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The Easter 1916 rising in Dublin is often portrayed simply as nationalist blood sacrifice but it can also be examined as an insurrection which was seriously planned to defeat the British army. It is credited with transforming political attitudes in Ireland, leading to the partally successful war of independance but nationalist histories tend to understate the other reasons why the situation was transformed and to completely ignore the wave of workers struggles that broke out during the war.

At 11.30 in the morning on April 24 1916, Bugler William Oman — a member of a workers' militia called the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) — sounded the 'fall-in' outside union headquarters.[1] This was the start of an insurrection in Dublin which was to see up to 1,700 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

[1] *The Easter Rebellion*, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p4

severely wounded and 179 buildings in the city centre were destroyed.[2]

It would be odd to publish an article in Dublin on insurrections on what is the 90th anniversary of this rising without mentioning the Easter rising (it started on Easter Monday). Despite the fact that there was no known anarchist involvement, the rising does provide a useful example of what an insurrection can be. Maybe a little over 15% of those who fought were members of the ICA which was in an alliance with nationalists. The ICA was created in 1913 due to police attacks on members of the syndicalist Irish Transport and General Workers Union. It was only open to union members.

The insurrection was planned by the ICA leader James Connolly and the nationalist leadership of the secretive Irish Republican Brotherhood who had successfully taken many of the leadership positions in the Irish Volunteers. From 1915 Connolly was publicly pushing for a rising, he had even converted part of the union building into a munitions factory which made bayonets, crowbars and bombs.

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"*. The struggle for Home Rule that had dominated Irish politics for the previous 40 years had created the situation that even before the war hundreds of thousands of Irish men were members of nationalist and unionist militias and tens of thousands of rifles had already been illegally imported.

In later generations it would be largely accepted that the rising was a 'blood sacrifice'. That is that the leadership knew all along that it was doomed to failure but that they had organised it to either — in Connolly's case — make a statement against the imperialist war or — in the nationalists' case — keep *"faith with the past, and hand[ed] a tradition to the future"*. But, as

[2] *The Easter Rebellion*, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p283

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"*.[3]

The First World War meant that the British army in Ireland *"stood well below full strength"*.[4] If all the 20,000 Irish Volunteers had been mobilized, they would have outnumbered the army around five to one. It was only at the last minute that MacNeill, the Volunteer leader, realised the depth to which he had been tricked by the IRB and had orders printed in the newspapers cancelling the mobilisation order. German support, which did see a diversionary Zeppelin raid on London and a naval bombardment of Lowestoft port,[5] would have also supplied a huge quantity of arms had not they been intercepted at the last minute off the Irish coast.

The military preparations of the rebels were quite well made, they had studied street fighting and had seized and fortified well-chosen positions from which they ambushed the British army. Rather than using the streets to move around, they tunneled through walls of adjoining buildings and barricaded the doors and windows of their strongpoints. The 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 around 17 rebels at the canal at Mount Street to catch the Sherwood Foresters in a cross-fire 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, rebel deaths were only 40% of those of the British army and police.

The British knew something was up but they feared a premature move against the rebels would only win the rebels support.

[3] *The Insurrection in Dublin*, James R Stephens, 1916, Intro John A Murphy, p xv

[4] *The Easter Rebellion*, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p28

[5] *The Easter Rebellion*, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p126

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"*.[6]

Part of the reason the British authorities 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, which was 41% of the male population between 10 and 44. Around half were from Ulster and many of these would have been loyalists but of the 40 to 50,000 killed in the war at least half were Catholic.[7] Even the ITGWU, the syndicalist union from which the ICA had emerged, believed half of its 1914 membership to have joined the British army by 1916.[8]

The insurrection took place on the first anniversary of the 2nd battle of Ypes, in which the Dublin Fusiliers, which many of these 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"*.[9]

[6] *The Easter Rebellion*, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p94

[7] *A History of Ulster*, Jonathan Bardon, The Blackstaff Press, 1996, p461

[8] *Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 — 1923*, Emmet O' Connor, Cork University press, 1988, p21

[9] *The Insurrection in Dublin*, James R Stephens, 1916, p36

as well".[23] But there was no organised left force that survived the insurrection and Connolly's successors in the union were unchallenged as they led it into an uncritical alliance with the nationalists that went as far as opposing most of the 80 or so workplace occupations of 1922. Technically the ICA continued to exist until 1927 but Frank Robbins, imprisoned for 2 years after 1916, said of the ICA of March 1918 *"the majority of the new members, strange as it might seem, did not hold or advocate the social and political views that had motivated those who fought in 1916"*.[24]

The insurrection and the events that followed created a political vacuum that allowed a massive spontaneous workers' struggle to emerge but this struggle was without ideology and without political leadership — nationalism filled that vacuum and led the workers down to defeat.

