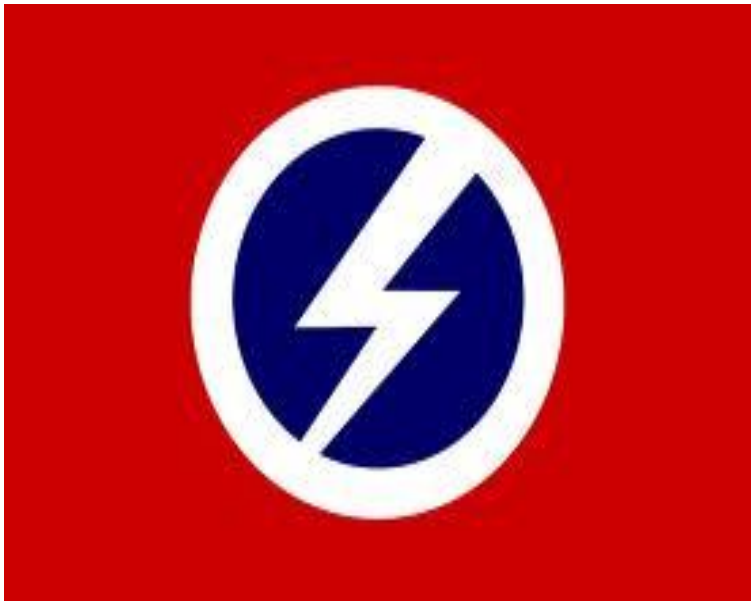
Britain For the British!



Nationalism and the British Union of Fascists

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent years there has been an upsurge in nationalist rhetoric being used across Europe, as increasingly ethnically diverse countries have seen a number of clashes between differing groups. In Great Britain, this has led to the rise in popularity of two new political parties, the British National Party and the English Defence League.[1] The British National Party is the more mainstream of the two organisations and the one that takes part in general elections. In 2005 the party received a total of 192,746 votes.[2] However, by the next general election in 2010, the part had increased its number of votes to 563,743.[3] This demonstrates the extent to which far-right wing nationalist parties have become more popular over a short period of time. The first nationalist far-right organisation that achieved any popularity in Great Britain was the British Union of Fascists in the 1930's. These years leading up to the Second World War was the last time that nationalist movements were prominent in countries across Western Europe.

The British Union of Fascists was a political party, formed in 1932 by Oswald Mosley. It was active in Great Britain until 1940 when its members were officially banned from taking part in any activities that related to the organisation. The British Union of Fascists soon became the largest and most well-known fascist organisation in the country and regularly held processions, meetings and other events throughout the nation in a bid to increase its popularity and support.[4] During its existence the British Union of Fascists managed to develop a strong loyal core of supporters, which included the paramilitary wing known as the Blackshirts, which was formed to maintain order at political meetings and deal with any violence, that came their way from opposition groups. Despite this following, the party was

[1] David Tyrer and Tina Patel, *Race, Crime and Resistance* (London 2011) 40-42.
[2] http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/rp2005/rp05-033.pdf, 45 viewed on 19/07/2011.
[3] http://www.general-election-2010.co.uk/2010-general-election-results.html viewed on 25/07/2011.
[4] Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London 2004) 74-75.

never able to drum up more than 50,000 members at any one time.[5] This limited the organisations effectiveness as a political force in Great Britain.

The theme that was running through all of the British Union of Fascists policies, activities and campaigns was nationalism. This was the key idea that the party had identified as being the way to build the British Union of Fascists into a leading political organisation in the nation. Mosley tried to develop, in the people of Great Britain a heightened sense of what it meant to be British. He tried to encourage the populace to develop an idea of what made them distinctly British and then increase the affinity felt between the people of Britain by using strong nationalist rhetoric in party propaganda. The party's motto was 'Britain for the British' and they initially managed to gain small pockets of support, especially in the major cities of England and from a national newspaper, the *Daily Mail*.[6] London was the organisations stronghold and they had an estimated support of around 25,000 people in this city alone in 1934.[7]

Few scholars have attempted to look at the British Union of Fascists from a specifically nationalist angle. The majority of authors have put more emphasis on investigating how a fascist organisation developed in Great Britain and why it ended in failure in this country, when fascist parties in other nations had more success.[8] Others have concentrated merely on looking at the life, actions and behaviour of organisations leader Oswald Mosley.[9] This thesis delves into these areas, however, it concentrates on analysing the role that nationalism had to play in the party's ambitions, rhetoric and actions Therefore, this study investigates how nationalism was used by Mosley's political party in order to develop its support and increase its influence. By tackling the topic from this approach, it

[5] G. C. Webber 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, vol. 19 (1984) 575-606, there 581-582.
[6] Stephen Dorril, *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London 2007) 278-282.
[7] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 599.
[8] See Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan (eds.), *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain* (London 2004), Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London 2006), Thomas P. Linehan, *East London for Mosley: British Union of Fascists* (London 1996), Colin Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (New York 1963), Kenneth Lunn and Richard C. Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain* (London 1980).
[9] See Nigel Jones, *Mosley: Life and Times* (London 2004), Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London 1990), Stephen Dorril, *Blackshirt*, Oswald Mosley, *My Life* (London 1970).

adds greater depth to the debate on the British Union of Fascists, as it will not only look at the events that occurred and the impact that they had, but also examines the beliefs and ideology behind the actions and policies of the party's leaders. It identifies what strands of nationalism were used and how it was manipulated in order to improve the position of the British Union of Fascists as a political force in Great Britain.

This thesis will assess the effectiveness of the nationalist approach of the British Union of Fascists to see to what extent it increased the party's chances of success. It aims to discover the ways in which Mosley and his party attempted to implement the theories of nationalism and fascism to make the movement appeal to large numbers of the British population. It investigates whether the British Union of Fascists was able to use its propaganda and nationalist ideas to generate a level of support that would allow the party to directly challenge the British government, or be considered to pose a significant threat to the national security of Great Britain.

In order to help answer these questions the second chapter of this thesis is a historiographical debate, which delves into a number of theories of nationalism in order to discover which relates most directly to the ideas implemented by Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. It assesses how these different theories relate to Mosley's organisation to varying degrees. It also investigates the literature and publications relating directly to Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, to discuss how opinions of the party and its leader have changed over time from the creation of the movement to the present day. The thesis then discusses various aspects of the organisation, to gain a deeper understanding of the party and their nationalist ideas.

There were a number of leading members of the British Union of Fascists. Chapter 3 of this thesis finds out exactly who these people were, what drew them to Mosley's side at this period of time and what direction they felt that the organisation should move in over the years of its existence, and how they viewed the relationship between fascism and nationalism. This chapter looks at the backgrounds that these people came from and how they began to lean towards fascist ideas. It also identifies who made up the British Union of

Fascists main support base, which sectors of British society flocked to the movements cause, whether it was the young or the middle-aged, the working class or the middle and upper-classes. It analyses which areas of the British nation these people came from, whether it was towns and cities, or rural areas in England, Wales or Scotland.

To put the ideas and actions of the British Union of Fascists in context, the fourth chapter examines other fascist organisations and movements that were taking place across Europe at the same period of time, mainly looking at Italy, France, The Netherlands and Germany. It investigates the different ways in which nationalist and fascist ideologies were used in the different nations and discovers the ways in which the British Union of Fascists were similar to other organisations in different countries and also how they differed. This will help to explain whether the British Union of Fascists was an organisation whose aims and aspirations were solely British or if they were in fact part of a wider fascist movement that was sweeping across Europe.

The British Union of Fascists used propaganda to try to get its ideas of nationalism and fascism to the wider public. The various forms that this took are investigated in chapter 5 to help discover the ways that the organisation tried to implement their nationalist rhetoric into all aspects of its policies, activities and publications. Despite all its endeavours the party was to collapse in 1940 without managing to achieve widespread support or take control of the nation. The sixth chapter looks at the reasons for the organisations lack of success. It analyses whether the nationalist approach of the British Union of Fascists was partly responsible for this failure and whether the government simply wanted to put an end to the activities of the British Union of Fascists because they seriously considered them to be a threat to Britain or if they were merely a nuisance, that the government wanted out of the way.

Chapter 2

A Historiographical Debate

2.1. Introduction

Nationalism is a force which has had a huge impact on the shaping of the world as we know it today. Consequently it has been debated for many years by scholars from all sorts of different fields and perspectives. Historians, philosophers, political scientists and many others have all had their say on the matter. This has led to the creation of a vast amount of academic material from all manner of different approaches assessing what nationalism actually is and how it has had a significant influence on an extraordinary range of topics, which invariably seem to find themselves somehow intertwined with nationalism and its impact on the world. Theories of nationalism have changed significantly over the years that the debate has been raging. It is a subject that scholars and academics are continually attempting to approach from different perspectives in order to try to contribute further to the issue. This chapter delves into this debate, in an attempt to discover the relevance the various studies and theories of well-respected scholars have for the development and promotion of nationalist sentiments in Britain from 1932-1940 by Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. It endeavours to uncover what strands of nationalism were prevalent and exploited by this party in the attempt to bind its fascist ideologies with the national sentiments of the British people.

The debate in this chapter looks at how theories of nationalism have both remained similar and developed over time. It therefore studies the ideas of scholars from different periods of the debate. It begins by investigating the Ernest Renan, a French historian and scholar who was discussing the subject in the nineteenth century. It then moves on to the ideas of Hans Kohn from the middle of the twentieth century and finally to some of the more contemporary theories by Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm. These three men are all philosophers or historians who have written extensively on the subject of

nationalism over the past century.[10] This chapter analyses their work to discover how various arguments support or contradict each other, and what factors each different scholar felt was the most essential in creating an environment where nationalism was most likely to develop and become a significant issue.

This historiographical debate also looks at some of the most significant literature that has already been produced specifically regarding the British fascist movement in the period between the First and Second World Wars. It identifies how the opinions of the historians vary, depending on the moral and political stances of each particular author and the period of time in which their accounts were written. As time progressed, thoughts on British fascism evolved and developed as the general anti-fascist sentiments that were widespread after the end of the Second World War gradually made way for some studies which were more understanding and at times very supportive of fascist ideology. In turn, these works have prompted further responses which have taken an altogether different approach. Some have attacked those who supported Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, whilst others have taken a more objective approach to the topic, instead analysing what happened and why it may have happened whilst trying to avoid making their own particular judgments.

2.2 Historiographical Debate

The earliest view of nationalism that this chapter takes into account is that of the nineteenth century French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan, who attempted to provide a definition of nationalism in his lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882 which was entitled *What is a Nation?*[11] Renan's ideas are the starting point for many of the modern theories on

[10] Ernest Renan, 'What is a nation?', in: Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), *Becoming National: A Reader* (Oxford 1996) 42-56, Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (New Jersey 2008), Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism* (London 1997), Ernest Gellner, 'Nationalism', *Theory and Society* 10 (1981) 753-776, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1986), Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge 2010), Eric J. Hobsbawm and David J. Kertzer, 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today', in: *Anthropology Today* 8 (1992) 3-8.

