

One hundred years since Ireland's Easter Rising—Part three

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Bolshevism and the Easter Rising

This is final part of a three-part series on the Easter Rising in Ireland. Part one is available [here](#); part 2 is available [here](#).

Drawing the necessary political lessons from 1916 and its aftermath is only possible through a careful study of the writings of Lenin and Trotsky.

Whereas Connolly after 1914 focused his energies chiefly on preparing an armed uprising in alliance with bourgeois nationalist forces, the two foremost leaders of the Russian Revolution of 1917 emphasised the need for an implacable political struggle against all forms of opportunism and insisted on the need for an internationalist orientation in the development of revolutionary tactics and strategy. This was the significance of Lenin's determined struggle against the Mensheviks from 1903 onwards, and Trotsky's elaboration of the theory of Permanent Revolution.

Writing months after the Easter Rising, in July 1916, Lenin sharply criticised Karl Radek, who took a critical view of the uprising. Lenin denounced Radek's position of calling the Easter Rising a "putsch" as a "monstrously doctrinaire and pedantic assessment" of the situation. He continued:

"The term 'putsch', in its scientific sense, may be employed only when the attempt at insurrection has revealed nothing but a circle of conspirators or stupid maniacs, and has aroused no sympathy among the masses. The centuries-old Irish national movement, having passed through various stages and combinations of class interest, manifested itself, in particular, in a mass Irish National Congress in America, (*Vorwärts*, March 20, 1916) which called for Irish independence; it also manifested itself in street fighting conducted by a section of the urban petty-bourgeoisie and a section of the workers after a long period of mass agitation, demonstrations, suppression of newspapers, etc. Whoever calls such a rebellion a 'putsch' is either a hardened reactionary, or a doctrinaire hopelessly incapable of envisaging a social revolution as a living phenomenon." (V.I. Lenin, "The Discussion on Self Determination Summed Up," *Collected Works: Vol. 22*, pp320-360)

Lenin understood the inevitability and necessity of rebellions by smaller nations against imperialist oppression, but he also realised that they could not succeed in isolation and that it fell to the working class to lead the struggle against imperialism to final victory:

"To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty-bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletariat and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.—to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution," he wrote.

Lenin continued, "The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real

anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene. ... It is the misfortune of the Irish that they rose prematurely, before the European revolt of the proletariat had had time to mature."

The successful conquest of power by the Bolsheviks in Russia, only 18 months after the Easter Rising, was possible only due to the years-long political, theoretical and organisational struggle waged by Lenin to establish the political independence of the working class through the building of the Bolsheviks—in direct opposition to all tendencies that took a conciliatory position in relation to the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois democrats. Lenin emphatically rejected any illusions in the revolutionary capacities of the bourgeoisie, insisting instead that regardless of its rhetorical commitment to democracy it would act to suppress and betray future revolutionary struggles.

On the eve of the Russian Revolution, he adopted Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated that in underdeveloped countries where bourgeois-democratic tasks still had to be fought for, they could be achieved only by the working class leading behind it the rural poor in a struggle for the conquest of political power and socialism. A precondition for the success of such a programme was the embrace of an international perspective and an acceptance that no revolutionary struggle for socialism could be led to completion within the framework of the existing nation state.

Trotsky, writing around the same time as Lenin, in *Nashe Slovo*, took Plekhanov, the founder of the Russian Marxist movement, but by that time a Menshevik, to task for his opposition to the Easter Rising, which he considered to be "harmful" for "the cause of freedom."

Trotsky described those who raised barricades and fought the British army in the streets of Dublin as "heroic" and added that the working class had "injected its class hatred of militarism" into the movement.

His brief essay provides an excellent application of the theory of Permanent Revolution to the Irish situation. He noted how the Irish rebellion demonstrated the incapacity of the bourgeoisie to carry through those national democratic tasks that remained outstanding in Ireland. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these tasks were indissolubly bound up with the fight for socialism under the leadership of the working class.

