

THE APPEAL OF FASCISM TO THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY DURING THE
INTER-WAR YEARS, 1919-1939

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Running Head: THE APPEAL OF FASCISM TO THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY
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The Appeal of Fascism to the British Aristocracy During the Inter-War Years, 1919-1939

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Abstract

This thesis examines the reasons the British aristocracy became interested in fascism during the years between the First and Second World Wars. As a group the aristocracy faced a set of circumstances unique to their class. These circumstances created the fear of another devastating war, loss of Empire, and the spread of Bolshevism. The conclusion was determined by researching numerous books and articles. When events required sacrifice to save king and country, the aristocracy forfeited privilege and wealth to save England.

Contents

Chapter One

Background for Inter-War Years	5
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Chapter Two

The Lost Generation 1919-1932	25
-------------------------------	----

Chapter Three

The Promise of Fascism 1932-1936	44
----------------------------------	----

Chapter Four

The Decline of Fascism in Great Britain	71
---	----

Conclusion

Fascism After 1940	83
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Chapter One: Background for Inter-War Years

Most discussions of fascism include Italy, which gave rise to the movement; Spain, which adopted its principles; and Germany, which forever condemned it in the eyes of the world; but few include Great Britain. England, the birth place of modern democracy with its parliament, constitution, and political parties, seems an unlikely fit for the radical policies of fascism. However, during the 1920s and 1930s, the period between the two World Wars, British aristocratic men and women led several prominent and vocal fascist organizations. The sacrifices required to win the Great War magnified the problems confronted by Britain and its aristocracy, and a number of aristocratic men and women sought new methods to solve these problems. Many wanted to return to the time before World War I when Britain ruled the world and the aristocracy ruled Britain. This idea proved impossible. Changes had taken place which caused many to fear the future and prompted them to look for new ways to preserve England's place in the world. Some believed the old political parties moved too slowly to create the change needed to compete globally. Family connections allowed some members of the aristocracy to debate alternative political policies and learn of their success. The appeal of fascism to the British aristocracy as an alternative to the existing political parties centered on their desire to avoid another devastating war, preserve the empire, and prevent the spread of Bolshevism.

Fascism became an organized political movement in Britain after the Great War, but the economic, social, and political problems that fostered its growth originated before 1914. These problems had an adverse effect upon the wealth, position, and political power of the aristocracy. The ownership of land, handed down from generation to

generation, constituted and defined the aristocracy. In England, dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons combined blue blood with enormous wealth in land, including urban real estate, to form the high aristocracy. The income from the land either supported or at least partially supported a grand residence necessary to the aspect of living nobly. The concept of living nobly involved lavish hospitality, education, rural recreations, dress, and culture.¹

The first challenges to the income of the landed aristocracy came between the years 1873 and 1896 with the collapse of the agricultural base of the economy, partly because the importation of cheap foreign grain from North and South America led to a long-term decline. The result of lower prices for agricultural products led to depressed land values and forced many lesser nobles to mortgage their estates. Land was no longer the safest or securest way to hold wealth.²

To survive the downturn in agricultural prices, many of the great families diversified their assets and utilized the natural resources available on their estates. The aristocrats who followed a plan of diversification and reduced expenditures minimized the effects of low prices and reduced rents on their incomes. By the end of the nineteenth century, about forty percent of the aristocrats' income in England came from non-agricultural sources. Urban rents, dividends, mineral royalties, especially from coal, and

¹ Ellis Wasson, *Aristocracy and the Modern World* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 9-10; Andrew Sinclair, *The Last of the Best: The Aristocracy of Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London, England: Macmillan Company, 1969), 7; Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of The Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York, New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 82.

² David Cannadine, *The Decline & Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), 26-27; Karina Urbach, *European Aristocracies and the Radical Right 1918-1939* (London, England: Oxford University Press, 2007), 57; Wasson, *Modern World*, 52; Martin Pugh, "Hurrah for the Blackshirts!" *Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 11.

business investments kept most of the elite solvent. By the 1880s and 1890s, the agricultural depression prompted peasant revolts and nationalistic movements, which added another threat to the aristocracy's way of life.³

Besides managing their great estates, the aristocracy held political power. Ever since Saxon chieftains met to advise the king in the first national assembly, the landowners of England performed executive duties within their own counties. The aristocracy believed they were bred to be the natural leaders of Britain. The aristocracy had the leisure and fortune which provided them with the security not to be tempted by greed. As a result, many people believed the rulers of the country should be chosen from among them. Belief in the theory of natural leadership, during the nineteenth century, led to aristocrats holding high office out of proportion to their percentage of the population. In England, political power lay concentrated in the hands of the two hundred great families who had been governing for generations.⁴

The end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century brought new challenges to the lifestyle of the aristocracy. Discussions of the growth of democracy and the threat of socialism took place at the great houses after dinner. The growing numbers of unemployed, homeless, and malnourished of English society led some of the aristocracy to fear rising tensions between the classes. The call for social reforms to help the urban poor changed the political climate. The politics of mass democracy began with the 1884 Reform Act, which gave most men the right to vote. Once direct representation started, government controlled by respect and patronage lost its traditional authority,

³ Wasson, *Modern World*, 53.

⁴ Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War: 1890-1914* (New York, New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), 9-11; Wasson, *Modern World*, 18-20.

which led to the first of many sacrifices required from the aristocracy to close the gap between the privileged and the masses.⁵

England's economy in the early twentieth century had recovered from the depression of the 1890s, but the gap in distribution of profits continued to grow. The rich lived in a state of luxury and leisure, while the purchasing power of the hourly wage fell. The distance between the classes grew more pronounced. In England, reformers, writers, journalists, socialists, and liberals wanted a remedy. The methods proposed to improve the living conditions of the masses varied from group to group but all required a form of social welfare. The aristocracy viewed the organization of the working class as a threat to their social and political power.⁶

A significant moment in the battle for political power occurred in 1901. The Taff Vale judgment by the House of Lords held the trade unions liable for damage caused by strikes. This action placed the workers' pensions and benefits funds in danger and convinced them of the need for political representation. Before the judgment, English labor fought its battles against employers by direct action through trade unions. Based on the Taff Vale decision, however, employers began to sue for damages, the unions lost case after case, the long-acknowledged right to strike was jeopardized, and the hard-won gains of collective bargaining became vulnerable. The working class realized its need for representation in Parliament and gave its political alliance to the Liberal Party.⁷

⁵Ian Kershaw, *Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry, The Nazis and the Road to War* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 2; Tuchman, *Tower*, 29.

⁶Tuchman, *Tower*, 359-360.

⁷Tuchman, *Tower*, 364-5.

In the general election of 1905, the Liberals needed the support of labor to win. Several issues gave the Liberals an edge with labor over the Conservatives: Chinese slavery, protection vs. free trade, school tax, and especially Taff Vale. The masses voted overwhelmingly for the Liberals, who won in a landslide. In Parliament, the Liberals gained an unprecedented margin of 513-157. This majority ended the aristocracy's complete control of Parliament and provided evidence to the Conservatives of the rise of socialism.⁸

The rise of modern liberalism threatened the existence of privilege. Until this time, the landed aristocracy had believed that they spoke for the people, their national interests were the same, and together formed one united England. The typical aristocrat thought of the masses in the terms of the servants and lower classes they employed. The new industrial labor force no longer shared any common interest with the landed elite. This growing division between classes gave rise to several bills in Parliament which caused battle lines to be drawn and eventually threatened the veto power of the House of Lords.⁹

Even with the greatest mandate in party history, the Liberal government was unable to keep its promises of 1906, despite three years in power. By 1910, the number of workers involved in strikes was the highest for any year since 1893. Aristocrats viewed the actions of the working class as evidence of their inability to govern. With public approval of the Liberal Party falling, party leaders believed that without a popular

⁸ Tuchman, *Tower*, 366.

⁹ Tuchman, *Tower*, 279-80.

issue they could lose the next election. Lloyd George's Budget of 1909 provided the reason for one of the great fights in the Liberal era.¹⁰

As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George needed sixteen million pounds of additional revenue to pay for eight Dreadnoughts, and to implement the Old Age Pensions Act, which provided economic assistance for those over seventy. He proposed to obtain the money by a tax-the-rich program. Deliberately created with the intent of provoking the House of Lords to reject it and thereby create an issue of Peers vs. People, the "People's Budget" raised the income tax on a graduated scale and added a super tax on incomes over five thousand pounds. The proposed land tax and increases in direct taxation of the wealthy supported the Conservatives' opinion that the budget was a revolutionary attempt to attack the social basis of power in British society. The new budget raised death duties to a maximum of ten percent on estates of 200,000 pounds or more, added a tax on automobiles and petrol which only affected the rich, and also on tobacco and alcohol, which proved to be a political mistake.¹¹

None of these actions aroused the landowning class into furious resentment like the tax of one-fifth the value on "unearned increment" of land when sold or inherited. The tax also called for an annual tax of a halfpenny per pound on undeveloped land and mineral rights. The land clauses required registration and valuation of property, which to the landowner represented governmental interference in private property. Controversy exploded over the budget, as its creators wanted. Conservative leaders called the budget the first step in a socialist war against property. Lord Rosebery said the measure was

¹⁰ Tuchman, *Tower*, 385; Mayer, *Old Regime*, 154.

¹¹ Tuchman, *Tower*, 386; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 12; Pugh, *Hurrah*, 15.

“not a budget but a revolution. Socialism was the end of everything... of faith, family, of property, of monarchy, of empire.”¹² The English aristocracy realized that their political power in the House of Lords was threatened.

On 16 December 1909, during the first of two general elections fought on the subject, Lord Curzon gave a speech at Oldham in defense of the aristocracy. The next day, Liberal Party member Winston Churchill gave his reply at Victoria Opera House. Churchill stated there were three issues to be decided on in the next few weeks: defense of the free trade system, the budget, and the Licensing Bill. On the issue of the budget, Churchill attacked the aristocracy for not wanting to pay their fair share. He said Parliament was “entitled not only to lay a heavier proportionate burden on the rich than the poor, but to see that that burden should be proportionately greater, should be on a graduated scale in order to ensure equality of sacrifice.”¹³ Churchill went on to state that the government needed large revenues at its disposal, and the rich should not reject the budget, based upon the fact they must carry the burden.

Churchill then asked why the House of Lords should have the right to rule over the people. He challenged the idea of hereditary legislators and the maintenance of a superior class, with law-giving functions inherent in their blood, who exercised this right independent of public need or will. Finally he disputed Lord Curzon’s claim that, “All civilization has been the work of aristocracies.” Churchill insisted that the country should be ruled by nature’s aristocracy, the best and most gifted beings in each

¹² *Annual Register*, Rosebery’s Glasgow speech in Crewe, 511-12. Quoted in Tuchman, *Tower*, 387.

¹³ Winston Churchill, “Haranguing the Hustings: ‘A Gust of Public-House Passion’, Victoria Opera House, Burnley, 17 December 1909, quoted in David Cannadine, *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: The Speeches of Winston Churchill* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 46-48.

generation, regardless of their birth. Instead of “all civilization being the work of aristocracies,” Churchill said he believed the upkeep of aristocracy has been the hard work of all civilizations.¹⁴

His final insult to the aristocracy came when he gave credit to the masses for almost all great ideas and energy that have benefited mankind. He attributed the rise of Christianity to the poor people of the world. The great artists, writers, and scientists came from outside the privileged world of the aristocracy. Churchill then described the disproportionate number of high offices in the government filled with members of the House of Lords as an example of the undue political authority that a small, limited, and unrepresentative class had held for years. Churchill closed with the observation that the Conservative Party faced certain defeat on more than one important issue.¹⁵

The irony in Winston Churchill’s response to Lord Curzon’s speech cannot be overlooked. Churchill entered politics as a Conservative but broke with the party over the issue of tariffs to protect British markets. Churchill declared himself “a Unionist Free Trader...opposed to what is known as Home Rule for Ireland and Protection in any form.”¹⁶ A change of party did not alter the fact that Churchill was born and continued to be an aristocrat, one who published books, fought in wars, and followed in his family’s political traditions. Born at Blenheim Palace into a family of privilege, the grandson of the Seventh Duke of Marlborough, Churchill spent his childhood in the care of a nanny. After graduating Harrow, he attended the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. His

¹⁴ Cannadine, *Blood*, 53-55.

¹⁵ Cannadine, *Blood*, 55.

¹⁶ Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* (New York, New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 30.

military service in India and the Sudan gave him the experiences needed to become a published author by his mid-twenties. Churchill's background of privilege gave him an education and opportunities unavailable to the masses which he utilized to obtain a seat in Parliament.¹⁷

Most common people knew the House of Lords' veto power remained the central issue, not the budget. The rejection of a Finance Bill by the Lords would cause the government in power to become deadlocked. The solution lay with the king's ability to create new peers. He needed to appoint enough Liberals to constitute a majority in the House of Lords, as many as five hundred if necessary, and overwhelm the hereditary peerage. The Conservatives decided to reject the Finance Bill on 1 December 1909 by a vote of 350-75. This rejection forced the dissolution of the current government. While preparing for the new election, the Liberals drew up a Parliament Bill for abolition of the Lords' veto. The proposal stated that on bills certified by the Speaker of the House, the veto should be abolished, and that other bills, if passed by three successive sessions by the House of Commons, should become law with or without the approval of the House of Lords. The Liberal Party returned to power, but in a diminished capacity. The Liberals needed cooperation from the Irish representatives to pass the bill, and the Irish disliked the budget because of the tax on whiskey. The Irish demanded the promise to carry through elimination of the Lord's veto in order to clear the way for a Home Rule Bill.¹⁸

The Conservatives were determined to preserve their last stronghold of privilege. To lose the veto or the Conservative majority in the House of Lords meant the loss of

¹⁷ Cannadine, *Blood*, 14.

¹⁸ Tuchman, *Tower*, 389.

their last check upon the advance of mass democracy. The ranks of the Conservatives split into two groups. One led by Lord Balfour held to a policy of stopping, at all costs, the creation of peers large enough to compose a Liberal majority. They considered the acceptance of the Parliament Bill the lesser of two evils. Opposed to this view, a group of “Diehard” peers formed, taking its name from a famous regiment. The Diehards consisted of large landed proprietors, privy councilors, former cabinet ministers, imperial proconsuls, officers of the Unionist party, and leaders of the new social imperialist leagues. The Diehards formed the foundation of those aristocrats who came to support fascism in the 1920s.¹⁹

The Diehards formed as a response to the growth of popular radicalism. Labor unrest, the question of Irish Home Rule, and women’s suffrage, prompted a rebellion of traditionalist forces determined to preserve their status and position in society. The Diehard’s leaders, Lord Halsbury and Greville Verney, the Lord Willoughby de Broke, nineteenth baron of his line, one of the eighteen members of the House of Lords whose title originated before 1500, represented aristocrats willing to fight to preserve their constitutional, hereditary right. The Diehards expressed their opposition to what they viewed as the aims and objectives of political liberalism.²⁰

The beliefs of the Diehards and most of the radical right reflected a specific interpretation of the national interest. Most Diehards supported tariff reform, compulsory military service, an expansion of the army and navy, social welfare, an end to “alien” immigration and armed resistance to Home Rule in Ireland. Many Diehards also had

¹⁹ Tuchman, *Tower*, 390-1; Mayer, *Old Regime*, 154.

