

The Easter Rising

By David K. McDonnell (© David K. McDonnell, www.clandonnell.net)

Ireland was not especially ripe for rebellion in the first decade or so of the twentieth century. The penal laws ended and Catholics were moving into the mainstream. Land reforms of the late 19th and early 20th Century were beginning to show positive effects, and more and more Irish farmers were the owners of their farms. The Irish had the same rights as other British subjects, meaning, in particular, they had freedom of speech and assembly, freedom from oppressive government action, the right to trial by jury, and a free press. Home rule, which would have given Ireland authority over most domestic policies, was painfully slow in coming, but it seemed inevitable.

In the sixty or seventy years after the Great Hunger, Ireland remained governed by and was a part of Great Britain. Britain would not have been able to govern Ireland then without the help and acquiescence of the Irish. The Irish were in all levels of the army, the police, and the civil service. The vast majority of Irish accepted British governance and union with Great Britain. Political groups on the far sides of the issue - the Unionists and the Republicans - opposed home rule, each for their own reasons. The Unionists wanted to maintain complete union with the British. The Republicans wanted complete independence. But for most of the Irish people in the middle, the home rule that was to come was sufficient.

The rebellion that did come was not, by any means, a popular uprising. It was instead the work of more radical and more committed elements within Ireland. It was they who led it, and it was the people who followed.

World War I was an especially brutal affair and Great Britain was thoroughly embroiled in it. Two years into the war, Irish extremists thought that Britain's struggles in the war provided a perfect opportunity for rebellion. Several secret organizations planned a combined uprising scheduled for Easter Sunday, 1916. The organizations included the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army (volunteers organized to protect labor union workers against the police), the Cumann na mBan (a women's paramilitary group), the Fianna Eireann (a Republican youth organization), and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (the secret society organization founded with the American Fenians). Each of these groups and the members of these groups would evolve into a single organization after the Easter rebellion - the Irish Republican Army.

Easter Sunday was chosen since government and businesses would be closed. The British, French, and Germans were embroiled in the horrific Battle of Verdun, and the British were thought too preoccupied with the war to deal with rebellion in Ireland.

The rebellion was postponed to Easter Monday. Armed Irish men marched through Dublin and seized several government buildings. They issued a proclamation as the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic. Copies were distributed in Dublin and later the entire island.

The British were taken completely by surprise, but by Wednesday, twenty-five thousand British troops were in Dublin facing only two thousand or so Irish rebels. The rebellion was crushed within a week. About five hundred Irish died in the fighting, over half of whom were civilians caught in the crossfire. Over two thousand Irish were wounded in what became known as the Easter Rising.

The primary focus of the Rising was government buildings - the Four Courts Building, the General Post Office, and others. Additional buildings, including Jacob's Biscuit Factory and Boland's Mill, were seized to gain positions commanding some of the main routes in the city.

The rebellion was planned island wide, but the Irish did not have an island-wide command and control structure. Not everyone got the memo to start fighting on Easter Monday. There were a few outbreaks elsewhere in Ireland, but nothing coherent. The rebellion petered out everywhere and lasted in Dublin for less than a week.

The Irish were organized, at least on paper, into battalions, each with eight companies and with 630 men per battalion. But on Easter Monday, some battalions only had a hundred or so men. The rest hadn't gotten the message or were preoccupied with other matters. The whole affair can best be described as organized chaos. British troops in Ireland at the time consisted almost exclusively of trainees. Those trained were already in France.

The Irish vs. Irish nature of the War of Independence that was to come was demonstrated at the Rising. The majority of the British troops in Ireland at the time of the Easter Rising were Irish. In fact, the first unit to respond and resist the rebellion in Dublin was an Irish regiment of the British army.

The rebellion leaders, or at least those who signed the proclamation, were taken to Kilmainham Gaol (gaol is 'jail'). The jail had an enclosed yard where, for over a hundred years, the inmates did hard labor by breaking stone. It was always called the 'stone breakers' yard.' The rebel leaders were executed by firing squad in the yard. Many thousands more were arrested. Kilmainham's Stone Breakers' Yard is today a national monument.

Most people in Ireland thought the Easter Rising was complete folly. Its leaders were, to quote Michael Collins, an Irish Volunteer leader, "a minority within a minority within a minority." But the British response turned the rebels into folk heroes.

The rebellion, and the British response, increased the popular support for complete independence. About two hundred thousand Irish from the southern counties had joined the British Army during World War I. It became increasingly difficult after Easter week to convince Irish

(outside of eastern Ulster) to join the British Army and fight the Germans in France. The killing and executing of Irishmen was too fresh in people's minds.

A year after the Easter Rising, nationalists hoisted the Irish tricolor flag over the ruins of the General Post Office. The act reflected the pride growing within many Irish people by that time. It would take a few more years before Ireland won its independence and the tri-color would be the national flag of the Republic of Ireland.