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IRISH NEUTRALITY AND WORLD PEACE

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Unquestionably the most momentous issue before the people of the world is that of peace or war. The Republic of Ireland maintains a position of formal military neutrality, and is, indeed, the only EEC country not a member of NATO.

The tradition of neutrality runs deep in Ireland. As long ago as 1790, the father of Irish republicanism, Wolfe Tone, believing there was no Irish interest involved in the opening war between England and Spain, advocated neutrality. In 1914 the Irish Socialists, like the Russians, Serbs and Americans, denounced the war and joined with republicans to found the Irish Neutrality League. And to Connolly's mind at least, the Rising of Easter 1916 had as its object bringing Ireland out of the war and contributing to a socialist ending of the conflict.

The (de facto 26-county) Irish Free State joined the League of Nations in 1923 and became very active in it. The progressive part played by De Valera during his period as president is well known. In 1935 Ireland supported the admission of the USSR into the League, and the following year maintained sanctions against Italy after the invasion of Abyssinia. Ireland was not a party to the Tory build-up of Nazi militarism, and was under no obligation to go to war when Hitler bit the hands that had fed him. Nevertheless there was a heavy price in economic terms to be paid for neutrality in a world conflict, a neutrality that was in a sense the ultimate exercise of national sovereignty.

It has been argued that if they had wished, the British or Americans could have easily over-run Ireland. Indeed full preparations were made and it would have been possible in military terms. It was thought inadvisable for political reasons in view of Irish-American opinion and the large Irish emigrant population engaged in war work in Britain.

Mr De Valera always combined neutrality with support for collective security and tried to reactivate the latter at the close of the war. He said: "I think we have a duty as a member of the world community to do our share in trying to bring about general conditions which will make for the maintenance of peace". His successors in the "Inter-party Government" turned down an invitation to join Britain in NATO, giving as a reason the continuance of partition. But in view of Ireland's long tradition of neutrality it would be a mistake to regard this as the whole reason.

In the 1960s, Ireland opposed nuclear armament, urged general disarmament and condemned apartheid in South Africa. Mr Frank Aiken proposed the creation, region by region, of nuclear-free zones which would ultimately cover the whole world. It was as a result of an Irish resolution adopted unanimously in 1961, that the non-proliferation treaty was signed in 1967. Again it was the Irish who raised the question of Chinese membership of UNO, against the express wishes of the USA and the warnings of Cardinal Spellman. There can be no reasonable room for doubt that this liberal orientation of Irish foreign policy was gravely embarrasing to ruling circles in Britain, or that they constantly sought means of bringing Ireland to heel, and involving her in "western" policies and the "western" alliance.

The main preoccupation of these circles is the underpinning of NATO in preparation for a world conflict with the USSR. The military machine wants facilities in every area considered to be strategic and its inhabitants must be induced to take the risks. The influence of military involvement on foreign policy will be obvious.

A debate in the House of Lords in 1960 emphasized the military value of Ireland's deep harbours. Later, suggestions were made that the Republic could facilitate the transit of war materials through Ireland to Britain, and that Ireland's thinly populated midlands should serve as a dispersal area for troop reserves. The so-called "north-western approaches" are regarded as vital for the movement of submarines, surface vessels and aircraft. NATO planners recently expressed fears that Russian bombers might fly to the west of Ireland to swoop down on their targets over neutral territory. It has been suggested that the sophisticated microwave stations at present being built in the Republic under an EEC-sponsored telecommunications programme could in an emergency be switched to military use.

Shannon airport has been suggested as the terminal of an Atlantic air bridge carrying the American forces to Europe in the event of war. The feasibility of seizing it by force has been openly discussed. Irish neutrality thus presents a barrier to war preparations. It is only necessary to contrast the complete integration of the six counties into the NATO system and the fact that at present almost the only work available to Belfast's main industries is war work. In this area possible nuclear targets have been designated and the microwave system, submarine detection equipment etc is linked with that of Scotland and England. In Co. Armagh a whole mountain is being hollowed out at vast expense for an unknown purpose.

During the Reagan administration in the USA American policy has been increasingly based on the doctrine of "limited nuclear war", which means making western and central Europe a nuclear cockpit. This has led, in default of facilities in Ireland, to the steady militarization of the Irish Sea. This sea is already the most heavily polluted in the world, in terms of nuclear waste, and the above-average rates of Leukaemia and other forms of cancer on its shores are well attested. After the Windscale accident unidentified aircraft were seen landing on the Irish coast and taking samples of the shingle. The area around the Tuskar rock has been described as the "Tuskar triangle" because of the dangers presented to international shipping by British submarine exercises. Trawlers from Ireland and Brittany have been sunk, and lives have been lost. The British naval authorities have tried to deny responsibility but have been forced to admit it. In February fishermen were told not to fish in the "Beaufort dyke", a trench 8 miles wide and 28 miles long stretching from the Isle of Man in the direction of Larne, Co. Antrim. The reason offered was that the British Admiralty had dumped high explosives in the area. No explanation was given, nor were these explosives identified. Their possible contribution to further pollution is thus unknown.

To place these facts in long-term perspective it is only

necessary to quote from official documents. In a memorandum to Labour Premier Clement Attlee, recently made available under the thirty year rule, Cabinet Secretary Norman Brook wrote: "It is a matter of first class strategic importance for this country that the north should continue to form part of His Majesty's dominions. So far as can be seen it can never be to Great Britain's advantage that Northern Ireland should form part of a territory outside His Majesty's jurisdiction. Indeed it seems unlikely that Great Britain would ever be able to agree to this even if the people of Northern Ireland desired it."

