The Curragh internees, 1921-24: from defiance to defeat

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Introduction

The years 1913 to 1924 were the most turbulent in twentieth-century Irish history. They were years of widespread political unrest, extreme violence, and momentous constitutional change. Faced with armed insurrection and revolutionary claims to democratic legitimacy, the British government responded with increasingly harsh emergency powers. When the time period for the use of D.O.R.A. (Defence of the Realm Act) legislation ran out, internment without trial was introduced, in late 1920, which led to thousands of men and women being imprisoned under emergency law. These measures provided the model of emergency powers for the provisional government which emerged following the establishment of the Irish Free State.[1] Around 12,000 people were imprisoned under the Free State governments emergency laws, which saw a harsher prison regime installed in the camps and jails than that of the British. The question of this study is why the internees in the Curragh internment camps went from a spirit of defiance in 1921 to one of despair and defeat in 1923-4?

The internment of republican prisoners is as old as the Irish republican struggle. Prior to 1798 most of the Irish rebellions, uprisings and wars were localised affairs, not national struggles for independence. The 1798 rebellion was the first uprising waged to break the link with Britain. The idea was to create an Irish republic based on the ideals of France and America. The British government replied with mass arrests, the implementation of 'free quarters' and other atrocities practised on the local population. The revolution of 1916-21 was for the same elusive republic, while the period 1922-23 was a civil war, fought by elements of the I.R.A. to maintain the republic declared in 1916, and by the Free State government to maintain, and build upon, what they had won in concessions from the British.

The outbreak and continuation of the Great War led to the enactment of a mass of emergency legislation, much of it operative throughout Britain and Ireland. The most relevant enactments – for Ireland – were the Defence of the Realm Acts (D.O.R.A.).[2] At the outbreak of the war in Europe, in August 1914, the leadership of both the Irish Volunteers and the Ulster Volunteer Force vouched their support for the British war effort, primarily, it would appear, in order to strengthen their respective hands at the post-war bargaining table. The Irish Volunteers, however, split on this issue, and a minority group began planning an insurrection which would exploit Britain's wartime difficulties. At Easter 1916 this I.R.B.-influenced minority, together with the Irish Citizens Army, occupied

positions in the centre of Dublin and declared an Irish republic. The immediate British response was to issue two proclamations. One announced the imposition of martial law, the other, under section I of the Defence of the Realm (Amendment) Act 1915, suspended the right to jury trial for breaches of the regulations, and thus re-created in Ireland an extensive court-martial jurisdiction.[3] Militarily, the rising was a failure. A total of 2,519 republicans were exiled to various prisons in mainland Britain. During the next few weeks, 650 were freed and allowed back to Ireland. The rest, 1,863 prisoners, were held under the Defence of the Realm Act (D.O.R.A.), which meant there were no charges, no court appearances and no pleas.[4]

The first use of the Curragh for detainees was when seventeen men from County Kildare, who were arrested during Easter Week 1916, were confined at Hare Park Camp, the Curragh.[5] Hare Park Camp had initially been built to billet large numbers of troops during the Great War but was converted for sorting and holding prisoners during the Easter Rising. (The camp took its name because of its location on the edge of the former Kildare Hunt Club hare park site).[6] Soon after the Kildare prisoners were conveyed from the Curragh to Richmond Military Barracks in Dublin, from which they were deported to Wakefield, in England.[7]

The escalation of the conflict in Ireland led to the strengthening of the Defence of the Realm Act, but the use of D.O.R.A. legislation in response to the Irish conflict was nearing the end of its life, as the power to issue regulations was only exercisable 'during the continuance of the present war.' The Restoration of Order in Ireland Act (R.O.I.A.) became law on 9 August 1920. The introduction of R.O.I.A. was followed by a general escalation of I.R.A. activities, which culminated in the shooting dead of fourteen British agents on 21 November in Dublin. The immediate British response was to resort to internment on an unprecedented scale and an overall intensification of the counter-insurgency drive.[8]

While the main internment camp for republicans was located at Ballykinlar, County Down, further capacity was required to deal with the large number of detainees. To supplement this, another internment camp was constructed some 400m north-west of the Gibbet Rath to house about 1,500 men. Known as the Rath Camp, it took its name from the historic Gibbet Rath – a large Danish mound – the scene of a massacre of rebels during the 1798 rebellion.[9] On 12 March 1921 the *Leinster Leader r*eported, 'Another internment camp, conducted on the same lines as the Ballykinlar Camp, has been opened at the Rath, Curragh. A large number of prisoners have been transferred from the Hare Park Camp to the Rath, where no visits are allowed.'[10]

Rath Camp 1921: the British regime

In the first six months of 1921 a considerable number of I.R.A. men were arrested by the crown forces. Numbers interned rose from 1,478 for the week ending 17 January, to 2,569 for the week ending 21 March, and 4,454 for the

