

Hashem Abushama, Sierra Mohamed  
Pelle Tracey, Alyssa Volkmann  
11 May 2016  
Group Learning Project  
Word Count: 4,210

## **“They Who Suffer the Most”<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

In Northern Ireland, the 1981 hunger strike is an event that has been engraved on the hearts, minds and political public memory of the Republican/Nationalist community. The significance of the ten Irish Republican Army (IRA) volunteers from the 1981 strike that sacrificed their lives can still be experienced through the Republican/Nationalist community’s continuation of murals, memorials, ceremonies, annual commemorations and parades that honor the strikers (Graham and Whelan, 2007: 484). As outsiders living in Northern Ireland, we were all struck by the Republican/Nationalist community’s dedication to memorializing, and even sometimes romanticizing, these men who sacrificed their bodies as tools of resistance against the British state in Northern Ireland. The staggered hunger strike lasted from nine months and took the lives of ten men, but their legacy of ‘transforming the political arena in Northern Ireland’ continues to live on today (Sweeney, 1993 a: 10).

In this paper, we seek to achieve a more comprehensive understanding how the 1981 hunger strikes were able to influence public and political opinions during the Troubles, as well as how their legacy has continued to influence politics today. In order to create a more in-depth understanding of the strikes’ significance, we will contextualize the hunger strikes of 1981 by examining the historic role that previous hunger strikes have played in the Irish nationalist

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<sup>1</sup> Terrance MacSwiney

movement, as well as how these strikes have influenced public opinion and inspired the 1981 strikes. We will also examine the role the hunger strikers played in redefining the conceptual line between ‘criminal’ and ‘political’ activity, which had been defined by the British government during the conflict in Northern Ireland. Next, the act of commemorating the hunger strikes will be examined, particularly through looking at the political party Sinn Féin and their contemporary memorialization of the hunger strikes as a means of political legitimacy. To expand on legitimacy, we will also provide discourse on the influence of the hunger strikers in the peace process by discussing how the strikes facilitated the legitimization of Republican prisoners’ identities as political prisoners. To conclude, we will examine how the hunger strikes of 1981 currently inform the Republican movement and current politics of Northern Ireland.

### **Historical Context: Sacrifice and Republicanism**

The Hunger Strike of 1981 was not the first hunger strike carried out by Republicans in Northern Ireland, nor indeed was it to be the last. However, the ‘second’ hunger strike in 1981 has the largest representation in social memory in Northern Ireland, and arguably, internationally. This section will attempt to place the ’81 hunger strike within a larger historical and political context. Towards this end, this section will first provide a background history of hunger strikes as carried out by Republicans, before moving to discuss the political context of the strikes in 1981.

As George Sweeney describes, hunger striking as a tradition in the island of Ireland began during the early 1900’s, though the tactics popularity had much deeper roots, originating in a Christian ethos of self-sacrifice and a tradition of fasting against landlords and/or debtors. He writes, ‘The earliest hunger strikes involved women from the suffragette movement. Up to twenty-two imprisoned women participated in hunger strikes between 1912 and 1914’ (1993: 424).

These early strikes marked the beginning of a decade of Irish politics characterized by political turmoil and violence, with hunger strikes featuring prominently throughout leading to 1923. During this period seven hunger strikers died, while thousands more called off their strikes. The motivation for these early strikes varied, including, 'protests against prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners, ...demands for political status or were means of dissent against perceived unjust imprisonment' (Sweeney, 1993: 424).

During this early period, one event stands out against the rest: Terence MacSwiney's death on hunger strike in 1920 (Jason Pearlman, 2007: 307). MacSwiney was a prominent member of the Republican movement and had been in contact with the leaders of the 1916 Rising, though eventually decided not to participate. In 1920 MacSwiney, then the elected Lord Mayor of Cork and a leader in Irish Volunteers, was arrested for involvement with the IRA. MacSwiney felt a deep sense of injustice over his arrest and began a hunger strike even before he was sentenced, announcing to the military tribunal that he had, 'decided the terms of my detention whatever your government may do. I shall be free, alive or dead, within a month' (Freeman's Journal, 1920 cited Jason Perlman, 2007: 310). The British government, in the greater context of the War of Independence, refused to make any concession to MacSwiney, believing that it would be a complete acquiescence to Irish Republican goals. At the same time, Republican leadership made a concerted effort to keep media and public attention on MacSwiney to, 'put pressure on the British government to release him and, failing that, to make his martyrdom felt worldwide' (Freeman's Journal, 1920 cited Jason Perlman, 2007: 310).

