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Sarah Slawson  
CSUSB

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## **The Irish Nationalist: Motivations, Experiences and Consequences**

By Sarah Slawson

The story of modern Ireland is one that is fraught with the question of Irish identity. English influence in Ireland dates to the Norman invasions under Strongbow, an adventurer seeking autonomy from the English crown, in the twelfth-century.<sup>1</sup> From these precarious beginnings, England gradually extended its power over Ireland, culminating in the Act of Union in 1801. This political, social, and economic domination lasted more than a century until Britain yielded to the Irish Republican Army, signing the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, which granted autonomy to the 26 provinces in what is now the Republic of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> This treaty would not have happened had it not been for the efforts of many Irish men and women who fought for independence, a struggle that manifested in the twentieth-century in the 1916 Easter Rising and subsequent War for Independence. Through the course of their struggle, these men and women faced many hardships and events that shaped their individual narratives. In order to preserve the memory of this crucial period of Irish history, the Irish Bureau of Military History collected witness statements from veterans of the 1916 Rising, all of which were recorded and subsequently organized in an online archive.

This archive is a collection of 1,773 witness statements from Irish citizens who were involved with the nationalist movement or in nationalist activities between 1913 and 1921. In addition to firsthand accounts, this rich archival resource also includes photographs and voice recordings collected by the state from 1947 to 1957. These statements recount the stories of the individuals engaged in the Irish nationalist cause during this crucial period of Irish history. The collection of these statements was intended, “to assemble and co-ordinate material to form the basis for the compilation of the history of the movement for Independence from the formation of the Irish Volunteers on 25th

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kee, *The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism* (London: Penguin Group, 2000), 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

November 1913, to the 11th July 1921.”<sup>3</sup> Although the number of statements is impressive, it is important to note that not all of the nationalists who took part in the 1916 Rising were interviewed, partly because the statements were not collected until twenty-five years later. Another issue is that many prominent figures such as Tom Barry, one of the most infamous members of the Irish Republican Army rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, and thus refused to be interviewed.<sup>4</sup> Barry’s refusal reflected his broader rejection of the auspices of Anglo-Irish Treaty, sentiment that led to the Irish Civil War fought between pro and anti-treaty forces between 1922-1923 as nationalists struggled to envision a partitioned Ireland. While it is unfortunate, from a historical perspective, that certain key individuals refused to provide their own accounts of the struggle, broadly, these statements provide insight to the motivations, experiences, and consequences for Irish nationalists illustrated in great detail. These witness statements are especially important for the elucidation of the vital role women played in the 1916 Rising.

Marie Perolz was one of the three hundred women who took part in the 1916 Rising. These women, who came from every class in society, were known as “basket girls.”<sup>5</sup> Prior to the release of their witness statements their experiences were neglected within the larger memory of the Easter Rising. Despite this, it is clear that these women contributed to the Rising in many ways and were seen as the “silent and secret army” due to their indirect modes of involvement.<sup>6</sup> Membership in the Irish republican paramilitary organization *Cumann na mBan* was one way that many of these women furthered the nationalist cause.<sup>7</sup> Members of *Cumann na mBan* were responsible for hiding arms, transporting these weapons and explosives, maintaining safe houses for the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and providing food and shelter for the

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Doyle, et. al, *An Introduction to the Bureau of Military History 1913-1921*, (Dublin: Military Archives, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> “Guide to the Bureau of Military History,” Bureau of Military History, accessed March 1, 2018, <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/about.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Sinead McCoolle, “Women of 1916,” *Irish Times*, February 15, 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/women-of-1916-1.2535291>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Anthea McTeirnan, “Women of rebellion: how the other half fought,” *Irish Times*, October 3, 2014, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/women-of-rebellion-how-the-other-half-fought-1.1949969>.

members of the IRA.<sup>8</sup> These operations played a crucial non-combatant role in supporting Irish revolutionary ambitions. All these components—motivations, experiences, and consequences—are apparent when examining the witness statement of Marie Perolz. Motivating factors for these individuals include, but are not limited to, cultural interest and previous Irish nationalist struggles.

### Motivations

Cultural interest was one component that drew many Irish youth into the nationalist fold. Multitudes of young men and women were first enculturated to the Irish identity through the school system. In her witness statement, Perolz recounts that though her father was a Protestant, she was sent to the Catholic Presentation Convent. Perolz states that “it was the Presentation nuns who made a rebel of me, Sister Bonaventure especially.”<sup>9</sup> This statement illustrates the importance of personal relationships between nationalist educators and their pupils. These close-knit relationships assisted in the enculturation of Irish nationalists by engendering a sentimentality of Irish Catholics as an oppressed nation under Protestant English rule. Perolz conveys that activities centered around Irish culture and language were a significant part of her youth. She states, “I attended classes in Irish in 87 Marlborough Street...I was in *Cumann na mBan*, took part in the National Players, played Irish parts, taught classes in Irish in Strand Street. What I learned on Monday I taught on Thursday.”<sup>10</sup> The passage of knowledge and ideas from one person to the next, facilitated by the school system, community organizations, and activities such as parades, fueled the nationalist cause.

