

**BACKGROUND:**  
Before 1976 republican prisoners were granted what was known as SPECIAL CATEGORY STATUS. This viewed them as 'political prisoners.' As such they were allowed certain privileges such as the right to wear their own clothes or associate together in prison.

The British government reviewed this situation and decided that they were introducing TWO new security policies.

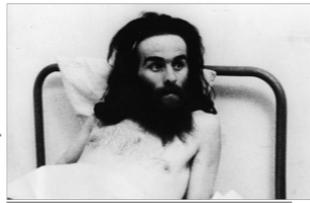
1) **ULSTERISATION:** this intended to gradually remove the British troops from Northern Ireland as they were regarded as now being part of the problem with a great deal of nationalist antagonism towards them. This followed events such as internment, the falls road curfew and Bloody Sunday. The RUC (police) and a new local regiment called the UDR (Ulster Defence Regiment) would replace the British army.

2) **CRIMINALISATION:** This second policy was designed to end Special Category Status. It wanted all prisoners to be seen not as political prisoners but common criminals. In this way it was hoped to starve PIRA of some of its propaganda. It was also concerned that prisoners associating together was actually leading to greater organisation in the long run. It would reduce this as well as make them do prison work and wear prison uniform, like other prisoners. The British government also began to build a completely new prison to house these prisoners. It was called the MAZE prison and the prisoners were housed in H Blocks

**REACTIONS.**  
Republican prisoners were deeply angry at this. They regarded themselves as political prisoners and were determined to keep their special category status. This would lead to a long and deadly battle of wills



**1) BACKGROUND**



HUNGER STRIKES

**2) WHAT HAPPENED?**

**PROTEST CAMPAIGNS**  
Republicans started a long campaign of protests designed to get concessions from the British government on these issues.

- 1) **BLANKET PROTEST:** they began by refusing to wear prison uniform. They wore blankets instead
- 2) **DIRTY PROTEST:** they then began to refuse to wash and smeared their excrement on the walls of their cells.
- 3) **PROTESTS:** outside the prisons, republican sympathisers across the world staged protests in support of the prisoners.
- 4) **ATTACKS** Attacks on prison officers took place with many killed or injured
- 5) **FIRST HUNGER STRIKE:** the use of the hunger strike was a potent weapon in republicanism. It had been used in 1920 by Terence mcswiney, republican mayor of cork who starved himself during the war of independence. However, the first attempt at hunger strike was not successful. It was tried with large numbers and got little results. This would be transformed when the PIRA commander in the prison, Bobby Sands changed the strategy completely.



**3) HOW DID THE HUNGER STRIKES END?**

Sands 6 Mar 81 66 days	Maguire 12 Mar 81 59 days	O'Malley 23 Mar 81 43 days	McCreesh 23 Mar 81 43 days	Shanley 18 July 81 42 days
Thornley 13 July 81 46 days	Conroy 3 Aug 81 75 days	Shanley 7 Aug 81 75 days	McDonnell 8 Aug 81 61 days	Shanley 10 Aug 81 66 days



**1981 HUNGER STRIKE**  
Bobby Sands transformed the hunger strike into a much more successful strategy. Instead of a mass hunger strike he introduced **STAGGERED HUNGER STRIKES** with volunteers going on strike over intervals to increase the pressure on the British government.

The hunger strike however faced a very tough opponent- Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher had saw one of her closest advisors killed by republicans and she was also completely opposed to doing any deals with those she saw as terrorists. This would therefore be a deadly battle of wills.

**10 KEY RESULTS OF THE HUNGER STRIKES**

- 1) TEN Republican prisoners died and would be regarded as martyrs in republican circles
- 2) violence spiralled out of control with up to 60 murders taking place in the period of the hunger strikes. Tensions between unionist and nationalist communities were at an all time breaking point
- 3) Thatcher would herself become a target of the PIRA in the Brighton bombing of 1984 which came close to killing her.
- 4) Many unionists regarded the prisoners as terrorists and murderers and were glad Thatcher had not conceded. Although they were unhappy with the end result.
- 5) Many nationalists felt further alienated from the British state
- 6) support for PIRA grew
- 7) Support for Sinn Fein grew significantly
- 8) Support for the more moderate nationalist SDLP began to drop and its leader Gerry Fitt lost his seat to Gerry Adams
- 9) The British and Irish government were concerned about the loss of moderate support and began working towards what would become the Anglo Irish Agreement
- 10) Sinn Fein realised the success of the electoral process through Sands victory . They began a dual campaign of the armalite (gun) and ballot box (election) which they would adopt in their drive towards a United Ireland



The hunger strikes did not end with bobby Sands death. TEN HUNGER STRIKERS would die altogether before they were called off in October 1981.

It appeared as if Thatcher had won. In a carefully choreographed move however, a few days after the strikes ended, the republicans were granted several of their key demands

- they could wear their own clothes
- they could freely associate
- visits would be relaxed
- they could still retain their 50% chance of remission

These concessions however came at a very high cost.

**WHAT WERE THE HUNGER STRIKERS 5 DEMANDS?**



**BOBBY SANDS ELECTION**  
Even with the array of protests and the hunger strikes, it looked as if the campaign was not having much success. However, in Fermanagh the local nationalist MP, Frank Maguire, died. This was seen as the perfect opportunity to show support. Bobby sands was put up to be candidate and won the seat in the British parliament while in prison and well into his hunger strike.

**BOBBY SANDS DIES**  
66 days into his hunger strike Bobby Sands died. His funeral was attended by over 100,000 people illustrating how the issue had won over many nationalists.