[11] http://www.cooper.edu/humanities/core/hss3/e_renan.html viewed on (25/02/11).

nationalism. Therefore, he has had a significant impact on the topic in question. Renan stated that he believed that a nation had a soul and was a spiritual principle, which he argued came from the combination of a rich legacy of common memories which make individuals feel part of a larger community and a present day desire to live alongside the other people who they feel are also part of that community.[12] Renan stated, he felt, if individuals truly felt they belonged to a particular nation that would be prepared to make sacrifices for it, if necessary. People would feel a very strong bond between themselves and the nation that they belonged to.[13] Renan suggested that national sentiments stem from the idea that individuals feel that they have something in common with other individuals, that are from the same historical background and are part of the same group of people. According to Renan, however, where people lived was the most important factor in the creation of nationalism. The geographical boundaries that isolated them from other groups held great significance. Those people who lived in the same area and were separated from other individuals by geographical features were more likely to feel a sense of kinship and belonging to one another, than people who were of the same race, religion or spoke the same language but lived a great distance away and were not within the close vicinity.[14]

Renan's view that nationalism is a sentiment which is largely determined by the geographical location of groups of people can be applied to the definition of nationalism used by the British Union of Fascists. Great Britain is an island nation, as it is separated from the rest of the world by the sea. This makes it easy for the people who live there to consider themselves to have more in common with their fellow islanders, than with other people from overseas. The British Union of Fascists claimed to be a political party that solely represented the interests of the British people. Therefore, it was not interested in any events occurring elsewhere in the world, unless they had a direct impact on Britain.[15] The British Empire for example was something which, the British Union of Fascists believed had a direct impact on

[12] Renan, 'What is a nation?' 51-53.
[13] Renan, 'What is a nation?' 54-56.
[14] Renan, 'What is a nation?' 50-52.
[15] Martin Blinkhorn, *Fascism and the Right in Europe, 1919-1945* (Harlow 2000) 60-61.

the future welfare and prosperity of the British nation. The party based its nationalist ideas around its pride in the British Empire and the fact that Britain was an island nation. It did not attempt to build up nationalist sentiments by identifying with a particular historical individual or event. Although the party was keen that Britain should protect the Empire and the people within it, the organisation would never accept these individuals as being truly British as they did not come from the island itself. The party argued that maintaining the Empire was crucial for Britain's hopes to be a powerful nation and consequently one of its main aspirations.[16] The British Union of Fascists believed that this ideology would draw more followers to its banner, as it offered a different approach to that of the other political parties who were in operation at the time.[17] This emphasis on the difference of the British people compared to other Europeans is clearly an idea that would help to create the sense of common kinship that Renan felt was a vital part of the development of nationalist feelings. This clearly demonstrates, how the nationalism of the British Union of Fascists fits with Renan's ideas that geography has a key role to play in the development of nationalism. However, it is also apparent that geography alone is insufficient to generate the development of nationalism. Therefore, Renan's ideas must be combined with those of other historians to create a clear indication of what needs to be present to allow nationalism to evolve.

Philosopher and historian Hans Kohn first published his thoughts on nationalism in 1944. His ideas differ somewhat from those of Renan, possibly because he had just lived through and experienced the Second World War, a conflict which had nationalist sentiments at its very core. Kohn believed first and foremost that nationalism was a state of mind that came from an act of consciousness. Nationalism is a belief and feeling that people develop due to their experiences and surroundings. Kohn argued that this developed into a collective consciousness with other people through the experiences that individuals have, and the common histories that they are taught.[18] In this sense, his idea of nationalism closely follows that of Renan, as it is about the feeling of a common identity of different people, that

[16] Captain R. Gordon-Canning, *The Inward Strength of a National Socialist* (London 1938) 3.
[17] Mosley, *My Life*, 281-282.
[18] Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (New Jersey 2008) 10-11.

develops from shared experiences and a shared history. However, Kohn appears to see the development of nationalism as having more of a political foundation than Renan, as he states that the growth of nationalism stems from the process of integration of the masses into a common political state.[19] This means that nationalism can only develop when there is a clear political entity which has control over a large and distinct area, with all the people that it encompasses being tied together in a sense of loyalty to this structure. Kohn suggests that, although there are a great number of factors which have to be present for nations and national sentiments to be created, a clearly defined political structure is essential. Any political party which attempts to have the ideas of nationalism at the heart of its policies will do so because they will have a definitive aim which they believe nationalism will help them to achieve. This aim is often to gain total political control of a nation and to generate mass public support. This shows a clear distinction to Renan, who put the key feature of nationalism down to geographical differences and boundaries rather than using nationalism to create a political state.

The fact that, as Kohn, claims political structure is required for nationalism to develop is clearly accurate to a certain extent, in that it was only after the clear formation of nation states in Europe, that nationalism became a crucial element in the functioning of these states. However, it does not sufficiently explain why some political parties within a political structure tried to promote nationalist sentiments more than their rivals. The British Union of Fascists attempted to draw on the strength of the public's feelings of being British and therefore different from people of other nationalities. The party managed to gain an official membership of 50,000 people, within two years of its formation, this suggests that there some call for a nationalist party in Britain.[20] The party initially tried to garner support across the nation by encouraging people to follow them for the good of the culture of Great Britain and the individuals within those lands. In the latter years of the party's existence, they began to lean more and more towards racial nationalist rhetoric rather than cultural, as anti-Semitic

[19] Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism,* 2.
[20] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 577.

propaganda was pumped out in large quantities in what seems to have been an extreme attempt to resurrect its waning support and possibly create alliances with fascist parties in continental Europe.[21] If there had been no solid political structure in place, however, it would have been almost impossible for Mosley and the British Union of Fascists to even conceive of increasing their support through nationalist ideas. A clear political structure is therefore essential for the development and implementation of nationalist ideas.

Ernest Gellner is another well-respected philosopher and academic who over the past few decades contributed a great deal to the debate on nationalism. Gellner's opinion differs from Renan and Kohn as he states that nationalism is essentially a political principle which has its focus on culture as being the primary social factor that binds otherwise different individuals together into a cohesive group.[22] He does, however, agree with Renan and Kohn that a similar way of life and background to other people in the same geographical region and common sense of identity, makes it easier for different people to classify themselves with others as being from the same particular group or nation.

A point that Gellner tried to stress very strongly in his work, is that he felt that nationalism is an occurrence which is inextricably linked to the development of the modern society. He agreed with Kohn in that he believed that nationalism can only develop when there is a strong political structure in place, where power is controlled by a single centralised government.[23] He argued that the politically centralised nature of modern nations allows a sense of similarity to develop between the people who are under the influence of, and controlled by this power. For Gellner, the key factor that allowed this to happen was the industrialisation of many nations across Europe and the increased technological advancements that went with it. As the world became increasingly industrialised and technology improved, Gellner argues that the need and opportunity for a greater number of people to receive a high level of education arose, and that this in turn gave more people

[21] Richard Thurlow, 'Developing British Fascist Interpretation of Race, Culture and Evolution' in Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan (eds.), *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain* (London 2004) 66-82, there 66-67.
[22] Gellner, *Nationalism*, 3-4.
[23] Gellner, 'Nationalism', *Theory and Society* 10, 753-754.

from various classes of society the capabilities to undertake higher skilled jobs. This also meant that people had to cooperate with a wider number of other individuals on a regular basis. They had the skills and contacts, which meant that they could move anywhere in the country and still find work; they had become vocationally mobile.[24] According to Gellner, this increased the interaction between individuals and made the feeling of sharing a common bond, much more likely to develop, than it would have done before industrialisation, which in turn heightened the chances of nationalist feelings being created.

This knowledge that people from various parts of the country had the same cultural background and similar feelings of identity to each other was crucial to the British Union of Fascists' hopes in developing a strong support base and encouraged it to put great emphasis on nationalist propaganda. It meant that there was now a possibility of gaining the support of people from anywhere in Britain. Due to the increased levels of industrialisation and improvements in communication, there was also no difficulty in getting its ideas heard, and the British Union of Fascists publications read very quickly across the country. Although another possibility for the mass support in certain areas could have been that there was a large amount of unemployment, thus making some cities a fertile breeding ground for nationalist ideas and consequently an ideal place for the British Union of Fascists to look for support.[25] This could explain why the British Union of Fascists managed to gain pockets of support in some of the largest and most industrialised cities in Great Britain, and particularly in England, with London and the cities of Yorkshire and Lancashire being the places where they were most popular.[26] In 1935, there were an estimated 1,000 members in the cities of Leeds and Hull, with a further 1,500 in Manchester.[27] This supports the theory proposed by Gellner that industrialisation is one of the key factors in the development of nationalist sentiments in modern societies throughout Europe. It also suggests that not only did industrialisation increase the likelihood of a cultural homogeneity evolving, but also made it

[24] Gellner, 'Nationalism', 755-757.
[25] Phillip Morgan, *Fascism in Europe 1919-1945* (London 2003) 96-98.
[26] Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 224-225.
[27] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 587-588.

much easier for the communication and organisation of a large number of people throughout an entire nation. Without these developments, nationalism would have been much less likely to be created, or pose any real significance. It would have been far more difficult to create a numerous and structurally sound political organisation like the British Union of Fascists, which did not have the backing and assistance of the nation's central government, without industrialisation and major technological advancements.

One of the most recognised and respected writers on the subject of nationalism in recent years is the historian Benedict Anderson. He is best known for his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, which has had a major impact on the most recent debates about how nationalism can develop into a government challenging and widespread force. Anderson's ideas bear a strong similarity to those introduced by Renan many years before, and appear to have been based on and developed from these thoughts, where the emphasis of nationalism is on the sense of having something in common with people of a similar culture and historical background. This is what Anderson refers to as being an imagined political community. It is where people who make up a single nation, feel that they have much in common with all the other people in this particular community, even though they will only ever meet a very small number of this group and will never actually know how similar they are to the majority of people that they consider themselves to have an affinity to.[28] This suggests that nationalist movements tend to be based largely on a sense of feeling, which groups people perceive themselves to be in and what they believe makes them feel similar to others within this imagined community.

Anderson's take on nationalism makes for a very interesting read and is a highly useful study. Unfortunately, his work is not entirely convincing when trying to understand the form of nationalism that was prevalent in British fascist parties before the outbreak of the Second World War. The British Union of Fascists certainly proclaimed in its publications and propaganda that it had a great deal in common with people who believed that the interests of the British people should come before anything else. However, its political ideas and views

[28] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 15-16.

for the future were far more radical, and vastly different to that of the majority of the population. The British Union of Fascists had significant similarities with other political parties abroad. These included Hitler's National Socialist German Worker's Party (NSDAP) and Benito Mussolini's National Fascist Party At least to a certain extent the British Union of Fascists had a feeling of communion with them. There was a clear distinction to Hitler's organisation, as it was national socialist rather than fascist, which meant that the Nazi's put much greater emphasis on race and the supposed superiority of the Germany people.[29] It would appear therefore that the feelings of nationalism in the members of the British Union of Fascists were on two separate but interwoven feelings of kinship. There was clearly a strong identity with the British nation and the idea of being British, yet there was certainly also a feeling of connection among the leaders at least with far-right movements across continental Europe. The British Union of Fascists political beliefs therefore meant that its feelings of a common identity should be considered to be on a much broader scale than being simply on a British basis.

