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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0002764216632842>

PUBLISHER

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VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Bairner, Alan. 2019. "my First Victim Was a Hurling Player...': Sport in the Lives of Northern Ireland's Political Prisoners". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/21899>.

‘My first victim was a hurling player...’ : sport in the lives of Northern Ireland’s political prisoners

Alan Bairner

Abstract

Much of the recent literature on sport, political violence and terrorism has been focussed on security issues and, more critically, their potentially damaging implications for civil liberties. Far less attention, however, has been paid to the place of sport in the lives of the so-called terrorists themselves. This essay draws heavily upon personal experience of interaction with loyalist and republican prisoners in the Maze between March 1996 and October 1999. The main focus of the essay is on the ways in which these prisoners talked about and related to sport and the insights that discussions with them offered in terms of their wider political views. Sport was never dismissed by any of the prisoners I met as being of secondary importance to other matters - a diversion from the real world of politics. In fact, as our discussions revealed, politics was often presented as being intimately bound up with and embodied in sport cultures. On the other hand, their interest in sport also highlighted the fact that these were rather ordinary men, some of whom had shown themselves to be capable of committing seemingly extraordinary crimes.

Keywords

Northern Ireland, the Troubles, paramilitarism, prisons, sport

Introduction

HM Prison Maze was located around 20 miles south of the city of Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Long Kesh site had previously been occupied by a Second World War Royal Air Force camp which was converted into a prison in 1970 when internment was introduced by the Northern Ireland government in response to what was regarded as politically motivated civil unrest. Over 1900 men were interned without trial during that period, 95% of whom were Catholics, nationalists and republicans. Political status was granted to the prisoners who were housed in a series of Nissan huts resembling a World War Two prisoner-of-war camp. With the subsequent increased numbers of prisoners in the early years of Northern Ireland’s

Troubles, the decision was taken by the British government to replace Long Kesh with the Maze Prison, a purpose built cellular, high security facility consisting of what became known as the H Blocks where prisoners from different paramilitary organisations, both republicans and loyalist, could be kept in separate buildings. In 1976, special category (or political) status was rescinded, leading to a series of protests - the blanket protest, the no wash (or dirty protest) and, finally, the republican hunger strike. The prison attracted global attention in 1981 when the latter led to the deaths of ten prisoners, amongst them an elected Member of Parliament, Bobby Sands. In 1983, the Maze also witnessed the largest prison break-out in British penal history when 38 republican prisoners escaped. During the mid-1980s, special category status was restored in all but name.

In 1997, the leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) was shot dead by members of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) inside the perimeter fence of one of the H Blocks. Following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and the early release of prisoners, the Maze was emptied in 2000 and officially closed in 2004 (McLaughlin, 2006). In subsequent years, the site and some of the buildings have been at the centre of heated debate focussed on their potential for re-development as a national sports stadium and/or a conflict transformation centre and museum (Bairner, 2007; Flynn, 2011; Graham and McDowell, 2007; Neill, 2006).

Much of the recent literature on sport, political violence and terrorism has been focussed on security issues and, more critically, their potentially damaging implications for civil liberties. David Hassan (2012) describes sport and terrorism as “two of the most pervasive themes of modern life” (p. 264). Unsurprisingly, therefore, “security and counter terrorism strategies are now established as key themes in the staging of sport mega-events” (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2012, p. 307). As Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young (2012) point out, “sport management researchers and others have assembled a working empirical

understanding of how the threat or perceived threat of terrorism has altered the ways in which mega-events are lobbied for, staged and policed” (p. 288). Arguably the threat posed to such events by terrorism has been exaggerated in sport management and sport tourism studies (see inter alia Toohey et al, 2003). There is no ignoring, however, the counter-terrorism measures that have been taken by governing bodies, local organisers and governments which have resulted in what John Sugden (2012) describes as a “process of totalitarian intrusiveness” (p. 415). At least as worrying for critical social science is the fact that “a vast majority of the burgeoning research focuses on the mass mediation of terror discourses, frames and images through mega-events as a means of promulgating dominant geo-political ideologies” (Atkinson and Young, 2012, p. ⁱ This aligns closely with conventional terrorism studies which have been “overly reliant on an uncritical acceptance of official sources in the reporting and analysis of ‘terrorist’ incidents and groups, to the extent that this academic sub-discipline has traditionally synchronized rather too well with the standpoints and interests of incumbent Western governments (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2012, pp. 309-310). ⁱⁱ

Those who threaten to engage in violence directed at the holy cows of western democracy are represented not only as criminal but also as deeply irrational. Yet, as indicated by Jonathan Powell, former British prime Minister Tony Blair’s chief negotiator in the Northern Ireland peace talks, progress is best made when there is a willingness to understand more about the lives and motivations of the so-called terrorists.