Outline of Rath Camp huts, December 2009 (Author)

week ending 16 July.[11] The large number of arrested republicans led to the establishment of a new internment camp at the Curragh military base, to supplement the camp at Hare Park. The new camp was laid out on the south fringe of the Curragh Camp directly opposite the grandstand of the racecourse. It consisted of about ten acres of the Curragh plain enclosed in a rectangle of barbed wire entanglements. There were two fences ten feet high and separated by a passage twenty feet wide, which was patrolled by sentries, and which the prisoners called 'No man's land.' At each corner of the compound stood high blockhouses from which powerful searchlights lit up the centre passage. These watchtowers were manned day and night by sentries armed with rifles and machine guns. Sentries posted on these watchtowers called out 'All's well,' on the stroke of the hour all night. Beyond the main barrier, the camp was surrounded by another fence consisting of five single strands of barbed wire about four feet high. This fence was designed, not to keep the prisoners in, but rather to prevent animals approaching the main barbed enclosure. Nevertheless, it was a further obstacle to the possibility of escape. To add to the difficulties of intending escapees, a large searchlight was mounted on the watchtower of the main military camp. During the hours of darkness the beam from the searchlight lit up the entire Curragh plain.[12]

Inside the enclosure there were some fifty-sixty wooden huts – which served as sleeping quarters for 1,200-1,500 men – a hospital, canteen, cook-house, chapel and library. There was a sports ground large enough to provide a football pitch.[13] The huts were wooden and some were bugged, though the practice was not particularly effective. However, the prisoners believed bugging devices were installed everywhere.[14] One wire and bug, which was found behind the bed of the prisoners' camp commandant, led to the British quarters. The prisoners – to their amusement and the guards' embarrassment – used this wire as a clothesline.[15]

The Rath Camp was opened in March 1921 and in early April the first draft of about 100 prisoners arrived there from Arbour Hill Jail, in Dublin. As more men arrived there was a need for organisation and the I.R.A. leadership soon took over these responsibilities. The prisoners ran their own camp and enforced their own discipline.[16] Tom Byrne, who escaped in a mass breakout in September, wrote:

> We ran the camp ourselves, making our own paths out of concrete blocks. In other ways, too, we were allowed within limits to improve our housing conditions. But such concessions were purely domestic and there was no leniency in the manner in which we were guarded for our jailers were constantly on the watch to offset attempts at escape. To try and catch us out there would be sudden swoops on the huts with intensive searches and the barbed wire was being constantly strengthened … So far only one prisoner had been able to make his getaway from the Rath Camp and he had himself carried out in a laundry basket. Next night the British, not knowing how he got out, tried to scare us by shooting a dummy figure which they had put in the wire.[17]

Life in the camp was dreary and monotonous. The same surroundings, the

same dull routine, day after day, week after week, was apt to make it so. No visits were allowed and morale was kept up with concerts, playing football, planning escapes and letter-writing.[18] The routine of the camp was dictated by two disciplinary systems. On the one hand the British regulations set the times when the internees were locked up and let out, the number of letters they might write and the amount of food provided. The internees had their own disciplinary system which dealt with the 'fatigues' allotted to the prisoners. These fatigues were mainly devoted to keeping the huts clean, hygienic and orderly.[19] C. S. 'Todd' Andrews arrived as a prisoner to the Rath Camp in May 1921. He found that:

> Life in the camp was, in a physical sense, far from unpleasant. Indeed for the first few weeks I found it agreeably exciting meeting new people including some national personalities, exploring the library which was surprisingly good, playing football, learning the procedure for receipt of letters and parcels and examining the canteen.[20]

The atmosphere in the camps was not good, with frequent accusations by the prisoners of brutality. The army claimed that the internees engaged in obstruction, which took the form of refusing to answer roll call, refusing to obey orders given by British officers, 'destruction of government property, and incessant

Historians Liam Kenny and John Evernan at the site of the Rath Camp, December 2009

clamour and complaint. The obvious and only remedy for such a course of action was to enforce obedience and good behaviour by physical violence, but such a course was not permitted by the regulations governing the treatment of internees'.[21] In October 1921 500 additional troops were brought into the Rath Camp in order to coerce the men to give their names, etc., but there was a decisive refusal.[22] In an attempt to cut down on the many escapes by tunnelling from the Curragh, a ditch was constructed all around the camp. This was filled with stagnant water, a development which 'produced vehement protest from medical authorities and much activity on the part of the local fire engine'.[23]

Todd Andrews spent five months in the Rath Camp before he escaped in September 1921. He wrote of the animosity of the guards:

