

The formation of the Ulster Home Guard

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores the problems encountered in the formation of the Ulster Home Guard, supposedly a direct equivalent to its well-known British counterpart, as part of the paramilitary Ulster Special Constabulary in Northern Ireland, during the Second World War. Predictably, the Ulster Home Guard became an almost exclusively Protestant organisation which led to many accusations of sectarianism from a variety of different national and international voices. This became a real concern for the British government, as well as the army, which understandably wished to avoid any such controversy. Though assumptions had previously been made about the numbers of Catholics in the force, this article explores just how few joined the organisation throughout the war. Additionally, the article investigates the rather awkward constitutional position in which the Ulster Home Guard was placed. Under the Government of Ireland Act, the Stormont administration had no authority on matters of home defence. It did, however, have the power to raise a police force as a way to maintain law and order. Still, the Ulster Home Guard, although formed as part of the Ulster Special Constabulary, was entrusted solely with home defence and this had wider implications for British policy towards Northern Ireland throughout the Second World War.*

The story of the Home Guard in Great Britain is well known; at least the popular memory of the organisation is, largely due to the success of the B.B.C. sitcom *Dad's Army*. The Captain Mainwaring and Corporal Jones characters so often associated with the Home Guard in Great Britain were far removed from the reality of the force in Northern Ireland. By the simple fact that the Ulster Home Guard (originally the Ulster Defence Volunteers) was established as part of the Ulster Special Constabulary (U.S.C.) it was composed overwhelmingly of Protestants, attracting only small numbers of Catholics to aid in home defence operations. It was in many senses a re-emergence of the Protestant volunteering tradition.¹ What will become clear, though, is that this was not the result of a deliberate policy undertaken

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¹ For more on the Protestant volunteering tradition of the seventeenth century onwards see: D. W. Miller, 'Non-professional soldiery, c.1600–1800' in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds), *A military history of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), pp 316–17. For a full discussion of its re-emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see: W. M. Butler, 'The Irish amateur military tradition in the British army, c.1854–1945' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Kent, 2013).

by the Stormont government, despite criticisms to the contrary, mainly directed from outside of Northern Ireland. The government had taken steps to meet the most immediate danger in May 1940, a very real threat of invasion, and had done so at the expense of an entire section of the population, albeit not for the first time or the last. Members of the Northern Ireland and imperial governments also directed criticism towards it because it was founded on very shaky constitutional ground. Strictly speaking, the Stormont government had no legal right to form a force for home defence, but in the late spring of 1940, although political considerations played a part, from a military and organisational point of view little choice existed if the Stormont government was to attempt to repel successfully an invasion on home shores. This article will examine, firstly, the formation of the Ulster Home Guard and its relationship with the U.S.C.; secondly, the question of its religious composition; thirdly, the constitutional questions raised by its existence.

I

Anthony Eden, the new secretary of state for war in Winston Churchill's coalition government, broadcast to the nation after the nine o'clock news on 14 May 1940, four days after the launch of the German campaign in western Europe, announcing the formation of the new Local Defence Volunteers (L.D.V.) in Great Britain. Northern Ireland was not included in the scheme. It has been noted that even before Eden finished speaking, men had begun to form queues outside police stations (many of which had not been given prior warning), not dissimilar to recruiting office queues of the First World War. The call was for men between seventeen and sixty-five with knowledge of firearms and capable of free movement. As many as 400,000 had answered this call by 1 June 1940.² Importantly, in relation to the future force in Northern Ireland, the L.D.V. was raised in accordance with the military authorities and, crucially, was administered by the County Territorial Army Associations throughout the country. In Westminster, as early as 22 May, Sir Edward Grigg, (joint parliamentary under-secretary of state for war), outlined the detailed organisation of the new force stating that:

The organisation is based upon the military organisation and is organised by areas like military commands. Each area has been sub-divided into zones, and each zone is sub-divided into groups, the groups into companies, and the companies into platoons and sections ... Military area commanders, after consultation with the Lord Lieutenants of counties, for whose co-operation we are grateful, and also with the chairmen of county councils and other local authorities of that kind, have appointed voluntary area organisers, who in turn have appointed the zone organisers, and so on down the chain.³

In Northern Ireland the only County Territorial Army Association was the small association which existed in County Antrim, only recently

² I. F. W. Beckett, *The amateur military tradition, 1558–1945* (Manchester, 1991), p. 266. For a full description of the raising of the L.D.V. see: S. P. Mackenzie, *The Home Guard* (Oxford, 1995), pp 33–51.

³ *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cclxxi, 238–76 (22 May 1940).

established – in 1938 – which could not hope to cope with administering a new military force for the entire province, a fact that was discussed and recognised quite readily by those in Stormont.⁴

Indeed, as might be clear from the decision to exclude Northern Ireland from the L.D.V. scheme, the British government placed much less importance upon the defence of Irish shores than it did on those of Great Britain. Indeed, J. W. Blake subsequently remarked that as early as 1937 the British conception of strategy placed little importance on the defence of Northern Ireland.⁵ It was not until the retreat from Dunkirk in June 1940 that special land and air commands were established in the province, these being responsible for the local control of active operations in the event of invasion. Plans were eventually drawn up for the defence of the whole of Ireland against German attack, based upon the forces immediately deployable in Northern Ireland. At this critical stage these amounted only to one, the 53rd Division, supported by the North Irish Horse, and the home service and anti-aircraft units, all of whom had only recently been established and were based in initial training camps, full of untrained men who were hardly capable of putting up a formidable fight. As John Blake remarked, the military resources of the United Kingdom during the summer of 1940 were perilously slender, so the view was taken that the maximum possible strength should be retained in Great Britain.⁶ With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that the army was unwilling to take on additional untrained men in an L.D.V. organisation based in Northern Ireland; it simply was not a priority for them.

