3. British fascism

Introduction

A fundamental challenge for historians examining the Britain of the 1930s is whether or how to present an even-handed, objective or neutral analysis of fascism. Although in the 1920s and 30s the term could be and was used in polite society and government circles, indicating that it was uncontroversial for many[1], by the outbreak of war when hundreds of fascists were interned this was no longer the case. Baker, in his 1996 study of the 'extreme anti-semite' A.K.Chesterton (second cousin of G.K. and Cecil) suggests that 'the sheer horror of … the Holocaust … still makes it difficult for historians to deal objectively with the great taboo subjects of the twentieth century, fascism and political anti-Semitism'. He quotes the Italian historian, Benedetto Croce, writing in 1946: 'I have not written it [a history of Italian fascism], nor shall I write it, because I hate Fascism so much that I forbid myself even to attempt to think about its history'. Even Chesterton, who put so much effort into promoting it and could proudly call himself a fascist in the 1930s, could claim by 1947 'it is impossible even to mention the word without invoking … what its deadliest enemies intended people to believe it to have meant' rather than 'what its adherents meant when they used it'.[2]

It is hard to see fascist activities as requiring an even-handed treatment. It was unarguably an evil creed, and fascists convict themselves with their own recorded and largely unretracted words, not open to misinterpretation or excused as being taken out of context. Fascism can be contrasted to its major competing creed, communism, which advocated an equal degree of violence against its enemies. Communists (to put it very crudely) aimed at the destruction of capitalist exploiters of the working classes, but these could be seen as oppressors through choice and might, in theory, mend their ways. Many extreme fascists wished the destruction of Jews as a people, who were so by birth and could only escape their fate by conversion to christianity, though even then they could be suspected of doing so fraudulently and insincerely and still be condemned.

Although universally anathematised today by historians, British fascism is still capable of stirring professional controversy. Two of these will be mentioned below: firstly, events surrounding the Olympia Rally in June 1934 and, secondly, the analysis of fascist and anti-fascist activities, especially in London's East End, presented by the modern historian Robert Skidelsky.

British fascism was characterised by personalities, organisations, mass assemblies in halls and on marches, secret meetings and societies, journals and uniforms. It was not a creed accessible to open public debate through detailed policies, published manifestoes or programmes. In the absence of rationally argued documents, the student of fascism tends to focus on events, public reactions to them and key individuals, such as Mosely, Chesterton and Ramsay. Desmond MacCarthy, the contemporary drama critic, described these as 'colossal egotists, who go so far because they do not know where they are going'.[3]

3.1. Fascist views

Like other far-right movements in Britain at that time, one of the main features of British fascism was its reactionary nature, partly defining itself by what it was against and by what it wanted to return the country to. The Britons (founded by Henry Hamilton Beamish in 1919), for example, 'did not bother with a detailed political programme based on a profound analysis of the complexities of modern society … [but aimed] at a revival of the glorified past, the imperial tradition' via the restoration of the Act of Settlement of 1700.[4] Some fascists such as A.K.Chesterton looked back more specifically to the 'lost generation of 1914-18'. Fascism was to 'enshrine in Britain the values of the dead'. However, as Baker points out 'the England with which he had fallen in love hardly existed outside the very special circumstances of Brightlands [the prep school Chesterton attended]'.[5]

---

[1] Maguire in Copsey and Renton, 2005, pp. 18-19.
[2] Baker, 1996, p. vii, 1, 189.
[3] Dorril, 2007, p. 89.
[4] Lebzelter in Lunn and Thurlow, 1980, p. 48.
[5] Baker, p. 154, 37.

These views led some to strongly favour hereditary leadership, the monarchy, to denigrate democracy and espouse dictatorship. Chesterton described 'the still unbroken men and women of our race who cling to a vanishing life … [in] a nation which has lost its sap and become lice-ridden with maggots of Financial Democracy in the last obscene depravities of life'.[6] Even non-fascists such as Harold Nicolson could write that the economic crisis had to be treated with 'on undemocratic lines'. 'Democracy for Mosley was dead- and so it is for me. The people must be treated humanely but firmly'. The fascist faction of Mosely's New Party 'was disappointed at the slow progress [towards fascism] and the refusal to commit to a "definite policy of dictatorship"'.[7]

It has been noted that their background in the colonies of some fascists helps to explain their lack of commitment to democratic institutions. Beamish settled in South Africa after involvement in the Second Boer War (until returning to the UK when he found South Africa too much under the influence of Jews). Chesterton spent early childhood and early adult years in South Africa, where he acquired habits of 'racial paternalism' and his embryonic 'fascist thinking'.[8] The colonial imposition of order on subject populations might also lead to fascist admiration for Nazi Germany as a 'model organisation'.[9]

Chesterton's reference to a 'lost generation' was not only a nostalgic tribute, it also symbolized that 'fascism was a phenomenon tied to the First World War … [It] was conceived in the mud and blood and brotherhood of the frontlines'.[10] Such experiences created a bond between people like Chesterton and Mosely. The former adopted 'a fascist creed that offered the chance to reunite the soldier and the civilian in one citizen in order to achieve a political state based on "spiritual values"'.[11]

Chesterton's mention of spiritual values reflects his and Mosely's explicit emphasis on emotion over thought. 'Mosely launched the BUF with the slogan "I have finished with those who think; henceforth I shall go to those who feel. … There are two approaches to National Socialism- the path of feeling and the path of thought … The first approach is by far the most vital, in that instinct is swifter than logic, and the emotional comprehension of a truth immeasurably more compulsive than the most efficient mental process"'.[12] 'The substance of Mosely's rhetoric was permeated by a concern that had nothing to do with reason'.[13] Nicolson said of Mosely 'he cannot keep his mind off shock troops, the arrest of MacDonald and Thomas, their internment on the Isle of Wight[14], and the roll of drums around Westminster. He is a romantic. That is a great failing'.[15]

The emotions most easily stimulated in 1930s Britain and most evident in reports and recordings of fascist speeches and marches were anger, fear and hatred, apparent as extreme nationalism and, of course, most particularly as anti-semitism.

