European History 2300 Vignette Assignment

(Stephen) Derek Devitt – Student No. 216609141

HIST 2300

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County Kildare, 1941

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In the early hours of December 14, 1941 Roland Wolfe escaped from an internment camp, and suitably disguised, caught a local bus and then a train which took him across the border where he was able to rejoin his RAF Eagle Squadron. His freedom was short lived because "his superiors had reservations about the manner of his escape"[1] and as a result he was ordered back to the internment camp. This unique event occurred in neutral Ireland during what was locally described at "The Emergency", but what the rest of the world regarded as the Second World War. Wolfe's escape and return illustrated Ireland's singular approach to maintaining its neutrality in the early years of the war as it sought to manage relations with the Allied nations and with Germany.

Prior to the outbreak of the war, the Irish Prime Minister, Eamonn de Valera had declared that Ireland would remain neutral and the historian Thomas Bartlett wrote that this position "was not only the supreme assertion of Irish sovereignty, it was the only feasible policy to adopt. Any move towards participation on Britain's side would have caused convulsions in an Ireland still recovering from the civil war and still fuming (at least publicly) over partition."[2] On a more fundamental level Ireland was not equipped to engage in the war. Its armed forces consisted of seven thousand regular troops when war broke out, the naval service was comprised of two ex-fisheries boats and its Air Corps was equally threadbare.

[1] Dwyer, T. Ryle. 1994. *Guests of the State*. Dingle Press. Dingle. Page 104
[2] Bartlett, Thomas. 2010. *Ireland A History* Cambridge University Press. New York Page 452

The question of access to Irish ports became a major point of tension between Ireland and the belligerents. Britain's handover of the ports to Irish control in 1938 was viewed in Ireland as a vital component of affirming complete sovereignty for the newly established state of Éire. However, these ports were of significant interest to both the British and German navies and this increased the pressure on de Valera and his ability to steer a neutral path in his dealings with the Allied and German powers.

His position was not made any easier when on August 20, 1940, the German crew of a Focke Wulf Condor crash landed on the slopes of Mount Brandon in County Kerry in the south west of Ireland. "They were helped to Faha, a tiny, remote, Irish-speaking townland in a staunchly Republican area whose people were sympathetic to the Germans and quite hostile to the official search party."[3]

Although they were treated like celebrities and signed autographs for the locals, the six crew members were removed to a military internment camp at the Curragh, County Kildare about 30 miles south-west of Dublin. The Curragh already housed 500 suspected members of the revolutionary Irish Republican Army (IRA) who had been interned without trial because of their potential to provide quisling support in the event of a German invasion. When the German Minister for Ireland visited the airmen they complained of being treated as prisoners-of-war but the Irish authorities position was " that they were not prisoners, but guests of the Irish State, which was merely obliged to ensure that they took no further part in the war."[4]

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[3] Dwyer, T. Ryle. 1994. *Guests of the State*. Dingle Press. Dingle. Page 25
[4] Ibid. Page 28

German Aircrew at The Curragh internment camp 1941-45

Within a month, Flying Officer Paul Mayhew, who made an emergency landing at Kilmuckridge, Co. Wexford became the first British pilot to be interned at the Curragh. As hostilities intensified the numbers of aircrews who crash-landed, or in the case of Allied pilots mistook Ireland for the British mainland, steadily increased. In total, Ireland interned over 200 “guests” from Germany and over 100 Allied crews from Britain, Poland, New Zealand, Canada and America. While the Germans’ opportunities to escape were limited by geography with no easy access to continental Europe, the Allies were just 100 miles from Northern Ireland, part of the UK. As a result, they made several attempts to escape.

Their efforts were hampered by a combination of the security at the Curragh and the protocols, including parole, that were established for all the guests. The initially strict regime at the camp was gradually relaxed to the extent that by 1941, Allied and German inmates were allowed to leave the camp for visits to local towns on condition that they observed the terms of their "parole". While accepting that the inmates were committed to attempt escapes from the camp, the authorities allowed them to leave the camp if they gave their word, in writing, to return by an appointed time and while outside the camp that they would not engage in any war related activities. They visited local pubs, with separate venues for opposing forces, attended horse races, played golf, went fishing, attended dances and dated local girls and sometimes the wives of their captors! These concessions had been secured by the efforts of the British and German ministers to Ireland and de Valera approved them in equal measure, at least at the start of the war, to ensure his position on neutrality was not compromised.

So, when Roland Wolfe escaped in December 1941, it was alleged that he did so while on "parole" which was a breach of the protocol and to avoid the cancellation of privileges enjoyed by all the other Allied guests, Wolfe was ordered back to the Curragh.

The Curragh Internment Camp 1941-45

The issue of Ireland's position has been a source of fervent debate on whether to "frame neutrality as the result of military weakness and moral strength or of diplomatic strength and moral weakness."[5] In maintaining its position the Irish government discovered that "Neutrality, of course, was a not a neutral position. It had to be actively maintained, required constant vigilance, and carried with it its own strain."[6] de Valera and his ministers were in constant engagement with the local representatives of the British and German governments – Sir John Mahaffey and Edouard Hempel. The interaction, although contentious at times was greatly assisted by the conduct of both Mahaffey and Hempel who "acted as a brake on the more tempestuous alarmists," and " the activities of conspirators, agents, provocateurs, idiots and journalists (who) were a frequent cause of much distress in official quarters."[7]

