



Pedagogická  
fakulta  
Faculty  
of Education

Jihočeská univerzita  
v Českých Budějovicích  
University of South Bohemia  
in České Budějovice

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**De Valera as Irish Political Leader: His Successes and Failures**

Irský politický vůdce De Valera: Jeho úspěchy a selhání

Vypracoval: Štěpán Raiterman

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Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Christopher Koy, M. A., Ph.D.

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## Anotace

Bakalářská práce se zabývá životem a politickou kariérou jednoho z nejkontroverznějších mužů irských dějin, Eamonem de Valerou. Úvodní část je zaměřena na historii Irska a jeho boj proti Britům. Hlavní pozornost je věnována de Valerově politice zejména v době jeho největší moci. Dále se práce dotýká jeho kontroverzních rozhodnutí, úspěchů i selhání.

## Abstract

The aim of the bachelor thesis is to provide an overview on the life and political career of one of the most controversial men in Irish history, Eamon de Valera. The introductory part focuses on the history of Ireland and its struggle against the British. The main focus is given to de Valera's policies when in power, to his controversial decisions, as well as to his successes and failures.

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## **Introduction**

Eamon de Valera, the dominating Irish figure for over fifty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to this day remains a subject of debate among many historians, biographers, and the general public, and he remains the most controversial political figure in Irish history. His leadership left an undeniable mark on Irish politics as well as an impact on its fight for independence. The aim of this bachelor thesis is to provide an overview of de Valera's political beginnings, the numerous challenges he faced, his policies when in power, as well as his successes and failures over an extremely long political career.

The first part of this thesis provides the much-needed historical context of Ireland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It describes the long-lasting struggle for Irish independence, the half-decade of Daniel O'Connell, and the horrible events, which many would call genocide, of the Great Famine. It describes how the hatred for the British grew over the decade.

In the next part, Eamon de Valera's rather harsh upbringing is introduced, as is how he struggled to find his identity when he was not even sure who his father was, and how he found his identity in the Irish language. His education and, more importantly, his formation of character are described. Then we take a look at his political beginnings and how he became devoted to being a mathematics teacher is taken, then to be transformed into a soldier and subsequently into the most prominent Irish political leaders of his time. The focus then falls on the Easter Rising, from which de Valera came to be the only surviving leader not executed; to the Irish War of Independence, where de Valera was primarily absent; and the Irish Civil War, for which he was to blame. We then witness his hardest years, as he was on the brink of leaving politics, and his resurgence when he gains back his power.

In the final part, the main focus is on de Valera's long-lasting tenure as Taoiseach, his achievements, such as the enactment of the new constitution and maintaining Irish neutrality during the WWII, his failures, such as the economic stagnation of Ireland and not responding the question of partition, and finally his quiet years as the president of Ireland.

## **1. Historical context**

To even get started on one of the most important men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland, the history of the country, Eamon de Valera was the dominating Irish political figure for almost fifty years, must be briefly introduced. The first mention of Ireland dates back to approximately 50 BC, so I will restrict my brief summary to the history of Ireland from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **1.1. Act of Union**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century started with the Act of Union (later ‘Act’), which united the Kingdom of Great Britain and the Kingdom of Ireland and formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>1</sup> This Act abolished, amongst many other things, Ireland’s status as a kingdom, the five-hundred-year-old lasting Irish parliament and moved all policy decision-making to London.<sup>2</sup> This was met with differing reactions. In the North, as the majority of the population there were Unionists, they feared they would be led by Catholics in Dublin, and they enthusiastically approved the Act. In the rest of Ireland, people were either strongly against the Act or they just simply did not care. Nationalists disapproved of the Act because only foreigners in a foreign country would now decide on all Irish policy. The remaining people simply did not care, as the Act did not bother them.<sup>3</sup>

People’s disapproval usually leads to a protest, and this was not a different case with the Act. The first significant rebellion started in 1803 and was led by Robert Emmet, who was a Protestant Irish nationalist leader.<sup>4</sup> Even though the rebellion was suppressed quite easily as Emmet had very little support, it is still rather considerable, not for the actions taken but for what Emmet said before the 25-year-old nationalist was hanged.

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<sup>1</sup> MARTIN, F.X. and MOODY, T.W. *The Course of Irish History*. p. 204

<sup>2</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland*. p. 103

<sup>3</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland*. p. 104

<sup>4</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland*. p. 105



*“My race is run—the grave opens to receive me, and I sink into its bosom. I have but one request to ask at my departure from this world, it is the charity of its silence. Let no man write my epitaph; for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them, let not prejudice or ignorance asperse them. Let them rest in obscurity and peace, my memory be left in oblivion, and my tomb remain uninscribed, until other times and other men can do justice to my character. When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written.”*

(Bottingheimer, *Ireland and the Irish: A Short History*. p. 169-170)

This is just a small extract from one of the versions of his speech, as it was transcribed by few people. Without this “Speech from the Dock”, Emmet and the rebellion would most likely have been forgotten, like hundreds of others have been forgotten. This speech resonated the most with the Irish nationalists and gave them strength that even after defeats, they would not give up and would fight for the long struggle for Irish freedom. It was so well known that names such as Abraham Lincoln or James Conolly later mentioned their significance in their lives.

## **1.2. The Half Decade of Daniel O’Connell**

### **1.2.1. Catholic Emancipation**

The next major issue was the demand for full Catholic emancipation. Even though most of the Penal Laws (these laws were designed to oppress the Catholic majority in Ireland) were revoked, Catholics still could not reach the highest positions in parliament, could not be judges, etc.<sup>5</sup> This was, other than the North, which was occupied mostly by Protestants, rather challenging for the rest of Ireland, which was mostly Catholic. They sought emancipation so that at least some fellow Catholics could sit in the parliament and speak for their people. Yet there were many, such as King George III, who ruled England at the time, who worked against Catholic emancipation, as it seemed pointless and threatening.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> MARTIN, F.X. and MOODY, T.W. *The Course of Irish History*. p. 205

<sup>6</sup> BOTTINGHEIMER, S. Karl. *Ireland and the Irish: A Short History* p. 170

All of it was about to change with a legendary lawyer named Daniel O’Connell. O’Connell is regarded as the most prominent man in the fight for Catholic emancipation in Ireland where the Catholics were the overwhelming majority.

The first key aspect to O’Connell’s success was the organisation of the Catholic Church, which meant Catholics could practise their religion openly, and O’Connell believed if the English government saw how unanimous Catholic Ireland was, they would soon agree with the emancipation.<sup>7</sup>

O’Connell’s next crucial success was forming the Catholic Association of Ireland in 1823, a unique grouping that allowed even peasants to join, who had never been allowed to be associative members of any group before. The reason they could take part in O’Connell’s association was because the ‘Catholic Rent’ (Catholic Rent was a subscription you had to pay in order to be a member of the Catholic Association) was as little as one penny, which even the poorest could afford.<sup>8</sup> The growing morale of Catholics was described by Dr Jebb of Limerick.

*“There is what we of this generation have never before witnessed, a complete union of the Roman Catholic body . . . In truth, an Irish revolution has, in great measure, been effected.”*

(Martin and Moody. *The Course of Irish History*. p. 206)

It was so groundbreaking that thousands began joining the Association. The success and growth of the Catholic Association were soon noticed by the members of parliament (later ‘MP’) and the king himself. The most significant triumph for O’Connell was in 1828, when he won the County Clare election. Even though, as a Catholic, he could not take a seat in parliament, just the thought of winning against a Protestant MP would mean a great deal to all Catholics. Against all odds, O’Connell won. The elation was so intense that other MPs feared there might be a rebellion, although O’Connell always wanted peaceful protests.

