

## **The British Union of Fascists in the Midlands, 1932 – 1940**

Craig Morgan BA, MA

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## **Abstract**

This thesis provides an examination of the emergence and development of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists in the Midlands between 1932 and 1940. It charts the fascist presence in four major cities: Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry and Leicester. The BUF is the largest and most important fascist movement to have ever existed in Britain. Mosleyite fascism in the Midlands as a region has never before been investigated and represents a significant gap in the historiography of British fascist studies.

Alongside affording valuable insight into Mosleyite fascism at the regional level, the study will illuminate further understanding of the BUF nationally. The fascist experience in the Midlands is used to test and contribute to arguments about the national movement in the secondary literature relating to three themes: (a) the social class composition of BUF membership; (b) the strength of BUF membership; and (c) the focus of BUF propaganda. Finally, four main areas generally recognised as the reasons for national failure are discussed to explain the long-term marginalisation of the BUF in the Midlands.

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## Introduction

Founded by Sir Oswald Mosley in October 1932 and proscribed in summer 1940<sup>1</sup>, the British Union of Fascists (hereafter BUF) remains Britain's largest and most significant fascist movement. Although an enduring scholarly interest has generated a sizeable volume of critical literature considerable gaps remain in our understanding of the BUF. A major gap in the historiography is a lack of knowledge of the BUF in the Midlands.

The first aim of this thesis is to fill this gap by producing a detailed empirical examination of the emergence and development of the BUF in the region between 1932 and 1940. The BUF in the Midlands has been under researched. This is despite the Midlands' large population and economic importance during the 1930s, and even though non-fascist contemporaries and a number of post-war scholars have noted that the Mosley movement was active in the region and at various points in the decade able to attract a following. The Midlands as a region has never been subjected to study in regard to its experience of Mosleyite fascism. This thesis will consider four cities: Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry, and Leicester; the leading municipalities of the west Midlands, north Midlands, south Midlands and east Midlands respectively. Birmingham is the only principal city in the region to have been examined concerning the presence of the BUF. It was explored by Brewer in 1975 and his book on the subject was published in 1984 before the release of invaluable government documentation on British fascism and the local Mosley movement<sup>2</sup>. The current study, in discussing Birmingham, both draws on and critically considers Brewer's work and incorporates relevant new information. The BUF in Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry and Leicester

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<sup>1</sup> The BUF was dissolved in summer 1940 when hundreds of Mosleyites were interned and the organisation pronounced illegal. Defence Regulation 18b (1a) was introduced into British law which allowed for the arrest and internment without trial of members of organisations which were adjudged to be subject to foreign influence or control, or whose leaders enjoyed past or present associations with leaders of now enemy governments, or who were deemed sympathetic to the system of government of enemy powers. Between 23 May and 24 May 1940 at least 24 leading members of the BUF were arrested, including Sir Oswald Mosley, and on 4 June the decision was made to extend the round-up to include some 350 local officials. The dragnet continued throughout June and July so that by the end of summer 1940 the number of BUF members and supporters arrested and interned under Defence Regulation 18b (1a) totalled 747. On 10 July 1940 under the freshly-passed Defence Regulation 18b (AA) the government declared the BUF a proscribed organisation. A. Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious. Detention Without Trial in Wartime Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), pp172-191.

<sup>2</sup> J. 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); J. Brewer, *Mosley's Men. The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands* (Aldershot, Gower, 1984).

has never been studied. The Mosleyite effort to establish a grass roots presence in the Midlands remains, therefore, substantially uncharted. In light of this sizeable knowledge gap the study of the fascist movement in Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry, and Leicester intends to represent a significant addition to the history of politics and right-wing extremism in the Midlands.

The second aim is to test and contribute to arguments about the national Mosleyite movement. It is intended that this will illuminate further understanding of the BUF nationally as well as regionally. Pryce-Jones has written that: 'English fascism cannot be studied in detail until the histories of local branches are written'<sup>3</sup>, and in recent years detailed local studies have not only added to our stock of knowledge of the BUF at the regional level but have reshaped debate on the fascist movement at the national level. From the immediate post-war period until the early 1980s, scholarly studies of the BUF were, in the words of Rawnsley, 'history written "from the top down"'<sup>4</sup>. Analysis of the BUF focused almost exclusively on the Mosley movement at the national level. Little or no attention was paid to the movement's experiences in branches throughout the country. What reference existed to Mosleyite fascism on the ground was limited almost uniformly to a brief mention of the East End of London. From the mid-1980s onwards major local studies have emerged which uncovered an abundance of previously neglected source material. As we shall see, through focusing attention on the experiences of fascist branches in regions of Britain these local studies have challenged a number of long-standing contentions about the national movement in the established literature and raised fresh questions about Mosleyite fascism.

Chapter one will review the arguments in the secondary literature surrounding the themes to be addressed in this study and will then consider the strengths and weaknesses of relevant primary sources. Chapters two, three, four, and five chart chronologically the emergence and development of the BUF in Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry, and Leicester between 1932 and 1940 respectively. The concluding chapter will reflect on what these four case-studies reveal about the themes in relation to the local and national Mosley movement.

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<sup>3</sup> D. Pryce-Jones, *Unity Mitford* (London, Book Club Associates, 1977), p76.

<sup>4</sup> S. Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', in K. Lunn and R. Thurlow (eds.) *British Fascism* (London, Croom Helm, 1980), p150.

## Chapter One: Themes and Sources.

Having explained why a regional study of the BUF in the Midlands represents a much required addition to knowledge of the Mosley movement our attention will now move to the themes which will be addressed and to a reflection on the primary sources which will be utilised in this undertaking.

### 1. Themes.

To date three detailed and extensive studies have been written on the BUF in particular regions. Rawnsley's reconstruction of the BUF presence in the north of England represented the first such study<sup>1</sup>. Linehan extended the field of local research into east London, 'a region where the impact of Mosleyite fascism was more pronounced than at any other location in Britain'<sup>2</sup>. In an attempt to broaden our knowledge of the BUF's political fortunes in rural areas Mitchell investigated the development of the Mosley movement in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex<sup>3</sup>. In an examination of the findings of these studies three important themes regarding the character of Mosleyite fascism emerge which need to be explored further. These themes are to be discussed in the framework of an existing secondary literature. They are: (a) the social class composition of BUF membership; (b) the strength of BUF membership; and (c) the focus of BUF propaganda. The relevant arguments relating to these themes in the historiography and the way in which they will be engaged in the following account will now be considered.

#### (a) The social class composition of the BUF membership.

The nature of the social class composition of the BUF's membership is recognised as a

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<sup>1</sup> S. Rawnsley, 'Fascists and Fascism in the North of England in the 1930s' (Ph.D., University of Bradford, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> T. Linehan, *East London for Mosley* (London, Frank Cass, 1996), pxvii.

<sup>3</sup> A. Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia: The British Union of Fascists in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex 1933-1940' (Ph.D., University of Sheffield, 1999), p1.

contentious question within the historiography of British fascist studies<sup>4</sup>. The first account in the post-war scholarship on fascism in Britain to discuss the social composition of the BUF membership was produced by Cross who argued that the ranks of the fascist movement were dominated by 'middle-class' recruits. Cross identified a 'typical' rank and file member as a 'middle-class' man who was 'not particularly clever but capable of loyalty and sacrifice'<sup>5</sup>. Crucially for efforts to establish a detailed picture of BUF membership Cross failed to make any attempt to define the term 'middle-class'. Since the publication of Cross's research the trend among academics has been to stress the diversity of recruits to the BUF<sup>6</sup> but it is the findings of the major regional studies which have most openly challenged the notion the fascist membership was dominated by a single social class<sup>7</sup>. In his study of the fascist presence in northern England Rawnsley concluded that the appeal of the Mosley movement cut across social class divisions, writing: 'the BUF attracted the support of different sorts of people from different class backgrounds'<sup>8</sup>. In his analysis Rawnsley claimed that a considerable 'working-class' contingent was present alongside numerous 'middle-class' recruits in the northern BUF and that no single social class grouping was dominant within the membership. Rawnsley's research has been described as marking 'a significant breakthrough in the treatment of the Mosleyite membership'<sup>9</sup> but like Cross before him it offers no definition of the social class categories employed to describe BUF recruits. While Rawnsley does not provide a definition of what kind of person constitutes somebody of the 'working-class' a pattern is discernable with regard to the people to whom he applies the term. Warehouse workers, weavers, carpenters, railway workers, factory workers, chemical plant operatives, taxi drivers, one-man painter and decorators, and window cleaners, are all at one point or another in his text associated with the social group 'working-class', which suggests that Rawnsley without ever explicitly stating that this was the case restricted himself to using this social categorisation to describe people engaged in manual occupations and in relation to such men and women amalgamated the employee and self-employed. The BUF members

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<sup>4</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p210.

<sup>5</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (London, Barrie and Rockliff, 1961), p70.

<sup>6</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.19, No.4 (1984), pp589-590.

<sup>7</sup> Linehan, *British fascism 1918-39* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000), pp161-165.

<sup>8</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascists and Fascism', p348.

<sup>9</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p163.

Rawnsley associates with the social categorisation 'middle-class' are people who had attended public school, ex-military officers, the children of mill-owners and those employed in the following occupations: company managers, civil engineers, merchants, bank managers, shopkeepers, and small businessmen<sup>10</sup>. Criticism of Rawnsley's approach came in the work of Webber. Webber was the first academic to specifically highlight the lack of a sophisticated conception of social class within the post-war historiography about the composition of BUF membership. Assessing the analyses of Cross and Rawnsley as 'far too simple', Webber argued that the existing observations on the class composition of the fascist movement were consequently of only limited value<sup>11</sup>. A response to Webber's critique arrived with Linehan's detailed investigation into the fascist movement in east London. Recognising the need to employ a precise and workable conceptual model to address the question of social class in the BUF, Linehan adopted a methodological approach to appraise membership composition based on an analytical framework previously developed by Kater in a groundbreaking study of the social structure of the Nazi Party<sup>12</sup>. The procedure utilised by Kater, whereby a stratification of occupational sub-groups is divided into three broad social class categories, 'lower'; 'lower-middle'; and 'elite' is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1.  
Social Class classification according to Occupational Sub-Group

Social Class	Occupational Sub-Group
Lower	1. Unskilled workers (inclusive of semi-skilled workers)
	2. Skilled (craft) workers
	3. Other skilled workers
Lower middle	4. Master craftsmen (independent)
	5. Non-academic professionals
	6. Lower/intermediate (petty) employees
	7. Lower/intermediate (civil) servants
	8. Merchants

<sup>10</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascists and Fascism', pp233-244.

<sup>11</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership', pp594-595.

<sup>12</sup> M. Kater, *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders 1919-1945* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1983).



9. Farmers (self-employed)

Elite

10. Managers

11. Higher civil servants

12 Students (upper school/university)

13. Academic professionals

14. Entrepreneurs

Source: M. Kater, *The Nazi Party: A Social Profile of Members and Leaders 1919-1945* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1983), p241.

Kater's social class model was later successfully adopted by Muhlberger in a pioneering study of Nazi recruitment patterns<sup>13</sup>. Linehan retained when adapting this conceptual model for use in the East End of London a small number of slight alterations Muhlberger made to Kater's approach with regard to the assigning of particular individuals to their respective social class categories. Firstly, believing there was a need to include a 'space' for those social groups that fell between the 'lower-middle' and the 'elite' classes Linehan altered these categories to 'lower-middle and middle-middle' and 'elite or upper-middle' respectively. Secondly, he introduced a 'status unclear' category, so as to take account of individuals whose class affiliation cannot be established. Thirdly, the occupational sub-group in Kater's model relating to farmers was eliminated owing to the exclusively urban nature of the East End. Fourthly, Kater's decision to allocate railway workers to an occupational sub-group which classified them in social-class terms as members of the 'lower-middle' class was adjudged to be inappropriate in the English context. Finally, Kater's division between 'skilled craft workers' and 'other skilled workers' was discarded in favour of a single occupational sub-group category for all types of skilled workers<sup>14</sup>. Linehan's amendments are set out in Table 2.

Table 2.

Social Class classification in East London according to Occupational Sub-Group

Social Class

Occupational Sub-Group

<sup>13</sup> D. Muhlberger, 'Germany' in D. Muhlberger (ed.) *The Social Basis of European Fascist Movements* (London, Croom Helm, 1987), pp40-139.

<sup>14</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p211.

Lower	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Unskilled workers (inclusive of semi-skilled)</li> <li>2. Skilled workers</li> </ol>
Lower-Middle and Middle-Middle	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Master craftsmen</li> <li>5. Non-academic professionals</li> <li>6. Lower/intermediate (petty) employees</li> <li>7. Lower/intermediate civil servants</li> <li>8. Merchants (self-employed)</li> </ol>
Elite or Upper-Middle	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Managers</li> <li>11. Higher civil servants</li> <li>12. Students (upper school/university)</li> <li>13. Academic professionals</li> <li>14. Entrepreneurs</li> </ol>
Status Unclear	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. Non-university students</li> <li>16. Retired</li> <li>17. Married women</li> <li>18. Military personnel</li> <li>19. Unemployed</li> <li>20. School pupils</li> <li>21. Full-time salaried employees on the staff of the BUF</li> </ol>

Source: T. Linehan, *East London for Mosley* (London, Frank Cass, 1996), p212.

Linehan's conceptual model allowed for the first time a nuanced analysis of social class composition of BUF membership which enabled his investigation into the emergence and development of Mosleyite fascism in the East End to be much more specific about who supported the fascist movement than any previous scholarly study. Linehan's research rejected the theory that the fascist general rank-and-file was dominated by one social class in general and a certain 'type' of member, the 'middle-class' recruit, in particular. He in his own words was able to go 'much further' than Rawnsley in 'pointing up' the 'lower class' aspect of BUF membership<sup>15</sup>. Linehan revealed that in the East End 'not insubstantial' numbers of 'lower-middle and middle-middle class' types could be found in the local branches but it was

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<sup>15</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p164.

the 'lower class' grouping of unskilled and skilled workers that comprised the largest social class contribution to membership in the region<sup>16</sup>. Members who could be classified as belonging to the 'elite or upper-middle class' were especially under-represented<sup>17</sup>. The effectiveness of this methodological approach for providing detailed insight into the social class composition of BUF membership was corroborated by Mitchell in his major regional study of the Mosley movement's attempts to establish a 'heartland' in East Anglia during the 1930s<sup>18</sup>. Mitchell adopted Linehan's conceptual model except for a minor alteration. Of vital relevance to a predominantly agricultural region, Kater's occupational sub-group 'farmers (self-employed)' was restored to the social class category 'lower-middle and middle-middle'<sup>19</sup>. The deployment of this amended model revealed that contrary to Cross's proposition the BUF membership in East Anglia was diverse in terms of social class composition. Although a majority of members were classified as belonging to the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social class a substantial percentage of unskilled and skilled workers was found to have participated alongside them in the ranks of the local branches<sup>20</sup>. People of the 'elite or upper-middle' class were recruited on a modest scale<sup>21</sup>.

The following study of the BUF in the Midlands represents a new contribution to this debate on the Mosley movement's social composition. An extensive account of the emergence and development of the BUF in the Midlands will examine the fascist membership in the region to determine whether it was as suggested by Cross dominated by the 'middle-class' or whether the ranks of the local Mosley movement were as the existing major regional studies have concluded diverse in terms of social class composition. A diverse rank and file in the Midlands revealing substantial 'lower-class' intakes would confirm Linehan's suggestion that what he terms the 'middle-class fascism paradigm' in the British fascist historiography is 'cracking under the strain' of the findings of major regional studies<sup>22</sup>. The sophisticated typology introduced by Linehan into British fascist studies will be drawn upon to determine the social class categories to which BUF members in the Midlands should be ascribed. Although

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<sup>16</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp164-165.

<sup>17</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p229.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', p2.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', pp388, 393.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', p393.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', p415.

<sup>22</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, pp164-165.

this conceptual model has proven a useful analytical device I propose that a number of fresh alterations can be made to further improve its effectiveness. In regard to its applicability to the Midlands I have followed Mitchell in restoring the occupational sub-group nine 'farmers (self-employed)' to the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social class category; this correction is needed owing to the large number of rural districts in Leicestershire during the 1930s. It is suggested that the occupational sub-groups 'married women' and 'full-time salaried employees on the staff of the BUF' are an unnecessary feature of the existing model. The notion that the class affiliation of individuals previously allocated to these categories is 'unclear' is deemed disputable. The social class status of married women in paid employment will be defined by the occupational sub-group relevant to their job while married women not in employment can be acceptably adjudged as sharing their spouse's social class. Full-time salaried employees on the staff of the BUF can be subsumed within the occupational framework, depending on the nature of their specific occupation. These two sub-groups have been discarded accordingly. Also removed from the 'status unclear' category is the occupational sub-group 'military personnel'. The suggestion that members of the armed forces cannot be integrated into the 'lower', 'lower-middle and middle-middle', and 'elite or upper-middle' social class categories is considered unsatisfactory. Therefore while it is recognised that these allocations are contestable, non-commissioned military men in the Midlands membership will be regarded as 'lower' class in social status while commissioned service personnel will be allocated to higher occupational sub-groups. The final alterations aim to more accurately reflect the social class based structure of the British educational system in the 1930s. The occupational sub-group 'school pupils' of the 'status unclear' social class category will be amended. It is suggested that this sub-group should be altered to exclude those who attend public schools. Public school pupils recruited will constitute a new sub-group and classified as being of 'elite or upper-middle' social class. Consequently, the sub-group 'school pupils' will be changed to 'non-public school pupils'. The enhanced conceptual model which will be used to identify the social class of BUF members in the Midlands is set out in Table 3.

Table 3.

## Social Class classification in the Midlands according to Occupational Sub-Group

Social Class	Occupational Sub-Group
Lower	1. Unskilled workers (inclusive of semi skilled) 2. Skilled workers
Lower-Middle and Middle-Middle	3. Master craftsmen 4. Non-academic professionals 5. Lower/intermediate (petty) employees 6. Lower/intermediate civil servants 7. Merchants (self-employed) 8. Farmers (self-employed)
Elite or Upper-Middle	9. Managers 10. Higher civil servants 11. Public school pupils 12. Students (upper school/university) 13. Academic professionals 14. Entrepreneurs
Status Unclear	15. Non-university students 16. Retired 17. Unemployed 18. Non-public school pupils

The analysis of social class affiliation allowed by the application of this model to BUF recruits in the Midlands will, it is suggested, provide unprecedented insight into the type of people attracted into the ranks of the Mosley movement in the region while supplementing further a wider understanding of the composition of membership at the national level.

(b) The strength of BUF membership.

The theme of how many people joined the Mosley movement in Britain has developed into a

major area of investigation in studies of the BUF<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, Thurlow has suggested that any account of the BUF should include analysis of the size of the membership<sup>24</sup>. The first post-war studies on membership trends were produced by Cross and Benewick respectively who painted a picture of a movement that peaked in members nationwide in mid-1934 and which subsequently entered a terminal decline. According to this view the BUF enjoyed steady recruitment in branches across Britain throughout 1933. The prospects for Mosleyite fascism brightened further at the start of 1934 when press baron Lord Rothermere publicly endorsed Mosley and threw the full weight of his publishing empire behind the fascist movement. The support of the *Daily Mail* proprietor accelerated recruitment nationwide at a rapid rate and in May and early June 1934 the BUF attained what would prove to be the pinnacle of its national membership with 40,000 recruits and a general image in the country of respectability. This respectability was shattered permanently by the violent events that unfolded at the mass BUF rally staged at Olympia Hall, London, on the evening of 8 June 1934 when fascist stewards and anti-fascist protestors clashed repeatedly in an evening of sustained violence and brutality. 'Whatever were the rights or wrongs of Olympia', Cross writes, 'there was one unchallengeable consequence. Justly or unjustly the BUF became associated in the public mind with violence'<sup>25</sup>. In the wake of the hostile publicity following this outbreak of disorder, Rothermere severed his compact with Mosley and by early 1935 membership in the BUF branches across the country had collapsed into steep and continuous downward trends. The only region in the country that contradicted the nationwide trend of a terminal collapse in membership over the course of the second half of the decade was the East End of London. It is suggested that by the time of the Second World War total membership numbered little more than 1,000<sup>26</sup>.

As Linehan and Thurlow have said, the most 'intelligent' and 'sophisticated' academic challenge to the Cross and Benewick estimate of BUF membership strength has come in the form of the research of Webber<sup>27</sup>. Webber believed that the picture painted by Cross and

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<sup>23</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, pp160-161; R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1987), pp122-127.

<sup>24</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p122.

<sup>25</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p131.

<sup>26</sup> R. Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order* (London, Allen Lane, 1969), pp108-110; Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, pp130-132.

<sup>27</sup> Linehan, *British fascism* p161; Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp122-125.

Benewick was accurate only to the point where membership plummeted following the negative media coverage generated by events at Olympia and subsequent withdrawal of Rothermere's sponsorship. The fate of the national movement and recruitment trends in branches in parts of the country after 1935 was, however, radically different. Webber believed that the experience of fascists in Leeds was 'broadly representative' of the branches in provincial regions. Whereas Cross and Benewick suggest a terminal collapse in membership in all areas other than East London, Webber argues that although by 1935 most provincial branches in the country had suffered a haemorrhage in numbers many of the BUF regional formations did not enter into a permanent decline and experienced a limited increase in recruitment during the late 1930s. Indispensable to the revival of branch membership in the regions, Webber says, was the BUF 'Peace Campaign' position of appeasing Nazi Germany. It is argued that by the outbreak of war in 1939 total national BUF membership had recovered to 22,500 and that many of the regional formations had achieved a level of membership higher than at any time other than 1934<sup>28</sup>.

While confident that his account was more 'plausible' than the interpretation of membership trends put forward by Cross and Benewick, Webber called for his argument to be 'tested' by regional studies that were extensive, detailed and widely distributed across the country<sup>29</sup>. The two existing major studies of BUF regional formations in the provinces have both offered support for his position. Rawnsley and Mitchell found that membership numbers in northern England and East Anglia revealed that not all provincial mobilisations collapsed into irreversible downward trends after 1935. The BUF formations in northern England and East Anglia enjoyed sustained and solid growth throughout 1933 and on into 1934 but although both were to later experience a sustained collapse in membership the respective declines, though prolonged, did not prove to be permanent and recruitment rose during the late 1930s. In addition, Rawnsley and Mitchell found that fascist branches in northern England and East Anglia benefited significantly from a flow of pro-appeasement enlistments from 1938 onwards which increased membership in these regions to their highest respective levels since the period of Rothermere's official support. A detailed investigation into the BUF presence in

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<sup>28</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership', pp575-606. While commending Webber's research Thurlow suggests 'a small downward revision' of the total membership figure of 22,500 by the outbreak of war to 20,000. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp124-125.

<sup>29</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership', p596.

the Midlands would continue this important process of subjecting Webber's theories on regional membership strength in the provinces to academic scrutiny. A study of the Midlands BUF with regard to membership strength would establish for the first time how many people joined the Mosley movement in the region. Charting of recruitment levels for BUF members in Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Leicester and Coventry between 1932 and 1940 will determine whether, as was the case with northern England and East Anglia, the Midlands region conforms to Webber's paradigm. Therefore the following study of the BUF in the Midlands will provide data on membership numbers in a previously unexamined region of the country which will expand our knowledge of BUF membership strength.

(c) The focus of BUF propaganda.

Much has been written in the historiography on the various aspects of 'Mosley's fascist ideas'<sup>30</sup>. A significant number of these studies focus on the historical roots of Mosley's thought. How local branches made use of the ideas of Mosley represents an area which has not received sufficient attention. Most works that discuss BUF ideas in relation to the content of the fascist message communicated to the British public invariably do so from a predominantly national perspective in the form of analysis of the pronouncements of the national leadership. Few attempt to relate their subject matter to the experiences of Mosleyites on the ground across the country to any greater extent than a summary mention<sup>31</sup>. It has been left to regional studies to break new ground in shedding light on the focus of propaganda pursued by fascists at the local level. A reading of the secondary literature which examines the Mosley movement at the national level suggests that there are three principal themes of BUF propaganda and the major regional studies support this. These themes are: corporatism; non-intervention in foreign disputes; and anti-Semitism. Each will be discussed

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<sup>30</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p146.

<sup>31</sup> P. Coupland, 'The Blackshirted Utopians', *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol.33, No.2 (1998), pp255-272; S. Cullen, 'The Development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists, 1932-40', *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol.22, No.1 (1987), pp115-136; R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London, Routledge, 1991), pp26-55; B. Farr, 'The development and impact of right wing politics in Great Britain, 1903-32' (Ph.D., University of Illinois, 1976); N. Nugent, 'The Ideas of the British Union of Fascists', in N. Nugent and R. King (eds.), *The British Right* (Farnborough, Saxon, 1977), pp133-164; S. Woodbridge, 'The Nature and Development of the Concept of National Synthesis in British Fascist Ideology 1920-1940' (Ph.D., Kingston University, 1997).



in turn.

Firstly we will look at corporatism. Mosley elaborated his idea of the Corporate State in his three main statements on BUF ideology which appeared during the fascist movement's lifetime: *The Greater Britain* in 1932, *Fascism – 100 Questions Asked and Answered* in 1936, and *Tomorrow We Live* in 1938. In these documents Mosley asserted that because of chronic underconsumption Britain faced an impending economic crisis which would lead to mass unemployment and attendant social chaos. Only the introduction of the Corporate State could reverse Britain's decline and this radical economic proposal was entirely dependent on the establishment of a fascist dictatorship.

The Corporate State would reorganise British industry to expand the home market greatly and manage the economy in the interest of the nation. Corporations with an equal quota of employee, employer, and consumer representation were to be created for every industry and profession in the country. Although tasked with a wide range of responsibilities, the chief function of each Corporation was to raise salaries and wages to rebalance consumption with production. These Corporations would operate under guidelines set out by the fascist government and enforced by a general economic body, the National Council of Corporations. This National Council of Corporations was to be composed of representatives from every respective Corporation. Mosley identified international trade as a fundamental threat to the corporate economy and advocated the exclusion of all foreign goods which could be produced in Britain. A completely self-contained or autarkic British Empire system of preference would be created wherein Britain purchased primary products and raw materials from the Dominions and colonies in exchange for the equivalent value in British manufactured goods. Imperial territories would have direct representation in London where the development of their resources would be planned to satisfy Britain's requirements.

Mosley's corporate economic programme was reliant on an authoritarian revolution in British government and political practice. Following the election by legal and constitutional means of the first fascist Parliament the fascist leadership principle would apply to the governance of the country in the same way as it applied in the BUF. A General Powers Bill would be passed empowering a fascist executive, consisting of Prime Minister and small cabinet, to govern British affairs by Order. Parliament would meet periodically and be allowed

to conduct votes of censure against the executive but debate and the blocking of legislation would be banned along with all opposition parties. Future national elections would be based on an occupational franchise, according to industry or profession. The entire population would, however, be allowed to vote in plebiscites held at intervals of not longer than five years to judge the government's performance. If the people voted against the government, the King would be tasked with appointing new fascist ministers who would then in turn be approved or rejected by another national direct vote. The House of Lords would be abolished and replaced by an Assembly containing representatives of British science, industry, culture, education, armed forces, and religion. Under the new fascist model the traditional system of local government would be disbanded. Local authority areas would be greatly expanded and placed under the executive control of a MP specially acquainted with the area. Councils would be elected by occupational franchise with the role of advising the MP<sup>32</sup>.

Linehan has demonstrated that the BUF was unable to sustain an ongoing branch presence capable of conducting propaganda campaigns in east London until the mid-1930s<sup>33</sup>. By contrast Rawnsley and Mitchell reveal that active and durable BUF branches were founded in northern England and East Anglia from the earliest years of the Mosley movement and have been able to chart the focus of local propaganda disseminated in these regions between 1932 and 1935. They show that during these years in northern England and East Anglia the local BUF branches concentrated their propaganda campaigns on promoting the economic programme of the fascist Corporate State as the only viable solution to the problems of the respective regions' staple but ailing industries<sup>34</sup>. The propaganda message disseminated by the local fascists in Lancashire and Yorkshire focused directly on the purported benefits corporatism would bring to the textile industries of northern England. According to the BUF branches in the region the corporate system would restore declining markets and thus save thousands of jobs and cure unemployment in the area by excluding from the home market and the Crown Colonies cheap cotton and woollen goods produced in low-wage Asian countries like Japan and forcing India as an imperial territory to suppress its

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<sup>32</sup> O. Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London, BUF Publications, 1932); O. Mosley, *Fascism - 100 Questions Asked and Answered* (London, BUF Publications, 1936); O. Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live* (London, Abbey Supplies, 1938).

<sup>33</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p22, 59, 79-80, 92.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', pp9-14, 40-291; Rawnsley, 'Fascists and Fascism', pp125-138.

manufacturers and eliminate import tariffs erected against British textiles<sup>35</sup>. In East Anglia the propaganda activism of the local fascists concentrated on explaining how the Mosleyites believed that under the corporate economic system the distressed domestic agricultural market would be revived and expanded by hundreds of millions of pounds. The Corporate State, it was claimed, would boost agriculture in the region by introducing a number of measures, among which were: the prevention of cheap and popular Russian wheat and Argentine beef from entering the country; doubling domestic output under an intensive three-year plan which involved the establishment of an Agricultural Bank to offer credit to local farmers to enable the meeting of corporate planning targets; and the abolition of the at times violently unpopular practice of farmers and landowners paying rent charges and tithes to the Church of England<sup>36</sup>.

This study will explore whether the Midlands BUF mirrored the fascist movement in northern England and East Anglia in focusing its propaganda on the Mosleyite corporate economic message when operating in the region in the first half of the 1930s. If this is found to be the case the propaganda output of the Midlands BUF will be analysed to determine whether the content was tailored to suit local economic grievances and which particular local emphases were pursued. A concentration on Mosley's economic ideas in the fascist message disseminated to the public in the Midlands would suggest a pattern may be discernable among the propaganda output of the BUF branches in the provinces during the years 1932 to 1935. The absence of this focus in the Midlands would suggest the concentrating of propaganda content in this way was reserved for BUF branches in regions which like northern England and East Anglia were dominated by a single industry.

Thurlow has suggested that from the national perspective the focus of BUF propaganda during the second half of the 1930s moved away from the one theme of promoting corporatism and towards the two themes of non-intervention in foreign disputes, and anti-Semitism<sup>37</sup>. These two themes are not of equal significance in the secondary literature. Isolationism is an important feature of BUF propaganda but discussion has been brief and unproblematic. It is for this reason that non-intervention in foreign disputes will be

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<sup>35</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascists and Fascism', pp125-138.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', pp9-14, 40-291.

<sup>37</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p127.

considered first. Anti-Semitism, by contrast, has attracted great interest. In the secondary literature there are different ways of explaining the emergence of anti-Semitism as a theme of BUF propaganda. When discussing this third theme I will provide a brief summary of the five principal positions on its role in the BUF, and the usefulness of these in relation to the experience of the fascists in the Midlands will be reflected upon in this study's concluding chapter.

We will now turn to the theme of isolationism. Mosley believed that the fascist movements of the principal continental European countries had the inalienable right to define their individual spheres of influence predicated on the solitary condition that their actions did not challenge the interests of the British Empire. It was in response to the Italo-Abyssinian dispute in summer 1935 that Mosley ordered the BUF's first national 'Peace Campaign' in favour of non-intervention in foreign disputes, demanding that the political class 'Mind Britain's Business' and remain strictly neutral while he simultaneously asserted that Abyssinian society required the civilising influence of Mussolini's Italy. This vigorous propaganda campaign was a preview of the 'Peace Campaigns' which would follow throughout the remainder of the decade as Mosley attempted to persuade public opinion to reject British interventionism upon the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and acquiesce to ever bolder Nazi actions to expand the borders or at least the influence of the Third Reich. Nationally the BUF's principal activity in the eight months that remained before the outbreak of the Second World War was an energetic 'Peace Campaign' demanding appeasement of Hitler's warmongering towards Poland<sup>38</sup>.

Finally, we will discuss the theme of anti-Semitism. Mosley had faced allegations of anti-Semitic tendencies from the earliest days of his national movement. In response the fascist leader had insisted that 'at the level of the official leadership anti-Semitism was forbidden'<sup>39</sup> and the 'Jewish Question' was a 'topic which had no place whatever' in the BUF<sup>40</sup>. However, at a rally held in the Albert Hall on 28 October 1934 he announced the BUF leadership had decided to openly endorse anti-Semitism and the fascist movement would

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<sup>38</sup> NA: HO144/21062, pp277-284; NA: HO144/2128, pp150-153; NA: HO144/21381, pp88-90, 139-141, 177-179; *Action* 8 April 1939, p4; *Blackshirt* 12 December 1936, p1; Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, p141.

<sup>39</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p104.

<sup>40</sup> S. Dorril, *Blackshirt. Sir Oswald Mosley & British Fascism* (London, Viking, 2006), p304.

now be overtly campaigning against the perceived 'Jewish threat' in Britain. Thurlow observes of this new development: 'the official attitude to British Jewry taken by the BUF saw Jews in terms of a national rather than a religious or racial issue'<sup>41</sup>. This can be illustrated by a perusal of fascist literature. According to the BUF Jews should be opposed only on account of conduct rather than on grounds of race or religion. It followed that there were 'good' Jews who had assimilated fully into the culture of the host nation and 'bad' Jews who preferred to form a nation within a nation and whose allegiance was with 'World Jewry' rather than the British state. These 'bad' Jews conspired to undermine the British national interest: they swamped the patriotic identity of the areas where they settled, manipulated the British media, dominated the Labour and Communist parties, controlled 'International Finance' to the detriment of the native economy, and ultimately, sought to bring about war between Britain and the Continental fascist powers. All Jews actively engaged in 'anti-British' activities would, it was held, be expelled from the country<sup>42</sup>.

As stated above, there are five principal explanations for the introduction of the theme of anti-Semitism into BUF propaganda. The first, supported by Benewick and Mandle, is that the adoption of anti-Semitism as a propaganda priority should be interpreted as a cynical act of political opportunism designed to resuscitate the Mosley movement's flagging prospects<sup>43</sup>. There is an assumption in this perspective that Mosley's anti-Jewish rhetoric was wholly insincere, lacking foundation in a set of beliefs that were genuinely held. In the words of Benewick, for Mosley 'anti-Semitism was more a weapon than a belief'<sup>44</sup>. The second explanation was proposed by Skidelsky, who suggests the theme of anti-Semitism was introduced into BUF propaganda as a reaction to anti-fascist opposition from Jews and Jewish groups. He asserts Mosley had no history of anti-Semitism prior to founding the BUF and from 1932 to 1934 'regarded the Jewish issue as more of a liability than an asset'<sup>45</sup>. The BUF thus got under way without an anti-Jewish position although there were a number of anti-Semites in its ranks. 'What started to change it', he writes, 'was the attitude of the Jews

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<sup>41</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p106.

<sup>42</sup> Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, p60; A Thomson, *Break The Chains That Bind Us* (London, British Union, 1937).

<sup>43</sup> Benewick, *Political Violence*, pp133-134, 151; W. Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists* (London, Longman, 1968), p23.

<sup>44</sup> Benewick, *Political Violence*, p134.

<sup>45</sup> R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London, Macmillan, 1975), p393.

themselves'<sup>46</sup>. Jewish attacks on the BUF, especially disruptive attendance at fascist meetings, made the movement 'Jew-conscious'<sup>47</sup>. Mosley was working closely with ardent anti-Semites and Skidelsky claims 'it was inevitable that once he started imagining himself an innocent victim of Jewish malevolence some of the classic anti-Semitic arguments would start to rub off on him'<sup>48</sup>. The implication in this theory is that without Jewish opposition to the BUF, anti-Semitism would have remained off the fascist propaganda agenda. A third explanation comes from Dorril. He claims the anti-Semitic campaigning of the BUF was 'pre-planned and worked to a timetable'. According to this argument Mosley had fully embraced anti-Semitism prior to his adoption of fascism and had intended from before the launch of the BUF that the fascist movement would be militantly anti-Jewish. The promotion of anti-Semitism was central to Mosley's ambitions but the fascist leader conspired to avoid openly advocating hostility towards Jews until he judged his movement 'strong enough to confront the inevitable backlash'<sup>49</sup>. A fourth explanation, provided by Holmes, suggests the use of anti-Semitism in BUF campaigning was the product of 'a specific social milieu'<sup>50</sup>. For Holmes anti-Semitic feeling was present in the fascist movement early on but it took the combination of the 'interacting pressures'<sup>51</sup> of socio-economic uncertainty, cultural and historical narratives of nativist racism, and physical clashes with Jews to 'trigger it forward'<sup>52</sup> in the BUF until it was adopted in late 1934. According to Holmes' theory the depression of the 1930s was essential to the development of overt BUF anti-Semitism. Economic distress, he argues, heightened in the BUF a cultural tension which was long-standing and prevalent in Britain about the role of Jews in society and was particularly strong in trades and localities where Jews were visibly ethnically concentrated. These tensions revolved around Jews being perceived as an exclusive interest group with external loyalties who were in direct economic competition with the majority Gentile population. The influence of militant Jewish opposition then came into play. The disruption of BUF meetings by Jewish anti-fascists, Holmes asserts, had the effect, in turn, of further accelerating anti-Semitic sentiment in the Mosley movement. Finally, this

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<sup>46</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p381.

<sup>47</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p383.

<sup>48</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p390.

<sup>49</sup> Dorril, *Blackshirt. Sir Oswald Mosley*, p212.

<sup>50</sup> C. Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', in Lunn and Thurlow (eds.), p128.

<sup>51</sup> Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', p121.

<sup>52</sup> Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', p121.

conflict with Jews in the present derived 'supportive strength' from an 'anti-Semitic folk memory' of earlier 'battles' which had been fought by native organised anti-Semitic and fascist groups against Jews and Jewish influence<sup>53</sup>. The fifth explanation is provided by Linehan, who in his study of the BUF in east London was the first commentator to examine exclusively at a local level the decision to incorporate anti-Semitism into the fascist propaganda message disseminated to the public. He suggests it was principally dependent on the presence or otherwise of 'uncompromising anti-Jewish elements'<sup>54</sup> within the local leadership pushing for aggressive overt anti-Semitic campaigning<sup>55</sup>.

Examining the content of the propaganda message the local fascists chose to concentrate on when publicising the Mosley movement during the second half of the 1930s, Rawnsley and Linehan found that the national trend identified by Thurlow was recreated on the ground throughout northern England and east London. From 1935 onwards in these regions corporatism was de-emphasised by the activists of the local branches when communicating with the public in favour of the two themes of promoting anti-Semitism and campaigning against British intervention in crises occurring in continental Europe<sup>56</sup>. In East Anglia, however, Mitchell discovered that the single theme of corporatism was replaced by the two themes of anti-Semitism and isolationism in only one of the region's three counties, Essex. In Norfolk and Suffolk the focus of the local propaganda did move away from advocating the benefits of the Corporate State onto demanding Britain refrain from becoming involved in foreign disputes but anti-Semitic campaigning was not adopted<sup>57</sup>.

In the study that follows the propaganda activity of the BUF in the Midlands will be assessed to determine which of Mosley's ideas were communicated by the fascist branches to the local public over the course of the second half of the 1930s. It will be determined whether the propaganda disseminated in the region from 1935 onwards conforms to the national pattern identified by Thurlow of campaigns focused on promoting hostility towards Jews and demanding Britain maintain a position of neutrality towards foreign quarrels. With regard to the principal explanations for the adoption or otherwise of anti-Semitic campaigning

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<sup>53</sup> Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', p122.

<sup>54</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p43.

<sup>55</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp42-48, 91.

<sup>56</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp22-23, 31-33, 36-37, 43, 70, 86-88, 153-185; Rawnsley, 'Fascists and Fascism', pp152-153, 160-161, 192, 207-208.

<sup>57</sup> Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', p161, 202-203, 265, 276-278, 291-361.

the study will determine which if any are applicable to the experience of the BUF in the Midlands.

## 2. Primary sources.

Having reviewed the secondary literature which relates to the three important themes of social class composition of BUF membership, the strength of BUF membership and the focus of BUF propaganda, we will now turn to a consideration of primary sources and the potential advantages and disadvantages of their use. The vast bulk of the internal documents of the BUF is unavailable to historians. This material was either hurriedly destroyed by branch officials anxious to conceal information from the authorities or seized by the Security Services during raids which followed the introduction of Defence Regulation 18b (1a) and have yet to be released by the government. A few branch records are known to have survived but these relate to the BUF in Dorset and parts of east London<sup>58</sup>. The whereabouts of other branch records which may have escaped seizure and destruction remains, in the words of Linehan, 'a mystery'<sup>59</sup>. Despite this paucity of official BUF documentary evidence a variety of important primary sources are available for consultation in the task of reconstructing the emergence and development of the BUF presence in the Midlands. The primary sources which have been examined to provide the basis for the following study can be divided into five categories: contemporary official documents; personal recollections of fascists; the BUF press; contemporary local newspapers; and information collected by contemporary anti-fascist organisations. The contemporary official documents are housed at the National Archives at Kew and since the first batch was deposited in the 1980s the sporadic release of new material has been ongoing. Contained in these documents is a wealth of information about the BUF in the Midlands<sup>60</sup>. Special Branch and MI5 monitored the BUF's progress from the spring of 1934 onwards and compiled reports on a fairly regular basis. Security Service and Chief Constable's reports contain data on the membership, branch activities and fortunes, internal

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<sup>58</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, pp150-151, 170; J. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism. Women in Britain's Fascist Movement* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2000), p47.

<sup>59</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p151.

<sup>60</sup> Home Office (hereafter NA: HO) 144 series; A. K. Chesterton. January 1934 – December 1934. NA: KV2/1345; S. L. Irvine. 1 January 1937 – 3 December 1944. NA: KV2/1223; J. Wynn. 1940. NA: KV2/1354.



politics and rivalries, structure, and finance of the BUF in the Midlands. MI5 personal surveillance files are available on a small number of individuals prominent with the BUF in the region. Other Home Office files provide additional information on fascist recruits in the region. For example there is material relating to recruits who were convicted of public disorder offences at political meetings, or, after January 1937, of breaching the Public Order Act. Thurlow has noted that invaluable insights into the Mosley movement have resulted from the personal recollections of ex-fascists<sup>61</sup>. As Thompson has observed, autobiographical reminiscence often provides the only available first-hand account and allows the historian 'to enter into the experience of people in the past as fully as possible'<sup>62</sup>. In the following study the reminiscences of two former senior officers in particular provide a unique and detailed view of many aspects of the nature and activities of the BUF in Birmingham and Leicester<sup>63</sup>. Useful information was uncovered in an inspection of the contemporary fascist press held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. As the weekly newspaper which developed into the 'house' publication of the BUF the *Blackshirt* contains regular detailed reports and features on various facets of Mosleyite fascism in the Midlands. In addition, local members were found to have occasionally contributed material to the *Blackshirt* and the BUF's other weekly newspaper *Action*, and these contributions often provide insights into the fascist authors' principal preoccupations and anxieties. Extensive use has been made of material generated by a search of the content of every edition of the principal daily local newspapers in Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry and Leicester published between the BUF's inception in 1932 and proscription in 1940. The daily local newspapers examined were: the *Birmingham Post*; *Birmingham Mail*; *Birmingham Gazette*; *Evening Sentinel*; *Midland Daily Telegraph*; and *Leicester Mercury*. In addition an examination was made of every edition of a monthly Birmingham newspaper, the *Town Crier*, printed during the period of the national Mosley movement's existence. These publications are deposited at the archives and local studies centres in the respective city to which they relate. The local newspapers were found to contain an abundance of data relating to the composition, numbers and conduct of the

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<sup>61</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp120-122.

<sup>62</sup> P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988), pp14-15.

<sup>63</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'; L. Irvine, 'The Birmingham Schoolteacher' in J. Christian (ed.) *Mosley's Blackshirts. The Inside story of the British Union of Fascists 1932-40* (London, Sanctuary Press, 1984).

membership of BUF branches in the Midlands. Local fascists often wrote letters to the editors on a variety of subjects while detailed coverage can sometimes be found of BUF campaigning and other activities involving Mosleyites in the leading municipalities in the region. The final primary source which has been utilized is information compiled on the BUF in the Midlands by contemporary anti-fascist organisations. On 12 June 1934 the Labour Party distributed a questionnaire on local fascist activities to 900 Secretaries of all Divisional Labour Parties, Industrial Trades Councils, and Party Agents. In response to this questionnaire valuable material was collected on the fascists in Stoke-on-Trent<sup>64</sup> which provides, in the words of Gottlieb, a 'bird's eye-view of local fascism just weeks after Mosley's highly publicized Olympia Rally'<sup>65</sup>. Detailed and informative data on the local BUF was gathered on a regular basis over the second half of the 1930s by the national Jewish organisation the Board of Deputies of British Jews, with an understandable emphasis placed on monitoring the promotion of anti-Semitism in the region<sup>66</sup>. The 'dispassionate spirit of inquiry' with which the Board of Deputies approached the question of Mosleyite fascism has drawn especial praise from Linehan<sup>67</sup>.

The flaw inbuilt in all the primary sources utilised in this thesis is that of absences and biases. It has been suggested that the contemporary official documents tend to emphasise the 'dubious aspects'<sup>68</sup> of the BUF because police and Security Services reports often followed requests for information from a Home Office alerted to cases of violence by questions in the House of Commons, reports in the press, or letters to MPs<sup>69</sup>. A common criticism of autobiographical material is that the author often seizes the opportunity to fight past battles by justifying his or her actions in retrospect and to 'provide evidence before the bar of history'<sup>70</sup>. As Linehan has noted, 'memory can work actively to erase as well as recall' and omissions and silences can occur with regard to 'sensitive episodes of personal or

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<sup>64</sup> Questionnaire on Local Fascist Activities. LP/FAS/34/16.

<sup>65</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p47.

<sup>66</sup> Board of Deputies, Co-ordinating Committee Report, 1936; Board of Deputies, Vigilance Committee Reports 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939; Board of Deputies, Secretary's Report, 1939; BD C6/9/1/3. MS British Union of Fascists and National Socialists To: All Districts, From: Director-General of Organisation, 12 March 1937.

<sup>67</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p233.

<sup>68</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p127.

<sup>69</sup> S. Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940; Ideology, Membership and Meetings' (M.Litt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1987), p11.

<sup>70</sup> J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history*. (London, Longman, 1997), p36.

historical experience'<sup>71</sup>. Newspapers contain only what proprietors and editors consider fit for public consumption and believe would gratify their readership<sup>72</sup>. Most publications, Tosh observes, are 'issued with little thought for posterity; they are rather intended to inform, influence, mislead or entertain contemporaries'<sup>73</sup>. Finally, the type of information collected in the Labour Party questionnaire and gathered by the Board of Deputies is restricted to reflecting the particular pressing concerns displayed by these organisations towards the fascist movement at the times of the respective investigations.

As with other historical records the primary sources which are utilized in the following study are imperfect. However, while it is necessary to be aware of the problems at the same time we must also be alive to the possibilities. Where feasible a primary source will be checked against other primary sources and existing secondary sources. By taking the inbuilt flaws into account, interpreting with care, and using the available material judiciously it is possible to produce an illuminating account of the BUF presence in the Midlands between 1932 and 1940 which tests and supplements the secondary works on the fascist movement. This has been pursued in the examinations of the Mosley movement in the four leading municipalities in the region to which our attention will now turn. The first to be considered is Birmingham.

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<sup>71</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p274.

<sup>72</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p39.

<sup>73</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p37.

## Chapter Two: The BUF in Birmingham, 1932 – 1940.

The examination of each of the leading municipalities in the Midlands will be divided into two parts: 1. 1932 – 1934; and 2. 1934 – 1940. The first section reconstructs the development of the BUF in the respective city from the founding of the Mosley movement nationally in October 1932 until immediately prior to the Olympia rally of mid-1934. The second section charts the progress of the local fascist presence from the violence-marred mass meeting in London until the BUF's dissolution in June 1940. This division is in accordance with Thurlow's observation that 'in retrospect [Olympia] marked the turning-point in the fortunes of the [Mosley] movement'<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. 1932 – 1934.

Birmingham had long been the principal city in the west Midlands but by the beginning of the 1930s had developed into the most sizeable and populous municipality in the entire region, and ranked, after London, as the second largest in the country<sup>2</sup>. The decennial Census records that in 1931 Birmingham encompassed 51,147 acres<sup>3</sup> and was home to a population of 1,002,603 people<sup>4</sup>. The city was divided into thirty-one wards<sup>5</sup> which were sub-divided into twelve parliamentary divisions<sup>6</sup>. Birmingham's local economy boasted a tradition of smithing and metal working stretching back to the seventeenth century<sup>7</sup>. Transformation came from the middle of the

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<sup>1</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p101.

<sup>2</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* (London, H. M. Stationery Office, 1932), pvii.

<sup>3</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* Table 3. Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings, p2.

<sup>4</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* Table 2. Population 1911 – 1931 and Intercensal Variation, p1.

<sup>5</sup> Acocks's Green, All Saints, Aston, Balsall Heath, Duddeston and Nechells, Edgbaston, Erdington North, Erdington South, Handsworth, Harborne, King's Norton, Ladywood, Lozells, Market Hall, Moseley and King's Heath, Northfield, Perry Barr, Rotton Park, St. Bartholomew's, St. Martin's and Deritend, St. Mary's, St. Paul's, Saltley, Sandwell, Selly Oak, Small Heath, Soho, Sparkbrook, Sparkhill, Washwood Heath, and Yardley. *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* Table 3. Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings, p2.

<sup>6</sup> Aston, Deritend, Duddeston, Edgbaston, Erdington, Handsworth, King's Norton, Ladywood, Moseley, Sparkbrook, West Birmingham, and Yardley. *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* Table 7. Population and Parliamentary Electors, p11.

<sup>7</sup> D. Hickman, *Birmingham* (London, November Ltd, 1970), p5.

eighteenth century as the city became established as a pioneering manufacturing town at the nucleus of the Industrial Revolution<sup>8</sup>. By the mid-1800s easy access to raw materials had combined with a pivotal strategic position at the centre of the country's new rail and canal transport network to attract major engineers and industrialists to make their base in the area. Driven by innovation and investment Birmingham had acquired the popular title 'Britain's second city' and emerged as one of the major industrial centres of Europe<sup>9</sup>. In 1850 Birmingham's manufacturing staples were buttons and brass products<sup>10</sup>, jewellery<sup>11</sup>, and guns<sup>12</sup>. During the second half of the century manufacturing in the city diversified, earning Birmingham fresh appellations of 'the workshop of the world'<sup>13</sup> and 'the cradle of invention'<sup>14</sup>. A dazzling array of metal goods were produced; including tools of all descriptions, bedsteads, pen-nibs, lamps, gates, screws, and industrial components<sup>15</sup>. The industrial output of Birmingham continued to diversify into the twentieth century. In the early 1930s Birmingham trades encompassed 'the bicycle, motor cycle and car industries, tyre industry, electrical goods, small and heavy engineering, chain industry, small arms manufacture, agricultural machinery, jewellery trade, gold and silver trade, brewing industry, confectionary and tobacco industries, building and construction, pottery and glass manufacture, carpet industry, newspaper trade and paper industry'. And these trades supported a range of services, advisors and middlemen<sup>16</sup>.

In correspondence with a historian Sir Oswald Mosley proudly boasted late in his life of his significant political associations with the second city: 'Birmingham has a special place in my memory'. The former fascist leader claimed to have developed a warm affection for 'the steadfast and loyal character of Birmingham people', and eulogised them as 'a natural blend of some of the best qualities of the British'. 'In my political life', he wrote, 'my personal relations were closer and

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<sup>8</sup> E. Hopkins, *Birmingham: The First Manufacturing Town in the World 1760 – 1840* (London, Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1989), p1.

<sup>9</sup> P. Baird and P. Drake, *Past and Present Birmingham: The changing face of the city and its people* (Sparkford, Sutton, 2002), pp11-12.

<sup>10</sup> C. Upton, *A History of Birmingham* (Chichester, Phillimore, 1993), pp65-67.

<sup>11</sup> S. Mason, *Jewellery Making in Birmingham 1750 - 1995* (Chichester, Phillimore, 1998), pp145-167.

<sup>12</sup> D. Williams, *The Birmingham Gun Trade* (Stroud, Tempus, 2004), pp23-26.

<sup>13</sup> D. Pigott, *Birmingham* (Studley, Brewin, 1997), pxiii.

<sup>14</sup> J. Zuckerman and G. Eley, *Birmingham Heritage* (London, Croom Helm, 1979), p21.

<sup>15</sup> K. Turner, *Made in Birmingham* (Stroud, Tempus, 2001), pp64-67.

<sup>16</sup> J. Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p73.

warmer than anywhere except East London...The vigour, vitality and warm responsiveness to any appeal, either for political action or high idealism, was very similar in the two areas'.

However, as Brewer recognised, Mosley's links to Birmingham prior to the formation of the BUF were not as steadfast and loyal as his memories recalled<sup>17</sup>.

Mosley had already cemented a reputation outside the region as one of Britain's most promising, if controversial, young politicians when in July 1924 he accepted an invitation to contest the Birmingham constituency of Ladywood on behalf of the Labour Party at the next General Election. The invitation came after Mosley had defected from the Conservative Party. The choice, selected from a multitude of seats on offer, demonstrated his burning political ambition. Birmingham at that time was a stronghold of the Chamberlain family, a member of whom had held the Ladywood seat for the previous fifty years. The present incumbent was the leading Conservative MP and former Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain, whose party machine at that time was amongst the strongest in the country. Years after the event Mosley's biographer son accurately reflected the feelings of the time: 'The Chamberlain family enjoyed almost feudal political power in Birmingham: it would be an extraordinary feat if [Mosley] could even get near to dislodging him'<sup>18</sup>. Undaunted, Mosley hoped to begin his parliamentary career in the Labour Party with a dramatic success. 'At the back of his mind, apparently, was the additional idea that Birmingham lacked a Labour leader of distinction and that a Mosley tradition might come to replace the Chamberlain tradition'<sup>19</sup>. A General Election was called in October 1924 just three months after Mosley had accepted the challenge of standing in Ladywood as the Labour candidate. In the face of reversals around the country forcing the Labour Government out of power after barely a year in office, Mosley's massive gains and defeat by only 77 votes was hailed as a victory. Over the course of the next five years Mosley became the key figure in Birmingham and west Midlands politics. Under Mosley's leadership funds were raised, candidates were selected, and constituencies were re-organised. 'He took an impoverished, sluggish party by the scruff of the neck, infused it with his own dynamism (and money) and used it to break the

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<sup>17</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p45.

<sup>18</sup> N. Mosley, *Rules of the Game: Sir Oswald and Lady Cynthia Mosley 1896-1933* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1982), p58.

<sup>19</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p22.

hold of the Chamberlain dynasty'<sup>20</sup>. Continual campaigning combined with superb organisation to make possible Labour's triumph in the West Midlands in 1929 when at the General Election Labour made 11 gains across the region, six in Birmingham and lost only one seat. The results confirmed that in five years under Mosley's leadership Birmingham and the west Midlands area had turned into a Labour fortress. Mosley was rightly overjoyed at this success, proudly recalling in his autobiography over thirty years later: 'At the election of 1929 we took half the city from the Conservatives, and the tradition of sixty years was at an end. Labour had its chance'<sup>21</sup>.

Skidelsky writes of the 1929 triumph: 'In Birmingham it was Mosley, not [Labour Party leader Ramsay] MacDonald, who ruled'<sup>22</sup>. As Brewer points out, however, the substantial grass roots support Mosley enjoyed was conditional on his remaining loyal to the Labour Party, and for years suspicions had been growing in the Birmingham Labour movement that Mosley's association with the second city was governed purely by self-interest<sup>23</sup>. Within six months of failing to unseat Chamberlain he accepted an offer to contest the Forest of Dean constituency in a by-election, only for his aspiration to be thwarted when the Birmingham and Ladywood Labour parties refused to let him go. 'A significant consequence of this episode was the first demonstration to the Birmingham movement that Mosley's personal ambition was stronger than his connection with the area and greater than his ambition for Birmingham. This was confirmed in December 1926 when Mosley readily accepted the opportunity of fighting the Smethwick by-election'<sup>24</sup>. The Conservative press made much of the fact that Smethwick, although a neighbouring constituency, was a move outside of the city and the city's borough, proclaiming: '...the soul of Birmingham can go hang for all Mosley cares'<sup>25</sup>. Many in the Birmingham Labour party shared these feelings, including a significant proportion of the Smethwick Labour party. Colleagues in Ladywood felt abandoned<sup>26</sup>. Mosley was duly elected the Member for Smethwick in December 1926 increasing the Labour majority five-fold and his ascent in the Labour Party was

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<sup>20</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p172.

<sup>21</sup> O. Mosley, *My Life* (London, Nelson, 1968), p177.

<sup>22</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p171.

<sup>23</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p45.

<sup>24</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p49.

<sup>25</sup> *Birmingham Mail* (hereafter *BM*) 24 November 1926, p6.

<sup>26</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, pp50-51.

rapid. But when he resigned from the Labour Party in 1930, impatient and furious at the Treasury's rejection of his reflationary programme known as the 'Mosley Memorandum', and subsequently founded his own political party, the New Party, he was unable to take noticeable support with him. Apart from taking two Birmingham MPs all the local constituency parties remained loyal to the Labour Party<sup>27</sup>. For members 'Sir Oscillating Mosley' had sealed his reputation as a 'mere soldier of fortune prepared to sacrifice party and honour in the face of an ambition for power'<sup>28</sup>. While Mosley was confident of retaining the support of the Birmingham rank and file<sup>29</sup>, Brewer and Skidelsky agree Mosley had seriously underestimated the extent to which the allegiance he had enjoyed in Birmingham was institutional not personal<sup>30</sup>. Brewer asserts that the hostile reception to the New Party in Birmingham provides a useful commentary on the extent to which Mosley's support among the grass roots was personal<sup>31</sup>. Opinion in Birmingham on the formation of the New Party was a deep disappointment that rapidly hardened into a menacing bitterness<sup>32</sup>. All over the country the New Party met a storm of organised violence as the leadership of the Left demanded a militant mobilisation to crush the new party at birth. Scenes of wild disorder at the inaugural New Party meeting held at Ashton-under-Lyme and a massive meeting at Glasgow were replicated in Birmingham. In Brewer's opinion the violence unleashed represented 'all the years of sublimated suspicion and doubt about Mosley's motives manifested...with venomous force'<sup>33</sup>. Speculation that Mosley would contest Smethwick at the 1931 General Election proved to be without foundation, and he would claim years later that his avoidance of the constituency was motivated by a wish not to wound old friends<sup>34</sup>. A more realistic interpretation of Mosley's decision would be he recognised a campaign based in his old constituency would have involved much animosity and anger, evidenced when the appearance of Mosley at a public meeting held at the 'Rag Market' in Birmingham descended into violent chaos

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<sup>27</sup> P. Drake, 'The Town Crier: Birmingham's Labour Weekly 1919-1951', in A. Wright and R. Shackleton (eds.) *Essays in Birmingham Labour History* (Birmingham, University of Birmingham, 1983), p114.

<sup>28</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p ix.

<sup>29</sup> H. Nicholson, *Diaries and Letters. Vol.1: 1930 – 1939* (London, Collins, 1966), p59.

<sup>30</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p47; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p173.

<sup>31</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p61.

<sup>32</sup> *Town Crier* (hereafter *TC*) 27 February 1931, p1.

<sup>33</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p61.

<sup>34</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p63.



as a mass free fight swiftly developed between New Party stewards and militant organised opposition intent on breaking up the meeting<sup>35</sup>. The turbulent meeting featuring the former 'blue-eyed boy of the Birmingham "Reds"' has since entered local folklore<sup>36</sup>. 'The failure of the rank and file in Birmingham to continue supporting Mosley showed itself in the 1931 election in Birmingham'. Two constituencies were contested. Both candidates were local men. Captain Bartlett, leader of the New Party branch in Birmingham, stood in Yardley, and Jesse Williams, a Labour councillor on the city council since 1922, stood in Duddleston. In keeping with a miserable New Party performance in the country as a whole, the two candidates in Birmingham failed to attract much more than 700 votes between them<sup>37</sup>.

Birmingham conforms to the belief that after the debacle of the 1931 General Election the organisation of the New Party rapidly collapsed<sup>38</sup>. One of the first branches of the New Party formed in the country, Birmingham branch opened an office at 6 New Street from where the entire Midland region was administrated by Organiser Dan Davies, who was previously Secretary to Aston Divisional Labour Party. The Chairman of the branch was eventual New Party candidate for Yardley, Captain Bartlett<sup>39</sup>. After the miserable failure at the General Election the Birmingham office closed, the meagre membership disbanded, and the senior officers retired from Birmingham politics. No structural trace of the Birmingham New Party remained intact and its former members appear to have been uninterested in Mosley's later conversion to fascism.

The General Election represented in Birmingham a personal and political rejection of Mosley and the New Party. Brewer believed the New Party's failure in Birmingham disqualified Mosley as a 'charismatic leader', writing: 'it is a fallacy to describe Mosley as a charismatic leader, if by that is meant the ability to engender mass support based on personal qualities which lingers

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<sup>35</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p49; Mosley, *Rules of the Game*, p200; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp275-276.

