

'The Irish password is no longer repeal, but revolution': a German view of Ireland's '48

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In 1848, Ireland, unlike England, followed the mainstream European pattern, whereby a group of middle-class intellectuals contemplated and attempted a revolution to take over the government of their country. The Irish situation was closely watched by journalists on the Continent, who drew comparisons with their own political situations. This strong interest in the Irish revolutionary movement was also reflected in the writings of the various anonymous correspondents of a German daily newspaper, the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* (*AAZ*). This middle-class paper, which was described as 'the intellectual voice of Germany', was the oldest independent political newspaper during the 1848 revolutions in Germany. It was not aligned to any of the political factions in the Frankfurt parliament. The *AAZ* took the Irish situation very seriously, and strongly believed that Young Ireland/the Irish Confederation, with the support of the starving masses, was willing and capable of carrying out a revolution.¹

The *AAZ*'s interest in Young Ireland increased in February 1848, with the appearance of John Mitchel's paper, the *United Irishman*. In the years before, the *AAZ* had only occasionally mentioned Young Ireland, while focusing on Daniel O'Connell and on the Famine. One correspondent described Mitchel's paper as preaching 'resistance against the law and unrest, if not treacherous murder'.² With the outbreak of the February revolution in France, the *AAZ* was quick to compare the Irish and French situations:

Parisian republicanism is a kind of Irish Repeal, and is nothing more or less than a violent and organised indignation against a government which does not succeed in finding profitable employment for the people.³

¹ I will use the term 'Young Ireland' rather than 'Irish Confederation', although the latter was, of course, the proper name of the political organisation since 1847. However, the movement remained better known as 'Young Ireland' in Ireland and abroad. The *AAZ* always used this name (in German: *Junges Irland*, *Jung-Irland*). ² *AAZ*, 1/57, Beilage (supplement), 26 February 1848, p. 908, col. 2. ³ *AAZ*, 2/68, 7 March 1848, p. 1058, col. 2. Unless a translation was directly taken from an English newspaper, the translations of German quotations are my own.

This quotation was translated word for word from the *Times*.⁴ *AAZ* correspondents often incorporated comments, either translated verbatim or paraphrased, from other newspapers, especially British ones.⁵ Some drew their own conclusions. They often put Irish affairs into the European context.

From March onwards, the *AAZ*'s international news focused on those countries with revolutionary upheavals: France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and to some extent Ireland. News from Britain, where no revolution was taking place, decreased dramatically and correspondents complained that there was nothing worth reporting from there.⁶ The *AAZ* stated repeatedly that Ireland was a country in crisis and correspondents believed that the Irish would use recent European developments to force the British government to concede Repeal.⁷ However, a correspondent insisted that although the extremists excited the poor people and put their own lives at risk with their revolutionary 'prattle', it was mainly empty talk, since Old and Young Ireland had as yet not re-united.⁸ The same correspondent implied that the government was partially to blame for the Irish situation, since Ireland was not completely amalgamated with Great Britain, and therefore had not benefited from the reforms and improvements taking place there. He claimed that

a bad administration bears fruit, which had oppressed the larger part of the nation for years, and treated the people like children so as to favour a minority. The present generation will have to pay dearly for the fact that its ancestors conquered Ireland at all, and that after the conquest they did not unify it properly with England.⁹

The *AAZ*'s interest soon centred on Mitchel, who was perceived as a dangerous agitator, a threat to law, order and property, whose ideas and actions would lead his followers into fruitless revolt. Correspondents cited his articles in the *United Irishman*, and his speeches, always highlighting his republicanism. Repeatedly, they pointed out that artisans appeared on the same platform as Mitchel, suggesting that he and Young Ireland had socialist tendencies. They overlooked the fact that many Young Irelanders did not share Mitchel's radicalism and certainly not his ideas on property and the re-distribution of Irish land. Since the majority of the *AAZ*'s correspondents were moderate liberals and constitutional monarchists who had great admiration for the English political system, their attitude to Young Ireland's perceived radical republicanism was very negative.

