

SHIRT MOVEMENTS IN INTERWAR EUROPE: A TOTALITARIAN FASHION

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The article deals with a typical phenomenon of the interwar period: the proliferation of socio-political movements expressing their “mood” and identity via a paramilitary uniform mainly composed of a coloured shirt. The analysis of 34 European shirt movements reveals some common features in terms of colour, ideology and chronology. Most of them were consistent with the logic and imagery of interwar totalitarianisms, which emerged as an alleged alternative to the decaying bourgeois society and its main political creation: the Parliamentary system. Unlike liberal pluralism and its institutional expression, shirt movements embody the idea of a homogeneous community, based on a racial, social or cultural identity, and defend the streets, not the ballot boxes, as a new source of legitimacy. They perfectly mirror the overwhelming presence of the “brutalization of politics” (Mosse) and “senso-propaganda” (Chakhotin) in interwar Europe.

Keywords: fascism, Nazism, totalitarianism, shirt movements, interwar period.

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“Of all items of clothing, shirts are the most important from a political point of view”, Eugenio Xammar, Berlin correspondent of the Spanish newspaper *Ahora*, wrote in 1932 (2005b, 74). The ability of the body and clothing to sublimate, to conceal or to express the intentions of a political actor was by no means a discovery of interwar totalitarianisms. Antoine de Baecque studied the political dimension of the body as metaphor in eighteenth-century France, paying special attention to the three specific functions that it played in the transition from the *Ancien Régime* to revolutionary France: embodying the state, narrating history and peopling ceremonies. “Clothing is politics”: this phrase sums up his approach to the symbolic universe that revolves around the corporeal metaphor (De Baecque 1997). More recently, other authors have approached the symbolic uses of body and clothing in modern times. Burger-Roussennac and Thierry Pastorello have coordinated a “dossier” of *Cahiers d'Histoire* on “this new historical field” (2015, 6), and Carlotta Sorba edited an issue of *Contemporanea* devoted to “the clothing of politics” in different countries and periods (Sorba 2017). But, although this device of political discourse has always played a major role in history, it became decisive in the period between the two world wars

due to the political prominence of the masses, the endless possibilities of the new propaganda technologies – cinema, radio, loudspeakers, posters – and the importance of symbols in the mechanisms used by the totalitarian dictatorships in their programs of social and “soul” engineering.

How people dress has always had political, social and gender dimensions. The *sans-culottes* (without breeches) of the French Revolution show the extent to which the presence or – as in this case – the absence of a piece of garment can define a social status that, in turn, is identified with a specific political position. To wear trousers instead of *culottes*, like the middle and upper classes at the time, was not a choice, but a consequence of the poverty of the popular classes, excluded from the use of this sign of distinction represented by the breeches. French *Ancien Régime* society was divided, therefore, into two opposed social blocks: with or without *culottes*. As a result, *sans-culottism* became a revolutionary ideology invoked by the defenders of a radical interpretation of the founding principles of liberty, equality and fraternity – especially, equality. The defeat of Jacobinism and accordingly of the *sans-culottes* in 1794 triggered a new socio-political fashion in revolutionary France embodied by the *Muscadins* or *Incroyables* (Gendron 1979; Waquet 2015). These were snobbish young members of the upper classes that, besides wearing musk perfume – hence their name –, sported fancy clothes, somewhat provocative, as if imitating the striking style of the *sans-culottes* – a marked fondness for garish colours and stripes. They liked extravagantly large lapels and thickly knotted cravats, and usually carried a twisted piece of wood by way of a walking stick that they called their “constitution”, perhaps suggesting that it was time for action and fight, not for more political word-mongering. Associated with counter-revolutionary violence under Thermidor and the Directory, their formal radicalism, as an inverted version of the Jacobin fashion, conveyed the new sign of the times: terror had switched sides.

As in the case of the *sans-culottes*, sometimes the message was not to wear something in particular but to not wear it. If not wearing breeches in the late *Ancien Régime* represented a specific social status and became a revolutionary sign, in the interwar period the absence of a hat in one’s personal attire could be a form of protest against the social, generational or gender order. Thus, in Spain a group of young female artists and intellectuals were known as “las sinsombrero” (the hatless ladies) in the late 1920s, turning the decision of not wearing a hat into a sort of wordless manifesto. However, *sinsombrerismo* (hatlessness) was also adopted by some young male Spanish intellectuals at the time, as observed by Jorge Luis Borges during a stay in Spain. He portrayed this phenomenon in an article

entitled “Los intelectuales son contrarios a la costumbre de usar sombrero” (intellectuals are against the custom of wearing a hat), published in *Diario Crítica*, Buenos Aires, on 8 September 1933.

Though mainly related to the “cultural” legacy of World War I, the fashion of coloured shirts among the paramilitary groups of the interwar years also connects with that carnival mentality that revolves around transgressions of the dress code. The key was, firstly, the refusal to wear a special piece of garment – in the case of these movements, the importance of not wearing a jacket, but just a shirt, even outdoors – and, secondly, the use of the streets as the arena where these movements manifested their power and tried to intimidate rivals with an aggressive political practice and symbolic language aimed at expelling adversaries from the public space.

Shirt movements were, therefore, the expression of an old relationship between clothing and politics, body and power, but also the consequence of the dramatic circumstances of the interwar period, dominated by the mysticism of violence, the “brutalization of politics” (Mosse 1990, 159-81), the prominence of young people and masses, the charismatic power of the leader and the importance of “senso-propaganda” (Chakhotin 1940, 170) in the new political culture of the 1930s. Totalitarianisms that emerged at the time understood perfectly the enormous potential of these uniformed movements for the conquest or conservation of power and for training the masses, or their youthful and radical avant-gardes, in their regimented conception of life. This is why the history of the shirt movements is also that of totalitarianism in its golden age. They were a walking total State, a community in motion, displayed in the typical rallies and parades of the 1920s and above all the 1930s. To wear the right shirt with the right colour afforded the comfortable sensation of belonging to and being protected by a chosen people, nation, race or social class. The shirt movements constituted in sum a project of closed society, with its uniforms, watchwords, martyrs and war songs, in search of a “heroic” destiny that most of them would find in World War II.

