

DeValera, Collins and the Scapegoat Question

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One of the most unusual and conflicting relationships in Irish history is that between Eamon DeValera and Michael Collins. Much of it still remains clouded in mystery and supposition. The conflict was a mixture of the personalities of the two men and the general complexity of the period in Irish history in which they lived.

Growing up, their lives were quite different. DeValera's Spanish father abandoned his pregnant mother in New York, then died in Denver. Young DeValera was packed off to Ireland and raised by his mother's aunts and uncles while his mother stayed in America. Michael Collins' father died at the age of 76 when Collins was only six years old. He was raised by his mother and his family in the rough and tumble area near Clonakilty in County Cork. DeValera went to college and became a mathematics professor. Collins did not have a college education.

Both men became involved in the Irish nationalist movement through membership in the Gaelic League. The older DeValera took a leadership role in the Irish Volunteers and served as a commander in the 1916 Easter Rebellion. Collins had a somewhat lesser role in the 1916 Rebellion. Through his membership in the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), he was an Aide-de-camp to Joseph Plunkett and served in the General Post Office. DeValera was never comfortable with the military portion of the struggle. Collins natural intelligence allowed him to master both innovative guerilla military tactics, as well as, the complex nature of financing revolutions.

DeValera approached problems from an academic, mathematical, position. He would often argue for hours over the proper use of words in communiqués. Collins was more relaxed and joking, although he was completely fearless and ruthless in dealing with his enemies. As a general rule, most people preferred the rough and relaxed personality of Collins to the stiff and formal personality of DeValera. Ireland was just too small for these two giant personalities.

Despite their differing personalities, Collins seems to have always respected DeValera. Collins engineered DeValera's escape from Lincoln Jail in 1919. Collins made the arrangements to smuggle DeValera both into and out of the U.S. following his prison escape. Most importantly, Collins protected DeValera's wife and children for 19 months while DeValera was in the U.S. He also brought the family money when it was needed. DeValera's children called Collins, "Uncle Mick."

The one question that is most often asked when speaking of the relationship between these two men is the question of the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations. **Did DeValera purposely set up Collins to be the scapegoat for the failure of the Anglo-Irish Treaty?** The question, like their personalities, is complex and not easily answered. We can begin to search for the answer by looking at DeValera's decision to send Michael Collins to the Treaty negotiations. Consider the following points:

κ DeValera was the most senior commander and leader of the rebel Irish government and, more importantly, he had the most international negotiating experience. He had previously met with British Prime Minister Lloyd George in London, before the actual negotiations began. Collins, although well known and popular in the U.S. and feared in England, had no diplomatic experience outside of Ireland.

κ Collins had just conducted a successful guerilla campaign against the British and had successfully infiltrated and eliminated the British intelligence network in Ireland. The British had no photographs of Collins. They had no idea what he looked like or how to find him. Sending Michael Collins to London destroyed his effectiveness as a clandestine military leader. Had the negotiations broken down, Collins, and the entire secret IRB network that he controlled, would have been seriously at risk.

κ DeValera was overly meticulous about every aspect of his life. There was almost no achievement of his life that he was not deeply and personally involved with to the point of being irritating and intrusive. The Anglo-Irish treaty negotiation was the only major historical detail of DeValera's life in which he chose not to be directly involved.

κ DeValera, having previously met with Lloyd George in London, knew, without any qualifications, that England was not prepared to offer republic status for Ireland. To break the Empire apart was not something that Lloyd George was prepared to do. For DeValera to expect Collins, Arthur Griffith and the rest of the Irish negotiating team, to return with an agreement granting Ireland complete republic status, would seem to be both an absurd and unfair expectation.

DeValera would respond to the question about a possible "set up" by saying that he sent Collins so that he (DeValera) could be kept in reserve, in case the negotiations failed. While DeValera's reasoning appears somewhat logical it does not fully answer the question, in light of the four points given above. Had negotiations failed, DeValera would have certainly been in reserve, however, Collins and his secret military organization would have been exposed and compromised. There were few, if any, effective people to replace Collins as a military leader.

If you believe from the evidence that DeValera knew, in advance of the negotiations, that republic status was not going to be on the negotiating table, then you have to question DeValera's motives in not going himself and choosing to send Collins. For DeValera to then make Collins the scapegoat for what he publicly portrayed as a betrayal of trust doesn't make a lot of sense.

Perhaps the most amazing feature of this complex historical drama is that Collins seems to have gone to London knowing that it was unlikely that republic status would be granted and that any compromise on a treaty would likely make **him** the scapegoat. Collins was smart enough to recognize that there were no other options left for Ireland. Ireland could not sustain a military confrontation with England and that was exactly what Lloyd George was threatening if negotiations failed.

To find out more about this critical and complex time in Irish History read Tim Pat Coogan's excellent biographies on DeValera and Collins, DeValera's own authorized biography, and the many books about Michael Collins. There is also an excellent video

drama called “The Treaty” that was produced in Ireland by RTE that deals specifically with the treaty negotiations.