

Irish Romantic Nationalism and the German Motive

By Erica Fornari

Wittenberg University Class of 2004

On Monday, 24 April 1916 in Dublin, at 12:15 p.m., Patrick Pearse, the commander of the Irish rebel forces, led eight hundred men in a seizure of the Dublin Post Office and other government buildings in the city. Several hours later, the Irish Provisional Committee declared the independence of Ireland. In the Proclamation, the leaders of the Easter Rising stated that the "the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory."¹ The Irish leaders made it public that "allies in Europe" supported them and it was known that these "allies" were the Germans. But to what extent did the Germans really support the Irish?

The Proclamation affirms what evidence suggested on the eve of the Easter Rising. Before the Easter Rising, several interactions occurred between Irish nationalists and German diplomats to secure support for an Irish Rising against English rule. The Irish attempted to generate a battalion for Irish prisoners in Germany to fight on the western front, and they requested German arms and officers to assist the rebel cause in Ireland. To determine if the Germans acted in concordance with the widespread, nineteenth century European belief of self-determination of people and the right of those people to realize nationalistic ideas, the events of the Easter Rising became chief factors in exposing Germany's questionable motives for aiding the Irish in order to gain an advantage toward a victory in World War I.

To understand the source of the Anglo-Irish conflict, it is necessary to understand its long history, which dates back to 1155. In an attempt to bring order to Ireland, Pope Adrian

IV, the first English pope of Norman descent, granted lordship of Ireland to King Henry II. This reallocation of power from the Irish to the English was the beginning of hundreds of years of fighting and bloodshed between the Irish and the English in the Irish quest to regain independence. The first rebellion of the modern age occurred in 1798 when The Society of the United Irishmen, which evolved into several revolutionary and violent secret societies whose policies were like "a terror that walketh by night,"² rose against the English with the support of the French. The revolt was a disaster, however, because radical Irishmen in the United States misled the French into believing that Ireland was prepared and organized.³

The direct result of this revolt was The Act of Union in 1800 by Parliament, which supposedly marked the equality of Ireland in the United Kingdom. To keep Ireland in order and as part of their Empire, the English continued to issue acts and laws that attempted to keep the people of Ireland from revolutionary motives, such as the Unlawful Drilling Act of 1819 and the Peace Preservation Act of 1881.⁴ The blatant disregard for these English laws, in addition to others, on the part of the Irish became increasingly evident as Irish nationalist activity dramatically increased until the start of World War I and continued, often times very publicly and without proper repercussions by the Irish Government, until the Rising in late April 1916.

The restrictive acts and laws led to the formation of two major types of nationalism: revolutionary and romantic. The revival of revolutionary nationalism came in 1848 as a series of revolts in response to the Great Famine. In 1858, James Stephens organized these rebels and the remnants of the Untied Irishmen into the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and coined the term *Sinn Féin*. *Sinn Féin* refers to the

movement of Irish nationalism, or "ourselves,"⁵ rather than a particular Irish association. In 1842, Thomas Davis, a Protestant, and two Catholics formed the Young Irelanders, an influential romantic nationalist group, which advocated the revival of distinctive and indigenous Irish culture by cultivating nationalistic symbols and the national spirit.⁶ Eventually, the Irish Volunteers of 1914 would incorporate the romantic ideas of the Young Irelanders into their beliefs. The old IRB and the new Irish Volunteers adapted to the modern anti-British and antiwar recruitment by adopting a pro-German mentality. Both of these groups printed openly seditious material in Ireland and the U.S. This began with the weekly newspaper, the *Nation*, started by Thomas Davis in the 1840s, which attacked the "materialism of industrial and commercial England," and ignited parts of the population to new nationalistic feelings.⁷

The increasingly common pro-German feeling that existed among many Irishmen prompted seditious articles expressing Irish desires for a German-Irish alliance in case of a war between Germany and England to appear in several Irish-American newspapers between 1911 and 1914. According to Reinhard Doerries in his *Prelude to the Easter Rising*, although the Irish did not particularly wish for a German victory in World War I, they hoped that Germany would severely weaken Britain's colonial power. The Irish also believed that the war was forced upon the Germans and that they stood for "European Civilization at its best," as Sir Roger Casement, a major authority in the Easter Rising, termed it.⁸ The mutual search for allies against Britain motivated both the Irish and the Germans to seek support from each other.

