

The Civil War in Galway

Part 10 of Nollaig O Gadhra's series to mark the 75th anniversary

THE execution of six local men in the Old Workhouse in Tuam on April 11th, 1923 was, as we have seen, a dramatic extension of the policy of reprisal against prisoners waiting on an indefinite "death row" situation, into Connacht.

It was seen by many as an extension also of the Army Council policy of Dick Mulcahy and Eoin O'Duffy of making certain that all fingers were steeped in bloody executions while the reign of arbitrary military terror existed; so that all the blame would not rest with the top brass later on.

Curiously enough the politicians, with their very doubtful mandate for anything even half as drastic as the measures being taken to push through the Treaty, escaped with very little criticism at the time. Contrast this, for example, with the way DeValera, head of the political Republicans, was blamed for every I.R.A. action while the Cosgrave Free State Government, which was, in theory, in charge of the National Army, and was supposed to be fighting for the principle of political control over the Army, handed over the entire pursuit of the war, including the power of life or death of prisoners, to a Military Council.

It was as ironic, and sad, as those who argued that the Free State were "fighting for democracy" — only their particular type of democracy, apart from everything else, included a compulsory Oath of Allegiance to a British Crown! Critics of DeValera, quite rightly, attack him for dismissing the Oath requirement as an "empty formula" after he founded Fianna Fáil and wanted to enter the Dáil. These same critics are less anxious to remind us of the fact that the original Irish Free State Constitution provided for the right of initiation by citizens in one of the really liberal provisions of that document that had any relevance in the 1920s.

Article 48 of the Free State Constitution stated in part:

"The Oireachtas may provide for the initiation by the people of proposals for laws or constitutional amendments. Should the Oireachtas fail to make such provisions within two years, it shall, on the petition of not less than seventy-five thousand voters on the register, of whom, not more than fifteen thousand shall be voters in any one constituency, either make such provisions or submit the question to the people for decision, in accordance with the ordinary regulations governing the Referendum." Proposals for having proposed Bills passed by the Oireachtas submitted to the people in a Referendum had been outlined in Article 47. But, Article 50 also provided that changes in the Constitution could be made by the majority in the two houses of the Oireachtas, Dáil and Seanad, by simple majority, and without a referendum, in the first eight years of the life of the new Free State. This is usually provided for in such circumstances, to tidy up obvious mistakes or unworkable details as they emerge in practice in a new constitutional situation. However, when Eamon DeValera and his new Fianna Fáil party set about seeking a Referendum on the crucial issue of the Oath in 1926, and when it seemed likely not only that he could collect the 75,000 signatures but would probably win the Referendum, the Cumann na nGaedheal Government of Mr. Cosgrave, in spite of its great claims for "democracy," simply abolished the provision of the people's right on Initiation by simple legislation within the eight-year limit that had been laid down. Even though it was clear that such drastic use of power by a slender Dáil majority was not the constitution the framers had in mind when the mechanism was originally included as a "tidying up" exercise! Some people argued at the time that the eight-year period of free-hand to the Government without having to consult the people was too long, given that the normal life-span of a Dáil session was five years at a maximum. What is significant however is that the Free State "democrats" abolished the Right on Initiation and the people of the 26 counties have not had it restored to them ever since.

True, DeValera, in his second coming as a 26-county democrat, did present Bunreacht na hEireann to the people in 1937. But changes in that Constitution, as we know, cannot be demanded by a group of concerned citizens. The initiative with regard to any referendum for change rests with the Dáil parties, who watch the Opinion Polls of course!

BUT to return to the aftermath of the Tuam executions and the reaction in the town in April 1923. Again, we return to J.J. Waldron's notes, which state:

At a meeting of the Tuam Town Commissioners held on April 17th, 1923 the following resolution was proposed by Mr. John Burke, T.C. [Editor of *The Tuam Herald*].

"That we hereby record our disapproval of, and sorrow at, the executions carried out in this town on Wednesday morning last, and we equally condemn attacks on the National forces, and reprisals, by whomsoever (committed) that we respectfully request his Grace the Archbishop of Tuam and through him, the other Bishops of Ireland to use their influence with the Free State Government to have a stop put to such executions in future, as already enough blood has been

split and young lives sacrificed in this unholy war.

