**Dissembled Fascism:**

**The Irish Blueshirts and the Battle for Nationalist Legitimacy.**

Mark Crowley

9389458

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**Abstract**

This thesis looks at the Irish Blueshirts, a fascist organisation that appeared in Ireland in the 1930s. By examining the wider historical context of Irish Independence (1921) and the ensuing Civil War (1922-1923), I hope to shed light on the way in which post-colonial and fascist ideology interacted in the emergence and failure of this movement. In this thesis, I look at the way Irish political identities were historically constructed and how these devolved into a rehearsal of colonial dialectics in the civil war and during the formation of the Irish Free State. Dispute over the Anglo-Irish Treaty that brought independence led to civil war, leaving a deeply ingrained oppositionality in the politics of independent Ireland: pro-treatyite against anti-treatyite. In the 1930s, the resurgent anti-treatyites peacefully took power and the Blueshirts represent a desperate attempt by the pro-treatyites to challenge the increased dominance of their opponents. By exploring the role of colonial dialectics in the emergence of the Blueshirts, I argue that the palingenetic mythic core of fascism was used in an attempt to challenge the monopoly anti-treatyites had achieved over the Irish nationalist tradition of revolutionary republicanism. My examination of the Blueshirts reveals opportunistic motivations behind the embrace of fascist aesthetics and rhetoric by the pro-treatyites, but also the limitations of fascism as a tool to marshal populist support. Through a discussion of why fascism failed in this particular case-study, I hope to offer a better understanding of fascism as an ideology and the post-colonial construction of Irish political identities.

**Introduction**

Every year Oxford University Press release their ‘word of the year’, a word ‘that has attracted a great deal of interest over the last 12 months.’ In 2017, the first runner up was ‘antifa’, an abbreviation of antifascist- a term that can be traced back to *Antifaschistische Aktion*, a militant anti-fascist network that operated in Nazi Germany (Oxford Languages: Word of the Year 2017). The resurgence of this word after decades of obscurity can be linked to the rise of populist nationalist movements in the West: Donald Trump’s election to president in 2016 the prime example, but Brexit, conservative Marine Le Pen’s near victory in France in 2017, the revival of Silvio Berlusconi’s right-wing politics in Italy, and a general upsurge in far-right nationalist rhetoric, led to a mainstream discourse on authoritarianism, fascism and the need to oppose it. The philosopher Alain Badiou described this new political ethos as ‘democratic fascism’, “operating inside the democratic apparatus” but “playing a different score, another music” (Badiou 2019, 10). Trump was the poster boy of this idea, democratically winning the 2016 American presidential election while being widely declaimed as, and often acting like, a fascist. I’m not discrediting the possibility of these right-wing figures being fascist or becoming fascist, after all Mussolini and Hitler were democratically elected, but in the frantic politics of the past decade, right-wing politicians being compared to Hitler or labelled fascist has become par for the course. Fascism has re-emerged in the zeitgeist. For me, this begs the question, what really is fascism? Is it authoritarianism? An ethos? An ideology? Roger Griffins states that “to apply it [fascism] to phenomena outside Italy is to change the status of the word: it becomes a generic term” (Griffin 1993, 1). If so, then what are the implications of this heterogenous usage? If fascism is a generic term, then what does it really mean? Why is it used and what makes people use it?

The Irish Blueshirts walked this fine line between democracy and authoritarianism, visibly proclaiming their fascism while forcefully denying their being fascist. The organisation emerged in the early 1930s and occupied a space in the polarized political landscape that followed Independence (1921) and the ensuing Civil War (1922-1923). Irish independence was achieved through the contentious Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 that saw the formation of the Irish Free State and British partition of the North. This treaty led to civil war, the main republican party, Sinn Féin, dissolving into enduring opposing factions; anti-treatyite versus pro-treatyite. The pro-treatyites won the war, becoming the political party Cumann na nGaedheal (CnG)[[1]](#footnote-1), and forming the government of the new Free State. A faction of the anti-treatyites, under the leadership of one of Ireland’s most important political figures, Éamon de Valera, formed the political party Fianna Fáil in 1926 and in the 1932 elections, they emerged victorious.

The Blueshirts were formed in response to this resurgent Fianna Fáil as pro-treatyite interests attempted to regain their power. CnG, having been soundly beaten in general elections in 1932 and 1933, formed the party Fine Gael[[2]](#footnote-2) in coalition with the Blueshirts and the Irish Centre Party. The Blueshirts were staunch pro-treatyites and were founded as the Army Comrades Association (ACA) for veterans of the pro-treatyite side of the civil war. They assumed a more political position with the appointment of Eoin O’Duffy as Director General in 1933 and quickly grew in influence over the next two years. O’Duffy claimed a peak membership of 100,000 but even with the majority of Blueshirts records destroyed, it seems the actual peak membership was around 50,000 in late 1934 (Cronin 1994, 239).

The exact politics of the Blueshirts are disputed, and generally they are not considered true fascists, as they were “far removed from the sphere of truly demagogic or putschist politics” (Griffin 1993, 119). However, this ambivalence offers opportunities to interrogate the exact nature of fascism, particularly its aesthetics and its methods of engaging populist support. While, ideologically, the Blueshirts were not fully fascist, they presented themselves as fascist to challenge the ideological and symbolic strength of their opponent, Fianna Fáil. In examining this case study, I hope to reach a better understanding of the ways in which fascist elements can be opportunistically used to gain populist momentum. My research question is therefore, (1) what were the motivations behind the use of fascist politics in 1930s Ireland and (2) how does the emergence and failure of the Blueshirt movement relate to the post-colonial process of Irish independence?

My central thesis is that the colonial process of othering whereby identity is constructed from a binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’, was reapplied to post-independence politics. During the independence movement, political and national identity were united in a neat opposition between Irish and British, colonized and colonizer. However, due to the nature of the Treaty and the civil war, this oppositionality perpetuated, opposing sides rehearsing old binaries so that Fianna Fáil was able to cast itself as the inheritor of Irish republican tradition while the pro-treatyites were increasingly characterized as pro-British. The ability of Fianna Fáil to maintain their revolutionary credentials allowed them ideological and symbolic clout to monopolise the historical narratives by which independence had been achieved. In response, pro-treatyites turned to fascism to regain a symbolic narrative and revitalize populist support through engagement with the aesthetic and mythic core of fascism. Essentially, fascism was an attempted challenge to the opposition’s propagandistic monopoly on revolutionary, populist narratives.

As to existing historiography on the Blueshirts, my combined use of fascist and post-colonial theory is a new addition to this field. I hope to shed light on the ideological impulses at the core of the movement, as even though these have been explored by other scholars, I have not found a source which explicitly ties the Blueshirts to Irish post-colonialism. My intention in this thesis is to interrogate the insistence by notable scholars like Mike Cronin, Roger Griffin, and Maurice Manning, that the Blueshirts were not truly fascist but were “potential para-fascists” (Cronin 1995, 312). While I agree with these writers’ points that the Blueshirts did not fully align themselves with a coherent fascist ideology, I think to dismiss their fascism as ‘para’ or ‘potential’ is to misunderstand fascism at its core. Through post-colonial theory, I hope to outline the existential threat that the Blueshirts embodied and bring a new perspective to this historiographical field.

Using a causal narrative, I look at the historical context from the 1916 Easter Rising to the resignation of O’Duffy from the Blueshirts in 1935. My theoretical framework is based on fascist theory from Roger Griffin and Roger Eatwell. I compare Griffin’s theory of the ‘palingenetic myth’ behind fascism with post-colonial theory by Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. For biographical information on O’Duffy I refer to *Eoin O’Duffy: A Self-Made Hero* (2005) by Fearghal McGarry. For the civil war and the politics of the Free State, I refer to *The Politics of the Irish Civil War* (2005) by Bill Kissane and *Ireland 1798-1998: War, Peace and Beyond* (2010) by Alvin Jackson. For primary sources, I work with issues of *The Blueshirt*, the organisation’s journal, that were accessed as hardcopies in the Early Printed Books archive at Trinity College Dublin. I also reference Irish parliamentary debates accessed at Oireachtais.ie and articles from the Irish Times that were accessed through the paper’s online archive.

In my first chapter, I look at the historical narrative from 1916 to 1924, outlining the development of the opposing sides. In chapter two, I look at how these sides developed in the early years of the Free State and the emergence of the Blueshirts. In my final chapter, I closer examine the precise nature of the Blueshirts, using fascist and post-colonial theory to establish why the movement happened and why it failed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Chapter One:**

**Civil War and the Formation of Modern Irish Political Identities**

The Blueshirts cannot be discussed without exploring their relationship to the civil war. An edition of the organisation’s journal, *The Blueshirt,* from August 19th, 1933, exhibits the centrality of the memory of the civil war in the constitution of Blueshirt identity. A frontpage section titled ‘Ireland’s Loss’ by M. J. Doolan, extols the memory of dead civil-war era leaders, Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith and Kevin O’Higgins, as “citizens of peerless civic worth… not destined to see the free and peaceful Ireland for which they thought, planned, toiled and prayed” (The Blueshirt (19/8) 1933, 1). Doolan writes that these men “will be for ever to Ireland’s youth, a priceless inspiration, a compelling stimulus to acquire and cultivate each in himself the virile qualities of heart and brain, the splendid patriotic and Christian values which imparted to their lives, their charms, their worth and their capabilities of vast service and superb achievement” (ibid). This overblown style, typical of inter-war fascist rhetoric, bears similarities to the strategies of Italian fascism whereby “demagogic use of crowd power, together with the celebration of war, sacrifice and heroism… all establish Italy's proto-fascism as a renunciation of both traditional and rational forms of politics in favour of 'charismatic' politics born of and tailored to the age of the masses” (Griffin 1993, 62). In the Blueshirt conception of the martyrdom of these men, their singular greatness is emphasised, the memory of their archetypal militarism, sacrifice and heroism presented as the driving force behind future activity. These men all died*[[4]](#footnote-4)* in the decade before the publication of *The Blueshirt* and were important political figures in the civil war and the formation of the Irish Free State[[5]](#footnote-5). Truly significant however, is that these men all stood on the victorious pro-treaty side of the civil war that went on to form the government and the democratic institutions of Independent Ireland.

