

Dieter Reinisch
Performing Resistance

Sport and Irish Republican Identity in Internment Camps and Prisons*

On 11 August 2014, the Irish Republican prisoners' group *Cogús* issued a press release titled "Further medical issues for Republican POWs", stating:

Last week, Cogús POW Department learned that Roe 3 POW Danny McClean broke his arm while playing a game of football in the Maghaberry prison yard. Cogús were informed that Danny would be taken out of the prison to a hospital, where he would undergo an assessment to deem if the arm was broken.¹

Cogús is one of the various groups supporting those Irish Republican prisoners currently held in prisons like HMP Maghaberry and HMP Hydebank Wood, both in County Antrim in the North of Ireland, and Portlaoise Prison in the Republic of Ireland. The prisoners' group complained about McClean's inadequate medical treatment following a "football" accident in the prison. As this statement illustrates, sport is part of the political prisoners' lives in today's Ireland.

In this chapter, I aim to examine the role leisure and sport played for internees and prisoners during the 30 years of conflict in the North of Ireland from 1968 until 2000. I will demonstrate that Irish Republicans used to sport in two ways. First, in resistance to the British prison regime and, second, to reinforce and maintain Irish Republican identity within the British internment camps and prisons. I will furthermore examine what sports the prisoners practised and used to uphold and strengthen identity. Certainly, as

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1 *Cogús*, "Further medical issues for Republican POWs", in *Republican Network for Unity Blog*, accessed 25 January 2015, <http://www.republicanunity.org/cogus-further-medical-issues-for-republican-pows>.

the conflict inside and outside the prisons evolved during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the prisoners' routines changed, their political and cultural views developed, and their approach to sport transformed. By using the concept of *critical junctions*, I will give examples of three key periods during the 1970s through the 1990s to illustrate how sport formed identities in the internment camps and prisons, and how the focus changed from traditional Gaelic games to what Irish Nationalists called "foreign games" like soccer² in the aftermath of the hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981. While the given examples in the 1970s and 1980s mainly focus on the Northern internment camps and prisons, I will outline the role that sport in prison played during the conflict transformation in the 1990s by analysing the situation in the Republic's Portlaoise Prison.

Based on written and oral remembrances of former internees and prisoners, I will show how the prisoners remember their experiences with sport – Gaelic football and soccer, in particular – in internment camps and prisons. Focusing on oral history and memory studies, the chapter is based on the interview transcripts of former Irish Republican prisoners from Long Kesh/HMP Maze, Magilligan Internment Camp, Mountjoy Prison, and Portlaoise Prison. All quoted interviews were conducted between summer 2013 and autumn 2015. Additionally, I use written published and unpublished memoirs of former Republican prisoners, and archival sources from the National Library of Ireland, the National Archives of Ireland, the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Linen Hall Library, and private collections.³

I will, furthermore, provide insight into the situation in the Republic of Ireland, namely in its only high-security prison Portlaoise, Co (County) Laois, while focusing on the internment camps and prisons under British jurisdiction in the North, mainly Long Kesh/HMP (Her Majesty's Prison) Maze and Magilligan Internment Camp. Historiography on the recent Irish Republican movement tends to focus on developments in the North; this regional divide is most obvious in academic research on political imprisonment in Ireland since 1968. Conversely, I argue that an all-Ireland understanding of political imprisonment is necessary to recognise its implications for the conflict transformation process. Therefore, I will focus on Northern developments and developments in Portlaoise Prison south of the border in order to underline my argument. In other words, the conflict in Ireland was not limited to the

2 In Ireland "football" is mainly referred to as "soccer", whereas the term "football" is used to describe "Gaelic football".

3 For a detailed introduction to the oral history methodology used see Dieter Reinisch, "Frauen in der irisch-republikanischen Bewegung nach 1969 Überlegungen zu Oral History, sensiblen Daten und dem Nordirlandkonflikt", in *BIOS* 28:1–2 (2017), 231–249; id., *Die Frauen der IRA. Cumann na mBan und der Nordirlandkonflikt 1968–1986* (Vienna 2017).

war in the North; hence, the role of political prisoners in the conflict transformation cannot be fully understood when narrowing the research on the situation in British prisons.

With the outbreak of the so-called Troubles in the North of Ireland, the Republican prison population reached its highest numbers on both sides of the Irish border since 1923. The British government introduced internment in August 1971 in the North of Ireland. Although there are not sufficient data on Republican imprisonment available for the Republic of Ireland, it is estimated that between 20,000 and 25,000 both Republicans and Loyalists were either interned or imprisoned in British internment camps and prisons between 1969 and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.⁴ The main internment camps and prisons were, among others, Long Kesh/HMP Maze, Co Antrim, and Portlaoise Prison, Co Laois. There are currently approximately 30 prisoners held on the Republican landings Roe three and Roe four of HMP Maghaberry, the high-security prison housing male Republican and Loyalist prisoners in the North of Ireland; the Republic of Ireland holds another 50 to 60 prisoners belonging to Republican organisations in Portlaoise Prison. While these prisoners are referred to as *Irish political prisoners*, *Republican prisoners*, or *Prisoners of War*, the status of the internees' and prisoners has always been disputed between Irish Republicans and the British and Irish governments.⁵

Within the general topic of the volume, this chapter opens the analysis of sport from camps to prisons. Internment camps holding Irish prisoners differ from the early concentration camps of the late nineteenth century and the death camps of the middle of the twentieth century. The main difference is, of course, mortality. However, there are also several similarities between the early concentration camps in South Africa, the Philippines, and Cuba on the one hand, and the internment camps holding Irish prisoners after 1916 in Wales and in the 1970s in Ireland.⁶ First, both types of camps opened as a direct response to guerrilla campaigns during a colonial conflict. Second, they were directed against a significant section of the population, in the Irish case against male Catholics suspected of Nationalist sympathies. Third, the

4 A report by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy Minister (OFMDFM) also estimates that there are up to 30,000 former political prisoners in the North of Ireland. Bill Rolston, *Review of Literature on Republican and Loyalist Ex-Prisoners* (Belfast 2011).