<sup>36</sup> V. Bird, *Portrait of Birmingham* (London, Robert Hale, 1970), p155.

<sup>37</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, pp63-64.

<sup>38</sup> S. Cullen, 'Another Nationalism: The British Union of Fascists in Glamorgan, 1932-40', *The Welsh History Review*, Vol.17, No.1 (1994), p106; T. Milligan, 'The British Union of Fascists' Policy in relation to Scotland', *Scottish Economic & Social History*, Vol.49, No.1 (1999), p2; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p280.

<sup>39</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p61.

irrespective of the ideas or party label the leader supports'<sup>40</sup>. Personal qualities of ambition, a self-orientated view of politics, and political inexperience, combined to evaporate whatever personal influence Mosley wielded among Labour supporters before the formation of the BUF. This dwindling of loyalty had consequences for the degree of support the first fascist branch in the city initially possessed.

A Birmingham branch of the BUF was formed within weeks of the official founding of the Mosley movement, marking the blackshirt presence in the second city among the earliest in the country<sup>41</sup>. Brewer does not mention in his study that the groundwork had been laid when prominent Mosleyite official Neil Francis-Hawkins personally approached local man Arthur W. Ward and began overtures with a view to his starting and organising a branch of the embryonic BUF in the city. The two men were familiar with each other as senior officers in the British Fascists, a reactionary anti-labour group the majority of whose small membership seem to have been occupational types attributed to the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' and 'elite or upper middle' social classes in Table 3 and who felt the conservative status quo of British society was under perilous threat from a rising radical left. By the early 1930s the organisation was experiencing terminal decline<sup>42</sup>. On Saturday 1 October 1932 Ward was officially appointed Organiser of the Birmingham branch of the BUF<sup>43</sup>.

The comprehensive collapse of the Birmingham New Party forced N.H.Q. to look outside of Mosley's former associations in Birmingham for the inaugural leader of the Birmingham BUF. This leader would be tasked with building support for Mosleyite fascism from scratch without the benefit of pre-existing structures or a pool of pre-established popular support. Ward swiftly proved himself an astute choice when his programme of careful planning, perseverance and energetic activism, often in the face of violent opposition, translated into notable success in building the Birmingham movement into one of the leading centres of fascism in the country over the course of the next eighteen months. The mantle of leadership would then pass to an equally capable

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<sup>40</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p45.

<sup>41</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p74.

<sup>42</sup> Benewick, *Political Violence*, p31; H. Blume, 'A Study of Anti-Semitic Groups in Britain, 1918-1940' (M.Phil., University of Sussex, 1971), p107; G. Webber, 'The British Isles', in D. Muhlberger (ed.), p143.

<sup>43</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934 p1.

successor who would proceed to guide the Birmingham BUF to what would prove its zenith in the city by mid-1934.

The inaugural Birmingham BUF meeting was held in October 1932 at the house Ward shared with his parents in Upper Cox Street West, Balsall Heath, a room of which served as the first Headquarters in the city<sup>44</sup>. In addition to his parents, the attendees were a small circle of Ward's friends<sup>45</sup> who were a collection of minor local authority officials and solicitors. These men belonged to the occupational sub-groups 6 and 13 listed in Table 3, and as 'lower/intermediate civil servants' and 'academic professionals' are classified as being 'lower-middle and middle-middle' and 'elite or upper-middle' in social status respectively. Ward and these friends formed the first blackshirt cadre in the city. The meeting at Ward's house became a weekly occurrence and was held every Thursday evening<sup>46</sup>.

Determined to make an immediate impact the small but ardent group of blackshirts launched themselves into an enthusiastic first month of propaganda work. The bulk of activism centred on publicising the movement in preparation for the city's first public BUF meeting. Leaflets advertising the meeting were distributed to theatre and cinema queues and a lorry belonging to a relative of a member was 'borrowed', plastered with fascist posters, and driven through the streets. Satisfaction at the raising of its public profile triggered an announcement the branch was ready to stage its first outdoor meeting<sup>47</sup>. The location chosen to host the event was the Bull Ring, a bustling market-place and traditional home of free public speech in Birmingham. Brewer makes no reference in his study to this important event.

The theme the speaker promoted at the meeting, the general programme of Mosley's Corporate State, would be the focus of the BUF propaganda disseminated in Birmingham until the end of 1934. In addition to indoor and outdoor meetings, this local fascist propaganda message would be distributed officially through outlets including letters to the local press, newspaper selling, and literature distribution<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p79; *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>45</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p74.

<sup>46</sup> *BM* 22 February 1938, p12.

<sup>47</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934 p1.

<sup>48</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 September – 6 October 1933, p4; *Blackshirt* 12 – 18 January 1934, p3; *Birmingham*

At the end of 1932 the branch numbered 40 active members<sup>49</sup>. There were three full time officials: Arthur Ward, his mother, and Propaganda Officer Arthur Miles. 'All the functions necessary for the efficient functioning of the branch, such as leadership, finance, administration and so on, were undertaken by these three officers'<sup>50</sup>. All propaganda work had to be conducted in the evening as the rank and file members were all employed in the daytime<sup>51</sup>. Sunday afternoons were reserved for meetings in the Bull Ring<sup>52</sup>.

The branch continued to grow steadily during 1933. At the beginning of the year the number of 'elite or upper-middle' class members increased when students belonging to occupational sub-group 12 listed in Table 3 established a Fascist Association at Birmingham University<sup>53</sup>. In February Propaganda Officer Charles Dolan was sent on temporary secondment from National Headquarters as a speaker. A veteran of radical street politics and a skilled propagandist<sup>54</sup>, Dolan arrived in Birmingham under instruction, with Ward, to develop the Birmingham branch and establish an inaugural branch in Coventry. The two men duly supervised the first BUF meeting in Coventry, witnessed by a lorry load of Birmingham blackshirts<sup>55</sup>. The Coventry branch was to remain under Birmingham administrative jurisdiction for the early period of its life and provides the first illustration of the Birmingham branch acting as a beachhead for BUF penetration into the wider Midlands.

A keenness to support fellow fledgling Midland branches also ensured an enthusiastic Birmingham presence at inaugural meetings in Wolverhampton<sup>56</sup> and Leicester<sup>57</sup>. Birmingham

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*Gazette* (hereafter *BG*) 24 July 1933, p6; *BG* 22 January 1934, p6; *BG* 8 February 1934, p6; *BG* 9 February 1934, p6; *BG* 16 February 1934, p6; *BG* 1 June 1934, p6; *BP* 7 August 1934, p12; *BP* 18 December 1934 p6. For a detailed account of Mosley's idea of the Corporate State see pp14-15 of this thesis.

<sup>49</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>50</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p80.

<sup>51</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>52</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p80.

<sup>53</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, pp75-76.

<sup>54</sup> Charles McEwan Dolan was born in Dundee in 1902; he refused to attend school and went to sea at sixteen. His seafaring would take him to Italy where he was a member of a secret Italian organisation and spent most of the 1920s in the Communist Party. He claimed to have been imprisoned in various countries for political activities and joined the BUF in Edinburgh. Disillusionment over the use of violent tactics triggered a break from the BUF after Olympia and in 1936 he testified against Mosley in the Marchbank Libel case. At the time of his testimony Dolan was a pastor in charge of Goldthorpe Methodist Church, Yorkshire. *BG* 6 February 1936, p9.

<sup>55</sup> *Blackshirt* 21 December 1934, p12.

<sup>56</sup> *BG* 29 August 1933, p1; *BP* 29 August 1933, p9.

fascists also demonstrated themselves dedicated to travelling even further on occasion in pursuit of Mosley's cause. In July 1933, 105 Birmingham members reportedly travelled down to London to participate in the first BUF 'national march'<sup>58</sup>. Contingents of Birmingham blackshirts often served as stewards at Mosley meetings throughout the country<sup>59</sup>.

Development progressed at a pace. As numbers and interest rose sharply the branch sought to move from Ward's home into larger premises. 261 Stratford Road, Sparkhill was secured in July 1933. According to the reminiscences of ex-fascists, provincial branch buildings were usually modest affairs. The Lancashire headquarters constituted two rooms above a shop. At Leytonstone in north-east London the fascist branch comprised two rooms, one an office, the other used for meetings<sup>60</sup>. The new Birmingham headquarters was an eight room building fitted up complete with club-room and licensed canteen<sup>61</sup>, and was described in the words of one ex-member as 'palatial'<sup>62</sup>. Rent amounted to four hundred pounds a year. The level of investment and the opulence purchased indicates the importance with which N.H.Q. regarded Birmingham<sup>63</sup>.

Activity at the new headquarters was swiftly organised into an established routine. 'Club Nights' were held every Thursday evening at 7:30 and lasted between two and two and a half hours long during which the blackshirts were given a quota of fascist newspapers received that day from N. H. Q. to sell for the week and lectures were delivered. The fascist literature was received on the Thursday so it could be distributed on the streets the next day, which was payday for the majority of Birmingham working people. Brewer claims Thursday evenings were chosen for 'Club Nights' solely because it fitted with the arrival of the fascist press. The lectures were part of a speakers' school founded at the branch by a visiting medium ranking Staff Officer and Propaganda Administrator from N. H. Q., Clement Bruning. Topics covered included the life story of Mosley, the meaning and significance of the fasces and other fascist symbols, BUF policies,

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<sup>57</sup> *BG* 15 June 1934, p1; *BM* 15 June 1934, p17.

<sup>58</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>59</sup> *Birmingham Post* (hereafter *BP*) 3 November 1933, p3.

<sup>60</sup> M. Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'* (London, Jonathan Cape, 2005), p138.

<sup>61</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>62</sup> *TC* 4 November 1938, p3.

<sup>63</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p126. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No.V. Developments to the end of February 1935.

and the iniquities of the 'Old Gang' of British politicians<sup>64</sup>. The atmosphere of militarism common to BUF branches was heightened by a bugler sounding the 'retreat' at the close of each night of the week as the Union Jack was ceremonially lowered<sup>65</sup>. On 'Club Night' the same bugler would sound the 'fall-in' to signal that lectures were poised to begin<sup>66</sup>.

According to the fascists sales of the *Blackshirt* were steadily rising and soon reached the 2000 a week mark<sup>67</sup>. In September a special 'Birmingham edition' was reportedly published to cope with the demand; only the cities of Liverpool and Manchester could boast comparable sales figures<sup>68</sup>. In addition to the opportunities provided by mingling with the crowd at meetings held in the Bull Ring<sup>69</sup> and various council schools buildings<sup>70</sup>, blackshirts were expected to devote two of their nights a week and Saturday to selling BUF literature and favourite spots were the city's bustling high streets and thoroughfares<sup>71</sup>.

Demonstrating that the Mosley movement successfully enlisted females for the fascist cause, a Women's Section had been organised by Miss G. E. Moss and soon became an active factor in Birmingham. In an assessment of BUF attitude to gender Lewis stresses what he identifies as a profound current of anti-feminism, misogyny and repression of women<sup>72</sup>. This convention has been successfully challenged by Durham and Gottlieb who have shown that the BUF, in the words of Durham, made a 'conscious attempt...not to position itself as a bulwark against feminism, but remarkably, as perfectly compatible with it'<sup>73</sup>. The BUF self-consciously distanced itself from the gender ideology of continental fascism and among its policies were equality within the Mosley movement and the British state, woman's right to work, and equal pay<sup>74</sup>. Another representative of the 'elite or upper-middle' social class category in Table 3, schoolteacher Louise Fisher was a member of the 'academic professionals' occupational sub-

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<sup>64</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p79; NA: HO144/21281, pp23-25.

<sup>65</sup> *BM* 28 June 1934, p7.

<sup>66</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, pp79-80.

<sup>67</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>68</sup> *Blackshirt* 23 – 29 September 1933, p2.

<sup>69</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p80.

<sup>70</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 November 1934, p9.

<sup>71</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p79.

<sup>72</sup> D. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British society, 1931-1981* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1987), p78.

<sup>73</sup> M. Durham, *Women and Fascism* (London, Routledge, 1998), p170.

<sup>74</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p267.

group who officially joined the BUF in 1936 aged 21. Soon after joining she became very active and rose rapidly through the ranks. While the Security Service assessed her as 'easily influenced'<sup>75</sup>, the Birmingham BUF regarded her as 'one of the best women...members in the country'<sup>76</sup>, but both agreed she was 'an intelligent, studious girl'<sup>77</sup>. 'She was more keen on this party...than anything else in her life,' the headmistress of the school where Fisher taught between 1937 and 1939 told MI5. Fisher herself admitted that the BUF was the principal interest in her life, apart from her job<sup>78</sup>. She recalled that branch life for active female members in Birmingham entailed performing a range of functions: 'The BUF's policy of sex equality meant that in many ways the women were not treated as a separate section, being encouraged and expected to take part in any and every activity'<sup>79</sup>. There was, Fisher felt, a feeling of freedom about life as a woman in the BUF, remarking: '...they (women) felt that they were doing something a bit different, a bit more...'<sup>80</sup>.

Gottlieb found that there was no 'typical' Mosleyite woman. Women joined the BUF for a variety of motives differing little from the men<sup>81</sup>. In Louise Fisher's case motivation came in the form of an impatient altruistic demand to see an improvement in Britain's economic and social welfare. She arrived in Birmingham from Crewe in 1935 to take up her first teaching appointment after completing her training. Both her parents were dead and she had been raised 'in a fairly genteel fashion' by two 'maiden aunts'<sup>82</sup>. Birmingham was her first experience of a big industrial city, and she was horrified at the reality of slum conditions and social injustice she perceived all around<sup>83</sup>. Fisher recalled: 'I was appalled by the economic conditions that I found in Birmingham. I had never seen anything like the back-to-back slum houses...Action was needed **now**...'. Feeling that the Conservative party was uninterested in the poor and the Labour Party more

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<sup>75</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 40a.

<sup>76</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 139a, 156A.

<sup>77</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 89b.

<sup>78</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 136x.

<sup>79</sup> L. Irvine, 'The Birmingham Schoolteacher', in J. Christian (ed.) *Mosley's Blackshirts: The Inside Story of The British Union of Fascists 1932 – 1940* (London, Sanctuary, 1984), p46.

<sup>80</sup> S. Cullen, 'Four Women For Mosley: Women in the British Union of Fascists, 1932 – 1940', *Oral History*, Vol.24, No.1 (1996), p56.

<sup>81</sup> J. Gottlieb, 'Women and Fascism in Inter-war Britain' (Ph.D., University of Cambridge, 1998), p8.

<sup>82</sup> Cullen, 'Four Women for Mosley', p52.

<sup>83</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 136x.

interested in foreign affairs than in Britain's domestic problems, she was impressed by Mosley's policy of social reconstruction and, above all, his insistence that something needed to be done as a matter of urgency<sup>84</sup>. It was the fascist movement's stress on action, Fisher believed, that attracted women to the Birmingham BUF. Women joined, she said: '...because they wanted to see something done...in a short space of time'<sup>85</sup>.

Gender relations in the Birmingham branches also confirm another of Gottlieb's findings: 'The intensity of fascism's spiritual appeal, coupled with the aestheticization of politics through the BUF's uniform and regalia, inevitably led to a sexually charged atmosphere...Fortifying the ideal of male-female co-operation, marriages and love affairs frequently occurred within the movement'<sup>86</sup>. On at least two occasions the Birmingham BUF acted as an impromptu marriage bureau<sup>87</sup>. Fisher recalled: 'I am afraid that sex and human nature being what they are...romances sometimes bloomed!'<sup>88</sup>

The move to Stratford Road coincided with the opening of a new branch in the city. Sufficient numbers had been recruited in Harborne to acquire full branch status and D. G. Reynolds<sup>89</sup>, who claimed to have studied the Corporate State on the spot in Italy<sup>90</sup>, was appointed leader. Reynolds swiftly established a reputation and was later promoted to a position as Political Officer in Lancashire<sup>91</sup>. The new branch remained under the administrative control of the pioneer branch which now assumed the designation Birmingham Central. Other subsidiary full branches were Stourbridge, Coventry, Leamington and Nuneaton. The winter months of 1933 heralded further enlargement. Many new members were reportedly being signed on throughout the area<sup>92</sup>.

Birmingham was now the premier BUF locality in the Midlands and one of the leading Mosleyite regions in the country. By the final month of 1933 active membership had risen to just

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<sup>84</sup> Irvine, 'The Birmingham Schoolteacher', p46.

<sup>85</sup> Cullen, 'Four Women for Mosley', p54.

<sup>86</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism* p79.

<sup>87</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p40.

<sup>88</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p80.

<sup>89</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>90</sup> *BM* 20 January 1934, p4.

<sup>91</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p238. Report by Major Cleghorn on Birmingham Branch 5. 12. 34.

<sup>92</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.



under 200<sup>93</sup>. Applying Webber's ratio, endorsed by Thurlow, of one-and-a-half non-active members to every one active member suggests total Birmingham BUF membership was around 500 as the Birmingham branches entered the New Year<sup>94</sup>.

The years 1932 and 1933 were ones of steady progress for the BUF in Birmingham but the development of the local fascist branches took place outside the gaze of the city's political establishment. Only the Communist Party had regarded the blackshirts as a threat to the established order. The inaugural BUF meeting in the Bull Ring was greeted by the opening expression of a Communist 'physical force' campaign in the city that was to continue into the following year as the 'Reds' sought to strangle the fascist movement in Birmingham at birth. BUF meetings were routinely disrupted by violent organised Communist opposition; platforms were attacked, posters torn down, and fascist speakers and stewards assaulted<sup>95</sup>. However, the 'Red' aggression against the Mosleyites in Birmingham tailed off during the second half of 1933. The fascist press claimed that the far-left disruption rather than harming the Mosleyite cause in the city had actually assisted it considerably by inducing many sympathisers to join the local branches<sup>96</sup>.

Both the Conservative and Labour parties in Birmingham failed to notice or refused to take seriously the determined programme of fascist activity proceeding on the city's streets and the growing receptivity with which it was being greeted. Indeed, each saw the danger to democracy as more likely to come from the other. Prominent voices in the Birmingham Conservative party contended blithely 'there is no threat here of a Fascist movement on Hitler or Mussolini lines' and insisted the people of the city direct their attentions instead towards 'Extreme Socialist Leaders' like Labour MP Stafford Cripps<sup>97</sup>. The Birmingham Labour Party in turn feared 'that a Fascist Spirit will seize the Conservative Party.'<sup>98</sup>

Two high-profile fascist events that occurred in quick succession during the first two

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<sup>93</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p74.

<sup>94</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership', pp575-606; Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp122-125.

<sup>95</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1; *Blackshirt* 2 November 1934, p9.

<sup>96</sup> *Blackshirt* 1 June 1934, p8.

<sup>97</sup> *BG* 15 July 1933, p6.

<sup>98</sup> *TC* 15 September 1933, p2.

months of 1934 would explode the entrenched complacency of the city political establishment, awakening the local elite to the scope of BUF growth in Birmingham and rousing fears of the success of fascism in the area. The catalyst for this change in attitude was 'the triumph at Bingley Hall'<sup>99</sup>.

On the evening of Sunday 21 January 1934, 8,000 people made their way to Bingley Hall to listen to Mosley address them on the aims of the BUF<sup>100</sup>. The rally was stewarded by 2,000 fascists drawn from branches in the Midlands and from London, Manchester, Liverpool and Chepstow<sup>101</sup>. The event was an all ticket affair with prices of tickets ranging from 7/6 to 1/-, but this had proved no deterrent, all places being quickly filled. The address lasted for nearly an hour and three-quarters; dividing neatly into a presentation of fascism as a patriotic revolutionary creed which had been subjected to gross misrepresentation and a detailed exposition of the Corporate State. After this Mosley answered a sheaf of written questions, and dealt with a number of others shouted from the body of the hall, and he was thus occupied altogether for two and a half hours.

Mosley's first public meeting in Birmingham since the Rag Market debacle of 1931 passed as an unmitigated success. Bingley Hall was the largest indoor BUF meeting in the movement's history so far. The capacity audience had listened 'with rapt attention' as Mosley expounded his brand of fascism and its response was enthusiastic. Press reports commented on the diverse sensibilities of the Birmingham men and women drawn to hear the fascist leader speak. The local journalists observed that a sizeable Conservative presence mingled freely with a substantial and receptive left-leaning element. Approval of Mosley's message was displayed by 'loud applause at frequent intervals' and many points raised the crowd to sustained cheering. Very little heckling took place, interrupters being skillfully handled by 'plain clothes' stewards who were posted among the two distinct groups of Communists known to be present. Persistent interrupters were quickly silenced without resorting to force, and every attempt at mass interruption was at once nipped in the bud. At the end of the meeting a 'steady stream' of recruits

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<sup>99</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 November 1934, p9.

<sup>100</sup> It is unclear whether the attendant blackshirts are included in this figure or whether the figures relate exclusively to non-uniform wearing audience members. *BG* 22 January 1934, p7; *Blackshirt* 26 January – 1 February 1934, p1.

<sup>101</sup> *BG* 22 January 1934, p7.

moved forward to the enrolment table, and at the conclusion it was estimated that 'several hundred people had joined up on the spot'<sup>102</sup>. Potential conflict outside the hall was dealt with effectively by the Birmingham police<sup>103</sup>.

The reaction of the national BUF to the Bingley Hall rally was one of unconcealed euphoria, although Brewer does not mention this response in his study. It appears the gathering was organised as a showcase test of BUF maturity and had been long awaited with extreme anticipation by the national leadership for two reasons. 'Firstly because it was regarded as a fair index to the attitude of the country towards Fascism, and secondly because it would decide whether we had finally conquered the 'Red Terror' in its attempts to break up our meetings'<sup>104</sup>. Despite having forecast a 'tremendous gathering'<sup>105</sup> the result exceeded even fascist expectations. A gleeful, almost disbelieving, fascist press crowed: 'The reception accorded to the Leader by an enthusiastic audience of more than 8,000 people and their appreciative applause at the explanation of our policy, justifies the belief that a large proportion of Britain is now Fascist minded'. At the conclusion of the event Mosley boasted to the blackshirt stewards: 'You have proved that the 'Red Terror' is finally broken'. The *Blackshirt* could barely restrain its sense of triumph. A jubilant report on Bingley Hall filled its front-page accompanied by a cartoon depicting Birmingham as the fascist New Man personified triumphantly deflecting puny Communist attacks off his barrel chest. The gathering was celebrated as a seminal moment in the short history of the BUF; a rite of political passage the movement had triumphantly navigated to come of age and the benchmark by which all future major meetings would be judged<sup>106</sup>.

The triumph of Bingley Hall was followed in early February by the Birmingham section of the Fascist Union of British Workers (hereafter FUBW) officially launching a legal action against the Corporation of Birmingham for alleged contravention of the Road Traffic Act. The FUBW was founded in early 1933 and organized nationally by Charles J. Bradford from his home in

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<sup>102</sup> *BG* 22 January 1934, p7; *BM* 22 January 1934, p8; *BM* 27 January 1934, p4; *BP* 22 January 1934, p17.

<sup>103</sup> *BG* 22 January 1934, p7; *BM* 27 January 1934, p4; *BP* 22 January 1934, p17.

<sup>104</sup> *Blackshirt* 26 January – 1 February 1934, p1.

<sup>105</sup> *Blackshirt* 19 – 25 January 1934, p2.

<sup>106</sup> *Blackshirt* 26 January – 1 February 1934, p1.

Battersea, London<sup>107</sup>. It aimed to establish a BUF alternative to traditional labour organizations, seeking to attract the unemployed and members of what according to Table 3 would be identified as every 'lower' class occupational type in the country by protecting the interests of 'unskilled and skilled' workers by fighting wage cuts, reductions in the standard of living and means tests; and by compiling a register of unemployed which firms could consult when searching for prospective new employees<sup>108</sup>. In addition, information was to be collected on the structure of British industry for use by the future fascist Corporate State<sup>109</sup>. While the FUBW proved largely unsuccessful nationally and was later discarded<sup>110</sup>, the Birmingham action was acclaimed by the BUF as one of the high points in FUBW history, and represented the offshoot's most prominent action up to that date<sup>111</sup>. The Birmingham FUBW was headed by Jesse George Redvers Hill, of Sparkbrook. Hill joined the Birmingham branch of the BUF in August 1933<sup>112</sup>, and was promoted to the position of Officer-in-Charge FUBW Birmingham Area<sup>113</sup>. Prior to his promotion the FUBW in Birmingham had restricted its activities to modest attempts to act as advocates at Courts of Referees in means test appeals, to miniscule effect<sup>114</sup>. He wasted no time in making his mark on industrial relations, diverting the local FUBW focus from the poor and unemployed and onto the city's industrial 'lower' class. Given his occupational background as a member of the sub-group 2 listed in Table 3 it was natural he would primarily target Birmingham transport workers. A bus driver for six years with the Birmingham Corporation, Hill used his influence to form a fascist bus drivers' union in the city that operated under the title the Birmingham Municipal Bus Drivers Association, an action that led to him being discharged by the Corporation in early 1934<sup>115</sup>. Hill operated as the Secretary of the fascist union, while two other drivers, ex-members of the Transport and General Workers Union who had been expelled for membership of the BUF, were appointed President and Vice-President. Linehan has noted the appeal BUF industrial

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<sup>107</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p140.

<sup>108</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, p73.

<sup>109</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp103-104.

<sup>110</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p226; P. Coupland, 'Left Wing Fascism' in Theory and Practice: The Case of the British Union of Fascists', *20th Century British History*, Vol.13, No.1 (2002) pp38-61.

<sup>111</sup> NA: HO144/20140, p113. Special Branch Report 30 April 1934.

<sup>112</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 - 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>113</sup> *Blackshirt* 9 - 15 February 1934, p4.

<sup>114</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p76.

<sup>115</sup> *BM* 27 March 1934, p10.

propaganda seems to have exerted among many transport workers, particularly busmen<sup>116</sup>. In early February 1934 Hill, under the auspices of the new fascist union financed by the FUBW, brought a summons at Birmingham Stipendiary against the Birmingham Corporation Tramways and Omnibus department for contravention of section 19 of the 1930 Road Traffic Act<sup>117</sup>. This stipulated the department's drivers were prohibited from driving for more than five and a half hours without a rest and for no longer than an aggregate eleven hours a day. The Stipendiary at Birmingham Police Court found in Hill's favour and fined the Corporation £40<sup>118</sup>. Befitting its status as the most prominent action up to that time in FUBW history, Hill was assisted in his suit by Captain Lewis, legal advisor to the FUBW, and substantial FUBW funds were released to engage the services of eminent London solicitor Sir George Jones<sup>119</sup>. The national BUF made great play of the FUBW Birmingham court victory, hailing it as evidence of a section burgeoning in efficacy<sup>120</sup>. The Mosleyites claimed in Birmingham the case impressed many industrial 'workers' and resulted in a number of enlistments from these representatives of the 'lower' social class<sup>121</sup>.

Confronted with incontrovertible public evidence of mushrooming Mosleyite potency in Birmingham, a shaken political establishment hastily implemented strategies designed to counteract the now recognised rapid growth of the BUF in the second city. The Birmingham Labour and Conservative parties made appeals to their supporters for solidarity in the face of the fascist challenge. While both saw in the BUF a political 'gangsterism' dedicated to the violent destruction of political liberty and individual freedom, as Brewer notes, 'the respective appeals differed based on the contrasting views of politics held by the parties'<sup>122</sup>. The Birmingham Conservative leadership, while recognizing the impatience many people felt at the difficulties of the National Government, urged its supporters to stay loyal to the party<sup>123</sup>. Fascism was

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<sup>116</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp222-225.

<sup>117</sup> *BM* 1 February 1934, p11; *BG* 2 February 1934, p3; *BM* 2 February 1934, p10.

<sup>118</sup> *BM* 27 March 1934, p14.

<sup>119</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p77.

<sup>120</sup> NA: HO144/20141, p147.

<sup>121</sup> NA: HO144/20141, p132.

<sup>122</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p82.

<sup>123</sup> *BP* 28 March 1934, p14.

condemned as an alien import contradictory to the heritage and traditions of Britain<sup>124</sup>. This was an appeal, Brewer recognizes, to 'the innate common sense of the steady 'Englishmen' of Birmingham, to their traditions of conservative gradualism. It was an appeal to...the community that was Britain, owing an allegiance not to a class culture but a general culture which endowed the correct political practice.' The Labour appeal would differ radically from that of the Tories. 'Solidarity in this instance was reinforced by appeals to the emotionalism of their class, to their forefathers fighting poverty to win for them their socialist movement and all the benefits they possessed. It was an appeal to their sense of belonging to the working class community'<sup>125</sup>.

While the Conservatives were content to make appeals through the medium of the local Tory press, the Birmingham Labour party settled on a more active stance. Supporters were urged to get on to the street corners and preach the doctrine of socialism<sup>126</sup>. Anti-BUF literature was to be distributed to the public. Fascism, it was argued, could only succeed by seducing the workers from their loyalty to the working-class movement, and the best method of defeating it was by educating the people on what fascism really meant, expose its 'real aims' and show what atrocities had been committed in its name in fascist countries<sup>127</sup>. Confrontation was disavowed however, as was collaboration with the Communists. The Communists, not Lord Rothermere, were perceived as the most effective ally of the Mosleyites, their violent methods enabling the fascists to 'pose as martyrs' of free speech<sup>128</sup>. Even peaceful counter-demonstrations were prohibited for fear of being exploited by either the far-left or far-right to trigger disorder<sup>129</sup>.

These anti-fascist strategies were maintained without amendment for the entire life-span of the Birmingham BUF<sup>130</sup> and did little to impede the rise of the BUF in the city between late January and mid-1934. In the immediate aftermath of the Bingley Hall meeting the buoyant

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<sup>124</sup> *BP* 18 June 1934, p14.

<sup>125</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p82.

<sup>126</sup> *TC* 2 February 1934, p1.

<sup>127</sup> *TC* 16 February 1934, p2.

<sup>128</sup> *TC* 15 June 1934, p1.

<sup>129</sup> *TC* 22 June 1934, p4.

<sup>130</sup> *BG* 26 January 1934, p11; *BM* 13 June 1934, p10; *BM* 15 June 1934, p17; *TC* 15 June 1934, p2; *TC* 27 July 1934, p6; *TC* 24 August 1934, p6; *TC* 31 August 1934, p1; *TC* 7 September 1934, p6; *TC* 14 September 1934, p1; *TC* 23 November 1934, p3; *TC* 21 December 1934, p6; *TC* 18 January 1935, p7; *TC* 24 May 1935, p4; *TC* 24 May 1935, p8; *TC* 6 November 1936, p12; *TC* 2 April 1937, p5; *TC* 16 December 1938, p5; *TC* 5 July 1940, p1.

Birmingham branches industriously set about making full use of the publicity generated from the successful gathering and the new respectability conferred on the movement by the national Rothermere press. Recruiting drives and canvassing schemes were stepped up and Birmingham fascist diligence reaped its reward with a tremendous influx of enrolments. New members at the Birmingham Central branch, according to the *Blackshirt*, averaged fifty a day and the administrative staff found themselves working 'at full pressure'<sup>131</sup>.

Demand to enlist in the branches continued throughout February at a figure 'very much above normal'<sup>132</sup>. At the end of February 1934 membership stood at around 2,000<sup>133</sup>. Whether this figure constituted total membership or only active membership is unclear. If it is the latter then Webber's ratio would produce a new total membership figure of 5,000. Either figure would validate N.H.Q.'s belief that Birmingham had earned itself a ranking 'high among the strongholds of Fascism in Britain'<sup>134</sup>.

A growing sense of potency was underlined when on Sunday 25 February the Birmingham Central branch enjoyed its first official propaganda parade, an event that climaxed in the 'most successful outdoor meeting ever'. Uniformed members, including a full company of the branch Defence Force, marched from the Area Headquarters in Sparkbrook along a three mile route through the main streets of Birmingham to the Bull Ring where blackshirt speakers addressed a well-behaved audience numbering over a thousand<sup>135</sup>.

A change in leadership in March 1934 failed to disadvantage the fascist cause in Birmingham. The rapid progress of the Mosley movement in Birmingham had deeply impressed the BUF national leadership and the man judged most responsible for the achievements was duly transferred onto the staff at National Headquarters in London<sup>136</sup>. Despite the loss of Arthur W. Ward the Birmingham branches maintained momentum under the temporary leadership of Propaganda Officers Miles and Seaborn<sup>137</sup>. A replacement for Ward arrived as part of the re-

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<sup>131</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 February 1934, p2.

<sup>132</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 February 1934, p2.

<sup>133</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p78.

<sup>134</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>135</sup> *Blackshirt* 9 – 15 March 1934, p3; *BM* 26 February 1934, p9.

<sup>136</sup> *Blackshirt* 17 August 1934, p3.

<sup>137</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 March – 5 April 1934, p4.

organisation of provincial branches undertaken by the BUF during April and early May 1934<sup>138</sup>. Warwickshire and Staffordshire were organized into a Midlands administrative unit covering Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Stoke, and Coventry<sup>139</sup>; and A. K. Chesterton was appointed Officer-in-Charge Midlands Area<sup>140</sup>, with his headquarters at Stratford Road<sup>141</sup>.

Mandle offers a portrait of the mid-1930s 'typical' charismatic national Mosleyite leader. He suggests a restless, well-travelled, privately educated, ex-army officer in his late thirties<sup>142</sup> who would have belonged had he been assessed according to the categories listed in Table 3 to the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' or 'elite or upper-middle' social class. Whilst Linehan has dissected the numerous problems with this representation<sup>143</sup>, in the individual case of Chesterton the composite fascist leader in Mandle's survey proves accurate. At the time of his arrival in Birmingham, 34 year old A. K. Chesterton was a rising star of the Mosley movement. He had enlisted as a private in the British Army at the age of 16 and rapidly rose through the ranks to the position of Company Commander. Serving in German East, and Central Africa, and later in France and Flanders during the First World War he was awarded the Military Cross for gallant conduct. After the war he went digging for diamonds, and also worked on a gold-mine in South Africa before entering journalism first as a reporter and later as sub-editor on an important newspaper in Johannesburg. Since returning to Britain he had worked successfully for four years as the Managing Editor of a series of newspapers in South Devon, and then for several years as the theatre critic of the *Stratford Herald*. Baker believed the close personal ties formed to the south Midlands were a decisive factor in Chesterton's appointment as Midlands Area Organiser. Chesterton had been a member of the BUF for only six months but had worked unselfishly for the movement both as speaker and writer; his articles in *Fascist Week* gained him great popularity among Mosleyites, and as a speaker he was in constant demand<sup>144</sup>.

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<sup>138</sup> NA: HO144/20140, p118.

<sup>139</sup> *Blackshirt* 1 June 1934, p8.

<sup>140</sup> NA: HO144/20140, p106.

<sup>141</sup> *Blackshirt* 6 – 12 April 1934, p3.

<sup>142</sup> W. Mandle, 'The Leadership of the British Union of Fascists', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol.12, No.4 (1966), pp360-383.

<sup>143</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, pp162-163.

<sup>144</sup> D. Baker, *Ideology of Obsession: A. K. Chesterton and British Fascism* (London, I. B. Tauris, 1996), pp125-126.



Chesterton's role encompassed the dual function of organizing the Midlands Area and leading the Birmingham region, and two local fascists were instantly promoted to assist him in his responsibilities; Sub-Company Officer Orton was appointed to the newly created position of Officer-in-Charge Staffordshire and Warwickshire Area Defence Force, and Sub-Branch Officer Pinner became the Area Accountant<sup>145</sup>. Miss Bessie C. Loxton became Women's Area Organiser for Birmingham<sup>146</sup>.

The transition in leadership from Ward to the new man passed seamlessly and in Birmingham Chesterton further enhanced his growing status within the movement. 'Here he established a reputation for efficient organisation and hard work, driving his blackshirt subordinates very hard in the process. At the same time he contributed regular articles to the national fascist press'<sup>147</sup>. Under Chesterton's guidance great strides were made in consolidating the impetus of fascism in the Birmingham area. Campaigns of rallies, meetings, canvassing and sales drives were sustained on an intensive scale<sup>148</sup>. Gratifying numbers of fresh recruits continued to stream into the fascist ranks. Sub-branches began sprouting in the city suburbs<sup>149</sup>; the existence of which Cross rightly claims as evidence of wide-scale support<sup>150</sup>. Five new Units formed in Birmingham Central<sup>151</sup> during the first half of May 1934 stand as testament not only to the escalating appeal of fascism in Birmingham but also to the increased willingness of many members to assume active status and publicly associate themselves with Mosley's movement on the streets of the second city. Among those local fascists who remained unwilling or unable to reveal their political beliefs to the general community of Birmingham were participants of the recently opened businessman's branch at headquarters whose members preferred to wear neither the blackshirt uniform nor BUF badges<sup>152</sup>. The major regional studies demonstrate that

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<sup>145</sup> *Blackshirt* 4 – 10 May 1934, p4.

<sup>146</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 March - 5 April 1934, p4; NA: HO144/20140, p108.

<sup>147</sup> Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, p125.

<sup>148</sup> *Blackshirt* 1 June 1934, p8.

<sup>149</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 March – 5 April 1934, p4; *Blackshirt* 6 – 12 April 1934, p4; *Blackshirt* 4 – 10 May 1934, p4; *Blackshirt* 11 – 17 May 1934, p4.

<sup>150</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, pp131-132.

<sup>151</sup> Under the command of newly appointed Unit Leaders C. Coates, L. Pinder, C. A. Ibberson, Thomson, Gould respectively. *Blackshirt* 4 – 10 May 1934, p4.

<sup>152</sup> NA: HO144/20141, p316. Report on the Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland.

such reticence was common. Businessmen who supported the BUF in northern England, east London and East Anglia often preferred for commercial and social reasons not to advertise their attachment to Mosley in too open a manner<sup>153</sup>. The businessmen in the Birmingham BUF ranged from small independent traders in occupational sub-group 7 of the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social class to well-known and highly successful local entrepreneurs whose occupational grouping afforded 'elite or upper-middle' status in the city<sup>154</sup>.

The majority of the fresh recruits flooding into the Birmingham branches were previously un-politicized young people, alongside older disaffected 'lower-middle and middle-middle' class Tories impressed by the seeming BUF ability to ensure a hearing for its speakers, which as one 'well-known city man' member of the local branch informed the *Birmingham Mail*, 'is more than the Conservatives can do in certain Birmingham constituencies'<sup>155</sup>. For the disillusioned Tories the BUF was a more virile and activist form of the traditional Conservative party: a movement of the Right devoted to order, stability, authority, and the defeat of Communism<sup>156</sup>. These men and women were commercial travellers and clerical workers of varying types allocated to the 'lower/intermediate (petty) employees' occupational sub-group listed in Table 3<sup>157</sup>.

Superficially these new recruits conform to profiles of the so-called 'Rothermere fascists', men and women drawn into the BUF during the period of sponsorship by the influential *Daily Mail* proprietor that stretched from early to mid-1934: youngsters, anti-socialists, and in the words of Tory leader Baldwin 'Ultramontane Conservatives'<sup>158</sup>. Like the 'typical Rothermere fascist' the majority of recruits attracted to the BUF in Birmingham during the first half of 1934 left the Mosley movement in the aftermath of Olympia. However, their motivations for departure were, as we will see, unrelated to the disorderly event in London and the whims of press barons. If it is indeed accurate to describe these men and women as 'Rothermere fascists' then they did not constitute the image firmly entrenched in the historiography: 'milk and water [fascists] who could not stand

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<sup>153</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p229; Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', p205, 283; Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', pp150-165.

<sup>154</sup> *BM* 31 January 1934, p10, *BM* 1 May 1934, p6, *BP* 16 June 1934, p9.

<sup>155</sup> *BM* 1 May 1934, p6.

<sup>156</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p21.

<sup>157</sup> *BM* 1 May 1934, p6.

<sup>158</sup> Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!', p152.

the pace and fell away when the going got tough'<sup>159</sup>.

Chesterton and a substantial contingent of his Birmingham Mosleyites were present at the Olympia rally of 7 June 1934. In the frenzy of media and political opinion engulfing Mosley in the wake of the Olympia scandal, the fascist leader recognized the benefit of having a man of Chesterton's abilities at his side at headquarters working as a journalist and propagandist. Chesterton was duly transferred to national headquarters at the end of June 1934 where he was appointed a full member of the Policy Directorate<sup>160</sup>. His final public action in his role as Birmingham leader and Midlands Organiser was to be principal speaker at the first Mosleyite meeting of importance in Leicester<sup>161</sup>.

## 2. 1934 – 1940.

The Birmingham BUF enjoyed a sustained and rapid growth during the period from its founding to the mass brawl at Olympia. Under Ward's stewardship the fascist cause had flourished in the city and this success had been both maintained and enhanced under Chesterton's tenure. During the second half of 1934 starting in July the Mosley movement in the city would swiftly lose momentum and fall into chronic decay. However, the Birmingham BUF was able to stabilize its membership and persisted in functioning, albeit in a battered state, until a minor recovery began in the later years of the decade that witnessed an influx of pro-appeasement enlistments and which continued until the outbreak of the Second World War.

The Birmingham press response to the events at Olympia was unremittingly indignant. Blame for the violence unleashed was placed firmly at the feet of the BUF. In the Birmingham newspapers' unanimous account of the disorder perfectly ordinary and respectable folk, whose only offence was a reasonable interruption, were set upon by gangs of blackshirt thugs. Editorials presented the Olympia story as incontrovertible proof that the Mosley movement was an

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<sup>159</sup> J. Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses* (London, Brockingday, 1990), p61.

<sup>160</sup> Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, pp126-128.

<sup>161</sup> *BG* 15 June 1934, p1; *BM* 15 June 1934, p17; *BM* 18 June 1934, p7; *Blackshirt* 22 June 1934, p7; NA: HO144/20143 p380. Disorder at Public Meetings, etc.

unacceptable alien creed that invited disorder and introduced a provocative element into British politics<sup>162</sup>.

Brewer attributed the decline of the Birmingham BUF during the second half of 1934 to public revulsion inspired by this hostile press publicity. While he is correct to identify the period immediately preceding the furore at the London rally as representing the watershed of BUF hopes in the city there exists no evidence to indicate that either the local or national publicity generated by the events that unfolded at Olympia impacted detrimentally on the membership, activities or appeal of Mosleyite fascism in Birmingham.

Security Service documents unavailable to Brewer explain the sudden deterioration of Mosleyite strength in the city during the second half of 1934 as the product of bitter discord between the two most senior officers in the Birmingham BUF. Internal divisions were not uncommon within the BUF. Thurlow has provided a detailed account of how conflicting rivalries in the Mosley movement within branches and between Districts and N.H.Q. often militated against its success<sup>163</sup>. The major regional studies completed by Rawnsley, Linehan and Mitchell reveal that sporadic outbreaks of personal animosities disrupted the progress of branches in Hackney, Shoreditch, Manchester, and Norfolk respectively<sup>164</sup>.

Upon his departure from Birmingham, National Headquarters divided Chesterton's former responsibilities between two fascists with solid knowledge of the city. Deputy Branch Officer Jesse Hill was appointed Birmingham Organiser and Deputy Branch Officer/Propaganda Officer D. N. Revett became temporary Officer-in-Charge Staffordshire and Warwickshire. Below the two promotions the hierarchy of command remained ostensibly constant with that in place during the tail end of Chesterton's incumbency. The propaganda department was run by Area Propaganda Officer Fletcher assisted by Speakers Gilmore, Ashcroft and Mosley. The sales department was overseen by Area Propaganda Officer Ibberson with the assistance of Sub-Branch Officers Startin and Twist. The Defence Force was trained by Company Officer Orton and Section Leader

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<sup>162</sup> *BM* 12 June 1934, p8; *BG* 15 June 1934, p6; *BM* 15 June 1934, p10.

<sup>163</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp132-144; R. Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', in A. Thorpe (ed.) *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter, University of Exeter, 1989), pp67-84.

<sup>164</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists', p123, pp137-138, 156; Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p40, pp44-46; Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', pp137-138.

Preston and judged 'a credit to the branch'<sup>165</sup>.

The appointment of Revett and Hill proved disastrous when a personal feud developed between the two men that crippled the BUF organisation and plunged fascism in Birmingham into crisis. Culpability for the conflict rests firmly on the shoulders of Jesse Hill. An undoubtedly capable man, the responsibility of leading the entire Birmingham BUF was too great a challenge and Hill buckled under the pressure.

Hill's tenure began encouragingly enough. The Birmingham BUF responded to adverse city press reports covering the Olympia rally by mobilizing onto the streets and conducting an intensive propaganda campaign that lasted throughout July<sup>166</sup>. Early in the month former Labour MP turned fascist John Beckett arrived in the city to add his weight to the launch of the publicity drive. An audience of 126 attended an address he delivered at a quiet and orderly meeting in Stratford Road Council Schools<sup>167</sup>.

But while a united front was presented to Lady Mosley when she visited the Birmingham headquarters during the final weekend of July to make a swift tour of the branches in the area and inspect the Women's Section<sup>168</sup>, divisions were beginning to open between Hill and his immediate superior. The MI5 report on developments in the fascist movement for August and September commented: 'Sir Oswald Mosley's movement has lost momentum...It has shown signs of receding...particularly in [among other places] Birmingham.' Decline was attributed to internal decay. 'In part as a result of financial stringency and in part as a result of various personal questions and administrative ineptitudes, dissensions have broken out'<sup>169</sup>. In Birmingham the 'personal questions' highlighted are a reference to a growing paranoia that was increasingly guiding Hill's decisions and leading to the above mentioned 'administrative ineptitudes'. Hill had convinced himself that Revett, a talented public speaker who had reputedly spoken at over 100 meetings throughout the region since arriving in the Midlands in May<sup>170</sup>, was

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<sup>165</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 November 1934, p9.

<sup>166</sup> *TC* 20 July 1934, p5.

<sup>167</sup> *BG* 6 July 1934, p7; *BP* 6 July 1934, p16; NA: HO144/20143, p372. Disorder at Public Meetings, etc.

<sup>168</sup> *Blackshirt* 3 August 1934, p4.

<sup>169</sup> NA: HO144/20142, p215. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No. III. Developments during August/September 1934.

<sup>170</sup> *Blackshirt* 17 August 1934, p10.

secretly sending to N.H.Q. adverse reports on his work and in response refused to leave the branch headquarters in order to carry out development work in the city because of an imagined lack of trustworthy subordinates<sup>171</sup>. New financial restraints imposed on branches throughout the country heightened Hill's sense of injustice. Special Branch reported: 'trouble was brewing...it is being fomented by J. R. Hill....Hill receives £3-6-0 per week – the amount he received as a busman – and wants an increase. This cannot be granted'. As Hill's angst deepened so did his erratic behaviour and potential for rash action. 'Hill is to come to London to put his demand before headquarters, and if it is not granted, it is said he and his followers will seize the branch'<sup>172</sup>.

At the beginning of December N.H.Q. took the decision to intervene and dispatched two high-ranking officials to Birmingham to investigate<sup>173</sup>. The assessment reached was unequivocal. The Birmingham branches of the BUF had fallen into a deplorable state. Hill was judged an unsuitable man to be leading the Birmingham branches and it was recommended he be removed as Organiser. However, finding an appropriate replacement would present new difficulties, it was concluded, because of a lack of both time and local candidates: 'There is unfortunately, no one in the Birmingham Branch suitable for carrying on in place of Hill and unless Hill is given an increase in salary, he will resign'<sup>174</sup>.

Special Branch reports show Hill was still Birmingham Organiser in mid-January 1935 when he again threatened to resign<sup>175</sup>. An abrupt disappearance from all the material discovered relating to the BUF in Birmingham after this point, coupled with the absence of a new leader for several months into the New Year, suggests National Headquarters finally lost patience with the former bus driver and acted, either by accepting his resignation or forcing him out.

Unsurprisingly the fraught situation at headquarters under Hill's leadership disillusioned many of the city fascists, the movement in Birmingham developed 'a bad name' and local branches haemorrhaged members<sup>176</sup>. The atmosphere of corrosion was compounded when

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<sup>171</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p238. Report by Major Cleghorn on Birmingham Branch 5. 12. 34.

<sup>172</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p277.

<sup>173</sup> Major A. Cleghorn, Assistant Director of Political Organisation, and Major P. G. Taylor, head of 'Z' (Intelligence) Department. NA: HO144/20144 p277.

<sup>174</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p239. Report by Major Cleghorn on Birmingham Branch 5. 12. 34.

<sup>175</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p197.

<sup>176</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p238. Report by Major Cleghorn on Birmingham Branch 5. 12. 34.

Birmingham University Fascist Association disbanded at the end of the summer vacation 1934 and was not revived<sup>177</sup>. The Harborne branch closed because of a collapse in interest. Concurrent to the slump in membership was a chronic reduction in activism. However, while street propaganda was non-existent and meetings in the Bull Ring were a rarity subjected to peaceful Communist opposition whenever they were staged<sup>178</sup>, a small measure of publicity work was maintained that saw female members playing an increasingly prominent role galvanised by the emergence of Miss Harris, the first woman speaker in the area<sup>179</sup>. During indoor meetings Miss Harris shared equal billing with established senior speakers Miles and Revett and overshadowed the two men by cultivating the greater interest among the audiences. The Birmingham Central branch was proud of its new star speaker and predicted she 'should prove invaluable to the cause of Fascism'. When the 'Winter Campaign' opened at a meeting held in the Stratford Road Schools building the 'chief item of interest' a speech by Miss Harris and her appeal to the women among the audience to come forward and 'help to the best of their ability'<sup>180</sup>. However, while Miss Harris and her fellow women fascists displayed a valuable capacity for rousing curiosity towards the movement they were ultimately unable to succeed where in recent times the men had failed. Interest refused to convert into support and at the end of November the Birmingham BUF abandoned active recruitment and turned its beleaguered attention exclusively towards keeping in touch with non-active members. A series of private meetings were especially arranged to which these members were invited<sup>181</sup>. Respite outside the city was also denied: a Birmingham contingent attended the disappointing Hyde Park rally that misfired embarrassingly in the presence of a huge anti-fascist rival gathering<sup>182</sup>. At the end of December 1934 there were 300 members on the books of the Birmingham Central branch, but only 68 paid their dues, of which about 35 were active<sup>183</sup>.

As the Birmingham BUF limped towards 1935 fascism in the city languished in a

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<sup>177</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*. p86.

<sup>178</sup> *BM* 29 October 1934, p9; *BM* 30 October 1934, p9.

<sup>179</sup> *Blackshirt* 14 September 1934, p9; *Blackshirt* 19 October 1934, p9.

<sup>180</sup> *Blackshirt* 19 October 1934, p9.

<sup>181</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 November 1934, p10.

<sup>182</sup> *BG* 10 September 1934, p7.

<sup>183</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p240. Report by Major Cleghorn on Birmingham Branch 5. 12. 34.

distressed state. Hill's period in charge of the BUF in Birmingham was a ruinous affair. The momentum gathered over the course of the previous two years had evaporated, membership was small and demoralised, and organisation had been allowed to crumble. However, the Birmingham BUF proved able to halt its decline and, though it remained mired in a generally moribund state, maintained a stable membership between the years 1935 and 1937.

The responsibility for salvaging the BUF in Birmingham was temporarily entrusted to Revett while National Headquarters deliberated on a permanent replacement for Hill. Revett sought to prevent a terminal decline of the Mosley movement in Birmingham by focusing attention on retaining and re-energising current membership. Indoor meetings and dances were preferred to gatherings in the Bull Ring. Organisation work replaced that of propaganda. Prominence was sacrificed in the interest of stability although sales drives of fascist literature continued on weekends<sup>184</sup>. Revett's reforms coincided with the re-organisation of the BUF nationally aimed at removing fascists from comfortable branch facilities and out onto the streets. The social aspect of BUF life was to be downgraded and emphasis placed upon active work. Blackshirt clubs and bars were closed all around the country and in many places headquarters were abandoned in favour of small inexpensive administrative offices and rooms. While the Birmingham BUF retained its opulent headquarters the building had never been equipped with a bar. Instead local Mosleyites would gather to socialise at the Old Stone Cross public house on the corner of Coleshill Street and Stratford Road near headquarters. Relaxing in this manner was now discouraged<sup>185</sup>.

A MI5 report covering developments in the movement to the end of February 1935 reported that Revett's reforms were successfully decelerating the decline of Mosleyite fascism in Birmingham, although membership remained 'small'<sup>186</sup>. The transition to the new system of organisation was overseen by a squad of Inspectors from N.H.Q. A. K. Chesterton was dispatched to supervise the transition in the Midlands, and this former Birmingham leader's tour has passed into notoriety in the historiography. As will be discussed in depth in the respective case-studies, Chesterton's response to the branch life he discovered in Stoke-on-Trent and

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<sup>184</sup> *Blackshirt* 18 January 1935, p12.

<sup>185</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p88.

<sup>186</sup> NA: HO144/20144, pp123-124. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No.V. Developments to the end of February 1935.



Coventry was to close the branches on the spot. The improvement experienced in Birmingham in early 1935 undoubtedly contributed to the Birmingham BUF managing to pass Chesterton's inspection while the other two Midlands branches failed.

In March 1935 Revett was moved to a Staff Speaker position in Manchester<sup>187</sup> and replaced by Arthur Mills, who was transferred from a position at N.H.Q.<sup>188</sup>. Mills would build upon the work accomplished by Revett and halt the chronic decline of the BUF in the city. Abandoning the tactic of retrenchment, activism would now refocus on outdoor meetings designed to publicise the movement and disseminate propaganda. The contraction in membership meant there was a shortage of members to conduct propaganda work so the responsibility to propagandise fell upon the shoulders of a small but dedicated corps of officers. Throughout March and April meetings regularly attracted large audiences. The gatherings also attracted occasional attempts at interference by Communist agitators that remained strictly peaceful. In addition to his participation at outdoor meetings, Propaganda Officer Shelville also held speakers' classes every Tuesday and Friday at the Central branch. Sales drives remained a staple of fascist activism in Birmingham<sup>189</sup>.

In early May membership was small, numbering under 50. At the end of the month the Birmingham BUF was re-organised in compliance with another round of national reforms. Birmingham was realigned as a 'District' with six branches within it corresponding to the geographical boundaries of Lozells, Handsworth, Ladywood, Sparkhill, Moseley and Selly Oak parliamentary constituencies. The old Central branch became District Headquarters with Mills as district leader. An emphasis on self-finance introduced a bookshop in the Stratford Road building selling BUF literature to the public and a shop was opened at Coleshill Street run independently of movement funds by selling tea, coffee, sweets, sandwiches, and cigarettes<sup>190</sup>. A 'Contact Officer' was appointed whose task it was to get in touch with influential persons and enlist their financial support of the movement. This man was one of the Birmingham BUF's 'elite or upper-middle' class members. A senior executive at a nationally famous brewery based in the city, he

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<sup>187</sup> NA: HO144/21062, p351.

<sup>188</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p47.

<sup>189</sup> *Blackshirt* 22 March 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 5 April 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 3 May 1935, p8.

<sup>190</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p89.

belonged to occupational sub-group 9 listed in Table 3<sup>191</sup>. The Birmingham branches had been stabilised and could now direct attention exclusively towards rebuilding membership and raising the fascist organisation from its lowly condition in the second city.

Where it has been possible to determine the social class of people attracted into the Birmingham BUF between 1932 and 1934 only the busmen recruited by Hill can be allocated to the category 'lower' class in Table 3. Every other member has been employed in an occupational sub-group which categories them as 'lower-middle and middle-middle' or 'elite and upper-middle' in social class. However, the BUF membership in early 1935 is revealed to be diverse in terms of social class. When recalling the social composition of the Birmingham BUF at this time, Louise Fisher described a broad range of occupational 'types' which included a notable 'lower class' element. These 'unskilled workers' and 'skilled workers' of sub-groups 1 and 2 were factory workers, railway workers, busmen, waitresses and domestic workers. She recalled:

What kind of people belonged to the Birmingham Branch? A wide cross-section of the community. One member was a son of one of the oldest and largest brewers in Birmingham while another was a well-known independent brewer; a well-to-do coal merchant belonged to our Branch, while we also had solicitors, teachers like myself, doctors, bank clerks, newspapermen (both reporters and technical staff), large and small restaurant owners, many small factory owners (these small metal works abounded at the time in Birmingham), office workers, skilled and unskilled factory workers, railway workers (their pay was abominable in the 1930s), shop keepers and shop assistants and busmen...The women members were equally diverse: teachers, secretaries, nurses, waitresses, domestic workers, housewives, etc<sup>192</sup>.

This shifting social class profile of the BUF membership in Birmingham corresponds to a suggestion by Linehan that while between 1932 and mid-1934 the fascist movement's main appeal was to people of 'lower-middle and middle-middle' and 'elite or upper-middle' social class, after Olympia and continuing through to 1938 increasing numbers of 'lower' class types entered the Mosleyite ranks<sup>193</sup>. As we shall see later, fascist propaganda campaigns in the city would reportedly in 1937 attract a fresh wave of 'unskilled workers' and 'skilled workers' into the local BUF.

During the second half of the 1930s the focus of the propaganda disseminated by the

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<sup>191</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p264.

<sup>192</sup> Irvine, 'The Birmingham Schoolteacher', pp46-47.

<sup>193</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p167.

Birmingham BUF shifted away from promoting the theme of the Corporate State. Apart from a brief period at the end of May 1937 when the local BUF campaigned against Jews, the fascist propaganda message in Birmingham from 1935 onwards concentrated on advocating the theme of non-intervention in foreign disputes. In Birmingham these 'patriotic mobilisations around emotive contemporary issues'<sup>194</sup> played a vital role in maintaining a degree of public interest in the BUF, boosting morale among the rank and file, and restoring a common sense of purpose and urgency to its activists.

Birmingham BUF fortunes began to improve in August 1935 with the advent of the 'Mind Britain's Business' propaganda campaign aimed at keeping the country from being dragged into war over Abyssinia. Led by Mills and Administrative Officer Dent<sup>195</sup>, the 'Mind Britain's Business' campaign galvanised the Birmingham BUF and the branches launched a 'gigantic push' in support of Mosley's position of non-intervention in the Italo-Abyssinian dispute and soon attracted large crowds among a receptive public<sup>196</sup>. Around this time Speaker Probyn was despatched from N.H.Q. to assist the Birmingham Mosleyites and wrote a series of propaganda letters to the Birmingham press outlining the BUF attitude to the international crisis<sup>197</sup>. In late August Birmingham citizens woke to discover local fascists had chalked peace campaign slogans on walls throughout the city<sup>198</sup>.

The frequency of BUF meetings devoted to promoting the message of isolationism increased as the Abyssinian Crisis deepened and were an almost daily occurrence throughout the first half of September. Often two or three meetings were held in a single day. On the afternoon of Sunday 8 September a fascist peace demonstration was held in Handsworth Park, which attracted an enthusiastic audience of over a thousand. In the evening in the Bull Ring a crowd of 2,000 listened to Section Leader Mosley, Administrative Officer Dent and Speaker Probyn<sup>199</sup>. While the number of BUF propaganda meetings staged in Birmingham fell to one every other day as the international crisis eased, audiences reportedly remained sizeable and

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<sup>194</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p105.

<sup>195</sup> *Blackshirt* 6 September 1935, p5.

<sup>196</sup> *Blackshirt* 9 August 1935, p8.

<sup>197</sup> *BG* 15 August 1936, p8; *BG* 18 August 1936, p6; *BG* 19 August 1936, p6.

<sup>198</sup> *BG* 30 August 1935, p4.

<sup>199</sup> *Blackshirt* 6 September 1935, p6; *BG* 2 September 1935 p7; NA: HO144/20145, p129.

sympathetic to the movement's position<sup>200</sup>. By October active membership remained stable at around 30<sup>201</sup>.

The 'Mind Britain's Business' propaganda campaign touched a nerve with a sizeable proportion of Birmingham people and through it the local BUF regained a slight measure of appeal. It was claimed sales of fascist literature had increased by three hundred percent over the course of the previous two months<sup>202</sup>. The Birmingham fascists began receiving invitations to guest at respectable debates. In early November Probyn addressed the Harborne branch of Toc H. The address was reportedly received with enthusiasm and Probyn warmly congratulated. An invitation to address another branch of Toc H was extended and accepted<sup>203</sup>. Over the last few months Birmingham, recognised Special Branch, whilst not making marked headway had 'managed to hold its own'<sup>204</sup>.

The peace campaign was followed in the final two months of 1935 by a new co-ordination plan instituted in November wherein Birmingham was divided into four districts: North, East, South, and West; each containing three Parliamentary Divisions. Steps were put into action to establish headquarters in each of these districts at the earliest possible moment. The Birmingham North H.Q. was opened at 382 Tyburn Road, Erdington; the Birmingham East H.Q. was founded at 111 Coleshill Street, Duddeston; the Birmingham South H.Q. was located at 261 Stratford Road, Sparkhill; and the Birmingham West district headquarters was situated at 76 City Road, Edgbaston. A central control office in Room 86, 174 Corporation Street directed the propaganda activities of Birmingham and Coventry<sup>205</sup>.

