

A STATE APART

Teachers Notes

Programme 4

HUNGER STRIKE

CONTENT

This programme deals with the impact of the hunger strike in the Maze Prison in 1981. It examines the reasons for the prison protest, and the emotional and political effects of the deaths of ten hunger strikers.

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The hunger strike of 1981 is a major turning point in that it provided the platform for the Republican strategy of 'the Armalite and the ballot box', with the emergence of Sinn Fein as a credible force in Nationalist politics. The period is also characterised by the strong emotional allegiance from Catholics and from world opinion which the prisoners' protest attracted. The issue seemed to become a straight contest between Republicans and the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, as the Protestant community was almost sidelined in the dispute.

KEY SECTIONS

1. The political motivation of Republican prisoners
The withdrawal of special category status and the beginning of prison protest
2. Bobby Sands' leadership of the 1981 hunger strike and his Westminster election victory
3. The impact, worldwide, of Sands' death and the skilful use of the hunger strike as a propaganda weapon
The deadlock between the prisoners and the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher
4. The end of the hunger strike and the concessions given to the prisoners
5. The effect of these events on Catholic / Protestant relations and the political gains of Sinn Fein
The effect of the hunger strike on British and Irish Government relations.

BEFORE THE PROGRAMME

- Briefly outline the history of the hunger strike as a method of protest in Ireland and beyond.
- Some explanation of the special court system would provide a useful context for the prison issue.
- It may be helpful to look at prison conditions before 1976 to gain a comparison.

DURING THE VIEWING

- Look for evidence of the reasons why Republicans believed they were political prisoners.
- Find out why the hunger strike attracted so much media attention.
- What were the effects of the hunger strike in the prison system and in politics?

AFTER THE PROGRAMME

- Discuss the standpoints of the Republican prisoners and of the British Government
- Consider whether either side could claim to have won a victory over the other
- Outline the short-term and long-term effects of the hunger strike.

HISTORICAL SKILLS/ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

Programme 4 centres on attitudes and perspectives towards the Hunger Strike of 1981 and its effect on politics and society in Northern Ireland.

Cause and Consequence and experiences and perspectives
(Assessment Objective AO1 CCEA GCSE History Specification)