

The Easter Rising: The Beginning of the End for the British Empire

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In 1916, with the First World War raging on continental Europe, a group of Irish republicans plotted a revolt intended to free Ireland from King George V's British Empire. These revolutionaries, led by Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Tom Clarke, Seán MacDermott, Joseph Plunkett, Éamonn Ceannt, and Thomas MacDonagh, would strike on Easter Monday, April 24, 1916, and thereby incite rebellion all across the island of Ireland. Assuming they were to be supplied by the Germans in their fight, the revolutionary leaders planned on assembling the Irish Volunteers to take towns across Ireland and hold them as the British would attempt to take them back while simultaneously fighting the Germans in the Great War.¹ In the end, though, this grand plan was not to be. Errors were made in its execution, and miscommunication botched any chance that Irish Republicans might have had to free their country from British rule. In Dublin, however, the seven leaders of the so-called Easter Rising and their followers would successfully seize the city and hold out for six critical days against the British Army. These six days would prove to be pivotal and go on to spark the decline of the once powerful British Empire. Thanks to those seven Irish Republican leaders, regions once dominated by the British Empire would now be thrown into contention.

Before the rebellion in 1916, there was a plan in place to gain some amount of autonomy in Ireland. This initial plan, supported by legislation in the British Parliament known as the "Home Rule Bill," would have allowed for a more autonomous Irish government, albeit with continuing ties to the British government. Essentially, this pre-rebellion home rule would have allowed a freer Ireland that would remain in the British Commonwealth. This bill, despite having been defeated twice already, would be reintroduced to the British Parliament in 1912 by Prime Minister H. H. Asquith.² Although it would end up being passed by Parliament in 1914, it would never be enacted due to the outbreak of the First World War. Nonetheless, the passage of the bill alone was enough to frustrate the Ulster Unionists and to lead them to create a militia organization known as the Ulster Volunteers to resist Home Rule.³ In response, the more radical republican nationalists would create the Irish Volunteers to oppose the Unionists, setting the stage for the Easter Rising, and thus, the domination of the radical republicans over the less-radical Home Rule Movement.⁴

¹ Geoffrey Sloan, "The British State and the Irish Rebellion of 1916: An Intelligence Failure Or a Failure of Response?" *The Journal of Strategic Security* vol. 6, no. 3 (2013): 328-57.

² H. H. Asquith, "The Government of Ireland Bill" (April 11, 1912), *The Parliamentary Digital Service*, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1912/apr/11/government-of-ireland-bill> (accessed February 28, 2019).

³ "Those that set the stage" *The National Library of Ireland*, <http://www.nli.ie/1916/exhibition/en/content/stagesetters/index.pdf> (accessed March 2, 2019).

⁴ "Those that set the stage." *The National Library of Ireland*.

The effort to free Ireland, of course, had not always been a legislative struggle as it was with the Home Rule Bill. Ireland had been a hotbed of insurrection in the British Empire since the days of Oliver Cromwell, in particular with a rebellion along with much of continental Europe in 1848 and again in 1867, but even more notably in 1798 when Irish leader, Wolfe Tone, attempted to seize the revolutionary fervor sweeping Europe in the wake of the French and American revolutions.⁵ Despite being bloodily suppressed, the 1798 rebellion failed to elicit a backlash against the British Empire from its other colonies. One thereby might easily assume that a small-scale rebellion against an already militarized British Government would never be capable of bringing about the decline of the Empire, when larger-scale rebellions such as that of 1798 had failed to achieve the same goal. Nevertheless, the botched rebellion in 1916 accomplished what Wolfe Tone and other Irish republican precursors had failed to do. The rebellion in 1916, which would come to be known as the Easter Rising, generated the response that Ireland had been seeking for generations by reinvigorating the Irish public with a sense of militant nationalism that, in the end, signaled the beginning of the end for the British Empire.

Originally, the planned Easter Rising appeared quite threatening to the distracted British Empire. In 1914, many of the conspirators behind the Easter Rising would come to realize that the war presented a unique opportunity for Irish independence, an opportunity that was too good to pass up. In an effort to secure a marriage of convenience with the German Empire, Irish Volunteer leader Roger Casement traveled to Germany to discuss German support for the upcoming 1916 rebellion. Later that same year, Casement would be joined in Germany by Joseph Plunkett, and, together, the two would continue the effort to gain foreign support. By the time that the scheduled rebellion in 1916 had arrived, Germany had repurposed a former British ship, once called the SS *Castro*, and disguised it under the codename *Aud* as a neutral Norwegian ship. Under the command of German Captain Karl Spindler the *Aud* was then tasked with smuggling arms and ammunition to Ireland for the rebels' use. The *Aud* also carried a large supply of whiskey and a Norwegian flag to be used to disguise the German ship. In case of a boarding, Spindler planned to try and get the English drunk in order to dispose of them more easily. "What was more natural than that the English prize crew should fall on the whiskey, which stood invitingly in every corner?," Spindler later wrote in a memoir of the campaign.⁶ Unfortunately for Ireland, this plan soon fell apart on the voyage as Spindler's rendezvous with his British contact, Sir Roger Casement, failed, and the British Navy was about to apprehend the *Aud* when Spindler gave the order to scuttle the ship and he and his crew were captured.⁷ German support for the rising would end there, with no arms or ammunition ever reaching Irish shores in time.