As the threat of war in Europe amplified during 1914, so did the Irish hope for a free and independent Irish nation. In Ireland, Irish nationalists saw the European War as an opportunity to take advantage of England's diverted attention in France. At the beginning of 1914, several antiwar pamphlets, posters and demonstrations in Ireland proposed that "Irishmen . . . should not fight for the freedom of others until Ireland itself was free."⁹ It was the belief of Ireland's upper classes and

executive officers, that as long as all anti-British and antiwar feelings remained in the minority, nothing needed to be done to suppress the lawlessness of the Irish nationalists. Advanced rebel organization began to take root in September 1914 when the Irish Volunteers broke from the National Irish Volunteers because "[they] have been in communication with the authorities in Germany and were for a long time known to be supplied with money through Irish-American societies."¹⁰ It also became public that the Irish Volunteers were cooperating with the Irish Citizen Army, a militant civil rights organization formed during the industrial strikes in 1913. As new nationalist groups began to form, the term *Sinn Fein* was reworked and used to describe the people who actively opposed the war and the recruitment of Irishmen for the British army and navy. Some of the prominent *Sinn Fein* leaders were men who were also involved with the Irish Volunteers; one such man was Sir Roger Casement, one of the twenty-eight founders of the new Irish Volunteers.

Casement, a former British diplomat and member of the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers chiefly responsible for seeking German aid during the Easter Rising in 1916, lived outside Europe where he could devote his life work to exposing the atrocities committed against minorities, specifically in South America. When he became too ill to travel, as his work demanded, he turned toward his native Ireland and discovered the increasing conflict surrounding the Irish need for Home Rule from the English. The controversies in Ulster and the abuses of the Irish citizens by the English disturbed him, and the European politics in July 1914 appalled him. As the war approached, Casement sailed to the United States, in rather ill health, to lecture and raise funds so the Irish Volunteers could fight for their freedom.

Upon arriving, he was introduced to John Devoy, a successful propagandist, editor of *The Gaelic American*, and the influential Fenian leader of the Clan na Gael, a federation of clubs with strong influence in the U.S. In 1900, Devoy and Daniel Cohalan revived the Clan na Gael with the Feinian spirit. According to William Thompson in his *Imagination of an Insurrection*, John Devoy was less than impressed with

Casement and had little confidence in his negotiating abilities; however, Devoy promised support for Ireland.¹¹ Devoy became the chief agent in America for communications between Germany and the nationalists in Ireland and introduced Casement to a number of other influential members of the Clan na Gael, including Judge Daniel F. Cohalan, an American-born lawyer and New York machine politician who would also serve as an international contact for Casement.¹²

The first record of Irish-American talks with Germany date back to 1907 and since then, the Irish-Americans have "maintained a continuous attack on anything that might suggest Anglo-American friendship."¹³ The first meeting after Casement's arrival in the United States occurred on 24 August 1914, when Irish representatives, through the Clan na Gael, met with German Ambassador Bernstorff to ask Germany to support the Irish by sending arms and officers to Ireland. At the meeting, "the Irish representatives quite clearly stated their purpose, namely to use the opportunity of the European war to overthrow British rule in Ireland."¹⁴ To Berlin, Ambassador Bernstorff promoted the product of the meeting, which was the German declaration of support for the Irish, because he believed that since no reconciliation with England was probable, it would be beneficial to honor the Irish requests. Since Germany's generosity toward Ireland was second to her clashing Anglo-German relations, it became obvious that Germany was more concerned about her international image, especially in the U.S., than the nationalism and self-determination of peoples for which she claimed to be fighting in World War I.

