

Last Weapons: Hunger Strikes and Fasts in the British Empire, 1890–1948

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Historians of the British Empire have long recognized the hunger strike—famously embraced by suffragettes in Britain, and by nationalists in Ireland and India—as a transnational tactic of democratic, anti-colonial resistance. Kevin Grant’s thoroughly researched and conceptually sophisticated study confirms that ‘British transimperial network[s]’ were ‘critically important in the spread of hunger in protest around the world’ (p. 3). New forms of mass media and the shared experience of imperial oppression permitted political activists, and the authorities charged with controlling them, to learn from each other across vast geographic spaces. In tracing the origins and global proliferation of an emblematic tactic of modern political protest—a ‘last weapon’ in the fight against oppression—Grant takes readers from Siberian prison cells to modern refugee camps, and from the pages of nutritional science textbooks to chambers of state in London, Dublin, and Delhi. Public displays of fasting were potent means to claim political rights through non-violent acts of self-sacrifice. For Terence MacSwiney, the Irish nationalist and lord mayor of Cork, who starved (and died after seventy-four days) to protest the authority of British courts in Ireland, the hunger strike invoked the sacrifice of Christ, who fasted for forty days in the desert. Likewise, Mohandas Gandhi embraced hunger as a path to spiritual purification and inner transformation. Yet Grant’s history reveals the hunger strike as a more diverse, more widespread, and less sanctified phenomenon than previously acknowledged. In contrast to the saintly profiles cut by prominent though exceptional figures like Gandhi and MacSwiney, many hunger strikers were motivated by more quotidian concerns. They demanded better prison conditions—including, ironically, better rations—and they strategically sabotaged prison management in order to gain early release and thus resume sometimes violent guerrilla reprisals.

Whatever the varied motives or circumstances, the British Empire proved fertile ground for the development and proliferation of hunger strikes. Following an opening chapter on the science of starvation that examines the technicalities of protein and vitamin deficiencies (and which might do more to highlight the subjective experience of starvation), the middle chapters trace the origins and genealogy of hunger protest across multiple imperial sites. Using government reports, political manifestos, published periodicals, and even oral interviews with retired revolutionaries, Grant situates hunger protest within a developing imperial chronology from Britain to Ireland to India, while highlighting the political, cultural, and juridical implications of hunger. A concluding chapter considers what colonial officials faced as they struggled to

respond to a new and vexing weapon. This review considers *Last Weapons*' major contributions, while inviting the author to comment further on key questions.

Why did hunger strikes work? And why did they work in Britain?

Quintessential "weapons of the weak" (p. 4), hunger protests, at first glance, are desperate acts of self-harm that leave the striker enfeebled and incapacitated. And yet, modern states—"hulking institutions armed to the teeth," as Grant describes them—are 'unsettled by a person too weak to roll over' (p. 156). Not everyone trembled at the sight of the emaciated hunger striker. 'Let them die; I have already ordered coffins for them all,' the Russian General N.V. Mezentsev proclaimed in 1878 (p. 42). By contrast, the British prime minister David Lloyd George feared the hunger strike would unravel an entire system of domestic and imperial justice. Lord Lytton, undersecretary of state for India, was so appalled by the flogging of Sikh prisoners refusing food at Coimbatore Central Jail in 1921 that he launched an official inquiry, lamenting it was no wonder they 'believe us to be capable of any brutality' (p. 141). Lytton's sister had earlier starved for women's suffrage. In the words of an Irish political inmate at Mountjoy Prison, 'hunger striking is different. They don't know how to meet it ... The Castle [Britain's government in Dublin] would gladly shoot us all out of hand ... but letting us die by inches frightens them' (p. 129). Why was this?

From Ireland's 'great hunger' to the 'late-Victorian Holocausts' of famine-struck India,⁽¹⁾ tens of millions starved to death under the British flag. Indeed, Lytton's father's callous inaction as viceroy during India's 'great famine' of 1876-7 remains a stain on Britain's conscience. Despite such tragedies, or perhaps in reaction to them, the hungry poor—both in Britain and overseas—progressively transformed into targets of sympathy rather than objects of scorn. In Britain, political reforms, from unemployment insurance to school meals, progressively reduced malnutrition, enshrining the 'duty to feed' as an essential feature of modern government. In 'both metropolitan and colonial settings,' the historian James Vernon confirms, 'the effectiveness of government [came] to be measured by the absence...of hunger and famine.'⁽²⁾ Even in the empire, where racist attitudes and political repression forestalled the development of liberal democracy, Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' instructed Britons to 'fill full the mouth of famine and bid the sickness cease' (p. 17). Victorian prison reform was likewise emblematic of a humanitarian zeal that enshrined food security as a basic human right, and a marker of good government; Kipling, after all, implored would-be imperialists to 'serve their captives' needs.' The 1898 Prison Act (a subject Grant somewhat belatedly addresses in chapter five), improved prison rations and dispensed with punitive diets, turning the prison, ironically, into a symbol of humanity and progress: a site of nourishment rather than starvation.