> We had very little contact with our guards. Periodically they would patrol the camp at night. Sometimes, if they read of some successful attack by the I.R.A., they would bang on our huts with their rifle butts, wakening us and swearing at us. Sometimes they would conduct exhaustive searches of the huts during the day. They belonged to a Scottish regiment – I am not sure if it was the King's Own Scottish Borderers or the King's Own Scottish Light Infantry – but their attitude to us was very hostile. In the course of the searches they never passed without calling you a bastard or threatening you with their bayonets. They were all young conscripts who seemed to loathe us and they treated us very differently from the Lancashire Fusiliers whom I had encountered in Dublin. They were particularly offensive when they succeeded in finding an escape tunnel of which there was always at least one being dug by one or other of the companies in which the internees were organized. When a tunnel was found the whole camp was punished by the stoppage of parcels and the closure of the canteen. Once we had a fine of five shillings per man imposed because bed boards were missing; they had been used either for fuel in the stove with which each hut was furnished or as pit props for the tunnels. As not everyone got money from home, those who did refused to accept any [money] in protest. The British replied by closing the canteen and stopping the newspapers.[24]

Brigadier F. H. Vinden, a veteran of the Great War, served with the 2nd Battalion Suffolks, in Ireland from 1920-22, mainly at the Curragh internment camp. In extracts from his memoirs held in the Imperial War Museum, Brigadier Vinden described the camp on his arrival, and the shortcomings of guard duty for regular soldiers.

> On arrival, we found an extensive hutted camp established during the war and round it we had, with the help of the Royal Engineers, to surround the camp with two ten-feet wire fences with watch towers at each corner. Aid to the civil power is one of the most unpleasant tasks which can fall to soldiers, and our colonel, Arthur Peeples, was most alert to the pitfalls for the military. If anything went wrong, it would be blamed on the soldiers and officers … Colonel Peeples wanted to avoid being in command of the regiment and at the same time be in charge of the internment camp, while the regiment only provided the guards required for it … Colonel Peeples was correct in his forecast of troubles. The internees raised all

> sorts of trivial grievances and one subject which I recollect was a complaint about their parcels being opened and cakes cut. The reason was that the camp staff had found knives, files, letters and money in them … Thinking over our time on the Curragh, I have realized how frightfully 'green' we were. We never even thought of putting agents in the cage through whom we could have hoped to get some information.[25]

It was a learning process for both sides, however, and the lessons learned by the internees would be put to use again and again. The constant reports coming from the camp of ill-treatment, published in the Irish media, helped to sap the morale of the British military. In an effort to counter the bad press, reporters were allowed access to the camp. The 'disturbances' Brigadier Vinden spoke of were far less disruptive than on the outside, and the regime not seemingly so harsh, as he found time to spend 'many an hour in evenings walking round the cage with' Desmond Fitzgerald (later a government minister) and Sean Lemass (later taoiseach).[26] In a possible bid to counter bad publicity a *Leinster Leader* reporter was apparently given full access to the internment camp from where he made two uncensored reports on activities within the camp, which were published in the *Leader*. The reporter also described the internees as in great spirits.[27]

Cook and staff, Rath Camp, 1921

Escapes, and escape attempts, led to much of the tension within the camp. They were a constant feature of the camp and in effort to dissuade them a warning notice was issued to the prisoners in the camp on 5 July 1921, and signed by Lieutenant and Adjutant H. F. Vinden:

> Warning
> The Commandant will not be responsible for the lives of any Internees seen outside their Huts or Tents between Evening Roll Call at 9 p.m. and Morning Roll Call at 7. 15 a.m.[28]

The internees continued their escape attempts and in a further effort to deter them a mock shooting was enacted by the British guards of a man dressed as an internee. This seems to have had little or no effect on the internees.[29] On 11 July a truce came into effect between the I.R.A. and the crown forces. Despite the signing of the truce construction and extension works continued unabated in the Rath Camp, which included a new style of hut able to accommodate thirty men and completely surrounded by barbed wire.[30] Escapes by prisoners continued as well. A mass break-out in September resulted in fifty prisoners tunnelling their way out, while a further eighteen had escaped by the end of the following month. The constant escapes heightened the tension and on the night of 24 October, two of three men attempting to escape, were seriously injured by the guards when they opened fire.[31]

As winter approached conditions in the camp deteriorated, with a report in the *Leinster Leader*, in September, which said that the huts in Hare Park had not been repaired since they were built in 1915, while those in the Rath Camp were of the 'felt hut class' and that 'the necessary patent tarring has not been used as far as the huts are concerned for some years, with the result that they are all in a very bad condition'. By October the ground in the camp had turned into mud, often knee-deep, and there were further complaints of the prisoners going hungry as food parcels were not being distributed due to the many escape attempts. However, it was reported that the men's spirit 'is as usual'.[32] These complaints led to the announcement that a 'joint investigation committee representing the republican party and the crown government' had been set up and as a result of their 'visits to the camps drastic changes were to be made in the conditions and general treatment of the interned men.'[33]

On 6 December the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in London and three days later the release of interned republicans began.[34] Upwards of 450 prisoners were released from the Rath Camp on 9 December and another 700 the following day. According to the *Leinster Leader*, 'The internees looked in very good health despite their long rigorous incarceration, and were in the highest spirits.'[35]

