

My Life for Ireland (Mein Leben Fur Irland)

Germany | 1941 | 90 minutes

Credits

Director	Max Kimmich
Screenplay	Franz Baumann Toni Huppertz Max W. Kimmich
Photography	Richard Angst
Music	Alois Melichar

Cast

Maeve Fleming	Anna Dammann
Robert Devoy	René Deltgen
Sir George Beverley	Paul Wegener
Michael O'Brien	Werner Hinz

Synopsis

Set in an English boarding school, Mein Leben für Irland tells of the Irish revolt against British domination. The sons of Irish rebels are sent to an English school to become good British patriots, but they secretly await the day they can fight for their country's independence against the British, who are depicted as treacherous oppressors bent on world hegemony. It was aimed largely at the Hitlerjugend market and was directed with assurance by Max Kimmich, who happened to be Joseph Goebbels' brother-in-law. Especially effective is the ambitiously mounted battle scene in the noir-lit streets of Dublin; this dynamic montage sequence was brilliantly shot by the incomparable Richard Angst (*Die weisse Hölle vom Piz Palü*).



Irish neutrality during World War II

The policy of Irish neutrality during World War II was adopted by Dáil Éireann at the instigation of Éamon de Valera, its Taoiseach upon the outbreak of hostilities in Europe and maintained throughout the conflict. De Valera refrained from joining either the Allies or Axis powers. While the possibility of both a German or a United Kingdom invasion were discussed in the Dáil, de Valera's ruling party, Fianna Fáil, supported his policy for the duration of the war. This period is known in Ireland as the Emergency, owing to the wording of the constitutional article employed to suspend normal government of the country.

Pursuing a policy of neutrality required attaining a balance between the strict observance of non-alignment and the taking of practical steps in order to repel or discourage an invasion from either of the two concerned parties.

Prewar relationship with Britain

Ireland was in 1939 nominally a dominion of the British Empire and a member of the Commonwealth. The nation had gained de facto independence from the United Kingdom after the Anglo-Irish War, and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 declared Ireland to be a 'sovereign, independent, democratic state'. A new constitution was adopted by a plebiscite in 1937. The Statute of Westminster meant that unlike in World War I, Britain's entry into the war no longer automatically included its dominions. Relations between Ireland and Britain had been strained for many years; until 1938 the two states had engaged in the Anglo-Irish Trade War.

Nevertheless, Ireland did not sever its vestigial connection with the Crown and it was not until the Republic of Ireland Act 1948 that the final nominal link was severed. No representatives of the new state attended Commonwealth conferences or participated in its affairs, but Ireland remained a legal member until the UK's Ireland Act 1949, which accepted the declaration of a Republic and formally terminated its membership of the Commonwealth.

Internal affairs

Irish neutrality was overwhelmingly supported by the population of Ireland, although a minority favoured fighting against the Axis powers. Irish citizens could serve in the British armed forces, as around 38,554 in the British Army did, as well as in the merchant navy and in British factories. Likewise a minority of Irish Republicans sided with Germany, believing that a German victory might bring about a United Ireland. Moreover, in a war in which the United Kingdom was involved, neutrality was perceived as the clearest expression of Irish sovereignty, something the Taoiseach fervently sought.

In response to claims that Ireland had failed to take up the moral fight against Nazism, the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Joe Walshe, answered in 1941 that: "... small nations like Ireland do not and cannot assume a role as defenders of just causes except [their] own ... Existence of our own people comes before all other considerations ... no government has the right to court certain destruction for its people; they have to take the only chance of survival and stay out."

On the day following the German invasion of Poland, a hastily convened Dáil declared an immediate state of emergency. The Emergency Powers Act that the day's debate culminated in came into effect one day later, on September 3, 1939. It was modelled extensively on the British draft worked-out during the Sudeten crisis a year before. In some respects the Irish act was regarded as more drastic. The key provisions were as follows: "The government may, whenever and so often as they think fit, make by order (in this act referred to as an emergency order), such provisions as are, in the opinion of the government, necessary or expedient for securing the public safety, or the preservation of the state, or for the maintenance of public order, or the provision and control of supplies and services to the life of the community."

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With such sweeping executive powers, de Valera's cabinet set out to tackle any problems that might arise and curb any inconsistencies with the nation's policy of neutrality. Censorship of radio newscasts meant newsreaders were confined to reading, without comment, the dispatches of each side, while weather forecasts were halted to preclude the inadvertent assistance of planes or ships involved in the war. Public expressions of opinion appearing to favour one side or the other were repressed. The word 'war' itself was avoided, with the Government referring to the situation in Europe from 1939 to 1945 as 'the Emergency'.

Prelude to war

The Irish government had good reason to be concerned lest the War in Europe re-open the wounds of the Civil War. There were pro- and anti-fascist movements in Ireland, and the IRA continued to pursue its own agenda.

