

Reinisch, D. (2021). The Fight for Political Status in Portlaoise Prison, 1973-7: Prologue to the H-Blocks Struggle. *War & Society*, 40(2).

## The Fight for Political Status in Portlaoise Prison, 1973-7: Prologue to the H-Blocks Struggle<sup>1</sup>

DIETER REINISCH

*School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway*

Between 1973 and 1977, about 100 Provisional republican prisoners staged a series of violent prison protests and hunger strikes in the Republic of Ireland's high-security prison Portlaoise. Research on political imprisonment during the Northern Ireland conflict overwhelmingly focuses on the H-Blocks struggle. The Portlaoise Prison protests, thus, remain an under-researched area, largely ignored by academics, commentators, and the public. This article tells the story of these protests in Portlaoise by focusing on three periods: winter 1974/5, winter 1975/6, and spring 1977. The Portlaoise protests ended almost simultaneously with the start of the blanket- and no-wash-protests in the H-Blocks. This article is based on the testimonials of former Irish republican prisoners, statements of the republican movement, and interviews with former Portlaoise inmates.

**KEYWORDS** Hunger Strikes, imprisonment, Irish Republican Army, Northern Ireland conflict, Portlaoise Prison

The 1981 hunger strikes of Provisional IRA (henceforth PIRA) and Irish National Liberation Army (henceforth INLA) prisoners are a defining moment in Irish history which brought the Troubles to a wider international audience.<sup>2</sup> They set (Provisional) Sinn Féin on track to become a mass movement that, eventually, embraced the conflict transformation process for the following two decades.<sup>3</sup> The circumstances which led to the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland started with the move of the republican prisoners from Mountjoy Prison in Dublin to Portlaoise

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<sup>2</sup> D. Beresford, *Ten Men Dead* (London: Grafton, 1987), 131-3; M. Bonakdarian, 'Iranian consecration of Irish nationalist „martyrs”: the Islamic Republic of Iran and the 1981 republican prisoners' hunger strike in Northern Ireland,' *Social History*, 43, 3 (2018), 293-331.

<sup>3</sup> M. Whiting, *Sinn Féin and the IRA: From Revolution to Moderation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

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Prison, Co Laois, on 9 November 1973. In order to examine the two hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981, we need to understand Irish republican imprisonment throughout the Northern Irish conflict on both sides of the Irish border. While historians like Brian Hanley, Dan Harvey, Patrick Mulroe, and Gearóid Ó Faoleán have recently published essential contributions for the understanding of Provisional republicanism in the Republic of Ireland during the Troubles, surprisingly, historians have paid relatively little attention to the study of political imprisonment in the Republic during the conflict.<sup>4</sup> Ó Faoleán argues that the 'Republic of Ireland is perhaps the most overlooked of all the theatres of the conflict during the "Troubles",<sup>5</sup> sentiments shared by John Maguire who researched internment in the Republic before the Troubles.<sup>6</sup> Mary Rogan reminds us that 'there has been no analysis'<sup>7</sup> of political imprisonment in the Republic as compared to Northern Ireland. Cormac Behan and Oisín Wall recently analysed prison protests of ordinary, non-republican prisoners in the Republic. Behan notes 'while much has been written about resistance by those imprisoned for politically motivated activities, especially in Northern Ireland, there has been relatively little examination of protests by ordinary prisoners.'<sup>8</sup> This article adds to his analyses of ordinary prisoners by describing the prison protests of politically-motivated, republican prisoners in the Republic, a subject touched on by Hanley in his recent book on the impact of the Troubles on the Republic.<sup>9</sup> A comparative approach towards political imprisonment in Northern Ireland and the Republic will broaden the analytic framework of academic research on the Northern Ireland conflict, imprisonment and criminology. Thus, this article discusses the protests of Provisional republican prisoners in Portlaoise Prison between 1973 and 1977. Events that I demonstrate in this article were, in fact, a prologue to the H-Blocks struggle in HMP Maze.

During these four years, political prisoners aligned to the Provisional republican movement carried out a series of protests, among these hunger strikes, in the high-security Portlaoise Prison. PIRA prisoners were separated from other prisoners in Portlaoise. While there was at times contact with other, smaller republican factions such as Saor Éire and the INLA, prisoners belonging to the Official IRA did not participate in these protests. In the course of the 1970s, several prison unions emerged that demanded a reform of the prison system.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the PIRA made a clear distinction between themselves and other prisoners. When the Irish government considered housing members of the prison unions together with socialist-leaning republican prisoners of Saor Éire, similar approaches were rejected by the Provisional prisoners.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the protests discussed in this article solely focus on the PIRA for their lack of cooperation with other groups.

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<sup>4</sup> B. Hanley, *The Impact of the Troubles on the Republic of Ireland, 1968–79: Boiling volcano?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); D. Harvey, *Soldiers Against Subversion: The Irish Defence Forces and Internal Security During the Troubles, 1969-1998* (Dublin: Merrion, 2018); P. Mulroe, *Bombs, Bullets and the Border: Ireland's Frontier: Irish Security Policy, 1969–1978* (Dublin: Merrion Press, 2017); G. Ó Faoleán, *A Broad Church: The Provisional IRA in the Republic of Ireland 1969-1980* (Dublin: Merrion Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Ó Faoleán, viii.

<sup>6</sup> J. Maguire, *IRA Internments and the Irish Government: Subversives and the State, 1939-1962* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>7</sup> M. Rogan, *Prison Policy in Ireland: Politics, penal-welfarism and political imprisonment* (London: Routledge, 2011), xvi.

<sup>8</sup> C. Behan, "'We Are All Convicted Criminals'?: Prisoners, protest and penal politics in the Republic of Ireland,' *Journal of Social History*, 52, 2 (Fall 2018), 501–26, 2; O. Wall, "'Embarrassing the State": The "ordinary" prisoner rights movement in Ireland, 1972–6', *Journal of Contemporary History*; DOI: 10.1177/0022009419863846.

<sup>9</sup> Hanley mentions republican prisoners in Portlaoise in the chapters 3, 5, and 10 of his book *Boiling volcano*.

<sup>10</sup> Behan; Wall.

<sup>11</sup> Rogan, 146.

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By telling the story of the Portlaoise protests, I aim to provide literature for comparative research of political imprisonment in the Republic and Northern Ireland in general, and prison protests in particular. Therefore, I will focus on the perspective of the republican side. Readers might miss the Irish government or prison warders' view on these events. Certainly, the purpose of my research is to understand the republican prison experience. Historians should not take one side in any conflict and, thus, triangulation is necessary to provide a more holistic account of the Portlaoise protests. Otherwise, the account that comes from one side becomes the official narrative. Hence, the perspective of the PIRA prisoners needs to become part of the story. In this way, the article will contribute to that holistic account.

The article is structured in three parts. I will first introduce the background to the prison protests in Portlaoise. This is followed by the second part, an overview of the prison protests between 1973 and 1977. This part is structured in three chronological sub-sections on three periods of protests and hunger strikes in the winter of 1974/5, winter of 1975/6, and spring of 1977; a note on the impact of the Portlaoise protests on the later hunger strikes in Northern Ireland 1980/1 and the conclusions follow this. The findings are based on eleven life-story interviews with former Provisional prisoners in Portlaoise,<sup>12</sup> archival material from the National Archives and the National Library in Dublin, the NIPC in Linen Hall Library, the Ruairí Ó Brádaigh Papers at NUIG, newspaper reports, mainly from the Sinn Féin weekly *An Phoblacht*, and books of and about former prisoners.<sup>13</sup> A critical reading of these sources provides the basis for a history of the Portlaoise protests.

