

# The Catholic Church versus the IRA Hunger Strikers of 1923



In the Ireland of 1922, a civil war tore through the land and in its path it ripped apart families and friendships. It also created a deeper wedge in an unstable society where the church grappled for top position in an emerging new state.

The Irish Republican Army had fought a War of Independence against British rule for over three years and, led by the young enigmatic Michael Collins, it managed to push the British government to the negotiating table.

Hopes of achieving a free and united Irish republic were dashed when negotiations resulted in six counties of the northern part of the island staying with Britain and the remaining 26 counties of the south gaining home rule under the guise of an Irish Free State.

It split the Irish republican movement in two halves between those who favoured an Irish Free State and those who wanted to continue the fight for an Irish Republic. What followed was the most unsavoury of wars; a civil war.

It was a short lived campaign but a bitter and bloody one. It

was a war that saw brothers fighting against brothers and comrades who had fought together during the War of Independence now on opposing sides.

The Irish Free State won the Civil War and as it came to an official end in May 1923, republican prisoners remained incarcerated. To protest at their continued imprisonment, IRA prisoners carried out a hunger strike.

The act of Irish republican prisoners going on hunger strike had been used during the War of Independence and continued to be used during the Civil War when twenty three members of the women's wing of the IRA, Cumann na mBan, who were imprisoned in Dublin's Mountjoy jail, conducted a hunger strike in February 1923. After 34 days the women were released, including Nellie Ryan who was a sister-in-law of the Free State Minister of Defence Richard Mulcahy.

Although hostilities had come to an end in spring 1923, internment without trial became a common aspect of Free State tactics against republicans and this led to IRA prisoners taking to another hunger strike in late 1923.

The Free State government used various tactics to break this hunger strike, including supplying prisoners with forged orders from IRA headquarters to call off the strike. The government also had the overwhelming support of the Catholic Church which was also used as a tool to break the strike.

The Catholic hierarchy had a keen interest in the formation of the new Irish Free state thus becoming a staunch supporter of its government. The Church established a strong opposition to the IRA and this can be clearly seen in its attitude to the republican hunger strikers of 1923.

Large numbers of IRA prisoners went on hunger strike in the early winter of 1923, but it did not stir the government into action. Neither did the Church flinch; it saw the republican movement as subversives. The Church instead solidified its

full support for the Irish Free State with its bourgeoisie interests and stern opposition to left wing politics.

The Church had mildly supported the IRA during the War of Independence but, during the Civil War it had changed its outlook.

From the start of the Civil War in 1922, IRA volunteers were instantly condemned from the pulpit while some priests even refused family members of hunger strikers to enter a Church or even light a candle for their loved one. Such tactics would increase as the year went on.

Without any release in sight for the many IRA prisoners still incarcerated after the end of the war in 1923, 300 republicans prisoners in Mountjoy jail started a hunger strike in October. The hunger strike soon spread to other institutions of incarceration resulting in over 7,000 prisoners going on hunger strike across Ireland.

Days before the hunger strike began, the Catholic hierarchy released a statement declaring their opposition to the IRA. The statement called on excommunication for IRA members who partook in the war against the Free State. This attitude of the church hardened as the IRA hunger strike began.

The total tally of hunger strikers in Mountjoy was 462 while in Cork jail they numbered at 70. The Curragh prison camp had the highest proportion of hunger strikers with 3,390 while in the Newbridge camp they totalled at 1,700. In Kilkenny jail there were 350 hunger strikers while 711 prisoners went on strike in Gormanstown camp. In Dundalk jail there were 200 hunger strikers and in Harepark camp there were 100. Members of Cumann na mBan also joined the strike and had 50 of its members on hunger strike in the North Dublin union.

Conditions in these places were appalling while the treatment handed out to the hunger strikers was calculated to break the strike and most importantly their morale. Medical attention

was nil regarding the prisoners while simple things such as clothing and bedding were denied to many. Lice, fleas and rats infested the jails and conditions worsened as the Winter wore on.

The hunger strike of 1923 lasted for 41 days and tragedy rather than victory was to be the outcome.

Two IRA members from Cork died on hunger strike just days apart. The first was Denis 'Dinny' Barry from Riverstick who died on November 20 while Andrew O' Sullivan from Mallow died two days later and even though death had occurred, the stance of both the government and church did not soften towards the prisoners.

