

Bret Rubin, "The Rise and Fall of British Fascism: Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists," *intersections* 11, no. 2 (2010): 323-380.

## ABSTRACT

Modern connotations of "fascism" in mainstream Western society are unflinchingly negative, heavily associated with the historical regimes of Mussolini and Hitler begun before the Second World War. It seems impossible to believe that the people of such an entrenched democratic country as Great Britain could ever harbor mainstream fascist leanings. However, fascism was not always such a vilified ideology in the West. In the late 1920s and 1930s in Great Britain, fascism was often admired by the public. During Britain's deep economic depression, many pointed to emerging autocracies in Italy and Germany as powerful new examples of effective modern government. The celebrated young British Member of Parliament Oswald Mosley became especially enamored of this new ideology in the early 1930s. Mosley created the British Union of Fascists as a vehicle for his economic vision of Britain as a Keynesian economic state, with an emphasis on deficit spending. After a period of initial popularity, his movement eventually became a haven for lunatic anti-Semites and fringe members of society. As Mosley became lost within the monster he created, frequent public violence at his group's rallies made him a national pariah. The impact of Mosley and his British Union of Fascists on British attitudes towards fascism cannot be underestimated. While it would seem that fascism's unpopularity was brought on by external forces, it was really Mosley's movement on the home front that initially turned the British public against the ideology. It was Oswald Mosley, not Hitler or Mussolini, who did the most to ensure Britain remained a free democracy and never succumbed to fascism.

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# The Rise and Fall of British Fascism

## Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists



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Before Sir Oswald Mosley, British fascism was nearly invisible, limited to a handful of radicals, and widely considered by Britons as a foreign phenomenon. The earliest fascist groups in the United Kingdom were simple imitations of Mussolini's *Partito Nazionale Fascista*. Rotha Linton-Orman founded the first of these groups, the British Fascisti, in 1923.<sup>1</sup> Splinter groups quickly broke away, including the National Fascisti in 1924 and the Imperial Fascist League in 1929.<sup>2</sup> Lacking a coherent ideology, and with membership in the dozens, their actions were limited to petty demonstrations and acts of vandalism. These groups received essentially no attention from either the press or the public. As such, British fascism remained limited to the very fringe of society.

<sup>1</sup> Colin Cross, *The fascists in Britain*. (New York: St Martin's, 1961), 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

When Sir Oswald Mosley founded the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1932, he launched fascism into the British mainstream. As a popular ex-Member of Parliament (MP), he seemed uniquely qualified to carry the unlikely ideology to the fore of British politics. His exceptionally visible career in Parliament from 1918-1931 secured the nation's attention. During this time, Britons widely admired Mosley for his political dexterity and talent for oratory. After having dinner with Mosley in June 1924, famed English socialist author Beatrice Webb declared him the "most accomplished speaker in the House [of Commons]."<sup>3</sup> As such, when Mosley announced his formation of a fascist political organization, his decision piqued the interest of the public. For reasons to be discussed, Mosley felt that fascism was the only recourse to save the nation from the economic crisis. Regardless of his reasoning, his decision merited national attention. For the first time, British fascism amounted to more than "three old ladies and a couple of office boys," as Mosley put it.<sup>4</sup> Mosley's movement served to widely publicize fascism as an ideology in Britain.

Although the BUF enjoyed brief stints of moderate popular support, the public eventually widely condemned the movement, and this rejection had a significant impact on British attitudes towards fascism in general. Before Mosley and the BUF, the British public saw fascism as a foreign phenomenon existing outside of national concerns. Mosley's movement brought fascism onto British streets and as the public grew more conscious of the BUF, British disinterest gradually evolved into outright revulsion.

Sir Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists created the negative connotation of fascism that was solidified by the Second World War. As such, British negative perceptions of fascism began not with events in Germany or Italy, but at home. Although initially received as a benign curiosity, significant opposition against the BUF soon mobilized from a variety of sources. As the tide of public opinion began to sway against him, Mosley's politics grew increasingly radical and polemic. By 1937, he was a national enemy. His transformation from a widely admired bright young politician to a national pariah had a powerful impact on British attitudes towards fascism. As Mosley increasingly alienated his nation, he destroyed the credibility of fascism as an ideology.

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<sup>3</sup> Beatrice Webb, Norman Ian MacKenzie, and Jeanne MacKenzie, *The diary of Beatrice Webb*, Volume Four 1924-1943, *The Wheels of Life* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1985), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Jacob Alexander Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 291.

## I. Beginnings: Fascism and Oswald Mosley, 1922-1932

In the 1920s, British attitudes considered the new Italian ideology to be nothing noteworthy. Coverage of the Mussolini's rise by the British press was mixed, ranging from a complete lack of recognition to mild disapproval. The *Daily Telegraph's* December 30, 1922 yearly review of important world events did not even mention the Italian fascist coup.<sup>5</sup> *The Times* (London) of November 18, 1922 declared Mussolini a "masterful man," whose, "programme bears the stamp of his strong character,"<sup>6</sup> reflecting the Conservative view that Mussolini's takeover marked the welcome end to Italy's previous corrupt liberal government, and was on the whole a positive resolution to Italy's dire political situation. "The rise of Fascismo," *The Times* explained, was "the result, the natural result, of the progressive degradation of the representative system as it has been witnessed in Rome."<sup>7</sup> Other press organs were more critical. The *Spectator* of November 4, 1922 warned of the possibility of tyranny in Mussolini's government.<sup>8</sup>

Later, incidents such as the 1923 Italian bombing of the Greek island Corfu provoked negative commentary from British press. *The Times* declared that "no possible excuse can be made for the bombardment."<sup>9</sup> Still, even this incident did not elicit total condemnation. The *Daily Mail*, the *Observer* and the *Morning Post* remained in support of Mussolini's fascism.<sup>10</sup> In the 1920s and early 1930s, fascism was more likely to provoke curiosity and debate than fear. It was in this political climate that Mosley launched the BUF in 1932.

When Italian fascism was born in 1921, Oswald Mosley was in his third year as a Conservative MP for the district of Harrow. As the heir to the Baroncy of Ancoats, Mosley came from wealth and prestige.<sup>11</sup> A young man from an aristocratic family, politics seemed a logical career decision. He first entered Parliament in 1918 at the age of 21, and quickly developed a reputation as a capable and confident speaker and politician. Although he was a member of the Conservative Party, his personal politics had little to do with the party. In his autobiography, *My Life*, Mosley claims that he, "was going into the House of Commons as one of the representatives of the war generation, for that purpose

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<sup>5</sup> R.J.B. Bosworth, "The British Press, the Conservatives, and Mussolini, 1920-1934," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 2 (1970): 168.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, "Signor Mussolini's Declaration," November 18, 1922, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bosworth, 168.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, "Signor Mussolini's Mistake," September 1, 1923, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Bosworth, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Skidelsky, 37.

alone.”<sup>12</sup> Mosley had fought on the Western Front in the First World War in the 16th Lancers Regiment and later as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corp.<sup>13</sup>



Sir Oswald Mosley with his wife, Lady Cynthia Blanche Curzon

It was Mosley’s experience in the war that most defined his character. Politically, it was his motivation. Mosley asserted that “in the case of the First World War, a single idea existed for me: always to do my utmost in all circumstances to prevent it ever happening again.”<sup>14</sup> Like many young veterans of the war, Mosley believed in the “need to conceive a nobler world in memory of those who died.”<sup>15</sup> He hoped to use politics as a vehicle to achieve this goal.

What characterizes Mosley’s political career in the 1920s was his frequent change of allegiance. From 1918 to 1924, he was a member of the Conservative Party, but left the Conservatives for the Labour Party in 1924, a move that coincided with the Labour Party’s formation of a government in the House of Commons, a bold move for the young politician. As the MP for the constituency of Smethwick from 1926 to 1930, his political career flourished. The Labour

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<sup>12</sup> Oswald Mosley, *My life* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1968), 90.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

Government appointed him the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1929, making him a minister in Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald's Labour Government. By 1929, Oswald Mosley was poised to achieve significant political power in established politics. However, when the stock market crash of 1929 created massive unemployment in Britain, Mosley dedicated himself to finding a solution. His radical economic ideas in the next few years (and Labour's reaction to them), were the catalyst for his downfall from established politics.

#### The Mosley Memorandum

The worldwide economic turbulence in 1930 left the United Kingdom in a serious depression. Unemployment, at ten percent at the beginning of 1929, skyrocketed to 22.2 percent by 1932.<sup>16</sup> Coupled with a near five percent decline in gross domestic product, the clear political issue of the time was how to approach the economic crisis.<sup>17</sup> Following the stock market crash of 1929, Mosley began to campaign for an aggressive short-term plan to alleviate the economic crisis. In January 1930, he compiled what came to be known as *The Mosley memorandum*. In sixteen pages, Mosley detailed an astonishingly proactive approach to dealing with rampant unemployment.

Mosley blamed the drastic rise of British unemployment on two things: the collapse of foreign economies, and Britain's dependence on exporting to those same economies. The collapse of foreign markets and the ensuing lack of British exports effectively crippled British industry. Orthodox economic policy in this situation focused on regaining Britain's previous share of the world export trade. Mosley saw this obsession with exports as an anachronistic holdover from before the Great War. He maintained that even if Britain could reclaim its previous export numbers, it would not be nearly enough to correct the labor surplus and return Britain to economic growth.<sup>18</sup>

At the time, British economic policy relied heavily on Smithian free-market principles. It was this deep-seated belief that contributed the most to the rejection of the *Mosley memorandum* by Parliament. Britain's previous success with an export-driven economy led to near-religious zeal for free-trade principles among the government. However, Mosley believed that the changing world

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<sup>16</sup> Joe Hicks and Grahame Allen "A Century of Change: Trends in UK Statistics since 1900" (London: House of Commons Library Research, 1999), 24. <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/rp99/rp99-111.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The Mosley memorandum* (London: 1930), 3.

market rendered “the traditional basis of Britain’s island trade” obsolete.<sup>19</sup> As such, he held that protectionist policies would be essential to defend Britain’s domestic industries, as well as to help loosen Britain’s economic dependence on exports.

Mosley’s pessimism on world trade failed to convince. It was undeniable that the export driven economy had failed for the moment. However, Mosley believed it was impossible to ever recover Britain’s previous trade balance. His prophecy of a “new era” of British economics dependent on the home market seemed too dismal. Many in Parliament believed in Mosley’s call for a more active unemployment policy, but did not see the existing system as entirely outdated. His ideas for a sweeping reform of the foundation of British economics seemed an overreaction. The official committee appointed to evaluate the *memorandum* exemplified this attitude. Led by Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden, the committee rejected the *memorandum* in its entirety.<sup>20</sup> Still, Mosley believed that the nature of world trade had changed permanently. To survive, Britain needed an economy based on the home market.

To create this new home market driven economy, Mosley argued for the implementation of import controls. In his autobiography, Mosley explains his “desire to develop a home market based on the purchasing power of our own people.”<sup>21</sup> Mosley understandably blamed much of Britain’s economic difficulties on world affairs outside of British control. In advocating a policy of “insulation,” he hoped to mediate these consequences in future crises, as well as protect home industries from the competition of foreign interests with “virtually slave conditions.”<sup>22</sup> He cited America as a successful example of a country that had created a full-employment economy based on the home market.<sup>23</sup>

Critics of Mosley’s protectionist policies blasted this link with America. Snowden’s report on Mosley’s proposal maintained that Britain’s size and lack of natural resources made a comparison with America irrelevant.<sup>24</sup> Britain was too dependent on foreign raw materials to try to limit imports. As such, a home-market based economy was not feasible for Britain. Protectionism would devastate the real basis of Britain’s economic success: trade. The lack of

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<sup>19</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 184.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Howson and Donald Winch, *The Economic Advisory Council, 1930-1939: a study in economic advice during depression and recovery*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 28.

<sup>21</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 253.

<sup>22</sup> Mosley, *The Mosley memorandum*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Howson and Winch, 29.

resources and demand supplied by other countries would cripple the British economy.

Mosley responded to this criticism with the assertion that the British Empire could provide ample resources and trade opportunities. He argued that Britain could afford to emphasize the home market as long as it properly utilized its powerful international Empire. In this way, Britain could insulate itself from the swings of foreign economies, while using its own overseas territories for resources and markets.<sup>25</sup> Mosley also hoped to assuage unemployment through a significant government public works initiative. Over three years, Mosley proposed the allocation of 200 million pounds<sup>26</sup> to the purpose of creating government sponsored jobs for the unemployed.<sup>27</sup> Among these jobs was a “mobile labour corps,” intended to provide more immediate aid to helping refurbish urban slums.<sup>28</sup> Mosley hoped to use deficit spending to help curtail unemployment, and boost morale with concrete and visible measures such as urban renewal.

Mosley’s ideas on economics were similar to the ideas of the famous theorist John Maynard Keynes. In fact, Mosley remained in close contact with Keynes throughout his time with the Labour Party.<sup>29</sup> Mosley and Keynes met often to discuss their ideas on the economic crisis.<sup>30</sup> However, the extent of Mosley’s ideas predated even Keynes himself. Keynes did not advocate Mosley’s level of deficit spending until he wrote *The general theory of employment, interest and money* in 1936.<sup>31</sup> Mosley’s economic proposals were truly ahead of his time, and represented a radical departure from contemporary economic orthodoxy. To combat unemployment and to deal with the economic crisis in general, Mosley believed that political power needed to be more centralized. He argued for the creation of a new cabinet, led by the prime minister and other top MPs, which was to be advised by a think tank of economic experts.<sup>32</sup> This cabinet was to utilize all of the resources of the nation to fight the economic disaster. This kind of measure had some precedent in Lloyd George’s Supreme War Council,

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<sup>25</sup> Mosley, *The Mosley memorandum*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Converted to current values, £200 million in 1930 would be the equivalent of £6.684 billion in 2010. See Currency converter, The National Archives, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/results.asp#mid>. To understand the significance of Mosley’s proposal in relation to government expenditures, a £200 million outlay spread over three years stood in relation to national expenditures that totaled £2.28 billion from 1930 to 1932 (and just under £4.41 billion for local and national expenditures). See <http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk/>.

<sup>27</sup> Mosley, *The Mosley memorandum*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Harold Nicolson and Nigel Nicolson, *The Harold Nicolson diaries and letters 1907-1963* (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2004), 79.

<sup>30</sup> Skidelsky, 186.

<sup>31</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *The general theory of employment, interest and money* (London: Macmillan, 1936).

<sup>32</sup> Mosley, *The Mosley memorandum*, 13.



created in 1916 to speed decision making in wartime. Mosley hoped to create a similar entity to deal with the economy.

The idea of creating a powerful executive council in peacetime seemed unusual, if not despotic. However, one must understand how Mosley approached the situation. To him, the current economic crisis was every bit as serious as a war. The normal political bureaucracy was not responsive, powerful or well advised enough to deal with the present situation. He beseeched Parliament and the Treasury to understand the need for a more forceful, reactive approach to resolving the crisis. However, his reasoning alarmed some members of the House. Labour MP Rhys Davies declared in response to Mosley's committee proposal that "Our people have always preferred freedom with poverty to affluence under tyranny."<sup>33</sup> Even as Mosley argued for a socialist response to the depression, he remained convinced that the government needed more authority to deal with the crisis efficiently. In this aspect of his proposed policy, Mosley demonstrated his belief in the need for strong government power in times of crisis. This concept would feature heavily in his later embrace of fascism.

