**The British State and the Irish Rebellion of 1916**

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I have argued that the British authorities both in Dublin and London were supplied with timely and accurate intelligence relating to events leading up to the 1916 rebellion. With respect to the latter there is evidence to show that the political head of the Royal Navy, Arthur Balfour, gave a clear warning to the Cabinet of this impending event: ‘We knew beforehand that the Revolution in Ireland would start on Easter Monday 1916 and made naval preparations in advance. The Cabinet would not believe the First Lord’. Furthermore, it was the Admiralty staff that conveyed to Downing Street the news of the outbreak of the rebellion in Dublin: ‘On Easter Monday I told the Duty Captain to keep in touch with the Post Office about the Irish Telegrams and when the DC told me the P.O. had telephoned that the system was blocked, I telephoned to Downing Street to the PM’s Secretary to tell the PM that the rebellion had commenced’. There was no failure of intelligence in London. Policy-makers failed to respond to this intelligence until it was too late.

Grob-Fitzgibbon has argued that the Irish Revolution covers the years 1912–22, and must be interpreted as a single historical period. Yet within that period he identifies three schools of thought as to why the British state failed to contain and defeat an insurgency. The first one is referred to as the colony to nation school. This interpretation is characterized in the following way: ‘The British were defeated in Ireland because of the inevitability of a successful Irish nationalist struggle an effort that had been intensifying for the previous two centuries’. The second school is termed the repressive– reaction school. The key period is 1916 – 21. The failure of the British state in Ireland is viewed in the following way: ‘British security forces acted with undue force towards the rebels turning them into popular heroes and swaying public opinion away from the British government and onto those who had revolted’.

The core of my thesis is that the British Army faced a problem that many military organizations have faced. Understanding the kind of conflict they were involved in, and adapting their methods of operation accordingly.

Hart argues that the origins of the rebellion can be seen in the profound changes and destabilization of Ireland’s political structure that occurred as a result of the attempt to introduce Home Rule. It resulted in a concatenation of events and forces that ultimately made the rebellion possible: The creation of the U.V.F. [Ulster Volunteer Force], the Liberal government’s tolerance of it, and the Irish Party’s passivity in the face of both, provided an opportunity for them (dissident nationalists) to enter politics in a paramilitary guise: as the Irish Volunteers, founded in November 1913.

For the organizers of the rebellion, British intelligence and policy-makers the First World War was all defining. Foster argues that: The First World War should be seen as one of the most decisive events in modern Irish history. Politically speaking, it temporarily defused the Ulster situation, it put Home Rule on ice, it altered the conditions of military crises in Ireland at a stroke, and it created the rationale for an IRB rebellion. Economically it created a spectacular boom in agricultural prices, and high profits in agriculturally derived industries.

Great Britain did not have a political policing section, which became known as the ‘Fenian Office’, until 1881. This was in response to a bombing campaign by Irish political extremists. The murder in Dublin of two key members of the Irish Executive one year later led to calls for similar efforts to be made in Ireland. This led to the setting up of a new independent Irish secret service department in Dublin Castle. In England a second wave of bomb outrages led to the setting up of the ‘Irish Branch’ which replaced the ‘Fenian Office’ in March 1883. The two police forces in Ireland tasked to obtain, organize, and evaluate political intelligence were the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), and the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Both these forces were involved in all three of these functions in the period leading up to the rebellion.

In terms of the nature and structure of the organizations they attempted to penetrate the best analogy is that of a Russian doll. Hidden from view was a secret and subversive organization called the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). Linked to the IRB was a sister organization in the United States called Clan Na Gael. This latter organization had a partial public profile. The former organization was to play a pivotal role in the rebellion: ‘The Easter Rising of 1916 was planned and executed by a secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and, in particular, a small Military Council of Leaders, Tom Clarke, Sean MacDermott, Patrick Pearse, Eamonn Ceannt, Joseph Plunkett and Thomas Mac Donagh’. Linked to the IRB and Clan Na Gael were two organizations with a public profile: the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army.

The British state obtained intelligence about the links between the IRB and Clan na Gael and the Irish Volunteers from the Detective Department of the DMP as early as December 1914. They had been successful in placing an agent inside the Irish Volunteers: I beg to report that, according to an informant, the Clan- na-Gaels have taken over military control of the Sinn Fein Section of the Irish Volunteers . . . All matters of policy will be determined by the Clan na Gael Executive. The funds will remain for the present, subject to audit, in the hands of the Irish Treasurers. The informant adds that an agent from America will likely visit this country on an early date to carry out the terms of the Alliance. The Irish Republican Brotherhood will also have representation on this new Executive, which will receive financial support from the Irish Societies in America.

