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## Sport, Memory, and Nostalgia: The Lives of Irish Republicans in Internment Camps and Prisons, 1971–2000

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### ABSTRACT

While there exists a wide range of historical and social science literature on political prisoners during the Northern Ireland conflict between 1969 and 1998, little attention has been paid to the prison life of the individual internees and prisoners. Sport, in particular, played a very important part in the lives of both republican and loyalist prisoners. Historians have long been preoccupied with the motivations and inner lives of individuals, and indeed the emotional states of people in collectives such as camps and prisons. Using Irish republican internees and prisoners as a case study highlights precisely this aspect of their experiences. Between 2014 and 2017, I conducted 34 interviews with activists in the Provisional IRA that have been involved since the 1960s. I draw on these records to analyze why former prisoners who had spent up to three years in isolation and on no-wash and blanket protests would describe their internment and imprisonment as ‘the best time of my life’. Indeed, their memories of sports in the camps and prisons were particularly happy and contributed to their nostalgic view of imprisonment.

### KEYWORDS

Prisons; Northern Ireland troubles; IRA; emotions; nostalgia

From the 1990s onwards, and particularly after the publication of behavioural economist Daniel Kahneman’s popular book,<sup>1</sup> historians and social scientists have increasingly shown an interest in emotions,<sup>2</sup> with their research making steady inroads in fields such as social movement studies and oral history.<sup>3</sup> I have recently studied the role of emotions in my oral history project comprising interviews with former Provisional Irish Republican Army (henceforth IRA) and Irish National Liberation Army (henceforth INLA) prisoners in Ireland. Oral history narratives of sport in the internment camps and prisons during the Troubles provides new insights into these collective experiences and demonstrates how prisoners form nostalgic memories of incarceration.

Since 2010, I have interviewed over 70 Irish republicans. Among those interviews are 34 conversations with former IRA prisoners.<sup>4</sup> Although I was asking about life in prison, with all its inherent hardship and challenges, I was very often told: ‘It was the

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best time of my life'. This statement illustrates the nostalgic view of prison that some prisoners held. However, the lives of political prisoners, as well as their complex emotions, remain understudied areas of the Northern Irish Troubles.

By analyzing the emotions in the memories of former IRA prisoners, I demonstrate that the common prison experience established an 'emotional community'. Barbara Rosenwein defined the concept of 'emotional communities' in her ground-breaking article in the *American Historical Review* in 2002.<sup>5</sup> Rosenwein explains that emotional communities are social groups that share the same understanding of emotions and how these should be expressed. Furthermore, these groups have same or similar interests and values which are connected by the style and assessment of emotions. Hence, I consider Irish republican prisoners as an emotional community, regardless of the differences between their experiences and interpretations of their time in prison.

As another aspect of prison life, sport has largely been neglected in the scholarly literature despite it being a growing field of research outside Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Most of the prisoners, both republican and loyalist, played some form of sport almost daily and regularly organized competitions. Prisoners were especially nostalgic about their sports activities. To be sure, while prison life is often remembered as being difficult and lonely, memories of sport tell of moments of happiness and camaraderie during incarceration. In this way, the narrators show that there is more to imprisonment than hardship and loss of freedom. In essence, the interviews suggest that an additional focus on emotions in interviews with former prisoners can offer a useful rethinking of the prison experience, particularly from the perspective of individuals and their subjectivities.

Sport occupied a pivotal position in Ireland at the beginning of the nationalist movement in the late nineteenth century. The formation of *Cumann Lúthchleas Gael* (GAA) boosted support for some allegedly ancient Celtic games such as Gaelic football, camogie, hurling, and handball.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, the GAA was far more than a mere sports organization; it formed, together with the *Conradh na Gaeilge* (Gaelic League), the driving force of the cultural and political Gaelic Revival.<sup>8</sup> Gaelic sports soon became a propaganda vehicle for nationalist sentiments and agitation. The British colonial administration subsequently banned the playing of these sports on Sundays. Accordingly, the republican prisoners played Gaelic games in the British internment camps and prisons to stress their Irish identity in these British institutions, as I show in my previous chapter on the topic;<sup>9</sup> as such, it could be argued that Gaelic sports were imbued with a similar symbolic importance and function as the use of the Irish language during the Troubles.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the dominant role of sports in the modern history of Ireland and the boom in research over the last two decades on political imprisonment, the relationship between these two areas, especially between recently released political prisoners and their sports activities has so far received little scholarly interest.<sup>11</sup> Existing studies on political imprisonment tend to ignore social and cultural life in prison, and instead focus on political developments;<sup>12</sup> similarly, studies on the relationship between sport and Irish nationalism and republicanism tend to ignore post-1969 republicans.<sup>13</sup> Notable exceptions are Brian Hanley's research on attitudes towards sport and Irish republicans, the works of Alan Bairner on sport in Northern