As Mosley himself pointed out, many of the economic concepts he espoused in his *memorandum* to Parliament would be readily accepted by the time he wrote his autobiography in 1968.<sup>34</sup> In 1930, however, many viewed his ideas as drastic if not suicidal. His contemporaries understandably doubted the feasibility of his ideas. How could Britain, a small island nation traditionally reliant on trade and export, suddenly completely reinvent itself into a self-sufficient industrial power? Mosley's emphasis on a "home market based on the purchasing power of our own people" seemed difficult to imagine.<sup>35</sup>

Many recognized politicians criticized Mosley's view of the economic world. Sir Donald Maclean of the Liberal party attacked Mosley's concept of the ruined export driven system as far "too pessimistic."<sup>36</sup> He believed that Mosley's doomsday predictions were unreasonable and unfounded. Despite the seriousness of the economic crisis, Maclean maintained that Britain's trade balance was capable of recovery. In addition, he questioned the feasibility of expanding the home market. Maclean asked, "What home market can consume the output of our coal fields? Seventy-five per cent of the output of the South Wales coalfield is export, and there is barely one-fourth of the product of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Daily Herald*, June 23, 1930.

<sup>34</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 252.

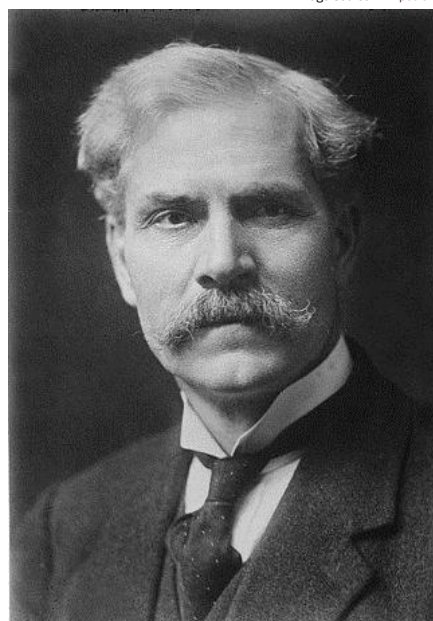
<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, October 29, 1930 (London: Hansard), column 101.

cotton industry which could be consumed in this country.”<sup>37</sup> Maclean and many of his contemporaries did not see Mosley’s home-market driven economy as possible for a small island such as Britain. Regaining Britain’s export trade seemed the only option to restore the economy. As such, they remained hopeful that the export market would recover soon. Maclean’s more optimistic prediction for Britain’s trading future was a common thread amongst socialist politicians. They saw the existing economic system as damaged, but not irreparable.

The wider implications of Mosley’s suggested policies brought forth other criticisms. Liberal MP Frank Owen believed that the economic isolation Mosley emphasized was morally wrong. He declared that Mosley was ignoring the “responsibilities of civilization” in his proposals.<sup>38</sup> Owen believed Britain’s status as a world power required that it maintain its involvement in world trade. Owen’s opinion was understandable; Mosley’s vision of Britain as a powerful self-sufficient Empire was a radical departure from contemporary Labour Party policy. The harmony of a free-trading world was an essential principle of Britain’s Labour-led socialist government. Owen, as well as many other politicians, saw Mosley’s form of economic nationalism as heretical to this vision.

Some worried that this economic ‘insulation’ could lead to international conflict. If every nation adopted Mosley’s vision of self-sufficiency, competition would be inevitable. Critics such as Labour MP Fenner Brockway warned of this “dangerous leaning towards economic imperialism.”<sup>39</sup> In Labour ideology, any mention of imperialism was a serious accusation. The post-war generation of liberal thinkers equated imperialism with conflict. A return to imperialist policy was not only sacrilegious to socialism, but a guarantee of increased international rivalry. As such, many leftist politicians had difficulty separating Mosley’s economic ideas from this imperialistic context.



James Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister (1929-1935).

<sup>37</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, October 29, 1930 (London: Hansard), column 102.

<sup>38</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, November 5, 1930 (London: Hansard), column 779.

<sup>39</sup> *New Leader*, July 18, 1930.

In keeping with this skepticism, MacDonald and his Labour Government strictly adhered to orthodox economic policy, regarding any sort of deficit spending as heresy. MacDonald's government instead focused on attempting to balance the budget in the face of enormous loss of revenue. In particular, MacDonald chose to cut unemployment benefits, a decidedly cruel measure given the national situation.<sup>40</sup> Despite the efforts of MacDonald's government, unemployment continued to rise, and the Labour Government fell in August of 1931, giving way to the National Government, a bipartisan coalition of Labour and Conservative.

In contrast to Parliament's condemnation of Mosley's proposals, other nations enacted Keynesian policies. Perhaps most recognizable was Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States. Although Roosevelt entered office with the intent to balance the budget, he outlined plans for a new "emergency budget" which would necessarily run a large deficit.<sup>41</sup> Roosevelt used this emergency to finance his extensive public works programs during the First New Deal of 1933.<sup>42</sup> While Roosevelt was skeptical of Keynesian ideas, he conceded to some deficit spending, though never at the level Keynes advocated.<sup>43</sup>

Mosley hoped to fight unemployment using the same concepts Roosevelt utilized. Mosley, however, was more of a pure Keynesian than Roosevelt, wholly embracing deficit spending and public works to aid economic recovery. In fact, in 1930 Mosley was perhaps more of a Keynesian than Keynes himself. Still, Mosley and Roosevelt shared some policy ideas. Mosley's suggestion to employ a government-funded mobile labor corps is almost exactly what Roosevelt did in 1933. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps occupied a similar role, except that the focus was on the development and conservation of natural resources instead of urban renewal.<sup>44</sup> Regardless, the goal was the same: providing jobs for the unemployed that also benefited the public.

The swift adoption of Roosevelt's New Deal policies just three years after *The Mosley memorandum* illustrates that Mosley's policies were not as outlandish as his political peers thought. Unfortunately for Mosley, the orthodox economic attitudes of his fellow politicians proved too entrenched, and his ideas were heavily criticized. Called "irresponsible" by Labour Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald, Oswald Mosley's fellow Labour MPs thoroughly rejected his

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<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, "Mr. MacDonald and Unemployment," April 29, 1929, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> William Edward Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row 1963), 28.

<sup>42</sup> Which refers to the administrative initiatives introduced by Roosevelt in 1933. Specifically: the National Recovery Administration, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Civilian Conservation Corps.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

response to the crisis.<sup>45</sup> Parliament received with uncertainty Mosley's plan for a more domestically based economy and increased government spending. Mosley's impatience with the Labour Party's stubborn refusal to employ alternative measures led to his decision to resign from the Labour Party in the spring of 1930.

#### Resignation from Labour

On May 21, 1930, Oswald Mosley informed Parliament of his intention to leave the Labour Government. He withheld his formal justification for a scheduled unemployment debate a week later on May 28.<sup>46</sup> On that day, Prime Minister of Labour Ramsey MacDonald fielded questions on his policies concerning the unemployment issue.<sup>47</sup> His speech was mostly a defense of the Labour Party's policy of inaction during the recession. The House of Commons questioned his strategy. Winston Churchill MP demanded to know the details of extra spending over the budget, asking "What we want to know is, what is the extra amount over and above the normal?"<sup>48</sup> When MacDonald stutteringly claimed "I tell the Committee that I have not got those details," the interruptions mounted.<sup>49</sup> Attempting to solidify his argument, MacDonald asked "Can we, in face of this special outburst of unemployment, this special manifestation of unemployment, undertake special emergency measures to tide it over?"<sup>50</sup> He then answered his own question, declaring that "every authority who has been consulted is convinced that it [the recession] is temporary."<sup>51</sup> MacDonald asserted "we are just as likely to have a period of immediate boom as a very prolonged continuation of the present depression."<sup>52</sup> Murmurs of discontent abounded as MacDonald stepped down.<sup>53</sup>

Following a few short comments by Robert Horne and Philip Snowden, Mosley rose to give his position,<sup>54</sup> Right away, Mosley challenged MacDonald by affirming the necessity for action, opening his speech with the maxim "the more serious the situation the greater the necessity for action by Government."<sup>55</sup> Mosley believed the current Government was incapable of meeting the crisis,

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<sup>45</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, May 13, 1930 (London: Hansard), column 1607.

<sup>46</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, May 28, 1930 (London: Hansard), column 1317.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1330.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1334.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1335.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1348.

and claimed that “to grapple with this problem it is necessary to have a revolution in the machinery of government.”<sup>56</sup> The machine he wished to create echoed his *memorandum*: a “central organisation armed with an adequate research and economic advisory department on the one hand... operating under the direct control of the Prime Minister and the head of the Civil Service himself.”<sup>57</sup>

He then shifted to the nature of the British economy. Citing changing world trade, he announced the need for the country to be “insulated” against the “electric shocks of world conditions,”<sup>58</sup> and declared that any “hope of recovering our position through an expansion of our export trade is an illusion.”<sup>59</sup> In support of this assertion, he used the example of the British cotton trade in the Indian market.<sup>60</sup> According to the International Labour Office, Mosley quoted the average sale of British cotton in India at 5.6 billion square yards of cotton a year.<sup>61</sup> While India had traditionally been Britain’s “exclusive market,” India now produced one billion square yards of its own, and Japan’s share in the market had grown tenfold from two percent to twenty percent.<sup>62</sup> Mosley alleged the example showed how “the intensified competition all over the world is making more and more illusory the belief that we can again build up in the world that unique position which we occupied many years ago.”<sup>63</sup> Instead, Britain must “face a shift in the whole basis of the economic life of this country,” and “get away from the belief that the only criterion of British prosperity is how many goods we can send abroad for foreigners to consume.”<sup>64</sup> He ended by asking the government to “give the vital forces of this country the chance that they await.”<sup>65</sup> For a moment after he finished, there was silence. Then, “the cheering broke out, loud and prolonged, from every section of the House and galleries.”<sup>66</sup> This brilliant but brief show of support for Mosley and his ideas emboldened him, urging him to forge onward towards political ruin.

Over the next few days, the press passionately acclaimed Mosley’s speech. The *Daily Herald* called it “a brilliant defense of his attitude followed by a vigorous and detailed offensive.”<sup>67</sup> The *Evening Standard* declared his oration “one of the most

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<sup>56</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, May 28, 1930 (London: Hansard), column 1350.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1352.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1353.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1354.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1372.

<sup>66</sup> Skidelsky, 216.

<sup>67</sup> *Daily Herald*, May 29, 1930.

notable Parliamentary speeches of recent times.”<sup>68</sup> The *Spectator* complimented Mosley’s “perfect clearness and faultless taste.”<sup>69</sup>

Following his resignation, Mosley was a political hero. The combination of his skill as an orator with the symbolic gesture of leaving the Labour Party seemed to win the admiration, if not agreement, of many. Much of Parliament applauded his bravery in leaving established politics and his powerful demonstration of his lack of confidence in Labour. He seemed to be the only politician to realize that the policies of a previous era would not fix the problems of this one. It was less the specifics of his ideas but simply his cry for action that resonated with many. Although much of Parliament certainly disagreed with his proposals, they disagreed far more with the Labour government’s frustrating inaction. Following his speech, Sir Richard Hopkins, controller of finance and supply at the Treasury, gave a report on Mosley’s views on the export crisis to different government departments.<sup>70</sup> Hopkins examined Mosley’s claim that regaining Britain’s export trade would not be enough to return the British economy to full employment. Upon review of statistical evidence, he reluctantly agreed with this concept.<sup>71</sup> The Board of Trade began to look into other strategies more in line with Mosley’s suggestions.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the acceptance of some of his ideas, Mosley lacked reliable political allies. Many agreed to a point with his short-term economic ideas, but his long term design for government and British trade policies fell flat. The Board of Trade, while surrendering to Mosley’s ideas in the short-term, believed that he “[appeared] to underestimate the potentialities in economic development” in undeveloped markets in Africa and Asia, which could provide more in the export trade.<sup>73</sup> In Parliament, he had only four supporters who remained in the Labour Party: W.J. Brown, Aneurin Bevan, Oliver Baldwin and Robert Forgan.<sup>74</sup> These men all had talent politically; Aneurin Bevan, for example, went on to design Britain’s national health care program following World War II. Still, all four were junior ministers having just entered the House in 1929.<sup>75</sup> Though capable and well-respected, they were too young to wield significant influence. The momentum Mosley gathered following his resignation proved hard to maintain. Though his rhetoric led many to declare his status as a rising star, it remained

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<sup>68</sup> *Evening Standard*, May 29, 1930.

<sup>69</sup> *Spectator*, May 31, 1930.

<sup>70</sup> Howson and Winch, 27.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>73</sup> Skidelsky, 219

<sup>74</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 249.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*.

unclear where he would fit. MacDonald's government was certainly in decline, but no one knew what would come next. Mosley found himself in the difficult position of being the object of admiration but not alliance. As an Independent MP in a chaotic House of Commons, he found much respect but little support for his ideas.

Ideologically, Mosley felt himself a world apart from politicians he saw as mired in a "pre-war mind." In a published statement in the *Sunday Express*, Mosley related his feeling that the essence of contemporary political division was not along party lines but in a difference in attitude.<sup>76</sup> The "modern mind" was a "hard, realistic type, hammered into existence on the anvil of great ordeal."<sup>77</sup> The "pre-war mind" was a product of a "static" age, a "nicer" age.<sup>78</sup> Mosley believed this difference in environment and upbringing created insurmountable ideological differences. It seemed that Mosley could not fathom the lack of support in his Labor compatriots with whom he shared much of his political background and ideas. Instead, he saw the rift as a sort of generation gap caused by the Great War, which rendered it such that individuals on either side could "scarcely understand each other's language."<sup>79</sup> The concept of "pre-war" ideas as opposed to "modern" ones was an essential aspect of Mosley's ideology throughout his career. In these early years, Mosley identified the lethargy of the Labour Party and other political groups with the "pre-war" mentality. Later, he would extend this label to apply to the British parliamentary system as a whole. During his time with Labour, Mosley could not believe that his party could show such aversion to action, and blamed their lack of confidence in his proposals on the generation gap.

Whatever the source of the ideological difference between Mosley and the rest of Labour, he found trouble gaining the support he needed. In Mosley's first announcement of resignation on May 21, he warned MacDonald that he would "appeal to the judgment of our party."<sup>80</sup> He hoped to create a new following outside the Party, and eventually to reenter it as the triumphant returning hero. To this end, Mosley organized a petition by sixty MPs to reevaluate the current policy on unemployment. When the motion came before the House in July, less than half of the party bothered to show up.<sup>81</sup> Those who did simply referred it back to a consultative committee by 80 votes to 38.<sup>82</sup> It seemed he was destined

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<sup>76</sup> *Sunday Express*, June 4, 1930.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, May 31, 1930 (London: Hansard), column 405.

<sup>81</sup> Skidelsky, 222.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

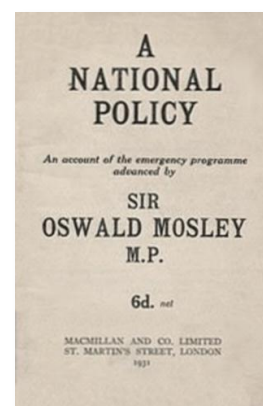
to be treated as little more than a pesky annoyance by organized politics. By the end of the summer, Mosley had lost faith in the Labour Party.

