

# Blessed are those who hunger for justice?

*A comparative analysis of the functioning of the discourse of Christian martyrdom in the cases of the political hunger strikes of the Womens Social and Political Union (1909) and the Irish Republican Army (1981)*



'An upholder of tyranny', *Votes for Women* (August 6, 1909).



'The writing on the wall', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (July 25, 1981).

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## Abstract

This thesis comparatively questions how the discourse of Christian martyrdom functioned in the context of the political hunger strikes of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1909 and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1981. Through its meta-narrative, Christian martyrdom has the discursive potential to transform the experience of being suppressed and persecuted because of one's conviction, in a righteous and noble act. Through empirical analysis of the language through which the WSPU and the IRA reported the stories of respectively their 1909 and 1981 political hunger strikers in their newspapers *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, this thesis shows how both movements employed the discourse of Christian martyrdom in their narration and framing of the meaning of the self-chosen starvation of their members. Although neither the WSPU nor the IRA operated out of primarily religious motives, both explained the course and impact of its hunger strikes through suggestive parallels with Christian martyrdom. Because they had proudly chosen suffering over a betrayal of their political convictions, WSPU-member Marion Wallace Dunlop (1864-1942) and IRA-member Bobby Sands (1954-1981) were praised for having given ultimate account of their movement's cause. Hereby, as their movements argued, their passive sufferings had been transformed into active weapons. Nevertheless, in both cases, the martyrdom of the hunger strikers was no foregone conclusion. Reports published in *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* on both cases show that the self-sought suffering of Dunlop and Sands caused irritation among the British people. Particularly in the case of the Sands, people could not reconcile the IRA's martyrological claim with the movement's violent propagation of its political cause. Hereby, it was shown that, although Christian martyrdom is a powerful discursive practice that arose in the context of many significant political conflicts, it is the public's sympathy through which the martyr's crown is granted.

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## Introduction

The spirit of the martyrs of old is strong in such women, and the pangs of death itself could not have broken that spirit to do and dare all in the cause of right and justice. Miss Dunlop's fast was a trial of faith that proved the depth of her devotion to the great cause for which she suffered, and for which other brave women are suffering to-day.

*Votes for Women* (July 23, 1909).<sup>1</sup>

Bobby, your death has been such a sad loss,  
Just like Christ you carried your cross.  
Sleep now my comrade, like martyr's past,  
You have inspired us with your courage, we'll fight 'till the last.

*An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 16, 1981).<sup>2</sup>

In today's western world, the infusion of political conflict and religious rhetoric is a sensitive affair. In the current wave of terrorism, society is confronted with the need to critically consider the place religious cultures hold in the (post-)modern world and the way it puts shape to human action in the context of political dispute and conflict. Paralysed by the inability to accommodate a religiously charged conception of socio-political grievances in a world we once thought to become secular, the cross-influence of religious- and political languages is often disregarded as arch-conservatism or religious radicalism. However, the usage of intertwined political-Christian language by militant movements is not a new phenomenon and does not only merely belong to the most extremist branches of radical religious traditions. On the contrary. As thesis shows, a complex entanglement of political and religious framing also appeared in two (in)famous political struggles of militant movements that, although not fighting a primarily religiously motivated struggle, employed a Christian language to communicate their cause: the hunger strikes of the Women's Social and Political Union's (WSPU) and of the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) in respectively 1909 and 1981.

On June 29, 1909, Marion Wallace Dunlop (1864-1942) was the first suffragette ever to go on hunger strike while imprisoned in London's Holloway Prison. Through her refusal to eat or drink she protested the British government's refusal to grant the status of political prisoner to women incarcerated for their involvement in the WSPU's militant struggle for the enfranchisement of women. Unnerved by Dunlop's action, the government of Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1852-1928) wanted to avoid a public scandal and decided to release her after ninety-one hours. Nevertheless, throughout the following months her example would be followed by hundreds of imprisoned suffragettes.<sup>3</sup> 72 years later, on March 1, 1981, the IRA initiated a hunger strike campaign among ten republican prisoners incarcerated in the H-Blocks of Maze Prison, 14 kilometres southwest of Belfast, of which Bobby Sands (1954-1981) would become the protagonist. This time, the British government, by then under the leadership of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), held to its stance that the hunger strikers were convicted criminals who

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<sup>1</sup> 'Two Great Meetings: Miss Wallace Dunlop's Heroic Action', *Votes for Women* (July 23, 1909), 981.

<sup>2</sup> 'Bobby Sands has been laid to rest', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 16, 1981), 1, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Laura E. Nym Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930* (Oxford 2003), 50-54.

had to serve their full sentence. Throughout the course of 1981, all ten hunger strikers died from starvation.<sup>4</sup> Although operating in deviate time frames and in different socio-historical contexts, both cases show a notorious resemblance. While primarily aiming at the issue of political status, both the WSPU and the IRA granted their hunger strikers with a label that transcended the political implications of their protests: a Christian-like status of martyrdom.

At the first sight, a militant movement assigning its members with the status of martyrdom seems a prevalent practice. However, when critically considering the concept's wider connotation, its appearance in the cases becomes even as problematic as intriguing. Being at the core of the Christian religion, martyrdom refers to those who proudly imitate Christ in his noble choice of suffering over betraying the sacred cause.<sup>5</sup> When absorbing the above citations from *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, the official newspapers of respectively the WSPU and the IRA, it becomes clear that the martyrdom assigned to Dunlop, Sands, and their fellow hunger strikers was somehow constructed in parallel with this Christian connotation. When absorbing the images on this thesis' frontpage and the citations on top of this introduction, all from *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, the official newspapers of respectively the WSPU and the IRA, it becomes clear that the martyrdom assigned to Dunlop, Sands, and their fellow hunger strikers was somehow constructed in parallel with this Christian connotation. Both movements however did not operate through primary religious grounds but had the primary aim to challenge the British government through militant force. Neither the WSPU nor the IRA propagated this struggle as being religious or spiritual, both regularly clashed with the established church, none of their prominent members were religious leaders, and as movements they did not hold definite opinions on hermeneutic or doctrinal issues.<sup>6</sup> As we can see later-on in this introduction's historiographical discussion (3.2 and 3.3), some strands of historians claim that the histories of the WSPU's battle for women suffrage and the IRA's fight for an independent (Northern) Ireland should therefore not be interpreted through a religious frame. This vision, however, does not explain why quasi-Christian language was so frequently used nor what its appearance reveals about the dynamics of cause and course of both conflicts. How can it be understood that these movements with no primary Christian affiliations used a quasi-Christian language to interpret the political causes of their hunger striking members, and what did this do to the framing of the issues at stake? And did society adopt their martyrological claims? Does a Christianly framed hunger strike automatically lead up to what is stated in the Sermon of the Mount in Matthew 5:6: 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled'?<sup>7</sup>

To make sense of the intertwined political and Christian language the WSPU and the IRA interpreted their 1909 and 1981 hunger strikes through, this thesis questions *how the discourse of Christian martyrdom functioned in the context of the political issues at stake during the 1909*

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<sup>4</sup> David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: A History of the Northern Ireland Conflict* (London 2012), 159-161, 164-166.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Middleton, *Martyrdom: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London 2011), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Harold L. Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign 1866-1928* (Harlow 2007), 30-32.; Margaret M. Scull, 'The Catholic Church and the Hunger Strikes of Terence MacSwiney and Bobby Sands', *Irish Political Studies* (2015), 282, 289; William Crotty, 'The Catholic Church in Ireland and Northern Ireland', in: Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence C. Reardon, Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives* (Washington 2007), 117; George Sweeney, 'Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice', 431.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:6 (King James Bible).

and 1981 hunger strikes of the WSPU and the IRA. Through a comparative discourse analysis of the WSPU and the IRA's own reports on their hunger strikes in *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, and the way in which British newspapers *The Times*, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Express* responded to their martyrological claims, this research examines how the Christian martyrdom as a discursive practice was positioned in the way their hunger strikes were performed and perceived in the contexts of the political struggles at stake.

## The Women's Social and Political Union

The struggle for inclusive women suffrage in Great Britain dates back from 1859, when a group of middle-class women founded several small associations through which they intended to enlarge women's opportunities in education and employment and thereby enlarge their societal mobility. When in 1865 John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), who was one of the first male politicians propagating the issue of gender equality, was elected as Prime Minister, the issue of the parliamentary vote started to become one of their central issues.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as several other feminist causes seemed more realistic to achieve on the short term, like reforms concerning women's property rights and divorce laws, it would take several years before the inclusive franchise became at the core of their campaign. As historian Martin Pugh explains, it was during the 1890s when the then leading Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) sowed the seeds for the thinking out of which the WSPU would arise about a decade later by '[reaching] the conclusion that they were wasting their time in passing annual resolutions, and would be better advised to accelerate the whole process by focusing on the women's vote'.<sup>9</sup> Through logic and reason, the WLF and several sister organisations hoped to convince the Labour Party that if women were able to abide the law, they were also able to contribute to its political construction and execution. However, the struggle of the suffragists, as the women became known, progressed with great difficulty. Parliamentarians stated that women were unable to understand the political construction of laws and refused to seriously consider their cause.<sup>10</sup>

As Pugh states, during the early 1900s it were the radical Irish nationalists, who at that time were mobilising their militant struggle for a free and united Ireland, who inspired some suffragist factions that only more provocative means would enforce the British authorities, and that therefore a militant style of action had to be adopted.<sup>11</sup> Frustrated by the suffragists' persistency on law-abidance and non-violence and the toilsome proceeding of their cause, in 1903 suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) and her daughters Christabel (1880-1958) and Sylvia (1882-1960) founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) under the motto 'Deeds not Words'. Throughout the course of time they became known as the suffragettes. Being a politically engaged woman and a gifted public speaker, Pankhurst quickly mobilised thousands of women from diverse ranges of society.<sup>12</sup> Under her leadership, the WSPU adopted tactics that focused on direct action and disruption. Initially this mainly concerned the interruption

<sup>8</sup> Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914* (Oxford 2000), 7-10.; Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14* (Chicago 1988), ix-x.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Cain, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford 1992), 182.

<sup>10</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 7-10, 14-16.; Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign*, 7-10.

<sup>11</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign*, 19-21, 34-36, Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 19-20.



of parliamentary meetings, through which the movement attempted to call attention for their cause and challenge male authority. The WSPU's actions, however, were to no avail and were brushed aside by both conservative and liberal politicians who argued that the movement's provocative stance only confirmed women's incapacity to understand and practice politics. In response, throughout the mid-1900s the WSPU further radicalised its tactics by adding illegal acts to its repertoire, and increasingly designed its operative modus through a mixture of violence and vandalism against people and objects representing the institutions that refused to listen to their arguments. The violent actions were mainly directed against anti-suffragists politicians, who were attacked by suffragettes scratching them in the face, whose residences were bombed, and whose golf courses were plastered with suffrage-slogans. Nevertheless, the WSPU meant to avoid severe violent inflictions of individuals, a stance it kept until its dissolution in 1917. Through its acts of vandalism and disruptions of the public order, the movement intended to bring inclusive suffrage to the attention of British society and thereby enforce the government to seriously discuss the matter. For example, parliamentary buildings and shops at London's Oxford Street were regularly vandalised, and several times a group of suffragettes sailed up the Thames to the parliamentary buildings and shouted 'abuse!' through portable loud-speakers. Also, as the Church of England had declared itself against women suffrage, churches were set on fire, and, as it was believed that the royal family was opposing their case as well, suffragettes chained themselves to the gates of Buckingham Palace.<sup>13</sup>

As is further expounded in Chapter 2, it was against this background that, in the July 1909 WSPU-member Marion Wallace Dunlop started her hunger strike for political status when imprisoned for her involvement in the movement's actions. From September 1909 onwards, the government introduced force feeding as means to avoid the hunger strikers to become seriously ill and to discourage the suffragettes to go on strike.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the following years, hunger strikes remained a frequently used tactic by imprisoned WSPU-members. The government used force feeding as standard means to end the strikes until 1913, when it introduced the (Prisoners) Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act. The Act, which is also known as The Cat and Mouse Act, arranged that suffragettes who went on a hunger strike would be left to their own devices until they were severely weakened. Then they would be released 'on license', with the expectation that they would break their strike when at home again. When again breaking the law, the whole process would be repeated, which, as the government hoped, would eventually exhaust them.<sup>15</sup>

Between 1909 and 1912, the WSPU continued its militant tactics. Although their militancy remained a debatable affair, gradually the support for women suffrage started to increase. In 1909, 1911 and 1912, Parliament debated (but not passed) Conciliation Bills, which would grant the vote to only some women.<sup>16</sup>

When the First World War broke out in 1914, however, the WSPU drastically changed its tactics. Christabel Pankhurst abandoned the militant actions and stated that suffragettes, as full members of British society, had the duty to support the government's war effort. As several

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<sup>13</sup> Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 176-180.; Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign*, 37-39.; Mayhall, 'Defining Militancy: Radical Protest, the Constitutional Idiom and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1908-1909', *Journal of British Studies* 39 (2000) 3, 340-345.

<sup>14</sup> Mayhall, 'Defining Militancy', 360

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign*, 44-49.

<sup>16</sup> Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement*, 107.

prominent WSPU-members disagreed on the movement's exact stance, during the war the WSPU splintered into several factions. In 1917 the movement was abolished, and Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst founded the Women's Party. Although, as Smith explains, historians disagree over the question whether the war 'was the cause or simply the occasion for the reform', from 1914 onwards the support for the cause of inclusive suffrage rapidly increased, both societally and politically.<sup>17</sup> In 1918, the cause of women suffrage became reality: on February 6, the Parliament accepted the Representation of the People Act and thereby enfranchised women above 30.<sup>18</sup>

## The Irish Republican Army

The (Northern) Irish tradition of militant republicanism has a long history. Although it goes back to the first English claim on the Irish Island (the Great Plantation of Ulster) in the twelfth century and the revolts against the 1695 Penal Laws (through which the British authorities juridically secured their stance), the more direct roots of the Irish Republican Army lie in the foundation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on January 1, 1801. The Union constitutionally tied up Ireland to Great Britain and secured the dominance of the (mainly Protestant) descendants of the Planters over the descendants of the native Irish (who were dominantly Catholic).<sup>19</sup> Although Catholic opposition against the Union grew rapidly, as a little educated community that was highly dependent on the discriminatory Protestant-dominated landlord system, their political mobilisation proceeded toilsome. Also, their political initiatives were abruptly hindered by the Great Famine that plagued western Europe between 1845 and 1850, and severely harmed the Ireland's agrarian Catholic community.<sup>20</sup>

However, when during the second half of the nineteenth century nationalism came into the picture, the grievous undertone of the Catholic self-image got another meaning.<sup>21</sup> During what became known as the Gaelic Revival, a culturally orientated Irish nationalism, which a decade later would become at the heart of the IRA's ideology, developed rapidly. During the Gaelic Revival, the British' discriminatory categorisation of the Catholic Irish being a lower people was seen in another light. Nationalist thinking directly twisted the framing of the identity markers that the British had indicated as a prove of the community's poverty and political inferiority. The folkish elements that separated the Catholic identity from the Protestant one, like the ancient Celtic roots, traditional music and dance, Gaelic sports, the Irish language and the agrarian lifestyle, were now framed as proud cultural heritage that bound together the Catholic Irish as a collective and thereby legitimised the wish for an own, independent nation.<sup>22</sup>

Although the political of Irish nationalism still proved to be a difficult affair, a radical, revolutionary interpretation of the Gaelic Revival's cultural nationalism rapidly gained support throughout the entire country. In 1858, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was founded,

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign*, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign*, 77-79.; Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 284-285

<sup>19</sup> Richard B. Finnegan, *Ireland: The Challenge of Conflict and Change* (Colorado 1983), 8-12.

<sup>20</sup> E. R. R. Green, 'The Great Famine 1845-1850', in: T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin, *The Course of Irish History* (Cork 2011), 230.

<sup>21</sup> Kathleen Nutt and Peter Gray, 'Re-thinking Irish Nationalism: Identity, Difference and the Northern Conflict', *An Irish Quarterly Review* 83 (1994) 329, 11-12.; Sweeney, 'Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice', 422-423.

<sup>22</sup> Nutt and Gray, 'Re-thinking Irish Nationalism', 11-12.; John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London 2012), 2.

a secret organisation that argued that, because of the stubborn attitude of the British, Irish independency could only be realised through militant struggle.<sup>23</sup> In 1874, the militant Young Irelanders joined the IRB's combat, and in 1913, together with several smaller (splinter) organisations, both joined forces under the wings of an umbrella organisation called the Irish Volunteers.<sup>24</sup> In April 1916, during the Easter week, the Irish Volunteers organised a series of mass-protest marches in Dublin, and eventually claimed the foundation of the provisional Irish Republic. The British government realised that the Irish situation was untenable. When its proposal to partition the island was rejected by the Catholic community, the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) broke out. Eventually, in 1921, the Irish Free state and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland were founded.<sup>25</sup> The struggle for a free Ireland, however, was not over yet. For many, the Irish Free state did not match the ideals of Irish nationalism as the northern province Ulster was still in British hands and the border of Northern Ireland was drawn in such a way that a slight majority of the community was Protestant; a construction that was democratically in the disadvantage to the Catholic community.<sup>26</sup>

Although the IRB was abolished in 1924, the Irish Volunteers continued their battle throughout the following decades and were eventually included in the Irish Republican Army, which had been founded in 1919.<sup>27</sup> During the aftermath of the Rising, the heavily weakened militant republicans had expanded their militant repertoire by adding hunger strikes to their tactics for the first time. Inspired by an ancient Celtic tradition, in which fasting could be used by the lower classes as juridical pressure means when in conflict with someone from the higher classes, the republicans used this tactic to challenge the British claim to power. Between 1913 and 1923, over fifty political motivated hunger strikes were organised in prisons, in which about 9.000 republican inmates participated.<sup>28</sup>

Due to the turmoil of the World Wars, the upheaval caused by (the aftermaths of) the Rising and the Irish War of Independence faded to the background. During the mid-1960s, however, the worldwide trend of decolonisation and civil rights protests stirred up the nationalist sentiments again. When in 1968 a civil rights march in Derry ended in a violent confrontation of demonstrators and the police, the situation started to escalate. On January 30, 1972, a day that would go down in history as Bloody Sunday, the British army shot fourteen unarmed civilians during another demonstration in Derry. In response to the events, a policy of internment was introduced, and the Northern Irish government was dissolved, which brought the country under direct governance from London. The developments caused enormous anger among both Catholic and Protestant paramilitary movements, including the IRA. The IRA's most violent wing, the Provisional Irish Republican Army, took up the arms heavier than ever before and declared war

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<sup>23</sup> T. W. Moody, 'Fenianism, Home Rule and Land War: 1850-91', T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin, *The Course of Irish History* (Cork 2011), 243.

<sup>24</sup> Moody, 'Fenianism, Home Rule and the Land War', 240-241.; Laura Filardo-Llamas, 'Committed to the ideals of 1916'. The Irish language of paramilitary groups: the case of the Irish Republican Army', *Critical Discourse Studies* 10 (2013), 1, 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Finnegan, *Ireland*, 36-39.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem.*, 28-33, 37-39.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem.*, 28-33.

<sup>28</sup> Sweeney, 'Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice', 424.

upon the British government.<sup>29</sup> As we see in Chapter 3, it was against the background of the conflict that followed, which would last from 1968 until 1998 and became known as the Troubles, that IRA-member Bobby Sands started his fatal hunger strike in March 1981.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the years following Sands' hunger strike, the IRA continued its militant campaign. Through guerrilla tactics, which mainly concerned frequent and severe bombings in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and abroad, it attempted to enforce the British government to give up its claim on Ulster. From the mid-1980s, however, under the leadership of Gerry Adams (1948), Sinn Féin, the IRA's political wing, (secretly) started to discover the option of political rapprochement and negotiations. Between August 1994 and February 1996 and again in July 1997, the IRA agreed with a ceasefire. On April 10, 1998, the British and Irish governments and the political parties of Northern Ireland signed the Good Friday Agreements and hereby declared the Troubles to be over. Several constitutional changes were implemented, which were all based on the idea of consociationalism: the segregation of the Catholic and Protestant communities was taken as a given and the democratic system was arranged as such that both would be guaranteed an equal say in political decision-making.<sup>31</sup> Northern Ireland would hereby remain in the Union until an electoral majority would decide otherwise. In May that year, through a referendum it was decided that, for the time being, the Union would be remained.<sup>32</sup> In September 2005, the IRA officially lay down the arms.<sup>33</sup> Its aim, however, was never reached. Up until the present day, Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom.

## Definitions

Several terms used both in this research's analysis and in the investigated sources need to be briefly clarified. Concerning the case of the WSPU: whereas 'suffragists' is used when it concerns the non-militant struggle for women's suffrage, 'suffragette' refers to those who did adopt a tactic of physical force to propagate the issue of inclusive franchise. In the case of the IRA, several terms are used to define the opposing stances of the Anglo-Irish/Northern Ireland conflict. Although the Catholic-Protestant distinction does overlap with the community's dominant ecclesial traditions, in the context of the Troubles it mainly refers to the segregation that divided Northern Ireland's community in many socio-political fields.<sup>34</sup> The nationalist-unionist distinction corresponds with the Catholic-Protestant labels, but refers to the opposite stances towards the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: nationalists propagate that (a united) Ireland should not be part of the Union, while unionists plea for the construction's preservation. In the historical context of the Troubles, the terms republicanism and loyalism refer to the more hard-line (and militant) stances in respectively nationalism and unionism. Also, it is relevant to keep in mind that with 'Irish' or 'Ireland' *An Phoblacht* referred to a united Irish

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<sup>29</sup> As the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) during the Troubles was the IRA's most active wing, this thesis refers to the PIRA as the IRA.

<sup>30</sup> J. H. Whyte, 'Ireland: 1966-82', in: T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin (eds.), *The Course of Irish History: New Edition* (Cork 2011), 300-306.

<sup>31</sup> Arend Lijphart, 'Constitutional Design for Divided Societies', in: *Journal of Democracy* 15 (2004) 2, 99.

<sup>32</sup> McKittrick and McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, 250-262.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem.*, 360.

<sup>34</sup> Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London 1993), 101-102, 277-279.

island. The mainstream British press and the secondary literature, on the other hand, define the country through its geographical border and therefore distinct Ireland/Irish from Northern Ireland/Northern Irish.

This thesis is no attempt to construct a (value) judgement on the WSPU's or the IRA's cause nor on their militant tactics, which in the case of the WSPU mainly concerned vandalism and moderate violent action, and in the case of the IRA a guerrilla bombing campaign. As for both cases this issue is already exhaustively investigated by others, their tactics are approached as given facts and there is no elaboration on the question whether the movements should be labelled as terrorist or whatsoever.<sup>35</sup> This thesis refers to the WSPU and the IRA by (an abbreviation of) their names or, if the textual context allows, as 'the movement'.

## **Historiographical debates**

By investigating the martyrological framing through which the WPUS and IRA narrated and framed their 1909 and 1981 hunger strikes and the way in which the mainstream British press responded to this claim-making, this thesis embeds itself in the wider historiographical debates on the movements' usages of religious language.

### **The Women's Social and Political Union and the usage of religious language**

Although the WSPU's primary aim was political, realising suffrage for women, in their campaign style they frequently adopted a prophetess attitude by using a Christianly charged, revivalist language to communicate their stance to the British society. Historians explain the appearance of such performances from several stances.

A first strand of scholars approaches the WSPU as a constitutionally orientated movement and argues that a focus on its religious language leads to a false, teleological interpretation of its history. As leading historian in this field, Laura E. Nym Mayhall states: the WSPU 'was a political movement and its protest was rational at its heart. Most essential to its functioning was the constitutional idiom through that it 'deployed to great effect while asserting their rights as citizens and resisting the government they had played no role in choosing'.<sup>36</sup> As Mayhall argues, Christian language and references were standard part of the vocabulary through which political issues were articulated in early twentieth century Britain, particularly when one propagated a cause with great emotional devotion. The fact that on some occasions a religious language was adopted was therefore historically insignificant to the movement's socio-political stance and impact.<sup>37</sup>

A second, more dominant interpretation of the WSPU's usage of religious language is the functionalist strand. These historians, such as Jaqueline R. deVries, interpret the movement's general ideological affiliation as 'pseudo-religious' and approach its propagational tactic as 'sec-

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<sup>35</sup> For more elaborative account on the WSPU's militancy: Brian Harrison, 'The Act of Militancy: Violence and the Suffragettes', in: Brian Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford 1981). For a more elaborative account on the IRA's terrorist and guerrilla tactics: Joanne Wright, *Terrorist Propaganda: The Red Army Faction and the Provisional IRA, 1968-86* (New York 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem.*, 87.

ular evangelicalism' through which a 'rational political calculus' was promoted.<sup>38</sup> For the suffragettes, deVries explains, the cause of women suffrage was so important and so just that they experienced it as a quasi-divine cause.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, a religious or evangelical articulation of their struggle was a fruitful way to show their devotion to the British people and thereby maybe influence the public's stance on inclusive suffrage.<sup>40</sup> The Christian references embedded in the WSPU's rhetoric, were thus used as 'springboards' to propagate their political stance. According to this functionalist approach, in researching the WSPU's understanding and usage of religion, one must thus not focus on 'what suffragists and suffragettes actually *believed*' but on 'what they *experienced* and how they interpreted that experience in customary ways'.<sup>41</sup>

A third strand of scholars approaches the WSPU's usage of Christian language substantively by focusing on the individual, theological convictions of prominent WSPU-members. As argued by historian Carolyn Christensen Nelson, it was because, individually, the suffragettes were 'familiar with the Christian doctrine' that they merged their language of politically orientated militancy with the one of religion. Hereby, as Nelson explains, on an individual level, their political and religious understandings of the world became merged, a fact that had a significant impact on how the WSPU as a movement constructed its ideology and tactics.<sup>42</sup>

Through a similar substantive reasoning, historian Gay L. Gullickson argues that the suffragettes' familiarity with Christian culture provided soil for the cult of 'self-sacrificial martyrdom' through which WSPU-member Emily Wildling Davison (1872-1913) was commemorated after her sudden death.<sup>43</sup> At the Epsom Derby at June 4, 1913, Davison threw herself in front of the racehorse of King George V while carrying WSPU-banners under her coat, and died four days later due to her injuries.<sup>44</sup> The WSPU immediately organised a massive funeral procession and published a drawing of Davison depicted as an angel in the *Suffragette*, the movement's official newspaper by then.<sup>45</sup> In his research, Gullickson pinpoints the fact that in Davison's case an intertwined political-Christian language was used to explain her death as a sacrifice. He does not elaborate, however, on the further implications of this findings. Davison's death was unexpected and as historians debate the question whether she was insane and suicidal (and thereby disagree over her intentions).<sup>46</sup> Although therefore, the specific case of her martyrdom is not suitable for the in-depth, comparative analysis of this thesis, Gullickson's conclusion marks an opening in the field that this research thankfully anticipates on:

I don't know if we need a new category of martyrdom that blends political goals with religious conviction, but we certainly need to acknowledge that for people like (...) Emily Wildling

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<sup>38</sup> Jaqueline R. deVries, 'Transforming the Pulpit: Preaching and Prophecy in the British Women's Suffrage Movement', in: Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (eds.), *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley 1998), 318.

<sup>39</sup> Jacqueline R. deVries, 'Sounds Taken for Wonders: Revivalism and Religious Hybridity in the British Suffrage Movement', in: Lucinda Matthews-Jones and Timothy Willem Jones (eds.), *Material Religion in Modern Britain* (New York 2015), 102-103.

<sup>40</sup> deVries, 'Transforming the Pulpit', 322-323.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem.*, 114-115.

<sup>42</sup> Carolyn Christensen Nelson, 'The Uses of Religion in the Women's Militant Suffrage Campaign in England', in: *The Midwest Quarterly* 51 (2010) 3, 235.

<sup>43</sup> Gay L. Gullickson, 'Emily Wildling Davison: A Secular Martyr?', in: *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 75 (2008) 2, 461-462

<sup>44</sup> Gullickson, 'Emily Wildling Davison', 461-462.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem.*, 474.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem.*, 462.

Davison, the cause for which [she] died may have been secular but the ideology in which it was embedded and which made death thinkable and acceptable (...) was religious.<sup>47</sup>

### **Irish republicanism and the usage of religious language**

As the Northern Ireland conflict occurred in the context of the segregation between the Catholic descendants of the native Irish and the Protestant descendants of the Planters, the usage of religious language by Irish republican movements, among which the IRA, poses a vexed question that has a rich historiographical debate.<sup>48</sup> Most scholars agree that religious contradictions do not lie at the heart of Northern Ireland's conflict.<sup>49</sup> The stances of how its role should be interpreted then, however, vary.

A first strand of scholars approaches the place religion held in the conflict through a reductionist view, like for example in the highly commended *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London, 1993), in which political scientists Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry statistically interpret its impact. When approaching religion as such, its significance is reduced to the Catholic and Protestant labels that historically marked (Northern) Ireland's discrimination and segregation in the fields of, among others, politics, education, residence, endogamy, and leisure facilities. Hereby, religion became a denominator for the ethnic division that actually lies at the heart of the conflict between the descendants of the native Irish and the British Planters. When considering the IRA's usage of Christian language in this reductionist light, its significance becomes merely instrumental. As O'Leary and McGarry argue, the movement consciously utilized references to the Catholic faith to galvanize and mobilize people from the Catholic community to participate in their militant struggle against the Union.<sup>50</sup> Seen from this perspective, for the IRA, Christianity's substantive tradition was thus only important as it signified and hardened the political dispute over the question whether (Northern) Ireland should be part of the Union with Great Britain.<sup>51</sup>

A second strand of scholars, mostly historians of Irish nationalism, approaches the place of religion in the (Northern) Irish conflict through a functionalist view that builds on the assumption that the differences between its Catholicism and Protestantism were organisational and cohesion-producing categories. Although the functionalists recognise that religious language, symbolisms and metaphors hereby became central to the identities of both communities, they do not consider the corresponding contents to be a crucial factor per se. Within the Irish nationalist and republican traditions, Catholicism thus provided a framework through which a pseudo-religious sacralisation of the nation could be constructed, and that thereby the wish for an own nation sociologically became a quasi-religious ideology. As for example argued by historian Aidan Beatty in *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism, 1884-1938* (London 2016), although several of the 1916 Easter Rising leaders claimed that they were willing to die for God, the true meaning of this phrasing was that they were willing to die for the nation.<sup>52</sup> In the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibidem., 478.

<sup>48</sup> For this thesis, a selection is made of the authors most representative to their stance.

<sup>49</sup> An account of the rare view that religious doctrines do lie at the heart of the conflict: J. Hickey, *Religion and the Northern Ireland Question* (Dublin 1984).

<sup>50</sup> O'Leary and McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism*, 206.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem., 277-279.