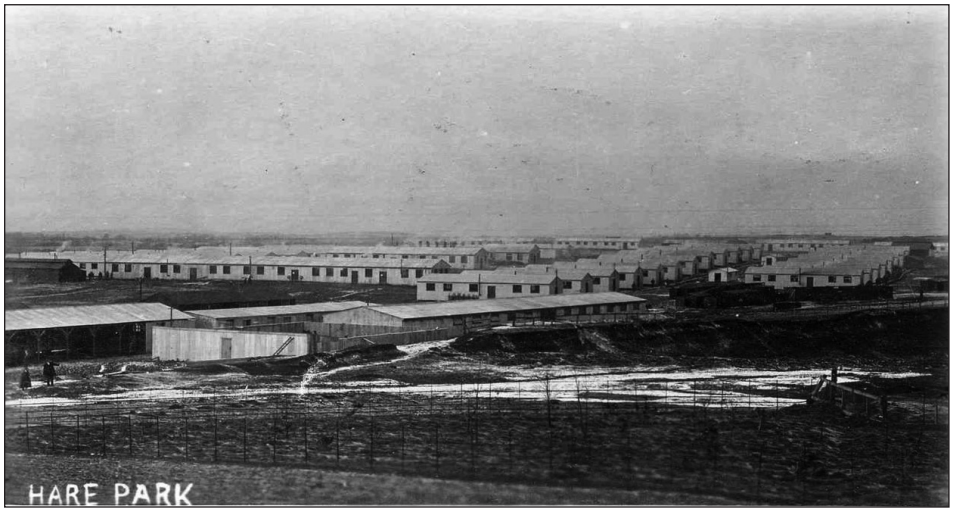
The internment camp in the Curragh lasted barely ten months and while it had a reputation for brutality and repression the regime was no more repressive than that of any prisoner-of-war facility during the Great War. Despite the republican propaganda the Rath Camp was not on a par with Ballykinlar, in Co. Down, where two prisoners who approached the wire in broad daylight were shot dead,

and several more died of ill-treatment.[36] There were no deaths in the Rath Camp and very little concrete evidence of ill-treatment, though two men were wounded in an escape attempt. When the Curragh internees were released in December 1921 they were in high spirits and good health. They had spent their incarceration well – with education and sport to the fore. The many successful escapes, I.R.A. successes, and the truce and treaty negotiations also lifted their morale. As they left the Rath Camp the internees were defiant, victorious and proud. They were on the winning side. Within months many would be back behind the barbed wire, but this time they faced a more ruthless foe – their own side.

Hare Park and Tintown: the Irish regime

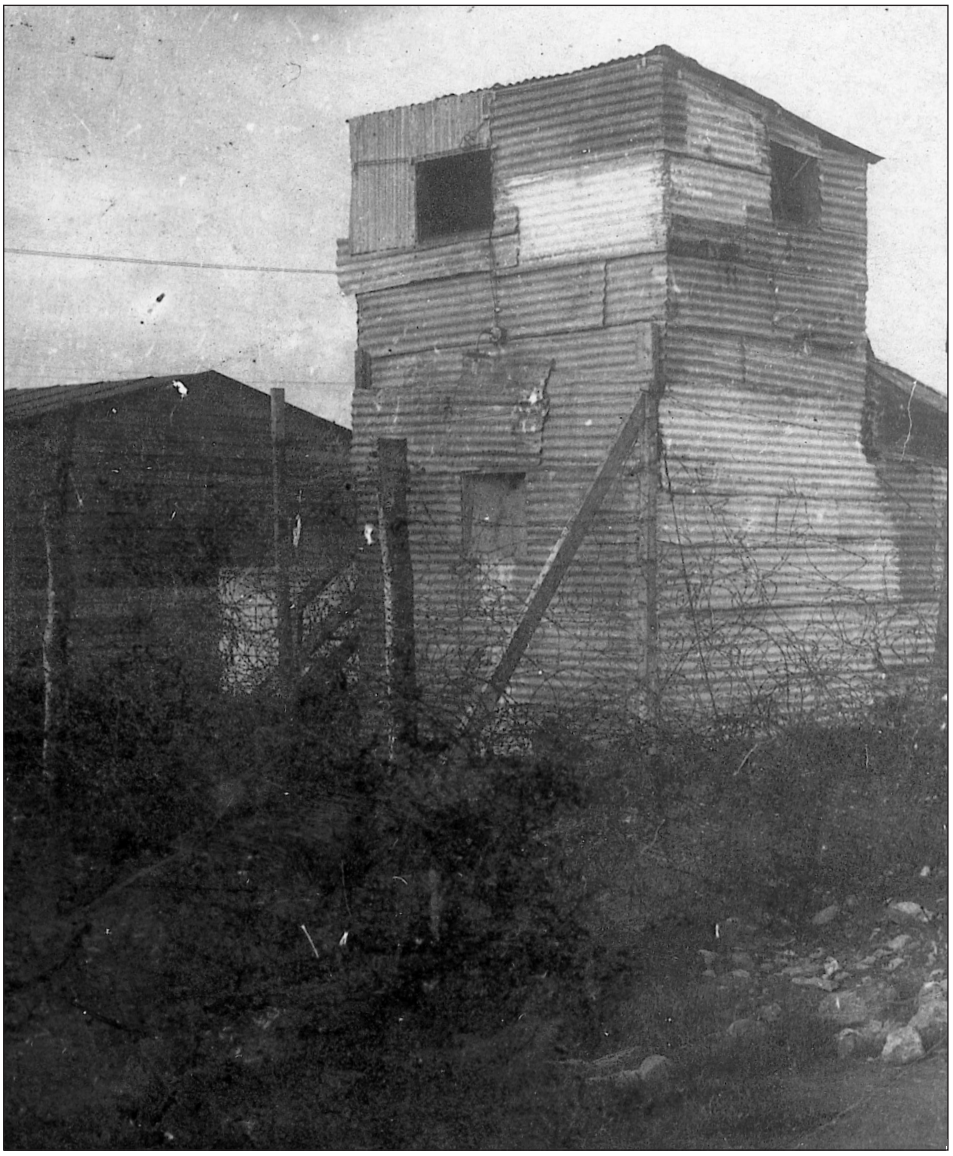
On 14 January 1922 the provisional government for the Irish Free State was elected and the formal transfer of power from Britain to the new government began two days later with the handover of Dublin Castle.[37] In March a conference of anti-treaty members of the I.R.A. established an executive council, and on 13-14 April their forces occupied the Four Courts, Dublin, refusing to recognize the authority of the provisional government.[38] The June general election in the Free State returned a majority for the treaty, but hardened the hearts of the anti-treaty minority. Civil war was inevitable.