Denis Barry was a member of the first Cork brigade and had been politically active in Sinn Fein. In 1917 he became election agent for W.T. Cosgrave in the Kilkenny by-election, one in which Cosgrave was successfully elected, but just six years later Barry would find himself imprisoned by the government Cosgrave was in charge of.

In 1922 Barry was imprisoned in Newbridge camp in Kildare and took part in the hunger strike of 1923. After 34 days protesting against the harsh regime and undignified conditions, Barry died but even in death he was still refused dignity.

The body of Denis Barry was not released to his family and was instead, on the orders of Minister of Defence Richard Mulcahy, buried in the grounds of Newbridge prison camp. The Barry family took legal action against this and eventually achieved the body of their loved one but their stress did not end there.

Upon returning back to Cork with the body of the dead hunger striker, the Bishop of Cork Daniel Cohalan, instructed his priests not to allow Barry's funeral in any church. Ironically just a few short years before, Bishop Cohalan had been a

strong vocal supporter of Terrence MacSwiney the Sinn Fein lord mayor of Cork who died on hunger strike in Brixton prison, but shortly after MacSwiney's death bishop Cohalan's attitude towards the IRA changed.

Not long after MacSwiney's death, Bishop Cohalan issued a decree condemning the IRA in which he stated that: 'Anyone who shall within the diocese of Cork organise or take part in an ambush or in kidnapping or otherwise shall be guilty of murder or attempted murder and shall incur by the very fact the censure of excommunication.'

Bishop Cohalan was the perfect example of Catholic hierarchy hostility towards the Republican movement. It was a hostility based on the interests of the church which wanted a strong grasp on an emerging new country, one which would be conservative and Catholic both socially and politically.

On December 10 1922 the bishop had preached publicly his support for the Anglo Irish treaty which set up the Irish Free State and he urged his flock to do the same. This led to an even greater wedge between the Catholic church and many IRA members, yet it would be the incident with Denis Barry that would seriously taint the Bishop of Cork and the Catholic church in republican eyes.

Because of Bishop Cohalan's stern objection to Barry's body being let into a Catholic church, the dead hunger striker had to lay in state in the Cork Sinn Fein headquarters on the Grand Parade in Cork city. Barry was then taken in a funeral procession to St.Finbarr's cemetery where he was buried in the Republican plot next to Terrence MacSwiney whose funeral Bishop Cohalan presided over three years previously.

In place of a priest was David Kent, Sinn Fein Teachta Dála (representative) for Cork and brother of Thomas Kent who was executed for his part in the 1916 Rising. Kent gave an oration, recited the rosary and sprinkled holy water on the

grave.

On November 28th 1923, the day Barry was buried, Cohalan sent an open letter to the Cork Examiner newspaper publicly denying a Christian burial for Denis Barry and urging all men of the cloth to stay away from any such attempts for a funeral for the dead hunger striker. Bishop Cohalan went so far as to write to the Bishop of Kildare Dr. Patrick Foley to enquire about Barry getting the last sacraments. Denis Barry did indeed receive the last rites from a Fr. Doyle who was serving as prison chaplain and this did not impress the Bishop of Cork.

Two days after Barry's death another IRA prisoner from Cork died. Andrew O' Sullivan died on November 22nd and the strike was called off the day after.

The attitude of the Catholic Church towards the IRA and those imprisoned and on hunger strike during the Civil War sums up the position the church took in the aftermath of the conflict.

Once the Free State was established the Church saw an opportunity to position itself in a seat of power. Although many priests and some bishops continued to sympathise with the Republican movement post War of Independence, the majority followed the middle class patterns the provisional government were knitting out.

When the hunger strike came to an end, only women prisoners were released. The men remained in prison until the following year which would see some of them granted their freedom in drips and drabs. By then the Irish Free State was fully set up through a bedrock of conservative Catholicism.

The Church hierarchy decided to support those who represented the haves rather than the have nots and the total disregard for anyone who opposed them can be summed up in incidents such as Bishop Cohalan's opposition to a Christian burial for Denis Barry in Cork.

*The photo is Dennis Barry, the first hunger striker to die.*

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