3.2. Anti-semitism

As it was socially acceptable in some circles in the 1920s and 30s to call oneself a fascist, so it was uncontroversial to be anti-semitic and openly admit to disliking Jews as a people not just individually. It seems possible to present anti-semitic attitudes on a scale of degree from the weakest to the strongest. Rather than comment on each level of this prejudice, this section will provide quotations from modern sources and contemporary writers and speakers.

1. 'Casual' or 'Social'

- 'Some individuals within this elite [of the political establishment] shared in the casual, non-theoretical antisemitism which was present in Britain'. [Holmes, p. 125]

[6] Baker, p. 167.
[7] Dorril, p. 155, 160, 173.
[8] Baker, p. 204, 166.
[9] Dorril, p. 173.
[10] Dorril, p. 34.
[11] Baker, p. 51.
[12] Baker, p. 178.
[13] Nicolson in Dorril, p. 95.
[14] the base of the Nazi occupation of the UK in C.J.Sansom's counterfactual novel *Dominion*.
[15] Dorril, p. 193.

- ‘We need to place [it] within the culture in relation to the Jews, which has been defined as “social antisemitism”’. [Griffiths, p. 11]

2. Cultural dislike, fabrication

- ‘Ada Chesterton [Cecil’s widow] … complained of Geilgud’s performance as Shylock: “this study of a Hebrew should include authentic gestures … eager, thrustful, as though to clutch the wealth even of the air”’. [Lunn, p. 35]
- ‘The penetration into our great English people of a vast Asiatic horde- the Jewish race was compared to a fatal virus’. [Lebzelter, p. 49]
- ‘To go to a swimming pool anywhere near London … is as efficacious as baptism in the Jordan; one becomes positively anointed with Semitic grease’. [Chesterton in Baker, p. 139]
- ‘Ramsay “had it on best authority that the ‘Daily Mail’ now belonged to Mr Israel Moses Sieff”’. [Griffiths, p. 100]

3. aliens and refugees

- ‘The dislike and mistrust of aliens led inexorably, from 1933 onwards, to rejection of refugees, or “refu-Jews” as they came to be called. The authorities’ concern with the effect of Jewish immigration was evidence not only of the impact such immigration was having but also of the underlying British anti-Semitism which could be fanned into flames if such immigration was allowed to continue’. [Griffiths, p. 21]

4. Jewish responsibility

- ‘[In local politics in London] Jews play too prominent a part. They should keep in the background … and leave it to Gentiles to fight for them’. [Herbert Morrison in Dorril, p. 397]
- ‘The Jew himself created anti-semitism … Even Hitler was not an anti-Semite before he saw a Jew’. [Mosely in Dorril, p. 397]
- ‘The growing atmosphere of anti-Semitism in Britain in 1939 … was in large part based on the propaganda which blamed the Jews for the prospect of war’. [Griffiths, p. 27]
- ‘The Duke of Westminster said that if there was a war it would be entirely due to the Jews and [the anti-German] Duff Cooper’. [Griffiths, p. 31]
- ‘The British public was perpetually having waved before it the concept that the Jews, in revenge for the treatment of their fellow-Jews in Germany, were hell-bent on a “War of the Jews’ Revenge”’. [Griffiths, p. 27]

5. Conspiracy theories

- “the Judaic-Bolshevik Soviet slave-state” [Chesterton in Baker, p. 141]
- “the Jew-Red conspiracy” [Chesterton in Baker, p. 142]
- “international Judaeo-Bolshevik plot” [Griffiths, p. 16]
- ‘Bolshevism was the German-Jewish-Masonic plot to destroy the world as we knew it’. [Nesta Webster in Griffiths, p. 23]

6. Solutions

- ‘What shall we do with our Jews? … Jews should be Jews and conspicuous as such … have Jewish-sounding names … clearly defined Jewish areas … a distinct and separate identity to be imposed’. [Vivian Carter in Lunn, p. 29]
- ‘Beamish sponsored the idea of a Jewish reservation in Madagascar … They were to be treated like criminals or lepers with whom one had to avoid contact at any cost … When advocating Zionism, he thought of a Jewish national home as a ghetto. “Madagascar, being an island, would make the problem of complete segregation a simple one”’. [Lebzelter, p. 45]
- ‘Expulsion … seemed adequate enough provided it was strictly enforced and irreversible … “Any attempt to evade this essential stipulation must be met with the death penalty of [sic] landing on our shores”’. [Lebzelter, p. 53]

7. Extermination

- 'Arnold Leese [of the Imperial Fascist League] disagreed with "the Jewish Extermination Policy being labelled as an Abomination or a fearful Atrocity". Instead he actively supported it; "We believe that as long as the destruction was done in a humane manner, it was to the advantage of everyone"'. [Morell in Lunn, p. 70]
- 'The sooner we get rid of the largest number of them and break their financial stranglehold the better it will be for the future greatness of the English people'. [Chesterton in Baker, p. 143]

