

Antifa without Fascism: The Reasons behind the Anti-fascist Movement in Ireland

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Abstract:

The anti-fascist movement is generally viewed as a reaction to the extreme right by concerned left-wing activists. Therefore we would not expect the Antifa to feature in countries where extreme right activism is not a feature of the politics. However, Ireland has no significant extreme right but it still has an anti-fascist movement that plays an influential role within radical left circles. By treating Ireland as an outlier in relation to the existing reactive explanation for anti-fascist mobilisation this paper takes a deviant case analysis approach to generate novel hypotheses behind the reasons for the anti-fascist movement. First, anti-fascism acts as a site of left convergence, an area of unity that transcends the usual ideological divisions that can impede other types of political collaboration in a fragmented radical left activist base. Second, in the absence of effective extreme right forces, anti-fascism acts as a form of prophylactic action. In effect, the aim of this activism is to deny political space to extreme right micro groups before they become a popular force or a more serious political threat. Finally, a close cultural lineage between elements within the left and a past revolutionary tradition will increase the appeal of anti-fascist activism among left-wing activists.

Key Words: Antifa; Militant anti-fascism; Right-wing extremism; Radical left; Irish Republicanism; Political activism; Political violence; Social movements; Immigration

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Why does militant anti-fascist activism occur in the absence of a significant extreme right? Undoubtedly, resistance to fascist activity is the *raison d'être* of the anti-fascist movement; the clue is in the name. However, the focus on anti-fascism as being a “quintessentially reactive phenomenon” (Copsey 2017, 158), ignores other key causal factors that leads to the growth of militant anti-fascism (popularly known as the Antifa); factors which are brought to the fore in the case of Ireland. A country without a significant radical right tradition (Garner 2007; O'Malley 2008) but with an anti-fascist movement that is influential within radical left and Irish Republican circles (O'Reilly 2012). There has been a large literature published on the radical right (e.g. Davies and Lynch 2002; Ford and Goodwin 2014; Mudde 1996, 2007) but relatively little on militant anti-fascism itself, especially within the social science literature (e.g. Fekete 2014; Vysotsky 2015). Most anti-fascist research to date has been compiled by academic historians (e.g. Copsey 2017; Hann 2013; Renton 2006; Ross 2017. Or provided directly by the semi-official historians of the movements themselves; such as Testa (2015) with the British Antifa, Birchall (2010) with the London Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) and O'Reilly (2012) with Anti-fascist Action Ireland (AFA Ireland). They all focus, and with some justification, on militant anti-fascism as a reactive movement against extreme right mobilisation (Birchall 2010, 22-29; Copsey 2017, 162; Testa 2015, 7-9). However, given this explanation a puzzle remains as to why Antifa activism is still a feature of radical left politics in Ireland which lacks a significant extreme right threat.

This paper adopts a deviant case analysis approach. Its aim is to generate new hypotheses about the reasons for the Antifa movement by treating Ireland as an outlier in relation to the existing reactive explanation for militant anti-fascist mobilisation. This hypothesis generation will be supported through data collected from semi-structured interviews with key activists within AFA Ireland, the main Antifa movement within the country.¹ The first hypothesis claims that anti-fascism acts as a site of left convergence; an area of unity that bypasses left-sectarian divisions that can impede other forms of radical activism. The second evaluates antifascism as a form of prophylactic action that aims to combat embryonic extreme right forces before they become a coherent threat politically. The third posits that being part of a political tradition that has an ideological affinity for militant

¹ Seven interviews were carried out in November 2017 under conditions of anonymity, due to potential legal concerns. All interviewed activists have organisational responsibilities within the movement.

resistance against perceived oppression will significantly increase the appeal of militant anti-fascist activism among left-wing activists.

This article will first explain the aims and background of the Antifa movement. It will then situate the study of militant anti-fascism within the relevant literature; followed by a descriptive study of the history and tactics of AFA Ireland. The next section will present the three novel explanations behind anti-fascist activism in Ireland that go beyond a simple reaction to the extreme right.

What is the Antifa?

What exactly is militant anti-fascism and why does it matter? Libertarians, conservatives and liberals often allege that the Antifa reduce all their political opponents to the label of “fascist” and in that way they are as politically intolerant of opposition as the extreme right (e.g. Beinart 2017; Thiessen 2017; Tuccille 2017). However, in general, they have both a well-defined and sophisticated understanding of what actually constitutes fascism (Bray 2017, xiv; Birchall 2010, 17; Testa 2015, 8-10). For the Antifa, fascist political behaviour involves an obsession with national “unity, energy and purity” and a narrative involving “decline, humiliation, or victimhood”, xenophobic aims are pursued through a cult of violence that is unhampered with ethical concerns, often with the grudging support of traditional elites (Bray 2017, xiv; Paxton 2015, 218). Fascism is thus understood as a form of “authoritarian coerciveness” in which physical violence against the left and vulnerable minorities, as well as the domination of public spaces, is used as a catalyst for further political growth (Eley 2015, 112). This Antifa classification of fascism fits with Mudde’s categorisation of the extreme right which he contends consists of an ideological mixture of undemocratic, elitist (as in non-egalitarian), authoritarian and nativist values (Mudde 2007, 23-25). While his definition may include some groups that are not openly neo-fascist (Mudde 2007, 49), this research will limit the term of extreme right to refer to those groups that openly embrace the fascistic and violent tendencies detailed above.

