



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

15 February, 1985

Prime Minister

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Dear Charles,

Irish Neutrality: Use of Treaty Ports During the Second
World War

At yesterday's meeting to discuss Northern Ireland, the Prime Minister asked the FCO for information about British shipping losses resulting from our inability to use the Irish Treaty ports during the Second World War.

I enclose a minute and attachments prepared by our Research Department, setting out such information as we have been able to assemble in the time available. The Irish Government's refusal to allow us the use of the Treaty Ports should be considered in conjunction with Lord Cranborne's list of facilities which the Irish Government did accord to us in the course of the War (Attachment D).

I am copying this to Graham Sandiford at the Northern Ireland Office and to Richard Hatfield at the Cabinet Office.

Yours ever,

Colin Budd

(C R Budd)
Private Secretary

C D Powell Esq
10 Downing Street

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FROM : E C Hallett
 International and
 Commonwealth Section
 Research Department

DATE : 15 February 1985

Mr Barrie,
 RID

IRISH NEUTRALITY : USE OF TREATY PORTS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

1. I understand that the Prime Minister has asked for information about losses to British shipping as a result of Ireland's refusal to allow the Allies use of the Treaty ports during the Second World War. In the nature of things, no precise figures can be given, since there is no objective way of evaluating those losses which resulted from non-availability of the Treaty ports and those which were due to other causes. What follows is therefore a qualitative assessment.

A 2. Under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which established the Irish Free State, Britain retained, for an indefinite period, use of the naval bases at Cobh, Berehaven and Lough Swilly (see map at Flag A). All three had served as bases for naval convoy escorts during the First World War and their retention was seen at the time as essential for Britain's economic survival in a future European war.

3. On 25 April 1938, however, Britain and Ireland signed an agreement giving Ireland unconditional possession of the ports. The Irish pressure to gain possession was an aspect of de Valera's policy of establishing Ireland's complete political independence. The British government's motivation was explained by Chamberlain to the House of Commons on 5 May 1938, as follows:

...we came to the conclusion that a friendly Ireland was worth far more to us both in peace and war than these paper rights which could only be exercised at the risk of maintaining and perhaps increasing their sense of grievance."

4. Churchill bitterly contested the decision to give up the Treaty ports, which he described as "the sentinel towers of the Western approaches."

5. Considerable U-boat activity around the Irish coast in the early months of the Second World War resulted in the loss of a number of British naval and merchant ships. This prompted Churchill to consider using force to acquire use

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of the Treaty ports, in the light of advice from the Royal Navy that use of Berehaven in particular, by ships and flying boats would greatly increase their ability to protect Atlantic convoys. In the late summer of 1940, the British Chiefs of Staff told the Cabinet that "by the use of Berehaven, we should be able to operate a further 180 miles west than is possible from bases in the UK." The fact that Berehaven was not available was party responsible for the decision to route convoys to the north of Ireland, using Londonderry and Lough Foyle as bases. The Irish Government tacitly acquiesced in this despite the dispute between the two governments over the division of territorial waters in Lough Foyle.

4. On 5 November 1940, Churchill argued in the House of Commons, that Irish neutrality was partly responsible for mounting shipping losses in the Atlantic:

"The fact that we cannot use the South and West coasts of Ireland to refuel our flotillas and aircraft and thus protect the trade by which Ireland as well as Great Britain lives, is a heavy and grievous burden and one which should never have been placed on our shoulders, broad though they be."

5. There is however, some disagreement over the extent to which the non-use of the Treaty ports was responsible for the high level of allied shipping losses in the Atlantic in the early years of the war. Some historians have argued that the German ability to read the British naval codes up to 1943 and their occupation of the French coast were more important factors. The American Chiefs of Staff did not appear to attach great importance to use of the Treaty ports. In 1943, General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, advised President Roosevelt that the ports would not be of much use as long as the French coast was under German control since ships travelling to the south of Ireland would be easy targets for German submarines based in the Bay of Biscay.

6. It seems clear, however, that use of Berehaven would have given us a wider radius of action for our anti-submarine operations in the Atlantic and provided convoys with more regular and frequent protection. The navy would have been able to reduce turn-round time at the end of Atlantic passage by refuelling in the west of Ireland rather than in UK ports. One might conclude, therefore, that if the Royal Navy had had use of Cobh, Berehaven and Lough Swilly, the U-boat threat might have been countered at an earlier stage and fewer (though it is not possible to say how many fewer) British seamen would have died.

