

# The Italian Fascist Party in Interwar Northern Ireland: Political Hub or Social Club?

JACK CRANGLE<sup>1</sup>

*A visible and proud society of fascists operated within the Italian communities of Belfast and Londonderry during the interwar years. The Fascist Party maintained close links with and obtained funding from Mussolini's regime. One might expect the presence of a foreign fascist group in the UK to have provoked considerable alarm. However, the most striking aspect of the Fascist Party's existence was the freedom it was afforded; journalists and government officials were distinctly unconcerned by the organisation's presence. Only in the late 1930s, when British-Italian relations deteriorated, was the British government panicked into action, culminating in a policy of blanket interment upon Italy's entry to World War Two in 1940. This article probes the function of Italian fascism in Northern Ireland, questioning whether party members were motivated by fascist politics or simply a desire to socialise amongst compatriots. The article contests that dichotomous interpretations of the Fascist Party as either a wholly benign socio-cultural group or a subversive radical movement are insufficient.*

## Introduction

Of Northern Ireland's three interwar fascist movements, the Italian Fascist Party was the oldest and most enduring. Established in 1924, Ulster's two *fascio* - located in Belfast and Londonderry - remained in active existence until 1940 when Italy entered the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> Peculiarly, despite being the region's only fascist group with direct links to a foreign regime, the Fascist Party was viewed as benign by authorities and the press. This article will probe the function of the Fascist Party within Northern

---

<sup>1</sup> Jack Crangle is a PhD candidate in the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University Belfast. Any errors are the author's own. The author can be contacted at jcrangle02@qub.ac.uk.

<sup>2</sup> *Fascio* is the term for an individual branch of the Italian Fascist Party (*fasci* is plural).

Ireland's Italian communities. What was the purpose of the group's public displays and what effect did fascism have on Italians in Northern Ireland? The purpose of the article is to add to the debate surrounding Italian fascism in the UK while retaining an emphasis on Northern Ireland.

### **Size and Membership Profile**

The proportion of British-Italians who were *fasci* members is contested amongst historians. Colpi (1991: 88) suggests that a large majority of Italians joined their local branch and "embraced fascism in a whole-hearted manner". Ugolini (2011: 66) contests this, claiming that MI5 records prove that only a minority of Italians participated. A significant proportion of Northern Ireland's Italian population was involved with fascism. A Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) report from 1926 established that Belfast's *fascio* had fifty members, all of whom were Italian nationals (Royal Ulster Constabulary 1926). The lack of available census data renders it difficult to establish the exact size of Belfast's Italian community in the mid-1920s. However, Joseph Forte, leader of Belfast's *fascio*, estimated that there were 300 Italians living in the city in 1935 ('Italians protest': 10). Fifty members therefore represented a substantial portion of the community, especially given that only adult males were eligible to join. Background information on *fasci* members is scarce, although two members of the Belfast group's governing body - Joseph Fuscuardi and Giovanni Magliocco - are recorded in the 1911 census. Both individuals owned ice-cream shops, the common occupation of Belfast's Italians (Census of Ireland 1911). More unusually, Fuscuardi, Magliocco and their spouses could all read and write (Census of Ireland 1911). Census data indicates that illiteracy was common amongst Italians in Belfast, suggesting that *fasci* members were of above average social status (Census of Ireland 1911). Membership was confined to men: the RUC (1926) report stated that in order for an individual to be eligible "he" must be an Italian national, implying the exclusion of women. The Fascist Party also served as a network for small businessmen who used membership to bolster their contacts (Sponza in Ugolini 2011: 63).