Into this political division the Blueshirts appear. To locate the motivations behind the fascistic elements of the movement, it must be explored in relation to the binaries that emerged from the colonial construction of Irish nationalist identities, and their fragmentation post-independence. In the way independence was achieved, the political landscape was polarized by a civil war that would reverberate for decades, colonial binaries reasserting themselves in factionalised politics. According to Edward Said, “all cultures spin out of a dialectic of self and other, the subject ‘I’ who is native, authentic and at home, and the object ‘it’ or ‘you’ who is foreign, perhaps threatening, different, out there” (Said 1999, 40). In the Irish Free State, this polarization of ‘us’ and ‘them’ remained ingrained in post-colonial politics as “the primary Manicheism which governed colonial society is preserved intact during the period of decolonization” (Fanon 1963, 50). By examining how these polarities were formed and perpetuated, I hope to locate the reasoning behind the embrace of fascism by the pro-treatyites a decade after independence.

1. **1916: Revolution**

The trajectory of Irish nationalism was changed utterly by the Easter Rising, a republican rebellion that took place in April 1916. In Dublin, Irish republicans took control of several important buildings and Pádraig Pearse, the leader of the revolution, read a declaration of independence proclaiming an Irish Republic in defiance of British rule. The Rising failed due to poor organisation and a vastly superior British army. Pearse and fourteen other leaders[[6]](#footnote-6) were executed. The Rising is a foundational point in Irish history as it radically changed the political landscape and the rules by which independence was to be won; martyrdom and the brutal backlash of British suppression creating a united front. Before 1916 the idea of a united, independent Ireland was relatively niche, “when the cause of complete independence for Ireland was kept alive only by a few dozen people” (Kissane 2005, 40). In pre-WWI Ireland, political activity had largely focused on the issue of ‘Home Rule’ and on political autonomy, with full independence seen as a somewhat abstract aspiration. Irish politics were controlled from London and the Irish Party sent MPs to Westminster. Irish nationalist discourse had become stagnant and one of the “principal achievements” of the Rising “was to expose the compromises and contortions which parliamentarianism had involved: it overturned the artificial political certainties that the Irish Party had for so long exploited” (Jackson 2010, 200). At the outbreak of WWI, Britain had reneged on the promised enactment of Home Rule and their harsh response to the Rising galvanised a widespread push for self-determination. Nationalists no longer looked for legitimacy within the British Empire, but towards complete independence. From 1916 onwards, the political party, Sinn Féin[[7]](#footnote-7) (founded by Arthur Griffith in 1905), emerged as a political juggernaut in the Irish independence movement, coordinating “‘four glorious years’ of orchestrated resistance to Britain and seemingly adamantine nationalist unity” (Foster 2012, 20).

1. **1919: The Irish War of Independence**

In 1918 an extension in British suffrage[[8]](#footnote-8) saw a “dramatic increase in those entitled to vote in Ireland, from less than 700,000 to almost 2,000,000” (Kissane 2005, 30). In a general election the same year, Sinn Féin won “69 out of 72 seats in the future area of the Irish state” (Ibid, 31). In this landslide victory, Griffith’s attempt to “summarize and to popularize the diversity of Irish Irelandism within a single political philosophy and (eventually) a single party” (Jackson 2010, 185), appeared a success. The Irish Volunteers[[9]](#footnote-9) and Sinn Féin operated as a cohesive unit, politics and militarism working towards a common goal. With enormous popular support, Sinn Féin convened the First Dáil Éireann[[10]](#footnote-10) as the democratically elected representatives of the Irish people, and the Irish Republic was again declared. “Established by democratic means, the Republic would be defended by violence” (McGarry 2005, 41) and in January 1919, the Irish War of Independence began. At this point Irish republicanism was unified, an atmosphere of co-operation existing between the revolutionary elite, the military, the politicians, and the public. Political or personal differences were supplanted by an opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’, colonial binaries of opposition providing a totalising ideology since “in this colonial context there is no truthful behaviour: and the good is quite simply that which is evil for ‘them’[the colonizer]” (Fanon 1963, 50). The Easter Rising had served as a statement of republican intent, martyrdom intensifying an ideology of binary opposition. The 1919 Dáil was thus based on the principles of 1916, viewing themselves, as stated in the proclamation, as “the elected Representatives of the ancient Irish People in National Parliament assembled”, acting “in the name of the Irish Nation”. Implicit in the proclamation is a unified Irish people, ‘the *ancient* Irish people’ rejecting the preceding centuries of colonization and anglicization. Unable to convene due to British proscription and ongoing war, this first iteration of Dáil Éireann was largely symbolic, but it would have an enduring impact on hard-line republican ideology. Declared before the partition of Ireland in 1921, anti-treatyite republicans viewed the 1919 proclamation as the only legitimate claim to the Irish republic, successive governments convened in the twenty-six counties after independence considered illegitimate due to the retention of British sovereignty in the North.

1. **1921: The Treaty Split**

Due to military and political pressure, the British government passed the Government of Ireland Act in 1920 which was to settle the ‘home rule’ question by setting up a Northern government that would allow for the unionist majority in the six counties to assert their allegiance to the crown and autonomy for the southern twenty-six counties. A general election took place in May 1921 and, on the recommendation of the president of the 1919 Republic, de Valera, “the decision taken was to dissolve the Dáil and to recognize the parliamentary elections for the North Houses of Commons as elections to Dáil Éireann” (Hayes 1969, 2). Sinn Féin overwhelmingly won the election and nationalists from the northern six counties entered the second Dáil Éireann. A divided Ireland was symbolically rejected by Irish republicans but, with Unionists assuming office in the new Northern government, partition had become a reality.

All of this took place against the backdrop of the War of Independence, a steady increase in IRA action and resultant British suppression meaning that “the Sinn Féin landslide in the 1921 general election was effectively a protest vote against British counter-insurgency measures” (Kissane 2005, 46). In response to IRA activity “the British had passed a draconian Restoration of Order in Ireland Act in 1920, instituting ‘a form of statutory martial law’” (Jackson 2010, 267) with mass internment and widespread execution. Britain’s drastic response was due to the IRA becoming an increasingly capable force after 1919 with commanders like Michael Collins, Cathal Brugha and Richard Mulcahy (as well as the rising star, Eoin O’Duffy) emerging as public heroes and charismatic leaders. These commanders co-operated effectively with the political wing embodied by de Valera and Griffith. However, despite this unified, capable leadership, violent British suppression meant that the public, although largely in favour of the war, were beginning to experience war fatigue. Violence had escalated rapidly from January 1921 and in July, a truce was called that allowed for the recently elected Second Dáil to meet. Negotiations began between representatives of the Dáil and the British government, but a sizable portion of the military were uneasy, both in the leadership and a “disappointed and suspicious rank and file” (McGarry 2005, 77).

Negotiations progressed and on the 6th of December 1921, an Irish delegation, including Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith, signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty that gave the twenty-six southern counties of Ireland independence to form the Irish Free State. The signing of this treaty led to the “disintegration of the Sinn Fein movement into two armed camps” (Kissane 2005, 64) and civil war in June 1922. While Sinn Féin had maintained unity since 1916, republican tradition in Ireland had long been divided into two conflicting perspectives, “the practical implication of the cultural tradition was isolation if not autarchy, whereas the assimilationist logic of its rival was that an autonomous Ireland modelled on British imperial lines be given its proper status as an equal partner in the British imperial mission” (Kissane 2005, 27). The ‘cultural tradition’ saw Ireland as a separate cultural entity from Britain and rejected any anglicization or co-operation. On the other side were ideals of assimilation embodied by the pre-1916 parliamentarian politics that envisioned an Independent Ireland with close ties to Britain. The resultant split of Sinn Féin after the Treaty paralleled this division. On the pro-treaty side were Collins and Griffith who viewed it as “a ‘stepping stone’ to greater freedom” (McGarry 2005, 104), and on the anti-treaty side, de Valera and his allies who viewed the treaty as an act of capitulation, arguing “that being enslaved against one's will was still preferable to voluntarily accepting servitude” (Foster 2012, 40).

The principle point of contention between these sides was an oath of allegiance to the British crown[[11]](#footnote-11) that was fundamental to the Treaty. Independence was now assured, but the oath opened the pro-treaty side to accusations of assimilationism as for those against it, “acceptance of the Treaty was a betrayal of Ireland’s tradition of heroic resistance to British rule” (Kissane 2005, 29). The pro-treatyites took the pragmatic view, with Collins assuring “IRA leaders that he did not intend to honour the treaty” and that it “would provide a breathing space for a new campaign” (McGarry 2005, 89). Anti-treatyites viewed the issue in idealistic terms, the oath symbolising the perpetuation of British oppression. These positions were both supported by Britain’s threat of renewed warfare against an undersupplied IRA as the Treaty was allegedly signed under coercion; the British Prime Minister threatening “war within three days” (Foster 2012, 25) if the terms were refused. One side saw that if Britain launched an all-out military offensive, Ireland would lose and so they signed the treaty. The other side, however, saw the coercive nature of the treaty as a betrayal to the principles of the 1919 republic and an intolerable act of subservience.

Met with the terms of the treaty in December, the Dáil was reasonably split on the issue but once re-assembled in January 1922, things had changed thanks to a “wave of public support expressed in favour of the treaty over Christmas” (McGarry 2005, 93). “A chorus of influential voices in Irish politics and public life… strenuously endorsed ratification as the only alternative to further bloodshed” (Foster 2012, 26), and by January 1922, the anti-treatyites were on the back foot. De Valera’s faction maintained their position and on the 9th of January he resigned as president. The treaty split was finalised when, “the next day Griffith replaced him, becoming 'President of Dáil Éireann' by a unanimous vote, after de Valera had withdrawn from the House, 'followed by the entire body of his supporters” (Hayes 1969, 10). With civil war looming, the opposing sides were now demarcated. Pro-treatyites viewed themselves as pragmatic nationalists and were largely supported by mainstream Irish society as well as the British government. The anti-treatyites, with little substantial support outside of the IRA, viewed themselves as sole inheritors of traditional republicanism, idealistically fight against a foreign oppressor and its traitorous colluders. Returning to the two streams of historical republicanism in Ireland pre-1916, “what occurred with the Treaty was precisely the ‘restoration’ of the values and status hierarchies of the Home Rule generation, and the triumph of pragmatism over dogma in Irish nationalist politics” (Kissane 2005, 28). The majority of those involved in this conflict were ardent Irish nationalists and republicans but what separated them was their attitude, pragmatic versus dogmatic.

