

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Blood sacrifice, the left and the 1916 insurrection in Ireland

Class struggle during the War of Independence

Andrew Flood

Andrew Flood

Blood sacrifice, the left and the 1916 insurrection in Ireland

Class struggle during the War of Independence

April 2006

Retrieved on 12th August 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

April 2006

Contents

1916 — Connolly, blood sacrifice and defeating British imperialism	5
Preparations for insurrection	6
Connolly and the IRB	7
What if?	8
Might the Easter rising have succeeded?	10
The plan for the rising	11
Why the Castle failed to act	12
The rising	14
Reasons for public hostility	16
A terrible beauty is born?	17
What really built the IRA?	18
The cause of the British panic	19
Panic leads to compromise with Sinn Fein	20

The treaty led to the civil war, and as the Free State government won this civil war it used the forces of the Free State to crush the workers movements. Labour historian Emmet O' Connor describes how thousands of paramilitary police (Special Infantry Corps) were deployed so that by the Spring of 1923 "*military intervention was becoming a routine response to factory seizures or the disruption of essential services*". During the Waterford farm strike of 1923 "*600 SIC were billeted in a chain of posts throughout the affected area.*"

By the Autumn these forces were being deployed to defeat a postal strike, triggered by the Free State government rejecting the findings of its own commission of enquiry into the cost of living for postal employees. During the strike the government used armoured cars to disrupt pickets and arrest officials. "*Numerous arrests and re-arrests of pickets were made until the right to peacefully picket was asserted in the courts. Even then, troops continued to intimidate strikers with armoured vehicles and rifle fire. On 17 September a lady telephonist was shot in the knees. Raids took place on union offices and arrests of officials continued.*"⁴¹ This was to demonstrate to the workers that 'law and order' had returned, as the Post Master General described it "*at this critical juncture to smash such a well organised strike was a salutary lesson to the general indiscipline which just then seemed to run riot through the land.*"⁴².

Conventional nationalist histories of the period after 1916 do not provide a rational mechanism for how British imperialism was defeated. There is almost no mention of mass struggles, of the general strikes and of the occupations. Instead we are to believe that the 'blood sacrifice' of a few men transformed public opinion and then that the actions of another gallant few in fighting the black and tans imposed a military defeat on the British Empire. The real force, in Ireland and internationally that imposed a compromise on Britain are carefully hidden away.

⁴¹ Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 – 1923, p159

⁴² Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 – 1923, p159

In Glasgow, pitched battle were fought in George Square and 6 tanks and 100 lorry loads of troops with machine guns were brought in to prevent rallies.³⁸ it is not hard to see why the British ruling class was in something of a panic. The Director of Intelligence at the Home Office Basil Hugh Thomson wrote *“During the first three months of 1919 unrest touched its high-water mark. I do not think that at any time in history since the Bristol riots we have been so near revolution.”* Winston Churchill recorded *“We had a considerable number of mutinies in the army .. We had a number of strikes and a great many threats of strikes .. there were serious riots in Glasgow which required the presence of a large number of troops.”*³⁹

The cost to the British establishment of pursuing the war in Ireland was not military but political. They felt that *“If England goes on like this she will lose the Empire .. The coming year looks gloomy. We are certain to have serious trouble in Ireland, Egypt, and India, possible even with the Bolsheviks. At home those who know best say we are going to have a strike of the triple alliance and the Post Office. This will be a direct threat and attack on the life of the nation.”*⁴⁰

Panic leads to compromise with Sinn Fein

The level of panic from the British state about the threat of revolution shows why the Sinn Fein leadership came to be seen by the British state as a reasonable alternative that could be treated with. They reckoned — correctly as it turned out — that a sufficient amount of the leadership would settle for a deal that left key British interests, including the naval ports protected. Through the land courts, Sinn Fein was demonstrating that it posed no threat to capitalism in Ireland. In 1921 the treaty offered a way of stabilising a dangerous situation at little apparent cost.