Ireland, and David Hassan's analysis of how sport facilitated a separate northern identity within Irish nationalism.<sup>14</sup> Building on the recent work of Alan Bairner, *'My First Victim Was a Hurling Player...': Sport in the Lives of Northern Ireland's Political Prisoners*, and my chapter, *Performing resistance: sport and Irish Republican identity in internment camps and prisons*, I explore the experiences of republicans internees and prisoners by analyzing their memories of sport during incarceration, in particular, the complex emotion of nostalgia of former IRA and INLA prisoners about their internment in British and Irish camps and prisons during the conflict from 1971 to 2000.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Actors of the Northern Ireland Conflict**

The conflict in Northern Ireland, often called 'The Troubles', is the longest armed conflict in the Western hemisphere resulting in the deaths of more than 3,500 people between 1968 and 1998. There are three groups of armed forces involved in this conflict. The first group includes the British army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), later renamed the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), and the British intelligence service. The second group consists of loyalist paramilitary organizations such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), as well as smaller groups like the Red Hand Commando (RHC) or the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF). The political ideology of these groups is unionism, therefore, supporting the union between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. Working-class unionists willing to take up arms in defence of this union are called loyalists.<sup>16</sup>

The third group comprises republican paramilitaries such as the Provisional IRA, the Official IRA, as well as groups opposed to the current conflict transformation process such as the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) or the New IRA. Irish republicans are Irish nationalists, overwhelmingly Catholic, who are in support of the reunification of the North with the Republic of Ireland. Thus, it is wrong to characterize the conflict as religious. As political scientist Joanne McEvoy states, the conflict does not contain a religious element in any real sense but rather 'is about two groups with allegiance to two different national communities. [Hence, it] is about national identity whereby the Nationalist community look to the Republic of Ireland as the "motherland" whereas the Unionist community looks to Britain as their patron state'.<sup>17</sup> An attempt to end this conflict with the signing of the Good-Friday-Agreement in 1998 was only partly successful.<sup>18</sup>

At the outbreak of the so-called Troubles in 1968, the republican prison population had reached its highest numbers on both sides of the Irish border since 1923.<sup>19</sup> Despite insufficient data on republican imprisonment in the Republic, an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 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.<sup>20</sup> The main internment camps and prisons were Long Kesh (later HMP Maze), Co Antrim, and Portlaoise Prison, Co Laois. While these prisoners are referred to as political prisoners, republican prisoners, or Prisoners of War in the literature, the status of these internees and prisoners has always been disputed between republicans and the British and Irish governments.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, the civil rights movement demanded equality for the Catholic population by organizing mass protests in Northern Ireland. These protests culminated in clashes with the paramilitary police RUC and pro-British unionists and loyalists. As a direct result of pogroms, the British army was deployed to the region in the summer of 1969.<sup>22</sup> 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. This policy of internment lasted until December 1975. During that time, British authorities interned 1,981 people, of which 1,874 were Nationalists.<sup>23</sup> However, the policy of criminalizing Irish nationalists succeeded, and the newly built H-Blocks of HMP Maze became its centre after 1976. Following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement aimed at ending the 30 years of armed conflict, the British government released prisoners supportive of the peace process and in summer 2000 the high-security prison HMP Maze was closed.

