PRISON AS A LIBERATED ZONE: THE MURALS OF LONG KESH, NORTHERN IRELAND

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Abstract: In Northern Ireland’s Long Kesh prison in the late 1980s and 1990s, prisoners from each of the loyalist and republican groups painted highly politicized murals on the walls in their respective wings. This article seeks to examine these murals as both a symbol and a means whereby the politically motivated prisoners sought to appropriate the space of the prison for their own purposes. Their resistance, expressed in this and other ways, was not merely to the pains of imprisonment, the stripping of individuality and identity which was at the heart of the prison system. Rather imprisonment was seized as an opportunity to advance political understanding and build revolutionary structures whereby the prison was seen as one more front in their respective wars – that of republicans against the British state, and that of loyalists against republican insurgence. Each in their own way, republican and loyalist prisoners created virtual “liberated zones” within the prison and in doing so prepared for political power and conflict transformation on the other side of imprisonment.

Keywords: prison; resistance; murals; Long Kesh; liberated zone

Introduction

In 1991 when journalist Robin Kirk visited female Sendero Luminoso prisoners in Lima’s Miguel Castro Castro prison, she did so with permission from the Interior and Justice Ministries. But when she arrived at the entrance to the political prisoners’ section, she “had to get a different kind of permit, from the women themselves. No guard entered there; all visitors were subject to the rules and regulations imposed by the ranking leaders” (Kirk 1996). In this “liberated zone” she saw murals such as existed in various prisons where Sendero Luminoso and MRTA (Tu’pac Amaru Revolutionary Movement) prisoners were kept – El Frontón, Canto Grande and Lurigancho.1

Politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland’s main prison, Long Kesh/The Maze, also painted political murals in the 1990s. As the peace process gathered pace after the republican and loyalist ceasefires of 1994, I sought to enter the jail to photograph these murals. An approach through contacts to the OC (Officer

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Commanding) of the IRA (Irish Republican Army) prisoners led to an invitation from him. I managed to get an agreement in principle from the security governor that at some point I could visit the republican section to photograph the murals, but each approach led to the conclusion that “the time is not right at the moment”. On 27 December 1997, leading loyalist Billy Wright of the LVF (Loyalist Volunteer Force) was shot dead in the prison by prisoners from the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army). A few days later I phoned the security governor expecting to be told that if ever there was a right time, this was not it. To my surprise, he indicated that, as the spotlight of investigation was about to focus relentlessly on the prison, the likelihood of getting in at a later point was remote; I should come as soon as possible. I did so in January 1998.

In April 1998, the Good Friday Agreement, a peace agreement signed by all the major political parties in Northern Ireland, guaranteed the release of all political prisoners by the summer of 2000. Fearing (rightly as it turned out) that the murals would then be painted out, I became even more focused on photographing them. I contacted the OC of the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) prisoners, who, not wishing to be upstaged by the IRA, invited me in to photograph their murals in May 1998. Over the next year I entered the prison on six occasions and eventually got to document the murals of four of the groups: IRA, INLA, UVF and UDA (Ulster Defence Association).

On each occasion I was locked in with the prisoners and was released only when I went to the gates near the circle and called for a prison officer. On my last visit to the INLA, I was astonished to find that the keys to the section were held by their OC, who had also been one of the three men who killed Billy Wright; it was he who let me in and out.

The only group which did not reply to my request to photograph its murals was the LVF. However, when the murals in the prison were whitewashed with the release of the last prisoners, this wing was preserved intact. This was because it was designated as a crime scene for the purposes of an inquiry being held into the circumstances of Billy Wright’s death. Through contacts in the Northern Ireland Office, I was able to enter this wing after July 2000 to photograph the murals.

These two instances, an ocean apart, reveal key instances of political art by prisoners. I want to consider the Northern Ireland prison murals with a view to seeing what they can reveal in relation to the space that can be created by political prisoners for resistance to imprisonment.

**Imprisonment and Resistance**

From the denial of autonomy to the enforced control of every movement, from the invasion of privacy to the use of degrading and ill-fitting uniforms, prisoners are told
that their previous identity and patterns of behaviour are no longer acceptable and
should be abandoned (Scraton, Sim and Skidmore 1991: 59).

The effects of this deindividualization of the person by the totalizing institution
are painful to the point of mental breakdown or self-harm. The only way to counter
“the pain of confinement” (Boyle 1985) is through some process, no matter how
minimal, of reindividualization. The key issue is identity and self-worth. There
is a difficult tightrope to walk, accommodating to the system while avoiding
the subsequent deterioration of personality, intelligence and self-consciousness.
Cohen and Taylor (1992) itemize a number of options. Finding a routine is one,
but the problem there is of degenerating into obsession. Imagination and fantasy
is another response, but the danger there is depression. The prisoner can attempt
to find a middle way of expressing a sense of self-worth without drawing down
the wrath of the system. Depending on the strictness of the regime such “escape
attempts” (Cohen and Taylor 1992) are more or less difficult; the authoritarian
regime does not tolerate self-expression for fear of prisoner empowerment, while
the “liberal” regime may tolerate it in the interests of the smoother running of
the machine.

