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Enemies Within and Without

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Margaret Thatcher: Either Hated or Loved in Northern Ireland

During the post Second World War period, the Northern Ireland conflict known as ‘The Troubles’ is one most people often forget or know little about. This conflict lasted roughly three decades, with its roots going back centuries. Unfortunately, these deep sentiments and attitudes are still unresolved today with some members of both sides of the communities in Northern Ireland. From the pro-Irish perspective, also referred to as the ‘Irish Republicans’ or ‘Nationalists’, The Troubles were viewed as a civil rights movement and unification with the Republic of Ireland. The conflict in the perspective of the Pro-British community, also referred to as the ‘Unionists’, viewed the Irish struggle for union with the Irish Republic as a domestic terrorist operation to separate Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom (Connolly 1).

In a speech to the people of Belfast in 1981, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stated, “Those terrorists will carry their determination to disrupt society to any lengths. Once again, we have a hunger strike at the Maze Prison in the quest for what they call political status. There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing, and criminal violence. We will not compromise on this. There will be no political status” (Thatcher Speech Belfast 1981). This quote summarizes Thatcher’s firm stance during the period of The Troubles, an unfortunate series of events that dominated the second half of the twentieth century in Northern Ireland. In the context of the

ongoing hunger strikes by IRA prisoners, Thatcher's statement solidified her decision to not grant the IRA prisoners special political prisoner status.

Margaret Thatcher, also known as the 'Iron Lady' of Great Britain, was the Prime Minister for eleven years and was influential in defining British politics and views towards Northern Ireland. The decisions that Thatcher made over three decades ago left a legacy and shaped future British politics.

In the present day, Thatcher is often regarded as one of the United Kingdom's best Prime Minister (Schofield 1). However, some of her decisions in Northern Ireland were very unpopular and even disdained in the Irish-Republican communities. Thatcher's policies during this time were aimed at countering the Republican Irish movement, but they also deepened divisions within an already tense country. Thatcher's hardline policies consisted of military raids on nationalist communities, the controversial use of internment by the British military and the police, and the denial of special prisoner status to IRA prisoners. Thatcher's harmonious relationship with the police, including the Guildford Four trials, further angered the nationalist population. Ultimately, Thatcher's approach not only failed to resolve the tensions in Northern Ireland but also worsened the relationships between the two conflicting communities (Mallie 1).

"We never count our chickens before they are hatched, and we don't count No.10 Downing Street until it is thatched" (National Library of Scotland 1). These words were said on the morning of the third of May 1979 by Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher went on later that day to have a resounding victory against James Callaghan of the Labour party. Becoming the prime minister for Thatcher was a win in and of itself as she became the first woman prime minister elected in Great Britain, and the first prime minister elected in Europe (UK Government1). She was also the longest-serving prime minister since 1827, with three terms. However, Thatcher's gender was not a selling point of the conservative party, but it did go in their favor. Leading up

to the election of 1979 was the 'Winter of Discontent', which was the name given after many labor and trade union strikes from November 1978 to February 1979 (Lopez 1). The strikes during this time were a burden of inconvenience to the public, especially considering Great Britain had its coldest winter in over sixteen years. This, along with other policies from the Labour Party gave way for a conservative takeover in the spring of 1979, and ultimately Thatcher to Ten Downing Street (Digital National Library Scotland). Margaret Thatcher's policies and leadership style are today known as 'Thatcherism.' Part of this strategy was her attempt to neo-liberalize the United Kingdom and encourage its citizens to be more self-independent. Following her rise to power, Thatcher reduced the spending on social services, making citizens solve their own shortcomings. While not opposed to the welfare state, Thatcher wanted to reduce its misuse and dependency on the system (Gough 1).

Thatcher also ended excessive government influence on the British economy. Thatcher's policies also reduced the power within the trade unions by making it more difficult for them to strike legally (Gough 1). Thatcher did this by having the unions hold a ballot among their members before any action. This resulted in the lowest number of strikes across Great Britain in over thirty years (Tolpuddle 1). In a way, Thatcher was attempting to establish a libertarian movement, with its citizens affirming a more individualistic society. Thatcher said on a few occasions that a lot of her neo-liberal and libertarian views came from her Methodist upbringing (Rossell 1).

When Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, tensions in Northern Ireland were extremely strained due to the developing conflict. What first began as a civil rights movement for the Irish-republican communities in the 1960's, later evolved into a violent struggle against British oppression. The originally peaceful conflict started in the 1960's as a civil rights movement from the Irish-Republican communities in Northern Ireland quickly developed into a closely followed chain of events worldwide (Alpha History 1).

However, the British governments response included a heavy military presence, strong use of law and order, and violence. As a result, this increased support for the IRA.

