



THE EASTER UPRISING OF 1916

The Easter Uprising of 1916, one of the most bloody and politically important revolts in Irish history, almost did not happen at all. Some say it would have been better if it hadn't. Others believe that without that ill-fated rebellion, Irish freedom would never have been won. Whatever its influence on later events, the revolution got off to a shaky start.

With Britain fighting the Germans, the Irish republican rebels figured it was an opportune time to rise. A Home Rule Act, which was the ability for Ireland to have a governing body separate from British parliament that could make decisions on Ireland's behalf, had been offered, but was so full of holes, it was worthless. When the disillusioned and angry Irish asked Britain's enemies, the Germans, for help, the Germans offered 20,000 rifles which would be transported aboard a German ship. The ship and its cargo were to dock on the Kerry coast on April 20, 1916 and would be led to shore by an Irish pilot boat. All the plans were set, but at the last minute, the rebels' military counsel decided it would be best for the guns to arrive after the rising, rather than before. They sent a message to the Germans, requesting the delay, but the communication was intercepted and never delivered.

The ship arrived as planned on April 20th, but was not met by the prearranged pilot boat. The ship cruised up and down the coast but British ships intercepted it. The German captain sank the ship rather than allow the ship and all of its cargo to fall into enemy hands, and the 20,000 rifles succumbed to a watery grave.

Leader Padraig Pearse and his compatriots in the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) went ahead without the weapons. The plan was to take control of central Dublin, beginning with the Dublin Post Office, where they would set up headquarters. Although the British responded immediately and gave it all they had, they were surprised at how valiantly and skillfully the Irish rebels had fought. Strongholds, manned by only a few rebels, held their positions for long, bloody periods, taking far more casualties than they suffered. At Mount Street Bridge, the British troops honestly thought they were battling about 200 rebels; there were 17!

The English shelled the Post Office, severely damaging the once handsome building and killing more than a few civilians in the process. When the Post Office was set on fire, Pearse had surrendered in the interest of

preventing further bloodshed. In the end, the death toll for the day was 64 rebels, 130 British and approximately 300 civilians.

Although the rebels had thought themselves fighting for the common Irishman, the Irish were not all pleased about their efforts. Dubliners were angry with the resulting heavy civilian casualties, not to mention the ruin of their beautiful city. The rest of the country was not enthralled with their actions either. For the most part, the general public either considered the IRB fools or showed a marked apathy about the whole bloody affair – that is until the executions began.

Britain took a very hard stand against the rebels; little or no mercy was shown. Beginning on May 3, 1916, and continuing for a week, they executed 15 rebels. Some of the cases were particularly pathetic and unjust. Willie Pearse was shot only because he was unlucky enough to be Padraig Pearse's brother. An Irish rebel named James Connolly, with gangrenous wounds in his legs from battle, had to be carried to his execution site and tied in a chair before being shot.

When the Irish heard of these gruesome details, they sided with the rebels and the dead leaders became martyrs, sacrificed on the altar for Erin's freedom. Suddenly, what had become an ill fated, badly organized, unpopular uprising was an event to rally around. Without the 1916 uprising, unsuccessful as it may have seemed at the time, the Irish might never have gained their independence.

The Easter Uprising of 1916 succeeded in swinging public opinion to the side of those fighting for the Irish independence from Britain, but the actual separation did not come right away. Home Rule was still an unfulfilled dream for the Irish Catholics, a goal that seemed to move farther out of sight with each passing day. But in 1917, a glimmer of hope appeared on the horizon in the form of a tall, charismatic fellow named Michael Collins. Maybe those heroes didn't die in vain after all.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT MONTH – MICHAEL COLLINS, COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF THE IRISH FREE STATE ARMY

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