³⁸ Revolution in Ireland, p56

³⁹ Revolution in Ireland, p54

⁴⁰ Sir Henry Wilson quoted in Conor Kostick, Revolution in Ireland, p27

The 1916 rising in Ireland in which around 20% of the participants were members of a syndicalist militia became the founding myth of the modern Irish state. This articles looks at the core myth of ‘blood sacrifice’ and the class struggle that erupted during the War of Independence which broke out three years after the insurrection.

1916 — Connolly, blood sacrifice and defeating British imperialism

At 11.30 in the morning of April 24 1916 Bugler William Oman, a member of a syndicalist workers militia the Irish Citizen Army (ICA), sounded the ‘fall-in’ outside his union headquarters. This was the start of an insurrection in Dublin which was to see around 1,500 armed men and women seize key buildings throughout the city, and to hold these positions against thousands of British Army soldiers for almost a week. In the course of putting down the insurrection, 1351 people were killed or severely wounded and 179 buildings in the city centre were destroyed.¹

Around 20% of those who fought were members of the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) — who were in an alliance with the nationalist Irish Volunteers. The ICA had been set up in 1913, when employers had locked out members of the syndicalist Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) from their workplaces. The lock-out lasted for 6 months before the workers were starved back to work. Near the start, a number of workers were killed or seriously wounded by police attacks on their demonstrations, pickets and homes.

In response, at a rally on November 13 1913 the revolutionary socialist James Connolly had declared *“The next time we are out for a march, I want to be accompanied by four battalions of trained men.”*

¹ The Easter Rebellion, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p283

Why should we not drill and train our men in Dublin as they are doing in Ulster?" An ex-British army officer, Captain Jack White, offered to organise a defence militia of ITGWU members. The ICA kept peace at meetings, protected workers from the police and prevented evictions.²

Preparations for insurrection

In March 1914 the ICA was re-organised and a new constitution was ratified. The constitution was republican in character, without any explicit mention of socialism. It did however demand that *"the ownership of Ireland, moral and material, is vested of right in the people of Ireland"* and for *"equal rights and opportunities for the Irish people"*.³ The ICA was to be open only to members of a recognised union and the Dublin Trades Council gave its official approval.

The insurrection was planned by the ICA leader James Connolly, who was now also the leader of the ITGWU, and the nationalist leadership of the secretive Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). The IRB had successfully taken many of the leadership positions in the 20,000 strong Irish Volunteers without most Volunteers realising it. Even W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, who was one of the few non IRB Volunteer officers aware that the rising was planned, only learned of the IRB's role on the morning of the rising when he saw the proclamation that mentioned their participation on the morning of the rising.

From 1915 Connolly had been pushing publicly for a rising, he had even converted part of Liberty Hall (the union building) into a munitions factory which made bayonets, crowbars and bombs. He also published a number of articles in the 'Workers Republic' studying the tactics used in previous insurrections in Europe. Com-

² James Connolly 'A Full life', Donal Nevin, Gill & Macmillan, 2005, p554

³ Constitution of the Irish Citizen Army, 22 March 1914, online at www.wsm.ie

The cause of the British panic

Two things combined in to create this panic. Across the world these were years of revolutionary struggle for the working class. In most countries workers were defeated by the forces of 'law and order'. The republican armed struggle in Ireland, which was largely directed at making it impossible to police the country, created a 'law and order' vacuum. By the end of April 1921 800 police barracks and courts had been attacked.³⁵ Into that 'law and order vacuum' created by the IRA's military campaign, the working class stepped and occupied land and workplaces. The unique situation in Ireland meant in the southern 26 counties the force of law and order that were able to repress workers struggles elsewhere were largely ineffective.