In looking at the political space for inmates to oppose the system, the difficulty
which arises is that of defining resistance (Friedrichs 2009). There is a theoretical
argument which denies the possibility of effective resistance in late modernity.
Thus Brown argues that resistance is

at best politically rebellious, at worst, politically amorphous... resistance by itself does
not contain a critique, a vision, or grounds for organized collective efforts... Resistance
goes nowhere in particular, has no inherent attachments, and hails no particular
vision; as Foucault makes clear, resistance is an effect of and reaction to power, not an
arrogation of it. (Brown 1995: 49)

But not everyone denies the possibility of resistance in the real world of total
institutions: “By resistance we mean an organized activity with far-reaching
goals...actions, or preparation for actions, that were undertaken in order to thwart
or mitigate management campaigns directed against all inmates or a group of
them” (Langbein 1994: 51). In this definition there are two essential elements:
organized and collective action, and intentionality.

For Stanley and McCulloch (2012: 5) there are four crucial elements to defining
resistance: opposition, intention, communication and transformation. Tellingly,
they conclude that seeing collective action as an essential element of resistance
is too narrow; at the same time, they are at pains to exclude each and every
individual act of inmate non-compliance from the definition of resistance also.
This goes to the heart of the matter. To put it starkly: is collective articulated
action against systems of total power always classifiable as resistance, and is
individual action doomed to have no value in terms of resistance? Taking prison riots as an example, it is possible to conclude that not all violence is protest and not all violent prisoners in riot situations are self-aware proletarian warriors. “...resistance should not be simply equated with rudimentary forms of political action and transformation” (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001: 506). On the other hand, even individualized action can be a form of resistance, as the example of Khaim prison, cited below, indicates.

Scott (1985: 22) has written about “everyday forms of resistance” in authoritarian regimes, such as “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth”. These forms of resistance “stop well short of collective outright defiance” (29); they do not venture “to contest the formal definitions of hierarchy and power” (33). In this view, everyday resistance is the “weapon of the weak” and is fatally limited as a result.

On the basis of such conclusions, it is possible to draw a rigid distinction between acts of resistance and acts of defiance or transgression. Carlton (2007: 130) points out that “transgressive acts often serve simple needs such as letting off steam or creating a situation to break the monotony of the daily routine...” And Bosworth and Carrabine (2001: 507) note: “Whether in school or prison, counter conduct can be motivated by pleasure, play, boredom as much as by anger and rage.” But to dismiss the political potential of transgression out of hand would be to miss the dialectic involved in power. As Bosworth (1999: 130) concludes, “Appreciating these subordinate acts as forms of critique demonstrates that power relations inside may not be as fixed or unchangeable as they first appear.”

First appearances, in short, can be deceptive when it comes to the meaning and value of individual acts of transgression. For example, is the individual prisoner who becomes involved in writing escaping into a safe mind-space or building up skills which may later be used to challenge the system? Is the prisoner who paints a portrait of Che Guevara challenging the system of imprisonment or reproducing a commodified image?

A corollary is that, even if the intentionality of the author could be determined, this is not the sole measure of the possible effect of an act. Writing of the Nazi concentration camps, Langbein (1994: 54) seems to prioritize intentionality: “A differentiation between an instance of resistance activity and merely mutual aid among friends and like-minded people depends on whether this aid was an end in itself or the foundation of an activity intended to transcend this group.” Yet, he later demonstrates that, even though individual acts of kindness and humanity in a concentration camp did not prevent the system going about its genocidal ends, they subverted one of its fundamental lies, the denial of subjectivity and humanity.

Thus, for all that it is possible to draw a distinction between resistance and mere defiance or transgression, defiance in the face of power should not be dismissed
as unimportant. There are ways in which even the most simple, non-revolutionary actions in authoritarian situations can be potentially radical in their effects, even unintentionally. More than that, such individual apolitical acts can be the bedrock on which politically motivated resistance is built. For example, in ante-bellum slavery in the United States, individual acts of love or friendship between slaves did not of themselves threaten the system, but they played a role in restoring a sense of worth and humanity without which collective acts of political resistance would not have been possible (Johnson 1967).

However, while not wishing to reject out of hand the potential effects of defiance, I want to focus on a tighter definition of resistance, one where there is a direct link between intentionality and action. This comes closer to the ideal type definition, where articulated resistance seeks to reappropriate the space denied by the system. In as far as it succeeds, it undermines the very logic of the total institution. And above all it is rooted in political consciousness or articulation.

