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## Corporatist, Catholic, Catalyst, Crank: Patrick Belton's Role in Ireland's Involvement in the Spanish Civil War

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CORPORATIST, CATHOLIC, CATALYST, CRANK: PATRICK BELTON'S ROLE IN  
IRELAND'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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### Abstract

In the summer of 1936, a civil war *erupted in Spain and changed the course of the nation's history*, laying bare the worst-case scenario of partisanship, factionalism, and religious zeal. As much as the conflict affected Spain, however, it also led to a reckoning in surrounding states as they grappled with how to handle the conflict. The ultimate response of the Non-Intervention Agreement was, in the eyes of many, a failure—not just diplomatically or politically, but also morally.

Some, however, were not content to sit back while Spain battled itself. Irish politician Patrick Belton helped form the Irish Christian Front, a massive popular movement which swept over Ireland during the early days of the war and whose immediate goal was to aid General Francisco *Franco's Nationalist cause, which they saw as the last protector of the Catholic faith in Spain*. The ICF was short-lived, yet moved hundreds of thousands of people and raised significant donations for the movement. This paper seeks to examine the role Belton played in shaping and mobilizing *public opinion in support of Franco. Belton's involvement in the Spanish Civil War is too often overshadowed by the more well-known figures of the day; this paper will argue that while his fraught political ambitions ultimately led to his downfall, Belton played an instrumental role in molding the public response in support of the Nationalist uprising in Spain*. This paper will examine newspaper sources, government records, and journal entries in addition to analyzing existing scholarship.

## Introduction & Context

In the summer of 1936, a civil war erupted in Spain that changed the course of the nation's history, laying bare the worst-case scenario of partisanship, factionalism, and religious zeal. As much as the conflict affected Spain, however, it also led to a reckoning in surrounding states as they grappled with how to handle the conflict.

When the fighting first began, the Spanish Republic turned to its ally Léon Blum, socialist prime minister of France, for support. Blum initially pledged “materiel” to their cause, but once this was leaked to the right-wing press it divided public opinion in France's already-volatile political climate. Despite wanting to retain the support of his Popular Front party, Blum feared that continued support of the Republic would anger far-right dissidents and lead to the Spanish Civil War spilling across the border and into his own country.<sup>1</sup> Blum was also eager to retain France's relationship with Great Britain, whose position on the conflict was clear. Conservative British prime minister Stanley Baldwin told Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden that, “on no account, regardless of what France or any other country does, should we join in the struggle alongside the Russians” in order to maintain their post-World War I policy of appeasement with Germany.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Baldwin and others in the British government saw the conflict as “Rebel versus Rabble,” and felt that the Nationalist uprising was the best way to contain growing communist sentiment in the country.<sup>3</sup>

Blum's solution, the Non-Intervention Agreement, served to placate domestic opinion without causing an immediate rift in the broader European peace. Britain readily agreed, and other powers on the continent were quick to follow suit. By the end of September, the twenty-seven

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<sup>1</sup> Casanova, *A Short History of the Spanish Civil War*, 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 65-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

nations of the Non-Intervention Committee had also agreed to prohibit exports of arms and ammunition to Spain.

However, it was an open secret that the policies of the Non-Intervention Agreement were oft violated. Hitler and Mussolini had begun sending material aid to the Nationalists before the agreement was signed and continued to do so throughout the conflict. These contributions helped turn a coup with an uncertain outcome into a protracted, vicious civil war, which only intensified when the Soviet Union retaliated by offering support to the Republic.<sup>4</sup> Many citizens of nations signed onto the NIA were also not content to sit by while Spain battled itself and joined the International Brigades organized by the Communist International.<sup>5</sup> What began as a partial military uprising quickly grew to a war of international significance, testing nations' commitment to their ideals and vision of a European peace.

The Irish Free State signed the NIA in August, yet was itself experiencing some internal unrest. Following the turbulence after the Irish Civil War of 1922-1923, Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil party enjoyed a quick rise to power, and by 1933 had an overall majority in the Dáil.<sup>6</sup> The next few years saw increasing tensions between the "far-right" and "far-left" of Ireland. The fascist-leaning National Guard led by General Eoin O'Duffy, more popularly known as the Blueshirts, clashed with the IRA during the 1933 elections before de Valera's government decisively put a stop to the movement the following year.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this violence, neither communism nor fascism enjoyed as strong a following in Ireland as it did elsewhere in continental Europe. Cronin argues that in the Irish instance, the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>6</sup> Pašeta, *Modern Ireland: A Very Short Introduction*, 90-1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Church had “[co-opted] fascist ideas as a way of providing new paradigms for the advancement of theological belief,” and, as it had done throughout the centuries, adapted to the politics of the day.<sup>8</sup> Unlike in Italy, however, where fascism superseded the dominant role of Catholicism, Irish politics and public image were much more dependent on the Church and, without a legitimate communist threat, the Irish hierarchy did not have a reason to resort to more extreme, fascist measures.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, despite O’Duffy’s admiration for fascist movements in Europe, his agenda was not “fully fascistised”<sup>10</sup> and the Blueshirts “in reality offered little more than a pale imitation of the German, Spanish, and Italian varieties.”<sup>11</sup> Sean Lemass, then Minister for Industry and Commerce, commented that O’Duffy’s “knowledge of Fascism appears to have been acquired during a fortnight’s cruise on the Mediterranean.”<sup>12</sup> While “fascism” is a difficult concept to categorically pin down, O’Duffy indeed did not meet Madeline Albright’s definition of a fascist as “someone who identifies strongly with and claims to speak for a whole nation or group, is unconcerned with the rights of others, and is willing to use whatever means are necessary—including violence—to achieve his or his goals.”<sup>13</sup> His movement was certainly a far cry from the more successful fascism of Italy and Germany which, for example, suppressed workers, farmers, and rights of free speech with extremely violent tactics.<sup>14</sup>

As for the far-left, Ireland was too deeply Catholic to fully embrace communism, and indeed the majority harbored strong anti-Red sentiment on that basis alone. De Valera’s use of the harsh Public Safety Act against both the Blueshirts and IRA further curtailed any militant uprising

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<sup>8</sup> Cronin, “Catholicising Fascism, Fascistising Catholicism?”, 407.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 408.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 405.

<sup>11</sup> Pašeta, *Modern Ireland: A Very Short Introduction* 92.

<sup>12</sup> Manning, *The Blueshirts*, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Albright, *Fascism: A Warning*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Renton, *Fascism : Theory and Practice*.

from either end of the political spectrum.<sup>15</sup> While more radical political organization in Ireland was already unlikely, the government's one-track focus on increased sovereignty led to a zero-tolerance policy on anything which might inhibit it.

The Spanish Civil War thus brought to the forefront the tension, passion, and sometimes hypocrisy behind Irish political opinion. While many in Ireland were advocating for their country's right to self-determination, they were simultaneously on the side of the Nationalist coup against the Spanish Republic's democratically-elected government. Despite de Valera's determination to remain neutral for the best interests of the Free State's future, some saw the turmoil as an opportunity. One such man was Teachta Dála (member of parliament) Patrick Belton, who helped form the Irish Christian Front, a massive popular movement which swept over Ireland during the early days of the Spanish Civil War and whose immediate goal was to aid General Francisco Franco's Nationalist cause, which the ICF saw as the last protector of the Catholic faith in Spain.