²⁰Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (New York, New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1987), 2-4; Tuchman, *Tower*, 390-1; Cannadine, *Decline*, 520.

mixed feelings towards Germany. Clearly, Germany's rapidly developing military and industrial power threatened the safety of the empire, but they admired its administrative efficiency, social welfare program, and role of the state in national development. Most of the radical right demanded a similar modernization of British society and wanted the state to take a more active role in national life. However, the fundamental beliefs of the Diehards centered on the need to preserve aristocratic dominance, to strengthen British imperial power, and stop the spread of socialism. After the Great War, surviving Diehards sympathized with radical right wing organizations and the sons of devout Diehards became more receptive to fascist ideas.²¹

After the second general election of 1910, the Diehards attempted to block the Liberal threat to the House of Lords from the proposed Parliament Bill. In July, eighty Unionist peers met and pledged not to surrender, no matter what the party leadership decided. When the Liberals threatened to create new peers, the party leaders decided to vote for elimination of the veto, but the Diehards remained committed. To both the Diehards and Liberals, the House of Lords had a symbolic value. To the Liberals, it remained a barrier to democratic reform that must be removed; to the Diehards; it became the last aristocratic line of defense against an irresponsible government, which must be preserved at all costs. All that lay between mob rule or democracy was the veto power of the House of Lords.²²

When the Lords passed the Parliament Act of 1911, the powers of the House of Lords were forever diminished. The last political stronghold of landed power ceased to

²¹ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, 4-5; Urbach, *Radical Right*, 57.

²² Cannadine, *Decline*, 523-4.

exist. Democracy prevailed and the Diehards expressed anger and disappointment at the defeat. Some of the Lords suggested the formation of a new party; others believed they should try to take over the Conservative party and the Unionist machine. The compromise resulted in the formation of the Halsbury Club whose goal was the development of a militant policy. This policy led to the resignation of the leader of the Conservative party and a new more aggressive form of leadership in the appointment of Andrew Bonar Law, the first commoner to lead the Conservative party. Born in Canada, Law earned his living as a steel manufacturer, not from a landed estate. At a rally at Blenheim Palace in July 1912, he renounced the Liberal government as a “revolutionary committee which has seized by fraud upon despotic power.”²³ He went on to endorse Unionist tactics and support the use of force to maintain power. The issue of Ireland brought the Liberals and Diehards into direct confrontation.²⁴

The passing of the Parliament Act removed the last obstacle against the passage of a Home Rule Bill for Ireland. Introduced in 1912, the third Home Rule Bill had only two alternatives, Home Rule for the whole of Ireland, or Ulster would be excluded and the southern Unionists abandoned. For the Diehards, both alternatives were unacceptable. The crisis realized all the fears of the aristocracy, the abandonment of the Irish landowners to the nationalists, the threat that an independent Ireland might be a liability in a future war, and the beginning of the breakup of the British Empire. Some Diehards believed the situation was so desperate that violence seemed a reasonable choice. Civil War seemed a possibility, and in March 1913, the British League for the

²³ Cannadine, *Decline*, 525.

²⁴ Pugh, *Hurrah*, 19; Cannadine, *Decline*, 525-6; Mayer, *Old Regime*, 155.

Support of Ulster and the Union formed to arm all Unionists who wanted to fight the Ulstermen. The Diehards suggested that the issue of Irish Home Rule be decided by the electorate, and if not, by military force.²⁵

The landowners in Ulster did not stand idly by and wait for assistance. In 1913, aristocrats sent twenty thousand guns from England to arm the Ulster Volunteers. Others advertised in newspapers for men to fight in Ireland if conditions worsened. The British League tried to widen its popular support and achieve greater notoriety. These actions resulted in the formation of the British Covenant in support of Ulster and against Home Rule. By the start of the First World War, over two million opposition signatures had been obtained. The final blow came in May 1914, when a Home Rule Bill temporarily excluding Ulster passed a second reading. The coming of the war in July-August 1914 helped the Liberal administration out of an expected stalemate. The revolt of the Diehards ended with the passage of the Home Rule for Ireland Bill.²⁶

While the House of Lords fought over the budget, the veto, and Home Rule for Ireland, the workers of Britain began a series of strikes that reminded the aristocracy of the rising tension between the classes. The transportation strike, which began in June of 1911, ushered in a new method of organized labor. Workers no longer struck against a particular employer but against a whole industry. Mass labor wanted increased pay and employer recognition of unions. The workers wanted action and quickly turned to more aggressive methods. In the Rhondda Valley of Wales, destruction of mine-owners property by thirty thousand coal miners left the owners unsure of how to deal with the

²⁵ Cannadine, *Decline*, 527; Pugh, *Hurrah*, 19.

²⁶ Cannadine, *Decline*, 527-8; Mayer, *Old Regime*, 155.

unions. The situation reached a critical point when thirty-six unions of seamen, firemen, dockers, and teamsters formed the National Transport Workers' Federation. When ship owners refused to negotiate with the new union, a strike was called in June. The strike lasted seventy-two days and involved seventy-seven thousand workers. As the strike spread from London, most ports closed and riots, arson, and looting broke out. In August, the midway point of the crisis, four railway unions joined the strike. Britain faced the stoppage of all transportation. The Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, ordered military convoys to keep essential trains moving and sent troops to strike centers. Violent clashes between soldiers and strikers resulted in two dead and two hundred wounded. Settled on emergency terms, other strikes of equal strength occurred over the next three years. Trade-union votes turned from the Liberal party to their own representatives, ending the alliance with Liberalism.²⁷

The growth of organized labor posed a threat to the traditional political order. Twenty-five percent of the work force belonged to a union, and from 1911 to 1913, twenty million working days a year were lost to strikes. Many aristocrats feared the future, in which land and birthright would be threatened. Britain's industrial strength, from which they profited already, posed challenges to social power resting upon traditional hierarchy. On the eve of the Great War, Britain was the most industrialized and urbanized country in the world. More than seventy-five percent of its population lived in towns and cities and most worked as hourly laborers. The aristocracy's diminishing political power, growing class tensions, increasing threats to the security of the empire, and rising communism composed the set of social and political issues which

²⁷ Tuchman, *Tower*, 393-4.

troubled Britain as it entered the First World War; a conflict so costly it accelerated the changes already taking place within the British Empire.²⁸

The First World War changed the British aristocracy forever. Proportionately more sons of the aristocracy died than those of other classes. Not since the Wars of the Roses had the English aristocracy suffered such losses. The First World War demanded an extreme sacrifice one the aristocracy gave willingly, at first. When war was declared most young patricians reacted with excitement. They feared only that the war might end before they received orders. Across Britain the young rushed to join, while the older generation encouraged recruitment. Landowners offered to keep jobs open for their men if they enlisted and to let their families live rent free during their service.²⁹

During the early years of the war, noble ladies showed as much enthusiasm for the cause as the men. Many established hospitals and organized ambulance units. Others planned food drives, knitted socks, and trained as nurses to help the wounded. The response of the aristocracy played a part in the general enthusiasm for the war, and tradition played a key role in their response. Training and temperament defined the aristocracy as a warrior class. They rode horses, hunted foxes, and fired shotguns. They knew how to give orders and look after the men in their care. Many had great generals and leaders for ancestors, and this war provided an opportunity to live up to the family name.³⁰

²⁸ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 2-3.

²⁹ Cannadine, *Decline*, 36, 72.

³⁰ Cannadine, *Decline*, 73-4.

By 1915, it became clear that the length and number of casualties of the war exceeded anything imagined by the landed class. For the next two years, the aristocratic families of Britain sacrificed their sons as never before. By 1917, some families had lost two or three sons to the war. Some lost their only heirs to the family estates and effectively the future of their direct line. The list of sons, husbands, and friends, who had been killed, and the increasing worry of who would be next, led some aristocrats to demand an end to the war. The call to end the war resulted in the publication of Lord Lansdowne's letter written to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. Lansdowne owned large estates in England, Scotland, and Ireland and belonged to one of the powerful governing families of the empire. A loyal defender of England, the death of his son at Flanders in 1914, convinced him that the continuation of what he called "the most dreadful war the world has ever known," spelled the ruin of the civilized world.³¹ Politicians and family members expressed hostility to Lansdowne's plea for peace, but he remained convinced that unless the war ended, the traditional social order faced destruction. The casualties among the aristocratic families continued through 1918, and by the time victory finally came few among the patrician survivors expressed enthusiasm for the future. The loss of a father or husband often resulted in the forced sale of an estate to pay the death duties. With the tax fixed at two-fifths of the value of the whole, land in England quickly changed hands. By 1921, one-quarter of England had new owners, and by 1927 farmers owned more than one-third of the agricultural land. Even with these great losses the social order in Britain survived. Revolution altered many parts of Europe, but not Britain; the monarchy and aristocracy remained in power. One-tenth of a percent of the population controlled one-third of the nation's wealth. The replenishment of the old

³¹ Cannadine, *Decline*, 75-8.

aristocracy occurred with the creation of new peerages in exchange for large contributions to party funds. By 1920, one fifth of the seven hundred members of the aristocracy were recent creations. In the national government, seven peers occupied high offices of state in the first Conservative government after the war. On the surface, the aristocracy appeared intact, but the First World War accelerated the conditions already undermining their position.³²

Although the Great War took many talented young men from the aristocracy, fifty percent of all British and Irish peers and their sons survived. Few titles became extinct because of death in the war and the survivors made their mark in the years that followed. Among prominent inter-war politicians, Oswald Mosley and Lord Londonderry served in the trenches. By the 1930s, this wartime generation held positions in the national government. Their experiences shaped their political opinions and the methods used to preserve the empire. The loss of brothers, cousins, and friends, led many to vow never to become involved in a conflict on the continent again. No matter the cost, the English aristocracy must keep the empire isolated and intact.³³

The aristocracy needed to keep England out of conflicts on the European continent, but fear for the empire from political forces inside the country caused concern. The threat from communism appeared close and imminent. The violence that accompanied the Bolshevik victory during the Russian Revolution in 1917 sent shock waves reaching as far as England. The news traveled through the aristocratic network of marriage and friendship. Maria Alexandrova, daughter of Tsar Alexander II, a member

³² Kershaw, *Hitler*, 3-4; Sinclair, *Last*, 103.

³³ Cannadine, *Decline*, 84-5.

of the English royal family by marriage and a German duchess, warned her English nephew, King George V, of the dangers of Bolshevism. The royal family knew the dangers of Bolshevism first hand. Tsar Nicholas, related to the British royal family through Queen Victoria, tried to get to England, but the Prime Minister Lloyd George denied him entrance. The king's failure to help his Russian relations resulted in their deaths and gave the British royal family a sense of guilt about their inability to save them. The murder of Tsar Nicholas and his family convinced the aristocracy of their fate if the communists ever held power in Britain. Since several leaders in the Bolshevik party were Jewish, the revolution also resulted in an upsurge in anti-Semitism. Some writers blamed the Jews for almost all historic and recent disasters, including the revolutionary movement in Russia. In some of the grand houses, the British aristocracy viewed the Jews as an alien body, not quite British, and possessing links to dangerous international forces. Fears of a "Jewish-Bolshevik Conspiracy" helped to sustain a concealed prejudice towards Jews within the British upper class.³⁴

Besides the concerns about the possible spread of Bolshevism, the aristocracy worried about the position of Britain in the post-war world. The war greatly increased Britain's debt. England still ruled an empire, increased by colonies from defeated Germany, but the English-speaking dominions were starting to break away. By the 1920s, the dominions no longer gave British policy their automatic backing, and India, the key to the empire, began to shift toward an independence movement. Closer to home, Ireland erupted in rebellion in the middle of the war and split in two, with the larger,

³⁴ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 5; Urbach, *Radical Right*, 60-61; Pugh, *Hurrah*, 14; Jonathan Petropoulos, *Royals and the Reich: The Princes von Hessen in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 199.

southern part breaking away from Britain. In 1922, after six years of violent conflict and guerilla warfare, peace had still not been restored. These nationalist politics threatened Britain's power.³⁵

The war focused England's attention away from the problems at home and turned them to the international problems between countries. In June 1919, the Treaty of Versailles did not provide stability to the international order. Many members of the aristocracy, both at the time and afterwards, thought the Versailles Treaty to be unfair, assuring trouble for the future. Germany, forced to accept blame for the war and ordered to pay excessive reparations was isolated and resentful. The added insults of lost colonies, a reduced military, and forfeiture of territory, fostered a German nationalism of the extreme Right.³⁶

Conditions at home and abroad provided the reasons for pessimism within the post-war British aristocracy. They were forced to respond to a world where landed wealth did not assure stability or power. Mass democracy required major adjustments to the patrician expectations of deference and domination. Even the Conservative Party no longer provided security. The party had split over how to resolve the trouble in Ireland, the long tradition of free trade, and whether or not allowances should be made towards a limited range of self-government in India. Some in the aristocracy viewed all change as threatening; an indication of Britain's decline, but the increasing signs of weakness in India appeared to predict declining imperial might to more than just the aristocracy. The

³⁵ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 6.

³⁶ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 7; Robert Rhode James, *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 174.

world in the early 1920s was changing in ways the British upper class neither liked nor understood. The old traditions seemed to be lost. New dangers threatened, and the preservation of the old order and the maintenance of British power abroad appeared to be at stake. Some believed the time for a new idea, a new political system to preserve the place of the aristocracy, had arrived, and some placed their faith for the future in fascism.³⁷

³⁷ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 8-9.

Chapter Two: The Lost Generation 1919-1932

When the Great War ended and the soldiers came home, the impact of the conflict on society had not yet been determined. The war strained Britain's society and economy in ways never before felt by its citizens. Britain spent more on the war per capita than any other combatant and suffered a huge loss of life. In 1918, the country had the largest functioning army, navy, and airforce in the world, an expense it could not afford. Many who had witnessed the horrors of trench warfare declared the world must never experience such a waste of human life again. For British society, the war had a profound effect upon the emergence of fascism. The influence of the war affected social classes, groups, and individuals, in a variety of ways and some came to support fascism for different reasons. Among the aristocracy, many saw fascism as a means to restore the stability of the past and to erase the deteriorating effects of the expansion of the franchise in 1918 and the growth of political democracy. Others viewed it as a way to create a new political system where party politics gave way to the national will for reform and the reduction of democratic rights.³⁸

Several consequences of the war led some in British society towards fascism. In the immediate post-war period, the problems created by the Russian Revolution, the emergence of a socialist Labour party, and the extension of the franchise in 1918 to reward working-class men and women for their role in the war frightened many in the aristocracy. The failure of the Conservative and Labour governments in the 1920s, to create the "home fit for heroes," turned some to more radical solutions for Britain's

³⁸ Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (New York, New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1987), 22-23; Robert Gerwarth, *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

problems. Disillusioned with the policies of the standard political parties, some among the Conservatives began to look for alternatives. In the 1920s, fascism emerged in Britain as an imitation of Mussolini's regime in Italy.

