Fianna Fáil and the Spanish Civil War 1936-39: 

The Rhetoric of Hegemony and Equilibrium

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Abstract

The Fianna Fáil Government’s management of the crisis that broke out in Irish politics in 1930s Ireland over the Spanish Civil War and its policy of Non-intervention has usually been viewed in one of two ways. On the one hand, it has been claimed that the Party adopted a robust neutral position and faced down the widespread discontent that existed among a significant pro-Franco Catholic lobby. On the other, it has been argued that its reaction was much more pro-Franco than the above interpretation suggests, doing all in its power to conduct and present its policy as conducive to the Spanish Nationalists. This article challenges both these interpretations by focusing on the Party’s ideological and rhetorical strategy and deploying the Gramscian categories of hegemony and equilibrium in order to reveal the complex and integral strategy that Fianna Fáil embarked on to transcend this crisis and maintain its supremacy in Irish politics.

Introduction
When news reached Ireland in July 1936 of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (July 1936 – April 1939) it set off a series of dynamic and emotive ideological struggles in Irish politics which continues to intrigue both historians and public to this very day. How such an overtly external event could have caused such a furore in Ireland has two principle reasons. Firstly, it was due to the revulsion among Irish Catholics at the stories – both authentic and manufactured – of clerical abuses being committed by forces loyal to the Spanish Popular Front Government and the widespread belief that this represented the further spread of ‘Godless communism’ into ‘Catholic Europe,’ thus threatening Ireland’s own Christian heritage. The Spanish Civil War – a conflict that began when a cabal of ‘Nationalist’ generals backed by the army, the aristocracy, the Catholic Church and the commercial and industrial classes (‘old Spain’) set out to overthrow the elected Republican Government whose support came mainly from urban workers, landless peasants and Catalan and Basque nationalists\(^2\) – was at least initially viewed in Ireland by many as a religious war which inevitably aroused passionate commitments to Franco’s cause. Secondly, and most importantly, the internal ideological struggle was particularly fuelled by the Fianna Fáil Government’s decision to support a Non-intervention Agreement initiated by Britain and France in August 1936 to try to prevent the War from spreading into a volatile Europe which the opposition claimed – mainly because of the Government’s refusal to sever diplomatic relations with Madrid – placed ‘Catholic Ireland’ on the side of Spain’s ‘Red’
Fianna Fáil’s supremacy in Irish politics, which in no short measure was due to its political and ideological strategy of marrying its brand of constitutional republicanism to Catholic Ireland, was therefore severely destabilized and faced a major political threat. The ‘Spanish crisis,’ indeed, demanded and received a sophisticated ideological response that politically allowed that Party to pursue its policy of Non-intervention, maintain its core republican identity, while also preserving its Catholic and wider support base.

If we look to the current literature, however, it is precisely this dimension of ideological sophistication which is lacking – notwithstanding of course the considerable scholarship which much of this work entails. There have in fact been two dominant views on Fianna Fáil’s reaction to the Spanish Civil War. Firstly, Dermot Keogh, Michael Kennedy and Roy Stradling have generally agreed that the Party and Eamon De Valera in particular as Taoiseach and Minister of External Affairs pursued a robust policy of Non-intervention; refusing to be swayed by the pro-Franco campaign of the opposition Fine Gael Party, the Irish Christian Front, the Irish Independent and the Catholic Church. More recently, however, Fearghal McGarry has argued that the Fianna Fáil Party and Government and the Irish Press – like virtually all of the Irish political class and the Irish public - were Pro-Franco. This assessment would appear to rely on an excessive tendency to Catholic reductionism that, despite McGarry’s best efforts to present Fianna
Fáil’s conduct of ‘Non-intervention’ as advantageous to Franco’s cause, is difficult to tally with his own evidence which suggests to me at least a much more complex reaction by the Party to the crisis.

In what follows I therefore take issue with both of the above interpretations of Fianna Fáil’s response to the Spanish Civil War, maintaining that it cannot in fact be reduced either to this ‘pro-Franco’ position informed by Catholic essentialism; or ‘absolute neutrality’; or still less, a pro-Spanish Republic position. From my perspective, if we are to fully comprehend Fianna Fáil’s reaction to the conflict and crisis we must pay particular attention to its ideological strategy. As I intend to demonstrate by analysing the rhetoric of its political leaders and intellectual supporters in the Dáil and in the columns of the Irish Press, this reveals a much more complex and integral strategy than the above accounts suggest. What it entailed, in fact, was an ideological battle with the opposition over the very meanings of the Spanish Civil War and the policy of ‘Non-intervention.’ For Fianna Fáil the key consideration here was to maintain its hegemony over three particular identities in Irish society which reacted and were affected differently by the conflict: firstly, the significant number of republicans and workers who may have harboured some sympathy for the Spanish Government, but nonetheless, found themselves at the brunt of the opposition’s attacks on ‘communism’ regardless of their position on Spain; secondly, and most importantly, the significant number of Catholics who were initially at least
pro-Franco and discontented with the Party’s commitment to Non-intervention; and finally, the mass of Irish citizens who were neutral if not indifferent to the conflict in Spain. These were of course by no means fixed and bounded identities and reactions, and indeed, the key challenge for Fianna Fáil’s ideological strategy was precisely to shift their frontiers and to stabilize and bond a new *equilibrium* between them. This was primarily achieved by a skilful deployment of rhetoric which managed not only to present the policy of ‘Non-intervention’ as partially conducive to their respective demands, but also to *integrate* all three under a wider identification with ‘neutrality.’ Before turning to the empirical part of this article, however, it will first be necessary to offer some explanation of the key theoretical categories employed.

*Hegemony, Equilibrium and Rhetoric*

Although hegemony in Gramsci refers principally to the ideological battle for supremacy in civil society, it was important for the Italian that this ideological work should be firmly situated within a wider configuration of power relations including those relating to the state and the economic order, which when articulated successfully would form a power ‘ensemble’ that Gramsci identified as an ‘historical bloc.’ Indeed, the principal aim of a hegemonic strategy was to provide the ideological *cement* to hold together this alliance of forces and especially to bond the politico-economic centre to
the historically specific ‘national-popular’ elements of the society in question by winning their active consent.\textsuperscript{10} For Gramsci this role which he described as ‘organizational’ and ‘connective’ was performed by the political party and ‘organic intellectuals’ of a ‘leading group.’ His economic and class determinism, however, led him to assume that this task could only be fulfilled by a ‘fundamental social group’ (bourgeois or proletarian);\textsuperscript{11} a position that has been convincingly challenged by contemporary theorists of hegemony who I follow here in rejecting the residual economism and class reductionism in Gramsci’s theory.\textsuperscript{12}

One aspect of Gramsci’s hegemony that I particularly intend to lean on here is his neglected concept of equilibrium. While there is no doubt that the Italian in his Prison Notebooks was inclined to attribute an ‘organic’ character to the unity of a hegemonic bloc,\textsuperscript{13} his intermittent description of this alliance of forces as an ‘equilibrium’ seems a much more fruitful analytical path for reasons that Gramsci himself suggested. Firstly, the concept with its connotations of the disturbance and readjustment of a balance of forces seems much more sensitive to Gramsci’s renowned historicism which recognised like Machiavelli that ‘effective reality’ was not something ‘static and immobile’ but rather ‘a relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium.’ In these conditions, he argued, the task of the ‘active politician’ was to apply his will ‘to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist and are operative -
basing oneself on the particular force which one believes to be progressive and strengthening it to help it to victory.\textsuperscript{14} Secondly, equilibrium with its emphasis on a \textit{compromise} between forces (‘the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed’)\textsuperscript{15} offers a more attractive democratic and pluralist dimension to Gramsci’s hegemony which privileges more clearly than the metaphor of organic unity the autonomy and consent of the participating groups in the alliance; even if Gramsci deliberately enriched the concept to incorporate a \textit{thicker} more stable conception of compromise that entailed an ideological \textit{fusion} of the related elements.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, and most importantly, equilibrium captured the necessity for \textit{leadership} in conditions of historical evolution and adversity by the hegemonic group which according to Gramsci is ‘the element which balances the various interests struggling against the predominant (but not absolutely exclusivist) interest’ and ‘exercises the hegemonic function and hence that of holding the balance between the various interests in “civil society.”’\textsuperscript{17} It is at this point that the concept of equilibrium coheres with the crucial \textit{educative} dimension of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony (‘intellectual and moral reform’),\textsuperscript{18} since historical change would inevitably bring instability and conflict between the elements in the bloc and open up the possibility of their subversion by counter-hegemonic forces which in turn would have to be ideologically addressed. Although Gramsci was not
totally explicit on this point, his use of the concept of equilibrium – with its associations with balancing factors in economic production – implied that in reaction to such conditions the leading group would have to *critically* ‘check’ and ‘re-bond’ ideological elements in the bloc to prevent disintegration, *fend off competition* and thus maintain its hegemony.\(^{19}\)

