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EASTER WEEK, 1916

By PAT DEVINE

ON Easter Monday, 24th April, 1916 (twenty years ago), in the midst of the "last" Imperialist War, the world was shocked by the news that, after 700 years of oppression, the people of Ireland, led by a heroic band of Socialist and Republican men and women, had declared a Sovereign Independent Irish State.

The declaration read as follows :

POBLACHT NA H EIREANN
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC.

To the People of Ireland.

" *Irishmen and Irishwomen.* In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

" Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely 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 on the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

" 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 Irish Republic is entitled to and hereby claims the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all 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 from the majority in the past.

" Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional

Government hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

“ We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

“ Signed on behalf of the Provisional Government,

THOMAS J. CLARKE.

SEAN MAC DIARMADA

THOMAS McDONEGH

P. H. PEARSE

EAMONN CEANNT

JAMES CONNOLLY

JOSEPH PLUNKETT ”

For six days the rebels withstood the onslaught of the British troops. On April 29, at 3.45 p.m., when the situation was hopeless they surrendered, the President, P. H. Pearse, issuing the following instruction :

In order to prevent the further slaughter of Dublin citizens, and in the hope of saving the lives of our followers now surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered, the members of the Provisional Government present at Headquarters have agreed to an unconditional surrender, and the Commandants of the various districts in the city and country will order their comrades to lay down arms.

During those six days the heroes who took part in the rebellion wrote an indelible page in Irish and world revolutionary history. They occupied and used as headquarters the Dublin General Post Office ; other contingents attacked Dublin Castle, took over the most strategical houses and buildings in the city and encamped in St. Stephen's Green. Westland Row Station and Harcourt Street Station were in their hands, as well as the Four Courts. Bolands Mill, a highly strategical point, was well garrisoned by the rebels. Jacob's Biscuit Factory was occupied as a food base.

Military forces by the thousands were rushed from the Curragh, Belfast and England ; the Admiralty gunboat Helga came up the Liffey and bombarded Liberty Hall ; the centre of the city was a huge bonfire before the rebels were vanquished . . . temporarily as subsequent events proved.

The rebellion ended, the Government set about the job of vengeance. Fifteen leaders, P. H. Pearse, Thos. McDonagh, Thos. J. Clarke, Joseph Plunkett, James Connolly, Edmund Kent, John McDermid, the signatories to the proclamation, and Edward Daly, Wm. Pearse, Cornelius Colbert, J. J. Heuston, Michael O'Haurahan, John McBride, Michael Mallin and Thomas Kent were executed.

Among others, Countess Markievicz (known as the Red Countess) and Eamonn de Valera who were sentenced to death had their sentences commuted to penal servitude for life.

Over 3,000 prisoners were taken, the majority of whom were sent to Britain for internment. Many defenceless people were murdered by the troops as can be seen from the following coroner's verdict, which is typical of other verdicts during the period :

We find that the said Patrick Bealen died from shock and hemorrhage, resulting from bullet wounds inflicted by a soldier or soldiers, in whose custody he was an unarmed and unoffending prisoner. We consider that the explanation given by the military authorities is very unsatisfactory, and we believe that if the military authorities had any inclination they could produce the officer in charge.

Possibly the most brutal coldblooded murder of the time was that of Mr. F. Sheehy Skeffington, on April 27. Sheehy Skeffington was a prominent progressive journalistic figure in Ireland. He was arrested on his way home, taken to Portobello Barracks and placed in the guardroom. Captain J. C. Bowen-Colthurst, one of the officers, although he knew that the prisoner was not an active rebel, ordered him to be taken into the courtyard and shot dead because he said he wanted to prevent the possibility of escape or an attempted rescue.

The callousness of this murder forced a court martial trial "which found Captain Bowen-Colthurst guilty of the first, third and fifth charges of murder, and also found this officer was insane at the time that he committed these acts." Of course the Captain was not executed. He was detained at His Majesty's pleasure in a criminal lunatic asylum—where he did not stay very long.

An official announcement on May 11, 1916, estimated the casualties during the rebellion as follows :—

	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Total
Military officers ..	17	46	—	63
Military other ranks ..	86	311	9	406
R.I.C. officers ..	2	—	—	2
R.I.C. other ranks ..	12	23	—	35
Dublin Metropolitan Police	3	3	—	6
Civilians and Insurgents	180	614	—	794
	<hr/> 300	<hr/> 997	<hr/> 9	<hr/> 1,306

On the 20th anniversary of Easter Week it is proper that an attempt should be made to draw lessons from the struggle. To do this, even in the inadequate manner possible in an article such as this, it is necessary to see the situation before and after the actual uprising.

