging with the rest of the Unionist community. This let them reassert their British identity and anchor the memory of their service within the Unionist canon, which both welcomed and acknowledged returning soldiers as heroes and martyrs. In a part of the UK where there were concerns of a lack of engagement with the war, locating the unit in Ballymena, a strong unionist area, made sense. It was here that staff could utilise the stronger feelings towards veterans and participation in the war to their benefit. The Catholic community, however, was still seeking a narrative that made sense of their involvement in the Second World War, needing to accommodate participation in the war, reject any association that this had to Britain, whilst still confirming their Irish, Catholic national identity.

For any potential Catholic volunteer, participation with a CRU would be a constant reminder of this service. If the unit had been located in an area with strong republican sympathies or a large Catholic population, it would only serve to inflame tensions and act as a symbol reminding them of involvement in a war many were struggling to make sense of. Such was the example of Leading Seaman James Joseph Magennis, a Catholic volunteer and winner of the Victoria Cross. Upon his return, Magennis found that republican Belfast gave him the cold shoulder for his service in a British war, while the Unionist-controlled city council showed little inclination to give any special recognition to a Catho-

lic. While his actions were considered brave, they had been for the British armed forces and not the republican cause. For many in this community, this made Magennis a traitor (Richardson 2012, 200-204). Considering the reception Magennis received, it is likely that many other Catholic volunteers did not wish to attend something which would only serve to highlight their identity as having served in the British forces.

Yet, despite such feelings, there appears to have been a positive community response to the unit. Both commanding officers were loud in their praises of the cooperation they received from local Ulster firms, and the response to social evenings and invitation of home stay by locals had helped create a "family atmosphere", which helped eliminate the repatriate's doubts and worries and restore his confidence (*Bridging Gap "tween Army and Civil Life"* 1945, 3). Upon its closing, Lt. Col Aveling in a column for the *Belfast Telegraph* stated that the unit's success had been down to the "lively interest on the part of all organisations and individuals with whom we came into contact with" and "the cooperation of the civil community had dispelled any doubts surrounding such issues" (*Resettlement Unit Closing Next Month* 1945, 6). Such an article, however, was bound to be full of praise, and while some truth may be gleaned from Aveling's words, they cannot provide a full picture of the unit's happenings.

Despite such words, the unit at Ballymena would have a comparably small number of volunteers. The low number of volunteers may be reflective of the challenges faced by the Ministry of Labour and the staff of the CRU, who had to work in this region. Attempts had been made towards breaking down community barriers with advertising and outreach to persons of influence. These efforts, however, had been limited, and without the presence of an extension scheme upon the unit's closure, outreach in the community was restricted. The low attendance suggests a failure in engaging with their primary targets. Attempts to increase participation and attendance had to cross the divide of both communities, and as far as this research has found, advertisement of the scheme only appeared in newspapers considered Unionist. This would appear to be an area of oversight, and greater effort could have been made to engage with nationalist/republican and Catholic communities.

Without knowing the exact total number of Irish POWs in Ireland, it remains difficult to say whether the attendance rate was low. Weekly statistics from as late as March 1946, however, show that in Northern Ireland, there were only sixty-two volunteers available for the entire month, which should have amounted to a week's intake for a unit (*Weekly Statistical Statements* 1946, 3). Given the expense of running a CRU, it is reasonable to conclude that the low

numbers of repatriates volunteering was a major factor in its early closure. Additionally, CRUs in other areas of the UK were pressed for trained staff and experiencing large waiting lists. This may well have convinced authorities that the resources could be best deployed elsewhere, and it was no longer practical to keep the unit at Ballymena open. Instead, a vocational training centre would be opened in Belfast, meaning that help would remain for any POW who had missed the chance to attend the unit at Ballymena.

In addition to the above, the complex political minefield of post-war immigration may also offer an explanation as to the unit's short run time. CRUs were open to all who had served in the British army, and this included volunteers from Eire. The issue of policing the border had, as the war progressed, stoked fears within Protestant Ulster that immigration from Eire could potentially change the electoral demography of the region. In 1944, Rowley Elliott (Stormont Unionist MP, for South Tyrone) stated that if migrants from Eire remained and acquired voting rights, "the loyal people of Northern Ireland" would be placed "in great danger" (Ollerenshaw 2013, 192). As the CRU scheme's objective was to settle men back into the local community, there is a possibility that such a unit may have reignited underlying tensions and fears that any volunteers from Eire could stay indefinitely. Therefore, while the presence of a CRU in Ballymena offered a practical solution to POW resettlement, Its early closure may have been an acknowledgement of such fears, and a long-term scheme could be politically damaging to the area.