While Belton served in the Dáil at various points over the span of nearly a decade, was involved in the Easter Rising, and, according to his own account, initiated Michael Collins into the Irish Republican Brotherhood,<sup>16</sup> in historical accounts he is often pushed to the side in disdain and, when written about extensively, tends to evoke something between perfunctory distaste and unbridled hatred. Stradling refers to him as "one of an unholy trinity of evil reactionaries in the hall of infamy of the Irish left,"<sup>17</sup> while McGarry writes of him as a "rabid anti-Semite" and "a right-wing firebrand who had served time for riotous behaviour at a cattle market."<sup>18</sup> He evoked

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<sup>15</sup> Pašeta, *Modern Ireland: A Very Short Introduction*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Dempsey, "Belton, Patrick," <https://dib.cambridge.org>.

<sup>17</sup> Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War*, 128.

<sup>18</sup> McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: A Self-Made Hero*, 254, 261.



similar responses in his own time. Some of his contemporaries called him a “dirty dog”<sup>19</sup> and “an able but erratic individual with no use for discretion.”<sup>20</sup>

Belton was indeed a hateful character—reactionary, rambling, populist, and prejudiced, he serves as an uncomfortable reminder of Ireland’s less romantic past. However, his role in the Irish Christian Front cannot be ignored. The ICF was short-lived, yet moved hundreds of thousands of people across the nation and raised significant donations for the Nationalist cause.

By synthesizing existing literature surrounding the ICF and analyzing contemporary newspaper coverage of both the movement and Belton, this paper seeks to examine the role Belton played in shaping and mobilizing public opinion in support of Franco. Belton’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War is too often overshadowed by more well-known figures of the day, as existing literature tends to focus on General Eoin O’Duffy’s Irish Brigade or the Christian Front as a whole rather than the fact that the success—and failure—of the organization hinged on Belton as its president and primary public figure. This paper will argue that while his fraught political ambitions ultimately led to his downfall, Belton played an instrumental role in channeling the Irish response to the Nationalist uprising in Spain into a mass public movement.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>20</sup> Dempsey, “Belton, Patrick,” <https://dib.cambridge.org>.

## Belton Before the Spanish Civil War

Belton began his professional career by joining the civil service in London at the age of seventeen and was later assigned to the land commission in Dublin. After his suspension for taking part in the Easter Rising and subsequent court martial for his involvement with the Irish National Aid Association, Belton went on to start a number of profitable businesses in agriculture and construction.<sup>21</sup>

In 1922, 1923, and 1926 he unsuccessfully contested two general and one by-election before successfully standing for the 1927 general election with Fianna Fáil.<sup>22</sup> Led by Eamon de Valera, the party categorically refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Free State Constitution, which included an oath to the British monarch and commonwealth. However, in July 1927, the government introduced several crucial bills in the Dáil which would remove “the provision permitting referenda by popular demand” and compel candidates to swear to take the oath before their name could appear on the ballot.<sup>23</sup> This legislation would effectively end any official Fianna Fáil activity. Upon reviewing the bills, Belton decided to defy party policy and take the oath, which resulted in his immediate and unanimous expulsion from Fianna Fáil. Belton and de Valera proceeded to insult one another’s character in the press, with Belton criticizing de Valera’s hypocrisy and de Valera claiming that Belton had intended to take the oath all along.<sup>24</sup> Less than a month after Belton’s unceremonious removal from the party, de Valera (with the help of strong supporters such as Sean Lemass, future Minister for Industry and Commerce, leader of Fianna Fail, and Taoiseach) decided that members would be permitted to “sign the roll book containing

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<sup>21</sup> Dempsey, “Belton, Patrick,” <https://dib.cambridge.org>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ó Beacháin, “‘Slightly Constitutional’ Politics: Fianna Fáil’s Tortuous Entry to the Irish Parliament, 1926-7,” 384.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 385.

the public pledge ‘and did not intend or wish it to be inferred that we intended to give allegiance to the English King.’”<sup>25</sup> While inconsistent with most of Belton’s future political decisions, he was in this instance ahead of the curve—though it did him no favors with the political establishment, and instead created lasting enemies.

Following his expulsion from Fianna Fáil, Belton became a founding member of the National Centre Party, which in 1933 aligned with Cumann na nGaedheal to form Fine Gael.<sup>26</sup> In the newly merged party, Belton was closely associated with leader General O’Duffy, who appointed him to the national executive.<sup>27</sup> As mentioned previously, O’Duffy also headed the right-wing Blueshirt faction, which took a hard line against the Fianna Fáil government, particularly on the issue of land annuities and cattle seizures. O’Duffy also “embraced the view that Ireland should become a corporate state run on vocational lines; that it should utilise the liturgy of fascism; and should challenge” ideas of parliamentary democracy.<sup>28</sup> O’Duffy was dismissed as leader in 1934 largely due to these radical policies.

During this split, Belton made repeated peace efforts with Fine Gael, urging the rest of the executive to reinstate O’Duffy as president. However, as a former fellow party member noted, “Belton as a peacemaker was as realistic as an olivebranch [sic] in the beak of a vulture.”<sup>29</sup> The party leadership had no desire to reconcile and responded to these attempts by expelling Belton altogether. Nevertheless, Manning describes this parting as “amicable.” United Ireland later reported that Belton “should perhaps never have been in the party” due to his “natural inclination

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 388.

<sup>26</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Cronin, “Catholicising Fascism, Fascistising Catholicism?”, 403.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy: A Self-Made Hero*, 272.

to play a lone hand.”<sup>30</sup> Despite the initial uproar after O’Duffy’s resignation, it soon became clear that prolonged public controversy between the General and Fine Gael would only benefit Fianna Fáil, and so the party ceased to engage.<sup>31</sup>

After O’Duffy became resigned to the fact that he would not regain leadership of Fine Gael, he and Belton began plans for the New Land League to mobilize farmers against land annuities. Belton proved to be more radical than O’Duffy in this pursuit, and joined with another Blueshirt member to form a “Demolition Squad” which engaged in road blocks. However, a government crackdown on such agitation soon put an end to their efforts.<sup>32</sup> While these provocative actions did little to advance Belton’s cause, they confirmed his place as a political instigator and outsider and created a lasting impression on his contemporaries in the government.

Following the failed New Land League, Belton and O’Duffy’s next enterprise was the creation of the National Corporate Party, which did not emerge in earnest until June 1935. The party was originally intended to have Belton as leader and focus on corporatism and agricultural issues.<sup>33</sup> O’Duffy’s idea of the corporate state was influenced by Mussolini and largely based on the writings of Pope Pius XI. However, for reasons discussed above, this was not a truly fascist enterprise. His vision was instead concerned with the “preservation of conservative and Catholic values, as well as the defence of the existing system against radical alternative conceptions of domestic organisations,”<sup>34</sup> which meant rejecting communism and calling for parliamentary

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<sup>30</sup> Manning, *The Blueshirts*, 169-70.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 198.

<sup>32</sup> McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy: A Self-Made Hero*, 277.

<sup>33</sup> Manning, *The Blueshirts*, 172, 199.

<sup>34</sup> Cronin, “Catholicising Fascism, Fascistising Catholicism?”, 405.

representation from professional and vocational groups that would have a direct say on legislation that affected their respective fields.<sup>35</sup>

Support for the NCP was lackluster from the start, with O'Duffy's frequent trips abroad perhaps hindering its initial formation.<sup>36</sup> Like the New Land League, it quickly faded into irrelevance and scarcely impacted the political landscape of the time.

