



Citation: F. Mac Bhloscaidh (2022) The Belfast Pogrom and the Interminable Irish Question. *Sijis* 12: pp. 171-193. doi: 10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-13746

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

The Belfast Pogrom and the Interminable Irish Question

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Abstract:

This article re-examines the British establishment's crucial role in partition, arguing that it rested on imperial considerations and, indeed, that the character of the resultant "Orange State" punctures liberal assumptions about twentieth-century Britain. It counters much of the prevailing historiography on what nationalists call the Belfast pogrom, identifying it as the pivotal episode in the genesis of Northern Ireland, during which the Ulster Unionist leadership – with near unconditional state support – effectively purged Belfast's labour market of Catholics and Protestant socialists to create an Orange economy that served as the material basis for a half-century of Unionist rule. The piece concludes that loyalist ideology represented a fusion of inherent colonial-settler identity and derived racist and imperialist concepts then permeating metropolitan discourse and widely embraced across the post-war European Right.

Keywords: Belfast, Partition, Pogrom, Socialism, Unionism

On its centenary, a convergence of constitutional instability and long-term demographic change has left Northern Ireland facing an existential threat. Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) hubris in aligning with Tory Eurosceptics culminated in Boris Johnson throwing Ulster Unionism under a Wright Bus to facilitate the Brexit deal that underpinned his landslide 2019 election victory. Students of Irish history might have predicted such betrayal: only the Tory Right can abandon Unionism without fear of recrimination. In his famous Lord's speech, after the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Edward Carson lamented: "What a fool I was. I was only a puppet, and so was Ulster, and so was Ireland, in the political game that was to get the Conservative Party into power" (Lewis 2006, 231).

Ironically, the current Conservative Party's *weltanschauung* has seldom been closer to Ulster Unionism with Enoch Powell's restless spirit resurrected from its Ulster purgatory to haunt the Tory soul. Interestingly, a century ago, Unionist one-party rule

emerged from a similar constellation of right-wing forces. The creation of what R.F. Foster euphemistically described as Britain's "truculent and idiosyncratic offshoot" holds up a cracked mirror to an uncomfortable legacy of colonialism and racism (1988, 528-529). The British state sowed dragon's teeth in 1921, with Lloyd George admitting that "our Ulster case is not a good one" (Phoenix 1994, 225). Nevertheless, the highly selective reading of Britain's role in modern Ireland that infuses liberal thinking fails to acknowledge the reactionary and imperialist coalition that imposed partition, through which Ulster's Unionist leadership – with near unconditional state support – established a half-century of Orange supremacy.

In line with McVeigh and Rolston, this article argues that partition restored the historical "default position on controlling Irish Catholics – repression and hyper sectarianism" (2021, 212-213). The racist violence underpinning partition represented an especially intense variation of a more general policy of reprisals implemented by Britain across the island at the time. The central irony was that, by degree, British rule prior to partition "had softened its anti-Catholicism" and "attempted to secure legitimacy through *incorporating* rather than repressing the Catholic majority" (232). In addition, British-backed Orange revanchism operated "in a world in which democracy was beginning to undermine more archaic forms of legitimacy" (208). Therefore, a newly-minted and manufactured "Protestant majoritarianism made Northern Ireland more like a 'Herrenvolk democracy' – in the manner of apartheid South Africa" than an integral part of twentieth-century Britain (212).

At its very inception, Northern Ireland was baptised in blood. Around Belfast the conflict differed significantly from that between British forces and the IRA elsewhere across Ireland: while in the south violence overwhelmingly affected combatants, conflict in the north-east was characterised by indiscriminate sectarianism. O'Halpin and Ó Corráin's study of deaths from the Easter Rising until 1921 provides a civilian fatality figure in Antrim of 85%, while the same indicator in the two most active southern counties (Tipperary and Cork) ranges from 28% to 34% (2020, 1112). Indeed, "other than intercommunal violence in Derry" (O'Halpin, Ó Corráin 2020, 13) and Belfast, they concluded that it was "impossible to assign sectarian or ethnic motives as the primary reason for individual killings between 1916 and 1921" (39). Following Belfast's mass expulsions in July 1920, mobs drove 23,000 Catholics from their homes, and 50,000 left the North by early 1923 (Phoenix 1994, 251). Between July 1920 and October 1922 in Belfast, Kieran Glennon has identified 498 killings, including 266 Catholic and 181 Protestant civilians, or 90% of all fatalities (2013, 263). As Catholics comprised only a quarter of the population, in real terms, they were around six times more likely to die. The expulsion of 10,000 workers (mostly Catholics but including Protestant trade unionists) from the city's shipyards and engineering works on the first working day after the annual Twelfth of July holiday is widely recognised as the spark that lit the bonfire (Parkinson 2004, 21). Here the consensus ends, however.

Northern Ireland emerged from the resolution of three interwoven dilemmas, with the pogrom effectively severing Unionism's Gordian knot. First, the entire project relied on maintaining unity despite the Belfast-dominated Ulster Unionist Council's (UUC) acceptance of six-county partition under the 1920 Government of Ireland Act (GOIA). This decision effectively breached the 1912 Solemn League and Covenant and, as UUC member and Orange Order leader, James Stronge, put it, threw unionists in Cavan, Monaghan, and Donegal "to the wolves with very little compunction"¹. Secondly, Ulster Unionism then imposed its own

¹ Stronge to Montgomery, 12 March 1920, Public Record Office, Northern Ireland (PRONI), D627/435/9.

discipline within the Protestant working class, by crushing the nascent labour movement under the pretext of a refusal to tolerate the “infiltration” of republican politics into Ulster. Thirdly, the reorganisation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) provided the means to this end, a strategy consummated in formal incorporation into the new state through the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC).

A misplaced and ultimately apologetic historiographical consensus strains to absolve the Unionist leadership of responsibility for the expulsions and resulting violence. Parkinson, for instance, identifies “a dearth of evidence” that the UUC sponsored a “systematic programme of sectarian attack” (2004, 31), insisting that “despite the virulence of political speeches, there was no ‘grand plan’ involving senior politicians” (308-309). Indeed, some historians portray Unionist leaders as prisoners to their own extremists. Arguably, these positions rely on a failure of logical inference, an unwillingness to countenance the implications of leadership responsibility, an inability to develop a full picture of the forces at work (particularly the three dilemmas already identified) and a misreading of the leadership structure, the roles of Carson and – more significantly – Richard Dawson Bates.

1. Unionist Leadership and the British Radical Right

The UUC laid the foundation for the Protestant state. Founded in 1905 by James Craig, the first northern prime minister, the council emerged from demands by Belfast’s commercial elite for a provincial movement with greater independence from British Toryism (Kennedy 2005). The UUC also consolidated Belfast’s domination of Unionist politics, with its secretary, Dawson Bates, the future northern Minister of Home Affairs, the “master mechanic” of the political “machine” located in Old Town Hall, who “had all the threads of a complex network of organisation in his hands” (McNeill 1922, 112). Such was Bates’ importance, that, in November 1919, Craig asked the British cabinet if he could see the, still secret, partition plans, as Bates “knew the mind of Ulster almost better than anyone else” (Cabinet Conclusions, 11 November 1919)².

Carson’s appointment as leader in 1910 relied on his oratorical skill, and on his ability to access the corridors of power thereby exerting pressure on executive policy. In fact, leaving aside propaganda events and UUC executive meetings, Carson spent very little time in Ulster. As Ronald McNeill admitted in relation to the pre-war campaign against home rule:

A political campaign [...] could not be a success [...] however effective the oratory, unless the arrangements were based on good organisation. It was by general consent a triumph of organisation, the credit for which was very largely due to [...] Dawson Bates [...] Carson himself very wisely paid little attention to detail, happily there was no need for him to do so, for he had beside him in Captain James Craig and Mr. Bates two men with real genius for organisation [...] [Bates] always knew what was going on in out-of-the-way corners, and where to turn for the right man for any particular piece of work. (McNeill 1922, 111-112)

Carson constructed policy with an eye to influencing government and expected Bates to manage consent and organization: as he wrote himself: “it is by unity alone that we can expect to maintain our position in the councils of the state and enforce our policy of obtaining for

² The National Archives, Kew (TNA), CAB 23/37/3.

