

Ireland pays tribute to those who rose up against Britain on Easter in 1916

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.31.16

Word Count **924**



Irish soldiers march solemnly through the streets of Dublin, Ireland, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising against Britain, March 27, 2016. AP/Peter Morrison

DUBLIN, Ireland — Thousands of soldiers marched solemnly through the crowded streets of Dublin on Sunday in memory of the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising against Britain. The 1916 rebellion was a key moment in Irish history. Though it was not successful and left parts of Ireland's capital in ruins, it fired the country's flame of independence.

During the uprising about 1,200 rebels sought to ignite a popular revolt against Ireland's place in the United Kingdom. Sunday's parade featured military ceremonies at key buildings seized by the rebels in 1916.

The five-hour procession paused at noon outside the colonnaded General Post Office on O'Connell Street, the rebel headquarters a century ago. It was there that commander Pádraig Pearse formally launched the revolt by proclaiming to bemused Dubliners the creation of the Republic of Ireland.

Captain Peter Kelleher is a soldier in today's Irish Defence Forces, the republic's military. On Sunday, he stood in front of the restored post office to read the full text of Pearse's 1916 proclamation.

Uprising Caught British Unawares

"In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom," Kelleher proclaimed on Sunday. His audience included Ireland's leaders and scores of grandchildren of the rebels.

Many in attendance had donned their ancestors' Easter Rising bronze service medals. The medals were issued by Ireland in 1941 on the rebellion's 25th anniversary.

In 1916, British forces were caught off guard by the seizure of largely unguarded buildings. At the time, World War I was in full swing and many British troops were overseas fighting Germans. On the day of the uprising, most of the British officers still in Ireland were off attending horse races in the Irish countryside.

Rebellion Lasted Less Than A Week

However, Britain quickly deployed army reinforcements, who were cheered by some locals as they marched into Dublin. Artillery based at Trinity College and a gunboat on the River Liffey, which bisects the city, shelled the post office and other rebel strongholds. Within six days the rebels were forced to surrender.

The fighting left nearly 500 dead, most of them civilians caught in the crossfire or shot — by both sides — as suspected looters. Some 126 British soldiers, 82 rebels and 17 police officers were slain.

Many Dubliners at first opposed the uprising as an act of treason in a time of war. However, public sentiment swiftly swung in the rebels' favor once a newly arrived British Army commander decided to execute Pearse and 14 other rebel leaders by firing squad in Dublin's Kilmainham Jail.

A 16th figure, Roger Casement, was hanged inside a London prison. Days before the Easter Rising he had been caught trying to smuggle German weapons by sea to Ireland.

"A Terrible Beauty"

In the rebellion's immediate wake, the poet W.B. Yeats expressed Ireland's conflicted feelings about the uprising. To many, the rebellion appeared to be hastening Ireland's journey to political freedom, but at terrible cost. Yeats' "Easter, 1916" listed the names of executed Rising commanders and concluded that Ireland had "changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born." The poem is among the most quoted works in all of Irish literature.

Easter Rising veterans led Ireland's 1919–21 War of Independence. The rebels' ranks were swollen by many former soldiers who had returned to Ireland after World War I's conclusion. As the newly founded Irish Republican Army fought police and soldiers in the predominantly Catholic south, Protestants in northeast Ireland carved out a new U.K.-linked state of Northern Ireland.

A treaty accepted by most southern rebels established an Irish Free State in 1922. In 1922–23, however, the new Irish state was rocked by a brutal civil war between rival IRA camps. Michael Collins' pro-treaty forces crushed IRA die-hards who, backed by Eamon de Valera, rejected the treaty because the new state was not fully independent of Britain. Both men had fought in the 1916 Rising.

Ireland remained neutral in World War II and declared itself a republic on Easter Monday 1949.

Easter And Independence

Ireland long has struggled to embrace Easter as its independence day, in part because the enemy camps from the Irish civil war forged the country's two main political parties: Fine Gael, formed by allies of the slain IRA leader Collins; and de Valera's Fianna Fail party. Both parties claim to be the true defenders of the 1916 rebels' ideals.

Official unease with 1916's disputed history grew from the early 1970s as a new Belfast-based IRA launched a ruthless campaign to force Northern Ireland out of the U.K. and into the republic. This outlawed group called itself the Provisional IRA. It killed nearly 1,800 people before calling a 1997 cease-fire to support leaders of its revived Sinn Fein party. Today Sinn Fein helps govern Northern Ireland alongside British Protestant politicians.

A Show Of Political Unity

In a sign of changing times, leaders of Fine Gael, Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein stood side by side at Sunday's events. Among those events was a ceremony inside Kilmainham Jail, where Pearse and other commanders were executed.

Sunday's commemorations are the centerpiece of an estimated 2,500 events nationwide this spring and summer reflecting on the uprising.

The anniversary date is imprecise, given that Easter falls on different dates each year and the 1916 rebellion actually started on Easter Monday — an official holiday in Ireland — not on the Sunday. The rebellion began April 24 and ended on April 29, 1916. The executions began four days later.