MacSwiney's hunger strike and subsequent death in 1920 is important for understanding later hunger strikes for three reasons: it offered an example to Republican leadership how a hunger

strike could unite Republican public opinion even within a community divided politically, tied hunger striking as a tactic to a broader Republican tradition of blood-sacrifice, and proved the beginning of a longstanding debate within the Catholic church over the morality of hunger striking. Each of these themes will be explored briefly later.

The 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's saw some hunger striking, much of it against the Irish free state under Eamon de Valera's administration, but no high profile cases and only a few deaths (Michael Biggs, 2004: 1-2). The next period of hunger strikes that did receive significant attention began in 1972, and in many ways these strikes led directly to the strike of 1981. Billy McKee's strike in that year, although it received less media attention, was highly important contextually as it was essentially successful – in the same year Britain created Special Category Status, which would provide for the treatment of arrested paramilitary members as prisoner of war (interned prisoners already had this special status) (Peter Taylor, 2002: 119-120). This change is short-lived though, and in 1976 newly arrested IRA member Kieran Nugent began the blanket protest (refusing to wear prison uniforms) as a protest over being treated like an ordinary criminal (CAIN, Martin Melaugh). Blanket protest remains in the period leading up to 1980 as international and domestic attention is increasingly drawn to the conditions that prisoners face in Northern Ireland.

In 1980 Special Category status is ended for all prisoners, and the 'First Hunger Strike' begins. Seven strikers are chosen which is meant to symbolically invoke the seven signatories to the Easter Proclamation, but more importantly they represented five of the six counties (F. Stuart Ross, 2011: 92-105). These strikes are called off in mid-December as the British appeared ready to reinstate political status. However, by February it is clear that there has been no movement towards

Special Category Status by the government and on March 1<sup>st</sup> the ‘Second Hunger Strike’ begins with Bobby Sands rejecting food (F. Stuart Ross, 2011: 92-105).

While, as Sweeney describes, the Irish use of hunger strikes is rooted in fasting protests that extend back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 1981 Hunger Strike is rooted strategically and ideologically in Terrance MacSwiney’s strike in 1920. MacSwiney’s case highlights an important contradiction in the cultural logic of Irish hunger strikes – as Perlman notes, the hunger strikes simultaneously invoked and defied Catholicism (2007). The invocation of course being the idea of Christ-like sacrifice that MacSwiney would have witnessed Padraig Pearse appeal to, the defiance being the condemnation of suicide in the Catholic church. Interestingly, ‘the catholic church was fairly supportive of MacSwiney... as it would not be of later hunger strikers’, a change that we cannot totally account for (Perman, 2007: 312).

MacSwiney’s death also offered a powerful example to Republican leadership of how a public figure staking their life for the cause could galvanize support – something Arthur Griffith and other leaders during his time recognized and to some extent exploited. As Sweeney writes, the image of the hunger striker as a small, vulnerable body against the massive weight of the British government became a unifying force as, ‘those who had been skeptical were often moved by sympathy for the purity and selflessness of MacSwiney’s protest...’ (1993: 312). This unification is perhaps the most important legacy of the hunger strikes both in 1920 and in 1980 and 1981. Ross speaks to the unifying effect of the hunger strikes, writing that the plight of moderate Republicans during this time was highlighted by the hunger strikes – ‘while many abhorred the violence of the IRA, they found themselves increasingly at odds with Britain’s policies in the North’ (2011: 93). While in 1920 this unification was largely temporary as it was broken by the fragmentation that

occurred after partition in 1921, the unification in 1980/81 was more lasting. This more lasting unification was partially due to Sinn Fein's incorporation of both moderate and militant politics in the Ballot Box and the Armalite strategy which it launched from the wave of support the party received as a result of the 1981 Hunger Strike.

