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**IRISH SHIPPING LIMITED 1939-45 AND ITS
INFLUENCE ON IRISH NEUTRALITY**

by

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SUMMARY.

The outbreak of the second world war in Europe was an event which had been foreseen by many in Ireland, including the taoiseach Eamon de Valera, but had still been largely unprepared for. The country, which had been independent for less than twenty years, followed the only course of action available to her given this lack of preparedness and the political circumstances of the time, neutrality. This policy was adopted for two reasons, firstly as the Irish defence forces were ill equipped to partake in a modern war with no airforce or anti-aircraft guns with which to defend the country, and secondly it was affirmation to a global audience of Irelands sovereignty and the fact that Britain no longer dictated her foreign policy.

This policy of neutrality was fraught with risk and pitfalls for the Fianna Fail government though. Foremost among their problems was the issue of importing essential supplies to the country during the period of the emergency. Prior to the war Ireland had relied on foreign ships to carry a large percentage of her raw materials. However, with the outbreak of war, these ships were no longer in a position to serve Ireland. This problem was compounded by the fact that British resentment at Irish neutrality resulted in her refusing to ship supplies to Ireland or recognise Irish economic difficulties.

In response to this desperate situation Irish Shipping Ltd was formed in March 1941. Irish Shipping was vital to the maintenance of Irish neutrality, as without the vital imports the company carried, Ireland would have faced economic ruin. This fact was recognised by many of the belligerent powers though and consequently Irish Shipping was used as a means by which to put pressure on the Irish government, in some instances in an effort to move the government from its neutral stance. The aim of this thesis is therefore to examine the role Irish Shipping played in Irish neutrality and to examine the extent to which it was used by belligerent powers to pressurise the Irish policy of neutrality.

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Introduction

Neutrality in war has never been regarded as an act of much honour, and self-interest on the part of a nation fighting for its life can take on an ugly shape when it threatens the freedom of a country which has chosen to stand aside from the conflict.¹

With the outbreak of the second world war in 1939 Ireland adopted a policy of neutrality, in line with other small European states such as Switzerland, Portugal, Sweden and Belgium, although for very different reasons. Ireland, however, was the only British dominion to choose neutrality when war broke out. This meant that, due to her economic dependence on Britain, Ireland was forced into a position of economic isolation, with Britain reluctant to allocate or transport goods to a country which was not involved in the war effort. Irish Shipping Ltd was formed in April 1941 as a response to the position of international seclusion that the Fianna Fáil government found itself faced with. The role of Irish Shipping in supplying Ireland's economic needs during the period of the emergency has been widely acknowledged and well documented, yet Irish Shipping Ltd can also be viewed, not only as a physical manifestation of the Irish policy of neutrality, but also as a conduit through which the British, American and German governments placed great stress on that policy. One of the central arguments of this thesis will therefore be that British and American actions, in relation to shipping, posed as great a threat to Irish neutrality as did Germans actions.

The principal reason for the formation of Irish Shipping was to combat the lack of ocean-going vessels on the Irish shipping register and to supply the country with essential raw materials during the second world war, its creation being deemed by Sean Lemass to be 'as important for national safety as the army.'² It can be argued that it was this act, more than any other, that allowed Ireland to maintain her neutrality during the war. Although the formation of Irish shipping was one of the pillars on which Irish neutrality was built, it also conversely was a source of great pressure for the government. When discussing strains placed on Irish neutrality historians, such as

¹ Robert Fisk, *In time of war* (London, 1983), p.ix.

² *The Irish Times*, 1 Feb 1941, p.1.

Robert Fisk have tended to focus on Churchill's ambiguous offers of a united Ireland, the bombings of Campile and the North Strand and the debate over whether Britain should have been allowed use of the treaty ports, yet the strains placed on neutrality through the day to day running of Irish Shipping have been ignored. The establishment of the company was essential to the maintenance of neutrality, as without it Ireland would have faced economic ruin, but this fact was recognised by both the British and American governments, who put obstacles in place of the smooth running of the company, in an effort to move the Irish government from her neutral stance. Prior to the war agreements had been made whereby Britain guaranteed Ireland shipping space on an equal footing with Britain herself, but due to resentment at Irish neutrality these agreements were not honoured. As well as refusing to ship Irish goods, the British introduced a system of warrants and navicerts which were supposed to be a means of controlling neutral shipping, but could also be used as an economic weapon as they ensured that Irish ships could not pass allied blockades or load supplies at allied ports without British approval. It therefore took the full weight of the Irish government behind Irish Shipping to overcome these obstacles and allow neutrality to be maintained. During the war, due to the economics of supply and demand, ships became a valuable commodity with speculation forcing prices up. This meant that Irish Shipping had great difficulty in acquiring ships, with the problem being compounded by the fact that in many instances when ships could have been purchased, warrants were denied by the British. Although two ships were chartered from the US in 1941, after the American entry into the war requests to purchase further ships were vetoed, as the American government also adopted a hard line with relation to shipping matters in response to Irish neutrality. This thesis will argue that these actions were designed to deny Ireland vital shipping and consequently supplies, in an effort to move de Valera away from his policy of neutrality and coerce Ireland into the war on the side of the allies.

The concept of Irish shipping as a physical manifestation of Irish neutrality can be seen in the manner in which the company was run, as Irish ships sailed out of convoy, floodlit at night and with clear neutrality markings painted on their hulls and decks. Irish sailors placed great confidence in these neutrality markings and so the government regarded attacks on Irish ships very seriously. Although for the most part neutrality was respected, with instances of Irish ships being stopped by belligerent submarines and allowed to continue once their papers had been examined and neutrality confirmed, the sinking of the *Irish Pine* and the *Irish Oak* caused important diplomatic incidents. These attacks damaged relations, not only between Ireland and Germany, but also between Ireland and the U.S, since these were the two ships chartered from the U.S government in 1941. Their sinking resulted in complaints being made by the American government that Ireland failed to deliver a protest to Germany over the attacks. Incidents such as this placed great stress on the government and its neutral stance, while having the knock-on effect of increasing dissent within Ireland amongst those politicians such as James Dillon who were in favour of Ireland abandoning neutrality and entering the war on the side of the allies.

A number of secondary sources relating to Irish neutrality and Ireland during the emergency are available, though few of them deal with the subject of Irish Shipping Ltd in great detail. The most relevant secondary source to this topic is *The long watch*, written by Frank Forde, which deals with the history of the Irish mercantile marine during the second world war. This work devotes one chapter to Irish Shipping Ltd during the period, the focus of which is on the history of the wartime fleet, also discussing many of the personalities involved with the company, giving biographical details of captains and crews of ships which were sunk. This volume is particularly useful as a general work on the topic or as a work of reference, though it neglects to examine the political implications of Irish Shipping in relation to Irish neutrality,

concentrating on the human aspects of the history. A second text relating to Irish maritime history is *Turn of the tide* by Basil Peterson. This is a wide-ranging work discussing Irish maritime history from prehistoric times to the present, and though it contains a chapter on the second world war, it does not go into detail when discussing Irish Shipping Ltd in relation to neutrality. Of the general works on the period, most acknowledge the important role Irish Shipping played in the transfer of vital economic products to the country, however, none of them recognise the political implications the formation and running of the company during a wartime situation had for the government.³ One recurring argument in these secondary works is that British and American actions placed as much pressure on Irish neutrality as did German actions, therefore one of the objectives of this thesis is to examine this contention in relation to Irish Shipping.

The lack of research carried out on Irish Shipping Ltd is remarkable, as a wide range of primary source material relevant to the topic is available. The greatest volume of material relating to Irish Shipping is to be found in the department of foreign affairs files. The majority of these files relate to the company's relationship with belligerent powers, and the actions and reactions of foreign powers towards the company. These files contain information that is relevant to almost every aspect of this study, from the difficulties encountered in acquiring ships to papers relating to attacks by belligerents on Irish vessels, and indicate clearly how foreign powers used Irish Shipping as a means to pressurise the government and the policy of neutrality. An important benefit of these files is the diversity of information and sources enclosed within them. Not only do they contain the expected departmental and interdepartmental papers, but in some instances they include extracts from foreign newspapers and transcripts of radio messages, broadcast to Ireland by belligerent powers, which can often shed new light on a topic

³ See, for example, T Ryle Dwyer, *Irish neutrality and the USA* (Dublin, 1977); Robert Fisk, *In time of war* (London, 1983); Bernard Share, *The emergency: neutral Ireland 1939-45* (Dublin, 1987).

from a different angle. These help to bring an international dimension to the topic as they give information from a point of view contrary to that of the Irish and it is therefore important to examine what influence, if any, they had upon the company and consequently shipping policy. Department of foreign affairs files not only comprise of records of official viewpoints and statements, but also include personal statements of ships captains and officers who were involved in the day to day running of the company on the ground. These are important as they give reaction of those outside the decision-making process to issues such as arming of merchant vessels and sailing out of convoy. The main weakness of the foreign affairs papers is that they deal with Irish Shipping from a mainly international perspective, and contain little information on attitudes and opposition towards the company within Ireland.

This difficulty can be overcome by examining the papers of the department of the taoiseach, which deal with the company from a domestic perspective, and are important as it was this department that formulated official policy. Many of these files are written from a legal viewpoint and indicate how the government wished Irish Shipping to reflect the policy of neutrality. These files also contain the *Reports of the chairman* as presented at the annual general meeting and these indicate the reaction of those running the company to official policy and government intervention. As with the department of the taoiseach papers the dáil debates from the period deal with Irish Shipping from a domestic perspective. Whereas the department of the taoiseach papers reflect government policy towards Irish Shipping they fail to highlight the substantial political opposition to the company which is evident from the dáil debates. These debates raise a new series of issues as well as adding additional information to previously asked questions. For example, although department of foreign affairs papers clearly highlight the problems the company faced in relation to speculation and inflated ship prices, the dáil debates reveal the opposition from within the country at having to

pay these prices. Just as the British and American governments used Irish Shipping Ltd as a means of pressurising the policy of neutrality, the company also became the focus of attention of many anti-neutrality TDs such as James Dillon who criticised the decision not to arm merchant ships and sail out of convoy. The dáil debates are therefore useful in that they voice all sides of political opinion and can be useful to contrast with government files. Their major weakness is that they contain a solely political viewpoint and give no indication of reaction to events outside of political circles. Newspapers of the time can be used to overcome this to a certain extent however the rigours of wartime censorship greatly restricted their reporting on events. Although vague when reporting on events with an international dimension such as attacks on Irish ships, their reaction to events such as the formation of the company is more outspoken. It is also interesting to note the reaction of different newspapers to these events. The *Irish Press* was strongly pro-government in stance as it had been founded by de Valera and his Fianna Fáil party while the *Irish Times* did not have strong party political affiliations and therefore was not always as willing to support official government policy. However, bias can be reduced by comparing reports from different newspapers.

