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The Blueshirt Movement, 1932–5: Ireland's Fascists?

The Blueshirts are often referred to as Ireland's fascist movement. This is despite a short existence covering barely three years and a peak membership of only 48,000. The lasting political legacy of the Blueshirts was their central role in the formation of Fine Gael as a viable constitutional alternative to Fianna Fail. Their identification as fascists stems, quite understandably, from the shirt worn by members of the movement. By adopting a method of dress which was so readily comparable with that of the followers of Mussolini and Hitler, the movement was increasingly identified as another of the many shirted movements in interwar Europe. In the 1930s, as today, the wearing of the coloured shirt became synonymous with fascism. In reality the situation was far more complex.

The aim of this article is to explore the question of the Blueshirts and their relationship with fascism. As Robert Fisk states, 'Whether the Blueshirts were an essentially fascist organization or merely "a final instalment of the Civil War saga" is still a point of contention.'[1] The question is one which has perplexed countless Irish historians, and has also been at the centre of much of the previous work relating to the movement. A large part of the problem has been the failure of Irish historians to attempt a full definition of fascism and its many sub-categories. The term 'fascist' has been used as a general blanket term, and the understanding of it usually stems from the German and Italian models.[2] Before any classification of the Blueshirts as fascists or otherwise can be made, the term must be defined.

This article will attempt to clear up the conundrum of fascism in relation to the Blueshirts. The features of fascism in the movement will be examined, as will the perception of the Blueshirts as fascist by other groups in the Free State. This will lead to an

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understanding of the atmosphere of actual and perceived fascism. This can, in turn, be examined against not only the models of fascism put forward by academics, but also in comparison with examples of fascist movements and regimes in 1930s Europe. With a clear comprehension and understanding of fascism in its many different forms, it will be possible to define the true relationship between the Blueshirts and fascism, and to place the Blueshirts in their proper context. Although this article deals with the issue of the Blueshirts and fascism in isolation, the movement also gave expression to many other contemporary social, political and economic themes present in both Irish and European life.

This section will look at the evidence that the Blueshirts did possess certain fascist traits. There are four areas of study: the liturgical identity, the fascistic policies of the Blueshirts, the violent activities of their followers, and the perception by others in the Free State that the Blueshirts were a fascist body. By establishing clearly the evidence that there were links between the Blueshirts and fascism, it should then be possible to define the sub-category of fascist study (potential para-fascist) to which the Blueshirts belong.

Before examining the specific fascist traits of the Blueshirts, the assertion that there existed in Ireland in the 1930s a situation favourable to the spread of fascism must be explained. In 1932, Irish parliamentary life was entering the most turbulent stage of its ten-year existence. To a large section of society, the ascendancy of de Valera to power signalled the victory of the gunmen of the IRA. Despite all the legislation enacted by the Cosgrave administration which had strengthened the democratic process, the electoral process had seemingly put the stability of the state at risk. Democracy was under threat from the very men whom the Treaty, the Civil War and Article 2A of the Constitution had sought to exclude from public life. It was not only the embryonic Army Comrades Association (the first official title of the Blueshirts) who voiced their concern in 1932; there were more worrying rumours that a coup d'état was planned by several high-ranking ex-Cumann na nGaedheal Ministers.[3] As de Valera's government progressed, the concerns of his opponents did not abate. With the continued escalation of IRA violence through 1932 and 1933, and the government's seeming lack of control, the threat to democracy appeared greater than ever. With the sacking

of General O'Duffy as Gardai Commissioner in 1933 (before he was ever linked to the Blueshirts), it seemed that the attacks on the upstanding and trustworthy members of society had begun. The political situation in the Free State had reached crisis point. The state of crisis was heightened by continued concerns over the growth of communism in the country. O'Duffy had constantly warned the government that communism was on the increase, and the Catholic Church's concerns over communism, first voiced in the Bishops' Pastoral of 1931 which had banned Saor Eire, continued to grow. The economy was also in a state of crisis, which added to the intense feeling of political concern. The economic problems, which had a direct relation to political interest and activism, were heightened by the economic war. Increasingly throughout the Free State, the youth of the country were becoming involved in politics. The young, traditionally the most dynamic grouping in politics, did not have the experience of participation in the War of Independence and the Civil War and were increasingly turning away from old arguments and political groupings and seeking new answers. They were rejecting what Mosley had christened in Britain the 'old gang' in politics. In Ireland during the 1930s the young were swelling the ranks of a variety of political and social organizations which were ever more radical and increasingly militaristic. Sean Lemass noted in 1936: 'There has been a tendency in many countries towards a militarisation of politics, which it is very necessary to arrest if democratic institutions are going to be preserved.'[4] Coupled with the ground swell of militancy among the young, there was an increasing questioning of the merits of democracy by several of Ireland's thinkers. Foremost amongst these were W.B. Yeats, Alfred O'Rahilly, Desmond FitzGerald, the novelist Francis Stuart (who broadcast to Ireland from Germany during the war in the same way as Lord Haw-Haw) and the Trinity academic Walter Starkie, who became a leading light in the Centre International d'Etudes sur le Fascisme, based in Lausanne. This group is difficult to judge, especially Yeats and FitzGerald. Both were influenced by varieties of fascist thinking; Yeats in particular was deeply involved with ideas of the rebirth of Ireland and the uselessness of democracy, hence the marching songs he wrote for the Blueshirts (but later retracted). His perception of them as fascist is significant (especially in the light of his close friend Ezra Pound's commitment to fascism and Yeats's own knowledge of contemporary Italy), though it may be that Yeats,

FitzGerald and others were simply projecting their personal vision of fascism onto the most likely candidate to bring about the rebirth of the nation. The overall picture in Ireland in the early 1930s was one of a country in which increasing sections of the population were uneasy with the social, economic and political condition of the State. They were ready to seek new answers to their problems, and many different political ideologies might have been able to capture their support, one of which was fascism. The preconditions for fascism existed, and certain sections in society waited for a movement to capitalize on the state of crisis.

