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Sethu Das

October 25, 1920: Remembering Terence MacSwiney

During the hunger strike a young MacSwiney said: "I am confident that my death will do more to smash the British Empire than my release." Sethu Das of Design & People remembers **Terence MacSwiney** (1879-1920), Commanding Officer of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who died on the 74th day of his hunger strike in London's Brixton Prison — without giving up!



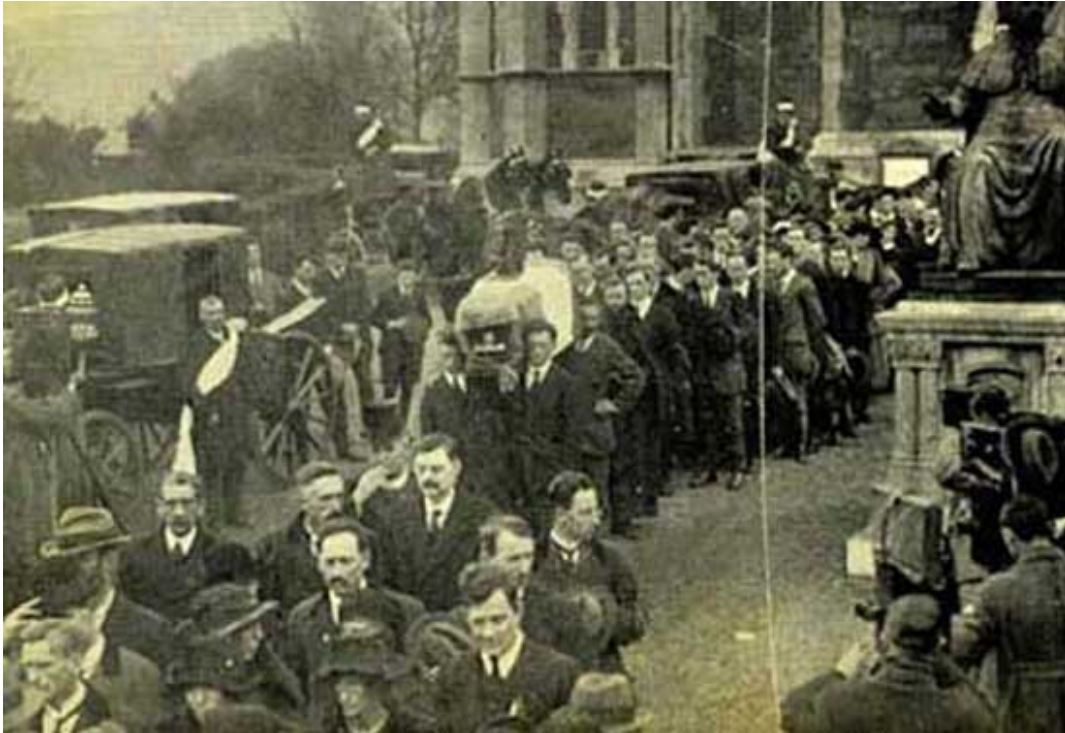
"A country with a citizen like him will never surrender," said a youthful Ho Chi Minh, then working in the Carlton Hotel in London. Ho Chi Minh was talking about Terence MacSwiney (1879-1920), the Commanding Officer of the Irish Republic Army (IRA), who died on the 74th day of his hunger strike in Brixton Prison on October 25, 1920 — without giving up!

I read about Terence MacSwiney and the book *Principles of Freedom* at a time when books on Irish struggle and the Russian Revolution were easy to find in any reading rooms in India and in almost any vernacular languages. Terence MacSwiney has almost disappeared from our minds and bookshelves.

What makes Terence MacSwiney a unique citizen and an unforgettable figure in the history of Ireland and the rest of the world? The young, handsome MacSwiney was in his forties when he went to jail — for wearing the IRA uniform and for advocating the separation of Ireland from England.

The struggles in Ireland and Russia inspired and continue inspire nationally-minded people all

over the world. *Battle Cries* (1918) and *Principles of Freedom* (1921) captured the minds of young revolutionaries in India too. Courtrooms were converted to propaganda places and prison cells to terror universities. Soon people like Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Jatin Das, Surya Sen, BC Vohra, Chandrashekhar Azad and many other concerned Indian were transformed into 'revolutionary terrorists' and later they became icons of Indian resistance against British imperialism.



Terence MacSwiney studied accountancy at the Royal University. But he became a poet and writer, and later the President of Sinn Féin. He founded the Cork Brigade of the Irish Volunteers. In 1917 he was arrested for wearing the IRA uniform and was released after three days when he reinvented the technique of 'hunger strike' inside the prison cell. He was again arrested in 1920 for making inflammatory speeches and was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in Brixton. Young MacSwiney started his hunger strike and he never saw freedom again. On its 74th day, MacSwiney died — making his protest one of the longest in the political history of Ireland. Till his death he believed that "separation from England will alone make for the final friendship with Ireland."

For many, the 'hunger strike' was the only and means of communication with the adversary. The technique of hunger strike found many takers in India — the revolutionary under-classes. Prominent among them was Jatin Das — a young man from Calcutta, one of ten inmates demanding better treatment in colonial prisons. The hunger strike they undertook ended with the death of Jatin Das on the 64th day on September 13, 1929. Like the funeral procession of MacSwiney from London to Cork, thousands of people gathered at every railway station from Lahore to Calcutta to pay their respects. Jatin Das' funeral became a historic event when a gathering of more than six lakh people turned into one of the largest demonstrations the country had ever witnessed.

Terence MacSwiney talked about the doctrine of "the ends justifying the means" in the book 'Principles of Freedom', where he said "one party will denounce another for the use of discreditable tactics, but it will have no hesitation in using such tactics if it can thereby snatch a discreditable victory. So, clear speaking is needed; a fight that is not clean-handed will make victory more disgraceful than any defeat. I make the point here because we stand for separation from the British Empire." He continued, "because I have heard it argued that we ought, if we could, make a foreign alliance to crush English power here, even if our foreign allies were engaged in crushing freedom elsewhere. I stand by the principle: no physical victory can compensate for spiritual surrender."

Terence MacSwiney and Jatin Das lived at a time when the nation was more important than an individual. Indian freedom fighters succeeded not only in replacing the Union Jack with the tricolour but also ensured that in future, Indians were not born with a white man's boot on their anatomy.

These are some of the young men who put their struggle in the world context — by giving their lives for their beliefs and by not betraying the national cause. We must be grateful to them — not only for their sacrifices and the sufferings they had undergone, but also for the ideologies and thoughts they left behind for us to be inspired by.

"It is not those who inflict the most, but those who suffer the most who will conquer"
Terence MacSwiney

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