"Further that we join with other public bodies in the suggestion that Monsignor Luzio the Papal Envoy be invited to act as intermediary between the two contending parties to negotiate an honourable peace, and thus bring to and end the horrible conditions now existing, which are a disgrace to the name of Ireland.

"That we tender to the bereaved parents and relatives of the deceased young men our heartfelt sympathy and we are of opinion that as Liam Lynch, one of the leaders, was accorded a public funeral this week, the bodies of the executed men should be given over to their relatives for interment. That copies of this resolution be sent to the Archbishop, the Ministers of Dáil Eireann, and the T.D.s for this county."

Mr. Burke in proposing the resolution said — the people of Tuam were shocked and pained at these terrible prosecutions. They heard a great deal nowadays of the old Gael of civilisation and civilisation and building up a Gaelic State. If the Gaelic State could only be built up by the execution of young Irishmen, he feared it would have a poor foundation. He was no supporter of republican attacks on the peoples' government or violence in any shape or form.

In seconding the resolution Mr. James Moran, T.C., said it was a most painful duty for him as he knew most of the parents of the boys executed — parents who brought up their children as Catholics and patriotic as any were brought up in any place in Ireland. Little he thought honest parents would meet with such a fate as seeing their children in the prime of life taken from them at the hands of their own countrymen. To the parents and sisters (one of whom is a nun in the Mercy Convent Tuam) of the deceased they tendered their deepest sympathy to all.

The resolution was passed unanimously. The following was sent to the Tuam Town Commissioners by Most Rev. Dr. Gilmartin Archbishop of Tuam commenting on resolution passed by them at a meeting on April 17th, 1923.

Dear Sir,

In reply to your resolution, I have to say I have already expressed my sympathy with the people of Tuam in the horror we felt at the Tuam executions and the deaths which preceded them. I wish to join with your body in offering sympathy to the parents and relatives of all deceased. May all their souls rest in peace, Amen.

As in the past I hope to use whatever influence I possess to put an end to all the violence and counter violence, as there is a constitutional way of composing our discords, existing conditions are a disgrace.

I join with you in praying Mgr. Luzio's mission may be crowned with success.

Yours very faithfully,
T.P. Gilmartin,
Archbishop of Tuam.

Sympathy

At a meeting of the Tuam District Council held in April 1923 at Court House, the following resolutions were passed:

No. 1: A vote of sympathy with the relatives of the prisoners recently executed in Tuam.

No. 2: A vote of condolence with their colleague Mr. Martin Higgins whose brother was killed in action against the Free State Army at Headford.

Mr. T. Costello D.C. referring to the Tuam executions, said that was the first time since the days of Cromwell that executions were carried out in Tuam. He did not know why the men were taken to Tuam for execution except it was to make the volleys ring in the ears of the Archbishop of Tuam or perhaps the Free State meeting held a few days ago was such a failure that it became necessary to bring something into the town to strike terror into the people. The sword would never succeed in this country. It had been tried by England for 800 years, she had also tried the gibbet, the jack and the rack and all and each failed, and today she was like Pontius Pilate, she had washed her hands out of the Irish trouble. Ireland could not afford to lose the men who had been sacrificed on both sides and he thought it was their duty to call on their representatives to resign, as they had not the consent of the people to carry out executions.

THE six executions in Tuam were the largest number of I.R.A. prisoners to be put to death in one centre since seven (Stephen White, Joseph Johnston, Patrick Mangan, Patrick Nolan, Brian Moore, James O'Connor and Patrick Bagnel) had been shot in Dublin, just before Christmas on December 19th, 1922. They also brought the total placed before firing squads by the Free State authorities to 71, since the previous November 17th, 1922. Given that they were all locals and that they were shot, rather unexpectedly, in the smallish town of Tuam in the heart of rural Connacht, the impact is enormous. Frequently, there have been suggestions that the executions were arranged for the Tuam Workhouse rather than Renmore Barracks in Galway, because the Catholic Bishop of Galway had just died, about that time and General Mulcahy in particular, a practising Catholic all his life,

could not tolerate the idea of blood running in the city while the Bishop was being mourned!

