

Irish Republican Army Collaboration with Nazi Germany in the United States

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Abstract

Case studies from the past can be of use in the present. The Irish have historically been the largest and, arguably, most radicalised minority in the United States. As recently as May 20 of this year, the Independent Women's Forum hosted a symposium on the new Arizona immigration law, wherein it was pointed out that the Irish are still our second largest population of undocumented immigrants. These Irish immigrants have been religiously motivated. For inspiration, they have often relied on the pronouncements of priests and clerics from the Pope to Father Coughlin. No doubt such inspiration can often lead to action. In this light, it may be of use for the policy-makers of today to familiarise themselves with how the FBI dealt with the Irish threat during World War II.

Key words: Irish Republican Army, Clan Na Gael, collaboration, sabotage

Introduction

This paper was originally submitted as part of a senior seminar on World War Two. The assignment was to make use of primary sources in order to research and analyse a narrow topic related to the United States' involvement in the war. The source on which this paper relies is the FBI documentation related to the Irish Republican Army. In attempting to anticipate events before they happen, the intelligence community often, and rightly, goes beyond the rigid *if-then* analysis to pose the question *if-then why not?* Unfortunately, such an approach is not deemed appropriate except during wartime. The US learned the price of such rigidity and lack of imagination in 2001, and continues to pay the price. With that in mind, it is well worth a look at how the Bureau dealt with the threat of a Trojan horse approach used by an immigrant population known to use violence in pursuit of its aims and known to have collaborated in the past with our enemies.

The White Paper

On 5 September 1939, Winston Churchill had resumed his place as First Lord of the Admiralty, a position he had held during the First World War. In his second full day on the job, he asked the First Sea Lord to report on the so-called neutrality of the so-called Eire and his most pointed question was 'if they throw bombs in London, why should they not supply fuel to U-boats?' (Churchill, 1948, pp. 428-9).

The Irish-born population in the United States in 1930 was 923,642 (744,810 from Eire and 178,832 from Northern Ireland); however it should be noted that the Irish-born population peaked in 1890 at 1.87 million (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2008). By contrast, the population of Ireland in 1936 was 2,968,420 (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2010). These numbers would indicate that the number of first or second generation Irish in the United States was actually greater than the population of Ireland itself. Thus the United States served a dual role for the Irish Republican Army, both as a safe house and as a source of money, weapons and matériel. It stood to reason that the IRA might abuse its freedom here to kick England while she was down.

In 1921, His Majesty's Government issued a White Paper illustrating the connection between Sinn Fein and the German Government during the late war (FBI Document No. 61-7606-83). Some of it, detailing Sir Roger Casement's operation to co-ordinate with the German Imperial Navy in the landing of weapons ashore in Ireland in preparation for the Easter Day Rising, was well known (Knott, 1917, pp. xiii-xxxviii). Some of it was not. On 26 January 1915, German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann sent a less notorious telegram to Graf von Bernstorff, German Ambassador in Washington:

'You can obtain particulars as to persons suitable for carrying on sabotage in the United States and Canada from the following persons: 1, Joseph McGarrity, Philadelphia; 2, John P. Keating, Michigan Avenue, Chicago; 3, Jeremiah O'Leary, 16 Park Row, New York. One and two are absolutely reliable, but not always discreet. These persons are indicated by Sir Roger Casement.' (Says Irish Plotted Here after 1917, 1921)

Joseph McGarrity was well connected. Only two months before the White Paper's submittal, Taoiseach Éamon de Valera was in Philadelphia to attend the christening of McGarrity's son, Eamon de Valera McGarrity (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-83, p. 4). However, the namesake of his son would have little to do with McGarrity's loyalty to de Valera.

