

From the Easter Rising to Partition: **‘Michael Collins’ & Irish Freedom**

Neil Jordan’s film “Michael Collins” opens with a dramatic recreation of the last, desperate hours of the 1916 Easter Rising, as Padraic Pearse’s Irish Volunteers and James Connolly’s Citizen Army vainly attempted to fight off encircling British forces amid the ruins of Dublin’s General Post Office.

The film has brought forth howls of indignation from the British press. One reason for this reaction is Jordan’s graphic depiction of the brutality of British colonialism. Another is that, while taking a few artistic liberties with details of historical fact, the film tells the story of how Collins—a veteran of Easter Week, the principal post-1916 IRA leader, and a self-described “yob from West Cork”—led an audacious guerrilla campaign from 1919 to 1921 that fought the British state to a stalemate. We see a relatively small band of rebels, enjoying popular support, but armed only with rudimentary weapons and a will to victory, bringing to terms what was then the mightiest empire on earth. In today’s post-Cold War world, where all political initiatives are assumed to come from the top down, such things are not supposed to happen—or ever to have happened.

The film shows how Collins succeeded in penetrating Dublin Castle, the headquarters of British rule, by recruiting a member of the Criminal Intelligence Division (a.k.a. the “murder gang”); how a team of crack British agents, dispatched to Dublin in November 1920 to counter growing IRA success, were shot in their hotel rooms by Collins’ men shortly after their arrival; and how, later that same day, in reprisal, the British opened fire randomly at a football match, killing a dozen civilians. The perpetrators of this massacre were the “Black and Tans,” a band of lumpenized ex-servicemen and criminals, recruited to suppress the rebellion. (Ordinary British soldiers were deemed insufficiently brutal and depraved.) We also see Collins, then the most wanted man in Ireland, jaunting openly through the streets of Dublin on his bicycle, making fools of British intelligence. There are certain historical facts that Britain’s rulers would simply prefer to see forgotten—especially in light of the recent breakdown of the Irish “peace process,” and the partial resumption of military operations by the present-day IRA.

Jordan is less enlightening in his interpretation of the civil war that followed independence. After having gone as far as they thought possible on the military front, the IRA sent a delegation, headed by Collins, to London to negotiate with the British government. The result was a treaty that created a 26-county Irish Free State in the south—with dominion status in the British empire—and the six-county Northern Ireland mini-state that exists to this day. Collins remarked that, by putting his name to the treaty, he was signing his own death warrant.

Indeed he was. The proposed treaty deeply divided

the IRA and the newly created Irish parliament (the *Dáil Éireann*). The principal point of contention was not partition, but the oath of loyalty that the Irish government was required to swear to the British crown. A narrow majority, with Collins as its chief representative, supported the treaty. When the anti-treaty forces (or “irregulars”) seized Dublin’s main municipal offices (the Four Courts) in 1922, British Prime Minister Lloyd George threatened total war on Ireland unless the “Free Staters” drove them out. This they did, with armored cars borrowed from the British. Ireland then witnessed the traumatic spectacle of the two factions, which less than a year earlier had fought shoulder to shoulder against the British empire, murdering one another in a brutal fratricidal war—of which Collins himself was the most famous victim. He was killed in an ambush by irregulars while on military patrol in his native County Cork. He was 31 years old, and left behind an ambiguous legacy.

Collins now figures in the annals of Irish nationalism, on the one hand, as the bold, swashbuckling captain of the only one of many Irish rebellions that was not defeated. On the other hand, he is the “traitor who bargained and sold,” the man responsible for the partition which, in Republican eyes, remains the source of all of Ireland’s ills.

Jordan presents the conflict over the treaty as one between Collins, the realist and peacemaker, and his chief rival, Eamon de Valera, president of the *Dáil*, and future head of the Irish government. De Valera is depicted as an opportunist, who believes that a settlement with Britain is inevitable, but seeks to avoid responsibility for it. He refuses to go to the negotiating table in London and sends Collins instead. When Collins returns, “Dev” cynically exploits anti-treaty sentiment to enhance his own prestige at Collins’ expense. Jordan even suggests that de Valera connived in Collins’ assassination.

