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Lowder: "The 1980/81 Irish Hunger Strikes: Terrorism"

"The 1980/81 Irish Hunger Strikes: Terrorism"

by Daniel Lowder

(History 1820)

"To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, to break the connection with England, the never-failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country, these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman, in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter, these were my means."

-Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1791

"I was stopped by a soldier, said he you are a swine, He beat me with his baton and he kicked me in the groin. I bowed and scraped, sure my manners were polite, Ah, but all the time I was thinking of my little Armalite."

-Anonymous, 1973

Republican population, one commonality endured throughout the bulk of the 20th century: violence. While anti-British sentiments had boiled over sporadically into nationalist movements and violent uprisings going as far back as 1798, the tension came to its climactic boiling point in April of 1916, with the famed "Easter Rising" by the Irish Republican Brotherhood. As they holed up inside the General Post Office in Dublin, awaiting the inevitable showdown with British forces, they flew up a banner; it read, in Gaelic, "Irish Republic". On that day, in addition to flying a new banner which symbolized a new nation, they issued a proclamation, declaring themselves to be a "Provisional Government". The Easter Proclamation of the Irish Republic, as it is now known, declared the following:

"We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people." The continued, "The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts..." (Easter Proclamation of the Irish Republic)

In these very sentences lie the main point of contention for Republican sympathizers, as well as a mission statement for a resulting century of bloodshed that would unfold in Ireland. The issuance of a proclamation such as this, and the subsequent establishment of the Irish Free State, serve to illustrate that the entire point of conflict in "The Troubles" is, first and foremost, a question of sovereignty, of independence, of freedom for self-determination. The religious differences and bloody history between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland only serves to add more fuel to the fire. To make matters more complicated, the Easter Proclamation essentially serves to annex the entirety of the island for the future Irish Republic. From the common British perspective, however, the "Irish Problem" was always seen as just that; a problem, a nuisance, or an undesirable involvement that was

for all intents and purposes better off neither seen nor heard. This relatively cavalier attitude is illustrated by scores of mistakes and poor decisions made in London.

In 1921, after five years of war, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, and the conflict between Irish and British forces was over. Some terms of the agreement, however, were problematic from the start; the British were ready to remove their military presence from the bulk of the island, but would incorporate the new Irish Free State as a British Commonwealth - not the full measure of independence, really. In addition, the Treaty drew a line in the island which separated Northern Ireland from Southern Ireland; if Northern Ireland's population chose not to be part of the Irish Free State, it would be reabsorbed into the United Kingdom. Being that the power-holding class in Northern Ireland was unionist and Protestant, the return of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom was a foregone conclusion. This unfolding of events ran in stark contrast to the Easter Proclamation's concept of "the whole nation and all its parts", and the bitter dissent over acceptance of the Treaty let loose a civil war within Southern Ireland. Aside from that, the Anglo-Irish Treaty set the table for years of civil rights abuse, shootings, bombings, and all manner of horrible acts which touched both sides of the controversial border.

The rogue Irish Republican Army picked up the banner of a united island, and brought decidedly terrorist tactics to the table in support of its cause. The fight had to be brought in via guerrilla and terrorist methods; a cursory evaluation of the geopolitical position of the Irish Republic in the years between 1922-1980 quickly reveals that the course of forceful reunification of the entirety of Ireland was an impossible pipe dream, unthinkable to pursue through traditional military routes. Randall Law illustrates the point: "...the British all along held fast to the position that Northern Ireland's status could only be changed by a majority decision, and Protestant unionists were clearly in the majority. Second, unionists were hardly likely to be compelled to leave for England, since their identity was inextricably bound up with Northern Ireland as their historical homeland. And third, the Republic of Ireland was in no position to absorb Ulster, given that the latter's population had grown accustomed to the inordinately expensive British welfare state." (Law, 236) If the unionist population refused to reunify, the hypothetical next step for reunification would be for the Republic of Ireland to invade Ulster - an open act of aggression at a territory possessed by a global juggernaut which, by the way, lies just across a twenty-two mile-wide channel of water. The Republic of Ireland through bureaucratic, economic, and simple geographic reasons - had its hands tied with regards to pursuit of reunification. The terms of the agreement had been set in 1921, Northern Ireland had made its choice to remain British, and nothing more was to come of it... legally.