Antifa can be understood as the popular term for militant anti-fascism which is a movement that encompasses all those anti-fascist groups that are willing to use violence as a tactic to oppose the extreme right.² The use of politically motivated violence differentiates

² The term Antifa and militant anti-fascism can effectively be used interchangeably.

militant anti-fascism from the two other types of anti-fascism, which are the use of state legislation (or militant democracy) and liberal activism (Testa 2015, 5). Liberal anti-fascism encompasses all those civil society groups (such as the European Network Against Racism Ireland) and government funded NGOs (such as the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland and the Immigrant Council of Ireland) that peacefully campaign against racism and the extreme right. While the Antifa will collaborate with liberal anti-fascist organisations on anti-racist campaigns, there is a mutual suspicion between the two, with both sides looking on the other's tactics as either counterproductive or ineffective (Testa 2015, 5-7). The Antifa itself is essentially an illiberal movement due to its contingent commitment to the principles of free speech and free association (Bray 2017, xv). This means that the Antifa respects the democratic mandates of right-wing populist parties, even when they translate racist discourse into politically acceptable terms, such as with the United Kingdom Independence Party or the Progress Party in Norway (Fekete 2014, 30; Seymour 2015, 41). So, for the Antifa it is fine to be a party that democratically opposes immigration but when the right steps outside this acceptable political band-width and into more fascist territory – such as with the Golden Dawn or the British National Party – then they are met with militant resistance (Fekete 2014, 30-31).

The Antifa can then be viewed as a radical non-hierarchical movement that stands in ideological opposition to the liberal bourgeois state; a movement of social revolutionaries – from diverse left-wing backgrounds – whose aim is to oppose racism through predominately peaceful political organisation, while reserving the right to meet the extreme right threat with politically motivated violence when it is deemed necessary (Bray 2017, xv; Testa 2015, 5-8). As a movement they lack faith in liberal principles to effectively oppose the rise of fascism; and they are concerned that state-led “anti-extremism” laws are more likely to be used against the radical left rather than the extreme right (Birchall 2010, 23; Fekete 2014, 36). Antifa is of increasing importance because of the rise in extreme right politics within Europe and North America. However, it also matters because it represents the most radical edge of left-wing activism in liberal democracies; a unique form of collaborative praxis that in most countries within the Global North is among the last left-wing movements to openly espouse and practice politically motivated violence against their political opponents (Vysotsky 2015, 236).

Antifa as a Reactive Force

Anti-fascist activists producing academic histories of the movement is common within the field of “anti-fascist studies” (e.g. Birchall 2010; Bray 2017; Hann and Tilzey 2003; Renton 2006, Testa 2015) and it is indicative of the importance placed on historical continuity within the anti-fascist movement (Copsey 2017, xv). In fact, this field should be more accurately called “militant anti-fascist studies” as it largely only concerns militant resistance to fascism, with the research primarily focusing on the struggle during the inter-war years and not on the modern Antifa incarnation (Copsey 2016, 707-708). This anti-fascist research has been far outweighed by the literature on the radical right; and much of the anti-fascist literature produced has focused on the British experience of militant resistance (e.g. Copsey 2017; Copsey and Olechnowicz 2010; Hodgson 2014; Tilles 2016). There has been one detailed history pamphlet produced on Irish anti-fascist activism by Bernardo O’Reilly (2012), an obvious pseudonym for one or more of the anti-fascist activists within the movement. And there have been some transnational studies of anti-fascism (e.g. Bray 2017; Copsey 2016; Hann 2013; Ross 2017; Testa 2015). For instance, Copsey (2016) has provided a transnational study that traces the spread of the British AFA to Germany and Ireland. Importantly, he highlights the Irish emigrant experience in 1980’s London as being essential to the foundation of AFA Ireland and acknowledges it as a “strange” case internationally due to the lack of an extreme right street presence (Copsey 2016, 708 & 724-726). But in general the field lacks a serious comparative analysis that looks at the motivations of Antifa activists in joining the movement. The lack of a focus on political phenomena and motivations has meant that the anti-fascist literature has primarily focused on anti-fascist activity as a reactive force within the radical left that emerges in response to the threat of the extreme right (Birchall 2010, 22-29; Bray 2017, 169; Copsey 2016, 713; Copsey 2017, 158; Testa 2015, 7-9). However, Ireland has no significant extreme right threat but still has an influential militant anti-fascist movement.

Why is there no Significant Extreme Right in Ireland?

Ostensibly, Ireland exhibits many of the conditions necessary for a successful radical right party. Such as rapid socio-economic change, increased immigration and a proportional electoral system that encourages new entrants (Garner 2004, 32; O’Malley 2008, 964). However, no such radical right party exists or shows any signs of emerging. There are two

main explanations as to why Ireland lacks a significant radical right presence or a cohesive extreme right group.³ The first views the two hegemonic mainstream parties (*Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael*) as creating an ethnically homogenous political narrative that goes back to the foundation of the state; which effectively excludes outsiders and inhibits the growth of more right-wing nationalistic narratives (Fanning and Mutwarasibo 2007; Garner 2007, 128-129). Garner, with some justification, points to the Citizenship Referendum of 2004 as an example of mainstream parties of government (in this case, *Fianna Fáil* and the Progressive Democrats) effectively harnessing populist anti-immigrant sentiment in a manner usually redolent of the radical right (Garner 2007, 124-126)⁴. O'Malley (2008) finds this explanation unconvincing; as immigration has never been a serious issue during Irish elections and all mainstream parties are open supporters of liberal immigration policies (*ibid.*, 96). Instead he claims that *Sinn Féin* gains much of its support from the kind of working class anti-establishment voter who in other countries would be likely to vote for the radical right; and he shows that those voters who do hold anti-immigrant views are more likely to support *Sinn Féin* over other parties (*ibid.*, 961, 971-972). The reason *Sinn Féin* remains a pro-immigration party is due to the liberal nature of Irish nationalism, which is built on a narrative of “struggle” against prejudice, empire and oppression (*ibid.*, 961). This means that ideologically *Sinn Féin* has no inclination to pander to anti-immigrant sentiment but as the representatives of the most radically nationalist mainstream party they still receive the votes of those who do hold intolerant nationalistic views (*ibid.*, 971). The AFA Ireland activists concur with this explanation for the absence of a significant radical right or extreme right in Ireland and view the “progressive” nature of Irish nationalism as being critical to the lack of a fascist threat similar in scale to many other European countries.⁵ In fact, they would go further and claim that *Sinn Féin* and other Irish Republican groups do essential work in channelling resentment in working class communities away from immigration and towards opposition to perceived economic or political “elites” within society.⁶