### **Overview of the Belton and the Irish Christian Front in the Spanish Civil War**

After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July of 1936, Ireland's press was inundated with confused and sometimes misleading reports of mass chaos and violence, often perpetrated against members of the clergy. As weeks passed, however, a clearer narrative began to shape up: Franco's Nationalist rebels had revolted against the ungodly forces of Communism in the Spanish Republic and were fighting to defend a Christian way of life. On the same page which the Irish Independent published the Christian Front's first manifesto, it also printed a picture depicting Carmelite relics removed from their tombs by Republicans, an article claiming that thirty priests were murdered by "Reds," and a statement that Ireland had been represented at the Congress of the Comintern for the first time.<sup>37</sup> Not every news outlet took such a direct stance. However, such evocative articles about beheaded nuns, burned churches, and execution line-ups of priests

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<sup>35</sup> Manning, *The Blueshirts*, 84.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

<sup>37</sup> "Comrade Murray," *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Aug. 29, 1936.

captured the imagination of the Irish people, 90% of whom identified as Catholic,<sup>38</sup> and who were horrified at what they believed their fellows in faith to be enduring.

By August, newspaper coverage shows that Belton had managed to channel that outrage into a movement whose purported purpose was to provide humanitarian relief—the Irish Christian Front. The organization grew to be the largest of its kind in Ireland, and channeled public opinion on the Spanish Civil War. First convened by the Fine Gael Lord Mayor of Dublin, Alfred Byrne, the ICF soon named Belton president. Dr. James P. Brennan was appointed vice-president, Alexander McCabe as secretary, and Aileen O’Brien as organizing secretary. Brennan was a coroner from county Dublin and an executive member of Cummann Poblachta nah Eireann, an IRA-supported republican party founded in March 1936, while McCabe had a darker political past, having previously been imprisoned for his involvement with the People’s National Party, a pro-Nazi organization.<sup>39</sup> O’Brien was an American whom the Special Branch believed had previously been involved with the “White Guards” in Russia and a quasi-militant anti-communist group in Geneva, and who later become involved with pro-Franco groups in America and Britain.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Belton was by far the most notorious public figure in the leadership.

The ICF’s first manifesto was widely circulated by the press and framed the Spanish Civil War as a battle for Christianity. It also immediately addressed concerns about Belton’s position in the Dáil: “We disagree entirely with the views expressed here and there who say that prominent public men should not be identified with this movement.”<sup>41</sup> The fiery document asserted that the Christian Front “was founded by Irish working men and women”<sup>42</sup> before detailing the ways in

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<sup>38</sup> Cronin, “Catholicising Fascism, Fascistising Catholicism?”, 401.

<sup>39</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 110, 123.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 110-11.

<sup>41</sup> “Manifesto to the Irish People,” *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Aug. 29, 1936.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*.

which Communism had gained a foothold in Spain at the expense of the Church. Despite the strong language used, the manifesto made clear that the ICF's goal was to supply medical aid, provisions for refugees, and Red Cross Ambulance units. It also took a tough line against any sympathizers with the Spanish Republic, asking "Are the supporters of the Spanish Government in this country not approving of those atrocities by supporting the Government? That being so, are they not preparing and longing for the day when a like fate will over-take the Christian churches in this country?"<sup>43</sup> The document did not hesitate to make a clear connection between supporting the Republican cause and a future Communist takeover in Ireland, utilizing religious rhetoric to capture the attention of the populace. Marxism in Ireland was limited to "a few self-proclaimed Communists;"<sup>44</sup> however, printed alongside graphic pictures of defiled tombs and reports of dozens of murdered priests, the ICF's call for humanitarian aid to the beleaguered Catholics of Spain would have seemed like a just and worthy cause for the Catholics of Ireland eager to help their brethren on the continent.

Indeed, the rabid interest stirred by the outbreak of the war gave both Belton and O'Duffy the opportunity to abandon the floundering National Corporate Party in favor of more popular pursuits. However, Belton quickly distinguished his enterprise from O'Duffy's more militaristic aims with his newly formed Irish Brigade. At the first public ICF demonstration, he noted that "Personally he did not favour military help, but at the same time he admired the courage and zeal of those who were prepared to make the supreme sacrifice . . ."<sup>45</sup> While distancing himself from his old friend, he was also careful not to alienate himself entirely from the popular Brigade.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Bowyer, "Ireland and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939," 145.

<sup>45</sup> "Anti-Communist Demonstration," *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Aug. 31, 1936.

Belton further asserted from the beginning of the movement that it was not a political entity, though this was soon to be contradicted by his own actions and words. In its early days, the ICF put considerable pressure on the Government as mass demonstrations and the steady rise of local branches proved to de Valera just how strong popular support for the Nationalist cause was. De Valera, himself a Catholic and likely a supporter of Franco, was limited in how harshly he could challenge the movement.<sup>46</sup> However much the Christian Front quieted his public voice, his private strategy was nonetheless cemented. De Valera was committed to neutrality for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the fact that violating the Non-Intervention Agreement would evoke the ire of Great Britain and jeopardize future treaty negotiations. Joe Walshe, policy advisor to de Valera, assured the British Government that the Free State would follow the prime minister's lead on measures to curb volunteers to Spain. In addition to maintaining diplomatic norms, the two governments were further concerned that the Irish Civil War would see a second act on Spanish soil, and that Irish Blueshirts fighting for Franco would clash with English communists in the International Brigades.<sup>47</sup>

These fears were justified. A joint manifesto of leftist parties published in 1937 confirms that Belton's activities played a role in stirring up old political divides: "We saw General O'Duffy, Patrick Belton and others, who but three years ago were in the forefront of a blatant effort to uproot democratic government in this country, organising financial and even military support for the war to overthrow the Spanish Republican Government. It was now clear that the same sinister forces that had stampeded the Irish people into the Great War in 1914 were again at work . . ."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 53.



The first Christian Front rallies further raised concerns that the anti-Communist violence of April 1935 would be repeated. Garda Commissioner Ned Broy advised the Minister for Justice “that if the speakers incite the audience mass attacks on person and property of Communist and Republican Congress Organisations may be attempted.”<sup>49</sup> While hecklers were treated roughly and chased out of several rallies, the threat of mob violence never fully materialized.

However, as McGarry notes, the “hysterical scenes” at some rallies “suggest that for many supporters, the appeal of the Christian Front was more emotional than intellectual.”<sup>50</sup> This was reflected in Belton’s populist rhetoric. During the mass 100,000-person rally on Dublin Green in late October, Belton referred to potential “insidious attacks by agents in various guises” in Ireland, and how “Spain, a few years ago, seemed as impervious to Communism as any country in the world, and yet a Red Front had been established there.”<sup>51</sup> His blatant fear-mongering struck a chord with the crowd, as did the stark terms he couched the war in. Belton noted that “they were, to-day, spectators of a war in Christian Catholic Spain in which one side stood nakedly for the dethronement of God and the abolition of Christian worship, and the other stood for the Catholic Christian traditions in Spain.”<sup>52</sup> This meeting marked the height of the ICF’s influence, and arguably the peak of Belton’s ability to toe the line between public outrage and acceptability.

With no established criteria for membership, no elected leadership, and little coordination between local branches and the standing committee in Dublin, the ICF was less organized than any political party or even other Catholic Action groups.<sup>53</sup> Various members suggested different methods to establish membership such as registers in city centers, while others felt that no such

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 113.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>51</sup> “Greet Dublin Meeting,” *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Oct. 26, 1936.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 111.

official membership was necessary. For his part, Belton advocated for leadership elections which would further formalize his control over the entire enterprise.<sup>54</sup> Groups from all sides distrusted Belton's motivations behind this endeavor. Leftist republicans saw his cause as less of a Christian Front and more of a front for fascism, while other republicans based their vocal dislike of Belton on his "personal defects."<sup>55</sup> Fianna Fáil was naturally suspicious of Belton's stance against neutrality, while many Fine Gael members were still distrustful of him following his role in splitting the party over O'Duffy's leadership just two years previously.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile, support from local clergy members was strong, as priests felt a connection with the Spanish Christian struggle. In early September, the *Independent* reported that "Many parishes have set up committees to undertake arrangements for house-to-house or church-gate collections" and that "In many cases the local priests are giving every co-operation possible."<sup>57</sup> In contrast, support from leaders higher up in the church hierarchy was sporadic, slower to come in and quicker to leave. Many harbored fears that Belton would turn the ICF into a Catholic political party.

