

Starving for Attention:  
Legitimizing Northern Ireland's Prison Hunger Strike of 1981 through the Print Media

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# Starving for Attention: Legitimizing Northern Ireland's Prison Hunger Strike of 1981 through the Print Media

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*This study examines the media's role in the legitimization of the 1981 Maze Prison Hunger Strike in Northern Ireland by members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA<sup>2</sup>) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). The strike was ultimately a protest by these groups of their status as common criminals and an effort to regain 'special category' prisoner status. If they were able to legitimize their actions in the eyes of their communities, then they could have been capable of placing enough political pressure on the British government to concede the hunger strikers' demands. In modern times, the media has become a powerful tool for terrorist organizations to gain support and recognition for their cause. However, in the case of the 1981 hunger strike, the media worked against the legitimization of the strikers which prevented them from achieving their political objectives. This study is a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the strike's coverage in the Belfast Telegraph and the Irish Independent, two influential Irish newspapers. It seeks to reconcile the coverage of the strike in the print media with its components of legitimacy to understand why the strike was unable to ultimately force concessions from the British.*

## Introduction

In 1981, ten Republican paramilitary prisoners starved themselves to death in pursuit of special category prisoner status while incarcerated in the Maze Prison of Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup> The men represented two separate paramilitary organizations, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). They were serving prison sentences for various violent offenses related to their membership in these organizations. The hunger strike was the last in a series of Republican prisoner protests over a new policy adopted by the British

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<sup>2</sup> The Provisional IRA is generally recognized as the IRA.

<sup>3</sup> The Maze Prison is also referred to as Long Kesh Prison. In this study, both "Republican" and "Nationalist" will be used to describe those individuals or groups who protest the participation of the British government in the politics and affairs of Northern Ireland. They support complete independence from the United Kingdom.

government in 1976, known as “Ulsterisation.”<sup>4</sup> More directly, it was a protest over their newly ascribed “criminal” status by the Northern Irish and British governments. They sought to push the British into reinstating their special category status by using their lives as leverage. The recognition of their acts of self-sacrifice by both the Irish and international communities were to prove that they did not share the same selfish motivations as criminals. The sheer number of deaths during the strike questions how such a lethal form of political protest could occur in modern times and involve the government of such an influential democratic nation.

The press coverage surrounding the strike made international headlines and focused the international community’s attention and efforts toward aiding in the negotiation process. Even under international scrutiny the British government, then led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, held firm against the constant external pressures to meet the prisoners’ demands. It was up to internal pressure from the Northern Irish communities to force concessions from the Thatcher government. The IRA was unable to rally this support from its community and the strike ended unsuccessfully. The strike was forced to end after the families of the hunger strikers continuously sought medical intervention for their loved ones once they lost consciousness. Preventing further deaths removed the urgency and pressure that was essential to the strike’s success. Just over seven months after its start, the IRA was forced to end the strike without the any of their five demands being met. After the strike had officially ended, the British government did make several adjustments to alleviate the humanitarian concerns associated with the harsh prison conditions in the Maze. However, none of these adjustments recognized the political motivations of the Republican prisoners. If measured by the success of achieving its political objectives, the strike was a complete failure for the Republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>4</sup> See corresponding section.

The purpose of this study is to understand why the strike did not achieve legitimacy for the IRA by analyzing the role of the media in influencing the opinions of the Irish communities in Northern Ireland and the Republic. Analysis of the strike's coverage in both the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Irish Independent* has shown that the media may have undermined the legitimization of the hunger strikers and their cause, thus affecting the resolution of the strike. Before moving onto this analysis, it is important to understand the complexity of the history and culture surrounding the hunger strike and how both contributed to the strike's conception and ultimate resolution. While a hunger strike death toll of this magnitude was an anomaly in Irish history, the act of hunger striking itself was no stranger to Irish society nor was its use as a protest over the British government's involvement in Irish affairs. Political protest, including hunger striking, has played a key role in the development of Irish Nationalism since its beginnings in the late eighteenth century. Many cultural and historical factors coincided in 1981 to act as catalysts for the hunger strike and ultimately lead to the death of ten men inside the Maze Prison of Northern Ireland.

## **A Historical Theme of Self-Sacrifice**

### **Republicanism from Wolfe Tone – 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

By the 1790's, the British government had successfully adopted the Irish government as its own; the leaders of the Irish administration were responsible to and appointed by their British counterparts. Britain's political control of Ireland was challenged by the birth of an organization known as the Society of United Irishmen in 1791. That which began as an organization of constitutional reform in Ireland became a revolutionary body by the turn of the century. This group of largely middle class Irishmen sought political equality and parliamentary reform that

would include civil rights for all Irish citizens, including Catholics. Their most influential member was a man named Theobald Wolfe Tone. It was partly under his inspiration that the group sought a revolutionary approach to political reform. In 1798, a series of uprisings occurred throughout Ireland as a staged rebellion by the United Irishmen. While the Rising of 1798 lacked organization and was unsuccessful in its attempt to disrupt British rule in Ireland, from its ashes Irish Republicanism was born. Wolfe Tone effectively became the first Republican martyr after his self-inflicted death during his imprisonment after the Rising.<sup>5</sup>

Nineteenth century Republicanism hoped to resurrect the original United Irish movement after the disaster of the Rising. In July of 1803, Republican leader Robert Emmet staged a second rebellion. Once again the rebellion was severely flawed in its execution and the rebels were unsuccessful. While the failure of this rebellion ended the United Irish conspiracy, Emmet joined Wolfe Tone as an Irish nationalist hero soon after being put to death by the British. The legend of Emmet that emerged after his death served to inspire others with its distinct Catholic and nationalist tone.<sup>6</sup> Wolfe Tone and Emmet began a line of romanticized Republican martyrs that inspired others to continue the Republican tradition in Ireland.

In 1916, a group known as the Irish Volunteers in deference to the original Volunteers of the late eighteenth century staged a rebellion on Easter Monday in an attempt to begin an Irish revolution. As was tradition with Irish Republican uprisings at this time, the Easter Rising was primarily a disaster for the rebels themselves. However, much like its predecessors it was a victory for Irish Republicanism and set the stage for the Irish War of Independence which began only three short years later.<sup>7</sup> The Irish War of Independence<sup>8</sup> and its aftermath set the stage for

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<sup>5</sup> Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Pan, 2007), 86-94.

<sup>6</sup> Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Pan, 2007), 119-21.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 386-87.

<sup>8</sup> Also referred to as the 'Anglo-Irish War' or the 'Tan war.'

British-Irish relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the war, Ireland was partitioned into two separate states by the Government of Ireland Act. One, the Republic, became a Free State in the United Kingdom while the other, the province of Ulster, would remain under the control of the British government with its gerrymandered Protestant majority.<sup>9</sup> This province is what would become known as Northern Ireland.

The separation of Ireland into parts based on religious majorities had pronounced political implications. Northern Ireland became a state in which a historically marginalized minority found themselves confronted with majority Protestant rule. Even with a comfortable majority, their political history would keep Ulster Protestants constantly on the defensive.<sup>10</sup> The Stormont government of Northern Ireland reflected this defensive ideology by putting into place both political and social obstacles for the Catholic community. The violence that ensued during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was largely a result of these political barriers. They would also serve as a revival of the Republican tradition during a period known as the “Troubles”. A small and unsuccessful uprising in the eighteenth century created a domino effect of mass political and ideological movement in Ireland that would last through the twentieth century. More importantly, the founders of this tradition and their followers had achieved immortality through martyrdom. The Republican tradition was founded and fueled by the self-sacrifice of its leaders, giving the concept of self-sacrifice a distinctly Irish flavor.

### **Nationalist Tradition and “Irishness” of Self-Sacrifice**

Self-sacrifice, in its various forms, has been a well-known phenomenon in twentieth century Irish politics. It has become the ultimate test of one’s dedication to a cause. While most

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 405.

<sup>10</sup> David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 7.

often associated with contemporary Irish politics and 20<sup>th</sup> century Republicanism, the tradition of self-sacrifice has played an integral role in Irish history and in the Irish Nationalist tradition.

From the pre-Christian era to the second half of the twentieth century, self-sacrifice has emerged and reemerged causing scholars to refer to this theme as the Irish cult of self-sacrifice. To further explore the “Irishness” of self-sacrifice, the historical background of this phenomenon will be analyzed as well as why such a phenomenon has emerged in Irish culture and history.

Hunger striking as a form of social redress can be traced back to the pre-Christian era in Ireland when those who wished to address a grievance chose to hunger strike on the doorstep of their wrong-doer. Death was rarely a result of these early fasts because of the social pressure placed on the wrong-doer to compensate the faster. From the perspective of the powerless in Ireland, the only weapon they had against the powerful was their own life.<sup>11</sup> After Christianity had established itself in Ireland, fasting and self-sacrifice became more of a symbolic gesture to the Irish as a means of identifying with the suffering and self-sacrifice of Christ.

The birth of Republicanism in the eighteenth century created a new avenue for self-sacrifice to continue its presence in Irish tradition. The death of Wolfe Tone revitalized the concept of self-sacrifice in Ireland as a means of gaining support and recognition from the public. It was only after his death that the Irish public showed support for Wolfe Tone’s Republican ideology. When others like Emmet followed in Wolfe Tone’s footsteps, self-sacrifice was shaped to increase the momentum of the Republican movement in Ireland. The self-sacrifice of its followers served to elevate the Republican cause among the Irish Catholic population. The immortalization and legendary celebrity status of the first Republican martyrs

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<sup>11</sup> George Sweeney. “Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 28 (2003): 421-23.

also helped to make self-sacrifice a staple of the Irish tradition. The prospect of eternal glory and honor solidified the concept of self-sacrifice in Irish politics.

Hunger striking reemerged during the first quarter of the twentieth century as a useful tool for the reemerging ideologies of self-sacrifice and militant republicanism at the time. The ten-year period of 1913-23 witnessed thousands of prisoners, both men and women, participate in hunger strikes organized against the British government and after 1922, the Irish Free State authorities. These politically motivated fasts centered on the perception of unjust imprisonment and the demand for political status. As a result of this decade of hunger strikes, a total of seven prisoners died.<sup>12</sup> Several of those who participated in these strikes would join the ranks of Irish Republicanism's greatest legends.

The effectiveness of hunger striking as a form of political protest was first noted during the post-Easter Rising era when the Volunteer Thomas Ashe (1885-1917) died while fasting as a result of being force-fed by prison authorities. Although his death was not the result of starvation, thousands poured into the streets of Dublin and joined his funeral procession in protest.<sup>13</sup> The most noted hunger striker of this time was the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, who protested the minor charges against him by hunger striking while imprisoned. After seventy-four days and numerous failed attempts at force-feeding, MacSwiney died on 25 October 1920. His sacrificial death symbolized resistance to British rule in the eyes of the Irish community and placed him among the ranks of Irish Republican martyrs. Before his death, he foreshadowed the Republican protests of the remainder of the century by stating, "It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can endure the most that will conquer."<sup>14</sup> These early

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<sup>12</sup> George Sweeney. "Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28 (2003): 423-24.

<sup>13</sup> Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Pan, 2007), 280.

<sup>14</sup> George Sweeney. "Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice," *Journal of*



martyrs like MacSwiney became role models for the later generations of Republicans. The public interest that followed the deaths of these hunger strikers showed the potential power that such fatal protesting could have in amassing support for their cause. A means of protest capable of attracting this level of attention and support would become critical to a successful Republican campaign.

The IRA as an organization was no stranger to the tactic of hunger striking before the strike in 1981. The granting of special category status had itself been the result of pressure placed on the British government by an IRA prison hunger strike in 1972.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, there were individuals who, for various reasons, individually chose to hunger strike in protest while incarcerated throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among these was Chief of Staff Sean MacStiofain, who was arrested and charged with six months in jail for his leadership role and participation in the IRA.<sup>16</sup> Even the hunger strike in 1981 was the second attempt of organizing a Republican hunger strike in the Maze Prison. The first began with the same motives as the second but ended before any deaths could occur.<sup>17</sup> The overarching theme of self-sacrifice can be seen throughout much of Irish history, taking the form of the hunger strike for much of the past century.

The theme of self-sacrifice poses important questions as to how and why such a theme successfully integrated itself into contemporary Irish society. The tentative model of self-sacrifice in Ireland by D. J. O'Neill can be used to answer many of these questions. He suggests five societal and individual needs that may account for the so-called "cult of self-sacrifice" in Irish society. To begin, self-sacrifice may be the only alternative for movements lacking

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*Contemporary History* 28 (2003): 428.

<sup>15</sup> See "Troubles" section for more detail on the events that surrounded this hunger strike and its resulting concessions.

<sup>16</sup> Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, (London: Penguin, 2007), 118.

<sup>17</sup> See "Maze Prison Protests" section for more detail on the first Maze Prison hunger strike.

manpower, resources, and popular support like the Republican movements seen throughout Irish history. Even at the beginning of such a tradition, hunger striking was used by the powerless against the powerful for they had no other means of ventilating their grievances. Self-sacrifice can also demonstrate legitimacy by establishing the importance and validity of a cause.

Willingness to die for a cause elevates and legitimizes that cause in the eyes of many in Irish society. The cult of self-sacrifice as a means of reinforcing this theme in Irish Nationalism also serves to inspire others to commit acts of self-sacrifice for the cause by venerating those who have previously sacrificed for the cause. Moreover, this creates a link between the members of a movement and their heroic martyrs, allowing those involved in a cause to share in the glory of their heroes. Finally, the Irish and Catholic ascetic traditions may have caused the suffering and deprivation of the Irish to manifest itself in unorthodox and extreme events.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the “Irishness” of self-sacrifice and its cult-like manifestation can be attributed to attempts to meet collective and individual societal needs in a culture with a history of deprivation and oppression.