³ Interestingly, one AFA activist (AFA 4) posited a third theory for the lack of a radical right that has yet to be examined in an Irish context. Based on Trotsky's (1969) analysis of fascism, this activist claimed that racism is something that the right uses as a mobilising tool when the left poses a threat to their dominance. Given the lack of an effective left-wing electoral challenge in Ireland, the right has never needed to mobilise anti-immigrant sentiment.

⁴ This constitutional referendum was designed to address the fact that citizenship was available to all children born in Ireland; including the children of immigrants and asylum-seekers (Garner 2007, 122).

⁵ Author's interviews with AFA Ireland activists.

⁶ Author's interview with AFA Ireland activists (AFA 1; AFA 4; AFA 5).

In summary, the literature views the Antifa as a left-wing reaction to the extreme right. However, Ireland functions as an outlier to this dominant reactive explanation in that it has no significant extreme right but it still exhibits militant anti-fascist activism. So by treating Ireland as a deviant case, this paper aims to generate new hypotheses for Antifa activism that then may be suitable to be tested in other cases (Gerring 2007, 105-106). These new explanations do not seek to completely discount the previous reactive understanding of anti-fascism but instead they seek to provide theory-informing alternative explanations that will strengthen our understanding of the complex motivations behind the anti-fascist movement (Lijphart 1971, 692).

Anti-Fascist Action Ireland (1991 to Present)

Militant resistance to fascism in Ireland has historically been led by a loose alliance of left-wing Irish Republicans, Communists and other socialist groups (Testa 2010, 104-105). Domestically, in the 1930s they fought against the proto-fascist Blueshirt movement (Cronin 1997, 55; Manning 1971, 56-58). And internationally, many on the left joined the International Brigades in Spain (Beever 2006, 344). However, in the post-war period most anti-fascist activity was carried out by various Republican paramilitaries. For instance, in 1953 Irish Republican Army (IRA) members in Galway burnt down a house belonging to the British fascist leader Oswald Mosley (Dorril 2006, 606; O'Reilly 2012, 7) and in the 1970s Official IRA members were involved in conflicts with the National Socialist Irish Worker Party (O'Reilly 2012, 15 & 17). So, what led to the transfer of militant anti-fascism activism from Irish Republican groups to a more inclusive movement consisting of the radical left and left-wing Republicans?

London and Red Action

The Irish emigrant experience in London during the 1980s was an essential formative event among the activists that went on to found AFA Ireland. Red Action (RA) was a militant anti-fascist group in London that would later become the nucleus of the Anti-Fascist Action movement in England (Copsey 2017, 153). It was founded by a group of Socialist Worker Party (SWP) members in 1981, after they were expelled from the party for “squadism” due to their violent confrontations with the extreme right (Birchall 2010, 55-70). The Provisional

IRA (PIRA) bombing campaigns meant there was a lot of anti-Irish sentiment among the extreme right in London; so many Irish Republicans and other Irish left-wingers naturally became involved with RA from an early stage (Birchall 2010, 328).

For instance, PIRA volunteers based in London regularly took part in RA attacks on extreme right activists, often acting as the main muscle behind the breaking up of meetings and demonstrations (Testa 2015, 255-256). Unusually, RA as a movement was as much Irish Republican as radical British left (Birchall 2010, 328). Some English activists with few Irish connections even joined Republican paramilitary organisations due to their radicalisation within Red Action (Seaton 1995). However, this process of entryism into Republican politics was as much to do with the anti-state sentiment within Red Action as with sympathy for Irish nationalism (Birchall 2010, 328). This radical political culture within the RA of the 1980s was passed down to the AFA in both the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland; creating an anti-fascist culture in the British Isles that is more militant and more working class than in other European countries. One activist claims that the formation of AFA Ireland in 1991 was:

...specific to the Red Action project and the AFA project, in that they were much more focused on working-class communities, and focused on organizing within football terraces, and organizing to a certain extent within the music scene, whereas the general experience in Europe, especially in, let's say Germany, it would have been much more focused on lifestyles, squatting, much more focused on music, much more focused on stuff like veganism. (Interview with author, AFA 1)

The returning emigrants who formed AFA Ireland in 1991, obviously found a much less aggressive extreme right presence in Ireland. The activists themselves actually point to the threat posed to left-wing activism by the Catholic pro-life group, Youth Defence, as being the first direct confrontation that helped to galvanise the movement (O'Reilly 2012, 47-50). While not a fascist organisation, Youth Defence did have some members who were sympathetic to the extreme right, such as Justin Barrett who would later found The National Party (National Party 2018). And, at that time, they were trying to break up pro-choice stalls and intimidate pro-choice protesters (Testa 2015, 256). One activist observed the differing responses to this aggression from left-wing liberals and the more radical AFA Ireland; a division that still exists today:

...the pro-choice groups that existed at that time were saying, "you cannot have conflict with them [Youth Defence]; conflict is really, really bad and if they attack then move

away from them”. There was a small group of us who were more active in AFA and we were saying you can’t [do that] because if you back away from them, you’re going to end up in your own house, giving leaflets to your housemate... We didn’t stop Youth Defence organising or anything. I don’t know if there would have been a reason to. But we were certainly not going to let them take our space or stop us giving out information. (Interview with author, AFA 5)

This highlights one of the unofficial uses of the Antifa, in providing a security presence at left-wing protests against anyone who would try to deny the left political space; in effect, the Antifa often acts as an “alternative police” force within the radical left (Testa 2010, 209; Vysotsky 2015, 250).