Hunger strikes, then, became potent tactics of protest at the very moment feeding the hungry emerged as a government responsibility. By refusing to be fed, the hungry struck at the liberal state's key claims to legitimacy. If the hunger strike resulted in the release of prisoners (a common demand) then the government undermined the impartial, uniform rule of law. If hunger strikers died, the state revealed its callous disregard for life, its failure to maintain the biopolitical health of its subjects (to restate the argument in theoretical language Grant largely avoids). Moreover, they became martyrs—enduring, emotive symbols of British misrule around which future generations could mobilise. If the state responded with forced-feeding—the peculiar horrors of which Grant might do more to describe, perhaps from the perspective of strikers themselves—the state only exposed its brute violence. 'It is, of course, always by the sword that [England] has maintained herself in Ireland,' the Irish nationalist Eamon de Valera noted, 'but she prefers to maintain herself with the sword in its scabbard if she can' (p. 126). The hunger strike forced Britain to draw its weapons, and, in the face of terrorist violence, relinquish its claim as a peaceful imperial arbiter. If the government accorded the hunger striker the special status of 'political prisoner', it implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the striker's claims and hence the illegitimacy, in a free society, of their imprisonment. Indeed, an abiding goal of many hunger strikers, from the suffragettes to disenfranchised Indians, was to be recognized as *political* actors. And finally, if the hunger strike subverted prison discipline, a quotidian if prosaic aim, it unravelled the ordered administration Britons cited, as last resort, to justify their rule.

The hunger strike thus presented a gordian knot almost impossible to untie, at least by the terms of modern liberal government. No such dilemma existed in imperial Russia, an illiberal regime ‘that was indifferent to the display of blood on its hands’ (p. 69). Though largely pioneered by Russian dissidents, hunger strikes rarely enjoyed the same purchase in Siberian cells as they did in British gaols. Hunger protest was a ‘weak,’ self-defeating weapon ultimately ‘doomed to fail,’ the Russian dissident Vera Figner concluded. Work stoppages along with more extreme measures like ingesting poison or self-immolation with kerosene were preferred Russian tactics for calling attention to a cause. One 1889 hunger strike at Kara, in the Transbaikal, failed to move authorities, and ‘culminated in the death of one woman after she was flogged’ along with ‘five suicides’ (p. 43). In contrast, the 1909 hunger strike by Wallace Dunlop, the first Briton to engage in the practice, ended after ninety-one hours. Fearing the ‘political crisis that would follow the death or injury of such a polite, if militant, prisoner: a painter and an illustrator of children’s books’, Dunlop’s release was ordered by the Home Secretary (p. 43). The liberal principles of British governance and the publicity of a modern, uncensored media protected British hunger strikers, Grant suggests, ‘from dying alone in a cage’ (p. 27). Though suffragettes equated British patriarchy with Russian tyranny, it was ironically a liberal sympathy for the dispossessed that transformed the hunger strike into an effective tool of broadcasting oppression and forcing concessions.

Comparison between Britain and Russia provides keen insight into the dynamics of liberal governmentality. Yet racist, authoritarian rule also framed British administration, particularly in the empire. British governments, Grant points out, flogged hunger strikers in India, allowed imprisoned Irish republicans to die, and force-fed other colonial dissidents through the rectum—measures inconceivable for Wallace Dunlop. Gandhi recognized the essential humanity and thus potential pliability of British administrators, noting one could not ‘fast against a tyrant’ (p. 69). But his contemporaries may not have agreed. Imperial inequities are never far below the surface of Grant’s analysis, yet readers may welcome further commentary from the author on what Partha Chatterjee termed the ‘rule of colonial difference.’⁽³⁾ The British government may well have been ‘liberal’ when negotiating with middle-class suffragettes, but what about in India and Ireland? How distinct, after all, was British imperial rule from Russian autocracy? How did imperial rather than domestic contexts reframe the legal stakes and political efficacy of hunger strikes, and the official response to them? And to what extent did nationalists in India or Ireland exploit differential strategies to combat hunger protest for their own political gain?