5 For a detailed discussion on the use of the term see Liam O'Ruairc, "Common Criminals or Political Law Breakers", in *TPQ Blog*, 21 August 2010, <http://thepensivequill.am/2010/08/common-criminals-or-political-law.html>; Andrew Silke, "Terrorists, Extremists and Prison: An Introduction to the Critical Issues," in Andrew Silke (ed.), *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism. Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform* (London 2014), 3–15; Clive Walker, "Irish Republican Prisoners. Political Detainees, Prisoners of War or Common Criminals?", in *The Irish Jurist* 19:2 (1984).

6 John McGuffin, *Internment* (Tralee 1973).

camps served as collective punishment of the Nationalist community.⁷ The internment policy was reintroduced in the North of Ireland in the summer of 1971 and formally ended in December 1975. However, the criminalisation policy of Irish Nationalists succeeded and the newly build H-Blocks of HMP Maze became its centre after 1976. Thus, this chapter will lead from the internment camp experience of Gaelic Athletic Association (*Cumann Lúthchleas Gael* or GAA) sport to the situation in the British and Irish prisons where both soccer and GAA games were played in the 1980s and 1990s.

Sport held a pivotal position at the beginning of the national movement of the Irish people in the nineteenth century. The formation of *Cumann Lúthchleas Gael* boosted the appeal to allegedly ancient Celtic games such as Gaelic football, camogie, hurling, and handball. Certainly, the GAA was far more than a mere sports organisation; it was, together with the *Conradh na Gaeilge* (Gaelic League), the driving force of the cultural and political Gaelic Revival in Ireland.⁸ Gaelic sports soon developed into a propaganda vehicle for nationalist sentiments and agitation. The British colonial administration subsequently banned the playing of these sports on Sundays. Accordingly, in 1897, the GAA itself introduced Rule 21 which banned members of the British security forces from membership of the GAA and thus from playing Gaelic games. Until recently, Rule 42, furthermore, prohibited the playing of non-Gaelic games, the so-called foreign games, in GAA stadiums. Even more striking was Rule 27, which banned GAA players from actively and passively taking part in “foreign games” such as soccer or rugby.⁹ Under those circumstances, sport had evolved from the cultural awakening of the Irish people into an anti-colonial battlefield of Irish nationalism.

Despite this outstanding role of sports in the modern history of Ireland and the boom in research in the last two decades on both political imprisonment in Ireland and sport in Ireland, the relationship between Irish Republican prisoners and sport has so far not inspired scholarly interest. Existing studies on political imprisonment tend to ignore social and cultural activity in prison rather focusing on political developments;¹⁰ equally, studies on the relation-

7 Jonathan Hyslop, “The Invention of the Concentration Camp. Cuba, Southern Africa and the Philippines, 1896–1907”, in *South African Historical Journal* 63:2 (2011), 251–276.

8 Timothy G. McMahon, *Grand Opportunity. The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society, 1893–1910* (Syracuse 2008).

9 Mike Cronin et al. (eds.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884–2009* (Dublin 2009); Donal McAnallen et al. (ed.), *The Evolution of the GAA: Ulaidh, Éire Agus Eile* (Belfast 2009).

10 The most significant among recent publications are Thomas Hennessey, *Hunger Strike. Margaret Thatcher's Battle with the IRA* (Dublin 2014); Laura McAtackney, *An Archaeology of the Troubles. The Dark Heritage of Long Kesh/Maze Prison* (Oxford 2014); Seán McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners 1848–1922. Theatres of War* (London 2003); id.,

ship between sport and Irish nationalism and Republicanism tends to ignore post-1969 Irish Republicans.¹¹ Notable exceptions are Brian Hanley's chapter on attitudes towards sport and Irish Republicans, the works of Alan Bairner on sport in the North of Ireland, and David Hassan's analysis that shows that sport helped develop a separate Northern identity within Irish nationalism.¹²

This chapter will add to the literature on sport in Irish and British internment camps and prisons during the conflict in North of Ireland. The role of sport over the decades was twofold. First, prisoners practised sport for recreational and training purposes; and, second, prisoners used sport to maintain and reinforce national and cultural identity. By discussing the use of sport in a prison context, the chapter will focus on three key issues. First, the role that Gaelic sports played in building and maintaining Irish Republican identity in the internment camps Long Kesh and Magilligan; second, the changing identities in the course of the 1980s and the debate on the "foreign game," soccer, inside HMP Maze and the wider Republican movement; and third, the use of sport and sport facilities in Portlaoise Prison in order to support the peace process in the 1990s. A description of the role of sport by both prisoners and political actors outside the prisons will shed light on the interaction of, on the one hand, political prisoners and, on the other hand, their political movements and wider community outside of the prisons. By understanding these developments, I will show how even the seemingly politically insignificant activities of internees and prisoners had an impact on the conflict transformation process in Ireland's recent past. In particular, this approach will contribute to the understanding of camps and prisons as integral places of

Irish Political Prisoners, 1920–1962. Pilgrimage of Desolation (Oxon 2014); William Murphy, *Political Imprisonment & the Irish, 1912–1921* (Oxford 2014); Ruán O'Donnell, *Special Category. The IRA in English Prisons, 1968–1978, vol. 1* (Dublin 2012); id., *Special Category. The IRA in English Prisons, 1978–1985, vol. 2* (Dublin 2015).

- 11 Among the most valuable recent publications are Mike Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland. Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity since 1884* (Dublin 1999); James Kelly, *Sport in Ireland 1600–1840* (Dublin 2014); Peter Rouse, *Sport and Ireland. A History* (Oxford 2015).
- 12 Alan Bairner (ed.), *Sport and the Irish. Histories, Identities, Issues* (Dublin 2005); id., "Sport, the Northern Ireland Peace Process, and the Politics of Identity", in *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research* 5 (2013), 220–229; id., "Still Taking Sides. Sport, Leisure and Identity in Northern Ireland", in Colin Coulter/Michael Murray (eds.), *Northern Ireland after the Troubles. A Society in Transition* (Manchester 2008); id. "Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland Revisited", in John Sudgen/Alan Tomlinson (eds.), *Power Games. A Critical Sociology of Sport* (London 2002); Alan Bairner/John Sudgen, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (Leicester 1993); Brian Hanley, "Irish Republican Attitudes to Sport since 1921", in Dónal McAnallen et al. (eds.), *The Evolution of the GAA. Ulaidh, Éire Agus Eile* (Belfast 2009); David Hassan, "Sport, Identity and Irish Nationalism in Northern Ireland", in Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 123–139.

the nationalist and political struggle, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, sport as a politicised mirror of developments outside the prison walls.¹³

