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The Retelling of the Story of Ireland and its Implications

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The Past is Never Behind Us
The Retelling of the Story of Ireland and its Implications

Introduction

It is almost universally assumed that the past is immutable, unchangeable, set in stone. In fact, this is a misleading and potentially dangerous assumption. The past is actually as uncertain as the future. History is not only written by the victors but also rewritten, time and time again. It is fluid, dynamic, and ever-changing. The "facts" of history can transform based on new contexts, perspectives, biases, interpretations, manipulations, contrasts, comparisons, and so much more. A look at a few exemplifying events in the history of Ireland demonstrates that this process can occur and a few ways in which it does. Specifically, the changing opinions on the impact of Sean Lemass (Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland from 1959-1966) on the Irish economy as well as the different opinions between the governments of Northern and Southern Ireland on the future of partition during the 1920s demonstrate the transformative power of the biases of the people who are interpreting the past. That is, the "past" can change based on the different perspectives, motivations, and inclinations of those who are doing the interpretation of the past.

Additionally, the changing analyses of the 1937 Irish Constitution and the 1916 Easter Rising exhibit the importance and impact of context in the perception of history. The "facts" of history are never viewed in isolation, and the surrounding muddle creates a haze with remarkable transformative power. Irish history is replete with examples of this process of changing history.

The existence of a mutable history has many important implications. One such consequence is in the area of nationalism, in two main ways. First, the phenomenon of a changeable past sheds light on the debate between primordialist and modernist views of nationalism, providing support for the latter. Second, it provides politicians with a powerful tool to manipulate nationalism for their own ends. Since the past can be changed, there is a strong agency of politicians in determining the legacy of the past, and politicians can thus alter history to artificially generate nationalism. The case of the breakout of war in the Balkans in the 1990s provides a useful example of this. Thus, the ability to metamorphose history has many important implications, particularly in the area of nationalism.

In this essay, I will first use a few select events from Irish history to demonstrate how the past is not fixed but, rather, can continuously grow and evolve. I will provide examples for this in two main areas: the effect of the bias of historians/politicians and the effect of changing contexts. I will then discuss the important implications of a changing history, starting with a particular focus on nationalism. With respect to nationalism, I will discuss how a changing history provides support for a modernist over a primordialist view as well as how it has dangerous potential for politicians to artificially generate nationalism. For the latter, I will touch upon the case of the war in the Balkans. I will proceed to briefly mention further important consequences and implications of a fluid past. Thus, I will argue that a look into the incessantly changing interpretations of Ireland's past demonstrates how history is not static but is rather continuously transformed in many ways, from changing contexts to deliberate manipulation through human agency. Such a mutable history has many important implications, as in the case of nationalism.

Irish Exemplification: The Impact of Bias

A few select events from Irish history demonstrate that how one sees the past is extremely dependent on the biases of the people making the interpretation, as well as the transformative power of the context that is being chosen. Two examples (albeit of very different magnitudes) can serve to illustrate the great ability of personal bias to drastically change the perception of the past: opinions on Sean Lemass' effect on the economy and perspectives on the "inevitability" of a North-South partition during the early 1900s. The more minor (and almost humorous) of these examples is the path of the changing opinions on Sean Lemass.

Lemass served as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of the Republic of Ireland from 1959-1966. Ireland had been in an economic depression in the decades leading up to this time. Other countries in Europe, even those devastated from World War II, were doing very well, recovering rapidly with such benefits as the Marshall Plan. The Republic of Ireland, however, was quickly becoming one of the poorest countries in the developed world. During the 1950s in particular, Ireland was hit by "the crisis of emigration, unemployment, and the widening gap in the standard of living between Ireland and Britain" (Murphy). They were hurting as a result of many economic policies at the time, such as that of Eamon de Valera, who was in office as Taoiseach for the majority of time from the 1930s to the 1950s, which had a tendency for protectionism due to his "commitment to economic nationalism and isolationism" (Murphy). As Rory O'Donnell notes in his essay "Ireland's Economic Transformation: Industrial Policy, European Integration and Social Partnership," protectionism "failed to solve the underlying developmental problem," and thus the 1950s were marked by "severe balance of payments difficulties, recession and emigration" (O'Donnell 4). Unfortunately for Ireland at the time, protectionism was a policy that had been continuing for too long and was stifling trade. Ireland was struggling as a newly independent country, and it was devastated from the "Economic War" with Great Britain, which manifested itself in reciprocal duties on each other's imports, crippling the Irish economy.

Lemass stepped into this mess as Taoiseach in 1959. While his specific impact is, as will be seen, clearly debatable, the Irish economy did apparently experience much change during the 1960s. This change was for the better, as "Ireland achieved relatively strong economic and demographic growth" (O'Donnell 4). The economy became more modern, industry was expanded, and there was "rapid productivity growth…accompanied by a distinct modernization… [and a] strong increase in living standards and expectations" (O'Donnell 4). Protectionism decreased, and Ireland was opened to direct investment from foreign nations. There were improvements in education, especially vocational/technical education, which helped fill a large gap and need for skilled workers in Irish industry. Thus, there at the very least appears to be a correlation between Lemass' time as Taoiseach and the upswing of the Irish economy during the 1960s. However, whether or not there was a causation effect is apparently prone to great shifts of interpretation depending on the biases of the interpreter.

Immediately following the impact of his policies, Lemass was, obviously, hailed as the harbinger of this positive economic change and a turning around of the economy. However, in the late 1980s, the Irish economy was again in downswing, being referred to as the "sick man of Europe". In fact, the Irish "period 1980 to 1987 was one of prolonged recession, falling living standards, a dramatic increase in unemployment and, once again, the prospect of emigration as the best option for the young" (O'Donnell 6). In this time period, opinions on Sean Lemass were tellingly becoming indifferent at best, paralleling with the downturn in the economy. A strong example of this new opinion of Lemass can be seen in J.J. Lee's 1989 book *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*. Lee takes away the agency of Lemass in the changing economic fortune of Ireland in the 1960s, implying that much of his success was due to essentially being in the right place at the right time, claiming that Lemass "was fortunate in many respects in the timing of his accession" (Lee 405). Lemass's reputation was, thus, on a downswing, as new interpretations painted him as merely taking advantage of the situation rather than actively bringing about great economic change.