It is common knowledge that for centuries the question of a struggle for independence and separation from Britain has been the dominant driving force in Irish politics, sufficient to call forth from the people unprecedented deeds of heroism and sacrifice. On successive occasions mass revolutionary movements in Ireland have been thwarted from achieving their aim by the vacillation of petty-bourgeois leaders who have either wavered or turned traitor at the crucial moment.

In the years preceding Easter Week, John Redmond, Irish Nationalist leader with an almost unanimous mandate from the country, had, true to form, carried on the same wavering, manoeuvring with Britain for Home Rule for Ireland. Successive General Elections in Britain returned Mr. Asquith to power pledged to give Home Rule to Ireland.

The Unionist Party, headed by Sir Edward Carson and Mr. Bonar Law, put its full weight behind a movement to prevent the passage of the Home Rule Bill. A scheme for a Provisional Government in Ulster in the event of the passage of the Home Rule Bill was endorsed by the Ulster Unionist Council on September 24, 1913. Standing behind this Provisional Government was the Ulster Volunteer Force organised in 1912 and armed by a consignment of 30,000 rifles and three million rounds of ammunition brought from Germany in the steamer *Mountjoy II.* and landed safely in Larne on April 24, 1914. Fred Crawford, the gunrunner on this occasion, reports (see the *Life of Lord Carson* by Ian Colvin, p. 363) that, when faced with signs of weakness on the part of some of the Ulster leaders, he approached Carson, the latter said: "Crawford, I'll see you through this business if I should have to go to prison for it."

The Army officers in the Curragh refused to move against the Ulster Volunteers led by Carson and the now famous Curragh Mutiny, led by Brigadier-General Gough, was the culminating point in convincing revolutionary republican Ireland that its freedom would never come through peaceful constitutional channels.

Therefore, to those who may criticise or deplore the 1916 rebellion because of its "unconstitutional" action, the above facts should be quite an enlightenment. To clinch this point let me quote from *Lenin on Britain*, page 58, where he deals with the Ulster crisis :

The significance of this revolt of the landlords against the "All powerful" (as the liberal blockheads, especially the Liberal scholars think and have said a million times) English Parliament is extraordinarily great. March 21, 1914 will mark a world historical turning point, when the noble landlords of England, smashing the English Constitution and English law to atoms, gave an excellent lesson in class struggle.

This lesson emerged from the impossibility of blunting the acuteness of the antagonisms between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie of England by means of the half-hearted, hypocritical, sickening reformist policy of the Liberals. This lesson will not be lost upon the English Labour Movement ; the working class will now very quickly shake off its philistine faith in the scrap of paper that is called the English law and constitution, which the English aristocrats have torn up before the eyes of the whole people. (Written in April, 1914.)

The reply of Nationalist Ireland to the Ulster Volunteers was the formation of the National Volunteers under the direction and domination of the Parliamentary Redmondite Party.

But something of far greater significance had taken place in Dublin during the Carsonite adventures. The great 1913 General Strike, led by Jim Larkin had solidified Ireland's working class into a powerful steeled army. In reply to the provocations and assaults of the police the strikers had formed the Irish Citizen Army with Captain James White as instructor. All honest and sincere intellectual and middle class elements in the country came out on the side of the strikers and we had the spectacle of an entire populace solidly together, fighting against the attempt of Irish capitalism to enslave the people.

The significance of this Strike and the formation of the I.C.A. cannot be overemphasised, in connection with the Easter Week and all subsequent revolutionary occurrences in Ireland. Redmond and his Nationalist Party was at its height. Home Rule looked a certainty, despite Carson's opposition. A General Strike of Dublin workers was a new feature.

Let us once again turn to Lenin to verify this :

At the present moment the Irish Nationalists (*i.e.*, the Irish bourgeoisie) are the victors ; they are buying out their land from the Irish landlords ; they are receiving *Home Rule* (the notorious home rule for which the long and stubborn struggle has been waged between Ireland and England) ; they will freely govern " their " land in conjunction with " their " Irish priests.