'This dismal catalogue of prejudice represents the very worst of his [Chesterton's] attacks on Jews. As Mandle says: "What Fascist, after reading Chesterton … could not find grounds for dislike in the epitome of evil that was the BUF image of the Jew?"' [Baker, p. 143]

These anti-semitic sentiments cannot be completely separated into discrete categories, as it is shown above that they merge and overlap. Individual speakers and writers might choose to emphasise one aspect over another on particular occasions and for specific purposes or audiences. Presenting such views as a scale perhaps demonstrates the escalation in language and attitudes that occurred. The most widely-held 'low-level' prejudices became the assumptions on which the more extreme forms could feed and build. It would not require much effort for a movement to persuade some potential followers that there was a problem of aliens in their midst and then to draw the conclusion that a solution was needed.

3.3. Supporters

Looking at the accounts of Griffiths, Dorril and others, it is hard to identify any group in British society in the 1930s that was entirely immune to some form of fascist attraction. Some might be regarded as passive supporters: those who heard the rhetoric of the BUF on the streets or in public meetings and found that it responded to something in them and their lives. Lancashire cotton mill workers or residents of London's East End could be stirred into resentment against whoever might be blamed for their conditions of unemployment or poor housing. 'Lancashire was again the centre of attempts to revitalize the movement … Mosley attacked the government's recent report on India … for its failure to tackle sweated labour and for allowing Japan to swamp Indian markets with cheap, cotton goods, the cause of unemployment in Lancashire'. Mick Clarke (BUF organizer in the East End) 'said it was time the British people knew that East London's big pogrom is not very far away now. … Mosley is coming every night of the week in future to East London and by God there is going to be a pogrom'.[16]

Others seemed actively to seek a movement that would represent their existing political and social views: for example, Catholics. 'Mosley's foreign affairs adviser, Robert Gordon-Canning, was involved with leading Catholic Mosleyites, MI5 friends and Spanish Fascists in the clandestine transfer of Generalissimo Francisco Franco to Morocco'. 'The BU … had the backing of a large number of Catholic members; 12 per cent of its leading officials were Catholics. The Catholic Herald and the Tablet were among the few journals which sympathetically reported on Mosley and the BU'.[17] 'The percentage of Catholics in the BUF was much higher than in the population as a whole'. 'Catholics we had in large numbers, beside many Church of England ministers and laity, because they supported our stand against atheistic communism mostly'. 'There were so many Catholic members in the Leeds area that Mosley's nickname there was "The Pope"'.[18]

Woodbridge suggests that Mosely 'failed to win the support of the aristocratic reactionaries who supported Fascism because of their pre-WWI experience of 'socialist' reform and their fear of a socialist government, as he was tainted by his pre-Fascist Labour past'.[19] However, the upper echelons of society seem to be disproportionately represented in fascist-leaning organisations. Lords and Dukes abound in Griffiths' studies. He lists a few of the most active: Lord and Lady Redesdale, Lord Lymington (Earl of Portsmouth), Duke of Westminster, Lady Delamere, Lord Brocket, Duke of Buccleugh, Lord Mount Temple, Lord Arnold.[20] Unity Mitford (daughter of the anti-semite Lord

[16] Dorril, p. 326, 295.
[17] Dorril, p. 379.
[18] Rawnsley, pp. 161-2.
[19] Woodbridge, p. 495.
[20] Griffiths, p. 36.

Redesdale) was one of the most wilfully blinkered and gushingly supportive of the Nazis. She wrote to her sister Diana (Mosely's wife) to commiserate over the latter missing the notoriously violent Olympia Rally through illness: 'Too awful for you. It does sound such heaven'.[21] She acquired a flat in Munich with Hitler's help: 'it had belonged to a Jewish couple who had decided to leave'. She also wrote to Lady Mosely expressing sympathy for Hitler after his purge of the SA. She felt 'terribly sorry for the Führer. It must have been so dreadful … when he arrested Röhm himself. … Then he went to arrest Heines and found him in bed with a boy. Poor Hitler'. King Edward VIII's friendship with Nazis encouraged fascists to see him as a hero and to attack Baldwin over the abdication crisis in December 1936. According to Special Branch, 500 fascists were among those who chanted outside Buckingham Palace: 'One two three four five we want Baldwin dead or alive!' Diana Mosely claimed, 'if the King and my husband had been in power, there would have been no war with Hitler'.[22]

A rung below the aristocracy, Mosley's nationalistic and initially non-populist form of fascism originally attracted right-wing Conservatives, including MPs who could operate in both organisations, seeing fascism as 'a more virile expression of Toryism', and Tory sympathisers of fascism were not barred from office.[23] The Tory MP, Thomas Moore, wrote in the *Daily Mail* that there were 'no fundamental differences of outlook between Blackshirts and their parents, the Conservatives'.[24] On the other hand, whatever Mosley's personal views on race, the BUF inevitably attracted racists and those who admired Nazi physicality, and Jew-baiting marches took place around the country. Mosely had to attempt a careful balance: not to alarm his middle-class Conservative supporters by too much violence and paramilitarism, while at the same time to demonstrate his fascist credentials and meet the expectations of his mass followers.