The phenomenon has already merited some specific studies devoted, for instance, to the Nazi SA (Casquete 2017), the Italian “*camicie nere*” (Cavazza 2008), the “green shirts” in France and Britain (Paxton 1996; Drakeford 1997), the fascist and anti-fascist shirt movements in Britain (Renton 1996; Gottlieb 2011), the French socialist and communist militia (Burrin 1986; Colignon 2000), Norwegian fascism (Hoidal 1971), the Portuguese “*camisas azuis*” (Pinto 2015) or to the comparison between two different national experiences, like the French and the British (Godet 2017), the Romanian

and the Hungarian (Nagy-Talavera 2011) or the Italian and the German (Reichardt 2009). There also exists an extensive study of the political meaning of colours in Modern Italy, the country where the phenomenon was probably born with Garibaldi's red shirts and where peaked with the fascist "*camicie nere*" (Ridolfi 2014 and 2015). It lacked, however, a general and empirical approach to the shirt movements of the interwar period, capable of revealing the commonalities and differences between these, the historical causes of their appearance and the main tendencies of this totalitarian fashion. The main basis of my approach is an inventory focused on the 34 shirt movements that I have managed to identify in interwar Europe with their essential features, namely, the colour of their shirts, the ideology and the year of their foundation (Table 1 in section 2). This information will significantly increase our knowledge of their historical links with totalitarianism and their crucial role in the struggle for power. The evolution of Mussolini's and Hitler's way of dressing, covered in section 3 (From street to office), suggests that the symbolic role of the coloured shirt decreases once these movements have attained power.

1. Uniforms: A Totalitarian Passion

Totalitarianisms did not invent uniforms, but they made them fashionable. The inertia of World War I, represented by the *Freikorps*, the Italian *arditi* and other groups of veterans, the triumph of Bolshevism in Russia and the egalitarian logic of these movements lent military paraphernalia a particular value. The principles and commitments acquired in the trenches determined the political tendency in post-War Europe, also the way of dressing. By December 1917, Benito Mussolini had already coined the term *trincerocrazia* (trencherocracy), as if sensing the importance that those special links established in the Great War trenches would have in the building of a new conception of power.¹ Wearing combat boots and trousers, paramilitary shirts and caps, cross strap and a pin, insignia or armband with the symbol of the party – the swastika, the five-pointed star or the fasces – stimulated pride in belonging to a strong, organised movement, which provided its members with security, self-esteem and a reason to live. It was not even necessary to wear the whole kit: just a shirt of a plain colour was enough to distinguish between *us* and *them*, as occurs with a sporting contest between two different teams. Comradeship – this precious sentiment in a time of extreme crisis – was born of a shared experience of frustration

¹ Mussolini, "Trincerocrazia", *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 15 December 1917; see Griffin (1995, 28-29).

and struggle, but also of living inside a closed community that recognised itself in its symbols and uniforms. After the peace – “the mutilated peace” in Italy and “the stab in the back” in Germany –, the prestige of violence and the attraction of “trencherocracy” marked domestic politics everywhere.

The expression “shirt movement”, sometimes as “black shirt movement”, referring to fascism, or “colo[u]red shirt movement[s]”, appears in the Anglo-Saxon Press as early as the 1920s and became quite common in the 1930s. In April 1923, an Australian newspaper was already echoing the mood prevalent among some “wise patriotic folks” in Britain, who were thinking about having “our own ‘Black Shirt’ movement in the ‘Land of Hope and Glory’”.² The phenomenon gained prominence around 1930 with the appearance of the “red shirt movement” in India, opposed to British control, and especially from 1933 onwards, after Nazism’s rise to power in Germany. Although in July 1933 *The New York Times* reported on the poor result achieved by the Finnish Nazis and other extremist “colored-shirt movements” in the last general election in Finland,³ the phenomenon did not cease to grow in other European countries; in Britain, for instance. At the end of that year, the bishop of Ripon, in a Methodist meeting held in Edinburgh, warned about the meaning of the “coloured shirt movements” that began to proliferate in the world: “The coloured shirts”, he claimed, “were the modern substitute for flag”.⁴

They did not represent a military uniform exactly, but a means of recognition of a volunteer militia or paramilitary force, a sign of distinction, pride and intransigence. To wear the same shirt, without the usual jacket of the regular soldiers, conveyed the egalitarian and fraternal spirit of this kind of armed *corps*. They were more than a guerrilla, but less than a regular army in terms of discipline and military equipment. The comparison with the mesocratic militias of the nineteenth century is significant, because the latter tended to wear pompous uniforms so as to convey social respectability, whereas the paramilitary groups of the interwar period preferred sober, even plebeian, uniform, consistent with the spirit of the times. The main links between their members were comradeship, mutual allegiance and a sense of hierarchy based more on the charisma of the leaders than on formal ranks. Not wearing a jacket over the shirt – this aspect is absolutely crucial – revealed the determination of men ready for action and prepared for everything.

² “London Gossip”, *The Express*, Adelaide, 15 June 1923.

³ “Left Gains Marked in Finnish Election. Nazis and Other Colored-Shirt Extremist Groups Get Few Seats in Parliament”, *The New York Times*, 9 July 1933.

⁴ “Youths in Politics”, *Edinburgh Evening News*, 30 November 1933.

It is difficult to specify the genealogy of the coloured shirts that inundated interwar Europe. It seems that the red shirts headed by Garibaldi in the struggle for Italian unity shaped the model followed by Mussolini and his blackshirts.⁵ Other groups were probably influenced by the Boy Scout Movement created in England in the early twentieth century and which spread rapidly throughout the British Empire and the rest of the world. The Green Shirts of Social Credit Party was the most paradigmatic case. It was founded in the 1930s by Major C.H. Douglas and John Gordon Hargrave, a rather conservative utopian and versatile artist from the ranks of the Boy Scouts who in the mid-1920s discovered the potential of credit to solve the social problems of capitalism without the trauma of a revolution. Their project attained particular popularity during the unemployment crisis triggered in Britain by the Great Depression. Green Shirts then emerged as a sort of third way between the fascist blackshirts of Mosley's Union of Fascists and the anti-fascist red shirts related to the Independent Labour Party. This equidistant position between extremes was infrequent, nevertheless, among the shirt movements, usually much closer to the far-right.

From this perspective, Douglas' and Hargrave's Green Shirts were a rare exception in the extremely polarised world of the 1930s, fascinated with totalitarianisms of any kind. The Boy Scouts model that inspired Hargrave were able to exert, thereafter, a certain influence upon other more radical organizations also characterised by the importance of the shirt as the main element of their uniform. In some cases their chromatic option was khaki green, a colour that recalled that of the Boy Scouts. Likewise, the paramilitary structure, hierarchy and training of the latter, their spirit of comradeship and youthful nature possibly rendered them an attractive precedent to some shirt movements at the time.⁶

In fact, it was not a strictly European phenomenon. According to Payne (1995, 352) – the leading expert on this aspect of interwar totalitarianism –, “at least seven different Arab nationalist groups had developed shirt movements by 1939 (white, grey and iron in Syria; blue and green in Egypt; tan in Lebanon; white in Iraq), though most of these groups would not be called generically fascist”. Other countries in the rest of the world were familiar with this peculiar manifestation of the political radicalism of the 1920s and 1930s, like the Indian group *Khudai Khitmatgar* (Servants of God), though the British and Australian Press usually called it “the red

⁵ In Stanley Payne's words (1995, 96), Garibaldi was “the inventor of the shirt movement”.

