

Introduction

A HUNGER STRIKE IN PRISON is a protest like no other. There are few proximates or equivalents. If we believe that humans will do anything to survive, then the choice to deprive one's body of food is baffling and alarming. By refusing to eat—for days, weeks, even months—the imprisoned person defies an instinctual imperative to persist. Yet to fight using one's body in this way is at the core of the hunger strike.

The term *hunger strike*, coined in English in the late nineteenth century to describe a type of protest in Russian prisons, circulated and was translated into many languages as the hunger strike became a worldwide form of protest in the twentieth century.¹ The word combination is a paradox. A strike is usually a cessation—a slowdown, no-show, sit-down, or rent strike, in which workers disrupt production or refuse obligations in order to force concessions from an authority. But a hunger strike requires the cessation of the striker's eating. Rather than causing material harm to an adversary, a hunger strike is an alarming exposure of the striker to suffering. Yet it foists the responsibility for the striker's self-destruction onto the state's authority and holds culpable the prison's power.

A hunger strike is distinguished from the more familiar idea of fasting, which, as a practice of abstinence from all or specific foods, stretches back millennia. Fasting is ritual and is often communal in purpose. When some individuals have called their cessation of eating a protest fast, a penitent and purifying self-discipline for the sake of protest, they have insisted on distinguishing its purpose from that of a hunger strike.

By choosing to hunger strike, a prisoner makes a crisis and, more than that, embodies the crisis. Even as the deprivation of food turns violence upon the striker, it is different from taking one's life in suicide or self-immolation,

where the result is rapid and immediate death. A hunger strike is a prolonged protest. The hunger strike's lengthening duration is possible only because of the prisoner's determination to overcome the body's signals of hunger and to withstand the pressures of authorities, guards, fellow prisoners, family, and physicians to resume eating. Since the process of bodily deterioration by hunger strike is slow—taking days, weeks, and even months in some cases for grave deterioration and fatality to set in—there is time to respond to the hunger striker and there is opportunity for the striker and his or her allies to leverage the strike to achieve their goals.

Authorities and opponents dismiss hunger strikes as impulse or pique, as inconsequential and not worth attention, or more ominously as acts of manipulation or blackmail. When they do cast the action as grave, it is to accuse the strikers of injury, violence, and harm to the state and society. Above all, the authorities hope for a brief and limited protest. They become anxious as a hunger strike persists and spreads. Reluctantly, government officials must assume responsibility for the hunger striker's life and reckon with how to deflect or mitigate that culpability.

Regardless of opinion, what is true is that the prisoner's striking body takes center stage, attracting inquiry, speculation, and concern. And what the hunger striker wants matters. A hunger strike is rarely the first option of protest in prison. It usually follows protests, petitions, the articulation of grievances, and other strikes. By choosing a hunger strike, the prisoner takes the battle with authorities to a different plane, one that lays bare the stakes of living and dying and tips the advantage to the prisoner.

Hunger strikers claim that they do not seek their death. However, they appear to be ready to die. They reclaim the meaning and course of dying and wield it as a threat, but most significantly as an opportunity to have their demands for change be heard by the authorities and the public. Their persistence puts authorities on notice that the strikers have summoned the resolve to wait out their opponents. The conundrum for the prison is to grab back power over the prisoner, whose very actions drain them of vitality and yet make them a formidable opponent. It becomes a test of who will outlast whom.

Refusal to Eat is an inquiry into what it takes to resist and oppose state power within the precincts of prison and then broadcast that opposition beyond its walls through the unique tool of hunger striking. The hunger strike as a tool has three primary elements. First, the hunger strike marshals the body's elemental material processes: it is the prisoner's personal and

political defiance of the state, with the purpose of laying claim to rights the striker has been denied. Second, hunger striking communicates: it speaks to prison authorities and fellow prisoners within the prison and can cross the prison barrier to reach the public outside. Third, the hunger strike has impact: it makes the prisoner and his or her self-starvation matter to whoever hears of it.