In his biography of Mosley, Robert Skidelsky posits that much of the Labour Party's resistance to change lay in the nature of the organization. Labour was the traditional "party of rebellion," most often in opposition.<sup>83</sup> Labour only surpassed the Liberal Party as the primary opposition to the Conservatives in the early 1920's, and assumed power in 1924. Skidelsky claims that Labour's position in 1930 left it reluctant to accept changes that could weaken its newfound political power. He asserts that this quality enforced a stricter sense of unity among the party.<sup>84</sup> As a result, a successful revolution within the Labour Party in 1931 may have been doomed from the outset.

The *New Statesman* commented on this Labour attribute in September 1931, by stating "Persons with no inside knowledge of the Labour movement find it hard to understand how little influence of any individual counts against the sentiment of collective solidarity."<sup>85</sup> This characteristic of the Labour party may have contributed to Mosley's difficulties. As a younger Member of Parliament who spent the first six years of his tenure in the Conservative Party, Mosley may not have fully understood this aspect. Whether their disdain was because of lack of Labour's faith in Mosley and his policies or just the nature of the party, the apathy of his former Labour compatriots left Mosley with a deep resentment toward Labour politics. On February 28, 1931, sick with pneumonia and beyond frustration, Mosley announced the founding of the New Party.<sup>86</sup>

#### The New Party

The rationale behind the New Party was the colossal failure on the part of both Labour and the Conservatives to react effectively to the "grave industrial crisis."<sup>87</sup> In February 1931, Oswald Mosley, his wife Cynthia Mosley, John Strachey, Oliver Baldwin, Robert Forgan and Allan Young all officially resigned from the Labour Party to form this new entity. Oliver Baldwin's commitment lasted only one day before he abandoned Mosley and



<sup>83</sup> Skidelsky, 223.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *The New Statesman and Nation*, September 5, 1931.

<sup>86</sup> Matthew Worley, "What Was the New Party? Sir Oswald Mosley and Associated Responses to the 'Crisis'," *History* 92, no. 305 (2007): 39.

<sup>87</sup> Oswald Mosley, John Strachey, Oliver Baldwin, Robert Forgan, Cynthia Mosley, W.E.D. Allen, *Why we left the old parties* (London: David Allen, 1931), 2.



rejoined Labour. W.J. Brown, a well-respected Labour politician, attached his name to the New Party program but remained with the Labour Party.

The ideas Mosley touted in his *memorandum* comprised most of the official program of the New Party, *A national policy: an account of the emergency programme*.<sup>88</sup> The programme expanded on some of his ideas for the reform of the structure of government, and declared the need to turn the House of Commons from a “talk-shop to a work shop.”<sup>89</sup> Mosley wanted to endow a small inner council of six men with the ability to pass legislation by council order. This new executive body would allow for the initiation of Mosley’s reforms in a more expedient manner.

The New Party also advocated the use of import controls to expand the domestic economy, as well as public works initiatives to create jobs. Mosley and his New Party hoped to “save and rebuild the nation” through an aggressive plan of deficit spending.<sup>90</sup> In *The Times*, Mosley stated the New Party’s intent to, “challenge the 50-year-old system of free trade which exposes industry in the home market to the chaos of world conditions, such as price fluctuation, dumping, and the competition of sweated labour, which result in the lowering of wages and industrial decay.”<sup>91</sup>

Strategically, Mosley intended the New Party to be a short term reaction to the economic emergency. Mosley and his followers attempted to appeal across party lines in the name of saving the country from total disaster. They believed the extreme nature of the economic crisis necessitated a political order exclusively focused on economic reconstruction. However, the Labour background of Mosley and his followers inevitably cast the party in a certain light. Although some Conservative and Liberal MP’s were sympathetic to the New Party’s ideas, they were still understandably wary of leaving established politics.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Oswald Mosley, Allan Young, John Strachey, W.J., Brown, and Aneurin Bevan, *A national policy: an account of the emergency programme advanced by Sir Oswald Mosley M.P.* (London: MacMillan, 1931), 1.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>91</sup> *The Times*, March 2, 1931, p. 14.

<sup>92</sup> Worley, 46.

Mosley hoped that with the Conservative Party in dire straits, the New Party could become the party of opposition to the heavily criticized Labour government. In a bid to appeal to youth, Mosley founded the New Party Youth Clubs (NUPA), which enjoyed some success in mobilizing young British men into politics. Mosley also hoped to win over the increasingly disenfranchised Labour affiliates in the Independent Labour Party.

One of the first of Mosley's converts was Harold Nicolson, son of the diplomat Sir Arthur Nicolson. Harold Nicolson became nationally known through a successful career in journalism, most notably in the *Daily Express* and the BBC. With an eye towards Nicolson's experience in journalism, Mosley appointed him the editor of the New Party's periodical *Action*.<sup>93</sup> As a close friend of Mosley's and a core member of the New Party, Nicolson's perspective is invaluable in this period. With a talented nucleus of leaders, the future of the New Party seemed bright.

However, the New Party faced many unforeseen issues. During much of 1931, Mosley suffered from pleurisy, a painful lung disease.<sup>94</sup> Largely confined to his bed, the illness forced Mosley to scale back his campaigning for the New Party. As a result, many potential supporters who came to New Party rallies hoping to see Mosley speak were instead treated to John Strachey, Robert Forgan or Lady Cynthia Mosley. Although they were all capable speakers, they did not possess Mosley's star power. His resignation from Labour had made him a household name, and it was he who had the best chance of gathering support for the New Party. As such, his lack of visibility within the movement hurt the New Party's recruiting abilities.

W.J. Brown could have been a powerful force in the New Party. However, he opted to remain with the Labour Party. Although he had promised to resign, he claimed that he could not afford to lose his job with the trade unions which supported his candidacy.<sup>95</sup> Brown stayed with Labour, despite his initial intent to resign with the other members of the New Party. After Mosley, Brown was the most influential New Party founder due to his



Harold Nicolson and his wife Vita Sackville-West

<sup>93</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 83.

<sup>94</sup> Worley, 39.

<sup>95</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 283.

connections with the trade unions and the more radical Labour MPs. With Brown reluctant and Mosley deathly ill, the New Party was far from running at full strength.

Inevitably, money also was a problem. Initially, the hugely wealthy automobile mogul Sir William Morris financed the New Party. Though not politically inclined, Morris worried at the state of Britain. He believed Mosley's politics were a "ray of hope" for the creation of an "industrial party." Morris believed in Mosley's capability for leadership, and gave him 50,000 pounds after interrogating him at a luncheon.<sup>96</sup> Later, however, monetary concerns forced Mosley to constantly harangue wealthy radicals for support.

Despite the New Party's troubles, the political world did not wait for them. The first test of the New Party's political viability was the by-election of the Ashton-under-Lyne in April 1931. Following the death of Labour MP Albert Bellamy in March, the New Party stood for election in the constituency alongside Labour and Conservative candidates.<sup>97</sup> The New Party candidate, Allan Young, received 4,472 votes to Labour's 11,005 and Conservative's 12,420.<sup>98</sup> The Conservative victory in the election led to serious Labour bitterness towards Mosley for a perceived splitting of the Labour vote. Following the declaration of the results, an angry mob formed outside the Town Hall. They shouted at Mosley, calling him "traitor," and "Judas."<sup>99</sup> The son of the defeated Labour candidate charged the steps and accused Mosley with ruining his father's chances.<sup>100</sup> In response, Mosley turned to John Strachey and said "that is the crowd that has prevented anyone doing anything in England since the war."<sup>101</sup> Strachey believed in that moment, Mosley began to set himself against the working class.<sup>102</sup> John Strachey later claimed that was the moment British fascism was born.<sup>103</sup>

Ashton-under-Lyne severed any positive link between Mosley and his New Party and Labour. First Lord of the Admiralty A.V. Alexander referred to the New Party as the "treacherous Mosley campaign."<sup>104</sup> Bitterness over this siphoning of Labour voters ensured widespread distrust of the New Party by

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<sup>96</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 345.

<sup>97</sup> F.W.S Craig, *British election results 1918-* (London: MacMillan, 1977), 98.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Skidelsky, 252.

<sup>100</sup> John Strachey, *The menace of Fascism*, (New York: Covici, Friede Inc., 1933), 156.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Skidelsky, 253.

Labour politicians. The opinion that the New Party had lost the election for Labour, was a misconception — the New Party's supporters at Ashton-under-Lyne drew support from Liberal voters.<sup>105</sup> As such, The New Party's involvement in the election probably had little effect on the Conservative victory.

The fall of Ramsey MacDonald's Labour government in August 1931 had serious political consequences for the New Party. In August, MacDonald chose to form a coalition government with the Conservatives and Liberals rather than remain with the fading Labour government. When MacDonald's new National Government stood for election in October of 1931, they took 556 of 616 seats in the House of Commons.<sup>106</sup> Of those 556, the Conservatives won 473 seats, indicating the degree of national frustration with the Labour Government.<sup>107</sup> MacDonald remained Prime Minister of this new coalition, but was expelled from the Labour Party. Labour won just a dismal 52 seats amongst powerful bitterness towards MacDonald as a traitor to the party.<sup>108</sup> MacDonald, as a true believer in Labour politics, was heartbroken by Labour's downfall. However, it was his move to create the National Government that annihilated Labour's position in government.

In this political climate, Mosley's New Party floundered as it lost the basis of its opposition. With much of the constituency the New Party hoped to win over now represented by the coalition, Mosley's message fell on deaf ears. He could never have predicted the unlikely political situation at the end of 1931. MacDonald's leadership of the new National Government came only at the urging of the King. Mosley, like most of Britain, expected the Labour Government to fall. He hoped to use the New Party as a vehicle to gather the support of both frustrated Labour supporters and disenfranchised Conservatives. Mosley opposed the Labour Government through such measures as his petition to create a new unemployment policy in July of 1931.<sup>109</sup> However, MacDonald himself decimated the Labour Party by holding the election in October, close on the heels of the coalition's establishment in August. Labour politics had no time to recover after the announcement of the coalition, and as a result lost 225 seats in Parliament.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Skidelsky, 255.

<sup>106</sup> Craig, 102.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Skidelsky, 222.

<sup>110</sup> Craig, 102.

The short time frame before the election also hurt the New Party. Mosley had not expected the Labour Government to fall so suddenly, and was counting on more time to refine his party's politics and gather support. Moreover, the National Government incorporated much of the constituency Mosley hoped to win; MacDonald had effectively appeased Conservative voters, leaving Mosley with nothing to offer them in terms of an alternative. The Socialists' distaste for Mosley's economic policies, as well as anger over the outcome of Ashton-under-Lyne ensured lack of support for Mosley from Labour politicians. By the final months of 1931, these circumstances crippled the New Party politically. With no support, the New Party failed to win a single seat of the fifty boroughs it stood in.<sup>111</sup> The general election of October 1931 saw the New Party win only 36,377 votes nationwide, only one-fifth of one percent of the voting public.<sup>112</sup>

At the beginning of 1932, Oswald Mosley had a serious political decision to make. He was a politician without a viable political party or even a seat in Parliament. He could retire from politics, as he had mused upon months earlier. In the late summer, Mosley had told friends that in the event of the New Party's defeat he "would retire from public life for ten years."<sup>113</sup> Still, he remained steadfastly convinced that Britain's economic crisis would only worsen. Others close to him did not share this opinion. Keynes told Mosley he believed Britain would recover soon.<sup>114</sup> But Mosley was preparing for an even greater national emergency than the economic one the New Party had hoped to solve. Soon, Mosley became convinced this crisis required an even more forceful political solution: fascism.

## II. The Early British Union of Fascists

Following the New Party's dismal performance in the October 1931 election, Mosley was looking for inspiration. In January 1932 he traveled to Italy at the behest of Benito Mussolini.<sup>115</sup> The beleaguered politician instantly felt a kinship with Mussolini. Like Mosley, Mussolini's political background was in socialist politics. Additionally, they had both grown weary of ineffectual legislative government. Mussolini's success in revitalizing Italy (and Mosley's electoral failure) confirmed what Mosley was already beginning to believe: the age of democracy was over. Shortly after his return from Italy in January, Mosley

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<sup>111</sup> Craig, 102.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 88.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 358.

began work on a new campaign based upon the development of a specifically British form of fascism, one that would be unveiled the following autumn.<sup>116</sup>

Fascism was not Mosley's only recourse in early 1932. His undeniable appeal to youth was still widely considered an important political asset. As such, Mosley had a number of political options. David Lloyd George, former Prime Minister and the leader of the ailing Liberal Party, hoped to utilize Mosley in forming an opposition to the National Government.<sup>117</sup> Winston Churchill, disenfranchised by his Conservative Party, offered to support Mosley's candidacy in a by-election.<sup>118</sup> Conservative chief whip David Margesson wanted to bring him into the National Government coalition.<sup>119</sup> Even the estranged Labour Party made some effort; MP Joseph Kenworthy reached out to Mosley about rejoining Labour.<sup>120</sup> Mosley's continuing desirability to British politicians illustrated the faith many still had in him, even after the New Party disaster. His charisma and political skill was enough to outweigh the sequence of alienating decisions he had made since resigning from Labour. To older politicians such as Churchill and Lloyd George, he was still a fresh young face with the capacity for leadership. They characterized the New Party as a young man's folly, not a career ending catastrophe. Because of their long tenure on the political scene, Churchill and Lloyd George both hoped to use Mosley to refresh their political image.

Outside of established politics, fascism was not the only alternative ideology. John Strachey, Mosley's compatriot in the New Party and a primary contributor to the New Party's economic program moved seamlessly towards communism following his break with Mosley in July 1931. Mosley, however, deeply despised communism. He felt that communism inevitably led to the destruction of a nation's productivity. While he later strongly advocated for a corporate state, he rejected the essential Marxist tenet of class conflict. He believed class conflict led only to violent revolution, to the detriment of national industry and production. He could not accept Communism's reliance on economic and social collapse as a catalyst for change. Instead, he argued for the creation of "equality of opportunity," which he believed fascism could provide.<sup>121</sup> Mosley did not want to destroy capitalism, he wanted to reform it.

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<sup>116</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 89.

<sup>117</sup> Skidelsky, 285.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 115.

<sup>121</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 325.

Even political retirement would not have been an outlandish decision. In the late summer, Mosley had declared that if the New Party failed he would “retire from public life for ten years.”<sup>122</sup> As he rightly pointed out, he could “well afford to wait ten years, to study economics, and even then when I return I shall be no older than Bonar Law was when he first entered politics.”<sup>123</sup> Mosley was a talented man with a good deal of wealth; he had no practical need for politics. At just 36 years old he was still young by British political standards. His longing for a more “civilized life” outside of politics was understandable, and many in his position might have done so.<sup>124</sup>

However, by the autumn of 1931, Mosley’s attitude changed. After the New Party’s dismal showing in the October general election, he published this ultimatum in the New Party’s political newspaper *Action*:

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 stifling in a uniform of blue and gold, strutting and posturing on the stage of little England, amid the scenery of decadence, until history, in turning over an heroic page of the human story, writes of us the contemptuous postscript: ‘These were the men to whom was entrusted the Empire of Great Britain, and whose idleness, ignorance and cowardice left it a Spain.’ We shall win; or at least we shall return upon our shields.<sup>125</sup>

Despite the New Party’s electoral failure, Mosley’s determination was unwavering. He felt that to leave politics would be to abandon his country. Without powerful change and leadership in this “crisis,” Britain would surely be left to deteriorate into “a Spain.”<sup>126</sup> By this point, however, Mosley’s feelings of disenfranchisement with established politics were irreconcilable. Labour, Conservative, Liberal or New, he believed existing party politics to be incapable of effecting change. His disillusionment was consistent with his ideas on the generation divide between the “modern man” and the “pre-war man.” Mosley saw the entire existing British political system as part of that anachronistic “pre-war” mindset, and that there could be no solution to “the crisis” within such a system.