### **“The Troubles” and the Reemergence of the Theme of Self-Sacrifice**

In the aftermath of the War of Independence, a period of relative political calm emerged throughout the two partitions of Ireland. The mid-twentieth century brought a time of political and social change throughout the Western world following the fall of the Nazi regime in World War II. Northern Ireland saw considerable economic prosperity during this time, which helped to close the economic gaps that had previously existed between the two religious communities. By the 1960’s, the Catholic Nationalist community was beginning to regain its footing in Northern Irish politics. Not only had post-war education programs greatly expanded the Catholic

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<sup>18</sup> George Sweeney. “Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 28 (2003): 433.

middle class, but, Catholics were beginning to take advantage of these new economic opportunities to voice their opinions in politics. Many of these voices were critical of Northern Ireland's political union with Great Britain and the limited rights that Catholics enjoyed under the Stormont government. Inspired by the American Civil Rights Movement, Catholics became forming non-violent protest organizations. In 1967, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) began to organize and attract large numbers of supporters in the northern districts. It is during the protest marches of this organization that violence in Northern Ireland broke out again. The international community watched in horror as cameramen filmed peacefully protesting civilians severely beaten by members of the police.<sup>19</sup>

The British government responded to the violence by deploying troops to patrol and contain the communities of Northern Ireland, although their attention was focus on the community they were originally sent to protect: the Catholics. Left defenseless, recruits flooded into the newly formed IRA paramilitary organization to defend their families and community from the British troops and loyalist paramilitaries. From the start of the civil rights movement, tensions between Protestants and Catholics in the North would take less than a decade to burst into indiscriminate violence and chaos that would consume Northern Ireland over the following decade. The breaking point came in 1969 and in its wake a period of destabilizing violence known as the "Troubles" began. The Republican theme of self-sacrifice reemerged during the Troubles as men committed themselves to death in return for reverence from their community. True to its name, the Troubles was a period of marked violence and destruction that shook Northern Ireland and demanded intense social and political change. Over the next thirty years,

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<sup>19</sup> David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 37-41.

over 3,600 lives would be lost in the battles between the British government and the Northern Irish paramilitary organizations.<sup>20</sup>

Significant conciliatory efforts were made in 1972 in an attempt to lessen the violence and destruction. Then Secretary of State, William Whitelaw, defused a Republican prison hunger strike by granting the prisoners “special category status.” The IRA and other paramilitary groups were given public recognition that their crimes were politically motivated. Whitelaw also made another serious conciliatory move in 1972 when he met directly with the leadership of the IRA. While both parties were steadfast in their refusal to make concessions, the very fact that the meeting took place would give the IRA reason to believe that the British, contrary to their political rhetoric, would indeed negotiate with paramilitary groups.<sup>21</sup> This would also come into play during the 1981 hunger strike when the IRA would expect then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to do the same. Unfortunately, Thatcher did not show the same willingness to negotiate with the IRA as had other British politicians. She had lost one of her closest aides, Airey Neave, just months before the election in 1979 when a bomb that had been planted on his car by members of the INLA exploded as he drove out of the House of Commons. Only a few short months into her tenure, eighteen British soldiers at Warrenpoint in County Down and the Queen’s cousin, Lord Mountbatten, were killed in IRA attacks.<sup>22</sup> If Thatcher had not previously adopted a hard-line attitude toward the IRA before these attacks, she certainly did afterwards.

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<sup>20</sup>David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), x-xi

<sup>21</sup>David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 84-85.

<sup>22</sup>David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 132.

## The Maze Prison Protests

### Ulsterisation

In 1976, newly appointed Labour Secretary of State Roy Mason began a serious effort to change the British government's approach to paramilitary violence. These strategic changes became known as 'criminalization' or 'Ulsterisation.' The former name reflected policy that sought to criminalize the actions of paramilitary groups, and in effect removed Whitelaw's "special category status" for Republican prisoners. The latter referred to the localization of law enforcement efforts, making the political violence of Northern Ireland into a law-and-order issue.<sup>23</sup> It de-emphasized the role of the British army and handed the conflict over to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the police force of Northern Ireland.<sup>24</sup> Persons caught for paramilitary offenses would thereafter be sentenced and tried in the same fashion as common criminals.

From the perspective of the government, the boundary between political and criminal action had been erected, and the Republicans were clearly located on the latter's side. The Republican prisoners, however, refuted the label of "terrorists" and protested that their actions did not originate from selfish motivations. Their motivation, they asserted, was purely political in nature and therefore further merited special category prisoner status.<sup>25</sup> Thus, on 16 September 1976 the first member of the IRA convicted under the Ulsterisation policy, Ciaran Nugent, refused the prison uniform and wrapped himself instead in his prison blanket.<sup>26</sup> Since the prison uniform was the mark of a criminal, this action was a rejection of criminal status in both a literal

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<sup>23</sup> David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 123.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 522.

<sup>25</sup> Aogan Mulcahy, "Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy: Press Coverage of the 1981 Northern Irish Hunger Strike." *Society for the Study of Social Problems* 42 (1995): 449.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 523.

and symbolic sense. Symbolism itself was to play a key role in the Maze Prison protests and soon hundreds of other Republican prisons would join Nugent in his protest, sending a message to the British government and the international community that they would not stand to be treated as criminals. The Blanket Protest, as it was later named, would mark the beginning of an escalating series of Republican protests in the Maze Prison that would culminate with the 1981 hunger strike.

### **The Blanket, No-Wash, and Dirty Protests**

Although the Republican protests of the Ulsterisation policy were not confined to the Maze Prison, the largest and most notable protests occurred there. Those who donned the blanket in the Maze faced the consequences of non-conforming prisoners. By 1978, there were already over 300 non-conforming Republican prisoners ‘on the blanket.’ In the protest’s third year, the prison system seemed to be containing it and it had amassed little support outside the prison.<sup>27</sup> If the Republican prisoners were not able to attract attention in the outside world, then the protest would be a failure. It was only through calling attention to their protests that they stood a chance in reclaiming special category status. This realization led to an escalation in the protests and a move into the ‘No-Wash’ and ‘Dirty’ phases.

The prison protest escalated into the ‘No Wash’ protest after the non-conforming prisoners refused to leave their cells to wash or to empty their chamber pots. The protest soon took a new name of the ‘Dirty’ protest as prisoners began spreading their excrement on the walls of their cells to keep the prison guards from entering. Prison authorities, threatened by maggot and disease infestation, had to forcibly remove the prisoners to bathe them and allow their cells

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<sup>27</sup> David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 139.

to be cleaned with special equipment. The forced baths and cell cleanings only caused further hostilities between the prisoners and the guards. After a visit to the prison, the leader of Ireland's Catholic Church Cardinal Thomas O'Fiaich made a rather publicized declaration of the horrific conditions of the prison and drew a distinction between the Republican prisoners and common criminals. Although this was the beginning of the propaganda war between the government and the prisoners, the media had yet to capitalize on the news of the Maze protests.

### **The First Republican Hunger Strike**

After the relative lack of success in their previous protests, the prisoners decided to unleash their ultimate weapon against the government: the hunger strike. The first hunger strike began in October of 1980, marking the end of all other protests to concentrate all efforts on the strike. The strikers made five demands of the British government: the right to wear their own clothes, the right to free association, no prison dictated work, weekly letters, visits, and parcels, as well as restoration of all lost remission due to the previous protests.<sup>28</sup> By granting these demands, the government would also in effect be granting special category status.

The first seven men to go on hunger strike comprised six members of the IRA and one member of the INLA. All seven participants were to begin the strike at the same time, therefore creating a quickly mounting death toll once the men began reaching the critical phase in their fasts. This "critical phase" as it was named, referred to the period during the fast where the striker was at a serious risk of dying. It was also a critical phase in the strike because it was hoped that the ominous threat of men dying would force the British government to break the deadlock and result in a victory without having to incur any real casualties. In December, the

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<sup>28</sup> David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 140-141.

prisoners were forced to call off the hunger strike prematurely when one of the seven strikers was removed at the point of death to a Belfast hospital. While the prisoners initially claimed victory, it soon became apparent that the government had no real intention of meeting any of their demands.<sup>29</sup> The frustration caused from the speculated broken promises of the British government fueled further resentment from the prisoners and they quickly began organizing a second strike, against the will of an outside leadership afraid that a second unsuccessful strike would only further add to the embarrassment of the first.

### **The Second Republican Hunger Strike**

The second strike began on 1 March 1981 with Bobby Sands, the Commanding Officer of the IRA prisoners, leading a phased version of the original strike. This time, men from both Republican paramilitary organizations would join the strike in two week intervals to increase the pressure on the British government. As one man died on the strike, another would replace him. There would be a narrow window of opportunity for the British to make the necessary concessions after each death. The decision to begin another strike was entirely that of the prisoners. The outside leadership strongly advised the prisoners not to begin another strike for fear of diluting the organization's resources. Staggering the deaths would also prevent the men from collectively acting to save another's life. Once the first striker died, each succeeding death would place increasing social pressure on the remaining strikers to see the strike to its end.

On some level, the second strike did produce a major propaganda battle and mounting tensions in the region. Most Nationalists who came to support the prison protests did so because of their resentment of Margaret Thatcher's inflexibility. Numerous third party organizations,

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<sup>29</sup> David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 141-42.



both political and non-political, attempted to mediate the dispute between the government and the prisoners to no avail. Then, only five days into the strike, the sudden death of Nationalist MP Frank Maguire created a by-election during which striker Bobby Sands defeated the former Unionist party leader Harry West to begin what would eventually become the IRA's road to politics. This sent a loud message to the British government that Bobby Sands supporters numbered high enough to achieve an electoral victory.

Sands received a seat among the greatest Republican martyrs when he became the first striker to die on 5 May 1981. An estimated 100,000 people attended his funeral. Sands' death also marked the beginning of the international community's interest and involvement in the strike. Even with the newfound interest in the strike, negotiations dragged on with no resolution in sight and violence threatened to consume the country as the death toll rose from unrest caused by the strike. Among the dead were many innocent men, women, and children who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Resentment soared, and with it, retaliatory violence.<sup>30</sup> As the months dragged on, neither side showed any movement despite efforts from international peace organizations and religious institutions.

Due to the staggering of the strike, there was over a month of crucial negotiation time between the deaths of the fourth and fifth strikers. Unfortunately, the two sides did not reach an agreement before the death of the fifth striker, Joe McDonnell, and the strike continued with no end in sight. Between May and August of that year, ten hunger strikers died. Prison chaplain Fr. Denis Faul began encouraging the families of the strikers to intervene once their loved ones lost consciousness. Faced with the futility of continuing a strike against familial intervention, the prisoners called off the strike in October 1981, without any concessions from the British

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<sup>30</sup> David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 2002), 143-44.

government. Afterwards, newly appointed Secretary of State James Prior eased prison regulations and allowed the prisoners to wear their own clothing along with other limited concessions to their demands. Special category status was not among them.

## ***Chapter 1: Subject Approach and Methodology***

### **Legitimization**

#### **Meaning and Importance of Legitimacy through Self-Sacrifice**

Legitimacy is the lifeline and means to an end of terrorist organizations. To legitimate is to show or affirm someone or something to be justified.<sup>31</sup> Thus, gaining legitimacy is a crucial step for terrorist organizations because it justifies their extraordinary acts of violence against persons or states and gives these organizations moral grounds to continue their campaigns of terror. Without legitimacy, the organizations would appear politically superfluous, losing the concept of political motivation. The power to determine whether the goals and actions of an organization are legitimate lies in the hands of the community it targets. There are several methods used by these organizations to gain legitimacy in spite of the indiscriminate violence they condone and carry out.

The most basic of these methods is to gain the emotional support of the community. Often times this involves the organization proving the justness of a cause through its dedication to it. To gain legitimacy this way, as particularly seen in the case of the 1981 hunger strike, an organization will often appeal to its target community at a symbolic or emotional level through acts of self-sacrifice. A shared set of religious beliefs can also be used to further support for the

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<sup>31</sup> "Legitimate," *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, Encyclopedia Britannica Company, Accessed Dec. 12, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-sacrifice>.

terrorist organization. The emphasis on religion by the organization not only plays a central role in emotional appeal but also places its actors in a position that reflects the community's interests or ideals.<sup>32</sup> Self-sacrifice in connection with beliefs that define a community can even be defined as altruistic suicide.

With altruistic suicide, the goal of the suicide act goes beyond the actor toward the aid of a group in which he participates. Thus, this form of suicide is named for its intense altruistic character. But most instances of altruistic suicide are performed as a duty, and are therefore obligatory. Martyrdom, the ultimate self-sacrifice, enters the foreground when the act of altruistic suicide is no longer expressly obligatory. Although public opinion may be generally favorable toward the act, the pressure is less direct on the actor to commit suicide. Here, the man who takes his life in circumstances that do not require him to do so gains social prestige. His act of suicide is not from hopelessness or despair but, rather, from a desire to obtain a goal that is outside the confinements of the realm of life. The altruistic suicide is an act that, unlike egoistic or selfish suicide, is not driven by the individual but rather that individual's commitment to an ethics to which life is subordinate.<sup>33</sup> Members of that society are compelled to support an organization that professes to represent them and their ideals through acts of self-sacrifice.

Altruistic suicide has been more often found among lower and more primitive societies although the more recent deaths of Christian martyrs can also fall into this category of suicide. Although they did not take their own lives, they sought an inevitable death and acted with full knowledge of the impending consequences of their actions. In their final act of faith, they discarded their individualism in favor of their beliefs. They renounced life for something they

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<sup>32</sup> James Dingley and Marcello Mollica, "The Human Body as a Terrorist Weapon: Hunger Strikes and Suicide Bombers," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 6 (2007), 459.

<sup>33</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: a Study in Sociology*. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951), 221-27.

loved more than themselves.<sup>34</sup> Early Christian martyrs testified to the power of their faith through their willingness to die for it; they were witness to something greater than themselves. Their martyrdom serves as an inspiration to modern day Christians of true commitment to their faith. While their sacrifices may have converted many, their acts may have also been seen as futile to those who did not profess or understand the Christian faith. Thus, the nature of altruistic suicide as centered on the beliefs of a community calls for a common source of morality to be understood and valued. This is especially true for the case of the IRA in Northern Ireland.

The sources of morality and legitimacy involved in the acts of the hunger strikers are found in their political community, especially in regards to their deaths. The hunger strikers and their acts of self-sacrifice played upon aspects of the Irish Nationalist culture that were poorly understood by the British, non-Catholic actors because they did not reflect a universally accepted morality or tradition.<sup>35</sup> Through their self-sacrifice, the IRA was able to isolate its community and use a shared ideology as a divider between their enemy (the British state) and their supporters (the Catholic community). The self-sacrifice of the hunger strikers in particular would also have been an effective way of showing the dedication that the members of the IRA had to their cause. It underlined their political motivations to the Northern Irish community as a whole. Their self-sacrifice would have also strengthened the religious ties to their community through its connection with Catholic tradition.

### **Martyrdom in Catholicism and the Religious Aspect of Self-Sacrifice**

Its identification with the Catholic religion most definitely linked the IRA to the Nationalist community. Although arguments exist on the extent to which the organization itself

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<sup>34</sup> Emile Durkeim, *Suicide: a Study in Sociology*. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951), 227-28.

<sup>35</sup> James Dingley and Marcello Mollica, "The Human Body as a Terrorist Weapon: Hunger Strikes and Suicide Bombers," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 6 (2007), 459-60.

followed the Catholic religion, the IRA was culturally Catholic in that its members were predominantly raised in Catholic families and held a common tradition as members of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. The hunger strikers sought to portray themselves to the Catholic community as martyrs, since martyrdom as an important concept in Catholic theological history would help to legitimize their actions.

The concept of martyrdom in Catholicism came from the Greek word *martus* as it was first used to describe the Apostles of Christ. This word signifies ‘a witness who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation’ although even in the context of its first use in describing the Apostles, there is a pronounced element of self-sacrifice.<sup>36</sup> The Apostles of Christ faced the daily threat of severe punishment, even death, for their testimony to the life and works of Christ. According to tradition and the Bible, all but one of the twelve died for professing their faith; two were even crucified in the same manner as Christ. Thus, the term ‘martyr’ came to signify a witness of Christ who would choose to suffer death rather than deny his faith. Though martyrs suffered the threat of death for their beliefs, it was only through a gradual process that the term was applied exclusively to those who had actually died for the faith. Before the term gained this exclusivity by the middle of the fourth century, there existed living martyrs who had bravely endured torture and other perils for their faith.