The majority of historians who have worked on the Blueshirts and their links with fascism have, as previously shown, placed great emphasis on the liturgical element of the movement as the primary reason why it can be identified as fascist. The identification of countless fascist movements across Europe during the interwar period was the wearing of a coloured shirt (many communist regimes also used liturgical elements as a way of compounding belief in themselves — a problematic comparison when using liturgy as a defining component of fascism). Manning notes that

> the most obvious aspect of all fascist movements was the liturgical element — the outward trappings, the uniforms, salutes, marches, parades and monster meetings. Each movement had its own liturgy, and it is here that all fascist movements have much in common.[5]

The liturgical element in the Blueshirts was highly developed.

The blue shirt came into existence in March 1933. The uniform was to consist of a blue shirt with black buttons, and a black beret. The original idea for a distinctive dress had been voiced at an Army Comrades' Association Executive meeting in February 1933[6] by Commandant Ned Cronin. Dr T.F. O'Higgins suggested that the shirts be coloured grey, but Ernest Blythe's suggestion of blue was adopted. The motivation behind the shirt was to distinguish between Blueshirts and non-Blueshirts in the event of a fracas at a meeting and so prevent members attacking each other, as had happened in the past.[7] This justification undoubtedly has an element of truth; the wearing of the shirt did bring about greater identification, awareness and efficiency. The adoption of the shirt had deeper roots than mere identification. The colour blue was chosen by Blythe specifically because it was St

Patrick's blue. By choosing a colour linked so closely with Ireland's patron saint, Blythe was attempting to awaken the nationalistic past, and incorporate into the movement a degree of historical mythology. The mobilization of past heroes is a central theme in fascist thought and rhetoric, and Blythe's use of St Patrick is comparable to Henri Doirot's personification of Joan of Arc in the mythological past of the French Parti Populaire Français. The St Patrick connection was reinforced by the Blueshirts' incorporation of the cross of St Patrick in its flags, emblems and badges; this further distinguished the Blueshirts from their opponents, whose symbols were the harp and the Easter lily. Despite the movement's insistence that the wearing of the shirt was merely a practical move, the shirt has no history in Ireland. As there was no Irish precedent for such a uniform, the influence of European shirted movements cannot be overlooked. By October 1933 the blue shirt had come to symbolize the very essence of the movement.

> The wearing of the blue shirt, finally, will secure continued adherence to the principle of action in politics and economics. The man in tweeds and a cap may stand for masterly inactivity in public affairs, but the man in a blue shirt and a beret is psychologically compelled to be for ever planning and doing, persuading and compelling. The blue shirt, therefore, spells the end of laissez-faire and all the shibboleths of liberalism.[8]

By embodying such principles as the end of liberalism, the shirt had become identified with the rhetoric of fascism.

With the arrival of O'Duffy in July 1933, the Blueshirts finally had a well-respected, popular and dominant leader figure. The Army Comrades' Association's habit of greeting its leaders by raising their arm above the head in the Fascisti style[9] was supplemented by the accompanying cry of 'Hoch O'Duffy' which was unashamedly based on the nazis' 'Heil Hitler'. By adopting a greeting which was openly based on the fascist style and adding a nazi greeting which had been adapted to stress Irish national and linguistic identity, the Blueshirt liturgy was becoming increasingly fascistic. One common denominator in several fascist regimes and movements was the cult of the leader, who was usually portrayed as a hero, the saviour of the state, or a superhuman. It is commonly agreed by most historians and contemporary onlookers that O'Duffy did not fit into this category. Although an exceptional organizer, he was not a competent political performer. His powers

of oratory were poor, he was a hardened drinker (if not an alcoholic), and Manning suggests that he was scared of women. Despite these failings, O'Duffy was immensely popular among his followers, who rated him very highly. One ex-member, Thomas Kelly, said that 'General O'Duffy was as fine a leader as you could find. Any country could be proud to have the likes of him',[10] while another, James Quinlan, was more forthright, saying that the members 'hero-worshipped him'.[11] O'Duffy was definitely not a hero-figure who could appeal to the mass of the populace (de Valera is far more likely to fit into that category), but he was able to count on the complete support and loyalty of his followers. To those men he did appear as a saviour of the state, and despite his failings he was a hero in their minds. It is for this reason that I would conclude that within the Blueshirt movement itself, O'Duffy did inspire a cult of leadership. The huge popularity of the movement coincided with his participation and, although Commandant Cronin and Richard Mulcahy were more adept politicians, they could never command the degree of loyalty and support which O'Duffy inspired.

