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Ireland: The 1916 Easter Rising and the struggle for Irish independence

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As the hundredth anniversary of the Easter Rising approaches, Counterfire is running a new 3-part series by Chris Bambery on the struggle for Irish independence.

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I. Home Rule and the roots of the Rising

The centenary of the Easter Rising of 1916 was always going to stir controversy, both in Ireland and in Britain. For the Irish government it is difficult to reconcile the fact that the state over which they preside owes its creation to an armed rebellion against British rule by people who would today be labelled terrorists.

One former Irish premier, John Bruton, believes the events should be remembered, not glorified. "If we hadn't had the rebellion, we probably would have proceeded – maybe not quite as quickly – to full independence by constitutional methods," he claimed.

"Home Rule was enacted two years before the Rising in Dublin and was already on the statute book and was going to come into effect anyway. So there was probably, in my view, no need at all for the killing that took place between 1916 and 1923." (*Irish Independent*, 17 January 2016)

Bruton's claim that Ireland would have peacefully passed from a colony to full independence does not really fit with the facts, and in particular that the failure to deliver Home Rule (devolution) by constitutional means created a radicalisation which brought people like Padraig Pearse, declared President of the Irish Republic by the rebels in Easter Week 1916, from believing the British government would honour its pledge to introduce Home Rule to planning an armed rebellion to secure Irish independence.

It also ducks the lengths the right wing in British politics, backed up by the King and the military command, went to resist any diminution of British control over Ireland. They rightly saw it as affecting Britain's Empire, particularly its control of India. In the event, the Easter Rising and the independence war of 1919-1921 it spawned were a real body blow to imperial rule, which impacted greatly on India, Egypt and other British possessions. The British ruling class of today wants to draw a veil over the real history of Empire and, in particular, how independence from it was won, not granted.

Ireland was formally part of the United Kingdom but it was ruled from Dublin by a Governor General and a First Secretary. The security forces, the Royal Irish Constabulary was armed, unlike its counterpart in Britain, and concerned not with fighting crime but with repressing unrest on the land and with suppressing republicans. Ireland was more like India than Scotland or Wales.

What Bruton's version of history misses out too is that from 1912 until 1923 Ireland was convulsed by a revolutionary crisis, and that the British ruling class feared they would be drawn into a civil war over the Irish issue in the summer of 1914, an issue seemingly resolved by Britain's entry into the First World War in August 1914 and the rallying of the British elite around King and country. By then the gun was part and parcel of Irish politics and the killing had started, initiated by British troops on the streets of Dublin.

The description of events in Ireland in those years as 'revolutionary' is not one which you'll hear from official platforms marking the centenary of the Easter Rising. The fact that James Connolly was a revolutionary socialist who saw it as blow against war and imperialism is an inconvenience, which will also be passed over.

This revolutionary crisis was initiated by the forces of reaction, and alliance between the Tory Party in Britain and the Unionist industrialists of Belfast. Together they threatened armed rebellion to block any devolution of power to an Irish parliament in Dublin.

A few weeks before the First World War began in the summer of 1914 they mass purchased German rifles and imported them to arm the Unionist militia they had created to fight any weakening of the Union with Britain. When the government in London ordered the British army in Ireland to respond senior officers refused, staging an effective mutiny. In contrast when Irish nationalists imported a far smaller number of rifles British troops in Dublin opened fire in crowds in Dublin celebrating their arrival, killing three unarmed and innocent civilians. The British 'inquiry' of exonerated the soldiers involved.

The issue of Ireland's relationship with Britain consumed politics on both sides of the Irish Sea, starting in 1912 when a Liberal Government reliant on the votes of Irish Nationalist MPs for its parliamentary majority introduced an Irish Home Rule Bill (creating a parliament in Dublin more similar in today's terms to the Welsh Assembly than the Scottish Parliament).

Twice before the Liberals had tried to pass similar measures, in 1886 and 1893, on both occasions because they needed Irish Nationalist support. On both occasions the legislation was vetoed by the Tory controlled House of Lords. On both occasions the Liberal Party split with a section of it fearing any concessions in Ireland would have a knock on effect across the Empire. What was different in 1912 was that the House of Lords veto had been lifted after it had tried to block the 1909 Liberal Government's budget. This time opponents of Home Rule could not rely on Tory peers that would have to look beyond the Palace of Westminster.