In October 1914, Casement left the US for Germany in order to raise an Irish Brigade from the Irish prisoners of war in Germany to fight the English. After he arrived in Berlin, his initial view of the Germans was expressed in a transmission from the Foreign Office in Berlin, supervised by Secretary of State, Roger Zimmerman, to Justice David F. Cohalan that, "here everything is favorable: authority helping warmly,"¹⁵ but the friendly sentiment that Casement encountered would not last long. Casement was unable to develop any close ties with the Germans because after his arrival he

noticed that the Germans had begun to realize their failing hopes of using the unrest in Ireland. Their main purpose was to tie down British troops in Ireland and to hinder British recruitment through the successful formation and publicity of an Irish Brigade in Germany.¹⁶ In extremely poor health, Casement attempted to persuade Irish prisoners to fight against the English, but the poor conditions of the German prison camps created a widespread disdain for the Germans and hindered many Irish prisoners from cooperating with Casement and the Germans.¹⁷ Therefore, in a failed attempt, Casement could only convince a few more than fifty men to join the proposed Irish Brigade, which the Germans repeatedly tried to send into Egypt to fight. Casement's usefulness to the Germans dissolved, however, when he insisted that the Irish Brigade would only fight for Irish nationality in Ireland or with the Germans against the English on the western front and not simply as shields for German soldiers.¹⁸ Robert Monteith, the Irish Volunteer organizer sent to Germany to help recruit and lead the Irish prisoners, had marginal luck arranging the prisoners, but the prisoners' unenthusiastic attitudes prevented the skill and number of Irish Brigade from improving. After the obvious Irish failure at satisfying the German need, the Germans began taking steps to rid themselves of the Irish Brigade and Casement as quickly as possible.

Along with the failed idea of the Irish Brigade, Casement's grandiose idea of achieving monetary and material support, in the form of German arms and troops to Ireland, to help the Irish Volunteers also failed. He believed that the Irish Volunteers could not succeed without the help of at least 50,000 German troops, but "to expect that soldiers could slip through the tight British naval block was unrealistic . . . and no troops were sent."¹⁹ The German disinclination to help the Irish became even more apparent in the early spring of 1915, and when Casement realized the complete failure of his attempts, he decided to return to Ireland to stop the insurrection. Unfortunately, his return to Ireland would not end with his desired outcome. Accompanied by Monteith, he left Germany in a submarine on 12 April after a delayed start. They made a submarine change on 15 April due

to mechanical failures, and they arrived at a bay at Kerry on 21 April. British officials, however, were ready and waiting to arrest Casement. Although Casement's mission was to return to Ireland to call off the insurrection, he readily admitted guilt and was eventually hanged in August 1916, a fate that might have been avoided providing a more solid communication among all the men involved. Devoy made many of the communication errors that would cripple Casement's return to Ireland and eventually haunt the failure of the Easter Rising.²⁰

On 10 February, Devoy decided that he could not rely on Casement to secure support for the Rising. At the wishes of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland, he wrote a letter to Berlin explaining that "Our enemies cannot allow us much more time. The arrest of our leaders would hamper us severely."²¹ He also requested that arms, munitions and officers be delivered to Limerick on 21 April or 22 April and that Casement should stay in Germany as "Ireland's accredited Representative."²² On 4 March, the Germans responded by agreeing to send some arms but no officers to Tralee Bay, sometime between 20 April and 23 April because they still had hopes of distracting the English. Although this was less than Devoy had hoped, he accepted the offer and made arrangements to dispatch the *Aud*, which would pose as a Norwegian freighter and carry the arms to Tralee Bay on 23 April. When Casement discovered Devoy's betrayal, he tried to warn the leaders of the Rising in Ireland that the Easter Rising could not succeed. Casement was in favor of arms from Germany, but he also realized that a full scale rising as the Irish Volunteers were planning could not be accomplished without a strong military cover from Germany. His attempts to warn the Irish Volunteers also failed because the Germans prevented Casement's letters and messengers from reaching Ireland. The Germans need the Irish to create a distraction, which is why they still sent arms to Ireland after they realized the Irish could not satisfy their larger plans, and they could not allow anything to interfere with the Rising, especially Casement.

