

**Maximilian Kolbe Stiftung
15th European Workshop
On dealing with the past of Auschwitz burdened by violence**

World War II and Auschwitz as remembered in Ireland

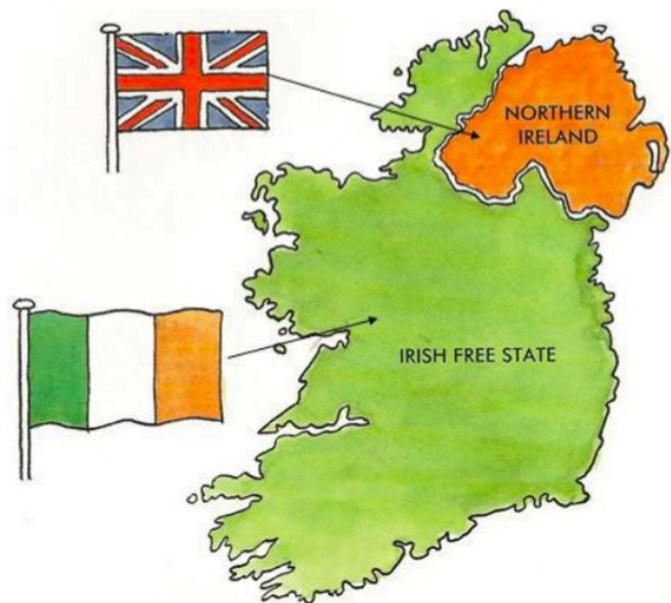
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15th August 2024**

Introduction

The Irish experience of World War II and the memory of that experience may appear strange and somewhat odd in the context of a European workshop that brings together so many people from countries that were to the forefront of the horrors of that terrible conflict. Ireland was largely spared the horrific destruction of life and infrastructure that characterised the conflict on mainland Europe, and in general, there is no sense of national trauma in the Irish consciousness from that period.

Historical-political context

To gain an insight into the Irish experience of World War II, it is necessary to understand the political context of the time. Beginning in 1916, during World War I, a period of revolutionary activity in Ireland led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. This established the Irish Free State which created a partition on the island of Ireland. The northern part of the island remained in the United Kingdom, while the southern part became a self-governing dominion within the British empire. This conferred a large measure of independence on the southern state, although the United Kingdom maintained control of a number of strategic ports, and ultimate authority rested with the British monarch through his Governor General in Dublin.



Through the 1920s and 1930s, following a bitter and divisive civil war due to conflict over the terms of the treaty, successive governments of the Irish Free

State gradually dismantled the terms of the Treaty. This culminated in the Constitution of Ireland of 1937 which officially abolished terms of the Treaty that had been painful sources of political division such as the office of Governor General and the Oath of Allegiance to the British monarch. In 1938, following a prolonged economic war between Ireland and the United Kingdom, the “treaty ports” located in the Irish Free State were handed over to the control of the Dublin government. In a period of less than two decades, the limited freedom conferred by the Treaty had been exploited to achieve a greater freedom: the Constitution of 1937 established an independent republic in all but name. However, this new independence came at a cost: the border separating the two parts of the island of Ireland now became an international frontier, and the nationalist (and Catholic) population of Northern Ireland felt abandoned by the southern state now officially known as Éire.

The Jewish community

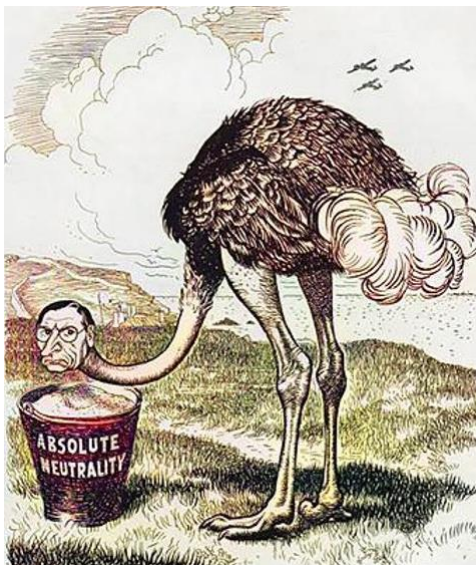
It is worth briefly considering the experience of the Jewish community in Ireland at this time. In 1940, the Jewish population of Éire was estimated at 5,000, most of whom had relocated from Lithuania in the early 1900s. It was therefore considered a small community, although its concentration in Dublin meant that it was nonetheless visible. In general, there was no political or social antagonism towards the Jewish community, although an isolated incident in the city of Limerick which gave rise to the boycott of Jewish businesses on foot of a fiery sermon by a Catholic priest remains notorious. This was later described by a prominent member of the Jewish community as “an aberration in an otherwise almost perfect history of Ireland and its treatment of the Jews”¹. Significantly, in the context of wider European anti-Jewish political sentiment at the time, the 1937 Constitution of Ireland gave specific protection to Jews among other religious groups.

Declaration of War

Following the declaration of war by the British government on 3rd September 1939, the government of Éire declared neutrality. This had been anticipated. The newly independent state simply did not have the military resources to participate in any large-scale conflict never mind defend itself. Having only recently emerged from a period of revolution and civil war, followed by a protracted period of economic hardship due to an economic war with the

¹ Joe Briscoe, quoted by Ray Rivlin in *Shalom Ireland: a Social History of Jews in Modern Ireland*.