Ironically, the changing fortunes of the Irish economy once again brought about an altered opinion on the accomplishments of Lemass. In the 1990s, Ireland became "one of the fastest growing economies in the European Union…Rapid growth of exports, output and employment…led market analysts to describe Ireland as the 'Celtic Tiger'" (O'Donnell 1). With the Irish economy performing so fantastically, opinions of Lemass's impact likewise became much more favorable. In *The Lemass Era: Politics and Society in the Ireland of Sean Lemass* , a 2006 book by Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy, Lemass was heralded as the Irish hero of the hour in his time. The Irish economy was failing, and he stepped in and essentially flipped the switch to bring about Irish progress and success. He is described as bold, creative, and almost single-handedly responsible for the great economic changes that occurred.

Nevertheless, after the global recession of the late 2000s, opinion on Lemass took a hit once again. Viewpoints on Lemass began an "agonizing reappraisal," and they took a turn for the worse (Evans). To exemplify, a 2011 book by Bryce Evans entitled *Sean Lemass: Democratic Dictator* claimed that Lemass, instead of the great hero he was recently claimed to be, was instead authoritarian, impatient, and cunning. Evans is highly critical of Lemass, demonstrating the changing opinion on Lemass once again.

Thus, in an almost humorous manner, the opinion of Lemass and his effects on the Irish economy mirror the current state of the Irish economy. This demonstrates how the biases of historians can affect their evaluation of history. When they are experiencing a poor economy, they are more inclined to see Lemass as having had an accidental or even negative effect on the Irish economy during the 1960s. On the other hand, when the economy is flourishing, they are much more biased to view Lemass as having brought about positive change to Ireland as a whole. Therefore, the changing opinions on Lemass by historians, depending on the current state of the economy, demonstrate how the biases of historians can work to transform how the past is interpreted.

A more serious and consequential instance of how history can be mutable is reflected by the different perspectives during the early 1920s. At this time, there was a striking gap between opinions in Northern and Southern Ireland as to the "inevitability" of a split between the two, further demonstrating how different biases, motivations, and perspectives can lead to drastically different interpretations of the same history. Ireland at this time was torn between groups with many different opinions regarding the future of the country. At the more extreme ends, Irish republicans wanted full secession and independence from the United Kingdom, while Irish unionists desired to maintain the union with Great Britain. More middle-ground approaches included, most famously, granting Ireland some form of "Home Rule" whereby they would have limited self-government but remain part of the United Kingdom. Republican sentiment was most ardent in the more southern parts of Ireland, whereas unionism tended to be most concentrated in the six north-east Ulster counties. In these Ulster counties, there was a strong Protestant population that feared becoming a minority if Ireland (which was, overall, primarily Catholic) were to become separated from Great Britain. In 1919, republicans in Ireland formed an Irish Republican Army (IRA) to fight against the British government for Irish independence, and months of violent guerrilla warfare ensued. A truce was called on July 11, 1921, which led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December, ratified in early 1922. This Treaty established the Irish Free State as a self-governing dominion within the British Empire, and it allowed Northern Ireland (i.e. the six Ulster counties) the option to opt out of the Free State if it so wished. The opinions of the two states during this time, as to whether or not this split was to occur, reveal the remarkable role that personal bias and motivations can play in how one perceives the "facts" of history.

Northern Ireland did indeed elect to opt out of the Irish Free State on December 7, 1922. However, just before this occurred, there was a striking difference in belief amongst the two Irish governments as to whether or not Northern Ireland would opt out of the Irish Free State. This discrepancy exposes the effect of the role of personal bias and perspective in distorting the past in two main ways. First, the ability of the two governments of Ireland to hold such opposing opinions of the same history make clear the strong role that personal bias and motivation play in changing how the past is viewed. Second, the fact that the government in the South of Ireland did not believe that partition was certain shows how, when looking back over the past, many historians and politicians fall prey to the unfortunate trap of rewriting history according to the lens of the present. That is, they look back at history with one eye, viewing the course of events as they are now known to have occurred, and, from this, they pick and choose the evidence that seems to indicate the inevitability of that course of action. With respect to the partition of Ireland, many historians too easily tend to see the split as inevitable, even when an examination of the transcripts of the two parliamentary debates at this time paints a strikingly different picture. The fact that the government of the South of Ireland did not see partition as a given is thus important in demonstrating how history is not fixed. It reveals both how two different entities with very different motivations and perspectives (in this case the respective governments of Northern and Southern Ireland) can look at the past and see two very different realities. It also shows how historians experience hindsight bias and use the lens of the present to change the reality of the past (in this case by seeing the split as inevitable since they know it did occur).

However, in contrast to an "inevitable" split given the course of history, the politicians of the two parliaments (most notably the respective Prime Ministers), fell prey to the same trap as the historians: selectively viewing the

information to draw conclusions that supported the side they most wanted to see as true. These diverging stances and viewpoints of the circumstances at the time demonstrate how different motivations and perspectives can cause history to be written in very different ways and according to how one chooses to look at the evidence.

Surveying the transcripts of the two Parliamentary Debates, particularly the speeches given by Sir James Craig (the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland) and W.T. Cosgrave (the President of the Executive Council in Southern Ireland) can provide an examination of the viewpoints in Northern and Southern Ireland. These sources are good evidence revealing the opinions of the two governments at the time because they are direct transcripts, stripping the filter and bias of a historian. Thus, they provide an accurate portrayal of the sentiment and mood of the government at the time, namely the end of 1922 when the split officially occurred. Further, since these speeches are the public face presented to the people, they provide insight into the public sentiment, such as what the citizens accept as given or general knowledge/truth.

In addressing the Parliament, the Prime Minister and President both believed they were speaking on behalf of the people and the national viewpoint, and thus the conclusions they made and the arguments they selected should, in theory, reflect the will of the people. However, the governments were prone to selectively examining the evidence in order to reach drastically different conclusions. Namely, both looked very differently on the will of the British government and what they supported, as well as the wishes and desires of the people of Northern Ireland. This caused the government of Northern Ireland to believe that a split with the Irish Free State was completely inevitable, while the Provisional Government of Ireland believed that the Six Northern Counties would, essentially, come to their senses and choose unity with all of Ireland.

