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Language in the Irish conflict:

The Gaelic “self-made revival” in prison

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Index

Introduction	p. 4
1. <u>Brief history of Ireland throughout the twentieth century</u>	
1.1 From colonization to partition.....	p. 8
1.2 Post-World Wars Ireland.....	p. 17
1.3 The Troubles and the IRA.....	p. 20
1.4 Post-1998 Ulster: between peace and hate.....	p. 24
Chronology of the events.....	p. 27
2. <u>Language and Nation</u>	
2.1 The fight for independence and the “weapon of language”.....	p. 31
2.2 Language Revival.....	p. 34
2.3 The Celtic decline in Ireland.....	p. 36
2.4 The Celtic revival in the Republic of Ireland.....	p. 41
3. <u>The Irish Revival in Northern Ireland</u>	
3.1 The outcomes of the Good Friday Agreement.....	p. 46
3.2 The language, the Troubles.....	p. 50
3.3 Republicans and Prisons.....	p. 53
3.4 The “Self-made revival” and its outcomes.....	p. 57
<u>Conclusion</u>	p. 67
<u>References</u>	p. 71

Introduction

In many ethnic disputes, language is proved to have a crucial role to construct and maintain the ethnic identity. Therefore, language eludes the simple meaning of “means of communication”, entering into a far more complex and multi-levelled study field that includes politics and language protection legislation.

Starting from the creation of the nation-states, the issue of language in disputed territories is a poignant matter still in our days inside and outside Europe, often becoming the anchorage for the the ethnic distinction and the territorial claim to be pursued.

The decolonization process started after the Second World War brought up questions concerning the cultural identity of the formerly oppressed countries, that included religion, education, social structures and, often, language. The contraposition of the colonial asset was structured around a powerful cultural revival which also created the chance to study backwards how the anticolonial resistance had been channeled throughout the occupation period.

As many studies pointed out, language has the ideological and political power to forge the creation of the ethnic unity that may lead to the making of a nation. In order to fulfill this, sometimes intellectuals and activists decide to bring back alive a lost or almost lost language.

Gaelic in Ireland and Hebrew in Israel are often taken into consideration as examples in the language revival field of study. While the latter proved to be successfully revitalized as the official language of the Jewish state, the Gaelic revival's outcomes in the context of a postcolonial Ireland are generally considered quite unsuccessful. However, the studies over Gaelic revival are usually focused on the legislative impact of the Republic of Ireland and on the several theoretical presuppositions upon which the legislative initiatives are based. The recent rediscovery of a different type of revival in Northern Ireland that, for many years, worked in open contrast with the British government, gives the chance to explore the methods and the outcomes that were underestimated in the field of language revival studies. Specifically, in this thesis, Northern Ireland has been assumed as case study for a unique example of language revival that largely passed not through legislation, but, on the contrary, through the self-organized initiative of activists. The specific case of the Republican prisoners' revival in jail during the Troubles time (late 1960s - 1998) has been explored as an extraordinary challenge to revive Gaelic in unconventional time and place.

Moreover, the possibility to analyze the institutional efforts of the Republic of Ireland's legislation to reintroduce Irish as first official language of the Republic has become a source of comparison with the long-term results obtained in Northern Ireland.

I consider it fundamental to provide the reader with a proper historical background to understand the chronology of the events and the political dynamics in which the crisis of Gaelic and the subsequent attempts to revive it took place.

After briefly summarizing the troubled history of Ireland, the thesis particularly deals with the historical context of the Irish Revolution (1916) and subsequent years (1919 - 1921). This period is dense of events that had a direct repercussion on language. The prison of Frongoch, for example, became the first case of Gaelic revival in a prison camp, setting the example for the future Republicans interned during the Troubles.

An important part of the work is dedicated to the history of the Irish decay and the context of racial subjugation that affected the people of Ireland during the British domination. The religious aspect undoubtedly influenced the mixed fortunes of Gaelic: in particular, from one side, the "barbaric language" was openly ostracized by the Protestant authorities through the Anglican education imposed on children.

On the other side, Gaelic ceased to be considered a "useful language" for the socio-economical context of Ireland and therefore its own speakers ceased to use it, choosing English as the language of opportunities.

The institutionalized revival of Gaelic language in the Republic of Ireland that took place after the independence from Britain has been primarily analyzed through the critical work of Fishman and Walsh and McLeod. All the authors considered the results of the institutional revival as "poor", at least with regard to the attempt of turning Irish into the first language of the country. The failure of the Irish revival, which includes a progressive decline of Irish also in the Gaeltacht¹, has resulted into the chance to take into consideration the outcomes of a different type of revival that took place far from the education system of the Irish Republic.

The "self-made revival" flourished in the political turmoil which characterized Northern Ireland after

¹¹¹ Gaeltacht indicates the Gaelic speaking areas.

the Second World War. Specifically, in the thesis, importance is given to the actual testimonies of the “laboratories of language resistance” in the Ulster prisons, a little-known phenomenon which contributed to the creation of a new chapter of language revival in the country. Undoubtedly, the number of the speakers in the Republic of Ireland proves to be higher compared to the North. However, I intend to consider the hypothesis that Gaelic revival in Northern Ireland can constitute a form of valuable revival, although small in percentage, thanks to the ethnolinguistic vitality which seems to characterize the speaking community.

1. Brief history of Ireland throughout the twentieth century

1.1 From colonization to partition

The troubled history of Ireland has a symbolic date that cut in half the long-lasting struggle for the political and military freedom of the country. As Patrick T. Coogan punctually underlines, 1916, the year of the Easter rising in Dublin, is the date that marked the beginning of the process that would lead to the Independence of the country and that impacted Ireland until the present day.²

“1916” carries its own meaning in the mythological narrative which is the equivalent, for the other side of the dispute, of “1690”, the year in which William of Orange won England, Scotland and Ireland and, moreover, settled definitely the Protestant ascendancy’s domain in Ireland. Even though in the Irish history there is “a before and after” 1916, the Irish nationalistic tradition is rooted between the 18th and the 19th century, partially inspired by the American War of Independence.

The conquest of Ireland started with the Norman invasion in the second half of the 12^h century³. The Irish society was already being Christianized since centuries; however, the feudal system was still fundamentally absent and the Celtic customs were profoundly rooted. The Normans perceived the Irish invasion also as a religious and cultural mission with the purpose of establishing a new Christian way of life, different from the “Celtic wilderness” and the Celtic law of Brethon.

When the Tudors Era began, Irish people had attempted to reject the colonizers for centuries. With the Tudors, England was now a modern nation that adopted English as official language and tried to incorporate the small Celtic countries under its own dominion. The same destiny occurred to Ireland through the “plantation” method, through which Irish people were expropriated of their land in favor of the colonizers. During all the Elizabethan time, the prejudices against the colonized were reinforced, also by notable authors, such as Edmund Spencer:

² Coogan, 2016, p. 12.

³ Curtis, 1985, p.7.

Marry those be the most barbaric and loathy conditions of any people (I think) under even. They do use all the beastly behavior that may be, they oppress all men, they spoil as well the subject, as the enemy. They steal, they are cruel and bloody, full of revenge, and delighting in deadly executions, licentious, swearers and blasphemers, common ravishers of women, and murderers of children. ⁴

When Oliver Cromwell came to power after the English Revolution of the 1640s, Ireland became strategic not only from an economical perspective, but also from the strategic point of view as a country at risk to be a royalist resistance spot. Cromwell's campaign in Ireland was seen once again as a "civilizing" mission, to pursue through the "Divine Providence" of the Protestant forces.⁵ Cromwell's campaign left Ireland devastated and in about 10 years the population was halved.⁶ After the end of Cromwell's parenthesis, royalty was reintroduced and under the power of the new king, William d'Orange, the so called "British ascendancy" was settled in Ireland, becoming the political dominator on the Catholics population for the three centuries. The English colonization came again with a wave of anti - Irish prejudices and stereotypes that, according to Curtis, helped to justify the exploitation of the Irish resources and the establishment of an all-Protestant ruling class.⁷ From the 18th century, English intellectuals actively helped to depict the image of Irish man as a semi-clownish figure, incapable of determining whichever destiny in his life and, therefore, responsible for the incredibly disastrous poverty of Ireland. The Irish as "buffoon" has an interesting literary tradition inspired also by Shakespeare's *Othello*. In the 1834 opera by Maurice G. Dowling *Othello Travestie*, Iago is in fact represented as a whiskey - drunk buffoonish character addressed as "Pat", native from county Tipperary, a land of famous Irish rebels.⁸

In *History of England* (1750), David Hume recalled Spenser's opinion about the Irish, specifying that their state of wilderness and ignorance is related to the lack of "Roman civilization" that indeed never

⁴ Curtis, 1985, p. 18.

⁵ Curtis, 1985, p. 25.

⁶ Curtis, 1985, p. 28.

⁷ Curtis, 1985, p. 36.

⁸ Neill, 2006, p. 44.

touched Ireland and that caused them to be affected by “all those vices alone to which human nature, not tamed by education or restrained by laws, is forever subject”⁹. The 18th century, however, marks the beginning of the Irish rebellions that had been interrupted by Cromwell’s carnage a century earlier. The first rebellion of this age was led by the “United Irishmen”, whose leader was Theobald Wolfe Tone, a young Protestant intellectual. The rebellion failed, and right after two years, the autonomy of the Irish parliament was canceled with the “Act of Union” (1800) which moved the Irish representatives from Dublin to the English Parliament in Westminster. In 1803, a new revolt was led by Robert Emmet, whose inspirational heroic attitude, however, did not help the uprising’s organization.

At this point, the political demands of the insurgents were mainly focused on the so called “Catholic emancipation”. Under the British rule, the Catholic majority of the nation was indeed deprived of the equal rights with the Protestants’ ascendant landlords. Permanently subordinated to a lower status, the Catholics had always had an educated and autonomous ruling class strictly connected with the Irish Catholic church which, however, failed to have a defined role into the fight for independence until the 20th century. As it was mentioned above, the first leaders against the status quo of Ireland under the British dominion were indeed young Protestants. Daniel O’Connell was one of them. He is known as the first political figure that actually brought the Irish Question to Westminster and fought, unsuccessfully, to finally repeal the “Act of Union”.

The Irish history of 19th century had yet to meet what is probably considered the greatest disaster in the Irish history¹⁰. *The Famine Plot* was a coincidence of two separate but correlated factors that determined the death of an estimated number of 1,000,000 of people between 1847 and 1852. As explained before, the 18th century Irish social structure was divided into the strict dichotomy of Catholics peasantry on one side, and the Protestant tenants and Landlords on the other. The Irish peasants were often subjected to house expropriations and affected by improper nourishing since the only crop that could be grown in their rented small plots was the potato. The only means of nourishment of the Irish peasantry disappeared when a specific fungus, identified as “*Phytophthora infestans*”, appeared on the scene. Potatoes got rotten and peasants began to starve. However, the

⁹ Curtis, 1985, p. 36.

¹⁰ Coogan, 2016, p. 16.

tragedy could have been avoided if the British rulers had approached the problem differently. As Coogan put in evidence¹¹, the Famine was indeed caused by the willingly failing response of the British government that continued to export Irish goods to the English towns, letting the already underprivileged population of Ireland starve in the countryside. The demography of Ireland dropped dramatically while Art and Literature well depicted this mid-19th century catastrophe. One century earlier, the poet and writer Jonathan Swift had written the famous *A modest Proposal*, a satirical pamphlet that may have well described the sentiments of part of the Landlords that saw the Famine of the 1840s as a self-purge of the excessive Irish population.

Despite this ongoing tragedy in the countryside, in the bigger towns the nationalistic spirit spread through the influence of the “Years of revolutions”. The “Young Irelanders” was a group of intellectuals that hypothesized for the first time a nation where both Catholics and Protestants could find place. Their political ideals merged with a militaristic attempt that, once again, failed in the eruption of an uprising.

A turning point in the Irish attempts came with the 1800’s Catholic Emancipation granted with the Act of Union of the same year that allowed access to school education for Irish children. The social change due to the increase of alphabetization marked a significant involvement into the political fights. The formation of “The National Land League” in 1879 is an example of this new involvement of all parts of the Irish society. One of the most striking issues was indeed the most material one: land. After years of British Landlords and a Famine, land was the priority for the equity fight of land ownership led by Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell, the founders of the League. The success of the land distribution brought up another issue that Parnell considered vital. Parnell’s request of the Home Rule, which was a political system that guaranteed internal autonomy from London and the restoration of the Parliament in Dublin, were closer than ever to be accepted when the presence of the Ulster with its 6 Protestant majority provinces stopped the process for which he had worked for his enter life. The existence of the Ulster raised the question of the “Irishness” itself of Ireland once it was split by the Northern Protestant presence. As Curtis underlines¹² the Catholic population and their will of autonomy spread the panic within the Protestants that created the anti-Home Rule motto “Home Rule

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Curtis, 1985, p. 69.

-Rome rule". In the British government itself there was, moreover, a general skepticism towards the idea of an Irish self-determination through the Home Rule. Lord Salisbury himself, a British politician and three times Prime Minister, said "Self-government worked well only for the people of Teutonic race"¹³.