‘A Womanish Thing’

Last Weapons is especially effective at charting the gendered politics of hunger strikes. Though Russian men as well as women had pioneered the practice in the 1870s (before renouncing it as weak and ineffective), British and Irish suffragettes (along with Americans of the ‘weaker sex,’ though they don’t appear in the book), turned hunger protest into a ‘womanish thing’ (p. 83). If they lacked men’s martial strength to resist authority with force, fasting in protest demonstrated women’s inner fortitude, self-sacrifice, and restraint—traditionally ‘feminine’ capacities honed as mothers and wives. (One speculates, too, whether a distorted relationship with food, as demonstrated today by the higher prevalence of eating disorders among women, might account for the convergence of suffragette protest with the politics of sustenance.) Women, in reality, could endure starvation better than men, perhaps owing to higher body fat, yet gender norms caused prison wardens and medical officers to view hunger striking women, particularly those of refined manner and ‘delicate’ physique, as fragile ‘hothouse flowers transplanted into the cold world of politics’ (p. 32). Middle-and-upper-class suffragettes, accordingly, were often more effective at eliciting sympathy and forcing concessions—at striking the liberal conscience—than other classes of prisoner. The implicit association between forced-feeding and sexual assault, consciously exploited by suffragette organizations, only fortified the efficacy of hunger protest against a paternalistic state. Indeed, one wonders whether hunger strikes would have proliferated as a global tactic if not for the early success they achieved within the gendered politics of suffragette activism.

Yet if women effectively weaponized food intake, new political contexts transformed hunger protest into

ammunition for male freedom fighters. Like women, colonized men in Ireland and India turned to voluntary starvation as a way to combat a government that recognized their biological right to exist, but not their political standing. In Ireland, the religious association between fasting and Christ coded the hunger strike as a masculine ideal, while the Catholic Marian cult of motherhood limited women to the domestic sphere, even as Irish suffragettes first imported hunger strikes across the Irish Sea. Though Grant does not discuss it, a republican political culture that connected ‘civic virtue’ with masculine citizenship also likely proscribed female political action. Meanwhile, the active combat roles Irish men adopted during the Easter Rising and Anglo-Irish War likely permitted them to adopt the prostrate and passive profile of the emaciated striker, previously associated with female suffragettes, without fear of emasculation. Though republican women continued to hunger strike in Ireland—and also to assert themselves as political actors in emulation of the warrior Queen (and Catholic Saint) Joan of Arc—the hunger strike had migrated into the violent, masculine world of nationalist, anti-colonial politics.

The sinews of empire also brought hunger strikes to South Asia, where Indian nationalists adopted ‘Irish methods.’ Gandhi looms large in this history. The Mahatma’s well-publicized, and largely successful, fast to foster peace between Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta in 1946 was immortalized in the penultimate scene of Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi* (1982). But as Grant points out, a majority of Indian hunger strikers were Hindu militants like V.D. Savarkar, who embraced revolutionary violence and communal conflict. Indeed, Gandhi emerges in *Last Weapons* as highly critical of hunger strikes conducted to release militants from prison (the vast majority), or that exacerbated Muslim-Hindu strife. (As in Ireland, where associations between hunger protest and Catholicism precluded Protestant participation, hunger strikes in India were largely sectarian Hindu affairs). As a ‘multivalent symbol’ of both nonviolence and militancy, Indian hunger protest was clearly more diverse than the Mahatma’s celebrated fasts. And yet, the agency of Indian women remains unclear in Grant’s account. Indeed, the gendered conception of ‘Mother India’ as Hindu goddess, a feminine embodiment of a nation in the making, and one famished and weakened under British rule, suggests a nationalist politics saturated with gendered tropes. As Grant himself points out in a deft analysis of nationalist iconography, the sacrifice of male hunger strikers would restore ‘Mother India’ to health by generating ‘*shakti*,’ an essential feminine energy (p. 115). But while readers learn that Gandhi admired British suffragettes (if not their militant tactics), they may wish for further explanation concerning the role of women in Indian hunger protest, particularly now that contemporary South Asian strikes are largely female affairs (see below). Did Indian women participate in nationalist hunger strikes? If not, why not? And if so, where are they in the pages of *Last Weapons*?