Gaelic Sport and Internment

Following the partition of Ireland in 1921,¹⁴ the Irish Republican movement continued its work in pursuit of a united Ireland, which resulted in numerous internees and prisoners throughout the twentieth century.¹⁵ Throughout the 1960s, the civil rights movement demanded equality for the Catholic population by organising mass protests in the North of Ireland. These protests culminated in regular clashes with the paramilitary police RUC and pro-British Unionists and Loyalists. As a direct result of pogroms, the British army was eventually deployed in the region in the summer of 1969.¹⁶ Two years later, in August 1971, the British government launched Operation Demetrius, which included mass arrests and internment. Internment camps were opened on the former Royal Air Force base of Long Kesh, near Lisburn, Co Antrim, as well as Magilligan in Co Derry; internees were also held on the Maidstone Prison Ship in Belfast. The policy of internment lasted until December 1975 and during that time, British authorities interned 1,981 people; 1,874 of them were Nationalists.¹⁷ Indeed, recreation, training, and fitness were not the only reasons for playing Gaelic sports in the internment camps and prisons.

The playing of Gaelic sport was always a central part of the recreational time in these internment camps. During the decades from 1916 until the 1970s, the prisoners overwhelmingly played Gaelic handball and Gaelic football. However, the rules of football were adapted to the particular situation in

13 I had a similar thesis regarding Irish Republican prisoners and the Irish language in Dieter Reinisch, "Political Prisoners and the Irish Language: A North-South Comparison", in *Studi irlandesi* 6 (2016), 239–258.

14 On the impact of the partition on sport, see Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: A History*, xf.

15 On internment and imprisonment of Irish Republicans in the twentieth century, see, inter alia, McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners 1848–1922*; id., *Irish Political Prisoners, 1920–1962*; John Maguire, *IRA Internments and the Irish Government. Subversives and the State, 1939–1962* (Dublin 2008); McGuffin, *Internment*; Murphy, *Political Imprisonment*.

16 On the outbreak of the conflict in the late 1960s, see Thomas Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles, 1970–72* (Dublin 2007); id., *Northern Ireland. The Origins of the Troubles* (Dublin 2005); Simon Prince, "Do What the Afro-Americans Are Doing: Black Power and the Start of the Northern Ireland Troubles", in *Journal of Contemporary History* (2015), doi:0022009414557908; Simon Prince / Geoffrey Warner, *Belfast and Derry in Revolt. A New History of the Start of the Troubles* (Dublin 2012).

17 Martin McCleery, *Operation Demetrius and Its Aftermath. A New History of the Use of Internment without Trial in Northern Ireland 1971–75* (Manchester 2015).

each prison or internment camp. The hard, wooden Hurleys were forbidden in all prisons, thus, the game of hurling could not be played. In the situation playing Gaelic games was a reaction to the British sporting culture for Irish Nationalists.¹⁸ Rouse writes:

Sport was central in the adoption of certain symbols – among them flags, crests, and anthems – and these symbols were often adopted enthusiastically. Sport offered a platform to display patriotism at best and chauvinism at worst.¹⁹

This statement is even more apparent for the Irish Republican internees and prisoners in the British camps. The political activists believed in these sentiments and most of them were active GAA members, taking their cultural identities and sports with them into the camps. The manifestation of Irishness through commemorations, sport, language, and history classes within the British camps were among the first forms of resistance shown by the internees.²⁰



Fig. 1: Huts at the Magilligan Internment Camps, Co Derry, where Republican and Loyalist internees were held in the 1970s. The same type of Nissen huts was also used in the Long Kesh Internment Camp in Co Antrim. (Photo credits: Frankie McCarron)

18 Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 3.

19 *Ibid.*, 4.

20 Reinisch, "Political Prisoners".

Irish Republicans understood the playing of Gaelic games as continuing their political activism inside the camps. The work of Republican internees focused on political and historical debates and lectures, drills, parades, commemorations, preparations for escapes, and sports competitions. The playing of Gaelic games was one tool to promote and uphold the Irish nationalist culture in the prisons. Further ways to underpin the Irish culture among the prisoners were promoting and using the Irish language, singing Irish songs, or organising lectures in Irish history. By doing this particular work, the Republican prisoners aimed to underline that they “are political prisoners instead of ordinary, criminal prisoners”.²¹

In his recollections of the time in Long Kesh internment camp, Bobby Devlin recalls one Gaelic football match between the teams of two cages. Devlin was born and reared in the Falls Road area of Belfast. He left school at 14 years of age; he later joined the RAF (Royal Airforce) for five years before becoming a postal worker. He was interned in Long Kesh from 1972 to 1974, his memoirs narrate this period:

Each Cage was allowed the use of the football pitch at least once a week. Gaelic football was the most popular of all there, and it certainly was the most competitive. If there were medals at stake then it became a pitched battle. Whenever any game was over, you would have a scene like Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow in football boots.

There would be broken limbs, steakies (black eyes) and bruises galore. The most famous or infamous match was fought out between Cage Two and Cage Three. Each team contained excellent players, but they suffered from what I called “medal fatigue.”

[...] It was a pity because those cages had two excellent teams. However, it was all in line with our policy of promoting Irish Culture.²²

Gaelic football features a number of times in Devlin’s memories and it was indeed the main team sport played by the internees in these early years of the camps. Devlin stresses the violent aspect of playing Gaelic football in the prison while, at the same time, enjoying the sport. This aspect underlines the competitiveness of the game, particularly in the prison. Behind the prison walls, the internees and convicts perform those activities that significantly break the routine. Thus, Gaelic games were performed with more intensity. This competitiveness made it appear more violent than games played outside prisons.