When the *Aud* arrived at Tralee Bay (some sources claim that it landed at the bay at Cork)²³ on 22 April, no rebels were present to intercept

the ship since the ship arrived a day early and the English quickly discovered it. Reinhard Doerries and the British Parliamentary Papers claim that the English sank the ship upon discovery, but William Thompson believes that the captain of the *Aud* sank the ship himself to prevent the arms aboard from falling into the hands of the English.²⁴ The discovery of the ship, however, does not seem to be just coincidence. As the ship departed for Ireland on either 17 April or 18 April, American officials seized Wolf von Igel's office at 60, Wall Street, New York. His office posed as an advertising agency but Germans and Irish-Americans used it for undercover operations. Official papers taken from the office proved relations between the Kaiser's representatives in the U.S. and the "Irish Plotters" that threatened the security of the US and Britain.²⁵ Alan Ward claims in his book, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, that although the U.S. discovered evidence of the future Irish Rising, the British Government already knew of the plot and had already captured Roger Casement and the *Aud*.²⁶ William Thompson, however, suggests the opposite by claiming that, "the German code had been cracked and a warning of the dispatch of the consignment had been sent to the Admiralty on April 17, 1916,"²⁷ by U.S. officials. Whether the U.S. provided the British with unknown information about the German ship or not, is irrelevant since the fact remains that the U.S. informed the British of Irish and German cooperation, which violated their neutrality.

In addition to the communication problems between Casement and Devoy and the U.S. and Britain, the leaders of the Rising could not even communicate amongst themselves. Consequently, the organization and the number of men needed on 24 April was not what it could have been. Patrick Pearse, another leader of the Irish Volunteers and commander of the rebel forces, planned the insurrection without notifying Eoin MacNeill, a leader of the Rising who urged the formation of the Irish Volunteers in 1913. MacNeill was violently opposed to the insurrection and vowed to do everything in his power to stop it without notifying the British. A week before Easter, however, the other leaders convinced MacNeill to rejoin the insurrection by presenting him with a forged document "that

outlined the British preparations to round up all nationalist leaders and suppress the Volunteers.²⁸ As soon as he heard of the sinking of the *Aud* and the capture of Casement on Easter Saturday, 23 April, MacNeill again gave Pearse and the other leaders the impression that he no longer wanted to fulfill his duties as Chief of Staff of the Volunteers. In accordance with this, and without informing the leaders, he made an announcement to the press countermanding the Easter parades, which were to be the beginning of the insurrection the following morning. The mistakes made by the Irish gave the Easter Rising its identity because they were part of the "romantic Fenian muddle...namely that [the Rising] had taken on a symbolic, not a military purpose; that it was not expected to succeed; that it was expected only to happen."²⁹

Although the Rising was not successful, it inspired the people of Ireland to continue to fight against English Rule in 1919. Immediately following the Rising, however, the leaders condemned to death and the citizens active against English rule maintained a continued disillusionment that Germany had, in fact, tried all means available to help the Irish Volunteers fight for a break from English rule. The night before his execution, Patrick Pearse said "the help I expected from Germany failed; the British sunk the ships."³⁰ Pearse, like most of the leaders of the Easter Rising, believed to his dying moment, which was not long after the Rising, that the Germans were as helpful as they could have been.

Only Sir Roger Casement realized the German Government's failure to follow through on their promise to extend material support to the Irish Volunteers. He felt betrayed by Devoy, who went behind his back to negotiate with Germany, by the other leaders of the Irish Volunteers, who could not agree on the plans for the Rising, and by Germany, who backed away from supporting the Irish as the Easter Rising grew closer. In his diary, which he left to a close friend, he said "[Germany] want[s] to get rid of the whole thing at the cheapest cost to themselves . . . the German Government washes its hands of all responsibility."³¹ Casement became increasingly aware of the fact that Germany was concerned solely with its

international appearance, especially to the U.S. The Germans only wanted to provide a little confrontation with England so they could say that they promoted Irish nationalism, and then they could become removed from the whole matter. This is evident through Germany's treatment of Casement, its unwillingness to send adequate aid to the Irish Volunteers, and its eventual lack of interest in the insurrection. No matter how involved Germany was with the Irish Volunteers, according to the English, "Germany plotted [the Rising], Germany organized it, Germany paid for it,"³² and this shows an outside view on the conniving motives of the German involvement in the Easter Rising. Despite the fact that Casement was unable to reach Ireland, the Rising continued without Germany's help.