Clan Na Gael was organised by Irish-Americans in 1860. It had been supportive of anti-English conflict in the Land War of 1880-1886 and the Easter Sunday Rebellion of 1916. However, in August 1920 there was a schism within the group, a more radical faction breaking away under the name 'Re-Organised Clan Na Gael' (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-83, p. 2). McGarrity would later become implicated with this faction and be quoted in 1938 as saying, 'De Valera is a past patriot. He is today what John Redmond was in 1916. We shall simply ignore him as we ignored

Redmond. We are after the real enemyí England.ö (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-83, p. 8) By this time, the radicals had dropped -Re-Organisedøfrom the name (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-83, p. 4). This forced the original group to declaim some of the more unseemly actions of the radical clan, and it made life difficult for the authorities trying to discern just which Clan Na Gael they were investigating.

Among others implicated in the White Paper was New York State Supreme Court Justice Daniel F. Cohalan and John Devoy, editor of the *Gaelic American*. They had already been implicated in a German plot with Wolf von Igel when the German Embassy in Washington had been raided by the Justice Department in April 1916 (öCohalan and other Irish Leaders Named in new Expose of German Plotsö, 1917). Such associations became a campaign issue in the 1917 New York City mayoral race as Mayor John Mitchel accused his Tammany Hall opponent, Judge John F. Hylan, of ties to Cohalan, Devoy and the same Jeremiah O'Leary later mentioned in the White Paper (öMayor Accuses Hylan as a Member of the German Propaganda Here, 1917). Mitchel also indirectly implicated William Randolph Hearst, who had been tied to the German spy Bolo Pacha (öBertelli's Story of Bolo in Americaö, 1918). The White Paper considered Devoy öthe chief agent in America for communications between Germany and the Sinn Fein activities in America.ö (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-83, p. 5) Yet another individual known to be active at that time within the Reich was Thomas St. John Gaffney, who had been US Consul to Dresden and München from 1905 to 1915 (öSays Irish Plotted Here after 1917ö, 1921). It was this past that informed the FBI's outlook on Irish-German collaboration in the coming Second World War.

Declaration of War

On 14 August 1939, the Irish Government raided twenty homes in Dublin, including that of George Plunkett. Plunkett was known to have recently signed a manifesto declaring war on England, and his son, Joseph Mary Plunkett, had been part of the Casement cell and was thus executed at Kilmainham Gaol for his role in the Easter Day Rising twenty-three years prior (öEire Gov't Raids, Arrests Opens (sic) Drive on I.R.A.ö, 1939 and Peters, 2010).

This newly declared war had been progressing in earnest throughout 1939. On 12 January, Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax received a letter ödemanding the withdrawal of all British armed forces stationed in Ireland and threatening actioní within four days.ö The bombing began on the 16 January (Hoare, 1939, p. 1). On 28 May, the Liverpool Theatre had been bombed. English experts believed the bomb materials to be of American origin (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-13, p. 26). At the end of June, Home Secretary Samuel Hoare estimated the number of öoutragesö at 160, roughly one a day. Most damning, from an American perspective, was the potential connection to American money:

öRecently Sean Russell, known to be one of the principal leaders, went to the United States to collect funds for the continuance of the campaign and is reported to have boasted openly in America that he had ordered the bomb outrages and that they would

continue until the demands were met. It is believed that the campaign has been financed from monies raised in America. The possibility of German assistance has not been lost sight of but so far no evidence whatever of this has been obtained.ö (Hoare, p.1)

Seán Russell had indeed been in America (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-83, pp. 10-13). On 16 June, the *New York Sun* had reported his arrival in New York City on 15 April. In May, the FBI had him in Butte, Montana speaking to the Irish Club. The reader should know that Emmons (2008) gives Butte a higher proportion of Irish residents in 1900 than any city in the US. On 5 June, Russell was arrested in front of the Michigan Central Railway Station in Detroit. Joe McGarrity, who was with Russell at the time of the arrest, was not detained. About this time, George VI and the Queen consort were due across the river in Windsor. An earlier FBI memo states that this arrest was made at HM Government's request (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-13, p. 1). This claim had been denied by the British War Office, but on 7 June the *New York Times* reported that Chief Constable Albert Canning of Scotland Yard declared responsibility. The next day, the paper reported Russell's release and from this point his trail goes cold (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-83, pp. 10-13).