Towards the end of the 19th century, after the failure of the Home Rule proposal, several cultural initiatives were born precisely to give life to the concept of Irishness. From sport, with the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association, to culture, with the Literary revival and the interest for the Irish language and folklore, the Irish identity began to be depicted and evaluated outside the British mockery that characterized the Irishness in the previous centuries. While the cultural resurgence of the Irish was flourishing and a new possibility for the Home Rule law was about to pass, the Ulster opposition to any form of national autonomy became radical to the point of creating a paramilitary force, the Ulster Volunteer Force, which caused a fatal attraction for the Ulster youth with a past in the British army. The reaction of the Irish nationalists was the creation of another paramilitary militia, whose roots were to be found in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a small group of nationalists who were planning a great uprising during the First World War's chaos. The purpose of the uprising was far from being the beginning of a war with England, however the Republicans hoped to swing the public opinion towards nationalist ideas and gather people ready to sacrifice themselves for what, from now on, will be called "The Irish cause".

As mentioned above, the perfect timing for the Irish uprising was found in the outbreak of the First World War. The nationalists were dedicated to an active campaign to discourage the Irish people from joining the British military effort. In the meantime, weapons were secretly imported from Germany, the British war enemy.

April 16th 1916 was Easter Monday, and the Nationalists were ready. Although the military attempt had no possibility to be a success, the symbolic potential was enormous. Easter, for the Irish Catholics, was the supreme symbol of compensation for the blood sacrifice that was about to come. The choreography itself of the uprising was a striking success in terms of spectacularism and glory: a 1500 militia marched on Dublin with the goal to occupy all the institutional buildings of the city. The

¹³ Curtis, 1985, p. 57.

General Post Office became the headquarter of the military command, which kept the uprising going for almost a week. The poignant moment was the Declaration of the Irish Independence addressed to “The Irish men and Irish women” and read on the very day of Easter Monday, which invited unity against the British domination: ¹⁴

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people.

The courage of the poorly equipped militia guaranteed the symbolic success of the uprising, but not the factual victory. Soon the modern military equipment of the British army destroyed the Irish resistance and pushed the rebels to surrender. Many were sentenced to prison. Among the leaders, two men will be relevant figures in the Irish cause for the years to come: Eamon De Valera and Michael Collins. Despite the content of the Declaration of Independence, the uprising was welcomed in a mainly non positive manner by the Irish public opinion, shaken by the chaos and destruction that the rebels had brought in the city. Coogan himself underlined, “the initial response on the part of Irish public opinion was of exasperation and anger, not to mention horror at the destruction of large areas of their city by artillery fire”.¹⁵

The toll of those sentenced to death was 16, including all those who had signed the Declaration of Independence. Even though the effort and heroism of the 16 executed prisoners became immortal through Yeats’s poetry *Sixteen Dead Men*, the attention of the public during the months that followed the uprising was focused on the prisoners, that the press called “Fenian prisoners”. “Fenian” derives from the Gaelic name *Sínn Féin* (“For us”)¹⁶, a separate organization founded in 1905 that had nothing

¹⁴ Coogan, 2016, p. 31.

¹⁵ Coogan, 2016, p. 32.

¹⁶ Currently existing party.

to do with the Easter Uprising and counted a relatively small number of affiliates. However, the Sinn Féin tactically treasured the post rising opinions and managed to become the main political movement of the Irish independentists. In the meantime, those who remained in prison without being executed reorganized the movement from the inside of the prisons, transforming the detention centers into a megaphone for the nationalist propaganda and establishing the tradition of prison as battlefield for the Irish struggle, which continued in the post 1968 Northern Ireland. While De Valera was moved from prison to prison, Michael Collins remained in the prison camp of Frongoch and reorganized the Irish brotherhood while the internal propaganda radicalized other prisoners. Hunger strike became a weapon through which to ask the status of political prisoners.

Collins was freed right before Christmas 1916 and was put in charge of the National Aid Association, which provided financial aid for prisoners through the Irish-American financing.

As Coogan explains,¹⁷ in a few months and thanks to the pressure and complicity of the United States, a country allied with the British Empire but full of Irish immigrants, the independentists' position changed into a new legitimacy:

The Frongoch prisoners returned to an Ireland so remarkably changed, in their eyes, as to be almost bewildering. They had departed as criminals and, a little more than six months later, they had returned as heroes.

In the meantime, the internal situation of the country became dramatically tensed. Sinn Féin became directly hostile to the British government led by Lloyd George. In the 1919 elections, Sinn Féin won triumphally and soon after it a new proclamation, inspired by the 1916 Declaration of Independence, was read in front of the Parliament by the activist Cathal Brugha. The 1919 Declaration reveals some interesting points that in the following years would become the basis of the Irish Independence. First of all, the economy aspect: for the first time Irish resources and industries were described as “detached” by the British dominion and under direct control of the Irish government. The latter, was bound to take

¹⁷ Coogan, 2016, p. 40.

care of “physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the children”¹⁸ and to secure that “all shall be provided with the means and facilities requisite for their proper education and training as Citizens of a Free and Gaelic Ireland”. In the word “Gaelic” there is the second important point. For the first time, Ireland is officially presented as a “Gaelic” country with Gaelic culture. The British economic dominion was wiped away to give space to an explicitly socialistic doctrine, based on strictly Republican ideals and with a group of individuals ready to defend it and that defined themselves “Irish Republican Army” (IRA). The double shooting in late 1919 that caused the death of two policemen by the hand of two IRA volunteers indirectly started the war that will lead to Independence. Some IRA commanders, including Collins, who was freed after 4 years of detention, carefully studied the battle tactics of the Boer leader Christiaan de Wet and other guerrilla fighters during the South African Wars. As Coogan underlines, the fact that Collins deliberately decided to fight out of uniforms and with unusual methods made Michael Collins the pioneer of modern urban guerrilla warfare¹⁹.

When the martial law was introduced and the country dairies (the main activity of export for the Irish country) were burned as reprisal for the IRA actions, the public opinion shifted towards the Irish cause. Also outside Ireland, the apprehension for the Irish situation grew. Mainly because of the fear for the spread of the “independence virus” to other colonies, the British government decided to transform the nationalistic insurrection into a public order issue through the criminalization of the Independentist movement. As the violence spread all over Ireland, the British forces recruited new military help within the former soldiers’ body. This new, semi-official combat body sent to Ireland with the purpose of sedating the rebellion was called “Black and Tans” because of the color of their uniform, non-correlated with the colors of the official British army. The Black and Tans role is still largely debated for the extreme violence that performed against civilians. More likely to the role of paramilitary - mercenary, they didn’t comply to the discipline of a proper army apparatus, and their actions were closer to a chaotic destruction in order to demolish the civilian morale than to fulfil proper missions against the IRA ranks. One of the most infamous crimes committed by the “Black and Tans” was the so called “Bloody Sunday”, the first one in the Irish history²⁰: a raid against the IRA at Dublin’s Croke Park during a Gaelic Football game that caused the death of fourteen people in the shooting against

¹⁸ Coogan, 2016, p. 46.

¹⁹ Coogan, 2016, p. 49.

²⁰ The second “Bloody Sunday” will happen on January 30 in Derry during a civil rights march.

the crowd. While several men near Michael Collins were captured during and after the raid, De Valera intensified his political activity in America. De Valera, unlike Collins, believed more in the diplomatic effort and foreign support than in the active military actions perpetrated by the IRA. De Valera's success as politician led him directly to the Prime Minister Lloyd George for the first truce talks. Sadly, the bases for a subsequent peace treaty were far from being in favor of Republicanism and, moreover, the painful question of the partition between the North, with a Protestant majority, and the Catholic South became more striking than ever. After further negotiations, a peace treaty that excluded the 6 counties of the North was finally signed by Irish and English delegates on 6 December 1921. De Valera's arrangement, however, caused the discontent of the most radical faction of the Nationalists. The two main leaders and competitors of the Irish Independence war, De Valera and Collins, took indeed two different paths: the former, highly educated and gifted with strategic and diplomatic skills, saw the future of Ireland amputated of the six Northern countries, while the latter continued to represent the voice and feelings of the Republican fighters willing to include the Northern countries into the Republic of Ireland. This radical division led to "the Split", the split of the two different fractions that will end up with the violent 1922, in which the Irish Civil War broke out causing atrocities and the destruction of public infrastructures. The killing of Michael Collins determined the first stop of the anti - treaty fights, with the armed rebels deprived of their successful leader. Finally, in May 1923, De Valera's government won the peace: Frank Aiken, the IRA Chief of Staff, agreed to sign a peace treaty and to renounce to the guerrilla that had shaken the country for two years. Seven years after the infamous 16 April 1916, Ireland was (almost) all freed and pacified.

1.2 Post-World Wars Ireland

After the two world wars, the Irish politics was dominated by the figure of De Valera. Although Ireland's neutrality during the second conflict, the post war Republic still faced challenges and problems on the social and economic sphere.

The most poignant issue was the modernization of the country: Ireland remained indeed a mainly agricultural and small farm - oriented nation bound to the idea of "self-sufficiency" until the late 1950's, when De Valera agreed to introduce the First Program for Economic Expansion that tried to move the Irish economy towards industrialization, export, and services. The most important step, however, was connected with pursuing the idea to become a member of the new and (and still small) European Economic Community (EEC).

On the social aspect, Ireland was still under the powerful influence of the Catholic Church, that for centuries was the stable authority in every county and that counted on the peasantry's idea of the infallibility, not of the Pope, but directly of the local parish minister himself.²¹ Religious believes mixed with a former pagan superstitiousness marked the slow life of a large part of the Irish population with an outstanding power of persuasion and, consequently, also political implications.

Vatican Council II favored slow but tangible changes in terms of the first opening to divorce, sexual freedom, and a general shift towards laity. The slight improvement of the general economic situation caused, nevertheless, a spark of optimism after the though first half of the century, pushing the Republic's society towards being a "consumer society".

While the general improvement of the Republic situation was tangible, beyond the Northern border things were going to the opposite direction. Still incorporated in the United Kingdom, the 6 counties were experiencing what we may define the "roots" of the Troubles. The Catholic population was systematically discriminated against in terms of housing and employment. Catholics were remaining second class citizens and soon they would be identified as the "Catholic working class", poor in education and lacking any hope of life improvement. While in the South the sun of De Valera was setting, in the North an important political atmosphere was rising and it was dominated by Ian Richard

²¹ Coogan, 2016, p. 84.

Kyle Paisley, a Protestant preacher from Co. Antrim. From the pulpit of his church to the stage in front of his passionate supporters, Paisley became famous for his oratory skills characterized by verbal attacks and violent slurs that granted him Coogan's definition of "one of the most successful demagogues to arise in Ireland in the course of the twentieth century, or indeed at any time before that."²² His persuasive and demagogical techniques were accompanied by a certain imagination and inventiveness. His attacks were mainly based on religious questions that irremediably mixed the political issue with the Protestant quarrels and openly incited to discrimination against the Catholics, guilty of ancient crimes against the British Protestants and, of course, guilty to be "rebels" in the new setting of the North.

The fear of the Catholic overcoming was a constant anxiety in the Protestant society as, in some counties, they were in greater number. In the eyes of the Protestants, they also had, despite poverty and unemployment, the "reproductive weapon" caused by the general thought that, as Catholics, they weren't allowed to use contraceptive methods. The run to "baby making" in order to overcome the enemy's demography will be a constant concern for both sides for all the duration of the Troubles. To be sure that the votes of the local elections would go to the right party, the Catholics' power to vote was diminished thanks to a smart expedient: the use of gerrymandering, by which the higher power of vote was given exclusively to Protestant through the higher number of representatives. Coogan mentions the example of the city of Derry, characterized by a majority of Catholics in terms of population, but that resulted into the Protestants' victory in the local and national elections. The political and socio-economic situation pushed the Catholics to start an Era of political activism against the Protestant dominion. This new Era was marked with the first manifestation²³: a march from Derry to Stormont to protest against the decision to establish the second university of the country not outside Derry but conveniently outside Coleraine, an all-Protestant suburbia that granted an easy university access for its inhabitants. The march was not a success, in fact the decision remained indeed unchanged. However, the beginning of a change was palpable: for the first time, the Northern Catholics organized a public demonstration focused on their being inside the Northern borders. Public debates were often shown on television, while the atmosphere outside became more and more heated. Many marches and rallies were organized, evidently inspired by the protests made in the USA, while Paisley

²² Coogan, 2016, p. 134.

²³ Coogan, 2016, p. 138.

seldom organized counter-protests on the same occasions. With the growing sectarianism between the two parts, the process of militarization of civilians started with the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), inspired by the old UVF of the times of the Home Rule. The IRA, on the other side, was not ready to come out from the grave yet. The Catholics' demands were in fact bound to the leftist area, less willing, in the early 60s, to start an armed fight. The chaos of the late 60s, however, changed many things, dragging Northern Ireland in what would be called the Troubles.

