

The war diary of Roger Casement

In 1914, soon after he landed in Germany to propose a deal that could help both Berlin and his fellow nationalists at home, Roger Casement began to keep a journal

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The war diary that [Roger Casement](#) kept during his 18 months in imperial [Germany](#) is one of the most candid and impenitent confessions of treason ever written by a subject and servant of the British crown.

The Irishman, a diplomat who had been honoured for his investigations of colonial abuses in west Africa and South America, had joined Sinn Féin in 1905. He took up the nationalist cause in earnest after retiring from the British consular service in Africa, shortly before the outbreak of the first World War.

Soon after the conflict began he travelled to Germany in search of support for an Irish uprising. In return for guns and military leaders, he said, rebels would fight against British rule – a worthwhile agreement for Berlin, he believed, because it would divert London from the war on Germany.

In April 1916, after negotiating a deal that would bring arms to nationalists, he boarded a German submarine to return to Ireland, tailing the shipment of guns. Casement was put ashore on [Banna](#) Strand, in Co Kerry – where a State ceremony to remember him was held on Thursday last week, 100 years to the day later – but Britain intercepted and destroyed the arms shipment; it soon captured Casement, too, and took him to London.

He recorded the first entry in his war diary – plotting a critical moment in his path to the scaffold at Pentonville Prison – shortly after he arrived in Berlin in November 1914.

Despite significant silences and interruptions, the diary chronicles a defining moment in the destiny of Irish independence and European diplomatic relations. And Casement quite clearly intended it for public scrutiny. In early April 1916, as he prepared for his departure on board the German U-boat, he left instructions for the safe-keeping and eventual publication of his papers, including this diary, which he considered a vital insight into the logic behind his self-confessed “treason”.

The diary

Berlin, November 2nd, 1914

The Foreign Office, No 76, is an old fashioned, white, very plain house of the time of Frederick the Great or earlier. You have to ring at a wooden gateway door, and the door opens. We went upstairs and a servant man took our coats, hats and sticks! So different from the London Foreign Office where I have been so often chez moi! The waiting room we were shown into was a fine salon, well furnished and large, with fine oil paintings of King Frederick Wilhelm III and the old Emperor Wilhelm . . .

Strange thoughts were mine, as I sat on a big sofa in the centre of policy of the German empire. No regrets, no fears – well – yes – some regrets, but no fears. I thought of Ireland, the land I should almost fatally never see again. Only a miracle of victory could ever bring me to her shores. That I did not expect – cannot in truth hope for. But, victory or defeat, it is all for Ireland. And she cannot suffer from what I do. I may, I must suffer – and even those near and dear to me – but my country can only gain from my treason. Whatever comes that must be so.

If I win all it is national resurrection – a free Ireland, a world nation after centuries of slavery. A people lost in the Middle Ages refound and returned to Europe. If I fail – if Germany be defeated – still the blow struck today for Ireland must change the course of British policy towards that country. Things will never be again quite the same. The “Irish Question” will have been lifted from the mire and mud and petty, false strife of British domestic politics into an international atmosphere. That, at least, I shall have achieved. England can never again play with the “Irish Question”.

She will have to face the issue once for all. With the clear issue thus raised by me she will have to deal. She must either face a discontented conspiring Ireland – or bind it closer by a grant of far fuller liberties. Coercion she cannot again resume. Laissez-faire must go for

ever. “Home Rule” must indeed become home rule – and even if all my hopes are doomed to rank failure abroad, at least I shall have given more to Ireland by one bold deed of open treason than Redmond and Co. after years of talk and spouting treason have gained from England.

England does not mind the “treason” of the orthodox Irish “patriot”. She took the true measure of that long ago. She only fears the Irishman who acts; not him who talks.

Within weeks of arriving in Berlin Casement went to the German headquarters on the Western Front, at Charleville-Mézières. The journey took him through war-torn Belgium. Casement’s most important conversation was with Wilhelm von Stumm, a senior figure in the German foreign office.