Although the primary sources in relation to Irish shipping have their limitations, many of them compliment each other well and thus help to fill some of the gaps. These sources will be used to form three main chapters. The first will deal with the formation of the company and the difficulties faced in doing so, concentrating particularly on difficulties encountered in acquiring ships. The second chapter will deal with the running of the company in a wartime situation and the extent to which Irish Shipping reflected the governments policy of neutrality. The third chapter will deal with the sinking of the *Irish Oak* and the *Irish Pine* and the pressure which these incidents placed

on the government. Unfortunately the files relating to the sinking of the *Irish Pine* have been lost so this chapter will focus to a greater extent on the sinking of the *Irish Oak*.

Chapter I

The formation of Irish Shipping Ltd in a Wartime Situation.

'This country is in the circumstances of today almost entirely dependant on British ships for its supply of those commodities which must come from outside, and the British can no longer spare the ships to carry those commodities to our quays.'⁴ This editorial carried in the *Irish Times* in January 1941 was one of the first times the shipping crisis facing Ireland in the context of the second world war was highlighted and brought into the public domain. According to the department of industry and commerce, in 1939 only 5% of the total tonnage required for the Irish import and export trade was provided by Irish-owned vessels, although 32% was provided by vessels registered in this country.⁵ This meant that Ireland was almost entirely dependent on foreign vessels for international trade, a fact that was to cause great difficulty at the outbreak of war. These problems were further compounded in November 1939 when the United States announced that its ships would not enter the war zone, which was defined as the area east of a line from northern Spain to Iceland. This meant that all American cargoes would now be deposited at Lisbon with Irish ships being required for further transport to Ireland.

With outbreak of war, the government issued Emergency Power (no 2) Order, which required all Irish registered ships to fly the Irish flag. This resulted in an exodus of ships to the British register, as neutral ships were subject to excessive restrictions in terms of warrants and navicerts, which will be discussed later. Prior to the war, trade agreements had been made with the British and the secretary of the department of industry and commerce 'was assured that there would be no difficulty in respect of shipping and that we would be on the same footing as Britain.'⁶ Some historians such as Ryle Dwyer have argued that these trade agreements were beneficial to the Irish:

Irish authorities complied with a British request that Ireland would not charter neutral ships except through Britain. In this way Anglo-Irish competition for neutral shipping could be

⁴ *The Irish Times* 11 Jan 1941 p.6.

⁵ Shipping, report on difficulties encountered on outbreak of war in 1939 (N.A. Department of industry and commerce papers EHR/3/16).

⁶ *ibid.*

eliminated in order to keep chartering rates down. Of course the latter arrangement was mutually advantageous to both countries.⁷

Though in theory these trade agreements were to Irelands advantage, in practice this did not prove always prove to be the case. The U-boat campaign led to a hardening of British attitudes as is revealed in a letter from Churchill to Roosevelt dated 15 December 1940 which stated:

you will realise also that our merchant seamen, as well as public opinion generally, take it much amiss that we should have to carry Irish supplies though air and U-boat attacks and subsidise them handsomely while de Valera is quite content to sit happy and see us strangled.⁸

This hardening of attitudes also led to a toughening of the British policy towards Ireland as revealed in the department of foreign affairs papers:

the (pre-war) arrangement worked satisfactorily for a few months, but the tonnage being provided for our needs by the British began to shrink from mid-1940 until November 1940 after which no tonnage was made available. We protested strongly at the treatment we were receiving but the British took the line that they were in difficulties and that their needs must come first.⁹

In response to this deteriorating situation, the minister for supplies, Sean Lemass, announced the formation of Irish Shipping Ltd on 21 March 1941. The aim of the company was the acquisition of a deep-sea cargo fleet, as was stated at the first ordinary general meeting: 'the primary object of the company is the acquisition of a fleet of cargo vessels for the purpose of importing essential supplies.'¹⁰ Irish Shipping Ltd was established as a limited liability company under the Companies Act, with the directors being nominated by the government and the company directly under government control. Its chairman was John Leydon, who came from the department of supplies, while the board included representatives of the Limerick Steamship Co, Wexford Steamship Co, Palgrove Murphy Ltd, Grain Importers Ireland Ltd and a representative of the department of supplies and the department of industry and

⁷ T Ryle Dwyer, *Irish neutrality and the USA* (Dublin, 1977), p.19.

⁸ Frank Forde, *The long watch* (Dublin, 1981), p.34.

⁹ Refusal of American government to approve sale to Ireland of ss Wolverine (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11).

¹⁰ Statement by the chairman at the first ordinary general meeting (N.A. Dept of the taoiseach S14329).

commerce. The formation of the company was not greeted with enthusiasm from all circles though, with the *Irish Times* reporting on 24 March 1941 that:

the venture, to be frank, is in the nature of a gamble for the life of even a neutral vessel in these days and these waters is apt to be short... in view of everything both the risks and the expense, we should not support this venture if the position were not almost desperate.¹¹

Further opposition toward the company came from the dáil during the course of a vote on 19 June 1941 on whether £102,000 should be granted to the company to help defray expenses. James Dillon, the deputy leader of Fine Gael, was particularly critical during this debate, arguing that the expense of running the company was too great:

if we were to maintain a mercantile marine here which would not go bankrupt in five years it would cost £1,000,000 a year to keep our flag on the seven seas. Even if we had a mercantile marine which was capable of bringing in a substantial proportion of what we consume, it would cost us nearly £5,000,000 a year. That is the sum that would go out of our exchequer just to have the glorious warm feeling that the flag of Ireland is flying on the seven seas. If that is considered good business, even in peacetime, I think it is daft.¹²

This view was backed up by James Coburn, also of Fine Gael, who asked:

would not the minister get better value for the expenditure of that £2,000,000 or £3,000,000 within the country at the present time in the production of things which can be got here and which ought to be got before the approach of winter, turf for instance?¹³

Despite the opposition the vote passed. However, the new company was to face more aggressive opposition and resentment from outside Ireland.

From the outset the fledgling company was faced with a number of serious problems, foremost among which was the acquisition of ships. The necessities of war had led to a massive increase in the demand for ships regardless of their condition, while speculation led to inflation in prices, as John Leydon the chairman of Irish Shipping stated:

We found ourselves bidding in a market which was exposed to the impact of speculation on a grand scale. There was a veritable scramble for ships and with a full realisation of the urgency of our task we found ourselves practically helpless when it came to the question of bargaining

¹¹ *The Irish Times* 24 March 1941 p.2.

¹² *Dail debates*, vol. 83, 19 June 1941, col. 2374.

¹³ *ibid.* col. 2403.

about price. The smallest delay would lead to the loss of a ship for speculators as well as genuine buyers were active in the market.¹⁴

Irish Shipping was in fact offered a 100% profit on one of its ships within hours of purchase. Further problems were caused by the fact that each ship was required to carry both a warrant and a navicert, and this brought Irish Shipping into the political arena as is shown by department of industry and commerce papers:

from the beginning of August 1940 the British ministry of shipping introduced the ship warrants system, to ensure that shipping not directly under allied control would be restrained from carrying any trade prejudiced to the allied war effort. Thereafter warrants were procured for ships which Irish Shipping Ltd wished to acquire only with the utmost difficulty and much concession.¹⁵

This meant, in effect that the British had the power of veto over any ship Irish Shipping wished to purchase. By refusing to grant a warrant the ship would be in practical terms useless to the Irish, with this power being used in many instances to deprive the Irish of vital shipping, arguably in an effort to force them into the war on the allied side. The navicert system was introduced in January 1941 and was supposedly a passport that would exempt ships from examination and subsequent delay. In reality it was a means of controlling neutral shipping and denying its use to Germany. Without a navicert a ship could not pass through allied ports or receive fuel or stores and so this system could be used to put pressure on Irish Shipping Ltd and consequently on the Irish government. The view that the system of warrants and navicerts was being used as an economic weapon was recognised by the Irish government at this time:

recently the British have been using this system to prevent us obtaining certain supplies from neutral sources, even though there was no question of asking for shipping or other facilities from the British...the British attempt to justify their action by saying that these were commodities are in short supply. The result is that the navicert system is being turned into an economic weapon to squeeze us out of obtaining these supplies in neutral countries.¹⁶

The records of the department of foreign affairs are filled with examples of refusal by

¹⁴ Statement by the chairman at the first ordinary general meeting (N.A. Dept of the taoiseach S14329).

¹⁵ Shipping, report on difficulties encountered on outbreak of war in 1939 (N.A. Dept of industry and commerce papers EHR/3/16).

¹⁶ Memorandum for government, supplies from abroad (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11).

the British to grant warrants to Irish Shipping as is shown in a statement by John Leydon, the chairman of the company, 'I pointed out to Mr. Jenkins¹⁷ that they are refusing warrants for all our applications now and that they apparently want to keep for themselves any ship that is of any practical use. He said that unfortunately this is so.'¹⁸ The feeling was still held in Ireland however that the British were being discriminatory in their allocation of warrants. During 1941 attempts were made to obtain warrants for Norwegian and Italian ships which were tied up in French Atlantic ports. The British refused stating that those ships did not fall within the category in respect of which warrants could be given.¹⁹ The Irish government later learned that the Portuguese had been granted warrants for a number of ships in similar circumstances and although a protest was lodged about the British decision it had little effect. Similar attempts were made in 1943 to gain warrants for Norwegian vessels that were tied up in Gothenburg. The British responded that these vessels could not be acquired as either Norwegian or German permission would be denied, though when pressed to give their attitude in the event that permission could be obtained, they refused to grant warrants in any circumstances. The view continued to be held in Ireland however that the British were biased in their allocation of warrants, as can be seen in the case of the ss *Ergo*, a Finnish ship which Irish Shipping attempted to charter. The British imposed a number of restrictive financial preconditions on Irish Shipping Ltd before a warrant would be granted, which resulted in the ship being chartered to Switzerland. This led to a request from the department of supplies to the *Charge d'Affaires* in Berne to 'ascertain whether the British have insisted on the same conditions in issuing a ship warrant to the Swiss.'²⁰ In many instances where the British agreed to grant warrants, strict preconditions were

¹⁷ T.G. Jenkins, Ministry of war, London

¹⁸ Memorandum for government from John Leydon, 12 Sept 1941 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/164).

