



Fascism in Britain

FROM OSWALD MOSLEY'S BLACKSHIRTS
TO THE NATIONAL FRONT

Richard Thurlow

FASCISM IN BRITAIN

For Hazel, Kevin and Sally

FASCISM IN BRITAIN

From Oswald Mosley's
Blackshirts to the
National Front

Richard Thurlow

I.B.Tauris Publishers
LONDON • NEW YORK

Revised paperback edition published in 1998
by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
Victoria House,
Bloomsbury Square,
London WC1B 4DZ

175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

In the United States and Canada distributed by St Martin's Press
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

Copyright © Richard C. Thurlow, 1987, 1998

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review,
this book, or any part thereof may not be reproduced in any
form without permission in writing from the publisher.

A full CIP record for this book is available from
the British Library

A full CIP record for this book is available from
the Library of Congress

ISBN 1 86064 337 X

Library of Congress catalog card: available

Typeset by the Midlands Book Typesetting Company, Loughborough
Printed and bound in Great Britain by WBC Ltd, Bridgend

Contents

Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	x
1 The Origins of British Fascism 1890–1918	1
2 The British Fascists and the ‘Jew Wise’, 1918–1939	30
3 The BUF and British Society, 1932–1939	61
4 The Boys in Black, 1932–1939	88
5 The Mutiny against Destiny	114
6 The Hitler Fan Club	132
7 Internment, 1939–1945	157
8 New Wine for Old Bottles, 1945–1960	203
9 National Socialists and Racial Populists, 1960–1967	230

10	The Grand Synthesis, 1967–1985	245
11	Terminal Decline?	268
	Conclusion: The Sawdust Caesars	278
	Bibliographical Note	285
	Index	289

Illustrations

The publishers and author are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce photographs: Barnaby's Picture Library (2); BBC Hulton Picture Library (9, 14, 18, 18, 19); Camera Press (23, 24); The Photo Source (6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 17); Popperfoto (1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22); Rex Features (25).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following individuals for helping me at various stages of my research into British fascism: Caesar Aronsfeld, David Ashton, David Bland, Hilary Blume, Alan Booth, Martin Durham, Roger Eatwell, Neil Forsand, Gerry Gable, Roger Griffin, Richard Griffiths, Jeffrey Hamm, Sean Kelly, Kenny Lunn, Anthony Masters, Andy Mitchell, Nicholas Mosley, Alexander Prokopov, Peter Pugh, Dave Renton, Robert Row, Richard Russell, Brian Simpson, Robert Skidelsky, Robert Stanton, John Stevenson, Jeffrey Wallder, John Warburton, Gerry Webber, Nigel West and Leonard Wise. Special thanks are due to Dave Baker, Tony Kushner and Stuart Rawnsley for allowing me access to their completed research and some of their primary material. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude for Dave Baker's comments on the manuscript and Colin Holmes's sound advice, help and encouragement over many years and to John Hope for information on security and intelligence issues related to British fascism.

I would also like to thank the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the British Museum, the Home Office, the Imperial War Museum, the London School of Economics Library, the National Council for Civil Liberties Archive, the National Maritime Museum, the Newspaper Library of the British Museum, the Public Record Office, *Searchlight*, the University of Sheffield Library and the Wiener Library for their assistance. I acknowledge gratefully the financial assistance received from the University of Sheffield Research Fund and the British Academy.

Grateful thanks too are due to the secretarial help given by Irene Thurlow, Connie Goodwin and Pam Smith, who valiantly struggled to decipher my near illegible handwriting. Last but not least I would like to thank my parents, wife and children for their support, encouragement, love and affection over the years.

Abbreviations

BF	British Fascisti, British Fascists
BNP	British National Party
BP	British People's Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists (and National Socialists)
GBM	Greater Britain Movement
IFL	Imperial Fascist League
ILP	Independent Labour Party
LEL	League of Empire Loyalists
NF	National Front
NF after V	National Front after Victory
NL	Nordic League
NLP	National Labour Party
NSL	National Socialist League
NSM	National Socialist Movement
RC	Right Club
RPS	Racial Preservation Society
UM	Union Movement
WDL	White Defence League
WUNS	World Union of National Socialists

Introduction

Since the publication of *Fascism in Britain: A History 1918–85* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1987), the continuing interest in the subject shows little sign of abating. There have been several major works on aspects of the topic, and a stream of articles; it is a popular theme for A level projects and undergraduate dissertations, and, increasingly, postgraduate work at all levels. New sources have also become available. There have been further releases under the Open Government Initiative of Home and Cabinet Office files on British Fascism and the Home Defence (Security) Executive in 1995 and 1996, and important personal papers from Nicholas Mosley, and the Mosleyite, Robert Saunders, have been deposited in the libraries of the Universities of Birmingham and Sheffield, respectively. The latter includes an interesting collection of pamphlets and administrative material relating to the British Union of Fascists (BUF), and important correspondence between Saunders and Mosley, Union Movement, and other leading Mosleyites after 1945. A copy of the important 1300 page unpublished ‘official’ history of the BUF, ‘We marched with Mosley’, is also available in the University of Sheffield library.