The Italian *Fascisti* formed during the autumn of 1914. The group formed from patriotic former socialists who wanted Italy to fight in the First World War. Under the leadership of Benito Mussolini, a former editor of the leftist newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*, the fascists organized riots and threatened a civil war unless Italy entered the war. As a result, King Vittorio Emanuele ignored the position of parliament and signed a declaration of war against Austria. Later, Mussolini declared this event as the beginning of the fascist revolution in Italy.³⁹

In March 1922, the king appointed Mussolini as prime minister providing him with the opportunity to stage his famous March on Rome. The first chance British politicians had of assessing the new Italian regime occurred when Mussolini arrived in London for a conference about German reparations. The British reaction to Italian fascism was an encouraging one, and from the early 1920s Mussolini received positive attention from leading Conservative journals and newspapers. The common theme that united these reviews was hostility towards democracy and the impact of capitalism on the poor. The corporate state held the answers to these problems. By the mid-1920s, many in the British aristocracy had become convinced of the superiority of the fascist regime when compared to the perceived failures of democracy in Britain.⁴⁰

³⁹ Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!: Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (London, England: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 37.

⁴⁰ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 39.

Not only did the British admire Mussolini's statesmanship in international affairs, they admired his ability to stabilize the Italian economy. Five years of consistent rule put an end to strikes and class war. Taxation and unemployment fell, and the government's annual revenue became a surplus. Increased support of agricultural production connected with many British Conservatives who suffered with the collapse of agricultural prices during the 1920s. This connection through agriculture helps to explain why Sir Oswald Mosley devoted so much attention to farmers after he founded the British Union of Fascists.⁴¹

During the 1920s the *Daily Mail* praised Mussolini and predicted he would dominate the history of the twentieth century. While this prediction seemed excessive, it did give a measure of respectability to the fascist regime and increased the impression of unity, strength, and aggression that Mussolini wanted to send. The newspapers were not the only ones praising Italy's fascist leader. On a visit to Rome in January 1927, Winston Churchill gave a speech typical in tone of his class and time. Churchill informed the press: "Italy has provided the necessary antidote to the Russian poison. Here after no great nation will be unprovided with an ultimate means against the cancerous growth of Bolshevism."⁴² Churchill then admitted, "If I had been an Italian, I am sure that I should have been wholeheartedly with you from start to finish in your triumphant struggle against the bestial appetites and perversions of Leninism."⁴³

⁴¹ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 44.

⁴² Winston Churchill. *The Times*, 21 January 1927, quoted in Karina Urbach, *European Aristocracies and the Radical Right 1918-1939* (London, England: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63-4.

⁴³ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 47; Urbach, *European Aristocracies*, 63-4.

Churchill's response to Italian fascism appeared as a departure from his usual views. As a former Conservative who spent the years from 1904 to 1923 as a Liberal, he was not associated with the pro-fascist sections of Conservatism. The explanation comes from his reaction to the revolution in Russia and his return to the Conservative Party as an outspoken opponent to Bolshevism. Seen by some, such as the Prime Minister Lloyd George, as obsessed with Bolshevism, Churchill faced ridicule. In his memoirs, Lloyd George blamed Churchill's fear of Bolsheviks on his aristocratic lineage. George observed that "his ducal blood revolted against the wholesale elimination of Grand Dukes in Russia."⁴⁴ Though not a fascist, Churchill admitted that even in Britain fascist methods for countering communism remained an option. The achievements of Mussolini's government provided some in Britain with a model for an alternative political party to create change and secure the future of British superiority.⁴⁵

While Mussolini rose to power in Italy, Britain faced discontent with the response of the government to the problems confronting the nation in the aftermath of the Great War. Some of the young men who had served in the war turned to traditional politics as a way to bring about the changes needed to return Britain to its rightful place of world leadership. Sir Oswald Mosley's election to Parliament and his eventual disillusionment with its inability to react to social needs provided the main focus for the growth of the fascist movement in Britain. However, he was not the founder of the original movement.

⁴⁴ Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* (New York, New York: Crown Publishing, 2008), 105.

⁴⁵ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 48.

A woman created the first fascist organization, an odd occurrence given the normally misogynistic views of many fascists.⁴⁶

The earliest fascist movement in Britain was founded in 1923 by Miss Rotha Lintorn-Orman. A veteran of the Great War, she worked as an ambulance driver in Serbia. She received the *Croix de Charite* for her willingness to risk her life to reach the wounded. Invalided home in 1917 with malaria, she became Commandant at the British Red Cross motor school where she trained ambulance drivers. Lintorn-Orman's work with the British Red Cross helped her to realize the importance of a uniform in creating new employment opportunities for women, especially after the war when attitudes toward women's employment became hostile. Her difficult war experiences and inability to adjust after the war contributed to her poor health and alcoholism. Concerned by the growing industrial unrest and the potential threat to property from the emergence of a working-class party and a perceived communist threat, Lintorn-Orman saw the need for an organization ready to serve its country in an emergency. She decided to run a series of six advertisements in the Duke of Northumberland's paper *The Patriot*. The advertisements asked for recruits for a British Fascisti to act as an organized force to combat the Red Revolution. Mussolini's fascist movement saved Italy from Bolshevism and she based her movement upon his regime.⁴⁷

Rotha Lintorn-Orman admired Mussolini for his strict reaction to the socialist menace, but she knew little of the content of his fascist regime. She used little more than

⁴⁶ Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts For Nazi Germany 1933-1939* (London, England: Constable and Company Ltd., 1980), 85.

⁴⁷ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 85-6; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 51; Colin Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), 57; George E. G. "Cotlin, Fascist Stirrings in Britain," *Current History*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (February, 1934): 542.

the name and received no financial help from the Italian movement. The British Fascisti (BF) reflected Lintorn-Orman's experiences in public and military service, and many individuals called the BF a cross between a glorified Boy Scout movement and a paramilitary group. To others, the BF became a rallying point for the sections of society which had never adjusted to the end of the Victorian era. Just weeks after her advertisements, Lintorn-Orman had enough support to rent offices in London. In the early part of 1924, hundreds of recruits applied each week.⁴⁸

Many of the recruits came from military backgrounds, but the new organization also attracted men and women from the aristocracy. Notable figures such as Lord Garvagh, the Earl of Glasgow, the BF's first president, and Sir Arthur Hardinge, a former ambassador to Spain, were among the men whose names added prestige to the group. The BF also attracted aristocratic women, including Viscountess Downe, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Mary. Despite the reputation of fascism for anti-feminism, many of these women played active roles and promoted the formation of women's units.⁴⁹

On the enrollment form, applicants pledged to "support His Majesty King George V, the constitution of Great Britain, the British Empire, and the BF in their struggle against all revolutionary movements working for the destruction of the Throne and Empire."⁵⁰ The BF further defined their program in a catalogue of principles and policies: defending king and constitution against the forces of communism, promoting class friendship, better conditions for the poor, protecting patriotic citizens from trade unions,

⁴⁸ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 86; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 52; Cross, *Fascists*, 58.

⁴⁹ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 52.

⁵⁰ Griffiths, *Tavellers*, 86.

eliminating strikes, amending the franchise to restrict it to those “really qualified to vote,” preferential treatment for ex-servicemen, gradual purification of the British race, and restrictions on immigration; principles many aristocrats in the Conservative Party supported. The BF was not anti-Semitic, although they had suspicions that “aliens” were at the center of the Red Revolution. Some of the more aggressive members split off in 1925 to form a group called the British National Fascisti, which promoted anti-Semitism and proved to be more militant than the BF. The BF claimed to be non-political, but in practice they supported the Conservative party by providing stewards for their public meetings.⁵¹

The BF saw the importance of emphasizing the common ground between the Conservative party and their new movement. Most of the momentum behind fascism in the 1920s came from a widespread fear of communist sabotage. To respond in an emergency to such a communist threat the BF needed to be ready to provide the organized physical resistance that conventional politics did not offer. The perceived need to protect the British constitution served as the basis for the paramilitary structure of the organization. At the local level, members formed units of seven men under a leader; three units composed a troop and several troops made a company. The companies were part of a district controlled by the Country Commanders and Area Commanders. The whole organization was run by the Executive Council and the nine member Fascist Grand Council. The hierarchy also contained separate women’s units and cadet units for those under sixteen. Contained within the men’s groups were flying squads of young, unmarried men ready to go anywhere. The BF declared publicly that the purpose of the

⁵¹ Cross, *Fascists*, 58; Griffiths, *Travellers*, 87-8; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 56-7; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 54.

system was not violence, but educational as well as evolutionary and should not be confused with Mussolini's Blackshirts.⁵²

To the British Fascists, the start of Britain's first general strike formed the crisis from which they hoped to save the country. The General Strike of 1926 began on 3 May just before midnight, but its roots reached back eight years. During World War I, the government operated the coal industry and the miners benefited from increased wages and shorter days. In 1919, the miners demanded a six-hour day, a thirty percent wage increase, and nationalization. The government refused and coal was deregulated. In this situation, a confrontation between miners and owners determined to reduce costs seemed inevitable. The approaching strike became serious when the miners joined with railway men and transport workers unions. The result of a strike by all three unions might have paralyzed the country. The government prepared to use troops to keep industry going, and the other two unions backed down forcing the miners to accept wage cuts. The union movement realized it needed a General Council to coordinate industrial strikes in the future.⁵³

Falling union memberships and a worsening economic climate undermined the unions' bargaining position. In 1925, Chancellor Winston Churchill revaluated the currency making British exports ten percent more expensive. Employers needed to reduce costs, and the easiest way was a reduction in wages. To save working-class living standards, the only weapon left to the unions was a general strike. The reasons for the

⁵² Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 57.

⁵³ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 92-3.

strike were economic, not political, but to many in the aristocracy the strike appeared to be a weapon of the communists inspired by the Bolshevik regime in Russia.⁵⁴

Some members of Parliament expressed concern over the high level of communist activity among the trade unions. The Duke of Northumberland believed the miners were pawns of the Bolsheviks used to organize a revolution in Britain by gaining control of trade unions and manipulating British workers. As the duke owned the *Morning Post*, a newspaper widely read among the aristocracy, the theory of a Bolshevik conspiracy gained acceptance. The purpose of the Labour Party was to hide this plan until the optimum time for a revolutionary strike on a large scale. The government supported the duke's theory by prosecuting twelve leaders of the Communist Party for libel and inciting mutiny. Though short of the oppression of the Communist Party favored by many in the aristocracy, it reflected the government's intention to curtail an organization they believed to be supporting mass industrial unrest. Intelligence reports in 1926 show that the General Strike actually did receive funds from the Soviet Union. Further investigations revealed the Communist Party received money from Russia in 1920-22, and again in 1925, 1927, and 1928. Perceptions of the General Strike as a subversive movement proved to be more than a delusion of right-wing fanatics.⁵⁵

The crisis reached a breaking point at the end of June 1925. Declaring their inability to compete in foreign markets, coal owners announced a wage cut and return to an eight-hour day. A government report supported the coal owners, and in April of 1926 the General Council threatened a strike, which began on 4 May. The Duke of

⁵⁴ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 92; Urbach, *Radical Right*, 62.

⁵⁵ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 94.

Northumberland warned that if a socialist government came to power because of the general strike, a gradual program of nationalization would be replaced by violent revolution. Though the government appeared unprepared to deal with the effects of the strike, there were detailed plans in place to maintain law and order and keep essential supplies moving.⁵⁶

The plan to combat the strike included the recruitment of thousands of volunteers to operate basic services. The Organization for the Maintenance of Supplies, under Home Secretary Sir William Joynson-Hicks, provided the fascists with an opportunity to show their ability to serve the country. The British Fascists enrolled their men in Q Divisions, a military style force available to police meetings and suppress disorder. During the strike Lintorn-Orman organized a fleet of cars from her Elm Park Garden in Acton, to transport strike-breakers to work. The Home Secretary's negative reaction to the help provided by the fascists deprived them of the prestige and respectability they sought in responding to the national crisis. Instead of strengthening the position of the fascists, the General Strike weakened the movement.⁵⁷

The General Strike of 1926 lasted only nine days and did not result in the revolution predicted by fascist leaders. The strike bolstered the fascist movement; however, giving credibility to the idea that Britain faced alien subversion. It also encouraged fascists to maintain their role as patriots organized to combat the nation's enemies. This interpretation reached some mainstream politicians, including Churchill. His recognition that a Conservative government managed to confront the crisis led him to

⁵⁶ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 97.

⁵⁷ Thurlow, *Fascism*, 55; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 101; Cross, *Fascists*, 62.

question whether the same would be true if a general strike happened with a Labour government in power. In such circumstances he concluded a fascist-style coup might be the only alternative to communism.⁵⁸

On the other hand, the strike caused internal strife within the British Fascists that resulted in a serious split. Several important members resigned leaving Lintorn-Orman as the central figure of the movement. The decline in membership experienced by the British Fascists also resulted from the fact that the fears of the early twenties had been unjustified. During the General Strike, the workers did not form soviets and a revolution had not taken place. The movement needed to find a new role and a new appeal to attract and keep members. Lintorn-Orman tried to create interest through articles in the British Fascists journal, *The Lion*, planning parades, and creating a Fascist Order of Merit, but the movement continued to decline. Even after the loss of almost all the active members, she continued her fight until her death in 1935. The movement needed a new leader, one who possessed the position, wealth, and charisma to inspire change. The leader who had all these characteristics was Sir Oswald Mosley.⁵⁹

Born in 1896, Sir Oswald Mosley came from a Staffordshire gentry family concerned about the loss of its political influence and material resources. Like many from his class, Mosley blamed urbanization, industrialization, and the liberal middle-

⁵⁸ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 106.