¹⁹ Shipping-report on difficulties encountered on outbreak of war in 1939 (N.A. Dept of industry and commerce papers EHR/3/16).

²⁰ Memo to *charge d'affaires* Berne, 1 Jan 1943 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/2).

imposed. In some instances it was stipulated that fifty percent, or in extreme cases, up to seventy-five percent of a ship's cargo capacity would be granted to the British, making it inevitable that the ships would be highly unprofitable to run, thus forcing the Irish to withdraw from purchase or charter. Irish Shipping Ltd attempted to find ways around this, proposing the acquisition of two ships of equivalent tonnage each of which was subject to a fifty percent service condition. One of these would then be chartered to the British ministry of war transport, trading under the British flag, with the other being reserved for the sole use of Irish Shipping.²¹ However the difficulties in chartering one ship, let alone two, coupled with the danger of financial loss as a result of the ship under the British flag being sunk, made this plan unfeasible in most instances.

Aside from the problems in obtaining warrants and navicerts, Irish Shipping Ltd faced many other difficulties in obtaining ships. One possible source of ships, which the company had hoped to exploit, was the United States, yet even here they ran into unexpected difficulties. Shortly after the formation of the company the minister of co-ordination of defensive measures, Frank Aiken, was sent to the United States on a diplomatic mission to examine the possibility of purchasing food and supplies. This mission was to be dogged by problems however. While *en route* to America, Aiken was reported to have said that he favoured a German victory, while the British informed the state department that the purpose of Aiken's visit was to mobilise support for Irish neutrality. The American minister in Dublin, David Gray, had also sent a letter to the secretary of state creating an unfavourable impression of Aiken, stating that he 'lives in a dream world...dependent on the British for nothing.'²² Further difficulties emerged after Aiken's meeting with Roosevelt with Aiken's dogged defence of Irish

²¹ Memorandum for government from department of supplies, 17 Sept 1941 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/164).

²² J.L. Rosenberg, 'The 1941 mission of Frank Aiken to the United States: an American perspective' in *IHS*, vol xxii (1980), p.165.

neutrality infuriating Roosevelt to the point where he upset a table in rage.²³ Although the Americans agreed to sell two ships to Ireland, the offer was made directly to De Valera with Aiken being snubbed. Relations between the two countries had nevertheless been greatly strained. These two ships, the *West Neris* and the *West Hematite*, renamed *Irish Oak* and *Irish Pine* respectively, were, the only ships acquired by Irish Shipping in the United States during the war, partially as a result of the deteriorating relations between the two countries. The Irish did receive many offers of ships from the United States, as a letter from the Atlas Company Inc of Massachusetts directly to de Valera illustrates: 'we are in close touch with the maritime situation and have information and access to boats of one thousand to ten thousand tonnes that are to be had, but it is not known that these are on the market to be sold.'²⁴ The motives behind this offer seem to have been wholly noble and not profit-driven with inflated prices as was the case with many other offers:

we offer to place this information and service at no cost to you except when purchases in these lines are made and then at only the cost of handling. This offer is made because of our interest in the cause of our ancestors and in the hope we can in some small way help the nation we love next to America.²⁵

The Irish consul in New York also received offers of ships for sale from the Andrew Bernstein Shipping Company, however, Irish Shipping Ltd felt it would have problems financing these deals, 'we are definitely interested in buying ships in the United States. Difficulty is foreign exchange. Our foreign exchange resources would be insufficient without new dollar credits.'²⁶ A number of offers of ships were also vetoed by the American government for differing reasons prior to and after the country's entry into the war. The United States Lines, for example, offered eight ships to the Norwegian government, prior to the German invasion, whereby sixty per cent of the capital would

²³ T Ryle Dwyer, *Irish neutrality and the USA* (Dublin, 1977), p.113.

²⁴ Letter to E. de Valera from the Atlas Company Inc, 7 Feb 1941 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60).

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Letter from F.H. Boland to Sean Leydon, 18 April 1941 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60).

be held by the Norwegians and the remainder by the United States Lines. The Norwegian government blocked this arrangement as they saw it as an evasion of the United States neutrality act. It was anticipated that the United States Lines would then try to come to a similar arrangement with an Irish group, however, Irish officials believed that

the German government would be opposed to the arrangement, because they were satisfied that what the United States Lines had in mind was to acquire the right to use a neutral flag for the purpose of putting their vessels outside the scope of the neutrality act thus making it possible to resume direct sailings between U.S. and British ports.²⁷

The American government was also aware of the use of this tactic as an article in the *Manchester Guardian* regarding the transfer of American ships to the Panamanian flag highlights:

the feeling appears to be strong that the scheme was a device for evading the terms of the neutrality laws under which American ships may not travel to 'combat zones' and might have serious consequences. If an attempt were made to transfer the ship to the Irish flag or to that of any other European neutral nation the objection would be even stronger.²⁸

Although American objections to the acquisition of ships in this manner seems reasonable they adopted a much tougher approach after their entry into the war in December 1941.

In 1943, Robert Brennan, the Irish minister in Washington, was instructed to explore the possibility of obtaining further shipping from the United States, citing the improvement in the shipping position of the allies and the adverse effect the lack of shipping was having on agricultural exports to Britain and, consequently, the British was effort as reasons for such a request. In particular Irish Shipping was interested in acquiring the ss *Wolverine* which was under charter to the United States war shipping administration. The U.S. state department denied the application for this sale as 'not being in the interests of the United States.'²⁹ However, a letter from David Gray in early

²⁷ Letter from R.C. Ferguson to Sean Leydon, 25 Jan 1940 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60).

²⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Nov 1939 viewed in (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60).

²⁹ Letter from D. Gray, 6 Jan 1944 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11).

1944 revealed the real reasons behind these refusals. The *Irish Pine* and *Irish Oak*, the two ships chartered from the United States, had been lost in 1942 and 1943 respectively and although belligerent action was suspected, no protest could be made due to lack of information and evidence.³⁰ The Americans used this fact as a pretext to deny use of any further shipping to the Irish as is indicated in Gray's letter:

so far the American government is informed the Irish government has taken no steps against the axis governments and thus far has offered no word of protest to the axis governments against these wanton acts. These repeated attacks on Irish ships appear to be conclusive proof, if further proof were needed, that the axis powers are in fact making war upon Ireland while, at the same time, using Ireland's friendship to the detriment of the united nations war effort...Any further ships transferred to the Irish flag would be subjected to the same hazards. In view of the foregoing circumstances it is regretted that the state department cannot comply with your request regarding the sale in question.³¹

This view was not admitted officially in the U.S. as a memo from F.H. Boland indicates:

I had an informal talk with the Under Secretary today and went over entire ground. He was anxious to avoid discussion re Gray's message. He said war-shipping board refused 'Wolverine' because of essential need of every boat they have at this time.³²

However, Gray's explanation infuriated Irish officials who regarded it as yet another attack on neutrality: 'the new communication, can have no other purpose than to express the spleen of Roosevelt and his minister here against Ireland for not having surrendered to their attempts to bring us into the war.'³³

It was not just the British and Americans who caused problems with relation to the acquisition of shipping as the Germans also had an agenda of their own. In 1944 Irish Shipping Ltd was offered the *Ceylon* by Swedish authorities on condition that it would continue to operate under the Swedish flag and with a Swedish crew. The British agreed to supply the necessary warrant and navicert. The Germans objected, however, stating that

³⁰ See Appendix II

³¹ Letter from D. Gray, 6 Jan 1944 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11).

³² Letter from F.H. Boland to Sean Leydon, 7 Feb 1944 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11).

³³ 'Attitude of the U.S. toward the sale of ships to Ireland (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11).

Germany's enemies did not allow ships to pass from areas under their control to areas controlled by Germany and in consequence the German government could not agree to the transfer of ships from waters controlled by them to waters controlled by the enemy.³⁴

Although the Irish accepted this as a valid reason they were more upset by Germany's refusal to recognise the purchase of the *Caterina Gerolimich*. This ship had been in Dublin since 1940, unable to leave as she would have been sunk or captured by the British once outside Irish territorial waters due to her Italian registration. Irish Shipping Ltd had been attempting to negotiate the purchase or charter of the ship for over two years but the deal had been delayed by a number of unresolved issues. Firstly the Italians wanted the crew of the *Caterina Gerolimich* repatriated and although the British agreed to this, on condition that an equal number of British seamen would be released from internment in Italy, there were further delays as the Italians wanted port dues waived for the period the ship was tied up in Dublin while Irish Shipping claimed this was a matter for the port authorities and out of their control. Finally there were arguments over price which was related to tonnage. The Irish regarded the ship as 7950 tonnes based on 1016 kilograms per tonne while the Italians regarded it as 8077 tonnes based on 1000 kilograms per metric tonne. In June 1943 Irish Shipping Ltd succeeded in chartering the ship but the German government refused to recognise the transfer of the flag as, under the terms of the charter, the ship had to be returned to the Italians within three to six months of an armistice. The German authorities rightly feared that if the Italians signed an armistice with the allies, all Italian shipping would be requisitioned, and the *Caterina Gerolimich* would fall into British hands. Irish Shipping therefore felt it necessary to keep the ship in port for a six month period after the charter until assurances of the ship's safety could be obtained from Germany. Assurances had also to be gained from the American government that the vessel would not be subject by them to capture or to prizecourt proceedings by reason of the change of the flag to that

³⁴ Conditions of grant of British ships warrants for vessels (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/164).

of Ireland. This assurance was given on condition that no more than twelve per cent of the purchase price of the vessel would be available to the Italian government in any one year. In response to the continuing threat from Germany, a strongly worded protest was sent to the German government:

if we are deprived of use of this ship we may have to ration bread and German government may be subject to severest criticism for having made this final and quite unnecessary attack on our supplies position. Urge official foreign office to revise at once this decision which must otherwise be brought to notice of parliament. Public opinion may then force government to reconsider the whole question of relations with Germany.³⁵

In response to this Hempel, the German minister in Ireland, stated on 16 October 1943 that:

the German government is prepared not to object to the intended putting to sea of the Italian steamship *Caterina Gerolomich* under the Irish flag. The German consent with the putting to sea of the ship for the Irish wheat supplies does not mean the recognition of the sale or charter conditions particularly not the clause concerning the return of the ship six months after armistice.³⁶

As can be seen from these examples a vast amount of political wrangling and negotiation took place before any ship could sail under the Irish flag. Despite these difficulties Irish Shipping Ltd managed to secure a total of sixteen ships during the war.³⁷ Yet although the acquisition of ships proved difficult, the running of the company in a wartime situation was to prove equally so.

