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Ireland

The H-Block Struggle

- Reviews section -

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OVER THE PAST decade there has been a flowering of critical, unorthodox and revisionist historical writings that examine the armed conflict that raged between 1969 and 1997 over Britain's occupation of the north of Ireland – a period commonly referred to as "The Troubles." For decades historians and journalists, even those with diametrically opposed political sympathies, mostly relied on a handful of established political tropes to tell the story of the war. But the plot has thickened in recent years as a new wave of historical works, many of them by authors with personal histories in social movements, have intently shined a light on many previously under-explored aspects of the war.

Veteran journalist Ed Moloney kicked off this trend towards critical reassessment with his 2003 book, *A Secret History of the IRA*, which looked at the rise of Gerry Adams as the central leader and spokesperson of the Irish republican movement. Maloney portrayed Adams' accession to leadership as a long march of near-Machiavellian maneuvers and backroom negotiations with the British, paving the way for a stage-managed "peace process" in the 1990s.

The book was a bestseller and something of a literary game-changer. A few years later former IRA political prisoner Richard O'Rawe's book *Blanketmen* examined disagreements surrounding the 1981 hunger strikes, sending shockwaves through the Republican Movement and reopening discussion of that watershed event.

After decades of books about "The Troubles" focused exclusively on the Provisional IRA and their political party Sinn Féin, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers Party* (released in 2010) unearthed another buried story of modern Irish radical politics, bringing to light the history of an IRA faction that turned towards reform socialist politics and seemingly disowned the "National Question."

Anthony McIntyre, former IRA militant turned historian, contributed to *Good Friday: The Death of Irish Republicanism* (2008), an intimate look at the mainstream (Provisional) IRA's long slide towards accommodation with the political status quo. His blog "The Pensive Quill" focuses on critically reevaluating the republican tradition.

F. Stuart Ross's *Smashing H Block: The Rise and Fall of the Popular Campaign against Criminalization, 1976-1982* [1] is a welcome addition to this renaissance of rethinking and reassessment. It focuses on the struggle over the rights of Irish republican militants held in Britain's notorious prisons in the North of Ireland. (H Block refers to the H-shaped buildings, specifically designed to keep male POWs isolated. Women prisoners were held at a separate prison, Armagh.)

Unlike nearly all previous writing on the prison struggle, Ross focuses on the grassroots movement that was built outside of the prisons. *Smashing H Block* pays special attention to how ordinary working-class Irish people – many of whom had not previously been involved with political organizing – built a powerful mass movement in solidarity with the prisoners.

Instigated mostly by relatives of prisoners, this movement represented the high point of popular mobilization against Britain's policies in Ireland in the 1969-1997 period. Ross's "from below" reading of this militant yet broad-based movement should be required reading for Left activists as well as students of modern Ireland.

1976: A New Movement Born

In 1976 the first rumbling of a movement in solidarity with republican prisoners was sparked by protests against deteriorating conditions led by prisoners themselves. The 1969-1972 period had been marked by mass-based militant political demonstrations against British rule in the streets – mobilizations so far-reaching that they effectively made some nationalist areas “no-go” zones for state forces.

Britain’s brutal drive to roll back this insurrectionary upsurge effectively made street protests impossible, shifting the dynamic towards protracted armed conflict between the state and IRA guerrillas. As Ross points out in detail, rekindling mass participation would be extraordinarily difficult.

In the early 1970s, Irish republican activists imprisoned by Britain were given special status as political prisoners. By the mid-’70s, sensing that the reborn IRA was being weakened, Britain withdrew this special status for prisoners. This move, which radically changed living conditions inside the prisons, was aimed at changing the political conversation. Irish republicans, the British government argued, were not activists with political goals; they were simply criminals and deserved to be treated as such.

Downgrading the standing of political prisoners was a key part of Britain’s strategy of “criminalization” aimed at isolating the movement and depriving it of any legitimacy in domestic and world opinion.

A key change in the new prison regime was clothing: from now on Irish republicans would be forced to wear prison-approved clothing, not their own clothes. The prisoners refused to wear a “convict’s uniform” and wrapped themselves in blankets instead. But refusal to wear such a uniform eventually meant that they could not leave their cells, which meant that urine, feces and menstrual blood would also remain in the cells.

The “blanket protest” of 1976 eventually escalated to the “dirty protest” by 1978. But as conditions further deteriorated and the situation inside the prisons became more desperate, the population outside the prisons and outside the close-knit republican community remained largely unaware of the situation. Both British and Irish media meticulously ignored the situation, mainstream politicians would not dare raise the issue, and the IRA itself was more focused on honing its military ability than it was on campaigning for its imprisoned members.