⁶ On the Boy Scouts ideology, values and role in Britain in the early twentieth century, see Springhall (1971).

shirt movement”.⁷ In China the nationalist Blue Shirts Society emerged, in the USA the racist Silver Legion (or Silver Shirts) and in South Africa the Nazi Greyshirts (Payne 1995, 337, 350 and 338). But grey (“steel grey”) was also the colour of the shirt worn by the socialist militia in Chile – with this grey shirt and the rest of the militia paraphernalia the young Salvador Allende was photographed in some socialist parades of the late 1930s. Green was the colour of the shirt characteristic of the New Zealand Legion as well as those of the nationalist organization Young Egypt and the fascist *Ação Integralista Brasileira*, founded by Plínio Salgado in 1932 (Pinto 2015, 161-3). In Mexico the *Acción Revolucionaria Mexicanista*, created in 1933, preferred the golden shirts (Gojman de Backal 1988). Like other similar organizations, its members were mostly known by the colour of their shirts – the “*camisas doradas*” or simply “*los dorados*” –, held a far-right ideology close to fascism, proclaimed an alleged revolutionary program and adopted violence as a regular means of political action.

However, the epicentre of the phenomenon was in Europe, where it represented the totalitarian spirit of the decade. Not even the population of the most consolidated democracies escaped the attraction for uniforms, paramilitary parades and street violence. Thus, in Britain, the disturbances provoked by these movements acquired sufficient relevance for the correspondent of an Australian newspaper to entitle “Battle of the Shirts” his chronicle in April 1934 on a recent debate in Parliament on the proliferation of these groups. The best known – he put it – were the “Mosleyite Blackshirts” headed by Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, involved in several violent demonstrations, mainly against Jews. Hargrave’s Greenshirts, with around 3,000 members in the whole country, were much more discreet. Like the Blackshirts, other organizations responded to the “fashion”, to use his expression, set by German Nazism and Italian fascism. Like Mosley’s party, they had a strongly anti-Semitic stance. By contrast, the Redshirts were linked to the Labour Independent Party, which encouraged its youths “to wear red shirts and grey flannel trousers”. In general, the idea of providing the membership of the parties with a uniform was targeted at the young, who, in the words of a conservative MP, might find it amusing “to dress up” and feel themselves to be “something between a conspirator and a soldier”.⁸

Another journalistic report at the time, prepared by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), illustrated the concerns of the British authorities:

⁷ See for instance the article “Marching on Fort”, *The Scotsman*, 5 June 1930.

⁸ “Battle of Shirts”, *The Argus*, Melbourne, 14 April 1934.

“Wearers of colored shirts expressive of militant party affiliations are becoming so frequent in Great Britain as to cause the Home Office to recognize them as a public danger.” According to “a recent survey” cited by the report there were in Britain at least eight shirted groups with different ideologies and one thing in common: “mortal hatred of each other.” Four of them were fascist and mostly “against ‘Jewish domination’”; the other non-fascist movements were Douglas’ Green Shirts – the JTA report does not cite John Hargrave –, with about 3,000 members, and the red shirts linked to the Independent Labour Party, with 10,000 members, mainly young people. The piece includes two other possible shirt movements to which we do not have other reliable references: it asserts that communists wear khaki shirts – khaki would be “the favorite color for workshirts in England” –, but without providing further information, and it mentions a non-identified group founded by a British Jew, which wore a white shirt as the traditional symbol of “charity and benevolence, of brotherly love” in England.⁹ The information regarding the latter is extremely vague – no name, no ideology, no number of members –, but it turns out to be significant that this kind of philanthropic organization adopted the colour white, probably the least representative of the militaristic and very often totalitarian spirit of this social phenomenon.

Young men were especially sensitive to this tribal clothing and chromatic language, in particular to the benefits that accompanied a shirt of such-and-such a colour. As a Spanish fascist of the 1930s (Juan Antonio Ansaldo) recalled later, “for a uniform or a more brilliant emblem, the young, eager for adventures, changed party as they did shirt” (quoted by Payne 1965, 50). Not for nothing, in 1932 a Spanish journalist, Eugenio Xammar, entitled “the great importance of shirts in European politics” an article sent from Berlin to his newspaper, and two years later French Minister of State, Édouard Herriot, criticised those who, “in the way of Nazis or fascists, ... are ushering us towards an epoch in which the opinion of a citizen will be recognisable by the colour of his shirt” (quoted by Burrin 1986, 12). Xammar’s analysis has the added interest of the direct observation of the battle of colours and shirts triggered in Germany under the Weimar Republic. More than a contest between political principles, it was a clash of identities expressed through colours and clothes vaguely associated with self-referential myths: red with revolution and brown with the Army and war. Strangely enough, when in 1932 Brüning’s Government decided to ban

⁹ JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency): “The Bulletin’s Day Book”, 9 April 1934 (accessible on <https://www.jta.org/1934/04/09/archive/the-bulletins-day-book-68>).

uniforms – a measure also adopted by the British Parliament in 1936 –, the SA resorted to the mesocratic white shirts, perhaps as a nod of complicity to the “suffering middle-class”. Xammar’s insightful interpretation of the phenomenon merits an attentive reading:

Of all items of clothing, shirts are the most important from a political point of view. But even more important than the shirt itself is the colour of the shirt. A shirt of a specific colour represents, so to speak, a whole programme. Some political parties give shirts the same importance, at least, as their principles. A leader of a party, in order to express the measure of his strength, says that he has a hundred or a thousand shirts of such-and-such colour. Not in all countries have shirts attained the same political importance. In England, for instance, there are no political shirts. In France, the adventure of blue shirts ended in the most ridiculous way... Germany, by contrast, is a country of political shirts, as is Italy. What there is not, however, is a single colour. There are communist red shirts, republican grey shirts, white shirts of the Young German Order and national-socialist brown shirts. The latter are those with the most promising future. Brown is the only future colour of German political shirts. (Xammar 2005b, 74)

The Spanish journalist echoed the ban of the uniforms under Brüning’s Government and the new authorization recently granted by Chancellor Von Papen, which mainly benefited the 400,000 Nazi brownshirts. They and the communists were the only ones to return to the streets after the lifting of the ban. Both bands maintained ferocious combats in the working class suburbs, with numerous injuries and even some deaths, particularly amongst the SA, due – Xammar claims – to the particular visibility of their brown shirts. But, in spite of the risk it involved, the omnipresence of their uniform had an intimidating effect on political adversaries and contributed decisively to the conquest of the public space, a crucial prior step to the conquest of power. As Hitler asserted in a letter written in 1926, “we have to show Marxism that National-Socialism will be the master of the street, as one day it will be the master of the State”.¹⁰