1.3 The Troubles and the IRA

What was called “security situation” started to change the positions on the Catholic side. The civilians had a growing feeling of insecurity because of the spread of indiscriminate attacks and violence, from house burnings to bombs attacks. The civil rights movement burst in 1968, in concomitance with the world-wide political agitations. However, the Irish civil rights movement had exclusively Irish stances. The activists were asking for the end of the sectarianism against the Catholics, equal educational opportunities, and housing rights. Sadly, the presence of paramilitary forces led to an extreme street violence that rapidly became armed fight. One of the most heated areas was the Catholic proletary neighborhood of the “Bogside”, circumscribed outside the city walls in Derry. Known as a bastion of Republicanism, the Bogside remained isolated in the barricades for 3 days, from 12 to 14 August 1969 in the so called “battle of the Bogside”, during which activists and Catholic rioters established a “no go” area to protect the neighborhood against the Protestant paramilitaries. In the mob, there were several people that would be considered the most remarkable activists of the decade, including Bernadette Devlin, that during the same year would be elected as Northern Ireland representative in Westminster at the age of 21, becoming the youngest woman ever elected in the British government. The growing violence against the Catholic suburbia pushed the British Parliament to send the army as pacifier between the two parts, making the “The battle of the Bogside” the turning point moment that had dragged the British army into Ireland for the first time since the Independence. The presence of the army was initially perceived as a guarantee of security and stabilization against the violence of the street; however, the good will of the British army became blurred in several occasions. The most infamous case that led the presence of the army in stance in Northern Ireland under accusation was the “Bloody Sunday” that until today remains stuck into the Irish people’s mind as a horrific memory. A protest march along the Bogside neighborhood in Derry was transformed into tragedy when the first Battalion of the Parachute regiment of the British army started to shoot on unarmed civilians causing the death of 14 people.²⁴ The worldwide astonishment caused by this event pushed the British government to grant some concessions to the Republicans, such as the abolishment of the gerrymandering.

²⁴ Coogan, 2016, p. 145.

The extremely exasperated situation caused a fracture inside the IRA ranks. In the early 70s, the IRA's members dropped the violence abstentionism and decided to go through the armed fight under the name of "Provisional IRA". Initially not provided with any weapons, they started their attacks with homemade explosives. As soon as the weapons started to be imported from foreign countries, the violence on the streets increased dramatically. Areas like Skankill Road in Belfast became combat zones with reciprocal killings and bomb attacks that often involved civilians. One of the most famous bomb attacks perpetrated by the IRA, called "The Fishshop bombing" or "Skankill Road bombing" took place in Skankill Road and eight civilians and one of the bombers mistakenly died in the attempt of killing the leadership of Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a loyalist²⁵ vigilante group that controlled the street.

The response of the British government was to put on arrest all the people that appeared to have, rightfully or not, connections with the armed fight, suspending the trials. Only a few Loyalists, however, ended up in the internment camps without trial.²⁶ Prisons were mainly filled, instead, with Irish Unionists. The lack of trial and the abominable torture under which the prisoners were forced to live caused the mass enrollment in the IRA ranks as a form of political radicalization. The militant Republicanism was in fact popularized and idolized, and definitely demolished the intent of the government of annihilating the IRA and its supporters.

Inside the prisons, the outside paramilitary action was perceived in a peculiar way. The incapability to pursue guerrilla actions, led the IRA prisoners to create new ways to "fight back": against the government, against the injustice, and against the very presence of British on Irish soil. However, the thing for which they struggled the most was about something that concerned prison itself. Until the middle of the 1970s, Republican prisoners were allowed to self-organize inside the prison camps²⁷, with the possibility of gathering and giving lectures. With the building of the new camps, like Long Kesh, with the structure shaped like an "H", from here the name "H-blocks", things radically changed depriving the prisoners of the previous concessions. New dispensations were taken under the suggestion of Baron Kenneth Diplock²⁸, and they were all focused on the idea of the "ordinary decent

²⁵ Loyalists were supporters of the Northern Irish Unionism with the United Kingdom.

²⁶ Coogan, 2016, p. 168.

²⁷ Coogan, 2016, p. 176.

²⁸ Coogan, 2016, p. 152.

criminal”, that obviously crashed against the behavior and stances of the Republican prisoners. They objected, in fact, to the idea of wearing the prison garb, the one of the “common criminals”, when, instead, they wanted to be recognized as political prisoners. The first prisoner to refuse the garb was a certain Kieran Nugent and after his example, all the Republican prisoners went on the “blanked protest” and wore exclusively blankets in the freezing cells of the H - Blocks. Subsequently prisoners engaged the “dirt” protest, refusing to wash and shave. These forms of protest were the prequel of what later made the Irish prisoners famous in all the world and that dug back into the tradition settled during the years of the Irish revolution: the Hunger strike. The first Hunger strike took place in 1980 and continued until Christmas. Prisoners were asking for a betterment of their conditions and the possibility to wear the civil clothes and not the prison uniforms. After the failure of this first strike, the prisoners reorganized and found their leader in Bobby Sands, a young Irishman whose Republican faith was marked and reinforced by the loyalist violence his family had faced when he was younger. He had ended up in prison because of his activity and left a collection of writings that later guaranteed him an international recognition as non-surrendering Irish fighter. This second strike, which took place in 1981, was carefully planned to keep the public’s attention as high as possible for the longer time. The strike caused the death of ten prisoners that substituted one after the other in a macabre “death” circle that, however, did not crack Margaret Thatcher’s firmness. Queen Elizabeth’s suggestion of “mercy”, didn’t change Thatcher’s government’s decision to refuse the prisoners’ requests, transforming in this way each striker into a martyr. The sacrifice of the 10 hunger strikers publicized worldwide the “North Irish tragedy”, finding sympathizers also in the Palestinian Liberation movement. When Bobby Sands died, English flags were burned in the main squares of the world. During those violent years, the Republican political party found its leaders in two figures that marked an era: Gerry Adams and Martin Mc Guinness. Adams was one of the first supporters of the provisional IRA and passed the first part of his life in hiding because of his IRA activity. However, the years of the Hunger strikes and his relations with the inmates²⁹ granted him an incredible popularity within the Republican civilians that made him become one of the most prominent leaders of the Sinn Féin party. Adams and Martin Mc Guinness, an IRA associate that pursued the political career like him, increased the success of the Sinn Féin. After the turbulent 80s, these two men promoted the path towards the pacification process. A huge step towards it was accomplished by the Downing Street Declaration of 15 December 1993, an

²⁹ Coogan, 2016, p. 160.

official Declaration of the British Government that declared that the self determination of Ireland was possible if the majority of people would stand for it. The ceasefire was officially agreed on 1994 and the change of power in Britain, with the election of Tony Blair in 1997 and the American mediation with Bill Clinton, sealed the official change of the British policy towards Northern Ireland. The result of it was the 1998 “Good Friday Agreement”, that granted equal rights for all the citizens, a progressive de-militarization of the paramilitaries and the possibility of deciding the future of Northern Ireland through a Referendum.³⁰

The success of the “Good Friday Agreement” became evident in political terms in 2007 with the election of Ian Paisley as Prime Minister with Martin Mc Guinness as his deputy. Even so, the sporadic violence within the two parts never ceased to exist and it still represents a challenge today.

The Troubles aftershocks traumatized the Northern Ireland population also after the new millennium, establishing an extraordinary case study that will be explored in the next chapter.

³⁰Coogan, 2016, p. 164.

1.4 Post-1998 Ulster: between peace and hate

The six counties of Northern Ireland officially reached peace through the Good Friday Agreement. However, the formal political peace didn't follow society's pacification: as in the article *Youth in Northern Ireland: Linking Violence Exposure, Emotional Insecurity, and the Political Macrosystem* is claimed, "sectarian violence has continued throughout the post-agreement period, particularly within socially deprived neighborhoods in Belfast".³¹ Even if paramilitary groups were dismantled, weapons were handed over, and conciliatory speeches were made, sectarianism, ethnic hate related crimes, and anti-social behavior remained intact. The so called "Peace lines", long walls built in 1969 to separate the Catholic neighborhoods from the Protestant ones to prevent riots, were still present in the post agreement Ulster, as well as the school and social relationship sectarianism. Nowadays, neighborhoods still carry symbols of a strong political identity that "mark" the territory of the two factions, such as flags, graffiti, painted mottos etc. Some traditions of the "old times" of the troubles still remain as an identity display that every year repeats itself: on the one hand, on 12th July there are bonfires in the Loyalists' areas, where piles of wood with Catholic symbols (like a framed picture of the Pope) are burnt to remember the victory of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. On the other hand, there are parades in uniform and masked faces of presumptuous ex IRA affiliates that remember the deaths of those who were victims/martyrs of the Irish cause. Rallies and manifestations are practiced by both sides, often lean to degenerate after alcohol abuse. Symbolic dates are not the only days that cause incidents. In several cases, violent rioting was caused also by issues relating, for example, to the possession of the urban space. The most infamous case was the 2001 "Holy Cross dispute" in the Ardoyne area in the North of Belfast. Beyond the media coverage of that specific case, the Holy Cross dispute is a poignant case - study also because it depicts the typical Northern Ireland case that carries all the issues related to territorial control and space dominion of the city. The Holy Cross Catholic Primary school for girls is situated in a "border" area between the two communities. The moving of a few families from the street changed the "equilibrium" in the neighborhood, absorbing the school in the Protestant populated area. Schoolgirls had to walk down a part of street that, after previous incidents, became first hostile, then dangerous for the continuous attacks of the Protestant community. The desire to remark the right for education of their children, pretty soon became a matter of principle for the girls' families, that

³¹ Townsend, Taylor, Merrilees, Furey, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, Cummings, 2020, p. 34.

started to refuse to pass through the backyards to take their daughters to school. The act of taking children to school became a real “statement march” with weekly crashes and incidents, with slurs, insults, urine balloons, throwing objects, pornographic exposition of pictures under the children’s eyes with the goal of discouraging the passage of the Catholics. The Protestant inhabitants were manifesting the fear of IRA infiltrations inside the daily march to school, and a more general exasperation because of the night clashes between the two communities with window breaking and car burning that made the neighbor unlivable. The “vendetta” mentality and the legacy of “paramilitary vigilante” attitude of the previous decades led to the exacerbation of the symbolic walking vs banning the walking that street, causing an international media coverage. The families got to the point of deciding to take the girls to school passing through police shields and followed by cameras. Even after the throwing of a blast bomb, which caused the injury of a police officer, it took months to sedate the protests and the attacks, showing world widely that sectarian hate was still a problem in Ulster, especially in the younger generation. As the essay *Post accord Northern Ireland* puts in evidence, “One report shows that over three-quarters of adolescents in Belfast had experienced sectarian crime or violence in their communities, making it difficult for them to break free from the social and psychological narrative of the troubles”³². The most affected youth seemed to be related to deprived neighborhoods where alcoholism, unemployment, and lack of interest in education and cultural activities caused the craving for a violent distraction. One study mentioned in *Post accord Northern Ireland* tries to explain the tendency of perpetrating street violence between communities and the result of the study indicates “boredom” in the initial causes of inter-ethnic violence.³³ One interesting perspective is the comparison with the Palestinian case through the research by McEvoy-Levy (2006), according to which “for many youths, participation in rioting and other forms of sectarian behavior is a way to demand agency in response to feelings of invisibility and economic marginality.”³⁴ The decay of the “real” paramilitary activity represented the creation of a void that couldn’t be filled easily. The end of troubles caused disillusionment towards the reasons the political fight had until that moment and that had left mental health problems (such as post traumatic shock disorder) in the lives of thousands of people. The suicidal rates reached a pick in the 2000s, ranking Northern Ireland in the top 15 countries in the world

³² Townsend, Taylor, Merrilees, Furey, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, Cummings, p. 35.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Townsend, Taylor, Merrilees, Furey, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, Cummings, p. 91.

for suicides.³⁵ The non-interest of the government and lack of dedicated funds left the youth in an institutional vacuum for all the first years of the 2000s, leaving the kids from both communities to seek a life purpose for themselves. However, several initiatives started from the mid-2000s involving the suicide-at-risk youth into inter-communities activities to favor dialogue and inter-ethnic projects that would keep them away from violence.

³⁵ Yeginsu, 2019 [26/08/22].

Chronology of the events ³⁶

1534

The Act of Supremacy makes King Henry VIII the Supreme Head of the Church of England.

1541

Henry VIII has himself declared King of Ireland by the Irish parliament.

1609

The plantation of Ulster begins.

1649

Oliver Cromwell arrives with his army in Ireland. He first lays siege to Drogheda. The city is captured and most of its defenders and inhabitants killed.

1685

James II becomes King of Great Britain and Ireland after the death of his brother Charles II.

1688

James II is deposed by the British parliament, which invites Prince William of Orange and his wife Mary to take the throne instead.

1689

James II's troops lay siege to (London)Derry. The city holds out for three and a half months before the siege is lifted.

1690

James' army is defeated by William's at the Battle of the Boyne (The anniversary of the battle is celebrated nowadays on 12 July).

1691

The Treaty of Limerick ends the Jacobite war. James II goes into exile, along with many of his Irish supporters.

1695

The first Penal Laws are passed to limit the power and influence of Catholics. More laws are enacted in the following decades.

1774-93

The Catholic Relief Acts remove some of the Penal Laws' restrictions on Catholics relating to property, education, and political participation.

³⁶ See <https://www.irishhistorycompressed.com/timeline-of-irish-history/> (27/07/22).

1782

The Irish parliament gains legislative independence.

1791

The Society of United Irishmen is founded in Belfast, dedicated to Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals.

1798

The United Irishmen attempt an insurrection.

1801

1 January: The Act of Union comes into effect, abolishing the Irish parliament.

1803

A rebellion led by Robert Emmet and some other United Irishmen against British rule is swiftly put down; Emmet and the other leaders are executed.

1823

The Catholic Association is founded to campaign for equal rights for Catholics.

1829

Catholic emancipation is granted, allowing Catholics to hold any political office, including that of MP.

1845-49

Potato famine ("The Great Famine").

1848

The 'Young Ireland' rebellion occurs.

1858

Both the Irish Republican (or 'Revolutionary') Brotherhood and Fenian Brotherhood are founded.

1884

The GAA (Gaelic Athletics Association) is founded to promote 'indigenous' sports.

