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Ireland

Easter Rising against colonial rule

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Description:

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Ireland and the world is commemorating the 100th anniversary of the great 1916 Rising. On the morning of Easter Monday 1916, April 24, some 1,300 members of the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army seized the center of Dublin.

From the steps of Dublin's General Post Office, Patrick Pearse with James Connolly at his side read the Proclamation to the Irish people announcing the establishment of an Irish Republic guaranteeing equality to all of Ireland's citizens, men and women:

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 of the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien Government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

In response, the British Army blitzed Dublin destroying the city center and indiscriminately killing civilians along with rebel fighters. Despite a heroic and courageous stand, the rebels—outnumbered, outgunned and exhausted—were forced to agree to an unconditional surrender. Insurrection leader Countess Constance Markievicz declared, "Well, Ireland was free for a week!"

The rebellion inspired the poet William Butler Yeats to write "Easter, 1916":

Was it needless death after all? For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said. We know their dream;
enough To know they dreamed and are dead; And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died? I write it out
in a verse - MacDonagh and McBride And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be, Wherever green is worn, And
changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.

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Historian Piers Brendon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, described the immense impact of the Irish Rising as "blasting the widest breach in the ramparts of the British Empire since Yorktown," referring to the decisive victory over the British Army during the American Revolutionary War.

In the early 1900s, Britain held 50 colonies and 345 million people under its rule. By 1914, the economic competition between Britain and the other imperial powers spilled over into an all-out industrial war for geopolitical dominance across the globe.

The rising was designed to inflict the maximum damage to the prestige of the British Empire while it was consumed with war on the continent. Ireland, Britain's oldest and closest colony, defied imperial rule, and others under the boot of the Union Jack would follow.

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In the weeks following the uprising, leaders of the rebellion were executed, including Pearse and Connolly. Markievicz was sentenced to death, but her life was spared because British authorities feared the reaction to the execution of a woman.

Martial law was declared across Ireland. Thousands of suspected rebels were arrested and interned. The British commander-in-chief in Ireland, General Sir John Maxwell, hoped that by ruthlessly punishing rebellion participants Britain could instill widespread fear to offset the possibility of further resistance among the Irish population. He declared:

In view of the gravity of the rebellion and its connection with German intrigue and propaganda, and in view of the great loss of life and destruction of property resulting therefrom, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, has found it imperative to inflict the most severe sentences on the known organizers of this detestable rising and on those Commanders who took an active part in the actual fighting which occurred. It is hoped that these examples will be sufficient to act as a deterrent to intriguers, and to bring home to them that the murder of His Majesty's liege subjects, or other acts calculated to imperil the safety of the Realm, will not be tolerated.

Maxwell's strategy backfired spectacularly. The insurrection and its vicious repression assisted in unleashing a political, military and social whirlwind that made Ireland impossible to govern.

A combination of guerrilla warfare creating liberated zones across Ireland and workers' action, including general strikes, mass boycotts and occupations, ultimately led to the expulsion of the British state from 26 of Ireland's 32 counties.

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Today Ireland's political establishment is embarrassed by a violent rebellion against what was the world's most powerful imperial state. For example, John Bruton, the former Fine Gael Taoiseach, claims the rebellion "damaged" the psyche of the Irish people through the introduction of "brutal violence."

This is nonsense.

In 1916, Ireland was at times held militarily as a British colony by tens of thousands of British troops. The memory of Britain's responsibility for Ireland's Great Hunger between 1846-51—in which 1 million lives were lost and another 1 million were forced to flee the country—burned brightly.

The Ulster Volunteers were formed in 1912 to resist through armed rebellion the British government's democratically mandated Home Rule for Ireland. The militia illegally imported thousands of guns from Germany with the encouragement of British Army generals and sections of the British ruling class.

Home Ruler John Redmond, the leader of the dominant Irish Parliamentary Party, encouraged Irish Catholics and Protestants to sacrifice themselves together in the service of the British war effort on the European continent during the First World War. His recruiting efforts assisted in convincing 200,000 Irish to fight; nearly 50,000 of them died.

In the Battle of the Somme alone, 300,000 soldiers perished, including 3,500 from Ireland. The Easter rebellion happened in the context of the slaughter and barbarism of the Great War, which consumed 17 million lives and destroyed much of Europe.

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Without a doubt, the insurrection was a response to Ireland's brutally enforced colonial status, the trampling of Home Rule's democratic mandate, the inevitability of partition and the growing hatred for the war to "defend little Catholic Belgium" and save "civilization."

The Irish rebels aimed to strike a blow for Irish freedom while the British Army was stretched due to its efforts to hold its great territorial empire. The goal of the rising was an independent Irish Republic free from empire and monarchy.

For Connolly and others, the rising could open the door to a struggle to overthrow capitalism and imperialism in Ireland and across Europe. Explaining his perspective in 1914, Connolly wrote:

Starting thus, Ireland may yet set the torch to a European conflagration that will not burn out until the last throne and the last capitalist bond and debenture will be shriveled on the funeral pyre of the last warlord.

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The 100th anniversary is an opportunity to challenge many of the myths encouraged about the rising. For example, the idea the rebellion was simply a Christ-like blood sacrifice with no chance of success to awaken the soul of a predominantly Catholic and conservative people to struggle to free Ireland is widely accepted.