The objective of the co-ordination was to build an electoral and propaganda machine capable of contesting Birmingham constituencies at some unspecified point in the future. The man assigned responsibility for creating a fascist electoral machine in Birmingham was Captain Charles Henry Bentinck-Budd, who replaced Mills as Organiser Birmingham area at the

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<sup>200</sup> *Blackshirt* 20 September 1935, p5.

<sup>201</sup> NA: HO45/25385 p46. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, excluding Northern Ireland Report No.VI. Developments from March 1935 to October 1935.

<sup>202</sup> *Blackshirt* 11 October 1935, p8.

<sup>203</sup> *Blackshirt* 8 November 1935, p8.

<sup>204</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p16.

<sup>205</sup> *Blackshirt* 6 December 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 20 December 1935, p8.

beginning of 1936<sup>206</sup>. Another leader of the Birmingham Mosleyites to conform to Mandle's stereotype Bentinck-Budd was 39 years of age. Educated at St. Edward's, Oxford, he left school at 16 to enlist in the Fifth Dragoon Guards in 1914<sup>207</sup> and served in France during the Great War. In 1915 he received a commission to the Second Battalion of Buffs, and was severely wounded in the battle of Loos. After the war he travelled extensively and served for two years in the South of Ireland with the Royal Irish Constabulary Auxiliary Force. In 1930 he was elected to Worthing Borough Council as a Conservative councillor, and a year later was elected to West Sussex County Council. His defection to the BUF in 1933 gave him the distinction of being the first blackshirt councillor in the country<sup>208</sup>. He resigned from these positions shortly before his move to Birmingham; and it has been suggested he did so unnecessarily early just before elections to avoid embarrassing defeat<sup>209</sup>.

Bentinck-Budd affirmed it was 'useless' to hold public meetings, especially open-air, and preferred to confine the local BUF activism to the establishing of discreet contact with potential supporters in private<sup>210</sup>. This entailed a dramatic scaling back in propaganda campaigning on the streets of the second city, and as a consequence the publicity profile of the Birmingham BUF for the average local citizen fell to its lowest ever level. Fascist visibility dipped further in July when the expensive Stratford Road headquarters was abandoned in favour of modest premises at 81 Stafford Street<sup>211</sup>, a building described in the local press as a 'house-shop'<sup>212</sup>. At the beginning of August Bentinck-Budd's strategy of withdrawing fascist speakers from the streets of Birmingham was overturned when the national BUF implemented an isolationist propaganda campaign mobilised around the escalating Spanish Civil War<sup>213</sup>. Weekly outdoor meetings attracted large crowds throughout the month<sup>214</sup>. 'Steady progress' was reported, with an increase in sales of

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<sup>206</sup> *BP* 14 January 1937, p9.

<sup>207</sup> *Blackshirt* 16 January 1937, p7.

<sup>208</sup> *BP* 14 January 1937, p9.

<sup>209</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p95.

<sup>210</sup> NA: HO144/21061, p315.

<sup>211</sup> *Blackshirt* 18 July 1936, p7.

<sup>212</sup> *BG* 7 December 1937, p5.

<sup>213</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p92.

<sup>214</sup> NA: HO144/20146, p302.

*Action* and the *Blackshirt*, and the formation of a new Unit in the Birmingham North district<sup>215</sup>. Protest letters written by Probyn appeared in the local press<sup>216</sup>. The outdoor speaking to audiences of hundreds continued as the propaganda campaign advanced into September. Sales drives featured debut appearances by local grey shirted BUF cadets<sup>217</sup>. On this activity, an ex-Cadet recounted years later: 'Selling *Action* in New Street on Saturday nights, spread about forty or fifty yards apart, we were frequently...insulted. Selling the paper was an initiation rite'<sup>218</sup>.

Nine of these cadets, boys aged between 14 and 16, went on to form a drum corps that marched at the head of fascist parades in the city.<sup>219</sup> The establishment of the drum corps was part of the 'art of seduction' consciously practised by the BUF. Linehan writes: 'Fascism aestheticised politics through carefully choreographed marches and mass gatherings, secular rituals and display of paramilitary paraphernalia. Fascist political theatre generated a highly charged atmosphere that appealed to the emotions, mesmerising and ensnaring the unwary.'<sup>220</sup> This statement may, however, do a disservice to a number of these juvenile fascists. While the irrational appeal of what Pussard describes as 'the use of performative techniques by the BUF'<sup>221</sup> undoubtedly exerted a powerful pull over many of the Birmingham cadets, for some the appeal of the BUF operated on more diverse levels. Brewer found that alongside 'the appeal to the young of any uniformed movement' of adventure, excitement and fellowship ran 'a rational appeal to youth's desire for change, the provision of a channel to express youth's protest'. For one 14 year old schoolboy fascist cadet the Birmingham BUF offered a solution to rational impatience at the traditional parties' responses to the economic, social and political position of Britain, explaining: 'I was very interested in politics...coming from an intensely political family who had passionate support for the Labour Party'. Interestingly, his political allegiance was deeply informed by his Catholic upbringing. Rawnsley noted that BUF membership in northern England contained a high

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<sup>215</sup> *Blackshirt* 15 August 1936, p6.

<sup>216</sup> *BG* 15 August 1936, p8; *BG* 18 August 1936, p6; *BG* 19 August 1936, p6.

<sup>217</sup> *Blackshirt* 26 September 1936, p6.

<sup>218</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p40.

<sup>219</sup> *BG* 25 November 1936, p3.

<sup>220</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p169.

<sup>221</sup> H. Pussard, 'The Blackshirts at Belle Vue: Fascist Theatre at a North-West Pleasure Ground', in J. Gottlieb and T. Linehan (eds.) *The Culture of Fascism. Visions of the Far Right in Britain* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2004), p117.

percentage of Catholics<sup>222</sup>. The fascist press claimed twelve per cent of leading BUF officials were Catholics, a proportion significantly higher than the Catholic percentage in the country<sup>223</sup>. Durham has suggested that it was in recognition of Catholic support that the BUF never widely advocated eugenics. On issues of social engineering Mosley attempted 'in part to steer a path that minimized criticism from Catholic circles which he hoped would be sympathetic to fascism'<sup>224</sup>. The question of what motivated Catholics to join the BUF is a contentious one. Rawnsley partly suggested an enduring Irish-Anglo appreciation of Mosley's stand in his early political career as a Conservative MP against the British Government's deployment of 'Black and Tan' paramilitaries in Ireland. Religious writers in the fascist press admired fascism's stance on the 'Red Threat'<sup>225</sup>. More controversially, Skidelsky suggested that Catholicism, unlike Anglicanism, had developed a social and economic theory requiring action on the political plane, and 'many Catholics saw in Fascism the movement that corresponded closest to their social ideals'<sup>226</sup>. The individual case of the Birmingham schoolboy fascist cadet corroborates Skidelsky's position. When questioned on his allegiance to the BUF he explained his opinion that fascism was an organic political extension of the teachings of his childhood religion, stating: 'I had a good Catholic upbringing which turned my ideas towards authoritarian solutions to problems, since Catholicism is very authoritarian. The anti-Communism of Catholicism was instilled in my upbringing'<sup>227</sup>.

While the local BUF took great pride in the debut of their cadets on the streets of Birmingham, less welcome among the Mosleyites was the attention Communist opposition displayed towards the local fascist mobilisation. Organised peaceful interruption had been an occasional occurrence at BUF meetings in Birmingham during the months of August and September. As tension in the East End of London between Mosleyites and anti-fascists escalated, Communist opposition in Birmingham hardened in attitude and tactics. In late

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<sup>222</sup> Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', pp150-165.

<sup>223</sup> *Blackshirt* 17 May 1935, p4.

<sup>224</sup> Durham, *Women and Fascism*, p38.

<sup>225</sup> *Action* 2 April 1936, p5.

<sup>226</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p347.

<sup>227</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p38.

September and early October attempts were made to physically attack blackshirt activists<sup>228</sup>. In the days immediately following 'The Battle of Cable Street' the Birmingham BUF took the decision to impose a cooling off period and all street activism ceased for the duration of October. While this did not mean the local blackshirts were afraid of clashes with anti-fascists, the BUF believed such confrontations if they should manifest would serve no useful benefit at a time when the local press was filling its pages daily with damning features on the chaotic events plaguing the East End and the repercussions felt around the country. A handful of letters to the press outlining the general BUF position of non-intervention in foreign disputes represent the only visible local propaganda campaigning undertaken during this period of confinement<sup>229</sup>. Outdoor meetings recommenced during the final week of October 1936<sup>230</sup>. On 9 November Mosley attended a luncheon of businessmen in the city where he received an enthusiastic welcome<sup>231</sup>. Street-based campaigning attracting not inconsiderable crowds would continue unmolested throughout Birmingham for the remainder of the year<sup>232</sup>.

While the various propaganda campaigns urging the Birmingham public to reject interventionism in foreign disputes during 1936 successfully generated a noteworthy degree of interest and sympathy in the cause of the fascist movement in the city, the local Mosleyites failed to convert this sentiment into membership. At the close of the year the Birmingham area could boast around 100 members; a minor improvement on the figures for 1935. This illustrates the relative stability of Birmingham BUF membership, in total numbers at least, between 1935 and late 1936<sup>233</sup>.

This consistency in membership numbers was achieved despite during 1935 and 1936 the Birmingham BUF becoming associated in the public mind with political violence leading to the local movement being denied the use of civic halls to hold fascist meetings. The leadership of the Birmingham BUF hoped a scheduled appearance by Mosley at a mass meeting in Birmingham

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<sup>228</sup> *Blackshirt* 22 August 1936 p6; *Blackshirt* 29 August 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 3 October 1936, p6.

<sup>229</sup> *BM* 21 October 1936, p7; *BM* 28 October 1936, p14.

<sup>230</sup> *Blackshirt* 24 October 1936, p6.

<sup>231</sup> *BG* 10 November 1936, p4; *BM* 9 November 1936, p14.

<sup>232</sup> *Blackshirt* 14 November 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 21 November 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 28 November 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 5 December 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 12 December 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 19 December 1936, p6.

<sup>233</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p93.



Town Hall on Sunday evening 19 May 1935 would greatly assist the resuscitation of fascism in the second city. Mosley's last appearance in the city, at Bingley Hall in January 1934, had energised fascism in Birmingham: a similar effect was expected again. The local fascists were to be gravely disappointed.

In keeping with the importance the BUF placed on the meeting a large expensive advert was placed in the 'public notices' section on the front page of the Tuesday 14 May edition of the *Birmingham Post*<sup>234</sup>. A capacity 3,000 strong audience gathered to hear the blackshirt leader. The dominant reaction among the audience to his speech was that of modest approval<sup>235</sup>. While there had been a number of minor interruptions throughout the meeting it was during the verbal question section at the conclusion of the meeting that the serious disorder occurred. A man asked Mosley a question; evidently believing Mosley's reply evasive the man stood up whilst Mosley was speaking, in order to protest either that Mosley was not answering the question properly, or alternately, that he had not heard the question aright. A number of blackshirts immediately attempted to restrain the man and within minutes violent free fights were erupting over the whole back half of the ground floor<sup>236</sup>. For ten minutes pandemonium reigned and eventually 100 constables were sent in to restore order. In the course of the fracas 30 people had been ejected, and two men had been badly beaten. One was a member of the audience and the other was Birmingham Organiser Arthur Mills, who had been knocked unconscious<sup>237</sup>. Mills was later taken to hospital where he was treated for a broken rib<sup>238</sup>.

In the days following the Town Hall meeting Mosley's exposition was paid little notice. Attention focused firmly on the violent clashes witnessed between fascist stewards and members of the audience. Mosley stated that the disturbance was the most serious he had experienced at a BUF meeting for two years. Like a localized version of the Olympia controversy the correspondence columns of the *Birmingham Post* began to fill with letters written of eye-witness

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<sup>234</sup> *BP* 14 May 1935, p1.

<sup>235</sup> NA: HO144/20144 pp40-41. Fascist Meeting Addressed by Sir Oswald Mosley in the Town Hall, Birmingham, on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1935.

<sup>236</sup> NA: HO144/20144 pp41-42. Fascist Meeting Addressed by Sir Oswald Mosley in the Town Hall, Birmingham, on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1935.

<sup>237</sup> *BG* 20 May 1935, p1; *BP* 20 May 1935, p16.

<sup>238</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p87.

testimonies seeking to apportion blame for the shocking disorder. Immediately after walking off stage Mosley gave an interview to a local journalist, declaring his stewards had been the innocent victims of a vicious coordinated Communist assault and that any violent act performed by his members had been lawful self-defence<sup>239</sup>. While a handful of correspondence corroborated Mosley's explanation for the disorder and praised the 'exemplary patience' and 'admirable restraint' displayed in by the fascists in dealing with their attackers,<sup>240</sup> the majority of letters carrying testimony denied the presence of organized opposition within the hall and painted a picture of unprovoked blackshirt savagery unleashed against innocent law-abiding men and women in the audience<sup>241</sup>.

While newspaper reports suggest a strong Communist element was indeed present in the hall<sup>242</sup>, in a replica of the infamous rally staged in London in June 1934 the issue of whether or not organized opposition interrupted proceedings became inconsequential in the mind of the average Birmingham citizen. A consensus emerged among the majority of eye-witnesses categorizing the fascist stewards' actions as hooliganism inexcusable 'either as self-defence or as a means of securing order'<sup>243</sup>. A general feeling took hold in the city that the response of the fascist stewards to opposition had been excessively aggressive. The *Birmingham Post* believed it spoke for the majority of Birmingham men and women when it declared: 'Whether they were justified in beginning ejectments at all does not much matter; the complaint – and it is a serious complaint – is that the stewards deliberately set themselves not only to perform ejectment "duty" but to give their victims "what for" at the same time. This sort of thing is intolerable'<sup>244</sup>.

The Birmingham Town Hall meeting achieved what the Olympia scandal had failed to do: the disorder imbued the Birmingham BUF with an aura of physical violence in the minds of the general Birmingham public. That is not to say the average man and woman believed the Birmingham fascists innately violent, but while it was recognized the vast majority of stewards had been imported from outside the Midlands it was widely believed an atmosphere of violence

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<sup>239</sup> *BP* 20 May 1935, p16.

<sup>240</sup> *BP* 23 May 1935, p5.

<sup>241</sup> *BP* 21 May 1935, p3; *BP* 22 May 1935, p5; *BP* 24 May 1935, p3.

<sup>242</sup> *BP* 20 May 1935, p16.

<sup>243</sup> *BP* 21 May 1935, p3.

<sup>244</sup> *BP* 22 May 1935, p8.

would now inevitably 'shadow' the local members however guiltless of provocation the behaviour of the local Mosleyites might be<sup>245</sup>.

Among those who shared this view were the Lord Mayor and Birmingham City Council. The Town Hall meeting of May 1935 would be the last BUF meeting held in municipal property in Birmingham. As a direct consequence of the disorder unleashed at this meeting multiple applications for BUF meetings to be staged in public buildings in October 1935, February 1936, March 1936, April 1936, and August 1936, were refused by the civic authority. On each occasion the Lord Mayor informed the fascists: 'The meeting organized by the fascists and held in May, 1935, led to a considerable amount of adverse feeling in the City which existed long after the date of the meeting. Disturbance took place at that meeting as to the cause of which various views have been expressed. I take no side in the matter; but I do feel that there is considerable danger of serious disturbance at a further meeting'<sup>246</sup>.

A furious local and national BUF responded to this sequence of rebuffs by accusing the Birmingham civic authorities of capitulating to 'Red violence and terrorism'<sup>247</sup>. In an indication of the priority the fascist movement attached to Birmingham, Mosley himself led the complaints. In a series of letters to the Lord Mayor published in both the local Birmingham press and the *Blackshirt* the fascist leader indicted the civic authorities for 'placing a premium on lawlessness'<sup>248</sup>. The Lord Mayor was attacked as a hypocrite whose obvious bias against the Mosley movement was either the product of abject cowardice or a disposition eager to exploit 'Communist hooliganism' as the pretext for the suppression of the fascist right to be heard by people in the city<sup>249</sup>.

The Birmingham BUF began 1937 with the announcement Bentinck-Budd would stand as the fascist movement's official parliamentary candidate to challenge the incumbent member Geoffrey Lloyd, Under-Secretary in the Home Office, for the Ladywood Division at the next

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<sup>245</sup> *BG* 20 May 1935, p8.

<sup>246</sup> *BG* 8 January 1936, p1; *BG* 8 January 1936, p9; *BM* 8 January 1936, p4; *BM* 8 January 1936, p8; *BP* 8 January 1936, p6; *BP* 8 January 1936, p14; *BM* 7 November 1936, p7; *BM* 9 November 1936, p7; *BM* 9 November 1936, p8; *BG* 9 November 1936, p4; *BG* 10 November 1936, p6; NA: HO144/20145, p87.

<sup>247</sup> *BP* 10 January 1936, p6; *BM* 13 January 1936, p10; *BP* 14 January 1936, p3; *BM* 15 January 1936, p12; *BM* 16 January 1936, p14.

<sup>248</sup> *Blackshirt* 10 January 1936, p5.

<sup>249</sup> *Blackshirt* 10 January 1936, p5; *Blackshirt* 17 January 1936, p3.

general election<sup>250</sup>. As past president of the British Legion, a member of the Legion of Frontiersmen, an ex-member of the Royal Irish Constabulary and a wounded ex-serviceman having lost a leg on the Western Front, he was a solid choice for this Tory constituency, the Conservatives having ousted a longstanding Labour figure in the 1931 election. Brewer notes: 'the choice did not escape interest being the first constituency Mosley fought in the Labour Party and one with fond memories for him....This past association with Mosley explains the choice of this division'<sup>251</sup>.

Ladywood had been selected as one of the first 100 constituencies the BUF intended to fight at the next general election. The constituencies were chosen, *Blackshirt* editor John Beckett explained to his readership, on account of 'proved support and organisational development' and the presence of a person who had completed election agent or assistant election agent training or was expected to have done so in the next few months<sup>252</sup>.

As the only constituency to be contested in the west Midlands, Ladywood could call upon the resources of the whole area<sup>253</sup>. Propaganda work in the constituency intensified immediately.<sup>254</sup> 'Ladywood is a real possibility', the fascist press crowed, while the local members reiterated their determination to 'make it a certainty'<sup>255</sup>. Canvassing and fund-raising was interrupted only to organise a warm welcome for Women's Organiser Northern Olga Shore during her tour of northern branches in late February<sup>256</sup>. Assiduous effort propelled Ladywood to the top of the 'northern zone' sales league for literature sales. At the monthly General Meeting of Birmingham and Districts held on Sunday 28 February Bentinck-Budd outlined his plans for future campaigning and rallied his followers. Over 50 members attended with their friends<sup>257</sup>.

These plans were thrown into disarray by the crisis that was to hit the BUF in early March 1937. Precipitated by a chronic lack of funds and massive cuts in expenditure, on 11 March 1937 a comprehensive reduction in paid party personnel occupying positions throughout the movement

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<sup>250</sup> NA: HO144/21062, p392.

<sup>251</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p95.

<sup>252</sup> *Blackshirt* 7 November 1936, p5.

<sup>253</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p95.

<sup>254</sup> *Blackshirt* 21 November 1936, p6.

<sup>255</sup> *Blackshirt* 19 December 1936, p6.

<sup>256</sup> *Blackshirt* 6 March 1937, p6.

<sup>257</sup> *Blackshirt* 13 March 1937, p6.

was announced<sup>258</sup>. Captain Bentinck-Budd found himself one of a long list of staff discharged. Also dismissed from the movement was William Joyce, who along with John Beckett immediately formed the National Socialist League<sup>259</sup>. Probyn was among the sixty BUF members nationwide who quit the BUF to join this splinter group<sup>260</sup>.

The March retrenchment left the Birmingham BUF floundering. Branches sank into inactivity. Special Branch reported in late May that there was no longer any effective organisation in the area<sup>261</sup>. Having withdrawn from the streets while awaiting a replacement for Bentinck-Budd, senior officers occupied their time writing propaganda articles for the fascist press<sup>262</sup>. The depression that had engulfed the Birmingham BUF lifted with the appointment at the end of May of Samuel Lawrence Irvine as Bentinck-Budd's successor. Born in Bromley in Kent, 23 year old Irvine was educated at the Polytechnic, Regent Street, London, but left at the age of 14. He joined the BUF early in 1934 at the Maidenhead branch and by 1936 was Assistant District Leader at Canterbury where he was employed as assistant manager in a firm of amusement caterers at Herne Bay<sup>263</sup>. In November 1936 he moved to Birmingham and became a branch leader in the city while earning a living as a lorry driver with various firms<sup>264</sup>. As an 'unskilled worker' from occupational sub-group 1 during his time in Birmingham Irvine is classified as belonging to the 'lower' social class in Table 3. In an interview with Brewer, one ex-Mosleyite remembered Irvine as 'very superior' and 'a splendid type' whose 'whole life was dedicated to the movement'<sup>265</sup>. In Special Observation Forms compiled on him as an ex-internee serving in the British Army during the Second World War, the question 'What type of man is Irvine?' was answered by a commanding officer: 'More intelligent than the average. He does appear to be a leader'<sup>266</sup>. Roger Corbet was appointed Irvine's deputy. Corbet had joined the BUF in 1936<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> BD C6/9/1/3. MS British Union of Fascists and National Socialists, To: All Districts, From: Director-General of Organisation, 12 March 1937.

<sup>259</sup> M. Kenny, *Germany Calling. A Biography of William Joyce Lord Haw Haw* (Dublin, New Island, 2003), pp146-149.

<sup>260</sup> Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, p135.

<sup>261</sup> NA: HO144/21063, p22. Special Branch Report 21 May 1937.

<sup>262</sup> *Blackshirt* 13 March 1937, p8; *Blackshirt* 3 April 1937 p3, 6.

<sup>263</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 139A.

<sup>264</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 24.

<sup>265</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p98.

<sup>266</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 87a.

and is described by Brewer as being at this time 'a particularly staunch fascist' and one of the few 'lower class' leaders which the branch produced during its existence<sup>268</sup>. A skilled propagandist, Corbet regularly contributed articles to the fascist press. Irvine was the Birmingham BUF's final leader and under his tenure membership again began to rise.

Irvine's arrival as leader signalled a brief attempted change to the focus of BUF propaganda campaigning in Birmingham. Brewer claims there was in the propaganda disseminated by the Birmingham BUF from its inception until its dissolution a neglect of the theme of anti-Semitism. According to his research a campaign against Jews was not at any time undertaken<sup>269</sup>. For Brewer the lack of hostility towards Jews in the fascist message when the local BUF was communicating Mosley's ideas to the Birmingham public was explained by the absence in the city of Holmes' 'specific social milieu' discussed in the previous chapter<sup>270</sup>.

In Birmingham the total numbers of the Jewish population was low. In 1938 6,000 of the city's inhabitants were Jews, approximately one in every 200<sup>271</sup>. According to Andreski anti-Semitic animosity is activated when the ratio of Jews to Gentiles reaches 10%<sup>272</sup>. The Jewish community in Birmingham was comprised mainly of assimilated Jews who 'were not geographically located in any one residential area but were dispersed in line with the patterns of geographical and social mobility'<sup>273</sup>. Academic studies of the Jewish anti-fascist response in major British cities to BUF local and national anti-Semitic propaganda campaigns have found that Jewish communities were often divided along class lines on how to deal with the threat of Mosleyite racial hatred. While the men and women of the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' and 'elite or upper-middle' social classes listed in Table 3 who comprised the 'Jewish Establishment' were uniformly in favour of acting through formal channels, many 'lower' class men and women of

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<sup>267</sup> *TC* 14 October 1938, p1.

<sup>268</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p87.

<sup>269</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, pp104-113.

<sup>270</sup> J. Brewer, 'The British Union of Fascists and anti-Semitism in Birmingham', *Midlands History*, Vol.9 (1984), pp109-122.

<sup>271</sup> *Jewish Year Book 1939* (London, Jewish Chronicle Publications, 1939), pp343-350.

<sup>272</sup> S. Andreski, 'An economic interpretation of Anti-Semitism', *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, Vol.5, No.2 (1963) pp201-213.

<sup>273</sup> Brewer, *Mosley Men*, p107.

Jewish descent preferred physical confrontation, often in connection with the Communist party<sup>274</sup>. This divide was absent in Birmingham where the Jewish community was unified in its determination to counter fascist anti-Semitism without resorting to confrontational methods. To counter claims of being 'alien' a campaign was initiated showing the history of Jews in Birmingham stretched back to the thirteenth century without major outbreaks of anti-Semitic feeling. The Birmingham Jewish community became extremely aware of its own conduct, seeking to control what the national Jewish organisation Board of Deputies of British Jews termed 'the internal causes of anti-Semitism'. A 'Representative Council' was established to 'check the anti-social behaviour of the Jewish community by making it conscious of the effects of its own individual malpractices, to obtain the co-operation of all elements in their elimination and to investigate individual cases of such malpractice'<sup>275</sup>. A 'Manifesto for Birmingham Jewry' was published arguing for responsible behaviour to prevent fault finding on the part of Gentile neighbours. Birmingham's charismatic Head Rabbi Rev Dr A. Cohen proved tireless in efforts to engage Gentile audiences. 'His links with the general community were good. He had contact with the Rotary Club, local church groups, women's organisations, WEA students and the local university. He had the support of the local Church of England in combating fascist claims... This was reflected in inter-denominational meetings of both a religious and social character'<sup>276</sup>. In a 'striking address' delivered at Birmingham Synagogue during a Jewish festival in mid-December 1936, a passionate Dr Cohen commended the tolerant nature of the average Birmingham Gentile man and women, saying: '...civic testimony meant very much to the Jewish community just now, when other cities had been disgraced by anti-Jewish outbreaks from which Birmingham had been happily free. It is an eloquent indication...that in this city a community could have its distinctive

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<sup>274</sup> N. Barrett, 'Liberal Tolerance, Anti-Semitism and Fascism: Responses of the Jewish Community in Manchester to the Mobilisation of the British Union of Fascists in Lancashire, 1933-1940', in C. Barker and M. Tyldesley (eds.) *Proceedings of the Conference on "Alternative Futures and Popular Protest" Vol. 1* (Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, 1995), pp50-54; H. Maitles, 'Confronting Fascism: Attitudes of the Glasgow Jewish Community in the 1930s', *The Local Historian: Journal of the British Association of Local History*, Vol.2, No.27 (1997), pp106-116; H. Srebrnik, 'The Jewish Communist Movement in Stepney: Ideological Mobilisation and Political Victories in an East London Borough, 1935-45 (Ph.D., University of Birmingham, 1984).

<sup>275</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p108.

<sup>276</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p111.

creed and still be recognised as an integral part of the civic body<sup>277</sup>.

Police records unavailable to Brewer, however, demonstrate that an abusive and aggressive anti-Semitic campaign was launched by the new leader of the local fascists almost immediately upon his arrival in the city. Propaganda meetings were held in the Bull Ring where fascist speaker Norman Gough dehumanized Jews as 'filthy mongrels' as a prelude to the intended targeting of Jewish residents in the residential area surrounding the junction of Sutton Street and Holloway Head near Birmingham city centre<sup>278</sup>. Although no area of the city was identifiable as 'a Jewish locality' as the Jewish community was 'scattered across the city'<sup>279</sup> this section of central Birmingham did possess a slightly higher than average number of Jewish residents and this fact was sufficient for the city BUF to hold open-air gatherings there whose speakers Jebb, Gough, and Irvine himself before audiences numbering hundreds were 'very frank in their open admission of the denunciation of the Jews'<sup>280</sup>. Gough, like Irvine, belonged to the 'lower' social class in Table 3. A labourer, he was among the 'unskilled workers' who form occupational sub-group 1<sup>281</sup>.

Although documented occasional anti-Jewish comments made by Birmingham BUF activists reveal that hostility towards Jews was present in the local fascist branches under former leaders Hill, Mills and Bentinck-Budd<sup>282</sup>, the police records suggest the theme of anti-Semitism had been absent from the propaganda disseminated by the Mosleyites in the city until Irvine's appointment in May 1937<sup>283</sup>.

The promotion of anti-Semitism in BUF propaganda in Birmingham lasted only a handful of meetings. Appointed in 1935 to the most senior position in the Birmingham police<sup>284</sup>, Chief Constable C.C.H. Moriarty was an anti-fascist who upon being informed by his officers of the theme of the fascist message being disseminated at the events in Sutton Street immediately

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<sup>277</sup> *BG* 14 December 1936, p4.

<sup>278</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 4A.

<sup>279</sup> Upton, *A History of Birmingham*, p102.

<sup>280</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 4A.

<sup>281</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 6A.

<sup>282</sup> *Blackshirt* 26 October 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 5 July 1935, p5; *Blackshirt* 27 February 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 13 March 1937, p6.

<sup>283</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 4A, 6A.

<sup>284</sup> J. Reilly, *Policing Birmingham. An Account of 150 years of Police in Birmingham* (Birmingham, West Midlands Police, 1989), p90.



prohibited the BUF from holding any further gatherings in this district. Determined to prevent anti-Semitism becoming a feature of Birmingham politics Moriarty ordered officers to take notes at all fascist meetings in the city and sought at every opportunity to accumulate enough available evidence to justify prosecutions under the Public Order Act that had come into force in January 1937<sup>285</sup>. This tactic bore fruit when the successful prosecution of speaker Gough for 'using insulting words in a public place whereby a breach of the peace was likely to be caused' in mid-June under Section 5 of the new public order legislation, accompanied by the warning to his colleagues that other proceedings were under consideration, compelled Irvine to cease permanently all anti-Semitic campaigning in Birmingham<sup>286</sup>. From mid-1937 onwards the sole outlet for anti-Jewish feeling present in local BUF branches was the pages of the *Blackshirt*. Articles written by Birmingham officers Corbet and Luckin were published in late 1937 employing crude anti-Semitic stereotypes to suggest a conspiratorial link between Communism and Jewry<sup>287</sup>. In 1936 the Board of Deputies established 'vigilance committees' around the country for the purpose of charting anti-Semitic fascist campaigns and monitoring 'anti-social behaviour' within Jewish communities. The 'vigilance committee' reports pertaining to Birmingham found that from summer 1937 to the outbreak of war there was no anti-Semitism in the city of any consequence<sup>288</sup>.

Having curtailed the attempt to introduce anti-Jewish campaigning onto the streets of Birmingham, the Chief Constable retained a close watch on the local BUF and seized eagerly upon any opportunity to prosecute fascist activity. Irvine's insistence to his rank and file of the importance of assertive street-based activism translated into numerous prosecutions. While he had abandoned inciting hostility towards Jews as a theme of Birmingham BUF propaganda, Irvine's retention of a confrontational attitude to both the authorities and opponents ensured that he himself between June 1937 and January 1939 accumulated no fewer than five convictions in the course of his propaganda work<sup>289</sup>. In late June 1937 he was summoned under the recently

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<sup>285</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 4A.

<sup>286</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 6A.

<sup>287</sup> *Blackshirt* 4 December 1937, p3, *Blackshirt* 4 December 1937, p4.

<sup>288</sup> Board of Deputies, 'Vigilance Committees' Reports 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939.

<sup>289</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 139A.

introduced Public Order Act Section 1 for wearing a political uniform at two meetings; found guilty of wearing a garment that constituted a uniform he was bound over and ordered to pay costs. The prosecution was the first of this nature in Birmingham and only the third in the country<sup>290</sup>.

Skidelsky writes that the banning of the BUF uniform under the Public Order Act dealt a 'severe blow' to the Mosley movement as it estranged the 'younger elements', citing as evidence the mass exodus of younger members in the ranks that caused membership at the Leeds branch to fall from two thousand in late 1936 to five hundred by mid-1937<sup>291</sup>. In a challenge to this interpretation the banning of the uniform in Birmingham had no negative impact on the younger members of the local BUF. For most the change was minor. One young member believed he spoke for the majority of his peers when he said: 'the uniform was illegal but we still wore a black shirt under a black pullover, we still saluted and we still marched'<sup>292</sup>. In addition, while Irvine's robust brand of activism energised the Birmingham BUF in general, it appealed in particular to the younger members in the ranks. He swiftly gathered around himself an enthusiastic cadre of 15 - 20 young men to work alongside on the streets. Indeed, youth appears to have been a common feature of Birmingham BUF street activists during the period of Irvine's leadership. Of the number of BUF activists to appear in court in the years following the introduction of the Public Order Act the average age was 23 years<sup>293</sup>. One of these young men, 19 year old Sidney Arrowsmith, was the youngest member of an entire family of Mosleyites. As Linehan has pointed out, such family affiliations were common: 'wives joined husbands in the ranks, and vice versa, as did father and son and brother and sister'<sup>294</sup>.

Stripped of the option of exploiting the theme of anti-Semitism, Birmingham BUF propaganda during the second half of 1937 concentrated on campaigning against events and actions in the city which the local fascists interpreted as representing support for pro-Republican forces in Spain. From 1938 until the BUF's proscription in June 1940 the fascist propaganda disseminated in Birmingham focused on promoting Mosley's pro-appeasement attitude towards

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<sup>290</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 2A.

<sup>291</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p326.

<sup>292</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p38.

<sup>293</sup> *BG* 14 October 1937, p4; *BG* 23 December 1938, p10; *BG* 24 January 1939, p1; *BG* 25 January 1939, p9; *BG* 1 February 1939, p4; *BM* 22 December 1938, p7; *BP* 23 December 1938, p2.

<sup>294</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p180.

Nazi Germany, and these 'Peace Campaigns' proved instrumental in reviving fascist fortunes in the city.

Irvine decided to maximise the limited resources at his disposal by concentrating BUF interest on the municipal wards of Ladywood and Erdington for the duration of his tenure as leader of the Birmingham BUF<sup>295</sup>. Sales drives in New Street every Friday and Saturday were retained as a regular feature of local Mosleyite activism, as was the long established Sunday meeting in the Bull Ring. As the focus of extensive previous organisational work Ladywood was a natural choice. The selection of Erdington is somewhat surprising, apparently made on the basis of an amenable response to a series of meetings held by Officer Gilmore on Erdington Village Green on Saturday evenings in late April and early May<sup>296</sup>. Good crowds had been attracted, particularly among the younger generation; and BUF literature had sold well. The fascists had great hopes of progress in this locality<sup>297</sup>.

Linehan writes on the subject of the BUF and the Spanish Civil War: 'The BUF did not involve itself overtly in [the conflict], although it undoubtedly sympathised with [Franco's] rebels against the Republican government'<sup>298</sup>. While recognising that the Spanish fascist movement constituted only a small section of the armed opposition to the Republican forces, the BUF wished the 'insurgents' well in their fight against 'the common enemy of mankind'<sup>299</sup>. Among the majority of BUF branches around the country involvement in the Spanish conflict was limited to national 'Mind Britain's Business' mobilisations demanding British non-intervention. For a handful of branches, however, an additional opportunity was presented by the government's acceptance into Britain in early June 1937 of 4,000 child refugees from the pro-Republican Basque region<sup>300</sup>. Mosley immediately launched a propaganda campaign in the BUF press denouncing the humanitarian gesture as an act of partisan bias that both contravened the government's pledge of

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<sup>295</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p95.

<sup>296</sup> *Blackshirt* 24 April 1937, p7; *Blackshirt* 1 May 1937, p7; *Blackshirt* 8 May 1937, p7; *Blackshirt* 22 May 1937, p7.

<sup>297</sup> *Blackshirt* 8 May 1937, p7.

<sup>298</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p120.

<sup>299</sup> *Blackshirt* 22 August 1936, p4.

<sup>300</sup> J. Fyrth, *The Signal was Spain. The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936 – 39* (London, Macmillan, 1986), p22.

neutrality and discriminated against underprivileged British children<sup>301</sup>. As more Basque child refugees arrived in the country over the course of the following three months BUF propaganda persistently depicted them as ungrateful and violent: 'thorough little pests'<sup>302</sup>.

The majority of the Basque child refugees were housed on the South Coast<sup>303</sup> but Birmingham City Council agreed to accept 100 youngsters into its protection<sup>304</sup>. The Lord Mayor of Birmingham set up his own Spanish Refugee Children's Fund which organised flag days and house to house collections. The contributions from this went to supporting the children's colonies which had been set up in Spain and to supporting the homes for the Basque children which had been established in and around Birmingham<sup>305</sup>. In protest the Birmingham fascists initiated a propaganda campaign under the slogan 'Britons before Basques' that lasted throughout the second half of 1937. Anti-refugee meetings staged in the Bull Ring in August attracted some of the largest crowds to ever gather for an outdoor meeting of the local BUF and reportedly aroused considerable sympathy and approval. Newspaper sales rose<sup>306</sup>. The Mosleyites claimed that during the final full week of August approximately two thousand people around the city heard the fascist case<sup>307</sup>. In September the established speakers were joined by William C. Luckin, a BUF member temporarily settled in Birmingham. Newspaper sales in New Street reached the highest figure for some time<sup>308</sup>. Pro-Nationalist Spain correspondence was sent to the local press<sup>309</sup>. In October all the main thoroughfares and outlying suburbs were heavily chalked with 'Britons before Basques'<sup>310</sup>.

The 'Briton before Basques' mobilisation reportedly met with a good amount of approval from people in Birmingham and the district BUF branches benefited from pushing forward Mosley's position of 'Britain First'. During the months of the campaign a slow but steady

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<sup>301</sup> *Blackshirt* 29 May 1937, p5; *Blackshirt* 19 June 1937, p3.

<sup>302</sup> *Blackshirt* 31 July 1937, p4; *Blackshirt* 7 August 1937, p4; *Blackshirt* 7 August 1937, p8; *Blackshirt* 14 August 1937, p1; *Blackshirt* 25 September 1937, p3.

<sup>303</sup> *Blackshirt* 25 September 1937, p3.

<sup>304</sup> *BG* 27 May 1937, p1; *BG* 18 June 1937, p6; *BG* 29 June 1937, p7.

<sup>305</sup> K. Myers and I. Grosvenor, 'Generous Help in Hard Times: Basque Children in the Midlands 1937 – 1940', *Birmingham Historian*, Vol.14 (1996), p8.

<sup>306</sup> *Blackshirt* 14 August 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 21 August 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 28 August 1937, p6.

<sup>307</sup> *Blackshirt* 28 August 1937, p6.

<sup>308</sup> *Blackshirt* 11 September 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 18 September 1937, p7.

<sup>309</sup> *BG* 8 September 1937, p6; *BG* 16 September 1937, p6.

<sup>310</sup> *BG* 2 October 1937, p7.

membership growth was maintained<sup>311</sup>. Special Branch recorded that by mid-November the active strength of the Birmingham BUF had risen to 70<sup>312</sup>. The fascist press claimed record numbers of members for recent years were attending the monthly General Meeting held at the Temple Bar<sup>313</sup> and described propaganda classes at the district headquarters taken by Luckin as being attended by excited members anxious to become speakers<sup>314</sup>. Local Mosleyites reported that the 'Britain First' message enjoyed a particular resonance among unskilled and skilled workers in the city<sup>315</sup>. If the majority of the new enlistments were indeed drawn from occupational sub-groups 1 and 2 listed in Table 3, Birmingham would conform to a suggestion by Linehan that the Mosley movement nationally during 1937 attracted more recruits of 'lower' social class status<sup>316</sup>.

From 1938 until summer 1940 the Birmingham BUF would maintain a steady growth in membership. New enlistments, although remaining relatively moderate in numbers, would accelerate from mid-1938 onwards as the local branches' passionate promotion of Mosley's peace agenda appealed to anti-war sensibilities.

During the opening months of 1938 the Birmingham BUF held meetings regularly in Ladywood and Erdington. According to the local fascists these events attracted good audiences and the average crowd size at regular gatherings in the Bull Ring was 200 - 300 people. Hundreds of leaflets and large numbers of back copies of newspapers were handed out. In Erdington special attention was given to distributing fascist literature to shops in accordance with N.H.Q. hopes to attract to the movement more private traders and small businessmen. Speaking at lunch-hour on a week day in the Bull Ring was tried and positive audience response ensured mid-day meetings became a regular feature<sup>317</sup>. The movement reported sales of literature at these meetings as very good<sup>318</sup>.

Self-belief was rising and the Birmingham BUF refused to lose its impetus when the

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<sup>311</sup> *Blackshirt* 27 November 1937, p6.

<sup>312</sup> NA: HO144/21064, p46. Special Branch Report 10<sup>th</sup> November 1937.

<sup>313</sup> *Blackshirt* 20 November 1937, p6.

<sup>314</sup> *Blackshirt* 27 November 1937, p6.

<sup>315</sup> *Blackshirt* 9 November 1937, p8.

<sup>316</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p167.

<sup>317</sup> *Blackshirt* 15 January 1938, p6; *Blackshirt* 22 January 1938, p6.

<sup>318</sup> *Blackshirt* July 1938, p5.

Birmingham Baths Committee abruptly rejected William Luckin's application to hire one of the several halls controlled by the City Corporation for a meeting. The reason given was 'a strong possibility of disturbances and consequent damage to the building'<sup>319</sup>. Furious, the fascists resolved to press ahead with the planned event. Despite the refusal by Birmingham Council of Victoria Road Baths, the scheduled meeting went ahead on an open-air site near the banned hall<sup>320</sup>. According to the local press the decision to ban the use of a public hall to the Birmingham BUF was not popular with all non-fascists in the city. It was reported many believed the Mosleyites were being unfairly treated as the hall was frequently let to other political groups including the Communists<sup>321</sup>. The local fascists attempted to exploit such feeling among the public and claimed that at meetings in the Bull Ring much sympathy would be gained from the crowd when the speakers criticised the local council for its 'flagrant discrimination'<sup>322</sup>.

The pace of activism quickened further with the appointment to Birmingham of Tommy Moran as part of a new National Inspectorate system<sup>323</sup>. Another fascist leader who conforms to Mandle's portrait, the 37 year old working engineer was one of the earliest members of the BUF and a principal lieutenant of Oswald Mosley. He was educated at a Roman Catholic School in Newcastle, apprenticed to a prestigious engineering company, and served in the Navy during the Great War and after as an engine-room artificer. During his service at sea he won the cruiser-weight boxing championship of the combined fleets. Before joining the Mosley movement he had been an officer of the Newcastle West Labour Party<sup>324</sup>. During his time as a BUF Organiser in South Wales<sup>325</sup> and Northampton<sup>326</sup> he had developed a reputation as a highly effective organiser and a redoubtable speaker. However, it was his fearless, sometimes reckless, attitude to opponents and readiness to place his body in harm's way that had secured him folk-hero

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<sup>319</sup> *BG* 20 January 1938, p7.

<sup>320</sup> *Blackshirt* 29 January 1938, p4.

<sup>321</sup> *BG* 21 January 1938, p6; *BG* 25 January 1938, p6.

<sup>322</sup> *Blackshirt* 29 January 1938, p4.

<sup>323</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 34b.

<sup>324</sup> *Blackshirt* 21 November 1936, p5.

<sup>325</sup> Cullen, 'Another Nationalism', p108.

<sup>326</sup> P. Coupland, 'The Blackshirts in Northampton, 1933-1940', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, Vol.53 (2000), pp71-82.

status in the movement<sup>327</sup>. Irvine and Moran quickly formed an excellent professional relationship and became close friends<sup>328</sup>.

The response of the Birmingham BUF to German troops marching across the Austrian border on 12 March 1938 was to increase the rate of street meetings held for the remainder of the month to five a week and lead to a march from the Stafford Street headquarters to the Barton Arms, Ladywood, where Corbet spoke to an audience of several hundred<sup>329</sup>. The militant streak of Irvine's regime resurfaced in this month when a cadre of fascists attempted to disrupt an anti-appeasement rally organised by the Left Book Club. A free fight seemed imminent between the Mosleyites and the anti-fascists until a large contingent of police intervened<sup>330</sup>. The actions of the Birmingham BUF enraged the local Communists and it was only tactful handling by the police and astute implementation of the Public Order Act that prevented the Birmingham far-left from re-implementing a 'physical force' campaign<sup>331</sup>. In April over a thousand people heard Irvine and Gough speak at the Bull Ring<sup>332</sup>.

'The Munich Crisis, the Czechoslovakian affair and the question of the Polish corridor all intensified local branch activity'<sup>333</sup>. On the evening of 30 October Mosley propounded his position on the vexed international situation at a meeting staged in the 'Tower Ballroom', Edgbaston, after the lessee, Mr Alfred Hall, had resisted pressure from Birmingham Council to induce him to cancel the letting of the hall to the BUF. Comments he made at the close of the gathering suggest Hall was a supporter of the Birmingham BUF<sup>334</sup>. The meeting, which was preceded by a march of 300 - 800 Mosleyites imported from London, Manchester and the Midlands<sup>335</sup>, was quite orderly and there was practically no heckling<sup>336</sup>. Mindful of the disastrous end to his previous appearance in the city, Mosley insisted no known Communist be admitted. Irvine took care of the

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<sup>327</sup> J. Hamm, *Action Replay. An Autobiography* (London, Howard Baker, 1983), p266.

<sup>328</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 34b.

<sup>329</sup> *Blackshirt* March 1938, p6.

<sup>330</sup> *BG* 19 March 1938, p1; *TC* 25 March 1938, p2.

<sup>331</sup> *BG* 7 April 1938, p4.

<sup>332</sup> *BG* 7 April 1938, p4.

<sup>333</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p99.

<sup>334</sup> *Blackshirt* November 1938, p2.

<sup>335</sup> *TC* 28 October 1938, p3.

<sup>336</sup> *BG* 31 October 1938, p7.

arrangements at the door<sup>337</sup>. On the invitation of Mosley a police presence undertook a search for weapons among the audience. 'He wanted no disorder on this occasion because of the nature of his speech. Since his last visit to the city his speech had changed considerably. International events gave this meeting a special significance for which Mosley wanted to portray a serious image'<sup>338</sup>. Mosley spoke for nearly three hours, his speech urging the audience to be on its guard against being dragged into a war which would destroy every idea and dream any one of them might have held. The fascist leader exhorted all Englishmen not to be swayed by the like or dislike of any foreign country and not to take sides in foreign quarrels, but to see what was in the interest of their own land and peace. 'The best foreign policy is to be strong and mind our own business'<sup>339</sup>.

Mosley's speech elicited an enthusiastic response from the 5,000 people present<sup>340</sup>. The fascist press claimed that less than one-tenth of those in the hall were actual BUF members<sup>341</sup>. While it is unclear what proportion of the audience could be defined as fascists or held sympathy for the movement, the BUF position warning against British intervention in international affairs held a potent appeal for sizeable numbers of a Birmingham population frightened during the Munich crisis by the council's public preparations for German air raids, particularly the decision that it was necessary to commence the task of distributing 957,700 gas masks, with fitting teams conducting house to house visits<sup>342</sup>.

Birmingham BUF members would hear Mosley speak again on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> July 1939 when a local contingent attended the huge BUF 'peace rally' at Earl's Court, London. Moran led the communal singing at the commencement of the event<sup>343</sup>. The Birmingham fascists had set out on the journey south from outside the newly acquired district headquarters at 30 Coleshill Street<sup>344</sup>.

The months just prior to the outbreak in September of World War II witnessed the

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<sup>337</sup> *TC* 28 October 1938, p3.

<sup>338</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p99.

<sup>339</sup> *BG* 31 October 1938, p7.

<sup>340</sup> *BG* 31 October 1938, p7; *BM* 31 October 1938, p10; *BP* 31 October 1938 p14.

<sup>341</sup> *Blackshirt* November 1938, p2.

<sup>342</sup> *BM* 19 October 1938, p6; *BP* 19 October 1938, p12.

<sup>343</sup> NA: HO144/21281, p155.

<sup>344</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 16A.



Birmingham BUF undertaking the most urgent and vital propaganda mobilisation in its seven year history. During this final 'Peace Campaign' 'activity was as pronounced as it was in the years of relative progress up to 1934'. The district branches grew rapidly in membership numbers. Publicity work increased accordingly. The Bull Ring became the centre of sizeable fascist anti-war meetings<sup>345</sup>. Leaflets including 'No War for Warsaw' and 'Mosley's Four Point Policy for Peace', were distributed<sup>346</sup>. Irvine recalled: 'At the outbreak of war we were holding our biggest meetings, getting new members and selling more papers'<sup>347</sup>.

Gottlieb found in her study of women and fascism that female participation in the Mosley movement nationally grew significantly in importance from 1938 to 1940 when the BUF increasingly became an anti-war organisation. 'Women members came into their own both [in some branches] taking over from men and by establishing a virtually all-female pressure group.' The tone of much of the fascist women's propaganda became 'decidedly more revolutionary' culminating in the 'Women's Peace Campaign' in February 1940. While the intention was that this campaign would spread outside its London base, Gottlieb found 'these smaller campaigns did not seem to materialize'<sup>348</sup>. Louise Fisher became Birmingham Women's District Leader in summer 1938<sup>349</sup>, taking over the position from a Mrs. Hays, a married woman who held 'very strong political views' but was forced to give up active membership through ill health though she encouraged her two sons to remain active in the branch<sup>350</sup>. Fisher recalled: 'In Birmingham we did not have a separate women's organisation for peace, but worked generally together [with the men]. We had a series of lunch-time meetings in the Bull Ring while we were still pushing for a negotiated peace, and women members could attend these, selling literature. We got quite a lot of support at these meetings'<sup>351</sup>.

On the outbreak of war, newly promoted to District Inspector<sup>352</sup>, Irvine persisted with the peace campaign. Audience sizes continued to grow. Some of the biggest fascist outdoor

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<sup>345</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p99.

<sup>346</sup> NA: HO144/21281, p53.

<sup>347</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p99.

<sup>348</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, pp59-61.

<sup>349</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 136x.

<sup>350</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p89; Cullen, *Four Women For Mosley*, p56.

<sup>351</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p62.

<sup>352</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 23a.

meetings ever held in the city were staged just after the outbreak of war. 'The war galvanised members and was an issue which was upper-most in the minds of the whole population – something which gained their interest...Impromptu street meetings could be held and interest among passers-by was assured. Almost daily members mingled with the crowds which were assured'. New enlistments mushroomed as activity rose. Brewer states that the number of active fascists engaged in propaganda work swelled to 100, which using Webber's ratio would produce a total membership of 250. Many of the new members were pacifists, drawn from organisations the BUF were working in concert with, including the Peace Pledge Union, Peace Society, Peace and Liberty Movement and the Quakers<sup>353</sup>. Not all veteran fascists were impressed by Mosley's opposition to the war however; as soon as war broke out the movement lost its patriotic glamour to some and a small number walked away from the Birmingham branch<sup>354</sup>. Such people were in the minority and the majority of Birmingham fascists disavowed the movement only when the detentions began in May 1940<sup>355</sup>.

An extensive series of outdoor BUF meetings was maintained in Birmingham during the first five months of 1940. The fascists were encouraged to be innovative in their political activities on the condition that they did nothing illegal. In April the leader of Yardley district, Frederick Head, began sending memorandums to Yardley parliamentary constituents, inviting membership of the BUF, enclosed with a copy of the fascist newspaper *Action*. Activism intensified in May<sup>356</sup>. A routine of two successful meetings a day was established in the Bull Ring. Audiences of 400-500 attended to hear Moran and Irvine speak. Copies of *Action* sold well among the audience. Pamphlets advocating negotiated peace were also popular. Violent opposition manifested on only one occasion. During a gathering on Saturday 13 May Irvine was attacked and stoned by Communists and his platform smashed<sup>357</sup>.

On 25 May an unknown assailant smashed the window of the district headquarters in

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<sup>353</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p100.

<sup>354</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 89b.

<sup>355</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 99b.

<sup>356</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 18A.

<sup>357</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 25a.

Coleshill Street<sup>358</sup> but at this stage in the life of the BUF in the city an isolated assault by anti-fascists was shrugged aside. Local fascist concern was directed towards the prospective actions of the State. When news broke in Birmingham on the 24 May 1940 that on the previous day Mosley and eight of his closest lieutenants had been interned<sup>359</sup>, Moran and Irvine decided to continue actively pushing Mosley's policy until Special Branch arrived to inflict upon them the same fate as their leader. The final BUF meeting in the Bull Ring occurred on Sunday 28 May 1940 when 500 people heard Moran speak<sup>360</sup>.

On 3 June 1940 the Chief Constable of Birmingham received from the Home Office notification that the Secretary of State had made orders under Regulation 18b (1a) of the Defence (General) Regulations, 1939, directing the arrest of Birmingham BUF members Samuel Lawrence Irvine, age 25, Thomas Patrick Moran, age 39, and Joseph Benjamin Monk, age 45, and ordering their conveyance to Liverpool Prison<sup>361</sup>. When Birmingham CID executed the order the following day all three men were located and arrested without resistance<sup>362</sup>. That same evening they were transported north and lodged in Walton Gaol<sup>363</sup>. The arrest and incarceration of these men signified the extinction of the BUF in Birmingham.

The two academics to have assessed BUF fortunes in Birmingham both concluded that fascist efforts in the city were fatally undermined by a strong recovery in the local economy that began in 1934. In a cursory assessment of BUF performance outside of London, Skidelsky asserted 'He [Mosley] ...made little headway in his old stamping-ground of...Birmingham where heavy industry started booming once home-market recovery got under way'<sup>364</sup>. Brewer believed that at the beginning of 1935 an economic recovery was 'well at hand' rendering fascist policy 'no longer relevant' as improving employment figures calmed any radical potential in Birmingham politics<sup>365</sup>. By November 1934 Birmingham's unemployment figure was 6.8%, against a national average of 16.6%. By 1936 the number of unemployed was 15,742; the lowest ever recorded in

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<sup>358</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 18A.

<sup>359</sup> *BG* 24 May 1940, p1; *BM* 24 May 1940, p2; *BP* 24 May 1940, p4.

<sup>360</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 23a.

<sup>361</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 18A.

<sup>362</sup> *BM* 4 June 1940, p5; *BG* 5 June 1940, p5; *BP* 5 June 1940, p2.

<sup>363</sup> NA: KV2/1223, 20A.

<sup>364</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p326.

<sup>365</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p74.

the city up to then, and a labour shortage was being reported<sup>366</sup>. At this time the suburbs of south Birmingham were among the most prosperous areas in the entire country<sup>367</sup>. In September 1937 the percentage of Birmingham workers unemployed was 3%, the figure Beveridge would later consider to represent full employment<sup>368</sup>. 'Although there was a trade recession in Birmingham as in other parts of the country in 1938,...there was a revival in 1939 in which the rearmament programme played a large part'<sup>369</sup>.

However, both Skidelsky and Brewer underplay the strength of the Birmingham economy prior to the general national recovery of the second half of the 1930s. On the whole the inter-war years were a period of mild prosperity in Birmingham. Unemployment in Birmingham in the 1920s was not much above the pre-First World War figure of around 20,000<sup>370</sup>. When the shock-waves of the Wall Street Crash reached Britain triggering the economic crisis of 1929 – 1931 certain regions and industries were hit harder than others. 'The highest rates of unemployment were concentrated in areas of heavy industry, including coal mining, heavy engineering, ship building, textiles, and iron and steel manufacture. On the other hand London, the South East and parts of the Midlands were relatively protected, and some districts experienced comparatively boom conditions'<sup>371</sup>. Birmingham had the good fortune not to have the basic staple industries where downturn had been most marked at the basis of its economy. Its industrial diversity insulated Birmingham against the storm of the Depression, particularly the presence of the new growth industries of the time: electrics, plastics, and motor vehicle manufacture<sup>372</sup>. The completion of longstanding developments of a municipal airport at Eldon increased Birmingham's attractiveness to industry<sup>373</sup> and helped bring foreign firms to the city<sup>374</sup>. The bottom of the slump

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<sup>366</sup> E. Hopkins, *Birmingham: The Making of the Second City 1850 – 1939* (Stroud, Tempus, 2001), p145.

<sup>367</sup> G. Cherry, *Birmingham. A Study in Geography, History and Planning* (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 1994), p126.

<sup>368</sup> Hopkins, *Birmingham: The Making of the Second City*, p145.

<sup>369</sup> A. Briggs, *History of Birmingham, Vol II, Borough and City 1865 – 1938* (London, Oxford University Press, 1952), p290.

<sup>370</sup> Hopkins, *Birmingham: The Making of the Second City*, p145.

<sup>371</sup> Cherry, *Birmingham*, p125.

<sup>372</sup> Briggs, *History of Birmingham, Vol II*, p290; Cherry, *Birmingham*, pp126-127; Hopkins, *Birmingham: The Making of the Second City*, p144; B. Tilson, *Made in Birmingham: design and industry 1889 – 1989* (Studley, Brewin, 1989), p134.

<sup>373</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p73.

<sup>374</sup> Hopkins, *Birmingham: The Making of the Second City*, p289.

in Birmingham came in August 1931 when there were 76,000 people out of work. Even at this nadir in the city the average unemployment rate for the year was 17.7% of the workforce, as compared with the national figure for England of 20.7%<sup>375</sup>. While unemployment became more serious in England as a whole between 1931 and the BUF founding in 1932, the position improved steadily in Birmingham from September 1931 onwards<sup>376</sup>. Thereafter unemployment figures in Birmingham tumbled as a strong recovery began that continued to grow throughout the remaining years of the national depression and the rest of the decade. Birmingham, several historians have suggested, may be said to have led the national revival in employment after 1931<sup>377</sup>. Overtime was being worked again in the motor industry by September 1932<sup>378</sup>. 'In the Spring of 1933, when the Birmingham tyre firms were working to capacity, Birmingham touched its lowest unemployment figures since July 1930: 2.25 % of the population were receiving poor relief as against 7.38 % in Manchester, 8.72 per cent in Liverpool and 10.38 % in Glasgow'<sup>379</sup>. The figure in Birmingham of 6.4 % of insured persons unemployed in mid-1934 stood in stark contrast to that of the areas hardest impacted by the slump, with Gateshead recording 44.2 % unemployed, Merthyr Tydfil 61.9 %, and Jarrow 67.8 %<sup>380</sup>. 20,000 people were receiving poor law relief in Birmingham, or 2.22 % of the total population, against figures for the comparable cities of Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow, of 7.38 %, 8.7 %, and 10.38 % respectively<sup>381</sup>.

The Birmingham economy was, therefore, comparatively strong throughout the 1930s. And yet despite an economic backdrop of relative prosperity the Birmingham BUF during the period from the founding in October 1932 until its peak in mid-1934 enjoyed substantial growth and exerted a strong appeal over a significant number of local people. The Mosley movement in the second city was already in decline before the period identified as being the city's economic turning point by Skidelsky and Brewer.

The experience of a member of the local BUF who migrated to Birmingham from the

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<sup>375</sup> Cherry, *Birmingham*, p126.

<sup>376</sup> Briggs, *History of Birmingham, Vol II*, p289.

<sup>377</sup> Briggs, *History of Birmingham, Vol II*, p290; Cherry, *Birmingham*, p127.

<sup>378</sup> Hopkins, *Birmingham: Making of the Second City*, p145.

<sup>379</sup> Briggs, *History of Birmingham, Vol II*, p289.

<sup>380</sup> C. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (London, Methuen, 1955), p465.

<sup>381</sup> Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*, p118.

north of England in search of employment provides a possible explanation for the success of Mosleyite fascism in the city between October 1932 and mid-1934. That there was a marked movement of population into Birmingham in the first half of the 1930s is a testimony to the strength of the city economy<sup>382</sup>. One of these incomers was an unemployed steel worker from Sheffield. Steel, the dominant industry in Sheffield, was one of the staple industries severely damaged by the national economic slump, resulting in considerable unemployment. Many men left the city in search of work, including this man who walked to one major northern industrial city after another looking for employment without success. Attracted by tales of relative prosperity he headed south, finding work in Birmingham. Because the crisis of unemployment had featured greatly in his life before he arrived in 'prosperous' Birmingham, the fear of possible future unemployment dominated his social and political attitude. Disillusioned with mainstream parties who had proven themselves unable either to protect Britain from economic slump or capable of even alleviating, if not remedying, the mass unemployment afflicting huge swathes of the nation, a radical alternative exercised powerful attraction. In Birmingham the Sheffield man came to see fascism as, in his own words, 'salvation'. Explaining his motivation for joining the Birmingham BUF he stressed his fear of unemployment: 'Unemployment is the most degrading thing you can ever have. It's horrible to be unemployed. The collection of the dole is the most degrading act'. Mosley, the new recruit believed, understood the crisis of unemployment and had placed its eradication in rapid time at the heart of BUF ideology, recalling: 'Hope, this was my main aim – to help men by Mosley's policy of Britain First...Mosley knew there was a crisis and gave us hope...[Fascism] provided for the future, hope for a good life'<sup>383</sup>. Rawnsley found that a significant proportion of the early membership of the BUF in northern England was motivated to enlist by a personal dread of unemployment<sup>384</sup>.

A desire to avoid becoming unemployed, rather than discontent at the actual experience of being out of work, provides a cogent explanation for why large numbers of Birmingham people found the BUF appealing at a time when the second city was enjoying relative economic security.

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<sup>382</sup> Hopkins, *Birmingham: The Making of the Second City*, p145.

<sup>383</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p28.

<sup>384</sup> Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', p160.