<sup>52</sup> Aidan Beatty, *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism* (New York 2016), 32.

edited volume *Political Religion Beyond Totalitarianism: The Sacralization of Politics in the Age of Democracy* (London 2013), historian Joost Augusteijn also underlines this assumption by stating that nationalism in the context of the Anglo-Irish conflict manifested itself as being a civil religion. In this view, the ideology of nationalism thus generally holds the ability to sacralise the cause of an own nation, a dynamic that, according to Augusteijn, within the Catholic community in (Northern) Ireland was intensified by strong church-community relations. The concept of nation in this respect became a ‘secular collective entity that provide[d] meaning and an ultimate purpose to social existence and prescribe[d] the principles for distinguishing between good and evil’.<sup>53</sup> In this way, the martyrological glorification of those who died as part of the conflict should be understood as nationalist heroes rather than religious saints.<sup>54</sup>

A third group of scholars approaches religion through a substantive approach by focusing not on its direct political or organisational structures, but on its ability to provide meaning and thereby influence both individual and communal action. Hereby, this approach recognises that religious division did not cause the conflict but argues that it did significantly influence its course.<sup>55</sup> As sociologist Steven Bruce argues in *Paisley: Religion and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Oxford 2009), the religious division between the two communities added an incompatible element to the conflict. Through teachings on endogamy and education, religious leaders and institutions prevented the boundaries from eroding, and thereby hardened the ethnopolitical communal segregation.<sup>56</sup> As sociologist Claire Mitchell points out in *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief* (Belfast 2006), ‘religion does provide much substance and depth of meaning to social and political relationships’.<sup>57</sup> Because people in Northern Ireland ‘have absorbed religious types of cultural knowledge, belonging and morality’, it thus also influenced their political behaviour.<sup>58</sup> Through traditional Catholic and Protestant moral language, symbols, and traditions, both communities gave meaning to the socio-political in- and exclusion they experienced. Through this substantive ability, religion thus has a unique way of enforcing the feeling of (not) sharing experiences with other people, even when it does not have much meaning for someone on an individual level.<sup>59</sup> Several authors have employed this substantive lens to interpret the reception of the hunger strike of Bobby Sands within Northern Ireland’s Catholic community, such as sociologists James Dingley and Marcello Mollica and historian George Sweeney, who underline that Sands deathbed, passing, funeral and commemoration were soaked with Catholic rituals and symbolisms, and that therefore the Catholic community internally portrayed him as holy martyr who had sacrificed himself for the Irish nation.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Joost Augusteijn, ‘Nationalism as a Political Religion: The Sacralization of the Irish nation, in: Joost Augusteijn, Patrick G. C. Dassen & Maartje J. Janse (eds.), *Political Religion Beyond Totalitarianism: The Sacralization of Politics in the Age of Democracy* (London 2013), 147.

<sup>54</sup> Augusteijn, ‘Nationalism as a Political Religion’, 141-142.

<sup>55</sup> Claire Mitchell, *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief* (Burlington 2006), 68.

<sup>56</sup> Steve Bruce, *Paisley: Religion and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Oxford 2009), 5.

<sup>57</sup> Mitchell, *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland*, 35.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem.*, ix.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem.*, 67.

<sup>60</sup> George Sweeney, ‘Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice’, 422-423.; James Dingley and Marcello Mollica, ‘The Human Body as a Terrorist Weapon: Hunger Strikes and Suicide Bombers’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30 (2007) 6, 472-274, 276-287.



## Theoretical framework: Christianity as discursive practice

The functioning of Christian language is hard to measure, and its intermingling with political language even more. Even when concentrating such a quest on the Christian reading of martyrdom, one is confronted with the problem of intangibility. The hunger strikers and their supporters themselves probably didn't even know to full extent to which Christianity influenced their actions, language and world view. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the current sensitivities surrounding the intermingling of political and religious language, this difficulty only makes it more relevant to research how the two can get infused and what this does to the issues at stake in a political conflict.

As means to acknowledge the multidimensional fullness that Christianity, like any other religion, holds but to simultaneously construct a clear framework through which the WSPU's and IRA's usages of Christian language can be investigated, this thesis approaches Christianity (and thereby its reading of martyrdom) as a discursive practice. In doing so, it draws on the insights given by historian Callum G. Brown in his study to secularization in Great Britain and on sociologist Max Weber's thesis on the multicausality of religious ethics as expounded in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, who both approach Christianity as a discourse rather than as a measurable, institutional force.

As pointed by historian Brown in his *The Death of Christian Britain* (London and New York 2001), Christianity's functioning in the modern world is often misunderstood and misanalysed because of a focus on its statistical elements such as the numbers of churches, churchgoers, and new-borns getting baptised. This mathematical approach, Brown argues, disregards the tradition's more persistent impact on (British) society, namely the discursive power through which Christianity as meaning-producing reservoir became deeply embedded at the heart of the (British) public culture.<sup>61</sup> If one intends to reveal the stance Christian culture holds in a certain case, instead of attempting to scientifically count or measure its doctrinal or institutional influence, one must thus critically consider the impact its religiosity has on the way the concerning actors gave meaning to and moved within the world surrounding them.<sup>62</sup>

Although Brown uses Christian religiosity's discursive power to historically investigate the secularization of Great Britain (which, he argues, pushed through in the 1960s), for this thesis' investigation of the martyrological language used by the WSPU and the IRA it is relevant to focus on his theoretical insight in the cultural resonance that Christianity potentially holds as a discourse:

The discourses will be manifest in the protocols of behaviour (going to church on a Sunday, or saying grace before meals), but they will also be discerned in the 'voices' of the people. (...) By listening to these voices, and by consulting the dominant media of the time (such as popular books, magazines and religious tracts), we can trace how the discourses circulated in society.<sup>63</sup>

To consider Brown's discursive Christianity in the context of the martyrological claims made during the political WSPU and IRA hunger strikes, this thesis also anticipates on Weber's

<sup>61</sup> Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding secularisation, 1800-2000* (London 2009), 7-8, 36-39.

<sup>62</sup> Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 12-13.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem.*, 13

multicausality of religion, which he expounded in, among others, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and in *The Social Psychology of World Religions* (1920).<sup>64</sup> Religious ethical contents, Weber argues, carry the ability to generate and shape social actions and can thereby steer and transform human life. Hereby, the significance of a religious tradition thus goes beyond the intentional spiritual actions it evokes, such as church going, praying, or Scripture readings.<sup>65</sup> In this respect, Weber disagrees with sociologist Émile Durkheim, who approaches religion monocausal and argues that all religious traditions have communal cohesion as main outcome.<sup>66</sup> According to Weber's thesis on the multicausality of religion, it is not just the socio-psychological outcome through which religion impacts human life, as 'different types of belief have different outcomes'.<sup>67</sup> As sociologist Grace Davie explains about Weber's argument:

Central to Max Weber's understanding in this respect is the complex relationship between a set of religious beliefs and the particular social stratum which becomes the principal carrier of such beliefs in any given society the elective affinities already referred to. The sociologist's task is to identify the crucial social stratum and the ethic that they choose to adopt at the key moments in history; it requires careful comparative analysis.<sup>68</sup>

Although Davie and Weber assign the task to investigate the functioning of religious ethical contents to sociologists, this thesis will implement Weber's insights, together with those of Brown, in a historical manner. It will do so by approaching Christian martyrdom as a discourse that can steer human action *because* of its contents. Taking Brown and Weber as a starting point, it can thus be hypothetically stated that, the discourse of Christian martyrdom in the context of a political conflict has the potential to steer the perceptions and actions through which people interpret and move within the conflict.

## Methodology

As means to investigate how Brown and Weber's theoretical insights on Christianity's discursiveness functioned in the context of *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht's* martyrological claim-making, and the way *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and the *Daily Express* responded hereto, this thesis approaches Christian martyrdom as a discourse. In doing so, this research follows the definition of a discourse given by historians Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann's in their *Reading Primary Sources* (London and New York 2009):

A discourse denotes a body of assertions and utterances which are related to a certain topic and follow a certain set of rules. Discourse analysis is thus the attempt to reconstruct the rules according to which these assertions or enunciations (...) are created.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda* (London 2013), 28.

<sup>65</sup> Max Weber, 'The Social Psychology of World Religions', in: H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds. and trans.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York 1946), 267-270.; Max Weber, 'The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism', in: H.H Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds. and trans.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York 1946), 320-322.

<sup>66</sup> For the Durkheimian approach, see: Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford 2001).

<sup>67</sup> Davie, *The Sociology of Religion*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem.*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> 'Glossary', in: Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources, the Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London and New York 2009), 243.

This thesis analytically investigated the discourse of Christian martyrdom by anticipating on the methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Central to CDA is the assumption that language is a social practice ‘in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it’.<sup>70</sup> As explained by cultural historian Stuart Hall in his *Representation* (London 1997), ‘language’ in this respect is not just about linguistics but is constituted through what he calls ‘the discourse of belonging’: ‘signs and symbols whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings’.<sup>71</sup> We understand and exchange this language of belongingness through ‘the practice of signifying’: through shared sets of meaning, we can decode and interpret the meaning of that what language communicates to us.<sup>72</sup>

The choice for newspapers as a source to investigate how the discourse of Christian martyrdom functioned in the context of the WSPU and IRA’s political hunger strikes is well considered. Newspapers select and construct their publications with the purpose of informing a specific target group among their contemporaries. Although not ‘simply reflecting contemporary events or public wants in objective, mirror-like fashion’, they do ‘[shape] the news and views of their readers by employing a particular framework for understanding events and institutions’.<sup>73</sup> As they are informative and selective in their contents, as historical source a newspaper thus provides a suggestive insight in how the community (that it claimed to represent) ‘thought about their own society and the world around them (...), created influential categories of thought and established, enforced or eroded conventional social hierarchies and assumptions.’<sup>74</sup> As historian Stephen Vella underlines:

Newspapers offer a wealth of information about the social, political, economic and cultural life of the past. (...) A critical reading of [them] can lead to significant insights into how societies or cultures came to understand themselves and the world around them.<sup>75</sup>

Through its comparative approach, this thesis transcends the cases of the WSPU and IRA from their time- and context-related isolation. As historian Peter Baldwin underlines, a comparative investigation and juxtaposition of such related, but yet different cases, can serve as ‘an attempt to isolate what it is that is unique, crucial and therefore causal’.<sup>76</sup> In doing so, this thesis not only pinpoints the elements that were decisive to the construction and perception of the martyrological claims of the WSPU and the IRA, but also provides a fuller image of the functioning of the discourse of Christian martyrdom.

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<sup>70</sup> N. Fairclough and R. Wodak, ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’. in: T.A. Van Dijk (ed.), *Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (London 1997), 258.

<sup>71</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation* (London 1997), 1.

<sup>72</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Vella, ‘Newspapers’, in: Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources, the Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London and New York 2009), 192.

<sup>74</sup> Vella, ‘Newspapers’, 192.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem.*, 192.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Baldwin, ‘Comparing and Generalizing: Why all History is Comparative, yet no History is Sociology’, in: Deborah Cohen & Maura O’Conner (eds.), *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective* (New York and London, 2004), 15.

## Source selection

This thesis conducts its research through empirical analyses of reports on the 1909 and 1981 hunger strikes published in respectively the WSPU's *Votes for Women* and the IRA's *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, and in mainstream British newspapers *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express*. Time-wise, for each case, the year of the hunger strike demarcates the selection of investigated articles, because otherwise their contents might be influenced too much by other, not-related developments and issues.

As means to get a sense of how the WSPU articulated its understanding of the hunger strikes that its members conducted throughout the course of 1909, this thesis empirically analyses the language through which *Votes for Women* reported the events. *Votes for Women* was founded in October 1907 by WSPU treasurer Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (1867-1954) and her husband Frederick Lawrence (1871-1961) and was the WSPU's official newspaper from 1908 until 1912. Reasoning from a pro-suffragette stance, the weekly published newspaper gave account of news related to the struggle for women suffrage, both within Britain and internationally, reported incidents in which WSPU-members had been involved, and announced upcoming events or issues related to the movement's cause. In relation to recent events, each issue published a handful of opinion pieces from WSPU-members or -supporters. Also, several pages were devoted to non-political issues, such as recommendations on leisure activities and entertainment, and 'classified advertisements', for example for boneless corsets and ladies' costumes.<sup>77</sup> The editions investigated in this thesis are available through The British Newspaper Archives, which digitised *Votes for Women* in April 2018 as part of its celebration for the hundredth anniversary of women suffrage in Britain.<sup>78</sup>

To investigate how the IRA articulated its interpretation of its hunger strike campaign throughout 1981, this thesis empirically analysed the language through which *An Phoblacht/Republican News* reported the event throughout that same year (from here, the newspaper is referred to as *An Phoblacht*). Up until today, *An Phoblacht* is the official newspaper of Sinn Féin, (Northern) Ireland's main republican party that is known for its historical association with the IRA.<sup>79</sup> The newspaper was founded in 1906 in Dublin by a group of militant Irish nationalists under the title *An Phoblacht*, Gaelic for 'the Republic'. Between 1907 and 1925 it was published as *The Peasant* and returned to its original title again from 1925 until 1937. Throughout the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s the newspaper had a limited circulation and changed name and editors several times. In 1970, Sinn Féin president Ruairi Ó Brádaigh (1932-2013), who had been a prominent IRA-member throughout the 1950s, became the head editor and adopted the name *An Phoblacht* again. As it rapidly developed into the most-read newspaper among (pro-IRA) Irish republicans, in 1979 it changed its name into *An Phoblacht/Republican News* and assigned IRA-member Danny Morrison (1953) as its head editor. Throughout 1981 the newspaper reported in weekly editions on developments and

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (London 1999), 460-461.

<sup>78</sup> 'Suffragette Newspapers', *The British Newspaper Archive* (February 1, 2018), online available: <https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2018/02/01/suffragette-newspapers/>.

<sup>79</sup> Although going beyond the scope of this thesis' research, it must be mentioned that, up until the present day, the relation between Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army is a controversial and sensitive affair. For a more elaborative historical account of the issue: Brendan O'Brien, *The Long War: The IRA and SINN FÉIN* (Dublin, 1999).

incidents related to the course of the Troubles. In doing so, it approached the issues at stake from the militant republican/nationalist stance and explicitly supported the IRA.<sup>80</sup> For brevity reasons, from here on this thesis refers to *An Phoblacht/Republican News* as *An Phoblacht*.

Probably due to its controversial propagation of the IRA's guerrilla tactics, digitised editions of *An Phoblacht* are rare and hard to find (handful of the 1981 issues is available through the website of the IRA-supporting Sinn Féin bulletin *Saoirse Irish Freedom*).<sup>81</sup> About all 1981 issues, however, are available in hardcopy at the International Institute for International History in Amsterdam. Only the editions dating from the first week of February 1981 and the second week of *An Phoblacht* 1981 were missing.<sup>82</sup>

As becomes clear in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, a discrepancy exists both in the number and tone of articles that *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht* published on respectively the WSPU and IRA hunger strikes. Although *Votes for Women* throughout 1909 did publish many articles on the course and impact of the hunger strikes of Dunlop and those who followed her example, it interpreted the topic as being one of the several significant issues of that time and reported with a similar frequency on several other incidents and developments the WSPU ought to be relevant, such as for example the upcoming general elections in January 1910. Throughout 1981, however, *An Phoblacht* published many more articles on the IRA hunger strike campaign. It reported the issue as single most important event of year and approached it as a watershed moment in the history of the Northern Ireland conflict. In doing so, it elaboratively connected the campaign to the wider identity, purpose and outlook of the IRA. Hereby, *An Phoblacht* constructed an immense personality cult surrounding Sands as an individual. *Votes for Women*, on the other hand, merely approached the WSPU hunger strikers by elaborating on their political motivations. To ensure that the deviate number of articles published on each case does not negatively affect this thesis' comparative analysis, also *Votes for Women*'s earliest editions (from October 1907) are investigated for their account of the movement's identity, purpose and outlook as a movement.

The selection of mainstream British newspapers *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* is based on a combination of substantive and practical reasons. Substantively, they together reflect a variety of political orientations and therefore provide a balanced basis to analyse how the British society responded to the martyrological claims through which the WSPU and the IRA reported their hunger strikes in their own newspapers. Both in 1909 and in 1981, *The Guardian* and *The Times* were widely-read broadsheet newspapers. *The Guardian*, founded in 1821 as *The Manchester Guardian*, was associated with the Labour Party and known for its centre-left stance.<sup>83</sup> For brevity reasons, from here on this thesis refers to *The Manchester Guardian* as *The Guardian*. *The Times*, established in 1785, was identified with the Conservative Party and published from a centre-right, conservative perspective.<sup>84</sup> Both in 1909 and in 1981, the *Daily Express*, which was founded in 1900, was a much-read tabloid newspaper that was associated with the Conservative Party and known for its right-wing, populist stance.<sup>85</sup> As

<sup>80</sup> An Phoblacht/Republican News, 'About us', <http://www.anphoblacht.com/about> (version July 2018).

<sup>81</sup> Saoirse Irish Freedom, 'History', <https://republicansinnfein.org/saoirse/> (version May 2018).

<sup>82</sup> 'Collection: An Phoblacht', *International Institute for Social History*, online available: <https://search.socialhistory.org/Record/1345209>.

<sup>83</sup> Mick Temple, *The British Press* (Maidenhead 1996), 58-60, 79-80.

<sup>84</sup> Temple, *The British Press*, 27, 67-68.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem.*, 21-30, 70-71.

becomes clear in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, all three newspapers clearly expressed their socio-political stances in their reports on both the 1909 and 1981 hunger strikes. The selection of *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* was also made out of practical considerations as their 1909 and 1981 volumes are all accessible through the digitised archives ProQuest Historical Newspapers (*The Guardian*), Gale Primary Sources (*The Times*) and UK Press Online (the *Daily Express*).

## Research Design

To reveal how the discourse of Christian martyrdom functioned in the context of the political hunger strikes of the WSPU and IRA, this thesis is split up in three chapters.

Based on secondary literature, Chapter 1 critically considers the construction and functioning of the discourse of Christian martyrdom. Building on Brown and Weber's insights concerning Christianity's discursiveness and multicausality, it is investigated how Christian martyrdom has the potential to function in the context of political conflicts, particularly when used in relation to a political hunger strike. How did martyrdom end up at the core of the religion's tradition and how did it evolve into a concept emerging in political conflicts? Under what circumstances is a political hunger striker eligible for the status? And what does it do to the dynamics of the concerning conflict when the status of Christian martyrdom is successfully claimed?

Chapter 2 empirically examines the functioning of the discourse of Christian martyrdom in the context of the 1909 hunger strikes of the WSPU. By analysing how *Votes for Women* throughout the course of 1909 reported the hunger strikes of Dunlop and the suffragettes who followed her example, it is questioned how the WSPU constructed its martyrological claims. How did the movement embed the hunger strikes in its wider conception of the struggle it was fighting and where did the discourse of Christian martyrdom come in? Through empirical analysis of how British newspapers *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* reported the case throughout the year, the WSPU's martyrological claims are placed in a critical perspective. What societal responses to the WSPU's martyrological claims were reflected in these newspapers, and what does this reveal about the functioning of the discourse of Christian martyrdom in the context of political conflict?

Following the same build-up, Chapter 3 conducts an empirical research on the hunger strikes of the IRA in 1981. Through analysis on the coverage of the campaign by *An Phoblacht*, it is investigated how the IRA inserted the hunger strike campaign in its wider fight, and to what extent it, in doing so, made an appeal to the discourse of Christian martyrdom. To provide critical counterbalance to the stance of *An Phoblacht*, reports on the campaign that were published in *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* throughout the course of 1981 are investigated. What stances towards the IRA's martyrological claims did they lay bare, and how does this help us to better understand the discursive functioning of Christian martyrdom in the context of political conflict?

Finally, the ways the discourse of Christian martyrdom functioned in the context of the political hunger strikes of the WSPU and the IRA are critically compared in the conclusion of this thesis.

## Challenges and opportunities

Before starting our investigation, it is relevant to first briefly consider the pitfalls and opportunities that come with this thesis' thematic- and operationalising approach.

First, we must realise that concerning the disentanglement of the WSPU's and the IRA's usages of political and Christian languages, there is, obviously, no 'mathematical formula' that point out where the movements' political claims stopped, and where their Christian-like martyrological claims have begun. Also, we don't know to what extent the authors of the investigated articles consciously used (or left out) a Christianly charged or martyrological language as means to manipulate the concerning newspaper's target audience. To avoid a teleologically steered analysis, this thesis's empirical research is therefore not solely focused on the tracing of the literal words, such as 'martyr(dom)', 'Christ', 'Jesus' or 'God'. Instead, as is expounded in Chapter 1, Christian martyrdom is approached as a discursive concept that is constructed through reservoir full of narration structures, metaphors and symbolisms. Nevertheless, the difficultness of investigating intertwined religious- and political languages, is also this thesis' main opportunity. As mentioned before, society is nowadays confronted with the need to critically (re)consider the place that religious cultures and traditions holds. By comparatively investigating this theme in two historical cases, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of this issue.

The comparison of the WSPU and IRA hunger strikes holds a handful of remarks. Obviously, in between the cases there is a 72-year time gap, which is even as much a challenge as it is a potential. It is a challenge because the dissimilarities in the functioning of society, politics and culture. In these roughly seven decades, it is likely that Christianity's cultural resonance in Britain changed, just like the prison system, ethical stances towards the medical care of hunger strikers, and the media discourses through which the investigated newspapers and newspapers constructed their reports. As means to provide an insight in the developments that British society, politics and culture underwent between the late 1900s and the early 1980s, Chapter 1 elaborates on how the British government was confronted with (a martyrological connotation of) hunger strikes throughout this time span. Apart from being a challenge, however, the time gap between this thesis' case studies also is a potential as it allows to investigate two cases which were not interrelated, but in which the discourse of Christian martyrdom was used in a more or less similar manner.

Also, this thesis approaches Christian martyrdom as one discourse and doesn't make a distinction between Protestant from Catholic martyrdom. Notorious differences might exist in this respect, as most WSPU-members grew up in Protestant England, while the IRA-members came from a Catholic environment. However, due to the size and scope of this thesis, these potential deviations are not investigated as it is relevant to first gain an understanding of Christianity's martyrdom in general. As the distinction might nevertheless be of valuable addition to our knowledge on the topic, it is left for further research.

# 1 Chapter 1. The discourse of Christian martyrdom: a historical analysis

As a first step in unravelling the construction and perception of the martyrological claims made by the WSPU and the IRA during their 1909 and 1981 hunger strike campaigns, this chapter questions what Christianity's reading of martyrdom is about. In three sections, this chapter gradually enunciates how Christian martyrdom is approached in the context of the political hunger strikes of the WSPU and the IRA in respectively Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. By analysing the construction and development of Christian martyrdom in a historical aerial view, first, it is investigated what martyrdom is about and what characteristics its Christian interpretation holds. Secondly, it is questioned how self-sought hunger can lead up to a status exploiting the meta-narrative embedded within Christian martyrdom. Thirdly, the concluding section combines the insights on the Christian discourse of martyrdom and on political hunger strikes in a Weberian analysis of how the discourse of Christian martyrdom can impact a political conflict.

A note to this chapter is that the history of Christian martyrdom is massive and contains plenteous details, cases and (sub)developments. As not all of this can be covered due to the size of this thesis, based on secondary literature a selection is made that provides a representative insight in Christian martyrdom's socio-cultural contents and historical development.<sup>86</sup> Also, martyrologies, particularly modern ones, often contain ambiguity and are topic of academic and socio-cultural debate (as also becomes clear in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this thesis). Due to the extent of this thesis, this chapter does not elaborate on the controversies surrounding the given examples.<sup>87</sup>

## 1.1 Christian martyrdom: a multi-causal narrative

Martyrdom becomes influential through the narratives that celebrate it. (...) It is the viability of the narrative's transmission which becomes the measure of the martyr's significance. Like all stories, the martyr's narrative is shaped according to the oral and literary traditions of the culture within which it circulates.<sup>88</sup>

As emphasized by Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner in *The Martyr's Conviction: A Sociological Analysis* (Atlanta 1990), martyrdom is no term that solely concerns the status of the labelling of a person. On the contrary. It is the narrative that makes the martyr. Hand in hand with the concept's status comes a narration structure that suggestively interprets the social significance of the wider situation the martyr finds him- or herself in. This section dissects the meta-narrative that is embedded at the core of the discourse on Christian martyrdom and explains its discursive capacity to function in the context of a conflict that is not religiously charged per se. First, the historical coming-to be of the Christian understanding of martyrdom is analysed through an investigation of its roots in Greek antiquity and a comparison to its Islamic equivalent (1.1.1). Second, the historical development of the discourse's political potential up until the Cold War

<sup>86</sup> An elaborative account of martyrdom's versatile history can be found in: Paul Middleton, *Martyrdom: A Guide for the Perplex* (London 2011).

<sup>87</sup> For an elaborative account of debates surrounding contemporary martyrdom's, I would recommend: Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction: A sociological Analysis* (Atlanta 1990).

<sup>88</sup> Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, 12.



is discussed (1.1.2).

### 1.1.1 The historical construction of a meta-narrative

Notoriously, in the New Testament, the literal term ‘martyr(dom)’ does not occur. As explained in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, however, some of the New Testament’s contextual usages of ‘witnessing’ or ‘witness’ (the translation of the Greek *μάρτυς* or *martus*), do actually concern martyrdom as they referring to bearing ultimate witness to the faith. The Bible’s connotation of martyrdom hereby concerns the situation of paying with one’s life for giving account to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith he embodies: those who, because of their faith, find themselves in a situation of threat but nevertheless follow Jesus’ example to ‘choose death rather than renouncing one’s religious principles’, are granted with the biblical martyr’s crown.<sup>89</sup> Most illustrative in this respect are the New Testament’s narrations of the deaths of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29 – Matt 14:1-12; Luke 9:7-9), Stephen (Acts 7:54-60) and James (Acts 12:1-2). By nobly preferring death over a betrayal of the righteous faith they followed the ultimate example of faithful behaviour that, according to all four gospels, was given by Jesus Christ during his Passion.<sup>90</sup> The model provided by Jesus, as the gospels stress, rests on the voluntariness through which he accepted his fate.<sup>91</sup> As expounded in the book of Revelations 20:4-6, in which the theme is referred to several times (5:9-11, 16:6 and 17:6), a ‘special reward during the millennial reign of Christ’ is singled out to martyrs.<sup>92</sup>

The roots of this Christian reading of martyrdom go back to the early Christian community’s reflections on the experience of being persecuted because of their religious beliefs, contemplations which were rooted in the antiquity’s culture and world view.<sup>93</sup> Etymologically, the word *martyr* thus leads back to the Greek *martus*, which was mainly used in a juristic context.<sup>94</sup> The earliest writings in which this conception was linked to the preparedness to suffer or die for a conviction date from about 400 BC and are constructed around the literary theme of the *noble death*. Most famous in this respect is Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, which narrates how the Athenian leaders pronounced sentence of death on Socrates after accusing him of piety and morally corrupting the youth.<sup>95</sup> Instead of being attempted to flee from his sentence, in his final testimony Socrates accepts his faith as being the only way to hold up onto his beliefs by stating he ‘would rather die having spoken in my manner, than speak in your manner and live’.<sup>96</sup> Although by then deliberately choosing for one’s own death was formally understood to be a form of suicide, and therefore as a sin, according to Plato this fault did not apply in this particular case because Socrates had committed his act under the special circumstances of being prepared to die because of the belief in the true societal values. This condition had transformed his sin into a noble and

<sup>89</sup> *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume I* (New York 1992), ‘Martyr/Martyrdom’, 574.

<sup>90</sup> See: Mark 8:34-35, Matt 16:24-25 and John 15:18-20.

<sup>91</sup> See: John 10:18, Mark 8:31-33, Matt 16:21-23 and Luke 9:51.

<sup>92</sup> *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ‘Martyr/Martyrdom’, 577.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (London and New York 2006), 1-2.

<sup>94</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 1, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Michael P. Jensen, *Martyrdom and Identity: The Self on Trial* (London 2010), 3-4., Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 1, 7, 10-11.

<sup>96</sup> Plato, *The Last Day of Socrates* (London 2003), cited in: Jolyon Mitchell, *Martyrdom: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2012), 8.

admirable act through which the entire Athenian community was served.<sup>97</sup>

For the early Christians, Antiquity's literary conception of martyrdom was a fruitful framework to interpret and narrate their own experiences through. Against the background of the toil-some coming-to-be of the early Christianity, a situation marked by the turmoil of the partition of Judaism, the political upheaval in Palestine, and several upswings of Christian persecution, their community did not immediately hold a strong societal position and were regularly confronted with persecution, torture or even murder.<sup>98</sup> By preferring the Christian God and worldview over the Roman state religion and emperor cult, the early Christians directly undermined element fundamental to the socio-political order on which the Roman empire was built.<sup>99</sup> Through their subversion, the Christians were understood as being a threat to the stability of the empire's uniform identity and, therefore, to its political legitimacy.<sup>100</sup>

Keeping these settings in mind when reading the New Testament, these experiences of conflict and rejection and persecution at the hands of an unjust power are repeatedly uttered, and, in relation to them, the reader is repeatedly advised in the right way of how to deal with this situation: a true Christians is faithful under all circumstances.<sup>101</sup> As theologian Paul Middleton, authority in the field of Christian martyrdom, explains about these dynamics, the socio-cultural impact of the persecution of the early Christians 'imprinted a scar on the Christian psyche' out of which an 'evangelical call to share in the sufferings' arose which, as mentioned earlier, became manifested in the gospels' Passion.<sup>102</sup> The biblical story of Jesus' crucifixion, which narration structure loosely follows the historical context of the early Christians' enduring of severe sufferings at the hands of the Roman rulers, thus became central to the tradition's understanding of martyrdom.<sup>103</sup> Like the early Christians, Jesus, who was confronted with persecution, torture and even murder because of his faith, nobly accepted his suffering as he was determined to hold up his faith in the righteous cause no matter what. Despite the brutal torture that he had to endure, he gave ultimate witness to his faith and thereby transformed a suffering with humiliating intentions into an uplifting form of redemption.<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, the conception of a noble suffering for the true faith does not solely belong to Christianity but is also a dominant theme in other monotheistic traditions. Like in Christianity, the Islamic notion of martyrdom (which originated from the late sixth- and early seventh centuries) knows its historical origin in the legal concept of witness (*shahid* in Arabic) and also implies an all-embracing devotion to the true faith.<sup>105</sup> Although the precise theological distinction between Christian and Islamic martyrdom requires complex discussion that goes beyond the scope of this thesis, when historically comparing the two it becomes clear that both traditions hold dissimilar, characteristic understandings of the concept. In contrast to the history of the

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<sup>97</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 1, 8-9.; Mitchell, *Martyrdom*, 8-10.

<sup>98</sup> Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, 1-2.

<sup>99</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 2, 38-41.; Mitchell, *Martyrdom*, 32.

<sup>100</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 26, 42.

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem., 2, 31, 34-35.

<sup>102</sup> Ibidem., 57.

<sup>103</sup> David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge 2007), 11.

<sup>104</sup> Mitchell, *Martyrdom*, 21-26.; Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, 12-14.; Harfiyah Haleem and Brian Wicker, 'The Veneration of Martyrs: A Muslim-Christian Dialogue', in: in: Brian Wicker (ed.), *Witnesses of the Faith?: Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam* (New York 2006), 100-104.

<sup>105</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 167.

early Christians, the early Islam knew no large-scale persecution or imposed torture. Although Muhammed and his followers initially met some aversion concerning their monotheistic message, the Islamic tradition quickly developed to a politically and culturally dominant system in a wide region. Although confronted with both victories (like the Battle of Badr in 624 and the victory over the Meccans in 630) and defeats (like the Battle of Uhud in 624), the expansion of the Islamic culture, politics and religion happened relatively smoothly. Also, after Muhammed's death in 632 AD, Islam continued its militant spread to the Near East and North Africa during the following decades. Historians explain the rapid propagation of Islam by emphasising the weakness of other imperial powers at that time, the Muslim's highly developed military knowledge, and the eagerness of native populations to exchange greedy, unpopular rulers for 'more benign ones'.<sup>106</sup> Theologically, the continuing military success of the Islam is understood as a repeatedly confirmation of the rightness of the Islamic faith.<sup>107</sup> As Islamic historian David Cook explains, although Muhammad did not die himself in the battlefield, the story of his life set the example of a sense of choice and an element of activeness embedded in the Islamic understanding of *jihad* as the road to martyrdom.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, the imitation of Muhammad's active martyrological quest became a means to testify the true faith in central to Islam.<sup>109</sup> Whereas the martyrdom of Jesus, who never took up his arms, was thus centred around him *passively enduring* the suffering the Romans imposed to him as they had done to the early Christians, Muhammad's martyrdom, on the other hand, exemplified the conception of an *active struggle* through which the true Islamic identity could be protected and propagated.<sup>110</sup>

### 1.1.2 The discursive evolution of a metaphor

When the persecution of Christians ended with the rule of Constantine the Great in 306, and Theodosius I made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380, the development of the Christian conception of martyrdom was not about to end at all. On the contrary. In centuries following Constantine's conversion, several situations in which Christians were prepared to suffer or die as witness of their own faith occurred. Changing however was the rise of a social order in which Christianity, instead of being a reason for persecution, became the western Europe's most dominant religious tradition. Hereby, it became deeply rooted in the cultural identities of the western European peoples and thereby in the region's political-institutional make-up. Against this background, Christian martyrdom gradually developed in a well-known and accepted concept that proved to be rich of narration structures, metaphors and symbolisms that could function both in a religious and in a non-religious context.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Silverstein, *Islamic History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2010), 14.