Early Christians suffered more than a century of mass religious persecution over which countless numbers of men, women, and children made the ultimate sacrifice for their faith. It is with little surprise that these innumerable sufferings faced by early Christians have been venerated by the Church. Relics from these martyrs are highly valued and displayed throughout the world in numerous churches. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christians endured many

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<sup>36</sup> Maurice Hassett, “Martyr,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Accessed Feb. 26, 2011, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09736b.htm>.

hardships to visit the shrines in which these relics were contained. Martyrs were respected and honored as those who won the greatest victory through their freedom of conscious of death.<sup>37</sup> It is the ambition of many faithful to emulate this dedication to their faith.

Although martyrdom through religious persecution in the early Church is revered by the modern one, there exists now a great emphasis on the sanctity of life. Modern Christian societies profess a particularly strong aversion to suicide because they assign a greater importance to the life of the individual. Despite theories of man and his destiny, this moderate individualism prevents these societies from condoning suicides, especially during the modern era of relatively significant religious tolerance.<sup>38</sup> However, from a theological standpoint, Catholicism still allows certain justifications for taking one's own life. Life, according to the Catholic religion, is sacred and cannot be given up for any reason except when one's death is self-sacrificial to honor God or to save the lives of other people. The former justification mirrors the actions of early martyrs while the latter mirrors the story of Christ, who laid down his life for this purpose. This self-sacrifice does not seek its own advantage or edification, but the advantage and edification of those whom the act saves. It is voluntary, purposeful, and done out of true love for the sake of others.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, it is through the emulation of Christ's sacrifice for others that the hunger strikers strove to achieve consistency with the doctrine of the Catholic community.

If the hunger strikers were not consistent with Catholic teachings on self-sacrifice, then they risked being labeled as suicides. Catholicism as a whole is particularly unkind to the concept of egoistic suicide. Taking one's life is a sin against God, especially when the action is calculated and not made in a moment of desperation or intense emotional disarray. If the hunger

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<sup>37</sup> Maurice Hassett, "Martyr," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Accessed Feb. 26, 2011, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09736b.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Emile Durkeim, *Suicide: a Study in Sociology*. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951), 226.

<sup>39</sup> M. David Litwa, "Self-Sacrifice to Save the Life of Another in Jewish and Christian Traditions," *Heythrop Journal: A Bimonthly Review of Philosophy and Theology* (2009): Page 912-17.

strikers orchestrated the strike themselves and did in fact willingly refuse food to the point of death, then their acts could be seen as sinful. Suicide in and of itself is also quite foreign to Catholic nations, leading to the possibility of an added stigma to the hunger strikers' actions from local and international Catholic communities. There is a negative relationship between the percentage of Catholics and the average number of suicides in European states in particular.<sup>40</sup> This shows that there likely exist some factors, rather religious or cultural, which make suicide less likely among Catholic populations. This in particular could have created a substantial obstacle for the strikers on their road to legitimacy. The nature and cause of the suicide may create a platform for inconsistency with Catholic teachings. Thus, proving their actions fell into one of the categories of exception within the framework of Catholic Doctrine was imperative to acquiring the legitimacy they sought from their community.

### **Components of Legitimization**

For each organization of violence, there are different components of legitimization. In the case of legitimizing the 1981 hunger strike, there are three important components. The first is to prove their actions were acts of self-sacrifice, and not suicide. The second component follows that the hunger strikers must have been acting of their own free will. Lastly, the motivation of the hunger strikers being political and not selfish in nature. These components depend not on the ideology or actions of the hunger strikers themselves, but on the perceptions of their community. Regardless of the beliefs of the hunger strikers, to achieve legitimacy they would have had to have conveyed those beliefs successfully to their community.

The first critical component of legitimizing their cause would be to define their actions as those of self-sacrifice, not suicide. An action deemed as self-sacrifice would have compelled

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<sup>40</sup> Emile Durkeim, *Suicide: a Study in Sociology*. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951), 152.

their community to support their actions, especially given the Republican tradition of self-sacrifice that was still prevalent in Irish society. On the other hand, suicide as an act of killing oneself voluntarily and intentionally could not have been supported or legitimized by a community that followed Catholic religious traditions.<sup>41</sup> The Catholic Church and community of Northern Ireland would have been faced with deciding whether or not death on hunger strike constituted voluntary death (and therefore suicide) or an act of self-sacrifice. Language in the media would also be especially important to distinguishing between the two acts, as would the competing Protestant ideology of the time.

The second component is the perception of the hunger strikers as acting on their own free will. If the outside organization was using the strikers to gain publicity or win elections despite the futility of the gaining their demands and special-category status, then theirs were not acts of true self-sacrifice. An act cannot be seen as self-sacrifice if it was not the actor himself who was fully aware of the circumstances and consequences of his actions. Their actions could not have been those of true self-sacrifice if they had been used or manipulated from any actor or actors inside or outside of the prison. If it was the outside leadership who was prolonging the strike and causing the deaths of the strikers, then the strikers would have been characterized as simply pawns of their organizations; their deaths seen as further murders carried-out by an organization known for its indiscriminate violence.

Lastly, the third component of legitimization involves the perception of the nature of their actions as being selflessly and politically motivated. The IRA considered any act of violence as an act of war against a government they saw as illegitimate. Thus, they professed themselves to be separate from common criminals in their motivation. If they were perceived as criminals,

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<sup>41</sup> "Suicide," *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, Encyclopedia Britannica Company, Accessed Dec. 18, 2011. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-sacrifice>.



then they would not have been justified in demanding special-category status. Not only did this concept come into play in how the strikers were portrayed in the newspapers, but also how the actions of their organizations outside of the prison were depicted during this time. If their actions were seen as selfish or criminal in nature, their efforts to achieve political prisoner status could not have been legitimized by their community.

These components of achieving legitimacy are important to analyze in the media surrounding the strikes. Given the influence of the media on public opinion and perception, the media could have posed a threat to this legitimacy had they been inconsistent with any of these three components. The media had access to an open line of communication in the daily lives of the public while the prisoners were very much isolated from the outside world. All three components will later be analyzed through the media's portrayal of the hunger strike in the *Irish Independent* and *Belfast Telegraph* to test whether or not these three components were upheld by the papers. If they were undermined, the papers' portrayal of the strike may have been a critical factor in undermining the strikers' cause and prevented them from achieving the legitimacy they needed to obtain their demands.

## **Subject Introduction**

### **Current Literature on the Subject**

There is a plethora of scholarly research that has been done on the Northern Irish hunger strikes and the topic of the media in relation to terrorist organizations. For the 1981 strike in particular, there are several different images that current research and documentation convey. Each contributes a different yet important perspective on the strike. There are four specific works that were especially relevant to this research.

The first of these is an especially detailed version of events written by British journalist David Beresford. In his book, Ten Men Dead: the Story of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike, Beresford compiles an account of the hunger strike from the smuggled letters or “comms” sent back and forth between the prisoners in order to communicate and coordinate their efforts throughout the strike. Beresford appealed to the IRA leadership for the ability to sift through thousands of comms in order to piece together the events inside and outside the prison. He seeks to recreate the daily prison life experience from inside the Maze by supplementing his narrative with the comms. The narrative is primarily comprised of contemporary newspaper reports from the time and personal interviews conducted by Beresford with those involved indirectly and direct in the strike. He also pulled from his own writings as he was assigned to the coverage of Northern Ireland by the British newspaper *The Guardian*. It is a very complete and compelling work written from the perspective of someone just outside the immediate effects of the strike yet still able to give personal witness to its events.

Another especially significant perspective of the strike comes in Pdraig O’Malley’s Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair. Like Beresford, O’Malley seeks to retell the story of the 1981 hunger strike but this time by emphasizing its religious component. In his book, he records the theological struggle between the Catholic and Protestants Churches of Northern Ireland. O’Malley highlights the extensive involvement of Church officials in negotiations and also the mounting pressure placed on the Catholic Church by its Protestant counterpart to declare the strikers as suicides. His work adds the religious and also political angle of the strike and contributes evidence that further reveals the multi-layered complexity of the strike. It contests the notion that the strike was a stalemate solely between the

British government and the Republican prisoners. For this reason, it is an especially relevant and important element of scholarship on the strike.

An extremely controversial and thought-provoking work is Richard O’Rawe’s Blanketmen. Published nearly twenty-five years after the hunger strike, Blanketmen retells the story of the H-Block hunger strike from O’Rawe’s perspective as press officer for the IRA’s Maze prisoners. In this account, O’Rawe accuses the outside leadership of prolonging the hunger strike despite the British concession to nearly all five of the prisoners’ demands. He claims that a settlement was reached between the prisoners and a secret correspondent from the British government, codename “Mountain Climber,” that could have ended the strike after the fourth striker died, avoiding the deaths of the last sixth strikers. O’Rawe accuses the outside leadership of prolonging the strike for political and electoral reasons; he insists the strikers were being used as pawns by their leaders. This angle on the story of the hunger strike reveals another potential obstacle to the strikers’ obtaining their demands. There are those who feel that the strikers were not acting on their own accord and O’Rawe’s account confirms these feelings. What it does not take into account, however, is that while several of the demands had been conceded by the British through the Mountain Climber Initiative, political status was not one of them. Consequently, the outside leadership would not have seen these concessions as sufficient enough to end the strike without the main ideological component having been conceded.

The scholarly article that was most instrumental to this research is that of Aogan Mulcahy’s. In his article, “Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy: Press Coverage of the 1981 Northern Irish Hunger Strike,” Mulcahy demonstrates the importance of the claims-making of the media to the legitimacy of the hunger strike. He examines the media’s role in the construction of legitimacy through its claims-making process through a qualitative analysis of

coverage in the *Irish Times*, the *London Times*, and the *New York Times*. This analysis is broken down into four sub-categories: parliamentary elections, deaths, funerals, and the hunger strikers themselves. He concludes that the lack of support for the strike, the routinization of its events, and the emphasis placed on critiquing the British government undermined the strikers' quest for legitimacy. His research is broad in its focus and pulls from papers located in Dublin, London, and New York respectively; therefore creating a more international image of the news coverage from that time.

### **Significance of Further Research**

The research that has been done surrounding the Irish hunger strike of 1981 does not align completely with the outcome of the strike. By many accounts, especially the secondary accounts of the second strike itself, it is unclear as to why the hunger strikers were not able to achieve their demands. As is common with retrospective research, these scholars are able to piece together the various parts and perspectives of the strike to form a more complete picture that was not shared by those who actually witnessed and participated in the events surrounding the strike. Had the public been aware of the chain of events in the prison as seen from the strikers' point of view as well as their overall ideologies, the resolution of the strike may have taken place on different terms.

This research attempts to shed light on why the strike ended as it did through analyzing the construction of legitimacy in its basic ideological form. What this research seeks to do is to analyze the components of legitimacy through the one source from which the Irish public could have gained reliable information on the events of the strike: the print media. It seeks to take a closer look at the print media of Northern Ireland and Ireland, limiting the international element

that Mulcahy has analyzed. Analyzing the print media in relation to the outcome of the strike may bridge the gap between the retrospective secondary research and the primary accounts of those directly involved.

## **Methodology**

The primary research analysis of this paper was done by isolating newspaper articles that covered the hunger strike over the roughly eight month period of the strike from March-October of 1981. Each of the papers was scanned from articles pertaining to the politics, events, and opinions surrounding the hunger strike. For the purposes of the quantitative section, articles were divided based on the source, the month and tone of the news coverage, and the location of the article as it appeared in the newspaper. For the qualitative section, the articles were then separated based on their topic of coverage and were then further divided into six categories that could have influenced or undermined the three components of legitimization. These six categories were then used to compare the coverage of the two papers to look for any further trends that appeared. A sample was drawn from each of the categories in order to limit and isolate the most relevant and pertinent articles for this research

The *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Irish Independent* are the two newspapers chosen for this analysis for several reasons. Firstly, the geographic location of the papers was central to analyzing the direct effect that their papers could have had on the communities of both Northern Ireland and the Republic. The papers are headquartered in Belfast and Dublin, the capital cities of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which gives them a large and diverse readership as well as easy access to the governmental and political figures of the time. The *Telegraph* would have had more direct contact with the political and social repercussions of the hunger

strike while the *Independent* was more removed from the direct effects of the strike given its location in the Republic. Both papers could reach a wide audience to keep them informed on the events of the strike, as well as potentially influence public opinion on it. They were also well-respected among their communities and boasted high circulations.

## **Terrorism & the Media**

### **The Media as a Tool for Terrorist Organizations**

All terrorist organizations wish to take actions that will maximize the public attention and recognition given to their organization. Acts of violence are carried out to attract enough attention to communicate that organization's goals.<sup>42</sup> Because the ultimate goal of terrorist organizations is to communicate with the public through their actions, the mass media has become an important tool for these organizations. The information revolution of the twentieth century has created mass media-oriented terrorist groups that carry out their activities to attract international media attention. The openness of contemporary society combined with almost unlimited communication possibilities has placed the role of the media at center stage in both the transmission and dissemination of information.<sup>43</sup>

The media capitalizes on sensation-invoking news which terrorist organizations are more than capable of providing. News coverage of death and violence at the hands of these organizations, even if abhorred by the public, elevates them to a position of power through the invocation of fear. On the other hand, media coverage may also serve to legitimize an organization in the eyes of its followers. In his 1969 book, *Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla*, Brazilian terrorist and modern terror "theorist" Carlos Marighella put it this way: "to inform

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<sup>42</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Terrorism, the Media and Public Opinion," *Inside Terrorism*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 131.

<sup>43</sup> Anita Peresin, "Mass Media and Terrorism," *Medij. Istra.*, 13, no. 1 (2007): 5-22.

about the revolutionists' actions is enough for the modern mass media to become an important tool of propaganda and that the psychological war is a technique of fight, based on direct or indirect usage of the mass media." It is only through maximum publicity that terrorist organizations have the most potential to effect political change.

Fortunately for these organizations, the mass media does not hesitate to publicize their actions. The mass media hopes to hold public interest with stories that are attention-grabbing and dramatic in order to raise their ratings and company profits. Where profits are concerned, news companies tend to ignore the political implications of such reporting. Media influence is such that the new term "propaganda war" has been coined to describe the struggle of terrorist organizations to utilize the media to justify their goals while also fending off damage from negative publicity. One of the major objectives in a propaganda war is to mobilize wider support for a cause through demonstrating the rightness and inevitability of it. This also has the potential to increase future recruitment and raise funds for an organization. The media then becomes a tool for sustaining the future existence of an organization. Keeping this in mind, terrorist organizations are still unable to completely control the mass media. These organizations are constantly working toward manipulating and exploiting the media for their purposes under the imminent threat of negative publicity.<sup>44</sup>

Especially relevant to this research are the ways in which the media can effectively be used for counterterrorism strategies. Broadcasting in an objective manner the violence against the innocent and the deaths caused by terrorist organizations can help to undermine the organization's cause. Showing these organizations in this light helps to decrease the extent to which the public believes them to exemplify principles such as freedom and justice. Essentially it counters the ability of terrorists to use the media to convince the public that their cause is a just

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<sup>44</sup>Anita Peresin, "Mass Media and Terrorism," *Medij. Istra.*, 13, no. 1 (2007): 7-9.

one.<sup>45</sup> By adopting certain strategies such as these, the media can become a weapon used against terrorist organizations. Northern Ireland is one case where a Western liberal state used the media in its counterterrorism strategy.