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<sup>7</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland*. p. 108

<sup>8</sup> MARTIN, F.X. and MOODY, T.W. *The Course of Irish History* p. 206

Finally, on 13 April 1829, the Catholic emancipation became law.<sup>9</sup> It was an important victory for the Irish Catholics, as they could become MPs, judges, generals, etc., and were one step closer to gaining the independence they sought.

### **1.2.2. Repeal of the Act of Union**

Soon after emancipation, O'Connell took a seat in the House of Commons, planning to achieve even greater things. O'Connell's next major goal was to bring the parliament back to Ireland and to undo the Act of Union. O'Connell was still the hero from the 1820s, and so he had a lot of support from the Irish people, and so he thought he would succeed in abrogating the Union. In 1840, he founded yet another organisation called the Repeal Association. However, it was notably different from the 1820s. He still enjoyed the support from Irish folk, but back then, O'Connell also had an important support coming from the House of Commons and also, even though not as extensive, from the House of Lords. This time, he was rather alone; no other MP would join or even consider the Repeal Association.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of MP opposition, he did not want to surrender. He still believed it would be possible to overcome those obstacles. He began organising what were called the 'monster meetings', where huge masses of people would gather and, most of the times, peacefully protest for their cause. The most impressive one took place in Tara, where over 750 000 people gathered.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless the Union would still stand. The MP's recognized the power of those meetings and feared how many people O'Connell could get together, so they banned all future meetings. The Repeal Association would still meet, but in hiding and without any notable outcome. The ban of the meeting at Clontarf (the monster meeting at Clontarf was supposed to be even greater than the one in Tara) resulted in the decline of his popularity and support. This ended the half decade of Daniel O'Connell.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> MARTIN, F.X. and MOODY, T.W. *The Course of Irish History* p. 209

<sup>10</sup> MARTIN, F.X. and MOODY, T.W. *The Course of Irish History* p. 213

<sup>11</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland* p. 115

<sup>12</sup> MARTIN, F.X. and MOODY, T.W. *The Course of Irish History* p. 214

### **1.3. The Great Famine**

The Great Famine (later ‘Famine’) is viewed as one of the greatest European catastrophes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was even greater incident in Irish history. Although there were many significant events throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as mentioned previously and to be mentioned, nothing came close to the events during the years 1845-1849. Its short- and long-term repercussions are, to this day, what defined 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland.

#### **1.3.1. Cause of the Famine**

It all started in 1845, when there were the first occurrences of the potato blight. (Potato blight, caused by a fungus, wreaks havoc on potato plants. It results in black spots and a white mould on the leaves, ultimately rendering the potatoes inedible). At first, it seemed harmless, as there were many cases of famine throughout the centuries, but in 1845, it was different because the failure of the crop was reported from all over the country.<sup>13</sup>

#### **1.3.2. Course and the Consequences of the Famine**

In 1845, the crop started failing, but there was still as much as half of a good crop. It was the following year that it became a considerable issue. In 1846, almost all the crop was a total loss, resulting in the first deaths from hunger. The health of Irish people began to worsen, as there was very little to eat, the weather was cruelly cold and wet, and many diseases, such as typhus and relapsing fever began to spread.<sup>14</sup> As the years went on, the death toll and the number of people who emigrated from Ireland rose.

The Famine had ended in early 1850, as the potato crop finally began yielding and there were, most respectfully, fewer mouths to feed.

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<sup>13</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland* p. 124

<sup>14</sup> MARTIN, F.X. and MOODY, T.W. *The Course of Irish History* p. 224

### **1.3.3. Government's response to the Famine**

Once the Irish parliament was abolished in 1801 and all policies about Ireland was decided by English in Westminster. The Irish people rightfully expected some kind of aid, which frankly never came. Although there were some signs of support, such as the repeal of the Corn Laws, the introduction of soup kitchens or workhouses, were not very sufficient solutions to the enormous crisis.

The major problem of the British government was the underestimate of the upcoming crisis. If the government made some precautions as soon as there were signs of the potato blight, to say they would precede the crisis would be an overvaluation, the consequences would have been far less severe. The problem was ignored and so the Irish hatred towards the British grew.

At the start of the Famine, Sir Robert Peel was the Prime Minister (later 'PM') and he, unlike many others, genuinely wanted to help the Irish people. His radical steps, such as the repeal of the Corn Laws (the Corn Laws prohibited the importation of inexpensive corn, making it hard to afford for the poor), or to supply of food to Ireland without the Cabinet's approval only delayed the inevitable, and got him voted out of the office.<sup>15</sup>

Lord John Russell became the new PM, and if it was not yet hard enough during these times in Ireland, it would only get worse, with Russell coming into office. During his time as PM, he insisted that it was not up to the government to provide food for the starving, but up to the people to find an employment to pay for their own food.<sup>16</sup> Even though they had other kinds of food other than the potato, such as onions, peas, beans and various meats, they had to export all of it to England as a form of tax did not help the popularity of the British government. This, as expected, enraged the Irish even more.

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<sup>15</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland* p. 127

<sup>16</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland* p. 128

The last straw for the Irish was when Charles Trevelyan, assistant to the Treasury in London during the Famine in charge of relief efforts to support Ireland, tried to justify his stringent policies during the Famine.

*'The judgment of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated. ...The real evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of the Famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people'.*

(Blank, 2020)

Trevelyan soon became the most despised figure by the Irish in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The person in charge of the relief efforts stated that the Famine is God's will to "teach you a lesson" truly shocked the people of Ireland. They soon realised that they were on their own. Indeed, it was recognized as genocide by many.

#### **1.3.4. Consequences of the Famine**

During those years, the Irish population dropped by nearly twenty percent, as around a million people perished and another 2 million emigrated, mostly to America or Britain, but also to Australia and Canada.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the population of Ireland was cut in half by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to just 4,4 million. The last effect it had was that more than ever the Irish nationalist laid the blame at the British Government and started demanding the long-wanted self-government.

#### **1.4. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Post-famine Ireland was an exhausted country, yet hope for freedom was not gone, as new organisations started being formed. After the famine, people started coming back from the countries they escaped to, to fight for Irish independence once again. Amongst many there was James Stephens, who founded the Irish Republican Brotherhood (later 'IRB') in 1858.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> RANELAGH, O. John. *A Short History of Ireland* p. 131

<sup>18</sup> MARTIN, F.X. and MOODY, T.W. *The Course of Irish History* p. 230

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## *1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT*

The Fenians (The Fenians referred to both IRB and the Fenian Brotherhood founded by John O'Mahony) were a group explicitly preparing to use weapons. They organised small revolts throughout the country. Their only objective was to gain independence. They arranged an uprising in 1867, which ultimately failed. They played an important part in 1916, the failed Easter Rebellion.

The last important, at least for this thesis, event that occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the Home Rule movement. As all the preceding actions to gain its independence back failed, this was the last chance for Ireland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to become free again. The most dominant person of this movement was Charles Stewart Parnell, an Irish nationalist, and a member of the British Parliament, who fought for the movement in Westminster. To his disappointment, the two Home Rule Bills in 1886 and 1893 he was fighting for were defeated by either House of Commons or House of Lords.<sup>19</sup> Only after his death the Third Home Rule Bill was passed in 1914.