However, Northern Ireland's prime minister, Lord Craigavon, was adamant that a scheme of home defence comparable to the L.D.V. should be extended to Northern Ireland. He had to hand a force which, structurally, was not unlike that of the newly formed L.D.V., as outlined by Grigg, and which would be used in the formation of the Ulster Home Guard (U.H.G.): the Ulster Special Constabulary. During the immediate period after partition, the U.S.C. was established in Northern Ireland as a means to provide an aid to the civil power. It consisted of four sections: the 'A' Specials, a full-time paid force; the 'B' Specials, which trained on a part-time basis; the 'C' Specials, which consisted of unpaid, ununiformed reservists; and the 'C1' Specials, consisting of non-active men who would be called out only during emergencies. (The 'A' Specials and 'C' Specials were abolished in 1925–6.) The U.S.C. was paid for and controlled entirely by the unionist government.⁷ As demonstrated by Timothy Bowman, this force swiftly came to be made up of former members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.) and quickly became an outlet for unionist political patronage,

⁴ Memorandum by the secretary of state for war to the War Cabinet Legislation Committee, 5 Mar. 1942 (T.N.A., Cabinet minutes, CAB/75/14); Notes on the formation of the Ulster Home Guard, 1945 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/3/A/77). For the L.D.V. in Great Britain see Beckett, *Amateur military tradition*, pp 266–7; Mackenzie, *Home Guard*, pp 33–7.

⁵ J. W. Blake, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* (Belfast, 1956), p. 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 155–60. This includes a fuller discussion of plans made in case of an invasion from the south.

⁷ For more on the formation of the U.S.C. see: Michael Farrell, *Arming the Protestants: the formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, 1920–27* (London, 1983), pp 38–46; Arthur Hezlet, *The 'B' Specials: a history of the Ulster Special Constabulary* (London, 1972), p. 20.

not a force inclusive of all sections of the population.⁸ Although there were no formal blocks on Catholic membership, in practice it was almost an entirely Protestant force right up until its disbandment after the Hunt Committee Report in 1969. The U.S.C. was a 'formidable' force, well-armed with rifles, revolvers, and machine-guns, trained with these weapons and holding regular drills even during quiet periods.⁹ The 'B' Specials were organised into districts and sub-districts which had their own commandants, and most were grouped around towns and even small villages in order to allow for a greater degree of control at a local level.¹⁰

The L.D.V. in Great Britain contained a very high proportion of men with previous military experience, most of whom had seen action during the First World War and, as a result, already had a degree of military training. In some cases, entire units were composed of war veterans.¹¹ In Northern Ireland, this would not be the case, particularly because the number of men who had served during the First World War was much smaller than that of Great Britain. Though many of those who had served during that conflict were either existing or previous members of the U.S.C., and some of these men would be the driving force behind forming independent defence organisations prior to the introduction of the official scheme, they did not dominate it.¹² Given the high degree of training, abundance of equipment, structural similarities to the scheme outlined by Grigg, and the lack of any substantial Territorial Association to handle the task, it is hardly surprising that this ready-made force was selected by Craigavon as the basis for the U.H.G. in May 1940.

Within a week of the initial announcement of the formation of the L.D.V., Craigavon discussed, in the Northern Ireland cabinet, the possibility of informing the press that a similar scheme could be extended to Ulster. He suggested that the arrangement for the 'defence against parachute troops' would fall to a newly created section of the 'B' Specials, 'who were admirably suited for this work'.¹³ Even at this early stage Craigavon stated that there were 'grave objections' outside Northern Ireland to an arrangement along similar lines to that in Great Britain.¹⁴ Yet this did not act as a deterrent. Two days later, on 22 May, Craigavon indicated in Stormont that such a force would be inaugurated, though the details were as yet vague.¹⁵ Clearly he was intent on going ahead with an independent home defence scheme without the initial support (or consent) of the imperial government. He did not, in fact, visit London until 23 May where, it appears at this stage, Churchill made no objection to the establishment of the force, and on his return to Northern

⁸ Timothy Bowman, *Carson's army: the Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910–22* (Manchester, 2007), pp 190–201.

⁹ Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange state* (London, 1980), pp 95–6.

¹⁰ Farrell, *Arming the Protestants*, p. 45.

¹¹ Beckett, *Amateur military tradition*, pp 269–70; Mackenzie, *Home Guard*, pp 37–8; Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting home defence: men, women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2007), pp 28–30.

¹² *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 June 1940; *Newry Reporter*, 22 June 1940; *Belfast Weekly Telegraph*, 29 June 1940; Transcript of a radio broadcast by Major May, 'Today in Ulster', 19 Feb. 1942 (P.R.O.N.I., LA/7/3H/11).

¹³ Statement by Lord Craigavon, Northern Ireland cabinet conclusions, 20 May 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Hansard N.I. (Commons)*, xxiii, 1211–13 (22 May 1940).

Ireland Craigavon claimed that his government had been entrusted with the task of raising a local defence corps.¹⁶ Constitutionally, however, this was a problem, and if it was not recognised at the time, it would raise some serious questions later, particularly because the Stormont government had no authority over defence policy even though it was responsible for law and order in Northern Ireland.

Even so, by 25 May the cabinet had decided to begin recruitment of a corps of defence volunteers, using the 'B' Specials as its nucleus, and expanded by the recruitment of 'suitable applicants' by the sub-commandants. This expanded force would come under the control of Sir Charles Wickham, inspector-general of the R.U.C.¹⁷ The pace of events meant that the decision-making process behind the new home defence formation was rapid, necessarily so given the speed of the German advance in Europe and the urgency associated with a potential invasion. By the time Craigavon made the first detailed announcement at Stormont on 28 May, the prime minister had already visited London and consulted with various ministers, and with the War Office, regarding the decision to independently form home defence units. Arrangements had been agreed with the imperial authorities which stated that the Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.) and the U.S.C. would undertake the duty of home defence, in addition to their normal constabulary responsibilities. An explicit distinction was to be made in relation to the new Ulster Defence Volunteer section. The main R.U.C. and U.S.C. would carry out home defence duties, as well as deal with ordinary crime. The new section, however, would be confined only to home defence and would not be used as an aid to the civil power – a significant difference in this context.¹⁸