The second great revolution in mass communication had occurred in 1968, around the beginning of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The United States had just launched the first television satellite, accelerating news broadcasting and giving terrorist organizations a new weapon in propaganda. The long-lasting struggle with paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland, and the technological innovations in the mass media, forced the British government to be among the first who recognized the importance of the media in its fight against terrorism. They implemented a set of regulations that instructed journalists in their reporting. These instructions stressed the responsibility of the journalist to report the truth in a concise and careful way while avoiding speculation.<sup>46</sup> The hope was that this would contain the extent to which the media could be used to fuel the propaganda machine for terrorists and give the public a more realistic take on the conflict.

The British government under the Thatcher administration was also no stranger to media censorship and manipulation. Prime Minister Thatcher demanded that in a time of such serious terrorist threats, the British government deprive terrorist organizations of publicity through a ban on broadcasting declarations or statements by terrorist spokespersons. The British were not the only government that used censorship against Republican paramilitaries. In its Media Act of 1960, the Republic of Ireland banned the interviewing of all terrorist spokespersons as well. The Republic attributes this act to a decrease in voter support for the political wing of the IRA, Sinn Fein, and diminished the legitimacy they had previously gained from the media. After a

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<sup>45</sup>Anita Peresin, "Mass Media and Terrorism," *Medij. Istra.*, 13, no. 1 (2007): 13.

<sup>46</sup>Anita Peresin, "Mass Media and Terrorism," *Medij. Istra.*, 13, no. 1 (2007): 9-14.



ceasefire was signed in the Republic, these bans were lifted.<sup>47</sup> Before the hunger strike began in 1981, both Northern Ireland and the Republic had experience with manipulating the media so that it could not be used as a propaganda weapon for paramilitaries.

## **The Social Construction of Martyrdom**

How martyrdom is constructed is an important element to be used in analyzing the media and its role in the legitimization of terrorist organizations. The modern construction of martyrdom deviates significantly from the classical definition that is generally accepted by most scholars. This defines martyrdom to be an act of fatal religious witness for the purpose of demonstrating one's faith and commitment. While there are some issues that remain with this definition, it sets a universal concept of martyrdom as a connection between commitment, risk-taking, and death. Even after acknowledging this framework, martyrs are not made by their actions and deaths alone. They can only be recognized as martyrs by 'martyrologists,' or those who describe and characterize their deaths. The actions and beliefs of the martyrologist is the driving force behind the construction of martyrdom. In modern times, martyrologists have broken away from the confinements of the classical definition of martyrdom and sought to produce martyrs of their own conception. Ultimately, martyrdom has become a product of social construction, making the importance of the media in creating martyrs an ever increasing one.

When the continuation of a political cause is at risk, the capacity to create martyrs rests primarily with the martyrologists and not the martyr himself. These socially constructed designations of martyrdom typically occur in situations of widespread public mourning, for an individual of celebrity status or one whose death was caused at the hands of an enemy. When

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<sup>47</sup> Anita Peresin, "Mass Media and Terrorism," *Medij. Istra.*, 13, no. 1 (2007): 17.

these deaths are labeled as “martyrs” it elevates them to a level that they would not have previously achieved through their deaths alone. By virtue of the socially constructed martyr, martyr status is assigned more on the evil doing of the enemy than on the actions or beliefs of the martyr. The self-sacrifice and beliefs of the martyr become irrelevant while constructed martyrdom mirrors victimization. What matters to martyrologists is how and to what degree a martyr’s death can be dramatized and used to glorify the cause.<sup>48</sup>

The Republican tradition itself has been fueled by the construction of martyrs in a way that serves to motivate its followers and further its tradition. The recount of nearly every Republican martyr contains some element of social reconstruction. Wolfe Tone, himself the first recognized Republican martyr, was from a Protestant background. Republican martyrs are most easily constructed when very little is known for certain about them as individuals. The legend of Robert Emmet after his death was easily molded into the Republican tradition because the reality of his life could not spoil the myth of it. Despite little being known about his life, the martyrdom of Emmet would be used as an inspiration for Republicans over the two centuries following his death.<sup>49</sup> The deaths of the hunger strikers in 1981 also fall into the category of socially constructed martyrs. While Bobby Sands is the most notable of these socially constructed martyrs, the strikers are seen as modern day versions of their Republican predecessors. The glorification of their deaths in the Republican tradition has little root in the actual events surrounding the hunger strike, nor in their beliefs. While they were unsuccessful in achieving their five demands and obtaining political status, they did achieve immortality by means of the Republican tradition of martyrdom.

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Barkun, “Appropriated Martyrs: The Branch Davidians and the Radical Right,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (2007): 117-23.

<sup>49</sup> Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*, (London: Pan, 2007), 121.

## Historical Background of the Newspapers

### The Belfast Telegraph

The *Belfast Telegraph* was founded in November of 1861 by the Baird brothers, William and George. They came from very conservative backgrounds and were members of the Orange Order, a Protestant fraternal organization concentrated mainly in Northern Ireland and Scotland. The Orange Order has generally been associated with staunch unionism and the *Belfast Telegraph* began as a very conservative, pro-unionist paper.<sup>50</sup> Despite its conservative beginnings, over the next century the paper would become the most liberal newspaper in Belfast. During the time of the Troubles, the *Telegraph* earned a reputation for liberalism by supporting then Prime Minister Terence O'Neill and his efforts to lead the Unionist Party away from extremist control. It received much criticism from the Unionist community in Belfast and was even boycotted by several newspaper shops. This did not deter the *Telegraph* from continuing to reach both sides of the conflict in all six counties, making it the most widely distributed paper from the capital.<sup>51</sup>

During the years of the Troubles, the paper's headquarters and several branch offices became targets of bombings by paramilitary organizations. Also over this period, it is estimated that upwards of 100 of their distribution vans were hijacked by gunmen. One delivery man on the west Belfast run, Barney Campbell, was hijacked some twenty times. The newspaper developed a system of responding to paramilitary threats and continued to circulate despite efforts to derail its production.<sup>52</sup> Despite the violence and turmoil of the Troubles, it is the hunger strike of 1981 that served as the biggest challenge to a newspaper that served a polarized

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<sup>50</sup> Malcolm Brodie, *The Tele: A History of the Belfast Telegraph*, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Limited, 1995), 1-3.

<sup>51</sup> Malcolm Brodie, *The Tele: A History of the Belfast Telegraph*, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Limited, 1995), 70.

<sup>52</sup> Malcolm Brodie, *The Tele: A History of the Belfast Telegraph*, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Limited, 1995), 183-84.

community. Unfortunately, the violence of the time took center stage for many in Northern Ireland, including its press coverage. Several of the *Telegraph's* reporters were singled-out by paramilitary men to be taken for 'joy rides' from which they amassed information for their stories.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the strike, the paper struggled to continue distributing its papers to both the Catholic and Protestant communities of Northern Ireland. Regardless of these efforts to give fair and impartial news coverage, the placement of the paper amidst the violence and turmoil cannot be overlooked. The *Telegraph* and its staff were working on the front lines of the conflict and the effect of such proximity to the violence may be reflected in its coverage by more emphasis on ending paramilitary violence than understanding the political context for such violence.

### **The Irish Independent**

The *Irish Independent* was founded in December of 1891 and sponsored by William Parnell and the Parnellite Party in order to counter the anti-Parnellite papers of the day. The paper, though appearing after Parnell's death, became known as the record for speeches from Parnellite leaders and any presently relevant political information on the party. Unfortunately, business considerations took second place to politics and as a result, the paper suffered chronic financial problems until the beginning of the twentieth century when it was bought by William Martin Murphy. Its first daily paper was printed on 2 January 1905. The paper's new leadership devoted its energies toward cost-cutting, an aggressive advertising campaign, and soon became the most widely read newspaper in Ireland. Despite its wide audience, the paper received endless criticism for its strong anti-British coverage.<sup>54</sup> The paper was especially critical of the

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<sup>53</sup> Malcolm Brodie, *The Tele: A History of the Belfast Telegraph*, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Limited, 1995), 189.

<sup>54</sup> Patrick Maume, *The Irish Independent and empire, 1891-1919*, Ed. Simon J. Potter. (Dublin: Four Courts Press,

expansion of the British Empire and mirrored sentiments expressed by most of Ireland's nationalist population. While the original Parnellite paper was forthright about its radical anti-imperialism, Murphy's *Independent* expressed a less extreme version of anti-imperialism and therefore reached a wider audience. The paper supported a mutually beneficial relationship with Britain but recognized the limitations of a foreign power in developing Irish resources and treating Irish nationalists as equal citizens.<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, the paper expressed moderate pro-nationalist sentiments that mirrored the most common views among the Irish Catholics.

Over its century long tenure in Dublin, the *Independent* has consistently remained the most widely read newspaper in all of Ireland. If anything, it has remained a voice for the nationalist population and has continued to serve first and foremost the people of Ireland. For this reason, and its independence from most of Northern Ireland's politics and conflict, the *Independent* may have offered a more even coverage of the strike and acknowledged the underlying factors contributing to the violence. Being removed from the conflict yet still near in cultural and geography to Northern Ireland gave news in the Republic an up-close view of the conflict without any direct involvement. Thus, any bias expressed by the Republic and the *Independent* would have been to a lesser degree than papers such as the *Telegraph* which found themselves placed in the crossfire of the conflict.

## ***Chapter Two: Research Analysis***

### **Quantitative Analysis**

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2004), 124-29.

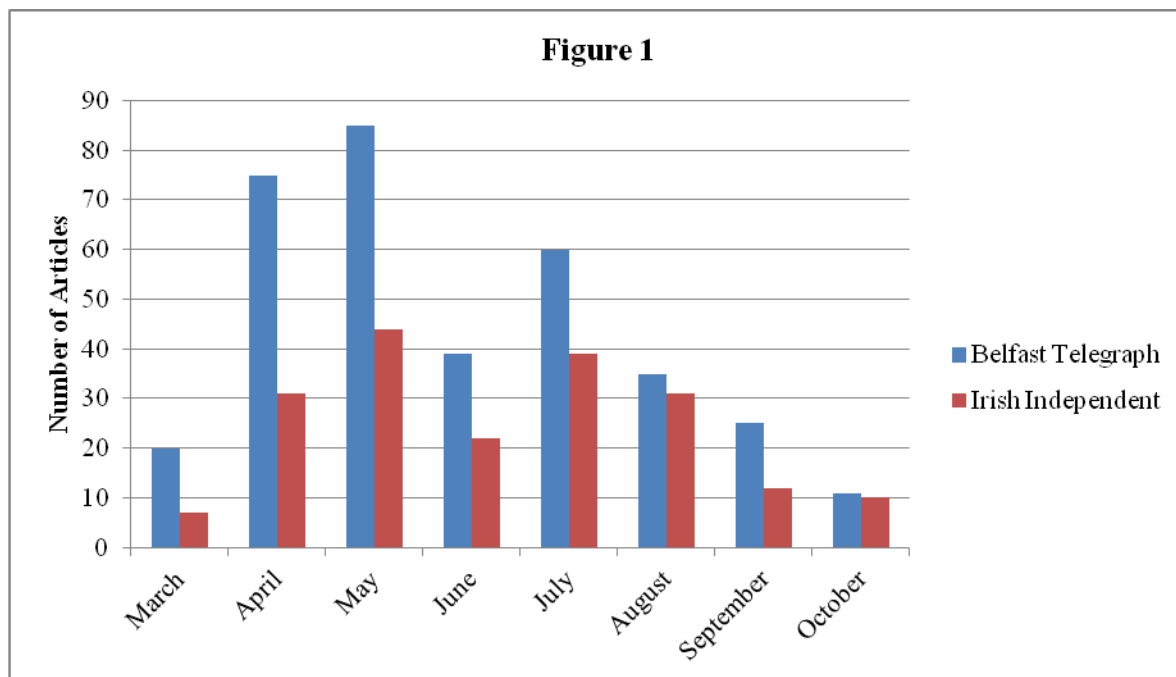
<sup>55</sup> Patrick Maume, *The Irish Independent and empire, 1891-1919*, Ed. Simon J. Potter. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 141.

A quantitative analysis of the collected data is important to understanding the general span of coverage and media trends for the hunger strike. These trends will also later serve to support the qualitative data. It is undeniable that the hunger strike amassed a significant amount of publicity and media attention. Of the 546 articles collected in relation to the hunger strike, around two-thirds came from the *Belfast Telegraph* while the remaining articles were published in the *Irish Independent*. The sheer volume of articles published reveals the heightened interest of the public in the hunger strike. Even considering immediate political geography, the 196 articles published in the *Independent* during the strike's span of less than eight months also attests to the international interest that the strike was able to attract.

The monthly distribution of articles published during the strike follows the main events of the strike and shows that the peak of newspaper coverage of the strike was not toward the end as the hunger strikers intended. Figure 1 shows that the distribution of articles by month follows the trend of events during the strike, with the highest volumes published in the months of April, May, and July. It was during the month of April that Bobby Sands was able to run for, and win, the Fermanagh/South Tyrone MP by-election. The election attracted a large amount of publicity for the strike, especially after Sands' victory. The month of May follows April as another high volume month as Sands became the first casualty of the strike on 5 May 1981. During that month, three strikers would follow Sands to the grave, bringing the death toll high enough to stimulate an increase in media coverage of the strike. The month of July also shows a high volume of articles published in both newspapers. The five-week period that lapsed between the deaths of the fourth and fifth strikers was the most critical period to the strike's negotiations and can likely be attributed to this increase in media coverage. When these negotiations failed to

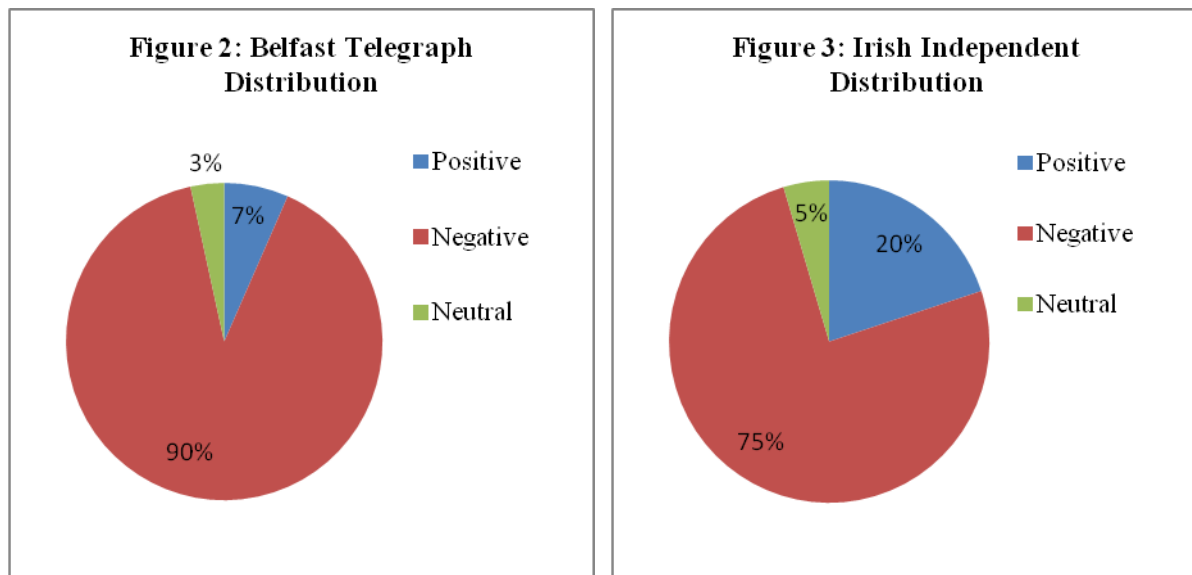
reach an accepted resolution before the fifth striker died on 8 July 1981, tension, speculation, and news coverage increased.