While Birmingham experienced comparative protection from the depression many of its people never felt secure during the first half of the 1930s. A high proportion of the men and women in Birmingham had numerous and diverse ties with the neighboring Black Country towns and during the first nineteen months of the Mosley movement's existence observed with apprehension the severe unemployment afflicting these locations<sup>385</sup>. The Black Country was an area constituting the boroughs of Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley and Sandwell. Birmingham and the adjacent Black Country were often confused in the popular mind and widely regarded as together comprising the west Midlands region<sup>386</sup>. While only thirteen miles distant there is a marked contrast to be drawn between what happened in Birmingham and the experience of the Black Country during the period of the slump. While Birmingham was cushioned from the impact the Black Country felt its full force. In the Black Country the staple iron and coal industries had been in long-term decline even before 1914, and this decline continued throughout the 1920s, accelerated by the depression at the end of the decade. In 1931, when the unemployment average for the year in Birmingham was 17.7%, Dudley's figure was more than double this at 38.8%. Of the fifteen Black Country towns in 1931 only Smethwick had unemployment figures below the national average of 20.7%, at 18.9%<sup>387</sup>. The percentage of unemployment in the Black Country remained substantially above the national average until late 1934 and over 40% higher than the average in Birmingham. After this point the Black Country began to recover<sup>388</sup>. Brewer mentions evocatively many Birmingham people bearing witness to the severe economic problems plaguing the west Midlands towns located on Birmingham's very own 'doorstep' during the period of the depression: 'Scanning the face of the British menfolk once soiled by the grime of daily toil, people viewed hopelessness born of despair. The fears it could arouse, the hopes it could shatter, made it tragically suited to generate an atmosphere of crisis'<sup>389</sup>. In the opinion of many local people, like the Sheffield migrant mentioned above, the mainstream political parties had

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<sup>385</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p318.

<sup>386</sup> G. Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850 – 1939* (Wolverhampton, Integrated, 1998), p3.

<sup>387</sup> Hopkins, *Birmingham: The Making of the Second City*, p145.

<sup>388</sup> G. Walker, 'A Survey of the Industrial Population of Birmingham and the Black Country', in M. Wise (ed.) *Birmingham and its Regional Setting* (London, British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1950), p253.

<sup>389</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p18.

failed in their duties to protect Britain's economic welfare. Disillusionment with established politicians, horror at the social conditions caused by mass unemployment on display within close proximity, fear that the same fate that had befallen the Black Country towns could spread across the borough borders into Birmingham, pushed large numbers of Birmingham men and women to seriously consider radical political alternatives between October 1932 and mid-1934. The Sheffield-born fascist in Birmingham provides a solution as to why, when both offered radical alternatives in the city, he preferred the BUF to the Communist party. This man was deeply patriotic and believed communism was unpatriotic. Being haunted by the spectre of unemployment yet devoted to the country that placed him in that situation caused a dilemma: how to fight to improve conditions while remaining a patriot. 'The revolutionary patriotism of the BUF was the solution...Protest and patriotism coexisted in the BUF'<sup>390</sup>.

A resilient or recovering economy was not the reason the Mosley movement was ultimately a failure in Birmingham. The long-term failure of the Birmingham BUF rests upon the local branches losing and then being unable to regain credibility as a valid political alternative in the eyes of the Birmingham public. This loss of credibility was triggered initially by inadequate leadership pertaining to the Birmingham branches at both the local and national level. Cullen believes 'the real key' to building and maintaining a successful BUF branch was a high calibre branch leader, stating: 'The guarantee of the activity and strength of a branch was dependent more upon who led it than by the more passive attractions of policy and programme. With such a new organisation the local leaders had an importance out of proportion to their nominal position, even in such a leader orientated movement like the BUF'<sup>391</sup>. According to Cullen the BUF in the provinces often found itself sorely lacking good local leadership and branches were often hampered by having 'the wrong leader who failed to keep the branch's support, or a bad leader who created internal strife and made little attempt to increase membership'<sup>392</sup>. Cullen cites two major industrial cities as good examples of this. In Liverpool and Leeds there existed a high level of latent support for the fascist programme, yet the local BUF branches were undermined by bad

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<sup>390</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p18.

<sup>391</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940', p80.

<sup>392</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940', p93.



leadership. Successful branches enjoying sizeable membership were allowed to spiral into stagnation because the problem of a lack of leadership in the person of a new branch leader was not remedied<sup>393</sup>. The Birmingham BUF conforms to this paradigm, flourishing under the effective leadership it enjoyed in the period from its founding to mid-1934 until the incompetent leadership of Hill squandered the successful work completed by Ward and Chesterton and left the Mosley movement in Birmingham languishing in a parlous condition. Clearly BUF N.H.Q. were far from fully aware of the crisis afflicting the Mosley cause in Birmingham during the bulk of Hill's tenure or corrective measures would surely have been implemented much earlier. It appears that with regards to Birmingham there was a lack of attention paid to organizing and maintaining good leadership in the local branches. Cullen suggests neglect of this type was one of the main failures of the BUF as a political movement<sup>394</sup>. N.H.Q.'s failure to recognize the inadequacy of Hill's leadership when danger signs first began to emerge and its protracted delay in finding a resolution to the problem indicates the Birmingham branches operated with independence from the movement's political centre. The corollary of this, as Brewer recognized, is that the political centre failed to impose itself upon the Birmingham BUF<sup>395</sup>. This independence may have benefited the branches when guided by effective leadership, but combined with bad stewardship it accelerated the onset of decline and compounded stagnation.

The decision to promote Hill to the most senior position in the Birmingham BUF represented a devastating error of judgment by N.H.Q. Unable to consolidate the advances achieved by his predecessors, Hill's failure to maintain organizational legitimacy consigned the BUF to the periphery of Birmingham social, cultural, and political life. Most critically for the future prospects of the Birmingham BUF its local branches had accrued unsavoury reputations. The failure to shake off this acquired discreditable status and restore a public image of respectability among large numbers of Birmingham people accounts for the Mosley movement's limited impact in the region post-1934.

The enduring problem of poor reputation established under Hill was exacerbated by the

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<sup>393</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940', pp93-94, 99.

<sup>394</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940', p92.

<sup>395</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p111.

blackshirt response to the disruptive tactics of militant anti-fascists at the May 1935 Town Hall meeting. Unlike many localities around the country, anti-fascist activities among Birmingham men and women other than in the first year of the fascist presence was rarely militant, and even when it did become disruptive in ethos barely registered in terms of containing the BUF on the streets in Birmingham. The exception came at the Town Hall meeting where, significantly, the vast majority of fascist stewards had been imported from outside the region. On this occasion organized Communist opposition brought out the violence of the BUF stewards and saddled the local Mosleyites with the public blame for the disorder that inevitably ensued. Researchers on anti-fascist activity have shown that the militant Left frequently managed to impede effectively the BUF in this way elsewhere in the country<sup>396</sup>. The Town Hall meeting represented a catastrophe for the Birmingham BUF: it both undermined whatever morsel remained of its mainstream credibility by associating the local branches with violence in the minds of the Birmingham public and, most damagingly, induced what proved to be an insurmountable constraint to the Birmingham Mosleyites' pursuit of political legitimacy.

The Birmingham BUF at the time of the Town Hall meeting represented in no way a serious threat to the political establishment of Birmingham, but nonetheless, the overwhelming opposition inside Birmingham Council to the BUF impelled by the disorderly scenes at the Town Hall meeting terminated any hopes the local Mosley movement may have harboured of re-establishing itself in peacetime as a significant presence in the second city. The prohibiting of the Birmingham BUF from holding meetings in public buildings denied the local Mosleyites the means of exploiting to their full potential a series of issues upon which the local BUF position proved popular and thereby forced the Birmingham fascists to rely upon less respectable and effective street propaganda methods.

The inability to overcome powerful barriers to credibility during the second half of the

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<sup>396</sup> S. Cullen, 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.28, No.2 (1993), pp245-267; D. Renton, *Red Shirts and Black: Fascists and Anti-Fascists in Oxford in the 1930s* (Oxford, Ruskin College Library, 1996); H. Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1984); L. Kibblewhite and A. Rigby, *Fascism in Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, Aberdeen People's Press, 1978); N. Todd, *In Excited Times: The People Against the Blackshirts* (Whitley Bay, Bewick Press/Tyne & Wear Anti-Fascist Association, 1995); D. Turner, *Fascism and anti-Fascism in the Medway Towns 1927-1940* (Rochester, Kent Anti-Fascist Action Committee, 1993).

1930s meant that the space necessary for the Birmingham BUF to re-emerge as a successful mass movement was effectively closed down. While the sizeable approving crowds and high newspaper sales the Birmingham BUF were able to generate during this period in response to various propaganda mobilizations illustrates, as Webber suggests<sup>397</sup>, a considerable reservoir of sympathy for fascist policy even in the days when the movement itself was in dire straits, the irretrievable loss of political credibility translated into a refusal by the vast majority, even when the local branches operated under efficient leadership, to formally associate themselves with the Mosley movement. For those who preferred to remain outside the movement, to enlist was to embrace an unacceptable level of disrepute, or a sympathy towards BUF ideas failed to extend to approval of the Mosleyites and their movement, which was beyond the pale. A revival in official membership did occur before the war but it was, as Brewer correctly points out, minor and itself a product of the war<sup>398</sup>. It is possible to say Brewer was guilty of understatement when he concluded that 'given no war, fascist activity, planning, organisation and support in Birmingham...did not bode well for parliamentary success in the 1940 general election'<sup>399</sup>.

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<sup>397</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership', p579.

<sup>398</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p149.

<sup>399</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p149.

### Chapter Three: The BUF in Stoke-on-Trent, 1932 – 1940.

#### 1. 1932 – 1934.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the city of Stoke-on-Trent in the county of Staffordshire was the largest and most populous municipality in the north Midlands<sup>1</sup>. Stoke-on-Trent came into being first as a borough in 1910 with the amalgamation of the six clustered towns of Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Longton, and Fenton<sup>2</sup>, and it was granted the status of a city in 1925 as a belated recognition of its size and economic importance<sup>3</sup>. The 1931 decennial Census reveals Stoke-on-Trent encompassed 21,209 acres<sup>4</sup> and its population was enumerated at 276,639<sup>5</sup>. The city was divided into three parliamentary constituencies: Burslem, encompassing the towns of Burslem and Tunstall; Hanley, encompassing only the town of the same name; and Stoke, the largest of the three Divisions, encompassing Stoke, Fenton, and Longton<sup>6</sup>. Described as ‘one of the notable products of the Industrial Revolution’<sup>7</sup>, Stoke-on-Trent had been one of the main industrial areas in Britain and the centre of the country’s great earthenware and porcelain industry since the eighteenth century<sup>8</sup>. By the early 1930s there were hundreds of pottery works and porcelain factories operating in the city<sup>9</sup>. The production of ceramics dominated economic life in each of the six towns<sup>10</sup> and the quality of Stoke-on-Trent pottery and porcelain had earned and retained a

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<sup>1</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Stafford (Part 1)* (London, H. M. Stationery Office, 1933), pviii.

<sup>2</sup> V. Bird, *Staffordshire* (London, B.T. Batsford, 1974), p187; J. Jenkins, *Stoke-on-Trent: Federation and After* (Stafford, Staffordshire County Council, 1985), p252; M. Raven, *Staffordshire and the Black Country* (Stafford, Michael Raven, 1988), p300.

<sup>3</sup> D. Baker, *Potworks: The Industrial Architecture of the Staffordshire Potteries* (London, Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, 1991), p1.

<sup>4</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Stafford (Part 1)* Table 3. Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings, p3.

<sup>5</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Stafford (Part 1)* Table 2. Population 1911-1931, and Intercensal Variation, p2.

<sup>6</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Stafford (Part 1)* Table of Constitution by Local Government Areas p15; *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Stafford (Part 1)* Table 7 Population and Parliamentary Electors, p15.

<sup>7</sup> J. Thomas, *The Rise of the Staffordshire Potteries* (Bath, Adams & Dart, 1971), p3.

<sup>8</sup> M. Greenslade and D. Stuart, *A History of Staffordshire* (Chichester, Phillimore, 1965), pp85-87; A. Meen, *Staffordshire* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), p159.

<sup>9</sup> Meen, *Staffordshire*, p160.

<sup>10</sup> D. Palliser, *The Staffordshire Landscape* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), p220.

worldwide reputation<sup>11</sup>. A prominent local historian writes: 'The story of Stoke[-on-Trent] is basically that of a community of potters, whose skill and business acumen have in the course of two centuries made Stoke[-on-Trent] the twelfth largest city in the United Kingdom and extended its reputation in the field of ceramics far beyond the shores of Britain'<sup>12</sup>. In recognition of the dominant livelihood in the area locals often referred to the six towns as 'the Potteries', and this colloquial designation had become interchangeable with the official title of Stoke-on-Trent<sup>13</sup>.

Although Oswald Mosley was in line to be the heir to a Staffordshire baronetcy and estate, and spent much of his childhood at his grandfather's house Rollaston Hall in the county<sup>14</sup>, the close personal and political ties he enjoyed with Stoke-on-Trent prior to the BUF came through the political career of his first wife, Cynthia, better known as 'Cimmie'. During 1925 Cynthia Mosley accepted an offer from the Stoke-on-Trent Labour party to stand for parliament in the Stoke Division in the city. Cynthia Mosley possessed great courage and considerable powers of oratory. During the three years in which she nursed the city in preparation for the 1929 General Election she became extremely popular in the local Labour party and among the people of Stoke-on-Trent, especially the poor. Her personality assisted her acceptance. de Courcy writes: 'All her life she had had the ability to get on with all sorts and kinds of people, and to make herself loved by anyone who knew her well. When she knocked at the poorest doors she evoked not resentment at her obvious wealth and her title but admiration and liking'<sup>15</sup>. Cynthia Mosley's popularity in Stoke-on-Trent was confirmed in the 1929 General Election when she 'romped'<sup>16</sup> to victory against an incumbent Tory who had enjoyed a strong 4,500 majority and had allegedly employed the tactic of spreading false rumours about wealth and duplicity. She won a 7,800 majority, and in doubling the Labour vote from 13,000 to 26,000 recorded one of the biggest swings to Labour in the country<sup>17</sup>. The Mosleys instantly accepted the mantle of being the

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<sup>11</sup> D. Sekers, *The Potteries* (Aylesbury, Shire, 1981), p11.

<sup>12</sup> J. Jenkins, *A History of the County of Stafford Volume III* (London, Oxford University Press, 1963), p80.

<sup>13</sup> W. Morland, *Portrait of the Potteries* (London, Robert Hale, 1978), p10.

<sup>14</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p9; Mosley, *Rules of the Game*, p1; Mosley, *My Life*, pp1-23; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp30-31.

<sup>15</sup> A. de Courcy, *The Viceroy's Daughters. The Lives of the Three Curzon Sisters* (London, Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2000), pp142-144.

<sup>16</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p177.

<sup>17</sup> Mosley, *Rules of the Game*, pp117-118.

Potteries' pre-eminent political and society couple. Busy as he was conducting his own successful election campaign in Birmingham, Oswald Mosley contributed little to Cynthia's efforts in Stoke-on-Trent, but in the afterglow of victory swiftly acquired affection and admiration among swathes of the city's population to rival, though never quite equal, the esteem in which his wife was held. Skidelsky relates how vital a role Cynthia played in this process: 'Whereas 'Tom' [Oswald Mosley] tended to be remote and deficient in warmth, often giving people the impression of using them for his own ends, Cynthia was emotional, warm, transparently sincere. She disarmed suspicion, added the human touch, smoothed personal relations and...came to stand as a guarantor for Mosley's own sincerity'<sup>18</sup>. When Mosley formed the New Party, Stoke-on-Trent quickly became its heartland. A choir from the city regularly performed at New Party meetings around the country<sup>19</sup>, and Stoke-on-Trent is notable, along with Birmingham for being home to one of the few New Party youth clubs opened in the Provinces<sup>20</sup>. 3,000 people, with queues outside the door, heard Cynthia Mosley speak in place of her husband, who was unwell and unable to attend, at the inaugural New Party meeting in the city staged on the evening of 9 March 1931 at the King's Hall<sup>21</sup>. The organised left-wing disruption that pursued New Party speakers around the country<sup>22</sup> soon made itself known in the audience but Cynthia's furious defence of herself against indignant heckling won much acclaim from the peaceful majority<sup>23</sup>. The results of the 1931 General Election reveal the strength of support the Mosleys and the party had achieved in the city. Cynthia was due to defend her seat as the New Party candidate in the Stoke Division but three months pregnant and debilitated by nervous exhaustion, the product of spearheading the New Party national campaign during her husband's ongoing illness, she was ordered by her doctors to take a complete rest. Skidelsky writes of her withdrawal: 'Cynthia was the one New Party candidate (apart from Mosley himself) who might have got elected, since her following was

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<sup>18</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p84.

<sup>19</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p248.

<sup>20</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p49.

<sup>21</sup> de Courcy, *The Viceroy's Daughters*, p162.

<sup>22</sup> Cross, pp47-49; de Courcy, *The Viceroy's Daughters*, pp163-176; Mosley, *My Life*, pp284-303; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp274-276.

<sup>23</sup> de Courcy, *The Viceroy's Daughters*, p163.

very strong in Stoke'<sup>24</sup>. The New Party stood in 24 constituencies but results nationally were disastrous. The New Party retained its deposit in only two contests: Merthyr and Stoke-on-Trent. Mosley had stood in Stoke-on-Trent in place of his wife but shouldering virtually the whole burden of public speaking for the New Party around the country could commit only five days of campaigning to the city. Despite this handicap, coupled with the national and local press supporting the National Government, the smother tactics of the Left, and facing a three way contest involving strong Labour and National Conservative candidates, support for the fledgling party and its leader turned out in force. Large enthusiastic crowds attended his public meetings and although he finished bottom of the pile his candidacy won 10,534 votes, or a 24% share of the total vote. Labour came second with 13,264 votes. The National Government candidate Mrs Ronald Copeland was elected with 19,918<sup>25</sup>. While the Merthyr candidate attracted 300 more votes than his leader he had enjoyed the considerable benefit of local Tory support<sup>26</sup>.

In contrast to his failure in Birmingham to engender personal support which endured irrespective of the ideas he promoted, the popularity of his wife in Stoke-on-Trent had aided the formation of a deep seam of mass loyalty to Sir Oswald Mosley during the late 1920s that survived his departure from mainstream politics and provided the foundation of sizeable early BUF membership in the Potteries.

It is the contention of the little research conducted on the New Party at the local studies level that whilst Mosley was touring Italy in search of fresh ideas following the terrible showing at the General Election the organisation of the party collapsed. Skidelsky writes: 'Following its electoral debacle the New Party virtually ceased to exist as a political party. The central office in Great George Street was closed down; the regional organisations were disbanded and their officers retired'<sup>27</sup>. If local organisation survived Mosley's sojourn in Mussolini's State then it deteriorated drastically or ceased to exist in the wake of the decision to wind up the ailing party

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<sup>24</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p274.

<sup>25</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp274-278; Mosley, *My Life*, p286.

<sup>26</sup> Cullen, 'Another Nationalism', p106; Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, pp86-87; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp278.

<sup>27</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p280

on 5 April 1932<sup>28</sup>. Cullen has written that at the time of the founding of the BUF all that remained of the New Party days were some of the members and key officers who had joined in 1930 and 1931<sup>29</sup>. These are certainly not accurate descriptions of events in Stoke-on-Trent. The branch was disbanded in public only. Privately the Stoke-on-Trent New Party continued to exist: maintaining the bulk of both its membership and infrastructure, and disseminating its ideas. Mr H. Miles, regional organiser of the New Party, had remained active in the district<sup>30</sup>. As Pugh has written, 'though depressed, Mosley recognised that the New Party had simply been a victim of the turn of events; it had not had time to capitalise properly on the crisis following the breakdown of the Labour government. His mind soon focused on the next stage'<sup>31</sup>. The intact Stoke-on-Trent New Party patiently awaited the conclusion of his deliberations. Loyalty was to the man. For a sizeable number of the members Mosley would be followed regardless of what form his new vehicle assumed. Upon its formation the BUF was effortlessly grafted onto the pre-existing New Party structures in the district. A Deputy Branch Officer admitted when questioned by the local press: 'The branch was formed originally as a branch of the New Party, and there has been no break in its existence'<sup>32</sup>. Political work began in earnest. Miles, the former New Party organiser, boasted: 'His [Mosley's] following in the Stoke Division is as keen as ever...We have enthusiastic officials in every ward who have been working quietly and effectively'<sup>33</sup>.

Mosley acknowledged the loyalty of his supporters in Stoke-on-Trent by deciding upon the city as the location in which to address the first indoor meeting under the auspices of his new organisation. Permission was acquired to let the King's Hall, Stoke, for a public meeting to be held on Sunday evening 23 October 1932<sup>34</sup>. Expensive advertisements of a size usually reserved for football matches were placed in the premier local newspaper the *Evening Sentinel*<sup>35</sup>. A circular letter advertising the meeting was sent to all members of the New Party in the district. Prior to the meeting the chairman and secretaries of the various ward committees of the former

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<sup>28</sup> Milligan, "'The British Union of Fascists' Policy in relation to Scotland', p2.

<sup>29</sup> Cullen, 'Another Nationalism', p106.

<sup>30</sup> *Evening Sentinel* (hereafter *ES*) 18 October 1932, p1.

<sup>31</sup> M. Pugh, '*Hurrah for the Blackshirts!*', p124.

<sup>32</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7.

<sup>33</sup> *BG* 18 October 1932, p1.

<sup>34</sup> *ES* 12 October 1932, p2.

<sup>35</sup> *ES* 18 October 1932, p2; *ES* 21 October 1932, p2.



party took tea with Sir Oswald and Lady Cynthia Mosley at the North Stafford Hotel, after which they engaged in an informal talk<sup>36</sup>. On the night of the meeting a packed hall listened intently as Mosley explained the objects of the BUF. His new movement, he stressed to the audience, was the New Party 'developed and carried further – improved'. At the last election he laid before the country a set of ideas to meet an emergency but the country would not accept them. These ideas 'had now been developed into a permanent programme, and a political system and philosophy of life which he believed could save the future of this country'<sup>37</sup>. Mosley insisted his watchword remained the old New Party slogan 'Britain buys from those who buy from Britain'<sup>38</sup>.

The period from the founding of the national movement until mid-1934 was one of progress for the Stoke-on-Trent BUF. During what Skidelsky has described as "this phase of "respectable" fascism"<sup>39</sup> the prospects for the Mosley movement in the Potteries looked bright: the Stoke-on-Trent branches enjoyed a sustained growth in membership. The first BUF branch headquarters in Stoke-on-Trent was 'a large building' at 84 Normacot Road, Longton, opened in October 1933. The Organiser in charge of the fascist movement in the city was local man Spanton Reid. His deputy was W. E. Bailey<sup>40</sup>. Not long afterwards a second branch was opened with appropriate fascist ceremony at 14 Glebe Street, Stoke<sup>41</sup>.

Local BUF propaganda campaigning in Stoke-on-Trent from October 1932 until the end of 1934 focused on explaining how the fascist corporate economic system was designed to solve all problems afflicting the pottery industry and thus satisfy demands for a higher standard of living. In speeches at outdoor and indoor meetings, lectures at the branch headquarters, letters to the local press and literature disseminated to the local public, this propaganda theme was outlined. A corporation, it was argued, was to be established for the pottery industry consisting of the following: representatives of the pottery manufacturers; representatives of the pottery workers, who would be elected directly from the industry; and representatives of the consuming interests. It would be the duty of the corporation to grade all manufacturers and agree on a price for the

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<sup>36</sup> *BG* 18 October 1932, p1.

<sup>37</sup> *ES* 24 October 1932, p5.

<sup>38</sup> *ES* 24 October 1932, p5.

<sup>39</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp322-323.

<sup>40</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7.

<sup>41</sup> *Blackshirt* 5 – 11 January 1934, p3.

various products. It would then be a criminal offence to buy or sell below the fixed price. 'Thus competition would be based on quality and design, and not on undercutting, as at present'. The corporation would decide whether it was necessary to continue to import foreign pottery, and if they arrived at a negative decision, all such goods would be excluded from British shores. The Stoke BUF affirmed that the fascist aim of increasing wages over the whole field of industry would enable the people of Britain to pay a price for their pottery that would ensure: '(a) A fair wage for the worker. (b) A fair price to the consumer. (c) A fair profit for the manufacturer'<sup>42</sup>.

Stoke-on-Trent would be one of the first areas in the country to establish a section of the FUBW. Its mandate in the city was to deal with problems of unemployment in the pottery industry. The administrative machinery was implemented in early January 1934 by a Propaganda Officer Tynan, who also arranged meetings and political classes<sup>43</sup>. At the end of the same month Deputy Branch Officer A. V. Edwards was appointed FUBW Area Organiser<sup>44</sup>.

The Stoke-on-Trent BUF preferred to organise quietly during 1932 and 1933 and enjoyed a cautious respectability among the social and political elites in the district that would endure until the Olympia scandal. Formal fascist participation was accepted at popular local traditional events such as church parades, where representatives of diverse but mainstream interest groups ranging from the political to the religious and social, marched in a carnival-style procession alongside costume-wearing schoolchildren. On Sunday 24 December 1933 detachments from the Longton and Stoke branches marched together in a local Stoke church parade. After the church service the fascists marched to the Stoke Cenotaph, where Fascist Young, with an escort of Fascists Murray and Starkey, placed a wreath on the Memorial. On Christmas Day a detachment from Stoke proceeded to Longton and participated in a similar church parade there<sup>45</sup>. At least one 'fascist baptism' was arranged in the district. E. Hulme, leader of a Unit at the Longton branch, and his wife, also a member, christened their baby boy 'Oswald' at St. John's Church, Longton, in honour of the fascist leader. A large number of members of the Longton branch attended the

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<sup>42</sup> *ES* 3 March 1933, p5; *ES* 17 June 1933, p6; *ES* 27 October 1933, p8; *ES* 23 February 1934, p6; *ES* 9 March 1934, p6; *ES* 28 November 1934, p6; *ES* 2 December 1934, p6.

<sup>43</sup> *Blackshirt* 5 – 11 January 1934, p3.

<sup>44</sup> *Blackshirt* 26 January – 1 February 1934, p4.

<sup>45</sup> *Blackshirt* 5 – 11 January 1934, p3.

service and afterwards lined up outside and gave the fascist salute when the party left the church. In his study of fascism as a sub-culture, Spurr identifies the aesthetic politicisation of such conventionally apolitical social rituals as baptisms as playing an important role in the establishing of a sense of fascist identity and community<sup>46</sup>. The Stoke-on-Trent fascist baptism was reported in a respectful tone alongside other worthy district occasions of note in the diary section of the local press: an indication of the established image of propriety surrounding the branch<sup>47</sup>.

Mosley personally remained respected, if not necessarily admired or liked, in Stoke. The Tory-supporting *Evening Sentinel* praised his intellect: the local newspaper reviewed neutrally *The Greater Britain* but remarked 'every point in this remarkable plan for national reconstruction is closely reasoned'. Parallels were drawn between BUF ideas and those of the New Party espoused during Mosley's Stoke election campaign: 'Throughout Sir Oswald's statement of the system of government as visualised by the British Union of Fascists runs the "workshop instead of talkshop" which he made so prominent a feature of his election campaign in Stoke'<sup>48</sup>. The Mosleys were a subject of interest to local people. Without fail the fascist leader was referred to in the familiar 'Sir Oswald'. The diary section of the press reported bouts of ill health<sup>49</sup>.

An association with Cynthia Mosley was an undoubted benefit to the movement in the area. The popularity of the ex-local MP endured undiminished. Her presence at her husband's side at the King's Hall meeting, in spite of ill health, had prompted genuinely warm appreciation. Cynthia Mosley was struggling to come to terms with her husband's new political trajectory<sup>50</sup> and very rarely publicly shared any sympathy with fascism, but true to his description of her as 'my steadfast, ever loyal and able colleague in the tough existence of politics'<sup>51</sup> she summoned up a brief endorsement, although more in praise of her husband as a man than of his new venture, that conceivably persuaded some of the uncertain minds in the hall to align themselves with the fascist cause. She stated that in his political career, Sir Oswald had stuck to his convictions, and

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<sup>46</sup> M. Spurr, "'Living the Blackshirt Life": Culture, Community and the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940' *Contemporary European History*, Vol.12, No.3 (2003), pp305-322.

<sup>47</sup> *ES* 26 February 1934, p4.

<sup>48</sup> *ES* 30 September 1932, p6.

<sup>49</sup> *ES* 21 November 1932, p6.

<sup>50</sup> de Courcy, *The Viceroy's Daughters*, p178.

<sup>51</sup> Mosley, *My Life*, p111.

had had the courage to state them and the intelligence to do so in a form understandable to the people. Such a combination of courage and intelligence was what was needed<sup>52</sup>. Cynthia Mosley's death in London on 16 May 1933 following an operation for acute appendicitis and peritonitis triggered an outpouring of sympathy for Mosley in Stoke that softened the attitude of some critics towards the fascist leader. The *Evening Sentinel* produced a long obituary fulsome in its praise of the deceased<sup>53</sup>. Sincere condolences were offered to 'devoted' husband Sir Oswald who it was believed was seldom away from his wife's bedside during her final illness. Political opponents who regarded Cynthia Mosley with affectionate esteem but held her husband in contempt wrote of their sincere sympathy with Sir Oswald: 'Our hearts go out...in this his hour of sadness and sorrow. Stoke-on-Trent is a typically English community, and I am sure, will share...in this expression of deep regret and sympathy.' Others paid tribute to the late Lady, before adding: 'We would like Sir Oswald Mosley to know that every man and woman in this district sincerely sympathises with him'<sup>54</sup>.

In her study of women's participation in British fascist movements Gottlieb found that while there was no typical BUF woman member, many of the female recruits' prior political experience lay in the Conservative party<sup>55</sup>. Little mention is made of previous connections to the New Party. A legacy of the Cynthia Mosley-headed New Party in Stoke-on-Trent to the local BUF was a significant female following. The participation of women in the activities of the Stoke-on-Trent branches corresponds to the findings of Durham and Gottlieb that stress the important activist role played by women in the BUF and the Mosley movement's radicalism on women's issues<sup>56</sup>. The Stoke-on-Trent branches vigorously pursued the recruitment of women, asserting 'we have as many intelligent, good women in our district as anywhere else'<sup>57</sup>. In a contradiction of Lewis' assertion that the BUF espoused 'a doctrine of profound anti-feminism' seeking to consign females to 'the nether regions of domesticity'<sup>58</sup>, fascist speakers at weekly meetings advocated a

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<sup>52</sup> *ES* 24 October 1932, p5.

<sup>53</sup> *ES* 17 May 1933, p7.

<sup>54</sup> *ES* 17 May 1933, pp6-7.

<sup>55</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, pp13-14.

<sup>56</sup> Durham, *Women and Fascism*, p170; Gottlieb, 'Women and Fascism in Inter-war Britain', p77.

<sup>57</sup> *ES* 16 February 1934, p6.

<sup>58</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, p53.

woman's right to work and equal pay in the pottery industry<sup>59</sup>. Female Mosleyites wrote letters published in the local press. The people of Stoke-on-Trent were informed: 'Fascism stands for emancipation of women. We are against the exploitation of their services in industry. Women are to be recognised, not pushed into the background as hitherto...Therefore it is the duty of all women to join their local organisation at once, before it is too late'<sup>60</sup>. A Women's Section was organised at the Longton headquarters by Miss E. Allcock. Meetings were held every Monday at 7:30. The women had their own room in which they received lectures on BUF ideology. Female members marched in a separate 'ladies parade' at St. John's Church<sup>61</sup>.

Until early 1934 organised opposition to the BUF in Stoke-on-Trent came exclusively from the tiny local Communist party. Mosleyite propaganda campaigning was diligently ignored by Stoke-on-Trent Labour and Conservative parties, both hoping in the words of Skidelsky to 'kill fascism by ignoring it'<sup>62</sup>. The local Communists, by contrast, immediately announced upon the initiation of weekly BUF outdoor meetings coinciding with the opening of the respective branch buildings in October 1933 that they were 'going to prepare themselves' to challenge the fascists and threatened 'there will be trouble'. True to their word the Communists began disrupting BUF meetings and physically assaulting individual fascists. The Stoke-on-Trent Mosleyites did not respond in kind to this 'physical force' campaign and this one-sided confrontation established a pattern that would be repeated throughout the existence of a BUF presence in the city. Eager to maintain a respectable image, local fascist leader Reid responded to Communist charges that the Stoke-on-Trent BUF employed weapon-wielding 'trained fighters' in its ranks by declaring in the local press: 'Physical fitness is one of the ideals of Fascism, and every member is expected to keep himself fit; with this objective a certain amount of boxing is indulged in. Every Britisher should be capable of defending himself if attacked. The defence the Fascist relies upon is his own fists. No Fascist is allowed to carry a "kosh" of any description....Fascism aims to build up character and nothing is more degenerating than to carry a coward's weapon'<sup>63</sup>. Violent

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<sup>59</sup> *ES* 6 March 1934, p6.

<sup>60</sup> *ES* 16 February 1934, p6.

<sup>61</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7; *ES* 16 February 1934, p6.

<sup>62</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p365.

<sup>63</sup> *ES* 12 December 1933, p6.

Communist disruption at a BUF meeting in Hanley Market Square on a Saturday night in early December 1933 induced the Watch Committee to investigate the question of whether to permit future meetings to be held. After consultation with the Stoke police, the Committee concluded 'the Fascists ought to be as free as anyone else to hold their meetings' and granted permission for BUF meetings to continue on the condition the police supervised the location<sup>64</sup>. Police supervision proved unnecessary however as the local Communists soon thereafter ceased disrupting local fascist meetings and would not return to the use of direct physical action until the transformed political atmosphere of the second half of the decade. The local press suggested that the violent strategy had induced sympathy among many Stoke-on-Trent residents for the fascist movement, with anti-Communists, believers in free speech, and the apolitical apparently expressing disgust at the far-Left's tactics and voicing respect for a movement that was in their opinion willing to stand its ground within the law in the face of rowdy provocation<sup>65</sup>.

At the beginning of 1934 the Stoke-on-Trent BUF radiates an impression of energetic yet genteel fascism. Inside the Longton headquarters the most important part of fascist activities was speakers' classes, where speakers were trained in fascism, with *The Greater Britain* as the main text-book. Lectures were given practically every day. Physical training was directed by the head of the Defence Force, Mr H. Downward. One room of the building was especially assigned for members to play games such as skittles. There were concerts on Saturdays and Sundays and a library in one room where *Fascist Week* and the *Blackshirt* were available. The branch officers gave orders from the orderly room. Every member immediately he or she set foot on the doorstep was under orders and had to take turn in cleaning the windows. The headquarters was open from 11am to 11pm and different men cleaned the place voluntarily from 9am to 11am. Every member saluted when entering the building. Members saluted when they entered the orderly room, and every member had to put in a book the time of entering and leaving, whether he or she was in uniform or mufti, rank, and to which branch he or she belonged. An orderly officer was appointed for duty each day and he had a guard. Only the officers of the branch and members of the

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<sup>64</sup> *ES* 8 December 1933, p7.

<sup>65</sup> *ES* 9 December 1933, p3; *ES* 12 December 1933, p6; *ES* 13 December 1933, p6; *ES* 14 December 1933, p8.

Defence Force wore uniforms. The branch was entirely self-supporting and no salaries whatever were paid. Football matches were played against the other branch in Stoke. The Longton branch also had plans to run a cricket team and hold week-end camps at nearby scenic Dovedale<sup>66</sup>. A Ramblers Club had been formed within the branch whose members distributed BUF literature on their walks<sup>67</sup>. Outdoor meetings were held two or three times a week and a contingent of blackshirts were regulars at the monthly parade at St. John's Church, Longton<sup>68</sup>.

Membership in Stoke-on-Trent at this time numbered at the minimum more than 509 active members, and at least 500 non-active members. Quite a number of schoolboys from the local state schools had joined the Youth Section<sup>69</sup>. The local branches expressed delight at the interest displayed during public meetings and the enthusiasm shown by the audiences. A number of 'prominent business people' in the city from occupational sub-group 7 allocated to the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social class and occupational sub-group 14 from the 'elite or upper-middle' category listed in Table 3 were reportedly inquiring about BUF policies and examining closely the economic system of the Corporate State<sup>70</sup>. The number of activists propagandising on the streets rose steadily. Six new blackshirt Units were formed at the end of January in the Stoke branch<sup>71</sup> and another five formed during February in Longton<sup>72</sup>. Many of these men assisted in weekly sales drives that the BUF claimed were being held with much success. An expanding rank and file necessitated promotions at the officer level. At Stoke: Fascists G. Starkey and G. Harrison were made Section Leaders, Fascist A. J. Austin became a Sub-Branch Officer, and Fascist K. Molina ascended to Assistant Propaganda Officer. A Miss Heath was appointed Branch Organiser of the Women's Section. At Longton Fascist J. Holmes was made a Section Leader, and Fascists N. B. Swann and A. Smith became Assistant Propaganda Officers<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7.

<sup>67</sup> *Blackshirt* 23 – 29 March 1934, p3.

<sup>68</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7.

<sup>69</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7.

<sup>70</sup> *Blackshirt* 12 – 18 January 1934, p3.

<sup>71</sup> Under the command of Unit Leaders; A. Bloor, T. Heath, A. Dewsnap, A. Parkes, S. Wooliscroft, and J.W. Clewes, respectively. *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 February 1934, p2.

<sup>72</sup> Under the command of Unit Leaders; E. Hulme, J. Budworth, W. N. Scotton, T. E. Jones, and H. Alcock, respectively. *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p4.

<sup>73</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 February 1934, p2; *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p4; *Blackshirt* 9 – 15 March 1934, p4; *Blackshirt* 23 – 29 March 1934, p3.

The fascist movement in Stoke-on-Trent was flourishing. Having established a substantial footing in Stoke-on-Trent plans were drawn up for expansion into neighbouring Rough Close, Meir, Barlaston, and Stone. Progress in the FUBW fortified confidence. While only a small number of unemployment cases had been tackled by the section's activists they had won every one<sup>74</sup>. The BUF believed it had arrived as a significant force in Stoke-on-Trent, declaring proudly: 'Fascism is undoubtedly a subject of paramount importance in this district'. Optimism was transforming into expectancy. It was predicted solemnly: 'the Potteries will soon go over enthusiastically to Fascism'<sup>75</sup>.

An increasing public profile prompted belated concerns among the local Labour and Conservative parties about the attraction of Mosley's brand of fascism in Stoke-on-Trent. The two parties identified different solutions to the challenge posed by the BUF in early 1934. The Conservatives took a more relaxed attitude than their left-wing rivals and fell into the camp described by Northern Organiser Reynell Bellamy: staunch Conservatives who were heard to say that while not wanting Mosley in power they hoped his rise would startle the lethargic national party leader Stanley Baldwin toward more radical Tory ideas<sup>76</sup>. The leadership of the local Conservatives attributed the growth of fascism nationally to the Mosleyites 'playing upon the fears of many Conservatives with some success'. These fears were that Socialism was encroaching within the leadership ranks of all the major Parliamentary parties. The Stoke-on-Trent Tories' solution was to pay the BUF little regard and instead concentrate on moving their own party towards 'a greater Conservative Party' shorn of its 'timid, apathetic and semi-Socialist members'<sup>77</sup>. The Stoke-on-Trent Labour party and affiliated socialist organisations by contrast believed the local BUF should be criticised through the medium of the local press. J. F. Price, President of the Staffordshire Federation of Labour Parties, assumed a lead role. Anti-BUF criticism manifested primarily in two distinct lines of argument. Firstly, fascism was an un-British concept that had

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<sup>74</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7.

<sup>75</sup> *Blackshirt* 12 – 18 January 1934, p3.

<sup>76</sup> R. Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley* (Unpublished manuscript), p105.

<sup>77</sup> *ES* 20 February 1934, p5.



brought economic misery to Germany and Italy<sup>78</sup>. Secondly, Mosley's ambition was to install himself as all-powerful dictator by force<sup>79</sup>. Initially the tone of the anti-fascist position was measured and polite. The response of the Stoke-on-Trent BUF was to seek the moral high-ground, declaring that it would not by contrast attempt to deride other political parties: 'It is for the people themselves to judge the parties for whom they have previously voted. Nowadays, I think we are all sufficiently intellectual to do this'<sup>80</sup>.

The Labour party criticism of fascism and the BUF seems to have had no detrimental effect on the growth of the Mosley movement in Stoke-on-Trent and an air of insecurity began to appear among the local labour movement leadership. In early March 1934 Price invited prominent local fascist S. T. Dunn to arrange a public debate in Longton between a representative of the local BUF and a well-known Stoke-on-Trent socialist but included a condition to which he was surely aware the Mosleyites would never agree: all proceeds raised at the event should be sent as aid to Austrian socialist workers injured during recent violent clashes with Austrian fascists<sup>81</sup>. Confident of their debating abilities the Stoke-on-Trent fascists proved eager to pursue the opportunity of getting the better of their Socialist rivals. A compromise was suggested wherein the Stoke-on-Trent BUF would agree to participate in a public debate if the proceeds were channelled 'to one of the many deserving institutions that cater for the needs of British workers'<sup>82</sup>. Price, however, insisted on his stipulation<sup>83</sup>. After much thought the Stoke-on-Trent BUF declined, as Price obviously hoped it would, citing in the words of Area Propaganda Officer Swann, a reluctance to 'help swell the funds of foreign socialists'<sup>84</sup>. An official statement released by the local BUF explained: '[we] refuse to let the insistence of Mr J. F. Price lead [us] to support a move in favour of international Socialism, when the policy of [our] movement is a national one. His

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<sup>78</sup> *ES* 20 February 1934, p5; *ES* 26 February 1934, p4; *ES* 1 March 1934, p6; *ES* 2 March 1934, p6; *ES* 12 March 1934, p4; *ES* 13 March 1934, p6.

<sup>79</sup> *ES* 26 February 1934, p4; *ES* 2 March 1934, p6; *ES* 8 March 1934, p6; *ES* 9 March 1934, p6.

<sup>80</sup> *ES* 2 March 1934, p6.

<sup>81</sup> *ES* 2 March 1934, p6.

<sup>82</sup> *ES* 5 March 1934, p6.

<sup>83</sup> *ES* 6 March 1934, p6.

<sup>84</sup> *ES* 5 March 1934, p6.

insistence, however, compels me to wonder to what extent this country would have been involved with the Austrian situation, if the Labour Party had been the Government of the day<sup>85</sup>.

A buoyant Stoke-on-Trent BUF was further boosted by two highly successful public meetings addressed by Mosley and Director of Research William Joyce respectively and held within a fortnight of each other. Both events were previewed in the diary sections of the *Evening Sentinel* and for the Joyce meeting the local fascist branches invested in expensive large advertisements in the newspapers' public notices columns<sup>86</sup>.

As Cullen has noted a personal appearance by the charismatic Mosley consistently guaranteed a packed audience, if not an enthusiastic reception<sup>87</sup>, but a clamour to hear the less well-known Joyce indicates the scale of interest in fascism in the Potteries. On 25 March 1934 a capacity audience of several thousands of local men and women packed Longton Town Hall to grant William Joyce an uninterrupted and enthusiastic hearing as he delivered an address that explained at length the fascist corporate economic system<sup>88</sup>. The Stoke-on-Trent fascists had eagerly anticipated the visit of Mosley and happily voiced expectations 'that there will be a large crowd.'<sup>89</sup> The excited local fascists were not disappointed when on the evening of 25 March a 'great gathering' of a 4,000-strong capacity audience filled the King's Hall, Stoke, to listen to Mosley deliver his speech. According to the journalist covering the event for the *Evening Sentinel* a larger venue would have been filled without difficulty. Stoke-on-Trent men and women flocked to hear the fascist leader. The hall was filled long before the meeting was due to start, there being a large queue waiting early in the evening. Mosley was given an enthusiastic reception. The meeting passed orderly and uninterrupted throughout. In a comprehensive review of the Corporate State that lasted over two hours it was Mosley's stressing of the importance of developing and protecting the pottery home market that roused the loudest round of applause heard during the address<sup>90</sup>. The success of the two meetings delighted the fascists. The Stoke-on-Trent BUF believed the gathering illustrated the trend of public opinion in the city. It asserted

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<sup>85</sup> *ES* 9 March 1934, p6.

<sup>86</sup> *ES* 22 March 1934, p9; *ES* 23 March 1934, p2; *ES* 24 March 1934, p2.

<sup>87</sup> Cullen, 'Another Nationalism', p110.

<sup>88</sup> *ES* 26 March 1934, p7.

<sup>89</sup> *ES* 14 February 1934, p1.

<sup>90</sup> *ES* 9 April 1934, p5, 6.

proudly: 'Bitterness was entirely absent, and no doubts exist in the minds of those who know the political tendencies of the Potteries, that the area is ripe for Fascism'<sup>91</sup>.

Rattled Stoke-on-Trent Socialists responded to Mosley's visit by hardening the tone of their anti-fascist rhetoric during April 1934. In an attempt to stir up religious opinion against the BUF it was claimed fascism sought to deny freedom of thought as preparation to replace Christianity with a martial paganism<sup>92</sup>. And in an act revealing of deepening frustration and anxiety within its senior ranks, the Chairman of the Stoke-on-Trent Labour Party took to publicly praising the contemporary parliamentary and economic situation in Britain<sup>93</sup>. His glowing descriptions both delighted and flabbergasted local supporters of the National Government but undermined the propaganda work of a number of his fellow Stoke-on-Trent socialists who were forcefully presenting the Mosleyites as agents of a capitalist system in crisis<sup>94</sup>.

According to the public pronouncements of these socialists the Stoke-on-Trent BUF was at this time recruiting primarily among the 'public schoolboy' and 'university student' sons of affluent Conservatives in the area<sup>95</sup>. Belonging to occupational sub-groups 11 and 12 respectively listed in Table 3, these young men are classified as being 'elite or upper-middle' in social status. Whether this suggestion from the local socialists was the product of empirical observation or merely an assumption based on the contemporary Marxist view of fascism as the reactionary arm of capitalism's social elite seeking to prevent the historical ascent of socialism is unclear<sup>96</sup>.

While the Stoke-on-Trent BUF had consistently insisted it was enlisting people from across the social spectrum<sup>97</sup> the evidence suggests that up until mid-January of 1934 the membership of the local branches appears to have been drawn from the occupational sub-groups which comprise the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' and 'elite or upper-middle' social class

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<sup>91</sup> *Blackshirt* 13 – 19 April 1934, p3.

<sup>92</sup> *ES* 19 April 1934, p7.

<sup>93</sup> *ES* 12 April 1934, p7.

<sup>94</sup> *ES* 14 April 1934, p3; *ES* 16 April 1934, p4.

<sup>95</sup> *ES* 26 February 1934, p4; *ES* 22 April 1934, p4.

<sup>96</sup> On the contemporary Marxist analysis of fascism see D. Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism. Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-War Period* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1983).

<sup>97</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7; 28 February 1934, p6; *ES* 2 March 1934, p6; 14 March 1934, p6; *ES* 26 March 1934, p7.

categories respectively in Table 3. Core support for the Stoke-on-Trent BUF during the first year or so of its existence came from members of the old New Party which the historiography suggests would have been youthful former Conservatives, a sizeable proportion of whom were university students<sup>98</sup>. As the local fascist branches established a higher profile the rate of recruitment had 'gone up by leaps and bounds', with growth sufficiently rapid that by early January 1934 membership had reached nearly 1,000<sup>99</sup>. The local press reported that the bulk of non-active members were businessmen who, as has often found to be the case in the existing major regional studies<sup>100</sup>, felt unable for commercial reasons to profess their new political allegiance publicly<sup>101</sup>.

However, with the advent of Rothermere's sponsorship came a substantial flow of recruits that can be allocated to the 'lower' social class category in Table 3<sup>102</sup>. At the end of May 1934 the Security Service reported that during the prior few months membership of the Stoke-on-Trent BUF had swelled further and the majority of these new recruits were 'working men'<sup>103</sup>. These members from occupational sub-groups 1 and 2 were employed as unskilled and skilled manual labour in the works and factories of the pottery industry. Unemployed former pottery workers were also being attracted into the ranks of the local BUF<sup>104</sup>. The major regional studies produced by Rawnsley and Linehan reveal a significant 'lower' social class intake among the BUF membership in northern England and east London respectively and suggest the majority of these fascists were drawn from non-unionised sections of the labour market<sup>105</sup>. In the Stoke-on-Trent pottery industry relations between the employers and employees were heralded by the National Society of Pottery Workers as a model to which the rest of the country should aspire<sup>106</sup>. Co-operation was

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<sup>98</sup> Dorril, *Blackshirt. Sir Oswald Mosley*, pp162-188; Nicholson, *Diaries and Letters, vol. 1: 1930-39*, p75; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p249.

<sup>99</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7.

<sup>100</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p229; Mitchell, 'Fascism in East Anglia', p205, 283; Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', pp150-165.

<sup>101</sup> *ES* 15 February 1934, p7.

<sup>102</sup> *ES* 2 March 1934, p6.

<sup>103</sup> NA: HO144/20141, p316. Report on the Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland.

<sup>104</sup> *ES* 2 March 1934, p6.

<sup>105</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp195-230; Rawnsley, 'Membership of the British Union of Fascists', pp150-165.

<sup>106</sup> *ES* 19 March 1934, p4.

sufficiently friendly for the employers in the city in the form of the Pottery Manufacturers' Federation to actively encourage workers to join the local trade union<sup>107</sup>. This cordial relationship was a source of concern for many Conservatives in Stoke-on-Trent<sup>108</sup> and the subsequent reaction of large swathes of the local BUF membership to the Olympia scandal suggests many of the unskilled and skilled workers attracted to the Mosley movement in the city were drawn from the 'lower' class Conservative tradition common to areas of industrial England<sup>109</sup>. Rawnsley found that 'lower' class Mosleyites came from a Conservative background as often as from a Labour one<sup>110</sup>. If indeed a sizeable number of 'lower' social status recruits in Stoke-on-Trent were drawn from a Conservative heritage deeply suspicious of trade unionism, the BUF acted in the Potteries, as Linehan has demonstrated it did in the East End of London, as 'a rival focus of allegiance for high numbers of local workers who, for various reasons, rejected the traditional organisations of the Labour movement'<sup>111</sup>.

Nearly 900 Stoke-on-Trent members of the BUF attended the mass Olympia rally staged in London on the evening of 7 June 1934<sup>112</sup>. If it is assumed that this figure relates only to active members, as defined by a willingness to be publicly associated with the Mosley movement, then utilizing Webber's advocated ratio of one active member to one-and-a-half non-active members would number the total membership of the BUF in Stoke-on-Trent at this time at a minimum of 2,250.

## 2. 1934 – 1940.

The period immediately preceding the Olympia meeting represents the high watermark of fascist hopes in Stoke-on-Trent. BUF membership in the city in the wake of the violent events in London dropped dramatically by at least two thirds. By the end of June the Stoke-on-Trent Labour party

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<sup>107</sup> *ES* 26 March 1934, p6.

<sup>108</sup> *ES* 16 May 1934, p7.

<sup>109</sup> E. Nordlinger, *The Working Class Tory: Authority, Deference and Stable Democracy* (London, MacGibbon & Kee, 1967); F. Parkin, 'Working-Class Conservatives: A Theory of Political Deviance', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.18, No.3 (1967), pp278-290.

<sup>110</sup> Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', pp150-165.

<sup>111</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p216.

<sup>112</sup> *ES* 8 June 1934, p1.

reported local BUF membership had plummeted to around 300<sup>113</sup>. Although it is unclear whether this figure represents whole membership or simply active, either would suggest a rapid exodus.

The almost instantaneous haemorrhaging of membership cannot be explained solely by adverse press coverage. The mass departure was not noticeably encouraged by the local press. The *Evening Sentinel* reported neutrally on the Olympia disorder and refrained from officially apportioning blame to any side. Unlike many provincial newspapers it failed to produce an editorial on the event. Subsequent repercussions such as Mosley speeches, Labour deputations, and Parliamentary debates on the subject were covered but always as press association stories without commentary<sup>114</sup>. While national press coverage is impossible to discount as a factor in the deterioration of the Stoke-on-Trent branches, Pugh has effectively challenged 'the received opinion' that posited the vast bulk of national press coverage was hostile and its influence debilitating to BUF fortunes<sup>115</sup>.

An explanation for the exodus can be found in the Stoke-on-Trent members' experiences of the Olympia meeting. The 900 members who attended the London gathering travelled in about 60 buses to the capital on the afternoon of the rally. They arrived in London at five o'clock and went to the BUF headquarters in Sloan Square to march in parade to Olympia. At headquarters the Stoke-on-Trent fascists were informed that Communists from different parts of the country had organised a party of 4,000 – 5,000 protestors. This was confirmed by some Metropolitan police officers who met the Stoke-on-Trent Mosleyites half way to the Olympia hall and warned them what was happening outside the building. Concerned at the news the Stoke-on-Trent fascists decided that the parade should split up, and they made their way to the hall in groups of three and four. Many of the Stoke branch members acted as stewards and found themselves at the heart of the violent disorder for which the rally would become infamous. One of them, Albert John Buckley, aged 17 of 64 New Street, Hanley, sustained serious internal injuries when struck across the stomach with a flag pole by an assailant while assisting another man in carrying a

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<sup>113</sup> Questionnaire on Local Fascist Activities, LP/FAS/34/16.

<sup>114</sup> *ES* 8 June 1934, p1; *ES* 8 June 1934, p11; *ES* 9 June 1934, p1; *ES* 11 June 1934, p1; *ES* 11 June 1934, p7; *ES* 12 June 1934, p1; *ES* 14 June 1934, p1; *ES* 14 June 1934, p1; *ES* 26 June 1934, p1; *ES* 27 July 1934, p7.

<sup>115</sup> M. Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate,' *Historical Journal*, Vol.41, No.2 (1998), pp529-542.

woman to first aid who had fainted in the crush<sup>116</sup> The force of the blow sent him tumbling down about nine stairs and he may also have been kicked. Buckley was transported by ambulance to West London Hospital and was detained until 9 June<sup>117</sup>. His father, John Albert Buckley, was also a member of the Stoke branch and serving as a steward. Five minutes after rushing to his son's rescue Buckley was making his way back towards the platform when a man struck at him with a walking stick, but warned in time by a woman he ducked out of the way. Another disturbance was going on at the time involving Stoke-on-Trent fascists. One man climbed up to the roof and a searchlight was brought in use to locate him. A member of the Stoke branch, Boot Harrison, started climbing up stanchions towards the roof and was followed by another Stoke Mosleyite, Reg Glover. Between them they managed to get the man down and put him outside. The Stoke-on-Trent party reached home about 8:30 the next morning<sup>118</sup>.

The events of the Olympia meeting appear to have come as a jarring culture shock to the majority of the Stoke-on-Trent Mosleyites. That is not to say fascist opinion in the city, as conventional interpretation would have it, 'suddenly woke up to the real nature of fascism and recoiled from its brutality'<sup>119</sup>. The Stoke-on-Trent fascists insisted stewards had been the victims, not the perpetrators, of violence. In an interview with the local press it was declared: 'When our leader commenced to speak there was a disturbance and our stewards, acting on instructions previously given, gave two warnings to each person responsible for the interruptions before putting them outside. Several of the people who were causing the trouble struck out at our stewards who, of course, defended themselves....Not one of our lads did anything to start the disturbance. All the trouble was caused by the other men'. There would have been no sympathy for the anti-fascist cause that had put the teenage Buckley into hospital; one of the more serious cases of the 63 blackshirts Mosley claimed required medical treatment for injuries<sup>120</sup>. The almost immediate plummet in membership suggests the majority who departed were 'Rothermere fascists'; those recruits identified in the historiography as disaffected ex-Conservatives, patriotic

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<sup>116</sup> *ES* 8 June 1934, p1.

<sup>117</sup> NA: HO144/20141, p379.

<sup>118</sup> *ES* 8 June 1934, p1.

<sup>119</sup> Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p161.

<sup>120</sup> Mosley, *My Life*, p297.

anti-socialists and politically inexperienced youngsters<sup>121</sup>. Indeed, Stoke-on-Trent BUF active membership had effectively doubled during the period of the press baron's sponsorship of Mosley. Skidelsky wrote of the impact the disorder at Olympia had on the average Rothermere fascist in the audience: 'First there is no doubt that many violent acts took place which were deeply shocking to those who witnessed them. Secondly, although political violence on the scale of Olympia had occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it had virtually disappeared by the 1920s. People relatively new to politics or those unconnected with politics were shocked at this echo from half-forgotten times'<sup>122</sup>. The clashes may have had a greater effect on Stoke-on-Trent Mosleyites than on many of their comrades based in other parts of the country. A good six months had passed since the Communists in the city had last agitated against the local BUF, and in that time the level of fascist recruitment had enjoyed its most concentrated period of growth. Accustomed to peaceful debate and grudging respect from opponents, physical confrontation was something a minority of Stoke-on-Trent Mosleyites would have encountered during their time in the movement, especially of a violent nature. It seems that in common with the majority of 'Rothermere fascists' who had flocked to the movement around the country, many of whom believed that in the BUF they would find a more virile form of Conservatism, the Stoke-on-Trent variety realised the Mosley movement had abruptly become too exciting for their taste<sup>123</sup>.

The membership of the Stoke-on-Trent BUF remained constant at around 300 until January 1935. As few fresh members enlisted, it is assumed these 300 people were the hardcore of ex-New Party supporters attracted to the Mosley movement prior to the period of Rothermere's endorsement; men and women whose loyalty to the fascist leader stretched back over more than three years and had survived the trials and tribulations, sometimes violent, encountered during his previous party's existence. For many of these supporters the events at Olympia would have seemed reminiscent of the storm of organised left-wing hostility unleashed against the New Party during the solitary by-election and single General Election it contested. These men and women had refused to allow their political allegiance to be, as Mosley put it in his autobiography, 'mobbed

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<sup>121</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p125.

<sup>122</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p377.

<sup>123</sup> Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p152.



out of existence'<sup>124</sup> in 1931 and remained resolutely faithful to him in the six months that followed Olympia. A possible reason for the lack of new recruits in this period can be located in answers given in response to the 'Questionnaire on Local Fascist Activities' distributed by the Labour Party on 12 June 1934. Labour N.H.Q. was informed that the Stoke-on-Trent branches were a hot-bed of sexual licentiousness with loose women in plentiful supply. "It only wants a red light on the door!"<sup>125</sup> Gottlieb interprets these breathless comments to mean it was the fascist women who were engaged in sexual impropriety, writing of Stoke-on-Trent and a case in the Brixton branch where four female Mosleyites were expelled from the movement because of their 'immoral conduct': 'With these incidents in mind, the common taunt to women members selling literature on the streets as 'Mosley's whores' can be seen in context'<sup>126</sup>. Whether the person who answered the questionnaire was indeed writing of female members or some other category of woman visitor to the Stoke-on-Trent branches is largely irrelevant: the description is highly dubious. There exists no mention of sexual misconduct involving Stoke-on-Trent fascists of either gender in the local press and if the story was with foundation it is inconceivable local journalists would have chosen not to report on it. In addition it is extremely unlikely a dissolute atmosphere would have been permitted to develop, indeed the Labour Questionnaire suggests the behaviour was overt, under the administration of A. K. Chesterton. A man whose every action was governed by an absolute commitment to ideological concepts the underlying essence of which Griffin diagnoses as the 'palingenetic myth'<sup>127</sup>, Chesterton believed sexual impropriety one of a variety of modern cultural forms symptomatic of a post-war decadence which reflected the spreading sickness of non-fascist Western civilisation and culture. A recurring theme in many of his articles contributed to the BUF press, Chesterton regularly denounced the 'lunatic obsession with sex', the 'sex-obsessed individual', and the 'sex pervert' he believed heralded British decline and undermined the fascist quest for national regeneration<sup>128</sup>. Appointed Officer-in-Charge Midlands

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<sup>124</sup> Mosley, *My Life*, p286.

<sup>125</sup> Questionnaire on Local Fascist Activities, LP/FAS/34/16.

<sup>126</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p55.

<sup>127</sup> On the concept of the 'palingenetic myth' see Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, pp32-36.

<sup>128</sup> *Fascist Week* 5 – 11 January 1934, p8; *Fascist Quarterly* Vol.11, No.1 (January 1936), p65.

