

The 1916 “Easter Rising” and Irish Independence

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Irish history offers a case study in colonialism, prolonged resistance and eventual triumph. It is important as a counter to racialist interpretations about the roots of imperialism because the victims of British policy were White Europeans. Study that focuses on the Easter Rising of 1916 helps students understand the conditions and events that can lead to the defeat of revolutionary forces and also those that rapidly transform a society.

As early as the 12th century, a Norman invasion established an English beachhead in Ireland. From the 17th century onward, Great Britain tried to assimilate Ireland into the United Kingdom. It discriminated against Roman Catholics, outlawed the Irish language, deported political opponents, and replaced rebels with peers, landlords and settlers loyal to the crown.

After a rebellion in 1798 and the 1801 Act of Union, Ireland sent representatives to the British Parliament, but was seriously underrepresented and had little influence. In the 19th century, Great Britain saw Ireland as a labor supply for its burgeoning factory system and as a source for agricultural products to feed its growing cities. During this period, between 1845 and 1852, Ireland suffered from a potato famine that led to a sharp decline in population due to mortality and emigration.



<http://www.rootsweb.com/~irlmahs/map11a.gif>

Between 1798 and 1923, Irish nationalists led a series of unsuccessful rebellions in an effort to secure independence from Great Britain. In general, they were ill-timed, poorly planned, lacked needed munitions, had insufficient funding and failed to mobilize the broader population. The leaders of these rebellions tended to be middle-class, educated, urban professionals who did not have close ties with the mass of the Irish people. However, it is not clear whether any strategy could have defeated Great Britain, the dominant military and economic power of the nineteenth century.

Easter, 1916 seemed like a propitious moment to rebel. Great Britain's armed forces were preoccupied by trench warfare on continental Europe. High casualties and taxes and the possibility of a military draft were draining public support for the government. Nationalist and revolutionary organizations were poised for action. Germany, Britain's enemy, seemed a possible source for weapons.

The rebellion started on Monday, April 24, 1916 in the center of Dublin. Members of the Irish Volunteers (a military group) and the Sinn Fein, led by Patrick Pearse, James Connolly the head of the Irish labor movement, Thomas Clarke, Sean MacDiarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, Eamonn Ceannt, and Joseph Plunkett, seized the General Post Office (GPO) and other important points throughout Dublin. The next morning the nationalists controlled most of the capital city and declared an independent Irish Republic.

British troops stationed in Ireland surrounded Dublin and began engaging in firefights with the rebels. On the 27th, the British gunboat Helga, moored in the Liffey River, shelled the city. By April 29, all nationalist strongholds were under attack. That afternoon, Patrick Pearse announced an unconditional surrender to the British forces. The fifteen leading rebels were tried before a military tribunal, sentenced to death and executed by firing squads. James Connolly, who had been severely wounded in the battles, was tied to a chair so he could be shot.

Despite limited initial support for the Easter Rising, the cold-blooded execution of the Irish rebels proved to be a catalyst, sparking Irish nationalism across the country and a broad-based independence movement. In December, 1921, the British agreed to a treaty creating an independent Irish Free State out of the 26 southern and central counties of Ireland.

Document Packet: The 1916 “Easter Rising” and Irish Independence

Introduction: This document-based essay is based on the accompanying documents (1-8). It is designed to test your ability to work with historical documents. Some of the documents have been edited. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of each document and any point of view that may be presented in the document.

Historical Context: **The 1916 Easter Rising was a rebellion by Irish nationalists against British rule. During the rising, rebels took over key locations in Dublin, Ireland and called for a broader revolution that did not occur. Although the rebellion was militarily unsuccessful, it sparked growing feelings of Irish nationalism that eventually led to Irish independence.**

Task: Using information from the documents and your knowledge of global history, answer the questions that follow each document in Part A. Your answers to the questions will help you write the Part B essay, in which you will be asked to:

Explain why Irish nationalists staged the Easter Rising against British rule.

