

# Sir Oswald Mosley and British fascism



Mosley inspects an assembly of 'Blackshirts', c.1935

Was British fascism ever a real player in British politics? What influence did Sir Oswald Mosley gain over major political events?

## Exam links

**AQA 2M** Wars and welfare: Britain in transformation, 1906–1957

**Edexcel paper 1, option 1H** Britain transformed, 1918–97

**OCR Y142/Y112** Britain 1900–1951

**F**ascism has never taken hold in the UK and no fascist has been elected to Parliament. However, there have been times of crisis when there were fears that fascism might make a breakthrough by unleashing a breakdown in public order that would lead to a fascist government.

British fascism did produce in the 1930s one figure of political influence: the aristocratic Sir Oswald Mosley. An impressive figure both physically and intellectually, he might, with better judgement, have become leader of the Conservative Party or, later, the Labour Party. Commentators at the time expected

him to be a future prime minister, but instead he chose to follow the fascist route to power and in that he failed utterly.

An important factor in the emergence of fascism was the catastrophe of the First World War. The destruction of European empires, the death of millions of people, and the economic slump which followed, led people to question the old order and the entire political system. Physically and mentally damaged soldiers returned home to find that the land 'fit for heroes' they had been promised did not materialise, and that they were relegated to the margins of society. Some blamed the Jews for their plight and looked to 'new movements' for fundamental change.

## British fascism in the 1920s

The success in 1922 of Benito Mussolini in creating a fascist regime in Italy was admired by leading British politicians. Sir Winston Churchill, for example, saw Mussolini as a strong advocate of anti-communism and ally against the Bolshevik government in Russia. A pro-Italian British Fascisti (BF) movement was formed in 1923 by the Duke of Northumberland with the support of Nesta Webster, a writer dedicated to exposing an alleged international conspiracy of Jewish bankers.

The BFs attracted members from the right of the Conservative party with a programme of support for the empire, nationalism and patriotism, and anti-immigration. They were, though, a pale reflection of the movements then developing in continental Europe and were described as 'conservatives with knobs on'. Membership reached 100,000 but the organisation declined in the late 1920s, partly because of the lack of a charismatic leader.

## Sir Oswald Mosley

Born in 1896, Mosley served in the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War as an observer. Injured in a plane crash, he transferred to the army and experienced the horrors of trench warfare, including witnessing gas attacks. The slaughter of British troops at battles such as Ypres was a major influence on his thinking and he was determined that such a war should not happen again. He believed Western civilisation was in decay and that only a modern movement of the young that could generate a 'rebirth'.

He was taken with the romantic ideas of Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle, who argued that history was made by 'great men' such as Napoleon. Mosley, too, believed 'in the magically gifted individual who transforms his era and people', and, indeed, thought of himself as a new Caesar, who would transform society following the inevitable economic 'crisis'.

Mosley viewed the success of state intervention and national planning during the war as a model for rebuilding a shattered economy. Tariffs on imported goods in a protected 'Greater' Britain, which included

the empire, would end class war and improve the lives of patriotic workers. This was not fascism, but it could lead to it.

Tall, impressive looking and a national fencing champion, the 22-year-old Mosley stood at the general election of December 1918 as a Conservative. He became disillusioned by the government's failure to rebuild the country and, in 1924, joined the radical Independent Labour Party (ILP) as a route into the Labour Party.

## Labour Party

Mosley was seen as the 'coming figure' in the Labour movement and was spoken of as a future leader of the party. He created a small band of acolytes and put forward proposals to deal with the economic slump and growing unemployment. Influenced by the work of J. M. Keynes, later to become Britain's most important economist, Mosley's plans might have worked but were rejected by a traditionalist Labour Party for being too radical.

Impatient, unwilling to compromise and dismissive of colleagues who did not share his sense of urgency, Mosley resigned from the party to seek 'action'. Critics thought him vain, egotistical and solely concerned with the pursuit of power.

In 1931, he created the New Party, a centre party which drew together people from different parties and classes. It had considerable backing from industrialists to fund a major campaign, but failed miserably at that year's general election. Mosley decided that he had finished with political parties and would create a movement based on those in Italy and Germany.