There are many obstacles to success. A system devoted to the industrial scale elimination of populations is not easily diverted from within. An excessively authoritarian system of imprisonment contains few cracks which can be exploited for individual self-worth never mind collective political organization. Another obstacle to collective resistance is that there are divisions among the inmates. They may arrive in the system unacquainted with each other and separated from each other by chasms of class, ethnicity, habits and beliefs, and those divisions can be exploited by systems of authoritarian control; one obvious example is the case of Nazi concentration camps where most of the control of inmates was carried out by other inmates and uniformed guards were rarely involved on a day-to-day basis (Levi 1991). Building collectivity in a total institution can be an uphill struggle. On the other hand, as the case of African Americans like George Jackson (Jackson 1971) and Eldridge Cleaver (Cleaver 1991) in the 1960s and 1970s reveals, it is not impossible for someone to enter the prison as a criminal and become politicized by the experience of incarceration.

There is another scenario, however, that the inmates enter the system already part of a politicized collective, that in fact their participation in that collective is the basis of their incarceration. So, it is not a case of the system engendering resistance, but of resistance finding its footing and space in the system. This begins to come close to the ideal type.

A key example of such resistance is that of prisoners on Robben Island in South Africa. They sought to “dilute, circumvent or eliminate the imposition of unwelcome power” (Buntman 2003: 137). There was more than the pursuit of an easy life involved. The goal of political resistance was, firstly, survival, keeping the liberation movement alive, and secondly, beyond survival, building up the liberation movement in preparation for power. That required the appropriation of
space, in effect a liberated zone of sorts. “At the heart of prisoner resistance was the development of mechanisms to remove, to the extent that was possible in the prison governed by the regime, state control of the prisoners and introduce prisoner self-government instead…” (Buntman 2003: 165). The cracks in the system were not merely utilized – for example, the imposition of a work regime of breaking up limestone by hand provided the opportunity for prisoners to have lengthy political discussions – but also widened – thus, a four year struggle to be allowed to play soccer eventually led to in effect a meticulous training programme in organizing for those who would one day hold political office on the outside (Buntmann 2003; Suze 2010).

Such planned resistance is much more than simply defiance. Both entail agency. But resistance is not simply a response to imprisonment and its pains; it is also a rejection of the legitimacy of imprisonment in the first place. Resistance outside and inside are linked by common agency, with the result that the resistance is not simply to the fact of imprisonment or even the conditions of imprisonment, but to the system of the distribution and use of power itself of which imprisonment is one manifestation. For ANC prisoners it was the same system of Apartheid which manifested itself in both locations. For politicized African Americans in prison the same system of racism which confined them to ghettoes and to unemployment also disproportionately locked up Black males.

Resistance is part of a complex dyadic relationship (Stanley and McCulloch 2012: 8–10). As resistance reacts to power, so power responds by attempting to eliminate or at least contain resistance. It attempts this through the same mechanisms it employs with non-politicized, regular prisoners. It strives to remove the individuality of the inmate through the wearing of uniforms, the conferring of a prison number or the use of surnames to address prisoners. Indres Naidoo points out, on Robben Island:

Every warden and officer would tell us that prison regulations forbade us to use the word “we”, that we were in prison as individuals and not as a group, but we would persist in saying "we" and "us" when speaking to those in charge, however high their rank. (Cited in Harlow 1987: 151)

The system demands conformity to the rules no matter how trivial or arbitrary. It sanctions behaviour through granting privileges or withdrawing resources. Above all it limits or bans collective action. As the republican prisoners in Long Kesh realized, if the prison is a “breaker’s yard” for ordinary prisoners, destroying individuality, restricting agency and opposing collectivity, it was even more so for politicized prisoners who were intent on maintaining their political beliefs and organization as a challenge not just to the system of imprisonment itself but to the
wider system of power which prison upheld and protected (Feldman 1991: chapter 5). But as McConville (2001: 9) puts it specifically in relation to the Irish context:

An ordinary offender enters the criminal process shamed, isolated and vulnerable. The political offender, should his or her group of supporters and sympathisers be large and confident enough, embraces and transcends captivity. To know that one is cherished and respected revivifies the prisoner and directs a confrontational energy on the many irksome restrictions of institutional life. The balance of advantage shifts, with the prisoner becoming ever more assertive and the retreating administrator and his staff demoralised.

In considering art in prison, therefore, I intend to do so in the context of this dialectic. Given that, I will avoid the important debate over art therapy in prison. The main reason for this is that its fundamental premises are anathema to the kind of political prisoner I am considering. Prison inmates such as those in Miguel Castro Castro or Long Kesh did not see themselves as regular criminals but as politically motivated activists whose cause was just and whose violence was justifiable.

