

**UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS IN BRATISLAVA**  
**FACULTY OF APPLIED LANGUAGES**

Evidence number: 106007/I/2021/36122163611325444

**The Assassination of Michael Collins:**  
**What Happened at Béal na mBláth**  
(Diploma thesis)

**Bratislava 2021**

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**UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS IN BRATISLAVA**  
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(Diploma thesis)

**Study programme:** Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication

**Field of study:** Philology

**Study department:** Department of Intercultural Communication

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**Bratislava 2021**

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### **Affirmation**

I hereby affirm that this thesis represents my own original research and writing and that I have referenced all appropriate source materials.

**Date:**

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## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank PaedDr. Eva Stradiotová, PhD. for her assistance in the researching and writing of this paper, as well as for her guidance and support.

## ABSTRAKT

MESÁROŠOVÁ, Tereza: *Zavraždenie M.Collinsa: čo sa stalo na Béal na mBláth*. Ekonomická univerzita v Bratislave. Fakulta aplikovaných jazykov; Katedra interkultúrnej komunikácie. – Vedúci záverečnej práce: PaedDr. Eva Stradiotová, PhD. – Bratislava: FAJ EU, 2021, 54 s.

Hlavným cieľom záverečnej práce je zodpovedať otázku: *Čo sa stalo Michaelovi Collinsovi v Béal-na-mBláthe?* a opísať čo najpodrobnejšie jeho poslednú cestu v okrese Cork. Diplomová práca opisuje život írskeho lídra, ktorý svoj život obetoval za vlasť. Táto práca obsahuje tri kapitoly. Prvá kapitola približuje súčasné riešenie problematiky doma a v zahraničí. Ďalej sa zaoberá jednotlivými obdobiami v živote Collinsa predtým, ako sa začal politicky angažovať. Taktiež popisuje jeho úlohu vo Veľkonočnom povstaní v roku 1916, ako aj väznenie vo Walese, kde sa naplno prejavili jeho schopnosti lídra. Zachytáva taktiež Írsku vojnu o nezávislosť, spolu s Občianskou vojnou. Druhá kapitola popisuje zvolenú metodológiu práce a poukazuje na použitú literatúru. Zaznamenáva samotné stanovenie hlavného i čiastkového cieľa. Tretia kapitola sa venuje opisu udalosti, ktorá sa stala 22. augusta 1922, keď počas prepadnutia, zomrel generál Michael Collins. Rozoberá výpovede očitých svedkov, ktoré vyvracia alebo potvrdí. Ďalej sa sústreďí na teórie možných vinníkov a poukazuje na nezrovnalosti.

**Kľúčové slová:** Michael Collins, zavraždenie, Írsko, vojna, vyšetrovanie, nezávislosť, Mierová dohoda

## ABSTRACT

MESAROSOVA, Tereza: *The Assassination of Michael Collins: What Happened at Béal na mBláth*. University of Economics in Bratislava. Faculty of Applied Languages; Department of Intercultural Communication. – Advisor of the diploma thesis: PaedDr. Eva Stradiotová, PhD. – Bratislava: FAJ EU, 2021, pp. 54.

The main aim of the diploma thesis is to answer the question: "*What happened to Michael Collins at Béal-na-mBláth?*" and to describe his last journey in Cork County in as much detail as possible. The thesis describes the life of an Irish leader who sacrificed it for his homeland. This work contains three chapters. The first chapter presents the current state of the problem at home and abroad. It then deals with the various periods in Collins's life before he became politically involved. It describes his role in Easter Rising in 1916, as well as his imprisonment in Wales, where his leadership skills fully manifested. It also captures the Irish War of Independence, along with the Civil War. The second chapter describes the chosen methodology of the paper and points to the literature review. It records the very setting of the primary and partial goal. The third chapter describes the event that happened on August 22, 1922, when General Michael Collins died during the ambush. It analyses eyewitnesses' accounts that it refutes or confirms. Also, it focuses on theories of possible culprits and points out inconsistencies.

**Key words:** Michael Collins, ambush, assassination, Ireland, war, independence, Treaty, investigation

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## Introduction

At the dawn of the 20th century, Ireland struggled for its independence for several centuries longing for freedom of its people. Young Michael, full of ideals and dreams, wandered the meadows in his homeland County Cork. He used to read quite a lot, predominantly Irish nationalistic authors. At that time, he did not know that one day he would negotiate with Britain for Ireland's independence. Over time, the little dreaming boy has become one of Ireland's most popular but also most hated leaders. Collins is considered to be the founder of modern guerrilla warfare. He managed to dismantle the entire intelligence service with the help of the Squad unit, which assassinated British secret agents. Thanks to that, Britain lost power over its colony. After signing the Treaty, friends fighting for a common cause became enemies, and that was a great tragedy that has befallen the country. The assassination of Michael Collins marked Ireland's history like no other.

The great advantage of the country is the fact that it remembers salient points of its history and in our case the history of the Irish Republic. The first chapter of this paper will examine the current state of the problem in Slovakia and abroad. In search of the literature, many enriching and inspiring sources have emerged. We must admit that, despite our efforts, we have not discovered the relevant resources in the Slovak Republic. After much research, we found only one article on Wikipedia, which summarizes his life very superficially and does not provide any significant data. On the contrary, many sources have been published by authors from Ireland, England and America.

It is also devoted to the detailed description of the Collins's life. It deals with his childhood, where it mostly points out tutors who influenced his political thinking and also offers a view of Michael Collins as a teenage man who moved to London to study and to work. Then it reflects his joining into the Irish Republican Brotherhood and participation in Easter Rising in 1916, including the period right after the suppression of the rebellion in Frongoch Prison, where he allegedly received his famous nickname the Big Fellow. It also shows his involvement in Treaty negotiations where he with other brave delegates ensured the truce between Great Britain and Ireland.



The second chapter is concerned with the methodology used for this study as well as with its objectives. The main aim of this study is to accurately and systematically describe the last day of the Irish leader and events that led to it. A suitable research strategy for this thesis is presented and a literature review conducted in order to get as many possible materials as we could. Subsequently, we analysed these books and compared the recorded statements. This study has an exploratory and interpretative nature. This thesis is conducted with the benefit of all published, researched and revealed. It also determines our research question which is almost identical to the thesis title - *What Happened at Béal na mBláth?*.

The third chapter consists of four main parts namely the ambush, accounts of its participants, theories on the possible perpetrator and the last one is about the wound nature. It focuses on the last day of Michael Collins and his effort to achieve peace settlement within the war-torn country. It also offers contradictory findings of the Big Fellow's demise, which are summarized in that chapter, too. The accounts of both sides are presented, and any discrepancies are either refuted or confirmed.

# 1. The Current State of the Problem at Home and Abroad

It is undeniable that Michael Collins's assassination belongs to the most famous cold cases in Ireland which continues to attract the public's attention up to now. From his death to the present day, many historians, experts and various authors devoted their lives to find either any clue or evidence to show and reveal possible perpetrator who might have killed the Irish leader. Almost 100 years after that tragic event, the society does not have any definite answer to the question *Who killed Michael Collis at Béal na mBláth?*

There have been written tens of books on the subject of Collins's murder and biographies about his short but spectacular life. Some of them may be perceived as books of great value, other more likely as gripping novels full of unsubstantiated claims. In this thesis, information based on facts will be used, and those based on hearsay or rumours will be omitted or more precisely disproved.

Michael Collins is universally regarded as the epitome of a great leader who has proved himself to be both humane and pragmatic. Therefore, we cannot be surprised by the Irish leader being in the spotlight for so much time. A slim book of his selected speeches and writings, *The Path to Freedom*, was published posthumously and reading that book provides us with better understanding and insight into his great mind.

For many years, this phenomenon was surprisingly neglected by Irish authorities. The National and Military Archives were not opened to the public. Each country has a hard time dealing with the war, and even harder with a civil one. Ireland has long fought for its freedom. It was a tough fight and cost a lot. Although it was an uphill struggle, it was apparently worth it. The reluctance to take a look at the Civil War persisted while its participants were alive. Nowadays, universities offer study programs on Irish history and especially on the beginning of the 20th century, which has become academically possible in the 1990s. No wonder, this event has left a great stigma on the Irish people. The society divided itself into two groups, one that adored Collins and the other that could not stand him. Basically, the situation has not changed much since then, although Collins is now more popular.

After much research, we have not come across any relevant resources which are concerned with the Irish history in Slovakia and especially with the period of early 20th century. The current state of the problem at home is, therefore, at the elementary level.

However, we found only one article on this subject, more specifically on Collins's life. The second article is of tangential importance and mentions Neil Jordan's movie about General Collins. The first mentioned is the article perhaps of the most famous free content encyclopaedia. Wikipedia provides a short summary on his life and leaves out important details. It rather gives us the impression of badly done translation. We also did literary research of Slovak libraries but did not find any book directly related to Collins and his role in the establishment of the Irish Free State. Some information about the Civil War was found, but Collins's demise was not specifically described there. Therefore, a major focus was put on foreign literature.

Abroad, a considerable amount of literature has been published on this subject. From his death till this day, many books have been written, believing that they will shed some light on his life and solve his unexpected death. We focused our attention mostly on pertinent books from renowned authors who have been dealing with this issue even for several decades. One of the first published books was *Michael Collins and the Making of a New Ireland* by Piaras Béaslaí which Joe Connell (2018) calls hagiography regarding many inconsistencies in it. Conversely, one of the latest books in this field is Joe Connell's paperback *Who Shot Michael Collins?*. This book deals with the very death of General Collins, his fatal itinerary of that day, discusses the ambush and its participants as well as points out theories based on facts.

It is certainly important to know how to accept one's history. People are often attracted to unresolved mysteries, which this definitely is. Most of the foreign authors are of British, Irish or American origin what is not surprising at all. Some of them are also immediate and lineal descendants of the participants in those historical events. For instance, Tim Pat Coogan is the son of Eamonn Coogan, the former member of Collins's killing unit in Dublin who is known for refusing to kill two young women even though they spied on Collins's adherents, but according to Coogan they were too beautiful and young to be murdered. Or for example, Emmett Dalton's nephew, who portrays his uncle as a devoted soldier who respected Michael Collins so much that he wanted to be buried next to him (Dalton, 2008).

Even in the neighbouring Czech Republic, we can find enough resources for our topic. But, of course, we prefer to use the texts in their original version so that we could

avoid possible translation shift. However, this does not question, indicate or judge the quality and ability of the Czech research.

