



## The Impacts of British Policies and the IRA's Ideology on the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike

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### Abstract

The Northern Ireland question is the key question all over the world. The question is not only close related to the Britain and the Republic of Ireland, but also influences on Europe political and economic situation. Besides it, it is more important for the stability of West Europe. This essay is to list the conflicts between the British government and the Irish Republican Army in 1970s, to analyze the British government policies made to the IRA, to elaborate the IRA's own ideology, with the view to state their influences on the 1981 Irish hunger strike, and on the develop of the Northern Ireland question.

**Keywords:** British government policies, Irish Republican Army, Ideology, Special political status

The question of Northern Ireland has been one of the thorniest problems which British Government had to deal with. Not only has there been a profound and lasting historic background, but also interweaved complex contradictions of both race and religion. The Northern Ireland Question refers to a series of conflicts concerning the constitution, social economics, cultural identity, and religious difference. When it comes to 1968, Northern Ireland problem were getting thornier and thornier. The Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland took a series of violence which seriously had an impact on the local social, economic development and people's livelihood stability. Entering into the 1970s, British policies, in this period were made in the purpose of suppression the IRA. Additionally, removal of Special Category Status also aimed at controlling the IRA's violence. The IRA, meanwhile, insisted to struggle for the union and freedom of Ireland, to put England out of Ireland and to set up 32-county Republic of Ireland, and to regain Special Political Status. The IRA finally launched the hunger strikes, involving the death of ten men in 1980-1981 that can be seen as the most tragedy event in Irish history. The hunger strike, which becomes a turning point in Northern Ireland problem, leads the IRA's violence to the peace process. This essay analyzes the British government policies made to the IRA, to elaborates the IRA's own ideology, with the view to state their influences on the 1981 Irish hunger strike, and on the develop of the Northern Ireland question.

### 1. Britain's Policies towards the IRA from 1971 to 1979

The years between the late 1960s and 1998 when the Belfast Agreement was signed, are often referred to as 'The Troubles'. This was a period of consistent conflicts and confrontations involving republicans and loyalist paramilitary organizations, the RUC, the British Army and other parties. From the 'Battle of the Bogside', from 12 August to 14 August in 1969, the situation in Northern Ireland can be described as a descent into violence. It had a strong and unprecedented impact on Northern Ireland. Derry and Belfast, where had stronger segregation, were involved in national antagonism, religious clash, military struggles. Facing with the confrontation between IRA and British army, and following the RUC, British government feared that it would threaten its rule. Therefore, policies, in different period

were made in the purpose of suppression the IRA. After internment without trial, no-jury charge, disastrous ceasefire, criminalization, IRA being convicted as 'detainees', 'terrorist', and 'criminals' respectively, they finally launched the hunger strikes to struggle for their political status. To IRA, they are paramilitaries, fighting for Irish liberty and freedom.

In the early 1971, the first soldier and first IRA member was shot by the IRA and army respectively. Internment was demanded. Brian Faulkner produced a policy with a radical security initiative in the form of internment without trial, and he saw it as 'a panacea' (McKittrick, D. and McVea, D., 2000, PP. 67) both in halting violence and in improving the political atmosphere. A large-scale arrest, on 23 July 1971, codenamed 'Operation Demetrius' (Holland, J., 1999, PP. 66) started with thousands of troops and police rounding up the IRA in Belfast and Derry with a copy of 452 listed names. Internment was provided under Section 12 of the Special Powers Act, which allowed suspects to be held without charge. Internment being in effect during the following four years, not a single Protestant was detained. Faulkner announced that 'the main target of the present operations is the Irish Republican Army.' (Adams, G., 1996, PP. 153) More IRA suspects were given special experimental interrogation treatment. The European Court of Human Rights characterized internment as 'inhuman and degrading' treatment. (McKittrick, D. and McVea, D., 2000, PP.68)

Merlyn Rees, turned towards the republicans and PIRA after Whitelaw's failure. Whitelaw once made attempted to talk with the IRA and sought for the possibility of the ceasefire in 1972. In autumn 1974, the PIRA maintained a concerted campaign both in Northern Ireland and England with numbers of bombs. (McKittrick, D. and McVea, D., 2000, PP. 69) Rees's strategy was 'to create the conditions in which the PIRA's military organization might be weakened. The longer the ceasefire lasted, the more difficult ... to start a campaign again ... this period of peace...political action would be given a chance.' (Rees, M., 1985, PP. 224) The talks between them lead to IRA ceasefires in 1974-75, although no evidence showed British withdrawal was possibility. During the ceasefire, Catholics and Protestants continued to be killed, which proved the ceasefire not much effectiveness. After the last internees being released by Rees, the IRA gradually returned to the offensive. (Bishop, P. and Mallie, E., 1987, PP. 224) In republicans' eyes, the ceasefire was a 'disaster'. (Bishop, P. and Mallie, E., 1987, PP. 217) From then on, the PIRA entered into the phrase of more offensive sectarian killing.