There were 5 general strikes in Ireland between August 1918 and August 1923, and 18 general local strikes, twelve of these in 1919. For example, the general strike of 14th April 1920 saw workers take over the running of the country and it had been called overnight by the union leadership. The Manchester Guardian reported from Waterford that *"the City was taken over by a Soviet Commissar and three associates. The Sinn Fein mayor abdicated and the Soviet issued orders to the population which all had to obey. For two days, until a telegram arrived reporting the release of hunger strikers, the city was in the hands of these men."*³⁶

In January 1919, the London Times wrote of fear that the radicals would *"push aside the middle class intelligentsia of Sinn Fein, just as Lenin and Trotsky pushed aside Kerensky and other speech makers."*³⁷ The ruling class really started to panic when the loyalist workforce of Belfast started using similar tactics during the great Engineering strike of 1919. Mutinies also broke out in the Irish Regiments of the British army stationed in India.

³⁵ Revolution in Ireland, p97

³⁶ Revolution in Ireland, p123

³⁷ Revolution in Ireland, p139

What really built the IRA?

Here I will sketch out an alternative explanation, details of which will be developed in future articles. The executions certainly gave the public cause to think again, but it was the slaughter of World War One, and the need for the British army to conscript Irish men to fight its war that really recruited for the IRA. This is recorded in Kerry police estimates that *“the rate of affiliation to the republican movement was highest between October 1917 and November 1918 when the threat of conscription loomed largest.”*³¹ Ernie O’Malley who rose to OC of the Second Southern, the second largest division of the IRA was in Donegal at the other end of the country. He recorded the same phenomenon there in reverse, that once *“Fear of conscription passed away with the European war. The numbers in the Volunteer companies decreased and we had more opposition.”*³²

Michael Collins reckoned the IRA never had more than around 5,000 active volunteers during the war while the British administration built up a force of tens of thousands of armed men. In comparison with World War One, British casualties were so light as to be insignificant. Foster gives figures for the War of Independence showing only 400 police and 180 soldiers killed. In comparison, the British armed forces lost one million men during World War One³³.

Yet, by 1921, the British ruling class was in a panic. Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson recorded in his diary for 18 May 1921 *“I said that directly England was safe, every available man should go to Ireland that even four battalions now serving on the Rhine should ought also to go to Ireland .. I was terrified at the state of the country, and that in my opinion, unless we crushed the murder gang this summer we shall lose Ireland and the Empire.”*³⁴

³¹ The IRA in Kerry 1916 – 1921, Sinead Joy, The Collins Press, 2005, p32

³² On another Man’s Wound, Ernie O’Malley, Colour Books Limited, 1936, p88

³³ BBC, www.bbc.co.uk

³⁴ The Real Chief: Liam Lynch, Meda Ryan, Mercier Press, 2005, p46p92

menting on Connolly’s article on the 1905 Moscow insurrection, a recent biographer Donal Nevin observes *“It is impossible to read without noting the remarkable similarities in the tactics to those used by the insurgents in Dublin eleven years later”*.

By 1915 the ICA was regularly engaging in training exercises around Dublin. For example, *“one night in October , when heavy fog hung over the city, the entire army, men and women, set out at midnight and for two hours engaged in ‘attack’ and ‘defence’ exercises around the Castle”*.⁴ The minutes of the Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland include police reports on these armed training exercises.

Connolly and the IRB

Relationships between the ICA and the Volunteers were not always smooth. On October 11 1914 there had been clashes between Irish Volunteers and ICA over rival meetings at Glasnevin to mark Parnell’s death. In Christmas 1915, Padraic Pearse said of Connolly *“Connolly is most dishonest in his methods. In public he says the war is a war forced on Germany by the Allies. In private he says that the Germans are just as bad as the British, and that we ought to do the job ourselves. As for writings in his paper, if he wanted to wreck the whole business, he couldn’t go a better way about it. He will never be satisfied until he goads us into action, and then he will think most of us are too moderate, and want to guillotine half of us.”*

It was, however, obvious to Connolly that an insurrection coordinated by both bodies would be militarily stronger than one of them acting on its own. Brennan-Whitmore claims to have been later told that *“Around the time of the outbreak of the First World War, James Connolly .. told Cathal O’Shannon .. that he wished to get in touch with the IRB and, if necessary was prepared to take the*

⁴ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p591

oath of that body for the purpose of establishing friendly relations between militant nationalism and Irish labour”.