There was a desperate need to break through the media blackout, build awareness of the prisoner’s situation, and construct a popular movement in the streets on behalf of the prisoners. Ultimately it would be family members of the prisoners – and eventually a wide swath of other sympathetic forces – who would step into the void and build such a movement.

As the crisis in the prisons mounted, prisoners’ families and individuals from the Northern nationalist community came together to found the Relatives Action Committee (RAC) in 1976, with the goal of building support for political status for political prisoners. While quite a few RAC founders were close to the Republican Movement (IRA and Sinn Féin), the Republican Movement was not of one mind regarding how to relate to the emergence of the RAC.

As Ross explains in great detail, many in the Republican Movement were hesitant, for example, to share a platform with political groups or individuals who might not share their commitment to the IRA’s armed campaign. There was also the widely held belief that the time for broad-based demonstrations had passed and that “the war” required the movement to keep its focus on armed struggle. Demanding rights for prisoners, it was argued by many Irish republicans, was a step backwards from the movement’s central demand: a full British withdrawal from Ireland.

In addition to these misgivings about the tactics and orientation of the nascent “political status” movement, the Republican Movement was hampered by the fact that it was by necessity organized on an entirely clandestine basis. Above-ground, mass organizing around demands that fell short of full British withdrawal was not the Republican Movement specialty in 1976.

But increasingly the Republican Movement realized it had little choice but to engage and help build such a movement; this was essential both to win support for the prisoners and ultimately to help the Republican Movement sink roots outside the Northern ghettos where its support base was concentrated. As events proved,

“... the protests against criminalization” would provide republicanism “with the means for transforming itself from a small, ghetto-based sect into a truly national movement. And the first step in that long and difficult process was the formation of the Relatives Action Committees.” (22)

As it began to quickly grow, the RAC became the National H Block/Armagh Committee.

Evolving Strategy, Evolving Tactics

One remarkable aspect of *Smashing H Block* is in showing the mechanics of a disciplined (and doctrinaire) political movement changing key elements of its strategy. Ross looks very closely at the tension that existed between the leadership of the Republican Movement and the growing movement in solidarity with Republican prisoners.

That “Smash H Block” would emerge as a heterogeneous, single-issue campaign was far from certain. Ross maps out how disparate forces, from prisoners’ families to non-Republican human rights activists to the socialist left, assembled a movement on behalf of the prisoners. Those in the Republican Movement who believed that only armed actions worked and that the days of mass mobilization were past were gradually won to the idea that a mass-based protest movement was needed and could work. When the grassroots started to mobilize — bringing the prisoners’ message to people beyond the reach of the Republican Movement — skeptics became believers.

While the movement spearheaded by the prisoners’ relatives began to build its viability, buoyed by a handful of successful demonstrations and a dedicated core of activists, it also faced a predictably harsh response from the British government. Using the British Army, local police and Loyalist death squads, a campaign of assassinations and repression was orchestrated against the movement nearly from the moment of its inception.

Ronnie Bunting and Miriam Daly, both socialist-republicans, were summarily executed in their homes by a Loyalist gang orchestrated by the British SAS was to blame. Soon civil rights icon Bernadette Devlin McAliskey would be targeted for an attempted assassination. But this climate of state violence could not stop the growing anti-criminalization movement.

Ross’ extensive reliance on movement newsletters, internal documents, and party newspapers maps out the movement’s slow but determined growth in vivid detail, giving the reader an intimate sense of what it takes to build a vibrant movement under extraordinary circumstances.

A Unique Coalition

A great achievement of *Smashing H Block* is an in-depth examination of a number of left-wing political groups previously excluded by standard histories of the conflict. Peoples Democracy was a key force in the Northern civil rights movement of the 1960s, in some ways comparable to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the

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United States. While this early era of Peoples Democracy has been written about before, Ross examines PD in the later 1970s when the organization was smaller but also now openly socialist and revolutionary.

For their diminished size PD played a remarkable role in the growth of the prisoners' movement in the late 1970s and early '80s, due largely to their Marxist understanding of the role of mass action and their insistence on an "anti-imperialist front" that included but went beyond the organized Republican base. Ross also examines Women Against Imperialism, yet another leftist group that played an important role in the prisoners' movement yet has been overlooked by historians until now. Ross explains:

"Women Against Imperialism came out of a split in the Belfast Women's Collective in 1978. The group argued that: 'The anti-imperialist struggle takes its most intense form in the resistance of the nationalist areas of Belfast and it is in those areas and through organizations such as the Relatives Action Committee that we should work to raise issues relating to women in the anti-imperialist struggle.' During its short lifespan (it collapsed in early 1981), Women Against Imperialism found that it was "easier to feminize Republicans . . . than to Republicanize feminists.' Arguably, the organization spurred the formation of Sinn Féin's Women's Department." (55-56)

As the book follows the flowering of the prisoners' solidarity movement over 1978 to 1980, readers are shown a movement widening and diversifying. Pacifist Catholics, moderate Irish nationalists with no sympathy for the IRA's guerrilla war, British trade unionists, clergy from Dublin to New York, and U.S. peace activists were getting involved with the fight for prisoners' rights.