Ireland was essentially an agricultural producer for Britain and an exporter of people, many ending up in British factories. Industry was absent except in one corner of the island. In Belfast and its surrounds heavy engineering and shipbuilding had sprung up dependent on British investment, British coal and British domestic and imperial markets. The majority of the population in the North East were Protestant. Faced with a rising tide of Irish nationalism the British and the employers of Belfast had used sectarianism to drive a wedge between Protestants and Catholics, the majority of the Irish population. Crude divide and rule, pioneered in Ireland and exported by Britain to India, Yemen, Cyprus and many other places.

The industrialists of the North created the Unionist Party, allied to the Tories in Britain, and co-

opted a once disrespected organisation the Orange Order as the means of mobilising popular support. Sectarian rioting became a feature of Belfast life with the Catholic minority generally on the receiving end. Discrimination was rife with Catholics barred from work in the engineering plants and shipyards.

In 1912 the Unionists reacted to Home Rule with venom. Quickly they organised monster rallies and then went further raising a militia, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), pledged to meet the passing of Home Rule with Civil War. The Tories rushed to back them with their leader, Bonar Law, telling a rally at Blenheim Palace, that "I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster will go, in which I shall not be ready to support them."

Added to this cocktail of unrest, Ireland had also become home to one of the most radical trade union movements in Europe. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) was led by the radical firebrand James Larkin, with the revolutionary socialist, James Connolly, second in charge. By 1913 Dublin's working class was organised into the ITGWU. The employers responded by launching a lock out of union members. After six months of mass picketing, police baton charges and denunciations of the workers by the media, politicians and priests the workers were driven back. But the Lock Out contributed to the more general radicalisation sweeping Ireland.

By 1914 Ireland seemed on the verge of civil war and the British ruling class were hopelessly split with no solution to a growing crisis in sight. To counter the UVF the Irish Volunteers had been formed, ready to fight for Home Rule. The outbreak of the First World War seemed to resolve everything.

The leader of the Irish Nationalists at Westminster, John Redmond had a popular mandate, his party held 84 out of 105 Irish constituencies. The Liberals relied on him for their majority but in the summer of 1914 he rallied to the flag and Britain's war effort. It marked the beginning of the end for him and his party. First, Redmond agreed that the Home Rule Bill which finally passed into law would not be acted upon until the end of the war. Secondly, he agreed to the exclusion of the North East of Ireland, supposedly on a temporary basis.

Redmond then went further and urged Irish men to enlist in the British Army and to fight Germany. He pledged the Irish Volunteers to serve the crown and the Union Jack. A minority broke away determined to oppose British rule and the war.

At first Redmond's gamble seemed to have paid off. Recruitment levels in Ireland in the first year of war were comparable with those in Britain but then they fell away markedly. Losses were mounting and the British Army would not let Irish brigades have any independent identity unlike the UVF who formed a separate Ulster Division.

John Bruton champions Redmond's approach today but by 1915 the party he led was in terminal decline, faith in Britain's pledge to enact Home Rule was fading, and opposition to Ireland's involvement in the war was growing.

The Easter Rising could not have occurred without this shift. Ireland was entering the rapids of revolution.

II. A revolt against Empire: the 1916 Easter Rising

In the second part of our 3-part series on the struggle for Irish independence, Chris Bambery looks at the uprising of Easter Monday 1916.

In the course of the 1980s and 1990s the narrative about the Easter Rising fundamentally changed. Out went the traditional nationalist interpretation and in came on that saw the rebellion as a “blood sacrifice” carried out by a small group of fanatical nationalists isolated from mainstream Irish society. This revisionist narrative was part of the offensive in both Britain and Ireland against the Provisional IRA and its military campaign

The nationalist portrayal of the Easter Rising was a fairly easy target because it largely cut out the mass action which swept Ireland from 1912 to 1922, the progressive politics at the heart of the Rising – something the conservative rulers of what became the Irish Republic were deeply unhappy with, and because republicans too often emphasised the rebellion was the work of a small, dedicated minority whose sacrifice revived Irish separatism.