Perolz speaks of a nationalist parade in 1898, which celebrated the anniversary of the United Irishman Rebellion a century prior, as inspiring her own nationalist activities.<sup>11</sup> She remembered, “That thrilled my heart, which nearly burst with joy

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<sup>8</sup> McTeirnan, “Women of rebellion: how the other half fought,”

<sup>9</sup> Marie Perolz, Witness Statement, May 9, 1949, Document 246, Bureau of Military History Witness Statements, 1913-21, Irish National Archives, 1. <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0246.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

at the sight of the flags, tableaux, etc.”<sup>12</sup> For Irish youth, remembering the uprising in such a celebratory fashion glorified Ireland’s struggle for independence and heightened nationalist sentiment. Perolz herself was directly involved in the 1916 Rising and her experiences during the revolution illustrate the diverse roles that were played by women in the Irish nationalist movement at the time.

## **Experiences**

In the months leading up to the 1916 Rising, Perolz served the nationalist movement as an intelligence operative.<sup>13</sup> The Irish republican intelligence network had been constructed by Irish Republican Brotherhood member—and future revolutionary guerilla leader—Michael Collins, after his incarceration prior to the 1916 Rising. Irish historian T. Ryle Dwyer asserts that Collins was an integral part to the success of the IRA intelligence network. Collins, Dwyer notes, “was the brains behind the whole network and his industry was phenomenal. He retained personal control over work similar to that done by three different intelligence agencies in Britain, MI5, MI6, and MI9”.<sup>14</sup> This was the intelligence network that many nationalists like Perolz worked in. Through the nationalist intelligence network, Perolz found herself in close contact with many prominent leaders of the revolutionary movement. In her witness statement, she recalls a time when she directly consulted one of the movement’s most senior leaders, James Connolly, about a police officer in Dublin Castle—the seat of British power in Ireland—who was willing to serve as an informant.<sup>15</sup> She asked Connolly, “Can I use him?” to which Connolly replied, “Yes, but don’t let him use you.”<sup>16</sup> The police officer in question, called Myles, would pass along his information while strolling down the street with Perolz. She says that as the information was passed along, the pair pretended to not know each

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<sup>12</sup> Perolz, Witness Statement, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Perolz, Witness Statement, 4.

<sup>14</sup> T. Ryle Dwyer, *Big Fellow, Long Fellow* (Dublin: Gil & Macmillan, 2006), 69.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Kee, *The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism* (London: Penguin Group, 2000), 493.

<sup>16</sup> Perolz, Witness Statement, 5.

other, preserving the secrecy of the meetings.<sup>17</sup> Perolz's intelligence was significant enough, that in the days leading up to the 1916 Rising she reported directly to Connolly. Through a vast web of informal agents like Perolz, the nationalists were able to assemble a network of informants and spies throughout Ireland, under the very noses of their British adversaries.

While some Irish nationalists confronted British forces head on, others chose to serve the nationalist cause as couriers, authors, or educators. Prior to the 1916 Rising, Perolz played less visible—but equally necessary—roles within the movement. Perolz states, “At that time with Nellie Clifford I was running a bureau for Irish fellows to get them jobs and get them out of the British Army.”<sup>18</sup> Later in her statement, Perolz says that she caught up with the family of one of these men, a German family residing in Ireland, known as the Keppels. When she needed lodgings the night before the 1916 Rising, the Keppels would not let her stay with them.<sup>19</sup> Though Perolz assisted one of the Keppels in escaping the British Army, the family was unwilling to provide lodging to an active Irish nationalist. Perolz does not explicitly say how she felt about being turned away by the Keppels, or why they turned her away. However, it is clear that in the tense days leading up to the 1916 Rising, it may have been too risky for the family to lodge a woman known to be affiliated with the Irish nationalist cause.

