



William Murphy. *Political Imprisonment and the Irish, 1912-1921.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xii + 301 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-956907-6.

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The bullet and the bomb typify images of Irish revolutionary activity in the twentieth century, from the Fenians to the Provos.[1] However, as William Murphy contends, this trend of modern Irish historiography, intentionally or not, limits conceptions of revolution to purely physical acts against others, which threatens to narrow the scope of historical investigation. Murphy aims to broaden the scope of what constitutes revolutionary actions through a “comprehensive history of political imprisonment” during the Irish revolutionary period (p. 1). He graphs the time frame of events from 1912 with the first suffragist prison protests through to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 that ended the War of Independence with a semiautonomous British satellite “Free State” in southern Ireland. The emphasis within *Political Imprisonment and the Irish, 1912-1921* is the experience of Irish prisoners held by the British government, primarily in the region that now constitutes the Republic of Ireland, with special focus on issues of starvation, force-feeding, prison status, and matters of arrest and release. Murphy mostly excludes imprisonment in Northern Ireland and Great Britain, prisoners and captives held by the Irish, and the period of civil war that followed (1922-23).

Noting the British authorities’ increased reliance on prisons and ultimately mass incarceration for its occupation of Ireland, Murphy develops the notion of imprisonment as a shared experience for radicals, revolutionaries, and political opponents of the colonial regime. These experiences, not only for the prisoners but also for their families and outside support networks, along with government policies, are key to understanding the overall revolutionary experience. People from all strata of society were incarcerated, including politicians, and some of them on multiple occasions. To compile this comprehensive history, Murphy referenced archives at the British Home Office and the War and Colonial Offices. Even more impressive is his use of the largely uncatalogued archives of the General Prisons Board of Ireland and the Chief Secretary of Ireland’s Office, along with thousands of letters and diaries spread across dozens of small and private collections.

The concept of “political imprisonment” had legal precedence stretching back to the British Prisons Act of 1840, which soon established a class of prisoners known as “first class misdemeanants.” This was a downgrade from a felony, and allowed for ameliorated conditions without specific mention of the political nature of their “crime.” Orig-

nally developed for dealing with Chartist prisoners in England, by the latter half of the nineteenth century its use had spread to Ireland's legal system and became applicable to Fenians and other opposition movements. Murphy details the evolution in tactical approaches to imprisonment by inmates and their supporters, with the earlier nineteenth-century approach marked by an effort to display imprisonment as martyrdom while in the twentieth century, the focus shifted to making examples and causes out of the conditions of prison life.

By viewing the conflict through the lens of the prison system, one can see a larger challenge to the state than direct, physical acts of violence against persons, and one that is often more immediately successful. Prison awakened and radicalized Irish political consciousness in advance of the military struggle that developed in its wake. By the later stages of the war, "just as hunger strike [sic] threatened to render prison useless as a weapon for the state, the state was becoming more and more dependent on the prison" as the level of violence escalated (p. 256). Support from outside provided much-needed encouragement for the prisoners to continue their protests and also promoted their cause. The increased activity of the prisoners, in turn, encouraged more activists outside of the prisons.

If someone is looking for a detailed legal and political historical narrative on the concept of Irish political prisoners and the challenges they faced in their daily lives, they will find a real treasure in this book. It is also an exemplary specimen of popular, "bottom-up" history, giving spectacular detail and insight into the lives of Irish prisoners during the revolution. That is all the more impressive considering the dominant trend in modern Irish historiography of producing massive numbers of political biographies on a few scant individuals, particularly martyrs, from Theobald Wolfe Tone to Pádraig Pearse to Bobby Sands. However, it is not a text that engages much with theoretical frameworks or ideologies. The bibliography cites

Michel Foucault's postmodern masterpiece, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), which, while influencing Murphy's views, is not engaged with directly. *Political Imprisonment and the Irish, 1912-1921* is not about the role of prisons in society so much as about the lives of the prisoners and the politics behind Irish imprisonment.

Although *Political Imprisonment and the Irish, 1912-1921* is not ideologically laden, it does actively engage with the concept of Ireland as a colony, a contentious but well-argued view. As such, Murphy situates his work within the framework of contributions on world imperialism by Fran Lisa Buntman (Apartheid in South Africa), Ujjwal Kumar Singh (India), Peter Zinoman (colonial Vietnam), and more.[2] It is only regrettable that Murphy makes no attempt to explain how Ireland, in turn, demonstrates how imperialism develops or operates. Combining the present work with the insights of even just some of the more popular works on imperialism as a system, whether classics like Nikolai Bukharin's *Imperialism and World Economy* (1917) and Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism* (1917), or more recent works like John Milios and Dimitris Sotiropoulos's *Rethinking Imperialism* (1988) and Zak Cope's *Divided World, Divided Class* (2012), could have greatly expanded the significance of the findings. Britain's concerns over Ireland cannot be separated from its desire to maintain its crumbling empire as U.S. capital began to overcome Britain's stranglehold over international markets. General crises of capitalism, such as in the wake of the First World War (1914-19), generally entail imperialists tightening control over their colonial possessions to maximize their gains and minimize their losses.

The book's main weakness is its narrow focus. Despite the inclusion of female suffragists in the narrative, concepts of gender and sexuality are largely absent. Likewise, there is only superficial coverage of class, so important to distinctions among the Irish Republic Army from this period onward. While the book places prison policy in Ire-

land in the context of colonial prison systems more broadly, the revolution itself is not placed in an international context, appearing as a purely Irish event. Little connection is made to the world war, the political upheavals and revolutions in Europe, or the Russian Revolution and creation of the Soviet Union, which was the first country to officially recognize the Irish Republic. This was the only real Irish diplomatic success, and Irish delegates participated in the Third (Communist) International, while the United States and League of Nations turned them away. Murphy does not address how these events influenced British prison policy and the treatment and actions of political prisoners. To be fair, the author acknowledges the Limerick Soviet of 1919, but in a scant few lines and without explicit significance. Even more fundamentally, the Irish rebels' Bolshevik comrades had their own extensive experience with political imprisonment that could have been cross-analyzed.

In sum, Murphy's work is a well-written, direct, concise, engaging, and enjoyable study, neither disappointingly simplistic nor needlessly esoteric. It is accessible to new students of the period and specialists alike. The focus of the work is overly localized to Ireland without connection to a broader philosophical or theoretical framework, yet the book does not pretend to be more than what the title suggests: a narrative of Irish political imprisonment. The original research is extremely impressive and renders the work a valuable contribution to prison studies and studies of the Irish revolution while it is simultaneously a great sample of history written "from below."

Notes

[1]. Fenian refers to a member of the Fenian Brotherhood and Irish Republican Brotherhood, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Provo refers to a member of the late twentieth-century Northern Irish paramilitary group the Provisional Irish Republican Army.

[2]. For a good discussion of the Irish colony question, see the collection Terrence McDonough,

ed., *Was Ireland a Colony? Economics, Politics and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005).

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