Apart from running and training in the gym, Gaelic football was the most favoured sports activity for two reasons; first, it was a political statement, and

21 Interview with Dan Hoban, Newport, Co Mayo, 15 April 2015.

22 Bobby Devlin, *An Interlude with Seagulls. Memories of a Long Kesh Internee* (London 1985), 32.

second, it was an opportunity to keep physically fit. In other words, being an active member of the GAA was a political statement in order to promote Irish culture in opposition to the British culture. Playing Gaelic football, hurling, and handball were, thus, acts of cultural resistance, in particular, for northern Nationalists. Devlin explains the personality of some internees and their roles during football matches: "One of the main reasons for Cage 22 being a good disciplined place was due to the fact of Jimmy Roe being in charge. In his youth, Jimmy was a hard-tackling back on the last great Antrim Gaelic Football side of 1951".²³ The Republican Movement tried to push the promotion of the Irish culture among the internees and prisoners even further by organising Irish classes and Gaelic football competitions. All internment camps had football pitches. A drawing from the late 1970s shows that the Long Kesh camp had two big football pitches plus another small pitch.²⁴ Another camp, Magilligan Camp in Co Derry, also had two football pitches.²⁵ Indeed, it was

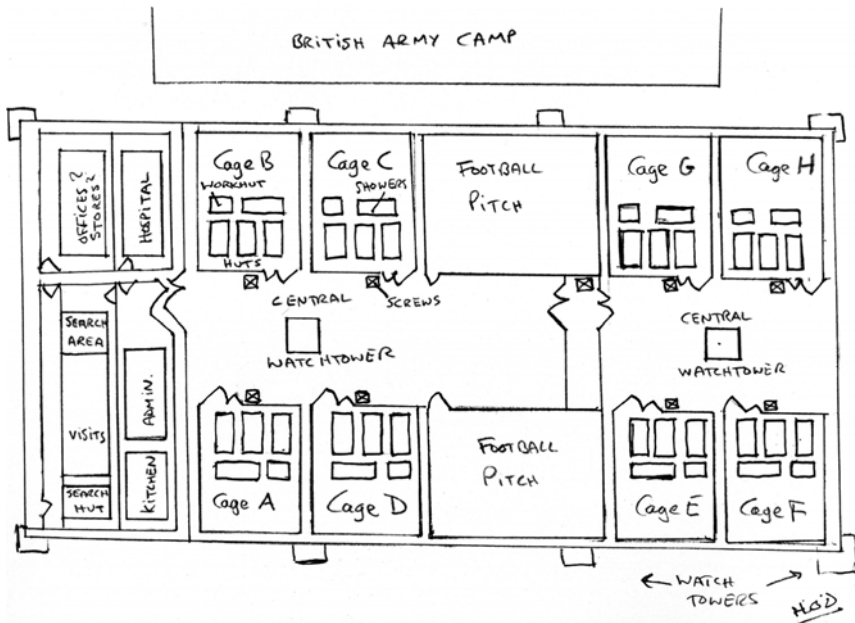


Fig. II: A map drawn by a former Irish Republican internee of the Magilligan Internment Camp, Co Derry, showing two football pitches that were used by both Republican and Loyalist internees during the 1970s. (Photo credits: Frankie McCarron)

23 Ibid., 59.

24 Provisional Republican Prisoners, *Prison Struggle. The Story of Continuing Resistance Behind the Wire* (Belfast 1977).

25 Frankie McCarron, *Magilligan. POW Memories from 1974 to 1980s* (Derry 2013), 10.

in the interest of the movement to have physically fit internees and prisoners so that they would be prepared to continue their activities immediately after their release.²⁶

As mentioned in the first statement by Devlin, the Republican inmates did not solely hold football matches on an individual basis, rather they organised tournaments. The Irish nationalist community outside the camps, especially sympathising GAA clubs, usually supported these competitions by donating medals, balls, or jerseys. Frankie, who was an internee of Magilligan in the 1970s, relates the following:

I remember the soccer and GAA leagues in Magilligan. They were very competitive. There were medals and cups sent in from outside for us to compete for. I won a few of those medals but don't know what happened to them. The fiercest competition came from the matches between Cage D and Cage G. For some reasons Cage F always seemed to have the weakest team in both cup competitions. We had some cracking GAA matches because there were always some intercounty POW players in Magilligan. [...] Keeping fit was a big thing in Magilligan, be it soccer, football, running or workouts, it kept the guys busy.²⁷

Like Long Kesh internee Devlin, Magilligan internee Frankie remembers that the matches were usually organised between the various cages. The support from GAA clubs was highly appreciated by the Republican prisoners, not only because the facilities were very poor in the early days of the camps but also because it kept the spirit of the inmates intact by proving to them that there was support for their cause on the outside. By doing this, prisoners and their supporters established links that broke the distinction between inside and outside; this distinction is usually a typical feature for camps and prisons. In a pamphlet published by the Provisional Republican Movement, the prisoners write:

I suppose it would be difficult for someone on the outside who has never experienced the Kesh or any other Concentration Camp to imagine the pleasure when some football club or individual sends in a new leather ball or a badly needed set of jerseys.²⁸

With the help of outside GAA clubs, the prisoners furthermore organised tournaments such as the Jimmy Steele Cup held in Belfast Prison in September 1972. Steele was a leading Belfast Republican who had died in August 1970. As these testimonies and articles show, before the opening of the H-Blocks,

²⁶ Prisoners, *Prison Struggle*, 41.

²⁷ McCarron, *Magilligan*, 72f.

²⁸ Prisoners, *Prison Struggle*, 41.

HMP Maze, and the removal of de facto political status for the Irish Republican prisoners under British jurisdiction in 1976, the internees in Long Kesh had wide-ranging rights. There were, indeed, few restrictions on the performing of sport in the camp.

While the focus was put on Gaelic games, internees and prisoners performed other sports as well; so-called Mini Olympics were held in various camps and prisons, such as Long Kesh, Mountjoy Prison, and Portlaoise Prison.²⁹ In Long Kesh, the first Mini Olympics were held during a festival that lasted several days on the anniversary of the introduction of internment, Devlin was one of the organisers and writes:

I remember on the first day we held the four hundred and forty metre heats. [...] The next event was the half-mile and the favourite was the “White Tornado” Eamon Caughey. He could really go in the shorter distance races. The half-mile race involved four circuits of the cage. There were about a dozen entrants at the start and Peadar McIlvenny with Eamon Caughey zoomed off as if it was a hundred yards sprint. This absolutely wrecked me after one circuit but I knew if I could keep in touch with the first four then I would be in the medals. For the next three laps I hung on and got in behind Eamon and Peadar going down the home straight and I gave it all I had which wasn’t much, yet I tied a second place with Peadar until Gerry Maguire (God Forgive Him) shouted: “There’s another lap to go.” By now I had come to a halt but then everyone dashed off again. That “fifth” lap nearly killed me as I struggled around on “rubbery” legs to finish outside the medals. I was exhausted and had to lie down.³⁰

Devlin’s account on sport in the camp reflects the joy the prisoners felt when doing these activities, and both the competition and feeling of community among prisoners. In another account, he remembers doing sport in winter to overcome depression on Christmas Eve 1973.³¹ Apart from running, Gaelic sports, and occasionally handball, the Republican inmates played soccer. However, Irish Nationalists consider soccer a “foreign game” and, therefore, the Republican leadership did not promote it. However, Bairner argues that the discouraging Gaelic games sparked the interest of some Republican internees and prisoners in soccer.³² Although this may be true, Gaelic sports held a pivotal role in the cultural resistance of the Republican leadership. Additionally, sport served to maintain the physical fitness of the prisoners and brought

29 Interview with Seosamh Ó Maileoin, Tyrellspass, Co Westmeath, 30 April 2015; and interview with Vivian Hayden, Dublin, 14 April 2015.