Conversely, the American Minister to Ireland, David Gray, could have been included in the category of provocateur. At 70 years old when he was appointed in early 1940, he had no diplomatic experience but was married to an aunt of Eleanor Roosevelt which forced Gray to concede in later years that his appointment could be considered "nepotic". "From the time he arrived in Ireland he tried to impress on de Valera and everyone else he met that the United States was anxious for Ireland to give Britain as much assistance as possible."[8]Finding de Valera resistant to his pressure, Gray threatened a deterioration in relations between Dublin and Washington. As early as 1940 Gray indicated that the US would be entering the war and would

[5] Higgins, Roisin *The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 82. No.1* (March 2010) Page. 194
[6] Ibid. Page 195
[7] Dwyer, T. Ryle. 1994. *Guests of the State*. Dingle Press. Dingle. Page 14

[8] Dwyer, T. Ryle. 1994. *Guests of the State*. Dingle Press. Dingle. Page. Page 41

need Irish ports so, in anticipation of that, de Valera should allow British access to them immediately. de Valera, who considered Gray to be an enthusiastic amateur as a diplomat, was nevertheless concerned about the impression that Gray was conveying regarding the US position.

de Valera was also anxious at the level of support that Gray seemed to have from Roosevelt even though Gray's credibility was questionable as some of his opinions were influenced by dubious sources. He was a believer in spiritualism and in November 1941 sent Roosevelt a transcript of a séance he attended in which the ghost of the late British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour warned him that an Irish diplomat was collaborating with the German Minister with a view to setting up a puppet government in the event of a German invasion. The ghostly Balfour indicated that de Valera would welcome the US takeover of the country and Washington should move quickly to achieve this. "Ireland had enough problems without having Gray listening to the advice of ghosts in the American legation"[9] but at the same time there was concern that Roosevelt seemed to be satisfied with the job that Gray was doing.

Other forms of pressure to secure access to Irish ports were applied to de Valera and his government by the Allies in the early part of the war. While the British Prime Minister's initial impulse was to be aggressive - "as a last resort we should not hesitate to secure the ports by force, Churchill told his cabinet on 16 June,"[10] - he was constrained by concerns about the potential backlash from the United States. His next approach was to secretly offer to end

[9] Dwyer, T. Ryle. 1994. *Guests of the State*. Dingle Press. Dingle. Page 88

[10] Ibid Page 21

partition in return for the use of Irish ports. de Valera, despite his role in the fight for Irish independence "was not persuaded of the sincerity of the proposal on partition nor did he believe that the British would face down Unionist resistance to unification."[11]

Churchill continued to press for access to Irish ports and in applying further pressure "sparked off a major political crisis in May 1941 by suggesting the possibility of introducing conscription to Northern Ireland."[12] This was greeted with alarm on both sides of the border in Ireland. " First and most significant was the well-founded fear of political and social disorder organised by various groups, sometimes with the support of the Catholic Church."[13] Republican sentiment would not only have spurred significant civil unrest in Northern Ireland but would likely have engulfed the whole island and de Valera was acutely aware of this. Churchill was finally dissuaded from pursuing this course by the arguments of his entire cabinet.

Not surprisingly, elements of the British media reflected the most extreme views on Churchill's position with the **Daily Mail** cartoon showing de Valera riding a donkey inscribed "Neutrality at any Price", past a concentration camp while holding a placard reading "no Bases for Britain"[14] Following a German bombing raid on Dublin in May 1941, which killed 34 civilians and for which the German government apologized, the British based **Pathé News** commented that "Maybe this is the price that Éire pays for sitting on the fence".[15]

[11] Bartlett, Thomas. 2010. *Ireland A History* Cambridge University Press. New York Page 453

[12] Ibid Page 58
[13] Ollerenshaw, Philip. *War, Industrial Mobilization and Society in Northern Ireland* 1939-45 Page 174
[14] Coogan, Tim Pat. 1993. *De Valera, Long Fellow, Long Shadow*. Random. London. Page 558
[15] Pathé News German bomb Dublin 1941 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rwJ1T6rmAg

The arrival of Canadian and then US aircrews during and after 1941 together with Germany's focus on the invasion of Russia signalled a change in the profile of the guests landing in Ireland as well as a shift to a more benevolent neutrality extended to the Allies by the Irish Government. De Valera and his colleagues were now less concerned about the likelihood of the seizure of Irish ports and mindful of the trading relationships with the US and Britain for petroleum and coal respectively, they started to regard most, if not all, Allied landings as non-operational flights (e.g. aircraft repositioning, transport of senior personnel) and allowed the aircrews to make their way to Northern Ireland. Finally, in early 1943 they moved the remaining Allied internees to a new camp at Gormanstown, near Dublin, before releasing them all. The Germans remained in The Curragh until August 1945; at which time they were passed to the British authorities for repatriation to Germany with an agreement secured by de Valera that they would not be returned to the Soviet Zone.

De Valera maintained his commitment to neutrality, and this was evidenced in April 1945 when he visited the German Minister, Hempel to offer his condolences on news of the death of Adolf Hitler. Such a gesture, in light of the revelations regarding the death camps, appalled many but as Robert Fisk wrote, "Morally, it was both senseless and deeply wounding to the millions who had suffered in the war; politically, it could have been disastrous. But symbolically, it could not be misunderstood: Éire had not accepted the values of the warring nations and did not intend to do so in the future."[16]

[16] Fisk, Robert. *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the Price of Neutrality, 1939-45*. University of Pennsylvania Press 1983. pp. 141-142

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