He wrote, "The general national movement, however it was expressed in the heads of the nationalist dreamers, did not materialise at all. The Irish countryside did not rise up. The Irish bourgeoisie, as also the upper, more influential layer of the Irish intelligentsia, remained on the sidelines. The urban workers fought and died, together with revolutionary enthusiasts from the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. The historical basis for the national revolution had disappeared even in backward Ireland."

Trotsky explained how, completely dependent on its ties to imperialism, the Irish bourgeoisie as it had developed over previous decades, emerged with undisguised hostility towards the working class.

Although Trotsky did not mention Connolly by name, he identified the objective pressures at work that brought about his adaptation to the

nationalists. This was not based on picking apart Connolly's tactical errors or personal failings, but through a careful analysis of the historical and political factors shaping the evolution of the Irish proletariat:

"The young Irish working class, taking shape in an atmosphere saturated with the heroic recollections of national rebellions, and clashing with the egoistic, narrow-minded, imperial arrogance of British trade unionism, naturally swing between nationalism and syndicalism, ever ready to unite these two concepts in their revolutionary consciousness. It attracts the young intelligentsia and individual nationalist enthusiasts, who, in their turn, supply the movement with a preponderance of the green flag over the red."

Trotsky concluded his article by noting that the Easter Rising provided a foretaste of what was to come, writing, "The undoubted personal courage, representing the hopes and methods of the past, is over. But the historical role of the Irish proletariat is only beginning." (Leon Trotsky, "On the Events in Dublin," in Trotsky's *Writings on Britain*, Vol. 3, London: New Park, p168-169)

The aftermath

Trotsky's prognosis was borne out by subsequent developments.

With the Easter Rising's brutal suppression, the socialist movement in Ireland lost not only its most prominent leader in Connolly. The overwhelming majority of deaths in the fighting were suffered by members of the Irish Citizen Army (ICA), which made up a critical section of the political vanguard of the working class.

The ICA was never again a serious political force. But the Irish working class struggle in opposition to the war and British imperialism continued to radicalise. By 1918, general strikes were called to resist attempts by the government in London to impose conscription in the wake of the German spring offensive on the western front. The Russian Revolution inspired workers in Ireland, with seizures of land and landowners' property occurring throughout 1918. Strikes were called to stop the transportation of supplies for the British army and troops, and to force the release of republican prisoners. A general strike took place in Belfast, cutting across the sectarian divisions between Ulster and the rest of Ireland, on the issue of a shorter workweek. British rule in Ireland was so shaken by this that troops were sent to Belfast on February 15, 1919, to push for a settlement of the dispute, which the reformist labour leaders soon enforced.

Warnings of the influence of Bolshevism were widespread in the bourgeois press. The 1918 congress of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (ILPTUC) passed resolutions calling for workers' control of the means of production and support for the Bolshevik revolution.

Time and again, workers showed their determination to fight. Strikes broke out across the whole country. It was out of one such strike, a general strike called by the Limerick Trades and Labour Council to oppose the declaration of a special military zone in the area by the British Army, that the short-lived Limerick soviet was established in April 1919. During its 12 days of existence, it took on the responsibilities of distributing food and other necessities to the workers and directing city administration, and it even printed its own money. The arrival of the Irish Labour Party/Trades Union Congress leadership put paid to the soviet, which was wound up on April 27.

However, the lack of political leadership offered to the strikes and mass struggles of the working class by the reformist union leadership handed the political initiative to the nationalists.

Sinn Fein was not involved in the Easter Rising and only adopted the call for a republic in its aftermath. But it was allowed to become the sole political force offering leadership to the mounting anger towards British

imperialism.

Founded in 1907, Sinn Fein initially aimed to achieve Irish independence through a combination of electing MPs to the British parliament, who would then boycott their mandates, and by establishing a general council and other institutions in Ireland that would refuse to pay taxes to London and make Ireland ungovernable. Ireland would become independent, but be part of a dual monarchy system modelled on the lines of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In December 1918, Sinn Fein swept the board in parliamentary elections, and implemented their boycott of the House of Commons before declaring an Irish parliament (Dail) in January 1919. The Soviet government was the first and only government to initially recognise Ireland's independent parliament.