Rarely can such an apparently insignificant topic have been responsible for such an outpouring of ink. This is well illustrated (in more than one sense) by the treatment British Fascism is given by Stanley Payne in his magisterial *A History of Fascism 1914–45* (UCL Press, London, 1996). Here the subject is covered in three pages (out of 613), one of which is photographs. The barbed text

suggests that British Fascism is studied for its 'negative findings'; the British Union of Fascists (BUF) was essentially a 'contradiction in terms, a sort of political oxymoron', and the 'volume of literature on the BUF is inversely proportionate to its significance'. All the other British fascist groups were 'each pettier and more irrelevant than the others. Most of these were not even generically fascist'.¹

These points are all valid, even if there are hints in Payne's brief analysis which suggest that BUF ideas are particularly interesting. The force of the argument can be seen by a cursory examination of the electoral history of the BUF. Mosley was particularly adamant that the BUF would come to power by constitutional means, that it would win a majority of seats in two successive general elections before implementing the full programme of the 'Fascist Revolution'. In fact the BUF never had any candidates at a general election; in 1935 using the less than inspiring slogan 'Fascism next time', it declined to contest the polls using the argument that as a new party its electoral machine was not ready. In 1940 the election was postponed until after the war; fascists were interned without charge not elected to power. The BUF did take part in a number of local elections after 1936. Apart from the election of a BUF councillor at Eye, in Suffolk, in 1938, when Ronald Creasy was fourth of five, in a four member constituency, and the special case of the east end of London, when BUF candidates obtained between 16 and 22% in three constituencies in 1937, BUF candidates invariably finished bottom of the poll in the small number of wards where they put up a candidate, usually with less than 3% of the votes cast. In three parliamentary by-elections in 1940, two of which were straight contests with a representative of the party which was successful in 1935, the BUF obtained considerably less than 2% of the vote in all constituencies.

Yet despite this catalogue of failure there are, in fact, a number of reasons why British fascism has received rather more attention than its significance warrants. As will be argued, the BUF produced the most coherent and developed programme of any fascist movement. Like all fascisms, this grew out of its own national traditions, which gave it certain cultural idiosyncracies; it was anti-war, portrayed itself as law abiding engaging only in defensive

¹ S. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-45* (London, 1996) pp. 303-305.

violence, and for the 1930s had some relatively advanced views on feminism, traits which were not usually associated with popular conceptions of fascism. Although these features, like the national cultural influences on all fascist movements, made it *sui generis*, its 'mythic core' of 'palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism', its economic doctrine and synthesis of ideas, made it a particularly good example of what was common to all fascisms, the 'fascist minimum' of 'generic fascism', particularly if fascism is defined as an ideology.² This however, was only one important feature in the interesting history of British fascism.

Mosley would have liked his movement, when compared with its continental cousins, to be 'fascism minus violence'. His militant opponents, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and radical Jewish working class organisations, ensured that there was never any likelihood of the BUF being perceived in that light despite the much lower level of political violence in Britain than on the continent. While not, ostensibly, seeking violence in its public marches and rallies, it was seen by the authorities as provoking confrontations with its enemies, when choosing to demonstrate in working class districts and areas of relative concentration of Jewish ethnic identity. In that respect the BUF had violence thrust upon it and together with its adoption of an articulated political antisemitism after 1934, displayed most of the attributes conjured up in the popular image of fascism.

It was these features which helped make the British Union of Fascists such a controversial organisation, and which attracted both public interest and the attention of historians. The main issues centred around the extent to which British fascism was an outgrowth of a native political tradition or, whether it was, first and foremost, a mimetic hybrid of the two most successful continental fascisms, Italian Fascism and German Nazism. The second world war has made this argument more than a dispute between academics tilting at windmills. A whole series of issues turned on the relationship between the BUF and 'international fascism'. Broadly speaking debate has focused on extent to which the BUF can be considered as typical of 'generic fascism', the nature of

² R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London, 1993) pp. 26–55, R. Eatwell, 'On defining the "Fascist Minimum": The Centrality of Ideology' *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1, 3, 1996.

the links in symbolic, structural, financial and ideological terms in the 1930s between British and continental fascisms, and the extent to which, if any, there was 'fifth column' activity orchestrated by fascists under Nazi manipulation or control, in the second world war.³ Of central importance for the fascists themselves was the issue of internment after 1940 and the traumatic, and sometimes devastating, impact it had on their lives.⁴

Apart from these highly controversial issues, British fascism has impinged on the national historical consciousness in other ways. Although seen in popular imagination as an eccentric uniformed boy scout association (although up to one fifth of the membership were women), and often viewed with ridicule or contempt by the political establishment and its enemies on the left, the activities of the BUF were factors in the political debates relating to civil liberties, public order, political violence, internal security and immigration during the 1930s.⁵ Indeed the response to the BUF campaign in the east end of London proved to be the trigger mechanism for the introduction of the Public Order Act in December 1936. While other factors were also involved, including much concern about long standing worries about left wing radical and communist demonstrations leading to public disorder and political violence, and the discretionary power of the authorities, nevertheless it was the Blackshirts who were 'blamed' for provoking the strengthening of the law. Although the wording of the Public Order Act was couched in general terms, it was obvious whom the authorities had in mind when sections 1 and 2 banned the wearing of political uniforms and paramilitary groups. While increasing police powers to ban marches and demonstrations was used primarily against the left, Mosley and the BUF were seen as provoking disorder in the 1930s.⁶

³ R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History 1918–85* (Oxford, 1987) pp. 186–214.

⁴ R.R. Bellamy, 'We marched with Mosley' Unpublished Narrative, University of Sheffield Library, pp. 932–1036.

⁵ R. Thurlow, *The Secret State* (Oxford, 1994), J. Morgan *Conflict and Order* (Oxford, 1987), D.S. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur* (Manchester, 1987) pp. 145–180, S. Cullen 'Political Violence: The case of the British Union of Fascists' *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, 2, April 1993, pp. 245–267.

⁶ R. Thurlow, 'Blaming the Blackshirts: the authorities and the anti-Jewish disturbances in the 1930s' in ed. P. Panayi *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1996) pp. 112–130.