Punk Scene and Football as Recruitment Agents

In Europe and North America much of the punk music scene functions as an important gateway into the anti-fascist movement (Thomson 2017). However, in Ireland the influence of the alternative music scene is viewed by activists as being even more central to anti-fascist recruitment and in the prevention of extreme right politicisation:

On so many different levels the music scene has been critical in Ireland, the fact that the skinhead scene in Dublin has almost exclusively been anti-racist, you probably can’t describe how important that is. In any other city in Europe you would probably have a fifty-fifty divide between fascist skinheads and Antifa, or sometimes it would be, in a case like Poland, it would be like ninety to ten. The fact that in Dublin 95 per cent of all skinheads are into reggae, into two-tone... the music scene in Ireland, thankfully, especially the punk scene in Ireland is made up almost exclusively of good, solid kind of lefties and anti-fascists. (Interview with author, AFA 1)

...compared to England, life has been made so much easier by the fact that anti-fascism has been the predominant culture of alternative music. (Interview with author, AFA 2)

In many countries significant parts of the skin music scene has “dovetailed” away from its multicultural roots and into right-wing extremism (Brown 2004, 157). However, this is not a part of alternative music in Ireland (with the notable exception of certain elements within the Metal scene). The reasons for this may originally have been the liberal nature of Irish nationalism but the activists now believe that a left-wing critical mass exists within these

music sub-cultures that makes it difficult for extreme right politics to gain a foothold within them⁷.

Ireland is also unusual, in a European context, in having a football supporter scene that is predominantly left-wing (Spaaij and Vinas 2013). AFA activists have emphasised the importance of the League of Ireland for both anti-racist education among the working class and in anti-fascist recruitment:

But definitely within League of Ireland there is getting a bigger and bigger political scene. And a lot of the time it is to the left and it is fighting fascism. It does go beyond football, it does start there and people are recruited from there, but it doesn't stop there. It is almost like the punk scene. It can start from there and go from there but it does result in political action. (Interview with author, AFA 3)

This left-wing influence on the League of Ireland is exemplified by the Bohemians Football Club supporters who have flown flags with “GayBohs” written on them in support of same-sex marriage (Irish Independent 2016); and have created a mural in Dalymount Park stating “Refugees Welcome” during the Refugee crisis (Casey 2015). A progressive football culture is also witnessed in Catalonia and the Basque country; places that have similar nationalist narratives based on “shared struggle” and resistance to oppression (Spaaij and Vinas 2013, 183-184).

“Smash the Fasc” – Tactics and organisational structure

Copsey (2017; 2016) points to early divisions within the British AFA between those who prioritised direct action against extreme right activists and those who favoured a move towards predominately non-violent action campaigning against racist views (*ibid.*, 159). No such divide has emerged in AFA Ireland, in which there is a general consensus on the need to prioritise both tactics in resisting the extreme right. However, similar to other Antifa groups (Bray 2017, 167-172) they assert that direct action is a tactic that is rarely used and only then as a last resort against the extreme right; they claim:

The only difference between us and other anti-racism groups is that we believe physical confrontation should be a tool that should be utilised when it needs to be. Ninety-five per cent of AFA work is fund raising or intelligence gathering, or building links, or covering

⁷ Author's interview with AFA 1 and AFA 2.

up racist graffiti or helping migrants that have been attacked. The physical confrontation is our unique selling point, but it's a very small part of our work. (Interview with author, AFA 1)

Public meetings that raise awareness about the history of fascism and what fascism represents as a threat to people are effective. This is not something that is dealt with well in the history books, telling people what fascism can do. Those things have been very successful and good, particularly around the twenty-first anniversary [of AFA Ireland in 2012] and then recently enough there was an event around the anniversary of Cable Street....Probably, one of the most successful things has been the Facebook page. Not that social media is the be all and end all, but it has been a way of spreading the message of anti-fascism. (Interview with author, AFA 4)

The Antifa is a non-hierarchical movement (Birchall 2010, 107) and AFA Ireland replicates this pattern; it consists of about 30 to 40 core activists who take care of most of the social media, intelligence gathering, fund raising and campaign organising.⁸ These numbers mask the movements true influence within the Irish left as when needed the movement can call upon much larger numbers of AFA activists and other left-wing sympathisers to take part in direct action or protests. In extreme cases this can amount to hundreds of left-wing and Irish Republican activists on the streets of Dublin; as in the case of the anti-Pegida protest in 2016 (Lavin 2016). AFA Ireland is also aided by the continuity of activist experience; in most countries Antifa activists “burn out” due to the high risk of militant activism and the extent of the extreme right threat, but in Ireland the same activists who founded the organisation are still involved today, albeit at a less active level.⁹ The relatively light threat from the extreme right in Ireland means that more experienced AFA activists can remain part of the movement; while in a cycle consisting of around every ten years, they can be relieved of onerous or time consuming duties and replaced in active roles by a new generation of activists.¹⁰ So, what are the political backgrounds of these activists, and does this point to militant anti-fascism acting as an unusually collaborative movement among the radical left in Ireland?

Anti-fascism as a Site of Left Convergence

⁸ Author's interview with AFA 1 and AFA 2.

⁹ Author's interview with AFA 1.

¹⁰ Author's interview with AFA 1 and AFA 2.

