The hunger strike and the fast are reflective experiences, performances of death in which we see ourselves. We see the outward signs of hunger that we have inwardly felt, whether with stout annoyance or wasted despair. We see an end reminiscent of the brittle walk to death in old age. We may see an end reminiscent of famine, disease, or war, depending upon our experience, our attention to history, or, perhaps, our recollection of a passing photograph of an anonymous, impossible life. Yet there is something unfamiliar about the choice to starve to achieve a goal larger than oneself, if only because people rarely choose to starve, a torturous journey to death. People have long since fasted to different ends, generally religious or healthful, but relatively seldom in the modern era have they courted death; seldom has hunger to the death been a willful act undertaken to inspire, coerce, or atone for others. One might recall famous or not-so-famous hunger strikes and fasts outside the range of strictly religious or healthful practice, but these are few in number in the broad scheme of things in comparison with other forms of protest such as laying down tools, occupying space, rioting, or attempting to kill someone other than oneself.

In these early decades of the twenty-first century, acts of hunger in protest are rare yet seemingly ubiquitous. They appear in snippets of media coverage and persistent social media campaigns that can occasionally generate global interest in a local cause. Take the case of Irom Chanu Sharmila, a civil rights activist and poet in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur. On 9 August 2016 she ended a sixteen-year hunger strike, one of the longest on record, with a lick of honey. She had begun her strike in November 2000 to protest India’s Armed Forces Special Powers Act, under which the military in Manipur had been granted extensive coercive
powers in law enforcement and exemption from civil prosecution. The govern-
ment placed her in judicial custody and fed her through a nasal tube on the
grounds that India’s federal laws prohibited attempting suicide. Having decided to
end her sixteen-year strike in order to promote reform through electoral politics,
Sharmila secured her freedom with that lick of honey under the gaze and glare of
cameras that projected the moment around the world.¹

Groups and individuals who shared in Sharmila’s tactic of self-starvation in the
same period, between 2000 and 2016, were myriad and incongruous. They ranged
from members of the terrorist organization al Qaeda to environmental activists of
Greenpeace; from the American actress Mia Farrow to the deposed Iraqi dictator
Saddam Hussein. Taking a broader view encompassing most of the twentieth cen-
tury, a survey of select media sources found that between 1906 and 2004 there
were 1,441 hunger strikes conducted by tens of thousands of people in 127 coun-
tries, with the numbers of protests spiking in the 1980s and 1990s, probably
inspired by the widely publicized Irish republican hunger strike that left ten men
dead in 1981.² These numbers certainly understate the total number of acts of hun-
ger in protest across this timeframe, given that such protests tend to be conducted
by common people in desperate circumstances, most often in prison, out of public
view and the media’s reach.

Today the stock picture of hunger in protest is that of a refugee, a subject of
ininitely diverse cultures and politics displaced across borders and between states.
Refugees sometimes hunger in protest if their path is blocked; they sometimes
hunger for asylum or against deportation to the place from which they have come.
“I prefer to die here,” said Mahyer Meyari, a seventeen-year-old Iranian man who
in 2011 went on hunger strike with five other Iranian men camped outside the UK
Border Agency office in London. They were protesting against the British govern-
ment’s decision to send them home and into the grip of a regime that they had
denounced in street protests two years earlier.³ Most refugees, however, starve
against the conditions in which they are held in detention centers and refugee
camps, cheek by jowl, fenced, and under surveillance for weeks, months, or years
as their visa applications pass from desk to desk or sit in government offices.

The detention centers are increasingly run by private companies contracted by
governments, as in case of the Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Center
near Heathrow Airport in west London. This is Europe’s largest detention center,
with a 615-bed capacity for its all-male population of asylum detainees. It holds
a transitory, international population of south and east Asians, Africans, people
from the Middle East, eastern Europeans, and representatives of peoples from vir-
tually every other region of the globe. Between 2013 and 2016 the center experi-
enced a series of mass hunger strikes, including a strike by a hundred men in
2014.⁴ These strikes were largely directed against conditions such as those previ-
ously brought to light by an investigatory committee dispatched by the United
Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2012. An advance briefing paper by the UNHCR office in London observed, “Harmondsworth IRC [Immigration Removal Center] . . . is comparable to a category B (high security) prison in its design. UNHCR is of the view that facilities designed or operated as prisons or jails should be avoided.” The UNHCR was unfortunately arguing against the imperatives of efficiency and profit in a private enterprise. It is no wonder that the business of detention should look to the prison as a transnational model as it grows to manage the global flight of refugees. In Great Britain most detainees were held in prisons until early in the present century. What is more remarkable is that under such oppressive conditions—increasingly standardized around the world—asylum seekers of dozens if not hundreds of nationalities should all find in starvation a weapon forged by Russian revolutionaries in czarist prisons over a century before.