One of the lessons that comes most starkly out of the Northern Ireland experience is the importance of maintaining contact. It is very difficult for governments in democracies to be seen to be talking to terrorists who are killing their people unjustifiably. But it is precisely your enemies, rather than your friends, that you should talk to if you want to resolve a conflict. ⁱⁱⁱ

With specific reference to the topic in hand, therefore, it is always worthwhile to speak with perpetrators of politically motivated violence and sport can be useful medium for communication. This essay draws heavily upon personal experience of interaction with loyalist and republican prisoners in the Maze between March 1996 and October 1999. The main focus of the essay is on the ways in which these prisoners talked about and related to sport and the insights that discussions with them offered in terms not only of their wider political views but also their ordinary lives. First, however, it is necessary to comment, if only briefly, on both the history of political violence and the relationship between sport and politics in Northern Ireland.

Political Violence in Northern Ireland

From the late 1960s, political violence exacted a heavy toll on Northern Ireland. Around 3,500 people were killed during what became euphemistically known as the Troubles. The main illegal organisations that were responsible for the violence on the loyalist side were the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the UVF (and their various *noms de guerre*) and, belatedly, the LVF. The most significant republican paramilitary organisations were the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), INLA and, both before, and more visibly after, the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, various dissident groups opposed to the IRA's decommissioning of weapons.

According to Henry McDonald and Jim Cusack, "The roots of the Ulster Defence Association were in the rioting that flared across Belfast between 1968 and 1970".^{iv} Even at the height of its powers, when it had an estimated 50,000 members, the UDA appeared to lack the discipline required of a successful terrorist organisation.^v Indeed, by the time that

the Troubles formally came to an end, it had squandered most of the support that it had once commanded in working-class neighbourhoods as a consequence of internal feuding and extensive involvement in purely criminal, as opposed to politically motivated, activities. As for the attitude held by members of the other main loyalist paramilitary organisation, the UVF, one notorious UDA man, Johnny Adair, is reported to have observed, “They look down their noses at us.”^{vi}

The sense of superiority surrounding the UVF owed much to a selective reading of history which suggested a degree of continuity between the original Ulster Volunteers, founded in 1912 to oppose Home Rule for Ireland, and its modern manifestation. The respected status of the Volunteers can be traced back to August 1914 when the Home Rule issue was temporarily suspended due to the outbreak of World War I. Many UVF men enlisted in the British Army, mostly with the 36th (Ulster) Division of the 'New Army'. Others joined the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions. By the summer of 1916, only the Ulster and 16th Divisions remained and both suffered heavy casualties in July 1916 during the Battle of the Somme and were largely wiped out in 1918 during the German Spring offensive. As Keith Jeffery reminds us “the particularly concentrated nature of the Ulster Division, not just socially but also in terms of its religion and politics, meant that its losses on the first day of the Somme, grievous enough in themselves, had a disproportionately great impact back home.”^{vii} With this in mind perhaps, the modern UVF “always prided itself on being more principled and disciplined than the UDA.”^{viii} As shall become apparent in the substantive discussion below, this was reflected to some extent in the behaviour of the prisoners with whom I engaged. However, as the Troubles progressed, the UVF, like the UDA, acquired a reputation for feuding, racketeering and ruthless sectarian violence which had little or no connection with the blood sacrifice of the 36th (Ulster) Division during the Great War.

A former member of the UVF, Billy Wright, founded the LVF in 1996.^{ix} Wright believed that the UVF leadership had abandoned the original aims of the organisation, and, by implication, those of the earlier Ulster Volunteers, by giving their consent to a peace process which would result in the Irish Republic having a say in the affairs of Northern Ireland. According to Chris Anderson, Wright “believed that there was no longer a requirement for the staid politics of traditional [Ulster] unionism and that it must be replaced by a more vibrant style of politics, which was truly representative of the unionist people.”^x He had acquired a reputation for ‘taking the fight’ to republicans in his mid-Ulster redoubt. With the formation of the LVF, however, he was increasingly regarded by the UVF leadership and by the British government as a major obstacle on the road to peace. In 1997, Wright was sentenced to eight years imprisonment for threatening to kill a witness to an assault. He began serving the sentence in Maghaberry Prison but during the spring of 1997 he negotiated with the authorities for a transfer to the Maze which took place that April. He and his fellow travellers were isolated from the other loyalist prisoners in a wing of an H Block shared, rather surprisingly, as subsequent events would demonstrate, with INLA prisoners who were similarly segregated from their fellow republicans. Shortly before 10 am on 27th December 1997, while waiting outside the block in a van which was to take him to meet visitors, Wright was killed by three INLA members in circumstances that remain mysterious at the very least.^{xi}

