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# British Fascism: A Regional Perspective

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MA History by Research



The University of Huddersfield

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April 2018

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## **Abstract**

The early 1930s saw a wave of Fascism sweep across Europe. It had a varied impact across many European countries; Germany, Italy and eventually Spain; were engulfed into the movement whilst Britain managed to resist. In Britain, the Fascist movement is considered to have been a minor threat to British politics but became a significant focus of conflict in a climate of fear about the rise of European Fascism. Though always a minority movement British fascism did gain support in three main areas - in parts of Yorkshire, south Lancashire and in London – where it posed major concerns for the British government. This raises the question of who supported fascism in these districts and why?

This dissertation aims to understand the appeal that resonated with some of the inhabitants of Britain's key fascist regions of Yorkshire, Lancashire, and East London. Each region was an area of local strength for the British Union of Fascists, at a time where European Fascism was an increasing concern to national security. This work aims to understand the extent to what some constituents of these key regions supported Mosley's economic recommendations to address the unemployment crisis. Also, to what degree did Mosley's recruitment strategies succeed in gathering local support and which local policies assisted with the party's popularity?

This study explores the local motivations and the nature of local recruitment, evaluating the events that shaped the success of the British Union of Fascists. Mosley's militant approach often led to abrupt decisions, directional party changes and internal disruption, this study reveals the effects of such leadership at a local level.

A variety of primary sources have been used to draw these conclusions, they include the extensive number of speeches delivered by BUF executives, party materials and pamphlets,

autobiographies of party members, public labour surveys as well as readings from speeches delivered at the House of Commons.

Part of the appeal lies in the way Mosley adjusted his speech to correlate with local interests.

Its decline may be due to how he later lost sight of his original political and economic visions, becoming too entwined in notions of anti-Semitism, which ultimately resulted in a less engaged dwindling membership.

## Chapter One - Introduction

The threat of Fascism dominated Continental politics during the interwar years. The social and economic infrastructure of many European nations had been left in a state of disrepair after the First World War and further economic dislocation emerged after the global economic crash of 1929. This global distress paved the way for the emergence of extreme political parties from both the left and the right. Indeed, a wave of radical change overcame European nations like Italy and Germany, who gave way to Fascist dictators in Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Frustration emerged in Britain, resulting in the British government coming under pressure to address and rising unemployment levels, declining industries and a shrinking economy, and this helped promote fascism in Britain. Indeed, Oswald Mosley, the founder of the British Union of Fascists, propelled himself as the saviour, aiming to guide the country and Empire into a position of social and economic stability.<sup>1</sup>

Oswald Mosley was a member of both the Conservative and Labour Party between the Great War and the early 1930s, until he left the Labour Party after his economically based Mosley Memorandum on how to tackle the unemployment crisis in 1930 was narrowly defeated both by the Labour government and the Labour Party Conference of 1930. After his resignation, he pursued his Memorandum through the extension of the Memorandum into the Mosley Manifesto. Mosley expressed his frustration with the political system by advocating a redistribution of power that would give Parliament general control and a cabinet of five would be placed to enforce decisions. The decision for the government to gain greater control demonstrates Mosley's personal frustration with the current system and more specifically, the

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<sup>1</sup> P. Stocker, 'The Imperial Spirit: British Fascism and Empire, 1919-1940', *Religion Compass* (February 2015), pp. 50-53.



barriers that prevented his policies moving forward. This eventually led Mosley to launch the New Party in February 1931.

The Mosley Manifesto, and the formation of the New Party was heavily influenced by the government's failure to deal with the unemployment crisis.<sup>2</sup> The Mosley Manifesto suggested revolutionary economic reform and challenged the orthodox notions that occupied parliamentary discussions after 1918. It advocated the nationalisation of the banks and encouraged consumer credit for the unemployed, in the hope of influencing a rise in demand and injecting currency back into the economy. It also recommended early retirement and a higher school-leaving age to reduce the labour market. Indeed, the Manifesto suggested expensive public works schemes, import tariffs and a central trade organisation to break up monopolies. This was all to be enforced under a reduced cabinet of five, a maverick strategy that was not publicly consented to by other MP's, despite it gathering some private interest by a small group of followers who were all critical of the government's failure to act on the unemployment issue.<sup>3</sup>

Mosley's ideas represented a new economic philosophy which challenged the orthodox view held by all the major political parties in the inter-war years that the pre-1914 economic orthodoxy of free trade could be revived to develop a booming economy which would tackle the problem of unemployment. A laissez-faire approach was consensually resumed by all but a selection of outsiders, which included the likes of Mosley and the economist John Maynard Keynes. However traditional policies were so deeply ingrained into the hearts of the nation that Mosley was never able to offer a realistic alternative. The New Party eventually crashed after it failed to occupy any seats in the general election of 1931.<sup>4</sup> After he failing to gather

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<sup>2</sup> T. Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-1939 Parties, Ideologies and Culture* (Manchester, 2000), p. 84

<sup>3</sup> J. Stevenson & C. Cook, *The Slump* (London, 1979), p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

public interest in The New Party, Mosley created the British Union of Fascists in October 1932, where he continued to pursue his economic ideas. However, the BUF and British fascism failed emphatically – not one of its members was ever elected in office and seven hundred and forty-seven of its members were imprisoned between 1940–1945.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, and perhaps because of the interest in European fascism, Mosley and the BUF have attracted considerable research and debate.

Jakub Drabik in his 2016 historiographical review of the British Union of Fascists mapped a chronology of fascist studies and how with the influence of new material, has changed the perception of fascism. Drabik cautiously subscribes to the argument that the academic historiography can be divided into three chronological groups: classic (1960s-70s), revisionist (1970s-80s) and the new consensus works (1990s-present).<sup>6</sup> The first group argued the resistance of liberal Britain was the principal cause for the failure of the BUF. Revisionist works moved away from the highly controversial biography of Mosley by Robert Skidelsky, recognizing that British Fascism failed for several reasons. The New Consensus remarked that previous works had a narrow focus on the failings of the BUF, resulting in the social and cultural elements being overlooked. The New Consensus reveals local fascism and fascism as a culture, social attractions of the movement are explored and Julie Gottlieb discovers gender roles within the movement. Of course, not all works between these periods fall specifically into these categories, and the definitions of the works extend far beyond these definitions.

This dissertation, along with other scholarly work focusing on the local impact fits into the new consensus. It reviews material acquired from fascist newspaper publications such as; *Action*, *The Blackshirt* and *The Fascist Quarterly*, political party pamphlets from the BUF and the

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<sup>5</sup> N. McCloud, 'Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists: A Brief Historiographical Inquiry' *History Compass* (2006), p. 688.

<sup>6</sup> J. Drabik, 'British Union of Fascists' *Contemporary British History*, 30/1 (2016), pp. 1-19.

socialist league, responses to the Labour Party survey on fascism, municipal and bi-election results, Home Office records from the Public Records Office, Nellie Driver's autobiography, Special Collections from the Oswald Mosley Papers as well as records from *Hansard* to capture the emergence, success and failure of fascism from a local perspective.

The thesis argues that Fascism gathered interest in Yorkshire, Lancashire and East London through its association with local social and economic grievances, this strength also became a leading contributor in its demise - for the movement could not unify and find collective strength. Ultimately, its internal weaknesses, its radical challenge to the democratic system, its militancy and finally its pivot to intolerable anti-Semitic behaviour were all factors that gathered greater opposition than support, combining this with the strength of the state the BUF could have never posed anything more than an ideological threat to the national government.

British Fascism at the local level has attracted significant academic attention. Local studies revealed that the BUF recruited autonomously so they could connect with the electorate at a local level. By having such an interest in the local cause, Mosley found the movement gathering momentum in early 1930s, yet the nature of local aggravation was short term which caused fluctuations in membership patterns and create a general disconnect between the local and national movement.

Stephen Cullen uses a wide range of material to develop the work on the BUF in Scotland, suggesting that here the composition of street politics was considerably different to that in England, with religious sectarianism gathering wide interest, something the BUF failed to recognise and conversely argued had no place in a 'modern movement'.<sup>7</sup> Internal problems of leadership and funding, as well external opposition from the left and the nationalist right,

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<sup>7</sup> S. M. Cullen, 'The Fasces and the Saltire: The Failure of the British Union of Fascists in Scotland, 1932-1940', *The Scottish Historical Review*, Vol 87/2 (2008), pp. 306-331.

resulted in the BUF gathering limited support in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> Similarly in Northern Ireland, James Loughlin finds that the movement was autonomous from the parent BUF, specially designed to address local conditions, though followed a common political and economic corporatist policy.<sup>9</sup> The BUF faced religious and political complications in Northern Ireland, resulting in several splits within the fascist movement and it consequently never gaining significant ground. There is a growing interest into the development of the BUF in the Midlands, with work on Birmingham from John D. Brewer<sup>10</sup> and the West Midlands from Craig Morgan. Morgan analyses social class composition and the strength of the membership by focusing on local propaganda. He finds the movement gathered ideological support from the Midlands, but argues the sympathy found for the BUF failed to extend to the approval of Mosleyites and the militant actions of the BUF.<sup>11</sup> A similar story is told by Phillip Coupland in the case of Northampton. Coupland suggests the movement in Northampton relied heavily on the local leadership.<sup>12</sup> The BUF in Northampton had a small representation of four members during 1934, whilst the rest of the nation was seeing a surge in membership, where it was reported as high as 50,000 across the nation.<sup>13</sup> It was only after a visit from Oswald Mosley and the appointment of Branch Organiser, Harry Frisby that the movement began to take shape. Similar recruitment trends are evident when reviewing BUF activity across English towns. During Mosley's first speech he suggest the boot and shoe export industry, which had supplied Northampton with fortune, had almost vanished. He promised a home market substitute for

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>9</sup> J. Loughlin, 'Northern Ireland and British Fascism in the Inter-War Years', *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 116 (November 1995), pp. 537-552

<sup>10</sup> J. D. Brewer, 'The British Union of Fascists, Sir Oswald Mosley and Birmingham: An analysis of the Content and Context of an ideology' (MSocSc, University of Birmingham, 1975)

<sup>11</sup> C. Morgan, 'The British Union of Fascists in the Midlands, 1932-1940' (University of Wolverhampton, 2008), p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> P. M. Coupland, 'The Blackshirts in Northampton, 1933-1940', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, Vol.53 (2000), pp. 71-82.

<sup>13</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO144/20141.

foreign trade, via Empire autarchy.<sup>14</sup> This began to ignite recruitment, Coupland reported membership had doubled soon after his visit. Local studies reveal recruitment patterns and their effect in penetrating the electorate, Mosley targeted local grievances and aimed to provide an imperial solution. Whilst this was highly effective in the short term, the changing tides of the economy resulted in fluid membership figures.

Other local studies have examined oral material to understand the depth of fascism, Stuart Rawnsley interviewed former BUF members and Tom Linehan in his research into East London conducted a series of oral interviews. These interviews help build a picture of fascist perspectives, yet they hold limited value for the time between the events could distort one's memory, additionally the fear of association with continental fascism may have had an influence.<sup>15</sup>

Writings on British Fascism in the age of the new consensus has opened new debates on a variety of topics. Julie Gottlieb has explored several avenues, often looking beyond the extent of the BUF's electoral and ideological failings. Gottlieb has driven the historiography forward by focusing on the feminist fascist, the BUF's use of political marketing and technology and the impact of body fascism. The works on the feminist fascist revealed several previously unexplored themes, Gottlieb suggests the women attracted to the fascist movement were not divided into 'traditionalist' or 'fascist feminists', but were united in support of fascism defined by men.<sup>16</sup> The BUF offered women political participation and valued their devotion and contribution to leadership.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> P. M. Coupland, 'The Blackshirts in Northampton, 1933–1940', pp. 71-82.

<sup>15</sup> S. Rawnsley, 'Membership of the British Union of Fascists', Thurlow and Lunn, *British Fascism*, (London, 1980), p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> P. Lassner, Review: J. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement 1923–1945*, *Women's History Review*, 03/2002, Vol 11/ 1, pp. 133 – 160.

<sup>17</sup> N. Gullace, Review: J. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement 1923–1945*, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 13/ 3, (2002), pp. 320–322

Gottlieb's research into the BUF's use of political technology suggests the movement combined the intellectual property of the continental fascism with British populist and celebrity culture to form a new image of Fascism, a fashion.<sup>18</sup> Mosley expressed himself through militancy, he trained members to fight, wore a 'soldier-like' uniform and paraded himself as the saviour to all local and national grievances. Mosley attempted to connect with individuals through the fanaticism of the uniform and its aesthetic brutality.<sup>19</sup> Mosley created an offensive weapon, fuelled by its voyeuristic appeal and populist politics.

Gottlieb develops this notion of body fascism in a more recent article, 'Body Fascism in Britain: Building the Blackshirt in the Inter-War Period'<sup>20</sup>. To be a 'body fascist' in Gottlieb's terms, is to be a man or a woman pre-occupied with outward appearance and aesthetic self-perfection<sup>21</sup>. However, she argues that Fascism carried more style than substance. Mosley built a fashion, suppressed by its failed electoral success, its internal dilemmas and the strength and resistance of the public and state. Helen Pussard in her MA thesis, 'A mini-Blackpool' explores the appropriation of the Blackshirt culture with a specific focus on the BUF meeting at Belle Vue, Manchester in 1934. She found through the depiction of the Belle Vue meeting, that the BUF showcased their uniform, militancy, platform oratory and other forms of culture to create a political marketing tool, sought to flaunt the man ship of the Blackshirt culture.<sup>22</sup>

Paul Stocker has brought new attention to the BUF and imperialism. Stocker argues scholarly interest in the BUF's imperial vision has been negligible. He agrees that it has been subject to

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<sup>18</sup> J. Gottlieb, 'The Marketing of Megalomania: Celebrity, Consumption and the Development of Political Technology in the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 41/1 (2006), pp. 35-55.

<sup>19</sup> J. Gottlieb, 'Body Fascism in Britain: Building the Blackshirt in the Inter-War Period', *Contemporary European History*, 20/2 (2011), p. 136.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-136.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> H. Pussard, 'A mini-Blackpool: Belle Vue and the cultural politics of pleasure and leisure in inter-war Manchester', (unpublished thesis, University of Manchester, 1997).

debate in terms of economics, citing writings from Skidelsky, Linehan and Pugh.<sup>23</sup> Yet there is room for discussion beyond the assumption that the BUF's attachment to the Empire was derivative of conservative imperialists who sought to economically unite the Empire to protect British industry from Global economic downturns. Imperialism, whilst almost always going hand in hand with British fascism, took different forms and the extent to which fascist parties in Britain were considered imperialistic differs considerably.

The Empire was at the centre of the BUF's ideology, Mosley himself considered the BUF as the only possible saviour to Britain and its Empire.<sup>24</sup> William Joyce recognised the Empire as testament to Britain's greatness, and a renewal of imperial vigour was needed to reassert these values on Britain. Joyce wanted to foster imperial unity through totalitarianism and he blamed the decline in imperial values on democratic politics, political corruption and parasitical forces, such as Jews who were decaying the Empire from within.<sup>25</sup>

The BUF stressed the importance of imperialism in both foreign and domestic policy. Gordon Canning, the BUF's Director of Overseas Policy argued that only once Britain had achieved imperial unity, could they carry weight in European and World councils. Unity was defined by all the dominion nations being closer to the mother land. The BUF also sought to make the Empire relevant domestically, campaigning to the working classes the economic benefits of Imperial trade.<sup>26</sup>

Mosley's BUF created greater nationwide resistance than support. Nonetheless, Mosley's economic ideas struck a chord in three regions; Yorkshire, Lancashire and East London.

These regions shared economic uncertainty like the rest of the nation, but were not the worst

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<sup>23</sup> Stocker, 'The Imperial Spirit: British Fascism and Empire, 1919-1940', pp. 50-53.

<sup>24</sup> O. Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London, 1932).

<sup>25</sup> W. Joyce, 'Britain's Empire Shall Live' *The Fascist Quarterly* (1935), pp. 91-107.

<sup>26</sup> *Yorkshire Betrayed*, political pamphlet 1939.

affected by the depression. The support for the BUF from each of the focused regions was both economic and ideological, but unique to that locality. Each area shared a high Jewish population, which later became focal to the BUF campaign.

Colin Cross estimated that the BUF membership was at its largest in 1934, totalling 40,000 prior to the events that unfolded at the Olympia disturbances of June 1934. G. C. Webber and Robert Skidelsky challenge the figure, for they believe the membership figures were around 10,000 higher.<sup>27</sup>

When studying the success of British Fascism, it is easy to undervalue the threat of the movement due to the strength of the state, the British public's commitment to parliament, democracy and to the rule of law. Classic studies challenged this ideology, with works from Skidelsky looking at Mosley's character as a cult figure. Skidelsky heavily sympathised with Mosley, he attempted to draw on his success and underplayed the fascist association with anti-Semitism, suggesting it was a response to the reaction of the working class Jews.<sup>28</sup> Skidelsky is heavily criticised for his bias, new evidence from Daniel Tillie's suggests the movement was inherently anti-Jewish even before it formed a large Jewish resistance.

Interest for the BUF in Yorkshire, Lancashire and East London stemmed from Mosley's adaptability to link local grievances with his economic policy. Mosley saw opportunity in connecting with local communities to drum up support. An example of this can be found through the BUF's recognition of the social suffering from the decline of Lancashire's cotton trade. Cyclical depression caused an influx in unemployment in Lancashire and to win over the regions support, the BUF promised to provide employment to the disgruntled cotton

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<sup>27</sup> G. C. Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Reassessments of Fascism (1984), pp. 579-580.

<sup>28</sup> K. Lunn and R. Thurlow, *British Fascism*, R. Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism', (London, 1980), p. 79.



workers. Mosley attracted interest through social opportunities; the Woodhouse School of Physical Culture in Leeds provided members to train as stewards, it also provided a social identity that influenced recruitment within the area pre-1934.<sup>29</sup> Mosley also connected with individuals on an economic basis, where he pledged his support in local aggregations; he spoke about agriculture in a speech delivered to crowds in York in 1934, then later declared his support for the declining furniture manufacturing trade in Leeds, 1937.<sup>30</sup> He was committed to identifying with the roots of local regions in order to win their support.

British Fascism developed at a varying pace across different regions because of the fluctuating economic conditions. The industrial layout and social composition of the certain regions played a role in the rise of fascism. Regions with high unemployment and declining trade like in Lancashire, identified with the BUF as they attempted to appeal directly with local causes. The BUF shaped their campaign and policies around the problems of the regions in which they contested, they often backed local campaigns and bolted onto other movements to capture a greater reach.

This strategy was not effective across all suffering regions. Jarrow suffered from unemployment levels of above 80 per cent, yet they showed little interest in Fascism.<sup>31</sup> The recession had a devastating impact on multiple regions, but we cannot simply assume it led to a substantial increase in Fascism. Mosley made no ground in Jarrow, his manifesto and commitment to solving the unemployment crisis failed to resonate with even the most volatile local economies. Those who marched in the Jarrow Crusade did so alongside Ellen

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<sup>29</sup> Trevelyan Scholarship Report, *The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40* (1960), Figures taken from the Jewish Year Book 1934, held in the University of Bradford, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 10th April 1934 & 3rd February 1937.

<sup>31</sup> E. Wilkinson, *The town that was murdered* (London, 1939), pp. 191-192.