In looking at the reality of Easter 1916 it is worth beginning with its leaders, a talented and inspiring group of revolutionaries, comprising of revolutionary republicans, like Padraig Pearse, socialists and trade unionists, like Connolly, and feminists like Constance Markievicz (also a socialist) who helped lead the Irish Citizens Army in street fighting around St Stephen’s Green, was jailed after the Rising ended and on her release was the first woman elected to Westminster, as a Sinn Fein member she refused to take her seat in an alien parliament!

On Easter Monday Padraig Pearse read out The Proclamation of Independence outside the rebel HQ, the General Post Office in Central Dublin. It stated:

“The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally...”

It went on to promise that:

“... a national government would be representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrage of all her men and women.”

The British government was led by the Liberal Herbert Asquith who had opposed the Suffragettes and their demand for Votes for Women. Compare his stance with the statement read out by Pearse.

The republicans were not socialists but they had largely been sympathetic to the Dublin working class during the 1913 Lock Out when employers, backed up by the police, fought to break the newly organised Irish Transport and General Workers Union led by the revolutionary syndicalist Jim Larkin and his deputy, James Connolly.

This was not a group of men and women who were committed to collective suicide. The republicans belied a rising was necessary so that the issue of Ireland would be part of any post-war settlement. Connolly saw it as a blow against war and imperialism which could help the European working class revive and resist their rulers.

Pearse did make some comments which play into the hands of the revisionist but Connolly called him a “blithering idiot” for making them and they echo similar statements by many young poets and writers in 1914, Rupert Brooke for instance, who became an English national hero.

The real “blood sacrifice” was on the Western Front and the killing fields of Gallipoli. In July 1916 he first day of Britain’s offensive on the Somme saw the highest casualty list ever in the history of the British Army, 60,000 dead or wounded.

The emphasis on a supposed "blood sacrifice" misses out that the Easter Rising was a carefully conceived act of rebellion which if it had come off had a good chance of success. The plan was for republicans in Dublin to take control of the inner city and draw British forces into street fighting in the capital. Meanwhile arms acquired from Germany were to be landed in Kerry and distributed to republicans across the South West. They were to advance on Dublin forcing British forces there into a two front battle.

The plan fell down because the leadership of the Irish Volunteers, the main rebel force, called off the mobilisation called for Easter Monday. They had been presented with a British document ordering the mass arrest of the Volunteers but discovered it was a forgery, drawn up to force them to act. They had been told of the German ship bringing weapons but when it was scuttled to avoid seizure by the Royal Navy that confirmed their decision to cancel the rising.

The republicans decided to go ahead with a rising on the Easter Monday because plans were so advanced the British would eventually discover them. Their chances of success were slimmer than before but they were not committing collective suicide. 1500 Volunteers and members of Connolly's Irish Citizens Army, originally set up a defence force for strikers, joined the rebellion in Dublin.

The Irish Volunteers did not allow women to join, but the ICA did and women were involved in the fighting during the Rising. Connolly stated 'that no movement was assured of success that had not women in it.' He also wrote 'Win the women to your cause and your cause is secure.' Constance Markievicz was second in command of the St Stephen's Green garrison and was sentenced to death afterwards, although the sentence was commuted. Margaret Skinnider was a scout and dispatch rider for the garrison there and was mentioned in dispatches on three occasions for bravery. Eventually she was shot and wounded.

On that Easter Monday Volunteers in different parts of the country assembled but confusion reigned and they failed to act, with one exception. In North Dublin County a group of Volunteers organised into mobilised columns captured police barracks, gaining badly needed weapons, and defeated a far greater force of police sent to crush them. Their success pointed to the guerrilla tactics used successfully in 1919-1921.

In Dublin too the rebels inflicted a bloody nose on the British in street fighting at Mount Street Bridge, where British troops were ordered into frontal attacks against well prepared fixed positions, and in North King Street, where the British became bogged down in house to house fighting and lost heavily when one officer ordered an open charge down the street. The rebel garrison in the South Dublin Union also succeeded in repulsing an attack by British troops. For a week they held the city centre, despite the indiscriminate use by the British of heavy artillery. Forced to evacuate the GPO after it caught fire, the leaders decided on surrender to avoid any further suffering for the civilian population.