By Christmas of 1915, the IRB Military Council was setting Easter 1916 as the probable date for a rising. Connolly, unaware that a date had been set, was concluding that the IRB, like earlier generations of Irish, was taking too long to act. Of the rebels of 1848 he had written *“for the most part those who undertook to give it articulate expression were wanting in the essential ability to translate sentiment into action.”* In January of 1916, Connolly told JJ Burke *“that the Citizen Army would move within a week on its own and under his leadership.”*⁵

Connolly met with the Volunteer leadership January 16. *“MacNeill stated that Connolly favoured an immediate insurrection and argued that the seizure of selected buildings in Dublin would ignite the whole country. He insisted that the ICA was prepared to rise alone.”*⁶ Nothing came out of that meeting, but on the 19th Connolly vanished for a three day meeting with the IRB military council at which they agreed joint plans for an insurrection on Easter Sunday. At this point Connolly was co-opted on to the Military Council of the IRB. Nevin says that Connolly *“may have been accepted into the IRB the following month.”* Certainly this was claimed by a IRB member, who at the time was also trying to recruit Frank Robbins of the ICA.⁷

What if?

An interesting question arises as to what would have happened if the ICA had gone out on their own in January 1916, as intended. Did Connolly see such an insurrection as a token gesture doomed to defeat, or did he hope it might spark off a more general rising.

⁵ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p628

⁶ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p629

⁷ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p634

chamber pots.” On a more measurable level, Caulfield points out that during the rising *“Not a single trade, political or municipal society anywhere in Ireland had declared for the republic.”*²⁸

A terrible beauty is born?

Despite this initial public hostility, within two years the republicans were to win the overwhelming majority of seats in the 1918 election, and within five years the British were forced to sign a treaty and then leave 26 of the 32 counties. The 1916 insurrection almost seems designed as a perfect case study of how an insurrection can radicalise the population and change public opinion.

Even during the insurrection James Stephens noticed that public opinion was changing. He wrote that on the Wednesday *“There is almost a feeling of gratitude towards the Volunteers because they are holding our for a little while, for had they been beaten the first or second day the City would have been humiliated to the soul.”*²⁹

After the rising, the British establishment made up for their lack of action beforehand; 3439 men and 70 women were interned, 92 sentenced to death³⁰. ‘Only’ 16, including Rodger Casement, were executed, but many observers recorded public opinion changing as the executions were dragged out. When they culminated with the execution of Connolly on May 12, who was so wounded that he had to be shot sitting in a chair, the foundation was laid for the nationalist myth that it was the insurrection, and in particular the blood sacrifice of the leaders, that had ‘freed Ireland’.

²⁸ The Easter Rebellion, p184

²⁹ The Insurrection in Dublin, p39

³⁰ Conor Kostick, Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917 to 1923, Pluto Press, 1996, p23

the British army. *“That day there were two of us fighting for England, two of us against.”*²⁵

Reasons for public hostility

The insurrection took place on the first anniversary of the 2nd battle of Ypres, in which the Dublin Fusiliers, which many of the ITGWU men would have joined, had suffered very heavy losses. Eyewitness James Stephens noted, in his account written just after the rising, that *“It is considered now (writing a day or two afterwards) that Dublin was entirely against the Volunteers, .. Most of the female opinion I heard was not alone unfavourable but actively and viciously hostile to the rising. This was noticeable among the best-dressed classes of our population; the worst dressed, indeed the female dregs of Dublin life, expressed a like antagonism, and almost in similar language. The view expressed was ‘I hope every man of them will be shot’.”*²⁶