From a civil rights perspective, the Republicans were upset with the current lack of political representation and discrimination in the workplace and public sphere in Northern Ireland (Alpha History 1). Many of the common protests during this time were organized with the goal of seeking equal rights, and to end the government's policy of internment without trial.

On the tragic day of January 30, 1972, now known as 'Bloody Sunday,' a peaceful demonstration in Derry/Londonderry was organized to protest the newly implemented Law of Interment by the Stormont government (Britannica 1). Thousands of people, which included families and young children, attended the demonstration. Fearing a violent upheaval from the demonstrators, the British military deployed troops to the Creggan and Bogside area of Derry (Melaugh1). As the demonstrations progressed, and with tensions escalating, the British Army's controversial Parachute Regiment began to fire at the demonstrators. Later, the regiment claimed their lives were at threat and amid the shooting, killed thirteen (later fourteen as one died of his injuries) with many others being injured during the strife.

The Parachute Regiment's actions on 'Bloody Sunday' were not a standalone incident and not the first time the Parachute Regiment has been under controversy (Ballymurphy Massacre 1). Roughly five months earlier, the same regiment shot eleven Irish-Catholic civilians near the Northern Ireland capital in West Belfast. Among the deceased was a Catholic Priest, Father Hugh Mullan, who was administering last rites to a dying civilian. To have no misinterpretations of his intentions, Father Hugh waved a white handkerchief in the middle of Springhill while he prayed for the dying (McClements1). This is now known as 'The Ballymurphy Massacre.' The coroner's report from the UK parliament from 2021 found that all of those killed in the massacre were "without justification" (Lewis1). An apology was made one

decade earlier when the then British Prime Minister David Cameron apologized to the people of Derry. Cameron was quoted during his speech saying, “What happened should never, ever have happened... I am deeply sorry” (Seligson1). Because of these two unlawful instances, many people rose to support the nationalist paramilitaries such as the IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) to help rebel against the viewed tyrannical British government (History 1). This provoked the British government to respond with an even stronger military presence. This, along with the already prejudice laws such as interment, made support for the IRA a simple choice for those among the Irish-Republican communities.

Shortly after Thatcher was elected prime minister, her cabinet adopted tough measures to suppress the republican movement (Connolly 1). Thatcher believed that tough measures, through police and military action, was the right way to combat the IRA. She prioritized security measures over negotiations (Pearl 1). Over time, Thatcher’s government funded and pushed for the ulsterisation of the police in Northern Ireland. This became known as the ‘Royal Ulster Constabulary’ (“RUC”) (RUC Foundation 1). The aim of ulsterisizing the police force was to support local policing in dealing with the problems in Northern Ireland. Thatcher’s government believed funding and recruiting a more local police force would be more representative of the local community. While to some this seemed like a satisfactory solution, it had unintended repercussions.

In some cases, RUC police officers from Northern Ireland were more aggressive towards the Irish-Catholic communities than the British military, leading to angry tensions and deep mistrust of the RUC (Caparini 1). Thatcher wanted and needed to prove Britain’s strength, and law and order through the RUC to uphold an image of power. By doing so, she simultaneously sent a political message of an ‘iron fist’ of control and stability during a time of a severely fractured society (Thatcher Speech Belfast 1). That said, Thatcher’s strategy of keeping law and

order was criticized and contributed to the two conflicting communities in Northern Ireland. Thatcher's intolerance of rebellion contributed to Irish-Republican communities sympathizing with the IRA campaign.

Margaret Thatcher's government met strong disapproval over the false convictions of the Guildford Four and Maguire Seven. Two groups of mostly Northern Irish men and women were falsely accused of being IRA bombers in England. In both instances, the accused underwent aggressive police practices, including physical abuse, threats to family members, and extended interrogations without legal counsel. Because of the policy of internment, the RUC could detain a suspect for up to seven days at a time based off mere suspicion, which often leads to false confessions. (Melaugh 1) The Guildford Four and Maguire Seven were sentenced to prison ranging from fourteen years to life, despite no concrete evidence connecting them to the bombings. The cases of Guildford Four, Maguire Seven and many others proved the systemic issues within the British Judicial system during The Troubles. While these convictions were eventually overturned, the trauma endured was unforgettable to those who were wrongfully incarcerated.

The cases being overturned also confirmed the suspicions and distrust of the RUC throughout the republican communities. Thatcher's refusal to acknowledge the injustice of these trials and the faults of her government further angered Irish communities across Northern Ireland (Mallie 1). Gerry Conlon, one of the 'Guildford Four,' vividly recounted his abuse during interrogations, "They dragged me out of the car, forced me to my knees and put a gun in my mouth. They told me to make my peace with God. I thought they were going to shoot me" (Socialist Worker 1). We have come a long way in the fight against terrorism. "We have made great strides in getting back to normal policing throughout Northern Ireland. The task is not yet

done. But we can all have full confidence in the steadfast dedication of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and of the Army, including your own Ulster Defence Regiment, to carry it through” (Margaret Thatcher Foundation 1).