Gramsci, however, had little to offer on the exact nature of the ideological strategies that could bring about ‘intellectual and moral reform’ or ‘transform the popular “mentality.”’\(^{20}\) And it is at this point that Gramsci’s work on ideology can be usefully enriched with contemporary theories of *rhetoric* associated with the work of Quentin Skinner\(^ {21}\) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.\(^ {22}\) For all these thinkers – influenced by the ‘linguistic turn’ in contemporary social sciences – rhetoric is in fact about the *politics of meaning* understood in its *performative* rather than constative sense.\(^ {23}\) On the one hand, Skinner’s contextual account of rhetoric as the deployment of a *descriptive-evaluative* language by ‘innovating ideologists’ who use political ideas to ‘name’ ‘describe’ and ‘evaluate’ political actions and states in conditions of political contestation - often re-constituting concepts and events *intellectually and morally* in the process to meet their needs\(^ {24}\) - helps us to explain how political movements like Fianna Fáil attempt to bring theory into line with political practice when faced with events and opposition campaigns that induce a crisis in their ideological bloc. While on the other, Laclau and Mouffe’s much stronger emphasis on the manner in
which rhetoric *articulates* and sustains *hegemonic relations* between *identities* through *logics of equivalence* and *nodal points*\(^\text{25}\) allows us to draw out more clearly how the ideological bonding and stabilization of elements is accomplished. I intend to deploy both of these conceptions of rhetoric below within the Gramscian framework of hegemony and equilibrium. And even if their specifics will only become clear in the detailed analysis which follows, it should be obvious nonetheless that from my perspective a key component of any hegemonic strategy faced with the threat of disintegration under changing historical conditions and competition is the deployment by its leading group of an innovative political language that interprets the new realities in favour of its continuing supremacy and the re-equilibrium of its dislocated elements. In order to grasp the full significance of Fianna Fáil’s sophisticated and integral ideological strategy in reaction to the Spanish Civil War, however, we must first comprehend the national and international context of the Party’s hegemony and the challenge mounted by the opposition.

*Fianna Fáil Hegemony and Counter-hegemony in a National and International Context*

The Fianna Fáil Party emerged in 1926 from the Anti-Treatyite faction of the Irish independence movement (Sinn Féin and the IRA) which had refused to compromise over the terms of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty (that
partitioned the island and granted dominion status to the South). The Anti-Treatyites had in fact fought a bitter Civil War (1922-23) with their Treatyite opponents (Cumann na nGaedheal and then Fine Gael from 1933), with the latter eventually emerging victorious with the help of the material support of the British and the moral intervention of the Catholic Hierarchy who condemned the Anti-Treatyites and refused them the sacraments. What the Anti-Treatyites had failed to achieve by force during the Civil War Fianna Fáil then attempted to pursue through political means, entering the Dáil in 1927 and acceding to power in 1932, thanks mainly to their promises to redress the dubious ‘national’ and ‘democratic’ credentials of the State founded on the Treaty, and the economic crisis of the late 1920s which the Cumann na Gaedheal Government had responded to with a programme of severe economic austerity.

From its accession to power in 1932 until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War Fianna Fáil in fact maintained a steady momentum on its republican and economic objectives, developing and implementing policies that appealed to a wide section of Irish society. The republican programme was effectively pursued by ‘de-Treatying’ the Free State Constitution and extending the sovereignty of the Irish people through the abolition of the Oath of Allegiance to the British Crown (1933), disempowering and then abolishing the office of Governor-General (1933-1936), and indeed, by 1935 work had already begun on the drafting of a new Constitution (1937) which
would make the twenty-six county State a republic in all but name. The economic programme also delivered significant advantages to the urban and rural poor as large estates were broken up to provide land for small-holders, a system of wide-spread unemployment benefit was introduced, old age pensions were increased, and an extensive state-sponsored housing scheme provided homes for the worst off. Protectionist Control of Manufacturers Acts (1932-1934) also created the conditions for national industrial output to increase from 25.6 million to 30 million and industrial employment from 111,000 to 166,000 between 1932 and 1938, thus improving the lot of both workers and industrialists.

Crucially, all the above measures were rhetorically articulated within an integral and expansive republican ideology that presented Fianna Fáil as the ‘national’ party, placing the interests of ‘the Irish People’ and ‘the Republic’ above all sectarian demands. The Party’s press organ - the Irish Press - played a crucial role here. Founded in 1931 to counter the almost unanimous opposition to Fianna Fáil in the Irish media, it grew with the Party to reach circulation figures of over 100,000 by the late 1930s almost equalling its much older and pro-Fine Gael rival newspaper, the Irish Independent. Throughout the 1930s the republicanism of Fianna Fáil and its press organ thus provided the cement that held this hegemonic bloc of forces together, as advances on sovereignty and democracy were persuasively articulated and presented as further steps on the road to ‘the
Republic’ and the end of British imperialism in Ireland; the benefits won for rural and urban workers were portrayed as an integral part of the Party’s republican egalitarianism; and the protectionism that brought new jobs and supported the expansion of a native industrial class was skilfully and coherently articulated to republican anti-imperialism by presenting it as part of ‘the Economic War’ with the former imperial power to release Ireland from its dependency on the British market. Equally important, however, was the ability of Fianna Fáil’s ideological strategy to bond its political and economic forces together with national-popular elements in civil society, and especially to Ireland’s strong Gaelic and Catholic cultural traditions. Fianna Fáil’s major achievement here - given that its ‘extreme republicanism’ had been declared inimical to the Catholic Faith by the Bishops during the Irish Civil War - was to win back a substantial proportion of the Catholic element to its programme throughout the 1930s when it went to considerable lengths to persuade ‘Catholic Ireland’ of the compatibility of its republican vision with Catholic values. In sum, by 1936 on the eve of the Spanish Civil War the Fianna Fáil Party’s hegemonic advance was gaining momentum as the Party proved increasingly successful in maintaining a healthy equilibrium between all the forces in its historical bloc while eroding further the opposition’s support base. It was now, however, to face a significant threat from Fine Gael which was due as much to developments on the international as the national stage.
The 1920s and 1930s are remembered of course in Europe for the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. It was particularly in reaction to the fascist threat to the Soviet Union that the Comintern – now completely in the grip of Stalin – suddenly changed direction in the mid-1930s from a ‘Class against Class’ to a ‘Popular Front’ strategy which involved seeking support among European ‘bourgeois democracy’ to form a common ‘democratic alliance’ against fascism.\(^{38}\) It was in this context that Popular Front Governments emerged in France and Spain in 1936 whose immediate effect was to drive European politics even further to the extremes as the centre-right now made common cause with more authoritarian elements in order to avert the threat of international communism and its ‘puppet’ Popular Front Governments.\(^{39}\) Countries which had considerable Catholic constituencies were particularly susceptible to this drift to the right given the traditional antipathy of the Catholic Church to both ‘modern liberalism’ and ‘atheistic communism,’ and it was no coincidence therefore that Italy, Poland, Portugal and eventually Spain should have emerged among the bloc of authoritarian (if not fascist) regimes.\(^{40}\) This drift to the right was in fact the culmination of a longer term trend in European Catholic countries whose internal politics had been strongly influenced by the development of a world-wide Catholic revivalism throughout the 1920s and 1930s and the development of a Catholic ‘fortress mentality’ in reaction to the spread of materialist creeds.\(^{41}\) There was moreover a veritable explosion of lay Catholic groups and journals in European civil society in this period with
the emergence of *Catholic Action* and *Opus Dei* standing out in particular. Their principle raison d'être was the promotion and defence of Catholic values and social teaching against the evils of liberalism, socialism and especially atheistic communism, and indeed, some countries saw the formation of Catholic parties advocating a similar corporatist ideology – largely in response to Papal Encyclicals – that fascist Italy had patented as a means to transcend the nefarious class struggle. While it would be misleading to characterize this drift to the right by European Catholicism in the 1920s and 1930s as monolithic, since significant divisions remained between a more democratically-minded and populist Christian Democratic tradition and an emerging more authoritarian strand of Catholicism that was willing to collaborate with dictatorial regimes, there can be little doubt that the effect of the Comintern’s Popular Front strategy in the 1930s was to strengthen the hand of the latter significantly.