AN EMPIRE OF HUNGER IN PROTEST

I want to explain how hunger in protest became a global phenomenon. I will do this by illuminating sources of the hunger strike and the fast, the international adaptation of hunger as a form of protest, and the ways in which the meanings of hunger have refracted across cultural and political boundaries. The proliferation of hunger in protest has followed multiple paths, sometimes disparate, sometimes overlapping. This book initially follows the transfer of the hunger strike from Russian revolutionaries to British militant suffragists in the early twentieth century. When Marion Wallace Dunlop, a Scottish artist, became the first militant suffragist to hunger strike for political prisoner status in Holloway Prison in north London in 1909, she placed the so-called Russian method within the ambit of the British Empire, where imprisoned Irish and Indian nationalists subsequently adapted it to their own political causes. These nationalists first starved against British rule and then against each other in their respective countries. In focusing on hunger strikes and fasts by prisoners convicted of political offenses in their campaigns for civil rights in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and in India, I argue that the British transimperial network was critically important in the spread of hunger in protest around the world. That is the basic point of the book.

Hunger strikes and fasts were first broadly publicized as forms of prison protest in the context of the United Kingdom and the British Empire. The tactic was simultaneously adapted by other groups in other places, including pacifists and conscientious objectors in Britain, Ireland, and the United States, suffragists in the US, prisoners of war, communists throughout Europe and Asia, and refugees virtually everywhere. Campaigns of hunger in protest in the first half of the twentieth century then served as models that various political activists adapted later in the century, from Robben Island, South Africa, to California’s Central Valley. Yet it must be
said that hunger in protest does not have a neatly sequential and articulated genealogy. While I assert that hunger in protest proliferated mainly through the British transimperial network, I acknowledge that there were many trajectories of hunger in protest in the twentieth century, perhaps even more than there have been homelands lost to refugees starving for safe passage, asylum, or, simply, dignity.

This book examines acts of hunger in protest that targeted prison systems and, in the cases of the United Kingdom and India, the ideological principles that justified the violence of these systems in moral, paternalistic terms. In an article entitled “The Revolution of the Twentieth Century,” published in 1906, the British journalist and inveterate radical W. T. Stead declared that previous hunger strikes by Russian women had revealed the power and potential of the “modern political strike” against the “militaristic state.” “The substitution of Suffering for Force, as the final determining factor of this world’s affairs,” he observed, “is equivalent to a subversion of the whole foundation of which States are constituted to-day.” He anticipated that hunger strikes, and strikes of other kinds, especially the boycott, would be useful to British women in their fight for suffrage. “Woman is not so strong as man in fighting force,” he explained. “She is immeasurably his superior in the capacity to suffer. The boycott and the strike, the new weapons of the weak, can be wielded as effectively by women as by men.”

The weak could wield hunger because they required nothing more than themselves to do so. Hunger was, moreover, a weapon versatile in its conduct and effects, fluid in its meaning, and, when wielded with determined conviction, hard to stop. This combination of qualities facilitated its adaptation and enabled protestors to infiltrate the rigid structures of the state’s bureaucracies and laws. As Stead suggested, this process proved particularly useful to groups who did not otherwise have the ability to confront the state’s power projected through the police and the military. When, for example, British militant suffragists—derisively dubbed suffragettes by the media in 1906—and anti-imperial nationalists in Ireland and India found themselves unable to wage their campaigns on the streets or on the battlefield, they hungered to shift their campaigns to spaces, literal and ideological, within the state itself. Hunger strikes and fasts placed significant strain upon prison systems and especially on the conscience, resolve, and physical capacity of key personnel such as the prison medical officer. These protests also strained the principles of British liberalism in belying the government’s paternalistic claim to provide for and protect all of its subjects. On the contrary, prisoners embodied the state’s oppressive violence in starving themselves to death. Their assertion of abjectness exposed a coercive force that troubled liberal sensibilities disposed to tolerance and equity, if not equality.