And this Nationalist Irish bourgeoisie is celebrating its " national " victory, its " State " maturity by declaring a war of life and death against the Irish Labour Movement (p. 127.)

The Dublin events mark a turning point in the history of the Labour Movement and of Socialism in Ireland. Murphy threatened to destroy the Irish labour unions. He only succeeded in destroying the last remnants of the influence of the Nationalist Irish bourgeoisie over the proletariat in Ireland. He has helped to harden an independent, revolutionary labour movement in Ireland, free from nationalist prejudices. (*Lenin on Britain*, pp. 129.)

The disillusionment of the working class and republican forces in Ireland, with the Nationalist Party was not yet complete. True the basis had been laid, but much water flowed beneath the bridge before the final disillusionment was achieved.

For some time after the 1913 strike the I.C.A. and the National Volunteers competed for the support of the masses of workers. The Volunteers having the most powerful organisation, and being supported by the Parliamentary leaders, soon gained the leading position so far at least as numbers were concerned. For some time this competition brought sharp ill-feeling between the two organisations.

The essential difference between the two organisations was that of labour and nationalism. There did not seem to be any clear ideas at the time as to how, and on what issues Labour-Nationalist unity could be achieved. However, with the definite split of the Volunteer movement

into the National Volunteers under the domination of the Parliamentary Party, and the Irish Volunteers under the direction of the original Executive Committee, the breach was somewhat healed. The I.C.A., now led by James Connolly (Larkin had gone on tour to America), welcomed the Irish Volunteers for their action. And at the Emmett Anniversary held on October 25, organised by the Irish Volunteers, the I.C.A. attended in full strength.

With the outbreak of war in August, 1914, and the attempt by Redmond to swing the Irish people in behind the Imperialist war plans, the Volunteer movement moved further away from the Parliamentary Party and closer to the I.C.A. And James Connolly, clear-sighted revolutionary that he was, did everything in his power to bind that unity still closer.

Because of this, Connolly has been a very much misunderstood man. Sean O'Casey, first secretary of the I.C.A., in his valuable pamphlet, "The Story of the I.C.A.," writes :

It is difficult to understand the almost revolutionary change that was manifesting itself in Connolly's nature. The Labour Movement seemed to be regarded by him as a decrescent force, while the essence of Nationalism began to assume the finest elements of his nature. His articles . . . speeches . . . all proclaimed that Jim Connolly had slipped from the narrow byway of Irish Socialism on to the broad and crowded highway of Irish Nationalism. The vision of the suffering worlds' humanity was shadowed by the nearer oppression of his own people, and in a few brief months pressed into a hidden corner of his soul the accumulated thoughts of a lifetime and opened his broad heart to ideas that altered the active trend of his being. The high creed of Irish Nationalism became his daily rosary, while the higher creed of international humanity that had so long bubbled from his eloquent lips was silent for ever, and Irish Labour lost a leader.

A well known author has declared that Connolly was the first martyr for Irish Socialism ; but Connolly was no more an Irish Socialist martyr than Robert Emmett, P. H. Pearse, or Theobald Wolfe Tone. (Page 52.)

When a sympathetic writer can write thus about Connolly it is no wonder that Connolly himself should have said to his daughter Nora on the eve of his execution—"The Socialists will never understand why I am here. They all forget I am an Irishman." (*The Irish Labour Movement*, by Wm. Ryan, p. 276.)

It is around this question that the working class must learn its biggest lesson from Connolly and Easter Week. That it was no accident that brought him on to the streets in Easter Week ; that it was not the passing of a Socialist, can be seen from his article in the *Glasgow Forward*, August 22, 1914, when he says :

The war of a subject nation for independence, for its right to live its own life in its own way, may and can be justified as holy and righteous, the war of a subject class to free itself from the debasing conditions of

economic and political slavery should at all times choose its own weapons and esteem all as sacred instruments of righteousness ; but the war of nation against nation in the interest of royal freebooters and cosmopolitan brigands is an accursed thing.

The week previously in the same Glasgow *Forward* Connolly wrote :

I make no war on patriotism, never have done. But against the patriotism of capitalism—the patriotism which makes the interest of capitalism the supreme test of right and duty—I place the patriotism of the working class, the patriotism which judges every public act by its effect on the fortunes of those who toil. That which is good for the working class I esteem patriotic. . . .