4 *The Times*, 29 February 1848, p. 5, col. 2. 5 The correspondents wrote anonymously, but could be distinguished by the symbols they used, for instance, one regular correspondent used *, while occasional correspondents used ***, †, +, or ++. One regular correspondent used no symbol. Most of the correspondents were liberals. 6 For example, *AAZ*, 2/77, 17 March 1848, p. 1224, col. 1. 7 For example, *AAZ*, 2/75, *Ausserordentliche Beilage* (extraordinary supplement), 15 March 1848, p. 1, col. 1. 8 *AAZ*, 2/85, *Beilage*, 25 March 1848, p. 1356, col. 2. 9 *Ibid.*

The *AZ*'s belief that Ireland was on the verge of a well-organised revolution was taken from the British press, which confirmed Young Ireland's claim that Ireland was ready to rise. An *AZ* correspondent explained that Young Ireland found strong support among the Irish peasantry because it declared for the redistribution of land among the tenants. The peasantry felt that at last the hated land-settlement would be overthrown by force. Although this correspondent again drew solely on Mitchel's ideas, he made it clear that 'it is not communism; nobody thinks of distributing the land equally amongst all men of no property'.¹⁰ He warned that if a revolution broke out a military victory for the government could not be taken for granted, since the English and Scottish regiments in Ireland might already have been subverted by revolutionary ideas. He also doubted the loyalty of the Irish police.

A Paris correspondent of the *AZ* reported that a Young Ireland delegation had met the foreign minister of the French provisional government, Alphonse de Lamartine, to ask for French support for an Irish revolution. He stated that Lamartine's reply was sympathetic, but he firmly rejected the idea of French involvement because he wished to maintain peace between Great Britain and France.¹¹ A London correspondent stated that although England was pleased with Lamartine's reply, the cabinet was aware that there was no guarantee that this provisional government would remain in power for long. In his view, England was well prepared and would not be caught off-guard by a sudden change of circumstances.¹² Another *AZ* journalist claimed that Lamartine's declaration had cooled the enthusiasm of many Irish revolutionaries, but added that Duffy and Mitchel insisted that Lamartine was just pretending not to support the Irish cause, and that Ireland could count on the support of 50,000 Frenchmen.¹³

AZ correspondents stressed that it was not Young Ireland but the Irish lower classes who constituted the main revolutionary potential both in Ireland and England, adding that the Irish poor in England were completely corrupted by revolutionary ideas. Any coverage of the Chartist movement always highlighted its strong and radical Irish membership.¹⁴ The paper also reported that Young Irelanders were stirring up the Irish in several English industrial cities and that Michael Doheny travelled through England as 'some kind of Repeal missionary'.¹⁵ Young Ireland and the Irish lower classes were thus perceived as attacking England on two fronts, in England itself and in Ireland.

At the end of April, reports described panic in Ireland, as many believed that a revolution was fast-approaching. The *AZ* claimed, for instance, that many people were withdrawing their money from the savings' banks.¹⁶ One correspondent

¹⁰ *AZ*, 2/96, *Ausserordentliche Beilage*, 5 April 1848, p. 1, col. 1. ¹¹ *AZ*, 2/99, 8 April 1848, p. 1575, col. 1. ¹² *AZ*, 2/101, 11 April 1848, p. 1623, col. 1. ¹³ *AZ*, 2/107, *Ausserordentliche Beilage*, 16 April 1848, p. 1, col. 1. ¹⁴ For example, *ibid.*, p. 2, col. 1. ¹⁵ *AZ*, 3/126, 5 May 1848, p. 2006, col. 2. ¹⁶ *AZ*, 2/118, 27 April 1848, p. 1880, col. 1.

expressed a strong belief in an imminent revolutionary outburst in Ireland, unless the Young Irelanders were only braggarts. He added that they 'write as if they wanted to throw the worst firebrands amongst the people at the eleventh-hour'.¹⁷ However, when Young Irelanders were attacked by Old Ireland supporters in Limerick in May 1848, *AZ* correspondents were made aware that there was as yet no broadly based revolutionary movement in Ireland and that the old animosities continued to exist. Therefore, one correspondent questioned if an Irish revolution was possible at all. He compared the fights between Old and Young Ireland to the divisions among the Poles, and insisted that 'indeed the "revolution" was given up by their advocates, but Mitchel and Meagher belong to this particular class of people who hunger and thirst for political martyrdom'. He believed these two to be 'as obstinate "as the German Herwegh"', a reference to the German poet and radical democrat Georg Herwegh, who was involved in the Baden revolution in April 1848.¹⁸