The Irish Free State, of course, having emerged from independence with an almost homogenously Catholic religious constituency proved extremely fertile ground for the growth of such influences. In the 1930s in particular journals such as *Studies, United Ireland, Hibernia*, the *Irish Monthly* and *The Standard* were all evangelizing for the vocational ideas of Pius XI. Just as in other European states, however, the Catholic lobby in Ireland was by no means a united bloc. But the effect of the Spanish conflict was not only to ratchet up the campaign of these forces to drive the Irish State
towards a more Catholic, corporatist and authoritarian social order as elsewhere in Europe, but also, to bound them together more closely to confront what they saw as the growing threat to their Faith.

Indeed, the Spanish Civil War seemed to confirm all of the fears that had long exercised revivalist Catholicism about the need to take action to defend Ireland against the danger of international communism, and the opportunity that it offered to reconfigure Irish politics around a Catholic-centred ideology was quickly seized upon. The success of this counter-hegemonic campaign resided above all in its swift ideological and rhetorical reaction to the outbreak of the conflict in Spain in July 1936. Firstly, the War was quickly established in the popular mind by the Irish Independent, the Irish Christian Front (ICF), Fine Gael, the Catholic Hierarchy and the various Catholic journals and associations as a conflict in which the forces of atheistic communism (the Republicans) were pitted against the defenders of Christianity (the Nationalists). As early as August 1936 the Irish Independent had indeed already ‘named’ the conflict, ‘describing’ and ‘evaluating’ the main lines of division by declaring that what was ‘at stake in the present struggle in Spain was …a struggle to the death between Christianity and communism’ in which the insurgents stood for ‘Catholic and national ideals’ and the Republican Government ‘an unholy alliance of Communists, Anarchists and anti-Christian revolutionaries.’ \(^{45}\) Secondly, political identifications were immediately brought into play in this rhetorical
crusade as Spain’s ‘Red’ Republican Government was unsurprisingly portrayed as the avowed enemy of ‘Catholic Ireland’ while the Nationalists were the friends and allies of the Irish People who shared their Catholic Faith and their determination to resist ‘Godless communism.’ Among pictures of Republican militants shooting at a huge statue of Christ outside Madrid, exhumed Dominican nuns strewn across the steps of a Barcelona Church by fanatical supporters of the Republic and Francoist Nationalists by contrast invariably captured in religious settings, the Irish Independent thus demanded that the Government assert its sympathies ‘with our unfortunate fellow-Catholics who are the victims of red savagery’ and ‘raise its voice to speak out the Irish people’s horror and condemnation of the fiendish Red campaign.’ The Catholic Church and ICF were soon engaging in similar identifications, raising ‘humanitarian’ funds for the Nationalists under the telling campaign slogan of support for Spain’s ‘suffering Catholics’, and presenting a picture of ‘Catholic Ireland’ as being faced with a similar threat to ‘Catholic Spain’ given the supposed growth of communistic doctrines in Ireland among radical republicans and the labour movement. The latter was indeed a major theme of the Bishops’ Lenten pastorals in February 1937. Finally, and most importantly, the most dangerous aspect of the rhetorical campaign for Fianna Fáil was the attempts by the opposition and Fine Gael in particular to identify the Government’s policy of Non-intervention as ‘pro-Communist’ and ‘anti-Catholic’ which was of course to revive Irish Civil War animosities. Non-
intervention was particularly susceptible to such charges since it not only had been devised by Britain and France (who were seen in Ireland and internationally to be among the democratic countries most sympathetic to the Spanish Republic), but moreover, because the Government refused to officially break off diplomatic or trade relations with the Spanish Republic or to recognise Franco within Non-intervention. Fianna Fail was thus accused in the Dáil by the leader of the ICF (and Independent TD), Patrick Belton, of ‘feeding the Red soldiers of Anti-Christ’ and ‘quietly supporting the Red Government in Spain’ while Fine Gael deputies - in calling for the recognition of Franco and the severing of all relations with the Spanish Republic – charged the Government with swallowing ‘the propaganda of the Communist International and of the Soviet Government’ that ‘the struggle in Spain is a struggle between fascism and democracy’ (O’Sullivan) and failing to take seriously the Church’s warnings of the threat of communism in Ireland (McGilligan). The opposition’s rhetorical campaign built around the Spanish Civil War and the Non-intervention policy of the Government represented indeed a major threat to Fianna Fáil hegemony and the equilibrium of their republican-centred bloc as tensions began to emerge between its key republican, labour and Catholic elements – with the latter in particular in danger of going over to the opposition. It was this threat of disintegration that Fianna Fáil’s sophisticated and skilful counter-rhetorical campaign set out to avert.
One of the key disintegrating tendencies created by the Spanish Civil War and the opposition campaign was the destabilization of those identities within the Fianna Fáil bloc - mainly of a strong republican and labour background - who now found themselves accused once again of collaborating with ‘Godless communism’ and representing a danger to ‘Catholic Ireland’ which of course threatened to disarticulate them from the Catholic element now increasingly present in De Valera’s Party. Here it should be recalled that Fianna Fáil had not only been periodically dependent on informal alliances with the Irish Labour Party since 1932 to pursue progressive legislation in the Dáil, but also, that since early 1936 Labour had been attempting to put some ‘clear red water between itself and Fianna Fáil’ by adopting the more radical programme of ‘the Workers’ Republic’ and thus mounting a serious challenge to Fianna Fáil’s working class vote.\textsuperscript{53}