From time to time, a review of the book appears at a website, academia.edu, that tries to explain any discrepancies. We believe that interest in the investigation of Collins's death will increase due to the hundredth anniversary of his death next year in 2022. Although we do not anticipate significant progress regarding the accusation of General's murderer. Perhaps it is positive for the Irish that they do not know the name of the murderer who deprived them of such an important personality. The worst thing that can ever happen to the nation is that its inhabitants oppose each other, instead of fighting together for a common goal. That is precisely the case of Ireland. The same thing could happen after the killer is discovered, so it is sometimes good to leave things as they are. They may think who killed him, but they cannot blame anyone in particular.

Above mentioned book, *The Path to Freedom* enjoys popularity among the Irish and what is interesting, especially among the youth. It helps them understand what their predecessors achieved for them, for the country. History of every country needs to be cleared and accepted so that people can live on.

## **1.1. Early Life**

*“One day he will be a great man. He will do great work for Ireland.”*

Michael Collins Senior, on his deathbed

Michael Collins was born on October 16th, 1890 in West Cork and lived on the family farm at Woodfield as the youngest of eight children. His boyhood may be perceived as exceptionally happy, although his father died at the age of 81 when he was only six years old. Missing his own dad, he might have needed a father figure which he found in two men, namely Denis Lyons, the local schoolmaster and a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) as well as in James Santry, a village blacksmith. Collins himself considered them as tutors with great personalities who influenced his political thinking at the young age (Coogan, 2015). Thanks to them, he grew to love and be proud of the Irish culture and heritage. Michael's parents passed on their children catholic belief and also a deep fondness for Irish nationalist literature and songs.

At the age of twelve, young Michael was greatly influenced by his latter colleague, Arthur Griffith, who wrote editorials for *United Irishman* which Collins used to read and later founded a political party called Sinn Fein meaning ‘We Ourselves’. He sympathized with those ideas of Griffith which depicted England as an oppressor of Irish trade and on the contrary, emphasized Ireland being a land with quality goods, its own literature, art, and language.

Later he was sent to study and prepare for postal examinations in Clonakilty. He also wrote sports columns for local newspaper *West Cork People* owned by his brother-in-law. After some time, he passed the examination and was offered a job in London in the Post Office Savings Bank. In 1906, he as a fifteen-year-old boy moved from little West Cork village to West Kensington, London, and since that time, he lived there by his older sister Johanna who also worked in the Post Office (O’Mahony, 1996).

## **1.2.London Years**

The life in such a large city was not easy at all. Right after he arrived in London, he was not full of joy. Instead, he missed his wandering in the fields and meadows in his homeland. The Irish are, or at least at that time they were, a very religious nation, and Michael himself was a part of the devout family. As any young teenager, he experienced wild times during the adolescent stage of his life. His behaviour was affected by the death of his beloved mother and sister’s illness which resulted in decease, too. Of course, the young man with the soul of a nationalist was more attached to the Irish community in London than to the English community (O’Mahony, 1996).

Michael had never liked team games, though he joined Geraldine Hurling Club which belonged to the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Under its banner, Irish businesspeople organised a wide range of sports events in the capital in order to support young Irish girls and boys. Teenage Collins could not stand when someone did not play fair and became a self-proclaimed team leader. Already at that time, some peers liked and idolised him, but others found him too commanding. He held various prestigious positions within the GAA. Initially, he became a part of the local committee, then a member of the London County Board of the Gaelic Athletic Association, and finally received the most significant position within the Geraldines, becoming a secretary (Mackay, 2014).

At the same time, thanks to his fellow from the office, Sam Maguire, he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a secret oath-bound organisation (Stanford, 2011) at the meeting in Barnsbury Hall in North London. Its main objective was to establish the independent democratic Republic of Ireland. In 1914, after being a part of the IRB for a year, he was designated as treasurer for London and the South of England (Coogan, 2015).

In addition to his job, education and self-development played a significant role in his life. He attended King's College, where he took evening classes so that he could pass the civil servant examination. His focus was mainly put on philosophy, politics, commercial law, accountancy, taxation, and economics (Sigerson, 2015). Besides that, Collins was also practising public speaking which he utilised during the conflict surrounding Treaty negotiations what may be seen in a book comprised by his speech collection, *A Path to Freedom*. One of his contemporary historians and a great admirer of him, a member of Supreme Council of the IRB, P.S. O'Hegarty describes Collins as follows: *"Everybody in Sinn Fein circles knew him, and everybody liked him, but he was not a leader. He had strong individuality, clearly-held opinions, and noticeable maturity even as a boy of seventeen when he made his appearance in Irish circles in London. But his place was rather as the raw material of a leader than as a leader."* (in Coogan 2015, p.31).

At the end of 1915, the British government introduced the Military Service Act, which should have come into effect in January 1916. Michael had to decide whether he stays in London and joins the British army, because it could be applied only for all men in England, not those in Ireland or he terminates the employment and departs from London for Dublin. Collins chose the latter. If not, he would consider himself to be a traitor of the desired republic. His immediate superior was told that Collins wanted to enlist in the British Army and gave him a parting bonus which was equal to a weekly salary. On 14 January 1916, after almost ten years spent in London, he bid farewell to his sister Johanna and embarked on a journey to Holyhead from where he sailed to Ireland the next day (Mackay, 2014).

### **1.3.Easter Rising 1916**

At the beginning of the year, Collins returned to Ireland where he got a job by the Plunkett family as a financial advisor. It was only a part-time employment, and he received a weekly remuneration of £1 which seemed not to provide sufficient means of subsistence for a young man. Therefore, he found a second job as an accountant in a well-known company Craig Gardiner, in Dawson Street. One member of the Plunketts was especially dear to Collins. Joseph Plunkett was one of the organizers and chief military strategists of the Easter insurrection, widely known as Easter Rising. Plunkett underwent an operation of his neck glands on Good Friday just before the Rising occurred. Although he was quite weak and terminally ill, it did not discourage him at all. Collins represented his aide-de-camp what practically meant a personal assistant of high-ranking officials during that week (McEvoy, 2020).

Michael also joined the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League which primary objective was to encourage young people to learn Irish language as well as to excite nation's interest in publishing and reading the Gaelic literature. Collins, as a true nationalist, enjoyed learning the Irish and wanted to be addressed as Mícheál Ó Coileáin instead of his name in its English form. Its second concern was to connect like-minded people who wanted to free Ireland from its oppressor. (Michael Collins - Ireland's Greatest, 2013).

The main aim of the Easter Rising in 1916 was to weaken English domination over Ireland and to fight for its independence. Since Britain was involved in the First World War, it reduced staff on duty at the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin. The Irish volunteers and rebels saw this building as a symbol of an occupation. Moreover, it was the centre of British communication. On Easter Monday, it all started when one of the Irish leaders, James Connolly, gave the command to attack GPO. They had no intention to cause any civilian casualties, so they ordered post staff and its clients to leave. The tricoloured flag of the Irish Republic was raised on the top of the GPO, and the Proclamation was read aloud by Patrick Pearse. It is considered to be one of the most crucial documents of modern Irish history. The Proclamation was a declaration of Ireland's autonomy, of Ireland being a republic (O'Mahony, 1996).

Revolutionaries held their position for a week, then they unconditionally surrendered to the British, because they did not want to place civilians in jeopardy anymore. In general, the Easter rebellion may be seen as a failure which cost many lives of innocent people, but it has brought them closer together (Chollataín, 2009). In total, 485 people lost their lives during the Rising, of which 82 were Irish rebels, 143 British military personnel and 260 civilians who were mostly accidentally killed in the crossfire or regarded as rebels.

Some Dubliners were against that insurrection, but soon after surrender, when many volunteers were arrested, some of them were even secretly executed and unarmed killed or wounded; they changed their mind quickly. Approximately 3400 men were imprisoned all around Ireland and among them Michael Collins himself (O'Mahony, 1996).

One group of the incarcerated was transferred to a prison in Wales, to Frongoch. There also Collins might have got his nickname the Big Fellow or Big Fella. Part of his inmates regarded him as over-assertive who always causes trouble, the others as an influential leader with a great sense of responsibility and belonging. His strategic thinking proved to be most needed when authorities wanted prisoners to identify themselves so that they could find out who might be enlisted into the British Army as well as when someone wanted to smuggle anything out of Frongoch he was the right person to go to. Ultimately, on 21 December an amnesty was granted to inmates by Henry Duke, the Chief Secretary of Ireland and Collins was discharged.

#### **1.4.After Rising**

There was a sombre mood right after the rebellion. Although men who returned from prisons were welcomed glowingly and those who died there were reckoned as Irish heroes. Following the Rising, the situation in Ireland remained peaceful for a moment but fragile. This peace was disrupted when Count Plunkett, the father of Collins's executed friend Joseph Plunkett, was expelled from the Royal Dublin Society simply because of the fact that his sons took part in the uprising. This organization was mainly dominated by men loyal to the British Crown. Collins, together with his former inmates from Frongoch, used an opportunity to promote Plunkett's expulsion from the institution as political injustice as



well as disrespect for democracy and Irish patriotic family. Plunkett's candidature for a seat in the British Parliament as a part of the opposition was successful. However, he never attended it, because he believed that abstentionism was the only way showing to the British his attitude towards its parliament. Arthur Griffith, Collins's childhood role model, perceived it the same way, so he adopted an identical policy for the Sinn Fein party (Coogan, 2015).

An amalgamation of two Irish institutions was needed in order to provide necessary funding for those who lost their loved ones during the Easter Rising or were transported to England for penal servitude. The National Aid Association emerged, and Collins became its secretary with a weekly income of 2 pounds and 50 pence. This job brought him connections in the right places.

According to Collins, the help of the Irish Republican Brotherhood was crucial to freedom of Ireland. Therefore, he and Thomas Ashe reorganized the old IRB. The latter became its President and the Big Fellow its Secretary. De Valera and Brugha relinquished from the secret brotherhood. Later that year, Ashe and other volunteers were accused of disaffection to the British Crown. In prison, they decided to go on hunger strike, and after some time, the President of the IRB died in the hospital. That was the last straw (O'Mahony, 1996).

In April 1918, the Irish Military Bill should have become active, which was vigorously rejected by the Irish. The British needed to replenish losses because the number of casualties during the Great War was very immense. Due to the end of the war, it was no longer necessary to recruit Irish men into British military service.

At that time, Collins realized the need for communication system improvement. He made valuable contacts at the Post Office, who sympathized with the idea of free Ireland and so they smuggled British messages and dispatches out of the post and gave it to the Volunteers all over Ireland. Connections in the seaport were also beneficial to him because he could have imported weapons clandestinely from abroad.

## **1.5. The Irish War of Independence**

The apparent radicalization of the Irish was caused by events that influenced their thinking and which unified all shades of Irish nationalists. It was demonstrated by the

General Election result which took place on 14 December 1918 when ruling Irish Parliamentary Party dropped significantly, and Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin Party claimed a massive victory. It promised its voters to divest itself of the British Parliament and instead of that to establish the Irish assembly which should have functioned as a supreme body of the Irish Republic.