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<sup>19</sup> BOTTINGHEIMER, S. Karl. *Ireland and the Irish: A Short History* p. 212

## 2. Biography of Eamon De Valera

### 2.1. Early life

Eamon de Valera (later ‘de Valera’) (was christened Edward, but later in his life decided to change it to the Irish version of Edward, Eamonn, but with only a single ‘n’), originally enrolled as George de Valero, was born on 14 October 1882, in the Nursery and Child’s Hospital in Manhattan, New York. He was the son of a Spanish man, Juan Vivion de Valera, and an Irish woman, Catherine Coll.<sup>20</sup> He was later called “the Spanish bastard” by opponents since there is no evidence that his parents had ever married. He was one of the many children born in America to a ‘post-famine’ woman. Even though he was born with both parents, de Valera hardly remembered his father, as he died when he was just two years old. He remembered very little of his mother too, as he was sent back to Ireland in 1885 due either to de Valera’s medical conditions<sup>21</sup> or Catherine’s living conditions<sup>22</sup>. Either way, he arrived in Bruree to live with his aunt, uncle, and grandmother. He soon became fond of her aunt, but as Catherine left for America in 1879, so did his aunt Hannie in 1886.

His first memories in Ireland include picking berries and reading books, but most importantly, he became aware of the Irish language. His grandmother and most of her friends were speaking that language. Although he did not learn the language, which he later regretted, he became fond of it, it started shaping his identity and was crucial later in his life.

### 2.2. Education

From the start of his schooling at Bruree National School, de Valera showed his knack for studying as he passed for graduation each year.

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<sup>20</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 3

<sup>21</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 5

<sup>22</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 7



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## 2 BIOGRAPHY OF EAMON DE VALERA

Although a perfect student, de Valera's uncle insisted that after school he should give up on education. As his grandmother died, his chores at the house increased, and, as she was the only one from the family that persuaded him to study furthermore (she wanted him to become a priest), it looked like he would spend his whole life doing manual labour. At this time his most important character trait, was unveiled. His strong determination, will power, and self-belief simply forbade him from settling with such a life, and he told his uncle that he would either attend Charleville or be sent back to America. 'Charleville it was' and de Valera later summed it up in his diary as: "First victory for E. de V."<sup>23</sup> The years at Charleville were rather harsh at first, but he had to prove to himself that he would get through them with honour. As de Valera started becoming an Irish nationalist, he studied Irish history, but to his disappointment, it was not taught at all. The only history taught was British, so to gain more knowledge about Ireland, he would have to listen to people's stories back at Bruree.

A few years later, after winning an exhibition and a scholarship, he was admitted to attend Blackrock College in Dublin. The college had strict rules, but slowly he acclimatized and became an above-standard student. It was at Blackrock, when he became a member of the debating society, where he fit in, as he was a great spokesperson, even though he had a stutter, through his college years and during his years in office.<sup>24</sup> De Valera won further scholarships and attended the Royal University of Ireland, where he graduated.

In the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, de Valera started teaching mathematics and physics, not yet very bothered by politics. It would all soon change.

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<sup>23</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 19

<sup>24</sup> DWYER, T. R. *De Valera: The Man & The Myths* p. 6

### 3. Beginnings of de Valera's political career

#### 3.1. Gaelic League

Because of de Valera's harsh upbringing, he sought to find an identity for himself, and found it in the Irish language, which became an essential part of his career. He was not particularly keen on politics, but it began to change as he joined the Gaelic League (the Gaelic League was, and to this day is, an organisation that educated people and promoted the Irish language) in 1908. At first, he only deepened his knowledge of the language, which was such a major part of his identity. When the Third Home Rule Bill was introduced, the IRB started infiltrating the Gaelic League politics exerted a powerful influence.

##### 3.1.1. Sinéad de Valera

Eamon de Valera joined the Gaelic League, and also met his future wife, Sinéad Ní Fhlannagáin. Sinéad joined the Gaelic League in 1899 as a teacher. She politically engaged from a young age, she helped Eamon because whenever he had to choose between a political career and Sinéad, the career won thanks to Sinéad's encouragement.<sup>25</sup> After only a half-year of knowing each other, they got engaged in 1909, and another six months later they got married.<sup>26</sup>

#### 3.2. Irish Volunteers

To this point, de Valera had been a cultural nationalist, but as the Third Home Rule crisis was ahead, he transformed into a political nationalist. His direct political involvement started when he joined the Irish Volunteers in 1913.<sup>27</sup> (Irish Volunteers was a paramilitary organisation, that promoted Irish nationalism and wanted to secure rights

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<sup>25</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera Volume 1: Rise (1882-1932)* p. 82

<sup>26</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera Volume 1: Rise (1882-1932)* p. 83, 85

<sup>27</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 28

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### 3 BEGINNINGS OF DE VALERA'S POLITICAL CAREER

for Irish people and was formed as a response to the establishment of Ulster Volunteers – Ulster Volunteers were a paramilitary organisation formed to fight against Home Rule movement as they wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom). De Valera was rather rose quickly through the ranks. Soon after, he was promoted to captain, becoming a leader of a group of men for the first time in his life. In 1915, he was promoted to the rank of commandant.<sup>28</sup> After being promoted, de Valera reluctantly joined the IRB, even though he was personally against the idea of secret organisations.

In the meantime, the Third Home Rule Bill was passed, and it might have seemed that the long fight for independence might be over, but as World War I (later 'WWI') started in 1914, this Bill was put on hold. This was the last straw for the Irish Volunteer Force and the IRB, who now planned an uprising to gain Irish independence.

#### **3.3. Easter Rising**

The Easter Rising (later 'Rising') was an armed insurrection in 1916 to free Ireland from British political domination. As England was fighting in WWI, the idea was that most of the forces would be fighting abroad, and England would not be able to properly respond to the Rising.

The main objective of the Rising was to take over the capital of Ireland, Dublin. The aim was to take over military strongpoints. There were four main battalions, whose goals were to surround the city and then take it over. De Valera played a somewhat significant role in the Rising, as he was the leader of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. Yet all the battalions were heavily undermanned, as of the expected five hundred men, only 130 showed up.<sup>29</sup> The intelligent among the leaders knew from the beginning that the Rising would fail, yet they carried on.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the Rising only lasted for six days and resulted in the unconditional surrender of the Irish commandants.

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<sup>28</sup> DWYER, T. R. *De Valera: The Man & The Myths* p. 13, 14

<sup>29</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 66, 67

<sup>30</sup> DWYER, T. R. *De Valera: The Man & The Myths* p. 16

### 3.3.1. Aftermaths of the Rising

Heavily outnumbered, the British put down the Rising soon, resulting in nearly five hundred casualties and nearly two thousand people arrested without being tried by Court Martial. More importantly, 16 leaders of the Rising were imprisoned, including de Valera, and 14 of them were executed. One can debate, what Ireland would be like if de Valera had been executed among other leaders, but he was not. The luck was with de Valera, as he was one of the last leaders captured, not imprisoned with the other leaders, to be the last executed and also an American citizen. In the meantime, the political pressure to stop the executions was mounting.<sup>31</sup> De Valera, unaware of this fact, wrote a letter to his friend, thinking of the worst.