Xammar was right in predicting the chromatic dictatorship imposed by the Nazis not long afterwards, under the Third Reich. Also when he attributed a programmatic meaning to a shirt of a determined colour and the

¹⁰ Letter from Hitler to Haputmann von Pfeffer, 1 November 1926, quoted by Casquete (2017, 45).

ability to represent a sort of daily plebiscite: the more shirts of a particular colour there were, the stronger the party they symbolised would be. He was wrong, however, to minimise the importance of other national expressions of the political brutalization at the time, probably because when he wrote his article the totalitarian wave had not yet reached its peak. Certainly, not all of these groups that turned their shirt into an ineffable symbol were as successful as the Nazi brownshirts and the fascist blackshirts. But all the movements aspiring to play a paramount role in the politics of their countries adopted a specific colour to express their desire for power. Also in other continents, as we have already seen, though the phenomenon acquired in Europe a special dimension and probably a greater ideological coherence than in the rest of the world.

2. The Colours of the Shirts: An Inventory

The chromatic range of the shirt movements spanned nearly the whole rainbow, with predominance of green and to a lesser extent blue. The French anti-Semitic party *Le Faisceau*, created in 1925, developed a powerful militia dressed in blue shirts. In Portugal the followers of Rolão Preto, the leader of the most fascist sector of Salazarism, were known as “*camisas azuis*” (Pinto 2015), in the same vein as Nazi leaders referred to their supporters as “brownshirts”, an expression that became, as in other similar movements, a counting unit: “There are around 10,000 brownshirts”; “the brownshirts rule everywhere”; “20,000 brownshirts”, exults Goebbels in his diary.¹¹ Spanish *Falange* (Phalanx) also adopted blue as its colour of reference for its shirt. It was, according to his leader and founder, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, a way to symbolise the engagement of the movement with the working class, identified with the dark blue overall used by the industrial workers – *Falange* needed, said its founder, “a distinct, plain, serious and proletarian shirt colour” (Bravo 1940, 29). The shirt, which appears in a significant line of the *Falange*’s anthem *Cara al sol*, played the same function as the other coloured shirts in the European political panorama as a kind of individual banner that accompanied every member. It also conveyed the same messages: a determination to conquer the public space via recourse to military methods and paraphernalia, and the aim of building a closed community from scratch – was not the very name of *Falange* a statement of intent vis-à-vis its project of closed society?

¹¹ Goebbels’ diary: entries of 27 April 1927, 3 April 1929 and 8 June 1931 (Goebbels 2015a).

The supporters of other Catholic fascisms, such as the Irish Army Comrades Association (ACA) of Eoin O’Duffy and the Pétainist French Legion of Fighters in the early 1940s, were also blue-shirted. By contrast, British fascism, led by Oswald Mosley, a former conservative and Labour MP, chose the black shirt as the principal element of its uniform. It became indeed the most representative symbol of the movement, to such an extent that its members, estimated at 50,000 in 1934 (Gottlieb 2011, 118), were frequently labelled “blackshirts”, a political metonymy, very common at the time, which turned this coloured piece of garment into a flag of the cause. In the Netherlands, the uniform of the Black Front was consistent with its name and with the influence that Italian fascism exerted on this movement. In Bulgaria, a former Army general founded an illegal militia called *Rodna Zashitita* (Home Defence) shortly after Mussolini’s accession to power in Italy, which probably explains the explicit imitation of Italian fascism expressed in the adoption of the black shirt and Roman salute (Payne 1995, 134). Though black seemed to have been the fascist colour *par excellence* – it was the trademark colour of the SS, and some Spanish falangists proposed its adoption instead of blue –, green was actually the most extended among the fascist and filo-fascist movements of the 1930s (see table 1 and figure 1); and not only in Europe: the followers of Brazilian integralism – the *Ação Integralista Brasileira* – were nicknamed “greenshirts”.

Fascists in Romania and Hungary, mostly represented by the Iron Guard and the Arrow Cross Party respectively, also wore green shirts (Nagy-Talavera 2001), though the Hungarian Arrow Cross previously used brown shirts and the National Christian Party in Romania adopted the blue shirt (Payne 1995, 284). In France, the semi-fascist peasant organisation *Comités de Défense Paysanne*, founded in 1927 by Henri Dorgères, would be known in the 1930s as the “green-shirt movement”. In Belgium, the fascist militia linked to the *Verdinaso* (an acronym standing for Federation of Low Countries National-Solidarists) had a green shirt as the most emblematic part of its uniform (Payne 1995, 300). This colour also characterised the symbolism of the Catalan *escamots*, a paramilitary *corps* linked to the ultra-nationalist Estat Català. Though integrated in the populist *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* – by far, the majority party in Catalonia under the Spanish Second Republic –, the greenshirts of *Estat Català* aroused the distrust of some sectors of the Spanish left due to the notorious commonalities between the *escamots* and Italian fascism.

Table 1: Shirt movements in interwar Europe¹²

Colour	Name/Adscription	Country	Ideology	Foundation
Green	National Corporate Party	Ireland	Far-Right	1935
	Iron Guard	Romania	Far-Right	1927
	Arrow Cross	Hungary	Far-Right	1935
	<i>Comités de Défense Paysanne</i>	France	Far-Right	1927
	Federation of Low Countries National-Solidarists (<i>Verdinaso</i>)	Belgium	Far-Right	1931
	<i>Escamots</i>	Catalonia (Spain)	Populist Left	c. 1932
	<i>Juventudes de Acción Patriótica</i> (JAP)	Spain	Right	1932
	German Nationalist Party	Germany	Right	?
	Yugoslav Radical Union	Yugoslavia	Far-Right	1935
	Green Shirts of Social Credit Party	Great Britain	Centre	1932
Blue	<i>Falange Española</i>	Spain	Far-Right	1933
	National Syndicalist Movement	Portugal	Far-Right	1932
	Irish Army Comrades Association	Ireland	Far-Right	1932
	French Legion of Fighters	France	Far-Right	1940
	<i>Le Faisceau</i>	France	Far-Right	1925
	National Christian Party	Romania	Far-Right	1935
	Socialist Young Guardians	France	Left	1930
	<i>Milicia Antifascista Obrera y Campesina</i> (MAOC)	Spain	Far-Left	c. 1936
Black	National Fascist Party	Italy	Far-Right	1921
	British Union of Fascists	Great Britain	Far-Right	1932
	Black Front	Netherlands	Far-Right	1934
	<i>Rodna Zashchita</i>	Bulgaria	Far-Right	c. 1923
Red	Red Shirted Independent Labour Party	Great Britain	Left	?
	Communist Militia	Germany	Far-Left	?
	Socialist Militia	Spain	Left	c. 1936
	Warriors for the Advancement of the Bulgarian National Spirit (<i>Ratniks</i>)	Bulgaria	Far-Right	1936
Grey	Republicans	Germany	Centre	?
	The Thunder Cross	Latvia	Far-Right	1933
	Anti-Fascist League	Great Britain	Left	1934
	Nationalist Party	Iceland	Far-Right	1934
Brown	Nazi <i>Sturmabteilung</i> (SA)	Germany	Far-Right	1920
	<i>Hird</i> (<i>Nasjonal Samling</i>)	Norway	Far-Right	1934
White	Young German Order	Germany	Right	1920
Orange	Agrarian Union	Bulgaria	Far-Right	1920