7. The bitterness which Churchill felt over Irish neutrality and the denial of access to the Treaty ports, in particular, was reflected in a passage from his Victory broadcast on 13 May 1945 (attached at flag B). This

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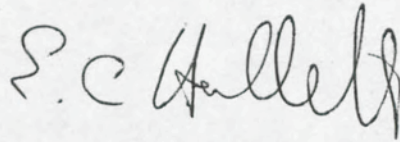
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B

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C prompted, however, what many have regarded as an effective riposte from De Valera (attached at flag C).

D 8. Although they did not grant us use of the Treaty posts, it should not be concluded that the Irish Government did nothing to help as during the Second World War. Viscount Cranbourne, British Dominions Secretary, told his Cabinet colleagues in 1945 that the Irish Government "have been willing to accord us any facilities which would not be regarded as overtly prejudicing their attitude to neutrality." He gave the Cabinet a list of such facilities (attached at flag D).



E C Hallett

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In Time of War

played the National Anthem right through. All officers stood at the salute, all NCOs and men at attention, and every civilian within hearing, either on the pier or in boats and vessels nearby, had his hat off. There was no necessity to call for cheers from the British troops in answer to this compliment.¹²

In so blithe a manner did the British take leave of their imperial holdings. As the twin-funnelled *Acasta* turned south to escort the *Immisfallen* out of Cobh, the Irish soldiers who now manned the four 18-pounders by the Spike Island drill shed fired a farewell 21-gun salute. They understood that the occasion was one of historic importance for the British as well as themselves¹³ and were aware that some of the young men whose departure they were honouring might shortly die in a war which Eire would hopefully be spared. Indeed, in just over two years time, the *Acasta* herself would be sunk in action off northern Norway while engaging the German battle cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*.

The British also left behind an embossed eighteenth-century Fort Westmoreland;* and there were some neat rows of graves as a safeguard.¹⁵ There were some buildings which could arouse harsh feelings on Spike Island, so the British officer's shore-line residence was destroyed. It was unintended and had over the past nine years several dozen of these, many broken headstones bearing the names of the dead, had sustained the anonymous ravages of dysentery within the walls of a station to a penal colony during the years of the Famine.¹⁶

But the greatest memorial was left to themselves. At the time of the famine a small inlet formed by the lough provided the deep-water anchorage for the mouth of Bantry Bay. The Hungry Hill created the headlands of Europe. Kinsale, a narrow, headlands more than a mile long, probably the oldest port in the world. The Battle of Kinsale, the last battle of the war, there were several forts, each containing a magazine. After Wolfe Tone's rebellion, the War Office decided to build a fort at the mouth of Lough Swilly. The cost of the fort was £1,000,000. The British placed a garrison at that time.

Sketch map of Ireland showing the Treaty Ports



* There was an excellent view of the coast from the fort. The fort was built on a hill overlooking the lough.

APPENDIX F

APPENDIX F
 CHURCHILL'S VICTORY BROADCAST,
 MAY 13, 1945

Thursday last that His Majesty the King and the National Government of all parties to the war is a long time in human life, especially for good conduct. However, this National Government, by the entire British Parliament and by the entire British Empire, and by the united forces of the British Dominions far across the oceans and of the globe. After various episodes had been lived through, it is a great relief to see that so far things have worked out for the benefit of the British Commonwealth and Empire stands more firmly than at any time in its long history. This is what may well, I think, be the result of the war—in a far better state to cope with the future than we were five years ago.