In Londonderry there are fewer membership details, although press reports give an indication of the group's prominence within the community. When, in 1933, an Italian

air armada made a ceremonial visit to the city, fascist leaders were seen as the natural representatives to greet visiting Italian officials. The *Irish Press* reported that the Fascist Party's chairman, Signor Fiorentini, was invited to a garden party as a representative of the city's Italian population ('Derry Fascisti to welcome fliers' 1933: 7). The conflation of the Fascist Party with the wider Italian community in Londonderry supports Ugolini's (2011: 73) argument that organised fascism became the "public face" of Italian migrants in the UK. The activities of the Fascist Party were co-ordinated to cultivate an image of Italians as loyal and respectable citizens. An underlying tenet of fascism amongst Italian migrants was to abstain from involvement in the adopted country's politics. In 1925, a visiting dignitary named Signor Romano spoke in Belfast, declaring that Italian fascists were "strictly forbidden from interfering in the politics of any country in which they lived" ('New flag blessed' 1925: 10). Italians in Northern Ireland subscribed to this principle wholeheartedly. In 1935, Joseph Forte declared that "as Italian Fascists we strictly obey this neutrality" ('Italians protest' 1935: 10). The Fascist Party sought to enhance the reputation of UK-Italians by participating in important ceremonial occasions, particularly on Armistice Day. Press reports indicate that Italian fascists were a common feature of remembrance celebrations in both Belfast and Londonderry, where they paid tribute to fallen soldiers and laid wreaths ('The ceremony in Belfast' 1926: 8; 'Armistice Day observance' 1936: 9). In prior decades Italians had suffered from a poor reputation as shady characters, associated with violence, deceit and criminality (Homes 1988: 76). As Baldoli (2003: 1-2) argues, the purpose of fascist involvement in events such as Armistice Day was to refute this stereotype, thus remoulding popular conceptions of Italians in the UK.

### **Fascism and Irish-Italian Identity**

Despite performing gestures which would usually be associated with Northern Ireland's Protestant community, the Fascist Party operated in harmony with the Catholic Church. In 1925 the organisation's flag received a Catholic blessing, symbolising the close and friendly relationship between the Church and Italian fascism in the UK ('New flag blessed' 1925: 10). It is unclear whether the *fasci*'s pro-British gestures on Armistice Day angered the local nationalist community, with whom Italians shared a religion. Regardless, the organisation clearly attempted to show courtesy

towards local unionist customs in an effort to enhance Italians' respectability. The *fasci* portrayed Italian patriotism as perfectly compatible with loyalty to Britain; during Armistice Day in 1924, fascists in Belfast saluted both the King of Italy and the British monarch in a display of dual-respect ('Northern Fascisti': 8). The growing legitimisation of the Italian community in Northern Ireland allowed them to express their national identity positively and proudly. When the 1933 air armada arrived in Derry, there was reportedly a "carnival spirit" amongst the city's Italian population, with bunting erected and demand for Italian flags reaching unprecedented levels ('Derry Fascisti to welcome fliers': 7; 'Early start of air armada?': 11). Two Fascist Party members commemorated the event by naming their new-born daughters Atlantica and Italia, an expression of growing Italian self-assurance ('Balbo may take off to-day': 9). Despite incorporating only a minority of the community, the Fascist Party played a significant role in establishing Italian immigrants as an accepted feature of Northern Ireland's social landscape and boosting the self-confidence of an immigrant group which was attempting to break free from disparaging stereotypes (Baldoli 2003: 1).

### **Political Function**

The analysis so far suggests that - as Loughlin (1995: 537) argues - Italian fascism in Northern Ireland was merely a community-oriented cultural movement and a social network for Italian businessmen. On this assessment, the organisation appears to have served no political function beyond the representation of local Italians. Colpi (1991: 87) claims that the patriotism promoted by fascism merely marked a desire to maintain links with Italy. Oral history testimony from Italians in Scotland supports this argument. Joseph Pia, an interviewee from Ugolini's (2011: 64) research, claimed the *fasci* to be "not political in the least", whilst another stated that most members attended to socialise rather than discuss politics. These statements correspond with how the Fascist Party was portrayed in the local press. Newspaper reports adopted a factual tone, contrastingly, local Blackshirt gatherings were depicted as sinister and "stormy" ('Stormy Belfast meeting': 8). However, one should be cautious before denying the political element of the *fasci*. There has been a tendency among historians to whitewash the Fascist Party of political connotations. Ugolini (2011: 55) suggests that this subconscious concealment, by both academics and community leaders, stems from a

deep sense of shame amongst the Italian diaspora regarding fascism's association with the Holocaust, fuelled by the popular belief that "Fascism equals Nazism equals Auschwitz" (Iacovetta and Ventresca cited in Ugolini 2011: 58).