The new volunteers would not receive any payment., could resign with fourteen days' notice and would not be required to give full-time service, live away from their homes, or enrol for a period exceeding the war. The county commandants, who would be required to make local arrangements for the enrolment of volunteers, would undertake recruitment.¹⁹ This was, of course, a pragmatic approach to the whole system of enrolment. As the British authorities had relied on the already existing mechanism of the County Territorial Army Associations, so the Northern Irish authorities used the existing U.S.C. organisation and structures. The negative effect of this was that any pre-existing biases within the U.S.C. at a local level were also prevalent and apparent in the new volunteers, leading to a similarly negative effect on Catholic recruitment. Yet using alternative mechanisms, such as the ex-servicemen's association, the British Legion, would have required the creation of a detailed structure from scratch.

In fact, the use of veterans' associations had been raised at the cabinet meeting on 25 May. A letter tabled by the cabinet secretary, Robert Gransden, advocated the use of Old Comrades' Associations in recruitment, but also noted the possibility of absorbing them directly into the U.S.C. for home defence purposes. It mentioned the existence of associations linked to specific

¹⁶ Robert Fisk, *In time of war: Ireland, Ulster and the price of neutrality, 1939–45* (London, 1985), p. 158; Northern Ireland cabinet conclusion by Lord Craigavon (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

¹⁷ Northern Ireland cabinet conclusions, 25 May 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

¹⁸ *Hansard N.I. (Commons)*, xxiii, 1256–7 (28 May 1940).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

battalions of the Great War's 36th (Ulster) Division, and of associations of ex-servicemen of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and Royal Irish Fusiliers. As an example it noted that the 13th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles Association consisted of area organisers across County Down, many of whom were ex-N.C.O.s, and that it consistently turned out 400 men at parades, all of whom had war service. The 11th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles Association, which had only been in existence for a year, had recently turned out 500 men in County Antrim.²⁰ Of course, this was not dissimilar to the independent formations set up across Great Britain, also based around veteran associations, which were so important during the early days of the L.D.V. By the last days of May the majority of these organisations in Northern Ireland had indeed been absorbed into the Ulster Defence Volunteers section of the U.S.C. (although, curiously, others continued to spring up independently, such as that recruited by the British Legion in Rathfriland, County Down as late as the end of June 1940).²¹

Philip Ollerenshaw has recently suggested that Craigavon's decision to raise the volunteers as part of the U.S.C. was an explosive response to British attempts at negotiation with de Valera, and was a way to keep control firmly in Belfast.²² Moreover, Craigavon had been given a 'dressing down' during a meeting in June with British representatives over his uncompromising stance towards Éire. His decision to attempt to raise a force through the U.S.C. risked damaging British negotiations with Éire over its neutrality. It is logical that the British wished to distance themselves from potential involvement with a sectarian force, given the potential for criticism from Éire.²³ The British authorities were particularly keen to stress the importance of a coordinated defensive plan with Éire should an invasion occur. In fact it was envisaged that if Germany invaded Éire, the 53rd Division would strike from the north, whilst a brigade of Royal Marines would seize a bridgehead in Éire, from Milford Haven in Wales, through which reinforcements could be introduced.²⁴ The authorities recognised that this would be a tricky policy to sell, especially if units from Northern Ireland were involved, given the strong anti-partitionist feelings which existed in the south at the time.²⁵

²⁰ D. C. Lindsay to Gransden, 25 May 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1); *Belfast Weekly Telegraph*, 29 June 1940.

²¹ *Newry Reporter*, 22 June 1940.

²² Philip Ollerenshaw, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War: politics, economic mobilisation and society, 1939–45* (Manchester, 2013), pp 145–6.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 146; John Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster question, 1917–1973* (Oxford, 1989), pp 220–33. Indeed, as Charles Wickham later admitted when putting together notes for the official history of the Home Guard, 'the War Office would not raise the L.D.V. here because they were afraid of getting involved in local political and sectarian differences ... The only way of getting it done quickly was to use the framework and machinery of the Special Constabulary': Wickham to H. C. Montgomery, 5 Feb. 1943 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/794). In a handwritten note at the side of the letter, which had been distributed to the British representatives compiling the history, it was noted that 'we know this but won't put this sort of thing in a book about the Home Guard. We want to avoid, as far as possible, any stressing of the Special Constabulary connection.'

²⁴ Blake, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War*, p. 157.

²⁵ See Michael Kennedy, *Division and consensus: the politics of cross-border relations in Ireland, 1925–1969* (Dublin, 2000), pp 70–91; Stephen Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, partition and Northern Ireland, 1926–1971* (Dublin, 2013), pp 93–106.

These considerations must have influenced matters of home defence but it remains clear that Craigavon simply had no other mechanism open for recruiting a new defence force than reliance upon the U.S.C. The army was in no position to provide any additional support across the Irish Sea, and, judging by his actions in Stormont and the cabinet, Craigavon was intent on taking up responsibility for home defence entirely from within Northern Ireland.²⁶ No doubt this was consequently a relief to the military authorities, who by this point were incapable of defending the south coast of England, let alone anywhere else. The ‘open frontier’ with the south only made matters worse, especially because of the potential for ‘fifth columnists’ in the form of the I.R.A. It had begun operating with much more intensity between February and April 1940, and there was evidence to suggest that its leaders might seize the opportunity of invasion to damage the war effort.²⁷ As a result of this Wickham was very protective of the ‘B’ Specials and concerned about recruitment from it to the armed forces, given its significance for the internal defence of the region.²⁸ From Stormont’s point of view, then, the best solution was to vest in itself control over any home defence force. Retaining control of internal security, also meant ensuring that weapons only fell into the hands of ‘loyal’ men and minimised the risk that any would fall into the hands of the I.R.A.

