

Political Prisoners and the Irish Language: A North-South Comparison¹

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Abstract:

The Irish language is witnessing a revival in some parts of Ulster. This revival is most visible in Belfast where *An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta* (Gaeltacht Quarter) was founded to promote the Irish language. While Irish was marginalized during the conflict in the North, Belfast, for example, had more *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish-language schools) than any other city in Ireland except Dublin and Cork in 2013. One of the most important aspects for this development was the release of the Irish Republican prisoners following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. In contrast to the North, although considered as the national language in the southern Republic of Ireland, the Irish language is further declining in the South. Thus, while the former Republican prisoners perform a pivotal role in the North, their role in re-vitalising the language in the Republic is marginalized. By comparing the role of the Irish language in Long Kesh/HMP Maze and Portlaoise Prison, I will discuss two aspects for this North-South divergence. These two differences are first the role of former prisoners within their community, and second the colonial/post-colonial framework of the two states.

Keywords: IRA, Irish language, Irish Republicanism, Language Revival, Prisons

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1. Introduction

In 1969, riots between the Unionist majority and the Nationalist minority broke out as a result of the demand for civil rights by the pro-Irish minority. The Unionist establishment greeted these demands with further repression, harassment and discrimination. Following what those who experienced them describe as pogroms, in August 1969 in Belfast, the British army was deployed to the North of Ireland. It was this event that marked the conflict that is commonly known as the “Troubles”. The deployment of the British army only intensified the already tense situation, resulting in a full-scale war in Ireland in the early 1970s². As a consequence, the Unionist government introduced internment without trial in 1971 (McCleery 2012, 411-430; Doherty 2015, 68-75; McCleery 2015). Until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the release of the majority of the political prisoners in the year 2000, between 20,000 and 25,000 people, overwhelmingly male Catholics, went through the internment camps and prisons in the North of Ireland³. While few of these Northern Republicans spoke Irish before their imprisonment, the majority of them left the prisons as fluent Irish speakers.

This paper looks at the Irish language use of the Republican prisoners on both sides of the inner-Irish border. Thus, by comparing the colonial and post-colonial situations in both Irish states, I discovered that the former prisoners have a stronger position in society in the North of Ireland than in the Republic of Ireland. In other words, by using the Irish language as a case study, this paper illustrated the role former political prisoners’ play in their communities in Ireland.

The Irish language is witnessing a revival in some parts of Ulster. This revival is most visible in Belfast where *An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta* (Gaeltacht Quarter) was established to promote the Irish language in 2002. While Irish was marginalized during the conflict in the North, by 2013 Belfast, for example, had more *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish-language schools) than any other city in Ireland except Dublin and Cork. In this contribution, I argue that one of the most important reasons for this development was the release of the Irish Republican prisoners following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in

² For an overview on the outbreak of the troubles see *inter alia*: Bell 1997 [1989], 1993; Hennessey 2005, 2007; Prince 2012; Prince, Warner 2013, 271-296.

³ The record of how many people experienced time in internment camps and prisons as a result of the conflict in the North of Ireland and Republican activities in the Republic of Ireland since 1969 is not precise. This might be a surprising fact for some of the readers. Now, according to various surveys, the number of political internees and prisoners in the North of Ireland since 1969 range from 20.000 to 30.000; comprehensive numbers for political imprisonment in the Republic of Ireland since 1970 do not exist; see *inter alia*: OFMDFM 2007.

1998. However, although discussing the Irish-language revival in the North of Ireland, this is not the main focus of this article. Instead, I will firstly introduce the roles and mechanisms which Irish Republicans adopted during imprisonment in order to learn the Irish language; this will be followed by a discussion on the role that former Republican prisoners play in the language movement in the late 20th Century and early 21st Century. In essence, then this paper compares the Irish language and political imprisonment in the North of Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Rather than outlining the Irish-language revival in the North, my paper examines the learning and using of the Irish language by Republican prisoners. Therefore, I will not discuss what a language revival actually is and why I am speaking about a revival of the Irish language in the North of Ireland with respect to a revitalising of the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland; since this has already been done (MacGiollaChríost 2012; MacIonnraichtaigh 2013; Couzens, Eira 2014, 313-334). Nonetheless, it is useful to outline the growth of the Irish language in the North of Ireland, in particular, the city of Belfast. The establishment of *An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta* as one of Belfast four quarters has already been mentioned; the other three quarters are the Cathedral Quarter, the Queen's Quarter, and the Titanic Quarter. Another example is the increase in *Bunscoileanna* (primary schools) in and around Belfast in recent years. The first Irish-medium primary school in the North of Ireland, *Scoil Ghaelige Bhéal Feirste*, later *Bunscoil Phobal Feirste*, was established in 1971 in a climate that was hostile towards the Irish language. Nonetheless, in 2010 and 2011, with twelve primary schools, Belfast and the County Antrim had the third-highest number of *Bunscoileanna* outside Gaeltacht areas in Ireland after County Dublin with 32 *Bunscoileanna*, and County Cork with 21. If we compare the number of pupils attending these primary schools, Belfast and County Antrim still ranked number seven of all 32 Counties. Although County Antrim runs only one Irish-language post-primary school, its 553 school students in this school make County Antrim number four in the ranking of the number of school students in the post-primary Irish-language schools (*Iar-bhunscoileanna*); if measured by the number of teachers in these *Iar-bhunscoileanna*, Belfast and County Antrim is even number three. To conclude, although the Irish language has developed in a hostile environment in the North of Ireland since the early 1970s, its spreading in recent years justifies using the term "language revival", even on a small scale⁴. Hence, the aim of the paper is to contrast the use of the Irish language by the prisoners and ex-prisoners in the North with those in the