The first meeting of the revolutionary parliament called Dáil Éireann was attended only by 26 Sinn Féin members out of 73 elected because some of them were imprisoned or abroad. The other two Irish parties disregarded that assembly. Those present also selected their temporary representatives such as ministers and president. Soon after, Volunteers began to be called the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.). On the same day as Dáil met for the first time, a group of I.R.A. members killed two Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) policemen what has been widely considered as the inception of the Anglo-Irish War (Hopkinson, 2014b).

At the beginning of February, Collins with a prominent Republican Boland hatched a plan and helped de Valera and two other friends with an escape from Lincoln jail. De Valera had to be in hiding for several weeks after that. The second meeting of Dáil was held in early April 1919, and 52 members attended it which was twice as much than before. They decided to elect their officials. Éamon De Valera, also called Dev, became acting president of Irish Republic, Collins Minister of Finance, Griffith was appointed Minister of Home Affairs, and Count Plunkett Minister of Foreign Affairs.

De Valera, president-elect of Ireland, intended to depart for America in order to get diplomatic recognition of the republic from allies and Irish emigrants as well as to raise funds. He left in June 1919 and stayed abroad till December 1920.

Even though British citizens were tired of the First World War, many families lost fathers and sons, found themselves in a bad situation, the British government still wanted to retain its dominion over Ireland and to suppress all rebellions which erupted. They sent armed services there to establish law and order. Several different forces were introduced, for example, Black and Tans who were a violent part of Royal Irish Constabulary, then the Auxiliaries represented by the former British soldiers. The last one was G Division of the Dublin Metropolitan Police which consisted mostly of detectives concerned with intelligence agency against the Irish Republican Army (Coogan, 2015).

Pragmatism, logical and strategic thinking being Collins's strengths, helped him to outstrip British secret services. The Big Fellow's intelligence network was cruel but effective. He masterminded the whole plan in order to undermine British units in Ireland. By creating a Squad, also known as the Twelve Apostles, he managed to succeed in weakening of Britain's intelligence service. Some of his gunmen infiltrated into the G Division and acted as double agents. The British even announced a reward for a revelation of Collins's whereabouts. They supposed that if they had eliminated Collins, the whole Irish intelligence system would fall apart. However, the problem was that they did not know precisely how Collins looked like (Connell, 2017).

A particular unit, nicknamed as Cairo Gang, composed of 16 top-class secret agents from Britain, was created only to assassinate Collins (Sigerson, 2015). The British did not possess any picture of Collins and had to find and kill him without it. He was described as follows: "*Clean shaven, boyish appearance, dressed well, dark brown eyes, regular nose, fresh complexion, an oval face, active male, 5 feet eleven inches high about 30 years of age, dark hair, generally wears trilby hat and fawn overcoat.*" (O'Mahony, 1996, chapter 7) It is said, many of his comrades were so loyal to him that they grew their hair in order to have similar hairstyle as Collins had to confuse secret agents. The Big Fellow was the most wanted man by the British for a long time. He hung between death and life but managed to escape every single trap. People say the darkest place is under the candlestick, and that was exactly true for him. Collins did not want to attract anyone's attention, so he blended into the crowd of Dubliners. Dressed as a businessman, riding his bicycle through the city centre from one place to another, he never aroused suspicion (Sigerson, 2015).

Bloody Sunday is considered as one of the worst days of the Anglo-Irish War. It took place on 21 November 1920. In fifteen hours, approximately 30 people were killed. Collins gave the order to eliminate agents of Cairo Gang. In the morning of that day, the Squad murdered 18 people altogether both agents and spies. Some afraid of their possible killing fled from their homes to the Dublin Castle, the centre of the British services. Loss of the best British agents was a crushing defeat of the intelligence network. It made them so furious that they wreaked vengeance on the Irish in a brutal way. In the afternoon that day, a football match between a Tipperary team and a Dublin team took place at Croke Park. As soon as Collins found out about intended intervention, he sent his assistant to warn Gaelic Athletic Association of planned attack, but it was too late to cancel the match.

Shortly after 3 o'clock, the first shots were fired, resulting in 14 dead and hundreds injured or wounded. Also, the capture of his three friends which were held in Dublin Castle made him dejected. He was on the rack. Later that night, they were shot dead being caught escaping (O'Neill, 2020).

There were many raids, attacks, ambushes and buildings set on fire right after Bloody Sunday. It only caused more casualties on both sides and destabilized the everyday life of the Irish people. In the meantime, Griffith was discharged from jail where he was put shortly after 21 November 1920, and de Valera finally returned from his fundraising journey in America. Thank veracious propaganda, ordinary people learnt about Anglo-Irish struggle and supported Ireland. Lloyd George, the then British Prime Minister, decided that the war must end and was willing to negotiate with Ireland. De Valera welcomed Lloyd George's idea, and both sides declared a Truce which was signed on 11 July 1921 (Coogan, 2015).

## **1.6.Treaty Negotiations**

The Irish president promptly arranged a meeting in London with the British not to postpone peace settlement. The delegation consisting of Griffith, Plunkett, Stack, Barton and Childers was prepared to set out the next day. Collins was not among them. Notwithstanding Collins's objections, de Valera decided that Michael will stay in Dublin. Later, he stated that he wanted to safeguard him from the British, so they did not know how he looked like, which is full of contradiction because they already had his photo (Coogan, 2015).

The end of the war was perceived very positively, especially by ordinary people. However, Collins was apprehensive about the Truce. Once I.R.A. members break cover and show their faces to the British services, it cannot be reversed. People who had been hiding so far could come out of their hiding places, and in the event of Truce annulment, they would be easy targets.

Many authors hold the view that de Valera knew that reaching an agreement on the recognition of the Republic was not be possible. Therefore, he decided not to go on other negotiations to London. During the following months, de Valera exchanged letters with the British Prime Minister who demonstrated British attitude towards absolute Irish autonomy

(Dwyer, 2006). De Valera was the most experienced negotiator among them but refused to leave Ireland because he regarded himself as a symbol of the Irish Republic and insisted on not leaving the country. Collins was reluctant to go to London. He felt himself to be an expert in finance or even strategist, rather than a negotiator. Many people thought otherwise and persuaded him to go. After lengthy deliberations, though grudging, he finally went.

Eamon de Valera had purportedly the ulterior motives when he sent Collins to London as a plenipotentiary to parley against the British. At the same time, he knew that the status of the Republic is not achievable and would have never be recognized by the English. In this case, we may suppose that Éamon de Valera used Michael Collins as a scapegoat. Collins made the following comment about his journey to London: *“For three hours one night, after the decision had been made to send a delegation to London, I pleaded with De Valera to leave me at home and let some other man take my place as a negotiator. But it was no use. My arguments seemed to fall on deaf ears. I had no choice. I had to go.”* (Talbot, 2011, p.145) It has commonly been assumed that de Valera envied Collins his popularity among Irish people which he gained when the president was on his journey in America. De Valera’s nickname based on his height, the Long Fellow, compared to Collins’s the Big Fellow based on his deeds, made him jealous. We may suppose that the stumbling block of one-sided rivalry was pride.

The Irish delegation had to follow instructions which the Dáil gave to them. Initially, Liam de Roiste, the member of Sinn Féin party, suggested that plenipotentiaries should not have their hands tied and should freely and conscientiously decide what is best for the Irish nation but also, they had to report to the Parliament. This motion was unanimously approved. However, that did not satisfy de Valera’s intention to have total supremacy over delegates. Therefore, he tried to limit their power with credentials. Although they had unfettered powers, plenipotentiaries had to notify Parliament and wait for an approving response before making a final decision (Coogan, 2015).

On 11 October, two teams of negotiators from belligerent countries met at the famous 10 Downing Street. The Irish negotiator team consisted of Arthur Griffith as a leader, Michael Collins, Gavin Duffy, Eamonn Duggan, Robert Barton, and its Secretary Erskine Childers and the British one out of Lloyd George, Austin Chamberlain, Lord

Birkenhead, Winston Churchill, Sir George Howart, Sir Lamington Evans and Sir Hamar Greenwood.

For Collins, it was hard to participate in negotiations because the British regarded him as a head of murdering gang called Twelve Apostles with whom is impossible to hold talks. Moreover, a few months ago, they offered a reward for him dead or alive, and those days, especially, the Prime Minister treated them as old friends.

Three main issues had to be discussed, and more specifically the question of the adherence to the British Crown, a unity of Ireland regarding the Province of Ulster and the extent of the Irish independence. Both sides needed to split the difference.

Negotiations came to an impasse, chances were slim, and the delegation had to make a grave decision. Lloyd George imparted if there is no agreement within three days, the state of war will be renewed. Small fledging nation parleying against the world's largest empire, could only hope for dominion status, certainly not for full recognition of the Irish Republic. It must be conceded that plenipotentiaries did their utmost. They might have chosen Dominion status and peace or Republic and war again. So, they chose the lesser of two evils. Collins saw it as a means of achieving Irish independence (Dorney, 2020).

On 6 December 1921, (The National Archives, 1921) the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed after the two-month period of conferences at 10 Downing Street in London by the Irish plenipotentiaries as well as by the British leaders. While putting their signature on it, Birkenhead said in jest "*I may have signed my political death warrant*", straight-faced Collins remarked to him "*I may have signed my actual death warrant,*" (Coogan, 2015, p.338). In the end, the Irish gained full monetary sovereignty, could establish its national army, could have chosen the name of their country. The British forces would withdraw from Ireland but would keep three naval ports. The Oath of Allegiance was a thorn in republican hardliners side. The British king would be the formal head of the nation. Albeit it had more or less symbolic meaning. Besides that, his or her majesty would not have any power and Ireland would be as free as ever (Heintz, 2009).

## 1.7. The Irish Civil War

Beneath the superficial unity of Sinn Féin party, there was much vying within the movement regarding personality differences as well as ideologies. This was substantially shown when plenipotentiaries returned to Ireland. The signing of Treaty caused an enormous uproar in the Dáil. The Irish government immediately divided itself into two groups. One that supported the Treaty and the other which rejected it. De Valera read about the Treaty in the Evening Mail before their arrival and was so infuriated by the fact that he was not told before its publication. The following day, De Valera convened a meeting where he called for the resignation of absent plenipotentiaries without hearing delegation's account.