The Provisional IRA was born in December 1969 by republicans who were dissatisfied with the leadership of the Official or “old” IRA in the face of attacks on the nationalist people of Northern Ireland by loyalists and members of the security forces.^{xii} As Richard English suggests, “It was the distinctive experience of nationalists in the north [of Ireland] that had decisively generated the new IRA as reflected in the case of the most significant member of the Provisional movement’s entire history: Gerry Adams.”^{xiii} The

other most notable figure who made the transition from physical force nationalism to constitutional politics is the Derry man, Martin McGuinness. Arguably at least as important as both, however, was Bobby Sands, the first of the republican hunger strikers to die in the Maze in 1981. As Denis O’Hearn recounts, “The British government may have considered the end of the fast to be its victory, yet the strength of the Republican movement as a result of the hunger strike, both militarily and electorally, spurred the British and Irish government into new campaigns to weaken its public image.”^{xiv} However, sympathy for the plight of the hunger strikers amongst northern nationalists, many of them previously supporters of the constitutional Social Democratic and Labour Party, led to such an upsurge in support for the IRA’s political wing, Sinn Féin, which almost certainly paved the way for republicans to take part eventually in the government of Northern Ireland.

English argues that “The term ‘guerrilla war’ perhaps suits the IRA’s campaign best, carrying as it does the dual implication of the seriousness of war, and the irregularity and small-scale aspect of the paramilitaries’ struggles.”^{xv} It also avoids too obvious a value-judgment “being a more neutral and less presumptuous label than, for example, ‘terrorism’”.^{xvi} However, the IRA was not the only armed republican organisation during the troubles.

According to Jack Holland and Henry McDonald, “by late 1974 it appeared to many republican activists not only that the Official IRA was betraying the struggle for a united socialist Ireland but that the Provisionals were undergoing an ‘Ulsterisation’ of their politics in a dangerous bid to win over Protestant support and wring concessions from the British”.^{xvii} The result of this was the formation of the Irish Republican Socialist Party, the armed wing of which was to be the INLA – the product of “a relatively painless birth for what would turn out to be one of the most destructive and deadly organisations ever to take

part in the Irish troubles.”^{xviii} Amongst its countless victims, of course, was the self-styled Brigadier Wright, also widely known by that time as ‘King Rat’.

Sport and Politics in Northern Ireland

Since the 1980s, Northern Ireland has attracted a considerable amount of attention from sociologists and historians of sport, their main interest being the relationship between sport and sectarianism.^{xix} In addition, from the mid-1990s, such organisations as the Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SCNI - now Sport Northern Ireland) and the Irish Football Association (IFA) took significant steps towards weakening the links between sport and sectarianism. Those of us who were involved in this process from the outset, as academic researchers, as activists and as a combination of the two, tended to base our approach on one very simple premise – namely, that far from being separate from the wider society, sport was an integral, and increasingly important, element of society in Northern Ireland as elsewhere. For many this will seem like a truism that is scarcely worth repeating. Yet it runs counter to the cherished belief that is held by many sports administrators who present their sphere of activity as one of sanctuary into which people can escape from the real, often unpleasant and sometimes violent world of politics.^{xx} This is a form of denial which, in the context of Northern Ireland, needed to be challenged. It would be foolish, of course, to assume that sport can solve society’s problems, including removing those injustices, real or imagined, which can fuel terrorist violence. However, at the very least people who are involved with sport might be expected to recognise the negative aspects that bedevil their particular part of

society and seek to address these. In so doing, they can contribute to making the whole of society a better place in which to live. For example, it is widely accepted in many countries that challenging racism and sexism in sport can produce beneficial results that are felt well beyond the sporting world.