Eric Hobsbawm, a renowned British Marxist historian, has along with Gellner and Anderson, been greatly involved in the more recent debates about the emergence of nationalism as an extensive phenomenon throughout the world. The opinions put forward by Hobsbawm have a fair amount in common with many of the other scholars that this chapter has discussed previously. His theories are based firmly around the idea that nations and nationalism are created when political thoughts converge with increased technological abilities at a time when a social transformation is occurring.[30] By this he means that with technological advancement and the ever increasing industrialisation of nations came the improvement of education for people from all classes of society, enabling them to have a greater awareness of the world around them. This in turn allowed the realisation that politics and political movements might allow changes to be made to improve their way of life in times of unhappiness and depression. Hobsbawm felt that when all these situations arose at the

[29] Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 74-76.
[30] Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780,* 10-11.

same time, the likelihood of nationalist movements developing became much higher than when only one or two of these factors were evident. [31]

According to Hobsbawm, a major factor in the development of nationalism in the last century was the First World War: 'The chickens of World War I are coming home to roost'.[32] With this statement Hobsbawm suggested that the collapse of major empires in 1917 and 1918 allowed smaller groups of people to demand to now be part of a new nation that was made up of people of their own ethnic background, culture and language who they felt a very close bond with because of all their national traits. He believes that people now wanted to be part of an autonomous region that was made up of and ruled by people who shared their own feelings of common identity. Years of domination for a lot of ethnic groups was now potentially over with the collapse of empires such as the House of Habsburg and the Ottomans and the creation of new smaller nations with the Treaty of Versailles. However, as Hobsbawm intimated, this in turn has been the cause of many of the more recent conflicts. The impact of the events that occurred during and after the First World War have had an everlasting impression on the history of nations and feelings of national identity and will most likely continue to do so in the years to come.[33]

Hobsbawm's arguments are clearly valid. However, the First World War cannot be the most significant factor in the development of nationalism, as rising feelings of nationalism was one of the key factors that led to the outbreak of the First World War itself. Tensions had been growing for a number of years as ethnic minorities in major Empires and small nations were beginning to challenge the might of the once powerful Habsburg and Ottoman Empire whose powers had begun to wane dramatically in the early part of the twentieth century. Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro amongst others had increasing desires to expand their territories and elevate their nation to a position of greater power and influence.[34] In Western Europe, France was still bearing a certain amount of ill-feeling towards Germany as well

[31] Idem, 13-15.
[32] Hobsbawm and Kertzer, 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today', 5.
[33] Idem, 3-5.
[34] James Joll, *Europe Since 1870: An International History* (St. Ives 1990) 171 -172.

after their defeat to the latter in the Franco-Prussian war, which resulted in Germany's confiscation of the regions Alsace and Lorraine which France firmly believed was rightfully French territory.[35] This series of nationalist disagreements across Europe ultimately led to the outbreak of the First World War. This in turn created a large number of smaller ethnic minorities who were no longer controlled by a vast Empire, which provided a ripe a fertile breeding ground for further nationalist sentiments which continue to cause conflict in the world today.

The timing of the emergence of the British Union of Fascists as a political force is concurrent with the ideas of nationalism put forward by Hobsbawm. Oswald Mosley formed the party in the years that followed the conclusion of the First World War, when the majority of the nations that had been involved in the conflict were undergoing a period of political and social change.[36] Many countries were suffering an economic depression and the governments were battling to maintain their nation's stability. It was the combining of these factors that led to the creation of fascist movements across Europe. There was much disillusionment towards the effectiveness and ability of a democratic government to successfully bring their countries out of the economic crisis and into a new era of prosperity.[37] Britain at this time was a nation that had voting rights extended to the vast majority of its population, which meant there was an outlet for people to use their newly discovered political freedom to create social transformation that would help to improve their own situations.[38] This meant that parties like the British Union of Fascists believed that they might now have the capacity to use ideas of British nationalism to gain a significant enough following that could force the end to the democratic government and take control of the nation as the political power in a new corporate and autocratic state.

The study of Mosley and the British Union of Fascists has steadily become more widespread and significant. It has gradually increased in popularity as a topic that requires

[35] Joll, *Europe Since 1870*, 172-174.
[36] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 126-127.
[37] Blinkhorn, *Fascism and the Right in Europe*, 61-64.
[38] Susan Bassnett, *Britain at the turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Amsterdam 2001) 40-42.

investigating and studying at an academic level, with its uniqueness and importance being given greater acknowledgement. Initially, Mosley's party received little interest as an academic subject, due to its failure and relative insignificance as a fascist organisation compared to the Nazi's and Mussolini's Italian government. However, these topics were rapidly exhausted and it was realised that studying smaller fascist party's like the British Union of Fascist's in countries like Great Britain would add greater depth to the subject. At the time when the British Union of Fascists was active there was little literature being produced about them, there was only the propaganda that they themselves were producing on a regular basis to try to increase their support or conflicting publications by their opposition such as communist parties and Jewish groups. These people considered the British Union of Fascists to be their enemy and felt that Mosley and his followers were deeply anti-Semitic.

In the early years of the British Union of Fascists existence, there had been little or no open anti-Semitic rhetoric coming from the party. There did not seem to be any apparent desire for the party to try to emulate the exact ideology of Nazi Germany, Europe's most powerful fascist nation, by going down this route. It appeared that Mosley was keen to promote a distinctly different form of fascism that he felt was appropriate for Great Britain. Initially, the British Union of Fascists was eager to promote the idea of uniting Britain as a nation that put the interest of the British people above anything else. It would not concern itself with any events that were occurring outside of Europe unless it had a direct impact on Great Britain. Mosley stated that Britain should not be involved in any military conflict unless the welfare of the nation and lives of the British people were endangered. The British Union of Fascists argued that they were unconcerned with people's ethnicity and religious beliefs as long as they believed in putting the welfare of Great Britain first.[39] This implies that the British Union of Fascists was fully intent on promoting nationalism as a political tool on the basis of a shared culture and geographic situation, rather than on the grounds of a particular and

[39] Stephen Cullen, 'The Development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists, 1932-40', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, Vol. 22 (1987) 115-136, there 118-120.

clearly defined ethnicity of the British population. However, as the years progressed, the propaganda produced by the British Union of Fascists seemed to become increasingly hostile to the British Jewish population. By April 1936, Mosley announced a change to the party's name. It would now be officially known as The British Union of Fascists and National Socialists.[40] This alteration in name seems to be a clear indication that Mosley was attempting to align himself more closely to Nazi Germany. At this point in time Mosley's policies were taking a strong anti-Semitic approach. This suggests that with Nazi Germany's increasing power and influence in Europe, the British Union of Fascists was trying to seize its opportunity to make a significant ally. Later that same month, Mosley dispatched his wife, Lady Diana Mosley to Germany in the hope of securing major financial support from the Nazi Party.[41] This suggests that the change of the party name and the ever growing hostility towards the Jewish population may have been at least partly, a single-minded attempt to gain funding and a powerful ally, rather than strictly a policy of gaining support through the promotion of nationalism on an ethnic basis.

After the British Union of Fascists had been disbanded in 1940 and the Second World War had come to its conclusion in 1945, very little was written about either the party or Mosley. This may have been down to the fact that the idea of fascism at this time was utterly despised and people wanted to ignore the fact that Britain had ever had any affiliation at all with a movement that was generally considered to be brutal and barbaric.[42] The first widely read book on the topic was the autobiography of Mosley himself, first published in 1968, which detailed his entire life until that point including his time in charge of the British Union of Fascists.[43] There seemed to have been a great deal of fascination with the fascist leader of Great Britain and his life story was actually well received, as many people were keen to see his take on the events of his life.[44] The book that followed it a few years later, however, a

[40] Jones, Mosley, 113.
[41] Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 371-372.
[42] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 1-2.
[43] Oswald Mosley, *My Life* (London 1968).
[44] John Newsinger, 'Blackshirts, Blueshirts and the Spanish Civil War', *The Historical Journal* Vol. 44, No. 3, (2001) 825-844, there 827-828.

biography written by Robert Skidelsky caused a great deal of resentment and instigated many academic responses and criticisms of the work, for the way it seemed to sympathise with and justify Mosley's actions. It seemed to be accepted that Mosley would defend himself, but unacceptable for an apparently neutral writer to do this also. Since then there has been an increasing number of essays and books written about the topic. Two of the most comprehensive and acknowledged books on the subject have been written by Martin Pugh and Stephen Dorril respectively. This chapter now investigates how the attitudes of authors towards Mosley and the British Union of Fascists have changed and developed over time up to the modern day and how their motives for writing about the topic differ greatly from each other.

The first person to undertake the challenge to write in any detail about Mosley or the British Union of Fascists after the First World War turned out to be the man at the centre of the movement, Oswald Mosley himself. In 1968 he published his autobiography detailing his entire life from childhood up to the moment of writing and even including his plans for the future. Mosley's autobiography understandably seems to have been written to justify the actions that he took during his life and to defend himself from criticism and contradict claims made about him by his opponents. He strongly refutes the claim that he or the British Union of Fascists were anti-Semitic and points out that the Jews had never been mentioned in public rallies or meetings organised by the party until 1934.[45] It is his assertion that the only reason that they had been perceived as hostile to Jews up until that point, was because of the actions of other fascists and national socialists in Europe. Mosley admits that he admired both Hitler and Mussolini and they were they had risen to power and tried to turn their nations into fascist states. However, he claims that he was critical of Hitler's treatment of the Jews before the war Mosley, but thought it was better not to be openly critical of Germany as he did not want to provoke a conflict between them and Britain.[46] Mosley later states that the only reason he was against Jews openly after 1934, was because in his opinion they were

[45] Mosley, *My Life*, 281-284.
[46] Mosley, *My Life,* 307-309.

against fascism and therefore against Britain. It would be impossible for him to be racist due to the fact that he was desperate to uphold and maintain the British Empire and all the different nationalities and races that were incorporated in that.[47] This shows that Mosley is clearly trying to prove that ethnicity played no role in his policies or the form of nationalism that his party was attempting to generate and that it merely opposed anyone whose priorities conflicted his ideas of fighting for the interests of Britain. However, as Mosley's autobiography was written after his fascist party had failed and the atrocities the Jewish people had suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany had come to life, it is natural that he would want to distance himself from Hitler's party. His autobiography was a medium in which, he could use to paint himself in a positive light for the media and give justifications for the actions he took during the inter-war years, even if they may not have been completely truthful.