Although, de Valera demurred that Griffith promised to report back before making a final decision and felt offended that the deputies designated by him allegedly decided without apprising president. According to Coogan (2015), there is general agreement that there was hardly any communication between delegates in London and the Irish in Dublin, which is patently untrue. The documents confirm that some of the representatives returned to Ireland every week to report to the Cabinet on what was happening in the negotiations. Collins travelled back almost every weekend. It was only last update of the Treaty, when they did not wait for approval because they had to decide till the next day or war would begin. The Big Fellow argued that they obtained the best deal for Ireland as they could. On 14 December 1921, another meeting of the Dáil took place in Dublin where the participants should decide whether there is consensus on Treaty ratification. Authors generally describe this assembly as a conflict of the two worlds, the realistic one and idealistic. Right after beginning, mudslinging had immediately started. Some of the Sinn Feiners called the Big Fellow a traitor what was relatively mild in comparison to all filthy names which were used that day. Dissension among them was bigger and bigger. Despite the good feeling after peace-making negotiations, Collins described the situation as follows: *"The English Die-Hards said to Mr. Lloyd George and his Cabinet, 'You have surrendered.' Our own Die-Hards say to us, 'You have surrendered.'"* (Talbot, 2011, p. 161)

After three weeks of meetings, they put Treaty to the vote. The result was 64 for and 57 against. The assembly ratified the Treaty on 7 January 1922 and two days later de

Valera offered his resignation from the post of the president. Someone proposed his re-election, and the motion was carried to de Valera's disadvantage. On 10 January, in the absence of de Valera and his supporters, Arthur Griffith was appointed President of the Free State. That could be considered as a herald of the Civil War (Hopkinson, 2014a).

One month after the first debate, the election took place in the Mansion House. The provisional government was formed, and Collins became its Chairman. Although de Valera claimed that the whole nation would be against the Treaty, it proved to be the contrary. People appreciated the acceptance of the Treaty. Even bishops and priests presenting Church's perspective declared for Treaty what was quite crucial in religious Ireland. Over 300 public bodies expressed massive support of ratification compared to five that were against (Sigerson, 2015).

Not only the political scene divided itself into parts but also the military. IRA tended to republicans, and its most significant concern was the allegiance to the Crown. Their vision of the united republic was far more important than peace settlement. Concurrently, an overwhelming majority of the IRB Supreme Council voted for ratification. Although some of them accepted Treaty only on the grounds of their loyalty to Collins. The split was perceptible in the Irish Republican Brotherhood as well (Hopkinson, 2014a).

Since 13 April 1922, IRA forces occupied the Four Courts in Dublin, the erstwhile headquarters of the British power during the Easter Rising. Two weeks later, some of the IRA officers, namely O'Hegarty, Hales and Breen, suggested accepting the Treaty in order to prevent using brute force against former friends and to establish army unification. Even though a group in Four Courts did not share their opinion, promised to maintain truce during peace talks (Hopkinson, 2009).

The British were concerned by the disturbed and unstable political situation in Ireland. Even some British soldiers were executed in Cork and Churchill drew no consequences from it in order to preserve Irish independence. Free State was founded, and the need of its own loyal National Army had emerged.

In the meantime, Collins and de Valera made a pact together as a willingness to cooperate for the common good. Many did not understand why Collins decided to do so, including Griffith and the Brits. De Valera was not interested in the common good of the country, but apparently only in his own. From the British point of view, it appeared as a



breach of the Treaty. Collins believed that if there was a constitution, a sense of peace could be concluded within the Free State (Talbot, 2011).

However, during May and June, the British Parliament invited Griffith together with Collins to discuss the draft of Irish Free State Constitution and its articles. As they presented it, it contravened the ratified Treaty. The British have made it clear that they do not agree with the proposed constitution because it represented de Valera's republican concept instead of the agreed one. Irish deputies accepted British objections leading to a pact-breaking just two days before the general election in Ireland (Coogan, 2015).

During those elections, a system of proportional representation was used for the first time and, in addition, the candidates were clearly identified as to whether or not they supported the Treaty. The election turned out to be positive for the pro-Treaty, which cannot be said of the anti-Treaty. Its supporters gained the largest number of seats within parliament – 58 out of 125 whereas anti-Treaty candidates won only 36 which meant a crushing defeat. Thanks to that, the Provisional government could act as an official authority with given competencies and legitimise the status of a national government. It announced formal dissolving of the Dáil in the mid-July 1922 (Hopkinson, 2014a).

Another event that greatly affected relations with Britain and increased their impatience with the Four Courts rebels was the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson (Hart, 1992). As Hopkinson (2014a) states he was shot dead on 22 June in front of his house in London by two IRA men, namely Reginald Dunne and Joseph O'Sullivan. Some corroborated that Collins was directly involved in the matter of Sir Wilson's assassination.

Churchill and the whole British nation were outraged. They called for justice. It was considered as a gross breach of the Treaty what could not have remained unpunished. The British Cabinet dealt with the Irish matter and decided that in the event of Free State Government's inaction, the British would have to intervene which would entail the military presence in Ireland (Regan, 2007). IRA mutineers in Four Courts hoped for such a scenario because if the British opened fire against them, the Irish would have unified again. However, it did not reach fruition. Collins unwillingly arrived at a conclusion that they had to attack Four Courts preventing repeated occupation by British troops. The Cabinet even offered weapons and ammunition for the attack (Hopkinson, 2014a).

Pro-Treaty supporters called on IRA forces to surrender and leave the Four Courts, otherwise, they would begin bombarding. IRA did not respond to entreaty and remained on

its position. The first shots were fired on 28 June in the morning and returned by the other party. The National Government emphasised that the decision on attacking Four Courts building was made freely without coercion. The conflict lasted eight days, and sixty-five people died, and hundreds were injured. Eventually, anti-Treaty forces surrendered to the National Army on 5 July 1922. The losses were too high whether on lives, destroyed buildings or lost archives in flames.

On 12 August, Arthur Griffith, President of Free State, died as a consequence of a cerebral haemorrhage. The British government was alarmed by his death because Griffith was regarded as the only authentic supporter of the Free State among Irish delegates. William T. Cosgrave was appointed as his successor. Collins learnt about the death of his childhood role model during a tour inspection in the Kerry area. He immediately returned to Dublin so he could attend his funeral. Three days later, after the internment, Collins decided to undertake another inspection trip to Cork County, where he was to meet with various officials and prominent Cork citizens to discuss peace settlement. Collins was in bad health. His colleagues tried to persuade him not to go to Cork due to its occupation by the IRA forces. Despite their warnings, he set out (Talbot, 2011).

## 2. Methodology and Objectives

In recent years, many books have been published on the subject of Michael Collins's death, and it has become increasingly important to know the answer on the long-standing question *What happened to Michael Collins at Béal na mBláth?* The most important thing before starting to write a thesis is to find a research question around which we centre our research, then to evaluate its goals and clarify how we want to achieve them. Therefore, we need to establish a methodology and set objectives. This chapter focuses precisely on that.

### 2.1. Methodology

Determination of the research strategy was essential to progress. First of all, it was necessary to conduct a literature review. It helped to comprehend the topic as a whole. Searching expedient and convenient books for the aim of the thesis brought general knowledge. There have been written many books, but not all of them were relevant to us. We had to evaluate sources. Elimination of irrelevant literature was crucial to reaching reliable and the most authentic result.

The author, Joe Connell, of the book *"Who shot Michael Collins?"* offered an extraordinary perspective on facts about the theories and theories about the facts. It was published in 2018 what puts it among contemporary literature. Connell referred to various theories and then disproved them. Another book we have dealt with is a book with the same title as this thesis, namely *"The Assassination of Michael Collins: What Happened at Béal na mBláth?"* written by a lecturer in history and social anthropology, S.M. Sigerson. She has also mentioned hitherto unpublished theories, which, according to some, were identified as conspiracies. It offered testimonials from ambush participants that were subsequently analysed. Some statements corroborated each other, and some did not. The third book of our primal concern was a biography by Tim Pat Coogan – Michael Collins. Although it did not provide us with various theories on the ambush, it mainly shaped a picture of Collins's life before his death. We formed a fundamental idea of his position in Easter Rising 1916, also during the War for Independence as well as the Civil War.

This thesis used mostly descriptive and comparative research method in order to answer its research question, which was *What happened to Michael Collins at Béal na mBláth?* The collected materials, together with scientific articles, were amassed for the best possible understanding of the topic. The availability of relevant literature in Slovakia is considerably limited. Naturally, we also looked for suitable books in Slovak libraries but failed to find anything applicable. We expected such an outcome, so we decided to order a number of books from abroad or to borrow them online. In addition to the books mentioned above, we have worked with others as well.

We adopted a qualitative research approach to collect and analyse data. The reason why the quantitative research approach was not chosen is apparent. By observing, comparing and analysing, we answered the research question of our thesis. The complex subject of Collins's fateful day was examined in our thesis.

Thanks to Collins 22 Society which provides for those interested in Collins's life plenty of different articles, free online books as well as other material, we found enormous number of records from the archives regarding negotiations with the British after the peace settlement, and also transcripts from provisional government meetings. Moreover, the peace agreement between Ireland and Britain, the so-called Treaty, was published there for viewing.

Critical and careful examination of rendered facts by other authors was introduced. Due to that, we were able to make use of gathered materials. With the help of Academia.edu, a website, which is a platform for academics to share research papers, we had access to research papers from around the world. There are also presented reviews of books.

The website JSTOR.org is a research and teaching platform in the form of a digital library. It serves students, researchers, as well as scholars. There are published articles from renowned journals, primary sources and books that help to get an overview of the topic. It has a similar function as academia.edu, connecting publishers with readers.

## **2.2.Objectives**

The main objective of the diploma thesis was to accurately and systematically describe the last day of the Irish leader. It was necessary to compare ambush descriptions

made by different authors. Some described the event in detail, some superficially. It was time-consuming to find out whether the authors substantiate their statements with some objective evidence or only spread the hearsay and statements of those who were involved.

Our secondary aim was to attempt to point out the different views of ambush participants and their statements. Some authors had conducted interviews from both parties when they were still alive. The others depicted the event based on the nameless eyewitness.

Thanks to the statements that have only recently come to light, we can say that we have succeeded in summarising the given accounts in such a way as to exclude those that were at first sight untrue.

The sub-objective has been set in order to delineate Collins's life. It acted as an introduction to his world and relationships so that even a reader who had not been previously familiar with the remarkable story of Michael Collins learnt what led to the events that had taken place at Béal na mBláth.

Eventually, we must admit that the chosen methodology led to confusion sometimes. We encountered difficulties in analysing data due to its quantity. So many contradictory theories were published that sometimes it was not possible to discover or verify the primary source of the account.

### 3. Results and Discussion

So far, this paper has focused on Michael Collins's life and his effort to achieve independence and freedom of Ireland. The following section will discuss the last day of the great man who was shot dead in his homeland at Béal na mBláth, which stands as some sources state for "mouth of flowers". A summary of the main findings, together with a detailed description of an unsolved conundrum of Collins's end, is provided in this chapter. Several different theories will be introduced. Some of them might be corroborated, others disproved.

