

EAMON DE VALERA AND IRISH NEUTRALITY

Political necessity and the national interest



Honors History Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Today, neutrality is the defining feature of Irish foreign policy, seen as an expression of national self-determination on the international stage. In my honors history thesis, I set out to examine in part how neutrality became so core a component of Irish national identity, looking in particular at the influence of Taoiseach Eamon de Valera on Ireland's foreign policy. I seek to understand what de Valera truly believed about neutrality, how his practical policy differed from his public comments, and how his particular stance on neutrality influenced the Irish public.

I explore de Valera's stance on neutrality at three moments: the 1938 Anglo-Irish negotiations on the eve of World War II, Irish neutrality during the war itself, and the Irish decision not to join NATO after the war. De Valera always linked neutrality publicly to his genuine views of the importance of self-determination, arguing that achieving neutrality could help bring about an end to partition. In practice, however, de Valera treated neutrality practically, compromising when necessary to secure the Irish interests and his political control over the 26 counties, rather than the entire island of Ireland.



METHODOLOGY

Research for this project took place over the course of the past year through archive research, collections of primary documents, and secondary source histories. Last June, I visited the Irish National Archives and the University College Dublin archives, where I examined documents from the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of the Taoiseach, as well as the personal papers of Eamon de Valera, Minister for External Affairs Frank Aiken, and Taoiseach John Costello. I have also relied upon the *Documents on Irish Foreign Affairs* collection, as well as transcripts from meetings of the Irish Dail. Secondary sources which have proved particularly useful include John Bowman's *De Valera and the Ulster Question*, Deirdre McMahon's *Republicans and Imperialists: Anglo-Irish relations in the 1930s*, Robert Fisk's *In Time of War*, Timothy Patrick Coogan's *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland*, J.J. Lee's *Ireland, 1912-1985: Politics and Society* and de Valera's official biography written by the Earl of Longford and Thomas O'Neill.

THE 1938 NEGOTIATIONS

During the 1938 Anglo-Irish negotiations, de Valera stressed that ending partition was his ultimate goal, despite knowing that the British would not budge on the issue. Doing so both gave him domestic political cover and served as a negotiating tactic to make what was a good deal for Ireland appear like a concession.

After achieving the return of the Treaty Ports to Ireland, de Valera couched the newfound ability of Ireland to remain neutral in the event of war as a win for Irish sovereignty and an advancement towards the end of partition. In reality, no progress had been made on partition, but de Valera had to deal with political pressure for not having reached a deal on the issue. Greater sovereignty had been achieved over the 26 counties, but not over the entire island.



"Eire" painted on a hillside to alert German planes they were in neutral airspace.

IRELAND AND NATO

Following the war, de Valera and Ireland found themselves at a crossroads, now able to enter into an Atlantic alliance without fearing the imminent threat of war. At first de Valera pursued closer relations with the United States, accepting Marshall Plan aid without raising the issue of partition and not yet making a definitive stance on NATO membership.

However, when he lost the 1948 election, he traveled to the United States for an anti-partition tour, where he tied to neutrality to partition, arguing that Ireland should join NATO if partition were ended. De Valera's tour demonstrates that neutrality was not a rigid policy for him. By emphasizing partition, which he knew was unlikely to be ended, even with American help, he also gained political support among republicans and pushed the Irish Government towards neutrality.



De Valera stands in front of 10 Downing Street following the signing of the Treaty.

NEUTRALITY IN WORLD WAR II

As war broke out on the continent, de Valera immediately declared Ireland's neutrality. Just as immediately, British pressure was brought to bear on Ireland to enter the war or at least to allow the British Navy use of the Treaty Ports.

De Valera resolutely refused British calls to join the war, arguing that neutrality was a matter of national sovereignty. Even as Churchill offered to support a United Ireland in exchange for Irish belligerency, de Valera refused, prioritizing neutrality over unity.

At the same time, however, de Valera provided aid to the Allied side, allowing them to use Irish airspace and returning Allied pilots stranded in Ireland. These actions, atypical of a neutral, also demonstrated that de Valera was willing to compromise in order to secure Irish interests.



De Valera disembarks from a plane in New York in 1948 for his anti-partition tour.

CONCLUSION

To de Valera, neutrality was at once a genuine expression of strong feelings about Irish sovereignty and a politically convenient position. Linking neutrality to national identity in the first place before the war allowed de Valera to make inevitable concessions to the British on trade more palatable to his republican base. During the war, de Valera judged neutrality to be both good policy for Ireland's interests and recognized that joining the war on Britain's side would be politically unpopular. After the war de Valera offered to support Irish entry into NATO in exchange for American support for an end to partition. While de Valera recognized that such a deal was practically impossible, making this appeal helped shore up his republican flank. At the same time, however, it framed the inevitable result of this approach - the continuation of neutrality - as a principled stand on the principle of sovereignty, rather than the result of a political calculus. In all these moments, de Valera pushed for neutrality, at least in part, because it was politically convenient for him. His attachment to it, at least in part, was not ideological but practical. By linking neutrality and sovereignty, however, de Valera cemented neutrality as an aspect of national identity in the public eye and prevented the very practical policy he pursued.



De Valera on a boat during the handover ceremony for Spike Island, one of the Treaty Ports.

"There was, for this state, only one policy possible, neutrality. Our circumstances, our history, the incompleteness of our national freedom through the partition of our country, made any other policy impossible."