

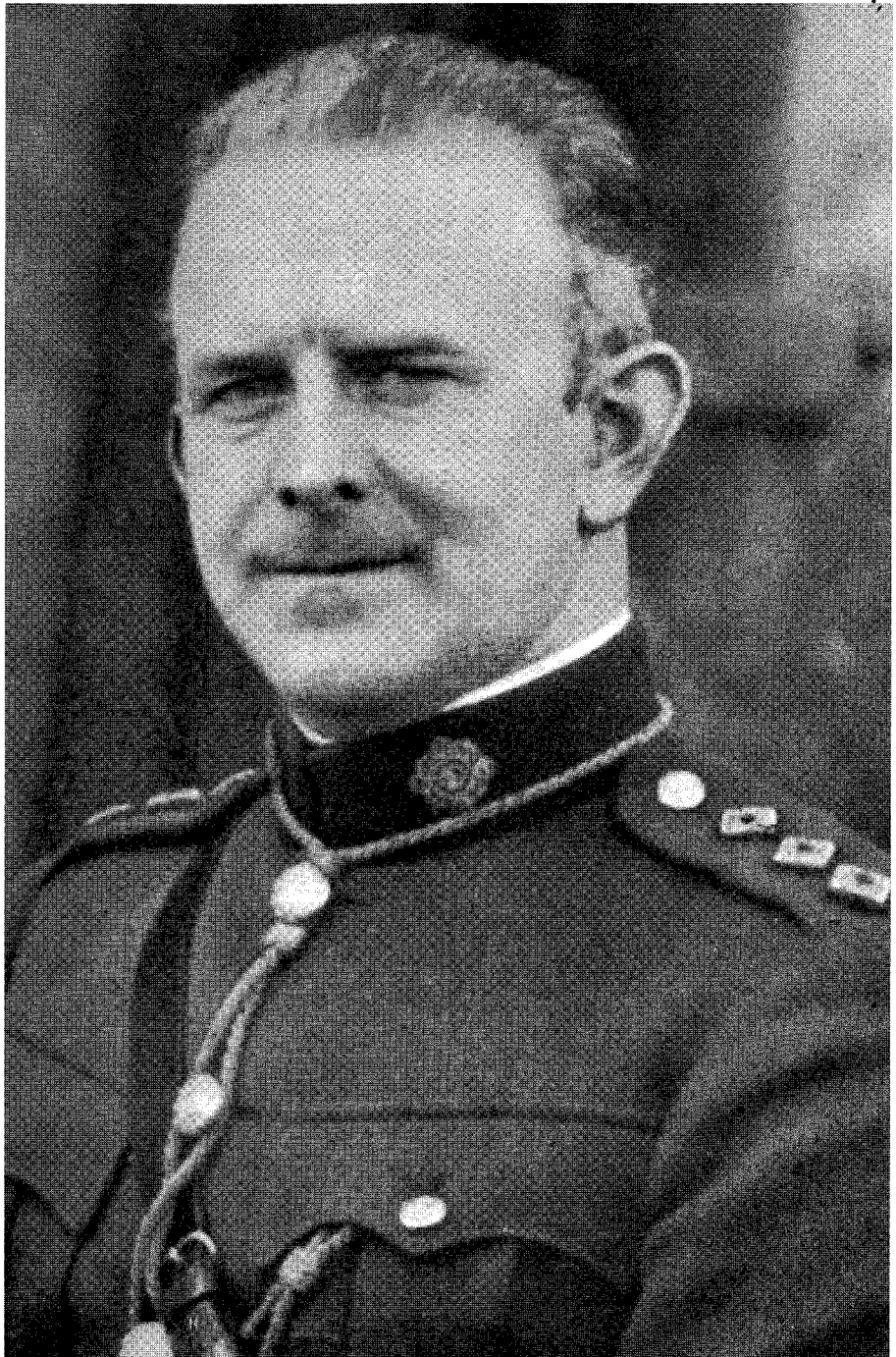
The Blueshirts in Limerick 1932-1936

The politics of Limerick are intimately intertwined with political and economic developments at national level and are also influenced by general political moods, tensions and economic shifts on the broader international arena, as this article dealing with the Blueshirt movement in Limerick City and County in the 1930s amply illustrates.

Ireland's struggle for independence from British rule culminated in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Under this agreement, Ireland's thirty-two counties were divided: twenty-six were allocated to the Irish Free State, while the remaining six, because of their overall Protestant majority, stayed within the United Kingdom.

The acceptance of the partition of the country and the Oath of Allegiance to the British Monarch split the Irish nationalist movement into two factions, those who were pro-Treaty led by Michael Collins, and those who were anti-Treaty, led by Eamon De Valera. The foot soldiers of the movement, the volunteers of the Irish Republican Army, also divided. What followed was a bitter civil war that lasted from June 1922 until May 1923, when the anti-Treaty forces were defeated. On 7 December 1923, the Irish Free State officially came into existence. The members of the Provisional government, under the leadership W.T. Cosgrave, took the name of Cumann na nGaedheal - the Irish Party. Anti-Treaty members elected to the Dail, specifically Sinn Fein, refused to take their seats and remained outside the parliamentary process. This state of affairs came to an end in 1927 following the assassination of the Vice-President and Minister of Justice, Kevin O'Higgins, when the Cosgrave government passed a Bill forcing every elected member to the Dail to either take the Oath of Allegiance to the British Crown or give up his seat. By that time Eamon De Valera's new political party, Fianna Fáil, founded in 1926 after he split with Sinn Fein, had become the main political opposition.

In laying the groundwork for a democratic state, the government faced a number of threats to its stability. In 1924, a mutiny by a small group of officers within the army was brought to an end when Kevin O'Higgins sacked the officers involved. The decision of the Boundary Commission in 1925 to retain all the six northern counties within the British State, when the government had thought that some of the counties would be re-united with the south, made the partition of the country a permanent feature of Irish life.



General Owen O'Duffy, about 1932

by Des Ryan

After this, O'Higgins approached members of the British establishment with Arthur Griffith's old idea of dual monarchy, that is, a 32-county Ireland with its own government, under a British Monarch; this suggestion fell through.¹

During the world economic crisis sparked off by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Cumann na nGaedheal government made a number of unpopular decisions that included the cutting of the old age pension by one shilling, cuts in the salaries of teachers, civil servants and the Garda Force and the introduction of the Intoxicating Liquor Act, which sought to reduce the number of public houses and

shorten opening hours. On 22 January 1932, the entire Garda Force of Limerick City held a meeting in William Street Barracks and the following resolution was adopted:

'We the N.C.O.'s and men of the Limerick Force, view with the gravest alarm the action of the Executive Council in deciding on a further curtailment of 5% in our emoluments, and we are strongly of the opinion that this action on the part of the Executive is wholly unjustifiable and is a step taken more in the case of election propaganda than in the interests of economy'.²

By the early 1930s, Cumann na nGaedheal had become so unpopular with the electorate that it was defeated in the general election of February 1932, bringing De Valera and his party to power. In the weeks leading up to polling day, Cumann na nGaedheal election posters emphasised their achievements of the previous ten years, including the establishment of a sound financial position, which was, they maintained, the envy of Europe and America.³ Conversely, they portrayed Fianna Fáil's election promises as a threat to the stability of the state and hinted that Fianna Fáil was influenced by socialist and communist ideas.⁴

Nevertheless, Fianna Fáil swept to power on a platform of radical ideas and promises:

1. Fianna Fáil would abolish the Oath of Allegiance.
2. Fianna Fáil would keep the Annuities within the country and get advice on whether or not the Irish Government should pay pensions to members of the former police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary.
3. Fianna Fáil would encourage the creation of Irish manufacturing industries to meet the needs of the people and protect the home market for farmers to encourage them to grow enough food for the population.
4. Fianna Fáil would negotiate foreign trade agreements that would give preference to Irish goods.