*“Just a line to say a last goodbye. I am to be shot for my part in the Rebellion. If you can give any advice to Sinead and the little ones I know you'll try. Remember me to your wife, Mother, Aunt Stan etc. Pray for my soul. DeV.”*

(Coogan, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 77)

In the end, de Valera was only one of two people who were spared execution, and he was sentenced to life imprisonment, but that did not mean he would spend his whole life in prison, as another prisoner informed him, it would be just a year.<sup>32</sup>

Another important outcome of the Rising, even though the Rising itself failed, was that the executions sparked outrage amongst Irish people towards Britain. It increased the opinion that, without the use of force, Ireland may never gain its independence.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Eamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 45

<sup>32</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera Volume 1: Rise (1882-1932)* p. 152

<sup>33</sup> [BBC - History - 1916 Easter Rising - Aftermath - The rise of Sinn Féin](#)

## 4. From prisoner to president

### 4.1. Imprisonment and his release

After the Rising, de Valera was imprisoned for roughly a year. While in prison, de Valera's leadership started to shine through. Other prisoners looked up to him as a leader. He organised hunger strikes, refused to do manual labour, and encouraged his cellmates to do the same.<sup>34</sup> After the year or so in prison, as he was released, he was informed that he was chosen to be a candidate for Sinn Féin (Sinn Féin was, and still is an Irish political party and the Gaelic name of the party translates to "We Ourselves") in the by-election in East Clare.

Noting the state of public opinion at that time, after the failed Rising, most of the public blamed Sinn Féin and now the imprisoned leaders for the unnecessary violence and casualties because most of its leaders participated in the Rising. De Valera was hesitant about taking part in the election. While de Valera was in prison, the opinion shifted dramatically. It was mainly due to two factors: the first was that people were suddenly enraged by the number of executions, and the second was the threat of conscription. When de Valera arrived in Dublin, to his surprise, he was greeted by thousands of supporters, and he thought to himself that maybe there was another way to achieve independence than with a gun.<sup>35</sup>

### 4.2. From soldier to politician

Soon after his release from jail, de Valera agreed to take part in the by-election in East Clare. His campaign began, and he was able to make as many as five speeches a day, persuading others to vote for him.<sup>36</sup> Within a month of his return, he was elected MP for East Clare. This triumph imbued de Valera with self-confidence.

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<sup>34</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 50

<sup>35</sup> Dale (2023)

<sup>36</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera Volume 1: Rise (1882-1932)* p. 184

The transformation from a teacher and a soldier to a politician was completed in late 1917 when he was elected President of the Volunteers and also, unanimously, after the surrender of Arthur Griffith, the President of Sinn Féin.<sup>37</sup> At the start of 1918, everything looked as though de Valera and Sinn Féin would be unstoppable that year. Their rise was halted in the first quarter of that year, when Sinn Féin lost three by-elections to the Home Rule Party, and it all suddenly became different. Soon after the defeats, Britain did de Valera a massive favour by introducing Irish conscription. This was massively unpopular, and as de Valera was a very persuasive speaker, he gained popularity yet again and secured people's votes for Sinn Féin.<sup>38</sup>

As if the year 1918 was not dramatic enough for de Valera, he was arrested yet again, this time for the so-called 'German Plot'. The British authorities accused de Valera, along with other Sinn Féin leaders, of collaborating with Germany, the enemy, in the ongoing WWI. This yet again did de Valera a favour. De Valera had a brilliant mind and a strategic vision and saw that the arrest would increase his and Sinn Féin's popularity.<sup>39</sup> After being imprisoned for yet another year, rather than waiting to be released, he escaped the prison, which also increased his popularity.

While de Valera was in prison, Sinn Féin won the general election, and rather than take a seat in the House of Commons, they set up their parliament in Dublin, the First Dáil (also Dáil Éireann), and when de Valera escaped from prison, he was elected the President of Dáil Éireann (later 'Dáil').<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Eamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 61

<sup>38</sup> YOUNGER, Calton. *A State of Disunion Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, James Craig, Eamonn de Valera* p. 233

<sup>39</sup> FERRITER, Diarmaid. *Judging dev: A reassessment of the life and legacy of Eamon De Valera* p. 33

<sup>40</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 132

## 5. De Valera departs for America

The following years were, at least in my opinion, crucial in showing the capabilities and the true nature of Eamon de Valera. Two major events took place in Ireland: the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. De Valera played a significant role in both of these events, and he became either celebrated or hated by many.

### 5.1. De Valera tours America

It was confusing that de Valera left Ireland for America for a year or so after becoming the President of the Dáil. Many tried to convince him not to leave the country at such important times, as Ireland was on the brink of a war and it needed its leader home rather than abroad, but his mind was made up. He believed he would do more good abroad.<sup>41</sup> Despite all the objections, he left.

His main goal in America was to seek official recognition of the Republic of Ireland. He began a tour through all of America, making public speeches, giving interviews, and raising money for the Irish cause. Ultimately, his tour to America is viewed as a huge failure. All he managed to do was enrage the people in Ireland, who lacked political leadership during the War of Independence, and the Irish-Americans, who began forming anti-de Valera and anti-Irish groups. The only bright side of the tour was that he was able to raise almost \$5 million dollars.<sup>42</sup> He also engaged in extra-marital affairs during the trip.

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<sup>41</sup> YOUNGER, Calton. *A State of Disunion Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, James Craig, Eamonn de Valera* p. 240

<sup>42</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 181, 183

## **5.2. The Irish War of Independence**

With its leader abroad, Ireland prepared for a guerilla war against the occupying forces of the British. The key factor in this war was intelligence. The Irish Republican Army (later 'IRA') knew they could not win the war head-on against Britain as they would be outnumbered, so they resolved to a guerilla warfare tactics of hit and run as well as the use of cells.<sup>43</sup>

At first, the war was slow; there were target killings, raiding barracks, and such. As it progressed and the 'Black and Tans' (a British violent ex-military group) got involved, the war intensified, with killings of innocent people, such as 'Bloody Sunday'. As the casualties on both sides were growing, a truce started to be negotiated in late 1921.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> [Irish War of Independence | National Army Museum \(nam.ac.uk\)](#)

<sup>44</sup> [Irish War of Independence | National Army Museum \(nam.ac.uk\)](#)



## 6. De Valera in the 1920s

Upon his return from America, the War of Independence was still on, and de Valera set objectives to himself. He manoeuvred himself into an advantageous position for negotiations with the British and, more importantly, to assert his dominance over his colleagues, especially Michael Collins.<sup>45</sup> It is a known fact that de Valera's nature did not allow him to be subordinate. De Valera was again criticized because he wanted to involve rather old-fashioned tactics in the war, despite not taking part in combat for so long.

### 6.1. Michael Collins

Before presenting one of the events that de Valera was blamed and hugely criticized for, we must understand who Michael Collins was. Michael Collins was, as he is often regarded, the hero of the Irish armed struggle for independence. As the mastermind behind the guerilla warfare during the War of Independence, he was also very close with de Valera, as it was Collins who got de Valera out of prison. He was the head, if not the founder, of the IRA during de Valera's absence, which later led to their separation and created a rivalry between the two.<sup>46</sup> To many, such as Coogan, the modern biographer of both Collins and de Valera, Collins is regarded as 'The man who made Ireland' while the survivor de Valera is 'The man who was Ireland'.