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<sup>122</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 88.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Action*, December 31, 1931, p. 2.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

Mosley's enthusiasm for military grandeur also pushed him towards fascism. His wartime experience had lent him a powerful appreciation for structure and discipline. The martial efficiency present in fascism appealed to him. Harold Nicolson, in discussing Mosley, wrote "Tom cannot keep his mind off shock troops, the arrest of MacDonald and J.H. Thomas, their internment in the Isle of Wight and the roll of drums around Westminster. He is a romantic. That is a great failing."<sup>127</sup> Mosley's pride could not bear the disgrace of remaining within a political system he had no faith in. He felt that to remain in party politics would be to "place himself in a strait-waistcoat."<sup>128</sup> Instead, he chose to completely eschew British political principles in favor of fascism.

Mosley was deeply impressed with the achievements he saw during his visit to Italy. He did not, however, view Mussolini himself as an exceptional individual. Mosley characterized him as "affable but unimpressive."<sup>129</sup> If anything, Mosley considered himself the more able leader and politician. The Italian government represented everything Mosley hoped to achieve in Britain. In the *Daily Mail*, Mosley praised the new regime: "No time is wasted in the polite banalities which have so irked the younger generation in Britain when dealing with our elder statesmen."<sup>130</sup> The new Italian mind, he wrote, was "hard, concentrated, direct — in a word, 'Modern'."<sup>131</sup> "Modern" was perhaps the highest form of praise from Mosley. He saw the Italian system as the embodiment of what twentieth century government should be. Mosley believed the improved efficiency and capability of the Italian fascist system more than compensated for the loss of the "right to blather" so valued by traditional British politics.<sup>132</sup> In contrast, the same fascist system horrified his travel companion Harold Nicolson.<sup>133</sup>

As Mosley began to embrace fascism, his views on the approaching "crisis" adjusted. He no longer foresaw a fantastic implosion of British government, economy and trade but rather a slow, painful decline. As he wrote in the *Political Quarterly*, he predicted a "slow and imperceptible decline, until in the course of a generation or two, Britain had degenerated into the position of a Spain."<sup>134</sup> Similar to his battle cry in *Action* six months before, the concept of a British

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<sup>127</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 88.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>130</sup> *Daily Mail*, February 1, 1932.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 86.

<sup>134</sup> Oswald Mosley, "Old Parties or New?" *Political Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1932): 28.



decline “into the position of a Spain” was a terrifying image. Spain’s painful fall from colonial superpower to a nation racked by political strife and poverty was familiar to most Britons. The aversion of this national breakdown became Mosley’s rallying call.

During this time Mosley viewed fascism largely as a means to enact his economic ideas. It was only in later years that Mosley began to see fascism as necessary in and of itself. Although he believed in the need for a restructured British state, fascism remained largely a vehicle for his unique vision of the British economy. This home-market driven, self-sufficient, imperial entity was the only way to prevent Britain’s collapse into “a Spain.”<sup>135</sup> Mosley’s adoption of fascism was a direct result of his belief that his economic ideas could never be implemented through the existing government structure. He had worked to enact these ideas since early 1930, first from within Labour and then from the New Party. Unfortunately, the “pre-war mind” was too ingrained in the British political system to ever allow for the revolutionary change Mosley thought Britain needed. As such, Mosley believed an entirely new, modern form of government was the only way to enact meaningful change. To Mosley, fascism was that government. It was the only option left to the “modern man.”

Mosley told Harold Nicolson at the last New Party meeting in April 1932 that he believed as “leader of the fascists, he could accomplish more than as a party-backbencher,” and that he was “prepared to run the risk of further failure, ridicule and assault, rather than allow the active forces in this country to fall into other hands.”<sup>136</sup> Nicolson told Mosley that he could not support fascism. He begged Mosley to “lie low” and advocate for the “corporate state idea” outside of fascism.<sup>137</sup> Mosley politely refused.<sup>138</sup>

Nicolson was not the first of Mosley’s colleagues to leave over ideological differences, nor would he be the last. John Strachey and Allan Young had quarreled with Mosley over the New Party’s intended foreign policy in July 1931.<sup>139</sup> Strachey and Young wrote a foreign policy memorandum emphasizing “close economic relations” with the Soviet Union.<sup>140</sup> Mosley pointed out that a friendly trade policy with Russia contradicted existing British policy.<sup>141</sup> As such,

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<sup>135</sup> Mosley, “Old Parties or New?” 28.

<sup>136</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 94.

<sup>137</sup> Skidelsky, 287.

<sup>138</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 86.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *The Times*, “Political Notes; The Shrinking New Party,” July 24, 1931, p. 14.

<sup>141</sup> Strachey, 159.

it was guaranteed to cost the New Party support from the political establishment.<sup>142</sup> He believed advocating improved relations with Russia to be a waste of potential support over an unimportant point. Mosley had no desire to ally the New Party with Communist interests. Even worse, the memorandum was contradictory to the New Party's isolationist economic goals. Strachey and Young wished to downplay the importance of commerce within the Empire in favor of trading with Russia.<sup>143</sup> This clearly conflicted with Mosley's plans for a self-sufficient imperial economic system.

The resulting argument between the three men left each angry and bitter. Strachey and Young resigned from the New Party three days later, claiming that Mosley "was adopting a fascist tendency."<sup>144</sup> They believed that aspects of the Party such as the NUPA youth movement were headed towards fascism.<sup>145</sup> Strachey accused Mosley of harboring fascist ideas as early as Ashton-under-Lyne.<sup>146</sup> Harold Nicolson's diaries gave some credence to this accusation. Even before the October 1931 General Election, Mosley was beginning to discuss fascism.<sup>147</sup> On September 22, Nicolson wrote that Mosley believed the crisis would bring a "rapid and immense" surge in communist interest.<sup>148</sup> Mosley mused with Nicolson over whether this surge could be countered by fascism.<sup>149</sup> John Strachey wrote in his 1933 book, *The menace of Fascism*, that following the New Party's failure at the April 1931 Ashton-under-Lyne by-election "Mosley began more and more to use the word Fascism in private."<sup>150</sup>

Mosley's wife Cynthia resented her husband's gravitation towards fascism. During the New Party campaigns, Cynthia had been a key member of the movement. Her glamorous image and friendly demeanor had helped the New Party win over female members. Politically inexperienced but kind-hearted, she was remarkable in helping to lead the party during her husband's pleurisy. However, when he began to lean towards fascism following the October 1931 election, she was not as supportive. Cynthia was a staunch social democrat who believed that the duty of politics was to protect the rights of the working class. Fascism disgusted her. After Mosley's visit to Italy, Cynthia warned her husband that she would issue notice to the press removing herself from his politics.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Strachey, 159.

<sup>143</sup> Skidelsky, 260.

<sup>144</sup> *The Times*, "Political Notes; The Shrinking New Party," p. 14.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>146</sup> Strachey, 158.

<sup>147</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 84.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>150</sup> Strachey, 157.

<sup>151</sup> Skidelsky, 284.

Although it proved to be an idle threat, Cynthia never again fully embraced her husband's political agenda.

Mosley kept the New Party alive only in name in the months following the April meeting, instead devoting his energy toward writing the outline of his new fascist ideas in the form of the book. During this time he decided to combine the NUPA Youth Movement with the existing fascist organizations in Britain, and debated what to call this new movement. Initially, he hesitated to label it as fascist. Robert Forgan and W.E.D. Allen counseled against using the term, arguing that it was too foreign.<sup>152</sup> Still, Mosley overruled his colleagues, and founded his movement as the British Union of Fascists. Four years later, in *Fascism-100 questions asked and answered*, Mosley gave his reasoning for his choice of words:

Fascism is the name by which the modern Movement has come to be known in the world. It would have been possible to avoid misrepresentation by calling our Movement by another name. But it was more honest to call it Fascism and thus to let everyone know exactly where we stood. It is up to us to defeat misrepresentation by propaganda and explanation of the real policy and method of Fascism as it will operate in Britain. In the long run straightforward dealing is not only honest but also pays best.<sup>153</sup>

Initial BUF Policy: *The Greater Britain*

Published in conjunction with the founding of the British Union of Fascists in October 1932, *The greater Britain*, first published in conjunction with the BUF's founding in October 1932, outlined the BUF's ideology. In his work, he logically explained his arguments for a new fascist state to the British people. His ideas were very much grounded in practical concerns such as wages, unemployment and the economy. Despite Mosley's rationalization of the need for fascism, the creation of the BUF severely damaged his public image. Bitterness and desperation stemming from the BUF's failure would lead to its radicalization in later years.

Still, it is important to understand the BUF's policies as Mosley originally intended, in order to serve as a contrast to its later incarnation. With *The greater Britain*, Mosley presented his concept of fascism as adopted to fit the needs of the

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<sup>152</sup> Skidelsky, 284.

<sup>153</sup> Oswald Mosley, *Fascism — 100 Questions Asked and Answered*, (London: BUF Publications, 1936), 8.

United Kingdom. He hoped to remove the negative connotation of fascism through a logical explanation of his vision of a fascist Britain. For example, he made clear in *The greater Britain* that fascism was not synonymous with despotism.<sup>154</sup> His concept of fascism entailed a “Dictatorship” still beholden to the people through legislative assembly.<sup>155</sup> He also attempted to debunk the idea that a fascist state could only be achieved through violence. Instead, he argued for the implementation of fascism through established political channels. This point is especially significant, as Mosley later embraced the prospect of violence. *The greater Britain* represented a softer form of fascism, intended to gently convince rather than force the cooperation of the British people. This form of fascism emphasized the protection of individual rights as well as much of the existing political system.

In addition to attempting to remove the stigma from fascist ideology, Mosley outlined in detail his arguments for why fascism was essential to Great Britain’s future success. To this end, he asserted that the current economic crisis served as “tragic proof that economic life has outgrown our political institutions.”<sup>156</sup> He believed that the current “system of government designed by, and for, the nineteenth century” could not succeed in the modern world.<sup>157</sup> This concept of a “fascist century” echoed Mussolini’s essay *The doctrine of Fascism* written earlier in 1932.<sup>158</sup> Mosley agreed with Mussolini’s assertion that “If the XIXth century was the century of the individual (liberalism implies individualism) we are free to believe that this is the “collective” century, and therefore the century of the State.”<sup>159</sup>

Mosley argued that the needs of a new world economy far outstripped the capability of the existing political system. Political parties created the tendency of Parliament to indulge “in detailed debate of every technical measure,” leading to inordinately slow policy-making.<sup>160</sup> Mosley believed the “modern age” required government to act quickly and decisively. Within the existing Parliamentary two-party system, this was admittedly often impossible. Mosley held that the solution to the economic crisis lay not with the Right or the Left, but with an entirely new entity: fascism.

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<sup>154</sup> Oswald Mosley, *The greater Britain*, (London: Jeffcoats, 1932), 23.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Benito Mussolini, *Fascism: doctrine and institutions* (Rome: Ardita, 1932), 1.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>160</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 29.

Much as he advocated with the New Party, Mosley urged his country to ignore these party lines in support of his new movement. He characterized the political Right as the party of stability, and the Left as the party of progress.<sup>161</sup> The unfortunate consequence of this separation was that it was impossible to achieve both ends at the same time. Mosley held that fascism was the natural solution to this dilemma. However, he carefully noted that “Fascism is not Dictatorship in the old sense of that word, which implies Government against the will of the people.”<sup>162</sup> Rather, Dictatorship simply meant strong leadership, without tyranny. He asserted that “modern Dictatorship” is “Leadership resting on the enthusiastic acceptance of the people, and could not endure without their support.”<sup>163</sup> In Mosley’s system, this form of Dictatorship was to be embodied in a powerful executive figure called “The Minister.” This person was to be responsible for most of the government, but not in a despotic sense. As an example, Mosley turned to Mussolini: “We are solemnly assured that the Government of Mussolini is a Dictatorship against the will of the Italian people, but when he appeared before them in his tour of the country during the tenth anniversary of his government he was accorded probably the greatest popular reception ever given to an individual in the history of the world.”<sup>164</sup> Mosley attempted to eliminate some of the stigma from terms such as “fascism” and “dictatorship,” and cast them in a more positive light.

In *The greater Britain*, Mosley’s plan for achieving a fascist state was remarkably orthodox. Mosley believed violent revolution should be avoided, and his visit to Italy further confirmed this belief. Nicolson paraphrased Mussolini’s advice to Mosley as a warning “not to try the military stunt in England.”<sup>165</sup> Instead, Mosley’s approach to gaining power emphasized “loyalty to the crown.”<sup>166</sup> He wanted to achieve fascism by the simple method of gaining a parliamentary majority at election.<sup>167</sup> With this accomplished, “government will be drastically altered by the legal constitutional means to which we adhere, in order to provide the effective instruments of government and of action which modern problems demand.”<sup>168</sup> Mosley explicitly indicated that his movement would work through the current political system. In this way, he was able to silence possible accusations of intending violent revolution.

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<sup>161</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 24.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>165</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 88.

<sup>166</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 39.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

These alterations included a retooling of the present House of Commons. Mosley believed that the inherent fault with the present Parliamentary system lay in the nature of the electoral system. Instead of judging candidates on their ability to lead or their technical expertise, constituents voted for those who demonstrated “assiduity in opening local charity bazaars,” or “lung power at street corners.”<sup>169</sup> Representatives therefore focused on achieving success in the political game. As such, they often did not possess the effective technical knowledge needed to make policy decisions. In a “vastly technical age,” Mosley believed that this old system of politics was unworkable.<sup>170</sup>

Following a BUF victory in the election, the new fascist MPs were to be appointed as “executive officers” of their constituencies.<sup>171</sup> They would then step down from the Commons in order to serve this function. A “locally elected Counsel” would assist these officers in fairly governing their communities.<sup>172</sup> These officers and their counsels would allow for more direct and efficient handling of local affairs. This contrasted with the existing system, where MPs often had little or no contact with their constituencies.<sup>173</sup> Mosley wanted to increase the level of accountability in local politics. He hoped that by making local government more accountable, small-scale issues could be more easily dealt with.

Once this new Parliamentary system was in place, the House of Commons would be reformed into a new entity. Voting would be run through what Mosley called “the Occupational Franchise.”<sup>174</sup> This entailed citizens voting for candidates based on their profession to represent their profession; “A steel worker will vote as a steel worker; a doctor as a doctor.”<sup>175</sup> In this way, Mosley believed that a voter would be able to select a representative based upon a “lifelong experience of the trade in which he is engaged, instead of an “amateur knowledge of foreign and domestic politics.”<sup>176</sup> Mosley considered most of the problems of the modern age to be technical, not political. The “Occupational Franchise” ensured that representatives would have the necessary knowledge to deal with these technical issues. This new version of Parliament would be an amalgam of national industry, able to work together to promote the real end of government:

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<sup>169</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 28.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

economic growth. The main function of this new body would be to advise the minister on technical issues.

