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Mosley, Sir Oswald (1896-1980)

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Abstract:

Sir Oswald Mosley was one of the most controversial British politicians of the twentieth century. He was elected twice as a Member of Parliament (1918-24 and 1929-31) and was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The only significant figure in inter-war British fascism, he founded the New Party in 1931 and, in 1932, the British Union of Fascists, which was associated with anti-Semitism and violence. He was interned by the British government during the Second World War and in the post-war period created the Union Movement. He died on 3 December 1980.

Main text:

Sir Oswald Mosley remains one of the most controversial British politicians of the twentieth century through his association with fascism, violence and anti-Semitism. Between the wars contemporaries saw him as a potential future leader of either the Conservative or the Labour party, though colleagues believed his overweening pride would have prevented him ever achieving high office. His service with the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War was cut short by injury but the war proved crucial in forming his political philosophy, like other “Front Generation” fascists (White 1992) who claimed their creed was conceived in the trenches. His time in the Ministry of Munitions provided a model for national-planning and state intervention.

In December 1918 Mosley was elected as the youngest MP to Parliament as a Conservative Unionist in the Coalition government. He subscribed to the “socialist imperialist” ideas of Joseph Chamberlain – an industrial council, nation above class, social efficiency, centralised state power, and a controlled economy – which, argued Bernard Semmel (1960: 24-26), he later welded into a British fascism. Mosley was a brilliant speaker but was a loner and egotist, never happy within a party structure. He ditched the Conservatives but realised that as a “man of action” – he identified with George Bernard’s Shaw’s version of Caesar – he needed an institutional base. In April 1924, he joined the Independent Labour Party.

A political magpie who synthesized others’ ideas, he was influenced by guild socialism as a third way between syndicalism and orthodox socialism, and took economic policies from the ILP’s chief thinker, J.A. Hobson, who also paved the way for Mosley’s “rational” anti-Semitism (Dorril 2006: 78). Mosley’s 1925 pamphlet *Revolution by Reason* included reference to “the obscure and secret working of the hidden bankers’ hands” (24-25). Mosley was one of the first politicians to take seriously the economic ideas of J. M. Keynes. He has been seen as a proto-Keynesian, though he was chiefly an ideological national planner and Keynes was not.

He resigned as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, a non-Cabinet post, in May 1930, unable to persuade colleagues to pursue his policies on unemployment. Mosley launched the New Party in 1931 with funds from car manufacturer William Morris, with a programme of nationalism, class harmony, and anti-parliamentarianism. When the National Government was overwhelmingly elected in October, he abandoned conventional politics for Corporatism and a movement of youth.

He founded in October 1932 Britain’s most important fascist movement, the British Union of Fascists (BUF), which the Home Office feared might achieve power through unconstitutional means. Mosley drew financial support from newspaper baron Lord

Rothermere and the Italian Fascist leader, Benito Mussolini. The majority of BUF meetings were peaceful but there were significant incidences of violence in clashes with anti-fascist demonstrators, such as Olympia (1934) and the Battle of Cable Street (1936). The BUF was associated with anti-Semitism. Whether its promotion was a cynical move by Mosley or a genuinely held belief is still debated. Biographer Robert Skidelsky (1981) favoured an interactionist model in which the BUF and anti-fascist demonstrators were caught in a chain of provocation and counter-provocation but later modified this view. Evidence from internal debates suggests anti-Semitism was a central policy plank. During 1933 Jews were attacked as “alien financiers”, responsible for “Jewish rackets.” The anti-Semitic rhetoric was switched on and off depending on press reaction, anti-fascist response, and the demands of his funders.

Mosley’s marriage to Diana Guinness in 1936 provided access to the highest levels of the Nazi regime and new funding. The subsequent national socialist orientated British Union did not, however, produce the anticipated breakthrough. The approach of war brought new support but Mosley and his followers were interned at the beginning of the conflict under Regulation 18B and any threat was nullified. After the end of the Second World War Mosley claimed his Union Movement was not fascist but its platform was a rehash of familiar themes with one addition, “Europe a Nation” (Mosley 1947), which appealed to a continental network of neo-fascists and neo-Nazis. The Notting Hill riots of 1958 briefly raised expectations but he was humiliated in the subsequent election and his influence on the extreme right remained limited.

The release in the 1990s of Home Office and MI5 documents produced new research (Thurlow 1998) on the New Party (Wortley 2010), women in the BUF (Gottlieb 2003), Mosley post-war (Macklin 2007), and local studies; the transition from the New Party to the BUF, links to Empire fascist movements, and international networks remain under researched.

SEE ALSO: anti-Semitism; fascism; National Socialists (Nazis).

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