Ulster all that is thought essential”³. A proper understanding of this structure indicates that Carson and more specifically Bates orchestrated violence in 1920.

Curiously, the extant historiography barely touches on the reactionary nature of Carsonite politics. After a legal career spent defending notorious landlords, attacking trade unions, justifying imperial aggression, and prosecuting Oscar Wilde, while in parliament, Carson opposed a reduction in miners’ working hours, disempowered trade unions, faced down ameliorative land legislation, protected the Anglican establishment, and opposed democratisation and franchise reform. During a 1912 Poor Law debate, he advocated that “the able-bodied paupers if well conducted might be placed in labour colonies, if ill-conducted in detention centres” (Bell 1976, 37-38). The student of Irish history will struggle to find any sustained treatment of the reactionary character of the British ruling class.

After the war, Lloyd George’s coalition claimed it had no selfish interest in Ireland. Yet above any other individual, Lloyd George was politically indebted to Carson (Stewart 1981, 107), and the very same Tories who had challenged parliament’s sovereignty, openly supported the Curragh Mutiny and funded the Larne gunrunning in 1914 dominated his government (Jackson 2004, 133-134). While in office, they enforced partition through legislation and financial subsidy for Belfast’s massive security apparatus. In 1924, England and Wales had one police officer for 699 people, Scotland one for 751, while Bates had under his command one gendarme for every 160 inhabitants (Ellison, Smyth 2000, 30). In fact, paramilitary police served to consolidate the Orange economy, and the state’s eventually permanent suppression of British civil liberties under the 1922 Special Powers Act constituted perhaps the defining peculiarity of the one-party administration. The rationale was clear: the British political elite supported partition to subvert home rule and, failing that, to render any independent Irish state a virtual possession.

During the Buckingham Palace Conference of 1914, Lord Milner advised Carson to “stick out for the six counties as a minimum,” although he added, “There is no particular virtue in counties [...] as long as the excluded area is one solid block”⁴. Milner had previously formed the Ulster Union Defence League to rescue “the white settler colony of Ulster from submersion in a sea of inferior Celts” (Murray 2011, 31)⁵. Milner’s chief ally in this venture was Walter Long, the former leader of Irish Unionist MPs before Carson’s appointment. Long’s parliamentary committee drew up the plans for six-county partition, which led to the 1920 GOIA. James Craig, himself a junior minister, informed Long that Unionists could not control, and did not want, nine counties (Cabinet Conclusions, 19 December 1919⁶; Ferriter 2015, 294). Again, this policy revolved on an imperial pivot, which operated globally. Despite his crocodile tears post-Treaty, Carson had settled on six-county partition since before the war.

Carson’s connection to and familiarity with race patriots such as Milner had significant implications for Belfast. In his introductory letter to Carson, requesting “a straight and confidential talk” in December 1913, Milner impressed that Ulster’s position “goes very deep with me”⁷. Milner claimed that Ulster’s “uprising of unshakeable principles and devoted patriotism, of loyalty to the Empire and to the Flag,” had stirred him from political retirement as it went

³ Carson to Bates, 21 April 1919, PRONI, D1327/18/19.

⁴ Milner to Carson, 21 July 1914, PRONI, D1507/A/6/40.

⁵ Carson later privately opined that Irish Catholics were “really far from civilised” and that “the Celts have done nothing in Ireland but create trouble and disorder” (Hostettler 1997, 307).

⁶ TNA, CAB23/18/17.

⁷ Milner to Carson, 9 December 1913, Bodleian, MS 40/204-5.

“far deeper than ordinary party struggles” and required much more “than mere talk”⁸. Both men played crucial roles in Lloyd George’s appointment as prime minister in December 1916, and Carson apparently sought to transfer Milner’s racist populism to Ireland. While Milner funded the British Workers’ League (BWL), which “endeavoured to mobilise patriotic labour and counter the growing appeal of the Labour Party to the working class” (Stubbs in Linehan 2000, 44), Carson sat on its executive and saw in the social imperialist body a blueprint for Unionist hegemony over labour politics. As a leading historian of the movement observes, “the term ‘National Socialist’, if it had not acquired a special meaning in Germany, would be a fair summary of the opinions propagated by the League and its periodical at this period” (Douglas 1972, 537). Within this context, Carson developed his own new unionism, which included the promotion of the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA) operating under the thumb of Dawson Bates, while J.M. Andrews – mill owner and future prime minister – chaired this supposed labour organisation, whose four MPs then formed a group with the National Democratic Party (the BWL’s new name) at Westminster.

Carson’s reasoning also reflected changing conditions in Belfast, where the independent trade union movement was beginning to present a formidable challenge to Unionist hegemony over the Protestant working class. Attempts by socialists to protest conscription in central Belfast in April 1918, for example, led to violent scenes and spurred the re-emergence of the Belfast Protestant Association (BPA). The BPA had been founded by Arthur Trew, “the spokesman of the Tory working man” to combat trade unionism at the turn of the century (*Voice of Labour*, 20 April 1918). Inspired by Milner and the BWL, Carson sought to equip Ulster Unionism for the democratic age by bringing the BPA into the official party fold under UULA auspices. The UULA carried out the pogrom of July 1920. As a result, the Unionist leadership violently enforced its provincial hegemony in anticipation of the GOIA, marking indelibly the polity that emerged from the ashes. In effect, a strange hybrid of Orange ideology and the wider post-war British radical Right became deeply embedded in the congenial *modus operandi* of the new Northern Ireland state. Moreover, the imperial elite connived in this process, as Ulster Unionism reflected many of its own prejudices and strategic priorities.

2. *The Khaki Election and Belfast General Strike*

In 1919, “the *annus mirabilis* of prosperity, employment in linen reached 90,000 and in shipbuilding, 30,000 [a ten thousand increase on the 1914 figure]” (O’Connor 1988, 173). Under these favourable conditions, trade union militancy flourished, including a distinctly socialist current. While strike activity and economic demands appeared general, socialism remained strongest among the “unskilled”, particularly female textile workers⁹, who voted consistently for the Belfast Labour Party (BLP), a largely anti-partitionist and independent socialist grouping that objected to the Irish Labour Party’s decision to abstain from the 1918 general election and backed the British Labour Party’s call for self-determination in a unified Ireland (O’Connor 2011, 118). The BLP made headway because the social reality for thousands of northern workers undermined the “myth” of Protestant prosperity and progress, which “concealed many lags in social development; the exploited underclass of linen lasses, the marginalised Catholic workforce, or the subsistence waged labourers in agriculture, which remained the north’s chief industry”

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ For analysis of unskilled female mobilisation and links to the BLP, see Mac Bhloscaidh (forthcoming).

(O'Connor 1988, 172). In the 1918 general election, the BLP secured an average of 22% in four predominantly Protestant constituencies, and while their opposition to Carsonism "did not make them nationalists [...] it certainly made them anti-unionist" (Morgan 1991, 250).

In response, the Unionist leadership promoted the UULA, which proclaimed itself: "a distinctive entity in the Loyalist movement in this country," with "its origin in the brain of the greatest patriot and one of the greatest men this country ever saw – Lord Carson" (*Belfast Newsletter* [BN], 20 January 1922). As early as October 1918, Bates wrote to Carson warning of the BLP threat¹⁰. At Carson's insistence, four UULA members stood as official Westminster candidates. This much-vaunted new unionism represented, in part, a response to the Representation of the People Act. Carson, the UULA's first President, told members that "revolutions go on whether you like it or not. It is idle for anyone to suggest that the war has not brought about a great revolution" (BN, 14 July 1918). Yet, the UULA would act as a bulwark against those "trying to set labour against capital and capital against labour" (*ibidem*).