They also pledged to try to end, by peaceful means, the partition of the country. Other aspects of their policies were: decentralization of government, the preservation of the Irish language and the release of political prisoners. They denied that they had any 'leanings toward communism or belief in communistic doctrines'.⁵

The 1930s was a turbulent period, not only in Irish history, but also in Europe. These were the years of the Great Depression and massive unemployment worldwide. The unemployment figures for the Limerick area on 3 September 1934 showed 15,524 men and 18,710 women and juveniles out of work. Nationwide there were 92,437 men and 102,038 women and juveniles registered as unemployed.⁶ Meanwhile, the 1920s and

'30s saw the rise of militant, colour-shirted, extreme right-wing political parties in practically every country in Europe, the two largest being Benito Mussolini's black-shirted fascists in Italy and Adolf Hitler's Brownshirts in Germany, who came to power in 1922 and 1933 respectively. Ireland followed the European trend with its own homebred colour-shirted movement - the Blueshirts.

The Blueshirts had their origins in the Army Comrades Association (ACA), an organisation founded to protect the interests of ex-Free State soldiers who had upheld the Treaty. Two of its founding members were Commandant Ned Cronin from Charleville, County Cork, and Colonel Austin Brennan from Meelick, Co. Clare. The ACA began life on 10 February 1932, the same month that De Valera and Fianna Fáil were elected to power. The objectives of the association were:

- (a) To uphold the honour of the State.
- (b) To honour the Irish Volunteers who had died during the Anglo-Irish War of Independence and to raise a national memorial to them.
- (c) To be non-political and non-sectarian.⁷

But this rather innocuous policy began to change when Fianna Fáil began releasing IRA political prisoners and lifting the former government's ban on such left wing organizations as Saor Eire and the Irish Communist Party. Large open-air meetings were held to celebrate the release of Republican prisoners and threats were made by speakers against Cumann na nGaedheal to the effect that the hour of retribution had come.⁸ The release of the prisoners was seen by Cumann na nGaedheal supporters as an attempt to stifle any opposition to Fianna Fáil and as a threat to the freedom of speech,⁹ for calls were openly being made by IRA leaders for the suppression of the 'Free State traitors' and the 'Cosgrave traitors'.¹⁰ In April, ex-President Cosgrave was prevented from speaking at a meeting in Cork by a hostile mob.

In August 1932, Colonel T.F. O'Higgins, brother of the assassinated Minister of Justice Kevin O'Higgins, took over the leadership of the Army Comrades Association. In response to the IRA's call for a 'No Free Speech For Traitors' campaign, O'Higgins said that the ACA would stand shoulder to shoulder for democratic rights, 'the right to assemble and the right of free speech'.¹¹ He went on to say that, while the organisation was originally intended for ex-army men, it had now decided to take recruits, whether ex-army or not, and would organise for the purpose of preventing rowdiness and disorder at public meetings.¹² In another statement the following month, O'Higgins denied that the ACA was a political organisation, but admitted that it could be seen as political because it stood for decent citizenship, respect for the law and the maintenance of law and order. The ACA, he maintained, was intent on the extermination of a sinister communistic organisation, a reference to left-wing members of the IRA.¹³ But the major

battleground of the 1930s in Ireland was not communism: it was going to be the Economic War with Britain and the payment of Annuities by the farming community to the De Valera government.

The Annuities, which were paid twice a year to the British Government, were repayments on low interest loans that Britain had given to Irish farmers in the 1890s and early 1900s to help them to buy land. In the mid-1920s, Peadar O'Donnell, an anti-treaty IRA leader and socialist, had been actively involved in a campaign not to pay Annuities. It was felt that the people were paying for land that originally had been taken from them. The fact that the British Government had scrapped the paying of annuities in Northern Ireland was grist to the mill. De Valera adopted O'Donnell's proposal in his 1932 election manifesto, which became official government policy when Fianna Fáil came to power. The withholding of Annuity payments to Britain led to a retaliatory 20% tax imposed on Irish goods imported into Britain. This was particularly detrimental to Ireland's cattle export trade, hitting those 'big farmers' who tended to be Cumann na nGaedheal supporters. In reply to these measures, the Irish government applied import duties to British goods.

Meanwhile, attacks on Cumann na nGaedheal meetings were becoming more frequent. On Sunday, 9 October 1932, several hundred Fianna Fáil supporters, some of them marching four square in military formation with hurleys on their shoulders,¹⁴ gathered in the Co. Limerick town of Kilmallock to obstruct a Cumann na nGaedheal meeting which was to take place that afternoon. As soon as the speakers, who were accompanied by fifty or sixty ACA men, stood up on the back of a lorry to make their speeches the attack began. In the hand-to-hand fighting that followed, hurleys, sticks, stones and bottles were used as weapons. As the fighting continued, Fianna Fáil supporters tried to start a rival meeting. When the Cumann na nGaedheal speakers returned to Lyon's Hotel, they were attacked, as were members of a band from Limerick. One former member of the Blueshirts, to whom this writer spoke, related how he and some other men were trapped in the hotel. When I asked if he had thrown any missiles, he said, "Well, we had to defend ourselves". It was not until the parish priest arrived on the scene that peace was finally restored.¹⁵ After the incident, a detachment of soldiers arrived from Limerick to escort some of the ACA men to their homes.

At least fourteen people were injured in the melee, the most serious being Peter Hall from Thomas Street, Limerick, who suffered injuries to his face and head.¹⁶ Later that evening, Fianna Fáil said they were opposed to the Cumann na nGaedheal meeting because the De Valera government were at the time in negotiations with the British.¹⁷ A week later, after the disturbances in Kilmallock, the negotiations broke down.¹⁸ As it had



Funeral of Michael Lynch, a boy killed when members of 'S' Division of the Garda Síochána ('Broy Harriers') opened fire in Marsh's Saleyard in Cork when a lorryload of men crashed a barrier, August 1934. The High Court in 1937 found a prima facie case of manslaughter, but no further action was taken

proved difficult during the fracas to differentiate between friend and foe, Comdt. Cronin came up with the idea that in future ACA men wear blue shirts.

The following month Alderman Mossey Reidy, a Cumann na nGaedheal Dail deputy for Limerick, blamed the government for the high increase in the numbers unemployed. "Never before" said Ald. Reidy, "were so many unemployed in the city, while destitution was widespread". The trade of the port had decreased to such an extent that the wages bill had been reduced by 50%. The building trade was practically at a standstill and depression was everywhere, while the ranks of the unemployed were being added to day after day. That, said Ald. Reidy, "was what Fianna Fáil had done for Limerick".¹⁹

To add to the gloom, some of the items that had had import duties placed on them just before Christmas 1932 were: custard powders, Christmas stockings, jewellery, Easter eggs, bread, spark plugs, spectacles, clay pipes and underclothing.²⁰ The farming community was also hard hit by not being able to export cattle to Britain.