Although this was by no means the major threat faced by the Party - which was obviously the danger of loosing its Catholic support base to Fine Gael - it is clear nonetheless that Fianna Fáil’s rhetorical machine went to considerable lengths to reassure and re-articulate these ideologically and emotionally significant elements, even those among them that continued to harbour some support for the Spanish Republic which it attempted to win over to the Party’s policy of Non-intervention. My analysis here is thus clearly at odds with those who have claimed that the level of support for the
Spanish Republic among mainstream republicans was negligible,⁵⁴ which in my view fails to capture the complexity of the situation. Indeed, that there was some sympathy for the Spanish Republic among many of Fianna Fáil’s grass-root supporters seems obvious. Anti-Treatyites had, like the Spanish Republicans, incurred the wrath of exactly the same lobby in 1922-23 during the Irish Civil War and again on the eve of Fianna Fáil’s assent to power when similar ‘red scare’ campaigns were launched to convince the Irish electorate that the Party’s republicanism was a stalking horse for ‘IRA gunmen’ and ‘communists.’⁵⁵ They too had faced the threat of a military style coup from 1931-33 when General Eoin O’Duffy (Garda Commissioner) was well-known to have been plotting with similar-minded colleagues in the police and army to prevent Fianna Fáil taking power in the event of an election victory;⁵⁶ an ambition he returned to in 1933 after his dismissal by De Valera when he played the leading role in setting up the quasi-fascist Irish Blueshirts.⁵⁷ This historical experience would no doubt have made Fianna Fáil supporters amenable to some extent at least to the rhetoric of the pro-Spanish Republic lobby in Ireland spearheaded by their former Anti-Treatyite allies on the fringes of the Irish left, including the popular and charismatic figure of Frank Ryan – leader of the Irish section of the International Brigade. Ryan wrote an open letter to Cardinal MacRory before his departure for Spain in which he condemned the Irish support for Franco as ‘an Irish Catholic’ disgusted with the actions of ‘the Catholic clergy in Spain’ who ‘identify themselves with the Fascist rebellion against
the people’ and reminded the Cardinal that ‘Irish Republican soldiers’ were similarly ‘outlawed as ‘murderers and looters’’ and ‘dubbed ‘Reds’ who would destroy religion’ during the Irish Civil War. ‘Our stand in 1922-23 is already vindicated,’ Ryan concluded, ‘history will vindicate our stand on the Spanish question too.’ Indeed, evidence of Fianna Fáil Party sympathy with the Spanish Republic is also apparent from: the Irish Press’s cautious endorsement of the regime in 1931; De Valera’s expressions of support for the Republic to the Spanish Government’s Representative in Dublin in the early phase of the War; and the Fianna Fáil Minister (and future Taoiseach) Sean Lemass’s retrospective testimony that ‘there was far more sympathy for the Spanish Republic both within and without Fianna Fáil than might be apparent from the newspapers.’

This is not of course to suggest that Fianna Fáil spoke on behalf of the pro-Republic lobby in Ireland during the Spanish Civil War. On the contrary, the success of the Party’s rhetorical campaign had more to do with the internal dynamics of Irish politics where Fianna Fáil hegemony required countering attempts to tar Irish republicans and Irish labour with the same brush as their Spanish counterparts, and crucially, to ‘articulate’ ‘check’ and ‘educate’ its republican and labour elements in a wider process of re-equilibrium that drew them decisively on to the terrain of its Non-intervention policy and re-sutured the gap that had been opened between republicans, workers and Catholics. This of course required engaging in an
ideological contestation of the meanings and identifications that had to some extent already been established around the Spanish conflict and Non-intervention by the pro-Franco lobby, and to a lesser extent by left republicans such as Frank Ryan and Peadar O’Donnell.

One of the principal ways in which Fianna Fáil successfully articulated the identity and interests of republicans and workers in reaction to the charges of ‘Red sympathies’ that were being levelled against them - and Fianna Fáil itself - was to join in the Irish left’s attack on the Irish Independent, Fine Gael and the ICF – although significantly not the Church or the Bishops as Ryan and left republicans had done – with counter charges that it was neither a genuine concern for Catholicism or a fear of communism that motivated the pro-Franco campaign on Spain, but pure ‘political opportunism’ and ‘fascist tendencies.’ What was involved here was therefore an ideological battle conducted through the rhetorical and performative acts of ‘naming’ the political parties to the controversy over Spain with Fianna Fail and the Irish Press now attempting to carry out what Skinner has called *paradiastolic* shifts of meaning that *reconstituted* not only the opposition’s actions, but also, their very identity in the process by the use of a new and *negative* ‘descriptive-evaluative’ terminology. In the Dáil Fianna Fáil Ministers thus undermined the ‘Catholic’ *ethos* that the Fine Gael Party had been seeking to establish for itself, lambasting their attempts to pose as ‘the great crusaders of Christianity in this country,’
castigating them for daring to ‘trail the garment of Christ in the arena of politics’ for ‘mere party gain’\textsuperscript{64} and even mocking them for adopting a position that was ‘more Catholic than the Pope.’\textsuperscript{65} The \textit{Irish Press} also joined in this campaign in its editorial columns accusing the \textit{Independent} and Fine Gael of engaging in ‘a stunt’ aimed at ‘cashing in electorally on Christianity.’\textsuperscript{66} But it was in identifying the opposition with fascism that the \textit{Irish Press} played its most significant role. De Valera, responding to Fine Gael’s motion to have Franco recognised in the Dáil in November 1936 had in fact charged Fine Gael politicians of attempting ‘to mend the fortunes of their Party’ and ‘to build up a case for Fascist organisations on the ground that this Government was sympathetic to Communism.’\textsuperscript{67} This was duly followed up by the \textit{Irish Press} who began referring to the \textit{Irish Independent} as ‘the morning Fascist organ in Dublin,’\textsuperscript{68} ‘a Fascist mouthpiece’\textsuperscript{69} and its ‘morning Fascist contemporary’\textsuperscript{70} while also attacking the leader of the ICF, Patrick Belton, as ‘The Christian Front Dictator.’\textsuperscript{71} All of this of course served to reassure and stabilize Fianna Fáil’s support among republicans and workers.

Equally important, however, was the ideological effort to disassociate Irish republicans and Irish workers from their nominal counterparts in Spain by emphasizing the former’s ‘democratic’ credentials. This was not only a challenge to the pro-Franco lobby’s efforts to brand Irish republicans and workers ‘communists,’ but also to the left republicans’ claim that there was
a coincidence of interests between Irish and Spanish republicans and workers in the defence of ‘democracy’ in Spain. In this effort to ‘articulate’ republicans and workers there was therefore a simultaneous ‘checking’ of radicalism in a manner which facilitated the re-bonding of these elements into the Fianna Fáil historical bloc. The first move in this process was to undermine the notion that the War in Spain was being fought between democracy and fascism. The Irish Press thus frequently pointed to the ‘undemocratic’ practices of the Spanish Republic and primarily its ‘connivance’ with clerical abuses and its reliance on a Stalinist regime that was then purging all opposition in its midst.72 This provided the grounds for rhetorical practices marked by what Laclau and Mouffe have called unifying and externalizing chains of equivalence as Fianna Fáil discourse bonded Irish republicans, workers and Christians under the category of ‘democracy’ while the Spanish Government, Moscow, and indeed European fascism were constructed as an ‘anti-democratic’ opposite and external axis. Irish republicans and workers were thus ‘educated’ on the Spanish ‘Communist Government which owed allegiance to, and took its orders from Moscow’73 and the ‘warring creeds’ of communism and fascism which were ‘alike as two peas’ in their ‘scorn for the democratic ideals of personal liberty and equal citizenship.’74 By contrast, in an editorial significantly entitled ‘Labour and Democracy’ the Irish Press congratulated its Irish Labour allies for their commitment to democracy and rejection of the communist Popular Front strategy whose ‘pretended defenders of democracy …when the
opportunity arises ...make the very same assault on liberty which they attack the Fascists for doing.  

Indeed, in a further extension of the positive equivalence clearly intended to articulate, check and bond in the same instance the editor of the *Press* declared that ‘None of the current anti-democratic creeds have succeeded in getting any footing in this country and the religious and political traditions of the Irish people forbid that they ever will.’