Despite certain historians' inclination to understate the political function of the *fasci*, Baldoli (2003: 7-8) demonstrates that links between the Italian government and diaspora fascism were extremely close. The Italian Foreign Ministry saw fascist clubs as a vehicle for maintaining the loyalty of its citizens in other countries. This process - dubbed "fascistisation" (Baldoli 2003: 2) - sought to transform emigrants into committed fascists rather than simply proud Italians. The dispensation of propaganda was therefore an integral function of the Fascist Party. In 1924 members of Belfast's *fascio* performed the Roman Salute and "enthusiastically honoured" Mussolini ('Northern Fascisti': 8). Two years later the group unveiled a portrait of Mussolini at its Trocadero Hall (Royal Ulster Constabulary 1926). As the party became more established, displays honouring Italy's leader grew increasingly fervent and public. In 1932, during another visit by the Italian Air Force, members of the Londonderry branch paraded through the streets of the city chanting "Vive Il Duce [*sic*]" ('Italian seaplane': 7).<sup>3</sup> Whilst public displays of enthusiasm for Mussolini clearly indicated a political flavour to Italian fascism, they do not prove the existence of influence from the Italian government. Other reports, however, provide evidence of direct involvement from Mussolini's regime. In 1932 the *Irish Times* reported that Mussolini himself had written to Forte, promising to fund the establishment of an Italian-language school in Belfast ('Mussolini and Belfast': 4). Although Colpi (1991: 95) suggests that Italian schools were merely a means of "keeping the mother tongue" alive, the direct input of the Italian government rendered political influence inevitable. Baldoli (2003: 14) cites the selection of teachers by the Italian Foreign Ministry as clear evidence of the schools' propaganda function; the fact that the Belfast school was to be taught by a "specially chosen Italian teacher" supports her argument ('Mussolini and Belfast': 4). Other initiatives included the provision of summer camps in Italy for the children of migrants, a scheme known as the *Balillia* (Ugolini 2011: 67). *Balillia* camps were evidently

---

<sup>3</sup> "Viva Il Duce" - misspelt by the *Cork Examiner* as "Vive Il Duce" - translates from Italian as "Long Live the Leader [Mussolini]".

designed to indoctrinate children. According to a UK Home Office report, children selected for the *Balillia* spent much of their time in Italy learning “to salute the flag, to drill with dummy rifles and to sing the Giovanezza and other patriotic Fascist songs” (1937: 3). Children from Northern Ireland participated in *Balillia* camps on at least two occasions. In 1933, twelve boys departed for Italy and another group visited two years later (‘Month’s visit to Italy’ 1933: 8; ‘Guests of Italy’ 1935: 10). The fact that the scheme was confined to boys emphasises the gender exclusivity of the *fasci* and the *Balillia*’s militarism.