⁵⁹ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 89; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 55; Cross, *Fascists*, 62.

class for these hardships. Mosley's background made him part of the established order and provided his motivation to preserve it.⁶⁰

In 1914, Mosley completed his education at Winchester and joined the 16th Queen's Light Dragoons. He also served in the Royal Flying Corps, a new and dangerous form of war service. A life-threatening wound, forced his discharge from the military and after his war service, he became a prized guest for prominent aristocratic hostesses such as Nancy Astor, Lady Colfax, and Emerald Cunard. As a result Mosley met the leading politicians of the day, who wanted to promote his political career. Mosley possessed the qualifications needed to excel in politics. He was handsome, rich, young, aristocratic, and possessed a distinguished war record. His family's political background was Conservative, and he entered Parliament as the Coalitionist Conservative candidate for Harrow in September 1918.⁶¹

Mosley's war experiences influenced his decision to enter politics. Mosley believed two lessons must be learned from the Great War: never to repeat such a waste of human life and the survivors must live in a better world. During the 1920s, Mosley tried to reform the political system from within through traditional party politics, but failure to achieve his goals led him to try and revolutionize British politics from outside.⁶²

After his election to the House of Commons, Mosley quickly gained a reputation as an eloquent speaker and independent-minded member. Ambitious and unafraid, his

⁶⁰ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 110; Cotlin, *Fascist*, 545.

⁶¹ Alastair Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism: A Study of Intellectuals and Fascism 1919-1945* (New York, New York: Macmillan Company, 1971), 259; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 111.

⁶² Thurlow, *Fascism*, 30.

first speech in February 1919 attacked Winston Churchill on the basis that he could not handle the Ministries of War and Air together. Mosley's disregard for traditional loyalties made his separation from the Conservative Party increasingly obvious and allowed him to emerge as the spokesman for the younger generation. During 1919, while campaigning for Nancy Astor, Mosley met Lady Cynthia, daughter of Lord Curzon. Lord Curzon, who as Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, Foreign Secretary, Chancellor of Oxford University, and President of the Royal Geographical Society strengthened Mosley's aristocratic and political connections. Mosley's reputation as a playboy did not worry Lord Curzon, as his own past included two marriages for financial gain.⁶³

In the 1890s, Lord Curzon's estate in Derbyshire faced financial problems. With his land heavily mortgaged Curzon survived on an insufficient allowance, which he subsidized by writing articles and travel books. To alleviate the problem he married an American heiress, Mary Leiter. His first wife's money financed his Indian viceroyalty, and his second rich American wife, Grace Hinds, supported his re-entry into public life during the First World War. His lavish lifestyle at Carlton House Terrace, Kedleston, Tattershall, and Bodiam Castles depended on American money. When Mosley proposed marriage, Curzon made sure of his daughter's financial future by investigating Mosley's finances. As Mosley's estate allowed him an income of eight to ten thousand pounds, which would increase to twenty thousand, Curzon gave his approval.⁶⁴

The couple married in May 1920 at the Chapel Royal. A small reception held at the Foreign office hosted guests such as King George V and Queen Mary, the King and

⁶³ David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), 230, 397, 584.

⁶⁴ Cannadine, *Decline*, 397, 399; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 112.

Queen of Belgium, and many from society and politics. Mosley's position in politics seemed assured. However, his growing disloyalty to the Conservative Party soon led to ridicule by his colleagues, and in November 1920, he crossed the floor of the House of Commons to sit as an Independent member. He briefly associated with the Liberals, but did not accept their free-trade ideas and by the spring of 1921, decided to cooperate with the Labour Party.⁶⁵

During the early 1920s, Mosley came to see unemployment and economic policy as the key issues in British politics. His studies in economic theory convinced Mosley that government objectives, instead of returning the country to prosperity, were preventing economic growth. Mosley quickly became an active critic of government economic policy. The Labour party did not accept his radical ideas, and once again Mosley found himself at odds with an established political party. Mosley was not alone in his desire for change in economic policies; Harold Macmillan in the Conservative Party shared his views. Like Mosley, Macmillan's war experiences influenced his political views, and they agreed the state must not abandon war veterans during times of unemployment. Many young politicians agreed that existing conservative economic policies were ineffective, but they did not share a uniform political view or solution.⁶⁶

The unemployment problem took center stage during the general election of 1929. Conservative candidates suffered from working class resentment leftover from the handling of the General Strike in 1926. As a result, Labour increased its seats from 151 to 288, close to an overall majority. The chance to implement a left-wing program

⁶⁵ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 112-3.

⁶⁶ Thurlow, *Fascism*, 32; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 112; Harold Macmillan, *Winds of Change: 1914-1939* (New York, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers), 132.

seemed possible, but the second government of Ramsay MacDonald failed to restore Britain's share of the world's export market, which led to criticism from Mosley and others who depicted his policies as Victorian liberal economics. Consequently during 1929 and 1930, his government struggled to finance the cost of rising unemployment and a growing budget deficit. Worsening economic conditions gave credibility to the fascist assessment of parliamentary democracy in Britain.⁶⁷

Mosley resigned from the Labour government in 1930 when the Cabinet turned down his reflationary program outlined in the "Mosley Memorandum." Mosley believed his program provided an effective response to the immediate problem of mass unemployment and a solution to reversing the long-term decline of the British economy. Mosley's plan contained some new ideas: earlier retirement from industry; protection of the home market by tariffs, import restrictions, bulk purchase agreements with foreign and empire producers, development of British agriculture, public control of industry, and a system of credit for industrial development. Mosley's ideas found followers in all parties including Harold Macmillan, who wrote a letter to the *Times* in support of Mosley's plan, published on 27 May 1930. The letter created in Macmillan's own words, "quite a stir."⁶⁸ Macmillan presented his views on the Socialist Party's inability to follow through with its campaign promises. He also criticized the Conservative leadership and expressed the hope that the practice of fighting elections on the basis of a program, which

⁶⁷ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 117; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 35.

⁶⁸ Macmillan, *Winds*, 245.

was either self-contradictory or obscure should be brought to an end. Although Mosley received support, his ideas were too far from center to appeal to a broad base.⁶⁹

Unable to convince the Labour party at a conference, Mosley and six other Members of Parliament withdrew to form the New Party. The New Party campaigned on the Mosley Manifesto, a revision of his memorandum. Unfortunately, in 1931 the economic crisis deepened, bringing about the fall of the Labour government. Replaced by a National Coalition made up of Liberals, who formed the majority, Conservatives, and a few Labour MPs, the new government won the general election in a landslide, and the New Party lost all its members of Parliament.⁷⁰

The failure of the New Party brought an end to Mosley's attempt to change the policies of the British government from within the party arena. Mosley discovered that the rules of the political game and the increasing conservatism of the British government worked against action from within the political structure. Convinced of the correctness of his policies, and fearful of the consequences of economic decline, Mosley became attracted to forms of activist mass politics in an attempt to revive society. British fascism was born of the failure of economic conservatism to stop the rapid decline of Britain in the inter-war years. In spite of its obvious imitation of continental movements, fascism in Britain developed from uniquely British roots.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Macmillan, *Winds*, 247.

⁷⁰ Thurlow, *Fascism*, 35-6; Macmillan, *Winds*, 244; Cotlin, *Fascists*, 546; Steven Woodbridge, "Fraudulent Fascism: The Attitude of Early British Fascists Towards Mosley and the New Party," *Contemporary British History*, Vol., 23, Issue 4(December, 2009): 493-507.

⁷¹ Thurlow, *Fascism*, 36.

Mosley came to fascism as a result of the failure of the process of British parliamentary politics to create the new society, but others were drawn because of personal trials and lingering after-effects of the war. Two men who contributed to the fascist movement from outside the traditional party spectrum were Henry Williamson and Arthur Kenneth Chesterton, whose traumatic experiences on the battlefield and fear for Britain's future accounted for their turn to fascism. The war separated them from other men and made it difficult for them to conform to civilian existence after the war.⁷²

Henry Williamson's war experiences convinced him of the futility of war and the need for an understanding between nations, especially England and Germany. Williamson survived many of the major battles of the war, first as a volunteer soldier and later as a commissioned officer. Two events affected him deeply. The first was the Christmas truce of 1914, when after the horrible fighting of the first battle of Ypres, German and British troops socialized and played football together on Christmas Day. This experience convinced him that the entire war was based on lies and that both sides fought for the same cause. Williamson believed corrupt political and industrial interests were the only ones to benefit from the war. For Williamson, only soldiers understood the horrors of modern conflict and could save Europe from another disaster. He also believed he had a special bond with Adolph Hitler. Since Hitler belonged to the German regiment with whom he socialized in 1914, Williamson believed Hitler wanted to

⁷² Melvin David Higginbottom, *Intellectuals and British Fascism: A Study of Henry Williamson* (London, England: Janus Publishing Co., 1992), 8; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 36-7; Cross, *Fascists*, 79.

maintain peace at all costs. Williamson even imagined that he spoke with Hitler during the Christmas truce.⁷³

The second event which affected Williamson was his experience at the battle of the Somme. When sixty thousand British soldiers died or suffered wounds, on the first day of battle 1 July 1916, Williamson realized the waste of war and the ineptitude of the governing classes. The effect of this knowledge was the alienation of Williamson from the contemporary world. In his mostly autobiographical work, *The Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, Williamson provided a view of the impact of the war and how the experience led to his support for fascism. Williamson's descriptions of the horrors of war hardened aristocratic views and provided further evidence, especially among upper-class women who had lost family members and loved ones, of the necessity to avoid war at any cost.⁷⁴

Another young man who joined the fascist movement from outside the political field was A. K. Chesterton who served on the Western Front in 1917-1918. His patriotism and enthusiasm for the British Empire left him unable to adjust to civilian life after the war. His disappointment in the government's care of ex-servicemen caused Chesterton to become an alcoholic until Mosley paid for his treatment at a special clinic in Germany during the 1930s. Chesterton's vivid memories of the horrors suffered by survivors of the First World War explain his reactionary form of fascism. Once drawn

⁷³ Higginbottom, *Williamson*, 21; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 38; Hamilton, *Appeal*, 267.

⁷⁴ Thurlow, *Fascism*, 40.

into the movement, he became an important member of the leadership of the British Union of Fascists until the late 1930s.⁷⁵

The general election of 1931 set the stage for Sir Oswald Mosley to form a fascist movement. After the defeat of the New Party, Mosley travelled to Italy in search of a different strategy to stop Britain's economic and political decline. Mosley believed he found the cure for Britain's social and economic problems in Mussolini's fascist movement.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Thurlow, *Fascism*, 26, 28, 37; Hamilton, *Appeal*, 264.

⁷⁶ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 126.

Chapter Three: The Promise of Fascism 1932-1936

The beginning of the 1930s was a time of unemployment and uncertainty across Europe and America. In Britain, at the end of 1929, the Depression took the form of a major downturn in demand together with severe unemployment in heavy industry. How high unemployment rose and for how long it lasted is difficult to measure, but at its height about one-fifth of the total workforce remained idle. Even with these statistics the world-wide depression affected Britain less than almost any other Western society. Unemployment hit only certain industries. The geographical isolation of the unemployed, along with the payment of unemployment benefits, stabilized politics and strengthened the Conservative Party.⁷⁷

In the 1930s, Britain's political polices remained conservative. The Labour Party's growth appeared stagnant and provided no serious challenge. The only threat that could undermine the Conservative government's position was war, but not everyone had faith in their ability to keep the peace and deal with the depressed British economy. Young men like Sir Oswald Mosley, who had tried to reform the government from within, wanted a rapid change from outside the traditional parties. For reformers, the time seemed ready for a new movement to take control and build a corporate state to take the place of a confused democracy, and Mosley wanted to be the man in charge.⁷⁸

In January 1932, Mosley travelled to Italy, where he admired fascist achievements and met Mussolini who advised him on the best way to proceed in England. Mosley

⁷⁷Robert Gerwarth, *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 47-9.

⁷⁸Colin Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), 65; Gerwarth, *Twisted*, 50.

returned home ready to abandon the traditional political parties he judged to be incapable of solving the economic and political challenges Britain faced. Mosley wanted immediate action, and he believed Mussolini's fascism could be adapted to solve Britain's problems.⁷⁹

During 1932, Mosley approached the existing fascist movements in Britain to see if cooperation was possible. He attempted a takeover bid of the major groups demanding acceptance as their new leader without success, in October 1932, Mosley announced the formation of the British Union of Fascists (BUF). The movement recruited its members and officials from existing fascist organizations which allowed Mosley to quickly gain power for fascism which he believed to be the only salvation for the country. The start of the BUF coincided with the publication of his book *The Greater Britain*. The thirty-two founding members attended a solemn inaugural ceremony at the former New Party office in Great George Street where Mosley posed for photographs and displayed a black banner with *fasces* embroidered in silver. His speech asked for complete dedication to the fascist cause and warned of the misunderstanding and possible danger members might face in the coming struggle to save the great land of Britain.⁸⁰

From the beginning, youth composed the majority of membership in the BUF. Mosley was thirty-five and most of his associates were younger. They viewed themselves as the post-war generation who needed to save Britain from the political corruption of the past. Often referred to as a movement of ex-servicemen, Mosley

⁷⁹ Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Balckshirts!: Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (London, England: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 126.

⁸⁰ Cross, *Fascists*, 66-7; Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (New York, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 95-6; Alastair Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism: A Study of Intellectuals and Fascism 1919-1945* (New York, New York: Macmillan Company, 1971), 264.

wanted to recruit from the Conservatives, the old British Fascists and from outside politics, people who shared or admired his social background.⁸¹

To many people in Britain, Mosley seemed the perfect man to bring attention to fascism. War hero, aristocratic, handsome, and possessing excellent public speaking skills, he seemed to be the perfect leader. Yet colleagues found Mosley lacked the qualities needed to lead the fascists in England. He seemed an odd combination of political reactionary and playboy. Mosley spent part of the summer of 1932 writing his forty thousand word manifesto, *The Greater Britain*, which combined New Party economic strategy with an explanation of the case for fascism. His book offered a clearer approach to fascism than either of his Continental counterparts, Hitler or Mussolini, had written. However, Mosley did not renounce his self-indulgent lifestyle. Even Mussolini criticized him for spending too much of the summer on the Riviera. "It's not a place for serious reformers to linger in villas or grand hotels for more than a few days," he told Lord Lyvington, later the Earl of Portsmouth.⁸²

Mosley possessed the skills and enough energy to launch a new political movement and a new love affair at the same time. He met twenty-one year old Diana Mitford-Guinness, wife of brewing heir Brian Guinness in the spring of 1932. From the beginning, Diana accepted Mosley's dedication to his new political party. Raised with a sense of responsibility as the counterpart to privilege, she soon dedicated herself to fascism and its leader. Diana asked the same question thousands of others did, "What

⁸¹ Cross, *Fascists*, 68.