Wilkinson, the Labour MP as well as members of the National Union of Workers' Movement, who had close ties to the Communist Party.<sup>32</sup>

The governments of the interwar years were riddled with the persistent problem of unemployment. The fundamental issue of the governments in the run up to the 1930s was that they consensually accepted the necessity to return to the gold standard in 1925 as a method to stimulate the world economy. A return to the gold standard would denote Britain's return to free trade. It was widely considered that by returning to gold standard to regulate the economy, other foreign countries would follow suit and allow free trade, thus fuel world trade and subsequently unemployment levels would eventually decline.

John Stevenson and Chris Cook argue that the British economy grew during the interwar years, which influenced a rise in living standards in some districts of the country.<sup>33</sup> The conditions of the working population were on the rise in southern areas of the country. John Newsinger agrees with Stevenson and Cook when reflecting on the state of the British economy in the 1930s. He suggests that the economy was not as critically affected as was expected, resulting in British Fascism not having the influence of a complete financial collapse and widespread political confusion like other countries in Europe had.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless there were roughly three million unemployed individuals during the interwar years. Without a nationwide economic crisis, Fascism would not have risen as it did in the 1930s.

The state of the economy and the lack of compassion with orthodox economic policies played a significant role in increasing Fascist support. Had the British economy suffered as significantly as Germany or Italy, then Britain may have been much more vulnerable to the

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<sup>32</sup> MEPO 2/3097, Ministry of Labour to the Home Office, 26th September 1936.

<sup>33</sup> Stevenson & Cook, *The Slump*, pp. 51-52

<sup>34</sup> J. Newsinger, 'Race Class' *Sage Journals* January 2006, vol 47/3, pp. 98-101.

rise of Fascism. That said, the British public was exposed to a popular left-wing movement in the form of the NUWM and the Communist Party that was successful to some degree in identifying with the working classes.

To understand the rise, fall and failure of British Fascism it is helpful to examine both where and why support arose in the regions it did and the reactions of violence it attracted. Indeed, one must identify the regional locations of the movements' followers and examine whether the social and economic environment played a part in the recruitment process. Furthermore, the challenge to fascism by the Jewish population, the Communists and other Anti-Fascist groups must also be considered when understanding the development of the movement. It can be argued on one hand that the anti-Fascist resistance played a role in fuelling the growth of the BUF at a local level, it led to an increase in exposure, violence and political barbarism. On the other hand, the rise of anti-Semitism led to an increased resistance from Jewish Anti-Fascists and stimulated greater unification between the anti-fascist groups built from the working class community, the Jewish population and the Communist Party.

Laybourn, Dorril and others suggest the movement gained a following in Lancashire, East London and its northern counterpart Leeds because of the growing number of Jews who resided there. Leeds inhabited a Jewish community of around 25,000<sup>35</sup>, Mosley sought to drum unrest between the local and Jewish communities through Jew-baiting and anti-Semitic regimes.<sup>36</sup>

The BUF often invited anti-Jewish, and sometimes anti-Semitic, feelings into their local campaign, connecting with each region and adapting its policy to identify with the local suffering. Mosley developed a strong and committed following on the back of various social

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<sup>35</sup> Trevelyan Scholarship Report, *The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40* (1960), Figures taken from the Jewish Year Book 1934, held in the University of Bradford.

<sup>36</sup> S. Dorril, *Blackshirt* (London, 2007), p. 165

and political anxieties. Mosley used his platform to reach as far as he could in East London, supporting residents who were uneasy with the increasing levels of Jewish immigration. In taking this anti-Jewish stance, the BUF struck a nerve within the community, forming both support and a variety of opposition.

Joe Jacobs, a young tailor and member of the Young Communist League who went on to become secretary of the Stepney Communist branch at the age of 22 formed part of this opposition. In his autobiography, Jacobs details the internal divisions within the Communist Party around how to contain Mosley, many of whom were prepared to go to great lengths to resist Fascism.<sup>37</sup> The violent perspective from both sides, suggests many within each movement, believed achieving support and success was paramount to defeating one another on the streets. Advocating violence prevented any parliamentary success for both the BUF and the Communist Party. The Jewish elite community was opposed to demonstrating any form of violence and actively worked with the police and the Home Office to contain the behaviour of militant Jews.

Daniel Tille's brings new attention to the impact and response to anti-Semitism in Jewish communities. Tille's suggests that the BUF was founded with antisemitism absent from its programme, attempting to mirror the Italian totalitarian regime, which Mosley based his movement on. Yet, he attempts to prove that anti-Semitism was central to the movement, challenging the notion that anti-Semitism derived out of Jewish provocation as not justified. Tille's analyses anti-Semitic articles published in fascist newspapers to support his claim that anti-Semitic feeling was continual, yet maintained sharp fluctuations in intensity, peaking in 1936. Such fluctuations corroborate with the notion that the movement was opportunistic,

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<sup>37</sup> J. Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto* (London, 1978), p. 57.

clearly demonstrated through the way it handled matters according to its changing circumstances as well as local issues.

Tille's analyses the Jewish elitist response to the emergence of fascism in early 1930s through the *Jewish Chronicle*, a newspaper that he suggests represented the Jewish community and moreover the Jewish elites.<sup>38</sup> Tille's tackles the notion that pre-1935 the voice of the Jewish leadership was unsympathetic to the plight of the working-class Jews who experienced fascist anti-Semitism. Tille's provides evidence that suggests responses to the BUF pre-date the arrival of the BUF in the East-End. Tille's argues that the Jewish establishment did not feel the BUF presented enough of a threat to warrant a drawn-out discussion. What's clear from Tille's study, is the Jewish elite monitored the situation to understand the depth of fascist anti-Semitic behaviour on the street, communicating with the BUF to determine their standpoint on specific events that were taking place. One such event Tille's presents came from a BUF meeting in London's Memorial hall in late October 1932, where Mosley confronted two Jewish hecklers with the retort that they should 'go back to Jerusalem'. The *Jewish Chronicle* was quick to respond criticising Mosley for commenting on their Jewishness. Soon after, the *Jewish Chronicle* expressed relief after reviewing Mosley's response to the situation, where he labelled in the *Blackshirt*, that antisemitism was an irrelevance and commented that 'Jew-baiting in every shape or form [had been] forbidden'.<sup>39</sup> Tille's builds a pre-1935 narrative to support numerous counts of activity of similar occurrences, where the BUF expressed isolated incidents of anti-Semitism then reassured the Jewish community. What's clear is that the *Jewish Chronicle* and the rest of the Jewish elite were slow to recognise the BUF's flight towards

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<sup>38</sup> N. Copsey & D. Tilles, 'Uniting a Divided Community? Re-appraising Jewish Responses to British Fascist Anti-Semitism, 1932-1939, *Holocaust Studies*, (2009), 15:1-2, p. 164.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

Hitlerism. Only when it did, when the BUF adopted an openly anti-Jewish stance in the East End of London, did it call for a more active role in responding to anti-Semitism.<sup>40</sup>

Even after Mosley advocated an openly anti-Jewish policy, the Jewish community remained divided in their response to the BUF. The most visible retort derived from the militant antifascists, who sought to engage in conflict with the BUF through street violence and disrupting of demonstrations. The Board of Deputies represented the Jewish elite, who came under criticism for their formal approach in dealing with anti-Semitic behaviour.

Scholars have criticised the Anglo-Jewish elite for being unsympathetic and ineffective. Paying greater attention to policing the Jewish community and preventing the exacerbation of anti-Semitism than countering the fascist anti-Semitism. Geoffrey Alderman<sup>41</sup> and Elaine Smith<sup>42</sup> go as far to suggest the passive actions of the elite Jewish community influenced and strengthened anti-Semitism. One of the first controversial actions taken by the newly established Co-ordinating Committee (CoC), a body created in response to anti-Semitism in 1936, fuelled the notion supported by Alderman and Smith. The CoC launched a propaganda campaign with two objectives, the first to counter anti-Semitic claims and the second was to inform the public of the positive contributions the Jewish community had made to society. A method criticised as being apologetic to the British public and was to some degree interpreted as an acceptance of being a second-class citizen. Tilles and Copey support the argument the Jewish elite needed to combat the ignorance of the anti-Semite, refuting fascist accusations for fear the public may have interpreted them as the truth.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>41</sup> G. Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 285-286, 293.

<sup>42</sup> E. Smith, 'But What Did They Do? Contemporary Jewish Responses to Cable Street', in T. Kushner and N. Valman, *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Antifascism in British Society* (London, 2000), pp. 48-49, 53.

<sup>43</sup> Copey & Tilles, 'Uniting a Divided Community? Re-appraising Jewish Responses to British Fascist Anti-Semitism, 1932-1939', p. 174.

Tilles and Copsey go further to criticise previous scholarly work for ignoring the Board's archives, focusing only on the perspective of the 'East End' Jewish perspective.<sup>44</sup> Other strategies deployed by the CoC not only aimed to shape the gentile opinion of the Jew, but were also designed to prevent the Jewish community from involving themselves with militant antifascism. The Jewish antifascist militancy was fuelling the publicity of the BUF and supported their claim that anti-Semitism was a reaction to the victimisation by Jews.

Anti-Semitism can be perceived to have influenced the awareness of fascism, but it contributed more opposition than support, which ultimately influenced further state intervention that suppressed the growth and existence of the BUF.

Stuart Rawnsley conducted a series of interviews with former fascist members and sympathisers. He went on to describe the membership of the movement as an undefined collection of individuals.<sup>45</sup> In an interview conducted with John Charnley, a former member of the BUF in Southport and Hull, who was later imprisoned under the Defence Regulation 18b in 1940, Rawnsley identifies the diverse affiliations of the Hull members. Charnley became district leader of Hull. By 1936 he had counted the unemployed working-class members as high as forty per cent out of a total of 268 in 1936. He also commented on the affiliations of the local members, describing 'thirty per cent disenchanting; fifty to fifty-five per cent politically motivated, ten to fifteen per cent who approved of Oswald Mosley's philosophy', a quote that suggests many different factors directing people towards the ideology of Fascism.<sup>46</sup> Charnley's experience within the Hull regions reinforces Rawnsley's notion of the movement being of a heterogeneous nature.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>45</sup> Rawnsley, 'Membership of the British Union of Fascists', p. 154

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

Rawnsley found further support for his suggestion in Nellie Driver's autobiography. Driver goes on to further decree that district leaders had great difficulty in getting the members to salute them publicly or privately.<sup>47</sup> Without the members acknowledging their political position, there was little chance of the movement finding momentum.

Rawnsley concluded that the Fascist movement itself was blind to the type of audience it attracted. Rawnsley hypothesis carries weight in the early years of the movement as Mosley identified with localities based on their specific grievances, whether this was social, ideological or economic. The BUF attempted to recruit people from all classes and tried to create a 'classless' following using a uniform, propaganda and cult-like behaviour. Post-1936, Mosley was conscious that he needed to move away from the militancy if the party stood any chance of democratic success.<sup>48</sup>

It has been argued that people joined the British Union of Fascists as an expression of revolt to mainstream politics. Julie Gottlieb suggests the movement attracted a diverse range of individuals, from former Conservatives and Labour members, criminals and street hooligans, as well as women.<sup>49</sup> Fascist ideologies could intentionally appeal across all sections of the political spectrum, bringing Fascism to the forefront of mainstream national politics was so far in the distance, it could not afford to eliminate any group from its proposed following.

Rawnsley suggests the movement had an impact in northern areas of the country due to the local industries suffering from economic hardship, whilst also seeing an increase in Jewish inhabitants. G. C. Webber attempts to draw different scenarios to demonstrate the most

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<sup>47</sup> N. Driver, *From the Shadows of exile*, unpublished autobiography, S. Rawnsley, 'Membership of the British Union of Fascists', Thurlow and Lunn, *British Fascism*, (London, 1980), p. 154

<sup>48</sup> Rawnsley, 'Membership of the British Union of Fascists', p. 151

<sup>49</sup> J. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism Women in Britain's Fascist Movement* (London, 2003), p. 267



popular areas of Fascist support, yet the sources available to exemplify this popularity, only concern the active members, which provides a limited perspective. The areas of support are determined by the popularity of meetings, and the subsequent violence that occurred at such events. This does not necessarily suggest these areas were a Fascist stronghold, it could also relate as Webber suggests, to an area of high communist/ anti-fascist support.

G. C. Webber suggests that the middle class predominantly occupied the movement particularly after 1936 when the Public Order Act was passed, tightening control of how the Fascist party represented itself on the street. Webber goes on further to suggest the movement was fighting against the threat of communism rather than revolting because of economic suffering. This suggests most supporters were politically motivated and agrees with the comments made by John Charnley, but it tells us little about the class divisions within the movement.

Thomas Linehan argues that the quality of the material available is hardly sufficient in understanding the different members of the movement, for most of the registers only contain the information of active members, a decision made in 1937 to conceal the identities of non-active recruits.<sup>50</sup> Local BUF branches also attempted to conceal the identities of the local members by hastily destroying the registers that existed in local branches. Consequently, the conclusions that have been drawn regarding the membership of the British Union of Fascists has been the work of estimations, pieced together by police reports and other outlets.

Fascism in Britain was supported by a diverse range of people, drawn to it for many different reasons. The members of the BUF were politically, ideologically, culturally and economically motivated, frustrated by both the political failures of the national government and the mass unemployment levels that soared across the nation. Mosley attempted to capture the interest

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<sup>50</sup> Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-39 Parties, Ideology and Culture*, p. 150

of almost every community, supporting local aggravations proved effective, but not effective enough to influence political concern.

Mosley had limited, if any political success, he demonstrated cultural progression, women had leading roles within the political movement, it gave many women a platform and a political identity.<sup>51</sup> Fascism offered women roles beyond canvassing and fund-raising, women undertook a full range of activism, from district leaders to ju-jitsu trained stewards.<sup>52</sup> Mosley created a 'fascist culture', a fashion to some degree, yet this wasn't not enough to challenge to the party system and break voters' faith in democracy.<sup>53</sup>

Local municipal election results reveal the BUF made progress within these regions, yet failed to mount a significant challenge to mainstream political parties, even at the worst moments of 1930s depression. The thesis will analyse the regional events surrounding anti-Semitic behaviour and the effects it had on anti-fascist support, racist populism drove more resistance than it did support. The strength in opposition led to greater state control, which eventually suppressed the party and its leaders into submission. The thesis will demonstrate to what extent the BUF made progress in the three most prominent localities across Britain and whether it was a threat to local or national politics.

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<sup>51</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p. 267

<sup>52</sup> P. Ward, Review: *Feminine Fascism Women in Britain's Fascist Movement* (London, 2003), *Twentieth Century British History*, Volume 13, Issue 3, 1 January 2002, Pages 158–160.

<sup>53</sup> Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-1939 Parties, Ideologies and Culture*, p. 84

## Chapter Two – Fascism in Yorkshire

Fascist doctrines were by no means unfamiliar to the inhabitants of Yorkshire in the 1920s. The citizens of Yorkshire had been aware of earlier Fascist groups such as the Imperial Fascist League. Like Mosley's BUF it failed to mobilise popular support for their cause. A few expressed interest into notions of Fascism in Yorkshire, yet they were never collectively committed enough to cause a major concern. The Yorkshire members of the BUF associated with the movement for several reasons ranging from industrial suffering to young progressive conservatives experimenting with ideologies further along the political spectrum. However, whilst present in Yorkshire fascism had very little influence in its political life, failing to elect any members of parliament and all attempts to breakthrough local municipal elections failed emphatically.

Mosley expressed an interest in Yorkshire through his public speaking visits with the New Party.<sup>54</sup> During these visits, Mosley recognised the industrial issues that plagued the local towns and cities of Yorkshire and began to shape his policies around the areas of vulnerability. Indeed, Leeds was one of the first cities to be visited by Mosley and the New Party in 1931.<sup>55</sup> The New Party formed around Mosley's memorandum, a document that advocated reducing unemployment through tariff protection, public works schemes and protection of local industries. All of which resonated with the struggles found in Yorkshire.

W. J. Leaper, the New Party candidate for Shipley in 1931 who later became a prominent writer in the *Fascist National Press*, suggested many of the New Party supporters remained loyal to Oswald Mosley in cities such as Leeds, even after the New Party's national landslide electoral defeat in 1931.<sup>56</sup> After battling with the failure to make any progress through the

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<sup>54</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 16 March 1931.

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

<sup>56</sup> Trevelyan Scholarship Report, *The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40*, p. 1.

traditional diplomatic means within the New Party, Mosley drove forward his ideas of an economic renaissance with the formation of the British Union of Fascists in October 1932.<sup>57</sup> Designed to act and address the economic suffering of the nation, Mosley began to campaign across towns and cities like Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield and Sheffield to only name a few. Leeds was not unaware of far-right political notions. The Imperial Fascist League had a strong branch of support in both Leeds and Bradford.<sup>58</sup> Evidence has also been identified that there was a following of ‘The Liberators Group’, a racist outfit similar to the Ku Klux Klan that operated specifically against Jews.<sup>59</sup> Anti-Semitic roots were ingrained into the foundations of some of Yorkshire’s cities, yet anti-Semitism barely featured as part of the pre-1934 Fascist agenda. It was however, used intrusively between 1934 and 1937, despite Mosley’s denial. Mosley aimed to identify the movement with local issues. To achieve local support Mosley needed to dress the national fascist agenda in an outfit of local causes. In Yorkshire, Mosley succeeded in targeting the domestic issues of each region, painting a picture of distress with Fascism as the only alternative solution to the country's ills.

The membership of the British Union of Fascists was estimated to have been around 50,000 in its pinnacle year of 1934.<sup>60</sup> This figure was hugely influenced by Lord Rothermere, a financier of the party who wrote about the advantages of Mosley’s party in the *Daily Mail*. To measure the threat, in the same year, the Labour Party released a national survey to its constituents to monitor the progress of Fascism within the local community. The survey questioned whether public meetings were held, how often the members frequented, how the local press reported the demonstrations, if any literature is being distributed and if there was any resistance activity by other political parties. The survey demonstrates the progression of

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<sup>57</sup> K. Laybourn, *Britain on the Breadline* (Gloucestershire, 1998), p. 179.

<sup>58</sup> R. Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order* (London, 1969), p. 270.

<sup>59</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 27 April 1933.

<sup>60</sup> R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London, 1975), p. 358.

the BUF in 1934, when membership expanded at rates that evidently concerned opposing parties.

The Labour survey returned a wave of responses in Yorkshire. In the returned questionnaire for Sheffield, it stated that there were approximately 350 members of the BUF, 50 of whom wore uniform. The survey comments on how regular outdoor meetings occurred in Sheffield, yet this wasn't supported by press coverage.<sup>61</sup>

In Wakefield the secretary, A. B. Johnson, raised concerns with the behaviour of the British Union of Fascists. He used the questionnaire to report back that Wakefield is to be the central branch of Fascism for the West Riding. He went on to further recommend, after witnessing a public meeting held in Wakefield hall that occupied a full room of 200 attendees, to let the police be responsible for maintaining order as opposed to the stewards.<sup>62</sup> This would be a condition of the let from the co-op, a property target of the BUF's.

The national Labour survey helps in understanding the patterns of movement within the Fascist community, many members of whom travelled between the industrial towns to show their support for the public speeches. The secretary of Leeds suggests that most attendees of the Mosley Leeds town hall meeting in June 1934, travelled to Leeds from neighbouring towns and cities by bus.<sup>63</sup> This undermined the strength of the movement, as it demonstrates a rather limited reach in its armour of support at a time where membership was thought to be at its pinnacle.