⁵ Theobald Wolfe Tone, *The Autobiography of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, ed. by Seán O'Faoláin (London: T. Nelson, 1937), 211-12.

⁶ George Renwick, "German Describes Effort to Arm Irish," *The New York Times*, January 3, 1921, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1921/01/03/103526649.pdf> (accessed January 2, 2019).

⁷ George Renwick, "German Describes Effort to Arm Irish."

Although it was a mere six days and could be categorized as a failed rebellion, the Easter Rising was crucial to beginning the Irish War of Independence. Those aforementioned leaders (Pearse, Connelly, Clarke, MacDermott, Plunkett, Ceantt, and MacDonagh) were executed without trial soon after the events of the Rising. This incensed the Irish public, even those who were not originally supportive of the Easter Rising, creating an atmosphere ripe for an independence movement. Even the self-proclaimed moderate Irish MP Stephen Gwynn said, “Nothing could have prevented the halo of martyrdom from attaching itself to those who died by the law for the sake of Irish freedom; the tradition was too deeply ingrained into Irish history.”⁸ Gwynn, who had no involvement in the Easter Rising, nor was he even a part of Sinn Féin, nevertheless recognized the impact that those who died during the Easter Rising would have on the men and women all throughout Ireland. Ultimately the independence movement would be led by Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera, who were both involved in the 1916 uprising. Not only would the members of the Easter Rising be seen as admired figures in the upcoming war of independence, but they would continue to be viewed in modern Ireland as martyrs for the cause of Irish freedom.⁹

Much like Ireland (which had many Indian residents), as future Irish president Sean T O’Ceallaigh put it in a speech to an Indian group in 1924, India already had a history in the British empire as having been “beaten into subjugation” and having been “so long oppressed.”¹⁰ Although it was the “crown jewel” of the British Empire, India had become more heavily involved with anti-colonial organizations and sentiments with people like Mahatma Gandhi joining the Indian National Congress and working towards an independent India.¹¹ When news of the Easter Rising reached Indian shores in 1916, these feelings only intensified, as stated by Indian independence activist Subhas Chandra Bose when describing the inspirations used by Indians to answer the question of independence: “Of all the freedom movements we Indians have studied closely and from which we have received inspiration, there is perhaps none that can equal the Irish struggle for independence. The Irish Nation has had the same oppressors and exploiters as ourselves. It has had the same experience of ruthlessness, brutality and hypocrisy as we have had.”¹² Like the Irish, the Indians had invested thousands of men to the protection of the Empire during the First World War. Those who did not fight were sometimes away receiving an education in British or Irish

⁸ Quoted in Christopher M. Kennedy, *Genesis of the Rising, 1912-1916: A Transformation of Nationalist Opinion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 284.

⁹ “The People of the 1916 Easter Rising,” *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/1916/people-of-the-1916-rising> (accessed November 13, 2018).

¹⁰ Michael Silvestri, ““The Sinn Fein of India”: Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal,” *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2000): 454-486 at 485.

¹¹ B. R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

¹² Quoted in Jane Ohlmeyer, “Ireland, India and the British Empire,” *Studies in People’s History*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2015): 169-188 at 183-184.

universities, such as Gandhi, who associated closely with the Irish Volunteers and James Connolly. V. V. Giri would go on to speak about this experience in Ireland during the Rising saying:

I remember vividly meeting Connolly on several occasions as I was regularly invited to their Citizen Army meetings. More than any of the leaders of the uprising, it was Connolly who inspired me. I resolved that as soon as I returned to India, I would give a graphic account of these struggles to inspire our own people. . . . With the fervour inspired by the revolutionaries still fresh in my mind, I determined to return to India and take an active part in the political movement to secure the independence of my country.¹³