Hunger striking takes many forms across space and time, as the chapters of this book illustrate. There is no one format or formula. Each historical instance alters our understanding of its potential purposes and meanings, communicated through a variety of media—speech, writing, murals, banners, acts of demonstration—adapted for speaking from the prison to the public.

Refusing to eat speaks viscerally in a way that is undeniable. People can opt to turn away, deny, criticize, or seek to manage the hunger striker, or they can listen, support, or participate. Whatever the response, the hunger striker's plunge into the unknown summons both allies and adversaries to gather at the precipice of life and death, hopeful and fearful for what comes next.

The power that hunger striking unleashes is volatile, unmooring all previous resolves, certainties, and structures, and forcing supporters and opponents alike to respond in new ways. It can upend prison regimens, medical ethics, power hierarchies, governments, and assumptions about gender, race, and the body's endurance. Whatever its immediate result, it can propel far-reaching and sometimes unexpected effects across the globe and through history.

STATE POWER

Prisoner hunger strikes erupt out of inequity imposed by states that deny rights to people. In the first decades of the twentieth century, hunger strikes erupted out of crises over democracy in a world divided by sprawling empires. Lofty democratic ideals were tested by the swelling protests and rebellions by those denied voice, vote, and participation in governing their society. At the core of this crisis of democracy, states upheld the rights of some and consigned others to rightlessness. Unheard grievances and denied rights spawned protests. States marshaled their powers of police and the courts to subdue political dissent and quell perceived threats to the social order by incarcerating protesters or corralling suspect people. Imprisonment exacerbated further losses of rights, but prisoners found many ways to protest and strike against the prison's rules, routines, and demands. They turned to enacting

disruptions—noisemaking, slowdown strikes, work stoppage, and more—and one option was the hunger strike.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, prison power scaled up and expanded across the globe. The powers of criminalization were also broadened. Governments imprisoned and criminalized political opponents and discredited their protests, and imprisonment became a catchall solution to harness and suppress political dissent and insecurity.² Since the mid-twentieth century, governments also expanded the use of administrative detention at an astonishing pace, using emergency powers to abrogate the right to fair and speedy trial and enabling large-scale, prolonged, and often secretive detention of political opponents, individuals, and groups branded as enemies or unauthorized immigrants. Governments justified this exception to their own laws by wielding accusations of terrorism and security threats, and criminalizing unauthorized migrant entry. For those caught in its web, indefinite detention fuels despair that there is no way out of incarceration—an evidently intended response designed to deter and punish.³

The universality of rights is an aspiration at the core of a modern idea of the rights of humanity. However, the opportunity to claim rights and have grievances heard is not universal, because policing and social and judicial structures have blocked egalitarian rule. What is invariably at stake in a hunger strike is a demand for justice, equity, and fair outcomes that the state has so far refused to concede. The strike's broader political agenda can include political self-determination or access to citizenship for communities who are disenfranchised or whose aspirations are blocked. Or it may be a demand for inclusion through expanding the electorate or dismantling racial and gender hierarchies or ending colonial and white supremacist rule while rebuking those who hold the reins of power.

PRISON POWER

States deploy prison power to solve society's problems by imposing the punitive caging of humans. The prison's power derives from techniques of surveillance and subjection administered by confining, isolating, binding, and controlling the prisoner's bodily movements and activities. This power to punish and reform—carceral power—expansively establishes its techniques of correcting and retraining delinquency across modern institutions such as

reformatories, schools, asylums, hospitals, parole systems, factories, the military, and, at its maximum, prisons and detention camps.⁴

Every dimension of a hunger strike by prisoners is enveloped *in a contest over* the prison's power to coerce, regulate, and control human behavior. The prison responds by dominating, seizing sovereign control over the body and life of the prisoner, and attempting to muffle his or her voice. Prisons sometimes isolate hunger strikers in solitary confinement to reduce their opportunities to organize, strategize, and console each other. Bondage is also used to subdue the restive prisoner. Holding prisoners' arms, legs, and heads with straps and fitting them into a straightjacket or constraint chair are simple technologies to dominate the prisoners' bodies and force compliance. All of these are used against hunger strikers to apply the prison's weapon of forcible feeding. And these technologies of constraint travel freely among a phalanx of institutions: the asylum, the hospital, the prison, the internment camp, and the detention center.

