

Grandparents Grand Stories

On Malin Head, Donegal, visible only from the air and etched in white stone, you can read Eire. The letters stand out as a signpost and milestone. An artificial landmark to set the island apart from its neighbour. During the 1940s, these Eire signs were placed along the coast to tell pilots where they were and where not to drop their bombs. Shortly thereafter, a number was added, identifying this lookout point. The letters and numbers were made of local rock and cemented into place. Malin Head was one of 83 lookout points around the island.

While Ireland, or the Irish Free State, declared it would not be participating in the World War that broke out in 1939, a decision largely supported by the public, it did not mean the population was indifferent and unaffected.

The Irish Free State was exercising its newfound autonomy, with the recent return of the derelict "Treaty Ports", and uncertain what if any influence it could have on a war between the major clashing powers. Much is made of Taoiseach (Prime Minister) de Valera expressing condolences to the German nation on the death of Hitler, however, this threatens to overshadow the Free State's favourable disposition to the Allies, especially those Allied airmen ushered across the border into Northern Ireland, that part of the island actively involved in the conflict. The Taoiseach had insisted on displaying a strict adherence to the formalities of neutrality, as unpalatable as that might be for us today.

A lot has been written about Ireland during the Second World War, dubbed The Emergency locally; the many failed spies sent by the Abwehr, the unrealised invasion laid out in Plan Kathleen, Richard Hayes the librarian codebreaker, the members of the Irish Defence Forces who deserted and joined the British Army to fight fascism, Churchill's 38th Irish Brigade, the IRA and the list goes on. We Irish may have been neutral, but we like to share stories of how this global conflict touched us.

When it came to deciding a theme for my History thesis, I felt drawn to this period.

My own grandparents had already died, and as my father was born in 1943 I could not inquire about his wartime experiences, I would have to go further afield for witnesses and oral sources.

During the Emergency, strict rationing was introduced, as was censorship. The Irish government rolled out multiple new powers, "Emergency Powers" in 1939 hence the disparaging name for this global conflict. The news was strictly controlled. The fear of a British invasion was very real if indeed Irish neutrality proved to be a liability. Fortunately, it never came to that, despite Winston Churchill's huffing and puffing. The partition of the island may have averted this outcome, as Northern Ireland was strategically placed to support Atlantic supply lines.

My research took me to the National Archives, the National Library, to UCD archives and the Military archives. I leafed through various documents and memoranda. I read about debates in parliament, government spending on defence and how the budget was only a fraction of what other neutral nations were spending. I read about plans to blow up bridges, erect roadblocks and deploy troops to hinder any invading force, the various would-be spies who made attempts to contact Irish dissidents, and then there were those who deserted the Irish Army to fight fascism abroad.

I examined sources regarding spies apprehended in Ireland. I mentioned one spy in Skerries, Co. Dublin to my girlfriend at the time. Where was his home? She directed me to a house on the beach and when we took a walk along this stretch one blustery day, suggested I should interview her grandmother, a native of Dublin but not Skerries about her wartime experience. I was a bit sceptical that such an interview would shed new light on Dublin life during the Emergency, but I was sure there would be a humorous story or two.

"Hitler was in Ballyfermot!" Jenny Memery, the grandmother assured me. The children of Dublin were sure they had spotted the dictator lying low amongst the Irish working class. What better place to hide than under the noses of the neighbouring archenemy the British? A rumour that was difficult to dispute in a climate of censorship. There is something endearing about this farcical thought, as I imagined the local children armed with sticks and stones on a mission, searching the streets and enquiring where Der Führer had last been seen. Determined to hunt Hitler down and bring him to justice. It is a testament to youthful imagination, that Free State Ireland, neutral, censored and isolated from the conflict on the continent was plausibly the haven of the leading Nazi. Hitler was not in Dublin.

It is true, that some high-profile SS members did find themselves in Ireland after the war, including Austrian SS Officer Otto Skorzeny, who had led the daring rescue operation to free a captured Mussolini. But there was also Albert Folens, Waffen SS Flemish legion and later Gestapo, who would go on to dominate the Irish educational publishing market after the war, but not before he had escaped from prison in Germany, entering Ireland with a fake passport. It is estimated that Folens was one of circa 200 hundred Nazis to flee to Ireland after the Second World War. Hitler may not have been in Ballyfermot, but those children could well have bumped into one of his acolytes.