II

There was no formal policy against Catholics joining the Ulster Home Guard, but much like the U.S.C. during the interwar period, Catholics did not join in any significant numbers, even at the outset. Some of the reasons for this are perhaps obvious, not least because the U.S.C. was composed overwhelmingly of Protestants. Within days of the announcement of its formation, the *Irish News*, a nationalist newspaper, wrote of the new force, that it was

unfortunate in formation and on the lines it is run, [and] cannot possess the confidence of the whole people, despite the statement to the contrary by the Premier. A sectarian organisation, its bias has been exemplified on many occasions; of narrow loyalties, it will have to overcome these in the performance of the wider duties that are now to be entrusted to it if these are to be discharged satisfactorily. Can it rise to such heights?²⁹

Two days later, the Northern Ireland Labour Party announced withdrawal of support for the force as it was felt that ‘as long as the “B” Specials constitute the basis of the force there will not be a united front, which is necessary if the scheme is to be a success’.³⁰ This withdrawal of support was followed by statements in Stormont. John Campbell, the Nationalist M.P. for Belfast Central, in a lengthy speech regarding the formation of the U.H.G., noted that

²⁶ Northern Ireland cabinet conclusions, 25 May 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

²⁷ Blake, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War*, p. 171.

²⁸ Ollerenshaw, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War*, p. 31.

²⁹ *Irish News*, 29 May 1940.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31 May 1940. Although the newspaper did not support the formation of the U.H.G., this same issue did carry advertisements for the newly formed home defence battalions of Northern Ireland, which were under the control of the British Army.

‘no one can dispute the salient fact that the composition of the “B” Specials is unquestionably sectarian. I would add that the composition of the “B” Specials is unquestionably political.’³¹ Campbell also took note of what the minister of agriculture, Sir Basil Brooke, had said regarding the admittance of only ‘loyal’ men to the U.H.G., an important point. He went on to say that ‘if a man is a Catholic or a Nationalist is he by that very fact disqualified? A disloyal man is a man who does not vote with the Government. Just as the Government will not give the Catholics more than one-tenth of the public money available for school-building, so here they will not trust Catholics with defensive arms.’³²

A week later, Campbell reiterated the point that to a large section of the population in Northern Ireland, the county commandants in charge of recruiting, and the force under them, were sectarian and political in character. Without irony, the prime minister replied that the force was ‘very loyal’, but also mentioned the particular difficulties of the political situation in Northern Ireland. William Lowry, parliamentary secretary to the ministry of Home Affairs, commented on the problem of handing out arms and taking in men to the force ‘indiscriminately’. By that he meant, of course, the risk of handing weapons to possible members of the I.R.A. and he felt that county commandants were the best judges of the character of potential recruits.³³ The perceived risk from the I.R.A. had some substance, as information received in July 1940 detailed I.R.A. plans to disarm or infiltrate the U.H.G. when it was on training or patrol, and these reports continued to surface throughout the war.³⁴

The power of the county commandants to recruit the force left it open to justified criticisms. Cases of alleged religious discrimination did occur. At the end of July 1940, Jack Beattie, Labour M.P. for Belfast East, presented an example. He stated that because his local U.H.G. platoon was equipped with a Lewis gun, he had asked Alexander Stafford, a former N.C.O. in the Gordon Highlanders, with twelve years’ service, and in possession of a machine gun instructor’s certificate, to join the platoon. Stafford was rejected by the local commandant because he was a Catholic. Beattie indicated that the commandant had said that he ‘would not take any papishes’. Additionally, Beattie stated that in his area there were 120 ex-servicemen in the British Legion and thirty-nine of them had volunteered to serve in the U.H.G., the majority Catholics. Of these, only six had been enrolled after their names and addresses had been passed on to the local commandant, who also said that he ‘did not want ex-servicemen especially those who were papishes’.³⁵

It was not just during the initial months of the formation of the U.H.G. that accusations were made with regard to the blocking of Catholic applicants to the force, or indeed, of attempts made to expel men for this reason. Examples continued to surface as late as 1943 when a complaint was made directly to

³¹ *Hansard N.I. (Commons)*, xxiii, 1347–52 (4 June 1940).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Hansard N.I. (Commons)*, xxiii, 1426–7 (11 June 1940); ‘Local Defence Volunteers: status and organisation’, undated document (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/793).

³⁴ Letter from the County Fermanagh commandant to area commandants, 31 July 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., Brookeborough papers, D998/25/8); Weekly orders, 2nd (Belfast) Battalion, U.H.G., 3 Jan. 1942 (P.R.O.N.I., LA/7/3/H/7).

³⁵ *Hansard N.I. (Commons)*, xxiii, 1817–18 (24 July 1940).

John Andrews who, by this point, had been appointed prime minister. A vacancy for an instructor had arisen in a battalion of the Home Guard in County Tyrone and it had been suggested that Colonel McCarthy O'Leary should be appointed because of his prior experience in the regular army. Mr J. A. Gregg, the author of a letter objecting to this appointment, stated that O'Leary was

a Roman Catholic and not only that, he is a native of Southern Ireland: all these points have come up at a sitting of our club of Apprentice Boys sitting in Beragh Orange Hall. All the members of the club are Home Guard. After many different opinions it was finally agreed that one of our own religion should get the position as it was very bad if there was not an old comrade of the Ulster Division who was not able to fill the position, and an Ulsterman ... We can see that the Roman Catholic is trying to push themselves in at the head of all good government jobs and they are able to make a fool of a good many of our friends through their civility, but we won't have it here in Beragh, we say not an inch and no surrender.³⁶

This clearly suggests the political leanings of at least some of the Home Guard, regardless of any use Colonel O'Leary would have been to the force. Gregg was reminded that O'Leary was in fact a distinguished officer who had won a Distinguished Service Order with Bar and a Military Cross, spending most of his time in an Ulster Regiment, as well as commanding a battalion of the Ulster Division during the First World War. The authorities dealt with the complaint in an unsympathetic way. H. C. Montgomery, secretary to the Department of Home Affairs, explained to Gransden that the U.H.G. could consider themselves 'lucky in having the assistance of a man like this' and the matter was laid to rest. It is unclear whether O'Leary was eventually permitted to join the U.H.G.³⁷ This case is noteworthy for it illustrates how sectarianism in relation to recruitment arose from local circumstances rather than government policy.