1933

On 2 January 1933, De Valera delivered a political bombshell when he dissolved the Dail and called for a general election. The

reason given by the President was that, "the programme on which the government was elected required that there should be no doubt that the government enjoyed the confidence of the electorate and that they, the government, continue to have necessary parliamentary strength to put their programme into effect".

In the closing days of the election campaign, both De Valera and Cosgrave paid visits to Limerick. A novelty of the campaign at the time was a Cumann na nGaedheal van going around the country showing a film of an election speech by Mr. Cosgrave.²¹ On the night before polling day, Fianna Fáil supporters in Limerick, in anticipation of an election victory, paraded through the city led by a number of horsemen wearing sashes and accompanied by St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band.²² The next day, 24 January, Fianna Fáil swept to power with an overall majority.²³

Two weeks later, on 22 February, De Valera called Police Commissioner General Eoin O'Duffy to his office to tell him that he was being relieved of his post. O'Duffy was offered an alternative position, with the same salary, but he declined the offer. After a second meeting, De Valera dismissed O'Duffy from his post. The dismissal of O'Duffy was due to the fact that Fianna Fáil saw him as a pro-Treaty officer and Cumann na nGaedheal

supporter and they did not have 'full confidence' in him.²⁴ After his dismissal, O'Duffy went on holidays to fascist Italy.

In March 1933, the Limerick City branch of the Army Comrades Association passed a resolution pledging their loyalty to the National Executive of the ACA in Dublin. They also pointed out that it was not their intention to usurp the functions of the Garda Síochána, but to help when necessary to maintain order at public meetings.²⁵ However, not all of its members were so law abiding. On 1 July, three members of the ACA from Limerick City broke into a summer hut in Ardnacrusha at 3.30 in the morning. At gunpoint they ordered the occupants of the hut out. While two of the ACA men kept them covered with revolvers, a third ransacked the hut. They appeared to be looking for weapons, but on not finding any, they left, firing at least six shots as they went. In the court case that followed, two of them were fined and bound to peace for twelve months.²⁶

In Dublin, at a convention of the association, General O'Duffy, back from his holidays in Italy, was offered the leadership of the ACA. This he duly accepted on 20 July. Almost immediately he changed the name of the association to the National Guard.²⁷ He also announced that he was reviving the former government's (Cumann na nGaedheal) annual

parade to the Collins-Griffith-O'Higgins cenotaph at Leinster House, setting 13 August as the date.

Meanwhile De Valera and the government, fearing a possible seizure of power by O'Duffy and the National Guard, decided to act. Garda stations around the country were ordered to withdraw all firearm permits and to collect the weapons. O'Duffy refused to comply with the order and on Wednesday, 2 August, detectives called to his house and confiscated two firearms. One of them was the revolver that Michael Collins had in his hand when he was shot dead in an ambush in County Cork in August, 1922, during the Civil War.²⁸ Finally, O'Duffy's planned march was banned by the government on the day before it was due to take place. In an effort to save face, O'Duffy called for a Church parade of the National Guard to be held in every district in Ireland on Sunday, 20 August.²⁹

However, due to objections from the church authorities, O'Duffy instructed his men to limit the march to their own areas. On Sunday the 20th, just after one o'clock, forty-five members of the Limerick National Guard under Captain Walsh left the Cumann na nGaedheal headquarters in the Crescent and gathered at the O'Connell monument. After observing two minutes silence, Captain Walsh started to read a statement from General O'Duffy. Just then a man dashed from the crowd that had gathered and attempted to snatch the document from Captain Walsh. He was arrested and removed from the crowd by one of the Gardaí on duty. After the brief ceremony, the Blueshirts returned to the Cumann na nGaedheal office. Later, as groups of Blueshirts left the office, the crowd attacked them and the Gardaí had to draw their batons to protect them. It was four o'clock before the last of the Blueshirts got away. Later that night some Blueshirts were attacked in Carey's Road and chased through Mallow Street and Catherine Street until the Gardaí intervened.³⁰

The following day, 21 August, the government banned the National Guard. A week later De Valera held a political rally of his supporters at the O'Connell monument in Limerick; this went off peacefully.³¹ On 8 September O'Duffy and the National Guard amalgamated with Cumann na nGaedheal and a smaller group, the National Centre Party, to form a new political party - Fine Gael. O'Duffy was to be leader of the new party, but because he was not an elected member of the Dail, Cosgrave was chosen to head the party in the Dail. It was agreed that the Blueshirts would exist as a separate entity within the party under a new name, the Young Ireland Association.

On Saturday 23 September, the new party leaders, Eoin O'Duffy, W.T. Cosgrave and James Dillon, arrived in Limerick for a meeting that evening at the Crescent. Nearly 200 Gardaí were on duty when the leaders arrived at Cruise's Hotel, the starting point on lower O'Connell Street for the parade to the Crescent. A

group of Fianna Fáil supporters standing across the road made a dash to get at them. The Gardaí drew their batons and the crowd dispersed for a while. As a procession of Blueshirts made their way to Cruise's Hotel, led down O'Connell Street by a pipe band, they were attacked. In the ensuing struggle a Blueshirt flag was ripped to pieces, a member of the band was seen with his face and head covered in blood and a Blueshirt was knocked to the ground and beaten. Eventually the procession, protected by the Gardaí, reached Cruise's.

When the main parade marched up O'Connell Street to the Crescent, they were met with from the side streets with volleys of stones and bottles. In a struggle to get a penknife from a man in the crowd, a Garda Sergeant received a cut to his abdomen and right thigh. At the height of the violence an attempt was made to set fire to cars outside Cruise's Hotel and a lorry which had brought Blueshirts to the city had vital parts removed. Shots were fired at Gardaí near the Lyric Cinema, located on the corner of Glentworth Street and Baker Place, as they pursued some of the protestors. That evening at least 33 people were treated for injuries at Barrington's Hospital. It is estimated that 10,000 people were in the city that evening for the meeting. In some instances, Blueshirts leaving the city required police protection.³²

Throughout the autumn and winter months of 1933-34, conflict between the opposing factions grew more bitter.³³ On 15 November, a Blueshirt on his way home to Tervoe, Mungret was followed by some men from Limerick City in a motor car. As he was walking with his bicycle, the car passed him a few times. Eventually the car pulled up some distance away and waited for him. As he came towards the car, he could see two men standing near it. While one of the men was asking him directions for the road to Foynes, the other pulled out a revolver. The man with the gun then said, "Are you as good a man as the night you fired on the Republicans at Tervoe?" The Blueshirt replied, "You know who fired the shots on us that night," and denied that he had fired any shots. "Shut up O'Duffy now," said the gunman. After some further exchanges there was a struggle for the gun. As the Blueshirt got hold of the revolver, a shot was discharged apparently wounding one of his assailants. After that, the men drove off.³⁴

Two weeks later, on Sunday night, 26 November, at least five or six hundred people wearing Blueshirts attended a Fine Gael dance at Newcastlewes. A large force of soldiers, Gardaí and detectives were drafted into the County Limerick town and took up positions around the Carnegie Library, where the dance was to be held. The local power station, which supplied electricity to the area, was also guarded. Army and police patrolled the town throughout the evening, but this did not stop interference with the power supply. The town was plunged into darkness a number of times, but the dance

continued. Earlier in the night, a motorist and his passengers on their way to Abbeyfeale crashed into a tree that had been deliberately laid across the road some distance from the town.³⁵