⁴ All data taken from: De Brún 2006, <http://www.gaelscoileanna.ie/assets/Staitistic%C3%AD-2010-2011_Gaeilge.pdf> (07/2015); for an introduction to the Irish language in the North of Ireland see: O'Reilly 1999; for a history of the Irish language see: Doyle 2015.

southern Republic. By using this comparative approach I will provide a different focus on the role of the former prisoners in the Irish language movement in particular and the role of former political prisoners in society in general.

2. Research Question & Methodology

2.1 Historical Significance

Irish Republican ex-prisoners now hold prominent positions within both their political movements and their community. While John F. Morrison writes that Republican internees and prisoners held a “significant role” in the larger transformation of Republican organisations (2014, 75-86), I go further and argue that these former prisoners additionally perform this role within their wider community. On the basis of one case study, the Irish language and Republican prisoners, this article problematizes our notion of interaction between political prisoners and their communities outside of prison walls; in other words, I argue that it is crucial for the understanding of political prisoners to rethink them as agents of political and cultural changes in societies. In essence, I am of the opinion that, through the self-organised education process in the internment camps and prison, the political prisoners were able to influence political and cultural phenomena outside the internment camps and prisons. I will argue that education, reading, and debates within the internment camps and prisons were one of the driving forces behind the political self-awareness, politicization and de-radicalization process of the Republican Movement in Ireland.

While these considerations provide the broader research questions of the research project, this paper is a case study on the learning of the Irish language in the prisons. Thus, this paper outlines the impact that former political prisoners have in developing the Irish language in the North of Ireland. Indeed, I would argue that the Republican ex-prisoners are the driving force behind the Irish-language Revival in the North of Ireland. In other words, this case study on Republican imprisonment and the Irish language analyses one particular aspect of the education system within the prisons. Additionally, it shows how this Irish-language activism of the former Republican prisoners influenced the cultural and political developments within their Northern Irish nationalist communities. In contrast, the Republican ex-prisoners do not have similar pivotal positions of influence within their communities in the southern Republic of Ireland. Hence, the former prisoners, although mostly fluent Irish speakers, perform a minor role within the language movement in this southern part of the island. Thus, I will compare the experiences of the prisoners in the Northern and Southern prisons as well as the colonial and post-colonial situations in both states in order to illustrate the role of prisoners as agents in their communities.

2.2 *Theoretical Framework*

Language was one form of resistance by political prisoners in Ireland. The learning and speaking of the Irish language by the Republican prisoners served two forms of resistance: First, it was a form of resistance developed as a direct result of the colonial, and respectively post-colonial, framework of Ireland to strengthen the cultural and national identity (McMahon 2012, 80). MacLonnraichtaigh calls this an “act of cultural de-colonization” (2013, 78). Second, it was a communication tool that made the English warders in the Northern Irish prisons unable to understand what the prisoners are saying.

Fran Buntman has described various categories of resistance when analysing political prisoners in South Africa. Among these categories are: resistance as survival; resistance as dignity and self-consciousness; and resistance as open challenge (2003); if I analyse the two previously outlined functions of the Irish language in the prisons according to Buntman’s categories, then the use of the language as a way to strengthen cultural and national identity is a form of “resistance as dignity and self-consciousness”. Furthermore, the second function, language used as a “secret” communication tool, is a form of “resistance as the appropriation of power” (Buntman 2003, 254).

The use of the Irish language by political prisoners is a form of “strategic resistance” (*ibidem*, 128). According to Buntman, strategic resistance aims at long-term development of the community of prisoners in organisational and educational terms that could “impact upon the political terrain both within and beyond the prison” (*ibidem*). This notion of using the Irish language as strategic resistance stands in contrast to Kieran McEvoy’s argument that the learning of the Irish language is a “hidden or less overt form of resistance” (2001, 442), since MacLonnraichtaigh, instead, sees it as a “public” form of protest (2013, 56). In other words, the learning and speaking of the Irish language by the Republican prisoners in Long Kesh/HMP Maze and Portlaoise Prison is a form of strategic and cultural resistance, aiming at the long-term development of their community. McMahon writes that “the simple act of speaking the indigenous language in an ‘unauthorised context’ is already a strike against the Other” (2012, 82). Nonetheless, this strategy only proved successful in the colonial context of the North, rather than the post-colonial context of the Republic of Ireland, as will be seen below. While the results of the learning and using of Irish are different, the speaking of the Irish language was, in both prisons, a form of resistance by Republican prisoners.