While movements that encompass most strands of the radical left and Irish Republicanism are not unheard of – the “Right2Water” campaign against the introduction of water charges is an example of this (Finn 2015, 56) – they are still uncommon. Ireland has a fragmented left tradition, with ideological and personality differences often hampering collaboration on issues of shared concern. For example, under the banner of the United Left Alliance (ULA) the two Trotskyist parties in the *Dáil*, the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), attempted to form a political alliance with left-wing independents but right from the start cooperation was hampered by infighting between the three parties involved (McGee 2012). In more Republican circles, there has been a long history of animosity and sometimes violent feuding between political parties and their paramilitary groups; such as between *Sinn Féin*, The Workers’ Party, Republican *Sinn Féin* and the Irish Republican Socialist Party (Moloney 2003, 69-72). These are just two illustrative examples but, in general, the radical left and Republican scene can descend into complicated patterns of conflict over long periods of time; which passes on tensions that can obstruct present day collaboration (Hanley and Millar 2009, 346-347). On top of this are the usual ideological difficulties between those aligned with the Marxist and Anarchist traditions (Prichard and Worth, 2016, 4-5). Even the successful “Right 2 Water” movement was marred by significant disagreements between the various political parties and trade unions on its organising committee (Mercille 2016). This means that areas of sustained shared campaigning in Ireland, as opposed to one-off single issue movements, are uncommon within the left.

Activists within AFA Ireland have emphasised the wish for a shared basis for political engagement that avoids the shallow disagreements which often impede long term campaigning on the left; activists have claimed:

...this is something that stuck with me at the start when I got involved [with AFA Ireland]; the smaller political things didn’t really matter. It was just this one thing that you could really stick with, with everyone. This was a thing that no matter what your political beliefs are, if it is to stop fascism on a militant basis, this is something every one of us agrees on... If you believe in the crushing of fascism, how you think the housing crisis should be fixed within the left; is neither here nor there. (Interview with author, AFA 3)

It’s that thing of anti-fascism being this unifying force for the left where everyone can come together; your opinion on what the Soviet Union was is not really very important,

as long as you know that your real common enemy is fascism. (Interview with author, AFA 4)

The political backgrounds of the activists aligned with AFA Ireland, as a non-hierarchical movement there is no official membership, reads like an exhaustive list of the radical left and Republican parties in Ireland. Activists within AFA Ireland have included members of: *Sinn Féin*, Republican *Sinn Féin*, The Workers' Party, *Éirigi*, Communist Party of Ireland, the 1916 Societies, the Irish Republican Socialist Party, the 32 County Sovereignty Movement and the Workers Solidarity Movement (anarchist). Another major bloc of AFA activists comes from the trade unions and many more – perhaps the largest grouping – are just unaligned left-wing activists.¹¹ The single unifying theme among this disparate group of activists is a willingness to support militant action against the extreme right; for instance, an AFA Ireland activist claims:

If people are willing to stand together in a fight, a physical fight, they tend to trust each other politically. It's true though, it doesn't matter what some Russian said in 1930, as long as you're fighting fascism now. (Interview with author, AFA 5)

While all the Irish Republican groups listed are – to a greater or lesser extent – on the left politically; it is fair to assume that any members involved with anti-fascism would be on the left of their respective parties.¹² Within the radical left, the only elements that are not regularly involved in AFA Ireland are the members of the two main Trotskyist parties of the SP and SWP; for reasons of divergent political cultures and differing campaign tactics, but some individual members from these groups still occasionally become involved in militant anti-fascism.¹³ This willingness for anti-racist individuals to converge under the theme of militant anti-fascism is highlighted by one activist:

An example of that from our side [cooperation], I recall during the late 90s when we would have been involved in big leaflet campaigns in the South Inner City, we had a member of the Green Party with us and even some South City *Fianna Fáilers*. (Interview with author, AFA 6)

That the ideologically motivated activists of AFA Ireland campaigned with liberal or centrist party activists within the Green Party and *Fianna Fáil* is surprising; given their political

¹¹ Author's interview with AFA 1, AFA 2 and AFA 5.

¹² Unlike with Red Action, there is no evidence to suggest that the paramilitary organisations linked to some of these dissident Republican groups take any part in AFA Ireland activism.

¹³ Author's interview with AFA 1, AFA 4 and AFA 5.

differences. However, it does show how in a fragmented left-wing political arena, cooperation across diverse political boundaries can be encouraged by the exigencies of Antifa activism. That activists from such different political backgrounds, many of whom have a history of conflict, can come together is a significant indicator as to the cohesive power of anti-fascist militancy. Undoubtedly, Antifa narratives built on resistance to fascism helps to romanticise its appeal among radical left activists, but it still provides a clear example of a willingness for intra-group convergence on one unifying theme, over a sustained period of time. Therefore this paper proposes that in the case of Ireland, *the attraction of radical left activists towards the militant anti-fascist movement increases due to a fragmented left tradition*, as left-wing activists search for suitable areas of cooperation across political divides.

Prophylactic Action: Antifa as a Defensive Force

Anti-fascism as a defensive force, as well as a reactive one, has been underemphasised within the field of anti-fascism studies (Birchall 2010, 22-29; Copsey 2017, 162; Testa 2015, 7-9). In the Irish context, this is one of the main motivations behind anti-fascists activism. An AFA Ireland activist describes how this form of preventative action works in both theory and practice:

“No free speech to those who would deny free speech to others”, that has always been the way we’ve operated. Sometimes it might seem heavy handed when you go into a pub with four lads sitting around a table talking about organising or starting a group and ending it there and then... but much better you stop it at that stage than let them gather 20 lads in a pub or a meeting. (Interview with author, AFA 2)

Many activists claim that their motivation in taking part in militant anti-fascism was to ensure that Ireland remains free from a significant extreme right presence.¹⁴ Retrospective lessons have also been learnt within AFA Ireland from the British experience of militant anti-fascism. The anti-fascist literature points to a correlation between the rise of the British National Party (BNP) and English Defence League (EDL); and the decline in militant anti-fascist organising after 2002 (Copsey 2017, 178-179). In fact, Birchall (2010) has argued that the main reason that the UK lacked an extreme right electoral presence from 1977 to 2002 was largely due to