Area in April 1934<sup>129</sup> with responsibility for the supervision of all branches within the Staffordshire and Warwickshire counties<sup>130</sup>, Chesterton kept a characteristically diligent eye on the Stoke-on-Trent Mosleyites from his base in Birmingham<sup>131</sup>. His authority in the city was reinforced in early May when as part of a general re-organisation of the new Midlands Administrative Unit he appointed Birmingham Deputy Branch Officer Sutton to the newly established position of Officer-in-Charge Potteries Sub-Area and promoted Stoke Area Propaganda Officer K. J. Molineaux to be Officer-in-Charge Stoke branch<sup>132</sup>. With these personally handpicked officers as Chesterton's representatives in Stoke it is doubtful the city branches could have adopted characteristics unbecoming of BUF morality. If indeed in its campaign against the growth of fascism in the Potteries the Stoke-on-Trent Labour Party had resorted to spreading malicious stories it says much about the public perception of the BUF in the wake of the Olympia scandal that these damaging claims were believed wholeheartedly by many local people. Among average citizens the era of respectability for fascism in the area had been broken under the blows inflicted at Olympia. The Stoke-on-Trent fascist clubs swiftly acquired a 'sinister' reputation locally for being 'part thieves' kitchen and part bawdy house'<sup>133</sup>. While this air of ill repute may have deterred respectable citizens from joining, the branch appears to have maintained high standards of entry that barred any disreputable elements from enlisting. While there is no evidence to suggest the Stoke-on-Trent BUF was ever home to violent men seduced by the allure of 'cosh and castor oil' as described by Brewer<sup>134</sup>, the likely unfounded stories of fascist iniquity in Stoke-on-Trent proved sufficiently potent to persist long enough into the post-war years to be picked up by Cross and subsequently repeated by Brewer<sup>135</sup>.

The Stoke-on-Trent BUF response to hostile publicity in the wake of Olympia and the decision of the Rothermere press group to sever its links with Mosley was to retreat from the

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<sup>129</sup> *Blackshirt* 6 – 12 April 1934, p4; NA: HO144/20140, p118.

<sup>130</sup> *Blackshirt* 1 June 1934, p8.

<sup>131</sup> *Blackshirt* 6 – 12 April 1934, p3.

<sup>132</sup> *Blackshirt* 18 – 24 May 1934, p4.

<sup>133</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p138.

<sup>134</sup> J. Brewer, 'The British Union of Fascists: Some Tentative Conclusions on its Membership', in S. Larsen, B. Hagtvet, and J. Mylkebus (eds.) *Who Were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1980), p548.

<sup>135</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p108; Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p88.

streets and lick its wounds. A self-imposed cooling off period saw the local fascists confine themselves to the comforting routine of internal branch life. This move proved initially beneficial, enhancing further a longstanding sense of solidarity forged in an atmosphere of political dissidence subjected from inception to abuse and attack. Heightened camaraderie insulated the remaining Stoke-on-Trent fascists from the kind of discord erupting in other BUF branches around the country<sup>136</sup>. Internal decay in the form of quarrels, damaging personal rivalries and administrative ineptitudes was conspicuous by its absence. When financial stringency forced the closing of the Longton headquarters and a merging of the branches under the roof of the Glebe Street building, dissension was studiously avoided. However, in this enclosed environment the 'genteel' fascism prevalent in Stoke-on-Trent since the movement's founding gradually shifted by degrees into full-blown 'social club' fascism. This development presents a paradox: in many parts of the country the flood of recruits drawn to the Mosley movement during the period it received extensive praise in the Rothermere press had engendered a change in ethos whereby many branches began to resemble mainstream political party clubs, particularly of the Conservative kind. 'For such members were only interested in social activities, not taking our message onto the streets. Eventually, dozens of branches...had become nothing more than social clubs', lamented a prominent Mosleyite<sup>137</sup>. Social club fascism took hold in Stoke-on-Trent only after the departure of the local Rothermere fascists. Its advent roughly coincides with the arrival of D. N. Revett to replace a N.H.Q.-bound Chesterton as temporary Officer-in-Charge Staffordshire and Warwickshire<sup>138</sup>. Revett was reportedly an excellent propaganda officer, and a very genial man to work with, but no administrator<sup>139</sup>. His authority was also distracted by a bitter feud with the Organiser of the Birmingham BUF. Under his administration activism collapsed and the BUF became an almost invisible presence in Stoke-on-Trent. Anti-fascists believed victory had been won. Local BUF propaganda campaigning was reduced to the occasional letter to the local press extolling the merits of the economic system of the Corporate State in rejuvenating the pottery

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<sup>136</sup> NA: HO144/21042, p215. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No. III Developments during August/September 1934.

<sup>137</sup> A. Beavan, 'The Welsh Security Officer', in Christian (ed.), p58.

<sup>138</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 November 1934, p9.

<sup>139</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p238. Report by Major Cleghorn on Birmingham Branch 5.12.34.

industry<sup>140</sup>. No fascist meetings or cases of disorder arising out of fascist meetings were recorded during October and November 1934<sup>141</sup>. As social club fascism seized a tighter grip on the remaining Stoke-on-Trent branch discipline began to break down in isolated cases. The most serious incident occurred near the end of the year when a fascist of long membership and previous senior rank named Smith disappeared taking the branch funds amounting to £15 with him<sup>142</sup>.

During January 1935 'Mosley carried through an extensive reorganisation, centralizing the control of branches through a system of headquarters inspectors, inaugurating strict financial controls and turning the bias of the Movement...towards a more conventional plan for winning power at a general election'<sup>143</sup>. In accordance with this new spirit of austerity local branches were to be re-organised so as to consist of the barest necessities: a small, administrative office, and a room in which political activities could be organised. Members should be on the streets engaging in activism<sup>144</sup>. Inspectors from N.H.Q. were dispatched to supervise the transition. A. K. Chesterton was appointed to undertake the tour of the Midlands. Arriving in Stoke-on-Trent, Chesterton was horrified to discover, in the words of Cross, 'the extent to which blackshirts passively waited in their clubs for the revolution instead of sallying outside to propagate the Fascist cause. The apparition of the tense, eager Chesterton must have been a great shock'<sup>145</sup>. He found a fascist drinking and social club with separate bars marked 'Officers' and 'Blackshirts'. Along the counters ran tankards, each bearing the name of its owner<sup>146</sup>. Political activity had fallen to a very low ebb<sup>147</sup>. From Chesterton's furious perspective, Baker suggests, clearly the Stoke-on-Trent members had come to view fascism as just another kind of British Conservatism<sup>148</sup>. Chesterton closed the club on the spot, dismissed the whole branch leadership

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<sup>140</sup> *ES* 28 November 1934, p6; *ES* 2 December 1934, p6.

<sup>141</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p272.

<sup>142</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p240. Report by Major Cleghorn on Birmingham Branch 5.12.34.

<sup>143</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p137.

<sup>144</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p324.

<sup>145</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, pp137-138.

<sup>146</sup> Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, p126.

<sup>147</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p88.

<sup>148</sup> Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, p126.

and expelled the entire 300 strong membership in one go. It was the largest purge in the Mosley movement's history<sup>149</sup>.

This remarkable episode marks the extinction of fascism as a significant presence in the Potteries. A series of attempts to revive the movement in Stoke-on-Trent were fated to end in dismal failure and what little fascist activity that was undertaken in the city during the second half of the 1930s appears to have ceased after mid-April 1938. From January 1935 onwards the propaganda pursued by the local Mosleyites in Stoke-on-Trent focused on promoting the theme of non-intervention in foreign disputes.

Within a month BUF N.H.Q. sought to reverse the effects of Chesterton's onslaught<sup>150</sup>. The man assigned responsibility for re-establishing a BUF branch and restoring the movement's strength in Stoke-on-Trent, was the newly appointed inaugural Midlands National Inspecting Officer W. H. Symes<sup>151</sup>. Symes was unable to make any headway in his mission<sup>152</sup>. In early May 1935 he complained to headquarters that he could get no support in Staffordshire and that membership in Stoke-on-Trent numbered a meagre four or five<sup>153</sup>. His task was further complicated by a revival of Communist opposition in the city when the importation of hard-worked BUF speakers from Birmingham in early July prompted the Communists to reinstate their formerly abandoned policy of direct confrontation. The Communists vowed to prevent a resuscitation of fascism in the city by driving the Mosleyite interlopers out of Stoke-on-Trent<sup>154</sup>. This time around the anti-fascist policy proved highly effective. The mood of the majority of people in the city towards fascism had shifted drastically since Olympia: fascists were pariahs and attacks upon them would no longer elicit pro-BUF sympathy. On the first Saturday evening of the month, Propaganda Officer Shelville of the Birmingham BUF attempted to address what was planned to be the first of a series of outdoor meetings in the city devoted to explaining in light of the

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<sup>149</sup> In Cross's account of this episode he states that the drinking club was in Coventry. But in a letter to Baker he recalled that Chesterton queried this point after publication and insisted that it was, in fact, in Stoke-on-Trent. Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, p225.

<sup>150</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p138. Special Branch Report 5<sup>th</sup> March 1935.

<sup>151</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p47.

<sup>152</sup> NA: HO45/25385, p43. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, excluding Northern Ireland Report No. VI Developments from March 1935 to October 1935.

<sup>153</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p47. Special Branch Report 9<sup>th</sup> May 1935.

<sup>154</sup> *ES* 19 July 1935, p8.

emerging crisis surrounding Italy's intentions towards Abyssinia the fascist belief that Britain should remain neutral in foreign disputes. Organised Communist heckling greeted his every word before the anti-fascists started an opposition meeting nearby which lasted for about ten minutes, at the end of which they returned and broke up the meeting held by Shelville<sup>155</sup>. While propagandists in the fascist press endeavoured to promote the meeting as 'one of the best ever held in Stoke-on-Trent'<sup>156</sup>, no-one on the ground on either side was fooled. In the face of public apathy, if not hostility, scant resources, and aggressively organised anti-fascist opposition, plans for further meetings were abandoned. The effort to re-ignite interest in fascism in Stoke-on-Trent was further undermined when Symes was summoned to appear before a Board of Inquiry at N.H.Q. to answer charges of disloyalty and conduct likely to promote dissatisfaction. It was alleged Symes had boasted of flying Mosley by aeroplane to Rome where the latter interviewed Mussolini with a view to securing financial assistance; that he himself had been to Rome to obtain instructions and funds personally from the Duce, and that Mosley, National Chief of Staff Hope Dundas and himself had spent 'a very gay time in Paris'. It was further alleged that Symes had expressed the opinion that Mosley was not the right man to head the movement, that there was 'too much Mosleyism and too little Fascism' in it. A compromised Syme was removed from his position and replaced with a P. Whittam<sup>157</sup>.

Whittam fared little better than his predecessor. While the old branch building at 14 Glebe Street was re-hired, it was only open on evenings from 6.30 pm onwards due to a lack of available staff. The tiny membership was unable to devote any spare time to newspaper selling so the local headquarters also became the only sales outlet in the area for the *Blackshirt*<sup>158</sup>. Paltry sales prompted the branch to write a letter to the Chief Librarian of Stoke-on-Trent requesting that this periodical be placed in the city libraries' reading rooms<sup>159</sup>. This request was swiftly forwarded to the relevant council committee responsible for all purchasing and display decisions pertaining to the Stoke-on-Trent library system. After two months of prolonged

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<sup>155</sup> *ES* 20 July 1935, p8.

<sup>156</sup> *Blackshirt* 19 July 1935, p8.

<sup>157</sup> *Blackshirt* 28 August 1935, p8; NA: HO144/20145, p235.

<sup>158</sup> *Blackshirt* 4 October 1935, p9.

<sup>159</sup> *ES* 9 July 1935, p4.

consideration, during which the Chief Librarian was instructed to forward a copy of the fascist newspaper to each member for private scrutiny, the Public Libraries, Museums and Gymnasium Committee resolved that the request be acceded to, subject to the periodical being provided free of charge<sup>160</sup>.

An influential factor in pushing a hesitant committee towards accepting a fascist publication in the city's reading rooms was a violence-free appearance by Mosley at Victoria Hall, Hanley, on the evening of Sunday 15 September 1935. A capacity audience turned out to hear Mosley deliver an address on the BUF's isolationist position regarding the Italo-Abyssinia dispute. The hall was packed and the audience noisily approved his message of non-intervention which occupied well over an hour. Fascists in their blackshirt uniforms acted as stewards but their task was not difficult. There were few interruptions. Vocal but peaceful organised opposition failed to make an impact at the close of the meeting<sup>161</sup>. That the Communist opposition on display was lacking in fervour stands as testament to the terminal state of fascism in the city. Communist anti-fascists were cognisant that applause for the fascist leader in public halls was not being converted into membership in the branch and the dissemination of propaganda on the streets of Stoke-on-Trent. Fascism had become an irrelevancy in the city and since having run the Birmingham BUF speakers out of the area the Communists preferred to channel their energies into violently breaking up outdoor meetings held in support of National Government candidates during the run up to the General Election in November<sup>162</sup>.

Anti-fascist opposition was entirely absent during Mosley's return to the city less than two months later. On the Saturday evening of 10 November 1935 the fascist leader addressed yet another capacity 4,000 strong audience at the King's Hall, Stoke. The local press reported that during his speech Mosley told the audience that Jews controlled the City of London which in turn dictated to whichever party was returned to Westminster and used it ruthlessly and relentlessly against Britain's interest. No government, he continued, dared to stand up to the Jews or to oppose their will, or it would be caused to fall within a night through a wrecking of the Stock

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<sup>160</sup> *ES* 10 September 1935, p7.

<sup>161</sup> *ES* 16 September 1935, p4.

<sup>162</sup> *ES* 5 November 1935, p5; *ES* 8 November 1935, p11; *ES* 9 November 1935, p1.

Exchange or the threat of a panic. 'It was because fascism had tackled this evil, dared to tear the mask from what was called democracy, thereby exposing the features of alien faces, that the blackshirt movement was being attacked by all and sundry'<sup>163</sup>.

Aside from this segment of Mosley's speech there is not a single other instance of anti-Semitic thought or deed recorded in the evidence available on the history of the BUF in Stoke-on-Trent. The vigilance committees of the Board of Deputies of British Jews reported there was in the city a total absence of anti-Semitism<sup>164</sup>. Jews had been present in Stoke-on-Trent from at least as early as 1873, when the first synagogue was founded<sup>165</sup>, and there was no tradition in the Potteries of hostility towards Jews<sup>166</sup>. In Stoke-on-Trent in the 1930s both the total numbers of the Jewish population and its density were tiny. In 1938 there were only 190 Jewish people living in the city, a population density of 0.069%<sup>167</sup>. The local Jewish population was not located in any one area of the city and was successfully integrated into the wider Gentile community. A literary society and amateur dramatics group regularly raised considerable sums for the local hospital<sup>168</sup> and it has been suggested that the 'typically English middle-class nature' of these activities illustrates the depth to which the local Jewish community had been assimilated by this time<sup>169</sup>.

Mosley concluded his speech at the King's Hall with advice to the audience that they should help 'build up' the fascist movement<sup>170</sup>. The citizens of Stoke-on-Trent chose to decline this counsel. In his memoirs ex-BUF speaker John Beckett wrote of Mosley's public image during this period: 'Several times a month, [Mosley] addressed large audiences, and saw hundreds of members and great enthusiasm. He did not realise, and I suppose does not realise now [1938],

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<sup>163</sup> *ES* 11 November 1935, p5.

<sup>164</sup> Board of Deputies, Vigilance Committee Reports 1936; 1937; 1938; 1939. See also Board of Deputies, Co-ordinating Committee Report, 1936; Board of Deputies, Secretary's Report, 1939.

<sup>165</sup> *Jewish Year Book 1939*, p345.

<sup>166</sup> I. Down, 'Modern History of Jewish Settlement in the Potteries' (BA dissertation, University of Keele, 1984).

<sup>167</sup> *Jewish Year Book 1939*, pp343-350.

<sup>168</sup> *ES* 8 March 1939, p8.

<sup>169</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p110

<sup>170</sup> *Blackshirt* 15 November 1935, p5.



that a great part of this is a stage army which attends him everywhere'<sup>171</sup>. This description of imported supporters goes some way to explaining how ostensibly successful Mosley meetings in Stoke-on-Trent could fail to induce even a minor increase in recruitment. The local fascists' experience at the annual Armistice Day ceremony staged the day after Mosley's visit provides a revealing contrast between the rarefied atmosphere of a grand Mosley gathering and the everyday reality for his local activists on the streets of Stoke-on-Trent. On Sunday 11 November the small band of Stoke-on-Trent fascists under the command of Whittam marched to the city War Memorial and attempted to place a wreath on the cenotaph in the presence of a very large crowd of ordinary spectators who had gathered to attend the memorial service<sup>172</sup>. The fascists were booed and pushed, the wreath being torn from their hands<sup>173</sup>.

The local BUF crawled into the New Year. In January 1936 the branch moved premises to Copeland Chambers, Copeland Street, Stoke-on-Trent<sup>174</sup>. The change of location did little to improve the deathly condition of fascism in the city. Activism was almost non-existent, failing to extend beyond requesting permission to present copies of the new weekly fascist newspaper *Action* to the reading rooms of the city libraries<sup>175</sup>. In late March 1936 N.H.Q. expressed anxiety that the branch seemed to be slipping out of contact. It reported: 'Of...the Potteries little news can be obtained'<sup>176</sup>. The insignificance of the BUF in local affairs is illustrated by the fact that not a single mention of the movement, nationally or locally, was made at the annual May Day celebration in the Market Square, Hanley. The two speakers, the Chairman of the Stoke-on-Trent Labour Party, and the President of the North Staffordshire Trades and Labour Council, focused primary on local issues. When talk eventually turned to the subject of fascism, it was the German variety under discussion<sup>177</sup>.

It was at this point, just as the Stoke-on-Trent BUF was perilously teetering on the brink of extinction, that the local fascists enjoyed a remarkable propaganda coup. In late May 1936 the

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<sup>171</sup> Quoted in F. Beckett, *The Rebel Who Lost His Cause. The Tragedy of John Beckett, MP* (London, London House, 1999), p138.

<sup>172</sup> *Blackshirt* 22 November 1935, p8.

<sup>173</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p86.

<sup>174</sup> NA: HO144/20146, p88. Special Branch Report 6<sup>th</sup> January 1936.

<sup>175</sup> *ES* 10 March 1936, p7.

<sup>176</sup> NA: HO144/20147, p387. Special Branch Report 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1936.

<sup>177</sup> *ES* 2 May 1936, p5; *ES* 4 May 1936, p6.

branch enlisted its most prestigious ever member: Major H. Stapeley Read. The new recruit was immediately appointed Honorary Secretary of the local movement. As Chairman of the Burslem and Tunstall Conservative and Unionist Association for nearly ten years, Read was one of the pre-eminent figures in Stoke-on-Trent Conservative politics and a successful entrepreneur whose membership of occupational sub-group 14 classifies him as belonging to the 'elite or upper-middle' social class listed in Table 3<sup>178</sup>. A charismatic Great War veteran whose broad appeal among the citizens of the city included a particularly warm rapport with the 'lower' class and ex-servicemen<sup>179</sup>, Read was a member of an old Staffordshire family with long roots in anti-socialist Conservative politics<sup>180</sup>. His father had held senior positions on the Stoke-on-Trent Council<sup>181</sup>. Well respected by his opponents<sup>182</sup>, who would grudgingly agree with the general consensus that he was 'a really capable leader' and 'the live-wire' of Stoke-on-Trent Conservatism<sup>183</sup>, Read falls into a category of fascist supporter identified by Webber: ex-Conservatives increasingly disillusioned at various stages with the consensus-orientated pragmatic Conservatism of Stanley Baldwin, the steady erosion of empire symbolised by the 1935 Government of India Act, and the imagined decline of patriotic sentiment in the Conservative Party<sup>184</sup>. Read was an admirer of dissident hard right-wing Tory General Henry Page Croft, who in the 1920s had formed the National Party, described by Pugh as representing 'a halfway stage between the militant ideas of the pre-war radical right and the fascist movements of the inter-war years'<sup>185</sup>. Croft's organisation advocated propriety in high office, a paternalistic attitude to the 'lower' classes, a corporate doctrine to guarantee industrial harmony, and was fervently anti-Communist<sup>186</sup>. Read's defection to fascism came as the culminating act of half a decade of festering dissatisfaction with the direction taken by the Conservative party at the local and national level, and the policies of the

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<sup>178</sup> *ES* 25 November 1933, p1; *ES* 27 February 1934, p7.

<sup>179</sup> *ES* 30 November 1933, p6; *ES* 1 December 1933, p7; *ES* 14 November 1934, p6.

<sup>180</sup> *ES* 1 December 1933, p7.

<sup>181</sup> *ES* 26 October 1932, p5.

<sup>182</sup> *ES* 28 November 1933, p4.

<sup>183</sup> *ES* 30 November 1933, p4.

<sup>184</sup> G. Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right, 1918-39* (London, Croom Helm, 1986), p45.

<sup>185</sup> Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!', p76.

<sup>186</sup> M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920 – 1924* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971), p77; L. Witherell, *Rebel on the Right. Henry Page Croft and the Crisis of British Conservatism, 1903-1914* (Delaware, University of Delaware Press, 1998).

National Government. Read agitated persistently and outspokenly for radical Croft-style 'real Conservatism' to be introduced in his local organisation and in the wider Government<sup>187</sup> in the form of pronounced public activism against the perceived growing menace of socialism, prohibiting of the importation of foreign pottery and other goods, immediate rearmament, the preservation of British rule in India, and the curtailing of the influence of Trade Unions in British industry. Read demanded action. The local Association was, in his opinion, 'dilly-dallying'<sup>188</sup> and 'deeds not words are required'<sup>189</sup>. As early as December 1933, the Stoke-on-Trent BUF had attempted to attract Read to the Mosley movement. Local fascist leader Spanton Reid wrote to him noting that fascism was laying stress upon the points raised in his various writings and addresses<sup>190</sup>. At this stage in his political life Read was uninterested in joining the BUF and resisted the fascist's overtures, proudly declaring: 'I am a Royalist, Imperialist, and Protectionist – consequently, an Anti-Socialist. In other words I am an un-adulterated Conservative, and proud of it'<sup>191</sup>. But by May 1936 his faith in the Conservative Party and patience with the National Government had evaporated. Thoroughly exasperated with traditional right-wing politics, he believed that despite his best efforts his complaints had not been addressed either in the local organisation or at the national level. The country was in terminal decline and the socialists were at the gates. The Conservatives were hopeless and the National Government hollow. 'He wondered what was going to happen...unless someone does take the bull by the horns and say we are not going to allow these things'<sup>192</sup>. The BUF welcomed him with open arms.

The branch immediately sought to capitalise on his new affiliation and arranged a series of prominent meetings at which Read was expected to speak beginning in June. The propaganda theme of these speeches was to be the need for Britain to retain a strict position of non-intervention in foreign disputes. A particular sense of urgency was felt owing to the growing threat of civil war in Spain<sup>193</sup>. Apart from a gathering held at the Fair Ground, Longton, on 4 July 1934<sup>194</sup>,

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<sup>187</sup> *ES* 27 February 1934, p7.

<sup>188</sup> *ES* 27 November 1933, p7.

<sup>189</sup> *ES* 11 December 1933, p4.

<sup>190</sup> *ES* 1 December 1933, p7.

<sup>191</sup> *ES* 29 November 1933, p4.

<sup>192</sup> *ES* 3 November 1934, p3.

<sup>193</sup> *ES* 17 November 1936, p5.

all outdoor meetings were staged at Hanley Market Place. Traditionally the bulk of support for Read's brand of rebel rightist conservatism in his Association had been centred in the Tunstall area<sup>195</sup>; and targeting his former power base as a potentially fruitful recruiting ground, all indoor meetings were held at the Assembly Rooms, Tunstall Town Hall<sup>196</sup>. At a time when many civic authorities around the country were refusing to hire buildings to the fascist movement, Stoke-on-Trent Council remained staunchly libertarian: its cherished belief was that any organisation had the right to hold a meeting and as a consequence the BUF never encountered any difficulty in engaging the use of a civic hall for an evening<sup>197</sup>. In turn the Communists respected the Council's tradition and refrained from disrupting indoor meetings. Read was given the opportunity to discuss the fascist future with his new leader when Mosley met his valuable new recruit at a BUF luncheon arranged for local businessmen held at the North Stafford Hotel, Hanley, on 20 July<sup>198</sup>.

While Read's defection invigorated the tiny cadre of loyal fascists in Stoke-on-Trent, it also shocked and alarmed the local Communist movement. In a replication of the actions of May 1935 a campaign of confrontation was organised to crush any BUF recovery under Read's guidance before it could take root. The Communists' violent tactics proved highly effective once again. An outdoor meeting held at Hanley Market Square on 29 June was the first gathering to be targeted and an anti-fascist pattern of disruption was established that would be repeated at every other Mosleyite meeting held in Stoke-on-Trent under Read's leadership<sup>199</sup>. The Communists held an impromptu but well-attended anti-fascist meeting in the location shortly before the BUF gathering was scheduled to begin<sup>200</sup>. The opening speaker was Read, who as chairman made a short introductory propaganda speech which was received without interruption. The main speaker for the night was a Captain Collins, who planned to deliver an hour-long statement on Mosley's isolationist attitude towards foreign affairs. While he was speaking a section of the crowd swarmed towards the lorry on which he was standing causing him to cease his address and

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<sup>194</sup> *Blackshirt* 4 July 1936, p6.

<sup>195</sup> *ES* 27 February 1934, p7.

<sup>196</sup> *ES* 6 October 1936, p7.

<sup>197</sup> *ES* 9 July 1936, p10.

<sup>198</sup> *ES* 30 June 1936, p2.

<sup>199</sup> *ES* 30 June 1936, p1.

<sup>200</sup> *ES* 9 July 1936, p10.

prompting the police who were stationed in various parts of the square to intervene. The police controlled the crowd in a short space of time and with order restored escorted Collins back to his transport. Lack of numbers meant there were few men able to act as stewards and without the intervention of the police the situation would have escalated into 'some serious trouble'<sup>201</sup>. While the Communist opposition focused its attention on disrupting the local BUF branch's high profile public meetings, fascist activists working comparatively quietly on the streets of the city disseminating propaganda managed to operate unmolested. A small group of fascists became a regular presence at the Labour Exchange<sup>202</sup> where BUF leaflets were distributed<sup>203</sup>.

The Stoke-on-Trent mainstream Left was also shocked by Read's conversion to the fascist cause but refused to budge from its established strategy for countering the growth of the BUF in the city: peaceful debate and the upholding of the right to freedom of speech. The Labour Party affirmed that 'no useful purpose could be served by action which might incite people to fight. If fascism had anything in it, they could examine it with clear reason, and reject it...' When a resolution was ventured at the Staffordshire Trades Council to support a deputation to interview the Lord Mayor and request him to see the Chief Constable and invite the prohibition of fascist meetings, the resolution attracted only three votes in its favour leading a senior official to state: 'The attitude suggested by the resolution was just the attitude with which the Labour movement had to contend with in its early days, and, if it were carried, it would be something which the fascists could use against them. They had always been advocates of free speech, and he felt they should stand by that right'<sup>204</sup>.

Like Syme and Whittam before him, Read failed miserably in his attempts to revive fascism in Stoke-on-Trent. While it raised the branch's public profile, Read's conversion had a negligible effect on increasing membership<sup>205</sup>. Without new recruits the movement continued to languish. The 'Battle of Cable Street' passed without impact. In late October active membership

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<sup>201</sup> *ES* 30 June 1936, p1.

<sup>202</sup> *Blackshirt* 20 June 1936, p6.

<sup>203</sup> *Blackshirt* 29 August 1936, p6.

<sup>204</sup> *ES* 9 July 1936, p10.

<sup>205</sup> *Blackshirt* 29 August 1936, p6.

numbered a paltry five persons<sup>206</sup>. Unable to transfer the popular support he enjoyed as a Conservative to his new allegiance, Read swiftly became disillusioned with the fascist movement and by the end of the year had walked away from both the BUF and Stoke-on-Trent. In late August an anti-fascist mole at N.H.Q. was reporting that Read had moved miles away to a new home in Shropshire<sup>207</sup>. His last appearance in Stoke-on-Trent under the fascist banner came in mid-November<sup>208</sup>.

Read's successor would be the final fascist leader in Stoke-on-Trent. Dedicated and hard-working, S. T. Dunn was a 32 year old born in the village of Mushroom Green, South Staffordshire. He had been employed as a bus driver in the Potteries since the age of 21. As a 'skilled worker' from occupational sub-group 2, Dunn is classified as belonging to the 'lower' social class in Table 3. In addition to being active in the fascist movement he was also a member of the Transport and General Workers' Union and gained the T.U.C. award for recruiting 50 members<sup>209</sup>. Rawnsley and Linehan's investigations into the membership profile of the BUF suggest members such as Dunn, a recruit from a highly-unionised section of the 'lower' class, was a rarity, although the latter did find that when branches possessed 'unskilled workers' or 'skilled workers' with trade union affiliations the member concerned tended to be employed in the transport industry<sup>210</sup>. Dunn was a longstanding admirer of Sir Oswald Mosley. He was a member of the New Party on its formation, and joined the BUF immediately it was formed<sup>211</sup>. His wife shared his political affiliations. As part of the BUF 'Fifth Anniversary Honours' in October 1937 he would be awarded the 'Bronze distinction for magnificent service'<sup>212</sup>.

The fortunes of the BUF branch in Stoke-on-Trent under Dunn were indistinguishable from that under Read and suffered the same ignominious fate. 1937 began with Dunn persisting in attempting to hold a series of outdoor propaganda meetings but at each violent Communist opposition ensured the fascist message failed to reach an audience. Events at a meeting held in

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<sup>206</sup> NA: HO144/21062, p351. Special Branch Report 5<sup>th</sup> November 1936.

<sup>207</sup> NA: HO144/21060, p43. Special Branch Report 1<sup>st</sup> September 1936.

<sup>208</sup> *ES* 17 November 1936, p5.

<sup>209</sup> *Blackshirt* June 12 1937, p5.

<sup>210</sup> Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', pp150-165; Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp195-230.

<sup>211</sup> *Blackshirt* June 12 1937, p5.

<sup>212</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 October 1937, p7.

Hanley Market Square on 22 January exemplifies fascist fortunes in the city when Communist disruption succeeded in knocking the BUF speaker off the platform<sup>213</sup>.

Olga Shore, a senior national BUF officer wrote to N.H.Q. at the end of January 1937 lamenting the general condition of the movement in the Northern Zone: '...everything there is bloody bad, they couldn't be worse, and if we don't make dramatic improvements the whole movement in the North will be blown up'<sup>214</sup>. These words could easily have been describing the grim state of affairs confronting the Stoke-on-Trent branch. If branch reports are a fair indication, however, the local fascists would have refused to accept such a pessimistic assessment. Deluded, or willfully engaging in the act of deception, the local fascists preferred to flatter N.H.Q. with a stream of untruths. While the local fascists were incapable of attracting sizeable audiences or even holding an uninterrupted meeting, N.H.Q. was informed: 'During the last week a series of successful meetings have been held in the Potteries. The message of National Socialism has been taken right into the heart of this industrial area. Everywhere good audiences assembled and listened eagerly...The meeting was carried through with highly successful results'. While active membership remained in single figures, the branch dispatched: 'Many working people of [Stoke-on-Trent] are turning to National Socialism as the muddling of the old Democratic parties becomes evident. Further propaganda like this and it will not be long before Democracy is played out in [Stoke-on-Trent] for good'<sup>215</sup>. The decision by N.H.Q. to announce Dunn on 9 June 1937 as a BUF candidate for a Stoke-on-Trent constituency at the next election should perhaps be placed in the context of these misleading communications<sup>216</sup>.

Fascism, not Democracy, was 'played out' in Stoke-on-Trent. By the time Dunn was being unveiled in the fascist press as the man who would sweep into office as the Parliamentary representative of a fascist Potteries, lack of finance because of due-paying membership numbering single figures, and microscopic public interest had forced the Stoke-on-Trent branch to close its office in Copeland Street<sup>217</sup>. From this point onwards until the movement was eclipsed in

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<sup>213</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 January 1937, p6.

<sup>214</sup> NA: HO144/21063, p406. Special Branch Report 28<sup>th</sup> January 1937.

<sup>215</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 January 1937, p6.

<sup>216</sup> *ES* 10 June 1937, p7.

<sup>217</sup> NA: HO144/21062, p5. Special Branch Report 17<sup>th</sup> June 1937.

the city Dunn's home at 60 Fletcher Road, Hanley, served as the de facto administrative centre for the meagre remains of BUF activity in Stoke-on-Trent<sup>218</sup>. Active membership had remained interminably static since a branch had been re-founded in Stoke-on-Trent but by mid-1937 even this hardcore of five or six fascists were running out of steam and beginning to recognize the seemingly hopeless situation. While these five or six fascists remained BUF members and retained their Mosleyite beliefs, propaganda work began to peter out and by the end of the year had been all but abandoned. An ad hoc outdoor meeting addressed by national speaker Clement Bruning as part of a brief tour of the provinces that also took in Weymouth, Salisbury and Wolverhampton, stands as the solitary recorded meeting held under the auspices of the BUF in Stoke-on-Trent during the second half of 1937<sup>219</sup>.

The fascists in Stoke-on-Trent stayed anonymous until the growing international crisis surrounding Hitler's intentions towards Austria in February and March 1938 triggered a desperate burst of 'Peace Campaign' activity. Dunn stood at the heart of this propaganda work, but failed to inspire his local sympathizers to stand with him. The tiny circle of doggedly loyal activists had finally thrown in the towel. Stripped of local support but determined to persevere with his mission, Dunn called upon the assistance of a Mosleyite active as a public speaker in the Wolverhampton District by the name of Gee. Together the two men embarked on a frenzied but ineffectual round of chalking, sales drives, and writing correspondence to the local press all advocating a position of appeasement towards German territorial ambition. An impromptu meeting held in Penkhull Square on 27 February passed unnoticed by the people of Stoke-on-Trent. Zeal alone could not compensate for lack of numbers and an uninterested public. With the easing of the international crisis Gee returned to his area of residence, leaving the Stoke-on-Trent BUF in the ignominious position of being a one man band. Dunn wore this mantle with pride, however, insisting that he would be happy in his duty 'keeping the flag flying for Mosley'<sup>220</sup>.

The dying breath of fascism in Stoke-on-Trent came in April 1938 when massive Communist opposition violently disrupted a Mosley meeting at the King's Hall. For days in

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<sup>218</sup> *ES* 5 March 1937, p2.

<sup>219</sup> *Blackshirt* 17 July 1937, p6.

<sup>220</sup> *Blackshirt* April 1938, p7.



advance the Communist Party in the Potteries had distributed leaflets in the streets asserting they were going to organize violence, inside and outside the hall, to prevent Mosley's speech. Alerted to the planned confrontation, the BUF were confident of being able to maintain an uninterrupted meeting. Trouble, Mosley glibly asserted, would be dealt with 'in double quick time'. The subsequent rowdy scenes inside and outside the hall exposed the degree to which the BUF had misjudged the amount of anti-fascist feeling Mosley's presence was now capable of inspiring in the city<sup>221</sup>. Several thousand anti-fascists turned out on the evening of the meeting to carry the threat of organized interruption into effect<sup>222</sup>. While suggestions to the civic authorities that the meeting should be cancelled were rejected in the interest of freedom of speech, a large number of extra police officers had been drafted into Stoke-on-Trent from outlying areas<sup>223</sup>. The hall was patrolled by stewards, who like the majority of the audience, had been imported from Lancashire. For the people of Stoke-on-Trent Mosley's charm had worn thin and Beckett's 'stage army' had been mobilised in force to compensate<sup>224</sup>. The rows filled by the traveling faithful listened rapturously while Mosley delivered a speech which focused on his belief that the way to preserve British interests and peace in the world was by forging an alliance with Hitler's Germany<sup>225</sup>.

There were numerous incidents during the course of Mosley's speech as the Communists made their presence known throughout. Many scuffles occurred, several free fights broke out, 30 people were ejected, and two men received facial injuries<sup>226</sup>. The worst incidents of the night, however, occurred after the meeting. A large number of anti-fascists assembled outside and waited for Mosley to attempt to leave. When he emerged with a body of escorts, including Dunn, a portion of the crowd broke through a police cordon and rushed the fascists. Dunn was struck in the face in the ensuing clashes, and fighting continued for quite a while before the police succeeded in restoring order<sup>227</sup>.

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<sup>221</sup> *Blackshirt* 11 April 1938, p5.

<sup>222</sup> *Blackshirt* May 1938, p7.

<sup>223</sup> *ES* 11 April 1938, p5.

<sup>224</sup> *Blackshirt* May 1938, p7.

<sup>225</sup> *ES* 11 April 1938, p5.

<sup>226</sup> NA: HO144/20143, p147. Disorder at Public Meetings, etc. Summary in the form of weekly returns, commencing 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1934.

<sup>227</sup> *ES* 11 April 1938, p5.

The available evidence suggests this violence-marred meeting hammered the final nail in the coffin of fascism in Stoke-on-Trent. There is no recorded instance of any type of fascist activity being undertaken either by an individual or group in the city between this date and the proscription of the BUF nationally in summer 1940.

The Stoke-on-Trent BUF over the course of the second half of the 1930s was the victim of A. K. Chesterton's reaction to the situation he discovered in the branch while touring the Midlands in January 1935. Chesterton was a man for whom fascism represented a truly revolutionary phenomenon, a 'legitimate crusade against all the trends of 'decadence' that afflicted the age'. His sincerity was total and his devotion to the cause selfless. A similar standard of commitment was demanded of his subordinates. As Baker acknowledges, 'to be nominally on his side was never sufficient proof of fascist commitment'. A 'transcendent' creed, fascism must inform every aspect of life. A great fear of Chesterton's was that the BUF could turn from a radical political movement into a conventional political party<sup>228</sup>:

Life without integrity is death and in human affairs integrity is served only by Ethics. The end does not justify the means unless the means be good, because evil means corrupt the end. As far as humanly possible our grasp of this fact must be absolute: either we stand remorselessly for truth, with an adamant resolve to have done with shams, or else we are not the movement we believe, but part of that which we would destroy – just another political party scrambling and wrangling amongst other political parties down the slope of Britain's fall<sup>229</sup>.

This ideological anxiety lay at the heart of Chesterton's rage during his surprise visit to the Potteries. His extreme response to the placid state of affairs he found in the Stoke-on-Trent branch was absurdly disproportionate to the situation. While it is true to say that the local branch had succumbed to the 'social-club' approach to politics, the condition was surely not completely unsalvageable. Cullen emphasises the importance of good leadership in maintaining a successful branch life, and offers the experiences in Hull and Huddersfield as examples of good new leaders turning around the fortunes of weak branches<sup>230</sup>. At the time of Chesterton's palingenetic over-reaction the Stoke-on-Trent branch membership had reached a standstill but remained one of the largest in the country: the 300 members may have become bewitched by the relative comforts of

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<sup>228</sup> Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, pp126-133.

<sup>229</sup> *Blackshirt* 27 November 1937, p1.

<sup>230</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932 – 1940', pp93-95.

a conventional political party life but had remained loyal to Mosley. The situation called for reform not eradication. The bedrock of a potentially successful branch remained firmly in place. It is difficult to imagine an official who was more restrained in character behaving in such an excessive and unnecessarily destructive manner, or even indeed Mosley, but doctrinal radicals like Chesterton rejected a rational approach to politics and were thus unable to balance fascist ideals with the need to see them realised in practice. Chesterton was unprepared to compromise with the Stoke-on-Trent BUF, and in taking drastic measures squandered a solid opportunity to re-direct the activities of a sizeable membership in an area that had previously revealed a wide level of latent support. Whether a ideologically renewed branch would have proved capable of restoring the BUF to its former position and reputation in Stoke-on-Trent is, of course, a moot point; but less open to question is that without the aid of the hard-core Mosley loyalists who constituted the bulk of the membership immediately prior to Chesterton's reckless purge, it would prove next to impossible to restore fascism to any semblance of a popular movement in the city.

Humiliated, the Mosley loyalists refused to return to the fascist fold. This rejection left the tiny handful of members willing to persist with the BUF in the unappetising situation of effectively starting all over again. Only this time as an infant movement, without the foundation of the sizeable hard-core support so ruinously alienated by Chesterton to build upon, trying to establish itself against a hostile political environment in conditions of economic recovery which denied the local fascists the opportunity to operate successfully and severely blunted their ability to present the BUF as a vitally needed political alternative in the city.

The violent tactics of local Communist activists made a significant contribution to the containment of the BUF in Stoke-on-Trent from 1935 onwards. Unlike in many other places around the country<sup>231</sup>, the Communist Party in Stoke-on-Trent was small in membership<sup>232</sup> and had previously proved ineffective in combating the rise of fascism in the Potteries. But during the second half of the decade, a chronic lack of numbers and public support for the local fascists meant the remaining local Mosleyites were unable to overcome the constraints reactivated

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<sup>231</sup> Renton, *Red Shirts and Black*; Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*; Kibblewhite and Rigby, *Fascism in Aberdeen*; Todd, *In Excited Times*; Turner, *Fascism and anti-Fascism*.

<sup>232</sup> H. Pelling, *The British Communist Party* (London, A & C Black, 1958), p192.

militant anti-fascist hostility placed on the Stoke-on-Trent BUF. Communist agitation made it extremely problematic for the local BUF to organise, spiked the propaganda outlet of platform oratory, sapped spirits, and left the fascists floundering in their attempts to present the Mosley movement as a dignified and legitimate replacement to the mainstream parties.

The established MPs in Stoke-on-Trent offered a robust and respectable alternative to the fascists for those in the city sympathetic to the theme upon which the local BUF focused what little propaganda campaigning it was able to pursue from 1935 onwards. The three National Government supporting MPs who represented Stoke-on-Trent constituencies were respected and popular among the people of the city<sup>233</sup> and were staunchly isolationist in their attitude towards foreign disputes. While the local BUF's 'Mind Britain's Business' and 'Peace Campaign' activity faltered in violence and obscurity, to widespread local public support and enthusiastic endorsement in the Stoke-on-Trent press the local MPs voiced a similarly unshakeable belief in non-intervention and British neutrality in response to the contentious events in Europe around which the remaining fascists in the city had sought to mobilise. On the Abyssinian problem the MPs firmly insisted that Britain should keep out of the dispute. The introduction of sanctions should be entirely ruled out as it would certainly mean war and widespread conflagration. Military conflict with Italy, a country for generations had been Britain's friend in peace and ally in war, was 'unthinkable'. The British people, it was declared, were under no obligation to police the world and must not be dragged into a quarrel in which they were not interested and which was not their business<sup>234</sup>. The local Parliamentary representatives' response to the threat and eventual outbreak of the Spanish Civil War was to adopt a strident non-intervention stance: 'It is no business of ours to interfere or to aid one side or the other, it is our concern only to protect and maintain the integrity of British territory and to lend any further help that may be necessary to any of our nationals requiring assistance'. Whatever the outcome of the war, it was argued, it was essential that the Spanish people settle 'their tragic quarrel and bitter conflict' without outside intrusion. 'Otherwise, the alternative to civil war in one country may be the wholesale conflict of

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<sup>233</sup> D. Stuart (ed.) *People of the Potteries: A Dictionary of Local Biography Volume 1* (Stoke-on-Trent, University of Keele, 1985), p110.

<sup>234</sup> *ES* 25 July 1935, p7; *ES* 26 August 1935, *ES* 29 August 1935, p7; p6; *ES* 30 August 1935, p6; *ES* 4 September 1935, p4;

other countries<sup>235</sup>. The local MPs praised Chamberlain for his 'realism' in appeasing Hitler's seizure of Austria<sup>236</sup>. Austro-German union, it was posited, was natural and inevitable, although some regret was expressed at the use of 'force majeure'<sup>237</sup>. A Britain which was 'strong, and becomes ever stronger, with a minimum of commitments', was promoted as the greatest influence and guarantee for the preservation of peace and the eventual pacification of Europe<sup>238</sup>.

The local BUF branch would most likely have not fared any better in attracting support over the second half of the 1930s if, rather than move the focus of its propaganda on to the theme of non-intervention in foreign disputes, it had instead continued to concentrate on promoting the fascist corporate economic system as the only viable solution to the problems afflicting the dominant local industry. A revitalisation of the Stoke-on-Trent pottery industry began in 1935 that increasingly made radical ideas for socio-economic recovery appear unnecessary. While the pottery industry was enjoying a minor upturn in fortunes during the second half of 1934, the government's introduction of modest trade protection for the sector sparked a 'great revival' in 1935 that drove expansion both of production and employment during the year. In July 1935 officials were celebrating 'marching in the right direction'<sup>239</sup> and at the end of the year unemployment in Stoke-on-Trent had fallen by 13,000<sup>240</sup>. Exports overseas began to show a 'cheering improvement', while imports were down by a morale-boosting £170,247<sup>241</sup>. An upbeat local press informed its readers: 'We have not reached prosperity yet, but we are well on the road of that name'. Confidence in the industry and among its workers was running high and responsibility for the ongoing economic improvement was widely attributed to the National Government's 'commonsense fiscal protection of the home market'<sup>242</sup>. The substantial improvement in trade and employment in the pottery industry in Stoke-on-Trent was maintained throughout 1936<sup>243</sup>. In October 1936 trade was booming and unemployment in Stoke-on-Trent

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<sup>235</sup> *ES* 6 August 1936, p4.

<sup>236</sup> *ES* 11 April 1938, p4; *ES* 14 April 1938.

<sup>237</sup> *ES* 14 March 1938, p4.

<sup>238</sup> *ES* 21 March 1938, p4.

<sup>239</sup> *ES* 15 July 1935, p4.

<sup>240</sup> *ES* 7 November 1935, p9.

<sup>241</sup> *ES* 15 November 1935, p10.

<sup>242</sup> *ES* 4 November 1935, p7; *ES* 13 November 1935, p6.

<sup>243</sup> *ES* 5 August 1936, p4; *ES* 5 October 1936, p1; *ES* 6 October 1936, p6; *ES* 6 October 1936, p7.

stood at its lowest since 1929<sup>244</sup>. The rate of improvement slowed during 1937 but unemployment in the city continued to fall, and trade maintained a rise. In February the pottery industry was reporting a shortage of skilled labour to meet fresh orders<sup>245</sup>. By late 1937 the increases in trade and employment were levelling out but even while static remained at levels unimaginable only a few years before<sup>246</sup>. Grateful owners rewarded their workforces with improved working conditions and the introduction of holiday pay<sup>247</sup>. At the time of Mosley's final visit to Stoke-on-Trent as fascist leader to address the meeting that marked the last recorded incident of BUF activity in the city, local pottery exports from the start of the year had easily turned the million pounds mark, totalling nearly £100,000 more than the corresponding period of the previous year<sup>248</sup>.

In Stoke-on-Trent from 1935 until the movement's demise in the city around mid-1938 the mainstream socio-economic and political forces in the city adequately catered for the needs and wants of most people. This resulted in the local BUF being pushed to the periphery of Stoke-on-Trent life where it suffocated in permanent marginalisation and lack of legitimacy.

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<sup>244</sup> *ES* 3 November 1936, p1.

<sup>245</sup> *ES* 9 March 1937, p5.

<sup>246</sup> *ES* 7 June 1937, p2; *ES* 4 October 1937, p1.

<sup>247</sup> *ES* 14 April 1938, p6.

<sup>248</sup> *ES* 19 April 1938, p4.

## Chapter Four: The BUF in Coventry, 1932 – 1940.

### 1. 1932 – 1934.

The city of Coventry is situated in the north-east of the county of Warwickshire and is the leading municipality in the south Midlands<sup>1</sup>. According to the 1931 decennial Census Coventry covered 12,827 acres<sup>2</sup> and had a population of 167,083<sup>3</sup>. The city was divided into fifteen wards<sup>4</sup> and was represented by a solitary seat in Parliament<sup>5</sup>. The Industrial Revolution was late in arriving in Coventry, and until the late-1800s the city's industry was dominated by the wool and ribbon weaving that had been established in the eleventh century. At the end of the nineteenth century Coventry was a city of great social and economic change, its geographical position at the heart of the country allowing it to take advantage of the country's new road and railway networks to attract talented engineers and entrepreneurs to the area who established fresh sources of wealth and employment. In the 1880s Coventry's industries swiftly diversified to include watchmaking and the birth of the cycle trade, to be followed by motorcycles and cars. 'The expansion of the motor industry was paralleled by the growth and development of other metal and engineering industries. To the motor industry, for instance, they supplied the necessary component parts such as radiators, magnetos, lights, rims, wheels, carburettors and all the other essentials that went into the construction of a car. Other firms performed the equally important functions of body pressing and drop forging and the making of machine tools, all of which eased the introduction of both batch and mass production methods in the car and other industries'<sup>6</sup>. Acquiring a reputation for

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<sup>1</sup> W. Stephens, *A History of the County of Warwick Vol VIII: The City of Coventry and Borough of Warwick* (London, Oxford University Press, 1969), p1.

<sup>2</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* Table 3. Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings, p3.

<sup>3</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* Table 2. Population 1911-1931 and Intercensal Variations, p1.

<sup>4</sup> All Saints, Bablake, Cheylesmore, Earlsdon, Foleshill, Grey Friars, Harnall, Hill Fields, Longford, Lower Stoke, Radford, St. Mary's, St. Paul's, Upper Stoke, Westwood. *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* Table 3. Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings, p3.

<sup>5</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Warwick (Part 1)* Table 7. Population and Parliamentary Electors, p11.

<sup>6</sup> D. Thoms and T. Donnelly, 'Coventry's Industrial Economy, 1880-1980', in B. Lancaster and T. Mason (eds.) *Life and Labour in a 20<sup>th</sup> Century City. The Experience of Coventry* (Coventry, Cryfield Press, 1986), p32.

adaptability and innovation, Coventry continued to develop new industries into the twentieth century at an accelerated pace. By the early 1930s artificial silks, aircraft<sup>7</sup>, electrics, and telecommunications equipment were being produced on a mass scale in Coventry<sup>8</sup>.

In contrast to Birmingham and Stoke-on-Trent there existed no major personal or political connections between Sir Oswald Mosley and Coventry prior to the establishment of a BUF branch in the city<sup>9</sup>. In February 1933 a paid speaker in the N.H.Q. Propaganda Department, Charles Dolan, was despatched to Birmingham tasked with working alongside Birmingham Organiser Arthur Ward in building up BUF branches in the Second City and establishing a branch in Coventry<sup>10</sup>. Cross writes of a BUF standard practice for opening a new branch in the Provinces: 'The policy...was always to present a show of strength. For a first meeting in new territory the speaker would arrive with a coach-load of blackshirts who...would march through the streets to advertise the meeting. Afterwards there would be another march, with new recruits encouraged to fall in behind. A full-time official from National Headquarters would stay in the town for three or four weeks, instruct the new recruits and organize them into a branch. The aim was then to find a local leader capable of taking over [as branch leader]'<sup>11</sup>. Dolan and Ward followed the template described, wasting little time in organising the first BUF event in Coventry when a lorry load of blackshirts arrived from Birmingham and held a meeting in Coventry Market Square. After this meetings were held regularly. A branch was soon established which would operate as a subsidiary of Birmingham Central branch until early 1934, and a Mr. Raymond was appointed Organiser Coventry and Warwickshire Sub-Area<sup>12</sup>. In May 1933 a temporary branch headquarters was opened in a disused warehouse in Whitefriars Lane. Finding more suitable premises was the first task Allan MacDonald set himself upon being appointed the new Organiser in August 1933. This proved difficult but by November 1933 premises had been secured at 33 Stoney Stanton Road<sup>13</sup>. MacDonald had returned from Canada during the First World War to 'do

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<sup>7</sup> E. Newbold, *A Portrait of Coventry* (London, Robert Hale, 1972), p134.

<sup>8</sup> D. McGrory, *A History of Coventry* (Chichester, Phillimore, 2003), p251.

<sup>9</sup> *Midlands Daily Telegraph* (hereafter *MDT*) 17 May 1933, p5.

<sup>10</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>11</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p105.

<sup>12</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1; *Blackshirt* 21 December 1934, p12.

<sup>13</sup> *Blackshirt* 21 December 1934, p12.



his bit' for the native country he proudly called 'a glorious land'<sup>14</sup>. The BUF would make undistinguished and ineffectual progress in Coventry during the period from the founding of this branch in the city to the outbreak of disorder at the Olympia meeting.

From the first BUF meeting held in Coventry in February 1933 until the end of 1934 the propaganda message disseminated in the city by the local fascists concentrated on the general programme of the Corporate State. This theme was promoted at outdoor meetings and through letters to the correspondence columns of the principal local newspaper the *Midland Daily Telegraph*<sup>15</sup>.

The common reaction to the local Mosleyites as they tried to maintain and expand a fledgling branch in Coventry during 1933 appears to have been general indifference. Coventry proved to be predominantly barren ground for fascist recruitment efforts and the BUF failed to make an impact of any note in the city<sup>16</sup>. Coupland suggests a personal appearance by Mosley could spark a surge in enrolments into even the most lethargic and struggling of BUF branches<sup>17</sup>. It stands as a testament to Coventry's seeming immunity to his movement's appeal that Mosley's first appearance in the city as BUF leader at the Corn Exchange in late 1933 exercised little or no discernable effect on the local branch's levels of recruitment. The disappointed Coventry branch had harboured high hopes the meeting, at which Mosley delivered an exposition on the general principles of the Corporate State, would kick-start the fascist movement in the city<sup>18</sup>. In an attempt to promote as widely as possible the leader's visit a large sum of money had been spent placing a series of prominent adverts in the public notices section of the *Midland Daily Telegraph*<sup>19</sup>. When called upon by its Birmingham supervisors to assist with the stewarding at inaugural BUF meetings in Wolverhampton and Oxford, the contribution of the Coventry branch

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<sup>14</sup> *MDT* 22 October 1936, p6.

<sup>15</sup> *Blackshirt* 15 June 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 30 November 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 14 December 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 21 December 1934, p12; *MDT* 15 November 1933, p5; *MDT* 17 January 1934, p4; *MDT* 2 February 1934, p3; *MDT* 20 February 1934, p4; *MDT* 2 May 1934, p3; *MDT* 24 May 1934, p4; *MDT* 23 November 1934, p12; *MDT* 23 December 1934, p6. For a detailed account of Mosley's idea of the Corporate State see pp14-15 of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p238. Report by Major Cleghorn on Coventry Branch. 5. 12. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Coupland, 'The Blackshirts in Northampton, 1933 – 1940', pp71-82.

<sup>18</sup> *MDT* 15 November 1933, p5.

<sup>19</sup> *MDT* 10 November 1933, p7; *MDT* 11 November 1933, p5; *MDT* 13 November 1933, p5.

numbered in single figures<sup>20</sup>. By the end of 1933 the Coventry BUF had failed even to raise the six active men required to form a blackshirt Unit<sup>21</sup>.

Alongside a shortage of numbers the Coventry BUF was also suffering from a lack of quality among its membership. These shortcomings were exposed for the Coventry public to see when the Honorary Organiser of the Leamington BUF branch appeared in court early in the New Year. In November 1933 a decision had been taken to endeavour to form a subsidiary branch of the Coventry BUF at nearby Leamington. Casting a critical eye over the tiny Coventry membership, N.H.Q. found there were only three potential candidates for the job of organising a new branch and Fascist Charles Bowlby was selected. 22 year old Bowlby had attended the Royal Naval College until he was 18 but a serious motor accident ended his career in the Navy and he became an insurance agent. As an occupational 'type' belonging to the 'lower/intermediate (petty) employee' sub-group, Bowlby is allocated to the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social class category in Table 3. He had been a member of the BUF for only a month before he was asked to organise in Leamington. The selection proved highly embarrassing when Bowlby, considered one of the highest calibre members in the Coventry branch, was found to have over the course of his three months as Leamington Organiser embezzled the entire £6 sent to him in weekly 15s sums from N.H.Q. as rent payments on a premises taken as Leamington headquarters at 1 Regent Street<sup>22</sup>. Bowlby's case is not unusual in the historiography. Throughout its existence the BUF attracted an embarrassing number of men and women with criminal tendencies and often, as at Leamington, the movement would be the chosen victim of such members' illegal activities, with theft being a particular problem<sup>23</sup>.

A problem that the Coventry branch did not have to worry about at this time was opposition from the political parties present in the city. Organised opposition to the Coventry BUF during the period from the opening of the city branch until mid-1934 was virtually non-existent. On

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<sup>20</sup> *BG* 29 August 1933, p1; *BP* 29 August 1933, p9; *BP* 3 November 1933, p3; *Blackshirt* 2 – 8 March 1934, p1.

<sup>21</sup> *Blackshirt* 19 – 25 January 1934, p4.

<sup>22</sup> *MDT* 26 February 1934, p8; *MDT* 28 February 1934, p8.

<sup>23</sup> Beavan, 'The Welsh Security Officer', p58; Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p53; Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p111; L. Pizzichini, *Dead Men's Wages. The Secrets Of A London Conman And His Family* (London, Picador, 2002), p44; Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', p157.

the founding of new BUF branches, Cross writes: 'The arrival of blackshirts in a town generally caused a stir which on many occasions turned to violence'<sup>24</sup>. This physical opposition most commonly appeared in the hostile form of members of the local branch of the Communist Party<sup>25</sup> but the Coventry far-left did not attempt to disrupt the activities of the fascist movement in the city until the second half of the decade. A minor fracas occurred at the conclusion of Mosley's meeting in the Corn Exchange when a group of Communists who had assembled to heckle the arrival of the fascist leader clashed with members of the departing audience but these far-left anti-fascists were outsiders who had travelled into Coventry specifically to try and disrupt the showcase BUF gathering: the local Communists, who had been holding their own meeting in the Market Square without a mention of fascism, took no part in the disturbance<sup>26</sup>.

The mainstream political parties in Coventry displayed an unconcerned attitude to the presence of Mosleyite fascism in the city. The Conservative and Labour parties in Coventry were fully conversant with the activities of the fascist branch but believed the Mosleyite presence did not merit opposing because it was failing miserably to establish even a toe-hold in the city. Though assessing the Coventry BUF still-born, the city political establishment thought it better to err on the side of caution nonetheless and refused to in any way provide the local fascists the oxygen of publicity any kind of organised opposition might potentially bring<sup>27</sup>. The Coventry Conservative and Labour parties would maintain this position throughout the entire history of the BUF presence in the city.

The Coventry BUF believed it had secured a great coup in January 1934 with the enlistment at the branch of H. E. B. Ludlam. As a newspaper proprietor Ludlam belonged to the 'entrepreneur' occupational sub-group allocated to the 'elite or upper-middle' social class in Table 3 and was prominent both locally and nationally for his promotion of the Douglas Social Credit theory<sup>28</sup>. In the years following World War One retired Army engineer C. H. Douglas wrote a series of short articles outlining an economic philosophy that quickly became known as Social

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<sup>24</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p106.

<sup>25</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p106.

<sup>26</sup> *MDT* 15 November 1933, p5.

<sup>27</sup> *MDT* 9 July 1934, p3.

<sup>28</sup> *MDT* 17 January 1934, p4.

Credit. Douglas believed that all social ills were a product of economic problems caused by a shortage of purchasing power in society. The Social Credit system would solve this problem by ensuring there would always be sufficient money (credits) issued to the public so that the people could purchase all the goods that could be produced. This would be achieved through the introduction of three core demands: the creation of a 'National Credit Office' to calculate on a statistical basis the amount of credit required to be circulating in the British economy, a price adjustment mechanism that reflected the 'real cost' of production, and a 'National Dividend' to give a basic guaranteed income to all regardless of whether or not they had a job<sup>29</sup>.

During the 1920s Coventry became a hotbed of support for the Social Credit theory. A group called the Economic Freedom League based itself in the city which focused on spreading Douglas's theory among the 'lower' class and the unemployed and central to spreading its message was a newspaper the *Age of Plenty*, a monthly publication owned and edited by Ludlam<sup>30</sup>. In late 1928 the Economic Freedom League allied itself to a movement for Social Credit called the Kibbo Kift which was led by its founder John Hargrave. The two organisations agreed to set up an intermediate group called the Economic Party, with shop organisations established to conduct day to day propaganda work among 'workers'. The first was established in Coventry with a George Hickling, an unemployed mechanic, as secretary. The Economic Party was undermined by intrigues and personal feuds and the scheme was soon abandoned. In the disorganisation Ludlam's *Age of Plenty* suspended publication for two months. Not long after the collapse of the Economic Party in 1930 Hickling began to organise the out of work in Coventry into a new Social Credit organisation he named the Legion of the Unemployed. The following year the 'inner elite' of the organisation adopted a quasi-uniform of green shirt and beret, and they swiftly became known as the 'Green Shirts'<sup>31</sup>. The Legion of the Unemployed proved unable to expand beyond a small membership and in 1932 it officially affiliated with the Kibbo Kift. The

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<sup>29</sup> C. Douglas, *Social Credit* (London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1924), pp207-208.

<sup>30</sup> J. Findlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.5, No.1 (1970), p60; E. McCarthy, 'A History of the Social Credit Movement' (MA thesis, University of Leeds, 1947), p29.

<sup>31</sup> Findlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', pp60-65.

ambitious Hargrave, whose 'personality...so outshone Hickling'<sup>32</sup>, wasted little time in absorbing the Legion fully into his organisation. In 1933 the Legion of the Unemployed was broken up and the Kibbo Kift renamed the Greenshirt Movement for Social Credit<sup>33</sup>.

The wider Social Credit movement gave such 'undignified' groups no support<sup>34</sup> and what little support had existed in Coventry for the Economic Freedom League and the Legion of the Unemployed did not extend to an endorsement of the Green Shirt Movement for Social Credit. What measure of popularity Hargrave's movement did enjoy was concentrated primarily in Britain's northern industrial centres. At its height, Hargrave's movement, which underwent a final name change in 1935 to become the Social Credit Party of Great Britain, boasted a chain of sixteen groups across Britain, not one of which was located in Coventry<sup>35</sup>.