### **Official Response**

The obvious political component of Northern Ireland’s two *fasci* dispels the notion that they were purely social clubs. The party was Northern Ireland’s only interwar fascist group with substantial links to a foreign dictatorship. However, the RUC deemed the Fascist Party to be of little concern due to the fact that it was only open to Italian nationals. The same report was far more cautious when discussing a home-grown movement, the British Fascists, warning that it would be inadvisable for state officials to associate themselves with the movement (Royal Ulster Constabulary 1926). Authorities in London began to monitor Italian fascism by the mid-1930s. In September 1935 a Home Office official wrote to the chief constables of several regional UK police forces, including the RUC, suggesting that the Fascist Party may be “worth some attention” (UK Home Office 1935). There is no evidence that the RUC followed up the Home Office’s advice, as the Fascist Party continued its activities as normal in Northern Ireland (‘Guests of Italy’ 1935: 10). The lack of attention paid to the movement’s activities can be explained by several factors. In addition to being unconcerned with local politics, the Fascist Party operated peacefully and lawfully (Fisk 1983: 50). One must also remember that Italian fascism had yet to be tainted by its postwar association with Nazism. Relaxed official attitudes towards the *fasci* prevailed throughout the UK; despite suggesting that the movement should be monitored, authorities in London took no action against the party until the late 1930s.

Surveillance was increased dramatically as Italy edged closer to becoming an enemy nation. In 1937 Vernon Kell, the head of MI5, ordered that all Fascist Party branches

in the UK should be placed under warrant (Kell 1937). Later that year, an intelligence report suggested that Italian fascism posed a substantial security threat to the UK. The report stated that the aim of the *fasci* was to condition British-Italians to become “securely bound to the service of the totalitarian State”, capable of subversion and sabotage (Committee of Imperial Defence 1937: 1). Bowd (2013: 84) argues that the authorities became wary of the Fascist Party after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, an event that led to increasing British suspicion of the Italian government.<sup>4</sup> Soon after the Abyssinian invasion, the Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police wrote that fascist clubs were “now essentially places where Italian fascist policy is expounded instead of merely social clubs not much concerned with political affairs in any country” (Metropolitan Police 1936: 2). Italian fascism in the UK therefore transformed from being perceived as a benign, cultural movement, to a potential fifth column of enemy aliens. When Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940, authorities immediately raided *fasci* across the UK and simultaneously interned all Italian males between the ages of sixteen and seventy (Hughes 1991: 93). Despite being isolated from the British mainland, Northern Ireland’s two branches were similarly targeted and sixty Italian males were interned (‘Round-up of Italians continues’: 9). Italian cafes and ice-cream shops in Belfast were subject to police protection, such was the ferocity of the public backlash against the city’s Italian population (‘Anti-Italian riot in London’ 1940: 1). As Kushner (2005: 183) argues, the policy of blanket interment provided the rioters with a sense of legitimacy. Reports do not specify where in Belfast the besieged Italian businesses were located, although Italians in Loyalist districts usually bore the brunt of abuse during periods of tension (see, for example ‘Unrest in Belfast’ 1912: 7; ‘Belfast rioting’ 1935: 2).

### **Italian Perspectives**

The draconian crackdown on UK-Italians, both fascist and otherwise, emphasises that authorities had become acutely conscious of Italian fascism’s political element. However, it also poses the question as to whether members of the *fasci* had - as intelligence reports declared - become fanatical exponents of fascist ideology. Evidence suggests this to be unlikely. When police raided Edinburgh’s *fascio*, they

---

<sup>4</sup> The Abyssinian Crisis led to increasing geopolitical tension. The limited international response to Italy’s invasion weakened the position of the UK and France prior to World War Two.

expected to discover arms, explosives and other incriminating weaponry (Edinburgh City Police 1940: 2). Instead, all that was found were legal documents and records of the group's sporting and charitable activities (Edinburgh City Police 1940: 2). Although an Edinburgh detective sergeant reported his suspicion that fascist officials had been burning files, this was likely a reaction of panic; as Bowd (2013: 90) notes, there is no evidence of subversive activity within the *fasci* or of a fascist Italian fifth column. Some members immediately renounced any association with fascist politics. In 1940 a Scottish-Italian named Umberto Filippi was interned at Barlinnie prison near Glasgow. Soon after his detainment, he wrote a letter to the prison's governor, stating:

*Although I was considered a Fascist and recognised as such, the reason for my membership was solely because of the advantages membership gives. I certainly listened to Fascist politics and I suppose some of these doctrines may have been impressed on my mind. However, as far as enmity to Great Britain goes, I am certain that I have none, for it is here that I have my home (Filippi 1940).*

The cynical interpretation of Filippi's plea of innocence is that he was attempting to secure an early release. However, cases such as Filippi's were genuine and common. Many Italians joined the *fasci* simply to avail of social and business opportunities. Ugolini (2011: 81) argues that hundreds of loyal British-Italians were arrested despite having only a tenuous and "innocuous" association with fascism.

