

IMPERIALISM & INDEPENDENCE

In 1914, what was initially called the Great War broke out. Subsequently, it came to be known as the First World War or World War One (WW I). In fact, what occurred was the onset of the first Global Inter-imperialist War (or GIW I). The second GIW (or GIW II) took place between 1939 & '45. In either instance, the assertion that what was entailed was a struggle for democracy is sheer humbug. However, GIW II is a subject for analysis on another occasion.

In 1914, the relevant chain of events began when the Austro-Hungarian Empire attacked Serbia in July following the assassination in Sarajevo the previous June of Arch Duke Ferdinand, heir to the imperial throne in Vienna. The Russian Empire then sided with Serbia, and the German Empire supported the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The latter two entities came to be described as the Central Powers. Pursuant to the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1894, the French Empire (legalistically styled in metropolitan terms as a 'republic') was next engaged in war with the Central Powers and the British Empire joined the French and Russians in August. (It had guaranteed Belgian neutrality in the Treaty of London of 1839 and had concluded the Entente Cordiale with France in 1904 and a Convention with Russia in 1907 - these overall developments are sometimes referred to as the Triple Entente.) When GIW I started, Russia, France and the UK were to be called the Allies. Thus far, the conflict was yet another European one. As for 'poor, little catholic Belgium', which was invaded by the Germans on 4th August 1914, it was also an imperialist state, although its subjugated territories lay outside Europe, mainly in Africa and, to a small extent, in China.

In 1914-16, other European countries were to become embroiled on one side or the other. Italy was the largest, while smaller states such as Montenegro, Bulgaria and Romania were also drawn in.

Outside of Europe, in the same period, the Ottoman Empire and the Japanese Empire joined in the conflict, again adopting different stances. In 1917, the most significant new participants were America and China, while, in that year and the next, a raft of countries from Southern Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, simply jumped on the band wagon.

Of course, the War did not only involve sovereign states and their overseas dominions (such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand), it witnessed fighting in the overseas colonies of empires. It was also waged across the globe on the high seas.

But, within these parameters, the question arises as to the real geopolitical dynamics of the conflagration.

Austria-Hungary was concerned to strengthen and extend its control of the Balkans, while Russia, equally so concerned with that region, was determined that it should not do so. France, still smarting from the defeat of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, continued to fear continuing German might, now enshrined in the Second Reich in Europe and increasingly evident in Africa and Asia. Britain was worried about the Reich as well in the same respects, but especially as regards the growth of German naval power. Italy later joined the fray with its sense of 'Italia irredenta' vis-à-vis Austria, while the Ottoman Empire was fearful of greedy Russian, British and French designs on its empire and Japan was anxious to expand in the Pacific. Towards the end of GIW I, America entered the fray after Germany announced unrestricted marine warfare, in particular to isolate the UK - a major trading partner of the US - and sank a number of American ships. (America had already established its own imperialist character, as demonstrated in its seizure of Mexican territories in the 19th century, and its colonial interests in the Caribbean and the Philippines enduring into the 20th.) China joined the Allies with a view to regaining the Shantung peninsula, originally the site of a German colony, which had been seized by Britain and Japan; it also still had its eyes on Tibet.

The outgrowth of GIW I saw the emergence of several new, independent states: in Northern Europe - Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; in Eastern and Central Europe - Poland,

Czechoslovakia and Hungary; in Southern Europe - Yugoslavia (i.e. South Slavia comprised chiefly of Slovenes, Croats and Serbians) and Albania. (However, independence was not always matched by post-imperialist democracy.) In Western Europe, the most notable development was the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.

The armed struggle for Irish independence had begun in 1916 with the Easter Rising. Several attempts have been made to denigrate it. Firstly, the question of mandate has been posed. The fact is that the mandate for national insurrection derives from foreign occupation. Even if some or many of one's fellow nationals acquiesce in colonial bullying, that does not bind one to do so as well.¹ Apart from that, it has to be remembered that the United Kingdom of 1916 was not a proper democracy as, in round terms, 70% of adults (i.e. persons aged 21 and more) did not have a vote for parliament. When the suffrage was extended to all adult males in 1918 and some adult females (the latter did not get the same suffrage as males until 1928), the First Dáil was elected and the War of Independence began.

Returning to 1916, a number of assertions have been made about the Rising that are dubious, to say the least. To begin with, much is made of the derision to which captured rebels were subjected by some of the citizenry of Dublin as they were led off to prison. However, it does not take a genius to suspect that supporters of the Rising were afraid to come out on the streets in the face of the British army, while relatives of husbands and sons who had been lured into the service of British imperialism felt free to do so.

In fact, there is evidence to support this conclusion. A member of the Canadian press, sent to Dublin after the Rising broke out, wrote a book about his experiences. In this, he said: "I have read many accounts of public feeling in Dublin in these days. They are all agreed that the open and strong sympathy of the mass of the population was with the British troops. That this was so in the better parts of the city, I have no doubt, but certainly what I myself saw in the poorer districts did not confirm this. It rather indicated that there was a vast amount of sympathy with the rebels, particularly after the rebels were defeated. The sentences of the Courts Martial deepened this sympathy." And further on he stated: "People were leaning from their windows waving triangular flags and handkerchiefs. 'They are cheering the soldiers,' I said to my companion. ... As the main body approached I could see that the soldiers were escorting a large number of prisoners, men and women, several hundreds in all. The people were cheering not the soldiers but the rebels."²

Another attempt to diminish the Rising (as touched on by the author just quoted) is by reference to General Maxwell, commander of British forces during the episode. It is often suggested that had it not been for his execution of rebel leaders, opinion in Ireland would not have swung behind them and their cause. Thus rebel heroism and popular patriotism is reduced to the stupidity of a British general.

1916 is of course also the year of the Somme where many Irishmen perished in battle with the Germans. Furthermore, the Somme is the symbol of the tens of thousands of Irishmen who fell throughout GIW I. An effort is increasingly made to equate the fate of these men with those who died in the Rising and the War of Independence. While it is a matter of human compassion and deep sadness that Irishmen met their end at the Somme, in Flanders and elsewhere between 1914 and '18, the fact remains that they were imperialist cannon fodder rather than national freedom fighters. Their subjective drive may have varied from seeking to enhance their income, to a search for glory, to an idealistic belief that they were fighting for democracy in general or Irish home rule in particular. But the objective reality is that they were simply the instruments of British imperialism.

With regard to the promise of home rule at the war's end, it was well short of national independence, both as regards partition and the limited powers to be granted to two devolved administrations north and south.

While the Irish Revolution of 1916-22 did not lead to a desired all-Ireland republic, it brought much more than 'home rule' to 26 of the island's 32 counties in the shape of the Irish Free State, and inspired anti-colonial movements throughout the world. In particular, it began the end of the British Empire.

1. For example, although it can never be capable of proof, one way or the other, one wonders if a majority of the French people actually supported the resistance between 1941 and '44 rather than the Vichy regime. But no democrat thus calls into question the validity of that resistance.

2. F A McKenzie, *The Irish Rebellion - What Happened and Why*, (C Arthur Pearson Ltd, 1916).

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