30 Devlin, *An Interlude*, 54f.

31 *Ibid.*, 55.

32 Alan Bairner, “My First Victim Was a Hurling Player...? Sport in the Lives of Northern Ireland’s Political Prisoners”, in *American Behavioral Scientist* (2016), 10, doi: 0.1177/0002764216632842.

them “back into shape” before their release in order to maintain their political and paramilitary activities immediately on the outside.³³ Soccer only played a marginal role in the early internment camps. It was, as Bairner writes, either promoted for ideological reasons by the prison authorities, or it was followed by a small group of northern Nationalist inmates supportive of various Irish Nationalist clubs in the North, such as Derry FC, the then-dissolved Belfast Celtic, or Glasgow’s Celtic FC, a Scottish club with a significant support base among Nationalists in Ireland.³⁴ However, the political standing of soccer rapidly changed following the 1981 hunger strikes.



Fig. III: A photo showing Republican internees doing “physical training” in Long Kesh internment camp. The photo was published in the booklet *Prison Struggle: The Story of continuing Resistance behind the Wire* in March 1977.

The text in the booklet reads: “There are entries for the breath-taking egg-and-spoon race, the gruelling 30 times round the Cage marathon and the three legged race. The sportsday is very popular and great fun. All these athletic activities serve some purpose either by breaking the prison monotony, relieving tension or just providing fun and entertainment.”

³³ Prisoners, *Prison Struggle*, 41.

³⁴ Gareth Fulton, “Northern Ireland Fans of the Republic of Ireland Soccer Team”, in Bairner, *Sport and the Irish*, 140–156; Hassan, “Sport, Identity and Irish Nationalism”; Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 303.

Soccer in HMP Maze

On 1 March 1976, following an earlier announcement by the new Labour Secretary of State Merlyn Rees, Special Category Status for Irish Republican prisoners was phased out. This meant that anyone convicted of a scheduled offence after March 1976 would be treated as an ordinary criminal and, thus, would have to wear a prison uniform, do prison work, and serve their sentence in the new HMP Maze, in what became known as the H-Blocks due to their architecture. Later that year, Kieran Nugent was the first Republican to arrive in the H-Blocks; he refused to wear a prison uniform and instead, wrapped himself in a blanket, the only available item in his cell. Nugent's protest marks the start of a new form of protest by Republican prisoners, known as the "blanket protest". Through their protest, the prisoners demanded recognition as political rather than criminal prisoners; thereby, they tried to show that the struggle for Irish unity was indeed a political struggle and not a criminal, terrorist one as portrayed by the British government. The "blanket protest" and the subsequent "dirty protest" – i.e., the refusal to leave cells to shower or use the lavatory because of attacks by prison officers, culminated in two hunger strikes. During the last hunger strike in 1981, ten Republican prisoners died, seven were members of the Provisional IRA and three were members of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). Following the end of the hunger strikes in autumn 1981, the British government gradually granted most of the demands.³⁵

The Republican movement experienced previously unknown waves of support during the hunger strikes³⁶ and a great number of people from not traditionally Republican backgrounds joined the movement.³⁷ Some of these people had moderate Republican views. One of the pre-1981 Republicans and one of the ten dead hunger strikers, INLA member Kevin Lynch, was also a member of the St. Patrick's GAA Club in Co Derry and captained Derry to win the 1972 All-Ireland Under-16 finals. After his death, the club was

35 For an overview of the prison protests, see, inter alia, David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead. The Story of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike* (London 1987); Brian Campbell et al., *Nor Meekly Serve My Time. The H-Block Struggle, 1976–1981* (Belfast 1998); Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*; Laurence McKeown, *Out of Time. Irish Republican Prisoners, Long Kesh, 1972–2000* (Belfast 2001).

36 F. Stuart Ross, *Smashing H-Block. The Rise and Fall of the Popular Campaign against Criminalization, 1976–1982* (Liverpool 2011).

37 Robert W. White, *Provisional Irish Republicans. An Oral and Interpretive History* (Westport, CT 1993); Robert W. White/Demirel Pegg, "Social Movements over Time. Recruitment, Splits, Revolution Versus Reform", in Lorenzo Bosi/Gianluca DeFazio (eds.), *The Troubles. Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements* (Amsterdam 2017).

renamed the “Kevin Lynch GAA Club”.³⁸ The influence prisoners had with their outside communities further diminished the distinction between inside and outside the prison walls.

With the arrival of the new prisoners, the popularity of sport in the H-Blocks shifted from football to soccer. The growing interest in the “foreign game” soccer within the Provisional Republican Movement was reflected both inside and outside the prison. There are two main reasons for this development. The first reason is the arrival of new members of the movement. Republican veteran John Hunt remembers his experience with these new, mainly northern activists: “I was always suspicious of these new people. They were Nationalist, not Republicans. They wanted human rights, things like that, but they were not Republicans.”³⁹

Indeed, during the 1970s, the recruitment shifted from the southern Republic to the North. The Catholics in the northern cities of Belfast and Derry historically sympathised with Nationalism, rather than Republicanism. Hunt outlines, that Nationalist activists were demanding civil rights and equal opportunities for Irish Catholics, Republicans were fighting for a United Ireland. The shifting membership was reflected in the new political ideas developing within Sinn Féin.⁴⁰ The introduction of new political ideas was accompanied by the opening up of traditional Irish Republican values. In other words, it was not only the politics that changed due to the influx of new activists; it furthermore led to the introduction of new cultural ideas by activists from urban areas.

