

NATO and the Culture of War: Ireland's History of Resistance

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Global Research, May 08, 2019

Region: [Europe](#)
Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the founding of NATO with the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty on 4 April 1949. Established as a peacetime alliance between the United States and Europe to prevent expansion of the Soviet Union, NATO has grown in size and changed from a defensive force to an aggressive force implementing Western policies of expansion and control.

NATO now has 29 members ranging geographically east to west from the United Kingdom to countries of the former Soviet Union and north to south from Norway to Greece. NATO's intervention in the Bosnian war in 1994 signaled the beginning of a new role for a force effectively made redundant by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then NATO has escalated its presence on the international scene taking on various roles in Afghanistan in 2003, Iraq in 2004, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean in 2009 and culminated in the bombing of [Libya](#) in 2011 with '9,500 strike sorties against pro-Gaddafi targets.'

The main argument for the existence of NATO was for it to be a system of collective defence in response to external attack from the Soviet Union. Although during the Cold War NATO did not carry out military operations as a defence force, its changing role has now implicated its members in a culture of aggressive war which they had not originally signed up for.

For former colonial powers the NATO culture of war on a global scale is nothing new. The geopolitical agendas of expansionism for Western elites that NATO serves is the modern form of the colonial adventures of the past which have long passed their sell-by date. The culture of war which passes for 'the white man's burden', 'bringing freedom to other countries' or 'saving them from communism' legitimizes aggressive action abroad while giving a sense of pride at home of a worthwhile military doing a great job.

War as a means to an end and war as culture

The culture of war then is different from culture wars (e.g. competing forms of culture like religion). Since the Enlightenment, war has been described as a means to an end, serving essentially rational interests. The benefits of war at home like ending the feudal system, repelling invaders, etc. were seen to apply abroad too by helping others through systems of alliances, for example the Second World War alliance to end Hitlerite fascism.

However, there are those who see war as an end in itself, as part of the human condition. Writers like Martin Van [Crevelde](#) have argues that:

"war exercises a powerful fascination in its own right — one that has its

greatest impact on participants but is by no means limited to them. Fighting itself can be a source of joy, perhaps even the greatest joy of all. Out of this fascination grew an entire culture that surrounds it and in which, in fact, it is immersed."

However, not all cultures of war are the same. Van Creveld conflates the culture of war of imperial nations with the culture of war of resistance to colonialism and imperialism. Britain's wars were fought for the benefit of British elites. But Ireland, for example, has a long history of opposition to British colonialism and Ireland's culture of war has similar symbols and traditions to Britain yet very different content. Over the centuries generation after generation of Irish men and women have taken part in wars of resistance to colonial domination. While the British culture of war may have been a proud culture of successful militarism, in Ireland it was a desperate fight for independence from an all-powerful enemy always willing to throw its vast armory into the fight against 'treachery to the King'.

In other words, the culture of war was imposed on a people as a way to survive military, economic and political domination. Which brings up the question of whether war really is a part of the human condition.

War and 'primitive tribes'

It has been a Romantic trope to look back to the 'primitive tribes' as a way of understanding our own society and how they may have looked before feudalism and the burgeoning capitalism's 'satanic mills' were set in motion. Yet, it is interesting to see the descriptions of 'primitive people' from our history books, as [Zinn](#) writes:

"When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking oddly, the Arawaks ran to greet them, brought them food, water, gifts. [...] These Arawaks of the Bahama Islands were much like Indians on the mainland, who were remarkable (European observers were to say again and again) for their hospitality, their belief in sharing."

Bartolome de las Casas, who, as a young priest, participated in the conquest of Cuba, wrote:.

"They are not completely peaceful, because they do battle from time to time with other tribes, but their casualties seem small, and they fight when they are individually moved to do so because of some grievance, not on the orders of captains or kings."

Their resorting to violence and killing was a form of defence which ultimately failed:

"On Haiti, they found that the sailors left behind at Fort Navidad had been killed in a battle with the Indians, after they had roamed the island in gangs looking for gold, taking women and children as slaves for sex and labor.[...] Total control led to total cruelty. The Spaniards "thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and of cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades." Las Casas tells how "two of these so-called Christians met two Indian boys one day, each carrying a parrot; they took the parrots and for fun beheaded the boys." The Indians' attempts to defend themselves failed. And when they ran off into the hills they were found and

killed.”

Thus, we can see that while there was occasional violence against other tribes these tribes lived in peace until faced with the extreme violence of their invaders.

Development of warrior societies

Recent research in archeology seems to suggest now that we don't need to look to 'primitive tribes' abroad anymore but can see similar experiences in research on our own ancestors here in Europe and nearby regions.