1. **1922: Civil War**

Civic order was severely disrupted by the War of Independence and with the ratification of the treaty and the withdrawal of British forces from the Free State, sporadic violence broke out. Anti-treatyite IRA forces began occupying abandoned British barracks, “leaving a country divided between armed camps, with most areas under the control of anti-treaty commanders” (Kissane 2005, 68). The now pro-treaty Dáil struggled to control an increasingly factionalised IRA and despite being banned by Griffith, an army convention took place on March 26th which was attended by representatives of two-thirds of the IRA. The convention “unanimously agreed that the army ‘shall be maintained under an Executive appointed by the convention’” (Kissane 2005, 69). With the IRA no longer under the control of the Dáil, the government set about forming a national army that would oppose the ‘irregular’ IRA. In April, “Liam Lynch was elected chief of staff of the IRA” (McGarry 2005, 98) and the Irregulars (as they were now known) occupied the Four Courts[[12]](#footnote-12) and other buildings across Dublin[[13]](#footnote-13). They declared their loyalty to the aspirations of 1919, demanding that “the existing Republic be upheld, that the IRA be under the control of an elected independent executive, and crucially that no election on the Treaty be held while Britain’s threat of war existed” (Kissane 2005, 70).

As seen in these demands, the June 1922 election was a contentious issue. Elections were called on the condition of a pact made between Collins and de Valera that the balance of power would be maintained post-election; “the President was to be chosen by the Dáil, the Minister for Defence by the Army. Five other Ministers were to be pro-Treaty, four anti-Treaty” (Hayes 1969, 17). This spirit of co-operation was hampered by negotiations with the IRA over who was to be elected Minister of Defence and on June 14th, the IRA Executive Council voted to end negotiations, warning that they were willing “to take ‘whatever action may be necessary to maintain the Republic against British aggression’” (Kissane 2005, 73). Collins withdrew from the pact and pro-treatyite candidates won the election, unsurprising considering it was perceived as a choice “between war or peace” (Ibid). In June the Third Dáil[[14]](#footnote-14) convened and began consolidating their position. For the Irregular forces, Collins had betrayed them by breaking the pact and they positioned themselves firmly against, in their eyes, the illegitimate Provisional Government. The ongoing occupation of the Four Courts “had been a constant menace to the Government”, and “on 28 June 1922 the building was attacked, and the garrison surrendered” (Hayes 1969, 18). Significantly, government forces bombarded the Four Courts using British artillery (McGarry 2005, 106).

With this bombardment the ‘conventional phase’ of the civil war began. Despite the Irregulars appearing to be the superior military force, as “a mere seven of a total of sixteen IRA divisions were loyal to the Ministry of Defence” (Kissane 2005, 76), they were quickly set on the run. The Provisional Government, supported by the full strength of the British army, had greater resources than their opponents, and the Irregulars were plagued by low morale with commanders reluctant to engage with soldiers who had so recently been comrades. However, in the support provided by the British army to government forces, the pro-treatyite side were quickly characterized as an extension of British power, republicans arguing that this conflict was “a continuation of the struggle that had begun against the British in 1916” (Ibid, 179). Even while being routed across the country, Irregulars were able to claim a republican legitimacy, aligning themselves with the idealised 1916 politics of martyrdom while rejecting the nationalist claims of their opponents as British puppetry. The conventional phase was lost for the Irregulars when, in August, O’Duffy successfully captured the strategically important city of Limerick which had been under the command of Lynch. As McGarry points out, “Lynch’s unwillingness to fight his former comrades was a weakness which the more decisive O’Duffy would exploit” (McGarry 2005, 107), and this was typical of this stage of the conflict. Outnumbered and outgunned by former allies, the abstract ideals motivating the anti-treatyites were insufficient to surmount the odds and the conventional conflict was concluded by September 1922.

Despite the government victory, the nature of the civil war had been transfigured by the assassination of Collins in late August, leading “to the descent into bitterness and extremism on both sides” (Kissane 2005, 65). Collins was the charismatic face of the pro-treatyites, and he was widely recognized, even by anti-treatyites, as a talented commander and dedicated republican. His death was hugely significant and led to increased polarization through “the assumption of power by a group of men who were determined to exclude the republican viewpoint entirely from the chambers of power” (Ibid, 84). Collins’ death marked the beginning of the ‘guerrilla phase’ of the Civil War as reluctance to fight devolved into an escalation of violence and reprisal through the widespread execution of prisoners[[15]](#footnote-15). The extent of this polarization is best seen in a statement from a pro-treatyite government advisor that “in his view the ‘Irregulars’ had placed themselves outside the pale of civilization and had to be dealt with ‘by methods usually not adopted by civilised governments’” (Kissane 2005, 92). Despite having fought together only a year ago, the anti-treatyites were now cast as non-citizens, justifying a policy of execution which inevitably led to a reactive policy of reprisal. The ‘adamantine unity’ of the republican movement had now dissolved into a binary opposition that was highly reminiscent of the colonial dialectics by which this unity had been achieved.

1. **1923: The Formation of the Free State**

This brutal phase of the civil war continued until 1923 when, in February, republican prisoners began calling for peace, marking “the beginning of the disintegration of the IRA’s resistance, which would culminate in a ceasefire on 30 April” (Kissane 2005, 92). Despite the ceasefire, violence continued across the country until well into 1924; civic order in disarray with parts of the state “lawless since 1919” (McGarry 2005, 117). De Valera and the Irregular leadership had begun to diverge in early 1923 as he looked to the future, “reorganizing Sinn Fein for post-civil war politics” and “formulating his own peace proposals that would eventually bring the IRA campaign to an end” (Kissane 2005, 94). Despite entrenched sectarian animosity, de Valera could see that “the phase begun in 1916 had run its course, and that those who would continue to work for Irish independence must prepare themselves for a long patient effort at reorganization and education” (Ibid, 98). For the politicians, the fate of the Irish Republic was to be decided without warfare from here on but, in the battlefield construction of these two identities, there was ingrained dialectic of opposition. Pro-treatyites were presented as British colluders, so that “republicanism in the Civil War is typically treated as a species of anti-English, physical-force separatist nationalism that is more akin to a quasi-mystical political dogma” (Foster 2012, 21). The anti-treatyites, through their idealistic stance, achieved a monopoly of the dogmatic, romanticised iteration of Irish republicanism as it had historically been constructed. The pro-treatyites however, were characterized by their economic and political pragmatism, as well as their influential alliance “between the British government, the Catholic Church, and the Irish middle class” (Kissane 2005, 175). Political opposition on both sides entailed a dehumanisation and vilification of the other, but after the horrors of war, this was now largely contained to the political sphere.

Although “the politics of the Free State… would become disfigured by the hatreds, betrayals, and disillusionment of the Civil War” (McGarry 2005, 114), all-out civil war never reoccurred. In the 1920s, the prerogative of the newly-formed governing party of CnG, was “to build up the authority of the state and secure the economic base of the country, and with the most powerful sections of the society cooperating with them in a small country, this… was eminently realizable” (Kissane 2005, 98). The challenges faced by the government were not straightforward with the economy of the Free State in dire straits. One challenge was that under British rule, a series of land purchasing acts from 1891 to 1909 had allowed tenants to purchase land from landowners. The Treaty ensured the repayment of these annuities and “in 1923 the Free State government agreed to collect annuities from tenants and pay them into the British land purchasing fund” (Drisceoil 2011, 42). Substantial arrears had built up during the chaos of the previous years and the payment of these land annuities would be a costly and contentious issue for over a decade.

A weak economy led to increased industrial action, but CnG blamed dissident republicans, viewing this unrest in the context of civil war divisions. While anti-treatyites were undoubtably involved in some of this disorder, CnG made a concerted effort to represent them “as anarchists and terrorists, and the government as the protector of life and property” (Kissane 2005, 163). Industrial or political activity was cast as criminal, and in attempting to achieve economic stability, CnG came down hard on social activism. This would be later capitalized upon by Fianna Fáil in the late 1920s with its “shift to the left on economic issues” (Ibid, 169) as well as the leftist IRA splinter group, ‘Saor Éire’[[16]](#footnote-16). CnG firmly positioned themselves as the party of law and order, but in their conservative economics, they “seemed to be the mouthpiece for insensitive, even anti-national civil servants, and to be simultaneously oppressing the poorest beneficiaries of state support” (Jackson 2010, 282). The ruling party of the Free State were quickly associated with the upper classes, dependent “on the votes of ‘ranchers and importers’” (Kissane 2005, 170). For a newly post-colonial population, these upper classes were virtually synonymous with empire.

Colonial binaries were thus perpetuated after Independence with CnG characterized as the colonizer and anti-treatyites positioning themselves as the colonized. While much of this oppositionality was due to propaganda from either side, there were legitimate reasons behind accusations of betrayal aimed at the government. For one thing, “the overwhelming majority of civil servants were retained: more than 98% of the old British administration” (Jackson 2010, 273). Similarly, “the task of democratic state-building required… the ruthless imposition of centralized authority” (Kissane 2005, 153), the severity of which was reminiscent to the Irish people of British rule. The political identity represented by CnG was seen at variance with the republican ideals it claimed, its centrist position and continued cooperation with the British weakening the ideological strength of its nationalist republicanism. While the pro-treaty position was initially legitimate on the practical level, the Boundary Commission of 1924-1925 did huge damage to Collins’ original ‘stepping-stone’ argument and further eroded their claim to 1916 republican ideals. Contained in the Treaty was an agreement for a bipartisan boundary commission, overseen by a nonpartisan mediator, that would establish the exact border between the Republic and Northern Ireland[[17]](#footnote-17). The Boundary Commission “was the first great test of the Treaty as a vehicle for national aspirations, and it was an embarrassing failure” (Jackson 2010, 278) as it established little change in the border drawn up in 1920. Essential to the pro-treatyite position had been the promise of a thirty-two-county republic and they hoped that the commission would extend the borders of the Free State to the point that a Northern government was unfeasible. The disappointing results of the Boundary Commission left CnG “symbolically bankrupt” as “the failure of the Boundary Commission was a failure for the Treaty settlement” (Ibid). The pro-treatyite claim to traditional republicanism had been contingent on the promise of things to come but now they could offer no ideology other than pragmatism, a centrist liberalism, and an uncomfortably intimate relationship with Britain. Anti-treatyites, however, could still enjoy the ideological power of republican continuity, monopolising their hold on the symbolic significance of 1916, 1919, and the legacy of resistance.