In addition to reforming the Commons, Mosley suggested the elimination of the House of Lords, pronouncing it an “unworkable anachronism.”<sup>177</sup> Many of Mosley’s contemporaries agreed with him on this point. The House of Lords had been essentially powerless since an act of Parliament in 1911, stripping it of all but the ability to delay bills for a short time.<sup>178</sup> Mosley hoped to rid Parliament of the Lords and replace it with a more constructive institution. In *The greater Britain*, he suggested completely disposing of the House of Lords in favor of a new “Second Chamber.”<sup>179</sup> This new Chamber was to be composed of “specialists and men of wide general knowledge” and was intended to serve in an advisory capacity to the Commons.<sup>180</sup> Mosley hoped to fill this Chamber with experts representing every interest, from each of the colonies to religious institutions to trade unions. These specialists were meant to advise the Commons on matters pertaining to their expertise. In addition to its specialist role, this Chamber was also to be responsible for non-technical subjects such as foreign policy.<sup>181</sup> This reflected Mosley’s sense of priorities. To him, industry was the driving force behind the country’s success. Matters of foreign policy fell by the wayside in his dream of a self-sustaining industrial utopia. These two new branches of Parliament were to provide expert advice for the Minister, while leaving the actual decision making to the Minister himself.

Mosley believed that the new legislative system “would provide an executive instrument to implement the nation’s demand for rapid action while retaining the principle of elected representation in every element of national life.”<sup>182</sup> He emphasized that fascism would not mean the end of elected representation. Under his system, Britain could still have elected representation, without the snail’s pace of legislative policy-making. Mosley hoped to convince the nation that his system presented an ideal compromise between the democracy of representative democracy and the efficiency of pure dictatorship.

Mosley included other measures to assuage fears of despotism. Specifically, he alleged that the Minister was not unimpeachable. At least every five years, there would be a nationwide referendum for the continuance of the Minister and the

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<sup>177</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 41.

<sup>178</sup> *The New York Times*, Feb. 23, 1911.

<sup>179</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 41

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

government.<sup>183</sup> If the Minister was deposed, the King was responsible for appointing a new Minister who he believed “the nation will show confidence in a fresh vote.”<sup>184</sup> In this way, Mosley demonstrated his “loyalty to the Crown” by restoring part of the King’s traditional powers.<sup>185</sup> Mosley hoped to assuage popular fear that a fascist state would lead to a tyrannical regime. To combat this fear, his system entailed a powerful executive Minister still beholden to the approval of the people and the King. He thus illustrated that a fascist government fixated on economic growth need not be a despotic one.

To achieve this growth, Mosley advocated for the necessity of the “corporate state.” He borrowed this concept from Italian fascism. The Italian Corporate system or “Corporativismo” mostly allowed for private industry, but intervened in the interest of the state when necessary. As Mussolini wrote in *Fascism: doctrine and institutions*, “State intervention in economic production arises only when private initiative is lacking or insufficient, or when the political interests of the State are involved.”<sup>186</sup> The goal of Corporativismo was to harness the success of capitalism and use it for the good of the state. Mosley elaborated on his idea of fascist capitalism in 1936, explaining “Capitalism is the system by which capital uses the Nation for its own purposes. Fascism is the system by which the Nation uses capital for its own purposes.”<sup>187</sup> In this way, the government would take over struggling industries and attempt to make them productive, while leaving successful industries to continue their achievement. Mosley’s version of the corporate state was very similar. He believed the only permanent solution to unemployment was to use government to maximize the potential of industry. However, wholesale industrial nationalization was not the goal as in Communist Russia. As in Italy, Mosley wanted to use state planning only to maximize productivity. However, Mosley also emphasized maintaining wages, in line with his concept of a new home-market based economy. He hoped to increase the efficiency of national industry using government-led expertise, and in doing so create high wages. These higher wages would increase the purchasing power of British consumers. This would then allow British industry to center on the home market, as Mosley had advocated since 1930. The result was to be a self-sufficient nation, capable of huge production as well as consumption, impervious to international economic fluctuation.

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<sup>183</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 163.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>186</sup> Mussolini, *Fascism: doctrine and institutions*, 135.

<sup>187</sup> Mosley, *Fascism — 100 Questions*, 17.



Mosley outlined the specifics of this corporate state in *The greater Britain*. A system of organizations labeled the “National Council of Corporations” would advise the government as to the specifics of the “Protective System.”<sup>188</sup> The Council would be responsible for handling the details of the protectionist economy. The trade policies of individual industries could then be constantly adjusted to fit changing circumstances. This would allow leaders and experts in their respective industries a more effective say in their own policies.

Each Corporation within the Council would be responsible for its own affairs. The Corporations would be comprised of representatives from both workers and consumers in order to ensure the “dual objective” of “good wages and low prices.”<sup>189</sup> These Corporations were to be self governing, except in the case of irresolvable conflict. In this case, the greater Council would step in, eliminating the need for worker strikes.<sup>190</sup> The principle of “industrial self-government” was to provide permanent machinery for national protectionism.<sup>191</sup> Mosley hoped to not only alleviate the current economic crisis, but to install a system where future catastrophe could be avoided.

To Mosley, fascism was as much a “new conception of life” as a political system.<sup>192</sup> This new conception stressed action and responsiveness, bravery and youth. The enemy of modernity was the “Old Gang” of established politics, who had since World War I “surrendered Britain’s power and greatness.”<sup>193</sup> Mosley hoped to “raise the standard of youth” to “challenge that betrayal” of old party politics.<sup>194</sup> Mosley’s movement intended to sway the young by emphasizing a patriotic, energetic mentality. Frustrated with the lethargy of the existing government, Mosley hoped they would rally around something new and energetic.

In ideology and in policy, Mosley’s initial concept of fascism was not particularly outlandish. Although clearly a radical proposal, the fascist system outlined in *The greater Britain* still hoped to accommodate much of the British political system. Mosley’s rationale was simple; the British economy needed to be restructured. The economy could not be effectively reformed without the corporate state, and the corporate state could not be instituted through the existing government.

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<sup>188</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 113.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

Therefore, the “modern” fascist state was the only way to restructure the economy. Mosley presented his argument for fascism as a simple necessity to regain and preserve Britain’s economic superiority.

In contrast to the later BUF, Mosley’s concept of British fascism in *The greater Britain* was far from an autocratic regime. He still wanted to include an elected Parliament, as well as some checks on the Minister’s authority. He even promised continued freedom of the press.<sup>195</sup> Despite the relative timidity of Mosley’s idea of fascism, most still saw it as unworkable. However, he did receive support from some unexpected sources.

#### Early Reactions to the BUF

Harold Nicolson wrote a letter to Mosley on May 20, 1932, a month after he had left *Action* and removed himself from Mosley’s politics.<sup>196</sup> In reference to the BUF, he warned Mosley that “it is always the more active element which colours the whole.”<sup>197</sup> His warning proved to be prophetic. It was not Mosley’s carefully outlined fascist policies or his vision of an industrial utopia which eventually garnered attention. It was a reputation for violence at rallies that became the BUF’s trademark. At early rallies, groups of strong young men served as stewards. When people came to heckle Mosley, these men were responsible for ensuring the continuance of the rally, often by forcibly removing the offenders. After the introduction of the BUF’s black uniform, the stewards became popularly known as “Blackshirts.” Mosley’s Blackshirt stewards were instrumental in maintaining order at BUF rallies. However, the public perceived them as little more than violent thugs.

In his autobiography, Mosley claimed that his “thugs” were necessary to prevent disruptions at BUF rallies.<sup>198</sup> Still, as more angry people came to rallies to start trouble, Mosley’s men became known for their fighting ability. Tough, athletic young men began policing public BUF events, dressed in the “Blackshirt” uniform. Their slogan: “We never start fights, we only finish them.”<sup>199</sup> This alarmed many Britons, who began to perceive the BUF as an actual fighting force. Mosley claimed that this was never his intention.<sup>200</sup> However, the growing preponderance of the Blackshirt uniform proved intimidating. Mosley’s

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<sup>195</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 51.

<sup>196</sup> Skidelsky, 288.

<sup>197</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 94.

<sup>198</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 304.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

Blackshirt police force became a highly visible aspect of the movement. Increasingly, the BUF resembled an army more than a political group.

This characterization of the BUF as a paramilitary organization was questionable, but popular. The British press accused Mosley of intending a violent revolution. The February 25, 1933 edition of the *Daily Star* accused Mosley of being “ready to take over the government the aid of machine-guns when the moment arrived.”<sup>201</sup> The quote had been taken out of context; Mosley had stated in the Mosley promptly responded with a libel suit against the *Daily Star*, which he won to the tune of five thousand pounds.<sup>202</sup> The judge described him as “a public man of no mean courage, no little candour and no mean ability.”<sup>203</sup> This case illustrates that in the first year of the movement, Mosley still had the respect, if not agreement, of much of the country. Still, his image was slowly evolving from talented but eccentric to dangerous and reactionary.

### III. The Marginalization of the BUF 1932-1937

In its early years, most Britons saw the British Union of Fascists as a relatively harmless entity. Mosley, although a political outsider, still enjoyed the lifestyle of a young party politician, spending much of his time attending upper-crust London social functions. Although his fellow politicians viewed him as radical politically, he had not yet developed the image which would completely alienate him. As such, much of the London high class still welcomed him. Londoners knew of his enthusiasm for high society pleasures, which reached new heights during this period. On the way to Italy in January 1932 Mosley and Nicolson spent a few nights in Paris. Mosley’s nightlife shocked Nicolson during the trip. He observed that Mosley one night “had spent *réveillon* at the Fabre-Luces and had been kept up doing the *jeux de société* till 8 a.m.”<sup>204</sup> It was evident that Mosley’s changing political attitudes to this point had little effect on his social life.

It was partly this reputation for pleasure-seeking that encouraged many not to take him seriously. For those in this camp, fascism appeared to be merely the latest trend for Mosley. Having switched from Conservative to Labour to Independent and then to the New Party in just twelve years, many thought the

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<sup>201</sup> *Daily Star*, February 25, 1933.

<sup>202</sup> *The Times*, June 27, 1934.

<sup>203</sup> *Evening News*, November 7, 1934.

<sup>204</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 87.

new fascist experiment would be short-lived. His reputation as a playboy in the tabloids contributed to this assumption. The Communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* disparagingly commented on a picture of the Mosley's at a glamorous dinner, remarking "the above picture of Fascists at play should remove once and for all any lingering doubt as to the superman nature of Mosleyini, self-cast for the role of future dictator of Britain."<sup>205</sup>

Despite this reputation, Mosley retained some political respectability. In the early days of fascism there was no lack of venues for him to speak at, and he was often invited to publicly discuss fascism with prominent politicians and intellectuals. On March 16, 1933 he was even invited to debate fascism with Megan Lloyd George over B.B.C. radio, where he defended his views commendably against fierce critics.<sup>206</sup> BUF rallies were also initially held in high profile locations. The BUF held its founding rally on October 15, 1932 at Trafalgar Square in the heart of London, with only mild disruption.<sup>207</sup> Mosley's politics, although certainly radical, were not perceived as threatening by most Britons. As such, he conducted the business of promoting the BUF with little organized resistance.

The BUF itself contributed to this non-threatening image. In the early years, the movement placed a large emphasis on athleticism.<sup>208</sup> Young fascists spent much of their time playing quintessentially English sports such as rugby.<sup>209</sup> This demonstration of traditional British masculinity was disarming; by playing sports, the early fascists seemed more akin to a youth athletics club than a military movement. Also conspicuously absent in the early days was the "Blackshirt" uniform. Mosley himself did not don the much vilified Blackshirt until late in 1933. Without a uniform, it was therefore difficult to envision the movement as a military force. Due to this perception, the public initially received the BUF with curiosity instead of disgust. A later government Mass Observation study by Tom Harrison found that most British citizens "regarded him as a colorful eccentric, and fascist occasions as entertaining spectacles."<sup>210</sup> In the early 1930s, Mosley's alienation did not extend beyond the political sphere. To the average Briton, Mosley and his movement was more an interesting conversation piece than an alarming paramilitary force. However, this phase of reputable fascism was soon to change. The perception of the BUF shifted from a benign curiosity to

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<sup>205</sup> *Daily Worker*, January 24, 1933

<sup>206</sup> *The Guardian*, March 15, 1933

<sup>207</sup> *The Observer*, October 16, 1932, p. 21.

<sup>208</sup> Michael A. Spurr, "Playing for Fascism: Sportmanship, Antisemitism and the British Union of Fascists," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 37, no. 4 (2003):368.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>210</sup> Skidelsky, 386.

a military menace by 1937. During this period, Mosley began to embrace increasingly radical concepts of violent resistance and anti-Semitism. The new manifestation of the BUF engendered a serious change in the image of the movement as well as that of Mosley himself. No longer considered a harmless radical, Mosley completed his transformation into a hated and feared militant.

#### The Blackshirts

During much of the 1930s Mosley was extremely prolific in his advocacy for the British Union of Fascists. He traveled the country extensively, promoting fascism through his speeches. From 1933 to 1937 he averaged about 200 speeches a year.<sup>211</sup> This was largely due to necessity; the press mostly boycotted BUF material, except for the occasional speech excerpt. Public speaking provided the only opportunity for Mosley to get his message across. Due to this high volume, his speeches were the most visible aspect of the movement's agenda. These events, more than actual BUF ideology or policy, defined the movement for most Britons. As a result, when outbreaks of violence at these rallies became frequent towards the end of 1933, it earned the BUF significant negative publicity. Still, Mosley was determined to exercise his right to speak freely. As such, aggressive hecklers at his meetings were often violently met with his own personal security detail. Known as the "Blackshirts," this force became a very visible aspect of the BUF

Mosley's stated that the Blackshirt stewards originated with his resolve to not succumb to disruptors.<sup>212</sup> Mosley claimed that as the movement gained momentum, so did its resisters.<sup>213</sup> Rather than allow his meetings to be shut down by a disruptive "organized minority," Mosley created the London Defence Force to train and recruit more Blackshirt stewards.<sup>214</sup> He claimed that the creation of the Blackshirts was entirely out of defensive necessity, a result of increasing hostility to his movement. However, there is evidence that this force had an offensive capability as well. The press accused Blackshirts of unprovoked attacks on Communists, and later, Jews. *The Times* testified to Blackshirts verbally provoking a group of young Jewish men in London in the summer of 1933.<sup>215</sup> The *Daily Worker* of January 23, 1936 charged Mosley's Blackshirts with raiding its offices, turning over cars and causing extensive damage.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Skidelsky, 335.

<sup>212</sup> Mosley, *My Life*, 294.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>215</sup> *The Times*, August 15, 1933, p. 7.