Finally, Fianna Fáil rhetoric set out to win over republicans and workers to its policy of Non-intervention by identifying it with *anti-imperialism*, claiming moreover, against the left republicans’ advocacy of intervention to defeat the ‘fascist imperialists’, that steering clear of the Spanish conflict was the real anti-imperialist position. Again equivalences were drawn along imperialist and anti-imperialist lines as the *Irish Press* linked the imperialistic intentions of Moscow, Berlin and Rome with headlines and editorials demanding ‘“Hands off” Spain all round,’ while De Valera defended Non-intervention in the Dáil by identifying it with Irish resistance to British imperialism:

> If I were a Spaniard …I would wish to see every single foreigner out of my country, because foreigners, when they come into a country as representatives of big Powers, have, as we know to our cost in this country, a knack of trying to stay there.'
Indeed, it was notable that even with the defeat of the Republic in early 1939 the *Irish Press* continued to appeal to republicans and workers who had harboured some sympathy for the Spanish Republic along these lines, with timid pleas that ‘in his hour of victory …General Franco will be merciful and magnanimous’\(^7\) and calls for the *Caudillo* - now that ‘the Gospel that Moscow attempted to implant on Spanish soil has been killed off’ - to restore peace to Spain by extricating it from European fascism.\(^8\)

*Fianna Fáil and Catholic Ireland*

There is little doubt, however, that the Spanish Civil War, Non-intervention and the campaign of the pro-Franco lobby in Ireland posed a much greater problem for Fianna Fail hegemony and equilibrium in terms of its ability to maintain its Catholic support base which was of course much more amenable to the opposition’s rhetoric. The most pressing and crucial aspect of the Party’s ideological strategy was therefore to fend off this challenge which could only be achieved by re-establishing the *active consent* of these elements and re-bonding them in a critical and educative process into their republican-centred historical bloc. In contrast to other European States then, where a relatively clear Catholic/clerical and secular/anti-clerical cleavage existed, the division in Irish politics was much more complex and this is nowhere more evident than in the way in which the Fianna Fáil Party at
once articulated and constrained the excesses of its Catholic support base’s reaction to Spain. In the early months of the conflict with allegations - and actual instances of clerical abuse at their height⁸¹ - the Party therefore paid careful attention to the feeling among the Catholic masses and responded to their demands without compromising the essentials of Non-intervention. This required too a measured and compromising ideological shift that did not threaten the equilibrium and coherency of the overall ensemble. Fianna Fail and the Irish Press’s response to the furore over clerical abuse among its Catholic constituents was not then to join with the opposition in endorsing the Nationalists as the defenders of the Faith which would have undoubtedly alienated much of its republican and labour support and rendered illegitimate and incoherent its policy of Non-intervention. The strategy was rather to engage in a ‘pro-Catholic’ rather than a ‘pro-Franco’ ideological campaign, expressing sympathy for the suffering of fellow practitioners in Spain and aiming to assuage and articulate the initial resentment felt among Catholics at the continuing stories of abuses.⁸² Accordingly, the Irish Government’s announcement of Non-intervention in August 1936 included a veiled declaration of support for suffering Spanish Catholics by stating its shock ‘at the tragic events that have taken place in Spain’ and expressing sympathy with ‘the great Spanish people in their terrible suffering.’⁸³ As the furore over Spain reached its height, however, in the autumn of 1936 such oblique and measured condemnations were replaced in the Irish Press with outright denunciations of the ‘mad orgy of
blood lust and hatred\textsuperscript{84} and ‘the holocaust which has been made of Bishops, priests, nuns\textsuperscript{85} by the communist forces in Spain which occasionally bordered on outright condemnation of the Spanish Government and support for Franco. The primary aim nonetheless was to articulate Irish Catholic sentiment as indicated by Irish Press editorials that declared it:

\begin{quote}
...inevitable that a people so deeply attached to their religion as the Irish should feel shocked and horrified by what is occurring in Spain and that all their sympathies should go out to their co-religionists in that country who are treading a Calvary such as perhaps no religious community in modern times has gone through.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

It should be recognised, however, that by the beginning of 1937 Fianna Fail rhetoric returned to a much more measured discourse, with the Bishops’ comments on Spain in their Lenten pastorals being all but ignored by the Irish Press,\textsuperscript{87} as the Party now seemed unwilling to encourage further clerical interference in Irish politics or to risk alienating it’s more republican and labour support base.

The major problem confronted by the Fianna Fáil Party in respect of Non-intervention, however, was the continuance of diplomatic relations with the Spanish Republic and the non-recognition of Franco which, as we have
seen, caused greatest anger among his Irish Catholic supporters. As soon as
the policy was announced it was therefore incumbent on Fianna Fáil and its
intellectuals at the Irish Press to counter its inevitable construction by the
opposition as ‘pro-Communist’ and ‘anti-Catholic.’ This was mainly
achieved by exploiting the fortunate circumstance that the Irish
Government’s policy coincided with that of the Vatican. Here again it was
not simply a question of engaging in a paradiastolic struggle over the
meaning of the policy, but crucially, of winning the active consent of the
Party’s wavering Catholic support base by establishing an equivalence
between the Fianna Fáil Government and the ‘Holy See’ with reference to
their shared policy on Spain. On the 31 August an Irish Press editorial thus
called the attention of its readers to the Vatican’s position of Non-
intervention and non-recognition of Franco expressed in Osservatore
Romano, declaring that ‘The policy of the Free State Government …is in
strict accordance with the appeal of the Vatican organ.’

In the Dáil De Valera struck a similar chord in opposing Fine Gael’s attempt to have Non-
intervention re-formulated to recognize Franco, arguing that ‘the Holy
Father …must believe that it was not in the best interests of Christianity that
…recognition should be given.’

While the rhetorical move of identifying government policy with the
Vatican would no doubt have reassured those Catholics sympathetic to
Franco, by late 1936 and early 1937 this was no longer sufficient since the
opposition had now shifted its attention to Ireland, especially on the back of the Bishops’ Lenten pastorals in February 1937 when *equivalences* were consistently made between the communists in Spain and the similar threat from Labour groups in Ireland. The Party’s rhetorical campaign now moved to ‘check’ and to ‘educate’ this extreme clericalism which necessitated considerable attention to avoid alienating the Catholic constituency on which Fine Gael were attempting to found a new hegemonic order. While a confrontation with the latter could not now be avoided this was skilfully handled by the Fianna Fáil ideological machine as it drew on some ‘authoritative sources.’ In the Dáil in February De Valera in fact used comments by Cardinal MacRory (Primate of All-Ireland) and Papal Encyclicals - *Rerum Novarum* (1891) or *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) - in defence of ‘the just demands of a working class’ to attack the opposition’s ‘pretence that those who are looking for their legitimate rights and legitimate liberties are necessarily Atheistic and Communist.’ He in particular singled out for criticism the claim of The Irish Catholic journal that ‘204,000 affiliated members of the Irish Trades Union Congress are tacit supporters of Communism’ asking ‘Is there anyone here, or anybody in the country, who is going to believe that?’ The Irish Press took this up in an editorial significantly entitled ‘Libelling the Workers’ which now not only sought to *educate* Catholics of this ‘grave misrepresentation of the attitude and spiritual allegiance of the mass of the Irish workers’ but also to bond Catholicism and labour in equivalences that again placed both in
antagonistic opposition to communism. The editor of the *Press* thus declared that Irish workers repudiate:

… with indignation and even horror the charge of apostasy made against them. They have no sympathy with communism in no shape or form. …They are, as they have always been, staunch and faithful children of the Church who accept unquestioningly and unhesitatingly her dogmas and her standards, and who would, if need be, willingly shed their blood and lose their lives in her defence.\(^{91}\)

Such rhetoric had of course the powerful effect of re-equilibrating Fianna Fáil hegemony by checking the Catholic element in the ideological bloc while also re-bonding it with republicanism and labour.