On 8 December the government banned the Young Ireland Association³⁶ and six days later the Blueshirts reappeared as the League of Youth. In order to stop the government from banning the Blueshirt organisation again, Fine Gael affiliated the League of Youth more closely to the party. This meant that if the government tried to ban the League they would also have to ban Fine Gael.³⁷ Fine Gael also brought an action to the High Court to obtain a declaration that the League was a lawful association.³⁸ It took nearly six years for the High Court to give a ruling in favour of the League, but by that time, in 1937, it no longer existed.³⁹

1934

In early January 1934, Home Assistance Payments for those who were unemployed in the City were reduced by 33 1/2% due to a shortage of cash in the Health Board.⁴⁰ A torchlight procession by the recipients of home assistance, led by the Sarsfield Band, marched from Bank Place to the O'Connell monument to protest against the cuts. The meeting began in a down-pour of rain.⁴¹ In anticipation of trouble from the protestors, the Gardaí in the city were reinforced. The situation was calmed down by the intervention of a Fr. Murray, who counselled the aggrieved citizens not to indulge in any acts that would put them outside the law.⁴² At that time there were about 2,000 recipients of home assistance, each with an average of four dependants.⁴³ In rural areas the home assistance situation was much the same.

On Sunday 11 February, General O'Duffy paid an unexpected visit to Croom, Co. Limerick, and addressed a large and enthusiastic meeting of Fine Gael supporters that included a guard of honour of five hundred Blueshirts and Blueblouses (ladies). He told the assembled gathering that the new party, Fine Gael, had over 1,200 branches around the country and that great progress had been made in the Limerick area. In regard to the economic situation, the Limerick dairy farmers knew well the ruinous effect of De Valera's policy and even the road worker could not hope to find work if there was not a change of government soon. O'Duffy advised the people to be prepared for a general election. "The future of Ireland" he stated, "lay in the hands of the Blueshirts" and he had no hesitation in saying, "they were the salvation of the country". After the meeting, as the Blueshirts paraded through the town, some stones were thrown and there were shouts of "Up Dev". When the parade ended, Capt. D. P. Quish advised the Blueshirts to go home in a peaceful manner. A scuffle took place as some Blueshirts were leaving town, but the Gardaí intervened and peace was restored.⁴⁴



Funeral of Michael Lynch leaving the church

In east Limerick, at Kilmallock, six young boys between the ages of eleven and thirteen and a half attempted to hold a Flag Day collection in aid of the Fine Gael party. They were attacked by about twenty other boys, who knocked them down, tore up the paper flags and made off with two of the collection boxes. One of the flag sellers, Patrick Campion, received slight injuries to his head.⁴⁵

In their Lenten pastorals that February, the Catholic Bishops of Ireland referred to the dangers of communism, nocturnal raids, intimidation, intemperance, the evil of impurity and the plight of the agricultural community. Dr. Keane, Bishop of Limerick, chose the bitterness that had entered into the political life of the country and the right to vote as his themes. Although he didn't mention them by name, Bishop Keane's pastoral condemned the attacks on the Blueshirts:

"Public gatherings" the Bishop said "have been frequently attacked and broken up, those attending assaulted and beaten until the disorder became so great as to need the intervention of the police and military forces to preserve the right of assembly and free speech. These outbreaks, so far from being isolated or sporadic, have been widespread throughout the country and marked by methods so seen to indicate careful organisation. Another feature of these disorders has been that they have been directed mainly against one political party".⁴⁶

On 20 February, two Blueshirts from Limerick, Sean Walsh and James Gallagher, were brought before a Military

Tribunal in Dublin and were charged with illegal possession of arms. These men had previously taken part in the attack on the hut at Ardnacrusha in July 1933. This time they were charged with stealing a revolver. Gallagher was sentenced to fifteen months with hard labour, Walsh to nine months with hard labour. As it was illegal to possess a gun at this time, the owner of the weapon was given four months with hard labour.⁴⁷

At a meeting of Limerick County Council, a proposal from the County Dublin Agricultural Committee calling on the government not to collect rates or annuities on agricultural land was rejected.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the government pushed a Bill through the Dail to ban the wearing of military style uniforms in support of any political party. During the debate on the Bill in the Dail, John A. Costelloe, a Fine Gael TD, pointed out that the Government had failed to mention the fact that the Blackshirts were victorious in Italy, the Brownshirts in Germany, and that in spite of the Bill and the Public Safety Act, "the Blueshirts will be victorious in the Irish Free State".⁴⁹ Deputy G. Bennett (Fine Gael) from Limerick felt that the Blueshirts had been faced with more provocation than any other body of men in the world. All attempts to provoke them into serious breaches of the law had, he asserted, failed. In reference to the IRA, Deputy Bennet maintained that, if the government wanted to control anybody, they should control the IRA, who were openly drilling and carrying out manoeuvres as large

as those held by the Irish Army the Curragh.⁵⁰ The Uniforms Bill was defeated when it reached the Senate.

At a Fianna Fáil meeting in April, De Valera argued that the policy the government was pursuing against Britain would lead the people out of their difficulties, but it would not happen overnight. Having warned young people against the glamour of wearing a Blueshirt, he referred to the IRA and asserted that the arms they possessed could have only one ultimate purpose - to be used against the elected government and its forces, which would mean civil war.⁵¹

At Ennis, the leader of the League of Youth in County Clare was charged with attempted murder. During a Blueshirt-IRA clash in the town, the accused had fired a shot in the air that ricocheted off a wall and hit one of the protesters. The accused was found guilty of manslaughter.⁵²

'Exciting Scenes in the City - Baton Charges - Sixteen People Treated in Hospital'. So ran a Limerick newspaper headline in the aftermath of a Fine Gael dance held on Saturday, 5 May, at the Lyric Cinema Ballroom. Early that night large crowds, including many women and young boys, had gathered outside the Lyric in Glentworth Street and Baker Place and in Catherine Street. As Garda held them back there were shouts of "Up Dev" and "Up Tom Barry". Some of the crowd sang snatches of the *Soldiers Song* and *The Legion of the Rearguard* and jeered the Blueshirt girls walking down Glentworth Street.

The principal guests at the dance, General Mulcahy TD, Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Blythe, Ned Cronin and his wife, Alderman Reidy TD, Mr. G.C. Bennet TD and Mr. and Mrs. Morgan McMahon, were staying at the Glentworth Hotel and they all walked across the road to the Lyric to go to the dance.⁵³ Trouble began in earnest as bottles and stones were thrown at people arriving at the Lyric, some on push-bicycles. One young girl from the city was attacked by a man who, it was later claimed, was drunk. She was knocked to the ground and the assailant tried to pull off her blue blouse. The Gardaí came to her rescue.⁵⁴

The crowd in Catherine Street tried to break through the Garda cordon but were pushed back. As they became more aggressive, a baton charge was ordered and a volley of stones and bottles was thrown at the advancing Gardaí. At the junction of Cecil Street a man shouted at the crowd from an upper window that was promptly smashed in with stones. A second baton charge began and, as the crowd fled through Upper Cecil Street, they were trapped by Gardaí coming from Dominic Street. Skirmishes occurred in other city centre streets and in William Street a plate-glass window was smashed by stone-throwers. On the Friday prior to the dance, the chairman of the city executive of Fianna Fáil had appealed for calm on the night of the dance, but this appeal had fallen on deaf ears. The dance ended at 4.00am and by that time sixteen people had been injured, one of the most serious being a Garda who had been hit in the face with a bottle. The following day Mr. and Mrs. Blythe, Ald. Reidy and Mr. Bennett addressed several hundred Blueshirts at the village of Athlacca.⁵⁵

A week later, on 14 May, rival meetings of Blueshirts and IRA took place in Listowel, Co. Kerry. Two Army armoured cars, three lorry-loads of soldiers and about 600 Gardaí were deployed in the town square to keep the two factions separate.