The arguments put forward in *My Life* appear to be accurate at least to the extent of Mosley not publicly opposing the Jewish people due to the fact that they were ethnically not British or because they adhered to Judaism. In 1938, at the time when the British Union of Fascists and its leader were being attacked and criticised for their apparent anti-Semitic attitude and policies, Mosley produced a short book, which outlined why he was opposed to Britain's Jewish population. He stated: 'We do not attack Jews on account of their religion, for our principle is complete religious toleration, and we certainly do not wish to persecute them on account of their race, for we dedicate ourselves to service of an Empire which contains many different races and any suggestion of racial persecution would be detrimental to the Empire we serve. Our quarrel with the Jewish interests is that they have constituted themselves a state within the nation, and have set the interests of their co-racialists at home and abroad above the interest of the British State'.[48] This paragraph clearly supports the arguments that Mosley was making in his autobiography, that his opposition to the Jews was based on their decision to put other Jewish people abroad ahead of the interests of Great Britain, rather

[47] Mosley, *My Life*, 281-283.
[48] Oswald Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live: British Union Policy* (London 1938) 42.

than because he believed they were an inferior race. However, it may be that he was trying to convince people even in 1938 that supporting the British Union of Fascists did not necessarily mean that you had to be racist or harbour hatred towards Jews. It could have been that he was merely making this statement to try to avoid generating negative publicity and alienating potential supporters. However, the statement evidently shows that the promoting of British interests was at the heart of the form of nationalism that Mosley was using to try to increase the British Union of Fascists' support.

The next comprehensive work concerning either the British Union of Fascists or Mosley was produced in 1975 by the British economic historian Robert Skidelsky. Titled *Oswald Mosley*, this was a biography detailing the life and times of the fascist leader. It is a hugely significant account, as it was the first major work written about the subject, by somebody who was not deeply involved in the British Union of Fascists or their opposition.[49] The biography received criticism from many different areas, as it was considered that Skidelsky had taken a sympathetic view to Mosley by supporting much of what he had written in his autobiography and that he even justified the anti-Semitic sentiments that Mosley used. Some historians including Stephen Dorril claimed that Skidelsky effectively blamed the British Union of Fascists' hostility towards the Jews on the Jewish population itself. Dorril argues that the root of the conflict between the Jewish population and the British Union of Fascists was caused by the Jews natural animosity towards fascist parties at this period of time, this meant that they were instantly opposed to Mosley and it was this that caused the tension between the two groups to intensify to such a great extent.[50] Skidelsky's book created a great deal of interest in the British Union of Fascists simply due to the controversy it caused and therefore prompted such a huge amount of subsequent work on the topic. For this reason, along with the autobiography of Mosley, Skidelsky's work is one of the most important publications relating to the British Union of Fascists.

[49] Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley,* 1-3.
[50] Dorril, *Blackshirt*, xi-xii.

Skidelsky himself refused to accept the criticism that his book received and claimed that his intention when he set about writing it was to describe what happened merely as a biographer and not as a prosecutor. He states that his intention was to make an effort to explain the motives behind the events that occurred rather than to judge those motives.[51] This approach was condemned by many historians such as Vernon Bogdanor, who argued that Skidelsky should have used the evidence he described to make judgements on Mosley's actions and make the necessary criticisms of him as a result of this.[52] However, if the topic Skidelsky was writing about had been less controversial than the subject of Mosley and British fascism was at this period of time, it is unlikely that there would have been such an outcry about Skidelsky's failure to condemn the actions of Mosley. The majority of authors who had written about fascism in Britain up until this point had generally made their disapproval and disgust towards it very evident. Therefore, due to the fact that Skidelsky was not prepared to do this and instead decided to simply explain the motives behind the policies of the British Union of Fascists and Mosley without judgement and condemnation, it seems unfair that he received such wide-ranging criticism. However, it should have been possible for Skidelsky to also explain the motives behind why Mosley's extreme right-wing activities caused so much negative publicity during the inter-war years and was continuing to do so when he published his biography in 1975. However, Skidelsky argues that the reason he didn't do this was because he wanted to avoid suggesting that British Fascism was inherently evil and allow readers to draw their own conclusions from the facts that he presented.[53]

Following the controversy of Skidelsky's biography, Mosley and the British Union of Fascists have become a more popular subject to study leading to an ever growing number of books and articles being written. In the 25 years that followed several authors including Richard Thurlow, Kenneth Lunn, Thomas Linehan and Julie Gottlieb all had books published directly

[51] Robert Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism' in Kenneth Lunn and Richard C. Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain* (London 1980) 78-99, there 78-79.
[52] Vernon Bogdanor, 'A Deeply Flawed Hero (Review of *Oswald Mosley* by Robert Skidelsky)', *Encounter* Vol. 44 No. 6 (1975) 69-77, there 69-71.
[53] Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, 17-19.

relating to this subject.[54] However, since 2003 there has been a rapid increase in the number of comprehensive publications that have been produced in just a short period of time entirely Mosley, the British Union of Fascists or both. Martin Pugh, Stephen Dorril and Nigel Jones are just a few people that have broached the topic in the last few years.[55] It is unclear if there is a specific reason for this sudden upsurge of interest. The death of Lady Diana Mosley in 2003 and the subsequent hostility towards her in the British media is certain to have had an impact on the number of academics wanting to write about fascism.[56] Lady Mosley maintained her fascist beliefs for her entire life and refused to back down on any of the comments she made about her fondness for Hitler and other members of the Nazi party. Many people in the media consequently showed very little regret that she had passed away. Andrew Roberts, a historian and journalist for *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote that 'Diana Mosley took her disgusting, unchanged views to her grave'.[57] This demonstrates just how strongly people are still against the idea of fascism and anti-Semitism being present in Britain. It is easy to imagine how this kind of reaction to one individual's death could have caused a surge of interest in the studies of Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists.

Another reason for increased interest in the study of British fascism is possibly related to the gradually rising popularity of extreme right-wing parties in Great Britain, such as the British National Party and the English Defence League. The presence of active extreme right parties such as these will inevitably have caused a greater number of people to look to the past to investigate the relationship between previous fascist parties and those of today, and has undoubtedly contributed to the resurgence of interest in the British Union of Fascists

[54] Richard C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London 1998); Kenneth Lunn and Richard C. Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain* (London 1980); Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan (eds.), *The Culture of Fascism*; Thomas P. Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester 2000); Thomas P. Linehan, *East London for Mosley: British Union of Fascists* (London 1996); Jan Dalley, *Diana Mosley: A Life* (London 2000); Graham Macklin, *Very Deeply Dyed in Black: Sir Oswald Mosley and the Resurrection of British Fascism* (London 2007); Mosley, Nicholas, *Rules of the Game; Beyond the Pale: Memoirs of Sir Oswald Mosley and Family* (Chicago 1991).

[55] Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London 2006), Stephen Dorril, *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London 2007), Nigel Jones, *Mosley: Life and Times* (London 2004).

[56] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 2-3.

[57] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3595037/Diana-Mosley-unrepentantly-Nazi-and-effortlessly-charming.html viewed on (07/03/11).

over the past decade. However, the majority of authors who have written about Mosley or inter-war British fascism, such as Stephen Dorril, still state that the main reason that they have written their book is in response to one particular publication, *Oswald Mosley* by Skidelsky.[58] These factors combined with the growing popularity of right-wing parties and nationalism in Europe in particular is therefore responsible for the regular scholarly additions that have been made to this debate in recent years.

2.3. Conclusion

This chapter discussed some of the various theories of nationalism that have been developed over the years. Each scholar presents a different idea as to what they perceive to be the most important and essential factors that contribute to the rise of nationalism in the modern world. However, they all seem to agree that a particular group of people must have the sense of a common identity between them, whether this is down to the history that they share, the physical geographical area that they come from, the language that they speak or most likely all of these factors. National sentiments can only develop between a distinct group of people, if they become aware of a certain feeling of kinship with other individuals, regardless of whether they know them personally or never meet them at all. It is apparent from the theories that have previously been discussed, that rising nationalist feelings are often caused by a political party or entity that uses the promotion of the sense of commonality between a group of people to unite them together in support of a particular cause. In this sense these historians agree that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, as it could only develop under the modern political state structure.

Nationalism was integral to the policies and actions of the British Union of Fascists and its use of it was unique to the party. However, it bore significant similarities to that of other fascist organisations that were operating in Europe during these inter-war years. This emergence of fascism throughout this period brought the ideas of nationalism to the forefront

[58] Dorril, *Blackshirt,* 1-3.

of the political world. This thesis uses elements of the theories of nationalism put forward by Renan, Gellner and Anderson to investigate the role nationalism played in the policies of the British Union of Fascists, which therefore shows the evident similarities and differences that it had to fascist movements elsewhere in Europe.

Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists had their own particular brand of nationalism, which was at the core of the party's aims and policies. A combination of the theories of Renan, Gellner and Anderson seems to be the most accurate to explain the form of nationalism that was promoted by the British Union of Fascist and therefore the most useful to use in this thesis. The British Union of Fascists put a strong emphasis on the fact that Great Britain was an island, separate to the rest of Europe and that the British were therefore a united group of people, a notion that draws on some of the ideas of nationalism by Renan and Anderson. The latter was keen to suggest that the sense of belonging to an imagined community was key to the development of nationalism. The British Union of Fascists indeed publicised the idea that everyone who lived in Great Britain was British and therefore part of the same community and should unite together accordingly. Gellner's ideas are relevant as well, as he stressed that nationalism was a political principle and also a construction of modern society and industrialisation. This ties in with the British Union of Fascists' use of nationalism as well, because they clearly used the idea of nationalism as a political tool to try to gather widespread support.

Chapter 3

Leaders and Followers – A Movement for the Disillusioned?

3.1 Introduction

After the end of the First World War many European countries plunged into a period of economic and political instability. The costs of the war led to severe repercussions and tension between nations and also within individual nations. This left many people disillusioned with their democratic governments and in many cases caused them to begin to look elsewhere for an alternative strong and powerful organisation that would be capable of bringing them out of the troubled times that they were facing and back into an age of economic prosperity and stability.[59] It had become difficult for the general population of Europe to trust their particular governments that had somehow allowed the previously inconceivable four years of mass industrialised destruction in the heart the continent to take place.[60] These factors combined in many countries to create sentiments that led to both fascist and nationalist mentalities arising. There was a growing belief that democracy had run its course and was swiftly becoming a thing of the past. It became apparent in many countries that the route back to wealth and stability lay with an autocratic and authoritarian power in charge that put national interests above any other concerns; this opened the door for many people to take steps down revolutionary and extremist paths.[61]

The British Union of Fascists formed in 1932, was born out of this widespread disillusionment in Great Britain. This was the same year that unemployment had reached its peak in Great Britain, with 22.1 per cent of the population being registered as out of work.[62]

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[59] See Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (London 1995); Martin Kitchen, *Europe Between the Wars: A Political History* (Harlow 2006); Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London 1999); Dr. Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930's* (London 2001).
[60] Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 28-30.
[61] H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'The Phenomenon of Fascism', in S. J. Woolf (ed.), *Fascism in Europe* (London 1981) 22-38, there 20-22.
[62] House of Commons Library, London, Research Paper 99/111, 'A Century of Change: Trends in UK Statistics since 1900' 21st December 1999, 24.

