A native of South Armagh, Frank Aiken was born the youngest of seven children on 13 February 1898. He lost his father at two years old, took on responsibility for the family farm aged thirteen, and was orphaned at fifteen; a year later, aged sixteen, he joined the Irish Volunteers. Following the Rising, Aiken became a Sinn Féin organiser. He was a tall and imposing figure. A keen amateur boxer who listed Genghis Khan as his hero, in 1918 he was arrested for illegal drilling and imprisoned in Belfast. Following his release, and as the War of Independence took hold, Aiken soon made a name for himself in orchestrating daring IRA raids and ambushes in South Armagh and South Down.

By March 1921 Aiken, every inch the IRA ‘big man’, had risen to Commandant of the Fourth Northern Division. He combined brawn with brains, however, and in June 1921 he meticulously planned the spectacular derailing of the train carrying King George V’s cavalry regiment heading for the opening of the Northern Ireland parliament. But it would be in the period following the truce of July 1921 where Aiken was to really make his name. As an Ulsterman, the partition which the Anglo-Irish Treaty delivered was simply ‘wrong’ and would leave a deep historical scar. And yet he urged initial restraint after the Dáil ratified the deal, assuming a steadfast neutrality he would later apply to foreign policy as Minister for the Coordination of Defensive Measures during the Emergency. In a list drawn up in March 1922 Aiken is the only senior IRA officer described as ‘non-partisan’. His earnest efforts to avoid civil war are reflected in his role in negotiations leading to the ultimately ill-fated electoral pact between Collins and de Valera in May 1922 and – remarkably – Aiken’s division took no part in the series of covert offensives against the northern state sanctioned by Collins.

Aiken’s motivations as a peacemaker within the broader nationalist fold came from an implacable opposition to the formation of what he regarded as a sectarian entity in Northern Ireland and a determination to avoid fratricidal conflict between nationalists in opposing it. Unlike contemporaries whose opposition to the Treaty was primarily focused on the oath of allegiance, he was inevitably more immersed the tit-for-tat sectarian nature of violence in the north and indeed his reputation would become tainted by it: responding to the gang rape of a heavily pregnant local Catholic woman by a group of Ulster Special Constables, Aiken’s troops carried out a notorious reprisal in the town of Altnaveigh in June 1922, executing several members of a small Presbyterian community.

Meanwhile, Aiken’s middle-ground position was becoming increasingly untenable as the Civil War intensified and his eventual refusal, when pressed, to endorse the provisional government in Dublin led to his imprisonment in Dundalk Jail in July 1922. He wasted no time in leading a mass escape of 100 prisoners and responded to what he saw as a double-cross by Free State Minister for Defence Richard Mulcahy by angrily renouncing his neutrality. His republican colleague Todd Andrews called Aiken’s subsequent dramatic recapture of Dundalk from Free State forces ‘the most spectacularly efficient’ operation of the IRA during the entire Civil War.

Yet the Civil War placed this restless guerrilla and his men in a strange limbo: whereas previously they could escape south across the new border, they now found themselves fugitives in both states. Nevertheless, he continued to evade capture and his by-now-established renown led to him being elected successor to Liam Lynch as Chief of Staff by the IRA’s Army Executive in April 1923. Aiken had helped to carry the dying Lynch across the Knockmealdown Mountains before his body was laid down and now, wearied by war, it would be Aiken who would secure his place in history by issuing the order to ‘dump arms’ in May 1923. It speaks not only to the futility of the anti-treaty cause by this point but also to Aiken’s elevated standing that this order was obeyed up and down the country. In later Fianna Fáil governments Aiken would go on to serve as a Minister for Defence, Finance and External Affairs. He died in 1983.