At a rally for Samuel McGuffin, UULA candidate in Shankill, Carson laid the foundation for the subsequent attack on labour and republicanism. Echoing BWL rhetoric, McGuffin claimed that "the cooperation of employer and employee, the capitalist and the worker" (BN, 6 December 1918) represented the best means to resolve labour issues. Carson, who doubted "how far a great part of the increased enfranchised electorate had been politically educated," claimed that "the world was upside down" (*ibidem*). He ridiculed socialists for criticising Ireland's role as "a partner in the greatest Empire the world has ever seen" (*ibidem*) and claimed that the BLP candidates disguised their Irish nationalism to secure unionist votes under false pretences. He then railed against the 1916 Rising, the "worst act [...] perpetrated by a treacherous and perfidious people" who "stabbed us in the back [...] while we fought a world war for freedom" (*ibidem*):

Sinn Féin was contesting every seat in Ireland, and I believe they have already had 26 unopposed returns. What does that mean? ("Bolshevism.") You are about right [...] The whole thing [Irish republic] is trash, but at the same time it is one of the most dangerous propositions ever put before the people so guided by sentiment as the people in the South of Ireland are. What are they coming to Ulster, to Belfast for? [...] [There was] never a greater insult offered to this great Imperial province when they put a Sinn Feiner forward to contest every seat. (BN, 6 December 1918)

In any event, McGuffin won easily, but a quarter of the electorate voted for the anti-sectarian socialist, Sam Kyle, suggesting that many trade unionists rejected the UULA's social imperialism. Carson, nevertheless, had characterised labour and republicanism as an unholy alliance within a global Bolshevik conspiracy bent on the Empire's destruction. This trope justified the subsequent pogrom, but in the period after the 1919 general strike, the BLP only consolidated its appeal among a significant minority of Protestant workers.

The Belfast 44 hour or general strike of January 1919, which involved 60,000 people, at least demonstrated "that workers wanted a shorter working week, were not fooled by the economic and political arguments of the employers, and showed massive solidarity", which "was not threatened at any stage by communal tensions" (Morgan 1991, 246)¹¹. Bates had little doubt that the strike "leaders are practically all Sinn Feiners, who have taken advantage of some of the rank and file"¹². He also claimed that almost a quarter of strikers were "out and

¹⁰ Bates to Carson, 8 October 1918, PRONI, D1507/A/28/43.

¹¹ Indeed, the strike's leader, Charles McKay, appears to have been a Scottish-born Catholic as the 1911 census only lists one 36-year-old, Pattern Maker from Pottinger.

¹² Bates to Craig, 31 January 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/29/7.

out socialists”¹³. In relation to the strike, Henry Patterson criticises the tendency to portray “every economic conflict” as an opportunity for the working class to “see through” Orange ideology, concluding that “Unionist politicians in no way were clear-headed manipulators of ideology” (1980, 111). Apparently, Bates did not fear Russian-style revolution, but a repeat of “the Belfast riots of 1886 between the Protestant workers and the police,” with “the cunning bourgeoisie and its political representatives” mere “caricatures of reality” (115).

This represents a strange reading of the sources. At the end of January 1919, Bates wrote that “after consultation with a few of us”, Colonel R. H. Wallace, the Orange County Grand Master, actually “drew up a manifesto”. Bates counselled against overt Unionist party intervention to avoid a situation where workers might feel “let down”¹⁴ and he feared that if Hackett Pain (the local British military commander and former UVF leader) intervened, workers would be “so embittered with the Authorities that they would join hands in a universal strike for the whole of Ireland [...] the consequences of which would be very far-reaching”¹⁵. The Orange manifesto, therefore, would permit “the decent men to secede from the Sinn Fein Bolshevik element”¹⁶. Bates enclosed a leaflet linking the republican movement to a global Bolshevik conspiracy, seeking to invade Ulster under a Labourite cloak. The Unionist leadership undoubtedly lent credence to these paranoid conspiracies. One Fermanagh Unionist warned Bates of an “organized movement [...] to overcrowd the city of Belfast with rebels”. Young Catholics were “being sent to the city [...] instructed to attain work [...] especially in the shipyards then they are to create discontent among the workers”. This “class of man” was apparently at the bottom not only of the Belfast general strike but Red Clydeside as well¹⁷. Elsewhere, Craig privately wrote to warn Lloyd George that “the Rebel plans are directed towards the establishment of a Republic hostile to the British Empire [...] working in conjunction with Bolshevik forces elsewhere towards that end” (Parkinson 2004, 37). In this respect, Unionist analysis mirrored conspiracy theories about Ireland propagated by the British extreme Right from the Primrose League to the British Fascists (Douglas 1997, 58; Hendley 2001).

Likewise, the Wallace manifesto blamed the strike on malcontents who had “taken advantage of a Trade dispute to bring discredit on the fair fame of Belfast”. Obviously in an allusion to the BLP, the manifesto continued that this group, “smarting from the defeat they have suffered recently at the General Election”, sought to manoeuvre Belfast working men “into a position from which in a short time they might find it very difficult to withdraw”¹⁸. Rather than passive observers, Unionist leaders co-ordinated a strike response based on the apocalyptic analysis of the viceroy, Lord French, and their own apparent weakness vis-à-vis the popularity of the strike committee’s demands during the post-war boom. Indeed, Bates sent James Craig a précis to that effect from Hackett Pain so that he could understand the situation “at a glance”¹⁹.

In the wake of the strike, Carson outlined the three strands of Unionist strategy in a letter to Bates: the soft power of Unionist propaganda would be backed by the muscle of the UULA and the UVF. The way Bates dealt with each demonstrates how leadership and policy operated. Firstly, Carson returned to the issue of placing “our organizations on the thoroughly

¹³ Bates to Craig, 1 February 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/29/8.

¹⁴ Bates to Craig, 31 January 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/29/7.

¹⁵ Bates to Craig, 1 February 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/29/8.

¹⁶ Bates to Craig, 1 February 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/29/8.

¹⁷ Eames to Bates, 28 January 1919, PRONI, D1327/18/15.

¹⁸ Orange Order Manifesto, January 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/29/9.

¹⁹ Bates to Craig, 1 February 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/29/8.

democratic basis". He advised that Bates should "take care [...] that all classes and all views are thoroughly represented and all our local organizations". Carson then regurgitated the radical Right's conspiracy, concluding that "our separatist opponents are working diligently both here and in America with a view to harnessing to their cause various elements of unrest in order to influence public opinion at home and abroad in favour of the policy of what is called an independent Ireland". Carson, therefore, directed Bates to "establish an active propaganda department". He concluded by proposing the reorganisation of the UVF, since "we should not shut our eyes to the serious condition of affairs existing in the south and west of Ireland", since "the leader of the majority of the Irish people" demanded a Republic. De Valera's

undisguised threat [...] in the event of Ulster's refusal to abandon her loyalty to the King and her citizenship in the British Empire must bring home to each of us the necessity of being prepared for all eventualities. I have myself but a little trust in politicians or political parties in relation to Ireland and [...] in the last resort it will be found that we must rely upon ourselves, this I believe we are prepared to do.²⁰

While the revolutionary potential of the Belfast working class should not be over-estimated, neither should we downplay Unionist disquiet at the growth of socialism. By June, Bates warned that "the Labour question is becoming acute in Belfast and the North of Ireland", before concluding that "we have got to face this sooner or later"²¹. He subsequently urged Carson to strengthen the UULA as "many of the unions [...] are controlled by officials who hold Home Rule views," a situation, which "leads the younger members of the working class to Socialist i.e., extreme, organisations run by the ILP [BLP] where they are educated in views very different to those held by our body". Bates warned that "if nothing is done the association will die, because its members will feel that it is not sufficiently progressive to meet an admittedly felt want". Interestingly, he praised "the vast bulk of thinking Employers, and those who have the interests of the Empire at heart", who realised that UULA advocacy had a "most beneficial" effect²². Bates' letter reflected similar concerns from grassroots UULA members that "some steps should be taken to enrol the younger members of the community who are liable to be influenced by opponents of the cause"²³.

During the summer of 1919, the UULA and the Ulster Ex-Servicemen's Association (UESA) contacted Carson, through Bates. Already UULA president, Carson became UESA vice-president. The correspondence clearly suggests that both groups wanted to discuss matters better left to personal and private conversations rather than the written record. The UULA asked Carson for "a private conversation with you at a time during your visit that would be most opportune" and again "for a few minutes' private conversation"²⁴. While the UESA argued that "if I had a private interview with you, I could explain more in person than in writing"²⁵. While Carson's ill-health stopped the meetings, around the same time, James Craig advised UVF gunrunner, Fred Crawford, to temporarily postpone his efforts. The Unionist leadership clearly shared grassroots concern for secrecy:

²⁰ Carson to Bates, 21 April 1919, PRONI, D1237/18/19.

²¹ Bates to Captain Craig, 18 June 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/30/3.