The British Labour government under Roy Mason considered Northern Ireland with security policy, instead of political policy that was proven as having no effectiveness. Rees' administration was eager to form security policy on the basis of more logical and effective approach. Mason and Kenneth Newman, the new Chief Constable of the RUC, seeking 'to undermine the whole political ethos of the struggle' produced the policy of 'Ulsterization, criminalization and normalization. (English, R., 2003, PP. 187-188) Among this coherent strategy, the concepts of 'Ulsterization' and 'criminalization' were important and controversial. Both of them, especially the more aggressive 'criminalization', paved a disaster road for PIRA, and directly resulted in PIRA hunger strikes in 1980-1981.

Ulsterization was a strategy similar to 'Vietnamization', with the purpose of improving the security system in Ulster. In practice, it ensured that the RUC and UDR would be reorganized and expanded, while British regular troops were meanwhile decreased in numbers gradually. Regular troops would eventually be replaced by the RUC and UDR, (McKittrick, D. and McVea, D., 2000, PP.123) both to confront IRA and loyalists paramilitary groups and to take charge of security in Northern Ireland. Criminalization, which only focused on the IRA and other paramilitary groups, meant criminalizing the IRA. They were to be deprived of any political status even once acknowledged and denied any political motivation, and were to be treated as 'ordinary decent criminals'. (McKittrick, D. and McVea, D., 2000, PP. 123)

Internment had been abolished at the end of 1975, when Rees released the last internees. With the police returned to front line fighting against the IRA, the Northern Ireland question was redefined as a law and order question instead of a political one. The relevant approach, therefore, produced to push the paramilitaries, especially the IRA behind bars again, using criminal courts. (McKittrick, D. and McVea, D., 2000, PP. 123) It meant that IRA members would be subjected to long-time, intensive and frequent interrogation without jury. And all that they did were viewed as ordinary crime without any political motivation. It would realize so-called Normalization and criminalization. This kind of approach confessions extracted from terrorist suspects, gradually developed and produced immediately disastrous results for the PIRA.

In practice, the British Government used criminal courts and interrogation. Two laws, the Emergency Provisions Act

(EPA) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) were passed to heavily support and improve its security policy. The EPA 1973, established the special 'no-jury Diplock Courts' (James, L., 1998, PP. 80) to deal solely with terrorist offenses. The no-jury courts were on the basis of the Lord Diplock report in 1972 which 'highlighted the fear of paramilitary intimidation of jurors', (McKittrick, D. and McVea, D., 2000, PP. 123) linking with abolishment of juries. Additionally, the EPA also involved the phasing out of internment without trial, although 'suspects could be held for seven days without being charged.' (Bishop, P. and Mallie, E., 1987, PP. 255) The PTA was enacted 1974, as a strong response towards the extension of PIRA bombs in Birmingham against the acceptability of the EPA. The PTA conceived of a special device called an exclusion order, which shows that any Northern Ireland citizens who were suspected of terrorist activities would not be allowed to enter into England, Scotland or Wales, and must be deported back to his province with no right to appeal. (Rees, M. 1985) The two laws were somehow 'draconian'. Home Secretary Roy Jenkins said that 'In combination they are unprecedented in peacetime. I believe they are fully justified to meet the clear and present danger.' (Conroy, J., 1988, PP. 92)

The combination of the two laws and Normalization policy had both immediate and potential impact on the PIRA. The new interrogation team consisted of re-organized detectives, new appointed specialist collators who took charge of gathering and analyzing evidence, and trained teams of interrogators. Castlereagh, in east Belfast, was referred to the interrogation centers. Paramilitary members, especially the PIRA were arrested and then received an intense interrogation, some of them were finally charged as serious offences. However, most confessions were extracted through either physical or psychological ill-treatment during interrogation. A PIRA 'Staff Report' blamed the IRA itself for 'not indoctrinating members with the psychological strength to resist interrogation.' (Hennessey, T., 1998) It is estimated that, between 1976 and 1979, about three thousand suspects were charged with terrorist offences, most of them based on confessions extracted from interrogation. (Bishop, P. and Mallie, E., 1987, PP. 255) Facing such interrogations, more and more doubts and challenges were made to its legality and impartiality.