Yet it was the issue of antisemitism which led Mosley ‘beyond the pale’. The announcement of this new policy in the autumn of 1934, following Lord Rothermere’s withdrawal of support in the *Daily Mail*, and the notoriety of the issue in the east end campaign (1935–38), exerted both a bee sting effect on the government in terms of its increasingly restrictionist immigration and refugee policies, and destroyed any residual credibility which Mosley still had in respectable circles. The issue of antisemitism, also raised concerns about the extent to which Mosley reactivated dormant nativism, and how far it was an attempt to emulate Nazism, copying the tactic which allegedly provided the dynamic behind the rise to power in Germany. Some historians, and much anti-racist and anti-fascist propaganda, argued that British fascist antisemitism has to be viewed in the light of the Nazi genocide model.⁷ This view can be challenged for interwar fascism because the nature of the Holocaust did not become public knowledge until 1945, although the use of similar racist and conspiracy theory arguments against minority groups, including Jews, after 1945 by racial populist and neo-fascist groups, was certainly done with full knowledge of the ‘final solution of the Jewish problem’.

The war to produce the ‘unconditional surrender’ of Nazism and international fascism, the internment of 747 British fascists, and the proscription of the BUF in July 1940 meant that in public perception British fascists were seen as a native fifth column, and Hitler’s representatives in Britain. There were some bad apples, but as Brian Simpson has shown, the ‘fifth column’ scare and the powers assumed by the authorities under the Defence Regulations, although perhaps inevitable in the circumstances of 1940, represented a dubious episode in British legal history, ensured the destruction of the BUF, and the smearing of the large majority of members who prided themselves on their patriotism.⁸ British public opinion continued to see British fascism in the light of William Joyce being sent to the gallows in 1946 for his ‘radio treason’ during the second world war, despite Mosley having severed his connection with that ‘odious little man’ in 1938. The fact that the war led to the premature death of at least thirty million europeans, including 410,000 Britons, and a new division

⁷ G.C. Lebzelter, *Political Antisemitism in England 1918–39* (Basingstoke, 1978).

⁸ A.W.B. Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious* (Oxford, 1992).

of the continent for fifty years, ensured that fascism would be turned from a mixed image of fear, loathing and ridicule, in popular perception, into one of hate. It is this issue above all which has resulted in some ex-members declining to acknowledge their connection to the Mosley movement even fifty years after the end of the war. E.G. 'Mick' Clarke, one of the leaders of the east end campaign between 1935 and 1938, kept his identity and address secret from the war until his death in 1996.⁹

If these issues, and the delay in the promised revisionist 'soap opera' television mini-series on Mosley's political career, ensure continued controversy, then the problem of sources also suggested arguments for new light being shed on British fascism. While exciting new material is becoming available for researchers to consult, from fascist, anti-fascist and state sources, many of the continued mysteries of British fascism are no nearer resolution. Along with its arch enemy, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), a whiff of cloak and dagger still prevails. Indeed, this problem is greater for the BUF than for the CPGB, because there has been no ostensible 'opening of the books', to mirror the CPGB records in the National Museum of Labour History archive in Manchester, although 'We marched with Mosley' provides a valuable insight into the motivations of members and the outlook of the BUF from its birth in 1932 to its traumatic end in proscription and internment during the second world war. As a result the study of British fascism has been a pioneering area with regard to some of the newer aids to historical investigation. This has been particularly true for the valuable insights to be gained from the use of oral history and intelligence records for the interwar and 1939–45 period.

New sources and methodologies have also been helpful in illuminating the more mysterious aspects of Mosley's career. Mosley always compartmentalised his life, and was secretive to a fault. While visible as a propagandist in the 1930s, forced onto the streets by lack of both media attention and a parliamentary forum, it was not necessary to dig too deeply to discover the iceberg quality of his campaigns. Low politics was complemented by ingenious strategies to minimise his lack of impact in high politics. The attempt to influence the political establishment through the

⁹ *Comrade* No. 46, November 16, 1996.

January Club, the subterranean connections with both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, the commercial radio project, the 'secret meetings' with other fascist fringe groups in 1939–40, and the permeation strategy after 1945, were all features of a considerable hidden history of British fascism. While no more successful than the open politics of Mosley fascism, the murky subterranean methods represented an important aspect of his activities.

The reason for the relative dearth of material was the trauma engendered by the second world war. Special Branch raids were responsible for much of the documentation of the movement ending up in official hands, although there were considerable rumours that some of the more sensitive material was placed in a safe place and which has not surfaced since. None of this evidence, particularly relating to the membership records of the BUF was recovered after the war. The membership lists appear to have been lost and given that Richard Griffiths was sent the extremely sensitive membership list of the Right Club by a solicitor, discovered in a clear out of material, it appears the authorities did not give a high priority to keeping tabs on seized records.

Both the relative dearth of records, and the consequences of the second world war for British fascism, has led to the critical use of new methods by many of the new historians engaged in the study of British fascism. The probing of the memory of both increasingly old Blackshirts and anti-fascists has led to some interesting new perspectives on interwar fascism, the second world war and the failed political resurrection of the Mosley movement after 1945. The pioneering work by Stuart Rawnsley and John Brewer on the membership of the BUF, and the 'in house' collection of reminiscences by 'Mosley's Blackshirts' (ed. J. Christian) has more recently been extended with more sophisticated questionnaires and larger samples in the work of Stephen Cullen, Tom Linehan and Andrew Mitchell.¹⁰ The analysis of the Chief Constables' information for the MI5 reports on the BUF by Gerry Webber, has enabled a plausible estimation of the size and spatial development of the organisation to be assessed.¹¹ New anti-fascist history, written very

¹⁰ T. Lenihan, *East London for Mosley* (London, 1996), S. Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists 1932–40: Ideology, Membership, Meetings', University of Oxford, M. Litt. 1987.