The significance of the month-by-month article distribution lies in the events of each respective month and also within the general pattern that the coverage takes. Figure 1 shows that the peak of media attention to the strikes happened during the third month of the strike in both papers. The initial goal of the prisoners in staggering their deaths to increase pressure is not reflected in the volume of media coverage. It declined steadily after the third month, which was not even halfway through the duration of the strike. It is likely that the media's decrease in coverage of the strike reflected the waning interest of readers. The pressure that the strikers theorized would build by staggering their deaths does not materialize in the data collected from this study.



The tone of the articles was also analyzed by labeling articles that contradicted with the goals and perceptions of the strikers as “negative” and those that seemed to be consistent as

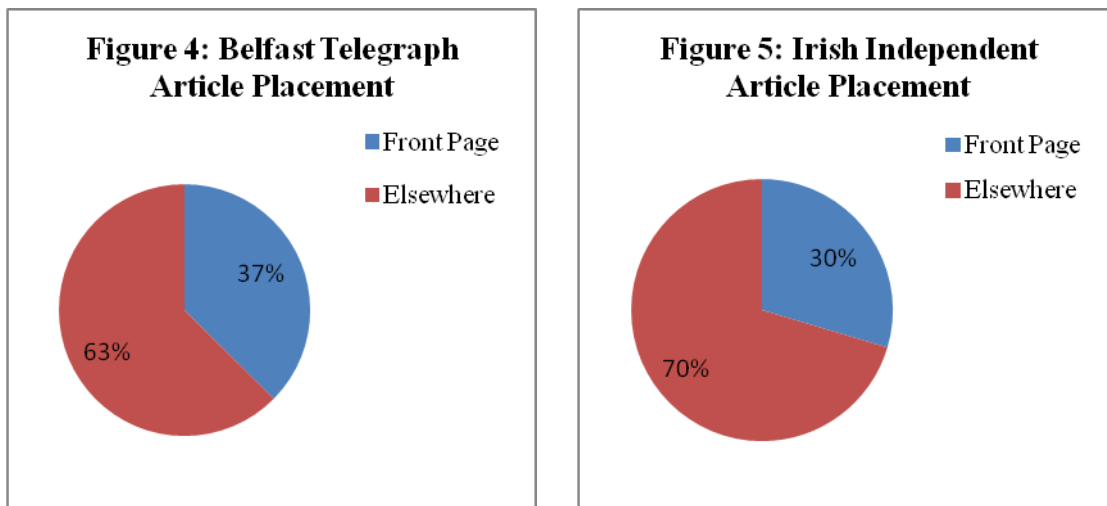
“positive.” Articles that did not seem to either reflect or contradict these goals and perceptions were labeled as “neutral.” An article considered “positive” did not have to support the strike itself as long as it reflected the authentic intentions of the strikers. The distribution of these articles is shown in Figures 2 and 3, which show there is a vastly negative interpretation of the hunger strike, meaning that the media’s portrayal of the strike differed significantly from the hunger strikers’ intentions. Even considering the proximity of the *Telegraph* to the strike, it has only a 15% increase from the *Independent* in negative articles overall. Both papers have around the same percentage of neutral articles. This data shows the possible effect that the media could have on how the public perceived the strike. Regardless of whether or not the strikers proclaimed themselves to be politically motivated and willing to commit acts of self-sacrifice in the name of their cause, the media’s less heroic interpretation is what reached the public.



The front page articles of each paper were also assessed separately since these are the most widely read and usually contain the most important or most attention-grabbing articles. As can be seen in Figures 4 and 5, around one-third of the articles published about the hunger strike



made front page news in both papers. This shows the interest and publicity that the strike had generated in both countries. What should also be noted is that the overall percentage of negative, positive, and neutral front page articles is consistent with the percentages of the entire newspaper. Although the articles in both papers were vastly negative in nature, the articles published on the front pages were no more negative or positive than the rest. It was hypothesized that these articles would show a higher percentage of negative coverage as they received the most attention; this trend, however, was not supported by the data.



In conclusion, it can be seen from the quantitative analysis that both papers, regardless of whether from the north and south, focused heavily on the hunger strikes. Contrary to the hunger strikers' intentions, however, media coverage of the strike peaked in the third month, long before the last six strikers would meet their fate. The high volume of negative articles shows that readers were being given reports that did not provide the kind of coverage the hunger strikers had intended and hoped for. The coverage of the strike in front page articles was consistent with the general newspaper coverage. This quantitative analysis is important to understanding the general

patterns of reporting and how those patterns could have affected public opinion of the strike. In the next section, a qualitative analysis of the articles will be made focusing on the components of legitimacy.

## **Qualitative Analysis**

### **Overview**

The qualitative analysis of the *Independent* and the *Telegraph* will focus on the components of legitimization of the hunger strikers as portrayed in the content of the newspaper articles. Since the Catholic community of Northern Ireland had the potential to legitimize the hunger strike, it is important to note how the different aspects of this legitimacy were either supported or undermined in the newspaper articles. For the purposes of this research, six aspects that played into the legitimacy of the strike were chosen to be analyzed. The articles on the strikes collected for this data were separated into sections and then the most significant articles were selected for specific analysis. Each section is devoted to a different aspect of media portrayal that could have served to create a barrier between the hunger strikers and their cause gaining legitimacy.

The first three sections of this analysis on the coverage of elections, the portraits of the strikers, and the reports of death and violence from paramilitaries will focus on the hunger strikers' claim that they were politically motivated. The elections are particularly important for showing not only their political motivation, but, also popular support from the electoral communities in the north and south of the country. The last three sections will discuss how the strikers' self-sacrifice was portrayed in the newspapers through the sections on suicide, Catholic Church disapproval, and speculation that the strikers were merely pawns of their organization.

The aspect of true self-sacrifice is important to the legitimacy of the strikes because it was the basis for which the hunger strikers showed their dedication to their cause. If their actions were not seen by the public as being of acts of self-sacrifice, whether through the categorization of the deaths as immoral suicides, the lack of ideological support from the Catholic Church, or lack of free will, then they could not have gained legitimacy in the public's eyes. Legitimacy from the public is the key ingredient needed to achieve their goals. Examining the newspapers' role in the legitimization of the strike is crucial to understanding its eventual outcome.

### **Election Coverage**

The political elections that took place during the hunger strike were an important tool that the strikers used in their attempt to gain legitimacy. Running for, and winning, elections would be evidence of popular support. If they were elected as Members of Parliament, it would be difficult to argue that their motivations were criminal and not political. They hoped that their electoral success would speak for itself and legitimize their cause. Unfortunately for these newly elected officials, the *Independent* and the *Telegraph* downplayed their electoral victories and focused instead on the ethical and political dilemmas surrounding the election.

Because of its location in Dublin, the *Independent* wrote from outside the context of the first election. Before the Fermanagh- South Tyrone by-election took place, writers of the *Independent* were busy weighing the odds of a Nationalist victory. The political balance of power in Westminster would not have been threatened by the election, but it was made clear that Westminster officials were wary of the possible level of support for the IRA's hunger strike that the election could show:

At the end of the day there is only one real issue to be decided here. What is the level of support within the community for the IRA hunger strike now in progress at the Maze Prison in support of the demand for political status for convicted Republican prisoners? That is the crux of the matter

and that is what the British, who have consistently taken a hard line on the hunger strike, are keen to discover. This is the first time the electorate in the North has had the opportunity to demonstrate the strength of feeling for the prison controversy. Robert Sands the Republican candidate has gone 41 days without food, and some indication of the support for his action and demands among the ordinary people will emerge from his showing at the polls.<sup>56</sup>

The election was the first opportunity for the hunger strikers to prove to the British government that they were capable of rallying mass support for their cause. In this regard, the election was seen as a critical test of the hunger strike.

Although the most basic explanation for his victory would have been electoral support from the Northern Irish Nationalist community, the *Independent* cast doubt on this theory by accounting by offering alternate explanations. Because Sands was the only Nationalist candidate on the ballot, the *Independent* claimed that the large nationalist population of Fermanagh-South Tyrone had been in effect disenfranchised by the election. This constituency, based on past elections, had typically voted in favor of the more moderate nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Thus it was speculated that Sands would have not been elected had there been another Nationalist candidate on the ballot. The *Independent* blamed those responsible for putting Sands' name on the ballot for having more concern for "publicity for Sands and for the H-Block hunger protest" than for the democratic representation of Nationalists in Northern Ireland.<sup>57</sup> This changed the focus of the election from the electoral support of Sands to the possible manipulation and disenfranchisement of the Fermanagh-South Tyrone constituency.

Another explanation for the victory concerned the humanitarian aspect of the strike. If the vote was not a Nationalist versus Unionist vote, then it could have been an emotional one for

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<sup>56</sup> Dominic Cunningham, "Level of support for IRA hunger strike real issue in the by-election," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Apr. 9, 1981.

<sup>57</sup> "Strange election," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Apr. 9, 1981.

a man suffering in prison after over forty days on hunger strike.<sup>58</sup> The coverage of the election also centered on the problems facing the British government with a man in prison now holding a seat in their Parliament. Hesitant to expel Sands from his seat, the British House of Commons passed a Bill not long after the election to prohibit a prisoner from standing in a parliamentary election.<sup>59</sup> The election dilemma was depicted as a fundamental problem for the British electoral system and not as a potential political victory for the hunger strike.

As the first electoral success of the hunger strike, the Sands election received the most publicity, but his successors and fellow Republican prisoners would also win the spotlight during their political campaigns. Since the British government had now banned prisoners from running in elections, the Republican prisoners turned to the Republic of Ireland's political body, the Dail. While the Republic was also surprised at the success of the H-Blocks campaign in the elections, the *Independent* once again shifted the focus away from the demands of the strikers and deciphered the results as a message to the Irish government that its people wanted an end to the strike. However, the focus of the newspaper was neither on the prisoners' demands nor the support for those demands but, on the inaction of the government. As an H-Block Committee leader was quoted,

“We didn't set out to bring down the government, but to show that there is a depth of feeling of disappointment with Fianna Fail and Mr. Haughey because they did not take the necessary steps to save the lives of four prisoners.”<sup>60</sup>

It was the human cost of the hunger strike that was the primary concern of the Irish people. Their electoral decisions showed supported for the lives at stake and the inability of the Irish government to mediate an agreement between the British and the Republican prisoners. The elections were depicted as an expression of the impatience of the Irish people over the

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<sup>58</sup> “Fermanagh result,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Apr. 11, 1981.

<sup>59</sup> “M.P. Change.” *Irish Independent*. [Dublin], May 2, 1981.

<sup>60</sup> “H-Block success major coup,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], June 13, 1981.

continuation of the strike. There was a definitive avoidance of speculation that the election could have meant that the electorate supported the political goals or demands of the strikers.

The *Belfast Telegraph*, reporting in Northern Ireland on the Sands election, gave a strong anti-H-Blocks message from the time it was announced that Sands would stand as a candidate. Before the election took place the paper noted the futility of electing a prisoner who stood on a platform of violence. If elected without challenge, the seat in Parliament for Fermanagh-South Tyrone would remain vacant until the next general election and its constituency would lack parliamentary representation.<sup>61</sup> As well as the political futility of electing Sands, the claim was also made that each vote would be taken by the IRA as direct endorsement for their campaign of terror in Northern Ireland.<sup>62</sup> While these warnings were ultimately unsuccessful in influencing the outcome of the Sands election, the results of the election in turn were used to undermine the important political message they would have otherwise supported.

After Sands' electoral victory, the evident electoral success of the H-Blocks campaign was not acknowledged. Instead, reporting shifted toward the possible disqualification of Sands as an MP.<sup>63</sup> As in the *Independent*, the consequences of not having legislation that forbade prisoners from running for Parliament were seen as the main issue surrounding the election. The possible legitimizing effect of the election was greatly downplayed by the articles, some taking a more condescending tone toward the electorate themselves for electing a man in prison for criminal offenses. As an article on 11 April proclaimed,

“What a tragic result. What a defeat for the Unionist Party, for the SDLP, for the Government and for all the moderate voices in Northern Ireland which have been attempting to divert the two communities away from confrontation. It was a wholly unusual and, it is to be hoped, never-to-be-repeated-by-election. But after every allowance has been made for the special factors in Fermanagh South Tyrone – the straight fight between two prime symbols of Unionism and

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<sup>61</sup> Liam Creagh, “If Sands did win a Commons seat...Can a prisoner become an MP?” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Mar. 28, 1981.

<sup>62</sup> David Watson, “Oppose Sands’ call as MEPs send support,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 8, 1981.

<sup>63</sup> Desmond McCartan, “Commons faces Sands Dilemma,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 11, 1981.

Republicanism, the sympathy for a hunger striker, and the Republicans' skilful avoidance of the connection with violence – it has to be admitted that the result amounts to the biggest fillip to the IRA since the introduction of internment.”<sup>64</sup>

The disappointment and disapproval explicitly stated in the above excerpt characterizes Sands' victory as a travesty for those who are politically moderate and wish for a non-violent solution to the political woes of Northern Ireland. As with the *Independent*, the *Telegraph* explains the results in multiple ways, each of which does not assume support for the political goals of the strikers. The main issue for debate was not whether the results showed support for granting the prisoners political status but, rather if they showed popular support for the IRA and its acts of violence throughout Northern Ireland.