Firstly, the challenge turned to the police, RUC, accused of abusing the power of extracting confessions. It is said that over 2800 people were arrested in 1977-78, however, only 35 percent were charged with any offence. (James, L., 1998, PP. 81) Secondly, more controversies focused on the impartiality of getting confession: whether the RUC forced the IRA to confess by any beatings and ill-treatments. Subsequently, Amnesty International made an official inquiry about ill-treatment, headed by Harry Bennett, an English Crown Court Judge. However, the outcome of the inquiry disappointed. Its report said that 'at least some of those injured while in police custody had not inflicted their wounds themselves.' (Bishop, P. and Mallie, E., 1987, PP. 255) It seemed to support such a charge. Thirdly, some paid attention to British 'draconian' legislation. More debates on the EPA and PTA led to a doubt on monitoring of the effect of the legislation. The London-based National Council for Civil Liberties argued that 'the laws violate international standards on human rights.' (Conroy, J., 1988, PP. 93) It was argued that no evidence showed any decrease in IRA terrorist activities. In reverse, it seemed to justify violence and increase terrorism in Northern Ireland.

## **2. The Ideology of the IRA**

The hunger strikes in 1980-81 were guided by its shared political ideology, and motivated by the common interests and values, which showed its spontaneity and strong sense of comradeship. The IRA's activities were shaped by its republican doctrine which was 'essentially an expression of political and cultural nationalism' (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 336) Furthermore, the IRA always belonging to Catholic community had been suppressed and segregated. In its eyes, continuing violence was the only effective force to struggle. Although they would be imprisoned, they would still take pride in imprisonment rather than take a shame. The IRA's extension of violence and resistance to removal of Special Political Status, were both the reflection of its loyalty to a traditional nationalism. Its view of Northern Ireland is summarized by two phrases: 'the people of Ireland form one nation'; and 'the fault for keeping Ireland divided lies with Britain.' (Whyte, J.H., 1990, PP. 118) Irish nationalism refers to political and sociological movements and sentiment that contains a love for Irish culture, language and a sense of pride in the island of Ireland. The wish of all people in island of Ireland to form one nation can be dated from the Act of Union of 1800 which declared the creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. From then on, nationalism referred to a desire for greater autonomy or independence of Britain.

Almost all traditional nationalists attributed Unionist opposition to Irish unity to Britain's presence, and argued that

Britain was eager to maintain its doctrine of 'Divide and Rule', (Gwynn, D., 1950, PP. 23) further control Northern Ireland to be its neo-colony. Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Fein, holds a strong view that the root of Ireland's problem is the British presence. For him, the British presence deprived the Irish people of self-determination. (Adams, G., 1988, PP. 26) However, in his eyes, Unionists had the right to self-determination which was 'in direct contravention of the principle of self-determination.' (Adams, G., 1988, PP. 41) He also argued that Britain's control was not only over Northern Ireland, but a neo-colonial over the Republic. (Adams, G., 1988, PP. 32) P. S. O'Hegarty argued the view 'partition was primarily an English Conservative Policy, designed as propaganda to dish the Liberals.' (O'Hegarty, P. S., 1952, PP. 2-3) Frank Gallagher suggested 'Britain based her partition policy on divergences she herself created and fostered among the Irish people.' (Gallagher, F., 1957, PP. 88) And Denis Gwynn concluded that 'most people in Ireland take it for granted that Partition was deliberately devised by English politicians as a means of retaining a grip on Irish territory which could at any time be expanded.' (Gwynn, D., 1950, PP. 23) The issue of British presence was the key issue which IRA's radical republicanism fought against.

What the IRA was strongly dedicated to was the very aim of Irish nationalism: the removal of the British presence from Ireland. In fact, such firm belief had its historic root when the IRA appeared, for the first time, with a green flag in 1866. Colonel John Roberts, at that moment, had declared 'the green flag will be flying independently to freedom's breeze and we will have a base of operations from which we can not only emancipate Ireland but annihilate England.' (Kee, R., 1979, PP. 31) The name Irish Republican Army was gradually 'used to unite the disparate groups that made up the rebel forces,' (Bishop, P. and Mallie, E., 1987, PP. 7) always associating with countering English or British rule in Ireland. The members of the IRA viewed themselves as the United Irishmen founded as a Liberal Political organization in the eighteenth Century. The American Revolution and French Revolution broke out in succession in the eighteenth Century, which deeply affected its ideology with the thoughts of liberalism and democracy. The emigration of late nineteenth Century enriched it with 'an English-speaking world dimension' (Hachey, T. E., and McCaffrey, L. J., 1989, PP. 9) that included American egalitarianism, deeper democratic and republican dimensions. The organization of the IRA gradually shaped and improved its belief that all of Ireland should be a single independent republic, both in political and cultural aspects, whether as a unitary state, a federal state or as a confederate arrangement.