Prisoners most famously, if not most commonly, used the hunger strike to claim political prisoner status in opposition to the state’s portrayal and treatment of their political offenses as crimes without just causes. The laws and prison regulations of some countries distinguished between offenses committed for criminal
or political reasons. In such countries political prisoners commonly had privileges that other prisoners did not. More importantly, from the prisoner’s standpoint, governments acknowledged that their claims and actions had political motives and, thus, a measure of ethical integrity. This was not the case in the United Kingdom and India.10 Prisoners there starved for political recognition to which the law itself was blind. In unmaking themselves through starvation, prisoners abandoned the discursive rules of engagement through which people were constructed as politically recognizable and audible subjects or citizens. Taking this tactic farther still—and beyond political prisoner status—refugees today not only hunger strike, but sew their lips shut. The six Iranian men on hunger strike outside of the UK Border Agency office in London sewed their lips shut with fishing line. Banu Bargu observes in terms illuminating of both the present and the past, “These radical practices are . . . irreducible to their goals alone. As expressive acts emanating from the margins of the political, they put forth a modality of political action that critiques conventional political subjectivity.”11 In unmaking themselves, hunger strikers attempt to challenge governmental authority and the rule of law with a gut-level question that actually displaces political subjectivity, because it gets at something more basic: Can this government be just if it inspires death?

**HUNGER IN SPIRIT**

Poverty, virtue, sacrifice, brutality, purity—hunger has long been the product, embodiment, and means to these and other conditions and ends. This book is specifically concerned with individual hunger reasonably accepted and endured to serve and benefit others. The deepest, clearest sources of such hunger are to be found in religion. In the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament, the Lord reprimands those who habitually undertake fasts without reflection, or with simple expectation of the Lord’s reward. He enjoins his followers to fast instead in the spirit of a whole, virtuous life:

> Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
> to loose the chains of injustice
> and untie the cords of the yoke,
> to set the oppressed free
> and break every yoke?
> Is it not to share your food with the hungry
> and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
> when you see the naked, to clothe them,
> and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
> Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
> and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you, 
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. 
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; 
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. 
(Isaiah 58:6–9)

The book of Isaiah incorporates fasting into its broader emphasis on the role of individual sacrifice in achieving salvation for the whole community, a principle subsequently shared by Jews and Christians. In the same spirit, more than one Irish hunger striker has quoted the Gospel of John, in which Jesus states: “Greater love hath no man, than that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

The starving subjects of this book, in Britain, Ireland, and India, grew up in communities in which fasting was practiced or at least recognized as a form of religious propitiation, penance, asceticism, or preparation for sacred ritual. In all three countries, people of different faiths fasted in accordance with religious calendars, and they associated fasting with spiritual trials and visions. In Britain and Ireland, as in much of Europe and the United States, “hunger artists,” people who made commercial spectacles of their own starvation, treated the forty-day fast as a benchmark, referencing Christ’s fast in the desert and his temptation by Satan. Hunger in protest was likewise understood as a bodily trial of spiritual, even soulful strength. The Irish republican Ernie O’Malley, who found his Catholic faith intensified by his prison experiences, wrote to a friend on the thirty-fourth day of his hunger strike in 1923: “My body is pretty weak and the doctors tell me all kinds of stupid things at times, but I tell them they have to reckon with the spirit and not the body.”