¹¹ G.C. Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists' *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, 1984, pp. 575–606.

much in the spirit of the Popular Front of the 1930s, or from an anti-racist or anti-Nazi league perspective, has also searched the collective and individual memory as to how Mosley fascism was opposed at all levels, particularly in Tyneside and the East End of London.¹² Although there is still a tendency to fight long forgotten battles by such interviewees, and with the historical and political agendas of both 'The Friends of OM' and labour movement and Jewish anti-fascism taken into account, it nevertheless remains true that exciting new material and a deeper understanding of some of the more controversial aspects of British fascism and anti-fascism has resulted despite the sometimes continued reluctance of some to acknowledge their association with what they saw as a patriotic organisation.

This has been supplemented by the written and oral testimony in the 'Friends of OM' archive, some material from which can now be consulted at the University of Sheffield, including the 1300 page typescript which ranks as the 'official' unpublished history of the BUF, 'We marched with Mosley', by Richard Reynell Bellamy, the internment autobiography and diary of Charlie Watts and Arthur Beavan, and the interesting papers of Robert Saunders.¹³

Recent work on anti-fascism, and the significant intelligence information revealed in state papers, as well as official attitudes, also provides differing perspectives which enables the plausibility or justification of such sentiments to be checked. While due allowance has to be made for the perspective of MI5, Special Branch and the Home Defence (Security) Executive, and the clash between the Home Office and the Security Service on how best the problems posed by political extremism should be treated in peace and war, nevertheless the state papers reveal that the authorities had excellent sources of information about British fascism, even if care has to be taken about the interpretation of that material, and some of it is still under lock and key.

The publication of ed. M. Cronin, *The Failure of British Fascism* (Macmillan, 1996), a series of essays by some of the leading academic specialists in the field, highlighted another important

¹² N. Todd, *In Excited Times* (Newcastle, 1995), M. Beckman, *The 43 Group* (London, 1993).

¹³ R.R. Bellamy, loc.cit. C. Watts 'It has happened here', A. Beavan 'Internment Diary 1941-2'.

problem.¹⁴ Although fascism was an interwar phenomenon, the majority of the essays were about post-war developments and, as was to be expected in a multi-authored volume, there was no uniform definition of the term. While, broadly speaking, I still subscribe to the same general position adopted in *Fascism in Britain* as to the relationship between interwar movements and post 1945 'fascism', nevertheless much stimulating 'new light' has been shed on both theoretical and empirical aspects of the problem since 1987.

In particular the sophisticated models of generic fascism outlined by Roger Griffin and Roger Eatwell can be used to explain both the diversity and fracturing of the tradition, and the continuation and development of the central myths and ideas of the movement, together with the necessary synthesis of old themes with the political realities of the post 1945 world.¹⁵ Diethelm Prowe has shown how the post-war radical right has utilised new concerns about immigration from developing and third world countries into Europe, to merge with old fascist themes to create hybrid forms of racial populism and neo-fascism on the farther shores of nationalist politics in many European states.¹⁶ Similarly in Britain hostility to new Commonwealth 'coloured' or 'black' immigration has provided the main propaganda and exoteric theme of such groups, often combined with a less visible esoteric agenda using symbols, language and images which would be familiar to interwar fascists. David Baker had shown that although the old BUF hagiographer of Mosley, A.K. Chesterton, changed his tune both with regard to Mosley and to fascism, nevertheless there were distinct links between his continuing obsessive conspiracy theory antisemitism, the paternalist and racist themes in his views of new Commonwealth immigrants, and his fascist past.¹⁷

¹⁴ ed. M. Cronin, *The Failure of British Fascism* (Basingstoke, 1996).

¹⁵ ed. R. Griffin, *Fascism: A Reader* (Oxford 1995) pp. 1–12, R. Griffin, 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling' in M. Cronin, *op. cit.* pp. R. Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism' *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 4, 2, 1992 pp. 161–194, R. Eatwell, 'On defining the Fascist Minimum: the centrality of ideology' *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1, 3, 1996 pp. 303–319, R. Eatwell, *Fascism* (London, 1995) pp. 259–275.

¹⁶ D. Prowe, 'Classic Fascism and the New Radical Right in Western Europe: Comparisons and Continuities' *Contemporary European History* 3, 3, 1994 pp. 289–313.

¹⁷ D. Baker, *Ideology of Obsession: A.K. Chesterton and British Fascism* (London, 1996).

While new primary material, from state and personal archives is slowly becoming available on the post war Mosleyite movement, there is a continuing black hole with regard to the rise and fall of the National Front, and its multifarious derivatives. Although there is a considerable and developing literature on the theme, much of it is based on printed material and newspapers, or is from anti-fascist sources, some of which is inaccurate, or based on agent provocateurs tactics designed to discredit such groups. Much of the most interesting work has developed from the use of oral history interviews, both with 'fascists' and anti-fascists. Perhaps some of the more significant research has been on the role of nativist resistance to immigration in resurrecting racial populism and neo-fascism since the 1960s and the extent to which Mrs. Thatcher's strong leadership of the Conservative party, which despite the fact that her economic and social policies were the antithesis of fascism, nevertheless her nationalist stance denied the far right the political space within which to develop. Although the neo-fascist right has exerted a bee sting effect, particularly with regard to immigration, on party politics since the 1960s, even the current vogue of anti-europeanism and Brussels bureaucrats bashing has been contained within the Westminster political spectrum, despite the political demise of Mrs. Thatcher.