Describe the events that took place.

Evaluate the success and failure of the Easter Rising

Note: Be sure to use specific evidence cited in the documents as well as outside knowledge about global history.

The movie, *Michael Collins* (1996, starring Liam Neeson), is primarily about the civil war that followed the establishment of the Irish Free State. Its opening scene depicts the Easter Rising. It can provide students with a visual sense of Ireland and Dublin during this time period.

1. Chronology of Irish Rebellion

1798. Rebellion inspired by American and French Revolutions. In response, Britain dissolves 500 year old Irish Parliament.

1803. Revolt following the 1801 Act of Union absorbing Ireland into the United Kingdom.

1845-1852. Great Irish Famine. Millions die or go into exile.

1848. Desperate revolt spurred by failure of Great Britain to provide adequate famine relief.

1867. Fenian Uprising with support from Irish emigrants in the United States.

1880-1882. Waive of evictions by landlords of tenant farmers leads to another unsuccessful rebellion.

1916. World War I era Easter Rising.

1921. Irish Free State established. Britain relinquishes control over all of Ireland except 6 counties in the north.

2. Chronology of the 1916 Easter Rising

April 24. The 1916 Rising begins in Dublin at noon. 2,000 men lead by Padhraic Pearse seize control of the Dublin General Post Office. Leaders of the rebellion proclaimed the Independence of Ireland and announced the provisional government of the Irish Republic.

April 25. Rebels control a considerable part of Dublin. British reinforcements arrive. Martial law declared.

April 26. Rebels now outnumbered 20 to 1. British destroy headquarters of the Labor Party and trade unions. St. Steven's Green cleared of rebels.

April 27. General Sir John Maxwell arrives as the new British commander in-chief with orders to put down the rebellion as quickly as possible. The gunboat Helga shells Dublin from the Liffey River. There are hundreds of civilian casualties in the city.

April 28. The GPO is on fire. James Connolly orders women to abandon the building. Final battle is fought in King's Street.

April 29. Under heavy attack, rebel leaders in the GPO surrender unconditionally. Sixty-four rebels and 132 British soldiers are dead.

May 3-12. Fifteen leaders of the uprising were tried before a military tribunal and executed by firing squad.



Dublin monument to James Connolly and martyrs of the 1916 Easter Rising.

3. Proclamation from the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland.

THE PROCLAMATION OF
POBLACHT NA H EIREANN.
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

“Ireland, through us, summons her children to the flag and strikes for her freedom. . . 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 its citizens. . . 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.”

1. What did the leaders of the rebellion declare?
2. In your opinion, why did they believe people would support the proclamation?

4. Excerpt from *Easter, 1916* by W. B. Yeats

(Source: <http://www.online-literature.com/yeats/779/>)

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice? . . .
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse -
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born

1. What “sacrifice” and “love” does Yeats describe?
2. What is the “terrible beauty” that was born?

5. London Had Heard Rumors (*The New York Times*, April 27, 1916)

“For some time, rumors of impending trouble have been in London. The Irish papers have printed information of an alarming character. Although the London papers generally refrained from or were not allowed to print news of this nature from Dublin, *The Times* about ten days ago gave a half-column report from its Dublin correspondent of the seditious movement there. In the early part of last week, the *New York Times* correspondent heard reports that an Irish rebellion was timed to break out between Good Friday and Easter Monday. These reports were spread broadcast and it was naturally assumed that the Government was in possession of all the facts requisite to place it in full position to keep matters well in hand. Among members of Parliament there was a widely spread idea that a strict investigation must be made.”

1. According to *The New York Times*, why should the British government have been prepared for the rebellion?

6. Martial Law Curbs Ireland; Rebels in Trap (*The New York Times*, April 28, 1916)

“British regulars from Belfast and England are now in Dublin and have recaptured from the revolutionary faction several important centers which the members of the Sinn Fein party had occupied. These include Stephen’s Green, Liberty Hall and the GPO. Martial law has been proclaimed in the city and country of Dublin and the official announcement is made that drastic steps are being taken to suppress and arrest all those responsible. The associations which participated in the revolt are proclaimed illegal.