³⁵ Memo to the Irish legation, Berlin, (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/106 A).

³⁶ Letter from German legation, Dublin, 16 Oct 1943 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/106A).

³⁷ See Appendix I

Chapter II

Operating Within the Bounds of Neutrality.

One of the biggest problems facing Irish Shipping Ltd, after the acquisition of ships, was the issue of the sailing instructions to be issued to their captains. Although under international law neutral ships could be stopped and searched by belligerent powers, they were exempt from attack and unlawful interference. The reality was somewhat different, however, as ships sailing in convoy or carrying armaments were always subject to attack, as U-boats could not take the risk of surfacing to identify them. This led to a difficult problem for Irish Shipping: should ships sail unarmed and out of convoy, relying on the goodwill of the belligerent powers for their safe passage, or should they sail in protected Allied convoys, depending on military protection from attack?

At the outset the company had no official policy regarding sailing instructions for its ships: 'in the early months of our operation we issued no special sailing instructions and the masters of our ships in the exercise of their discretion, invariably sailed in convoy.'³⁸ The issue of sailing instructions was not simply a matter of company policy, though, as it also had implications for Irish neutrality and therefore was debated before the Dáil on several occasions. This was a problem which arose for the government even before the formation of Irish Shipping and the policy which was put forward at the outbreak of war was largely adhered to throughout the conflict. In February 1941 James Dillon of Fine Gael raised the issue of protesting against the German naval blockade and installing defensive armaments on Irish ships, after repeated attacks by German aircraft on shipping in the Irish sea. De Valera replied that in past wars many states found the only effective solution against the threat of a blockade was to prohibit their ships from sailing to the blockaded ports and that even in the present conflict this tactic had been adopted by the United States. On the issue of arming merchant ships he stated:

³⁸ Statement by the chairman to the members at the first ordinary general meeting, 17 Dec 1942 (N.A. Dept of the taoiseach papers S14329).

the government is not satisfied that the advantages of installing defensive armaments on Irish ships would outweigh the disadvantages, instead of obviating such incidents as have occurred it would serve to make them more frequent, thereby increasing the danger to Irish life and property.³⁹

This issue came before the dáil again on 3 April 1941 to which Mr de Valera gave a similar response, adding however, that due to recent attacks on Irish ships the policy was being reconsidered. It is unlikely though that serious consideration was given to this issue, as the arming of merchant ships was regarded by many as being outside the bounds of neutrality. As Seán MacEntee, the minister for industry and commerce stated

The arming of neutral merchant vessels would be contrary to the interests of the country's neutrality ... a neutral merchant vessel which opens fire on a belligerent aircraft or submarine, from which it apprehends an attack, commits an act of piracy if the gun and gun crews are provided by the owners of the vessel without official approval. They would be committing an act of war if the guns are provided with official approval.⁴⁰

Another factor, which undoubtedly influenced the government's stance in relation to the arming of merchant ships, was a German radio broadcast transmitted to Ireland in May 1942 in response to newspaper reports that neutral ships were arming themselves.

This broadcast stated that:

Ships which are not at war with Germany have nothing to fear from German units outside the declared zone of operations if they keep strictly within their rights. They will not be attacked or molested in any way by units of the German forces if they make themselves clearly distinguishable as neutral vessels and have their markings distinctly visible by night. If they do not follow a zigzag course or adopt measures which confuse them with the enemy, if they do not travel in convoy and accept the recognised right of belligerents to halt and search them, outside the area of operations. If such ships arm themselves however, they convey the impression that resistance will be offered to German units, they surrender the characteristics of a peaceful merchantman and so place themselves outside the scope of international relations.⁴¹

Although this broadcast did not specifically mention Ireland it was clearly posted as a warning to the Irish government, among others, against the arming of merchant ships. In March 1943 Alfred Byrne, an independent TD, suggested seeking assurances from Germany for the uninterrupted passage of Irish ships to which de Valera replied 'neutral ships carrying neutral cargoes have a right to travel freely and safely. I do not see why

³⁹ *Dáil debates*, vol.81, 20 Feb 1941, col.2320.

⁴⁰ Robert Fisk, *In time of war* (London, 1983), p.275.

⁴¹ German radio broadcast to Ireland, 31 May 1942 Transcript viewed in (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

we should seek guarantees about something to which we are entitled in international law and I do not think any useful purpose would be served by doing so.’⁴² A memorandum prepared by the department of external affairs for de Valera on this matter indicates that the German government did seek to make an agreement with the Irish government, but were rejected by officials in Dublin:

in August 1940 they offered to make a special agreement with us whereby our ships would enjoy defacto immunity. For reasons of policy and principle we did not take advantage of this offer. We have always maintained the attitude that our ships are entitled as a right to navigate freely and safely and that the German blockade measures cannot legally apply to them.⁴³

A change in company practice came about in September 1941 when the crew of the *Irish Poplar*, which was docked in Lisbon, refused to sail in a British convoy. According to Frank Forde ‘this decision was influenced by the arrival in Lisbon of the surviving ships of convoy OG 71, which included the Limerick-registered *Laharone*. Her crew told of how in a seven-day battle, ten ships were sunk, one being the Limerick steamship company’s *Clonlara*.’⁴⁴ As a result of this protest by the crew and, with governmental approval, from September 1941 onwards all Irish Shipping vessels sailed out of convoy. This move had the added benefit, for the company, of reducing the duration of a round trip between Ireland and the United States, thus increasing the number of voyages undertaken and consequently increasing the volume of commodities imported into Ireland. Although the decision to sail out of convoy brought benefits in terms of voyage time it also brought unforeseen difficulties as in February 1942 the crew of the *Irish Poplar* refused to leave Halifax unless they were paid a bonus for sailing out of convoy. As a result each crewman was paid a productivity bonus due to the increased number of sailings that were made.

The biggest problem facing the company, once the decision to sail out of convoy

⁴² *Dáil debates*, vol. 89, 24 March 1943, col.1338.

⁴³ Memorandum for the minister of external affairs (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

⁴⁴ Frank Forde, *The long watch* (Dublin, 1981), p.37.

was made, was to ensure that all its vessels were clearly identifiable as neutral merchant ships. As well as flying the Irish flag, the company's vessels had the word 'EIRE' and the Irish flag clearly painted on both sides of the hull, as well as on the decks, to make identification easier for aircraft. Floodlights were also installed on all Irish ships to make identification possible at night. Despite the fact that these measures were undertaken solely to ensure the safety of the ships involved, they met with some hostility, particularly in allied shipping circles, as this Canadian newspaper report indicates:

ducks in death valley would be no more out of place than are Eire freighters here, their fresh coat of paint and blazing deck light looking at least three years outdated beside the dirty grey, blacked out merchant ships of the united nations ... Once outside the harbour gates they are shunned by the shipping of the united nations. Depending on bright orange, green and white flags painted on their sides, illuminated by searchlights for protection instead of guns and ships of war, these freighters are given a wide berth by convoys in which death is often the penalty for showing as much as a match flare.⁴⁵

This report can be viewed as yet another indication of allied hostility to the Irish policy of neutrality, as reflected in the operation of Irish Shipping. When sailing out of convoy the Irish ships were obliged to follow certain routes reserved for neutral vessels in an effort to prevent them being mistaken for allied merchantmen which had fallen out of convoy. The routes to be followed by neutral vessels were laid down by the allies and in some instances were the cause of disputes as Irish officials believed they were being allocated unnecessarily long routes:

our transatlantic tonnage is severely lessened by the roundabout routes which we are constrained to follow. Within the last year we have been given a route which brings our vessels down to a point southwest of the Azores and across the Atlantic at that latitude. Owing to our compliance with that requirement the effective cargo carrying capacity of our transatlantic tonnage has decreased by about one third.⁴⁶

This was viewed in Irish circles as yet another obstructionist tactic on behalf of the allies, designed to put unnecessary pressure on Irish Shipping Ltd and consequently on Irish neutrality.

⁴⁵ *Halifax Daily Star*, 16 Jan 1943 viewed in (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

⁴⁶ Letter to the Irish minister in Washington, 7 Jan 1944 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11).

As well as taking the above precautions, which were observed by most neutral vessels, the Irish government took the additional step of sending thorough lists of the identifying features of Irish Shipping Ltd's vessels to the German authorities, which included everything from the dimensions of each ship to the colour of their funnels.⁴⁷ The German authorities were also informed of any irregular shipping routes which were to be followed as the following information passed to the German legation in Dublin illustrates:

The ss *Irish Poplar* will leave Rushbrooke, Cork, on the 26th April for Georgetown, British Guiana, (where she will pick up a consignment of sugar and a small consignment of greenheart timber) and St Kitts (where she will bunker and pick up more sugar) She is due at Georgetown on approximately the 20th May, will depart from St Kitts on approximately the 28th and the round trip is expected to take about 60 days.⁴⁸

Despite the volume and detail of information the German authorities were receiving they refused to accept any responsibility for the safety of Irish ships as this Irish Government memo indicates:

Herr Hempel made it clear that the legation could not accept any responsibility for notification routes addressed to it. If he had suggested that the notifications should be addressed to our legation at Berlin he had done so parenthetically and unofficially and it had certainly not been his intention to suggest that if notifications were sent through the legation at Berlin 10 or 12 days in advance the German government guaranteed or accepted responsibility for the ships involved in the blockade zone.⁴⁹

The Irish government respected the German government's stance on this issue but continued to forward information regarding special voyages or deviations from the general route throughout the war.

One further precaution taken by Irish Shipping to ensure the safety of its fleet was to have every ship degaussed as a protection against magnetic mines, which posed a threat particularly in European coastal waters. These mines were dropped from aircraft, by both sides, into the water, resting on the seabed until activated by a ship's magnetic field at which point they rose to the surface and exploded. The Irish sea in particular

⁴⁷ See Appendix III.