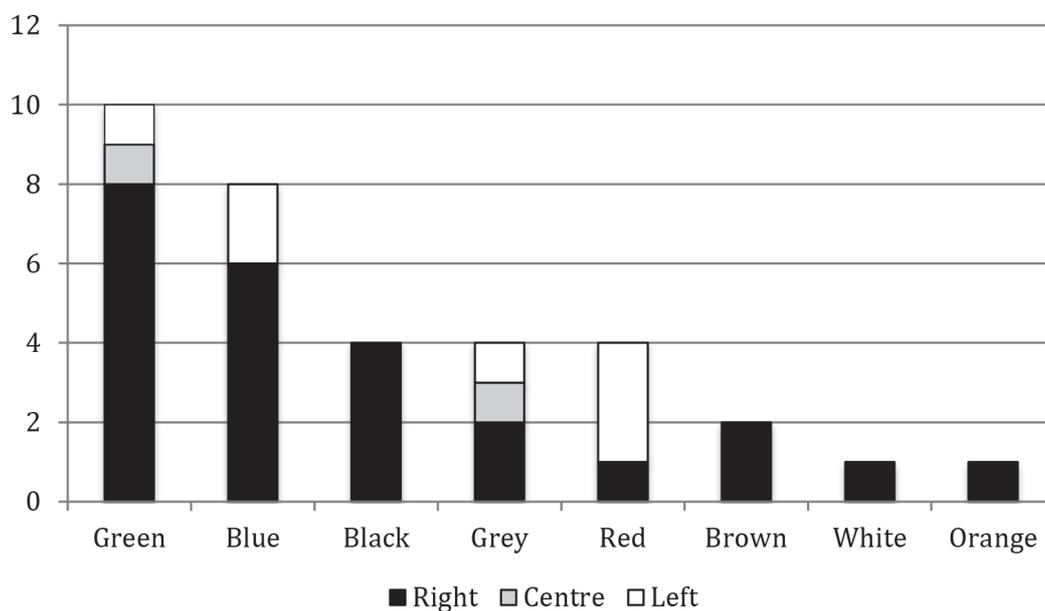
Source: Burrin (1986), Copsey (2017), Pinto (2015), Dalisson (2007), Del Rey and Álvarez Tardío (2017), Gottlieb (2011), Drakeford (1997), Hoidal (1971), Nagy-Talavera (2001), Payne (1995), Renton (1996), Vidal (2006), Xammar (2005b).

It is perhaps no coincidence that the name of one of the groups belonging to this separatist conglomerate was *Moviment Nacionalista Totalitari* (Totalitarian Nationalist Movement) (Ucelay da Cal 1982, 267). Quite

¹² I have preferred to include only European organizations because the variety and complexity of the phenomenon in the rest of the world could distort the result of this inventory. Likewise, I have ruled out some possible European shirt movements about which we do not have reliable information, for instance, that created by a British Jew in England which supposedly wore white shirts, but whose name and ideology are unknown (see the JTA report “The Bulletin’s Day Book”, 9 April 1934).

paradoxically, the members of the JAP, the semi-fascist youth organization of the Spanish Catholic CEDA, radically opposed to Catalan nationalism, also had the green shirt among their symbols of reference, along with the Roman salute. As a result, two extremely antagonistic nationalisms – one, Spanish, Catholic and conservative; the other one, populist, republican and Catalan – shared green shirts as a fundamental element of their political clothing.

Figure 1: Number of shirt movements in interwar Europe by colour



Source: Prepared by the author from Table 1.

The chromatic language in 1930s politics produced some other curious paradoxes. In Bulgaria, the Warriors for the Advancement of the Bulgarian National Spirit, founded in 1936 and also known as the *Ratniks*, wore red shirts, perhaps in an attempt to wrest from the communists such an emblematic colour. It is well known that Hitler, who considered it “the best known political colour of modernity” (Maier 2006, 273), imposed the incorporation of red into Nazi symbolism, in spite of Goebbels’ opposition. But if red can be considered a left-wing colour and blue a right-wing one, there are significant exceptions to this rule, particularly in the symbolic field of the left. In 1934, the fashion of uniforms and parades led the French socialist youth to create a self-defence organization – the Socialist Young Guardians. They employed the entire political panoply and body language of the time: raised fist salute, rhythmic watchwords, marching step, blue shirt, red cravat and blue Basque beret (Burrin 1986, 13). In Spain the

socialist militia prior to the Civil War – a small organization composed of members of the Socialist Youth – wore red shirts, whereas the communists of the Spanish MAOC used a red cravat and blue shirt, though lighter than that of the *Falange*. Quite surprisingly, in the mid-1930s French communists decided against providing a uniform for their self-defence organization: “No weapon, no shirt ... republican defence” (*pas d’arme, pas de chemise ... défense républicaine*), stated a communist leader in November 1935 (Vidal 2006, 914-15), mixing perhaps the new political prudence displayed by the Third International with the deeply rooted pacifism of the French left.

The map of shirts in the interwar years, especially in the 1930s, is not, therefore, lacking in exceptions and incongruities: a Stalinist party renouncing weapons and uniforms, a far-right organisation adopting the colour red for its shirts, blue used by the communist militia in Spain and the Socialist Young Guardians in France... Still, the symbolic use of such a simple item offers us some insights into the political mood of that period and its expression in terms of senso-propaganda. A visible coloured shirt supposed the absence of a jacket and of the colour white. It is significant that the exception to the latter was the conservative Young German Order, because this suggests that only an old-fashion paramilitary organisation, banned by Nazism in 1933, could express its worldview through white, a colour identified with the middle-class – the expression “white-collar worker” was coined at that very moment – and with the established order whose destruction was a priority. New times required strong messages and resolute men, willing to take their jackets off and to go out into the streets in search of action. Colours could not be ambiguous. They had to convey a comprehensible message, whatever it was: a resolve to fight related to war or revolution (brown, red or green), a nihilistic engagement with an alleged superior cause (black) or a nod to the working class, such as dark blue in Spain, defined by Primo de Rivera as “a distinct, plain, serious and proletarian” colour.