This echoes what Premier Lloyd George wrote to Sir Edward Carson on May 29th, 1916, apropos of his proposed partition: "We must make it clear that at the end of the provisional period Ulster (sic) does not, whether she wills it or not, merge in the rest of Ireland."

The reason was revealed once more by Marshall Sir John Slessor, Chief of the Air Staff, who as long ago as 1952 said: "There is a pretty nasty gap in NATO, namely the completely defenceless position of Eire and the inability of NATO forces to make any use of Irish bases. The attitude of the Irish to date has been bedevilled by their nonsensical attitude to partition."

During the Haughey-Thatcher talks of 1981, when Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins was talking about an Anglo-Irish mutual defence pact, Conservative backbench chairman Mr Michael Mates said: "If there is to be any closer association between our two states, it can't be while one is strongly non-aligned and neutral... To have a neutral Ireland if we were to have another conflict, would have nothing like the same value to western defence as having an Ireland totally committed to the West....it would be important for us, for the two nations, to sing with one voice over defence. The strategic importance of the island cannot be over-estimated."

In view of all this it is understandable that British and American influence has been exerted against Irish neutrality. There are of course interests in the Republic that would benefit from the injection of NATO funds into the Irish economy. The present Government is credited with less enthusiasm for neutrality than would be displayed by the more strongly national Fianna Fail. British policy has been to encourage those who would stand to gain from Irish integration into the NATO system.

Broadly speaking the two aims of British establishment policy are:

1. To maintain possession of the six counties and domination of the Irish Sea.
2. To secure as much influence as possible in the Republic up to the ideal of complete military integration.

It has been suggested, by Mr Enoch Powell among others, that the policy for achieving these aims is to offer the Dublin government jurisdiction (complete or partial) over the six counties in return for military integration of the whole island in the NATO system.

But there are difficulties. One is the strong popular tradition of Irish neutrality. The mass of the Irish people do not feel that they have an interest in the quarrel between NATO and the USSR. They have never fought the Russians; they have fought the British for eight hundred years. Another is the fact that British control of the six counties rests on a "Unionist" garrison which would lose its reason for backing Britain if the six counties were to be replaced in a minority position within the thirty two.

British policy has therefore been pragmatic, though certain identifiable strands emerge:

1. To try to induce the Republic to renounce its claims to the six counties in return for a more liberal treatment of the republican minority.

2. To weaken the will to national independence of the people of the Republic and thus their desire for neutrality.

These policies are the two sides of one coin. For a number of years the means adopted were in essence forms of anti-national propaganda. An English newspaper deplored the "nationalist" content of Irish education. Soon afterwards Irish editions of popular English papers appeared on the news-stands. An Irish publisher merged with an English and became in the words of the "Sunday Times" the disseminator of "revisionist" (pro-British) Irish history. A whole school of anti-national academic writing came into existence, some of it financed by ad hoc "trusts". Too many apparently unconnected accidents pointed in the one direction for an overall design to be excluded.

The adherence of Ireland to the EEC in 1973 gave the NATO powers more direct influence over Irish policy. The Republic joined the EEC because of the economic dependence of a partitioned country on the country that had partitioned it. At the time two-thirds of Ireland's foreign trade was with Britain. Although there is nothing in the Treaty of Rome about military or security matters, there is no doubt that political matters obtrude all the time. In the bargaining and horsetrading of economic discussions it would be strange indeed if the subject of foreign policy never entered the balance.

Moreover, side by side with the formal institution of the EEC has grown up the so-called Political Cooperation Procedure, whereby member states regularly consult together in order to "harmonise" foreign policy positions. Harmony is not always achieved, but the result has been a weakening of the determination of the Republic to maintain an independent stand. Irish policy within the UNO has shifted towards that of NATO on a number of questions. Today Ireland abstains on issues on which she would formerly have opposed Britain, France and Germany. Over the US hostages the Republic voted for sanctions though she had no quarrel with Iran. The same applied in the case of the joint EEC sanctions against Poland. Initially the Republic backed EEC sanctions against Argentina, but the government was compelled to bow to public opinion after the sinking of the Belgrano, much to the fury of Mrs Thatcher's government.

Public opinion in the Republic has become increasingly alarmed at the pro-NATO drift in Irish foreign policy. Fresh disclosures come every week, for example on February 14, 1984, the Sunday Press revealed that there were 140 British spies operating in the Republic and that the spy-centre at Cheltenham could if necessary monitor any telephone conversation inside the Republic. The result is the spectacular growth of the peace movement. Irish CND has become the largest sincle political pressure group in thestate. It is demanding a commitment to permanent military neutrality to be inserted in the constitution. At the same time since the ecological effects of any substantial nuclear exchange would not spare neutrals, public opinion is seeking means by which Irish influence can be used to greater effect for the purpose of preserving world peace. The role of Sweden is sometimes referred to in this connection. The demand for the enshrinement of neutrality in the Irish constitution has the support of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions which is an all-Ireland body, and has substantial support in the six counties. Indeed the area of peace might be one where the whole people of the Island might be able to join hands at once.

In Ireland we see the people of a small country the majority of whom are anxious to restore the integrity of their national territory, to preserve their national independence and military neutrality, and play a part in international efforts to safe-guard world peace. That unity, independence and neutrality, indeed their very existence, is threatened by the forces of imperialism and war. That this stand is being taken by Ireland is to the advantage of the majority of the people of Britain. What is necessary is that more people in Britain recognise the reality of the Irish question and recognise the unconditional right of the Irish people to unity, independence and neutrality. On this basis there should be the utmost possible extension of fraternal relations between the peace movements of the two countries.

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