The marches, rallies and mass meetings which were such an important part of the fascist experience in Germany and Italy were also central to the existence of the Blueshirts. The movement's aim was to keep itself as prominent as possible. There were parades of Blueshirts every Sunday after Mass in every town and village where there was a branch. Even the social life of the movement was geared to public display. The cycling, hiking and sporting groups carried out their activities in the open as a way of demonstrating their force. Mass meetings were also commonplace and held on a regular basis. Throughout the movement's existence, the leaders, O'Duffy, Cronin, Mulcahy, Blythe and Gunning, constantly toured the country speaking to district and county gatherings. The attendances ranged from several hundred in a small town such as Cobh, to nearly 14,000 at larger meetings in cities such as Limerick. The overriding rule at these gatherings was that all members attended in uniform. This gave the impression that the Blueshirts were a highly organized, well-disciplined and dynamic mass movement. The aim was to consolidate the feeling of unity among the members, and to impress onlookers, opponents and the press that the Blueshirts were a dominant force which could defend Ireland against the various perceived evils of the time. In this sense, the Blueshirts were completely different from their

opponents. The IRA did not engage in mass public demonstrations, and preferred to content themselves with drilling practice in secret. Although there is a long history of mass meetings in Irish history, the Blueshirts were unique in their approach in the 1930s, and the psychological effect of their displays belonged to fascism, not to an updated version of the nineteenth-century meetings of O'Connellite nationalism.

The policies of the Blueshirts were based around the ideological adherence to, and eventual adoption of, a corporate and vocational state. Despite the usual correlation between the adoption of such ideas and fascism, the impetus for the corporate and vocational state within the Blueshirts came largely from the Vatican, and not from fascist Italy. However, the existence of fascist ideals within the Blueshirts' policies should not be dismissed. In explaining the links between the Blueshirts and fascism, I am exploring the traits of fascism within the movement. Although it is clear that the intellectuals and political thinkers of the movement looked towards the Vatican for their ideology, the interpretation of those ideas by certain Blueshirts, especially O'Duffy, showed the vestiges of fascistized thought. Dealing with the adoption of such ideas as a defining component of fascism does require care. It is often presumed that there is a correlation between corporatist policies and fascism. The importance of such ideas is that they can point to the desire to create a new order on fascist lines — as happened in Italy, and was planned by the British Union of Fascists — though this is not actually necessary. Salazar and Franco corporatized their economies, yet are not defined as fascists, whereas the nazis, a true fascist regime, remained ambivalent to the whole theory. Corporate policy points to a degree of probable fascistization, yet is not a prerequisite.

The Blueshirt intellectuals adhered strongly to the view that Ireland needed a radical restructuring of the social, economic and political mechanics of the state. This was to be achieved through the adoption of various corporate and vocational ideals. It was never argued that such restructuring would require the destruction of parliamentary democracy. The Dail and the Senate were always seen as central to the new way forward. True fascism is, in its very character, anti-democratic. Griffin, in his 'Discursive Characterization of the Nature of Fascism' states:

> Though they [the fascists] may well make some concessions to parliamentary democracy in order to gain power, the pluralism of opinion and party politics upon which it rests is anathema to their concept of national unity, which implies in practice the maximum totalitarian control over all areas of social, economic, political, and cultural life.[12]

The intellectuals' view of the Blueshirt policies, which did not condemn democracy, was not therefore fascist. The presentation and interpretation of the policies of corporatism and vocationalism by certain senior Blueshirts did on occasions demonstrate that there was a commitment to destroy democracy, and by doing so accomplish an authentic fascist revolution. Admittedly these Blueshirts were few in number, and their references to the destruction of democracy rare. It does, however, demonstrate the undercurrent of fascist thinking in the movement, if not a hidden agenda among certain members and leaders.

O'Duffy's political views are difficult to fathom, as little remains of his personal archive from the early 1930s. His speeches remain, and are the key to understanding the man's ideas. O'Duffy's speeches were prepared for him by Ernest Blythe, Michael Tierney and others, and always put forward the accepted views of the Blueshirts/Fine Gael which had been agreed at various Ard Fheis. It is in these speeches that O'Duffy presents an image of a traditional and constitutional politician who has no affinity with fascism. By reading from prepared speeches, O'Duffy was being stage-managed by the traditional conservative right in the organization. O'Duffy was, however, beyond complete control. There were numerous occasions when he chose to either ignore his script or add his own views to a speech. James Dillon once said to O'Duffy, 'When you stick to your notes, General, you're the greatest speaker there is. But let some old women in the audience shout "Up Dev" and God knows what you will say next.'[13] When O'Duffy turned his speeches towards his own interests and his own political views, the ideas that were presented were quite different from those of Fine Gael. He was highly controversial and confrontational, and presented a brand of fascism which Manning sums up as 'emotional and instinctive rather than intellectual'.[14] The nature of O'Duffy's unscheduled pronouncements can be gauged from the following:

> Party politics has served their period of usefulness, and the sooner a change is effected the better.[15]

> As sure as we are here we shall be Masters of Ireland in three years. We do not want party politics and politicians; we want a disciplined and well-governed country. This evolution is inevitable.[16]

> When we think of the striking similarity of the Italy to which Mussolini came as leader and our own present day Ireland, we realise that this book [Mussolini's, *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism*] will have more than a passing value to those who are interested in rescuing our country from weak government, civil unrest and the encroachment of Communism. This is not to say that Ireland can be rescued only by Fascism, but we would be fools were we to shut our eyes to the fact that behind fascism in Italy, and responsible for its phenomenal success, is the same spirit which is now making the Blueshirt movement the biggest political movement that Ireland has ever known.[17]

As well as the traits of fascism and anti-democratic sentiments which were appearing in O'Duffy's speeches, the company he was keeping, especially towards the latter stages of his Fine Gael leadership, was increasingly fascistic. In August 1934, *An Phoblacht* claimed that O'Duffy was in contact with Oswald Mosley, and was scheduled to meet the Norwegian fascist leader Terje Ballsrud (leader of the Greyshirts).[18]