I also wish to avoid a focus on prison art as an individual pursuit – whether as escape, merely passing the time, or self-fulfilment. Again, the measure of this is the self-identity of politically motivated prisoners for whom prison is not a hiatus in political struggle, but another front in the war. In taking on the prison authorities as articulate members of a collective they viewed themselves as continuing the struggle they had carried out on the outside and for which they had ended up in prison. Their self-identity was as members of a collective.

Nor do I intend to look at tattoos (Hall 1997) and graffiti (Wilson 2008; Johnson 2007) in prison, nor indeed the ingenuity of prisoners worldwide in fashioning artefacts out of the most unlikely materials (Steinmetz 2009), including intricately decorated envelopes (Lepke 2007).

Lastly, although it is obviously a close phenomenon to prison art, I will not be focusing on prison writing. This has been well covered in the literature where the core of the argument is that in writing the prisoner can restore voice (Gready 1993), or, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o puts it, “defy daily the intended detention of my mind” (cited in Harlow 1987: 125). This can involve imaginative methods, such as writing on toilet paper like Kwame Nkrumah in James Fort Prison, Dennis Brutus on Robben Island, Abdilatif Abdalla in G Block, Kamiti (Harlow 1987: 126), and Bobby Sands in the H Blocks of Long Kesh (Sands 1998).

Instead, I want to see how politically aware prisoners can collectively create the space which allows politically articulate art to be produced despite their confinement in a total institution. The collective may be rigorously suppressed, as in Khaim prison, an Israeli prison in southern Lebanon between 1985 and
2000. Yet even here prisoners managed to create ornaments out of olive stones, carving minute designs by rubbing the stones against a wall for days, until their fingers bled. The designs did not depict political images or messages, yet it cannot be denied that in a situation where such activity was outlawed, the process can be seen as political resistance with the individual acts adding up to a collective rejection of the system’s rules.5

In short, my focus is less on the artistic expression per se than on what that expression reveals: an attempt by politically motivated prisoners to win back the space in which they are confined, to control it, to aspire to creating a liberated zone in the most inhospitable of environments.

Ireland and Prison: Resistance in the Breaker’s Yard

Resistance to colonial rule ensured that generations of Irish political leaders ended up in prison. In turn, inevitably, prisons became key sites for further resistance. The struggle came down to the clash between two definitions of the actions which led the prisoner to be incarcerated; the prisoners saw themselves as legitimate political activists, while the state viewed them as illegitimate – as criminals or felons or terrorists, depending on the era. This was not initially the case; in the 1840s the Young Irelanders were treated as gentlemen convicts (McConville 2001: 101–3). But a generation later, the treatment of Fenian prisoners in English jails, and especially that of Fenian leader Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, led to the government-appointed Devon Commission ordering his release in 1871 (O’Donovan Rossa 1991). A generation later again, the rebels of 1916 were accepted as a military force engaging the British military and were consequently treated as prisoners of war (McConville 2001: 450).

There was much less variation in the twentieth century. After the partition of Ireland in 1921, governments on both sides of the border strove to treat politically motivated offenders as regular prisoners, an imposition they rejected. To take the Irish Free State as an example: in the 1920s, republicans went on hunger strike to win the concession of being treated as prisoners of war (O’Donnell 1966; Gallagher 1967). In 1941 IRA man Sean McCaughey refused to wear a prison uniform in Portlaoise prison and spent five years wearing a blanket. Eventually, he went on hunger strike in pursuit of political status and died after 23 days (Flynn 2011).

The emergence of the most recent conflict in Northern Ireland saw the introduction of internment without trial in 1971 (McGuffin 1973). Between then and 1976, hundreds of internees were incarcerated in compounds where they wore their own clothes, had free association and made their own rules for order and cooperation (Adams 1990); they were recognized as political inmates.
When internment was phased out in 1976, the British government announced that in future politically motivated sentenced prisoners were to be treated as regular criminals. This policy change was, unsurprisingly, rejected by both loyalist and republican prisoners. It was the latter who set the pace in terms of resistance, refusing to wear the prison uniform and being clothed solely in towels and blankets; they became known as “blanket men” (Coogan 1987; Campbell et al. 1994). Eventually the protest escalated into a no-wash protest and then in 1980 and 1981, a series of hunger strikes. In 1981 ten prisoners starved to death demanding the return of the political status they had previously enjoyed (Sands 1990; O’Hearm 2006; Beresford 1987).

In the aftermath of the hunger strikes political status was eventually returned in all but name and the organization of each of the prison blocks came under the control of an OC (officer commanding) of the military group concerned – IRA (Irish Republican Army), INLA (Irish National Liberation Army), UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), UDA (Ulster Defence Association) and LVF (Loyalist Volunteer Force).