I regard each nation as the possessor of a definite contribution to the common stock of civilisation, and I regard the capitalist class of each nation as being the logical and natural enemy of the national culture which constitutes that definite contribution. Therefore the stronger I am in my affection for national tradition, literature, language and sympathies, the more firmly rooted am I in my opposition to that capitalist class which in its soulless lust for power and gold would bronze the nations as in a mortar.

It must be clear to all to-day that instead of signifying the passing of a Socialist, Connolly's energetic drive to bring about Republican Labour unity leading up to the 1916 rebellion, signified the coming of age of revolutionary socialism in the English-speaking world. Connolly showed himself to be a Marxist who had already grasped the significance of revolutionary national struggles in the fight against Imperialism. Connolly's clarity, vision, courage and steadfastness brought about the Easter rebellion, the first revolutionary uprising in the new period of wars and revolutions, heralded by the last world war and which already has seen the success of the Russian Revolution.

Alas, Connolly and those Republican Labour forces who went to battle with him had to pay a dear price for the wavering of their petty bourgeois associates. The rising was planned on a nation-wide scale. Dress rehearsals, as it were, had been held throughout Ireland on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1916, when the Volunteers paraded through many towns and villages. Connolly and the I.C.A., although the leading driving force for the rebellion, were in a minority in the higher councils. To be successful, there had to be simultaneous risings everywhere—and these were planned in advance.

The arrest of Sir Roger Casement on April 21, 1916, was a set back for the movement, both from an organisational and psychological point of view. Taking place as it did on the eve of the uprising the arrest to some extent warned the Government that something was afoot although it is true to say they already had a general idea that trouble was brewing.

It will be as well here to answer those who have thrown the charge of pro-German at the rebels to give a quotation from Casement's speech at the trial :

But there are misstatements given in the evidence against me which I shall refute. First—I never at any time advised Irishmen to fight with Turks against Russians, nor to fight with the Germans on the western front. Second—I have already claimed that he has no right to fight for any land but Ireland. . . . Fourth—There is a widespread imputation of German gold. I owe it to those in Ireland who are assailed with me on this very ground to nail this lie once for all. . . . Those who know me know the incredibility of this malicious invention. They know from my past record that I have never sold myself to any man or any Government. From the first moment I landed on the Continent until I returned to Ireland I neither asked nor accepted a single penny of foreign money, either for myself or for any Irish cause nor for any purpose whatever, but only the money of Irishmen. I refute so obvious a slander because it was so often made until I came back.

Casement was found guilty of treason and executed in Pentonville prison on Thursday, August 3, 1916. A contemporary example of Britain's generosity is given in its recent refusal of the request of the Fianna Fail Government for the body of Casement, which they desired to bury with honour in Ireland.

The rebellion suffered its most severe blow on Easter Sunday, the day before the scheduled uprising. Arrangements had been made for the Volunteers to hold Easter manœuvres in all parts of Ireland. These manœuvres, bringing the entire insurgent military force into action in a disciplined military form on Easter Sunday, would have changed the whole history of Ireland had they taken place.

Unfortunately, the Volunteers were thunderstruck on Sunday, April 23, when they took up their Sunday papers to read the following notice :

Owing to the very critical situation, all orders given to Irish Volunteers for to-morrow, Easter Sunday, are hereby rescinded, and no parades, marches, or other movements of Irish Volunteers will take place. Each individual volunteer will obey this order strictly in every particular.

Signed, Eion MacNeill, Chief of Staff.

The confusion resulting from this order disorganised the rebel forces and left Dublin, where Connolly and the I.C.A. were the dominant force, to bear the full brunt of the rising. This was undoubtedly a major weakness.

It must also be noted that the people at large had no clear idea as to what was afoot. No real attempt was made to organise the masses of people to come in behind the rebel forces. It was in such a situation that Eamonn de Valera could correctly say " If only the people had come out with knives and forks."

To those Socialists, who for any reason (ranging from disapproval of " armed rebellion," to the theory that the rebellion was a putsch), still fail to see the tremendous significance and importance of the Easter

rebellion allow me once more to return to Lenin, that master revolutionary who speaks with authority :

The last issue of the *Socialist Review* (September, 1916), the organ of the Independent Labour Party, on page 205, in an editorial, we read the following declaration: "We do not approve of the Sinn Fein rebellion (the Irish Rebellion of 1916). We do not approve of armed rebellion, or of any other form of militarism and war." Is it necessary to prove that these "anti-militarists" and *similar* supporters of disarmament, not in a small nation but in a Great Power are pernicious opportunists? (October, 1916.) (*Lenin on Britain*, pp. 164.)