²² Bates to Carson, 30 June 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/30/12.

²³ Scott to Bates, 27 January 1919, PRONI, D1327/18/15.

²⁴ Thompson to Carson, 26 September 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/31/20-1.

²⁵ Watkins to Carson, 24 July 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/31/45-6.

When Peace is signed it will be for you to consult Dawson Bates and take whatever action the two of you deem judicious, but under no circumstances should either Sir Edward Carson or myself be implicated – we should know nothing whatever about it. I could talk more freely on this subject, but you will read between the lines.²⁶

The UULA's Aims and Objects provide partial insight into their intentions, which included “getting employment for discharged and demobilised soldiers”, by attempts to “counteract and fight Sinn Fein organisations. Which are at present doing all they can to keep our men out of, and their own in employment”. They further emphasised the importance of “harmony between Unionist Employers and workers”, hoping that a branch be “established in every town and village in Ulster”. Interestingly, they also proposed to

start something in the nature of an Ulster Trades Council. The difficulties foreseen in this are that if this question were brought forward at Branch Meetings of Trade Unions there would be a complete rupture and the Sinn Fein element would likely break away and join the ITGWU, or perhaps, the “Big Union Movement”.²⁷

By September 1919, the UULA had identified the issues of ex-servicemen's jobs and Sinn Féin's “infiltration” of Belfast as key to establishing Unionist hegemony over labour relations. The UESA and UULA constituted the dominant groups in the mass expulsion of Catholic and Protestant socialists the following summer. By that stage, the initial post-war boom had collapsed, wrecking labour's favourable bargaining position, and facilitating a reactionary counterattack: the scarcity of work operated as a powerful lever for imposing political discipline. Nevertheless, while the Unionist leadership had long recognised the need to tackle trade unionists, the delicate issue of six-county partition precluded direct action until the summer. In short, Bates had to secure acceptance and the consequent betrayal of Unionists in the three border counties before dealing with labour in Belfast.

3. The 1920 Elections and Six-County Partition

In January 1920, the general strike's anniversary provided organised labour with another opportunity to demonstrate its support. This time, however, the introduction of proportional representation for local elections greatly improved BLP prospects. Indeed, Unionists quickly recognised PR's potentially disastrous effect “as far as the Belfast Corporation is concerned”²⁸. Belfast Labour secured twelve seats and matched its average share of the vote from the 1918 general election, even securing 20% in the predominantly Catholic Falls ward. Apparently, a politically conscious, anti-sectarian constituency existed, whose emergence reflected the massive upsurge in trade union activism. Patterson argues that the BLP's vote merely represented “municipal politics with a vengeance” and that “the minority of Protestant workers who voted for the Labour candidates had not revolutionised their politics” (1980, 119-120). Nevertheless, their loyalist opponents had spent a year portraying them as a republican Fifth Column. This time the UULA's James Turkington faced off against Kyle in Shankill, his speech leaving little to the imagination:

²⁶ Craig to Crawford, 16 June 1919, PRONI, D640/7/3.

²⁷ UULA's Aims and Objects 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/31/22.

²⁸ Robinson to Bates, 30 June 1919, PRONI, D1327/18/15.

Sinn Feiners, Socialists and Bolsheviks were going about today asking the people for their suffrages [...] There was a game going on, and socialists were running candidates in all the divisions of Belfast – men [...] pledged to a republic [...] He wanted to draw the attention [...] to the condition of the countries, which [...] had republics of late, and he did not think they would be satisfied with it [...] With regard to the wages question, the socialists had opposed the granting of a living wage to the police, whom they had been fighting, and slaughtering throughout the country [...] to terrorise them in order that they could have a workers' republics in Ireland and rule Belfast, but that would never be. These people had also denied a living wage to the teachers because Sinn Feiners wanted education to be in the hands of the priests. In conclusion, he said he was out against revolution, Bolshevism, and rampant Socialism [...]. (*BN*, 9 January 1920)

Faced with a free choice, thousands of Protestant workers ignored the Sinn Féin blood libel and labour candidates consistently outpolled their UULA opponent. Turkington and his UULA running mate secured less than five hundred votes against Kyle's poll-topping 2,082, with another BLP candidate returned with transfers after securing five hundred first preferences. Typically, unionist voters chose official candidates over the UULA. A resilient working-class politics had demonstrated itself impervious to a year of black propaganda; the ensuing loyalist backlash would assume more bellicose form. Nevertheless, the delicate passage of six-county partition at Westminster and within Ulster itself precluded direct action in the immediate aftermath of Belfast labour's "big stride", where official Unionist candidates barely secured the majority of first preferences in the Party's stronghold (*Irish Times*, 19 January 1920)²⁹.

While Carson still pledged privately as late as 1919 to "stand by our covenant in letter and spirit"³⁰, in reality, he had marked six counties as his irreducible minimum in any partition settlement as early as 1913. Indeed, he had previously told a leading Tyrone Unionist that "our policy should be that, in the event of it being found that devolution was a necessity, we demand a subordinate parliament for Ulster"³¹. Similarly, both Bates and Craig had quietly welcomed permanent six-county partition³². Even before the Khaki election, James Stronge claimed that Bates, "like some others [...] is too exclusively Belfast in his views", yet Stronge "reconciled" himself "to the idea of partition", since "if we have no friends south of the Newry Mountains, it might be better to draw the boundary line there and be frankly 'West Britons' and not Irishmen"³³. The Tyrone UVF leader, Ambrose Ricardo, recalled how, in 1916, Craig "talked to me for an hour about his six-county scheme. I told him I believed he had gone mad!"³⁴. Ricardo could not fathom Craig's enthusiasm as, for him, the Covenant rested on equal imperial citizenship for everyone in Ulster, Catholics included, while the abandonment of border Covenanters and the construction of a partisan one-party government were anathema. Indeed, many unionists apparently shared this perspective, which suggests that the discriminatory administration that eventually emerged relied heavily on elite or "inner circle" machinations. As a British Cabinet official visiting Belfast in January 1920 noted:

Most of the people [...] were of the opinion that the whole of the province would be excluded; but on the other hand, the people in the inner circles hold the view that the new province should consist

²⁹ Identifiable "Unionist" candidates, including the UULA's 4,699, gained 49,773 first preferences out of 89,031 votes cast. The BLP secured 12,768, the Nationalist Party gained 10,758, while Sinn Féin received 7,120.

³⁰ Carson to Bates, 29 September 1919, PRONI, D1327/18/24.

³¹ Carson to Montgomery, 15 August 1919, PRONI, D627/434/53A.

³² Montgomery to Willis, 15 June 1916, PRONI, D627/429/35.

³³ Stronge to Montgomery, 10 May 1918, PRONI, D627/434/11.

³⁴ Ricardo to Montgomery, 11 April 1920, PRONI, D627/435/28.

of the six counties, the idea being that the inclusion of Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan would provide such an access [*sic*] of strength to the Roman Catholic Party, that the supremacy of the Unionists would be seriously threatened. Further with Home Rule not a vital issue, there is a real danger that on certain questions the Unionist Labour Party in Ulster might vote with the Roman Catholics.³⁵

Carson's correspondence with Bates bears this out. Carson identified the question of six-versus nine-county partition as "the most difficult and critical one which has yet arisen and fraught with consequences for Ulster and [...] Ireland in the future of such a character that any hasty or too ill-considered action is to be deprecated. I earnestly hope therefore that all our friends will keep an open mind". He then outlined the wider imperial implications of six-county partition, which rested on "not merely local or personal interests" but also on Unionists doing their "best for the United Kingdom and the Empire as a whole"³⁶.