<sup>216</sup> *The Daily Worker*, January 23, 1936

This paramilitary wing of the BUF., founded in 1933, lived in Chelsea, London at a facility known as the Black House.<sup>217</sup> Eventually, over a thousand young men lived there full-time, training in various martial arts and living under military discipline.<sup>218</sup> Primarily, these men served as stewards at BUF functions. As the movement expanded, these stewards became the trademark of the BUF

From 1932-1934, Mosley's movement grew steadily. However, in the early months of 1934 the BUF enjoyed a significant leap in membership. This increase was largely due to the public endorsement of the BUF by Lord Rothermere. A well-known conservative newspaper baron with fascist leanings, Rothermere threw the full support of his newspaper the *Daily Mail* behind the BUF. On January 8, 1934 Rothermere published an article in the *Daily Mail* entitled "Hurrah for the Blackshirts!" praising Mosley's movement.<sup>219</sup> A few weeks later, he wrote another article defending the BUF from accusations that Mosley aimed for a "system of rulership by means of steel whips and concentration camps."<sup>220</sup> In the same article, he also attacked critics of the BUF as "tired alarmists" and "panic mongers."<sup>221</sup> Rothermere's continued support did much to legitimize the movement, and membership skyrocketed.

As thousands of Rothermere's supporters joined the BUF, Mosley was able to speak to larger audiences at larger venues. However, the growing success of the movement also fueled its opponents. After 1934, BUF rallies suffered increasing disturbances. As the growing presence of the movement further inflamed its opposition, protesters increasingly interrupted Mosley's speeches. The Blackshirts often responded brutally. Previously, Mosley was usually able to disarm such hecklers through a talent for ridicule acquired over a lifetime of public speech. As the hecklers became more determined, the Blackshirts forcibly removed them with a questionable degree of violence. Still, Mosley was adamant that the violence which often erupted at his meetings was a product of organized resistance to his right to speak.<sup>222</sup> He claimed that the violence of the Blackshirts was provoked by increased disruption. While this may have been true, the increased disruption was largely symptomatic of the anger the expanding BUF was causing. In this way, a vicious cycle developed. The increased violence of the Blackshirts incited more popular discontent with the movement, which led to more disruption of BUF events and, in turn, more violence. While it is difficult

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<sup>217</sup> David Stephen Lewis, *Illusions of grandeur: Mosley fascism and British society 1931-1981*, (Manchester: Manchester University, 1987), 62.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Daily Mail*, January 8, 1934.

<sup>220</sup> *Daily Mail*, January 22, 1934.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> Mosley, *My Life*, 295.

to determine the root of this cycle, the escalation present in confrontations from 1932 to 1934 was evident.

Brutality on both sides of podium abounded in this period, although Mosley claimed he forbade his Blackshirts to use weapons of any kind.<sup>223</sup> The Constitution of the Blackshirts outlined careful rules for the keeping of order at BUF meetings. It stated, “Interrupters will be ejected only on the instructions of the speaker when the persistence of an interrupter prevents those in his vicinity from hearing the speech. Ejection will be carried out with the minimum of force necessary.”<sup>224</sup> In *My Life*, Mosley recalls the slogan he used to inspire his protectors: “We never start fights, we only finish them.”<sup>225</sup> At many meetings, hecklers showed up with nasty instruments such as razors, brass knuckles and other melee weapons. While Mosley’s men were not supposed to have weapons, some independent accounts state that the Blackshirts used street-fighting weapons such as “knuckle-dusters,” or metal knuckle coverings.<sup>226</sup> The fights often resulted in serious injuries on both sides. Notwithstanding the frequent violence, Mosley later proudly declared that “never once” was one of his meetings successfully broken up.<sup>227</sup> Accomplished at the price of extensive violence, this dubious achievement was unquestionably a result of the Blackshirt stewards. In his autobiography, Mosley alleged that these “devoted young men” of the Blackshirt movement “saved free speech in Britain.”<sup>228</sup> The savagery of Mosley’s stewards did ensure his right to free expression, but at a high price. Notorious Blackshirt brutality contributed greatly to its marginalization and later condemnation by the British public.

From 1932 to 1934, tension between anti-fascists and the growing BUF led to increased confrontation. While the BUF was certainly not blameless in this escalation, there is evidence that other organizations sought conflict with Mosley and his movement. Initially, the Communist Party was especially determined to oppose fascism. Some Communist Party members actively sought the disruption of BUF meetings. The Communist press even seemed to encourage violence against the Blackshirts. The June 4 edition of the *Daily Worker* celebrated an unprovoked attack in Edinburgh that placed four Blackshirts in the hospital as a “good hiding.”<sup>229</sup> Although the Communist Party was not representative of the

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<sup>223</sup> Mosley, *My Life*, 297.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>226</sup> Joe Jacobs, *Out of the ghetto* (London: Phoenix 1978), 198.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> *Daily Worker*, June 4, 1934.

nation as a whole, its determination to stop Mosley and the BUF was indicative of mounting public disgust with fascism. The best example of the Communist Party's initiative to combat fascism, and the severe violence employed by the Blackshirts to stop them, came at the Olympia rally of June 1934.

Olympia: June 7, 1934

Mosley called the rally at Olympia on June 7, 1934 “the most massive and seriously organized attempt ever made in Britain to smash a meeting by violence.”<sup>230</sup> While this may have been an exaggeration, it is certain that there was a definitive plan orchestrated by the Communist Party to disrupt the meeting. To demonstrate the strength of the movement, Mosley had planned a rally at the enormous Olympia meeting hall in London. On the day of the rally, fifteen thousand people filled the Olympia Hall to capacity.<sup>231</sup> Of those, about twelve thousand were legitimate audience members. Mosley's Blackshirts numbered about 2,000 — 1,000 of which were stewards spread throughout the crowd to deal with disruption.<sup>232</sup> The remainder was comprised of Communists, Communist sympathizers, and other unaffiliated anti-fascists. However, it was the Communists who came with a distinct plan to prevent Mosley from speaking.

Mosley scheduled the rally far in advance, giving his opposition ample time to arrange their disruption. To this end, the Communist Party authorities distributed a general plan, which was later published in the *Daily Worker*.<sup>233</sup> Communist local leaders were to obtain as many tickets to the event as possible. They were told to encourage all cell members to apply for tickets by sending in fake letters of support for fascism. Some attempted to secure tickets through an essay contest run by Lord Rothermere and the *Daily Mail*, which asked respondents to explain “Why I Like the Blackshirts.”<sup>234</sup> Other members in trade unions were told to bring up the Olympia rally at meetings, and attempt to apply for tickets through their union. The Communist Party hoped to infiltrate an “organised opposition” within the Olympia in addition to staging a “monster mass demonstration” outside.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Mosley, *My Life*, 300.

<sup>231</sup> *The Times*, “Fascists at Olympia,” June 8, 1934, p. 16.

<sup>232</sup> Mosley, *My Life*, 300.

<sup>233</sup> *Daily Worker*, June 9, 1934.

<sup>234</sup> Skidelsky, 367.

<sup>235</sup> *Daily Worker*, June 9, 1934.



All of these preparations did not go unnoticed. The London Police “Special Branch,” responsible for monitoring underground political activities, reported on May 25 that “the leaders of the Communist Party have definitely decided that something spectacular must be carried out by members of the organization against the fascists at Olympia.”<sup>236</sup> The plan was for the anti-fascists to locate themselves in pockets throughout the crowd. Following Mosley’s introduction, they would trade off chanting slogans in a pre-determined order. Other disruptors were to attempt to cut the lighting cables at a particular moment.<sup>237</sup> To disguise themselves and spread confusion, Communist Party members planned to wear black shirts.<sup>238</sup>

During Mosley’s speech, groups of interrupters continually shouted such slogans as “Fascism Means Murder: Down with Mosley” until they were removed.<sup>239</sup> As soon as one group was removed, another would take up the chant. This type of interruption continued for a whole hour, while Mosley spoke in fits and starts. Eventually, the stewards succeeded in removing enough objectors to allow the speech to continue uninterrupted. All told, the Blackshirts forcibly removed about thirty protesters.<sup>240</sup> Still, Mosley managed to complete the speech. Outside of the Olympia, the police arrested 21 anti-fascist protesters for various charges of obstruction, public disturbance and refusing to cooperate.<sup>241</sup>

That night, Mosley appeared on the BBC to discuss the events at Olympia. Joining him was Gerald Barry, the editor of the *News Chronicle*, who had been present at the speech. On the broadcast, Mosley claimed that the Communists had come with the intent to “shout down free speech.” Armed with weapons, these disruptors resisted ejection violently. Mosley asked the audience “Now I put it to you, to your sense of fair play: would you have handled these Reds very gently?- when you had seen your men kicked in the stomach and slashed with razors, and your women with their faces streaming in blood?”<sup>242</sup> Gerald Barry, in contrast, denied seeing any weapons, but testified to seeing interrupters “being struck on the head, in the stomach, and all over the body with complete absence of restraint.”<sup>243</sup> Barry declared the violence at Olympia to be worse than anything

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<sup>236</sup> Skidelsky, 366.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>239</sup> *The Times*, “Fascists at Olympia,” p. 16.

<sup>240</sup> Martin Pugh, “The National Government, the British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate,” *Historical Research* 78, no. 200 (2005): 258.

<sup>241</sup> *The Times*, “Outside Olympia,” June 9, 1934, p. 11.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

he had witnessed “short of the war.”<sup>244</sup> This was the last time the B.B.C. allowed Mosley on for over two decades.<sup>245</sup>

Following the chaotic and violent event, much of the British press lambasted Mosley’s Blackshirts for their brutality at Olympia. *The Times* the next day included testimony from Geoffrey Lloyd, a Conservative MP who had attended the rally. Lloyd told *The Times* that he was “appalled by the brutal conduct of the fascists last night.”<sup>246</sup> He reported that groups of as many as twenty fascists ganged up on single interrupters.<sup>247</sup>

As “five or six Fascists carried out an interrupter by arms and legs, several other Blackshirts were engaged in hitting and kicking his lifeless body.” Gerald Barry, the same man who had criticized Mosley on the B.B.C. the night of the Olympia rally, agreed that “the force used in ejecting people was much more than was required to get them out.”<sup>248</sup> Barry claimed that he saw a group of Blackshirts violently beating a single objector after dragging him out of view of the audience.<sup>249</sup>

Mosley’s response to these accusations was also published in *The Times*. To those who reported massive beatings inflicted on protestors, Mosley simply asked “Where are the bodies?”<sup>250</sup> He claimed that “our assailants have produced only one man in hospital, suffering from facial and head injuries such as would be incurred in any serious fight. Eleven Blackshirts are hospital cases, suffering from stomach injuries and razor slashes.”<sup>251</sup> Mosley asserted that “Until the men injured in this way can be produced, the case against the Blackshirt goes by default.”<sup>252</sup>

The hospital statistics Mosley gave in defense of his Blackshirts were largely unverified. While the Communist Party was guilty of hatching a plan to disrupt the meeting, the Blackshirts were also undeniably guilty of responding with excessive violence. The consequence to the movement was an inevitable public association of the BUF with violence. This association cost Mosley potential supporters who might have looked favorably upon his economic policies, such as

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<sup>244</sup> *The Times*, “Outside Olympia,” p. 12.

<sup>245</sup> Skidelksy, 371.

<sup>246</sup> *The Times*, “Outside Olympia,” p. 11.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, June 15, 1934. p. 12.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

increased deficit spending and public works initiatives. Instead, the brutality associated with the BUF overshadowed its actual political ideology.

Mosley denied this violent characterization of his movement. Most offensive to Mosley was the implication that he reveled in such brutality at his meetings. He believed that the BUF had a “legal and moral right” to resist the attempt to destroy his speeches.<sup>253</sup> Violence was a regrettable byproduct of asserting this right.<sup>254</sup> If he had been able to speak without interruption, there would have been no need for violence.<sup>255</sup> Mosley refused to let a disruptive minority prevent him from speaking, and he believed that severe violence was justified in such situations.

To critics of the Blackshirt stewards, Mosley cited what he saw as a longstanding precedent in English politics. Rowdiness at political speeches was certainly not a phenomenon unique to fringe politics. The practice of ejecting disruptors was as old as Parliament itself. Mosley himself recalled in his autobiography a near riot in Birmingham during his time with the Labour Party.<sup>256</sup> Mosley claimed he created the Blackshirts to complete this task “in the traditional English fashion, as I had seen Tories thrown out of Liberal meetings when I was nine years old.”<sup>257</sup> However, the severity of his stewards’ tactics had less of a precedent. While scuffles at political meetings were not new, Mosley and his security detail brought them to a new level of brutality.

In any case, much of the press condemned the BUF for the violence at Olympia. Only a few questioned this position. David Lloyd George of the Liberal Party wrote in the *Sunday Pictorial* on June 24, “It is difficult to explain why the fury of the champions of free speech should be concentrated so exclusively, not on those who deliberately and resolutely attempted to prevent the public expression of opinions, of which they disapproved, but against those who fought, however roughly, for freedom of speech.”<sup>258</sup> He agreed with Mosley that “men who enter meetings with the deliberate intention of suppressing free speech have no right to complain if an exasperated audience handles them rudely.”<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 300.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Sunday Pictorial*, June 24, 1934.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

Still, most accused Mosley's Blackshirts of reckless violence. The *Guardian* referred to the event as "Oswald Mosley's Circus," and accused Mosley of provoking violence to create excitement.<sup>260</sup> *The Times* published an letter condemning the ejection of interrupters, claiming "interruptions are the real test of the speaker."<sup>261</sup> In Parliament, the consensus was also clear. Clement Atlee MP declared that "There is abundant evidence of deliberate incitement [by the Blackshirts] in order to give excuse for the exercise of force."<sup>262</sup> Isaac Foot MP asked the House of Commons if the Illegal Training and Drilling Act of 1819 could be applied to the BUF.<sup>263</sup> After some debate, the House decided it did not apply.<sup>264</sup> Still, this discussion illustrated the level of opposition to Mosley following Olympia. As both the Press and Parliament condemned his movement, Mosley found himself further marginalized by the violence of his Blackshirts.

Regardless of whether Mosley's Blackshirts were at all justified in their actions at Olympia, they acquired a violent and ruthless reputation. Although organized disruption and violent expulsion in the style of Olympia was not seen again, the damage to the movement was done. The explosion of media coverage in such mainstream newspapers as *The Times* and the *Guardian* on the Olympia incident permanently associated violence with the BUF Olympia was the first decisive step in the final marginalization of Mosley and the BUF.

#### The Final Radicalization of the BUF

**I**n the next few years following Olympia, the character of the BUF as well as Mosley changed significantly. The people associated with the movement, as well its policies, ideas and actions, completed Mosley's transformation into a national pariah. By the end of 1936, Mosley had become the hated leader of a radical oppositional movement.

One particular cause of this change in perception was Mosley's political sympathy to German National Socialism and Adolf Hitler. The British public was initially conflicted on how to interpret the new German leader. Many conservatives, such as Lord Rothermere, praised Hitler's initiative and leadership.<sup>265</sup> Others were less enthusiastic about the new Germany. However,

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<sup>260</sup> *Guardian*, June 8, 1934.

<sup>261</sup> Arthur Madsen et al, "Blackshirts and Interrupters," *The Times*, June 12, 1934, p. 15.

<sup>262</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, June 14, 1934 (London: Hansard), column 1930.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1924.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1925.

<sup>265</sup> *Daily Mail*, October 24, 1933.

the events of the summer of 1934 caused a large swing in British public opinion against Hitler.

