

MUNICH—80 years on



“This morning I had another talk with the German Chancellor, Herr Hitler, and here is the paper which bears his name upon it as well as mine...”

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[Ireland, Germany and the Nazis: politics and diplomacy, 1919-1939](#)

Mervyn O’Driscoll

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Sunday is 30th September and therefore the 80th anniversary of the signature of the infamous Munich agreement that allowed Nazi Germany to take over the German-speaking parts of Czechoslovakia, a concession to threats and bluster which arguably gave Hitler the confidence to go further and inadvertently provoke World War II. It marked the high point of the policy of “Appeasement”, of trying to make a deal with the German dictator which might prevent a repeat of the carnage in World War I. The picture of Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, stepping out of an aeroplane after returning from Munich and brandishing a piece of paper which he said would deliver “peace in our time”, is one of the most iconic in twentieth century history (see above).

Less than a year later, when Chamberlain’s concessions to Hitler had demonstrably failed to satisfy the Führer’s demands, the Soviet Union used Munich as part of its justification for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, another act of appeasement which enabled the partition of Poland between Germany and the USSR and gave Hitler the green light for his long-desired adventures in the east.

That much is well known. What is less well known is how the whole process played out in tiny, uninfluential Ireland, which tried throughout the 1930s (and later) to remain neutral. How this was morally possible after the failure of Munich is a subject that has been much debated since. Ten years ago, in an excellent book called [That](#)

[Neutral Island](#), Clair Wills described how neutrality worked during the war (essentially to British advantage, except in the early stages of the Battle of the Atlantic). Now we have another study, published last year, which shows how Ireland moved from its “war of liberation” against Britain to international neutrality when war against Hitler threatened. The turning point was Munich.

[Ireland, Germany and the Nazis: politics and diplomacy, 1919-1939](#) by Mervyn O’Driscoll of University College, Cork elegantly demolishes many of the complacent myths of inter-war Irish diplomatic history, including those concerning Appeasement. Here I wish to concentrate on the light Dr O’Driscoll sheds on the momentous events of late 1938 from an *Irish* perspective—one that is again in the news due to Brexit.

The background is relevant. In 1921, 26 of Ireland’s 32 counties detached themselves from the United Kingdom and became the Irish Free State, though still with dominion status inside what was soon to become the British Commonwealth. Ireland was desperately poor, administratively unsophisticated and almost completely undefended. But many Irish people—perhaps a majority—wanted *more* independence from their former imperial overlord, not less. Protection from great power rivalry was not a priority.

That was not an unreasonable position to take while Germany was flat on its back after 1918. In the 1920s, Dublin established trade relations with the German Weimar Republic and started importing industrial ma-

chinery, for example for a hydro-electric scheme built by Siemens on the Shannon (which was commemorated in postage stamps reminiscent of Soviet ones featuring Dneiprstroy, for which Siemens also supplied the turbines—see below). Ireland had nothing to sell in return but agricultural products. The balance of trade was 10:1 in Germany's favour. However, anything was better than nothing in the attempt to outflank Britain economically.

When the old revolutionary and rugby enthusiast, Eamon de Valera, was elected Taoiseach (Prime Minister) in 1932, he took the campaign to cut ties with Britain further by, amongst other things, stopping payment of the land redistribution compensation annuities which had been agreed in the 1921 Treaty. He also abolished the oath of allegiance to the British Crown. Britain retaliated by imposing tariffs on, amongst other things, Irish beef, butter and eggs. This was damaging to both countries as over 90% of all Irish trade was with Britain. But due to the unequal sizes of the two economies, the Anglo-Irish trade war had a disproportionate effect on Ireland.

Dublin instructed its Ambassador in Germany—a weird and fascinating Anglo-Irish Catholic convert from Quakerism, who spoke fluent Latin and was a strong Nazi sympathiser—to redouble his efforts to sell Germany the beef, butter and eggs that Britain was no longer buying. But Germany was desperately short of foreign currency and also concerned about food security, having lost most of its grain-producing Junker east to Poland in the Versailles settlement in 1919. Its remaining farmers were almost as inefficient as Ireland's.

But those obstacles were small compared with the much more interesting fact that from the early 1920s to the late 1930s, Germany was deeply pro-British. Even the Nazis wanted to do nothing which would offend their alleged racial kin across the North Sea, in partnership with whom the Fuhrer wished to make the world safe for Aryanism. As Dr O'Driscoll writes,

The pre-eminence of Britain in Hitler's combination of nationalist-racialist and military-strategic notions was profoundly limiting for Irish-German relations after 1933. It meant that the Free State could never be allowed to interfere with Hitler's objective of furthering Anglo-German relations... Hitler's stubborn pursuit of Anglo-German understanding reduced Germany's interaction with Ireland to a simple calculus predicated on the Anglo-German relationship. (pp. 113, 177)

In addition, the Irish were racially questionable—on a par with Latvians, according to Alfred Rosenberg. Worst of all, the country was small. Goebbels was overheard by the Ambassador saying to a group of journalists, "We only deal with big powers." (p. 147) In those days, with

its Empire covering a sixth of the globe, with America isolationist and with the Soviet Union still industrialising, Britain was in practical terms the biggest of them. Ireland was one of the smallest and least significant.