By the end of 1936, cracks were beginning to show in the Christian Front leadership. A trip to Spain by Belton prompted Brennan to step down as vice-president, followed just two weeks later by the resignation of secretary McCabe. The papers sensed a scandal and jumped on the departure of these two leading figures, and while details at the time were scant, it contributed to the overall atmosphere of increasing distrust in Belton's leadership as he also became embroiled in public disputes with religious leaders and government ministers. The *Irish Press* felt

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 124.

<sup>57</sup> "The Conflict in Spain – Irish Christian Front," *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Sep. 3, 1936.

comfortable enough to launch more direct attacks, from which it had previously had to abstain due to the mass popularity and Catholicism of the organization.

In February 1937, the ICF held its first conference, which had the unintended effect of further laying bare the ways in which the organization had fractured. There were questions of whether or not Belton should continue to lead the movement, and several delegates directly accused him of having political motivations, despite his protestations to the contrary:

**Mr. Sweeney**—It is generally understood in the country, and there is a feeling that this organisation was formed with a political object. Politics will kill it.

**Mr. Belton**—I cannot allow you to proceed. Has there been any accusation against the organisation by friends and supports of the Christian Front?

At this point, there were opposing cries of “No and “Yes” from various delegates.<sup>58</sup>

While the ICF and Belton attempted to bill the conference as a success, many local branches fell apart or rebranded shortly after its conclusion.<sup>59</sup>

The remainder of that month focused primarily on the passage of the impending Non-Intervention Bill and how it would affect ICF activities. Belton’s numerous heated clashes with the Government during Dáil debates on the issue were incompatible with his continued claims that the Christian Front was non-partisan.

In April, the ICF attempted to rally flagging support with another large Dublin demonstration advocating for Franco alongside other Christian Front ideals. Newspapers reported attendance at between 10,000 and 20,000, with the Irish Press gleefully noting “An almost constant barrage of interruptions, cheers, and boohs, accompanied by frequent scuffles between

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<sup>58</sup> “Lessons from Spain,” *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Feb. 4, 1937.

<sup>59</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 130.

the police and a small section”<sup>60</sup> of the crowd. Belton’s speech was markedly more extreme and contradictory than in previous appearances, and the increased presence of hecklers demonstrated that Belton and his organization had become more of a political sideshow than a legitimate threat. Nevertheless, the Press did not hesitate to drive home its (and, by extension, the Government’s) unfavorable opinion, and published an editorial denouncing Belton’s rhetoric at the rally as “of so grave and menacing a character that it is imperative that the public should know without delay whether in the threats of civil war and anarchy in which he indulged he did or did not speak for the organisation of which he is President.”<sup>61</sup> In reality, however, the dwindling ICF had no such ability to follow through on Belton’s claims.

Following the April rally, the Christian Front further devolved as scandals swirling around Belton, O’Duffy, and misspent funds dominated the narrative of the movement. The organization became increasingly erratic, and radical calls for action from the people and the Government rendered Belton and the ICF less of a threat—while their previously modest asks posed a real alternative to the official stance the previous autumn, their hot-headed agenda of summer was so unrealistic that it absolved the Government of the need to take them seriously.<sup>62</sup>

As May came to a close, Belton turned his focus to his reelection campaign, which was largely based on “financial assistance for farmers, the prevention of Jewish immigration and a ban on communism.”<sup>63</sup> Apparently these issues no longer resonated with his constituency, and he lost to a Labour opponent. Other Catholic Action groups, who had been quietly working in the background of the ICF’s firestorm, took over Ireland’s activism regarding Spain. Speaking

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<sup>60</sup> “Stormy Scene at I.C.F. Rally,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Apr. 5, 1937.

<sup>61</sup> Mr. Belton’s Threat,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Apr. 6, 1937.

<sup>62</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 131.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

engagements of pro-Franco priests and lecturers—which had been originally organized by the Christian Front—were diverted to groups such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians and An Rioghacht, and the Catholic Young Men’s Society, which had embraced the ICF, launched independent “prayer crusades.” Besides these devotional efforts, support for Franco became mostly limited to Dáil debate and newspaper editorials.<sup>64</sup> The minutes of the final ICF meeting indicate an intention to reconvene, but these plans never materialized, and the movement was officially ended.

### **Belton’s Inevitable Political Agenda**

From the Irish Christian Front’s inception, Belton claimed that the movement was not intended to be a political party. Coming from Belton, a man who had scarcely had a quiet, nonpartisan public moment for nearly the past decade, this was hard for many to believe. Nevertheless, his choice of words proved effective in the early days of the ICF, as it was difficult to speak out harshly against a Catholic aid organization. While O’Duffy’s leadership of the Irish Brigade “encouraged many to revert to a picture of O’Duffy as an extremist, who lacked the sense of responsibility of his more mature political rivals,”<sup>65</sup> Belton’s presidency of the humanitarian-focused ICF seemed to allow for a brief rehabilitation of his image, or at least the possibility of it. However, the political nature of his leadership also cemented the demise of the organization and subsequently mass unified action for the Nationalist cause in Ireland.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 132, 133.

<sup>65</sup> Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War*, 13.

Initially, Belton was able to keep up this façade of nonpartisanship. When ICF treasurer John Corr put forth a Dublin County Council resolution in September of 1936 to censure the Government for permitting representatives of the Spanish Republic to remain in the Saorstát, Belton countered with a far milder suggestion that instead requested that the Government terminate trade relations. He acknowledged that while “Nobody would accuse him of being a blind supporter of the Government . . . they would have to ask themselves what was the position of the Government . . . The putting of the Spanish representative out of the country might mean European war.”<sup>66</sup> In an uncharacteristic nod to de Valera, Belton went on to say that while he loathed Communism, he would not favor the carrying of a more extreme resolution if he were in the President’s shoes.<sup>67</sup>

However, this relative mildness was not to last. At the mass Dublin rally in late October, he used his platform to call more strongly for severing trade ties: “‘Unfortunately,’ he said, ‘we still continue to maintain special trade relations with the Spanish Government, which facilitated the shipment of a consignment of fat cattle, eggs, and butter to the Spanish Communists from the port of Dublin.’”<sup>68</sup> This rally marked a turning point in perceptions of Belton’s leadership of the ICF. Not only did the huge, often frenetic crowd showcase the widespread appeal of the movement, but Belton’s increasingly political speeches also proved that he was willing to attempt to harness this energy for his own agenda. This disturbed members of the hierarchy, politicians, and members of the Christian Front itself. Even Secretary McCabe seemed wary of Belton’s motivations. In a letter to Liam de Róiste, Cork ICF organizer, he commented that he “felt almost appalled & to

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<sup>66</sup> “County Councils Debate Issue,” *Irish Press*, (Dublin, Ireland), Sep. 1, 1936.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> “Great Dublin Meeting,” (*Irish Independent*, (Dublin, Ireland), Oct. 26, 1936.

think that any of us who have helped to put it going should now, or later exploit it for any other purpose than that for which it was intended.”<sup>69</sup>

In late November, the *Irish Press* published a scathing editorial claiming that the Christian Front was a Fine Gael puppet bent on conflating the Government with communism. The article was hyperbolic, with little basis in political reality, as the Fine Gael leadership did not want to be too closely associated with Belton. However, it reflected the wider view that the ICF was being used as a political tool, as well as Fianna Fáil’s specific concern that the organization was undermining support for de Valera’s policy of neutrality.