Former Old IRA commander and founder of the Fine Gael Party General Eoin O'Duffy became a leader of the fascist Blueshirt organisation in 1932-33. He was active in creating links between the IRA and German Nazi politicians. The pro-Nazi sympathies and anti-semitism of some Irish politicians during WW2 were once airbrushed from history, but Ireland is now beginning to acknowledge them. In this context, it is relevant to note that two Irish contingents fought on opposing sides of the 1937 Spanish Civil War, O'Duffy's pro-Nationalist (Fascist) Irish Brigade and the pro-Republican Irish contingent of the International Brigades, though neither had government support.

In the six months prior to the onset of war there had been an escalation of Irish Republican Army violence and a bombing campaign in Britain under the new leadership of Seán Russell. De Valera, who had tolerated the IRA as recently as 1936, responded with the Offences against the State Act, 1939. Upon the outbreak of the main conflict in September, subversive activity was regarded as endangering the security of the state. There were fears that the United Kingdom, eager to secure Irish ports for their air and naval forces, might use the attacks as a pretext for an invasion of Ireland and a forcible seizure of the assets in question. Furthermore, the possibility that the IRA (in line with the Irish nationalist tradition of courting allies in Europe) might link up with German agents, thereby compromising Irish non-involvement, was considered.

This threat was real: Russell, upon the outbreak of war, travelled to Berlin in order to press for troops and arms to be sent to Ireland. In response, many German agents were parachuted in the Republic of Ireland. De Valera prepared for the eventuality of a German incursion and G2 (the Irish military intelligence branch) were able to detain most of the agents within days, with the last apprehension in 1941. Active republicans were interned at the Curragh or given prison sentences; six men were hanged under newly legislated acts of treason and three more died on hunger strike. IRA chief of staff Seán Russell died in a U-boat off the Irish coast as part of Operation Dove; the Germans also later came to realize they had overestimated the abilities of the IRA. By 1943, the IRA had all but ceased to exist. Neutrality was popular, despite rationing and economic pressure.

External affairs

Policy

For de Valera the emphasis of Irish neutrality was on preservation of the Irish Republic and an expression of sovereignty, so committing to the policy accomplished both rational and ideological goals. While the revolutionaries of the Irish War of Independence were ready to enter into alliances with the enemies of Britain to secure Irish independence, they realised that continuing such a policy after achieving independence would be dangerously provocative, a point de Valera made as early as February 1920: "*An independent Ireland would see its own independence in jeopardy the moment it saw the independence of Britain seriously threatened. Mutual self-interest would make the people of these two islands, if both independent, the closest of allies in a moment of real national danger to either.*"

This statement reflected a point de Valera had made as early as 1918 (when writing to President of the United States Woodrow Wilson, seeking that the United States formally recognise the Irish Republic as an independent state): "*Ireland is quite ready by treaty to ensure England's safety against the danger of foreign powers seeking to use Ireland as a basis of attack against her.*"

Months before the outbreak of war, de Valera gave a statement to the Associated Press which appeared in newspapers on February 20, 1939: "*The desire of the Irish people and the desire of the Irish Government is to keep our nation out of war. The aim of Government policy is to maintain and to preserve our neutrality in the event of war. The best way and the only way to secure our aim is to put ourselves in the best position possible to defend ourselves so that no one can hope to attack us or violate our territory with impunity. We know, of course, that should attack come from a power other than Great Britain, Great Britain in her own interest must help us to repel it.*"

Offer to end the Partition of Ireland in 1940

In June 1940, during and after the Battle of France, Britain offered to end the Partition of Ireland quickly if Ireland would abandon its neutrality and join the war against Germany and Italy. De Valera had campaigned against partition and the 1937 Constitution drafted by him had an irredentist clause describing the State as the "whole island of Ireland", but he declined the offer. After the war he again called repeatedly for the ending of partition. The offer and his rejection remained secret until a biography was published in 1970.

Mixed effects

In April 1941, the question of Ireland's entry into the war was again raised when the Australian Prime Minister Menzies paid a visit to Belfast and Dublin for private discussions with Andrews, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland and De Valera. Subsequently Menzies reported to Churchill that the complexity of the questions of Irish unity and sovereignty meant that there was little possibility of Ireland abandoning its policy of neutrality.

Without the Irish treaty ports (which the United Kingdom had released a year prior to the war), an independent Ireland posed a serious disadvantage to the military capability and safety of British fighting and trade, risking the possibility of invasion if that disadvantage ever proved too great. If Irish sovereignty was to be maintained, then neutrality would have to be steered consciously to the benefit of British

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interests, as these were its own: at once to aid the British war effort but also to forestall invasion by Britain to regain the treaty ports. Ireland, like other neutrals was '...neutral for the power that potentially threatened them most.'