The UUC's acceptance on 10 March 1920 threatened to split Ulster Unionism. Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal loyalists naturally felt betrayed. Ricardo resigned in "anger & disgust" and claimed that "Carson on 10th fell from the pedestal that many had placed him on"³⁷. Elsewhere, he criticized "the narrow Belfast clique" and claimed to speak for "a strong minority of loyalists" who wished "to prevent the Covenant being torn up"³⁸. This led to much empty soul-searching. Yet, as UUC delegate, John Gunning-Moore, wrote privately, "the whole question of 'breach of Covenant' turns upon numbers [...] the whole nine will be such a rickety parliament that it must [almost] at once be absorbed into the Dublin one"³⁹. Another UUC delegate, Barry Meglaughlin, argued that

if the nine counties are included within five years there will be a nationalist majority and this work has commenced already into a much more serious extent than most people imagine. There are funds provided in different centres for the purchase by nationalists of properties in or about the several towns of Ulster and even already nationalists from the midlands, south and west are being drafted in to such an alarming extent that even with the six counties alone, we would have to be constantly on the watch. It is asked by some of our people what is to prevent us doing to the same, but I know from bitter experience that we cannot do so; we have not the power of the Church behind us to force our people to come... as you know the other side have 100 to every one of ours in the south and west on whom to operate.⁴⁰

Indeed, Unionist leaders living on the "right" side of the border recognized Carson's "considerable triumph" in getting Tyrone and Fermanagh "included in the Northern Pale" and that, "if the whole thing is thrown back into the melting pot again, we may be the sufferers"⁴¹. A minority, however, shared the opinion of one female UUC delegate "who no longer wish[ed] to be a member of a Council who deliberately and shamelessly broke the Solemn League and Covenant [...] It may have been expedient and statesmanlike to break it – it was not honourable"⁴². In May, an emergency UUC meeting, attended by Carson, voted by 390 to eighty against the extension of the northern parliament's authority to nine counties. Clearly, in terms of the acceptance of six over nine-county exclusion, the ultimate decision was "not a question ethics and honour, but a question

³⁵ "Report on visit to Ireland, January 1920", 4 February 1920, TNA, CAB/24/97.

³⁶ Carson to Bates, 26 January 1920, PRONI, D1237/18/24.

³⁷ Ricardo to Montgomery, 8 April 1920, PRONI, D627/435/23.

³⁸ Ricardo to Montgomery, 11-21 April 1920, PRONI, D627/435/28-47.

³⁹ Gunning Moore to Montgomery, April 1920, PRONI, D627/435/57B.

⁴⁰ Meglaughlin to Craig, 8 March 1920, PRONI, D1327/18/27.

⁴¹ Montgomery to Gunning Moore, 26 April 1920, PRONI, D627/435/58.

⁴² Hamilton to Bates, 15 March 1920, PRONI, D1327/18/27.

of arithmetic"⁴³. James Craig made his own position clear: "the six counties are the citadel of Ulster Unionism. If we are unable to hold the outposts, must we refuse the offer of the undisturbed position of the citadel? [...] The Covenant cannot be construed as a compact for suicide"⁴⁴. Where room for a functioning democracy existed within this arrangement appeared as a moot point.

The supremacism underpinning six-county partition reflected Lloyd George's attempts to consolidate Ulster Unionism's position, while crushing the developing IRA campaign across the island in 1920. Having secured acceptance of six-county partition, the Unionist leadership initiated a clamp down on all political dissent. This campaign received ideological cover in widespread outrage at perceived republican savagery in the south and west. While the actual statistics of the conflict and the legitimacy of Sinn Féin's mandate for a republic undermine such rhetoric, its efficacy appeared obvious, or "claims of their opponents' atrocities were exaggerated but the propaganda value of such stories was immense" (Parkinson 2004, 18). Unionists watched on aghast as the IRA wore down the global hegemon in asymmetric guerrilla warfare, not least because of republican infiltration of the military and police. From the Unionists' perspective, the massively disproportionate reaction to southern violence in the summer of 1920 and the subsequent security clampdown and systematic discrimination under their rule appeared reasonable to a community wedded to the idea of Empire, anxious about their place in it and convinced of their natural superiority to Irish Catholics. At every step, the coalition government matched loyalist instincts. Yes, Tory opposition to home rule and then Irish independence was expedient, but it operated within a definite imperial and supremacist framework, or, as Bonar Law confided to Lloyd George's secretary in January 1920: "coercion was the only policy", as "the Irish were an inferior race" (Fanning 2013, 247-248). K.O. Morgan has described the coalition's policy of reprisal as "the blackest chapter [...] in any theatre, a monument to ignorance, racial and religious prejudice, and ineptitude" (1979, 139). When questioned about reprisals in parliament, Churchill refused to grant a republic to "a miserable gang of cowardly assassins like the human leopards of West Africa" (Bew 2016, 99). Such assumptions underpinned a very hot summer in Belfast.

4. *The Pogrom*

The defeat of socialism in Belfast rested on direct masculine action by a loyalist aristocracy of labour, for "unlike their southern colleagues, northern craftsmen had no need of an alliance with labourers to secure their bargaining power" (O'Connor 1988, 168). Skilled workers in the shipyards and engineering fused "craft exclusiveness and sectarianism", wherein two-thirds were highly skilled, affiliated to British-based craft unions and enjoyed a major advantage in pay over non-skilled workers (168-170). The UULA and UESA used the developing IRA guerrilla campaign to excuse the mass expulsion of Catholic and socialist workers from the city's main industrial centres. Despite elision by many historians, political Unionism, including Carson, inspired, directed, and reaped the reactionary dividends.

On 18 June 1920, the UESA sent Carson a telegram, pledging by "all means in our power to restore law and order in Ulster"⁴⁵. After violence between the IRA and a combined force of UVF and military in Derry, "Belfast shipyard workers had telegraphed Carson asking him to mobilise the UVF and take revenge" (Farrell 1982, 26). The UULA then arranged a meeting

⁴³ Montgomery to Stronge, 5 May 1920, PRONI, D627/435/72.

⁴⁴ James Craig *et al.*, Ulster and Home Rule: Six Counties or Nine, 25 May 1920, PRONI, D1327/18/29.

⁴⁵ UESA to Carson, 18 June 1920, PRONI, D1507/A/35/33.

with Carson through Bates over the Twelfth, apparently to discuss the GOIA⁴⁶. Having spoken privately to the UULA, Carson then delivered an incendiary speech at the Twelfth field in Finaghy, despite his own disdain for a medium akin to “the unrolling of a mummy. All old bones and rotten rags” (Gailey 1996, 85). Warning against Sinn Féin attempts to “penetrate Ulster”, by the “insidious method” of “tacking on [...] the Irish Republican question to the labour question”, Carson claimed that “these men who come forward posing as the friends of labour care no more about Labour than does the man on the moon”. He concluded: “we in Ulster will tolerate no Sinn Fein [...] we will take matters into our own hands [...] And these are not mere words. I hate words without action” (*BN*, 13 July 1920).

Some historians dismiss Carson’s intervention as “irresponsible rhetoric, a measure of his failure as a political leader” (Morgan 1991, 267), claiming that there is no evidence “that he was exhorting loyalists to wage war on Sinn Féin by attacking the labour movement” (*ibidem*). This analysis rests on an erroneous distinction between the BPA and the UULA. Nevertheless, each individual Morgan identified as a UPA leader also held a prominent role in the UULA (267-271). This elision serves to obscure Bates and Carson’s links to the pogrom. Others have chosen to downplay UUC “wire-pulling” and “plots”, while simultaneously acknowledging that the UULA acted “to ‘purify’ the labour movement in Belfast” (Patterson 1980, 126; 140). Elsewhere, Bew claims that “shipyard workers took matters into their own hands and expelled Catholic workers and ‘rotten Protestants’ [...] Craig sent wary signals of support to angry Protestant workers but was fully aware of the dangers” (2007, 402). In fact, Bates arranged a meeting between the UULA and Carson, who then gave an incendiary speech at the Orange field inciting his followers to expel Sinn Féin supporters and trade unionists. The UULA, a body Carson had created, and which Bates controlled, then carried out the expulsions.

Between Carson’s speech and the re-opening of the shipyards, the IRA assassination of Colonel G. F. Smyth in Cork on 17 July provided the excuse for loyalist “action”. After Smyth’s funeral on 21 July, the first morning of full production after Carson’s speech, a crowd of between “two and five thousand” loyalists assembled at Workman and Clark’s to protest against the “peaceful penetration” of Sinn Féin (Patterson 1980, 115). Loyalist workers then attended similar meetings at dinner time, when “the sudden ebullition of active hostilities against the Sinn Fein workers in the shipyards” erupted like “a spark in a powder magazine”, after one worker allegedly shouted out “Up the rebels!” (*BN*, 22 July 1920). A white terror swarmed through the two yards engulfing Catholics and Protestant trade unionists, some swimming for their lives under a hail of rivets. This ignited a series of expulsions affecting up to 10,000, including hundreds of Protestant trade unionists as the terror rippled from the shipyards, reverberating through Belfast’s foundries and factories.