With respect to the support of Great Britain, both parliaments selectively elected different kinds of evidence (quotes, actions, and people) in order to formulate and express the opinion that Great Britain was in support of their own side. This is significant, seeing that whichever side the British government was believed to have been supporting would gain much more credence and legitimacy. However, with the same evidence in front of them, both sides reached very different results. For example, Craig, in his address, used the case of Lord Londonderry, a British official who was in great support of the Northern Irish cause (Craig). In using this example and highlighting Londonderry's support, Craig seemed to extrapolate British general support for Northern Ireland's push for unity with Great Britain.

On the other hand, Cosgrave, in his address in the south of Ireland, stated that the British people had shown steadfast and unfaltering commitment to the Treaty, and "never tried to whittle down by one iota the fullness of what they had yielded back to us". In the eye of the President, this British support for the Treaty was equivalent to support for unity of the whole of Ireland, as evidenced by his use of a quote by Lloyd George that "If Ulster [wa]s to remain a separate community you [could] only by means of coercion keep [the people] there" (qtd. in Cosgrave). Lloyd George was "the chief British signatory to the Treaty" (Cosgrave). Thus, his viewpoint was interpreted to speak for the letter of the Treaty as a whole. As Cosgrave remarked, "I am sure every reasonable man agrees with this statement of the British ex-Premier. Why there has ever been the slightest confusion about this part of the Treaty I could never understand". Cosgrave thus made the following jumps: the British people all were in strong support of the Treaty, the Treaty made inevitable the unity of all of Ireland (it is "part and parcel of the Treaty" and the only logical path), and consequently the British people were in support of the unity of Ireland. Thus, by selectively examining the evidence, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland and the President of the Executive Council reached strikingly different opinions on the wishes of the British people/government.

A parallel discriminate examination of the evidence brought the two governments to reach divergent conclusions as to the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. At the time, Sir James Craig expressed his opinion that the "people of the whole Six Counties will stand firm and true together, so as to get over what I sincerely trust will be the last fence leading to the land of promise, peace, and happiness to our people (Hon. Members: Hear, hear)". In his address to the British king, he betrayed a similar sentiment of a people united in their wishes to separate from the Irish Free State: "There is no use our holding out at the moment any hopes whatever of a desire on the part of the Ulster people to go in under a Dublin Parliament". In his view, the people of Northern Ireland clearly stood together in their opposition to remaining unified with the Irish Free State, and they desired instead to announce, as quickly as humanly possible, their wish to remain united with Britain and have their own parliament. In sharp contrast, Cosgrave

believed that "we must not, cannot, forget our solemn pledges to those great sections of the population in the Six Counties who *do* want us, and who are crying out daily to be included in the Irish Free State". These two speeches were given within one day of each other, further demonstrating how it is possible to look at the same evidence/circumstances and reach very different conclusions based on one's own perception and motivations.

With such biased and motivated selection and interpretation of evidence, it is little wonder that Craig and Cosgrave reached drastically different conclusions about the fate of Ireland. Cosgrave looked at what he determined to be the relevant evidence. He reasoned that a split between the Irelands would be "bound to have disastrous reactions on Northern enterprise" and that union "alone [could] bring real harmony, and lasting and genuine security to our Common Motherland". Thus, Cosgrave was "looking Northwards with hope and confidence that, whether now or very soon the people of that corner of our land [would] come in with the rest of the Irish Nation, and share…its Government as well as the great prosperity and happiness which must certainly follow concord and union"(Cosgrave). In sharp contrast, Craig, merely one day later, concluded that, with regards to the question of whether or not to join the Free State, there had "never been any doubt in the mind of any hon. Member of the House on that point…there [could] be no misunderstanding….about our continued anxiety to remain with Great Britain in the closest possible alliance, and at the moment, at all events, to stay quite clear of a Dublin Parliament". Thus, both sides saw a very different expected and logical course of action for the future of Ireland.

This raises important questions about and complications for any argument about an "inevitable" fate of Ireland. These discrepancies between the public sentiment of the two governments at the time demonstrate the mutability of history both by revealing how different motivations could cause the two governments to draw very different conclusions from the recent history and by demonstrating how historians use the lens of the present to draw conclusions about the past that were not necessarily true at the time. That is, many historians today tend now to see the split as "inevitable" because they know now that it did happen, and, accordingly, history changed based on how events played themselves out. However, as can be seen from the opinion of the government in the south of Ireland, the split was clearly not predetermined. Questions and complications are therefore raised about historians' ability to accurately select evidence to portray the sentiments of a time period or an event. Additionally, perspectives and motivations can skew even current analysis of sentiments, as evidenced by the different conclusions reached by the two governments about British and Northern Irish sentiments regarding the Irish Free State. Thus, biases and motivations can change how history is perceived in many ways.

Irish Exemplification: The Impact of Context

In addition to the transformative power of perspectives, biases, and motivations, context can also play an important role in changing the past. Again, two examples from Irish history can serve to illustrate this process: how context molds the interpretations of the 1937 Constitution as well as the altered significance of the 1916 Easter Rising.

Once the Irish Free State gained independence from Britain with the Anglo-Irish Treaty, a 1922 Constitution was adopted. However, there was much resentment over many aspects of this treaty, mostly deriving from the sentiment that it had been forced upon Ireland by the British government. Controversial aspects like the inclusion of an "Oath of Allegiance" to Britain and other features seemed to link the Irish much more to Britain rather than characterize it as independent. Consequently, a movement to put a new "Irish" stamp on the Constitution led to the adoption, under de Valera, of a 1937 Constitution. Looking back on this Constitution, its impact and classification can metamorphose based on the context in which it is placed. To exemplify, two authors (namely Caitriona Clear and Gerard Hogan) demonstrate this impact of context on the 1937 Constitution.