1886

The first Home Rule Bill is defeated in the House of Commons.

1890

Charles Stewart Parnell is involved in a divorce case scandal which destroys his reputation and splits the Irish Party, of which he is the leader.

1891

Death of Parnell.

1893

In London, the Second Home Rule Bill is thrown out by the House of Lords.
In Dublin, the Gaelic League is founded to encourage the use of the Irish language.

1900

John Redmond becomes leader of Irish Parliamentary Party.

1912

Over two hundred thousand men sign the Ulster Covenant, pledging themselves to resist the plans to set up a Home Rule government in Ireland.

1913

January: the Ulster Volunteer Force is formed.
November: Nationalists found the Irish Volunteers.

1914

The third Home Rule Bill is passed and immediately suspended due to the international situation.

1914-18

First World War.

1916

24 April-30 April: The Easter Rising.

1918

A general election is held across Britain and Ireland. Sinn Féin MPs gain an overwhelming majority of seats in Ireland and meet as the Dáil Éireann in Dublin.

1919-21

The Anglo-Irish War/The War of Independence.

1920

“Bloody Sunday” in Croke Park (Dublin).

1920

The Government of Ireland Act partitions Ireland.

1921

Negotiators from Sinn Féin agree on the Anglo-Irish Treaty with the British government.

1922

The Irish Free State is established. Death of Michael Collins.

1922-23

A Civil War is fought in Ireland over the acceptance of the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

29

1925

Tri-Partite Agreement between North, South and the British government is signed which confirms the existing border.

1926

Éamon de Valera founds a new political party, Fianna Fáil, and announces his intention to contest elections in the Free State.

1931

The IRA is banned in the Free State.

1932

Fianna Fáil are elected and form a government.

1937

A new Irish Constitution is adopted after being approved by referendum.

1969

The 'Troubles' break out in Northern Ireland. "Battle of the Bogside" in Derry.

1972

"Bloody Sunday" in Derry.

1974

Car bombs planted in Dublin city center and Monaghan by Northern Irish Loyalists kill 33.

1981

Hunger Strike in Long Kesh and death of the leader Bobby Sands.

1994

The major terrorist groups in Northern Ireland declare ceasefires.

1996

A car bomb in London kills two and signals the end of the IRA ceasefire.

1997

New ceasefires are declared in Northern Ireland.

1998

The parties in Northern Ireland agree a deal to end decades of violence: "Good Friday Agreement".

2. Language and Nation

2.1 The fight for independence and the “weapon of language”

“Nation-building” and “culture” is a correlation that has been widely explored in several fields of study. In this thesis, the focus will be mainly on language and on how it has been used for identity building and cultural revival in the Irish case. The study will be only partially on the literary aspects, and mainly on the everyday language point of view. The territorial and urban aspect of language dispute in Northern Ireland will be considered as well, since, as Nicholas Coupland writes³⁷, “visualizations of modernity, linguistic landscapes can bring different qualities of contemporary urban experience into focus, including different manifestations of language conflict”.

Before specifically analyzing the Irish case, the themes of “language and conflict” and language as culture/nation building will be studied from a broader perspective.

According to Safran, the issue of the relationship between language and political sphere caused several controversies in several fields of study.³⁸ However, history from the 19th century proved how language and its politicization had an unquestionable role in the creation of “statehood” as we know it today. However, according to Kohn,³⁹ there is more than one potential element apart language that can unify a social group into a nation and, eventually, a statehood. Safran explains that these potential elements combined can create the foundation of a modern Nation-State, but currently it is language that emerges as a functional ethnic-unifying weapon:

These foundations are kinship, religious, or linguistic, in various combinations. Among them, language would seem to be the most important, for kinship lines are often difficult to substantiate; religious links are weakening in an age of growing secularization; and culture without language is a global mass culture that is ephemeral and implies little in the way of tradition or emotional

³⁷ Pavlenko, 2009, p. 248.

³⁸ Fishman, 1999, p. 77.

³⁹ Fishman, 1999, p. 78.

commitment. There remains language; more specifically, an ethno-nationally distinct language.⁴⁰

Language itself does not define the beginning of nationalism, but a language spoken and treated with an ideological pursue is invested of the power to change the destiny of a human group. As Safran specifies, this power is infused by an elite of intellectuals by “manipulating language as an instrument for the expression of collective consciousness”.⁴¹

The use of language or writing system for ideological and political purposes has indeed a long tradition that roots back in the history. Taking into analysis the writing system, Olivier Durand, for example, mentions the case of the Egyptians of the III century A.D. that, in the process of adopting Orthodox Christianity, abandoned the hieroglyph, demotic, and hieratic writing to replace it with a slightly modified Greek alphabet.⁴² The alphabetical replacement has several other famous cases that can be reported. Starting from the 20th century, Ataturk’s Latinization of Turkish, for example, was applied in the western oriented attitude of the “new” Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the case of the ex-USSR, the Cyrillization of the alphabets (as well as the introduction of the Russian language) was applied in all the territories, from the Turkic languages in Central Asia to the famous case of Moldovan, transformed into a “cyrillicized” Romanian in the attempt to culturally separate Moldovia from Romania.⁴³

From the other side of the Iron Curtain, in Europe there are at least four cases in which language was involved in political dispute. The first one concerns the Germanophone and Ladinophone minority in Südtirol who experienced a violent forced Italianization during Fascism, that led to change of toponyms and a general discouragement of the use of German for public communication. The second case concerns the Basque language, that for a long time was claimed as symbol of alterity compared to the Spanish language in the independentist movement context. The Basque language, the “Euskara”, is presumably a pre-Indo-European language that survived centuries of linguistic dominations and that

⁴⁰ Fishman, 1999, p. 91.

⁴¹ Fishman, 1999, p. 82.

⁴² Durand, 2014, p. 211.

⁴³ Ibid.

also for this reason became one of main reasons of pride of the Independence fight that lasted the main part of the 20th century. Considering the Spanish area, in recent years the Catalanian language case became famous in linguistic studies for its political use in the attempt to have a Referendum of Independence that would have determined a formal separation from the rest of Spain. The last case, less famous than the others, concerns the Corse language, that reached the status of autonomous language of the Corsica Island in 1974 and still today represents a “cultural weapon” for the Independentists.

All these examples well fit with Fishman’s definition of “Independence Cluster” in the language of a community:

Every late modernization movement (and every language movement that is or has been “late” relative to certain others in its vicinity), every contextually weak language movement (and every language movement that is or has been “weak” relative to certain others in its environment), every corpus planning movement that co-exists with other collective efforts that are marked by elements of nationalism or ethnocentrism, have or have had a strong dose of “independence” stress in their corpus- planning dynamics.

Hence, Fishman considers the societies under threat and cultures at risk of political domination as willing “to free to be themselves” by choosing the maximum degree of linguistic isolation. However, the complete inward orientation of a language is rarely possible. The bipolarity⁴⁴ between Independence (the inward look) and Interdependence (the necessity and inevitability of contact with other languages and cultures) is a delicate balance that, according to Fishman⁴⁵, cannot exclude one

⁴⁴ Fishman elaborates corpus planning strategies exemplified by an orthogonal bipolar dimensions scheme which is susceptible to the partition of superdimensions. In this case, the superdimension regards the bipolarity between independence cluster and interdependence cluster. The dimensions of “purity, uniqueness, classicism, and Ausbau”, share the purpose to “foster the authentic individuality” of a language (Fishman, 1991, p. 108) in contrast with the “interdependence cluster”.

⁴⁵ Fishman, 1999, p. 112.

cluster from the other. Languages reflect the functional needs of the human culture, but, at the same time, they fulfil the sociocultural interaction with other cultures for the sake of their own existence:

The bipolarity of corpus planning is implemented (not necessarily equally, but nevertheless, without fail) in order to provide all languages with all possible opportunities for successful multidirectionality.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ibid.

2.2 Language Revival

Language Revivals have become a popular object of study throughout the 20th century also due to the progressive decolonization of a number of nations started in the late 19th century with the first anti-colonizers movements. The linguist Fishman stated that “Every sociocultural collectivity interested in doing so has the right to strive for its own perceived authenticity via the language of its own preference”.⁴⁷ The Revival always involves politics wherever the above-mentioned sociocultural collectivity pursues the establishment of a new nation or territorial autonomy. The Language Revival or Revitalization is the attempt to stop the disappearance of a language which is not used anymore in the primary communication role. The revitalization can be performed on extinct languages, like the successful case of Hebrew, and on languages that are still existing but endangered by the use of a more appealing language. The question whether a language can be revitalized or not involved several linguists who, thanks to the existing examples of many postcolonial cases, can study the developments and the strategies of what Fishman called “Reversing language shift” (RLS). Fishman is considered one of the most reliable linguists for this topic and he is famous for elaborating a strategy divided into eight steps.

First of all, adults have a primarily role as “language shifters”. Specifically, the adults involved should have an active social role, as being socially engaged in the community and having work relations. Often the last speakers of a language are indeed isolated elders. The next step is to keep a socially integrated population of active language speakers, focusing first on the spoken language. Later, this population will have to encourage the informal use of the language among all the ages and within families in areas where there is a reasonable number of people already habitually using the language (3rd step). This encouragement should be applied through local institutions that should create occasions in which this language can be used. This step directly refers to the 4th one: this (primarily oral) language use should be firstly encouraged in local institution, avoiding the reliance on the formal education at school. Once that this has been accomplished, according to the 5th step, the language revival should finally pass through school with mandatory language courses. When the previous steps have been

⁴⁷ Fishman, 2001, p. 4.

accomplished, the encouragement of the use of language should pass through the workplace (6th step) and, later on, through mass media and government services (7th step).

Only when the all the previous phases have been achieved encourage language should be used and consolidated in higher education and government (8th step).

As it is described, the application of the eight steps passes also through the institutions that are bound to organize re-education of language starting from non-speaker adults and creating proper social scenarios that Fishman calls “home-family-neighborhood communities”⁴⁸ in which the use of the language can be encouraged. The possibility of compulsory language schooling is contemplated. However, this factor, as it will be explained in the Irish case, is not a key factor in revitalizing a language. It is proved indeed that Language Revivals have a better chance to succeed when in the family scenario the use of the language is encouraged and creates emotional associations with the language itself.⁴⁹

According to Fishman, the difficulties of reviving a language are multiple. The most interesting point, though, regards the challenge of Globalization that places the rescue of a “weaker” language in an unequal battle. If we consider that the predominance of the American power means the predominance of English for communication exchange, the Irish case and those of other postcolonial countries of the British Empire, seem almost hopeless.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Fishman, 2001, p.16.

⁴⁹ Wright, 1996, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Fishman, 2001, p. 7.

2.3 The Celtic decline in Ireland

The Celtic languages are part of the Indo-European family and six of them currently survive in Britain: Breton, Welsh, Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic, Manx, and Cornish. Many Celtic areas remained almost untouched by the rest of linguistic development of the Kingdom of England, maintaining their own languages and traditions intact for several centuries. Since the beginning of the policy of linguistic uniformity of the Anglo-Saxon dominion, the question of the language became relevant: since “language was a natural vehicle for a cultural and political aspiration of the Celtic peoples, this cultural clash naturally escalated into a linguistic confrontation”⁵¹.

The core of the Celtic culture was kept by the Bards⁵² and their schools which were, however, exclusive for the rest of the society, causing a minimization of the literacy transmission in the centuries. Bardic schools became illegal after the Henry VIII Reformation of 1534 and survived only as an illicit activity. The *Act for the English Order, Habit and Language* put the stress indeed on the diversity (from English) caused by the language, together with “certain savage and wilde kind and manner of living” that characterized the subjected populations.⁵³ This attempt to anglicize the Irish wasn’t as successful as the one perpetrated against, for example, Welsh people, as both Durkacz and Ahlqvist underline⁵⁴. Irish Celtic was indeed strictly bound to culture and religion and, especially this latter element, helped to keep distinct the Irish from the Protestant anglicization.⁵⁵ Differently, in the case of Scotland there was a “split” after 1560, with lowlands more anglicized and the highlands, distant from the political sphere of London and more bound to Catholicism, keen to preserve Gaelic. The Highlands continued to be seen for a long time as wild territory filled with anti-English sentiment and that was remarked through a unique traditional setting and a strict behavioral code that represented the antithesis against the English. While in Wales and Scotland the religious education used Gaelic as means of communication of the Protestant doctrine, the Irish situation was far different from that. Protestantism never substituted Catholicism, a religion that had a further language of rite and didn’t require a personal reading of the Holy Scriptures. A priest with a basic knowledge of Latin supplied all the spiritual needs

⁵¹ Durkacz, 1983, p. 1.

⁵² In the Celtic tradition, Bards were storytellers, music composer, and genealogist of the community. Through their role, the tradition and history of the tribes were preserved.

