

# Life in neutral Eire

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1942)**

Heft 1007

PDF erstellt am: **24.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691861>

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## LIFE IN NEUTRAL EIRE.

By GOTTFRIED J. KELLER.

A visit to Dublin is a strange experience for anybody who has been inside belligerent Britain since the outbreak of war. The difference between life in London and in Dublin is such that it takes a while to adapt oneself to the new conditions. One comes, as it were, out of the blackout into the glare of the street-lamps. But there is in Eire a different kind of blackout, which in my opinion is much more difficult to bear: a kind of mental blackout imposed on the country by what is probably the most savage censorship anywhere in Europe.

The press, the theatre, the screen and the wireless are subjected to a censorship which, I have no hesitation in saying, can only be a danger to the state which enforces it. Not only military and security matters are censorable, but also articles on internal politics, expressions of opinion, even advertisements. In the Eire cinemas the war does not exist at all, as no film containing any reference to it is allowed to be shown. Blank spaces in the papers are not tolerated, and editors have to have some advertisements always ready to fill up in case the censor has bluepencilled any passage. As a result many people in Dublin do not seem to take the slightest interest in news about the war. Such a censorship constitutes a very definite danger to a state which prides itself in possessing an army which is to be ready to defend it against all comers.

Owing to this mental detachment there is in Dublin an easy-going atmosphere, and life is utterly devoid of any sense of urgency. In the streets and shops people seem to have plenty of time.

It would be very difficult to say whether the people of Eire are more pro-Ally or more pro-Axis. What we can say with certainty is that they are, above all, pro-Eirean. Most Dubliners seem to be genuinely pleased not to be in the war. It is probably correct to say that they have not very much liking for either of the belligerents, but they seem to regard the Allies as the lesser of two evils. One meets many Irish who are strong nationalists, a tendency which is being furthered by the Government with all the means at its disposal. The Irish have long memories, especially of any wrongs suffered, and it would therefore be wrong to say that they are pro-British. In conversation they keep talking about Cromwell and the Black and Tan period. On the other hand, most people regard Germany's war as imperialistic, and have therefore little sympathy with her.

The policy of the Government seems to be to keep out of the war unless attacked, and to try and get the partition abolished, one of the main aims of the Government. Leading Eire politicians seem to believe that in case of an Axis victory they would be given the six Northern counties. In case of an Allied victory it can be assumed that they will cite the Atlantic Charter to get the North from Britain. *De jure* Mr. de Valera's Government does not recognise the present position, but *de facto* it has to put up with it.

Both Mr. de Valera and the President, Dr. Douglas Hyde, received me in audience, but I was asked not to publish our conversations.

Most European states have legations or consulates in Dublin. As for the relations with Britain, Eire considers herself a completely independent state, independent of anybody and in particular of the British

Commonwealth of Nations. At the outbreak of war she hastened to demonstrate her independence by declaring herself neutral. Britain, on the other hand, has never legally recognised this independence, and continues to regard Eire as a Dominion. The other Dominions, and indeed most countries, have followed Britain's lead. Thus according to unilateral declaration Eire is independent and neutral, yet she is regarded by practically all countries as a British Dominion. Foreign diplomats residing in Dublin are accredited to the King of England, and Eire diplomats going abroad carry letters of credence signed by His Britannic Majesty. Britain with her customary sense of compromise calls her own diplomatic representative "Representative of the United Kingdom." Were she to call him a Minister she would, by implication, recognise Eire's independence; were she to call him a Governor, she would unnecessarily hurt Irish feelings. He enjoys of course full diplomatic status, and his office extra-territoriality.

Many people in London seem greatly to overestimate the strength of the Axis Legations. They are accommodated in small, suburban houses and have not, as many people seem to believe, staffs of several hundreds; the German and Italian Legations have eight members each and Vichy has six. Eire's relations with all States are correct, if not in all cases friendly.

Mr. de Valera's Government frowns, of course, upon the many Irish men and women engaged in the war on this side of the Irish Sea. There are at least 100,000 men in H.M. Fighting Forces, and another 60-70,000 are working in British factories, earning wages they would never get at home. Irish members of H.M. Forces, if they go home on leave, must don civilian clothes, as otherwise they would be interned by their own people. Soldiers and factory workers all send money home to support their relatives. Though they mostly remit small amounts, these add up to some £5,000,000 per annum, a quite considerable figure in a state with an annual budget of about £30,000,000. The fact that thousands of Eire's citizens are actively engaged in the war must not be mentioned in the press, and thus the death of that famous fighter pilot Paddy Finucane was announced only in a small advertisement.

Whether Eire is an important post for the Axis or not is difficult to ascertain during a short stay. It probably is, and there are probably leakages of information, otherwise the British security authorities would not render the exit so difficult. Attempts are now being made to tighten up the frontier restrictions between Northern Ireland and Eire. On the British side the control is very strict. The windows of the aircraft which takes one across in just over the hour are opaque and the pockets, wallet, diary, notebooks, luggage of any traveller are subject to minute examination unless he carries special papers exempting him from such treatment.