<sup>107</sup> Silverstein, *ibidem.*, 11, 14.

<sup>108</sup> One must realise that in contemporary understandings, *jihad* is often misinterpreted as nothing more than the wish to violently attack disbelievers. Although some *jihad*-related verses in the Quran do mention the use of violence in the case of idolatry, for example. the infamous Sword Versus, the concept is much wider than that. Significant part of the concerning verses read *jihad* as a peaceful, internal struggle that comes with true devotion to the faith.

<sup>109</sup> Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 9-10.

<sup>110</sup> Brian Wicker, 'The Drama of Martyrdom: Christian and Muslim Approaches', in: Brian Wicker (ed.), *Witnesses of the Faith?: Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam* (New York 2006), 105, 114-116.; Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 24.

<sup>111</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 84-86.

As Middleton explains, at the core of this transformation was how Christianity's understanding of martyrdom throughout the course of time was 'recycled' over and over again in all sorts of different contexts. During the ages following the end of the Christian persecutions, this development mainly concerned the rise of martyrdom as spiritual status that could be obtained through an exclusive, ascetic tradition of a self-imposed suffering:

The torture that a martyr in the past might have had to undergo in order to demonstrate ultimate loyalty to and identification with Jesus in an age of persecution gave way to the voluntary self-denial of asceticism.<sup>112</sup>

By living an extremely sober life without any earthly pleasures or material comfort, a spiritual elite thus showed how they dedicated their lives to give expression to their witnessing of the true faith.<sup>113</sup> Hereby, within Christian culture, the status of martyrdom transformed into an exclusive iconic reward that was granted to those who had shown ultimate conviction to Jesus' example by nobly enduring a passive suffering. As Middleton underlines here, although exclusive, martyrdom hereby gradually started to evolve into a 'democratised practice' that all Christians could participate in as long as they were prepared to devote their entire life to spiritual discipline.<sup>114</sup> This democratisation of the martyrological practice further expanded when, between roughly the seventh and the tenth century, the concept increasingly gained a political twist when kings and popes promising salvation to those who died in the battlefield. Although not directly rewarded with a martyrological status, it was promised that those who would fall while fighting for the ruler's cause would join 'with the holy martyrs in glory on high' as those who died in the battlefield had 'imitate[d] the trials and suffering of Christ'.<sup>115</sup> Out of this tradition, it was in the eleventh and the twelfth century that martyrdom really became a practice of the grass-roots. Although it is unclear if martyrdom was already promised to the people during the First Crusade (1096-1099), it is known that from the Second Crusade (1145-1146) onwards, church leaders started to incorporate elements of martyrdom in their explanations of the situation the crusaders found themselves in and the quest that they consequently faced. However, the Crusades' violent course seems to be in a somehow paradoxical contrast with the Christian reading of martyrdom being a passive, nobly endurance of an exposed.<sup>116</sup> On the one hand, as Mitchell explains, in broad lines the Crusaders' martyrdom nevertheless remained true to the New Testament's conception as the focus still lay on the nobility of choosing a faith of suffering over the option that the Holy City would be silenced and destroyed. On the other, however, the Crusades' divergent interpretation shows how Christian martyrdom, as well-known status symbol, could be pragmatically interpreted by rulers and community leaders who attempted to galvanise among the grass roots, a practice that throughout the course of history would also prove to be a fruitful source for non-religious movements.<sup>117</sup>

As granting the mass with a martyrological status did devalue the concept's spiritual credibility, throughout the second half of the Middle Ages the conception became more exclusive

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<sup>112</sup> Ibidem., 84.

<sup>113</sup> Mitchell, *Martyrdom*, 40-41.

<sup>114</sup> Ibidem., 86.

<sup>115</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 87.

<sup>116</sup> Mitchell 18-19.; Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 88.

<sup>117</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 87-88.

again as churches started to canonise historical martyrs. In interaction with this development, martyrdom also gained a central place in the tradition of Christian material symbolism. Now, a Jesus-like suffering for the faith was no longer expected from ordinary individuals. Only those who had shown extraordinary devotion were labelled as martyr and, with this label, were granted with an iconic status ‘second only to apostles’.<sup>118</sup>

This selective, institutional reading of Christian martyrdom, however, caused discord within the Christian church. As Middleton explains, ‘what one group saw as the execution of heretics, others proclaimed as the witness of the martyrs’, a tension that played significant part in Martin Luther’s Reformation in 1517.<sup>119</sup> Within early Protestant communities, the experience of being persecuted was, in line with the above explained experiences of the early Christians, interpreted as ‘confirmation that this vision was of the true Church, since persecution and martyrdom was a sure sign on the apostolic nature of the faith’.<sup>120</sup> One of the most significant examples in this respect is the persecution of Protestants under the reign of ‘Bloody’ Mary Tudor (1516-1558) between 1553 and 1558. Against the background of her violent reign, which included the burning of about 300 Protestants at stake, historian John Foxe (1516-1587), who lived in exile for several years for having published Protestant books, wrote his *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (which was first published in 1563 and followed by several revised editions). In his book, Foxe connected the experiences of the Marian Martyrs to the sufferings that Christians throughout the entire course of western history had endured because of their ‘true’ understanding of ‘the doctrines of the primitive church’.<sup>121</sup> Although the exact difference between Catholic and Protestant martyrdom is not at the centre of this thesis, the Reformation’s schism over the concept provides an insight in the concept’s fruitful context-dependency. As Middleton explains:

Of course, for the Roman Catholic authorities, the Reformers were heretics who required correction, and if they remained obstinate, death was the appropriate punishment. The difference between a martyr and a heretic was a matter of perspective.<sup>122</sup>

As the Christian discourse of martyrdom became more and more intertwined with political practices, throughout the following ages, a more socio-culturally understanding of what martyrdom contained developed rapidly. Although initially mainly limited to casualties suffered by active Christians in the context of missionary work (like a Portuguese mission in Japan in the 1660s, where about 20.000 Christian missionaries were massacred), increasingly the rewarding of what Middleton calls modern, or secular martyrdom, became unstuck from a martyrdom gained by those involved in a religiously charged quest or granted by clerical institutions.<sup>123</sup>

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in several cases the meta-narrative embedded in Christian martyrdom got intertwined with nationalist ideologies. When for example considering the history of Irish republicanism as outlined in the introduction of this thesis, the cultural nationalism that arose during the Gaelic Revival, proudly interpreted the Irish people’s

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<sup>118</sup> Ibidem., 89-91.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Kolb, ‘God’s Gift of Martyrdom: The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith’, *Church History* 64 (1995) 3, 399-404.; Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 90-91, 94, 96-97.

<sup>120</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 93,

<sup>121</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 99-100.; Mitchell, *Martyrdom*, 66-68.; John N. King, ‘Guides to Reading Foxe’s Book of Martyrs’, in: *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68 (2005) 1-2, 140.

<sup>122</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 94.

<sup>123</sup> Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr’s Conviction*, 8-9.

historical suppression as victorious legitimisation of their wish for an own nation.<sup>124</sup> Another notorious example can be found in Poland. Building on the messianic metaphor used by nationalist by poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), who described Poland as ‘Christ among the nations’, a nationalism arose that interpreted Poland as crucified nation which, with God’s help, would eventually resurrect and for once and for all shake of the suppression of its neighbouring countries. By martyrologically interpreting the experience of being discriminated and suppressed for being Irish or Polish, both peoples envisioned themselves as witnesses of the righteous stance who enjoyed the proud right of an own nation.<sup>125</sup>

During the twentieth century, against the background of the World Wars, the discourse of martyrdom lived through an upsurge and was claimed by many actors from deviate stances. Still, situations occurred where Christians were massacred for their beliefs by ruling powers, of which Stalin’s massacre of Orthodox Christians in 1922 is an infamous example.<sup>126</sup> Also, religious leaders who had been involved in these great conflicts were granted with a martyrological status, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), a German pastor, theologian and active anti-Nazi activist who participated in a conspiracy against Hitler and was hanged by the Nazis.<sup>127</sup> However, on some occasions martyrdom was also consciously exploited by the regimes themselves, as for example in the case of Wessel Horst (1907-1930), a leader of the Nazi party who died after being shot by communists, and was assigned as the Nazi martyr by Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945).<sup>128</sup>

As Middleton points out, during the post-war era it became increasingly popular to commemorate those who died consequently to their determinedness for a political stance in a Christian context, such as Martin Luther King (1929-1968).<sup>129</sup> In this same period, media developments provided (potential) martyrs the option to visually expose their passive suffering to the world. In cases such as when ‘Cold War Martyr’ Czech student Jan Palach (1948-1969) burned himself to death, the whole world was confronted with the active protest that spoke from his passive suffering.<sup>130</sup>

When considering the above historical aerial view, one thing becomes clear: Christian martyrdom comes in many shapes. The way in which its rich and well-known meta-narrative was applied in deviate times and in distinct contexts, remind of what Dobson and Ziemann define as a discourse: ‘a body of assertions and utterances which are related to a certain topic and follow a certain set of rules.’<sup>131</sup> But what is at the core of this discourse? From the Noble death to Plato to the ascetism of monks to the murders of Bonhoeffer and King, they all have one thing in common: those who were granted with a martyrological status were somehow confronted with a suffering because of the ‘truth’ that they had witnessed and had hold on to no matter what. In its essence, the discourse of Christian martyrdom thus refers to those who followed a script that

<sup>124</sup> George Sweeney, ‘Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice’, 422-423.

<sup>125</sup> George Sweeney, ‘Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice’, 422-423.; Brian Porter, ‘The Catholic Nation: Religion, Identity, and Narratives of Polish History’, in: *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45 (2001) 2, 289-290.

<sup>126</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 116.

<sup>127</sup> Ibidem., 118.

<sup>128</sup> Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr’s Conviction*, 104-106.

<sup>129</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 118-119.

<sup>130</sup> Charles Sabatos, ‘The “burning body” as an icon of resistance: Literary representations of Jan Palach’, in: Charles Sabatos, *Gender and Sexuality in 1968* (New York, 2009). 193-217.

<sup>131</sup> ‘Glossary’, in: Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources, the Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London and New York 2009), 243.

is printed in the mind of western Europe's Christian culture. As meaning-producing reservoir, the Christian reading of martyrdom is so deeply embedded in the contemporary public culture that it is a meta-narrative about the purpose of human suffering that we all know and therefore understand. It must be a sacrifice in the name of the greater good.

For the discourse of Christian martyr to function, it is thus not the most important question whether the martyr (or his or her cause) was/is primarily Christian or not. What matters is whether the martyr's *public* agrees with the drama that is played out. However, the sympathy of the public is not easily won. Cases where martyrdom was willingly sought or violently taken, such as the Crusades and the Nazi martyrdom of Wessel Horst, immediately cause doubt as the 'truths' they had witnessed are not widely accepted today. The martyrdom of for example Martin Luther King, on the other hand, will probably not meet widespread opposition, as today people generally sympathize with his stance.

## 1.2 Seeking martyrdom through hunger strikes: how the starving body became a weapon for the inferior

Throughout the course of history, the British government was relatively often challenged by oppositional movements or individuals who attempted to enforce socio-political change by going on hunger strike. However, as historian James Vernon explains in *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge 2007), it was only when, in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, 'humanitarian considerations had established that starving to death was unnatural, immoral, and inhumane' that self-sought hunger became 'effective as a weapon of political protest'.<sup>132</sup> Vernon roughly divides the British political connotations of hunger in three 'modern regimes' that, between the mid-nineteenth and late-twentieth century, chronologically followed upon each other: the divine, the moral and the social.<sup>133</sup> As Vernon explains:

The notion of hunger as either God's divine plan or the necessary sign of an individual's moral failure to learn the virtue of labour was gradually displaced, if never entirely superseded, by the discovery that hunger was a collective social problem. Hunger, it was eventually recognised, was not the fault of the hungry. They were, rather, innocent victims of failing political and economic systems over which they had no control, and their hunger threatened not just themselves, but the health, wealth, and security of society as a whole.<sup>134</sup>

In line with this transformation of the British political conception of hunger, also its potential to be utilised as means to challenge the government transitioned. The roots for this change, as Vernon explains, lie in political-economic critique on the Malthusian ethic that hunger was a necessary evil functioning as 'natural check on the morally weak'.<sup>135</sup> Both in the cases of Ireland and India, the British nullified great starvations by measuring the success of their rule through the absence (and not the presence) of famine and by branding the hungry as primitive and lazy.<sup>136</sup> When a nationalist tradition arose in both countries, however, for the Irish and Indian

<sup>132</sup> James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Harvard 2007), 64.

<sup>133</sup> James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History*, 2.

<sup>134</sup> Ibidem., 2-3.

<sup>135</sup> Ibidem., 3, 10-11.

<sup>136</sup> Peter Gray, 'The Triumph of Dogma Ideology and Famine Relief', *History Ireland* 3 (1995) 2, 27, 29-31.; James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History*, 3.

peoples ‘famine became to represent the inhumanity and incompetence of British rule’ that ensured ultimate redemption and the right to an own nation. As Vernon explains:

The British had promised free trade, prosperity, and civilization; they had delivered famine (...). Famine highlighted the moral strength of those who suffered. (...) Those awaiting citizenship made hunger an index of political exclusion and a mark of the moral strength and fortitude of the disenfranchised.<sup>137</sup>

From the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries onwards, the anti-imperial/nationalist reading of hunger as theme to challenge the British government through, also found soil in Great Britain itself. Collectives who, like the Irish and the Indians, felt victimised, neglected and underrepresented by the government, utilised the suffering of starvation as means to underline the government’s repressive and unfair stance. The first example in this respect can be found in the hunger marches through which unemployed Boer War veterans attempted to show their physical strength and thereby contest the government’s stance that they were ‘unemployable’.<sup>138</sup>

The first time that the British government was challenged through a hunger strike was when in 1909 the imprisoned WSPU-members attempted to expose to society the limits of the British constitution by ‘highlighting the illegality and violence on which women’s political subjection rested’.<sup>139</sup> As Vernon underlines, ‘it is not surprising’ that of all the country’s oppositional actors, it were women who for the first time utilised hunger’s changing connotation in the form of a hunger strike:

Like the Irish and Indian nationalists who followed them, they sought to politically mobilise (...) sympathy to highlight the illegality of the metropolitan or colonial state and expose the inhumanity and violence upon which its rule appeared to depend.<sup>140</sup>

After the First World War, this protestive utilisation of hunger strikes became a frequently used tactic by Irish and Indian nationalists. As Vernon explains:

Hunger strikes demonstrated the courage of those subjugated by colonial rule. (...) The brutal inhumanity of a state prepared to allow its subjects to die was contrasted with the willingness of the strikers to risk their own lives to further their claims to citizenship and independence.<sup>141</sup>

When considering political hunger strikes through this angle while keeping the discourse of Christian martyrdom in mind, it becomes clear that the construction of the first lends itself to the practicing of the latter: through the suffering that comes with self-starvation, a political hunger striker exposes the agony that the people he or she (claims to) represent(s) have to endure at the hands of an unjust power.

In comparative contrast to this thesis’ empirical analysis of the hunger strikes of the WSPU and the IRA, it is interesting to consider the case of the twentieth century’s most beloved hunger striker who, according to many, deserves the martyrs crown: Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948).<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Vernon, *Hunger*, 42-43.

<sup>138</sup> Ibidem., 43.

<sup>139</sup> Ibidem., 43.

<sup>140</sup> Ibidem., 64.

<sup>141</sup> Ibidem., 43.

<sup>142</sup> Mitchell, *Martyrdom*, 108.



Out of the fifteen fastings he undertook during his life, three (those in 1932, 1943 and in 1948) became known for their political connotation. Although Gandhi carried out his strikes in the context of his protest against the injustice of the British colonial rule in India, he himself insisted that his hunger strike was not a political deed but ‘an act of conscious’:

Resolved upon in the name of God, for His work, and as I believe in all humility, at His call [was] undertaken with the purest of motives and without malice or anger against any single soul.<sup>143</sup>

As Tim Pratt and James Vernon explain about the metropolitan reception of Gandhi's hunger strikes, his today widely recognised status of noble martyr of the Indian cause was out of question in Great Britain in the 1930s and 1940s. Neither Gandhi nor his strikes were well-liked or seen as noble martyr(dom). British newspapers approached his actions through a language of concern and scepticism and depicted him as a saboteur who deliberately risked starvation to bring the British and Indian governments in an awkward predicament.<sup>144</sup> Particularly the conservative and right-wing newspapers directly condemned Gandhi's actions. As illustratively stated in the *Daily Mail* after the end of his 1943 hunger strike:

The nation which refused to be intimidated by HITLER, MUSSOLINI, and TOJO was unlikely to surrender to GANDHI. The days of appeasement are over (...) the dark days of struggle for existence have shown us who are our true friends and who the false.<sup>145</sup>

Pratt and Vernon explain this toilsome reception of Gandhi's hunger strike through the fact that the ‘cultural translation’ of his actions was a difficult affair among the British public. Their lack of sympathy for his actions was partly caused by the geographical distance, the absence of photographic accounts of his strike and disagreement with Gandhi's political stance, but also by the public's hesitation to go along with the necessity of the extremeness of self-inflicted starvation.<sup>146</sup> As we know, this changed on the long term. Particularly after Gandhi was shot death in 1948, he would gain worldwide acknowledgement for the self-sought hunger through which he had exposed his conception of the unjust colonial system.<sup>147</sup>

When now considering the act of political hunger strikes in the context of the discourse of Christian martyrdom, hunger strikers thus anticipated on a narration of conflict and suppression that shows significant parallels with the one in the New Testament. The suffering he or she endures through starvation symbolises the suffering of the suppressed or excluded people they (claim to) represent. Hereby, their passive suffering becomes a powerful weapon that not only touches on the specific political issue at stake, such as colonial rule or prison conditions, but exposes an injustice at the core of a systems political structures.

However, as the case of Gandhi showed, a hunger striker becoming a martyr is not a foregone conclusion. Whereas history's most famous martyrs, such the early Christians, the Marian

<sup>143</sup> Pyarelal, *The Epic Fast* (Ahmedabad, 1932), 101.; quoted in: Vernon, *Hunger*, 70.

<sup>144</sup> Tim Pratt and James Vernon. “‘Appeal from this fiery bed...’: The Colonial Politics of Gandhi's Fasts and Their Metropolitan Reception’, in: *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005) 1, 103-104.

<sup>145</sup> *Daily Mail* (March 4, 1943), 2., cited in: Tim Pratt and James Vernon, “‘Appeal from this fiery bed...’: The Colonial Politics of Gandhi's Fasts and Their Metropolitan Reception’, in: *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005) 1, 107.

<sup>146</sup> Pratt and Vernon, “‘Appeal from this fiery bed...’”, 96-97.

<sup>147</sup> Mitchell, *Martyrdom*, 108.

Martyrs and Martin Luther King, did not ask for their suffering, hunger strikers somehow did. But as we saw in Gandhi's case: it is the public that decides. As Jolyon Mitchell states on Gandhi's case: 'martyrs do (...) have the potential to rule from their graves, but they require support from the living to do so'.<sup>148</sup> Only among a public that sympathises with the hunger strikers' cause, he or she will receive the martyr's crown.

### 1.3 A Weberian discussion

As we set clear how the Christian martyrdom functions discursively and how it has the potential through its powerful meta-narrative to function in the context of a political hunger strikes, still one question remains: what can it do to the dynamics at stake in a political conflict when it is consciously sought by protestive movements such as the WSPU and the IRA? If one's righteous conviction is violently suppressed by a tyrannical ruler, why would a passive suffering become so powerful? Why wouldn't it be more efficient in such a situation to take up the metaphorical sword and actively propagate one's conviction like Muhammed did?

As means to structure our thoughts on these dynamics, this thesis loosely leans on the Weberian conception of the tension between, on the one hand, an ethics based on conviction and, on the other hand, an ethics based on political responsibility as he expounded in his *Politics of Vocation* (1919).<sup>149</sup>

To explain the Weberian tension between the ethics of conviction and responsibility in the light of the discursive functioning of Christian martyrdom, we must go back to Weber's understandings of politics, the modern state and the characteristics of a good politician. Weber defines politics as 'the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a *political* association, hence today, of a *state*'. Deriving from this conception, the modern state must be defined as the (successful) claim on 'the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'. In other words: 'if the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be'. Following this logic, the functioning of the state depends on the legitimate usage of this physical force.<sup>150</sup> Politicians, those who control the tools that come with the legitimate monopoly on violence, are continuously confronted with the tension that exists between the two ethics. Should they stay true to their moral consciousness even if this might lead to socio-political chaos, instability and insecurity? Or should they prioritise the maintenance of peace, security and prosperity even when it cuts across their moral consciousness? As Weber explains:

All ethically oriented conduct may be guided by one of two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims: conduct can be oriented to an 'ethic of [conviction]' or to an 'ethic of responsibility'. (...) There is an abysmal contrast between conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of [conviction] – that is, in religious terms, "The Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord" – and conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of responsibility, in which case one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one's action.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibidem., 108.

<sup>149</sup> Max Weber, 'Politics as Vocation', in: H.H Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds. and trans.), *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York 1946), 78–80.

<sup>150</sup> Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', 77.

<sup>151</sup> Ibidem., 120.

A good politician, someone who exercises the state's control over violence legitimately, according to Weber implements a deliberate balance between that what is morally right and that what is socio-politically sensible in his or her actions. Although the ideal politician thus executes a balance between the two ethics, in practice a continuous tension exists between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility, and a politician is continuously confronted with the pitfall to let one of the two prevail over the other.<sup>152</sup>

In the context of a political conflict, the dynamics that a self-crowned martyr attempts to set in motion by employing the discourse of Christian martyrdom, can be understood through this Weberian tension between the ethics of responsibility and conviction. By narrating an experience of suppression through the language of Christian martyrdom, it is suggested that the politicians who are (claimed to be) responsible for the suffered agonies do not carry out their claims to power (the monopoly of violence) in a legitimate manner.

A martyr, someone who, like Jesus, holds on to the truth even in a situation of great suffering, shows an ultimate form of the ethics of conviction (and, in the words of Weber: 'does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord').<sup>153</sup> Hereby, the martyr rejects the ethics of responsibility as being a task that the opposing politician needs to hold on to in the concerning conflict. By narrating his or her starvation through a narration paralleling to Christian martyrdom, the martyr thus frames the issues at stake not as being a matter of calculated political correctness but as a matter that concerns the essence of the ultimate values and meanings of human life. Here, for the challenged politicians, like for Pilatus in the Gospels, it is about impossible to come up with the right response. In almost all scenarios, the balance between the ethics of conviction and responsibility is upset. If the politicians refuse to give in and leaves the martyr to his or her own devise (which might lead to his or her death), this denigrates the execution of the ethics of conviction. If the politicians give in and admit that the martyr is right, they deny the ethics of responsibility and possibly also bely their own ethics of conviction. Hereby, a self-acclaimed martyr who 'successfully' seeks martyrdom provokes a politician to do what Pilatus did: evading the political duty to pronounce a judgement that practices the balance between the conflicting ethics of conviction and responsibility.

When hypothetically considering the human action generated when the discourse of Christian martyrdom is employed 'successfully' in the context of political conflict, it becomes clear that a martyr can stir up the stable functioning of the political system he or she opposes to by exposing to the world that the ruler's claim to the monopoly of violence is illegitimate. As the distinction between, for example, the cases of Wessel Horst and Martin Luther King show: the discourse of Christian martyrdom has the *potential* to affect a political conflict by exposing that the political status quo of that very moment is illegitimate. The ethical tension that is exposed by someone who chooses suffering over a renouncement of his or her convictions, must be accepted and assumed by (part of) society to become an effective form of martyrdom. As the case of Gandhi showed, for a hunger strikes such a self-assigned bid for martyrdom is difficult but not impossible. As becomes clear in Chapter 2 and 3, however, making converts among the layers of society that do not necessarily belong to the heart of a movement's own constituency is a difficult affair.

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<sup>152</sup> John Verstraeten, 'The Tension Between 'Gesinnungsethik' and 'Verantwortungsethik': A Critical Interpretation of the Position of Max Weber in 'Politik als Beruf', *Ethical Perspectives* 2 (1995) 3, 180.

<sup>153</sup> Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', 120.

## 2 Chapter 2. The Women's Social and Political Union and the 1909 hunger strike of Marion Wallace Dunlop

On July 5, 1909, Marion Wallace Dunlop (1864-1942) was the first suffragette ever to go on hunger strike. While being imprisoned in Holloway Prison in London for pinning an extract of the 1689 Bill of Rights on a wall of the House of Commons, she refused to eat or drink as long as she was not treated as a political prisoner. As the government released her after ninety-one hours, we will never know whether she was prepared to fast up until death.<sup>154</sup> Nevertheless, as this chapter shows, her action had a significant impact on the tactics of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Dunlop's fellow WSPU-members welcomed her action with open arms. In its official newspaper, *Votes for Women*, the movement praised Dunlop for the brave and noble perseverance with which she had continued their struggle while locked up by the hostile government. As her example was immediately followed by many other imprisoned suffragettes, it became an integral part of the movement's tactics from that moment onwards. *Votes for Women* narrated the stories of the hunger strikers through a language reminding of the discourse of Christian martyrdom as expounded in Chapter 1. Particularly when in the fall of 1909, the government started to conduct forcible feeding on imprisoned women who refused to eat or drink, the newspaper increasingly portrayed the hunger strikers as martyrological heroines who exposed to the British society the unjust and illegitimate manner in which the government executed its power. However, the martyrological message that the WSPU attempted to convey with this narration was not automatically adopted by the British people. Although the *Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* at some points themselves incorporated the term 'martyr(dom)' in their reports, they did so in a rather cynical manner and questioned martyrological credibility coming with the hunger strikers' self-sought suffering.

This chapter critically approaches the embedding of the Christian martyrological meta-narrative in the meaning the WSPU's assigned to its 1909 hunger strikes, with a focus on the strike of Dunlop, and the way in which the British press responded to this claim. Through a thorough empirical investigation of publications on the case in *Votes for Women*, the *Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express*, the language through which the movement constructed and expressed its understanding of the issues at stake, and the way in which this was received within the British society, are analysed.

It does so in five steps. First, the historical background of Dunlop's hunger strike is briefly considered. Secondly, the language through which *Votes for Women* narrated her strike and the ones of the suffragettes who followed her throughout 1909 is mapped. Thirdly, it is analysed how the WSPU embedded its narration of the strike within its framing of the wider issues at stake in their struggle for women's suffrage. Fourthly, it is investigated how *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* responded to the WSPU' martyrological claims. The fifth, concluding section of this chapter, it is critically analysed what can be said about the way in which the discourse of Christian martyrdom functioned in this case.

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<sup>154</sup>Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (London 1987), 104.

## 2.1 Historical background to the WSPU's 1909 hunger strike

The action preceding Dunlop's arrest found place against the background of a fierce dispute between the WSPU and the government of Herbert Henry Asquith (1852-1928) concerning the government's refusal to grant political status to women incarcerated because of infringements related to the cause of inclusive suffrage. Asquith, statesman of the Liberal party, was an outspoken anti-suffragist. Throughout the mid-1900s his government took firm measures against the rebellious suffragettes who by that time had increased their radical, militant tactics. As means to enforce parliamentarians to discuss the issue of women suffrage, from 1905 onwards the WSPU had integrated organised interruptions of parliamentary sessions in their repertoire.<sup>155</sup> The strategy regularly led to (violent) confrontations with safeguards and police officers, such as in October 1905, when WSPU-founder Christabel Pankhurst and fellow-member Annie Kenny (1879-1953) had interrupted a parliamentary meeting in Manchester by shouting WSPU battle cries to the parliamentarians while waving with corresponding banners. After being arrested they were offered the choice of either paying a £5 fine or being jailed. Motivated by the believe that only imprisonment would expose the injustice of the British political system, both chose the latter and started what would become a trend of consciously preferring prison sentence over a fine when arrested in relation to suffragette action.<sup>156</sup> As during the years that followed the WSPU further radicalised its tactics, also the number of arrests rapidly grew. During 1909, the experiences of suffragettes who were imprisoned because of their involvement in vandalism and violating the public order, increasingly led to debates concerning prison conditions. Incarnated suffragettes were consistently placed in second or third division cells, which meant that the authorities equated their actions with those of 'ordinary criminals' like burglars and shoplifters.<sup>157</sup>

When on June 3 1909 Dunlop was arrested for vandalism after she had pinned a copy of an extract of the 1689 Bill of Rights on a wall of the House of Commons, she also consciously chose incarceration. She was immediately brought to London's Holloway Prison where she started her hunger strike. The Asquith government, however, was not amused by her action. They were annoyed by the dramaturgical attitude she adopted and feared the potential public perception of the government's share in Dunlop's suffering.<sup>158</sup> After efforts of tempting her to break the strike, by placing plates with food and cups of tea in her cell, had failed, the doctor in attendance told her that she might be forcibly fed when continuing her strike. None of this, however, had the desired effect as Dunlop persistently continued her strike.<sup>159</sup>

After a strike of ninety-one hours, the government decided to release Dunlop to avoid having to deal with her getting seriously ill from her self-inflicted starvation. But this did not indicate the end of the matter. On the contrary. Inspired by Dunlop's action, the WSPU decided to embed hunger strike campaigns at the core of its tactics. During the week after Dunlop's release, fourteen other imprisoned members announced to refuse to eat or drink as long as

<sup>155</sup> Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 171-173.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibidem.*, 187.

<sup>157</sup> Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 102-104.; Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 195-198.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign*, 52.; Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 104-105.; Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement*, 1-2.

<sup>159</sup> Caroline J. Howlett, 'Writing on the body? Representation and Resistance in British Suffragette Accounts of Forcible Feeding', in: Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel and Ellen E. Berry (eds.), *Bodies of Writing in Performance* (New York and London 1996), 2-3.

the first division status was refused. Again, the government responded through a mixture of great disgust and serious concern. It was feared that the campaign's public image would mock and disgrace the judicial system. The government was persistent to avoid the scandal of a suffragette dying in prison. On September 29, 1909, Home Secretary Herbert Gladstone (1854-1930) announced to the House of Commons that he decided to introduce forcible feeding as a measure against the striking suffragettes. As force feeding was a standard hospital treatment used when prisoners became seriously ill, Gladstone publicly argued that he understood the introduction of the measure to be his duty as it was his responsibility to save the women's lives.<sup>160</sup>

As anthropologist Caroline J. Howlett shows in her research on the WSPU's representation of this forcible feeding, the introduction of the treatment had a crucial impact on the discourse through which the movement narrated its struggle from that moment onwards, and hereby also influenced its public perception. Even in comparison to the (chosen) pain caused by starvation and dehydration, being forcibly fed was an extremely unpleasant experience, both physically and mentally. Often, immediately after the treatment was performed, the women were put in solitary confinement for several hours. Although Gladstone argued that the procedure was a form of care that the government was obligated to deploy when the life of an inmate was in danger, as Howlett states it is very unlikely that Gladstone was not aware of these effects. Underlying the measure was probably the hope that a scandal would be avoided by not granting the women the opportunity to mock the law.<sup>161</sup>

The forcible feeding, however, did not have the effect desired. On the surface, the measure did what it had to do as it temporarily caused feelings of extreme isolation and desperation among the treated prisoners (personal accounts describe the forcible feeding, particularly when followed by as traumatic 'horror beyond description').<sup>162</sup> The expected deterrent effect, however, was limited. The government had underestimated the unifying impact that the individual accounts had on the suffragette community once the treated women had recovered. The WSPU held several public gatherings devoted to the strikes, where letters from released strikers were read out loud and recovered ex-strikers held speeches and organised grotesque celebrations once another striker was released. As in such meetings the experience of forcible feeding was a main theme of discussion, the treatment got a crucial impact on the language through which the suffragettes represented their struggle:

Suffragettes could make their pain communicable and comprehensible, where it might otherwise have seemed debilitatingly private and inarticulable. In making their pain meaningful, they also prevented it from seeming pointless or irrelevant to others; the forcible feeding account constructed the pain as politically relevant because part of a shared experience.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Howlett, 'Writing on the body?', 6.; Martin Pugh, *The March of the Women*, 180.; Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 104-109.