Carceral power envisions total control. Any attempt to subvert or chip away at or wrest the state's carceral power is met with more exertions of power and domination—a bidding up that is asymmetric. When prisoners challenge authority with a hunger strike, carceral power is expended in subduing the human body and obliterating the human spirit. Yet despite all the violence and deprivation inflicted on prisoners, their captors are anxious to prevent a hunger-striking prisoner from dying in their custody. Their threats and coaxing, their indifference and aggressive interventions are invested in keeping the prisoner alive, if just barely, so that his or her death in prison does not make the prisoner a martyr and a legend.

Food—its preparation, delivery, scheduling, and withdrawal—is central to the structuring of prison operations. Food quality, quantity, and distribution are critical measures of prison treatment. The lack of choice in meals indexes unfreedom and punishment. Prison administrators can manipulate food delivery, quantity, and content to discipline prisoners. Guards can withhold or delay the delivery of rations to exert punitive control.

Withdrawal from eating is an avenue for prisoners to assert some degree of control. Wielding this last-resort personal power, prisoners scrape together a measure of sovereignty over their body at the most fundamental level—the right to eat, the right to choose whether or not to eat, the right to refuse when someone tries to force you to eat.

The strikers' grab for this power sets off a fight between themselves and prison authorities. They wield the prison's power of punitive food deprivation

against their own bodies. They also challenge the prison's institutional order, demanding a shift of the authorities' attention, resources, and treatment of the prisoners. Their decision to not eat threatens prison structures and procedures that are designed not to let prisoners die but to contain and maintain them.

The physical structures of barbed wire, barricades, walls, and bars separate and confine. The cell's tightly contained internal environment, lacking natural light and ventilation, seals its resident from the larger environment for the sake of security and punishment. The cell both isolates from others and telescopes the surveillance of the prisoner's body, whether directly by guards, by other prisoners, or through the camera.

Despite these attempts to separate and isolate prisoners, hunger strikes spread through avenues of communication among fellow prisoners. A hunger strike is rarely undertaken by just one person. Usually there are several hunger strikers, sometimes hundreds. The prisons try to constrain the prisoners' ability to organize and to break their solidarity. Guards taunt strikers, ridiculing and belittling them for inflicting such extreme violence on themselves. Or they try to persuade them to resume eating by offering better-quality food. Another strategy is picking off more vulnerable prisoners and pressuring them to cease their fasting, with the aim of demoralizing the prisoners who continue the hunger strike.

Hunger striking is used not just by the prisoner voicing defiance; it is also marshaled by the state to identify and strategize what actions to take, who to deploy, and how to subdue this kind of striker. The state and its agents name, diagnose, and define hunger strikes to pathologize and individualize the striking prisoner, to halt the strike's spread, to demoralize and break solidarity between prisoners, and to shut down support from allies—all in the service of quelling prison rebellion and averting rebellion outside.

THE PHYSICIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

When prisoners go on hunger strike, the prison administration calls in physicians and deploys prison medical staff to treat the strikers. The medical professionals diagnose the deterioration of the body and speculate on how long the person can endure without food. Physicians also conjecture about how bodily endurance might vary by gender, race, age, and class. As the striker's body moves closer to the edge between life and death, there is a new element of urgency: Will the hunger striker continue to fast? How long before medi-

cal intervention is essential to preserve life, and will it be given or not? What symptoms and measures mark when the descent to fatality becomes irreversible?