The surprise and shock displayed by Fascist Party members upon their arrest demonstrates that Italians believed involvement with the *fasci* to be compatible with loyalty to the UK. Perceptions of the *fasci*'s function therefore differed between the Italian Foreign Ministry and the Italian citizens who participated. To the Italian regime - and latterly the British government - the fact that Italians felt empowered to chant "Vive Il Duce [*sic*]" on the streets of Northern Ireland could be viewed as a vindication of the policy of "fascistisation" and a guarantee of emigrants' loyalty to Mussolini. To Fascist Party members such actions simply constituted lively displays of patriotism. Although shame and embarrassment may have caused Ugolini's (2011: 64) oral history



interviewees to downplay the political aspects of the *fasci*, there is no reason to disbelieve respondents' consistent assertion that membership did not constitute an endorsement of Mussolini's politics. Despite intense historiographical debate over the meaning of Italian fascism in the UK, both sides make valid points. Few scholars could deny the political function of the Fascist Party in light of the financial and organisational input of the Italian government. Yet, while the propaganda dispensed by the group appears obvious today, anti-British subversion was not the motivation for members in Northern Ireland. The dismayed reaction of Italian fascists to their arrest in 1940 serves to emphasise that most perceived themselves to be acting lawfully and very few were hostile to the UK.

### **Conclusion**

The history of Italian fascism in Northern Ireland – and elsewhere in the UK – requires a delicate interpretative balance. Overstating the political function of the *fasci* risks depicting the Italians who participated as radical nationalists, committed to upholding and spreading the political doctrine of Mussolini. The evidence fails to support this portrayal. Displays of patriotism were celebratory rather than provocative, especially when compared with the disorder which often accompanied public demonstrations of national identity in Northern Ireland. The Fascist Party aided Italians' establishment as a legitimate immigrant community through participation in events such as Armistice Day. It was also a hub for Northern Ireland's Italian communities, facilitating the development social and business networks. These were the purposes of the Fascist Party. Admittedly, the Italian government exercised significant control through propaganda, maintaining enthusiasm for the Duce despite geographical separation; the political significance of the organisation therefore cannot be denied, overlooked or whitewashed. However, although a large proportion of adult males in Northern Ireland joined the *fasci*, few paraded in fascist uniform and there is no evidence of fanaticism or extremism. Despite the existence of a visible and proud society of fascists within Northern Ireland's Italian population, it is doubtful that any of them were committed political radicals.

### **Bibliography**

‘Anti-Italian Riot in London’ (1940) *Irish Press*. 11 June, 1.

‘Armistice Day Observance’ (1936) *Cork Examiner*. 12 November, 9.

‘Balbo may take off To-day’ (1933) *Irish Independent*. 5 July, 9.

Baldoli, C. (2003) *Exporting Fascism: Italian Fascists and Britain’s Italians in the 1930s*. New York: Berg.

‘Belfast rioting’ (1935) *Irish Press*. 22 July, 2.

Bowd, G. (2013) *Fascist Scotland: Caledonia and the Far Right*. Edinburgh: Birlinn.

*Census of Ireland* (1911). Available at: [www.census.nationalarchives.ie](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie) (Accessed 14 January 2016).

Committee of Imperial Defence. (1937) *Nazi and Fascist Party Organisations and Activities in British Territory*. 5 May. Available at: The National Archives, KV 4/291.