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<sup>61</sup> The Manchester People's Museum, LP/ FAS/ 34/ 22, 19 June 1934, A response from the Sheffield City council to the Labour party's survey on Fascism.

<sup>62</sup> The MPM, LP/ FAS/ 34/ 49: i, 18 June 1934, a response from Wakefield Labour party.

<sup>63</sup> The MPM, LP/ FAS/ 34/ 20: i, 18 June 1934, a response from the City of Leeds Labour party.

In Harrogate, in a cover letter sent to secretary J. S. Middleton of Transport House, Labour Party Head Office on 20 June 1934, the constituent expresses concern with the rate of recruitment amongst the young affluent individuals in its locality.

In expressing my own personal opinion, I should be inclined to say that the BUF is making considerable progress in and around Harrogate, and that their membership is being recruited very largely from the young people of the 'well to do class' of whom there are a considerable number in Harrogate.<sup>64</sup>

The BUF made progress in connecting with the younger conservative voters in Harrogate. Mosley's policies had imperial unity ingrained into them, they thought it was a necessity to restore imperial values into the nation, so Britain could share a voice in the world stage. Not only did the BUF resonate with local working-class causes like that of the woollen trades of Leeds, but also with the middle-class nationalists who were politically aligned with the imperial ideology advocated by Mosley.

It can be inferred from the Labour survey that a different recruitment approach was underway, the local fascist organisation adopted different tactics to those offered in industrial towns. 'At their meetings they invite contribution and appeal to questions, and they appear to be gaining considerable ground in this area.'<sup>65</sup> Mosley was adaptable in his approach and sought to give the under-represented a voice in politics. He attracted youthful members of all genders by offering opportunities to socialise with likeminded individuals. He promoted sports like boxing and fencing and created clubs for people to train.

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<sup>64</sup> The MPM, 20 June 1934, LP/ FAS/ 34/ 23, a response from Harrogate and District Trades Council.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.,

The impact of such tactics shows little significance in terms of membership numbers. Whilst the Labour survey does show Fascist activity across the Yorkshire towns, it doesn't demonstrate an influential movement close to occupying a national threat. The movement did seem to be building on a bed of indefinable classes. In Harrogate, the younger Tories were expressing interest in Mosley.<sup>66</sup> A deeper look into the Mosley's speeches and recruitment methods suggests that the BUF targeted all classes. The loyalty and commitment of the members was then put under strain after the BUF continued to express militant tactics at public demonstrations. The events at the 1934 Olympia rally shocked the nation. The BUF brutally assaulted several anti-fascist protesters, resulting in the police intervening

The consequences of Olympia meeting resulted in a substantial decline in membership figures across the nation, including those in Yorkshire. Olympia influenced the politically indecisive to disassociate with a barbaric political party. Through the withdrawal of Lord Rothermere, many of the members who came forth on the back of the *Daily Mail's* national newspaper campaign, abandoned the movement for the public's perception of the BUF shifted almost overnight. The losses sustained included the 'well to do classes' from Harrogate.<sup>67</sup> This subsequently led to a membership of hardened and loyal fascists, people who supported the Fascist movement for action and change.

Mosley recognised that a new direction was required to increase membership figures. After showing anti-Semitic behaviour throughout his campaign, after 1936 he publicly became anti-Jewish and actively demonstrated his frustration with the Jewish population in his public meetings. Mosley sought to scapegoat the Jewish population for society's struggles by interlinking anti-Semitism with local grievances. Indeed, he argued in a speech in Bradford, that 'The reduction of the value of the German market was, he declared, almost entirely due

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<sup>66</sup> Trevelyan Scholarship Report, *The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40*, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*,

to the Jewish International boycotting of German goods.’<sup>68</sup> Similarly, in a speech delivered in Leeds in 1937, the Jews were accused of strangling the British woollen trades. ‘We will not tolerate great Jewish combines establishing a stranglehold on the British woollen and furniture trades.’<sup>69</sup> In Barnsley, William Joyce targeted the struggling mining communities. He stressed the importance of the mines to the extraction of petroleum from coal, reassuring the importance of their production.<sup>70</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest the local agricultural and county textile campaigns led to a substantial increase in Fascist support in Yorkshire. Whilst it can be assumed that it drew the attention of the local crowds, it cannot be considered as the most significant contributor. Yet, one consistency ran through all state-theory and propaganda programmes post 1934, anti-Semitism. Mosley’s speeches amplified his disposition to the Jewish race; manipulating social frictions for political gains.<sup>71</sup>

**Table A, Jewish Population in Yorkshire, Jewish Yearbook 1936<sup>72</sup>**

Town	Jewish Population	Total Population	% Of Jews	% As compared with other Yorkshire cities
Leeds	25,000	458,320	5.49%	1st
Hull	2,500	287,013	0.87%	12th
Middlesbrough	700	131,103	0.53%	22nd
Sheffield	2,462	490,724	0.50%	23rd
Bradford	750	285,979	0.26%	Not known
York	60	82,282	0.07%	Not known

<sup>68</sup> Mosley speech at Bradford, *Yorkshire Post*, 19 November 1934.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 February 1937.

<sup>70</sup> *Blackshirt*, 12 July 1935.

<sup>71</sup> Trevelyan Scholarship Report, *The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40*, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> Figures taken from the Jewish Year Book 1936.



The Jewish community in Leeds occupied the highest percentage of population for any city in the country, which made it a centre of anti-Semitism in Yorkshire. The Jewish population in 1936 in both Leeds and East London was growing at considerable rates as displayed in this table above – with the Jewish population in Leeds occupying 5.49% of the total population.

Anti-Semitic tensions grew in parallel to the Jewish population growth; Basil Henrique aptly defining the Fascist stance in a speech in Leeds 1937.

We in London and you in Leeds have, during the last six or seven months have been insulted by something, which I consider to be completely un-English.<sup>73</sup>

Henrique's speech was posted in the *Jewish Chronicle*, a newspaper that circulated nationwide and condemned the actions of the Fascists.<sup>74</sup> The paper summarised the hostility the BUF had created amongst the Jewish community.

Further tension was evidenced when the *Yorkshire Post* posted headlines in respect to conditions in Hull entitled, 'Fear of riots in Hull'.<sup>75</sup> Anti-Semitic posters and flyers became commonplace around Yorkshire cities and poison-pen letters were being sent to anti-fascists and Jews.<sup>76</sup>

Elsewhere, Mosley had vowed to tackle the Jewish opposition that was forming after Olympia. At Leicester in April 1935 Mosley declared:

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<sup>73</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, April 1937.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>75</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 30 September 1936.

<sup>76</sup> Vigilance Committee Report on Hull, Feb 1939.

For the first time, I openly and publicly challenge the Jewish interest in this country commanding commerce, commanding the press, commanding the cinema, dominating the City of London, killing industry with sweatshops. These great interests are not intimidating, and will not intimidate, the Fascist movement of the modern age.<sup>77</sup>

Mosley declared war against the Jewish population that had been so forcefully opposing him at his meetings. He targeted the 'old gangs' that had formed under Jewish monopolies. In one example the BUF identified themselves with the underrepresented nations shopkeepers – an obvious opportunity for a party with a declining membership. The Shops (Sunday Trading Restriction) Act of 1936 restricted the number of days a shop could trade. According to Mosley, this restriction imposed on the local trader, played into the hands of the Jewish corporations and victimised private traders. A BUF political pamphlet written in 1939 suggests that a crisis was developing for local enterprise.

The alarming growth of the chain store, multiple shop and cut-price monopolies is rapidly provoking a crisis amongst the distributive trades.

The small shopkeeper is being driven off the streets of this country before the inexorable advance of the great trusts and combines, so many of which are controlled by alien and Jewish finance.<sup>78</sup>

The government failed to consider the impact of passing the bill for the local trader, leaving the topic open for Mosley to oppose government policy and attempt to identify with the shopkeepers and their trading partners. In the second reading of the bill in the House of Lords, the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava comments of consumer behaviour, 'It is totally

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<sup>77</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 15 April 1935, quoted R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement*, p. 156.

<sup>78</sup> *The Menace of the Chain stores*, a BUF political pamphlet, 1939.

unnecessary from the consumer's point of view that these shops be open on Sunday, and totally unnecessary from the shop-keeper's point of view, because, after all, one does not increase the volume of trade by opening on Sunday, one merely spreads it over a longer period.<sup>179</sup>

Mosley used this opportunity to identify his cause with the local movement of shopkeepers. He commented further by suggesting it was 'dire necessity to open on Sundays. It was stark tyranny that deprived him of this last means of livelihood.'<sup>180</sup> Mosley pledged to support the nation of shopkeepers by opposing the bill, later calling for the shopkeepers to unite by signing up to the British Union. There is little evidence to suggest this increased the membership figures for the BUF, requests for amendments to this bill were somewhat frequent and often rejected.

Similar tactics were used by the BUF across a variety of trades. There is little evidence to suggest that this tactic influenced an increase in support, yet it did bring about greater awareness of what Mosley stood for as he leveraged wider issues to identify Fascism as a resolution to all of society's ills. Mosley also used this opportunity to attack the Jewish combines and enforce his policy of Occupational Franchise, which aimed to grant direct Parliament representation for local industries by creating a diplomatic means for members to vote on matters concerning their respective trades. Such a policy would invoke action within politics rather than the slow-moving pace of traditional parliament and remove the weight and influence the powerful Jewish corporations had over industrial policy. This is just one example of how Mosley positioned his party in parliamentary disputes to gather momentum

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<sup>79</sup> *Hansard Milbank*, HL Deb 25 June 1936 vol 101 cc253-74

<sup>80</sup> *The Menace of the Chain stores*, a BUF political pamphlet, 1939.

for his cause. When the opportunity arose for him to side with a local or national issue, Mosley took his position in hope of identifying with as many groups as possible.

The greatest influence on Fascist membership growth after 1934 was clearly the BUF's identification with anti-Semitism. East London held the largest Jewish community in the whole of the United Kingdom with Leeds coming second. The Jewish population became a scapegoat for the attacks on the BUF at Olympia. Mosley re-positioned his political agenda after Olympia 1934 despite the loss of Lord Rothermere. To re-ignite his following, Mosley aimed to scapegoat the Jewish community using anti-Semitism as a cynical weapon of political mobilisation. The economic crisis paved a way for anti-Semitic ideologies, a wave of racial elitist notions became the feature of Mosley's public speeches, propelling the BUF into further confrontation.<sup>81</sup>

Skidelsky describes the Jewish anti-fascist disruptions of Mosley's meetings as a pre-emptive strike that sought to strangle the BUF at birth.<sup>82</sup> Controversially, Skidelsky excuses the anti-Semitic behaviour as retaliation to the offence the Jewish embarked on during Fascist party meetings. He argued that anti-Semitism was spawned out of retaliation to the behaviour of the anti-fascist Jews. To suggest anti-Semitism was a reaction to the Jewish response to fascism undermines the multiple examples of anti-Jewry demonstrated by fascists before 1936. Daniel Tille's argues that the Jewish response to Fascism began with the New Party, where it constantly monitored its activity, evidence to support this can be found in the Jewish Chronicle in the early 1930s.<sup>83</sup>

In Yorkshire, the rapid growth of the BUF preceded the local agitation with the Jews. Anti-Semitism was Mosley's last attempt to drum up discontent within areas of high Jewish

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<sup>81</sup> Linehan, *British Fascism Parties, Ideology and Culture*, p. 191.

<sup>82</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp. 385-410.

<sup>83</sup> Copey & Tilles, 'Uniting a Divided Community', p. 164.

settlement. At the height of the anti-Semitic movement in 1936-7, the BUF's membership in Yorkshire was in steep decline.<sup>84</sup> Provocative campaigns in Yorkshire only led to an increase in anti-fascist resistance. A BUF march to Holbeck Moor in Leeds in September 1936, resulted in a clash with 20,000 anti-fascist demonstrators in which Mosley and many other fascists were injured by missiles.<sup>85</sup>

By maligning the anti-fascists, the BUF could attract a more respectable member, those who they labelled as patriotic, law-abiding and honest. The movement had now filtered out the cosmopolitan followers who desired only the social elements of the membership and perhaps the idyllic uniform. The youthful followers lost momentum due to the BUF's pacifist stance. This paved a new opening for the BUF, yet they failed to impose any threat in numbers.

Indeed, the Public Order Act of 1936 increased the power of the authorities and limited civil liberties. The movement became less desirable, particularly with the Spanish Civil War influencing a rise in Republicanism and European Fascism looking a greater threat to world peace.

Anti-Semitic demonstrations were Mosley's last-ditch attempts to revive the membership of the BUF. Anti-Jewish notions dominated the post-1934 recruitment drive for the BUF and it sparked considerable interest in middle-class areas in Yorkshire. Mosley drafted an anti-Semitic theme into his national policies that appealed to the working-classes.

Mosley was keen to capitalise on the suffering farming communities that had endured intractable economic problems since the end of the war. A decade of plummeting prices had driven many bankruptcies and the sale of cheap land within Yorkshire's farming community. The price of wheat had dropped by 50 per cent between the year of 1929-1931 and that of

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<sup>84</sup> Trevelyan Scholarship Report, *The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>85</sup> N. Copsey, *Anti-fascism in Britain* (2000), p. 46-7.

beef by 30 per cent the same year, resulting in cultivation declining to levels of redundancy.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, Mosley attracted large enthusiastic audiences in agricultural towns and cities like York, where he won over important activists through his agricultural policy.<sup>87</sup> The agricultural policy was marketed to local working-class farmers whilst criticising the Jewish financiers that encouraged international imports. His policy decreed to expand its domestic agricultural market by £200 million – exactly the value of imported food. This would be achieved through a three-year plan that incorporated an agricultural bank lending to its farmers to effectively meet their targets when corporate planning.<sup>88</sup>

Mosley strengthened his argument by implanting fear and distress in Yorkshire. Releasing headlines in the *Blackshirt* warning people of the doom the woollen industries faced under the Tory government. ‘Without a constructive plan, such as the British Union proposes the woollen industry of Yorkshire is inevitably doomed.’<sup>89</sup> He then went on to advertise a scheduled campaign to target the local regions within Yorkshire.

A campaign to bring before the textile workers of Yorkshire the British Union’s constructive policy for the woollen industry will be held from Feb 27 to March 12. Towns to be covered are Leeds, Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield, Dewsbury, Shipley, Batley, Keighley, Pudsey, Cleckheaton, Bingley and Morley.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts* (London, 2005), p. 140.

<sup>87</sup> Mosley speech at York, *Yorkshire Post*, April 25 1934.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>89</sup> *Blackshirt*, March 1938.

<sup>90</sup> *Blackshirt*, March 1938.

One can infer from the absence of further reference to it in subsequent editions of the *Blackshirt*, that this campaign produced little response and no substantial increase in support. Had it been otherwise, the Fascist propagandists would not have ignored it.

During 1935 the BUF began to re-adjust its structure. Mosley adopted a policy of 'Fascist next time' and encouraged his followers to withhold their vote in the coming general election in protest against parliament. New BUF branches were formed and existing ones extended their capability to cover as many parliamentary constituencies as possible.<sup>91</sup> In Leeds, five of the six parliamentary consistencies had Fascist branches in 1935. Growth also appeared in Sheffield, where four branches emerged, and in Bradford and Hull where three branches were formed. Many more towns including Barnsley, Pudsey, Otley, Featherstone and Halifax all saw Fascist branches emerge between 1935 and 1936.<sup>92</sup> The restructure was a response to 1934 membership influx, Mosley soon realised that if he was to put forward Fascist MP's, a reliable infrastructure needed to be in place to support them.

In November 1936, the BUF headquarters in London announced the first one hundred constituencies that they intended to fight in the next general election, twelve of which were from Yorkshire.<sup>93</sup> The British Union of Fascists chose constituencies in Bradford, Leeds, Hull, Huddersfield and Sheffield. These were areas as the 1936 *Jewish Yearbook* suggests, with the highest Jewish population, but also areas of strong Fascist support.

Leeds held the highest population of Jews, totalling roughly 25,000, with 2,500 at Hull 2,462 in Sheffield and 750 in Bradford.<sup>94</sup> The BUF knew if they stood a chance of gathering any measure of success they needed to target habitats that could be manipulated by the BUF's

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<sup>91</sup> O. Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London, 1932)

<sup>92</sup> Trevelyan Scholarship Report, *The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40*, p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 7 November 1936.

<sup>94</sup> Figures taken from the *Jewish Year Book* 1936.

right-wing nature. That's not to suggest these areas were one of political instability, rather these areas like the rest of the nation were suffering from the economic depression, seeking to find a solution within the political system.

The chosen constituencies were areas that would likely generate a strong Fascist representation in the polls. The Labour Party dominated the local elections in Leeds<sup>95</sup> which was considered the Fascist stronghold in Yorkshire, where it occupied 2,000 members at its height in 1934. In Sheffield the Fascist movement is said to have been around 350 strong. The secretary of Sheffield Trade and Labour Council commented in the Labour survey that regular outdoor meetings took place; propaganda was distributed, though it was met with little resistance.<sup>96</sup> Only a handful of complaints about the activity had been submitted to the council, this could have been a consequence of the low Jewish population (0.5 per cent of the total population, 2.4k, vs 490k) as well as an economy on a path to recovery. The movement did not gather a significant following in Sheffield, it was tolerated as opposed to supported, resulting in little press coverage. Without opposition to thrive off, the BUF failed to gather support and publicity. Mosley's manifesto vowed to revive the economy by solving local economic issues and lifting the hand of the Jewish elite from exercising what he felt was excessive power over the country, yet in Sheffield the Jewish population was a minority and the economy was on the road to recovery. Consequently, Mosley's hand was becoming less relevant to the people of Sheffield.

*The Blackshirt* comments on the consequences of the economy in 1938.

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<sup>95</sup> The 1935 General Election Results, Richard Kimber, *Political Science Resources*, [www.politicalresources.net/](http://www.politicalresources.net/)

<sup>96</sup> The Manchester People's Museum, 19 June 1934, LP/ FAS/ 34/ 22, A response from the Sheffield City council to the Labour party's survey on Fascism.



The prosperity bubble has now completely exploded in Yorkshire... in places like Barnsley, Doncaster, Middlesbrough and Hull, British Union propaganda is not the battle it was some time ago.<sup>97</sup>

The economic suffering of the 1930s had just as much of an effect on the BUF internally than it had on the wider public. Membership was plummeting by the time the election of November 1937 came around. The BUF faced almost complete financial disaster. Expenditure cuts meant that nearly all the paid BUF staff had to be cut. A total of 101 out of 140 staff was dismissed; this included all the subordinate full-time organisers and propagandists.<sup>98</sup> The expenditure cuts saw the BUF turn into relative turmoil, specifically in the North of England. The director of propaganda, William Joyce and the editor of *Action*, John Beckett took badly to their dismissal. Joyce managed to raise funding from a former British Union financier to create the 'National Socialist League'.<sup>99</sup> The financial crisis had a damning effect on the branches of Yorkshire, resulting in declining public support and northern branches with very little funding.