The attitude and behaviour of the police was at best ambiguous. At the time of the Battle of Cable Street in the East End (in October 1936), 'an eyewitness recalled three bus loads of police arriving, some giving 'Hitler salutes' and shouting 'Jew bastards"'. 'BU speakers felt they had little to fear from the police, who were regarded as their natural allies since many were ex-army men who were "extremely patriotic" and, therefore, agreed with their views'.[25]

Age was also a factor, with fascism presenting itself as a battle for the future by the young against the elderly, failed politicians of the past and present, especially by those who had fought as young men in the Great War. 'These young Germans have discovered, as the young men and women of England are discovering, that it is no good trusting to the old politicians'.[26] 'Against the old who ran Britain, there was a 'curious cult of hatred', George Orwell noted. Their dominance was 'held responsible for every evil known to humanity … Throughout the whole nation there was a revolt of youth versus age'.[27] 'Fascism appeals … to those elements among the younger minded middle class who are conservative by temperament and strongly nationalist in spirit'.[28]

Possibly some of the most surprising adherents were former suffragette feminists, and women can be seen prominent in marches and holding senior positions in the BUF. 'There existed within the BUF a strand of "Fascist feminism" which attracted former suffragettes to the possibility of a carefully controlled revolution, opening new fields of activity to women but avoiding social and class dislocation'.[29] Mary Richardson (ex-suffragette prisoner) 'saw in the Blackshirts the "courage, action, loyalty, gift of service, and ability to serve which I had known in the suffrage movement." [Norah Elam] argued that "Fascism is the logical, if much grander, conception of the momentous issues raised by the militant women of a generation ago"'.[30]

Although fascists such as Chesterton loathed pacifism, connections were also made between fascism and elements of the peace movements. 'In July 1939 there was a plan by some fascist leaders "to

[21] Dorril, p. 298.
[22] Dorril, p. 461, 303, 406.
[23] Pugh, 2006, p. 12, 148.
[24] 25/4/1934.
[25] Dorril, p. 391, 395.
[26] George Ward Price, editor of the *Daily Mail*, on behalf of Rothermere in Dorril, p. 147.
[27] Dorril, p. 227.
[28] fascist supporter quoted in Rawnsley, p. 150.
[29] Dorril, p. 281.
[30] Dorril, p. 282.

amalgamate all the parties who think the same on foreign policy". The Catholic Times, Catholic Herald and Peace Pledge Union all came out against the government's war policy, and there was talk of an alliance with the ILP whose journal, Forward, attacked the "Jewish control of British foreign policy"'.[31]

Nor was the mainstream Labour Party immune. Conflicts surrounding fascism, communism and anti-semitism in the East End posed dilemmas for the Labour Party, with its desire to distance itself from the Communist Party. 'Many Stepney Jews … "even those who were social democrats ideologically, were thoroughly disillusioned by the official Labour Party representation" which failed to express their deep feelings of outrage against Fascism and Nazism. Some went so far as to accuse the party of harbouring anti-Semites'.[32]

Further public support came from elements of the right-wing press, naturally in the vanguard in jumping on the bandwagon of a current populist cause. The *Daily Mail* became the most notorious, voicing its proprietor Lord Rothermere's fascist views in 1934. Ironically, there was a risk to the BUF in this advocacy, which could turn it into a mainstream party and no longer an alternative voice to the establishment.[33] This is what Rothermere aimed at: to make the BUF an adjunct of the Conservative party, thus pulling it to the right away from the moderate National Government of his arch-enemy Baldwin. However, 'even the *Daily Express* was shocked' after Hitler's Night of the Long Knives in June 1934. 'There has never been anything quite like it in the history of the world. Jews are still murdered in the concentration camps; they are still beaten in the streets. But from this week the screw tightens. There is nothing they can do except run around helplessly in circles until they die'.

In 1947 A.K.Chesterton (Mosley's former close companion), after renouncing fascism at the outbreak of the war, provided a final perspective on the true extent of support for Mosely's brand of fascism:

> 'What did lend colour to the suggestion that Mosley was leading a great mass movement were the packed meetings he addressed. The explanation was that when he spoke, say, in Lewisham, adulating followers from every part of London and the Home Counties would rush to hear him and if he spoke the next week at Hackney or Ealing there would be the same rush by the same people. … Why, then did Mosley appear to be marching to the sound of thunder during the six years before the war? The answer is simple – nine-tenths of the thunder was provided by his enemies. Had they not counter-demonstrated in thousands – on one occasion in hundreds of thousands – his marches would have been about as spectacular and exciting as the progress of a troop of bedraggled Boy Scouts on a rainy day'.[34]

3.4. Fascist methods

With such a broad spectrum of society having some degree of sympathy for fascism of some kind, but having failed to attract more than minimal support for his parliamentary route via the New Party, Mosley focussed on a narrow range of methods to gain attention. These methods could not be called subtle. As an extra-parliamentary movement, the support received by the BUF for its principles was strongly associated with the methods it employed to communicate its message.