This intelligence was incorporated into a Cabinet document that was dated January 1915. The assumption can be made that members of Cabinet were in receipt of this information. Secondly the veracity of this intelligence was endorsed by Brien’s line manager who added that: ‘This information comes from a good source and is believed to be correct’. The use of an agent yielded further detailed information about the identities of the recipients of these funds: Before the split between the National and Irish Volunteers considerable funds were coming from America and being paid into various banks in Dublin to the account of Mr John MacNeill, President of the General Council and Executive Committee, and Mr M.J. O’Rahilly, Treasurer, or to the joint account of these two gentleman. The money was being used for two things: the purchase of arms and the funding of seditious newspapers and leaflets. One of these documents can be described as crude geopolitical propaganda. It had outlined the strategic benefits that would accrue to an independent Ireland in the event of a German victory in the war. O’Halpin claims that it was not until 1915 that the police in Ireland had any reliable agents inside the Irish Volunteers: ‘In 1915 two low level informants, “Chalk” and “Granite” were placed or found in the Irish Volunteers. These provided scraps of worthwhile intelligence, but they were not in a position to say what their leaders intended’.

One challenge that British intelligence faced was understanding how Germany’s policy with respect to providing assistance to the IRB and the Irish volunteers was evolving. Initially the German High Command was presented with military plans from the IRB and the Irish Volunteers that entailed a German-led invasion: The original plan for the 1916 Rising involved an elaborate county-by-county rebellion, which would have depended for its success on a German backed invasion with the landing being at Limerick. This was the basis of the proposal put forward by Joseph Plunkett and Sir Roger Casement to the Germans in 1915.

By March 1916 the scope of the plan had narrowed to a request from Irish Revolutionary Headquarters for the following munitions: field guns, German gun crews and officers, machine guns, rifles and ammunition. The German High Seas Fleet should make a demonstration in the North Sea and a submarine should be detailed to Dublin Bay. Finally, the Germans decided to supply rifles and machine guns, and sortie elements of their High Seas Fleet to bombard a town in Kent. The weapons and ammunition were to be loaded onto a captured British ship from the Wilson Line that was renamed the Aud.

A breakthrough came on 10 February 1916. This was the date when the British intercepted and decrypted the following message ‘on the position in Ireland’ from John Devoy. It had been delivered to the German embassy in Washington for transmission to Berlin: Unanimous opinion that action cannot be postponed much longer. Delay disadvantageous to us. We can now put up an effective fight. Our enemies cannot allow us much more time. The arrest of our leaders would hamper us severely. Initiative on our part is necessary. The Irish regiments which are in sympathy with us are being gradually being replaced by English regiments. We have therefore decided to begin action on Easter Saturday. Unless entirely new circumstances arise we must have your arms and munitions in Limerick between Good Friday and Easter Saturday. We expect German help immediately after beginning action. We might be compelled to begin earlier.

A further message was intercepted on 18 February that confirmed the earlier proposals of the IRB. This message was sent using another route which the British were monitoring. The American transatlantic cable which Bernstorff, the German ambassador, was given access to as a means of discussing President Woodrow Wilson’s peace initiative: The Irish leader, John Devoy, informs me that rising is to begin in Ireland on Easter Saturday. Please send arms to [arrive at] Limerick, west coast of Ireland between Good Friday and Easter Saturday. To put it off longer is impossible. Let me know if help may be expected from Germany. Bernstorff.

By mid-March 1916, the British authorities had a comprehensive understanding and knowledge of the planned rebellion: ‘The decrypts revealed the extent of the German complicity in the Easter Rising . . . between 1914 and 1917 Room 40 intercepted over 30 messages between Bernstorff and Berlin indicating German support for the extremists’.

Given the intelligence that Britain now had obtained on this planned rebellion, it is important to pose two questions. Firstly was this information communicated to the authorities in Ireland? Secondly, how comprehensive was the dissemination of intelligence to both the mobile and stable forces of law and order?

There is evidence to suggest that there was a coordinated response by both the military (stable force) and the two police forces in Ireland (mobile forces) to this intelligence.

