

**Excerpt From “Irish Neutrality in World War II:
Eamon de Valera’s Struggle to Protect Eire”
An Independent Study**

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World War II is one of the most interesting periods of history for modern Americans. Of the many wars in which American soldiers have fought, it, along with perhaps the American War of Independence and the American Civil War, grips the minds of contemporary Americans. These were defining moments in the nation’s history: the war to found America, the war to maintain America, and the war to maintain World Liberty. Each war is uniquely remembered as being “justified” wars, or wars that America had to fight. For the case of the Second World War, America tried its best to remain at peace, and, although the U.S. Navy had started firing on German U-boats in the Atlantic a few months earlier, America only began to fight in earnest after being attacked by an authoritarian state. This World War was fought from the American point of view to save freedom, liberty, and democracy, from cruel totalitarian states. The American cause in this war was a righteous one, and those men who fought in it and the women who maintained the home-front are remembered as “the greatest generation.”¹ Though soldiers on both sides in the war, Allied and Axis, committed honorable and terrible acts, the Allied cause is generally remembered as good, and the Axis as evil.¹

The American knowledge of World War II is largely limited to the largest powers of the Allied and Axis sides, but there is little knowledge among Americans of the smaller countries, and hardly any of those nations that stayed out of the war entirely. This study is a look at one of those small nations that did not fight in World War II: Ireland. Ireland is not an unfamiliar country to Americans. Many Americans are descendents of Irish people who immigrated to this nation during the nineteenth century, mostly to find work and to escape famine back home in Ireland. While there are a large number of Irish-Americans in the United States, Ireland is often only remembered once a year on March 17, as people stumble out into the streets to parade, drink, and celebrate St. Patrick² with a kiss for being Irish. However, Ireland, being so closely tied to American history and identity, should be remembered and studied in this country more often than once a year. This is an examination of Ireland that will mix the heritage that so many Americans derive from that island with the American interest in the Second World War: this is the study of Irish neutrality in World War II.

The Irish policy of neutrality was brought about and enforced by Prime Minister Éamon de Valera. The decision to stay out of the fighting in World War

¹ The largest Allied powers, though not the only ones, were The United Soviet Socialist Republics (Russia), Great Britain, The United States of America, and France. The largest Axis powers, though not the only ones, were Germany, Italy, and Japan.

² St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. His feast day is on March 17 every year.

It was affected by the desire of de Valera and the Irish Government to protect the people of Ireland from the war. As de Valera saw it, the nations fighting the war had such powerful militaries, that if Ireland was to enter the conflict, it would stand little chance of having a large positive effect on the war, but it would also likely be overrun, decimated and occupied by one of the larger powers. Having faced past occupation by the powerful nation of Great Britain, and fearing the prospect of future occupation, de Valera wanted to stay apart from the conflict. This thinking from the perspective of such a small country is understandable. However, this does not explain one of Éamon de Valera's more interesting and confusing acts during the war.

In April 1945, as the war in Europe was coming to a close, two leaders of the belligerent countries passed away: Franklin D. Roosevelt, the President of the United States, and Adolf Hitler, the Chancellor of Germany. At the time, Roosevelt was one of the most admired and beloved men in the world, while Hitler was one of the most reviled. Éamon de Valera expressed his condolences to both the American and German Ambassadors in Dublin ³ over the loss of their leaders. While many people across the world expressed similar grief over the passing of President Roosevelt, hardly any lost sleep over losing Hitler. De Valera's expression of condolence to the German Ambassador was one of the most controversial and hated events in modern Irish history. De Valera certainly had no illusions about what the public reaction would be, and he actually expected that he would be highly criticized. Knowing full well what people would say, why would he do this? Was it his final "neutral" action before the end of the war? Was it in defiance of Ireland's ancient enemy, Britain, which fought against Germany in the war? With Ireland having only recently won freedom from Britain, was the act meant to show how truly independent Ireland had become? In fact, the most likely answer lies deeper in the tumultuous wartime relationship that de Valera had with the leaders of the Alliance and their foreign delegations in Ireland, as well as with the rather congenial relations that he had with the German Legation. It is probable that de Valera's condolences to the German Embassy in April, 1945, were due to his high regard for the German Ambassador, Dr. Edward Hempel, and for his antipathies toward the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and the American Ambassador, David Gray.⁴

³ Dublin, located in the middle of the eastern coast of the island, is the capital city of Ireland.

⁴ Before I begin with this study, I would like to thank the two largest sources of aid in this endeavor to understand Ireland during the war years: Tim Pat Coogan and T. Ryle Dwyer. Without their previous studies in Irish history, much of this work would not have been possible.

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