

One hundred years since Ireland's Easter Rising—Part two

By Jordan Shilton
28 March 2016

This is Part two of a three-part series on the Easter Rising in Ireland. Part one is available [here](#).

Since founding the Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1896, Connolly had, while paying due attention to the appeal of Irish nationalism due to Ireland's historic oppression by British imperialism, warned of the fatal character of any illusions in the ability of bourgeois nationalism to end the poverty and exploitation faced by the working class and rural poor.

In "Socialism and Nationalism," written in 1897, Connolly outlined the type of republic for which his followers should fight. He warned against any adaptation to the middle class and bourgeoisie in the name of "national unity". Arguing that the republic he was striving for was not like the French, "where a capitalist monarchy with an elective head parodies the constitutional abortions of England," nor like the United States, "where the power of the purse has established a new tyranny under the forms of freedom," Connolly continued, "If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic your efforts would be in vain. England would still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through her financiers, through the whole array of commercial and individualist institutions she has planted in this country and watered with the tears of our mothers and the blood of our martyrs."

After 1914, in response to the terrible setback suffered by the working class due to the betrayal of the Second International, this stand on Connolly's part was to weaken. He focused his work on seeking an alliance with the Irish Volunteers.

There was nothing wrong in principle with seeking to win the support of the best elements of the Irish Volunteers, which drew its recruits from urban workers and poorer rural populations. Many were imbued with a healthy hatred of British imperialism and the social order that it defended. But Connolly's orientation involved concessions of a political character, above all a downplaying of his previous critique of the perspective of forming an independent, capitalist Ireland.

In September 1914, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) faction within the Irish Volunteers, which had led the Fenian rising of 1867, argued in favour of carrying out a military uprising during the war. The IRB contended that the conflict offered an ideal opportunity, with Britain engaged in fighting on the continent, and that the prospect of German victory would redefine the balance of forces in Europe. The Volunteers split into two factions, with the vast majority joining the National Volunteers under the leadership of John Redmond to support the British war effort. The IRB-led faction retained the Irish Volunteers name and about 15,000 fighters.

In May 1915, a number of IRB leaders including Thomas Clark and Patrick Pearse formed a Military Committee to advance the planning of the uprising. Pearse famously declared, "We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but

bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing and a nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood."

Connolly, like the IRB, believed that an uprising across the country in opposition to British rule would be triggered by launching action in Dublin. He also shared their illusions about the role a victorious Germany would play in securing Irish independence, in part as a substitute for the international revolutionary movement led by the working class that had failed to materialise. Notwithstanding the oft-cited banner which hung outside Connolly's Liberty Hall headquarters, "We serve neither King nor Kaiser, but Ireland," by December 1915 the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) was marching to a song during its training called "The Germans Are Winning the War, Me Boys."

In what amounted to an echo of the propaganda used by Germany's Social Democrats to justify support for their own bourgeoisie on the outbreak of hostilities, Connolly wrote of the conflict between Russia and Germany, "If we had to choose between strengthening the German bully or the Russian autocrat the wise choice would be on the side of the German. For the German people are a highly civilised people, responsive to every progressive influence, and rapidly forging weapons for their own emancipation from native tyranny, whereas the Russian Empire stretches away into the depths of Asia, and relies on an army largely recruited from amongst many millions of barbarians who have not yet felt the first softening influence of civilisation. German thought is abreast of the best in the world; German influences have shaped for good the hopes of the world, but the thought and the hopes of the best in Russia was but the other day drowned in blood by Russia's worst." (James Connolly, "On German militarism," *Irish Worker*, August 22, 1914)

This misguided analysis clearly reflected the propaganda used to justify support for the war by the SPD in Germany. It also proved to be an utterly false estimation of the course of subsequent events. It was out of "backward Russia" that the revolutionary struggles of the working class in opposition to war found their highest political expression in the conquest of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917.

Connolly and the nationalist leaders

Though Ireland remained a country oppressed by British imperialism, the development of capitalism was such that the opposed interests of classes had to find expression in the working class securing its political independence from the Irish bourgeoisie, in the struggle against imperialism and for socialism.

Connolly's great strength was his realisation that breaking British colonial dominance over Ireland and carrying out the national democratic tasks had to involve the working class in the forefront. Organised in the ICA, a paramilitary group rather than a political party, his followers were pledged to fight for the achievement of an Irish workers' republic by force of arms. But the nature of that republic remained undefined and, without a clearly opposed political perspective and leadership, the working class cadre of the ICA were to be subordinated to the

petty-bourgeois and bourgeois forces that dominated the nationalist struggle.

Connolly repeatedly expressed frustration with the vacillation of the nationalists, sections of which were reticent about or even explicitly hostile to the idea of supporting an uprising directed against British rule. On several occasions he vowed to lead the ICA in a revolt alone. But he ultimately joined the nationalist-dominated Military Committee in January 1916 as its sixth member, and would serve as military commander during the rising.