In common with nearly all the Social Creditors in Coventry, Ludlam wholly rejected Hargrave's new Greenshirt movement. However, in Ludlam's case the collapse of the Legion of the Unemployed signalled the end of his, and thus the *Age of Plenty's*, decade long support for Social Credit theory. The newspaper proprietor and editor had decided that 'the age of plenty' could only be brought in under fascism. Many contemporary observers discerned a 'fascist streak' to the Green Shirt Movement of Great Britain; and at a superficial level, Findlay argues, this identification could be pardoned<sup>36</sup>. However, the 'Greenshirts' saw themselves as firm in their rejection of fascism and the BUF were in turn hostile to Hargrave's movement and in certain parts of the county hostility between the rival political groups did on occasion erupt into violent physical clashes<sup>37</sup>. Ludlam discerned the fascism he now believed necessary to cure all the myriad ills of the country could be found exclusively in the Mosley movement<sup>38</sup>.

Perhaps a crucial factor in Ludlam's conversion to Mosleyite fascism was that it did not involve him abandoning in its entirety the economic philosophy to which he had adhered for the previous decade. Thurlow has identified Social Credit as one of the diverse concepts that

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<sup>32</sup> Findlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', p64.

<sup>33</sup> Findlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', p66.

<sup>34</sup> Findlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', p66.

<sup>35</sup> Findlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', p65.

<sup>36</sup> Findlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', p69.

<sup>37</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940', p100.

<sup>38</sup> NA: HO144/20140, p105. Special Branch Report 30<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

collectively form what he terms 'the underground of rejected knowledge', a reservoir of ideas that while incompatible with the conventional wisdom of the establishment provided much intellectual stimulus to Oswald Mosley during the 1920s and 1930s. For Thurlow, Douglas's idea of the national dividend to aid consumer spending was 'the main precursor and perhaps source' for a BUF policy of 'consumer credits' scientifically directed by the Corporate State to the less advantaged sections of British society to facilitate a 'consumption boom'<sup>39</sup>. BUF economists like Alexander Raven Thomson rejected Douglas's key theorem as certain to create chronic inflation, but the fascist theorists' principal objection to Social Credit as a system was ethical not economic: whereas Douglas suggested consumer credits should be every citizens' automatic right, Mosley believed consumer credits should be a reward earned for making a significant contribution to the Corporate State<sup>40</sup>. Ludlam retained his belief that the problem of production having been solved, Britain was faced with the 'fact' that millions of its men and women were going short of the necessities, not to say the amenities, of life not because it lacked sufficient food, warmth and shelter for everyone, but because they had not the purchasing power to buy the goods modern industry could produce in super-abundance. However, he had reached the conclusion that it was 'ridiculous' to believe that the purchasing power of the mass of consumers could be substantially increased without national co-ordination and regulation of production and trade, nor could it be achieved by monetary reform alone. The British fascism of Sir Oswald Mosley, he believed, offered the only plausible remedy to the discrepancy between producing power and consumer power<sup>41</sup>.

The recruitment of Ludlam prompted a re-organisation and re-launching of the BUF in Coventry. His enlistment proved timely. Unable because of personal financial problems to devote the amount of time he believed necessary to the position of Organiser Coventry and Warwickshire Sub-Area BUF, MacDonald had recently resigned his command at his own

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<sup>39</sup> R. Thurlow, 'The Return of Jeremiah: The Rejected Knowledge of Sir Oswald Mosley in the 1930s', in Lunn and Thurlow (eds.), p105.

<sup>40</sup> A. R. Thomson, 'British Fascism and Douglas Social Credit', *Age of Plenty* No.2 1934.

<sup>41</sup> *Blackshirt* 22 June 1934, p10.

request.<sup>42</sup> Ludlam was immediately appointed to the vacant leadership position. George S. King was appointed his assistant and William Stanley Woods became the Area Administrative Officer for Coventry and Warwickshire<sup>43</sup>. These appointments were swiftly followed by the promotion of Fascist W. Watkins to the position of Section Leader, Fascist T. Gorman to the position of Sub-Branch Officer, and Sub-Branch Officer Roblyn to the position of Deputy Branch Officer<sup>44</sup>.

Delighted at acquiring the membership of a well-known local figure, the Coventry branch staged a special public meeting on the evening of 16 January 1934 to announce the support of Ludlam and his publication<sup>45</sup> to which the fascist press would soon take to referring grandly as 'the Fascist quarterly, *Age of Plenty*'<sup>46</sup>. At the gathering Ludlam delivered his maiden speech as the new leader of the Coventry BUF<sup>47</sup>.

The conversion of Ludlam to Mosleyite fascism immediately served to raise the profile of the BUF in Coventry during the first half of 1934. Ludlam had gathered around him an energetic band of propagandists and conducted a steady six month long campaign of public meetings. Suddenly considered newsworthy, these meetings were covered neutrally but in detail by the previously apathetic *Midlands Daily Telegraph*<sup>48</sup>.

The new-found interest of the local newspaper, however, does not appear to have reflected a surge in curiosity about the Mosley movement among the local people. The announcement of Ludlam's membership came only a day after Lord Rothermere published the notorious editorial titled 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' that inaugurated six months in which his *Daily Mail* supported the Mosley movement. The BUF branch in Coventry experienced a trickle rather than a flood of new recruits during the period of Rothermere's sponsorship. The local fascists remained unable to build substantially on this and gain any significant momentum. The public meetings arranged by Ludlam failed to attract noteworthy attendances. Ambitions announced in early February to form subsidiary branches throughout Warwickshire at Warwick, Nuneaton,

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<sup>42</sup> *Blackshirt* 19 - 25 January 1934, p4; NA: HO144/20144, p238. Report by Major Cleghorn on Coventry Branch 5.12.34.

<sup>43</sup> *Blackshirt* 26 January – 1 February 1934, p4; *Blackshirt* 15 June 1934, p10; *MDT* 20 February 1934, p4.

<sup>44</sup> *Blackshirt* 2 - 8 March 1934, p4.

<sup>45</sup> *MDT* 17 January 1934, p4.

<sup>46</sup> *Blackshirt* 22 June 1934, p10.

<sup>47</sup> *MDT* 17 January 1934, p4.

<sup>48</sup> *MDT* 2 February 1934, p3; *MDT* 20 February 1934, p4; *MDT* 2 May 1934, p3; *MDT* 24 May 1934, p4.

Rugby, and Hinckley, among other places<sup>49</sup>, came to nothing. Membership of the Coventry BUF increased but remained small and only a minority of members were willing to engage in activities that would associate them publicly with the Mosley movement. The Coventry BUF proved incapable of raising more than three active Units, two based at the Coventry branch and the other based at its subsidiary in Leamington<sup>50</sup>; and failed miserably to improve on the previous years' paltry contribution when asked to provide stewards to assist at BUF meetings in the wider Midlands and around the country<sup>51</sup>.

As we have seen in previous chapters, A. K. Chesterton's arrival in the Midlands had foreshadowed a general national re-organisation of provincial branches in April and early May 1934<sup>52</sup>. As part of organising the Midlands into a single administrative unit, Chesterton initiated a series of personnel changes across the region. At the Coventry branch Major James Shearer was promoted to an executive position<sup>53</sup>. A former member of the Intelligence Department of the British War Office, Shearer lived in Kenilworth in Warwickshire and earned his living as the publicity director at the Coventry works of Courtaulds Limited, the nationwide rayon goods and artificial silk textile manufacturers. As an occupational 'type' belonging to the 'managers' sub-group he is classified as being of 'elite or upper-middle' social class status in Table 3. Major Shearer would a few years later be appointed the first National Inspecting Officer of the Mosley movement<sup>54</sup>. His wife Mrs C. A. Shearer had served as the Officer-in-Charge Women's Section of the Coventry BUF since inheriting the position from a Mrs Holl in early March 1934<sup>55</sup>. During the summer months of 1934 Mrs Shearer acted as Women's Area Organiser for Warwickshire and Staffordshire<sup>56</sup>.

Local press reports on Mosleyite activities corroborate the Chief Constable of Warwickshire's assessment made in late May 1934 that little or no public interest appeared to

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<sup>49</sup> *MDT* 2 February 1934, p3.

<sup>50</sup> Under the command of Unit Leaders MacDonald, O'Rourke, and Gardner respectively. *Blackshirt* 9 – 15 March 1934, p4.

<sup>51</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p121.

<sup>52</sup> NA: HO144/20140, p118.

<sup>53</sup> *Blackshirt* 4 – 10 May 1934, p4.

<sup>54</sup> A. Miles, *Mosley in Motley* (London, A. C. Miles, 1936), pp8-9.

<sup>55</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 March – 5 April 1934, p4; NA: HO144/20140, p108. Special Branch Report 30<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>56</sup> *Blackshirt* 28 June 1934, p7; *Blackshirt* 3 August 1934, p4; *Leicester Mercury* 9 June 1934, p8.



have been taken in the BUF in the county<sup>57</sup>. Total membership of the Coventry BUF at this time numbered approximately 45<sup>58</sup>.

## 2. 1934 – 1940.

Mosleyite fascism in Coventry reached what would prove to be its peak during the period of Rothermere's sponsorship. In the wake of the disorderly events at the infamous Olympia rally the Coventry BUF would lose rapidly what little momentum it had struggled to accrue and fall into a sharp decline.

While a large contingent of Midlands members attended the infamous London meeting it is unknown whether any of the Coventry BUF was present. The local fascists' meagre record on attending previous BUF meetings outside the immediate area suggests very few, if any, Coventry Mosleyites made the long journey to London. Certainly there were no Coventry blackshirts among the 50 stewards drawn exclusively from the Midlands region who travelled to Shropshire to attend a BUF public meeting addressed by Mosley at Shrewsbury on 12 June 1934. This peaceful gathering of an audience comprised primarily of local farmers was one of the first to host Mosley since the violence-marred rally in London and the BUF leader used the opportunity to accuse opponents and the press of grossly misrepresenting the blackshirts' role in the disorderly events at Olympia<sup>59</sup>. Coventry fascists were also absent from the 30 to 40 strong 'Midlands contingent' of blackshirts who attended the first BUF meeting in Leicester of any significance which was held on the evening 14 June 1934<sup>60</sup>.

The *Midland Daily Telegraph* was not among those newspapers indicted by Mosley at Shrewsbury of making 'inaccurate accusations' about blackshirt actions at Olympia. The local Coventry newspaper had refrained from covering events at the controversial rally. Subsequent court-cases, deputations and Parliamentary debates arising out of the violent meeting were

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<sup>57</sup> *MDT* 24 May 1934, p4; NA: HO144/21041, p317. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland.

<sup>58</sup> *MDT* 24 May 1934, p4.

<sup>59</sup> *BM* 18 June 1934, p7; *ES* 12 June 1934, p1.

<sup>60</sup> *BM* 18 June 1934, p7; NA: HO144/20143, p380. Disorder at Public Meetings, etc.

reported neutrally without editorial observations<sup>61</sup>. Pugh has challenged the established 'conventional' notion that posited the haemorrhaging of BUF membership in the aftermath of the Olympia rally could only be explained by 'respectable opinion' suddenly waking up in the sobering light of generally hostile media coverage to the 'real nature of fascism' and recoiling from its innate brutality<sup>62</sup>. While it must certainly be recognised that nationally the general press and popular reaction to the disorder at Olympia was far more complicated than previously accepted, the experience of the Coventry BUF suggests the 'conventional' argument is not automatically without merit. In the case of Coventry the 'conventional' position holds true. The sudden deterioration of the local branch can be attributed to widespread revulsion evoked by adverse press publicity surrounding aggressive fascist stewarding at the controversial London gathering. While the Coventry press did not conspicuously dissuade local people from supporting the BUF, the coverage of Olympia in sections of the national media had a harmful impact on perceptions of Mosleyite fascism in the area. The Coventry BUF had struggled since its founding to make a mark on the consciousness of the Warwickshire public and in a short space of time the little profile it had achieved in the area became associated in the minds of local men and women with violence and cruelty. The Coventry BUF acknowledged the debilitating influence some of the national media coverage was exerting on the local public's impressions of the Mosley movement<sup>63</sup>. Distressed but loyal local Mosleyites insisted the BUF was the defiant victim of an extensive conspiracy perpetrated by a media frantic at the Mosley movement's rapid growth. 'In the farcical outbursts against the so-called 'brutality' of Blackshirt stewards in daring to eject Communist hooligans from the Olympia,' the Coventry BUF proclaimed, 'we witness the 'last throw' of the liberal Press and the B.B.C. against the growing ascendancy of fascist ideas in Britain'. The adverse response to the events at Olympia was the latest transparent attempt by 'an ingenious "stunt" press' that had by every despicable method striven to 'drown the voice of commonsense in a flood of sentiment and misrepresentation' and prevent the BUF from being understood by the public. Coventry fascist anger was directed in particular at the B.B.C., which, it

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<sup>61</sup> *MDT* 8 June 1934, p10; *MDT* 9 June 1934, p10; *MDT* 13 June 1934, p1; *MDT* 26 June 1934, p8.

<sup>62</sup> Pugh, '*Hurrah for the Blackshirts!*', p161; Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate'.

<sup>63</sup> *MDT* 13 June 1934, p1.

was felt with deep indignation, was biased against Mosley and his movement: 'If the B.B.C. desire to avoid stormy meetings let them invite the Leader to state his case clearly to the listening millions. But no! They dare not do this. They know only too well what the public response would be to the voice of true leadership. They will go to any lengths rather than allow our [ideas] to be heard'. The conspiracy would not make a difference, it was concluded; for BUF policy had already taken a deep hold upon the minds of the people: 'This is no "stunt" Movement, but a Movement invincibly certain of its great destiny'<sup>64</sup>.

Fascist bravado failed to convince not only the public but also the majority of local members and in the aftermath of the Olympia scandal membership of the Coventry BUF plummeted. Departures from the movement came at a rapid rate and from every rank, including the most senior positions. The Leamington sub-branch closed due to declining interest. A sudden disappearance from all material covered relating to the BUF in Coventry after delivering an address at an outdoor meeting in the city at the end of June 1934<sup>65</sup> suggests Ludlam severed his links with the Mosley movement at the same time as Rothermere. Ludlam's departure was not accompanied by the termination of the *Age of Plenty's* support for Mosleyite fascism. It appears that the long-standing proprietor sold his rights of ownership of the newspaper to the fascist organisation at some point during his membership. The inaugural fascist edition of the journal was published in April 1934 and the series continued irregularly until it was discontinued at the end of October 1934<sup>66</sup>. The BUF attempted to revive the *Age of Plenty* in July 1937 with no connection to Coventry<sup>67</sup>.

A report compiled at the request of MI5 by the Chief Constable of Warwickshire on developments in the Mosley movement in the area during August and September 1934 reveals that at the beginning of August the membership of the Coventry BUF had fallen by more than half on its peak of only two months before. Membership stood at about 20 and the majority of these

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<sup>64</sup> *Blackshirt* 15 June 1934, p12.

<sup>65</sup> *Blackshirt* 15 June 1934, p12.

<sup>66</sup> *Blackshirt* 19 October 1934, p9; NA: HO144/20140, p105. Special Branch Report dated 30<sup>th</sup> April 1936.

<sup>67</sup> *Age of Plenty* Vol.2, No.1 1937.

members were considered 'young local people of no standing'<sup>68</sup>. According to the local press these young fascists were drawn predominantly from the ranks of unskilled manual workers employed in Coventry's factories, an occupational 'type' which is classified as belonging to the 'lower' social class category in Table 3. These 'lower' class members reportedly formed the staple of branch membership during the second half of 1934<sup>69</sup>. Very little interest was taken in the weekly meetings being held by the branch during August and September 1934 and the audiences attracted were 'small and amused'<sup>70</sup>.

The sudden decline in membership numbers in the wake of the Olympia scandal suggests the bulk of those who left the Coventry BUF were 'Rothermere fascists'. Certainly the Coventry BUF had experienced its biggest growth during the six month period when the Rothermere newspapers supported the BUF. It seems that the experience of the Coventry BUF provides yet another example of 'Rothermere fascists' that accords with the image in the historiography of men and women joining the Mosley movement in search of a more virile form of a conventional political party only to drop out when the going got a little too tough for their sensibilities<sup>71</sup>.

The exertion of a powerful appeal to youth has long been established as a generic trait of European fascism between the world wars<sup>72</sup> and the historiography agrees that the BUF does not represent an exception<sup>73</sup>. Although it is possible that the 'lower' class young people who by early August 1934 had come to comprise the majority of Coventry BUF membership may well have been members of the Mosley movement in Warwickshire prior to the Olympia controversy, an alternative explanation for their presence lies in the Special Branch suggestion that while the violence unleashed at the London rally alienated many people throughout the country it proved a

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<sup>68</sup> NA: HO144/21042, p230. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No. III Developments during August/September 1934.

<sup>69</sup> *MDT* 22 December 1934, p10.

<sup>70</sup> NA: HO144/21042, p230. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No. III Developments during August/September 1934.

<sup>71</sup> Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p152.

<sup>72</sup> J. Linz, 'Some Notes Towards a Comparative Study of Fascism in Sociological Historical Perspective', in W. Laqueur (ed.) *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* (London, Wildwood, 1976), p81.

<sup>73</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p67; Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p47; Linehan, *British fascism*, p165; Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p138; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p317.

'fillip to recruitment' by bestowing a new allure upon the BUF among a section of young people<sup>74</sup>. If these 'lower' class young members had indeed been motivated to join the Coventry BUF post-Olympia in the hope of participating in political violence then they were to be sorely disappointed as all BUF meetings in Coventry during the remaining months of 1934 would pass peacefully without interruption of any kind<sup>75</sup>.

Allan MacDonald, one of the few senior Coventry members during the second half of 1934 to remain loyal to the BUF, assumed temporary leadership of the Coventry branch until a Branch Officer Hirst was sent by N.H.Q. in September to replace Ludlam on a permanent basis. Hirst had served as deputy of the FUBW at Birmingham in early 1934<sup>76</sup> and in a recognition of the condition of the Coventry BUF had been tasked by N.H.Q. with halting the decline of the Mosley movement in Warwickshire and consolidating the remaining small number of members into 'a solid branch'<sup>77</sup>. While Hirst focused on administration, MacDonald was given responsibility for communicating the branch's propaganda message to the Coventry public. Weekly propaganda meetings were held in Coventry Market Square during November and December and a sales squad was formed to sell fascist literature<sup>78</sup>.

The arrival of Hirst failed to in any way improve the fortunes of the Coventry BUF. In late December 1934 two high-ranking officials paid a surprise inspection to the branch on their way to investigate the personal feuds that had plunged the Birmingham BUF into crisis. They found a Coventry branch in disarray. Hirst had proved unable to halt the decline of the branch and membership had continued to fall. Only twelve members were now willing to be publicly associated with the Mosley movement. The Coventry public had responded to MacDonald's meetings with a stony indifference. The absence of experienced quality personnel had forced MacDonald to import guest speakers and general assistance from outside the area and what

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<sup>74</sup> NA: HO144/20142, p115. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No II. Developments during June & July 1934.

<sup>75</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 November 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 14 December 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 21 December 1934, p12.

<sup>76</sup> *BM* 1 February 1934, p11; *BM* 2 February 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 5 – 11 January 1934, p4; NA: HO144/20140, p113. Special Branch Report 30<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>77</sup> *Blackshirt* 21 December 1934, p12.

<sup>78</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 November 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 14 December 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 21 December 1934, p12.

audiences did turn up to hear what the fascists had to say remained the 'small and amused' variety. At the branch premises, which the visitors found open but unattended, were piles of unsold fascist newspapers and the general impression gained was of an entire lack of method and business-like instinct. The report compiled by the two officers from London was damning. The position of the BUF branch in Coventry, it concluded, was 'deplorable'<sup>79</sup>.

At the end of December 1934 the Coventry branch announced it had formulated a programme of indoor meetings and a canvass campaign which would commence in January 1935<sup>80</sup>. However, the Coventry BUF would be denied the opportunity to carry out these plans. During the first month of 1935 Mosley initiated an extensive nationwide reorganisation to move the BUF away from 'semi-military training, designed to suppress Communist revolution' towards a more conventional British political operation designed to win power through the ballot box at the next General Election. The control of branches was to be centralised through a system of headquarters inspectors who would purge the unproductive from the membership lists, close all fascist social clubs and strip facilities down to a small administrative office from which all political activities would be organised. A. K. Chesterton was the inspector dispatched from headquarters to supervise the transition in the Midlands and his response to the conditions he discovered in the Coventry branch is often recounted in the historiography<sup>81</sup>. The earliest account is provided by Cross in his work *The Fascists in Britain*, first published in 1961 and enduringly respected as representing the beginning of serious contemporary investigation into the BUF<sup>82</sup>. Cross writes of how alarmed Chesterton was to find that the Coventry branch had fallen deeply into the depths of the despised 'social club' approach to politics. The blackshirts at the branch were passively waiting in their club for the revolution 'instead of sallying outside to propagate the Fascist cause'. The overly social nature of the branch which had come to resemble the clubs of conventional

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<sup>79</sup> NA: HO144/20144, pp237-238. Report by Major Cleghorn on Coventry branch. 5. 12. 34.

<sup>80</sup> *Blackshirt* 21 December 1934, p12.

<sup>81</sup> Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, p126; Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, pp137-138; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p324; Spurr, "Living the Blackshirt Life", p314.

<sup>82</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932 – 1940', p1.

political parties resulted in a furious Chesterton closing it on the spot, dismissing the branch officers and expelling from the movement the entire membership<sup>83</sup>.

While in the historiography a 'social club' ethos is associated with the membership attracted during the period of the Rothermere press group's support<sup>84</sup>, as we have seen, at the Stoke-on-Trent branch 'social club fascism' took hold only after the departure of this type of member and coincided with the transfer of Chesterton from his position as Officer-in-Charge Midlands Area to a post at Mosley's side at N.H.Q. Chesterton's temporary replacement D. N. Revett was a poor administrator and his authority was weakened by a distracting feud with the new Birmingham Organiser<sup>85</sup>. The development of 'social club fascism' in the Coventry branch, it seems, mirrors the experience of the Stoke-on-Trent BUF. There is no evidence to suggest that the "social club" approach<sup>86</sup> to politics was an aspect of the Mosley movement in Warwickshire prior to Chesterton's arrival in the Midlands and during his time as the fascist leader in the region he kept a close watch on the branches under his jurisdiction<sup>87</sup>. As his behaviour during the tour of the Midlands branches in January 1935 amply displays, Chesterton was a man profoundly committed to the radical ideals of the fascist creed, and as such it would be uncharacteristic in the extreme for him to permit even the hint of 'social club fascism' to develop at Coventry BUF branches over which he exerted influence and at which he had appointed a handpicked representative.

While, as we have seen in the Stoke-on-Trent case-study, Chesterton's response to the conditions he discovered in the Potteries branch was an ideological over-reaction to a salvageable situation by an increasingly unstable revolutionary fascist, his decision to shut down the Coventry BUF is readily justifiable. Whereas the Stoke-on-Trent BUF possessed the potential to regain its former position as a significant presence in the Potteries and at the time of Chesterton's visit remained one of the largest BUF branches in the country with a large membership of loyal Mosleyites in an area of proven latent support, the experience of the

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<sup>83</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, pp137-138.

<sup>84</sup> Beavan, 'The Welsh Security Officer', p58.

<sup>85</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p238. Report by Major Cleghorn on Birmingham Branch 5.12.34.

<sup>86</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p324.

<sup>87</sup> *Blackshirt* 6 – 12 April 1934, p3.

Coventry BUF from its founding was that of drudgery with little reward at the periphery of Warwickshire life. There was nothing in the prior development of the BUF in Coventry to suggest the branch could ever establish itself in the city as a prominent feature of any kind, and N.H.Q. evidently agreed with Chesterton's action. Only a month had passed before N.H.Q. reversed the decision to close the Stoke-on-Trent BUF<sup>88</sup> but by contrast it would not be until 1936 that any attempt would be made to revive the BUF branch in Coventry. The shutting down of the Coventry BUF was, therefore, unremarkable: one of dozens of inconsequential branches closed around the country during the January 1935 re-organisation<sup>89</sup>.

The BUF was extinct in Coventry during 1935<sup>90</sup>. In early 1936 BUF N.H.Q. again introduced a series of important changes as part of a new national re-organisation. Chief among these was the creation of a new administrative body, the Department of Organisation, invested with executive authority over every aspect of the Mosley movement's operations<sup>91</sup>. Neil Francis-Hawkins was appointed head of the new department and his promotion, according to Linehan, 'would eventually prove the most significant of the January changes'. Francis-Hawkins prioritised matters of organisation and sought to reform the BUF into 'an efficient political machine on the basis of a technically competent administrative base'<sup>92</sup>. Shortly after Francis-Hawkins' appointment a decision was made to try to revive the Coventry BUF. As with the first attempt to form a Coventry branch in 1933, responsibility for the endeavour fell to the Organiser of the Birmingham BUF. Charles Bentinck-Budd, operating out of a central office in Corporation Street, Birmingham, dispatched propagandists to Coventry when funds allowed<sup>93</sup> but their infrequent activities were unable to attract more than a handful of new members until October 1936.

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<sup>88</sup> NA: HO144/20144, p138. Special Branch Report 5<sup>th</sup> March 1935.

<sup>89</sup> Beavan, 'The Welsh Security Officer', p59.

<sup>90</sup> NA: HO144/20144, pp126-131. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No V. Developments to end of February, 1935; NA: HO144/20144, p264. Special Branch Report 20<sup>th</sup> June 1935; NA: HO144/20144, p235. Special Branch Report 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1935; NA: HO144/20144, p83. Special Branch Report 29<sup>th</sup> August 1935; NA: HO144/20145, p14. Special Branch Report 24<sup>th</sup> October 1935; NA: HO144/20144, p13. Special Branch Report 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1935.

<sup>91</sup> *Blackshirt* 10 January 1936, p5; *Blackshirt* 24 January 1936, p2; NA: HO144/20146, pp90-91. Special Branch Report 7<sup>th</sup> January 1936.

<sup>92</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p104.

<sup>93</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p88.



The events that occurred in east London on 4 October 1936 have subsequently become part of British political mythology<sup>94</sup>. As Deakin has detailed, 'the Battle of Cable Street' has inspired a host of 'local' legends<sup>95</sup> but the most popular interpretation in the historical literature on British fascism is that the forces of anti-fascism scored a crushing victory that decisively checked Mosley's political campaign in the east End of London<sup>96</sup>. Linehan believes this interpretation requires some qualification. In contradiction of much of the prevailing wisdom on the subject, he has found that police reports and oral testimony provided by Mosleyites suggests that the BUF profited from the Cable Street affair in terms of an impressive upsurge in recruitment. Linehan writes: 'the immediate portents for the BUF following the 4 October affair were extremely favourable. In the following week, the Mosley movement held its most successful series of propaganda meetings since the BUF's inception...Just as significant was the mood of these audiences, which was enthusiastic and manifestly pro-fascist in orientation. The BUF's membership also increased substantially immediately subsequent to the Cable Street affair'<sup>97</sup>. As a consequence of a fierce local anti-Communist and anti-Jewish backlash the east London BUF was the chief recipient of this stimulus in membership<sup>98</sup>, but Special Branch noted that there had been increases in recruitment in many places in the provinces also<sup>99</sup>. This argument that rather than irreversibly damage the Mosley movement, the Cable Street affair actually benefited the BUF has been contested by, among others, Kushner and Valman who contest the reliability of the sources utilised, particularly the Special Branch reports. According to Kushner and Valman 'Special Branch...had particular reason to downplay the significance of 4 October 1936. The day itself was...one of general humiliation for the police, and Special Branch especially wanted to counter Communist party claims that it represented a 'tremendous victory over fascism...Ultimately, however, [the Special Branch reports] tell us more about the anti-

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<sup>94</sup> Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p173.

<sup>95</sup> N. Deakin, 'The Vitality of a Tradition', in C. Holmes (ed.) *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1978), p167.

<sup>96</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p107.

<sup>97</sup> Linehan, 'Fascist Perceptions of Cable Street', in T. Kushner and N. Valman (eds.) *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society* (London, Valentine Mitchell, 2000), p23.

<sup>98</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp199-200.

<sup>99</sup> Linehan, 'Fascist Perceptions of Cable Street', p24; NA: HO144/21062, p406. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No. IX Developments from August 1936 to November 1936.

Communism of Special Branch than about the growth, or decline, of the BUF<sup>100</sup>. While there may indeed be some validity to Kushner and Valman's claim, the impact in Coventry of the Cable Street affair nonetheless conforms to Linehan's position. The controversial scenes in London increased the membership of the Mosley movement in Coventry to eight and it seems those who enlisted were motivated by animosity towards Jews<sup>101</sup>. Although the resultant rise in numbers was small it was enough for the BUF to re-open a branch in the city free from Birmingham supervision early in the New Year<sup>102</sup>.

Crucial to the re-opening was the recruitment during October 1936 of 27 year old motorcycle enthusiast Alfred Joseph Mazengarb, who as an engineer belonged to the 'academic professional' occupational sub-group attributed to the 'elite or upper-middle' social class in Table 3<sup>103</sup>. For the next two years Mazengarb would be the figurehead of Mosleyite fascism in Coventry and the driving force behind the branch's activism in the city. Mazengarb rose rapidly to the position of branch leader and his home at 1a Foleshill Road served as the Coventry BUF headquarters<sup>104</sup>. The propaganda message promoted in Coventry during 1937 and 1938 focused on the two themes of non-intervention in foreign disputes, and anti-Semitism. The public response to the fascist movement over these two years would expose the minor boost in membership of the tiny Coventry branch in the wake of Cable Street affair as representing an anomaly in the normal evolution of the BUF in the area.

It has been suggested that the banning of political uniforms when the Public Order Act became law on 1 January 1937 had a devastating impact on BUF membership<sup>105</sup>. However, the introduction of the Public Order Act had no discernable negative effect on the BUF in Coventry. From the start of the New Year the Coventry branch was handicapped not by legislative action but by a lack of experienced public speakers and an unresponsive general public. A series of propaganda meetings expounding Mosley's idea of isolationism were staged during January 1937

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<sup>100</sup> T. Kushner and N. Valman, 'Conclusion', in Kushner and Valman (eds.), p280.

<sup>101</sup> *MDT* 22 October 1936, p6.

<sup>102</sup> *Blackshirt* November 7 1936, p4; *Blackshirt* January 2 1937, p6; NA: HO144/21062, pp351-358. Special Branch Report 5<sup>th</sup> November 1936.

<sup>103</sup> *MDT* 9 June 1937, p10.

<sup>104</sup> *MDT* 23 June 1937, p5.

<sup>105</sup> Benewick, *Political Violence*, p257; Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p174; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p326.

but the bulk of the speaking responsibility fell upon the shoulders of Mazengarb. If speakers from Birmingham were unable to assist then Mazengarb would proceed as a lone voice or the meeting wouldn't go ahead at all. When the personnel could be mustered to stage an outdoor meeting it would invariably be held on a Sunday<sup>106</sup>. A lack of speakers and indifferent response from the Coventry public persuaded Mazengarb that a more effective and wider reaching way of promoting the fascist message in the area would be through selling literature on the city high streets and writing letters to the correspondence column of the local press. Mazengarb and his small band of activists duly concentrated on using these two propaganda outlet alternatives to public meetings during the spring and summer months of 1937. A favourite site at which to sell literature was Smithford Street near Coventry Arcade and it was at this location on 22 May that Mazengarb was arrested for wearing a uniform signifying association with a political party, an offence under the Public Order Act. Charged under Section 1 of the Public Order Act, Mazengarb appeared before Coventry magistrates in early June where he was found guilty and fined a nominal penalty of 10s. The local press eagerly informed the local public that prosecution was the first of its kind in Coventry and only the second in the country<sup>107</sup>. The wearing in public of a dressage ensemble which according to the court gave Mazengarb a general appearance that was 'outstandingly recognisable as being a member of the Fascist Party'<sup>108</sup> stands as a testament to his political fervour for the BUF that would soon find its way into print.

In late May 1937 the British government agreed to accept into the country 4,000 child refugees fleeing the Nationalist forces in the Spanish Civil War<sup>109</sup>. The majority of these children were accommodated on the South Coast but a number were housed elsewhere in the country, offering nearby BUF members the opportunity to promote within an immediate local context Mosley's 'Mind Britain's Business' message<sup>110</sup>. The Coventry BUF exploited just such an opportunity when the Coventry and District Co-Operative Society accepted into its care twenty Basque child refugees who were accommodated at Wolvey Abbey, a 900 acre estate the

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<sup>106</sup> *Blackshirt* January 2 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* January 16 1937, p6.

<sup>107</sup> *MDT* 9 June 1937, p10.

<sup>108</sup> *MDT* 9 June 1937, p10.

<sup>109</sup> *MDT* 21 May 1937, p7.

<sup>110</sup> *Blackshirt* 25 September 1937, p3.

organisation had been bequeathed near Coventry<sup>111</sup>, and fund raising appeals for the benefit of Basque children at home and abroad were launched by various Coventry organisations and individuals<sup>112</sup>. Throughout June a stream of letters written by Coventry BUF propagandists on the subject of the child refugees and associated issues were published in the *Midland Daily Telegraph*. While Mosley, as Linehan points out, did not involve his movement overtly in Franco's campaign against the Republican government<sup>113</sup>, the BUF position of advocating non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War was in part motivated by a desire to see the Nationalist forces, with their minority fascist contingent, triumph in the conflict. The British fascist leader launched a sustained campaign in his movement's press opposing the arrival of the Basque children<sup>114</sup> and the sentiments expressed were replicated in the writings of the Coventry BUF published in the local press. Under the slogan 'Charity Begins At Home' the Coventry BUF denounced the efforts to assist the Basque children. While the Coventry BUF in public at least refrained from following Mosley's example of demonising the children as ungrateful and violent pests<sup>115</sup>, stating that 'we are not concerned with the children themselves. Having been brought here they are entitled to be sheltered and fed'<sup>116</sup>, it was claimed that the British people had been deceived into believing they would be mistreated under Franco. The Leader of the Spanish 'rebels', it was asserted, was a man of honour who could be trusted to keep a promise he had made to treat well the people of the Basque country<sup>117</sup>. It was an outrage, therefore, that foreigners should receive undeserved charity while millions of indigenous unemployed 'poor souls', particularly veterans of the Great War, and their children 'know the pangs of hunger' in the many deeply distressed areas of the country<sup>118</sup>. Rhetorical questions were posed indignantly: 'Have we no poor and hungry in

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<sup>111</sup> *MDT* 22 May 1937, p7; *MDT* 12 June 1937, p7.

<sup>112</sup> *MDT* 26 May 1937, p4; *MDT* 17 June 1937, p7; *MDT* 21 June 1937, p4.

<sup>113</sup> Linehan, *British Fascism*, p120.

<sup>114</sup> *Blackshirt* 29 May 1937 p5; *Blackshirt* 19 June 1937, p3; *Blackshirt* 31 July 1937 p4; *Blackshirt* 7 August 1937, p4; *Blackshirt* 7 August 1937, p8; *Blackshirt* 14 August 1937, p1; *Blackshirt* 25 September 1937, p3.

<sup>115</sup> *Blackshirt* 31 July 1937, p4; *Blackshirt* 7 August 1937, p4; *Blackshirt* 7 August 1937, p8; *Blackshirt* 14 August 1937, p1; *Blackshirt* 25 September 1937, p3.

<sup>116</sup> *MDT* 26 June 1937, p6.

<sup>117</sup> *MDT* 23 June 1937, p5.

<sup>118</sup> *MDT* 23 June 1937, p5; *MDT* 26 June 1937, p6.

England to worry about? Mosley is right when he says “Britain for the British!”<sup>119</sup> Lancashire in particular was singled out as a deprived part of the country where the aid being squandered on the Basques would be rightfully better spent<sup>120</sup>.

Cullen, writing on the development of BUF ideas, found that the Mosley movement was different from other manifestations of fascism in Europe in that it celebrated the spirit of comradeship and loyalty of life in the trenches of the Great War but refused to glorify war and although not pacifist contained a distinct outlook that could be described as ‘pacificistic or, at the very least isolationist’<sup>121</sup>. This element of BUF thinking intrigued the Coventry Pacifist Party and its members invited the local fascist leadership to a debate on Mosley’s isolationist position towards the Spanish Civil War. The debate was held before a small audience in a local community hall but Mazengarb and his lieutenants reportedly failed to impress and a further invitation was not forthcoming<sup>122</sup>.

In early July 1937 the Coventry BUF launched a month-long propaganda campaign against Jews. The local fascist writers denounced Jews as a ‘state within a state’ undermining and dominating Britain in their own self-interest. It was suggested that the Jews, via their nefarious control of the international system of finance, were the cause of all poverty in the country. ‘The people who think this country is governed by the windbags of Westminster are sadly misled’<sup>123</sup>, wrote Mazengarb. The Jews, warned the Coventry BUF feverishly, exercised a stranglehold over national affairs and were working their ‘Red, pink and pale blue’ puppets in Parliament in the hope of fomenting a war between Britain and world fascism<sup>124</sup>. Thurlow has categorised Mosley’s espoused anti-Semitism as being strongly ‘neo-Lamarckian’, meaning that the fascist leader suggested that behaviour was governed not by race but culture and therefore Jews could be divided into two typological constructs ‘good’ and ‘bad’ according to their ethical

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<sup>119</sup> *MDT* 23 June 1937, p5.

<sup>120</sup> *MDT* 9 June 1937 p6; *MDT* 23 June 1937, p5.

<sup>121</sup> Cullen, ‘The British Union of Fascists, 1932 – 1940’, pp28-30.

<sup>122</sup> *MDT* 7 July 1937, p6.

<sup>123</sup> *MDT* 12 July 1937, p4.

<sup>124</sup> *MDT* 7 July 1937 p4, 6; *MDT* 12 July 1937, p4; *MDT* 26 July 1937, p6.

conduct<sup>125</sup>. This 'neo-Lamarckian' strand to Mosley's anti-Semitic rhetoric was faithfully replicated in the Coventry BUF propaganda message. Mazengarb would repeatedly insist that the Mosley movement did not cultivate anti-Jewish hatred, writing that any Jew who was ready to put the interests of Britain before the interests of 'International Jewry' had nothing to fear from the BUF<sup>126</sup>. This campaign against the Jews marks the first publicly expressed instance of anti-Semitic hostility from the Coventry BUF. Although MacDonald reportedly held anti-Semitic beliefs<sup>127</sup> there is no recorded example in the material available of anti-Jewish sentiment being present in the propaganda pursued by the Coventry BUF prior to Mazengarb's time in charge of the branch.

The propaganda campaigns undertaken against the Basque refugees and the Jews failed to increase membership numbers in the Coventry branch. When in late 1937 Mazengarb revived outdoor BUF meetings in Coventry the results were as disappointing and ineffectual for the branch as those held at the beginning of the year. Still reliant on visiting speakers from outside the city, Mazengarb was unable to elicit a sympathetic response from consistently small audiences, although his passion for the cause remained admired by his fascist peers<sup>128</sup>. By the end of October 1937 membership had fallen to a meagre three in number<sup>129</sup>. Brewer has written on languishing BUF provincial branches: 'Being starved of success often leads to the exaggeration of minor incidents out of all proportion. The function is [twofold]. It helps keep the morale of members high while illustrating they are defiant not defeated. It might also convince some that the movement was larger and more effective than it really was'<sup>130</sup>. Brewer's words describe the Coventry branch in early December 1937 when, as their last public act of the year, the entire membership waited at the exit of the Coventry Corn Exchange on a Sunday evening to greet with the fascist salute and shouts of 'Mosley' the famous left-wing publisher Victor Gollancz as he left the building and got into his waiting car after a pro-Spain meeting. By the time the Coventry fascists had written up this rather prankish episode for the fascist press, 'Gollancz

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<sup>125</sup> R. Thurlow, 'Satan and Sambo: The Image of the Immigrant in English Racial Populist Thought Since the First World War', in K. Lunn (ed.) *Hosts, Immigrants and Minorities* (Folkestone, Dawson, 1980), pp39-63.

<sup>126</sup> *MDT* 12 July 1937, p4.

<sup>127</sup> *MDT* 16 October 1937, p9.

<sup>128</sup> *Blackshirt* 30 October 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 6 November 1937, p6.

<sup>129</sup> *MDT* 23 October 1937, p4.

<sup>130</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, pp95-96.

Encounters Coventry Blackshirts' had been transformed into a triumphant victory over the forces of anti-fascism in the area<sup>131</sup>. As the year drew to a close the Coventry fascists were struggling to justify the decision to re-open a BUF branch in the city.

In 1936 Mosley began what would become known in his movement as the yearly 'Leader's Autumn Tour' where at 'central points' around the country branch officials gathered to 'have the benefit of the Leader's advice and inspiration'<sup>132</sup>. At these conferences provincial fascist leaders discussed with Mosley the progress made in their areas, reported on prospects, and the special needs of Districts. Mazengarb was among the thirty provincial leaders, organisers and officials to meet with Mosley in private conference on the evening of 6 December when his 1937 'Autumn Tour' made a stop at Birmingham BUF headquarters<sup>133</sup>.

The detail of the discussion between Mosley and the Coventry fascist remains undisclosed but events during the next twelve months suggest that the meeting failed to provide the benefits intended. 1938 would mark the final year of an organised BUF presence in Coventry. After the meeting with Mosley the Coventry BUF branch ceased all propaganda work in the city until November 1938, although individual Coventry branch members are known to have been present among the Midlands contingent who attended Mosley's large meeting at Tower Ballrooms in Birmingham on the evening of 30 October 1938<sup>134</sup>. The fascists of the Coventry BUF branch were roused from their inactivity in the city when in early November 1938 the Mayor appealed for financial support from the local populace to aid Czechoslovakian refugees fleeing Germany's acquisition of the Sudetenland<sup>135</sup>. While on this occasion the humanitarian effort would not involve bringing Czechs to Britain let alone housing them locally, the subsequent Coventry BUF propaganda mobilisation assumed a similar form to that of the 1937 campaign against the Basque children. Letters were preferred to public meetings and filled the correspondence columns of the local press until late November. Employing the familiar slogans of 'Charity Begins At Home', 'Britain First', and 'Mind Britain's Business', the Coventry fascist propagandists

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<sup>131</sup> *Blackshirt* 4 December 1937, p3.

<sup>132</sup> NA: HO144/21062, p259. Special Branch Report 27<sup>th</sup> October 1936.

<sup>133</sup> *BG* 7 December 1937, p5; NA: HO144/21064, p69. Special Branch Report 18<sup>th</sup> October 1937.

<sup>134</sup> *MDT* 25 November 1938, p9; *TC* 28 November 1938, p3.

<sup>135</sup> *MDT* 4 November 1938, p9.

declared that to suggest aid of any kind should be provided to the Czech people formally resident in the Sudetenland was a gross insult to, and a wicked and wilful betrayal of, the unemployed and old age pensioners of Britain, particularly those living in the distressed areas of Northern England and South Wales. The Czech refugees were entirely undeserving of sympathy. As their migration into the Sudetenland had been encouraged by the Czechoslovakian government that had illegally annexed the German territory, explained an indignant Coventry BUF branch, it was the responsibility of the Czech government and no other nation to help them now<sup>136</sup>. The response of the Coventry public to the fascist anti-Czech propaganda campaign mirrored that to the Basque children and membership remained static<sup>137</sup>.

It was hoped that a visit by Mosley himself would succeed where the latest local demonstration of his isolationist ideas had failed. Cullen suggests that the high point of belonging to a branch of the BUF in the provinces was to host a Mosley meeting, writing: 'The rousing oratory of the Leader in a packed hall must have been like manna in the desert to many struggling Blackshirts in the provinces'<sup>138</sup>. Certainly, the announcement that Mosley would be speaking in Coventry at the Corn Exchange on Sunday 27 November provoked great excitement in the Coventry fascists that spilled over into boastful public statements claiming an address by the movement's leader would significantly increase the local branch membership<sup>139</sup>.

In the days following the announcement of Mosley's impending visit the Coventry far-left initiated for the first time since the founding of the fascist movement an anti-BUF campaign in the city but, unlike many other anti-fascist mobilisations around the country<sup>140</sup>, this Communist action remained strictly non-violent. In the week before the scheduled Mosley meeting the Coventry far-left focused its energies on lobbying the city Corporation to cancel the fascist booking at the municipally-owned Corn Exchange, urging: 'Coventry is to be asked to listen to the same type of political philosophy that has resulted in the shameful barbarities being perpetrated in Germany at

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<sup>136</sup> *MDT* 4 November 1938, p9; *MDT* 7 November 1938, p5; *MDT* 8 November 1938, p5; *MDT* 14 November 1938, p4; *MDT* 22 November 1938, p4; *MDT* 25 November 1938, p9; *MDT* 26 November 1938, p6.

<sup>137</sup> *MDT* 7 December 1937, p6.

<sup>138</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932 - 1940', p91.

<sup>139</sup> *MDT* 24 November 1938, p6.

<sup>140</sup> S. Cullen, 'Political Violence'; Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*; Kibblewhite and Rigby, *Fascism in Aberdeen*; Renton, *Red Shirts and Black*; Todd, *In Excited Times*; Turner, *Fascism and anti-Fascism*.



the present time against a racial minority....To grant the use of our halls to Fascists in order that they may propagate a political philosophy that has proved itself to be directed against the best ideals of democracy and civilisation is not in the best interests of the people of Coventry'<sup>141</sup>.

Replying that 'democracy should hesitate before endeavouring to eliminate unpopular political parties by the simple process of strangling them'<sup>142</sup>, the Corporation resisted Communist pressure and Mosley's meeting went ahead as arranged.

On the evening of 27 November 1938 the BUF leader addressed a large audience for ninety minutes before devoting a further thirty-five minutes to answering written and verbal questions. Mosley's speech focused principally on international affairs. He insisted that Great Britain 'should look after her own affairs', although, he suggested, the possibility of a European peace would be heightened by forming an 'understanding' with Germany and Italy. A general defence of the Third Reich was launched amid cheers from the audience, with Mosley declaring: 'I have had enough of this drivelling cowardice which shows itself every time a German gets one inch bigger round the chest'<sup>143</sup>.

The Mosley meeting passed devoid of incident. Although admission was free<sup>144</sup>, the Coventry far-left resisted the temptation to disrupt the fascist leader's speech and chose instead to organise a noisy but peaceful demonstration outside the hall in Smithford Street. The unsympathetic crowd was cordoned off from the carriage way by police and a large section sang the 'Red Flag' and chanted 'derisive doggerel' at Mosley when he finally departed from the Corn Exchange unmolested<sup>145</sup>.

The confidence expressed by the local fascists in advance that the meeting would boost the branch's tiny membership proved to be misplaced. Mosley's first visit to Coventry as leader of the BUF had failed to induce a notable number of new enlistments in the local branch. His second visit to the city almost five years later was similarly unsuccessful in raising membership

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<sup>141</sup> *MDT* 17 November 1938, p6; *MDT* 21 November 1938, p7; *MDT* 23 November 1938, p4; *MDT* 24 November 1938, p6.

<sup>142</sup> *MDT* 21 November 1938, p6.

<sup>143</sup> *MDT* 28 November 1938, p5.

<sup>144</sup> *MDT* 23 November 1938, p5.

<sup>145</sup> *MDT* 28 November 1938, p5.

numbers<sup>146</sup>, suggesting that the large enthusiastic audience who turned out to hear the fascist leader were a part of the travelling 'stage army' described by John Beckett<sup>147</sup>. Cross also discusses this tactic of concentrating forces from a wide area in one particular spot, writing that in the provinces, where BUF branches were small and widely dispersed, the movement's organizers developed a particularly efficient technique of transporting blackshirts from around the country in buses and lorries<sup>148</sup>. The lack of positive response among the local public in the aftermath of Mosley's visit appears to have sounded the death knell for the Coventry BUF branch. For the remaining eighteen months before the proscription of the national movement there is not a single mention of fascist activity in Warwickshire in the evidence available.

Cullen suggests that after the Olympia scandal most BUF branches in the provinces faced years of struggle to maintain interest, members, supporters and even their local leaders<sup>149</sup>. While the experience of the BUF in Coventry from mid-1934 onwards conforms to this description, life as a member of the Mosley movement in the city had from the beginning of the branch been arduous and unglamorous with precious little reward. The inability of the BUF branch to any time in its existence attract a substantial following in Coventry is attributable to the fact that there was no room in the city available to the Mosley movement in which to construct a mass base of support.

The Mosleyite efforts to promote the revolutionary Corporate State were redundant at a time when the city was enjoying uninterrupted economic growth and prosperity<sup>150</sup>. Coventry during the 1930s was a 'boom town'<sup>151</sup>. The interwar period would make Coventry's name as one of the most dynamic local economies of the first half of the twentieth-century as the city became one of the centres of the new industries that, in the words of Thoms and Donnelly, 'in many ways epitomized the new industrial Britain, standing in stark contrast to South Wales, the North West, Merseyside and Central Scotland'<sup>152</sup>. During the depression of 1929-1931 the Coventry economy

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<sup>146</sup> *MDT* 7 December 1938, p6.

<sup>147</sup> Beckett, *The Rebel Who Lost His Cause*, p138.

<sup>148</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p83.

<sup>149</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932 – 1940', p88.

<sup>150</sup> Thoms and Donnelly, 'Coventry's Industrial Economy', p48.

<sup>151</sup> K. Richardson, *Twentieth-Century Coventry* (London, Macmillan, 1972), p39.

<sup>152</sup> Thoms and Donnelly, 'Coventry's Industrial Economy', p48.

appears to have suffered little in comparison with areas reliant on the old staple industries such as coal, steel, and shipbuilding. Scholars have noted that the impression gained of the motor car production during this period is one of 'industrial dynamism...placing the city at the forefront of the UK motor industry with both mass and specialist producers functioning side by side'<sup>153</sup>. The motor industry in Coventry experienced rapid growth during the 1930s as sales rose to record levels. In mid-1934, one Coventry factory turned out 3,000 motor cars in a week to meet a demand that had pushed up sales by 60% on the previous year<sup>154</sup>. The expansion of the motor car industry in the 1930s was paralleled by a similarly rapid growth and development of artificial silks, aircraft, and electrics and telecommunications industries. Courtaulds, the artificial silk production firm based at a substantial plant in Coventry, has been described as 'one of the outstanding industrial successes of the period'<sup>155</sup>. Many of the car firms based in Coventry diversified into producing aircraft and assisted by the creation of nearby Baginton Airport<sup>156</sup>, the city soon became home to Britain's emerging aero industry with Armstrong-Whitworth establishing itself as the largest manufacturer<sup>157</sup>. 'The emergence of the motor, aircraft and electrics industries between the wars were all part of the "revolution in communications" and in a Coventry context this is highlighted by the rapid development of General Electric Company with its emphasis on radio and telephone equipment'<sup>158</sup>. Founded in 1920, by 1936 the G.E.C. in Coventry employed approximately 6,000 people, which constituted an increase of 4,000 people on 1933<sup>159</sup>.

At the time of the founding of the inaugural BUF branch in Coventry unemployment in the city was approximately 5.5% while the national average was recorded to be more than double this percentage<sup>160</sup>. By the time of Rothermere's infamous 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' editorial and Ludlam's adoption of the Mosleyite fascist creed in early 1934 there were only 5,131 men and women on the unemployment registers of the Coventry Labour Exchange, or 2.8 % of the total

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<sup>153</sup> Thoms and Donnelly, 'Coventry's Industrial Economy', p29.

<sup>154</sup> *MDT* 7 April 1934, p5.

<sup>155</sup> D. Coleman, *Courtaulds. An Economic and Social History Vol. 2* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1969), pp55-56.

<sup>156</sup> *MDT* 26 November 1936, p7.

<sup>157</sup> McGrory, *A History of Coventry*, p251.

<sup>158</sup> Thoms and Donnelly, 'Coventry's Industrial Economy', p33.

<sup>159</sup> *MDT* 30 December 1936, p3.

<sup>160</sup> *MDT* 7 March 1933, p5; *MDT* 6 February 1934, p5; *MDT* 3 March 1934, p8.

population, a figure below the 3% Beveridge would later suggest represented full employment. A proud local populace would have agreed with Beveridge's analysis, revelling in the consensus among the city's financial and employment experts that Coventry was 'one of the busiest towns today' and that 'it can be claimed that Coventry is, at the moment, very near the zero mark so far as unemployment is concerned'<sup>161</sup>. While at mid-1934 the national average unemployment figure was 16.6% and the areas hardest hit by the slump were recording local unemployment at 40% and over<sup>162</sup>, Coventry was booming with an out of work total of 4,000 people or a tiny 2.2% and these men and women, it was boasted officially by the manager of the Coventry Employment Exchange, were mainly composed of 'those for whom there is unlikely to be an open labour market even in the most vigorous trade periods'. There was 'every likelihood', he added, that it would soon be necessary to call married women back into paid employment from 'the semi-retirement of the home'<sup>163</sup>. New local industries continued to be established, empty factories re-occupied and new factories built, and existing enterprises extended. Shortages of skilled workers began to be reported in the building and engineering trades<sup>164</sup>.

According to Lynam the benefits of Coventry's economic strength in the first half of the 1930s was enjoyed across the social class spectrum. Large numbers of the Coventry populace saw their standard of living rise and pay for the majority was good, with the car manufacturers in particular paying relatively well. Friendly relations were enjoyed between workers, management, and owners. Employers in general were content to increase pay if productivity was also increasing<sup>165</sup>. Many Coventry firm owners assumed a progressive attitude to their workforce. Managers such as John Black at Standard Motors have become recognised as being in advance of their time in paying unprecedented attention to health and safety in their factories<sup>166</sup>. Writing on the nature of recreation in Coventry in the inter-war period, Crump believes the confidence and prosperity of the local population in the 1930s was typified by the expansion of 'brash, glossy, mass' private leisure activities in the city during the decade: 'Coventry's rapid economic

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<sup>161</sup> *MDT* 6 February 1934, p5.

<sup>162</sup> Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*, p465.

<sup>163</sup> *MDT* 4 May 1934, p7.

<sup>164</sup> *MDT* 10 May 1934, p1.

<sup>165</sup> P. Lynam, 'Domestic Life in Coventry 1920-1939', in Lancaster and Mason (eds.), pp196-199.

<sup>166</sup> Richardson, *Twentieth-Century Coventry*, p100.

growth...was the base for the development of a wide range of popular recreation with some distinctive local features. While the activities were much the same as those elsewhere, in Coventry the pattern of ownership and promotion was distinctive. It reflected a booming local capitalism, and catered principally for skilled and semi-skilled workers in the large firms. The people...had access to the leading sports and social clubs, with their new pavilions and refurbished ballrooms, to the super-cinemas and to commercial dance-halls'<sup>167</sup>.

Throughout the 1930s Coventry council utilised the economic prosperity of the city to spend 'vast sums of money' on improving public services, a policy that was supported enthusiastically by the local population and which served to negate much potential discontent towards local mainstream parties and the established political system. The development of the new growth industries brought an increase in rateable value in the city from £811,563 in 1929 to £1,559,805 in 1939, and Richardson believes the use made of this money, and of additional government grants, is best indicated by a steady rise in the total of the city's loan debt which by 1939 stood at £8,864,655<sup>168</sup>. Regardless of political affiliations, successive Coventry councils persisted over the course of the decade in large scale building and reconstruction projects to improve the quality of life for residents of the city. The local authority met the demands of the community for both private and to a lesser degree council accommodation. A thousand slum houses were demolished before 1938 as part of a comprehensive five year programme to clear slums in the city and were replaced with 'decent red brick working-class houses'<sup>169</sup>. During the 1930s 'Coventry enjoyed the fastest rate of growth in house-building in Britain'. Substantial additions were made to the city's civic amenities, including hundreds of thousands of pounds spent on new sewage systems, road improvements, and extensions to municipal buildings. The council built various new elementary schools and the demands of the city's engineering-based industries for increased provision in technical education were satisfied at a cost of approximately £140,000<sup>170</sup>. Sustained and substantial investment in public medicine, including the opening of a

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<sup>167</sup> J. Crump, 'Recreation in Coventry Between the Wars', in Lancaster and Mason (eds.), p280.

<sup>168</sup> Richardson, *Twentieth-Century Coventry*, p59.

<sup>169</sup> Richardson, *Twentieth-Century Coventry*, p60.

<sup>170</sup> Richardson, *Twentieth-Century Coventry*, p245; Thoms and Donnelly, 'Coventry's Industrial Economy', p35.

new modern hospital in 1934, and efficient management by the city's highly admired Medical Officer, ensured that the young people attending the new educational facilities were the healthiest in Coventry history. The city's general health improved throughout the 1930s and consistently rated above the national average<sup>171</sup>.

However, as we have seen in the Birmingham case-study, it is possible for a fascist organisation to successfully overcome the barrier to its development presented by an unfavourable socio-economic context if there was contained within a locality a deep-seated fear of potential or impending unemployment. In sharp contrast to Birmingham, the towns adjacent to Coventry in the South Midlands were similarly prosperous and cushioned from the slump<sup>172</sup>. The Coventry of the first half of the twentieth century was a youthful and vibrant city populated by a people with 'immense self-confidence' in their approach to industrial affairs and their ability to stave off potential economic adversity through innovation<sup>173</sup>. The self-assured character and upbeat nature of the average Coventry resident in the first half of the 1930s was commented upon by the writer J. B. Priestley in his travelogue of the period *English Journeys*, who concluded it had developed because 'the famous new city of bicycles and motor cars and wireless sets...is one of those towns that have often changed their trades and have had many vicissitudes, but unlike nearly all the rest, it has managed to come out on top'<sup>174</sup>.

When the focus of propaganda disseminated by the Coventry BUF moved during the second half of 1930s from that of corporatism pursued throughout 1934 to the two themes of non-intervention in foreign disputes and anti-Semitism the local fascists were unable to find a receptive audience in the city. As we shall see this is explained by the fact that an isolationist position on foreign affairs was strongly articulated within the established Coventry polity while anti-Jewish rhetoric was an irrelevancy in the city.

Public satisfaction with the established mainstream political parties in Coventry extended to widespread approval of the MP who represented the city constituency throughout the 1930s, Captain W. F. Strickland. Hard-working, and heavily involved in social work in the city, particularly

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<sup>171</sup> G. Mason, 'Coventry: A Study in Urban Geography' (MA, University of Warwick, 1949), pp94-108.

<sup>172</sup> Cherry, *Birmingham*, p126.

<sup>173</sup> Richardson, *Twentieth-Century Coventry*, p44.

<sup>174</sup> Quoted in *MDT* 28 March 1934, p10.

through the British Legion where he was hailed as 'the finest exponent...they had had in Coventry'<sup>175</sup>, Strickland offered a popular and respectable alternative to the Coventry BUF 'Mind Britain's Business' propaganda mobilisations around the Spanish Civil War and the Czechoslovakian Crisis. Campaigning vigorously that 'Britain should leave Spain strictly alone'<sup>176</sup>, Strickland passionately promoted two arguments in defence of his position of strict neutrality towards the Spanish Civil War. Firstly, the moral line that Britain did not have the right to interfere in the domestic affairs of other nations<sup>177</sup>. The second argument was the pragmatic assertion that intervention would possibly lead to another European war with Italy and Germany, a war Strickland did not believe that at that time Britain had the military capability to win<sup>178</sup>. Strickland was widely acknowledged, often grudgingly by those in favour of intervention, as dutifully representing the voice of the Coventry people on this issue, the vast majority of whom reiterated through opinion polls and the local press that they believed non-intervention to be 'the only possible course' however distasteful many of them may have found the Nationalist cause<sup>179</sup>. Strickland's response to the Czechoslovakian crisis was similarly well received by the bulk of Coventry people<sup>180</sup>. Maintaining that 'one day we shall learn to leave these squabbles alone, concentrating upon our ability to settle our own problems as they arise', Strickland asserted that Britain had nothing to gain from interfering in an affair in which Germany, it could be argued, had on this occasion right on its side. The reclaiming of the Sudetenland, it was posited, had not seriously affected the rights of other nations and to intervene, even in the traditional role of mediator, would earn Britain 'little but odium' and potentially lead to a European war<sup>181</sup>. The average man and woman in Coventry, the local press reported, were fully behind their Member of Parliament on this question<sup>182</sup>.

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<sup>175</sup> *MDT* 20 March 1934, p3; *MDT* 30 October 1935, p3; *MDT* 3 March 1939, p6.

<sup>176</sup> *MDT*, 30 November 1936, p5; *MDT* 8 December 1936, p4; *MDT* 2 June 1936, p4; *MDT* 26 June 1937, p6.

<sup>177</sup> *MDT* 21 December 1936, p4; *MDT* 2 June 1937, p4.

<sup>178</sup> *MDT* 21 September 1936, p3; *MDT* 26 June 1937, p6.

<sup>179</sup> *MDT* 30 November 1936, p5; *MDT* 8 December 1936, p4; *MDT* 2 June 1937, p4.