The rhetoric of the leader and his companions can be seen in the BUF journals (*Action*, *Blackshirt*, *Fascist Week*) and in the speeches delivered at rallies and on the street. 'Mosley admitted they had failed "both as a party and as a paper [*Action*] to arouse the people to any sense of their necessities"'. "Better the great adventure, better the great attempt for England's sake, better defeat, disaster, better far the end of that trivial thing called a political career than strutting and posturing on the stage of Little England, amid the scenery of decadence … We shall win, or at least we shall return upon our shields"'. On the other hand, in a debate at the Cambridge Union, Clement Attlee thought 'he talked pretty fair rot. It is really Mosley and nothing more'.[35]

In the year before the formation of the British Union of Fascists, 1931, Mosley spoke of 'establishing a body of young men who could give "physical support ... and protect [the New Party's] meetings ... the

[31] Dorril, p. 282.
[32] Griffiths, p. 17, quoting Srebrnik.
[33] Pugh, 2006, p. 151.
[34] from *London Tidings*, quoted in Baker, p. 188.
[35] Dorril, p. 191, 226.

only methods we shall employ will be English methods. We shall rely on the good old English fist"'.[36] Pugh suggests that violence, including the 'elimination of the weak' was central to the Union's philosophy. Violent force could be justified if the government of the day was deemed illegitimate, a view promoted by Spanish fascists later in the decade. Clearly, the paramilitarism of the BUF, emphasised in its own propaganda films, had an implication of violence, and Mosley boasted that he had the ability to meet a crisis not with words 'but with Fascist machine guns'.[37]

This more physical type of communication with potential followers focussed on provocation against their enemies in order to stimulate a reaction, the so-called 'English methods'. 'There must be a fight in Reading to secure the mastery of the Blackshirts over all others'.[38] Any anti-fascist retaliation could then be blamed for the public disorder that might follow, while the BUF itself could claim to stick within the bounds of the law. The blaming of a range of scapegoats for the social, political and economic ills in the country was aimed at aliens, immigrants and communists, though all of these categories could be seen as alternative labels for their main target, Jews, always abetted by the Jewish press.

The questions surrounding fascist marches especially in London's East End with its large Jewish population, counter-demonstrations by Jewish and communist anti-fascists and the provocations on both sides are the focus of a debate centring on the modern historian, Robert Skidelsky. In his 1975 biography of Mosley, he presents a picture of public disorder and its causes which is somewhat at variance with the majority of accounts. 'To represent Jewish and communist opposition as having come along to hear an argument and then being goaded beyond endurance by the speaker's insults is misleading. Opponents came along to prevent the speaker from saying anything. For much of the East London campaign [in 1936] speakers were subject to organised opposition which coincided with the maximum disturbances'. He quotes from police reports describing the 'persistent and organised heckling, singing, shouting of slogans, jeering at the speaker … actively conducted by the opponents of Fascism'. 'Breaking up opponents' meetings was not a tactic of the B.U., whereas it was of the Communist Party'.[39]

Dorril quotes Skidelsky's original conclusion 'A Jewish malaise of this time was to be obsessed by fascism'. 'Skidelsky claimed violence occurred because of "the attitude of the Jews themselves, and they must take a large share of the blame for what subsequently happened." Following criticism he changed "a large share" to "some"'.[40]

In his chapter in Lunn and Thurlow (1980), Skidelsky recognizes that in his biography he had not been aware of some of the evidence beyond the police reports. In particular, he refers to the autobiography of Joe Jacobs, an East End communist. 'One important fact that I had not gathered from the police records was the extent to which East London fascists were prepared to break up communist meetings'. Additionally, 'I would concede that my summary of Mosley's anti-semitism as "intellectual and moral carelessness" was seriously inadequate'.[41]

A related tactic of Mosely's BUF was to obey the law. Skidelsky says 'on this evidence it cannot be claimed that the B.U. in East London contravened the law as it then stood. Mosely insisted that the law be obeyed, which aroused great opposition from militant B.U. anti-semites … who were urging a policy of courting arrests and imprisonment to "intensify antagonism towards Jews"'.[42] However, although it may not have been Mosely's policy, 'the B.U.'s East End campaign saw an increase in attacks on Jews by young Fascist hooligans. The breaking of shop windows, the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues, and the spread of anti-Semitic graffiti led to a highly charged atmosphere'.[43]

[36] Copsey, p. 469.
[37] Pugh, p. 14, 135.
[38] Mosley quoted in Dorril, p. 229.
[39] Skidelsky, 1975, p. 402, 403.
[40] Dorril, p. 237.
[41] Skidelsky, 1980, p. 89, 81.
[42] Skidelsky, 1975, pp. 399-400.
[43] Dorril, p. 395.

In the end these methods produced a lot of noise, a few broken bones, a lot of column inches in the national and local press over a period of seven years, but next to nothing in the goal of creating a mass fascist movement.

3.5. The Olympia Rally

Griffiths' 'decisive moment', which he identifies with 'mid-1934', is narrowed down by many historians to the evening of June 7th, the occasion of what became known as the Olympia Rally. Some have seen this as a significant crisis in the fortunes of the BUF, as a result of the very widely publicized violence associated with the event and the subsequent arguments and action this provoked. This response can be seen in press reporting, public opinion, politcal debate and legislation, but firstly it is useful to examine the way in which historians have interpreted the event. Essentially, the controversy centres on whether the rally was a true turning point against the BUF or not.

The modern-day discussion was initiated by Martin Pugh, who aimed to reassess 'the significance of the … rally for the fortunes of the British Union of Fascists'.[44] The centre of the contemporary controversy was the question of how much the violence caused a reaction against the BUF and helped turn the tide against public support for British fascism. At that time there was parliamentary debate about curtailing political meetings of this kind that led to violent confrontation with protesters, about risks to public order and about banning the blatant display of paramilitary force. Prominent among these arguments was the extent to which Tory politicians, some of whom had lent respectability to the BUF (along with the Tory-supporting press), had withdrawn support and distanced themselves from such public displays of fascism. Pugh claims that in the aftermath of the rally, several Conservative MPs continued to believe that BUF strong-arm tactics were justified in maintaining freedom of speech. Furthermore, he points out that government prohibition of political uniforms (in the Public Order Act of 1936) did not come into force until 1937 (three years after the rally), by which time public support for fascism was much diminished, and thus should not be interpreted as a direct result of Olympia.