In August 1994, the IRA declared a ceasefire, followed six weeks later by the loyalist paramilitary groups. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 guaranteed the release of all remaining politically motivated prisoners by the summer of 2000, regardless of the length of sentence, provided it exceeded two years.

In this final phase, the prisoners came to control their wings, running them in effect as quasi-liberated zones. Republican prisoners in particular saw themselves not as casualties of war but as agents of change (Sharoni 2000). Their central demand was to be treated as a collective. In pursuit of this recognition, they viewed resistance not as the opposite of power but as the attempt to appropriate power (McEvoy 2001). They came closest to this ideal in the years after the hunger strike. Loyalist prisoners also saw themselves as prisoners of war, but as pro-state militants, identification with the greater system of power in the society meant it was more difficult for them to resist within prison (McEvoy 2001). However, what the republicans succeeded in doing in terms of transforming the prison system affected all the prisoners, including loyalists. Thus, when republican prisoners succeeded in winning back a form of political status in the mid-1980s its benefits were experienced also by loyalist prisoners.

Throughout these twists and turns, education, broadly defined, in the prison went through a number of phases. In the early 1970s, before the H Blocks were built and first, internees and later, convicted prisoners were housed in compounds or cages where political status existed, there was no formal education available. Inmates engaged in leather and woodwork, producing belts, wallets and miniature harps decorated with Celtic imagery (Devlin 1985). In addition, both loyalist and republican prisoners had intricate self-education regimes which involved military
and weapons instruction and history classes as well as political development (Novosel 2013; McKeown 2001). UVF former prisoners recount that Gusty Spence, founder of the organization and himself a prisoner, used to ask each of them as they entered the prison system, “What are you here for?” This was the first step on the journey of political awareness and development. UDA prisoners through the years gained the reputation for being the least committed to education, formal or self-taught. At the other end of the spectrum were the republican prisoners whose focus was on the history of Ireland and of republican struggle. Classes were regarded as compulsory for republican prisoners and were run in a hierarchical and didactic fashion. In the early days of imprisonment some republican prisoners were interested in reading about political struggles elsewhere, but the conservative leadership of the newly emerged Provisional IRA was not particularly happy with aspects of this development. Thus in 1974, the leadership ordered the burning of books on Marxism – as well as pornography (O’Hearn 2006: 53).

As the blanket protest, the hunger strikes and their immediate aftermath unfolded, the possibilities of formal education disappeared (McKeown 2001). But the deprivations of living naked except for a blanket, on 24-hour lock up without washing facilities, two to a cell whose walls were smeared with their own excrement, and where the only material objects were a mattress and such contraband as they were able to smuggle in paradoxically became in a very intense sense a liberation. This was Goffman’s “stripping” carried to an extreme. What it did was force the republican prisoners back on themselves. Without books, newspapers, radios, cassette players or computers, they had only one resource left: oral culture. Every prisoner had something to share: a story, a song, a few words of Irish, knowledge of some political struggle elsewhere. They gathered in the evenings close to their cell doors and told stories, taught each other Irish and had political discussions through shouting loudly for all to hear (O’Hearn 2009; Campbell et al. 1994). Bobby Sands in particular was noted for his ability to tell stories, once taking three weeks to recount Leon Uris’ historical novel Trinity from memory (O’Hearn 2006: 191). By dint of necessity, the form of education had changed. It was now collective rather than hierarchical, informal but highly effective. In their own way and through necessity the prisoners had discovered a form of education which was more Freire than Lenin. This was no theoreticist programme, but an organic development.

The experience was markedly different for loyalist prisoners. Although some had supported demands for the return of political status by going on a blanket protest for a time, they did not endure the mass and sustained experience of “stripping” that republicans had. Consequently, they did not develop equivalent techniques and attitudes to a liberationist form of self-development.
For republican prisoners the lessons learned during the blanket protest were carried over to the post-hunger strike period. The late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated what was possible in a prison whose wings they came to run independently. Not only did they embark on formal education courses through, for example, the Open University, but they continued their self-education programme through collective and egalitarian methods. This was not rote learning, but intense critical reflection (Sharoni 2000). By now they had the chance to include books by Freire in an impressive library where they could also read about political struggles elsewhere, socialist and Marxist ideas, women’s liberation, etc. (English 2000). Formal education for state examinations took place, but the epitome of their education was around collective politicization, including the creation of an Irish speaking wing in one Block (Mac Ionnrachtaigh 2013). In many ways the “culture of criticism” which they had developed was in advance of and set the pace for developments outside.

They reverted to the previous arrangements of the pre-blanket protest period, where each wing had its officer commanding who was the only person to deal directly with the prison authorities. And for their part, the authorities likewise returned to the status quo ante, rarely venturing into the wings where the cells were and then usually be prearrangement with the officer commanding. Despite confinement, the republican prisoners had retrieved a relatively liberated space, which they used to full advantage in many ways, including planning what became the largest prison escape in post-war European history.6 They exploited the space culturally as well. They produced a regular discussion journal, An Glor Gafa (The Captive Voice) which was sold outside, as well as a CD of republican songs (“Music from the Blocks”) and an oral history of their experiences during the no-wash protest and hunger strike (Campbell et al. 1994).