From this polarized and ideologically unstable conflict, the Blueshirts would emerge.

**Chapter Two:**

**The Blueshirts: “Service, Discipline, Country.”**

Much of the historiography on the Blueshirts has been dedicated to ascertaining the degree to which they were fascist. Cronin described them as “potential para-fascist” (Cronin 1995, 312), ‘para’ referring to Griffin, meaning “a radical right regime with fascist trappings” (Griffin 1993, 117) and ‘potential’ from the fact they never attained power. Maurice Manning, who wrote the first definitive book on the movement, *The Blueshirts* (1970), similarly argued that they were “respectable Irish conservatives, who had merely adopted the symbolic trappings of European fascism as was fashionable at the time” (Newsinger 2001, 837). While I agree that the fascism of the Blueshirts extended little beyond aesthetics and bravado for most members, I think there is more at play in the motivations behind the embrace of these aesthetics than their simply being ‘fashionable’. In the previous chapter, I gave a cursory overview of Irish history from 1916 to 1925, exploring the role of colonial dialectics in this political sphere to argue that there was a symbolic imbalance between the two dominant political factions. In this chapter, I look at what the growing strength of the anti-treatyites in the Free State meant for the government, and how fear for the security of their political position led them to fascism.

The Blueshirts were a reactionary group, initially founded as an organisation for veterans who had fought for the government in the civil war, they widened their membership in response to the threat of reprisals from the IRA and a new de Valera-led government. They claimed to fight against communism (although there was little communism to be found), defend free speech and protect against tyranny. A focal point of all of this was the issue of the land annuity payments, as de Valera’s new government, once in power, refused payment to Britain but continued collecting the annuities for the Irish exchequer. The British responded with harsh economic tariffs on cattle[[18]](#footnote-18) imports and the ‘Economic War’ began. Griffin argues that “fascism is in its element as an oppositional ideology only as long as the climate of national crisis prevails” (Griffin 1993, 40), and the Blueshirts were able to portray the Economic War as such a crisis, using it to galvanise huge support between 1933 and 1935. Non-payment of the annuities became a protest movement that provided the Blueshirts with a practical political role, and much of their activity involved disrupting government attempts to seize and auction off confiscated property. While the concrete nature of the Economic War allowed the Blueshirts some populist momentum, for the highest-ranking members and their political allies, the real crisis had already occurred with CnG’s loss in the 1932 and 1933 elections. For them, the crisis extended beyond the economic, and in a speech by O’Duffy, recorded in *The Blueshirt*, their perception of a deeper crisis is made clear: “our determination is to raise the Irish nation- the whole Irish nation- out of ignominy of party politics, out of sectarianism and out of the rot of Communism” (The Blueshirt (19/8) 1933, 4). O’Duffy’s statement reflects the Blueshirt position: a moral crusade, disillusionment with liberal democracy, and an inchoate desire for change.

1. **Eoin O’Duffy, Law & Order.**

Eoin O’Duffy was born in County Monaghan in the north of Ireland in 1890. During the War of Independence, he rose quickly in the ranks of the IRA and Sinn Féin. O’Duffy became known as a capable military man and excellent administrator who was largely respected by the revolutionary elite. He had a close relationship with Michael Collins and “throughout his career, O’Duffy would depict himself as a protégé of Collins and the heir to his political legacy” (McGarry 2005, 26). Famously leading “one of the most daring raids for arms that has yet taken place in Ireland” (Irish Times 1920) against an RIC[[19]](#footnote-19) barracks in Ballytrain Co. Monaghan in 1920, O’Duffy was raised to IRA high command. In September 1921 he assumed the second highest position in the organisation, Deputy Chief of Staff. Upon the signing of the Treaty, O’Duffy’s position seemed somewhat ambivalent, initially assuring the military that it was just a “trick” (McGarry 2005, 89). His position soon changed, likely under the influence of Collins, and “O’Duffy’s important role in winning support for the treaty would soon earn him the bitter enmity of the Irregulars” (Ibid). O’Duffy was cast as a traitor by the Irregulars and emerging as an ardent pro-treayite during the split, he let an unrelenting campaign in the civil war.

Despite his military record, in September 1922 he was appointed leader of the newly formed Civic Guard by the minister for home affairs, Kevin O’Higgins, because “only a figure of O’Duffy’s stature, O’Higgins claimed, could redeem the force which had been paralysed by indiscipline since its formation” (McGarry 2005, 113). The Civic Guard had been introduced after British withdrawal and the dissolution of the RIC in the twenty-six counties, and O’Duffy would maintain his influential role as commissioner for the next eleven years. Renamed An Garda Síochána[[20]](#footnote-20) in 1923, the force had lofty post-colonial ideals, “that Ireland could move from policing by coercion and force to policing by consent and cooperation” (Conway 2014, 25). These were admirable ideals, but O’Higgins was correct about the initial performance of the Civic Guard as the task given them in the middle of a civil war was near insurmountable. The restoration of order across the country was an urgent priority for the Provisional Government as “for pro-treatyites, the growing disorder of 1922 affronted their determination to vindicate the Irish capacity for self-government” (Kissane 2005, 29). The pro-treatyites were battling to consolidate a functioning state and prove their right to govern but, consequently, they became heavily associated with an overly severe form of law and order.

O’Duffy set about reforming the police force with gusto, and it is clear his later battle to ‘raise the nation’ began here in his “determination to impart a moral and national outlook to his young recruits” (McGarry 2005, 120). Indeed, “the Civic Guard would become a living image of the ideals espoused by those who had fought for independence” (Conway 2014, 34): Catholic, nationalist and republican. While the Gardaí[[21]](#footnote-21) were formed into a distinctly nationalist entity, maintaining their nonpartisan position in a polarized state awash with paramilitary forces was essential and it was decided they be unarmed. This decision was a key part of the enduring success of the force and in 1927, O’Higgins would reject a proposal from an overstretched O’Duffy to arm the Gardaí on the grounds that “the moral support of the people for the police might be lost if they were armed” (Kissane 2005, 167). The Gardaí were quickly accepted into the community and crime began to drop so that “by 1924, the Garda Síochána had proved itself a success” (McGarry 2005, 131). In a tacit endorsement of the improved civic order of the country, the era of military tribunals was seemingly ended the same year and the force “was given responsibility for all crime” (Conway 2014, 41). In the subsumption of political law into the civil judicial system, there can be seen the longstanding strategy of CnG to present dissenting republican forces as criminal, anti-treatyite action viewed as “a concerted effort to undermine the moral fabric of Irish society” (Kissane 2005, 152). CnG sought to present the fallout of the treaty split as the difference between good and bad; forces of moral law and order against anarchic criminals acting in bad faith.

Under orders to re-civilize and re-moralise the Irish people, O’Duffy seemed to agree wholeheartedly with a general conception of a social degeneration; “his reports as commissioner had revealed an increasing concern about immorality and the decline of civic spirit” (McGarry 2005, 157). According to Kissane, “complete and unswerving was the Provisional Government’s fidelity to the values of Victorian Britain” (Kissane 2005, 151), meaning that while CnG, O’Duffy, and An Garda Síochána were distinctly, if not radically, nationalist, they were fundamentally conservative in their attitudes towards social morality and law and order. Again, the pro-treatyite faction represented by CnG were implicitly associated with the British and with memories of suppression: the result of “a political elite profoundly sceptical of the civic virtue of the population to which it owed its right to rule” (Ibid, 152). It was felt that the Irish people needed to be whipped into shape and O’Duffy was the man for the job.

1. **Fianna Fáil**

As already mentioned, de Valera wasted no time in preparing Sinn Féin for a new peacetime strategy once he saw inevitable defeat in the civil war. “Sinn Féin, as defined by Griffith, implied parliamentary abstentionism and autarky” (Jackson 2010, 242), so after the war, with CnG having assumed parliamentary positions, the party had little practical political capability. The Treaty still justified abstentionism, partition and the oath, meaning that for anti-treatyites there was little difference between the colonial governments of the past and the present one. Sinn Féin’s abstentionism meant that CnG easily won the elections of 1923 and 1927 despite their being faced with a series of debacles. In 1924 there occurred an army mutiny due to “long-standing tensions between the civil and military treatyite wings personified by the rivalry between Kevin O’Higgins and Richard Mulcahy, the minister for defence” (McGarry 2005, 131). The following year, the disaster of the Boundary Commission led to “much dissension within the ranks of Cumann na nGaedheal” (Jackson 2010, 278), resulting in a minor schism. While CnG succeeded in consolidating democratic institutions in the Free State and coordinated their successful integration into Irish society, their political base was weakened as they “scarcely bothered to stimulate any more narrow, partisan loyalty” (Ibid, 279). For de Valera and his more revisionist allies, the political opportunity presented by CnG’s lack of focus on electoral realities and their public missteps, meant that it was time to rethink abstentionism.

Fianna Fáíl was formed in May 1926 on the basis that “while the Free State Dáil was not the legitimate parliament of the Republic, it would use it to achieve such a parliament” (Coogan 1980, 78). The party sought to modernize itself through proper economic policy, aiming to win “the support of different social groups on the basis of concrete economic rather than abstract nationalist issues” (Kissane 2005, 189). For the June 1927 election they positioned themselves further to the left so that, “without being socialist, Fianna Fáil ate into the support of the Labour Party; without being violently republican, the party provided an alternative to the IRA regrouping of the later 1920s” (Jackson 2010, 282). Fianna Fáíl still lost and the tense political equilibrium that existed after the election was shattered with the assassination of O’Higgins (then vice-president) in July the same year. The IRA had been resurgent for the past few years, and the murder of O’Higgins necessitated drastic change. The government brought in the Electoral Amendment Bill, that forced elected TDs[[22]](#footnote-22) to accept the controversial oath and take their seat in the Dáil. Abstentionism “treatyites believed, encouraged IRA violence by undermining the legitimacy of the state” (Kissane 2005, 178). Fianna Fáil was thus “rescued from its own suicidal abstentionist politics through the actions of the Cumann na nGaedheal government” (Jackson 2010, 281) and whether “an act of political self-sacrifice in the interests of the democratic political culture of the newly independent state” (Ibid, 282), the rules of the game had been changed. To the credit of CnG, the institutions of the Free State had revealed themselves to be so enduring that it became clear to de Valera and his allies that their goals were better realised from within. So, “to this end, his party took the oath and entered the Dáil in July 1927” (Kissane 2007, 215). Ultimately, while the CnG act of 1927 forcibly ended abstentionism, Fianna Fáil were prepared, and they acted as parliamentary opposition until their victory in 1932.