In response to this 'revisionist' account, Jon Lawrence claims that 'revulsion at Fascist violence played an important part in the failure of Mosley and British Fascism. …the furore over blackshirt violence at Olympia in 1934 served to alienate Conservative opinion from Fascist 'extremism' both in parliament and in the press'.[45] This dispute over attitudes to and the strength of British fascism in the 1930s has continued in a number of further articles, which provide a great deal of useful detail of parliamentary and press debate and add depth to our understanding of British public and political views. Griffiths, taking a similar line to Lawrence's, claims that the Olympia Rally had a great effect on Tory and middle-class support[46] and led to Mosley attempting to broaden his appeal, specifically to working-class xenophobia and anti-Semitism. This could backfire, as in Leeds, with a large Jewish population, where membership of the BUF dropped off after 1934.

3.6. Press reaction

On May 25th 1934 *Fascist Week* ran an advertisement for the 'Blackshirt Rally' to be held in London on 7th June, promoting the event as 'the most momentous political gathering held in Britain since the war ... applications for tickets have been received from all parts of Western Europe'.

The Left press saw the Rally as significant in stimulating anti-fascist opposition and 'burst the bubble' of BUF popularity.[47] On the morning of the rally the *Daily Worker* described it as 'an impudent threat and a challenge to the whole working-class movement'. Its call for an anti-fascist counter demonstration was responded to by trades union branches 'in the print shop of the Fascist "Daily Mail"' and other groups of workers 'in a great front action against Mosley'.[48] The scene was set for a major political confrontation.

---

[44] Martin Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate', *The Historical Journal,* 41.2 (1998), 529-42. p. 529.
[45] Jon Lawrence, 'Fascist Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Inter-War Britain: The Olympia Debate Revisited', *Historical Research,* 76.192 (2003), 238-67. p. 238.
[46] Griffiths, 1980, p. 105.
[47] Pugh, 2006, p. 161.
[48] 7/6/1934.

One of the earliest and most detailed accounts of the Rally was printed in the *Daily Express* the following day. The focus was on the degree of violence, with very little reporting of the political content of speeches: 'The next forty minutes were in the ratio of one minute speaking to four minutes fighting'.[49] The report emphasized Mosley's attempts at restoring order once the protests began, especially for the benefit of 'hundreds of women in evening dress': 'Sir Oswald's voice, amplified through twenty-four loudspeakers could be heard crying for calm. "Keep your seats! Please keep your seats!" The women were reassured and sat down. Others, of bolder spirit, were standing on chairs watching the fighting through opera glasses and laughing with excitement'. In reality, the violence seemed to be far from a laughing matter and not, as Mosley ("a remarkable blackshirted figure") called them, "small interruptions". There was 'hand-to-hand fighting' and 'vicious blows', "razor blades, knuckle-dusters and bludgeons were freely used". There were baton-charges from 1,000 mounted police, "kept busy until midnight", dealing "severely with Blackshirts and Communists alike".

The *Manchester Guardian* presented more of a chronological narrative, though equally dramatic. Using a rather jocular tone, its report describes the scene as 'an entertainment which Mr Bertram Mills might at once have envied and deplored ... Sir Oswald Mosley had nothing of theatricalism to learn from either Hitler or Mussolini'.[50] The incident described in most detail was the shouting of anti-fascists from the roof and the attempt by Blackshirts to remove Communists from 150 feet above the crowd. The end of the meeting saw 'a general stampede of the audience, who had plainly grown tired of Sir Oswald's two-hour monologue'. The *Guardian* had a remarkably even-handed view: 'It is not easy to apportion blame for the disturbances', but noted that for the anti-fascist groups 'the mounted policeman seems to be regarded as the most provocative'.

The Rally soon became notorious, with the reports of violent clashes within and outside the hall. The *Daily Worker* reported a confrontation in a café in East Ham, where 'it was obvious their [Blackshirts in uniform] intention was to use "Olympia" methods on local comrades'.[51] This paper reported defections from the fascist cause: 'Following the Olympia Rally ... as he handed his uniform to the comrade the ex-Storm Trooper said, "Here you are, it's first blood to the Communist Party and you'll certainly get a great many more as the chaps realise what the Blackshirts really stand for"'.

Such was the general public reaction against the scenes of violence that by the following month there was an attempt to set the record straight: 'Assistant Propaganda officer, Chester branch … dealt with the alleged Blackshirt brutalities. Having attended the Olympia Rally he was able effectively to deal with the lies and exaggerations published by the opponents of the Movement'.[52] An 'Ex-sixth-former' wrote to the Blackshirt to complain of the discrimination he had experienced at school when 'certain members of staff of my school discovered that I was an active member of the B.U.F., and had taken part in the Olympia Rally'.[53]

In a lengthy 'Open Letter to Westminster' two years later, the editor of the *Blackshirt*, A.K.Chesterton, accused the democratic opponents of the Movement of provoking violence. 'In this great struggle for the soul of Britain, members of the House of Commons, you have almost to a man, been on the side of the alien thug and the half-witted Red razor slasher … these elements came by the hundred determined (and subsidised) to turn the huge Olympia rally into a murderous riot … the grand young Blackshirts met them with bare fists … you tried to exalt the ruffianly gangsters at the expense of authentic young British manhood'.[54]