This period saw an upsurge in violent opposition to the payment of annuities. In Bruff, nine head of cattle were seized for non-payment of rent and, as the cows were put up for auction at Fedamore, a large number of Blueshirts attended the auction.⁵⁶ At Kilmeedy, on Sunday 17 June, at least 1,200 Blueshirts attended a meeting to protest against an assault on the local curate that had taken place two weeks previously outside the church gates. Apparently, the parish priest had attempted to physically remove some Fianna Fáil supporters who were holding a church gate collection. One of the speakers at the meeting stated that when there were anti-clerical outrages in other countries such as Russia, Mexico and Spain, Irish newspapers condemned them. Yet when similar outrages were perpetrated on our own doorstep, the press of the country fell silent and those in authority remained inactive.⁵⁷

In the local elections of June 1934, Fine Gael suffered a shattering defeat when



Blue shirt with Fine Gael insignia over the left breast pocket

(Kilmallock Museum)

they gained control of only seven councils out of twenty-three.⁵⁸ A few days later a Tipperary Blueshirt died after a scuffle with some Fianna Fáil supporters and IRA men.⁵⁹ In early August, six men were arrested during an incident at Ballinamullough, Kilfinane, in east County Limerick. This occurred at the farm of a local County Council official and prominent member of the League of Youth. When the County Registrar's representative called at the farm to collect payment for a land annuity, the owner refused to pay. When the officials attempted to seize sixteen head of cattle, farm labourers and supporters of the owner drove the cattle in all directions. Reinforcements arrived, but when they reached the iron gate fronting the farm, they found it locked and wired. They forced open the gate with the aid of hammers and pliers and eventually got the cattle out on to the road for delivery to the Kilfinane pound.⁶⁰

On 10 August, furniture seized for non-payment of annuities was sold at the County Courthouse on Merchants Quay, Limerick. The furniture was the property of two lady farmers from Meanus, Bruff.⁶¹ In another sale, seven cattle were sold to a man who acted in the interests of the owner who said afterwards, holding up a broken lock, that he would have it inscribed and would keep it as a memento of the De Valera government.⁶² A comical occurrence took place on 21 August when a motor car belonging to a Blueshirt was put up for auction at the Courthouse. The car was bought back on behalf of the owner, but when the car wouldn't start, the Sheriff's men had to give it a push. There were shouts and threats from the owner's supporters about suing the Sheriff's men for any damage to the vehicle.⁶³

At Rathkeale blows were struck during

the sale of some cattle that had been seized at Patrickswell. Attention was directed towards a man in the crowd pointed out as a Fianna Fáil supporter who received a thumping before Gardaí could reach him.⁶⁴ That same day telegraph and telephone wires all over Limerick county were cut and communications to the city were interrupted; a number of trees were also cut down and laid across roads. The train from Limerick to Kerry was delayed at Patrickswell for over two hours.⁶⁵ On Sunday 26 August, Blueshirt parades in memory of Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith and Kevin O'Higgins were held in Kilfinane, Bruff and Knocklong. The Kilfinane parade was attended by contingents from Kilmallock, Ballinagaddy, Ardpatrick, Bruree and Effin.⁶⁶

Eoin O'Duffy, the Blueshirt leader, called upon the government not to collect the annuities and to set up a tribunal to examine the farmers position generally. He advised the farmers not to pay the annuities unless the government agreed to his proposals. In addition, O'Duffy was making political statements that conflicted with Fine Gael party policy. On Northern Ireland he stated that, in the event of a war between Ireland and England, 95% of the Blueshirts would fight.⁶⁷ The government of Northern Ireland was quick to react; they banned O'Duffy from entering any part of the province.⁶⁸ After being called to order by the leadership of the Fine Gael, O'Duffy resigned from the party. Ned Cronin was made the new Director General of the League of Youth. O'Duffy disputed this and the argument, which went on for many months, split the Blueshirt movement into rival factions, the majority following Cronin.

On Sunday 23 September, an attempt was made to blow up a bridge in County Clare in order to stop a Blueshirt ceremony near Lahinch. The explosions

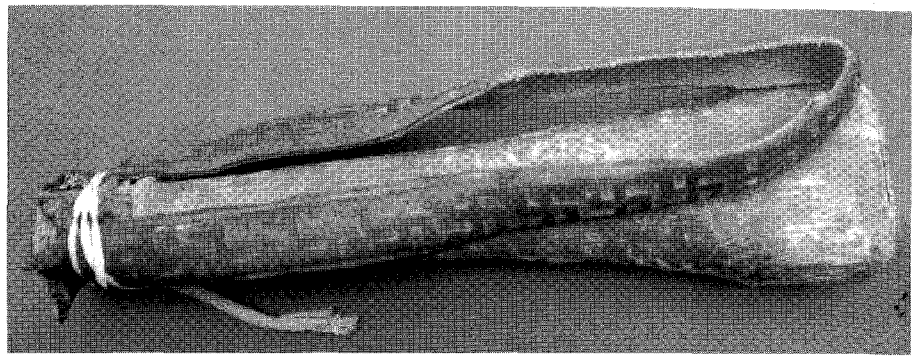
left two holes in the floor of the bridge. Although heavy traffic was diverted, Cronin, who was on his way to the meeting, was able to drive over the bridge later that morning. Telephone wires were also cut.⁶⁹ A few days later seventeen head of cattle, belonging to a farmer in Shanagolden, were sold at auction at Rathkeale. The night before the sale, telephone and telegraph wires were out in the area.

Meanwhile, Cronin and O'Duffy were at loggerheads as to who was in control of the Blueshirts. O'Duffy called for a meeting of the Central Council of the League and Cronin retaliated by saying that any officer who attended would be suspended.⁷⁰

In early October, a twenty-four year old Blueshirt was shot and wounded near Newcastlewest.⁷¹ At Ballyneety, fifteen Blueshirts were charged with felling trees across the main road at Rathkeale and attempting to obstruct a court messenger in the course of his duty. The men were brought by bus from Limerick Prison and when they arrived at Ballyneety, they were met by a large number of men and girls wearing blue shirts and blouses. They cheered as the men were escorted from the bus to the police barracks. As there was no evidence to sustain the charges, the cases against the men were dropped.⁷² At a special sitting of Rathkeale court, four Blueshirts were charged with malicious damage to the property of the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs and with the obstruction of train services. A witness stated that on the morning of 5 October, the train from Limerick to Tralee was delayed at Patrickswell because of interference with the rail system.⁷³

At a Blueshirt convention in the county held on 3 November, O'Duffy met Cronin and T. F. O'Higgins. After a bitter and stormy meeting that lasted six hours, no agreement was reached between the three men.⁷⁴ Two days later, O'Duffy held a meeting in the Council Chamber at Limerick Town Hall in Rutland Street. About thirty Blueshirts, including girls, attended the meeting and a small force of detectives was on hand in case of any disturbance. As General O'Duffy took his seat in the Chamber, some Blueshirts, dubbed by the press as 'Fine Gael Blueshirts', questioned his right to preside over such a meeting. Fighting broke out and, with women screaming, detectives made a vain effort to bring the meeting under control. During a second bout of fighting, General O'Duffy's Blueshirts forcibly threw the 'Fine Gael Blueshirts' out of the Council Chamber. In a short statement to the press afterwards, O'Duffy said that the city had been divided into four areas, each with its own officer, and that a motion of confidence had been passed in his leadership.⁷⁵

The following day, 6 November, President De Valera arrived in the city to give support to the local Fianna Fáil candidates in the municipal elections. The President was met outside the city by 150 torchbearers, two marching bands and a



Homemade Blueshirt cosh alleged to have been used in an Army Comrades Association – Fianna Fail disturbance at Kilmallock on 9 October 1932.