On the 17th of that month [April] the Major-General Commanding [GOC Ireland] showed to the Under Secretary [Sir Matthew Nathan] at the Castle a letter from the Officer Commanding Queenstown defences which told of a contemplated landing from a German ship, rigged up as a neutral and accompanied by two submarines., of arms and ammunition on the south-west coast with a view to their reaching Limerick, and of a rising timed for Easter eve . . . The letter was shown to the Inspector-General, Royal Irish Constabulary, and the County Inspectors in the south and south-west counties were put on their guard. The Chief Commissioner, Dublin Metropolitan Police, was also informed so that a watch could be kept on the turbulent spirits in Dublin, and he arranged with the military authority for armed pickets of 100 men to be henceforth nightly available at each of the four main barracks. There were the usual meetings of suspects in Dublin on the 17th and the 18th.

The Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, had been in receipt of an intelligence warning that predated Stafford’s information by 24 days: On the 23rd March, 1916, the Director of Military Intelligence informed General Headquarters, Home Forces, that he had received information from an absolutely reliable source that a rising in Ireland was contemplated at an early date, and that extremists in that country were in communication with Germany with a view to obtaining German assistance. He added that the rising was timed to take place on 22nd April and that Irish extremists had asked Germany to supply arms and ammunition in Limerick by that date. Acting on similar information the Admiral at Queenstown issued a stringent order for the patrolling of the Irish Coast.

O’Halpin maintains that this intelligence obtained in the third week of March was not passed onto the Irish authorities.

On 12 April 1916 Sir Roger Casement, Robert Monteith and Daniel Julian Bailey, both members of the ‘Irish Brigade’ embarked on a U-20 at Wilhelmshaven. The night before their departure they had been given a final briefing by the German General Staff. They were given two important things: a code for communication; and a clear commitment of further supplies of arms and ammunition if required: ‘The code, as the photograph shows, was devised in order that we might communicate with the Germans should operations be prolonged, necessitating further supplies of ammunition and material’. This line of communication was to be maintained from 22 April to 20 May 1916. Due to a mechanical failure they transferred to U-19 after a day and a half at sea. The Aud set sail on 10 April disguised as a Norwegian steamer commanded by a reserve Lieutenant Karl Spindler. The crew consisted of three officers, one helmsman, and 15 sailors of the Imperial German Navy. It was carrying a cargo of 20,000 Italian rifles which had been captured by the Germans from the Russian Army on the Eastern Front, plus 10 million rounds of ammunition, ten machine guns, 1 million rounds of machine-gun ammunition, explosives, landmines, bombs, and hand grenades.

At midnight on 20 April a German U-boat, U-19, commanded by Captain Weisbach, arrived at the pre-arranged rendezvous point. This was a one mile north west (NW 16’) of Inishtooskert Island, at the entrance of Tralee Bay on the west coast of Ireland. Two important meetings had been scheduled to take place there. The Aud was to rendezvous with U-19 during the period 20–23 April after 10 pm and a pilot boat, which was to show two green lights, was to meet the U-19 and take Casement and his two companions ashore. The first meeting never took place. The Aud, due to a navigational error, was several miles from this point. This was compounded by the fact that the Royal Navy was already shadowing the ship: ‘The Aud had been shadowed for a considerable distance down the coast and kept under close observation while in Tralee Bay’. The increased patrolling ordered by the Admiral at Queenstown had the required effect. HMS Bluebell was one of the patrolling vessels: The Commander of the Bluebell took definite action by approaching to within about 3 miles distance from the ‘Aud’ and asking What is your name? Where do you come from? To which the Aud replied. ‘The Aud from Bergen to Genoa with cargo’. Then to the question what are you doing here? The Aud replied, ‘I have lost my bearings, and I am taking them from the Irish coast’.

This ruse failed as the Aud was shadowed and informed that she was being escorted ‘to Queenstown for search’. At the position of one mile south of the lightship at Daunts Rock, at the entrance to Cork Harbour, Lieutenant Spindler took action to scuttle his ship: ‘Suddenly the Aud stopped, hoisted two German naval ensigns, and lowered her boats into which got the officers and seamen – about thirty in number, in naval uniform. Then an explosion occurred in the Aud and she went to the bottom’. Grob-Fitzgibbon maintains that the Royal Navy sank the Aud.