That the Government intends to deal with the offenders with a heavy hand, as indicated by the publication of a proclamation in the official *Gazette* tonight, suspending the Defense of the Realm Amendment act of 1915, which gives to a British subject charged with an offense under the act, the right to be tried by a civil court. The proclamation recites that “the present state of affairs in Ireland is such as to constitute a special military emergency.”

1. What happens when British troops arrive in Dublin?
2. In your opinion, why was martial law declared and the right to a civil trial revoked?

7. A Rebel Speaks at his Court Martial

Patrick Pearse was born September 10, 1879 in Dublin. He was a member of the Irish Bar and of the Central Council of the Irish Volunteers, Commandant General of the Army of the Irish Republic and President of the Provisional Government. He was tried by court martial on May 2, 1916 and executed by firing squad the next morning between 3:30 and 4AM at Kilmainham Prison. At his trial he made the following statement:

I assume I am speaking to the Englishmen who value their own freedom, and who profess to be fighting for the freedom of Belgium and Serbia. Believe that we too love freedom and desire it. To us it is more desirable than anything else in the world. If you strike us down now we shall rise again and renew the fight. You cannot conquer Ireland; you cannot extinguish the Irish passion for freedom; if our deed has not been sufficient to win freedom then our children will win it by a better deed.

My sole object in surrendering unconditionally was to save the slaughter of the civil population and to save the lives of our followers who had been led into this thing by us. It is my hope

that the British Government who has shown its strength will also be magnanimous and spare the lives and give an amnesty to my followers. . . .

I am prepared to take the consequences of my act, but I should like my followers to receive an amnesty. I went down on my knees as a child and told God that I would work all my life to gain the freedom of Ireland. I have deemed it my duty as an Irishman to fight for the freedom of my country. I admit I have organized men to fight against Britain.



The courtyard at Kilmainham Prison.

I admit having opened negotiations with Germany. We have kept our word with her and as far as I can see she did her best to help us. She sent a ship with men. Germany has not sent us gold.

1. Who was Patrick Pearse?
2. Why did he participate in the Easter Rising?
3. Do you believe he should have been executed for treason? Explain.

8. Moira Regan, Irish Girl Rebel Tells of Dublin Fighting (*The New York Times*, August 20, 1916)

“At 6 o’clock on the evening of Easter Monday I went down O’Connell Street to the Post Office,” she said. I belonged to an organization called Cumann na Mban—the Council of Women. We had been mobilized at noon on Monday being told that we’d be needed for bandaging and other Red Cross work.

“The Post Office burned all day Friday, and late in the afternoon it was decided that it must be abandoned. The rebels succeeded in reaching a house on Moor Lane in back of the Post Office. There they stayed all night. They had only a little food and the ammunition was almost exhausted. So on Saturday they saw that further resistance was useless, and that they ought to surrender, in order to prevent further slaughter.

“The prisoners were shot in the yard of Killmainham Jail. Then the bodies were taken in their clothes, outside Dublin to Arbor Hill Barracks and thrown in to one large trench. In every case the bodies were refused to the relatives of the dead men.

“But the greatest result of the rising, the thing that will justify it even if it were the only good result, is the complete and amazing revival of Irish nationality. We have been asleep—we have been ready to acquiesce in things as they were, to take jobs under the government and to acquiesce in the unnatural state of affairs. But now we have been awakened to the knowledge that

there is a great difference between Ireland and England, that we are really a separate nation. Even the people that were not in sympathy with the rebels feel this now.

“This feeling has spread all over Ireland; it has remained and it is growing stronger. We were a province, and now we are a nation; we were British subjects, and now we are Irish. This is what the rising of Easter week has done for Ireland.”

1. What was Moira Regan's role in the Easter Rising?
Why does she feel the rising was a success?