<sup>161</sup> Howlett, 'Writing on the body?', 3-7.

<sup>162</sup> 'The Hunger-Strikers at St. James's Hall', *Votes for Women* (August 6, 1909), 1043.

<sup>163</sup> Howlett, 'Writing on the body?', 7.

## 2.2 Narrating the hunger strike: the instrumentality of exposed pain

This section unwraps the language through which *Votes for Women* structured the narration of its understanding of the 1909 hunger strikes by imprisoned WSPU-members. First, it is analysed how the newspaper narrated the general struggle between the British government and the WSPU in this period (2.2.1). Secondly, the way in which the 1909 series of hunger strikes by imprisoned WSPU members were embedded within the newspaper's general interpretation of the conflict is investigated (2.2.2).

### 2.2.1 Mapping the conflict: the community of the true faith versus the unjust tyrant

The point of departure that *Votes for Women* took in its narration of the 1909 hunger strikes, was the wider WSPU understanding of their conflict with the government. As this subsection shows, this conflict was approached as a clash between, on the one hand, those who understood that the inclusive women suffrage was the only righteous move forward, and, on the other, the British government that wanted nothing else than to preserve its status quo, a stance through which it, according to the WSPU, illegitimated its own power. As is shown throughout this chapter, this exact way of broadly mapping the conflict would provide a rich framework for the martyrological narration of the 1909 hunger strikes.

Broadly speaking, the image sketched in *Votes for Women* of the community opposing to government consisted of two dimensions. On its top-layer were the women and men who not only supported the political cause of suffrage for women but were also prepared to actively fight a militant struggle in its name. This group of people practically demarcated itself through WSPU-membership, which, on a somehow demanding tone, was equated with understanding the true meaning of equality and pugnacity. As enunciated in the WSPU's 'Constitution' that was printed in the newspaper's first issue in October 1907, members were expected to break all ties with other politically coloured organisations or institutions, and had to devote their entire political lives to the cause of women suffrage:

MEMBERSHIP. – Women of all shades of political opinion who approve the objects and methods of the Union, and who are prepared to act independently of party, are eligible for membership. It must be clearly understood that no member of the Union shall support the candidate of any political party in Parliamentary elections until Women have obtained the Parliamentary Vote.<sup>164</sup>

As already becomes clear from *Votes for Women*'s articulation of the WSPU membership, the movement's expectations of its members went beyond the requirement of only holding the righteously understanding towards the issue. As is underlined in the movement's official statement concerning its objectives, that was published in the same October 1907 issue, those who were in favour of inclusive suffrage, or in other words those who had witnessed the truth concerning this matter, were bound to an active propagation of this cause:

OBJECTS. – To secure for Women the parliamentary Vote as it is or may be granted to men;

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<sup>164</sup>'Dedication', *Votes for Women* (October 1907), 2.

to use the power thus obtained to establish equality of rights and opportunities between the sexes. And to promote the social and industrial well-being of the community.<sup>165</sup>

This core of active members was surrounded by a second, much broader community which, through their struggle, the WSPU (claimed to) represent: women everywhere and at any time. The language through which this community was defined transcended space and time as it included all human beings who, at some point in the past or in the future, had been or would be confronted with inequality. Illustrative for this universalist tone is the ‘Dedication’ that consistently appeared at the newspaper’s first page:

The brave women who to-day are fighting for freedom: to the noble women who all down the ages kept the flag flying and looked forward to this day without seeing it: to all women all over the world, of whatever race, or creed, or calling, whether they be with us or against us in this fight, we dedicate this paper.<sup>166</sup>

Although differently approached in terms of mobilisation, in the end both layers of the community the WSPU (claimed to) represent(ed) met again in their opposition against injustice, which concerned the British government. Often describing the government or individual anti-suffrage parliamentarians like Asquith and Gladstone as ‘tyrants’, the government’s actions and motivations were narrated as characteristic to the profile of the enemy to everyone believing in a fair and equal world. This contradistinctive language appears frequently in the newspaper’s narration of Dunlop’s hunger strike:

But we who see with clearer vision are not ashamed to confess that [Marion Dunlop’s] action has filled us with intense gratitude, and has furnished us with one more proof of the triumphant power of the human spirit to overcome the obstacles of oppression and tyranny. In her action in fighting for liberty she has enriched the whole history of the world.<sup>167</sup>

Although the WSPU mainly sought confrontations with politicians who were outspokenly anti-suffrage, in *Votes for Women* also those who were not against inclusive franchise but wished to amend the electoral law gradually or uttered critique towards the WSPU’s militant tactics, were unrelatable ranged with ‘the enemy’. This trend particularly concerned members of the Liberal Party who wished to expand the right to vote but nevertheless condemned the militancy movement ought necessary in realising it. For example, the Liberal’s attempt to grant suffrage to aristocrat women through a Suffrage Bill in the spring of 1909 (which eventually was dropped as it did not go through Parliament) was seen as a sop set up to keep the suffragettes from their cause of inclusive franchise. As illustratively depicted in the cartoon below (Figure 1), the concerning politicians were portrayed as a will-o’-the-wisp, a mythic creature with a lantern that in old folk stories mislead lost travellers by guiding them to swamps or pools. Their Reform Bill was understood to be a bait that had to keep the suffragettes from the righteous road of ‘militant methods’ that would eventually lead up to the ‘woman citizenship’ that was already looming at the horizon.

<sup>165</sup> ‘Constitution’, *Votes for Women* (October 1907), ii.

<sup>166</sup> ‘Constitution’, *Votes for Women* (October 1907), 1.

<sup>167</sup> ‘The Outlook’, *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 933.



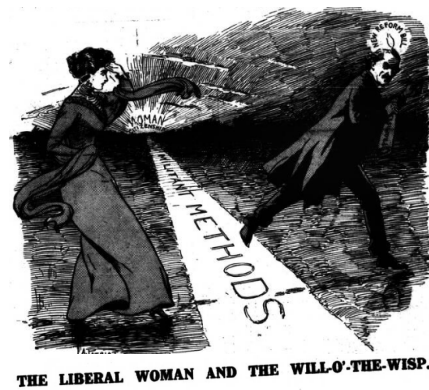


Figure 1: The Liberal Women and the will-o-the-wisp, *Votes for Women* (May 14, 1909), 1.

On the surface *Votes for Women* narrated the clash between those in favour of women suffrage and the anti-suffrage Asquith government, as a dispute over the fact that women were excluded from suffrage while were expected to obey several civic duties. Regularly, in its reports the newspaper elaborated its statement through arguments reminding of the American Revolution's 'Taxation without representation is tyranny' stance, as for example in the below cartoon ('Taxation without representation is legalised robbery):



Figure 2: 'A legal thief' *Votes for Women* (May 7, 1909), 1.

*Votes for Women* did not, however, approach the WSPU's cause in isolation of only the question of the legal introduction of inclusive suffrage. The attitude through which the Asquith government dealt with the issue of suffrage for women was seen as a symptom of an even bigger threat, namely the fact that the legitimacy through which it executed its power was false. As the government constructed its legitimacy through an exclusive electorate that it had selected itself and was unwilling to enlarge, its entire claim to power could only be fragile. Through suchlike arguments, the newspaper approached the issue of women as a principle that went beyond the practical right to vote and strongly intertwined it with a wide understanding of the just

functioning of politics, namely that all citizens had to be treated as equals both in their duties and in their rights. As articulated in an essay of Emmeline Pethick Lawrence that was published in the newspaper's first issue in October 1907, the question over women suffrage actually was a question over the righteous functioning of the society, the state, and the interaction between the two:

Oh, you women of Britain! If only you could understand, if only you could see what the vote really means. But we know and see that the women's vote could help to bring into the life of the nation something of your ideal, and put into possession of many the chance of the sweetness and beauty that is in your own life.<sup>168</sup>

If women were given the right to vote, it was argued, eventually not only the British society but the entire human race would be served as this would be a crucial step in the realisation of an equal and just world. Therefore, participating in the WSPU's struggle was a noble task of which realisation would write history:

To women far and wide the trumpet call goes forth, come fight with us in our battle for freedom. (...) This is a battle in which all must take part; they must come ready for active endeavour and for strenuous service (...) This is no anti-man crusade; the women who take part in it are fighting for their fathers, and husbands, and brothers, as well as for themselves, because it will be a good thing for men and women alike when their combined point of view is recognised in the counsels of the State. (...) To us the banner "Votes for Women" is a sacred trust. (...) We fight for nothing less than the emancipation of the one-half of the whole human race, and with this great aim in front, and with our trusted banner above our heads, we go forward with assurance to victory.<sup>169</sup>

### 2.2.2 Hunger strikes as transformative instrument

Although most of the above statements were published roughly two years before the WSPU's first hunger strikes, the bottom line of this definition of the movement's identity and stance would be at the core of the martyrological approach through which *Votes for Women* would provide meaning to the suffering of the striking suffragettes. During the late spring and early summer of 1909, *Votes for Women*'s reports on the imprisoned WSPU-members were constructed through the same narration structure. At the core of the newspaper's interpretation of the issue of political status was the unjust governmental response to the demand for the status of political prisoner, which was seen as a perfect example of the illegitimate manner in which the government executed its power. The language through which this opposition was phrased, was structured along the schism between on the one hand the unfair policy of the government, with Prime Minister Asquith and Home Secretary Gladstone as its main players, and on the other hand the just cause propagated by the community of everyone struggling for suffrage for women.

In its reports on the arrests, convictions, incarnations and releases of WSPU-members, *Votes for Women* interpreted the experience of being imprisoned as a tool to prove the determination through which the suffragettes propagated their cause and thereby as means to underline the cause's crucial importance. The newspaper portrayed the imprisoned women as noble champions

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<sup>168</sup> Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, 'What the Vote Means', *Votes for Women* (October 1907), 3.

<sup>169</sup> 'Votes for Women: The Battle Cry', *Votes for Women* (October 1907), 6.

of the righteous cause who with their ‘determination to continue the fight for the freedom of women’ had ‘inspired many others to follow their example’.<sup>170</sup> Holloway Prison in this respect was directly explained as symbol for the government’s tyrannical oppression of women that the WSPU proudly fought against as being shut behind bars had not silenced them. In doing so, the narration structure through which the newspaper interpreted the stories of the incarcerated women thus appealed to a framing that reminds of the discourse of Christian martyrdom: the women were praised for approaching the suppressive measures not as limitations but as a confirmation of their stance, and thereby understood it not as weakness but as strength. As is illustrated by a speech from former prisoner Mrs. Eats, which was cited by the newspaper in May 1909:

At last, said Mrs. Eats, she could call herself by that honoured name, a Suffragette, for she had graduated in the Suffragettes’ school, Holloway. To her it had seemed no prison. (...) Those narrow cells and high walls were symbols of many women’s lives. But even in prison there was comradeship. The leaders of the movement had been there, and their spirit sustained their followers. The bursting open of the prison gates was like the opening to the greater hope for the womanhood of the world’.<sup>171</sup>

Despite the increased measures implemented by the government, *Votes for Women* repeatedly reported that the support for the WSPU was rapidly growing. For example, when in May 1909, the WSPU had hosted an international suffragette conference in London, *Votes for Women* explained the high number of visitors as prove that the time was ripe to push through the demand of inclusive suffrage. The women who had attended the conference were (literally) approached as witnesses of the righteous cause of the WSPU and therefore seen as evidence that the government’s stance did not stand up to scrutiny:

Did [the government] consider that the cloud of witness was soon to be augmented by keen observers from countries where such treatment of women would be accounted a shameful thing? It is to liberty-loving England under a Government calling itself Liberal that these visitors from other lands come to see such things – a fine object-lesson for peoples of the earth to gaze upon!<sup>172</sup>

When on June 29, 1909, a group of suffragettes was arrested after Pankhurst, who was among them, had ‘deliberately struck an inspector who had handed her a letter in which Asquith rejected a visit requested by a WSPU delegation’, the situation became critical. In response to Asquith’s refusal and the arrests, a series of massive WSPU protests in London’s governmental district was announced. As the suffragettes were known for not avoiding physical confrontations, the authorities forbade that the police would deal firmly with any form of unacceptable behaviour. As *Votes for Women* reported, several women ‘had decided that if they were to be arrested (...) they would leave a mark which should be remembered’. As the newspaper reported ‘accordingly, taking deliberate aim with stones, they broke a number of the windows in the Government Offices in Whitehall, an action which brought upon themselves immediate arrest’.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>170</sup> ‘Release of the prisoners’, *Votes for Women* (May 7, 1909), 621.

<sup>171</sup> ‘What the Foreign Delegates saw’, *Votes for Women* (May 7, 1909), 628-29.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibidem.*, 628.

<sup>173</sup> Henry W. Nevinson, ‘The Battle of Westminster’, *Votes for Women* (July 2, 1909), 869-870.

It was against the above background that on July 5, Dunlop was arrested for ‘wilful damage’ done to the House of Commons by pinning on a wall the extract from the 1689 Bill of Rights, which stated: ‘It is the right of the subject to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal’. Through this action, she aimed to oppose against the refusal of Asquith to receive and speak to a WSPU delegation.<sup>174</sup> *Votes for Women* reported how Dunlop had righteously ‘declined to pay a fine for an action which she believed necessary to remind the legislators of the country of their duty’ and how the cause of her action was a noble one: ‘calling the attention of members of Parliament to the forgotten section of the Bill of Rights’.<sup>175</sup>

*Votes for Women* approached her arrest and second division incarceration as direct examples of the unconvincing manner in which the government attempted to fight the cause of women suffrage.<sup>176</sup> At the surface, the factual course of the confrontation between the government and the WSPU was told through the political disagreements at stake. As for example phrased in a citation of Dunlop’s adjourned hearing on July 2 1909, printed in the newspaper on July 9, she did not deny that she had violated the rules laid down in the law, but, with her action, had had the intention to make clear that she did not consider this juridical construction to be a legitimate constellation of power. As she addressed the magistrate as follows:

In the main the evidence which they gave was correct, and I do not propose to challenge it. (...) I wrote those words because they were in danger of being forgotten by our legislators, and because I intended that they should be indelible. My action was political and had a political motive and no other. It was wilful, if you please, because I certainly intended to do it, but it was not wilful damage, because I did not, and still do not, consider the walls of the House of Commons have been damaged by what I have done. That is my defense.<sup>177</sup>

Intertwined with the political language through which *Votes for Women* narrated the juridical issues at stake in Dunlop’s case, a much more morally charged language was used, which narrated the event in moral, universalist terms. The battle for inclusive suffrage, as the movement argued, was much more than just a political schism. It was a battle of the righteous suffragettes against a tyrannous government:

It was not violence that counted (...) but the moral force behind, the utter absence of self, and the willingness so universally shown to give everything freely and cheerfully to purchase the great gift of womanhood- actual freedom in a free land.<sup>178</sup>

Central to *Votes for Women*’s moral, universalist interpretation of the issue was a language of necessity, duty and, above all, braveness. As, through her hunger strike, Dunlop had remained true to her insights of (what the WSPU considered to be) justice, her action proudly embodied the ultimate implementation of what a true suffragette should be. Even within the isolated environment of Holloway Prison, she had halted the propagation of her political belief that she

<sup>174</sup>Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 104.

<sup>175</sup>‘The Outlook’, *Votes for Women* (July 9, 1909), 901.; ‘The Writing on the Wall: Miss Wallace Dunlop Sent to Prison for One Month’, *Votes for Women* (July 9, 1909), 905.

<sup>176</sup>‘The Writing on the Wall: Miss Wallace Dunlop Sent to Prison for One Month’, *Votes for Women* (July 9, 1909), 905.

<sup>177</sup>Ibidem., 905.

<sup>178</sup>‘Great London Meetings’, *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 949.

deserved the status of political prisoner. As regularly emphasised in the newspaper, she had accepted the fact that the pain of starvation and dehydration was an unavoidable consequence of this choice. When contrasted to the government's argumentation and attitude, the latter was charged with a mocking sense of invalidity and weakness. As Dunlop for example declared in a letter published in *Votes for Women*:

My pulse was felt many times in the day, and I laughed at them all the time, telling them I would show them the stuff the Suffragette was made of; and that they would either have to put me in the first division or release me. 'You may feed me through the nostrils all the month,' I added, 'but suppose you get 108 women in here on Friday all requiring to be fed through the nostrils?' At this the doctor's face was a delightful study.<sup>179</sup>

The fact that Dunlop was released after ninety-one hours already, the outcome of her action was narrated as a victory on the WPSU's side. As Dunlop stated in a letter to her fellow WSPU-members:

I laughed at them all the time, telling them I would show them the stuff the Suffragette was made of; and that they would either have to put me in the first division or release me.<sup>180</sup>

*Votes for Women* argued that the persistency of her hunger strike had confronted the authorities with the fact that Dunlop's 'spirit was strong enough to carry out her determination even to a fatal conclusion if that were necessary.'<sup>181</sup> As mentioned previously in this chapter, based on this reasoning it was decided to integrate hunger strikes at the core of the movement's tactic from that moment onwards. The WSPU hereby openly announced to 'not going to conform any longer to the regulations of that prison if we go there' and that 108 suffragettes who were imprisoned at that moment would 'do what Miss Wallace Dunlop did'.<sup>182</sup> Hereby, the WSPU intended to powerfully 'create an impasse' that in every direction possible would 'block the way of the Government' as it directly anticipated on the 'Cabinet Ministers' fear and [realisation] that the effect of such protests is to make Liberal meetings a failure'.<sup>183</sup>

By structuring its narrative of the hunger strike of Dunlop along this structure, the WSPU adopted a combative tone. While her refusal of food had been one of passivity, it was described and evaluated through terms associated with an active, combative battle. It was frequently described as 'the most terrible weapon' a political prisoner could use. As for example stated in an article on Dunlop's release:

The terrible nature of this weapon will be understood when it is realised that its object can only be achieved when the Authorities realise that the prisoner is prepared to go through with her protest up to death itself, if necessary, and that if they refuse to deal with her justly they will have her death upon their hands.<sup>184</sup>

<sup>179</sup> 'Miss Wallace Dunlop Released', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 934.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibidem.*, 934.

<sup>181</sup> 'Miss Wallace Dunlop Released', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 934.

<sup>182</sup> 'Mrs. Pankhurst's Speech: A determination to be Treated as Political Prisoners', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909),

<sup>183</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, 'The National Women's Social & Political Union: An Impasse', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 944.

<sup>184</sup> 'Miss Wallace Dunlop Released', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 934.

## 2.3 Framing the hunger strike: carrier of the ethic of moral conviction

But what did this style of narration do to the wider framing of the issues at stake? And to what extent did it charge the events with discursive dynamic bearing marks of the Christian discourse on martyrdom expounded in Chapter 1? This section is used to analyse the further impact of the narration style as expounded in section 2.2. First, the framing of the hunger striking suffragettes as being witnesses to the true constellation of the world is discussed (2.3.1.). Secondly, it is investigated how the narration of the hunger strikes transformed the striker's individual, passive suffering into an active weapon instrumental to the WSPU's struggle for the victory of justice and righteousness (2.3.2.).

### 2.3.1 Witnessing the truth

Central to the language through which the WSPU phrased the attitude its members were expected to adopt, was absolute determination. As Pankhurst said in a speech at the Queen's Hall on June 28, 1909, the struggle had to be fought through:

Absolute loyalty to the faith which the movement has inspired in the members of the W.S.P.U. – absolute sacrifice of what may be demanded, be it personal liberty or gifts of money, and absolute determination to *go on* at all costs.<sup>185</sup>

According to the WSPU, through this attitude the illegitimacy of the government's power was proven. On a factual level, this absolute determination meant an absolute loyalty to that what the WSPU considered to be the righteous understanding of the functioning of politics: a system that build on an inclusive and equal division of power. However, by narrating their political struggle as being one between good and evil, between those who understood the righteous functioning of the world and those who did not, the battle fought by the WSPU and those supporting their cause became a matter of them witnessing the truth and justice, and, motivated and inspired by that witnessing, fighting those who didn't. Hereby, the movement's individual story was transcended onto the higher level of their paying testimony to the ultimate truth. As was stated in *Votes for Women* about the release of Dunlop:

The charge of being lawless and unconstitutional (...) we are now bringing against them. In truth, our deliberate aim and purpose of surrounding the enemy on every side but one, of leaving him but a single way of escape, is being more and more completely achieved. We are glad that the enemy now recognises and admits the fact for that tells that the end of our fight cannot be long deferred.<sup>186</sup>

The experience of being imprisoned fulfilled a metaphorical key role in this respect, as it transformed those imprisoned into embodiments of the injustice that was otherwise going on behind closed doors. While the imprisonment was used by the Government as means to temporarily isolate the suffragettes from society and from their own community, the WSPU seized the opportunity with both hands by using the increased number of imprisoned members as a rich source of proving their right. In this respect, the hunger strikes functioned as a weapon that suffragettes could employ to continue their struggle when silenced by the unjust enemy:

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<sup>185</sup> 'The Eve of Deputation', *Votes for Women* (July 2, 1909), 873.

<sup>186</sup> 'Miss Wallace Dunlop Released', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 934.

The heroic courage of the Suffragettes was not exhausted; they had another weapon yet to use, and they used it with tremendous effect. All other protests being rendered impossible, they decided to protest by means of hunger strike which has proved so effective in the case of Miss Wallace Dunlop, and which they knew they could use, and were prepared to use, whatever the cost it entailed upon themselves.<sup>187</sup>

Dunlop's action was described as not only having paved the way for many others, but as expression of what a true suffragette should be, an expression of the true identity of those who approached the world righteous. Without putting her on a pedestal per se, Dunlop's position within the movement transcended her role as individual member. Her strike was presented as an act that, because of its ultimate manifestation of the truth witnessed by the movement, should be mimicked by other members:

Miss Dunlop has shown [an ingenious and magnificent resolution] in finding a new way of insisting upon the proper status of political prisoners, and of the resourcefulness and energy in the face of difficulties that marked the true Suffragette. It was not violence that counted (...) but the moral force behind, the utter absence of self, and the willingness so universally shown to give everything freely and cheerfully to purchase the great gift of womanhood-actual freedom in a free land.<sup>188</sup>

Hereby, Dunlop had written history. By mimicking her action, others who were imprisoned were enabled to continue Dunlop's contribution to the creation of a better world. Hereby, she became the embodiment of the ethos at the core of the movement's identity:

Those who, in these latter days, are privileged to witness this triumph of the spiritual over the physical, understand now as never before the true meaning and manner of the miracles of old times, and we reverence the divine power which, as these comrades of ours have taught us, is entrusted now, as in the past, to human things that they may work miracles in the pursuit of great ends.<sup>189</sup>

### 2.3.2 Passive suffering as active weapon

Through the narration as outlined above, the hunger strike of Dunlop provided the WSPU with a style of framing through which the movement acted out a drama structured along the disbalanced power of, on the one hand, the mighty government, and on the other hand, the politically excluded women.<sup>190</sup> Particularly the fact that forcible feeding was another violent act on behalf of the state emphasised this dynamic. Through this type of framing, the WSPU pushed through their truth, and thereby unmasked the state's illegitimate use of coercive power.

The suffering endured during a hunger strike was hereby interpreted as instrumental to the WSPU's wider cause, namely liberating the world of inequality and injustice. Instead of a pitiful burden, the suffering of women fighting for a more inclusive suffrage was thus transformed into a brave community service:

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<sup>187</sup>'The Outlook: The Hunger Strike', *Votes for Women* (July 23, 1909), 965.

<sup>188</sup>'Great London Meetings', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 949.

<sup>189</sup>Christabel Pankhurst, 'The National Women's Social & Political Union: Coercion Defeated', *Votes for Women* (July 23, 1909), 976.

<sup>190</sup>'Miss Wallace Dunlop Released', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 934.

Miss Wallace Dunlop has shown that the prison is not strong enough to hold even the *body* of one as determined as herself. Over 400 militant Suffragists who have preceded (...) in Holloway have shown themselves not broken but strengthened in spirit by being sent to gaol. Our experience in the country proves that it is this resistance to methods of coercion which has done more than anything else to rouse public sympathy with our cause. In fact, by imprisoning women the Government is injuring and weakening, not the movement which they so much dislike, but themselves.<sup>191</sup>.

Key to the effectiveness of the hunger striker's embodiment of moral revelation, was the (quasi-)Christian reasoning that preferring physical or emotional pain over a betrayal of the sacred, transformed the passive body in pain into an active and extremely powerful weapon. Through its ethical exposure, the martyrdom hidden in the hunger strikes unmasked the illegitimate power through which the government justified its power:

Martyrs! This is the name – never yet claimed by Suffragettes themselves – which opponents have given to them in would-be derision. The good, brave women who have just won their way to freedom would not claim that title even now, but we, their comrades, hail them as martyrs, for what is martyrdom if theirs is not? (...) These comrades of ours have rebuked us for our want of faith in humanity, and have taught us that the women of this our own time have it in them to suffer cheerfully, and, if need were, to die for the cause which is dear to them<sup>192</sup>

## 2.4 Press response

In *Votes for Women*, the WSPU thus narrated and framed the 1909 hunger strikes through a language reminding of the meta-narrative of Christian martyrdom: it interpreted the suffering that Dunlop (and those who followed her on strike) had nobly endured as meaningful act that had exposed to society the righteousness of her stance and the injustice with which the government treated the issue. This was, however, only the WSPU's interpretation of the nature of the conflict. As shown in Chapter 1, however, it is the public that, through its sympathy, decides the extent to which the martyrological claim truly stirs up the political system. To gain an insight in how the WSPU's martyrological claims were societally received, this section analyses the way in which the hunger strikes were reported by *The Guardian* (2.4.1), *The Times* (2.4.2) and the *Daily Express* (2.4.3). What sort of societal arguments did these newspapers reflect upon? And what insight do these findings give in how the British society responded to the martyrological claims made by the WSPU in relation to the strikes?

### 2.4.1 The Guardian

During 1909, *The Guardian* reported WSPU's cause and actions through a factual though slightly prejudiced narration of the events and issues the movement was involved in. Both in its articles and in its readers opinion, newspaper approached the WSPU as a serious political actor that was propagating a political issue found serious support, both within Britain and interna-

<sup>191</sup> 'Miss Wallace Dunlop Released', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 934.

<sup>192</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, 'The National Women's Social & Political Union: Coercion Defeated', *Votes for Women* (July 23, 1909), 977.



tionally.<sup>193</sup> Although the WSPU's militancy was regularly appointed, its members were often portrayed as 'enthusiastic women' who were devotedly struggling for a relevant cause. Whereas the newspaper's coverage of the government's side of the story was marginal, dominant part of the articles approached the issue from the perspective of the suffragettes, such as in its reports on the WSPU's attempt to visit Asquith and discuss with him the issue of inclusive franchise, which it solely approached from the perspective of the suffragettes.<sup>194</sup>

When during the six first half year of 1909, the number of suffragettes who were imprisoned increased, *The Guardian* reported a handful of more critical considerations on the WSPU's militant tactics.<sup>195</sup> These stances, however, came from people who were in favour of inclusive suffrage but disagreed with the usage of physical force to obtain it.<sup>196</sup> Nevertheless, in its reports *The Guardian* kept focussing on the political stance the WSPU aimed to propagate with its actions.<sup>197</sup> The fact that the Asquith government refused to go in conversation with the suffragettes, was seen as confirmation that in a way, the WSPU had a point.<sup>198</sup>

The arrest, imprisonment, strike, and release of Dunlop were reported by *The Guardian* in a style that also leaned towards a pro-WSPU stance. On July 9, the newspaper published its first article on the matter, which factually reported that the WSPU had 'received a telegram from Miss Dunlop stating that her discharge is "due to the fact that she instituted a hunger strike in the prison, herself abstaining from food for 91 hours'.'<sup>199</sup>

When after Dunlop's release immediately several imprisoned suffragettes followed her example, the newspaper switched its focus from reports that, despite a slight prejudice, mainly provided factual insights in the course of events, to a coverage of the public debate evoked by the hunger strikes and the government's response to it. In doing so, rather than focusing on the acts of hunger strike itself, the reports mainly concerned the motivations to go on hunger strike.<sup>200</sup> Although *The Guardian* newspaper did not explicitly choose a side, it repeatedly gave the floor to the suffragettes themselves. On several occasions, it quoted *Votes for Women* as source for information when reporting on the course of the strikes. For example, as elaborated in an article citing WSPU-member and hunger striker Florence Cook's accounts of 'how the nature of this punishment can be':

I saw that all means of protest had been taken from me except one, and that was to do what Miss Wallace Dunlop had done, and refuse to take any food. The hardest time was the first twenty-four hours [etc.] (...) [doctor told that she could get fever] 'but I was absolutely

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<sup>193</sup> For example: 'MRS. PANKHURST AND THE SUFFRAGE AGITATION: Address to her supporters', *The Manchester Guardian* (January 15, 1909), 8.; 'Women's Congress. The Suffrage Movement in England', *The Manchester Guardian* (May 1, 1909), 6.

<sup>194</sup> For example: 'Why women need the vote', *The Manchester Guardian* (April 2, 1909), 8.

<sup>195</sup> ANTI-SUFFRAGISTS ATTACK ON MR. HOWARD'S BILL', *The Manchester Guardian* (March 19, 1909), 9.

<sup>196</sup> 'SUFFRAGIST MILITANCY: WILL IT ADVANCE THE WOMEN'S CAUSE?', *The Manchester Guardian* (February 23, 1909), 9.

<sup>197</sup> ANTI-SUFFRAGISTS ATTACK ON MR. HOWARD'S BILL', *The Manchester Guardian* (March 19, 1909), 9.

<sup>198</sup> 'MILITANT SUFFRAGETTES: Another deputation to the premier', *The Manchester Guardian* (June 23, 1909), 14.; 'CORRESPONDENT: Mr Asquith and the militant suffragists', *The Manchester Guardian* (June 26, 1909), 7.

<sup>199</sup> 'The King and the Women's Freedom League', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 9, 1909), 8.

<sup>200</sup> For example: 'The King and the Women's Freedom League', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 9, 1909), 8.

determined to do my part at whatever sacrifice.<sup>201</sup>

In its coverage of the hunger strikes, several times *The Guardian* approached Pankhurst and her daughters as the movement's spokeswoman. In their explanation of the strikers' motivations to not obey to the prison rules, Pankhurst and her daughters always reverted to the WSPU's wider socio-political struggle. For example, in a letter published on July 23 1909, Christabel Pankhurst explained the series of hunger strike 'as a protest against being treated as common criminals'.<sup>202</sup> She underlined that, within the frame of the then British juridical system, the imprisonment of the suffragettes was juridically right but how the system itself was unjust and illegitimate at its core. As the government refused to even consider giving women the vote, she stated, for the imprisoned suffragettes there was no other option left than to end up in prison, where they continued their struggle by going on:

It is quite true that these women went into prison prepared to make a vigorous protest, all ordinary methods of securing the treatment due to political offenders having been tried with no result. Their protests they carried out intentionally, and when charged with having made it they not deny the charge, but stated the reason for their action. Such a protest cannot naturally be made without some friction arising between the prison officials and the women who are in revolt against a system of prison discipline which they think unsuited to their condition as political offenders.<sup>203</sup>

*The Guardian* also published several accounts that Pankhurst and her daughters gave on behalf of the (ex-)hunger strikers concerning the prison conditions. In such articles, the Pankhursts commented on the physical and material force the hunger striking suffragettes had conducted, such the breaking of the windows of their cells and the kicking and biting of wardresses.<sup>204</sup> They admitted that, through their stubborn propagation of their stance the imprisoned suffragettes regularly brought the prison staff in a difficult position.<sup>205</sup> As the Pankhursts underlined, however, the response that was given to the behaviour of the hunger striking suffragettes was illustrative to the way in which the Asquith government dealt with the general issue of inclusive suffrage:

I desire also to say that our friends bear testimony to the fact that the great majority of prison officials, including the wardresses, behaved remarkably well under the difficult circumstances, and no complaint would have been made, even in those individual cases, but for the unwarrantable charges brought by the Home Secretary.<sup>206</sup>

The Pankhursts explicitly underlined that, as answer to their protests the striking suffragettes were insulted, pushed or even beaten by officers and, when they defended themselves ('using no unnecessary force'), 'directly removed to a more severe punishment cell'.<sup>207</sup> Even though, as they argued, the measures taken against the strikers were out of proportion, the hunger strikers

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<sup>201</sup> 'MILITANT SUFFRAGISTS' 'HUNGER STRIKE: THE PROTEST IN HOLLOWAY', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 23, 1909), 9.