For their part, the loyalist prisoners meticulously recreated the paraphernalia of military marching bands – uniforms, drums, bannerettes – out of cardboard and cloth, smuggled in flutes and paraded in the narrow confines of the prison corridors. When broadcaster Peter Taylor was given unprecedented access to the loyalist wings and filmed these displays in 1999, this was the first time that the public realized the extent to which Long Kesh had become a partial “liberated zone” for political prisoners (Taylor 2000). Another obvious sign of this was the fact that all the political groups painted political murals.

The Irish Prison Murals

Long Kesh consisted of eight single storey blocks, each built in the shape of an H. The cross-bar of the H was the “circle” and contained the entrance hall and guards’ offices. Each arm of the H was built to house 24 prisoners in single cells measuring...
8 feet 3 inches (2.44 metres) by 7 feet 1½ inches (2.17 metres) along a narrow corridor (Purbrick 2004). Each wing also had a toilet and shower area, communal spaces such as a television room, a refectory, an education room and a “big cell” (a double-sized cell where prisoners could sit and relax together). There were murals painted in the communal areas and corridors, and occasionally in individual cells.

In the IRA wings there were murals on a relatively wide range of themes, by far the most common being Celtic mythology. Celtic maidens and warriors, including Cuchulainn, harpers, wolfhounds and Celtic designs appeared in at least a dozen of the murals on display in the late 1990s. Next in terms of quantity were memorial murals, including those which portrayed the ten hunger strikers who had died in the prison in 1981 (see Figure 1).

![IRA mural, H Blocks.](image)

Figure 1   IRA mural, H Blocks.

Most frequent, occurring in ten murals, was the smiling face of the OC of the IRA prisoners then, and the first to die on hunger strike, Bobby Sands. There were no military murals as such, although guns were displayed in a few – for example, a mural depicting the firing party giving the final salute over the coffin of a dead hunger striker. There were four murals on the Easter Rising, but no murals on any other historical theme; one depicted the scene in the General Post Office in Dublin during the Rising (see Figure 2).

Eight murals were on international themes, including the plight of native Americans, one quoting Sitting Bull (Tatanka Yotanka): “If we must die, we die
defending our rights.” Che Guevara was portrayed in four murals; in one of them he was part of a pantheon of international heroes, including Spartacus, Steven Biko and Oliver Tambo. Finally, there were five murals on aspects of Irish culture, including two in support of the Irish language in the Gaelic-speaking wing, named Gaeltacht na Fuisceoige.  

The most common theme in the murals in the two INLA wings in H6 related to Irish history, in particular the original republicans, the United Irishmen, in the late eighteenth century. One historical mural depicted the Easter Rising (see Figure 3). Portraits of dead leaders of the INLA, dressed in military-style black berets, including Dominic McGlinchey (see Figure 4) and Gino Gallagher appeared in four murals.

Other military images appeared in a few murals, including one which solely represented a meticulously painted Armalite rifle. There was only one mythological mural, depicting Cuchulainn, and only two on international themes, both portraying Che Guevara.

The predominant theme in the six UDA wings of H2 and H7 was the military activity of their organization; there were eight murals showing UDA/UFF men in action (see Figure 5). The most striking of these murals depicted Eddie, the mascot of heavy metal group Iron Maiden. Portrayed as a loyalist, he strides through a wasteland past crosses which bear the names of the IRA, the INLA and their
respective political parties, Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Socialist Party. Behind him is the Grim Reaper (see Figure 6). 

Figure 3  INLA mural, H Blocks.

Figure 4  INLA mural, H Blocks.

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Figure 5  UDA mural, H Blocks.

Figure 6  UDA mural, H Blocks.
Most of the other UDA murals (about six in number) referred to the organization either by name or through their flags, badges, emblems and slogans, such as “Simply the best”. Many of these murals also displayed weapons. Two murals commemorated dead comrades. In line with the UDA’s attempt to rebrand Cuchulainn as a defender of Ulster rather than a Celt, two murals depict the mythological warrior. And finally, one mural refers to the peace process underway outside the prison, labelling the two nationalist parties, Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party, as “Satan’s emissaries”.