### **Imprisonment in the Republic in the early years of the Troubles**

Since the independence of the southern 26 Counties, which became the Republic of Ireland, and the Irish Civil War in 1922-3, the Dublin government criminalised republican activists who continued their fight for a unified Irish Republic. These republicans were initially known as 'anti-Treaty republicans' because they rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty that gave the 26 Counties independence and divided Ireland by keeping six north-eastern Counties, the later Northern Ireland, within the United Kingdom. As Mark Findlay argues, a section of prisoners with radical politics and direct association with revolutionary organisations on the outside was 'a constant threat to the Irish state'.<sup>14</sup> Historically, republicans rejected the label of 'criminals', and by doing so, they underlined that they were political activists and not terrorists. Following the 1916 rising, the British government had granted Irish prisoners held in Britain the same prisoner-of-war status as German First World War prisoners.<sup>15</sup>

The early 1970s was a time of expansion of the prison system in the Republic.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the prison population had declined from about 25 average daily prisoners per 100,000 of the

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<sup>12</sup> All interviews for this article were conducted as part of a larger research project by me involving 34 former Irish republican prisoners between 2014 and 2017. I approached these interviews as life-story interviews. The narrators were recruited through a snowball process and accessed by so-called gatekeepers who established contacts in ex-prisoners' organisations in Dublin, Tralee, and Wexford. The interviews lasted between 2-3 hours and were conducted in the homes of the narrators. I obtained ethical approval from the European University Institute, my affiliated institution during the data collection, for this research. Each interview partner signed a consent form prior to the interview that stated, among other things, that he participates voluntarily in the research project and that he was given the opportunity to remain anonymous; no interview partner quoted in this article asked for anonymity, hence, in accordance with the consent form, the real identities are given.

<sup>13</sup> Fáilte Cluain Eois (eds), *Their Prisons, Our Stories* (Monaghan: self-publishing, 2015); J.J. Barrett, *Martin Ferris: Man of Kerry* (Dingle: Brandon, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> M. Findlay, 'Criminalization' and the Detention of 'Political Prisoners': An Irish Perspective,' *Contemporary Crises*, 9, 1 (1985), 1-17.

<sup>15</sup> See Murphy, *Political Imprisonment & the Irish, 1912-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3-10.

<sup>16</sup> Rogan, 130-54.

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general population in the early 1940s, reaching its lowest point of 10 average daily prisoners in 1958, the renewed outbreak of the conflict in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s also had repercussions for the penal system in the Republic.<sup>17</sup> In 1972, the average daily prison population reached 35 per 100,000 and 53 in 1985.<sup>18</sup> New prisons for adult males were opened, and there were plans to build a new women's prison.<sup>19</sup> In the words of Mike Tomlinson, these were 'very troubled years in the South's prisons, with escape attempts and the build-up of a well-organised group of political prisoners.'<sup>20</sup>

The outbreak of the conflict in Northern Ireland, often called 'The Troubles', brought further challenges to the prison system through an influx of republican prisoners. While some commentators are reluctant to acknowledge it as a 'war', instead describing it as 'conflict', 'insurgency', or 'emergency' to minimise the impact of the PIRA violence for political reasons, Edward Burke, by using Clausewitz's definition, writes that the Troubles in the early 1970s 'does meet the minimal criteria to be described as a war'.<sup>21</sup> The Troubles resulted in the deaths of more than 3,500 people between 1968 and 1998. There were several groups of armed formations involved in this conflict. Among those were British and Irish state forces and loyalist paramilitary organisations. Loyalism describes pro-British Protestants who are willing to use violence to maintain the Union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. In opposition to those were republican paramilitaries such as the PIRA. Irish republicans are Irish nationalists, overwhelmingly Catholic, who are in support of the reunification of Northern Ireland with the Republic. An attempt to end this conflict with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 was only partly successful.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1970s, the Irish state introduced a new strategy; this was to be 'criminalisation.' In 1972, the second Prison Act was introduced. While the focus of the first one in 1970 was a modernisation of the prison system with an aim to rehabilitation, the later one reflected 'a general hardening of attitude towards republican activity'.<sup>23</sup> Findlay argues that the Government of the Republic 'used the army systematically to screen certain sections of the population and arrest and intern certain "suspects" for varying periods without trial.'<sup>24</sup> Examples of this criminalisation policy were the introduction of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Act (1960) which banned the voice of members of Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA from the national broadcaster RTÉ; the reactivation of the Special Criminal Courts in 1972, the equivalent of the Diplock courts in Northern Ireland; benches with three judges; non-jury courts; the less rigid rule of evidence; and the reversal of the onus of proof in certain circumstances.<sup>25</sup> In 1974, the Prison Act 1972 was extended for another three years, this time

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<sup>17</sup> E. O'Sullivan and I. O'Donnell, *Coercive Confinement in Ireland. Patients, prisoners and penitents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Rogan, 217.

<sup>19</sup> S. Kilcommins et al., *Crime, Punishment and the Search for Order in Ireland* (Dublin: Institute for Public Administration, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> I. Tomlinson, 'Imprisoned Ireland' in V. Ruggiero, M. Ryan and J. Sim (eds), *Western European Penal Systems: A critical anatomy* (London: Sage, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Edward Burke, *An Army of Tribes: British Army Cohesion, Deviancy and Murder in Northern Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 2.

<sup>22</sup> For an introduction to the conflict see G. Gillespie, *A Short History of the Troubles* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2010); M. Mulholland, *Northern Ireland: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Rogan, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Findlay, *Criminalization*.

<sup>25</sup> M. Findlay, 'Organized Resistance, Terrorism, and Criminality in Ireland: The State's construction of the control equation', *Crime and Social Justice* 21/22 (1984), 95-115; F. Davis, *The History and Development of the Special Criminal Court 1922-2014* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

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under the new Fine Gael/Labour coalition, and again in 1977.<sup>26</sup> In essence, the developments in the Republic's prisons echoed those in Northern Irish prisons; thus the systematic protest by prisoners against this criminalisation foreshadowed the later H-Blocks struggle. When the Troubles erupted in 1968, Mountjoy Prison was the main prison holding republicans in the Republic. It was under these circumstances in the Republic that prison protests unfolded in Mountjoy and, later, Portlaoise.