Mosley needed to use the opportunity of the Metropolitan Borough Council elections to drum up support for the failing BUF. This proved highly difficult with little to no campaign funding. The election results that prevailed showed a discouraging position for the British Union of Fascists for no gains were achieved.<sup>100</sup>

Fascism, though making little headway in Yorkshire, was still trying to capture support through the industrial failures of Yorkshire industry. Indeed, in a political pamphlet entitled, *Yorkshire Betrayed* in 1939, Mosley effectively contrasted the suffering of Yorkshire's

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<sup>97</sup> *The Blackshirt*, July 1938

<sup>98</sup> R. Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley* (London, 2013), p. 133.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>100</sup> J. Stevenson and C. Cook, *The Slump* (London, 1977), pp. 208-209.

woollen trade with the BUF's political agenda.<sup>101</sup> One of the areas of substance in the pamphlet discussed the need for Britain to distance herself from the international trading market. Rather than openly competing against international free trade, Mosley advocated an insulated empire policy, whereby Yorkshire would have secure export markets within its empirical confines. This guarantee would subsequently see a tax levy on non-empirical goods, making them more expensive within the countries of Britain's Empire – an economic policy similar to that of America's throughout the 1920s that saw import tariffs placed on US goods sold in Europe. Mosley's link to Yorkshire's local trade issues was part of his wider economic scheme discussed in his earlier book, *The Greater Britain* of 1932, a cogent document that offered a far more considered approach to Fascism than any of his continental counterparts.<sup>102</sup>

Mosley initiated his policy of 'industrial self-government' arguing what a self-governing industry is supposed to regulate itself using the representative bodies it is built on, the workers, the manufacturers, the consumers and the shippers. Mosley took this opportunity to target all the members of the woollen trade by stating it would remain in the hands of the Yorkshire people. Small enterprise would be able to stand up to the ever-looming threat of Jewish combine trusts, thus restoring fair competition on the ground of British commercial morality.

In the closing statement of the 1939 *Yorkshire Betrayed* pamphlet, Mosley advocated to defend Yorkshire by outlining two immediate benefits his policy would have on the Woollen industry.

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<sup>101</sup> *Yorkshire Betrayed*, political pamphlet 1939.

<sup>102</sup> M. Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts* (London, 2005), p. 127.

1. Because the increased purchasing power resulting from higher protected rates within the corporations will bring immediate increased demand for clothing in the domestic market.
2. Because the organised state will be able to bring bargaining power to bear upon those countries which sell us raw materials, demanding that they buy our manufactured articles in return, and thus supporting our export trade.<sup>103</sup>

Mosley further attacked the Jewish population with his economic policies by suggesting the industries were built on Jewish monopolies who aimed to squeeze competition out of local business. Mosley also targeted Jews during his election campaigns and through public speeches. In March 1940, a Fascist candidate stood in the North-East Leeds by-election. Anti-Semitic discontent influenced his support and shaped his campaign – so much so that the *Yorkshire Evening News* reported,

Voters going to the poll saw vehement anti-Jewish posters displayed on walls... walls and pavement in the district were defaced with anti-Jewish slogans.<sup>104</sup>

Further evidence for anti-Semitic behaviour derives directly from the former director of propaganda, Richard Bellamy. In his *Authorised History of the British Union of Fascists*, describes William Joyce's anti-Semitism as harmful to the BUF after a middle-aged Yorkshireman commented at an outdoor meeting in Leeds: 'I had come here especially to hear what your party thought it could do to help the wool trade but all I have had to listen to is a lot of silly crap-trap about Jews'.<sup>105</sup> This suggests that the movement appealed to the

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<sup>103</sup> *Yorkshire Betrayed*, a BUF political pamphlet, 1939.

<sup>104</sup> *Yorkshire Evening News*, 13 March 1940.

<sup>105</sup> R. Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley* (London, 2013), p. 137.

working class concerned with their local industry. The BUF had let their opposition with the Jewish population overbear the real economic solutions it aimed to provide.

Nevertheless, membership of the BUF rose again in 1938 after suffering considerably since its pinnacle in 1934. Membership figures ran relatively thin after the autumn of 1935 and little activity occurred in Yorkshire. The Public Order Act of 1936 had prohibited the movement from wearing a parliamentary uniform in public, estranging the younger members of Leeds, subsequently leaving a solid and dedicated core of members. *The Blackshirt* mentioned little activity in places like Leeds and Harrogate in the years after 1934.<sup>106</sup>

As the decade progressed and war approached, Fascist activity became infrequent. The apparent apathetic attitude of the local branches is shown through the organisation of the Fascists biggest ever-indoor meeting in Yorkshire, 16 July 1939. The meeting was organised to demonstrate the public support shown for Mosley's campaign for appeasement with Hitler.

The purpose of Mosley's position with appeasement was twofold, he understood public opinion and what the prospect of war meant for his political progress, yet more significantly he sympathised with Germany and their need to regain economic stability. Mosley advocated isolationist policies; aspiring for a self-sufficient economy that relied only on imperial trade. If Britain regained such control of its economy and adopted imperial values, then and only then, could it resume its foothold within the world council. Yet, Mosley's success relied heavily on the outcome of Hitler's plan after the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles had been lifted, as Hitler's threat to peace grew, the actions of the state became

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<sup>106</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 29 June 1934.

increasingly forceful and the BUF's political future shrank both locally in Yorkshire and nationally.

Fascist activity declined across the county. In Leeds, the branch still functioned, although many fled in fear of becoming arrested. The mobilisation of the state had proved highly effective in its quest to suppress Fascist activity. The Leeds City Police had a special officer attending every Fascist meeting and an inside informant. The sufficient monitoring eventually led to the arrests of all the major Yorkshire fascist members.<sup>107</sup>

Mosley was pragmatic in his approach to identify with the public. By identifying local issues with Fascism, he received an engaged response in Yorkshire. Nevertheless, Fascism failed to gather sufficient momentum to ever pose a substantial threat to Yorkshire. The meetings were suppressed by the elements that made them thrive. Anti-fascist resistance proved fatal for Mosley's BUF, as it forced the hand of the state to pass the Public Order Act. His militant approach had little success in a strong democratic state. Democracy was not about to fall under the BUF's regime; firstly, because Mosley was not well enough mobilised and secondly because the state was powerful, despite the economic hardship it endured. The Equal Franchises Act entitled the British public to suffrage on equal terms in 1928; something the British public were not going to put under threat with Mosley's proposal to dictate under a cabinet of five.

To analyse the BUF's failures in Yorkshire assumes that the party was a political threat. The BUF never came close enough to political success to analyse its failures. The BUF failed to shift public opinion despite their various attempts to connect with the electorate. The response to the Labour Party Survey in Yorkshire didn't demonstrate a movement with overwhelming momentum, it showed high volumes of meeting activity with low attendance

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<sup>107</sup> Trevelyan Scholarship Report, *The British Union of Fascists in Yorkshire 1934-40*, p. 19.

figures, which offered little insight into the size and scale of the movement. The mainstream political parties were conscious of the BUF's efforts, the need for the Labour Party Survey itself demonstrates their concern.

The BUF made no progress in the local elections. Any reasonable local support for the BUF was countered with an equal gathering of resistance. In Leeds and Sheffield there were reports in the *Yorkshire Post* that the 'Youth fronts against War and Fascism' had formed.<sup>108</sup> In Bradford, an anti-fascist committee was formed.<sup>109</sup> Violence was commonplace at Fascist meetings though this was of course exaggerated by the *Blackshirt* to vilify the anti-fascist opposition. Yet there is no evidence to suggest this led to an increase in BUF membership in Yorkshire, instead the movement remained insignificant and offered no challenge to local elections.

The BUF electoral failures were a consequence of being too focused on alienating the Jewish population. The political reform it campaigned for became diluted by the notion of anti-Semitism. To engage with the middle-class supporters, rather than aiming to resolve the local industrial issues with honest political reform, the BUF focused on immersing itself in anti-Semitism. Consequently, the movement gathered a collection of members that was not necessarily devoted to the wider Fascist cause, but rather because some elements of the BUF's policies and culture appealed to their political conscious.

This sense of disunity must be recognised as the greatest challenge for the British Union of Fascists. The party membership remained unstable throughout its duration primarily because of the variations in the type of Yorkshire members and why they identified with the party, some seeing the movement as an economic solution and others wanting to be involved in the

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<sup>108</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 1 October 1934.

<sup>109</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 19 November 1934.

social elements around the BUF. Mosley attempted to build a party that appealed to all. Whether this was because of local issues Mosley addressed, anti-Semitic unrest or whether it was for the cultural and fashionable elements of the movement that was attractive, he exercised many tactics to broaden his reach. All failed to unify the movement, resulting in the BUF never imposing any threat to the mainstream parties that occupied Yorkshire's electorate.

### Chapter Three – Fascism in Lancashire

Lancashire became a hotspot for fascism during the 1930s, housing its northern headquarters and maintaining a political party structure that went on to challenge in local elections.

Similarly, to other prominent Fascist areas in Britain, it became the host to hundreds of fascist public displays throughout the 1930s, resulting in the movement gathering a prominent local following. Nevertheless, even here Mosley and the BUF were unable to make much of an impression on the existing political balance of power

Many areas of Lancashire, such as Manchester were unsettled by poor economic conditions, declining local trade and a high Jewish population. The declining trades and economic concerns of the region played a significant role in influencing a rise in Fascist membership, the BUF like in other areas of the country, sought to identify with local aggravations to invoke support for the party. The BUF pushed social and gender boundaries by recruiting and supporting women in politics, they gave opportunities to younger activists and created a fashion-like appeal to their political campaign. Despite their efforts, the BUF failed to mount a challenge to the political infrastructure of the interwar governments.

To understand why Fascism was prominent in Lancashire we must first understand how fertile the Lancashire environment was prior to the BUF's arrival. In Manchester, two Fascist parties already existed in isolation of one another. Similarly, to the layout of Yorkshire, a group named the British Fascists formed a branch in Manchester in 1923.<sup>110</sup> The president for the movement was Brigadier-General R. B. D Blakeney, who visited Manchester on 16 December 1925 to deliver a speech at Albert Square. The speech was received by a small crowd, half of whom were reported by the *Manchester Guardian* as hecklers associated with

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<sup>110</sup> R. Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order* (London, 1969), p. 27.



the Communist party.<sup>111</sup> The movement gathered very little momentum and chose to distance itself with the other Fascist movements in the area.

The Fascist Brigade was also formed in the 1920s. This movement was a social gathering that replicated the fascist culture of Italy. Designed to retain the political identity and beliefs of Mussolini, the Fascist Brigade was set up and was founded by prominent Catholics known as 'Della Primara' (the first hour).<sup>112</sup> Dr Laetre Azzoni, one of the founding members influenced the spread of the movement to other Italian communities in Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield. Yet the movement never looked beyond its isolated Italian spheres. It served as a social commune for the children where it retained the characteristics of the 'motherland'. The Fascist Brigade was a cultural movement rather than a political one. It aimed only to strengthen its ties to contemporary Italy, rather than aim to spread its ideology to the people of Manchester.

The Fascist Brigade movement in Manchester remained isolated to the events of the British Union of Fascists and chose to remain detached from the development of British Fascism. The BUF attracted much of their target audience from the Irish Catholic communities and the former British Fascists.<sup>113</sup> Anti-Semitism was evident in some communities, specifically the Irish Catholic groups who were noted for attacking Jews at Cheetham Hill.<sup>114</sup> The fact that Manchester was home to two Fascist groups prior to 1931, suggests Mosley's New Party was destined to have a strong following. Yet the relationship between the existing Fascist groups and the New Party were somewhat tenuous, the same conclusion can be drawn from the pre-

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<sup>111</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 23 April 1931.

<sup>112</sup> A. Valgimigh, *La Colonia Italiana di Manchester* (1932). p. 63.

<sup>113</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s', p. 99.

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

1931 Fascist parties in Yorkshire towns and cities too. The BUF's precursor, the New Party had declined as quickly as it had risen.<sup>115</sup>

The Northern Command Headquarters of the BUF was seated in Preston for the early years of the movement. It was headed by G.G. Vincent and assisted by Vincent Keens. The success of the local movement depended on the local leaders. It was up to Vincent and Keens to expand the movement to a rate where it could maintain a branch that could appoint its own officials. It was reported that the movement was fraught with the limitations like that of the New Party. Vincent and Keens led with a dictatorial style, with no room for dissent or appeals to higher order.<sup>116</sup>

The Fascist following in Lancashire was the largest in the whole of the North of England. It built its membership on the consequences of Lancashire's economic struggle throughout the early years of the 1930s. Jobs were limited, the cotton industry was in considerable decline and the government offered no long-term solutions to the issues. Whether one was a businessman or a weaver, for some, fascism began to voice a stake in providing a resolution to the country's ills. Nellie Driver, the Woman's District Leader of Nelson, subscribes to the belief that the movement attracted a membership of all classes.

The rank and file of the members came from all walks of life, from Dockers to doctors; miners to office workers; and factory workers to big business men. When on active duty they all wore the same uniform, so that there was no class distinction, and all had the same chance of gaining rank.

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<sup>115</sup> Stevenson & Cook, *The Slump* (1979), p. 199.

<sup>116</sup> *Sheffield Daily Independent*, 29 June 1934.

If a lad of eighteen was capable of being district leader, he was the one appointed.<sup>117</sup>

The BUF aimed to gather momentum by initially breaking through to the cotton workers. Throughout the 1930s, staple industries suffered due to foreign competition. Loom production was falling at substantial rates, from 1917 to 1937; the industry produced 43 per cent less cotton. This had a detrimental effect on the security of the weavers' jobs, with 267,000 male and females losing their positions within the mills between the years of 1912 to 1937.<sup>118</sup>

The BUF made it clear the reason for such a collapse within the cotton industry; Britain had lost 23.5 million spindles of cotton between the years of 1912 to 1937.<sup>119</sup> The loss derived from foreign competition, specifically that of China, Japan and the African colonies.

The BUF firmly sided with the vulnerable cotton workers. The BUF wanted to restrict trade and specifically prevent the erection of cotton mills in Japan and China, built by British financiers, namely the Jewish Sassoon family. Lancashire was being outpriced in the production and sale of cotton to British colonies like India. A quote from a BUF pamphlet on Lancashire reads, 'The main reason for Japan's lower prices is that her labour costs on comparable cloths appear to be less than a fifth of Lancashire's'.<sup>120</sup> Production output was also considerably higher in Japan for they bypassed regulations set out under the Factories Act, as evidenced by Captain Fuller when addressing the house in 1933.

Apart from the factories in Japan, there is a very large cottage industry, where factory legislation does not apply and hours of work are longer and

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<sup>117</sup> N. Driver, *From the Shadows of exile*, unpublished autobiography, p. 29.

<sup>118</sup> A BUF political pamphlet, *Is Lancashire Doomed?* (1939), p. 1.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

wages lower, and this is especially the case in the country districts where goods are made for export to those markets we formerly enjoyed, including Empire markets. I think this explains why Japanese looms have a greater output, especially when we remember that in this country our looms work one shift per day approximately 48 hours per week, while in Japan not less than two shifts per day and 120 hours per week are worked.<sup>121</sup>

The topic of Japan and her cotton production was frequently debated in the House of Lords. In the one debate on this issue on 29 November 1933, Captain Fuller, a former major general turned BUF member in 1934, addressed the house to call for a vigorous motion in dealing with the crisis that the Cotton industry faced in this period.<sup>122</sup> On the one hand, many traditionalists were in favour of isolating Japan's trade by sanctioning their ability to trade within Britain's Empire. On the other hand, the motion was opposed by many who sought to criticise the self-destructing industry, dubbed as the product of a greedy capitalist state. Mr Crossley, the MP for Oldham decreed the Cotton industry was full of undercutting jealousies, who 'given the opportunity to 'undercut' the Japanese capitalists, would do it'.<sup>123</sup> The home market needed to unify similarly to its approach during the war, to drive a harder bargain within the foreign marketplace.

Mosley's influence on the cotton campaign extended beyond Lancashire, it influenced the electorate's position on Indian Reform.<sup>124</sup> Mosley brought attention to the topic of Indian Reform to the working class cotton employees, by advocating Britain ruled India by

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<sup>121</sup> *Hansard Milbank*, HC Deb, 29 November 1933, vol 283, cc897-958, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1933/nov/29/japanese-competition-1>

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*,

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

<sup>124</sup> M. Pugh, 'Lancashire, Cotton, and Indian Reform: Conservative Controversies in the 1930s' *20th Century British History*, Vol 15/ 2 (2004), pp. 143-151.

conquest, dismissing the case to enfranchise ‘thirty million illiterates’ and opposing handing over power to the pockets of financiers.<sup>125</sup> Mosley wanted to develop the Empire into a source of food and raw materials and influence economic growth at home, instead of ‘fattening profits’ at the expense of British producers.<sup>126</sup>

The BUF advocated an ‘Insulated Empire’ policy to combat the ills of the woollen industry. The policy suggested the exclusion of foreign goods within the Empire’s markets, except where an equitable exchange of products had been arranged by the Government. Mosley’s position on international cotton trade was influenced by the necessity to stimulate Britain’s trade as well as encourage a link between the working class and the Empire, by demonstrating the economic benefits of imperial trade. After the consequences of the economic decisions of the 1920s, specifically the return to the gold standard and then Lloyd George’s deflationary policies, Mosley proposed an outspoken and alternative solution. In a BUF pamphlet titled, *Is Lancashire Doomed*, he suggests a policy of protection for Lancashire and Britain’s imperial markets.

The British Union distinguishes clearly between the function of Government and the function of Industry. The protection and preservation of imperial markets and the prevention of unfair sweated competition in those markets is a part of the duty of Government, a duty scandalously neglected by the present so-called ‘National’ Government.<sup>127</sup>

The British Union of Fascists aimed to denounce the government's reluctance to act and exclude all Japanese and other foreign cotton goods from trading with colonial markets. This

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<sup>125</sup> *The Blackshirt*, 1 April 1933.

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

<sup>127</sup> A BUF political pamphlet, *Is Lancashire Doomed?* (1939), p. 5.

was thought would inspire a trade recovery in Lancashire, but also in East and Central Africa. Mosley aimed to 'insulate' Britain and its Empire from potential world economic crisis, like that of the Wall Street Crash of 1929. He argued that he did not want to isolate Britain and the Empire from mutually beneficial trade. Instead, Mosley and the BUF wanted to leverage the Empire to protect British industry and to protect imperial values across the nation through demonstrating the economic benefits of the Empire to the working-class voters. By strengthening the Empire, they argued Britain could resume their foothold within the world stage.

Mosley later announced in the same pamphlet that once the Cotton Industry has been restored, the governance of the industry would be passed over to the National Cotton Corporation, a self-governing body built up of every firm, trade unions, shippers and other consumers of the industry.<sup>128</sup> This notion of a self-governing industry amidst a Fascist government seems both idealistic and improbable. Patterns in attendance figures seemed to be emerging in the early 1930s, meetings were well attended and the movement began to look a threat. Yet Mosley failed to gather any serious momentum from the cotton community, the threat to the national government lay in splitting the vote by appealing to patriotic Tories and unsettled, unemployed millworkers, thus providing an opening for the Labour party.<sup>129</sup> Further to this, the BUF undermined itself with militancy and its influence over the violent backlash that pursued most meetings. Many turned out to hear Mosley's economic ideas, but the policies in which he voiced were overshadowed by the militant clashes expressed by members and anti-fascist demonstrators.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>129</sup> M. Pugh, 'Lancashire, Cotton, and Indian Reform: Conservative Controversies in the 1930s' *20th Century British History*, Vol 15/ 2 (2004), pp. 143-151.