Former prisoners of war toured the United States and Europe, detailing British repression in gripping detail. Britain was increasingly seen as a human rights pariah, with television exposés and anti H Block op-eds appearing in establishment media outlets scarcely known as mouthpieces of anti-imperialism. This swelling chorus of solidarity with Irish republican prisoners framed the issue as one of basic human rights.

From the point of view of the Left and many rank-and-file RAC activists, the Coalisland Anti-Repression conference was the first ... breakthrough [for the anti-criminalization campaign]. Held in January 1978 "just days after the European Court of Human Rights found Britain guilty of "inhuman and degrading treatment" of Irish internees "the conference was a one-day event "open to all who wish[ed] to attend, irrespective of their political opinions or lack of them." The hopes were that attendees could come together and "take the first step towards united action to bring rampant repression to an end.

The event received front-page coverage in the *Irish News*, where journalists estimated that over 500 people attended (others put the number at closer to 1,000). What is more, over 20 different organizations running the gamut of political opinion in the Catholic community were in attendance. It was particularly noted that "even the SDLP, which ha[d] been ... [wary] about association with groups on an anti-repression basis, was represented by Austin Currie and Paddy Duffy." (42-43)

Photographs of prisoners living in cells with feces-covered walls contributed to a significant shift in public opinion, humanizing the IRA militants and shaming Britain's prison regime. With a diverse range of political forces expressing varying degrees of support for the prisoners' demands, the stage was set for the prisoners' last, desperate move: hunger strike. With Britain unmoved, IRA prisoners resorted to hunger strike to force the government's hand.

The 1981 hunger strikes would leave 10 Irish republican revolutionaries dead. The hunger strikes were a grim turning point, eventually winning some demands but only after the crushing defeat of losing young, dedicated Irish revolutionaries. But the 1981 hunger strikes also represented a major breakout for the Republican Movement, with three hunger strikers elected to office and swelling sympathy around the globe.

The H-Block Struggle

Ross sums up the lesson of the struggle:

“This study of the popular campaign against criminalization simply underscores the critical importance of political organization and mass mobilization. After all, as former IRA Chief of Staff Seán Mac Stiofáin put it, “[a] hunger strike is a two-sided weapon, and it does not work well unless those inside and outside jail play their part with equal determination.”

There have been a number of republican hunger strikes since 1981, most drawing inspiration from the ten men who died that fateful year. More often than not, however, those who have chosen to embark on this form of protest tend to fall back on the words of IRA hunger striker Terence MacSwiney: “[I]t is not they who can inflict the most, but they who can suffer the most who will conquer.” Self-sacrifice and martyrdom are privileged over the building of a mass movement. This “like so much in orthodox Irish republicanism” is a mistake based on a misreading of history. It is also based on a misunderstanding of how one effects real political and social change. (186-187)

It is impossible to imagine the emergence of Sinn Féin as an above-ground political party without the groundwork carried out by Relatives Action Committee and the patchwork anti-H Block insurgency.

Even readers with a long history of involvement with the Irish Republican movement will be floored by Ross’s research. The detailed footnotes take up nearly a third of the book “with good reason!” and make for some of the its best reading. By focusing on the republican grassroots and not simply the movement’s established institutions (Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin), Ross is breaking with standard historiography to a profound degree. Ross’s scrutiny of the role of the socialist left, specifically Peoples Democracy, is perhaps entirely unique.

The last decade of critical historical reexamination of “The Troubles” is certainly important for students of Irish history. But this spirit of reexamination is important for socialist activists as well. When histories of revolutionary movements focus exclusively on the movements’ leadership, our understanding of what makes popular upsurges suffers. This approach often mirrors the “great man” view of history, slighting the agency of everyday working-class people.

It was the nationalist working class of British-occupied “Northern Ireland,” proudly referred to in Irish republican circles as “the risen people,” that rebelled against the sectarian Orange state. It was this oppressed social class that created the IRA, not the other way around. F. Stuart Ross understands this dynamic.

It was this same community that built a powerful human rights movement against all political odds, against even Britain’s war machine and its Frankenstein-like Loyalist death squads. *Smashing H Block* is an inspiring story of everyday people fighting back against an intransigent and brutal empire, told with astonishing and vivid detail.

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[1] *Smashing H Block: The Rise and Fall of the Popular Campaign Against Criminalization, 1976-1982*
By F. Stuart Ross
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