In India, unlike in Britain and Ireland, fasting with religious purpose was a common feature of daily life. From villages to urban households, Hindus fasted to comply with rules of caste, to propitiate a god, or to assert moral leverage in family disputes. Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, and Jews also fasted periodically in accordance with the practices and rituals of their faiths. Across the subcontinent, fasting was furthermore associated with the asceticism and mysticism of monks and traveling sadhus, or holy men. Mohandas Gandhi, who became more mystical with age and political power, understood fasting as an essentially spiritual, rather than corporeal, journey; it was a way toward truth and oneness with akash, the omnipresent space between all material things in which the transcendent soul might join “the entire creation.” Gandhi and other Indian political mystics of his era were typecast in British conceptions of exotic Oriental culture, of which fasting was a part. Rudyard Kipling’s novel Kim, published in 1900–01, concludes after a mendicant Tibetan Lama, a central figure in the story, rejects food and water for two days and experiences a vision that enables him to complete his years-long pilgrimage by locating a river, sanctified by the Buddha, which cleanses him of sin. In contrast, Gandhi’s fasts cleansed his soul, atoned for others, and compelled those same others to see in his suffering the sin in themselves.
The religious significance of hunger strikes and fasts is critically important, but it does not fully explain the significance of hunger in protest in the modern era. It is telling that the term *hunger strike* entered the English language in the late nineteenth century with reference to protests by Russian revolutionaries who were, in fact, atheists. The word *strike* connected the act of self-starvation to a variety of acts of protest through cessation or abstention, especially work stoppages by labor unions aiming to win concessions from employers or the state. The term is now common parlance, identifying virtually any protest in which a person refuses food to induce an authority to fulfill a demand. This catchall usage of the term obscures a fundamental distinction that historical activists themselves sometimes drew between the meanings of hunger in protest; that is, the distinction between the hunger strike as an explicitly political, militant act and the fast as a nonviolent act infused with spirituality. Scholars sometimes identify Gandhi’s usage of hunger in protest as a hunger strike, but Gandhi himself seldom described his self-starvation with this term. Instead, he, like many others, generally preferred the term fast. He did so for two reasons. First, the spiritual connotations of the term corresponded generally with Gandhi’s personal quest for truth and, more specifically, with the principles and practices of his multifaceted, nonviolent program of *satyagraha*, or “truth force,” as a social and political project bent upon *swaraj* (self-rule). Second, the term distinguished his act of protest from those of contemporary, well-publicized, militant “hunger strikers” in not only India, but also Britain and Ireland. A “strike” could, after all, be either an act of abstention or an attack. This semantic distinction between hunger strikes and fasts was often lost upon less discriminating activists and upon British officials. For example, as Gandhi attempted to advance and manage his first mass noncooperation movement in India after 1919 as a satyagraha campaign, militant nationalists on hunger strike in Indian prisons declared themselves to be *satyagrahis* (practitioners of satyagraha), and British officials mistakenly identified such strikers as satyagrahis, much to Gandhi’s chagrin. Then again, Gandhi himself occasionally blurred the distinction between hunger strikes and fasts. In his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*, published in 1928, he praised a “hunger strike” successfully conducted by satyagrahis against an abusive jailor in the Diepkloof Convict Prison in the Transvaal, South Africa, in 1910. Be that as it may, the present book employs the terms *hunger strike* and *fast* in accordance with their usage by particular starving subjects. As we will see, this loose dichotomy strains against the disparate sources and meanings of hunger in protest.

**A NEW HUNGER**

Historians have tended to define hunger strikes and fasts as discrete, essentially national acts, even within the British transimperial network across which ideas and information indisputably flowed between dissident groups. Although historians
have increasingly emphasized the transnational and international forces at work in the British Empire and at play in the rise of the Irish and Indian nationalist movements, the treatment of hunger in protest remains limited by powerful impressions of the hunger strike and the fast as national traditions.\(^{21}\) Hunger strikes and fasts by both Irish and Indian nationalists have been long represented as forms of protest derived from ancient Celtic and Hindu customs and laws that authorized public fasting, especially as means to negotiate and settle debts.\(^{22}\) In the case of Ireland, a debtor who regarded his debt as unjust or who feared distraint could employ the custom of *Troscead*, or fasting upon another. The debtor would sit outside the home of the person holding his debt and not eat until the debt was forgiven. Should the subject of the fast refuse to forgive the debt, he might suffer public shame and, potentially, a ruling under Brehon Law that he should pay the debtor up to twice what he himself had been owed. In the early twentieth century, the Irish poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats represented *Troscead* in his modern revival of Irish cultural nationalism through literary arts derived from Celtic legends and lore. In 1904, the same year in which Yeats co-founded the Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre, in Dublin, he published a play entitled *The King’s Threshold*. The climax of the play begins with the court poet Seanchan undertaking a fast to the death in the course of a dispute with the king:

For there is a custom,  
An old and foolish custom, that if a man  
Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and starve  
Upon another’s threshold till he die,  
The Common People, for all time to come,  
Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,  
Even though it be the King’s.