Violence at Mosley's demonstrations hindered the BUF's electoral progress, but it played into the culture he was beginning to develop. Violence at Mosley's meetings became the focal point for the younger members who identified with the movement. The British Union of Fascists protected their public meetings with a ring of stewards around the inside of the venue. This gave the general feeling that the meetings could at any moment erupt into violent disorder.

The first example of Fascist public display and violent disorder derived from the meeting at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, on 12 March 1933.<sup>130</sup> This meeting was the first example of Mosley turning his attention away from London. The meeting was dubbed as a mass demonstration to exhibit Fascist support in the North of England. The 'Spring Offensive' as labelled by Mosley, achieved certain notoriety across the nation. It was the first example of the 'Blackshirt' stewards using weapons to beat down hecklers.

At the beginning of every meeting, Mosley made it clear his position on anybody who attempted to restrict free speech.

We do not want any fighting or violence. On the other hand we are going to have free speech. That is why we are organised to preserve free speech and have our defence force here tonight. No one will be molested by us providing he gives us a chance to put our case. If anyone has come with the object of preventing free speech in Manchester he may go out head first.<sup>131</sup>

Mosley then proceeded with delivering his speech, detailing his position on industrial organisation if he came to power. The opportunity arose for the crowd to ask Mosley

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<sup>130</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 21 February 1933.

<sup>131</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 13 March 1933.

questions, one audience member wanted to know whether the union was anti-Semitic. Mosley was quick to refute this charge, denying any association with anti-Semitism, which given earlier evidence was doubtful. Another member of the audience pursued his answer only to find himself dealing with a uniformed steward telling him to be quiet. A *Manchester Guardian* reporter observed the situation and reported the following.

There was some argument and much disorder, in which Sir Oswald could be heard at the press table telling the steward to leave the interrupter alone, but he did not hear and continued to dispute, which ended with a blow which could be heard at the press table. This plunged the whole of the watching audience in tumult. One steward pinioned the interrupter by the arms and carried him along the front aisle, sweeping people off the front row chairs immediately below the platform. Immediately after an indignant Scotsman rushed at the platform loudly calling on Sir Oswald to tell him that of the stewards had hit a woman and asking if he allowed that. A large part of the audience was booing, and the rest appeared to be shouting and screaming, in no part of the hall where their people sitting down.

Sir Oswald stood helpless, with his arms folded, looking at the confusion, which increased every minute. The centre gangway was filled with people fighting; civilians, grey shirts and black shirts. A row of three chairs was lifted in the air. Some men could be seen using what looked like rubber truncheons. At the moment it appeared that the hall would never be cleared without serious injury.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 13 March 1933.



Mosley eventually decided to terminate the meeting and the police cleared everybody out of the hall. The Free Trade Hall meeting marked the first time the BUF used weapons at its public meetings, something that became commonplace in the subsequent gatherings. The meeting also marked the first-time police intervened at one of the BUF's meeting, a move that exposed the purpose of the 'stewards' and gave the BUF a notoriety that haunted their potential from ever becoming an established mainstream party. The normal practise of the police was not to intervene in private meetings, but on this occasion Chief Constable Maxwell felt it was needed. Furthermore, as the meeting was met with many female protesters, it marked the turning point for the movement to open itself to all genders. Focus was then on placed on inviting women to the movement so they could act as stewards, for a male confronting a female protester would have only damaged the reputation of the BUF even further.

Women went on to play a prominent role with the British Union of Fascists. Like anti-Semitism, the role of the woman grew in parallel from 1932. A national survey conducted by the Labour party in 1934 to monitor the British Union of Fascists suggests that in Bolton, 18 women were actively selling copies of the *Blackshirt* at all meetings, in the main streets and outside the market, an observation made by the Labour party of Bolton.<sup>133</sup> Women eventually accounted for 25 per cent of the movement's membership and 28 per cent of those who attended movements and marches. Woman served as Blackshirts and stewards, sold newspapers, leaflets and helped raise funds. They organised their own Women's Section (1937), which had its own speakers and classes. They initiated their own Women's Propaganda Patrol (1933) as well as their own Para-military Women's Defence Force (1934)

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<sup>133</sup> The MPM, LP/ FAS/ 34/ 7, 10 Dec 1934, A response from Bolton Labour party's survey on Fascism.

and Women's Drum Corps (1937).<sup>134</sup> The BUF united genders and gave women a platform to voice their political beliefs and progress within their party infrastructure.

Nellie Driver, a former district leader of the fascist movement brings a unique perspective to the BUF in Lancashire, her autobiography provides insight into gender opportunities, the type of people who were brought into fascism, and the challenges she faced as a district leader.

Information that the local press, reports of the public meetings and BUF propaganda does not otherwise provide.

By breaking through gender barriers, adopting a uniform, creating social opportunities and fuelling a militant approach to demonstrations, Mosley created a unique and fashionable movement. Mosley always denied the initiation of violence at his meetings, insisting that the Blackshirts were always acting in defence of attacks from the 'reds'.<sup>135</sup>

In *The Star* libel court case in 1936, Mosley justified the attacks by accusing the 'reds' of attacking the BUF members with razorblades in the meetings prior to the one at Free Trade Hall. No attacks on the BUF were reported prior to the meeting at the Free Trade Hall in any of Manchester's newspapers, something that could not have been ignored by the press. The only other suggestion that could be made is if the victims did not report the attacks, again something that is highly unlikely as the BUF would have capitalised on any opportunity to further their political presence. Mosley also stated in 1936, that 'the meeting was the only occasion where weapons were used by our people'.

In Rochdale, only two days later, a man was arrested for breaching the peace, assault and being armed with a coil of rubber filled with lead. Daniel McNichol, the Lancastrian man in

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<sup>134</sup> J. V. Gottlieb, 'Motherly Hate': Gendering Anti-Semitism in the British Union of Fascists' *Gender & History*, Vol.14/ 2 (August 2002), pp. 294–320.

<sup>135</sup> *The Star*, November 1934.

question was later sentenced to three months' hard labour for his participation in the events that unfolded in Rochdale.<sup>136</sup> McNichol was involved in further incriminating activity throughout 1933; another case reported that McNichol had struck a blow to a Jewish man walking down Miller Street for no apparent reason. He was later fined £5 for the offence that took place shortly after his stint of hard labour.<sup>137</sup> It was disclosed to the court that McNichol was involved in the spreading of anti-Semitic propaganda, specifically on the premises occupied by Jewish trades people. McNichol's case presents evidence to suggest that the BUF were demonstrating anti-Semitic behaviour as early as 1933. This example, albeit an isolated instance in this context, suggests that anti-Semitism ran through the foundation of the BUF since its formation. There was evidence for Jew baiting as early as 1932, yet Mosley always denied the party's association with anti-Semitism, something that the Jewish elite took at face value.

The BUF never resisted clashes with anti-fascist and communist groups, particularly in Manchester, where the Fascists gained a reputation of bullying. Meetings in Manchester had a sense of notoriety and clashes between fascists and anti-fascists were common. The BUF's public meetings were met with resistance, a point that influenced both their rise and their fall from political influence. At a meeting in Belle Vue, Manchester in October 1933, disturbances occurred. Between 800-900 members attended the meeting, many travelled by coach from surrounding areas of Lancashire and Mosley himself travelled by train from London. Mosley spoke for some time on his economic policy, at the end of the speech, a fight broke out at the back of the room between the stewards and a female interrupter. A witness at the meeting told the *Manchester Guardian* of the events that unfolded.

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<sup>136</sup> *Rochdale Observer*, 25 March 1933.

<sup>137</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, 29 June 1933.

A man sitting next to the protester intervened with the stewards who aimed to throw her out. The stewards then set about kicking both of them out, resulting in a fight breaking out. He shouted out 'They are trying to murder me'; his screams were pitiful to hear. I am not a Communist, but I do not think that people should be treated as this wretched man was.<sup>138</sup>

Further violence broke out after the meeting when several fascists descended on a small group of people who sang 'The Red Flag' over the national anthem. Similar violent patterns remained throughout the meetings of the BUF, demonstrating to the electorate how unelectable the party was. The British Union of Fascists offered a deeper threat to western civilisation than the political destruction of the national government throughout the 1930s.

The BUF continued to develop a militant approach, attempting to resonate within the youth cultures. By autumn of 1933 the local headquarters in Manchester had organised itself into a position where it could field a boxing team to fight the local I.C.I works at Blackley.<sup>139</sup>

Boxing was by and large the most popular sport within the party, but a gym was fitted out in the basements of the Manchester headquarters for its members to practise and train for various sports and games. By practising violent sports, it attracted the politically disengaged who identified themselves with blood and violence, rather than the evolution of fascism in British politics.

The glamour exhibited at demonstrations like Belle Vue, attempted to orchestrate glory, imperial values and the politics of change.<sup>140</sup> Mosley attempted to portray the strength of the movement through its organisation and uniform. The fact that members practised sports like

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<sup>138</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 16 October 1933.

<sup>139</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, 9 September 1933.

<sup>140</sup> H. Pussard, 'A mini-Blackpool: Belle Vue and the cultural politics of pleasure and leisure in inter-war Manchester', (unpublished thesis, University of Manchester, 1997).

boxing and fencing wasn't a coincidence and it all contributed to the showmanship of the BUF. The motivation to join the union had become greater influenced by its style, weakening the party's sustainability as a political threat.

Some people identified themselves with the social opportunities the BUF offered. Sporting rivalries became more important to some members than the political goals of the party.

Rumours of a potential coup of branch members was leaked in a September 1933 edition of the *Manchester Evening News*, but senior officials soon dismissed this.<sup>141</sup> An element of truth must have been present as soon after Mosley made wholesale expulsions of its members to weed out the less desirable elements, who ran the branches more as social clubs rather than political organisations.<sup>142</sup>

Mosley found further disruption in his party when District Leaders exaggerated the attendance figures in their meetings. Nellie Driver describes the 'cooked' reports and how the true reflection of the BUF's successes rested within the poor election figures.

I am also afraid that in their enthusiasm and in their desire to please and impress the leader. Some of the District leaders gave him exaggerated ideas about the progress of the movement. Many reports from Districts were carefully 'cooked' and meetings that were flops were written up as highly successful. Several bad blunders were made through these false reports. Election campaigns were held which showed up our lack of support in the low number of votes cast for our candidates.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, 9 September 1933.

<sup>142</sup> *News Chronicle*, 19 July 1934.

<sup>143</sup> Driver, *From the Shadows of exile*, p. 31.

After adopting the ‘Fascism next time’ policy in 1935 where it was agreed that the party wouldn’t challenge any elections at that time, the BUF aimed to fight half of the 10 constituencies in the forthcoming general election. It prepared well and selected constituencies based on the strength and support within the local area, the availability of a candidate also played a determining factor.

**Table B, Distribution of prospective parliamentary candidates in areas of high BUF support.**

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Area	Number of seats in the area	Number of seats contested by the BUF	Percentage of possible BUF representation (%)
Manchester	10	5	50
Leeds	6	3	50
London	61	10	33
Liverpool	11	3	27.2

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It is clear from the election plans that the three main regions considered by the BUF, were Manchester, Leeds and London, where they aimed to contest a total of 18 seats out of a possible 78, ten of which were to be fought in London.

The five candidates in Manchester were selected on the grounds of their rank and popularity within the party. Thomas Davies, a local miner and former soldier was to be fielded in the

Gorton constituency. In Hulme, R. T. Parkyn was selected, another local man and former soldier. Captain L. Wright, the Chief Propaganda Officer for the North-West area was the candidate for the Exchange constituency. R. R. Bellamy, the Chief of Northern Propaganda was to represent the Blackley constituency. Bellamy felt that the constituents of Blackley were conscious of the local Jewish community, which in turn provided him with the opportunity to exploit this feeling of animosity. Finally, the last prospective candidate for the Manchester area was L. E. Griffith, who was to fight for the working class Moss Side constituency. The five candidates were all popular within the BUF movement and the constituencies they represented were strongholds for the party. However, the prospect of challenging a general election never progressed for the BUF, the movement had been eclipsed by the time the next general election was held in 1945.

The BUF had few opportunities to test the electorate's response to the fascist movement but in 1938 they contested the local municipal elections. The BUF challenged four regions within Manchester that year. Miss Margaret Pye served the All Saints ward; James Simmonds in the South Gorton area, F. Fowden in the Collyhurst Ward, and Bernard Talbot in the St. George's ward. The candidates were all recognised as relatively prominent within their local regions, though not nationally known.

The manifesto proposed was replicated across all four wards. It took a stance against 'Communism, Cant and Corruption' as quoted by Margaret Pye.<sup>144</sup> The party carefully positioned itself against two elements within the manifesto, Communism and Religion. It released party pamphlets that played both Socialism and Religion against one another, titled, 'Socialists say: - 'Abolish Religion''. The leaflet then went on to condemn Manchester Labour MP's for voting in favour of the 'Anti-God Congress'. On the same pamphlet, it

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<sup>144</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s', pp. 381-384.

quotes the leader of the 'Union of Godless' as having said 'Remember, that the struggle against Religion is the struggle for Socialism'.<sup>145</sup>

The wards chosen for the municipal elections were predominantly Catholic and generally working class which they attempted to connect with through the suffering of the cotton industry and anti-Semitism. Propaganda was published in the run up to the election, branding the Jewish population as the 'financial ruling elite', which aimed to invoke unrest within the cotton community. Party pamphlets demonstrated through this through headlines such as:

'None Shall Stuff – while others starve – Poverty in an age of plenty. The rich have all – the poor have none. So it will ever be while the parties and the financiers rule'<sup>146</sup>

Every speech and pamphlet ran an anti-Semitic rhetoric. Throughout Mosley's policies and manifesto, he attempted to scapegoat the Jewish population by blaming them for the economic depression and suggesting they found benefit in the midst of suffering. Anti-Semitic hostility derived out of waves of immigration in the early twentieth century. By 1900, following years of persecution of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe; Britain's Jewish population had risen to around 160,000, which represented 0.3 per cent of the total population.<sup>147</sup> Most fascists devoutly believed that the real power exercised by the Jews lay in the economic sphere where their roles as financiers and company directors ensured British economic policy favoured City investment and foreign industrial markets like that of those in Japan's cotton trade, where Jewish factories 'undercut' British produce.

Mosley attempted to present a message to the working class, suggesting he would redistribute the power attained by Jewish monopolies under his policy of insulation. The

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<sup>145</sup> Political pamphlet, Fowden, *Socialism say:- 'Abolish Religion'*, 1938.

<sup>146</sup> Appendix 2

<sup>147</sup> Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts*, pp. 213-214.



BUF caused unsettlement amongst the working class, yet that unrest failed to influence a shift in the electorate of 1938.

The British Union further attempted to resonate with Christian religious communities at a time of social instability. They campaigned for the freedom of religion in education, an issue that was publicly supported and one that exposed the other election candidates. The BUF supported the right for Catholic children to attend Catholic schools. The British Union had advocated for the freedom of religion ever since the New Party's representative, Allen Young polled in the Ashton by-election of 1931 with this policy as his focus in a move that resulted in many Catholics resigning from the Ashton Labour Party, only to later join Young for his religious conscience. Tension on this matter rose even further when Gordon, the Labour candidate attending a Roman Catholic Church service, was denounced from the pulpit by the priest for his evasive attitude on the topic of freedom of education. The priest called for the Churchgoers to vote for the candidate who would allow 'freedom of conscience when Catholic principles conflict with party discipline.'

**Table C, Manchester Municipal Election Results in constituencies with Fascist candidates, November 1938.<sup>148</sup>**

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Votes Cast</b>	<b>% Of Vote</b>	<b>Votes Cast as % of poll</b>
<b>Collyhurst</b>			
Johnston W. (Lab)	1709	87.59%	30.2%
Fowden F. (Fascist)	242	12.40%	
<b>St Georges</b>			41.0%
Kearns J. H (Con)	2267	53.39%	
Clapham J. G (Lab)	1840	43.33%	
Talbot A. (Fascist)	139	3.29%	
<b>Gorton South</b>			29.26%
Adams T. H (Lab)	3643	93.91%	
Simmonds J. (Fascist)	236	6.08%	
<b>All Saints</b>			37.66%
Harper R. S jnr. (Con)	1817	64.63%	
Gower E. A (Lab)	968	34.43%	
Pye Miss M. E. (Fascist)	23	0.81%	
Whittington L. (Ind)	3	0.10%	

The results of the 1938 municipal elections in Manchester were damning for collectively the BUF achieved only 4.9 per cent of the total votes cast across all wards. Fowden in Collyhurst, totalling a percentage of 12.04 per cent, achieved the highest percentage of votes for the BUF. Labour's Johnston received a total of 87.59 per cent of the electorate. Whilst

<sup>148</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s', p. 99.

Fowden's result might be recognised as opportunistic he was only opposed by one party, which may have naturally gifted him more votes from the maverick section of the electorate.

The same can be said for Simmonds in the Gorton South region. Simmonds managed to win only 6.08 per cent of the vote against the Labour candidate, a figure falling considerably short of what was expected when considering the nature of his campaign. Simmonds targeted the working class in the run up to the election with pamphlets (see Appendix 1) that read, 'The snob and the parasite must go and the rich must not eat cake until the poor have bread'.<sup>149</sup> The BUF aggressively targeted the working class and the Irish Catholics during their campaign, these regions were predominantly poorer areas with anti-Semitic prejudices.<sup>150</sup>

What's clear is the propaganda and party pamphlets released in the run up the election, had little effect in gathering momentum for the BUF. An example of failed propaganda derives from Fowden's campaign (see Appendix 2). He quoted Socialists as saying, 'Christianity, indeed is a cemetery of dead religions', which many socialists would have rejected.<sup>151</sup> Such a caption was designed to inspire voters to move away from the Labour party and vote the British Union. The BUF were attempting to target long-term Labour voters using fictional quotes from religious bodies. The election results hardly came as a surprise, when analysing the quality of the pamphlets used during the campaign. It's clear the BUF identified areas of vulnerability for the population of Lancashire, yet it could not provide the solution. The percentage of the poll that voted suggested a disengaged electorate, the poll averaged 34.52 per cent.

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<sup>149</sup> Appendix 1

<sup>150</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s', p. 99.

<sup>151</sup> Appendix 2

The municipal elections of 1938 reveals the weakness of the BUF in Lancashire. This should have been the opportunity for the BUF to drive support for its cause as it campaigned aggressively against a vulnerable government. The momentum of the movement was in decline after the passing of the Public Order Act in 1936. The Act withdrew the glamour and fashion the party once exhibited through its inability to wear uniform and march in public. After 1938, the BUF spiralled into a decline as war approached. The National Socialists of Germany were on the path to take Western Civilisation to War by 1938, although Mosley emphasised his opposition to war in an attempt to offset such views.

After the municipal elections, the BUF challenged three parliamentary by-elections in 1940, in one of which Lancashire's F. Haslam failed to acquire more than 1.3 per cent of the vote.<sup>152</sup> The by-election results of 1940 epitomised the affect the British Union of Fascists had on society at a national level. The plans the BUF had for the by-election never bore fruit because the movement had been considerably weakened by 1940.<sup>153</sup>

**Table D, 1940 Parliamentary by-election<sup>154</sup>**

Area	Candidate	Percentage of vote %
Lancashire, Middleton & Prestwich	F. Haslam	1.3% (418)
West Ham, Silvertown	T. P. Moran	1% (151)
Leeds, North-East	S. Allen	2.9% (722)

<sup>152</sup> F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949* (London, 1969), pp. 162, 273, 401.

<sup>153</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s', p. 181.

<sup>154</sup> Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949*, pp. 162, 273, 401.