### 6.2. The Anglo-Irish Treaty

The war ended in a truce called by the British, so a treaty had to be negotiated between Britain and Ireland, specifically between David Lloyd George and Eamon de Valera. The negotiations between the two started on 11 July 1921. At first, de Valera went to London himself to talk to George. What must be said is that David L. George was an excellent, most unprincipled negotiator of his time, yet when he met de Valera and spoke to him, he later said, "Negotiating with de Valera was like trying to pick up mercury

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<sup>45</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 197

<sup>46</sup> [BBC - History - Michael Collins](#)

with a fork,” which proved what a great, sometimes stubborn, negotiator de Valera was himself.<sup>47</sup>

The first proposal by George was that Ireland would have a dominion status, meaning it would be independent but still be subject to the British crown. This was unacceptable for de Valera, yet he took it back to Dublin to decide. His cabinet colleagues split on the decision; some liked it, some did not. This was not what he wanted. In the end, it was rejected, and further negotiations followed.

This time, de Valera sent a delegation to negotiate with George. This was a crucial mistake and a failure from de Valera, as he later stated, and he never made the same mistake again. He sent a delegation with a list of demands that had to be fulfilled.<sup>48</sup> He refused to go to London because he thought that if the delegation had to refer back to him, it would slow down the negotiations and help Ireland achieve what they wanted.<sup>49</sup> Others remarked that he refused to go because, if the negotiations failed, people would not blame him but the others, and those other were political rivals Collins and Griffith<sup>50</sup> As the tension between George and the delegation escalated, George pressed the delegation into signing the Treaty; otherwise, the war would be resumed. The delegation signed the Treaty, which initially was a better deal than what de Valera was proposed during their first meeting but still far from ideal.<sup>51</sup>

De Valera was furious. Partly because he was not consulted, but mainly because the Treaty said that Ireland as a “Free State” would stay firmly in the grasp of the British Empire. He decides to oppose the Treaty in the hopes that if it is rejected by the cabinet and the Dáil, so that the negotiations would start over. However, to his surprise, the Treaty was accepted in the cabinet.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dale (2023)

<sup>48</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 108

<sup>49</sup> Dale (2023)

<sup>50</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 113

<sup>51</sup> DWYER, T. R. *De Valera: The Man & The Myths* p. 85

<sup>52</sup> YOUNGER, Calton. *A State of Disunion Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, James Craig, Eamonn de Valera* p. 263

De Valera then makes a public statement.

*“The great test of our people has come. Let us face it worthily without bitterness and above all, without recriminations. There is a definite constitutional way of resolving our differences — let us not depart from it, and let the conduct of the Cabinet in this matter be an example to the whole nation.”*

(Coogan, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 287)

The statement ultimately meant that if the Treaty was also accepted by the Dáil, he would accept the decision and no longer oppose it. To de Valera’s surprise, the Dáil actually accepted the Treaty because of the persuasive speech by Collins which made a dozen members of the Dáil change their opinion and vote in favour of the Treaty. It meant that de Valera was now in the opposition, and Arthur Griffith became the President of the Dáil.<sup>53</sup> De Valera later broke his promise because while he said he would acknowledge the Dáil’s decision, he still opposed the Treaty and began publicly speaking against it. As he did so, the country began to split between a pro-Treaty side, the big battalions, the church, etc., and an anti-Treaty one, mostly the Republican side of the IRA, leading to the Civil War where many of the top leaders of the Cabinet would die, but de Valera managed to survive.<sup>54</sup>

### **6.3. The Civil War**

The tension between the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty forces was growing rapidly. As soon as the British Army left Ireland after the War of Independence, the anti-Treaty forces started occupying various checkpoints that were left unattended. De Valera also did not particularly help the anti-Treaty image with his public remarks.

*“If they accepted the Treaty... they would have to wade through Irish blood, through the blood of the soldiers of the Irish government, and through, perhaps, the blood of some of the members of the government in order to get Irish freedom.”*

(Fanning, *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 133)

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<sup>53</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 285

<sup>54</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 295

This, as he later described, was meant to be a warning, but most obviously saw it as a threat of violence. It was precisely the opposite sentiment he made in the “constitutional way of resolving our differences” cited above.

When Sir Henry Wilson, lateral MP, was assassinated in London, Winston Churchill urged the pro-Treaty side that if they did not resolve the conflict on their own, the British Army would march to Ireland and end it itself. Under immense pressure, the pro-Treaty side agreed and attacked the Four Courts, a court building occupied by the IRA, thereby starting the Civil War officially<sup>55</sup> After five years, de Valera is forced to become a military leader after creating this conflict.

The pro-Treaty forces led by Michael Collins swiftly pushed the anti-Treaty forces out of the occupied zones. The anti-Treaty forces were outgunned, so they reverted to guerilla war tactics. The war becomes a nasty conflict, resulting in murders, reprisals, executions, etc. Michael Collins was killed during the war in an ambush most likely set up by de Valera. De Valera was blamed for the death of his long-time friend, who had even looked after de Valera’s family, risking his own life, while de Valera was in America. During the war, the partition of Ireland was completed, as the twenty-two counties of central and southern Ireland now became an Irish Free State, and still a dominion of the British Empire.<sup>56</sup>

#### **6.4. Aftermaths of the war**

The war ultimately led to a defeat of the anti-Treaty force, which, after the killing of their military leader, Liam Lynch, called a ceasefire in May 1923. The Civil War lasted for nearly ten months and resulted in casualties, the destruction of buildings all over the country, and the deaths of several key figures of the independence movement.

For de Valera, the Civil War that he essentially caused was the most miserable time of his career. His ambition and years of work to win Ireland’s independence were gone.

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<sup>55</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera Volume 1: Rise (1882-1932)* p. 417, 418

<sup>56</sup> [The Irish Civil War – A brief overview – The Irish Story](#)

His reputation was tarnished, as many have seen him as the one responsible for the start of the war and the one without whose influence the war would not be so extensive. He would later be yet again arrested, by the Free State Government, and would be locked up for a year. This gave him enough time to contemplate his future.<sup>57</sup>

### 6.5. Fiana Fáil

Upon his release from jail in 1925, de Valera began with his task of rebuilding the anti-Treaty Sinn Féin party into an organisation that would be able to enter the Dáil. There was just one major problem. To enter the Dáil, you had to take the oath, meaning that you had to swear your allegiance to the British Crown, which was unimaginable to members of Sinn Féin. De Valera tried to persuade them to join the Dáil if the oath was to be removed. He was unsuccessful and outvoted, and he resigned as president of Sinn Féin, suffering a bitter defeat, as de Valera contemplated leaving politics for good.<sup>58</sup>

*“Well Séan, I have done my best, but I have been beaten. Now that is the end for me. I am leaving public life.”*

(Dwyer. *De Valera: The Man & The Myths* p. 139)

De Valera was later persuaded by his friend Séan Lemass not to quit politics, and de Valera was, quite easily, persuaded. Because he disagreed with Sinn Féin’s policy, and had many supporters who would leave Sinn Féin for him, de Valera established a new political party in 1926 called Fianna Fáil, the “Warriors of Destiny,” with five main aims:

- 1) Securing the political independence of a united Ireland as a Republic.
- 2) The restoration of the Irish language and the development of a native Irish culture.
- 3) The development of a social system in which, as far as possible, equal opportunity will be afforded to every Irish citizen to live a noble and useful Christian life.