⁵³ Durkacz, 1983, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Ahlqvist, 1990, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Durkacz, 1983, p. 4.

of the Irish peasantry, without involving a translation into the local language. Differently, by the first half of the 1660s, the entire Bible had a complete translation in Gaelic available for the Protestant evangelization of the subjected lands. The Bible in Irish for Catholics became available only three centuries later, in 1981⁵⁶. Some members of the Protestant clergy like Rev. John Richardson saw the Gaelic religious literacy as a vital step in order to convert as many as possible. He wrote “A proposal for the conversion of the Popish natives of Ireland: to the establish’d religion”, an entire essay about the use of Gaelic for religious proselytism. Richardson himself published an Irish liturgy and a collection of sermons.⁵⁷ As an Irish estimator, he had an interesting perspective about the political role of the language. According to him⁵⁸, the political distance between Ireland and the rest of the Kingdom was due not to the language difference, but to the attachment to Catholicism and the only way to overcome this was providing the Irish peasantry with a proper religious schooling in their own language. Despite Richardson’s efforts, the destiny of both Irish and Scottish Gaelic became the same one century later. While the Charity Schools that provided basic education to poor children failed to transmit the Celtic literacy in an effective way, the imposition of the English culture and language became reality through the establishment of the Parochial schools in 1616 with the School Establishment Act. The purpose of this was to fit Ireland into the national system of the Kingdom, degrading Celtic literacy to a lower level of importance that related to poverty and cultural underdevelopment.⁵⁹

According to the Protestant eyes, the issue of the language risked to become strictly connected to the attachment to the Catholic religion, and religion was strictly connected with the question of the “loyalty” to the Kingdom. Thomas Bray himself, the founder of the “Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge” (SSPK) that diffused the Charity Schools, stressed the inseparability of Language with religious and political belonging:

⁵⁶ Ahlqvist, 1990, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Durkatz, 1983, p. 33.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Durkatz, 1983, p. 72.

If some effectual method be not made use of to instruct these great Numbers of People in the Principles of the True Religion and Loyalty, there is little prospect but that superstition and idolatry [...] will from generation to generation be propagated among them. That among the ways proper to be taken for converting and civilizing of the said deluded Persons... one of the most necessary had always been thought to be Erecting and Establishing of a sufficient number of *English* Protestant schools, wherein the children of the *Irish* Natives may be instructed in the English Tongue, and the fundamental Principles of the True Religion.⁶⁰

This was indeed later applied with the S.S.P.K. (“Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge”) idea of opening some special schools where the poor Irish children could be fed, taught with Anglican principles, and, of course, set against their Irish roots and culture.

The consequence of this approach was a minor production of Gaelic religious works throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th century that included The Irish New Testament of 1754, the Liturgy by Richardson and Catechisms in Irish.⁶¹ However, the poor condition and the abusive practice of the S.S.P.K schools for Irish children made the system fail from the inside. The forced cultural alienation turned into anti-Anglican sentiment later in the 18th century establishing the basis for the Irish Nationalism. The Celtic response to the attempt of Anglicization was the maintenance of an illegal form of Celtic/Catholic schooling that maintained some form of Bardic tradition and that was called “Hedgeschools”.⁶² The problems of the “Catholic education”, however, encountered problems not only with the attempt of Protestant influence, but also with official laws that forbade the practice of Catholic education. The first official ban was under Cromwell and continued under the Hanovers. Only in 1792 some teachers were finally allowed to practice again thanks to a more slightly tolerance for Catholics.⁶³ The Gaelic literacy was still threatened, in the 18th century, by the last obstacle, probably the most effective one:

⁶⁰ Durkatz, 1983, p. 74.

⁶¹ Durkatz, 1983, p. 75.

⁶² From the “hedgerows”, the hiding place of the illegal lectures.

⁶³ Durkatz, 1983, p. 76.

the disregard by its own native speakers. As Durkatz put in evidence⁶⁴, the more the teachers themselves became more proficient with the English language, the more they were reluctant in continuing the Irish Education. Moreover, the same reluctance was shared by the children's parents that were aware of the horrible life conditions in the colonized Ireland and therefore preferred to favor the knowledge of English to let their children have more possibilities in terms of jobs and adaptation. The Gaelic diffusion in Ireland was ironically slowed down also because of the lack of diffusion of the Evangelical movements, patronized by the Protestant Irish minority. Gaelic was indeed accepted at this point, but exclusively to diffuse the Holy scriptures in the local language that was hopelessly disappearing to leave space to an English, but still Catholic, literacy.

As Ahlqvist points out, Gaelic started to deteriorate as spoken language around 1600 and continued this course until 1851, establishing, however, the split between the Northwest area that included County Galway, County Kerry, County Donegal, County Mayo, and other small areas far from the capital that kept the language alive in the rest of the country. The Great Famine of 1851 particularly hit the area where Gaelic speakers were, accelerating the disappearance of the language. In the same year of the Famine, the first census was made and demonstrated that out of 6.5 million of inhabitants, only 320,000 spoke Irish and only 1.5 million were bilingual.⁶⁵

However, even before the Famine, at the beginning of the 19th century, Irish was declared officially an endangered language by the Association for discountenancing Vice, a Protestant education society that had the diffusion of Protestant religion as mission. The strong Catholic belief of Irish people and the dispute between the Anglo-Irish Protestants who wished the use of Gaelic as a means of conversion and those who didn't, failed to create a stable Christian production in Irish. From the spoken language point of view, the first bilingual spelling book was published in 1820 and its use was thought to be merely practical.⁶⁶ It was indeed necessary to provide the poor masses able to read Irish a proper English vocabulary to communicate with the upper classes. Therefore, Gaelic seemed relegated to a lower status language by the Irish people themselves as they saw a greater usefulness in the mastery of English to find a way in life.

⁶⁴ Durkatz, 1983, p. 77.

⁶⁵ Ahlqvist, 1990, p. 9.

⁶⁶ Durkatz, 1983, p. 155.

The Gaelic resurgence arrived with new interest throughout the 19th century. This renewed interest towards a language who seemed to be fairly extinct in the everyday use came from the educated upper classes of Ireland in the context of national and cultural resurgence. Irish was rediscovered as literary language thanks to poetry volumes like *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1796) and the work of the Gaelic Society, Irish Archeological Society, and Ossianic Society⁶⁷ that successfully shifted the opinion of Gaelic from “language of barbarians” to the noble language of Bards also thanks to the Romantic cultural environment that idolized the Celtic world. The cultural and political mutations of the 19th century granted the roots for the linguistic revival of Gaelic. However, the fluency of Gaelic of whoever was not part of the intellectual world, was proved to be far from diffused. According to Durkatz⁶⁸, the fluency of Gaelic for monoglots in 1871 census must be read on the age basis. While the older generations kept the existence of spoken Gaelic, the younger generations determined a decline until the beginning of the 20th century. While the forced English education at school granted generations of bilinguals, Irish simply stopped to be spoken at home for good. Also for Durkatz⁶⁹, the progressive abandonment of Gaelic as everyday communication has a rather simple explanation: while English represented the language of opportunities, commerce, and auspicious prosperity in a poor country, Gaelic represented all the opposite: a still language that represented a lost past, with no use for the present and even less use for a future dominated by the biggest colonial Empire of the world.

⁶⁷ Durkatz, 1983, p. 191.

⁶⁸ Durkatz, 1983, p. 222.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

2.4 The Celtic revival in the Republic of Ireland

The autonomist ambitions of the first attempt to obtain the Home Rule in 1885 (see chapter 1, p. 11) led to an incredible cultural turmoil within the Irish intellectuals. The Gaelic League specifically decided to emphasize the language as symbol of cultural and political resurgence⁷⁰. The League supported culturally based research and propaganda, promoting initiatives like festivals and meetings that underlined the Celtic belonging of the Irish people. The cultural struggle continued in the beginning of the 20th century with political propaganda that encouraged the use of Irish. Irish words appeared on the anti-conscription fliers⁷¹ distributed during the First World War when the United Kingdom was trying to conscript to the army as many men from the provinces as it could. The refusal to fight for their own oppressor was indeed a mantra for the Irish nationalists. At the end of the civil war in 1923 (see chapter 1, p. 16), the first official statement about the language was provided through the official Constitution of Ireland. In 1922 Gaelic became the national language of the country along with English and in 1932, in the revised Constitution, it became “first official language”. Fishman⁷² underlines the uniqueness of the Irish case into the European minority language landscape. Differently from other cases, Irish was meant to become not a protected language, but a national language. The political purpose of re-gaelicization of the Island was clear, even though it had to pass through, once again, education. A Gaeltacht Commission was established in order to map and keep monitored the spoken Gaelic and one hour of Gaelic a day became mandatory in school.⁷³

The process of re-gaelicization was substituted with an official bilingualism in 1965, however, the governmental effort to grant it was not institutionally effective.⁷⁴ Walsh and McLeod compared at least two models to analyze the process of resurgence of a language minority, including the Fishman’s eight steps LRS (Language Reversal Shift). According to them⁷⁵, Fishman’s analysis cannot be useful in the case of Irish specifically for the concept of “diglossia”:

⁷⁰ Durkatz, 1983, p. 206.

⁷¹ Anti.conscription campaign (<https://libcom.org/article/1918-irelands-anti-conscription-campaign>) (20/08/22).

⁷² Fishman, 2001, 195.

⁷³ Wash-McLeod, 2008, p. 22.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Walsh-McLeod, 2008, p. 23.

If we understand diglossia as occurring when ‘each language or variety in a multilingual society serves a specialized function and is used for particular purposes’ (Romaine 2000: 43), Ireland does not constitute a good example, as the relative proportion of balanced bilinguals is small and both languages occur over the full range of social domains, though the use of Irish in many of them is ... minimal.⁷⁶

Diglossia indicates the situation in which there are two languages inside the same language community. Each of the two languages is used in a specific occasion. A typical example of it is the categorization between formal and informal language or vernacular (high prestige language vs low prestige language). Considering the Jewish language, the situation of diglossia was set in religious terms, with Jewish spoken during the religious function. In the case of Ireland, the situation of diglossia does not exist. First of all, Irish as a language doesn’t cover a domain, either religious or informal (in house language). Moreover, the small number of speakers could not constitute a proper diglossia. If Fishman proved that revitalization has been possible for Jewish, this model could never be applied to Irish for the fact that Ireland is not a diglossic community.

The analysis method that, according to the two authors, can be used for an effective analysis of the institutional steps and initiatives for the Gaelic revival is Strubell’s “Catherine Wheel”⁷⁷ language planning framework. Walsh and McLeod defined the “Catherine Wheel” as the instrument framework that “identifies weaknesses in the measures and suggests a way of overcoming them. It is argued that, for this legislation to have a significant linguistic impact, careful strategies are needed to equip speakers of Irish and Gaelic to use their languages in relation to public services, given the dominance of English in these domains. In particular, strategies are needed to recruit and deploy bilingual staff in

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “Catherine Wheel” was a wheel-shaped torture device from the Middle Ages. Strubell used this name to recall the concept of more aspects of the language use in a society that “spin” allowing the survival itself of the language.

an effective manner. Without careful planning, there is a risk that these enactments will not bring about meaningful changes in language practice and may become largely symbolic rather than functional”.⁷⁸

The “Catherine Wheel” model has several aspects that need to be taken into consideration in order to establish an institutional language planning: the individual as consumer, the individual as worker, and the individual as social being. Without the consideration of these three linguistic aspects, a minority language cannot survive. According to Walsh and McLeod the “Catherine Wheel” model establishes that “in the case of minoritized languages, there is a link between competence in a language, its social use, the presence and demand for products and services in/through the language, and motivation to use and learn it, which in turn enhances competence in the form of a wheel”.⁷⁹

According to this assumption, a language revitalization has the change to be actualized if a population finds a motivation to practice it.

In the case of Ireland, a real institutional step towards language legislation was done in the year 1977 when the organization *Conradh na Gaeilge* (“The Gaelic League”) proposed a *Bill of Rights for the Irish Language*. After several non-effective proposals of the government, such as guidelines for the use of Gaelic in the public offices, the idea of introducing a Language Legislation was approved only in 1997. Before its final approval, several issues were discussed. First of all, the Irish legislation was inspired by other existent legislations, respectively Canadian, concerning the appliance of the legislation itself, and Welsh, concerning the creation of “schemes”⁸⁰ for the institutional language.⁸¹ The biggest obstacle was the presence of the word “equality” that stands between Irish and English in the Irish Constitution. According to it, the word equality was not to be included inside the Bill itself because of the “Irish language’s pre-eminent status as the “national” and “first official language.”⁸² Finally, in 2003 the Act passed and 650 public bodies were directly affected by the bilingual shift.

⁷⁸ Walsh-McLeod, 2008, p. 20.

⁷⁹ Walsh-McLeod, 2008, p. 23.

⁸⁰ Schemes were dedicated plans for each public body of the state. They were provided for Gaeltacht area and the rest of the country. The purpose of the schemes was to give specific guidelines on where and how apply the use of Gaelic language, for example, in the Gaelic translation of the websites.

⁸¹ Walsh-McLeod, 2008, p. 27.

⁸² Walsh-McLeod, 2008, p. 26.