Instead, much as with Eire, "soft intervention" would be of preference, utilising pre-existing services that did not come attached with the same negative association with the British Army that CRUs had or of any potential of upsetting the perceived sectarian balance in the region. The unit at Ballymena allowed the British government to meet its moral obligations to volunteers from Ireland as well as showcase the benefits of a social programme to a Stormont government that remained suspicious of a Westminster run by Labour. By setting social policy in line with the rest of Britain, this allowed the north to differentiate itself from Eire and would persuade many Unionists that enacting social reform policies set by Westminster was the only way to preserve the Union. The CRU not only acted as a reward for the role Northern Ireland played in an Allied victory, but at a time when the UUP faced accusations of its slow response to post-war challenges, it had the benefit of providing a boost to the UUP at a time of political uncertainty. If viewed in this context, the relatively low number of volunteers was secondary to the political benefits, and the strategic use of soft power can be seen as a success.

Volunteers from Eire

While all Irish volunteers would be offered a chance to attend a CRU, volunteers from Eire would present a delicate situation and their status as British servicemen was mired in political controversy. The British government would still seek provisions for these men, and the CRUs would be just one way in which they could reward their service. There was, however, little chance that a unit could be established in Eire, and other strategies would be employed by the CRU planners and the British Government to ensure the welfare of POWs from Eire would be met. Despite the Taoiseach (prime minister), Éamon de Valera's, decision to keep Eire officially neutral during the war, the Irish government did nothing to stop its citizens from joining British forces. Eire contributed a substantial number of recruits to the British Army, with estimates of around 60,000 – 70,000 volunteers joining the wartime British effort (O'Connor 2015, 418).[7] During wartime, both governments had chosen to ignore this fact, yet, during peace, for Eire to recognise these men, it would be problematic. If they chose to directly help these returning men, then it would be tantamount to admitting that Irish neutrality had favoured Britain and a source of domestic embarrassment for a supposed sovereign and independent state. As Brian Girvin concludes, measures such as the censorship of obituaries, restrictions on uniforms and remembrance, and the punishment of Irish army deserters were a deliberate attempt to deny the large number of volunteers who fought for Britain, as they contradicted Irish neutrality (2006, 277-281).

There was also genuine concern from certain quarters of British society for the welfare of these volunteers and what provisions should be provided. Even before the war ended there was debate as to what would happen to volunteers from Eire, in 1944 the British Legion in Dublin recommended that "everything possible should be done to dissuade men from coming to their homes in Eire pending release from the services" owing to "practically no work to be found for ex-servicemen in Eire" (*Release of Eire volunteers* 1945). Viscount Addison echoed the growing concern of the future welfare of these men, writing in October 1945 that "these men from Eire are volunteers […] who […] On their return they cannot hope for benefits from their own government but on the contrary may even be exposed to disabilities or become objects of local criticism" (*Release of Eire volunteers* 1945). There is even evidence that points towards the government in Dublin preferring Irish war workers to extend their stay in Britain indefinitely due to the possible social turmoil a mass of returning workers

would cause, with the state unable to provide jobs or social benefits to these people (Wood 2010, 159).

Public opinion in Britain also shared these concerns, and many believed that those who had shown loyalty to Britain should be treated as heroes, even in their own land. In a letter to *The Times*, Hubert Gough urged the British government to give unemployment benefits to those Irish who were due to be demobilised, even if they were to return to Ireland, because "they gave their services when needed" and "as a matter of public policy it would be a wise and generous act" (*Demobilisation of Irishmen* 1945, 8). There was, therefore, a strong belief that Britain had a moral responsibility towards volunteers from Eire. This was reflected in debates in parliament with the Minister of National Insurance, James Griffiths stating ''I think it is a matter of general consent that something should be done now to help men and women from Eire who during the war joined His Majesty's Forces and helped us to beat our enemies" (Hansard 1946). Griffiths would finish his statement by stating that "we want to make them feel that the United Kingdom is not unmindful of the services they rendered" (Hansard 1946). The British government, however, would need to walk a fine line when confronting this issue. Its response was limited as it could not directly intervene in Irish policy without risk of being accused of interfering in matters of a sovereign state. The CRU scheme was a good compromise, offering returning POWs the use of CRUs was one way of rewarding their service and rebuilding bridges after diplomatic relations had been strained by Irish neutrality. By taking the responsibility of resettlement away from the Irish government, it would act to preserve their neutrality and would serve to deflect any criticism that the British government was shirking its responsibilities. Whilst this meant that POWs from Eire would be unable to attend a unit within their community, at this early stage, it was the best that could be offered.