2.3 *Sources & State of the Art*

While some publications have already analysed the learning of Irish, the reading habits of the prisoners, and their literary output from the Long Kesh internment camp resp. HMP Maze, there is a wide lack of academic

research on political imprisonment in Portlaoise Prison (McKeown 1996, 43-49; 2001; Whalen 2006, 123-139; MacGiollaChríost 2007, 317-336; Whalen 2007; McKeown 2009, 74-283; MacGiollaChríost 2012; MacLonnraichtaigh 2013). Two recently published works explore the learning and using of the Irish language by Republicans during internment and imprisonment. These are the books by Diarmait MacGiollaChríost on the *Jailtacht* (2012) and by Feargal MacLonnraichtaigh on *Language, Resistance and Revival* (2013). Diarmait MacGiollaChríost offers a linguistic analysis of the particular version of Irish that has been learned and developed by the internees and prisoners, an Irish-language dialect he calls “Jailtacht”, whereas Feargal MacLonnraichtaigh uses post-colonial approaches to research the use of the Irish language by the Republican prisoners both inside the prison and following their release. Although both analyses provide an essential understanding of the Irish language in 21st century Ireland and its role in the modern Provisional Republican Movement, they are intentionally limited to the developments within the Northern prisons and the Six Counties. Melanie McMahan similarly limited her analyses to the North in her PhD-Thesis, *Irish as Symptom: Language, Ideology and Praxis in the Post/Colony* (2012). McMahan analyses first the meaning of the language during the dirty protests in the H-Blocks; in a second step she argues that the building of a prisoner’s community was enacted by the speaking of Irish. While all these three studies provide important contributions to the field, this paper goes beyond MacGiollaChríost’s, MacLonnraichtaigh’s, and McMahan’s approach by comparing their findings on the North of Ireland with additional finding on the southern Republic. Thus, this paper will provide additional material on the situation in the Southern prisons and the Republic of Ireland, as well as providing a comparative analysis on the situation in these two states.

The main data for the article is provided by interviews and archival research⁵. I will use this to present an in-depth case study with former political prisoners. To collect the data, qualitative expert interviews were conducted with former political prisoners from the Provisional IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). The second group of sources used are archival sources such as documents from the prison authorities, the governments in Dublin and Belfast, as well as documents and articles written by the prisoners themselves while imprisoned⁶.

⁵ For a detailed description of my data collection process see: Reinisch 2012.

⁶ The main archives and libraries to be used in Belfast are the Northern Ireland Political Collection of the Linen Hall Library, the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), the National Library of Ireland (NLI) and the National Archives of Ireland in Dublin. Additionally, material made available by online databases like the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) and recently collected databases with interviews of participants of the conflict in Ireland, such as the Prison Memory Archive, has been consulted.

3. *Imprisonment in Ireland*

MacLonnraichtaigh argues that the “cultural re-conquest”, as mentioned by Irish socialist Republican James Connolly, was an integral part of the ideology of the resistance strategy by Republicans opposed to the Two-States-Strategy (2013, 71-78)⁷. Since the 19th century, the Republican Movement used education during imprisonment for their political strategy. Following the 1916 Rising, political prisoners held lengthy political debates and organised classes in the internment camp Frongoch, giving it the name “University of Revolution” (O’Mahoney 1987). Similarly, the Republican prisoners in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s used their time in Irish and British prisons to develop political strategies, rethinking the Republican programme and ideology, as well as sharpening their historical and cultural understanding of Ireland⁸. MacLonnraichtaigh, for example, writes that “Belfast’s Crumlin Road prison became a centre for language activity and cultural revivalism as part of their resistance during incarnation” (2013, 86-87). In the following part, I will first discuss the use of the Irish language by the Republican prisoners in the North; this will be followed by a discussion of the use of the language in the southern Portlaoise prison.

3.1 *Republican Prisoners & Irish in the North of Ireland*

The internment camp Long Kesh and later the prison HMP Maze, infamous for its H-shaped Blocks, was the main prison of the North of Ireland⁹. Among the first classes organised by the prisoners in Long Kesh were Irish-language courses (McCarron 2013, 100). In Long Kesh, one of the internees remembers that “nine or ten people out of 80 or 90 people” housed in one hut took these Irish classes. The classes were organised once or twice a week and the language was initially taught through Gaelic songs since Irish books were forbidden by the prison authorities. Thus, Irish-language development varied from cage, an area comprising various huts, according to the knowledge of Irish of individual internees. Later, the prisoners established two Gaeltacht huts. Gaeltacht is a term used in English to mean an Irish-speaking district. One of these Irish-speaking districts was Cage 10, the other one was Cage

⁷ See also: Connolly 1910; Metscher 2002; Reinisch 2012; MacLonnraichtaigh 2013, 71-78.

⁸ For an overview of Republican imprisonment before 1970, see *inter alia*: McGuffin 1973; O’Mahony 1987; MacEoin 1997; Kleinrichert 2001; McConville 2003, 2014 [2003]; Ebenezer 2006; Bryson 2007; Maguire 2008; Brennan-Whitmore 2013; O’Duibhir 2013; Murphy 2014.