Once he had resigned from the Presidency of Fine Gael, O'Duffy gave full reign to his fascist ideas. The National Corporate Part, the Greenshirts, was openly fascist.[19] He attended the December 1934 conference on 'International Action of Nationalisms'. The conference was funded by the nazis, and promoted the ideas of international National Socialism and universal racist doctrine.[20] He also attended the December 1934 International Fascist Congress at Montreux and was elected to the international committee of seven to plot the future course of European fascism. The Congress was Italian-inspired, and aimed to woo foreign fascist movements into an international movement by guaranteeing their independence and integrity, to promote a theory of the corporate state which provided a unique solution to the European economic crisis, and to establish a universal, Christian, yet tolerant doctrine which resisted any claims to racial superiority or regional dominance. In Montreux O'Duffy, without a movement of any numerical strength, was mixing and plotting with the big guns of European fascism, most of whom would either form independent or collaborative regimes during the 1930s and 1940s.[21] O'Duffy's major contribution to the Congress was fully to support an ideological commitment to anti-semitism.[22] In January 1935, his work at the Congress led to his election in Rome to the newly established

International Centre for Corporate Studies. O'Duffy's political career eventually ended with his comical excursion to fight for the nationalist cause in Spain.

The assertion of Bew, Hazelkorn and Patterson that O'Duffy was personally a fascist is correct.[23] Although he adopted the conservative and constitutionalist ideas put forward by the intellectuals of the Blueshirts/Fine Gael, this was a move of common sense. O'Duffy can be seen as a highly inept politician, but he was not stupid. He realized that a traditional grouping in politics such as Fine Gael offered a greater chance of success than a marginalized fascist group which, in the climate of the early 1930s, de Valera would have attacked with all his political weaponry. Behind the respectability of O'Duffy's Presidency of Fine Gael was a political mind which was aiming for complete power and a fascist-style state. Dillon noted in January 1935 that O'Duffy 'has returned from his interview with Mussolini definitely fascist'.[24] MacDermot had written to O'Duffy in July 1934 that

> The time has come when I feel obliged to make a more formal protest than I have yet done against the tendency of certain speakers and writers of our Party to attack the Parliamentary system of Government, and to imply that it is our official policy to replace it by a Blue Shirt ascendancy modelled on fascism.[25]

From the comments of Dillon and MacDermot it is clear that these two leading members of the Fine Gael hierarchy had realized that O'Duffy's political direction was different from their own. The Blueshirts in general were careful to avoid direct comparisons between their own organization and the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy.

This section has not shown the policies of the Blueshirt movement to be fascist. What it has attempted to do is to show the traits of fascist thought within the Blueshirt movement. These were largely suppressed by the conservative alliance with the Blueshirts and the controlling influence of the Fine Gael politicians who would play no part in a fascist movement. Once O'Duffy moved closer to a complete embrace of fascist identity in 1934 he was unceremoniously dumped by Fine Gael. Equally, the admiration of fascist forms by any individual Blueshirt member was largely ignored by Fine Gael, as they directed the Blueshirts towards the more important domestic role of defeating Fianna Fail. There was definitely a strand of fascist thought, policy and

admiration in the Blueshirt psyche, but this was successfully muffled and marginalized.

In implementing fascism as a political ideal, numerous regimes and movements turned to violence. This violence was usually directed at the enemies of the state or the party. The range of violence in Europe in the 1930s stretched from street battles to incidents involving weapons.

The cult and use of violence is in many ways central to the psychological base of fascism, and counters the lack of firm ideology in fascist thought. Violence against perceived enemies was the embodiment of the vital energy and life-force of fascism. The Blueshirts did not shy away from using and espousing the use of violence to achieve their aims. There is an obvious non-fascist tradition of violence within Irish political life. The activities of the IRB and the IRA had been violent, and the War of Independence and the Civil War had seen the use of violence as a justifiable means of gaining victory and liberty. It is my belief that the violence connected with the Blueshirt cause did not belong in its entirety to this tradition. Members of Cumann na nGaedheal and the Army Comrades' Association had been banned from possessing firearms in the early months of 1933, and both the party and the movement went out of their way to portray the Blueshirts as an unarmed and non-violent organization. The main targets of Blueshirt violence were the IRA, the communists and the government officials who were implementing the collection of annuities and other legal processes connected with the economic war. These targets were all political, and the atmosphere of violent conflict which the Blueshirt attacks produced was aimed to heighten the sense of emergency in the Free State and to reinforce the belief that the Blueshirts were the only trustworthy and legitimate grouping in the country.

The Blueshirts had their basis in an ex-servicemen's organization, the Army Comrades' Association. These men were armed, and well versed in the mentalities of comradeship, military operations and the use of violence. Woolf observed: 'The future fascist parties in almost all the countries of Europe traced their origins back to the numerous groupings of patriotic associations which emerged or re-emerged in strength after the war.'[26] The Blueshirts had as its core a group of men with the mentality and experience that could, with the right encouragement and nourishment of their

grievances, be moulded into a violent political, if not fascist, force. The Blueshirt leaders who predated O'Duffy's involvement were the greatest believers in violence as a justifiable political weapon. Cronin, Quish and Quinlan were foremost in this group. Manning believes that there were speeches by Cronin and Quish 'which could be construed as inciting civil war' and that 'there is the undoubted military aspect of Blueshirtism'.[27] Cronin demanded in 1933 that members should 'exchange ten blows for every one received' and 'break gobs if necessary'.[28]