In Ireland, north and south, sport brings many benefits to the population in terms of better health, good companionship, excitement, fun and so on. It also possesses the potential to promote social inclusion. In many respects, however, this potential has remained unrealised. For example, sport in Ireland tends to be dominated by men at least at the level of leadership. Moreover, gender is by no means the only area in which sport in Ireland presents itself as exclusive. This is particularly true in Northern Ireland. It is frequently asserted that one of the great achievements of Irish sport is that it creates a strong sense of community identity. In a divided society, however, the very idea of community is problematic. Indeed it is commonplace to talk in terms of the two communities in Northern Ireland and one might even be inclined to suggest that there exist considerably more than two. Whilst it is undeniable that sport has played an important role in maintaining and supporting community life especially in rural parts of Northern Ireland, it is arguable that it has done so at a price. Whilst serving to consolidate a sense of pride in one's own people and one's own cherished places, it has also contributed to the construction and reproduction of the very attitudes towards others upon which conflict and division have thrived.^{xxi} Where there are high levels of social exclusion and inter-communal division, it is often a very short step from celebrating one's own community and its values to vilifying those of others. In a divided society which contains some divided sports and also numerous divided clubs and competitions in those sports that are superficially inclusive, it is important to be constantly aware of this danger and do whatever is possible to counter it. The various attempts that were made by organisations such as the SCNI and the IFA to challenge sectarianism were to be welcomed. However,

there can be little doubt that the task is difficult and has arguably been made even more difficult as a consequence of recent political developments within and involving Northern Ireland.

When initial attempts were made to harness sport to the cause of promoting better community relations, there appeared to be some kind of consensus within the British political establishment and key elements of Northern Irish civil society that integration was the favoured means of tackling the problem of inter-communal (and intra-communal) strife. Bringing people closer together would work as if by some process of osmosis to foster mutual respect, understanding and, ultimately, trust. To the extent that sport had a role to play, therefore, the emphasis was on encouraging those sports and clubs which were strongly identified with only one of the two main traditions to become more inclusive. This was a laudable ambition holding out as it did the possibility that everyone in Northern Ireland would be able to enjoy an even greater number of sporting opportunities than ever before whilst simultaneously helping to lay the foundations for a more stable and peaceful society. Such objectives were at the heart of many strategies involving sport in recent years. It is reasonable to ask, however, how far sport has been assisted by the wider political process when asked to implement such strategies.

Association football has long presented problems as well as opportunities in relation to community relations issues in Northern Ireland. Of the major team sports it is the one, along with boxing, that arguably crosses the community divide most successfully. The 'people's game' is watched and played by Catholics and Protestants in huge numbers and also provides sporting outlets for members of Northern Ireland's less well known communities consisting of a variety of ethnic minority groups. Its potential for bringing people together is undeniable. Nevertheless it is precisely because of its cross-community appeal that football presents difficult challenges for those who would use sporting for

integrative purposes. Whilst extremely popular within both nationalist and unionist communities, the game is not consumed in the same way by each (with the exception of support for English Premiership teams which does have the capacity to bring together unlikely bedfellows). In other respects, the local football culture has tended to be characterised by division with prominent nationalist clubs (Belfast Celtic or, since the late 1970s, Cliftonville) being pitted against unionist adversaries (Linfield, Glentoran, Portadown and so on), support for Celtic and Rangers adhering strictly to the sectarian contours of Northern Irish society and, at least in the recent past, Catholics supporting the Republic of Ireland's national side and Protestants favouring Northern Ireland (Fulton, 2005).^{xxii} The latter example is clearly particularly vexing if a peaceful future is postulated on the notion of cross-community integration.^{xxiii}

Amongst its many responsibilities, the ministerial advisory panel on football in Northern Ireland which was set up in October 2000 by Michael McGimpsey, who was then Minister for Culture Arts and Leisure, was asked to examine ways in which the game could be made more inclusive and, just as importantly, could be made to appear more inclusive. Recommendations that were made in response to this particular task included a new national stadium for Northern Ireland which would not be seen to 'belong' only to the unionist community, equal opportunities that would allow teams with predominantly nationalist support to progress through the competitive structure and a governing body that not only talks about the need for good community relations but is also an example of good practice in this respect.^{xxiv} Another suggestion that might have been made, but was not, was for the IFA to reconsider its use of "God Save the Queen" as the anthem played before international matches. None of these changes would have been certain to attract more nationalists to Northern Ireland international football games. On the other hand they were undeniably in the

spirit of an integrative approach to sports development. Whether or not it is right to continue to expect sports administrators to act in this spirit is, however, a very different matter.