The creation of the institutional schemes had to face several issues. First of all, the spread of Gaelic knowledge wasn't the same in all the Island. Places like the Gaeltacht, the northwest area of Ireland, had a general attachment to Gaelic that many other parts of the country did not have. The conclusion was that the application of the several articles had to differ specifically in the Gaeltacht area from the national directions for the public bodies. Very specific directions were provided for every public body, from the public announcements to the correspondence reply. Sadly, such a detailed scheme could not withstand with the "elephant in the room": even after the mandatory learning at school, the Gaelic skills of the Irish population was still insufficient to cope with the bilingualism that the government was pushing so much. The re-basquicization experience⁸³ proved that even though governments put any effort to provide a correct diffusion of a language, the speakers must have an adequate level to use it. The outcomes of the language policies from 1922 to the early 2000 resulted into a reconsideration of the purposes. In Giollagáin's article *From revivalist to undertaker. New developments in official policies and attitudes to Ireland's 'First Language*, the analysis of the latest language policy can be done through "20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language" and the *Gaeltacht Act 2012*, promoted by the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

While the Strategy was meant to function as general perspective for the next 20 years language policy, the *Gaeltacht Act 2012* was a more technical text that had the purpose to direct the political aspects of the policy in the Gaeltacht area. According to Giollagáin, "The emphasis on institutional, primarily educational, provision in the Strategy, combined with the voluntary aspect of the Gaeltacht community language plans set out in the Gaeltacht Act 2012 would suggest that language policy in Ireland has moved into a new phase: a post-Gaeltacht phase".⁸⁴

The first critique of the author regards the lack of ethnolinguistic perspective. The Gaeltacht area's identity loses importance in spite of a general anarchy of the funds' destination and language planning. Moreover, the Act doesn't designate a specific expert team but delegates to political institutions that lack of expertise key aspects of the matter. Language's protection seems left to what Giollagáin calls "laissez faire" of the speakers by reducing the amount of effective interventions of the State:

⁸³ Walsh-McLeod, 2008, p. 30.

⁸⁴ Ó Giollagáin, 2014, p. 112.

Language agencies are not being dissuaded from adopting a *laissez-faire* attitude to the communal crisis of native-spoken Irish, but are, ironically, being encouraged to support Irish as an optional secondary linguistic identity — an optional post-modern adornment in addition to English language normativity, but certainly not a primary or a communally-rooted identity [...], it appears inevitable that Irish will cease to exist as a social identity.⁸⁵

With the above-mentioned current reforms, the Irish government does not seem to be interested anymore in intervening on the predominance of English over Irish in the social sphere. On the contrary, Irish seems to be relegated as a secondary language, crystalized into its institutional frame. The primary social communication role is left to English, the predominant language in the competitive market that won over the speakers, weakening the use of Gaelic also in the areas where it was mainly spoken.

⁸⁵ Ó Giollagáin, 2014, p. 113.

3. The Irish Revival in Northern Ireland

3.1 The outcomes of the Good Friday Agreement

The Irish language had a shared destiny in both Northern Ireland and the Republic until the formal partition of 1921. From back then until the current day, Irish in the North was subjected to a separate treatment. The previous chapter analyzed the institutional efforts to revitalize a language that continued to decrease decade after decade. The Republic of Ireland had almost 100 years, from the establishment of the Republic until the last language plan of 2012, to provide a legislation to preserve the language. On the contrary, the six counties of the North remained under the control of Britain, facing the exclusion from any form of minority language preservation at least until after the Good Friday agreement of 1998. However, the lack of Institutional measures to save Gaelic did not result in a complete disregard from the speakers towards the Irish language. On the opposite, in the context of the civil rights movement, Gaelic seemed to be the object of a renewed interest completely detached by any institutional plan. The outcome of this “partisan” language revitalization may be analyzed through the census from 1911 to 2021.

Taking into consideration the time frame between 1911 and 1991, the evidence is that from the beginning of the century to the latest years of the Troubles, the knowledge of Gaelic has increased significantly. The number of people who declared to have knowledge of Gaelic almost quintuplicated, from 28,725 people in 1911 to 142,003 in 1991.⁸⁶ The 2001 census contained a more specific question concerning not the “knowledge” of the language but the understanding of it. As Muller specifies,⁸⁷ this terminology change may complicate the comparison between this census and the previous ones, however, it is possible to have a general perspective of the trend between pre-Good Friday agreement and post-Good Friday agreement. The number of people with knowledge of Gaelic reached a total of 167,490, around the 10.4 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland (1,617,957 people). As McLeod points out,⁸⁸ there are other cases where the presence of 8 per cent of minority language speakers has been used to determine the state of bilingualism of an area, like Sweden and Scotland. Thanks to a more refined categorization of the skills concerning Gaelic in the 2001 census, it is possible

⁸⁶ Muller, 2010, p. 40.

⁸⁷ Muller, 2010, p. 40.

⁸⁸ Muller, 2010, p. 40.

to have a general overview of the Gaelic language in Northern Ireland in the beginning of the 21st century. First of all, only 75,125 out of 167,490 people can “Speak, read, write and understand Irish” (the degree of these skills are not investigated). A substantial part of the interviewed people, 36,479 out of 167,490, declared that they “Understand spoken Irish but cannot read, write or speak Irish”. Although the level of fluency is not taken into consideration, it is possible to assume that between 1991 and 2001 a further jump forward a general knowledge of Gaelic has been done, specifically among young children⁸⁹. The religious difference connected to Gaelic was still confirmed as a predominant mark, with a significant majority of Catholic Irish speakers compared to other religious backgrounds. In 2011 Census, the Gaelic knowledge settled around 11 per cent, establishing the continuation of a slow growth of the trend.⁹⁰ It is interesting to question whether the role of 2017 Brexit referendum had an influence on the interest towards the learning of Gaelic. According the 2021 census, the number of Gaelic speakers settles around 12.4 per cent (228,600 people)⁹¹, establishing a small increase. The most interesting aspect of 2021, however, does not concern language: for the first time since the separation from the rest of the Island, the six counties of Northern Ireland count more inhabitants that define themselves as “Irish” and “Catholic” than “British” and “Protestant”, changing in this way a proportion which constituted the very foundation of the country.

The issue of language in Northern Ireland was considered by the institutions only in 1998 in the context of the Good Friday Agreement. The Good Friday Agreement is an international treaty signed by almost all the Northern Irish parties⁹² and recognized by both Ireland and England. Part of the treaty was focused on the agreements concerning the cultural and social sphere in order to favor social peace and stop the interethnic hatred. One of the key terms was about language minorities and their status in Northern Ireland:

All participants recognize the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic

⁸⁹ Muller, 2010, p. 44.

⁹⁰ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/>) (17/07/22).

⁹¹ Census 2021 Main Statistics for Northern Ireland Phase 1 press release (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/>) (27/09/22).

⁹² The Democratic Unionist party did not approve and therefore sign the treaty.

communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.⁹³

Even though this term seemed to put an accent about a generalized purpose to protect all the minority languages in the territory, the specifications that followed were conceived specifically for the Irish language and included the willingness to promote the language through several channels. Education, primarily, but also broadcasting in Irish and financing Irish films production. Moreover, the parts also agreed on “seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language” and “facilitate and encourage the use of the language in speech and writing in public and private life where there is appropriate demand”⁹⁴. In the first years of the new century, the question of how enhance the Good Friday propositions was raised. It resulted into the 2007 Act promoted by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), that tried to designate an official status of Irish in Northern Ireland, including the possibility to set bilingual road signals together with other institutional steps towards a Gaelicization of the country. These purposes, obviously raised criticism from some political areas. Muller quotes the submission from Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, an organization founded in Belfast in 1765 that “is committed to the protection of the principles of the Protestant Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688”⁹⁵. The criticism raised by the Orange Lodge focuses on the worries concerning the idea of “changing the faces of Northern Ireland”⁹⁶ through a language policy that undoubtedly would hide a political charge that is beyond the simple revitalization of the language. According to the activists, any institutional step towards the institutional diffusion of Irish would lead to “the most serious repercussions and create the greatest damage imaginable to community relations”⁹⁷. Moreover, the recognition of Irish in the frame of a possible bilingualism to be implemented through governmental steps similar to the ones established in the Republic of Ireland, would leave other minority languages of the territory, like Ulster

⁹³ Muller, 2010, p. 73.

⁹⁴ Muller, 2010, p. 74.

⁹⁵ Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland (<https://www.goli.org.uk/>) (12/07/22).

⁹⁶ Muller, 2010, p. 176.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Scot, in a lower status in terms of prestige and, obviously, funding.⁹⁸ From the picture of this declaration, it is possible to assume that after the Good Friday Agreement, the political turmoil is far from being sedated and the Irish language still represents a divisive aspect inside the Anglo-Irish society. The controversy concerning the political charge of language is today, after Brexit, more present than ever. The 2021 census itself represented the chance for further polemics, with the census questionnaire provided in both English and Gaelic in the digital version and exclusively in English in the paper version, compromising the possibility for the elderly that lack computer skills to fill the demographic survey in Irish.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Muller, 2010, p. 177.

⁹⁹ Jackson, 2021 (26/08/22).

3.2 The language, the Troubles

After a brief presentation of the recent history of Gaelic in Northern Ireland, the focus of this chapter will be on the 30 years (1968-1998) of the Troubles and their repercussions on the language's role and destiny inside the society. In particular, the context of the prison as laboratory for language revival will be analyzed as an exceptional example of a self-made revitalization experience.

As mentioned before, the destiny of Irish took different paths after the partition. Gaelic in Northern Ireland started to be an "ostracized" language already in 1923 with the *Education Act*, through which the status of the Gaelic was set as a "foreign language" and therefore threatened accordingly, putting in this way an end at the work of the Gaelic League.¹⁰⁰ Gaelic became an optional language at school deprived from any nationalistic implication that might rise suspect of anti-governmental activity. As Ionnrachtaig points out¹⁰¹, the most extreme supporters of the loyalist cause (both in and out politics) considered Irish as an extreme danger and automatic detector of "republican conspiracy". The Gaelic "appeal" needed to be reduced, and to fulfil this proposition a "soft" approach was chosen. Instead of an official "ban" of the Gaelic lecturing that would have caused strong reactions, the option applied by the Parliament in 1933 was to forbid the payments of fees for teaching Gaelic, even as a second language.¹⁰² The legislative interventions against Irish continued a decade later, when in 1948 the any attempt to put on street signs in Irish was punished by the law, anticipating of two years the 1950's legislation:

The Public Order Legislation (1951) and the Flags and Emblems Act (1954) amounted to drastic emergency measures that enabled the Stormont government to subdue any cultural or political expressions of Irish nationalism by the excluded Catholic minority.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ionnrachtaigh, 2013, p. 80.

¹⁰¹ Ionnrachtaigh, 2013, p. 82.

¹⁰² Ionnrachtaigh, 2013, p. 82.

¹⁰³ Ionnrachtaigh, 2013, p. 84.

Language was obviously included in the concept of “cultural expression” and had to be fought with the language of the political and therefore cultural domination. Although the institutional decisions were preventing the diffusion of Irish through the official schooling, an unofficial activity devoted to language revival started to diffuse within communities. Together with language, the range of the activities proposed by these self-organized gatherings included folklore, dances, music, and sport activities. This non strictly political “clubs” attracted a various collectivity of Gaelic estimators that continued their activity in a center called *Cumann Chluain Ard*. This center tried to take the place of the old Gaelic League that, although still existing, was less and less popular.

Several activists were later imprisoned in the former Victorian prison of “Crumlin Road” during the Second World War. As Ionnrachtaigh reports, there are testimonies of former prisoners who described the Gaelic learning inside this prison, in particular, the words of former prisoner Liam Ó Stiobhaird are emblematic:

Hundreds of us came out of Crumlin Road Jail as fluent Irish speakers and many of us had a rejuvenating impact on the cultural activity on the outside.¹⁰⁴

Later in the early 50’s, part of the activism gathered around the figure of Seamus Mac Seáin who wished a more radical shift towards language politicization. The activities of the old Gaelic League were considered by him “too mild and bourgeois”¹⁰⁵, almost an “hobbyist” movement. Therefore, the beginning of the post Second World War revolutionary shift of language activism can be traced back in this time. Although they did not consider themselves belonging to any political side, the socialist influence was clear in their declarations and, in the case of Northern Ireland¹⁰⁶, their belonging to the working-class rights activism. The language activism of Mac-Seáin’s group indeed meddled with a

¹⁰⁴ Ionnrachtaigh, 2013, p. 87.

¹⁰⁵ Ionnrachtaigh, 2013, p. 88.

¹⁰⁶ The Northern Ireland Nationalists close to the socialist ideas were often belonging to the working class. On the contrary, the political fight in the 1968 context attracted from the Republic students from middle-upper class.

vast variety of initiatives for social justice in the deprived Catholic areas of Belfast. The most creative idea was the founding of a “Gaeltacht area in Belfast”: newlywed couples of activists raised financing to build on Belfast’s Shaw’s Road the first “Irish speaking community” as an urban “decolonizing project”.¹⁰⁷

The Shaw Road activists managed to take their instances on the educational sphere: disobeying the laws, between 1969 and 1971 they founded an Irish speaking nursery and a primary school for the children of the “free neighborhood”. According to Ionnrachtaig¹⁰⁸, the idea of urban space decolonization to be develop also through a language shift was the “seed” that later flourished in the detention centers in the context of the 80’s political imprisonments.

¹⁰⁷ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 89.

¹⁰⁸ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 92.