This likening of two radical Young Irelanders with Herwegh derives from the fact that the majority of *AZ* correspondents were moderate liberals, who believed in bourgeois democracy under a constitutional monarch, but not in the immediate political participation of the lower classes. Consequently, they feared movements suspected of supporting greater political rights for the lower classes and/or an interference in the rights of property. They also felt that the revolution in the German states should not be continued, but that the newly-elected (bourgeois) German parliament in Frankfurt had to secure the liberties of the March revolution, pursue German national unification and write a liberal German constitution. Since Germany had no clearly defined national territory, but consisted of many states, some of which were claimed by other countries, national unification posed a serious problem. Opposition to the liberal policies of the national assembly came from the German princes and the German radicals. On the one hand, the princes objected to a reduction of their powers, but some thought it was safer for the time being to co-operate with the assembly. The Frankfurt parliament had no national army, and depended on the princes' forces in times of crisis, which strengthened the position of their delegates in the assembly. With increasing tensions between Denmark and Germany over Schleswig, which was claimed by both governments, the fears of an attack on Germany and outright war meant that the parliament had to rely heavily on the co-operation of the princes, thus bolstering their position. On the other hand, German radicals like Herwegh insisted that the revolution had not gone far enough, and consequently, various radical groups (including Herwegh's republicans) revolted in several German states, demanding political rights and social and economic betterment for the lower classes. Although these insurrections were unsuccessful, the *AZ* was frightened of any further

¹⁷ *AZ*, 2/121, *Ausserordentliche Beilage*, 30 April 1848, p. 2, col. 1. ¹⁸ *AZ*, 3/131, *Ausserordentliche Beilage*, 10 May 1848, p. 1, col. 2. Interestingly, many of Herwegh's poems had been translated by Young Irelanders in the *Nation*.

revolutionary tendencies in Germany, believing that they would weaken the bourgeois assembly, while strengthening the extremes on both ends of the political spectrum, 'anarchy' and the princes. This apprehension increased with the growing possibility of war. Therefore, the paper dismissed German and European radicals alike, tarring them with the same brush. A correspondent even used specific English terms, usually applied to Young Ireland, to describe a German political movement. He categorised the republican party of Friedrich Hecker and Gustav von Struve (leaders of the revolution in Baden) as the 'physical force party'.¹⁹

Mitchel's trial for treason-felony in May 1848 was closely followed by the *AAZ*. The paper reported that news about the verdict was so important that when the mail boat left Kingstown before a verdict was reached, a pre-arranged signal from the shore informed people on board that Mitchel had been found guilty.²⁰ A detailed description of Mitchel and his speech from the dock followed in the next issue, which shows how much his personality and trial captured the interest of *AAZ* journalists, even if they did not share his views.²¹ Mitchel's wife, Jenny, also attracted the attention of the *AAZ*, which reported, falsely, that she had stood beside Mitchel in the dock.²² The issue of jury-packing at Mitchel's trial was widely discussed in the paper and was regarded as injurious to the concept of British democracy and British law, which most correspondents esteemed highly. The *AAZ* assumed that one consequence of Mitchel's conviction would be a reconciliation of Old and Young Ireland, which would give an Irish revolution a better chance of succeeding.²³

In July 1848, the situation in Ireland had the *AAZ*'s fullest attention. Like the British press, the *AAZ* was convinced that the revolution would break out soon. An *AAZ* reader was offered a considerable amount of information about Young Ireland and was able to follow developments in Ireland. The *AAZ* supported the British government's measures to stop the rebellion and correspondents expressed their strong belief that the government should have intervened sooner and stopped the Young Irelanders from spreading their physical force doctrines. Compared to German press censorship before March 1848, British press law was considered to be extremely liberal. *AAZ* correspondents were astonished at the ease with which the Young Irelanders were able to produce seditious writings and make revolutionary speeches.²⁴ After the March revolutions in the German states, the newly-won freedom of the press was precious to *AAZ* correspondents and their anger at abuses of this freedom by revolutionary writers in Germany was projected onto the Young Irelanders, whose revolutionary writings and speeches were cited in detail and condemned.

Rumours about the numerical strength of armed revolutionaries in Ireland

¹⁹ *AAZ*, 3/144, *Ausserordentliche Beilage*, 23 May 1848, p. 1, col. 1. ²⁰ *AAZ*, 3/154, *Ausserordentliche Beilage*, 2 June 1848, p. 1, col. 1. ²¹ *AAZ*, 3/155, *Ausserordentliche Beilage*, 3 June 1848, p. 1, col. 2. ²² *Ibid.* ²³ See *AAZ*, 3/158, *Ausserordentliche Beilage*, 6 June 1848, p. 2, col. 2 and 3/175, 23 June 1848, p. 2795, col. 2. ²⁴ *AAZ*, 4/206, 24 July 1848, p. 3286f.