As the hunger strike persists, prisons may introduce force-feeding as a carceral tool to envelop, contain, and control it. Medical staff are necessary to execute force-feeding. So administrators enlist physicians and psychiatrists to examine and diagnose hunger-striking prisoners in order to sanction intervention in the form of force-feeding. This dovetails with the strategy of discounting a hunger strike as the action of a person who is mad, despairing, isolated, and incapable of rational decision-making and thus can be force-fed without his or her consent.

In prison settings, physicians, nurses, and orderlies are likely to approach those they treat quite differently than they would in hospitals and clinics, where compassionate care is the expectation. Historically, prison medical staff's treatment of restive hunger strikers while administering force-feeding has often been brutal and taunting or cold and dispassionate. It has been difficult for physicians and nurses to fully address the hunger-striking prisoner's needs, especially if doing so would defy the prison's order, protocols, and discipline.

Hunger strikes have been the subject of debates among the medical profession, the administrative bureaucracy of prisons, and political circles about how, when, and by what means to implement feeding by force. These debates led to a cascade of doubt and controversy within the medical profession concerning the medical ethics and the physician's role in such settings. Questions were raised by practitioners who believed that the remedy of feeding by force came at considerable psychic, physical, and spiritual cost to the prisoner-patient and to the medical staff.

Medical intervention was supposed to depoliticize the confrontation between hunger striker and prison, but it was rarely neutral. The physician's imperative to save life at all costs confronted the moral imperative of a person's right to control his or her own body.

Hunger striking thus triangulated an ethical and physical battle among prison authorities, physicians, and hunger strikers—replacing terms of living and dying with terms of medical responsibility and judgment. Prison physicians' responsibility to the patient was often outstripped by the demands of their profession and their employer. Across a century, the medical supervision and implementation of force-feeding intensified the dehumanization and alienation of the prisoner.

THE INSURGENT VOICE OF THE PRISONER

Protest and political insurgency outside of prison walls often results in imprisonment. Once in prison, the protester-prisoner may choose to continue the insurgency in confrontations with prison guards and administrators, often protesting the conditions, treatment, and justifications of incarceration, but in a larger battle against political inequity and injustice. Their protest is also often tied to claiming status as a political prisoner—a new category of both politics and captivity beginning in the late nineteenth century, when, historian Padraic Kenney argues, prisons became a vehicle for politics. While states had previously used prisons to suppress political challengers, in this era rulers vied with political dissenters to define the status of “political prisoner” and its legitimacy. For prisoners, demanding the status of political prisoner provided them with a strategy to challenge the labels of criminal, terrorist, and rebel being used by the “regimes that imprisoned them.”⁵

Political prisoner status set these individuals apart from ordinary, criminal prisoners and meant better treatment in prison and other privileges based on their partisan agenda or political membership. Political prisoners justified claiming these rights because they were waging a struggle politically against state authority, which, they believed, had landed them in prison in the first place. They also often aimed to elevate their particular conflict to the level of politics, batting away the state’s aim to criminalize them and to suppress their words and actions into insignificance. Their goal was often to create connections with and help build momentum for political movements outside.

How prisoners are recognized, or not, by the society that cages them is a matter not only of politics, but also of existential uncertainty. From the mid-twentieth century onward, large-scale administrative detention escalated globally as states corralled residents, migrants, and insurgents and stripped them of rights and recognition. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben coined the term *bare life* to explain how the statecraft of using carceral power to cage humans in camps can render those humans barren of social and political recognition, expendable and disposable.⁶ Scholars Hannah Arendt and Naomi Paik have noted that the rightlessness detainees experience is used to justify their capture, detention, and coercion. The deprivation of rights, whether in instances of fighting insurgency, terrorism, or unauthorized migration, is governed by the politics of state security.⁷

When prisoners and detainees choose to hunger strike, they reach for a last-resort personal power, seizing command of their bodies from authorities

in an act that anthropologist Banu Bargu calls the “weaponization of life,” to resist being driven politically and collectively to “bare life.”⁸ From inside captivity, the prisoner reckons with her own bodily deprivation, clashes with guards and medical staff, and reflects her experience to fellow prisoners and her captors. She also reaches out beyond the prison—to allies, companions, advocates, and family—by finding ways to communicate her voice to the outside world.