Civilian deaths were in the main caused by British artillery fire and the fires that started. But British troops carried out reprisals on civilians in North King Street and eight innocent civilians were shot dead in Portobello Barracks, including the well known pacifist, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, arrested while trying to stop looting in the city centre.

It's often claimed the rebels met a hostile response from the city's population as they were marched off to jail. That was true in the upper class parts of South Dublin and some wives of soldiers in the British army were certainly hostile, but recent histories have uncovered crowds cheering the rebels, despite the drawn bayonets of their guards, and a growing sense of admiration for their resistance. The executions, carried out under military law, deepened a growing sense of alienation from British rule.

Connolly, shot in the ankle during the fighting, was dying of gangrene but was driven into the prison yard at Kilmainham strapped to a chair and shot. The last calls for his execution had come from Dublin's main employer.

Connolly was well known to trade unionists and socialists in Britain, and had begun his political career in his native Edinburgh. But few rallied to defend his participation in the rising. An exception was John Maclean in Glasgow who grasped that rebellion in Ireland would weaken British imperialism and that Connolly was determined to strike a blow against the war.

Across Europe, but above all in Ireland, support for the First World War was slipping away as the death toll mounted. Within weeks the slaughter houses of Verdun and the Somme would worsen the barbarity of the Western Front. The tide had turned against British rule in Ireland and there was no going back.

III. How the Easter Rising changed the world

In the final part of our series, Chris Bambery argues that the Easter Rising relaunched the struggle for independence in Ireland and inspired national liberation movements globally

In November 1918 as the First World War ended, the British Empire grew still further as more countries were painted pink on the map of the globe. Yet the reality was that the expansion of imperial rule to countries like Iraq and Palestine came as the British ruling class came to understand that their economic and military power was slipping away, and they faced a growing challenge to colonial rule, above all in Ireland.

In the two years that followed the 1916 Easter Rising, the republicans - grouped now in Sinn Fein - garnered mass support as the British government threatened to extend conscription to Ireland. That threat was met by further mass mobilisation.

1918 started with three German offensives on the Western Front, which at one stage led the British commander to consider evacuating the British army across the English Channel. The British were short of men and the government announced plans to introduce conscription to Ireland. That had the effect of creating a tidal wave of opposition.

The Irish Trade Union Congress called a special congress and delegates voted for a general strike against conscription. The resolution proposing this declared that the strike 'will be a signal to the workers of all countries at war to rise against their oppressors and bring the war to an end.' Outside of the Belfast area the strike was solid.

In late 1918, Sinn Fein swept the board in the general election that followed the armistice, which ended fighting on the Western Front. Rather than traipse off to Westminster, they met in Ireland to create an Irish parliament, Dail Eireann, and to re-affirm the Declaration of Independence and the creation of an Irish Republic issued by Pearse and Co. in April 1916. On the same day the Dail met the Irish Republican Army (as the Irish Volunteers were now known), the latter began its guerrilla war against British occupation.

Armed struggle was accompanied by mass strikes and protests against growing British repression.

1919 began with a general strike across the Belfast area in support of a 44-hour working week. The majority of the strikers were Protestant and the militancy of the strikers rocked the Unionist establishment in the city. Unfortunately, control of the strike remained in the hands of local trade

union officials, who buckled as the strike was attacked in the media and by politicians. They failed to maintain the strike momentum, by calling out transport workers for instance, and in the end called off the battle. On 1 May 1919, 100,000 workers marched in the city.

In April 1919 the working class of Limerick took control of the city for two weeks. After the IRA shot dead a policeman, the British authorities declared martial law in the city. Anyone wanting to move in or out, or within the city needed a special permit. In response the Trades Council called a general strike and 14,000 workers answered the call. The strike committee declared itself a Soviet.

Eventually the Soviet ordered a return to work after the national trade union leaders refused their appeals for solidarity action. They did win the withdrawal of the military permit system, although now the permits were supposed to be issued by employers.

In April 1920, some 100 trade unionists, republicans and socialists were held in Dublin's Mountjoy Jail without having been charged. They began a hunger strike for their release and by the end of the first week of the protest 40,000 people gathered outside the jail, facing British troops and armoured cars. The trade unions called a general strike, which spread like wild fire, with local workers councils taking control in many towns. Sinn Fein grew nervous as the crowds grew outside Mountjoy Jail and intervened to disperse the protesters. Eventually, though, the British authorities caved in and realised the hunger strikers.