The three regions in which the BUF fielded candidates for the by-election were the strongholds for Fascist support across the nation, yet it failed to rise above three per cent of the electorate in 1940. The damning result was justified when considering that in 1940, European Fascism under the banner of Hitler, was at war with Britain. Further to this, the BUF's leader Oswald Mosley had been imprisoned under the Defence regulation bill, leaving the British Union of Fascists party with no direction.

The BUF party membership was heavily influenced by the fashion and culture it represented, this subsequently influenced an unstable flow of membership retention in Lancashire. The BUF failed to retain this type of member after the Public Order Act, resulting in the movement never posing anything more than an ideological threat to the political system.

The BUF blamed Lancashire's economic suffering on the Jewish financial elite, yet their anti-Semitic fuelled 1938 municipal campaign failed to stimulate more than five per cent of the electorate to vote in favour of the British union. The habitants of Lancashire were not as affected by Jewish residency as those who resided in East London, coupled with a view that an 'insulated empire' wouldn't necessarily bring immediate recovery to the cotton industry, the BUF failed to connect their value with the people of Lancashire. A reviving economy, a party culture strangled by the State, and a failed election campaign were all key factors in the failure of fascism in Lancashire.

## "None Shall Stuff \_\_\_\_\_ while Others Starve"

POVERTY IN AN AGE OF PLENTY. THE RICH  
HAVE ALL — THE POOR HAVE NONE. SO IT  
WILL EVER BE WHILE THE PARTIES AND THE  
FINANCIERS RULE.

THE DISGUSTING SPECTACLE OF FLAUNTING  
EXTRAVAGANCE AND PARADED RICHES IN THE  
FACE OF POVERTY EXISTS TO-DAY. 'THE MAN  
THAT LIVES UPON HIS FATHER' LOOKS DOWN  
UPON THE POOR AS BEING IN A LOWER CLASS.

SO IT WILL ALWAYS BE WHILE THE PARTIES OF  
CLASS EXIST.

THE SNOB AND THE PARASITE MUST GO  
THE RICH SHALL NOT EAT CAKE UNTIL  
THE POOR HAVE BREAD

**BRITONS**  
*Unite with* **MOSLEY**  
*in the classless movement of* \_\_\_\_\_  
**BRITISH UNION**

Local District 11 **VOTE FOR SIMMONDS**

**GREY STREET,  
HYDE ROAD.**

Ask your Newsagent to stock **OPERATIONS** 2d Weekly



Issued by British Union. Printed by A. E. SHEPHERD, (Printers) Ltd (T.U.) all Days  
Further copies of this can be obtained at 2/6 per 1,000

UNION.

## BRITISH UNION

During the past three years the Labour Party have done their utmost to bring on India a war over quarrels which have been the concern of the workers of Britain.

First they sought **SAVE ABYSSINIA, CHINA, PALESTINE, SPAIN**, and soon during the recent crisis, they made themselves known, shouting, stand by **CZECHOSLOVAKIA**. They would have taken the risk of sacrificing millions of **BRITISH LIVES** to safeguard the **ALLEN FINANCIAL INTERESTS** in Czechoslovakia, yet during this period not one cry have we heard from the Labour Party, the so-called champions of the British Workers, to **SAVE LANCASHIRE or SAVE BRITAIN**.

**BRITISH UNION** policy is to use the Youth of Britain to carry out the policy made to their relatives in 1918 by the government of that day, to make a **LAND FIT FOR HEROES TO LIVE IN**.

The governments that have followed have, unfortunately, forgotten that policy, but the people of Britain, who made the sacrifices have not.

**BRITISH UNION** will fight to the last man against any nation, be they Fascist, Nazi, or Democrat, who attempt to attack any part of Britain or her Empire, but they are determined to see that not one drop of British Blood shall be spilled on foreign soil in an alien quarrel which is no concern of ours.

Show your disapproval of **LABOUR WARMONGERS** by giving your vote to the **BRITISH UNION CANDIDATE** in the Municipal Election on **NOVEMBER 1st**.

Published by F. FOWDEN Printed by J. TRANTER & Co., 147, Oldham Road, Manchester, 18.



MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS  
1938.

Collyhurst Ward

—  
Polling Day:  
November 1st

**VOTE FOR FOWDEN**  
The "BRITISH UNION" Candidate

—  
The "Man of Action"  
who will fight

**COMMUNISM**

**CANT and**

**CORRUPTION**

—  
Committee Room:

661, ROCHDALE ROAD, QUEEN'S PARK.

### *Below Britons.*

Once again the Council elections are here. Now is your opportunity to elect a real live man to your Council who will for a change put the interests of the people first. How many times have the people elected local Councils and Governments to carry out their will only to be betrayed again and again by political careerists?

How often at Election time have the little men of the old parties promised you programmes of action and when they have been elected they have gone back to office to put every interest in the world before your own? Have you ever got from these parties what you voted for at Election time?

Thousands of local people to-day never take the trouble to vote in these elections. They know they will never get what they vote for because politicians and councillors are far too busy campaigning for Spain, China and Abyssinia while Britons starve; busy looking after the interests of foreign empires while rates pile up in our own borough; building costly town halls with money that could be better spent on building homes for the people.

The Tories at Election time promise you nothing and see that you get it. The Labour party promise you everything and see that you don't get it. That is the only difference between them, and so long as you put your faith in them nothing will ever get done.

British Union now enters the field. Not a political party because we do not believe in politics. I, as a representative of British Union, come to you with a new creed and policy of Action summed up in the simple formula "Britain First."

If you will return me to the council I promise you that I shall not take part in their party dog-fights, but shall become the watchdog of the people in this borough. I believe that the great social services should be a National responsibility and not local.

I shall expose any attempt to cheat you of your rights as ratepayers. I shall expose the pinching of the relatives and friends of councillors in snug jobs, and demand fair play to all applicants for employment. I shall demand that letting of flats on borough housing estates shall be fair and free from political bias, necessity to be the deciding factor.

As your watchdog I seek to be returned. I shall fight without gloves, without sentiment, in order that the will of the people might triumph over the will of the little men that rule us to-day. Our fight is your fight. The people's cause must win, and by your votes on Polling Day you can make a start to clean up local Government by sending a man of Action to the Council Chamber.

In your service,

F. FOWDEN.

31, Chain Road,  
Mr. Blackley.



Manchester City Council Elections, 1938.

REMEMBER!  
ACTION - not Talk

ALL SAINTS.

VOTE BRITISH

for a

BRITISH UNION CANDIDATE.



YOU VOTE AT:-

Polling Day - Tuesday, November 1st.

GIVE YOUR VOTE TO

MARGARET E. PYE,

the woman who will fight against

COMMUNISM, GANT AND CORRUPTION.

VOTE FOR BRITISH UNION

Committee Rooms - 140a, Oxford Road.

Printed and Published by  
The E. J. Taylor Printing Co. Ltd., 14, Radcliff Street, Manchester, 3.

## ELECTION ADDRESS.

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140a, Oxford Road,  
All Saints,  
Manchester.

### To the Electors of All Saints Ward.

Fellow Britons,

Once again the Council Elections are here. Now for the first time in history is your opportunity in All Saints to vote for a **British Union Candidate**, who will, for a change, put the interests of the electors of Manchester before the interests of Spain, China and Abyssinia.

The Tories at election time promise you nothing and see that you get it. The Labour Party promises you everything and see that you don't get it.

British Union now enters the field, not a political party because we do not believe in politics. I seek to be returned to the Council to act as the watch-dog of the people. I shall not take part in their party dog-fights, but I will fight against any attempt to cheat you of your rights as rate-payers.

I will fight without gloves and without sentiment, in order that the will of the people might triumph over the will of the little men that rule us to-day.

My fight is your fight. The people's cause must win and by your votes on Polling Day you can make a start to clean up Local Government by sending a woman of action to the Council Chamber.

Help British Union in their fight against the old parties, by voting for a woman of action, who remains in your service.

MARGARET E. PYE.

# Mr British Union Candidate's Election Address.

## BOROUGH COUNCIL ELECTIONS.

### SOUTH GORTON.

Fellow Britons,

1. Once again the Council elections are here. Now is your opportunity to elect a real live man to your Council who will, for a change, put the interests of the people first. How many times have the people elected local councils and governments to carry out their will only to be betrayed again and again by political careerists?

2. How often at election time have the little men of the old parties promised you programmes of action and when they have been elected they have gone back to office to put every interest in the world before your own? Have you ever got from these parties what you voted for at election time? So long as you put your faith in them nothing will ever get done.

3. Thousands of local people to-day never take the trouble to vote in these elections. They know they will never get what they vote for because politicians and councillors are far too busy campaigning for Spain, China and Abyssinia while Britons starve; busy looking after the interests of foreign causes while rates pile up in our own borough; building costly town halls with money that could be better spent on building houses for the people.

4. British Union now enters the field. Not a political party, because we do not believe in party politics. I, as a representative of British Union, come to you with a new creed and policy of action summed up in the simple formula "Britain First."

If you will return me to the Council I promise you that I shall not take part in their party dog fights, but shall become the watchdog of the people of this borough, and will report faithfully to my constituents exactly what takes place during the deliberations of the Council, which the electorate is fully entitled to know. I believe that the great social services should be a national and not a local responsibility. The burden of A.R.P. should be shouldered by the Government.

5. I shall expose any attempt to cheat you of your rights as ratepayers. If rates go up, your spending power goes down. I shall expose the placing of the relatives and friends of Councillors in snug jobs, and demand fair play to all applicants for employment. I shall demand that letting of flats on borough housing estates shall be fair and free from political bias; necessity to be the deciding factor.

As your watchdog I seek to be returned. I shall fight without gloves, without sentiment, in order that the will of the people may triumph over the will of the little men that rule us to-day. Our fight is your fight. The peoples' cause must win, and by your votes on Polling Day you can make a start to clean up local government by sending a man of action to the Council Chamber.

In your service,

JAMES SIMMONDS.

2, DeLacont Road,  
Fallowfield,  
Manchester.

## To the Electors of St. George's Ward.

Fellow Britons,

Once again the Council elections are here. Now is your opportunity to elect real live men to your Council who will, for a change, put the interests of the people first. How many times have the people elected local Councils and Governments to carry out their will only to be betrayed again and again by political careerists.

How often at Election time have the little men of the old parties promised you programmes of action and when they have been elected they have gone back to office to put every interest in the world before your own. Have you ever got from these parties what you voted for at Election time?

Thousands of local people to-day never take the trouble to vote in these elections. They know they will never get what they vote for because politicians and councillors are far too busy campaigning for Spain, China and Abyssinia while Britons starve. They are looking after the interests of foreign causes while rates pile up in our own borough. Building costly town halls with money that could be better spent on building homes for the people.

The Tories at Election time promise you nothing and see that you get it. The Labour Party promises you everything and sees that you don't get it. That is the only difference between them; and so long as you put your faith in them nothing will ever get done.

British Union now enters the field, not a political party because we do not believe in politics, and having been put forward by the Hulme branch of the British Union I come to you with a new creed and policy of Action summed up in the Simple Formula "Britain First."

I am an ex-serviceman, having lost an arm in the Great War, and as I work amongst you I believe that my knowledge of the conditions prevailing in this Ward should prove invaluable if you decide to return me as your representative.

I do not promise you the moon but I promise you that I shall not take part in their party dog fights, but shall become the watchdog of the people in this city. I believe that the great social services should be a national responsibility not local.

I shall expose any attempt to cheat you of your rights as ratepayers. I shall expose the placing of the relatives and friends of councillors in snug jobs and demand fair play to all applicants for employment.

I shall demand that the letting of Flats of City Housing Estates shall be fair and free from political bias, NECESSITY to be the deciding factor.

As your watchdog I seek to be returned. I shall fight without gloves, without sentiment, in order that the will of the people might triumph over the will of the little men that rule us to-day. My fight is your fight. The peoples' cause must win, and by your votes on Polling Day you can make a start to clean up Local Government by sending a man of Action to the Council Chamber.

Remember it was the Labour Party that was responsible for introducing the Means Test.  
B.U. stands for the only test which is a job at a decent wage.

Yours faithfully,

**BERNARD TALBOT,**

British Union Candidate.

## Appendix 2

### A BUF political pamphlet for Fowden

**SOCIALISTS say:—**  
**“ABOLISH RELIGION”**

From a pamphlet of the Socialist Party of Great Britain called “SOCIALISM & RELIGION”:—  
“CHRISTIANITY,” indeed, is a cemetery of dead religions.”

YAROSLAVSKY, Leader of “Union of Godless,” said:  
“Remember that the struggle against Religion is the struggle for SOCIALISM.”

**ALL MANCHESTER LABOUR  
M.P.s — CLYNES, WEDGWOOD  
BENN, and HENDERSON — voted  
in favour of the ANTI-GOD  
CONGRESS being held in London**

Are you going to vote for  
“Labour - cum - Communist”  
Moscow’s Anti-God Agents?

If you love your country, and the  
freedom of Religion which “British  
Union” guarantees you, there is  
only one answer  
**“VOTE BRITISH”  
for FOWDEN and “British  
Union”**

Published by F. FOWDEN Printed by J. TRANTER & Co. 347 ©Jillson Rd., Me, 10

## Chapter Four – Fascism in East London

In the early 1930s the politics in the East End of London became a battleground for social and political movements. The British fascist movement emerged out of the economic depression and the reluctance of the traditional party system to take immediate action in resolving Britain's unemployment crisis. Tensions quickly arose in East London and violent clashes became common ground at political demonstrations. This chapter aims to analyse the effect the BUF imposed on the government and party politics, as well as the lives of the people in East London.

Economic hardship swept over East London in the 1930s. Local trades were in decline and local communities felt threatened by an increase in Jewish immigration. Such cultural and psychological fears were the prelude to the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism in East London.

Oswald Mosley and the fascist movement shaped the identity and social experience of individuals in East London. He subscribed to the notion that the British economy was going to collapse in an 'apocalyptic' fashion in the early 1930s. This influenced his paramilitary tactics and sense of urgency to become the nation's saviour.<sup>155</sup>

The BUF embarked on three phases, the pre-1934 politically motivated paramilitary fascist, the anti-Semitic and violent fascist and finally Fascism as a bureaucratic peace collective.<sup>156</sup> Many inhabitants of East London followed this journey that began with social and economic reform, it soon outgrew these issues and collaborated with anti-Semitic ideas, leading finally onto a split in the party, where one remained vigilant and highly anti-Semitic, the other took a peaceful resistance to the Second World War.

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<sup>155</sup> T. Linehan, *East London for Mosley* (London, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> M. Spurr, 'Living the Blackshirt Life': Culture, Community and the British Union of Fascists 1932-1940, *Contemporary European History*, Volume 12, Issue 03 (2003), pp 305-322.

Mosley had great difficulty in balancing the two types of groups associated with the movement. First, there were those who joined based on national concerns and who felt on reflection, Mosley's fascism provided a solution to Britain's social and economic problems and therefore should ascertain power through elections, a sustainable but long-term strategy. Then there were the revolutionaries, who wanted to gain power through physical force and aggressive propaganda. William Joyce was amongst this group of members who aimed to provoke unrest in the areas of high Jewish settlement.

Mosley wanted to address the economic crisis immediately. To do this he needed unlimited control. The BUF ideology was structured with this sense of immediacy and urgency. The BUF adopted a paramilitary style and dictated with irrational impulses, often complicating Mosley's detailed economic programme. This chapter aims to understand the effect BUF activity had on the inhabitants of East London, the extent to which the BUF gathered support and why it was a movement that invoked popular interest. This chapter also identifies the effects of the Home Office and their suppressive tactics in preventing the party from being at liberty to rally against and resist opposing forces such as those occupied under the anti-fascist movement.

Fascist activity began to gather considerable momentum in London in 1933 and consequently the government increased its surveillance. The Home Office called a conference in November 1933, where it was decided that the BUF, like the Communist Party, would be placed under political surveillance by Special Branch, a dedicated force ordered to protect national security, with MI5 assigned to reporting the results.<sup>157</sup> The decision was then put back for six months due to a lack of funding. Heightened political surveillance and neither the BUF and anti-fascists showing few signs of slowing down meant

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<sup>157</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 45/25385/54-9.

that, Lord Trenchard, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, was able to persuade the Home Office to expand Special Branch from 134 to 169 officers in July 1935.<sup>158</sup>

Rallies like Olympia on 7 June 1934 revealed the acceleration of the BUF in London and how they could mobilise en masse, attendance figures of up to 10,000 people were reported. The Home Office had to act to control what looked like a Fascist epidemic.

Olympia and the Battle of Cable Street were trigger events that led to a higher level of State surveillance and eventually the passing of the Public Order Act of 1936. As well as expansion of the secret police force, the Home Office ordered a stronger visible presence on the streets. More police had been put on the streets of East London between 1936 and 1937 than ever before, large numbers of additional Special Constables were assigned to normal duties, while much of the police establishment were assigned to maintaining order at over one thousand public meetings between the summer months of 1936 to 1939, the great majority of which were occupied by both Fascists and Anti-Fascists.<sup>159</sup>

After the national government passed the Public Order Act of 1936 and the economy reached a level of stability, Mosley's apocalyptic economic expectations began failing to materialise. Mosley publicly identified the party with anti-Semitism in a tactical attempt to incite hatred to the Jewish population because it offered new distraction to the recovering economic crisis, thus having a maximum effect on the working and middle-classes.<sup>160</sup>

Reg Groves, on the executive of the Socialist League and former member of the Communist Party challenged the BUF in a pamphlet he wrote in 1936. The BUF was attacked for its anti-

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<sup>158</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 45/25479, Lord Trenchard to Home Office, 4 July 1935.

<sup>159</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, MEPO 2/3043

<sup>160</sup> K. Hodgson, *Fighting Fascism: The British Left and the Rise of Fascism*, (Manchester, 2010), p. 134.



Semitic regime designed to cause divisions within the working class.<sup>161</sup> Groves, a member of the Marxist League, advanced the Marxist argument in the pamphlet by suggesting the purpose of anti-Semitism was to fragment the working class as a prelude to the nullification of its own strength. 'They set Gentile against Jew and Catholic against Protestant... Division amongst the workers, particularly in the East End where, for over a generation, the workers have stood together in their common interest, is the first step to the ultimate destruction of every freedom and every right that the workers have wrested for themselves from the capitalist.'<sup>162</sup>

It was accepted by the Left that capitalism fostered prejudice and discrimination. Without capitalist competition and a society without competition, anti-Semitism would wither away. He suggested that Mosley was distracting attention away from what he believed was a common enemy, the Capitalist State. Mosley relied on the growing frustrations of the public and therefore the increasing economic disparity, to direct the blame towards the Jewish population. Mosley believed it was the Jewish financiers who created the depression, rather than the greed of the capitalist state, he then began to paint this image of Jewish hatred in his campaign. Both the Communists and the BUF were aware that the rise in unemployment and the saturation of the labour market accelerated the reach of their campaigns, therefore shaping their policies around the working classes was paramount to success.

East London was home to a significant number of working class Jews, many of whom chose to affiliate with the Communist Party. The appeal of the Communist party, according to Joe Jacobs was threefold: communism was responsible for bringing an end to Jewish persecution in Russia; the appalling conditions of the tailoring trade of which employed much of the East London Jewish proletariat; and lastly, the escape from the ghetto that political affiliation

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<sup>161</sup> R. Groves, *East End Crisis: Socialism, the Jews and Fascism* (London, 1937), pp. 4-5.