By using the weapon of hunger striking, prisoners also gain a new way to *use* their voice. The striking body itself articulates and utters viscerally. And hunger strikers give voice to their experience in spoken and written words, whether conveyed to their fellow prisoners or sent beyond the prison walls—in recorded testimony, in smuggled notes, in interviews with their lawyers.

However, the strikers’ ability to be heard is muffled and suppressed by the prison’s powers, so prisoners fear that news of their hunger strike will not escape the confines of the prison. They doubt and hope: Does anyone care for my life? If I speak through my body, will people hear, respond, act? Can the government wielding the prison’s power be pressured to change course?

Because the captors are loath to publicize information about prisoners, only limited information is released. So even a rumor of a hunger strike makes others—both fellow prisoners and people outside the prison, such as family members, lawyers, and journalists—intent on hearing more. However, outside the prison, the receipt of communication about a hunger strike is rarely immediate. Some information emerges during the strike, but state records are often sequestered for decades—in the case of some of the hunger strikes in this book, for nearly three-quarters of a century. Testimonials may be spoken and written after the strike is over and the hunger striker has been released from prison. Some memoirs, biographies, and investigations are published in the years and decades after the episode. Oral histories are taken decades afterward and in vastly different political contexts.

COMMUNICATING HUNGER STRIKING

One of the most powerful and unstoppable aspects of hunger striking is how it exceeds the boundaries of the prison. Although the prisoner cannot move outside the prison physically, and most observers cannot come in, the hunger strike can cross over the prison walls and cross back, achieving visibility and voice for the unseen and unheard prisoner.

Communication carries the hunger strike over the threshold from the prison to outside. Witnesses—lawyers, journalists, advocates, family, and sometimes other prisoners—can bear witness to the striker’s condition, both describing their own experiences in engaging with the striker and representing the striker to others.

Witnesses carry the striker’s voice and its cry for assistance and attention to the outside world in the form of interviews, testimonials, smuggled notes, images, and diaries. The communication is not only verbal but also visceral, reflexive, and bodily. It delivers the particulars of a prisoner’s voice, their body in deterioration and distress, and the heft and burden of their emotions and sensations. It can deliver the sensibility and rationale for refusing to eat and the dire conditions that fuel the urgency.

Not all communications are successful or impactful; some can fail to deliver or be pitched in ways that miss or mislead their audience. The communication needs to be agile and sensible in delivering claims of grievance and of rights persuasively. One of the early innovations, by suffragists, was using the voices of the hunger strikers themselves in their publications and in the media. A striker’s first-person narrative, when available, brings the listener into nearly direct contact with the feelings and bodily distress of hunger striking, as well as the purpose and resolve for the strike.

Journalists broadcast news of the hunger strike through the media to inform the public about the hunger strikers’ struggles and the political cause that inspired their actions. The experience of hunger striking during imprisonment is thrust into the public eye in order to pressure the government to curb abusive treatment, improve conditions, ease communication, or grant parole.

For the strikers to succeed, witnesses need to convey the strikers’ visceral experiences and win the empathy of the relatively rightful citizens in whose name governments have created the rightless. Identifying self-starvation as both “utterance” and political “speech,” scholar Maud Ellmann describes the act of refusing sustenance—food and drink—as “a dialogue whose meanings do not end with the intentions of the speaker but depend on the understanding of the interlocuter.”⁹ That understanding varies. Some listeners respond with criticism, some with empathy, and some with action. In the streets and on public grounds, those who choose to act as the strikers’ allies and supporters communicate through demonstrations, picketing, placards, banners, performances, and sympathy fasts. Each of these forms makes the prison hunger strike visible and manifest outside. In contrast, governments counter-

act the striker's voices with their own voices of political and administrative concerns, promoting their own actions as defense of law and civil order.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, mass politics and mass media expanded rapidly, prompting innovations in advocacy for striking prisoners. Oppositional mass political movements used expressive emotional and visceral language to motivate political demonstrations in solidarity with the suffering prisoner and to shape the emotions of the public.¹⁰ For scholar Diana Taylor, the witnessing and sharing after the striker's trauma "is a tool and a political project" that challenges listeners to respond, to actively reckon with injustice, and to summon a call to action to raise awareness, change a policy, or enact reparations.¹¹ Opposition political organizations feature these singular voices in their own media and in the information they furnish to independent news media.