A month later dockers in Dublin refused to unload two ships carrying British war material. The boycott spread, with railway workers refusing to transport any military cargo or armed troops. The boycott was slated until December 1920, despite military intimidation and frequent sackings. Eventually the rail workers were ground down and forced to call it off.

It would be wrong to counterpose such mass action to the military struggle of the IRA. Two areas, Dublin City and the South West, shook the resolve of the British. In Dublin, IRA units kept up constant attacks on British forces and the British administration, which seriously affected the morale of the British administration. In the South West, IRA flying columns like that of Tom Barry in West Cork inflicted defeats on British forces. Barry's ambush at Kilmichael saw an entire British column of 18 men wiped out. Later at Crossbarry, the IRA fought their way out after being encircled by 1,200 British soldiers.

The British in the South West responded by sending in extra troops and using aircraft to locate and destroy the IRA. In that they failed.

By the beginning of 1921, the military argued that 100,000 troops were needed to crush the republicans but the British government refused because it could not produce such numbers and was realising it could not win. In July 1921, the IRA had over 100,000 members, though only a few thousand had access to modern weapons.

The British political strategy now centred on rushing through partition and creating a loyal state in Northern Ireland while also putting out feelers for negotiations.

In July 1921 it agreed a truce with Dail Eireann and the IRA and negotiations began over a Treaty to resolve the Irish Question. The British quickly identified a section of the republicans who disliked the revolutionary mood of the country, wanted to protect private property and the standing of the Catholic Church and who shared none of the social vision of Padraig Pearse, let alone James Connolly.

These leaders agreed to the creation of an Irish Free State as a dominion of the British Empire on similar lines to Canada or Australia, and accepted partition, the creation of a six county state in the

North of Ireland within which the Unionists had majority support.

One of the leaders of the 1916 rising, James Connolly, had warned partition would lead to a “carnival of reaction.” He was 100 percent correct. In what became Northern Ireland, there was bloody, sectarian pogrom, as Unionist militias, hastily recruited as special police constables, terrorised the nationalist population. To the south, the new government in Dublin waged civil war on their republican opponents who opposed the 1921 treaty with Britain. The new government treated its opponents more brutally than the British had during the armed struggle for independence waged from 1919 until the Treaty.

The leaders of the two states brutally broke the revolutionary wave that had swept Ireland repeatedly since 1912. They created two conservative run states which were very much a mirror image of each other.

And there lies the problem that the elite in Ireland, north and south, have always had with Easter 1916. The Republic Pearse declared outside the GPO was far more radical than anything that has existed in Ireland since the 1921 Treaty, far more radical than the current Assembly in Belfast and the parliament in Dublin. Secondly, the events of 1916 and the Irish revolution still acted to inspire those prepared to challenge the two states existing on the island of Ireland. That of course includes republicans committed to armed struggle but the spirit of Connolly is apparent whenever Irish workers rise up, and his legacy retains its cutting edge despite repeated attempts to co-opt it.

On a wider stage, rebellion in Ireland acted as an inspiration for assorted forces of liberation, whether the Bolsheviks in Russia who sent a stash of the former Czarina’s jewels to help fund the IRA, to revolutionary nationalists in Bengal who took up armed struggle in the 1920s and 1930s to break British rule in India. Indeed the Easter Rising was one of the key staging posts in the huge wave of national liberation struggles that marked the 20th century.

Ireland’s struggle for independence is something all rebels should cherish, by watching Ken Loach’s film *The Wind That Shook the Barley* or by reading the memoirs of republican fighters like Ernie O’Malley and Tom Barry.

This Spring we should commemorate a talented and inspiring revolutionary generation, and help keep the flame of freedom they lit burning against the warmongers, imperialists and profiteers they fought and we still face today.

Chris Bambery, February 2, , and 2016

P.S.

* <http://www.counterfire.org/history/18165-home-rule-and-the-roots-of-the-easter-rising>

<http://www.counterfire.org/history/18209-a-revolt-against-empire-the-1916-easter-rising>

<http://www.counterfire.org/articles/history/18259-how-the-easter-rising-changed-the-world>

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