As seen in the *Independent's* election coverage, it was assumed that the H-Blocks campaign was on borrowed time. The electorally moderate Nationalist majority in Fermanagh-South Tyrone was given the choice between two extremes and thus opted for the Nationalist one. There was comfort in suggesting that given a wider range of moderate candidates to choose from in the next month's Council elections, the electoral support for the H-Blocks campaign would decline markedly. Until those elections, however, disbelief of, and speculation about, the Sands election results would continue throughout the United Kingdom. The attitude of the English toward the results was especially humiliating for the Northern Irish electorate:

“In Britain, where there is only a passing understanding of Northern Ireland affairs, the result must come as a deep shock, challenging all the accepted wisdom about attitudes to violence and prison protests. People will be tempted to look at Ulster from a different perspective, and perhaps to reassess their relationship with such a strangely misguided community. The steeples of Fermanagh must seem even drearier and more distant than ever today.”<sup>65</sup>

Those in other parts of the United Kingdom were portrayed as interpreting the election results as public support in Northern Ireland for violence.

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<sup>64</sup> “Shadow of a gunman,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 11, 1981.

<sup>65</sup> “Shadow of a gunman,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 11, 1981.

The results of the election became an embarrassment to the electorate of Fermanagh-South Tyrone:

“It is far too late, but one wonders if they fully considered the effect of their actions and the ammunition it lends to the extreme loyalists. For the Democratic Unionists, hoping to make the most of the crucial local government elections, the by-election vote seems to confirm the wildest claims of its leaders. A hunger striker is an MP, because tribal loyalties of Republicanism were stronger than a sense of right and wrong, but the authorities have been quick to emphasize that no response will be forthcoming on the H-Blocks issue. The demand for political status does not suddenly acquire respectability or acceptability just because of a by-election vote.”<sup>66</sup>

Although the results were seen as a misguided and an unfortunate stimulant of ideological polarization in Northern Ireland, Sands’ electoral victory did not mean victory for his cause, at least from the perspective of newspaper coverage of it. Regardless of the underlying political significance and meaning of the election results, the outcome of the hunger strike would remain unchanged.

Not long after the initial shock of the election results, both the *Telegraph* and the British government shifted their focus to justifying unseating Sands as MP. Provisional Sinn Fein representatives were quick to accuse those members of the British government who wished to remove Sands from office as proving the limitations of non-violent political action.<sup>67</sup> Any action from the British government would show its interference with the will of the Irish people. Parliament did allow Sands to keep his seat and this served as a reminder to the Irish people of the results of their vote. As an article on 13 April read,

“It is a time for thinking clearly, rather than emotionally, and the disadvantages of a move to ban Mr. Sands far outweigh the advantages. It would be a repudiation of violence, which would serve a purpose, but it would also give the IRA another weapon in their propaganda war. Headlines would appear round the world: “Britain expels hunger striker from Parliament” and this could be twisted to amount to a repudiation of the democratic process. No, a majority voted for Mr. Sands, in full knowledge of what he represents, and the people of Northern Ireland –and the United Kingdom –have to live with the consequences.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> “Shadow of a gunman,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 11, 1981.

<sup>67</sup> “Ousting him justifies violence,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 11, 1981.

<sup>68</sup> “Verdict stands,” *Belfast Telegraph*. [Belfast], Apr. 13, 1981.



The emphasis remained on safeguarding the democratic process of the United Kingdom in spite of the proposed “propaganda victory” for the IRA and its acts of violence. The importance of preventing such results in future elections took the foreground:

“The deed has been done, exposing the naked tribalism in Fermanagh-South Tyrone, but, to prevent any repetition, Parliament should now consider laying down tighter ground rules for elections to Westminster. Does it make sense, ultimately, to let candidates stand who cannot take their seats? Democratic rights are one thing, but permitting them to be abused, for propaganda purposes, is another.”<sup>69</sup>

The emphasis was again placed on the abuse of democratic rights for the purpose of gaining a propaganda victory for the IRA.

The elections in Northern Ireland and the Republic could have been significant political victories for the Republican prisoners had they been depicted as evidence of support for achieving political status. Both newspapers offered several theories to explain the outcome of the elections, but neither accepted that the election results were evidence of the legitimacy of the Republican cause. These alternate explanations and questions about electoral processes served to shift focus from the possible political victory the election could have served. The elections could have sent a strong message to both the government and the Irish people that the hunger strikers and their demands were supported by a large body of citizens in Northern Ireland. Instead, the media served as a useful tool to detract from this message.

### **Portraits of the Strikers**

The strikers themselves were individually given a large amount of the media’s attention throughout the strike. Each striker was referenced by name, town of origin, and a basic biography was given as the men joined the strike, reached the critical period, and ultimately died. Giving such personal details on the strikers and their lives would add a humanitarian dimension

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<sup>69</sup> “Verdict stands,” *Belfast Telegraph*. [Belfast], Apr. 13, 1981.

to the strike. These written portraits and updates throughout the strike served to humanize the strikers, but also in many ways to criminalize them. In both papers, while accounts may have aroused sympathies for the men dying on hunger strike, they did not justify their actions or the actions of their organization. As is consistent with the general trend of coverage shown in the quantitative analysis, interest and attention to each striker varied greatly and was dependent upon their placement in the strike. Those who began it were given much more attention from the papers than were those at the end of it. This trend shows that as the strike wore on, pressure to resolve the strike diminished.

The beginning of the second Republican hunger strike in the Maze prison was depicted rather anticlimactically in the *Independent*. A very small article of scarcely more than ten lines acknowledged the start of the strike with Bobby Sands from the Lower Falls area of Belfast refusing his breakfast on the morning of 1 March.<sup>70</sup> This lack of interest was probably due to its lack of novelty. There was no reason to believe, after the first strike, that the second would bring anything new to the negotiating table. A few days afterward, an article of similar length announced that Francis Hughes would become the second prisoner to join the hunger strike. This time not only was his place of origin noted (Bellaghy, Co. Derry), but also his imprisonment in February of 1980 for the murder of one soldier and the attempted murder of another.<sup>71</sup> This pattern of noting the crimes for which the strikers were imprisoned continues throughout the coverage. Even as late in the strike as July, the small and rather uniform articles that announced the addition of another prisoner on strike held to the formula of name, city and county of origin, and the crime for which they are imprisoned. As noted in an article on 9 July

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<sup>70</sup> "Start of new hunger strike at Long Kesh," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Mar. 2, 1981.

<sup>71</sup> "Second man on hunger strike," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Mar. 13, 1981.

announcing the commencement of prisoner Patrick McKeown's fast, McKeown was currently serving a 15 year sentence for IRA membership and the bombing of a hotel.<sup>72</sup>

Their crimes are noted at other times throughout the articles in conjunction with humanitarian concerns or updates on the health of the strikers. As an article on 15 April titled "Bobby Sands 'deteriorating'" states:

"A Northern Ireland Office spokesman said of Sands, who is serving 14 years for arms offences: 'He is showing signs of some deterioration.' His condition was giving no cause for concern 'at the moment.'"<sup>73</sup>

Sands had, by this time, already completed 45 days of his hunger strike and was beginning to reach a critical condition. While noting his crimes may serve as background information, it is more likely that it serves to remind the reader of the crimes that Sands had committed. This would not have lent credibility to the strikers' profession of political motivation. Moreover, the labeling of these men as "prisoners," which was often seen in the articles, would have incited from the Irish public the traditional distain for those who are found to be on the wrong side of the law.

As well as noting the strikers' specific crimes, the *Independent* also referred to their crimes using the general term "terrorist offenses."<sup>74</sup> Supporting terrorists or terrorism would likely have received a negative response from most in the community. This also calls into question, both implicitly and explicitly, the motivations of the strikers. It is difficult to reconcile the criminal nature of their actions as depicted in the *Independent* with their claims of political motivation.

The shock and interest after the deaths of the strikers diminished after the novelty of Sands' death. On the day of Sands' death alone, there were eight articles about him published in

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<sup>72</sup> "New hunger striker," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], July 9, 1981.

<sup>73</sup> "Bobby Sands 'deteriorating,'" *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Apr. 15, 1981.

<sup>74</sup> "Now seven on hunger strike," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], June 23, 1981.

the *Independent*. Several of the Sands articles were featured on the front page of the newspaper and almost every article spanned at least half a page. The same smiling and youthful photo of Sands that would become widely recognized and immortalized in Northern Ireland appeared twice on this day, as well as a picture of his grieving mother. The next three strikers to die were given considerably less attention in the newspaper. Second striker Francis Hughes was given a spread of a significant portion of a page of the paper on 13 May, although not the front page attention Sands had achieved.<sup>75</sup> After this, the articles focused less on the personal histories and backgrounds of the strikers and more on the current status of the negotiations between the strikers and the British government.

Although these men were depicted often as violent criminals without regard for the sanctity of life, there was a sense of tragedy in their deaths. Many of the articles after the deaths of each striker took care to note the situational and humanitarian factors that contributed to their ultimate fall from societal grace. Their deaths called for reflection on the period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the young paramilitary men it had created. As seen in this article on 5 May immediately after the death of Sands:

“Sands was born on March 9, 1954, one of the generation of Northern youngsters whose lives were dramatically shaped by the “troubles.” He was just 15 years old when British troops arrived on the streets of Belfast, and at an age when most teenagers are following girls and pop groups, he joined the Provisionals. By the time he was 18, Sands had been arrested in Lisburn, Co Antrim and charged with possessing four hand guns.”<sup>76</sup>

There was a sense that the hunger strike, and the hunger strikers themselves, were products of the political troubles that plagued Northern Ireland.

The *Telegraph*'s portrayal of the strikers was not all that different from the *Independent*'s. The beginning of the strike did arouse more coverage from the *Telegraph* but it

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<sup>75</sup> Dominic Cunningham, “Hughes the hard man of H-block is dead.” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], May 13, 1981.

<sup>76</sup> Peter McKenna, “The hard man behind the smile,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], May 5, 1981.

was not necessarily a call to alarm. A front page article on 2 March announced the beginning of the strike along with skepticism about its possible achievements.

“In what must have been a preplanned move, the IRA prisoners in the H-Blocks and Armagh have come off their dirty protest, in order, they say, ‘to highlight the main areas of our demands.’ Doubt still remains about what the main demands are, but it will be a relief that this degrading practice has been suspended. As to what the one-man hunger strike is supposed to achieve, there already seems to be some confusion among the prisoners.”<sup>77</sup>

The article also emphasized that political status would not be achieved, regardless of this second strike. There was a definitive lack of enthusiasm and urgency in the article, giving a sense of the same routinization that appears in the *Independent*. If anything, more attention was given to expressing relief with the end of the Dirty Protest, which was seen as an important step toward ending the prison protests altogether.

The *Telegraph* also took note of the crimes of the strikers, emphasizing their names, places of origin, and reasons for imprisonment. On 13 March, the addition of Francis Hughes to the strike was announced through an article titled, “‘Most wanted’ man Hughes set to join hunger strike.” Hughes was once at the top of the RUC’s most wanted list for the murder of 23-year-old paratrooper, Lance Corporal David Jones, and a fact not forgotten in this article.<sup>78</sup> Hughes had previously gained notoriety through wanted posters that appeared throughout Northern Ireland during the several years that he was on the run.<sup>79</sup> From the reader’s standpoint, it would have been difficult to empathize with a murderer who claimed his actions that cost others their lives were politically motivated.

A sense of the public’s loss of interest in the strike was also felt through the articles of the *Telegraph*. Even more than in the *Independent*, the succession of deaths quickly became routine with each death receiving less press than the one before it. While the hunger strike itself did not

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<sup>77</sup> “Second attempt,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Mar. 2, 1981.

<sup>78</sup> “‘Most wanted’ man Hughes set to join hunger strike,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Mar. 13, 1981.

<sup>79</sup> “IRA man No. 2 goes on hunger strike,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Mar. 16, 1981.

elicit much attention at the beginning, the novelty of Bobby Sands' death did. The men succeeding Sands in death received progressively less media attention. The novelty of, and interest in, the hunger strike had by the tenth death almost completely evaporated, having been replaced with a sense of fatigue and routinization. Like in the *Independent*, more of the articles surrounding the strike focused on the diplomatic relations and negotiations between the British government and the prisoners, calling into question the futility of each additional death.

This large volume of coverage on the individual strikers themselves peaked with Sands and slowly declined over the first four strikers and decreased more dramatically over the last six deaths. It would seem as though death on hunger strike quickly lost the interest of the public or became routine enough that it did not merit a significant amount of press coverage. It may also be worth noting that while the coverage of the individual deaths declined as the death toll mounted, coverage of the negotiations increased. The news of more men dying on the hunger strike seemed to lose its appeal in favor of progress in negotiations. This may have also added pressure on the British government to reach an agreement with the strikers, but that pressure did not include meeting the strikers' demands. The public seemed to continue to lose interest in the strikers' cause as the novelty of their deaths began to fade.

Both the *Independent* and the *Telegraph* depict the strikers and their personal histories in a light that serves to deemphasize the political nature of their cause. Neither paper portrayed the strikers in an outright positive or supportive light. The criminal nature of the strikers' actions before the strike and the ongoing violence throughout the strike was emphasized to a degree that would have deterred both audiences from supporting the strikers on political grounds. This would have undermined their claim of political motivation, a key component of legitimacy for the strike.

## Death and Violence

Death and violence at the hands of Republican paramilitaries were reported in the media throughout the fast, often comparing the lives of innocent victims to those lost by the strikers. Also among the perpetrators of violence in Northern Ireland were members of the H-Block Protest organization whose actions were devoted to achieving the prisoners' demands and often turned violent, especially during the critical periods of the strike. Neither the *Independent* nor the *Telegraph* failed to report the violence carried out by Republican paramilitaries and the H-Blocks organization, which would have directly contradicted the prisoners' protests that they were not criminals or criminally motivated.

The *Independent* compared the voluntary acts of the hunger strikers to the victims of their organizations and the H-Block riots. The escalation in violence due to the hunger strike was not lost on the media:

The people in the background who are trying to rouse emotions higher (on both sides of the Border) are playing no one's game but their own and we should remember that. Bobby Sands has voluntarily committed himself to a fast to death – a grim and even courageous course of action, but a voluntary one, nevertheless. If he ended his fast today the violence would taper off.<sup>80</sup>

On 28 April, a little more than a week before Sands' death, the *Independent* reported in a front page article, the “fading hope” of compromise as tensions and violence rose. Before reporting on the condition of Sands on his 58<sup>th</sup> day on strike, the paper notes the increase in activity of Loyalist paramilitaries as a result of the strike and the death of a member of the RUC by an INLA bomb in West Belfast. It was then reported that residents in the North were making house calls in the West Belfast area advising other residents to board up their homes and stockpile food

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<sup>80</sup> “Unleashing riots,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Apr. 23, 1981.

in preparation for Sands' death.<sup>81</sup> The news on Sands came second to the report of growing tensions and continuation of casualties by members of the same organization that several hunger strikers belonged.