While republican prisoners enjoyed a special status in the Republic's prisons since 1916, this situation changed with the outbreak of the Troubles. In the autumn of 1969, the republican movement had split into an Official and a Provisional wing;<sup>27</sup> a significant faction of the Mountjoy prisoners belonged to the armed wing of the Provisionals, the PIRA. The Officials were socialist-orientated, whereas the Provisionals followed a nationalist ideology. By 1973, 130 people had been arrested and convicted for republican activities. Most of them were detained in Mountjoy Prison and the Curragh Military Centre, while Portlaoise had also been reopened to house some political prisoners. By demanding the right to be treated as 'prisoners of war,' all these prisoners brought the Northern Irish conflict into the Republic's prisons. Thus, the newly arrived prisoners in Mountjoy also demanded 'prisoner-of-war' status from the government. In June 1972, William Whitelaw, who had become the first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in March, introduced special category status for both republican and loyalist prisoners following the hunger strike of senior Belfast Provisional Billy McKee.<sup>28</sup> The Republic of Ireland government followed one year later. In the summer of 1973, following a hunger strike which lasted twenty-two days, privileges that amounted to 'special category status' were granted to the republican prisoners in Mountjoy.<sup>29</sup> John Lonergan, the former governor of Mountjoy and Portlaoise, acknowledges this situation in his memoirs: 'In the decades before the outbreak of conflict in the late 1960s, IRA prisoners had automatically been granted political status.'<sup>30</sup> This status changed again with the transfer of the prisoners from Mountjoy to Portlaoise in 1973. Thus, both in the Republic and Northern Ireland, the status and treatment of republican prisoners remained contested throughout the conflict.<sup>31</sup> On the particular situation in Portlaoise, Findlay wrote that 'the press argued that through the wide use of solitary confinement and the strict regime effected in Portlaoise when compared with other prisons, the government was de-facto according to these inmates special political status and, as a result, should treat them as being a special category'.<sup>32</sup> As in the situation in Northern Ireland after the 1981 hunger strikes, the Irish government recognised political status but did not officially referring to the prisoners with the term 'political prisoners'.<sup>33</sup> In the academic literature on the Northern Irish Troubles, this status is referred to as 'de-facto political status'.

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<sup>26</sup> Rogan, 142.

<sup>27</sup> See B. Hanley and S. Millar, *The Lost Revolution: The story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party* (Dublin: Penguin, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> T. Hennessey, *Hunger Strike: Margaret Thatcher's battle with the IRA, 1980-1981* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014), 10-1.

<sup>29</sup> Behan, 7.

<sup>30</sup> J. Lonergan, *The Governor* (Dublin: Penguin, 2010), 115.

<sup>31</sup> C. Walker, 'Irish Republican Prisoners: Political detainees, prisoners of war or common criminals?,' *The Irish Jurist*, 19, 2 (1984), 189-225.; S.A. Caesar, 'Captive or Criminal?: Reappraising the legal status of IRA prisoners at the height of the Troubles under international law,' *Duke Journal of Comparative and International Law*, 27, 2 (2017), 323-48.

<sup>32</sup> Findlay, *Criminalization*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Hennessey, 458-70.

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The years 1972 and 1973 were a period of high tensions that was characterised by small and short protests by republicans in Mountjoy, the Curragh, and Portlaoise.<sup>34</sup> That year also witnessed several escape attempts from the various prisons, some of which proved successful. The most significant of these happened in October 1973, when three leading PIRA members escaped by helicopter. This escape caused much embarrassment to the government, both on a national as well as an international level, and, as a result of the protests and escape attempts, all the republican prisoners were moved to Portlaoise within days. The Irish government considered Portlaoise a higher-security prison that was more suitable for the housing of subversive prisoners. Thus, after more than two decades, Portlaoise Prison once again became the main prison housing political convicts in the Republic.<sup>35</sup>

### Portlaoise Prison protests

In the 1970s, riots and hunger strikes were the two dominant forms of prison protest used by republicans before the start of the blanket protests in September 1976. The republican use of hunger strikes originated from the British suffragette movement in the early 20th century.<sup>36</sup> The first republican to die during his hunger strike was Thomas Ashe in 1917. Altogether, until 1946 a further seven republicans died on hunger strike. In 1973, the republican prisoners were moved from Mountjoy to Portlaoise, and around the same time in England, the republican prisoners Marian and Dolours Price embarked on their hunger strikes.<sup>37</sup> Both women were subsequently force-fed.<sup>38</sup> The treatment of force-feeding, however, had not been used by Irish authorities since Thomas Ashe's hunger strike.<sup>39</sup> Thus, while republican hunger strikes originated from the same political tradition, the hunger strikes in England and Ireland took different paths.<sup>40</sup>

The most common use of hunger strikes by republicans was to protest their classification as criminals. When authorities refused political prisoner status to the suffragettes in the 1910s, they went on hunger strike. Republicans took similar action to demand their treatment as political prisoners of war from the 1910s until today.<sup>41</sup> The republican newspaper *An Phoblacht/Republican News* explained the tactic of a hunger strike by republicans as follows: 'Hunger-strike is the last resort for prisoners. It is a supreme test of will-power, a decision that calls for the ultimate self-sacrifice. It is the final means of protest against an unbearable, intransigent regime when all other means of protest have gone unheeded.'<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, this action was also taken to protest conditions and their classification as criminals during the Portlaoise protests.

On 15 March 1972, there were eleven political prisoners housed in a separate wing. These prisoners belonged to three different groups. They were Saor Éire prisoners Patrick Dillon, Joseph Dillon, Martin Casey, Brendan Walsh, Seán Morrissey, Finbarr Walsh; PIRA prisoners James Hazlett, Michael Walls, and Liam Fagan; and Official IRA prisoners James McCabe and

<sup>34</sup> Rogan, 138-42.

<sup>35</sup> Harvey, 111-26.

<sup>36</sup> K. Grant, 'British Suffragettes and the Russian Method of Hunger Strike', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 53, 1 (2011), 113-43

<sup>37</sup> L. Whalen, "'A Womanish Thing': The Price Sisters and the Gendered Dimensions of Irish Republican Hunger Strikes in England, 1973-74', *New Hibernia Review*, 23, 2 (2019), 95-113.

<sup>38</sup> I. Miller, *A History of Force Feeding: Hunger Strikes, Prisons and Medical Ethics, 1909-1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 195-219.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> G. Sweeney, 'Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28 3 (1993), 421-37.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Opinion: Hunger-strike, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (subsequently AP/RN), 14 February 1985, 2.

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Roland Giles.<sup>43</sup> Following the helicopter escape in October 1973, about 130 prisoners were moved to Portlaoise. One year later, 71 prisoners were affiliated to the PIRA in Portlaoise.<sup>44</sup>

The staff at Portlaoise Prison had no experience in dealing with these prisoners and tensions arose immediately, especially when the prison authorities refused to grant the special status that had been won by the prisoners in Mountjoy that summer. Seosamh Ó Maileoin was one of the prisoners transferred from Mountjoy to Portlaoise. He remembers that 'Portlaoise was a much tougher place than Mountjoy. [...] The warders were very aggressive, and we had fewer rights there, in the beginning, they couldn't cope with the situation. It was not like Mountjoy'.<sup>45</sup> A document by the Department of Justice (henceforth DoJ) though states that 'all PIRA/OIRA inmates of Mountjoy and Curragh were transferred to Portlaoise under a very liberal regime'.<sup>46</sup> The prisoners had lost the privileges they had previously won by embarking on various prison protests in Mountjoy in 1972/3; however, following days of intense negotiations between management and prisoners, special category status and all other concessions previously granted in the Curragh camp and Mountjoy were also introduced in Portlaoise. According to the DoJ, the situation in Portlaoise after the granting of rights was as follows: the prisoners had free association all day; access to each other's cells; were locked-up at 10 p.m.; unlimited visits, cigarettes, letters, newspapers, and parcels; unlimited quantities of craft materials; and musical instruments and craftworks were allowed in the cells.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, Behan writes 'as the 1970s began, conditions in Irish prisons were grim. The vast majority of prisoners had no in-cell sanitation and had to "slop out." Prisoners spent over fifteen hours in their cells, and there were limited productive out-of-cell activities'.<sup>48</sup>