Fifty years later, social conditions had only deteriorated in Northern Ireland. The Catholic population was on the outside of power, and growing disenchanted with their lot in life. "A new generation of young people, however, resented the discrimination that was being implemented to their detriment. They could get neither employment nor housing. All employment and promotion within all services was strictly reserved to non-Catholics. Notices were displayed outside factories proclaiming: 'No Catholics employed here.'" (MacBride, 17) A civil rights movement came about in the later part of the 1960's, inspired by the success of African-Americans standing up under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States. Much like the white Southern aristocracy had done in the United States, the unionist Protestant Irish in Northern Ireland responded with paranoia and violence. According to Randall Law, in August 1969 "the Constabulary and the B-Specials beat, tear-gassed, and terrorized a peaceful civil rights march from Londonderry to Belfast and then watched as gangs of unionist Apprentice Boys rioted." (Law, 234) To further complicate matters, the British sent in 25,000 troops to serve as a police force, but they quickly proved to look unfavorably upon the Catholic population just as much as the unionist paramilitaries did. The Catholics needed a proverbial knight in shining armor, and members of covert Republican paramilitary organizations such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) were there to fight back against the unionist thug coalition which

ran rampant in the streets. Catholic youth, systematically oppressed and discriminated out of societal advancement, turned to the appeal of striking out against the establishment. Enrollment in the PIRA and INLA swelled dramatically. Bombings of commercial, military, and civilian targets became relatively commonplace in daily life. What was happening was at once a civil defense movement blown to epic proportions, and a calculated maneuver to attain a unified Ireland once and for all. In the eyes of the men who fought against the unionist and British forces, their actions were means to complete the Irish Republic idea set by the Easter Proclamation over sixty years prior. The proof of injustice was running red in the streets: in January of 1972, thirteen peaceful protesters were shot dead in Derry by British troops in the event known as "Bloody Sunday".

After the hunger strike of Billy McKee in 1972, the British had treated prisoners involved in the sectarian violence with "special-category status", meaning more or less that they were political prisoners of war. "Prisoners were not required to wear prison uniforms or to work; they were allowed more visits and food parcels, and better facilities, than ordinary prisoners; and they were housed in compounds." (O'Malley, 264) In 1976, however, the British government made the Republican prisoners wear common prisoners' uniforms. "The symbolism was enormous; the H-Blocks rang with songs against Britain's attempt to 'brand Ireland's fight 800 years of crime.'" (Maas, xi) In addition, the British government had established that the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) would now be heading up the war against "terrorism". In nominally heading up the fight against the PIRA and INLA with standard police forces, and forcing Republican prisoners to don standard prison uniforms, the British government was attempting to depoliticize and criminalize the Irish Republican movement. "Criminalization was a denial of a belief held dear by Republican Ireland- that husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, parents, grandparents and great grandparents who had suffered and died for Irish independence had done so in the high cause of patriotism." (Beresford, 16) In addition, the British government began to crack down on the Provisionals. Roy Mason, the new British Secretary of State, said that he was "going to roll up the IRA like 'a tube of toothpaste." (Taylor, 237) The proof of this focused criminalization lies in the numbers of Republican prisoners held in Ulster's jails: "The number of sentenced prisoners... had risen from 745 in 1972 to nearly 2,300 in 1979." (Beresford, 19) Also attributing to the swollen prison population was the controversial and legally questionable implementation of so-called "Diplock Courts" by the British in 1972; the rationale behind the establishment of these special courts was that juries and witnesses could be harassed and intimidated by terrorist groups - and should thus be cancelled from the legal process entirely. The grounds on which the new court system were established also left room for interpretation by the judge on what, in fact, constituted small details such as "torture" and "forced confessions". The 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act passed by Parliament also gave a loophole, which the British could use to lengthen interrogation periods of suspected terrorists. Provision 7, Point 2 of that Act states that "a person arrested under this section shall not be detained in right of the arrest for more than 48 hours after his arrest: provided that the Secretary of State may, in any particular case, extend the period of 48 hours by a further period not exceeding 5 days." (Prevention of Terrorism Act) Instead of being allowed to hold and interrogate people for two days, the British detectives now had up to one weeks' time with which to work all manner of interesting confessions and information from the mouths of beaten men.

