

***Learning Behind Bars: How IRA Prisoners Shaped the Peace  
Process in Ireland, by Dieter Reinisch***  
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DANIEL WEINBREN

Open University, UK

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The distinctive contribution of this thorough text is the employment of the composed, recorded reflections of 34 former Irish republicans incarcerated in 11 prisons over a 30-year period. Drawing on over 90 interviews, 41 ‘interview partners’ are quoted in the book, Rheinisch illuminates the ways in which oral testimony is collaboratively constructed, foregrounding both the ways in which he thinks his ‘interview partners’ understand his position as a researcher and how their accounts of the past are informed by perspectives based in the present. Their testimony, together with memoirs and archival sources, are employed to make clear that prisoners were central to the convoluted path taken by the wider republican movement as it developed policies, strategies and command structures which enabled the major factions to move from violent opposition to the British state towards an agreement to decommission arms and share power with Unionists in Northern Ireland.

Initially much informal teaching was through lectures by older prisoners aimed at boosting morale and the promotion of a conventional, Catholic-focused and conservative republicanism. There were also outside influences. When the prisoners felt that they were planning a ‘long war’ in the 1970s education became focused on political ideas. When arms flowed to Ireland from Libya and support for republicanism was demonstrated by the election of a hunger striking prisoner as an MP, there was talk of a swift popular military victory and growth in interest in learning about revolutionary socialism and ideas associated with national liberation struggles in Cuba, Angola and elsewhere. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the release of Mandela the focus shifted to ‘pragmatic anti-imperialism’ and secret peace talks commenced.

It was not just content which changed, but also the form which education took. There was a conceptualisation of education, which included learning and practising the Irish language, Gaelige as a form of resistance to the notion that republican prisoners should be categorised as criminals. While he does not let their perceptions uncritically dominate the narrative Rheinisch demonstrates that a persistent thread was that republicans prioritised that it was they, the learners, who should control their own teaching and learning and to shape the narratives about their struggles to determine their education and determine the preferred understandings of the materials. Control remained central even when the approach shifted to structured education, external support and a revised pedagogy. Notions of learning through discussion spread, particularly after there was access to Open University texts and lecturers. The Open University, based in the UK, opened to students in 1971 and from the start permitted prisoners to gain qualifications through correspondence materials and television programmes. It was the skills acquired through prison education which enabled the debates about engagement in elected as-

Correspondence Daniel Weinbren, Email: [daniel.weinbren@open.ac.uk](mailto:daniel.weinbren@open.ac.uk)

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semblies to move beyond the 'lack of profound analysis' which characterised discussions of the early 1980s. It was education which was an important element in the shift towards a negotiated settlement, the 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement. It has been ex-prisoners, educated to construct arguments and realistic plans, who have been able to contribute to their communities in a range of ways. It is they, Rheinisch concludes, who helped implement the peace process working within their communities at the level at which people lived their lives.

The shifts in strategies are illuminated by Rheinisch's categorisation. His detailed chronological account of developments is built upon both contemporary political developments and also the traditions of republican prison education since the 'University of Revolution', created in an internment camp in north Wales in 1916. Three of the seven chapters are about Long Kesh/HMP Maze. This was in Northern Ireland, where republican prisoners came to have greater influence than the republican leadership, and prisoners, in the Republic of Ireland. There were three phases of political education in the H-Blocks of HMP Maze, two categories of internees and prisoners and seven periods of evolution as political subjects. Progress between these stages was not linear. There were divisions between prisoners regarding the form and content of education, times when key texts were banned and neither teaching by external teachers nor by fellow inmates were permitted. Rheinisch lumps as well as splits, with camps and prisons being classified together and the characterisation of the conflict as religious being labelled as 'wrong'. While sometimes classification boundaries are blurred, the effect is to offer a well-organised reconstruction which highlights the significance of prisoner education in the 'transformation' of the republican movement.

By drawing on the experience of learners and employing a framework which enables generalisations to be made from the particularities of Ireland, Dieter Rheinisch makes a powerful case for the value of education in prisons for prisoners, prisons and the wider society.

**Daniel Weinbren** works at the Open University, UK and has published on the experiences of Open University students in prisons.