In addition to her roles in intelligence, and building grass roots support for the movement, Perolz was also tasked with the procurement of weapons for the nationalist leadership. On one such occasion, Perolz was tasked by Connolly to purchase guns from an individual named Grant. She was told that she could find this man at Stephen's, the local bicycle shop. When she finally caught up with Grant, she was informed that he had already distributed them.<sup>20</sup> The disorganization illustrated by this miscommunication proves that the system was not infallible. The same disorganization would continue to plague the Irish nationalist movement and contribute to the failure of the 1916 Rising. Perolz was lucky on another occasion and was able to procure several

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<sup>17</sup> Perolz, Witness Statement, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Perolz, Witness Statement, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

revolvers for the cause. The man who supplied the guns, Mr. Murphy, provided so many weapons and so much ammunition that Perolz could not carry it all and needed to enlist the assistance of her brother-in-law to transport the supplies. Mr. Murphy refused the money offered to him by Perolz though she left it inside a book on the bookcase.<sup>21</sup> Throughout her witness statement, Perolz demonstrates the active role that she took in all levels of resistance against the British in Ireland. Moreover, the staggering number of roles she played, is a testament to the ad-hoc and exceptionally flexible nature of the Irish nationalist movement. As demonstrated through Perolz's witness statement, the consequence for participating in the 1916 Rising was often severe.

### **Consequences**

As a member of the Irish revolutionary movement, Perolz was apprehended in the wake of the uprising's defeat. She knew in advance that the authorities were coming to arrest her, and before they arrived Perolz warned her family not to give away any information to British authorities, even under threat of arrest. Even after the failure of the 1916 Rising, Perolz remained staunchly committed to the cause and unwavering in her belief that the nationalist mission should continue uninterrupted.<sup>22</sup> In her witness statements, Perolz lists the various prisons and holding facilities she and the other prisoners were taken. When the prisoners were treated well in Lewes Prison, Perolz recounts that a fellow nationalist, "Helene Moloney said we should not admit we were well treated."<sup>23</sup> Helene, like many captured members of the 1916 Rising, desired to preserve the support garnered from nationalist sympathizers in the aftermath of the revolution's defeat. While she was being held at Kilmeinhem, Perolz was informed that the leaders of the Rising were being executed. Among the leaders executed was James Connolly, Perolz's superior in the days leading up to the Rising, and one of the most prominent leaders of the entire nationalist movement. Only the kindness of a fellow

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<sup>21</sup> Perolz, Witness Statement, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

prisoner, Brigid Foley, prevented Perolz from starving herself in grief upon hearing of her comrades' executions.<sup>24</sup>

When Perolz was brought to trial, she was interrogated by Lord Midleton, a leading member of the pro-British Irish Unionist party. Midleton asked Perolz, "And how did you come to get mixed up with this business?"

Perolz responded, "If I only saw two dogs fighting in the street I'd have to take sides."

To which her interrogator replied, "And which side would you take?"

Perolz responded, "That of the bottom dog, of course."<sup>25</sup>

This dialogue exemplifies how the nationalist movement viewed their struggle against Britain. Irish nationalists, such as Perolz, believed that Ireland was the bottom dog fighting the mighty British Empire. This mindset was shared by many throughout Ireland who were outraged by the British response to the 1916 Rising, particularly the summary execution of the Rising's leaders. After her trial, Perolz states that she was released back to Ireland where she returned to the service of the nationalist cause. Although, her statements do not indicate that she took part in any other key events in Irish nationalist history following her release.

## **Conclusion**

The Irish Bureau of Military History archives provide a unique window into the lives of Irish nationalists involved in the struggle for independence between 1913 and 1921. This collection is one of the most important primary sources of information on the period available anywhere in the world.<sup>26</sup> Without it, the memory of the Irish revolutionary period would be at best incomplete, and the role of rank-and-file nationalists like Perolz might have been forgotten completely. Thanks to the numerous witness statements collected, archived, and digitized by the Irish Bureau of Military History, the firsthand accounts of Perolz, and thousands of others like her are immortalized for the benefit of future generations.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Perolz, Witness Statement, 11.

<sup>26</sup> "Guide to the Bureau of Military History," Bureau of Military History.



For centuries, the Irish nationalist movement attracted men and women who were willing to sacrifice life and limb in pursuit of an autonomous Ireland. Marie Perolz provides an excellent example of the unique and imperative role played by women in this nationalist movement. Irish nationalists unequivocally hungered for Irish independence, though violent tensions often erupted over the specific form independence would take. Their motivations drove them, their experiences shaped them, and the consequences of their actions made their plight impossible to ignore.

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**Author Bio**

Sarah Slawson is an undergraduate student at California State University, San Bernardino, and will be graduating in Spring 2018. She will be graduating with a Bachelor's in History and a minor in Business Administration. After graduating, she plans on taking a year off to put her hard-earned skills to use. Once she has discovered her true calling, she will pursue a Master's degree in her field of choice.