British fascism, then remains an interesting field of study for several reasons. Despite its lack of significance in British politics, its controversial features played an important role in state concerns over public order, civil liberties and internal security between 1932 and 1945. The cloak and dagger aspects of its history are not only interesting in themselves, but with new material becoming available from a variety of sources and with very different perspectives on controversial issues, a more considered judgement on these matters can be attempted. British fascism, because of continuing secrecy about delicate issues from state and fascist sources, has also led to work on membership and the use of intelligence records which have relevance for pioneering work in other areas. Current political issues like restrictions on immigration and political asylum, and the continuing debate on european union suggest that themes pioneered by the fascist tradition in Britain will remain relevant.

1

The Origins of British Fascism

Twilight of the Gods 1890–1918

British fascism, like its European counterparts, had its roots deep in the social tensions and ideas fostered by an age of modernization and change. Its emergence was, however, mainly based on native political tradition and a belief that a new type of man with fresh ideas was needed to break the mould of politics, so that Britain could meet the problems of the twentieth century. Some fascists found their utopia in idealized versions of various parts of British history; others looked to the future, expecting fascist struggle and power to create this new man with new values who would revolutionize British society. British fascism was to be a strange blend of these pre-existent modernizing and anti-modernizing elements.

Some theorists in the British Union of Fascists (BUF) saw the origins of British fascism in an idealized view of Tudor government and the reign of Elizabeth I, but its roots are actually to be found in reactions to the political, economic and social problems of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, and to the disillusion created by the First World War.¹ Together these influences were sufficient to create the various peculiar amalgamations of ideas and personnel from right across – and in some cases from outside – the conventional political spectrum, which were to be the

¹ A.L. Glasfurd, 'Fascism and the English tradition', *Fascist Quarterly*, 1, 3 (July 1935), p. 363; J. Drennan (W.E.D. Allen), *BUF, Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London, 1934), p.30; B.L. Farr, 'The development and impact of right wing politics in Great Britain, 1903–32', PhD thesis, University of Illinois, 1976, pp. xi, 305.

hallmarks of British fascism. The failure of the political elite adequately to manipulate and incorporate emerging populist mass forces in this period also proved crucial to the activism and conflict associated with British fascism.

The radical right

In general, Britain has not been thought to conform to any European pattern of economic, political or social crisis in this period, despite recent work which has suggested that this picture needs modifying.² Many historians still view the Edwardian era as a period of relative social stability, if not a 'golden age'.³ Yet just beneath the surface of Edwardian society the differences between groups and classes in the nation widened as the century progressed, the growth of single-issue pressure groups only partly under the control of the political establishment increased, and the principles of liberalism as providing the basic consensus values of politics were increasingly challenged. The growth of populist radicalism, particularly in the 1911–14 period, with the development of labour unrest, syndicalism, the suffragette movement and the Ulster Volunteer Force, certainly gives more than a semblance of credibility to the gloomy analysis of George Dangerfield's classic interpretation of the period, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*.⁴

Recent work has suggested that there was a European revolt of the right in the early twentieth century representing a rebellion of traditionalist forces who were determined to preserve their status and position in society despite a modernization process that was making them economically redundant.⁵ The crisis was spearheaded and orchestrated by agrarian elites and supported by middle-class,

² G. Searle, 'The revolt from the right in Edwardian Britain', in *Nationalist and Racialist Movements in Britain before 1914*, ed. P. Kennedy and A. Nicholls (Oxford, 1981), p. 21.

³ D. Reed, 'Introduction. Crisis age or golden age?', in *Edwardian England*, ed. D. Reed, (London, 1982), pp. 14–39. See also *The Edwardian Age. Conflict and Stability*, ed. A. O'Day, (London, 1979).

⁴ G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1935).

⁵ A.J. Mayer, 'Internal Crisis and War since 1870', in *Revolutionary Situations in Europe 1917–22*, ed. C.L. Bertrand (Montreal, 1977), pp. 206–11; F.L. Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism* (London, 1970), p. 10.

petit bourgeois and peasant strata who felt threatened by that process. However, the emergence of the radical right in British politics in the Edwardian era only partially confirms this thesis.⁶ Its most important elements were the so-called 'Die-hards', the Unionist peers who defied the party whip by voting against the Parliament Act in the House of Lords in 1911; and the Round Table group organized around the Imperial ideas and national efficiency programme of Milner and his collaborators. The political views of these two groups were broadly supported by Leo Maxse's *National Review* and the *Eye Witness* (later the *New Witness*) of Hilaire Belloc, G.K. and Cecil Chesterton.⁷ There were also several left-wing supporters of the Campaign for National Efficiency and a programme of imperialism and social reform, including Robert Blatchford and the *Clarion* newspaper with its emphasis on national socialism, and elitist Fabians such as the Webbs, George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells.⁸

Yet despite the similarity of ideas, this group never really represented a coherent alternative to the dominant liberal ethos of the age. The Die-hard peers were suspicious of Milner's conspiratorial methods and his attempts to encourage the formation of a governmental and administrative meritocracy, and of his interest in Lloyd George's proposal of a coalition government at the constitutional conference in 1910. The Chestertons' *Eye Witness* with its distributionist arguments was fundamentally opposed to the landed interest which so many of the Die-hard peers personified. Indeed, in 1911, Belloc and Cecil Chesterton wrote *The Party System*, whose basic argument was that British politics had been corrupted by the social and institutional ties between the two front benches in the House of Commons.⁹ They were thus opposed to any coalition of separate parts of the existing political establishment.