The second meeting also failed to happen. The pilot boat never materialized. The initial plan had been for Casement, Monteith, and Bailey to go ashore in the pilot-boat which would also make contact with the Aud. Captain Weisbach had an alternative set of orders to be used if the pilot boat failed to appear. This was to land the three men in the submarine’s inflatable dinghy, this plan not without its risks as owing to the war the local population had been urged by the RIC to report any activity that could be the prelude to an invasion. There was a witness to the three men moving inland from the beach: The instructions we got were to request the people living along the coast to inform us if they saw any indication of a hostile landing. They always reported anything unusual they saw and this instruction was in existence from the outbreak of the war. It was when Mary (Gorman) was milking cows between 3 and 4 o’clock in the morning that she observed three men coming from the direction of the sea.

With the interception of the Aud and Casement’s arrest, the plans that had been made to coordinate the landing of the weapons took on a farce like quality. On 21 April Irish Volunteers Austin Stack and Cornelius Collins were attempting to oversee a plan that went very wrong. That evening a car was driven off the end of Ballykissane Pier and all the occupants bar one were drowned. They were also arrested on charges of conspiracy to land arms.

These events represented a coup for British intelligence. Furthermore, the Royal Navy, the British Army and the RIC had all cooperated in an effective manner. However, it would be wrong to attribute Casement’s capture solely to the signals intelligence provided by Room 40: ‘We knew about Sir Roger Casement’s traitorous expedition to Ireland in a German submarine partly from RM 40 and partly from the Head agent’. These events had an effect on the leadership of the Irish Volunteers. News of Casement’s arrest and the interception of the Aud by the Royal Navy caused Eoin MacNeill, the Chief of Staff, to issue a ‘countermanding order’ against mobilization. This was distributed throughout the country by messenger and adverts in the national press. The original plan had a mutually re-enforcing element that now become unhinged: ‘The Easter Sunday manoeuvres would serve as a distraction from the arms landing in Munster, and this in turn would enable the Volunteers to deter or resist any attempts at suppression by the British authorities’. The possibility of mobilizing the Irish Volunteers throughout Ireland had now been abandoned. There has been an ongoing historical debate as to how damaging this order was to the rebellion when it finally broke out in Dublin.

The successful response by the British authorities in preventing the landing of German arms, and securing Casement’s arrest, stands in sharp contrast to the reaction to intelligence that was being provided by the DMP and the RIC to key policy-makers in Dublin Castle. Townshend has argued that the ‘British authorities were bombarded with warnings about the approaching rebellion’. He argues that it was an intelligence failure not a failure of response. Furthermore, he makes no reference to the assumptions that motivated policy-makers within hours of the outbreak of the rebellion: ‘This was a classic instance of intelligence failure: caused not by a lack of information, but by the blinkered view of those whose job was to interpret it’. Major Price at army headquarters is cited as a source of this failure of interpretation.

The assumptions of the senior civil servant in Dublin Castle, Sir Matthew Nathan, need to be understood: ‘Like Birrell he saw his overriding task as being to keep the situation as quiet as possible, to prepare the way for the constitutional nationalists to take over when Home Rule was finally implemented’. This heightened the tendency of what Betts has described as the ‘allure of deferring decision’. For example, despite being shown a letter on 17 April that indicated, through signals intelligence intercepts, a direct connection between the German government and the IRB Nathan claimed in his evidence to the Royal Commission that it was only the interception of the ‘Aud’ and the capture of Casement three days before the rebellion, that proved the link between the IRB and the German government. Prior to that reference is made only to German organizations in the United States: Until three days before the insurrection there had been no definite proof of any connection between the anti-British party in Ireland and the foreign enemy. It was of course known that the Clan Na Gael, which was in touch with the Republican Brotherhood and the Volunteers were in alliance with German organisations in America.

This statement of Nathan’s raises a key point. Did evidence of ‘hostile association’ as defined by the Defence of the Realm Act 1914 only become actionable on 21 April 1916 and before that date it was not possible to treat these citizens as external enemies? In fact there existed a range of legislation that was on the statute books prior to the First World War that could have been applied, but was not. These acts gave the Irish Executive extensive powers for dealing with riotous or unlawful assemblies. Yet their utility, and the intelligence warnings, were ignored.