The Irish Civil War began on the morning of 28 June 1922 with the bombardment of the Four Courts garrison, and ended in May the following year. There were three main phases in the conflict. The first, from June to the end of August, saw the fighting between the Republican (anti-treaty) and Free State (pro-treaty) forces waged largely on conventional lines. The defeat of the republicans in the field led to the re-adoption of guerrilla tactics. With conventional



Hare Park huts circa 1914

hostilities ostensibly over, the struggle was now carried on by ambush and counter-ambush. In this second phase, a military stalemate ensued which began in September 1922 and lasted until December. The third phase began in December and saw the development of an increasingly ruthless, and ultimately victorious, counter-insurgency strategy by the provisional government, which responded to the shift in tactics with the same measures that the British had employed: emer-



Guard Tower at the Rath Camp 1921

gency powers, internment, and official and unofficial reprisals. Though victory came in May, with the I.R.A. order to dump arms, this period can be considered to have lasted until the end of July 1923, when martial law came to an end. From August 1923 until mid-1925 a variety of emergency public safety acts were in force, which had a detrimental effect on the remnants of the I.R.A.[39]

At the start of the fighting, the provisional government took a number of steps which covered areas dealt with or touched upon by the British under the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act (R.O.I.A.) and under martial law powers. During the first month of the war issues relating to the arrest of republican combatants seemed relatively clear in that conditions approximated to conventional warfare.[40] Around the second week of July, huts at Hare Park were once again put into use as troops from the National Army arrested local republicans and brought them to the Curragh Camp.[41]

The Curragh internment camps were plagued with continuous allegations of ill-treatment of prisoners, a claim rejected by commander-in-chief of the National Army, General Richard Mulcahy.[42] Some weeks after its opening, on 24 April 1923, a number of prisoners escaped through a tunnel from Tintown No. 1 Camp, and subsequently a number of tunnels similarly constructed were discovered in Tintown No. 2, and Hare Park camps. In an effort to ascertain the names of the men who escaped, the camp authorities met with considerable opposition from the prisoners. That this opposition was the result of orders issued by the prisoners' leaders was proved by a document found on one of the prisoners, containing instructions to hinder any attempt at discipline by the camp regime. To effectively prevent any other such escape by tunnel, orders were issued that steps should be taken to make the prisoners in the camps at the Curragh dig trenches around each camp. The prisoners' leaders were removed from the camps before the prisoners were made to commence this work, and a number of those leaders were transferred to the Glasshouse military prison. Some statements referred to alleged ill-treatment there.[43] Alfred McLoughlin later wrote to the *Irish Independent* in reply to General Mulcahy's denial of ill-treatment of prisoners in the Curragh.