If the emerging radical right was split over tactics in the Edwardian era, it also lacked unified leadership and direction. The

⁶ Searle, 'Revolt from the right', p. 21f.

⁷ Idem, 'Critics of Edwardian society: the case of the radical right', in O'Day, *The Edwardian Age*, pp. 79–96.

⁸ G. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (Oxford, 1971), and B. Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform* (London, 1960), pp. 53–82, 216–33.

⁹ K. Lunn, 'The Marconi scandal and related aspects of British anti-semitism, 1911–14', PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1978, p. 79.

stroke which incapacitated Joseph Chamberlain in 1906, and the temperamental disinclination of Milner to soil his hands in party political arguments, seriously weakened its position. It was therefore relatively easy for Lloyd George to deride the opposition in the House of Lords to the 1909 budget and the 1911 Parliament Act as emanating from 'backwoodsmen'. In fact the Die-hard opposition in the Lords was at least in part one of political principle deriving from the belief that the Liberal government was undermining the national interest.¹⁰ The Die-hards were not simply a declining agrarian elite reacting against modernity. In fact, most of the landed aristocracy had successfully diversified their agricultural interests out of the sorely pressed cereal sector, and had also invested profitably in developing new industrial projects. Similarly, Die-hard peers had lost neither status nor influence in local politics with the decline of the role of Justices of the Peace and the rise of elected local government after 1888.¹¹ The Die-hards did also include political reactionaries such as the Halsbury circle, but in general their arguments were rationally expressed in terms of reasoned opposition to what they saw as the aims and objectives of political liberalism.

The beliefs of the Die-hards and most of the Edwardian radical right were based upon a particular interpretation of the national interest. Broadly speaking, most of them supported tariff reform, compulsory military service, an expansion of the army and navy, the development of social welfare, the introduction of the political referendum, an end to 'alien' immigration and armed resistance to Home Rule in Ireland. Many had ambiguous attitudes towards Germany. As nationalists, they were fearful of Germany's rapidly developing military and industrial power and the challenge this posed the British Empire; yet they admired many aspects of Wilhelmine Germany, particularly its administrative efficiency, social welfare programme and the leading role of the state in national development. Most of the Edwardian radical right demanded a similar modernization of British Society and called for the state to play a more active role in national life. For these reasons most of them had supported the Campaign for National

¹⁰ G.D. Phillips, 'The Diehards and the myth of the backwoodsmen', *Journal of British Studies*, 16 (Spring 1977), pp. 105–20.

¹¹ Idem, *The Diehards* (London, 1979), p. 56 and p. 81.

Efficiency since 1902.¹² However, for the Die-hards in particular this radicalism was also based on a belief in the need to preserve aristocratic dominance and to strengthen British imperial power. Their opposition was not only to the actions of the Liberal government after 1906, but also to the leadership of the Unionist party, which in the view of most Die-hards had either colluded with, or failed adequately to oppose, the new liberalism which threatened the traditional social basis of British society.¹³

The Die-hards' revolt against the cosy traditions of high politics shared some of the same assumptions as the later Mosley fascism.¹⁴ However, the influence survived in a more direct form in the patriotic press and the links they had with the British Fascists (BF) in the 1920s. In particular, the eighth Duke of Northumberland took up the Die-hard beliefs of his father and extended the tradition in journalistic form long after the First World War with the publication of a newspaper, *The Patriot*, from 1922 to 1950. Nesta Webster, a leading figure for a time in the BF, contributed several series of articles upholding the principles of 'true conservatism' as emanating from aristocratic paternalism.¹⁵ Sir Oswald Mosley similarly saw the social origins of his beliefs in his roots in the landed gentry.¹⁶ Continuity between Edwardian values and inter-war fascism can also be found in the person of A.K. Chesterton, second cousin of G.K. Chesterton, who was a leading member of the BUF, although family connection was of relatively minor importance in the complex origins of his fascist beliefs.¹⁷

However, many of the national issues around which the Edwardian radical right mounted their forlorn challenge were to provide of equal significance with personal connections. Although the BUF were to show opposition to the remaining privileges of landed society in the anti-tithe campaign in the 1930s, and Mosley had a much more favourable view of Irish nationalism and

¹² Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*.

¹³ Phillips, *The Diehards*, p. 158.

¹⁴ J.R. Jones, 'England', in *The European Right*, ed. H. Rogger and E. Weber (London, 1965), pp. 29–70.

¹⁵ *The Patriot*, 9 Feb. 1922.

¹⁶ O. Mosley, *My Life* (London, 1968), and R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (1975), pp. 23–44.

¹⁷ D. Baker, 'A.K. Chesterton. The making of a British fascist', PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1982, pp. 268–77, 331–4, D. Baker, *Ideology of Obsession* (London, 1995).

Germany than had the Edwardian radical right, there was a distinct and discernible continuity of ideas in their interpretation of the national interest, how it should be maintained, and some of the assumptions on which the concept was based. Many fascists also linked the threat of Carson and the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1914 to revolt against Home Rule in Ireland with the spirit of the BUF challenge to the National Government in the 1930s.¹⁸

Yet neither the rebel peers in the House of Lords nor the permeation strategy of the Milner circle managed to break out of the charmed circle of high politics. The galvanizing and educating of the masses became the function of the political leagues and pressure groups, given the fissures within the party and the lack of leadership shown by Balfour and the Unionists before 1911.¹⁹ It was, therefore, the general Edwardian crisis of British Conservatism which gave birth to the modern radical right in British political history. The BUF were later to attempt the fusion of part of the anti-liberalism of the Edwardian radical right with the educational strategy of the political leagues and the oratorical tradition of mass politics as developed by Gladstone and Chamberlain, among other elements. British fascist political style and content was to owe much to these native traditions and consequently appeared somewhat old-fashioned by the inter-war period.