⁹ For a history of Long Kesh/HMP Maze see *inter alia*: Ryder 2000; McKeown 2001; McAtackney 2014.

11, according to MacIonnrachtaigh (2013, 117, 124), whereas MacGiollaChrist mentions Cage 11 and 17 as being the Gaeltacht huts (2012, 16-18); one prisoner who was in Cage 10 at the time remembers that:

Your teacher nominated you, but there was always a waiting list and only a half of a hut was used which left only around 20 beds. [...] [T]hey were very strict on the language in the Gaeltacht in Cage 10. [...] [Y]ou were thrown out if you spoke in English and there would be a list of guys waiting to take your place. (MacIonnrachtaigh 2013, 124)

The situation in the Gaeltacht hut in Cage 11 was more relaxed. Another prisoner remembers that there:

It was about helping each other and learning together [...]; it moved away from the heavy compulsory, anti-English language mentality. [...] [O]ur motto in the Gaeltacht was inclusive and simple: Gaeilgemásféidir, béarlamásgá. (Irish if possible, English when necessary). (*Ibidem*, 122)

This situation proved to be highly successful and one prisoner says that:

Towards the end of my time in prison, our Gaeltacht had developed amazingly. [...] I mean, between 1977 and 1979 I really never spoke English at all except when I had to, we even began doing all our political and theoretical discussions in Irish. (*Ibidem*, 123)

Another prisoner says that in 1977, there were “about seven or eight of us from the Cages who had Irish [and] within a year and a half, there were 300 prisoners with fluent Irish” (*ibidem*, 108, 139). This shows us that, the self-organised Irish-language classes held by the Irish-speaking prisoners in Long Kesh proved to be successful, encouraging hundreds of fellow prisoners to use the language.

The situation changed dramatically with the opening of the H-Block prison and the withdrawal of de-facto political status for the political prisoners¹⁰. In response to these new developments, the Republican prisoners embarked first on blanket and dirty protests and later on two hunger strikes¹¹.

¹⁰ For the discussion on ‘political status’, see *inter alia*: Walker 1984, 189-225; Hogan, Walker 1989; O’Ruairc 2010.

¹¹ Those prisoners sentenced before the withdrawal of ‘political status’ maintained their rights and were not transferred to the H-Blocks. Thus, a number of prisoners stayed in the Long Kesh huts until the mid-1980s, continuing their Irish language classes as they did before opening the H-Blocks, while their newly arriving fellow-prisoners were kept in the H-Blocks. The differences of imprisonment in the huts on the one hand and the H-Blocks on the other hand is not subject to this article; for a discussion on this question, see: MacIonnrachtaigh 2013.

Those prisoners on protest lost all their privileges and spent 24 hours' locked up in their cells. As a consequence they had to adapt their programme for learning Irish: a 'shouter' was selected to teach the classes. As this name implies, the shouter, in Irish *scairteoir*, shouted lessons out of the cell door. The Irish classes were called *ranganna Gaelige* and every class started with a shouting of *rang anois* ('class now'). The beginners' classes were on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays between 12 noon and 1pm; the advanced classes were on Tuesday and Thursday from 3pm to 5pm; and the teachers' class was every Sunday from 12 noon to 2pm (MacGíollaChríost 2012). Stripped of all their belongings during the protests, the only four resources available for the prisoners to learn Irish, apart from the lesson given by the shouter, were the Bible, since it was the only book allowed in the cells and it provided some paper on which to write; the cross, used to write on the walls; some toothpaste that was left outside the doors by the prison warders and which was used to write on the walls; and the priest during the Sunday mass (Maclonnrachtaigh 2013, 145). In some blocks there were no good Irish speakers; as a result, the prisoners had to learn Irish from texts without learning the correct pronunciation, so the priest was the only person who could tell the shouter how to pronounce Irish-language words (MacGíollaChríost 2012, 30-31). Moreover, the priest smuggled learning materials in during Sunday mass (Goldenberg 2002, 76; Maclonnrachtaigh 2013, 140-141). In fact, the prisoners had to organise their learning of Irish themselves in a hostage environment, under these circumstances, the Irish language was made a coping strategy during the prison protests. One prisoner remembers that "this [the Irish-language classes, note DR] was totally invaluable in the terrible conditions to lift the spirit of the lads and help build their identity" (*ibidem*, 139). Thus, while the prisoners used Irish as a 'secret' language for communication, "the building of identity was its main function" he explains (*ibidem*). McMahon argues accordingly and writes that "Irish language and excrement combine in the H-Blocks to produce a disordering of the accepted relationship between language and politics" (2012, 74).