The push for welfare provisions was further emboldened by a fear that volunteers from Eire would suffer discrimination or reprisals, with ministers openly admitting that "there was a possibility, almost amounting to a likelihood, that there would be some discrimination against these men in Eire" (Hansard 1946). These fears were not entirely unjustified, with Flight Sergeant Kehoe and Corporal Shannon, both of whom had just been released from captivity in May 1945, arrested by the authorities upon their return to Ireland and tried for desertion (Quinn 2021, 844). Their trial was part of the much larger desertion crisis experienced by the Irish Defence Force, and while their experience was not reflective of all POWs, it is a demonstration of the difficulties faced by returning servicemen from Eire.

The trial attracted massive publicity and was portrayed by elements of the British press as a vicious attack upon the Irish volunteers who fought for Britain in the war. The *Daily Mirror* stated the trials were "an affront to every moral principle that should guide the conduct of governments" (*Deserters* 1945, 2), while Dr T. H. O'Higgins, leader of the opposition (Fine Gael), called the treatment of retuning Irish volunteers as "brutal, unchristian, and inhuman" (*4,000 Eire "Deserters" get 7 years "Hard"* 1945, 1). Such fierce opposition and public outcry from the British press had an effect, and due to the public scrutiny that the trial had attracted, Shannon and Kehoe were discharged from the Irish army and set free (*Irish Army Deserters Set Free* 1945). This was not to say that Shannon and Kehoe did not face further discrimination as the Irish Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, sought an appropriate means of punishing deserters without incurring a diplomatic backlash. This was accomplished with the Emergency Powers (No. 362) Order, 1945 (the starvation act). Under this legislation, all troops deemed to have deserted would have all pay and allowance rights forfeited and lose all entitlement to a pension or gratuity. Furthermore, they were prohibited from obtaining employment in any state or public body and barred from all work remunerated from public expenditure. In addition, a "blacklist" was sent to all public bodies and local government offices around the state to ensure that they were known to these organisations (Quinn 2021, 845). This bill was not repealed until May 2013 with the then Minister for Justice and Defence, Mr Alan Shatter, announcing to Dáil Éireann (Irish assembly) that his government were "committed to issuing an apology for the manner in which those members of the Defence Forces who left to join the Allied side during World War II […] were treated by the State" (Seanad Éireann, Defence Forces (Seanad Éireann debate 2012). While it was clear that the wartime British government was aware of the special considerations involving demobilised volunteers from Eire, as citizens of another state, there was little they could do except apply diplomatic pressure to the then Irish government.

This pressure would pay dividends regarding POWs when, in December 1945, representatives of the CRU scheme approached the Irish High Commission in London with the prospect of extending it to Eire. To make sure no POW would return home without being screened by resettlement officials, medical examination boards were set up in Eire. These would consist of one Ministry of Pension official and two local doctors, and these boards would be authorised by De Valera himself (Kelly 2012, 96). This would be an important step in efforts to extend the CRU scheme outside Northern Ireland. This kind of "soft" intervention would utilise infrastructure already in place without the need for the presence of a unit in Eire. The medical boards also extended help beyond that of the

unit at Ballymena and would cover those POWs returning from the Far East or those from the European theatre who had missed the initial call for volunteers.

There was still, however, the matter of the disconnect between returning servicemen and the communities to which they returned. Irish neutrality meant that there was little room for public discourse or space for remembrance ceremonies. Many ex-servicemen would choose to return to the UK, dissatisfied with their life in Eire and unhappy at being sidelined (184). But for those who remained, there were a number of associations where a veteran community would form. The British Legion, the Men of Eire, the Aircrew Association, and the Burma Star would all play their part in forming a subculture of veterans within Eire. These organisations had their own flags, songs, and commemorative ceremonies, which set them apart from the Irish public at the end of the war. It was to these associations that veterans turned for comradeship and comfort, and it was here that they could make sense of their roles and resocialise. Where a CRU was not present, these associations would step into the void.