<sup>180</sup> *MDT* 12 September 1938, p4.

<sup>181</sup> *MDT* 30 August 1938, p4; *MDT* 12 September 1938, p4.

<sup>182</sup> *MDT* 30 August 1938, p4.

If the BUF's isolationism failed to distinguish the movement, there was simply no notable appetite for anti-Semitism in Coventry during the second half of the 1930s. Nor, apparently, had there been at any time in the city's history. A prior tradition of nativist racism was entirely absent from Coventry. Levine writes of the warm and mutually respectful relationship between the Jews and Gentiles in Warwickshire which 'runs like a golden thread throughout the hundred years history of the county'<sup>183</sup>. Andreski suggests racial antagonism becomes active when a minority group constitutes 10% of a given location's total population<sup>184</sup>. Never throughout its approximately two hundred years existence in Coventry had the Jewish community exceeded 0.1% of the whole population. In the words of Levine in Coventry 'the Jews were, in fact, a mere handful of citizens'<sup>185</sup>. During the 1930s the Jewish population of the city averaged a miniscule 0.060% of the total population or just 120 people<sup>186</sup>. In 1938 the Jewish community consisted of only 35 families<sup>187</sup>. The Jewish people in Coventry were dispersed throughout the city and were assimilated into general society to such a degree that more traditional Jews outside the area were concerned that there was a potential danger that their co-religionists would eventually at best struggle for recognition as a community by the civic authorities and at worst abandon their faith<sup>188</sup>. The Jews of Coventry were not viewed as a sectional interest group in social and economic competition with the Gentile community but were respected and admired in recognition of the great contribution people of Jewish descent like Siegfried Bettman had made to the city's industries, prosperity, and civic and political development. An immigrant from Germany, Bettman had arrived in Coventry in 1863 whereupon he founded the hugely successful Triumph Company producing bicycles and later motorbikes. Esteemed for his 'benevolence and for his philanthropy', Bettman was elected a Liberal councillor in 1903, served as Vice-President of the Coventry Liberal Association, was elected President of the Chamber of Commerce in 1907, and became Mayor of the city in 1913<sup>189</sup>.

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<sup>183</sup> H. Levine, *The Jews of Coventry* (Coventry, Coventry Jewish Community, 1970), pp95-96.

<sup>184</sup> S. Andreski, 'An Economic Interpretation of anti-Semitism', pp201-213.

<sup>185</sup> Levine, *The Jews of Coventry*, p2.

<sup>186</sup> Levine, *The Jews of Coventry*, p2.

<sup>187</sup> *MDT* 8 December 1938, p7.

<sup>188</sup> Levine, *The Jews of Coventry*, p62.

<sup>189</sup> Levine, *The Jews of Coventry*, pp57-60; Richardson, *Twentieth-Century Coventry*, p36.



The BUF found that there was simply no need or desire for a radical alternative in the city to the established socio-economic, political, and cultural system, and as a consequence the Mosley movement was from its very inception consigned permanently to the obscure margins of Coventry life.

## Chapter Five: The BUF in Leicester, 1932 – 1940.

### 1. 1932 – 1934.

Although historically no single town or city has been able to play a particularly dominant role in the east Midlands, Leicester has from its founding as a Viking settlement been the area's largest and most industrially active urban centre<sup>1</sup>. Located in the county of Leicestershire, the city of Leicester occupies a central geographical position ringed with isolated market towns near the edge of the county<sup>2</sup>. The decennial Census records that in 1931 Leicester encompassed 8,582 acres<sup>3</sup> and its population numbered 239,169<sup>4</sup>. The city was comprised of sixteen municipal wards<sup>5</sup> which were divided into three parliamentary constituencies: Leicester East; Leicester South; and Leicester West<sup>6</sup>. The development of Britain's transport networks transformed Leicester into a major manufacturing centre and the city became one of the country's principal producers of hosiery and footwear<sup>7</sup>. During the Industrial Revolution the hosiery industry expanded into silk weaving, cotton, lace and elastic-web manufacture<sup>8</sup>. Industrial diversification continued into the twentieth century with Leicester moving away from an emphasis on hosiery and footwear towards other industries, particularly precision engineering such as the production of clocks, lenses, optical goods, bicycle making and the manufacturing of agricultural machinery<sup>9</sup>. By the early 1930s Leicester was noted nationwide

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<sup>1</sup> J. Beckett, *A Regional History of England: The East Midlands from AD1000* (London, Longman, 1988), pp5-15.

<sup>2</sup> R. Millward, *A History of Leicestershire and Rutland* (Chichester, Phillimore, 1985), pp120-123.

<sup>3</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931: County of Leicester (Part 1)* (London, H. M. Stationery Office, 1933) Table 3. Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings, p2.

<sup>4</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931* Table 6. Comparison of Census and Resident Populations, p9.

<sup>5</sup> Abbey, Aylestone, Belgrave, Castle, Charnwood, De Montfort, Knighton, Latimer, Martin's, Newton, St. Margaret's, Spinney Hill, Westcotes, West Humberstone, Wycliffe, Wyggeston. *Census of England and Wales, 1931* Table 3. Acreage, Population, Private Families and Dwellings, p2.

<sup>6</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1931* Table 7. Population and Parliamentary Electors (1931 Register), p10.

<sup>7</sup> C. Brown, *The Growth of Leicester* (Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1970), pp32-42; J. Simmons, *Leicester Past and Present Volume 1* (London, Methuen, 1974) p138; N. Pye, *Leicester and its Region* (Leicester, British Association, 1972), p283.

<sup>8</sup> P. Head, 'The Leicester hosiery industry in the middle of the nineteenth century', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol.XXXVII (1962), pp44-59.

<sup>9</sup> Beckett, *A Regional History of England*, pp292-293.

for this range of industries, with no one industry any longer dominant in the city's economic life<sup>10</sup>.

Attempts to form a branch of the BUF in the east Midlands began much later than in any other part of the region. Ironically, Leicester was home to one of the earliest official members of the Mosley movement, Walter Gough, who upon hearing of the formation of the new fascist organisation had in October 1932 at the age of 17 written to the then BUF National Headquarters in King's Round, Chelsea, enquiring about possible membership. Invited to London for an interview, Gough was as impressed with the blackshirts he met there as they were with him and his enlistment proved a formality. Gough recalled of the experience years later: 'I went down to Chelsea and joined at the place, paid a shilling and you got like a trade union card and they put a black stamp on for a shilling. You are supposed to pay a shilling a month. 'Course I turn up as the [laughing] first member for Chelsea'<sup>11</sup>.

Gough believed that N.H.Q. judged him ill-suited to the position of Branch Organiser at this time and preferred to wait until a more suitable candidate from Leicester enlisted before authorising an attempt to form a branch in the city<sup>12</sup>. Although N.H.Q. recognised that as Leicester had no pre-existing personal or political association with Mosley and therefore a latent reservoir of support from which to draw, it probably did not expect to have to wait until spring 1934 before finding someone considered eligible for the position. Gough remained inactive, and probably the solitary member in Leicester of the BUF, until he suddenly received a letter around April 1934 from a Colonel O. Alwyne Brown who lived in Humberside Drive in the city. Brown was a recent recruit and in him N.H.Q. felt they had finally found the man capable of starting a branch of the fascist movement in Leicester. The two men met at Brown's house and after acquiring a cadre of six new members began in early May organising with the aim of establishing a BUF branch in the city<sup>13</sup>. During the month before the Olympia meeting of 5 June 1934 the BUF in Leicester would experience rapid growth in membership and reach what would prove to be its peak in the city.

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<sup>10</sup> W. Hoskins, *The Victorian History of the Counties of England: Leicestershire Volume 3* (London, Oxford University Press, 1955), p293.

<sup>11</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>12</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>13</sup> *Blackshirt* 14 November 1936, p2.

The propaganda pursued by the Mosleyites in Leicester prior to the infamous London rally and for the rest of 1934 focused on promoting Mosley's idea of the Corporate State. This propaganda theme was disseminated through indoor and outdoor meetings, literature distribution, and letters written to the correspondence column of Leicestershire's premier local daily newspaper the *Leicester Mercury*<sup>14</sup>.

Only two outdoor meetings would be held in Leicester before 5 June 1934, with the local fascists during this period disseminating their message primarily through the correspondence column of the *Leicester Mercury*. The first outdoor meeting was a small, deliberately low-key affair at the Turkey Café, a regular haunt for the cadre of members in the city, on the evening of Monday 14 May 1934<sup>15</sup>. The journalist who covered the event for the local press confessed to being somewhat surprised at the modest and sedate nature of the meeting, writing: 'It was quite unlike the Fascist gathering of popular imagination. A company of Blackshirt supporters and others interested...listened in complete silence to an official of the British Union of Fascists, who gave a quiet and sober address on Fascist economics and ideals'. The speaker was A. K. Chesterton, Officer-in-Charge Midlands Area, who was supported by prominent local member Captain W. A. Porter M. C.<sup>16</sup>. Porter was a self-employed farmer, an occupation which ascribes him 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social class status in Table 3. Another self-employed farmer among the Leicester membership was a J. Tramall<sup>17</sup>. Chesterton's speech concentrated on detailing 'the various workings of the Corporate State'<sup>18</sup>.

The Turkey Café was again the location when the Leicester members of the BUF held their second outdoor meeting on the evening of Monday 28 May 1934. A letter from Mosley was read in which he urged that self-abnegation and the spirit of service in the fascist movement should be remembered by all his followers in the city. 'All Fascists must remember that their task is the greatest that has ever been undertaken in our land', the fascist leader

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<sup>14</sup> *Blackshirt* 12 October 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 2 November 1934, p5; *Blackshirt* 7 December 1934 p10, 12; *Leicester Mercury* (hereafter *LM*) 2 May 1934, p12; *LM* 10 May 1934, p12; *LM* 15 May 1934, p14; *LM* 15 May 1934, p19; *LM* 6 June 1934, p12; *LM* 7 September 1934, p19; *LM* 20 November 1934, p9. For a detailed account of Mosley's idea of the Corporate State see pp14-15 of this thesis.

<sup>15</sup> NA: HO144/20141, p314. Report on the Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland.

<sup>16</sup> *LM* 15 May 1934, p19.

<sup>17</sup> *Blackshirt* 12 October 1934, p10.

<sup>18</sup> *LM* 15 May 1934, p19.

wrote. 'Fascism is a dynamic creed of the modern age, is destined to awake in the hour of decay and surrender a mighty will of the race which has always known how to bring triumph out of adversity'. Also during this meeting arrangements were made for a 'big fascist gathering' to be held in the city's Oriental Hall on 14 June 1934, at which it was hoped to officially inaugurate a branch of the BUF in Leicester<sup>19</sup>.

It was not because of the threat of disruption by organised opposition that the Leicester Mosleyites staged only two outdoor meetings in the city in the short period of time in which they were active prior to the Olympia scandal. Organised opposition to the local fascists came solely from a range of left-wing organisations in the city, all of which believed that 'fascism was just another form of Capitalism, and if workers did not unite against it, they would have to suffer'<sup>20</sup>. While the Conservative response to the presence of Mosleyite fascism in the city was to ignore it<sup>21</sup>, the Leicester Labour Party, the Leicester Independent Labour Party, and the Leicester Communist party and its front organisations, immediately began challenging the spread of BUF propaganda in Leicester. These groups refused to co-operate with each other but their respective campaigns nonetheless assumed an identical form. All believed at this stage that the most effective way of countering the growth of the BUF in Leicester would be through the local Mosleyites' own most favoured medium: the correspondence column of the *Leicester Mercury*. The anti-fascist counter propaganda adopted the line of argument that the 'Incorporate State' as it was dubbed was merely a collection of vague and woolly ideas and was in practice unworkable. Evidence for the alleged fatal flaws in corporatism was provided by the low wage rate in a fascist Italy that had that very year acknowledged a huge deficit in its Budget<sup>22</sup>.

The Leicester BUF felt it appropriate to respond to the anti-fascist criticism and a series of letters were written to the *Leicester Mercury* by P. D. Turner, chief Propaganda Officer in the city. Turner was a former activist for the New Party in Birmingham who initially joined the BUF as a result of an enduring idolization of Sir Oswald Mosley as man and

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<sup>19</sup> *LM* 29 May 1934, p9.

<sup>20</sup> *LM* 7 May 1934, p16.

<sup>21</sup> *LM* 15 June 1934, p8.

<sup>22</sup> *LM* 10 May 1934, p12; *LM* 11 May 1934, p10; *LM* 31 May 1934, p12; *LM* 1 June 1934, p5; *LM* 2 June 1934, p10; *LM* 5 June 1934, p12.

leader<sup>23</sup>. Linehan has noted that this motivational reason for enlisting in the fascist movement was common, writing: 'Many individuals were enticed into the party by Mosley's presence alone. In many ways, Mosley was the quintessential charismatic fascist leader-figure, the type whom masses of individuals were drawn towards throughout continental Europe between the wars'<sup>24</sup>. As Turner immersed himself in the new movement his absolute personal devotion to Mosley, which he continued to express in fervent tributes to the man in the fascist press, expanded into a passionate embracing of his idol's fascist ideas<sup>25</sup>. Turner produced lengthy expositions in reply to the suggestion that the concept of the Corporate State lacked coherent detail<sup>26</sup>. The troubled state of the Italian economy was deemed worthy of only brief attention in his writings, swept comfortably aside as the natural consequence of the corporate system spending the vast sums of money needed to regenerate Italy from the chaos into which it had fallen before the rise of Mussolini. Turner conceded that wages had fallen but accused his opponents of neglecting the fact that rents and the cost of living generally had been reduced in Italy under the fascist regime<sup>27</sup>. Cullen has noted that the BUF was highly sensitive to the suggestion that its ideas were a foreign importation<sup>28</sup>, and Turner insisted that although there existed 'certain fundamentals' to fascism such as the Corporate State the development of a fascist movement in an individual country was ultimately shaped by national culture much in the same way that socialist parties in two different countries could share common values and beliefs but had assumed differing political forms<sup>29</sup>. 'What British fascism teaches', the Propaganda Officer wrote, 'is what matters for Britain'<sup>30</sup>.

The organised opposition was unable to prevent the number of BUF members in Leicester rising rapidly to approximately 100 by the days immediately prior to the Olympia scandal<sup>31</sup>. The evidence suggests that the membership at this time was composed primarily of occupational 'types' allocated to the 'lower' and 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social class categories in Table 3. Gough recalled that the greatest influx of recruits had come from

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<sup>23</sup> *LM* 22 June 1934, p23.

<sup>24</sup> Linehan, *British Fascism*, p169.

<sup>25</sup> *Blackshirt* 26 October 1934, p12; *Blackshirt* 16 November 1934, p6; *Blackshirt* 4 January 1935, p9.

<sup>26</sup> *LM* 11 May 1934, p6; *LM* 15 May 1934, p14; *LM* 2 June 1934, p10; *LM* 5 June 1934, p12.

<sup>27</sup> *LM* 15 May 1934, p14; *LM* 2 June 1934, p10.

<sup>28</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940', p23.

<sup>29</sup> *LM* 10 May 1934, p12; *LM* 2 June 1934, p10.

<sup>30</sup> *LM* 2 June 1934, p10.

<sup>31</sup> *LM* 5 June 1934, p15.

two groupings: young people and self-made local businessmen<sup>32</sup>. According to the local press the vast majority of the young people who had joined the BUF in Leicester were manual workers in various local factories<sup>33</sup>. However, not all of the young fascists in the city belonged to the occupational sub-groups 1 and 2 which form the 'lower' social class category. Both the Security Services and the *Blackshirt* noted that a small number of men in the Leicester branch were undergraduates at the University College in nearby Loughborough where a fascist group was organised under the supervision of schoolteacher and local Unit Leader R. G. Jagger<sup>34</sup>. Members who belonged to the occupational sub-group 'students (upper school/university)' are allocated 'elite or upper-middle' social class in Table 3. An apparent ability to appeal to the young is a generic fascist trait<sup>35</sup>. For many young people fascism represented, in the words of Linehan, 'a rebellion of youth against age and the perceived old and decadent bourgeois world of tradition, compromise and delay'<sup>36</sup>. For Gough it was this disillusionment with the existing political system and old political parties in which they could see no hope that motivated a large number of the young people in Leicester who enlisted in the ranks of the BUF<sup>37</sup>. While Skidelsky points out that a sizeable proportion of fascist leaders throughout the country were in their twenties or thirties<sup>38</sup>, Gough believed that his own youth was less attractive to N.H.Q. than a record of military service, and this was why he was overlooked for the position of inaugural Leicester Organiser in favour of Colonel Brown. Colonel Brown, he claimed, was representative of most of the ex-servicemen, usually veterans of the Great War, who joined the BUF in Leicester pre-Olympia: 'After about twelve or thirteen years they were getting into their fifties and sixties and they retained their intense patriotism and they always wore their ribbons and things like that and always retained their handles that they had in the war'<sup>39</sup>.

According to Gough the local businessmen he claimed were heavily represented in the Leicester branch were shopkeepers and small independent traders, occupational 'types'

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<sup>32</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>33</sup> *LM* 5 June 1934, p15.

<sup>34</sup> *Blackshirt* 15 June 1934, p5; *Blackshirt* 10 August 1934, p10; NA: HO144/21042, p119. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No. II Developments during June & July 1934.

<sup>35</sup> Linz, 'Some Notes Towards a Comparative Study', p81.

<sup>36</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p166.

<sup>37</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>38</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p318.

<sup>39</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

who form the 'merchants (self-employed)' sub-group listed in Table 3 and belong to the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social class category. Apparently these businessmen felt unable 'for occupational reasons' to declare their political persuasion at that time and so refrained from publicly endorsing the Mosley movement or allowing their membership to become known outside the ranks of fellow recruits. As we have noted in previous chapters this reluctance to advertise their allegiance to the BUF appears to have been a common characteristic among many businessmen fascists. Gough recalled that it was the Corporate State's 'fantastic' objective of nationalist economic autarky which attracted to the local BUF the 'considerable support' of significant numbers of shopkeepers and small independent traders in Leicester during May and the early days of June 1934. He explained: 'They were very much dependent on the preservation and development of the home market you see. Our simple [idea] at that time that we don't import anything from anywhere that can be made in this country was sound economic sense and they joined us purely on the economic simplicity of the programme because at that time...the Labour party and... National Government as well were tending towards free trade'<sup>40</sup>. Interestingly, while in Leicester the Mosley movement attracted a noticeable level of endorsement among shopkeepers and small traders as early as mid-1934, the BUF nationally did not make a determined play for their support until 1935 onwards that developed in a more systematic manner during 1938 and 1939<sup>41</sup>.

Local anti-fascists believed that coverage given to the fascist movement in the national press exerted a noteworthy degree of influence in generating support for the BUF among shopkeepers and businessmen in Leicester. Concern was expressed about the influence of 'certain sections of the Press, who are backing up the foreign fascist movement in this country' and were 'shouting about...octopus and big-business methods', prompting many opponents of the BUF in Leicester to ask: 'Why this concern for the small trader'<sup>42</sup>. That the national press shaped public feeling in Leicester towards the Mosley movement would be confirmed when its reporting of the Olympia scandal severely undermined Mosleyite fortunes in the city.

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<sup>40</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>41</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p227; Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, pp327-328.

<sup>42</sup> *LM* 28 May 1934, p10.



## 2. 1934 – 1940.

The experience of the BUF in Leicester from Olympia onwards was that of terminal decline. In the immediate wake of the disorderly events in London membership numbers plummeted<sup>43</sup>. This abrupt collapse is attributable to adverse news coverage in the local and national press associating the BUF with violence in the mind of the Leicester public. In common with many of the national newspapers the response of the local press to the events at Olympia was, in the words of Gough, 'vehement'<sup>44</sup>. An indignant *Leicester Mercury* declared that 'hooliganism at public meetings must not pass without censure' and proceeded to brusquely condemn the actions of the fascists as alien to the constitutional traditions of Britain that had for generations enabled conflicting interests to debate in 'perfect security'. The stewarding at Olympia was an example of 'organised violence' and as such should not be tolerated 'under any circumstances'. The editor expressed the hope that the 'full force of public opinion' would now be directed against the BUF but inserted the caveat that such action must be 'moral rather than physical'<sup>45</sup>. The senior officers of the Mosley movement in Leicester recognised that the hostile press coverage was exerting a crippling effect on local public perceptions of the BUF and on the loyalty of its membership in the city. A damage limitation exercise was launched that was directed as much at local members as at the wider Leicester populace. Meetings were held at the Turkey Café for local Mosley supporters at which a Colonel H. F. Crocker from N.H.Q., and Major and Mrs Shearer who, as we have seen, held the positions of Officer at the Coventry branch and Women's Area Organiser for Warwickshire and Staffordshire respectively, gave short addresses about the disturbances at Olympia and answered questions. The speakers reiterated the official BUF account of the controversial events, explaining to the local Mosleyites assembled that 'reports of rough handling by Blackshirts were greatly exaggerated'<sup>46</sup>. The disorder exhibited, the Leicester members were told, was sparked by organised Communist agitation: 'The violence was created from outside, it definitely wasn't the blackshirts themselves, they were provoked and they were trying to

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<sup>43</sup> *LM* 15 June 1934, p8; *LM* 18 June 1934, p1.

<sup>44</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>45</sup> *LM* 9 June 1934, p10.

<sup>46</sup> *LM* 9 June 1934, p8; *LM* 12 June 1934, p13.

preserve the freedom of speech'<sup>47</sup>. Gory tales of Blackshirts sustaining disfiguring facial injuries were relayed as evidence of the brutality unleashed indiscriminately against innocent stewards by 'Red' thugs<sup>48</sup>.

Fascist figures from outside the area were required to provide pro-BUF eye-witness accounts of the Olympia disorder because few members from Leicester had actually attended the London rally<sup>49</sup>. One of the local fascists who did travel to London and was involved in the meeting was Walter Gough and in the aftermath of the event he was assigned the responsibility of disseminating the Mosleyite perspective on the disorder to the local press. Gough informed the readers of the *Leicester Mercury* that as a participant in the activities inside Olympia he was able to place before their eyes 'the facts' about the mass rally. He wrote: 'The Blackshirts held the biggest political meeting ever attempted. The overwhelming success of this significant rally has scared certain sections of the Press so much that, unable to answer the case of Fascism in fair debate, they have debased themselves to publishing sensational lies, alleging brutality by the Blackshirt stewards'. Rather than view the disorder at Olympia as a setback to the fascist cause, the people of Leicester were advised to recognise the incident as a triumph in the defence of the British tradition of freedom of speech threatened by the forces of Communism. Gough crowed that in the light of fascist actions at Olympia the BUF now stood alone 'as the only trustworthy guardian of our national liberties'. From some time previous the Communist Party had openly advertised its intention of wrecking the Olympia meeting, and from the outset there was organised 'Red' interruption to the speech. Unfortunately interruptions became so frequent that force had been necessary to prevent the meeting from being smashed up. 'Let it be known', Gough appealed to emphasise his point, 'that it was not questions that were shouted, but wails of "Down with Mosley," and screams of the "Internationale"'<sup>50</sup>. Gottlieb has noted that the BUF 'made great currency' out of highlighting the common anti-fascist tactic of 'using provocative women to act as interrupters and hecklers at Blackshirt meetings' as alleged evidence of their male opponents' 'impotence'<sup>51</sup>, and this practice is evident in Gough's sneering statement: 'And as is

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<sup>47</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>48</sup> *LM* 12 June 1934, p13.

<sup>49</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>50</sup> *LM* 12 June 1934, p23.

<sup>51</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p119.

customary with Reds, they used women to do their dirty work!' While the teenage Mosleyite emphatically denied that any of the stewards or blackshirts in the audience carried weapons, he claimed that the Communist agitators were armed and belligerent: 'I saw hooligans actually draw "knuckledusters," razors, socks full of broken glass, and bricks, and savagely slash at our stewards. No wonder half a dozen Blackshirts were required to deal with each dispenser...Would any Britisher tolerate such disgusting tactics?'<sup>52</sup>

Attempts to negate the adverse publicity directed towards the BUF in the local and national press appear to have proved fruitless. Within the space of a week after the Olympia rally a mass exodus had reduced the Leicester membership to a rump of 30 people<sup>53</sup>. The haemorrhaging of membership under the glare of publicity generated by events in London suggests the majority of people who had joined the Mosley movement in Leicester were 'Rothermere fascists': anti-socialists, disillusioned former Tories, and the politically inexperienced young<sup>54</sup>, all of whom had been attracted to the BUF on the back of the *Daily Mail's* endorsement hoping to find a virility perceived as lacking in the mainstream parties but who abandoned Mosley after Olympia 'because the new movement proved to be too exciting for their taste'<sup>55</sup>.

Pugh has written that the media and public reaction to the Olympia disorder 'even in the immediate situation' was more complicated than previously thought, citing among his evidence Special Branch reports compiled at the time that suggest that the violence witnessed at Olympia heightened the allure of the fascist movement among young people and the militantly anti-Communist<sup>56</sup>. Special Branch advised:

so far from causing widespread indignation...it provided an unprecedented fillip to recruitment. For the next two days people of different classes queued up from morning until night at the National Headquarters at Chelsea. A working man among the recruits remarked on the mixture of ex-officers, public schoolboys and working men, and the general admiration in the queue for the organisation of the Blackshirts and their determination to preserve the right of free speech<sup>57</sup>.

In contrast to the bustling scenes described at the fascist door in West London, the violent actions at Olympia inspired only two new members to join the Mosley movement in Leicester.

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<sup>52</sup> *LM* 12 June 1934, p23.

<sup>53</sup> *LM* 15 June 1934, p8; *LM* 18 June 1934, p1.

<sup>54</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p125.

<sup>55</sup> Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!', p152.

<sup>56</sup> Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!', p161.

<sup>57</sup> NA: HO144/20142, p115. Special Branch Report 1<sup>st</sup> August 1934.

While both new recruits fitted Pugh's profile of being young men, neither was inspired to enlist by hatred of Communism or a determination to preserve the British tradition of freedom of speech. Gough recalled the two men were motivated by an attraction to the excitement engendered by potential physical confrontation, but their enlistment was more the product of a boyish thirst for adventure than what Brewer called 'the appeal of the cosh and castor oil'<sup>58</sup> to men of violence: '[the new recruits] thought "oh here's a good thing to [join]"; rather like joining a football supporters group, here's an opportunity to get into a fling of active life for young people'<sup>59</sup>.

Over the remainder of the decade these two young men, if they stayed in the Mosley movement, would have found plenty of opportunity to sample the 'active life for young people' available within the ranks of the Leicester BUF, beginning with events surrounding the first fascist meeting of significance in Leicester which was held on the evening of 14 June 1934. Arrangements for the gathering in the Oriental Hall, Leicester, had been made in late May when it had been announced the meeting would mark the official inauguration of a BUF branch in the city and a headquarters was to open at 84 London Road<sup>60</sup>. The meeting went ahead as scheduled and passed without interruption inside the hall where an audience of 150 listened as Birmingham BUF leader and Midlands Area Organiser A. K. Chesterton delivered an address on the general principles of the Corporate State that lasted for two hours. Outside the hall, however, a hostile crowd had gathered under the banner of the Leicester Anti-Fascist Movement<sup>61</sup>.

Formed in the days following Olympia, the Leicester Anti-Fascist Movement consisted of the local Communist Party and its front organisation the National Unemployed Workers' Movement; the Guild of Youth, which was the youth wing of the Independent Labour Party; the Unemployed Broad Council, a local organisation that embraced workless men and women of various political creeds; and a small number of prominent figures within the Leicester Labour Party. In joining the Anti-Fascist Movement these Leicester Labourites were ignoring the party's officially established policy of non-engagement with the Mosley movement and non-association with the Communist party in the campaign against fascism. The national

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<sup>58</sup> Brewer, 'The British Union of Fascists', pp542-546.

<sup>59</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>60</sup> *LM* 29 May 1934, p9.

<sup>61</sup> *LM* 15 June 1934, p8.

Labour leadership prohibited association with the Communists on the grounds that 'communism stood for as ruthless a form of dictatorship as fascism, and that it was ludicrous to ask those who believed in democracy to unite with those who did not in the struggle against dictatorship', while it was believed in addition that the adoption of the Communist-approved 'extremist' policy of confronting fascists on the streets would serve only to accelerate the growth of fascism in Britain<sup>62</sup>. Interestingly, however, it does not appear that any of the Labour transgressors were ever censured in any way by either the local or national Labour party, even though their participation in direct action against the Leicester BUF was publicly acknowledged on many occasions. The total membership of this organised movement in Leicester numbered several hundred and its express aim was to constrain the growth of fascism in the city through the systematic harassment of local fascists and disruption of Leicester BUF meetings, violently if necessary<sup>63</sup>. The Anti-Fascist Movement in Leicester was not a front organisation for the Communist Party, which was small in the city and historically unimportant<sup>64</sup>. A confidential Home Office report compiled later in the decade for the Home Secretary following a conference with the Chief Constable of Leicester suggests it was a genuine reflection of widespread left-wing anti-fascist resentment 'among a very large section of the working class population'<sup>65</sup>.

In the days immediately before the Oriental Hall gathering notices were chalked in different parts of the city declaring local anti-fascists' intention of breaking up the BUF event<sup>66</sup>. It had been originally planned by the BUF that the meeting in the Oriental Hall would be preceded by a large march through the main streets of Leicester, which as Cross has pointed out was a standard practice when the Mosley movement was inaugurating a new branch<sup>67</sup>. However the procession was cancelled on police advice when it was realised the fascists

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<sup>62</sup> M. Newman, 'Democracy versus Dictatorship: Labour's Role in the Struggle Against British Fascism, 1933-1936', *History Workshop*, Vol.5, No.1 (1978), pp69-70.

<sup>63</sup> *LM* 14 June 1934 p11

<sup>64</sup> N. Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp15-17; NA: HO144/20145, p110. Fascist Meetings in the Market Place, Leicester. Note of Conference with the Chief Constable of Leicester; Pelling, *The British Communist Party*, p192; A. Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1920-1945', *Historical Journal*, Vol.43, No.3 (2000), p781.

<sup>65</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p110. Fascist Meetings in the Market Place, Leicester.

<sup>66</sup> *LM* 23 June 1934, p10.

<sup>67</sup> Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, p105.

would have to pass a counter-demonstration in Leicester Market Place and the anti-fascists were proposing to follow the fascist column 'some distance behind' to the hall<sup>68</sup>.

When the announcement had been made prior to Olympia that the Oriental Hall meeting was being arranged it was anticipated that several hundred blackshirts from across the Midlands would participate in the procession through Leicester to advertise the event before serving as stewards inside the hall<sup>69</sup>. It is illustrative of the decline of the Mosley movement membership in Leicester, and that of the wider Midlands BUF generally, that on the occasion of the Oriental Hall gathering barely 50 blackshirts could be raised, most from Birmingham and only ten from Leicester<sup>70</sup>. If these ten blackshirts are assumed to represent the total active membership in Leicester, then utilising Webber's ratio of one active member to every one-and-a-half non-active members<sup>71</sup> suggests the total BUF membership in the local area at this time had fallen to 25. During the time the Mosleyites had been holding their meeting, a series of Communist speakers took turns to address a large and enthusiastic anti-fascist crowd at the Market Place next door. When the Communists concluded their speeches the anti-fascist demonstration moved the short distance to outside the Oriental Hall where a donkey in a black shirt was being paraded up and down the street and the crowd of several hundreds sought to drown out the fascist speakers with booing and hissing. At the close of the BUF meeting the attitude of the demonstrators became more aggressive. As the fascists began leaving the building they were greeted with storms of booing and a cordon of police endeavoured to keep the crowd back. Fascists and anti-fascists came to blows as the blackshirt contingent began parading around the block of buildings where the meeting was held and a man was knocked-out in a back street. Elaborate precautions to prevent trouble had been taken by the police, and at the first hint of disorder a special posse of reserves were rushed to the scene and immediately proceeded to clear the streets. The police then escorted the travelling blackshirts through hostile crowds without interference to a motor-coach waiting nearly a quarter of a mile from the hall, and the Leicester blackshirts were accompanied by police officers to the newly taken branch headquarters at London Road. It is likely that but for

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<sup>68</sup> *Blackshirt* 22 June 1934, p7; *LM* 15 June 1934, p8.

<sup>69</sup> *LM* 5 June 1934, p15; *LM* 14 June 1934, p11.

<sup>70</sup> NA: HO144/20143, p380. Disorder at Public Meetings, etc. *LM* 18 June 1934, p1.

<sup>71</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership', pp575-606.

the intervention of the police the small complement of blackshirts would have found themselves the focus of a full-scale riot<sup>72</sup>.

The hostile demonstration and resulting disorderly events at the Oriental Hall meeting were a foretaste of the anti-fascist strategy that would dog the BUF in Leicester for the remainder of its existence. From mid-1934 onwards nearly every single BUF meeting held in the city other than those held inside the branch headquarters would be subjected to organised and effective disruption. The uncompromising campaign of hostility waged by the organised anti-fascist Left in Leicester over the course of the decade would prove highly successful and provided a barrier to fascism which the BUF branch in the city struggled to overcome.

In late August the Leicester BUF announced it had mapped out a 'comprehensive programme' of propaganda work to be conducted over the autumn of 1934. The dissemination of BUF propaganda was considered 'one of the biggest jobs' for fascists in the area and outdoor meetings rather than letter writing were now identified as crucial in spreading the Mosley message<sup>73</sup>. During September and early October 1934 a series of meetings to promote the BUF Corporate State were arranged to be held in the Market Place and at the Victoria Park gates, Leicester's traditional centres for open-air political meetings. Occasionally a speaker from the Birmingham branch or outside the Midlands region would share the platform with the local fascist orators<sup>74</sup>. The presence of upwards of 800 angry demonstrators from the organised anti-fascist Left ensured that these meetings were humiliating and chaotic failures. The fascist speakers were unable to make themselves heard above incessant booing and barracking. At several of the meetings blackshirts were assaulted despite a heavy police presence, and the likelihood that serious disorder would develop compelled the police to intervene and clear the crowds. On the evening of 7 September the fascists felt sufficiently threatened to address the hostile crowd from behind a barricade of wooden benches and stalls. At the end of each meeting police protection was required for the fascists to march unmolested back to the branch headquarters with large angry crowds following behind the small blackshirt procession, resisting police attempts at dispersal. On each occasion the police made attempts to turn back the crowd by forming hand-chains

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<sup>72</sup> *LM* 15 June 1934, p8.

<sup>73</sup> *Blackshirt* 24 August 1934, p10.

<sup>74</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p120, 129; *LM* 20 November 1934, p9.

across the principal thoroughfares, but the majority of the men and women evaded this measure, forcing the police to form a cordon outside the Leicester headquarters building and keep guard over the fascists inside for the remainder of the evening in anticipation of an attack<sup>75</sup>.

The impact of the organised anti-fascist Left's 'physical force' tactics during the second half of 1934 on BUF development in Leicester was devastating. The disorder created by the hostile demonstrators reinforced in the mind of the average Leicester citizen the alienating association between the BUF and political violence that had taken root in the aftermath of the Olympia scandal. Gough recalled: 'The success that the opposition...had in creating violence [meant] that every meeting then was to be picketed and disrupted wherever possible, so we were faced then with organised opposition throughout and the reputation got round that the blackshirts were troublemakers because every meeting they had was trouble'<sup>76</sup>. Fear of continued disorder prompted the civic authorities to prohibit the fascists from holding meetings in outdoor locations traditionally associated with political discourse in Leicester. The disturbances throughout September and during early October 1934, coupled with the declared intention of the organised anti-fascist Left to cause 'further and more serious disturbances' at all future open-air fascist meetings in the Market Place and at the gates of Victoria Park, had convinced the Chief Constable of Leicester, O. J. B. Cole, and his senior officers that 'there was a risk of serious breaches of the peace occurring' if the fascists continued to use these respective locations for their meetings. The Chief Constable accordingly decided to inform the local Mosleyites that their meetings would not in future be permitted in the Market Place, or at Victoria Gates but that their meetings could be held at 'suitable sites' away from the places that had been the scene of the disturbances<sup>77</sup>. Correspondence thereupon followed with William Joyce, Director of Propaganda, at N.H.Q. in the course of which the Chief Constable explained the reasons for his decision<sup>78</sup>. Chief Constables did not at that time possess statutory power to forbid the holding of meetings on sites which had been traditionally used for that purpose, and this fact was pointed out to Cole

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<sup>75</sup> *Blackshirt* 21 September 1934, p9; NA: HO144/20145, p107. Fascist Meetings in the Market Place, Leicester. Note of Conference with the Chief Constable of Leicester.; *LM* 7 September 1934, p19; *LM* 14 September 1934, p22; *LM* 12 October 1934, p5.

<sup>76</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>77</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p107.

<sup>78</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p105.



by a typically acerbic Joyce. However, despite veiled threats of legal action Joyce conceded that the BUF were unwilling to enter into 'legal quibbles' at this time and grudgingly submitted to the police decision on the condition that the Chief Constable identified the replacement site<sup>79</sup>. As Pugh has noted, 'this was a shrewd way of ensuring that the police would accept responsibility for controlling any counter-demonstration'<sup>80</sup>. After consultation with Propaganda Officer Turner the Chief Constable allocated a site for fascist meetings in the Haymarket about 400 yards from the Market Place<sup>81</sup>. While the following year upon the arrival of a new branch Organiser the Leicester BUF would appeal against the Chief Constable's decision<sup>82</sup>, it appears that in late 1934 the local fascist leadership was quite satisfied with the arrangements made by the police for the holding of open-air meetings in Leicester<sup>83</sup>. Pugh suggests that while the BUF was in general permitted to police its own indoor meetings, at outdoor meetings the Chief Constables 'adopted a more consistently interventionist policy'. The police had no legal right to prohibit fascist meetings, hence their reluctance to intervene too frequently, but in practice often endeavoured to regulate the time and location<sup>84</sup>.

The Chief Constable's decision to ban the Leicester BUF from using the Market Place and Victoria Park gates for outdoor meetings appears to have been motivated more by a fear of Communist growth in the city than an expression of anti-fascist feeling. In a series of consultations with a Home Office wary of the legality of the Leicester police action it was conceded that the fascists in Leicester in 1934 were the law-abiding targets of unprovoked assault. A senior civil servant advised the Secretary of State: 'The position would no doubt be different if disturbance of the peace was the natural consequence of the acts of the Fascists taking part in the meetings in the Market Place, but, so far as we are aware it was the conduct not of the Fascists, but of their opponents which gave rise to apprehension of disorder'<sup>85</sup>. The Chief Constable expressed deep concern that whilst the Communist Party had 'comparatively few adherents' locally 'a little Communist eloquence' could potentially transform the 'considerable anti-fascist following' in the area from an anti-BUF coalition into a pro-

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<sup>79</sup> NA: HO144/20145, pp123-126.

<sup>80</sup> Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p171.

<sup>81</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p107.

<sup>82</sup> *LM* 3 July 1935, p6.

<sup>83</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p105.

<sup>84</sup> Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'*, p170.

<sup>85</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p109.

Communist 'trouble making mob'<sup>86</sup>. With every disrupted BUF meeting, he suggested, support for the Communists was growing<sup>87</sup>. In fearing a fascist presence only in so much as it could serve to stimulate the growth of arch-rival Communism, the Chief Constable of Leicester was articulating sentiments shared by the Security Service, with MI5 warning at the end of November 1934 that nationally the most unfortunate effect of BUF activity hitherto had been 'the fillip which it has given to the Communist movement'<sup>88</sup>.

The fear of 'anti-fascist demonstrations and consequent trouble' compelled Leicester council to refuse to let the sizeable DeMontfort Hall to the BUF for a Mosley meeting that the fascists hoped to stage on the evening of 26 November 1934<sup>89</sup>. An earlier application for Mosley to speak at the Hall on the evening of the 9 November had been accepted, and the organised anti-fascist Left in Leicester had arranged a 'big meeting' to coincide with the fascist leader's first ever political appearance in the city<sup>90</sup>, but the fascist meeting arranged was cancelled owing to the hearing of summonses against Mosley at a court in Worthing<sup>91</sup>. The Leicester fascists were hoping that a visit by their leader would have a rejuvenating effect on local morale and recruitment<sup>92</sup>. As we shall see below, the Leicester BUF was in these respects in dire need of inspiration. Explaining its unanimous decision, the cross-party committee responsible for the letting of public halls in Leicester stated it feared that if a BUF meeting were held 'there might be large crowds outside and counter-demonstrations...We also considered the possibility of people...smashing up the meeting'<sup>93</sup>. The committee could find no insurance company willing to insure the historic Hall and its grounds against the risk of damage for this meeting, stating: 'We are mindful of the fact we are the custodians on behalf of the citizens of Leicester of that beautiful building, and its lovely surroundings....we felt we could not take the risk of having damage done to them'<sup>94</sup>. Furious fascist allegations that a politically-biased council were 'capitulating to the worst elements in society' and admitting 'the

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<sup>86</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p122.

<sup>87</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p110.

<sup>88</sup> NA: HO144/20143, p270. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland Report No. II Developments during October/November 1934.

<sup>89</sup> *LM* 15 November 1934, p1; *LM* 15 November 1934, p6.

<sup>90</sup> NA: HO144/20143, p104.

<sup>91</sup> *LM* 15 November 1934, p1.

<sup>92</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>93</sup> *LM* 15 November 1934, p1.

<sup>94</sup> *LM* 15 November 1934, p6.

administration of affairs in Leicester is controlled by the mob'<sup>95</sup> were spiked by the committee's offer of the Granby Hall as an alternative venue for the same date<sup>96</sup>. The leadership of the Leicester BUF spurned the offer of Granby Hall, claiming that N.H.Q. believed a Mosley meeting at this much larger venue could not be organised on time, and an alternative date offered in the middle of December was 'too near Christmas'<sup>97</sup>.

The organised anti-fascist Left, by creating disturbances at BUF meetings, succeeded in driving fascist gatherings off the streets of the city of Leicester until summer 1935<sup>98</sup>. Although the Leicester BUF had agreed to the allocation of the Haymarket site, it seems the local fascists had no desire to experience further confrontation with the forces of militant anti-fascism in the city and preferred the comparative calm and safety of meetings advocating the Corporate State outdoors in outlying districts of Leicestershire and inside at the branch headquarters in the city. During the final quarter of 1934 fascist propagandists from the Leicester BUF travelled to small villages and towns on the outskirts of the county like Ratby, Oakham, Loughborough, Market Harborough, and Melton Mowbray, where impromptu outdoor meetings and sales drives would be staged undisturbed, usually in the market place if one existed<sup>99</sup>. When the Leicester BUF activists were not holding these outdoor meetings during late autumn and winter 1934 they were busying themselves inside the local headquarters at 84 London Road delivering propaganda addresses, organising speaking classes and holding fund-raising events. Every Tuesday night a lecture was given by a Mosleyite speaker either from within the ranks of the Leicester BUF or from outside. On Thursday nights speakers' classes were provided which were described as 'severely practical'. Early December witnessed the first whist drive held by the Leicester branch. Members of the Leicester general public were free to attend all these events except the speakers' classes but entry was carefully vetted to prevent infiltration by disruptive elements<sup>100</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> *LM* 15 November 1934, p6; *LM* 16 November 1934, p15; *LM* 16 November 1934, p16; *LM* 17 November 1934, p16.

<sup>96</sup> *LM* 15 November 1934, p1; *LM* 15 November 1934, p6.

<sup>97</sup> *LM* 16 November 1934, p15.

<sup>98</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p112.

<sup>99</sup> *Blackshirt* 12 October 1934 p10, 11; *Blackshirt* 7 December 1934, p10; 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'; *LM* 20 November 1934, p9.

<sup>100</sup> *Blackshirt* 12 October 1934, p10; *Blackshirt* 2 November 1934, p5; *Blackshirt* 7 December 1934, p12.

The spoiling tactics of the organised anti-fascist left had successfully prevented BUF public speakers from reaching an audience of any size or enthusiasm during the second half of 1934. Shifting its propaganda meetings off the streets of the city enabled the Leicester BUF to operate for a period without fear of disruptive opposition but achieved little or nothing in terms of successfully spreading the fascist message. The audiences attracted to hear the fascist expositions on the Corporate State proved disappointingly small and apathetic<sup>101</sup>. The sole propaganda outlet that allowed the Leicester BUF to reach a wide audience during the second half of 1934 was the correspondence columns of the *Leicester Mercury* and a steady stream of propaganda letters promoting corporatism appeared in the local press from mid-June until September<sup>102</sup>.

Membership of the Mosley movement in Leicester had plummeted in the week following the disorder at the Olympia scandal and continued to fall over the second half of 1934. The decline of the Leicester BUF was noted by the Chief Constable of Leicestershire who reported to the Security Service as early as mid-July 1934 that 'the fascist movement is practically negligible in the county'<sup>103</sup>. At the end of September 1934 the BUF branch in Leicester consisted of six members only<sup>104</sup>.

Among this tiny pool of fascists was prominent local political activist Mr Swinfield-Wells, who until he defected to the BUF in mid-June 1934 had been a well known figure in the Leicester Labour party and a familiar face on various socialist forums including the Leicester Unemployed Board Council, a deputation of socialists who served on the city council as representatives of the out of work<sup>105</sup>. In his reconstruction of the BUF presence in east London, Linehan discovered that a number of 'joiners' had been active in the Labour Party prior to enlisting in the Mosley movement. Instrumental in recruiting these members was their protracted disillusionment with the Labour Party's tendency towards moderate politics during

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<sup>101</sup> *Blackshirt* 12 October 1934, p10, 11; *Blackshirt* 7 December 1934, p10; 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'; *LM* 20 November 1934, p9.

<sup>102</sup> *LM* 13 June 1934, p12; *LM* 16 June 1934, p10; *LM* 18 June 1934, p10; *LM* 22 June 1934, p8; *LM* 26 June 1934, p12; *LM* 29 June 1934, p16; *LM* 30 June 1934, p10; *LM* 3 July 1934, p12; *LM* 6 July 1934, p16; *LM* 7 July 1934, p20; *LM* 13 July 1934, p19; *LM* 27 July 1934, p18; *LM* 31 July 1934, p10; *LM* 13 August 1934, p16; *LM* 27 August 1934, p10; *LM* 4 September 1934, p12.

<sup>103</sup> NA: HO144/21042, p119. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom Excluding Northern Ireland Report No. II Developments during June and July 1934.

<sup>104</sup> NA: HO144/20142, p232. The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom Excluding Northern Ireland Report No. III Developments during August/September 1934.

<sup>105</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p142.

the preceding period, and the attraction of Mosley's radical new policies for social change and national regeneration<sup>106</sup>. Similarly, Swinfield-Wells in Leicester had become thoroughly disillusioned with the Labour party at the local and national level and believed that Mosley's brand of fascism, like socialism, offered a utopian solution to the problems afflicting British society. In explaining his decision to join the BUF Swinfield-Wells informed the people of Leicester that the Labour leaders were absolutely indifferent to the plight of the working class, the Labour Party lacked any constructive policy, and that the local Labour leaders with few exceptions were 'more concerned with their own petty affairs and jealousies than the people they boast they represent'<sup>107</sup>. That Swinfield-Wells decided to join the BUF in the aftermath of the Olympia disorder during the period when local membership of the Mosley movement was collapsing suggests, perhaps, an additional motivating factor was a personal disgust at Communist-inspired political violence. Swinfield-Wells certainly harboured an intense dislike of Communism<sup>108</sup>, while the son of John Beckett suggests Communist attacks on meetings addressed by his father on an ILP platform played a motivational part in the ex-MP later joining the BUF. In the early 1930s the Communist Party operated under the so-called 'class against class' policy wherein all its rivals on the left were attacked as 'social fascists'. J. T. Murphy, a leading Communist who left the party in 1931, recalled: 'The history of not a few ex-Communists and ex-members of the ILP who became members of Mosley's organisation is due to that process'<sup>109</sup>.

The conversion of Swinfield-Wells to fascism astonished the local population and made him a special focus for the anger of the anti-fascist Left in Leicester who alternately branded him 'traitor', 'Worse than Ramsay [MacDonald]', and 'Joseph – the man with the political coat of many colours'<sup>110</sup>. Swinfield-Wells became an active public speaker for the Mosley cause in Leicester during early to mid-autumn 1934 but addressed only one meeting in the city before the branch moved its propaganda activities indoors at headquarters or out into the small isolated districts<sup>111</sup>. The solitary meeting in question was held at the Market

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<sup>106</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp254-255.

<sup>107</sup> *LM* 19 June 1934, p12.

<sup>108</sup> NA: HO144/21045, p142.

<sup>109</sup> F. Beckett, 'The Rebel Who Lost His Cause', *History Today*, Vol.44, No.5 (1994), pp36-37.

<sup>110</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p142.

<sup>111</sup> *Blackshirt* 7 September 1934, p7; *Blackshirt* 14 September 1934, p11; *Blackshirt* 21 September 1934, p11; *Blackshirt* 12 October 1934, p10.

Square in early September but as had become customary the audience was dominated by the presence of a typically hostile anti-fascist crowd and the fascist speakers' words were inaudible above constant jeering and shouting<sup>112</sup>.

While a noteworthy figure in local politics and an active propagandist, Swinfield-Wells failed to bring new members with him into the Leicester BUF and the branch continued to decline during the duration of his membership, which terminated in April 1935<sup>113</sup> and appears in this case to corroborate Rawnsley's suggestion that 'those members of the Labour movement who joined the BUF seemed on the whole to have flirted with fascism rather than to have experienced a deeper commitment'<sup>114</sup>.

The operation of the branch in Leicester apparently met with the approval of A. K. Chesterton when he visited as Midlands Inspector at the beginning of January 1935 during the recently launched nationwide re-organisation to inject a new spirit of austerity and activism into the BUF. In stark contrast to the experience of the BUF in Stoke-on-Trent and Coventry, social club fascism had been entirely absent from the Leicester branch since its founding. While numerically tiny at the time of Chesterton's inspection tour of the Midlands and unable to establish itself as a credible feature of the local political scene, the cadre of members who remained loyal to the Mosley movement in Leicester had persisted in actively propagating a fascist propaganda message. This demonstration of dedication in the face of overwhelming public hostility would have undoubtedly appealed to Chesterton's profound belief in fascism as a heroic revolutionary creed whose adherents in the words of an article he wrote shortly after returning from his inspection tour were 'implacably determined to make no peace with the bad, old world'<sup>115</sup> and explains why the Leicester branch received the endorsement to continue to function while many branches, like Coventry, which were similarly small and marginalised but had become nothing more than social clubs where the members were passive and politically inactive were closed down throughout Britain during the early 1935 national re-organisation<sup>116</sup>.

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<sup>112</sup> *LM* 7 September 1934, p19.

<sup>113</sup> *LM* 15 April 1935, p10.

<sup>114</sup> Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', pp160-161.

<sup>115</sup> *Blackshirt* 1 February 1935, p1.

<sup>116</sup> Beavan, 'The Welsh Security Officer', p59.

The BUF would maintain an active presence in Leicester until mid-1938 and from 1935 onwards the remaining local fascists would focus their energies on constructing an efficient electoral machine in pursuance of the movement's new conventional political strategy and launching propaganda campaigns advocating British neutrality in foreign disputes. However, in a break with the tradition established from the earliest days of BUF propaganda dissemination in the city the Leicester fascist message would cease to be promoted through the correspondence columns of the local press. Letters published in the *Leicester Mercury* had proved popular among the Leicester BUF as an outlet for spreading its propaganda agenda but when Propaganda Officer P. D. Turner was forced to withdraw from activism owing to illness in early 1935 it appears that there was not a single local fascist willing or able to continue this method of promoting Mosley's ideas which Turner had utilised since before the branch's inception. The inability to find an adequate replacement for Turner suggests a lack of propaganda talent among the small handful of fascists who had remained loyal to the branch following the haemorrhage in membership suffered over the preceding six months.

From late winter until late spring 1935 the Leicester BUF continued to avoid propagandising on the streets of the city, preferring as it had since autumn 1934 to stage meetings inside the branch headquarters and outdoors in the outskirts of Leicestershire<sup>117</sup>. The political activity of the branch during the first months of 1935 was supervised by Area Deputy Propaganda Officer Captain Roberts, who was appointed temporary branch organiser upon Captain Brown resigning from the Mosley movement at the beginning of the year<sup>118</sup>.

In early April the branch moved from London Road to new premises in the Florence Building, St Nicholas Street, which were officially opened by Lady Mosley, accompanied by Midlands National Inspector S. C. Symes<sup>119</sup>. The move coincided with a minor re-organisation of key senior positions in the branch, with C. E. Joyce becoming District Officer, Walter Gough appointed District Treasurer, and Charles Leslie Till promoted to Area District Officer<sup>120</sup>. The first major task undertaken by these men in their new roles was at short notice

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<sup>117</sup> *Blackshirt* 18 January 1935, p7; *Blackshirt* 8 February 1935, p12; *Blackshirt* 15 February 1935, p12; *Blackshirt* 8 March 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 31 May 1935, p8.

<sup>118</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p205. Special Branch Report 10<sup>th</sup> July 1935.

<sup>119</sup> *Blackshirt* 28 June 1935, p12.

<sup>120</sup> *Blackshirt* 5 April 1935, p8.

to organise the first ever Mosley meeting staged in Leicester. On the evening of Sunday 14 April 1935 Mosley delivered an address at the Granby Halls<sup>121</sup>. The fascist leader's speech unfolded as a unrelenting tirade against 'Jewish international power' which according to the local press was up to that time one of the most strident ever made by Mosley in the provinces on this theme<sup>122</sup>.

This speech by Mosley and two addresses made by William Joyce at meetings in the city in 1936<sup>123</sup> represent the only occasions on which a representative of the BUF present in Leicester would express to a public audience hostility towards Jews. Ideological anti-Semites were present in the Leicester BUF during the second half of the 1930s. Gough recalled: 'It was generally recognized at that time...the power they held in Marks and Spencers and all the big shopping concerns and means of distribution, the control of newspapers. Rothermere...had to give this [the BUF] up after three months because he lost all his advertising from all these Jewish business houses see and that was the bread and butter of a newspaper you see, so that forced him out'<sup>124</sup>. Leicester Mosleyites who harboured anti-Jewish hostility did not, however, reveal their enmity in public. The theme of anti-Semitism is entirely absent in the material available on the propaganda output of the Leicester BUF and other activism conducted in the presence of the local populace from the inception of the branch in the city until the proscription of the Mosley movement in June 1940. Leicester fascist speakers at public meetings in the city appear to have steadfastly avoided mentioning Jews, a situation which in the immediate aftermath of the 'Battle of Cable Street' so enraged one young local anti-fascist he promptly assaulted violently at an otherwise peaceful outdoor gathering a Leicester BUF propagandist who persistently refused to answer his question 'about what the fascists were going to do with the Jews'<sup>125</sup>. The refusal of the Leicester BUF to be drawn into discussing 'the Jewish Question' had been earlier observed with fury by another representative of the local organised anti-fascist Left who complained bitterly to the local press that 'it is fact that gives us this barren silence on the question of the treatment to be meted out to...racial minorities' and suggested that to gain an accurate picture of the

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<sup>121</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>122</sup> *LM* 15 April 1935, p10.

<sup>123</sup> *Blackshirt* 24 January 1936, p7; *LM* 25 May 1936, p10.

<sup>124</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>125</sup> *LM* 3 September 1934, p12; *LM* 25 June 1935, p12; *LM* 9 November 1936, p6.



Mosley movement's attitude to Jews the people of Leicestershire should read a fascist newspaper rather than listen to local fascist speakers<sup>126</sup>. The maintained absence of anti-Semitic rhetoric in Leicester BUF propaganda over the second half of the 1930s was noted by the Board of Deputies of British Jews<sup>127</sup>. It is doubtful that the promotion of anti-Semitism in Leicester would have attracted notable support for the local BUF branch. Andreski's model of internal change suggests that anti-Semitism becomes active in a host community when Jews number one-in-ten of the total population<sup>128</sup>. In Leicester Jews were a tiny minority. In 1938 there were only 330 Jewish people living in Leicester, a population density of just 0.128%<sup>129</sup>. The Jewish population of Leicester was not easily identifiable as a physical or cultural presence in the city. Widespread assimilation and residential dispersal meant that most Jews in Leicester were indistinct from the Gentile majority<sup>130</sup>. There was no tradition of anti-Semitism in the region's socio-political or economic system and the average local citizen was proud of this attitude of tolerance<sup>131</sup>.

On the significance of Mosley meetings to the provincial membership Cullen writes: 'Undoubtedly, the high point of belonging to the BUF in the provinces was to attend, or, better, to belong to the branch hosting, a Mosley meeting'<sup>132</sup>. Gough validates Cullen's observation, recalling: 'In the early days of the branch the leaders meeting was our greatest ambition'. The excited branch membership welcomed the visit by Mosley as an opportunity to experience 'an epic achievement worthy of all efforts' and an encouragement 'to give our all to the cause'<sup>133</sup>. However, the reality for the Leicester branch of hosting a Mosley meeting proved a deep disappointment. The BUF failed to fill the 6,000 capacity Hall, with the audience numbering 1,500<sup>134</sup>. Gough recalled that ticket sales for the meeting had been disastrous and only two

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<sup>126</sup> *LM* 25 June 1935, p12.

<sup>127</sup> Board of Deputies, Vigilance Committee Reports 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939. See also Board of Deputies, Co-ordinating Committee Report, 1936; Board of Deputies Secretary's Report, 1939.

<sup>128</sup> S. Andreski, 'An Economic Interpretation of anti-Semitism', pp201-213.

<sup>129</sup> *Jewish Year Book 1939*, pp343-350.

<sup>130</sup> H. Brotz, 'Outlines of Jewish Society in London', in M. Freedman (ed.) *A Minority in Britain: Social Studies of the Anglo Jewish Community* (London, Valentine & Mitchell, 1955), p30.

<sup>131</sup> *LM* 18 April 1935, p10.

<sup>132</sup> Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940', p92.

<sup>133</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>134</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p122. Fascist Meetings in the Market Place, Leicester. Note of Conference with the Chief Constable of Leicester.

hundred were sold in advance<sup>135</sup>. The remainder of the undersized audience was comprised primarily of the 'great stage army' of imported BUF activists described by John Beckett<sup>136</sup>.

The inability of the BUF to mobilise mass support from the local people to sell-out the largest Hall in Leicester stood in embarrassing contrast to the efforts of the city's organised anti-fascist Left. From the moment the Leicester BUF announced the arrangement of Mosley's visit in a large expensive advertisement published in the *Leicester Mercury* in early April<sup>137</sup> the Leicester Anti-Fascist Movement initiated extensive steps to organise a counter-demonstration outside the Granby Hall and disrupt the meeting inside. On the evening of the Mosley address Leicester Market Place was the scene of a preliminary anti-fascist meeting which was followed by a march in procession under a banner bearing 'Unite against Mosley' to the Granby Halls where the marchers, who numbered around 150, joined with up to 9,000 protestors who had gathered outside the venue<sup>138</sup>. An organised anti-fascist presence in the hall systematically disrupted Mosley's speech throughout his address, with shouts, jeers, and in the words of Gough a 'barrage of howls', often drowning out the speakers' voice<sup>139</sup>. Proceedings were further interrupted when attempts by fascist stewards and the many police officers on duty at the meeting to eject protestors triggered numerous fights in a number of places in the Hall at the same time and chairs were brandished around the venue. Additional scenes occurred and fights broke out at the conclusion of the meeting and spilled out of the entrance onto the street. If it had not been for skilled police handling inside and outside the Hall the disorderly scenes might well have escalated into a riot<sup>140</sup>. Although the police officially absolved the blackshirt stewards of culpability for the disorderly scenes at the Granby Halls meeting and attributed the blame solely to pre-meditated anti-fascist aggression, according to the local press the clashes at the Mosley meeting reportedly served to compound deeper in the mind of the average Leicester citizen the prevailing disreputable association between the BUF and political violence<sup>141</sup>.

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<sup>135</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>136</sup> Beckett, *The Rebel Who Lost His Cause*, p138.

<sup>137</sup> *LM* 4 April 1935, p4.

<sup>138</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'; *LM* 12 April 1935, p20; *LM* 15 April 1935, p15.

<sup>139</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>140</sup> *LM* 15 April 1935, p10; *LM* 15 April 1935, p15; *LM* 15 April 1935, p16; NA: HO144/20145, p122. Fascist Meetings in the Market Place, Leicester. Note of Conference with the Chief Constable of Leicester.

<sup>141</sup> *LM* 17 April 1935, p14.