Two important issues conflated to produce atrophy in terms of responding to intelligence warnings. First was the political relationship between the Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell, Sir Matthew Nathan, the senior civil servant in Dublin, and the leaders of the Irish Parliamentary Party: ‘His [Birrell’s] nine years as Chief Secretary were characterised by his cultivation of the close links with the Nationalist leaders’. The second was the impact of the First World War, and the requirements of recruiting that drove Asquith’s government to pass on 18 September 1914 the Irish Home Rule Bill, and a second bill suspending its operation until after the war: Lord Kitchener, the new Secretary of State for War, had told them [the Cabinet] that whilst recruits in Ulster were plentiful, outside of Ulster he had been forced to rely on English troops to fill the gaps in the Irish Regiments. As a result they needed Redmond’s Irish Volunteers.

This need to ensure a buoyant recruitment in the south of Ireland dovetailed with the policy that Birrell was following. The desired outcome was that wartime political expediency would pave the way for the constitutional nationalists, led by John Redmond and John Dillon, to head up a devolved government in Dublin when the Home Rule Bill was finally implemented. Paradoxically Birrell was less than convinced about the efficacy of the policy: Even with the Home rule on the Statute Book the chance of its ever becoming a fact was so uncertain, the outstanding difficulty about Ulster so obvious, and the details of the measure so unattractive and difficult to transmute into telling platform phrases that Home Rule as an emotional flag fell out of daily use.

Arthur Norway, Secretary of the Post Office in Ireland, and an eyewitness to the events that led up to the rebellion: ‘He [Sir Matthew Nathan] had formed the habit, possibly on instructions from Mr Birrell, of consulting John Dillon upon every step he took, and viewing everything through the eyes of that old and inveterate rebel’.

These assumptions mitigated against any response to the intelligence warnings that the RIC and the DMP were assiduously reporting. The latter organization demonstrated that it also had the capability to do more than mere surveillance of the Irish Volunteers. The DMP was running two agents code- named ‘Chalk’ and ‘Granite’ in the months before the rebellion. Their reports illustrated the degree to which effective police work, with respect to subversive organizations, depended on good intelligence. The DMP built up a detailed picture of the Irish Volunteers. On 24 February 1916 ‘Granite’ reported to ‘G’ Division detectives that: The organisers appear to be supplied with plenty of money and every effort is being made to win over as many as possible of the members of the National and Redmond Volunteers. He further added that rifles and ammunition are being stored at the residence of Michael O’Hanrahan, 26 Connaught Street; E. DeValera, 33 Morehampton Terrace; B. O’Connor, 1 Brendan Terrace, Donnybrook.

On 22 March, one month before the rebellion, ‘Chalk’ gave details of a meeting he had attended. One of the speakers was Thomas McDonagh. ‘Chalk’ reported verbatim extracts of McDonagh’s talk: ‘There will be a general mobilization on the next Sunday, the 2nd April: should any change take place you will be notified by our own Post, or by Head Quarters’. ‘Chalk’ had also managed to uncover the locations of this communication system: ‘Harding’s, Christ-Church Place; Head Quarters, Dawson Street, and Callan’s (address unknown) are some of the places where letters are dealt with’. Perhaps the most startling intelligence that ‘Chalk’ reveals is that the Irish Volunteers were also in receipt of intelligence from a surprising source: ‘The Sinn Feiners obtain considerable information, and that, as far as can be ascertained, it comes from the Chief Secretary’s Office at the Castle’. The irony is that the cover sheet of this intelligence report indicates that it was seen by the Chief Secretary on 3 April 1916! The activities of ‘Chalk’ continued to provide detailed information on IRB members such as McDonagh: ‘T. McDonagh and two other Sinn Feiners were seen to enter the Restaurant in Henry St owned by Mrs W. Power and carrying heavy handbags which they left inside. It is believed that the bags contained ammunition’.

Augustine Birrell was not above dissembling with respect to police intelligence. He claimed ignorance with respect to police intelligence. In addition, he stated that he did not know about the IRB connection with Imperial Germany until the 16th of April.: I always thought that I was very ignorant of what was going on in the minds, and in the cellars if you like, of the Dublin population. I was always exceedingly nervous about that . . . So far as Dublin is concerned, I do not know if Sir Matthew was more in a position than I was to receive these warnings, but I am not conscious of any until towards the end, the 16th April, when we had the letter from Stafford to General Friend telling us about the ship.