Just three weeks after Olympia came Hitler's infamous Night of the Long Knives. Between June 30 and July 2, 1934, Hitler ordered the systematic killing of an estimated 85 political rivals.<sup>266</sup> Hitler claimed that this was a reaction to a treasonous conspiracy, but even contemporaries were doubtful. In Britain, this event had serious consequences for popular perception of the Nazi regime. A letter to the editor in the July 16 edition of *The Times* asserted that Hitler's "account of the conspiracy... carries no conviction at all."<sup>267</sup> Another letter condemned the "sensational developments in the political situation," referring to the abundance of "Fear" and "Mass Hysteria."<sup>268</sup>

Mosley and the BUF openly supported Hitler's actions. The movement's newspaper *Blackshirt* ran an article accusing the men murdered by Hitler of "the greatest Fascist crime of disloyalty to their leader."<sup>269</sup> Mosley's decision to publicly support Hitler's purge had serious consequences for the image of the BUF. Already seen as a willfully violent entity following Olympia, the support of the purge further pigeonholed the BUF as a would-be tyrannical regime. As the tide of British opinion turned against Germany, Mosley's continuing support of German National Socialism proved devastating to the image of the BUF.

As a consequence of Olympia and the BUF's endorsement of Hitler's political purge, Rothermere withdrew the support of the *Daily Mail* in late July. Rothermere had been urging Mosley to moderate the movement for some time. He wanted Mosley to discontinue the use of the term "Fascist" as well as severely modify his plans for fascist government. Rothermere hoped to bring Mosley's movement within the fold of orthodox Conservatism. After Mosley refused, Rothermere withdrew his support for the movement. Mosley later claimed that Rothermere's rejection of the BUF was due to pressure from Jewish advertisers.<sup>270</sup> His accusation, while unverified, served his later anti-Semitic agenda.

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<sup>266</sup> Klaus Epstein, "The Nazi consolidation of Power," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34 no. 1 (March 1962): 74.

<sup>267</sup> *The Times*, "Herr Hitler's Apologia," July 16, 1934, p. 13.

<sup>268</sup> Arthur Compton-Rickett, "The Gospel of Hitler," *The Times*, July 11, 1934, p. 15.

<sup>269</sup> *Blackshirt*, July 1934.

<sup>270</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 346.

## Anti-Semitism in the BUF

Through the early stages of the BUF, Mosley considered anti-Semitism to be largely unrelated to fascism. In fact, Mosley's initial refusal to incorporate anti-Jewish propaganda into the movement led to criticism from hard-line anti-Semitic groups. Most notably, Arnold Leese of the Imperial Fascist League caustically referred to the BUF as the "British Jewnion of Fascists," and publicly attacked its form of "kosher fascism."<sup>271</sup> Leese's group was truly on the political fringe, never amounting to more than a few hundred members. However, Leese saw his group as being in competition with the BUF. In his publication *The Fascist: The Organ of Racial Fascism* Leese focused intently on the supposed Jewish financial conspiracy, in stark contrast to the BUF's less racially oriented policies.<sup>272</sup>

Despite pressure from other fascist groups, Mosley initially remained steadfast in his refusal to commit to an anti-Semitic agenda. In a statement to the *Jewish Chronicle* in January 1933, Mosley promised that "anti-semitism forms no part of the policy of this Organisation, and anti-semitic propaganda is forbidden."<sup>273</sup> Despite this declaration, the BUF was often associated with anti-Semitism. This association was mainly due to the views held by other prominent BUF members. Although the BUF officially barred anti-Semitism from the movement, a number of potent anti-Semites held positions in the BUF

The most influential of these early promoters of anti-Semitism was William Joyce. Joyce was an American-born Irish national with a deep-seated hatred for Jews. A powerful orator, Cecil Roberts described Joyce's unique impact after hearing him speak in 1933:

Thin, pale, intense, he had not been speaking many minutes before we were electrified by this man. I have been a connoisseur of speech-making for a quarter of a century, but never before, in any country, had I met a personality so terrifying in its dynamic force, so vituperative, so vitriolic... He ridiculed our political system, he scarified our leading politicians, seizing upon their vulnerable points with a destructive analysis that left them bereft of merit or morality.<sup>274</sup>

<sup>271</sup> *The Fascist: The Organ of Racial Fascism* 65, October 1934.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, January 6, 1933.

<sup>274</sup> J.A. Cole, *Lord Haw-Haw — and William Joyce: the full story* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 45.

Joyce went on to broadcast English-language Nazi propaganda during the Second World War after fleeing to Germany in 1939. Known as “Lord Haw-Haw,” his radio show “Germany Calling” attempted to demoralize British listeners through spreading of Nazi and anti-Semitic propaganda. Many Britons initially listened to his radio show out of curiosity and hopes of more accurate war news. Later, “Lord Haw-Haw” was to become a household name in Britain synonymous with Nazi evil. He earned the hatred of his country, and was executed for treason in 1946.<sup>275</sup> During his time with the BUF from 1932-1937, Joyce represented the loudest voice for an anti-Semitic policy.

Having joined the BUF shortly after its founding in 1932, BUF policy initially forced Joyce to temper his violently anti-Semitic views. Mosley’s position on anti-Semitism was clear: it was irrelevant to fascism. Despite this handicap to Joyce’s ideology, his talent for incisive rhetoric soon made him the most renowned speaker in the BUF after Mosley himself. Following the incident at Olympia in June 1934, Mosley promoted Joyce to the position of Propaganda Director.<sup>276</sup> In this capacity, Joyce greatly expanded his influence. As Mosley began to adopt some anti-Semitic tendencies late in 1934, Joyce was instrumental in bringing this attitude to the forefront of fascist politics.

While Mosley was ill for a few months following Olympia in late 1934, Joyce became the primary speaker at BUF events.<sup>277</sup> Although he downplayed his rhetoric, Joyce’s hysterical anti-Semitism was apparent. He claimed that the common root of every national problem was always Jewish treachery. His speeches warned of a “two-pronged Jewish advance, by means of capitalism and Communism, towards world domination.”<sup>278</sup> Partially as a result of Joyce’s rhetoric, by the time Mosley returned to full involvement in the fall of 1934, the movement was progressing towards full-blown anti-Semitism.

Although Mosley was not entirely responsible for this transformation of the BUF position on “The Jewish question,” he was not without blame. Even in 1932-33, Mosley did little to rid the movement of anti-Semitic individuals. After the founding of the BUF in October 1932, the small fringe of existing British fascist groups flocked to Mosley banner. Many of these groups were based on anti-Semitic principles. Rotha Linton-Orman’s British Fascisti, for example, had been founded primarily as an anti-Semitic organization.<sup>279</sup> In addition, despite Arnold

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<sup>275</sup> Cole, 17.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> Cross, 57.

Leese's distaste for the BUF, many members of his Imperial Fascist League defected to Mosley. As a result, the BUF began with a core following heavily committed to anti-Semitism. Mosley claimed he allowed men with such views to join his movement in the belief that they wanted to move beyond simple anti-Semitism to "a bigger and better fight."<sup>280</sup>

As a result, even in the early BUF there was a significant dichotomy between official policy on anti-Semitism and the actual beliefs and actions of BUF members. The irony of Mosley's fascist movement is that many of his followers disobeyed his supposed absolute command in asserting small-scale anti-Semitism. As a result, while Mosley continued to publicly declare that "anti-semitism forms no part of the policy of this Organisation," what happened on the ground was entirely different.<sup>281</sup>

As skirmishes between fascists and British Jews increased, the intrinsic anti-Semitism within the BUF boiled over into outright persecution. One incident in the East End of London in April 1933 exemplified mounting Jewish-fascist tensions. London police arrested seven BUF members and six Jewish citizens for creating a public disturbance.<sup>282</sup> The fascists had been selling the BUF publication *Blackshirt* on a street corner in a Jewish neighborhood. A scuffle erupted, and the police arrived and arrested all parties involved, although none were officially charged.<sup>283</sup> A week later, the fascists returned to the same street corner, this time with twelve members. Again a fight broke out, and three of the fascists were injured, with one hospitalized with a concussion.<sup>284</sup> The police arrested eight of their assaulters for assault and disorderly conduct. The officer noted that all eight men "appeared to be of the Jewish faith."<sup>285</sup> Two were sentenced to five weeks in jail.<sup>286</sup> However, the officer also noted the "extremely provocative" attitude of the fascists.<sup>287</sup>

Mosley subsequently wrote to the police department, proposing "personally to take charge of the Party selling newspapers in this area."<sup>288</sup> He stated his desire to "conform in every way with Police regulation," but also wanted to "affirm the right of Englishmen to pursue any legal and peaceful activity in this country

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<sup>280</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 341.

<sup>281</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, January 6, 1933.

<sup>282</sup> Skidelsky, 382.

<sup>283</sup> *The Times*, August 15, 1933.

<sup>284</sup> Skidelsky, 382.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*



without molestation and assault.”<sup>289</sup> The conflict eventually ended with Mosley withdrawing his newspaper from that particular street corner. However, the Coventry Street brawls and similar incidents indicated the degree of fascist provocation of Jews and subsequent Jewish-fascist conflict, even before the BUF adopted an official anti-Semitic agenda.

Much of the mounting conflict between British fascism and British Jews was out of Mosley’s control. Although he repeatedly denied the BUF’s involvement with anti-Semitism, much of his message failed to convince. In the *Jewish Economic Forum* on July 28, 1933, Mosley reaffirmed his message to British Jews. He insisted that “Bias for or against the Jew is completely irrelevant to the issues involved in our political creed,” and that “religious and racial tolerance” was a part of the BUF’s agenda.<sup>290</sup> He claimed that attacks on the Jews in Germany were not due to “any Fascist principle but are the manifestation of an inherent quality in the German character.”<sup>291</sup> Mosley hoped to assert that fascism was not inextricably linked to anti-Semitism. Still, Mosley’s declarations in upper-class Jewish publications did little to change the anti-Semitic actions of his own followers. Incidents like the one at Coventry Street illustrated that Mosley’s followers did not share his aversion to “Jew-baiting.”

By 1933, there were about 350,000 Jews living in Britain.<sup>292</sup> Of these, about 200,000 lived in London, and 150,000 in the London East End.<sup>293</sup> Many of these individuals were impoverished recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, some without knowledge of English. Understandably, many British Jews strongly opposed Mosley’s movement, identifying it with German National Socialism and its more express anti-Semitic policies. This assumption was entirely valid. Mosley’s public support of Hitler even after the Rohm purge of July 1934 indicated his relationship with German National Socialism. Mosley and the BUF maintained a friendly relationship with many prominent Nazis.<sup>294</sup> In 1937, the Nazi government invited 20 members of the BUF to tour Germany.<sup>295</sup> While there, the anti-Semitic Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher gave a speech praising the unity of international fascism.<sup>296</sup> Streicher referred to his BUF guests as “brothers and comrades” against a “common enemy...the Jew.”<sup>297</sup> Besides such

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<sup>289</sup> Skidelsky, 382.

<sup>290</sup> *Jewish Economic Forum*, July 28, 1933.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> Miron Kantorowitsch, “Estimate of the Jewish Population of London 1929-1933,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 99, no. 2 (1936): 374.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> *The Times*, “Herr Streicher Greets British Fascists,” July 29, 1937, p. 13.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

alarming anti-Semitic propaganda, reports of fascist violence such as at Coventry Street also verified Jewish assumptions.

As such, attempted truces between fascists and Jews had little impact. When the August 4, 1933 *Jewish Chronicle* condemned Jewish attacks on fascists as “wicked and stupid,” most ignored its declaration.<sup>298</sup> The vast majority of Jews felt actively persecuted by the BUF, and Mosley’s lip-service to abolishing anti-Semitism within his movement failed to convince. Even in the early days of the BUF, the latent anti-Semitism present within the BUF proved highly inflammatory. Olympia proved to be the turning point for Mosley’s official position on the “Jewish question.” Mosley became embittered over what he saw as institutionalized Jewish opposition to fascism. As a result, for the first time in his career he began to publicly attack Jews. He claimed that his verbal attacks were really in defense of Jews determined to destroy his movement. However, much of this shift in ideology can be attributed to an effort to win over the urban working class.

Mosley hoped to fill a niche in anti-immigrant propaganda present in Britain for decades. Organizations such as the British Brothers League had gained significant following in urban areas in previous years.<sup>299</sup> Formed in 1902, the League espoused an anti-Semitic platform seeking to limit Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe.<sup>300</sup> Its limited success can be attributed to traditional friction of the working class with large immigrant populations during times of scarcity. Perceived competition over jobs, customers, and culture led to reactions from native Britons. Conditions in 1934 were ripe for this type of clash, and Mosley hoped to capitalize with a new “Britain for the British” policy, thereby further marginalizing British Jewish immigrants.<sup>301</sup> Still, Mosley’s decision to campaign against Jewish interests in Britain proved to be the death knell for his movement’s short-lived public appeal.

In a speech on October 28, 1934, Mosley publicly mentioned Jews for the first time. To preface his position, he claimed that “the Jews more than any other single force in this country are carrying on a violent propaganda against us.”<sup>302</sup> He declared that thirty-two of the sixty-four people convicted for attacks on fascists in the past year were Jewish<sup>303</sup> He read out the surnames of the convicted men

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<sup>298</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, August 4, 1933.

<sup>299</sup> Robert Benewick, *Political violence and public order: a study of British Fascism* (London: Allen Lane, 1969), 27.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> Skidelsky, 386.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

amidst howls from the audience.<sup>304</sup> In Britain Jews represented six percent of the population, yet Mosley alleged that Jews were responsible for fifty percent of attacks on the BUF.<sup>305</sup> While some Jews certainly opposed the BUF, Mosley's statistics were questionable. In addition, many of these "attacks" on fascists had been provoked by Mosley's own men. Still, Mosley insisted that he did not attack "the Jews on racial or religious grounds," but "because they fight against Fascism and against Britain."<sup>306</sup> "Organized Jewry" thus replaced Communism as the primary enemy of British fascism.

Mosley introduced this new commitment against the Jews on two levels. In the same speech, Mosley asserted that "big Jews" in the Press were conspiring to discredit the BUF.<sup>307</sup> Mosley cited Rothermere's withdrawal of support for the BUF as proof of this conscious attack. The other level of assault came from "little Jews."<sup>308</sup> This consisted of the physical attacks on his meetings by working class anti-fascist Jews.<sup>309</sup> Together, he claimed, British Jews aimed to prevent the BUF from accomplishing its goal of saving Britain from inevitable downfall.<sup>310</sup> As such, Mosley committed himself to battling the collective Jewish consciousness that he now presented as his primary antagonist.

This new policy changed the nature of the BUF drastically. For one, Joyce was now free to spout his venomous propaganda, which he did with abandon. In a pamphlet entitled "Fascism and Jewry," Joyce claimed "these little sub-men are a nuisance to be eliminated."<sup>311</sup> This new message of hate proved costly to Mosley's movement. In November 1934, Mosley lost yet another close friend and supporter as a result of the radicalization of his politics. Robert Forgan, the last of the original four Labour MPs who resigned with Mosley to form the New Party, quietly retired as a result of the BUF's new policy of anti-Semitism.<sup>312</sup> Mosley was now without a single tie to the political establishment he came from. Following Forgan's departure, Mosley and the BUF's popularity with the average Briton plummeted further. No longer seen as a "colorful eccentric," Mosley was a name that was spat and not spoken. The culmination of this trend was the so-called Battle of Cable Street in October 1936.