To the contrary, Connolly rejected all talk of blood sacrifice as nonsense. At the outbreak of the Great War, the Irish Republican Brotherhood committed itself to striking a blow against Britain during the war. Similarly, after the outbreak of the war, Connolly, who was leader of the Irish Citizen Army and Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), argued in 1914:

Should a German army land in Ireland tomorrow, we should be perfectly justified in joining it if by doing so we could rid this country once and for all from its connection to the Brigand Empire that drags us unwillingly into this war.

Should the working class of Europe, rather than slaughter each other for the benefit of kings and financiers, proceed tomorrow to erect barricades all over Europe, to break up bridges and destroy the transport service that war might be abolished, we should be perfectly justified in following such a glorious example and contributing our aid to the final dethronement of the vulture classes that rob and rule the world.

But pending either of these consummations it is our manifest duty to take all possible action to save the poor from the horrors this war has in store.

Yes, the leaders of the uprising were "idealists" and "dreamers," but they organized and planned the rebellion on the assumption there was a possibility it could be victorious. An Irish Republic would not only be proclaimed but "enthroned" also. They hoped to mobilize many thousands of the Irish Volunteers. They obtained some 20,000 guns and 1 million rounds of ammunition from Germany for the rising.

Connolly and others believed Ireland had become a political and social powder keg awaiting a spark. Recruitment to the British war effort plummeted as knowledge of the continental carnage grew.

Opposition to the war effort and the plan to partition Ireland was so great that when the British government was forced to introduce conscription to keep the supply of raw recruits going for the battlefield, Ireland was excluded.

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Ireland's main labor bodies, the Dublin Trades Council, the ITGWU and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, pledged their opposition to the war and to conscription. Support for Redmond's Home Rule party drained away as the constitutional road to Irish self-government collapsed.

On the eve of the rising, the British Navy sighted the German ship loaded with arms for the insurgents and it had to be scuttled before it could land. Leaders of the rising met to debate its prospects now that it was clear fewer insurgents could be mobilized and fewer arms would be available.

Opposition movements in Ireland, as throughout Europe, were already facing increasing repression as their message connected with growing numbers of people embittered by war propaganda encouraging them to become cannon fodder for the imperial war machine.

Ireland's insurgent leaders would be charged with treason for aiding the enemy during the war and face execution as the British authorities became fully cognizant of the scale of the plans for the uprising. For these reasons, they decided to continue with the rising. They calculated it would be more effective to fight and be defeated than not act and face annihilation.

The rising was defeated, but it helped inspire anti-colonial resistance across the world. It should be viewed as part of the growing wave of rebellion and revolution in response to impoverishment and slaughter of the imperial war.

Subsequently, Connolly's perspective that the whole of Europe, and not just Ireland, was ripe for revolutionary upheaval was completely vindicated. In the weeks before the uprising, he restated his aspirations for the coming rising and the force capable of bringing it about:

We are out for the Irish. But who are the Irish? Not the rack-renting, slum-owning landlord; not the sweating, profit grinding capitalist; not the sleek and oily lawyer; not the prostitute pressman—the hired liars of the enemy. Not these, but the Irish working class—the only secure foundation upon which a free nation can be reared.

Executed in May 1916 for his leadership of the rebellion, it was a great tragedy that Connolly was not there to lead the great political and social upheaval inspired by his ideas and actions that stormed Ireland from 1918 on toward the goal of a workers' republic.

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The focus on the minority of insurgents during Easter week events honoring the rising misses the fact that hundreds of thousands were drawn into the great struggle that finally broke Britain's hold. Indeed, the scale of social unrest terrified the elite who would eventually become Ireland's new rulers. These people had nothing in common with Connolly or even with the more moderate republican leaders of the 1916 Rising.

Today, the Irish elite would prefer to ignore the blow struck against the tyrant empire but must commemorate the event because it is a pivotal event in the creation of modern Ireland and the rebels are viewed as heroes by many the Irish people.

Ireland's contemporary rulers have ruthlessly imposed austerity, promoted the country as a low-wage tax haven to U.S. corporations and allowed the U.S. military to use Shannon airport as a stopover for bombing runs in the Middle East. And, of course, Ireland remains partitioned.

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In recent years, they have faced a massive protest movement opposing water charges, and in recent elections the dominant political parties had their worst showing in decades. They would like to keep the rebellion as part of Ireland's far-off political history with no relevance for today. Too much talk about rebellions against injustice and imperialism in this context can encourage people to think about how to bring about society-wide change.

The Easter 1916 Rising was a political rupture attempting to break from the politics of submission and compromise. Therefore, revealing its true history leads to a scrutiny of the injustice, lack of genuine democracy and independence in modern Ireland today.

The gulf between the 1916 rebel generation and the present leaders of the Irish Republic is a tremendous one. High ideals and great aspirations animated the actions of the rebels. In contrast, Ireland's political elite sacrificed Irish people with massive debts created by bankers, developers and the richest sections of society.

The 100th anniversary should be celebrated as a stand against imperialism and for Irish self-determination. However, the goals of the Irish revolution are still unmet. Ireland needs another rising involving millions opposed to austerity, imperial war and social injustice.

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