Note the swastika insignia on the cover, which is made from a bicycle tyre

(Kilmallock Museum)

number of horsemen. A parade through the streets to the Crescent was led by a horseman wearing a green cloak. Other horsemen carried cardboard placards on their backs with the names of each Fianna Fáil candidate. In the course of his address to the assembled gathering, De Valera referred to the payment of the annuities, the plight of the farmers and the economic war with Britain. He asked the people to stand by the government who were doing their best to lead the people towards prosperity and freedom.⁷⁶

In mid-November, the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs brought 110 cases for malicious damage to telegraph poles and wires against Limerick County Council.⁷⁷ Towards the end of the month, twenty Blueshirts from the areas of Knocklong, Elton, Galbally, and Grange were arrested in connection with the cutting of telegraph poles.⁷⁸ By 6 December the number of Blueshirts arrested had risen to sixty. Most of the men were kept at William Street Garda Station in Limerick City before being brought before a Military Tribunal in Dublin.⁷⁹ Two Blueshirts from Newcastlewest were sentenced to twelve months each, but this was reduced to six months following assurances that they would keep the peace. Their solicitor said that the men had seen the error of their ways and that "they really had been victims of misguided influence". A police officer informed the court that he felt that the campaign of pole cutting etc. was very near its end.⁸⁰

A newsreel film showing the marriage of the Duke and Duchess of Kent drew protests when it was shown in three Limerick cinemas. At the Coliseum, a group of youths shouted for it to be withdrawn and began singing republican songs. In the Grand Central some of the audience made noise as the film was shown, and at the Lyric others stamped their feet in protest. As a precautionary measure, detectives from William Street Barracks took the newsreel away each night and brought it back for each showing.⁸¹ In another incident at the end of the month, some men called during the night to the house of a soldier at Creagh Lane, off Broad Street. After getting him out of the house on the pretext that some friends wanted to meet him, they kidnapped him. Later that night he was

taken to Cathedral Place and tied to the railing of the Sarsfield monument. A placard fastened to his tunic bore the words, 'This man is a deserter from the IRA'. Four men, one of whom lived near the soldier, were arrested.⁸² When they appeared before a Military Tribunal in Dublin they were charged with being members of an unlawful organisation, conspiracy, and the imprisoning of a soldier of the national army. The men stated that they were members of the IRA and refused to recognize the authority of the court. They received sentences ranging from three to fifteen months.⁸³

After the split in the Blueshirts, many members left the movement rather than choose sides. Meanwhile, O'Duffy became infatuated with European fascism. In December 1934, he attended a Nazi-sponsored conference held in Switzerland and Belgium, where he was appointed to the Secretariat of the Fascist International. In January 1935, he met Benito Mussolini in Rome while attending a meeting to establish a Centre of Corporative Studies. As leader of the Blueshirts, O'Duffy had promoted the Fascist idea of Corporatism - the belief that workers and employers should form joint bodies to regulate industry and economic activities in order to eliminate class conflict.⁸⁴ Blueshirt intellectuals claimed to have got their ideas on Corporatism from Pope Pius XI's encyclical, 'Quadragesimo Anno', and not from Mussolini's Italy.

1935

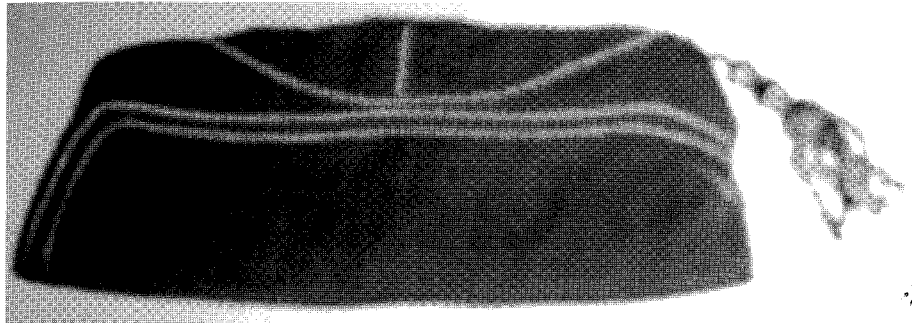
In early January 1935, there was a negotiated breakthrough in the Economic War, with the British government announcing that cattle imports from Ireland would be increased by 33½%. In return, the Irish government would allow British coal to an equivalent value into the country.⁸⁵ In a statement De Valera said, "opportunities for further similar understandings will, no doubt, present themselves from time to time and will probably be availed of by both sides in the same spirit".⁸⁶

In Limerick, the Corporation was taken up with a slum clearance programme. The City Manager also gave instructions to the Home Assistance officers to investigate the rents paid to landlords in the city's

slum areas. It was stated that in many cases the rents charged were excessive and made a great drain on the recipients of Home Assistance. The Manager wanted first-hand information on the subject in order to ensure that assistance was paid on as equitable a scale as possible to the dwellers in the slums.⁸⁷ Some of the slum areas in the city at that time were in the Lady's Lane, Parnell Street, the Dominic Street area and in Palmerstown.⁸⁸ The families from these areas were to be rehoused in the new Corporation housing scheme on the Island Field, a disused British military training ground. During this period the City Manager and some of the Councillors discussed the pros and cons of whether to build 'economic units' (single terraced houses) or 'un-economic units' (flats) each with its own separate entrance. The point was made that provision would have to be made to temporarily house people cleared from slum districts pending the building of a house.⁸⁹

In rural areas, farmers hoping that the annuities would be abolished were disappointed when court messengers arrived to collect the disputed payments. On Wednesday 6 February, a court messenger from Limerick, accompanied by several Gardaí, called to the farm of a prominent Blueshirt in the Bruff area to collect annuities that were due on the land. The official told the farmer that his instructions were to seize furniture if the bill was not paid. The farmer informed the official that he could not pay the full amount owing to the fact that he was not able to sell any of his cattle at the recent fair in Bruff, but he was willing to pay half of the amount owed. As the messenger insisted on seizing the furniture, the Blueshirt told him that he could seize the cattle instead. With that the messenger and the Gardaí left the premises. Later that night, at two o'clock in the morning, a lorry with detectives arrived at the farm house and as bailiffs proceeded to remove furniture from the dining room, sitting room and the four bedrooms, a neighbour arrived on the scene and told the men that he would pay the bill. After that the furniture was returned to the house.⁹⁰ At a Fine Gael convention held in Limerick a few days later, the night raid on the farmhouse at Bruff was condemned.⁹¹ That same month Ald. Reidy, Mr. Morgan McMahon and others were taken to court in respect of rent owed and damage to a former ground floor city office at No.5 the Crescent, which had been leased to Cumman na nGaedheal.⁹²