Some of the best writers on Irish republican hunger strikes have quoted this passage to suggest that Irish hunger strikers of the modern era have acted upon an innate, collective, Celtic memory of hunger in protest.\(^{23}\) There is no evidence, however, of a prisoner on hunger strike or fast in Ireland who, during or after her or his protest, explained the source or significance of the hunger strike in such terms. The Irish suffragette Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who went on a hunger strike for the vote in 1912, recalled in later years, “Hunger-strike was then a new weapon—we were the first to try it out in Ireland—had we but known, we were the pioneers in a long line.”\(^{24}\) Likewise, looking back on the hunger strike in South Africa in 1910, Gandhi observed, “As hunger strikes were a rarity in those days, these Satyagrahis are entitled to special credit as pioneers.”\(^{25}\) In India imprisoned Hindu and Sikh revolutionaries who undertook hunger strikes and fasts after 1912 couched their protests in the terms not of national traditions but of their faiths. Moreover, a significant number of revolutionaries from the Bombay Presidency in western
India to the Bengal Presidency in the east cited Irish republicans, not ancestors, as inspirations for their hunger strikes.

As a youth Gandhi had been aware of the use of traditional tactics of public fasting to exercise leverage in disputes with government officials. In the princely state of Rajkot, now part of the western state of Gujarat, he had watched his father serve both the Indian ruler and local British administrators. A public fast usually augmented a dharna, a sit-in or occupation protest, outside the home or workplace of the person from whom the protestor sought relief. Despite this early experience, however, Gandhi recognized the potential use of hunger in protest against the British state when he attended a reception in London for a group of suffragettes who had been released from prison on hunger strike in 1909. Rejecting the methods of fasting that he had witnessed in his youth, Gandhi subsequently insisted that fasting should not be used to achieve personal advantage, whether political or monetary. He observed, “A fast undertaken to wring money from a person or for fulfilling some such personal end would amount to the exercise of coercion or undue influence. I would unhesitatingly advocate resistance to such undue influence.” He also rejected the hunger strike as practiced by suffragettes, on the grounds that this was, according to the suffragettes themselves, an extension of political violence.

Traditions of fasting to settle disputes or negotiate debt are not irrelevant to the history of hunger strikes and fasts. The invocation of such traditions surely enhanced the nationalist symbolism of hunger in protest, but these traditions were invoked in hindsight and not by the protestors themselves. It is telling in this regard that Yeats rewrote the ending of The King’s Threshold after Terence MacSwiney, the lord mayor of Cork and a commander of the Irish Republican Army, died on hunger strike in a British prison in October 1920. In the original play, the poet Seanchan came off his fast and survived. In the revised play, which was staged at the Abbey Theatre in November 1921, Seanchan’s fast concluded with his death. Yeats observed before the revised play’s opening, “My new tragic ending . . . I think a great improvement & much more topical—as it suggests the Lord Mayor of Cork.” It would appear, then, that art imitated life after death, rather than death imitating a national tradition.

The same lord mayor of Cork became famous among Indian revolutionaries. When one of their own, Jatindranath Das, a Bengali, died on hunger strike in a prison in Lahore in the Punjab province of India in 1929, he became known as “the Indian Terence MacSwiney.” This is just one of many demonstrations of the refraction and adaptation of hunger as a tactic of protest within the British Empire. To understand this process, one must understand how those hungering in protest became distinctive bodies politic that were defined not only by their present cause, but also by the resonance of previous protests, sometimes local, sometimes a world away.
Following the initial adaptation of hunger in protest between Russian revolutionaries and British suffragettes, the international proliferation of this tactic seems to have accelerated after 1912, as well-publicized suffragette militancy escalated. It appears, however, that hunger in protest already had disparate sources beyond even Russia. There is no evidence that another Bengali, Nani Gopal Mukherjee, was inspired by the so-called Russian method, or by British or Irish suffragettes, when in 1912 he apparently became the first Indian revolutionary to go on hunger strike for political prisoner status in the Cellular Jail at Port Blair on the Andaman Islands of British India. He starved for seventy-two days before ending his hunger strike under pressure from a comrade, who threatened his own death by starvation should Mukherjee die. We do not know why Mukherjee chose the tactic of hunger striking. It is entirely possible that he had heard about the suffragette strikes through the predominantly educated, middle-class networks of Bengali revolutionaries. However, as we will see, there is reason to ask whether this Indian revolutionary may have found his inspiration to starve in India itself.