#### 3.1. The Fateful Day

On Sunday, 20 August 1922, Michael Collins went for an official inspection to the Cork area. Several associates tried to persuade him not to go. They feared the danger that might have awaited him in his homeland due to the unstable and unsteady situation in the state. According to witnesses, the Big Fellow answered following to their concerns: *'my own fellow county men will not kill me.'* He has been in charge of several ministries for the last few months, and that has also affected his health. Despite being ill, he decided to go. (Sigerson, 2015).

That fateful morning of 22 August, Collins and his convoy set out from Army General Headquarters in Cork approximately at 6 am. The fatal itinerary was set. They headed first to Macroom, then south to Bandon, and continued west to Clonakilty and Skibbereen. They made several stops along the way.

General Michael Collins was sitting in the back of a yellow Leyland Thomas Straight Eight touring car borrowed from Churchill's acquaintance with the canvas roof down. Together with him, there were two drivers in front and one officer next to him, Emmet Dalton. Dalton was the Big Fellow's brainchild and joined IRA just before Bloody Sunday occurred. It was he who arranged a plane for Collins during negotiations with Britain to bring him safely back to Dublin if there was no agreement and the war was declared. He would be in danger (Kennedy, 2005).

Collins was accompanied by a full military escort composed of about 25 men. Lieut. John Joseph Smith was heading the convoy on his motorcycle. His central role was to find out if there were any roadblocks in front of them and if there was any danger lurking on them because, at that time, Anti-Treaty forces were destroying bridges and obstructing roads with fallen trees so that they would not be passable and they would have complete control over who went down the road.

Furthermore, it consisted of a Crossley tender commanded by an officer Sean O'Connell, along with eight soldiers, a driver and two Lewis machine gunners. The last part of an escort group was riding in the armoured car, Rolls Royce Whippet, also called Slievanamon. The crew comprising one driver, co-driver, two privates and one of them Jock McPeak the gunner for water-cooled machine gun closed the convoy. Some argue that Collins's convoy was insufficient in terms of troop numbers as well as unpreparedness to take action against the enemy. Cork county was also known for many opponents of the Treaty living in the area. Therefore, jeopardy could lurk just around the corner.

The first stop was at Macroom barracks, which they also visited a day before, to deliver some supplies to Captain Conlon. The escort purportedly picked a guide up who knew the area. They left the city at 8 am headed towards Béal na mBláth where they halted to ask the way. A man who gave them directions was a member of anti-Treaty forces. From there they continued to the next stopover, to Bandon. Collins arranged a private meeting with General Sean Hales, whom he considered a friend since childhood. Connell (2018) suggests that Collins informed Hales of possible peace negotiations between supporters and opponents of the Treaty which should have taken place in Cork that evening. Hence Hales immediately began organizing the meeting of civil war IRA/IRB neutrals. Collins also told him about a meeting with Florence O'Donoghue, a head of the Cork County IRA unit, the night before in order to discuss possible steps to a ceasefire (Egan, 2019).

From their lunch break at the Callinan's Pub in Clonakilty, they proceeded to Sam's Cross, the small village next to Woodfield. He met his family at the inn owned by his cousin, in the Four Alls Pub. According to Sigerson (2015), Collins disappeared for half an hour to meet someone who was supposed to give him some information about the anti-Treaty forces. Then the party went on to Rosscarbery and Skibbereen afterwards. Feehan (1991) points out that at Rosscarbery Collins spoke with Captain Sean McCarthy,

who allegedly warned him that some ex-British privates are in his unit and plan to kill him. In Skibbereen, Collins carried out his last inspection, listened to commanding officers' complaints as well as suggestions and embarked on a journey back to Cork where he should meet war neutrals. On the way, the escort stopped again in Bandon where they met several Free State officers. For unknown and obscure reasons, they went back along the same road, which was unusual for the military, especially from a strategic point of view.

The escort left Lee's Hotel in Bandon, and General Collins supposedly told Dalton: *"If we run into an ambush along the way, we will stand and fight them."* (Dalton, 2008) His prophecy was soon fulfilled. As they approached the village Béal na mBláth, a small group of anti-Treaty soldiers, the remainder of an ambush party was still in the place. That encounter had fatal consequences, which affected Irish history in a way that nothing else did. At the age of 31, General Michael Collins died at Béal na mBláth.

### **3.2. The Ambush and its Participants**

At the close of the day when they were heading towards Cork, and the sun was setting down, Michael Collins was shot dead on 22 August 1922. As discussed above, Collins was driving with his party through a shallow desolate valley in Cork County called Béal na mBláth which is situated between Macroom, Crookstown and Bandon. The convoy consisted of four vehicles. First of them was a motorcycle which monitored the situation on the route. The second one was a lorry known as a Crossley tender which carried 12 soldiers, followed by Leyland touring car with Collins, the commander of the pro-Treaty troops in Cork, Emmet Dalton, and two drivers aboard. The last of the mentioned vehicles was armoured Rolls Royce named Slievenamon carrying several soldiers and machine gunner Jock McPeak.

When the firing began General Dalton, who was in charge of this convoy commanded to accelerate and according to himself said: *"Drive like hell."* (Younger, 1968, p.427) Collins did not want to drive away without fighting them back, so he countermanded the order and made them stop. The crew stepped out of the vehicles and returned fire. The crew of the third vehicle in which the Big Fellow travelled, was hiding behind the lorry, but Collins decided to change his position and left the safe place. He saw retreating ambushers, so he ran 15 yards, approximately 14 meters, up the road and then it



happened. The Irish leader was fatally wounded by a single gunshot to his head, precisely speaking behind his right ear (Forester, 2006).

Accounts of ambush participants reveal many inconsistencies. None of those statements matches each other completely, which makes it challenging to investigate the cause of his death. Nor can we assume that all the preserved statements were true. Nevertheless, they have been spread as relevant theories. Some claims can be refuted based on other sources. We will first describe salient points that are agreed.

Regarding the location, the terrain was hummocky, and hills were on both sides of the road, and it was more winding than it is now, which is supported by the fact that the convoy was divided by a bend into two parts. There is a general consensus that anti-Treaty troops were waiting for the convoy. They deliberately blocked the road with a cart and laid mines on the ground so the first car in the column would have blown up. The ambush was aimed directly at Collins and his convoy. Many also claim and among them Deasy (1994) that anti-Treaty troops were in place for several hours, but when the convoy did not appear for a long time, they thought they were returning by another route and therefore decided to leave their positions. Only a fraction of the ambush party remained at Béal na mBláth. Possible firing start time ranged from 7:15 to 7:30 pm and ended about when Collins died approximately 30 minutes after the first shot was fired.

### *3.2.1. The Free State Party Accounts*

The convoy that accompanied Michael Collins on his journey through Cork county consisted of 25 men. We cannot forget that their only and most important task was to protect the Big Fellow from possible attacks which they failed. Among them were experienced soldiers, such as a member of the famous Collins's Squad unit, also known as the twelve apostles. It is worth noting that no official investigation has been launched and Dalton's report was published a year later. Some even deliberately exaggerated the number of ambushers, to conceal the fact that the most important man of the Free State, died at the ambush caused by a small party consisting of five remaining ambushers. Therefore, some men of the convoy confirmed the presence of 200 Treaty opponents. At that time, it would be challenging to admit that they had failed in their role. It could have been life-threatening situation. So instead, they came up with their version.

There is too high tendency to idealize and romanticize Collins's death which is also aided by some eyewitness accounts, such as Dalton's. Sigerson (2015) calls it as impeccable and unexamined gospel. Dalton's description of the event is often used in books about General Michael Collins as an objective testimony. Interestingly, it was not published until a year after the tragedy, which could indicate the need to unify the testimonies and decide how to present them.

Dalton's words as he reputedly said to the driver of the touring car "Drive like a hell", should point to the fact that without Collins's contradictory decision to stop and fight them, the convoy would have continued, and nobody would have been hurt or wounded. Although a motorcyclist Smith corroborates Dalton's statements, we must realize that he was at the head of the convoy and logically could not hear it. The driver to whom it was addressed, did not catch that command (Sigerson, 2015).

Dalton describes it as a very moving scene. He claims that he knelt by dying Michael's body and that his name was one of the last things General Collins said which is improbable when a person has a large gaping hole on the head. Dalton reported another odd thing that the convoy came under such heavy fire that it shattered the windscreen. However, it was refuted by other participants. It is hard to believe that in the touring car without the roof, nobody would be wounded under the heavy fire and especially after shattering the windscreen (Emmet Dalton remembers, 2017).

What follows is an account of the motorcyclist Lieutenant Smith. He is said to be the second wounded man in the whole ambush, besides Collins. The statement attributed to him was the first published two days after the ambush on 24 August 1922. He was a quarter of a mile (approximately 0,4 km) ahead of the General's car when someone started firing at him and hit him in hand. Others of Free State party claimed that lieutenant was injured in the neck while taking General Collins's body of the scene. If he were shot, he would have been definitely taken to the hospital which neither medical record nor other accounts supported, or the injury was such that it did not require medical treatment. Moreover, when Smith was supposed to leave the ambush in the touring car with dead Collins. He also exaggerated the time of the shootout, the duration of which he estimated at an hour (Sigerson, 2015).

In his book, Feehan (1991) describes the ambush based on the testimony of one of the last survivors. After the death of the eyewitness, he also mentions his name. It was

William McKenna, a soldier from the Crossley tender. The book was published during his lifetime, and therefore he was able to correct Feehan in case of misunderstanding. McKenna's view differs from the statements made by other members of the fateful convoy. His answer is more in line with the anti-Treaty view than with his associates. He claims that although Collins was out of his sight during the ambush, he can certainly say that his opponents did not kill him. Based on his military experience, he could easily distinguish the sound of a projectile or whether it was a machine gun or another type of weapon. Being interviewed by Feehan, William McKenna was no longer afraid of the possible consequences as in wartime.

John "Jock" McPeak is considered as one of the most controversial participants in the escort. He was responsible for operating the Vickers machine gun situated on the armoured car. According to him, those weapons were not reliable and often jammed what allegedly happened during the ambush what contradicts Dalton's statement who claimed that the ambushers were under heavy fire due to the Vickers. Shortly after General Collins time has come to an end, he joined the anti-Treaty forces. Later, the Free State accused him of vehicles theft which remained at the ambush (Sigerson, 2015).

### *3.2.2. The Ambush Party Accounts*

Anti-Treaty representatives present at the ambush are in most cases seen as perpetrators of the assassination. Before anything else, we need to determine the possible number of the anti-Treaty privates involved. It has commonly been assumed that there were up to ten of them. Initial estimates from the Free State were greatly exaggerated. The ambushing group initially consisted of 20-25 men, but in the afternoon as they found out that Collins is still in Bandon, they came to a conclusion that Collins will not return along the same way, so the ambush was called off. Some of them decided to leave the valley and walked to the Long's Pub in Béal na mBláth. The rest remained in order to clear the road and remove mines. Those were Jim Hurley, Tom Hales, Dan Holland, Paddy Walsh, Sonny O'Neill, Dan Corcoran, Sonny Donovan, Tom Kelleher, John O'Callaghan and Bill Desmond (Sigerson, 2015).