⁸² Earl of Portsmouth, *A Knot of Roots: An Autobiography* (London, England, Geoffrey Bles, 1965), 159; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 126-7; George E. G. Cotlin, "Fascist Stirrings in Britain," *Current History*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (February, 1934): 546.

else was there? The Tory and Labour parties were failures, and Mosley was forceful and persuasive.”⁸³ Many individuals who were disillusioned with the current government began to view Mosley as a future prime minister. Diana wanted to be an important part of society, and mistress of the prime minister ranked above being a brewer’s wife.⁸⁴

At first, their affair conformed to the rules of upper-class conduct; Mosley and Diana were discrete, and Mosley’s wife Cimmie pretended she did not know. However, Mosley and Diana believed their affair to be a great love that should not be restricted by the rules of aristocratic society. Diana risked everything and divorced her husband to become Mosley’s mistress openly. Mosley’s refusal to respect convention provided proof to his critics of his inflated ego and opportunism. While his lack of respect for tradition slowed his acceptance among the older generation, it did not cause concern among his peers.⁸⁵

Mosley had confidence in his abilities as both leader of the movement and potential leader of the nation. He realized that to achieve these goals he must define his social and economic policy. Mosley’s economic policy consisted of stimulating domestic demand and economic autarky influenced by the example of the United States with its large home market insulated from the instabilities of the world economy. In his book, *The Greater Britain*, Mosley explained the cause for Britain’s economic problems resulted from its failure to keep pace with changes in science and technology, which then

⁸³ Jan Dalley, *Diana Mosley*, (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 89.

⁸⁴ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 127; Dalley, *Diana*, 89.

⁸⁵ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 128.

led to the overproduction of goods. Mosley attacked the importation of cheap foreign goods, as he claimed they damaged manufacturing and agriculture.⁸⁶

Mosley understood that joining the fascist movement meant the rejection of Britain's traditional political system. For many of his followers this idea was the main appeal of fascism; for others it posed the biggest obstacle to joining the BUF. Mosley advocated an authoritarian state that would be above party and sectional interests. Mosley believed effective government within the existing framework was not possible and wanted to rewrite the British Constitution. Based primarily on the Italian model, Mosley's corporate state organized the entire industrial and commercial sector into a network of twenty-four groups. The coordinating body, the National Council of Corporations, composed of laborers, employers, and consumers working for the national interest, would determine output, wages, prices, and profits in each industry. The British Union of Fascists would be the only political party, and fascist members of Parliament would replace local authorities to ensure implementation of the national plan. The plan gave power to a leadership that could carry out the people's will unobstructed by traditional parliamentary procedure. Parliament would represent occupational franchises from miners to housewives and could dismiss the government by a vote of censure. In the event of a dismissal, the king would appoint new ministers. This increased control of Parliament by the king appealed to many people on the right.⁸⁷

Like Hitler and Mussolini, Mosley disliked the title of dictator, because it carried the stigma of a ruler exercising his will over the people. He preferred the term leader, the

⁸⁶ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 128; Hamilton, *Appeal*, 264; Cotlin, *Fascists*, 547.

⁸⁷ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 129; Cross, *Fascists*, 71-73; Hamilton, *Appeal*, 264.

fascist leader being the embodiment of the people's desires and nothing should obstruct his work. At first Mosley proposed an executive team but later decided a single individual proved more efficient. The leader must be prepared to assume absolute responsibility, and Mosley believed he had all the necessary skills to head the BUF.⁸⁸

Many recruits found the degree of faith required of them to be too great and left the movement. Others left because of internal disagreements that plagued the movement from beginning to end. Like a small fascist state, the BUF had all of its authority concentrated in its leader. The group did not hold meetings to decide policy or elections to choose officers. Mosley consulted with six to eight of his senior members on important matters, but decisions were his alone. Disobedience or criticism of policies resulted in expulsion. Mosley's absolute authority had success in some respects. The BUF did not argue about policy or discipline, which gave them more time to appeal for voters. On the other hand, it created an atmosphere of intrigue, with officials competing against each other to get Mosley's approval.⁸⁹

The structure of life within the movement was important. The BUF conducted its own holiday camps, produced its own brand of cigarettes, and had its own ceremonies for fascist weddings and funerals, all designed to build corporate loyalty. The most important symbols of the movement were the insignia and uniforms. The black shirt, modeled after Mosley's fencing uniform, had a high, polo neck and fastened with buttons over the left shoulder. Mosley, and those who could afford them, had tailor-made silk shirts; others had cotton ones. Regulations called for the shirt to be worn with grey

⁸⁸ Cross, *Fascists*, 73.

⁸⁹ Cross, *Fascists*, 75.

pants, but most members preferred to wear black. Women members, recruited under the leadership of Mosley's mother, wore black blouses with matching skirts and berets.⁹⁰

In the beginning, the movement adopted the *fasces*, the ancient Roman emblem of authority that Mussolini had revived. The fascists wore the badge on their uniform shirts, and it appeared on flags, posters, and printed materials. After 1935, the movement adopted a new insignia, a flash of lightning within a circle, which from a distance looked like a Nazi swastika, but Mosley insisted that his form of fascism was "British, through and through."⁹¹ The lightning represented the fascist power of action and the circle symbolized the unified fascist state. From the start, the BUF adopted the Roman salute with out-stretched arm. These were the circumstances with which Mosley hoped to set up an entirely new form of state. Three months after the foundation ceremony, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. At the same time Britain's unemployment figure reached an all-time high of almost three million and current government appeared incapable of providing a solution. The time seemed right to copy Germany's revolutionary change, and in the early months of 1933 a mass membership drive began to respond to Mosley's vision.⁹²

Mosley believed the BUF would rise to power in Britain faster than Hitler had in Germany. The fact that the BUF had become a nationally known movement within weeks of its creation made him optimistic for the future. Hitler's success had great publicity value, and newspapers speculated whether Mosley was the British Hitler.

⁹⁰ Cross, *Fascists*, 76.

⁹¹ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 134.

⁹² Cross, *Fascists*, 77; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 134.

Recruiting occurred mainly in London, but also in Manchester, Birmingham, and South Wales. To keep recruits informed about activities and provide communication of Mosley's policies, the movement developed its own newspaper.⁹³

Blackshirt, the movement's first regular paper, started publication in February 1933; it contained eight pages and sold for a penny. Cecil Courtney Lewis served as the first editor and pioneered a literary style which labeled all opponents as scum or sub-human. Later, Lewis served as the movement's legal advisor during the numerous civil and criminal cases. Another important member who became Mosley's Chief of Staff was Ian Hope Dundas. Dundas had an impeccable social background; his father held the title of twenty-eighth Chief of Dundas and admiral. Dundas previously served in the Royal Navy, and as Mosley's personnel officer he conducted his duties in a military manner. His marriage in December 1933 became the first fascist wedding complete with a Blackshirt escort and Mosley as best man. Dundas wore his Chief of Staff's uniform, and the bride pinned a *fascies* badge on her dress. Dundas proved to be a capable Chief of Staff, bringing order to the chaotic affairs of a rapidly growing movement.⁹⁴

Mosley admired Nazism for its appeal to the German youth, but his movement was closer to Italian fascism. Mosley visited Italy regularly and received funding from Mussolini for several years. The BUF also shared the more relaxed Italian view of race as a product of the interaction of environmental factors, not the Nazi idea of race as biological. In April 1933, Mosley and his wife Cimmie took part in the International Fascist Exhibition in Rome, where British fascists carried a banner given to them with the

⁹³ Cross, *Fascists*, 78.

⁹⁴ Cross, *Fascists*, 79.

inscription, "For King-Empire and International Justice." The BUF carried the banner in Rome but never used it in England. The highlight of the trip for Mosley occurred when Mussolini granted him the special honor of sharing the saluting platform during the parade. When it rained Mussolini decided to appear on a covered balcony a quarter of a mile away. The Mosleys, however, remained on the official platform for two hours in the rain to acknowledge the salutes of the entire parade. For Mosley's wife, Cimmie, this event was the only time at a public event she showed support for fascism. A month later, at the age of thirty-three, she died in the London Clinic from peritonitis. Many of her friends found it difficult to believe she had turned fascist, but loyalty to her husband dictated her every move.⁹⁵

King George V, Queen Mary, and the Prince of Wales sent their condolences. Winston Churchill, David Lloyd George, and others made a public appeal for a memorial fund, which resulted in a day nursery established in her name. Churchill wept at the ceremony officiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. For a year after her death, Cimmie Mosley's body lay in a private chapel at Cliveden, home of Lord and Lady Astor. Her final resting place consisted of an elaborate tomb on the grounds of Mosley's home Savehay Farm, Denham. After Cimmie's death, Mosley devoted himself to the BUF, becoming the busiest opposition politician in England.⁹⁶

Mosley spoke at two or three large public meetings a week, visited new BUF branches, and supervised the rapid release of printed propaganda. Many in London society attended his debates, with Blackshirts maintaining order in the audience. In June

⁹⁵ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 131; Cross, *Fascists*, 84.

⁹⁶ Cross, *Fascists*, 85; Pugh *Hurrah!*, 131.

1933, Mosley led the first of the marches, which became an essential part of the BUF technique. The march with Mosley in front, accompanied by bands, banners, and about nine hundred men and one hundred women Blackshirts, paraded through the West End of London. One thousand participants in the march represented the majority of the active membership in London. While far from obtaining the political influence Mosley dreamed of, the BUF established the structure of a national organization and acquired more members every week.⁹⁷

With new members pouring in, the BUF quickly gained the revenue to move from its small rooms on Great George Street. In the autumn of 1933, Mosley leased Whitelands Teachers' Training College, Chelsea. The large building housed lecture rooms, dormitories, a gymnasium, and a parade ground. In an emergency, the BUF claimed five thousand Blackshirts could live there as a self-contained unit. Mosley renamed the building "Black House," but others referred to it as the "Fascist Fort." The members of Black House came from all areas of society and discipline problems surfaced. Rather than summoning the police, the Blackshirts maintained their own discipline using unconventional methods.⁹⁸

Within Black House, three categories of fascists performed the necessary duties to keep the operation running. The top level consisted of the movement's senior officials, numbering between twenty and thirty individuals, who used Black House as an office and only stayed there if they worked late. The second group numbering between fifty and two hundred, were the resident Blackshirts who did duty as guards, messengers, drivers,

⁹⁷ Cross, *Fascists*, 86.

⁹⁸ Cross, *Fascists*, 87.

and paper-sellers. They lived a military life-style with set meal and bed times. The elite core of the group acted as a special escort for Mosley and wore jackboots, and called itself the I Squad. At Black House, the I Squad patrolled the corridors on the lookout for intruders and created a fascist atmosphere. The third group consisted of the hundreds of unpaid Blackshirts who used Black House as a social center and headquarters. They stayed at Black House if kept late on duty or if they lost their jobs and needed a place to live. The cost of maintaining Black House caused disagreement within the movement. Some believed it concentrated activity at Chelsea instead of encouraging the formation of new branch offices. Black House also gave an impression of fascist strength to new members who became part of a powerful community. Black House created a distinctively fascist way of life and provided a fortress in the event of a communist revolution, which the fascists believed was a real threat.⁹⁹

By the end of 1933, the BUF ran the costly Black House, produced propaganda on a large scale, and paid its officials and journalists generous salaries, but few people knew how it was financed. The highest estimate of paid membership in December of 1933, approximately five thousand at one shilling a month cannot have been worth more than three thousand pounds a year, an insufficient sum to support the activities of the BUF. The balance came from Mosley, business, private individuals, and in the early days from Mussolini. Italian money provided the second largest source of income from 1933 to 1936, contributing over sixty-thousand pounds; only Mosley gave more, nearly one hundred thousand pounds. The BUF also received substantial financial backing from those who feared communism. The landed gentry who liked Mosley's plans for

⁹⁹ Cross, *Fascists*, 88; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 99.

developing agriculture contributed dozens of one hundred pound subscriptions. Even with several sources of income, BUF finances fluctuated from insufficient to flush, until Mosley instituted a strict method of control. The inconsistency of the availability of money appears to coincide with the idea of money arriving irregularly from Europe, and the problem of finances plagued the BUF throughout its existence.¹⁰⁰

The prospects for fascism at the start of 1934 seemed bright. Mosley began the year with a drive for new recruits, but he also wanted to improve the quality of the movement and gain more influential and financial support from conservatives. In January the BUF acquired a new and important supporter, Lord Rothermere. Influenced by Mussolini, Rothermere gave support to BUF activities through his newspaper articles for the next six months. Lord Rothermere, born Harold Sydney Harmsworth, became a baron in 1914 and first Viscount five years later. Among the richest men in England, Rothermere developed a strong fear of communism that became the motivating force for his support of Mosley's BUF and his admiration for Hitler. His fear of a communist invasion of Britain drove him to purchase large estates in Hungary to act as a buffer between Russia and the west. Rothermere believed that offering Hitler friendship and a free hand in Eastern Europe, where he could destroy Bolshevism, benefited the national interest.¹⁰¹

Rothermere started his campaign with a front page article in the *Daily Mail*. Headlined "Hurrah For the Blackshirts!" Rothermere claimed Mosley wanted to bring

¹⁰⁰ Cross, *Fascists*, 90; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 136.

¹⁰¹ Ian Kershaw, *Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry, The Nazis and the Road To War* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 58; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 149; Fortune, *Background of War* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937), 33,

Britain up to date. Italy and Germany had the best governed nations in Europe and Mosley could do the same for Britain by replacing the indecision of the national government. Conservatives feared the results of the by-elections if Labour gained additional seats. Many conservatives believed a Labour Party in power would abolish the House of Lords and dissolve the empire. To conservatives and aristocrats, the alternative, a fascist *coup d'état* seemed a better choice.¹⁰²

Support for Mosley appeared in another form with the creation of the January Club. At a series of dinner parties held late in 1933, the decision was made to form a club of intellectuals who promoted modern methods of government and an interest in fascism. The January Club lasted about two years. Its main activity was a monthly meeting where Mosley or other fascist members gave speeches and answered questions. At its height, the club attracted an attendance of two hundred or more. The initial membership list of the January Club contained current right-wing members of Conservative MPs including Viscount Lymington (Earl of Portsmouth) and former MPs Sir Waden Chilcott and Sir Fairfax Lucy. Other January Club members were already involved in the BUF or other pro-fascist organizations. The club also included many titled men including Lord Londonderry and even young Tory MPs such as Harold Macmillan.¹⁰³

Mosley had reservations about accepting support from Rothermere. He worried Rothermere wanted too much control of the movement and wanted to use it to gain power for himself. Mosley weighed the benefits and correctly concluded that the risk was worth

¹⁰² Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 149; Cross, *Fascists*, 95-6.