The UULA organised the expulsions: they were not spontaneous. Internal disciplinary charges levelled against executive member, Nicholas Gordon, demonstrate that the UULA organised the meeting that sparked the dinner time expulsions. Gordon stood accused of failing “to have a meeting at the Queen’s Island when called upon” on the day of the pogrom. Furthermore, he did not condemn a comment that “the days of the Orange flag and the big drum were over” and allegedly called James Connolly and John Crumlin, the two main UULA members behind the expulsions, “the catspaw of the Official Unionist Party”⁴⁷. William Grant told a subsequent UULA meeting in Portadown that the expulsions “were bound to occur” when “they had to take the law into their own hands”. Fellow leading UULA member, John Holness, claimed that “before Christmas” Sinn Feiners in the shipyards “were boasting that it

⁴⁶ UULA, 1-3 July 1920, PRONI, D1327/11/4/1; *BN*, 12 July 1920.

⁴⁷ UULA, 15 December 1920, PRONI, D1327/11/4/1.

was the Protestants who would go now”, before fantastically claiming that loyalists “could see the pistols sticking out of their hip pockets, and they said they were going to change the tune of the Protestant workers on the island” (*BN*, 23 August 1920).

After the initial frenzy, the UULA then organised protests in City Hall against a motion by two BLP councillors to have the workers reinstated⁴⁸. Indeed, the corporation’s Unionist chairman refused the councillors’ subsequent request to have the meeting postponed, thereby facilitating widespread intimidation, with loyalist shipyard workers packing City Hall, carrying revolvers, throwing projectiles, and threatening to kill non-Unionist councillors (*BN*, 2 August 1920; *Irish News*, 2 August 1920). Dawson Bates effectively controlled the UULA, while J.M. Andrew’s acted as chairman. In short, the Unionist leadership left their fingerprints all over the pogrom. Bates wrote to Carson on 4 August, thrilled by the “great exodus of Sinn Feiners”. He had “never seen the temper of the men so strong in regard to their determination not to work along with Sinn Feiners any longer”. Tellingly, Bates added that “the movement [...] entirely lacks anything of an excited character and [...] is entirely different to the old spasmodic outbreaks, which used to take place now about the Twelfth”. This represented an organised assault that purported to “exercise every possible self-restrain[t] and to prevent hooliganism breaking out among their ranks”⁴⁹. On 7 August, Wilfred Spender addressed the UULA about the re-organisation of the UVF⁵⁰. As the *Westminster Gazette* reported: “It is common knowledge in Belfast, and frequently admitted by individual Unionists, that plans were matured at least two months ago to drive all Home Rule workmen in the shipyards out of their employment” (24 July 1920). To present the Ulster Unionist leadership as the fortuitous beneficiaries of spontaneous loyalist agency distorts the available evidence and points to an abject failure of deductive reasoning.

Neither does Bates’ rationale for the violence stand up to scrutiny. Loyalist claims that ex-servicemen suffered unemployment because republicans had peacefully penetrated the industrial centres to steal their jobs ignored Sinn Féin’s weak support amongst Belfast nationalists and the enormous growth in war-time employment – it is very difficult to steal a job that didn’t previously exist⁵¹. Indeed, Belfast’s Catholic community was also “four times as likely to enlist as Catholics from other parts of Ulster” and proportionately contributed as many recruits as the city’s Protestants (Mercer 2003, 30). In 1919, loyalists formed the UESA, “all loyal Ulster men and 95% are Orangemen”⁵², in opposition to the Comrades of the Great War Association as the latter accepted Catholic members. In short, like a great deal of the radical Right, Unionist paranoid rhetoric and conspiracy theories had a very tenuous relationship with the truth.

Arguably, the specific targeting of socialists or rotten Protestants constituted a more significant stimulus for the expulsions than fantastical fears about an invasion of rural Catholics. The UULA campaign insured that the “entire cadre of working-class leaders” suffered with their Catholic comrades. One prominent trade unionist recounted how “every man who took a part in the Trade Union movement [...] had been absolutely driven from the [...] island” (Morgan 1991, 270). The UULA then directed vigilance committees in workplaces, which began in the two shipyards on 28-29 July – that many of the excluded Catholics and trade unionists had recently served King and Country apparently counted for nothing. Furthermore, Harland and Wolff recognised the vigilance committee in the unsuccessful negotiations with the Carpenters’ Union to reinstate

⁴⁸ UULA, 29 July 1920, PRONI, D1327/11/4/1.

⁴⁹ Bates to Carson, 4 August 1920, PRONI, D1507/A/36/4.

⁵⁰ UULA, 11 August 1920, PRONI, D1327/11/4/1.

⁵¹ Joe Devlin secured 72.3% of the vote in Belfast Falls against Éamon de Valera’s 27.7% (*BN*, 30 December 1918).

⁵² UESA to Carson, 24 November 1919, PRONI, D1507/A/31/45-6.

expelled workers (Bell 2016, 88). With this exception, British trade unions singularly failed to challenge the expulsions, thereby facilitating loyalist control without severing ties to craft unions (O'Connor 1988, 178). The cause of labour had ridden the wave of First World War production, which temporarily swelled in the early peacetime market, before crashing into overproduction by the autumn of 1920. By December 1920, a quarter of Irish workers were idle (O'Connor 2011, 119). To all intents and purposes the UULA had achieved a principal aim outlined the previous summer: the depoliticization and effective neutering of the trade union movement.

The two leaders of Ulster Unionism then publicly backed the pogrom. On 14 October, James Craig's wife recorded in her diary how he "unfurls a big Union Jack for them and makes a splendid speech [...] that he approves of their action in not allowing the disloyal element in their midst"⁵³. Carson subsequently told parliament that "I am prouder of my friends in the shipyards than of any other friends I have in the whole world"⁵⁴. Yet, with Bates operating as political fixer, there is *prima facie* evidence that both leaders anticipated the expulsions, as well as the reorganisation of the UVF, with both pushing for a Special Constabulary in government.

5. From Ulster Volunteer Force to Ulster Special Constabulary

The British government then recruited the pogromists *en masse* into the new Ulster Special Constabulary (USC). The Specials undoubtedly acted as a further economic incentive for loyalty during the post-war depression. Indeed, James Craig coached a UULA delegation before meeting Bonar Law to petition for their creation in the pogrom's aftermath⁵⁵. The Specials also represented the effective state-sanction of the UVF. Fred Crawford recorded in his diary that he had been active "since March [1920], when Sir Edward Carson asked us to mobilise them again"⁵⁶. Carson counselled secrecy, however, so as not to disturb the progress of the GOIA⁵⁷. By 25 June 1920, the UUC appointed Wilfred Spender as UVF organiser across Ulster. Hamar Greenwood, who succeeded Macpherson as Chief Secretary in April 1920, privately sanctioned this initiative, but added that "it would be politically unwise to announce this publicly" (Buckland 1973, 446). In September 1920, the Tyrone UVF leadership, including Ricardo, issued a secret memo admitting that the Specials would only include Protestants⁵⁸.

The Unionist leaders' appeals for British assistance operated against a deeply ingrained and condescending suspicion, not only of the rebels, but also of lower-class Protestants. Bew, Gibbon, Patterson taking a lead from Althusser, condemn James Connolly's "pre-Marxist notion of ideology" (1979, 9) and his classical socialist analysis of the internal forces at work within the Orange monolith. Rather, they argue that leadership ideology was "not primarily Orange at all", but rather "democratic," "pro-imperialist" and "secular" (8). Below this, however, the leadership struggled to control a "populist strain within Protestant ideology" (9). Such analysis wilfully ignores the evidence and constructs "counter-factual fictions" (Thompson 1978, 108). Leadership rhetoric and agency not only chimed with popular Orangeism, but Carson and Craig, through Bates, manipulated popular extremism to institute a white terror. Post-war

⁵³ Typescript from Diary of Lady Craigavon, 14 October 1920, PRONI, D1415/B/39.

⁵⁴ 25 October 1920, *Hansard, HC*, vol. 133, c 1493.