A defining year in regards to sport was 1982. In that year, the Northern Irish team reached the quarter-final stage at the FIFA World Cup and the main Republican newspaper *An Phoblacht* (The Republic) carried some of their first articles about soccer. In one of these articles, Brian Martin wrote: “The ‘foreign sport’ tag on this occasion, given that the World Cup is an international sporting event, is perhaps misplaced and too introverted-looking.”⁴¹

A fierce debate on the letter pages of the paper about “foreign games,” and “imperialist, British culture” followed these comments.⁴² However, these articles on the soccer World Cup finals in 1982 reflected the changing times in the movement both outside and inside the prisons.

The new prisoners from urban areas, culturally and politically socialised in a British environment, brought with them their own values, ideas, and

38 Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 304.

39 Interview with John Hunt, Ballybunion, Co Kerry, 6 August 2015.

40 Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London 2007); J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army. The IRA* (Dublin 1997); Richard English, *Armed Struggle. The History of the IRA* (Oxford 2003).

41 Brian Martin, “Football Crazy”, in *AP/RN*, 1 July 1982, 10.

42 Hanley, “Irish Republican Attitudes to Sport”.

interests. Although they were fighting British occupation in Ireland, one of their main sports interest was the “foreign game” soccer. Soccer, similarly to the situation in Scotland, reflects political and, far too often, sectarian sentiments within Northern Irish society. Support for English and Scottish soccer teams mirrors the allegiances of diaspora communities in these countries; for example, Glasgow’s Rangers are a Protestant club supported by Northern Irish Loyalists, while Celtic is mainly supported by Irish Catholics in Scotland and Ireland; similarly, the Merseyside club Everton FC was founded by Methodists, whereas rival Liverpool FC is supported by sections of the Irish Catholic community in the city. This is also true for those Irish Nationalists who do not follow GAA games. Hence, supporting Nationalist soccer teams such as the defunct Belfast Celtic, Derry City, and recently Cliftonville FC provides for David Hassan a sense of “localised identity” and “a forum for counter-hegemonic activity”.⁴³ However, the support for soccer is an urban phenomenon, thus, the “battle lines in these discussions” sharpened with the influx of new prisoners “with prisoners from country areas more likely to make the case for Gaelic games while prisoners from the cities [...] were more inclined to favour ‘soccer’”.⁴⁴

Indeed, soccer became an important part of the daily life of Republican prisoners in the North of Ireland. In his eulogy for the late Brazilian player Sócrates, former Republican prisoner Anthony McIntyre writes:

That summer of the World Cup we were not out of the blanket protest a full year. The tournament we managed to see in fits and starts due to being confined to our cells every second evening. Soccer-mad, it was excruciating to miss crucial clashes. The Italy-Brazil game was one of those denied us. We could snatch snippets from the black and white TV in the canteen and were in no doubt as to how it was going. The competition appeared to die with Brazil’s exit, only to be revived by a controversial France-West Germany semi-final.⁴⁵

McIntyre remembers the 1982 World Cup finals because these were the first matches the prisoners watched inside HMP Maze and it was one of the first positive experiences the prisoners had after years of the blanket and dirty protests and the hunger strikes.⁴⁶ Additionally, increasing the interest for soccer among the prisoners and strengthening their “localised identity” was the fact that the Northern Irish team enjoyed spectacular success in the 1980s,

43 Hassan, “Sport, Identity and Irish Nationalism in Northern Ireland”, 133.

44 Bairner, “My First Victim”, 11.

45 Anthony McIntyre, “Socrates”, in *TPQ Blog*, 9 December 2011, <http://thepensivequill.am/2011/12/socrates.html>.

46 Bairner, “My First Victim”, 14.

qualifying twice for the World Cup finals in 1982 and 1986.⁴⁷ This success not only augmented interest for soccer among prisoners in general but also instigated support for the Northern Irish team, while historically Nationalists supported the southern Republic of Ireland team.⁴⁸ Furthermore, prisoners who grew up in Northern ghettos and developed support for Third World Socialism in prison, identified with players from similar political and social backgrounds, like the Brazilian soccer player and Socialist activist Sócrates.

However, in the early years, prisoners were able to follow soccer results on radio and TV but not play soccer themselves, as former Republican hunger striker from Belfast, Laurence McKeown, writes:

For the first time in five years, we could get out of our cells, eat in the canteen, go to the yard for exercise, watch television during association time, listen to the radio, get access to the library and have weekly visits. We were still on protest, however, as we refused to do prison work and thus continued to lose remission and other privileges such as access to the gym, football pitches and shop facilities.⁴⁹

This situation finally changed in 1983, and during the course of the 1980s and 1990s, soccer turned from a mere spare time interest from newly arriving prisoners into a tool to improve the situation of the prisoners during the emerging peace process. McKeown writes that the prisoners used the 1994 World Cup finals in the United States with its matches late into European night to end the nighttime lock-ups; he quotes the then Officer-in-Command of the Provisional IRA in HMP Maze, Seán Lynch:

The camp staff discussed the possibility of using the World Cup as an issue to end the night-time lock ups. [...] It was decided we would make the admin aware of our intentions to refuse to lock up. All OCs were briefed on all aspects of the plan: that is, what would happen if the riot squad was sent in, etc. In the meantime, the loyalists got wind of our plans and they let the admin know that they would do likewise.⁵⁰

The prisoners eventually succeeded in their attempt to end the night time lock ups and Lynch was furthermore granted permission “to move around the camp to explain to all republican prisoners what had been agreed upon and why”. It was indeed the first time since the beginning of the hunger strikes fourteen years earlier that this concession had been granted, thus McKeown concludes that using the World Cup finals to improve the living conditions

⁴⁷ Rouse, *Sport and Ireland*, 305.

⁴⁸ See, inter alia, Fulton, “Northern Ireland Fans”; Cormac Moore, *The Irish Soccer Split* (Cork 2015).

⁴⁹ McKeown, *Out of Time*, 81.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

of the prisoners “was a critical milestone in the prison struggle of republican prisoners”.⁵¹ The gaining of these conditions empowered the prisoners to press for further demands and political recognition.

In essence, the political values and programmes of the Republican movement shifted with the influx of new recruits as a direct result of the war in the North and the prison protests. These new developments were reflected within the prison population and the daily routine of the prisoners. In the Northern prisons, newly arriving prisoners from urban areas were introduced to soccer in HMP Maze, which sparked an interest in the World Cup finals and Premier League seasons. Thus, the changing regional, social, and generational background of the Northern Republican Movement was not only reflected in policy changes⁵² but also habits towards sport within HMP Maze.