⁴⁸ Letter to H Tomsen, German legation Dublin, 14 May 1943 (N.A Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

⁴⁹ Letter to Irish legation Berlin, (N.A. Berlin embassy papers 48/11).

was littered with magnetic mines, but the fact that they were not securely anchored in place meant that many of them were carried into Irish coastal waters by sea currents. There were two methods of degaussing, the wiping method, which was suitable only for smaller vessels on coastal journeys, and the coiling method, which was used on most larger, ocean-going vessels. The coiling method, which was that used on most of the Irish Shipping fleet, involved fitting coils of cable horizontally inside the ship and passing current through them in an effort to neutralise the ship's magnetic field. Although the British ministry of shipping agreed to supply the formula for degaussing to the Irish government, the necessary materials and cable were often unavailable, resulting in the work having to be carried out in Britain. This often resulted in further delays for the company, as the British ministry of shipping only agreed to carry out the degaussing procedure if it did not delay the degaussing of British ships. Attempts were made to have the *Irish Oak* and the *Irish Pine* degaussed in the United States after their purchase there, but it was found that the process was not popular there as most magnetic mines were found only in European coastal waters, an area which American ships were prohibited from entering until after the United States joined the conflict.

Despite these attempts made to ensure the safety of Irish Shipping Ltd's fleet and to ensure that it adequately operated within the bounds of, and reflected the governments policy of neutrality, a number of problems came to light that both threatened the safety of the ships and impinged on Irish neutrality. One of the most important among these was the issue of belligerent ships, which in reality were mostly British, flying the Irish flag in an effort to disguise their true identity. This issue first came to light as early as 1939 when a report was received from the German legation in Dublin concerning vessels flying the Irish flag off the coast of Scandinavia and the Iberian peninsula.⁵⁰ This report stated that there was reason to doubt whether the vessels

⁵⁰ Letter to Dr Nolan from N S (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

in question were of genuine Irish registry and requested that the German legation in Dublin should be supplied with all information regarding the markings of Irish registered ships on these routes. The practice by belligerents of flying the Irish flag was also common around Irish coastal waters, with the flag being hauled down once inside Irish territorial limits. This practice was brought to the attention of the department of external affairs on numerous occasions, again with British-registered ships being among the main culprits, and it was suggested that 'appropriate action should be taken to prevent such incidents as this happening, if they are allowed to continue it can only have the effect of leaving our own vessels open to much greater risks than those which they are at present experiencing.'⁵¹ In May 1942, the *Irish Elm* while *en route* to Ireland, reported seeing an armed merchant ship zigzagging⁵² and flying the Irish flag about six hundred miles off the American coast.⁵³ The *Irish Elm* signalled the ship 'what's wrong?' to which it replied 'have lost my convoy.' As a result of incidents such as this the belief was held in shipping circles that British ships made a practice of raising the Irish flag if they got separated from their convoys and raising their own ensign again once they rejoined it. Although this issue did pose a threat to the safety of Irish ships and violated Irish neutrality there is no evidence that protests were made to the British admiralty. This issue also failed to cause widespread concern among the Irish crews as many experienced officers shared the views of Captain Henderson of the *Irish Elm* who stated that it was:

unlikely that the German pilots and submarine commanders paid much attention to the flag. They relied on painted markings because they could not be changed so easily. The crews regard the word EIRE painted in large lettering on the sides of the vessels as their main protection.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Letter from M O'Leary, comdt adjutant Curragh command to J P Walshe, Dept of external affairs, May 1941 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

⁵² Allied merchant ships sailed in a zigzag pattern in an effort to prevent U boats getting an accurate fix on their position, thus reducing the chances of being hit by a torpedo. Neutral ships were advised not to follow this pattern as it drew unnecessary suspicion upon them.

⁵³ Particulars re Irish registered vessels on Atlantic routes (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

⁵⁴ Untitled document, 4 June 1942 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

It was not only violations of Irish neutrality by foreign powers that jeopardised Irish ships and lives. The Irish government also received complaints regarding Irish ships behaving in a manner which was in violation of international neutrality regulations. In February 1943 a *Warning to masters of ships* was issued by the department of industry and commerce, which stated that:

masters of ships and other craft and owners of fishing vessels are warned, in their own interest, to give as wide as possible a berth to any surface or air operations of a warlike nature which they may observe in their vicinity and in particular not to approach or interfere with any floating object connected with such operations⁵⁵

This warning was issued after complaints by the British authorities that an Irish trawler had extinguished flares used to mark the position of a U-boat in an effort to prevent the flares from burning its nets. The British admiralty stated that 'if British air or surface craft are attacking a U-boat, they will not desist from doing so simply because the continuance of their attacks might mean sinking or damaging an Irish vessel which might be near.'⁵⁶ This warning clearly had severe implications for Irish Shipping and put further pressure on the company to ensure its operations were carried out in a strictly neutral manner.

Of more serious importance to Irish Shipping was an allegation made by the German naval authorities that some of the company's own ships were operating in violation of neutrality laws. In June 1943 the Irish legation in Berlin received a complaint that the '*Irish Rose* when sighted by a submarine on 19 April was sailing on a zigzag course. Another Irish ship (name not given) observed sailing zigzag on 26 May. Neutral ships in their own interests should sail a straight course.'⁵⁷ This was a fully justified complaint on behalf of the Germans, particularly in light of their radio broadcast on 31 May 1942 warning against 'surrendering the characteristics of a

⁵⁵ Warning to masters of ships issued by department of industry and commerce, February 1943 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/13).

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ Telegram sent from Berlin via Berne to Dublin, 11 June 1943 (N.A. Berlin embassy papers 48/11).

peaceful merchantman.⁵⁸ However, the allegation was firmly denied by the Irish government and the crew of the *Irish Rose*. The Irish government replied:

we should be surprised if your reports are accurate. All Irish ships have categorical instructions to sail in a straight course and to avoid any kind of unneutral or suspicious activity. Our experience is that in the interests of their own safety masters of ships are only too willing to comply with these instructions.⁵⁹

The captain and officers of the *Irish Rose* also denied the allegation and suggested that when fully laden the ship could be difficult to steer and an inexperienced helmsmen might occasionally swing a point or a point and a half off course. Despite isolated complaints such as these, German units, for the most part, respected Irish neutrality, and although Irish ships were frequently stopped for identification, they were rarely unlawfully interfered with.

‘Captain Henderson had nothing to report of his homeward voyage but stated that while outward bound to Halifax the *Irish Plane* was signalled by an unidentified submarine which on receipt of the vessel’s name and destination allowed the vessel to proceed.’⁶⁰ This report is only one example of the many occasions on which Irish ships were stopped by U-boats during the war, with perhaps the best documented incident being the stopping of the *Irish Willow* on 16 March 1942. At 1:40 p.m. the ship, travelling from Ardrossan to St John, sighted a submarine on the surface about five miles away. All crewmen were ordered on deck with lifejackets on, while the wireless operator was given orders that the transmitter must not be used without further notice as any unauthorised radio transmissions could be perceived as a call for assistance by the German submarine commander and therefore lead to an immediate attack. The *Irish Willow* continued at the same speed and course until a shot was fired across her bows, at

⁵⁸ German radio broadcast to Ireland, 31 May 1942 transcript viewed in (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/1).

⁵⁹ Irish government service personnel, 5 July 1943 (N.A. Berlin embassy papers 48/11).

⁶⁰ Letter from M Guilfoyle Dept of defence to ? (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/182)

which point the engines were stopped. The submarine then signalled with a lamp, requesting the name of the ship and the captain. Further signals were indistinguishable due to the distances involved. At 3 p.m. the captain of the *Irish Willow* ordered a lifeboat to row across to the submarine with the ship's papers. Upon inspection of the papers the German commander stated that although the papers appeared to be in order he had no instructions regarding the *Irish Willow*. He ordered the lifeboat to return to the ship with instructions not to use the engine or radio under any circumstances and stated that in two hours he would either fire a gun, which would be a warning to abandon ship as the *Irish Willow* was to be sunk, or he would fire red, white and green rockets which would indicate the vessel could proceed. The German commander also expressed his regrets in the event the ship would have to be sunk. At 6 p.m. the submarine fired red, white and green rockets and the ship was allowed to continue on its way. The official report on this incident noted that 'both the submarine and the *Irish Willow* acted in accordance with international law.'⁶¹

Undoubtedly the steps taken by Irish Shipping to ensure their vessels behaved, and were easily identifiable, as neutral vessels, prevented many tragedies during the war. However, despite this fact and the fact that on most occasions, as in the case of the *Irish Willow* cited above, German naval units behaved legally and within their rights, there were a number of attacks on Irish vessels which resulted in major diplomatic incidents.

⁶¹ Report by Captain Shanks of the *Irish Willow* on the stopping of his ship by a German submarine on 16 March 1942 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/182).

Chapter III

‘An Attack on our Independence and Vital Interests.’

The ss *Irish Pine* (5621 tons gross) one of the most modern ships operated by Irish Shipping Ltd is missing and presumed lost. There is no news as yet of the crew of 33 Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Louth and Wexford men who manned her on her last trip from Dublin.⁶²

This was the news that greeted the nation on 5 December 1942. In late October the *Irish Pine* left Dublin bound firstly for Boston, to have repairs carried out on her fuel tanks, and then for Tampa to collect a cargo of phosphates. On 14 November she made radio contact with the *Irish Fir* and gave 17 November as the date for her arrival in Boston. Fears for the safety of the ship began to grow when she failed to reach Boston by 18 November and it was only when all hope was gone that an announcement was issued to the Irish newspapers. Surprisingly, this incident, which represented such a major loss to Ireland's small but vital merchant fleet, received little coverage in the newspapers, due mainly to the pressures of wartime censorship. The *Irish Times* carried the announcement of the ship's loss on 5 December under the headline *Irish Pine* feared lost, no news of crew of 33 men.⁶³ The article which followed contained the statement issued by Irish Shipping:

Irish Shipping Ltd regrets to announce that the *Irish Pine* is now so considerably overdue at her transatlantic port of call that she must be presumed lost. The company regrets that as of yet there is no news of the crew.⁶⁴

The article also contained a history of the ship and a list of the crew. There were no further reports on the incident in the *Irish Times* in the following days or weeks. On Monday 7 December the *Irish Press* carried the headline 'No news of *Irish Pine*'s crew',⁶⁵ followed by a small article which shed no further light on what had happened to the ship. On 8 December the paper carried a report on a meeting of the Maritime Institute of Ireland during which the crew of the *Irish Pine* and other Irish Shipping vessels were praised for their services to the country. The impact of wartime censorship

⁶² *The Irish Press*, 5 December 1942, p.1.