Imperial lessons and legacies

Finally, *Last Weapons* is a worthy addition to a growing body of transnational history. Analysis of the international and British imperial networks that disseminated new practices and ideas are especially evident in chapter two: the cosmopolitan circles of prewar London—a major centre for exiled Russian dissidents—exposed British and Irish suffragettes (and possibly Indian nationalists) to ‘Russian methods.’ Later chapters follow the dissemination of hunger strikes from English suffragettes to Irish republicans and Indian nationalists, like Jatindranath Das, who became the ‘Indian MacSwiney’ following a fatal sixty-three day strike. The Colonial and Indian Offices, meanwhile, consciously compared notes from multiple imperial sites when forging an official response. In each case, Grant notes, historical actors did more than simply ‘copy’ their predecessors: local cultures, religions, and political contexts shaped the meaning and efficacy of hunger strikes, whether as practical protest against prison conditions, or as public and principled statements of heroism or martyrdom. In this regard, political context is crucial: British suffragettes adopted ‘Russian tactics’ less for their perceived practical efficacy than as an indictment of Asquith’s ministry, which they discursively equated with Czarist despotism.

The colonial archive, which Grant skillfully interrogates at repositories in London, Dublin, and Delhi, offers an accessible lens into the movement of peoples and ideas across cultural and political borders. Such sources permit the historian to know ‘who knew whom, who read what, who wrote what, and who said what’ (p. 154). Yet as Britain’s empire crumbled, and as hunger strikes transcended the boundaries of the British

world, the imperial plot unravels. 'Following the global practice of hunger in protest today is like following smoke,' Grant confesses, as the 'new global web of digital communication renders hunger in protest bewildering in nuance and scope' (p. 155). Historical hunger strikes, Grant reveals, were more widespread and diverse than the hallowed memories of Gandhi and MacSwiney suggest. This is even truer today, where helpless refugees and Al Qaeda terrorists, deposed dictators like Saddam Hussein, and American actresses, including Mia Farrow, have all embraced the hunger strike. So too have detained asylum seekers protesting overcrowding amid COVID-19, and racial justice activists outraged by the death of Breonna Taylor.⁽⁴⁾ 'If other scholars wish to follow the proliferation of hunger in protest in more recent decades,' Grant concludes, 'they will have to choose different methodologies, or create new ones' (p. 155).

A complete genealogy of the hunger strike is no doubt beyond *Last Hungers*' concise and considered scope. Yet British imperial history, a tried, tested, but by no means exhausted field of enquiry, can surely advance the narrative past the Second World War. Hunger strikes in southern Africa, inspired in part (but not in whole) by Gandhi, suggest a manageable way to follow the imperial thread from Asia to Africa, and from the pre to post-war worlds. Examining the cross-fertilization between anti-colonial politics in the British Empire and the civil rights movement in America and elsewhere might also permit analysis of the hunger strike's postwar proliferation—and perhaps, even, its recent resurgence within the Black Lives Matter movement. On this point, one also wonders whether the origins of the hunger strike are perhaps more diverse than Grant lets on: slaves incarcerated on the middle passage, certainly, fasted in protest long before their counterparts in Russian or colonial prison cells.

Tracing the imperial legacies of British administration in postcolonial states might likewise reveal continuities between past and present. How might the feminist tactics of early suffragettes have inspired the activist Swati Maliwal's 2019 hunger strike against Indian rape laws?⁽⁵⁾ And how might memories of the independence struggle have informed the civil rights crusader Irom Chanu Sharmila's record-breaking sixteen-year fast (which Grant mentions on page 1 but does not revisit)? Does Sharmila's protest against India's Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958)—an extension of emergency military powers that resembles, in key respects, the Rowlatt Acts of British India (1919)—echo the revolutionary fight for Mother India? And did the Government of India's decision to force feed Sharmila via nasal tube derive from colonial-era precedents and enabling legislation? Having feasted on *Last Hungers*' many insights, I invite Professor Grant to speculate further on the lessons and legacies of the British Empire, and the way it has shaped and may still inspire the hunger strike today.

Notes

1. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (Verso Books, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Belknap Press, 2007), p. 42.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton University Press, 1993).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Victoria W. Wolcott, "Suffragists used hunger strikes as a powerful tool of resistance—a tactic still employed by protesters 100 years on," *The Conversation*, August 19, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/suffragists-used-hunger-strikes-as-a-powerfu...> [2].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "'I will die if I have to': hunger striker leads fight against rape crisis in India," *The Guardian*, December 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/07/india-rapes-activist-hunge...> [3][Back to \(5\)](#)

Image on landing page: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on hunger strike in protest of the British government's decision to separate India's electoral system by caste, 1932.

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/330868>

[2] <https://theconversation.com/suffragists-used-hunger-strikes-as-a-powerful-tool-of-resistance-a-tactic-still-employed-by-protesters-100-years-on-144323> [3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/07/india-rapes-activist-hunger-strike-protest>