The Good Friday Agreement which has been viewed as the cornerstone of the Northern Ireland peace process essentially adopts a consociational approach to peace-building.^{xxv} The two main traditions are allowed to cling to their competing constitutional aspirations. It is hoped that they will learn how to share political power. Yet there is very little attention paid to the need for them to share anything more than power – an identity perhaps, a way of educating children or the use of major sports and sporting spaces. It is as if, at the political level at least, the integration project has all but been abandoned in favour of living with difference. The problem is that this is not the message that is being sent out to the various elements of civil society, sports organisations included. Instead, as is reflected in the advice offered to the IFA by the ministerial advisory group, integration remains the preferred option. Furthermore, there are many who would agree that this is the best way forward for Northern Ireland as a whole, not necessarily pursued in isolation from the constitutional arrangements set out by the Good Friday Agreement but rather as an essential complement to these arrangements. The current political impasse suggests, however, that the Good Friday Agreement may well have served to institutionalise sectarianism to such an extent that the very idea of asking sport to put its house in order seems faintly ludicrous. In such circumstances, it is hard not to be sympathetic to sports administrators when they mouth the time honoured mantra that sport and politics do not mix and point out that they are offering people a place into which to escape from the real world. If the real world is represented by the kind of negative sectarian attitudes that have so seriously undermined the peace process, then sport in Northern Ireland, despite its failings, might indeed seem like a far, far better place., even for those men, and some women ,who have been most directly implicated in decades of political violence.

Ethical considerations

Only for a very short time was I involved in carrying out research while visiting the Maze. With the permission of the Senior Probation Officer, I conducted a series of interviews with LVF prisoners with their agreement. The focus of these interviews was the prevalence and symbolic meaning of tattoos amongst loyalist paramilitaries. This research was published in Spanish in 2001.^{xxvi} For the most part, however, my reason for being a regular visitor to the prison was to lead discussions with prisoners about sport and society.

In late 1995, I was approached jointly by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Community Relations Council of Northern Ireland to take part in a project whereby academics and others would talk with prisoners on a variety of subjects. The main aim was to capture the interest of those prisoners not currently taking advantage of the formal educational opportunities offered in the prison. It was felt that sport was a subject that was likely to attract the attention of this group as well as of prisoners already actively engaged in education. The subjects that I actually taught evolved over time with IRA prisoners asking if I would also lead sessions on political ideologies which I did, having first sought the approval of probation officers. Despite this shift of emphasis, however, my remit to teach rather than to conduct research. It is for this reason, that I feel the need to be circumspect in what I write in this essay. Only one prisoner will be referred to by name and he is now deceased. The conversations that are revisited here did take place but, with the one exception, the prisoners who took part in them will not be identified. I am also reluctant to use the word “terrorists” since this would be offensive to the men whose lives and thoughts are the focus of this essay. All of them, I feel confident in saying, would prefer the term “political prisoners”.

A Day in the Maze

My days in the prison began at around 8.30 in the morning. After negotiating the various security checks, I would spend around an hour talking with probation officers and other contributors to the informal education programme. At 10, I would be taken by one of the probation officers to the H Block where I would lead my first session of the day. After my arrival was announced to the Principal Prison Officer, I would enter one of the wings of the block through another series of gates. From that point onwards, I was alone with the prisoners with whom I was about to engage. Sessions would normally last for two hours at which point a probation officer would collect me and we would go for lunch. The same procedure was followed in the afternoon, albeit in a different H Block.

Normally a prisoner had been assigned to meet me, offer me a mug of tea and take me to where the sessions would take place, usually in a shared space but occasionally, if numbers were small, in what was known as the ‘big cell’. The turnout for sessions varied enormously with members of IRA attending in the largest numbers (up to thirty for a single session with prisoners coming from other wings of the H Block but not from other H Blocks, and members of the loyalist Ulster Defence Association (UDA) being the least engaged (with only three or four prisoners in attendance). I would begin each session with a brief introduction and then, as quickly as possible, we would move on to general discussion. Sport-related topics included sectarianism/sport in Ireland, national identity, gender, ‘race’, the politics of international football, the Olympics Games and so on. At around 5 in the afternoon, my day in the Maze was over. It was time to reflect on the prisoners’ sporting experiences and the ways in which their views on sport were connected to a broader political ideas which had either been central to or, on occasions, may have ran counter to those specific activities for which they had been incarcerated. My deliberations form the content of the remainder of this essay.

Playing sport in prison

My first session in prison was with a group of UVF prisoners. As I was led past the cells towards the communal area accompanied by one of the prisoners, I noticed that one had been turned into a weights room. I soon came to realise, not least by observing the body shapes of many of the loyalist prisoners, that “pumping iron” was a valued activity in both UVF and UDA blocks. This was far less apparent when I was with IRA prisoners. However, the main sporting activity offered to the prisoners was popular with republicans as well as with loyalist. This was football and nothing was allowed to come between the men and games which they were only informed about at short notice for security reasons. On one occasion, this was to have interesting and slightly uncomfortable consequences for me.