## The British Union of Fascists

Mosley launched the British Union of Fascists (BUF) with a small band of followers to 'win power for fascism'. Recruits wore black shirts modelled on

Mosley stands with Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini in Rome, 1943





Mosley's fencing tunic. An interesting aspect of the membership, which grew rapidly, was that it attracted a group of 'fascist feminists', former suffragettes who found in the BUF, at least initially, the same 'courage, action and loyalty' they had previously experienced.

In early 1934, MI5 became alarmed that Mosley was supported by the industrialist Lord Nuffield, owner of Morris cars, as well as the press baron, Lord Rothermere, owner of the high circulation *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail*. MI5 feared the BUF might develop into a serious threat to the political system.

### Fascism and the press

On 15 January 1934, the front-page of the *Daily Mail* was headlined 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'. They were praised for having the same energy and purpose as Hitler and Mussolini. On the back of the publicity generated by Rothermere's national newspapers, BUF membership grew to 40,000.

Mosley spoke at 200 meetings a year, and major events attracted crowds of 10,000. Most meetings were peaceful but occasionally serious violence occurred. The BUF Defence Force was seen as particularly provocative and began to be associated with violence. The Home Office viewed this as a threat to public order.

A meeting at Olympia in June 1934 led to major violence between the fascist stewards and anti-fascists, with shocking reports of hecklers suffering severe beatings. Mainstream politicians were horrified by the levels of violence, though Rothermere's papers continued to support the Blackshirts, who now received the endorsement of Hitler and Mussolini.

Backing from the Nazis was contingent on the Blackshirts adopting anti-Semitism as a policy. Such a campaign was launched, with the claim that Jews were provoking conflict between Britain and Germany which might lead to war.

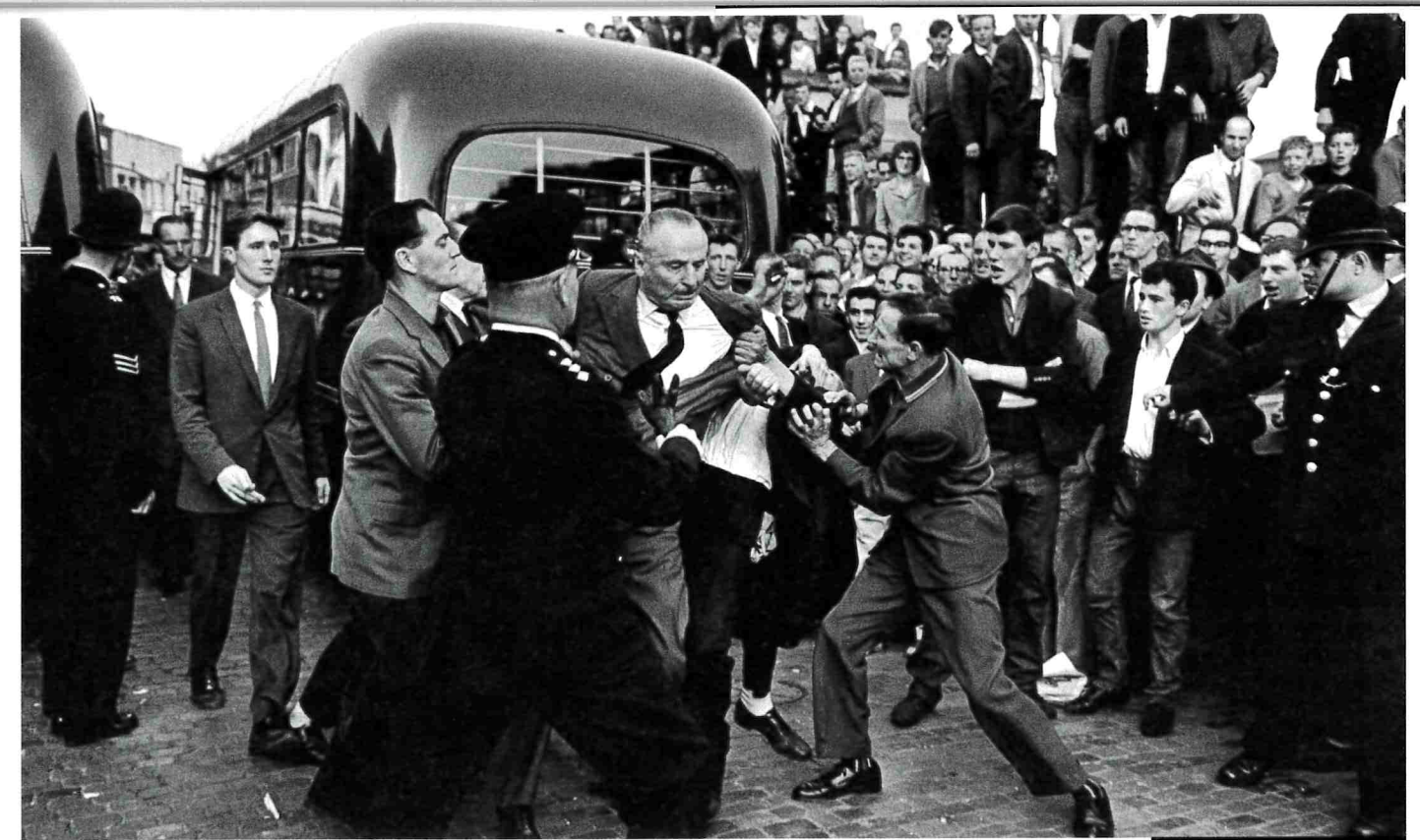
Rothermere came under pressure from Jewish businesses that threatened to stop advertising in his newspapers unless he ceased his support of Mosley. Rothermere duly obliged, which instantly cut the BUF's access to mass publicity.