The political leagues of Edwardian England were mainly radical right pressure groups designed to encourage the electorate and the masses to agitate for the interest that they represented. Of particular significance for the later development of fascism was the Tariff Reform League formed in 1903 by Joseph Chamberlain. This struck at the heart of economic liberalism, attacking one of the basic consensus values of Victorian politics, free trade. It operated both in the sphere of high politics, where its influence dominated Unionist party strategy between 1905 and 1910, and in wider terms by trying to break the allegiance of the electorate and the masses from free trade through a campaign of political

¹⁸ Drennan, *BUF, Mosley and British Fascism*, pp. 290–1; R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain* (London, 1972), p. 24; Farr, 'Right wing politics', p. 113.

¹⁹ R.A. Rempel, *Unionists Divided* (Newton Abbott, 1972).

education.²⁰ Its twin policies of protection for British industry, and the establishment of Imperial Preference, were to be precursors of Mosley's plans for an autarchic British Empire and also survived in slightly altered form as the basic nationalist platform of the National Front in the 1960s and 1970s.

Indeed, the activities and personality of Joseph Chamberlain were to influence British fascism in a number of ways. It is no accident that Mosley's base in the 1920s, Birmingham, was the political stronghold of Chamberlain and his family. Chamberlain, like Mosley, was arrogant and contemptuous of the lesser intellectual skills of his political colleagues. Both failed to play the rules of the parliamentary game and put principle above loyalty to party. Chamberlain split the Liberals in 1886 over Home Rule in Ireland, thus sending them into the political wilderness for much of the next twenty years. His turn to Protectionism in 1903 and the resulting divisions it created among the Unionists seriously weakened them before the First World War, and the issue was to lose Baldwin the election in 1923.²¹ Chamberlain, like Mosley, was not averse to allowing mass populism to degenerate into street conflict and violence, as Lloyd George discovered when he was forced to dress up as a policeman to avoid being lynched in a riot in Birmingham in 1901.²² Some of his other ideas were also to find an echo in British fascist politics. For instance, his proposal in 1899 of an Anglo-Saxon alliance of Britain, Germany and the United States based on race, has been resurrected by John Tyndall in the New National Front in the 1980s.²³

Other leagues dominated by the radical right were designed to promote various sections of Britain's national defences. The Navy League and its rival, the National Maritime League, both successfully promoted the necessity to maintain Britain's lead in the new naval deterrent, the Dreadnought battleship, and the National

²⁰ A. Summers, 'The character of Edwardian nationalism: three popular leagues', in Kennedy and Nicholls, *Nationalist and Racialist Movements in Britain*, pp. 70–87; A. Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British Politics 1903–13* (Oxford, 1979).

²¹ J. Amery, *Joseph Chamberlain and the Tariff Reform Campaign* (London, 1969).

²² R. Rhodes James, *The British Revolution*, vol. I, 1880–1914 (London, 1976), p. 205.

²³ W. Mock, 'The function of race, in Imperialist Ideology. The example of Joseph Chamberlain', in Kennedy and Nicholls, *Nationalist and Racialist Movements in Britain*, p. 193. John Tyndall, 'Tyndall speaks. Our Anglo-Saxon heritage' (Cape, New National Front, 1981).

Service League under Lord Roberts agitated for army reform and introduction of conscription.²⁴ The emphasis of the Edwardian radical right was to preserve Britain's defences to enable her to resist rival imperialist aggression without the need for compromising alliances. Splendid isolation was preferable to the Entente Cordiale. Feeling threatened by the rise of Germany and the gradual deterioration in relations between the two countries, the radical right thought the best solution was to have powerful and numerous defences – the line developed by Mosley in the 1930s. However, far from seeing Germany as the potential enemy by 1933, Mosley saw her foreign policy as not being directed against British interests, and this represented marked shift in emphasis away from the arguments of earlier British patriotic and fascist movements in the 1920s, who still saw 'the Huns' as one of the chief threats to the Empire's security.

The liberal consensus and Britain's decline

The most basic shared assumption among the Edwardian radical right was that the existing political system had been unable to check the sharp decline in British power in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. (British fascists were later to argue that this process had become intensified by the effects of the First World War). This concern took a number of forms. In the economic sphere, Britain's position as the leading industrial nation had clearly been superseded by the United States and Germany by 1914. In 1870 Britain had 31.8 per cent share of world manufacturing production compared with the United States 23.3 per cent and Germany's 13.2 per cent, but by 1913 the USA had 35.8 per cent, Germany 15 per cent and the United Kingdom 14 per cent. Britain's share in the output of pig iron and steel had dropped even more calamitously from 46 per cent to 13.9 per cent and from 35.9 per cent to 10.3 per cent of world production in the same period.²⁵ Perhaps of even greater significance was that the British economy had been slow to develop the new chemical and electrical products

²⁴ Summers, 'Edwardian nationalism', pp. 70–87.

²⁵ P. Cain, 'Political economy in Edwardian England: the tariff reform controversy', in O'Day, *The Edwardian Age*, pp. 36–7.

of a second industrial revolution, and since 1870 her economic growth had been relatively sluggish compared with both the mid-Victorian period and her rapidly developing rivals.²⁶ In the words of one historian, British industry in 1914 was like 'a working museum of industrial archaeology'.²⁷ Although the relevant statistics were not available to contemporaries, popular opinion was inflamed by such journalistic propaganda as E.E. Williams's *Made in Germany*, published in 1896.