The relatively peaceful atmosphere that followed a compromise between prisoners and authorities was to be short-lived. Following the conclusion of the transfer of 'subversive prisoners' to Portlaoise, the tensions and regular clashes between prison staff and republicans led to the reinforcement of the physical security of the prison in four ways. First, armed guards patrolled the perimeter walls day and night; secondly, barbed wire had been mounted extensively around the prison; thirdly, perimeter security was further ensured by a military presence of both soldiers and equipment; and, fourthly, on each segregated landing with the prison, officers of the Garda Síochána, the Irish police, complemented prison personnel.<sup>49</sup> Prison officers in the Republic were unarmed; therefore, members of the police and the army assisted in guarding Portlaoise. As a consequence, the prisoners pressed for reforms. The particularly objected to five issues: first, deprivation of free association and access to other prisoner's cells; secondly, requirements to wear prison clothing; thirdly, lack of suitable visiting facilities; fourthly, absence of proper toilets; and, fifthly, lack of sufficient exercise facilities. While some of these issues could be solved, other continued to be disputed throughout the 1980s, such as closed visits; furthermore, issues like the requirement to wear prison clothing, reflected, together with the prisoners' protest tactics, the developments in the H-Blocks.<sup>50</sup> It was under those circumstances that the prison protests in Portlaoise unfolded.

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<sup>43</sup> NLI, JUS/14/603; Confidential note by Governor Portlaoise Prison.

<sup>44</sup> Ó Faoleán, 44.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Seosamh Ó Maileoin, Tyrellspass, Co Westmeath, 30 April 2015.

<sup>46</sup> National Archive of Ireland (subsequently NAI), DFA-2012-59.1721; Department of Justice (subsequently DoJ), Demands by Prisoners. Concessions by Government, 1972-1977.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Behan, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Findlay, *Criminalization*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

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The first time the prisoners embarked on a protest in Portlaoise was a solidarity action for republicans held in England in March 1974.<sup>51</sup> Although this protest was not directed against the prison administration in Portlaoise, it highlighted the internal discipline of the PIRA prisoners who were described as a 'close-knit highly organised group' by the authorities.<sup>52</sup> In August 1974, the PIRA organised a mass escape. Nineteen prisoners escaped from Portlaoise. As a consequence, a large amount of money was spent on improving security in and around the prison. Furthermore, there was a gradual erosion of the rights gained the year before which 'led to further trouble'.<sup>53</sup> That meant that searches of the cells increased; letters and books were restricted, and food parcels and the right to craft materials were withdrawn.<sup>54</sup> The removal of these rights resulted in a heightening of tensions within the prison. On St. Patrick's Day 1975, the PIRA prisoners organised an escape attempt in which prisoner Tom Smith was shot dead by snipers guarding the prison.<sup>55</sup> George McDermott, who was imprisoned from 1974 until 1990, remembers: 'The atmosphere soon changed after that. The regime came down very hard after that. There were lock-ups for months.'<sup>56</sup>

### **December 1974 and January 1975: Riots and Hunger Strikes**

The simmering tensions in Portlaoise exploded in riots in the days after Christmas 1974, followed by a hunger strike in the following month.<sup>57</sup> During the autumn months, the situation for the prisoners had worsened. The demands of the prisoners were not met and, as a result, prisoners rioted after Christmas 1974. During this riot, the prisoners took several hostages. Dan Hoban took part in this riot and recalls:

When the riot took place [...], they haven't given us our conditions, and it was boiling up and boiling up, and the next thing was that there was a riot in the jail and there were prison officers taken as hostages [...]. Leo Martin from Belfast was the O/C in prison, and I was the adjutant, and I was selected to go out by all the prisoners to negotiate with the governor. [...] I went through a line of screws with batons and everything, and I went in to negotiate with him, and I had the only certain option to negotiate with him, so the talks broke down between us. [...] Then they came with the power hoses, and they broke down the barriers at the bottom of the prison, and they battered us back with the high-power hoses. [...] We had the cell doors sprung so they couldn't take us individually and beat us, I say what they would have done if they got us locked up in the cell.<sup>58</sup>

As Adjutant General, Dan Hoban was the second-in-command of the PIRA prisoners. He had already been interned in the Curragh Camp in the 1950s and imprisoned in Mountjoy in the early 1970s. Hoban was elected to represent the prisoners on various occasions; among these were the hunger strike that followed these events.

During the protests in December 1974, 27 prison guards were held hostage for six hours by around 140 prisoners. The prisoners used doors, mattresses and furniture to barricade themselves inside a cellblock of the E-wing that housed republicans. The prison authorities

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<sup>51</sup> F.S. Ross, *Smashing H-Block: The rise and fall of the popular campaign against criminalization, 1976-1982* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>52</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS 44,183/1; Conditions in Ireland.

<sup>53</sup> Hanley, 102.

<sup>54</sup> Ross, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Hanley, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Fáilte Cluain Eois, 155-7.

<sup>57</sup> Findlay, *Criminalization*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Dan Hoban, Newport, Co Mayo, 15 April 2015.



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called in 600 police officers and army soldiers to surround the building. During the negotiations, the prisoners issued a list of demands. Additionally, they hung a large white sheet from a window, with 'Fight repression' written on it but gave up without a fight when riot troops moved into the prison.

Following the conclusion of this riot, prisoners complained about the brutality of the prison officers during the riot.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, they lost further rights: the lock-up time was changed from 10 p.m. to 8 p.m., and only one book was allowed in the cells at a time.<sup>60</sup> In response to the riot, a permanent Gardaí presence was maintained in prison, since Irish prison guards were unarmed, and a new governor, William Reilly, was appointed. Over the following weeks, conditions further deteriorated. Hanley quotes a Gardaí source, writing that 'while the prisoners' complaints were dismissed as propaganda, a Garda later admitted that "things went on we'll say in searches [...] that shouldn't have gone on [...] there were episodes that were fairly severe, that shouldn't have happened".<sup>61</sup> As a direct consequence of this situation, eight prisoners embarked on a hunger strike on 3 January 1975. The numbers on hunger strike doubled within a fortnight.<sup>62</sup> In a press release, Sinn Féin explained:

Six republican prisoners have been on hunger strike since 12.00 noon on 3 January last. That means that at 12.00 noon today they have completed 40 days on a diet of water and salt, and entered on the 41st day. Eight other prisoners have been on hunger strike since 13 January which means that they have now completed 30 days' fast.