In September of 1976, Kieran Nugent, the first IRA prisoner convicted under the new rules of "criminalization", was jailed and ordered to wear his uniform. He refused. "Criminals wore uniforms. He was a political prisoner. Political prisoners wore their own clothes." (Taylor, 238) Nugent was put into his cell, naked. Folded atop the bed in his cell was a prison-issued blanket; it became his clothing. To complicate matters, the prison rules also said that inmates had to wear clothes to leave their cells, and since he refused to don the uniform of a criminal, Nugent found himself confined to his cell at all times. More prisoners piled into the H-Blocks after Nugent, facing the same choice; the ones who followed suit and declined a uniform became known as "blanketmen".

And so, in a twist of irony, the maze of bureaucratic prison regulations and traditional Irish stubbornness had set the traditionally cutthroat and violent IRA ranks to pursue a passionate movement revolving around passive resistance; the "blanket protest" took flight.

Shortly thereafter, the prisoners faced a second hoop to jump through. In 1978, the prison system refused to grant prisoners a second towel with which to wash themselves. Objecting to the forced nudity, the prisoners refused to leave their cells to go to the bathroom. This was known as the "no wash protest". They began emptying their teeming chamber pots into the cell block corridors from under their cell doors. Prison wards responded by sealing the doors off at the base. The prisoners then took to "pouring the urine out through cracks and dispersing the excrement by smearing it on the walls." (Beresford, 17) This third and drastic stage was known as "the dirty protest". By 1980, there were an estimated 341 prisoners on dirty protest in Long Kesh prison. Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich visited the prisoners in July of 1978 and described the sight: "The stench and the filth in some cells, with the remains of rotten food and human excrement scattered around the walls, was absolutely unbelievable." (Taylor, 258) Since prisoners refused to clean themselves, forced washings took place. Prisoners were beaten until they could not resist the guards, and held down against their will. Their hair was harshly cut, as quickly as possible, and they were tossed into a tub to be soaped off. By a multitude of prisoner accounts, officers seemed to take sadistic joy in vigorously scrubbing the genitals of the prisoners with a hard-bristled brush. It seems that every opportunity was taken by those in authority over the prisoners to humiliate and dehumanize by intensely physical and equally intensely psychological means. The British system refused to let itself bend to the Republican will, yet steadfastly asserted that this struggle was not political in the slightest.

Communications were smuggled into the prison system via "comms": handwritten notes on cigarette papers, smuggled into the cell blocks through prisoners' sinuses, dental cavities, or their rectums. Sympathetic Republican women, oftentimes the girlfriend or wife of a blanketman, smuggled tightly wrapped parcels containing contraband such as comms, tobacco, miniature radios, or even the odd camera to the prisoners with feminine ingenuity: "...in their mouths, in their bras, under their breasts, in their panties, sanitary napkins and vaginas." (Beresford, 19) These transfers, tongue-to-tongue or between hands under tables, came under the watchful eye of the prison guards. The authorities knew that such transfers were taking place, and subjected prisoners to humiliating "mirror searches"; the prisoner was beaten, forced to squat over a mirror, and was unceremoniously probed by hand. One guard seemed to relish probing first the prisoners' backside, then their mouths, in that order. By all accounts, he was murdered by the IRA on the outside of the prison. The routine human rights abuses taking place in Long Kesh's H-Blocks were simply horrifying; something had to give.