> I am one of the Hare Park prisoners referred to. In spite of what Gen. Mulcahy says, I slept on bare boards in the Curragh military prison for five nights – April 24-28 … I got one blanket … I was handcuffed night and day (day behind, night in front) … The handcuffs were not off for meals; they were off one wrist for alleged dinner, excluding Thursday, April 26, when they were both off for dinner, but on that day I was hanging handcuffed by the wrists to a kit-rack about six inches from the floor for four-and-a-half hours… I was threatened with a gun several times [that] I was to be shot.

Alfred McLoughlin made a sworn affidavit of his treatment in the Curragh. Arrested on 21 October 1922 McLoughlin spent a year interned and was never told why he was being detained.[44] Another prisoner, T. Boyle 'O.C. republican prisoners Keane Barracks,' wrote a letter of protest about the detention and treat-

ment of two boys, J. Smith (14), Dunlavin, and T. Driver (16), Ballymore, who went on hunger strike for release in September 1922.[45]

On 1 September 1922 Richard Monks, a republican prisoner, was shot dead as he allegedly tried to escape from custody. An inquest was held by Dr J. O'Neill, deputy coroner for South Kildare, and the jury found that the deceased had died from the effects of a bullet wound, fired by a sentry 'in the discharge of his duty.' The provost marshal, Commandant Peter O'Mara, deposed that the prisoner had been trying to escape from custody when he was shot dead. Evidence of identification was given by a fellow prisoner, but no detainees were asked what really happened. This was the first fatality in the Curragh Camp.[46]

On 13 December 1922 National troops from the Curragh arrested ten men and one woman in a house and a dugout, at Rathbride, on the edge of the Curragh. One of the men, Tom Behan, was allegedly shot dead while 'trying to escape' from the Military Detention Prison, known as the Glasshouse. The authorities claimed that Behan was shot dead while trying to escape through a window in the Glasshouse, and issued a statement saying:

> One of the party of men arrested when trying to make his escape from the hut in which he was detained at the Curragh, ignoring the warning of the sentry to desist, was fired on and fatally wounded.[47]

Mick Sheehan was a prisoner in the Glasshouse – so called because of its glass roof – at the time and thought it highly unlikely that an experienced volunteer like Behan would try to escape through such a small window. Other sources, including an eyewitness, claimed Behan was killed when he was arrested at Rathbride and not in the Curragh, and that this was a fabrication to cover up his unlawful killing.[48] On 19 December 1922 seven of the men captured at Rathbride were executed by firing squad in the Glasshouse, for being in possession of arms and ammunition. Their bodies were buried in the yard adjacent to the Glasshouse.[49]

Throughout 1922 Republican prisoners were held in the old huts at Hare Park; the Glasshouse; and in Keane Barracks (now Pearse Barracks), but as the number of detainees grew, further facilities were required and work began on a series of new prison camps known as Tintown 1, 2 and 3. Tintown No. 1 Camp opened in early 1923 with each of the huts holding around twenty men. Tintown No. 2 and 3 were located on the right and left of No. 1 Camp.[50]

Republican prisoner Peadar O'Donnell arrived in 'the new camp in the Curragh, Tintown No. 1, which was built to accommodate about 600 men ... Our living huts were large and had concrete floors serrated like stable floors, and we had spring beds. We could cook and distribute our own food and organize the camp life generally.' Discipline, in the beginning was strict, with according to O'Donnell, '… strange as it may sound during my time in Tintown everybody was out, and most of them at [physical] jerks, at 8 o'clock every morning.'[51]

The new internment camp was surrounded with heavy rows of barbed wire, with sentry posts on platforms at intervals. Powerful lights lit up the limits of the

camp at night, as military police patrolled around. The prisoners were locked in their huts and during the night the military police would unlock the doors and stage head counts, often flashing lamps on the faces of sleeping prisoners, or pulling down the bedclothes to ensure that a bed was occupied. At 7 a.m. the doors were opened and the men went outside for exercises and washed from running water behind a street of huts. Orderlies carried in breakfast for the internees or men prepared their own. Hut inspections were carried out around 10 a.m. and all huts were expected to be clean and tidy, with beds made and all men indoors. The internees stood at ease at the foot of their beds and at the command of their hut leader sprang to attention and numbered off, while Free State officers checked the count. Each hut supplied orderlies for drawing food, for the cookhouse, for fatigue work and for latrine duty. What most prisoners found the worst was the noise and bustle and the lack of privacy. Escape occupied the minds of most internees and there were many successful break-outs.[52]

On 1 July 1923 the number of republican prisoners in the Free State was officially estimated as 11,316. In the immediate aftermath of the civil war, the government became concerned that the use of internment might be illegal, particularly as the Free State constitution neither expressly permitted nor forbade it. In order to hold the internees while a state of war no longer existed, a special act, the Public Safety (Emergency Powers) Act, was passed in August 1923.[53]