### Mosley and the dictators

Rothermere had introduced Mosley to Mussolini, who agreed to subsidise the BUF. At least £1.2 million was secretly given to Mosley as part of a propaganda effort to create a 'universal fascism' movement across Europe.

Hitler's financial support was smaller but his backing was more significant. Hitler had sympathy with Mosley and arranged for him to marry his fiancée, Diana Mitford, in secret in Berlin (in Joseph Goebbels' drawing room). MI5 knew from its agents that there was secret funding but did not know the details, which were closely guarded by Mosley and his wife, who often met Nazi leaders.

In 1936 in order to bolster recruitment, Mosley openly embraced anti-Semitism and the myth that Jewish bankers were behind attempts to undermine the economy. It was less racial than the Nazi version, which viewed Jews as less than human, but Mosley's rabble-rousing anti-Jewish speeches were very provocative.



Mosley's provocative rhetoric continued into the 1960s and often resulted in conflict

### The 'battle' of Cable Street

Mosley also adopted a militant stance. Renamed the British Union, members wore a black uniform modelled on the Nazi SS with a peak cap and jackboots. An anti-Semitic campaign was launched in London's East End where a number of Jewish refugees lived in a climate of fear as Blackshirts marched through the streets, with Jewish shops and businesses attacked. The provocations came to head on 4 October 1936 when Mosley planned to march 3,000 Blackshirts through the area. They were opposed by 100,000 people, the largest anti-fascist demonstration yet seen in London. Between them were 6,000 police.

The myth of Cable Street is that there was a battle between Mosley's men and the anti-fascists. In fact, when the police could not clear a way through for the Blackshirts, Mosley cancelled the route and turned away from the East End. It was a major victory for the residents and although it was not the end of British fascism, Mosley's image was severely dented. The battle led to introduction of the Public Order Act, which forbade the wearing of political uniforms. This ban effectively finished the BU as a major movement, though there were two further occasions when Mosley was seen as a serious threat to parliamentary democracy.

### The abdication crisis

During 1936, King Edward VIII announced his wish to marry a divorcee, Wallis Simpson, plunging the country into constitutional crisis. The BU identified itself with the young king, who was promoted as 'England's sore need — a benevolent dictator'. When the prime minister warned the king that he would have to abdicate if the marriage went ahead, Mosley called for a 'King's Party', which MI5 feared might collaborate with the king's supporters and seize power. In the end, the king decided to go quietly.