1. **The IRA in the Free State: A Bolshevik Threat?**

Sinn Féin and the IRA had begun drifting apart after the civil war, divisions growing between the political and military spheres. In 1925, rumours of de Valera’s reversal on abstentionism, led to the convening of a republican conference where de Valera resigned as president of Sinn Féin. The IRA elected to limit political leadership, reorganising themselves as a secret army loyal to the army council, and now their “primary enemy was not Britain or Northern Ireland but the Free State government, which, as Britain’s garrison in Ireland, was most responsible for maintaining the humiliation of the treaty settlement” (McGarry 2005, 172). There was still a great deal of cooperation between the political and military wings, republicans were to enter the Dáil and reverse as many stipulations of the treaty as possible, while “the I.R.A. was to get control of all arms in the Free State, and all enemy forces (that is the Free State Army) were to be withdrawn from Dublin, disarmed and demobilised” (Coogan 1980, 78). The ultimate goal of the IRA was to become the official army of the thirty-two-country republic envisioned in the proclamation of 1919 and, initially, Fianna Fáil seemed the best vehicle to achieve this.

The assassination of O’Higgins changed this position. “Fianna Fail had refused an offer of formal cooperation with the IRA for the June 1927 election” (Kissane 2005, 189), but this did little for public perception of the party.[[23]](#footnote-23) Since late 1926, the IRA had launched a campaign against the Gardaí as enforcers of an illegitimate state and this had led to Commissioner O’Duffy demanding rearmament and extra-judicial powers. O’Higgins death was viewed an assault on the very foundations of the Free State, so the same year a Special Powers Act was instigated that “was essentially a return to the emergency measures of the Civil War” (McGarry 2005, 178). The relationship between O’Duffy and the government had already been strained by the overzealous repression of the IRA by the ‘Special Branch’[[24]](#footnote-24) of the Gardaí. Special Branch dealt harshly with political crime using methods outside the remit of the law that amounted to “a policy of counter-repression” (Ibid, 175), and public opinion was strained towards them. They were despised by the IRA and “both sides began to develop personal grudges and fears as to what might happen if one should fall into the hands of the other” (Coogan 1980, 194). The 1927 Public Safety Act sent the IRA to ground but it was suspended in late 1928 to offset perceptions that the political environment of the civil war lingered.

From late 1928 onwards, the IRA resumed their concerted effort to undermine the Free State and launched a campaign against the judiciary by targeting judges and witnesses. For O’Duffy, who had consolidated his position as commissioner into “a cult of personality” (McGarry 2005, 142), and who seemed almost maniacally invested in his role, the situation was unacceptable; “as IRA violence mounted, so too did O’Duffy’s extremism” (Ibid, 179). The commissioner appeared to become deeply disillusioned with the politics of the Free State and began to be viewed as something of a liability by his allies. O’Duffy, from early on in his career, had displayed a ruthlessness when dealing with his enemies[[25]](#footnote-25), and the extent of his repressive tactics made many of those in government uncomfortable. In his tenure as commissioner, this attitude only seemed to intensify and this extremism, bordering on paranoia, reappeared in his leadership of the Blueshirts.

Difficulty in suppressing IRA activity led to O’Duffy’s extremism which would later appear in his fascistic tendencies, but another key pillar of Blueshirt identity came to the forefront after 1927: the spectre of communism. Fear of communism was rampant across the West at this time and anti-communism was a near-foundational feature of inter-war fascism. Throughout the civil war, Irregular forces were presented as Bolshevik, a British army report from 1922 alleging that the “republican side were ceding power to the Bolshevik and the gunman” (Kissane 2005, 84), reflecting a belief that a breakdown in social order would lead to communist revolution. In the late 1920s, industrial action increased, “strikes went from 54,292 in 1928 to 310,199 in 1931” (Kissane 2005, 171), and global events made conservative Irish society extremely nervous. The fear of communism was amplified by the Irish clergy but in fact, “for all the hysteria that existed around communism, the far-left was numerically tiny in context, and lacking in influence in Irish political life or broader society” (Fallon 2014, 71). Despite the evident improbability of a communist revolution in the Free State, events abroad and “a continuing lack of socio-political identity in a time of heightened class tensions” (Hammill 1995, 56), intensified establishment paranoia. As Fianna Fáil changed their economic policy to incite populist support, the IRA saw the political potential in this growing unrest and “responded by mimicking this social radicalism in an effort to capitalise upon and channel such forces” (Ibid, 56). The bulk of the IRA, although revolutionary, were not radical, yet in 1931, small socialist factions formed the organisation Saor Éire. In a utilitarian move, Saor Éire was supported by IRA leadership who hoped to harness social unrest in their favour. However, public concern quickly grew around the organisation, and it was forcibly proscribed after vocal denunciation from the clergy.

So, while republicanism did flirt with socialist politics, they were a means to an end in the disruption of the government and no significant communist force really existed. The ‘red scare’ of the early 1930s was undoubtably exaggerated by CnG to implicate Fianna Fáil and the IRA in an ideology that would receive disavowal from the clergy and cripple electoral prospects. O’Duffy as commissioner, played a key role in fomenting this fear, the discovery by Garda of a Saor Éire manifesto justifying his belief “that communism was one of the guiding hands behind anti-treaty republicanism” (McGarry 2005, 183). O’Duffy exaggerated the threat and the government used “the exaggerated memoranda of the commissioner and Special Branch to depict the IRA as a front for Soviet infiltration” (Ibid), enacting another Special Powers act in October 1931. A deep-seated fear of a communist/republican alliance justified the enactment of repressive policies but once the air of panic lifted, the “measures appeared heavy-handed and its very success added to public concerns about the government’s authoritarianism” (Ibid, 186). This damaged CnG’s chances in the 1932 elections.

1. **The Rise of the Blueshirts**

The earliest iteration of the Blueshirts, the ACA, was formed in February 1932, the same month as the general election. Looking to safeguard the rights of pro-treatyite veterans, the organisation was “ostensibly designed to represent the interests of those who had served in the Free State National Army of 1922–24” (Montgomery 2014, 22). They soon began providing protection for CnG rallies that were under increased threat from the IRA. Dubbed “the ‘White Army'” (Hanley 2001, 54) by the IRA, the growing militancy of the organisation was perceived as a threat by the new government, and O’Duffy, who was still commissioner, described it in 1932 “as ‘a formidable insurrectionary force” (Kissane 2005, 192).

The fear of an anti-treatyite government that motivated the formation of the ACA was realised with the electoral victory of Fianna Fáíl the same year. In the election, CnG “made few policy proposals, projecting itself instead ‘as the sole bulwark against terror and Communism’” (Kissane 2005, 191), and was defeated by Fianna Fáil’s ability to combine “nationalist fundamentalism with a carefully tailored social and economic appeal” (Jackson 2010, 280). Fianna Fáil, unable to form a majority government, formed a coalition with Labour TDs, but in 1933 they declared a snap general election and were “re-elected with a majority of one over a combination of all the other Dáil parties” (Ibid, 287). The 1932 election result had “led to a sharp rise in IRA recruitment and activism but also, for reasons of pragmatism, a decline in violence against the state” (McGarry 2005, 192). Less IRA violence did not negate the fact that they had given support to Fianna Fáil in the 1932 elections[[26]](#footnote-26). If this was not enough to spark fear in CnG and its allies, de Valera proposed “the withdrawal of army pensions” (Cronin 1994, 237) that would specifically target pro-treaty veterans. Faced with targeted political reprisals and an emboldened IRA, all pro-treatyite fears seemed to become a reality with the sacking of O’Duffy as commissioner in early 1933.

In a debate in the Dáíl on the firing of O’Duffy, the leader of CnG, W.T. Cosgrave, denounced the decision; “there is scarcely any person in this country who possesses in greater degree the confidence of the people of this State than that officer who was removed” (Dáil Debates 1933). While this is exaggerated as O’Duffy was “widely criticized for his illiberal tenure as commissioner” (McGarry 2005, 199), the sacking was clearly political. Many in the ACA were close comrades of O’Duffy and “de Valera had understandable concerns about Special Branch’s appetite for suppressing the militantly treatyite ACA” (Ibid, 198). De Valera was proven right about O’Duffy’s bias when he was named leader of the ACA in July 1933. The organisation renamed itself The National Guard and “sought to redefine itself as an explicitly political movement” (Montgomery 2014, 24). O’Duffy was an ideal leader for this new phase; his firing had made him the face of contemporary pro-treatyite grievances while his military record and his uncompromising treatment of the IRA proved him a leader with the proper administrative and moral credentials.

While the overall politics of the Blueshirts are in dispute, the fascist influence was obvious. The ACA had already begun to use the fascist Roman salute in their interactions, and with the arrival of O’Duffy, “it was supplemented by the accompanying cry of 'Hoch O'Duffy' which was unashamedly based on the Nazis' Heil Hitler” (Cronin 1995, 315). The organisation’s use of the blue shirt had also begun in April that year to differentiate between sides in street battles against republicans. From then on, they were generally known as the Blueshirts. The organisation denied the fascistic implications of the uniform and instead, insisted on its being a symbol of discipline, “The blue shirt… is our emblem, our symbol, our ideal… summed up in three words: Service, discipline, country” (The Blueshirt (19/8) 1933, 4). I will go into details on the aesthetics and politics of the Blueshirts in the next chapter, but in terms of their political identity, I agree with Manning and Cronin’s assessment of the rank and file largely being ignorant of fascism as an ideology. The economic policy of the Blueshirt’s largely stemmed from the corporatist doctrines emerging from the Vatican at this time, but “the interpretation of those ideas by certain Blueshirts, especially O'Duffy, showed the vestiges of fascistized thought” (Cronin 1995, 317). The Blueshirts were ideologically vague at best, but in the opportunistic, reactive nature of the movement, action came first, ideology second. A display of Blueshirt power was organised for the 13th of August 1933, with a parade through Dublin to the cenotaph erected in front of Leinster House[[27]](#footnote-27) that commemorated Griffith, Collins, and O’Higgins. An edition of *The Blueshirt*, published on the 12th, gives detailed orders for the march which was to end at Collins’ grave where, “a decade of the rosary will be recited, an oration delivered by the Director General[[28]](#footnote-28) and the Last Post sounded” (The Blueshirt (12/8) 1933, 2). All attendants of the march were to be in uniform, and parallels were immediately drawn to Mussolini’s march on Rome.