The typical consensus of opinions on the 1937 Constitution is to see it as backwards and oppressive. As Professor Gearoid O. Tuathaigh points out, the most controversial aspects of the new 1937 constitution included the role and rights of women as well as Church-State relations. Thus, the bulk of criticism has been leveled primarily at these two main areas, namely: the 'treatment' of women as oppressive, stereotypical, and biased, as well as at the religious influence of the Catholic Church. For example, Yvonne Scannell, in her article "The Constitution and the Role of Women", discusses the negative impact of the constitution on women in Ireland. Dr. Maryann Valiulus, director of The Centre for Gender and Women's Studies at Trinity College, is, in numerous works, extremely vocal about the

suppression of women in the new Irish free state. However, recently, such legacies (i.e. oppression of women and favoritism of Catholicism) have been questioned. Authors such as Clear and Hogan are calling for a reevaluation of the legacy of "de Valera's Ireland". This reevaluation demonstrates how context can have a strong effect on how one views the past, and thus how the past can shift based on the context in which it is placed.

Both authors advance similar arguments about the importance of context using slightly different methods and subject matter. Clear, in her essay "Women in de Valera's Ireland 1932-48," draws attention particularly to the first criticism: that of the oppression of women in de Valera's Ireland. As she says, the typical impression is that the treatment of women led to "an oppressive, stagnant, uncomfortable social environment" for them (Clear 104). Clear complicates this notion, believing that it is impossible to generalize about women as a whole during this period, as well as about such notions as "domesticity." In fact, she argues that many women actually saw improvements to their overall well-being and lives during this time. For example, there was an increase of women pursuing work outside of the domestic sphere, a decrease of death in childbirth, an increase in income (such as through children's allowances), women communities, women in the public service advocating for women's rights, etc. Clear further argues that the fact that such issues were even on the table, that such issues were being discussed and debated, shows an important improvement in the lives of women at the time. Thus, she is calling for the situation of women at the time to be placed back in the historical context and to examine the status of women not from a present context, which would create unfair standards of comparison for the status of women back then. Any judgment calls about this period, Clear implicitly argues, need to be recast and distanced from the hindsight bias of the future.

Hogan, in his essay "De Valera, The Constitution, and the Historians," takes up a similar vein, also arguing for a reexamination of the time period of de Valera's Ireland, demonstrating how context can change the past. He, however, takes up a more general line of argument, calling for the reexamination of the time period via a reexamination of the 1937 Constitution. He notes that critics point to certain clauses and aspects in this document to argue that the Constitution was backwards, unprogressive, and suffered many flaws, particularly with respect to the "unfortunate" influence of the Catholic Church and the discrimination against women. Hogan contradicts these notions, seeming to address the claims of the critics directly by discussing the specific contested clauses. He places these clauses into the context of the time period, i.e. with respect to the wider global context, the arguments of the time, and in contrast to the earlier 1922 Constitution. In so doing, he argues that the Constitution, viewed from this perspective, has led to unbalanced, unfair, and inaccurate criticism. Hogan advocates for the importance of not looking at the words of the Constitution in a way that divorces them from the wider global context, the implementation of the clauses, how it was drafted, etc. In this way, he shows how the context can drastically change how this 1937 document is interpreted and perceived.

A second example demonstrating the power of context in transforming history can be found in the 1916 Easter Rising. Considered in isolation, the 1916 Easter Rebellion easily could have been a relatively insignificant event. From the start it had basically no chance of military success since, as F. X. Martin argues, much of the military thought that went into planning the rebellion was misguided, ill-informed, and marked by inexperience. Further, the rebels were a mere "minority of a minority of a minority," a small Military Council set apart from the Supreme Council within the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret revolutionary organization (Martin 132). This small group of men, with little to no military experience and without even informing the rest of the IRB, tried to plan a military event against the massive British Empire. Not surprisingly, it had no military success, since the British "forces immediately available, which only barely outnumbered the rebels, were pushed instantly to key points, and within twenty-four hours it could already be said that the military challenge had been neutralized" (Townshend 269). It is easy to imagine how this event could have gone down in history as a minor skirmish, a blip on the course of the Great British Empire. However, quite to the contrary, this uprising has been given a great pedestal in Irish history as one of the key and defining moments of the Irish break from British rule. The great conversion occurred as a result of the background surrounding this uprising. Namely, the political context the Easter Rising created, the framework of failed alternatives such as Home Rule, and the British actions in the aftermath of the uprising all served to elevate the status of the events of the Easter of 1916, demonstrating the power of context to transform an event into something entirely different, reflecting the mutability of history.

One of the most important and defining contexts of the Easter 1916 uprising was the context the event created for

itself, i.e. the legacy the event left behind. Namely, the actions of the leaders served to turn the event into a political victory rather than attempting to make a lasting military mark on the British forces. As Martin makes clear, the planning of the rebellion was marked by military bungling and terrible planning by members of the Military Council who had "little competence in military affairs" (Martin 111). In fact, the whole Council was marked by a distinctive "unmilitary character" (Martin 129). Further, there was little to no measure of popular support, since the majority of Irish people supported Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party, and implicitly indicating their aim of Home Rule (Martin 132). In addition to this, the rebels were facing one of the greatest world powers at the time, a power that had proved again and again extremely unwilling to concede control of Ireland. Some, if not most, of the rebels were distinctly aware of this fact and the impact it had on their chances of success. Connolly is quoted as saying that there was no chance whatsoever of success (Martin 126). Nevertheless, this lack of prospect for military success was irrelevant to the future impact of the uprising. This was so because the legacy the uprising made for itself was not in leaving a military mark on the British forces but rather in creating a political legacy. Evidence that the rebellion was planned or at least worked out to have a political instead of military legacy is in the nature of the planning itself. As Martin says, the Military Council was composed of people who "were in fact politicians…and soldiers only temporarily and by accident" (Martin 110). Their work was in the realm of politics, not the battlefield, which helps explain why there were little if any consistent or serious attempts to extend the military planning past the city of Dublin. The military impact could afford to be localized because military success would not be the primary objective. Thus, "while their political objective was certainly nation-wide their military vision was bounded by the outskirts of the city as far as the actual rising was concerned" (Martin 117).