### **The Hunger Strikes: A Source of Legitimacy and Alternatives**

In this section, we begin discussing the Hunger Strikes as an act of protest against the British Government's 'criminalization policy,' arguing that the act successfully challenged the government's, and consequently the mainstream media's, perspectives on the political role of the hunger strikers. In particular, we discuss how the act was a powerful conceptual protest against the blurring of the boundaries between the 'criminal' and the 'political' by the British Government. In addition, the Hunger Strikes of 1981 constitute a major political moment that significantly contributed to the developmental process that resulted in today's political scene in Northern Ireland. Thus, outcomes of this act of protest did not only impact the hunger strikers, their families and even the political discourse at the time. They did not only challenge the government's 'criminalization policy.' Rather, when put within the larger context, the Hunger Strikes prove that they challenged, and continue to challenge, the political scene in today's Northern Ireland. It is no surprise, then, that the parties like Sinn Fein evoke the hunger strikes to legitimize not necessarily their desired political ends, but their political means. This is why we briefly discuss the impact of the competing commemorations of the Hunger Strikes, highlighting Sinn Fein's narrative with all of its contradictions.

In an attempt to limit the effects of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the Wilson government publish a policy document titled 'The Way Ahead' to push forward a set of agenda for 'Ulsterization' (Mumford, 2012: 109). The policy aimed at 'Ulsterizing' the conflict by withdrawing the British army

and allowing for a gradual transition, where Ulster is governed and policed by its Ulstermen. To further depoliticize and localize the conflict, the plan aimed at 'normalizing' paramilitary activities as mere criminal acts (Mumford, 2012: 109). The policy was regarded by many as a myth, for discounting from the political equation the ambitions of an entire community in Northern Ireland. The republican prisoners at the time were the first to feel the consequences of such policy.

By criminalizing the prisoners, the policy had two assumptions: first, that the prisoners had no popular support and that, second, they were 'non-political' actors who were driven by selfish motivations. The latter had major implications on the larger context of Northern Ireland. Blurring the boundaries between the 'criminal' and the 'political' was only a symptom of a larger push to depoliticize the entire conflict. It was an attempt to shift the conceptual framework, or the discourse, to be one that addresses crimes rather than political ends that are pursued through violent means.

The Hunger Strikes with all of their partialities challenged these assumptions. The hunger strikers, 'starved themselves to death to prove their political motivation' (Mulcahy, 1995: 450), hence the construction of legitimacy for them to be seen as political actors. Furthermore, multiple prisoners were elected to public office while on hunger strike. The most memorable one is Bobby Sands, who ran to be a Member of Parliament, representing the constituency of Fermanagh/South Tyrone. As described by Mulcahy,

He [Bobby Sands] listed his occupation as "political prisoner," and went on to win the seat. The hunger strikers and their supporters also contested other parliamentary elections. In the by-election after Sands's death, his former election agent, Owen Carron, contested and won the seat. The Republic of Ireland held a general election on June 11 in which two Republican inmates, including hunger striker Kieran Doherty, won seats in the Dail, the Irish parliament (Mulcahy, 1995: 454).

Needless to say, the election of prisoners, who were portrayed as 'terrorists' and 'nonpolitical' actors, proved the government and media wrong. Mulcahy rightly states that their elections were indicative

of the significant popular support they enjoyed, hence defying the government's argument that they were mere 'criminals' who did not have the support of the public (Mulcahy, 1995: 454). These conclusions clearly had an impact on the larger context, and challenged the 'myth' of Ulsterisation where it was thought that the withdrawal of an army and the criminalization of violent 'resistance' activity would eliminate the political nature of the conflict. We say a 'myth' because the conflict is political in its essence. By being elected and by sacrificing their lives, the prisoners offered an alternative way to understand the conflict. Mulcahy states that,

The hunger strike undermined the entire strategy that the British government had pursued in Northern Ireland. It offered an alternative interpretation of the nature of the conflict, and even of the Northern Irish state itself (Mulcahy, 1995: 450).

This alternative framework allowed for the IRA prisoner and non-prisoner volunteers, to enter the political sphere. This framework signified a conceptual leap from the prisoners being described as 'terrorists' to being described as 'political prisoners.' In particular, the elections of prisoners to public office offered them a lot of social and political currency to prove their positionality as political actors. Thus, out of the many influences that the Hunger Strikes offered for republicanism the legitimization of a purely political and democratic method to achieve the end goal of a United Ireland seems to be most striking and crucial.

It can be argued that this effect is a perceived and interpreted one. In other words, the Hunger Strikes are part of the public memory of Northern Ireland. Like all parts of history, what they mean depends on the social, economic and political conditions and ambitions of the interpreter. For example, while Sinn Fein sees the election of Bobby Sands as a source of legitimacy for their 'political' and 'democratic' approach, many of the disaffected republicans see his election as a mere statement of resistance against the 'colonizer' and 'the oppressor.' It must be noted, however, that



Sinn Fein has enjoyed and intentionally built a monopoly over the legacy of the Hunger Strikes.