At Kilmallock on St. Patrick's Day, close to 500 Blueshirts gathered in the town to parade and to hear Comdt. Cronin and General Sean McEoin TD speak. Between one and two o'clock that day, crowds of young men and women wearing blue shirts began arriving in the town by bus, motor car, lorry and bicycle. Earlier that morning, the majority of Fianna Fáil supporters in the area had gone to Limerick to see the annual parade. Others had travelled to Mitchelstown for the



Brigadier General's cap worn by General O'Duffy as commander of the Irish Battalion fighting for Franco during the Spanish Civil War

(Courtesy of Kieran Kennedy; photo by Des Ryan)

unveiling of an IRA memorial. As the Blueshirt parade began its journey from Lord Edward Street and made its way into Sarsfield Street towards John's Castle, fighting erupted between the Blueshirts, the Gardaí and groups of young men who had gathered in the streets. Cronin was hit on the head with a Garda baton and was taken to the Central Hotel where his wound was cleaned up.⁹³

During the speeches that followed, some of the Blueshirts standing at the edge of the gathering smashed in the door of the local blacksmith's forge and caused some damage to the bellows. Comdt. Cronin called for order, but his appeal went unheeded; his followers broke loose and attempted to smash up certain houses in the town. Finally, in desperation, General McEoin told the disorderly Blueshirts that he would leave the town without speaking if the men did not return to the meeting. When the meeting ended further disturbances took place. Sixty Blueshirts decided to take on the Gardaí, who had formed a cordon at the junction of Sarsfield Street and Lord Edward Street. A baton charge was ordered and the Blueshirts were driven back. By that time, a busload of Gardaí had arrived from Limerick. Many Blueshirts were injured that day.⁹⁴ Later that night there were further incidents of vandalism, when doors and windows were damaged by stone-throwers. One resident of the town had the windscreen of his car smashed. It was noticeable that many adherents of the Fine Gael party in the professional, business and farming classes were absent that day.⁹⁵

In early April, similar unrest broke out when 100 Blueshirts paraded through Kilfinane and telegraph wires in the area were cut.⁹⁶ In Dublin, O'Duffy and a number of his supporters formed an additional association known as the 32 Club. Its aims were the reunification of Ireland through social, cultural and business contacts. Membership was open to all, irrespective of their religious beliefs.⁹⁷ This was an attempt to forge stronger links with Fascists in Northern Ireland, but it fell through. O'Duffy then turned his attention towards the IRA and in an attempt to gain their support, he instructed his followers not to inform on republicans. This gesture proved to be a failure as well.⁹⁸ The following month, a Blueshirt who, it was alleged, sent a

threatening letter to the pound keeper at Kilfinane had his case dropped through lack of evidence.⁹⁹ On 30 May, the Minister of Local Government arrived in Limerick to officially open the new tuberculosis and ophthalmic hospitals at the City Home and from there to the Island Field to perform the ceremony of inaugurating the completion of the housing project.¹⁰⁰

In early June, O'Duffy announced a change of name for his section of the League of Youth - they were now to be known as the National Corporate Party. At one of the first meetings he outlined the objectives of the new party: the abolition of party politics, the setting up of a united Irish corporate state and the protection of liberties against communism, capitalism and dictatorships. Attempts to set up new branches of the Corporate Party were met with hostility by pro-Cronin supporters.¹⁰¹ At the end of the month, President De Valera addressed a large gathering of his followers in Limerick. There were a number of hecklers at the meeting, but when De Valera got up to speak he was given a rousing reception. Before he returned to Dublin he visited his uncle and some old friends in Bruree.¹⁰²

At the onset of the parading season in Northern Ireland, violence broke out between Catholics and Protestants and by July, nine people had been killed and one hundred injured.¹⁰³ As a result of this sectarianism, serious rioting broke in Limerick. On Saturday night, 19 July, a number of Protestant houses and businesses in the city were attacked. A mob estimated at between two and three hundred youths went on a rampage, smashing glass windows, bringing the Gardaí and later on, the army, carrying rifles with fixed bayonets, onto the streets. In the Protestant Young Men's Association building on O'Connell Street, many of the windows were smashed. The windows in the Gospel Hall in Upper Mallow Street were completely wrecked and those in the Trinity Church on Catherine Street were put in. Stones were thrown at the Masonic Club in the Crescent. An attempt was made to set fire to the Presbyterian Church in Lower Mallow Street, while in Pery Square St. Michael's Church of Ireland was about to be stoned when the Gardaí came on the scene and baton-charged the crowd. Plate glass windows in the following shops were also damaged:

Goodwin & Co., William Street; J. Goods, Upper William Street; Lindsay Bros., Patrick Street; Stewarts, O'Connell Street; Widdess, Roches Street; Wickhams, Henry Street and Stockils in Catherine Street. In the dockland area that day, workers refused to unload a ship from Northern Ireland. In Kilmallock, the Protestant Church was completely destroyed by fire.

At Masses in Catholic churches the following morning, the rioting and damage of property the previous night were condemned. The Mayor and the City Manager called to the houses of the various Protestant clergy and on behalf of the citizens sympathized with them on what had happened. That night one hundred extra Gardaí were drafted into the city to protect Protestant churches and places of business. In case of more trouble the army was on standby at Sarsfield Barracks. Five men were arrested in connection with the rioting.¹⁰⁴

The Royal George Hotel on O'Connell Street was the setting for a private meeting of the Fine Gael executive for the city and county on Saturday 15 September, when Comdt. Cronin addressed the gathering. He told the assembled members that the government was, in his opinion, hanging on to their position by a single hair. The Blueshirt movement, he said, had been a spontaneous development that came as a counter-move to communism in its various forms. Stating that national unity should be the first objective, he went on to say that industrial development and agricultural development should go hand in hand to solve the unemployment problem. Cronin felt that Fianna Fáil was putting industrial development before the interests of agriculture.¹⁰⁵

The annual convention of the West Limerick division of the League of Youth (Cronin supporters) was held on 8 October at Rathkeale, Commandant M. Conway presiding. Sixty-five members, he declared, were arrested and some of them were in Arbour Hill Prison in Dublin. Another speaker, Colonel Austin Brennan, one of the founding members of the Army Comrades Association, told his audience that the future of Ireland was in the hands of the Blueshirts and he had no hesitation in saying that they were the salvation of the country. It was agreed at the meeting that a ladies prisoners committee be appointed to organize a reception for the men due to be released from prison.¹⁰⁶ When two Blueshirts arrived home to Rathkeale on 11 December after having served their twelve-month sentences, they were met by members of the League of Youth and Fine Gael supporters. After a parade, the Blueshirts were addressed by a number of people including Cronin, Brennan and one of the released prisoners, David Madden.¹⁰⁷