[...] Mr William Whitelaw conceded special category status to both republican and loyalist prisoners in the North in June 1972. [...] The Coalition government in Dublin refuses to grant republican prisoners what the British have conceded in the Six Counties.<sup>63</sup>

The strike lasted for 44 days and only ended after Pat Ward was admitted to hospital in a critical condition.<sup>64</sup> Dan Hoban remembers: 'Many men went on that hunger strike, including Pat Ward; that was his third hunger strike. The hunger strike really had his toll on him when it finished, and he was on the brink of death like when the hunger strike was over.'<sup>65</sup>

On the thirtieth day of the hunger strike, the prisoners were moved to the Curragh Military Hospital and on the 42<sup>nd</sup> day, the conditions of two hunger strikers, Pat Ward and Colm Daltún, deteriorated seriously; with doctors believing them to be within hours of death. Following public pressure, Government officials entered into negotiations with the prisoners and, on the forty-fourth day, the government agreed to restore some form of 'special category status.' Hoban was Ward's negotiator during this hunger strike, and he recalls a conversation that he had with Ward's brother, who tried to convince him to take Pat off the hunger strike:

They sent in Pat Ward's brother, and I got out of my cell, it was half eleven at night, and I had to go out into the visiting boxes to meet Pat Ward's brother. I sat here at the table, and you're sitting there, and I moved in, and this is Pat Ward's brother, and I shook hands with him, and he said to me: 'Are you going to let my brother die?' You know, straight across the table, like he wasn't a republican, but the

<sup>59</sup> Hanley, 102.

<sup>60</sup> Ross, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Hanley, 102.

<sup>62</sup> Fáilte Cluain Eois, 141.

<sup>63</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/4; Hunger Strike in Port Laois and Curragh Prisons, Sinn Féin Press Release, 12 February 1975.

<sup>64</sup> Hanley, 102.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Hoban.

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authorities were using him. So, I say: 'I feel, I can understand how you feel. [...] Your brother is a personal friend of mine. We were in the battle for Irish independence together, and your brother has entrusted me as his negotiator during his hunger strike. And what you are asking me to do, if I do what you are asking me to do, I would no longer be a friend of your brother. I appreciate your brother's friendship very much. Sorry, I cannot ease your request. There is no point sitting across the table crying to me. I appreciate your brother's friendship to me is very important, we are in this battle together, and I cannot do it for him.'

And he went away, and Pat Ward was getting very weak then. Then the hunger strike was called off, they got certain demands they were looking for, and Pat Ward was shifted to hospital. He was very weak.<sup>66</sup>

The prisoners announced: 'Following discussions on a confidential basis between the prisoner's representatives and the prison authorities a satisfactory settlement has been reached in the dispute which led to the hunger strike, and we are happy to announce that the hunger strike has now ended.'<sup>67</sup> The 29-year-old hunger striker Ward is quoted as saying 'another victory [for the republican prisoners].'<sup>68</sup> The interpretations of this 'settlement' starkly differed. While Joe Cahill noted that 'the IRA men had won political status,' a government spokesperson denied this claim and a subsequent statement read that: 'Certain matters which were not matters of principle as far as the government was concerned were resolved satisfactorily. The Minister for Justice is pleased with the outcome.' On the other hand, the IRA statement read: 'Following the discussion on a confidential basis between prisoners' representatives in Portlaoise and the prison authorities a satisfactory settlement has been reached in the dispute which leads to the hunger strike, and we are happy to announce the hunger strike has ended.'<sup>69</sup> A report of the DoJ from 1981 claims that the hunger strike 'ended after 38 days following concessions of a well-stocked tuck shop, two late nights per week to 10.30 p.m., etc.'<sup>70</sup> In essence, the republicans argued that the concession of these demands de facto meant 'political status,' while the government argued that these were merely well-defined concessions, and, thus, the government did not back down to the republican demand of 'political status.' Both sides could claim a propaganda victory for themselves.

During an escape attempt in March 1975, prisoner Tom Smith was shot dead. Following this incident and the discovery of explosives in prison, the authorities immediately suspended all visits for prisoners and, when visiting rights were eventually restored, they replaced the old 'open visit' system with a new 'closed' version. For the next decade, visits were to take place in a box resembling a cage. A table separated the prisoners from the visitors, and from that table two wire grilles, two feet apart ran to the ceiling. On the inside of both grilles were sheets of Perspex. A prison officer sat in a cage at the end of the table to monitor all the conversations and take notes.<sup>71</sup> In 1976, two extra officers were placed on visits, one directly behind the prisoner and one stood behind the visitor. Any mention whatsoever of the conditions with the prison resulted in a warning that the visit would be terminated. The closed visits continued after the end of the protests in 1976. It was only in 1984–85 and 1987 with the appointment of a new

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/1; End of Hungerstrike, Prisoners' Communique from Portlaoise Prison, undated.

<sup>68</sup> 12 IRA members quit prison fast, *The Morning Record*, 17 Feb. 1975.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> NAI, DFA-2012-59.1721; DoJ, Demands by Prisoners. Concessions by Government, 1972-1977.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Vivion Hayden, Dublin, 14 April 2015.

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prison administration that closed visits, strip-searches, and night searches were finally phased out.

### **October 1975 and January 1976: Further Hunger Strikes**

As a result of strip-searching, another hunger strike began in October 1975. This hunger strike was again undertaken by Pat Ward and Colm Daltún; however, it ended after a few days. It had begun in protest to the beating of a young prisoner, Martin Ferris, from County Kerry. Ferris was beaten by military police when he resisted the strip-search before medical treatment in the Curragh Military Hospital. In a press release dated 14 December 1975, the PIRA-linked *Irish Republican Information Service* (IRIS) complained about the 'inhuman conditions' in Portlaoise, referring to a statement smuggled out of prison. In this report, written by then PIRA O/C (commanding officer) in Portlaoise, Dáithí O'Conaill, the prisoners informed about a confrontation with prison offers on 25 November:

Within an hour, the following punishment was inflicted on all political prisoners:

a) Removal of all furniture and beds from cells; b) Deprivation of exercise, ablutions, laundry, recreational, craft, library and TV facilities; c) Banning of all visits, mail and newspapers; d) Withdrawal of shop facilities; e) Harassment of prisoners by frequent searches and threats to strip men naked; f) Denial of access to Chaplains and legal advisers; g) Collective fining of all political prisoners of £3.50 each without their consent.

[...] [T]he governor [...] instructed his warders to carry out an orgy of destruction, removing beds from the cells and smashing hundreds of tables and lockers. The punishment resulted in prisoners eating and sleeping on the floors.<sup>72</sup>

Ó Conaill and his Adjutant Liam Kelly furthermore issued three demands on 2 December.<sup>73</sup> In particular, they demanded a 'public sworn inquiry into the management of Portlaoise Jail.'<sup>74</sup>

In January 1976, prisoners held a solidarity hunger strike with a republican held in England, Frank Stagg.<sup>75</sup> Although this was only a temporary hunger strike, the prisoners were stretching their muscles in opposition to what prisoners Dáithí O'Conaill and Liam Sean O'Ceallaigh called 'the Pinochet-style regime in Portlaoise.'<sup>76</sup> A similar comparison with Chile was also made in the *Sunday World* later that year.<sup>77</sup> On February 1976, *IRIS* again informed the public about what they called the 'brutal treatment of prisoners' and 'state "violence" in Portlaoise Prison.' The statement claimed that the prisoners had nothing but a mattress in their cells and had been 'eating their food off the floor since Friday, 20 February 1976.'<sup>78</sup>

### **The 1977 Hunger Strikes**

In the summer of 1976, the situation further deteriorated when three prisoners escaped during a court hearing. The prisoners had used explosives smuggled into the prison to blow a hole in the courthouse wall. This led to intensified strip-searches and a reduction of visits. In protest,

<sup>72</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/1; Irish Republican Information Service (subsequently IRIS), Press Release 14 December 1975.