His own critique of his allies became less focussed on their class position and more on the refusal to fight. Previous attempts to challenge English rule, beginning with the United Irishmen revolt of 1798, had failed, he wrote, largely because their leaders had been indecisive. In "The days of March," published just weeks before the uprising in his *Workers Republic*, Connolly wrote, "The Fenian Rising in March, 1867, was almost foredoomed to failure because like the United Irishmen in '98, and the Young Irelanders in 1848, the leaders had allowed the golden opportunity to slip away, and their attempt when it came was belated ...

"In these days of March let us remember that generations, like individuals, will find their ultimate justification or condemnation not in what they accomplished but rather in what they aspired and dared to attempt to accomplish. The generation or the individual that is stricken down in the attempt to achieve a high and holy thing is itself therefore high and holy. By aspiring to reach a height the generation or the individual places its soul unassailably upon that height, even should its body be trampled in the mud at its base."

Connolly's call for a heroic generation, ready to sacrifice their lives in the tradition of previous nationalist movements, did not distinguish between the opposed goals of the working class and the bourgeoisie. As subsequent experience was to tragically demonstrate, his belief that the nationalists in the leadership of the Irish Volunteers could be pressured into becoming reliable allies in the fight against British imperialism and that German imperialism would provide the necessary international support was to prove misplaced. German military aid was limited to a single shipment of arms, which never arrived after the ship carrying it was sunk by the Royal Navy, while deep divisions within the nationalist movement were to cripple the Easter Rising.

The Rising

The Easter Rising was an expression of a more general radicalisation of the working class brought on by the war. It came just over a year and a half after Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, when the sentiments of significant sections of the Irish population had become increasingly hostile to British rule.

The Irish Parliamentary Party, led by John Redmond, for decades had held up the prospect of achieving an Irish parliament as part of a constitutional process. It saw its support fall drastically, especially after the British government's attempt to tie the granting of home rule to the acceptance of conscription in Ireland. So tense were social relations that when conscription was introduced in Britain in February 1916, Ireland ultimately had to be excluded.

On Easter Monday, April 24, 1916, rebel forces seized prominent buildings in Dublin and set up barricades. In a solemn service at the General Post Office, which became the rebel headquarters, an Irish republic was proclaimed by Patrick Pearse at 12:04 p.m.

Standing on the steps of the General Post Office, Pearse read, "We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six

times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State. And we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations."

The proclamation was signed by seven members of the provisional government, Pearse, Connolly, Tom Clarke, Thomas MacDonagh, Joseph Plunkett, Sean Mac Diarmada and Eamonn Ceannt. It reflected the continued belief that Germany would come to Ireland's aid with its reference to "gallant allies in Europe."

The proclamation pledged universal male and female suffrage. It guaranteed "religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities of all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority in the past."

The Irish bourgeoisie was to prove organically incapable of implementing such bourgeois-democratic principles. The uprising was weakened considerably by the countermanding of an order to mobilise the Irish Volunteers at the last minute by founder Eoin MacNeil, who insisted that it was better to wait until an act of aggression by London, such as an attempt to impose conscription, created more favourable circumstances for an uprising. Units of the Volunteers, originally due to mobilise in towns and cities across the country on Sunday April 23, either remained at home or broke up amid confusion over what was to be done. The uprising was delayed until the 24th and when it did take place, far fewer fighters participated.

The rebellion lasted six days, and was brutally suppressed by British Army units. Martial law was declared on the second day of the uprising. In all, there were 418 civilian and rebel casualties and 116 British army fatalities in the fighting, which saw the British army rely overwhelmingly on indiscriminate artillery and heavy machine gun fire. Around 2,600 were injured and much of the city centre was left in ruins.

Brigadier General William Lowe, who commanded the British army through most of the week, gave a sense of the ruthless disregard for Dublin's population when he issued an order that British troops entering the city should treat anyone as a potential enemy. "Columns will in no case advance beyond any house from which fire has been opened, until the inhabitants of such house have been destroyed or captured," he decreed. "Every man in any such house, whether bearing arms or not, may be considered as a rebel."

Immediately after the surrender, the leaders of the uprising were detained and sentenced to death in a series of drumhead courts martial. Connolly, seriously injured during the fighting, had to be carried on a stretcher to his execution by firing squad on May 12. Between May 3 and May 12, 90 people were sentenced to be executed. Fifteen of these executions were carried out.

The military, under the leadership of General John Maxwell, who was made governor general of Ireland, launched a widespread crackdown against anyone associated with the movement for Irish independence, even if they had not been engaged in the rising. A total of 3,430 men and 79 women were arrested. Those arrested were overwhelmingly from the working class, with 55 percent of those detained after the rising being labourers, salesmen, shop assistants or clerks. An additional 1,480 were detained across Britain.

To be continued

To contact the WSW and the

Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>