Britain's economic base was thought to be especially significant by the radical right, for on it depended the resources that could be spent on national defence. The issue became of paramount importance to many when it was shown that the leadership of the armed forces, the quality of its recruits and indeed the human capital of the nation as a whole was also defective – points highlighted by the Boer War. The fact that it took five times the number of British troops, armed with the most modern equipment, to subdue the Boer farmers showed the rest of the world that Britain was no longer a significant factor in power politics. Just as worrying was the fact that only one in three who volunteered for the armed forces was fit enough to be sent to South Africa, thus confirming the empirical surveys of Booth and Rowntree on the extent and effect of poverty in urban areas.²⁸ The Edwardian radical right came to argue that the reforms of the Conservative government from 1902–5, and of the Liberal government after 1906, either did not go far enough, or were financed in such a way as to be detrimental to the national interest.

In particular, the radical right was concerned that Britain was no longer the world's foremost power and had lost her pre-eminence in Europe to Germany.²⁹ Although in general they supported the reforms in the army, the establishment of the Committee of Imperial Defence in 1904, and the Selborne-Fisher naval programme beginning in 1902, they wished them to be extended to include universal male conscription and the building of yet more battleships. The radical right had dreaded the possibility that the reforms would be put into reverse after the comprehensive victory

²⁶ P. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* (London, 1980), pp. 291–305.

²⁷ C. Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, 1972), p. 88.

²⁸ Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*, p. 34; J.R. Hay, *The Origins of the Liberal Welfare Reforms 1906–14* (London, 1975), p. 31.

²⁹ Kennedy, *Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, pp. 306–20.

of the Liberals in the general election of 1906. The growth of Germanophobia on the radical right was orchestrated by *The Times* and a plethora of literary outpourings of the genre of George Chesney's *Battle of Dorking* (1871), prophesying a German invasion.³⁰ From such propaganda a veritable spy mania developed, aimed chiefly at wealthy German Jews. Indeed, it was the campaigns of the radical right and the Unionist party in Parliament which persuaded the Liberals to increase the Dreadnought building programme, thus precipitating a major fiscal and constitutional crisis between 1909–11.

The radical right saw their chief enemy as the all-pervading liberal consensus which underpinned the values of high politics in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, and tainted the Unionists almost as much as the Liberal party. They were opposed to many aspects of its influence, excepting the moral attributes of justice and good government. For them, it was the political programme which stemmed from most of its assumptions, rather than any objective economic factors, that had led to Britain's weakness and decline. The feeble policies of government dominated by the woolly, moralistic and humanitarian assumptions of liberalism thus accounted for the collapse of British power.³¹ Gladstonian moralism and Cobdenite internationalism between them were blamed in great part for the crisis of empire which the radical right perceived. The British Empire had been created, they argued, by men who had courageously planted the flag in all the corners of the globe. These men showed initiative, resource and qualities of leadership. They had been betrayed by the flaccid, small-minded and puritanical elements in government who were more concerned with playing the party game and maintaining their own privilege than with ensuring the future security of the Empire.³² Of contemporary politicians only Joseph Chamberlain was credited with the necessary will, resolve and vision to pursue an active policy which would strengthen national power, and he was physically incapacitated after 1906.

³⁰ I.F. Clarke, 'The Battle of Dorking 1871–1914', *Victorian Studies*, 8 (1965), pp. 309–27.

³¹ Kennedy, *Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, pp. 306–21.

³² Barnett, *Collapse of British Power*, p. 59.

Race, culture and evolution

It is, of course, clear that the origins of Mosley fascism must be seen in his criticism of the 'old gang' game of conventional party politics. Yet after his failure to convince popular opinion of the existence of a crisis of British government he unleashed a campaign which had deep roots in late Victorian and Edwardian politics, namely his highly controversial use of political anti-semitism after 1934. The connections between the radical right in Edwardian Britain and political anti-semitism were almost as close as Mosley's later orchestration of the theme, although for the most part BUF criticism of Jews was far more specific than either the Edwardian British Brothers League anti-alien campaign or the innuendo of the conspiracy accusations of the National League for Clean Government in 1913–14. Anti-semitism had not been as serious a problem in England as in Russia, France and Germany in the period before the First World War, but there was a strong link between various anti-alien groups like the Parliamentary Alien Immigration Committee, the British Brothers League, the London League and the Immigration Reform Association, in the campaign against Jewish immigration between 1901 and 1906.³³ Both this movement and Mosley's use of this theme were directed mainly at the East End of London where a strong cultural tradition of anti-Jewish hostility could be called upon for political purposes. The function of anti-semitism was to mobilize a populist movement in support of an anti-alien campaign and thus to incorporate the non-political masses in a protest movement against both the Jewish immigrant and, more importantly, the liberal values of the political establishment.

Another Edwardian form of anti-semitism bequeathed to the British fascist tradition was the conspiracy theory of history. This in its anti-semitic form derived from nativist traditions, even if it was the arrival after the First World War of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* that gave it such notoriety.³⁴ The British variant of

³³ C. Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876–39* (London, 1979), p. 91; S. Wilson, *Ideology and Experience. Antisemitism in France at the Time of the Dreyfus Case* (London, 1982); P. Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (New York, 1964); N. Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide* (London, 1970), pp. 118–37.

³⁴ Lunn, 'The Marconi Scandal', p. 381; idem, 'Political anti-semitism before 1914: fascism's heritage?', in Lunn and Thurlow, *British Fascism*, pp. 20–40, and G.C. Lebzelter,