In Dublin the only sign of activity dangerous to the Allies I noticed during my short stay were the many rumours going round the town. Occasionally one notices a swastika chalked on a wall, but "V" signs seem to be more numerous.

Life in Dublin reminds one of life in England in the first days of the war. The rationing is only now beginning to make itself felt, but was mainly introduced because Eire did not want people from the North buying up things in large quantities. Tea and sugar and, I

believe, bread, are now rationed, whereas a short while ago it was possible to buy any amount of ham, jam, chocolates, sweets, meat, lemons, wines, sherries and other delicacies.

The two main problems of Eire are fuel and gas. There is very little coal, and trains have now started running on peat, with disastrous results. Gas is not rationed, but the gas company turns the gas on only at certain hours, and the life of the whole community has had to adapt itself to the gas company's time table. Only Government officials, army officers and diplomats are allowed to run cars, doctors only if on urgent cases. But anybody is free to run a car on other means than petrol, and peat-burning cars are now making their appearances, looking somewhat like dinosaurs. Public transport is good, clean and frequent; this applies both to buses and trams. Many people have taken to bicycles, and quite a number of shops have been converted into bicycle-parks.

On the whole the war seems incredibly far away. The atmosphere is rather uncanny. The Irish are extremely hospitable, and time does not seem to matter to them. Parties go on through more than half the night, and arguing for argument's sake thrives.

The Government would like the whole of the country to use the Gaelic language, but only very few people do, though street names and the names of stations are given in Gaelic first and then in English. American films, the British press and wireless, and the constant stream of visitors coming and going are of course a hindrance to the policy of making the people Gaelic-minded. It is an odd coincidence that Eire's Prime Minister cannot write his own name in Gaelic, as his name is of Spanish origin, and Gaelic does not know the letter "V."

### SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY.

The Monthly Meeting of the Society was held at Swiss House on Saturday, December 12th. The President, Mr. J. J. Boos, welcomed the large number of members and friends present. Six new members were admitted, viz. Messrs. W. Bachmann, A. de Westenholtz, W. Flory, J. J. Keller, A. Kern and E. Ulmann, bringing the total of admissions for the year to 23.

The Chairman read a letter from Mr. G. Hafner, a founder of the S.M.S., who had for many years taken a very active part in the affairs of the Society. Though in retirement, Mr. Hafner still follows the activities of the S.M.S. with keen interest as evinced by his letter in which he related some reminiscences of the early days of the London Section. It was on Mr. Hafner's suggestion that the Society began to hold its deliberations in English which, as he put it, had previously been carried on in some sort of "Hochdeutsch." The innovation proved so successful that it has never been departed from since. Mr. Hafner has now rejoined the S.M.S. as a Contributing Member.

The Chairman announced that owing to special circumstances the next Monthly Meeting had been postponed to Saturday, January 23rd. The Annual General Meeting, however, will be held as customary on the second Saturday in February, i.e. the 13th.

In winding up the official part of the meeting, the President, on behalf of the Council and the Committee,

extended best wishes to all present for a happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

The Meeting was followed by a film show. Through the kind offices of Mr. Gottfried Keller, President of the Foreign Press Association, the Society was able to procure four excellent sound films from the Ministry of Information. The first, "Corvettes," showed the little wizards of the ocean coming off the slips and steaming across boisterous seas to join the convoys. It was interesting to see these agile boats shepherding the numerous merchantmen with their invaluable cargoes through the U-Boat infested sea-lanes. There were thrilling moments when the anti-aircraft defences went into action and when the depth charges sent high cascades of water with a roar into the air.

The second film, entitled "Battle of Supplies," gave a graphic account of the enormous supply difficulties facing the United Nations with their external lines of communication. The supply routes across the vast ocean tracts form an infinitely greater problem than the internal lines of communication of the Axis, harassed though the latter may be by constant Allied air attacks. That these problems have not proved insuperable to the Democracies was amply proved by this film.

In the third film, "H.M.S. George V," we gained an insight into the life on board a modern super battleship. There has lately been a great deal of controversy as to the value of these capital ships, but there is little doubt that they still form the backbone of the navy and combine everything which mechanical science and technical skill have been able to contrive.

The fourth and last film of this series, "Troopship," vividly depicted the life of soldiers whilst sailing to distant lands to carry on this world-wide struggle.

The second part of the programme formed a complete contrast to the first. The scenes shifted from a world of strife, with whole Continents engaged in a deadly grapple, to peaceful little Switzerland. By courtesy of the Swiss Federal Railways the Society was able to show two excellent Swiss films.

The first was a silent picture under the heading "Switzerland off the beaten track." It showed the life and sceneries of one of the most picturesque valleys in the Bernese Oberland, the Kienthal. The strenuous but healthy life of the inhabitants was excellently portrayed. We saw lumber jacks at work, bringing the timber down the dangerous mountain streams. Of particular interest was the unearthing of marmots by national guards who are entrusted with the safety of these quaint animals. This was indeed a delightful picture.

The last of the films formed the *pièce de résistance* of the afternoon's performance. It was the première of a talkie in the local dialect entitled "Besuch im Appenzellerland." This was a gem of a picture. We saw

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at every meal—for Health!