United Kingdom, the newly independent state had precious few financial resources to engage in a war. Ideologically, the state could not countenance going to war *alongside* the military power that continued to occupy a large portion of the island. But by the same token, neither could it countenance going to war *against* the same military power. Apart from some fringe elements, there was no sympathy for National Socialism in mainstream Irish politics. Successive Dublin governments had successfully steered the political life of the young state through the extremes of communism and fascism which had embroiled so much of Europe. In any event, the social and cultural links between Ireland and the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, would never have led to considering Germany as an ally; only the most extreme anti-British revolutionary elements would have countenanced such a scenario. Eventually, the state's incapacity to participate in a war, coupled with its inability to enter into an alliance with either warring party, coalesced in a promotion of sovereignty and independence that had to be protected at all costs. The independence that had been hard won was not to be surrendered.



The consequences of Irish neutrality

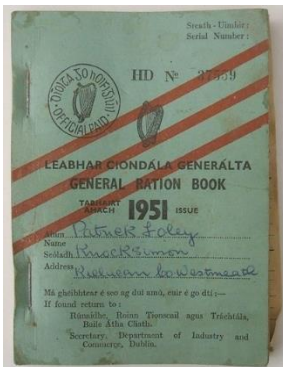
The neutrality of Éire during World War II succeeded in its aim to protect its sovereignty and independence, but this undoubtedly came at a significant cost. With the northern part of the island at war due to its status within the United Kingdom, the international border was further hardened, leading to decades of division between communities on either side of the border, and a hardening of social, political, and religious divisions within Northern Ireland. In the eyes of the Unionist population, the Dublin government was

deemed untrustworthy, while the Nationalist population felt further abandoned.

Internationally, Éire became isolated. Having demonstrated significant leadership and diplomatic ability in the League of Nations during the inter-war

years, Éire now experienced the humiliation of not being admitted to the newly established United Nations. The sense that Éire was viewed internationally as weak, cowardly, and untrustworthy contributed to its isolation on the global stage.

From a socio-economic perspective, Éire's neutral stance plunged the country and its population into economic hardship which was to last decades. The period of World War II was called – and is still remembered!



– as “The Emergency”, which illustrates the memory of poverty, hardship, and compulsory economic, agricultural, and labour measures rather than the experience of war. Food-rationing continued for many years after the War, and emigration remained high until the 1970s. Due to its non-participation in the conflict, Éire was excluded from the Marshall Plan which was so successful in contributing to the rebuilding of post-war Europe.

For various reasons – because of historic family allegiance, military tradition, or quite simply, because of poverty – thousands of young Irishmen join the British armed forces. Approximately 150,000 British soldiers named next of kin with Irish addresses². Taking up arms in the military force that had relatively recently carried out atrocities in Ireland and which continued to “occupy” a part of the country, did not meet with societal approval³. This would be further complicated for veterans and their families into the 1960s and onwards when the security role of the British Army in Northern Ireland would contribute to the injustices imposed on the Nationalist (Catholic) population. Éire's neutrality also created tensions for the diaspora whose sons were in the armies of Britain, USA, Canada, Australia, etc.

A strange mixture of pride and guilt

Perhaps the memory of World War II in Ireland, especially in the state now known as the Republic of Ireland, can best be described as a peculiar mixture of pride and guilt. There is some pride in how the young, fragile state asserted its sovereignty and independence at a critical moment of world history. There is pride in how such a small state resisted immense international pressure to join the war effort, in the face of threats of invasion from the United Kingdom, the U.S.A., and Germany. And there is justifiable pride in how the general

² This figure refers to both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland.

³ As a priest, I have celebrated the funerals of Irish-born British Army veterans of World War II. Their participation in the War as soldiers in the British Army continues to be a complex legacy for their families.

population embraced the national effort to be self-sufficient in terms of food and fuel.

On the other hand, there is a perceptible guilt that at a crucial moment in world history, the Irish state did not participate in the struggle against the brutal and destructive totalitarianism of Nazism. Irish people who are justifiably proud of their nation's heroic defence of its sovereignty must also carry the guilt and shame of inaction to prevent or counteract the atrocities committed in the name of Nazism across Europe.

Ireland's neutrality today

Ireland participates at the heart of the peace project that is the European Union since 1973. Two separate jurisdictions continue to inhabit the island of Ireland but a peace process in Northern Ireland, together with an increase in co-operation between the Dublin and London governments, have resulted in a softening of the frontier, and greater participation in the democratic process by all communities on the island. The Brexit process threatened to harden the border between the two jurisdictions again, but so far this has been avoided thanks to intense diplomatic efforts on all sides.

Conversely, the Brexit process has highlighted the place of the Republic of Ireland in the European Union. This raises the question of the Republic's neutrality today. Perhaps we can say that our mixed pride and guilt must inform our neutrality today so that Ireland can become a voice for weaker, vulnerable nations whose sovereignty is threatened, while also resolving to confront the evil of totalitarianism.