Suddenly, the Free State party was approaching from the south. The ambushers were frightened that the escort would have caught up the retreating part unexpectedly.

Therefore, they discharged two warning shots to attract the Treaty supporters' attention. Hurley aimed at the cyclist Smith but missed. Kelleher fired the second shot on the next car. As for the weapons used, the Republicans only had rifles and revolvers. However, the other group possessed two machine guns.

From their perspective, the ambush lasted about 20 to 30 minutes. They claimed to have taken a disadvantageous position. Since Collins's convoy was armed with machine guns, it was virtually unimaginable to stand up, so they shot randomly at their enemies. It was a misty evening, and it was getting dark, the Big Fellow's convoy suddenly set off, and the shootout stopped at almost 8 pm. Unaware of an actuality that someone had died, followed their comrades-in-arms to the Long's Pub, where they reported that there were no casualties on either side.

According to O'Mahony (1996), Republicans admitted they were sworn to secrecy and had to maintain the confidentiality that they could not reveal who was present in the ambush or what happened there. Naturally, Collins's demise shocked the whole of Ireland and Britain, and nobody wanted to hold the responsibility and answer for it.

### **3.3.Theories on Possible Perpetrators**

At a glance, we could easily accuse anyone of being guilty of General's demise, but it would be only based on circumstantial evidence. Many historians, authors, journalists and other enthusiasts for the political situation in Ireland tried to put forward various theories on the possible perpetrator who after his or her disclosure would become a social pariah. This section discusses possible suspects of the Michael Collins's murder. Although several theories about who did it were written, there is no consensus about the exact name of the assassinator. We will also focus on authors who present their theories in books, from which we then draw our conclusions.

The thing that needs to be explained is the reason why Michael Collins decided to visit a Command Area of General Dalton, and how could have led this visit to his death. The first one suggests that Anti-Treaty troops did not like activities of Michael Collins in the County. According to Dalton, there were two objectives of Collins visit: soldiers and money. Firstly, he came to check up on the problem which the Military was facing at that

time and say a few words of encouragement and thankfulness. Secondly, Collins wanted to ensure that money would not go to Anti-Treaty forces that they would have not increased in power. Collins talked to bankers, and also to parish priests who collected money and insisted on not giving the resources to the Republicans (McDonnell, 2008).

While there were only two main reasons for Collins visit in the County, there are several conspiracy theories about the way he died. However, without much evidence. Every author has brought something new to this case, either elucidation or even more chaos and confusion. Some Anti-Treaty soldiers claimed that it was a British spy in his own column who killed Collins. Some Pro-Treaty members suspected de Valera, one of the Republican leaders and former colleague of Collins, full of animosity and rivalry towards him from the past. The main weakness of this theory is the fact that we do not have any direct proof of him wanting Collins to get killed. On the contrary, he reportedly said that it would be loss if Collins would be killed because he could be replaced by a lesser man (Mills, 1998).

Another suggestion would be the person of Jock McPeak who, while at that time belonging to the same party as Collins, defected from Pro-Treaty to Anti-Treaty in three months after Collins's death (Egan, 2018). The defection of one man from the convoy to the Anti-Treaty side arouses suspicion. During the ambush, he had problems with the machine gun, which was jammed, and we can only speculate whether it was on purpose or not.

However, the closest to the truth and the commonest seems to be the theory on Dennis Sonny O'Neill. Anti-treaty IRA volunteers waited on Collins and his convoy to return to Cork via the same route which they passed that morning. The Republican fighters ensured he would come back so they destroyed few bridges and put a roadblock on the route. Collins's visit prolonged so at the end of the day there were just up to ten men left, O'Neill being one of them. Among the Republicans, everybody knew, and also their commander in the ambush admitted that it was the bullet of O'Neill.

Moreover, this was supported by several eyewitnesses who confirmed that he was the one who fired the fatal shot. Although there was no official interrogation of suspects, it is said that O'Neill admitted to one of the IRA intelligence officer Dowling that he killed Collins. Jim Kerney, one of the last survivors of the ambush, confirmed off-camera O'Neill's guilt (Buckley, 2013).

Everything is just alleged testimony of his guilt. If we knew the specific names of the witnesses, we could draw better conclusions, but it would be unfair to label someone a murderer without sufficient evidence. O'Neill reportedly told his family on his deathbed that he had not killed Collins. There are also at least seven men who said they did it or at least thought so and O'Neill among them. Authors who identified O'Neill as the killer at the end of their research include Tim Pat Coogan (2015), a renowned journalist, and Meda Ryan (1989).

The author challenges the widely held view that suggests the guilt of the ambusher and put forward other theory. The theory of the British secret agent's infiltration into Collins's convoy resembles a conspiracy, but Sigerson considers it probable. *"It is offered that isolating Collins from the rest of the party in this way, was key to his assassination. The C-in-C could hardly be attacked in the presence of such a numerous escort."* (Sigerson, 2015, p. 231) Sigerson is a lecturer in history and social anthropology. As the main reason, she states that he was murdered because of his North Policy, and the British wanted the exact opposite. That would indicate that someone took advantage of the meandering of the road, was left alone with Collins and shot him at point-blank range.

Donald Kennedy (2005) remarked a noteworthy thing that whether a man who died in a battle with a gun in his hand could be referred to as an assassination. Some even liken his death to the murder of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

The most prominent finding to emerge from the analysis of Michael Collins's assassination is that we cannot accuse anyone in particular. Firstly, maybe only the Free State Government for not insisting on the investigation of their dead leader. Secondly, de Valera for being guilty of rabble-rousing. His well-known quote *'The Volunteers... in order to achieve freedom, will have to march over the dead bodies of their brothers. They will have to wade through Irish blood.'* (Coogan, 2015, p.376), encouraged many idealistic and nationalistic men to fight for the Republic and freedom at all costs.

Collins's death is full of contradictions, and it seems that everyone must form his or her own opinion and choose between theories. Upon scrutiny, a great deal of relevant material does exist, but it does not guarantee a straightforward solution. His suspicious death always remains a mystery and unsolved conundrum. Most authors do not dare to label anyone and let the reader choose. In this way of conclusion, we also consider the best. All ambush participants are dead today. It is not for us to judge.

### 3.4. Medical Records and the Weapon

A more detailed account of Collins's fatal injury is given in the following section. The most challenging problem in clarifying Collins's murder is the inconsistency of testimonies as well as impartiality and disinterest in the subject. We consider it to be a shortcoming that we cannot verify statements of witnesses or ask other questions that have arisen in connection with this research. However, we must rely only on other authors and their ability to discern logical and objective conclusions from illogical and subjective. Public access to selected archives was also allowed what facilitates the collecting of materials.

An official investigation of the Big Fellow's murder was never launched, nor formal independent autopsy performed. The only aim of the attending physician was to determine the cause of death. However, even medical reports are not identical. The only thing people agreed on was that there was a gaping wound to the back of his head, behind his right ear. If only we knew the weapon that killed Collins, we could identify the shooter, because each side used different weapons.

Collins's corpse was first examined by Dr. Ahern, who saw that the Big Fellow is beyond medical help and pronounced him dead. It took place outside the Imperial Hotel in Cork. Subsequently, they transported his remains to the Shanakiel Hospital. It was a British medical facility designated mostly for First World War veterans. Later Dr Leo Ahern and Dr Michael Riodarn conducted the autopsy. Doctor Kelly corroborates Riodarn and Ahern that Collins had only an entrance wound and no exit wound (Connell, 2018). According to Lenihan (2013) Dr Riodarn was young and more or less inexperienced in this field so he conformed to Dr Ahern's expertise.

Dr Patrick Cagney, experienced war doctor who has seen many injuries caused by various weapons, confirmed the presence of the entry wound as well as the exit wound. Three days later another, fourth, examination of Collins's remains took place at that hospital. Sigerson concluded from the evidence that he was shot at point-blank range. *"There was a large part of the flesh under the right ear blown away, and Gogarty had fitted the cavity with a wax-like substance. Close to the left ear, there was a small circular wound which seemed "bluish" in colour."* (Sigerson, 2015, p. 310) This autopsy was performed by Dr Oliver St. John Gogarty in the presence of William McKenna, Moira

Llewellyn Davies, Collins's relatives and Desmond Fitzgerald who would later in 1932 when the political party Fianna Fáil won the election, became Minister of Defence. He allegedly gave the order to burn files related to Collins's death and the Civil war crimes (Connell, 2018). Feehan (1991) states that Dr Gogarty allegedly later admitted the small wound behind Collins's left ear.

Given these ambiguities, we may guess and speculate whether he had only one massive wound on the back of his head or there were at least two of them. Free State units had a reason to cover up real ambush events. Their lives were at stake. The fact that 25 men failed to protect Collins is more than disturbing. Especially when it was their only job to take care of their general's life, if, by chance, they were found to be responsible, either consciously or unconsciously, for Collins's death, they would be lost forever.

It remains a matter of conjecture whether it was dum-dum, ricochet bullet or any other kind of bullet what ended his life. The theory of ricochet bullet may be considered as the most suitable, beneficial and advantageous theory for everyone involved in the ambush. The Commander-in-Chief died by a chance, and no one could have been charged with his murder. Neither his fellow combatants nor his adversaries would be responsible. It could appear as an unfortunate coincidence that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, Connell refutes the ricochet theory and regards it as untenable. *"Bullets that have ricocheted from the steel or armoured plate have a very distinctive flat spot that is characteristic of the material where the contact has been made. Once it enters body, the bullet will, due to its inherent unstable condition, tumble end over end, leaving a large irregular wound channel."* (Connell, 2018, p.29)

The second most popular theory of a murder weapon is the dum-dum one. Those expanding bullets increased in diameter on impact for faster incapacitation. It is known that IRA members used those projectiles during that time. The Irish state pathologist Dr Harbison came up with another possible theory. Based on further examination of ballistics neither ricochet nor dum-dum killed him. It was a rifle. *"It was a high-velocity rifle from above. The bullet entered behind the left ear, and the wound at the back of the head was an exit wound."* (Connell, 2018, p. 30)

All this considered, we must come to terms with the fact that his death will remain unresolved forever. A possible shift in the case could only occur after the disinterment of



Collins's body. However, even that would not necessarily bring the desired answers. It would be helpful if at least one of the many obscurities was clarified.