<sup>73</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/1; Dáithí O'Connell and Liam Kelly letter to the Visiting Committee, Portlaoise Jail, 2 December 1975.

<sup>74</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/1; Republican prisoners in Portlaoise Jail are demanding a public sworn enquiry into the management of Portlaoise Jail, 2 December 1975.

<sup>75</sup> NAI, DFA-2012-59-1596; Government Information Service, 31 December 1975; NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/1; Hunger Strike in Portlaoise Prison, Statement from the IRIS, 2 January 1976.

<sup>76</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/1; Portlaoise Jail Situation, IRIS, 3 January 1976.

<sup>77</sup> Hanley, 89.

<sup>78</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/1; Portlaoise Prison, IRIS, 28 February 1976.

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the prisoners attempted to burn the prison on 21 July. As a result, the two late nights and the free access to the landing and other cells were withdrawn. Although it was forbidden to speak about the conditions in prison during visits, the stories of released men have led Fr. Denis Faul of Dungannon, Co Tyrone, 'to say that men coming out of Portlaoise are more socially disorientated than ex-prisoners from any jail in the North or in Britain.'<sup>79</sup> Hanley writes that in another article, the *Sunday World* claimed that the inmates were treated 'worse than in any other regular prison [...] in the EEC [the forerunner of today's EU]'.<sup>80</sup>

In 1976, the Garda is believed to have prevented a bomb attack on the governor of Portlaoise. In October, a suspicious object was reported, and when the Gardai investigated it, a booby trap bomb exploded, killing Garda Michael Clerkin. While the PIRA denied involvement, it heightened the tensions.<sup>81</sup> As Hanley shows, around 40 people were killed by republicans in the Republic during the 1970s, including Fine Gael Senator Billy Fox, the first member of the Irish Senate killed by the IRA since 1927, British Ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs, and five Gardai. On the other hand, loyalists murdered 50 people in the Republic during the same period.<sup>82</sup>

The situation in Portlaoise eventually exploded in a hunger strike in 1977. Prisoner Patrick Casey from Dundalk, Co Louth, outlines the condition that leads to the hunger strikes in a prison statement to Fr. Piaras O Duill:

As a means of alerting our relatives and the public, we staged a protest in prison by burning the mattresses in the cells. [...] The only food we got for the two days in the cells was a cup of tea and dry bread on one occasion. There were no toilet facilities. [...]

Each prisoner was sentenced to one-month (31 days) solitary confinement [...], loss of 14 days remission, loss of all privileges and each fined £41. [...] Because of these conditions and in order to draw public attention to them, twenty of my comrades began a hunger strike on 7 March.<sup>83</sup>

This statement and other republican accounts were propaganda statements aimed at the republican support base and must be read in this regard. On 20 March, the *Sunday World* also reported 'random strip-searches, beatings, harassment and solitary confinement'.<sup>84</sup>

On 7 March, 20 PIRA prisoners went on a fast, which lasted 47 days. The *Irish Press* reported at that time that there were in total 134 republican prisoners; they included 82 PIRA, 12 'dissident' Provisionals, seven Official IRA, 18 Socialist Republican Alliance Group A, 11 Socialist Republican Alliance Group B prisoners, and four dissidents from the Socialist Republican Alliance.<sup>85</sup> The prisoners on hunger strike were Kevin Mallon, Tyrone; Seamus Swan, Wexford; Joe Ennis, Cavan; Mick Brody, Clare; Liam O'Mahony, Laois; Jim Nolan, Tipperary; John Carrol, Offaly; Martin Ferris, Danny O'Sullivan, Brendan O'Doherty, all Kerry; Phil O'Donnell and Jim Ferry, both Derry; Tom Bannon and Sean McGettigan, both Monaghan; Kevin Walsh and Bobby McNamara, both Limerick; Daithi Ó Conaill and Jerry Quinn, both Dublin; and the two remand prisoners Tom Keenan and Fintan Hearty, both South Armagh.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>79</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/2; Eamonn McCann, Inside Portlaoise, *Sunday World*, 20 March 1977.

<sup>80</sup> Hanley, 102.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, 55, 108.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,184/1; Witness statement by Patrick Casey to Fr. Piaras O'Duill, 23 April 1977.

<sup>84</sup> Hanley, 108.

<sup>85</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/2; Pat Holmes, Inside Portlaoise, *Irish Press*, 10 November 1977.

<sup>86</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,183/1; Portlaoise Hunger Strike.

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As Stuart Ross writes, the 'initial demand on undertaking the hunger strike was for a public inquiry into the running of Portlaoise Prison;' however, several other demands were soon put forward.<sup>87</sup> On 18 March, the prisoners issued eight demands: 1. The right to free association. 2. An end to degrading and humiliating strip searches. 3. An end to solitary confinement. 4. Open and respectable visits. 5. The right to engage in craftwork. 6. The right to educational facilities. 7. Adequate recreational and exercise facilities. 8. The right to communicate with the legal advisor of choice.<sup>88</sup> While 20 prisoners started the hunger strike, less than a dozen stayed on until the end.

The then President of (Provisional) Sinn Féin, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, who himself embarked on a hunger strike in Mountjoy Prison in June 1972,<sup>89</sup> said 'that men were being turned into vegetables and broken mentally in Portlaoise. The special non-jury court had sentenced them to imprisonment for alleged crimes: "No one is entitled to punish or torment them further, yet that is what happening."<sup>90</sup> Ó Brádaigh also addressed the question of whether the hunger strikes were directed by the outside movement: 'It has long been recognised in the republican movement down through history that no one has the moral right to order another on hunger-strike.<sup>91</sup> This claim is strengthened by former prisoners Vivion Hayden from Dublin. Hayden was imprisoned in Portlaoise during the times of the hunger strikes and emphasised that it was the prisoners themselves who decided to start and, later, end the protests. The decision to join the hunger strike was voluntary: 'They passed a list around, and everyone who wanted to join could join. It was usually the younger ones who had no family or children outside.'<sup>92</sup> By saying that the prisoners were not ordered from the outside movement to go on hunger strike, Ó Brádaigh reacts to claims made by the government. The days before the hunger strike had started, a document had been found ordering prisoners to go on hunger strike. Yet, the fact that this document was drawn up by the prisoners themselves did not emerge.<sup>93</sup> A press statement from the DoJ read: 'A document found in the course of a routine search of Portlaoise Prison yesterday indicates that some of the main group of prisoners there are likely to be instructed by their leaders to stage a hunger strike early next month.'<sup>94</sup> This claim was continuously denied by republicans. The front-page of *An Phoblacht* read: 'It was the prisoners who decided to make the protest against the jail conditions. It was they who decided to end it.'<sup>95</sup>

Ó Brádaigh underlines the periods of both violent and passive resistance forerunning the hunger strikes and mentions 'extensive publicity outside.' Public support for the hunger strikers, however, was limited. Although Hanley and Ó Faoleán recently provided a first understanding of the support for Provisionals in the Republic, there is no in-depth research on the campaign in support of the Mountjoy, Curragh, and Portlaoise hunger strikers.<sup>96</sup> Hence, it is fair to assess

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<sup>87</sup> Ross, 29.