There were three distinct phases of varying access to sport in the camps and prisons in the 29 years between the introduction of internment in 1971 and the closure of HMP Maze in 2000. The first phase spans until the phasing out of the special category status in 1976. Until then, loyalist and republican prisoners had de facto political status, which meant that they enjoyed a higher degree of independence and freedom within the camp system; in particular, prisoners had regular access to the yard and other sport facilities. The second phase from 1976 and 1983 was marked by protests of those prisoners who were either arrested after the phasing out of the special category status or had lost the status due to escape attempts. These prisoners staged a series of protests to regain the previously held status, such as blanket protests, no-wash-protests, or hunger strikes. However, prisoners who joined these protests automatically lost all prison privileges and, thus, had little access to the yard and were held sometimes in isolation in their cells. Under those circumstances, performing sport activities was not possible. After the death of ten hunger strikers in 1981, the prisoners' demands were gradually granted and in 1983 all prisoners had regained de facto political status, another term for the special category status. Hence, the third phase from 1983 until 2000 was marked by a gradual relaxation of the prison regime, in particular during the peace process of the 1990s. During these years, the prisoners had regular access to a wide range of sporting facilities, as well as newspapers and TV sets to follow sporting events outside the prisons. In essence, life in prison was not a constant, and access to sport varied over time; it ranged from almost daily access to sport facilities in the camps of the early 1970s and prisons in the later phase of the peace process, to limited access in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To facilitate the reader's understanding, I situate my interviewees experiences in the respective time-frames.<sup>24</sup>

### **Interviews with Former IRA and INLA Prisoners**

I collected oral history accounts in conversations with former Irish republican prisoners from Long Kesh/HMP Maze, Magilligan Internment Camp, Belfast Prison

(Crumlin Road Gaol), and Portlaoise Prison. Between 2014 and 2017, I conducted 34 interviews with former members of the Provisional IRA, the Official IRA, the Irish National Liberation Army, the Real IRA, the Continuity IRA, and Óglaigh na hÉireann. All prisoners were either interned or imprisoned between 1971 and 2010. The interviews lasted for one to two hours each and were usually conducted in the homes of the interview partners.

I approached these interviews as life-stories, beginning with biographical questions about growing up and joining the republican movement.<sup>25</sup> This life-story approach, also known as ‘qualitative in-depth interviews’ or ‘biographical interviews’, is characterized by open-ended questions that allow each narrator to recite his or her story as far as possible according to their own memories. It also allows for an analysis of the familial, cultural, and social background of the narrators and their social networks. This approach facilitates a better understanding of why these men joined paramilitary organizations and provides insights about their motivations and political ideologies before, during and after imprisonment.

My methodology closely follows the tradition of oral history, influenced by the writings of scholars such as Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini. Portelli showed how using interviews as historical sources can reveal more about the meaning of the historical events discussed than researching the event alone would.<sup>26</sup> Regarding the role of emotions, Passerini explains that ‘we cannot understand subjectivity unless we see emotion as constituents of it. Memory, which is a form of subjectivity, would not exist without its emotional undertones and components, and the same applies to identity, of course’.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, my larger research is occupied with the subjectivity of republican prisoners, namely, the making of political subjects within the total institution of the British and Irish prison system during the Troubles. Accordingly, rather than extracting exact patterns, my oral history approach aims to understand the meaning of the narrators’ prison experience over time.

### **Emotions Expressed in Prisoners’ Memories**

What emotions are, and whether they are different from feelings, has long been discussed among historians. Debra Smith cautions that research into emotions ‘is complex, contested, and controversial, and there remains no universal definition of emotion’.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Rolf Petri writes that ‘there are no standard universally acknowledged answers about what is called emotion’.<sup>29</sup> Often, the terms of emotion, passion, and feeling are used synonymously in the scholarly literature. Petri cites various approaches and interpretations and surmizes that ‘these debates, too, do not lead to a certain conclusion’.<sup>30</sup> Here I have chosen to use the terms emotion and feeling interchangeable.

During my research, six different common emotions were frequently mentioned in the interviews and became particularly relevant for understanding the prison experience: loneliness; bitterness; nostalgia; joy; stress; and loss. Focusing specifically on the emotion of nostalgia in relation to the recollections of sports and sporting activities of prisoners in Northern Irish prisons and camps provides fertile ground for exploring their experiences of both sport and internment.