The editorial did not mention Belton by name, but a month later the Press published his response to the accusation. Belton claimed that questioning the Christian Front’s intentions was an attack upon himself and retaliated by calling the paper a “pink” publication. Rather inadeptly, Belton continued to confirm the paper’s assertion that he was attempting to associate the Government with Communism by attacking the editor of the Government’s own paper: “I will ask the editor . . . is he Communist, and if he says ‘No,’ I hope he will act up to it, and I hope we will hear no more about Catholic Moors or of boastful featuring in the front page of his newspaper that Irishmen have died fighting in the ranks of antichrist in Spain or anywhere else.”<sup>70</sup> Any political adroitness or subtlety Belton had displayed in previous months was quickly falling to the wayside in favor of his usual bombastic, reactionary style.

The end of 1936 and beginning of 1937 saw mounting worries that the ICF was becoming a reiteration of the old Blueshirt movement. The Press reported Minister for Finance Seán MacEntee’s statement that “The self-appointed champions of Christianity were the men who tried

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 124.

<sup>70</sup> “Mr. Belton Replies,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Dec. 23, 1936.

to sabotage the whole local services in 1934 or 1935 because they thought to paralyse the arm of Fianna Fáil.”<sup>71</sup> Around this time, ICF membership lost wider, nonpartisan support as meetings began addressing issues like the economic war and the threat posed by republicans—familiar themes to old Blueshirt members.<sup>72</sup> Many people had undoubtedly joined the movement with genuine motives for helping Spain, and while Belton was able to capitalize off that sentiment at first, its limitations were becoming clear.

The February convention was also marred by accusations of Belton’s ulterior motives. Despite managing to keep the presidency of the ICF, debates on the Non-Intervention Bill later that month confirmed beyond reasonable doubt that his plans for the organization were distinctly political. Ireland had joined the Non-Intervention Committee in August 1936, and by the end of September participating nations had also agreed to prohibit exports of arms and ammunition to Spain—though this was frequently ignored by Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union. The bill introduced in the Dáil in February 1937 extended “the non-intervention agreement to cover the recruitment in, the transit through or departure from, their respective countries of persons of non-Spanish nationality proposing to proceed to Spain or the Spanish dependencies for the purpose of taking service in the present civil war.”<sup>73</sup> The Non-Intervention Committee also requested that Ireland place a ban on the export of “war material,” but declined to define what these materials were. Much of the opposition to the bill was centered around fears that these clauses would put a stop to the Christian Front’s humanitarian aid as well as O’Duffy’s Irish Brigade.

De Valera requested that the bill be passed as a matter of some urgency. Accordingly, Belton tabled several amendments which, the Press was quick to note, were surely “designed to

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 127.

<sup>72</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 127.

<sup>73</sup> Republic of Ireland. *Dáil Éirann Debate*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (1937).



delay its [the bill's] coming into operation.”<sup>74</sup> The amendments included a proposal “that the Bill should not come into operation until the Government has presented a scheme ‘for enforcing non-intervention,’” an amendment to make it illegal for anyone in the Free State to trade with either side of the conflict, and one preventing the Garda from arresting persons suspected of violating the bill without sworn information. He also proposed that combatants be exempt from the ban on travel to Spain from Ireland, and sought to have it declared that “the rendering of necessary services to either of the combatants in the civil war should not be regarded as military service” and should therefore not be prosecuted as such.<sup>75</sup> The aim of the cessation of trade with the Spanish Republic, which Belton had been touting for several months, was clearly represented in these amendments, as was the blatant attempt to exempt the ICF from any potential ill consequences. In another display of obstinance, Belton proposed an amendment that would prevent the Dáil from granting a second reading of the bill until the Government formally recognized Franco’s regime.<sup>76</sup>

During the debate itself, Belton was erratic. His false claims, poor Spanish pronunciation, and hours-long speeches evoked derision throughout the sessions and precluded him from being taken as a serious opposition voice. He began one session by claiming that “The President is asking us to forego what we were taught at school, that is, to defend our religion with our lives if it were threatened” and that the Non-Intervention Committee was “composed of the Radical Socialist and Communist nations of Europe.”<sup>77</sup> His statements only became more outlandish as he declared that by saying the conflict was between Fascism and democracy, de Valera had gone against the word of the Cardinal Primate of Spain, who said the conflict was a fight between Christ and anti-Christ. As such, Belton alleged that the president “has said in effect that the Cardinal Primate of Spain is

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<sup>74</sup> “Spanish Civil War Bill Amendment,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Feb. 23, 1937.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Republic of Ireland. *Dáil Éirann Debate*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (1937).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

a liar.”<sup>78</sup> Throughout the rest of the debates on the bill, Belton continued to make such bold claims as “99.9 per cent. of the Irish people stand for the recognition of General Franco.”<sup>79</sup> Belton also asserted that he “had always a doubt that the Fianna Fáil Party was ‘pink,’ but, after the disclosures made here this evening through its chief spokesman, [he was] now afraid that it is ‘red.’”<sup>80</sup> At various points in his speeches, several deputies—including de Valera—devolved into laughter at Belton’s pronunciation of the Cardinal-Primate of Spain’s name, and derided his bold claims.

Despite these more controversial statements, several Fine Gael deputies voiced their support for the Christian Front during the debate, as well as their fears that the bill would curb its charitable activity. TD General Seán MacEoin noted that “Deputies may sneer at Deputy Belton and at the Christian Front movement as they like, but this is true, that the people of the country flocked to it and are flocking to it simply because it has as its object the helping of the wounded in Spain . . .”<sup>81</sup> Acknowledging the animosity towards Belton, MacEoin also brought attention to the fact that tens of thousands of Irish citizens across the country—constituents of deputies in the chamber— had joined the ICF and clearly believed in its cause.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of these debates for the Christian Front was not any prohibition of humanitarian aid by the Government, but Belton’s admission of his true intentions for the organization. Directly contradicting months of his own statements, Belton proudly proclaimed: “I happen to be President of one of the largest political organisations that ever existed in this country.”<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately for any true believers in the ICF cause, this confirmed every suspicion that the movement was everything Belton had spent so long claiming that it was not.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Republic of Ireland. *Dáil Éirann Debate*, Vol. 65, No. 5 (1937).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

With the help of Labour votes, the Non-Intervention Bill passed the Dáil. Unsurprisingly, none of Belton's amendments were included.

Despite calling the Christian Front “one of the largest political organizations in the country,” Belton utilized the April rally in Dublin to once again assert that the ICF neither represented nor was a political party. He then contradicted himself further by stating that while the movement was not political, it “had popular support not surpassed if equaled by any political party in the State, a good cause and inspiring programme, and plenty of finance to contest the General Election . . . [and] While they had never considered the question of going into politics, they had not forfeited their right to do so.”<sup>83</sup> The remainder of the event consisted largely of anti-Communist fear-mongering and the voicing of support for Franco. However, the drastically reduced attendance and increased heckling compared to the rally of the previous autumn was a clear indication that the majority of the Irish people had lost patience with or moved on from Belton's crusade.

In May, a publicized meeting of the executive revolved around “communist cells” in Dublin, as well as the need for increased censorship of nudist clubs and indecent films. At the meeting, it was also announced that a “special branch . . . to clean Irish Journalism from A to Z”<sup>84</sup> had been formed. The Christian Front's increasing calls for censorship worried some in the Dáil. TD Franck MacDermont expressed his fears in one speech, stating that he “was terrified lest pressure from some of the people connected with the Christian Front—who were passing resolutions demanding the suppression of Communism not only in public but in private, passing resolutions calling on the Government to make it a crime for a man to express Communistic

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<sup>83</sup> “War on Communism” *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Apr. 5, 1937.

