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HIS 310: Europe from Cold War to EU

18 March 2020

Response to *Some Mother's Son*

While The Troubles faced by Irish republican prisoners seem to be distant events of the 20th century, *Some Mother's Son* is a reminder that the martyrs of independence live on in the memory of Northern Ireland. Director Terry George tells the story of the events at Maze Prison, a facility used to hold parliamentary prisoners, most notably members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). Within the prison walls took place poignant events in the history of British-Irish relations, that of the blanket protest of 1976 and the 1981 Hunger Strike. Yet, George does not simply retell these events as a historical account, but rather as a tale of brothers, sons, and friends so defined by their political conviction that their lives and the order of their families became synonymous with said conviction. Such ties developed the characters of Kathleen Quigley and Annie Higgins as they became understood through their sons', Gerard and Frank, plight in the hunger strike. Ultimately, Annie and Kathleen face whether to allow their sons to willingly suffer for their steadfast beliefs, or risk losing momentum in a political battle that continues to bring suffering to their homeland.

March 1, 1981 marked the beginning of the Maze Hunger Strike, yet ethno-nationalist tensions between the British and Irish had been building since the beginning of the century.

Specifically, the fight for political status dates back to 1917 in the years leading up to the Irish War of Independence. In that time, eighty-four republican prisoners went on hunger strike including Thomas Ashe, leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood who died after being force-fed. This mobilized the masses to support the demand for independence from the British and later inspired Provisional IRA member Bobby Sands to initiate a hunger strike in 1981.

Sand's main opponent was Margaret Thatcher who assumed the role of England's Prime Minister in 1979 with the promise of dismantling the Irish Republican Army. As shown in the opening of the film, Thatcher took a three-pronged approach in affairs with the IRA: isolation, criminalization, and demoralization. Criminalization manifested as the removal of Special Category Status, which redefined the Maze prisoner's as criminals instead of prisoners of war: stripping them of their right to wear their own clothes, have free association, and abstain from prison labor.

While one may consider the categorization of a prisoner a trivial debate, it is of the message in the movie and the greater Irish struggle with the British altogether. Gerry Adams writes that the IRA was portrayed as "godfathers of terrorism" through British world media, completely overshadowing Ireland's struggle to be an independent territory free from British rule (Adams 59). The labeling of IRA members as criminals detracted from their motive to create a freer Ireland. To be a prisoner of war was to be noble, and to be a criminal was to have no agency. When Franky was captured by British authorities he told his mother, "I need to tell you something. I am probably going to get locked up for a long time, and I don't need a lawyer because I am a prisoner of war." For the British to recognize IRA members as prisoners of war was to recognize there was a war to begin with, to regard them as criminals was to disregard their actions.

The emphasis of the mother's role in a time of conflict provides unmatched value to this film. Often, the human aspect is forgotten once a life is lost in the name of greater good. Though, it is important to remember how the families of Frankie and Gerard were taken apart through these events in history. From brutal attacks at Christmas dinner, job loss for Gerard's sister, and ultimately the death of Frankie in the hunger strike, the family structure was altered indefinitely. For half of the film, viewers live through the uncertainty of the families, specifically the mothers, to show how the actions of the prisoners went beyond the prison walls to change life in Northern Ireland forever.

For myself, this film calls into question the preciousness of life. The warfare of a hunger strike seems like that of none other. While on a battlefield there is no guarantee of death, one chooses the path of death on a hunger strike. This speaks volume to the psychological impact of occupation and colonization in which individuals feel subjugated and constrained by their ruler. To the ten men who died in the H-Block Hunger Strike of 1981, death must have appeared more liberating than living suppressed.

Work Cited

Adams, Gerry. *Free Ireland: towards a Lasting Peace*. Brandon, 1995.