For his part, McGarrity had been indicted in December 1938 by the Southern District of New York for running an illegal sweepstakes. In April, these charges were dropped at a hearing in Philadelphia öfor lack of identificationö (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-13, p. 1). In August 1939, on a visit to his native County Tyrone, he was questioned by the Royal Ulster Constabulary regarding Russell's whereabouts; McGarrity believed he had already left the United States.

Apparently, Russell had somehow found his way to Germany. Unbeknownst to the authorities, on 8 August 1940 he departed Wilhelmshaven aboard *U-65*, along with Frank Ryan, commander of the Irish Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. Ryan, an avowed Communist, had broken out of Burgos Prison in July. It was not a good match, and they are rumoured to have fought aboard the boat. The plan was to drop Russell ashore in Ireland so that he could co-ordinate Plan Kathleen, a Nazi plot to secure bases in Ireland for operations against England. On 13 August, Russell reported a stomach complaint. It was thought to be constipation, but the following day he dropped dead. For all intents and purposes, Plan Kathleen died with him (Paterson, 2003, pp. 60-61).

The Visitor

On 23 October 1941, Colonel William Donovan paid a call to Assistant Director Edward A. Tamm of the FBI. He wanted to know what the Bureau knew of Irish activity in the US and if they were giving aid to those in Northern Ireland, or Germany? (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-83, p. 1). Two weeks later, Donovan received a twenty-nine page memorandum. Much of that memorandum has already been described herein; the vast majority of it dealt with McGarrity and Russell.

There were, however, some other developments that went unreported. In mid-September, 1939, the FBI had investigated the annual meeting of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in San Francisco. On the last day, a lengthy resolution was adopted praising William Randolph Hearst. Additional resolutions were adopted pledging unqualified loyalty to the United States and condemning the barbarism inflicted upon Jews in Germany, and the tactics of the German government oppressing the Catholics and Protestants of that nation (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-7, pp. 7-8) At the same time, US Customs were searching the *RMS Aquitania* on Pier 90 in New York for evidence of sabotage. The *Aquitania* was sister ship of the *Lusitania*, therefore, it was a significant target both for its symbolism and as one of the largest four-stack liners in the world (AJN Transport Britain Collection, 2006). Nothing was found, and the FBI closed the case on 16 October (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-16, pp. 1, 3 & 11).

The files are fairly quiet in 1940. There had been a newspaper report of a German fifth column active in Ireland and Seán Russell surfacing in Hamburg, but his whereabouts were considered unknown by the FBI (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-45). In spite of this, J. Edgar Hoover was careful to instruct the New York Office that "the Bureau has not been greatly concerned in the past with the activities of the Irish Republican Army except on specific occasions" (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-51). On 5 August 1940, Joseph McGarrity died in Philadelphia (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-54). If there was any possibility of Irish help for the Nazis in the United States, it would appear that it left with Russell and died with McGarrity.

If Colonel Donovan were involved in any further co-ordination with the Bureau, it is not reflected in the record.

"Clear this delinquency"

Cornelius Conneen was thought to have taken over for McGarrity. Neenan was also wanted on charges of running a sweepstakes. The Bureau's action in the case of Neenan is nothing less than dilatory. In March 1941, Washington asked the New York Office to check the status of an outstanding warrant on Neenan (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-62). Little happens for over a year. In April 1942, an interoffice memo to Hoover regarding Neenan, Liam O'Flaherty, Gaffney and Cohalan states that "no action is necessitated in this case" (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-95). What follows is a series of confused memoranda attempting to ascertain whether or not the Bureau knows Neenan's whereabouts. By 3 July, Hoover sends an exasperated message to New York: "In view of the importance of this investigation and the possible use by German interests of radical Irish nationalists in this country, it is my desire that immediate steps be taken to clear this delinquency." (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-100)

The record is unclear about the source of the new enthusiasm on the part of the Director. He had posted a memo a year earlier taking notice that Judge Cohalan had been retained as counsel for seamen accused of sabotage (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-71). However, a week later the New York