¹⁴ Author’s interview with AFA 1, AFA 2 and AFA 5.

militant anti-fascism (*ibid.*, 23). This is a lesson eagerly embraced by the AFA activists. For example, one activist spoke about his personal motivations in becoming involved with the movement:

...from being politically active and looking at things the BNP and the EDL were doing in England; and thinking that scares me. I find it hard to see that happening in Ireland but I would hate to allow it to get to that stage. And then learning a bit about the history of militant anti-fascism in England and seeing that period where Red Action seemed to go off the stage and there was a re-analysis of approach, and in that period the BNP were able to get a foothold, and get smarter in the way they were doing things. (Interview with author, AFA 4)

The dominance of anti-fascists principles within radical circles also creates a climate of fear for the extreme right, in which AFA Ireland unapologetically wishes to contribute:

When you crush these small little groups it does put the message out. The word goes out that we [the fascists] tried to have a meeting and it didn't happen because of A, B and C. That creates the idea that fascists won't be able to organise, in any guise, it creates an atmosphere of fear when they try to organise because if they do the "bogey-man" [AFA Ireland] will come and get them. (Interview with author, AFA 2)

However, the Antifa's contingent commitment to the principles of free association and free speech remains in the case of Ireland. So, AFA Ireland does not view all of the right as being legitimate targets for militant activism. In fact, it is only when the extreme right spills into the public space or into open online organising that it becomes an area of concern for anti-fascists. For instance, an AFA Ireland activists states:

If someone has right-wing politics; or if someone has conservative politics then great, good for you. I'm not going to spend any time trying to confront you. Another important argument is that if you are a Nazi and you enjoy watching fucking Hitler speeches in your bedroom then fine go ahead, I don't give a fuck about that, whatever you do in your spare time. But the second you bring that onto the streets, or you try to organise; whether that's online, or on the streets, or in communities, that's where the line is crossed. I think that is where the role of AFA is; to identify and to stop those groups becoming a threat. When you look at Europe – where unfortunately that hasn't been done – now you're dealing with very well organised, very scary groups of fascists. (Interview with author, AFA 1)

Again, avoiding the extent of the extreme right menace that exists in other European countries is a powerful motivational influence on AFA Ireland activists. This points to a significant aspect of militant anti-fascism; in that it is regularly defensive in nature. Activists speak about fascism as an “existential threat” to the left; that if the extreme right gained a foothold in Ireland it would be trade unionists, socialists and Republicans who would become the prime targets of their violence.¹⁵ There is also a sense that the extent of the threat faced by AFA Ireland’s counterparts in Europe is so great, that to not take part in a movement to avoid the same type of political climate, would be disrespectful of their sacrifice. For example, one activist claims:

Our relative ease of operation and our lack of worry about fascism in Ireland, underlines the continued need for anti-fascism for me. Because you see what goes on in other countries where they have this real struggle going on every day, with real life and death consequences. And to not do what you can here would, I feel, be letting those people down. (Interview with author, AFA 4)

So this paper hypothesises that in Ireland: *the radical left will tend towards militant anti-fascist organising, even in the absence of significant extreme right activism, in order to prevent the emergence of future extreme right threats.* In this way, embryonic extreme right forces are met with militant resistance before they can develop into larger political movements.

Preventative Action in Practice

AFA Ireland since its formation in 1991 has used direct action against numerous extreme right micro-groups (see Table 1 Appendix for a full list of these groups). For example, AFA Ireland broke up the meetings and disrupted the political organising of the neo-Nazi group *Celtic Wolves* (2001-2009), effectively restricting them to an online only presence (Millar 2010; O’Reilly 2012, 76-77). And the first public protest by the Immigration Control Platform (ICP) in 1999, against the introduction of work visas for asylum seekers, was met with direct action from AFA Ireland and ensured that the ICP never held another public protest (McDonagh 1999; O’Reilly 2012, 65). As well as direct action against extreme right individuals; most international Antifa groups will attack property that is linked to the support of the extreme right (Copsey 2017, 204). In the case of Ireland, the manager of the White

¹⁵ Author’s interview with AFA 4.

Horse Pub in Dublin was warned that a band he had booked, *Celtic Dawn*, was in fact a neo-Nazi group; when he expressed his indifference to this fact, the windows of his pub were smashed in by AFA activists (O'Reilly 2012, 44).

In 2018, AFA Ireland believes that the greatest extreme right threat, paradoxically, comes from Eastern European migrant workers living in Ireland. There is an attempt to bring the extreme right politics of their home countries into the Irish political scene; this concerns AFA Ireland as language barriers makes it difficult to gather intelligence on their activities. One activist contends:

...it [the biggest threat] is the Eastern European groups. Groups of friends, or lads from the same town in Poland or Latvia or wherever, and there's some Czechs, who've come over here and started organising amongst themselves. And that's difficult, because we are, generally speaking, outside their networks. And there's been speakers that have come over from Poland, from far right groups in Poland. You're kind of running to catch up with them and find people who can interpret what's going on. (Interview with author, AFA 5)

The attempt of *Pegida* to launch their fifteenth European branch in Dublin was an example of extreme right Eastern Europeans living in Ireland attempting to openly link with elements of Irish extreme right micro-groups, such as *Identity Ireland* (Lavin 2016). The launch was set for 6 February 2016 and it was met by over a thousand protesters in Dublin city centre; AFA Ireland activists attacked *Pegida* supporters and disrupted the movement of *Identity Ireland* in order to ensure they could not rendezvous with *Pegida* as planned (Griffin 2016).¹⁶ The failure of this meeting is viewed by AFA Ireland as being a success in both practical terms and as a form of propaganda; in that the message went out to the Eastern European extreme right that Ireland is not a safe space to organise politically.¹⁷ An AFA Ireland activist also claims that its failure ensured that future collaboration between the Irish and Eastern European extreme right is highly unlikely:

But this protest happened and it went so bad, that afterwards they [the Eastern Europeans] thought we will have nothing more to do with them [the Irish extreme right and Identity Ireland]. We'll have our own meetings that a small section of the Polish community will know about. But as for dealing with Irish people of the same political bent, we don't have

¹⁶ Author's interview with AFA 3 and AFA 5.