Graff-McRae states that,

Significantly, the example of the Hunger Strikes illustrates that commemorative discourse does not merely evolve to reflect changing political context or present political pragmatism - as significant as these considerations are. Rather, through an appeal to the 'memory' of the strikes, commemoration can be deployed as an intervention to effect and legitimize these political and ideological shifts. The reiteration and rewriting of the Hunger Strikes is, in Sinn Fein's case, a vehicle to underwrite the party's increasing 'democratization' within an electoral process: the 'struggle' for a united Ireland is now conducted by electoral battles for political power on both sides of the border in an ostensible bid for de facto unity (Graff-McRae, 2014: 19).

'The reiteration and rewriting' is important to highlight. This is a powerful acknowledgment that Hunger Strikes, like many other phenomena from the past, are remembered on the terms of those remembering. A reflection on our participation in the Hunger Strikes commemoration parade in Derry speaks to a lot of these conclusions. The parade was held on May 1<sup>st</sup>, only 4 days before the Northern Ireland Assembly elections. There was a big banner next to the Free Derry corner that had a photo of Sands while on hunger strike, and a photo of the ballot of his election. The banner captures a lot: a legitimization of the legal political approach, a monopolization of a public memory, and a magnet to attract popular support for Sinn Fein. Yet, the results were not satisfactory for Sinn Fein. It has significantly lost in West Belfast, one of its major political bases. This is no surprise, considering the gradual decline in electoral and popular support for the party. However, it signifies an important re-shift among republicans towards an alternative. In parallel, there has been a dispute between Sinn Fein and Bobby Sands' family over the copyrights of his publications and murals. These, along with other issues, are indicators of an emerging reinterpretation and re-imagining of the Hunger Strikes.

## Legitimization of the 1981 Hunger Strike and its' Effect on the Peace Process

The Good Friday Agreement took place in 1998 as a result of each side of the conflict, deciding to lay down their arms, and speak with one another in order to create a peaceful Ireland. However, peace, in any form that it may take, is only achievable when each side is able to recognize the other. Many people would consider the acts of Republicans as terrorist activity. However, the participation in the 1981 hunger strikes spoke directly to their claim as political prisoners and in doing so, garnered support from the larger nationalist community, support that had not widely been present prior to these men's actions. 'The ultimate sacrifice for the nation was coded male in the very public political struggles surrounding the hunger strike' (Ashe & Harland, 2014: 753). One of these struggles being the sacrifice of their health, through starvation, in order to gain the political statuses that they required while in prison. The publicity that these men received enabled their actions, which were arguably, 'the most extraordinary political drama of the conflict...' (Howard, 2006: 70), to be known both nationally and internationally. Even to this day, the 1981 hunger strike is one of the most visualized components to the 30-year conflict.

One of the greatest tasks that these men achieved through their actions, was legitimizing their, and their fellow IRA comrades, status as political prisoners. To be a political prisoner, offers one a status in prison that is not afforded to any other person in state custody. For the British Government to strip these men and women of their classification as political prisoners furthered the government's campaign to depoliticize the conflict (Mulcahy, 1995: 450 cited Balbus, 1977). This was an attempt to portray the Republican armed resistance as, "ordinary"-if particularly state-threatening-crime rather than part of a politically motivated struggle (Mulcahy, 1995: 450 cited Findlay 1985). It is exactly this form of undermining behavior from the British state that makes the

hunger strike pivotal in the peace process. The state was using any and all tools at its' disposal to undermine the asks and actions of the Republicans. This includes false representations to the wider global community as well as armed soldiers effectively implementing martial law their use of barriers that attempted to stunt the actions of the Republicans. However, while the Republicans were certainly committing atrocities of their own, in the name of civil rights, one must take note of the willingness to effectively rot one's own body through starvation in order to obtain their goal. It is this resilience that makes the hunger strike imperative to the peace process. However, during the strike itself, these men met continued resistance from the British state that acted as tools to delegitimize the cause of the prisoners.

The British state would not originally acknowledge a hunger strike as a form of political protest. Instead, under Margaret Thatcher, it was considered a suicide, rather than acknowledging that one outcome of a political hunger strike is death.

The hunger strike is a politically motivated protest, which includes threatened suicide and is compatible with feelings of martyrdom and desperation, fear of insanity, and lucidity. It is also threatened suicide, since the willingness to starve to death is an essential component of the act's full political impact. Death by starvation is not the stated objective of the hunger strike, but it is a necessary component (Dooley-Clarke, 1981: 6).