The death day of the eighth hunger striker Kieran Doherty was reported alongside the funeral of a murdered ex-RUC officer and the murders of two on-duty RUC officers by the IRA.<sup>82</sup> Deaths from paramilitary violence were often reported alongside the deaths of the hunger strikers to emphasize the criminal nature of the organizations to which the hunger strikers belonged. On 5 August, following the funeral of Doherty, the *Independent* reported that an increasing body count spiked fears that many more would have to die before any new initiative would be proposed by the British. A grim picture was described:

The Thatcher Government last night was also well aware that it had been a day when both aspects of the Northern tragedy had been reflected. In Co. Tyrone there were harrowing scenes as the heart-broken widow of an RUC man, killed by the Provos, repeatedly screamed his name and the former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, Dr. Ronald Craig, told mourners that he could not understand how anyone could think of talking to hunger-strikers, "or other criminals", while such killings continued.<sup>83</sup>

The emphasis was placed on the violence carried out by the organizations to which the hunger strikers belonged as if to show their true nature and intentions.

Because of its location in the capital of Northern Ireland, the *Telegraph* reported paramilitary violence to the communities that were witnessing this violence first hand. Thus it comes with little surprise that the death and violence associated with Republican paramilitaries would be well covered in the paper. An article that covered an H-Blocks protest march numbering 15,000 emphasized the unease felt by the police and even narrowed in on the arrest of

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<sup>81</sup> Dominic Cunningham, "North Tenses as Hope Fades," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Apr. 28, 1981.

<sup>82</sup> "Day of death," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Aug. 1, 1981.

<sup>83</sup> Peter McKenna, "Decision time for hunger strike," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Aug. 5, 1981.



one adolescent for stone throwing.<sup>84</sup> There was an emphasis on the potential for violence between the police and the protesters.

The government and media continued with the hard line that the strikers were no better than those committing crimes on the streets; the only difference was that the strikers were behind bars. At the beginning of the strike, the Deputy Secretary of State Michael Alison was quoted as referring to the strike as a different type of paramilitary violence, but violence nevertheless:

“Do not forget that a prison hunger strike is not a sort of yoga exercise. It is a form of violence, although in this instance self-inflicted, and like violence outside the prison, it is designed to coerce the Government into meeting terrorists’ demands,” he said. But the Government would not be coerced by this action, or any other inside or outside the prisons, into granting some kind of special indulgence to those convicted of the most brutal crimes.<sup>85</sup>

Calling to mind that those committing crimes outside of the prison were not so different from those inside emphasized the criminality of the strikers. The violence that ensued after the death of Bobby Sands was used as an appeal to reject violence. Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins was quoted as emphasizing the futility of violence, especially in regardless to pointless death. He considered the death of Sands to be more one pointless death in a long line of them. The difference between Sands and the deaths of others in Northern Ireland however, was that Sands chose his death while the victims of his organization did not.<sup>86</sup>

The fear of violence was also an issue that the *Telegraph* did not take lightly, although steps were taken so that no paramilitary organization would benefit from fear-tactics used. The paper took care not to overestimate the capabilities of the IRA in building tensions and potential outbreaks of violence following the deaths of the hunger strikers. Doing so would have given the organization more power and control in the North by preying on the fears of its communities. Government officials were summarized as believing that the threat of large-scale violence after

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<sup>84</sup> “15,000 turn out for H-blocks rally,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 27, 1981.

<sup>85</sup> Desmond McCartan, “We’ll beat the Provos- Alison,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Mar. 14, 1981.

<sup>86</sup> “Reject violence after this pointless death: Atkins,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], May 5, 1981.

the death of Sands was not as imminent as previous reports had suggested. International journalists were accused of encouraging people to commit acts of violence in order to provide them with graphic photographs for their newspapers and journals.<sup>87</sup> In this regard, the international media was seen as contributing to the propaganda and violence of the strikes. Giving in to this publicity would only further escalate the potential for violence. It was also made clear that no more British troops were to be brought in, suggesting that any riots that ensued from Sands' death would be manageable.<sup>88</sup> This same fear of violence was later even accused as being a tactic used by the IRA to scare the Northern Catholics into a situation where the IRA could emerge once more the "defender" of the Catholic people.<sup>89</sup> The same violence that was used to turn the Catholics away from supporting the strikers was also used to deflate the capabilities of the Republican paramilitaries.

The death and violence depicted in both papers serves the important purpose of undermining the strikers' claims of being politically motivated. If the organization that they belonged to continued to carry out acts of indiscriminate violence during the hunger strike, how were the communities of Northern Ireland to believe that their motivation was political? If the strikers were to successfully prove their motivation as purely political and undeserving of the badge of criminality, then their actions and the actions of their organization would have had to be in accordance with this. The reports of the death and violence in the papers did not support the idea of political motivation by either the strikers or their outside organizations.

### **"Suicides"**

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<sup>87</sup> "The truth?" *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], May 6, 1981.

<sup>88</sup> Desmond McCartan, "Atkins briefs Cabinet on security measures," *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 30, 1981.

<sup>89</sup> "Advance Notice," *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], May 1, 1981.

Classifying the actions of the strikers as suicides would have seriously threatened the legitimacy of their actions given the fundamental religious beliefs of both communities in Northern Ireland. The content and language used in both papers suggested that the actions of the hunger strikers were indeed suicides. Even the mention or occasional labeling of the strikers as suicides could have been enough to shed doubt in the minds of readers on the authenticity of the strikers' actions. Such labeling occurred throughout the coverage of the strike in both papers.

One article in the *Independent* was devoted to this paradigm of the hunger strike, questioning whether their acts were of suicide or of war. In comparing the strikers to French and German naval captains who 'went down with their ships,' writer Dean Charles Gray-Stack states:

“The young men who have died on hunger-strike do not fit into quite the same category. On the other hand, if they genuinely view the matter in a different light and think of themselves as soldiers of a Republic that does not exist in law, while we, as citizens of the Irish State may differ with their opinions, we can hardly dismiss them as suicides.”<sup>90</sup>

Even though Gray-Stack draws an interesting parallel and cautions readers against labeling the strikers as suicides, he also points out a fact that undermines the strikers' cause: the strikers saw themselves in a completely different light, as soldiers of a nation that was not yet in existence. This difference may in fact have contributed to the community's dismissal of the deaths as suicides. While the *Independent* did quote other sources that recognized the actions of the hunger strikers as those of self-sacrifice, these sources would not seem to have outweighed the sources that would defame their actions as suicides.

The quotations of political figures are also especially important for their use of strong language suggesting that the hunger strike was a case of mass suicide. As one Whitehall official was quoted before the death of the first striker, “Sands can stop this if he wants to. No one wants

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<sup>90</sup> Dean C. Gray-Stack, “Death on hunger-strike: Is it suicide?” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], July 7, 1981.

to see him die, but if people decide to commit suicide it is very sad.”<sup>91</sup> The line of some government officials was to recognize the unfortunate circumstances of the hunger strike yet strip all power of propaganda from the strikers themselves. Even the most seemingly unbiased accounts in the articles evoke a sense that the deaths caused directly by the hunger strike were suicides. The brief official statement from the Northern Ireland Office on the day of Sands’ death stated: “Mr. Robert Sands, a prisoner in the Maze, died at 1:17am. He took his own life by refusing food and medical intervention.”<sup>92</sup> This statement does not directly mention suicide, as do others, but it implies suicide by using the same language that would be used to report one.

The nature of their deaths was also noted by officials countering the death and violence that resulted from the H-block protests. Northern Ireland Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins was quoted in an article on 5 May as stating, “Too many have died by violence in Northern Ireland. In this case it was self inflicted. We should not forget the many others who have died.”<sup>93</sup> Although this too is not a direct mention of suicide, paired with the many concurrent violent deaths in Northern Ireland from paramilitary violence, the public would not have been as willing to label Sands’ death as that of martyrdom. Overall, the *Independent* did not take a solid stand either for the strikers as martyrs or suicides but this in itself would be enough to undermine the strike as a legitimacy building mechanism.

The *Telegraph* was generally more explicit than the *Independent* in implicitly and explicitly implying that the actions of the strikers should be considered acts of suicide. Coverage of the strike also emphasized the strikers’ lives as being ‘in own hands’ and as causing their own deaths if and when they should occur. The government and its officials played an integral part in these statements in order to deflect responsibility of the deaths from themselves and place it

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<sup>91</sup> Dominic Cunningham, "North Tenses as Hope Fades," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Apr. 28, 1981.

<sup>92</sup> “After 66 Day Hunger Strike,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], May 5, 1981.

<sup>93</sup> “After 66 Day Hunger Strike,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], May 5, 1981.

squarely on the hunger strikers. Minister of State Michael Alison insisted in an article on 27 April before the deaths: “The lives of the hunger strikers remain, as they have done since they began their protests, in their own hands.”<sup>94</sup>

The concept of choice was an important element in the labeling of the actions of the strikers. To many, they were given a choice to take their own lives while their victims were not given the luxury of such a choice. This also undermines the concept of self-sacrifice among the strikers by comparing their deaths to the deaths of their organization’s victims. North Down MP Mr. James Kilfedder was more explicit in labeling the strikes as suicide in a statement after one of his constituents had been killed by IRA violence:

“It is heart-breaking and sickening to Ulster people, particularly to the relatives of the 2,000 people murdered by the IRA – and provocative to all law-abiding people in the province, that the world’s Press and the British media churns out IRA propaganda about a convicted thug who elects to commit suicide when that choice was not given to other people.”<sup>95</sup>

County Armagh MP Mr. Harold McCusker also made an emotionally charged statement against the acts of the strikers, even going as far as to compare their choice to die on hunger strike with capital punishment by the state:

“...we emphatically state once again that if murderers and their associates were executed they would not then have the privilege of committing suicide while being portrayed as decent young freedom fighters and not inhuman, degenerate and indiscriminate killers of women and children and old men.”<sup>96</sup>

Juxtaposing the strikers’ decision to take their own lives against deaths that had occurred because of their organization’s violence simply shows the futility of more deaths and violence, even deaths of hunger strikers to achieve political demands. Overall, there was a general sense of frustration that these men could amass so much attention for an act that would normally not have been accepted in modern day society.

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<sup>94</sup> “Strikers’ lives ‘in own hands,’” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 27, 1981.

<sup>95</sup> “Terrorism condemned by Thatcher,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr. 29, 1981.

<sup>96</sup> “McCusker backs Tory stand on hunger strike,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], July 13, 1981.

Neither the *Independent* nor the *Telegraph* seemed to seriously consider the strikers' insistence that theirs were acts of self-sacrifice for a just and politically motivated cause. Too many public officials in both Northern Ireland and Ireland were quoted in refutation of these claims. Suicide, as an act of taking one's own life, could not have been supported by the community of Northern Ireland and would have worked against legitimizing the hunger strike.

### **Involvement of the Catholic Church**

Opinions from leaders of the Catholic Church were highlighted throughout the news coverage of the strike. The cultural connection between the Republican tradition and Catholicism helped facilitate the Church's involvement in the strike and during the negotiation process. The Catholic community of Northern Ireland would have been influenced by the stance of the Church because of the recognition by Catholics of its legitimate authority. Even the British government could not ignore such an influential body as the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland. As a religious and moral body, the Church was the center of justice and morality for Irish Catholics and was often charged with the responsibility to condone or condemn the actions of the paramilitaries, especially those of the IRA. With the conflicting humanitarian and political concerns of the hunger strike, it is only natural that Catholics would turn toward the Church for direction.

The *Independent* included numerous quotations and opinions from Catholic Church officials in its coverage of the strike. An article published the day after the beginning of the second hunger strike voiced the opinion of many church officials in its title: "Para-militaries 'sinful.'" The article mentioned the opinions of Bishop Daly of Derry, who became one of the

main representatives of the Catholic Church during the strike and heavily involved himself in its events:

“He said the hunger strike activities going on outside were the glorification and justification of violence, “the most dreadfully degrading acts” –were spawning a frightening erosion of morality in the North’s society.”<sup>97</sup>

The bishop was quoted during a speech to over 1,500 youths in which he denounced joining paramilitary organizations as sinful. Bishop Daly used his position of authority within the church as well as religiously charged language to deter involvement in or support for the H-block struggle and protests.

There was also a significant amount of coverage of the general involvement of the Catholic Church in mediating negotiations and encouraging an end to the strike. A front page article on 29 April notes the inability of Papal Envoy Father John Magee to successfully mediate a solution before the death of Sands.<sup>98</sup> This dramatic intervention by the Vatican would send a loud message to the Catholics of Ireland as to the seriousness and importance of resolving the hunger strike conflict. When this occurred toward the beginning of the strike, it may have served to transform the hunger strike from a prison protest to a legitimate international crisis. But the ultimate failure of the prison leadership to resolve the strike even with the help of a representative of the Vatican probably worked against the prisoners’ interests. Given the level of respect and importance of such an official, and the fact that Fr. Magee was an Irishman himself, his failure to reach a resolution between the two parties may have cast doubt as to whether such a resolution would ever be reached.

The use of religiously charged language called into question the theological component of the hunger strike. An example article criticizing the hunger strike after Sands’ death: “The

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<sup>97</sup> “Para-militaries ‘sinful,’” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Mar. 2, 1981.

<sup>98</sup> “Sands: Pope’s Envoy ‘Fails,’” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Apr. 29, 1981.

Provisionals, who have shown their indifference to the sanctity of life, have won a publicity battle over the British.”<sup>99</sup> The Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise condemned the use of fast protests, stating: “The first duty of respect which we owe to ourselves is respect for our own lives.”<sup>100</sup> Other well known international church officials also spoke out against the hunger strike. On a visit to Northern Ireland, legendary nun Mother Teresa was photographed and quoted on many pages of the *Independent*, speaking out against the hunger strike.

“‘Anything that destroys life we must not do; anything that destroys life cannot be right,’ she said. She prayed that the men of violence ‘may realize that that (violence) is not the way to bring the peace, joy and love for which we have been created. I am praying that they will realize their duty towards God and their families,’ said Mother Teresa.”<sup>101</sup>

Even with such strong rhetoric and language used against the strike, there was a reluctance to publicly declare whether or not the acts were considered those of suicide based on Catholic teachings.

This hesitancy to distinguish between acts of self-sacrifice and suicide based on the Church’s teachings reflects an important religious element of Northern Ireland’s paramilitary violence. Practicing Catholics or not, the hunger strikers represented an organization that had begun its campaign of violence in defense of the Catholic community. This placed the Church and its leaders in delicate position. The Bishop of Derry, Dr. Edward Daly, was once again quoted with an opinion that reflected the Church’s feelings at the time:

“While he believed the British Government had been intransigent over the present hunger strike, he found it difficult in his own conscience, to morally justify the hunger strike. But he would not describe Bobby Sands’s death as suicide. ‘I could not accept that. I do not think he intended to bring about his own death. I think he felt it was a possibility, but he had hoped something else would be achieved.’”<sup>102</sup>

The Church was forced to juggle its strict religious teachings while taking care not to undermine the hunger strike or its Catholic supporters. As noted in the *Independent*, the hunger

<sup>99</sup> “Bishop’s warning,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], May 11, 1981.

<sup>100</sup> “No more purpose in fasts –Daly,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Sept. 7, 1981.

<sup>101</sup> “Hunger strike ‘one way of violence’ –Mother Teresa,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], July 7, 1981.

