

EASTER RISING – MYTH AND TRUTH

There is a myth that the Easter Rising of 1916 was greeted with hostility by the majority of the Irish people and that they only became sympathetic to the rebels as a result of the stupidity of a British general in executing the leaders afterwards. Furthermore, it is asserted that the Rising had no mandate and was not democratically justified.

The evidence adduced for the first claim consists of a number of elements. Firstly, and most vividly, we are constantly told about how the rebels being led away following surrender were mocked on the streets of Dublin by ordinary people. Secondly, the elected representatives of the Irish Parliamentary Party denounced the Rising. Thirdly, many of the newspapers in Ireland expressed opposition as well.



However, objective and contemporary observers of the Rising do not substantiate the claim of general hostility. A Canadian journalist who went to Dublin to report on the event (J F A McKenzie) wrote as follows: "I have read many accounts of public feeling 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." (The Irish Rebellion –

What Happened and Why, 1916.)

A Frank Thornton was imprisoned with Seán MacDiarmada in Richmond Barracks. He recalls that on the way to Kilmainham on 9th May 1916: "We marched along the road and with every yard there were indications of the changed attitude of the people. The open trams passing by always brought a cheer from somebody, even though rifles were pointed at the offender on every occasion, and old men stood at the street corner and saluted despite being pushed around." (From Behind a Closed Door, Brian Barton, 2002.)

Of course, it is true that some people did come onto the streets of Dublin to mock the rebels, but it is not difficult to understand how the wives and mothers, in particular, of soldiers serving in Flanders and elsewhere, and receiving remittances for their separated ones, were not enamoured of the rebels. But that is a long way from establishing that the majority of the people were opposed to them. And it does not take a great deal of wit to realise that supporters of the rebels were not inclined to rush onto the streets and hail them in the face of armed and angry British soldiers.

As for the Irish Parliamentary Party, it was the representative of the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie and its MPs were not elected as a result of universal franchise, which was only introduced for all adult males, and adult females above the age of 30 fulfilling certain property qualifications, in 1918. With regard to the news media, this was also in the possession of the bourgeois classes.

On the question of democratic mandate, is it seriously suggested that the British would have allowed revolutionary candidates to stand for election, even on the severely restricted franchise of 1916, or have permitted a plebiscite, on independence? There is also the point that, when a foreign power invades one's country and occupies it, the principle of justifiable resistance comes into play.

A simple analogy might help here: if one shares a house and it is burgled, is one expected to try and take a democratic vote on whether or not the burglar should be resisted? There are examples of an answer to this question such as in the case of the French resistance to Nazi Germany

For all that has just been stated, the myth of the unpopular Rising was established early on and has been repeated, time and time again, since that fateful year of 1916, by some journalists and academics alike who thus behave more as anti-national propagandists than as persons of intellectual and moral integrity. It should be the task of all committed nationalists and republicans to destroy this myth, once and for all, and enshrine the truth. As some are wont to say: the truth shall set you free.