The century-old Irish National Movement, having passed through various stages and combinations of class interests, expressed itself, *inter alia*, in a mass Irish National Congress in America (see *Vorwarts*, March 20, 1916), which passed a resolution calling for Irish Independence—it expressed itself in street fighting, conducted by a section of the urban petty bourgeoisie and a *section of the workers* after a long period of mass agitation, demonstrations, suppression of papers, etc. Whoever calls such an uprising a "putsch" is either a hardened reactionary or a doctrinaire, who is hopelessly incapable of picturing to himself a social revolution as a living phenomena.

To imagine that a social revolution is conceivable without revolts of small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without the revolutionary outbursts of a section of the petty bourgeoisie *with all its prejudices*, without the movement of non-class conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against the oppression of the landlords, the church, the monarchy, the foreign yoke, etc.—to imagine that is tantamount to *repudiating social revolution*. Only those who imagine "that in one place an army will line up and say 'we are for socialism,' and in another place, another army will say 'we are for imperialism,' and believe that this will be the social revolution, only those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic opinion could vilify the Irish Rebellion by calling it a 'putsch.'" (Emphasis Lenin's.) (*Lenin on Britain*, p. 166.)

The spark of Easter Week, 1916, dormant for a period, burst out into a blazing fire in the years 1919-22. Unfortunately there was no Connolly and no virile working class leadership working in close harmony and unity with the Republican forces. The petty-bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie of Ireland headed all the republican forces. The heroic struggle against the Black and Tans drove Imperialism to the wall. When victory was once more in sight there came the division over the Treaty.

For two years after the signing of the Treaty when Mr. Cosgrave was in power, the country passed through the bitter experience of Civil War which terminated in the official execution of the "77" Republicans by the Cosgrave murder régime. For ten years until 1931, Cosgrave ruled Ireland with an iron hand in the interests of his Imperialist masters, and the big ranchers.

In 1932 the Fianna Fail Party, headed by Mr. de Valera, swept Cosgrave out of office on the breast of a rising wave of popular indignation supported by rising Irish capitalism and the petty bourgeoisie.

Since 1932 Mr. de Valera has broken many of the main rings of Imperialist oppression. He has abolished the Annuity Payments, abolished the Oath, made the Governor-General a mere figurehead, abolished the Senate, carried through the Irish Citizenship Law, prepared for the introduction of a new constitution, and is already in the midst of preliminary negotiations for a "settlement" with Britain.

During the same period Mr. de Valera has poured millions of pounds in subsidies into the hands of Irish capitalists in pursuit of his policy of industrialisation, he has more than quadrupled the wheat acreage of the country. On top of this he has instituted a drive against the working class and republican movements. His Conditions of Employment Bill practically introduces compulsory arbitration and relegates women to a secondary position to men in industry. The Free State Army has been used in an endeavour to defeat the Tram and Bus strikers. The unemployed are faced with forced labour under a new Bill that will come before the Dail this year. The Irish Republican Army has been attacked as much if not more so than under Cosgrave. "*An Phoblacht*" official I.R.A. paper was censored out of existence and hundreds of I.R.A. men imprisoned.

All this has brought Ireland to the position where to-day it is recognised that the differences between Mr. de Valera and Mr. Cosgrave's Party are considerably narrowed, while the difference between the workers and farmers, labour and republican adherents, and both capitalist parties have reached breaking point.

The Irish Labour Party in conference this year has recognised this, and in line with the general rising feeling throughout the country for Republican Labour unity has for the first time in years taken a stand for the complete independence of the country and the Workers' Republic.

The Republican Movement (I.R.A.) has lost heavily among those elements who see in the policy being pursued by Mr. de Valera, the achievement of the independence they were looking for. Its leadership is wavering and doing little to mobilize the large number of republican masses who still have faith in the I.R.A., but who to-day demand that the Republic for which they fight shall be one wherein the masses of the people, and not the ranchers and capitalists, will get the benefits.

On this 20th Anniversary of Easter Week we must again study the lessons it holds. Labour Republican unity is the key. Not a fight for a bourgeois republic, but a fight for a Workers' and Farmers' Republic which alone can guarantee an Independent Ireland. That is the lesson we must drive home on this anniversary.