Arriving at a republican block one morning, I was surprised to be met, after a longer delay than usual, by a prisoner whom I had never been aware of seeing before. Once through the gates, I was told that the men whom I normally met had all been told a few minutes earlier that they could go out to play football. These were men who had customarily attended sessions in large numbers and had demonstrated considerable interest and extensive knowledge. On this occasion, the lure of football was too great and I spent the remainder of the morning ‘trapped’ on a sofa, eating toast, drinking tea and watching daytime television with prisoners who had no desire to have an intellectual discussion with a visiting academic. In light of this, it was a little surprising that some republican prisoners expressed their anger that they were only allowed to play “soccer” and not Gaelic football although some of them accepted that this had as much to do with practical considerations as ideology on the part of the prison authorities. One prisoner even went so far as to say that, although he had only ever

played Gaelic football in the past, being exposed to “soccer” in the prison had made him more interested in the game as a whole and he now followed it closely.

Loyalist prisoners and football fandom

My first session with UDA prisoners was intended to be about football and sectarianism in Scotland and Northern Ireland. I had to pass numerous prisoners on my way to the room where the session was to take place and noticed that most of them were wearing Rangers Football Club tops, tracksuits and jewellery. It came as something of a surprise, therefore, that only four men took part in the session, with one of them telling me that most of the men in the block were not really interested in sport. Not interested in sport or not interested in hearing a university lecturer criticising the songs sung at games involving their favourite team? I will never know but can only surmise.

The UVF prisoners left a very different impression on me. A small group of men attended sessions regularly. Only a handful of them took a serious interest in sport as players or fans. However, they were interested in learning more about sport’s social significance. Of the ones who had a more personal attachment, the chosen sport was football but unlike the majority of men in the UDA block, this tended to mean supporting teams in the Irish League, notably Linfield, Glentoran and Crusaders in Belfast and the mid-Ulster clubs, Glenavon and Portadown. What I inferred from this was a greater degree of affinity with Northern Ireland as opposed to some generic sense of Britishness which, for the UDA, coalesced around symbolic allegiance to Rangers.

Interestingly but not surprisingly, given the almost exclusively working-class roots of Ulster loyalism, none of the UDA or UVF prisoners expressed any interest in what are

perceived to be largely middle-class Protestant sport such as rugby union, (field) hockey and cricket. Boxing, on the other hand, was talked about with approval and with no obvious sectarian prejudice, reflecting, one suspects, respect for hard men but also for the willingness of boxers themselves to cross the sectarian divide.^{xxvii}

Republican prisoners, football and Gaelic Games

Although most republican prisoners were satisfied with the opportunity to play what some of them consistently referred to as “soccer”, there were still debates amongst them about the rival merits of this “foreign” pastime and Gaelic games such as football and hurling, not only as sports *per se* but also in terms of the relationship of each to versions of Irish nationalism. Battle lines in these discussions normally coincided with a rural/urban divide with prisoners from country areas more likely to make the case for Gaelic games whilst prisoners from the cities of Belfast and Derry were more inclined to favour “soccer” or what they termed “football”. The latter were usually supporters of Celtic Football Club in Glasgow and either Cliftonville Football Club in Belfast or Derry City. This division is widely replicated amongst the nationalist population of Northern Ireland as a whole. Exceptions exist, as they did in the Maze, but these only serve to prove the general rule.

Support for English football teams could become a more controversial matter. One prisoner, who regularly wore his Nottingham Forest shirt to sessions, was chastised by supporters of Gaelic games and Celtic alike. One prisoner even suggested that he could just as easily be English given his support for Forest, the fact that he read the *Mirror* newspaper and his love of *Coronation Street*, a television soap opera set in Manchester. His response to

his critics was to point out that what made him different from most working-class Englishmen was that he was a member of the IRA. With this, what had been a relatively heated discussion came to an end.

Perhaps the most interesting debate amongst IRA prisoners, not least in light of the peace process and the accompanying dissident republican violence, centred on the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland international football teams. It came as no surprise that few prisoners expressed any enthusiasm for the latter. Again this replicated attitudes amongst the nationalist community at large. Contrary to the general support for the Irish Republic, however, one prisoner commented that he could not bring himself to support either team because both were products of the partition of Ireland. The 26-county Republic of Ireland, in his opinion, was, or should be, as much of an anathema to Irish republicans as the six-county “statelet” of Northern Ireland. He longed for both a politically united Ireland and well as 36-county international football team. One of his fellow prisoners commented, only partly in jest, that given the attitudes that prevailed within the IFA, there was actually a greater likelihood of a united Ireland than a united Ireland football team. However, the main point had been clearly made. Republican prisoners, and the republican movement as a whole, were at odds in relation to the peace process and what it might mean for the ultimate goal of a 32-county republic.