Policy assumptions continued to exercise an influence on the Birrell– Nathan nexus just two weeks away from the outbreak of the rebellion. They are encapsulated in a letter that Nathan wrote to the Adjutant General of the British Army on 10 April: Though the Irish Volunteers element has been active of late, especially in Dublin, I do not believe that its leaders mean insurrection or that the Volunteers have sufficient arms to make it formidable if the leaders do mean it. The bulk of people are not disaffected. On 22 April, three days before the rebellion, ‘Chalk’ reported that: The Sinn Fein Volunteers are going out for a march on Sunday next, 23rd instant at 4pm, each man to carry three days rations, rifle and ammunition, etc. All men employed in the Civil Service and Government appointments (who are members) to proceed on cycles or walk to a certain place, of which they will be notified later. These men are to leave their rifles and, etc at their respective Depots, and they will be carried by the Transport Section to the place of meeting. This is being done with the object of safeguarding the Government servants from observation by the police.

In the same report a verbatim account was provided of an address given by Thomas McDonagh on 19 April. This report also illuminated the extent to which the IRB Military Committee, of which he was a member, had used the so called ‘Castle’ document as evidence of British provocation and a pretext for rebellion: Professor McDonagh on issuing the orders on Wednesday night last said: ‘We are not going out on Friday, but we are going out on Sunday. Boys, some of us may never come back – Mobilisation orders to be issued in due course’. McDonagh further stated that Kelly’s statement relative to the Army was true, and that it came from friends in the Castle.

This point remains highly contested.

Another piece of intelligence that ‘Chalk’ provided stated that: About 700 Martini Rifles were recently landed at Wexford; and the Motor Car which was seized by the Police at College Green brought 200 military bayonets to Dublin, and they were handed over to ‘Captain Wafer’, who is the Armourer for the Volunteers. I have seen one of these bayonets and it is dated 1899 – a short military weapon in a black scabbard, and recently sharpened.

This unresolved tension between policy assumptions and the ability of intelligence to influence decisions continued right up to the start of the rebellion at 12 noon on 24 April. This is illustrated by an account given by Lord Wimborne, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland: At 7pm [22 April] the Under Secretary reported that the prisoner captured in Kerry had been identified as Sir Roger Casement, and that he was on his way to England under a strong guard. I concurred that the Sinn Fein Party had been much dismayed by those events, and the menace of their rising that day could be considered at an end, that a rising was probably contingent on the successful landing of arms and that the prospect of future tranquility was improved; but when the Under Secretary called at 10pm I again reverted to the desirability of making arrests in Dublin and urged immediate action.

These ambiguities and the inability to evaluate intelligence correctly continued into Sunday 23 April, the day before the rebellion. At 10:30 am Nathan called Lord Wimborne to inform him that the previous night 250lbs of gelignite had been stolen from a quarry south-west of Dublin and taken to Liberty Hall in Dublin. This theft appeared, initially, to act as a catalyst for action. Nathan proposed to raid Liberty Hall and two other ‘Sinn Fein’ arsenals whose locations were known to the authorities. These are given as Larkfield Kimmage and Father Matthews Park. In addition, Lord Wimborne urged him ‘to put his hand on the ringleaders’. On the same day the Lord Lieutenant wrote what he described as a ‘colloquial note’ to the Chief Secretary urging him to ‘write and ginger Nathan’.

On the morning of the rebellion, 24 April, the two police forces in Ireland continued to provide reports of surveillance and intelligence-based warnings. Lord Wimborne was given critical intelligence by Nathan two hours before the rebellion began: the Under Secretary called at 10am and reported that at 6am a report from Limerick has arrived that Bailey, who had landed with Casement, had been captured ‘he is now on trial’. He had confessed that the other companion was Monteith, who had escaped and left for Dublin; that a rising had been planned for that day and Dublin Castle was to be attacked. I urged that the Castle Guard be strengthened, but the Under Secretary demurred.

This intelligence had been telegraphed in cipher to the Inspector General of the RIC. It was disseminated beyond Nathan’s office. The headquarters of the British Army’s Irish Command and the Chief Commissioner of the DMP were informed. Chamberlain also issued orders to all RIC barracks throughout Ireland to be on extra alert and to watch carefully for movements of the Irish Volunteers. Grob-Fitzgibbon erroneously argues that: ‘This was the only solid piece of intelligence the British government received about the Easter rising prior to its beginning’. He also claimed that Casement’s arrest and the interception of the Aud had provided Birrell with a degree of reassurance: ‘The Chief Secretary’s Office, however, believed that it was “unlikely that the intended rising could take place”’.