¹⁷ Author's interview with AFA 3.

any interest because they're not serious and they won't back us up. And we don't want to have to pay a price for it. (Interview with author, AFA 4)

Prophylactic action like this means that even in a political climate that is not at all favourable to extreme right movements; it is difficult for these extreme right micro-groups to sustain themselves, or to grow into something more permanent in Ireland. It is important to note that many of the anti-racist protesters at this event were from religious or liberal organisations that would have not supported the non-peaceful tactics used by AFA Ireland, and viewed them as counterproductive. However, the majority of radical left activists at the event remained relatively unconcerned by AFA Ireland's actions on that day, even if they would not have been personally willing to take part.¹⁸ A cursory glance at the sheer numbers of groups within Irish Republicanism and the radical left (detailed above); provides evidence as to how small numbers of committed activists can sustain entire political parties and movements. So, it does seem likely that AFA Ireland has contributed to the continued inability of the extreme right to consolidate into more long-term movements or political parties. Whether this is necessary given the hostile political climate for extreme right politics in Ireland is a different issue, the Antifa activists believe it is necessary and this perceived need for defensive action is a major motivation in their joining the movement.

Tradition Sympathetic to Militant Resistance

This research argues that militant anti-fascism becomes less marginal in countries that have a strong tradition of violent resistance to perceived oppression. In the Irish context, this includes those Republican and left-wing activists who view their politics as a continuation of the Irish nation's historical struggle against empire and prejudice. The following activists highlight the role of this militant tradition on their motivations for anti-fascist activism and the crucial role that the Irish Republican heritage plays in the intimidation of the extreme right:

I come from a working-class rural background and always had an interest in the fight against the Blueshirts and the Land War. Issues like that, where people stood up for themselves and relied on no one but the strength of their own community. (Interview with author, AFA 5)

¹⁸ Author's observation of event, 6 February 2016.

If you're a Polish skinhead who thinks he's the hardest bastard living in his city in Poland and he moves to Dublin and he gets politically involved. And he does a bit of reading or research and he realises that he's up against something that he never really experienced before which is the threat of Republicans. And the fact that they are, more or less, supportive of militant anti-fascism is something that puts people off, and puts fascists off after limited experiences because they realise the threat is really on them. That's one of the critical reasons why the far right has never been able to grow, is that bogey man threat of Republicans...they've [Irish Republicans] a lot more experience at neutralising enemies [than the extreme right]. (Interview with author, AFA 1)

Therefore the muscle, or the not so subtle threat, of Irish Republicanism helps to create a hostile climate for extreme right activism; but it also encourages ideologically sympathetic activists to join the Antifa movement so that they can take an active part in this tradition of militant resistance to oppression. In effect, the same progressive nationalism that impedes the growth of the extreme right actually encourages anti-fascist activism among those political actors that trace their political lineage to the struggle for independence.

Large sections of the radical left in Ireland also embrace a tradition of militant resistance, not just Irish Republicanism, at least those left-wing elements who are either sympathetic to or trace their political beliefs back to the Irish independence movement.¹⁹ For instance, a seminal event for AFA Ireland was in 1998 when Michael O'Riordan – who was in the IRA, founded the Communist Party of Ireland and fought in the Connolly Column during the Spanish Civil War – publicly endorsed the group and passed the mantle of anti-fascism in Ireland onto them (O'Reilly 2012, 61-62). This is still an event of some pride for today's activists, which shows the reverence the movement has for the continuity of the historical resistance to fascism.²⁰ There is an obvious self-mythologisation in this tracing of their political lineage to the anti-fascist and independence struggles of the past. But the romantic appeal of revolution should not be underestimated as a motivational tool for the radical left; the Antifa provides a modern narrative that can instil both pride and political authenticity within AFA Ireland activists, who see themselves as the modern iteration of a historical emancipatory struggle.

¹⁹ Most of this left-wing tradition within AFA Ireland (with the exception of The Workers' Party) would view the conflict in the North as part of a continued nationalist struggle against state-led oppression; albeit a deeply flawed and sectarian one.

²⁰ Author's interview with AFA 1 and AFA 2.

Apart from the Irish Labour party, which has a less radical membership who are more supportive of liberal principles (Elkink *et al.* 2017, 361), the only section of the Irish left in which members are less likely to be involved in AFA Ireland are the two large Trotskyist parties; the SP and the SWP. An AFA Ireland activist spoke about this aberration:

It [AFA Ireland] is definitely a movement where there wouldn't be any problem with members of Trotskyist groups being involved. But it's not something that I think many of them have been, that I'm aware of, in an Irish context anyway. But obviously that goes back a lot longer than I would know. I've definitely spoken to quite a few members of PBP [People Before Profit – an electoral front for the SWP] who just don't agree with the strategy of militant anti-fascism. (Interview with author, AFA 4)