<sup>88</sup> NUI Galway, Hardiman Library, Special Collection, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh Papers*, POL28/94; Demands of the Portlaoise Hunger Strikers.

<sup>89</sup> R.W. White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh: The life and politics of an Irish revolutionary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 181-5.

<sup>90</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,184/1; Jail conditions the real issue, says Ó Brádaigh, *Irish Press*, 15 Apr. 1977.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Hayden.

<sup>93</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,184/1; Darach McDonald, Why the Hunger Strike Failed, *Hibernia*, 29 Apr. 1977, 5.

<sup>94</sup> NAI, DFA-2007-59-221; Portlaoise Prison – Hunger Strike Threat, Press statement DoJ, 25 Feb. 1977.

<sup>95</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,184/2; Portlaoise pledges must be honoured, *AP/RN*, 26 Apr. 1977, 1.

<sup>96</sup> See Hanley; Ó Faoleán.

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that Ó Brádaigh's claim of 'extensive publicity' is exaggerated.<sup>97</sup> Ross, in his study on the popular movement in support of the H-Blocks prisoners, writes that the actions inside Portlaoise 'had only a limited impact on the unfolding prison struggle in the North.'<sup>98</sup> Bernadette O'Hagan, the wife of J B O'Hagan who was on hunger strike in 1971, remembers that when she went to the (Provisional) Sinn Féin Office in Dublin, only to be informed that there were no preparations for a public campaign, seven prisoners were already nineteen days into their hunger strike.<sup>99</sup>

On 22 April, the hunger strike ended after 47 days without concessions following a visit to the prison by Bishop James Kavanagh.<sup>100</sup> Throughout the year, the Fianna Fáil government improved conditions in prison.<sup>101</sup> Yet, these new developments were not enough for the prisoners who started to refuse all privileges except visits from September on. The prisoners demanded free association and an end to strip-searching. In an internal report, the authorities noted that there was a danger of a riot in prison. Therefore, to ease the tensions, the prison authorities ended the strip-searches; lock-ups were agreed for 8:30 p.m.; the prisoners were granted one late night every five to six weeks; tapes and records for language studies were allowed in the cells, and the tuck shop was improved. The concessions convinced the prisoners to end their protest.<sup>102</sup>

While the prisoners did not manage to attain their ultimate aim of 'political status,' they had secured de-facto 'special category status', and the conditions unquestionably improved over the four years of protest.<sup>103</sup> Following the end of the protests, prisoners were able to wear their own clothes, and they could associate at breakfast. Nonetheless, they were not allowed to receive any parcels, and no teaching staff were allowed in the jail – although self-study was permitted, and prisoners could also organise their own seminars and lectures.<sup>104</sup> Considering this, I would argue that the prison protests were successful insofar that the prisoners achieved most of their demands. In Northern Ireland, the blanket protests had started in the H-Blocks and republicans were shifting their attention from the Republic's prisons.

Whereas the conditions improved throughout 1977/8, the prison authorities retained five security measures: first, periodical searches of the prison; secondly, strip-searches; thirdly, wire mesh barriers in the visiting room; fourthly, access to craftwork only permitted if prisoners would agree to be strip-searched; and fifthly, free association only during periods of recreation. Furthermore, Patrick Cooney, the Minister of Justice, noted presumably in the spring or summer of 1977 that 'allegations of brutality or inhuman treatment are totally false and without any foundation whatever.' He claimed that: 'Prisoners have outdoor recreation with facilities to play football, volleyball and handball. At indoor recreation, they can play cards, chess, draughts, table tennis, watch television and have four pool tables. Prisoners are well bedded, well fed and warmly clothed.'<sup>105</sup> The Minister of Justice's outline shows an improvement of the conditions. The document of the DoJ noted that 'it is clear that the regime is a benign one and markedly different from that enjoyed by ordinary criminals.'<sup>106</sup> Therefore, the government observed that 'since the phasing-out of Special Category status [in Northern Ireland] there has been a marked

<sup>97</sup> However, Rogan mentions a few support groups on pages 143-4.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 29.

<sup>99</sup> Fáilte Cluain Eois, 127.

<sup>100</sup> NLI, *Sean O'Mahony Papers*, MS44,184/2; Statement issued from Liberty Hall, *AP/RN*, 26 Apr. 1977, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Hanley, 110.

<sup>102</sup> NAI, DFA-2012-59.1721; DoJ, Demands by Prisoners. Concessions by Government, 1972-1977.

<sup>103</sup> Harvey, 142.

<sup>104</sup> Findlay, *Criminalization*, 12.

<sup>105</sup> NAI, DFA-2007-59-221; Statement by Minister of Justice, 1977.

<sup>106</sup> NAI, DFA-2012-59.1721; DoJ, Demands by Prisoners. Concessions by Government, 1972-1977.

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decrease of tensions in Portlaoise. This may reflect the fact that conditions there are now appreciably better than in the Maze.<sup>107</sup> Different treatment from the ordinary criminal convicts was the main demand for republicans.

### **‘Portlaoise Prison is an example for this’: The H-Blocks Hunger Strikes**

The Portlaoise protests and the recognition as de-facto political prisoners in the Republic had an overlooked impact on the prison protests in the Northern Irish prisons between 1976 and 1981. In 1978, merely one year after the conclusion of the Portlaoise protests, Fr. Alec Reid of Clonnard Monastery in Belfast addressed the Minister of State at the NIO, Don Concannon. Reid pointed to the Government of the Republic as an example of how to deal with republican prisoners in Northern Ireland:

As you know, they do not, in principle, recognise political status for prisoners, or give any special status to any prisoner, but they so manage the affairs of their prisoners that they are able to avoid the kind of confrontation we are experiencing here. Portlaoise Prison is an example for this. The approach of the authorities in the Republic and the way they have managed to handle their prison protest are worthy, I believe, of serious and detailed examination because they may give helpful guidelines.<sup>108</sup>

Archival papers demonstrate that the British Government studied the previous prison protests in Portlaoise. An internal document of the British Government compared the conditions of the prisoners in the Northern Ireland prisons and camps such as H-Blocks/HMP Maze, Magilligan, Hydebank, and Armagh, with the conditions of republican prisoners in Portlaoise. Another British document compared the Northern Ireland prisons with Portlaoise and the conditions in other European countries. The information on Portlaoise included in these documents was obtained directly from the Irish Government in inter-governmental briefings.<sup>109</sup> As the rumours of a hunger strike in the H-Blocks and the Armagh Women’s Gaol intensified, ‘a British official visited the Department of Justice in Dublin on 6 and 7 October, to investigate how the Irish authorities dealt with their paramilitary prisoners in Portlaoise Prison’.<sup>110</sup> Another report was compiled by Sir Leonard Figg on the effect of the hunger strikes in Republic of Ireland.<sup>111</sup>

The comparison between the protests in Portlaoise and the H-Blocks was also picked up by public commentators, such as the editor of the *Irish Press*, Tim Pat Coogan. In a letter to the *Guardian* on 31 October 1980, Coogan argues that the H-Blocks/Maze crisis could be solved by granting the prisoners the same rights as the Irish Government had granted the Portlaoise prisoners:

In fact, of course, the substance of the five demands of the protesting republican prisoners in Long Kesh has been conceded in the Republic’s Portlaoise gaol since 1977. [...] [The p]rison conditions in Portlaoise where protests, fasts, explosions, and a general state of near-riot over the issue of how IRA prisoners should be treated had created a situation which in some ways resembled the tensions generated by the H blocks.