Office unknowingly had been quick to quash any suspicion related to this, stating quite clearly that "there has been no indication of any foreign-inspired sabotage" (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-77X). There was no mention of any such sabotage in the memorandum to Colonel Donovan. Now, in 1942, the New York Office was nearly as quick to throw water on the Director, stating that they had no evidence of sabotage or persons involved in the same and, thereby, declaring that they were closing the case (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-106X). Hoover writes New York again in October 1942, again bemoaning the "delinquent status". The Neenan case was finally resolved in May 1943 when New York informed Hoover that Neenan had been "not pressed" by the US Attorney for lack of evidence (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-103).

Dull Reading

The few references to Germany throughout the war have already been noted here. The remainder of the record makes for dull reading. Much of it pertains to the location of Russell and, by 1944, Frank Ryan. Many are guesses as to their location: rumours of Russell dying in Lisbon or being shot by the British in Gibraltar, and rumours of Ryan dying in a Madrid or Dresden sanatorium. Hoover's memo to the New York Office in July 1942 is the last mention of sabotage as a credible threat. From about late 1942 the Bureau appears to have focused on three areas regarding the Irish: keeping tabs just in case, seeking threats to British interests, and checking ties to labour unions, i.e. Communists. They clearly did not regard the Irish as a threat. Even a bombing of the British War Relief Society in Boston, on 15 September 1942, failed to raise eyebrows (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-110). The reader can nearly hear J. Edgar Hoover yawn as he gives dictation. In the absence of such a threat, field agents took on other duties, such as rhetorical criticism. A report on a 1943 Easter Week Rebellion commemoration in New York, after noting that the speakers "were careful to show no evidence of un-American attitudes," complains that "the speeches were uniformly badly given and were utterly lacking in oratorical or dramatic effect" (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-216, p.16).

By 1 March 1944, an apparently low-level agent (because his name has been censored) feels free to state:

"There are literally thousands of Irish-American organizations in the U.S. and the vast bulk of these groups has (sic) never been of any intelligence or other interest to the Bureau. The Bureau files do contain sufficient information to indicate that the majority of Irish organizations are completely pro-American in their political and ideological concepts and beliefs and that with the single exception of the Irish Republican Army (Oglaigh na h-Eireann) and a few of its affiliated groups, practically all of which are now defunct with the exception of Clan na Gael, the Irish-American organizations are purely harmless and of no interest from an intelligence standpoint." (FBI Doc. No. 61-7606-297)

Assessment

In a study of pro-Axis elements in Ireland, R.M. Douglas (2006, p. 1181) concludes that they failed due to political and ideological inadequacy, a dearth of talent, and the hostility of the political environment. The first two apply in the United States. Neither Mussolini nor Salazar could claim any influence in America, let alone Hitler. With Joe McGarrity dead, the remaining leadership was comprised of discredited civil servants ó Gaffney, and discredited justices ó Cohalan, both creatures of the last war and hardly vibrant enough in old age to successfully promote resistance. The latter criterion, a hostile political environment, had some degree of truth as well. The potential for radicalisation in the United States was greater due to de Valera's lack of influence. However, in place of a de Valera Government clamp-down on subversive elements, the United States could rely on the American people to keep the Irish in check and on American society to temper hard feelings.

Perhaps the most significant variable here had to be the fact that most Irish were now second-generation. They had inculcated American democratic values to such a degree that it was even difficult for radical elements to build support for attacks on Britain. Public statements generally assumed the form of protest, albeit lacking the dramatic gravitas some thought necessary. Any alignment with Germany was out of the question.

Does this logic apply today in reference to radicalised Islam? The answer to this question would go a long way toward clarifying the decisions that must be made regarding allocation of security resources. If it is true that the vast bulk of threat must come from first-generation immigrants, then the onus is clearly on our enforcement of immigration above all else. Whilst energetically pursuing all individual threats, it is important that the makers of policy bear in mind the true nature of the problem; otherwise every tactical gain is liable to be wasted on strategic ruin.

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