In this regard Viscount Cranborne acknowledged at the war's end that the Irish Government had '...been willing to accord us any facilities which would not be regarded as overtly prejudicing their attitude to neutrality', collaborating with the British war cabinet. (See below for complete text.) The pattern of co-operation between British and Irish agencies began upon the onset of war when de Valera indicated his acquiescence to (limited) use of Irish airspace (the "Donegal Corridor" — the narrow strip of Irish territory between County Fermanagh and the sea) by Allied forces, and to patrolling coastal points. While de Valera rejected British appeals to use Irish ports and harbour facilities directly, de Valera was, according to M.E. Collins, 'more friendly than strict neutrality should have allowed.' The cooperation that emerged allowed for meetings to take place to consider events after German troops had overrun neutral Denmark, Norway and Belgium. Three days after the fall of France, Irish and British defence officials met to discuss how British troops could, strictly at de Valera's invitation, occupy Ireland upon the event of a German landing there in order to expel foreign troops attempting to use her as a back door to later invade Britain. The meetings continued, as Cranborne described, throughout the war, facilitating further dialogue.

Before the war began, de Valera had held a meeting with career diplomat Dr. Eduard Hempel, the German Minister in Ireland since 1938. The meetings discussed Ireland's close trade links with the United Kingdom and the ease with which Britain could invade her if its interests were threatened. He in turn communicated to Berlin that such was the case that it 'rendered it inevitable for the Irish government to show a certain consideration for Britain' and urged war officials to avoid any action that would legitimise a British invasion of Ireland. In mid-June 1940, Secretary of External Affairs Joe Walshe expressed his 'great admiration for the German achievements.' Hempel, for his part, wrote to Germany of 'the great and decisive importance even to Ireland of the changed situation in world affairs and of the obvious weakness of the democracies.' Hempel might well have known better of Irish intentions, having earlier described a native custom 'to say agreeable things without meaning everything that is said.'

Other examples of Irish attitudes towards Nazi Germany found expression in mid-1940 in de Valera's Chargé d'Affaires in Berlin, William Warnock, 'whose "unquestionable" hostility to Britain could easily be interpreted as sympathetic for National Socialism.' Academic J.J. Lee questioned just how much of Warnock's zeal towards Hitler's Reichstag speech on July 19 was genuine enthusiasm for the 'international justice' that could be expected after Germany's victory, as opposed to an adherence to the instructions of Dublin to please oneself to the potential victors. Three years later, by 1944, the orientation of the war and of Irish relations to Germany had turned about-face, with the threat of a German victory no longer imminent. In that climate the Irish Government, once so ready to 'say agreeable things', Hempel remarked, had become 'unhelpful and evasive'.

The United States Ambassador to Ireland, David Gray, stated that he once asked de Valera what he would do if German paratroopers "liberated Derry". According to Gray, de Valera was silent for a time and then replied "I don't know".

Condolences on Hitler's death

Ireland maintained a public stance of neutrality to the end by refusing to close the German and Japanese embassies, and the Taoiseach Éamon de Valera signed the book of condolence on Adolf Hitler's death, on May 2, 1945, and personally visited Ambassador Hempel, following standard protocol on the death of a Head of State with an embassy in Ireland. President Douglas Hyde visited Hempel separately on 3 May. At the time the Third Reich was about to surrender unconditionally. The reasoning at international law was that the embassies represented at least the German and Japanese peoples, even as their governments were collapsing. This was not unique; Germany's ambassador to the Holy See, Ernst von Weizsäcker, had remained a member of the diplomatic corps for months after Germany's surrender. In contrast, the equally-neutral Switzerland and Sweden rounded up German embassy officials and expelled them, on the narrower basis that they no longer represented a functioning state.

Ireland, Britain's last Redoubt?

In his book "Wings over Ireland - History of the Irish Air Corps", Donal McCarron gives extensive details on the otherwise secret Rathduff aerodrome (Chapter Nine). He states that as early as the summer of 1940 both governments were worried about the "Doomsday scenario" of a successful invasion of Britain. The RAF would need at least one aerodrome to continue the fight in Ireland and both the Irish and British armies secretly scouted for a site in the south of Ireland. The other airfields of Rineanna near Limerick and Dublin airport and Baldonnel near Dublin would cover other parts of Ireland, so the RAF was keen on a site near the southeast coast.

The Irish Army disagreed, fearing a German invasion would overrun it quickly, so both finally agreed on a site in the south of County Tipperary, in the valley of the river Suir, west of the Galtee Mountains. This also suited the Irish army as they had built a secret command headquarters near a convent school seven miles away to be used in case of invasion. The name "Rathduff" was chosen as a cover because such a name is to be found all over Munster. Both sites were completely out of bounds for all normal military operations.

With Hitler turning towards the USSR in 1941 the chances of an invasion of Britain waned and the Irish Army decided to hold a major exercise to test the planning and training it had been undertaking for four years, in autumn 1942. As part of this, "Rathduff's" secret was partially released, with it serving as the airfield for Ireland's 2nd Division during the exercise. After the exercises "Rathduff" slipped into obscurity, its fields returning to use as the thoroughbred stud farm they had been before.

Taken from Wikipedia