In their six wings in H1 and H3, the UVF had an equal number of murals, five each, on two themes: the military activities of their organization and memorials to dead comrades. The former showed armed and masked men in action, while the latter usually displayed soldiers with downturned rifles flanking a roll of honour of the names of the dead. There were guns displayed also in other murals which mainly focused on flags and emblems of the UVF. Indeed guns figured also in murals which displayed the prison in which they were located – incongruously, armed and masked UVF men were painted within the confines of Long Kesh (see Figure 7) – and in the four murals which related to the turbulent period at the start of the twentieth century when the original UVF was formed to oppose Home Rule for Ireland and later fought at the Somme as the 36th (Ulster) Division of the British Army (see Figure 8). There was one banner which called for the release of prisoners – “Our only crime was loyalty” – which was the only pictorial display in the UVF wings which did not contain the depiction of a weapon.

Figure 7  UVF mural, H Blocks.
There were only about ten murals in the two LVF wings in H6. Most were quite small and depicted single flags – the Ulster flag, the Union flag and the flag of St Andrew of Scotland. There were a number of slogans displayed at various points, including “KAI” (Kill all Irish). The most prominent mural was a portrait of dead LVF founder Billy Wright, flanked by a soldier with bowed head and downturned rifle (see Figure 9).

While all the murals mirrored the equivalent murals in loyalist and republican areas outside the prison, the overlap was most obvious in relation to the loyalist murals; the predominant theme both inside and outside the prison was the valorization of the armed activity of the respective military groups. During this period, and indeed for a long time afterwards, it was difficult for loyalist muralists to expand the range of themes on which to paint. One reason for this was that, as self-defined defence organizations, they were relatively light on political ideology beyond that function; this was especially true for the UDA. Hence, their prison murals were exact replicas of outside murals. In fact, in one instance, that of Eddie and the Grim Reaper, the first such mural was painted inside the prison and later copied outside. The UVF had slightly more scope, artistically and politically. Although there was not an unbroken link between them and the original UVF, formed in the early twentieth century to oppose Home Rule, the fact that they
shared the name allowed them to paint about the sacrifice of the original UVF, reconstituted as the 36th Ulster Division, at the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

Republican muralists inside the prison and outside had more scope for artistic imagination. History, myths of origin, international struggles and heroes, current affairs – all these could be translated into pictorial messages. Hence, the republican prison murals overall, and the IRA murals in particular, had much less stress on armed activity, although it is clear that the hunger strikers, frequently displayed, were imprisoned for involvement in armed activity. The INLA prison murals were more likely to depict guns and gunmen than the IRA murals. In part, this was because of the INLA’s need, as a much smaller organization, to distinguish itself firmly from the IRA. The INLA also viewed itself as more ideologically sound than the IRA, its Marxist-Leninism more doctrinal than the Third World Liberation view held by many IRA inmates.

The republican prison murals were stronger on historical themes than the loyalist murals, and much stronger in relation to mythology. One exception to the
latter rule was the UDA’s refashioning of the myth of Cuchulainn, usually upheld as a republican hero, in a few of their murals. But there were no equivalents of the Celtic imagery apparent on the republican wings. Similarly, there was a stark difference in relation to international references, with loyalist murals having no such references, but republican murals, and particular those on the IRA wings, having many.

The murals speak of a differential relationship to the state. But that is sometimes depicted obliquely. There are no “Brits Out” slogans in the republican murals and, even though it is clear that the guns lovingly painted in INLA murals are turned towards the state and its forces, it is left to the viewer to read that message between the lines, as it were. Instead republican murals, and especially those of the IRA, indicate the legitimacy of their cause from their point of view. That is reinforced by reference to other causes where oppressed groups have taken up arms against authoritarian and repressive regimes. Loyalist murals spell out more directly who the enemy is. Believing themselves an extension of state forces in combating republican terrorists, loyalist muralists express a sense of indignity that loyalists should be locked up for expressing their loyalty. Their guns are pointed clearly towards republicans and nationalists – “Satan’s emissaries” as one UDA mural puts it; another mural has crosses symbolically marking the graves of the IRA, the INLA and their respective political parties, Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Socialist Party. In these ways, the loyalists depict their sense of legitimacy and pride, that they carried out the state’s task more effectively than state forces, bound by the niceties of law, could ever do.

These murals are clearly about political identity and the expression of that in alien circumstances. But there is much more involved. As politicized prisoners, republicans and loyalists, and particularly the former, were intent on maintaining their political beliefs and organization as a challenge not just to the system of imprisonment itself but to the wider system of power which gave rise to their imprisonment in the first instance. In that battle for control, cultural artefacts such as the murals became both a sign and means of the prisoners’ appropriation of space and power. What was involved in the painting of murals was thus not simply art, but resistance.