The political legacy the uprising left was that one of its leaders was willing to die for the cause of Irish independence, which brought the political struggle for independence to an almost holy level and impacted political decisions for years after. Connolly knew of the great impact of their actions. As he is quoted stating at his trial: "We succeeded in proving that Irishmen are ready to die endeavoring to win for Ireland their national rights which the British government had been asking them to die to win for Belgium" (qtd. in Foy and Barton 231). Their endeavors in this regard were successful, since the "dead 1916 leaders underwent a steady process of secular sanctification, at the expense of their human qualities and frailties" (Townshend 346). As Barton and Foy demonstrate, the records of their final moments were marked by nobly facing their fates with a sense of conviction in the rightness of their actions, of bravery and nobility (Barton and Foy 225-242). As a result of such treatment in the reports, the rebellion and the men who died for the cause ingrained themselves in future Irish political debates and decisions, and to go against what the rebel leaders had fought for became almost an anathema. For example, during the Treaty debates shortly after the rebellion in the early 1920s, the "anti-treaty republicans of course took their stand on the rightness, indeed the holiness of the rebels, but even their fiercest opponents incorporated the rebellion in the Free State's political genealogy…Denying it was not a political option for anyone unprepared to alienate mainstream opinion" (Townshend 348). Thus, the rebellion left behind a momentous political legacy that had an impact for years (Townshend 344-59). Despite its military failings, the context of the political legacy helped transform it into a great event in Irish history.

A second contextual component that helped transform the events of Easter 1916 into such a momentous part of history was the failure of political alternatives during that time. The traditional alternative to violence and rebellion was represented by Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP). Around the time period of the Easter Rising, Redmond's Home Rule Bill and his pursuit of constitutionalism were seen as failures, and in this environment the promise offered by the uprising became all the more significant. Redmond had for years operated "within the tradition of constitutional nationalism" (Bew 98). That is, he was attempting to work through legal governmental means, within the rules of the British government, to secure more independence for Ireland in the form of Home Rule. However, when Britain joined the Great War in 1914, this huge new priority threatened to put a stop to negotiations with Ireland. Instead, in "September 1914 Redmond offered Irish support for the British war effort in exchange for Home Rule being placed on the statute book" (Bew 97). The future of Redmond's policy was thus tied to the British war effort, and Redmond began to advocate for Irish volunteers to join up and show their loyalty to the British army and the Allied cause. However, when the war dragged on and progress for Home Rule was at a standstill, crisis after crisis piled up against Redmond, causing him to lose much popular support. For example, "separatists sincerely believed that Redmond was responsible for the blood sacrifice of tens of thousands of Irishmen at the front in pursuit of a will-o'-the-wisp which the British would in the end tear away" (Bew 98). Additionally, during "the winter of 1917-18 the economic impact of the war, rising food prices and unemployment, offered fertile ground for the government's

opponents" (Townshend 340). Thus, Redmond had tied his political future to the British war effort and Irish engagement with it, and unfortunately the war took its toll on Irish lives and well-being. As a result, popular support waned as Home Rule seemed ever more unattainable.

When the rebellion occurred, it seemed to offer an alternative, and a more immediate one. It was a dramatic and bold endeavor to accomplish what Redmond had so far failed in: achieving more independence for Ireland. Unfortunately for Redmond, the noble sacrifices of the Irish regiments on the distant front were not as impactful because "their deeds were obscured in the chaos of war…[In contrast,] Pearse and his associates offered to Irishmen a stage for themselves on which they could and did secure full personal recognition—the complete attention of Ireland's mind" (qtd in Bew 105). In the light of Redmond's "failure," the uprising took on a much greater significance than it would have otherwise. As Charles Townshend argues in his work *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*, the success of "Home Rule would have made the 1916 rebellion, in any case improbable, impossible in anything like the form it took. Thus 1916 followed directly from the failure of Home Rule" (Townshend 30). Therefore, the failure of Redmond's policy as an alternative to violent rebellion created a background in which the Easter Rising could flourish and take on much more significance than it would have otherwise.

Britain created a third important context in the aftermath of the rebellion that effectively changed the rising's impact. That is, British treatment of the uprising after the fact and their actions following the event had lasting effects that drastically affected the Easter Rising's significance. For instance, Britain engaged in a series of mass arrests, where a "total of 3,430 men and 79 women were arrested after the Rising—a considerable number in relation to the scale of the outbreak" (Foy and Barton 225). Additionally, ninety people were sentenced to death, and fifteen of those were executed. The executions of the rebel leaders turned them into martyrs, which, as aforementioned, helped create a lasting political legacy for them. Additionally, these arguably harsh repercussions turned the sympathy of the general population away from Britain and towards the rebels, making the rebels' actions more significant for the Irish people. Thus, within weeks after the crisis, Irish "public sympathy for the rebels was already increasing" due to the "death sentences and mass imprisonments" and the "treatment of the surrendered prisoners" (Foy and Barton 243). There were reports of a public "reaction against the courts-martial, mass arrests and deportations, and…many who had initially condemned the Rising had come to believe that unnecessary severity had been employed" (Foy and Barton 243). As H.E. Duke, Chief Secretary for Ireland, noted at the time, the "reaction in popular feeling upon the repression of the rebellion ha[d] altered the relations of the extremists to the general population" (qtd. in Townshend 300).

British imposition of martial law across all of Ireland combined with these harsh repercussions to further turn opinion against the British and thus towards the opposition to the British: the nationalist rebels. Townshend is not hesitant to accuse the British of blundering in this respect, claiming that their "wilfully crude division of the people into 'loyal' and 'disaffected', ignor[ed] the majority to whom martial law might be neither encouraging nor terrifying, but merely irritating or offensive" (Townshend 303). That is, the British assumed that imposition of martial law would be well-received by those who were loyal to Britain and eager to re-establish order, only punishing the rebels. Britain neglected to account for the typical citizens that bristled at the daily inconvenience and the injustice of such an act. Thus, public opinion began to turn en-masse against the British, and in "the wake of the 1916 Rising, the crude application of communal penalties, such as mass internment, suspension of common-law rights and banning of fairs and markets, unraveled the progress made by a succession of reformist governments. How could one trust a country whose government, in emergency, cast aside the basic tenets of democracy and justice in order to assert control by brute force?" (Fitzpatrick 141).