Much dissatisfaction was voiced about overcrowding, poor food and sanitation, ill-treatment, and indiscriminate use of firearms by prison guards at jails and camps throughout the country. Concern was voiced not only by republican supporters, but also by a number of pro-treaty senators, among them W. B. Yeats, Lord Granard and Sir Bryan Mahon. Eventually, the complaints prompted the International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.) to request permission to inspect prisons, internment camps, and hospitals, and in April 1923 the request was granted. On 20 April the I.C.R.C. delegate, R. A. Haccius, visited the Tintown Internment Camps. In general his reports were favourable and he concluded that 'the government refuses the status of "prisoners-of-war" to prisoners, but in reality treats them as such'. However, there was an important proviso in his reports – he also visited Mountjoy Gaol and Newbridge and Gormanstown internment camps – which was his comment in relation to Tintown that 'I have not had any complaints to register concerning the food, medical care, or treatment, not having been authorised to question the prisoners.' A delighted Free State executive council published the report, even going to the length of stating that 'prisoners actually receive full prisoner-of-war treatment'. Critics of the government were considerably less enthusiastic about the report, and were highly critical of the fact that prisoners were not interviewed and that some of the prisons where the most serious complaints had been made were not investigated.[54]

The prisoners, however, had plenty of complaints and a hunger-strike began in Mountjoy Jail on 10 October as a protest against conditions and the continued incarceration of the prisoners. An order of the day was issued by Frank Aiken,

I.R.A. chief of staff, asking for support for the Mountjoy hunger-strikers, which was interpreted in the jails and internment camps as an invitation to support the Mountjoy prisoners by joining the hunger strike and thousands of prisoners decided to do so. However, a mass hunger strike was considered to be a bad strategy, as many men could not stay on it. There had been an earlier hunger strike in the Curragh which had led to deaths – Daniel Downey, Dundalk, died from the effects of a hunger strike on 10 June 1923, while Joseph Whitty (19), Wexford, died on hunger strike on 2 September 1923. The short fasts, and general neglect and ill-treatment, were major factors in these deaths.[55] General neglect was also blamed for the deaths of Frank O'Keefe, from Tipperary, who died in the Curragh Camp sometime in 1923; Matthew Ginnity, Birkenhead, England, who died on 23 July, in No. 2 Tintown; and Dick Hume, Wexford, who died on 9 November, after being brought from Tintown No.3 to the Curragh Military Hospital.[56]

Despite these deaths 3,390 men in Tintown and 100 men in Hare Park joined the mass hunger strike. The large number of prisoners joining the hunger-strike instantly attracted the attention of the authorities, who were afraid that if a large amount of deaths occurred, public opinion would swing away from the government to the republican movement and could jeopardize the little stability the state had gained. The large number of prisoners going on hunger-strike was also a problem for the I.R.A. leadership. Some I.R.A. officers sought to limit the number joining the protest, but the request was turned down in case it caused bitterness among the prisoners if one was picked over the other. Some prisoners took part in the hunger-strike without fully thinking its implications through. Within days, men found they could not endure the lack of food and abandoned the hunger-strike in increasing numbers, further dividing the prisoners and adding to their demoralization.[57]

Nevertheless, some prisoners continued their hunger-strike to the bitter end. Two prisoners died on hunger strike: Andy O'Sullivan and Denis Barry. Commandant Denis Barry died on 11 November after being brought from Newbridge Internment Camp to the Curragh Military Hospital. Andy O'Sullivan died after forty days on hunger strike on 22 November 1923. The hunger-strike had its after effects, health-wise, too. Joe Lacey, Wexford, continued to decline after the end of the hunger strike, and died in the Curragh Military Hospital on 24 December 1923.[58]

When the hunger-strike finally collapsed, with no concessions gained, the discipline, which had held the prisoners together, began to further erode. Todd Andrews wrote that the will to escape had gone, interest in the Irish language had disappeared and that nobody spoke or tried to learn Gaelic.[59] In the jails and camps the strike's collapse had a demoralizing effect. For the Free State government the hunger strike involved huge dangers. A large number of deaths could have produced a considerable sympathetic reaction in the tradition of republican martyrdom and following its end there was an increase in the number of prisoners released, but the government decided that a mass release policy would have

made it appear that the protest had been a success. In the following months the question of a general amnesty was often debated but always rejected in favour of what was known as the 'dribble' policy, in which prisoners were let out slowly. In some instances officers were released and the men kept. It was all designed to disillusion the internees. The gradual release was only completed in the summer of 1924 and after that time only those convicted for criminal acts remained.[60]

Despite the dwindling prison population trouble continued in the Curragh internment camp and in December 1923 a military policeman suspected of carrying information to republican prisoners was murdered. The body of Corporal Joseph Bergin (23), from Camross, County Laois, was found in the canal at Milltown bridge on 15 December. The medical evidence showed that he had suffered considerable violence, and had been shot six times in the head. Bergin was an I.R.A. intelligence officer, and had been attached to G.H.Q. during the War of Independence. He was identified carrying messages in and out of Tintown No. 3 on behalf of prisoners there. Bergin was intercepted returning to the camp by several National Army officers, brutally interrogated and tortured in a hut and while still alive, tied to the rear of a car and dragged behind at speed. His body was then dumped in the Grand Canal. His girlfriend, Peg Daly, knew he was dead when his blood-stained cap was thrown into her hallway in Kildare town. Two army officers and a sergeant were eventually charged with the murder of Joseph Bergin. Captain James Murray was found guilty and sentenced to death. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and he died in Maryborough Prison in 1929.[61]