Towards the end of the rising, as Brennan-Whitmore’s unit tried to sneak through British lines near Sean MacDermott Street, he recalls the ICA men present saying *“we were in the middle of a very hostile area, being full of ‘dependents’ allowances’ women who would certainly betray us.”* They were betrayed while hiding in a tenement, where *“the majority of the inhabitants of the tenement had congregated on the first landing and showered curse upon us as we appeared. Several of the women called on the soldiers to shoot the ‘***** Sinn Feiners.’”*²⁷

Max Caulfield wrote that as the rebel prisoners were being marched away the poor working class women attacked them, *“‘Shoot the traitors they cried’ .. the shawlies pelted them with rotten vegetables, the more enthusiastic disgorging the contents of their*

²⁵ The Easter Rebellion, , p80

²⁶ The Insurrection in Dublin, p36

²⁷ Dublin burning, p110

Asked if the time was ripe for revolution in Ireland in 1915 he had replied with *“You never know if the time is ripe until you try. If you succeed the time is ripe, if not, then it was not ripe.”*⁸ Shortly after the deal with the IRB was reached, he wrote in the Workers Republic (Jan 26 1916) *“Revolutionists who shirk from giving blow for blow until the great day has arrived, and they have every shoe-string in its place, and every man has got his gun, and the enemy has kindly consented to postpone action in order not to needlessly harry the revolutionists, nor disarrange their plans — such revolutionists only exist in two places — the comic opera stage, and the stage of Irish national politics.”*

The program of an ICA-only rising would have been different to that of the Easter proclamation. In the previous issue of the Workers Republic, which may have been planned as the last one before the ICA rising, Connolly outlined a program for a new revolutionary government as follows *“All the railways at once to be confiscated and made public property, no compensation being given to the shareholders. All necessary ships ought at once to be taken from their owners, without compensation and without apology. Let [the Government] take the factories from the manufacturers, and immediately confiscate all the idle land (the enormous quantity of splendid land lying idle in demesnes and private estates of the nobility and gentry) and put labourers upon it to grow crops to feed the multitude. As the propertied classes have so shamelessly sold themselves to the enemy, the economic conscription of their property will cause few qualms to whosoever shall administer the Irish Government in the first days of freedom.”*

A lone rising of the few hundred ICA in January 1916 would have had even less of a chance to success than the Easter rising. A clue to Connolly’s goals thinking may be seen in his description of the ICA from August 1915; *“Its members are, therefore, of the number who believe that at the call of duty they may have to lay down their*

⁸ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p574

lives for Ireland, and have so trained themselves that at the worst the laying down of their lives shall constitute the starting point of another glorious tradition — a tradition that will keep alive the soul of the nation". A rising on the program outlined in the Workers Republic may have been intended to "*constitute the starting point of another glorious tradition*", intended to push the general tone of republicanism to the left.

Might the Easter rising have succeeded?

Another interesting 'what if' concerns the Easter rising itself. Afterwards, the nationalist consensus was that it was a intentional 'blood sacrifice' — a fatal gesture made in order to inspire future generations but there is a counter argument that many saw a chance for success.

The rising took place in the middle of World War One and, as with other Irish republican risings "*England's difficulty was seen as Ireland's opportunity*". Irish politics of the previous thirty years had been dominated by the struggle for Home Rule. In the years before World War One this had seen the formation of rival nationalist and unionist militias, numbering hundreds of thousands, and armed with tens of thousands of smuggled rifles.