As mentioned before, feelings and emotions have long been an object of study for historians. The last two decades, however, have seen an increase of general historical work on emotions. As Rolf Petri writes, 'during the last ten or fifteen years, they [emotions] have achieved a prominent place in historical research'.<sup>31</sup> Historians such as Barbara Rosenwein have even called this development the 'emotional turn'.<sup>32</sup> This research on emotions has also entered the sub-discipline of oral history.<sup>33</sup>

Susan Stewart defines nostalgia as a 'longing for an imagined past'. She writes that 'nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative'.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Svetlana Boym explains nostalgia 'as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'.<sup>35</sup> She argues that it describes a 'sentiment of loss and displacement [that] can only survive in a long-distance relationship'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, crucial to the understanding of nostalgia in the context of imprisonment and war is Boym's analysis of nostalgia as being 'about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory'.<sup>37</sup>

Research into the psychological effects of the conflict on the people of Northern Ireland, in general, and its prisoner population, in particular, started immediately after the release of prisoners in the late 1990s. For their research on the psychological effects of long-term imprisonment in Northern Ireland, Bill Rolston and Ian Tomlinson can be regarded as early vanguards of this turn.<sup>38</sup> Their research was followed later by Peter Shirlow's survey 'The State they are in',<sup>39</sup> which indicated that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was widespread among former prisoners. Ruth Jamieson and Adrian Grounds have since undertaken the most in-depth research on this issue.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, David Bolton has recently published on mental health and trauma in post-conflict Northern Ireland.<sup>41</sup>

The existing research on the psychological impact of the Northern Ireland conflict for the prisoners shows that 70% of the ex-prisoners say that they experience poor or very poor emotional health.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, 24% of the republican and 17% of the loyalist ex-prisoners reported symptoms of serious psychological trauma, such as depression, hyperactivity, negative self-appraisal, loss of sleep, and deep-seated emotional issues.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, one-quarter of former Blanketmen – prisoners who participated in the no-wash- and blanket-protests in the late 1970s in HMP Maze – were judged to need focused and immediate mental health support, while another quarter were advised to seek general psychological support.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, as Jamieson et al. concluded from the General Health Questionnaire, 41% of ex-prisoners reported taking medication for anxiety issues or sleeping difficulties; 54% of loyalists and 56% of republicans reported intervals of feeling seriously depressed since their release; 32% said they had, at times, felt they did not want to continue living; 51% reported being troubled by bad memories or dreams; and 72% of republicans and 64% of loyalists were over the threshold for hazardous drinking. Overall, 40% suffered probable mental health issues, with 19% of republicans and 18% of loyalists at the high-end.<sup>45</sup>

Before describing the interviews, it seems important to highlight that they were recorded between two and four decades after the release of the individual prisoners. In the period between the events and their narration, the lives of my interview

partners and Northern Ireland's political and economic situation changed significantly. Thus, the emotions expressed in these interviews are located in specific historical conjunctures. Certainly, prisoners might think differently about their involvement in the republican movement and their imprisonment today than they did at the time of their release. Furthermore, their perception of their own political struggles might have already changed inside the camps and prisons. Not only the republican struggle but also the conflict and Northern Ireland's political situation as such has changed fundamentally over the past two decades. The armed struggle of most paramilitary organizations has ended as a result of the peace process. In other words, the worlds of ex-prisoners have changed dramatically since their time in the IRA, their time in the prisons and camps, as well as their time after their release. In sum, all these aspects must be considered when interpreting these interviews regarding their articulated statements and pronounced/expressed emotions.

Moreover, the narratives of former prisoners differ starkly in respect to their later preoccupation with their prison experiences. Seanna Walsh, for example, an ex-prisoner and spokesperson for the ex-prisoner's organization Tar Anall in Belfast gave a rather clear and sober account of his imprisonment. He regularly speaks to journalists, students, and researchers about his imprisonment and seems to have polished his official account to perfection.<sup>46</sup>

Another ex-prisoner however, a Dubliner called Vivion Hayden who is little known outside Provisional circles, claimed to hardly remember any of his prison experiences, nor to feel the need to dwell on his imprisonment:

Now, this is something I can't really recall. Because I haven't even thought about the jail since I came out and that's a number of years ago. That period of time, although it was nine, nearly ten years, it's all condensed into a fleeting moment now. Maybe that's hard to understand, but that's the way it is. I kind of, I put it all out of my mind and I never kind of looked back on it. I never felt any reason to look back on it.<sup>47</sup>

These examples reflect that former prisoners involved in Sinn Féin or aligned organizations are more often contacted by researchers and journalists and, thus, are used to present a standardized narrative, whereas prisoners critical of the peace process often fall under the radar of researchers and journalists. Hence, they are less used to narrate their memories. For this reason, the latter group often finds it more difficult to tell their stories than the former group.