Conclusion

The question of this study is why the internees in the Curragh internment camps went from a spirit of defiance in 1921 to one of despair and defeat in 1923-4? The answer is that the I.R.A. was crushed as British General 'Bloody' Maxwell observed 'by means far more drastic than any which the British Government dare to impose during the worst period of the rebellion'.[62] There are many reasons why the civil war caused more division in, and ultimately, more success, against the I.R.A.

Internment under British rule was used by the army not only as a form of preventive detention, but also in an attempt to gather intelligence, despite having no specific power to interrogate internees. Accusations of brutality were common, and in view of the army's comments in relation to such claims, were probably at least partly justified. As to the question of effectiveness, internment did not seem to greatly impede the I.R.A. It is significant that British Army sources were not uniform in the endorsement of the effectiveness of internment. Some claimed the internments of early 1920 had considerable effect on the I.R.A., but another hinted at counter-productive effects in that the mass arrests at the end of the year prompted organisational improvements in the I.R.A., forced more men to go 'on the run,' with the result that they formed more flying columns.[63]

During the civil war, internment powers were first resorted to out of strategic

military necessity, and later as a counter-insurgency tool primarily designed to take republican activists out of circulation. Eventually, these powers were used on a scale which was approximately three times greater than that used by the British under R.O.I.A. However, its effect was more far more reaching in the 1920-21 period. Subsidiary uses of internment powers were as a means of imposing collective punishments as reprisals, and for intelligence-gathering purposes.[64]

Complaints about overcrowding in prisons, and the behaviour of prison guards, became a regular feature of republican propaganda in the course of, and after, the civil war. A major riot by republican prisoners in Mountjoy in July 1922 caused the jail to be put under the control of the military, with Diarmuid O'Hegarty appointed governor of the prison. He announced that prisoners would be treated as 'military captives … and that any resistance to their guards or any attempt to assist their own forces, revolt, mutiny, conspiracy, insubordination, attempt to escape or cell wrecking will render them liable to be shot down…'[65] Referring to such appointments, Gearóid O'Sullivan, adjutant-general of the National Army, later commented: 'You had to … get men whom you could trust, not because they had any particular ability.'[66] The result was that the camps and prisons under the control of the provisional government saw much bloodletting. During the period when the British controlled the Curragh Internment Camp (1921) there were no fatalities among the republican prisoners. However, during 1922-24, seventeen republican prisoners died – seven were executed by firing squad; four died of 'ill-treatment' or 'neglect'; three died on hunger-strike, two were shot 'trying to escape,' while another was deliberately murdered.

Another great blot on pro-treaty conduct, and a serious blow to republican morale, was the campaign of executions. Under martial law British military courts imposed sentences of death by hanging, death by shooting, penal servitude for between three years and life and imprisonment for up to two years. There were twenty-four executions for political offences carried out in 1920-1.[67] The military courts of the provisional government had a conviction rate of 85 per cent in cases in which a finding was reached. A wide variety of sentencing options were made use of. Death sentences were imposed and confirmed in twenty-nine per cent of the total number of cases tried. Seventy-seven executions were carried out between December 1922 and April 1923, compared to twenty-four by the British.[68] The December 1922 executions, of seven men from Kildare, in the Curragh Camp were the largest single executions conducted between 1916 and 1923.

With the death of Michael Collins the spirit of compromise vanished from the leaders of the provisional government to be replaced by a ruthless intransigence. Inside the Curragh camp the harsh prison regime was responsible for brutality; medical neglect; the shootings of would-be escapees; executions of those arrested under arms; the brutal murder of at least one republican; and the stoppage of vital food parcels. When hostilities had long ceased and their release was not forthcoming the prisoners embarked on a hunger-strike. This protest failed in its

objective due to government intransigence and led to the death of several internees. The failure of the hunger-strike and the continuing incarceration of prisoners led to further demoralisation among the Curragh prisoners, most of whom, as internees, had no release date in sight. The discipline that had held them together began to erode. Prisoner releases were indiscriminate. In more moves to break morale and organisation, individual officers would be released, then the rank and file, then officers again. All cohesion began to be lost and as Ernie O'Malley said, 'The majority of us were aimless and loafing.'[69] Outside the prisoners families and dependents were impoverished and the government's repressive conditions continued as long as resistance lasted. All these conditions contributed to the demoralisation of the internees in the Curragh who went from a stage of defiance to one of defeat.

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