In addition, help would be made available regarding finding work through the Ministry of Labour in Dublin, with arrangements made so that "anyone who wishes can make application to that office for the various types of employment which are open in this country as a result of the present man-power shortage" (Hansard 1946). Such assistance bore a remarkable similarity to what had been suggested by Major Newman in his article *The Prisoner of War Mentality* in which he wrote of the dangers of allowing returning POWs back into the community without some assistance available. For Newman, this assistance would be available, but at a distance, with advice available through POW clubs (in this case, associations and the medical board). Rather than a rehabilitation centre, an organisation should be available should the POW require it and provide "a form of long-distance guidance, an influence of which the repatriate is only just vaguely aware in the dim background, but which he can at any time make contact with should he feel the need for its help" (Newman 1944, 10). Indeed, Newman's suggestions were an important step towards the development of the CRUs, and it appears that this type of support suited the limitations present in Eire.

In addition to such assistance, for any ex-servicemen who wished to remain in Eire and find themselves unemployed, there would also be an agreement arranged that they would receive unemployment insurance at the British rate (Kelly 2012, 108). This would be vital support for POWs, as volunteers from Eire did not have the protection of the 1944 Reinstatement in Civil Employment Act, which their British counterparts had. This act required employers to rehire

ex-workers who had served in wartime forces for at least six to twelve months. The economic situation in Eire would influence many volunteers' decisions regarding their post-war prospects, and many would choose to stay in Britain (2). An article in the *Irish Times* in 1947 summed up their prospects: "Southern Ireland is a depressed area for ex-servicemen. Their chances of obtaining employment are understandably small… It is no secret that great numbers of them have been compelled to return to England… to seek employment there" (*An Irishman's Diary* 1947). This decision may have also been influenced by possible discrimination based on their service, with Patrick McGarth, Fianna Fáil TD for Cork, referring to a post-war electrification scheme that "preference should be given to Irish Ex-Servicemen over British Ex-Servicemen" (Dáil Éireann 1952).

Much like their Northern counterparts, POWs returning to Eire would face several difficulties regarding their resettlement and unique to their location. The poor economic prospects, discrimination and disconnect that they faced may well have been enough to persuade them to stay in England and attend a CRU there. Nevertheless, the CRU planners and the British government had made provisions for returning POWs from Eire. This help was similar to what a CRU could provide. Support was available through the Ministry of Labour, and welfare benefits were available at the British rates if they fell on hard times. The medical boards ensured the POWs' health could be monitored and that if resocialisation was needed, a stay at a CRU could be recommended. Political negotiations and pressure would, to some extent, ensure protection for the welfare of returning POWs, but for the most part, their experience would be political and social indifference. This "soft" intervention worked within the political controversies surrounding POWs from Eire, and while this help was limited without the presence of a unit, it is a good example of the efforts of the CRUs to ensure that all POWs who had served in the British forces would receive help in resettlement.

The situation in Eire highlights that where difficulties of location proved to be a barrier, the British government had shown how effective diplomacy could be in meeting its moral obligations. Considering the potential political minefield that repatriates from Eire presented and the impracticalities of running a physical unit in the south, this projection of soft power can only be seen as a remarkable success. More generally, the ability of the CRU scheme to project its work into a neutral country and beyond a unit demonstrates how successful the scheme was in meeting its objectives of providing care for all POWs who served in the British Army.

Conclusion

The resettlement of POWs in Ireland presented new challenges for those involved in the CRU scheme. The CRUs faced possible negative associations with the British army, and the wartime experience in Northern Ireland had differed from that of England, Scotland, and Wales. Conscription was never introduced, the public attitude remained complacent, and Northern Ireland faced criticism that it had only been partly in the war. However, such difficulties highlighted the need for a CRU in Ireland as their primary objectives were to bridge the gap between army and civilian life, smoothing the transition back into the community and promoting a "two-way" resocialisation process. The political situation in Northern Ireland also presented difficulties with the incumbent government facing by-election defeats, and the future of unionism was uncertain. The Northern Irish government needed to demonstrate what it stood for and provide a clear vision as to what a post-war Ireland would be. A resettlement scheme, such as the CRUs, gave the opportunity for the UUP to show decisiveness and strengthen its position politically.