The party was formed by people who felt that the government was entirely to blame for all the nation's problems and the suffering that had been caused. This in turn led them to feel that democracy must be brought to an end in order for the country to once again rebuild itself as a powerful nation.[63] As far as they were concerned democracy had failed the nation and would never be able to restore economic prosperity to Great Britain. Democracy was most definitely the past, fascism the future, so they thought.[64] The major challenge for the British Union of Fascists was trying to bring down a national government, which despite its difficulties remained stable and in control making it very difficult for an extremist party to pose a serious threat.[65] Despite the high level of unemployment in the year the party was formed, it steadily began to improve year on year and by 1937 it had reduced to just 10.8 per cent. Although it rose to 13.8 per cent in 1938, the outbreak of the Second World War the following year completely solved any employment difficulties.[66]

This chapter examines who the leaders of the British Union of Fascists were and what their reasoning for joining the party was, it identifies which sectors of society became members of the party and what were they hoping to achieve by doing so. The party generated support from the wealthy as well as the working class and there were members in the rural areas as well as in large cities. It looks at the ways in which nationalism and nationalist sentiments were used by the political leaders to try to increase the British Union of Fascists popularity throughout the country and whether this was simply done to increase their number of followers or because it was firmly a part of the party's vision for the future. As the party had members from such a varied background, it is to be expected that this may have led to the individuals in the party having different aspirations This might be partly responsible for the party only being in operation until 1940. Nationalism alone would have had difficulty in uniting such an eclectic mix of people into a cohesive movement with clearly defined and shared aims and expectations.

[63] Sir Oswald Mosley. 'Drastic Action or Disaster: Parliament Blethers While Industry Dies' *The Blackshirt,* February 1933.
[64] A. Raven Thompson, *The Coming Corporate State* (London, 1938) 1-3.
[65] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 315-316.
[66] W. R. Garside, *British Unemployment 1919-1939: A Study in Public Policy* (Cambridge 1990) Table 2, 5.

The British Union of Fascists considered itself to be a legitimate political party and as such aimed to be democratically voted into office or be invited to take power if Britain faced a severe social crisis.[67] To make either situation possible the organisation needed to develop a large amount of support across Great Britain and the party put a great deal of effort into trying to achieve this. However, neither of these events actually took place. The British Union of Fascists never actually stood for a general election, in 1935 they opted not to participate as the felt that they were not yet ready to realistically compete, but vowed that they would challenge the next time a general election was held. Unfortunately for the party, due to the outbreak of the Second World War, the next general election in Great Britain was not held until 1945, 5 years after the British Union of Fascists had ceased to exist.[68]

3.2. The Leaders

The British Union of Fascists was launched in October 1932 by Oswald Mosley who naturally became the party's leader and inspiration. There were 32 founding members who were from mixed backgrounds, although all were well educated and most had worked in political organisations before. The majority of these members joined the organisation out of a loyalty to Mosley, as they had worked alongside him in one of his previous roles. Many members came from right-wing parties that were in operation before Mosley. Mosley's first aim was to assimilate two of the largest fascist parties that were in existence in Britain at this time into the British Union of Fascists. The British Fascisti were formed in 1923 by a middle-class woman called Rotha Lintorn-Orman. She refused to become involved with Mosley at all as she claimed he was a socialist not a fascist. However the majority of the leading members opted to join the British Union of Fascists as it was considerably better organised,

[67] Julie Gottlieb, 'The Marketing of Megalomania: Celebrity, Consumption and the Development of Political Technology in the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, vol. 41 (2006) 35-55, there 40-41.

[68] Richard Thurlow 'The Failure of British Fascism' in Andrew Thorpe, *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter 2003) 67-84, there 75-78.

better funded and better led. Lintorn-Orman was an alcoholic and not an inspiring leader, consequently the British Fascisti's members dropped from a few thousand to less than 300 after the formation of the British Union of Fascists.[69] The second and smaller fascist party that Mosley incorporated into his party was the Imperial Fascist League created by Arnold Leese in 1929, which had a mere 500 members. Although once again the leader refused to join Mosley, the members saw that Leese's party was totally outclassed in terms of publicity and finances by the British Union of Fascists and so decided to throw in their lot with Mosley.[70] Others members came from left-wing parties, both groups were attracted by Mosley's ideas of combining patriotism with radical social economic reforms, such as the plan to turn Great Britain into a corporate state.[71] This bears a striking similarity with the leading members of Mussolini's fascist party, who had come from both sides of the political spectrum and were from a highly educated background and were also attracted to fascism by the same combination of nationalism and plans to restructure the economy.[72] This demonstrates the way that fascism could transcend the gap between left and right wing politics. The ideology behind it could appeal to both sides and consequently attracted potential leaders from various political backgrounds.

The party introduced itself to the British public with Mosley's self-penned 40,000 word manifesto, known as *The Greater Britain*.[73] Oswald Mosley himself came from a very wealthy and noble background, his family having been rich landowners in England for many centuries. Mosley held the title of the 6th Baron of Ancoats and was even a distant cousin to the mother of the British Queen Elizabeth II.[74] The British Union of Fascists' leader used a great deal of his inherited wealth to fund the party in order to try to turn them into a political party which could take control of the nation from the residing democratic government. He had already been a member of parliament for the Conservative party and then an officially

[69] David Stephen Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society, 1931-81*, (Manchester 1981) 29-31.
[70] Jeffrey Hamm, *Action Replay: An Autobiography of a British Fascist* (London 1983), 2-3.
[71] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 128.
[72] Joll, *Europe Since 1870*, 204-206.
[73] Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, (London 1932).
[74] Jones, *Mosley,* 1-6.

registered member of the labour party. Mosley, however, rapidly became disillusioned with all current British parties, as he felt that they were stagnant and filled with people who preferred talk to action. Therefore he developed a desire and determination to create his own new party based on fascist ideology.[75] Mosley toured Italy for several months in January 1932. Having met the Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini, he became convinced that fascism was the future. Consequently, the British Union of Fascists came into being shortly after.[76] This suggests that Mosley clearly did not need to involve himself in the rigours and criticism of leading the British Union of Fascists. He started the party because he felt that he could change his homeland for the better and make Great Britain a more prosperous, successful and stable nation than it was in 1932. Britain was just beginning to show signs of economic recovery in 1932 after years of depression but it had not yet reached the heights of Greta Britain before the economic collapse. There were still nearly 2.8 million people unemployed in Britain in 1932, a long way from the amount in 1929 when just 1.4 million people were out of work.[77] As he made clear in his autobiography *My Life*, the main reason that the British Union of Fascists were created, was in response to the fear that the government that had been elected into power in 1932 would only hasten the nation's decline and that something had to be done to prevent this.[78] Mosley would have used statements like this to try to instil fear in the British public and manipulate them into supporting his party. However, this clearly demonstrates that nationalism and the desire to improve Great Britain was at the heart of the reasons Mosley gave for the creation of the British Union of Fascists.

Other leading members of the British Union of Fascists included Robert Forgan, W.E.D. Allen, John Beckett, Ian Hope Dundas, A.K. Chesterton, Alexander Raven Thompson and the notoriously anti-Semitic William Joyce.[79] These figures held the key positions in Mosley's British Union of Fascists at various times in the party's eight year existence. These members came from very different backgrounds to each other and there

[75] Jones, *Mosley*, 52-55
[76] Dorril, Blackshirt, 191-192.
[77] H. W. Arndt, *The Economic Lessons of the Nineteen-Thirties: A Report* (London 1972) 128-132.
[78] Mosley, *My Life*, 239-240.
[79] Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain,* 66-68.

were a variety of different motives behind their individual decisions to join the party. Therefore, there were a number of different hopes and expectations for the party to accommodate. However, together they aimed to garner as much widespread support for the British Union of Fascists as they could, as they each felt very strongly about different elements of the party's policies. All of these men were from a relatively wealthy middle-class background. The British Union of Fascists would therefore transcend the social hierarchy to a certain extent as the majority of its popular support was in the poor working-class areas of Great Britain and less from the middle-class neighbourhood that the key individuals in the party hailed from.

Many of the leaders of the British Union of Fascists were former military or navy personnel who had spent many years abroad and who had become drawn into far-right politics through a combination of having developed deeply xenophobic attitudes whilst overseas, being appalled at the state of Great Britain when they returned to their country and the governments proposed plans to grant a certain amount of autonomy to India and other colonies of the British Empire. Many felt that Great Britain had dramatically changed socially and politically. They consequently believed that Britain's power in the world was beginning to wane drastically. Ian Hope Dundas and A.K. Chesterton came from a similar background to each other; both had previously seen active military service overseas. Hope Dundas was an ex-naval officer who became chief of staff of the British Union of Fascists Para-military wing, the Blackshirts.[80] Chesterton was a former army officer and alcoholic who had developed a strong racist and particularly anti-Semitic attitude, based on his belief that the Jews had an unhealthy influence on British society.[81] Having joined Mosley's party in 1933, Chesterton was swiftly promoted to become the Director of Publicity and Propaganda and later changed roles to take charge of editing one of the parties newspapers, *The Blackshirt*.[82] Another man who developed a fierce anti-Semitic attitude was the American born Irishman William Joyce. Having been raised as a Unionist in Ireland he moved to England to study at the University

[80] Cross, *The Fascists in Britain,* 212-215.
[81] Thurlow, *Fascism in* Britain, 73-74.
[82] David Baker, *Ideology of Obsession: A.K. Chesterton and British Fascism* (London 1996) 139-142.

of London and swiftly became embroiled in fascism. His hatred towards the Jewish community is thought to have been accentuated when he was attacked in his youth and given a disfiguring scar across his face by someone he considered to be Jewish communists, although there is no evidence to prove this, other that Joyce's opinion.[83] Joyce gained fame for his brilliance as an orator and was recruited as Director of Propaganda for the British Union of Fascists and later promoted to be Oswald Mosley's deputy. He was one of the key reasons that the party lurged dramatically towards anti-Semitism and National Socialism in the latter years of its existence. He regularly attacked the government and particularly Prime-Minister David Lloyd George for acknowledging any contribution made to British Society by the Jews.[84] After leaving the party, due to his belief that Mosley was not taking an aggressive enough stance towards, Joyce soon decided to move Germany to avoid being arrested by the British government and became infamous as Lord Haw-Haw, a broadcaster for German radio stations that was regularly aired in Great Britain, encouraging the population to surrender during the Second World War. These actions later led to Joyce being executed as a traitor to Great Britain, despite the fact that he was not a citizen of the United Kingdom.[85] Having men with such attitudes as leaders of a political organisation meant that the British Union of Fascists was always likely to go down a racist and anti-Semitic path, even if that was never the original intention. It was almost inevitable that they would attempt to use any power that they developed to abuse any group that they were prejudiced against.