The *Times* gave a dispassionate account of the evening's events,[55] though it is hard to avoid the impression that a factual, supposedly neutral report of 'military precision' and Mosley being 'saluted in the Fascist manner' sounds admiring and lends support to the cause, as anti-fascists might claim and became a characteristic feature of polarised discourse throughout the period. In its leader column of the same day, however, the *Times*, while focussing on the clash of extremes on the night,

[49] 8/6/1934.
[50] 8/6/1934.
[51] 27/6/1934.
[52] *Blackshirt*, 3/8/1934.
[53] *Blackshirt*, 14/12/1934.
[54] *Blackshirt*, 18/7/1936.
[55] 8/6/1934, p. 16.

emphasised its theatrical 'tinsel', which could not live up to its 'more fiery prototypes' in Italy and Germany. 'Whatever Fascism may be elsewhere, it will remain superficial here until it is at least proved that the collective common sense of the country … has failed to provide for its livelihood and its security'.[56]

3.7 Official reaction

Initially, official reaction, in the form of parliamentary debate and govenment statement, was mixed and cautious. This is partly because the Government still saw communism as a bigger threat than fascism,[57] though there was a clear difference of opinion between the Home Secretary and the Police Commissioner and among MPs. In a House of Commons debate on June the 11th (four days after the rally) The first question to the Home Secretary illustrated the level of political concern over fascist activity, when Mr Thorne asked if he was aware that the BUF had 'an air defence force and an armoured-car section' and that 'the uncrowned king of the Fascist movement ... is prepared to meet the situation with machine guns'. Michael Beaumont defended the BUF, claiming that their 'air force' 'is a flying club on all fours with other flying clubs in this country'. Other MPs urged the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister to 'take measures to avert this menace to public order and political good will', in the light of the Olympia Rally a few days earlier.

The Home Secretary answered all the questions with a prepared statement on the Government's and the Police Commissioner's policy towards the fascist rally. The police were warned in advance of the rally, the proposed counter-demonstration inside and outside the hall and that the fascists 'did not require the assistance of the police' in maintaining order. 760 police were deployed outside, and the events, as he saw it, were very much as reported in the press. While recognizing that police powers might need to be reviewed, he was 'not concerned to-day to apportion blame between the Fascists and Communists'. It perhaps suited the Government to portray the conflict in such black and white terms (ignoring all the non-communist anti-fascist groups) and a later exchange in the debate re-enforced this line: 'Mr Thorne: The Fascists were armed with some very dangerous implements. [HON. MEMBERS: Oh! What about the Communists?]'

Not until two years later in 1936, after continued confrontation between BUF supporters and the far more numerous anti-fascist demonstrators, was action finally taken, in the form of the The Public Order Act 1936. The Act, as brought into law on 18th December 1936, was brief and focussed on two measures against 1) 'Prohibition of uniforms in connection with political objects' and 2) 'Prohibition of quasimilitary organisations'. The former outlawed the wearing of uniforms in a public place 'signifying his association with any political organisation or the promotion of any political object'. The latter identified associations 'organised or trained or equipped for the purpose of enabling them to be employed in usurping the functions of the police or of the armed forces ... or ... for the use or display of physical force in promoting any political object', and made criminal the act of organising, training etc. The gravity of such an offence and the problem of definition meant that any prosecution had to be approved by the Attorney-General.

In spite of the Public Order Act being passed in Parliament explicitly as a political response to counter the growing paramilitary character of British fascism, such as the wearing of uniforms on public display and the associated violence of the Olympia Rally in 1934, the *Daily Worker* reported its introduction negatively, as it 'places limitations on the workers' rights to demonstrate, and gives added power to the police … making the leaders responsible for the actions and words of individual members (e.g. "insulting words and behaviour")'.[58]

The response of the B.U.F. was to attempt to bring a test case to court over the definition of 'uniform', (reported very objectively in the *Daily Mirror* of January 2nd 1937). 'Counsel, whom the British Union had consulted, had expressed the opinion that an ordinary shirt of black colour worn with a tie under ordinary suits of normal and diverse pattern was not a uniform within the meaning of the Act'.[59]

[56] 8/6/1934, p. 15.
[57] Pugh, 2006, p. 154.
[58] 28/12/1936.
[59] *Blackshirt*, 9/1/1937.

A letter to *Action* showed a rather broader support for the Fascist standpoint: 'I am not a Fascist … I have been a Conservative all my life … The last straw was when they [the Baldwin government] stooped to hitting below the belt by passing – with the unanimous approval of the other parties – the Public Order Act … there are … tens of thousands [of] hitherto Conservatives, who are prepared to change over to the British Union'.[60] This writer, perhaps typical of those supporters of the extreme extra-parliamentary movements, seems to miss the point about the democratic process in complaining about political unanimity.

The *Manchester Guardian* announced the "Prohibition of Political Uniforms" on 30th December 1936, with a specifically local angle. Emphasising, as the *Daily Worker* had not, that the purpose of this legislation 'is to check the quasi-military Fascist activities', the report pointed out that 'Stripping the Fascist of his uniform and his semi-military swagger is a device that was first tried within the limits of its powers by the Manchester Corporation', which required marchers to dress in 'the garb of ordinary peaceful citizens … The new Act has adopted Manchester's method of dealing with the objectionable features of Fascist propaganda, which has been borrowed from abroad'.