At this point tensions were extremely high. Brawls between Blueshirts and republicans were intensifying, police raids had found weapons in Blueshirt possession and there was a concerted questioning of parliamentary democracy in their rhetoric.[[29]](#footnote-29) De Valera, unwilling to allow such a display of strength outside government buildings, revived the Public Safety Act of 1931, “proclaimed the parade, and placed hundreds of armed gardaí outside key buildings” (McGarry 2005, 217). O’Duffy, forced to call off the parade, accused the government of malicious intent- “an organised and systematic campaign of falsehood and worse has been carried on against the organisation by the Government” (The Blueshirt (19/8) 1933, 4). The all-out proscription of the organisation was a difficult challenge, but this would change in September with the founding of Fine Gael. CnG had revealed itself to be a spent political force at this point and they looked to the Blueshirts to provide “an increased popular leverage” (Jackson 2010, 296). Initially known as the United Ireland Party, Fine Gael was formed out CnG, the National Guard and the Irish Centre Party[[30]](#footnote-30). O’Duffy was appointed the leader of Fine Gael; his popularity it was hoped would revitalise the party and in return, the merger “made it difficult for de Valera to ban the Blueshirts without also suppressing the opposition” (McGarry 2005, 219). Like Sinn Fein’s ability to unite disparate factions under one banner after 1916, Fine Gael sought to do the same thing for the pro-treaty side. The National Guard was renamed the Young Ireland Association to circumvent proscription, and they operated autonomously in Fine Gael, “subject to party discipline only in matters of constitutional and policy” (Ibid, 223). Fine Gael looked to the 1934 local elections as an opportunity to announce their arrival in the political landscape, and O’Duffy and other leaders, upped their touring of the country. The local elections were a disaster and, gradually, leading up to 1935, the leadership grew dissatisfied with O’Duffy’s erratic rhetoric to the point that he resigned.

1. **Land Annuities and the Fall of O’Duffy**

The issue of payment of land annuities to the British was an enduring problem throughout the first fifteen years of Irish independence. Payment of the annuity was fixed at around 10% net income for the average farmer, so in times of economic hardship it was a major burden. “In the mid-1920s the annuities issue slowly emerged as a source of contention and political mobilisation” (Drisceoil 2011, 43), as for smaller farmers 10% was a considerable cut and its being paid to the British was further salt in the wound. Both Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil tapped into this discontent as part of their attempt to galvanise a wider support base. Fianna Fáil campaigned in 1932 on the principle of non-payment to great success but their pursuit of the Economic War was polarizing. “Large cattle farmers (the ranchers' or graziers, the 8% of farmers who owned 50% of the land and who had benefited most from Cumann na nGaedheal's policies) were hardest hit by the trade war” (Ibid, 45), and payment became a political issue for the conservatives backing Fine Gael[[31]](#footnote-31). Farmers began advocating withholding payment to the government and this led to the Blueshirts protesting government seizures. “Blueshirt extremists placed themselves at the head of the anti-annuities campaign” (McGarry 2005, 260), and sought to disrupt seizure and auction.[[32]](#footnote-32) Blueshirts sabotaged railways and telephone lines to hamper police response (Montgomery 2014, 27), but this illegality “undermined the movement’s credibility as defenders of public order and appalled those treatyite politicians who prided themselves on their law-abiding tradition” (McGarry 2005, 260). Public violence increased with the Blueshirts but the government and police “constantly sought to construct the movement as illegitimate within Irish politics” (Montgomery 2014, 32) so that while republicans certainly instigated some violence, Gardaí “almost exclusively blamed the Blueshirts” (Ibid, 34).

It was with the issue of the land annuities that the party began to split. O’Duffy had become increasingly erratic and difficult for the leadership to control, he vocally “pushed for an annuities and rent strike, but Fine Gael baulked at the idea of advocating illegal action and the radicals lost the initiative” (Drisceoil 2011, 45).[[33]](#footnote-33) The severity of the Economic War began to lessen in 1935 and with this, the impetus behind the Blueshirt movement began to fade. O’Duffy’s radicalism and volatility, had alienated him from his conservative allies, and the revelation in 1935 that he “was in contact with foreign fascist organizations also caused embarrassment” (McGarry 2005, 264). O’Duffy was no longer Fine Gael’s solution to their problems and in September 1935, he resigned as president of the party. Although not formally settled until 1938, the crisis of the Economic War began to fade, and with it, the Blueshirts populist attraction. The Blueshirts quickly faded into obscurity as did O’Duffy himself[[34]](#footnote-34).

1. **Conclusion**

I have given a cursory overview of the events that led to the rise and fall of the Blueshirts. As McGarry points out, “O’Duffy’s leadership of Fine Gael represented an attempt to remobilize treatyite republicanism” (McGarry 2005, 235), fascism providing a symbolic vernacular with which to generate populist support. The land annuities dispute provided the crisis by which authoritarian support could be mobilized. The dialectics of the civil war persisted through this entire process, either side attempting to balance out the power of the other. In the next chapter, I closer examine the Blueshirts in the context of both post-colonial theory and Griffin’s concept of the ‘palingenetic’ mythic core of fascism. By looking at the interplay between post-colonial and fascist ideology, I hope to prove that there was more to the fascism of the Blueshirts than its just being ‘fashionable’.

**Chapter 3:**

**‘A Useful Club’.**

In a discussion on the complicated relationship between conservatives and fascists in inter-war fascist movements, John Newsinger mentions that “for the conservative elites, the fascists sometimes appeared to be a useful club” (Newsinger 2001, 826). I think this idea of fascism being used as a tool, a primitive yet effective blunt force weapon, is an apt description of the use made of the Blueshirts by pro-treatyite elites in the early 1930s. As Cronin argues, there was little widespread fervour for fascism as an ideology in the movement, instead the elements of fascism used by the Blueshirts were largely an attempt to brandish their new ‘useful club’ threateningly at their opposition.

While there was evident calculation behind the attempt to exhort populist support through the Blueshirts, it is my contention that there was something deeper at play, rooted in what Roger Griffin terms ‘palingenetic myth’, “the vision of a revolutionary new order” (Griffin 1993, 35). This idea of palingenesis, “as a generic term for the vision of a radically new beginning which follows a period of destruction or perceived dissolution” (Ibid, 35), is further elaborated on by Roger Eatwell as, “the mobilizing vision is that of the national community rising phoenix-like after a period of encroaching decadence which all but destroyed it” (Eatwell 1996, 38). There is a striking similarity between these fascistic visions of a palingenetic future and the revolutionary aspirations of colonial Ireland as they looked towards nationalist revival and independence. [[35]](#footnote-35) As Fanon points out “there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place” (Fanon 1963, 39) and this vision of a radically reorganised future, of a post-colonial utopia, is fundamental in the formation of colonial identities. Revolution is thus essential in the constitution of both the colonial freedom fighter and the prospective fascist, each offered a vivid vision of utopia. Rejection of colonialism left a deeply ingrained dialectical opposition in the Irish political consciousness of the Free State because “a central problem with ideas of resistance is the overly simplistic conflation of resistance with oppositionality” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999, 105). ‘Oppositionality’ became intrinsic to the political fabric and political identities of a country founded on a form of nationalism derived from a “tradition of heroic resistance” (Kissane 2005, 29). In the civil war and in the first decade of the Free State, these opposing sides laid claim to the same tradition of nationalism, rejecting the other side’s legitimacy in the process. The challenge faced by pro-treatyites was that in their pragmatic politics, they grievously weakened their claim to legitimacy while anti-treatyites were able to consolidate their near monopoly on the tradition of Irish republicanism. By 1933, “twice defeated by Fianna Fáil, with no natural new direction, and lacking a glamorous unifying leader, Cumann na nGaedheal had nowhere to turn” (Cronin 1995, 329): they had lost a hold on any ideology that could mobilize populist support and were unable to sell utopia. The Blueshirt movement “attempted to present itself as the rightful heir to the nationalist movement of the 1916-21 period” (Fallon 2014, 73), and in this chapter, I argue that they used the palingenetic basis of fascism in an attempt to reclaim their opponents’ stranglehold on the deep-seated utopic myth of 1930s Ireland, revolutionary republicanism.

1. **The Blueshirts as Fascist**

Whether ‘para-fascist’ or ‘potential para-fascist’, the Blueshirts looked an awful lot like fascists; the argument of ‘if it looks, walks, and talks like a fascist, it is probably a fascist’ coming to mind. Eatwell supplies a succinct description of fascism[[36]](#footnote-36) as: “An ideology that strives to forge social rebirth based on a holistic-national radical Third Way, though in practice fascism has tended to stress style, especially action and the charismatic leader, more than detailed programme, and to engage in a Manichaean demonisation of its enemies” (Eatwell 1996, 311). Eatwell provides a useful definition of a fascist minimum to work from, and when it is compared to the twelve objectives listed in the third issue of *The Blueshirt*, it seems that the movement meets this minimum. Firstly, ideologically, the Blueshirts were looking towards some form of ‘social rebirth’; one of their objectives, “to awaken throughout the country a spirit of combination, discipline, zeal and patriotic realism” (The Blueshirt (19/8) 1933, 5). Secondly, the movement endorsed corporatist policies and admired the economics of Italian fascism as a ‘third way’, arguing that “the formation of coordinated national organisations of employers and employees… will effectively prevent strikes and lockouts and harmoniously compose industrial difference” (Ibid). Finally, ‘Manichaean demonisation’ can not only be seen in their propaganda[[37]](#footnote-37) but in their objectives regarding communism and the government: their second objective to “oppose communism and alien control and influence” and their eighth, “to expose and prevent corruption and victimization in national and local administrations” (Ibid). On paper at least, the Blueshirts do meet a lot of fascist criteria.