Alongside these individuals who naturally aligned themselves with the far-right wing elements of the British political system, were a number of people who joined the British Union of Fascists from a more leftist background. Forgan, Beckett and Allen all emulated Mosley's move from being in the Labour Party to forming the British Union of Fascists. Robert Forgan was a close friend of Mosley and consequently allied himself to the British Union of Fascists' leader out of loyalty and friendship. However, after being the initial director

[83] Peter Martland, *Lord Haw Haw: The English Voice of Nazi Germany* (London 2003) 55-56.
[84] William Joyce, 'The World, The Flesh – and The Financial Democracy', *Action*, June 25th 1936.
[85] Martland, *Lord Haw Haw*, 1-8.

of organisation, Forgan quit the party in 1934 due to its gradual move towards anti-Semitism and National Socialism.[86] Allen was also a long-time friend of Mosley and was a leading member of the party for many years from the moment it was created. He had accompanied Mosley on his trip to Italy shortly before the foundation of the British Union of Fascists and was responsible for many of the party's publications, although he sometimes wrote under the pen name James Drennan.[87] John Beckett on the other hand, did not join the party until 1934 and became the director of both the party's regular publications *Blackshirt* and *Action*. Beckett was a former member of the Labour Party, but was swiftly convinced that the British Union of Fascists was the way forward for him. He was very comfortable with the party's change of policy after 1934 and bitterly resented the possibility that Britain might be dragged into a war with Germany to protect the Jewish population of Europe.[88] Beckett would eventually follow William Joyce when he left the British Union of Fascists into the newly created National Socialist League as they shared a similarly high level of hostility towards the Jews.[89]

This brief investigation into the background of key figures in the British Union of Fascists provides a useful insight into the different political and cultural views that would need to meld together in order to make the party a political success. As the majority of the organisation's leaders were from middle and upper class families, it may help to explain how this particular fascist party was able to develop a much greater level of support from this section of society in Great Britain than other fascist groups had previously managed to achieve. There were a number of prominent and wealthy figures in Great Britain who publicly declared their support for the British Union of Fascists at various points in the party's existence. This included Frank Cyril Tiarks, who was a director of the Bank of England, Geoffrey Dawson who was the editor of *The Times* newspaper and Lord Rothermere, the

[86] Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, 65-69.
[87] Stuart Rawnsley, 'The Membership of the British Union of Fascists', in Kenneth Lunn and Richard C. Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain* (London 1980), 150-166, there 150-154.
[88] John Beckett, 'Why I Joined the Blackshirts', *The Fascist Week*, March 2nd – 8th 1934.
[89] Thomas P. Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester 2000) 98-101.

owner of several newspapers.[90] This backing, combined with the disillusioned working class populace who were drawn to the party through offers of employment in the Blackshirts or enchanted by the oratory skills and charisma of Mosley and Joyce explains how the British Union of Fascist gained far more supporters than previous fascist organisations. Mosley's Party boasted 50,000 members significantly more than the few hundred in the Imperial Fascists league or few thousand in the British Fascisti.[91] The limited success that the British Union of Fascists managed to achieve was therefore down to the fact that it appeared to appeal to many sectors of the British society.

3.3. The Supporters

The level of support the British Union of Fascists garnered varied greatly over the eight years of the party's existence. This was partly due to the gradual alterations in the party's policies over the years, which made various people change their minds as to whether they felt that they should support Mosley's organisation or not. Initially, the British Union of Fascists tried to attract followers with its ideas for economic and social reforms, but this was soon replaced with an emphasis on anti-Semitism and finally National Socialism. These changes both alienated some potential followers and convinced others to join simultaneously. However, one of the key factors in the number of supporters that the British Union of Fascists was able to call upon, depended to a large extent on the public perception of whether the party was a respectable organisation that was attempting to achieve great things for the good of the British people, or whether it was an aggressive, violent movement which was only likely to bring harm and disorder to the nation. As the movement progressed, it became more and more associated with being a dangerous, racist group of thugs rather than being a respectable political party that could be conscientiously followed by upstanding

[90] Jones, *Mosley*, 86-94.
[91] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 577, Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur:* 29-31. Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 203-204.

members of the population.[92] This meant that the British press and media had a great influence over the quantity of their support by either promoting or lambasting the British Union of Fascists. This does appear to be hugely significant, as the party seemed to be at its most popular throughout the country when it was receiving public support and encouragement from certain newspapers and their respective owners.[93]

Due to the significant skills of persuasion that the media wielded over the public, Harold Sidney Harmsworth, 1st Viscount Rothermere, was a very valuable and influential supporter of the British Union of Fascists and Oswald Mosley. Rothermere was the owner and editor of several daily newspapers, including the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Record* and *Sunday Dispatch*. Already a friend of Hitler and Mussolini, Rothermere closely followed the career of Mosley and his party and publicly declared his support and admiration on many occasions up until June 1934, when he decided it would be in his better interests to withdraw his backing.[94] The influence that his support had, was abundantly clear, the number of paying members of the British Union of Fascists jumped from around 17,000 to nearer 50,000 by 1934 alone and then rapidly declined again by the beginning of 1935, after Lord Rothermere had distanced himself and his newspapers from an allegiance with the party.[95] Public support by national newspapers gave the general British public the impression that the British Union of Fascists was a respectable party that would have a significant role to play in the future of Great Britain. However, after violence and rioting broke out between fascists and anti-fascists at a rally organised by the British Union of Fascists at Olympia, London, in June 1934, Lord Rothermere decided to withdraw his support from the party. The way the Blackshirts, the Para-military wing of the British Union of Fascists behaved at this event, had a very negative effect on the perception of the party in the eyes of the majority of the population, as it was felt that they confronted their opponents with excessive and

[92] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 586.
[93] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 576-577.
[94] Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 277-283.
[95] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 576-578.

unnecessary levels of violence.[96] It meant that the majority of press reports and media coverage that Mosley's group received after the event was much more negative and critical, which turned out to be highly detrimental to the party's hopes of achieving a nationwide following. The relative economic improvement after 1935, and the decreasing levels of unemployment until 1938, when they rose again, combined with the withdrawal of media support to reduce the number of people who supported the party.[97]

The British Union of Fascists were clearly at the height of their power in 1934, when they had the support of the *Daily Mail* and Lord Rothermere's other editorial publications. However, it is not yet apparent as to where in Great Britain the majority of the British Union of Fascists followers came from, whether it was the poor working class or the comfortably wealthy middle-classes and if the organisation was only popular in the major cities or also in the more rural areas of the British countryside. When the party was established in 1932, its policies were based around the ideas of economic reforms and trying to return the country to prosperity after a number of years of economic stagnation. The British Union of Fascists stated that the only way that Great Britain could be returned to a prosperous and powerful nation would be by turning it into a corporate state with a fascist government in charge, overseeing the reforms. This meant that the British Union of Fascists immediately attempted to appeal to members of the working class population who were suffering economic hardship and felt that the government had not done enough to improve their situation.[98] The policy of trying to gain support based on the ideas of improving the economic situation clearly shows that the British Union of Fascists targeted the working classes as being the most likely to give them their support in huge numbers. However, the working class population were interested in any organisation that promised to improve the economic situation in their favour. They were not necessarily concerned with whether this involved the introduction of corporatism or an alternative system.

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[96] William D. Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the democracies could not have saved more Jews from the Nazis* (London 2002) 59-62.
[97] Michael Kitson and Jonathon Michie, *The Political Economy of Competitiveness: Essays on employment, public policy and corporate performance* (London 2000) 73-74.
[98] Raven Thompson, *The Coming Corporate State*, 4-8.

It is apparent that Mosley's organisation was most popular in major cities such as London, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and to a lesser extent Brighton, Birmingham and Wolverhampton, although they never had a membership of more than 50,000 people at any one time.[99] 50,000 people is a very small number, when the population of the United Kingdom in 1930's was between 46 and 48 million people, rendering the level of support that the British Union of Fascists managed to achieve as fairly minimal.[100] However, the party managed to generate a reasonable amount of followers amongst the agricultural workers and farmers in the countryside. It appears that its ideas for improving the country depended on which sections of the nation it addressed. The British Union of Fascists tended to put great emphasis on different aspects of their policies depending on their audience at any particular time. In Northern England and particularly the counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire, the organisation concentrated on securing the support of factory workers, mainly in the cotton and textile industries. They were able to achieve this at least to a certain extent by promising to secure employment for people whose jobs were under threat by saying that they would import fewer goods from abroad. The British Union of Fascists assured the labourers that if they were running the country they would encourage greater levels of manufacturing in Great Britain, in order to reduce the need to purchase foreign products.[101] This shows that not only was Mosley's party trying to interest the working class population on promises of economic security, but they were also attempting to appeal to their sense of British identity and the idea that in Great Britain the British people's interests should come first and foremost.

Nearly half the members of the British Union of Fascists' members were from London and particularly the East End. The party concentrated the majority of its marches and rallies in this area after Lord Rothermere withdrew his support in 1934. Mosley felt that he could build a solid base for his party in this region and then try to expand to other areas of London

[99] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 581-582.
[100] http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/rp99/rp99-111.pdf viewed on 02/06/11.
[101] Joanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London 1994) 198-201.

and then the rest of Great Britain.[102] East London was one of the few places were the British union of Fascists actually competed against the other political parties in Great Britain, this was in the London Local Council elections of 1937. The party stood for election in three constituencies, Bethnal Green North-East, Limehouse and Shoreditch. However, the party only gained a total of just under 8,000 votes, with an average of 18 per cent of the votes cast in each area.[103] The anti-Semitic rhetoric that the party turned to at the time was partly due to the fact that there was a large Jewish population in East London who was largely being used as a scapegoat for the unemployment that was being suffered in the area.[104] The level of unemployment in London throughout the years the British Union of Fascists' existed was estimated to have risen as high as 13.5 per cent, considerably more than it had been during the years before the economic depression, it was merely 5.6 per cent in both 1928 and 1929.[105] Strongholds for the party developed in the poorest neighbourhoods of this region in particular Stepney, Bethnal Green and Stoke Newington.[106] This partly explains why the party turned so dramatically anti-Semitic from 1935 onwards. It was attempting to consolidate and re-build its support and decided to start this in an area where it remained popular and wielded a certain amount of power. They felt that the most effective way to do this would be by verbally attacking and denouncing a group of people like the Jews who were already highly unpopular in the area because they were more affluent than the British working class.[107] Hatred towards the Jewish community gave the people in the area an extra incentive to unite behind Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, the only party who openly promised to oppose the Jewish population if they put Jewry ahead of Britain.[108] This appears to have been largely successful, as around 25,000 of the party's members were estimated to

[102] Linehan, *East London for Mosley,* 4-7.
[103] Robert Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order: A study of British Fascism* (London 1961) 281-282.
[104] A. Raven Thompson, 'The Highly-Skilled Jew', *The East London Pioneer*, December 5th 1936.
[105] W. R. Garside, *British Unemployment 1919-1939,* Table 4, 10.
[106] Linehan, *East London for Mosley* 9-11.
[107] Jerry White, *London in the 20th Century* (London 2008) 127-129.
[108] Mosley, *My Life*, 281-283.

have been from London in 1934 the year that the party had a total membership of 50,000 people.[109]

Although the majority of the support for the British Union of Fascists came from the big cities and particularly London, the party also managed to gather some support from the more rural areas of the country, where the poor economic situation at the time was threatening the livelihoods of many farmers. The British government was trying to re-introduce free trade, which had led to the dramatic decrease in the value of many crops, particularly corn.[110] Mosley tried to make sure that his party opposed all the small things that the farmers were feeling aggrieved about in order to gain their support and appreciation. A key example of this was his decision to openly and actively oppose the Tithe Law. This was a tax which meant that, all farmers had to make a payment to the Church of England or risk having their livestock and produce seized. It was a law that had been in place in Britain for centuries, farmers felt it should be abolished as the value of crops had reduced so drastically, however the government refused to give in to their demands. The British Union of Fascists actually sent members of the party to the lands of farmers who had refused to pay these taxes, to physically prevent any of their goods and property being confiscated. This enabled the British Union of Fascists to build up support throughout the rural counties particularly in South East England, with Dorset, Kent, Suffolk and Norfolk all becoming strong bases for the party.[111] This shows that the party was singling out certain sectors of the nation who they thought would be mostly likely to be susceptible to turning to Mosley because he was promising to protect their interests.