For the three years between 1976-1979, the IRA prisoners had made no headway with regards to a satisfactory resolution of "criminalization". The public opinion of their cause was not particularly overwhelming in its support, either. People who had seen the inside of the H-Blocks understood the point of contention - in 1978, after a visit to Long Kesh, Cardinal O'Fiaich wrote the following to the Northern Ireland Office of the Catholic Church: "The authorities refuse to admit that these prisoners are in a different category from the ordinary, yet everything about their trials and family background indicates that they are different. They were sentenced by special courts without juries. The vast majority were convicted on allegedly voluntary confessions obtained in circumstances, which are now placed under grave suspicion by the recent report of Amnesty International." (Beresford, 140) The prisoners believed that hunger striking would be a persuasive enough tool to rally public opinion behind their cause, thus forcing the British to concede policy to the favor of the prisoners. In addition, the more people who knew of the prisoners' cause, the more support the Republican movement could potentially garner.

In medieval Ireland, a legal code existed where if a person suffered a perceived wrong at the hands of another, they could starve themselves on the doorstep of the wrongdoer to protest the point. If the person starved to death, the wrongdoer was held responsible for the death and had to pay the victim's family. This form of protest was known as "troscadh", or "cealachan". The legendary St. Patrick supposedly starved himself against the will of God. On and off in the period from 1917 to 1979, a handful of Republican prisoners had committed themselves to the full measure of hunger striking, and paid with their lives. The core aim of hunger striking - of starving oneself to achieve a goal, settle a debt, or right a wrong - was not one with which the Irish people had been unfamiliar with throughout history; hunger striking was viewed with romantic reverence by the culture. Besides, the IRA prisoners had been deprived of every other possible means with which to fight for their cause; the hunger strike was the last weapon. David Beresford, author of "Ten Men Dead", offers an insightful look at why hunger striking was an ideal method for the IRA to achieve their aims: "Hunger-striking, when taken to the death, has a sublime quality about it; in conjunction with terrorism it offers a consummation of murder and self-sacrifice, which in a sense can legitimize the violence which precedes and follows it. If after killing- or sharing in a conspiracy to kill - for a cause one shows oneself willing to die for the same cause, a value is adduced which is higher than that of life itself." (Beresford, 25)

In January of 1980, the "Five Demands" were issued, making clear the goals of the prisoners. They would go on hunger strike if the following demands were not satisfactorily met:

- 1. The right not to wear a prison uniform
- 2. The right not to do prison work
- 3. The right to associate freely with other prisoners
- 4. The right to a weekly visit, letter and parcel and the right to organize recreational and education pursuits
- 5. Full restoration of remission of sentences as is normally provided for all other prisoners

On October 27, 1980, seven men went on hunger strike in Long Kesh. Soon thereafter, three women in Armagh jail joined the strike; they had been on "dirty protest" since February 7. Public support for the strikers built, and adequate pressure was applied to the British that it appeared that the demands would be met. On December 10, 1980, a document was presented to the prisoners which promised that "clothing provided by the families will be given to any prisoners giving up their protest so that they can wear it during recreation, association, and visits..." (Coogan, 375) The British also promised clean cells to any prisoner who came off the hunger strike. IRA leadership within the prison, and supporting Catholic clergy, took this concession as a sign of good faith from the British. It is important to note that IRA leadership was quick to jump at any agreement, nebulous in terminology or not, because of the condition of one striker in particular. All seven men had gone on strike at once, and Sean McKenna - in failing health - had admitted that he wished not to die. The adage of the weakest link applies well to this scenario; to go back on hunger strike would be tantamount to British victory, and also would represent a public relations nightmare for the Republicans. And so, the tentative deal - cloudy as it was in its terminology - was jumped at by the IRA; the hunger strike was called off on December 18.