The LVF

I approached my first meeting with LVF prisoners with more trepidation than I had experienced at any time since my first day in the Maze. The organisation had rapidly acquired a reputation for violence even in the murky world of loyalist paramilitarism where indiscriminate violence had long been commonplace. The LVF also had a charismatic, and

reputedly ruthless, leader in the form of Billy Wright. Such was the aura that surrounded 'King Rat' and his men that I was alone amongst the participants in the community relations project to agree to talk with them.

When I arrived for my first meeting, there was no sign of Wright, only an empty chair in the front row directly facing me. It did not take much to work out that this had been reserved for the leader who eventually came in and took his place, legs apart, muscles bulging, his numerous tattoos on show. Having announced that we would be discussing sport in Northern Ireland, I went on to suggest that none of the men would be likely to have any interest in or experience of Gaelic games. This was a little mischievous on my part as I had read that Wright had actually played some Gaelic football as a boy. He was quick to reinforce this, much to the surprise of most of his colleagues. I then asked if he still followed the game at all. He answered curtly that he did not and followed this up by explaining that the boy had become a man. These words were spoken in such a way as to make it clear that the subject was closed. Even more disconcerting, however, was a comment made by another LVF man on the first occasion that I visited the block after Wright's murder.

On entering the prison wing, I was invited first to inspect the small memorial that the prisoners had created for their fallen leader. Respect duly paid, we turned our attention to what I referred to as indigenous games and pastimes. I was thinking primarily of Native American pursuits but one prisoner, who spoke with a strong north Antrim accent, immediately mentioned hurling. Did he have something to tell me? I knew that it was unlikely that he had ever played this nationalist game but also that he had grown up in that part of the six counties of Northern Ireland where it is most popular. With this in mind, I commented that he presumably knew a bit about hurling. His answer forms part of the title of this essay. 'My first victim was a hurler' he said. He then "justified" the killing to his own satisfaction and the fact that the victim had played hurling was largely although perhaps not

entirely coincidental. Ironically, it was this particular prisoner who did most to help me conduct a small research project through which I sought to understand the reasons why loyalists are more inclined than republicans to cover their bodies with tattoos.^{xxviii} As with the UVF, many of the tattoos revealed support for local football teams, although notably in this instance mainly Glenavon and Portadown, reflecting the fact that there were fewer Belfast men in this organisation. Even in one-to-one interviews about their tattoos, it was unusual or any of the prisoners to discuss openly with me the nature of their “crimes”. However, I was made aware by probation officers of the reasons why some of them, loyalist and republican, had been jailed. With that information to hand combined with my own experience of talking with them about sport, how do now reflect on their commitment to political violence?

Conclusion

Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* was published in 1963.^{xxix} In it, she introduced the concept “the banality of evil”. Her thesis was that Adolf Eichmann, a leading architect of the Holocaust was neither a fanatic nor a sociopath. Instead, he was an extremely average person who was motivated by professional ambition rather than ideology. The word ‘banality’, in this context, is not used to suggest that Eichmann's actions were ordinary, or that there is a potential Eichmann in all of us, but simply that his actions were motivated by a sort of stupidity which was wholly unexceptional. Arendt never denied that Eichmann was anti-Semitic nor that he was fully responsible for his actions, but she argued that these characteristics were secondary to his stupidity.

I am not arguing here that the prisoners whom I met on a regular basis were stupid or that they are capable in any way with Eichmann and his fellow Nazis. I am more interested in

the word 'banality' in relation to the sheer ordinariness of these men's lives as reflected in their interest in and attitudes towards sport. Were any, or all, of them fundamentally evil? If they were then the banality of their evil was demonstrated on a regular basis, not least through their relatively ordinary interest in sport. They were capable of talking intelligently about the socio-political significance of sport. At the same time, when they talked about sport, they also did so as fans. Thus, sport was never dismissed by any of the prisoners I met as being of secondary importance to other matters - a diversion from the real world of politics. In fact, as our discussions revealed, politics was often presented as being intimately bound up with and embodied in sport cultures.

Would these men have contemplated engaging in acts of violence towards sport events if they believed that would serve their respective causes? Undoubtedly, they would. But this does not detract from the fact that, in prison, sport played as significant a part in their lives as it had done when they were at liberty. Everything stopped for football, even for those prisoners who had been brought up with Gaelic games. Discussions about the politics of sport rapidly turned into more banal conversations about sporting achievements.