Even though if Michael Collins would have survived the ambush, he would not probably escape the death. Collins was well-known for his repeated risk-taking. He was continually crossing the territory of his enemies in order to find a peace settlement. Béal na mBláth, in the end, seemed like a mere coincidence – every valley and every hill, bend on the road could have been a possible crime scene. This all stems from the fact that the name of Michael Collins was already on the official Irish Republican Brotherhood death list, so the place or the time was secondary. Even if he knew, he would have not stopped trying to achieve peace and protect civilians (Brady, 2010).

## Conclusion

This diploma thesis dealt with an important topic regarding the unsolved murder of one of the greatest politicians in Ireland. It happened in the midst of turmoil between anti-Treaty and pro-Treaty forces. Despite all authors' efforts, the death of the Irish leader, General Michael Collins, remains a mystery. It is not easy to prove who the assassinator was, especially when the time passed, and witnesses died. Michael Collins was a man of reconciliation. He always tried to find a way which could have brought unification of Ireland so they could get the freedom that they had fought for. Michael Collins was most probably the victim of the political situation of the day. He was a representative of one out of two quarrelling parties during the Civil War.

The first chapter captured his childhood, adolescence, years spent in London, as well as Easter Rising in 1916. It delineated Collins's development from an ordinary boy full of ideals living at the farm near Cork into impressive Irish leader whom some admired, and some regarded him as a traitor. The most ground-breaking part of this chapter was the signing of the Treaty when Irish society split, and instead of the War of Independence, the Civil War started. Although Ireland did not achieve complete independence from Britain, it gained full power over internal and economic affairs, which was the first step towards the nation's freedom. They also managed to persuade the British to withdraw their troops from Ireland. Loyalty to the monarch was also a problem for die-hard Republicans, even though it had more or less a symbolic function.

The second presented chosen methodology, literature review, as well as set objectives. The main aim was to describe the last day of the Big Fellow as detailed as possible. In the beginning, we selected our research question, which is *What happened to Michael Collins at Béal na mBláth?* and focused on available and reliable literature obtained mostly from abroad. We introduced several books that influenced our academic research and tried to evaluate the credibility of chosen sources. The qualitative research was preferred to a quantitative one. Our approach was to collect, analyse and compare data in order to answer our research question.

The third chapter described the death of the Irish leader, which is surrounded by many inconsistencies and unresolved mysteries. None of the testimonies of the participants is alike. Everyone describes it differently. It was easier for Collins's companions to say

that 200 men ambushed them than to admit that there were only 10 or less of them. Another suspicious fact is the inability of the new Free State Government to investigate the death of its leader. Even a folder with records regarding his death and crimes of the Civil war was to be burned in the 1930s as a part of a reprisal. In the case of the ambush party, we cannot claim that they were enthusiastic about the death of their former friend, but again, we cannot completely exclude it. Perhaps the most striking thing which aroused is the fact that Collins was the only one casualty.

Many people, including us, have tried to shed some light on this case. Some have succeeded, others have not. From the beginning, there were several conspiracies created by Collins's contemporaries. We may say that every author has his or her version, but many fingers point to Sonny O'Neill who belonged to Anti-treaty IRA fighters and were seen at the ambush where Collins was killed. It is said that he confirmed his deed to the commander of the ambush party, and everybody knew that it was the O'Neill's bullet which caused the death of Michael Collins. Despite the fact that he was probably killed by IRA member, General Michael Collins hung between life and death for a long time. His remarkable story will never be forgotten. Although, many believed and still believe that Sonny O'Neill is guilty of killing Collins, it was not substantiated with objective evidence. As we know, it was getting dark when the exchange of fire occurred and none of the ambushers knew that Collins was dead.

In this diploma thesis, we hoped to separate scientifically supported claims from pseudoscientific chaff. Due to the size and time constraints imposed on this thesis, we could not cover all details about Collins's young life, administrative work, Ulster issue, Northern Policy, involvement in the negotiations, as well as his relations whether to all members of Provisional Government of a new fledging state, IRA/IRB members or to die-hards Republicans. The most important limitation lies in the fact that we have to rely only on the testimonies of the people who adjusted it and changed their accounts over years.

Modern Irish democracy is built on the foundations that Collins made. People say if one wants to be a hero, he or she needs to be five things. One needs to be young, charismatic, good-looking, intelligent and dead. And that is exactly Collins's case.

## Resumé

Michael Collins dodnes patrí k najvýznamnejším osobnostiam írskej histórie. Človek, ktorého niektorí zbožňovali a druhí pokladali za samozvaného diktátora. Jeho smrť je plná kontroverzie. Množstvo kníh bolo napísaných ohľadom jeho krátkeho, ale zato zaujímavého života. Autori sa často opierajú o nepodložené fakty a úlohou tejto diplomovej práce bolo rozlíšiť medzi zdrojmi pravými a nepravými.

Michael Collins sa narodil 16. októbra 1890 v oblasti zvanej Cork. Pochádzal z farmárskej rodiny, ktorá žila vo Woodfielde. Jeho rodičia boli pomerne vzdelaní ľudia. Jeho otec, Michael Collins senior, zomrel, keď mal Michael šesť rokov a na svojej smrteľnej posteli povedal toto: *“Jedného dňa bude z neho skvelý muž a urobí veľa dobrého pre Írsko.”* Otcove tušenie sa naplnilo. Už ako mladý sa zaujímal o írsky národ. Rodičia ich vychovávali v katolíckej viere a rozvíjali v nich lásku k írskym piesňam a literatúre. Počas raného detstva bol ovplyvnený viacerými tútormi, ku ktorým vzhliadal. Medzi nimi bol aj jeho budúci kolega Arthur Griffith.

V roku 1906 sa presťahoval do Londýna za svojou sestrou Hannie. Život v Londýne pre chlapca ako Michael nebol jednoduchý. Rád sa domu túlal po planinách a uvažoval nad Írskom. Viacero autorov uvádza, že sa zaplietol so zlou spoločnosťou. Mladý Collins nikdy neobľuboval tímové hry, ale napriek tomu sa pridil k hurlingovému klubu Geraldine, ktorý zastrešovala Gaelská atletická asociácia. Tú podporovali finančne bohatí Íri, aby mladé Írky a Íri mohli dostať vzdelanie. Collins sa nejaký čas stal tajomníkom tejto asociácie. V tom istom čase sa pridil so svojím priateľom z práce k Írskemu republikánskemu bratstvu, ktoré bojovalo za vytvorenie nezávislej demokratickej republiky. Zhruba po roku pôsobenia v tajnom bratstve sa stal jeho tajomníkom. V Londýne sa majoritne vzdelával vo finančnej oblasti a to najmä ohľadom daní, obchodného práva, účtovníctva, ďalej sa zaujímal o politiku, filozofiu a vystupovanie na verejnosti. V roku 1915 chcela Británia zaviesť povinnú vojenskú službu, ktorá mala vstúpiť do platnosti už nasledujúci rok a preto Michael rozhodol, že podá výpoveď a vráti sa do svojho milovaného Írska, kde toto nariadenie nebolo.

Po svojom návrate do Írska, si našiel prácu ako finančný poradca v rodine Plunkettovcov, kde spoznal syna zamestnávateľa, Josepha Plunketta, ktorý bol hlavnou postavou Veľkonočného povstania. Hlavným cieľom tejto rebélie bolo oslabiť nadvládu

Británie nad Írskom a takti ež bojovať o nezávislosť. Na veľkonočný pondelok obsadili Dobrovoľníci Hlavnú poštu v Dubline, kde vyvesili írsku zástavu a Persai prečítal proklamáciu. Celé to trvalo týždeň, potom sa rozhodli kapitulovať, pretože straty civilistov boli priveľké. Írsky národ nebol príliš nadšený týmto počinom. Zomrelo veľa civilistov a mnoho ich bolo zranených. Hlavných predstaviteľov zajali a niektorých z nich potajme popravili. Medzi nimi bol aj Collinson mentor Plunkett. Michael sa dostal do nápravného zariadenia vo Frongochus. Práve tu dostal prezývku the Big Fellow, čo môžeme voľne preložiť ako veľký muž. Vo väzení sa stal prirodzenou autoritou. Vynikal vo fyzickej sile a nebál sa autorít. Svojim spoluväzňom odporúčal, aby sa neidentifikovali dozorcom, pretože by mohli byť zaradení do vojenskej služby Británie. Našťastie mu udelili amnestiu a 21. decembra ho pustili na slobodu.

Po povstaní ľudia vítali preživších ako hrdinov. Count Plunkett bol vylúčený z Kráľovskej spoločnosti v Dubline len preto, že jeho synovia sa zúčastnili rebélie. Tento čin sa stretol s veľkým nepochopením. Collins si zaumienil, že so svojimi spoluväzňami pomôžu získať Plunkettovi miesto v Britskom parlamente. Jeho kampaň postavili na nepravosti, ktorej sa mu dostalo ako členovi váženej rodiny írskych patriotov. Jeho kandidatúra bolo úspešná, avšak do parlamentu neprišiel. Bolo to na znak, že Íri si zaslúžia svoj vlastný parlament v ich krajine. Collins spoločne s Thomason Asheom zreorganizoval IRB, čo bolo podľa nich nevyhnutné pre oslobodenia Írska.

V roku 1918 sa konali voľby v Írsku. Obyvatelia jasne ukázali, kam chcú smerovať svoju krajinu. Strana Arthura Griffitha, Sinn Féin, vyhrala. Svojim voličom sľúbili, že sa odtrhnú od Britského parlamentu. Na prvom stretnutí Írskeho parlamentu sa zúčastnilo len 26 zo 73 zvolených, pretože niektorí boli vo väzení alebo v zahraničí. V ten istý deň zabili prívrženci Írskej národnej armády dvoch britských policajtov, čo sa považuje za začiatok Britsko-írskej vojny. Collins pomohol de Valerovi utiecť z väzenia a prepašoval ho na loď do Ameriky, kde mal získať finančné prostriedky a podporu republiky.

Michael rýchlo pochopil, že jediným spôsobom, ako sa vymaniť spod britskej nadvlády, je vybudovať vlastnú tajnú službu, ktorá by eliminovala tú druhú. Podarilo sa mu infiltrovať niektorých mužov do anglických jednotiek. Collins hľadaný britskými agentmi a za jeho prezradenie alebo zabitie ponúkali finančnú odmenu. Nemali jeho podobizeň, preto ho bolo ťažké nájsť. Azda najkrutejším dňom tejto vojny bolo Krvavá nedeľa, ktorá sa odohrala 21. novembra 1920, keď Collins nariadil zabitie 20

prvotriednych britských agentov, ktorí boli najatí na jeho zabitie. Odplata na seba nenechala dlho čakať. Poobede Briti zabili na futbalovom štadióne 14 ľudí a stovky zranili. Ľudia boli vyčerpaní a dôsledky nepokojov sa ich bytostne dotýkali. Nakoniec vtedajší britský premiér, Lloyd George, rozhodol, že táto situácia je neúnosná a navrhol prímerie, ktoré bolo vyhlásené a podpísané oboma stranami 11. júla 1921.