The colour red was much more widespread in the social-communist realm, in spite of the latter’s clear internal divisions, than black or brown among fascisms. The most plausible reason is the internationalist nature of the former and the ultra-nationalist of the latter, which probably led some of the fascist movements to discard brown and, to a lesser extent, black shirts so as to avoid accusations of being a mere imitation of a foreign political phenomenon. Hence the variety of colours they used, from green to blue, grey and even red. The predominance of green among the far-right militias might have been, on the one hand, a consequence of a search for originality – neither black nor brown –, which paradoxically turned green into a semi-

-fascist stereotype, and, on the other hand, the result of the incomparable political polysemy of this colour. It could suggest the *retour à la terre* and the defence of peasantry; evoke national imagery, like the Irish Corporate Party; resemble military khaki, like the uniform of the Catalan *escamots*, or even, in Payne's words referring to the Romanian Iron Guard, "symbolize the life and rebirth of the fatherland" (Payne 1995, 138). So green was the most representative colour of the "shirt movements", at least in Europe, but rather among the minor totalitarianisms. None of the "big three" – Stalinism, Italian fascism and German Nazism – adopted it as their "corporate colour". In all likelihood, the same reason why it became so appreciated by the low profile fascisms – its broad and ambiguous polysemy – explains the preference of leading totalitarianisms for black, red and brown, colours that had an old and unambiguous symbolism linked to war and revolution.

3. From Street to Office

Hitler and Mussolini represented with their way of dressing the nature, goals and changing mood of their regimes. They came from street fighting and coloured shirt movements, and ended by embodying the political systems that led them from the streets to the building from which they exerted their new institutional function: the Chancellery and the *Palazzo Venezia*, respectively. Both gave tremendous importance to their office as the symbol and measure of their power, particularly the *Führer*, whose colossal Chancellery and flamboyant personal office had to reflect his charismatic leadership. But fascism and Nazism always maintained the "romantic" and "heroic" spirit of the street fighting and paramilitary parades of the old times, though once in power both Hitler and Mussolini gradually replaced their plain shirt of the fighting years with a new dress code corresponding to their institutional and military role.

Their public image evolved somehow in a different manner. Before the March on Rome, *Il Duce* cultivated that of an agitator focussed on mass politics. It was the time to wear *camicia nera* and act in the streets, the natural milieu of a shirt movement and its leader. Black meant the opposite of white, the colour representing the liberal middle-class, the *plutocrazia*, Parliamentary politics, everything fascism wanted to destroy. It also recalls a basic component of fascisms: the cult of death. But, not by chance, one week after the March on Rome, the day he was summoned to the Quirinale by King Vittorio Emanuele, Mussolini changed his fascist uniform for a regular suit with a white shirt, particularly striking since in these pictures he is surrounded by the fascist leaders of the *quadrumviri* wearing their

black shirts. The seizure of power in such abnormal circumstances – under a Constitutional Monarchy with a Parliamentary system in which fascism was far from the majority – required some political and symbolic sacrifices. On 31 October, Mussolini became prime minister.

The transition from the streets to the Palazzo Venezia did not occur without consequences in his clothing and body language. A picture of that moment shows him bowing respectfully before the King and wearing swallowtail and white shirt. The following years saw an arduous transition from Parliamentary regime to fascist dictatorship that implied a significant evolution in his dressing policy. Until the early 1930s, black shirts almost disappeared from his wardrobe. He might dress in the fascist uniform with its whole paraphernalia – jacket, fez, high boots –, but it was very rare to see him wearing just the fascist shirt. A picture taken in August 1933 with the aviator Italo Balbo, who had just finished the legendary *Crociera del Decennale* (the Cruise of the Decade), suggests the nostalgic sense of the black shirt that a smiling Mussolini wore for the occasion: it is a homage to the “heroic” times of the struggle in the streets, a symbol of comradeship that he wanted to share with Balbo and the other exultant veterans of fascism who appear in the scene dressed in similar fashion. For a moment, celebrating Balbo’s exploit, *Il Duce* recovers the Nietzschean “live dangerously” of which he was so fond.¹³ But during his first years in office, the bureaucratic, more or less formal, suit with white shirt prevails in his attire: from a sample of 44 photographs dated between his appointment as Prime Minister in 1922 and the signing of the Lateran Pacts in 1929, he wore it on 29 occasions, i.e. 65.9 per cent of the time. His image as a street agitator had given way to that of a statesman who mixed his totalitarian politics with rather conventional clothing, which, as a matter of fact, served as a camouflage that disguised his ultimate intentions – war and imperialism.

The evolution of Hitler’s image offers some commonalities with Mussolini’s, but the period of time in question was much shorter and the range of clothing more limited. His style turned out to be much more consistent with totalitarian etiquette. It was the people who had to dress like their leader, not the *Führer* who had to imitate his compatriots in their diversity. During the years previous to his accession to power, he wore a suit more often than Mussolini before November 1922. When interviewed by Josep Pla in in 1923, the Spanish journalist was surprised by the raincoat he wore – “vulgar, with a belt and big

¹³ See the picture in Romano (2000, 84).

lapels” –, which constituted an idiosyncratic element of his personality. “Hitler’s characteristic is his raincoat”, according to Pla, who, unfortunately, did not explain the meaning that he attributed to this item of clothing.¹⁴ It might be inferred that the raincoat gave a touch of “man of action” to his image at a time of conspiracies and struggle in the streets, and represented a link between the party uniform and the suit he wore quite frequently, as if conveying the difficult balance he had to achieve between the plebeian wing of the Nazism, symbolised by the brown shirt, and the support it was looking for in the establishment. Once in office, Hitler rapidly adopted the Nazi uniform as the unequivocal expression of his totalitarian intentions, though when he was appointed Chancellor on 30 January 1933 he performed with Hindenburg the same scene as Mussolini had before Vittorio Emanuele ten years before: the pictures of that historical moment show him wearing a tailcoat, white shirt and top hat, and in some of them he appears sycophantically bowing before Marshall Hindenburg.