The prison protests ended in autumn 1981 and the situation for the Republican prisoners gradually improved in the H-Blocks during the 1980s¹². Following the hunger strikes, the politics of the Republican prisoners towards formal education courses changed; even where the prisoners had boycotted these classes in order not to give the prison regulations any recognition, they changed their position so as to use the 'system strategically'. This means that the prisoners recognised the prison regime in order to use the facilities for their own gains. Accordingly, the Republican leadership in the prison argued

¹² For an overview of Irish Republican prison protests in HMP Maze see *inter alia*: Beresford 1987; Campbell, *et al.* 1998; McKeown 2001; O'Rawe 2005.

that “the education would help our own personal development of the struggle itself” (MacIonnrachtaigh 2013, 151-152). One prisoner tells us that 46 fellow prisoners were on his wing, 90% of them were fluent in Irish, the rest could understand it, and, as he informs “Irish was the means of communication on the wings” (*ibidem*, 151). Nonetheless, the Irish language went into decline once again in the aftermath of the prison protests (*ibidem*) as former prisoner turned academic and writer Laurence McKeown tells:

However this had a major impact on the language, which began to dwindle as the spoken language of the Blocks [...] when people came face-to-face they tended to speak the language they were most comfortable with, which was English. (*Ibidem*)

In general, there were three reasons for the interim decline of Irish as the spoken language on the prison landings. First, as McKeown explains, prisoners started to use English when they met in person. On the one hand, they were more comfortable with English; on the other hand, they could associate with each other following the end of the protests. This association meant that they were not forced to shout from one cell to another in order to discuss political developments. Under these new circumstances, the use of Irish as a secret language became redundant. Second, while the prisoners on blanket protest, the so-called Blanketmen, held their history and language classes by shouting from door to door, no formal classes were organised in the immediate aftermath of the protests. Third, new prisoners who had no prior knowledge of Irish associated with the Blanketmen; consequently, the latter used more English in their conversations. To be sure, this decline of Irish as the spoken language by the prisoners HMP Maze was a short-lived result of the changing circumstances after the prison protests.

The P-IRA staff in the prison tried to counter this decline by setting up a ‘cultural/educational officer’, and the standardisation of Irish-language classes by introducing a curriculum for all blocks. Consequently, in 1983, 86 prisoners did an O level degree and 90% passed with an A grade in the exam (*ibidem*, 152-153). These changes in the politics of the prisoners further improved the Irish language in the H-Blocks, and professional teachers and learning material became available in the mid-1980s. After the Provisional IRA ceasefire in 1994, the prison authorities finally stopped all remaining restrictions regarding Irish-language material in HMP Maze. A Gaeltacht wing was re-established and by the time of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, there were even two Gaeltachtwings. The first Gaeltacht wing was created by 25 Republican prisoners in H6 (C wing) on 29 May 1995 and was relocated to H5 (D wing) in March 1996. The second Gaeltacht wing was established by another 25 prisoners in H8 during the year 1997 (MacGiollaChríost 2012, 40).

While the prisoners continued their Irish classes, the Republican Movement outside the prison likewise started to place more emphasis on the Irish lan-

guage. In 1982, Sinn Féin formed its Cultural Department, *Roinn an Chultúir*, and published the booklet *The Role of the Language in Ireland's Cultural Revival* in 1986. The main tasks of this newly established Cultural Department were to hold Irish-language classes and organise campaigns such as installing bilingual street signs in Nationalist areas in the North of Ireland. In 1984, the Irish-language newspaper *Lá* was established, Sinn Féin founded the political Irish-language magazine *Saoirse*, and ex-prisoners ran an Irish-language primary school in the West Belfast neighbourhood Ballymurphy. A survey from that time shows that the numbers of students in Irish-language schools increased rapidly after the 1981 hunger strikes and that three-quarters of the children in these schools came from Republican families. In 1985, researchers interviewed pupils from sixty Irish classes in Belfast; 86% of them said their motivation to learn Irish was an aspiration to “strengthen my Irish identity”, and 70% said their enthusiasm was ignited by “Bobby Sands and the H-Block protests” (MacIonnrachtaigh 2013, 165).

In essence, the former Republican prisoners in Long Kesh played an essential role in promoting and teaching the language. McCoy writes that the Irish-language movement had undergone “a rapid transformation from counter-culture to officialdom” during the so-called peace process in the late 1980s and 1990s (*ibidem*, 211). However, the Irish language did not just undergo this formation during but also because of the peace process. Former prisoner Jim McCann goes even further and puts the impact factor of the former Republican prisoners within their community much higher than the impact factor of Irish-language activists during that period when he claims that:

This might be a bit arrogant to those people who had previously been working on the language, but I know I did more in ten years than ten of them could have done in all their lives, I know this. I didn't sit in a club somewhere in Belfast waiting for people to come to the door wanting to learn the language. We went out and made Irish-language classes available to people and started them all over Belfast. If it hadn't been for Long Kesh it would not have happened. (*Ibidem*, 200)

While Irish-language activists might disagree with these critical comments on their own work and impact, McCann is correct when he stressed the availability of hundreds to thousands of fluent Irish speakers on the streets of the North of Ireland willing to promote the Irish language following the release of most of the political prisoners.

3.2 Republican Prisoners & Irish in the Republic of Ireland

Portlaoise Prison, originally named Maryborough Prison, is the only high-security prison holding Republican prisoners in the southern Republic of Ireland. Following the outbreak of the “Troubles” in the North, the high-security Portlaoise Prison, Co Laois, turned into a crucial theatre for

the struggle of the Republican Movement. Although situated in the Republic of Ireland, its E-Wing housed hundreds of Republican convicts. However, the literature on political imprisonment in Ireland mainly focuses on developments in internment camps and high-security under British jurisdiction, the North of Ireland¹³.