This re-balancing of Fianna Fáil hegemony continued throughout 1937 and 1938 as events now transpired to give the Party’s rhetoric an increasingly attractive appeal. If the Spanish Civil War might convincingly have been interpreted as a war between the forces of ‘God and Anti-God’ in 1936 and even early 1937 on the back of the clerical abuses, by the spring of that year the inadequacy of the opposition’s claims was becoming increasingly obvious to the Irish public.\(^{92}\) From this point on the consistent and flagrant interventions by Germany and Italy in the conflict,\(^{93}\) as well as the former’s
anti-Catholic and anti-democratic turn allowed Fianna Fáil to carefully undermine such depictions of the War. Indeed, the Party was given an additional fillip by the return of General O’Duffy’s Irish Brigade in June 1937 divided and disgraced; splitting into ‘two rival groups of men, of almost equal size, for and against their erstwhile leader’ on arrival in Dublin amid recriminations and accusations of a political rather than a religious crusade.\textsuperscript{94} While the \textit{Irish Press} declined to offer much editorial commentary on these events which would have been likely to antagonize some bishops its headlines and reports slowly brought home to Catholics the complex and wider imperialist dimension of the conflict. The bombing and virtual flattening of the Basque city of Guernica in April by the German Condor Legion for example was given front page prominence sparing no details of the enormity and brutality of the attack – ‘800 Killed in History’s Biggest Air-Raid – German Bombers Accused.’\textsuperscript{95} The rhetorical impact of such a report only comes home when viewed in the context of the \textit{Irish Press}’s continuous reminders to its readers in this period that one of Franco’s most vital allies, Nazi Germany, had recently been condemned in a Papal Encyclical – \textit{Mit Brennender Sorge} (1937) - while the Basques were predominantly Catholic. The headlines alone reveal the determination with which Fianna Fáil’s press organ pursued this rhetorical campaign: ‘The Holy Father Indicts Hitler Regime,’\textsuperscript{96} ‘Hitler Recognises Neo-Paganism’\textsuperscript{97} ‘Shock for Nazi Persecutors’\textsuperscript{98} ‘Nazis Bar Catholic Collections.’\textsuperscript{99} Such headlines frequently appeared alongside reports of the continuing German
intervention in Spain which of course made it increasingly difficult for the opposition to claim that the Spanish Nationalists were the defenders of the Faith. This too served to draw Catholic support away from the pro-Franco lobby and towards Fianna Fáil, facilitating the re-equilibrium of its hegemony.

*Fianna Fáil and the Burgeoning of ‘Neutral Ireland’*

In fact by mid-1937 Fianna Fáil’s rhetorical strategy in respect of the War in Spain and Non-intervention was showing signs of increasing success. The first nine months of the conflict and the challenge mounted by the opposition in Ireland had clearly induced a period of instability and a certain degree of contradiction within the historical bloc. However, the rhetorical campaign and the development of events were undoubtedly working to draw sufficient elements from both sides towards the compromise of Non-intervention and ‘neutrality’ which was the Party’s core position on Spain from the outset. In Gramscian terms, *theory* was thus becoming increasingly coordinated and balanced with *practice* and the groundwork for this had been firmly laid by a robust defence of ‘Non-intervention’ when it was most under threat, both in the columns of the *Irish Press* in the autumn of 1936 and in the Dáil in February 1937. What was most significant about Fianna Fáil’s articulation of ‘neutrality’ in relation to the Spanish conflict, however, was the concerted effort it entailed to draw partisan elements
towards this *compromise* position, and almost inadvertently to prepare the ground for the Irish State’s wider adoption of ‘neutrality’ in the Second World War.

Indeed, the most persistent and most successful line of argument raised by Fianna Fáil in defence of Non-intervention was that it was in the interests of ‘European peace.’ It was this above all which eventually trumped the claims that Non-intervention was a ‘pro-Communist’ or ‘anti-Catholic’ policy. Those who had been convinced of the latter by the opposition’s formidable campaign in the early stages of the War were therefore progressively weaned off it as the Fianna Fáil rhetorical machine deployed a *descriptive-evaluative* language that shifted the meaning of Non-intervention onto its own hegemonic terrain. The statement released to announce the Irish Government’s adoption of Non-intervention in August 1936 thus declared it a policy which ‘will best serve the cause of European peace’¹⁰¹ and this was followed by a whole series of *Irish Press* editorials throughout the winter of 1936-37 defending the Government’s ‘Peace Efforts’ and condemning the opposition’s support for ‘armed intervention’ and changes in diplomatic relations that the *Irish Press* argued could well ‘contribute to plunging Europe, and perhaps the world, into another Armageddon.’¹⁰² In the Dáil debate in November 1936 De Valera concluded his defence of Government policy by declaring it ‘best in the general interests of world peace’¹⁰³ and opened in February on this same
theme arguing that the extension of Non-intervention was required to prevent the conflict ‘spreading beyond Spain, thus endangering the peace of Europe.’  

But what was particularly notable about this effort to construct Non-intervention as a policy for peace was the manner in which bonding equivalences were again drawn on the basis of the Christian devotion to peace in order to win over the Catholic elements. Indeed, the *Irish Press* insisted that it was this goal above all that motivated both the Vatican’s and the Government’s support for the policy, and rounding up the debate in the Dáil on Non-intervention in February 1937 Sean MacEntee proclaimed:

> I say that every man who believes in Christianity, every man who follows the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, every man who stands for the Gospel of peace for which our Church stands, will, on this issue, stand behind the Government.  

The *Press’s* headlines on the February debate showed the centrality of this rhetorical strategy - ‘Free State’s Contribution to Peace.’  

Moreover, it was precisely on this basis that the pro-Fine Gael *Cork Examiner* now fell in behind Government policy in February 1937 as the *Irish Press* was quick to point out, demonstrating that public attitudes to the Spanish War and Non-intervention were clearly moving in Fianna Fáil’s direction.
In fact, the attitude of the public to Spain and Fianna Fáil’s policy of Non-intervention was a key source of ideological contention too as both sides claimed they were representing ‘the Irish people’ and therefore clashed over the privilege of asserting ‘democratic’ ethos in the controversy. There can be no doubt, however, that the policy had considerable and growing support from the outset. For it is highly unlikely that the Irish Press would have risked alienating further an already hostile public with declarations that the Irish Independent’s claim to be speaking on behalf of the people was ‘the merest bluff and nonsense’ or that such an astute political operator as Eamon De Valera would have stood up in the Dáil and declared it a policy ‘that is accepted by the vast majority of the Irish people’ who ‘are as convinced as the Government is convinced that the best thing that could be done in the interests of the Spanish, and in the interest of the thing we hold dear, would be to let the Spanish people settle this matter for themselves’ if there was not already significant and growing public support for it. The key advantage of defending Non-intervention on these ‘democratic’ grounds was, moreover, the possibility it offered to attract elements from both the pro-Franco and pro-Spanish Republic sides. One of the main supplementary arguments consistently raised by the Irish Press in this endeavour was that ‘in accepting the principle of non-intervention, the Free State Government has placed itself in line with virtually every other European Government.’ The ‘democratic’ flavour of this argument was of course given even greater force when the only states which emerged to follow Fine Gael and the
Independent’s calls to recognise Franco in the first phase of the War were fascist regimes in Germany and Italy which according to the Irish Press were out to ‘endanger the prospect of peace on the Continent’ which was by contrast ‘the consideration which is uppermost in the minds of all responsible people in every European country.’¹¹³ This equivalencing of the Irish State with the majority of European countries and especially the democracies externalizing fascism in the process was again resorted to by De Valera in the Dáil in February as he pointed out to the opposition that in ‘continuing our diplomatic relations with the Spanish State’ within Non-intervention they were following a rule that ‘Practically all the States of Europe, with the exception of Germany and Italy, have followed.’¹¹⁴ Democratic articulations of this nature undoubtedly augmented the support for Non-intervention. For while the claim of the Pro-Franco lobby that the severing of relations with the Spanish Republic and the recognition of Franco had widespread public support may have had some basis at the height of clerical abuses in the autumn of 1936, by the spring and summer of 1937 this became increasingly dubious. This was particularly evident from Fine Gael’s failure to raise these issues in the July election and the poor showing of those in their ranks who had been most vocal in exclaiming the virtues of Franco and the crusade for Christianity. Indeed, the leader of the Irish Christian Front, Patrick Belton, whose organization was in sharp decline by this stage, even had to suffer the indignity of losing his Dublin seat to a Labour Party candidate.¹¹⁵ Fianna Fáil’s rhetorical campaign to
declare Non-intervention a ‘democratic’ policy that ‘met with the approval of the vast majority of the Irish people’\textsuperscript{116} therefore took on something of the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy – helped on, however, by a fortuitous turn of events and the incompetence and extremism of some central figures in the opposition campaign such as Belton and O’Duffy. In fact, the Party was significantly aided by the latter’s extremism which worked to undermine the unity that had been forged by the Franco lobby around the issue of Spain in 1936, and eventually to accentuate the divisions which had always been present among the different strands of Irish Catholic politics in the opposition campaign.