That de Valera was indeed an opportunist is amply demonstrated by the fact that, within a few years, he had laid down arms and later went on to head the government of the state he had denounced. He even persecuted those who still held out for a 32-county republic. But the civil war cannot be understood simply as the result of a conflict between two individuals, as Jordan’s film might suggest to the historically uninformed. Nor were all opponents of the treaty opportunists like de Valera. Most saw themselves as fighting to preserve unsullied the goal that nationalists had striven for since the time of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen at the end of the eighteenth century: a totally independent and integral Irish Republic. Several anti-treaty leaders—Cathal Brugha, Liam Mellows, Rory O’Connor—were among the bravest and most honorable of the IRA chiefs.

Moreover, the Free State brought into being by the treaty was hardly a paradigm of human progress. Its cause was embraced by all those forces—capitalists, landlords, the Catholic hierarchy—who wished to end the independence struggle as quickly as possible because they feared the undercurrent of social radicalism it had nurtured.

Like any mass struggle against oppression, the war of independence stirred the hopes and energies of the most exploited sectors of the population. It was also, in its own way, part of the revolutionary wave that swept Europe in the aftermath of World War I and the October Revolution. The more militant elements of the IRA, and of the masses in general, were not unaware of Lenin's defense of the Easter Rising at a time when the social patriots of the Second International were denouncing it as a senseless putsch. Nor did they fail to notice that Trotsky—with the eyes of the world riveted upon him as he negotiated with the German general staff at Brest Litovsk—championed the cause of Ireland's freedom. There was, in fact, widespread sympathy for the Russian Revolution in Ireland at the time.

In the land-hungry south and west, there was also a conscious attempt to follow the Russian example, as poor farmers conducted strikes and sit-ins throughout 1919-23; and in Limerick and elsewhere they even called their organizations "soviets." In Dublin and in smaller cities, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, founded by James Larkin, and subsequently headed by Ireland's preeminent socialist revolutionary, James Connolly, experienced a resurgence. According to one historian, R.F. Foster, "by 1921 the cause of labour was threatening in many areas to displace that of the republic" (*Modern Ireland*, 1988).

Yet, despite the inchoate radicalism of some anti-treaty elements, the "irregulars" were chiefly petty bourgeois in composition and ideology, and therefore unsympathetic to working-class demands. As Foster recounts:

"On both sides of the Treaty divide, the reaction of conservative rural nationalism was predictably hostile to the Labour renaissance. By 1922 IRA Volunteers were being used in some areas as strike-breakers: recovering cattle driven away by rebellious labourers in Meath, protecting non-unionized workers from attack, and acting as arbitrators for lower farm wages in Clare."

Lenin, whose views on the national question were

influenced by Connolly, argued in favor of the right to self-determination because he saw national oppression as an obstacle to class consciousness among the oppressed of colonially subject nations. The hatred of the masses for their foreign rulers, he argued, obscured the role of their home-grown exploiters. Many landlords and capitalists are viewed as—and in fact are—imperialist collaborators. But others, by donning nationalist colors, can successfully pose as friends of the oppressed. Only by throwing off the colonial yoke can the masses see their native exploiters for what they are. This is why the proletariat of oppressed nations must take the lead in the struggle against imperialism.

The Irish masses, however, lacked proletarian leadership. In the south, the working class was negligible. In the more industrialized north, workers were (and are) divided along Catholic/Protestant lines. Protestants do not generally view themselves as part of the Irish nation. The IRA, in Collins' time as well as our own, has always acted as if the Protestants did not exist, arguing that all problems will be solved once the British leave.

The absence of proletarian leadership has had tragic consequences. Although the Irish masses were among the most downtrodden in Western Europe, the national question always eclipsed the class question in their consciousness. At those historic moments—and there have been several in the past century—when class struggles began to overshadow the national question, rebellious workers and peasants were invariably brought back into line with the aid of nationalism. By preaching all-class unity in the interests of patriotic struggle, the IRA created the basis for a particularly reactionary 26-county state ruled by a single class—the Irish bourgeoisie.

By evoking the blood and strife in which that state was born, Neil Jordan has produced a film in many ways reminiscent of Gilo Pontecorvo's more ambitious 1966 classic, "The Battle of Algiers," which reenacts the struggle against French colonialism that led to the creation of contemporary Algeria. While both these struggles ended in the creation of bourgeois states, these states were nevertheless brought into being by ordinary people, willing to stand up to their oppressors. If the results of their struggles were ultimately disappointing, their courage and their sacrifice will always be a source of inspiration. ■