Later generations would largely accept that the rising was a 'blood sacrifice', organised to make a statement against the imperialist war or from a purely nationalist's position to keep "*faith with the past, and hand[ed] a tradition to the future*". But, as historian John A Murphy wrote, "*it should be remembered that up to the stage of the final confusion, the Military Council believed the rebellion had a real chance of success*".⁹

⁹ The Insurrection in Dublin, James R Stephens, 1916, Intro John A Murphy, p xv

that "*as we marched up to the junction with O'Connell Street pedestrian traffic paused to let us pass and we received several cheers*." And that, while initially fortifying the GPO, "*We had not long been at this work when a great cheer from the crowd outside informed us that the tricolour had been hoisted on the top of the building fronting the street*."²¹

He also claims that when commanding the North Earl street position, on the first night "*I could have quadrupled my little garrison in a short time if I had taken in all those who were volunteering their services*." He turned those who were not already members of the ICA or Volunteers away, but in the GPO those taken in included a Polish and a Finnish sailor as well as a British conscientious objector (possibly called Allen) who wore the button of the international syndicalist union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). He was wounded during the evacuation of the GPO and died on Saturday.²² Also on Friday a "*cockney socialist called Neale*"²³ was mortally wounded. Although the rising was nationalist even some of the leaders, including Connolly, had been born outside of Ireland. Padraic Pearse's final words to his pupils were reported as being remember if we succeed it was the son of an Englishman who set you free.

Many of the British army units involved in the suppression of the rising were Irish regiments, this meant that members of the same family were on both sides of the barricades. One of the first British casualties was Lieutenant Gerald Neilan, shot by a sniper on Ushers Quay. His younger brother Anthony was taking part in the rising.²⁴ In the South Dublin Union's fierce fighting Richard O'Reilly was one of the first casualties on the rebel side, he had another brother was also in the SDU but two other brothers were in

²¹ Dublin burning, p41

²² James Connolly 'A Full life', p646

²³ The Easter Rebellion, p260

²⁴ James Connolly 'A Full life', p646

the 40,000 to 50,000 killed in the war at least half were Catholic.¹⁸ Even the ITGWU, the syndicalist union from which the ICA had emerged, believed that half of its 1914 membership had joined the British army by 1916¹⁹.

The lockout, ending only months before the outbreak of war, meant that many of the strikers were driven by poverty into the army. Connolly also claimed that one of the major employers, Jacobs, had dismissed all men of military age at the start of the war. Writing in the Workers Republic of February 26 1916 he recognised that *“The trenches in Flanders have been the graves of scores of thousands of Irishmen, a large proportion of whom were born and reared in the slums and tenement houses of Dublin, slums notorious the world over .. From out of these slums these poor misguided brothers of our have been tricked and deluded into giving battle for England.”* The Castle reckoned, not without reason, that the relatives of these soldiers were unlikely to look favourably on a rising.

The rising

The military events of the rising are well known. The rebels successfully seized most of their objectives. Then, over the following six days, the British army brought in re-enforcements, including artillery and the gun boat Helga, and proceeded to destroy selected rebel positions, in particular the GPO and O’Connell Street area. The British army were *“occupying strategic positions, possibly throwing up barricades and drawing a ring of fire tighter and tighter around us. We had no effective reply to that plan.”*²⁰

Brenan — Whitmore’s eyewitness account of the start of the rising demonstrates that not all Dubliners were hostile. He recorded

¹⁸ A History of Ulster, Jonathan Bardon, The Blackstaff Press, 1996, p461

¹⁹ Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 — 1923 Emmet O’ Connor, Cork University press, 1988, p21

²⁰ Dublin burning, p87

The First World War meant that the British army in Ireland “stood well below full strength.”¹⁰ If all the 20,000 Irish Volunteers had been mobilised they would have outnumbered the army around five to one. It was only at the last minute that MacNeill, the Volunteer leader, realising the depth by which he had been tricked by the IRB, had orders printed in the newspapers cancelling the mobilisation order. German support, which did provide a diversionary Zeppelin raid on London and a naval bombardment of Lowestoft port, also supplied a huge quantity of arms, intercepted at the last minute off the Irish coast.

“On the whole the plans for the Rising were as technically sound as the circumstances and resources available permitted. Given a successful landing of adequate arms, free co-operation and simultaneous action all over the country, they would have gone far in the attainment of the ultimate objective. That they could have resulted in a complete victory for the Volunteers and the Citizen Army is certainly open to conjecture”.