⁶³ *The Irish Times*, 5 December 1942, p.1.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *The Irish Press*, 7 December 1942, p.1.

can clearly be seen in the reporting of the loss of the *Irish Pine* as no newspaper speculated on the cause of the loss, even though the probability of a U-boat attack must have been foremost in everyone's minds. Similarly the incident was not discussed before the dáil except in relation to the issue of compensation for the dependants of the crew, nor was there any protest to any of the belligerent powers as there was no evidence whatsoever as to the fate of the ship.⁶⁶ It was not until the publication of *The long watch* by Frank Forde that the circumstances surrounding the loss of the *Irish Pine* were brought to light. Forde contends, after studying U-boat diaries brought to England at the end of the war, that the *Irish Pine* was sunk by U608 on 16 November 1942. According to Forde:

the war diary of U608 on 16 November recorded the last eight hours of the *Irish Pine*, from Struckmeier's first sighting of her at 3:10pm when she appeared out of a snow squall ... Struckmeier maintained contact all day but made no reference to seeing neutrality markings. At 10:30pm central european time he made his attack⁶⁷

The *Irish Pine* sank in just three minutes with no wreckage or bodies ever being found.

In contrast to the events surrounding the loss of the *Irish Pine*, the details of the sinking of the *Irish Oak* were known in full almost immediately and although no lives were lost it had far greater consequences for the Irish government in terms of international relations. The *Irish Oak*, like the *Irish Pine*, was one of the ships leased by the American government to Ireland in 1941 and, as Frank Forde states

the sinking had widespread repercussions, for in addition to the normal newspaper headlines, stories and interviews, the matter became an issue in the general election of 1943, was discussed at German naval headquarters in Berlin, raised as a question in the house of commons and caused an exchange of diplomatic notes between the Irish and U.S governments.⁶⁸

In May 1943 the *Irish Oak* left Tampa, Florida, bound for Dublin with a cargo of phosphates. On 14 May a submarine was sighted sailing parallel to the *Irish Oak* but exchanged no signals and showed no identifying marks. Radio silence was maintained

⁶⁶ See Appendix II.

⁶⁷ Frank Forde, *The long watch* (Dublin, 1981), p.51.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* p.56.

on board the *Irish Oak* as smoke from an allied convoy could be seen in the distance. The submarine remained on the surface for about two hours before submerging and was not seen again. At 8:19am the following morning the *Irish Oak* was hit by a torpedo and immediately began transmitting a distress signal, which was picked up by the crew of the *Irish Plane*, which altered course towards the *Irish Oak*. The crew abandoned ship in two lifeboats and at 9:31 a second torpedo hit the *Irish Oak*, sinking her. At 4:20pm the *Irish Plane* rescued her crew, with only minor injuries being suffered, and they arrived safely in Cork on 19 May.

The sinking of the *Irish Oak* led to widespread condemnation in Dublin, though as the nationality of the submarine involved could not be proven the government had to ensure that, while being seen to openly condemn the attack, it did not appear to place blame on the shoulders of either belligerent side. As was the case with the sinking of the *Irish Pine*, the newspapers were strictly censored and only reported on the bare facts of what happened. Both the *Irish Press* and the *Irish Times* carried the story on 18 May. These reports, however, divulged little information: 'Irish Shipping Ltd announce with regret that from information which they have received it is feared that the ss *Irish Oak* has been lost. The crew are all safe.'⁶⁹ On 19 May both papers ran a small article stating that the crew was safe and on its way home. It was not until 21 May that some details of what happened emerged with the *Irish Press* running the headline '*Irish Oak* was torpedoed' while the following article stated that an 'unidentified submarine' torpedoed the vessel.⁷⁰ This information was not reported in the *Irish Times* until 27 May 1943 when under the headline '*Irish Oak* sinking denounced by Mr de Valera'⁷¹ the newspaper carried a report of the dáil debate on the matter and stated that two torpedoes

⁶⁹ *The Irish Times*, 18 May 1943

⁷⁰ *The Irish Press*, 21 May 1943

⁷¹ *The Irish Times*, 27 May 1943

were fired at the ship. Again there was no comment on the facts or speculation as to the nationality of the submarine involved.

Although wartime censorship prevented the newspapers from speculating on what had happened or revealing any potentially controversial viewpoints regarding these incidents, department of foreign affairs files, intended for internal circulation only, are much more informative. The views expressed within these files indicate the true feeling within the Irish government regarding these attacks:

In wanton disregard of our neutral rights we have lost one of the largest units of our small merchant fleet. Small as our merchant fleet may be, it is an essential bulwark of our economic life and independence. On it we must depend, not only now but also in the post war period, for everything which our own resources cannot give us. Wanton attacks on our shipping such as that on the *Irish Oak* constitute therefore not merely an unwarrantable invasion of our neutral rights but a threat to our economic survival.⁷²

This condemnation of the attack once again clearly illustrates the importance of Irish Shipping to Irish economic survival and consequently to Irish neutrality, as well as the grave manner in which violations of this neutrality were viewed. These authors of these documents also attempted to express the feelings of the country as a whole:

the Irish people feel proud of the crews who brave the dangers of torpedo and mine to bring them the essential elements required to make up for what is lacking in our own raw materials and industrial products. But they also feel indignant that a belligerent power should deliberately attack and destroy an Irish ship engaged on its completely lawful task of bringing essential cargoes to this country for the use of our own people. Such an attack is not merely a violation of our neutrality. It is an attack on our independence and vital interests. It has no moral justification whatsoever.⁷³

These comments clearly indicate the depth of feeling that existed both in official and unofficial circles in Ireland in relation to the attack on the *Irish Oak*. Although feelings ran high, the government had to adhere to its policy of neutrality and as the attacking submarine had not been positively identified no official protest could be made:

it is much to be regretted that the absence of identification makes it impossible for the government to make a protest, but the belligerent responsible for the tragedy must be aware that the circumstances of the war at present being waged in the Atlantic inevitably arouses the greatest suspicion in the minds of the Irish people as to the identity of the culprit. Such wanton

⁷² Untitled document (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/8/35).

⁷³ *ibid.*

attacks committed against a neutral country leave behind a legacy of anger and resentment which seriously add to the difficulties in the way of restoring international goodwill.⁷⁴

The failure to make an official protest soon became a major thorn in the government's side, firstly in domestic politics as de Valera, in his role as minister for external affairs, was questioned on the matter in the dáil, and secondly on the international front as the United States used this issue to pressurise the government.

On 26 May 1943 James Dillon, the deputy leader of Fine Gael, asked if the submarine which fired the torpedo had followed the *Irish Oak* the previous day and had been identified, to which de Valera replied:

a submarine was seen on the previous day, which was identified not by any markings but by its general contour and silhouette, as a German submarine. That was seen sometime between 2:30 and 5:30 the previous day. The submarine was not seen after that. Therefore it is not possible to establish any connection between that particular submarine and the one which fired the torpedo. There are more submarines than one of course, and it would be difficult to establish, without direct proof, the connection that the deputy is trying to establish.⁷⁵

This statement clearly indicates the difficulties faced by the Irish government. Although all evidence strongly pointed to German culpability, no protest could be issued without indisputable proof. As one department of foreign affairs official put it:

so far as we have been able to ascertain, it is not the practice of neutral governments to make formal protests to a belligerent in a case such as this unless they have positive and irrefutable proof of the belligerents responsibility. To do otherwise is to merely invite a rebuff.⁷⁶

The Irish, in adopting this policy, were clearly influenced by the case of a Swedish ship sunk in the Baltic while carrying iron ore to Germany. The Swedish government came under considerable pressure from the press which argued that, since only German and Russian submarines were active in that region, and it was unlikely the Germans would sink a cargo destined for themselves, a Russian submarine must have sunk the ship. The Swedish government was coerced into making a protest to Moscow but this protest only

⁷⁴ Untitled document (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/8/35).

⁷⁵ *Dáil debates*, vol. 92, 26 May 1943, col.538.

⁷⁶ Memorandum for the ministers information (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/8/35).

served to cause embarrassment for them as the Soviet foreign office refused to accept the protest and rejected it orally. The Swedish official statement said rather weakly that 'it was proposed to make further investigations.'⁷⁷ From the precedent set by this the Irish concluded that

in practice there is no point in making a formal protest based on a mere presumption, however strong it may be, and the absence of formal identification as to the identity of the attacker may be said to rule out any question of a formal official protest.⁷⁸

Although the Irish government stood firm in their belief that no protest could be made in these circumstances, the American government did not share this view. The United States held the opinion that there was enough evidence with regard to the sinking of the *Irish Oak* to issue a protest:

although no definite information seems to be available regarding the sinking of the *Irish Pine*, the torpedoing of the *Irish Oak* appears to have been definitely established, as well as the fact that a German submarine was observed by the crew of the *Irish Oak* some hours prior to the sinking. The sinking of the *Irish Oak* which you have rightly described as a "wanton and inexcusable act" and, of other Irish ships, must be presumed in the absence of evidence to the contrary to be the work of axis submarines⁷⁹

The Irish minister in Washington, Robert Brennan, defended the governments actions stating that

the accusation that we had not protested to Germany was most unreasonable because such a protest could not be made without positive evidence. I instanced the case of the Kerlogue which had been machine gunned from the air and stated that a premature protest to Germany would have been ridiculous because it had lately been proved that the plane involved was British, and the British had admitted the facts but denied responsibility because the vessel was off course.⁸⁰

The Irish authorities attempted to further justify their response in a document entitled *Fixing responsibility for sinkings*⁸¹ which was sent to the United States legation in Dublin. This document clearly outlined Irish policy in instances such as that of the sinking of the *Irish Oak* and concluded by noting that the U.S followed a similar policy

⁷⁷ Memorandum for the ministers information (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/8/35).

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Letter from D Gray, 6 Jan 1944 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11).

⁸⁰ Frank Forde, *The long watch* (Dublin, 1981), p.63.