Refusal to Eat aims to explain how these voices emerge, in part by examining the platforms by which a striking body can pierce public consciousness. It explores how hunger striking—a pliable concept, reshaped by different hands for different purposes—came to be intelligible in different societies across the twentieth century, and how it was conveyed as a universal, visceral human experience.

GUT FEELING AND GUT KNOWING

We all know the feeling of hunger, the discomfort and weakness caused by lack of food coupled with the desire to eat. But can we sense hunger in someone else? The involuntary sounds of another's grumbling stomach convey that something is amiss. But its meaning is not clear—it could be indigestion, it could be distress, it could be hunger. Other symptoms may signal hunger in another person—smells, facial expressions, or pallor. In fact, I can only extrapolate your hunger from my own—an inadequate gauge for knowing *your* sensate experience. Even so, we speak of gut knowing and of the sight of someone else's suffering being gut-wrenching, making us feel uneasy and unnerved or distressed.

In communicating the experience of a prolonged refusal to eat, hunger strikers make many attempts to convey to others the feelings and sensations that transpire. Sometimes witnesses assert that they can sense the pain of the striker's body. At other times, both witnesses and critics doubt that such feelings and sensations can be fully known, even when they are anticipated and imagined.

The transmission of gut feeling and knowing from one person to another is the work of visceral body-to-body communication. In the twenty-first century, biomedical science, feminist research, and historical and cultural studies of affect and emotion have investigated the relationship between gut, perception, and feelings that circulate in society and politics.

Recent advances in biomedical science and gastroneurological research have identified the neural sensing capacity of the gut, dubbed the “second brain” by scientist Michael Gershon. This enteric nervous system encases the gut with an envelope of five hundred million neural cells that stretches thirty feet from mouth to anus, exceeding the neural mass in the spinal cord. The gut’s reflexes control the breaking down of food through mechanical muscle contractions and chemically through the absorption of nutrients, secretion of enzymes, and expelling of waste.¹² More than 90 percent of the body’s serotonin lies in the gut, as well as about 50 percent of the body’s dopamine. This intensity of chemical messaging allows us to “feel” the inner world of the gut. Research shows that gut health influences mood and physical and mental illness, but this communication pathway is one-way, with the vagus nerve signaling from the gut to the brain, bringing new insight to common expressions such as “gut reflex” and “gut feeling.”

But how does feeling travel from gut to gut, from body to body? Feminist theories of bodily affect have examined how sensory data, sensation, and sensitivity to human suffering can be socially and culturally felt in the sensing and expressing of the gut’s neural processes. Scholar Elizabeth Wilson, in her book *Gut Feminism*, draws out the “primitive psyche of the stomach as an example of motive capacity.” The network of neural tissue lining our guts “ruminates, motivates and comprehends.” This raises the question: What does the feeling of a gut emptied and depleted communicate?¹³

Scholars of affect and emotion examine how somatic responses are communicated between humans intimately, socially, and in public. Sara Ahmed has argued that emotions do not exist in singular bodies but circulate among bodies, aligning on the surfaces of bodies to pull some bodies together and pull others apart, making emotions social and cultural, not simply a matter of individual psychology.¹⁴ Scholar Lauren Berlant has tracked the eruption of visceral feeling from personal to public through storytelling genres that anticipatorily shape experiences and cultural expectations of feelings such as anger, suffering, and disappointment.¹⁵ Historians of emotion have similarly investigated how expressions of feeling are shaped culturally and learned socially through norms, rules, and expectations. They have found that cultural lenses