The difficulty of speaking about the prison experience and expressing emotions during the interviews has also been observed by Grounds and Jamieson who argue that former prisoners find it particularly difficult to talk about their prison experience with anyone other than their fellow former prisoners.<sup>48</sup> I made similar observations when interviewing prisoners who did not become Sinn Féin politicians or community workers after their release. These former prisoners were still willing to speak to me, but they clearly struggled to find the words to tell their story, unlike other former prisoners who had prior experience of talking about their past. The case of Malachy Trainor, a former Blanketman from Armagh, demonstrates this well:

I finished my prison sentence and got released after seven years. At that time, I didn't realize that it had done any damage to me. I was still young, and I didn't realize it. PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. But, when I got back on the streets and that was



1983 and 1984, and the war was not over. [...] It is hard to say what was it like in jail. Obviously, it is hard; it is incarceration and different from other things.<sup>49</sup>

Trainor did not elaborate further on his PTSD syndromes, but he was the only prisoner who was willing to discuss psychological problems. He made this remark at the very beginning of the interview, and I had the feeling that he wanted to put into context the story that he told me over the following two hours. And indeed, the context that he had chosen for the interview was PTSD. In other words, he wanted me to understand his story against the background of the long-term psychological effects of imprisonment for former IRA members. Indeed, many emotions run through Trainor's account, most of which would be considered negative, such as fear, pain, anxiety, and loneliness. Nonetheless, despite the widespread PTSD suffered by former prisoners, the good times that were experienced in prison gave them some solace. Their fond memories of playing sports, organizing tournaments, and listening to the GAA results on secret radios helped them to deal with their experiences, as I will explain in the next section.

### Nostalgia and Sport in Prisons

IRA prisoners were segregated from other prisoners in the internment camps and prisons, and this meant their prison experience was very different from ordinary prisoners, as Jimmy Kavanagh explained:

It's different to a regular prison [because] you had your friends in there, you had your structure, you had plenty of back-up in there which you wouldn't have as an individual in an ordinary prison, and that is always a big help. You are not on your own, and you feel you are never on your own and you can talk to everyone amongst your own because everyone is in the same boat. And keeping busy was the main thing, keeping the faith.<sup>50</sup>

Kavanagh is from Wexford, however, after joining the IRA, he was active in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and was, subsequently, interned in Long Kesh. This made him one of the few southern republicans interned in the North. Following his release, he re-joined the IRA and was arrested in the Republic. He was sentenced to imprisonment in Portlaoise. In the above excerpt, he stresses the difference between the camps and prisons that held republican and loyalist prisoners and other prisons. For him, the crucial difference is that the inmates were among a group of prisoners who not only shared the same political conviction but also the same emotions inside the prison. In this way, feelings of loneliness and isolation, usually perceived by other prisoners were less immanent for prisoners of the Northern Irish conflict. Regarding the role of sports during his time in prison, Kavanagh recalled:

I think it was only maybe for a couple of hours every week. It wasn't something you could go out every day because of the size of Long Kesh. It was huge; the amount of prisoners at that time in the early 70s was absolutely jammed. So, you couldn't get regular, constant use. You had your recreational hut, table tennis and stuff like that. [...] You had a handball alley; you could play football, basketball, volleyball or anything in the yard. You could do whatever you wanted to do, and you had your gym. You had more access to things in Portlaoise. There was also a smaller number of prisoners because I think at the height of it there were about 150 in Portlaoise, [...] whereas in the Kesh you talk about thousands.<sup>51</sup>

Sport also fostered the common prison experience. The handball alley was a rallying point of the prison life. Handball, one of the three Gaelic games, is mentioned by almost every narrator, even those less interested in the sport. Prisoners showed particular interest in playing handball, which contrasts to the games' standing outside the prison where it is arguably the least prominent of all Gaelic games. Dan Hoban, a republican from Co Mayo who was interned in the Curragh in the 1950s and incarcerated in Portlaoise in the 1970s, mentioned the handball competitions:

We had regular handball competitions; there was an open handball alley. [...] They played football in the small yard in different leagues of teams of five. A game of basketball, all these types of things. [...] Different prisoners organized it, and so many got involved. [...] That happened on and off. It might not always be a league, sometimes it was just fellas coming together and some fellas wouldn't, and those interested in football would have a game.<sup>52</sup>

The playing of Gaelic sport was a central recreational activity in these internment camps; however, other sports were also played as former IRA prisoner Matt Treacy told me:

Gaelic football and soccer would be the most popular team sports. Running was by far the most popular [individual] 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 prison. So, you had 14 laps a mile.<sup>53</sup>

From 1916 until the 1970s, the prisoners overwhelmingly played handball and football. However, the rules of football were adapted to the particular circumstances in each prison or internment camp. The hard, wooden hurleys were forbidden in all prisons. Thus, prisoners could not play hurling. For Irish nationalists, playing Gaelic games in prison was seen as a political reaction to the British sporting culture.<sup>54</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, these games were used as a specific instrument to 'promote and uphold the Irish nationalist culture in the prisons', and could be compared to other expressions of Irish culture and resistance, such as 'promoting and using the Irish language, singing Irish songs, or organizing lectures in Irish history'<sup>55</sup> In other words, playing GAA games was one way of preserving Irish identity in British prisons, and of stressing that the Irish republicans had been imprisoned by a foreign government. Prisoners not only played GAA games but also organized lectures on the history of GAA as part of an effort to learn about Irish culture, as John Crawley, an Irish-American who joined the IRA and was arrested in 1984, explained:

I was on the Irish language wing. That was very important; you had the whole Irish cultural nationalism going on, GAA lectures, language and all that because that was very important to us to maintain or Irish nationalist identity. GAA and all that belongs to Irish republicanism.<sup>56</sup>

While team sports were widely played by prisoners, individual sporting activities such as running or training in the gym were also popular. And in later years, other non-GAA team sports were widely played such as basketball, soccer, or table tennis. Matt Treacy was a prisoner in the Republic's high-security prison Portlaoise during the 1980s and highlighted the popularity of recreational activities among prisoners:

Sport was very popular, in particular, the playing of football, soccer, basketball, gym. Actually, 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.<sup>57</sup>

The cells in Portlaoise were opened at 08:30 in the morning and some prisoners would go straight to the yard to run or to train in the gym. They were then locked up again at 12:30 for lunch and the afternoons were usually dedicated to craft works or educational classes; political meetings and debates were held in the evenings before the prisoners were locked up again for the night.<sup>58</sup> However, it must be noted that not all prisoners shared the same enthusiasm for sports. Kevin Trainor from Armagh was held in various prisons throughout the 1970s, including HMP Armagh, Crumlin Road Prison in Belfast and Long Kesh: 'I read, and I learned Irish, but I was never into sports, the only thing I ever did was [play] table tennis'.<sup>59</sup> Contrary to Trainor, Seosamh Ó Maoileoin, another ex-prisoner, enthusiastically engaged in all kinds of sports:

I did my running in the morning, and even if no one went into the yard in winter, they opened the door for me, even there was no one else who went out. I did whatever it was, 84 laps that were six miles, sometimes I did seven miles. Whatever I did, I did it every day, and then I came in and took a shower.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, for Crawley, an ex-prisoner engaged in language classes, there was an additional purpose for this training, not merely leisure:

At 10 o'clock, I went for a mile run every day in the yard, which was awkward because the yard was sloped and canted in a certain way. Thirteen laps were one mile, and you could only run in one direction. So, it could have been an imbalance. A lot of boys are still injured from that; I am myself. [laughing] We ran there and then went back in at 11 and maybe go to the gym and afterwards take a shower. When you came back to the cell, it was half 12, so the day was half gone. It was a good way to break up the day. Plus, it kept you fit, and there was an escape in 1985, and I was always hoping that there would be another escape, so you kept fit for that.<sup>61</sup>

Apart from the individual running and training in the gym, prisoners organized tournaments. Due to the size of the football pitch, only 7-a-side matches were possible. Furthermore, Treacy explained that Gaelic football and soccer matches were alternately played on Sundays. He stressed that during the peace process in the 1990s, the situation in prison was relaxed and the prison authorities put few restrictions on playing team sports:

I think we just picked the teams randomly. So, it wouldn't be the same team all the time. [...] We used to play once or twice every six months or so. [...] 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.<sup>62</sup>

Such tournaments were organized in the internment camps and prisons regularly from the early 1970s. With the help of outside GAA clubs, the prisoners furthermore organized tournaments such as the Jimmy Steele Cup held in Belfast Prison in September 1972, named after the leading Belfast republican who had died in August 1970. Indeed, before the opening of the H-Blocks and the removal of de-facto

political status for the prisoners under British jurisdiction in 1976, the internees in Long Kesh had wide-ranging rights. There were restrictions on the performing of sports in the camp.<sup>63</sup> Ó Maoileoin recounted with amusement one of the prisoners' tactics to acquire better equipment from the prison authorities. This episode occurred around 1974, during a short period when the Derry IRA leader Martin McGuinness was held in Portlaoise:

We kicked a football, and I remember off in the yard on his own was Martin McGuinness, and we are kicking a plastic ball from one to another, and there was a razor wire, and we kicked the plastic ball towards the razor wire. McGuinness kicked me the ball back. You know, when you kicked the ball in the razor wire five times, they gave you a proper ball.<sup>64</sup>

Both in the internment camps in the North and in Portlaoise in the Republic, equipment for these tournaments such as balls, sweaters and even medals were also donated by outside supporters: 'The equipment we needed was part of the gym. People knew that republican prisoners were interested in that stuff, not just like ordinary prisoners'.<sup>65</sup> This narrated outline of the situation in Portlaoise stands in stark contrast to the memories of Vivion Hayden, a Dublin republican who was first imprisoned in Mountjoy and, later, also in Portlaoise. Hayden related that various sports activities were organized in Mountjoy: 'Football, table tennis, snooker, you know, whatever, volleyball, basketball'. Contrary to Treacy, he stressed that the facilities were bad: 'We just made the best of what we had, handball or football or whatever. The facilities in Mountjoy were very bad in the early days. [...] They were also not good in Portlaoise'.<sup>66</sup> Significantly, Hayden was imprisoned in Portlaoise approximately one decade before Treacy (who was imprisoned in the 1990s). Around the time of Hayden, Matt Leen from Tralee was imprisoned in Portlaoise and described the football tournaments organized there:

We picked football teams, we might have 10-aside, we played mostly Gaelic football, but there were also soccer players. [...] We had inter-provincials, we had Munster and Leinster. There were very few from Connacht there. [...] There were goalposts in the yard and balls, and that was all we needed. There was a handball alley. [...] The ball was provided by the jail. In the summertime we had competitions. The Gaelic football clubs around the country would send in medals for the teams to play against each other. [...] If a prisoner had played with a club outside, usually they would send in a set of medals. We usually had 20 or 30 medals to play for. [...] The competitions were during the summer when the weather was like this. But we used to have games all year, and the prisoners were sitting along with the pitch and watch the game. [...] There was a committee in charge that picked the teams so that in each team there are some good players. [...] The size of the pitch, [...] I think it was 80 yards in length; it was actually the length of the jail.<sup>67</sup>

Leen remembers in detail how regularly and systematically these sport tournaments were organized; similar memories are reflected in the other excerpts above. These detailed memories reflect their positive experience of sport. In other words, their enjoyment of sport competitions becomes significant in the memories as they are remembered in a more detailed, more fluent and more relaxed voice, in contrast to the negative memories of brutality and protests. Hence, the prisoners remember nostalgically the good times, reflected in sport, lectures, and learning the

Irish language, while their reluctance of remembering negative experiences and emotions also became apparent during the interviews.