Our mighty enemy, Germany, over whom we bore such a frightful strain in the ground and took some time to recover. The best of their strength, were substituted by the best of our strength. But for ourselves, Mussolini's Italy stabbed us in the back, at our last gasp. But for ourselves, the British Commonwealth and Empire—we were

in 1940 forty or fifty squadrons of fighters of Britain broke the teeth of the Luftwaffe, and now we are eight to one. May I repeat again in this hour: "Never in the field of human history was so much achieved by so many to so few." The name of Air Marshal Bomber Command is always linked with this splendid achievement. The Royal Air Force lay the Royal Navy, gathered from the canals of the world, and the German invading army could alone believe that the invasion of Britain had at that time, was a very easy matter. The immediate danger of the German storms the immediate danger of

Mr. Churchill said he would "rub out our names from our cities." This Blitz was borne

CHURCHILL'S VICTORY
 BROADCAST 13 MAY 1945

APPENDIX F

without a word of complaint or the slightest sign of flinching, while a very large number of people—honour to them all—proved that London could "take it", and so could our other ravaged centres. But the dawn of 1941 revealed us still in jeopardy. The hostile aircraft could fly across the approaches to our Island, where forty-six millions of people had to import half their daily bread and all the materials they needed for peace or war. These hostile aircraft could fly across the approaches from Brest to Norway and back again in a single flight. They could observe all the movements of our shipping in and out of the Clyde and Mersey, and could direct upon our convoys the large and increasing numbers of U-boats with which the enemy bespattered the Atlantic—the survivors or successors of which U-boats are now being collected in British harbours.

The sense of envelopment, which might at any moment turn to strangulation, lay heavy upon us. We had only the North-Western Approach between Ulster and Scotland through which to bring in the means of life and to send out the forces of war. Owing to the action of the Dublin Government, so much at variance with the temper and instinct of thousands of Southern Irishmen who hastened to the battle-front to prove their ancient valour, the approaches which the Southern Irish ports and airfields could so easily have guarded were closed by the hostile aircraft and U-boats. This was indeed a deadly moment in our life, and if it had not been for the loyalty and friendship of Northern Ireland we should have been forced to come to close quarters or perish for ever from the earth. However, with a restraint and poise to which, I say, history will find few parallels, His Majesty's Government never laid a violent hand upon them, though at times it would have been quite easy and quite natural, and we left the Dublin Government to frolic with the Germans and later with the Japanese representatives to their hearts' content.

When I think of these days I think also of other episodes and personalities. I think of Lieutenant-Commander Esmonde, V.C., of Lance-Corporal Kenneally, V.C., and Captain Fegen, V.C., and other Irish heroes whose names I could easily recite, and then I must confess that bitterness by Britain against the Irish race dies in my heart. I can only pray that in years which I shall not see the shame will be forgotten and the glories will endure, and that the peoples of the British Isles, as of the British Commonwealth of Nations, will walk together in mutual comprehension and forgiveness.

My friends, when our minds turn to the North-Western Approaches we will not forget the devotion of our merchant seamen, and our minesweepers out every night, and so rarely mentioned in the headlines. Nor will we forget the vast, inventive, adaptive, all-embracing

DE VALERA'S RESPONSE

16 MAY 1945

~~Chapter 15~~

Phrases Make History

... if it had not been for the loyalty and friendship of Northern Ireland we should have been forced to come to close quarters with Mr de Valera or perish for ever from the earth. However, with a restraint and poise to which, I say, history will find few parallels, His Majesty's Government never laid a violent hand upon them...

Winston Churchill 13 May 1945

Mr Churchill makes it clear that, in certain circumstances, he would have violated our neutrality and that he would justify his action by Britain's necessity. It seems strange to me that Mr Churchill does not see that this, if accepted, would mean that Britain's necessity would become a moral code and that when this necessity became sufficiently great, other people's rights were not to count.

Eamon de Valera 16 May 1945

The entry of the United States into the war added a new dimension to Anglo-Irish relations but at the same time reduced their importance. As the danger of German invasion receded and the Anglo-American navies gradually broke the U-boats' stranglehold on the Atlantic sea lanes, Eire's strategic significance began to dwindle. The Treaty ports were no longer an issue of life or death to the British, and Irish neutrality - far from being a threat to Britain's security - now became a largely symbolic irritant. This new state of affairs was reflected in the changed substance of diplomacy, in which statements and requests were now made in order to place policies upon record rather than to achieve any kind of positive result. Gesture became more important than intention, a development which was more conducive to rhetoric than to political understanding.