As if to attempting to achieve new heights in antagonism, prison authorities refused to issue the families' clothing to the prisoners. The Catholic clergy, which included Bishop O'Fiaich, felt that they had been misled by the British - so did Bobby Sands, the new leader of the prisoners. Plans were immediately made for a second hunger strike. This time, however, the organization would be different: instead of a group going on strike at once, individuals would enter into hunger strike at staggered intervals. As soon as one person died, another would enter his place. All told, some

seventy-five men volunteered themselves for the strike which would commence in the Spring of 1981. There was no going back.

"We in H-Block are actively tying our political resistance into the armed struggle. No amount of torture has stopped this. We have not been depoliticised, we have not been criminalised, if anything the incessant torture has stiffened our revolutionary resolve and determination, driving us to achievements and heights that we could never have hoped to gain. We have not been deterred from freedom's fight but rather rallied to the forefront... it has ensured that not only will the scars of the inhumanity which is H-Block remain imprinted in the minds of us tortured prisoners but will burn deeply and for generations in the hearts of our sons. H-Block is the rock that the British monster shall perish upon, for we in H-Block stand upon the unconquerable rock of the Irish Socialist Republic!"

-Bobby Sands' final writing before hunger strike, February 1981

"I am a political prisoner. I am a political prisoner because I am a casualty of a perennial war that is being fought between the oppressed Irish people and an alien, oppressive, unwanted regime that refuses to withdraw from our land."

-Bobby Sands, March 1, 1981 - Day One

When Sands went on strike, the other prisoners in H-Block began saying the Rosary twice daily. Within a week, Sands lost about seven pounds, putting his body weight at 134. The next day, he turned twenty-seven years old. By Tuesday the 10th, Sands had lost another four pounds - but not his resolve: "We wish to be treated 'not as ordinary prisoners' for we are not criminals. We admit to no crime unless, that is, the love of one's people and country is a crime." (Sands, 229) Sands then wrote down something which is incredibly enlightening with regards to the history of Irish hunger strikers versus the British colonial empire: "...the struggle in the prisons goes hand-in-hand with the continuous freedom struggle in Ireland." (Sands, 229)

Back on the 5th of March, Frank Maguire died. He was a Member of Parliament for the Ulster district of Fermanagh-South Tyrone. Naturally, an election would ensue to fill his vacant seat; it would be contested by loyalists and nationalists. All nationalist candidates who would have likely run under normal circumstances, in which a hunger strike was not taking place, stepped aside upon hearing that the Republican Movement had come up with the idea of running Bobby Sands, under the party of "H-Block/Armagh". Could it be that a prisoner, starving himself to death, would be voted into British Parliament?

On April 9, 1981, the results came in: Sands defeated his opponent 30,492 votes to 29,046; in addition, 86.9 percent of the eligible voters turned out for the election. The hunger strike was clearly successful in garnering the support of the nationalist population within Ulster. Almost immediately, the British government made legislative changes to close up the opportunity for prisoners to stand as Members of Parliament. Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of Britain, refused to budge from keeping a stiff upper lip: "We are not prepared to consider special category status for certain groups of people serving sentences for a crime. Crime is crime. It is not political." (Taylor, 282) The British made no effort to save the life of an MP, a move which some people were highly critical of. Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins reflected this sentiment: "If Mr. Sands persisted in his wish to commit suicide, that was his choice. The Government would not force medical treatment upon him." (Taylor, 282)

At 1:17 in the morning of May 5, 1981, Bobby Sands died. He had gone sixty-six days without food. In Parliament, the Speaker of the House announced the death of Sands: "I regret to

have to inform the House of the death of Robert Sands Esquire, the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone." (Beresford, 98) What is missing from that statement is the traditional offering of condolences to the family of the deceased, a point which came across loud and clear. Thatcher took the same line: "Mr. Sands was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life. It was a choice his organization did not allow many of its victims." (Taylor, 283)