⁵⁵ UULA, 4-7 September 1920, PRONI, D1327/11/4/1.

⁵⁶ 27 September 1920, PRONI, D640/11/1.

⁵⁷ Montgomery to unidentified correspondent, April 1920, PRONI, D627/439/15.

⁵⁸ Ricardo, Stevenson and McClintock, "Highly confidential" memoranda, September 1920, PRONI, D1678/6/1.

Unionism constituted one element in an international counter-revolution, which included the allied invasions of Russia and subsequent civil war, radical right-wing paramilitaries across central and Eastern Europe, and the rise of Italian fascism.

The Unionist leadership merely echoed their own anti-democratic anxiety for British consumption, with the imperial government self-interestedly swallowing it whole. On 23 July 1920, a “convinced” James Craig told the British cabinet the USC would prevent “mob law” and “prevent the Protestants from running amok”. In fact, Craig’s UUC had sparked this violence through the UULA. General Tudor warned that the Specials’ creation “would show that the Government did differentiate between rebels and loyalists”. Lloyd George, however, did not think “of such differentiation, but of releasing troops and police”⁵⁹ (Cabinet Conclusions, 23 July 1920). Locked in a struggle to subvert the creation of a democratic Irish Republic, the imperial state employed Ulster loyalism as a colonial bulwark – a role Orangeism had filled since the 1790s.

In May 1922, while referring to escalating violence in Belfast, Churchill disingenuously told cabinet that “Whether it was a case of six of one and half a dozen of the other he did not know. He would be sorry to try and arrive at any other ratio”. Nevertheless, the British stationed nineteen battalions, forty-eight thousand Specials and “orders had been given to accede to Sir James Craig’s request for arms and munitions to equip these”. Churchill warned that, “at any moment, patience may be ruptured, and we shall find ourselves in an atmosphere where people see red”⁶⁰ (British Cabinet Conclusions, 30 May 1922). Apparently, if loyalists weren’t armed to the teeth; they might become violent – so the British government created and funded the USC. Yet, partition and Northern Ireland’s illiberal exceptionalism within the British polity pointed towards wider imperial objectives. Partition had nothing to do with dual rights to self-determination for separate Irish and British nations. In March 1920, Bonar Law ridiculed “loose talk” about granting self-determination to Ireland, characterising the position as “living in the world with his eyes shut”. Law further lamented the “childish mistake” of ignoring Ireland’s centrality “to national security”. In short, self-determination for imperial possessions had “never been adopted by any nation in the history of the world except after defeat and under compulsion”⁶¹. Even after the signing of the Treaty, Churchill speculated on the contingency plans if “Republican forces” triumphed in the south, which envisaged Northern Ireland’s use as a base for reconquest⁶² (Cabinet Conclusions, 15 April 1922). Similarly, James Craig viewed the six-county area as “an impregnable, Pale”, while other leading Unionists visualised its use as “a bridge head for the re-conquest of Ireland”, if southerners declared a Republic⁶³.

By the May 1921 elections, the loyalist stranglehold on working-class politics and indeed Belfast itself appeared complete. When three labour candidates booked the Ulster Hall, loyalists seized the building and telegraphed Craig: “Mass meeting of loyal shipyard workers who have captured Ulster Hall from the Bolsheviks Baird, Midgley and Hanna request that you address them for a few minutes tonight”. Craig replied that “I am with them in spirit. Know they will do their part. I will do mine. Well done big and wee yards” (*Northern Whig*, 18 May 1921). Likewise, the prominent socialist and labour candidate, James Baird, told those assembled to hear the election returns that “many seeking to vote were brutally assaulted” amidst the “worst

⁵⁹ TNA, CAB/24/109.

⁶⁰ NAL, CAB/23/30; a battalion contained between five hundred and one thousand soldiers.

⁶¹ 30 March 1920 *Hansard*, HC, vol. 127, c 1125-1126.

⁶² TNA, CAB/23/30.

⁶³ For Craig’s statement see O’Leary 2019, 340; Montgomery to Stronge, 6 April 1920, PRONI, D627/435/21; Montgomery to Leo Maxse, 7 May 1920, PRONI, D627/435/75.

intimidation” during a contest “marked by wholesale impersonation” (Farrell 1982, 37). Loyalist direct action had crushed a growing labour constituency, a campaign orchestrated by the UUC, which the British state sanctioned through the USC. This all operated within the remit of wider imperial interests. As Lord Birkenhead remarked in July 1921, the government was “quite ready to be liberal to Ireland now that he and his friends had secured the safety of Orange Ulster”⁶⁴.

The argument here is not that Unionism lacked popular support. Rather, the evidence challenges the widespread assumption that Ulster Protestants constituted a homogenous group; a proposition typically deployed to legitimize partition. The local election results in January and June 1920 indicated a secure majority against partition and for independence across Ulster’s nine counties. In the urban elections, nationalists captured Derry corporation, but anti-partitionists (including labour) also secured unexpected victories in Lurgan, Dungannon, Carrickfergus, Larne, Limavady, Cookstown and Lisburn. In fact, anti-partitionist parties won over 54% of seats across the nine counties and over 41% within the proposed six counties, with a majority in Fermanagh and Tyrone and nearly half in County Armagh. Indeed, anti-partitionists won control of twenty-four of seventy-five local bodies in the six counties. A homogenous Unionist Ulster was a fiction⁶⁵. Moreover, the general strike of January 1919 and municipal election results a year later pointed to the consolidation of an independent, anti-partitionist labour constituency in Belfast itself. In response, the Unionist elite employed mass reactionary violence to create the material conditions for a fabricated polity, Northern Ireland, which lacked any genuine democratic legitimacy, outside rhetorical flourishes about self-determination designed to excuse imperial *force majeure*.

On the last day of May 1922, Lloyd George claimed that Mussolini’s *Fascisti* served as an “exact analogy” for the Specials that the initial attack and brunt of subsequent violence involved the “murder of member of the [Catholic] minority”, while Britain had armed 48,000 Protestants. In June 1922, the civil servant, Stephen Tallents, arrived in Ulster to enquire into outrages against northern nationalists. Ricardo told Tallents that the full-time A Specials “contained a large leaven of a bad type”, had serious problems with “drink and consequent indiscipline” and represented a “distinctly partisan force”. The part-time B Specials were “drawn from the Protestant section of the population and mainly from the more extreme side”. Ricardo then stated that the “N. Govt. is a very strict party machine which is influenced at the present time entirely by Belfast views of extreme type”, concluding that “the twenty-six counties [govt.] are not the only one that would benefit by a return to the Union and to impartial [...] Imperial Govt.”⁶⁶. Despite his contemptible opinion of Bates, Tallents whitewashed the Unionist regime. Nevertheless, his sympathetic report confirmed the stranglehold that paranoid right-wing conspiracies held over the Unionist psyche. “The social cleavage between the Protestants and Catholics in Belfast is almost absolute, greater [...] than the division between Pole and Jew in Warsaw [...] the Protestant community of the North feel that it is an outpost of civilisation set precariously on the frontiers of Bolshevism”⁶⁷.

The British government would fully resource the USC for two years to the tune of over £6 million, a period of little or no violence in the north (Farrell 1982, 79). Ricardo hinted that the Specials partially solved the problem of chronic unemployment: “every man in N.I. who has lost his job or who is at a loose end has endeavoured to get into the A’s and in many cases has succeeded”. He also reported to Tallents that “today the feeling against the Specials [...] is more bitter than against the Black & Tans – with this great difference – on the removal of the Black

⁶⁴ O’Connor to Dillon, 29 July 1921, Trinity College Dublin, MS 6744/848.

⁶⁵ For statistics, see O’Leary 2017, 822.

⁶⁶ Report by Gen. Ricardo to Stephen Tallents, June 1922, TNA, CO 906/27.

⁶⁷ Tallents to Smith, 15 July 1922, TNA, CO 906/30.

& Tans one side of the contending parties was removed". In Ulster, the USC had established "a group of personal blood feuds which will last for generations to come"⁶⁸.