⁸¹ See Appendix II.

in the first world war. Despite these attempts by the Irish government to account for their position the absence of an official complaint to Germany was used by the Americans as a pretext by which to deny the use of further allied shipping to Ireland, as was discussed in chapter one, in an effort to make the policy of neutrality untenable.

The complication over the issue of a formal complaint was not the only problem caused for the government by the sinking of the *Irish Oak*. Perhaps a more serious allegation was that the British captain of the vessel, Captain Jones, had passed information to a nearby allied convoy that a German submarine had been sighted, the insinuation being that this action had instigated the attack on the *Irish Oak*. During the course of the dáil debate on the incident Deputy Norton, Labour, asked the minister for external affairs, de Valera, if he knew the nationality of the ship's captain, to which the reply was negative. James Everett, Labour, then asked whether any information regarding the sighting of a German submarine had been passed to a British convoy, to which de Valera replied 'I am sure it was not ... it is not the business of our ships to give information to anybody.'⁸² Irish Shipping Ltd responded to this allegation by publishing a response in the *Irish Independent* on 28 May 1943:

In the course of a debate in dáil Eireann on Wednesday, 26 May, a suggestion was made that the ss *Irish Oak* before being sunk had conveyed information to a British convoy that a submarine had been sighted. The company states in the most emphatic manner that there is no foundation whatever for this reckless and mischievous suggestion. It is a matter of surprise and regret to the company that it should have been suggested that any officer or member of the crew of one of the company's ships could be guilty of such reprehensible conduct involving, as it would, a very grave risk for the ship and for the lives of the crew.⁸³

This argument raged for some time and became an issue in the general election of June 1943 with the Labour party criticising the government's actions in the national newspapers on 19 June: 'The government that raised taxation to £12 per head, that deported 150,000 Irish youths to work and fight for Britain, that placed a British

⁸² *Dáil debates*, vol.92, 26 May 1943, col.540.

⁸³ Statement issued by Irish Shipping Ltd, 28 May 1943 (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 306/8/35).

national in charge of the *Irish Oak* was also one hundred per cent Fianna Fail.’⁸⁴ The issue of whether a message was transmitted to an allied convoy was not just a domestic matter since it was also raised in the British house of commons on 8 June 1943. The difficulties that faced the government in maintaining their policy of neutrality can again be seen with regard to this matter. In Ireland the government was pressured as it was believed that the *Irish Oak* had sent a warning message to the convoy, while conversely on the international front complaints were made about the failure of the vessel to transmit a message. Sir William Davison asked the secretary of state for dominion affairs to protest the fact that although the *Irish Oak* knew a German submarine was in the vicinity of a British convoy no warning was given, and that as Éire was largely dependant on British shipping for much of its supplies, the government should be asked to notify British convoys in future in such circumstances. Mr Emrys-Evans, the dominions secretary, replied that though there was no communication between the *Irish Oak* and the submarine, in any case it would have served no purpose, as the convoy was fully aware of the situation. On the issue of asking for notification in similar circumstances in future he added

the object of the statement by Mr de Valera was no doubt to disperse any possible German allegation that the sinking by a German submarine of the Eire ship in question was justified on the ground that it had given information about German submarine movements. It would evidently be useless to ask the government of Eire to authorise any action which they would consider unneutral.⁸⁵

This was obviously an issue which was important to many in England as it was raised again on 23 June, with Francis Watt M.P. asking how many Allied ships had been lost conveying cargoes to Ireland. John Leslie M.P. also requested that steps be taken to ensure all exports and imports to and from Ireland be carried in Irish-owned or neutral

⁸⁴ Frank Forde, *The long watch* (Dublin, 1981), p.37.

⁸⁵ Extract from British house of commons debates official report, 8 June 1943 viewed in (N.A Foreign affairs papers 306/8/35).

vessels, in order to avoid the risks to British seamen.⁸⁶ This indicates that after almost three years of war the British still were not reconciled to Irish neutrality and were continuing to use shipping as a means to pressurise the government.

German reaction to the sinking of the *Irish Oak* was one of remorse and conciliation, without actually admitting responsibility. One of the main concerns of Irish officials, as the British had rightly guessed, was to ensure the Germans did not use the issue of Captain Jones' nationality as justification for the attack, as a letter to the *Charge d'Affaires* in Berlin indicates:

Captain Jones was born in Liverpool. This is correct as a statement of fact but the deductions drawn from it and the insinuations made in connection with it are completely unjustifiable and without foundation. Captain Jones spent almost his entire life on Irish ships and the suggestion that he would do anything prejudicial to the safety of his ship and crew and the interests of his owners is ridiculous.⁸⁷

The Irish legation was also urged to make an unofficial representation to the German authorities regarding the matter:

while not making any kind of official protest you should take advantage of any suitable opportunities which may present themselves to you in conversation with German officials to speak to them on the usual lines about the sinking of the *Irish Oak*, emphasising the resentment which such incidents cause here, the bad effect on our relations with Germany, the harm done to Germany by the comparison inevitably instituted between the action of the United States in giving us this ship and the action of the Germans in sinking it.⁸⁸

The German authorities accepted the line of reasoning put forward by the Irish, and as Frank Forde states,

in Berlin Jeschonnek's action in sinking the *Irish Oak* was not well received. Flag officer U-boats said it ought not have happened, but under the circumstances could be attributed to an understandable mistake by an eager captain. He went on to comment "the precise observance of Irish neutrality and of all Flag officer U-boats strict orders in this connection is the duty of all U-boat captains and is in the most immediate and pressing interests of the German Reich."⁸⁹

Members of the Irish legation in Berlin also sensed a certain amount of regret on the

⁸⁶ Extract from British house of commons debates official reports, 23 June 1943, viewed in (N.A Foreign affairs papers 306/8/35).

⁸⁷ Letter to charge d'affaires Berlin 16 August 1943, N.A. (Foreign affairs papers 306/8/35).

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Frank Forde, *The long watch* (Dublin, 1981), p.37.

part of the Germans regarding the incident and admiration for the crew of the ship who were praised for maintaining a neutral stance and not communicating with the allied convoy:

I beg to state that the incident caused a certain amount of embarrassment to the Foreign Office at the time ... The Germans were particularly impressed by the correct attitude of the ships crew who made no attempt to communicate with a nearby British convoy... I have the impression that the foreign office appreciates our point of view in all these matters and that the various incidents which have taken place are due for the most part to lack of experience or carelessness on the part of the navy or air force officers concerned.⁹⁰

This explanation was not fully accepted by all Irish officials, as some believed that the attacks were deliberate:

I have always believed that the reason for the sinking of the *Irish Oak* and *Irish Pine*, the two vessels which we got from the American government, was that we merely had these two ships on annual charter and that by refusing to renew the charters the Americans could get them back at any time.⁹¹

Although plausible, and likely to have further heightened emotions in Ireland at the time, this theory would seem to be dispelled by the German reaction to the sinking and their desire for Ireland to maintain her neutrality.

From the evidence at hand it would seem most likely that the attacks on the *Irish Oak* and *Irish Pine* were the result of inexperience or poor judgement on behalf of the individual German commanders involved, and not the result of an officially sanctioned strategy to eliminate the possibility of the ships being returned to the American flag. Whatever the motivation behind these attacks, they had a considerable influence on Irish neutrality, not just in terms of the shipping tonnage which was lost, but perhaps more importantly in terms of the political strife which they caused for the government.

⁹⁰ Letter from W Warnock, Irish legation Berlin, to secretary, department of external affairs, 30 Oct 1943 (N.A. Berlin embassy papers 48/16).

⁹⁰ Proposed purchase of Italian ship *Caterina Gerolomich* (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/106A).

Conclusion

All the small states can do, if the statesmen of greater states fail in their duty, is resolutely to determine that they will not become the tools of any great power, and that they will resist with whatever strength they possess, every attempt to force them into a war against their will.⁹²

This extract, from a speech made by de Valera to the league of nations in 1936, adopts added resonance when viewed in relation to Irish foreign policy during the second world war. Irish Shipping Ltd was one of the tools which the Irish government used to prevent the country being forced into the conflict against its will, yet the company can also be viewed as being very much a double edged sword in relation to neutrality. On one hand Irish Shipping Ltd made neutrality feasible. As Bernard Share stated 'the role played by these ships, most of them on routes for which they were never designed can scarcely be overestimated, particularly in the context of a national policy which had steadfastly turned its back on the sea.'⁹³ During the course of the war Irish Shipping carried 712,000 tons of wheat, 178,000 tons of coal, 63,000 tons of phosphates, 24,000 tons of tobacco, 19,000 tons of newsprint and 10,000 tons of timber to Ireland, supplies without which the country could not have possibly maintained her neutrality.⁹⁴ This fact was recognised by de Valera in his speech to the nation on 16 May 1945, when he paid tribute 'to the men of our mercantile marine who faced all the perils of the ocean to bring us essential supplies, the nation is profoundly grateful.'⁹⁵ Perhaps the greatest mark of respect to the vital role played by Irish Shipping in the maintenance of neutrality, was the decision to maintain the company in the post-war period, with the fleet being enlarged and upgraded.

Although Irish Shipping was vital to the country's interests on a practical level, it also played an important role on a psychological level, both domestically and internationally. The implementation of a policy of neutrality in 1939 by de Valera was a

⁹² T Ryle Dwyer, *Irish neutrality and the U.S.A. 1939-47* (Dublin, 1977), p.16.

⁹³ Bernard Share, *The emergency-neutral Ireland 1939-45* (Dublin, 1987), pp 101-2.

⁹⁴ Frank Forde, *The long watch* (Dublin, 1981), p.64.

⁹⁵ *ibid.* p.128.

bold move, particularly when viewed in light of Irelands historical links with, and economic reliance upon Britain. Irish Shipping Ltd can therefore be viewed as a physical symbol of Irish independence, as well as her desire and determination to remain neutral. This was equally true on the domestic scene as de Valera attempted to prove to both the Irish people and political opponents of neutrality that Irish independence was a concrete reality and was not merely dependant on British toleration or acquiescence. As Robert Fisk stated

in Eire the need to demonstrate sovereignty and independence overlapped with the neutrality on which the country relied for its defence. For once, symbol and reality were one ... they (the Irish Shipping fleet) were a brave enough symbol of the neutrality that de Valera would not break, even when the country to which he looked for his traditional support - the United States - entered the war in 1941.⁹⁶

The shipping policies adopted by the company, although practical and perhaps inevitable given the wartime context, were also highly symbolic of Irelands determination to stand alone and avoid the conflict. Irelands stance as a neutral was mirrored in the fact that her ships sailed alone, out of convoy, relying on no foreign power for support or protection. The decision not to arm ships also reflected the nations desire to avoid conflict at all cost. Irish Shipping Ltd therefore fulfilled a role as evidence, to both a domestic and an international audience, that Ireland was in every respect independent and sovereign, and would no longer allow foreign powers to dictate policy to her.