In Portlaoise Prison, the Republican prisoners enjoyed de-facto political status since the transfer of the prisoners in autumn 1973. This is an important aspect that set the situation in the Republic apart from the situation in the internment camps and prisons under British jurisdiction in the North. However, in 1977 a number of prisoners went on hunger strike demanding a public enquiry into conditions in Portlaoise Prison (Barrett 2005). This hunger strike was only the last one in a series of protests for better conditions in this prison. The Republican prisoners were at that time housed in the E-Wing of Portlaoise Prison; and it was also around that period, the Republican Movement put a higher emphasis on the politicization of their prisoners. The Republican prisoners had always maintained a military structure in the internment camps and prisons, since the vast majority of the prisoners were charged for IRA activity; thus the prisoners were organised in a rigid military structure led by the O/C of each prison landing. Additional, in the late 1970s, the Republican Movement decided to organise the prisoners additional as Cumainn (local branches) of its political wing, Sinn Féin. The formation of this Cumann was an integral part of the politicization and political self-awareness process of the Republican Movement. In August 1973, the first Sinn Féin Cumann was organised in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. During an attempt to politicize the IRA prisoners, this Cumann was later reorganised at a meeting of Republicans in Portlaoise Prison in 1978¹⁴.

A central part of the work of the Cumann was the teaching and promoting of the Irish language in Portlaoise Prison. One prisoner remembers that Irish classes were given by prisoners immediately after the transfer from Mountjoy to Portlaoise Prison¹⁵. The extent of these early classes is vague; another inmate, however, reports that the situation improved following the hunger strikes in 1977 and the prisoners were from then on allowed to organise their own classes and lectures¹⁶. Nonetheless, while inmates taught each other Irish in the early days, it was only in 1979 that a bigger attempt was made to promote the Irish language among the prisoners. This new de-

¹³ For literature on Portlaoise Prison during the 20th century see *inter alia*: Tomlinson 1995, 194-227; McConville 2014; Kilcommins, *et al.* 2004; Rogan 2011; O'Sullivan, O'Donnell 2012.

¹⁴ Author Unknown, Sinn Féin. In Mountjoy + Portlaoise, private possession.

¹⁵ Interview with Dan Hoban, Newport, Co Mayo, 15 April 2015.

¹⁶ Interview with Vivion Hayden, Dublin, Co Dublin, 14 April 2015.

velopment was largely initiated by the arrival of a new prisoner, Cyril McCurtain from Limerick¹⁷. McCurtain was a fluent Irish speaker, a member of Sinn Féin, and immediately joined the Cumann in Portlaoise Prison. In this position, he was elected to the officer board of the *Cumann* and started to form a Gaeltacht area within the prison¹⁸. This Gaeltacht area was situated on the top floor of the landing and everyone there was encouraged to use as much Irish as he could. Prisoners who spoke Irish or those who wanted to learn Irish could ask the prison authorities for transfer to one of these cells¹⁹. While it is known, that this Gaeltacht was set up in 1979 or early 1980 and performed a vital role in the political and social life of the prison in the first half of the 1980s, it is unclear when it ceased to exist. Matt Treacy who was imprisoned in Portlaoise Prison from May 1990 on said that at that time, the Gaeltacht landing had already ceased to exist²⁰.

The prisoners in this Gaeltacht area on the top landing of Portlaoise Prison organised a wide range of activities. Among those were Irish-language classes, the publication of the Irish-language prison newspaper *Maccalla* (Echo), and the organisation of Irish nights²¹. These Irish nights were introduced in 1984 and held twice a year. During these Irish nights, lectures were given in Irish, sometimes prisoners performed plays in Irish, and Irish songs were sung²². These nights were organised by the Gaeltacht Committee which also run the Gaeltacht. The committee consisted of three prisoners and was elected by all prisoners on the Gaeltacht landing. This is one of the differences between the Gaeltacht areas in HMP Maze and Portlaoise Prison. While the Gaeltacht in Portlaoise Prison was run by an elected committee, the Gaeltacht areas in HMP Maze were run by the Educational Officer of the IRA who was appointed by the IRA O/C of the prison. Another difference between Long Kesh/HMP Maze and Portlaoise Prison was the selection of the prisoners for the Gaeltacht areas. As mentioned above, the prisoners selected those on the two Gaeltacht huts in the Long Kesh internment camps themselves; instead the prisoners who wanted to join the Gaeltacht landing in Portlaoise Prison had to ask the prison authorities for transfer to this landing²³. Thus, while the prisoners on the Gaeltacht landing could voice their objection or approval of any prisoner asking for transfer through their OC, the final decision was made by the prison staff.

¹⁷ Author Unknown, Sinn Féin. In Mountjoy + Portlaoise, private possession.

¹⁸ Interview with Seosamh Ó Maileoin, Tyrellspass, Co Westmeath, 16 March 2015.