Other British actions also inadvertently gave the rebellion more significance than it had initially. For example, Britain helped tie the rebellion in with the Sinn Fein political party since "Sinn Fein members were targeted in the early May round-ups" despite the fact that, clearly, "Sinn Fein as an organization played no part in planning or staging the uprising; and equally clearly, Sinn Fein's ideas had always stressed the primacy of civil resistance over violence" (Townshend 314). This link ensured the uprising a lasting place in history, as Sinn Fein grew to political prominence in the following years. Additional actions included reopening the Home Rule negotiations following the crisis, which caused Unionists to cry out that Britain was "conceding" to violence, giving the rebellion more importance and prominence than it would have had otherwise (Townshend 210). Thus, many British actions following the uprising, such as the mass arrests, executions, imposition of martial law, tying the rebellion to Sinn Fein, and reopening Home

Rule negotiations in a seeming concession to the uprising, drastically changed the context surrounding the uprising and gave it a much greater significance than it would have had otherwise.

Stripped of its context, the Easter Rising could easily have been left in history as a minor event, quickly forgotten as Ireland moved past it to other matters. From the beginning, it was a military failure with no chance of success, and it certainly left no great mark on the British forces. However, placed in the all-important framework of the political legacy, the failure of Redmond's Home Rule, and the British actions following the uprising, suddenly the Easter Rising becomes an extremely significant moment in the course of Irish history. This phenomenon demonstrates the importance of context in determining the significance and impact of any moment in history, and thus how events that have already occurred are not static but can be drastically rewritten.

Therefore, a look over select events in Irish history demonstrates that the past is never fixed, never, static, never completely determined. Rather, the past can grow and change, affected by many possible factors including biases, perspectives, and motivations as well as the specific context surrounding the event.

A Potential Implication: Focus on Nationalism

There are many important implications to a mutable history. The ability to change the past has especial impact in the area of nationalism, in two main ways. First, an indefinite past provides support for the modernist over the primordialist view on nationalism. Second, it gives potentially dangerous power to politicians to artificially create hostile nationalist sentiment, as can be exemplified by the war in the Balkans.

Theories about nationalism, in general, tend to be defined around two main poles: primordialist and modernist interpretations. Advocates of primordialism argue that nationalism is a reflection of the ancient human tendency to form groups, and these groupings from ancient times naturally disliked each other. This hostility stemming from these "ancient ethnic hatreds" are thus implicitly written in stone from historical times, and these nationalist groups are ancient, natural phenomena. As Adeed Dawisha claims in her article "Nation and Nationalism: Historical Antecedents to Contemporary Debates," to the "primordialist, national identity is immutable. It cannot be created or altered through social construction or through purposeful manipulation" (4). Nationalism is inherent, predetermined, and set in stone. It is "deeply rooted in the culture, experience, mentality, even biology of individuals" (Suny 876). As a result, a "nation is not a choice but a given" (Suny 889).

On the other hand, advocates of modernism believe that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, brought about by characteristics of modernity. Three primary authors of this viewpoint (namely Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and E. J. Hobsbawm) provide arguments to demonstrate how nationalism is a relatively recent phenomenon. Rather than a predetermined state from ancient times, they argue that nationalism is changing the way that people see the past and their relationships to others.

Gellner believes that nationalism is "the product of certain social conditions" (xv). Namely, it was "a function of modernity" (Gellner xx). In Gellner's view, modernity was a rupture of past social orders, and from this rupture arose industrialization and then nationalism, and it was nationalism that produced nations (not the other way around). Nationalism arose as a necessity of industrialization. The success of industrialization (its survival and growth) depended on a common educational system, culture, ideology, language, etc. The need for this homogeneity bubbled to the surface as nationalism. Nationalism therefore has "a close, almost necessary, link with industrialism" (Gellner xxiii). Gellner exemplifies the modernist camp by arguing that nationalism is not derived from ancient groupings but rather is constructed as a more recent phenomenon. He completely refutes the primordialist claim of the inherent nature of nations, arguing that nations "as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth" (47). Instead, "nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: *that* is a reality" (Gellner 47). Thus, nationalism does not arise as a result of anciently-determined nations, but rather can be used as a tool to create such nations.

Anderson also advocates an argument to support the idea of a nation constructed in modern times as opposed to

being a derivative of ancient ethnicities. His basic argument is that a nation is "an imagined political community" (Anderson 6). It is physically impossible for this community to be based on actual social interaction, since nations are far too large for everyone to meet in person. However, people in a nation imagine themselves as part of one community, and this mutual recognition is what constitutes nationalism. These sentiments derive in large part from a common language and the use of the media, and thus nationalism is again a product of modernity and is constructed. It is not inherent in society but is rather "modular" and "capable of being transplanted" (Anderson 4).

Finally, Hobsbawm agrees with Gellner in that he stresses the "element of artifact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations" (9). Further, he claims that, as opposed to nationalist sentiment arising as a natural consequence of a "nation," "nations do not make states and nationalism but the other way around" (Hobsbawm 10). That is, it is the construction of a state and the arising of nationalist sentiment that creates a nation. Hobsbawm adopts much of the terminology and outline of his argument from Miroslav Hroch. Hroch, in his essay "From National Movement to the Fully-Formed Nation: The Nation-Building Process in Europe," claims that a nation was "not, of course, an eternal category, but was the product of a long and complicated process of historical development" (4). It originally developed from a "large social group integrated not by one but by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships…[among which] three stand out as irreplaceable" (Hroch 4). One of these three essential foundations for a nation is "a 'memory' of some common past" (Hroch 5). Forming these objective relationships and creating such a memory is the first of three phases of nation-building, phases driven largely by "activists" (Hroch 7). Thus, there is a human agency, a construction process to the nation that is not inherent from ancient times. Since the past and history are alterable, a "memory" of a common past is clearly prone to likewise manipulation.

Hobsbawm appropriates much of this terminology, likewise describing multiple phases through which nations emerged. In the first phase, a group/regional identity emerged. Hobsbawm believes this occurred primarily in the 1800s once the carve-up of Europe following the Congress of Vienna took place. States were created first, and then the process of creating a nationality followed. To illustrate this, Hobsbawm quotes Massimo D'Azeglio, an Italian statesman at the time: "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians" (qtd. in Hobsbawm 44). Although Hobsbawm is careful to emphasize the importance of a bottom-up emergence of a national consciousness, he nevertheless describes the agency of states/governments in constructing nationalism. He claims that states used "the increasingly powerful machinery for communicating with their inhabitants…to spread the image and heritage of the 'nation' and to inculcate attachment to it and to attach all to country and flag" (91). Thus, "nations" emerged only recently, and are not inherent from ancient times. Rather, they are prone to construction and manipulation in many different ways and by many different people.

