

**Ryan Murphy**

### **Thomas Ashe and the Hunger Strike**

Thomas Ashe died as a result of a botched force feeding, an attempt to keep him alive despite his hunger strike. It is worth pondering why a revolutionary would choose to die in prison rather than attempt to live and see the revolution through. The answer may be found in the cause of Ashe's strike, the conditions for a successful hunger strike, and the results of his strike.

Ashe's goal for his strike had been to gain Prisoner of War status in his prison. This would have given him the right to wear his own clothes and the right to interact with the other prisoners, but those were not the reasons Ashe wanted to be considered a Prisoner of War. Thomas Ashe had been sent to Mountjoy Jail for sedition and incitement of the population for his work promoting a free and sovereign Ireland. His actions were charged as a crime against the British Empire. This was paramount to a British declaration both condemning his behavior and claiming a right to control to him as a British subject. If he had been afforded Prisoner of War status, it would have been recognition of Irish sovereignty and of a state of war between Ireland and the United Kingdom. His strike was another tool for bringing about the independence of his homeland; if he had been successful, than the government of Britain would have recognized Irish independence. Unfortunately, his strike was not as effective as he wanted.

Hunger strikes can be effective, but there are a number of conditions which have to be met to make them work; namely, the strike must be noticed, the organization being struck against must care about its reputation, and the organization being struck against must have a responsibility for the well-being of the strikers.

As with all strikes, the hunger strike can only succeed if it is noticed. Strikes are attempts to leverage a desirable outcome by withholding expected action. In a hunger strike, it is refusing to eat. In each strike, if the action withheld is not noticed or not expected, then there will be no leverage. In cases where people are not expected to eat, such as periods of religious fasting or during famine, the hunger strike is ineffective because there is no expectation of eating. In normal circumstances, everyone is expected to eat. The other condition for leverage, being noticed, is the critical component. If no one notices that someone is not eating, then that someone may die without the reason for their strike being expressed. If some people notice, but members of the organization being protested are never made aware of the strike, the issues which caused the protest will not be addressed.

If enough people notice, the organization being protested against will be informed. This might have historically happened due to press involvement, though social media is a possible modern tool for promoting this awareness. Hunger strikes will almost always lead to bad press for the organization being protested, if there is a free press. Sufficiently bad press will force an organization to action, if it cares about its reputation. These are reasons why hunger strikes tend to fail in dictatorial regimes; they are not publicized, or, in the unusual case when they are, the publicity doesn't matter.

If the hunger strike takes place at a time when people are expected to eat, members of the organization being protested notice the strike, and the press leads to public support for the strikers, there is still another condition which must be met for a successful strike; the organization being protested against must be responsible for the strikers' well-being. If someone chooses to participate in a hunger strike against a foreign government or a large corporation, the strike will usually fail because the organization being struck against has no obligation to the

strikers. Many successful hunger strikes have historically taken place in prisons for good reason; the organization being struck against, the government managing the prison, is expected to be keeping people alive. If the imprisoned can make it seem that they will starve themselves if their demands are not met, the government will feel a tremendous amount of pressure to give in or to forcibly end the strike.

Ashe did everything right; the British government felt the pressure which Ashe had been able to produce. He had previously managed a successful hunger strike, at the end of which general amnesty was given to the remaining Irish prisoners. He had been able to attract media attention which made the British look bad on the international stage and promoted further revolutionary activity in Ireland. He had even lived through it. His second hunger strike, just as faultlessly executed on his part, did not end as well.

He died for his cause. He was willing to die for a free Ireland, and said, "Even though if I die, I die in a good cause." His commitment and willingness to die for his country doesn't mean he wouldn't have preferred to live for it. That's not to say his strike was ineffective. Thomas Ashe's death catalyzed another surge of patriotic fervor and helped to cement what was already there. Thirty thousand people came to his funeral procession and many thousands more rallied behind him. The Hunger Strike helped produce the public support for Sinn Fein and the cause of independence, which in turn led to their electoral victory, which led to the War of Independence, which eventually led to the modern Irish state.

Thomas Ashe believed in his cause. He went on hunger strike to become a Prisoner of War, a declaration of independence for his country. His strike was able to succeed because it was publicized, it made the status-conscious British look bad, and because the British who killed him

claimed to be looking out for his interests. In life and in death, Ashe helped to inspire a nation, to rise and to take what was theirs. Thomas Ashe died so that Ireland could live, and it did.