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<sup>57</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera Volume 1: Rise (1882-1932)* p. 421, 481

<sup>58</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 151

- 4) The distribution of the land of Ireland so as to get the greatest number possible of Irish families rooted in the soil of Ireland
- 5) The Making of Ireland [as] an economic unit, as self-contained and self-sufficient as possible-with a proper balance between agriculture and the other essential industries.<sup>59</sup>

It seems that these aims were set only to gain popularity and power, which he sought his whole life, for de Valera, as none of them were fulfilled. De Valera never united whole Ireland, the social system forced young Irishmen to emigrate, and Irish economy was in a terrible state, as de Valera never really had any interest in it.

Nevertheless, Fianna Fáil starts gaining momentum and popularity throughout the country. Many of de Valera's previous supporters from Sinn Féin have now joined the Fianna Fáil. The first real victory for Fianna Fáil came in June 1927, when they finished behind the leading party, Cumann na nGaedheal, in the general election. When Kevin O'Higgins was assassinated by members of Sinn Féin, an Electoral Amendment Bill was passed, requiring all election candidates to enter the Dáil if elected, and to enter the Dáil, one had to take the oath.<sup>60</sup> This was contrary to de Valera's belief, as he said: "*That oath no Republican will take, for it implies acceptance of England's right to overlordship in our country.*"<sup>61</sup> De Valera then eventually signs the oath, saying that it's only an 'empty formula'. He is then criticised; why it could not have been an 'empty formula' back in 1922, when he fought a civil war over the oath resulting in the death of tens of thousands of Irishmen?<sup>62</sup> This was a perfect example of what a hypocrite de Valera was.

Nonetheless, de Valera and Fianna Fáil enter the Dáil, and it would be only a matter of time before he takes over the reins of power.

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<sup>59</sup> FERRITER, Diarmaid. *Judging dev: A reassessment of the life and legacy of Eamon De Valera* p. 102

<sup>60</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 154, 155

<sup>61</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 386

<sup>62</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 155

## 7. De Valera regains power

De Valera entered the Dáil, unusually for him, as a leader of the opposition in 1927. His first year back at the Dáil included confronting other TDs (a Teachta Dála is a member of Dáil Éireann), fighting against the ‘communist claims’, and emphasizing Fianna Fáil’s Republican policy.<sup>63</sup>

The turning point for Fianna Fáil and for De Valera came in the general election in 1932, as they won the general election. Ten years after losing power, de Valera regained high office, was elected the Executive President of the Council, and also assumed the position of Minister of External Affairs. After being elected, his goals were set straight to the issues that dominated his political life; to win Ireland the independence he had argued for since 1922, to abolish the oath, and to undo the Treaty.<sup>64</sup>

### 7.1. The Economic War

One of de Valera’s first acts in office was the refusal to pay land annuities to the British government. After eleven years, de Valera visited London to negotiate. He discussed that the annuities should not be paid, while the opposing side strictly argued that “it must and should be paid.” De Valera refused, and so the dispute became known as the Economic War, which lasted until 1938.<sup>65</sup> The British put a tax on Irish cattle coming to Britain, which thoroughly wrecked Irish agriculture. De Valera used this conflict, which he started, to deepen both his popularity and that of the farmers that were mostly affected by the war. He began persuading the Irish people that the British were to blame for their struggle, even though it was de Valera’s lack of interest in economy that caused the struggle, but it eventually worked, and the Irish blamed the British.

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<sup>63</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera Volume 1: Rise (1882-1932)* p. 551, 563

<sup>64</sup> FERRITER, Diarmaid. *Judging dev: A reassessment of the life and legacy of Eamon De Valera* p. 123

<sup>65</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 40, 42

Throughout the war, de Valera had to often face accusations of running a dictatorship, as, for example, when he visited Italy, and expressed his “great admiration for fascism.” It was no secret that de Valera was a fierce leader and wanted to have things under his exclusive control, but often pointed out that the government will always be responsible to the Dáil.<sup>66</sup> The conflict eventually ended in 1938, after de Valera agreed to pay a sum of £10 million to the British.<sup>67</sup> The conflict is often seen as de Valera’s failure, as it increased emigration and unemployment. Ireland’s economy was mostly agricultural, and most labourers were farmers whose livelihood was ruined by de Valera’s politics.

## 7.2. De Valera’s greatest achievement

*“As long as I live anyhow, it will always be a matter of pride for me that I was the head of the Government that was able to get a majority of the Irish people to support and pass that Constitution. I would be very glad indeed at the hour of my death to stand over it.”*

(Coogan, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 490)

Having won the 1933 election, de Valera secured his place in the Dáil and was about to dismantle the Treaty. The first action taken by de Valera was submitting a bill that would abolish the Treaty-oath from the constitution. The bill was passed on 3 May 1933, and the oath to the King, over which so many Irish people died, was no longer.<sup>68</sup> The removal of the oath was just the beginning of de Valera’s plans. Later that year, de Valera introduced three new bills; the first two removed the power of the Governor-generals, and the third abolished the right of appeal to the judicial committee of the Privy Council. De Valera slowly but surely limited Irish connections to the Crown.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 65, 75

<sup>67</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Eamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 168, 188

<sup>68</sup> DWYER, T. R. *De Valera: The Man & The Myths* p. 193

<sup>69</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 87, 88



De Valera's triumph came during the abdication crisis in Britain. As King Edward VIII renounced his throne in order to marry Mrs. Wallis Simpson, the British were desperate for de Valera to recognize the abdication; otherwise, Edward VIII would still be the king in Ireland, even though only for a week, making it a monarchy.

De Valera took the opportunity to introduce a bill that removed any reference to the English king from the Irish constitution. Soon after, de Valera introduced the Constitution of Ireland, which is seen by many historians as his greatest achievement.<sup>70</sup>

### **7.3. Irish Constitution**

Even though the Irish Constitution is seen as de Valera's greatest achievement, it deepened the partition of Ireland, as the constitution was exclusively Catholic. Although it was one of de Valera's aims to solve the partition, he never really tried solving it, and did many things that deepened it.

Among the issues like the abolition of the oath, the removal of the king, the new Irish constitution contained various important articles such as:

- 1) The Irish nation hereby affirms its inalienable, indefeasible, and sovereign right to choose its own form of Government, to determine its relations with other nations, and to develop its life, political, economic, and cultural, in accordance with its own genius and traditions.
- 2) The name of the State is Éire, or in the English language, Ireland.
- 3) Ireland is a sovereign, independent, democratic state.
- 4) The Irish language as the national language is the first official language.
- 5) The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 488, 489

<sup>71</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 490, 492, 495

The constitution also introduced new posts, such as Taoiseach and President of Ireland. The president replaced the king as Ireland's head of state. The constitution was in line with Catholic dogma rather than keeping the country governing policy secular.

#### 7.4. Catholic influence

De Valera was a devout Catholic. The majority of the Irish population was Catholic, and that the Catholic Church played a powerful role in Ireland. During his life, he consulted on almost every piece of legislation with a member of the Church. The Church also dominated a political committee called "The Committee on Evil Literature" which banned books in Ireland. Authors such as James Joyce, Liam O'Flaherty, Edna O'Brien, and hundreds of other poets, playwrights, and novelists were banned. He had a great desire when drafting the constitution. He wanted to acknowledge the Roman Catholic Church as the one true church of the Irish nation.