6. Conclusions

Patterson has argued in relation to Belfast "[t]hat the local bourgeoisie were happy to see trade unions weakened and the left attacked is quite probable, but this had occurred because of developments over which they had little or no influence" (1980, 142). In fact, the Belfast bourgeoisie through the UUC played the decisive role in clamping down on the emergent socialist movement. In a similar vein Patterson argues that "Orangeism [...] could develop into a militant populism which expressed class conflict in terms of upper class 'betrayal' of the Protestant cause and develop links with sections of the labour movement" (144). Therefore, "[b]y concentrating solely on the integrating functions" of Orangeism, Connollyite socialism "produced an inadequate analysis" and "underestimated its resilience as a social force" (*ibidem*). Likewise, the republican socialist tendency "to treat Protestant working class Unionism in the Connollyite fashion as bigotry" dominated the thinking of twentieth-century Marxists "from whom a serious analysis would be most expected" (149). The heavily caricatured "manipulated dupes" thesis, in Patterson's widely accepted view, "proved incapable of even beginning an analysis of that class's political and ideological history" (150).

In effect, Patterson argues that "Orangeism *did* function both as an integrative mechanism and as a source of conflict" (147). The fundamental question here is: where did the weight of emphasis lie? While no serious observer disputes the presence of a reactionary Orange ideology within sections of the Protestant working class, the account outlined above contests long-prevalent assumptions about the immutability of sectarian antagonism in Ulster. For a brief period, a significant minority of working-class Protestants embraced a principled anti-sectarian egalitarianism. Orange ideology did not operate on some intangible level of the superstructure; it required material sustenance and depended on determined agency. Its triumph relied on loyalist shock troops in the first instance and its consolidation operated against the foundation of a discriminatory statelet, whose birth pangs reverberated to the beat of Lambeg drums.

An analysis of the politics propounded by UULA representatives in Belfast points to a fusion of inherent concepts of Protestant supremacy linked to the colonial past fused with a wider derived imperial, racist discourse. Similarly, the notion that the Unionist leadership espoused a liberal, democratic and secular ideology bears little or no relation to reality. The very same week he parleyed with Belfast's pogromists, Carson praised the exploits of General Dyer at Amritsar⁶⁹. The liberalism of British imperialists essentially excluded what George Orwell described as "unpeople", or those "unfit to enter history" (Orwell in Chomsky 2012). Well into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for many among the metropolitan elite, Irish Catholics ranked with other subject nations – those sullen peoples, half-devil, half-child. Such people could not enjoy liberty, as they occupied a profane space. The most challenging aspect of lower-class Protestant involvement in trade unionism revolved around working-class Orangemen's willingness to open the sacred space of freedom to their Catholic neighbours (Lorsurdo 2011, 309-10). The Unionist leadership employed a supremacist ideology and promoted reactionary violence to breach this gap, in the process riveting extreme loyalism into the very structures of the Orange state.

⁶⁸ Report by Gen. Ricardo to Stephen Tallents, June 1922, TNA, CO 906/27.

⁶⁹ *Hansard*, HC 8 July 1920, vol. 131, c1712.

A supremacist dimension formed part of the internal logic of loyalism and, rather than restraining this tendency from running amok, the structures of the Unionist bloc encouraged conceptions of Protestant superiority and Catholic inferiority, thereby justifying violence. Indeed, separate republican and Free State intelligence reports in 1924 claimed that elements of the USC had formed branches of the Ku Klux Klan. In April 1924, the IRA reported that “The KKK has been formed about three months ago in Belfast under the title of the ‘Gay Crusaders’. Members consist of Specials officers and recently the ordinary rank and file have been admitted”⁷⁰. On 4 January 1923, the *Belfast Newsletter* carried an article on the Klan and Italian Fascism, which asserted that while “undemocratic” at root, it would “be absurd to underestimate the significance of such movements or to ignore what is noble in their intentions. Their strength springs from the genuine desire [...] to make life sweeter and more wholesome” (*BN*, 4 January 1923). Fortunately, here, government rested “on the will of the people, rather than on the symbolism of White Hood or Black Shirt” (*ibidem*). In 1934, Craig himself boasted that members of the “Orange Order, the Black Brotherhood or the B Specials could substitute as Fascists” (Loughlin 1995, 544). Recent analysis has argued that the Unionist government operated “a moral economy of loyalty”, wherein Catholics and trade unionists became “liable to political discrimination, while those loyal were to be rewarded through patronage” (Loughlin 2017, 1). Certainly, Craig himself claimed the Stormont government’s main function was “to distribute the bones” (Probert 1978, 57). A far more straightforward approach would be to locate the Orange state within the aspirations of the contemporaneous British radical right.

The payoff for preferential treatment in employment, whether a position in the A’s, a job in a foundry, factory or local government was that working-class Protestantism was “stripped of” its “progressive elements” (Bew, Gibbon, Patterson 1978, 16). Yet, the Unionist establishment and bourgeoisie constituted the net beneficiaries of the Orange economic order. Belfast went from being the most militant centre of trade union activity in Ireland in 1919 to the quietest, failing to engage in the British engineering lockout of 1922 and abstaining from any industrial action in 1923 when, after the end of its civil war, southern Ireland witnessed an explosion of popular militancy. The Labour Ministry report (1923) noted that (in Belfast) “no material stoppage occurred in the shipbuilding and engineering industries or in the transport trades. The linen trade generally was also free from serious trade dispute” (O’Connor 1988, 101). Arguably, the UULA served a similar function to other corporatist groupings on the radical Right, which gave some expression to working-class politics, but within the carefully demarcated confines of cross-class solidarity based on ethnic or national distinction, a position that typically reinforced or improved the relative position of capital over labour. The UULA Westminster MPs always voted against organised labour and sided with the National Democratic Party, former Labour MPs who supported Lloyd George’s coalition. McGuffin himself publicly admitted, “If they (UULA) had not been much in the limelight of oratory they had been diligent in their support of the Government” (*Belfast Telegraph*, 28 April 1919). These social imperialists all became members of the British Empire Union, another grouping that shared an affinity with emergent fascist ideology in Europe (Linehan 2001, 44).

Certainly, the evidence suggests that the Unionist elite deliberately manipulated a form of reactionary Orange populism, akin to contemporary authoritarian and fascist trends in post-war Europe and Britain, to subvert far more progressive, and developing, currents amongst working-class Protestants, which employed the liberal aspects of Orange ideology in a universalist

⁷⁰ Free State intelligence division, 1924, Irish Military Archives, MS 334; Adjutant 4th ND IRA to GHQ, April 1924, University College Dublin Archives, P69/35/115.

fashion to include non-Protestants. Indeed, this Faustian bargain formed the very basis of the new Orange State, but *cui bono?*

The argument most closely associated with Patterson and Bew, that lower-class extremists somehow held the liberal Unionist elite to ransom, does not hold water. With the centenary of Northern Ireland now past, a challenge to the historiographical consensus on state formation and the nature of Ulster Unionism appears overdue. The dominant discourse relies heavily on a raft of “Establishment Marxism” which employed “left-wing terminology to produce an apologia for contemporary conservative practice” (Coughlan 1994, 301). Bew, Gibbon, Patterson conveniently argued that national independence and unification “have no relevance to the future of Ireland” (in Coughlan 1994, 303). As Coughlan rightly noted: “This of course is no novel thesis. It is the view of unionists, of the Orange Order, of transnational capital and of Her Majesty’s Government [...] The originality of the authors and of their several imitators is that no one previously had the thought of presenting it as Marxism” (*ibidem*). Northern Ireland emerged from a deeply reactionary, sectarian counter-revolution, enshrined in the very essence of the polity, which sowed the dragon’s teeth of future conflict. In this venture, the Unionist leadership received the unconditional support of an imperial state that applied the principle of self-determination against the vanquished, while its own dominions swelled – an empire built and maintained on concepts of race.

Since the early nineteenth century, English cartoonists have depicted Conservative prime ministers from Peel through Salisbury to Ted Heath as Sisyphus, condemned to roll the rock of Ireland to the mountain’s summit, only for it to slip their grasp and face the same laborious task in perpetuity⁷¹. The Corinthian king’s punishment reflected his crimes of duplicity and arrogance. Arguably, any solution to Britain’s interminable Irish Question might begin with an acknowledgement of the thoroughly illiberal, undemocratic and supremacist historical underpinnings of the partition settlement imposed on the island by the imperial state in 1921.

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⁷¹ Salisbury in 1886 by John Tenniel and Heath in 1971 by Cummings.

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