<sup>84</sup> “Communist Cells in Dublin,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), May 11, 1937.

opinions in his own home—might lead to the incorporation in the new Constitution of provisions fatal to liberty.”<sup>85</sup> However, the ICF lacked the clout to realize any of these radical schemes.

Later that month, it was reported that Belton had been admitted to “a nursing home for complete rest”<sup>86</sup> and in August, he made public the fact that he would resign as president of the Christian Front due to poor health. Included in this announcement was his question, “where will be found a man of ability who will take up the difficult and thankless job to lead the country against Communism?”<sup>87</sup> Belton’s question never found an answer, and the ICF’s final meeting was held that October.

In the early days of the Christian Front, it gained mass popular appeal as a humanitarian solution to the horrors people saw in their daily papers. The organization was most successful when horror at “Red” atrocities was fresh and Belton was able to market the ICF as non-political, yet fundamentally anti-Communist in a way that allowed members to feel that they were helping push back the red tide which they feared might be on the brink of overtaking their own nation. However, Belton’s hot-headed style and maverick nature prevented him from walking the line of nonpartisanship and instead sent him hurtling over it, contributing to the demise of his briefly rehabilitated public image and of the Christian Front.

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<sup>85</sup> Republic of Ireland. *Dáil Éirann Debate*, Vol. 67, No. 13 (1937).

<sup>86</sup> “Mr. P. Belton, T.D.—‘Complete Rest,’” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Apr. 17, 1937.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 133.

## **The Church: Support and Suspicion**

Belton and the Irish Christian Front had a complicated relationship with the Catholic Church in Ireland. On one hand, many local priests readily voiced their support for the movement. They were perhaps even more concerned than the average Free State citizen about reports of abused Spanish clergy and were eager to support humanitarian aid to their fellow Catholics abroad. The hierarchy, however, was largely distrustful of Belton. While some prominent members publicly supported the ICF, others declined to become involved, citing fears of Belton's political machinations. This inability to gain the full support of the Church heavily contributed to the ultimate loss of public support of the Christian Front.

Prior to the formation of the ICF, Catholic Action groups had already experienced a period of growth in Ireland. Their rise was largely a response to increasing pessimism about the state of society after World War I, as the clergy felt that the rise of communism and fascism over liberal democracies meant that "modern capitalistic society was on the verge of collapse."<sup>88</sup> The Spanish Civil War seemed to confirm these fears. However, the founders of the ICF felt that existing organizations did not do enough to combat the perceived threat. When de Róiste suggested that these groups be incorporated into the Christian Front, McCabe replied that "All the existing Catholic organizations previous to our movement were either too timid or inert to stir in the direction you suggest."<sup>89</sup> As the only group involved in collecting medical supplies for the victims of the Spanish Civil War, the ICF was already moving beyond the scope of its predecessors.

Despite taking more concrete action than existent Catholic Action groups, the Christian Front's lack of support for military endeavors rendered itself a palatable option to the Church.

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<sup>88</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 114.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 120.

O'Duffy's Irish Brigade had harnessed religious sentiment regarding the Spanish Civil War despite official disapproval from much of the hierarchy, which concerned certain members of the religious community. The Jesuit-run Social Justice commented rather derisively that "one of our metropolitan dailies is giving prominent space to a proposal to send an Irish Brigade to Spain, on the principal apparently that if there is a fight going on 'the fighting race' should join in."<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, surviving accounts of Irish Brigade veterans show that most cited religious motivation for their volunteering.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, the Christian Front provided a safer, more publicly acceptable channel for these energies. As reflected in newspaper reports of the ICF's growth, many priests naturally helped lead the formation of local branches of the preeminent Christian movement, and also spoke at demonstrations and meetings.

The hierarchy, however, did not immediately voice support for the movement. A Cork Examiner article published in early September reports Belton's statement "That the Catholic Hierarchy of Ireland welcomed the advent of the Irish Christian Front . . . He was replying to a criticism that the Bishop of Ireland had not come forward to stand on the platform of the new organisation."<sup>92</sup> However, this was evidently a sensitive subject—when a young man attempted to ask questions about this claim, "He was immediately seized by a section of the crowd and was being roughly handled"<sup>93</sup> before he was ejected from the meeting.

Reticence from more prominent members of the Church was largely due to fears that the Front could become a partisan entity. Also in September, de Róiste was informed that several leading clergy members distrusted Belton's motives, noting that "There is a widespread suspicion

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<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Stradling, *The Irish and Spanish Civil War*, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Stradling, *The Irish and Spanish Civil War*, 28.

<sup>92</sup> "Communist Menace," *The Cork Examiner* (Cork, Ireland), Sep. 11, 1936.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

that this is an attempt to found a Catholic Political Party.”<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, by the end of the month Cardinal MacRory, Primate of All Ireland, voiced his tentative support for the movement, though he did not mention it by name:

We should all pray for Spain and, if able to, we should all help from our purses, help her to obtain war supplies—what I should say is medical supplies for her sick and wounded. I do not want to say anything about any other kind of help. As Christians, if we are able, we should be prepared to render that help to her.<sup>95</sup>

It is important to note that at the time, MacRory was secretly working with O’Duffy to facilitate the formation of the Irish Brigade. As such, Stradling reads the cardinal’s statement as tacit support for O’Duffy’s crusade.<sup>96</sup> However, McGarry notes that as the ICF was the only group distributing medical supplies, the statement points towards support for the Front.<sup>97</sup> Despite MacRory’s own private plotting, the ICF used his words to issue a new appeal for donations, stating that “we feel the Cardinal would wish our efforts to be increased tenfold.”<sup>98</sup> The legitimacy afforded by even MacRory’s vague endorsement evidently emboldened the Christian Front to push for redoubled charitable activity and growth.

However, a series of events and controversies beginning towards the end of 1936 and growing into the new year further strengthened perceptions that Belton’s motivations were political rather than pietistic, alienating him from the clergy once more. In the lead up to the ICF’s February convention, the *Irish Catholic* reported that “Behind the distrust of the organisation which is becoming more evident every day there lurks the suspicion that designing men intend, at some future date, to use the Front as a weapon for political ends” and expressed its wish that

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<sup>94</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 121.

<sup>95</sup> “Cardinal MacRory’s Message to Spain,” *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Sep. 21, 1936.

<sup>96</sup> Stradling, *The Irish and Spanish Civil War*

<sup>97</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 120.

<sup>98</sup> “Appeal for National Fund,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Sep. 22, 1936.

“When, therefore, the National Convention meets on February 3, it is to be hoped that it will select as leaders men who are in no way connected with party politics.”<sup>99</sup> The emerging scandal surrounding Belton and the Church’s National Collection funds further necessitated distance between the ICF and the hierarchy.

In the beginning of 1937, Belton’s antisemitism also became more evident. He wrote to MacRory that “The Jews have a stranglehold here & present arrivals mainly consist of those expelled from European countries for their communist activities . . . They did their job well in Spain & can do it here if not checkmated.”<sup>100</sup> His use of the ICF platform to promote antisemitism was concerning to both Jewish and Catholic faith leaders.<sup>101</sup>

In March, Belton attempted to repair his relationship with the hierarchy by inviting MacRory to bless ambulances at the upcoming rally on College Green. MacRory, however, “declined with thanks!”<sup>102</sup> This lack of visible support from the hierarchy mirrored concerns that had surrounded the first mass rally in Dublin. At the time, notable Irish radical Peadar O’Donnell commented that he was sure that that meeting was the ICF’s “undoing” because Belton had “let a couple of priests on the platform, and that only made people notice the people that weren’t there . . .”<sup>103</sup> The ICF’s continued decline in subsequent summer months was thus compounded by lack of hierarchical support.

