

WHO ARE THE IRISH POLICE? They are a special group; in the Irish language, they are called the “An Garda Siochana” (pronounced gar-dee sha hanna). They are Ireland’s finest. Referenced in plural, they are the Gardai. Translated to English, they are **The Guardians of Peace**. Before policing by the Garda, law enforcement in Ireland emanated from London. In the early 1900s, the Royal Irish Constabulary, a British-operated force, ruled. That was a time of civil war in Ireland. A truce in 1921 disbanded the R.I.C., and the “Civic Guard” was established by the Irish hero and soon-to-be assassinated Michael Collins. In 1922, the newly established Garda took over.

Michael Staines, the first commissioner of the Garda, proclaimed that, “**The Garda Siochana will succeed not by force of arms or numbers, but on their moral authority as servants of the people.**” Therefore, firearms would not be needed. The Irish Times says that was a proud sentiment of the Irish people. The Irish were bruised by civil war, and many believed “the police should rule by consent, not coercion”. However, like much of Irish history, there is more to the story. Historian Conor Brady says it was way more complicated. Brady claims the original Garda **was** a fully armed force. However, the new government feared an insurrection from the police rank and file, which was mainly made up of former IRA men. Yet, most of the senior officers of the new force consisted of former Royal Irish Constabulary men who had worked for the British. Rather than having an armed group of potential mutineers, a decision was made to disarm the new force. Brady writes that the Gardai were tricked into giving up their weapons. They were told, “We are moving to a new training center, you will take lorries, and all your weapons will be taken separately. Brady says, “They never saw their weapons again.”

Today, Ireland remains one of only 18 nations with a mostly unarmed police force. The Garda are headquartered in Dublin with 14,500 Gardai and civilian employees. Most Gardai do not carry firearms, but they are trained in using extendible batons, pepper spray, and handcuffs. Things changed slightly in the 1980s. One of the catalysts for this change was a bank robbery in Dublin. In this case, unarmed detectives, coming face-to-face with armed robbers, had to point their fingers at the robbers with the hope that it would look like they were holding pistols. Specialized firearms units were then established. Today, Emergency Response Units and Armed Support Units are available for backup. These units are highly trained, and they use modern guns, tasers, and stun grenades. The 2020 Global Peace Index ranks Ireland as the 12th safest country in the world. It appears that the Garda has established itself as an unarmed force that has kept the peace through consensus rather than force. However, they are always ready with an appropriate response if it is needed.

- **by Bill Burke**. Sources: Resto NYC website, Ireland’s National Police and Security Service website, The Irish Times C. Gallagher Sept. 2020, Global Peace Index 2020.

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