*“The basic idea was to seize Dublin by a swift surprise attack and immobilise the British forces not so much by dint of the attack as by threat and manoeuvre .. This, it was confidently expected, would gain the necessary margin of time not only to land the arms and distribute them but also to get the provincial brigades properly in motion”*¹¹

The plan for the rising

The rebels had well thought out military preparations. They had studied street fighting and seized, and fortified, well-chosen posi-

¹⁰ The Easter Rebellion, , p16 + p28

¹¹ Dublin burning; The Easter rising from Behind the Barricades, W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, Gill & Macmillan, 1996, p16

tions from which they ambushed the British army. Instead of using the streets to move around, they tunnelled through the walls of adjoining buildings, and barricaded the doors and windows of their strong points. Some units of the British Army deployed against them seemed to have had little or no training for urban warfare, allowing, for instance, a tiny rebel force of less than 17 insurgents at the canal at Mount Street to catch the Sherwood Foresters in a crossfire and inflict over 240 casualties. Despite the vastly better equipment of the British army, including armoured cars and artillery, their better medical facilities, and the fact they outnumbered the rebels 3 to 1 Irish Volunteer and ICA combined deaths were only 40% of those of the British army and police.

The IRB military leadership made a considerable attempt at keeping the specific plans for the insurrection secret. The historian Max Caulfield, who interviewed many survivors for his history of the insurrection, noted that some of the rebels taking part that morning “presumed .. this was only an ordinary route march, or, at best, a tactical exercise.”¹² Of course the planned mobilisation was not itself a secret, in fact “Practically everyone in the city who knew anything about nationalist affairs was aware, for days ahead, that the Volunteers and Citizen Army had planned a full muster parade through the principal streets for Easter Sunday.” But the political background of the previous years meant that both the British authorities and the general population were used to the sight of armed bodies of men drilling in public, in fact “To lull officialdom, many marches and mock ‘manoeuvres’ had been held in the city from time to time.”¹³

Why the Castle failed to act

However, despite these efforts, British intelligence knew a good deal about what was planned and when it was timed. On April

¹² The Easter Rebellion, p7

¹³ Dublin burning, p6

19 an informer reported that Thomas MacDonagh had said “We are not going out on Friday, but we are going on Sunday .. Boys, some of us may never come back.”¹⁴ The directions to the German navy had been intercepted, and the British were expecting the arms landing over Easter. This “now open evidence of the connection of the Irish Volunteers with Germany led Lord Wimborne to insist on Sunday night that from sixty to one hundred of the leaders be arrested .. Nathan however postponed the arrests until permission was given by the Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell, in London. Permission was only received on Easter Monday.”¹⁵

The hesitation was because although the British knew something was up they feared the consequences of a premature move against the rebels. Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell “saw as his paramount task the need to keep a balance between prevention of a nuisance and the inflation of nuisance value into something more important than that it was”¹⁶ The Castle hoped that the interception of the German guns, and the subsequent countermanding of the mobilisation order by MacNeill, meant that the threat of a rising was over. They had spent the evening before the rising debating moving against the rebel HQ at Liberty Hall but had concluded they did not have sufficient forces to hand. On the first day of the rising, Lord Wimborne could only regretfully write that “If we only had acted last night with decision and arrested the leaders as I wanted, it might have been averted.”¹⁷

Part of the reason the British administration in the Castle felt secure was that they knew that the rebel cause was not that popular with the population. A huge number of Irish men were serving in the British army, 170,000 Irish men had enlisted, 41% of the male population between the ages of 10 and 44. Around half were from Ulster and many of these would have been loyalists, but of

¹⁴ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p637

¹⁵ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p637

¹⁶ James Connolly ‘A Full life’, p636

¹⁷ The Easter Rebellion, p94