

IRISH NEUTRALITY DURING WW II

For the generations born in Ireland since the end of the second World War, it is understandably difficult for some of them to envisage the state of public opinion on the issue of Irish neutrality during that conflict.

There has been much comment, mostly of a critical nature, on the morality of Ireland's policy of neutrality during the conflict, which in 1945 led to students on the roof of Trinity College burning the Tricolour and throwing it on to the lawn beneath.

There are some who even regard Ireland's stance as not so much neutral but pro-Nazi. These critics make no reference to countries like Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and Sweden which adopted a policy of armed neutrality, while most of the nations embroiled in the war remained neutral until they were invaded or attacked, including the US and the Soviet Union.

During the war years, the fallout from partition following the Anglo-Irish conflict was still vivid in the public mind, seeing as how it was just 17 years since the guns of the Civil War had fallen silent, and for both sides in the bitter internecine bloodbath the British were still the common enemy.

The decision of Dáil Éireann – not just that of Éamon de Valera or the government – to remain neutral in all probability avoided an outbreak of a second civil conflict here.

Critics ignore the fact that all political parties in the Dáil, along with public opinion outside, favoured the policy of neutrality. Indeed just one TD, James Dillon, voiced disapproval at our neutrality.

Even those Dáil members who were strong supporters of the Allied cause, and there were many, voted to remain neutral.

Furthermore, proposals from Churchill in 1940 for the offer of a united Ireland as a quid pro quo for Irish entry into the war were rejected by de Valera. Our neutrality, sovereignty and independence were not for sale.

Despite our position as a non-belligerent neutral state, Ireland did not introduce a prohibition on her citizens opting for foreign enlistment before or during the war, nor did Ireland introduce conscription into her armed forces.

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