Nevertheless, it is hardly surprising that so few Catholics joined the U.H.G. In March 1941, the British government strongly pressed Stormont to provide a figure on Catholic participation in the force. When presenting the information to Westminster, Stormont officials explained that the organisation was always intended to include Protestants and Catholics 'whose loyalty was beyond suspicion' and that members of the force were not asked for their religion which meant that a precise figure could not be given. As far as the authorities could judge, however, there were no more than 150 Catholics in the force, mainly concentrated in Newry, northern Antrim, Londonderry, and some areas of Tyrone. It was admitted that because the total strength of the force was 26,000, this number of Catholics was 'inconsiderable'.³⁸ Moreover, in comparison, it was estimated by the authorities that in the previous month

³⁶ Gregg to Andrews, 18 Feb. 1943 (P.R.O.N.I., PM/2/16/48).

³⁷ H. C. Montgomery to R. Gransden, 23 Feb. 1943 (ibid.).

³⁸ C. G. Markbreiter to Norman Brook, 26 Mar. 1941; Sir John Anderson to prime minister, 28 Mar. 1941 (T.N.A., CAB123/197). Attestation Forms held at P.R.O.N.I. did not include a section for the indication of religious affiliation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some unofficial forms did, however, include this section.

twenty-five per cent of officers and at least sixteen per cent of the total strength of the R.U.C. were Catholic. There was no hiding behind these figures – the U.H.G. was a Protestant force, one that through its mechanism of recruitment had actively discouraged Catholics participation.

III

Enrolling men as part of the police force for the task of home defence also brought up an important point regarding its legal position should an invasion occur. Stormont officials and army representatives had concerns that members of the U.S.C., both old and new, would be regarded as *francs-tireurs* by the enemy and subject to execution under the laws of war. At an early stage Craigavon stated, rather vaguely, that in the event of an invasion all members of the police force would come under the command of the military, resulting in them being classed as military combatants, and not civilian police.³⁹ Questions were raised as to the possibility of carrying out this task as it was believed that an act of parliament was required.⁴⁰ Craigavon appears to have been ready for this suggestion and believed that he had already carried out the appropriate steps. In fact, whilst in London in May 1940 he had arranged a means for the incorporation of R.U.C. and U.S.C. personnel into the military. All members of the forces would be required to re-attest, essentially to resign and re-join, and once this was done they would become legal combatants.⁴¹

For some this explanation was not satisfactory. John Campbell, for example, wished it to be made clear that the prime minister's proposals were rather ambiguous and obscure in certain matters, most of all that of the question of civilian or military control. He took particular issue with the position of the U.H.G. in the event of an invasion stating that,

The force as set forth by the Prime Minister is in a sense a hybrid one under dual control, part civil and part military. I dare say there was great difficulty knowing where the control of the military authorities begins and where the control of the civil authority ends. That is to say in this particular case where the control of the authorities at Stormont ends and where the control of the War Office begins. Reading as well as I can between the lines, I think the last word is with Stormont.⁴²

In response, Craigavon stated that in the event of an invasion the specific point of transfer would not be an issue because he did not believe that 'if parachutists come down in County Tyrone the men will stop and discuss their rights; whether they will act as Specials or as the other corps', and that if war did come to the shores of Northern Ireland then martial law would take precedent over civil authority at any rate.⁴³

Little more was said publicly on this matter over the summer as the newly raised volunteers carried out training and their new duties as best they could.

³⁹ Statement issued by Craigavon at press conference, 30 May 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

⁴⁰ *Hansard N.I. (Commons)*, xxiii, 1256–7 (28 May 1940).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Hansard N.I. (Commons)*, xxiii, 1347–52 (4 June 1940).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

In private, however, J. C. MacDermott, the minister for public security, was continually anxious about the position of the volunteers and U.S.C., both constitutionally and under military law. In correspondence with Major-General Sir William Thomson, Northern Ireland District, MacDermott stated that when the defence volunteers were formed initial planning revolved around the ability to repel the enemy. The likelihood, however, was that before this role was required, the internal situation would become much more difficult, stretching the capabilities of the police. He specified that:

It is generally accepted that if an acute emergency arises, the role of the Local Defence Volunteer Section of the Special Constabulary, and probably also of a large part of the old B' Special Constabulary, will be a military and not police role. I am accordingly, anxious that the basis of the organisation and training of the new force should be along military and not police lines. This is important too on the grounds of broad political considerations.⁴⁴

It was the constitutional position that bothered MacDermott most. Based on later interviews with MacDermott, Robert Fisk has claimed that he continually pressed the cabinet to make a more definite arrangement for the U.S.C. MacDermott wanted responsibility for the force to be transferred to Westminster, but given the opinion of Major-General Ridley Pakenham-Walsh, General Officer Commanding (G.O.C.), Northern Ireland District, was that separating the defence volunteers from the U.S.C. 'would be disastrous', this suggestion was not pursued.⁴⁵ Pakenham-Walsh stated that a strong framework already existed, suited to the circumstances, and that a transfer of power to the army might mean that 'undesirable elements' would be given access to weapons as the military could not carefully screen applicants in the way that the U.S.C. could.⁴⁶ MacDermott believed that the Northern Ireland government had no power to raise a military force under the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, but later claimed that at the time nobody minded because of the immediate emergency; they were, as he put it, 'legislating beyond their capability'.⁴⁷ It may, of course, be argued that the Stormont government had previously introduced comparable measures: the 'C' Division of the U.S.C. closely resembled an infantry division, though not officially sanctioned as one.⁴⁸

If the constitutional position concerned MacDermott most, the perceived sectarian problems bothered others more, especially those outside the Northern Ireland establishment. MacDermott subsequently maintained that

⁴⁴ J. C. MacDermott to Major-General Sir William Thomson, 8 Aug. 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/793).