Indeed, from mid-1937 to the end of the Spanish Civil War in April 1939 Fianna Fáil and the \textit{Irish Press} – satisfied that events had vindicated their interpretation of the conflict and the moral rectitude of Non-intervention in the eyes of the majority of the Irish public – avoided the issue altogether in the interests of unity and expansion. It was in fact subsumed under ‘neutrality’ which had now become the rhetorical centre around which the displaced and destabilized identities of the Spanish Civil War were being rebound. This of course had the added advantage of dissipating the grievances about Spain in this more popular rhetorical theme. Just as Non-intervention had been defended as an anti-imperialist, Christian and democratic policy, so now the focus shifted to the defence of ‘neutrality’ on this same ideological terrain. Neutrality, indeed, had the further attraction
of being constructed as an expression of republican ‘sovereignty’ and independence from Ireland’s principal ‘other’ of the period (Britain), and here again the rhetoric equilibrated with policy as October 1937 saw the Irish refusal to support the British at the League on the threat to end Non-intervention in Spain,\textsuperscript{117} April 1938 witnessed the return of Irish ports to the control of the Irish State under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Trade Agreement,\textsuperscript{118} and significantly, February 1939 was the occasion for de Valera to use the issue of Spain to again assert Irish independence by recognising Franco just weeks before Britain.\textsuperscript{119} ‘Neutrality’ thus emerged in this period from Non-intervention as an enduring principle around which a whole host of Irish ideological themes were related and interwoven. It had in fact taken on the character of a quilting point in the rhetoric of Fianna Fáil,\textsuperscript{120} stabilizing and binding together the various elements of Irish identity and finally putting an end to the unsteadiness that had been created by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War as the Party restored its equilibrium and hegemony on a new and more enduring basis.

\textit{Conclusion: Direzione, El Hilo del Caudillo and ‘Modern Ireland’}

Unfortunately for Irish democracy, however, it can hardly be argued that it emerged from the controversy over the Spanish Civil War on a more progressive footing. Clerical interference in Irish democracy in fact grew if anything in the 1940s on the back of the show of strength the Catholic lobby
had managed to muster during these years as the isolation and decline of a genuine Irish left continued simultaneously. While the main contributors to this regression were undoubtedly those in the media (the *Irish Independent*) and politics (Fine Gael) who had most solicited and facilitated the intervention of more authoritarian Catholic elements in Irish politics, and thereby succeeded in shifting its dynamics further to the right, Fianna Fáil were by no means blameless either. Hegemony, as Gramsci was keenly aware, can take many political complexions and if it is to be truly progressive it of course requires above all the willingness to lead (*direzione*) and to forge ideologically new and more advanced social relations,\(^{121}\) which is precisely what Fianna Fáil failed to do after it had successfully re-established equilibrium and hegemony in Irish politics in the aftermath of the ideological conflict over Spain. The Party, in fact, opted not to antagonise the forces of the Irish right that had mobilised for Franco in the years previously, instead moving increasingly on to their wider regressive terrain in the interests of preserving power at all costs, and thus foreclosing an opportunity that certainly existed to bring home to the Irish public the dangers of flirtations with authoritarian agendas of the Francoist variety that the Spanish dictator’s regime was increasingly demonstrating in its ‘pacification’ of Spain.\(^ {122}\)

Revisiting this period of Irish political history, moreover, is not without its contemporary resonances and lessons. As I have argued above, the
ideological contestation that was raised over Spain contributed significantly to the establishment of Irish neutrality which was to become something of the order of a fundamental tenet of Irishness in the years ahead, despite the fact that from its ascent to power in 1932 the Fianna Fáil Government and de Valera in particular had shown considerable willingness to commit the Irish State to interventionist policies in defence of the Covenant of the League of Nations including sanctions and possible military action in the case of Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia in 1935.\textsuperscript{123} Indeed, the recent ‘No’ vote on the European Constitution (June 2008) has demonstrated once again that ‘neutrality’ remains an issue around which powerful political emotions can still be mobilised with the skilful deployment of rhetoric, and revisiting what might be regarded as the ‘ignoble beginnings’ of this frequently unquestioned political commitment\textsuperscript{124} can provide precisely the jaunt that is required to prevent the Irish public from falling prey to suspect and regressive agendas built around supposed ‘sacred and ancient’ loyalties. Accordingly, while we should not of course engage in crassly ahistorical condemnations of Irish neutrality either in relation to Spain or the Second World War, it is nevertheless worth considering that the Irish State under Fianna Fáil in extolling the policy of Non-intervention and neutrality as a paragon of political virtue in its anti-imperialist, democratic and Christian dimensions long after it had been rendered toothless by flagrant abuses by Hitler and Mussolini played its small role – like many other European democracies - in providing the conditions in which Franco succeeded in
subjecting the Spanish people to over thirty years of dictatorship. At the very least, this reflection alone should encourage contemporary Ireland to stand back from the intellectual commitments it has inherited and ask itself ‘in a new spirit of enquiry’ what it should think of them. 

Finally, it is worth noting the level of international engagement that existed in Irish political and ideological contestation in this period that also calls into question some of the most cherished shibboleths of ‘modern Ireland,’ and not least the tendency to construct its history as one marked by an ascent from a closed, homogenous traditional nation to an open and plural modern society, proud to take its place in the international order. A favourite prop for this feel-good story of an ascent to modernity is of course the now widely disparaged ‘De Valera’s Ireland’; an era in which the former Irish Taoiseach supposedly lorded over a uniform and submissive mass by pointing endlessly to the victories and purgatories of the colonial past. As this article has demonstrated, there is good reason to believe that ‘De Valera’s Ireland’ was a lot less insular and submissive than we are sometimes led to believe, and accordingly, winning the battle for hegemony then was just as demanding for Fianna Fáil as it is today. Indeed, acknowledging the remarkable capacity of that Party to adapt and rejuvenate its equilibrium to the historically changing arena of Irish politics is the first and most vital lesson for building any serious opposition to its continuing hegemony today.
I am grateful to Margaret O’Callaghan, Aletta Norval, Peter McLoughlin, Patrick Maume, Richard English, Alan Finlayson and Paul Bew and an anonymous assessor of JPI for providing useful feedback on my work on Fianna Fáil and helping me to clarify my ideas. The views expressed in this article are of course mine alone. I also acknowledge the financial support of the ESRC (Grant Ref. PTA-026-27-1394).

1 I am grateful to Margaret O’Callaghan, Aletta Norval, Peter McLoughlin, Patrick Maume, Richard English, Alan Finlayson and Paul Bew and an anonymous assessor of JPI for providing useful feedback on my work on Fianna Fáil and helping me to clarify my ideas. The views expressed in this article are of course mine alone. I also acknowledge the financial support of the ESRC (Grant Ref. PTA-026-27-1394).

2 The books on the Spanish Civil War I have found most helpful are, B. Bennassar, El Infierno Fuimos Nosotros: La Guerra Civil Española (1936-1942…) (Buenos Aires: Taurus Historia, 2005); B. Bolloten,

There were, however, significant divisions within the opposition and especially within the Fine Gael Party on the level of resistance it was prepared to mount to Non-intervention.