### Second World War

The second occasion when Mosley was considered a genuine threat was at the beginning of the Second World War, when the Germans invaded Western Europe and British and French armies were in full retreat. MI5 stoked fears that a 'fifth column' made up of Mosley supporters with links to Nazis would aid an invasion of the country by the Germans. In the summer of 1940, Mosley and his wife were interned and over a thousand BU members imprisoned under Regulation 18b in camps on the Isle of Man.

Most were released within a year, but a hard core of Mosleyites were not freed until it was evident that Germany would lose the war. Deeply affected by their internment, the majority did not return to fascism but a few, very bitter at their treatment, were determined to revive the movement.

### Post-Second World War

The actions of the Nazis resulted in one of the greatest tragedies in human history: the Holocaust and the killing of 6 million Jews. However, there

A mural commemorates the 'battle' of Cable Street, when thousands of Londoners opposed a Blackshirt march



### Questions

- Who were the fascists in Britain?
- Why did fascism fail as a political creed in the 1930s?
- Why, in particular, did Mosley not succeed?



were still Mosley supporters who wanted to revive the pre-war movement. Some adherents became 'Holocaust deniers'. They refused to accept that the death camps had existed and produced what we now call 'false history', claiming that millions had died as the result of disease and not as part of an extermination policy.

Following the killing of British soldiers by Jewish terrorists in response to British resistance to the creation of a Jewish state in Israel, an anti-Jewish campaign by Mosley's newly formed Union Movement did find limited support in the late 1940s but was short-lived. The British public always associated Mosley with the violence of the pre-war period and his backing of Hitler and Mussolini.

From the 1950s to the late 1970s there were parties such as the British National Party and the National Front, which supported anti-immigration policies and presented a 'respectable' kind of fascism. These could poll up to 20% in local elections, but they were incapable of an electoral breakthrough.

### Why did fascism fail?

Britain had a stable parliamentary system and, despite a deep recession, there was no great crisis which fascism could exploit. Instead, the public voted for the conservatism of Stanley Baldwin and his 'safety first' policy. His right-wing national government had a massive majority throughout the 1930s and deprived the extremists of major issues to exploit.

Fears of communism were misplaced. In Britain, the Communist Party rarely ventured from the political fringe with only 6,000 members, many of whom left when employment revived.

Recession was also not felt everywhere in the country. The north suffered mass unemployment and appalling living conditions but this was generally

### Further reading

- Dorril, S. (2017) *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism*, Thistle.
- Hemming, H. (2017) *M: Maxwell Knight, MI5's Great Spymaster*, Preface.
- Holmes, C. (2016) *Searching for Lord Haw Haw: The Political Lives of William Joyce*, Routledge.

met with an air of resignation. In contrast, the south enjoyed an economic boom and, for the first time, cheap housing and consumer goods became available to a wide section of the public.

Although anti-Semitism was commonplace and there was an increasing drift to the right, the public, often conservative, highly patriotic and anti-German, did not like the importation of foreign ideas. Strutting around in Nazi-style uniforms was viewed as being distinctly non-British.

In addition, there was the question of Mosley's character. Although a brilliant orator who engendered intense loyalty among his followers, others saw him as a vain, arrogant and hugely egotistical man whose sole aim was the pursuit of power. He was also very bad with his timing. Fascism might have worked during the slump of the 1920s but not in the 1930s with the threat of war on the horizon.

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## Using this article in your exam



How could this article be useful in your exam?

We all know that the study of history often involves consideration of the role of individuals in shaping events. The characters focused on are often political leaders of some sort or another (kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers). This is unfortunate in some ways as the past has been influenced not just by 'great' figures but by those who are deemed, for one reason or another, to be more peripheral. Oswald Mosley falls into the bracket of lesser-known political characters. But, as Dr Stephen Dorril's article points out, he was a character who nonetheless had an important role in the way British politics was developing during the interwar period.