There is a key distinction between the age group of many of the members of the British Union of Fascists, compared to those in other political parties in Great Britain at the time. This seems to be due to a large extent with many young people in the country becoming disillusioned, particularly with Labour and the Conservatives. It was considered by many young people that the British Union of Fascists was an organisation for people of their

[109] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 599.
[110] Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 250-252.
[111] *Daily Mail* 6th July 1934.

age, who were eager, energetic and enthusiastic to change the country for the better.[112] It appeared to be a party without the stuffy, old-fashioned and relatively inactive nature of other organisations like the Conservative Party. The youth of Britain also saw opportunities in the British Union of Fascists. It was the only party where there was a good chance of rapidly being elevated to a key party role regardless of your age or experience. Mosley tried to build on this aspect to such an extent that the British Union of Fascists had organisations set up in many of the public schools across Britain in order to try to recruit members from a very early age.[113] This suggests that Mosley was hoping to instil the belief in his youthful supporters that his party was the future and they could very much be a part of it. This shows that the British Union of Fascists seemed to present a certain element of excitement for the public. It did something new and different and was breaking away from the slow and sterile movements of Labour and the Tories.

3.4. Conclusion

The British Union of Fascists deliberately targeted many areas of British society to try to increase its support. It specifically came up with policies that would attract different groups who had become disillusioned or felt they had been let down by the other political parties in the nation that had previously enjoyed their support. Anyone the British Union of Fascists felt would be easily tempted to break away from tradition to join a new organisation with alternative visions for their future became an object of its attentions in their hope of building a political organisation that was capable of taking control of the entire United Kingdom. Mosley and his party simultaneously tried to entice the middle class and the working class, farmers and city dwellers, right-wing and left-wing politicians and youngsters. Although this was definitely a very effective tactic to the extent that the British Union of Fascists did indeed gather members from all these areas of society, it was not quite enough. It appears that the

[112] *Daily Mail*, 25th April 1934.
[113] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 138-140.

support or criticism of the press played a crucial role in the level of support the British Union of Fascists was able to achieve. The party never managed to attract more than 50,000 members at any individual point in time. Even if this far exceeded the amount of people previous fascist parties in Britain had managed to attract, it was never going to be sufficient to challenge the Conservative or Labour parties for control of the nation.

The British Union of Fascist had ideas about nationalism at the root of all the policies it used to try to gain support. This stretched from their economic policies to its agricultural and overall policies. The party's idea of putting the interests of the British nation and the British people above foreign affairs that did not directly affect the nation was at the heart of all the rhetoric and arguments it made to attract support. The development of strong nationalist sentiments was required to keep the various sections of society working together for the success of the party. In a period of economic instability and depression, nationalism was the force that could drive ordinary citizens away from democracy and into the arms of fascism. In the period between the First and Second World War, people not just in Great Britain but across Europe were starting to believe that perhaps democracy had run its course and maybe fascism could be the future.

Chapter 4

Inter-War Europe - A Breeding Ground for Fascism

4.1. Introduction

The First World War had left Europe in a state of complete turmoil. The participants had mostly been left economically weak. Although this situation had been gradually improving, the economic depression of the 1930's hit Europe hard. Some nations, particularly Germany and Italy were suffering a great deal. Consequently they were becoming increasingly politically unstable. Political parties of both the extreme right and extreme left that challenged the whole concept of democracy began to develop and grew stronger rapidly after the First World War, as many people were coming to the belief that democratically elected governments were too weak to drag their nations back to prosperity and stability. They believed that democracy had run its course and was now effectively coming to an end. Perhaps it was the turn of a new and alternative political entity to lead the nations of Europe into a bright and successful future. This continual building up of unhappiness and anger towards democracy in many nations led to the creation of far-right and also far left parties, who claimed they could radically improve the situation for all the people of their nation. Conditions in nations such as Italy and Germany had become so desperate that fascist organisations were able to rise to power.

This chapter identifies how the British Union of Fascists fit in to this general shift towards fascism across Europe. It investigates the similarities and differences that its form of the fascism had with other fascist organisations throughout the continent. Primarily it will seek to discover the comparisons between Mosley's party and that of the Italian fascist regime under Benito Mussolini, but will also briefly compare the British Union of Fascists to the fascist movements in France, the Netherlands and on certain points, Germany. The aim is to discover whether the organisation created by Mosley was merely the British version of a European movement. Or if it was a unique movement created purely for the situation in

Great Britain at the time and was only loosely based on the same principle as the other fascist organisations. This chapter looks at some of the policies that the British Union of Fascists was looking to implement, if it managed to seize power to see in what ways it was the same or different from Italian and other European fascist movements. It analyses the party's ideas on race, religion, the economy, corporatism, women and foreign policy. As the British Union of Fascists was formed based on the ideas of European fascist organisations, it is interesting to see to what extent it mirrored these parties, or if it developed in to an entirely different being.

It is obvious that there are a great deal of similarities between the various fascist movements in question, as they were all essentially formed and based around what was definite fascist ideology, but they naturally all have key differences, depending on the needs of their individual nation. As Mosley stated in his autobiography *My Life* 'Fascism was in essence a national creed, and therefore by definition took an entirely different form in different countries. In origin, it was an explosion against intolerable conditions, against remediable wrongs which the old world had failed to remedy. It was a movement to secure national renaissance by people who felt themselves threatened with decline into decadence and death and were determined to live, and live greatly'.[114] This clearly shows how strongly Mosley believed that, although his party was clearly a fascist party like many others in Europe, it used ideas of fascism for the benefit of Great Britain, with the eventual aim being to establish a greater Britain.[115] It suggests that while fascism was a movement that transcended national boundaries, it was more often used in conjunction with nationalism and the desire of each party to improve the situation for their particular nation and for the people of that nation.[116]

[114] Mosley, *My Life*, 239.
[115] 'The Policy of the British Union of Fascists', *The Blackshirt,* February 1933.
[116] *Daily Mail*, 7th July 1934.

4.2. Fascism in Europe

When Oswald Mosley created the British Union of Fascists, he had only recently returned from a trip to Italy to see how Mussolini had implemented fascism into the everyday running of his regime. Consequently, the British Union of Fascists copied a number of things from the Italian fascists. This included the use of the fascist form of salute, the black shirt as the party uniform and the old roman symbol of the fasces on the party flag, which represented imperial power, although the flag was later changed to a lightning bold to symbolise the flash of action.[117] The British Union of Fascists also copied some of its other superficial elements from Nazi Germany. One of the party's marching songs that it occasionally played at meetings *Comrades the Voices* was played to the same tune as the Nazi party's anthem *Horst Wessel Lied*.[118] This copying of several small details emphasised the extent to which Mosley admired and wanted to emulate European fascist regimes, despite his claims that the fascism that he wanted to enforce in Britain was particular to the needs of the British people. However, these incidences would be insignificant if Mosley's political ideology was specifically related to the situation in Great Britain in the inter-war years.

A key issue that was regularly in the news during this period in the history of fascist parties was race and religion. The British Union of Fascists originally claimed that it opposed racism, because it believed in upholding the British Empire, which was made up of people of many nationalities, races and ethnic backgrounds. The party also stated that the only reason that it might oppose the Jewish people would be if they put their co-racialists abroad ahead of the interests of the British people.[119] However, as the years moved on, the rhetoric of the party gradually became more and more anti-Semitic. This suggests that although Mosley's party did turn towards anti-Semitism, it had initially intended to stay away from the policy of race and religion that was being used by the Nazi Party in Germany. However, due to the

[117] Jeremy Dobson, *Why Do People Hate Me So?: The Strange Interlude Between the Two Great Wars in the Britain of Stanley Baldwin* (Leicester 2009) 317.
[118] James J. Barnes and Patience P. Barnes, *Nazis in Pre-War London, 1930-39: The Fate and Role of German Party Members and British Sympathizers* (Sussex 2010) 127-128.
[119] Mosley, *My Life*, 281-282.

parties declining popularity after 1934, it was decided that an alternative tactic was necessary. In 1936 the British Union of Fascists changed their name and became the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists. This name change signified a shift towards Nazi Germany in terms of both ideology and influence.[120] The Nazi party was steadily becoming more prominent in Europe and Mosley hoped he might be able to resurrect his organisations waning support if he emulated more of Hitler's policies. The successes of the Nazi party's anti-Semitic policy appealed greatly to some prominent members of the British Union of Fascists like William Joyce.[121]

Therefore in terms of a policy towards race and religion the British Union of Fascists did follow quite closely the policies put forth by the Italian fascists, who themselves initially believed that all races and nationalities could be incorporated into the fascist regime. Mussolini believed that the creation of what he called a new Roman empire would be the way to make Italy a great and prosperous nation and stated in the early 1930's that anybody would be welcome in the Italian Empire, no matter what race or religion as long as they considered themselves to be Italian.[122] This was clearly the same idea as Mosley based his defence of the British Empire on and the fact that his party initially publicly bore no ill feeling to people of any race or religion. This suggests Mosley was firmly trying to lean towards the ideology that was prevalent in Mussolini's Italy rather than Hitler's Germany. However, the Italian fascists gradually aligned themselves closer to Germany as the outbreak of the Second World War grew imminent. Consequently took a much stronger and more official anti-Semitic stance than they had done in previous years.[123] Once again this bears a similarity to the actions taken by Mosley in the latter years of the British Union of Fascists, when its policy drifted from tolerance and acceptance to seemingly open hostility. It would

[120] Richard S. Levy, *Antisemitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution* (Santa Barbara 2005) 87-88.
[121] Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London 2006) 217-221.
[122] Phillip Morgan, *Italian Fascism: 1915 to 1945* (Basingstoke 2004) 141-144
[123] Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (London 2006) 60-64.

appear that Mosley's organisation definitely took after Mussolini's Italians in terms of racial and religious policies throughout its existence.