While similar in many ways to other fascist organisations, the Blueshirts rarely exhibited the same extremism as other inter-war fascist movements, and it is this tentative radicalism that makes scholars hesitant to categorize them as outright fascist. However, as Eatwell points out, for many fascist movements, style, action, and a charismatic leader often took precedence: aesthetics over politics. Blueshirt policies were far from ‘detailed’, and their corporatist model might be dismissed as fashionable instead of radical. Corporatism was of great interest in 1930s Europe as liberals desperately sought an alternative to the extremes of communism and capitalism, corporatism “a middle way between two hostile systems… to achieve social harmony by means of the establishment of corporations” (Broderick 1994, 88). A general lean towards corporatism was heightened in Catholic Ireland by the publication in 1931 of Pope Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* that “sought to revive the guild as a corporatist third way between liberal individualism and communism” (McGarry 2005, 212). The proposed policy of the Blueshirts thus bore similarities to Mussolini but it was nowhere near as revolutionary with O’Duffy insisting that he was a democrat merely “in favour of improving the present system” (The Blueshirt (19/8) 1933, 7). However, since Italy and Germany stand as the only states to achieve a fascist government independently, it is hard to tell whether O’Duffy was just saying what was necessary to achieve power since “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” (Cronin 1995, 327). Similarly, the Blueshirts cannot be classed as extremist in the traditional fascist sense as “in contrast to many variants of fascism, racism and anti-Semitism did not play an important role in Blueshirt ideology” (McGarry 2005, 252). While there were some truly radical members[[38]](#footnote-38), generally, the racism and antisemitism sometimes exhibited by the movement would not have been much out of place in the deeply conservative Ireland of the 1930s.

So, while the Blueshirts were not all that extreme for a fascist group, this does not mean that they were harmless. A fascist movement develops in three phases from “hardcore fascist group” with shared ideology, to “mass movement” and finally “there is fascism in power” (Newsinger 2001, 826). It is only once in power that proper economic and political policy really matters for a fascist movement as its populist support is derived from some form of perceived national crisis and the dubious offer of some form of cultural rebirth: “the vague or contradictory implications of the policies proposed to realize such nebulous goals do not diminish their attraction because it is precisely their mythic power that matters” (Griffin 1993, 39). The *appearance* of strength and certainty is therefore of the utmost priority for a fledgling fascist movement and, in the Blueshirts, “the liturgical aspects of fascism (the uniforms, salutes, parades, and mass rallies) were important because they symbolized the populist ultranationalism at the core of the ideology” (McGarry 2005, 244). Ultranationalism is defined by Griffin as any nationalism that rejects “anything compatible with liberal institutions or with the tradition of Enlightenment humanism which underpins them” (Griffin 1993, 37). This concept would not have been massively controversial in the ‘anti-English’ revivalist nationalism of early-20th century Ireland where liberalism and Enlightenment humanism were commonly viewed as British imports and where “centuries of suppression' at the hands of a foreign power had engendered in the people a sympathy with radical nationalists” (Kissane 2007, 214). In many ways, Irish nationalism was already ‘ultra’ and the Blueshirts were effectively trying to sell the same product as their opponents, fascism providing a symbolic vernacular with which to visibly differentiate themselves. The choice of blue for the movement’s uniform was because of its associations with St. Patrick, “attempting to awaken the nationalistic past, and incorporate into the movement a degree of historical mythology” (Cronin 1995, 315). The cross of St. Patrick was also used by the movement in their emblem and crest to distinguish them “from their opponents, whose symbols were the harp and the Easter Lilly” (Ibid). There is visible symbolic imbalance at play here with the harp an ancient symbol of Ireland that for centuries was “produced and utilized by successive waves of Irish utopian visionaries” (O'Donnell 2010, 253) and the Easter Lilly a memorial symbol of the martyrs of 1916 still used today. Both harp and lily are powerful nationalist signifiers of Ireland, representing an ancient, near pre-historic, tradition of nationalism and the modern republicanism of 1916. Abstract references to the mythic St. Patrick did little for the Blueshirts, but in their attempt towards contriving a nationalist symbolism, their desperate efforts to leverage populist support through aesthetics is evident.

The Blueshirts appeared fascist, but this did not extend far beneath the surface. Their politics, although heavily associated with fascism, were emblematic of the era in their corporatist, anti-communist, and protectionist position. Similarly, their bigotry was typical enough of the time, with their Manichaean view of their enemies and their nationalism having more to do with the political climate of Ireland than with fascism. If this is the case, then why did they so exuberantly adopt fascist aesthetics and rhetoric?

1. **The Conflicting Ideologies of Post-colonialism and Fascism**

The need of Fine Gael for a new narrative of rebirth extends back to the divide of the civil war. The representative nationalist party of a decolonial movement “mobilize the people with slogans of independence, and for the rest, leave it to future events” (Fanon 1963, 150). Like fascism, the exact details of what comes after the turning point of revolution is inconsequential, the revolution itself is what is important. This perpetual revolution is one of the structural weaknesses of fascism as an ideology as “it can only maintain its momentum and cohesion by continually precipitating events which seemed to fulfil the promise of permanent revolution, of continuing palingenesis” (Griffin 1993, 40). Both the ideology of colonial independence and fascism share a revolutionary core but the marked difference between the two is that colonial revolution has a far more concrete result, decolonization. Fascism can always insist on the promise of things to come, and in fact *must* insist because its militant palingenetic base depends upon action and on an enemy Other to attack. A revolutionary war also depends on militancy and othering, “the native identifies his enemy and recognised all his misfortunes, throwing all the exacerbated might of his hate and anger into this new channel” (Fanon 1963, 71). However, once the revolution has succeeded, the revolutionary impulse does not simply disappear, and “resistance and decolonization…persist well after successful nationalism has come to a stop” (Said 1994, 213).

What we see in the context of the Irish treaty split, is the disintegration of the nationalist party and the capacity of one side to maintain this revolutionary impulse through their not being in power. CnG had not only lost their claim to revolution but were widely viewed as having aligned themselves with the colonizer and as the Blueshirts came to forefront of the pro-treatyite cause, “conceptualizing the Blueshirts as imperialist was widespread within Irish politics” (Montgomery 2014, 35). ‘Successful nationalism’ had stopped with the treaty, yet resistance continued thanks to how either side interpreted the civil war. CnG in fact followed a normative post-colonial process as the emergent new bourgeoisie whereby “the fight for democracy against the oppression of mankind will slowly leave the confusion of neo-liberal universalism to emerge, sometimes laboriously, as a claim to nationhood” (Fanon 1963, 148). In successfully building the liberal, democratic institutions of the Free State, CnG could only point to such a ‘neo-liberal universalism’ as their driving ideology whereas Fianna Fáil were still able to portray themselves as revolutionaries up until they formed a government in 1932.

As can be seen in the writing of the Blueshirts, they were very aware of the nature of the political divide and, correctly, accused the new government of bias. For them, “the government had permitted one section [IRA], who claimed a monopoly of patriotism, to do honour to the Irish patriot, Tone[[39]](#footnote-39), to march as an army” (The Blueshirt (12/8) 1933, 6). Earlier that year, on June 19th, a commemoration of Wolfe Tone had taken place at his grave that was attended by “some fifteen thousand men and women” and although “in past years members of the Free State army… participated in the ceremony… on this occasion it was confined entirely to the IRA” (Irish Times 1932). This commemoration of Wolfe Tone was an open display of IRA power and although members of Fianna Fáil “were not represented officially” (Ibid), it was clear that they were supportive. Aware that their parade was likely to be proscribed, the Blueshirts presented this action as an assault on their patriotism as the government “threatened to prevent by force another section, a patriotic and non-military body[[40]](#footnote-40), to do honour to one who many Irish people considered to have been a better Irish statesman than Tone- the first Commander-in-Chief of their National Army” (The Blueshirt (12/8) 1933). A key point in creating a “culture of resistance” is “the search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths, and religions” (Said 1994, 226). For generations Wolfe Tone had been seen as the progenitor of Irish republicanism, a near mythic early martyr of the cause who had long been assured his role in a post-colonial pantheon. What is extremely significant in the Blueshirts description of the political divide, is their attempt to rewrite this pantheon by elevating the martyrdom of Collins and diminishing that of Wolfe Tone. In essence, the Blueshirts were trying to recode their role in the colonial process by dismissing the ideological continuity of their opponents and forcing their own narrative that began with their victory and the Free State. The nationalism at the root of Irish fascism was cultural rather than racial and this “meant it was possible to 'imagine' new nations--- though ones based on pre-existing bonds and myths” (Eatwell 1996, 311). In trying to challenge the claim of their opponents to a ‘monopoly of patriotism’ by insisting on an alternate pantheon of Irish patriots, the Blueshirts attempted to reconfigure the cultural and political landscape in which they operated. Since they couldn’t reclaim the historical narrative of Irish republicanism, they were forced to try to make a new one.

1. **Why Fascism Failed.**

By 1935 it was becoming obvious to Fine Gael that “the fascist trappings supplied by O’Duffy were an inadequate substitute for a broader socio-economic base or programme” (Jackson 2010, 296). The prominence of the Blueshirts that had brought about their merging with CnG was largely “owing to the grassroots popularity of the fight against the economic war and the payment of land annuities to the government” (Cronin 1994, 239). Fine Gael attempted to harness this momentum by installing O’Duffy as president but there was a fundamental contradiction in their strict law and order approach, and the aggression of their fascist allies. While “O'Duffy appealed to the youth of Ireland as the group that could sweep away all entrenched beliefs and take Ireland into a brave new world” (Ibid, 241), this was not necessarily the attitude of the rest of Fine Gael who were more interested in regaining power. Despite their polarization, Fine Gael were largely of the same stock as Fianna Fáil, all a part of the early 20th century Irish revolutionary elite who were in reality “more conservatives than revolutionaries” (Hayes 1969, 20). The structural instability of the new Fine Gael coalition derived from the radicalism that the Blueshirts were trying to push to the forefront, the result “of two overlapping and potentially conflicting elements, a conventional political party… and O’Duffy’s Blueshirts, who participated in mass rallies, street-fighting, and illegal agitation” (McGarry 2005, 224). While existing on the righthand side of centrism, Fine Gael were simply not radical, and unlike Italy and Germany where fascists used an alliance with the right-wing to gain power, the Blueshirts remained “in a clearly subordinate relationship with Irish conservatism” (Newsinger 2001, 838). The Blueshirts were able to gain some direction in the party with O’Duffy as president but once they began pushing illegal action, the relationship quickly soured, not because of the problematic elements of fascism but “because it failed to deliver the goods” (Ibid, 839).