By funding a unit in Ballymena, the British government would meet its moral obligations to those who had volunteered to fight for Britain, and it would act as a showcase of the benefits of a strong welfare policy without directly intervening in devolved affairs. This would help the Labour Party avoid accusations of interference, especially from a Stormont already suspicious of their intentions and of what it saw as socialism. Such a unit would also help in righting a perceived wrong of the past, and that the British government had failed to meet its obligations after the First World War. The location of Ballymena was therefore particularly symbolic. The unit at Ballymena demonstrated the effective use of soft power in Northern Ireland, successfully navigating the complexities of the region while meeting its objectives. However, while the unit can be seen as a success of diplomacy and soft power, the number of volunteers remained low, and the unit closed early.

In Ballymena, while it is difficult to say for certain as to why the unit had a relatively low attendance, the lack of engagement with the wider community may well have played a role. Such units were expensive to run, and considering the low attendance, it may have been concluded that staff and resources would be better employed elsewhere. It is equally possible that the unit was never intended as long long-term. The unit was intended as symbolic, meeting moral obligations, rewarding Northern Ireland for its wartime contribution, and acting to demonstrate the effectiveness of Labour's social policies. Considering the rapid onset of "siege mentality" in Northern Ireland after the war and the fear

of immigration from Eire, a CRU unit may have been seen as a threat to community stability rather than an asset. Considering the potential political fallout of such a unit and the negative association with the British army, it may have been concluded that soft intervention was more suitable for Northern Ireland. Assistance remained in the region through vocational schemes after the unit's closure and ensured that help remained for those POWs who had missed the initial call-up. That Northern Ireland would later adopt welfare policies in line with the rest of Britain, and a CRU successfully resettled men, is a demonstration of the effectiveness of the British government's use of soft power.

The handling of volunteers from Eire should also be considered a triumph of diplomacy. The position of volunteers from Eire was particularly difficult, and for the Irish government to recognise their service and take responsibility for their resettlement would be an admission that Irish neutrality had favoured Britain. Initially, volunteers from Eire were offered the use of the CRU scheme. By offering the use of the CRU scheme to these volunteers, it saved any embarrassment whilst addressing political pressure from sectors of British society that the British government had a moral responsibility towards these men. However, considering the scheme's objective was to resettle men back into the communities they lived, the distance alone was impractical, and such an offer was only a stopgap until something more permanent could be offered.

As Eire was a sovereign state, direct intervention was impossible. Therefore, diplomacy and indirect pressure helped in moving the government in Dublin to agree to British involvement. This would be a light touch with as little interference or presence as possible. Through negotiation, it was agreed that a medical board could be set up in Eire and services comparable to CRU made available to volunteers. Additionally, volunteers from Eire were provided with pensions at the British rate and given the opportunity to work in the UK. Such actions went some way to repairing the strained relationship between the nations due to Eire's neutrality during the war and gave the British government the opportunity to meet its moral obligations to those who had volunteered. This was nothing short of a triumph for the CRU scheme, extending the umbrella of assistance they could provide and represented the type of soft intervention acceptable in the region. Both the CRU at Ballymena and the extended provisions for volunteers from Eire should be seen as a major success of the British government in projecting soft power to achieve its objectives.

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[1] Such fears were stoked by the formation of Nationalist political organisations such as the Anti-Partition League (1945), committed to ending the border in Ireland, and the British-based Friends of Ireland, formed by around thirty Labour MPs who were sympathetic to a thirty-two county solution in Ireland.

[2] Please note that this article shall refer to the counties that made up the Irish Free State as Eire. This name was adopted in 1937 and was commonly used during the period discussed.

[3] The planning phase of the CRUs goes beyond the scope of this article and was the culmination of research by many prominent psychiatrists, such as John Rawlings Rees, A. T. M. Wilson, and Lieutenant Colonel Eric Trist.

[4] While it was common that those who closely identified with republicanism would also be Catholic, this should in no way be taken as applying to all.

[5] See headlines such as those in the *Irish Democrat* (1945), which encouraged "ALL Irishmen should vote Labour".

[6] Between 1920-1923, an estimated 275 "big houses" were burned during the Irish War of Independence and civil war. Partly as reprisals against British responses and partly as they

were seen as symbolic of the dominance of the protestant Anglo-Irish class at the expense of the native Catholic population (Bielenberg 2013; Dooley 2001).

[7] The actual figure of Irish enlistment has never definitively been settled, with figures ranging from 150,000 – 50,000 (Kelly 2012).