For the SWP, the foundations of Red Action and the English AFA, starting with expulsions from their party, has played an obvious role in their members unwillingness to embrace militant anti-fascism (Birchall 2010, 55-70). However, within AFA Ireland there is a belief that it is part of the political identity of Trotskyist parties to dislike their members becoming involved in movements that the party does not exercise some control over.²¹ This is why the SWP set up non-militant anti-racist organisations such as the anti-Nazi League (Manzoor 2008) in the UK and the Irish based Unite Against Racism (Uludag 2017); to act as both recruiting agents and to channel the anti-fascist sentiments of their members against the extreme right but within movements the party controls. Most importantly, both the SP and the SWP have defined their politics as being against the nationalist tradition and they provide a left-critique of Irish Republican responses to the conflict in the North; preferring a cross-community radical socialist solution rather than a nationalistic united Ireland approach (Boyd 2017; O'Boyle 2016). By taking a strong position against politically motivated violence in the North and by defining themselves in recent years against nationalist revolutionary narratives; they have taken an ideological step away from some of the fundamental tenants of militant anti-fascism (Testa 2015, 7). Thus moving their membership into an ideological space where militant anti-fascism becomes a less viable political option. So, militant anti-fascism becomes less attractive among left-wing activists who are from political backgrounds – such as the SP and the SWP – that are less supportive of the necessity for politically motivated violence against perceived threats. So in Ireland, *politically motivated violence against the extreme right increases in likelihood and becomes a viable option at an earlier*

²¹ Author's interview with AFA 5.

point, if activists embrace an ideology that views militant resistance to oppressive forces as being a valid and necessary option.

Conclusion

While much of this research has focused on Dublin based activism, AFA Ireland as a movement operates across the Republic. There is an Antifa presence in Northern Ireland, but it is less active than in the Republic due to the links of extreme right groups such as Combat 18 and the National Front with loyalist paramilitaries (Copsey 2016, 725). Effectively, these paramilitary links mean that the extreme right in the North is too dangerous to tackle with direct action; also there is a concern that there could be increased cross-community tensions if Antifa activists, who are mostly Catholic, were to enter loyalist working class areas and break up meetings.²²

Recent scholarship has debated if the Antifa can be considered a terrorist organisation (LaFree 2018) or if it fits the criteria of a violent criminal gang (Copsey 2018; Pyrooz and Densley 2018; Short and Hughes 2018). There is also a significant and continuing media debate about the rights and wrongs of Antifa activism (e.g. Beinart 2017; Thiessen 2017; Tuccille 2017). This research has concluded that AFA Ireland, like other Antifa groups, has a contingent commitment to the liberal values of free association and free speech. Also AFA Ireland only uses political violence in a disciplined fashion against extreme right targets. However, beyond these conclusions, this paper has avoided contributing to this normative debate about the use of politically motivated violence by non-state actors; as this has little pertinence to a case study which is trying to explain the reasons behind militant anti-fascism in Ireland, not the rights or wrongs of such militancy. What matters is that the activists themselves believe such a response is warranted and that their ideological preferences do not oppose the use of violence against perceived oppression.

Dahl (1963) has claimed that “influence” occurs when one actor forces another actor to act in a way they would otherwise have chosen not to (*ibid.*, 40). So AFA Ireland is influential to the extent that in a fragmented radical left space it induces mutually antagonistic activists to converge on one issue over a sustained period of time. It is also influential to the extent that it inhibits the political mobilisation of extreme right micro-groups, who without

²² Author’s interview with AFA 4 and AFA 5.

militant anti-fascist interference would presumably wish to utilise their full rights to free association and free speech. Given Ireland's unfavourable political climate for the extreme right it is debatable how necessary this Antifa defensive interference is in avoiding a significant extreme right presence. However, the AFA Ireland activists believe it is crucial and this remains a powerful motivation in their involvement in the movement.

To what extent can these hypotheses about the reasons for militant anti-fascism in Ireland be applied to other cases that have a much stronger extreme right presence? Undoubtedly, the main reason for the existence of anti-fascist activism is radical left concern over the threat posed by right-wing extremism. But the case of Ireland is important because it shows that anti-fascism can be more than just a reactive force. Future research should focus on testing these hypotheses through a transnational comparative case study of Antifa in Europe. The expectation would be that the defensive motivations (prophylactic activism) found in Ireland would be common across cases, and that left convergence would become a stronger causal factor in cases which have a similarly fragmented radical left to Ireland. The expectation would also be that cases which have a radical left tradition that traces its lineage to revolutionary struggle or national liberation (such as the Basque country, Catalonia or Greece) will have a more aggressive Antifa presence than those countries in which the radical left is more accepting of the principles behind the liberal state (such as in Denmark or the Netherlands).

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Appendix

Table 1: Extreme right micro-groups in the Republic of Ireland, 1991 – 2018

1991 – 2000	<p>National Socialist Party (NSP)</p> <p>Social Action Initiative</p> <p>Blood and Honour</p> <p>Celtic Dawn</p> <p>Combat 18 (Lansdowne Road riot- 1995)</p> <p>Dublin City Firm – GAA</p> <p>Immigration Control Platform (ICP)</p>
2000 – 2010	<p>National Socialists Are Us (Limerick)</p> <p>Celtic Legion</p> <p>Democratic People’s Party (DPP)</p> <p>Irish People’s Party</p> <p>Celtic Wolves</p> <p><i>Muscailte</i></p> <p>Movement to Save Ireland (MSI)</p> <p>Stormfront Ireland</p> <p>Blood and Honour (Polish)</p> <p><i>Bohemia Hammerskins</i> (Czech)</p> <p><i>Narodni Odpor</i> (Czech)</p>
2010 – 2018	<p>Democratic Right Movement (DRM)</p> <p><i>Craobh Gal Greine</i> (Cork)</p> <p>Ireland First</p> <p>Pegida</p> <p>The National Party</p> <p>Identity Ireland</p> <p>Misanthropic Division (MD- Ukrainian)</p> <p><i>Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski</i> (Polish)</p>

(Source: Author’s interviews with AFA Ireland activists; O’Reilly 2012; Phoenix 2018, 7)