The existence of a mutable history provides strong support for this modernist mindset over a primordialist view of history. Since the past can be changed and is not set in stone, it is difficult to conceive of nationalist identities that can be so predetermined. Instead, "nations are created, nourished, and sustained through the telling and retelling of their pasts" (Dawisha 5). According to Ronald Suny in his article "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations," Nations are congealed histories. They are made up of stories that people tell about their past and thereby determine who they are. Histories in turn are based on memories organized into narratives. Whatever actually happened is far less important than how it is remembered" (864). Namely, nations "are articulated through the stories people tell about themselves," and therefore the ability to retell history implies the ability to redefine and reconstruct the nation (Suny 864). Resultantly, a mutable history by extension implies a mutable sense of nationality and support for a modernist over a primordialist view of history.

The ability to reconstruct and redefine nationhood has a potentially dangerous implication in that it gives remarkable power to politicians. As Suny says, "nationalist violence or inter-ethnic cooperation and tolerance depend on what narrative, what tales of injustice, oppression, or betrayal are told. [Thus,] tellers of tales have enormous…power to reshape, edit, share their stories, and therefore to promote a future of either violence or cooperation" (864). Politicians can change history to their own advantage, and resultantly create strong nationalist sentiment where previously none existed. Unfortunately, the results of this artificial sentiment can be violent and sometimes even deadly, as exemplified in the case of Yugoslavia.

With respect to the conflicts and violence in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a primordialist argument would be that the conflict was inevitable, that the ethnic hatreds that erupted in such violence and tension had been predetermined from ancient times. However, quite to the contrary, as the case of Ireland demonstrated, history is never set in stone, and thus little if anything can be predetermined. Nationalism, rather, is a recent phenomenon that can thus be constructed and manipulated. In the case of the Yugoslav Wars, inter-ethnic hostility and nationalist sentiment was the work of politicians such as Milosevic, who constructed the hatred and worked it to their advantage. Milosevic saw the opportunity in appealing to such nationalism as a way of rising to power, opportunistically fanning Serbian nationalist sentiment in order to earn political support. As Ante Markovic, the last Yugoslav Prime Minister, testified during Milosevic's trial, "Milosevic used everything he could to ensure power for himself and power over people. And if that was nationalism, well, then he used nationalism…He was quite simply somebody who was ready to use everything at his disposal to secure power for himself" (qtd. in Kajfes 1). Milosevic used the opportunity of a malleable history to construct and fan nationalist sentiment and ethnic hatred in an attempt to gain more power for himself.

In fact, the conflict among the different ethnicities was clearly not predetermined, as demonstrated by the ability of the various ethnicities to coexist peacefully in Royal Yugoslavia, or the "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes". This state came into being partly due to a sense of pan-Slav nationalism that cut across ethnic divides, further demonstrating how the type of nationalism that arises is not predetermined by ethnic differences, but can be constructed to take various forms. Thus, the breakout of violence and conflict in Yugoslavia in the 1990s demonstrates the potentially dangerous implications of a malleable past that can be altered in order to create nationalist sentiments.

V.P. Gagnon, in his essay "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia," makes the case for the deliberate construction by politicians in this region of "ancient" ethnic hatreds where previously none existed, demonstrating how politicians can abuse the ability to change the past for their own ends, with possibly deadly results. As he says: "violent conflict along ethnic lines in the former Yugoslavia was a purposeful and rational strategy planned by those most threatened by changes to the structure of economic and political power" (140). Essentially, a "wide coalition…joined together to promote conflict along ethnic lines" (Gagnon 140). Gagnon is certainly not alone in perceiving a strong connection between "primordial" hatred/conflict and ethnic lines. Dawisha states that the "element that traditionally has tended to be most closely associated with primordialism is ethnicity" (4). However, these ethnic tensions and violence are not a natural consequence of different ethnicities. That is, "violent conflict described and justified in terms of ethnic solidarity is not an automatic outgrowth of ethnic identity, or even of ethnic mobilization. [Rather,] violence on a scale large enough to affect international security is the result of purposeful and strategic policies" (Gagnon 164). To exemplify, "in the case of former Yugoslavia there is much evidence that the 'masses'…did not want war and that violence was imposed by forces from outside" (Gagnon 164).

Gagnon claims that this violence was imposed deliberately from outside by the politicians in many ways, such as by "creating an image of threat to the group [which served] to place the interest of the group above the interest of individuals…[and in turn created] a context where ethnicity [was] all that count[ed], and where other interests [were] no longer relevant" (136). Unfortunately, a "common explanation for violent conflict along ethnic lines, particularly for the Yugoslavia case, is that ancient ethnic hatreds…burst to the surface" (Gagnon 133). However, this is "unsupported by the evidence" (Gagnon 133). As opposed to this primordial view of ancient ethnic hatreds, "violent conflict along ethnic cleavages is provoked by elites in order to create a domestic political context where ethnicity is the only politically relevant identity" (Gagnon 132). The fact is that "people have multiple identities, and such identities are highly contextual" (Gagnon 137). History and identities are not set in stone or predetermined, but can in fact be molded, a trait which is frequently abused by politicians to create "ancient" ethnic hatreds and nationalities where previously few, if any, existed. This can be done, for example, by "competing elites" who "focus on defining the collective interest by drawing selectively on traditions and mythologies and in effect constructing particular versions of that interest" (Gagnon 136). In the case of Yugoslavia, the "Serbian leadership from 1987 onward actively created…the outbreak of conflict along ethnic lines, especially in regions of Yugoslavia with histories of good inter-ethnic relations" (Gagnon 132).

The case of Yugoslavia is merely an example of this manipulation of ethnic identities, histories, and nationalist

sentiment. Gagnon extends this example globally, arguing that the "current major conflicts taking place along ethnic lines throughout the world have, as their main causes, not ancient hatreds, but rather the purposeful actions of political actors who actively create violent conflict, selectively drawing on history in order to portray it as historically inevitable" (164).