¹⁰³ Cross, *Fascists*, 101; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 146-7.

taking. Rothermere controlled a large part of the press including the *Daily Mail*, *Sunday Dispatch*, *Evening News*, and several dozen local newspapers. Rothermere disliked the word fascist and used the title “The Blackshirt Movement” in his newspapers. The papers praised the BUF as a modernizing, British movement of the younger generation that wanted to break the stranglehold old senile politicians had on the government. The *Sunday Dispatch* turned itself into a house journal for the BUF. The *Evening News* held a competition in which readers sent postcards with reasons why they liked the Blackshirts, hoping to win free tickets for major rallies including the one at Olympia in June 1934. Winning entrants included, “The Blackshirts place king and country above personal motive,” and “I like the Blackshirts because they stand for Empire Unity, and British public pride in the nation.”¹⁰⁴ After Rothermere’s first article, the *Daily Mail* printed twenty-six readers’ letters on fascism, all in support of the movement.¹⁰⁵

During the first six months of 1934, the Rothermere press made fascism so newsworthy that even opponents could not ignore the subject. With as many as a thousand new recruits signing up each week, members expected to gain power in twelve months. Colleagues realized the rapid growth of the BUF posed a threat to the national government, but they did not know how to respond. Most in government agreed that the use of force to suppress fascism would result in a backlash against democracy. Articles in the *Daily Mail* like “The Blackshirts Have What the Conservatives Need” expressed what many within the Conservative Party believed, the party needed to take action, and

¹⁰⁴ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 150.

¹⁰⁵ Cross, *Fascists*, 96; *Sunday Dispatch*, 22 April 1934. Quoted in Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 150.

the Blackshirts, who did not differ fundamentally from their parents the Diehards, would lead the way.¹⁰⁶

The view that the Blackshirts did not differ in principle from traditional conservative values seemed to overlook the fact that Mosley intended to eliminate parliamentary democracy, but the general dissatisfaction with the current government gave validity to the opinion. The national government had alienated many of its supporters by forcing through reforms which gave India increased autonomy. With the low opinion of the current government, support from Rothermere's press, and generous donations Mosley posed a serious threat to conventional politicians during the first half of 1934. The fascist movement began to attract a better class of recruits and an increase in its membership. The time appeared right for the fascist movement to campaign for seats in Parliament.¹⁰⁷

Mosley was not the only member of the BUF who attracted attention to the movement. When Hitler held his first Nuremberg Rally in 1933, the BUF's first official representatives seemed an unlikely choice. The British representatives included William Joyce, Captain Vincent, and Unity Mitford, sister of Mosley's mistress Diana. In 1934 Unity Mitford enrolled at a finishing-school run by Baroness Laroche, one of the many aristocrats who rented their houses to young well-connected British men and women. Unity begged her parents to be sent to Germany, so she could learn German and meet the *Führer*. She met him by sitting in the Osteria Bavaria restaurant until Hitler finally asked

¹⁰⁶ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 151; Cross, *Fascists*, 100.

¹⁰⁷ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 153-55; Rebecca West, *The New Meaning of Treason* (New York, New York: The Viking Press, 1964), 14.

her to join his table. Unity became one of the inner circle and accompanied Nazi leaders to meetings, rallies, and the Olympic Games. On her return to England, Unity publically expressed her admiration of Hitler's regime and adopted the Nazi salute. Diana, who accompanied Unity to the 1934 rally, came to Munich in October and November, and rented rooms. She returned on several occasions and soon joined Unity as a member of Hitler's confidants. The *Führer* cultivated the friendship of the two young Englishwomen whose aristocratic heritage and connections promoted his cause among British society.¹⁰⁸

In the second half of 1934, the BUF's handling of political opponents and the Jewish question forced many sympathizers to question their political motives. The first incident to damage the movement's reputation occurred on 7 June 1934, when eleven hundred Blackshirts marched from their headquarters to Olympia for a rally. Olympia, the second of three planned events designed to capitalize on the BUF's rising popularity, became as much a society occasion as political meeting. Months of propaganda in the Rothermere press had made the BUF fashionable, and much of the establishment, including 150 Members of Parliament, and large numbers of titled ladies and gentlemen, turned out to witness the event. The crowd of twelve thousand witnessed fifty-six Blackshirts carrying fascist flags and Union Jacks march down the center aisle followed by Mosley. After the National Anthem he began his speech, but hecklers interrupted him with shouts of "Fascism Means Murder" and "Down with Mosley." The aggressive behavior of the Blackshirts towards the hecklers drew criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. Reactions to the violence divided the public. Members of the BUF

¹⁰⁸ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 172-3.

believed its' violent response to the hecklers was justified and blamed the violence on a communist conspiracy to discredit Mosley. Others, such as MP Geoffrey Lloyd believed it showed the true nature of fascism, a movement that relied on oppression and violence.¹⁰⁹

The violent rally at Olympia had a negative effect on Mosley's fascist movement. Memberships declined from an estimated high of forty to fifty thousand to as few as five thousand in 1935. As a result of the negative perception of the violence associated with the rally, Rothermere pulled his newspaper support from the movement. The potential loss of advertising revenues and the BUF's justification of the "Night of the Long Knives," Hitler's purge of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) forced Rothermere to separate from movement. Additionally, Rothermere had hoped that an alliance between Mosley and the Conservatives would defeat Socialism in the next election. When the two groups failed to form a united front, Rothermere withdrew his support and looked for another way to combat the Labour party.¹¹⁰

Although Rothermere's newspapers stopped promoting the BUF after July 1934, their previous articles made the BUF newsworthy. Other newspapers continued to carry reports of Mosley's speeches, which helped keep the movement alive and for the remainder of 1934, the movement tried to regain its momentum. The BUF continued to struggle with strategy and organization in 1935. Caught unaware when the national government decided to hold an early general election in November, Mosley decided not to pursue office. This decision appeared to many as a sign of weakness and killed

¹⁰⁹ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 156-59; Griffiths, *Travellers*, 105; Hamilton, *Appeal*, 264.

¹¹⁰ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 168; Hamilton, *Appeal*, 265; Cross, *Fascists*, 116.

momentum until 1936 when anti-Semitic and pro-peace campaigns re-energized the movement.¹¹¹

If the decision not to participate in the general election hurt the BUF, the formation of the Anglo-German Fellowship (AGF) helped promote the cause among the rich and powerful. The AGF's founder, Ernest Tennant, a banker of impeccable social standing and cousin of Marot, Lady Oxford, spent a large amount of time in Germany on business. As a prominent pro-German spokesman he provided German Ambassador Ribbentrop with contacts to the aristocratic families in Britain. Since 1933, the changes that took place in Germany had impressed Tennant. German life had changed from a struggle of survival and the serious threat of a communist takeover to a country of prosperity. Tennant believed Hitler had arrived just in time and that communism could not be crushed easily. If the Nazis used heavy tactics, the alternative of a Bolshevik revolution would be worse. After accompanying a British trade delegation to Germany and seeing the attitudes of the delegates change from hostile to positive, Tennant became convinced of the value of such contact. On his return to London, Tennant decided to the Anglo-German Fellowship.¹¹²

From the start, the aim of the AGF was to attract the rich and powerful. It publically claimed among its members fifty members of Parliament, three directors of the Bank of England, and many generals, admirals, and bishops. The AGF did not want numbers; they wanted powerful names to influence the government. The Fellowship existed to promote good relations between Britain and Germany, and most of its members

¹¹¹ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 167; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 107.

¹¹² Griffiths, *Travellers*, 183.

did not support all the Nazi's policies, but the AGF did serve the purpose of making Nazi Germany respectable and accepted among the British elite. At meetings of the AGF, leading Nazis promote the merits of Germany's internal and foreign policy, showed fascist films, and arranged invitations for its members to attend the Nazi Congress at Nuremberg. The AGF attracted an impressive list of names including Lord Mount Temple, Lord Londonderry, Lord Redesdale, several MPs, and the Duke of Hamilton, who gained notoriety when Rudolph Hess, the Deputy Fuhrer named him as his contact after his flight to Scotland in 1941. Lord Mount Temple represented the old guard who regarded socialism as subversion. He saw a strong Germany as the best deterrent to a Bolshevik takeover of Europe. The AGF led a strong shift among the British elite to pro-Germanism, which took place around 1936.¹¹³

The events of 1936 proved to be a turning point in British attitudes towards fascism, Germany, and war. The year's events divided the country over several never before seen issues, convincing many in Britain there must never be another war with Germany. On the morning of 7 March 1936, when German soldiers marched into the Rhineland, the British government realized it must not become too involved in European affairs. The British viewed France's reaction as unreasonable and a danger to peace. With the Franco-Soviet Pact in place, the British public, especially the aristocracy, saw themselves in danger of being brought into European commitments on behalf of Bolshevik Russia. Hitler offered to enter into an air pact with Great Britain and re-join the League of Nations, offering peace with Britain while threatening France. The result of

¹¹³ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 185-6; Kershaw, *Hitler*, 56; Lynn Pickett, Clive Prince, and Stephen Prior, *Double Standards: The Rudolf Hess Cover-up* (London, England: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 145.

Hitler's actions caused disagreement between the Britain and France and strained their relationship.¹¹⁴

The fear that Britain might be drawn into a war on the side of France and Russia caused outrage among members of the aristocracy. Lord Mount Temple, chairman of the AGF, in a letter to the *Times*, stated that "a war in defense of Bolshevism would be deeply repugnant to the mass of the British people."¹¹⁵ Anti-French feeling produced sympathy for Germany and even increased admiration for Hitler and the Nazi regime which had prevented Germany from falling into a state of Bolshevism. The *Saturday Review* ran a series of articles which reflected Lady Houston's anti-Bolshevism and her urgent pleas for British rearmament. The articles influenced public opinion by spreading the opinion that with fascist regimes in Italy and Germany dominating Europe, Bolshevism could not carry out its plans for the disintegration of civilization. Other articles titled *Hitler at Home* stressed his love of children and animals along with his desire for peace in his time.¹¹⁶

Another supporter, Lord Londonderry, had returned from trips to Germany in January and February, where he met Hermann Goring, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and on 5 February Hitler himself. The friendship formed during the visit resulted in a visit by the Ribbentrops, who flew to Northern Ireland for a long weekend at the Londonderry's Mount Stewart, the weekend of the "swastika over Ulster." In a letter to the *Times*,

¹¹⁴ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 200-1; Fortune, *Background to War* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 37.

¹¹⁵ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 205.

¹¹⁶ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 207; Fortune, *Background*, 38.

Londonderry justified Germany's invasion of the Rhineland and asked Britain to partner with Germany, a country forced to take desperate measures to avoid a communist revolution. Such statements were effective among the Conservative anti-Bolshevik Right who believed in the collaboration of the French Deputies and press with Moscow. Mosley, too, reacted in favor of Germany, and his article in *Action* stated "We fought Germany before in a British quarrel; we are not going to fight them now in a Jewish one." The BUF peace campaign had begun.¹¹⁷

At this time, many in London society were not only pro-German but pro-Nazi, headed by hostesses such as Lady Cunard, Lady Londonderry, and the Channons. Chips Channon represented the typical aristocrat impressed by the glamor and excitement of the new regime, but unconcerned with the realities behind the show. Channon, the Conservative Member for Southend, travelled in royal circles and took every opportunity to advance himself socially. Chips and his wife represented the kind of set which indulged in the Nazi festivities at the Olympic Games.¹¹⁸

A large number of British aristocrats went to the Olympic Games in Berlin, which started on 1 August, 1936. Many received personal invitations from Hitler or Ribbentrop and were treated like royalty. The Nazi leadership spared no effort to put on a show aimed at presenting the regime's best face to the world and especially to important British guests who might help further friendship with Germany, which remained an important part of Hitler's vision. The events at the Olympic Stadium were accompanied by extravagant displays of hospitality by leading Nazis trying to outdo each other by

¹¹⁷ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 208; Kershaw, *Hitler*, 144, 152; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 156.

¹¹⁸ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 220; Dalley, *Diana Mosley*, 215.

providing entertainment for hundreds of foreign guests. Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Propaganda Minister, held a party for three thousand guests on Peacock Island, formerly the summer residence of King Frederick William III and Queen Louise of Prussia. The next night Goring held his garden party for eight hundred or so guests in Berlin.¹¹⁹

Chips Channon described the extravagance of the occasion in his diary, describing the effort the Germans made to show the world the grandeur, the permanency, and the respectability of the new regime.¹²⁰ They had their own assistant who collected them with a Storm Trooper as a driver. Channon praised his hosts as “masters of the art of party-giving. The English pour in, and are jealous of one another’s activities and privileges.”¹²¹ The British press also praised the performance of the Nazi regime’s athletes. Besides the Olympic festivities, Hitler entertained representatives of the Anglo-German Fellowship along with Lord Rothermere and Lord Beaverbrook. Even the former Prime Minister and war leader David Lloyd George returned home praising the new Germany and the greatness of its leader. George’s message to the British people was that the German people admired the British and wanted to stand with them against the common Bolshevik enemy.¹²²

The Olympics were not the only attempt to impress the British people with the new Germany. The Nuremberg Rally began on 8 September, and every year it had been

¹¹⁹ Hans-Otto Meissner, *Magda Goebbels: A Biography* (London, England: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), 153; Griffiths, *Travellers*, 221; Anna Maria Sigmund, *Women of the Third Reich* (Ontario, Canada: NDE Publishing, 2000), 86.

¹²⁰ Robert Rhode James, *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London, England: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 106.

¹²¹ James, *Chips*, 106.

¹²² Griffiths, *Travellers*, 224; Dalley, *Diana Mosley*, 221.

Nazi policy to attract as many prominent British people as possible, but their attendance in 1936 reached a new high. Official invitations were given to almost all who attended the Olympic Games. Lady Ravensdale, daughter of Lord Curzon and sister-in-law of Sir Oswald Mosley, claimed she attended because other prominent English citizens had been invited by von Ribbentrop. The English guests of honor stayed at the Grand Hotel and attended an informal party where they met Hitler, Goring, Goebbels, von Ribbentrop, Hess, and other Nazi leaders. The reactions to the rally printed in the British press were positive and resulted in a renewed interest in an Anglo-German alliance.¹²³

After the favorable impression Hitler made on the British elite who visited Germany during the summer of 1936, Mosley believed Britain was ready for the British version of a fascist regime. With new uniforms and a concern over Jewish influence on elections in the East End of London, Mosley planned a march for Sunday, 5 October 1936. Mosley wanted the march to be the biggest show of fascist strength the East End had ever seen. The Jews feared the march would be the beginning of a real program. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War increased tensions between socialists and communists and the communists urged their supporters to stop the march. The Blackshirts expected the march to be a battle, and between two and three thousand came prepared to fight. Thousands of protestors vowed not to let Mosley pass and blocked the streets. The police tried to clear a passage for traffic and Mosley's procession, but after several failed attempts the Home Office ordered the Blackshirts to disperse. Before dismissing his men, Mosley made a short speech accusing the government of surrendering to the Red violence and Jewish corruption. The failure of the BUF to

¹²³ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 227-8.

complete their Cable Street March appeared to be a victory for the opposition, but in reality it did not damage the movement. Almost all the fighting took place between the police and the anti-fascist demonstrators and did not solve the Jewish problem in the East End. In the weeks following the protest, the BUF membership gained two thousand recruits, tensions eased, and Mosley went to Berlin.¹²⁴

Mosley's trip to Berlin had a two-fold purpose, a second meeting with Hitler and an opportunity to secretly marry Diana Mitford. Under Prussian law the marriage remained a private matter, not part of the public record as in England. The marriage party consisted of the bride and groom; two British witnesses and Joseph and Magda Goebbels, who Diana had stayed with during the Olympic Games. Hitler attended as a guest and gave the couple a picture of himself in a silver frame as a wedding present. Mosley kept his marriage a secret, even to his children from his first marriage. During 1937 rumors appeared in newspapers, but no official announcement came until December 1938 after the birth of their first son. Mosley claimed the marriage was kept a secret to protect Diana from the special risks attached to his life.¹²⁵

Mosley returned from Berlin to become involved in the Abdication Crisis of December 1936. The BUF supported King Edward VIII in his desire to marry Mrs. Wallis Simpson and keep his throne. The movement believed Edward to be the ideal king for a fascist Britain. Mosley had family ties to the royal family; his grandfather the fourth baronet had been a close friend of Edward VII, the king's grandfather. During the

¹²⁴ Cross, *Fascists*, 161-2; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 227; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 111.