Thursday, November 19th

We talked of the Volunteers in Ireland, of Redmond’s recruiting dodges; of “Home Rule” and of the prospects of keeping the Irish out of the army. I explained the Irish position to him clearly and closely. He admitted he knew nothing about it – that he had once been in Ireland (on a hunting trip I fancy) but that he knew nothing of the feeling of the people.

I told him of my larger hope – “a dream if you will” – of an independent Ireland emerging from this war and he at once said it would be to Germany’s interest to have an independent Ireland. I said “Yes – to the interest of Europe at large.”

On his return journey Casement passed through the town of Andenne, where he was shown the site of an atrocity committed by the advancing German army against the civilian population.

Sometimes, I must confess, when the present “agony of Belgium” confronts me – and it cannot well be minimised: it is in truth a national agony – I feel that there may be in this awful lesson to the Belgian people a repayment. All that they now suffer, and far more, they, or their king, his government and his officers wreaked on the well nigh defenceless people of the [Congo](#) basin.

In early December Casement made his first visit to the camp at Limburg an der Lahn, near Frankfurt, to speak with Irish prisoners of war, whom he hoped to encourage to form an Irish brigade, to take part in the uprising.

Limburg, December 3rd-5th

I have brought plenty of “literature” for the soldiers – including a lot of copies of the new issue of my pamphlet *Ireland, Germany and the Freedom of the Seas*, which the Berlin FO has printed for me under the title *The Crime against Ireland – and How the War May Right It* . . .

I talked to the non-coms for about 10 minutes – told them who I was & all about the “Home Rule” fake & the Irish in America & that I was going to try to get arms & men into Ireland to join the Volunteers – but I said “I don’t think any of you are brave enough to do what I’ve done.” Some had themselves said they’d “join the Volunteers” or “go to America” when the war is over.

Instead of finding the Irish camp already long since formed on my arrival in Germany, as I had expected and had even been led to expect before leaving New York, no single step had been taken of any kind.

On the contrary I am forced to take a long and exposed journey to the headquarters to say again there what had already been said many times before, before an order is issued to collect the Irish prisoners – and then it is only on the thirty-fourth day after I land in Berlin that I am permitted to set out to see the first batch of men so collected – and only the thirty-fifth day when I see a few of them for the first time. Today it is six weeks since I came to Germany – & I have seen a few of the men in a makeshift way with no prior preparation of them.

Part of my plan had always been that they should have been got into a receptive frame of mind, by literature, special treatment &c before I came in person on the scene. Then the men’s minds would have been already enlightened before I came. Their hearts would have been heated and their imaginations awake. I would have been in their minds as the only Irishman at large in Germany, the open foe of England – & when they were told that “Sir R[oger] C[asement] was coming to visit the camp” I would have been sure of a hearty welcome; & anything I had said of treason felony would have met with an instant response.

After obtaining a guarantee from Berlin that Ireland would be treated well if it was occupied by Germany, Casement began to negotiate terms of a treaty. Over the following weeks he met with several of the most senior figures in the German government, including the chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg.

December 18th, 1914

Wedel took me round himself to the chancellor’s official residence next door to the foreign office. A fine palace. I was received and shown upstairs and sending in my card in a moment I was admitted to a large room where the chancellor, in a grey uniform, was standing up. He advanced to meet me, shook me warmly by the hand, and led me to a chair. We smoked cigarettes. He spoke in French, I in English, by agreement. I did most of the talking and discussed Ireland, the Irish in America and my hopes or “dreams” of a free Ireland. Either now or later – but some day. He agreed that an independent Ireland, if possible of achievement, would be a good thing for Germany and for the freedoms of the seas – and a desirable thing to attempt. I said I was aware, fully aware that today, with the British fleet barring the way and keeping all Ireland in jail, to think of an independent Ireland was “fantastic” and he agreed to that. But I begged him to have an Irish policy for

Germany in the future – for the next war would be a war for the seas, and then the cause of Ireland would indeed be the cause of Germany.