Rokovania o podmienkach mierovej zmluvy začali hneď na druhý deň. De Valera zostavil delegáciu, ktorá sa vydala na cestu do Londýna. Medzi zvolenými zástupcami bol Griffith, Plunkett, Stack, Barton, Childers a samotný prezident. Collins nástojil, že chce ísť s nimi, čo mu nebolo umožnené s odôvodnením, že de Valera ho nechcel vystaviť nebezpečenstvu. Koniec Anglo-írskej vojny priniesol úľavu hlavne obyčajnému ľudu. Boli vyčerpaní a straty na majetku ako aj na životoch boli neúnosné. Po príchode z Londýna si de Valera s britským premiérom, Llyodom Georgom, vymenili niekoľko listov, v ktorých mu zástupca kabinetu jasne vysvetliť ich postoj k Írskej republike. Z toho vyplynulo, že status republiky určite nezískajú.

V septembri sa začali dohadovať ďalšie stretnutia medzi Britmi a Írmi. Eamon de Valera bol považovaný za najlepšieho vyjednávača v Írsku. Bolo prirodzené, keby bol na čele delegácie a šiel opäť do Londýna. To to však odmietol. Hovoril, že on ako prezident je symbolom republiky a preto musí ostať v Dubline. Miesto toho poslal Arthura Griffitha ako lídra, Michaela Collinsa, Gavina Duffyho, Eamonna Duggana, Roberta Bartona, a tajomníka Erskinea Childersa. Collins nechcel ísť. Nemal žiadne skúsenosti s rokovaniami. Prišiel si ako zbytočný, hoci de Valera ho uistoval o opak. Mnohí autori tvrdia, že to spravil zámerne. Poslal Collins ako obetného baránka. Michael patrila donedávna medzi najhládanejších mužov Británie, za ktorého hlavu ponúkali finančnú odmenu a teraz mal dobrovoľne vstúpiť do jamy levovej. Po dlhých prehováraniach sa ho podarilo presvedčiť.

Írski zástupcovia sa 11. októbra 1921 stretli s britskými lídrami a to konkrétne s premiérom Lloyd Georgeom, Austinom Chamberlainom, Lordom Birkenheadom, Winstonom Churchillom, Sir Georgeom Howartom, Sir Lamingtonom Evansom and Sir Hamarom Greenwoodom na známej adrese 10 Downing Street v Londýne. Museli sa prediskutovať tri hlavné otázky, a to otázku lojality voči britskej korune, jednotu Írska v súvislosti s provinciou Ulster a rozsah írskej nezávislosti. Hoci mali írski zástupcovia skoro plnú moc, museli pred rozhodnutím upovedomiť kabinet.

Po dvoch mesiacoch stretnutí, vyjednávania a cestovania z Londýna do Dublinu a naspäť, sa obe strany ocitli v slepej uličke. Britský premiér povedal, že ak sa nerozhodnú do druhého dňa či podpíšu alebo odmietnu mierovú dohodu, bude musieť obnoviť vojnový stav. Bolo im jasné, že trvanie na titule republiky by prinieslo len ďalšie utrpenie a vojnu, rozhodli sa, že podpíšu. Hoci Írsko nedosiahlo úplnú nezávislosť od Británie, ale získalo úplnú moc nad internými a ekonomickými záležitosťami, čo znamenalo prvý krok ku slobode. Ďalej sa im podarilo presvedčiť Britov, že stiahnu svoje vojenské jednotky, ale ponechajú si tri námorné prístavy. Problém pre zarytých republikánov predstavovala aj vernosť monarchovi, hoci mala viac menej len symbolickú funkciu.

De Valera bol celý bez seba, keď zistil, že učinili rozhodnutie bez toho, aby ho informovali. Po ich návrate im to dal so svojimi prívržencami citeľne znáť. Írsky parlament sa rozdelil na dve časti za a proti dohode. Nasledovali dlhé debaty o tom či by mala byť zmluva ratifikovaná. Nakoniec 7. januára 1922 hlasovala väčšina za ratifikáciu. De Valera ponúkol svoju rezignáciu a Griffith bol zvolený za dočasného prezidenta. Vzniklo mnoho nepokojov, avšak írsky národ bol vďačný za prímerie. Rozkol nenastal len v parlamente, ale aj v armáde. Írska republikánska armáda sa priklonila na stranu odporcov a Írske republikánske bratstvo majoritne na stranu podporovateľov.

V apríli obsadili členovia IRA budovu súdu v Dubline, ktorá bola niekdajšie sídlo Britov. Collins nechcel útočiť na vlastných kamarátov a preto to toleroval. K zvratu došlo po zavraždení Sir Henryho Wilsona, britského úradníka. Vtedy sa museli rozhodnúť či začnú s bombardovaním súdu oni alebo Briti znova obsadia územie. Napriek obťažnosti rozhodli sa pre to prvé. Najprv dali výzvu na opustenie budovy a následne začali strieľať. Považuje sa to za začiatok občianskej vojny. Po ôsmych dňoch sa vzdali. Tento konflikt si vyžiadal 65 mŕtvych a stovky zranených. Collins chodil na inšpekcie do rôznych okresov, aby podporoval svojich vojakov. Na jednej takejto obchôdzke sa dozvedel, že Arthur Griffith, jeho detský vzor a súčasný kolega, zomrel. Tri dni po jeho smrti sa opäť vydal na cestu, avšak teraz na jeho poslednú.

V nedeľu, 20. augusta 1922, sa Michael Collins vydal na oficiálnu inšpekciu do oblasti Cork. Niekoľko spoločníkov ho odhovárало. Obávali sa nebezpečenstva, ktoré ho mohlo čakať v jeho domovine. Napriek tomu, že bol chorý, rozhodol sa ísť. Dlhodobu sa vedú rozpravy o zámere jeho návštevy. Väčšinou sa uvádzajú tri hlavné, a to pravidelná inšpekcia jednotiek Írskeho slobodného štátu, vypočutie sťažností dôstojníkov, ich

povzbudenie a prípadné strategické porady. Ďalej sa hovorí o mierových stretnutiach s oponentami Mierovej dohody. Niektorí autori taktiež spomínajú obchôdzky bánk, pretože členovia Írskej republikánskej armády mali údajne ukradnúť isté finančné prostriedky a Collins ich chcel naspäť.

To osudné ráno 22. augusta sa Collins spolu so svojím konvojom vyrazil z mesta Cork. Plán cesty bol jasne stanovený. Vyšli najprv do Macroomu, odtiaľ na juh do Bandonu a pokračovali na západ do Clonakilty a Skibbereenu. Počas cesty navštívili niekoľko armádnych zložiek. Collins mal počas dňa dohodnuté schôdzky, medzi ktoré patrí aj tá s rodinou.

Keď sa už vracali naspäť do Corku, prepadli ich neďaleko dediny Beal-na-mBlath. Sedel v zadnej časti automobile Leyland so sklopenou plátnovou strechou. Sprevádzal ho vojenský konvoj, ktorý tvorilo približne 25 mužov. Eskorta pozostávala z nákladného auta Crossley tender, obrneného vozidla Rolls Royce a na čele bol dôstojník Smith na motocykli.

Útočníci najskôr vypálili dva varovné výstrely, ktoré mali slúžiť na upozornenie vlastných jednotiek, ktoré už boli na ceste z miesta činu, prípadne tých, ktorí odstraňovali blokádu a míny z cesty. Pôvodne na Collinsov konvoj čakalo zhruba 25 mužov, avšak keď sa dlho neukazovali, mysleli si, že zmenili trasu spiatočnej cesty, preto sa niektorí rozhodli odísť skôr. Ostalo tam približne 10 mužov.

Smrť írskeho lídra obklopuje mnoho nezrovnalostí a nevyriešených otázok. Žiadna z výpovedí účastníkov tejto udalosti sa nezhoduje s inou. Každý to opisuje inak. Pre Collinsových spoločníkov bolo jednoduchšie povedať, že ich prepadlo 200 mužov, ako by mali priznať, že ich tam bolo oveľa menej. Ďalšou podozrivou skutočnosťou je neschopnosť novej írskej vlády vyšetriť smrť jedného z najdôležitejších mužov svojej krajiny. Dokonca zložka so záznamami ohľadom jeho skonu mali byť spálené v tridsiatych rokoch 20. storočia. V prípade druhej strany nemôžeme tvrdiť, že boli nadšení smrťou svojho niekdajšieho kamaráta, ale zase ani to úplne vylúčiť. Nikto by sa za ten čin nechcel priznať, pretože by sa z neho mohol ľahko stať vydedenec spoločnosti. Azda najzarážajúcejšie na celej veci je to, že Collins bol jediný zranený a to rovno smrteľne. Okolnosti jeho tejto udalosti zostávajú naďalej pod rúskom tajomstva.

Najpravdepodobnejšia teória hovorí o členovi IRA skupiny, ktorý sa údajne chválil tým, že zabil Michaela Collinsa. Avšak na smrteľnej posteli svojej rodine povedal, že to



neurobil. Sigersonová predstavila svoju verziu o britskom agentovi v generálovom konvoji. Na prvý pohľad sa to môže javiť ako konšpiračná teória. Sigersonová spolupracovala s Collinsonovou rodinou a jedenásť rokov sa venovala tejto problematike. Vo svojej expertíze sa zameriava na politické vraždy. Zo zbieraných dát prišla k záveru, že to musel byť niekto z jeho eskorty.

Lekárske záznamy sú tiež nekonzistentné. Z autopsií poznáme tri rôznych teórií ohľadom rany. Lekár, ktorý ho vyšetroval ako prvý a konštatoval jeho smrť, tvrdil, že Collins mal na hlave len jednu veľkú ranu za pravým uchom, čo by podporovalo teóriu odrazenej strely. Ďalší obhliadajúci lekár povedal, že hoci mal veľkú ranu za pravým uchom, za jeho ľavým bola menšia vstupná rana, ktorá by potvrdila Sigersonovej teóriu. Ten tretí hovoril o malej vstupnej rane na čele, skoro vo vlasoch, a výstupnej rane za pravým uchom.

Musíme vyrovnať s tým, že jeho smrť zostane navždy nevyriešená. K prípadnému posunu prípadu by mohlo dôjsť až po exhumácii Collinsonovho tela. Ani to by však nemuselo priniesť odpoveď. Všetci aktéri tejto nešťastnej udalosti sú už mŕtvi a nikomu, ani ich príbuzným by nepomohlo, keby niekoho obvinia.

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