<sup>202</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, 'The imprisoned Suffragists', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 23, 1909), 5.

<sup>203</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, 'The imprisoned Suffragists', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 23, 1909), 5.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibidem.*, 5.

<sup>205</sup> 'SUFFRAGISTS' 'HUNGER-STRIKE"', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 21, 1909), 10.

<sup>206</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, 'The imprisoned Suffragists', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 23, 1909), 5.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibidem.*, 5.

were not tempted to give up. Through such pragmatic self-criticism, they acknowledged that the hunger strikers broke the law but argued that they had done so because it was the only way to stray true to their beliefs.<sup>208</sup> Therefore, they were could not promise to not break to law again until inclusive suffrage was realised. Hereby, through their self-criticism, they drew attention to their political goal:

Our prison friends, realising the extremely difficult position in which the prison officials were placed, were most scrupulous in their behaviour to the wardresses and other officers, and did their best to show that they had no quarrel with them but with the Government who were responsible for what was happening.<sup>209</sup>

Also in the articles from its own correspondents *The Guardian* elaborated on the substantive motivations of the hunger striking suffragettes while not expounding in detail on the government's anti-suffrage stance. It hereby disproportionately informed its readers on behalf of the WSPU's cause. As was for example stated in an article concerning the question whether imprisoned suffragettes had to be punished for mutiny:

Each [prisoner] justified her action on the ground that they had been refused the treatment to which they were entitled as political prisoners. The attempt, they said, which was being made by the authorities to coerce them by treating them as ordinary criminals was contrary to the practice of civilized nations, and not only on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of all political offenders to come after them, they were determined to make a stand against it.<sup>210</sup>

Although not outspokenly picking a side, *The Guardian's* pro-suffrage stance was confirmed by the letters published in its reader's opinion section. Main part of the letters published here sympathised with the cause of the WSPU. As illustratively stated in a letter to the editor on August 4, 1909:

Hunger strikes in this absolute sense means more than weakness and privation. (...) Our Government has treated these women with a rigour which even in Germany is not imposed on Socialist editors or agitators. (...) The suffrage is important in itself. But infinitely more important is the ideal, the courage, solidarity, devotion, and self-respect which the effort to gain it is creating among women. These pioneers deserve the same regard and the same admiration which we accord to men who have roused to consciousness and fired to self-assertion a subject race or an exploited class. (...) But if Liberals will not make this sacrifice they must prove their sincerity on their own lines.<sup>211</sup>

When in September 1909 the government introduced forcible feeding as measure to bring the hunger strikes to a halt, *The Guardian* more explicitly articulated its stance. It reported the issue as 'a legal dispute' that had emerged between the WSPU and the government in the context of their wider political disagreement. Several letters published in the newspapers' readers' opinion, argued that the action of hunger strike was extreme. The government employment of forcible

<sup>208</sup> 'The King and the Women's Freedom League', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 9, 1909), 8.

<sup>209</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, 'The imprisoned Suffragists', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 23, 1909), 5.

<sup>210</sup> 'MILITANT SUFFRAGISTS' 'HUNGER STRIKE: THE PROTEST IN HOLLOWAY', *The Manchester Guardian* (July 23, 1909), 9.

<sup>211</sup> . N. Brailsword, Ford Madox Hueff, J. Forbes Robertson and Israel Zangwill, 'THE LIBERAL PARTY AND WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE: To the Editor of the Manchester Guardian', *Manchester Guardian* (August 4, 1909), 4.

feeding, however, was seen as even extremer as it not only physically harmed the hunger strikers but also devaluated the government's political credibility.<sup>212</sup>

#### 2.4.2 The Times

During the entire course of 1909, a section on 'WOMEN SUFFRAGE' was published in *The Times* once or twice every week, reporting the events and developments related to the issue of women suffrage. Next to this, however, *The Times* also elaboratively covered developments and arguments on the side of anti-suffrage movements like the Women's Anti-Suffrage League.<sup>213</sup>

Although main part of the articles in the section 'WOMEN SUFFRAGE' contained a factual overview of the events, in its implicit way of narrating these facts, *The Times* covered the stubbornness of the WSPU and particularly of the imprisoned suffragettes, in a critical manner. In its reports, the newspaper focused on how the WSPU had the intention 'to make world history' through militant tactics.<sup>214</sup> Illustrative in this account is the newspaper's coverage of the WSPU public meeting in St. James Hall in January 1909, during which a series of lectures was given. Although the event passed without any incidents, in its reports *The Times* emphasised how the movement was proud of its achievements and had the intention to 'extend and perfect our organisation, carry our operations into new places, and redouble the energy of our militant campaign.'<sup>215</sup>

In its explanation of the motivations underlying the militant actions, *The Times*, indirectly gave floor the WSPU itself. For example, on January 14, 1909, the newspaper used quotations from a speech of Christabel Pankhurst to explain the suffragettes' motivations to choose imprisonment over a fine:

To go to prison for a short time was a little thing compared with the human sacrifices that had been made for causes much smaller than theirs. (...) Since they began their militant tactics there had been 420 imprisonments of women. (...) If it was not in the King's Speech they would do what they said they had constitutional justification for doing – since they had no one to speak for them in Parliament, they would go there and speak themselves, and continue their demonstrations and their present policy.<sup>216</sup>

Unlike *The Guardian*, *The Times* covered anti-suffrage arguments as well, both in its factual reports and in its readers' opinion. In its factual reports, it gave for example account of the growing popularity of anti-suffrage movements like the Women's Anti-Suffrage League and understood some successful meetings as an indication that the anti-suffrage stance '[seemed] to be arousing much interest in some of the large provincial centres' and was 'showing great activity' in cities like Birmingham and Manchester.<sup>217</sup> When investigating the newspapers readers' opinion section, it becomes clear that the target audience of *The Times* was conservative

<sup>212</sup>'FORCIBLE FEEDING IN GAOL: Legal action by women suffragists', *The Manchester Guardian* (September 30, 1909), 4.; 'WOMEN SUFFRAGE', *Manchester Guardian* (October 9, 1909), 5.

<sup>213</sup>For example: 'WOMAN SUFFRAGE: Meeting at Queen's Hall', *The Times* (January 14, 1909), 10.; 'WOMAN SUFFRAGE: Women's National Anti-Suffrage League', *The Times* (February 2, 1909), 10.; 'WOMAN SUFFRAGE: Mr. Forbes-Robertson on woman suffrage', *The Times* (February 2, 1909), 10.

<sup>214</sup>'WOMEN SUFFRAGE: Social and Political Union', *The Times* (January 8, 1909), 8.

<sup>215</sup>'WOMAN SUFFRAGE: Women's Social and Political Union', *The Times* (January 7, 1909), 6.

<sup>216</sup>'WOMAN SUFFRAGE: Meeting at Queen's Hall', *The Times* (January 14, 1909), 10.

<sup>217</sup>'WOMAN SUFFRAGE: Women's National Anti-Suffrage League', *The Times* (February 2, 1909), 10.

and centre-right, particularly compared to *The Guardian*. Illustrative in this context is a letter from conservative poet Alfred Austin (1835-1913), published in *The Times* on January 7, 1909, and explicitly arguing against suffrage for women based on the argument that ‘the relation of the sexes, on which the family, actual or potential is founded and society is constructed, cries aloud against this claim’.<sup>218</sup> Austin stated that ‘one politician the more, one mother the less; behold the practical outcome of female franchise!’.<sup>219</sup> Austin structured his argument through the following logic:

The interests of Society and the State must take precedence of all other considerations; and I cannot doubt, and have never doubted, that by these, rightly estimated, women are precluded from any but an indirect share in Parliamentary elections. (...) Of all human relations, that between the sexes is the most important and the most operative; for on it repose the happiness of the heart, the dignity and decency of Society, and the stability of the state. For Rousseau, (...) people who separate morals from politics will never understand either.<sup>220</sup>

Granting full suffrage to women, Austin argued, would contain the risk of disrupting the entire British society:

Give women the franchise – and I cannot doubt it is a minority of them who wish to have it, and only the more emotionally combative of that minority who would exercise it. It is conceivable that war might be brought about by women, against the effort of men to avert it; and, in that event, it would be men, and men alone, who would have to fight, and, if need were, to die; while the very utmost women could do – and no small but after all, minor contribution – would be to act (...) as ministering angels’<sup>221</sup>

In response to Austin’s letter, however, on January 8, *The Times* published a letter of political activist, poet and writer Dame Millicent Garret Fawcett (1847-1929), which provided a moderate account of those who were in favour of suffrage for women, but against the militant tactics the WSPU utilised to realise this objective. In her letter, Fawcett, who was president of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, distanced herself from the militant tactics adopted by the WSPU:

The admission of women to the franchise would cause the home and domestic side of things to count for more in politics than they do at present. We appeal to the justice and common sense of our countrymen to see that some adequate expression is found in national affairs for all that women stand for in national life.<sup>222</sup>

However, the mixed tone of *The Times*’ selection of readers opinions shifted when the government implied forcible feeding. Through its implication of the measure, the government’s anti-WSPU stance gained a more controversial side as most of *The Times*’s readers associated

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<sup>218</sup> Alfred Austin, ‘FEMALE SUFFRAGE, SOCIETY, AND THE STATE: To the editors of the Times’, *The Times* (January 7, 1909), 6.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibidem.*, 6.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibidem.*, 6.

<sup>221</sup> Alfred Austin, ‘FEMALE SUFFRAGE, SOCIETY, AND THE STATE: To the editors of the Times’, *The Times* (January 7, 1909), 6.

<sup>222</sup> Millicent Garret Fawcett, ‘THE POET LAUREATE ON WOMEN SUFFRAGE: To the editor of the Times’, *The Times* (January 8, 1909), 8.

the treatment associated with criminal acts much more seriously than the breaking of windows and interruption of parliamentary meetings. Hereby, *The Times*' coverage of the debate changed as now not only the militant suffragettes were approached through their crossing of juridical and moral boundaries. Although in relation to the issue reader's opinions from several kinds were published, the general tone was against the forcible feeding:

I fear that if something be not done, and that speedily, the world will find itself involved in a war in which women must prevail, since they possess the fulcrum of the future.<sup>223</sup>

Perhaps it may be said that artificial feeding can be justified only when the prisoner is entitled to a vote, or at least is not by sex alone disqualified from having one.<sup>224</sup>

Nevertheless, *The Times* kept publishing critical accounts on the WSPU, also in relation to the case of forcible feeding. As for example Edward Thompson argued in a letter that was published on October 1, 1909, who described the hunger strikes as 'a foolish course' that 'should have been adopted when the first case presented itself.'<sup>225</sup> He described the practice of forcible feeding as the government's duty:

It seems a pity all this fuss over a proceeding which can hurt no one, and which saves the suffragist from the intense feeling of discomfort and indeed of actual pain which accompanies prolonged abstinence from food.

### 2.4.3 Daily Express

The *Daily Express* approached the issue of inclusive suffrage as a political cost-benefit analysis and took an explicit stance concerning the anticipated outcome, namely that the demand for women suffrage was understandable but not wise. Illustrative for this attitude is an article evaluating the implementation of women suffrage in Finland (which in 1902 had been the first country in the world to grant women with full franchise), in which the newspaper took a stance in the public and political discussion on the issue, which was rapidly spreading throughout the United Kingdom by then. 'The demand of women to take a large share in the conduct of public affairs is insistent everywhere', the newspaper stated on January 6, 1909.<sup>226</sup> In an elaboration of this stance, it was acknowledged that women who payed rates and taxes were in want of having a say in 'the spending of the funds towards which she contributes'. Also, it was argued that 'on a property basis [women suffrage] would provide an effective temporary bulwark against Socialist legislation'.<sup>227</sup> Nevertheless, the article stated that it was 'worth while to count the cost seriously before beginning a revolution that will eventualise in the complete change of the basis of social life'.<sup>228</sup> On the outcome of this 'counting', the *Daily Express* was clear: the right to vote would function as a stepping stone to parliamentary franchise, and if women would eventually gain full suffrage, they were likely to take over British politics:

<sup>223</sup> Flora Annie Steel, 'WOMAN SUFFRAGISTS: To the editor of The Times, *The Times* (October 4, 1909), 7.

<sup>224</sup> Nemo, 'WOMAN SUFFRAGISTS: To the editor of The Times, *The Times* (October 4, 1909), 7.

<sup>225</sup> Edward Thompson, 'THE WOMAN SUFFRAGISTS: To the editor of The Times', *The Times* (October 1, 1909), 7.

<sup>226</sup> 'Finn de Siecle', *Daily Express* (January 06, 1909), 4.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibidem.*, 4.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibidem.*, 4.

The present good is bought dearly if it entails far-reaching evil in the future. (...) Does anyone seriously believe that women of the type of Miss Christabel Pankhurst will be content with the right merely to vote for? (...) A women-governed country would inevitably be the prey of sentimentality and faddism. Women are the majority, and by mere counting of noses they might quite conceivably obtain the direction of affairs.

The article stated that such ‘a women-governed country’ was an objectionable development as it was understood to be unbeneficial for the nation’s political stability:

But laws must be enforced as well as passed. (...) Force still governs the world. The physical weak cannot permanently govern the physically strong. A woman despotism could only exist for a day. But its existence and its destruction might together destroy the greatness of the nation. We are aware that many of our readers sympathise with the demand of the reasonable suffragists. We recognise that it is a question worthy of consideration. But we submit that the probable ultimate consequences should be considered equally with the expected immediate results.<sup>229</sup>

Deriving from this stance, the *Daily Express* critically reported all incidents and developments related to the WSPU. The movement’s members and supporters were profiled as misguided extremists and were more than once described through a language of desperateness, recklessness and hysteria. Particularly brief reports on WSPU’s actions and statements contained phrases that narrated the event as irrational and disproportional to the intended aim. Several of them contained a suggestive tone such as ‘Chased by suffragists’, a report on how a group of suffragists who sailed a boat with the words ‘*Votes for Women*’ printed on the sail, attempted to get close to a speedboat attended by Winston Churchill. Often, the newspaper narrated the event through a tone of hysteria on behalf of the women, such as “Dumped” suffragists, a report on a suffragist who ‘performed some remarkable aerobatic feats with curling poles while shouting “*Votes for Women*” at a meeting addressed by Mr. McKenna<sup>230</sup> (...) [and] clung to the curtain rails at the side of the platform, and broke them before the stewards could tear her away’.<sup>231</sup>

In this respect, the militant tactics of the WSPU were approached as sheer madness. A report on the group of suffragists who were seeking for an audience with Asquith in early February, described the WSPU as ‘fighting body’ responsible for ‘more suffragist riots [were] are likely to take place’ later that day on Parliament-square in London. It described the suffragists who were sent away from Asquith’s office earlier that day as ‘chagrined’. It was reported how ‘after a little assistance from the police’ their eviction was effected.<sup>232</sup> The report stated it could be expected that more ‘riots’ would occur, as the WSPU had ‘signified [its] intention of seeing Mr. Asquith whether he likes it or not’ and that, even though he ‘had an engagement elsewhere’, they were determined to ‘seek him out’. It was reported how the suffragists had stated that they were even prepared to be imprisoned in their attempts, as Pethick Lawrence had stated that ‘We shall either see Mr. Asquith or we ourselves shall not be seen by some of our friends

<sup>229</sup> ‘Finn de Siecle’, *Daily Express* (January 06, 1909), 4.

<sup>230</sup> Reginald McKenna (1863-1943) was Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer.

<sup>231</sup> ‘CHASED BY SUFFRAGISTS’, *Daily Express* (February 6, 1909), 1.; “DUMPED” SUFFRAGISTS’, *Daily Express* (February 9, 1909), 5.

<sup>232</sup> ‘SUFFRAGISTS BY LETTER POST: Mr. Asquith’s butler foils a novel attack. More riots coming’, *Daily Express* (February 24, 1909), 5.

for a length of time'.<sup>233</sup>

Whereas *The Guardian* and *The Times* never directly touched upon the issue of martyrdom, the *Daily Express* directly interpreted the WSPU's conscious attempts of being arrested as a claim to this status. However, it did not go along with it. On the contrary, on March 31, it reported in the article 'MUD AND MARTYRDOM' how the day before, 'a handful of misguided women of the [WSPU] trod the muddy road to martyrdom' when they had attempted 'to "rush" the House of Commons'. It was reported how 'the usual scenes of disorder' had taken place and how the police 'had patiently borne with the women's antics for some time' but eventually was 'obligated to arrest a dozen of the most frantic "raiders"'.<sup>234</sup>

In their clashes with authorities and rapidly increasing number of arrests, the WSPU-members were profiled as desperate women capable of extreme things. On June 29, the *Daily Express* reported the expected 'attempt which the militant suffragists' would make that evening at the entrance of the House of Commons: 'It is well known that a desperate attempt is to be made by an army of women to force their way into the House of Commons and to see the Premier at all costs'.<sup>235</sup> It cited a report from the Criminal Investigation Department, that was published the day before, that stated that 'an unusually large number of persons' was expected at Parliament Square that day and that therefore 'the Commissioner of the Police deem[ed] it advisable to warn the public of the danger necessarily created'.<sup>236</sup> Extremism was expected as the women had 'recognised that (...) their only hope of getting into the House is by sheer force, and [that] it [was] with the full knowledge of this that the raid has been organised':

A large number of members of the [WSPU] have not only declared that they are ready to sacrifice their lives for "the cause," but have proved by their hysterical recklessness that this is no idle threat, and that they are prepared to go to any lengths to attain their object. (...) The organisers expect that an army of militant women, the like of which has never been seen before, will march on the House.<sup>237</sup>

On July 1, the *Daily Express* reported that '107 women and eight men were arrested during the suffragist disturbances outside the House of Commons', of which most were released again and five were 'charged with breaking windows with stones'.<sup>238</sup> On July 6, a report on the suffragettes who were waiting on the doorstep of the House of Commons as an attempt to speak with Asquith, started off with a quote from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*: 'I Shall sit here on and off for days'.<sup>239</sup> The next day, on July 7, the newspaper reported 'they waited patiently and pathetically in the rain until the small hours of this morning'.<sup>240</sup>

In addition to a touching belief that public opinion will ultimately compel the Premier to receive their deputation, the suffragists have great hopes of their forthcoming attempt. (...)

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<sup>233</sup> 'SUFFRAGISTS BY LETTER POST: Mr. Asquith's butler foils a novel attack. More riots coming', *Daily Express* (February 24, 1909), 5.

<sup>234</sup> 'MUD AND MARTYRDOM', *Daily Express* (March 31, 1909), 5.

<sup>235</sup> 'DESPERATE WOMAN SUFFRAGISTS: Threat to storming the Commons this evening. POLICE WARNING. Public advised to hold aloof', *Daily Express* (June 29, 1909), 1.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibidem.*, 1.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibidem.*, 1.

<sup>238</sup> 'SUFFRAGISTS IN COURT: Have they the right to present petitions?', *Daily Express* (July 1, 1909), 5.

<sup>239</sup> 'A GAME OF PATIENCE: Suffragists waiting to see Mr. Asquith or the King', *Daily Express* (July 6, 1909), 1.

<sup>240</sup> 'THE WAITS (JULY STYLE): Suffragists in isolation at the House of Commons', *Daily Express* (July 7, 1909), 5.



Should this mission end in failure, they are determined to continue their peaceful blockade of the House in relays throughout the season if need be.<sup>241</sup>

It was mid-July when the *Daily Express* started to cover the debate on the WSPU's claim to grant imprisoned suffragettes with political status. The newspaper covered how the women refused to follow several prison regulations (like doing mandatory tasks, wearing a prison dress, and giving up their jewellery), how they broke the windows in their cell and shouted 'through the aperture to sympathisers outside the prison who replied through a megaphone'. The article described this form of protests as 'mutiny'.<sup>242</sup>

Initially, no reports were published on the hunger strike of Dunlop nor of the other hunger strikers. However, the *Daily Express* shifted its focus from protests on the street to the debate on prison conditions when the measure of forcible feeding was introduced in September. It was announced that, in communication with the Home Secretary, a Home Office expert and medical officers, the prison authorities had decided that food had to be forcibly administered to the suffragettes who were in hunger strike at that moment.<sup>243</sup> Although Dunlop's name was not mentioned at all in its report, the newspaper recalled the earlier hunger strikes:

The hunger strikes originated with a suffragist who was sent to prison on July 2 for imprinting an extract from the Bill of Rights on one of the walls of the House of Commons. When she was ordered to wear prison clothes and eat prison food she set to work to starve herself. After ninety-one hours of starvation, during which the Governor of the prison and the Home Office were in constant communication, the authorities capitulated, and she was released. Her example was followed eagerly. (...) Six other hunger strikers were released from Holloway on August 5, and four more were set free on the following day.<sup>244</sup>

As 'hitherto the victory has lain with the hunger striker, for the Home Secretary ordered their release when they showed signs of physical weakness', forcible feeding was presented as a triumph of the government: 'the Home Secretary has evidently determined to show no more mercy to hooligan suffragists. He will not allow them to starve themselves'.<sup>245</sup>

## 2.5 Discussion

When looking into the way in which *Votes for Women* wrote about Dunlop's hunger strike and embedded the event within its broader conception of the conflict between the WSPU and the Asquith government, strongly intertwined styles of reasoning arise which, together, remind of the discourse of Christian martyrdom. On the first glance, the newspaper explained Dunlop's direct motivations predominately politically. Simultaneously, however, a much more morally charged language was used, which narrated the events in universalist terms. As repeatedly stated, the fact that imprisoned suffragettes were treated as common lawbreakers was seen as unjust, not

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<sup>241</sup> *Ibidem.*, 5.

<sup>242</sup> 'SUFFRAGISTS DEFY THEIR GAOLERS: Solitary confinement for prison mutiny', *Daily Express* (July 15, 1909), 5.

<sup>243</sup> 'HUNGER STRIKE FAILS: Suffragists not allowed to starve. Fed by Force', *Daily Express* (September 24, 1909), 1.

<sup>244</sup> 'HUNGER STRIKE FAILS: Suffragists not allowed to starve. Fed by Force', *Daily Express* (September 24, 1909), 1.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibidem.*, 1.

only because it hindered the WSPU in its campaign, but also because it was considered to be illustrative to the malfunctioning of British politics.

By reporting how Dunlop and those who followed her example had expressed their righteous understanding of the rotten British political system even behind the walls of London's Holloway Gale, *Votes for Women* portrayed the hunger strikers as women who would play a crucial role in the WSPU's wider struggle. In other words, through the pain the hunger strikers endured consequently to their struggle for inclusive suffrage, they were exposing to society that their conviction was not random but that they had witnessed a very important truth.

Through subtle (though sometimes literally used) references to terms like righteousness, witnessing and martyrdom, but most of all through its powerful narration structure, the discursive practice of martyrdom provided the WSPU with a powerful 'formulae' through which the auditory landscape was approached. Hereby, the language provided by the discourse had an associative effect on the way the hunger striking WSPU-members were portrayed. As the passive deeds of starvation morally unmasked the unjust power structures, the suffering they had endured became an active weapon. By continuously underlining that the hunger striking suffragettes did not undertake their actions solely for their own sake but that they acted the interest of humanity, *Votes for Women* narrated their stories as if victory was theirs. Even though political status was not granted to the imprisoned suffragettes, on the long term, the newspaper argued, Dunlop and her fellow hunger strikers had contributed to the creation of a better world.

Nevertheless, within the British society, *Votes for Women's* martyrological claim was no foregone conclusion. Throughout the course of 1909, the WSPU's framing of the hunger strikes was received with mixed feelings. *The Guardian* was relatively moderate in this respect. By giving floor to prominent suffragettes to elaborate on the prison experiences and motivations to go on strike, the newspaper did, to some extent, tolerate their claim making. The WSPU seized this opportunity with both hands and explained why not the hunger strikers, but the parliamentarians were the criminals. Hereby, in *The Guardian* the WSPU expounded its portrayal of the hunger strikers being noble advocates of the righteous case. Although in its own reports on the issue, *The Guardian* did not confirm the movement's claims, it also not renounced them. The newspaper approached the clash between the WSPU and the government through the debate on the political object of women suffrage rather than through the controversies surrounding the WSPU's self-sought suffering and militant tactics. *The Times*, however, did not give in to the WSPU's self-sought martyrdom. Although the newspaper was not fully against the idea of women suffrage, it covered the WSPU's militancy more dominantly (and adversely) than *The Guardian* had done. While *The Times* narrated the hunger strikes mainly through a political lens, it was critical on the extremeness of the actions and did not understand the self-sought starvation to be a reason to sympathise with suffragettes. However, under the surface, for the audiences of both *The Guardian* and *The Times*, the hunger strikers' agonies had a slight unmasking effect as the newspapers' readers' sympathy increased when the government introduced forcible feeding in September. In the reports of the *Daily Express*, however, the WSPU's martyrological claims were directly backfired to them. The newspaper approached the issue of women suffrage through outspoken criticism and was explicit in the stance it took: the one of

the government against inclusive franchise. The self-sought suffering of the hunger strikers only confirmed the idea that the suffragettes were hysterical, attention-seeking extremists who were incapable to participate in British politics. In this respect, the introduction of forcible feeding as means to silence the women only confirmed that victory was on the government's hand.

### 3 Chapter 3. The Irish Republican Army and the 1981 hunger strike of Bobby Sands

On March 1, 1981, the imprisoned Bobby Sands (1954-1981) started a hunger strike while being imprisoned in Belfast's Maze Prison for involvement in IRA violence and gun trafficking. His strike would last 66 days and would prove fatal to him on May 5 that same year. As this chapter shows, throughout the course of 1981, the IRA approached the suffering and eventual that came with his strike through a narration and framing that drew suggestive parallels to the martyrdom of Jesus Christ. Although Sands had been imprisoned for a serious crime, *An Phoblacht* portrayed him as a noble man who, by nobly preferring his suffering over giving in to the British stance, had unmasked the cruelty of the Thatcher government. In its construction of this interpretation, the newspaper both implicitly and explicitly drew parallels between Sands and Jesus Christ and, particularly after his death, portrayed him as iconographic folk Saint who had sacrificed himself for the cause of his people. Nevertheless, as the reports in *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* will show, externally the martyrdom that was granted to him within his own constituency proved to be a controversial affair.

This chapter critically approaches the embedding of the Christian martyrological meta-narrative in the meaning the IRA assigned to its 1981 hunger strike campaign, with Bobby Sands as main protagonist, and the way in which the British press responded to this claim. Through a thorough analysis of publications on the case in *An Phoblacht*, *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express*, way in which the movement constructed and expressed its interpretation of the issues, and the way in which this interpretation was societally received, are analysed.

It does so in five steps. First, the historical background of Dunlop's hunger strike is briefly considered. Secondly, the language through which *Votes for Women* narrated her strike and the ones of the suffragettes who followed her throughout 1909 is mapped. Thirdly, it is analysed how the WSPU embedded its narration of the strike within its framing of the wider issues at stake in their struggle for women's suffrage. Fourthly, it is investigated how *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* responded to the WSPU's martyrological claims. The fifth, concluding section of this chapter, it is critically analysed what can be said about the way in which the discourse of Christian martyrdom functioned in this case.

This chapter does so in five steps. First, the historical background of the IRA's 1981 hunger strike campaign is briefly considered. Secondly, the language through which *An Phoblacht* articulated the IRA's understanding of the issues at stake during the hunger strikes is mapped. Thirdly, it is analysed how the IRA embedded its narration of the strike in its framing of the wider issues at stake in their struggle against the British claim on the Irish island. Fourthly, it is investigated how *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* responded to the IRA's claims. As *The Times'* coverage of the 1981 hunger strikes is already covered in the research of historian Aogán Mulcahy, as an exception this sub-section is based on secondary literature.<sup>246</sup> In the fifth, concluding section of this chapter, it is critically analysed what can be said about

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<sup>246</sup> Aogán Mulcahy, 'Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy: Press Coverage of the 1981 Northern Irish Hunger Strike', *Social Problems* 42 (1995) 4, 449-467.

the way in which the discourse of Christian martyrdom functioned in this case.

### 3.1 Historical background to the IRA's 1981 hunger strike

The IRA hunger strike of 1981 took place against the background of the peak of the Northern Ireland Troubles. In October 1980, the IRA organised a first series of hunger strike together with the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), a socialist secession of the IRA that was founded in 1974. The strikes were part of a wider campaign through which the militant republicans intended to demand Special Category Status (SCS) for their prisoners; a label that would make them political prisoners instead of criminal convicts.<sup>68</sup> In September 1976, several of the participating IRA-members, most of them imprisoned in Belfast's Maze Prison, had started a protest called the Blanket Protests. By refusing to wear prison uniforms and dressing themselves only in blankets, hundreds of republican prisoners had attempted to enforce 'The Five Demands' which, as they stated, together would make them political prisoners:

1. The Right not to wear a prison uniform;
2. The Right not to do prison work;
3. The Right of free association with other prisoners;
4. The Right to organise their own educational and recreational facilities;
5. The Right to one visit, one letter and one parcel per week.<sup>247</sup>

In response, the British further restricted the rights of republican prisoners. In 1978, the Blanket Protest were followed by the Dirty Protests, during which republican inmates refused to leave their cells to use the bathroom or shower.

On 27 October 1980 hunger strikes were added to the protest repertoire, which were suspended again when the British authorities were willing to negotiate.<sup>248</sup> However, when during the first weeks of 1981 it became clear that the British were not willing to reintroduce SCS, the IRA announced that it had started planning a second hunger strike campaign. This time, it stated, the campaign was carefully designed and would not be brought down by false promises of the British government. Instead of one massive strike in which many participants joined once, ten men would start their strike one or two weeks after each other. Bobby Sands, who had been a spokesman during the first strike, would be the first and would be followed by Francis Hughes (1956-1981), Raymond McCreech (1957-1981), Patsy O'Hara (1957-1981), Joe McDonnell (1951-1981), Martin Hurson (1956-1981), Kevin Lynch (1956-1981), Kieran Doherty (1955-1981), Thomas McElwee (1957-1981) and Michael Devine (1954-1981). The ten were carefully selected as to be a faithful reflection of the Catholic population and had to represent 'the loud voice of the Irish people'.<sup>249</sup> Herewith, the IRA intended to emphasise that their strike was not just about prison conditions but that it symbolised the unjust claim to power through

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<sup>247</sup> 'The Five Demands of Irish Republican Prisoners' (September 1976), online accessible: <http://www.hungerstrikes.org/> (version March 2018).

<sup>248</sup> McKittrick and McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles*, 156-170.

<sup>249</sup> Sweeney, 'Self-Immolative Martyrdom', 342-347.

which the British had exercised their suppression of the Irish people for ages. Like claimed in the official statement of the second hunger strike:

As further demonstration of our selflessness and the justness of our cause, a number of our comrades, beginning today with Bobby Sands, will hunger strike to the death unless the British government abandons its criminalisation policy and meets our demand for political status.<sup>250</sup>

Initially the action did not gain significant societal attention as it was absorbed by the many incidents passing the course during this turbulent phase of the Troubles. However, when on April 9, 1981, in the midst of his strike, the imprisoned Sands was chosen for the by-elections of the county Fermanagh/South Tyrone, all eyes turned towards the hunger strikers and the way the British government attempted to deal with their protest. Although the public opinion critically approached the militant cause and tactics the IRA pursued, for some Sands' political achievement casted doubts over Thatcher's claim that the strikes were just a desperate cry for attention without a serious basis of political support. Thatcher's government, however, continued to dismiss the prisoner's demand for SCS by arguing that they were criminals that deserved a corresponding treatment. In her (in)famous speech, Thatcher underlined that the strikers were imprisoned criminals, and that their demands could therefore not be complied:

There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence. We will not compromise on this. There will be no political status.<sup>251</sup>

When Sands died after 66 days of hunger strike, the British government held up its claim that his death had been his own fault. After the other participants had passed away as well, the protest was brought to a stop without reaching its initial goal of the reintroduction of SCS.