Colpi, T. (1991) *The Italian Factor: the Italian Community in Great Britain*. Edinburgh: Mainstream.

Darby, J. (1989) ‘Twentieth-Century Settlers’ in Loughrey, P. (ed.) *The People of Ireland*. Belfast: Appletree, 169-184.

‘Derry Fascisti to welcome Fliers’ (1933) *Irish Press*. 13 June, 7.

Di Felice, P. (2002) ‘Manchester’s Little Italy at War, 1940-1945: “Enemy Aliens or Reluctant Foe?”’ *Northern History* 34(1): 109-123.

‘Early Start of Air Armada?’ (1933) *Irish Independent*. 10 June, 11.

Edinburgh City Police (1940) *Fascist Documents found in the Fascio di Edinburgh and Italian Consular Agency, 20 Picardy Place, Edinburgh*. Available at: The National Archives, KV 3/220.

Filippi, U. (1940) Letter to Finlayson, W. 17 June. Available at: The National Archives, HO 45/23721.

Fisk, R. (1983) *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the Price of Neutrality, 1939-45*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Griffin, R. (1993) *The Nature of Fascism*. London: Routledge.

'Guests of Italy' (1935) *Irish Independent*. 16 August, 10.

Holmes, C. (1988) *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society, 1871-1971*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Hughes, C. (1991) *Lime, Lemon and Sarsaparilla: the Italian Community in South Wales, 1881-1945*. Bridgend: Seren

'Italians protest' (1935) *Irish Independent*. 23 July, 10.

'Italian Seaplane' (1932) *Cork Examiner*. 16 June, 7.

Kell, V. (1937) Letter to Scott, R. 5 January. Available at: The National Archives, KV 3/220.

Kushner, T. (2005) *We Europeans?: Mass-Observation, 'Race' and British Identity in the Twentieth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Loughlin, J. (1995) 'Northern Ireland and British Fascism in the Inter-War Years' *Irish Historical Studies* 29(116): 537-552.

Metropolitan Police. (1936) *Italian Matters*. Available at: The National Archives, KV 3/219.

'Month's Visit to Italy' (1933) *Irish Press*. 8 August, 8.

'Mussolini and Belfast' (1932) *Irish Times*. 22 March, 4.

'New Flag blessed' (1925) *Irish Times*. 11 June, 5.

'Northern Fascisti' (1924) *Irish Times*. 6 November, 8.

Paxton, R. (2004) *The Anatomy of Fascism*. London: Penguin.

Payne, S. G. (1995) *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Pugh, M. (2005) *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!: Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Reynolds, B. (1993) *Casalattico and the Italian Community in Ireland*. Dublin Foundation for Italian Studies, University College Dublin.

'Round-up of Italians continues' (1940) *Irish Independent*. 12 June, 9.

Royal Ulster Constabulary. (1926) *Secret and Personal*. Available at: Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, HA/32/2/509.

Sponza, L. (1996) 'The Anti-Italian Riots, June 1940' in Panayi, P. (ed.) *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, rev. edn. London: Leicester University Press, 131-149.

‘Stormy Belfast Meeting’ (1934) *Irish Independent*. 27 April, 8.

‘The Ceremony in Belfast’ (1926) *Irish Independent*. 8 November, 8.

Thurlow, R. C. (1998) *Fascism in Britain: from Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts to the National Front*. London: Tauris.

Ugolini, W. (2011) *Experiencing War as the ‘Enemy Other’: Italian Scottish Experience in World War II*. Manchester University Press.

UK Home Office (1935) Letter to Maxwell, J. 24 September. Available at: The National Archives, KV 3/219.

UK Home Office (1937) *Additional Notes on the Organisation and Activities of the Italian Fascist Party in the United Kingdom, the Dominions and Colonies*. Available at: The National Archives, HO 144/21079.

‘Unrest in Belfast’ (1912) *Irish Times*. 19 September, 7.