Tuam was another matter however, even if it is obvious that the local Archbishop had been shocked also. The attack on Headford two days previously, obviously sealed the fate of the six men who had been in custody for almost two months, and had been sentenced to death "on hold" like many others at the time. Free State apologists will claim that the decision to execute "was the fault" of those who remained active outside the prisoners. Republican apologists suspect that certain members of the Free State Command in the West had also to be forced to taste execution blood, like all the other local areas, and in any case half a dozen executions in an area like Tuam would frighten the daylight out of all but convinced Republicans that the cause was not worth the risk!

Some Republicans even go so far as to suggest that the line-up in the Free State firing squad in Tuam was interesting, that some people were brought in from Mayo — to spread the fear and the involvement of all — including some officers of Northern origins whose children came to prominence in Irish political life a generation later. Be that as it may, the reality was that by mid April 1923 the Civil War was almost over and we have described already the various steps being taken by Frank Aiken, the new I.R.A. Chief of Staff and others to get DeValera, the president of Sinn Féin to make the cease-fire announcement that came into force on April 30th, 1923.

I am always amused when I hear Fianna Fáil politicians and others suggesting they do not really understand the relationship between Sinn Féin and the I.R.A. in Irish political history. Their founders, DeValera and Aiken, invented the arrangement in those difficult times. For while it was Eamon DeValera, as president of Sinn Féin and the *de jure* Republic which had only been disestablished by force of arms, who announced the cessation of hostilities, it was Frank Aiken and the I.R.A. Army Council which took the decision separately, and then informed Dev, who was not on the Army Council, of the decision. Note also that this was a cessation of hostilities. There was no surrender of the Republican position, much less a hand-over of arms — or even a "decommissioning". Dev told his followers as did Aiken to "dump arms," to keep them in a safe place, because they might be needed again at a later date!

I wonder has Senator Mitchell read about this? Albert Reynolds certainly seemed very well informed of the realities of guerrilla cessation when he insisted that the best form of "decommissioning" was rust! Certainly the Republican leadership of 1923 that defected to the new Fianna Fáil by 1926, never asked the I.R.A. rank and file that had sacrificed so much in the Civil War to go back to their dumped arms again. In fact, even though the I.R.A. played a significant part in helping Fianna Fáil to win power in the 1932 General Election, within another decade the DeValera government was shooting, hanging and interning former Republican comrades who did not come with them in 1926. These were the hard-line core Republicans who regarded Dev's 1937 Constitution solution as another "Stepping Stone" that would not work either, because it was based on faulty foundations. It may be worth adding here that it was not the Oath as such that caused the main problem for Republicans in the 1920s, but what it stood for — British sovereignty over Ireland and the right to rule in any part of Ireland. Similarly, with Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness today, the key issue is not the type of Oath they are asked to take at Westminster, or even any Oath at all. The crunch issue for those who believe in Irish sovereignty and the right of the people to self-government, is why has any Irish elected representative to go to Westminster in the first place to have his voice heard? Is there no All-Ireland National Assembly where those Northern M.P.s who want to, can sit and discuss issues with the rest of the elected Irish T.D.s? If the British government had to be informed or taken to task arising from this debate should it not be done by the Ambassador and Foreign Minister of a sovereign Irish Government?

History they say is always written by the victors.

But even with the best will in the world, and an honest attempt to try and set things in context, some basic issues tend to get lost in the evaluation of any complex situation. That is why we are treated recently to a "spin" about Gerry Adams going to Downing Street last December on a television scene that draws comparisons between that and Michael Collins "leading the Republican delegation" to meet Lloyd George in 1921. Nobody mentioned the fact that it was Arthur Griffith who led the 1921 delegation to London. Griffith too, was founder of Sinn Féin and its first President, from 1905 to 1917, when he stood down in favour of Eamon DeValera, the 1916 hero who had evaded the firing-squad by a whisker! But then, nobody did a film about Arthur Griffith, and there are those even in RTE who argue nowadays that television news is about showbiz., not about factual accuracy or historical parallels.

(To be continued)