Working class strikes and protests persisted throughout the (1919-1921) war of independence with Britain. But the Labour Party and trade union leadership maintained their political subordination to Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein's Eamon De Valera, the first president of the Dail, was welcomed at the trade union convention in August 1921 with a standing ovation. Proving once again its organic incapacity to lead the revolution to its conclusion, the nationalist leaders brought the revolutionary struggles to a premature end by agreeing to the Anglo-Irish Accord with British imperialism later that year, which sealed the partition of Ireland by establishing the Irish Free State in the 26 counties outside of Ulster.

The Irish Free State, far from guaranteeing religious and civil liberties, was dominated by the overbearing influence of the Catholic Church.

A small minority, led by Connolly's son Roddy, had declared openly for the Third (Communist) International when it was founded in May 1919 at the instigation of Lenin and Trotsky. The Socialist Party of Ireland had organised a demonstration of 10,000 in October 1917 in support of the Bolshevik seizure of power. Roddy Connolly led the establishment of the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI) in 1921, having attended the second congress of the Communist International in 1920. The CPI opposed the Anglo-Irish treaty, and demanded the adoption of socialist policies to continue the struggle against British imperialism and came under sustained attack by both the paramilitary Black and Tans created by London and by the Irish Republican Army.

However, the significant progress made by the CPI during its brief existence was to be derailed by the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet regime and of the Communist International, under the leadership of Joseph Stalin. In 1924, the Comintern dissolved the CPI in favour of establishing relations with Jim Larkin's personal political vehicle, the Irish Workers League—a relationship that barely lasted four years.

The Easter Rising today

From its inception, the Irish state seized on the events of Easter 1916 as evidence of Ireland's national resistance to Britain. Connolly was co-opted as a patriotic icon and his statue stands today in Dublin. As the government notes on its website promoting state-sponsored commemoration events to take place throughout Easter week, "Formal State celebrations will, as they have always done, mark 1916 as the moment when Irish nationalism joined forces with a revolutionary, cultural and language movement to forge an irresistible movement towards self-determination. The Proclamation of the Republic, drawing on the ideals of that generation, has remained an inspiration over succeeding generations."

But assertions of a supposed continuity with the revolutionary and democratic aspirations of 1916 ring hollow when made by the increasingly discredited Irish capitalist state and the openly right-wing,

pro-big business and anti-working-class policies pursued by all the major parties.

In the wake of the global capitalist crisis in 2008, all of Ireland's establishment parties participated in the implementation of a multibillion austerity programme aimed at offloading the crisis onto the backs of the working class and bailing out the banks. The result is an Irish society today that is more unequal than it has ever been in decades, with the number of billionaires doubling between 2008 and 2013. The vast increase in poverty and joblessness and the destruction of public services have been overseen by the trade union bureaucracy and pseudo-left parties, who have ensured that no fundamental challenge to the current social order from below has been possible.

One hundred years after the Easter Rising, it is the warning made by Connolly in 1897 and the political struggle waged by Lenin and Trotsky that have been proven correct. The formation of an Irish capitalist state did not provide a way out of the grinding poverty and exploitation faced by working people. The nationalist leadership proved utterly incapable of uniting Ireland, helping create the conditions instead for decades of fratricidal, sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland.

The lesson to be drawn from 1916 is not the dishonest propaganda about a steady march to independence and national glory, as the ruling elite would have it. Instead, the experiences of the century that has followed on from the Easter Rising have confirmed the need for the Irish working class to create its own party committed to a socialist programme and an internationalist strategy.

The advanced workers and youth must absorb the essential lessons of how a capitulation to nationalism led to the political degeneration of the parties of the Second and Third International and educate themselves on the fundamental struggle waged by Trotsky against Stalinism for the perspective of world socialist revolution. Today, more than ever, the Irish working class must link its fate to that of the workers of Britain, the European continent and beyond. This means building an Irish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Concluded



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