But the comedy lasted a very short time. In his new position, Hitler chose an upgraded version of Nazi uniform, more formal and militarised, with a peaked cap and white shirt. By contrast, a suit would be an increasingly rare garment in his wardrobe and the brown shirt would remain as a nostalgic concession to the spirit of the old times and to the “purity” of Nazism. The purge carried out in 1934 against the leading members of the brownshirts, known as the Night of the Long Knives, aimed at the domestication of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) as a shirt movement, once it had accomplished its job – to take control of the streets and destroy any kind of opposition – and when its radicalism could threaten the intricate *status quo* of the Third Reich.

Quite intriguingly, Joseph Goebbels, as far as I know, was never photographed wearing the brown shirt, in spite of his fondness for the SA – “our old comrades are wonderful”, the Minister of Propaganda asserted shortly before he endorsed the strike against the brownshirts.¹⁵ His reluctance to wear one might not have been by chance. In a tribute celebrated in Berlin on January 1933 to Horst Wessel, the SA killed by the communists in 1930 and converted into a martyr of the Nazi cause, Goebbels’ image wearing civilian clothes – a large black coat, white shirt and shoes instead of boots – was particularly striking since the rest of the

¹⁴ Josep Pla: “La inquietante periferia germánica. Cosas de Baviera. Hitler monólogo” (the disturbing Germanic periphery. Bavarian things. Hitler’s monologue), included in Xammar (2005a, 208-13).

¹⁵ Goebbels’ diary, entry of 21 February 1934 (Goebbels 2015b).

Nazi leaders wore black or brown uniform.¹⁶ Hitler himself appears with the characteristic shirt of the SA, with no jacket, barely ten days before becoming Chancellor.

Such a striking contrast, underlying the uniqueness of Goebbels' dressing style, seems to confirm the existence of a personal reason for avoiding the brown shirt, probably as a way of portraying his own uniqueness in the NSDAP. "Dr Goebbels", as he was usually called, would have wanted to highlight his function as the intellectual of the movement; the brain of Nazism, not the muscle. Still, his problem was not with uniforms in general – as *Reichsminister* he would usually wear one –, but with the brown shirt in SA fashion, with nothing on top. This sort of tough plebeian style did not marry with his refined taste. And perhaps, besides this, he had a hidden complex with regard to his appearance – big head, short, a clubfoot –, which he compensated for by covering his body, instead of exhibiting it *urbi et orbi* like Mussolini. If body is the message, and in times of senso-propaganda this was a very widespread assumption, Goebbels intended to convey a message about his intellectual leadership of National-Socialism, avoiding being considered a simple member of the Nazi shirt movement, and at the same time concealing his tragic non-fulfilment of the racial cannon of Nazism.

4. Conclusions: Shirt Movements and Totalitarian Utopia

Shirt movements and totalitarianisms appeared almost simultaneously and were the result of the same historical circumstances, mainly marked by the triumph of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the post-war crisis and the Great Depression. The shirt movement par excellence, Italian fascism, was created in 1921, although its matrix, the *Fasci italiani di combattimento*, dated back to 1919. That very same year saw the birth of the blackshirts (the *camicie nere*), the militia formed by the *squadristi*, most of them veterans of the Great War. They became not only the task force of fascism, but the epitome of the whole movement, conceived as a militia-party whose members were usually named and counted as *camicie nere*. All this responded to an emerging totalitarian logic, with its cult of violence and its aspiration to overthrow the "decadent" Parliamentary system and replace it with a "total State", a notion arisen from the idea of total war that emerged during the

¹⁶ 'Bundesarchiv Bild 102-02306A, Berlin, Hitler und Goebbels am Grab Horst Wessels.jpg'; Berlin, 22 January 1933 (available online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_102-02306A,_Berlin,_Hitler_und_Goebbels_am_Grab_Horst_Wessels.jpg).

Great War. A shirt movement was in sum like the anticipated expression of the totalitarian utopia: a closed society in combat formation; an alleged brave new world in progress, which needs to eliminate any vestige of dissidence in order to accomplish its destiny.

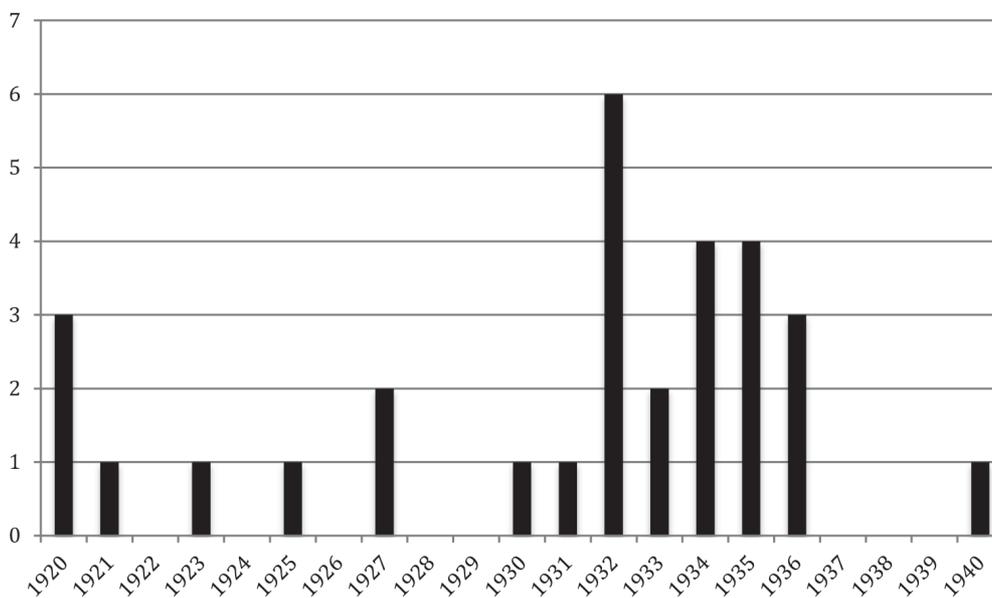
It is not surprising that the same country that witnessed the first important shirt movement, the fascist *camicie nere*, coined the adjective totalitarian (*totalitario*), born in Italy in 1923 and upgraded to a noun (*totalitarismo*) the following year. Though the concept was created by an anti-fascist politician, Giovanni Amendola, as a derogatory definition of Mussolini's regime, it conveyed the spirit of fascism to such an extent that in June 1925, speaking before the Fourth Congress of the Fascist Party, *Il Duce* himself used it to vindicate "our fierce totalitarian will" ("*la nostra feroce volontà totalitaria*").¹⁷ If the adjective – not the noun – became a key term of the fascist vocabulary, the *camicie nere* would constitute, in addition to the inevitable extras of the official scenography, the very nerve and the historical subject of the fascist "revolution", as can be inferred from the first words of Mussolini's transcendental speech announcing the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935: "Blackshirts of the Revolution! Men and women of all of Italy!" In the fascist imagery, blackshirts, totalitarian system and war as a way of life went hand in hand.