3.3 Republicans and Prisons

In order to understand Language Revival in the context of imprisonment, it is necessary to describe the detention centers system in Northern Ireland throughout history. The chronological analysis is fundamental for finding recurrent patterns and similarities among the cases of Irish Nationalists imprisonments that, as mentioned in the first chapter, have a long history back in the 19th century, in particular with the mythicized figures of the Sinn Féin leader O'Donovan Rossa and the Irish Republican Brotherhood Thomas Clarke that both originated the figure of the "heroic prisoner" that didn't lose the spirit during the imprisonment.¹⁰⁹

One of the first pattern which recurs in the Irish Nationalists jail sentences it's the classification of the inmates as "ordinary" (so non-political prisoner) but, at the same time, also as prisoners with special restraints, like negation of visiting hours, books and writing supplies. The status of "political prisoner" was indeed avoided already in the 19th century as form of negation of any political recognition of the crimes.¹¹⁰ The exception of this practice was during the First World War imprisonments, in particular after the Easter rising of 1916. In this case, prisoners received the status of POWs (prisoners of war) and therefore they could wear civilian clothes, read books, and write letters. After the partition, in the 1970's, in Northern Ireland the special statuses for prisoners continued to be granted to everyone who professed in front of the court the political motivation of their crime as a concession by the British government in exchange for a truce with the IRA. As Mc Keown points out, the date that changed back the attitude of the government towards the Nationalists is 1976, when the Northern Ireland government of Stormont¹¹¹ changed and the criminalization of political prisoners started to be applied. The new legislation increased the powers of the police forces and courts. The suspects of belonging to the IRA ranks were convicted after very fast processes with the absence of jury courts. One judge and the "spontaneous" self-accusation of the suspect during police interrogation was enough to grant a conviction. The consequence of this drastic change in the legislation was a dramatic increase of convictions throughout all the 1970's. As McKeown reports, "The result of the implementation of this legislation was a rapid increase in the number of convictions; over 56% of them based solely

¹⁰⁹ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 97.

¹¹⁰ McKeown, 1998, p. 10.

¹¹¹ Northern Irish Parliament.

on confessions and a further 30% supplemented by some form of forensic or identification evidence which of itself would not have been sufficient to secure a conviction”.¹¹²

The most important change, however, was the denial of the “political status” to all the prisoners that claimed whatsoever involvement with the political fight after the 1 March 1976. This choice consequently led to incredible raise of tension between prisoners, government and the outside world, with the involvement of local and international activists on the issue concerning the role and the very essence of these prisoners.

The increase of prisoners brought to the attention of the authorities the question of the physical space of the prisons. The necessity of extraordinary capacity led to the creation of the so called “H blocks”¹¹³ inside the Long Kesh prison camp. These blocks were single cages designed to host 800 prisoners. The 800 cages became the setting of the most known acts of political resistance during the prison experience of “The Troubles”, and many of these acts were directly related to the question of the negated political status.

An interesting aspect of the psychological resistance of the Nationalists is embodied in the concept of “collectivity support” that, as Mc-Keown explains¹¹⁴, is applied to a sociological construction and allows the survival of the inmates and, ideally, the survival of its ideological background. The support outside and inside the prison is indeed fundamental to overcome the lack of civil rights for the inmates, including the brutality of guards. Inside the prison the collectivity support was, obviously, the political faith and study of decolonizing theories that were applied in the colonies or ex-colonies of the British empire. During the 1970s the model of the “Republican prisoner” became, in some way, iconic. The IRA ranks were respected inside the prison, and the “resistance policy” at the certain moment stopped to be spontaneous. On the contrary, some the passive-fight acts were carefully planned by the leaders who, when possible, established a militaristic discipline for the self-organized activities.

¹¹² McKeown, 1998, p. 14.

¹¹³ Building area shaped like an “H”.

¹¹⁴ Mc Keown, 1998, p. 26.

The first well known act of political resistance was the “blanket protest”, started from Kieran Nugent, the first convicted nationalist that was affected by the negation of the special status. Nugent refused to wear the prison uniform (worn by the common criminals) and decided to wrap his body with blankets, followed by other Republicans. Following the punitive response by the Long Kesh authorities, that included solitary confinement and reduced food rations, the protesters extended their demonstrative act to the “no-wash” protest and managed to refuse showering for the next three years. The protest was later brought to the extreme with the 1981 hunger strike, that involved a several prisoners with the death of 10 of them, including Bobby Sands, the leader who left behind a vivid testimony of the Long Kesh resistance in his diary. As Mc-Keown¹¹⁵ points out, the hunger strike itself, apart the international attention that caused, became a way to break the system of “rewards and punishments” that the prison authorities tried to apply on the Irish Republicans, although this form of resistance had to pass through death.

Long Kesh played a crucial role in Northern Ireland’s political conflict¹¹⁶, with events within its walls influencing outside political events and vice versa. The prison regime, in the eyes of republican prisoners, was a microcosm of the opposition they faced in their larger political struggle. The prison guards were primarily loyalist and unionist members, many of whom had served in the armed forces, while a number of senior management were English. The consequences were that conflicts within the larger community over political, cultural, and social issues were perpetuated through the prison’s internal social relations. As Ionnrachtaig points out, similarly to the case of the Frongoch prison where the 1916 Republicans were jailed, the very fact to be jailed in Long Kesh was considered a “badge of honor”¹¹⁷. The acts of resistance were not the only form of inside action of the political prisoners. Self-organized activities and study groups became one of the ways to keep the spirits high and create a sense of community that remarked the Republican belonging.

¹¹⁵ Mc Keown, 1998, p. 27.

¹¹⁶ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 114.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

3.4 The “self-made revival” and its outcomes

Ionnrachtaig in the introduction of his sociological research in the book *Language, Resistance and Revival* describes the purpose of his investigation over the Gaelic education organized by the prisoners in Long Kesh. According to him, the interest towards this phenomenon resides in its uniqueness and spontaneousness compared to the institutional aspects which usually characterize language revival. Considering the marginalization of the revivals of this kind in the studies, Ionnrachtaig argues how “These “hidden voices” are often inaudible, because the “official histories” of academic and state institutions both produce and consolidate “formally sanctioned knowledge” that upholds “the determining contexts of material power relations””.¹¹⁸ The study also focuses on how the jail struggle transformed the wider language revival throughout the 1970s and 1980s and how it continues to influence the efforts of numerous activists that currently work to make Gaelic language and culture flourish.

Prison revival took place mainly in Long Kesh prison, the facility in which the main part of political prisoners was kept during the Troubles. Long Kesh prison was structured with a formal division between internment camp, the cages designed for the inmates interned without process, and the sentenced people’s cages. While the internment camp was ruled in a chaotic and undisciplined way in terms of activity organization, the sentenced prisoners’ cages resulted into a much more creative and stimulating environment for cultural initiatives. The subjects of study were inspired by the experience of anti-colonial movements which were all based on the belief of a strong link between language and political struggle, as confirmed by several testimonies provided by Ionnrachtaig:

In the cages, we were reading in depth about the mentality of colonization and the role of anti-colonialism and the role that native languages have in the fight back against the colonizer. The language spread amongst the prisoners on

¹¹⁸ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 12.

that basis, as a means of struggle, and this revolutionary tendency in terms of the language was also evident in the prisoners who were released.¹¹⁹

Both Ionnrachtaig and Reinisch analyze the “Long Kesh” anticolonial resistance through the categories of resistance elaborated by Fran Buntman for the case of political prisoners in South Africa. According to Buntman, these categories determine three different reasons behind resistance in jail: resistance as survival, resistance as dignity and self-consciousness, and resistance as open challenge. Reinisch identify the second category as the main propeller of prison resistance, mentioning also the “appropriation of power” obtained through the use of language as a secret tool.¹²⁰ However, the role of the “open challenge” against the prison administration (and ideally against England itself) may have had a role in the context resistance to contrast the systemic abuse and cultural repression.

The idea that emerged in the late 60s but more substantially in the early 70s was the creation and development of a Gaeltacht area¹²¹ inside of prisons that had, eventually, the power to influence and stimulate the formation of Gaeltacht outside of it. The scholar Mac Giolla Chríost called the prison Gaeltacht “Jailtacht”¹²², a name which remained in the jargon to indicate the imperfect (although fluent in its often non-standard grammar) Irish.

Language learning in prison was often connected with literature and folklore (such as songs), which were both considered fundamental to facilitate the interest into Gaelic. As Reinisch points out, only a small minority of Northern Republicans knew Gaelic before prison. However, once they finished to serve their sentence, they were almost fluent speakers.¹²³

The lectures in prison were established through a fixed routine, although susceptible at emergency cases, like sudden searches, lack of material, and setbacks of any sort. Several levels of Gaelic

¹¹⁹ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 202.

¹²⁰ Reinisch, 2016, p. 243.

¹²¹ Gaelic speaking area.

¹²² Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012, p. 1.

¹²³ Reinisch, 2016, p. 240.

knowledge were established in a way that reminds the current day language level of CEFR¹²⁴, obviously with a self-referential idea of levels. The names of levels were coded through colors like *Green Fáinne* (beginner level) up to *Gold Fáinne* (teacher level). Later on, prisoners created a pyramid scheme that worked in a way that each person could be teacher of the less advanced group before them. This attitude was particularly clear in “cage 11”, filled with highly politicized prisoners, that took in great consideration the idea of “helping the comrade” in the learning activity:

These developments were consolidated through a highly empowering and participatory teaching methodology, in which all learners took up teaching responsibility after they had achieved a certain level of fluency and in which the ‘teacher-of- the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease[d] to exist’ as everyone became essentially “responsible for a process in which all grow”.¹²⁵

As one of the testimonies of Ionnrachtaig confirms, in the pre-1975¹²⁶ context the general attitude was of “language opportunism”: the use of Gaelic was reinforced with a strong political connotation, however, the use of English was not precluded in a sectarian way with the motto *Gaeilge más féidir, béarla más gá*¹²⁷ (Irish when possible, English when necessary). Since 1975 there was an increase of the interest towards Gaelic in the prisons due to the embitterment of the political situation and legislative decisions. The “cage 11” became the “masterclass” of the prison revival, creating elaborated solutions to face the lack of material or the antagonism of prison guards. Although the learning of Gaelic was not formally banished, students had to face a general suspiciousness and discontent towards the language school. Often, they were not provided with stationary or books and they periodically were raided in cage perquisitions. To overcome the problems related to the lack of paper, the walls of the cages were used as boards for the classes, for example, for learning the irregular verbs. After the

¹²⁴ Common European Framework of Language Reference.

¹²⁵ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 192.

¹²⁶ In 1975 the legislation changed and the status of “political prisoner” was banished.

¹²⁷ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 122.

achievement of the fundamental of the language, prisoners asked to be moved to “cage 10”, the advanced class where the Gaelic speaking was mandatory without exception. The waiting list to access the cage was long and whoever spoke English was promptly substituted. Already in the beginning of the 1970s this “laboratory of language” was advertised outside in letters that invited the population in the learning of Gaelic. Bobby Sands himself became a proud supporter of the revival, and wrote a letter¹²⁸ in *Ar nGuth féin* (“Our Own Voice”), the journal prison, in which he “invited to follow the example” and to found new “Shawn Road Gaeltacht”¹²⁹ areas.

In 1976 the criminalization of the Republican prisoners changed the organization of the self-made revival system inside Long Kesh. The change of Legislation determined a further radicalization of the prisoners and a consequent incrementation of the learning of Gaelic. More and more prisoners joined the classes and the use of Gaelic went beyond the simple grammar learning and basic conversational skills. The decision of hosting games and debates in Gaelic was taken in a context of increase of violence against the inmates that gave ulterior motives to remark the political dimension of the language. The Gaelic revival started to be seen not only as an experiment to remark the Irish roots of the inmates but also as a starting point of a future continuation of the revival outside, as it will be explained later. With the establishment of the “H-Blocks” and the arrival of large groups of Gaelic fluent speakers that willed to share their knowledge¹³⁰, the situation of the inmates became even more dramatic in terms of oppression. The total lack of writing supplies and the isolation of the cages stimulated the imagination of the inmates. In order to take classes, the teacher (called in Irish *scairteoir* “shouter”) had to shout the lectures from his cage after the initial call (*rang anois* “class now”) for the beginning of the classes. Reinish, however, points out the problems concerning the learning of a correct Gaelic in the H-Blocks:

In some blocks there were no learning good Irish speakers; as a result, the prisoners had to learn Irish from texts without the correct pronunciation, so the

¹²⁸ Ionnarachtaig, 2013, p. 125.

¹²⁹ Shawn Road was the experimental Gaeltacht are in Belfast (see above).

¹³⁰ Ionnarachtaig, 2013, p. 138.

priest was the only person who could tell the shouter how to pronounce Irish-language words.¹³¹

The levels of the classes were divided by day and hour. Instead of pencils, they used a modified piece of toothpaste flacon or necklace crosses to scratch against walls. The only paper available, was the one of the Bible, the only book prisoners were officially allowed to keep. Grammars and books were smuggled in by priests during the Sunday services and hidden in the cages (with the highly risk to be found by prison guards). Mac Giolla Chríost mentions¹³² also the quasi-argot functions of the Irish language in prison, that included the creation of key phrases and nicknames for the inmates. Specifically, he mentions the autobiographical work of Gerry Adams¹³³ as a precious source concerning the Irish prison argot through which the language was “deformed” by “the peculiar social and physical nature of the carceral”¹³⁴. Chríost also points out¹³⁵ another aspect regarding the difference between “the Republic Irish” and the “the prison/Northern Irish”. Some prisoners seemed indeed to reject the standardized Irish that the Republic of Ireland adopted in 1958 and that was also the Irish language taught during the pre-protests period, in which an official Irish teacher was allowed to give classes. The Republican prisoners ideologically rejected the “standardized Irish of the Republic” in order to symbolize the rejection of the partition of Ireland. Moreover, the interest of some loyalist¹³⁶ inmates towards the learning of Gaelic convinced the Republicans to develop a “Northern Irish” also to preserve the possibility to use a “secret code” in prison.

When the mass protests, like the no-wash protest, started, the inmates were periodically moved from one cage to another in the so called “wing-shift”. The prison administration hoped in this way to “break the group”, separating the friendships and avoiding the creation of new initiatives against the prison system, including the semi-clandestine language classes in the blocks. Ironically, this decision seemed to help the diffusion of Gaelic. Each group of prisoners in fact left behind notes on the walls and useful

¹³¹ Reinisch, 2013, p. 247.