Paradoxically, although Irish Shipping made the policy of neutrality viable, it was also a source of great pressure on that strategy. The reliance of the Irish government and the Irish people on the supplies transported by Irish Shipping was recognised at an early stage in the war by powers who were less than sympathetic to Irish neutrality and consequently Irish Shipping was used as a means by which to place pressure on neutrality. Throughout the war, Britain and the U.S.A attempted to coerce de Valera

⁹⁶ Robert Fisk, *In time of war* (London, 1983) p.278.

into abandoning neutrality. As Fisk states of British policy towards Ireland during the war 'neither Churchill nor his ministers abandoned the idea that Eire might after all be cajoled or intimidated into the war'⁹⁷ Evidence of this 'intimidation' is particularly evident in British dealings with Irish Shipping. Almost from the outset of hostilities British actions towards the company were unreceptive and obstructionist, whether it was through denial of shipping tonnage or withholding of warrants and navicerts. A similar policy was adopted by the United States, particularly after her entry into the conflict, and again manifested itself in a reluctance to allocate shipping tonnage to the Irish. This resentment at Irish neutrality caused great difficulties for Irish Shipping. Many ships which could have been acquired by the company were lost, while the roundabout routes which neutral ships were obliged to follow increased journey time and consequently reduced the volume of supplies imported into the country. At no time however did the Irish government consider yielding to these economic sanctions, they only served to strengthen the Irish resolve to remain neutral.

The German reaction to Irish Shipping Ltd was very different to that of the allies, as it was to the benefit of the German government if Ireland maintained her neutral stance. Irish neutrality denied Britain use of the treaty ports and thus afforded the U-boats greater scope for action in the Atlantic. The attacks on the *Irish Pine* and *Irish Oak* though forced the Irish government to reassess the policy of neutrality. These attacks were damaging on two levels, firstly they could be considered as acts of war, precipitated as they were by a belligerent power against a neutral country, and secondly, as they denied Ireland vital resources at a time when she could ill afford to lose them. It was not only the German actions in relation to the sinking of the *Irish Oak* and *Irish Pine* which effected Irish Shipping and the Irish government though as allied reaction to these events caused just as much tension. The failure of the Irish government to issue

⁹⁷ Robert Fisk, *In time of war* (London, 1983) p.258.

a protest to the German authorities after the sinking of the *Irish Pine* and the *Irish Oak* proved something of a political coup for the allies. Although the Irish government followed what was theoretically the correct course of action in condemning these attacks without attributing blame to any particular belligerent, this action proved difficult to justify on the international stage. It therefore gave a pretext to the allied powers, under which they could deny Ireland further vital shipping needs and consequently make it increasingly difficult to adhere to the policy of neutrality.

Irish Shipping can therefore be said to have played a contradictory role in Irish wartime history. On one hand it was vital to the maintenance of neutrality, yet conversely it was also a major burden on it. Irish Shipping brought Irish neutrality closer to the forefront of international politics than it previously had been and forced the government to realise that even by adopting a policy of neutrality, Ireland could not survive in isolation, she was still very much at the mercy of the actions and reactions of foreign powers.

Appendices.

Appendix I

Irish Shipping Ltd Fleet 1941-1945

| SHIP | DATE OF PURCHASE/CHARTER | PREVIOUS NAME AND NATIONALITY | YEAR OF CONSTRUCTION | SUBSEQUENT HISTORY |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Irish Alder</i> | Jan 1942 | <i>Piret</i> , Estonian | | Returned to owners 1946 |
| <i>Irish Ash</i> | August 1942 | <i>Mathilde Maersk</i> , Danish | 1921 | Sold to Sweden 1949 |
| <i>Irish Beech</i> | May 1941 | <i>Cevriti</i> | 1884 | Scrapped 1948 |
| <i>Irish Cedar</i> | October 1943 | <i>Caterina Gerolimich</i> , Italian | | Returned to Italy 1945 |
| <i>Irish Elm</i> | | <i>Leda</i> , Panamanian | 1910 | Sold to Turkey 1949 |
| <i>Irish Fir</i> | October 1941 | <i>Margara</i> , Chilean | 1920 | Sold 1949 |
| <i>Irish Hazel</i> | June 1941 | <i>Noemi Julia</i> , Panamanian | 1895 | Sold to Turkey 1949 |
| <i>Irish Larch</i> | July 1941 | <i>Haifa Trader</i> , Palestinian | 1903 | Sold to Turkey 1949 |
| <i>Irish Oak</i> | May 1941 | <i>West Nerris</i> , U.S.A | 1919 | Sunk May 1943 |
| <i>Irish Pine</i> | May 1941 | <i>West Hematite</i> , U.S.A | 1919 | Sunk Nov 1942 |
| <i>Irish Plane</i> | September 1941 | <i>Arena</i> , Panamanian | 1917 | Wrecked off Cork 1947 |
| <i>Irish Poplar</i> | March 1941 | <i>Vassilios Destounis</i> , Greek | 1912 | Sold to Turkey 1949 |
| <i>Irish Rose</i> | January 1942 | <i>Mall</i> , Estonian | | Returned to owners 1946 |
| <i>Irish Spruce</i> | April 1942 | <i>Vicia</i> , Finnish | 1896 | |
| Irish Willow | October 1941 | Otto, Estonian | 1918 | Returned to owners 1946 |

Appendix II

Fixing Responsibility for Sinkings.

1. I can find no case of any neutral ever having made a claim against a belligerent for loss of ships through the warlike action of such belligerent without first having evidence that such belligerent was in fact responsible. The books do go into detail about protests as distinct from claims, because only the latter 'come to court' and so get fully reported in digests etc.

However, protests, almost invariably, are accompanied by claims for compensation or, at least, are succeeded by such claims at the end of wars. Even if a protest never developed into a compensation-claim, it is scarcely conceivable that any neutral would accuse a nominally 'friendly state' of destroying its property without some clear-cut evidence. In modern wars, all belligerents launch mines on the high seas and all possess submarines and (at present) aircraft. Moreover, accidents sometime happen and a neutral ship disappears with all hands as the result of a misadventure which may occur in wartime as easily as during times of peace.

2. Our own practice in regard to fixing responsibility for losses has been consistent with the foregoing. Although we were warned by the German government (17th Aug 1940) that our ships were trading in 'the waters around Britain' at their own risk, we have, quite properly, not assumed on that account that every boat of ours sunk by warlike action was sunk by the Germans. If we had treated the circumstantial evidence constituted by the German warning as conclusive proof of Germany's responsibility for all Irish ships sunk, we would have been ignoring (1) the fact that the waters in which we trade are strewn with the mines of other belligerents (mainly indeed with British mines), (2) the fact that torpedo attacks could, up to recently, have been made by the Italian, as well as by the German submarines – to go no

farther, (3) that all belligerents attack ships from the air and that any of them are likely to make a mistake (e.g. the British error re “Kerlogue” in last weeks), (4) that accidents of a normal peacetime kind may still happen to ships at sea.

In addition to all this, we cannot completely ignore the fact that, on countless occasions, German planes and submarines have sighted our ships, identified them and then allowed them to proceed unmolested. If they had always attacked our ships at sight, we could probably feel justified in making protests to Germany on the circumstantial evidence such a policy would certainly represent. We have, however, no such justification.

3. The practice as far as we are concerned has therefore been: (A) Where there is evidence that a certain belligerent was responsible for sinking an Irish ship or Irish chartered ship, (i) to protest and claim or (ii) to protest only; (B) Where there is no evidence, but where the particular circumstances point to warlike action for which one of the belligerents is more likely to be responsible than another – to request that belligerent to make enquiries with a view to fixing responsibility and (C) where nothing at all is known about the particular circumstances of the sinking (which might, sometimes, be due to an ordinary accident) and where no belligerent can be considered more likely to be responsible than another – no action.
4. Cases under A, above number to date two the belligerents concerned being in both cases Germany.

Cases under B above number to date two the belligerents approached being in one case Germany in the other Germany and Italy.

Cases under C above number 12; they include the cases of the *Irish Pine* and the *Irish Oak*.

5. It is understood that a procedure similar to ours (no protest without direct evidence) was consistently followed by the United States when neutral in the last war and, presumably, also in this one.

6th January 1944.

Source: (N.A. Foreign affairs papers 206/60/11)

APPENDIX III

Irish Ships Identification Signs Communicated to Germany

| Name of vessel and international code sign | Type and size of ship | Funnel Markings | On sides of ships | Other particulars by which ships could be identified |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| <i>Irish Alder</i> EINV | Cargo Length 288.1 Breadth 45.0 Gross Tonnage 2668.0 | Black funnel with letters ISL on white shield. Letters and rim of shield red. | Letters EIRE in large white letters with Irish flag fore and aft, the letters on both sides amidships. Irish flag also on both sides of the bow and stern. Both sides amidships floodlit at night | Hull black. Bridgehouse a superstructure buff. Two masts Irish flag on one hatch forward and one hatch aft Irish flag painted on both sides of the vertical board on poop deck if fitted. Flag on after hatch and vertical board, if fitted, floodlit at night. Ships name in large letters cut in the sides of a box or trunk above the boat deck and lighted from the inside at night, name readable at about one mile. Letters EIRE in similar lettering cut in the sides of a box or trunk on the poop, also lighted from the inside at night. |
| <i>Irish Ash</i> EINZ | Cargo Length 288.1 Breadth 45.0 Gross Tonnage 2122 | do | do | do |

Source: (N.A. Berlin embassy papers 48/11)

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Proposed purchase of the Italian ship Caterina Gerolomich 206/106A.

Purchase of ships by Irish Shipping Ltd, offer received through Irish legation Lisbon 206/60/2.

Refusal of American government to approve sale to Irish Shipping Ltd of ss Wolverine 206/60/11.

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