**FAMISHED HUNGER AND PROTEST**

While we may argue over the sources of hunger strikes and fasts, and the explicit terms with which protesters defined the significance of their actions, it has proven difficult to capture the more subtle, contemporary meaning of a particular act of hunger long ago. One might speculate that in Ireland and India the memory of catastrophic famine informed the self-representation of starving protestors or the general public’s perception of these people. Would it not have been rhetorically powerful for someone on hunger strike or fast to claim to represent symbolically the starvation of a nation as a whole, given not only the deadly effects of famine, but also its prominent place in nationalist polemics and literatures? Certainly, the hunger strike or the fast might have provoked a recollection of famine, but the evidence, be it written or oral, is elusive. Cormac O’Grada observes that relatives of the victims of the Great Famine in Ireland (1845–50) were reluctant to confess that a family member had died of starvation, though they would readily acknowledge that one had died of fever. If, perhaps, death by starvation during the famine had been regarded as shameful, famine might not have had any bearing upon the public’s understanding of a hunger strike that was regarded as courageous. Or perhaps contemporaries did not associate hunger in protest with famine because they attributed famine to poverty or environmental crisis. This is unlikely. Irish and Indian nationalists asserted vehemently that famines had been exacerbated, if not caused, by British laws and policies. They saw a “conjunction of natural and man-made plagues,” as Mike Davis puts it.

Like famines, hunger strikes and fasts reflected a ruthless legality, but only insofar as laws and official policies provoked a person to choose to starve and then governed
the conditions of her or his protest. So why were those on hunger strike or fast seldom if ever likened explicitly to the victims of Ireland's Great Famine or India's several "late Victorian holocausts" or the Great Bengal Famine of 1943? In the case of India, at least, it is possible that major differences between regional identities, including differences between languages and religions, prevented Gujaratis in the west of the subcontinent, for example, from associating a local nationalist's fast with a famine suffered by Bengalis in the east. Or perhaps it was simply a matter of goals. The famished wanted to eat in order to survive; those on hunger strike or fast wanted to make a point for which they were prepared to starve and die.

Is it possible that memories of past famines in Ireland and India informed how British officials or the British public perceived acts hunger in protest? This is a knottier question. Images of famished Irish and Indian bodies played into the paternalistic, imperial narrative that portrayed subject peoples as generally inferior and unable to care for themselves. Skeleton-gaunt bodies were signs of contemptible weakness and compelling need, mutely entreating the British to rule as a humanitarian act. As Zahid Chaudhary observes of photographs of famine victims in nineteenth-century India: "Humanitarian aid can dispense help to suffering populations, but it also brings these populations under the sway of imperialist power, and the darker side of sympathy remains the secret sharer of contemporary liberalism." Against the backdrop of famine, self-starvation in British custody may have struck some Britons as historically sardonic, an insult to their faith in their own good deeds. While there is no reference to memories of famine in British records of Irish and Indian hunger strikes and fasts, there is reason to believe, as discussed below, that self-starvation exposed a failure of British duty—specifically, a failure of the new duty to feed.