¹³² Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012, p. 324.

¹³³ Ex-IRA militant and leader of Sinn Féin from 1983 to 2018

¹³⁴ Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012, p. 336.

¹³⁵ Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012, p. 332.

¹³⁶ Militants loyal to the United Kingdom, that represented a minority inside Long Kesh.

tools. Moreover, the continue shift allowed the opportunity for linguistic exchange within groups. The prison administration attempted to ban the use of Gaelic in prison in order to contrast the political radicalization, especially during the period of the internal protests. Language organizations supported from the outside the prisoners' struggle to speak their own language in the "H-Blocks", throwing accusations of cultural discrimination for forbidding the prisoners to talk, play games, write letters, and wearing handmade Irish symbols.¹³⁷ After the end of the prison protests and, consequently, the end of the strict regime in prison, the use of Gaelic inside prison diminished for a short period of time and English started to be again the primary language of communication. The reasons behind this shift can be several; the use of Gaelic as secret language to scream from one cage to the other was not necessary anymore. Moreover, the new inmates were not fluent in the language, and they were slightly less motivated to learn it compared to the other prisoners that experienced the turmoil of Long Kesh during the previous years. The prison leaders of the Republicans and IRA decided to counter balance this momentaneous Gaelic slowdown through a reorganization of the Irish curriculum for the prison wings. Furthermore, from the mid-80s professional teachers and material started to be allowed in prison¹³⁸, slowly transforming the self-made revival into a standard educational learning in prison. Irish seemed to be object of a slow but tangible transformation of the Long Kesh experience: from a symbol of a counter culture that opposed the British system, it became a semi-officialized language¹³⁹, partially abandoning the aura of "outlaw language". Irish still "made its point"; however, it followed the slow political distension that characterized Northern Ireland in the following years until the Good Friday Agreement.

The effects of the protests in Long Kesh had repercussions in the external political fight during and after the Troubles. During the prison protests, manifestations of support for the "freedom fighters" of Long Kesh were organized by the activists that started to look at Gaelic language in a much more politically meaningful way. As mentioned before¹⁴⁰, the invitation to revitalize and use Gaelic also outside of prison had success among the supportive population. Taking in consideration a specific

¹³⁷ Ionnarachtaig, 2013, p. 187.

¹³⁸ Reinisch, 2016, p. 248.

¹³⁹ Reinisch, 2016, p. 249.

¹⁴⁰ Bobby Sands sent a letter to the prison journal that invited to share with the outside the Gaelic project.

testimony reported by Ionnrachtaig, the collective consciousness of Irish people shifted from a theoretical use of the language to an attempt to use it practically:

I was involved along with a lot of other young Irish speakers in the Gaels against the H-Blocks and Armagh, we were visible at hundreds of marches in the campaign against Long Kesh, we would have Irish banners and posters and shout Irish slogans aloud [...] this raised the feeling of identity created by the blanket protest and the hunger strike [...] the prisoners who died were known as fluent Irish speakers [...] this transformed the views of people who had never thought of the Irish language as a means of struggle before [...] there was always sympathy for the language but now people wanted to do something about that sympathy.¹⁴¹

Moreover, the struggle for language revival was perceived as a non-passive alternative to the choice of violence and guerrilla: experiments like the Shawn Road Gaeltacht was one of the ways to practice (cultural) resistance without being involved in the ranks of the IRA or IRA affiliates. Particularly interesting was the effort of “bringing Gaelic to the working class”. As mentioned among the testimonies¹⁴², the educational levels of the Northern Irish youth during the 1970s was disastrous. Young students coming from working class families had a discontinuous education in all the grades because of the emergency situation of the country and/or their own involvement on the first line into riots.

Also less young generation had troubles to be involved into formal education or whatsoever cultural initiative. The purpose of the self-made revival from the prison experience was clear:

Our plan was to bring the language to working-class people who had no

¹⁴¹ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 157.

¹⁴² Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 117.

confidence to go to the likes of the Cluain Ard¹⁴³ to learn it. Therefore, we recruited people who could go in to the various working-class areas and take classes where people were comfortable, whether it be in their own living room or the local community centre [...] the key was to utilise it to break their alienation in a time of immense poverty their homes and stop watching popular soaps at the time, like *Dallas*, etc. We saw it as a great opportunity to promote a liberating education amongst ordinary people and build confidence and self-worth in people who usually had very little.

However, the Gaelic education was framed into a larger project of language revival. The first and most significant campaign was to (illegally) change the names of streets with the involvement of the citizens' opinion. In this way they had the chance to hear from people's opinion about their ethnic and cultural belonging through an informal "door to door" survey that was meant to be outside from any institutional project¹⁴⁴. A successful example of the renaming street project happened to be in the underprivileged neighborhood of "Twinbrook", where the language activists managed to rename 160 street signs in Irish through a local fundraising of £1500.¹⁴⁵ Other areas where the prison revival had an enough impact to create new Gaeltacht were the Cathedral Quarter, the Queen's Quarter, and the Titanic Quarter.¹⁴⁶

This informal cooperation involved several language revival organizations like *Conradh na Gaeilge*, *Glór na nGael*, and the above mentioned *Cumann Chluain Ard*, that used the ex-Republican prisoners as promoters and representatives of the Revival:

We built a network of Irish speakers in every area that was able to help the revival on a practical basis, and the prisoners who were coming out of the jails played a vitally important role in this process, for the most part taking

¹⁴³ Organization settled in Belfast that favored the diffusion of Gaelic education.

¹⁴⁴ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 162.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Reinisch, 2016, p.241

classes in their own local areas, inspiring people with their own successful language-learning stories.¹⁴⁷

Ionnrachtaig provides a survey by Ó hAdhmaill's that confirms the involvement of the citizens into the revival coming from prisons. According to the survey, in the time span of one year (1985), among the people who joined the revival the "86 percent were motivated by the aspiration to strengthen the Irish identity" and the 70 percent were influenced by "Bobby Sands and the H-Block protests".¹⁴⁸

The language activist and author Mac Póilin brings out the issue of language politicization and its consequences. According to him¹⁴⁹, the people who had interest towards the destiny of Gaelic could be divided into three categories: learners who had a genuine interest towards Gaelic as language, people who had interest towards the political symbol of language, and Republican militants who used the language organizations as recruitment center. Mac Póilin put in evidence how the attitude to publicize the strong link between language and politics actually underlined the division inside the society, categorizing the language organizations as Sinn Féin's propagandists and IRA's recruiters at the eyes of the Unionists. The language activist and politician Bairbre De Brún underlined how the British government itself established the roots for which Gaelic became one of "hospot" of Troubles:

It is the discriminatory and anti-Gaelic policies of the British government that has made the Irish language into a political issue and they created a status for it as a 'contentious issue' or a 'controversial issue'.

¹⁴⁷ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p.164.

¹⁴⁸ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p.165.

¹⁴⁹ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 166.

The proof of the suspiciousness around the Irish language activism and its links with the IRA and former prisoners can be seen through the 1985 funding removal that impacted seven out of eight Irish nursery schools in Belfast.¹⁵⁰

The reaction of the British government towards the self-made Gaelic revival that involved the Republican society in and out of prison was to mitigate the role of the radical activists. Selective funding was destined to specific college and organizations in order to exclude the Sinn Féin from the Irish revival initiatives.¹⁵¹ One tactic was to isolate the Republican activists in order to favor the “cross community” initiatives, establishing, for example, the Ultach Trust funding for the “respectable Irish speakers”, as De Brún commented.¹⁵² De Brún was not the only one to have a strong opinion about Ultacht Trust; the activist Mac Seáin, for example, considered this funding in a double perspective: on one side he recognized the importance of the opportunity to receive, for the first time, governmental funding for the revival of Gaelic. On the other side, he refused the idea to join the “directed by the governmental” revival:

I have respect for the Ultach Trust and in particular, I respect Séamus de Napier and Ruairí de Bléine who were behind it – they realized it was an opportunity to get money for the Irish language. But personally, I was not willing to associate myself with them [the British government] while the community around me was being oppressed by them and fighting so ferociously against them.¹⁵³

Despite the efforts of the British government and the Unionist party to dominate through officialization the Irish education, the seeds planted by the self-made revival in prison led to a significant contribution in the Irish revitalization, that still lasts after 40 years into keeping the language alive in an environment that, for years, was hostile towards Gaelic. Although the revival does not affect Northern Ireland in a

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 179.

¹⁵² Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 181.

¹⁵³ Ionnrachtaig, 2013, p. 182.

geographically systematic way, the areas in which it has been developed demonstrates the effectiveness of its nature, with the creations of Gaeltachts that continued also in the new century:

The Irish language is witnessing a revival in some parts of Ulster. This revival is most visible in Belfast where An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta (Gaeltacht Quarter) was established to promote the Irish language in 2002. While Irish was marginalized during the conflict in the North, by 2013 Belfast, for example, had more Gaelscoileanna (Irish-language schools) than any other city in Ireland except Dublin and Cork.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Reinisch, 2016, p. 240.

Conclusion

The attempt to preserve the Irish language has a long tradition that goes back centuries. From the bards and keepers of the Celtic literacy to the illegal hedge schools, Gaelic managed to survive in rural areas to be later rediscovered by intellectuals in the context of a national resurgence. The Irish revival in Northern Ireland during the second part of the 20th century can be undoubtedly considered unique and exceptional in its genre. The self-made revival in prison constituted an example, also thanks to the prisoners' image of "martyrs", that created remarkable repercussions in the society outside of prison. The anticolonial inclinations of the Catholic/Republican part of Northern Ireland were indeed channeled inside the language revival as an alternative to a more radical approach that, for the youth, often meant ending up in the ranks of the IRA.

The most interesting aspect is the complete independence of the revival with respect to the institutional efforts that characterized, on the contrary, the Republic of Ireland. The two revivals are different not only in terms of approach, but also in their outcomes. According to Fishman's model for language revitalization, the Irish revival in the Republic encountered several issues because of the incredibly small number of speakers and the lack of diglossia, which on the contrary characterized the success of the Hebrew revival. Moreover, the language planning legislation framed Irish in a strictly educational and institutional bilingualism program, without a proper consideration for the social economic aspect. This issue was put into evidence also by Walsh and MacLeod through the analysis of Strubell's "Catherine Wheel" language planning framework, which, again, underlined the lack of initiatives in the sphere of social interaction and work relations. Fishman himself put as a precondition of a successful revival the "language functionality", which is the real purpose in terms of language usability inside the society.

Irish revival in Northern Ireland thrived far away from the institutional efforts that, when applied, tried nevertheless to "discipline" the revival into a non-political frame, distinguishing the "respectable Irish speakers" from the presumed IRA supporter revivalists. The self-made revival in prison caused a peak in the language vitality among the prisoners but also in the outside Republican society. After the experience of the H-Blocks, local activists took several initiatives with the idea of creating "Gaeltachs" in some neighborhoods of Belfast after the example of the Long Kesh "Jailtacht". Gaelic schools,

kindergartens, and community centers were founded in order to create a space that would cherish Gaelic as communication exchange language.

To draw a conclusion on the overcomes of Gaelic in Northern Ireland also in terms of comparison with the institutionalized revival in the Republic, it is wise to consider several clarifications concerning the statistics of the two cases. First of all, Northern Ireland's revival concerned almost exclusively Republicans, with the exclusion of a few Gaelic passionate Loyalists. Therefore, a statistical comparison between the number of Irish speakers of the Republic of Ireland and the number of speakers in Northern Ireland is, in my opinion, worthless. In the Republic of Ireland the institutional revival passed through official education curricula and teachers of all grades. Therefore, it is not surprising, that the number of Gaelic speakers is higher, as well as the grammar correctness of their Irish. Nevertheless, the correct measurement of the Irish revival should be probably applied in another dimension: the one of ethnolinguistic vitality¹⁵⁵. According to a recent study¹⁵⁶ analyzing the situation in the mid-2010s, it seems that the main difference among the speakers of the two countries consists in the motivation of the language revitalization. While the speakers of the Republic of Ireland seem nearly forced to learn Gaelic because it is part of the curriculum and, therefore, they are obliged to its study, the speakers of the Northern Ireland learn the language for "its own sake" and still with the attitude to reaffirm the "cultural identity" in opposition to the British government. Although in 2011 the number of fluent speakers of the Republic was set around 41% against the 11% of Northern Ireland, the question that may be raised concerns the core of the meaning of the Irish revival. Is it possible to consider a better revival, the one with a high percentage of speakers even though they seem to have a "cold and almost meaningless" relationship with the language?

The effectiveness of the self-made revival in Northern Ireland can be detected not through the high percentage of speakers, although the census shows a slow but growing number in these terms, but, on the contrary, on the relationship that almost 40 years of Troubles created between speakers and language. The identitarian attraction towards Irish forged a small but combative number of activists and speakers that adopted Irish as language to speak in their everyday life and that in the current day

¹⁵⁵ For the notion of 'ethnolinguistic vitality' as "a group's ability to maintain and protect its existence in time as a collective entity with a distinctive identity and language" see, for example, Ehala, 2015.

¹⁵⁶ Carty, 2015. [26/08/22]

continue to develop the revival, even though in a less tense environment than 40 years ago. The future chances of an institutionalized revival may succeed having the roots in this small but very determined ethnolinguistic vitality, learning from the mistakes of others in order to build a meaningful Northern Irish Gaeltacht.

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