

Kevin Grant. *Last Weapons: Hunger Strikes and Fasts in the British Empire, 1890–1948.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. 232 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-30101-6.



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In July 2016, the Indian activist Irom Sharmila sat surrounded by journalists and licked a finger which she had coated in honey. Sharmila had spent sixteen years refusing to eat food, kept alive by an involuntary nasogastric intubation while imprisoned on charges of attempted suicide for her protest against India's security laws in its restive northeast. India's most celebrated hunger striker of modern times ended her protest for the chance to participate in formal electoral politics. But other hunger strikers' fates have been harsher. Five years after India's independence, in October 1952, a veteran Indian freedom fighter, Potti Sreeramulu, embarked upon a fast in an effort to cleave out an independent state for the Telugu-language speakers of southern India. After two months, Sreeramulu succumbed to his fast, becoming only the second person in modern Indian history to actually die from a hunger strike.

The idiom of the hunger strike in postcolonial India is a powerful one—and it owes much, of course, to the formative influence of Mohandas Gandhi, with whom the form of protest is univer-

sally associated. Yet as Kevin Grant reminds us in his elegant and incisive *Last Weapons*, the hunger strike and the fast are “performances of death” whose power was apparent long before their deployment in anti-imperial campaigns in the late British Empire. Yet Grant contends that it was as a prison protest in the United Kingdom and the British Empire that the hunger strike and fast were transformed into global phenomena, ready for deployment in other campaigns from apartheid-era South Africa to ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement) processing centers in California's Central Valley.

In a slim and exceptionally readable volume, Grant pieces together what is likely the first comprehensive account of the hunger strike and fast in modern times, and his book offers a riveting account of changing techniques, ideologies, and practices as the fast moved from Russia to Ireland to India. Women, in Grant's account, were often key agents in bringing the practices of fasting to political prominence. But beyond this compelling and wholly new narrative, Grant also offers a

forceful reassessment of the philosophy and practice of the hunger strike itself. The hunger strike has often been framed as a deliberate and clear strategy—a definitive gambit rooted in a clear political vision. This gloss is particularly strong in the postcolonial historiographies of both India and Ireland, where the strategic acumen of Mohandas Gandhi or Bobby Sands is taken as emblematic of hunger strikers writ large. But hunger strikes, Grant shows, were frequently undertaken on less considered grounds, and with no direct expectation of an outcome—they were indeed last weapons as opposed to first flush strategies.

Moreover, beyond their muddled philosophical stances, which often substituted red-hot fury for calculated action, hunger strikes were uncertain in their very physiological dimensions. As Grant demonstrates in this book's first chapter, the actual course of a hunger strike and the effects of starvation on the human body were essentially unknown. Historians of Africa and South Asia have documented the late colonial "discovery" of nutrition and notions of malnutrition through imperial experimentation. Yet missing in these accounts is the fundamental difficulty that nutritional scientists, prison officials, and others faced in trying to trace the course of starvation when experimentation was ethically impossible. Well until the 1940s, "the medical profession in general remained unable to measure a starving subject's approach to the danger zone" (p. 40) where death would be inevitable. This uncertainty complicated jailers' approaches to hunger strikers, who themselves were unable to predict the course and outcome of their protests.

Grant's account of the fraught science of starvation precedes a transnational genealogy of the hunger strike. In *Last Weapons*'s second chapter, he locates the origin of the modern political fast outside of the political fast's origin beyond Britain, among Russian revolutionaries in the prisons of czarist Russia. British suffragettes, in the first decade of the twentieth century, drew upon hunger

strikes which revolutionaries had undertaken in Russian and Siberian prisons. Suffragettes learned of the "Russian method" of self-starvation in prison, known as *golodovka*, from exiles in Britain. While the political and cultural connotations of this practice were poorly understood by suffragettes, and very few of the Russian fasters were in fact women, the practice came to be seen as a form of protest which was strongly, if only temporarily, feminized. Meanwhile, in spite of widespread beliefs that hunger strikers in Britain required jailers to undertake practices of forcible feeding, prison medical officials themselves were divided about the wisdom of attending to hunger strikers at the expense of their other custodial duties.

These protests, Grant shows in his third chapter, moved in the next several decades to Ireland, where dozens of imprisoned women and thousands of imprisoned men undertook self-starvation in British and Irish Free State jails, seeking reclassification as political prisoners, release, or better conditions. The rise of the hunger strike in these circumstances did not merely represent a change of context, nor just a shift from women strikers to men. Rather, it was among Irish women and men striking that the hunger strike emerged as a true “last weapon through which to challenge the practical capacities of their prisons and to push warders and prison medical officers beyond their professional duties into the violation of law” (pp. 71-72). The hunger strike was a culturally mediated practice in Ireland, but its symbolism was, Grant contends, a double-edged sword. Strikers’ linkage of hunger striking with Catholic practices of abnegation alienated Ireland’s Protestants, presaging a similar alienation of Muslims in the context of colonial India. And hunger strikes after the Anglo-Irish War served to divide those who supported the partition of Ireland and those who supported an undivided republic. With the “Russian method” of fasting long forgotten, the hunger strike had become, by the 1940s, a wholly Irish practice, sutured to the broader mythopoesis of modern Ireland itself.

Grant moves from Ireland to India in the book’s fourth chapter, forwarding a complex typology of the hunger strike on the Indian subcontinent. Drawing from recent interventions into India’s nationalist historiography, Grant shows how the hunger strike in India was both more widespread than traditionally seen, and more multi-valent. Hunger striking could speak to different currents of Indian nationalism and anticolonial protest, from the militant to the pacifist and from notions of Indian unity to the conceits of communal division. Taking cues from the communal nature of fasting in Ireland, Grant explores the different religious and regional genealogies of political starvation in India and shows how the idioms

of Gandhian fasts, sutured to notions of Mother India personified, served to advance notions of a cohesive nation-space while also aggravating communal division.

These regional studies are scaffolding for Grant’s final chapter, and perhaps his most methodologically significant one. Scholars of the British colonial world (and the French colonial world, to a lesser degree) have shown how liberal claims of just rule were turned against imperial administrators. Grant achieves something similar by looking to the prison, where officials’ (and politicians’) efforts to create uniform policies to counter hunger strikes met up against the confounding realpolitik of their management. The “rule of exceptions” in the British prison laid bare both the power of the hunger strike and the hollow quality of Britain’s claims to uniform justice.

Last Weapons is a satisfying and fulsome account of a powerful political tool in late imperial Britain. It unpacks the symbolic resonance of the act of the hunger strike or fast, while also demonstrating how complicated, and frequently mundane, the reasons for the hunger strike often were. It is a welcome and large contribution to the growing body of literature on hunger and the politics of food in the imperial world, even if it does not wrestle deeply with questions of the political economy of food provisioning in the empire, beyond some descriptions of the new “duty to feed” (p. 14) that emerged toward the turn of the twentieth century. It is a panoramic account that is both revelatory to the scholar of food and hunger, and also accessible enough that a motivated undergraduate might tackle it in its entirety; no doubt, it will be a keystone reading in seminars on food, hunger, and the politics of provisioning in empire. And those who take up its charge—linking later and powerful campaigns of hunger striking to their heyday in the early twentieth century—have a panoramic account of a complex, fraught, but uniquely potent political tool.

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