This was opposed, as it would disillusion the great Protestant Republicans of Irish history such as Emmet, Parnell, Wolfe-Tone, or G. B. Shaw. De Valera then came up with a compromise: that the church would have a "special position" in Ireland.<sup>72</sup>

De Valera also enraged a huge amount of the public, mainly women, when the constitution stated that "women's place is within home." This part was another of de Valera's Catholic influences, and he would not understand why women were so angry. He resisted the opposition, and the reference remained in the constitution, even though women played a significant role in the spying effort, and in a few cases even in assassinations for the IRA.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> DWYER, T. R. *De Valera: The Man & The Myths* p. 198, 199

<sup>73</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 150, 151

#### 7.4.1. The Ireland that we dreamed of

De Valera's idyllic Catholic thinking can be seen in his speech from 1943.

*“That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis for right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit - a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that man should live.”*

(Coogan, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 628)

This speech describes de Valera's ideal Ireland: simple, peaceful, and Catholic. A place where there is no room for war such as the one taking place at the time. Irish would live according to the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Ireland is not dependent on any other country, and no chance of famine because people only work in agriculture. This was only an unrealistic dream of a devout Catholic, whose religion accompanied him.

## 8. Taoiseach for sixteen years

De Valera's office as taoiseach, which was more powerful than the Executive President of the Council, started rather harshly. A great test awaited him, as WWII was approaching.

Ahead of WWII, de Valera kept Ireland as a member of the League of Nations, where he became quite popular. His speeches received recognition on a global scale. He tried to persuade the League to act against Mussolini's fascist Italy after Italy invaded Ethiopia. After his failed attempt to persuade the League, de Valera decided that it would be best for Ireland to stay neutral during the course of WWII.<sup>74</sup>

### 8.1. The Emergency

Keeping Ireland from the war was not as easy as de Valera had imagined. He often faced criticism for not taking part in the war, from Irish, British, and American. Yet it was in Ireland's best interest to remain neutral, as it was a justifiable policy for a small, and rather defenceless country Ireland was during the war.

Even though de Valera declared Irish neutrality during the war, it was very much a neutrality that favoured the British. De Valera banned both British and German planes and submarines from entering Irish airspace and territorial waters, yet later the Royal Air Force was allowed in Irish airspace. He later allowed Irish people to join the British forces. He allowed Ireland to send food supplies to Britain.<sup>75</sup> As France fell, de Valera was afraid that Germany would invade Britain and Ireland would follow, so he secretly agreed to provide any facilities and intelligence needed for Britain to defeat the Germans. It was crucial that it stayed secret; otherwise, Germany would have invaded Ireland and de Valera would have to resign, as he promised Ireland would be neutral.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> DWYER, T. R. *De Valera: The Man & The Myths* p. 226

<sup>75</sup> Dale (2023)

<sup>76</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 192, 194

## 8.2. Censorship during the war

Another controversial policy of de Valera was the censorship and propaganda in Irish newspapers. De Valera appointed Frank Aiken, Minister for the Co-ordination of Defensive Measures, to operate the censorship. The censorship was much needed, as if the Irish saw what was happening in the war, they would start questioning the neutrality of de Valera's Ireland. All the news coming from the British had to be censored. The war was described as "a conflict where neither side is any better or worse than the other." When the atrocities of the war were revealed to the Irish public, no one could believe it. The censorship would later be seen as another significant misstep in de Valera's policy.<sup>77</sup>

### 8.2.1. The Irish Press

The Irish Press was a newspaper founded by de Valera using money he raised during his tours in America. The money raised in America were supposed to be for the IRA, but it was channelled to make de Valera's policies popular. It was controlled solely by de Valera to promote him and Fianna Fáil. Even though de Valera denied any accusations of the press being biased, it was certain that it was. The press played a great role in his gaining popularity in the 1932 election and also in the censorship during WWII.<sup>78</sup>

## 8.3. De Valera's reputation

As the war was coming to an end, de Valera's reputation was rather favourable among the Irish public, as he had kept Ireland, as far as they were concerned, neutral. His reputation would later be questioned when de Valera paid his condolences to the German Ambassador when Hitler died. He claimed he only did so as a form of neutrality, as he paid his condolences to President Truman on Roosevelt's death earlier.

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<sup>77</sup> Ó DRISCEOIL, D. *"Moral Neutrality": Censorship in Emergency Ireland*

<sup>78</sup> Ó GLAISNE, R. *De Valera and the Press: A Case Study in the History of Politics*

This was seen as an enormous misstep by de Valera. It disgusted everyone, even the Irish, as the press censorship regarding the war was removed and everyone knew what sort of tyrant Hitler had been. His reputation in Ireland was badly damaged.<sup>79</sup>

Luckily for de Valera, Winston Churchill, who has been irritated by de Valera throughout the war, rescued his reputation with his radio broadcast, where he said: “We left the Dublin Government to frolic with the German and later with the Japanese representatives to their heart’s content.” De Valera’s reply was eagerly awaited, and finally he replied in a very dignified way, resulting in Irish people celebrating him yet again.<sup>80</sup>

#### **8.4. Economic stagnation**

Even though de Valera’s Ireland remained neutral during the war, post-war Ireland was in a terrible economic state. During the war, its agriculture and industry shrank dramatically. Mass emigration, strikes, unemployment, and economic stagnation defined post-war Ireland under de Valera. Ireland was dependent on its agriculture and trade with Britain, but neither were successful. Yet his government tried to incompetently tackle the situation as the emigration and unemployment rates rose, and they received a huge amount of blame.<sup>81</sup> De Valera’s economic policies and government in the late 1940s and 1950s is to this day considered the worst in Irish history.

#### **8.5. De Valera in opposition**

De Valera’s sixteen years in power ended when he was finally defeated in the 1948 election. The public demanded a change, as Ireland was struggling, and de Valera did very little to help it. He had no appetite for being the leader of opposition, so he went instead on a world tour again abandoning his responsibilities.

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<sup>79</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 609, 610

<sup>80</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 611, 612

<sup>81</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 335

### 8.5.1. The issue of partition

The issue of the partition of Ireland was another life-long quest of de Valera. It was, after all, the main stated aim of Fianna Fáil. Even though de Valera always wanted to unite all of Ireland, he never made enough effort to end the partition and blamed Britain for separating it.

As he lost power after so long, it seemed that it was the perfect time to raise the issue of partition for the last time, not in just Ireland but in the world. His tour began in America, where he started with his public anti-partition speeches. He then travelled to Australia, New Zealand, and India, where he was greeted warmly. Although de Valera raised awareness of the partition in the world, it did not solve anything.<sup>82</sup> Upon his return to Ireland, the current government repealed the External Relations Act, which represented the last connection to Britain in the constitution, and the Republic of Ireland was accordingly signed into law in 1948. In response, the British introduced the Ireland Act, ensuring that Northern Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom.<sup>83</sup> This ultimately sealed in the minds of everyone that de Valera's tour came to naught, it was only idle talk.

### 8.6. Final years as Taoiseach

The final few years in office as Taoiseach from 1951 to 1954 and from 1957 to 1959 did his reputation more harm than good. De Valera was sixty-eight when he returned back to power, but he was not in a state to rule. His eyesight began to worsen rapidly, and he spent several months abroad undergoing operations. There were doubts about whether he would be able to effectively continue his job. As his eyesight got slightly better, he did continue as the head of the government.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 368, 370

<sup>83</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 640, 641

<sup>84</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 394, 395

The issue of partition was still in the air, but de Valera had given up on it just a few years after his world tour, when he was asked, “Have you a solution for [partition]? Is there a line of policy which you propose to pursue which you think can, within a reasonable time, be effective?” he answered. “I have to say that I have not and neither has anybody else.”<sup>85</sup> This ultimately proved that de Valera never had no interest in solving the partition, he only talked about it.