⁴⁵ Fisk, *In time of war*, p. 230.

⁴⁶ Pakenham-Walsh to MacDermott, 22 Nov. 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

⁴⁷ Fisk, *In time of war*, p. 231.

⁴⁸ In fact, during the mid-1920s, Craigavon had attempted to convert the 'C' Specials into an Ulster Territorial Army Division when they were no longer required. The proposal was not accepted, largely because the British authorities did not want to take over the cost of the force or risk the upcoming boundary settlement. See Craig to Lord Derby, 9 Nov. 1923; Derby to Craig, 19 Dec, 1923; Stephen Walsh to Craig, 25 Feb. 1924 (T.N.A., Home Office papers, HO45/24851); Extract from draft conclusions of Northern Ireland cabinet meeting, 9 Nov. 1923 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/404).

the volunteers were quite sectarian, but this was because the 'B' Specials were 'bad in parts' and that the denominational imbalance was largely the fault of the minority Catholics for not joining.⁴⁹ Others certainly did not see it this way and on 23 September 1940 a very public memorial letter was sent to Winston Churchill and other important political figures. It was signed by twenty-two influential figures, of Anglo-Irish background, including many unionists, and headed by the retired general Sir Hubert Gough. The letter stated that:

In Northern Ireland the provincial Government has been permitted to raise, arm, equip and control a force to perform the duties as to defence against invasion which are performed in the remainder of the United Kingdom by the Home Guard under military supervision and control. By an unfortunate expedient this new force in Northern Ireland, termed the Ulster Defence Volunteers, has been embodied as a branch of the 'B' Special Constabulary of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. By this one fact it has at once become identified with all the most bitter sectarian and political differences which have long divided Northern Ireland opinion. Its enrolment has been largely governed by considerations of religion and politics which would naturally be absent if it had been conducted on normal lines by the British War Office or under its direction. It has thus incurred the odium attaching to a political police force of a type familiar on the Continent of Europe rather than the general popularity and respect possessed in full measure by the Home Guard throughout the remainder of the United Kingdom.⁵⁰

The letter was also published in a number of British newspapers, which caused the Stormont government to initiate a form of damage control. Within three days, MacDermott had prepared a memorandum for the Northern Ireland cabinet which proposed that the name of the force should be changed to the Ulster Home Guard 'so as to avoid any confusion over it being associated with the police force'. Additionally, it was reiterated that the men were enrolled as special constables, not as members of the armed forces, but, nevertheless, that they would come under military control should the need arise.⁵¹ By 7 October, the Northern Ireland cabinet secretary had written to Churchill stating that if anyone was aware of any cases in which there was a reason to suppose that discrimination had occurred against individuals, either with regard to them being permitted to join the force, or after they had joined it, then the Northern Ireland government was prepared to look into these cases with a view to removing any cause for complaint.⁵² Other than this concession the Stormont government was unwavering.

From London, Charles Markbreiter, the Home Office official responsible for Northern Ireland, suggested that to appease the memorialists it might be best to explain that 'because of the situation as it was last summer it was necessary to raise forthwith a force which could be ready for immediate action,

⁴⁹ Fisk, *In time of war*, p. 231.

⁵⁰ Memorial letter on the Local Defence Volunteers in Northern Ireland, 23 Sept. 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/781).

⁵¹ Draft memorandum to the cabinet by J. C. MacDermott, 26 Sept. 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/793).

⁵² Gransden to Churchill, 7 Oct. 1940 (*ibid.*).

and that in Northern Ireland no other method was available except to make use of the existing force of special constables as a nucleus'.⁵³ Markbreiter felt that this would completely satisfy the memorialists and believed that it could be explained to Churchill that 'whereas in England a force could be created at very short notice, by the method of inviting individual applications, this was not so in Northern Ireland ... since, unless one was to make use of a body which was already accepted as a proved loyalty, it would be necessary to vet each individual application'.⁵⁴

Gransden stated that it was reiterated frequently that necessity had called for the U.H.G. to be raised as part of the U.S.C., as this force could be made ready for action almost immediately. It was argued that discrimination had to occur, especially in relation to the distribution of arms, because of the presence of 'subversive elements'. It was indicated that a 'body of men of proved loyalty' had to be raised.⁵⁵ Rather unfortunately the coats that had been ordered for the U.H.G., and which were supposed to be dark green in colour to match the trousers, had turned out to be black, causing further dismay due to an appearance reminiscent of the controversial 'Black and Tans' of twenty years previously. Furthermore, doubts had been cast as to the willingness of men within the force to transfer from civilian to military control.⁵⁶

Only a few days after the memorial letter was published, MacDermott had pointed out that after the first rush of enlistments, there was a strong possibility that pro-constabulary and pro-military elements would emerge in more rural areas over the coming winter.⁵⁷ This he reckoned to be likely because of the way in which the units had been raised in particular areas. Whilst the U.S.C. structure had been used for recruitment, in Belfast for example, the U.H.G. section as raised was completely separated from the 'B' Specials; as a result many of these men wanted military control. However, in other areas, particularly in the west, the U.H.G. sections had been formed in parallel to U.S.C. platoons. This meant that the two were much more closely intertwined, making it more difficult to take them away from the constabulary structure. Wickham went as far as to say that it was mainly in Belfast and some small towns that a change to military control was wanted, and this was because men in these areas were 'clamouring to become soldiers'.⁵⁸

The many facets of the issue of control remained contentious into November 1940 as it appears that some in Westminster, and most especially MacDermott, were determined not to let the matter rest. He even appears to have persuaded the Stormont cabinet that transferring control of the U.H.G. to the army was the best option. Pakenham-Walsh had other ideas and reminded MacDermott that, if the War Office gained control of the administration of the U.H.G., then the responsibility of recruitment would also fall to them 'with the consequent discrimination between individuals' and that 'such responsibility is bound to leave them open to attack for political bias

⁵³ Markbreiter to Gransden, 12 Oct. 1940 (P.R.O.N.I. HA/32/1/793).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, partially quoted in Fisk, *In time of war*, p. 389.