One of the general considerations motivating the incoming Fianna Fail administration was the fact that a sizeable section of the population in the Republic perceived that the motivation of the prisoners, while it led them to commit criminal

<sup>107</sup> NAI, JUS-2012-59-1721; Demands by Prisoners, Concessions by Government, 1972-1977, Liam Hourican to Taoiseach.

<sup>108</sup> PRONI NIO/12/128A Reid to Concannon, 25 July 1978; quoted in Hennessey, 24.

<sup>109</sup> NAI, DFA-2012-59-1596.

<sup>110</sup> Hennessey, 72.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, 454.

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acts, was not that of ordinary criminals, and had to be judged against the backdrop of the physical-force tradition in Ireland and specifically the conditions in Northern Ireland which had involved these young men in violence in the first place.

Since that accommodation was reached, Portlaoise has faded out of the Irish consciousness in a way which the H blocks could also do if a similar solution were pursued.<sup>112</sup>

In an editorial piece, the *Guardian* responded to Coogan, that 'Mr Tim Pat Coogan's letter today points to the solution at Portlaoise as a model for the Maze. [...] But it is our understanding that the Portlaoise prisoners were not given what the Maze prisoners are demanding – concessions which would distinguish them from 'non-political' prisoners'.<sup>113</sup> Though the impact of the Portlaoise protests in resolving the H-Blocks hunger strikes remains unclear, the protests in the Republic undoubtedly informed the politics of the British Government and the PIRA alike. Following negotiations between the republican prisoners and the British government, de-facto political status was also recognised in Northern Ireland and a similar process of dispute resolution developed, however, only after ten prisoners had died on the hunger strike. While their demands were not formally granted, republican prisoners had gained their special status on both sides of the Irish border from 1983.

## Conclusions

This article discussed the Portlaoise Prison protests that occurred between the spring of 1974 and the autumn of 1977. During these years, tensions were high on the republican wing of Ireland's high-security prison. The article provides literature for a comparative study of PIRA prisoners in the Republic and Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The move from Mountjoy and the Curragh Camp to Portlaoise in November 1973 saw a dramatic deterioration of the privileges of the prisoners in the Republic. Notably, while keeping their right to segregation from ordinary criminal convicts, the republicans lost their privileges of being considered as political prisoners. In Northern Ireland, the republican prisoners were granted special category status after a hunger strike in Belfast's Crumlin Road Prison in 1972. In the Republic, political prisoners in the Curragh Camp and Mountjoy enjoyed similar privileges. Still, when all prisoners were moved to Portlaoise, these rights were not immediately recognised by the authorities in the reopened high-security prison. After intense negotiation, these rights were granted, but tensions remained high. This resulted in serious riots, passive and active protests, and, finally, a series of hunger strikes. In 1977, the prisoners were eventually granted most of their demands, and the protests stopped.

Findlay includes the recognition of the paramilitary structure of the prisoners as an additional aspect that eased tensions in the debate. He argues that it was not until after the 1977 hunger strikes that the conflict could be solved, which enabled a smooth running of the prison. After these hunger strikes, the authorities informally recognised the paramilitary chain of command, which internally structured each of the segregated groups.<sup>114</sup> Thus, Findlay writes, a 'process of dispute resolution evolved.' He cites the governor of Portlaoise as saying: 'We meet their O/Cs every so often. Each group elect an O/C every three months, and they come in here. We discuss grievances and problems. It generally works pretty well.'<sup>115</sup> The former Portlaoise governor John Lonergan remembers the same situation in his memoirs: 'The Provisional IRA

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<sup>112</sup> NAI, DFA-2010-20-16; Tim Pat Coogan, Portlaoise example that the H Blocks should follow, *The Guardian*, 31 Oct. 1980.

<sup>113</sup> NAI, DFA-2010-20-16; Leader: The Irish dimension, *The Guardian*, 31 Oct. 1980.

<sup>114</sup> Behan, 13.

<sup>115</sup> Findlay, *Criminalization*, 13.



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prisoners had an OC (oifigeach ceannais) or commanding officer and a deputy OC who acted as spokesmen for their members. [...] The spokesmen came to see me on a regular basis, at least once or twice a month.<sup>116</sup> This situation described by Findlay and Lonergan is similar to the recognition of de-facto political status in the internment camps before phasing out of the Special Category Status in March 1976, and the post-1983 in the H-Blocks.

In conclusion, I argue that the Portlaoise protests were a critical period for the Provisional republican movement. The developments in the Republic, both as a logistic hinterland for the PIRA as well as the events in the Republic's prisons played a crucial role in the political and military discourse of the movement during the Troubles, as recently also outlined by Hanley and Ó Faoleán.<sup>117</sup> While the public campaign in support of the prisoners was marginal, the course and outcomes of these protests had relevant implications. The PIRA was a learning organisation, willing to adopt their tactics to new developments; most of these changes originated either in the prisons or in connection with prison protests, as has been shown previously.<sup>118</sup> As I argue elsewhere, republicans learned from the failure of organising a broad campaign in support of the Portlaoise hunger strikers by setting up the broad-front committee H-Blocks/Armagh Committee in support of the 1980-1 hunger strikers in Northern Ireland; and, as this article shows, so did the British government.<sup>119</sup> In other words, understanding of republican imprisonment in the Republic and, in particular, the developments within Portlaoise is vital for the understanding of the Troubles. Therefore, by telling the story of the Portlaoise protests, I aim to provide evidence of this forgotten phase of PIRA prison protests in the Republic and, at the same time, show that these protests were indeed a prologue to the H-Blocks struggle.

## Notes on contributor

Dr Dieter Reinisch is an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Political Science and Sociology at National University of Ireland in Galway, and an Adjunct Professor in International Relations at Webster Vienna Private University. He holds a PhD from the European University Institute. Twitter: @ReinischDieter

OrcID: 0000-0002-3205-8739

Correspondence to: dieter.reinisch@gmx.net

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<sup>116</sup> Lonergan, 117.

<sup>117</sup> Hanley; Ó Faoleán.

<sup>118</sup> J. Morrison, 'Copying to be Different: Violent Dissident Irish Republican Learning,' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40, 7 (2016), 586-602; D. Reinisch, 'Prisoners as Leaders of Political Change: Cage 11 and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland,' in *Historians on Leadership and Strategy: Case Studies From Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. by M. Gutmann (Cham: Springer, 2020), 55-75.

<sup>119</sup> D. Reinisch, *Self-educating political prisoners: An Oral history of Irish republican prisoners, 1971-2000* (2021, forthcoming).