Scarcely had the first American troops set foot on the Dufferin Docks in Belfast in January 1942 than de Valera was complaining that while 'the people of Ireland have no feeling of hostility towards, and no desire to be brought into conflict with, the United States... it is our duty to make it clearly understood that, no matter what troops occupy the Six Counties,

and recorded that 'his liaison with the Irish secret police and foreign services produced substantial results in intelligence'. Similarly, the Pentagon recommended that three of the highest ranking officers in Ireland's armed forces — the chief of staff (Lieutenant General McKenna), deputy chief of staff (Colonel Archer) and chief of the army air corps (Colonel Delamere) — be awarded the American Legion of Merit for what were described as 'exceptionally meritorious and outstanding services to the U.S.' in 1943-45; and the proposal was only dropped when the State Department reminded the Pentagon of how embarrassing it would be for an Irish government which had never ostensibly departed from the strict profession of neutrality.⁸⁶ Sir John Maffey, who had been appointed as United Kingdom Representative in Dublin on the outbreak of war, was also warm in his praise of the Irish intelligence effort, noting particularly their 'rigid surveillance of the German Legation, the impounding of their wireless transmitter and close understanding with the British Intelligence Service. In this underground of espionage and intrigue', remarked Maffey, 'a British authority in Ireland could never achieve what was achieved by a native authority. "The dog of the country hunts the hare of the country"'.⁸⁷ Even Viscount Cranborne, a British dominions secretary who was bitterly anti-Irish, was constrained towards the end of the war to acknowledge that the Dublin government 'have been willing to accord us *any* facilities which would not be regarded as *overtly* prejudicing their attitude to neutrality' (my italics); and he appended the following remarkable list for the British War Cabinet:

- (a) They agreed to our use of Lough Foyle for naval and air purposes. The ownership of the Lough is disputed, but the Southern Irish authorities are tacitly not pressing their claim in present conditions and are also ignoring any flying by our aircraft over the Donegal shore of the Lough, which is necessary in certain wind conditions to enable flying boats to take off from the Lough.
- (b) They have agreed to the use by our aircraft based on Lough Erne of a corridor over Southern Irish territory and territorial waters for the purpose of flying out to the Atlantic.
- (c) They have arranged for the immediate transmission to the United Kingdom Representative's Office in Dublin of reports of submarine activity received from their coast watching service.
- (d) They arranged for the broadcasting of reports by their Air Observer Corps of aircraft sighted over or approaching Southern Irish territory. (This does not include our aircraft using the corridor referred to in (b) above.)

- (e) They arranged for the extinction of trade and business lighting in coastal towns where such lighting was alleged to afford a useful land mark for German aircraft.
- (f) They have continued to supply us with meteorological reports.
- (g) They have agreed to the use by our ships and aircraft of two wireless direction-finding stations at Malin Head.
- (h) They have supplied particulars of German crashed aircraft and personnel crashed or washed ashore or arrested on land.
- (i) They arranged for staff talks on the question of co-operation against a possible German invasion of Southern Ireland, and close contact has since been maintained between the respective military authorities.
- (j) They continue to intern all German fighting personnel reaching Southern Ireland. On the other hand, though after protracted negotiations, Allied service personnel are now allowed to depart freely and full assistance is given in recovering damaged aircraft.
- (k) Recently, in connection with the establishment of prisoner of war camps in Northern Ireland, they have agreed either to return or at least intern any German prisoners who may escape from Northern Ireland across the border into Southern Ireland.
- (l) They have throughout offered no objection to the departure from Southern Ireland of persons wishing to serve in the United Kingdom Forces nor to the journey on leave of such persons to and from Southern Ireland (in plain clothes).
- (m) They have continued to exchange information with our security authorities regarding all aliens (including Germans) in Southern Ireland.
- (n) They have (within the last few days) agreed to our establishing a Radar station in Southern Ireland for use against the latest form of submarine activity.⁸⁸

But Irish popular perceptions remained untainted by these secret realities. The Irish public, safely cocooned by the censor's cloak, saw only what government wanted them to see: a lonely stand in defence of neutrality against the combined might of the United Kingdom and the United States. And neutrality, we must remember, was an all-party policy supported by all the state's leading politicians with the exception of James Dillon. That de Valera enjoyed the backing of all major parties on the central political issue immeasurably strengthened his authority. While political opponents might never forgive him his role in 1921-22, he could now genuinely lay claim to the kind of national leadership he had lost at the time of the treaty split and sought ever since to retrieve. De Valera, in Oliver MacDonagh's phrase, 'reigned as

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