Indeed, the author appears less than assured at times of his judgement on Fianna Fáil’s reaction to the conflict, and in the conclusion of his book the pro-Franco label is tellingly and hastily revised to a ‘benevolent neutrality’ which in some ways, he argues, foreshadowed the Irish State’s relations with the Allies in the Second World War. McGarry, *Ibid*, p. 233. See too, F. McGarry, ‘Irish Newspapers and the Spanish Civil War’, Irish Historical Studies, xxxiii, No.129 (2002), pp. 68-90.


Gramsci, *op. cit.*, Ref. 8, pp. 74-9, 242-4.


14 Gramsci, op. cit., Ref. 8, p. 172.


20 Gramsci, op. cit., Ref. 8, p. 348.


25 Laclau and Mouffe, op. cit., Ref. 12, pp. 105-114; Howarth, op. cit., Ref. 12, pp. 106-120.


31 Dunphy, op. cit., Ref. 29, p. 159.

32 Ibid, p. 10.


34 Irish Press, 14 June 1937. Frank Gallagher, the Irish Press’s first editor and without doubt the most important figure in establishing the ideological tone of the newspaper regarded its ‘essential mark’ and ‘appeal to the people’ to be based on its ‘democratic and republican outlook’ (O’Brien, op. cit., Ref. 33, p. 34). It was therefore no coincidence that on the day the 1937 Constitution came into effect the Irish Press announced in a banner headline ‘THE IRISH FREE STATE BECAME EIRE TODAY - A SOVEREIGN INDEPENDENT DEMOCRATIC STATE.’ Irish Press, 29 December 1937.


42 For a sophisticated treatment of the social policy and identity politics of Catholic journals in 1930s Ireland see, S. Riordan, ‘The Unpopular Front: Catholic Revival and Irish Cultural Identity 1932-48’ in M.

44 For the divergent ideological strands and tensions within Irish Catholic politics in this period see M. Curtis, *The Splendid Cause: The Catholic Action Movement in Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Original Writing, 2008).


46 *Irish Independent*, 17, 29 August.

47 *Irish Independent*, 9 September 1936.

48 *Irish Independent*, 20, 26 August, 29 September 1936.

49 *Irish Independent*, 14 August 1936.


51 *Irish Independent*, 8 February 1937.

52 *Dáil Debates*, Vol. 65, 18, 19 February 1937.


54 McGarry, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, pp. 1-9; 198-206.


57 M. Cronin, *The Blueshirts and Irish Politics* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997). Unsurprisingly, it was O’Duffy who led the ‘Irish Brigade’ which went to fight for Franco in the winter of 1936. See, Stradling, *op. cit.*, Ref. 4, pp. 6-128.

58 *Irish Press*, 23 September 1936. It should of course be pointed out that left republicans who supported the cause of the Spanish Republic *publicly* like Frank Ryan, Peadar O’Donnell and Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington – although influential – had little electoral support in Ireland and were very much in a minority
on the Irish left. The policy of the Irish Labour Party in relation to Spain was in fact to say as little as possible about the issue to avoid alienating its Catholic supporters and attracting the wrath of the Catholic Church and media. This lack of committed support – as opposed to ambiguous sympathy - for the Spanish Republic in Ireland was also reflected in the relatively small number of Irishmen who joined the International Brigades (approx. 200) in Spain in comparison to those who fought for Franco (approx. 1000). Puirseil, op. cit. Ref. 53, pp.57-62; Stradling, op. cit., Ref. 4, pp. 128-212.

59 Irish Press, 15 September 1931.


63 Thomas Derrig, Dáil Debates, Vol. 65, 19 February 1937.

64 Sean MacEntee, Dáil Debates, Vol. 65, 24 February 1937.

65 Sean Lemass, Dáil Debates, Vol. 65, 10 March. See too De Valera’s comments in November, Dáil Debates, Vol. 64, 27 November 1936.

66 Irish Press, 28 August, 12 September, 17, 29 October, 20, 28 November 1936; 2 January, 20, 23 February 1937.

67 Dáil Debates, Vol. 64, 27 November 1936.

68 Irish Press, 20 November 1936.

69 Irish Press, 30 November 1936.

70 Irish Press, 2 January 1937.

71 Irish Press, 6 April 1937.

72 Irish Press, 26 July, 7 September 1936.

73 Irish Press, 17 October 1936.

74 Irish Press, 3 October 1936.

75 The increasing control of Moscow over the Spanish Republic throughout the conflict - and indeed the importation of Stalinist methods into Spain for dealing with Trotskyites and Anarchists - has been well-recorded. For the most recent account, see Bennassar, op. cit., Ref. 2, pp. 166-180.
76 Irish Press, 2 September 1936.

77 Irish Press, 5 August 1936; Irish Press, 1 June 1937.

78 Dáil Debates, Vol. 65, 19 February 1937.

79 Irish Press, 27 January 1939.

80 Irish Press, 20 February, 8, 30 March 1939.

81 Bolloten, op. cit., Ref. 2, pp. 51-2.

82 Both Stradling and McGarry occasionally express some support for this position. Stradling, op. cit., Ref. 4, p. 16; McGarry, op. cit., Ref. 7, p. 73.

83 Irish Independent, 26 August 1936.

84 Irish Press, 15 September 1936.

85 Irish Press, 24 October 1936.

86 Irish Press, 14 October 1936.

87 Irish Press, 8 February 1937.

88 Irish Press, 31 August 1936. See too, Irish Press, 1, 12, 15 September 1936.

89 Dáil Debates, Vol. 64, 27 November 1936.

90 Dáil Debates, Vol. 65, 19 February 1937.

91 Irish Press, 23 February 1937. For additional editorials ‘checking’ Catholic anti-communism which denied there was any real threat of communism in Ireland, see, Irish Press, 28 November, 16 December 1936; Irish Press, 2, 23 January 1937.

92 Keogh, op. cit., Ref. 4, pp. 79-80.


94 Stradling, op. cit., Ref. 4, pp. 104-5.

95 Irish Press, 28 April 1937. For the difference between Irish Press and Irish Independent reports on this and other Nationalist war crimes see, McGarry, op. cit., Ref. 7, pp. 76-8.

96 Irish Press 22 March 1937.

97 Irish Press 4 April 1937.

98 Irish Press 16 April 1937.

99 Irish Press 19 April 1937.
The Irish Independent and Fine Gael retaliated to these efforts to associate it with fascism with unconvincing claims that De Valera was using the new 1937 Constitution and particularly its creation of an office of president - which was then under public discussion - to set up a European-style dictatorship in Ireland (Keogh, op. cit., Ref. 55, p.101).

Irish Press, 26 August 1936.

Irish Press, 31 August, 12, 15 September, 17, 29 October, 19, 20, 30 November 1936; 20, 23 February 1937.

Dáil Debates, Vol. 64, 27 November 1936.

Dáil Debates, Vol. 65, 18 February 1937.

Irish Press, 19 November 1936.


Irish Press, 19 February 1937.

Irish Press, 23 February 1937.

It should, however, be noted that Fianna Fáil was by no means omnipotent in Irish politics in this period as not only did a substantial 527,000 voters reject ‘De Valera’s Constitution’ in July 1937 (as opposed to 685,000 votes for), but the Party also decreased its share of the popular vote in the General Election held on the same day from 49.7 to 45.3 per cent and had once again to rely on Labour Party support in the Dáil. Lee, op. cit., Ref. 27, pp.210-211.

Irish Press, 19 November 1936.


Irish Press, 20 November 1936.


McGarry, op. cit, Ref. 5, pp. 132, 198.

Irish Press, 28 August 1936.

Kennedy, op. cit., Ref. 4, p. 233.

McMahon, op. cit., Ref. 28, p. 380.


Gramsci, op. cit., Ref. 8, pp. 78-9.