¹²⁵ Mary S. Lovelle, *The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family* (New York, New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001), 206; Cross, *Fascists*, 163-4.

1920s, Mosley had traveled in the same social circles as the then Prince of Wales, and his sister-in-law had even married the prince's best friend. The idea that Edward supported a fascist revolution seems unlikely, but before he came to the throne some of his comments favored the fascist cause. During a conversation, he told Louis Ferdinand of Prussia that "dictators were very popular these days and we might want one in England before long." Similarly, Chips Channon, recorded in his diary that Edward too was going the dictator way, was pro-German, against Russia and against too much slipshod democracy. Though such views were common in upper-class circles in the 1930s; the prince's habit of sharing such comments with important foreigners indicated his ignorance of the importance of his position.¹²⁶

From the beginning, support for the monarchy had been a fascist characteristic. Fascist writers, such as Chesterton, wrote enthusiastically of Edward's accession to the throne. When news broke of the king's intent to marry Mrs. Simpson, Mosley called on the BUF to stand by the king. The determination of the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, to force the abdication of Edward VIII divided the British people and Parliament into two camps. One side backed Baldwin who believed the king too irresponsible to rule and Mrs. Simpson morally unfit to be queen. The real problem lay in the fact that since becoming king, Edward had confirmed all of Baldwin's doubts his concern over social problems, his support of Hitler and Mussolini, and his intention to handle foreign affairs embarrassed the government. Edward's disregard for his constitutional role created a

¹²⁶Pugh, *Hurrah!* 243; Cross, *Fascists*, 164.; James, *Chips*, 85; Kate Auspitz, *Wallis: My War* (London, England: Quartet Books, 2011), 61; Editors of Fortune, *Background of War* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937), 40; Robert Lacey, *Majesty: Elizabeth II and the House of Windsor* (New York, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 49; Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 240; Fortune, *Background*, 40.

favorable view of him in Germany as a leader, not a figurehead and the *Anglo-German Review* newspaper praised him as a splendid king.¹²⁷

Opposition to Edward's abdication was stronger, both among the people and politicians, than Baldwin had realized, and the King's Party formed in his defense. The leading members in the King's Party were Churchill, Lord Beaverbrook, Lord Rothermere, Sir Oswald Mosley, Viscount Lymington, and others. With the crisis developing many within the government saw the possibility of Churchill forming a government that would include Mosley. Crowds assembled on Downing Street to demonstrate against the forced abdication. The abdication controversy stimulated fascism because it spoke to the fascists' need for patriotic leadership and the rebellion of youth against the old political traditions. Despite Churchill's support, Mosley's speeches, and favorable public opinion, Edward VIII chose not to fight. On 10 December Edward signed the Instrument of Abdication, and the next day made his broadcast to the nation. Great Britain had a new king, George VI who succeeded in re-establishing the stability of the monarchy. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor, however, continued to create problems for the British government during the next few years as they remained of interest to Nazi leaders who believed that the couple had influence in Britain.¹²⁸

The events held in Germany during 1936, such as the Olympics and the Nuremberg Rally, showcased fascist policies. The positive impression made on visitors, especially those from Great Britain, helped further Mosley's cause by increasing membership and revenue. At home, in England, the BUF's support for the king during

¹²⁷ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 246; Lacey, *Majesty*, 58; Ziegler, *Edward*, 237; Charles Higham, *The Duchess of Windsor: The Secret Life* (New York, New York: MacGraw-Hill Book Company, 1988), 126.

¹²⁸ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 255-6; Ziegler, *Edward*, 284.

the abdication crisis gave conservatives additional reason to sympathize with the fascist cause. When 1936 came to a close, many within the fascist movement looked forward to 1937 with optimism.

Chapter Four: The Decline of Fascism in Great Britain

After the excitement of the Olympics, the Nuremburg Rally, and Edward VIII's abdication, many in Britain were anxious to turn the public's focus back to domestic issues. The Battle of Cable Street increased the hostilities between fascists, communists, Jews, and working-class people in the East End. As a result of the escalation in the level of political violence, the government passed the Public Order Act, on 1 January 1937, in an attempt to contain the situation. The Public Order Act (POA) reflected the police concern about the use of uniformed paramilitary groups which might challenge their authority in law enforcement. The terms of the POA forbade the wearing of political uniforms except on ceremonial occasions, the use of stewards at open air meetings, and the use of insulting words in public speeches. Police had the authority to ban marches or alter their routes if they threatened the peace. Viewed by many MPs as a necessary piece of legislation, it limited the right of free speech, a fact denounced by both fascists and communists.¹²⁹

The British Union (BU), the new name for the BUF, turned its attention to the London County Council elections. The BU decided to contest three double-member constituencies. Mosley chose Anne Brock Griggs, the BU's Chief Women's Organizer, Charles Wegg-Prosser, a Catholic lawyer to appeal to the Irish vote, and the anti-Semitic William Joyce. The BU conducted a strong campaign of over one hundred meetings with Mosley speaking six times in each constituency. The campaign was also the first

¹²⁹ Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985* (New York, New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987), 113,115.

public appeal for funds made by the BU, which led to about seven hundred contributions, about half of them anonymous.¹³⁰

The results of the election on 6 March 1937 fell short of the victory the BU wanted but did prove the existence of a body of support for fascism. The BU received twenty percent of the vote, despite the opposition of the large Jewish community in the East End. Mosley, encouraged by the election, believed the BU could win in borough elections, but their candidates finished at the bottom in the polls. The poor showing of the BU in the elections of 1937 resulted in a series of internal problems from which it did not recover.¹³¹

The movement faced a shortage of money, and Mosley pledged to give his whole income to the movement, but this amount did not cover the salaried positions in the BU. The money crisis forced Mosley to dismiss over one hundred of his paid speakers and officials. He thanked them for their service and explained the need for their continued service without pay. Mosley explained the cuts in a public statement as the way to put the BU on a stable foundation to insure the future of the organization.¹³²

The loss of two of the best-known leaders of the BU, John Beckett, Director of Publications, and William Joyce, Director of Propaganda, crippled the movement's ability to distribute printed materials. They formed a rival organization, the National Socialist League. Led by Joyce, the new group reflected his views and became violently anti-Semitic. His book, *National Socialism Now* (1937) Joyce explained his beliefs as

¹³⁰ Colin Cross, *The Fascist in Britain* (New York, New York: St Martin's Press, 1961), 166.

¹³¹ Cross, *Fascists*, 167, 168, 169.

¹³² Cross, *Fascists*, 170.

revolutionary patriotism and called for the deportation of oriental criminals who supported communism. Besides being anti-Semitic, Joyce was passionate about maintaining the British Empire, especially its control over India. The last topic Joyce covered in his book was his love for England and his wish to preserve its greatness for the future.¹³³

The Nationalist Socialist League never became a serious political force, but it attracted enough support to provide Joyce with an income. Beckett left the organization at the time of Munich Agreement when Joyce said that in the event of war he would go to Germany to fight for Hitler. Joyce believed the war came down to a struggle between Hitler and the Jews and in fighting for Hitler he served Britain's best interests. The National Socialist League was formally dissolved in September of 1939.¹³⁴

While Mosley struggled with the re-organization of his fascist movement, a number of prominent people visited Germany. Lord Londonderry and Benito Mussolini were Goering's guests towards the end of the year. Many other aristocrats attended the Nuremberg Rally in September and came away with positive reviews. The lesson of Nuremberg was, in the view of the British press, that the Germans wanted peace with Great Britain, and efforts should be made to bring about an understanding between the two nations that would ensure peace. The visits of British aristocrats to Germany

¹³³ Cross, *Fascists*, 172; Rebecca West, *The New Meaning of Treason* (New York, New York: The Viking Press, 1964), 14.

¹³⁴ Cross, *Fascists*, 173; West, *Treason*, 14.

received coverage in the British press, but none received more acknowledgement than the October trip of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.¹³⁵

For the British government the Duke of Windsor continued to be a problem because he remained an object of interest to the Germans, who believed that he still held influence with policy makers. His rejection by the British establishment, and the refusal of the royal family to address his wife as Her Royal Highness, made the Duke susceptible to German flattery. When the Duke and Duchess announced their plans to visit Germany in October of 1937, attempts were made to deter them from the trip. The Duke claimed the trip's purpose was the study of housing and working conditions, but the Duke's ambition to secure an alliance between Britain and Germany was not a secret. The visit began on 11 October and received extensive press coverage. Under the supervision of Nazi official Robert Ley, the Windsors met Goering, Hess, and Goebbels. The Duke spoke fluent German and attended private meetings with Nazi leaders. At the end of the week, the Goebbels gave a formal dinner party. Besides the Duke and Duchess of Windsor the guests included Charles and Anne Lindbergh and many members of the military. However, the highlight of the trip was an audience with the *Führer* at Berchtesgaden.¹³⁶

The press followed the Duke and Duchess everywhere, and pictures of them with Hitler appeared in the British papers. Greeted by huge crowds, the Duke responded with

¹³⁵ Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers Of The Right: British Enthusiasts For Nazi Germany 1933-1939* (London, England: Constable, 1980), 269, 270; Ian Kershaw, *Making Friends With Hitler: Lord Londonderry, The Nazis and The Road To War* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 202; Kate Auspitz, *Wallis: My War* (London, England: Quartet Books, 2011), 89.

¹³⁶ Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Backshirts!: Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (London, England: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 257; Auspitz, *Wallis*, 92,96; Griffiths, *Travellers*, 272, 273; Hans-Otto Meissner, *Magda Goebbels: A Biography* (London, England: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), 136.

a modified Nazi salute, something between a wave and the full gesture. On two occasions, however, he did give the full salute: the first at a training school to an honor guard from the Death's Head Division and the second, to Hitler himself. The Nazis still believed that the duke had the possibility of power and could develop an English form of fascism and an alliance with Germany. As for his visit, the Germans believed it would cause embarrassment to the British government and make good publicity for German's social policies.¹³⁷

British reaction to the visit was mixed, but even those in favor of an Anglo-German rapprochement were aware of the inappropriate nature of such political activity by the ex-king so soon in his successor's reign. Mosley stated that the BU remained loyal to the crown, but not necessarily loyal to the present monarch. The design of fascist propaganda reminded working men of the interest Edward VIII had taken in them and that he was forced to abdicate because of his determination to do something for the laboring class. This complemented Mosley's attempt to exploit the economic discontent of manual workers in the late 1930s.¹³⁸

The popularity of the *Anglo-German Review* during the first six months of 1937 led to a readership of twelve thousand, where it remained until early 1939. From its beginning the paper was pro-Nazi but had emphasized the ex-service card, stressing comradeship and the need for togetherness. Sometimes, prominent people expressed their faith in Hitler. Lady Londonderry, who had visited Hitler with her husband twice in 1936, wrote in February 1937 describing Hitler as a symbol of the new Germany and a

¹³⁷ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 273.

¹³⁸ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 257.

born leader. She believed that he stood for peace and for friendship with the English. He saved Germany from communism and might need to save Europe as well. In July, a new group for Anglo–German friendship was founded, the Link, which identified closely with the *Anglo-German Review*. Led by Admiral Sir Barry Domvile, the Link identified openly with the Nazi regime. Unlike the Anglo-German Fellowship which attracted the upper-class, the Link had members from all classes and occupations.¹³⁹

By the end of 1937, German attitudes towards Great Britain were changing. The coverage of German intervention in the Spanish Civil War by the British press strained the friendship. Continued enthusiasm for German friendship remained in political and social circles, but despite the success of the Anglo-German Fellowship and the Link, realized the extent of the danger to peace Germany presented. The events of 1938 reinforced that fear.¹⁴⁰

The start of 1938 brought the resignation of Britain’s Foreign Secretary, Sir Anthony Eden, which gave the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain the chance to bring into the government more fascist sympathizers including Henry “Chips” Channon. In March, domestic politics took a backseat to Hitler’s occupation of Austria. Mosley’s opinion reflected the widely held view that no one could reasonably object to this action: “what on earth does it matter to us if Germans unite with others of that race?”¹⁴¹ Many among the aristocracy found nothing wrong with Germany’s action or the methods. Lord Tavistock supported Germany in the *New English Weekly*, and Lord Londonderry in the

¹³⁹ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 277.

¹⁴⁰ Griffiths, *Travellers*, 287.

¹⁴¹ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 276.

House of Lords, said that Europe and the whole world owed Germany gratitude for averting a civil war in Austria. In Lord Londonderry's view, which he expressed in his book, *Ourselves and Germany*, Britain's failure to offer friendship to Germany in the past, was partially responsible for Hitler's actions. Others began to fear, as Chips Channon recorded in his diary, that Czechoslovakia would be the next acquisition by Germany.¹⁴²

Hitler's demand for the Sudetenland and its German population received approval from fascists and from many Tories who believed it would remove barriers to Anglo-German friendship. The Anglo-German Fellowship emphasized the oppression of the Sudetenland Germans by the Czech government and that Britain must avoid allowing France to trap them in this dispute. The preservation of Great Britain and the empire was more important than the fate of certain countries on the European continent. Mosley insisted that Britain must not intervene to prevent one group of Germans practicing self-determination by joining with another. On this basis, he launched a major new campaign, Britain First, in July 1938.¹⁴³

However, self-determination was not the only reason why some in Britain did not want to be connected with Czechoslovakia. Many feared and hated Czechoslovakia's ally Soviet Russia. At a time when Hitler's victims numbered in the hundreds, Stalin's purge had killed millions. The idea of bringing the Red Army into Europe appalled Chamberlain, who despised the Bolsheviks more than the Nazis and fascists. As the Sudeten crisis unfolded, the fear of another Great War forced the British Prime Minister

¹⁴² Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 287, Robert Rhode James, *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London, England: Weindenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 218; Kershaw, *Hitler*, 222, 224.

