

## *1981 Hunger Strikes*

On 1st March 1981 the IRA prisoners' Officer Commanding, **Bobby Sands** refused food. Unlike the 1980 strike, this time only Sands began the strike; he was to be joined by a new hunger striker each week. Sands believed that in this way the strike would lead to a prisoner dying each week, thus increasing the pressure on the British Government (now led by Margaret Thatcher) to end **criminalization** (criminalization meant ending special category status for those convicted of terrorist crimes after March 1976. Anyone convicted after that date would be treated in the same way as other criminals. They would be sent to a new prison - consisting of H-shaped blocks - which had been built at the Maze outside Belfast).

On 5th March 1981 Frank Maguire, the MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone died. At this time, there was no law precluding prisoners becoming an MP, so Bobby Sands was put forward as a republican candidate for the seat and was eventually victorious. The election campaign made news headlines across the world. Even though Sands was now an MP the British government remained determined not to give the prisoners what they were demanding. On 5th May Sands died and over the next three and a half months nine other prisoners lost their lives through hunger strike. In the same five-month period 61 people died as a result of the violence that broke out following each hunger striker's death. Throughout this time no concessions were granted; however the families of those men still on hunger strike began to intervene to stop further deaths. On 3rd October the hunger strike was called off. Within a few days of the strike's end, the British government announced that:

- Prisoners could wear their own clothes.
- More prison visits would be allowed.
- Prisoners would be allowed to spend more time together during the day.
- It would reinstate the 50% reduction in length of sentence. This concession had been lost by those prisoners involved in the protests against criminalisation.

The 1981 Hunger Strike had a number of important results: a greater level of nationalist hostility towards the British Government, an increase in support for the IRA and an increase in the levels of paramilitary violence. As a result, **Margaret Thatcher's** government was coming under pressure from Unionists – who believed that Thatcher was not doing enough to stop either the growth in IRA membership or levels of violence – The Dublin Government, which believed that a new political solution was needed to bring the IRA's campaign to an end.

## *McGurk's Bar Bombing*

On 4 December 1971, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), an Ulster loyalist paramilitary group, detonated a bomb at McGurk's Bar in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The pub was frequented by Irish Catholics and nationalists. The explosion caused the building to collapse, killing fifteen Catholic civilians – including two children – and wounding seventeen more. It was the deadliest attack in Belfast during the Troubles.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the British security forces asserted that a bomb had exploded prematurely while being handled by Irish Republican Army (IRA) members inside the pub, implying that the victims themselves were partly to blame. A report later found that the police (Royal Ulster Constabulary) were biased in favour of his view, and that this hindered their investigation. The victims' relatives allege that the security forces deliberately spread disinformation to discredit the IRA. In 1977, UVF member Robert Campbell was sentenced to life imprisonment for his part in the bombing and served fifteen years.

## 1969 Belfast Rioting

In response to rioting between police and protesters in Derry arising out of Civil Rights agitation by Catholics and the parade of Protestant **Apprentice Boys** (a fraternal society), nationalists in Belfast staged protests outside **RUC** police stations from the night of 12 August.

Blame for what happened over the following days must be shared. There was provocation from the nationalist side, some shots were fired at police and a grenade thrown by an IRA member, leading the Northern Ireland authorities to thin they were facing an insurrection. But undoubtedly it was the authorities' response that helped alienate the city's Catholic population from the state. Indeed, RUC armoured cars equipped with machine guns fired on the Catholic Divis Flats, killing nine-year-old boy Patric Rooney, while further up the Falls Road, police failed to stop a loyalist crowd from burning down two terraced streets in Catholic neighbourhoods. Eight people were killed over three days and 750 injured. Barricades went up. Rival paramilitaries patrolled their areas. The British Army was deployed with fixed bayonets to restore order – a move Catholics initially welcomed.

After five days of rioting in a row, in all 19 people were killed in 1969, 14 of them civilians.

## Ballymurphy Massacre

**The Ballymurphy Massacre**, also called *Belfast Bloody Sunday* undoubtedly stands as one of the most tragic and controversial episodes of the conflict in Northern Ireland as it led to the deaths of 10 people shot dead. All 10 were killed in one small neighbourhood of west Belfast over little more than 36 hours in August 1971 during the disturbances that were triggered by the introduction of internment without trial.

On the morning of Monday 9 August 1971, the security forces launched **Operation Demetrius**, enforced by the Parachute Regiment. The plan was to arrest and intern anyone suspected of being a member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (a violence-advocating faction created after the 1969 IRA split). Members of the Parachute Regiment stated that, as they entered the Ballymurphy area, they were shot at by republicans and returned fire.

Among the nine men and one woman fatally wounded in the streets around Ballymurphy between the evening of 9 August and the morning of 11 August were a local priest, shot twice while giving the last rites to a man who had also been shot, and a 44-year-old mother of eight, shot in the face.

## Shankill Butchers

The Shankill Butchers was an Ulster loyalist gang—many of whom were members of the **Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)**—that was active between 1975 and 1982 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. It was based in the Shankill area and was responsible for the deaths of at least 23 people, most of whom were killed in **sectarian** attacks.

The gang was notorious for kidnapping and murdering random Catholic and suspected Catholic civilians; each was beaten ferociously and had his throat slashed with a butcher's knife. Some were also tortured and attacked with a hatchet. The gang also killed six Ulster Protestants over personal disputes, and two other Protestants mistaken for Catholics.

Most of the gang were eventually caught and, in February 1979, received the longest combined prison sentences in United Kingdom legal history. However, gang leader Lenny Murphy and his two chief "lieutenants" escaped prosecution. Murphy was killed in November 1982 by the **Provisional IRA**, likely acting with loyalist paramilitaries who perceived him as a threat. The Butchers brought a new level of paramilitary violence to a country already hardened by death and destruction. The judge who oversaw the 1979 trial described their crimes as "a lasting monument to blind sectarian bigotry".