Shirt movements were not necessarily fascist. The cult of violence and the fashion of political shirts were widespread in interwar Europe, in right-wing as well as in left-wing forces. However, the warmongering spirit of this phenomenon connected much better with those conservative sectors mobilised against communism and democracy. As a matter of fact, 22 of the 34 groups contained in our inventory, i.e. 64.7 per cent, can be located on the far-right and had at least a fascist component (see table 1). The most prominent in number and influence were by far the fascist *camicie nere* and the Nazi brownshirts. They represented during two decades the legacy of the Great War and the omen and the desire for a new World War. They were the perfect expression of "trencherocracy", according to the neologism coined by Mussolini, a sort of nostalgia for what has been called "the socialism of the trenches" (Browning and Siegelbaum 2009, 248). Though they constituted the model for the rest, they were somehow the exception. True: shirt movements were inspired by the myths of violence and comradeship originating from the Great War and quite frequently founded by former front soldiers. Most of them had nothing to do, nevertheless, with

17 On the origin of the adjective and the noun and the use of the concept by Mussolini, see Donofrio and Fuentes (2016, 16-18).

the territorial irredentism provoked by the end of the war and the peace of Versailles. The economic and social crisis of the 1930s, the discredit of democracy and the fear of communism or of fascism, in the case of the few left-wing groups, were the main reasons that triggered their creation. It is no coincidence that 21 out of the 30 groups whose date of foundation is known appeared in the 1930s, as shown by figure 2.

Figure 2: Number of shirt movements created per year



Source: Prepared by the author from Table 1.

In Europe, the majority came to power sooner or later, and some of them became militias of the puppet States established in the shadow of the Third Reich, like the Norwegian Hird, linked to Quisling's Nasjonal Samling; the Belgian Verdinaso; the Romanian Iron Guard, the Bulgarian Ratniks or the Hungarian Arrow Cross. War was at the origin and certainly at the end of this quintessential phenomenon of interwar Europe. Thus World War II had something of self-fulfilling prophecy of movements that encouraged a culture of violence and destruction, and in most cases perished with the defeat of fascism in the war. The Spanish case can be considered both paradigmatic and exceptional. It shows the close relationship between shirt movements and war and their enormous appeal in a broad political spectre, from so-called left-wing Catalan nationalism to Spanish Catholic nationalism, and from the fascist *Falange* to the working left. None of them, however, became a genuinely mass movement before the war.

The growth of the blueshirts of *Falange*, for instance, was extremely modest until 1936 and enormous after the outbreak of the Civil War. The same could be said of the small militias associated with the working left, above all with the socialist and communist youth organizations. So it was not shirt movements, including *Falange*, which led to war. It was war that prompted an unprecedented rise in all kind of militias. Before the war they were rather a disturbing symptom of the brutalization of politics that was affecting Spain and other European countries, with its correspondent corollary of military parades and street violence. But they did not constitute real mass movements, unlike other notorious cases in Europe, such as the Nazi brownshirts or the fascist *camicie nere*, even before fascism's rise to power. So the Spanish case shows both the irresistible strength of this political fashion of the interwar world, adopted by the most diverse political forces – from Spanish national-Catholicism to Catalan nationalism, from far-right to far-left – and the country's limitations in terms of producing real mass politics.

The phenomenon barely survived World War II. It was too marked by the tragic memory of the 1930s and its predominant links with fascisms of every kind. All that remained was the important role played in Franco's Spain by *Falange* as a means of social and youth mobilization in purest fascist style. By contrast, in Portugal, the “*camisas azuis*” founded by Rolão Preto were immediately marginalised by Oliveira Salazar's regime and did not even last until the end of the decade, punished by a system obsessed with its institutionalization and averse to the idea of disorder and street violence associated to a shirt movement, however close it might be to Salazarism. There was no place, in post-war Europe at least, for such a conception of politics. Totalitarianism was not in fashion anymore. And neither were its shirts, regardless of the colour.

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MOVIMENTOS-CAMISA NA EUROPA DE ENTRE-GUERRAS: UMA MODA TOTALITÁRIA

O artigo trata de um fenómeno habitual na Europa de entre-guerras: a proliferação de movimentos sociopolíticos que expressavam a sua opinião e identidade através de um uniforme paramilitar composto principalmente por uma camisa de uma determinada cor. O estudo de 34 “movimentos-camisa” revela algumas características comuns em relação à cor, ideologia e cronologia. Na sua maioria eram congruentes com a lógica e o imaginário dos totalitarismos do entre-guerras, que surgiram como suposta alternativa à decadente sociedade burguesa e à sua principal criação política: o sistema parlamentar. Ao contrário do pluralismo liberal e da sua expressão institucional, os “movimentos-camisa” encaravam a ideia de uma comunidade homogénea baseada numa identidade racial, social ou cultural, e defendiam as ruas, em vez das urnas, como nova forma de legitimidade. Esses movimentos foram um reflexo fiel da esmagadora presença da “brutalização política” (Mosse) e da “senso-propaganda” (Chakhotin) na Europa de entre-guerras.

Palavras-chave: fascismo, nazismo, totalitarismo, movimentos-camisa, entre-guerras.

LES «MOUVEMENTS DES CHEMISES» DANS L'EUROPE DE L'ENTRE-DEUX-GUERRES: UNE MODE TOTALITAIRE

Cet article s'intéresse à un phénomène propre à l'Europe de l'entre-deux-guerres: la prolifération de mouvements socio-politiques qui exprimaient leur opinion et leur identité par le biais d'un uniforme paramilitaire principalement composé d'une chemise d'une certaine couleur. L'étude de 34 «mouvements des chemises» révèle quelques caractéristiques communes quant à la couleur, l'idéologie et la chronologie. La majorité de ceux-ci se référaient à la logique et à l'imaginaire des totalitarismes de l'entre-deux-guerres, qui se présentaient comme une alternative à la société bourgeoisie décadente et à sa principale création: le système parlementaire. Contrairement au pluralisme libéral et son expression institutionnelle, les «mouvements des chemises» incarnent l'idée d'une communauté homogène fondée sur une identité raciale, sociale ou culturelle et défendent la rue, et non les urnes, en tant que source de légitimité. De tels mouvements furent le fidèle reflet de l'écrasante présence de la «brutalisation de la politique» (Mosse) et de la «senso-propagande» (Tchakhotine) dans l'Europe de l'entre-deux-guerres.

Mots-clés: fascisme, nazisme, totalitarisme, mouvement des chemises, entre-deux-guerres.