While the focus was put on Gaelic games in these competitions, internees and prisoners arranged other sports tournaments as well; these so-called ‘Mini Olympics’ took place in various camps and prisons<sup>68</sup> In Long Kesh, the first ‘Mini Olympics’ were held during a festival lasting several days on the anniversary of the introduction of internment.<sup>69</sup> Annual Olympics were also held in Portlaoise as Ó Maoileoin explained:

We had these sports competitions once a year. The sports competition was not only running; it included everything. We had athletics, running, handball, basketball, volleyball, we had relay races, football matches. We had everything feasible outdoor activity that could be organized. That was the annual summer sports, some of them called it Olympics. [...] We organized these at the landing meetings that were regularly held and were called by the landing O/C.<sup>70</sup>

In essence, when recalling cultural and sports activities inside the prison, the atmosphere of the interview tended to change significantly. The interview partners became more comfortable about recounting their experiences in full – as was evident from the longer answers and the tone of their voice. In other words, the cultural and sporting activities were positive memories of their incarceration that fed the nostalgic emotions they experienced when talking about their prison sentence. John Crawley, after discussing GAA and the Irish language, said: ‘There were great lads there, it was tough, but we had a good time. It is an experience that I don’t want to miss. Looking back, I wouldn’t have done anything differently’.<sup>71</sup> The importance of sport for the prisoners is also emphasized by a former internee of Long Kesh: ‘we were coping with Christmas depression by playing football’.<sup>72</sup>

### **Understanding IRA Prisoners as an Emotional Community**

Analyzing how emotions are presented in memories of sport helps us to understand the prison experience and open potential areas of future research. Historians have long been preoccupied with the motivations and inner lives of individuals, just as they have made generalizations about the emotional states of people in collectives such as camps and prisons. Using nostalgic memories of sport in interviews with Irish republican internees and prisoners as a case study highlights precisely this aspect of their experiences. It discusses the emotions expressed during interviews when narrating the prison experience. These memories tell on the one hand a different prison experience from the grand narratives of suffering and heroism during the high-profile protests and hunger strikes of the late 1970s and early 1980s. On the other hand, these stories narrated three or four decades after they actually happened provide a window into the lives and coping strategies of former prisoners today.

This nostalgia for the Troubles can be observed in interviews with various actors, not only prisoners. Hence, further research on this phenomenon might lead to a fresh understanding of war experience in general, and imprisonment in particular. Similar positive emotions also occur in my previous research. In 2010, I conducted a series of interviews with Irish republican women who were active in the women’s

wing of the Provisional IRA, Cumann na mBan.<sup>73</sup> Some of these women had been active volunteers in the IRA for many years, participating in open warfare, constantly moving from one place to another to avoid arrest, and some of them suffered serious trauma during their time in the Cumann na mBan. Their experiences are similar to those of the former male prisoners and the women interviewed were also nostalgic about their time in prison. One former bomb courier living in Belfast said: ‘The happiest and most beautiful time of my life was when I was in Cumann na mBan’.<sup>74</sup> This rose-tinted perception of the past is also evident in studies by other researchers on the Northern Ireland conflict. As Adrian Grounds and Ruth Jamieson found:

Most of the ex-prisoners we spoke to said that they had been warmly welcomed back into their own communities. Some said that they were treated as heroes and accorded a certain status and respect. But despite this goodwill, the welcome tended to be short-lived. After an initial period of solicitude, the men were ‘left to their own devices’.<sup>75</sup>

Grounds and Jamieson also stress that ex-prisoners were treated as ‘heroes of their community’. Still, these prisoners soon lost their heroic status, not as a group but as individuals, simply because there were so many former prisoners around. Moreover, while they were seen as ‘heroes’ by their inner social circle of friends and family, many of them encountered problems in wider society, especially: unemployment; loneliness – often because being imprisoned in their 1920s and 1930s had meant they were unable to build a family; alcohol dependency and alcoholism because of the trauma; depression, as Malachy Trainor mentioned; troubled family relations, in particular those prisoners with children that they could not see during their imprisonment; or just an inability to cope with living in the new world that had emerged since their arrest one or two decades earlier. In light of those issues, life in the prisons – despite the hardship – is perceived as a better life because it was a time that was marked by security, respect, and hope. In other words, the IRA prisoners’ comradeship, or comradery, as several narrators call it, served not only to build a social network among the prisoners community, but also an ‘emotional community’.<sup>76</sup>

In sum, by exploring these feelings and emotions, I aim to make a modest contribution to the interpretation of oral history interviews with actors of violent conflicts. While my initial research interest was the informal education of politically motivated prisoners, expanding my analysis to discuss the emotions expressed through the memory of sport in the internment camps and prisons demonstrates the value of analysing oral history interviews through several lenses and open new areas of future research on wartime experiences and life in prison.

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