Dublin began to wake up to its diplomatic irrelevance only after the Anschluss with Austria in March 1938, just six months before Munich. But what to do when great powers clash, especially when you are strategically placed across the essential supply lines of one of the likely future combatants? After all, the first English invasion of Ireland, in 1171, was undertaken partly to prevent an independent Norman state developing there. Since then, Ireland had often been thought about by London as a vulnerable "backdoor" to Britain. The age of the Messerschmidt and the Stuka reinforced these fears.

A German Ireland would be a catastrophe for Britain and, since Britain would never be likely to accept it willingly, it would most likely be a catastrophe for the emerald isle too. Every green-blooded Irishman remembered the last time the island had been a major battleground, in the 1640s-50s, when about a third of the population perished in one of the bloodiest conflicts in modern European history (on a par only with Germany's experience in the Thirty Years' War, or Poland's in 1939-45, and twice as bad, proportionately, as the Soviet death rate in 1941-5). De Valera was

determined to do whatever he could to avoid a repetition. He became as much of an appeaser as Chamberlain. For example, he turned a very blind eye to the repression of the Catholic Church in Nazi Germany.

Paradoxically, his only effective ally was his old enemy, Great Britain. Neville Chamberlain was equally determined to avoid war. Furthermore, he was prepared to "appease" not only Hitler, but also de Valera. He made a generous settlement of most of his demands in early 1938, including ending the trade war. Six months later, he travelled to Munich to try to "do business" with Hitler. For the British Prime Minister, appeasement "meant the methodical removal of the principle causes of friction in the world." (p. 212)

De Valera looked more hostile to Britain than he actually was. When negotiating the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1938, he "repeatedly stated that a truly sovereign and independent Ireland, and on occasion a neutral Ireland, would not undermine Britain's vital national security interests, but would rather strengthen them." (p. 213) Given the numbers of Irish who volunteered to serve in the British armed forces in the war, and the hundreds of thousands of civilians who went to work in British munitions factories, plus Irish help for Britain's counterintelligence effort and all the beef, butter and eggs sent east across the Irish Sea, he was not wrong.



Stamps depicting the Ardara dam on the Shannon and the Dniepr dam, built within five years of each other.





Eamon de Valera—half-Cuban; born in New York; rugby fanatic; Gaelic-speaking mathematics teacher and political patron of Catholic Ireland for half a century

In the middle of the Munich crisis, de Valera wrote to Chamberlain, whom he liked and respected, to say he was “completely satisfied that you are doing the right thing.” (p. 226) Informed opinion in Ireland at the time rather agreed with Chamberlain that Hitler’s claim about the injustice of the Versailles settlement was not entirely unfounded. Furthermore, the demand that all Germans should live under German political control, had much in common with the idea behind the Irish nationalism that de Valera had fought for right from the time of the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. He had been an important commander then, and it was only by chance that he had not been executed by the British, as most of his senior colleagues were. He had been prepared to die for the principle of cultural nationalism, one that had parallels all over Europe at the time.

To Irish eyes [writes O’Driscoll], Czechoslovakia appeared an unnatural polyglot state. Irish adherence to the nationalist principle as the basis for state formation permitted Irish policymakers, like many others, to accept uncritically Hitler’s case for the incorporation of the Sudetenland into Greater Germany... Fearing that Czechoslovakia was ‘strategically and racially ill-composed’ many considered ‘it was not worth fighting for’. (p.225)

As Russians will readily appreciate, de Valera was not alone—then or now—in justifying violence and land grabs with reference to the alleged imperatives of the territorial unification of an apparently independent national culture. What was unusual in his case was that he recognised that his main protector now was his former enemy. He realised that he could have a measured disagreement with his powerful, unCeltic neighbour in a way which would not have been possible if the Dun Laoghaire ferry had run back and forth to Hamburg rather than to Liverpool.

This was a strange but important exam-

ple of the sporting spirit which is at the back of all civilised views of international relations. De Valera had played full-back for Munster in 1905, and came close to winning a cap for Ireland. He was so widely respected for “playing by the rules” diplomatically that he was elected President of the Assembly of the League of Nations in September 1938, just days before the Munich agreement was signed. He was the first Irishman to achieve that level of international respect. But that did not deflect him from his two main goals: establishing Irish neutrality, and asserting his country’s claims on the six counties of northern Ireland.

The Nazis were equally determined in pursuit of their goals, but less scrupulous in the way they went about that. They did not play by the rules and were proud of the fact. For all their desire to be liked by the British, they did not seem to understand the sporting spirit—at least not in the way that they did at Lansdowne Road, the Irish national rugby ground, where de Valera was a frequent and engrossed spectator.

O’Driscoll gives an amusing example of German unsporting lumpishness. Ireland had done what little it could to support British sanctions against Mussolini’s Italy at the time it had invaded Abyssinia, two years before Munich. De Valera backed Chamberlain as solidly then as he did in 1938. The Nazi press, under the direction of Josef Goebbels, responded with mocking “humour”, which included publishing an article under the headline: “Ireland’s harmless sanctions. Three elderly camels and an old cannon boat.” (p. 180) Evidently Goebbels was not a rugby man—more club foot than club tie.

—Ian Mitchell, *Arvagh, Co. Cavan*,
27 September 2018



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