⁵⁵ Gransden to Markebeiter, Oct. 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/781).

⁵⁶ Anonymous letter to Gransden, 12 Oct. 1940; Memorandum on the status of the Home Guard in Northern Ireland, 18 Oct. 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/793).

⁵⁷ MacDermott to Major-General William Thomson, 27 Sept. 1940 (*ibid.*).

⁵⁸ Wickham to Major W. A. B. Iiff, Ministry of Public Security, 16 Oct. 1940; Wickham to MacDermott, 23 Oct., 15 Nov. 1940 (*ibid.*).

one way or the other'. The bottom line as far as Pakenham-Walsh was concerned was that this was something that was 'most essential the Army should avoid'.⁵⁹ MacDermott informed John Andrews of Pakenham-Walsh's position but told Andrews that he did not see how the military would be involving itself in a political issue because it had already used the police reports on recruits for the regular army.⁶⁰ What MacDermott had failed to appreciate, however, was the inherent differences between screening recruits for the regular armed forces and for the U.H.G. The Stormont authorities felt that they needed to be over cautious about allowing Catholic men to join the latter, because of their potential for I.R.A. involvement, and concern that, since U.H.G. members were required to store their arms at home, this carried the risk of them getting into the wrong hands.

Despite this, in the early days of 1941, discussions on this matter re-emerged in Westminster, mainly reiterating the memorial letter of the previous September, and it continued to be viewed as an important and difficult problem. Herbert Morrison, the British home secretary, felt that the Northern Ireland government's responsibility for the volunteers could be justified as a necessary measure for raising the force in an emergency, but he did not think it possible as a lasting arrangement for two main reasons: firstly, because Stormont was constitutionally responsible for internal law and order, not defence, and, secondly, because 'loyal Catholics' were unwilling to join a force which they saw as administered by a sectarian government.⁶¹ In reply, however, David Margesson, the newly appointed secretary of state for war, outlined the army's position, emphasising the need to remain apolitical, stating that 'on the grounds of both military efficiency and of the absolute necessity of not involving the army in the religious animosities of Ireland, we should not offer to take over this force, and I am not at all disposed to make any withdrawal from this position of principle'.⁶² It was Morrison's second reason that became the biggest sticking point for any transfer of authority, the overwhelming opinion in London being that the army should avoid any controversies which might arise from such a transfer. Sir John Anderson, the lord president, justified such a decision by noting that at the time the U.H.G. was not being used for defence purposes by the Northern Ireland government and, in fact, was only training and equipping for the task in the event of invasion.⁶³ The outcome was perhaps best summed up by Churchill who noted that the subject was no longer in the public eye, there was no need to publicise it, and thus, in his view, it was 'better to let sleeping dogs lie'.⁶⁴

S. P. Mackenzie has noted that Stormont's involving the British government in any decision with regard to the future of the force made the latter into a scapegoat should any problems arise.⁶⁵ However, the Northern Ireland government could not itself make any decision on the administration of the U.H.G. which involved the army, under the sole control of the British authorities. Even if the Northern

⁵⁹ Pakenham-Walsh to MacDermott, 23 Nov. 1940 (ibid.).

⁶⁰ MacDermott to J. M. Andrews, 29 Nov. 1940 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

⁶¹ Morrison to David Margesson, 1 Jan. 1941 (T.N.A., Cabinet papers, CAB123/197).

⁶² Margesson to Morrison, 15 Jan. 1941 (ibid.).

⁶³ N. Brook to Sir A. Maxwell, 17 Feb. 1941 (ibid.).

⁶⁴ Prime minister's personal minute, 17 Mar. 1941 (ibid.).

⁶⁵ Mackenzie, *Home Guard*, p. 85.

Ireland government did not wish for a transfer to military control to take place, it would still have been required to seek guidance from the imperial government as to how to proceed. Craigavon had caused difficulties in May 1940 by acting in an independent manner, but, after all, Stormont had to make preparations to defend its territory during this difficult phase of the war, and surely had no other option than to raise and expand a force through the U.S.C., when the regular military were not in a position to do so adequately and the Westminster government simply could not and did not want to involve itself in Northern Irish defence. As Robert Fisk has intimated, political expediency played a part in Craigavon's initial decision to secure a 'loyal' body of men, required to undertake an important task.⁶⁶ However, once Craigavon had decided that a local force was to be established, the only means of facilitating this was through the U.S.C., an organisation which had the administrative means at its disposal and that would be politically reliable.

In Northern Ireland, the decision made by the imperial government to maintain the status quo was outlined in cabinet, but Northern Irish ministers sought to make sure that the decision was not made public right away. A discussion was also held which made it clear that in Belfast the demand for a change in authority had diminished since new military equipment had been provided.⁶⁷ MacDermott remained unhappy about this arrangement, but it was not to change and, as has been argued by Fisk, the situation meant that the imperial government had pressed the Northern Ireland government into maintaining an unconstitutional arrangement, which had the result of strengthening the sectarian nature of the force.⁶⁸ This is largely true but, of course, the Northern Ireland government had not done itself any favours in the way that it had acted when the force had first come into being.

Although it had been recognised that the U.H.G. would come under the jurisdiction of the military in the event on an invasion, even as late as the end of 1941, this had not been officially codified. During the summer of 1941, discussions were still in progress with regard to the possibility of eventually separating the U.H.G. from the U.S.C., but these did not progress.⁶⁹ Eventually, however, the British government drafted a defence regulation which officially denied the existence of the U.H.G., except as Special Constabulary members, but stated that they would come officially under military control should an emergency arise.⁷⁰ As a result of this, members of the force were required to undertake a new declaration which stated their liability to fall under military control in the event of invasion, resulting in them being subject to military law.⁷¹ This also outlined that they were only required to serve in Northern Ireland.⁷² These points were, undoubtedly, crucial to the

⁶⁶ Fisk, *In time of war*, pp 157–8.