Sands' death, and the subsequent deaths of other hunger strikers, had served to further polarize the Catholic and Protestant populations in Northern Ireland. Nobel peace laureate Mairead Corrigan Maguire had this insight to offer: "There is far more bitterness and a feeling of anti-Britishness in many communities. People who never even used the term 'Brits out' started to use the term." (O'Malley, 268) The perception of the IRA was turning, and the Catholic population seemed to be rallying behind the cause of nationalism. According to Father Des Wilson, a priest who worked in the Catholic ghettos of West Belfast - where Bobby Sands' family had once been forced to move because of loyalist thuggery - saw the tide turning: "Never was there such a determination among the mass of the people to have done with Westminster. As each death occurred, a number of things became possible which had not been possible before. It was now possible to speak respectfully of the IRA. To have done so before would have been to invite condemnation by Church and state." (O'Malley, 268) In rejecting the five simple demands of Sands and the hunger strikers, Margaret Thatcher and the British government had provided the Irish Republican Army with a swell of support and recruitment boosts that were far more productive than IRA leadership could have ever dreamed. In addition, anti-British sentiment was booming across the globe. International media was issuing critical statements against Thatcher and Britain, students marched in numerous locations, and bombs were even placed in British commercial interests in France, Italy, and Spain. The Longshoreman's Union in the United States boycotted British ships for a day. In New York City, Irish bars closed for two hours. Secretary of State Atkins, on the day of Sands' funeral, showed that British opinion on the matter had not softened in the face of international pressure: "Is murder any less murder because the person responsible claims he had a political motive? The answer is no." (Beresford, 104) Atkins should have checked his facts: Bobby Sands had been incarcerated because of a gun possession charge, not murder. 100,000 people showed up for Bobby's funeral. His vacated seat in Parliament was filled by a member of Sinn Fein. The Republican cause was making legitimate legal headway. This watershed moment, in which devoutly Republican men had been elected to British Parliamentary seats, set the precedent for nationalist political methods which helped to alleviate "The Troubles" in the late 1990s. Peter Taylor reflects on the impact that Bobby Sands' death had: "Sinn Fein's electoral successes through the next two decades are the hunger strike's political legacy." (Taylor, 295)

On August 20th, 1981, Mickey Devine passed away after sixty-six days of hunger strike; the last of ten to die that year. Though men were still on the strike, more and more families had been taking their sons off of hunger strike and demanding medical intervention. The families of the six men left striking united and said they would take their boys off; it was obvious that the movement was losing steam. On October 3, 1981, the hunger strike was called off after seven months.

On October 6, the British granted partial concessions to the prisoners. They would be allowed to wear their own clothing, there would be remission of time lost through the protests, prisoners would be allowed to associate more freely with each other, and "prison work" would be redefined. The prisoners had won the stare down.

Roughly twenty-two years after the death of Bobby Sands, on June 13, 2002, the European Union issued a document known as *Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism*. Article 1 of this document states the following: "Terrorist offenses... given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organization where committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly compelling a Government or international organization to

perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization."

By this definition, it can be argued that the Republican hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 in Northern Ireland were a calculated terrorist offense - they fulfill the criteria that the European Union set for a terrorist offense. To bolster the case for the hunger strikes constituting terrorism, lives had been lost while the strikes took place - both inside and outside of the prison walls - the simple fact is that the strikes sprung forth more sectarian violence and bolstered terrorist activity and enrollment into paramilitary groups. As persuasive and deadly serious in its point as any Semtex car bomb, the hunger strike phenomenon was meant to sway Margaret Thatcher and the British Parliament into revoking the recently adopted "criminalization" policy. And, though not officially through any legal changes, it did force some concessionary moves from Britain. Without a long-running list of human rights abuses, of legally debatable legislative motions, wrongful convictions, beatings, and terrible public relations choices, the British position might have been drastically stronger. But the lingering colonial pride of a dead empire, convoluted hard line blustering, and complex matter of religious matters seemed to make Britain out of touch on the issue at hand.

"If they aren't able to destroy the desire for freedom, they won't break you."

-Bobby Sands, St. Patrick's Day, 1981

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