The rhetoric of violence was reinforced by reality. These acts either took place at Blueshirt meetings, where hecklers became the victims, or were premeditated attacks on the public meetings of their opponents. The atmosphere of fear provoked by certain activities of the Blueshirts is summed up in a letter to the Minister of Justice in March 1934:

> About 7.30 three I.O.C. buses full of blue shirts pulled in at no. 3 Merrion Square. They were of the rough ex-soldier type. After a lot of demonstrating and singing they planned to march past government buildings. This they actually did singing 'blue shirts blue'. These incidents appear, perhaps trivial, but with the note of terror struck, and the panic to women and ordinary citizens, the whole affair took on a tone of strength, and the bringing of the Government into contempt.[29]

This kind of display of power was rare in Dublin. The real shows of Blueshirt strength and violence took place at smaller rural meetings.[30] An example of Blueshirt violence can be seen in the government files relating to a meeting in Castlerea in February 1934. The Justice Minister was sent endless testimonies from members of the public who had been caught up in the violence. John Moore's account of the violence reads as follows:

> The meeting was generally orderly but there were some interruptions, mainly from a woman in the vicinity of the meeting and outside the blue shirts. Outside the Guards were members of the general public. The first disturbance arose when James Dowling, Patrick Street, saw a revolver with a blue shirt. Some men in the crowd protested and an argument with the blue shirt followed. A blue shirt leader was then seen to give an order and afterwards an attack was made by the blue shirts on men in the crowd. The attack was made by batons previously concealed under their coats and in some cases by walking sticks or what appeared to be. Superintendent O'Hara was present and no attempt was made to save defenceless members of the public. I had my two hands in my pocket when I was struck by batons, but no attempt was made to disarm the imported blue

shirts who began the row. There were fights in various places over the Square and through the town.[31]

The violence in Castlerea was re-enacted at countless political meetings over the country. Despite the Blueshirts' adherence to free speech, that privilege did not cover their opponents. The violence, and the Blueshirts' open flaunting of the uniform and firearms legislation, raised the political temperature. The Blueshirts' use of violence in support of their own political views reached a peak in the struggle over land annuities.

As with elements of fascism in the Blueshirt ideology, these incidents of politically oriented violence are not the whole story. They are selected incidents which demonstrate that the movement's use of violence indicated certain characteristics of fascism. The bulk of members and leaders, although involving themselves in fights at meetings, did not see violence as a means to a political end. They stayed within the movement's official bounds regarding the use of force.

One of the major reasons for the past and current identification in the popular mind of the Blueshirts as a fascist force lies in the perception of the movement in the 1930s. The de Valera government, the IRA, and the various wings of the socialist/communist movement constantly denounced the Blueshirts as a fascist force which was attempting to bring about a dictatorship. The widespread condemnations of the Blueshirts by highly influential groups entered the public mentality, and the word fascist was freely and openly connected with the Blueshirts. The denouncements ranged from the hysterical class-war condemnation of the socialist *Irish Worker's Voice*, to considered and guarded attacks from Ministers. At the formation of the National Guard, the *Irish Worker's Voice* brought the attention of the workers to the threat this fascist guard posed. It stated:

The organization of this new 'civil and unarmed' force is a challenge to the working masses of Ireland by the bankers, ranchers and big capitalists. The purpose of the Guard is openly stated to be against the struggle of the Irish workers and working farmers for national and social freedom. It is essential that every working man and woman realise the menace of the fascist imperialists. The blue-shirted band are directed against every section of the working-class movement. Every section must unite against them. Form the united front of the Irish working class against the fascist class and their anti-communist allies.[32]

The analysis of the *Irish Worker's View* was backed up in a similar class-war vein by the *Republican Congress*. That organ attempted to bring about a greater awareness of the dangers of underestimating the threat posed by the Blueshirts.

> The danger is not that fascism could get the backing of a deep section of the Irish people: its naked imperialism prevents that. The danger is that fascism might slip past before Republicans have been roused to a sense of their danger.[33]

These hysterical condemnations of the Blueshirts indicate the atmosphere of mutual paranoia that existed in the Free State during the 1930s. The anti-fascist consciousness which denounced the Blueshirts in the period of 1932–5 resurfaced in 1936, when O'Duffy formed a Blueshirt Brigade to go to Spain. Despite the portrayal of the Brigade by sections of the Church and the press as saviours of Catholicism against the forces of communism, the links between the Blueshirts and fascism had been well learnt in the preceding years. The brigade was condemned as fascist. Patrick Galvin remembers a neighbour protesting,

> When the Spanish Civil War broke out, Mr Goldman stood at the corner of Washington Street and protested against the Fascists. My Mother supported him and, in the evenings, she painted slogans on our tenement wall urging the natives of Cork to aid the Republicans and join the International Brigades.[34]

The Ministers of Fianna Fail were more subtle when expressing their doubts about the Blueshirts' political background. In the debate on the Wearing of Uniforms Bill in 1934, Ruttledge said: 'The wearing of uniforms in this country, as in other European countries has resulted in the creation of disorder, and a strain that the authorities cannot adequately deal with.'[35] Ruttledge also charged the Blueshirts with attempting to create a fascist state.

Internationally the Blueshirts were identified as fascist in some quarters. The most important journal within Italian fascist circles, that which contributed to the formation of the regime's interpretation of the spread of fascism, was *Ottobre*. It declared that the Irish Blueshirts under the leadership of General O'Duffy were a true fascist movement.[36] This would have had little effect on the perception of the Blueshirts in Ireland, but is interesting none the less.