De Valera’s government faced various problems in 1952, as taxes were raised, unemployment rose again, and emigration was at its peak. De Valera was now seventy years old, tired, lacked charisma and determination, and had no practical solution to any of those pressing issues. As the economy worsened in contrast to other Western countries, de Valera again lost power in 1954.<sup>86</sup>

De Valera’s final years as Taoiseach were quiet. He appointed a new government, but as he was old and tired, he let the government do all the work. His last controversy in office was with the Irish Press yet again, when he was accused of being Taoiseach and the director of the press at the same time, which was regarded as completely unacceptable.<sup>87</sup>

In early 1959, he considered retiring entirely, but as the current president has served the maximum of fourteen years, de Valera was encouraged by Fianna Fáil members to take part in the presidential election.

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<sup>85</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 229

<sup>86</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 400, 401

<sup>87</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 450, 452



## 9. President of Éire

Eamon de Valera won the presidential election and was inaugurated President of Éire on 25 June 1959. The role of now seventy-eight years old de Valera was mostly symbolic and ceremonial. He was not allowed to interfere in party politics, so he spent his time as he used to before he got into politics. He resumed his passion for rugby, he renewed his love for mathematics, and he was passionate about the Irish language again. He now had time to spend with his grandchildren. In many ways, he lived the life of a retired person.<sup>88</sup>

Yet de Valera still remained a famous political figure. He received many visitors as President, such as John F. Kennedy in 1963, whose funeral de Valera attended later that year; the king and queen of the Belgians in 1968; Richard Nixon in 1970; and others.<sup>89</sup> De Valera had outlived almost all of his former colleagues, whose funerals he too attended, such as Seán Lemass or Gerry Boland.<sup>90</sup>

Eamon de Valera served as president for an astonishing fourteen years. He left political life on 24 June 1973, at the age of ninety, after fifty-seven years as a leading figure in Ireland. Eamon de Valera died two years later, six months after his wife Sinead.<sup>91</sup> Some of his grandchildren have continued to today to be active in the Fianna Fáil party.

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<sup>88</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 468, 489

<sup>89</sup> FANNING, Ronan. *Éamon de Valera: A Will to Power* p. 253

<sup>90</sup> MCCULLAGH, D. *De Valera: Rule 1932-1975* p. 481

<sup>91</sup> COOGAN, T. P. *Eamon De Valera: The Man Who Was Ireland* p. 689

## Conclusion

In conclusion, to recapitulate the objectives set out at the beginning of the thesis, the primary one of this thesis was to provide an overview of the political career of Eamon de Valera, as well as point out his successes and failures. As de Valera is probably the most controversial political figure in Irish history, it is impossible to satisfy those who loved him and people who loathed him. I tried my best to subjectively point out the virtues and flaws of his policy plans and results.

Eamon de Valera was a complicated man. From his youth, he struggled to find an identity for himself, and barely knew his parents. He was brought to Ireland at the age of two, to his grandmother and uncle. His early years were tough, but de Valera showed a strong commitment and willpower indeed. Later in life, unexpectedly for him, he became a soldier and politician, the most dominant politician in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On one hand, de Valera's successes are undeniable, such as his life-long fight for Irish independence, which he ultimately won, the founding of the political party Fianna Fáil, a dominant party for nearly fifteen years under his leadership and, to this day, still a prominent political party in Ireland. His precise timing and acting during the abolition crisis led to the transformation of the Free State into the Irish Republic through the enactment of the new Irish constitution, which abolished the Crown from Ireland. He maintained Irish neutrality during WWII, despite criticism from the British and the American.

On the other hand, de Valera's flaws, and failures, as many would say, such as Coogan and myself, outweighed his successes. I have concluded that for every one success, de Valera had three to four errors in his lifetime in politics. His departure to America, when the people needed a political leader the most, during the Irish War for Independence. His fierce opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty that he indeed set up with his hand-picked delegation, and to Michael Collins, which ultimately led to the Civil War, and his remarks further added petrol to the fire.

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*CONCLUSION*

His hypocrisy when he said one thing and did the exact opposite. He held no real principles but to gain and maintain power. His silly economic policies led to economic stagnation and high emigration rates in Ireland. He broke his promises countless times, such as to bring an end to the partition of Ireland.

Eamon de Valera remains both the most dominant political figure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish history and the most controversial one. No one can deny his contribution to the Irish cause, nor can anyone refute the immense damage that he caused to the Irish nation.

## **Resumé**

Cílem této práce bylo poskytnout přehled života a politické kariéry Eamona de Valery a poukázat na jeho úspěchy i selhání. Vzhledem k tomu, že je de Valera pravděpodobně nejkontroverznější politickou osobností irských dějin, není možné uspokojit ty, kteří ho milovali, ani ty, kteří ho nenáviděli. V této práci jsem se pokusil subjektivně poukázat na jeho přednosti a nedostatky jeho politických plánů a výsledků.

Eamon de Valera byl komplikovaný muž. Od velmi brzkého věku se snažil najít vlastní identitu. Své rodiče téměř neznal. Ve dvou letech byl přivezen do Irska, kde ho vychovávala babička se strýcem. Jeho raná léta byla těžká, ale de Valera prokázal odhodlání a silnou vůli. Později se nečekaně stal vojákem a následně politikem, a to tím nejdominantnějším irským politikem 20. století.

Na jednu stranu nelze popřít de Valerovy úspěchy. Celý život bojoval za irskou nezávislost, které nakonec dosáhl. Založil politickou stranu Fianna Fáil, která pod jeho vedením téměř patnáct let dominovala irské politice a dodnes je významnou politickou stranou. Jeho přesné načasování a jednání v době aboliční krize vedlo k přeměně Svobodného státu v Irskou republiku, a to přijetím nové irské ústavy, která ukončila britskou vládu v Irsku. Během druhé světové války zachoval irskou neutralitu, přestože čelil kritice ze strany Britů a Američanů.

Na druhou stranu de Valerovy chyby a selhání, jak by mnozí, jako například Coogan či já, mohli konstatovat, převažují nad jeho úspěchy. Došel jsem k závěru, že na jeden úspěch připadají tři až čtyři chyby, které de Valera za svůj život v politice udělal. Například jeho absence během Irské války za nezávislost, kdy lidé potřebovali svého politického vůdce nejvíce. Jeho ostrý odpor k Anglo-Irské dohodě, kterou sestavil se svou delegací, a k Michaelu Collinsovi, což nakonec vedlo k občanské válce a jeho výroky, které ještě více přilily benzín do ohně. Jeho pokrytectví, když něco řekl, a nakonec udělal přesný opak. Neměl žádné skutečné zásady, chtěl pouze moc. Jeho pošetilé ekonomické zásady vedly k ekonomické stagnaci Irska a vysokým mírám emigrace.

Nesčetněkrát porušil své sliby, například když říkal že ukončí rozdělení Irska.

Eamon de Valera zůstane nejdominantnější a zároveň tou nejkontroverznější politickou osobností irské historie ve 20. století. Nikdo nemůže popřít jeho přínos pro irskou historii, stejně jako nikdo nemůže vyvrátit obrovské škody, které irskému národu způsobil.

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