Alternatively, the hunger strikers would argue that the death of a hunger striker is a murder committed by the British Government for their failure to meet the needs of political prisoners (Dooley-Clarke, 1981: 6), and in doing so, the state denies the possibility for a peace process. 'Likewise, in rejecting the allegations of murder, the British Government is refusing to accept the Republican interpretation of Ireland's political history' (Dooley-Clarke, 1981: 6), thus delegitimizing their claim for political prisoner status. Thankfully, for the Republicans, the hunger strike of 1981 is

what catapulted them into being seen by many as a politically motivated, and therefore legitimate, movement.

### **Conclusion:**

Historically, hunger strikes have been an act of resistance to the foreign, British state power on the island of Ireland for hundreds of years. While those in opposition to the strikes argue that participating in a hunger strike could be seen purely as self-inflicted violence or even suicidal behavior, others see the strikes as a form of self-sacrificial protest and a ‘weapon of last resort for those nurtured in a tradition of exploitation, colonization and cultural destruction’ (Sweeney, 1993: 10). When considering explanation of hunger strikes, it’s important to understand the relationship Republicans had with the British state and the goals of the Republican movement. It is necessary to identify that ‘[Republicanism] was— and remains by other means— engaged in a war against the British state rather than against loyalists. [The British] state is held to have been responsible for the oppression and torture of republicans while, simultaneously, trying to deny that it was an active participant in the war’ (Graham & Whelan, 2007: 483). As Republicanism in Northern Ireland is built heavily on the role of Britain as a colonial oppressor, it’s necessary to consider the role that hunger strikers have played in shaping the positionality of Republicanism in today’s political scene in Northern Ireland.

Out of the competing interpretations of Hunger Strikes, there is that of the disaffected republicans who are not satisfied with the current political framework as an appropriate means to seek a united Ireland. Although Northern Ireland has its own political executive assembly, the North of Ireland still remains a part of the United Kingdom. This historic colonial relationship between

Britain and Ireland largely motivated the politics of the 1981 hunger striker and IRA Volunteer Bobby Sands, as he said:

Generations will continue to meet the same fate unless the perennial oppressor-Britain-is removed, for she will unashamedly and mercilessly continue to maintain her occupation and economic exploitation of Ireland to judgment day, if she is not halted and ejected (Republican-news.org, 2016).

However, thirty-five years after the hunger strikes and eighteen years after the Good Friday Agreement, Britain still has not been ejected from Northern Ireland and Ireland remains partitioned, which allows for dissident Republican groups the possibility to claim that because of Britain's remaining presence in Northern Ireland, there is a need for the disaffected republicans to continue the armed struggle, or the 'armed pressure', to unite Ireland.

Conversely, the hunger strikes have informed the current politics of Northern Ireland through their political connection to Sinn Féin. The hunger strikes helped to galvanize the Republican/Nationalist community by connecting more militant Republicans and moderate Nationalists based on their support for the hunger strikers, which Sinn Féin has been able to politically capitalize on (Ross, 2011: 93-100). However, in the most recent elections in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin has lost ground. For example, in the Republican stronghold of west Belfast, People Before Profit alliance member Gerry Carroll was elected 'with 8,299 first preference votes, almost 3,500 votes ahead of the nearest Sinn Féin candidate.' Upon his victory, the socialist candidate said, 'This shows that people in west Belfast are looking for something different. They are fed up with the state of play at Stormont' (Little, 2016). Additionally, Sinn Féin has also been criticized by the family of Bobby Sands for using their son's legacy and anniversary of his death to '[betray] the cause of a united Ireland and [use] the emotion of the anniversary to boost its own election chances' (McDonald, 2001). As Sinn Féin loses ground in Stormont and continues to

receive criticism for arguably trying to capitalize from the deaths of the 1981 hunger strikers, their legitimacy has become contested among the Republican/Nationalist community.

In conclusion, these are factors that serve as indicators of an emerging alternative reinterpretation and re-imagining of the Hunger Strikes as a *moment* in the history of Northern Ireland. In this research, we have stated our belief that the reinterpretation of history is heavily influenced by the social, economic and political conditions that define the moment of reinterpretation. Clearly, Northern Ireland is experiencing a re-shift of these conditions that demand an alternative reimagination of the Hunger Strikes to fit with the contemporary political scene.

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