The *Times* of the following day quoted from correspondence between the London Commissioner of Police and the organiser of the Independent Labour Party's Guild of Youth (Fenner Brockway) concerning their dress, confirming that their 'red shirts and red blouses' was a uniform under the terms of the Act. Brockway claimed that these clothes 'are worn mostly on rambles, for sport purposes, and on week-end outings. The members … do not drill or carry through any physical exercises similar to those practised by the Fascists'. The matter would be taken up with the Home Secretary. The BUF, on the other hand, 'whose policy [in their own view is] to obey the law of the land', was quoted as stating 'the Backshirt uniform, therefore, will not be worn by members in any public place or at any public meeting'. [61]

Conclusion

The ignominious end of the BUF saw 747 fascist leaders and members interned in 1940. It could be claimed that where Chamberlain rescued Hitler in 1938 at Munich, the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia finished off British fascism in 1939. Although some regarded fascism as an inevitable failure, there was 'a widespread hostility to the prospect of fighting another war with Germany, which enabled Mosely to draw 20,000 people to a peace rally at Earl's Court in July 1939 … a reminder that the British were closer to fascism that they often care to acknowledge'.[62] It is worth examining some of the main features of this defeat, looking at the anti-fascist opposition and the wider social and political environment.

The degree of anti-fascist protest is most associated with Cable Street in October 1936. This was previewed a month earlier at the Battle of Holbeck Moor in Leeds, when 'forty Fascists were injured in an ambush mounted by anti-Fascists, who rained down rocks on Fascists'. The event was 'one of the things which inspired dread of what was going to happen in Cable Street'. This and the aftershocks of Olympia led some 'to fear a Fascist revolution and make arrangements to go into hiding. Such views were not uncommon'. [63] 'By 1935 the membership of the BUF had been drastically reduced from the high level in the spring of 1934. The more violence and anti-semitism were seen as central to the movement, the more people drifted away'.[64] This suggests that the anti-fascist, Jewish and communist opposition had the desired effect in the long run.

The BUF failed to win any seats in the East End in the London County Council election in 1935, at a time when a Gallup poll indicated a 49% to 51% of respondents were in favour of fascism versus communism. By the end of 1939 this had shifted to 24% to 57% believing Russia rather than Germany posed the greater danger. It could be claimed that an anti-German feeling in the country was stronger than any fascist-inspired anti-war sentiments. 'For many [admirers of Germany] in March

[60] 9/1/1937.
[61] 31/12/1936.
[62] Pugh, 1998, p. 542.
[63] Dorril, p. 390, 275.
[64] Rawnsley, p. 157.

1939 the Hitler they had trusted had turned out to be a power-mad aggressor whose word was no longer to be believed'.[65]

Turning to national politics, Overy suggests that in spite of the broad range of small groups promoting one version of Marxism or fascism or another, with fellow-travellers of both left and right, and 'a remarkable level of engagement [of the public] with both ideologies, [throughout] the 1930s electoral allegiance continued to be given to the three main political parties'. 'The existence of a nominally National Government … masked the reality of surviving political and class differences and undermined the appeal of extremism'. The National Government was set up in 1931 in response to the economic crisis. 'The absence, even at the height of the slump, of a serious collapse of the economic system … clearly played a part in sustaining the conventional parliamentary system'.[66]

Holmes compares these political consequences with those in Germany. 'Whereas in Germany the world crisis and depression led to the National Socialist dictatorship which had anti-semitism built into its programme, Britain survived the consequences of the crisis under Baldwin's Government … the essential political structure of British society remained intact'. 'The BUF movement was operating in a diminished context for the advancement of a fascist or anti-semitic campaign'. 'The British failed to see its relevance to them'.[67] Unlike its appeal to Italians and Germans, authoritarian forms of leadership did not attract them. Pugh suggests that the forms of government Britain experienced in the 1930s, involving explicit compromise among the major parties and implying a degree of consensus, protected the country from extremism.

Baldwin's personal role in maintaining moderation seems significant. '[For him] Fascism threatened to provoke "a real class war" … since communism, unlike fascism, drew its support overwhelmingly from among "the very poor", this meant that "the very poor are being singled out for being hit on the head [which] creates a spirit that is very dangerous"'.[68] 'The unemployed voted for Labour's reformism rather than radical solutions [both fascism and communism remained politically marginal]. The depression blunted rather than sharpened the edge of social discontent'.[69]

A.K.Chesterton himself provides a first-hand perspective on the failure of Mosely's brand of fascism to attract mass support. 'The Fascist edifice which he … [Mosely] constructed was about as stable as a house built of cards. Its organization was a joke … Outside East London, there was no branch which had an active membership of more than a few dozen high-spirited young men. … Outside East London, again, Fascists who stood for election to local councils polled, on average, about 25 votes apiece'.[70]

Baker concludes from his study of A.K.Chesterton 'Unfortunately for Chesterton and his fellow fascists, British liberalism survived the onslaught of the world slump … the consensus on liberal values held firm (at least against fascism), and British fascism remained a beleaguered and marginal force'.[71] Even though, therefore, it was not a serious threat to stability and democracy, arguments surrounding British fascism set the scene in the mid-1930s for the debate over responses to the much larger anti-democratic forces elsewhere in Europe. It provoked public displays of anti-fascism but also its fractious and factional nature, as elements of the Left (Labour, ILP and CPGB) disputed the credit for providing the most effective defence against fascism.[72]

[65] Griffiths, 2010, p. 66.
[66] p. 298.
[67] Holmes, p. 123, 124.
[68] Lawrence, 2005, p. 5.
[69] Dorril, p. 314.
[70] Baker, p. 188.
[71] p. 211.
[72] Copsey, pp. 470-2.