### **3.2 Narrating the hunger strike: the instrumentality of stubbornness**

This section unwraps the language through which *An Phoblacht* structured its narration of the 1981 IRA hunger strike campaign. First, it is investigated how the newspaper narrated the general dissensions between the British government and the Irish (3.2.1). As the struggle between the British government and the IRA at this stage of the conflict concerned many dimensions and therefore the available source material is plenteous, the focus of this analysis is on the debate on SCS for republican prisoners in Belfast's Maze Prison. Secondly, the way in which Sands' 1981 strike was embedded within this interpretation of the conflict is investigated (3.2.2).

#### **3.2.1 Mapping the conflict: the proud Irish people versus the unjust intruder**

The point of departure *An Phoblacht* took in its narration of the hunger strike was the wider (militant) republican understanding of the conflict at stake during the Troubles: the clash between, on the one hand, the just but suppressed Irish community and on the other hand, the

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<sup>250</sup> '1 March 1981 Statement at start of second hunger strike' (1 March 1981), online accessible: <http://www.hungerstrikes.org/> (version March 2018).

<sup>251</sup> Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech in Belfast', March 5, 1981, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, online available: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104589>.

unjust but in-power British government, a construction that, as becomes clear throughout this and the following sections, provided fruitful soil for the martyrological claims that it would make concerning the fatal strike of Sands.

Leaning on the IRA's nationalist ideology, *An Phoblacht's* approach of the Irish community as being a just but suppressed people was constructed through a language describing them as a vigorous victim. This somehow paradoxical characteristic can be understood through the different community layers embedded within the newspaper's language describing it. Like *Votes for Women's* layered approach of the community represented by the WSPU (those actively fighting and those served by them, see Chapter 2), *An Phoblacht* approached the community in whose name the militant republicans (claimed to) operate in a stratified manner. At its core were those actively fighting for Ireland's freedom. Although the newspaper focused on the IRA, it understood all people who participated in or supported the militant-republican cause as one force that was united through the 'spirit of republican resistance amongst saddened people.'<sup>252</sup> Hereby it meant that, against the background of the Anglo-Irish conflict, a special role was reserved for those who understood that the misery caused by the British should not paralyse the Irish community but that it was an incentive to only become more persistent in its propagation. In *An Phoblacht's* approach of the most active republicans, one can already sense a parallel with the discourse of Christian martyrdom as expounded in Chapter 1: namely that a special status is granted to those who bear witness to the righteous cause, even if this will consequently lead to socio-political exclusion or persecution. This core of republicans actively propagating rebellious and militant action was surrounded by the broader dimension of the community; 'the Irish people', with whom the newspaper meant the communities of descendants of the native Irish both in Ireland and Northern Ireland.<sup>253</sup> The language through which this community layer was defined leaned on an interactive mixture of (historical) victimhood and proud nationalism. *An Phoblacht*, however, did not elaborate too much on the exact construction of the Irish nationalist cause. The omission of such detailed explanations, however, is significant: the moral righteousness of the Irish nationalism and the republican's militant tactics to propagate this stance were seen as so just and righteous that they were approached as self-evident and therefore as beyond discussion.<sup>254</sup>

The two community layers met again in their common enemy: the British government, by that time embodied in the person of Margaret Thatcher. The newspaper persistently constructed its approach of the government through a language of cruel injustice through which the 'the mistreatment of Irish people' was falsely legitimised.<sup>255</sup> At the core of this characterisation was how the British government was an intruder of the Irish island who, from the Great Plantations in the fifteenth- and sixteenth century onwards, had structurally excluded and exploited the descendants of the native Irish people. Consequently, the (descendants of) native Irish people, who were mostly Catholic, had been confronted with socio-political inequality up until that day. Apart from a series of immediate discriminatory issues, like gerrymandering<sup>256</sup>, the

<sup>252</sup>'Sporadic but intense rioting', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 7.

<sup>253</sup>In the sources investigated for this research, *An Phoblacht* did not consider whether the overseas Irish communities were part of 'the Irish people'.

<sup>254</sup>'BRITISH MISTREATMENT', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 6.

<sup>255</sup>*Ibidem.*, 6.

<sup>256</sup>The manipulation of boundaries of electoral constituencies.

disproportionate unemployment among Catholic people and the army's presence in Catholic neighbourhoods<sup>257</sup>, this argumentation was founded on series of historical grievances such as the discriminatory Cromwellian rule in the 1650s, the Great Famine (1845-1852), the Easter Rising of 1916 and the Irish War of Independence (1920-1921).<sup>258</sup> As the British government had never been able to set these discriminatory issues right, the newspaper argued, their claim on the island was unbearable, unjust and therefore unconstitutional.<sup>259</sup>

Nevertheless, although the newspaper's portrayal of the enemy focused on the British government, also among the Irish people betrayal was lurking. Everyone who argued for even the slightest form of compromise (and thus leaned towards what Weber described as the ethics of responsibility) was portrayed as the enemy's collaborator. For example, when Irish politician John Hume (1937), who in 1998 would receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his involvement in the peace talks, criticised the 1981 hunger strikers for inflaming mutual incomprehension, the newspaper accused him of an evil form of cowardice and betrayal.<sup>260</sup>

*An Phoblacht's* narration of the Troubles' clash between the Irish people and the British government (and its allies) was centred around the claim through which the latter executed their power in Northern Ireland. As a significant part of the Northern Irish people did not support the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, it was argued that the legitimacy of this claim was staggering. Nevertheless, Thatcher and her government stubbornly attempted to exhaust the monopoly of violence they claimed to have in the northern counties. As *An Phoblacht* understood this claim to be in-and-in illegitimate, it argued that the British government had to be somehow stopped and removed from the Irish island. Problematic in this respect, however, was the fact that the British government, particularly in the person of Thatcher, was ignorant to such an extent that there was no other option for the republicans than to be the captain of their own soul.<sup>261</sup> The only thing the IRA was doing, as the argumentation of the newspaper went, was standing up as its own judge. As illustratively stated in *An Phoblacht* on January 17, 1981 issue:

Ireland, as of right, belongs to the people of Ireland and any foreign writ not approved by the Irish nation is not binding, is illegal and should be opposed. It is the Brits who will not listen to a democratic or a peaceful solution, and who have made the resort to guerrilla warfare the only effective opposition to their rule, the Irish Republican Army the only force that can bring about positive change.<sup>262</sup>

Although *An Phoblacht's* central focus on the British government as ultimate enemy suggests a similarity with the WSPU, the language through which *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht* approached the fight against the government actually differs at two crucial points. First, *An Phoblacht's* formulation of the interest and benefits of those not directly involved in their struggle was much vaguer than had been the case with the WSPU, which had offered a better and more

<sup>257</sup> On housing, see for example: 'Rising rents and rising damp', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981).

<sup>258</sup> See for example: Una O'Neill, 'A scandalous view of history', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 10, 1981), 10.; 'Una O'Neill, 'An admission of British guilt', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 10, 1981), 14.

<sup>259</sup> For example: 'The British presence, partition and Protestant privilege', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (October 22, 1981), 6-7.

<sup>260</sup> 'Shock and outrage', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 5.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibidem.*, 5.

<sup>262</sup> 'OPENING UP NEW FRONTS', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 17, 1981), 2.



equal world to all women. *An Phoblacht's* propagation of the struggle for a free Ireland only to a minor extent implied such a general promise of general justice and equality.<sup>263</sup> Secondly, for the militant republicans there was no space at all to move between the labels of justice and evil. You were either with them or against them (and thus with the British government in the latter case). As stated in the newspaper concerning the hunger strikes: 'the dividing line is clearly drawn: you either stand with the hunger-strikers or you stand against them, the days of standing nowhere are over'.<sup>264</sup> This contrasts with *Votes for Women*, who accepted (and encouraged) people changing their minds and whose narration leaned on the belief that, eventually, the whole of humanity was able to become enlightened by justice and righteousness, including those who initially were paralysed through stubborn ignorance.

### 3.2.2 Hunger striker as inexhaustible instrument

With the 1981 hunger strike campaign, and particularly with the suffering and death of Sands, all the elements of *An Phoblacht's* general narration of the conflict explosively came together. Going along with the newspaper's wider narration of the broader conflict, the imprisoned IRA-members were seen as instruments through which the unjust stance of the British government could be exposed, even beyond prison walls. As this subsection shows, the quasi-martyrological tone through which *An Phoblacht* narrated the general conflict provided fruitful soil for a narration that would (attempt to) make the hunger striking Sands the republican's most important post-war martyr.

Although on the surface the 1981 hunger strike campaign concerned the issue of SCS for republican prisoners, *An Phoblacht* made no secret of the fact that the action was actually about the wider conflict at stake during the Troubles:

The hunger strike must be made to challenge (..) Thatcher and to bring into the picture the overriding question of the Irish people's right to self-determination. It is about the demand of Irish people, treated presently by the British worse than captured animals, to be treated as political prisoners. It is about the way the British treat Ireland.<sup>265</sup>

Throughout the entire course of 1981, the hunger strike campaign was one of *An Phoblacht's* most extensively covered topics. Throughout the first period after the announcement of a second hunger strike campaign, this mainly concerned weekly reports that were published on the progress of the organisation of the second hunger strike campaign. Topic-wise, the main part of the articles focused on factual developments, such as exploratory meetings between Sands and prisoners who considered participation, and the persistent British refusal to grant SCS.<sup>266</sup> As *An Phoblacht* underlined in several reports 'many lessons were learnt' from the first campaign.<sup>267</sup> This time, it was argued, the IRA would reveal to the world 'the British intransigence

<sup>263</sup> 'Shock and outrage', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 5.

<sup>264</sup> Sean Delaney, 'Purposeful anger in Derry', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 30, 1981), 18.

<sup>265</sup> As member of Fianna Fáil, Charlie Haughey (1925-2006) was the premier of the Irish Republic between December 1979 and June 1981, March 1981 and December 1981 and March 1987 and February 1992. During lead-up to the second hunger strike campaign, he attempted to convince the republican prisoners to not go on hunger strike, a stance which the IRA and *An Phoblacht* explicitly renounced.

<sup>266</sup> For example: 'Cautious H-Block moves', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 17, 1981), 2.; 'On the brink: Hunger-strike imminent as Brits refuse to implement 'step by step' settlement', 'OPENING UP NEW FRONTS', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 31, 1981), 1.

<sup>267</sup> 'OPENING UP NEW FRONTS', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 17, 1981), 1.

and inflexibility on the H-Block'.<sup>268</sup>

Already in these first announcements of a potential second hunger strike campaign in early January 1981, *An Phoblacht* used a language reminding of the core elements of the discourse of Christian martyrdom (Chapter 1). As is illustrated by the below citation, before the campaign had even started the potential strikers were already praised for the courage with which they considered choosing a fate of suffering over a betrayal of their stance in the conflict; an action that was received as exceptionally noble as it would be of great instrumental value to help the IRA in exposing to the world the cruelty of Thatcher's government:

The courage of the prisoners and their refusal to bend the knee to British imperialism is the first strength of a renewed protest campaign, and is encouraged by the second strength, a campaign of mass mobilisation throughout Ireland (...) The people who rallied to their side constitute the conscience of Ireland, and are the guarantors not just of a victory for the prisoners but of future victories of peace, justice and freedom in Ireland.<sup>269</sup>

The martyrological language became more persistent after the ten hunger strikers were selected, both in *An Phoblacht's* reports and in the corresponding images. The ten were (despite their juridical conviction) described as innocent men who were so devoted to the Irish cause that they preferred humiliation and torture over giving up the propagation of their stance because of being imprisoned. Illustratively to this portrayal, the newspaper regularly published drawings depicting the (future) hunger strikers as humble and innocent but determined victims of a cruel and unjust regime. As illustratively shown in the below image (Figure 3, which was part of an article about both the refusal to let republican prisoners wear their own clothes and the harassment of republican prisoners by prison warders), the prisoners were depicted as suppressed people.<sup>270</sup>

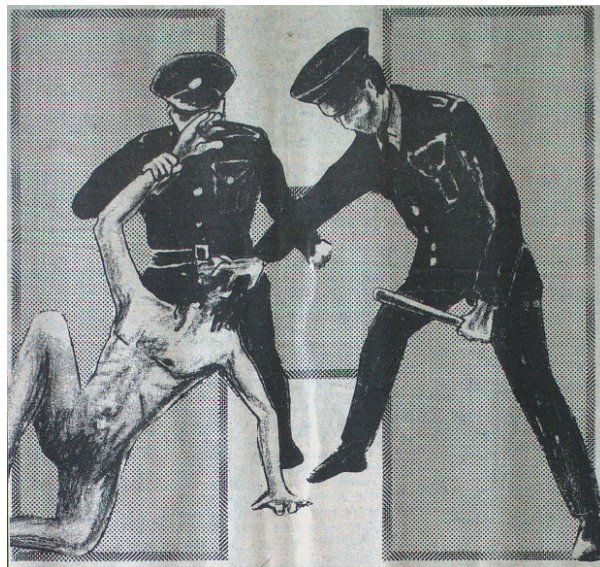


Figure 3: 'Tension heightened', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 31, 1981), 5.

<sup>268</sup> 'Hunger-strike threatens': H-Block/Armagh Prisoner's Frustration Rising in the Face of British Intransigence and Inflexibility', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 10, 1981), 1.

<sup>269</sup> 'HUNGER-STRIKE THREATENED', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 10, 1981), 2.

<sup>270</sup> Peter Arnalis, 'TENSION HEIGHTENED', 'OPENING UP NEW FRONTS', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (January 31, 1981), 5.

On February 7, 1981, *An Phoblacht* announced that it was decided that from March 1 onwards, Sands would be the first one to ‘hunger-strike to the death if necessary’, a determinedness that the newspaper underlined at any possible occasion.<sup>271</sup> Due to the stubborn stance of the Thatcher government, the campaign was described as ‘the only road open’ to ‘bring in the picture the overriding question of the Irish people’s self-determination’.<sup>272</sup> If the republican prisoners wished to end this injustice, it was argued, the prisoners had no other choice than to expose the British cruelty to the world, even though hereby they would have to endure a serious suffering and probably would face the risk of their own death:

The next hunger-strikers will be more convinced than ever that death will be the price of political status, if not just the price of challenging the Brits on this issue.<sup>273</sup>

In its reports during the week of the start of Sands hunger strike, *An Phoblacht* focused on the government’s failed ‘attempt to demoralise and degrade’ him, the other hunger strikers, and their supporters.<sup>274</sup> As *An Phoblacht* reported, these efforts were to no avail as the support for the hunger strikers among Northern Ireland’s Catholic community was massive. In this galvanisation of public support, as the newspaper argued, lay the heart of the future campaign’s strength and, through their sympathy for the strikers, the protesters showed their aversion to the British presence in the country.<sup>275</sup>

Although during the course of March Sands was followed in his strike by Hughes, McCreesh and O’Hara, *An Phoblacht* remained portraying him as the campaign’s protagonist. The language through which he was depicted increasingly contained a martyrological tone, both textually and visually, as for example in the March 21 issue, in which two pages were dedicated to the course of Sands’ strike up until then were illustrated with drawings suggestively comparing him to the early Christian martyrs (Figure 4).

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<sup>271</sup> ‘TO THE DEATH: New hunger-strike’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (February 7, 1981), 1.

<sup>272</sup> ‘THE ONLY ROAD OPEN: H-Block men start new hunger-strike’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (February 28, 1981), 12.

<sup>273</sup> ‘TO THE DEATH: New hunger-strike’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (February 7, 1981), 2.

<sup>274</sup> Peter Arnlis, ‘H-Block men resist attempts to demoralize and degrade them’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (February 14, 1981), 3.

<sup>275</sup> ‘FORCE THATCHER TO TURN NOW’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (February 28, 1981), 1



Figure 4: Drawings from 'The writings of Bobby Sands', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (March 21, 1981), 6-7.

From the first announcement of Sands' candidature for the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-elections, *An Phoblacht's* portrayal of him as republican martyr got an extra boost, particularly because in the same period of his candidature the consequences of his starvation became physically visible.<sup>276</sup> Despite his physical pain, however, the newspaper explained his suffering as an indication that his 'morale [was] sky-high following'.<sup>277</sup> Although the word 'martyrdom' was not used (yet), through such statements *An Phoblacht* increasingly portrayed him as a man who, through his suffering, embodied the moral righteousness underlying the claim that the British political stance was unjust. When on April 9 Sands won the by-elections, foreign media, politicians and pressure groups massively reported his campaign as the issue of an elected prisoner who was refused political status, which made many question Thatcher's argument that the IRA did not hold any political support. Although not necessarily sympathising with the striker's

<sup>276</sup> 'Sky-high morale' *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (April 4, 1981), 2.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibidem.*, 2.

action, several international actors questioned if Thatcher's unrelenting attitude did not go too far.<sup>278</sup>

For *An Phoblacht*, Sands' electoral victory and the media attention that had come with it were a sign that the campaign was successful in fuelling the public's understanding over the responsibility that the British government carried for his life. Deriving from this stance, in its reports the newspaper increasingly referred metaphorically to Sands' suffering as a symbol for the suffering endured by all the Irish people who, throughout the course of history, had been suppressed by the British government. As was for example stated in an article lining up Sands with the republicans who had lost their lives during the 1916 Rising:

Just as in 1916 there were men and women in Ireland prepared to lay down their lives in repudiation of British rule and in assertion of Irish sovereignty, so too this Easter weekend four young Irishmen, including Sands, lie in the prison hospital in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh on hunger strike, preparing to lay down their lives in the service of that same cause. (...) But Bobby Sands' life and the lives of his three comrades can still be saved (...) The British must be forced to realise that the cost to them – measured in terms of growing political instability in Ireland and an increasingly tarnished international image – of denying the prisoners their rightful political status, will inevitably exceed the cost of dropping their criminalisation policy.<sup>279</sup>

During the last weeks before Sands' death, *An Phoblacht* published several writings that he had produced during his imprisonment. In the selected pieces, the noble devotion, through which he had chosen for his suffering and upcoming fate over the possibility to give up, was underlined:

The republican spirit prevailed and as I sit here in the same condition and the continuing torture in H-Block 5, I am proud, although physically wrecked, mentally exhausted, and scarred deep with hatred and anger. I am proud, because my comrades and I have met, fought and repelled a monster, and we will continue to do so. (...) We, the risen people, shall turn tragedy into triumph. We shall bear forth a nation!<sup>280</sup>

A similar tone was adopted in *An Phoblacht*'s last issue before his death. Sands was praised for his discipline, dignity and duty, and was portrayed as an example to all Irish people:

Whatever occurs in the coming days, as the H-Block crisis reaches a climax, with leading hunger-striker Bobby Sands hovering on the brink of death (...) republicans and hunger strike campaigners should conduct themselves likewise. (...) The question is whether we can match the sacrifice of the prisoners and whether we can translate it in a way which is going to be politically and humanely useful.<sup>281</sup>

After Sands had died on May 5, *An Phoblacht* devoted its next issue almost entirely to his case. His death was depicted as a 'murder by the British government' that he had bravely

<sup>278</sup> For example: 'Campaign takes off internationally, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (April 11, 1981), 9.; and: 'New dimension', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (April 18, 1981), 9.; 'Euro-MP's give their views: unique H-Block visit to Bobby Sands', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (April 25, 1981), 4.

<sup>279</sup> 'Laying down their lives', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (April 18, 1981), 3.

<sup>280</sup> 'From a nationalist ghetto to the battlefield of H-Block, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (April 4, 1981), 6-7.

<sup>281</sup> 'Nothing less than the five demands, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 2, 1981), 3.

encountered up until the very end. The newspaper presented Sands' noble acceptance of his cruel fate as confirmation of the militant republican's righteous stance in the wider struggle between the righteous Irish people and the unjust British government. In its accounts of the strike, the newspaper adopted a narration structure that portrayed Sands as being a noble representative of the Irish people who was fighting a severe battle against the destroyer of peace and justice (the British government). Through a mixture of, on the one hand, a dramatic language of the suffering Sands and his supporters had to endure, and on the other hand the combative language through which he struggled for the Irish cause up until the very end, the strike and death of Sands was narrated as a service payed to the community of the Irish people.<sup>282</sup>

When Sands had passed away as a consequence of his starvation, *An Phoblacht* expanded its martyrological claim. In From the 'many poets and tributes to Bobby Sands' that *An Phoblacht* said to have received, the newspaper had selected the one by 'a young woman republican – a former Armagh prisoner from Ardoyne in Belfast', which was also quoted on top of this thesis' introduction:

Bobby, your death has been such a sad loss,  
 Just like Christ you carried your cross.  
 Sleep now my comrade, like martyrs past,  
 You have inspired us with your courage, we'll fight 'till the last.<sup>283</sup>

Also, visually the newspaper's interpretation of Sands' dead increasingly took a martyrological tone, such as in the below picture (Figure 5), which was part of a photo report of murals dedicated to Sands in Belfast and was published on July 25:

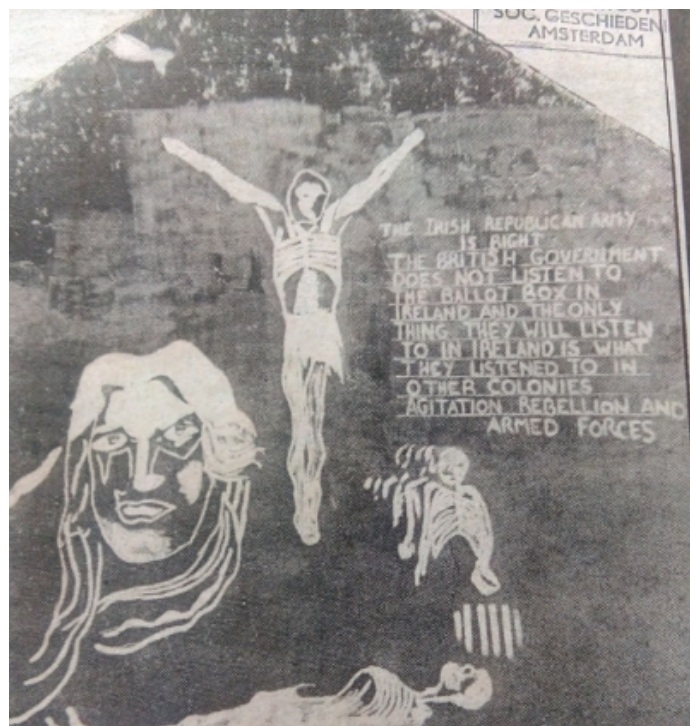


Figure 5: 'The writing on the wall', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (July 25, 1981), 1.

<sup>282</sup> 'THE FUNERAL OF BOBBY SANDS', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 16.

<sup>283</sup> 'Bobby Sands has been laid to rest', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 16, 1981), 1, 31.

Nevertheless, *An Phoblacht's* martyrological interpretation of Sands' death did not remove its militant tone. On the contrary. It only confirmed and underlined it. When taking a quick glance at the cover of this first issue, the reasoning is clearly visualised (Figure 6). The front and back pages are fully covered with a photograph of the 'final salute' for Sands, which not only illustrates militant-dramatic tones dominating the newspaper's narration, but also gives a glimpse into the political argumentations this language indirectly touched upon. On the foreground three IRA Volunteers are standing next to Sands' coffin and are saluting with their rifles in the air. A fourth Volunteer (on the right), who is wearing a balaclava and a military camouflage uniform, looks into the distance as he is keeping watch. A grieving mass beholds the scene, with on the right front Gerry Adams (1948), one of Sinn Féin's most prominent politicians who, up until the present day, denies all accusations of active involvement in IRA activities.<sup>284</sup>



Figure 6: Front pages of *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 1, 32.

The way Sands and his comrades had accepted their suffering, however, had made them embodiments of absolute devotion to the Irish republican cause. Through several accounts of prominent IRA-members, including Sinn Féin politicians, friends, and relatives of Sands, it was underlined how, even on the eve of his dramatic faith, he had kept his head up and had proudly propagated the militant fight for the Irish cause. As Gerry Adams for example wrote in the newspaper about his visits to the H-Blocks, the pain the strikers endured was real, but this did not withhold them from staying true to their cause. Adams had confronted Sands and the other strikers with what he called 'the darkest and blackest picture possible: between ten and twenty prisoners dead, nationalist Ireland demoralised, and no advance from the British government.' The strikers, however, had responded with proud determination: 'The British government is wrong and if they think they can break us they're wrong twice. Lean ar Aghaidh' (meaning:

<sup>284</sup>'FINAL SALUTE', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 1.

continue on).<sup>285</sup>

Central to the newspaper's narration of Sands' strike and death was how he as a person represented the Irish struggle. Through accounts of Sands' relatives, *An Phoblacht* constructed this representational approach of Sands by portraying him as an ordinary Irishman who stayed true to his identity to such an extent that he developed himself into an extraordinary community representative. Hereby, a character sketch was made portraying Sands as a humble but determined hero who would do everything to protect his people. As Sands' election agent Owen Carron (1953) stated in his grave side oration, Sands was a 'very ordinary man' who had taken the brave decision to protect this identity up until the very end:

Through a process of events, [he] became politically educated and at eighteen decided he no longer would accept the injustice of a partitioned Ireland with all its inherent evils. No longer could he accept second class citizenship in his own country. So he joined the IRA and embarked on a life of hardship and suffering and in the end made the supreme sacrifice of his life for the cause he believed in.<sup>286</sup>

Also illustrative in this respect is a three-page interview with his twenty-six-year-old sister Bernadette Sands (1958), again illustrated with several photographs. By elaborating on the childhood of the Sands' children as they grew up in Belfast and on how Bobby as a teenager became involved in radical republican circles, the article portrays Sands as a normal boy who, because of the disruption brought about by the British government, became a child of conflict.<sup>287</sup> At a young age Bernadette and Bobby had explicitly experienced 'how the Troubles were getting underway'. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the family lived in one of Belfast's predominantly Protestant districts, where they, due to their political stance, were regularly confronted with loyalist intimidation and violence.<sup>288</sup> Bobby, however, seemed to be immune for such attacks: 'if he got hit he wouldn't let anyone see him crying. He just went about as if nothing had happened (...). He just wouldn't give in to people. (...) An attitude that', as Bernadette stated, 'later in life, when he was imprisoned, he was to reproduce time and time again, until his dying breath'.<sup>289</sup> Because of this combination of his character and the situation he found himself in, Bernadette describes, he had no other choice than to become an active republican: at the age of sixteen or seventeen 'he more or less said 'right, this is where I'm going to take up'.<sup>290</sup> Bernadette also explained his decision to go on strike as being 'the only alternative'.<sup>291</sup> His fatal action, she stated, not only gave her hope, but also proved to her his endless braveness:

When I see the courage and strength that he has shown, it gives me more strength to go on. When I see that he is lying there dying, and still determined, still showing courage, and still trying to keep the family's spirits up, it gives me strength to keep going.<sup>292</sup>

This portrayal of Sands as a devoted and protective brother was not limited to his relatives, but also spilled over to his symbolic brothers and sisters. As elaboratively stated in a tribute to

<sup>285</sup> Gerry Adams, 'H-BLOCK VISIT: by Gerry Adams', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (August 8, 1981), 22-23.

<sup>286</sup> 'THE FUNERAL OF BOBBY SANDS', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 16.

<sup>287</sup> Peter Hays, 'My brother Bobby by Bernadette Sands', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 19.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibidem.*, 20.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibidem.*, 19.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibidem.*, 20.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibidem.*, 19.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibidem.*, 21.



Sands by his prison comrades Danny Devenny, Sands' political determination was directly rooted in his devotion to the Irish community and culture. The republican inmates, Devenny describes, buried themselves as much as possible in the Irish revolutionary tradition. They played Gaelic football and studied the Irish language and Irish history.<sup>293</sup>

As former *An Phoblacht* editor Ruairi Ó Brádaigh conclusively stated, with this democratic affirmation Sands had not only politically triumphed but had also proudly embodied the ultimate implementation of the identity of the Irish people:

With the sixty-six days and nights of fasting to the death of our comrade Bobby Sands, the Irish people bestowed on him the highest honour that lay within their power in that period of time – they elected him their parliamentary representative for the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone in the British-occupied six counties. (...) For human dignity at its greatest stature he has died on the slow agony of the hunger-strike. Surrounded by his political enemies he has resisted all blandishments and has triumphed before his people and the watching eyes of the world.<sup>294</sup>

As Ó Brádaigh argued, it was within his identity as devoted community man that Sands had found the persuasiveness to carry out his political ideals under all circumstances. This dynamic had not only proven the righteousness of Sands and the Irish community, but had also assigned Sands with the status of martyrdom:

His death is not a defeat but a triumph for the human spirit over material considerations. His martyrdom was bravely undertaken, heroically endured, and has not been consummated. Bobby Sands' life and death make Irish people everywhere prouder of their heritage and nationality.<sup>295</sup>

### 3.3 Framing the hunger striker: carrier of victory

As the previous section has expounded, *An Phoblacht* narrated the strike and death of Sands as an example to the Irish community of how an attitude of stubborn resoluteness carried the potential to reclaim the agency the British government had taken away ages ago. Through this language, the strike and death of Sands were not interpreted in the isolation of that moment of time or the specific political issue of SCS. On the contrary. Through the militant-dramatic narration structure his strike and death were told through, the newspaper transcended Sands from his position as individual prisoner and assigned him with the status of a community hero.

This section analyses the further impact of the narration style in two steps. First, the framing of Sands as witness is analysed (3.3.1.). Secondly, it is investigated how *An Phoblacht*'s narration of his strike and death transformed his individual, passive suffering into an active weapon that the IRA understood to be instrumental to the victory of their just cause (3.3.2.).

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<sup>293</sup>'Life in the cages of the Kesh: A tribute by Danny Devenny, a former prison comrade', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 22.

<sup>294</sup>'Dedicated revolutionary: a tribute by Ruairi Ó Brádaigh, president of Sinn Féin', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 26.

<sup>295</sup>*Ibidem.*, 26.

### 3.3.1 Witnessing injustice

The fact that Sands was elected only one month before his death charged the newspaper's militant-dramatic narration of the events with an element of indisputable righteousness. Through his position as politician Sands became a symbol in the wider framing of the movement's propagation of being right in every possible way (so both morally and politically), whereas the British government claimed that the republican inmates did not deserve SCS because they were criminals without any political support. As his election agent said in his graveside oration:

We have the moral right to struggle for freedom and self-determination. Britain has no right in our country and has no faith in her pretence because the moral right she pretends to have has to be backed up by a monstrous war machine of guns and tanks and the torture chambers of Castlereagh and the H-Blocks and by creation of division within the Irish people.<sup>296</sup>

Within this context, the hunger strikes were narrated as an instrument not only exposing the impotency of Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet, but also as means to beat the injustice on which her claim to sovereign power rested:

Though saddened at the tremendous loss, republicans draw strength from Bobby Sands' death which like his life on the blanket testifies to the fact that English rule cannot work when there is Irish resistance. It is a terrible price to prove a point but such is the cost of resistance, and the point when proven draws in greater numbers of hitherto uncommitted people who recognise that this is the only way, and that the course of resistance of and armed struggle has already forged a leadership in the Irish Republican Movement.<sup>297</sup>

The newspaper's narration of the acts of Sands and the other hunger strikers who had died because of their strikers, hereby framed them as warying witnesses of the injustice done by the British government to the Irish community. Neither the violence the militant republican movement had inflicted to others, nor the violence the strikers had inflicted to themselves, were acts of despair. They were framed as a last resort in a battle between justice and a very stubborn evil. As the British government was wrong and therefore their eventual loss was inevitable, the only thing the militant republicans were doing through their propagation of physical force and self-starvation was catalysing this process. By physically and metaphorically confronting and provoking the British government, they exposed to the world the incorrectness of British rule. As stated in the newspaper after the deaths of Patsy O'Hara and Raymond McCreech:

All of the dead hunger strikers spent many years of their short young lives behind the barbed wire and prison walls, which are just some of the foundations of British 'law and order' in the North. They could not tolerate what they saw going in in their land, a sectarian loyalist government discriminating against their people (...). They could not tolerate what they saw and the only choice they ever had was the choice offered to a slave. But instead they obeyed their consciences, found courage and energy, and went into battle with the odds overwhelmingly stacked against them.<sup>298</sup>

<sup>296</sup> 'Dedicated revolutionary: a tribute by Ruairi Ó Brádaigh, president of Sinn Féin', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 26.