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

offered.<sup>163</sup> Jewish orthodoxy decayed after the First World War, communism provided an alternative moral discipline to the Jewish population of East London.<sup>164</sup>

The Communist and anti-fascist opposition provided Mosley with the opportunity to reposition his party. Exploiting anti-Semitism in Britain was one of the first signs of decay and desperation for the BUF.<sup>165</sup> The Fascists knew after Olympia that they were losing members at a considerable rate; their only chance was to divide the working class by alienating the Jewish race from everything in society. Social anti-Semitism was evident in Britain, certain social organisations like golf clubs refused to allow Jewish members.<sup>166</sup> The BUF recognised this as an opportunity to build on existing animosity and decided to target financiers, Jewish shop owners and Jewish house owners. Jew-baiting commenced as part of Mosley's new strategy. As a result, Jewish resistance was building and was playing a prominent role in the growing number of anti-fascist demonstrations, so much so that the rivalry was beginning to concern the Metropolitan Police and the Home Secretary.<sup>167</sup>

Ethnic animosity existed in the local economies of East London, many disputes occurring between Jewish traders and non-Jewish working-class traders for it was felt the Jewish traders abused the trading laws. The BUF recognised this as an opportunity to turn such social animosity into anti-Semitic feeling and became vocal in resisting the new Sunday trading regulations, passed on 1 May 1937.<sup>168</sup> A Mosleyite from Stamford Hill commented his grievances in the BUF newspaper *Action*, he complained of the 'flagrant abuse of the Shops Act by local Jewish shopkeepers' in particular the trading activity 'on Friday's and

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<sup>163</sup> Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto*, p. 57.

<sup>164</sup> K. Lunn and R. Thurlow, *British Fascism*, R. Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism', (London, 1980), pp. 88-89.

<sup>165</sup> *New Leader*, 5 April 1935, p. 5.

<sup>166</sup> R. Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted*, (London, 1998), p.12.

<sup>167</sup> *Hansard*, fifth series, cclxxxviii (1934), pp. 14-15.

<sup>168</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p. 36.

Sunday's after 2pm in such places as Oldhill Street, N.16, Ridley Road, E.8 and various other Jewish market centres'.<sup>169</sup>

Many Fascists publicly demonstrated their frustration with the local Jewish traders, stirring anti-Semitic tension in East London. Barrington Brand and his wife, Rose Brand, proprietors of a hair salon in Hackney, reported to the police that they were being victimised by the local Jewish population. Brand was described as a local fascist by police sources, victimisation was inevitable when Brand displayed abusive notices in his shop window in full view of the public. An exhibition of recurring messages suggested Brand was dealing with growing 'poverty', he attributed this to the 'filthy cut prices of the Jews', a message he was keen to present in his window.<sup>170</sup> The BUF made a concerted effort to recruit shopkeepers in this period. On the one hand, this attempt attracted interest with many local traders, some even decided to advertise in the BUF press. Bertrand Beard a local English tailor, invited Mosleyites to trade from his shop on Kingsland High Street.<sup>171</sup> On the other hand, many could have remained silent for fear of a financial impact on their business.

By 1936 tensions between fascist and anti-fascists were high within the community. The BUF were attempting to turn any social ill-feeling towards anti-Semitic feeling. Anti-Semitism by their definition, was a response to the Jewish victimisation. The working class Jewish community continued to respond to the BUF in a militant manner, heckling and often clashing during demonstrations.

Tensions didn't simmer after the Board of Deputies, the Anglo-Jewry representatives supported the Home Office's reaction to prevent "baiting" speakers, or such occurrences of violence would be almost inevitable. Sir Phillip Game, urged the Board to do anything to

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<sup>169</sup> *Action*, 19 Nov 1938.

<sup>170</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 144/20143/244.

<sup>171</sup> *British Union News*, August 1939.

bring the Jewish anti-fascists to a more sensible frame of mind', arguing that if deprived of publicity and more or less ignored, the BUF's wings would very soon be clipped'.<sup>172</sup> By accepting fascist anti-Semitism and offering no resistance the Jewish community felt they were accepting the validity of anti-Jewish claims, which provided further ammunition to anti-Semites.<sup>173</sup>

To combat Mosley's attempted alliance with parts of the working classes, the Socialist League, led by Groves, released propaganda juxtaposing Mosley with the evil elements of capitalism. In a pamphlet titled *East End Crisis! Socialism, the Jews and Fascism*, released in 1936, the Communists targeted Mosley's unification with big businesses. The pamphlet exposed the Fascists for trying to identify with the working classes, whilst not having their best interests at hand.

It is indeed; from such business interests that Fascist propaganda receives help and support. 'Businessmen,' said Mosley recently, 'do support us, especially in the North, where they have experienced Red Terror' ('News Review,' October 22, 1936). In the North Wages there are as low, if not lower, than in any of the East End sweatshops. Unemployment is higher there than anywhere else, except perhaps in parts of Wales. It is not a 'Red Terror' that exists in the North but a black plague, a fiendish and horrible plague that breaks homes and hearts, that kills youth and happiness in the homes of men and women for whom big business has no further use. To protect its power, Big Business will spend money like water, though it refuses bread to the unemployed. It will build big armies

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<sup>172</sup> Letters from Sir Russell Scott and Sir Phillip Game to Laski, 14 December 1936, 30 July 1937 and 15 June 1938, LMA ACC/3121/E3/245/1, 242/2 AND 247; 'Public meetings' report 10 February 1936, NA MEPO 2/3085.

<sup>173</sup> Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, p. 286.

and navies for war abroad: at home it will create political armies to foster division and terror among the workers.<sup>174</sup>

The East End was an ideal place for street corner politics. The prevailing conditions played into the hands of a party limited on finances and manpower. Substandard and overcrowded housing, poverty and low incomes with a lack of recreational facilities drove people to the solutions offered by street corner politicians. Curious crowds gathered to hear a message never presented by a mainstream party. The BUF were prepared to alienate and scapegoat a race that didn't align with their beliefs and economic plans.

The relentless street corner speeches and pamphleteering was bound to cause more resentment than a genuine gathering of interest. Opposition grew and with it did violence. In order to provoke unrest and unsettlement the Blackshirts intensified the feeling. As reported by the *News Chronicle*, doors of Jewish shops were bolted, lighted fireworks were sent through windows of Jewish shops and people were threatened with letters and eventually feared leaving the house.<sup>175</sup>

The first large East End fascist rally took place in Victoria Park on 7 June 1936. *Action* suggested that 100,000 gathered to hear the leader.<sup>176</sup> Other publications estimated figures that ranged between 3,000 and 50,000, but the police reported an attendance of 5,000. The meeting ended in an out of control manner despite a well mobilised police presence standing at around five hundred strong on foot, sixty mounted and seven police vans. The crowd

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<sup>174</sup> Socialist League pamphlet, R. Groves, *East End Crisis: Socialism, the Jews and Fascism* (London, 1937), pp. 4-5.

<sup>175</sup> *The News Chronicle*, 10 October 1936.

<sup>176</sup> *Action*, 11 June 1936.

dispersed at the end of the rally and fighting broke out, leaving one Blackshirt unconscious and a total of nine arrests, most of whom were discharged by the court.<sup>177</sup>

Similar rallies occurred night after night in East London. Such events influenced a strong opposition resulting in a watchful eye from the Metropolitan Police. Geoffrey Lloyd, under Secretary of State for Home Affairs, announced that the London police had been present at no fewer than 536 meetings in August, 603 in September and 647 in October.<sup>178</sup> The BUF, despite suffering a considerable blow in membership figures after 1934, were still campaigning aggressively and causing considerable tension within the East End in late 1936. So much so that Geoffrey Lloyd was forced to act to control both police resources and the potential conflicts between the BUF and the anti-fascists. The change in the law was a consequence of the commissioner of the police, Sir Philip Game's inability to control the planned march on Cable Street in October 1936. Game realised he did not have the resources to prevent the march and its planned counter demonstration. The perfectly legal march could not be prevented, leaving Game with no other option but to divert the march into the West End, to avoid confrontation between 1,900 fascists and 100,000 anti-fascists.<sup>179</sup>

Prior to Mosley accepting the proposed re-route, the anti-fascists had erected barricades and smashed the glass of five shops on Cable Street. This tactic was designed to prevent the police from clearing the area. The re-route prevented what would have been a devastating demonstration. The violence of Cable Street occurred in the wider areas of East London; 85 people were arrested of whom 79 were anti-fascist.<sup>180</sup> The six fascist arrests were in

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<sup>177</sup> *East London Advertiser & City and East London Observer, The Eastern Post and the City Chronicle*, 13 June 1936.

<sup>178</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for the year 1936*, (CMd 5457), pp. 25-26.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86.

<sup>180</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, PRO HO 144/21060-2.

Trafalgar Square when the police refused a fascist meeting. A total of 40 police and 30 civilians were injured.

The number of anti-fascist arrests at Cable Street suggests that the Fascists were aiming to avoid violence by 1936. Throughout the journey of the BUF, a shift from aggression to peaceful disruption can be seen, it can be argued that this fell in-line with the economic state of the country and through state suppression under the Defence Regulation 18b.

After the Battle of Cable Street in 1936, the local authorities leaned heavily on the state to intervene. Richard Thurlow describes the Battle of Cable Street as the straw that broke the camel's back with state intervention.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, the events that unfolded represented the trigger mechanism for the passing of the Public Order Act. The order was created and presented to cabinet with urgency four weeks after the events that unfolded at Olympia, yet never received funding as the Home Office recognised themselves as equipped to deal with domestic issues.<sup>182</sup> The police were intervening in Fascist meetings as early as the meeting at Manchester's Free Trade Hall in March 1933. The forces were integrated with one another, resulting in them being sufficiently mobile and able to deal with many small conflicts.<sup>183</sup>

The Public Order Act of 1936 prevented any person who in any public place or at any public meeting wearing uniform signifying his/her association with any political organisation. The act also prohibited the formation or gathering of any quasi-military organisations. If the Blackshirts or any other political organisation wanted to arrange a public meeting under the new legislation, they would have to seek permission from the Commissioner, Sir Philip Game. The Commissioner reserved the right to prevent or suspend a meeting in order to 'foil

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<sup>181</sup> R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Modern Britain* (Gloucestershire, 2000), p. 74.

<sup>182</sup> CAB 27/ 610.

<sup>183</sup> K. Laybourn & D. Taylor, *Policing in England and Wales, 1918-39* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp. 76-80.

serious disorder'.<sup>184</sup> Eventually, after relentless violence and disruption in the Jewish areas of East London, Game stopped all marches and processions taking part in the main Jewish sections of East London from 13 March 1937 to the start of the Second World War.<sup>185</sup> Game had to apply in writing to the Home Office to extend the act every three months; the Home Secretary extended the ban from its implementation in 1936 to the Second World War through three monthly applications.<sup>186</sup>

'Herbert Morrison argued, that in the aftermath of Cable Street, all the political parties in the East End of London wanted the Fascists banned'.<sup>187</sup> After the Public Order Act was passed and renewed annually, according to the memoirs of Sir John Simon, the Home Secretary between 1935 and 1937 stated that the act 'worked like a dream' and suppressed political disruption with minimal effect to civil liberties and freedom of expression.<sup>188</sup>

The government was clearly paving a road to stability and the BUF recognised this shift and moved away from street violence in the later years of the 1930s. Major Fuller presented this argument to Mosley as early as 1935, warning him to deter the aggressive image and stop talking about revolution and dictatorship as it was alienating a proportion of its voters. 'It must not be overlooked that this is an old country, very solid, stable and matter of fact. Most Blackshirts are too young to realise this... in a revolutionary country they would be right, but in a conservative country they are wrong.'<sup>189</sup> The BUF's then Director of Political

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<sup>184</sup> CAB 27/ 610.

<sup>185</sup> See Annex B, The National Archives in the Public Records Office, MEPO 2/8656, A map of the prohibited marching area defined in the order of 21 June 1937, made by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis under the Public Order Act, 1936.

<sup>186</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, MEPO 2/8656

<sup>187</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 144/ 21062/10-45

<sup>188</sup> R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Modern Britain* (Gloucestershire, 2000), p. 74.

<sup>189</sup> 'Report on the British Union of Fascists', n.d.,II, Nicholas Mosley papers, Box 8.



Organisation, F. M. Box also took this stance, resulting in an orthodox political campaign known as the 'Box-Fuller' approach preceding.<sup>190</sup>

The BUF inevitably accepted that coming to power required a long-haul strategy rather than a quick dash that looked feasible prior to 1934.<sup>191</sup> After many setbacks in 1935, that discouraged a challenge to power, the BUF reversed policy and in adjusting their approach, placed their attention in the forthcoming 1937 municipal elections of East London and geared up for the subsequent general election.

Throughout 1936, numerous internal changes were introduced to drive innovation and front the BUF's new direction. A revised uniform system was introduced that rewarded the elite Division One members with a new uniform symbolising the meritocratic structure. The BUF released a new weekly publication, *Action*, supposedly for the more educated and politically engaged. It read like normal newspapers, incorporating sections on sports and films. Mosley was aiming for a wide and mainstream network, rather than his current disenfranchised following that was enthused by aggressive anti-Semitic rhetoric.

A new administrative body, the Department of Organisation was formed and led by Francis-Hawkins, former Director-General of the defunct 'Blackshirt Organisation'. The Public Order Act forced this shift, resulting in the BUF de-emphasising the paramilitary nature of its structure. Its operational procedures were officially demilitarised in December 1936.<sup>192</sup> The Public Order Act also aimed to broaden the legal scope and application of 'insulting words and behaviour' in public speeches that would incite violence and breach peace. The act

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<sup>190</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO144/20144/122-30.

<sup>191</sup> Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>192</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 144/20144/233-6.

influenced divisions within the leadership of the party, subsequently forcing new direction and apparent progressive transition through cuts to personnel.

The BUF had very little choice but to realign their internal structure and strategy after the Battle of Cable Street. The state became stronger after the passing of the Public Order Act 1936 and the anti-fascists were growing at an alarming rate. The BUF would never be able to increase their membership figures if they continued to fight with the anti-fascists.

The BUF were forced to reduce the number of marches it pursued after Cable Street and this had a positive effect on the membership figures in London, which were reported to have increased by 2,000.<sup>193</sup> Support for the BUF was continually analysed by the police through the monitoring of the number of public meetings held and the attendance figures of such meetings. A total of 131 fascist meetings were reported in November 1936 in London. The average number of attendees had reduced to 240 per meeting. Out of the 131 meetings in November, only seven led to acts of disorder, a statistic that undoubtedly demonstrates the strength and mobilisation of the state.<sup>194</sup>

The number of meetings began to increase again in February 1937, a total of 222 meetings were documented with the average attendance figure of 1400 people. The BUF had restructured internally and pledged itself to the 1937 municipal elections that were due to take place in March. In-line with the growth in fascist activity came a rise in anti-fascist meetings under the guidance of the Communist party, as demonstrated in the table below; an expected incline in the run up to the municipal elections.

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<sup>193</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, MEPOL 2/3043: Report on events of October 1936, item 21b.

<sup>194</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, MEPOL 2/3043: Report on events of October 1936, item 26a, 376.

**Table E, Fascist and Anti-Fascist Meetings in London: December 1946 – February 1937.<sup>195</sup>**

Month	Fascist meetings	Anti-Fascist meetings
December	61	70
January	103	141
February	222	184

The 1937 municipal elections became the focal point for the BUF as it campaigned relentlessly in the run up to the elections, with the number of meetings held in London doubling between January and February. Three L.C.C constituencies were contested in the East End of London in 1937.<sup>196</sup> Bethnal Green, Stepney and Shoreditch were the areas focused upon by the BUF. East London in the 1930s was an area suffering from significant overcrowding, this had a detrimental effect on the levels of poverty, combine this with an area of high Jewish settlement, the BUF could exploit the social issues resting within the foundations of East London.

Bethnal Green encompassed an area of 759 acres and was registered as the fifth smallest metropolitan borough.<sup>197</sup> The 1931 census revealed a population size of 108,194, making for an average population density of 142.4 persons per acre, second only to Shoreditch.<sup>198</sup>

Bethnal Green was in an adverse state of congestion. *The New Survey of London Life and Labour Eastern Study* revealed the extent of this overcrowding and its influence on poverty

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>196</sup> R. Benewick, *Political Violence* (1969); C. Cross *The Fascists in Britain* (London 1961), pp. 166-167.

<sup>197</sup> *Official Guide to the Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Tower Hamlets Local History Library (THLHL) 040.

<sup>198</sup> Census of England & Wales 1931, County of London, (His Majesty's stationary office, London, 1932), Table 3. *Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings*, p. 8.

levels. A rate of 1.35 persons per room was discovered, the third highest of the London boroughs, as well as 6.9 inhabitants living with more than three to a room, above twice the average for London.<sup>199</sup> This directly impacted the levels of poverty – 17.8 per cent of Bethnal Green’s population lived in poverty.<sup>200</sup>

Bethnal Green’s industrial environment revolved around traditional domestic manufacturing, this included the making of furniture and ancillary trades.<sup>201</sup> The residents in the Northeast division provided an important source of recruitment for the BUF for it was predominantly lower to middle and middle-classes.

It can be assumed that the BUF had realised Bethnal Green’s fertile ground as early as December 1933, for a branch was referenced in the internal bulletin of the *Fascist News*. The branch soon terminated in the spring 1934 due to restrictions imposed on Fascist propaganda. These restrictions were enforced as a subsequence of the ‘local Jewish element’ and the threat of disruption to the community.<sup>202</sup> The BUF decided to operate from a branch in the neighbouring village, Bow up until July 1935, when the Bethnal Green branch revived. Once re-opened the branch remained incredibly active; over eighty successful propaganda meetings were reported between July and December 1935.<sup>203</sup>

Almost inevitably, anti-Semitism became the significant objective for the BUF in the run up to the municipal elections in 1937. The economic difficulties East London faced enabled the BUF and candidates like Raven Thomson to scapegoat the Jewish population in areas like

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

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

<sup>201</sup> *New Survey of London, Borough of Bethnal Green*, p.5.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>203</sup> *Blackshirt*, 17 January 1936.

Bethnal Green Thomson had a threatening racist undertone, delivering speeches to East London crowds that saw him in front of the court.

Stepney shared many of the same characteristics of poverty and overcrowding. The surface area of Stepney was almost double that of Bethnal Green at 1,766 acres, yet Stepney's high population depressed the limited housing stock available.<sup>204</sup> Stepney occupied an average person per acre rate of 127.5.<sup>205</sup> Stepney also had an alarmingly high rate of inhabitants per room with 1.33, the fourth highest in the county.<sup>206</sup> Stepney had a subsequent poverty rate of 15.5 per cent, leaving the ground fertile for the BUF to open a branch.

The principal economic driver for Stepney was the textile and garment industry. In 1938, over 30,000 people, representing 21 per cent of the male and female workforce were employed in the clothing industry.<sup>207</sup> Dock work and other distributive trades also contributed significantly to Stepney's economy. Seasonal variations in employment including subcontracting characterised much of Stepney and Bethnal Green's economy.<sup>208</sup>

Shoreditch was the most densely populated borough of London.<sup>209</sup> It didn't occupy the largest population, 97,042 per the 1931 census, yet the average population density was 147.5 persons per acre.<sup>210</sup> Overcrowding affected the levels of poverty across London, Shoreditch suffered from poverty levels as high as 18 per cent. Hackney maintained 65.5 persons per

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<sup>204</sup> *New Survey of London*, Borough summaries, p.p. 343-412.