¹⁹ Interview with Matt Leen, Tralee, Co Kerry, 19 April 2015.

²⁰ Interview with Matt Treacy, Dublin, Co Dublin, 14 April 2015.

²¹ Interview with Seosamh Ó Maileoin, Tyrellspass, Co Westmeath, 16 March 2015.

²² Interview with Seosamh Ó Maileoin, Tyrellspass, Co Westmeath, 30 April 2015.

²³ Interview with Matt Leen, Tralee, Co Kerry, 19 April 2015.

Although the Gaeltacht area ceased to exist during the 1980s, the prisoners continued with the Irish classes following its closing. When John Crawley arrived in Portlaoise Prison in 1984, the Gaeltacht landing still existed. Crawley was original from the United States and had no Irish before imprisonment; nonetheless, he says that he learned Irish “very well in prison”. During his interview, he stressed the importance of the Gaeltacht landing in Portlaoise as a “national thing” because the Irish language is in the eyes of Crawley “a Republican and nationalist element”. He furthermore remembers that he did most of the reading and studying after the lock-up during the night²⁴. Treacy, who was in Portlaoise Prison from 1990 to 1995, tells that the prisoners were unlocked at 8h30 in the morning and the prisoners could decide if they go to the gym, the yard, or do classes such as Irish classes or learning for Open University degrees. He stresses that all prisoners did a lot of reading and writing. This was possible because every prisoner was allowed to order two or three books through the prison library per week²⁵. There were no restrictions regarding reading material, “any book on any subject” could be ordered, except hardbacks due to security reasons²⁶. SeánÓg Ó Mórdha remembers that classes were held twice a week for one hour each during the mid-1990s²⁷. So, although there was always a great emphasis on promoting the Irish language within Portlaoise Prison, former prisoner turned academic and political advisor Matt Treacy thinks that the “Irish classes [in Portlaoise Prison had] not the same meaning” as those in Long Kesh/HMP Maze, because in the “North [they were] more identifying”²⁸.

In other words, following the prison protests and the hunger strikes in Portlaoise Prison, the Irish classes became a central feature of the daily life of the prisoners which originated in the founding of the Gaeltacht landing in 1979-1980. For some years, this Gaeltacht landing was, along with the Sinn Féin Cumann, the cultural and educational pivotal point of the prison. However, following the split in the Republican Movement in 1986, the Gaeltacht landing ceased to exist. The reasons for its cessation are, however, unknown and not subject of the research question of this paper. Nonetheless, the prisoners continued with individual learning of the Irish language, self-organised, as well as official Irish-language classes throughout the 1990s. As a consequence, a significant number of Republican prisoners gained fluent Irish-language skills while imprisoned in Portlaoise Prison.

²⁴ Interview with John Crawley, Monaghan Town, Co Monaghan, 30 April 2015.

²⁵ Interview with Matt Treacy, Dublin, Co Dublin, 14 April 2015.

²⁶ Interview with Seosamh Ó Maileoin, Tyrellspass, Co Westmeath, 30 April 2015.

²⁷ Interview with SeánÓg Ó Mórdha, Dublin, Co Dublin, 17 April 2015.

²⁸ Interview with Matt Treacy, Dublin, Co Dublin, 14 April 2015.

4. *Ex-Prisoners & the Language Revival/Revitalisation: A Comparison*

The learning and speaking of the Irish language by the Republican prisoners was a form of strategic resistance both within the prison walls and outside the prison walls. While imprisoned, the Republican convicts had three ways to promote the Irish language. First, they did promote the Irish language through publications. Among these publications were not only Republican magazines and newspapers published outside the prisons such as *An Phoblacht* or *Saoirse*, but also magazines published by the prisoners themselves. These magazines were for example *Scairt Amach* (Shout Out), published from 1989 onwards; *Irish Bheag* (Little Magazine), published from 1987 onwards; and *An Glór Gafa* (The Captive Voice), published from 1988 onwards (MacGiollaChríst 2012, 38). Second, through visits, newspapers reports, and their own publications, Republican prisoners made their supporters aware of the importance of the Irish language for their struggle. Third, as a result of this, they generated an Irish-language friendly environment. Following their release, they continued with promoting the Irish language, once again on three fronts. First, ex-prisoners became active in grass-roots initiatives. Second, they started teaching Irish-language classes; this partly resulted out of idealism and partly out of the necessity to earn an income. Third, ex-prisoners supportive of Provisional Sinn Féin were able to lobby for language through Republican politicians supportive of the peace process and thus were able to generate additional funding for the Irish language in the North of Ireland. Although this may be true, the revival of the Irish language in the North is less linked to the financial funding of the language as agreed in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, than to the Peace Process in the North of Ireland during the 1990s, namely the release of the Irish-speaking political prisoners and their activism in cultural grass-roots campaigns. Likewise I disagree with MacGiollaChríst who writes that “Irish, as the peculiar language of Irish republican (ex-)prisoners, enters the public domain via murals” (2012, 145). I argue that the Irish language entered the public domain not via Republican murals but via cultural, community-orientated activism by former Republican prisoners.