<sup>297</sup> 'The unchanging desire for freedom', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 3.

<sup>298</sup> 'A slow burning fuse', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 30, 1981), 5.

Through this positioning, *An Phoblacht* dramatically emphasised how the proud suffering that had come with Sands' experience of starvation was not limited to individual physical and mental pain, but how it was shared by the entire Irish community. Deriving from this reasoning, it was stated that the example that Sands had set by accepting his death had awoken the second layer of the Irish community, namely 'the Irish people'. As the newspaper wrote about the demonstrations and riots after Sands' death: 'it is a clear signal to the British government of the mounting bitterness being caused by its foolishly intransigent stance on the H-Block Crisis'.<sup>299</sup>

By portraying Sands' determined attitude as a key example of how the community's historical suffering could be conquered, *An Phoblacht's* narration of his strike and death pierced through space and time by incorporating the events in the historical course of the Anglo-Irish conflict. As illustratively stated in an article on the growing support for the upcoming hunger strike campaign, the debate on SCS was interpreted as an integral part of this long historical course of events that had showed the unjust British claim on the Irish island:

For remembering that this issue of Irish hunger-strikers versus the British government is honeycombed with Irish history: traditional British imperialist contempt stokes the fires of nationalism and threatens to call up all the ghosts of those Irish patriots and their methods.<sup>300</sup>

Through this charged narration of him as a person, both the history and the future of the Irish conflict were bound together in a framing of the struggle with the British government as a situation that could be proudly conquered:

Bobby Sands has died but has left the prisoners in their strongest position and with their best prospects of success. Britain can be broken! And a demoralising defeat inflicted by the prisoners will have major repercussions for her stay in Ireland.<sup>301</sup>

The act of Sands was hereby described as a community service and source of hope. As the newspaper described, he symbolised 'the everlasting refusal to accept the criminalisation of the Irish freedom struggle'.<sup>302</sup> Hereby, it assigned Sands with a symbolic key role in Irish history:

Bobby Sands is a symbol of hope for the unemployed, for the poor and oppressed, for the home-less, for those divided by partition, for those trying to unite our people. He symbolises a new beginning.<sup>303</sup>

Through this type of language, the strike was hereby framed as disclosive watershed. It had exposed the British cruelty:

Irish people do not watch such funerals as Thursday's without being moved, emotionally as well as to action. The world has also seen an extract from the political struggle of the jail spilling on to the streets – and its recognition of the struggle for Irish national liberation

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<sup>299</sup> 'Sporadic but intense rioting', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 7.

<sup>300</sup> Peter Arnalis, 'RE-BUILDING WIDESPREAD SUPPORT', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (February 21, 1981), 3.

<sup>301</sup> 'Shock and outrage', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 5.

<sup>302</sup> 'Ever-lasting refusal to accept criminalisation', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 23.

<sup>303</sup> 'THE FUNERAL OF BOBBY SANDS', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 16.

will have its effect, will take a heavy toll on British rule, and may well be a watershed in British demoralisation. And all because of the hunger strikers and Bobby Sands.<sup>304</sup>

By assigning him with this precise role, Sands was embedded in the wider tradition of Irish republicans who had used hunger strikes as ‘a weapon in the prison struggle’ and had thereby contributed to the unmasking of the unjust British government. By assigning him with this symbolic status, Sands was integrated in the long line of Irish martyrs. In several articles he was compared to historical Irish republican hunger strikers, such as Terence MacSwiney (1879-1912):

As he goes to join the great company of Irish heroes and martyrs his actions speak out for his devotion to the struggle against oppression; and the words placed on record at the death of his great predecessor, Terence MacSwiney in 1920 bear repetition today.<sup>305</sup>

### 3.3.2 Passive suffering as active weapon

As we have seen in *An Phoblacht*'s narration of the militant republican struggle it was argued that through violent force the community would be able to reclaim the agency that, long ago, was taken away by the British government. Like exemplified by Sands, they were not intimidated by authority. They thought for themselves and had their own plan. The interaction between the two opponents was not framed as a schism or disagreement per se, which had been the case for the WSPU in *Votes for Women*, but narrated the physical force perpetrated by militant republicans as a counterreaction to violence done by the British government. The prison treatment the British authorities exposed to the republican prisoners was narrated as being unmasking in this respect:

So enmeshed has the British government become in the intransigence of its present prison policy in the North, that it has totally unbalanced the constitutional processes which serve its interests, both in North and South, in Ireland.<sup>306</sup>

With his dead, Sands had gained a key role in this metaphorical suing of the British government. Although ‘the British murder machine’, as the newspaper stated, had tried everything ‘to break his spirit’, it had failed. Instead of giving in and accepting its wrong, the British government, particularly in the person of Thatcher, had chosen to only harshen its attitude towards the militant republicans. Hereby, the newspaper argued, the British government had dug its own grave:

Around the world Bobby Sands has humiliated the British government. In Bobby Sand's death they have sown the seeds of their own destruction. Bobby once wrote about Britain that “her actions will eventually seal the fate of her rule in Ireland for they may hold our bodies, but while our minds are free, victory is assured”.<sup>307</sup>

Through this unmasking of the unjust British cruelty, Sands dragged the British into a metaphorical arena. Through his example, *An Phoblacht* framed the conflict in a moral-judicial

<sup>304</sup> ‘THE unchanging desire for freedom’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 3.

<sup>305</sup> ‘Dedicated revolutionary: a tribute by Ruairi Ó Brádaigh, president of Sinn Féin’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 26.

<sup>306</sup> ‘Defiance’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (August 8, 1981), 5.

<sup>307</sup> ‘THE FUNERAL OF BOBBY SANDS’, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 16.

manner: as the British were unwilling to take care of the Irish people, they had the right to not only take care of themselves, but also to (metaphorically) sue the British government for their ignorance. Through this logic, the indestructible determination Sands had shown was framed as a powerful weapon that could be seized in the wider militant fight through which the Irish people had to reclaim their agency. As his election agent said during his graveside oration:

Bobby Sands has not died in vain. His hunger strike and the sacrifice of his life is a cameo of the entire resistance movement. He symbolises the true Irish nation which never has surrendered and never will. Let us picture him lying all alone in his cell, his body tortured and twisted in pain, surrounded by enemies and isolated from his comrades and nothing to fight with but his will and determination.<sup>308</sup>

By reclaiming their agency through their determination (and thus not surrendering to the British pressure), the strikers had used their bodies as weapons against the British:

They used their bodies as weapons against British rule as coolly and calculatedly as they used guns and bombs before their imprisonment, but, alas, on this last operation their 'run back' led only one way – to the grave.<sup>309</sup>

[They] willingly died in the hope that their deaths would lead to a transformation in our struggle for national freedom. (...) No matter what their opponents allege about their actions, no-one can rob them of the dignified manner in which they overcame the daunting fear of death.<sup>310</sup>

For the IRA, the suffering of the passive Sands actively legitimised violence as means to propagate their cause. The usage of violence, whether it was done to the self or to the other, was narrated as an unavoidable stepping stone to eventual victory. While, for the suffragettes, the passive suffering of their strikers legitimised their cause, not violence as means to achieve this per se. As stated in response to the critique:

Our imprisoned comrades, furthermore are superior in motivation and politically sophisticated to a degree that has freed them and us from the oppressive discipline of a regular army. We are, above all else, a volunteer army.<sup>311</sup>

Through this narration structure, the conflict was framed as being an ultimate clash between righteousness and injustice. The victim-perpetrator dynamics were steered in an ultimate direction. It was underlined that the British government had chosen for their position of injustice. This style of reasoning transformed him into a saint. As illustrated in a tribute of then *An Phoblacht* editor Danny Morrison:

My dear friend and comrade (...) You are at peace now, out of the hell blocks that murdered you, out of the clutches of the screws and British rule, like the lark free and at peace. Now we need your prayers, your courage, and your determination, that beautiful unvanquished spirit that brought you through those tribulations. Watch over us'.<sup>312</sup>

<sup>308</sup> 'THE FUNERAL OF BOBBY SANDS', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 16.

<sup>309</sup> Jim Gibney, 'OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF DEATH: 'keep on marching, don't give up', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 30, 1981), 5.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibidem.*, 5.

<sup>311</sup> 'IRA SLAM FITZGERALD', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (August 8, 1981), 10.

<sup>312</sup> 'The H-Block O/C: A tribute by Danny Morrison', *An Phoblacht/Republican News* (May 9, 1981), 23.

### 3.4 Press response

Though their martyrological narration and framing of the struggle for political status, Sands and the other hunger striking inmates commanded legitimacy for the cause of the IRA. As we have seen, however, Thatcher and her government had a completely different view on the subject. In their eyes, the IRA hunger strikers were terrorists who did not deserve the status of martyrdom. But how did the British people respond to the IRA's claim for martyrdom? This section analyses the societal arguments *The Guardian* (3.4.1), *The Times* (3.4.2) and the *Daily Express* (3.4.3) reflected upon. What sort of societal arguments did these newspapers reflect upon? And what insight do these findings give in how the British society responded to the martyrological claims made by the WSPU in relation to the strikes?

#### 3.4.1 The Guardian

Central to *The Guardian's* coverage of the IRA 1981 hunger strikes was the debate on the (il-)legitimacy of the violence pursued by the movement and, although on less occasions, by the Thatcher government. As this section shows, different than in its reports on the 1909 WSPU hunger strikes (Chapter 2), *The Guardian* systematically prioritised the controversies surrounding the militancy of the IRA and the unrelenting attitude of Thatcher's government over the question of political status for republican prisoners and the overarching socio-political issue of the British claim on the Irish island. It was not the republican cause as such, but the legitimisation of violence that was at the core of its approach of the IRA. It is relevant to mention, however, that the newspaper's articles concerning loyalist paramilitary violence contained a similar critical tone.<sup>313</sup> The 'gruesome target practice' of both the IRA and the loyalist paramilitary movements, which *The Guardian* approached as an interpretation of the conflict that disproportionately leaned on the legitimisation of violent force: 'For God's sake let the next bout of intersectarian warfare stop there'.<sup>314</sup>

On February 4, 1981, *The Guardian* reported that republican movements were deciding 'whether to renew the prison hunger strike on the special status issue'.<sup>315</sup> Although the newspaper emphasised that all further details rested on rumours and speculations, the upcoming strikes were reported as a well-considered, strategical campaign that was meant to be a '[deliberate] courting confrontation on the prison issue as a matter of security policy, in an attempt to win a psychological victory'.<sup>316</sup> On the last page of its March 2<sup>nd</sup> issue, *The Guardian* reported that Sands had begun his hunger strike in Maze Prison. Although it was expected that his strike would 'be approaching a critical stage on Easter Sunday the anniversary of the 1916 uprising', not much widespread controversy was expected.<sup>317</sup>

Although initially *The Guardian* only published a handful of reports on the case, which mainly covered either factual developments or considerations of the government, both the amount and the focus of the reports changed drastically once it was announced that Sands would run as MP in the Fermanagh by-elections, a development that met widespread public attention

<sup>313</sup>Mention a few illustrative examples here

<sup>314</sup>'Back to a bloodbath', *The Guardian* (January 23, 1981), 12.

<sup>315</sup>David Beresford, 'Maze prisoners debate new fast', *The Guardian* (February 4, 1981), 3.

<sup>316</sup>*Ibidem.*, 3.

<sup>317</sup>David Beresford, 'IRA leader begins Maze hunger strike', *The Guardian* (March 2, 1981), 28.

and was approached as confusing and controversial.<sup>318</sup> ‘There is now a distinct possibility that an IRA hunger striker (...), Bobby Sands, will be returned as a member of Parliament’, *The Guardian* reported on March 27.<sup>319</sup> The profile that the newspaper sketched of Sands because of his candidature emphasised the fact that he was ‘serving 14 years in Belfast’s Maze Prison for firearms offences’ and that he ‘[was] expected to win’ as ‘the Fermanagh-South Tyrone constituency traditionally [had] a nationalist majority’.<sup>320</sup>

On April 11, *The Guardian* announced on its front page that Sands had won the by-election over his Unionist component Harry West with a majority of 1446 votes. Apart from elaborating on the controversy surrounding his IRA-membership, the report was slightly cynical on the course of events as the fact that ‘the per cent poll was 2.1 per cent down on the general election’ was explained as reflection of ‘an element of protest among Roman Catholic voters against the candidature of an IRA man’. Nevertheless, it described his election as a ‘political triumph for the IRA’ that confronted the government with great difficulties as it ‘[had] dealt a serious blow to the Government’s security strategy in Northern Ireland’ because it ‘threaten[ed] to undermine the criminalisation policy (...) as well as the sectarian schism in the province’.<sup>321</sup>

With Sands’ election, the predominantly negative tone of the reports changed. Despite its critical approach of Sands’ strike and parliamentary candidature, in a handful of articles *The Guardian* elaborated on dissenting opinions as well. For example, in an anonymous opinion article that was published on April 11 it was questioned it was fair to downplay Sands’ election as irrelevant and it was stated that people should consider what his victory revealed about the situation in ‘the greenest corner of an Orange state’. The letter argued that it was too easy to dismiss Sands’ election as insignificant only because he was a member of the IRA, and that, with his election had debunked the ‘myth (...) that the IRA in its violent phase represent[ed] only a tiny minority of the population’:

The vote means that scarcely a Catholic can have voted for the Union as it stands now. That fact alone must colour all policy-making between London, Dublin and Belfast. (...) For if Sands should die after such a vote of confidence how can the electoral system be said to reflect the views of the people?<sup>322</sup>

Also when a call from Sands for direct negotiations between the government and the striking prisoners was rejected by the government on the ground that ‘Mr Sands’ condition was not giving cause for concern at the moment’, *The Guardian* responded critically.<sup>323</sup> It increasingly referred to Sands’ as ‘the H-Block hunger striker’ instead of ‘the IRA hunger striker’, and published several opinion articles (both anonymous and from its own correspondents) criticising Thatcher’s certain insistence that even Sands’ election did not refute that ‘there [was] little support in the province for the violent tactics of the IRA’.<sup>324</sup> As *The Guardian* correspondent

<sup>318</sup> ‘Retired Loyalist’s stand against hunger striker’, *The Guardian* (April 7, 1981), 3.

<sup>319</sup> David Beresford, ‘IRA hunger striker stands as MP’, *The Guardian* (March 27, 1981), 2.

<sup>320</sup> David Beresford, ‘Hunger striker and Unionist in straight fight at Fermanagh’, *The Guardian* (March 31, 1981), 4.

<sup>321</sup> David Beresford, ‘Poll coup for IRA a blow to Thatcher: Catholics vote hunger striker Bobby Sands into Commons’, *The Guardian* (April 11, 1981), 1.

<sup>322</sup> ‘Fermanagh Tyrone and the Maze’, *The Guardian* (April 11, 1981), 10.

<sup>323</sup> John Hooper, ‘Sands calls for direct talks on political status: Agent of hunger striker leaves some room for manoeuvre’, *The Guardian* (April 15, 1981), 2.

<sup>324</sup> Peter Jenkins, ‘What is the nature of the Anglo-Irish game?’, *The Guardian* (April 15, 1981), 13.

Peter Jenkins for example argued, Sands' election had demonstrated, exposed, and unmasked that Thatcher was not searching for a real solution of 'the Irish question', but that she (as 'o u t – a n d – o u t Unionist') wanted nothing else than to defeat the IRA, and thereby only made the problems worse:

The Fermanagh and South Tyrone byelection demonstrated the intractable roots of the Northern Ireland problem, the strength of the tribal loyalties and folk memories which are a part of it, and the extent to which it is for the time being insoluble. (...) When the Government faced down the last hunger strike it claimed this as a great propaganda victory over the IRA. But by refusing then to be more flexible about prison conditions, it has handed the IRA the greater propaganda victory of the Fermanagh-South Tyrone byelection.<sup>325</sup>

In another letter to the editor, Thatcher was criticised for completely ignoring the possibility that Sands' election somehow rested on democratic legitimacy, and that she therefore refused to consider allowing him to wear his own clothes (without granting full political status):

Mr Sands is, or was, the IRA commandant in the Maze. The three other hunger strikers might be satisfied that a new symbolic status for Mr Sands applied by symbolic extension to them all. They might not. Since logic goes into suspense during the politics of absurdity there can be no telling. But one question is enough at a time, and the question of the moment is how to contrive matters so that a prisoner with the political status of a Member of Parliament, irrespective of any status attaching to his terrorist offence, does not starve himself to death.<sup>326</sup>

Despite the increasing critical tone through which the government's response was reported, the position of the IRA was still approached through serious criticism. The main argument in this respect was that the IRA had led Sands like a lamb to the slaughter and had thereby invoked a politics of absurdity. As for example stated in an anonymous opinion article: 'the Provisionals have threatened a new campaign of slaughter if Bobby Sands kills himself, thereby making nonsense of the well-meaning clerical appeals for his life to be saved by a doubtful package of humanitarian gestures.'<sup>327</sup>

When Sands died at May 5, the number of articles published on strikes increased significantly as the societal and political debate on who beard responsibility for his dead reached its peak, both within the United Kingdom and internationally. In its accounts of these debates on the hunger strike and dead of Sands, *The Guardian* reported a variety of responses from several political and non-political actors within the United Kingdom, Ireland and internationally.<sup>328</sup>

Deriving from this focus on the IRA's illegitimate violence, *The Guardian* structured its account of Sands' dead by narrating his fatal strike as a tragic example of the dangerous extremism the IRA was capable of. Although newspaper reports sporadically gave account of oppositional arguments (through citations of Sands' supporters, relatives, and spokespeople<sup>329</sup>), the overall

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<sup>325</sup> Ibidem., 13.

<sup>326</sup> 'A political sort of status', *The Guardian* (April 15, 1981), 12.

<sup>327</sup> 'Mr Sands as time runs out', *The Guardian* (April 21, 1981), 12.

<sup>328</sup> For example: John Hooper, 'Europe MPs lead attack', *The Guardian* (May 6, 1981), 3.; Joe Joyce, 'Dublin waits for election decision', *The Guardian* (May 6, 1981), 3.; Martyn Halsall, 'Runcie appeals for calm', *The Guardian* (May 1981), 3.; Colin Brown, 'Political status 'licence to kill'', *The Guardian* (May 6, 1981), 4.

<sup>329</sup> For example: John Cunningham, 'Ulster braced for more riots over Sands', *The Guardian* (May 6, 1981), 1.; Colin Brown, 'Political status 'licence to kill'', *The Guardian* (May 6, 1981), 3.



coverage of his death hereby consisted a critical and worried tone. As illustrated by the article ‘How the IRA manufactured a news martyr’:

Death through self-starvation is a potent political symbol in Ireland, and Bobby Sands is the latest in a line of Republicans to die this way. But more than any previous political figure, his protest combined a bizarre mixture of heroism, idealism, criminality and black comedy.<sup>330</sup>

Although *The Guardian*, like *An Phoblacht*, portrayed Sands as an ordinary man whose life had become extraordinary due to the Troubles, it still and foremost depicted him as a convicted criminal who, through a series of coincidences, came in touch with radical republicanism and ended up as IRA propaganda material:

True, he joined the Provisionals when he was 18 (...) but it was prison which really radicalised him. (...) It was Sands’ willingness to adhere to instructions from the Provisional leadership which first let to his enhanced status in their ranks. Later, when the hunger strike got under way, it was his inflexible resolve which became the dominant trait.<sup>331</sup>

*The Guardian* was very well aware of the martyrological status that Sands would potentially gain within his own community. ‘Bobby Sands’ name’, the newspaper stated in its issue the day after Sands’ death, ‘now joins the list of martyrs to the IRA cause who have chosen to die in this peculiarly Irish form of political protest’.<sup>332</sup>

### 3.4.2 The Times

In his research to coverages of the IRA’s 1981 hunger strike by *The Irish Times*, *The New York Times* and *The London Times*, historian Aogán Mulcahy shows that *The London Times* (from now on: *The Times*) centred its reports around the debate on the legitimacy of the IRA’s claim that their strikers were legitimate political actors.<sup>333</sup> The newspaper constructed main parts of its coverage of the issue as a debate that was mainly fought out between the IRA and Thatcher. Although a slight number of articles ‘offered criticisms of the criminalisation policy’, the language through which the events were reported predominantly approached the IRA as a terrorist movement that falsely propagated its claim as a status which it did not deserve.<sup>334</sup> As Mulcahy explains:

The majority of the coverage was concerned more with evaluating the hunger strikers’ strategy than assessing the validity of their claims. It was the success of the hunger strikers’ election campaign that needed to be accounted for, not the claim that they were politically motivated. On the fundamental question of their legitimacy, there was no movement; they may have been electorally successful, but they remained “terrorists”.<sup>335</sup>

<sup>330</sup> John Cunningham, ‘How the IRA manufactured a new martyr’, *The Guardian* (May 6, 1981), 3.

<sup>331</sup> John Cunningham, ‘How the IRA manufactured a new martyr’, *The Guardian* (May 6, 1981), 3.

<sup>332</sup> Gareth Parry, ‘Sands joins long line of hunger strikers’, *The Guardian* (May 6, 1981), 3.

<sup>333</sup> *The Times* (March 6, 1981), 1., Quotes in: Aogán Mulcahy, ‘Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy: Press Coverage of the 1981 Northern Irish Hunger Strike’, *Social Problems* 42 (1995) 4, 449, 463-464.

<sup>334</sup> Aogán Mulcahy, ‘Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy: Press Coverage of the 1981 Northern Irish Hunger Strike’, *Social Problems* 42 (1995) 4, 449.

<sup>335</sup> Mulcahy, ‘Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy’, 456.

As Mulcahy shows, in about all its reports on the 1981 hunger strike campaign, *The Times* approached the IRA's claiming that its law-breaking members in reality were political prisoners as a propaganda stunt. By publicly letting a selective group of its members starve to death, it was argued, the movement falsely profiled itself as a victim and attempted to distract attention from the devastating terrorism through which it on a daily basis propagated its cause.<sup>336</sup>

By designating the IRA as a key player on the republican side (and thus not the hunger strikers themselves), *The Times* portrayed Sands and his companions as nothing more than pawns in the game of the IRA. By using bodies of own members as propaganda material, it was argued, the IRA had crossed another line. In the few publications in which the striker's individual motivations were part of the reports, the focus lay on their crimes and their obedient stance towards the IRA. Hereby, Sands and his companions were portrayed as motivated through 'selfish, criminal, and predatory interests, rather than commitment to a political goal.'<sup>337</sup> The newspaper criticised the IRA top for planting this sort of extremism in the strikers' minds and accused the movement's leaders for expanding its exercising of violence to its own members. Hereby, instead of independent actors who were fighting for their own political stance, the newspaper's reports approached them as the IRA's next victims.<sup>338</sup>

In line with its repudiating reports on the cause of the IRA, *The Times* adhered closely to Thatcher's stance in the debate. The newspaper's portrayal of Thatcher was centred around her firm stance that 'there is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence'.<sup>339</sup> Although in a handful of articles a slightly critical language was used to report Thatcher's unrelenting attitude and her refusal to consider other options or to utter sympathy towards (the families of) the starving strikers, in general *The Times* 'accepted the British government's claim that the prisoners were ordered to starve to death'.<sup>340</sup>

When Sands was elected in April, the critical way in which *The Times* reported the cause of the IRA and its hunger strikers changed slightly. Although still predominately siding with Thatcher, in its reports on the elections the newspaper carefully adopted a tone of consideration. As Mulcahy explains, the election was reported as a 'vital test' for the question at the heart of the debate surrounding the hunger strike, namely the one on the political validity of the IRA's claim that its cause was political and not terrorist.<sup>341</sup> Nevertheless, *The Times* remained critical in its stance towards the IRA. By thematically focusing its reports on anti-IRA stances on the election results, the suggestion that the election was provoking an escalation of Belfast's violence, and on the question whether Sands had to be expelled from parliament, *The Times* suggestively undermined the significance of the event.<sup>342</sup> It acknowledged the election was an indication of 'a higher level of support for militant Republicanism than had previously been thought to exist'

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<sup>336</sup> Ibidem., 449.

<sup>337</sup> Ibidem., 457.

<sup>338</sup> Ibidem., 460-461.

<sup>339</sup> *The Times* (March 6, 1981), 1., Quotes in: Mulcahy, 'Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy', 449.

<sup>340</sup> Ibidem., 462.

<sup>341</sup> Ibidem., 455.

<sup>342</sup> *The Times* (April 11, 1981), 1., quoted in: Mulcahy, 'Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy', 455.

but simultaneously explained it as ‘a subtly managed propaganda exercise’.<sup>343</sup>

Like had been the case in *The Guardian*, in *The Times* the death of Sands was extensively covered. Focus in these reports was the potential propaganda campaign that the IRA could construct through Sands’ death and, in relation with this, the ‘significant concern at the prospect of violence’ in Northern Ireland. As was illustratively stated in the newspaper’s May 5 issue:

Hundreds of journalists from all over the world have given Northern Ireland its greatest flood of publicity since the ugly, violent early 1970s. The province now waits to see whether the Provisional IRA will launch a campaign of violence and destruction in Northern Ireland or England. The view among close observers is that the Provisionals, whose activities are under unprecedented watch by the security forces might bide their time while the propaganda machine continues to concentrate on the remaining hunger strikers.<sup>344</sup>

### 3.4.3 The Daily Express

In its reports on the 1981 hunger strike campaign, the *Daily Express* embedded the question on political status for republican prisoners in its wider approach of the Troubles as a conflict that was rooted in the ignorant attitude of the people of Northern Ireland. The conflict was approached as ‘the Irish mess’ that was centred around disputes between Northern Ireland’s Protestant and Catholic communities and since a few years was ‘was short of civil war’.<sup>345</sup>

In this respect, the IRA was approached as a terrorist organisation that with its violence had instigated the conflict and now upheld the realisation of rapprochement as, through its violent tactics, it made the Protestant community forswearing the option of a united Ireland as feared to be dominated and persecuted.<sup>346</sup> Deriving from this point of view, not only the IRA’s tactics but also its cause was framed as being senseless and immature:

The Irish are accustomed to blaming their inability to live alongside each other and to govern themselves decently upon English oppression. But sooner or later they will have to learn to live without the English. And with themselves. The Irish like to make out that they are an English problem. But Ulster is an Irish problem. The English presence (...) cannot possibly be permanent and the Irish- all of them – will start growing into political maturity once they recognise this. (...) There must be a limit to the time and resources which the English will be prepared to devote to a problem, which is not theirs.<sup>347</sup>

In the reports on the struggle, the *Daily Express* made no secret of the fact that it was on hand of the British government.<sup>348</sup> Thatcher, who was often referred to as ‘Maggie’, was portrayed as a noble, strong and determined woman who was prepared to help Northern Ireland to come out of the crisis.<sup>349</sup> This was also portrayed in illustrative cartoons, such as a drawing depicting Thatcher as a superwoman (Figure 7).

<sup>343</sup> *The Times* (June 13, 1981), 1., quoted in: Mulcahy, ‘Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy’, 456.

<sup>344</sup> *The Times* (May 5, 1981), 1., quoted in: Mulcahy, ‘Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy’, 460.

<sup>345</sup> George Gale, ‘How can we avoid another Irish explosion?’, *Daily Express* (April 21, 1981), 8.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibidem.*, 8.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibidem.*, 8.

<sup>348</sup> ‘JAIL PROVES END PROTEST’, *Daily Express* (January 12, 1981), 7.

<sup>349</sup> George Gale, ‘How can we avoid another Irish explosion?’, *Daily Express* (April 21, 1981), 8.



Figure 7: 'In the life of... Power woman', *The Daily Express* (March 3, 1981), 19.

In its coverage of the debate on SCS for the republican prisoners, the newspaper repeatedly reassured that the government had confirmed that no political status would be given to the prisoners:

Despite the threat of a new jail hunger strike' and that 'the Government [would] not surrender control of what goes on in the prisons to a particular group of prisoners. (...) It will not recognise that murder and violence are less culpable because they are claimed to be committed for political motives.<sup>350</sup>

The *Daily Express* only marginally reported the IRA's (plans of a) hunger strike campaign. If it did so, it referred to the campaign as 'the hunger strikers' propaganda coup' and focused its portrayal of the potential strikers on the fact that they were imprisoned because they had broken the law.<sup>351</sup> In April, however, the number of reports on the case of Sands increased rapidly. The situation of an IRA-member being elected while on hunger strike was reported through a language of absurdity and disdain. The *Daily Express* portrayed Sands as criminal by persistently describing him as 'gunman' and 'the IRA terrorist'.<sup>352</sup>

In its reader's opinion, the *Daily Express*' siding with the government was underlined. The hunger strikers were criminals who falsely attempted to justify terrorist action. Hereby, their suffering was nothing more than an act of propaganda. As was illustratively argued in a letter to the editor that was published on April 21:

The hunger strike by Robert Sands in the Maze Prison is a dreadful business (...) But he and his fellow hunger strikers – whose strike is not so advanced – have done this entirely of their own volition. Their demands, which involve the right of convicted IRA terrorists to wear their own clothes and to refuse prison work, are demands which no British government can possibly meet.<sup>353</sup>

<sup>350</sup> John Ley, 'We'll stand firm over IRA hunger strikers says Atkins', *The Daily Express* (February 6, 1981), 2.

<sup>351</sup> 'H-block trouble flares', *Daily Express* (January 29, 1981), 19.

<sup>352</sup> George Gale, 'How can we avoid another Irish explosion?', *Daily Express* (April 21, 1981), 8.

<sup>353</sup> 'No deals on Ulster', *Daily Express* (April 21, 1981), 8.

The anti-Thatcher protests that occurred in response to his strike were seen as an indication of how the IRA violently fuelled Northern Ireland's segregation. As was for example reported about a mass protest during Belfast's commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising:

That dire election proved that the Catholic and Protestant communities are as far apart as ever. The parades and the speeches at Easter were of men preparing and ready for civil war. (...) What is to be done, other than sitting tight and crossing fingers? (...) Efforts to find a formula for sharing power between the majority and the minority communities have come to nothing.<sup>354</sup>

The election of Sands was reported as an evil form of propaganda that the government could not have prevented. It was reported that the IRA had abused Thatcher's government's fair intentions to democratise Britain's political systems, and it was repeatedly underlined that Sands was a criminal who was 'serving 14 years for possessing firearms' and that Sands could therefore 'expect no reprieve from Mrs Thatcher'.<sup>355</sup> On the one hand, in its reports on the impact of Sands' election, the newspaper adopted a reassuring language as it emphasised that Sands was expected to die soon and that the British government had announced to act firmly if his death would be followed by protests.<sup>356</sup> Indirectly, however, a nervous tone appeared in several articles that merged reports of the course of Sands' hunger strike with accounts of IRA bomb attacks and announced mass protest.<sup>357</sup>

When it was evident that Sands would die in consequence of his strike, the *Daily Express* gave account of the martyrological status that the IRA was expected to grant him with. The newspaper, however, firmly renounced the claim by approaching it as propagandistically designed by the IRA: 'IRA chiefs desperately needing a martyr have ordered hunger – striker Bobby Sands to die, Ulster security sources reveal.'<sup>358</sup> Also in its reader's opinion, the move of the IRA to let Sands starve himself to death was narrated through a language of cynicism and indignation:

Britain lives this weekend in the shadow of one man's death. It is a death that will serve no noble purpose. (...) His suicide and all the murders that follow after will be used to fuel yet more hate and more killings in the vicious circle of violence that is Northern Ireland. (...) Sands can never be a martyr for an honourable cause; only the fall-guy for an evil fanaticism. Sands will find no victory in the grave. (...) Freedom and democracy will long outlive Sands.<sup>359</sup>

On June 5, the *Daily Express* announced Sands' passing as 'the propaganda of death'. In reviewing the events of months leading up to his death, the newspaper reported how the IRA had sneakily mapped out every detail of the road leading up to his fatal starvation as means to make him their martyr:

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<sup>354</sup> George Gale, 'How can we avoid another Irish explosion?', *Daily Express* (April 21, 1981), 8.