<sup>205</sup> *London Statistics*, Vol. 41, 1936-1938, London County Council, (London, 1939), Table 4, p.26.

<sup>206</sup> Census of England & Wales 1931, County of London, (His Majesty's stationary office, London, 1932), Table 3. *Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings*, p.8.

<sup>207</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p. 58; Stepney Reconstruction Group, *Living in Stepney*, p. 37.

<sup>208</sup> *New Survey of London*, Borough summaries, p.p. 343-412.

<sup>209</sup> *London Statistics*, Vol. 41, 1936-1938, London County Council, (London, 1939), Table 4, p.26.

<sup>210</sup> Census of England & Wales 1931, County of London, (His Majesty's stationary office, London, 1932), Table 3. *Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings*, p.8.

acre, 7.4 per cent of which lived in poverty; the two measures were intrinsically linked.<sup>211</sup>

Hackney and Shoreditch were industrialised areas, specialising in domestic manufacturing and workshop production. The areas often hosted seasonal and sub-contracted manufacturing of goods ranging mostly in the boot and shoe, fur, furniture and cabinet making trades.<sup>212</sup>

Similar themes of poor social housing and conditions ran through the boroughs of East London. Most of the Jewish population were either born into or lived through these conditions.<sup>213</sup> It was estimated by the *New Survey of London Life*, that 13.7 per cent of the East London Jews were living in poverty.<sup>214</sup> The poverty and overcrowding issues were then pinned on the Jewish population in the run up to the 1937 municipal elections.

Another point to note is the correlation between the cyclical economic patterns that affected the boroughs in East London.<sup>215</sup> Unemployment levels fluctuating in-line with demand, an issue Mosley attempted to address in his manifesto.

Mosley campaigned aggressively in East London, the BUF focused on recruitment, doorstep propaganda & newspaper sales, he aimed to challenge any communist sympathy and conquer the streets. The *Blackshirt* reported in January 1936, that the streets of East London had been won, propelling the party into the path of the 1937 municipal elections.<sup>216</sup>

By early 1936, the BUF were attracting the highest audiences recorded at Victoria Park.<sup>217</sup>

The speakers also established a presence at Russia Lane, a traditional Labour stronghold in

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>212</sup> *The Official Guide to Hackney* (Hackney Borough Council, 1931).

<sup>213</sup> J. Frankel, *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* (Oxford, 2004), p. 152.

<sup>214</sup> Census of England & Wales 1931, County of London, (His Majesty's stationary office, London, 1932), Table 3. *Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings*, p.8.

<sup>215</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p. 58.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>217</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 144/21377/251-7.

the northeast division.<sup>218</sup> Such progress instilled the party with hope when approaching the elections in March 1937.

Two BUF candidates stood in each of the wards of Bethnal Green, North East; Limehouse (Stepney); and Shoreditch. The results were far from devastating for the BUF when considering the high settlement of Jews in the regions contested, however the results were to be the best the BUF ever received.

**Table F, 1937 East London Municipal Elections<sup>219</sup>**

**Bethnal Green (South-West)**

Candidates	Votes
T. Dawson (Labour)	7,777
Mrs R. S. Keeling (Labour)	7,756
A. Raven Thomson (B.U.F)	3,028
E. G. Clarke (B.U.F)	3,022
A. J. Irvine (Liberal)	2,298
H. K. Sadler (Liberal)	2,228

**Stepney (Limehouse)**

Candidates	Votes
R. Coppock (Labour)	8,272
Mrs H. M. Whately (Labour)	8,042
V. G. Weeple (Municipal Reform)	2,542
G. E. Abrahams (Municipal Reform)	2,431
Mrs. A. Brock Griggs (B.U.F)	2,086
C. Wegg-Prosser (B.U.F)	2,086

<sup>218</sup> *Blackshirt*, 5 Sept 1936.

<sup>219</sup> R. Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order* (London, 1969), p.p. 281-282.

## Shoreditch

Candidates	Votes
Mrs H. Girling (Labour)	11,098
S. W. Jeger (Labour)	11,069
S. L. Price (Municipal Progressive)	3,303
R. S. Falk (Municipal Progressive)	3,217
William Joyce (B.U.F)	2,564
J. A. Bailey (B.U.F)	2,492
C. E. Taylor (Independent Labour)	385

Once the results were released on 6 March 1937, no dramatic changes had been made in shaping the swing of the election. The Fascists polled a total of 17.8 per cent of the total votes cast. Roughly 15,278 people voted for the Fascist party, most of the votes were attained in Bethnal Green, where Raven Thomson and Clarke received a combined effort of 23.17 per cent of the vote and finished ahead of the Liberals.

When reviewing the percentage of the vote the BUF received against the Jewish occupation in that area, the figures look considerably more impressive. East London housed roughly sixty per cent of Britain's Jews. Bethnal Green received the highest number of votes across the three constituencies, despite it maintaining approximately 13,000 Jews in 1930, about twelve per cent of its population.<sup>220</sup> The density of the Jewish population inevitably influenced the scope of what the BUF could achieve. Through the BUF's anti-Semitic rhetoric, it could immediately expect to be eliminated from around twelve per cent of the total available vote. The Labour Party occupied almost 60 per cent of the vote, whether there

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<sup>220</sup> 'Bethnal Green: Building and Social Conditions from 1915 to 1945', in *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 11, Stepney, Bethnal Green*, ed. T F T Baker (London, 1998), pp. 132-135. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol11/pp132-135>.



was a high proportion of Jews or not, the BUF imposed no threat on occupying a majority in Bethnal Green or any other of the challenged constituencies. What is more, the BUF only succeeded in achieving the number of votes they did due to the anti-Semitic rhetoric and the Jewish scapegoat they adopted, without which, the party would have been in even a less favourable position.

Raven Thomson was described in Special Branch reports as a 'fanatical admirer of anything German and advocates copying the German National Socialists in toto'.<sup>221</sup> In the wake of his candidature for the 1937 municipal election, he told a fascist sympathetic audience in East London,

Believe me, I have the utmost contempt for the Jews and I regard them as the most miserable type of humanity... The Jew is ruining our country and we must get rid of him... The Jew can be no more help being a parasite than a louse can be a louse, we've got to be a healthy people and then we won't need to pick them off... [The Jew] can wrap himself in the folds of the Union Jack as much as he likes, [but] his nose sticks out over the top.<sup>222</sup>

Thomson's anti-Semitic rhetoric proved successful amongst the sympathetic crowds in Bethnal Green, yet it failed to capture the eye of the mainstream vote. Thomson went on to criticise the Jews for fostering war with Germany, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We all know the Jews have a great hatred against the German people and they will try to drag all

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<sup>221</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO144/21378/223-4: Special Branch report, 9 December 1936.

<sup>222</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO144/21063/77-8,117-8: Police Observers Reports, 12 March 1937.

the nations into a war of revenge.<sup>223</sup> The BUF, like Raven Thomson were not concerned by the cultural backlash their anti-Semitic rhetoric caused, yet it fostered greater opposition than it did attract new support.

The local municipal elections gave Oswald Mosley no hope for building momentum for his party. In Shoreditch alone, fifty-seven meetings were scheduled with as many as five per night. Pooling resources into the municipal elections proved unsuccessful for the BUF; a strong representation in forthcoming elections became unforeseeable, especially when considering the way in which Chamberlain's foreign policy was shaping, with incessant challenges to democracy from Hitler's National Socialists. The municipal election results illustrate that even in their regional strongholds, the BUF never became more than a minority political subculture.

As a consequence of failing to invoke popular support in the L.C.C election, the BUF experienced the most fatal crisis in its history. Only five days after the results were announced, on the 11 March, a widespread reduction in Headquarters personnel was announced. The reorganisation was precipitated by a 70 per cent reduction in income, the majority of which was previously contributed by foreign sources. Special Branch reported through the location of a secret bank of the BUF, that in the height of Mussolini's Abyssinian campaign, the BUF received a total of £86,000 from Italian sources.<sup>224</sup> By 1937, the subsidies from foreign sources had fallen to £7,630.<sup>225</sup> Alongside administration changes that began in the latter half of 1936, it was announced in March that the Northern regional offices in Manchester were to be closed. In the national headquarters, 57 paid and voluntary staff

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<sup>223</sup> Board of Deputies of British Jews (BOD) C6/9/1/3: JDC observer's report, 20 August 1938.

<sup>224</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO45/25393/33-4.

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

remained from the previous total of 129.<sup>226</sup> All paid national speakers were dismissed as well as many the policy propaganda department. Among the senior officials, John Beckett and William Joyce were discharged, a victory for the bureaucratic members of the BUF who preferred to emphasise the intellectual dimension of party politics as opposed to aggressive anti-Semitic rhetoric.

William Joyce and John Beckett went on to create the National Socialist League after being dismissed from the party during the cost-cutting exercise.<sup>227</sup> The group remained militant and Joyce became critical of Mosley's approach, suggesting he had been too enthralled with continental Fascism. The party soon dissolved in the wake of the Second World War, as like Mosley, the politically-conscious were also engaged in foreign affairs. The disunity between the NSL and the BUF adds to the argument that the BUF were dismantling around a strengthening government heading for war.

On the other hand, Skidelsky argues that the financially constrained BUF party reignited its membership figures after embarking on a peace campaign that took headway after the hopeful return of Chamberlain from Munich in September 1938. Skidelsky argues the national movement again gathered a significant increase in membership figures, reviving the pre-1934 (Olympia) numbers of around 40,000.<sup>228</sup> Evidence for such revival cannot be identified in East London, where a combination of active and non-active membership figures have been estimated between 5,075-5800.<sup>229</sup> An estimation of East London's active members shows an even smaller support base, 2,100-2,400.<sup>230</sup> The East London members represented

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<sup>226</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO144/21063/252-6.

<sup>227</sup> Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order*, p. 270.

<sup>228</sup> R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p. 332.

<sup>229</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 144/21062/402-407, Sp.Br.Rep 20.01.38 in T. Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p. 198.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*,

around 70-80 per cent of all London membership in 1938.<sup>231</sup> The membership figures demonstrate that there was still active and non-active support, but not to the extent to which Skidelsky details.

The patterns that occurred in East London show a decline in active membership between 1936 and 1938, with a minor increase in early 1939.<sup>232</sup> A Special Branch report detailed the feeling of antagonism towards German foreign policy after the Czechoslovakian crisis, it stated:

Many of their most ardent members in areas such as Bethnal Green, Limehouse and East Ham became imbued with a feeling of antagonism to Germany during the crisis week... This opposition to the movement's line of policy has since crystallised into open rebellion on the part of some members and even local officials... This drift on the part of a section of its most valuable followers is causing much concern to headquarters.<sup>233</sup>

The report also referenced an underwhelming response to a request for assistance during the crisis week peace demonstrations from East End branches.<sup>234</sup> This resentment is also evidenced through the resignation of Limehouse leader Arthur Mason, who is believed to have been dismissed four weeks after the events that unfolded with Czechoslovakia, leaving the assumption that the two were related. The Limehouse branch was then subject to several inadequate leaders, resulting in great difficulty for it to sustain in the wake of the Second World War.

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<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>233</sup> The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 144/21281/97-102.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*,

Arguably, one of the highest factors to the decline of the British Union of Fascists derived from peacetime conscription. Conscription revealed threefold, the failure of the BUF's stance to remain peaceful, it marked the end of Chamberlain's appeasement programme, and finally it presented many of the members with new employment opportunities. By the late summer of 1939, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that many of the Bethnal Green and Shoreditch members had joined the armed forces.<sup>235</sup> What is more, the policy of rearmament saw many of the East London members absorbed into factory life. Hackney, Canning Town and Stratford Marsh's all became home to chemical plants and other forms of war production.<sup>236</sup>

Other factors all became prominent reasons for the decline of the BUF in East London. Many supporters became concerned of being associated with a movement that was recognised as pro-German as the likelihood of war increased. Many naturally detracted away from political movements in general as the war became impending.

The BUF became a party in decline after its financial struggles and municipal defeats in late 1937. It attempted to reignite itself through peace campaigns that aimed to capture the anti-war feeling that was still apparent after the First World War. The overriding fact was that foreign affairs and particularly European fascism overshadowed any threat that domestic fascism could bear on the British government. Whilst the BUF did invoke domestic interest for its cause and influence the government to keep a watchful eye on its movement, it failed to challenge or threaten the stability of the government.

Fascism in East London, like in Yorkshire and Lancashire was heavily built on several heterogeneous forms. The support and the decline of Fascism in East London cannot be isolated to a single cause. Fascism developed in East London from social, economic, cultural

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<sup>235</sup> Extract from the *Jewish Chronicle*, 21 July 1939, in The National Archives in the Public Records Office, HO 144/21281/148.

<sup>236</sup> A. Palmer, *The East End, Four Centuries of London Life* (London, 1989), p. 146.

and ideological reasons. Fascism offered a place for those with morbid perceptions of national decline, Mosley's imperial vision wanted to revitalise the national community through the strength of the Empire. Once the likelihood of war approached, Mosley's imperial dreams were overshadowed by the prominent threat to peace. Others in East London recognised a decline in the local economy and found Mosley advocating the recovery of their industry.

Once the economy began to stabilise and new job opportunities arrived through armament production, Mosley's economic policies became less relevant. Some East Londoner's had nostalgic motivations for joining the BUF, the decline of the community motivated by anti-minority feeling as well as the physical challenge imposed by the anti-Fascist community at Cable Street led them onto a path of anti-Semitic feeling. Further to this, others joined Mosley's anti-Semitic movement because of deeper anti-Semitic concerns that stemmed from wildly fanatical assumptions of Jewish behaviour, extending beyond the local issues. Others joined the movement because of its fashionable presence, resulting in it having more style than substance. The motives for fascism in East London were wide-ranging and complex, they cannot be collectively defined, consequently the movement could not unify and ever pose an electoral threat.

## **Conclusion**

The British Union of Fascists failed to gather sufficient momentum to challenge the mainstream political structure in the 1930s, although it gained influence in some regions. The BUF gained influence in East London, Yorkshire and Lancashire, yet its organisational structure fluctuated too often and its changes in political strategy often left members dissociating themselves from the party and reverting to the stable traditionalist parties.

There was a heightened level of unrest within the local atmosphere in the early 1930s that needed addressing. The nation's discontent varied across different regions, areas like Jarrow had unemployment levels as high as 80 per cent, yet had no interest in Fascism, for the Labour and the NUWM had a stronghold. This demonstrates that economic depression was not intrinsically linked to fascist support. Momentum for the BUF rested with the fluctuation of public opinion and partially due to the changing tide of the economy. People identified with the movement for several reasons, some cyclical in-line with their occupation, others down to their social aggregations with the Jewish population and others due to the social elements the BUF party offered, the challenge Mosley faced was tying these points together to create collective support at national level, something he failed to do.

Local Mosleyite Fascism did not derive its ideological content or coherence from a single source. Mosley's support developed out of the local ideological currents, it drew interest from a variety of local economic, social and political tensions.

Oswald Mosley attempted to frantically put forward his radical manifesto, its doctrine ventured away from mainstream political parties. He offered a maverick solution that was more an attack on the institution than it was ownership of property. His advocacy for a ruling cabinet of five posed a significant threat to democracy. In making such radical claims, as

well as building support for an aggressive military style, he limited his influence to a small concentrated loyal core.

The BUF attempted to compete with the Labour party over the working-class vote in East London, Yorkshire and Lancashire by appealing to the industrial workers struggling with the changing tides of their industry. To some degree this was successful pre-1934, the BUF movement was gathering support across the nation and attracting crowds within their tens of thousands, but it wasn't politically successful. The politically engaged members were made up of families and the less militant sought, they identified with the movement for the economic change it promised to bring. When the party became increasingly violent and developed a deeper engagement with hatred and Fascist rhetoric, these members abandoned Mosley's economic notions as they came at a high price. The country had recently experienced the tragedy of the Great War, it did not want to see violence at the roots of local election campaigns.

Mosley was challenged with balancing the party's militant aspects with its mainstream influence. The party fed off its militancy, attracting middle-class audiences who wanted a constructive alternative, yet it needed to keep this in check to avoid losing its wider support. It was Mosley and the BUF's urgency and lust for change that separated it from other parties. Whilst the BUF's fascist tendencies cost it support, it also influenced it in relative terms. Prior to Mosley's indulgence in Fascist rhetoric, he unsuccessfully contested his ideas in the 1931 general election with The New Party. The public showed little interest in The New Party, resulting in monthly financial losses driving the party and its weekly newspaper *Action*, to eventually cease in December the same year.<sup>237</sup> Mosley's personal political

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<sup>237</sup> Stevenson & Cook, *The Slump*, p. 199.



journey drove him to Fascism, he became increasingly frustrated with the barriers that prevented his policies moving forward.

Some of the inhabitants of Lancashire, Yorkshire and East London supported the BUF because they were unsettled by their social surroundings. They did not share the same frustration with Britain's political structure, their grievances were personal. The motivation to support the BUF could have derived from their economic suffering, the appeal was both politically and intellectual. Other militant types instinctively resisted the political violence at 'Cable Street', whilst some felt the psychological belief that their community was under threat from an 'alien' deluge. The fascist movement was built up of multiple public frustrations, these frustrations were temporary and fluctuated in-line with one's personal circumstances, the movement did not have a large enough core collective to cause the British government any serious concern.

East London represented Mosley's best opportunity to gather popular support. The frequency of the street confrontations, the public meetings and the public disorder were all reasons that resulted in fascism in East London being the most pronounced location in the country. The local election results of 1937 show Mosley had achieved significant backing, just not enough to break the natural voting tendencies of the electorate. The support for Mosley emerged out of anti-Semitic frustrations. The BUF invested a significant amount of time and effort into nurturing their policies around their anti-Semitic ideologies. No other regions received the level of effort and investment that East London did during Mosley's anti-Semitic tirade. Indeed, T. Linehan argues that if it weren't for the outbreak of war, areas such Bethnal Green North-East would have eventually elected a Fascist leader.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> T. Linehan, *East London for Mosley* (London, 1996), p. 58, Stepney Reconstruction Group, *Living in Stepney*, p. 303.

In Lancashire, the BUF recruitment drive focused on the potential gains that could be made from supporting the cotton workers. The challenge with pledging the party to a socio-economic issue was the fact that it was cyclical, by the end of 1934, Mosley had peaked in-line with the severity of the economy in Lancashire. After 1934, the economy began to redeem itself and Mosley increasingly lost the support of thousands of members.

Yorkshire also had cyclical elements to the nature of its support. It did unquestionably create an appeal that addressed two specific issues, socio-economic and anti-Semitic. Yorkshire suffered economic crisis within the agricultural sector, this combined with the high settlement of Jews specifically in Leeds, 25,000 almost 5.5 per cent of its population, created animosity within the habitants of the county. Yet it failed to parallel any relative success in contrast to the strength of the East London campaign.

The conclusion that can be drawn from every region where the BUF shared relative momentum was that the movement was composed of several heterogeneous and often conflicting forms. It was because of this that the movement never won or became close to winning popular support. The movement was bound and limited to its local causes. Its violent approach influenced the politically engaged to resist Mosley, whilst also forcing the politically disengaged to abandon his ideas for the same reason. The movement was built on an ideology that gathered more nationwide opposition than support. The British Union of Fascists was not equipped for a prolonged political struggle of attrition with stable democratic parties.

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