While there are few substantial differences in the development of the Irish language in Long Kesh/HMP Maze and Portlaoise Prison, the situation of the ex-prisoners in the revival respectively revitalisation of the Irish language in the North and the Republic of Ireland stands in stark contrast to each other for four reasons. First, the position of the former political prisoners in their community differs between the North and the Republic of Ireland. The former prisoners have a stronger position and perform leading roles within their community due to the colonial context in the North, whereas the post-colonial situation in the Republic of Ireland does not allow them to perform similar roles. Second, there are fewer grass-roots initiatives

to promote the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland than in the North. Thus, there are fewer opportunities of the former prisoners to become active in these initiatives. Third, the Irish language is an official language in the Republic of Ireland whereas in the North, the political party Sinn Féin can lobby for language support and sell any funding for the Irish language and culture as a 'victory' against the Unionist community. Fourth, the Republican prisoners in the Republic of Ireland were considered less relevant for the strategy of the Republican Movement by the Republican leadership itself than the Republican prisoners in the North of Ireland. Hence, while the Southern Republican prisoners were able to debate and express their opinion in public, Matt Treacy, who was imprisoned in Portlaoise Prison during the late 1980s and early 1990s, interprets the role of the Southern prisoners in the following way:

No one took us serious at that time. We were not important for the Movement. We were not the prisoners in the North, in Long Kesh or so, we were in the South, in Portlaoise and no one in the Movement cared what we were saying. But they gave us the feeling that we were important and send people into jail and they made us feel important and we send statements out and there were delegates to the Ard-Fheis and we thought we have an input but in fact, you know, they were just using us for their own gains, you know. I think that was very dishonest. (2015)²⁹

In other words, it is unsurprising that the Republican prisoners had a less powerful stance within their own communities in the Republic of Ireland compared to their fellow ex-prisoners in the North, if one considers that the Republican Movement itself gave the Southern prisoners the feeling that they were less important for the Republican struggle than the Northern prisoners.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, while similarities in the learning of the Irish language in the prisons in the North and the Republic of Ireland exist, at the same time significant differences occur in the role of former Republican prisoners in the Irish-language movement in the two Irish states. In this article, the developments within the cages of Long Kesh respectively the H-Blocks in the North of Ireland and Portlaoise Prison in the Republic of Ireland we used as examples. It has been outlined that the learning of the Irish language was among the first self-organised education classes in both prisons. Furthermore, both prisons developed Gaeltacht areas for those prisoners keen to use the Irish language as the main spoken language on the landings. In a similar develop-

²⁹ Interview with Matt Treacy, Dublin, Co Dublin, 14 April 2015.

ment, inmates from both prisons published some of their writings in Irish in political periodicals in order to promote the language among their supporters.

The use of the Irish language by the prisoners is characterised as a form of resistance within a colonial respectively post-colonial framework in order to maintain the cultural and national identity. Indeed, the using and learning of the Irish language was from the very beginning a cause of tensions between the Republican prisoners and the prison authorities whenever the latter refused adequate teaching material to the prisoners. Contrary to the similarities during imprisonment, the second form of resistance, the use of the Irish language as the main spoken language for 'secret' communication because the prison warders were unable to follow and understand it, in other words, to use Irish as a 'secret language', was not suitable in Portlaoise Prison; the reason for this is obvious since Irish is the national language in the Republic of Ireland. Thus, even though English is the first language of the vast majority of the people, all citizens have at least basic knowledge of the Irish language. Contrary, the British warders in the North of Ireland had no prior knowledge of the Irish language. Hence, the use of the Irish language in the H-Blocks established, according to MacGiollaChríost, a situation in which the prisoners could break out of their isolation and instead isolate the prison warders themselves (2012, 87).

On the one hand the situation within the prisons shows wide similarities, whereas on the other hand the role of the ex-prisoners in developing the Irish language is different in both Irish states. While the former prisoners ignited a language revival due to their activism in the community in the North of Ireland, the Republic of Ireland faces a further decline of the Irish language in recent decades. Under those circumstances, the former Republican prisoners were not able to develop the language in the Republic of Ireland as their comrades did in the North. The reason for this uneven development is to be found in the different role the prisoners hold in their communities. In other words, while the former prisoners are treated as heroes of their community within the nationalist, working-class areas of cities like Belfast, Derry, or Lurgan, these strong Republican communities do not exist in the Republic of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland, Republican publications have a lower circulation, the support for militant Republicanism is smaller and therefore former political prisoners are more likely doomed to experience isolation following their release. Rather than being seen as heroes, Republican ex-prisoners in the Republic of Ireland have to struggle to find a way back into an ordinary life in an often hostile environment.

In essence, this case study on Republican prisoners provides additional understanding of three areas in the research of the wider field of political imprisonment in Ireland. First, it provides understanding of the daily-life of the prisoners in Portlaoise Prison, a previously largely neglected area in academic research. Second, it provides further understanding of the role politi-

cal prisoners can play in shaping developments outside prison walls. Finally, third, by offering a comparative approach, it helps understanding the different roles the former prisoners play in their communities in the North of Ireland on the one hand and in the Republic of Ireland on the other hand.

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