[23] The Easter Rebellion, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p24

[24] Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917 to 1923*, Pluto Press, 1996, p175

machine guns were brought in to prevent rallies[19] 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"*.[20]

For the British and Irish capitalist class, Sinn Fein came to be seen as a way of returning to business as normal. The key event was probably May 17 1920 in Ballinrobe, Co Mayo when the first public Arbitration Court was held by Sinn Fein. This found against small holders who had occupied a 100 acre farm. Although they defied the court decision and remained in occupation, in the words of a Dail pamphlet *"the Captain of the local company of the IRA descended upon them with a squad of his men — sons of very poor farmers like themselves — arrested four of them, and brought them off to that very effective Republican prison — an unknown destination"*.[21] Ernie O'Malley summarised what happened *"There was land trouble in the South and West. The Dail, afraid of the spread of land hunger, used the IRA to protect landowners; the IRA who were in sympathy with those who wanted to break up estates carried out the orders of the Minister of Defence."*[22]

The 1916 insurrection remains part of the story but, for the left, it created the conditions by which the nationalists could come to power. The week before the rising Connolly warned the assembled ICA that *"if we should win hold on to your rifles because the Volunteers may have a different goal. Remember we're out not only for political liberty but for economic liberty*

[19] ibid, p56

[20] ibid, p55

[21] ibid, p104

[22] *On another Man's Wound*, Ernie O'Malley, Colour Books Limited, 1936, p161

Max Caulfield wrote that as the rebel prisoners were being marched away at the end of the street 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 chamber pots"*.[10] On a more measurable level Caulfield points out that *"Not a single trade, political or municipal society anywhere in Ireland had declared for the republic"*.[11]

Despite this, 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 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.

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 out for a little while, for had they been beaten the first or second day the City would have been humiliated to the soul"*[12]

After the rising the British establishment made up for their lack of action beforehand. 3439 men and 70 women interned, 92 sentenced to death.[13] 'Only' 16 including Roger 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 12th, 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 'freed Ireland'.

[10] *The Easter Rebellion*, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p281

[11] *The Easter Rebellion*, Max Caulfield, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p184

[12] *The Insurrection in Dublin*, James R Stephens, 1916, p39

[13] Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917 to 1923*, Pluto Press, 1996, p23

There is only room in this article to sketch out the reality. 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 from Kerry police estimates *"the rate of affiliation to the republican movement was highest between October 1917 and November 1918 when the threat of conscription loomed largest"*.[14] 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 that *"Fear of conscription passed away with the European war. The numbers in the Volunteer companies decreased and we had more opposition"*.[15]

But that too is only part of the story because, even according to the reckoning of Michael Collins, 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. Yet by 1921 the British ruling class was in a panic, Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson recorded in his diary *"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 they country, and that in my opinion, unless we crushed the murder gang this summer we shall lose Ireland and the Empire"*.[16]

In Ireland two things combined in to create this panic. Across the world these years were years of revolutionary struggle for the working class. In many countries workers were defeated by the forces of law and order. The nationalist armed struggle which was largely directed at making it impossible to police the country created a 'law and order'

[14] *The IRA in Kerry 1916 — 1921*, Sinead Joy, The Collins Press, 2005, p32

[15] *On another Man's Wound*, Ernie O'Malley, Colour Books Limited, 1936, p88

[16] *The Real Chief: Liam lynch*, Meda Ryan, Mercier Press, 2005, p46p92

vacuum. Into that vacuum the working class stepped. The unique situation in Ireland meant in the southern 26 counties the forces of law and order were largely ineffective.

There were 5 general strikes between August 1918 and August 1923 and 18 general local strikes, twelve of these in 1919. In the course of these, workers took over the running of towns and cities across Ireland, most famously with the 1919 Limerick Soviet but this happened even in the small town of Dungarvan in 1918 for one month *"Nothing could be bought or sold without a union permit. Nothing could enter the town without union permission. People who tried to break the blockade had their carts overturned and their goods destroyed… The strike committee set up its own rationing and distribution system"*[17]

Pitched battles were fought between workers and police, republican police and even self styled 'white guards' set up by employers. Of the General Strike of April 1920 the Manchester Guardian noted *"the direction of affairs passed during the strike to these [workers'] councils, which were formed not on a local but on a class basis. In most places the police abdicated, and the maintenance of order was taken over by the local Workers Council… In fact, it is no exaggeration to trace a flavour of proletarian dictatorship about some aspects of the strike"*.

In Jan 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"*.[18] The ruling class really started to panic when the loyalist workforce of Belfast started using similar tactics during 1919. Mutinies broke out in the Irish Regiments of the British army stationed in India.

When even in Glasgow pitched battles were fought in George Square and 6 tanks and 100 lorry loads of troops with

[17] *Syndicalism in Ireland 1917 — 1923*, Emmet O' Connor, Cork University press, 1988, p30

[18] Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917 to 1923*, Pluto Press, 1996, p139