¹⁴³ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 276; Griffiths, *Travellers*, 297.

to become involved diplomatically and prevent a Franco-German war. Chamberlain viewed the prospect of war with horror. He believed the deaths of 700,000 British soldiers, among them his cousin, must never be repeated. So with the goal of pressuring the Czechs to surrender, Neville Chamberlain made three trips to Germany in September 1938; the first to Berchtesgaden, then to Bad Godesberg, and finally to Munich.¹⁴⁴

The announcement of the Munich Settlement in September 1938 made an extraordinary impact on British society, bringing relief to a country on the brink of war. The AGF hailed Munich for putting an end to the entire post-war hostility between Britain and Germany and establishing a new era of cooperation. In the *Times*, Lords Mount Temple, Londonderry, and Redesdale described the agreement as a rectification of the most flagrant injustice of the Treaty of Versailles. Mosley praised the Munich agreement and in a speech at Manchester insisted that Hitler could be trusted to keep it. The Duke of Windsor expressed his relief in a letter to a friend, when he wrote that war could destroy both democracies and dictatorships, giving the victory to the communists.¹⁴⁵

Munich turned out to be a turning point for the apologists for Nazi Germany. Leading Nazis believed at a time of crisis between the two countries the AGF seemed to have little influence. They became increasingly irritated by criticism in the British press of their treatment of the Jews. In November, when the AGF expressed concern over *Kristallnacht*, German delegates returned to Berlin surprised at the narrow-minded views

¹⁴⁴ Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler, and The Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* (New York, New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 222; Griffiths, *Travellers*, 298.

¹⁴⁵ Cross, *Fascists*, 187; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 277; Griffiths, *Travellers*, 305.

of the British public. Lord Mount Temple resigned as AGF president in protest at the persecution of German Jews, and within weeks the organization lost half its members.¹⁴⁶

During the ten months between Munich and the outbreak of war, Mosley tried to consolidate his connections with mainstream politics. He reduced the number of BU candidates and focused on seats held by socialist warmongers. Mosley hoped this action would lead to an understanding with the conservatives. William Joyce believed that Mosley wanted to return to the Conservative Party. Mosley's desire to maintain his contacts with respectable people can be understood as an attempt to remain involved in the pro-peace and anti-Semitic groups that had emerged in late 1938 and early 1939. Most groups had little public impact, except for one, the Right Club.¹⁴⁷

The Right Club was the creation of Captain Archibald Henry Maule Ramsay, who came from the landed, aristocratic, and military background that produced several Scottish fascists. Ramsay, an MP since 1931 became aware of the dangers of communism during the Spanish Civil War. Like most fascist sympathizers, Ramsay maintained his loyalty to the national government until 1939, when he concluded that Chamberlain had bowed to Jewish pressure and started conscription. The new organization, like the AGF, intended to influence members of the establishment and protect its members by keeping their names secret. The original membership list consisted of 135 men and 100 women, already prominent in other pro-German organizations. Among them were the Duke of Wellington, William Joyce, Lord Redesdale, and several MPs. Although the Right Club became associated with spying

¹⁴⁶ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 278; Griffiths, *Travellers*, 339.

¹⁴⁷ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 280; Lynn Picknett, Clive Prince, and Stephen Prior, *Double Standards: The Rudolf Hess Cover-Up* (London, England: Little Brown and Company, 2001), 82.

during the war, it was not a significant movement at this stage. The club was an attempt to coordinate the fragmenting anti-war movement and provide it with some focus and leadership.¹⁴⁸

Hitler's action in March 1939, when German troops marched into Prague and dismantled what remained of the Czech state shocked many people in Britain. Mosley refused to accept that Germany was guilty of unprovoked aggression. As for the British government's guarantees to Poland in March and Romania in April, Mosley called them nothing short of a suicide pact. In April he toured northern England to spread the message that Britain had nothing to fear from Germany. The enthusiastic response to his speeches convinced many Blackshirts that their movement was once again on the rise. As public opinion became divided over the prospect of war, the BU's membership increased. On the eve of war, the movement had between twenty and thirty thousand members.¹⁴⁹

The climax of Mosley's peace campaign occurred in London on 16 July 1939 when a rally held at Earl's Court attracted an audience of around twenty thousand. In his two-hour speech Mosley attacked the Jews, pacifists, and communists. He insisted Hitler was not mad and that if he wanted to attack Britain he would have done so last September when the country was helpless. Mosley decided to walk a fine line between patriotism and rebellion by stating that Britons would fight for Britain, but not for a (Jew's) quarrel.

¹⁴⁸ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 281; Picknett, *Hess*, 82.

¹⁴⁹ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 285.

Mosley believed the crisis created by a war would give the BU its best opportunity to obtain power; for this reason he intended to maintain his campaign for peace.¹⁵⁰

On 1 September 1939, German troops crossed the Polish border, forcing Britain to uphold its guarantee. After a last minute attempt to avoid war, on 3 September, Chamberlain announced Britain's entry into war. Fascists responded to the outbreak of the war in different ways. William Joyce made good on his promise to fight for Hitler and on 26 August he and his wife left for Germany. He had intended to fight in the German army but became a broadcaster in the Propaganda Ministry. Joyce became the infamous Lord Haw-Haw, who after the war was hanged as a traitor. Others choose loyalty to Britain over sympathy for Nazi Germany. Some, such as the Marquis of Graham and the Duke of Hamilton, joined the military while continuing to be involved in pro-peace activities. Others were confused and frightened, the most famous example being Unity Mitford. Unable to bear the thought of war between the two countries she loved, Unity went to the English Garden in Munich and attempted suicide. The bullet lodged in her brain without killing her. Incapable of caring for herself, Hitler sent her to England. Unity never recovered and required constant care until her death, ten years later.¹⁵¹

Mosley and the BU took a more moderate stance. Mosley stressed that as the country was at war, his members must do nothing to injure it or to help any other power. In effect the BU stayed between the war and peace camps, encouraging members to do

¹⁵⁰ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 286.

¹⁵¹ Cross, *Fascists*, 190; Thurlow, *Fascism*, 249; Mary S. Lovell, *The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 291; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 289; Pickett, *Hess*, 82; West, *Treason*, 14, 35.

their duty to the country, but continuing to campaign for peace. The real strength of the peace campaign lay in its influence behind the scenes in Parliament, the government, and the royal family. Many among the aristocracy had no interest in war. They anticipated a repetition of the social and political problems that had accompanied the First World War and many upper-class people feared the extreme taxation, which a long war makes necessary. Mosley and the BU continued its campaign against the war and for peace until May 1940 when German troops reached the Channel.¹⁵²

When German troops reached the Channel, members of the BU knew the peace movement was over. Britain faced possible invasion, the country needed to stand together and most fascists choose to defend their country, even against fellow fascists.

¹⁵² Griffiths, *Travellers*, 371; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 291, 296; Pickett, *Hess*, 83.

Conclusion: Fascism After 1940

Fascism in Britain ended in May 1940, and except for one short-lived group, has not been revived. After May 1940, the arrests made under “Regulation 18b” grew until there were over sixteen hundred British subjects in prison without trial. About three-quarters of the detainees were former members of the British Union. The decision to terminate the activities of British fascism and to intern the leading members resulted from several factors. The fall of Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and the failure to stop the attack on France brought to an end the “Phoney War” period. These events led to a fifth column scare that was reinforced by the Rothermere press that placed suspicion on all aliens, fascists, and fellow travellers as potential traitors. Fascism was seen as a potential Nazi threat, and Mosley was seen as the prime candidate for a puppet dictator. For these reasons, the new Prime Minister Winston Churchill believed there should be a round-up of enemy aliens and suspect persons in Britain.¹⁵³

The Tyler Kent affair proved to be the event that triggered the internment of British fascists. The Tyler Kent affair came to light when British MI5 agents, who had infiltrated the Right Club, uncovered a breach of national security. They discovered a connection between a member of the Right Club, the American Embassy clerk Tyler Kent, and a member of the Italian Embassy. Kent had shown intercepted documents between Churchill and President Roosevelt to MP Archibald H. Maule Ramsay. If Kent published this material in the United States, there was a possibility Roosevelt might not

¹⁵³ Thurlow, *Fascism*, 194; Cross, *Fascists*, 195.

be re-elected, and if in Britain, Churchill's government would fall. The Secret Service acted and Tyler Kent had fifteen hundred copies of secret documents in his possession. Along with these documents, it was uncovered that Ramsay and Mosley were collaborating to unify fascist, anti-Semitic, and peace groups. This information led to Mosley's arrest on 23 May and in July the government banned the organization.¹⁵⁴

According to the Home Secretary, Sir John Anderson, the detention policy was designed to intern BU activists and organizers not ordinary members. Some suspects were not arrested, with the hope that they would lead to further discoveries, especially the female fascists whom the misogynists of British security regarded as especially dangerous. For this reason, Diana Mosley avoided arrest until the end of July, even though security reports described her as more dangerous than her husband and willing to stop at nothing to achieve her goals. Diana Mosley's ex-father-in-law, Lord Moyne, took the opportunity for revenge by sending summaries of her diary entries to Lord Winton, Chairman of the Security Executive. Despite this information the authorities preferred to leave her at home where they tapped her phone and opened her mail. Her eventual arrest proved embarrassing because she was a nursing mother and had an eighteen-month-old child. The children remained at home in the care of a nanny for the duration of her confinement, until 1943.¹⁵⁵

One of the interesting aspects of the detentions under "Regulation 18b" was not who was arrested, but rather who was not. Nearly all of the leading aristocratic fascists,

¹⁵⁴Thurlow, *Fascism*, 195; Jan Dalley, *Diana Mosley: A Biography* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 256.

¹⁵⁵Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 306; Mary S. Lovell, *The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 359; Dalley, *Diana*, 256, 259.

including Viscount Lymington, Lord Tavistock, later the Duke of Bedford, Duke of Buccleuch, and Viscountess Downe, who had been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Mary, escaped arrest. In the case of the Duke of Buccleuch, George VI accepted his resignation as Lord Steward of the Royal Household in an attempt to distance himself from someone who was pro-Nazi. Another person the king needed to remove from any involvement with the war effort was the Duke of Windsor. The duke's defeatist attitude raised questions about his loyalty to England. Enough was known about German intelligence to place the Duke and Duchess under suspicion of collaboration with Germany to form a new government favorable to a negotiated peace. This situation embarrassed King George VI and worried members of the government. Churchill's solution was the appointment of the Duke as Governor of the Bahamas. This post placed him far from any involvement in war efforts, yet provided him with a face-saving position. The duke and duchess did not view the appointment as an assignment worthy of an ex-king. Instead they perceived it as another insult from the royal family. Years later, unable to return to England and living in Paris, the Windsors became acquainted with the Mosleys. The couple's friendship resulted from their similar war experiences and their beliefs that World War I had been a total failure, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire should not have been broken up, the Versailles Treaty was unfair, and Germany should never have been encircled in the 1930s. Even so not all who had connections in the government escaped arrest, two of Churchill's cousins by marriage, Diana Mosley and Gorge Pitt-Rivers, were imprisoned.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 374, 375. 468; Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 302; Charles Higham, *The Duchess of Windsor: The Secret Life* (New York, New York: MacGraw-Hill Book Company, 1988), 390.

Although the detention of pro-fascists made sense in the context of the invasion scare that gripped Britain in May 1940, after eighteen months of being held in prison without a trial some people came to believe that Britain had become the kind of totalitarian state admired by the fascists. In fact, the number of BU members in prison had been reduced to 130 by April 1942. The Mosleys expected to be released once the fear of a German invasion had faded and the investigation had failed to turn up incriminating evidence. Although Churchill was embarrassed by their imprisonment, he did not want to upset his Labour colleagues or their followers. Nevertheless, Churchill provided Mosley with his best weapon. Tom Mitford, Diana's brother, had dinner with Churchill at Downing Street in December 1941 to ask for their release. Lady Redesdale, Diana's mother used her forty-year friendship with Churchill's wife, Clementine, to lobby for their release. Walter Monckton and Lady Ravensdale, Mosley's sister-in-law, also pressured friends and relatives in the government for their freedom. As a result of the family's intervention, Churchill persuaded the Home Secretary to allow interned couples to be reunited in prison. At this stage, Mosley's ill health opened up a new prospect of release.¹⁵⁷

Churchill's relaxed attitude towards the detainees probably reflected his belief that the influence of the pro-peace movement had diminished. Even the attempted bid for a negotiated settlement by Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess did not change Churchill's belief that an effective peace party no longer existed in Britain. By 1943, Mosley and the peace cause had become so discredited that Churchill saw no danger in releasing him. The recurrence of phlebitis in Mosley's leg gave Churchill the opportunity to release him for

¹⁵⁷ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 310; Dalley, *Diana*, 272.

health reasons. Mosley's release was conditional. He promised not to engage in any form of political activity for two years, to avoid contact with his followers, to limit travel to seven miles from home, and to report monthly to the police. Still only forty-seven when released, Mosley wanted to return to politics and some of his followers felt the same. By 1944 they had begun to meet as The Friends of Sir Oswald Mosley, and on 15 December 1945 over eleven hundred gathered for a social and dance. However, the time was not right for the revival of the movement. Mosley continued to speak at private meetings and circulated a monthly newsletter to supporters. Finally in October of 1947, he re-launched his movement by publishing *The Alternative* and holding a rally at Farringdon Street in November. In February 1948, he became the leader of what became known as the Union Movement, campaigning for Europe to become a single nation, using Africa as its estate to provide raw materials. This idea of a united Europe closely resembled the European Union of today.¹⁵⁸

Despite attempts by Mosley to resurrect his career and the emergence of several extreme right-wing movements in post-war Britain, fascism never succeeded in posing the serious challenge it did between the wars. The Second World War weakened the fascist cause in several ways. Throughout the inter-war period fascists had spread the idea that politicians and their corrupt parliamentary system would prove inadequate in the face of a real national crisis. Yet Britain managed, without deserting its traditional system, an authoritarian wartime strategy that enabled it to achieve victory. After 1945

¹⁵⁸ Pugh, *Hurrah!*, 314,315; Cross, *Fascists*, 201; Dalley, *Diana*, 273, 289, 290; Lynn Picknett, Clive Prince, and Stephen Prior, *Double Standards: The Rudolph Hess Cover Up* (London, England: Little Brown and Company, 2001), 168.

Britain had a different national story which made the earlier fascist theory about conspiracy, decline, and revolution appear irrelevant and defeatist.

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