**Conclusion**

The focus in this article on the prison murals of Long Kesh has not been for the purposes of considering the therapeutic or self-expressive advantages of art in prison. Nor have the murals as artefacts been considered as art per se. Instead, they have been viewed as a product and indeed emblem of the struggle which went on in Northern Ireland prisons between the prison authorities and politically motivated
prisoners. The goal of the system was to contain the prisoners and, on occasions, to break their political ideology and solidarity. For their part the prisoners saw their goal as resisting being criminalized or broken by the system. They were intent to preserve their collective political identity which led to their imprisonment in the first instance. In this light, they viewed prison not as a hiatus or as a place where they were biding their time, marginalized from political struggle. On the contrary, they came to view prison as the cockpit of struggle to the point where many now conclude that the peace process started in the prison, in the political discussions and collective education which were prevalent there.

The experience of prison for political prisoners in Northern Ireland was one of political awakening and development. The need to create and expand that psychological space was matched by an intent not simply to resist the prison rules but also to expand control of the physical space, to make the prison, in as far as possible, a “liberated zone”. The murals were at once a tactic and a symbol of that strategy. In a situation where the prison officers did not regularly enter the wings, the prisoners had taken the space to paint on the walls without censorship. For the loyalists, this meant mainly painting about their “armed struggle”, while for republicans it allowed them to paint of Irish history, mythology and culture and their identification with liberation struggles elsewhere. Like sport on Robben Island, the murals of Long Kesh became one element in the prisoners setting the agenda for the wider political movement and at the same time preparing for power on the other side of imprisonment.

For many reasons there are differences between the experience of loyalist and republican prisoners in this regard. The closest that Long Kesh came to a “liberated zone” on a par with prisons such as Miguel Castro Castro prison in Peru was in the republican wings in the 1990s. Forced to survive the brutality of the blanket protest and hunger strike in their bid to re-establish political status, they derived a radical approach to self-development and self-government. The vision may have seemed to outsiders as utopian, but for a while it became very real. Buoyed by these developments, republican prisoners came to see themselves as an unstoppable force and carried that enthusiasm and determination with them when they emerged to commit themselves to the task of conflict transformation.

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These “liberated zones” proved fertile ground for fiction writers – Isbell (2009), Bennett (1992) – and film makers – such as La Trinchera Luminosa del Presidente Gonzalo (The Shining Trench of Chairman Gonzalo) by Argentinian director Jim Finn (Kuehner 2007). A decade later FARC prisoners in Modela Jail, Bogota controlled the north wing “where the cellblocks are decorated with giant murals depicting fallen comrades and rebel commanders” (Hodgson 2001). The “liberated zones” were not to last. In 1992, newly-elected President Alberto Fujimori moved to take control of the prisons. Forty-two prisoners in Miguel Castro Castro prison died as a result (Kirk 1996).

The murals of H7 survived until 2002 when they were recorded by Purbrick (2011).

Art therapy in prison is intended as “a tool for rehabilitation and management” (Johnson 2008) which allows the sublimation of libidinal and aggressive tendencies (Gussak 2004), perhaps particularly in women (Delshadian 2003). It can alleviate emotional stress for disturbed, violent criminals (Gibbons 1997) and in doing so ensure that prisoners are easier to control (Djurichkovic 2011). Whether by intention or design such programmes do not encourage resistance.

Consequently, instances such as the Last Supper mural painted in Folsom Prison’s Greystone Chapel by Ralph Pecoror in the 1930s (Brown 2008), the six murals painted in San Quentin prison in the 1950s by Alfred Santos which portray the history of California from indigenous times (Hall 2007), or the religious murals painted between 1942 and 1943 by Stanley Warren, a prisoner-of-war in the Japanese Changi prison in Singapore (Cornelius and Wee 2008) will not be considered. Similarly, there are examples of subversion through art which are being excluded by focusing on a politically articulate collective, such as the five murals painted secretly by Auschwitz prisoner Jean Bartichand on the walls of the Goleszów cement factory which depict slave labour in the factory (“The People of Goleszów Remember the Prisoners of Golleschau, an Auschwitz Sub-Camp”, http://en.auschwitz.org.pl/m/index.php?Itemid=8&id=122&option=com_content&task=view – accessed 8 January 2013), and the needlework by Tony Casdagli, a British inmate of a German prisoner of war camp in the 1940s, which contains Morse code insults against Hitler (Barkham 2011). Even the paintings of jailed artists and political activists like Burma’s Htein Lin will be excluded. Against all the odds, he managed to smuggle paints into prison and, using fingers, syringes, etc. in the absence of access to brushes, completed 200 paintings during a seven year sentence; http://www.hteinlin.com/ (accessed 8 January 2013).

Prisoners in Chile did the same with avocado stones (Adams 2009: 2). Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails have been able to engage in the production of more political artefacts, which are displayed in Abu Dis, the Palestinian Museum of Prisoners (Mendel and Steinberg 2011). The collective may be putative rather than immediate: a prime case is that of Aboriginal art in Australian prisons. Even though “the prison provides the prehistory of urban Aboriginal art” (Kleinert 2001: 6), this art work has never managed to seriously challenge the prison system.
References