With the constant and widespread reiteration of the links between the Blueshirts and fascism by numerous bodies within

the state, the belief that the movement was indeed fascist became a truth in many people's minds.

Against the direction of contemporary thinking, Lee has argued that Fianna Fail in the early 1930s, and not the Blueshirts, demonstrated traits of fascist action and ideology.

> In electoral terms, therefore, Ireland seemed to promise a potentially fruitful harvest for fascism. Ironically it was Fianna Fail that most effectively harnessed this potential. Circumstances conspired to align forces, frequently sympathetic to fascism elsewhere, on the side of the party that came to be considered, because of the apparent Blueshirt association with fascism, peculiarly anti-fascist. Some isolated resemblances can certainly be detected between fascist and Fianna Fail rhetoric. The more strident forms of integral nationalism favoured on some Fianna Fail platforms could veer close to the fascist variant. Aspects of Fianna Fail's autarkic economic policy were reminiscent of fascist panaceas. Some Fianna Fail spokesmen clung to the idea of an agrarian utopia as insistently as any fascist rhetorician. And Fianna Fail certainly possessed the type of charismatic leader cherished by fascist ideologists.[37]

Elements of fascism certainly pervaded the political climate in Ireland during the 1930s, yet only the Blueshirts are remembered as Ireland's fascists. This is symptomatic of the whole problem of the lack of a definition of the term fascist within Irish history.

Any traits of fascism within the Blueshirts were heightened, and put under microscopic consideration, during the 1930s. The combination of fascist traits present in the movement, and the increased perception of the movement as fascist, led to the condemnation in popular history of the Blueshirts as fascist. Historians, in contrast, have chosen to dismiss the notion of the Blueshirts as a fascist force. The aim of the preceding section was to demonstrate certain areas of Blueshirt thought and action, and of Irish life generally, which could be interpreted as fascist, and does not deny that a large element of Blueshirt activity was non-fascist. By being aware of the elements of fascism within the Blueshirts, their proper place within the various definitions and experiences of European fascism can be defined, as can their relationship with the traditional politics of the Free State.

The amount of written work which attempts to define fascism is huge, and it is impossible to cover the plethora of different definitions here. By using one recent defining framework of fascism, the aim is to understand broadly where, if at all, the Blueshirts fit.

Roger Griffin's concise definition of fascism states: 'Fascism is

a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic [i.e. rebirth, regenerationist] form of populist ultra-nationalism.'[38] This definition breaks down into a fascist belief and use of: its own style of politics, a revolutionary aspect while out of power and a reactionary stance once in power, an affective power rooted in myth, a total commitment to a new order but with the foundations of that belief lying in the past, and the use of political force in the pursuit of 'integral' or 'radical' nationalism.

Griffin views only the regimes in Italy and Germany as fascist, and lists several other examples of fascism under the heading 'abortive fascist movements'. He makes the worthwhile distinction between a regime, a movement and artificially created fascist regimes as a result of invasion by Germany and Italy. This distinction is important in relation to the Blueshirts. They were only ever a movement, and never achieved control of the country. By failing to become a regime, the Blueshirts' links to true fascism are weakened. Whatever fascist views the movement may have held, it was never in a position to implement them. Without power, any dreams of an ultra-nationalist single party state which O'Duffy and others may have harboured came to nothing. In the pursuit of power, many fascist movements were prepared to enter into temporary alliances in which their strident fascist beliefs were suppressed. This is a common experience of fascist movements within Europe. The Blueshirts, if the fascist traits which were demonstrated earlier are to be believed, followed this experience when entering the alliance which formed Fine Gael. In terms of being a fascist movement, the Blueshirts as a whole undoubtedly fall wide of the mark: this despite the obvious commitment to fascism by O'Duffy and other organizers and ideologues. This select group did include men who held genuine (if nebulous) palingenetic goals, but the Blueshirts, as will be explained below, should not be condemned for their beliefs. The definition put forward by Griffin does not apply to the Blueshirts. Although the movement possessed certain attributes which are listed in the definitions, the attributes were largely marginalized and inspired few Blueshirts' political thoughts.

Para-fascism is also a concept put forward by Griffin. He argues that:

> A para-fascist regime, however ritualistic its style of politics, well-orchestrated

> its leader cult, palingenetic its rhetoric, ruthless its terror apparatus, fearsome its official para-military league, dynamic its youth organization or monolithic its state party, will react to genuine fascism as a threat.[39]

The examples of para-fascist regimes are Salazar in Portugal (threatened by Preto's National Syndicalists), Franco in Spain (threatened by the Falange), Vichy France (threatened by Déat's Rassemblement National Français), and Horthy in Hungary (threatened by the Arrow Cross). Similar regimes existed in Greece, Austria and Romania. The problem of differentiating between regimes such as those listed above, and a movement such as the Blueshirts, is once more present.