1936

In March 1936, O'Duffy's National Corporate Party shed their blue shirts in

favour of green shirts, green ties and '1916' Volunteer hats. O'Duffy said that, "blue is not our national colour no more than yellow or red. All over the world green is, and ever shall be, recognized as the national colour of the Emerald Isle". This change of colour was brought about due to his awareness that the NCP had failed in its attempt to gain control of the Blueshirt movement.¹⁰⁸ At the Fine Gael Ard-Fheis, where Mr. Cosgrave was re-elected as President of the party, only a small number of Blueshirts were to be seen, indicating that Fine Gael's flirtation with uniformed militants was very much on the wane.¹⁰⁹ The third annual Blueshirt congress, held in Cork on 26 May, caused very little excitement. Gone were the days of the impressive parades and flamboyant rhetoric. It was altogether a very low-key affair and was virtually ignored by the newspapers.¹¹⁰

Towards the end of June, thirty-six Republicans from Limerick were arrested. The men, who had stolen a lorry belonging to Limerick Co. Council, were on their way to a banned IRA demonstration at Bodenstown, Co. Kildare.¹¹¹ A few days later, at a Blueshirt rally of Cronin's supporters, James Dillon TD in his address said that in Limerick, Cork and Kilkenny, armed blackguards were encountered and defeated by the bare fists of the Blueshirts and but for that organization, the forces of tyranny would have succeeded. We have shown, he stated, that democracy could triumph in the end.¹¹²

The major event of that year in Europe was the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. During the Spanish municipal elections of 1931, the radical republican left won a majority, forcing the King Alfonso XIII to resign and go into exile. In August 1932, an attempted military coup was quashed by troops loyal to the government. In the elections of 1933, the parties of the right, conservative republicans, clericals and monarchists gained power, but in another election, before the civil war broke out, the parties of the left were returned to power again. A prominent feature of radical republicanism in Spain was its anti-clericalism. On 17 July, Generals Jose Sanjurjo, Emilio Mosa and Francisco Franco led a military rebellion against the government. In the opening months of the war many priests and nuns were murdered in areas that were under republican control. This was the deciding factor as to why so many Irishmen volunteered to go to Spain with Eoin O'Duffy to fight on the side of the Franco rebels.

O'Duffy had been approached by several influential people who put the idea to him of raising an Irish volunteer force to fight for Catholic Spain. A letter from O'Duffy to the *Irish Independent* on 10 August, proposing the formation of an Irish Brigade, met with enthusiastic support.¹¹³ At one stage it was claimed that 2,000 applications had been received.¹¹⁴ During the summer and autumn months, O'Duffy and his staff spent their time

organizing medical check-ups, character references and transportation for the brigade. In the meantime, the activities of the National Corporate Party were put on hold so as to promote a non-political character for the crusade. All this was done in as much secrecy as possible, because to raise such an armed force within the state would have been a criminal offence.¹¹⁵ The government reacted quickly to all this when they adopted the Franco-British initiative of non-intervention in the affairs of Spain. They also made it illegal for Irish people to go to Spain. Indeed, a passport belonging to a Blueshirt from Limerick, showing what countries he could travel to, had Spain blotted out. Of course, the loophole in this was that Irishmen, depending on which side they wanted to fight on, could travel by way of Portugal or France and then cross the border into Spain, and this is exactly what they did.

The Blueshirt leader, Ned Cronin, in a statement issued from Fine Gael HQ in early September, declared that O'Duffy's proposition was "moonshine" and that an Irish Brigade had as much chance of reaching Saragossa as it had of reaching the moon.¹¹⁶ By that time the Fine Gael leaders, particularly Cosgrave and O'Higgins, felt that the Blueshirts had achieved their purpose, that is, asserting the right to free speech, and now that the government had banned the IRA, it was felt that there was no need for two organizations within the party. It was also felt that some of Cronin's views were not in line with party policy, a charge that had been previously levelled at O'Duffy. On Saturday 10 October, Cronin was notified by the Fine Gael Standing Committee that the League of Youth offices at 3 Merrion Square in Dublin would not be available to him in future and that the party would not be responsible for any expenses incurred by him or in connection with the League of Youth.¹¹⁷ When Cronin tried to get into the building, he found that the door handle had been removed and the keyhole blocked with paper that had been stuffed into it.¹¹⁸

A month later, Cronin apparently changed his mind about O'Duffy's brigade when he travelled with a contingent of 84 men to Lisbon in Portugal. Thomas Gunning, O'Duffy's secretary, who was in Spain at the time, went to Lisbon and had Cronin arrested by the Portuguese Secret Police. Gunning told Cronin that O'Duffy resented his coming and had issued instructions that Cronin wasn't to be helped or facilitated in any way; he also succeeded in having Cronin stopped from entering Spain.¹¹⁹

On Saturday night, 12 December, small groups of men, volunteers for O'Duffy's Brigade, gathered in Sexton Street, Limerick, to be taken by bus to Galway, their point of departure for Spain. The men, a mixture of Blueshirts, IRA, young men who couldn't get jobs, young men who had jobs and gave them up and former ex-soldiers, were addressed by Mr. J. Ryan, one of the brigade organisers in

Limerick. In the course of his address, he told the men that they were going out as apostles to a foreign land to fight against the greatest heresy that ever swept over Europe - Communism.¹²⁰

The very next day, in Limerick, a meeting of the National Council of the League of Youth was held in Geary's Hotel in Thomas Street. The meeting, consisting of six people, was held in private. In the absence of Cronin, Comdt. P. Quinlan of Fermoy was elected as acting Director General. A statement issued after the meeting stated that owing to the action of Fine Gael in endeavouring to break up the Blueshirt movement by making unfounded charges against Comdt. Cronin, the League of Youth had decided to break away in order to preserve the organization.¹²¹ But by that time, the Blueshirts were finished as a pressure group and as a political force.

Conclusion

During the early 1930s, the Irish economy suffered a double blow when it was hit by the Depression and then, in 1932, by the Irish government's Economic War with Britain. This began, as we have already seen, when Eamon De Valera refused to pay Irish land annuities to the British Exchequer. This caused a serious depression in Irish agriculture and nearly led to a major disruption of the beef export industry. Irish farmers were hoping that the annuities would be abolished, but they were soon disappointed when court messengers came around to collect the disputed annuities. As farm incomes began to drop and unemployment and emigration increased, many disillusioned farmers joined the Blueshirts and took part in attempts to stop cattle seizures and caused destruction to telegraph poles and wires.

The first break in the Economic War came in January 1935, with the Coal and Cattle Pact; then in 1938, an Irish delegation met with their British counterparts in London. The Irish, led by De Valera, made it clear from the start what they wanted to discuss, in order of preference, partition, defence and outstanding debts. The British Government was not prepared to discuss partition, as they felt that the problem of a divided Ireland would have to be settled by the mutual consent of the people, north and south.¹²² During fourteen weeks of negotiations an agreement was reached under the terms of which three Irish ports, Cobh, Berehaven and Lough Swilly, which were still garrisoned by British troops, came under Irish control. In regard to outstanding debts, Ireland agreed to pay £10 million as a settlement between the two countries. This was a big drop from the £104 million that the British had demanded.¹²³ The special tariffs and duties imposed by both sides against each other since 1932 were lifted.¹²⁴ While the agreement was in a way successful, the outbreak of the Second World War hampered the development of the Irish

economy, as rationing had to be introduced during the 1939-45 Emergency and for several years afterwards.¹²⁵

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120. *ibid.*, 19 December 1936
121. *Limerick Leader*, 14 December 1936 .
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123. *ibid.*
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125. *ibid.*