The following case of the ‘Guildford Four’ and ‘Maguire Seven’ proved that Thatcher was more focused on keeping national security with a tight grip rather than repairing cases of injustice (Mallie 1). These unfortunate cases shed light on the need for reforms in the British judicial system, but Thatcher’s government supported a strong stance of law and order throughout her three terms as prime minister. Thatcher's steadfast decisions inadvertently increased support for the IRA. Support for the IRA was never constant for everyone in the Irish nationalist communities in Northern Ireland, as it fluctuated based off current events and incidents. Incidents like the ‘Bloody Sunday Massacre’ and treatment of the ‘Guildford Four’ and ‘Maguire Seven’ united nationalist communities in Northern Ireland and painted the IRA as liberators against British oppression. (White 1277).

In addition to Thatcher’s rigid stance on law and order increasing support for the IRA, her policy for the hunger strikers in 1981 also contributed to her polarization in republican communities (Mallie 1).

In 1980, a group of IRA prisoners, led by Bobby Sands, began a hunger strike against the harsh treatment in the Maze Prison. Since 1976, the British government removed the "special category status" for paramilitary prisoners (Dochartaigh1). Because of this overturn, the prisoners were forced to work in prison jobs, live among the common population, and wear prison uniforms. As said previously, the hunger strikes originally started as a protest against the inhuman conditions in the prison, but as time went on it evolved into a movement for the nationalist community. Sands, as the leader of the hunger strikers in the Maze Prison, became the

face of resistance for the Irish Republican mission. As the hunger strike progressed with time, and Sands condition deteriorated, the ongoing events in Northern Ireland began to bring attention worldwide. Thatcher, however, refused to give in to the hunger strikers' demands and viewed their demands as blackmail (Thatcher Foundation 1). Thatcher's stance was reinforced following the death of Bobby Sands, "We are on the side of protecting law-abiding and innocent citizens, and we shall continue in our efforts to stamp out terrorism. Mr. Sands was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life. It was a choice that his organization did not allow to any of their victims." (Apple 1).

This perspective from Thatcher divided both communities in Northern Ireland. In particular, the Prime Minister's refusal to grant political prisoner status and her portrayal of Sands as a criminal. For many Unionists, Thatcher's firmness in dealing with and denying political status to the hunger strikers was perceived as a mark of power, confirming her commitment of keeping Northern Ireland part of the United Kingdom and standing up to the perceived domestic terrorists. Irish-Republicans, on the contrary, viewed her actions as malicious and spiteful, seeing her as a brutal tyrant who would rather allow men to die than acknowledge their political intentions. The deaths of the ten hunger strikers, elevated them into martyrs for the Irish-Republican cause, and gained sympathy for the IRA both within Northern Ireland and communities abroad (Kalscheuer 1). Thatcher's outcome of the hunger strikers became an element of her controversial legacy. Her refusal to negotiate or show remorse to the hunger strikers led to her disdain among the nationalist communities. The hunger strikes of 1981 not only had a lasting impact on the political landscape of Northern Ireland, but also contributed greatly in dividing the two communities, intensifying the hostility and mistrust between the Republicans and the Unionists (Kalscheuer 1).

Margaret Thatcher's tenure as British Prime Minister played a crucial role in the history of Northern Ireland. Her strict measures included fighting against the Irish Republican Army, the controversial policy of internment and police militarization. These practices along with her refusal to grant political prisoner status to the hunger strikers furthered the divide between Unionist and Republican communities. These decisions, even today, have left a legacy of division and resentment. Present day, Thatcher is still resented throughout many in the republican community (Kalscheuer 1). After the news of the Iron Lady's death in 2013, there erupted a celebration within the Irish-Republican communities throughout the British Isles. The hit song 'Ding-Dong! The Witch is Dead' from the Wizard of Oz jumped to number two on the top-charts the week of her death (O'Carroll1). Nevertheless, not everyone in Northern Ireland viewed the Iron Lady as a negative figure. The unionists of Great Britain viewed Thatcher as a strong leader and dear friend to protecting their communities and keeping the North of Ireland part of the United Kingdom. Thatcher's approach to the conflict in Northern Ireland was influenced by a wider dedication to preserving the British Union and maintaining law and order, nevertheless, her policies unknowingly fueled IRA support, both in Northern Ireland and within Irish communities abroad. The political divisions she created during the troubles continue to affect the discussion of her legacy, illustrating the challenges of leadership during times of national crisis. Margaret Thatcher's policies in Northern Ireland were not just a reflection on Thatcher's personal political beliefs but also a representation of confliction between supporting national security and protecting civil rights, that still persists today.

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