CHOOSING HUNGER

In the midst of rebellion, activists themselves did not always frame their specific protests in historical or even ideological terms. This was brought home to me in 2004, when I spoke with an Indian freedom fighter, Gunvantrai Purohit, a Gujаратi, about his experience of a twelve-day fast in British custody during a satyagraha campaign in Rajkot in 1939–40. Purohit, a devoted Gandhian, undertook the fast to protest against inhumane prison conditions. I asked him if it had concerned him, at the time of his fast, that militant nationalists in Bengal had recently conducted widely publicized mass hunger strikes, and that his own fast might therefore have been mistaken for a militant act by the authorities or the public. With a wave of his hand, Purohit stated simply, "This didn't matter." What had mattered to him was the necessity of protest. Self-starvation had been the only means of protest available to him. Fasting was, as Gandhi had observed, the last weapon.
Several years later, in 2010, I asked the South African anti-apartheid activist Ahmed Kathrada about the first hunger strikes undertaken by him and his fellow prisoners on Robben Island under South Africa’s apartheid regime in the mid-1960s. I asked, “Whose idea was it [to hunger strike], and did you have an international model or inspiration in mind?” Kathrada said that it had been a “group decision” and that there had been no particular model that he could recall. He conjectured that if there had been a specific inspiration, it had probably been Gandhi. I then asked him a question like the one that I had put to Purohit: If the inspiration had been Gandhi, did Kathrada see anything problematic about militants, such as he and his comrades were then, employing the tactic of a pacifist? He dismissed the question and observed that the hunger strike was “a universal form of prison protest.”

It is instructive that Purohit and Kathrada treated the ideological fine points of their protests as secondary concerns, and that their common goal in starving was immediate relief from oppressive prison conditions, not the long-term realization of vaunted ideals. Scholars have tended to treat hunger in protest as an ideological and symbolic act intended to win control over law and governance. From this standpoint, the tactic may appear ineffective, if not futile. The tactic has rarely driven states to complete capitulation. The Irish republican Bobby Sands and nine of his comrades died on hunger strike in prison in Northern Ireland in 1981 without securing the British government’s recognition of their political prisoner status. The hunger strike by hundreds of Chinese student civil rights activists in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989 did not win democratic reforms and did not deter the infamous crackdown by the Chinese government. Saddam Hussein’s hunger strike in custody, following the second Iraq war, did not forestall his trial and eventual execution in 2006. To date, hunger strikes by inmates in the US detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have resulted in no reported reforms or releases. The tactic of hunger in protest has not, however, been without historical power. One might argue that some ostensibly failed hunger strikes and fasts, such as the 1981 Irish hunger strike, set the stage for subsequent political dialogue and reform. More to the point, I illuminate in this study a striking consensus among government officials—British, Irish, and Indian alike—that a concession to hunger strikers seeking release could effectively break the rule of law. The stakes of hunger striking were dangerously high for both prisoners and the governments that held them.

The problem with treating hunger strikes and fasts as means to move states is that this approach illuminates only the ideological and symbolic power of these protests, without acknowledging their critical instrumentality. An act of hunger in protest can be immensely disruptive within a prison system, a complex institution dependent upon fixed schedules, procedures, regulations, and the work of staff with standard, full-time duties of which caring for hunger strikers is not one.
A hunger strike or fast by even a small number of prisoners could place intense and sometimes debilitating pressure upon the workings of a prison. This pressure was brought to bear upon not only the institution, but also individual staff members and officials who feared that the starvation of a prisoner in their care might leave them open to punishment, even prosecution for manslaughter. For these reasons, starvation was often effective in securing changes in prison conditions, though it may not have moved governments to change policies or to concede power. Of course, any successful use of starvation depended on prison staff and officials bearing professional and legal responsibility for the prisoner’s life, or, to put it simply, caring. For all the brutality of the British imperial regime, it had a liberal conscience that dissidents hungered to exploit.