Sport in Portlaoise Prison in the 1990s

Support for the prisoners during the peace process was a necessity for the Republican leadership outside the prisons; both governments, the Irish and the British, were aware of the pivotal role of prisoners. Thus, the British and Irish governments gained the prisoners concessions in order to prove their willingness to continue their dialogue. Among these concessions were an improvement of and accessibility to sports and its facilities. The 1994 World Cup finals were used to end the nighttime lock-ups in HMP Maze, but south of the border in Portlaoise Prison sport also played its part in deepening the peace process.

The south of Ireland, in particular, the southwestern counties Kerry and Cork, were traditionally areas with strong Republican support. It is also in these areas that the GAA is strong. Under those circumstances, the situation in Portlaoise Prison developed differently from the situation in the Northern prisons during the 1980s and 1990s and the traditional role of the Gaelic games remained central among the Republican prisoners in Portlaoise Prison.

In the 1990s, the situation in Portlaoise Prison became the focus of both public attention and the Republican movement. Although holding a few hundred prisoners since the early 1970s, the Republican movement considered the prisoners in Portlaoise to be less important than those in the northern prisons. Matt Treacy, a former Portlaoise prisoner from Dublin who works as a columnist for *An Phoblacht* and as a political writer, explains the situation: “No one took us seriously at that time. We were not important for the movement.

51 Ibid., 199.

52 On the political changes that occurred with the Provisional Republican Movement during the 1980s, see Moloney, *A Secret History*; White, *Provisional Irish Republicans*.

We were not the prisoners in the North, in Long Kesh or so, we were in the South, in Portlaoise and no one in the movement cared what we were saying”.⁵³ However, this situation changed during the peace process because the Republican movement demanded signs from both the Irish and the British government that these two governments were willing to fulfil the Republican demands. Under these circumstances, Portlaoise Prison developed an essential position in the early days of the negotiations for a peace deal. In order to prove the goodwill of the Irish government towards the peace process, the prison regime in Portlaoise Prison was significantly relaxed and the British and Irish governments transferred prisoners from the notorious H-Blocks to Portlaoise Prison; conforming prisoners were furthermore invited to address the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis (annual party AGM, Annual General Meeting) in support of the peace process in 1995 and 1996.⁵⁴ Again, Matt Treacy explains the changing importance of the Portlaoise prisoners with following words:

We had no formal votes, no votes. One of the reasons why they did let them out to go to the Ard-Fheis was because to boost the leadership’s position. They used the prisoners as some sort of moral blackmail because they wanted to convince those people that were against the ceasefire because it was like: “Listen, if you don’t want this, we are not getting out.” It was a bit dishonest.⁵⁵

On the one hand, the Republican movement outside used the prisoners to promote the peace process; on the other hand, the Irish government also used them for the same reason. Hence, in order to convince the prisoners that times were changing, educational and sports facilities were significantly improved. Among these improvements was the refurbishment of the football field, extended times in which the field and the yard could be used, as well as providing new balls and jerseys for the prisoners. Consequently, the prisoners in Portlaoise Prison were able to organise regular Gaelic football tournaments. These tournaments were organised between counties, if possible, however, due to the peace process, significant numbers of prisoners were released. Thus, the composition of the teams was constantly subject to changes. Republican-friendly GAA clubs, provided jerseys and medals mainly from clubs north of the border, for these tournaments.⁵⁶ Treacy talks about sport in Portlaoise prison in the 1990s:

53 Interview with Matt Treacy, Dublin, Co Dublin, 14 April 2015.

54 Brendan O’Brien, *The Long War. The IRA and Sinn Féin* (Syracuse 1999), 388.

55 Interview with Matt Treacy.

56 Interview with Seosamh Ó Maileoin.

Sport was very popular, in particular, the playing of football, soccer, basketball, gym. Actually, the Gaelic football was very good because we had a lot of people who played for Dublin, for Kerry, Tyrone, there were actually a few people who played the All-Irelands. There was a lot of tension coming out during the football matches. [...] We had a lot of games.⁵⁷

As Treacy tells it, the prisoners played both Gaelic football and soccer in the 1990s, as well as basketball. The existence of the basketball court and the enthusiasm for playing basketball was also mentioned by other prisoners in Portlaoise prison.⁵⁸ Due to the size of the football pitch, only 7-a-side matches were possible. Treacy furthermore says that Gaelic football and soccer matches were alternately played on Sundays. When asked how the Gaelic football matches were organised, he gives the following answer:

We didn't want to encourage [County teams], anyway, Dublin would have won it. (laughing) Only a joke! I don't know, I think we just picked the teams randomly. So it wouldn't be the same team all the time. We also played Portlaoise GAA. They used to send in teams every so often.[...]

How often did you play with them?

We used to play once or twice every six months or so.

I find it quite unusual that they allowed a GAA team to go to the jail to play against you.
It was very relaxed at that time and I know some of the prison officers were involved with some of the Portlaoise folks, so it was arranged.

What do you think it was like for them playing inside the prison?

Ehm... (Thinking), well, quite unusual. You played the match and then you had a concert afterwards, it went on for two or three hours. It wasn't very abusive at that time, inside. You had a lot of other people coming in as well, drama performances and so.⁵⁹

During his interview, Treacy regularly stressed the "relaxed" situation in Portlaoise Prison during the 1990s. The fact that the Prison administration allowed the organisation of periodic GAA matches in the prison is astonishing, both from a political and security point of view. Similar concessions to Republican prisoners were new on both sides of the border. I argue that this was in order to improve the situation in Portlaoise Prison and to underline the

57 Interview with Matt Treacy.

58 See, for example, the following interviews: Seosamh Ó Maileoin; Seán Óg Ó Mórdha, Dublin, 17 April 2015; and Matt Leen, Tralee, Co Kerry, 19 April 2015.

