

The paradoxes of “the shadow of fear”: supposed and real consequences of internment without trial in Northern Ireland

Using Prime Minister of Northern Ireland William Faulkner’s speech announcing the implementation of internment without trial on August 9th, 1971, we will discuss the security and political implications of this operation.

Indeed, internment had been debated since the beginning of the “troubles” in 1969, particularly after the arrival of the British military did not suffice to pacify the situation, both by the Northern Irish authorities, the British government, and remained presented as a “gamble” by political figures until its implementation.

Internment without trial has a strong historical and legal precedent in Ireland, just as the emergency regulations governing it; after being used by the British during the civil war (1916-1922) and during the IRA Border Campaign (1956-62), it has been identified as a staple tool of the repression of republicans. Even so, the colonial nature in which this device is implemented is not only political criticism on the part of the opposition: the framework of detention and internment for nationalists has been tried out by the British security forces throughout its disintegrating Empire, particularly in Kenya and in Aden. It is worth highlighting that this implementation is overseen, if not directed, by the British authorities in London (i.e. Prime Minister, along with the Secretary of State for Home Affairs & the Minister of Defence), who wield the threat of direct rule – as such, the existence of the Northern Irish civil authorities, who are challenged internally as well, is at stake.

By presenting the debates surrounding the decision to carry out internment, and the expectations laid out in archival documents¹, we will show how internment is thought to lead to the pacification of the growing insurgency, fed by the crystallisation of antagonisms since 1969. The main argument developed by the authorities is that the removal of (supposedly) specific republican men from the public sphere will put an end to violence. Detention without trial is as such presented as the only tool enabling the local Northern Irish authorities, and the British government with them, to regain control of the situation in the province and downscale the antagonisms at play on the streets. However, a close study of the military archives shows a strong hesitation on the part of the general command to support internment, and the clear awkwardness of political aides discussing a political decision that must not be acknowledged. The display of Faulkner’s apparent care for the safety of the minority, which he wants to free from the “shadow of fear” embodied by the nationalist paramilitaries and activists, is thus already undermined.

After being gathered in temporary holding centres overseen by the military, the men arrested on August 9th, 1971 are progressively transferred to two internment zones: the HMS Maidstone, a military vessel docked in Belfast, and Long Kesh internment camp, a former military base turned prison. As we will show through an analysis of interviews², the latter becomes the main centre in late 1971 and, known as “The Cages”, will act as a

¹ The National Archives, CJ4/56 (1971-1972); TNA, CJ4/102 (1972); TNA, CJ4/80 (1971); TNA, CJ4/57 (1972); TNA, CJ4/22 (1970).

² Interviews of former internees, prisoners and activists, conducted by the author in 2024 and 2025 in Belfast.

politicizing space for the republican movement from 1971 to the late 70s, as it gathers all of them in the same space in which they not only build their political line, but also educate themselves – it will later be dubbed “guerrilla university”. While they remain in detention, sometimes for years, the riots, the attacks from loyalist-unionist groups as well as the raids and searches conducted by the security forces keep increasing, leading to the deadliest year of the Northern Irish conflict (1972) and laying the foundations of a conflict that will last almost three decades (1969-1998). A decade later, men from “the Cages” would stand for election after their comrades led the deadliest hunger strike in the country’s history (1981), with firm support from the community.

Our presentation will then endeavour to show how the ambitions of internment, both as they were discussed secretly and as they were given to the public, backfired remarkably. Indeed, not only did internment, far from its original objectives, allow for a strong radicalization of the men who were arrested, but it served as a rallying cry for civil rights leaders, nationalist politicians, and the whole catholic-republican community.

We will thus offer an analysis of internment as a catalyst for political violence and the aggravation of the conflict and will surmise that by targeting individual physical bodies to control the wider body politic, this detention policy sped up the constitution of a protesting minority community, as it would in turn offer new bodies to the ongoing struggle.