HUNGER AND THE NEW DUTY TO FEED

Given the long history of religious fasting and the long history of fasting as a means to settle disputes, why did hunger proliferate internationally as a tactic of protest after the early twentieth century? As James Vernon has observed, British suffragettes began hunger striking at the same time that Britons were changing their views on both hunger and their government’s duties to insure the health of domestic and imperial subjects. Earlier in the nineteenth century, the growing British middle classes, the press, and government officials saw the hungry as idle, immoral subjects who had brought hunger upon themselves. The hungry poor, especially, were cast as the architects of their own misery, incapable of the moral restraint necessary to check their birth rate, which produced too many mouths to feed. British evangelical Protestants were apt to regard Catholics, and particularly Irish Catholics, in these same terms. This perception, in combination with faith in the beneficent power of free trade, deterred the British government from aggressively attempting to relieve victims of the Great Famine in Ireland in the 1840s. Likewise, the British government made only limited efforts to relieve victims of famine in India, who, like the Irish, were deemed deserving of their fate.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, several factors contributed to a new status for the hungry in the eyes of Britons. Substantial advances in agricultural productivity since the eighteenth century had increased the caloric intake of the poor; lethal diseases such as plague had disappeared, while public health programs reduced exposure to the diseases that remained, leaving more poor people adequately, if not robustly, nourished for work. Malnutrition among the majority of Britons was reduced, and chronic hunger became less common and therefore less acceptable in the next century. At the same time, social reformers and journalists promoted a decidedly sympathetic public portrait of hungry people at home and abroad, displaying the victims’ humanity and desire for improvement. This tapped into a broader evangelical project of social reform that
extended responsibility for individual hardship and even criminality to civil society and the state, which had allegedly perpetuated the systemic inequity and injustice that had left the poor with few moral paths to survival, let alone improvement. When in 1851 the “ragged school” founder and children’s advocate Mary Carpenter published her influential book, *Reformatory Schools for Children of the Dangerous and Perishing Classes, and for Juvenile Offenders*, she, like other reformers, charged that poor children were dangerous and perishing not because of their intrinsic moral failing, but because of neglect, which civil society and the state had a Christian duty to remedy. Toward this end, in what Boyd Hilton has called the age of atonement, the British parliament passed the Youthful Offenders Act in 1854.

Advocates of the hungry, and the hungry themselves, turned to the government for relief in the heyday of late Victorian liberalism. According to Vernon, “Hunger was one of the core dilemmas of British liberalism that helped determine where the boundaries would be drawn between the market and the state, the subject and the citizen, the individual and the collective, the nation and the empire.” Yet the transition from a laissez-faire approach to famine in Ireland and India to more systematic government support and intervention was a slow, deadly process. When the west of Ireland experienced a “near famine” in 1879—due to a confluence of events including heavy rains that ruined that year’s potato crop—the government cautiously offered a greater measure of direct assistance and loans than it had done in the 1840s, but it still left the lion’s share of relief work to philanthropic organizations based in Britain, Ireland, and the United States. In tragic contrast, when India experienced a major famine in 1876–78, the government responded with dogmatic faith in free trade and self-help, but without significant support from private philanthropists. Millions perished. In response, the government formed a Famine Commission, which issued a report in 1880 that generally endorsed the current policy. Yet this report included a pointed minute of dissent. This minute conveyed unprecedented criticism of laissez-faire famine policy and charged that the government, having a fundamental duty to save life, should intervene to revive local Indian economies in the absence of effective private enterprise. The commission’s report was put to actual effect when the commission’s secretary subsequently used it in drafting the first of the Indian famine codes, which included government procedures for evaluating and responding to famine with relief services. The codes initiated more thorough attention to the nutritional needs of famine victims, giving preference to the able-bodied who could still work for what was called a living wage. “This wage [was] based,” as one critic later observed, “upon the price of the cheapest food grain and the physiological minimum of nutriment necessary for health.” This particular period of famine in Ireland and India appears to have played a pivotal role in what Peter Gray describes as “a changing centre of gravity in British liberal thinking about famine policy in the second half of the nineteenth century.”
The British liberal conscience was piqued by sympathetic portraits of famine-stricken Indians and Irish and by harrowing reports of their suffering. There was a vague sense that something should be done. In the immediate aftermath of India’s devastating famine and in view of the threat of famine in Ireland in 1879, a cartoon published in *Punch* portrayed Britannia, symbol of the British nation, saving a poor, rural Irish family from starvation, the figurative wolf at the door (figure 1). In reality, the Conservative government of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli played only a limited role in relief efforts, for which it paid no punitive, political price. When the Liberals under the leadership of William Gladstone crushed the Conservatives in the general election of 1880, they did so by condemning Disraeli for his foreign policy and by exploiting a weak domestic economy exacerbated by a historically bad harvest in Britain in 1879, which had been caused by the same weather that contributed to Ireland’s “near famine.” References to Irish and Indian victims of famine had no place on the hustings, as the Irish and Indians themselves took note.