Fascism was essentially a gamble for Fine Gael, an attempt to utilize a powerful driving myth that was in the zeitgeist without fully interrogating its implications and the long-term effect of depending on such an uncontrollable force. It seems that Fine Gael misunderstood fascism and the way it marshals support. According to Griffin, the palingenetic promise of fascism cannot indoctrinate an individual “if he is already 'booked by', or predisposed to take refuge in, another mythic scheme, whether this is a religious or ethical value system or a competing ideology” (Griffin 1993, 196). The failure of the Blueshirts was therefore due to the majority of the populace being ‘booked by’ the mythic scheme of Irish republicanism *and* the deep-rooted instability of their project when contextualised in the wider political programme of Fine Gael. The Blueshirts were successful at protecting Fine Gael politicians at their rallies, at carrying out largescale disruption of land annuity payments to Fianna Fáil and at offering some form of resistance to the IRA, but ideologically they failed at carving out a space for themselves in the Irish political landscape. While fascists see themselves at “the front line of an historical and cultural battle to turn back the tide of mediocrity and loss of vitality” (Ibid, 42), the Blueshirts could hardly claim such a role because they were allied with what had been the ruling party of the Free State for the preceding decade. Fascist rhetoric often succeeded by blaming the establishment, or the “Old Gang” (Cronin 1994, 241), for social misfortunes, but this strategy was made redundant because the Blueshirts were in coalition with the outgoing political establishment. So not only was there a robust competing ideology to fascism, the Blueshirts could not position themselves as truly subversive when so visibly allied with, and dependent on, the elites represented by Fine Gael. Furthermore, the paradox at the heart of the movement is that they were willing to carry out illegal political activity to defend a political party that had built its entire identity around the primacy of the law and the denunciation of political disruption. The Blueshirts failed to bring about the seismic change they intended and when “it became clear that Fianna Fáil’s hold on power was too strong… the conservatives terminated the alliance” (Newsinger 2001, 839). With the demise of the movement “Fine Gael ranks were swelled by ex-Blueshirts” (Cronin 1994, 244), indicating that party politics was the motivation behind the majority of members- yet another ideological ‘booking’ by which fascist indoctrination failed.

1. **Conclusion**

The strength of a fascist movement “will be decisively affected by the socio-political space in which it operates” (Griffin 1993, 184) and in 1930s Ireland, there simply was no room for a new ideology. Colonial binaries had become how political identities were conceptualised, but despite this polarization, the nationalist ideological core of both sides was virtually the same. Due to this oppositionality, Fianna Fáil were able to cast themselves as still engaged in the struggle to enact the vision of Irish republicanism originating in 1916 and before. In having to govern the country for a decade, the political factions that became Fine Gael could no longer claim an ideology of resistance and were forced further and further towards a liberal pragmatic identity that was characterized by their opponents as anglicisation. Ten years after civil war, the anti-treatyites were still able to present themselves as orthodox republicans, adhering to the principles of Irish nationalism whereas the pro-treatyites were faced with ideological stagnation and “left denuded” of “popular symbolism” (Jackson 2010, 278). For most fascist movements, the end goal is “a new era in which vitalistic nationalism will triumph” (Griffin 1993, 44), but for the Blueshirts, it was the revitalisation of their *particular* form of nationalism. All in all, fascism was used in an opportunistic attempt to gain populist support. Unable to access the mythic strength of Irish republicanism, the Blueshirts attempted to construct their own myths, rooted in a “historical cult around Michael Collins” (Fallon 2014, 73), that dissembled to offer an alternate utopia through the aesthetics and rhetoric of fascism. Essentially, fascism was employed in an effort to supplant the supremacy of the Irish tradition of revolutionary republicanism.

**Conclusion**

In this thesis I hope to have given insight into both the Irish Blueshirts and the methodology of fascism itself. The Blueshirts reflect the ability of fascism to act as an aesthetic that can provide strength to a pre-existing political agenda. The case-study of 1930s Ireland indicates the weakness of fascism when challenged by an alternate ideological structure. In the Blueshirts there exists both the populist potential of fascism and its inherent structural instability. As with Badiou’s ‘democratic’ fascists of the 21st century, the Blueshirts represent the uncertain limits of fascism, its devastating potential, and its fundamentally incoherent ideological base. The common denominator between the rise of the right-wing in the present and the Blueshirts in the 1930s is the *appearance* of fascism. In either case, this threat of fascism can be dismissed as hysteria, but this underestimates the driving force behind an ideology that is based entirely on the use of radical rhetoric to exhort populist support. Until it has achieved power, fascism is little more than an aesthetic, a violent symbolic vernacular for the inchoate desires of the disillusioned and disenfranchised. Whether the Blueshirts would have brought about a fascist state in Ireland is immaterial, the point is that they *could* have. The threat of fascism can be dismissed until, suddenly, it is too late. Whether something is a fascist or merely looks fascist, there is no way to be certain before the point of no return has been passed.

Fascism thrives in times of intense political division and socio-economic instability, and through its ideological fluidity, it can simultaneously embrace and deny itself; hiding within its ostensibly shallow politics until it has amassed the power to unleash its devastating potential. Fascism should never be dismissed but as seen in the Blueshirts, it requires a specific environment in which to incubate. Regardless of the likelihood of its success in a given context, fascism should always be challenged because as an ideology, it is all potential until suddenly, tragically, it is not. As ‘potential para-fascists’ the Blueshirts can be dismissed as a legitimate threat by historians, but fascist aesthetics, rhetoric and action are never benign, they are the symptoms of a disease that, if not caught early-on, could wreak untold havoc. Palingenesis is a potent motivator and wherever there are people desperate for an alternate future, there is the potential for fascism.

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1. Translates as ‘Society of the Gael’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Translates as ‘Tribe of the Irish’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Before beginning, I would like to briefly address the role of Catholicism in this narrative. Due to the word limitations of this thesis, I am not able to go as in depth into the role of the Irish Catholic Church as I would have liked. However, it is important to remember that in early 20th century Ireland, “Catholic faith of the majority was a cornerstone of Irish identity” (Fallon 2014, 72); being Irish was virtually synonymous with being Catholic. The Irish clergy was an epistemic, omnipotent force in Ireland at this time and little occurred without its influence, involvement, or direction. The Catholic Church was in fact so ubiquitous that it can be viewed as a dismissible factor. Unlike in Italy, the church had no interest in fascism as it required no further authoritarianism, it was already unassailable. This thesis explores binary political divisions, and, in this case, there was such ardent Catholicism on both sides that I am willing to leave it as a null factor. The Irish clergy will be mentioned but a closer examination of their role in this story will unfortunately have to wait for another day. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Collins was assassinated in 1922 and Griffith died of heart failure the same year. O’Higgins was assassinated while serving as Vice President in 1927. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The name given to the Irish Republic from Independence up until 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Seven of these were the signatories of the proclamation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Translates to ‘We Ourselves’ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This occurred across the Empire. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Soon known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Assembly of Ireland [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The oath had to be taken by members of the Dáil and Seanad Éireann (Irish Senate). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Central seat of the Irish judiciary. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Parallels to 1916 were evident. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Known as the Provisional Government. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “77 anti-treaty prisoners” (McGarry 2005, 112) are said to have been executed overall, but this number has been disputed. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Translates as ‘Free Ireland’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Based on the density of Catholic and Protestant populations. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ireland’s largest export. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Royal Irish Constabulary [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Translates as ‘The Guardians of the Peace [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Plural of Garda in Irish. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ‘Teachta Dála’: Irish term for MP or Member of Parliament. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The assassination was a complete political blunder for the IRA, but it was allegedly “the impetuous act of two young IRA men acting unofficially and without authority from the movement” (Coogan 1980, 79). Considering the extent of public and governmental backlash, this seems probable. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Special Branch was an armed section of An Garda Síochána, meant to tackle political crime and formed from the remnants of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Started by O’Duffy, it operated semi-autonomously from the rest of the Gardaí. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In the War of Independence, O’Duffy had ordered the controversial execution of dissenting nationalists and Unionists in the North due to their being “the enemy within, elements which could not be won over but could be frightened into submission” (McGarry 2005, 64). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Fianna Fáil did not officially accept or reject this support. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Meeting place of the Dáil. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. O’Duffy’s title. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. “Rejecting the cumbersome and illusory system of democracy and letting youth take the wheel” (The Blueshirt (12/8) 1933, 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The Irish Centre Party, originally The National Farmers and Ratepayers Association, was formed out of resistance to land annuity payments. (Drisceoil 2011, 45) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “The government’s decision to slaughter 200,000 cattle and distribute free beef to the poor” (McGarry 2005, 261) is perhaps emblematic of the class dynamics at play in these political divisions. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. A martyr was provided to the Blueshirt cause when Gardaí killed a member after Blueshirts drove a truck into a cattle auction. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. I shall closer examine the relationship between conservative and fascist elite by using Griffin’s theory on the subject in the next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. O’Duffy formed the National Corporate Party the following year which had its own paramilitary wing known as the Greenshirts. The party was essentially dead on arrival and O’Duffy’s last notable action was forming and leading the Irish Brigade that went to fight with Franco in the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The campaign was a disaster and the brigade suffered high casualties. O’Duffy continued communicating with European fascist organisations, but he never again obtained a substantial political position. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The ‘Provisional IRA’ that emerged during the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s used the phoenix as their symbol. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Eatwell derives this definition from the work of Griffin and two other authorities in the field, Zeen Sternhell and Stanley Payne. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Election posters running up to the 1932 election bore the slogan, “The gunmen are voting for Fianna Fáil. The communists are voting for Fianna Fáil.” (Fallon 2014, 71) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Prominent Blueshirt Denis Quish is quoted as having said at a rally that “the Government are a crowd of Spaniards, Jews, and Manxmen… we will use the guns again to redeem the people” (Dáil Debates 1934), [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Theobald Wolfe Tone, an Irish revolutionary icon, often viewed as the father of Irish republicanism. After co-ordinating the failed Irish rebellion 1798, he was captured and died in British custody before he could be executed. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. It must be noted that this is the same organisation O’Duffy described as a ‘formidable insurrectionary force’ while serving as Garda commissioner. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)