On its surface, the Christian Front seemed like the perfect cause for the Church in Ireland to support. Strictly non-militant and ostensibly apolitical, the ICF’s goals were in line with the views of a church that feared the influence of both communism and fascism, and which was

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<sup>99</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 128.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 129.

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 131.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



justifiably distraught at reports of violence against Spanish priests and nuns. However, Belton's political background made the hierarchy wary from the start, and his later outbursts only proved these suspicions. Perhaps without Belton's influence, the ICF would have had an easier time gaining and benefiting from the support of the hierarchy. As it stood, an organization founded on religious sentiment could not last long without firmer support from religious leadership.

### **Scandal, Slander, and Several Public Letters**

During its short life, the Irish Christian Front was marred by a number of public scenes, many of which were—directly or indirectly—caused by Belton. His taste for controversy, blustering demeanor, and questionable handling of funds were a recipe for disaster, as was his penchant for letting it all play out in the public press. Ultimately, this undermined any credibility for the ICF, and allowed the government to ignore it and any legitimate grievances it may have had.

Some of Belton's public spats were with less prominent opponents and as such garnered less oppositional attention. For example, in November of 1936, Reverend Dr. Arthur H. Ryan, a professor at Queen's University, Belfast, published correspondence between himself and Belton in the Irish Press. Belton wrote to Ryan questioning a statement the professor made during a meeting of the Six-County Socialist Party, in which Ryan had referenced Belton and a report from the ICF. The report in question claimed to relay atrocities from Spain, but Ryan noted that while the events might be true, "the message gives no names, places, dates, nor witnesses," and as such

was “quite valueless as evidence, and quite useless as argument.”<sup>104</sup> Belton’s letter implied that since Ryan did not believe this report, he had communist sympathies. Defending such an unsubstantiated missive and accusing a demonstrably anti-communist member of the clergy of “Red” ideology did not help Belton’s already flagging reputation as the year came to a close.

In January 1937, Belton picked another fight in the press, but this time with a member of the government. After failing to obtain a meeting with the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Sean Lemass, Belton published a letter questioning him about a shipment of cattle and other food supplies that was reportedly bound for Valencia. The Free State and the Spanish Republic still retained diplomatic ties at this time, but Belton claimed to be concerned about whether the goods would be payed for with “stolen gold” which the Nationalists could later attempt to reclaim.<sup>105</sup> Lemass’ response, published the next day, was calculated to make Belton’s questions look foolish. The minister wrote that the ship was actually bound for the British Navy stationed in Gibraltar, and that he had deduced that Belton’s “sole purpose was to score some political advantage, however obscure, over the Government” and find another “excuse for publishing a letter in the press.”<sup>106</sup> Yet the letters did not stop there. In a typically bombastic response, Belton refuted Lemass’ claims by stating that he had gotten his information about the ship’s destination from the Irish Press, which had further reported that regular shipments of cattle were made to the Republic via Valencia. This argument might have been strong enough for Belton to retain his dignity on its own, despite the fact that the Free State still recognized the Republic as Spain’s legitimate government. However, he went on to call Lemass’ letter “vulgar abuse” and sharply criticized the Irish government for continuing to supply the Republic and it’s “army of the anti-christ, whose

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<sup>104</sup> “Rev. Dr. Ryan Replies to Mr. Belton,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Nov. 4, 1936.

<sup>105</sup> “Irish Cattle for Reds?,” *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Jan. 22, 1937.

<sup>106</sup> “Minister’s Reply to Deputy Belton,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Jan. 23, 1937.

hands are dripping with the blood of thousands of murdered priests and nuns . . .”<sup>107</sup> This colorful language made it easy for his opponents to turn an argument with a somewhat justifiable basis against him.

Several days later, the *Irish Press* utilized the incident to highlight concerns about Belton’s presidency of the ICF: “The action taken by Mr. Belton last week in connection with the despatch of fat cattle from the Port of Dublin to a contractor for the British Navy at Gibraltar has given a foretaste of what might be expected from him . . .”<sup>108</sup> should he continue to lead the ICF in politically turbulent times. Despite Belton’s legitimate concerns, his reputation and combative rhetorical style made it a simple matter for Lemass and the Press to disregard him by focusing on his hysteria rather than any actual issues.

The largest scandal which plagued most of the ICF’s existence was a question of funds amassed by the hierarchy. In late October 1936, Ireland’s bishops had announced a national collection for Spanish Catholics which, while separate from the Christian Front, did not seek to undermine it. Belton requested that a portion of these funds be given to the ICF. Cardinal MacRory, however, preferred to give the money to the Spanish Primate, Cardinal Goma, referencing the hierarchy’s dislike of Belton. MacRory noted “I think it much better that we should hand over the sum collected and let the Primate and his colleagues use it as they judge best . . . some of Mr Belton’s critics would grumble at our handing over their money to him.”<sup>109</sup> Belton did not give up so easily. With the help of ICF organizing secretary Aileen O’Brien, he made contact with Goma directly and convinced him to transfer the money. Belton travelled to Spain to secure the transaction through Father Alexander McCabe—rector of the Irish College at Salamanca (and not

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<sup>107</sup> “The Clonlara’s Cargo,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Jan. 26, 1937.

<sup>108</sup> “Warnings Disregarded,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Jan. 30, 1937.

<sup>109</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 121, 125.

to be confused with ICF Secretary Alexander McCabe). While previously on holiday in Ireland, Fr. McCabe had formed a poor opinion of Belton, referring to him in his diary as “a greedy shark,” “a cold fish,” and “a boor of the first order.”<sup>110</sup> Despite not being the most amenable of advocates, Fr. McCabe was able to successfully introduce Belton to the necessary parties.

After several contentious meetings, Goma drafted a statement of thanks for funds collected by the Christian Front before transferring much of the hierarchy’s collection, which amounted to today’s equivalent of nearly two million pounds,<sup>111</sup> to Belton. However, Belton’s disagreeable and “bullish” attitude had managed to turn Goma and members of the Nationalist army against him, and Goma later apologized to MacRory for transferring the funds without his consent. The affair was also deeply troubling to Brennan, who resigned over the matter, saying “I felt I could not give Mr. Belton my loyalty any longer.”<sup>112</sup> Secretary McCabe also distanced himself from the mission before resigning two weeks later.<sup>113</sup> These resignations signaled to the press and public that something was amiss among the ICF’s leadership, and in many ways marked the beginning of the end for the organization.

While rumors of misspent funds had been circulating for some time, the true nature of Belton’s trip to Spain was not made public until three months later when he mentioned his acquisition of the funds at the February conference. The Irish Press questioned the source of the money in a biting editorial against Belton,<sup>114</sup> who in turn refused to provide an answer.

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 125.

<sup>111</sup> Calculated using 2018 rates with the Bank of England’s Inflation Calculator, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>.

<sup>112</sup> “Irish Christian Front—Dr. Brennan’s Decision,” *Irish Independent* (Dublin, Ireland), Nov. 11, 1936.

<sup>113</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 126.

<sup>114</sup> “Dragged into the Maelstrom,” *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Feb. 4, 1936.