Finally, it was a sporting reference that more than anything drew attention to the languor of long-term incarceration. Those people who regard the perpetrators of political violence as evil demand lengthy prison sentences or, indeed, the death penalty. Early release from life sentences is seen as unacceptable. But do such people ever consider what it is like to be in prison for 16 years? I was speaking one day with two relatively old republican prisoners about the upcoming 1998 FIFA World Cup Finals. I then happened to mention the 1982 Finals at which point one of the IRA men said, 'That was the first one we watched in here'. The jail sentences that terrorists receive might not be long enough to some. But as someone who can identify landmarks in my own life by reference to iterations of the World Cup, 16 years seems a substantial length of time.

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- ⁱ Atkinson and Young, “Shadowed by the corpse of war: Sport spectacles and the spirit of terrorism,” p.
- ⁱⁱ Giulianotti and Klauser, “Sport mega-events and ‘terrorism’: A critical analysis,” pp. 309-310.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred, Little Room. Making Peace in Northern Ireland* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), p. 313.
- ^{iv} Henry McDonald and Jim Cusack, *UDA. Inside the Heart of Loyalist Terror* (Dublin, Penguin, 2004), p. 11.
- ^v Colin Crawford, *Inside the UDA. Volunteers and Violence* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).
- ^{vi} Crawford, *Inside the UDA. Volunteers and Violence*, p. 213.
- ^{vii} Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 57.
- ^{viii} Steve Bruce, *The Red Hand. Protestant Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 197.
- ^{ix} Chris Anderson, *The Billy Boy. The Life and Death of LVF Leader Billy Wright* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2002).
- ^x Anderson, *The Billy Boy. The Life and Death of LVF Leader Billy Wright*, p. 62.
- ^{xi} See Anderson, *The Billy Boy. The Life and Death of LVF Leader Billy Wright*.
- ^{xii} Patrick Bishop and Eamonn Mallie, *The Provisional IRA* (London, Corgi Books, 1998).
- ^{xiii} Richard English, *Armed Struggle. A History of the IRA* (London, Macmillan, 2003), p. 109.
- ^{xiv} Denis O’Hearn, *Nothing But An Unfinished Song. Bobby Sands, the Irish Hunger Striker Who Ignited a Generation* (New York, Nation Books, 2006), p. 381.
- ^{xv} English, *Armed Struggle. A History of the IRA*, p. 381.
- ^{xvi} English, *Armed Struggle. A History of the* , p. 381.
- ^{xvii} Jack Holland and Henry McDonald, *INLA Deadly Divisions* (Dublin, Torc, 1994), p. 7.
- ^{xviii} Holland and McDonald *INLA Deadly Divisions*. p 33.

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- ^{xix} See Alan Bairner, “*Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland Revisited*,” in John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson, eds., *Power Games. Towards a Critical Sociology of Sport* (London, Routledge, 2002), pp. 181-195; Alan Bairner, “Still Taking Sides: sport, leisure and identity in Northern Ireland,” in Colin Coulter and Michael Murray, eds., *Northern Ireland After the Troubles. A Society in Transition* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 215-231; Alan Bairner, “Sport, the Northern Ireland peace process, and the politics of identity”. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*, 5 (4) (2013), pp. 220-229; John Sugden and Alan Bairner, *Sport Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1993).
- ^{xx} See Lincoln Allison, “Sport and Politics,” in Lincoln Allison, ed., *The Politics of Sport*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 1-28.
- ^{xxi} John Sugden and Scott Harvie, *Sport and Community Relations in Northern Ireland* (Coleraine: Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster, 1995).
- ^{xxii} Gareth Fulton, “Northern Catholic fans of the Republic of Ireland soccer team,” in Alan Bairner, ed., *Sport and the Irish. Histories, Identities, Issues* (Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2005), pp. 140-156.
- ^{xxiii} See Darragh McGee and Alan Bairner, “Transcending the Borders of Irish Identity? A Sociological Analysis of the Catholic Footballer in Northern Ireland,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 46 (4) (2011), pp. 436-455.
- ^{xxiv} Billy Hamilton, *Creating a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland* (Belfast, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, 2001).
- ^{xxv} See Bairner, “Sport, the Northern Ireland peace process, and the politics of identity”.
- ^{xxvi} Alan Bairner, “Masculinidad, musculatura y cristianismo en las representaciones corporales del unionismo del Ulster.” in Carolina Sanchez-Palencia and Juan Carlos Hidalgo, eds., *Masculino Plural: Construcciones de la Masculinidad* (Lleida, Universitat de Lleida, 2001), pp. 99-115.
- ^{xxvii} See John Sugden, *Boxing and Society. An international analysis* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996).
- ^{xxviii} Bairner, “Masculinidad, musculatura y cristianismo en las representaciones corporales del unionismo del Ulster.”
- ^{xxix} Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, Faber and Faber, 1963).

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