The IRA was a working-class organization based in the poorer rural areas and ghetto areas in the cities, (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 342) often seeing itself 'as an 'Army' and clinging to the remnants of what they believed to be a military code of ethics', (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 347) linking itself with emancipating Catholics and justifying activities as 'the only response to the repression of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland.' (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 348) Members of the IRA from working-class Catholic families could gain esteem entering into the organization that viewed itself as 'an elite and exclusive band'. (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 4) The sentiment of the emancipation of Catholics is traced from the late eighteenth century. Being a British colony, Ireland had been ruled by a Protestant minority. Since the Penal Laws' effectiveness, Protestant exclusivity was highlighted with the parliament perpetuating 'the religious, social, economic, and political disabilities'. (Hachey, T. E., and McCaffrey, L. J., 1989, PP. 2) After the partition of Ireland, Unionists, standing for the Protestants, had a majority at Stormont, declared to establish 'a Protestant parliament and a Protestant state' (Kelley, K., 1984, PP. 64) in the Six Counties. During the fifty years of Unionist rule at Stormont, from 1921 to 1972, the policy rejected the entire Catholic community being in power. Besides political power, Catholics were discriminated against in employment, housing, education, and social life, and were even excluded from recruiting the B Specials. (Belfast: H.M.S.O., 1972, PP. 92) From the emancipation of Catholics to Home Rule, from the Irish Free State to the Troubles, nationalists with Catholicism, especially republicanism, were struggling for a Catholic nation. This kind of combination of religion and nationality is the main characteristic of Irish nationalism.

When the struggles entered into the stage of birth of Northern Ireland, the communal violence escalated. It is estimated that 303 Catholics, 172 Protestants and 82 British soldiers (Bardon, J., A, 1992, PP. 494) were killed only July 1920 and July 1922, without the deaths during the Troubles. Facing such historic and continuing anti-Catholic prejudice, the IRA, particularly the PIRA, saw themselves as 'Catholic Defenders' (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 195) in the North, and should have guns to defend themselves.

Physical force republicanism, following the violent tradition of the United Irishmen, had persisted until the late 1970s. After the late 1970s, Sinn Fein was dedicated to taking a strategy of using both armed struggle and electoral contests. The ideology of the IRA was violent, concerning two aspects: 'England's presence leads to violence' on the one hand,

'England will not yield to any argument but force' (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 207) on the other. In fact, the IRA was initially told, as soon as they recruited, that the involvement in republican movement would possibly lead them to Milltown or to Long Kesh, well known as Maze. (Bishop, P. and Mallie, E., 1987, PP. 1 ) Long Kesh was regarded as a particular prison in the eyes of republicans, 'synonymous with internment without trial, the 'hooded men' the protests for political status, the hunger strikes, and the escapes.' McKeown, L., 2001, PP. XII) To the IRA, republican prisoners who were convicted of using physical force were the prisoners of war, which was of 'honour to be worn with dignity'. After the Extraordinary Army Convention in 1969, the PIRA leadership, complying with the spirit of the 1916 Easter Rising, insisted that only the violence can achieve British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 340) San MacStiofain, the founder of PIRA, clearly declared that refused to do with any organization on the basis of 'their opposition to armed struggle.' (MacStiofain, S., 1975, PP. 135) Leading by such the ideology, republican prisoners decided to launch hunger strikes to maintain its honor and dignity.

### 3. Special Political Status

In 1972, William Whitelaw, the Northern Ireland Secretary, granted the PIRA 'special category status' (the Special Political status in nationalist or republicans' eyes), partly because Whitelaw was improving his relations with nationalists and republicans to discuss with the representatives of the IRA the possibility of a truce, after Britain's direct rule, and partly because the British government wanted to find some political solutions to removing more violence from streets. (McKeown, L., 2001, PP. 29) The consequence of the special category status was long-term, and the removal of it in 1975, finally gave rise to, the republican tragedy, the IRA hunger strikes in the 1980-1981.