By early 1915 Casement's hopes for the Irish brigade had fallen well short of expectations, and he grew increasingly disillusioned and depressed by news from the front and his own isolated predicament. His health was also starting to deteriorate. He temporarily stopped his diary in February 1915. At the start of 1916 Casement was bedridden in a sanatorium in Munich when news reached him through his comrade Robert Monteith, who had been sent by the Irish Republican Brotherhood to train the Brigade, that a rising was planned for Easter. Summoning all his energy, Casement returned to Berlin and resumed his diary on St Patrick's Day.

March 17th, 1916

I write this beginning of what I feel is a last chapter on Patrick's Day in Berlin this year of war 1916. Last year on Patrick's Day I was also in Berlin, ill in bed, in the house of the Baroness von Nordenflycht.

Even then, hope had gone from me – for I realised then, already, that those I trusted here were little to be trusted and that their only interest in me lay in exploiting me, and the Irish cause, in their own supposed interests. Since then a hundred proofs have accumulated – and yesterday the climax came, and as now but little is left I begin, today, a hurried record of things that must be stated in order that some day the truth may be known.

In three weeks I shall probably be at sea in the maddest and most ill planned enterprise that the history of Irish revolutionary efforts offers. But it is not of my choosing, of my planning, or undertaken with my approval. I go because honour calls me to go – and because to stop it now (even if I could stop it) would involve others and perhaps bring greater grief . . .

I left the GSS [German General Staff] with Monteith at about 12.10 and walked back with him across the Tiergarten by the pond . . . I told Monteith all my fears – but how I saw clearly I had to go. He agreed that I could not stay behind. He also agreed with me that in any case, without a German army corps, any “rising” in Ireland by ourselves alone is hopeless – worse than hopeless.

But to attempt it with this meagre “help” under such conditions is madness and criminal. He agrees to it & sees the hopelessness, but feels with me it is our duty to try & get the rifles into Ireland. We have no right to stand in the way of that attempt. I explained to him that my only hope in going is to arrive in time to dissuade the leaders at home from the attempt. That if I can only get ashore a little ahead of the rifles I may be able to stop the “rising” and arrange only for the safe delivery of the rifles. If this can be done then (& then only) would the thing prove useful. Otherwise it is an awful danger. Of course the chances are that we shall never get near the shores of Ireland. If it is too “dangerous” for

a submarine to go off that coast, how do they expect “the steamer” or the trawlers loaded up with rifles &c to escape observation? The thing is worse than mad – it is dishonest.

April 7th, 1916

I told that faithful splendid Monteith last night that I should be glad to go even to death on the scaffold – to an English jail to get away from Germany & these people I despise so much. He said, “Indeed, I think I would too.” He & B[everley] slept here last night. Latter in an old suit of mine.

If my papers survive, and above all the Treaty, and some kind friend of former years (say ED M[orel]) should edit them there may yet be told a strange chapter of Irish history. In any case it will be shown that I was only a fool – to trust German honour or goodwill – & never a rogue.

April 11th, 1916

We shall be 12 days I reckon in the submarine – round by Orkneys probably. It will be a dreadful voyage – confined and airless and full of oil smells I fear.

My first fear is that we shall never land – but be kept off the shore until the “rebellion” breaks out . . . I long only for peace and forgiveness and reconciliation. All my life is one of that – and yet I’ve turned it into a nest of serpents at the end – oh! what a fate!

In the second week of April 1916 Casement boarded the German submarine with Capt Robert Monteith. His concerns about the plan to run guns into Ireland proved well founded. As the British navy intercepted and destroyed the vessel and its cargo, the rendezvous with the arms ship, Aud-Norge, never happened. Casement was captured at a ring fort near Banna Strand. Within 48 hours he had been taken to London, to face interrogators at Scotland Yard. After a trial at the end of June, Casement was found guilty of high treason. London ignored pleas for clemency from people in England, Ireland and elsewhere, and hanged Casement behind closed doors at Pentonville Prison, in central London, on August 3rd, 1916.

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