<sup>102</sup> “Sands’s death not suicide –Bishop Daly,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], May 11, 1981.



strikers received their Last Rites from Catholic priests, a right that under the Catholic tradition would not have been granted to those committing suicide.<sup>103</sup> This would have been an indirect way of recognizing the self-sacrifice element of the strike. Although the Church remained largely ambivalent about the nature of the deaths, they were consistent on the political aspect of the strike. Outside of resolving the conflict, the Church reportedly took no stance in support of the political demands of the strikers. They stressed a solution that would respect the government's authority yet resolve the humanitarian concerns of the prison's living conditions.

Fr. Daly was also quoted extensively in the *Telegraph* for his especially strong statements condemning the IRA and the hunger strike. In an effort to link the hunger strike with its organization's indiscriminate violence, he urged, "If you are invited to support a hunger strike, you must first ask the organizing group if it has publicly made known its rejection of murder and bombing."<sup>104</sup> Statements such as these would have been potentially more influential in the north than the Republic because they expressed the opinions of local church officials and made reference to paramilitary violence that had occurred in their communities. However, the Church itself chose to make no unified public statements for or against the strike.

The lack of an official statement from the Church caused Northern Protestants and newspapers alike to draw some of their own conclusions:

““The hunger strike to the death is a form of violence and surely cannot be condoned by the Church as being in accordance with God's will for man' – Cardinal Hume. That is a definitive statement, by one of the most influential men in the Roman Catholic Church, which cannot be lightly brushed aside. But does it apply to the hunger strike at the Maze?”<sup>105</sup>

The article gives no mention of a time or situational frame of this statement by Cardinal Hume, but it does imply that such a statement was not made in reference to the current Maze hunger strike. It concludes that the stance of the Catholic Church on past hunger strike protests must

<sup>103</sup> “Last rites,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], May 18, 1981.

<sup>104</sup> “Do not support Maze protest- plea from Bishop,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Mar. 2, 1981.

<sup>105</sup> “No room for doubt,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Apr 30, 1981.

hold true to the current hunger strike, regardless of whether an official statement exists. Articles such as this weakened the Church's ability to influence public opinion in support of the strike.

The most significant difference between the *Independent* and the *Telegraph* on their coverage of the Catholic Church lies within the context of Catholic theology on hunger striking. Coverage in the *Independent* was not nearly as focused on deciphering the Church's true views on hunger striking as it was in the *Telegraph*, most likely because of the *Telegraph*'s desire to cater to its Protestant audience. Therefore, the *Telegraph* went further than quoting the beliefs of religious officials and delved into the Church's religious teachings on death fasts. This resulted in canon law receiving an unprecedented amount of attention in a secular and public newspaper.

“The attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to the morality of hunger strikes has never been clear-cut. There is no doubt that suicide offends against the teaching of the Church. It is laid down in canon law that a person who commits suicide in order, for example, to avoid public disgrace, is denied ecclesiastical burial.”<sup>106</sup>

This particular article also continues with an attempt to explain how Sands may still be allowed to receive ecclesiastical burial, thereby granting him an implicit recognition by the church that his was not an act of suicide. Professor of Moral Theology at Maynooth, Fr. Denis O'Callaghan, explained:

“‘The difficulty is that a person on hunger strike is constantly hoping there will be some flexibility on the other side,’ he said. ‘I think the stage comes when a person is no longer capable of taking a decision to end his strike. If he really intends his death, then it is questionable morally. It becomes a question of intent.’”<sup>107</sup>

The coverage of the strike in both papers attests to the importance and influence of the Catholic Church throughout the hunger strike. The actions of the Church would have been greatly scrutinized during the strike for their connection with the Republican paramilitary tradition and their influence over the Catholic community of Northern Ireland. Due to this scrutiny, the Church would have been unable to openly support the actions of the hunger strikers

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<sup>106</sup> Neil Johnston, “How the RC Church views death fasts,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], May 1, 1981.

<sup>107</sup> Neil Johnston, “How the RC Church views death fasts,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], May 1, 1981.

or support their demand to be recognized as special category prisoners. Individual church officials were quoted in both newspapers as condemning paramilitary violence and considering the hunger strike to be a simple continuation of this violence. At the same time, officials who did not out-rightly condemn the strike were hesitant to mention the political demands of the strikers or to respond to the moral questions surrounding voluntary death on hunger strike. While opinions were mixed, no church officials supported the strikers in their political objectives.

### **Pawns of Outside Organization**

The concept of free will is an essential component of legitimacy for the strike. If the hunger strikers were believed to have been pawns of their organization's leadership outside of the prison, then their deaths would not have accorded the hunger strike legitimacy. Allegations such as this were present in both newspapers. The political goals of the hunger strike could have only been achieved if the free will of the strikers was beyond doubt.

The *Independent* stated that the IRA leadership had complete control over the beginning and end of the fast. It was responsible for the deaths of the strikers for refusing to use the political opportunities available to them for negotiation.<sup>108</sup> The resolution of the strike rested in the hands of an unbending leadership set on maximizing favorable publicity from the strike. As the strike continued into the month of August, government officials such as the Republic's Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald blamed the Provisional leadership's interference for the continuation of the strike,

“‘They cannot evade responsibility for the deaths of the hunger strikers although they seek to do so by manipulation of the media,’ he said. The Taoiseach charged that the Provo leadership had thwarted all efforts to end the hunger strike, ‘It seems to me to be no accident that as the efforts of

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<sup>108</sup> Chris Glennon, "How the Provos fated Sands to die," *Irish Independent* [Dublin], May 5, 1981.

the Irish Government to help solve the crisis became more public, the efforts of the Provisional IRA leadership to obstruct a solution doubled.”<sup>109</sup>

It was even reported that despite what the Provisional leadership had stated, the strike had been first sanctioned by IRA officers outside the prison. It was also noted how recruiting and financial contributions to the organization had doubled throughout the strike, implying that the goal of the strike was organizational and monetary, not political.<sup>110</sup> Catholic priest Fr. Flanagan was quoted on his opinion of the outside organization’s involvement in an 11 August article:

“It is similarly disappointing that those who called the hunger strike did not end it whenever they achieved a particular electoral victory, both north and south and perhaps spare those members, families and communities continuing suffering.”<sup>111</sup>

A disconnect existed between the media and the strikers as to the origins of the strike and its main perpetrators. Whether or not this disconnect was intentional is unknown but its implications are important for understanding this crucial period in the fast. Claims that the hunger strike did not originate from the strikers themselves would call into question whether or not the strikers were influenced by the leadership’s expectations and goals for the strike. It also questions whether or not the men were in full control of their own decisions and actions or whether they were ordered through the command structure of the IRA to carry out a fast to the death. Victims, not martyrs, can be made from men forced to die for their organization’s propaganda purposes.

The *Telegraph* was even more explicit in its assumptions than was the *Independent*. It assumed that the strike had been ordered by the IRA’s leadership and would end whenever the leadership decided. The hunger strikers themselves, as lower-ranking members in a military

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<sup>109</sup> Maurice Hickey, “Taoiseach accuses IRA leaders of intrigue,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Aug. 1, 1981.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Drury, “Hunger strike ‘not initiated’ in Maze,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Sept. 22, 1981.

<sup>111</sup> Peter McKenna, “Mourners walk out as priest attacks death fast leaders,” *Irish Independent* [Dublin], Aug. 11, 1981.

command system, were forced to abide by orders and continue the strike. Irish Prime Minister Dr. Garret Fitzgerald was quoted as saying:

“The prisoners represent themselves as belonging to a military structure. It is clear that those who are in charge of this structure can, at any time, end the crisis by ordering the hunger strikers to end their protest. They have not done so. They cannot evade responsibility in the deaths of the hunger strikers, although they seek to do so by manipulation of the media.”<sup>112</sup>

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was quoted as believing the IRA “preferred these men to die.”<sup>113</sup> It was reported that the strikers were more useful to the leadership dead than they were alive for the publicity purposes their deaths served. From a reader’s standpoint in Northern Ireland, any support for the strike would have to be humanitarian based and not directed toward achieving the political demands of the IRA’s leadership.

Officials throughout Northern Ireland, including RUC Chief Constable John Hermon expressed their frustrations with the strikers’ apparent lack of free will.

Provisional IRA leaders have cold-bloodedly decided that more prisoners must die on hunger strike regardless of their own wishes, the Chief Constable has claimed. Mr. John Hermon said the lives of hunger strikers were “mere instruments” of ruthless IRA leaders who were careful not to put their own lives at risk.<sup>114</sup>

In another article on 25 July, former Ulster Secretary of State Roy Mason was quoted as slamming the “manipulators” of the Maze hunger strikers:

“Those people outside the Maze, who are manipulating the minds and bodies of those inside, must now recognize that no international, reputable organization, or any body of any kind that has visited the Maze prison in recent times, has ever given them any support, solace or comfort. Therefore they should now have learned their lesson. They should not be asking them to fast to death when no reputable organization will give them support.”<sup>115</sup>

One front page article on 5 August titled, “Call to Adams and Morrison- fast yourselves,” illustrates the skepticism over the true intentions of the IRA leadership during the strike. This quote from West Belfast councilor Will Glendinning would have aroused some amusement at the

<sup>112</sup> “IRA obstructing solution at the Maze: Eire PM,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Aug. 1, 1981.

<sup>113</sup> “IRA prefers these men to die –Mrs. T.,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], May 16, 1981.

<sup>114</sup> “IRA leaders’ ‘cold-blooded decision on hunger strike,’” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], July 11, 1981.

<sup>115</sup> “Mason attacks the men behind hunger strike,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], July 25, 1981.

thought of Provisional Sinn Fein leaders (and suspected IRA leaders) Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison actually joining the hunger strike to show their dedication to achieving political status for the Republican prisoners.<sup>116</sup> More skepticism emerged when on 25 September Morrison announced that striker Bernard Fox had chosen to be taken off the hunger strike for fear that he “was dying too quickly.”<sup>117</sup> While the purpose of the strike was to amass the largest amount of pressure and support through prolongation of the strikers’ lives, the wording of the article and quotation by Morrison seems to suggest that the leadership was the one pulling the puppet’s strings. It was implied that when a hunger striker was no longer of strategic advantage to the organization, then and only then were they allowed to end their fast.

In summary, the *Independent* and the *Telegraph* both implied and explicitly stated that the leadership was manipulating the hunger strikers, or at the very least prolonging the strike to seek maximum publicity. This aspect of reporting the strikes is especially important to the legitimacy of the strike because it puts the hunger strikers in the role of victims of their organization’s leadership. As victims, they were not capable of exercising their own free will in participating in and ultimately dying on hunger strike. The act of hunger striking in order to prove the importance and dedication to their cause would have seemed superficial and any support expressed for the hunger strikers was in effect only humanitarian concern.

## Conclusion

Despite their religious and cultural history, the Catholic communities of Northern Ireland and the Republic were unable to accept the legitimacy of the hunger strikers’ claims of self-sacrifice. The reemerging theme of self-sacrifice as it first appeared with Republican martyr

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<sup>116</sup> “Call to Adams and Morrison- fast yourselves,” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Aug. 5, 1981.

<sup>117</sup> “Hunger striker ‘was dying too quickly,’” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast], Sept. 25, 1981.

Wolfe Tone was unsuccessful in amassing the public's sympathy it had over the past two centuries. The data presented in this analysis suggests that the media's role in the legitimization of violent organizations is a pivotal one. With modern technological advancements, the Republican tradition can no longer rely on mythical constructs of its martyrs to gain recognition from its community. The media was able to divert the public's attention from the underlying ideological questions of the strike to a more critical analysis of the strike and its direct and indirect effects in Northern Ireland. Any inconsistencies with Catholic doctrine or accepted morality were able to be highlighted through the media as opposed to ignored by the would-be martyrologists. The media as a modern day martyrologist worked against the creation of more Republican martyrs. More directly, the data shows significant evidence that the media played a role in the resolution of the strike.

The data from both the quantitative and qualitative sections of this research suggest that the newspaper coverage of the 1981 hunger strike of Northern Ireland may have had a significant impact on the resolution of the strike by denying the hunger strikers the public support they needed to meet their political objectives. The design of the staggered deaths was unable to achieve its purpose of gradually increasing pressure on the British government. As can be seen from both the quantitative and qualitative sections of this research, newspaper coverage of the strike did not increase as the strike progressed; it even declined toward the end. This volume of newspaper coverage is a reflection of the public's interest in, and concern for, the events of the hunger strike. The largest volume of articles on the hunger strike coincided with the political elections at the time and the death of the first striker, not necessarily the events of the strike itself. This showed that the public's interest was not incrementally increasing with each striker's death, but rather that the public showed the greatest interest in the humanitarian concerns of the

strike. The quantitative data also shows a sharp decline in coverage after the fifth striker's death in July as the deaths became routinized and focus shifted to the British government's inability to immediately resolve the strike.

The necessary elements of legitimacy from the IRA's community were undermined by the articles in both the *Independent* and the *Telegraph*. The three components of legitimization, that the actions of the strikers were of self-sacrifice, of their own free will, and selflessly and politically motivated, would not have been upheld by the print media's depiction of the strike. Firstly, the actions of the strikers were not portrayed as self-sacrifice. On the whole, they were treated as suicides that only added to the death toll of a state already too familiar with unnecessary death and violence. The strikers were labeled as immoral in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church which made the Church unable to fully support the strikers' actions. Lack of this support and the public scrutiny of Catholic theology further undermined their claim of self-sacrifice and deprived them of a powerful support base. The strikers' free will was thrown into doubt by accusations that accused the outside organization of forcing them to die for propaganda purposes. The lack of communication between the strikers and the public prevented them from addressing this accusation. Finally, the emphasis on the criminal actions of the strikers and the ongoing violence outside the prison by their organizations undermined their profession of selfless and political motivation.

Without these three components, the strikers would not have been legitimized by the Northern Irish community. The contrast between the secondary research on the hunger strike and its outcome can be explained by the findings of this research. The research completed on the hunger strike has been done retrospectively with the ability to take into consideration primary source data from the strikers and the strike's negotiations. The public at the time did not have



access to this information and were limited to what they read in local newspapers. These newspapers did not reflect the true intentions of the hunger strikers nor did they fully explain the ultimate goal of the strike. The shift in focus from political to humanitarian concerns completely neglected the underlying purpose for the strike. It was special category status that the prisoners sought; the changes in prison conditions were only to follow as a result of this recognition of political status.

This analysis has several important implications. It shows that the public's support for the Republican tradition of self sacrifice was beginning to deviate from its historically elevated level. It is perhaps evidence that the Irish were beginning to reject their age old traditions in order to move away from their internal divisions. More importantly, this analysis has important implications for future governmental actions against terrorist organizations. The same media used as an outlet for gaining legitimacy by these organizations can also be used to prevent them from achieving their goals. The media throughout the 1981 hunger strike played a decisive role in the public opinion of the time. Ultimately, the power that the media holds in the legitimization of terrorist organizations may be harnessed against these very same organizations and through the power of public opinion, create an atmosphere where indiscriminate violence is futile for achieving political goals.

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