⁶⁷ Northern Ireland cabinet conclusions, 25 Mar. 1941 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

⁶⁸ Fisk, *In time of war*, p. 232.

⁶⁹ War Office responsibility for the Ulster Home Guard, Aug. 1941 (T.N.A., War Office papers, WO32/10013).

⁷⁰ Fisk, *In time of war*, p. 232.

⁷¹ Declaration of the Ulster Special Constabulary, 1941 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9/CD/169/1).

⁷² Letter from the Inspector General's Office to all area commandants, 13 Nov. 1941 (P.R.O.N.I., Hart papers, D3077/L/4).

future organisation of the force, and went some way towards satisfying the various parties concerned, although this did not mean that these problems went away. The British attorney general, Donald Somervell, for example, still emphasised the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between the police and the armed forces, to make matters easier should an emergency occur.⁷³ Even within the U.H.G. itself, when compiling notes with relation to the history of the force, it was stated that any mention of the 'B' Special connection should be avoided.⁷⁴ It appeared, though, that this was the most satisfactory settlement that was likely to occur.

In line with these changes, over time the U.H.G. was placed on a more military footing. For example, military nomenclature was adopted universally across the province; it had already been in use in Belfast.⁷⁵ Military ranks were also formally adopted, although it was made clear that when situations placed those U.H.G. officers of corresponding rank with those in the regular forces, the latter would take precedence in authority.⁷⁶ Arrangements were made for the re-arming of the force with a better quality rifle (they had been training with former U.V.F. arms), as this was seen as one of the greatest recruiting tools.⁷⁷ Even as early as September 1941, there were also enquiries as to whether the U.H.G. could be issued with Rolls-Royce armoured cars left by the North Irish Horse, who had been re-equipped, but this was rejected.⁷⁸ In many respects though, it was clear that the U.H.G. found itself in a more favourable position in terms of equipment than its counterpart in Great Britain.⁷⁹

IV

From its inception, the U.H.G. experienced a number of difficulties which the Home Guard in Great Britain did not have to deal with, and these remained until the latter years of the war. Having initially been excluded from the original home defence scheme, Craigavon's persistence in his efforts to form an equivalent force in Northern Ireland had brought about a number of additional sectarian and constitutional problems for his government, as well as for the imperial authorities. Once Craigavon's decision to create the force had been made, however, the only viable option was to utilise the U.S.C. as the foundation on which to establish it. Doing so meant that the force was more politically reliable in the eyes of the Stormont administration, a point made strongly by Fisk, while the U.S.C. provided a solid basis, from a military perspective, for the speedy creation of the new force in the pressurised situation

⁷³ Minute of a meeting of the Home Policy Committee, 10 Mar. 1942 (T.N.A., Cabinet papers, CAB75/13).

⁷⁴ Wickham to H. C. Montgomery, 5 Feb. 1943 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/794).

⁷⁵ Notes on the formation of the Ulster Home Guard, 1945 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/3/A/77).

⁷⁶ Letter from the Inspector General's Office to all county commandants, 18 Aug. 1942 (P.R.O.N.I., LA/7/3H/13).

⁷⁷ Wickham to Sir R. D. Bates, 16 Mar. 1942 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/815); Bowman, *Carson's army*, p. 153.

⁷⁸ Letters between MacDermott and V. H. B. Majendie, 4, 8 Sept. 1941 (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/1/788).

⁷⁹ L. D. Hickeys, to G.O.C., N.I. District, 22 Aug. 1941 (T.N.A., War Office papers, WO32/10013).

in May 1940. Predictably this meant that the U.H.G. became an almost exclusively Protestant organisation, so continuing the Protestant volunteering tradition, which existed as far back as the seventeenth century and had been manifested in the Volunteers, yeomanry, U.V.F., and many other paramilitary organisations. This led to accusations of sectarianism from a variety of voices, and became a real concern for the British government and the army, which understandably wished to avoid any sectarian controversy. Handing over control to the army might have solved some of these problems, but the decision to do this only when an invasion occurred meant the force was put in a position whereby it felt as though it was nobody's baby. As no invasion did occur, this is how the situation remained until the force was stood down in December 1944.⁸⁰

In addition to accusations of sectarianism, the U.H.G. was placed in a rather awkward constitutional position. Under the Government of Ireland Act, the Stormont administration had no authority on matters of home defence. It did, however, have the power to raise a police force as a way to maintain law and order. Still, the U.H.G., although formed as part of the U.S.C., was entrusted solely with home defence. This bothered J. C. MacDermott, the minister for home affairs, more than any other person and he made repeated appeals to the Northern Ireland cabinet, as well as the British army and government, to take over control of the force. After much discussion, the decision was made to allow control of the force to remain with Stormont. The most important outcome of this decision was that members would not necessarily have been treated as *franc-tireurs* by an enemy force which landed in Ulster.

Criticisms were continually levelled against the force throughout the war, but in the dark days of May 1940, raising it through the administration of the U.S.C. was the only viable option, and thereafter it was no surprise that the army wished to have little to do with the force. Ultimately, the British government could not risk entangling itself with the religious affairs of Northern Ireland when it was fighting a war of such enormous magnitude.⁸¹

⁸⁰ *The Times*, 30 Oct. 1944.

⁸¹ I would like to thank Dr Timothy Bowman, Professor Ian Beckett, Professor Mark Connelly and Professor Alvin Jackson for their advice on a number of matters relating to this article, as well as Ian Montgomery of P.R.O.N.I. for his help in accessing certain previously unseen material. I thank the anonymous readers for their constructive comments, as well as Dr Robert Armstrong and Dr Liam Chambers for their guidance and patience throughout the publication process.