In an article by John Horgan, [Survey](#) of Earliest Human Settlements Undermines Claim that War Has Deep Evolutionary Roots, he looks at the recent work of anthropologist Brian Ferguson, an authority on the origins of warfare:

“Ferguson closely examines excavations of early human settlements in Europe and the Near East in the Neolithic era, when our ancestors started abandoning their nomadic ways and domesticating plants and animals. Ferguson shows that evidence of war in this era is quite variable. In many regions of Europe, Neolithic settlements existed for 500-1,000 years without leaving signs of warfare. “As time goes on, more war signs are fixed in all potential lines of evidence—skeletons, settlements, weapons and sometimes art,” Ferguson writes. “But there is no simple line of increase.” By the time Europeans started supplementing stone tools with metal ones roughly 5,500 years ago, “a culture of war was in place across all of Europe,” Ferguson writes. “After that,” Ferguson told me by email, “you see the growth of cultural militarism, culminating in the warrior societies of the Bronze Age.””

It seems then that the history of the development of warrior societies and their enslavement of peaceful peoples is the basis for our cultures of war: the wars of those imposing slavery on people and the wars of those resisting.

The idea of an inherent human condition of war promoted by Van Creveld may be covering up for the felt need or desire for a culture of war to dissuade those who may be thinking of imposing slavery or dominance on a people, as a form of defence in an aggressive, militarized world, for example, the Jews in Nazi Germany .

The Irish people have a long history of resistance to British forces and Ireland's long experience of foreign aggression has led it to be wary of foreign military associations. Thus, today Ireland is still not a fully paid up member of NATO. In the nineteenth century the British used every form of simianism and Frankensteinism to depict the Irish people who had the gall to combine against them.



Ridiculing resistance: “The Irish Frankenstein” (1882) and “Mr. G O’Rilla, the Young Ireland Party” (1861)

This all changed during the First World War when Britain desperately needed new recruits and issued posters now depicting a proud Irishman as a country squire. Guilt was the weapon of choice in these posters as Britain declared to be fighting for the rights of small nations like Ireland, who was not participating.



WWI British Army Recruitment Posters: “Ireland “I’ll go too – the [Real](#) Irish Spirit”” and “Ireland “For the [Glory](#) of Ireland””

Of course, after the war was over and the main nationalist party, Sinn Féin, won 80% of the national vote, the British government's reaction was to send in soldiers and criminals to put down the rebellion instead. This strategy failed, leading to negotiation and the signing of a treaty which led to the creation of Northern Ireland.



Ireland's culture of resistance: the Wexford Pikeman by Oliver Sheppard and IRA Memorial, Athlone

Ireland and NATO

In 1949 Ireland had been willing to negotiate a bilateral defence pact with the United States, but opposed joining NATO until the question of Northern Ireland was resolved with the United Kingdom. However, [Ireland](#) became a signatory to NATO's Partnership for Peace programme and the alliance's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1999.

In December 1996, the Peace & Neutrality Alliance (PANA) was established in Dublin. According to their [website](#), 'PANA seeks to advocate an Independent Irish Foreign Policy, defend Irish Neutrality and to promote a reformed United Nations as the Institution through which Ireland should pursue its security concerns.' A wide range of groups and a growing number of individual are affiliated to PANA. This wide anti-NATO sentiment was reflected in the attack on US military planes in 2003. In February 2003 the Irish Times [reported](#):

"The Army has been called in to provide security around Shannon Airport after five peace activists broke into a hangar and damaged a US military aircraft early this morning. It is the third embarrassing security breach at the airport where US military planes are refuelling en route to the looming war with Iraq."

One anti-war activist Mary Kelly was convicted of causing \$1.5m in damage to a United States navy plane at Shannon airport. She attacked the plane with a hatchet causing damage to the nose wheel and electric systems at the front of the [plane](#).

In 2018 the First International Conference Against NATO was held in Dublin. The conference

was [organised](#) by the Global Campaign Against US/NATO Military Bases which itself is a coalition of peace organisations from around the world.

However, there are still forces in Ireland pushing for full membership of NATO. A recent article in an Irish national newspaper stated that 'Ireland has been free-riding on transatlantic security structures paid for by American and European taxpayers since 1949' and that 'very few politicians think much about Ireland's security in any depth and even fewer believe we should join NATO. None is likely to provide grown-up leadership on national security.' A combination of realism and guilt that has been tried on the Irish people many times before and rejected. The writer [recognises](#) that 'few people advocate such a course and most are quite attached to the State's long-held position of military neutrality.'

Conference on the 70th Anniversary of NATO

Getting other nations to develop a similar attitude and leave NATO was the objective of the recent International Conference on the 70th Anniversary of NATO held in Florence, Italy, on 7 April 2019. During the conference Prof. Michel Chossudovsky (Director of the Centre for Research on Globalization) presented the The Florence Declaration which was adopted by more than 600 participants.

The Florence Declaration was drafted by Italy's Comitato and the CRG and [calls](#) for members

"To exit the war system which is causing more and more damage and exposing us to increasing dangers, we must leave NATO, affirming our rights as sovereign and neutral States.

In this way, it becomes possible to contribute to the dismantling of NATO and all other military alliances, to the reconfiguration of the structures of the whole European region, to the formation of a multipolar world where the aspirations of the People for liberty and social justice may be realised."

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