The solution I would suggest (admittedly a bastardized version of Griffin's definition) is that the Blueshirts should be viewed as 'potential' para-fascists. So much of the movement's rhetoric and ideology attempted to distance itself from true fascism, the denials of dictatorship, constant stressing of its belief in democracy and so on, that it obviously viewed genuine fascism as a threat. The attributes listed by Griffin as present in a para-fascist regime existed in the Blueshirt movement, albeit highly underdeveloped as it was not in a position of power. By adopting many of the trappings of fascism (however badly), the Blueshirts were attempting to become a populist movement, and their ultimate aim was to gain power. It is difficult to say what form of power the Blueshirts would have taken if they had ever been successful, and the problem of defining a clear taxonomy for a movement only magnifies the difficulties. It will be shown below how carefully Fine Gael controlled the party. On the evidence of this level of control it seems likely that had the Blueshirt/Fine Gael coalition ever deposed de Valera, the Fine Gael interpretation of politics would have been in the ascendancy. Against this needs to be weighed the unknown quantities of the Blueshirts. O'Duffy's pronouncements as leader of the National Corporate Party show him as tailor-made for a would-be fascist regime leader. Had he controlled the Blueshirts for longer would these views have emerged? Also, the fact that the Blueshirts wanted to gain power, and not merely influence policies, points to the possible existence of some kind of revolutionary thrust — tendentially a fascist one. The populist nature of the Blueshirts also poses problems. Para-fascist regimes as defined by Griffin stem, as in the case of Salazar and Franco, from the conservative élite (Salazar as Finance Minister

of a military regime, and Franco as an army general). The Blueshirts were not themselves the conservative élite (though their relationship with Fine Gael moves them in that direction), but were attempting to build on a populist basis in the same way as Hitler and Mussolini. Because of the Blueshirts' short lifespan and their existence as a movement, in defining them and their relationship to fascism we have to deal with countless unknowns, and numerous deviations from models of fascism's progress to power.

Reverting to the potential para-fascist definition and its attempts to neutralize fascism's revolutionary impetus, we have to look back to Lee's view that de Valera should be seen as more of a potential fascist than the Blueshirts. Revolutionary politics belonged in 1930s Ireland to the IRA's political wings, and the impetus for change to de Valera. The Blueshirts, in acting as 'potential' para-fascists, continually attacked the policies of the IRA and de Valera, while attempting to 'exploit those groups' populism for their own purposes'.[40] The para-fascism of Salazar and Franco is especially worthy of comparison with the Blueshirts. The Blueshirts did not have control of the army or the police in the way which Salazar and Franco managed, but they were not in power. The politics of those regimes were similar to the Blueshirts'. In neither Portugal nor Spain was the position of the Catholic Church attacked — indeed, it was preserved. The inspiration for the development of a corporate state was always seen as Catholic, not fascist. The power within the state, outside the sphere of government, was left in the hands of those who had traditionally held power — large farmers, big business, etc. Neither of these regimes, although radically restructuring their countries, relied on the support of the dislocated middle class and the discontented working class, but on that of the established and traditional centres of power. All these attributes are similar to the experience of the Blueshirts. By failing to gain power they could not fully implement their ideas, but the experience of the period 1932–5, and the rhetoric of certain Blueshirts, demonstrates what might have happened. Seen in terms of the pursuit of a traditional course in relations with the powerful in the state aimed at the preservation of key institutions, but with a radical restructuring of the economic, social and political life of the state, and the trappings of fascism, the Blueshirts' place in the political spectrum becomes clearer.

They were not fascists, but neither should their potential be lightly dismissed, as sometimes in the past.

Within the Blueshirt movement and wider Fine Gael coalition, potential para-fascism also existed. Fine Gael (including the Blueshirt wing) supported the élites, and relied on those élites for the bulk of its support: many leading Fine Gael politicians constituted the élite, as they controlled large businesses and farms. The potential para-fascism within the movement emerged as a result of its recent history of political misfortune and defeat, and its need to maintain a non-threatening stance and close support of the élites. The Blueshirts were a definite reaction to the political ineptitude of Cumann na nGaedheal. Twice defeated by Fianna Fail, with no natural new direction, and lacking a glamorous unifying leader, Cumann na nGaedheal had nowhere to turn. With the establishment of the Blueshirts, and the ever increasing cross-over of Cumann na nGaedheal and Blueshirt membership, the two movements were destined to become allied. The Blueshirts initially offered Cumann na nGaedheal everything they were lacking: a populist and dynamic answer to the excesses of Fianna Fail, yet tempered by a seeming adherence to the traditional political values which Cumann na nGaedheal held dear. With the arrival of O'Duffy, the involvement of the intellectuals and the advent of the Fine Gael coalition which gave the Blueshirts real power, all this changed. The coalition took a form which was common to a political life in contemporary Europe: an alliance between a 'fascist-styled' movement and the traditional conservative right.[41] As has been demonstrated, certain sections within the Blueshirts, especially O'Duffy, moved ever nearer a redefinition of the Blueshirts (and hence Fine Gael) as a fascist movement. Certain sections within Fine Gael, such as Cosgrave, recoiled from these developments with horror. They had no desire to see Fine Gael transformed into a fascist party willing to use any degree of violence or anti-democratic activity to win power. At the other end of the scale were the Blueshirts, such as O'Duffy and Gunning, who were content to see Fine Gael, led by the Blueshirts, transformed in this way. In the middle of these two factions was the largest section, the internal potential para-fascists. This group, which straddled both Blueshirts and the Cumann na nGaedheal traditionalists, was the one which had backed the dynamic twist the Blueshirts had brought to politics — and to Fine Gael politics in particular. During 1934, it did not see the position in black and

white as the two extremes did. It believed whole-heartedly in the normal functions of the state, the preservation of the élites, the shirted, ritualistic and youthful nature of the Blueshirts. It was utterly committed to ousting de Valera. But it opposed anything that could be condemned as fascist. Thus this group fits into Griffin's definition. It was composed of men like Blythe, FitzGerald, Tierney and Minch. Internally they recoiled from a commitment to total fascism of the type backed by O'Duffy, and were instrumental in his removal. They still believed, however, that there was a place for the Blueshirts, and all that their ideology and style of politics stood for.