Matters were made worse when O'Duffy and other members of the Irish Brigade became involved, and the Irish Press appeared more than happy to let the implications against Belton unfold in its pages. In April, the paper published a statement from Captain Liam Walshe, O'Duffy's personal secretary, denying that the Irish Brigade had received any of the funds in question. The Press pointed out "that the impression which prevailed in the public mind was that" the ICF had been collecting supplies and sending ambulances for use of the Irish Brigade, and that the two organizations were closely linked.<sup>115</sup> Following several more statements from O'Duffy and pithy Press editorials on the subject, Belton wrote an acerbic reply that was heavier in emotion than facts. He claimed that "The ICF never got a penny of the proceeds of the collection, which, according to the published statement of His Eminence Cardinal MacRory, was transmitted to Spain,"<sup>116</sup> and mentions nothing of his own appeals to repatriate that money to Ireland and the Christian Front's own accounts. Belton further asserts that he had spoken to O'Duffy at length about the fact that the Irish Brigades would not receive ICF funds. In a personal callback to the 1934 Fine Gael split, Belton notes that "General O'Duffy will, I know, be the first to admit that when his friends deserted him a few years ago I was the only public man in Ireland that stood by him."<sup>117</sup> In subsequent letters, Belton called O'Duffy's claims "a national shame and humiliation"<sup>118</sup> while O'Duffy countered that the ICF only grew in popularity through "the reflected glory of the Brigade."<sup>119</sup> Belton's overwrought and convoluted correspondence with his old partner contributed to his image as a crank and were a significant blow to the credibility of the

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<sup>115</sup> "An Unprobed Mystery," *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Apr. 8, 1937.

<sup>116</sup> "Mr. Belton Replies," *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Aug. 5, 1937.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> "A National Shame," *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Aug. 11, 1937.

<sup>119</sup> "General O'Duffy's Final Word," *Irish Press* (Dublin, Ireland), Aug. 12, 1937.

ICF. They also had the effect of solidifying MacRory's dislike, as well as his disillusionment with the Christian Front as a whole.<sup>120</sup>

Belton's numerous and passionate letters to the press often either caused new scandals or worsened existing ones. His unique aversion to nuance may have made for exciting reading, but also severely damaged the reputation of his organization by displaying his faults to his followers and providing ample fodder to those who wished to see him deposed.

## **Conclusion**

In little more than a year, Belton acted as the catalyst for the rise and demise of a movement that mobilized over a hundred thousand people domestically and moved medical supplies and millions of pounds across international borders. The popularity of the endeavor helped prove that citizens of the Free State had some fears of growing communist movements in Europe, and were especially concerned with how these movements affected fellow Catholics.

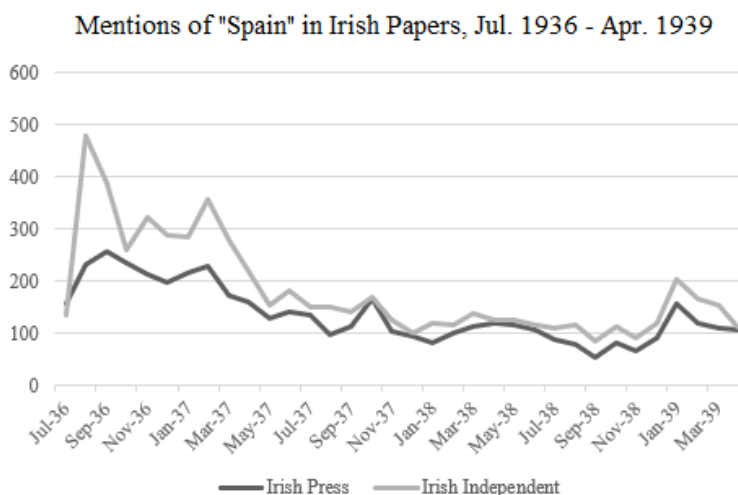
It is possible that Belton's previous failed attempts at establishing political parties and organizations had prepared him for this new enterprise—with the Irish Christian Front, he abandoned the violence of the New Land League and capitalized off a momentum which had been lacking in the National Corporate Party. However, his ideas were increasingly fascistic in that he “[claimed] to speak for whole nation or group,” and did not necessarily shirk from a fight. Even with these concerns, Belton and the ICF managed to accomplish more than any other Catholic

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<sup>120</sup> McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War*, 126.

Action group at the time while also capturing the imagination (and ire) of both the press and public with fiery speeches, impassioned letters, and massive rallies.

Yet it was these same qualities which led Belton to turn what had the potential to be a formidable opposition to the government's neutrality policy into a powerless fringe movement. Arguably, the ICF also fell victim to a natural loss of interest on the part of the Irish people as the initial fervor over the war died down and attention shifted to topics like the 1937 constitution or growing tensions elsewhere on the continent. A simple search for mentions of "Spain" in the Irish Press and Irish Independent, the two publications most relevant to this paper, clearly show how after a first spike of interest, attention levelled out over the course of the war. Mentions drop especially sharply following the passage of the Non-Intervention Bill in February.<sup>121</sup>



Despite this drop and subsequent stabilization, mentions of Spain remain steady throughout the war's duration. The *Independent's* larger number of mentions overall points to the fact that there was consistently more interest in the Civil War from right-leaning readers. The ICF's

<sup>121</sup> Data gathered using the Irish Newspaper Archive's keyword search for the publications and dates listed, [www.irishnewsarchive.com](http://www.irishnewsarchive.com).

downfall cannot therefore be solely attributed to a lack of public interest, especially considering the wide, cross-country base the organization had established and its supposed domestic agenda which addressed other salient issues of the time.

The ICF's early mass demonstrations were proof of both the Irish people's sentiment towards Spain and of the organization's potential to form a legitimate public pressure group with distinctly different goals than de Valera. Belton's initial calls for an end to trade relations with the Republic could have caused a serious rupture in government policy had he maintained this initial unified support, pushing the government to its limit on upholding both its Catholicism and its neutrality. In the most dramatic possible outcome of a powerful, populist Christian Front movement, the organization could have pushed de Valera to more closely align with Germany and Italy against Great Britain and France on the issue, with dim implications for Ireland's future following the outbreak of World War II.

However, Belton was certainly no Hitler or Mussolini. Despite the labels his worried contemporaries put on him, Belton was not a "fascist" in the strictest sense of the word, as he lacked the institutionalized, extreme violence of his continental role models. In a society as homogenous as the Free State was at the time, Belton was also missing a real "other" to vilify, a tactic which other fascist leaders employed to legitimize their own monopolization of violence. For all his best efforts, Belton could not manifest the threat of a communist or Jewish "takeover" of Ireland where none existed.

Perhaps most importantly, Belton did not have the pragmatic reticence of de Valera or even Franco. In spite of public support and relatively reasonable original goals, Belton's brand of leadership ensured that the Christian Front would fall apart and precluded a more adept president from maintaining it through the Spanish Civil War and beyond. It was indeed the "personal



defects” which his peers disliked him for that cemented the organization’s downfall, as his inability to (even pretend to) be nonpartisan wrecked his reputation among fellow politicians, the press, and the hierarchy. His political enemies had also been made over the course of a long and sensational career, hindering his chances at aligning the ICF with potential powerful allies in both church and state. Belton’s propensity for public squabbles, bold claims with no factual basis, and radical policies further led his detractors to label him as a crank and subsequently dismiss him. As the ICF’s image was so tied to its president, it too was written off as too political and indeed too nonsensical to be worthy of anyone’s time.

Ireland and former members of the ICF were left with little more than a bitter taste in their mouth as the nation contended with itself and its place in a radicalizing Europe. However, the case of Patrick Belton and the Irish Christian Front showcase how in the correct environment, the feelings and fate of many can hinge on the ability of one to balance outrage and authority in the eyes of the public.

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