Therefore, the existence of a malleable history has many important implications, especially in the area of nationalism. It sheds light on the debate between a primordialist and a modernist view of nationalism, providing support for the latter. Additionally, it reveals an important and powerful manipulative tool in the hands of politicians: the creation of artificial ethnic hatred and nationality where previously none existed, as demonstrated by the case of the violence in the former Yugoslavia.

Mutable History: Further Implications

It is quite clear that the passage of time does not etch history into stone. Rather, the past is more like clay, and can be continuously remolded and changed, never taking a definite form. Unfortunately, this pliability of the past has potentially hazardous consequences. Again, the cases of Yugoslavia and Irish history can serve to demonstrate these possible repercussions, and these cases also hint at additional repercussions.

The previously described breakout of war in Yugoslavia, replete with ethnic cleansing, violence, and unspeakable acts, speaks already to the devastating potential consequences of politicians manipulating history. Irish history, like Yugoslavia, has also been marred by hatred and violence among various groups. This violence could potentially have lessened were people to have the same perspective of a fixed history, rather than each looking at a differently constructed version. For example, "The Troubles" in Ireland was a period of conflict in Northern Ireland, partially if not mostly sparked by conflict over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. As aforementioned, many Irish republicans believed that the only possible future for Ireland was one of all-island unity, whereas many Ulster Unionists believed that their only future was in remaining part of the British Empire. As previously argued, much of the problems arose due to a difference in opinion as to the "inevitability" of partition. If both sides were looking at the same version of history, would each have been so convinced that their chosen path was the only logical outcome? Would the sentiments have been as extreme?

A further example can be found in the repercussions of the transformation of the Easter Rising into such a momentous historical event. As previously argued, the legacy of the Easter Rising created an almost holy status for the rebels, which polarized sentiment with regard to the future of Irish independence. Many people took the stance that anything less than the full-fledged republic for which the rebels had fought and died was unthinkable and an insult to their memories. Unfortunately, these differences of opinions had a tendency to erupt into violence, such as the Irish Civil War. Many people (such as the Irish Republican Army) felt that the Anglo-Irish Treaty did not give Ireland enough independence and betrayed the Republic. As Bill Kissane argues in his book*The Politics of the Irish Civil* War, divisions over the Anglo-Irish treaty were extremely important in provoking a civil war in Ireland. The war thus broke out between those against the treaty and those in support of it (people supported it for various reasons, including an end to the taxing Irish War of Independence against the British). Could this war have been avoided had the Easter Rising not been transformed into something much larger and more meaningful than it was? Would opinions have been so polarized if people did not have very different impressions of the legacy of the Easter Rising?

An additional danger of the legacy of the Easter Rising is that many current revolutionary groups in Ireland claim to be direct descendants of the rebels from this uprising. Under various splinter groups from the original IRA, many of these new groups are prone to extreme violence to the point where some are classified as terrorist organizations. Resultantly, how the legacy of the 1916 rebels is shaped has extremely important repercussions today. If the rebels are heralded as heroes, as saviors of Ireland, then it implicitly justifies the violence of the groups today who claim to be direct descendants of such movements. Politicians and historians are thus teetering on a dangerous line between violating the sacred legacy of those who fought in 1916 and justifying terroristic violence today. Such issues and more are discussed, for example, by Ciaran Brady in his book*Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism, 1938-1994.* Thus, the examples from Irish history also reveal the dangerous repercussions of the ability to mold and reshape the past.

The cases of Yugoslavia and Ireland hint at additional important consequences to a non-static past that is vulnerable to manipulation. As in the case of Yugoslavia, there is great danger in creating hatred, hostility, and violence in areas where it did not exist before. Further, there is an evident need to be open to constantly reinterpreting the past, never taking it for granted. The past should never be allowed to concretely dictate the present, since the past itself is a fluid concept and thus a shaky, unreliable foundation for any assumptions. Additionally, politicians and historians must always be questioned, and their claims must be put under scrutiny due to the strong role of human agency in shaping history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is an extremely grave and misinformed mistake to view the past as a static, unchanging entity. Although it makes intuitive sense to view history as static, this is clearly not the case. The past is never written in stone or fixed, but rather is in a constant state of flux. As the history of Ireland demonstrates, there are many factors that can work to change the past. These include the different biases and motivations of the historians/politicians, as evidenced by the changing opinions on Sean Lemass depending on the current state of the economy, as well as by the two different opinions in the North and South of Ireland as to the "inevitability" of partition. This latter example demonstrates both how historians today who see the split as inevitable were misguided by hindsight bias (since they knew in retrospect that the split occurred) and also how two different sets of politicians (in the North and South governments) could be affected by their motivations and perspectives, allowing them to see very different views of history.

The past can also be altered by context, as evidenced by how the context can change opinions of the 1937 Constitution and the legacy of the 1916 Easter Rising. Thus, select events from Irish history make clear the malleability of history and identify a few key factors that can contribute to this process.

It is vital to realize the changeability of history, as demonstrated by the many important implications of an evolving past. An extremely important implication is in the area of nationalism. A non-static past provides support for a modernist over a primordialist view of nationalism and reveals to be an important tool for politicians. Politicians can exploit the flexibility of history to manipulate sentiments and artificially generate nationalist feelings and ethnic tensions where little if any may have existed before. This can have violent and even deadly repercussions, as demonstrated in Yugoslavia, where politicians such as Milosevic generated ethnic hostility among groups that previously co-existed peacefully.

There are many additional examples of the dangers of a fluctuating history. Ireland, again, has many illustrations of this. Many of its violent conflicts were plausibly exacerbated as a result of altering history, including the Civil War, the Troubles, and the violence of the IRA splinter groups today. Consequently, questions should be perpetually raised regarding the motivations of historians and politicians whenever an account of history is given.

Thus, in contradiction to common sense and to previously held assumptions, the past is a non-static, fluctuating entity, and there is a profound gravity in realizing this. It turns out that "history" is much more of a story than might be perceived on first glance, a story that is continuously being edited and retold

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