(50,000, according to the *Morning Herald*, an English conservative paper), the large number of Irish revolutionary clubs in England, the number of American republicans sent over to train the Irish in the use of arms, and alleged attempts by American supporters to rescue Mitchel in Bermuda, were faithfully reported by the *AAZ*.²⁵ The paper took the possibility of an Irish revolt extremely seriously, and described in detail how it would threaten the integrity and security of the British empire.²⁶ A correspondent believed that once the harvest was brought in, many peasants would join the Young Irelanders, attracted by the idea of non-payment of rents, which was being promoted by the Young Ireland newspapers.²⁷ Another correspondent claimed:

The Irish password is no longer Repeal, but revolution, the aim is no longer an independent Irish parliament, but a Hibernian republic, and the leaders of the Irish people – or rather the demagogues – are ready to go to extremes. If the signal is really given, there is good reason to assume that two-thirds of the southern Irish population will rise.²⁸

He feared that the Irish poor would riot in English cities and cause great destruction of property. He was also concerned that the French revolutionary party, although momentarily defeated after the June Days, would support an Irish revolution, and that the emigrant Irish in America would help Young Ireland and urge the American government to attack Canada.²⁹ However, the *AAZ* also indulged in sensationalism, stating rather gleefully that the British government had taken up the gauntlet and the fight against Young Ireland had begun, implying that the 'revolutionary party' had no chance of winning.³⁰ When rumours of the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act reached the *AAZ*, a correspondent claimed that

already within four or five days the bill will become law. In this period of time the fate of the Irish rebellion must be decided. The outbreak will either have to happen within the next five days, or it will not happen at all. If there really exists a mighty and organised revolutionary party in Ireland, it must act now or perish. There is no doubt that the peasantry in the south, and parts of the urban population are ready to rise.³¹

The *AAZ* expected the peasants to rise with or without middle-class Young Ireland leadership. This view reflected the fears of the newspaper's middle-class

25 For example, *AAZ*, 4/197, 15 July 1848, p. 3143, p. 1. 26 *AAZ*, 4/208, 26 July 1848, p. 3318f. 27 *AAZ*, 4/203, 21 July 1848, p. 3237, col. 2. 28 *AAZ*, 4/208, 26 July 1848, p. 3318, col. 2. 29 June Days is the term used to describe the uprising of Paris workers from 23 to 26 June, which was vigorously put down by the provisional government. 30 *AAZ*, 4/210, 28 July 1848, p. 3354, col. 1. 31 *Ibid.*, p. 3351, col. 1.

correspondents of mob-rule in Germany and abroad. They were convinced that the unrestrained masses were capable of causing havoc in Europe.

Although the *AAZ* had never shown much faith in the abilities of William Smith O'Brien as a revolutionary leader – one article even called him 'king of the Apes' – when the rebellion finally broke out, it attributed the initial rebel successes to his effective leadership.³² The paper, quoting the *Times*, stated that Smith O'Brien was leading the insurrection in Tipperary, and was determined to win. The south of Ireland was in open rebellion, the people had arrived *en masse* in Clonmel, and had won a battle because many of the soldiers had fraternized with the rebels. The report added that the train station in Thurles was on fire, and that the tracks had been torn up for several miles. However, the paper was subsequently forced to admit that these rumours were false.³³

The *AAZ* gave more coverage to the events leading up to the rebellion than to the event itself. The paper was relieved that the uprising in Tipperary collapsed before the lower classes in other counties could join the rebellion.³⁴ Correspondents described the rebellion as a ridiculous and pathetic incident. They also poked fun at the rebels. Smith O'Brien was presented as the Don Quixote of the Young Ireland movement.³⁵ The *AAZ* joined many British papers in slandering his character and emphasised his apparent cowardice during the Ballingarry incident:

According to the Widow Cormack [*sic*] . . . Smith O'Brien behaved very cowardly, hiding in her cabbage garden from the shots of the police, and when this woman grabbed him by the collar, demanding that he negotiate with the head of the constabulary, 'the king of Munster' apparently crawled to the house on his hands and knees, etc.³⁶

Compared to the grudging respect given to Mitchel, who was seen as a real threat to the British empire, the *AAZ's* treatment of Smith O'Brien was contemptuous. There were frequent comments about his alleged lunacy, such as that he was 'not quite right in the head'.³⁷ The paper presented him as the proverbial 'mad aristocrat', who had lost all sense of his station.