The presence of fascists from London, Oxford, Bedford, Wellingborough, Northampton, and several other cities explains the rapturous applause that greeted Mosley's anti-Semitic statements in a city where a tradition of antagonism towards Jews was absent and the local BUF branch had studiously avoided introducing ethnic hostility into its public propaganda work<sup>142</sup>. The importation of fascists from outside Leicestershire also explains how the attendance of a large and ostensibly enthusiastic audience could fail to translate into fresh enlistments in the local branch. Mosley's appearance in the city had humiliatingly failed to excite the people of Leicester and the spurning of the opportunity by all but a minority to hear the fascist leader speak reflects the almost total lack of appetite for fascism in the city against which the members of the local BUF branch had been fighting, and losing, a war of attrition since the beginning of the year. Where Webber suggests that sales of the fascist press represent the level of latent support for the fascist movement in any given locality<sup>143</sup>, in late January 1935 Special Branch reported that sales of the *Blackshirt* in Leicester were 'practically nil'<sup>144</sup>. The meetings held by the Leicester BUF in the three months of the New Year prior to Mosley's visit to the city had been as ineffective as those conducted over the second half of 1934 with the audiences gathered to hear the fascist speakers at headquarters and in the outlying districts being similarly tiny and unresponsive. Writing on BUF branch life Brewer noted 'being starved of success often leads to the exaggeration of minor incidents out of all proportion'<sup>145</sup> and this mindset became prevalent in Leicester during the first quarter of 1935 with the branch considering it newsworthy to report to the fascist press when the interest of the people had been gained rather than their support won. A 'promise' by three people at the end of a meeting to become members of the fascist movement was considered an incident worthy of celebration<sup>146</sup>.

In mid-1935 the Leicester branch of the BUF was as peripheral as it was unpopular, a seeming irrelevancy to the lives of all local residents except the handful of harassed members who continued to faithfully promulgate the Mosley message and its opponents in the

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<sup>142</sup> *LM* 15 April 1935, p10.

<sup>143</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership', p579.

<sup>144</sup> NA: HO144/20143, p174. Special Branch Report 26<sup>th</sup> January 1935.

<sup>145</sup> Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, p95.

<sup>146</sup> *Blackshirt* 18 January 1935, p7; *Blackshirt* 8 February 1935, p12; *Blackshirt* 8 March 1935, p8.

organised anti-fascist Left<sup>147</sup>. It was a situation that would endure until all fascist activity ceased in the city in mid-1938, and it was into this unappetising environment that C. Hillman, an officer at N.H.Q., was despatched by the national leadership in July 1935 to replace Brown as Organiser of the Leicester BUF<sup>148</sup>. Hillman's first action upon arriving in the city was to challenge 'on a question of principle' the Chief Constable's ban on fascist speakers addressing audiences in the Market Place and at the Victoria Park gates. The Chief Constable informed the fascist Organiser in an interview that he 'still thought it necessary to maintain his prohibition' in the interests of the city generally, and upon receiving the full backing of the Secretary of State officially declined to lift his ban. However, the offer of the use of the Haymarket as an alternative site remained on the table<sup>149</sup>.

Although the Director of Blackshirt Organisation Neil Francis-Hawkins believed the Chief Constable had taken an action that appeared to be in excess of his statutory powers the Mosleyites had no intention of forcibly resisting the ban or of making the prohibition the subject of a test court case<sup>150</sup>. Fascist disappointment at the refusal of the Chief Constable to permit BUF meetings to be held in the Market Place and at the Victoria Park gates was tempered by the knowledge that the alternative location offered to them at the Haymarket in the city was, in Hillman's assessment, 'a central site and a good one'<sup>151</sup>, and a promise from the Chief Constable that he was prepared to arrange adequate police protection for fascist meetings to be held on the alternative site with officers instructed to deal with any disorder on the part of anti-fascist interrupters<sup>152</sup>.

It was at the Haymarket site that the branch resumed outdoor propaganda meetings in Leicester when at the beginning of August 1935 the BUF launched its Abyssinian peace campaign. Gough provides a summary of the local branch's position on Mussolini's invasion of the African state:

Our simple policy there was...[Italy] was an Empire which didn't got no Empire at all, which like England had to expand or explode and they were

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<sup>147</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>148</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p205. Special Branch Report 10<sup>th</sup> July 1935.

<sup>149</sup> *Blackshirt* 9 August 1935, p1; *Blackshirt* 9 August 1935, p3; NA: HO144/20145, pp107-111. Fascist Meetings in the Market Place, Leicester. Notes of Conference with the Chief Constable of Leicester; *LM* 3 July 1935, p1; *LM* 3 July 1935, p6; *LM* 1 August 1935, p8; *LM* 2 August 1935, p1.

<sup>150</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p138.

<sup>151</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p137.

<sup>152</sup> NA: HO144/20145, p110. Fascist Meetings in the Market Place, Leicester. Notes of Conference with the Chief Constable of Leicester; NA: HO144/20145, p121; NA: HO144/20145, p139.

going to take over what to me was nothing more than a desert area anyway for exploration and development. So it was a question of keep out of Abyssinia and we had to. There was a threat that England might have gone into war you see as it was brought up at the League of Nations at that time and they wanted sanctions against Italy so the meetings we had during that period were all on the one theme...The err colonists of the day, Empireists of the day saw that Italian war not as an err flagrant breach of freedom but as an err legitimate colonisation and err to go to war over a thing like that was considered unconceivable so we launched a Keep Britain Out Campaign<sup>153</sup>.

The entire branch membership of six mobilised to promote the message of non-intervention in the Italo-Abyssinian conflict and despite the sparse number managed reportedly to stage several outdoor propaganda meetings a week at the Haymarket throughout August and September, often in inclement weather. The frequency with which the meetings were staged slackened as the international crisis eased during October<sup>154</sup>. The return of local fascist activists to the streets of Leicester failed to make a noticeable impression on the citizens of the city. Crowds attracted to the Haymarket gatherings numbered in single figures and humiliatingly for the local fascists were often outnumbered by the police who were posted in the vicinity in case there was trouble<sup>155</sup>. The absence of crowds could not be blamed upon fear that the propaganda meetings would descend into disorder as in Leicester the 'Mind Britain's Business' campaign passed peacefully without a single meeting suffering anti-fascist disruption. The explanation for why the local fascists were able to disseminate their propaganda in public in Leicester without molestation for the first time since before the Oriental Hall disorder lies in a fear among the leading members of the Anti-Fascist Movement that any attempt at interruption would involve clashes with the extra police now on duty at these events which could prompt the Chief Constable to extend his prohibition on fascist gatherings at the Market Place to include anti-fascist meetings<sup>156</sup>. The Anti-Fascist Movement did not resume its policy of disruption and harassment until early 1936.

The peace campaign was followed at the end of autumn by a fresh re-organisation that divided Leicester into three districts: East, South, and West. Headquarters were established in each district, 'usually street corner shops which were rented for ten bob a

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<sup>153</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>154</sup> *Blackshirt* 13 September 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 20 September 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 4 October 1935, p12; *Blackshirt* 18 October 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 1 November 1935, p8; *LM* 16 August 1935, p14.

<sup>155</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'; *LM* 9 August 1935, p5.

<sup>156</sup> *LM* 1 August 1935, p9.

week<sup>157</sup>. The Leicester East HQ was located at 1 Beaumont Road; the Leicester South HQ was opened at 205 Marlborough Road; and the Leicester West HQ was founded at 140 London Road. A Central Office housing the local District Inspector and County Propaganda Officer was also located at 205 Marlborough Road but was distinct from the Leicester South headquarters<sup>158</sup>. Owing to the local fascists focusing on this re-organisation outdoor propaganda meetings in Leicester promoting the fascist movement's isolationist attitude to foreign disputes were a rarity during the final two months of 1935. The meetings staged were desperate affairs, with Gough and Till trying vainly to attract an audience that numbered more than a handful of passing people<sup>159</sup>. The fortunes of the Leicester BUF at this time had fallen so low it was considered newsworthy to report to the fascist press when a crowd 'remained to the end'<sup>160</sup>.

The re-organisation had been initiated as part of the movement's ambition of establishing an efficient electoral machine capable of contesting a future General Election in every parliamentary constituency in the country. Crucial to this new conventional political strategy was the task of canvassing, which Gottlieb describes as 'a challenging occupation which demanded faculty for persuasion'<sup>161</sup>, and it was on this aspect of orthodox electoral machinery in Leicester that the local fascists concentrated their energies unmolested during the first four months of 1936 until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War triggered a new national peace campaign in the late spring<sup>162</sup>. The Leicester fascists in setting about the task of canvassing utilised the 'street-block system' developed by the Nazis and advocated by BUF N.H.Q. where a ward was sub-divided into blocks of houses with each block under the charge of an individual blackshirt who in turn reported to a ward leader<sup>163</sup>. Gough recalled of his time as a ward leader during canvassing campaigns in Leicester:

The idea was that in our electoral ward we had the map and you had a block of five or six streets... and all these streets were solid streets of houses,

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<sup>157</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>158</sup> *Blackshirt* 17 January 1936, p7; *Blackshirt* 3 January 1936, p4; NA: HO144/20146, p202. Special Branch Report 6<sup>th</sup> January 1936.

<sup>159</sup> *Blackshirt* 1 November 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 8 November 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 15 November 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 22 November 1935, p8; *Blackshirt* 6 December 1935, 8; *Blackshirt* 20 December 1935, p8.

<sup>160</sup> *Blackshirt* 20 December 1935, p8.

<sup>161</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p70.

<sup>162</sup> *Blackshirt* 24 January 1936, p7; *Blackshirt* 28 March 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 16 May 1936, p6.

<sup>163</sup> *Blackshirt* April 1938, p1.

people living in them...You were responsible for house to house. You were responsible with any surplus members you could get living in that area to canvas the area so you built up a picture of everybody that lives there...ask who votes and who it supported and build it up so you've got quite a big library of information there...<sup>164</sup>

Although the handful of remaining Leicester BUF members were instructed in the block-house system by Hillman, who was recognised in the Mosley movement as an expert on the subject and in 1938 would be appointed National Electoral Instructor, the canvassing campaign in early 1936 was supervised by Charles Till who shortly afterwards became Leicester Organiser when Hillman was unexpectedly recalled to N.H.Q.<sup>165</sup>.

The Leicester BUF took a temporary break from canvassing during the summer of 1936 to undertake a propaganda campaign against British intervention in the escalating Spanish Civil War. Total membership now stood at five<sup>166</sup>. In his study of East End branches Linehan found that some members engaged in unofficial demonstrations of open and active support for the Spanish Nationalists, including the commandeering of Republican vessels docked at British ports<sup>167</sup>. The miniscule membership of the Leicester branch was strongly pro-Nationalist and while it abided by the official BUF stance of non-intervention in foreign conflicts sympathy for the Franco regime inspired the renaming in 1938 of the main headquarters in the city 'Alcazar House' after the Spanish castle which Franco's men defended successfully for nearly 18 months against Communist assault<sup>168</sup>.

Gough recalled that the only local people to take an interest in the ardent propaganda efforts of the small band of loyal Mosleyites campaigning against British involvement in the Spanish conflict were the supporters of the Leicester Anti-Fascist Movement<sup>169</sup>. Enraged by the plight of the Left in Spain, the organised anti-fascist Left in Leicester disrupted the Mosleyite branch's series of small propaganda meetings held throughout the summer at the Haymarket with an intensity that came as a surprise even to the local fascists<sup>170</sup>. The organised anti-fascist Left had also been the only people other than the membership of the local Mosleyite branch and fascists imported from Birmingham and London to attend a BUF

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<sup>164</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>165</sup> *Blackshirt* 24 January 1936, p7; *Blackshirt* April 1938, p1, 2.

<sup>166</sup> *LM* 7 July 1936, p4.

<sup>167</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp84-85, 285-286.

<sup>168</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>169</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>170</sup> *Blackshirt* 16 May 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 30 May 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 4 July 1936, p6; 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'; *LM* 18 May 1936, p4; *LM* 9 October 1936, p9.

meeting addressed by William Joyce at the Leicester YMCA in mid-January 1936. Supporters of the Leicester Anti-Fascist Movement interrupted the meeting throughout its duration and the event ended with fighting between stewards and protestors at the back of the hall. Joyce's typically acerbic speech, which focused primarily on condemning the Government for its 'undignified behaviour' during the Abyssinian Crisis, concluded with a brief exposition on the 'great danger' of a 'Hebrew' plot to manipulate Britain and France into declaring war on Germany, rhetoric that constitutes only the second recorded example of anti-Semitism being promoted by a fascist speaker in Leicester<sup>171</sup>.

The disorderly scenes witnessed at the Leicester BUF meetings in the Haymarket and at the Joyce gathering in 1936 were recreated on a much larger scale when Mosley visited Leicester for the second time to address an audience at the Granby Halls on the evening of 24 May. A large audience of local people had gathered to supplement the 'travelling army' of imported fascists present in the hall but the majority preferred not to sit but stand at the back of the hall having, in the assessment of a respected local journalist, 'obviously come for the purpose of seeing some excitement'. With the plight of the Spanish Left uppermost in the mind of its supporters the Leicester Anti-Fascist Movement were determined that Britain's leading fascist would be denied the opportunity to spread his message in person in the city. Mosley was interrupted from the very outset of his speech by protestors shouting anti-fascist slogans. Attempts by blackshirt stewards to remove the interrupters triggered melees throughout the hall and the gathering descended into chaos. Long before the customary question time near the conclusion of the meeting the hall was half empty. Outside at the end of the meeting Mosley was bundled into a waiting car and driven away at speed while bus loads of fascists leaving the city were 'hooted' by a hostile crowd that had gathered around the building, where they sang the 'Red Flag'<sup>172</sup>.

Organised anti-fascist agitators continued to violently disrupt propaganda meetings held by the Leicester BUF in the Haymarket until October, on several occasions managing to evade the police protection present and charge the speaking platform to physically assault the few fascists conducting the gatherings<sup>173</sup>. The beleaguered Mosleyite branch as it had under

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<sup>171</sup> *Blackshirt* 24 January 1936, p7; *LM* 17 January 1936, p5.

<sup>172</sup> *LM* 25 May 1936, p10.

<sup>173</sup> *LM* 26 October 1936, p1; *LM* 9 November 1936, p6.



similar circumstances in late 1934 retreated for the final two months of the year away from the hostility confronting it on the streets of Leicester city and into the comparative safety of the branch headquarters and the outlying districts of the county. A change of location failed to improve the public response to the propaganda theme of non-intervention in foreign disputes. As they had been at the end of 1934 the audiences attracted to Leicester BUF indoor meetings at branch headquarters and at impromptu meetings in isolated villages like Coalville were miniscule and indifferent<sup>174</sup>.

In the words of Gough the Leicester BUF 'plodded on' during 1937 but over the course of the year even the handful of doctrinal fascists who had remained loyal to the movement over the course of the previous two years in the face of unrelenting organised hostility and general public apathy, began to question the value of continuing to expend their time and energy working for the Mosley cause in Leicester<sup>175</sup>.

At the end of 1936 and in early 1937 Mosley announced the names of 100 fascist candidates and the respective Parliamentary constituencies it was intended these men and women would contest at the next General Election. 1937 began for the Leicester BUF with N.H.Q. informing the local press that a Charles Beauclerk had been selected to stand as prospective BUF candidate for the Leicester West division at the next parliamentary election<sup>176</sup>. Beauclerk had no connections whatsoever to Leicester and news of his appointment came as a complete surprise to the local branch which had not been consulted on this matter<sup>177</sup>. As a member of the 'students (upper school/university) occupational sub-group Beauclerk is ascribed 'elite or upper-middle' social class status in Table 3. The incumbent secretary of the Fascist Association at Cambridge University where he was studying, he had been educated at Eton and became an enthusiastic admirer of Nazism while attending Munich University in 1932. After reading *The Greater Britain* upon his return to Britain he joined the BUF in 1933 and immediately began active propaganda work in South West London<sup>178</sup>. After the announcement was made over the heads of the resident branch that Beauclerk was to contest a local seat at the next General Election he was never heard of

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<sup>174</sup> *Blackshirt* 31 October 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 28 November 1936, p6; *Blackshirt* 12 December 1936, p6.

<sup>175</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>176</sup> *LM* 21 January 1937, p5.

<sup>177</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>178</sup> *Blackshirt* 28 January 1937, p7.

again in Leicester and his candidature appears to have been quietly dropped, corroborating Pugh's suggestion that many of Mosley's 100 electoral nominees had been put forward exclusively for temporary propaganda gain at a specific time in the movement's history: 'Mosley boasted one hundred fascist candidates. These included some highly respectable names....As the new Public Order Act was about to come into force this announcement was timely, for adoption of candidates went some way to discrediting accusations that the Movement was aiming to acquire power through violence'<sup>179</sup>. Gough conceded the appointment of Beauclerk represented a short-term publicity stunt, stating: 'It was just a case of appointing a candidate'<sup>180</sup>.

The Leicester BUF spent the first seven months of 1937 pursuing the building of a ward organisation capable of efficiently contesting either a council or parliamentary election at some time in the future, whoever the candidate at that unforeseen point might be<sup>181</sup>. The branch's work was severely undermined by a debilitating lack of numbers but the handful of members turned out every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evening to canvass streets in Leicester. The fascist press was fulsome in its praise of the 'outstanding' canvassing work performed by the 'small band of stalwarts'<sup>182</sup>. The canvassing campaign passed without anti-fascist disruption, the provisional nature of the activity denying to the movement's opponents the opportunity to organise in advance or even be aware it was taking place. However, this minor victory over the forces of anti-fascism in Leicester failed to prevent the resignations of two of the remaining handful of branch members so that by autumn 1937 the Leicester BUF was reduced to longstanding leading officers Till, Joyce and Gough.

In October 1937 Gough replaced Till as Organiser of the Leicester BUF although the latter remained an active member of the branch. Gough would retain the position of leader of the Leicester branch until the Mosley movement was proscribed. The sole noticeable alteration made by Gough to the organising of the Leicester branch over the remainder of 1937 was the inauguration of weekly propaganda meetings held directly outside the front door

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<sup>179</sup> Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!', pp223-224.

<sup>180</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>181</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'.

<sup>182</sup> *Blackshirt* 28 January 1937, p7; *Blackshirt* 27 March 1937, p7; *Blackshirt* 17 April 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 24 April 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 8 May 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 22 May 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 29 May 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 5 June 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 12 June 1937, *Blackshirt* June 19 1937, p7; *Blackshirt* 26 June 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* July 3 1937, p6.

of the branch headquarters in Marlborough Road. The choice of location indicated the extent to which the remaining trio of members felt vulnerable to attack by the organised anti-fascist Left in the city, with the meetings seemingly staged in such a way that the fascist speaker was able to immediately retreat into the protection of the branch premises should violent interruption break out<sup>183</sup>. However, Gough, Joyce and Till need not have feared for their physical safety at this point in the history of the BUF branch in Leicester. After years of sustained opposition and direct action the organised anti-fascist Left believed that the 'Mosley menace' in the city had been effectively eradicated and the trio of remaining members were engaged in activism sufficiently insignificant as to no longer warrant attention<sup>184</sup>. From this period onwards the Leicester Anti-Fascist Movement pledged to devote its energies exclusively to campaigning against the 'gangsterdom' of Nazi Germany<sup>185</sup>.

From 1938 onwards the Leicester BUF branch entered into the final stage of the sustained decline it had suffered since the aftermath of the Olympia scandal. In January the three district headquarters opened in late 1935 were closed and the branch returned to operating out of a single small premises. The new Leicester headquarters was located at 187 Wellington Street. Owing to the membership consisting of only three people the branch premises were closed until the end of the working day<sup>186</sup>, while active political work on the streets was limited to Tuesday evenings. Gough, Joyce, and Till attempted to maintain a campaign of canvassing and meetings staged directly outside the front door of 187 Wellington Street<sup>187</sup> but by mid-1938 the efforts of the trio of remaining fascists had petered out and all political activity on behalf of the BUF in Leicester appears to have come to an end. While Joyce and Till retired from radical politics at this point, Gough remaining passionately loyal to the Mosley movement but finally accepting that Leicester had become barren ground for the fascist message departed the city and worked around the country as a speaker at BUF meetings until ceasing all political activity on the occasion of the outbreak of World War Two.

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<sup>183</sup> *Blackshirt* 9 October 1937, p12; *Blackshirt* 16 October 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 30 October 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 18 November 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 20 November 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 4 December 1937, p6; *Blackshirt* 11 December 1937, p6; *LM* 23 October 1937, p6; *LM* 15 December 1937, p5.

<sup>184</sup> *LM* 19 May 1938, p14.

<sup>185</sup> *LM* 27 August 1938, p10.

<sup>186</sup> *Blackshirt* 15 January 1938, p7; *Blackshirt* 29 January 1938, p4.

<sup>187</sup> *Blackshirt* 29 January 1938, p4; *Blackshirt* March 1938, p7; *Blackshirt* June 1938, p7; *Blackshirt* July 1938, p5.

The final public fascist meeting addressed by Gough was held in August 1939 at Portsmouth Docks<sup>188</sup>.

The Leicester BUF was unable to reverse or even check over the second half of the 1930s what proved to be a terminal decline triggered initially by the local public response to the Olympia scandal. The violence-marred meeting in London created an unfavourable image of fascism in the minds of many Leicester people which severely undermined the local fascist branch's ability to present the Mosley movement as representing a legitimate and necessary alternative to the established political parties in the city. Over the course of the second half of 1934 and then from 1935 onwards until all fascist activity ceased in the city this crucial ability was eroded further by anti-fascist opposition and the promotion of propaganda themes which failed to resonate with the local populace.

The Leicester branch perhaps suffered for being founded so much later than many other BUF branches in the country. Although it experienced rapid growth it had little time in which to establish itself as a credible presence in the political life of the city and foster an enduring sense of loyalty among significant numbers of the membership before the disorderly events of 5 June 1934. The lack of time in which to develop a deeper foothold in the city must have made it easier in the immediate wake of the Olympia scandal both for local members to walk away and for the local public to accept the media depiction of the BUF as a violent organisation. The collapse in membership numbers prompted by the disorderly scenes in London left the remnants of the local movement highly vulnerable to direct forms of anti-fascist opposition. The sustained and uncompromising campaign of disruption of Mosleyite activities perpetrated by the Leicester Anti-Fascist Movement from mid-1934 onwards constituted a powerful barrier to the subsequent development of the local BUF branch. The aggressive opposition of the organised anti-fascist Left limited the potential audience for Mosley's ideas by making it extremely difficult for the Leicester fascists to organise in the public outdoor locations associated with reputable local politics, drained the morale and enthusiasm of even the most ardent activists, and crucially saddled the local branch members with the public blame for the ensuing violence and disorder.

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<sup>188</sup> 'Blackshirts in Leicester Before World War Two'; *LM* 3 July 1939, p12.

This anti-fascist barrier may not have proved insurmountable, however, if the fascist message disseminated in Leicester post-Olympia had been of pertinence in the area. Unfortunately for the Leicester branch the themes upon which it focused its propaganda energies were, in the prevailing local context of the periods in question, irrelevant and unable to exert any notable appeal.

The propaganda theme of the Corporate State was pursued over the second half of 1934, a period when the local economy was beginning to recover strongly from a downturn triggered by the Depression. Although the diverse nature of Leicester's industrial structure had protected the city from the worst of the economic crisis the level of unemployment experienced by local people up to mid-1934 was acute and was widely acknowledged as such<sup>189</sup>. At the time of the official founding of the BUF branch in the city the total number of men and women out of work locally stood at nearly 16,000<sup>190</sup>. However, mid-1934 proved to be a turning point in the strength of the local economy. The number out of work peaked and then started to fall rapidly over the remainder of 1934 as Leicester emerged from the slump it had suffered since 1930 and entered a record breaking run of economic prosperity and levels of employment that lasted until late in the decade<sup>191</sup>. This improvement was mirrored in the cities and towns adjacent to Leicester in the east Midlands<sup>192</sup>. By the end of 1934 unemployment in Leicester had fallen by 30% on the figure recorded in the month before the Olympia scandal and it was reported that the general feeling locally was that the depression in Leicester was over<sup>193</sup>. The local press would soon reflect upon the optimism and confidence in the existing liberal democratic system which the people in the city and the county had expressed over the second half of 1934<sup>194</sup>. A recovering economy and trust in the established political institutions from mid-1934 until the end of the year rendered fascist proposals for a Corporate State unnecessary.

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<sup>189</sup> Beckett, *A Regional History of England*, p306; Hoskins, *The Victorian History of the Counties of England: Leicestershire Volume 3*, p296; *LM* 27 February 1935, p5; *LM* 12 April 1935, p18.

<sup>190</sup> Hoskins, *The Victorian History of the Counties of England: Leicestershire Volume 3*, p296.

<sup>191</sup> *LM* 8 August 1934, p9; *LM* 6 November 1934, p4; *LM* 27 February 1935, p5; *LM* 1 May 1935, p19; *LM* 29 August 1935, p12; *LM* 5 November 1935, p4; *LM* 5 October 1937, p11.

<sup>192</sup> Beckett, *A Regional History of England*, p308; Millward, *A History of Leicestershire and Rutland*, p132; *LM* 5 October 1937, p11.

<sup>193</sup> *LM* 7 August 1935, p7; *LM* 29 August 1935, p12.

<sup>194</sup> *LM* 27 February 1935, p5.

The theme of non-intervention in foreign disputes, upon which the Leicester BUF focused its propaganda output from 1935 until mid-1938, was of little interest to the people of the city. The cultural character of Leicester during this period in which the local BUF was active was extremely insular in outlook, a fact which was a long-standing source of irritation and consternation to the local political elite. Leicester people were apparently uninterested in foreign affairs, despite the efforts of the local MPs and councillors to persuade their fellow city men and women to adopt a more outward approach to life. This disinterested attitude to events outside of British shores was reportedly deeply rooted in Leicester history<sup>195</sup>. Harold Nicholson, one time member of the New Party and in the second half of the 1930s the MP for Leicester West, believed he spoke for the leadership of all the established political parties in Leicester when he lamented in late 1938 the 'aloofness' with which the 'remote city' had consistently regarded international events since his arrival in the municipality in 1935<sup>196</sup>. The apathy of which he complained was reflected in the *Leicester Mercury*. A review of the local press from the founding of the national BUF reveals a distinct lack of attention to international affairs until the Munich Crisis of September 1938, by which point all fascist efforts in the city had been abandoned.

Local people had nothing to gain by joining the BUF in Leicester during the second half of the 1930s. Without an appealing message capable of boosting its membership numbers the tiny Leicester branch was condemned to operating in harassed obscurity on the cultural and political fringe of the city until it was extinguished in mid-1938.

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<sup>195</sup> *LM* 21 October 1935, p12; *LM* 15 March 1937, p12; *LM* 18 March 1937, p14; *LM* 21 October 1937, p18; *LM* 21 October 1938, p18.

<sup>196</sup> *LM* 21 October 1938, p18.

## **Conclusion.**

The aims of this thesis were twofold. The first aim was to produce a detailed examination of the emergence and development of the BUF in the Midlands between 1932 and 1940. The second aim was to test and contribute to arguments about the Mosley movement in the secondary literature relating to three themes: (a) the social class composition of BUF membership; (b) the strength of BUF membership; and (c) the focus of BUF propaganda. The evidence gathered in the preceding case-studies generates the following reflections on these themes in relation to the local and national Mosley movement.

### (a) The social class composition of BUF membership in the Midlands.

The deployment of an enhanced version of the conceptual model utilised by Linehan and Mitchell to identify the social class composition of BUF membership has provided a valuable insight into the types of people attracted into the ranks of the Mosley movement in the Midlands. Adoption of this methodological approach to appraise recruits to the BUF in Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry and Leicester has revealed that the fascist membership in the region was not dominated by any one social class. The portrait of a 'typical' BUF member being someone of 'middle class' social status as employed by Cross failed to hold true in the Midlands. In conformity with the findings of the other detailed major regional studies, the evidence gathered about the emergence and development of the Mosley movement in the region demonstrates that the Midlands BUF was diverse in terms of social class composition. People from all the social classes represented in the conceptual model responded to the fascist appeal in the Midlands. 'Lower-middle and middle-middle' class members appear to have comprised the largest local social class contribution between 1932 and 1940. However, enough members were recruited from outside this social class grouping to suggest it would be misleading to present a 'typical' Mosleyite fascist in the region as a person of 'lower-middle and middle-middle' social status. The BUF in the Midlands also proved attractive to a significant intake of 'lower' class recruits. Therefore with regard to social class structure the Midlands membership appears to have been closer in composition to the

BUF in East Anglia than it was to the Mosley movement in east London. The noteworthy participation of unskilled and skilled workers in the ranks has been demonstrated at various points in the development of the respective BUF branches investigated in the Midlands. The diverse membership established in Birmingham by early 1935 included a variety of 'lower' class Mosleyites, while propaganda campaigns in the city agitating against the provision of local aid to foreign refugees proved notably effective in attracting new enlistments of people belonging to this social category during the second half of the 1930s. The final leader of the BUF in Birmingham, who held the position of Organiser in the city between May 1937 until his arrest and incarceration under DR 18b (1a) in June 1940, was found to be of 'lower' class social status. Many members of the BUF in the Potteries were found to belong to the 'lower' social class category. The evidence suggests that during the period of Rothermere's sponsorship the BUF may have served in Stoke-on-Trent as an alternative focus of allegiance to the traditional organisations of the labour movement for significant numbers of local unskilled and skilled workers. As was the case in Birmingham, the final leader of the BUF in the Potteries was a man who belonged to the 'lower' social class. Although it has to be recognised that the membership involved was small, the social core of the Coventry branch during the second half of 1934 was identified as being 'lower' class in composition. A substantial proportion of 'lower' class members were revealed to have been present in the ranks of the BUF branch in Leicester prior to the Olympia scandal. Alongside the 'lower' class and 'lower-middle and middle-middle' class members of the Midlands BUF were people classified as belonging to the 'elite or upper-middle' class who, it seems, were recruited on a modest scale in the Midlands.

The 'unskilled and skilled workers' identified as comprising the 'lower' class recruits in the Midlands were factory and workshop workers; labourers; menial office workers; railway workers; shop assistants; bus and lorry drivers; waitresses; and domestic workers. The occupational sub-groups that contributed 'lower-middle and middle-middle' class members to the Mosley movement in the region were 'non-academic professionals'; 'lower/intermediate (petty) employees'; 'lower/intermediate civil servants'; 'merchants (self-employed)'; and 'farmers (self-employed)'. The 'lower-middle and middle-middle' class occupational 'types' attracted into the Midlands BUF have been documented as schoolteachers; nurses;



journalists; clerks; commercial travellers; insurance agents; local authority minor officials; farmers; shopkeepers and the proprietors of independent small local businesses which included breweries, factories, restaurants and coal merchants. A distinctive feature of the 'lower-middle and middle-middle' class membership of the Midlands BUF, which is mirrored in Linehan and Mitchell's respective findings on the fascist formations in east London and East Anglia, is the heavy presence of self-employed merchants. These shopkeepers and owners of small businesses in the region were representatives of, as Skidelsky put it, 'those intermediate groups that fell outside the labour-capital confrontation'<sup>1</sup> and considered themselves overlooked by the prevailing political culture of the decade. They were among the archetypal 'small men' of the 'lower-middle and middle-middle class' who operated outside big-business and trade union support but clamoured for the two things they believed neither liberal capitalism nor orthodox socialism could combine: protection and continued independence, 'in a modern age where economic life was increasingly geared towards mass production and mass services'<sup>2</sup>. The occupational sub-groups from which 'elite or upper-middle' class Mosleyites were drawn in the region were 'managers'; 'students (public school/upper school/university)'; 'academic professionals'; and 'entrepreneurs'. These 'elite or upper-middle' class members were found to be senior executives; publicity directors; engineers; university students; solicitors; doctors; a newspaper editor and proprietor; and owners of large businesses.

This study into the emergence and development of the BUF presence in Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry and Leicester represents a new contribution to the debate surrounding the Mosley movement's social composition. In finding that BUF membership in the Midlands was diverse it continues the pattern established by Linehan and Mitchell of major regional studies challenging Cross's assertion that the 'typical' recruit belonged to the 'middle class'. The evidence presented demonstrates that while it is appropriate to highlight the 'middle class' aspect of BUF membership it is no longer acceptable to focus attention exclusively on this particular social class category when considering the social class

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<sup>1</sup> Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p327.

<sup>2</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p164.

composition of the Mosley movement and confirms Linehan's assertion that the 'middle-class paradigm' has begun 'to crack under the strain'<sup>3</sup>.

(b) The strength of BUF membership in the Midlands.

Extensive and detailed investigation into the BUF presence in the Midlands has for the first time provided figures on how many people joined the Mosley movement in the region. As a consequence it is possible to determine whether the Midlands, as has been shown to be the case with the regions scrutinised by Rawnsley and Mitchell, conforms to Webber's paradigms on regional membership strength in the provinces. The BUF in the Midlands enjoyed rapid growth in numbers which peaked in mid-1934 before experiencing a collapse in membership over the second half of that year. However, in a contradiction of Cross and Benewick's interpretation of membership trends this decline did not prove to be irreversible and the Midlands BUF experienced a limited revival in total numbers during the late 1930s. In avoiding the entering into a terminal downward trend in membership strength post-1934, the development in the Midlands mirrors that of the BUF in northern England and East Anglia, and constitutes fresh support for Webber's argument that not all provincial fascist formations fell into permanent decline in terms of numbers after peaking under Rothermere's sponsorship. In parallel with the major regional studies produced by Rawnsley and Mitchell the study of the Midlands BUF endorses Webber's proposition that in those provincial regions where the membership did not collapse post-1934 into terminal decline the fascist numbers were boosted by an influx of anti-war recruits during the final years of the decade. Unlike in northern England and East Anglia, however, the flow of pro-appeasement enlistments from 1938 onwards did not increase the total membership strength of the BUF in the Midlands to a level higher than at any time other than mid-1934.

However, when total membership numbers in the region are separated geographically into the individual contributions of the four leading municipalities it is revealed that the rise in the numerical strength of the BUF in the Midlands from the Munich Crisis onwards is attributable exclusively to the increase in Mosleyites recorded in Birmingham

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<sup>3</sup> Linehan, *British fascism*, p165.

during the final years of the decade. Whereas Webber suggests that in many of the provincial regions where membership of the BUF increased during Mosley's final 'Peace Campaign' the ranks of a number of local branches located around the area would have been boosted by new recruits, and this was indeed found to be the case in northern England and East Anglia, during these years the Birmingham branches contributed almost the entire membership of the fascist movement in the Midlands. We have seen that of the leading municipalities in the region only in Birmingham did the local BUF evade falling into a terminal decline over the second half of the 1930s and proceed to raise its membership numbers during the period of the British government's appeasement of Nazi Germany. It was during these years that the fascist branches in the Second City received an influx of enlistments motivated by anti-war sensibilities. However, the number of the new enlistments recorded in Birmingham was modest and stands in humbling contrast to the huge gains Rawnsley uncovered in major industrial northern cities where membership in September 1939 soared into thousands<sup>4</sup>.

It was in Birmingham that Mosleyite fascism made its greatest impact in the Midlands in terms of size and range of membership. BUF membership in Birmingham had grown rapidly from the first local branch's founding until reaching a considerable high-water mark of support immediately prior to the Olympia scandal. At the beginning of 1935 recruitment in Birmingham had lost all momentum and membership strength had fallen sharply. The BUF in Birmingham did not, however, enter into a permanent decline and in a contradiction of Webber's suggestion that Mosley's pro-appeasement position was indispensable to the revival of branch recruitment in the provincial regions actually began to stage a minor but sustained recovery in numbers as early as 1935.

The Midlands proves to be unique among regions in the provinces where the BUF has been subjected to substantial academic scrutiny in that only one local branch experienced a recovery, however minor, in membership during the second half of the 1930s. BUF membership strength in Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry and Leicester peaked in the days directly preceding the disorder at Olympia but by the beginning of 1935 the fascist branches in these three cities had experienced an exodus in numbers and decayed into moribund states. The general downward trend in membership strength experienced by the respective

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<sup>4</sup> Rawnsley, 'Fascists and Fascism', p207.

BUF branches in Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry and Leicester post-1935 proved to be unsalvageable and in 1938 all fascist activity in these three cities came to an end.

The BUF branches in Stoke-on-Trent, Coventry and Leicester followed similar paths in terms of membership strength over the second half of the 1930s but had experienced contrasting histories in recruitment numbers in the period from the time of their respective openings to the scandal surrounding events at Olympia. The growth of fascist membership in Stoke-on-Trent from the founding of the first branch to the infamous London rally was rapid and sizeable. Although the BUF branch in Leicester peaked at a comparatively modest membership figure it had been active for only a month and a half prior to the disorder at Olympia. Recruitment in the BUF branch in Coventry from inauguration until June 1934 was both slow and small. It is a moot but interesting point to speculate on what course the membership numbers of the Stoke-on-Trent BUF would have taken if A. K. Chesterton had not in January 1935 impulsively expelled the entire membership and closed the local branch. As revealed in the respective case-studies, at the time of Chesterton's infamous visit to Stoke-on-Trent the number of local members who had remained loyal to the Mosley movement following the post-Olympia collapse was in fact higher than their counterparts in the Birmingham branch. A fascist presence was established in both cities in October 1932 and these respective branches had shared a comparable pattern of substantial growth. It is not perhaps unreasonable to suggest that had the Potteries branch been placed under the guidance of a suitably able leader the Stoke-on-Trent BUF may have like in Birmingham avoided falling into a terminal decline and enjoyed a recovery to some degree in membership during the second half of the 1930s.

(c) The focus of BUF propaganda in the Midlands.

Charting the emergence and development of the BUF presence in the Midlands between 1932 and 1940 has revealed that the focus of the propaganda disseminated by the fascists in the region was not uniform across the branches examined over the course of the decade. The evidence suggests that the propaganda priorities of the respective branches were determined by the exigencies of the local areas with regard to the theme of the Corporate State and that

the character of senior branch officials decided whether or not the theme of anti-Semitism would be adopted.

Rawnsley and Mitchell have demonstrated that between the years 1932 and 1935 the BUF branches in the regions of northern England and East Anglia focused their propaganda attention on promoting the economic programme of the fascist Corporate State tailored to suit the grievances of local industry. The Midlands BUF did not mirror the fascist movement in these other areas. The Birmingham, Coventry, and Leicester branches all focused their propaganda output during the first half of the 1930s on promoting the Corporate State in its entirety without ever concentrating on any one particular aspect. Economics was discussed as part of the general programme of Mosley's idea but without reference to any specific industry or product. It was only in Stoke-on-Trent that the local BUF emulated the branches investigated by Rawnsley and Mitchell. While in northern England and East Anglia the respective local branches concentrated their propaganda content on explaining how the economic policies of the Corporate State would solve all the problems faced by the textile and agriculture industries respectively, it was found that in Stoke-on-Trent the fascist activists focused their energies firmly on extolling the purportedly unprecedented merits of corporate economics in rejuvenating the pottery industry. As was the case with textiles in northern England and agriculture in East Anglia, in Stoke-on-Trent an ailing dominant industry was facing an easily identifiable and highly emotive foreign threat which offered the local BUF the opportunity to adapt propaganda in such a way as to present fascist corporate economics as a solution both highly effective and proudly patriotic in nature. By contrast the diverse character of the local economies in Birmingham, Coventry and Leicester militated against adapting the fascist economic message around a specific local industry and denied the possibility of addressing the needs of a principal industry. The absence of a similar focus in the propaganda output of the branches in the Midlands outside of the Potteries suggests that the concentrating on content tailored to suit local economic grievances was not reserved for regions in the provinces which were dominated by staple but ailing industries. The experience in Stoke-on-Trent demonstrates how it could also be favoured by branches in much smaller areas, such as a city, equally reliant on one main but declining traditional industry in an otherwise economically diverse provincial region.

When the propaganda disseminated by the BUF in the Midlands is assessed to determine which of Mosley's ideas were communicated by the fascist branches to the local public over the course of the second half of the 1930s Coventry alone was found to conform to the national pattern identified by Thurlow of focus moving away from the single theme of promoting corporatism and towards the two themes of non-intervention in foreign disputes, and anti-Semitism. While in Stoke-on-Trent and Leicester the BUF branches de-emphasised corporatism when communicating with the local public in favour of opposing British intervention in foreign affairs there is in the material available no evidence to suggest that the local fascists ever engaged in disseminating anti-Semitic propaganda in these two cities. In Birmingham from 1935 onwards the focus of the propaganda disseminated by the BUF in the city was revealed to have shifted away from promoting the theme of the Corporate State but apart from a short period in May 1937 when the local fascists attempted to conduct anti-Semitic campaigns the Mosleyite propaganda message concentrated on advocating the theme of isolationism. However, the efforts to introduce anti-Jewish sentiment into the fascist message promoted in Birmingham was curtailed by the intervention of the Chief Constable and it is probable that without the actions he took against the local fascists the theme of anti-Semitism would have continued to be adopted along with that of isolationism in the propaganda pursued by the local BUF in the Second City during the remainder of the decade.

This study offers support for Linehan's explanation for the introduction of the theme of anti-Semitism into BUF propaganda. None of the other five principal explanations proposed in the secondary literature are applicable to the experience of the BUF in the Midlands. If the adoption of anti-Semitic campaigning can be explained, as Benewick and Mandle proposed, as a cynical device of political mobilisation to resuscitate an ailing movement then surely Mosley's anti-Jewish position would have been employed as a theme of the fascist propaganda disseminated across the leading municipalities in the Midlands rather than be restricted to the Coventry branch and a brief period in the history of the Birmingham BUF. The Stoke-on-Trent and Leicester branches were in desperate need of a boost from 1935 onwards. It would also have been introduced into the fascist propaganda for the first time in Coventry and Birmingham earlier than July and May 1937 respectively. At the time that anti-Semitic campaigning was adopted in Birmingham the fascist movement in the city was

actually undergoing a modest but steady recovery in membership. The explanation proposed by Skidelsky is similarly invalid at the local level: there is no evidence available to suggest that the BUF branches in Coventry and Birmingham were ever in their histories the subject of anti-fascist Jewish attacks. If, as Dorril claims, the anti-Semitic campaigning of the BUF was central to the fascist movement's ambitions and was pre-planned and worked to a timetable it would have been introduced into the propaganda disseminated by all the branches in the Midlands, not just Birmingham and Coventry. And it would have become a theme in the leading municipalities when the national trend began to emerge in early 1935 after Mosley's announcement at the Albert Hall in late October 1934 that his movement would be publicly embracing anti-Semitism and engaging in campaigns against Jews. Holmes' 'specific social milieu'<sup>5</sup> was not a feature of either Birmingham or Coventry. A number of the 'interacting measures' he identified were not present in the two Midlands cities. As stated above, the meetings and other activities of the Birmingham and Coventry BUF branches were not disrupted by Jewish anti-fascists. In both cities Jews apparently refrained from becoming identifiably involved in militant anti-fascist activism. Indeed, in Coventry the BUF branch operated throughout its history without ever clashing physically with any kind of anti-fascist opposition. The cultural and historical narratives of nativist anti-Semitism discussed by Holmes were absent in Birmingham and Coventry. There was no tradition of anti-Jewish hostility in these two cities. In Birmingham and Coventry the local Jewish communities were admired and respected and represented a tiny percentage of the respective populations. Neither as adherents to Judaism nor as members of an ethnic group did the Jews in Birmingham or Coventry have a specific relationship of any kind to the local socio-political systems which had in the past or could have in the present caused resentment among the Gentile community or be exploited. In Birmingham and Coventry the Jews were not a political, economic or ethnic minority bloc. The Jews of these cities were undifferentiated from the general population and were difficult to identify as a structural entity. 'Jewish cultural habits there were in plenty but they were not interpreted or widespread enough to constitute a specific way of life peculiar to Jews'<sup>6</sup>.

Linehan's research suggests that at the local level the adoption of anti-Semitic

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<sup>5</sup> Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', p128.

<sup>6</sup> Brotz, 'Outlines of Jewish Society in London', p30.

campaigning principally depended on the contingent factor of 'uncompromising anti-Jewish elements'<sup>7</sup> being present within the fascist decision-making hierarchy who were pushing for the introduction into propaganda activity of overt aggressive anti-Jewish sentiment. Anti-Semitic campaigning was absent in Birmingham and Coventry until Irvine and Mazengarb became the respective leaders in these cities. Both of these Mosleyites fall into the category of senior officer described by Linehan. Irvine was a fascist who believed in, and practised through leading by energising example, aggressive street-based propaganda activism with a confrontational attitude to the authorities and his opponents. Although no evidence has been uncovered to demonstrate his enlistment in the BUF was motivated by anti-Jewish feeling or that he was expressing opposition to Jews before he arrived in Birmingham, it would be implausible to suggest Irvine's strident anti-Semitism in the city was in any way insincere. Holmes has written that there is insufficient proof to say that, in general, members of the BUF possessed personalities which required the support of prejudice to function<sup>8</sup>. However, the historiography records that those alienated by the official embrace of anti-Semitism in late 1934 soon thereafter left the BUF<sup>9</sup>. While to claim it was possible for a person to be a member of a publicly anti-Jewish movement such as the BUF and be unsympathetic to anti-Semitism is intellectually incoherent. Refuting this position on anti-Semitism from a female fascist in Liverpool who claimed that 'as I knew no Jew and Mosley seemed to object to their apparent monopoly of British money and business, it did not seem to me very important, compared with [other ideas]', Gottlieb writes scornfully: 'And yet fascism was a package deal, and scape-goating, xenophobia, and rhetorical violence against the Jews were inextricable from the British fascist...discourse'<sup>10</sup>. Mazengarb was a similarly committed and active Mosleyite leader whose diligence and energy at times it seems single-handedly kept the Coventry branch afloat. Mazengarb was found to be what Linehan has termed 'Cable Street fascists': men and women who joined the Mosley movement as a consequence of a fierce anti-Communist and anti-Jewish backlash following the infamous events of 4 October

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<sup>7</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, p43.

<sup>8</sup> Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', p117.

<sup>9</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p145; J. Gottlieb, 'Motherly Hate: Gendering Anti-Semitism in the British Union of Fascists', *Gender and History*, Vol.14, No.2 (2002), p297; C. Holmes and B. Hill, 'Robert Forgan', in J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds.) *Dictionary of Labour Biography Vol.6* (London, Macmillan, 1982), pp111-114; Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!', p230; Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', p157; Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p147.

<sup>10</sup> Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, p130.



1936<sup>11</sup>. It would be improbable to believe that Irvine and Mazengarb's characteristically assertive brand of fascism and genuine dislike of Jews would not extend to a determination to see this hostility promoted in the propaganda disseminated in their respective cities. The prior history of the BUF in Birmingham and Coventry suggests that without the ascendancy of these two men to leadership positions in these two cities the propaganda theme of anti-Semitism may not have been promoted in any of the leading municipalities in the Midlands during the second half of the 1930s.

(d) Concluding thoughts.

This thesis confirms a suggestion by Webber that the BUF was 'largely unsuccessful' in the Midlands over the course of the 1930s<sup>12</sup>. As a final reflection we will examine how we might understand the ultimately limited progress made by the local fascists in the four case-studies in light of a body of secondary literature which seeks to provide answers for the BUF's failure nationally. Thurlow has identified four main areas which existing interpretations have highlighted to explain why the national movement was never of more than marginal significance to the politics of inter-war Britain. These explanations relate to: the BUF's misconception of the nature of the crisis in British society in the inter-war years; fascism's lack of resonance with the established tenets of British political culture; the internal weaknesses of the BUF; and opposition to British fascism by militant anti-fascist activists and state management of the BUF<sup>13</sup>. Thurlow writes that the main interpretations accept that all of these explanations were important<sup>14</sup>. It is therefore necessary to provide an overview of each general category of explanation before proceeding to discuss which if any of these critical external and internal factors are relevant when accounting for the failure of the BUF in the Midlands.

The role of crisis and Mosley's misreading of its nature in the Britain of the 1930s has been examined in detail by Lewis<sup>15</sup>. Mosley founded the BUF under the assumption

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<sup>11</sup> Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, pp199-200.

<sup>12</sup> Webber, 'Patterns of Membership', p589.

<sup>13</sup> Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', pp67-84.

<sup>14</sup> Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', p67.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, pp223-224, 263-267.

capitalism was entering its final stages and that the collapse of the economy was imminent. However the societal crisis which Mosley had diagnosed as having arrived in 1932 and which he believed was an essential requirement for the success of the BUF never materialized. Lewis suggests that Britain's political system did not undergo the same degree of 'trauma' as other countries in Europe during the inter-war period. In his interpretation the existence of trauma within a society, caused by the impact of modernisation, the onset of severe economic depression, and the divisive legacy of defeat in the Great War, created and sustained 'a climate of disintegration' which was a vital precondition for the growth of fascism<sup>16</sup>. Britain, of course, was not defeated, and while it would be fatuous to claim the 1930s were not for many people in Britain ten years of deep suffering and terrible hardship, the popular image of a 'devil's decade'<sup>17</sup> of endemic unemployment and accompanying social deprivation which an ineffectual Government was unable to solve is misleading. 'In Britain the onset of the depression was very much more gradual than elsewhere. The British economy had never recovered its pre-war position and during the 1920s remained relatively stagnant, with a permanent pool of over a million unemployed. Although the situation worsened after 1929, it lacked the air of a sudden and dramatic crisis'<sup>18</sup>. Crucially the effects of the depression were not uniform and the worst was relatively short-lived in most parts of Britain. Although areas dependent on traditional staple industries like Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and northern England bore the brunt of the impact, the rest of the country escaped comparatively lightly. 'Indeed, many prospered amid the hardship. Imports became cheaper and new opportunities for investment presented themselves. For those in work stable wage rates and falling prices increased real wages significantly. There was a boom in private houses, motor vehicles, and other new consumer industries'<sup>19</sup>. Those who lived outside the depressed areas of Britain and who continued in employment remained largely immune to the 'ravages of the slump', while the economy staged a revival in the 1930s which by the middle years of the decade included signs of a modest improvement even in heavy industry<sup>20</sup>. It was a haphazard rather than planned solution but the revival was overseen by the National Government nonetheless and

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, pp223-224.

<sup>17</sup> A. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1965), p317.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, p263.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, p263.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, p263.

showed that economic recovery did not require the authoritarian revolutions advocated by political extremists. There was no serious disintegration in the socio-economic fabric or political institutions in Britain. The established political parties and organisations retained their membership and the National Government proved to be acceptable to the majority of British people<sup>21</sup>.

The second argument identified by Thurlow which has been used to explain the BUF's failure was that fascism was alien to Britain's political culture. This interpretation has been emphasised by Benewick, who suggests that the BUF's methods and ideas, particularly the search for order through political violence and the promotion of anti-Semitism, proved anathema to an essentially moderate and tolerant national character which was deeply committed to the relatively peaceful evolutionary traditions of British liberal democracy and associated institutions. This distinctly British 'politics of civility' included respect for the rights of the individual, an attachment to religious pluralism, an adherence to constitutional procedures that opposed authoritarian solutions while accommodating innovation, and respect for the rule of law that abhorred political violence<sup>22</sup>. A more restrained and nuanced version of this argument has been proposed by Holmes who maintains that the BUF's attempts to attract support through the adoption of anti-Jewish campaigning was, in part, impeded by 'a tradition, deriving from the historical development of liberalism, which placed limits upon the expression and influence of anti-Semitism'. However, he stresses an important caveat, writing that it would 'be unwise to assume that it was universally accepted and dangerous to discuss it as some kind of autonomous, universal force inherent within the nation'<sup>23</sup>. Holmes suggests that adding colonial episodes to historical incidents of ill-treatment of racial minorities in Britain offers a 'firmer picture of the limits which existed upon the civilised decency of British society, even if its track record was better than that of a number of other countries'<sup>24</sup>.

Internal weaknesses were the third general category explaining why the BUF made little impact. Thurlow has written in detail on the national fascist movement's many shortcomings. As a leader Mosley was too trusting, had a poor tactical sense, an inability to

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, p266.

<sup>22</sup> Benewick, *Political Violence*, pp13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society*, p196.

<sup>24</sup> Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF', p126.

judge character, and a susceptibility to flattery which led him to surround himself with sycophantic incompetents to whom he would delegate organisational, administrative, and financial functions. At various points in the 1930s the BUF was disrupted by problems of mismanagement, factional divisions, personal acrimonies, corruption, expulsions and resignations<sup>25</sup>.

The fourth general category of explanation for the failure of the BUF was that of opposition to it both by militant anti-fascists and the state. The aggressive and confrontational 'direct action' tactics of the militant anti-fascist movement hindered the operational effectiveness of the BUF and helped to create an unfavourable image for fascism. The interruption and breaking up of meetings, the disruption of marches, and general harassment of fascists on the street made it difficult for the BUF to organise political activity and disseminate propaganda<sup>26</sup> and led, in the words of Thurlow, to 'violence and public order problems which public opinion chiefly blamed the fascists for creating'<sup>27</sup>. Thurlow has researched extensively the role played by state management of the BUF in containing the Mosley movement. From November 1933 the BUF was placed under surveillance by the Security Service<sup>28</sup>. After Rothermere split with Mosley in July 1934 newspaper editors and the BBC were encouraged to boycott or give only negative publicity to the BUF. Local authorities increasingly refused to allow council property to be used for fascist meetings. Thurlow writes: 'The state thought the best means of shunting Mosley into the political sidings was to ignore him'<sup>29</sup>. However, when civil disorder was threatened in 1936 after the 'Battle of Cable Street' and when the nation faced the threat of a potential pro-Nazi fifth column in 1940 the British state turned to legislative counter-measures and implemented the Public Order Act and Defence Regulations 18b (1a) and (AA) respectively<sup>30</sup>.

Examination of the fascist experience in the four leading municipalities during the

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<sup>25</sup> Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp132-144; Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', pp75-77.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, p310.

<sup>27</sup> Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', p77. See also R. Thurlow, 'Blaming the Blackshirts: the authorities and the anti-Jewish disturbances in the 1930s', in P. Panayi (ed.) *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, Leicester University Press, 1993), pp112-130.

<sup>28</sup> R. Thurlow, 'British Fascism and State Surveillance 1934-45', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.3, No.1 (1988), pp77-79; Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', p79; R. Thurlow, 'State Management of the British Union of in the 1930s', in Cronin, M. (ed.) *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition* (London, Macmillan Press, 1996), pp29-52.

<sup>29</sup> Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', p80.

<sup>30</sup> Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism', pp79-84; R. Thurlow, *The Secret State. British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994), pp173-213.

1930s suggests that all of the main factors in the secondary literature identified by Thurlow to explain the failure of the national movement are of significance when accounting for the limited development of the BUF in the Midlands. However, as we shall now see, the applicability of these explanations is not consistent across the individual cities.

The long-term failure of the BUF in Birmingham is explained by a combination of three of the four factors. In an endorsement of Benewick's analysis of the nature of 'civil society' in Britain the use of political violence at the Town Hall meeting in May 1935 horrified the local public and undermined attempts to present the BUF as a legitimate political movement. The prospects for fascism in Birmingham had already been severely disrupted by internal weakness in the shape of a crippling rivalry between the two most senior officers in the area which N.H.Q. had incompetently failed to recognise and then proved sluggish in resolving. The personal animosity between Hill and Revett caused organisational stagnation, the haemorrhaging of a substantial membership, and gained for the Birmingham branches an unsavoury reputation. The third contributing factor was both militant anti-fascist activity and opposition from the state. Organised Communist opposition led to disorder at the Mosley meeting of May 1935 which the Birmingham public blamed the local fascists for creating. The association between the BUF and violence in the minds of the local populace compelled Birmingham council to prohibit the use of public buildings for fascist meetings, a constraint which denied to the city's Mosleyites a respectable and effective outlet for disseminating propaganda and proved a powerful barrier to re-establishing credibility and support. The authorities' implementation of Defence Regulation 18b (1a) in Birmingham in June 1940 effectively destroyed the BUF in the city.

An explanation for the eventual failure of the BUF in Stoke-on-Trent was also found among the factors discussed by Thurlow. The lack of a sense of societal crisis among significant numbers of local people contributed to fascist disappointment in the city. From 1935 onwards the established political forces in the Potteries were able to satisfy comfortably the concerns and demands of the local population. The second contributing factor was that the political violence unleashed at Olympia alienated the sensibilities of both the majority of the local supporters and the general public, resulting in a collapse in membership which had hitherto been significant in numbers and an undermining of the fascist movement's reputation

among the people of Stoke-on-Trent. Internal deficiencies played a crucial role in the failure of fascism in the Potteries; the expulsion of the entire membership in January 1935 was an example of gross mismanagement which had a devastating impact on the BUF's prospects in the east Midlands. Unlike in Birmingham, the BUF in Stoke-on-Trent faced opposition from militant anti-fascists but not from the state. State management appears to have played no apparent role in disrupting the progress of the Mosley movement in Stoke-on-Trent. The anti-fascist activity organised against the local BUF made it difficult for the Mosleyites to organise and disseminate propaganda, weakened morale, and hindered their ability to present the Mosley movement as a credible alternative to the existing political parties.

The BUF was never at any time in its existence able to attract a significant following in Coventry, and the local branch from its founding languished on the periphery of life in the city. This consistent failure is explained by the combination of two factors identified by Thurlow which were present in the city throughout the 1930s. Coventry during this decade was a dynamic and confident city which like its neighbours in the south Midlands enjoyed great economic prosperity the benefits of which were shared across the social class spectrum. The established political parties remained respected, popular and were widely regarded as being representative and effective. Therefore in Coventry the growth of the BUF was constrained by the absence of a sense of socio-economic trauma which could have persuaded a notable percentage of the population to believe the city required a radical alternative to the existing liberal democratic system. The other barrier to fascist progress in Coventry was the alien nature of anti-Semitism in the city's political culture. The propaganda disseminated by the Coventry BUF during the second half of the 1930s focused on the two themes of isolationism and anti-Semitism. The theme of non-intervention in foreign disputes was successfully articulated in the city's established polity but the fascists did not appear to have any rivals, respectable or otherwise, in their campaigns against Jews. However, in another corroboration of Benewick the anti-Jewish activities of the local fascists in Coventry proved to be of no interest to the population of a city noted for its historically moderate and tolerant attitude towards Jews.

The two factors which account for the BUF's lack of success in Coventry also contributed to the limited development of the fascist branch in Leicester. The strong economic

recovery experienced by Leicester and nearby towns and cities in the east Midlands over the course of the second half of 1934 negated any sense of crisis which could be exploited during a period when the local fascists were pursuing the propaganda theme of the Corporate State. The method of seeking order through political violence on display at the infamous Olympia meeting proved unacceptable to most supporters of the BUF in Leicester and instilled a deeply unfavourable impression of fascism in the minds of many local people. In the immediate wake of the disorderly rally in London the branch, which up to this point had been growing in numbers rapidly, lost the majority of its membership and the Mosley movement in Leicester was left floundering in its efforts to present itself as a reputable feature of political life in the city. The third factor in the failure of the BUF in Leicester was that the local branch from 1935 until it was extinguished in mid-1938 persisted in focusing its propaganda message on the theme of non-intervention in foreign disputes. It can be argued that this represents an internal weakness of the Leicester branch. In Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent and Coventry the idea that Britain should adopt an isolationist position towards foreign crises exerted a strong appeal among a notable number of local people. Unfortunately for the BUF in the respective cities of the north and south Midlands the fascists were unable to capitalise to any degree on this potential opportunity for growth because the local MPs were strongly in favour of neutrality and non-intervention and therefore represented a respectable and popular alternative to the Mosley movement. In Leicester by contrast the general public were uninterested in foreign affairs which meant that during the second half of the decade the local fascists were disseminating an irrelevant propaganda message which, even when echoed by respected mainstream political figures, was unable to attract a sympathetic audience of any note. As was the case in Stoke-on-Trent, the BUF in Leicester was opposed by militant anti-fascists but not it seems by the state. The activities of anti-fascist protesters played a significant role in marginalising fascism in Leicester by restricting the ability of the local fascists to operate in outdoors locations associated with respectable politics in the city, sapped the morale and energy of activists, and most importantly saddled the BUF with the blame among public opinion for the resulting violence and public order problems.

In none of the individual cities examined in this thesis did all four of the factors proposed in the secondary literature and highlighted by Thurlow play a role in the failure of

the local branches. Indeed, the combination of the factors which do account for lack of success was different in each respective city. While the BUF's misconception of the nature of crisis in 1930s Britain, Mosleyite fascism's lack of resonance with Britain's political traditions, and internal deficiencies were each relevant in at least two of the Midlands cities, the fourth category of hostility by militant anti-fascists and state management was found to have hindered the BUF in Birmingham only. Direct action by anti-fascists disrupted the progress of the fascist movement in Stoke-on-Trent and Leicester but it was in the leading city of the west Midlands that the local BUF faced opposition both by militant anti-fascists and the state. This is not to say, however, that the experience of the fascists in the Midlands suggests that state management of the BUF was important nationally but of little significance at the local level. It has been demonstrated in this study that during the second half of the 1930s the vast bulk of BUF membership in the Midlands belonged to the Birmingham branches, while from late 1938 onwards fascism in the three other leading municipalities had ceased to exist. Consequently during the final eighteen months of the national movement's existence the fascist presence in Birmingham to all intents and purposes constituted the Midlands BUF. As state management played a part in limiting the growth of the Mosley movement in Birmingham during the second half of the 1930s it can be stated that opposition from the authorities was indeed significant in the long-term failure of the BUF in the region. Therefore while the applicability of the four factors was inconsistent across the leading municipalities, each category was found to have contributed to the failure of Mosleyite fascism in the Midlands, which suggests that the main explanations in the secondary literature for why the BUF was never of more than marginal significance at the national level can also provide an answer for why the Mosley movement failed at the regional level.



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