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<sup>304</sup> Skidelsky, 386.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> William Joyce and Sons of Liberty, *Fascism and Jewry* (Metairie, LA: Sons of Liberty, 1976), 8.

<sup>312</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, 124.

## The Battle of Cable Street and the Public Order Act of 1936

Following Mosley's declaration of war against "Organized Jewry" in late 1934, the BUF began a decisive campaign in the London East End. Hoping to pick up where the British Brothers League had left off, Mosley concentrated much of his efforts in this area. Although he managed to win some converts, the constant BUF presence led to significant tension with Jews living in the area. Similar to the Coventry Street conflicts of 1933, numerous incidents took place between Blackshirts and anti-fascist Jews.<sup>313</sup> Incendiary speeches by Mosley, Joyce and other BUF speakers frequently provoked squads of Jewish disruptors. Both sides claimed persecution at the hands of the other. It was in this climate of street skirmishes that the Battle of Cable Street occurred.

In order to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the BUF's founding, Mosley proposed an organized march through London on October 4, 1936. However, the increasing anti-Semitic platform of the BUF earned it the hostility of the Jewish People's Council, which represented Jewish friendly societies and trade unions.<sup>314</sup> The Council gathered signatures for a petition to prevent the fascist demonstration.<sup>315</sup> However, officials refused to ban the event. Instead, they mustered six thousand police officers to prevent violence as a result of the march.<sup>316</sup> Mosley and three thousand of his supporters intended to march from the Royal Mint to the districts of Shoreditch, Limehouse, Bow and Bethnal Green.<sup>317</sup> The intent was to stop at each location to allow Mosley to deliver a speech.

However, when Mosley and his entourage arrived at the Royal Mint, they found an enormous crowd blocking Cable Street. As the police attempted to clear a path for the procession, they faced stiff opposition from the protesters. Meanwhile, the Blackshirts and the crowd shared angry exchanges. The fascists chanted "M-O-S-L-E-Y, we want Mosley", while the crowd responded "So do we, dead or alive."<sup>318</sup> After a struggle, the Commissioner of Police Sir Philip Game gave up and contacted the Home Secretary for permission to cancel the march.<sup>319</sup> For the sake of avoiding more violence, the Home Secretary agreed.

<sup>313</sup> "Coventry Street conflicts" refers to the incidents of April 1933 over fascists selling newspapers in the East End of London.

<sup>314</sup> Joe Jacobs, *Out of the ghetto: my youth in the East End: communism and fascism, 1913-1939* (London: Janet Simon, 1978), 255.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>318</sup> *Daily Herald*, October 5, 1936.

<sup>319</sup> Jacobs, 255.

Game ordered the fascists to disperse, and Mosley complied. By the time the incident was over, 83 protesters were arrested and nearly 100 injured.<sup>320</sup>

The BUF responded in the press by claiming “Socialists, Communists and Jews openly organised not only to attack the meetings but to close the streets of London by violence.”<sup>321</sup> A protester named Reg Weston confirmed that many of the protesters prepared ahead for the disruption. He testified that “The *Daily Worker* acted as the main organiser for the protests centrally. By midweek we were getting plenty of information and so were its thousands of readers, especially in the factories and workplaces such as the bus garages and the rail depots.”<sup>322</sup> Still, many accused Mosley of marching with the intent to incite violence. The prevention of the march was popularly seen as a victory against racism and violence. Max Levitas, a protester interviewed years later, fondly recalled the Battle of Cable Street as “a victory for ordinary people against racism and anti-Semitism.”<sup>323</sup>

The incident at Cable Street was the final straw for the British government. Previously, the government never directly interfered with the BUF’s activities. However, Cable Street illustrated the level of popular opposition to Mosley and his movement. The government was convinced that the potential for violence and unrest was too great. As a result, Parliament voted for the Public Order Bill, which was enacted as the Public Order Act on January 1, 1937.<sup>324</sup>

The Public Order Act specifically targeted the BUF. The Act stated that “any person who in any public place or at any public meeting wears uniform signifying his association with any political organisation or with the promotion of any political object shall be guilty of an offence.”<sup>325</sup> The Act explicitly outlawed “quasimilitary organisations,” defined as groups “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 of the Crown.”<sup>326</sup> It also prohibited creating an organization “for the purpose of enabling them to be employed for the use or

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<sup>320</sup> *The Times*, “Fascist and Jew; Police Action in East End,” October 30, 1936, p. 7.

<sup>321</sup> *Daily Worker*, October 5, 1936.

<sup>322</sup> Reg Weston, “Reg Weston Account of Battle of Cable Street,” <http://libcom.org/library/fascists-and-police-routed-battle-cable-street>.

<sup>323</sup> *The Guardian*, September 30, 2006.

<sup>324</sup> *The Times*, “Public Order Act Prosecution,” January 28, 1937, p. 16.

<sup>325</sup> “The Public Order Act 1936 (c.6),” December 18, 1939, The UK statute law database, <http://www.statutelaw.gov.uk/content.aspx?LegType=All+Legislation&searchEnacted=0&extentMatchOnly=0&confersPower=0&blanketAmendment=0&sortAlpha=0&pageNumber=0&navFrom=0&activeTextDocId=1083745&parentActiveTextDocId=0&showAllAttributes=0&showProp=0&suppressWarning=0&hideCommentary=1>.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

display of physical force in promoting any political object, or in such manner as to arouse reasonable apprehension that they are organised and either trained or equipped for that purpose.”<sup>327</sup> This second definition gave fair license to limit any fascist activity that was deemed to “arouse reasonable apprehension.”

The strict nature of the Act revealed Parliament’s growing uneasiness with the BUF. Many MPs considered it to be essentially a military organization. John Clynes MP worried that “A garb answering to a uniform and worn in what really is a military march and in a military manner and spirit brings into our political activities alien elements making for conflict and disorder.”<sup>328</sup> Daniel Chater MP went so far as to assert the need for the government to actively oppose the fascists. He asked the government “to take the necessary steps to organise ourselves efficiently and effectively as an opposition force to the Fascists.”<sup>329</sup> After the onset of the Second World War, this uneasiness grew to distrust significant enough to order the internment of all fascist sympathizers. In 1936, however, the government mainly concerned itself with preserving public order.

Initially, there was some doubt as to whether the government would enforce the Act. This doubt was quickly resolved. In early January, a BUF member selling newspapers on a street corner was arrested for wearing a “peaked cap with a leather chin-stap and... two badges commonly associated with the British Union of Fascists” and “a black shirt and black tie.”<sup>330</sup> It was evident that the police intended to enforce the new legislation.

The Public Order Act forced Mosley and his men to abandon the Blackshirt uniform. However, Mosley considered this a minor blow. He believed that “the black shirt had fulfilled its practical purpose, and the chief loss was sentimental.”<sup>331</sup> A greater consequence was the loss of the ability to steward meetings. While the BUF could still lawfully steward its indoor meetings, they were forced to allow the police to maintain order at outdoor meetings. The inexperience of the police in dealing with political events made it far easier to disrupt BUF meetings. The police were less willing to resort to violence in order to save the meeting. As such, Mosley’s speeches were increasingly broken up by protesters. The BUF’s primary form of expression was now even more limited. Besides the *Blackshirt* publication, public speaking and demonstrations had been the only arena for the BUF to communicate its message. As more meetings were

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<sup>327</sup> “The Public Order Act 1936 (c.6)”

<sup>328</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, November 16, 1936 (London: Hansard), column 1369.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, column 1386.

<sup>330</sup> *The Times*, “Public Order Act Prosecution,” p. 16.

<sup>331</sup> Mosley, *My life*, 312.

successfully disrupted by anti-fascist protesters, the BUF's faltering politics collapsed.

Beginning with Olympia, the theme of 1934-1936 for Mosley and the BUF was alienation. Not from the political establishment, as in the New Party and early BUF, but from the average Briton. The public violence and anti-Semitism ensured the transformation of the BUF from an "entertaining spectacle" to a dangerous "quasimilitary organization."<sup>332</sup> The Public Order Act was instrumental in this respect. It both demonstrated and reinforced public opposition to the BUF. A growing national perception of the BUF as violent, radical and anti-Semitic eradicated his support amongst average Britons.

A few years earlier, Mosley regarded anti-Semitism as an irrelevant pursuit and a criminal waste of energy and resources. Ironically, it became the most visible aspect of his movement. Anti-Semitism won Mosley supporters, but not the ones he hoped. The BUF had become "one of those crank little societies... mad about the Jews," as Mosley had contemptuously characterized the Imperial Fascist League four years earlier.<sup>333</sup> The new policy attracted psychotic "Jew-baiters" who had little interest in fascism itself. At the same time, it estranged more levelheaded Britons, who were alarmed by Mosley's declaration of war on "Organized Jewry." William Joyce and other prominent members of the BUF continued to lambaste the Jews for destroying the movement's political credibility. What they did not realize was that a policy of anti-Semitism did more damage to the legitimacy of the movement than any concerted effort by Jews, real or imaginary.

#### IV. Conclusion

By the onset of the Second World War on September 1, 1939, British fascism was a dead ideology. Popular association of the BUF with the Nazi regime solidified existing public revulsion towards Mosley and his movement. Vilified by the press and hated by his country, the British government forcibly interned Mosley in 1940.<sup>334</sup> With this result in mind, it is tempting to declare that British fascism was never a possibility. It would seem, as Harold Nicolson told Mosley in

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<sup>332</sup> Skidelsky, 386.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>334</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary debates*, House of Commons, December 14, 1939 (London: Hansard), Col. 1238.

November of 1931, that fascism was simply “not suited to England.”<sup>335</sup> However, this conclusion is not altogether true.

In the world political climate of the early 1930s, a fascist government in Britain was possible, if unlikely. Contemporaneous sources agree with this assertion. In an October 1932 interview with Harold Nicolson, David Lloyd George was hesitant to declare fascism impossible in Britain.<sup>336</sup> Other opinions in the 1930s were also optimistic about fascism’s chances in Britain. Johannes Steel, a German socialist intellectual, wrote an essay entitled “Fascism in the West” in the spring of 1934.<sup>337</sup> He attacked the British Labour government as “thoroughly bourgeois,” characterizing its leaders as “tired old men who feel they cannot take any risks.”<sup>338</sup> He blamed Mosley’s coming rise to power on the stupidity of Labour politicians, who rejected his “proposals for the reduction of unemployment and snubbed him for his urge to “do something.”<sup>339</sup> Steel believed that “England, like all other countries where society is organized in defense of capitalism, will soon pass through a phase of fascism.”<sup>340</sup> Written at the height of Rothermere’s support for the BUF in March 1934, Steel believed that Mosley would soon come to power. While Steel’s prediction proved false, it illustrates the fact that in the early 1930s, many did not believe British fascism to be a doomed prospect. It was the decisions Mosley made that ensured his ideology never came to fruition.

Mosley’s movement was less “not suited” to Britain than it was misapplied. The first mistake Mosley made was in his use of the term “fascism”. By borrowing from the Italian faction, he undermined the nationalistic aspect of his own movement. “Fascism” was so ill-defined that he had little to gain by adopting the word. Instead, it created a parallel to the Italian state which proved misleading. Mosley intended his concept of fascism as outlined in *The greater Britain* as a method to set up the corporate state. His initial vision of fascism was largely a means to an end. As discussed, he believed fascism was the only way to solve the economic crisis and insulate Britain’s economic future. Yet, it was not the ultimate solution. In the conclusion of *The greater Britain*, Mosley asserts that a fascist government would no longer be necessary after the corporate state had

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<sup>335</sup> Nicolson and Nicolson, 85.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>337</sup> Johannes Steel, “Fascism in the West,” in *They were there: the story of World War II and how it came about*, ed. Curt Riess (London: Ayer, 1944), 53.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 52



been perfected.<sup>341</sup> Mosley hoped to exploit fascism to create a sort of utopian industrial society. In the end, it seems, fascism exploited him.

The BUF's anti-Semitic policy marked the beginning of Mosley's loss of perspective within the fascist monster he created. When Mosley adopted an anti-Semitic platform in October 1934, he relinquished his original economic goals in order to pursue an imaginary war against "Organized Jewry." His earlier goal of the corporate state, combined with an emphasis on the home market and imperial isolation, faded into the background, overshadowed by anti-Semitic propaganda. As it became clear that Mosley's concept of fascism was not taking hold, he faced increasing pressure to conform to existing fascist archetypes. In a bid for popularity, Mosley gave in to the pressure of Joyce and others within the movement to attack the Jewish community. While he gained some supporters with this tactic, they were not the ones he hoped to represent. He soon found himself alienated from the constituents he hoped to win. Mosley's vision of himself leading the "modern" generation into a new political era disintegrated as he lost the trust of mainstream Britain. Instead, his movement became a safe haven for anti-Semites, lonely military officers, and radical pseudo-intellectuals. His appeal to the average Briton was almost nonexistent; indeed, the average Briton regarded him as a dangerous and violent would-be despot. When Mosley was released from forced government internment due to life-threatening illness in 1943, a Mass Observation study found that 87 percent of the country disapproved of his discharge.<sup>342</sup> Mosley had truly become an enemy of the people.

In the end, the BUF achieved essentially nothing. In historical terms, its most significant achievement was contributing to the destruction of fascism as a credible ideology. Modern connotations of fascism are understandably negative, and it is difficult to imagine a world before the West condemned fascism as inherently evil. In the early 1930s, there was significant admiration for the achievements of the fascist movements in Italy and Germany. The dynamic changes brought by fascist leaders like Hitler and Mussolini appealed to many Britons. The frustrating inaction of the Labour Party and the following National Government made fascism seem favorable. However, by the onset of World War II it was clear that fascism was not a possibility for Britain. Much of this, of course, was due to the negative perception of the fascist governments in Europe. As Hitler became more aggressive, the tide of British public opinion turned against him. The Night of the Long Knives in June of 1934 was the first step in the

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<sup>341</sup> Mosley, *The greater Britain*, 189.

<sup>342</sup> Skidelsky, 462.

popular condemnation of Hitler's dictatorship. Still, European fascism remained far enough removed from Britain that it was not an immediate concern for most Britons in the 1930s. The evils of foreign fascism only appeared as an occasional story in the newspaper, or rumors from contacts abroad.

If not for the BUF, many British citizens may never have found themselves so opposed to fascism. Sir Oswald and his movement brought the experience of fascism closer to home. The British public could ignore accounts of foreign tyranny, aggression and persecution. However, it was impossible for them to disregard the British Union of Fascists. The extent of Mosley's public appearances, and the inevitable conflicts they led to, made the BUF eminently visible. Any British citizen living in a major city from 1932 to 1939 could not escape Mosley and his movement. Everyone had an opinion. Initially, some found the flash and zeal of the movement appealing. Others were determined to fight it at the risk of their own lives. Regardless, the BUF was far more real to most Britons than any story of fascism in Europe.

From the beginning, the movement aimed to attract attention. Mosley rooted his grand plan for a new "modern" government in a dream of mobilizing the young and young-minded of the nation. His political credentials and powerful charisma brought the discussion of British fascism to the fore of both Parliament and the average dinner table. The unfortunate arc of Mosley's political career began the negative popular perception of fascism, to be completed by the actions of Hitler and Mussolini and the Second World War. In the end, his movement's greatest achievement was the destruction of the British fascist ideal it hoped to promote.