How to deal with Irish political prisoners has been a thorny issue for British governments for a long time. The precise policy has depended on the current circumstances. From the Easter Rising of 1916 when the IRA, led by Sinn Fein, officially declared to struggle for liberty and independence and against the British presence, the IRA viewed itself as a paramilitary group fighting for a united Ireland. Therefore, in the IRA's eyes, their activists in Northern Ireland expressed political motives. With the growing number of republicans being imprisoned, they always insisted that they were prisoners of war. However, the British government's attitude towards the 'prisoners of war' has been indecisive sometimes, and has from time to time granted and withdrawn political status. To the IRA, if the demands for political status could not be realized, they always chose the method of prison protests. Tomlinson writes that 'Protests became much more collective and intense after the turn of the century. With the more decisive rising of 1916, there was so much more at stake for political prisoners with the immediate prospect of liberating Ireland from British rule ... The form of protest, whether against imprisonment, internment or military detention, changed dramatically. ... The hunger strike became the dominant form of protest.' (Mike Tomlinson, 1995, PP. 245)

The Hunger Strike is widely used as a method of political protest in Northern Ireland. And this strong tradition can be seen as an integral part of Irish history. From the early twentieth century, many hunger strikes were involved in struggle against prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners. Others concerned demands for political status and perceived unjust imprisonment. (Sweeney, G., 1993, PP. 421-437) In republicans' opinion, the hunger strike, being a political protest, is a reflection of resistance to British oppression and pursuit of its own political belief. Additionally, it is always, in term of Catholic, a sort of martyrdom. The strikers are, therefore, regarded as Irish heroes. In 1917, eighty-four republican prisoners, headed by Thomas Ashe, launched a hunger strike for political status, which was viewed as a turning point in gathering support for the demand for political status. Bobby Sands, starving himself to death in prison in 1981, is seen as a republican hero by the Irish, and obtained a great amount of people's sympathies. From Thomas Ashe to Bobby Sands, the hunger strike protest truly reflects the political nature of the IRA's struggle.

Among republican hunger strikes, on May 1972, there was a hunger strike launched by Bill McKee in Crumlin Road Prison to demand political status which was 'always done in the prisons all through the periods.' (McKeown, L., 2001, PP.28) After a prisoner being removed to the Boards, other prisoners launched the protest to ask for his return to the wing. When the prisoners were told that it was impossible to let the prisoner return, the prisoners demand for the political status took place, involving in five demands: (McKeown, L., 2001, PP.28) the right to not wear prison uniform, to be segregated from criminal prisoners, to be excluded from prison works, to receive letters and parcels, and to freely visit someone. The hunger strike did not last long and all demands were granted to IRA prisoners immediately, because of the improving relations between British government and republicans. However, it was called 'special category status',

which was evident to avoid the term of 'political'. It can be seen that British government did not regard this special category status as a kind of political sense.

Whitelaw's special category status was a direct cause for hunger strikes in 1980-1981 on one hand. The success of the 1972 hunger strike, to some extent, convinced the IRA that the hunger strike was an effective protest, which contributed to the tragedy of 1981, on the other hand.

From the analysis above, the IRA can be described as a descent into the violence. It took more aggressive actions to struggle for the union of Ireland. In order to stabilize the political situation, safeguard national security, the British policies changed political policy to security policy. The British government not only regarded the IRA as terrorists, carried out internment without trial, and forced the IRA to sign the ceasefire agreement, but also adopted a policy of Ulsterisation referring the republican prisoners as common criminals rather than political prisoners. The British Government removed the Special Political Status and deprived the IRA of political motives so that the IRA's confrontational emotion peaked at the climax of history. A series of policies that Britain made focused on undermining the strength of the IRA, decreasing Britain's domestic violence. The IRA was a working-class organization based in the poorer rural areas and ghetto areas in the cities, usually seeing themselves as an 'Army', linking themselves with emancipating Catholics and justifying their violent activities as the response to repression of the Catholic community. (Cronin, S., 1981, PP. 347-348) In the IRA's eyes, their activists in Northern Ireland were power of political motives. With the growing number of republicans being imprisoned, they always insisted that they were prisoners of war. The tension between Britain and the IRA was deteriorating in 1970s. The confrontation between the Britain's policies and the IRA's ideology was in a cycle of repression and anti-repression, violence and counter-violence. This unstable relation paved a way for the IRA extreme protests, and ultimately launched the hunger strikes in 1980-1981.

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