Although the *AAZ* believed that 'the cause of Young Ireland is, for the moment at least, irretrievably defeated', it still reported rumours of revolutionary activities in Tipperary and Limerick.³⁸ Correspondents suspected that there might be another uprising but hoped that the main threat had passed. One correspondent

³² An *AAZ* correspondent translated the English word 'mock-king' as '*Affenkoenig*', which means 'king of the Apes', see *ibid.*, p. 3350, col. 2. ³³ *AAZ*, 4/214, 1 August 1848, p. 3413, col. 1. See also *The Times*, 28 July 1848, p. 6, col. 3. ³⁴ *AAZ*, 4/218, 5 August 1848, p. 3478, col. 2. ³⁵ *AAZ*, 4/228, 15 August 1848, p. 3638, col. 2. ³⁶ *AAZ*, 4/220, 7 August 1848, p. 3511, col. 1. ³⁷ *AAZ*, 4/218, 5 August 1848, p. 3478, col. 2. ³⁸ *AAZ*, 4/226, 13 August 1848, p. 3607, col. 1. See also, *AAZ*, 4/263, 19 September 1848, p. 4167, col. 1.

explained that 'since the public is filled with ideas of an Irish rebellion, every brawl in Ireland is blown up into an insurrection'.³⁹ However, another correspondent believed that although the insurrection was contemptible and ridiculous, there were more sinister forces behind the scenes:

The big associations of Repealers, and the appalling conspiracies of Ribbonmen and Catholics have surely not suddenly disappeared, just because Smith O'Brien crawled on his hands and knees out of a cabbage garden. Next to the thoughtless and impetuous men, who really drew the sword, stood thousands of conspirators of another kind, who calmly controlled themselves and did not plunge headlong into the revolution.⁴⁰

The writer argued that if these revolutionaries-in-waiting had believed that there was the slightest chance of success, the proper revolution would have started and the entire Catholic population of Ireland would have risen. This shows again that the *AAZ* did not believe that the revolutionary spirit in Ireland was confined to the Young Irelanders but that it was shared by the lower classes, and by Catholics in general, who were waiting for an opportune moment to rebel.

How much Young Ireland and its uprising were perceived as part of the European revolutions of 1848 can be seen by the *AAZ*'s comparison of the fates of Robert Blum, member of the Frankfurt parliament, and William Smith O'Brien, MP. The former had taken part in the October insurrection in Vienna and was executed on the orders of the new Austrian prime minister, Prince Felix zu Schwarzenberg. The *AAZ* praised England for allowing Smith O'Brien a trial by jury and strongly approved of the commutation of his death-sentence to one of transportation.⁴¹ It expressed the view that the death penalty for political offences was uncivilised.⁴²

In 1848, the *AAZ* perceived the Irish situation as a European problem, not as an exclusively Irish or United Kingdom issue. Its correspondents were convinced that a revolution would break out in Ireland and that Ireland would follow the path of revolutions in Europe. They feared the possibility of Ireland separating from liberal Britain, whose political system was regarded as a role model for a future liberal German state by many German liberals. Correspondents believed that if such a split occurred, the cause of liberalism in Europe would be severely weakened and the position of radicals and 'mob-rule' strengthened. At the same time, a dissolution of the British empire could provoke conservative reactions in Europe. At a time of instability in Europe, the *AAZ* supported stability and moderate liberalism and therefore rejected the views of the Young Irelanders, in particular those of Mitchel,

³⁹ *AAZ*, 4/264, 20 September 1848, p. 4283, col. 2. ⁴⁰ *AAZ*, 5/304, 30 October 1848, p. 4790, col. 2. ⁴¹ *AAZ*, 5/322, 18 November 1848, p. 5091, col. 2. ⁴² *AAZ*, 5/293, 19 October 1848, p. 4619, col. 1.

who was perceived as a proto-type of European revolutionary. Correspondents also drew direct parallels between the Irish and German situations. Young Ireland's perceived republicanism was believed to be similar to the policies of German radicals and was therefore rejected as very dangerous. The *AAZ* feared that leftist extremism in Germany would provoke a strong reaction from the political right, which would lead to the restoration of the status quo, that is an aristocratic and particularist Germany. Correspondents' apprehensions about radical policies were confirmed by the lower-class uprising in Paris in June 1848. The journalists' fears about the growing instability in Germany, which threatened the existence of the liberal assembly and bourgeois democracy, were projected onto the Irish situation. Their dislike of Irish nationalism was also fuelled by the assembly's arguments with Polish and Czech nationalists over disputed territories. Consequently, the *AAZ* increasingly opposed the secessionist nationalism of smaller nations and emphasised the rights of larger units, such as Germany and Britain, to preserve their territorial integrity.

Only when the Irish '48 turned out to be no more than an affray in 'Widdy McCormack's cabbage garden' did the *AAZ* belittle Young Ireland's revolutionary attempt, dismissing it as no more than empty talk. The threat to the British empire and to European liberalism was then played down but even at the end of 1848 many *AAZ* correspondents expressed a strong fear that the Irish '48 might not yet be over.