<sup>355</sup> 'SANDS CASE DILEMMA FOR MPS', *Daily Express* (April 13, 1981), 10.; 'UNMOVED', *Daily Express* (April 22, 1981), 1.

<sup>356</sup> For example: 'UNMOVED', *Daily Express* (April 22, 1981), 1.; 'Sands plea to the pope', *Daily Express* (April 23, 1981), 2.; 'Fury as IRA terror girl goes free', *Daily Express* (April 23, 1981), 2.; 'THE SAVAGE SLING: The terrible toy of Ulster', *Daily Express* (April 23, 1981), 20.; 'Maggie lets Euro team see Sands', *Daily Express* (April 25, 1981) 2.

<sup>357</sup> For example: 'YOU DAMNED COWARDS: Tory MP hits out after letter bomb from IRA', *Daily Express* (April 27), 1.; 'Sands: IRA siege terror plot exposed', *Daily Express* (May 1, 1981), 1.

<sup>358</sup> John Ley and Michael O'Flaherty, 'IRA chiefs have told Sands to die', *Daily Express* (May 5, 1981), 1.

<sup>359</sup> 'Shadow that will pass', *Daily Express* (May 2, 1981), 2.

Ever since [the IRA] was founded it has lived on death, exploited death, exulted in death. (...) The fact that Sands starved himself to death on the orders of his masters (...) only emphasises the fact that he has been killed by the IRA. (...) This is the stuff of propaganda. You look for a potential martyr who yearns for sacrifice (...) and then you give him a “cause” with a humanitarian gloss.<sup>360</sup>

The IRA’s martyrological claim was directly repudiated by the *Daily Express*. In an article ‘The IRA has its martyr: playground-battleground’ it was reported how Sands’ death had sparked several riots in Belfast. An elaborative description was given of how groups of youngsters had left a trail of destruction throughout Belfast. ‘This was how they celebrated their martyr’, the newspaper concludingly stated.<sup>361</sup>

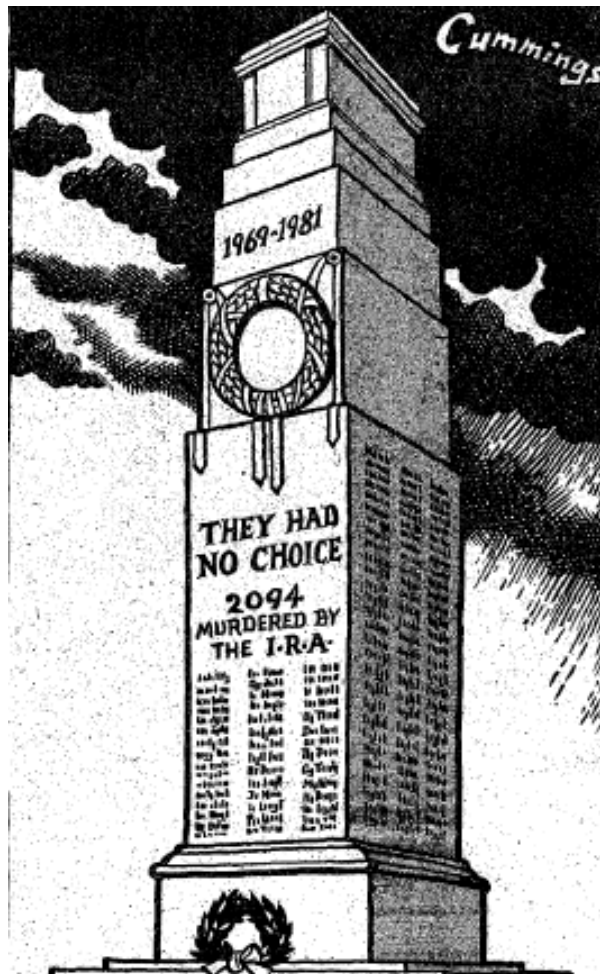


Figure 8: ‘Propaganda of death’, *Daily Express* (May 6, 1981), 8

In a full-page readers opinion on the topic, several letters to the editor interpreted Sands’ fatal hunger strike as a suicide that under no circumstances was worth any positive status let alone the one of martyrdom.<sup>362</sup> As also illustrated in a corresponding drawing (Figure 8), the main argument in this respect was that Sands, unlike the 2093 other victims the IRA had made

<sup>360</sup> ‘Propaganda of death’, *Daily Express* (May 6, 1981), 8.

<sup>361</sup> ‘The IRA has its martyr: Playground-battleground’, *Daily Express* (May 6, 1981), 20.

<sup>362</sup> ‘The hatred’, *Daily Express* (May 6, 1981), 8.; ‘The terror’, *Daily Express* (May 6, 1981), 8.; ‘The restraint’, *Daily Express* (May 6, 1981), 8.; ‘The choice’, *Daily Express* (May 6, 1981), 8.

during the Troubles, had had a choice. To the IRA's 'tyranny of terror', as one of the letters argued, 'organised civilized government, with its compromises and tolerance, is unacceptable.' In a comparison with the martyrdom granted to Horst Wessel by Joseph Goebbels during the Second World War, another letter stated, that movements preaching violence to this extent could never make a righteous claim to martyrdom:

No doubt the IRA's Goebbels is planning a similar show for the unfortunate Sands. And any number of people will be fooled, seeing in Sands a victim of the British oppression. (...) It is Britain's job to defend those who have no choice from those who choose to kill. We will go on doing that job. We have many faults. Cowardice is not among them.<sup>363</sup>

During months following Sands' death, the *Daily Express*' coverage of the hunger strikes rapidly decreased. Although the deaths of the other hunger strikers were reported through a language of disdain that was similar to the style in which the newspaper was written about the death of Sands, the articles approached the hunger strikes as a campaign that was running down.<sup>364</sup> As Thatcher had not given in on the strikers' demand, she and her government were seen as winners of the dispute.<sup>365</sup>

### 3.5 Discussion

When looking into *An Phoblacht* issues 1981, two intertwined narration structures dominate the language through which the hunger strikes were reported: a dramatic language of suffering at the hands of the intruder and a combative language of inescapable militancy. Through this type of language, the newspaper's reports quickly built up to the suggestive parallel between the suffering of Sands and the Passion of Jesus Christ. By narrating Bobby Sands' devotion to the Irish cause through an attitude of ultimate determination, *An Phoblacht* metaphorically embedded his strike at the foundations of the righteousness of the militant republicans' undermining of the British power during the early 1980s. The strike of the elected Sands, it argued, had unmasked the unjust cruelty of the British and had thereby directly served the wider republican cause.

Like had been the case for *Votes for Women*'s narration of Dunlop's strike, his strike was framed as act that had directly damaged the credibility of the British government as it exposed the injustice on which it founded its power in Northern Ireland. At the core of this narration was how Sands as representative of the Irish people had decided to take fate in his own hands and thereby had immediately gained (a taste of) victory. Through his resistance against British evilness, the undeserved suffering of the Irish people was not only fought but also (partly) conquered.

Through these dynamics, the strike and death of Sands were presented as a watershed moment in a history that would eventually prove that not only the lasts shall be the firsts, but also

<sup>363</sup>The restraint, *Daily Express* (May 6, 1981), 8.

<sup>364</sup>For example: 'Hunger strikers No 2 dies', *Daily Express* (May 13, 1981), 1.; 'Riddle of hunger striker's request for food', *Daily Express* (May 19, 1981), 2.; 'Stalemate sinks hopes of hunger strike peace', *Daily Express* (July 20, 1981), 2.; 'Hunger strikers No 8 dies', *Daily Express* (August 3, 1981), 2.; 'Twin blow hits IRA death fast', *Daily Express* (September 7, 1981), 7.

<sup>365</sup>For example: 'Britain's boom is on the way: despite council losses, Maggie looks on bright side', *Daily Express* (May 9, 1981), 2.; 'Lone hero outguns IRA: No surrender says Maggie', *Daily Express* (May 29, 1981), 1.; 'The circle of death that can be ended now', *Daily Express* (August 5, 1981), 8.

that the firsts shall be the lasts. Through this reasoning, *An Phoblacht's* narration of Sands' hunger strike, and the wider framing resulting from it, remind of the Weberian argumentation on how religious ethical contents carry the ability to generate certain types of action (Chapter 1). The discursive practice of martyrdom provided the militant republicans with a clear meta-narrative through which the ideology on which their cause and strategy rested was confirmed. The language provided by this discourse instrumentally supported their unmasking of the unjust power structures the British claim on the Irish island was founded on.

Internally (within the Irish republican community), the newspaper's anticipation on the discourse of Christian martyrdom was a powerful one. By narrating Sands' act through a portrayal of him being both a devoted republican politician but simultaneously a mischievous and protectionist brother, he was approached as a noble representative of the Irish people. Through the suffering he had proudly endured at the hands of the British, he had paid his community the ultimate service: instead of giving up he literally propagated the Irish identity up until his last breath, an endurance that *An Phoblacht* eagerly compared to biblical martyrs by portraying him as a saint.

Sands' external martyrdom, however, was problematic. As the reports by mainstream British newspapers *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Express* concerning the IRA's 1981 hunger strike campaign show, within British society the movement's internal martyrological glorification of Sands and his comrades was received with great criticism. None of the investigated newspapers agreed with this martyrological categorisation. By explaining the entire hunger strike campaign as propagation of republican violence, they approached the martyrological claim made by the IRA as illegitimate radicalism. Even *The Guardian's*, which was also quite critical on Thatcher's stance, portrayed Sands as the plaything of the IRA, and approached the impact of his death as a consciously organised violent action. As well for *The Times* sympathy for his self-sought martyrdom was out of question. In its reports, the newspaper underlined how the IRA had consciously used Sands as pawn in its violent game and therefore there was no way that his suffering reflected an illegitimacy on the British side. On the contrary, it only confirmed how the IRA was blocking the way to rapprochement and peace. The *Daily Express* was most severe in its rejection of Sands' martyrdom. The newspaper not only renounced the IRA's martyrological claim-making but even turned around the reasoning of *An Phoblacht* by arguing that it was not Sands but Thatcher who had nobly fought for a righteous cause. The Troubles, as the *Daily Express* argued, were a Northern Irish and not a British problem. The fact that Thatcher nevertheless attempted to steer the issue in the right direction did only confirm that she was a good politician who embodied a righteous and just political system.



## 4 Conclusion

In 1909 and again in 1981 the British government was actively challenged through deeds of passive suffering. By going on hunger strike, imprisoned members of respectively the Women's Social and Political Union and the Irish Republican Army persistently protested the government's refusal to grant political status to those convicted for law violations related to the causes of militant women suffrage and Irish republicanism. Although 72 years apart from each other, in both cases a notorious language was employed to articulate the meaning of the suffering that the hunger strikers consciously endured in the name of their movements' wider struggles: the one of Christian martyrdom. But how did the discourse of Christian martyrdom function in the context of the political issues at stake? Was it as stated the Sermon of the Mount that 'blessed are those who hunger for justice righteousness, so they will be fulfilled?'<sup>366</sup>

### 4.1 Christian martyrdom as discursive practice

When analysing Christian martyrdom through the lens of the theories of historian Callum G. Brown and sociologist Max Weber, who explain Christianity as a discursive practice that as a rich cultural reservoir can generate and steer certain types of human action, it becomes clear that the concept holds much more than only its biblical or institutional connotation. When considering the history of Christian martyrdom, it is shown that its applicability is not limited in time or place nor to the communities of actively professing Christians. Anticipating on antiquity's *martus*, in which the juridical conception of a witness was merged with the literary theme of noble death, for the early Christians staying true to the Christian God even when this led to persecution, torture or death, became a noble and victorious deed. Being an inferior community in the Roman Empire, passively accepting the suffering that they were confronted with because of the faith they bear witness to, became the early Christians' most active weapon: accepting this fate rather than betraying their conviction, was the ultimate evidence of one's loyalty to Him. Paralleling to this interpretation, in the Gospels' Passion, Jesus resigned himself to his fate once he was arrested and thereby consciously chose his dedication to God's justice over the freedom to escape death. Through the brave resolution embedded in this deed, Jesus had not only shown his unfailing fidelity to God but also rendered a noble service to the Christian community by giving an ultimate account of the faith that was at the heart of their identity.

Throughout the course of history, the way in which the early Christians had used martyrdom to provide meaning to their sufferings, proved to be not limited to only those who had witnessed the Christian fate, and transformed into a discursive practice. The metaphors and symbolisms embedded within the Christian meta-narrative of martyrdom, developed into a well-known and powerful discourse through which the experiences of inferior, suppressed and tortured collectives could be narrated as stories of those who had undertaken a noble struggle against an unjust power. From the Marian Martyr's to the Nazi's hanging of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 to even the sacrifices made by the protagonists of today's popular stories of C.S. Lewis, J. J. R. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling: by interpreting a course of events parallel to the meta-narrative of Christian martyrdom, the nature of a situation of suppression

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<sup>366</sup>Matthew 5:6 (King James Bible).

is suggestively steered and framed as a battle between an innocent, righteous witness and an unjust tyrant. When hypothetically considering an interpretation of these stories through the lens of Islamic martyrdom, which narrates the profession of one's faith as an active struggle, it is again underlined that Christian martyrdom carries its own, significant potential to steer people's perception of a situation on which it is applied.

In the context of political conflict, the discourse of Christian martyrdom *can* be of powerful effect. By holding on to one's inviolable belief in the righteous stance, a martyr, like Jesus, accepts no compromise. Hereby, the politician who is (held) responsible for the martyr's suffering is brought in a difficult predicament. As the martyr accepts nothing else than his or her own stance, for the politician, a balanced realisation of the Weberian ethics of responsibility and conviction, a condition to the legitimate execution of the monopoly of violence, is no longer possible. If the politician goes along with the martyr's demands, one's responsibility to maintain socio-political stability is under threat. If the politician accepts a continuation of the martyr's suffering, the accusation of having betrayed the morally right is lurking. Hereby the martyr, by choosing persecution over a betrayal of his or her political stance, thus 'unmasks' the politician and exposes to the world the illegitimacy of his or her claim to power.

## 4.2 The noble sufferings of Marion Wallace Dunlop and Bobby Sands

Applying this thesis' historical-theoretical insights on the cases of WSPU- and IRA hunger strikes, enabled us to further expand our knowledge of how the discourse of Christian martyrdom has the potential to function in the context of a political conflict.

The WSPU's and the IRA's anticipations of the discourse of Christian martyrdom during their 1909 and 1981 hunger strikes did come out of nowhere. Both *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht's* placed a quasi-martyrological connotation at the heart of their articulations of the wider conflict their corresponding movements were entangled in. The WSPU and the IRA were each seen as representative advocates of a collective that was historically suppressed, respectively women and the descendants of the native Irish people. The British government in this respect was interpreted as tyrannical that executed its suppression through a power claim that was unjust because British women/the Irish people were excluded from having an equal share in it. By making such statements in their newspapers, both the WSPU and the IRA profiled themselves as extraordinary protagonists of the suppressed communities. As their members did hold on to their convictions even if they hereby risked persecution, they were portrayed as noble witnesses of the just stance. Like the early Christians, the fact that they hold on to their stance despite the possibility of suffering showed their ultimate loyalty to their (political) stance and thereby made their grievances and pain meaningful.

A notorious difference, however, can be found in the specific languages through which *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht's* articulated their quasi-martyrological narrations of the wider conflicts their movements were entangled in, particularly concerning their legitimisation of the militant action. In *Votes for Women*, the WSPU narrated its quasi-martyrological struggle for women suffrage through a political-moral language. The suffragettes, they argued, had witnessed a political error and morally had no other option than to enforce change. Through this style of reasoning, *Votes for Women's* legitimised the militant strategies employed by the

WSPU by presenting them as manner of defence, used in a ‘war’ that was fought against them. *An Phoblacht*, on the other hand, used a militant-dramatic language to construct the IRA’s quasi-martyrological stance. It interpreted the British political claims on the Irish island as a direct legitimisation for the IRA to take up the arms and start a violent war against the British government. Deriving from these reasonings, each newspaper also explained the long-term effects of the militant tactics differently. While *Votes for Women* explained the WSPU’s militant struggle as a battle that would help to create a better world in which the last would be the first, *An Phoblacht* understood the IRA’s militant force as means to show the enemy that, as long as he would not surrender, the first would be the last.

When Dunlop and Sands went on hunger strike in respectively 1909 and 1981, the quasi-martyrological way in which *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht* already interpreted the suffragettes and Irish republicans’ wider stances provided fruitful soil for a narration reminding of Christian martyrdom. Through their imprisonments, Dunlop and Sands already found themselves in a situation of (relative) passive suppression. Both *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht* thankfully utilised this fact by approaching London’s Holloway Prison and Maze Prison in Belfast as metaphorical windows into the heart of the suppressive and unjust rule of the Asquith- and Thatcher governments. Building on this metaphor, both newspapers explained the passive suffering that came with starvation as active weapons that exposed to the world the government’s unjust and unrighteous stance. Hereby, in their newspapers, the WSPU and the IRA explained the hunger strikes as being much more than only a practical demonstration of militant-political struggles they were entangled in – they were manifestations of battles nobly fought for the good, the right, and in the name of justice.

The way *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht* implemented the discourse of Christian martyrdom in their reports on the hunger strikes, however, differed. Building on the earlier mentioned political-moral and dramatic-militant language styles, the WSPU and the IRA approached the deeper meaning of the suffering of their hunger striking members in a completely different manner. While *Votes for Women* narrated the starvation of Dunlop (and those who followed her on strike) as confirmation for the cause of women suffrage was strong, righteous and just, *An Phoblacht* portrayed Sands as a saint whose suffering legitimised the IRA’s violent propagation of the cause of Irish nationalism. Whereas for the WSPU, the hunger *strike* was hereby interpreted as an instrument through which Dunlop was enabled to unmask the unjust government for its tyrannous stance, for the IRA the hunger *striker* himself became a soldier who was actively fighting the stubborn Thatcher government until his last breath.

When comparatively considering the extent to which *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht* made direct references to Christian martyrdom, the deviate languages through which they each constructed their martyrological narrations of the hunger strikes are underlined. *Votes for Women* did use Christian terms but strongly intermingled them with its wider political argumentation. Although phrases like ‘cloud of witness’, ‘the triumph of the spiritual’ and ‘the trust in the divine power’ appeared in its reports, the newspaper employed such references only as part of its more dominant language, which focused on the justice and righteousness of the struggle

for inclusive suffrage.<sup>367</sup> *An Phoblacht* was much more direct in this respect; both textually and imaginatively it approached Sands as a divine saint, up to the point where it directly compared him with Jesus. Hereby, Sands' righteousness was approached as beyond discussion, a casualness through which, at some points, the newspaper overstrained its political argumentations.

### 4.3 The martyr on trial: the importance of the public's sympathy

Although Christian martyrdom is a powerful discursive practice that arose in the context of many significant political conflicts, it is the public's sympathy through which the final judgement is passed. In most of history's well-accepted martyrdoms, the martyr received the status after the suffering that he or she nobly endured but not willingly caused or sought. The self-sought starvation that comes with political hunger strikes thus does not guarantee a severe disturbance of the political system. As explained through the case of the fasting of Mahatma Gandhi in 1943, first, his self-sought suffering evoked a public resistance as people interpreted it as an unwillingness to seek for rapprochement. Nevertheless, as the nowadays cult status of Gandhi shows, the public's willingness to grant a hunger striker with the martyr's crown can change if, at some point, a widespread sympathy for the strikers' cause arises. As it is the public that grants the martyrs' crown, it is their sympathy that must be won to transform a passive suffering into an active weapon that can unmask the ruler's illegitimate power claims.

Through their martyrological narrations of the hunger strikes, *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht* attempted to expose an error in the government's claim to power, a dynamic that reminds of the Weberian tension between the ethics of conviction and responsibility. Internally, the desired effect was probably reached. Although this thesis did not measure the extent to which WSPU- and IRA-members agreed with the martyrological framing of respectively Dunlop and Sands, the letters and interviews published in *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht* concerning the hunger strikes of Dunlop and Sands suggestively imply that within the WSPU and the IRA, their martyrological stances were widely accepted. Their passive sufferings were approached as very meaningful in the movement's wider struggle as they had shown to the world the injustice through which the British government executed its power. By not surrendering to this injustice, the newspapers both argued, the hunger strikers had given ultimate account of the righteous stance and had '[left] the results with the Lord'.<sup>368</sup>

Nevertheless, as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and the *Daily Express* revealed, within the British society the way the WSPU and the IRA attempted to unmask the British government was received externally with great suspicion. Although both the WSPU and the IRA succeeded in causing societal debates, in both cases, people were annoyed by the dramatized way in which the hunger strikers had inflicted their own starvation but nevertheless argued that their fate was a political responsibility.

Throughout 1909, the martyrological claims made by the WSPU were received with mixed feelings. *The Guardian* approached the WSPU's construction of its argument for inclusive suffrage relatively positive. Although the newspaper never directly judged the movement's

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<sup>367</sup>Christabel Pankhurst, 'The National Women's Social & Political Union: Coercion Defeated', *Votes for Women* (July 23, 1909), 976.; 'What the Foreign Delegates saw', *Votes for Women* (May 7, 1909), 628.; 'Great London Meetings', *Votes for Women* (July 16, 1909), 949.

<sup>368</sup>Weber, 'Politics of Vocation', 25.

martyrological claims, in its reports on the hunger strikes it did subtly choose the side of the hunger strikers over the one of the government. *The Times* uttered severe critique on the movement's self-sought starvation and militant tactics. Nevertheless, in its reports on the hunger strikes it did cover the suffragettes' substantive motivations with seriousness. Particularly when forcible feeding was introduced, both *The Guardian* and *The Times* regularly gave floor to the WSPU itself and hereby gave the movement (limited) space to articulate its arguments, including its martyrological interpretation of the issues at stake. The *Daily Express*, however, directly renounced both the WSPU's cause and its martyrological claims. Portraying the women as hysterical extremists, the newspaper mocked them for the same devotion which within the WSPU was seen as noble and just.

Throughout 1981, all the investigated mainstream British newspapers were clear about their stance on the martyrdom of Sands. The way in which the hunger strike campaign was used by the IRA to legitimise its violent tactics was unacceptable. Main argument in this respect was that there was nothing righteous to the IRA's stance. For the investigated newspapers, the movement's tactics were out of proportion and thereby were no part of the political debate on the (il)legitimacy of Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom. Through its severe propagation (and execution) of violence, the IRA was understood to be a terrorist organisation that did not deserve pity or sympathy. Even for *The Guardian*, which was also critical on Thatcher's unyielding attitude, the only right way to portray Sands was as lawbreaker who had become a victim of an unrighteous movement that was fighting for an unjust cause. Both *The Guardian* and *The Times* accused the IRA of having consciously designed the hunger strike campaign and having utilized Sands as a pawn in its violent game. For the *Daily Express*, the hunger strikes had confirmed the noble stance of Thatcher, and not of the IRA or Sands. By offering help in a conflict that was not hers, the newspaper argued, she had done a good deed. The IRA, of which Sands had been a proud member, was held responsible for the situation that Thatcher now attempted to solve. Therefore, approaching Sands as a saint was seen as absurd: a crime was a crime and those who were guilty of a crime deserved nothing more than severe juridical conviction.

Although this thesis focused on way the WSPU's and the IRA's martyrological claims were constructed and received in the heat of the movement, it makes sense to briefly reflect on the today conceptions of both movements' martyrological narratives. While the one remained a controversial affair up until the present day, we can carefully conclude that the other, after all, did receive the martyrs' crown. While this thesis was written during the first half year of 2018, Great Britain widely celebrated the hundredth anniversary of women suffrage. On February 6, press responses from all kinds, including the *Daily Express*, proudly reported how the country's second female Prime Minister, Theresa May, in a speech at Parliamentary Square in London, thanked all women who had ever struggled for equal rights and inclusive franchise. Although not elaborating on the case of Dunlop or the WSPU's militant movements per se, May's statements reflected the generally accepted stance that votes for women is a cause that self-respecting governments do not oppose to. The case of the IRA, however, is a controversial and sensitive affair up until the present day. Although within the Catholic (Northern) Irish community, Sands gained the iconographic cult status of a saint, externally his martyrdom is

still not widely accepted. The IRA is known for being one of the most violent movements of western Europe's post-war era. Also, its goal was never reached. The compromising Good Friday Agreements, which made an end to the Troubles in 1998, were on the hand of the ethics of responsibility. Up until today, there is no united Ireland and, with the upcoming Brexit, the question of the British claim on the Irish island remains a sensitive affair.

#### 4.4 The functioning of Christian martyrdom in a political context

So, how did the discourse of Christian martyrdom function in the context of the political issues at stake during the 1909 and 1981 hunger strikes of the WSPU and the IRA? Neither the WSPU nor the IRA employed Christian martyrdom because of active, religious reasons but because of its powerful discursive functioning. Obviously, we don't know the considerations on which the authors of the investigated newspaper articles based their choices of words. What we do know however, is that through such references to Christian martyrdom, the newspapers' wider martyrological interpretations of the issues at stake were underlined. By narrating and framing the hunger strikes through the discourse of Christian martyrdom, there was no compromise possible. By adopting this narrating structure, both *Votes for Women* and *An Phoblacht's* attempted to highlight how the British government was struggling with the Weberian antithesis between the ethics of conviction and responsibility. Through these deviate martyrological narrations, also the WSPU and the IRA's embeddings of the hunger strikes in their wider their framings of the issues at stake in the political conflicts different. Within *Votes for Women*, the martyrological reading of the 1909 hunger strikes was a stepping stone to confirm and further substantiate the WSPU's stance concerning the general issue over inclusive suffrage. It understood the suffering of Dunlop as prove of the unbalanced and therefore unjust way the British government executed its power. In *An Phoblacht*, on the other hand, the fatal hunger strike of Sands became a legitimatization not for the cause of Irish nationalism per se but for the IRA's usage of violent tactics to propagate it.

Through its insight on the functioning of Christian martyrdom, this thesis can embed its findings in the wider historiographical debates concerning both the WSPU's and the IRA's infusion of political-Christian language.

The constitutional argument given by Mayhall, stating the WSPU was political at its heart and should be historically approached as such, is not false but it is incomplete. The reports in *Votes for Women* confirmed that a constitutional idiom was indeed at the heart of the movements struggle. Even when the newspaper adopted references to Christian martyrdom in its narration of the 1909 hunger strikes, it did so to underline its political message. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the WSPU's quasi-Christian language therefore is insignificant because it might have been common practice in the 1900s to use a Christian language. As shown by this thesis, it played a significant role in the movement's underlining of the importance and meaning of its claims. Also, the reductionist approach through which O'Leary and McGarry explain the place of religion in the Northern Ireland conflict, is too narrow. Although they are probably right in their statement that religion labelled but did not cause the Catholic-Protestant division in Northern Ireland, it is too simple to state that therefore Christianity as a substantive tradition did not have an impact on the conflict's course.

The functionalist stance of deVries and of Betty and Augusteijn, who approach the usage of religious language by respectively the WSPU and the IRA as ‘pseudo-religious’ and ‘secular evangelicalism’, is partly confirmed and partly renounced by this thesis. Indeed, like deVries claims, the WSPU understood the cause of inclusive suffrage as if it were a divine matter. Also, like Augusteijn states, the Irish republicans avowed their nationalist cause with a passion similar to spiritual devotion. Hereby, both political struggles logically lend themselves to be told through a divine narration and a quasi-Christian language. In *Votes for Women’s* and *An Phoblacht’s* articles that are analysed in this thesis, a quasi-Christian language was always used as means to propagate the political stance and not as means to promote a primarily religious belief. Hereby, deVries and Augusteijn are thus right in their statements that the significance of religious/Christian claims does not primarily lie in an individual, theological Christian devotion of the WSPU- and IRA-members, but in how they used Christian language as means to interpret a non-religious cause. Nevertheless, this thesis’ approach of both cases through the theoretical lenses of Brown’s discursivity and Weber’s multicausality, showed the importance of the precise Christian narrations of the martyrdom that both the WSPU and IRA employed. If they would have interpreted the hunger strikes as being Islamic martyrdoms, their stories would probably have been different. There was nothing ‘pseudo’ to their martyrological narration of the passive sufferings of Dunlop and Sands. It was *because* the suffragettes and the Irish republicans knew the contents of the discourse of Christian martyrdom that they understood the hunger strikes to be a very meaningful way to explain the conflict they were entangled in.

This thesis’ findings are an elaboration on the substantive approaches of Nelson and Gullickson and of Bruce, Mitchell, Dingley & Mollica and Sweeney, who all argue that it was respectively the suffragettes’ and the Irish republican’s familiarity with Christianity that made them use an intertwined Christian-political language to construct and express their cause. Nelson based her findings on research to individual accounts of WSPU-members. Although her line of approach thus deviates from this thesis’ investigation of *Votes for Women*, we can confirm that her insight on the significance of the suffragettes’ knowledge of Christian culture and of the bible, also was of affect at the level of the WSPU as a movement. Hereby, this research is a critical elaboration of the findings of Gullickson, who, in the case of the commemoration of suffragette Emily Wilding Davison, concludingly questions whether ‘a new category of martyrdom that blends political goals with religious conviction’ is needed.<sup>369</sup> Although it might be true that in political contexts martyrdom provides fruitful soil to communicate ones devotion to a secular cause, this thesis shows that a strict demarcation of religions- and ‘secular’ martyrdom does not accurately explain the concept’s discursive functioning: it is *because* the line between the two is diffuse (or maybe not even exists) that the discourse of Christian martyrdom has the potential to function as a rich and powerful cultural reservoir through which people can give meaning to a situation of conflict and suppression. Although this thesis does not elaborate on Mitchell’s, Bruce’s, Dingley & Mollica’s and Sweeney’s insight on substantive differences and tensions between Northern Ireland’s Catholic and Protestant traditions, through its insights on Christianity’s discursive functioning, it confirms their argument that religious contents can influence the human action through which the course of a conflict is steered.

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<sup>369</sup> Gullickson, ‘Emily Wildling Davison’, 478.

This research revealed one piece of the complex mechanisms through which the stories of the WSPU and IRA are constructed and represented. Hereby, it provides an insight in the functioning and impact of political violence in which religiously charged language plays a role. Not everyone asking for a blessing because of his or her hunger for justice will be fulfilled. The discourse of Christian martyrdom is powerful but hard to consciously employ. Particularly in the context of a self-imposed suffering, it is difficult to convince people that a passive deed is a noble act that actively elevates a political stance to a divine exposure of the righteousness of the world. Nevertheless, once successfully employed, martyrdom cuts off the road to consultation and compromise, and thereby to the ethics of responsibility. Crucial in this respect is the sympathy of the public. The conditions under which the martyrs' crown is granted are complex and depend on many factors. This thesis was no attempt to have a final say in these dynamics. It did show however that the line between religious and political language is fluid (as far as it exists at all). For collectives that wrestle with fundamental questions and grievances, particularly the one of being excluded from socio-political control, choosing the vocabulary of Christian martyrdom can form a powerful means to approach these issues. Knowing both the explicit and implicit messages of what the martyr attempts to communicate might therefore enlarge our comprehension of what drives him or her and thereby enlarge our understanding of the grievances and motives of the community the martyr claims to represent. Hereby, it might be of use in finding a response for the mess created by people who ought it necessary to witness their faith by seeking for a noble death.



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