



Hunger Strike: Margaret Thatcher's Battle with the IRA, 1980-1982

Thomas Hennessey

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Thatcher and the iron will of Irish republican prisoners in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, in an

attempt to break the British policy of criminalising paramilitary prisoners. The prisoners'

ultimate demand, to be granted a 'special category status' that distinguished them from

other prisoners, led to two hunger strikes. The first, in 1980, ended without success for the

prisoners; the second, led by Bobby Sands, resulted in ten prisoners starving themselves to

death. The consequences of the hunger strikes changed Irish politics and British-Irish relations

forever, beginning the long path to eventual peace with the signing of the Good Friday

Agreement in 1998.

Now, with the release of recently declassified documents, Thomas Hennessey forensically

examines the origins and evolution of the prisons dispute, leading up to the first hunger

strike of 1980, and setting the scene for the final confrontation with the British Government

in 1981. Alongside republican protagonists – Bobby Sands and Gerry Adams – Margaret

Thatcher's personal role in the hunger strikes is analysed in detail, including her clashes

with Charles Haughey and Garret FitzGerald, and also revealing her authorisation of the

backchannel between MI6 and the IRA. Hennessey also addresses the controversial issues

surrounding the hunger strike, in particular, whether there was a deal on the table that

could have ended the strike in July 1981, and whether it was accepted by the prisoners in

the H-Blocks.

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