The Easter Rising that broke out on 24 April 1916, ended one week later with the surrender of the Irish Volunteers on 1 May 1916. The climax of the Rebellion was the seizure of the General Post Office in the initial attack on 24 April. All of the German cooperation for the Easter Rising was organized through the IRB in Ireland and the Clan na Gael in the U.S., including a German attack on England to distract the English from the attack in Dublin, which consisted of Zeppelin raids 24 and 25 April and a naval raid on 25 April. Because of miscommunication and confusion, the combined total of all Irish Volunteers that fought the week of the Rising was a pitiful 1,200 as opposed to the 16,000 men that belonged to the Irish Volunteers. By the end of the Easter Rising 450 people had been killed, 2,614 were wounded and fifteen men were sentenced to death. By Christmas, however, all the leaders of the Rising had been executed and interest in the Rising was lost. Therefore, all prisoners taken during the Rising were released.

The need for Germany to promote its self-image was much greater than maintaining its pledge to help the Irish fight for nationalism and because of this need it was probable that Germany would never fully supply the Irish. Germany's interest in its own image forced the sacrifices of the Easter Rising solely on the Irish. Every man who fought for Irish nationalism during Easter week knew he was sacrificing himself for Ireland. This feeling was part of a

Romantic Nationalist view held by the Irish Revolutionary leaders. While the leaders of the Rising, especially Pearse, were revolutionary in their approach to Home Rule, they held a romantic view of the Rising. They believed in the mystical vision of sacrifice and the idea that the revival of the Irish nation could only happen with the overthrow of English imperialism.³³ To them, war was an opportunity to make blood sacrifices. As Ward states, "Pearse did not anticipate a military victory in a rising. Indeed, a victory would come from not surviving. Pearse and his colleagues planned to sacrifice

themselves for Ireland and by their example, to inspire their countrymen."³⁴ As the leaders made their "blood sacrifices," they successfully inspired their compatriots to continue fighting for Home Rule, which eventually required independence from England, and they removed immediate attention from Germany's questionable motives and involvement. German intervention in Ireland during the Easter Rising proves that "nations have no friends, only interests," and, in the end, only Casement understood this principle.

End Notes

¹ Sean Murray, *The Irish Revolt - 1916 and After* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, [1936]), 2.

² George Dangerfield, *The Damnable Question: a study in Anglo-Irish Relations* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1976), 9.

³ Alan Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1980), 61.

⁴ *The Irish Uprising 1914-1921: Papers from the British Parliamentary Archive* (London: The Stationery Office, 2000), 79-80.

⁵ Dangerfield

⁶ Ward, 56.

⁷ Ward, 57.

⁸ Reinhard R. Doerries, *Prelude to the Easter Rising: Sir Roger Casement in Imperial Germany* (London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000), 4.

⁹ Ward, 3.

¹⁰ *The Irish Uprising, 1914-1921: papers from the British Parliamentary Archive* (London: The Stationery Office, 2000), 86.

¹¹ William Irwin Thompson, *The Imagination of an Insurrection, Dublin, Easter, 1916: a study of an ideological movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 92.

¹² Ward, 72.

¹³ Ward, 68.

¹⁴ Doerries, 3.

¹⁵ *The Irish Uprising*, 36.

¹⁶ Doerries, 12.

¹⁷ Doerries, 12.

¹⁸ *The Irish Uprising*, 45.

¹⁹ Thompson, 92.

²⁰ For more information see Doerries, Thompson, and *The Irish Uprising*.

²¹ *The Irish Uprising*, 55-56.

²² Doerries, 17.

²³ Thompson, 93.

²⁴ Thompson, 93.

²⁵ *The Irish Uprising*, 62.

²⁶ Ward, 107.

²⁷ Thompson, 93.

²⁸ Thompson, 95.

²⁹ Dangerfield, 169.

³⁰ *The Irish Uprising*, 69.

³¹ Dangerfield, 166.

³² Ward, 10.

³³ Ward, 61.

³⁴ Ward, 103.

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