59 Interview with Matt Treacy.

goodwill of the Irish government during the peace process. In other words, the Irish government in order to deepen the peace process between the British government and the Provisional IRA during the 1990s encouraged the playing of Gaelic games in Portlaoise Prison. However, the smoothing of the regime had also a positive impact on other sports:

Gaelic football and soccer would be the most popular team sports. Running was by far the most popular sport in there, people used to run, everybody used to run. When the things relaxed after the ceasefire, they stopped locking us up at 4 o'clock and we used to run for three or four hours. Some people did marathons even in the prison. So, you had 14 laps a mile.⁶⁰

The Republican prisoners in Portlaoise Prison held a pivotal role in promoting the peace process within the Republican movement. Both the Republican leadership and the Irish government encouraged the prisoners to support the transformation of the struggle publically by allowing delegates to attend the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis in 1995 and 1996. The prison regime was significantly relaxed in order to convince the prisoners of the advantages of the peace process. Among the concessions for the prisoners was the organisation of GAA matches with local teams and increased opening hours of the yards and football pitches. Thus, the Irish government and the Portlaoise Prison administration used, among other means, sport to sell the peace process to the Republican prisoners.

Transforming Conflict through Sport in Prisons

The use and the meaning of sport within the internment camps and prisons reflect the political developments within the Irish Republican Movement throughout the twentieth century. As the three examples have shown, the prisoners used sport to uphold and promote their Irish cultural identity, particularly until the hunger strikes in 1981; thus, sport was a form of resistance of Republican prisoners in the British camps. The prisoners encouraged sport to keep “in shape” in order to continue the fight immediately after their release. From an analytical perspective, sport reflected the changing political developments due to an inflow of people from different social and political backgrounds in the Republican movement in the aftermath of the prison protests. Finally, the Irish and British governments used sport to foster political developments during the peace process in the 1990s. In essence, I argue

⁶⁰ Ibid.

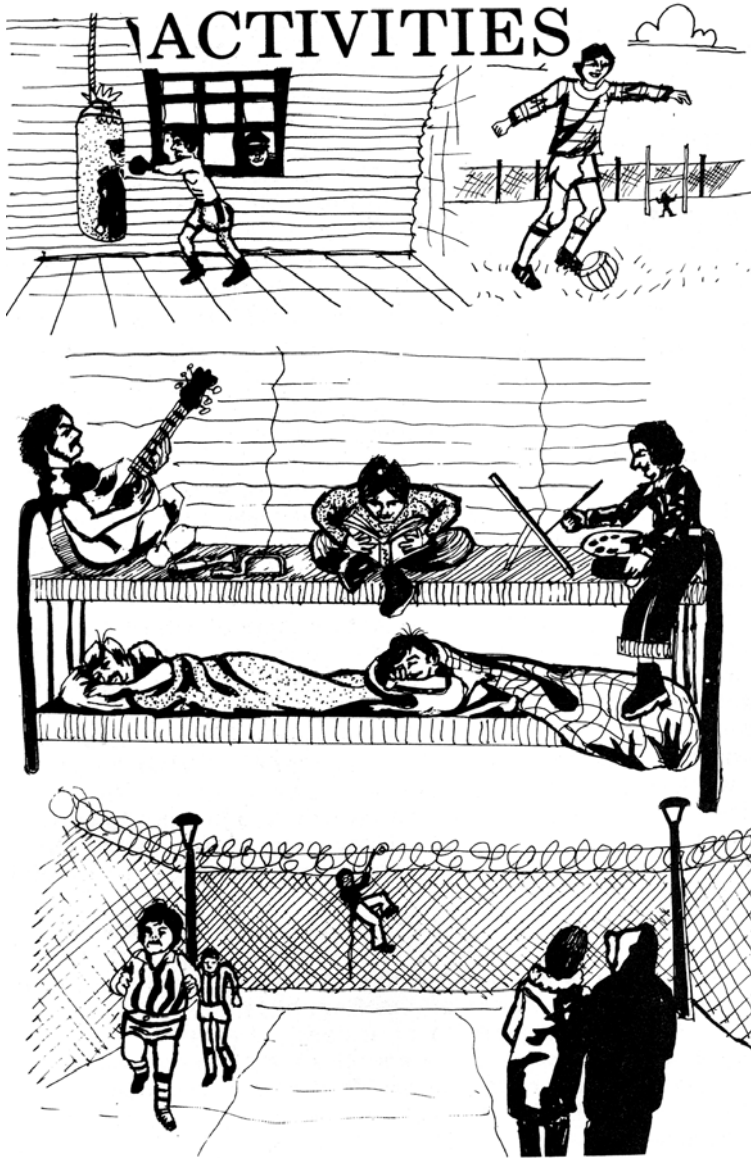


Fig. IV: A sketch introducing the chapter “Activities” in the Republican booklet *Prison Struggle: The Story of continuing Resistance behind the Wire* in March 1977. The booklet was compiled and the sketches drawn by internees in the Long Kesh internment camp. The sketch shows prisoners in the camp boxing and playing Gaelic football outside their huts (top); playing guitar, reading, painting, and sleeping in their huts (centre); and prisoners in the yard running in sports clothing, escaping, and talking (below). The text underneath it reads: “Recreation, constructive pastime or participation in some sort of leisure activity is essential to a POW whether or not he is serving a long or short sentence”.

that sport was used both by the Republican Movement as well as the prison authorities, the British and Irish governments to influence political developments outside the prisons and internment camps.

This influence on outside events by the political prisoners was possible because of the fading boundaries between prison and the community outside. The distinction between inside and outside the prison is characteristic for camps and prisons. In this chapter, I argue that Irish Republican prisoners are not on the margins of society but in a central position. In other words, I have shown that the distinction between inside and outside is blurred. Thus, Irish Republican prisoners have authority in their communities and play a pivotal role in developments within their political movement and community.

This article made use of Republican prisoners' experiences on both sides of the inner-Irish border. Two examples of sport in camps and prisons were taken from the North of Ireland, while the third example outlines the role of sport during the peace process in the high-security prison Portlaoise in the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, an All-Ireland perspective of the conflict in the North in general and Republican imprisonment, in particular, will offer a key to a better understanding of the conflict transformation in Ireland.

In conclusion, Republican prisoners perform a leading role within their communities. This role enables them to influence developments outside the prisons. In this article, I argue that both prison authorities and the Republican movement used the playing of sport to further their interests. On the one hand, the prison authorities and the British and Irish governments used sport to give the prisoners concessions during the unfolding peace process; on the other hand, the Republican movement reinforced Irish cultural identity among the prisoners through GAA games. By doing this, the prisoners held a pivotal role both in the conflict transformation process and the strengthening of Irish cultural identity within the Nationalist communities in the North of Ireland.

CONCLUSION

