

Memorandum – Analysis of Historic Conflict:
Analysis of the British response to the Easter Rising 1916

Memorandum prepared by
Benedikt Wahler

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by Professor Eliot A. Cohen, PhD

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The Johns Hopkins University
The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)
Washington, DC

Memorandum

To: Professor Eliot Cohen

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From:

Subject: Analysis of the British response to the Easter Rising 1916

1. In order to assess the strategic validity and value of reactions by the British to the Easter Rising of April 1916, an analysis will have to look at the immediate military response to the challenge as well as to judge the political and military efforts undertaken in its aftermath for their potential to resolve on terms favorable to London the issues that had given rise to the rebellion. The momentum created by the Easter Rising had effectively foreclosed an indefinite retention of the status-quo ante so that a preferable outcome for the British government would have ideally involved a controlled devolution of power (*home rule*), avoidance or containment of violence during the process and continued suzerainty over Ireland in areas relevant to British national security.
2. A promising strategy would therefore have to seek a control, division and diversion of separatist energies, to allow Britain to manage the process to the maximum amount possible. Any such strategy however would be seriously complicated by London's dependence on one of the parties to the inner-Irish conflict over home rule, the apparent irreconcilability of demands of both sides and the ongoing world war as external constraint on political attention and leeway.
3. The initial military response to the Rising showed a lack of preparedness both in training as well as in planning for the contingency of rebellion. In the context of preceding rebellions, separatist sentiments and the presence of armed paramilitary movements, this constitutes a severe failure. Had the Rising been better planned, equipped and coordinated, British forces would have had a much harder time. So, the military onslaught the rebels had anticipated did not at first materialize. When the Rising began the authorities had just 400 troops to confront roughly 1,300 insurgents. Their immediate priorities were therefore to amass reinforcements, gather information on rebel strength and locations and protect strategic positions, including the seat of government, Dublin Castle.
4. Waiting for reinforcements in troop strength and arms was a correct decision given the advantage defenders could enjoy as their positions were well fortified and enabled them to control the routes of access to these strongholds. Meanwhile, surrounding the city center and occupying positions as a "wedge" between rebel-held points was an effective and necessary move to inhibit their communication and coordination and cut possibilities for resupply. However, this delayed reaction afforded the rebels a propaganda victory of having held out long against the strong forces of empire.
5. Attacks on barricaded position at Mount Street Bridge and North King Street proved tactically inept. Despite the trench experience on the Western front, forces were order to storm a fortified position by frontal assault in a narrow alley that gave clear shot to the defenders without artillery or fire cover from nearby buildings. Especially inexcusable was that this tactical mistake was repeated several times, showing no signs of learning. A chance was missed to exploit the potential value of intelligence to locate and by-pass positions of rebels as it was unlikely that their small force would be able to control all accesses to Dublin's center. Yet, effective innovation was evident in the improvisation of armored cars and troop transporters to give protection in urban combat.
6. Massive use of artillery, while effective in weakening the rebel strongholds, may not have been wise in its full extent in the context of an urban surrounding and a populace whose at least passive support would be needed for a longer-term resolution of the situation that had brought about the Rising. In particular, given resentment springing from the death of civilians and as indistinct shelling contrasted with efforts of the rebels to mind and preserve property from damage in the fight.
7. The issue of prisoners may have been an intractable problem without any perfect solution. A sound objective would have consisted in attempting to neutralize rather than martyrize the leaders of the Rising, and avoid to create more empathy for their cause. Rapid but open trials of the instigators and top leaders of the Rising including their potential execution while removing other participants with the potential to revive the IRB and the radical part of the Volunteers by long prison terms

including deportation to remove them from the Irish public may have been a feasible option. Drawing out executions until August and the secrecy of the court martials only incremented the public attention and stirred continuous debate. The initial sweep of arrests that incarcerated far more than those having taken part in the Rising, played into the hands of the radicals in changing public opinion, as did the persistence of nationwide martial law until November 1916, perceived as unjustified after a rebellion that had evidently lacked popular support. It undermined the earlier strong belief in Britain as trustworthy counterpart for a negotiated solution championing the rule of law. Repeated threats to impose conscription were equally unwise to entice the Irish for a process in which Britain would keep control of achieving a political solution.

8. While military superiority had been shown by British forces, London's political weakness in Ireland versus the positions of both nationalists and unionists would have to be addressed. Victory and arrest of the insurgents opened a window of opportunity that would be very rapidly closing, though. A return to “killing home rule by kindness” could hardly be meaningfully achieved, the more radicalized atmosphere put a home rule resolution squarely on the agenda. Britain would have to act rapidly. Interlocutors existed in the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Unionists at Westminster. However, after such an effort involving their respective leaders Redmond and Carson failed in summer 1916 Britain was in no position to afford to let the issue slip and gain a momentum not controllable by London. A possibility existed to get around the resistance of Conservatives and Unionist in the coalition by imposing “home rule” together with (nominally temporary) partition. It would have been able to satisfy the minimum demands of Unionists and Irish nationalists and permitted to reframe the confrontation from one with British rule to one over the shape and nature of home rule in Ireland. Partition was also the only apparent option to remove the constant provocation to Southern nationalists by the unobstructed existence of the Ulster Volunteers who due to the coalition government's dependence on Conservatives and Unionists were immune.

9. As a corollary to such a political strategy that would have anticipated the inner-Irish split of the Civil War, British policies rather than alienating the entire population by harsh measures with interspersed, ineffective “carrots” should have worked to build on and emphasize inner-Irish faultlines (urban-rural, petit bourgeois-worker, property owners-unpropertied) over the Irish-British ones. The socialist leanings of some of the radicals may have provided such an opening, one with the potential to foment also the influential and conservative Catholic Church as a bulwark against rather than supporter of Irish radicalism. This could only be achieved by some significant concessions in the area of “self-determination”, allowing the moderates to present some successes. In their absence, the Irish Party was effectively deflated and disabled as a means of channeling Irish masses and their political aspirations – Sinn Féin could take over the Irish nationalist political landscape as a catch-all organization

10. Accompanying and complementing these political efforts, security measures would have to be targeted at undermining and controlling the reorganization of radicals with the minimal possible public visibility of repressive actions by British forces. The Easter Rising of 1916 had only been the first, less successful hint; unchecked, surviving militants and their disciples could reconstitute their position in the organizations already by 1917. A central goal in British preventive strategy thus would have to be infiltration and control of the main organizations to ward off a danger of a takeover by militants, as well as a direct intelligence focus on unearthing and unraveling the infrastructure of the militants of the IRB. The highly visible and violent police actions actually undertaken were counterproductive, and undermined the legitimacy of local security forces.

11. The question remains open whether Britain could have successfully avoided the rise of nationalist sentiment after 1916. The propagandistic value of the Rising was high and all measures could be exploited to illustrate a too repressive British rule. More general issues that arise from the analysis pertain to the limited political attention due to foreign policy disturbances (World War I) that incapacitates the ability to act on pressing domestic issues, as well as the danger of unchecked challenges to state authority in the emergence of paramilitary organizations, an experience ominously repeated in the interwar years in Italy and Germany.