The Blueshirts clearly deserve the label of potential para-fascists. Externally they reacted against the perceived threats of an authoritarian de Valera/IRA regime, and internally they reacted against the threat of an openly fascist regime led by O'Duffy. What they fundamentally attempted to achieve was a Salazaresque transformation of power. The Blueshirts could be said to lead the mythical battle fought in the heart against the evils of society, while Fine Gael established the regime which the mind demanded, that which preserved the status quo, yet banished the shibboleths of liberalism, socialist republicanism and de Valera's nationalist economic system.

The Blueshirts undoubtedly possessed certain fascist traits, but they were not fascists in the German or Italian sense. The movement should be viewed as an attempt at an original interpretation of Irish politics. Certain sections of the movement struggled to put forward their own brand of fascism, 'potential' para-fascism. Against the strong government of de Valera, such a movement with extreme views had little chance of success. By being forced to seek political respectability in Fine Gael, the Blueshirts were in turn suppressed by their coalition partners. Any movement with even minor traces of fascism in their beliefs had little chance of success, especially in a coalition with the traditional conservative right whose aim was to manipulate their popularity, but ultimately distance themselves from such political ideas. The rejection by the membership of the values of fascism is instructive. Certain leaders and intellectuals held fascist or fascistized views, and developed their ideology accordingly. Members of fascist movements in inter-war Europe have rarely held views which have the ideological self-awareness and complexity of their leaders, yet members of the PNI and NSDAP were assured in their revolutionary prin-

ciples. The Blueshirt members were not at all convinced by their leadership's revolutionary ideas; indeed, most rejected them. The whole question of the Blueshirts and fascism needs to be revised along these lines; simple contradiction of or agreement with the view that the Blueshirts were fascists needs to broaden out into a wider debate that actually attempts to understand fascism, the relationship between the potential para-fascists and the traditional conservative right, and the differences between the ideological commitment of the members, leaders and intellectuals of the movement.

Notes

1. Robert Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster, and the Price of Neutrality, 1939–45* (London 1983), 426.

2. For examples see Joseph Lee, *Ireland 1912–85. Politics and Society* (Cambridge 1989), 179–84; Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and Europe, 1919–1948* (Dublin 1988), 43–9; Paul Bew, Ellen Hazelkorn and Henry Patterson, *The Dynamics of Irish Politics* (London 1989), 47–69; F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London 1971), 527–36; and Maurice Manning, *The Blueshirts* (2nd edn Dublin 1987), 232–44.

3. See F. Munger, *The Legitimacy of Opposition: the Change of Government in Ireland in 1932* (Beverley Hills 1975), 11–12.

4. Quoted by Lee, op. cit., 180.

5. Manning, op. cit., 239.

6. See Ernest Blythe Papers, P24/655(h), University College Dublin Archives (February 1933), 1, note 2.

7. See *United Ireland*, 23 April 1933, 5.

8. 'United Ireland', 21 October 1933, in The National Guard S6433 (1936), National Archives, 7.

9. Blythe Papers, P24/653, 1.

10. Questionnaire received from Thomas Kelly, Co. Leitrim, September 1991.

11. Questionnaire from James Quinlan, Co. Waterford, August 1991.

12. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London 1991), 44.

13. Quoted by Manning, op. cit., 160.

14. Ibid., 229.

15. *Irish Times*, 9 August 1933, 3.

16. *Irish Times*, 14 August 1933, 7.

17. *United Ireland*, 25 November 1933, 7.

18. *An Phoblacht*, 18 August 1934, 8.

19. For full details of the ideas and activities of the National Corporate Party

see Department of Justice, Garda/Crime Division (1993 Release) B46/34, B1/35 and B9/35, National Archive of Ireland, Dublin.

20. See M.A. Ledeen, *Universal Fascism. The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928–36* (New York 1972), 113.
21. Ibid., 115.
22. Ibid., 120.
23. Bew, Hazelkorn and Patterson, op. cit., 62.
24. Letter from James Dillon to Frank MacDermot, MacDermot Papers 1065/2/7 Four Courts Dublin (1 January 1935), 2.
25. Letter from Frank MacDermot to General O'Duffy, MacDermot Papers 1065/3/1 Four Courts Dublin (9 July 1934), 1.
26. S.J. Woolf, *European Fascism* (London 1968), 6.
27. Manning, op. cit., 238.
28. Ibid.
29. Letter from E. Corcoran to the Minister of Justice, Justice Department file: Blueshirt complaints, 62/1 (20 March 1934), Public Records Office Dublin.
30. See Justice Department Files 62/1 and H306/23 for numerous examples.
31. Justice Department File 62/1.
32. *Irish Worker's Voice*, 5 August 1933, 2.
33. G. Gilmore, *The 1934 Republican Congress* (Dublin 1969), 33.
34. P. Galvin, *Song for a Poor Boy. A Cork Childhood* (Dublin 1990), 25.
35. *Dail Debates*, vol. 50, col. 2120.
36. *Ottobre*, 28 October 1933, in Ledeen, op. cit., 100.
37. Lee, op. cit., 182.
38. Griffin, op. cit., 26.
39. Griffin, op. cit., 122.
40. Ibid., 124.
41. For examples see Martin Blinkhorn (ed.), *Fascists and Conservatives. The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe* (London 1990).

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