Not only did the Indians recognize the significance of the Rising, but the British themselves were keenly aware of the danger that open rebellion in Ireland posed for the continuity of the British Empire. Prime Minister David George Lloyd would comment soon after the Rising, speaking of the danger it posed for the rest of the British Empire saying, “Suppose we gave it to them – It will lower the prestige and the dignity of this country and reduce British authority to a low point in Ireland itself. It will give the impression that we have lost grip, that the Empire has no further force and will have an effect on India and throughout Europe.”¹⁴ Here we can see the recognition of the danger that this insurrection in Ireland posed, a danger not only to the colony of India but also to another key British colony, Egypt. “If you tell your Empire in India, in Egypt, and all over the world that you have not got the men, the money, the pluck, the inclination and the backing to restore order in a country within 20 miles of your own shore, you may as well begin to abandon the attempt to make British rule prevail throughout the Empire at all.”¹⁵ British MP Edward Carson commented when he first saw signs of potential chaos caused by the Easter Rising. The realization Parliament had about the threat of an Irish revolution set the stage for the British Empire to put up a stiff resistance in 1919 when the Irish, once again, rose in an attempt to finally grasp independence.

The Easter Rising did not merely cause a headache for wartime Britain, but it would also go on to garner support for British resistance even outside of places like India and Ireland itself. In Australia, Irish Catholics would begin to push back against the British war effort after they learned of the Rising in Dublin. These Irish Catholics in Australia would demonstrate their frustration in the voting for conscription to send more Australians off to fight in World War I, with Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes commenting to British confidant Keith Murdoch,

¹³V. V. Giri, *Irish Days, Indian Memories: V. V. Giri and Indian Law Students at University College Dublin, 1913-16*, ed. and trans. Conor Mulvagh (Sallins, Ireland: Irish Academic Press, 2016), 79-80, 85.

¹⁴Quoted by Liam O’Ruairc in “Easter Rising,” *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-imperialism*, ed. Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 622-624 at 623.

¹⁵ David George Boyce, *Decolonisation and the British Empire, 1775-1997* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, U.K.: Macmillan Press, 1999), 75.

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“Australian recruiting is practically at a standstill. Irish National Executive here has carried resolution to effect that until Home Rule granted no Irish Catholics shall join forces.”¹⁶ With the Irish in Australia effectively blocking Australian conscription, more pressure would be on the British themselves to fight, which would have an impact on the number and severity of casualties that Britain would suffer in the Great War.¹⁷

Australia was not alone in causing worry for the British now, because joining the Australians were Irish Americans, who were gathering support for the Irish cause. By the end of the First World War, the United States had become the world’s largest economy and was not a nation to be trifled with. It just so happened that the United States also contained the largest Irish population on the planet, a population that had become eager to see Ireland be a free nation. In fact, when fundraisers were started at the beginning of the Irish War for Independence, the United States’ Irish population sent over \$3,000,000 to support the new Irish government – more than Ireland itself raised.¹⁸ The vast majority of Irish-Americans were behind the idea of Irish independence, so much so that it would have potentially caused even more trouble for the struggling post war British Empire if they continued to upset a large demographic in their key American ally.¹⁹

In conclusion, the Easter Rising would not only be the event which would begin to unravel the once-mighty British Empire, but also would serve as a battle-cry for the future Irishmen and Irishwomen who would attempt to construct an independent Irish state. Not only that, but it was also representative of the British Empire becoming more fractured as the twentieth century rolled along. The Irish rebels involved in the 1916 uprising were not only made out to be martyrs for Ireland, but for all freedom fighters in the colonies controlled by Great Britain. An already weakened wartime Britain was further damaged by rebels in Dublin, and the cracks that the rebels exposed would go on to be widened by other colonies in the coming decades. All of these factors shown in 1916 would ultimately culminate into what would become the decline and dissolution of the British Empire.

¹⁶ Jeff Kildea, “Killing Conscription: The Easter Rising and Irish Catholic Attitudes to the Conscription Debates in Australia, 1916-1917,” *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2016): 161-180 at 172-173.

¹⁷ “Conscription Referendums, 1916 and 1917 - Fact Sheet 161,” *National Archives of Australia*, <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs161.aspx> (accessed November 15, 2018).

¹⁸ Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 165-176.

¹⁹ “Region and Country or Area of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population, With Geographic Detail Shown in Decennial Census Publications of 1930 or Earlier: 1850 to 1930 and 1960 to 1990” by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1999): table 4, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab04.html> (accessed Nov. 15, 2018); *Irish American Verdict on Easter Week* (ca. 1916), *University College Dublin Digital Library*, <http://digital.ucd.ie/view-media/ivrla:30975/canvas/ivrla:30976> (accessed Nov. 13, 2018)

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