Another institution had made extensive preparations based on intelligence warnings that they had received. The Royal Navy acted with alacrity: We had an old battleship with a marine battalion on board at Milford Haven and they went to Haulbowline Dockyard Queenstown. There were also destroyers from the Grand Fleet and Harwich sent to various Irish ports, and all the SNOs [Senior Naval Officers], at all the patrol bases round Ireland were warned and ready.

It was not until 10:30 am on 24 April, one and a half hours before the outbreak of the rebellion that Nathan recognized that the warnings now rendered the policy assumptions untenable. He sent the following telegraph to Birrell: In view of the definite association of Irish Volunteers with the Enemy now established I agree with the Lord Lieutenant that leaders should be arrested and interned in England. Can this be proceeded with subject to concurrence of the Law Officers, Military authorities and Home office?

Less than an hour later the log of the Dublin Metropolitan Police Telephone Messages, all of which were being copied to Dublin Castle, revealed the extent to which events were slipping out of the control of the Irish Executive. The initiative now lay with the decisions that had been made by the Military Council of the IRB at 8 pm on Easter Sunday when Patrick Pearse sent a message, by couriers, to the leaders of the Irish Volunteers throughout Ireland saying that the rebellion would start at 12 noon the next day. At 11:20 am a message from E6 AND 78E stated that: ‘Fifty volunteers now travelled by tram car 167 going in the direction of the city’. This report was phoned to three police stations in the city and the Chief Superintendent of ‘G’ Division. The next message sent at 11:55 am was an attempt to sustain this monitoring. All six divisions of the DMP area were given the following instructions: ‘Please have three or four cyclists out to watch movement of Volunteers’. At the same time a report was received that stated that: ‘The Volunteers are turning everyone out of Stephens Green Pk and locking up the gates’. Liberty Hall was also under surveillance. A message received at 12:20 stated: ‘The volunteers are now breaking up at Liberty Hall and going in the direction of Eden Quay’.

As these events were unfolding Nathan’s final action was an attempt to isolate Dublin from the south of Ireland. This would prevent the spread of any rebellion in Dublin to the rest of the country. To do this he needed the help of Arthur Norway, Secretary of the Post Office. Nathan had phoned him and asked him to come to Dublin Castle on the morning of 24 April: He desired me to take immediate steps for denying the use of the Telephone and Telegraph service over large areas of Southern Ireland to all but the military and naval use. I said that was too important a matter to be settled verbally, and I must have it in writing. ‘Very well, he said you write what you want and I will sign it’. I was just finishing the necessary order, when a volley of musketry crashed out beneath the window. I looked up. ‘What is that I asked’. ‘Oh that’s probably the long promised attack on the Castle’, cried Nathan.

This attack and the occupation of the General Post Office (GPO) was recorded by the DMP Telephone Message log: ‘12.26pm The Sinn Fein volunteers have attacked the Castle and have possession of the GPO’. Approximately nine minutes later at 12:35 pm the following message was sent out to all stations in the DMP area: ‘Send to the Castle at once every available man also all arms and ammunition’. The Royal Commission summarized well the situation that had now come about: ‘Before any further effective steps could be taken the insurrection had broken out and by noon many portions of the City of Dublin had been simultaneously occupied by rebellious armed forces’.

The first public acknowledgement, by the British authorities in Ireland, of the involvement of the Imperial German government came on the first day of the rebellion. The proclamation issued by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Wimborne, stated: An attempt, instigated and designed by the foreign enemies of our King and Country to incite rebellion in Ireland, and thus endanger the safety of the United Kingdom, has been made by a reckless though small body of men, who have been guilty of insurrectionary acts.

Dublin was engulfed in fighting until 29 April when Patrick Pearse, the self- styled ‘Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Republic’, ordered a general surrender to British Forces. The cost in terms of lives numbered 116 British soldiers and officers, 13 members of the RIC, and three members of the DMP. There were also 318 insurgents and civilians killed.197 In addition, the destruction in the centre of Dublin had been enormous: ‘The Chief of the Dublin Fire Brigade reported that over 200 buildings had been destroyed during the rising, and estimated the value of all that had been destroyed to be in the region of £2,500,000’.