Fascism in France and the Netherlands also appeared to take a similar stance towards the Jewish communities of their nation. In France, where there was not a single dominant party but a series of loosely linked groups, the general opinion was that anyone in the country, who was not considered to be entirely French, was disapproved of. This meant that refugees from Germany and Eastern Europe, along with the Jewish population who had settled in France were all disliked by the French fascist organisation without being openly hated. The Jewish people were also not singled out by many French fascists as being a particular group that should be persecuted or expelled.[124] In the Netherlands, the largest Fascist party was the Nationaal Socialistische Beweging (NSB), led by Anton Adriaan Mussert. It was also very keen to steer away from the anti-Semitic stigma that was attached to fascism. Mussert stoically refused to put anti-Semitism down as being part of the organisation's policies, despite pressure from a number of other fascist groups and even some members within his own party.[125] Both the French and Dutch fascists also strongly believed that maintaining and even extending their imperial empires would be a key way to restore their country to power and prosperity and would be the foundation of the nation's greatness.[126] In both France and the Netherlands there appears to have been a very similar policy employed to Great Britain and Italy in the early 1930's. There was a desire to avoid being associated with the anti-Semitic Nazi Party in Germany, and Dutch and French fascists were keen to keep anti-Semitic rhetoric out of their official policies. Despite this, the influence that the Nazi Party had over the fascist parties in neighbouring countries appears to have been very substantial, as they all seemed to be willing to take a more active anti-Semitic stance as the power of the Nazis grew. Fascist party's that had failed to rise to

[124] Robert Soucy, 'France: The 'Second Wave' of Fascism in the 1930's', in Aristotle A. Kallis (ed.), *The Fascism Reader* (London 2003) 232-241, there 234-236.
[125] A.C.W. van der Vet, 'Dutch Tolerance on Trial: Holland on the Brink of Conflict' in William Adriaan Veenhoven (ed.), *Case Studies on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom: A World Survey, vol. 5* (Dordrecht 1977) 433-472, there 433-435.
[126] Dietrich Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism in Western Europe* (New York 2009) 49-53.

power may have believed that the Nazis would be willing to help them take control of their own nations. All four nations also seemed to believe that the creation of a strong and powerful empire was crucial in demonstrating and rebuilding the nation's strength. The fascist parties in each nation believed that this should be one of the most sought after things for any nation. It is apparent from this that the British Union of Fascists at least bore some striking similarities to the fascist movements that were prevalent across Western Europe.

Another theme that was interlinked to race and religion which played a major role in the agenda and policies of the British Union of Fascist was nationalism, the promoting of the feeling and sense of identity of being British and a member of the British nation. Mosley was keen to encourage the populace to be proud of being British and to emphasise that he felt the nation should work together in order to protect and improve the prospects and situation of the country and indeed empire. He felt that the maintaining and upholding the vast British Empire was a key factor that would allow Britain to keep its place as a leading force in world politics.[127] This ties in with the ideas of other fascist movements that had developed in Europe in the 1930's. It suggests that the increasing number, and in the case of Italy and Germany, rise to power of far right groups was a general result of the conditions and situation at the time, rather than just a phenomenon in certain countries. The link to nationalism also seems evident at least at a certain level in each of the countries that are investigated here. In Italy, Mussolini was intent on allowing any person who considered himself to be Italian and was prepared to work for the interests of Italy, to call themselves Italian. It did not concern him originally as to whether these were people from one of Italy's colonies or if they had a background which was not ethnically Italian or if they were from an alternative religion to Christianity. Mussolini fully believed that there were no entirely pure races left in the world. Therefore race was a feeling rather than biological, so he claimed that he would consider anyone who felt they were Italian to indeed be part of his Italian nation, although this later fell by the wayside when the nation became openly anti-Semitic.[128]

[127] Oswald Mosley, 'Britain First' speech at Earls Court 1938.
[128] Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (Oxford 1997) 175-176.

The theme of nationalism also ran through the policies of both the French and Dutch fascist parties, but not in altogether the same way. In France, the various fascist organisations put a strong emphasis on the importance of improving the way of life for the French people and wanted people to be proud of their country and happy to be from France. However, they were much stricter as to which people they considered to be completely French. At this point in time only those people who were considered to be ethnically French were accepted as being true French people. Any person who followed a religious faith that was different to Christianity, for example Jews or Muslims were also thought to be outsiders to the rest of the French population and were not considered entirely welcome by the French fascist groups. It seems that the majority of these people were strongly disliked by most French fascists and it is likely that they would have been encouraged to leave if a fascist organisation had come to power in order to make France a truly French.[129] This suggests that despite the turn towards anti-Semitism in Great Britain and Italy, on the whole fascists in these countries seemed to be much more tolerant of other groups than the French fascist writers and groups appeared to be. In the Netherlands, the main fascist party led by Mussert again had a slightly different take on nationalism. The NSB considered anyone who they felt was Dutch, no matter where they lived to truly be part of the Dutch nation. In fact, it turns out that the majority of their financial backing came from people who lived in the Dutch East Indies or who had previously lived there. These people felt that the fascist party was the group in the Netherlands that was most enthusiastic about maintaining the Dutch Empire and keeping control of places like the Dutch East Indies, therefore ensuring the livelihoods and stability of the Dutch citizens who lived there. Mussert's party was also very keen to incorporate all the Flemish and Dutch speaking people in Belgium into a wider and more extensive Dutch nation. The NSB also seemed to be less sure about denying anyone who lived in the Netherlands Dutch citizenship. This included the Jewish population, even though the NSB was a National Socialist party, its shift towards anti-Semitism only came later, like it

[129] David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism and the Ideology of Culture* (Chichester 1995) 3-7.

did with the British Union of Fascists.[130] In this instance then it appears that the fascist parties of each different nation used a slightly different take on this element of nationalism. They each had a different outlook on who they considered to strictly be part of their nation or who they felt should be part of it. It is also evident that these opinions gradually changed over time, depending on the situation in Europe and the rising influence that the Nazi Party had on the separate fascist groups.

An issue that was crucial to the British Union of Fascists' hopes to reform and improve Great Britain, was its economic policies and plans to re-structure and rebuild the economy. The party had frequently criticised Britain's democratic government for failing to reduce unemployment and restore prosperity to a nation that had previously been a world economic power. To solve this problem the British Union of Fascist's planned to make Great Britain a corporate state.[131] This is the idea that each section of the economy would be managed by state controlled corporations that were made up of employers and workers from that particular section of society alongside state officials.[132] In theory the party hoped, this would allow the government to take closer control of the nation's finances and remove the class structure from society.[133] This bears similarities to Nazi Germany, where Hitler attempted to turn Germany into a unified total state, without a class structure. The economy was supposed to be geared towards benefitting all members of the nation, however, the Nazi economy tended to benefit the army most of all.[134] In Italy, Mussolini had attempted to put the corporate state system into operation, in his aim to improve the nation's economic fortunes and bring it under tighter government control. He was aiming to remove the autonomy of large businesses and to a certain extent capitalism altogether as this was blamed for creating a class system in society which was increasingly thought to have been creating conflict in the country.[135] This once again emphasises that there were clear and

[130] Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism*, 35-39.
[131] 'Fascism and Philosophy: A Rational Basis', *The Blackshirt*, May 16th 1933.
[132] Peter Davies and Derek Lynch, *Fascism and the Far Right* (London 2002) 142-144.
[133] Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley,* 313-315.
[134] Joseph W. Bendersky, *A History of Nazi Germany: 1919-1945* (Maryland 2000) 129-131.
[135] Phillip Morgan, *Italian Fascism: 1915-1945* (Basingstoke 2004), 157-161.

obvious similarities between the British Union of Fascists and Mussolini's Italian counterparts, which was essentially due to the fact that they were both fascist organisations and most obviously that Mosley had based a large amount of his ideas for the British Union of Fascist's on what he had seen when he had visited Italy. Italy and Germany were both used as models for Mosley's new party and were therefore hugely influential on the British Union of Fascists.

The situation was not dissimilar in the fascist parties of both the Netherlands and France at this time. The democratic political system was vigorously attacked and blamed for the continuing poor economic conditions that were blighting most of Western Europe. There were major factions in both of these countries that were arguing for the implementation of the corporate state to help bring prosperity and stability back. There were also a great number of people who strongly opposed corporatism and consequently tried to marginalise the fascist groups in order to preserve, what they considered to be a stable and effective political system.[136] This demonstrates that these ideas were being discussed by fascist movements and parties in a number of countries including Italy, Germany and Great Britain.

One area where the British Union of Fascists under Mosley broke away from the mainstream ideas of fascist politics was on the issue of women. Although there were a number of very right-wing and old fashioned members in the party who felt that women's place was in the home and not in politics, the British Union of Fascists on the whole was very open to women playing an active role in the organisation, not simply by being members of the party but on a number of occasions standing as candidates to be members of parliament.[137] Despite some initial scepticism to the part that women would play in his movement, Mosley rapidly warmed to the idea and time came to realise the significant role that these women could and did occupy within the organisation. As Mosley stated: 'My movement has been largely built up by the fanaticism of women; they hold ideas with

[136] Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism*, 49-53.

[137] Julie V. Gottlieb, 'Female "Fanatics": Women's Sphere in the British Union of Fascists', in Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power (eds.), *Right-wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World* (London 2002) 29-42, there 34-36.

tremendous passion. Without the women I could not have got one-quarter of the way'.[138] This suggests that between the wars women were heavily involved in the fascist movement of Great Britain. It is unusual for women to be so strongly associated with a movement like fascism, as it is generally considered to be a process which tries to repress and control as much of society as it possibly can. It would be natural to expect that women who had by no means been accepted as equals to men in terms of politics at this period of time would have been excluded altogether.[139] However, in the British Union of Fascists under Mosley, this does not appear to be the case and women were accepted and valued in the party. Many women who joined the British Union of Fascists even considered the organisation to be the natural successor to the women's suffrage movement and the closest they could get to a feminist group in Britain at this point in time.[140]

In stark contrast to the British Union of Fascists, the Italian fascist movement, even though it may never have intended to be a distinctly anti-feminist movement, it appeared to have gone very much along that path by the 1930's. This was largely due to the fact that women performing an active role in party politics, conflicted with the Mussolini's idea of the role that women should play in the future of the Italian nation under the control of a fascist state. One of the main goals that Mussolini felt was an integral part of bringing Italy out of poverty and into the world as a powerful nation and leading economic force was a dramatically increased population. He believed that as Italy had a much smaller population, even including its empire, to many of its rival nations for supremacy that increasing the population was vital for Italy's future. This meant that he insisted that women's place should be in the home and not in the workforce, as their primary objective in life should be childbearing, so that the nation could increase its population in the shortest amount of time.[141] Therefore, as the Italian fascists were keen for women to spend their time at home, having babies and raising their children, it seems highly unlikely that there would have been

[138] Jones, *Mosley,* 86.
[139] 'Women: Spreading the Truth of Fascism', *The Fascist Week,* November 17th – 23rd 1933.
[140] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 143-144.
[141] Martin Durham, *Women and Fascism* (London 1998) 13-16.

any encouragement or acceptance of them becoming involved in the labour force or indeed in politics. There would clearly be no possibility of women coming to occupy positions of power and influence as they managed to do in the British Union of Fascists. Mussolini even went as far as to claim that one of the simplest and easiest ways the unemployment could be solved in Italy would be by removing women from the work force and instead giving any of the jobs that they held to men instead.[142] It is therefore clear then that there were great differences in terms of the way the female population was treated by the British Union of Fascists to in the fascist Italian state under Mussolini. In the British Union of Fascists view, women seemed to hold a much more valued and respected position in society.

The fascist organisations that dominated France and the Netherlands appear to have gone down a similar route to Italy in their attitude towards women. In France much of the fascist sentiments that were prevalent came in the form of literary work produced by a great number of respected authors and journalists. Their attitude was wholly derogatory to women.[143] In many cases women were dismissed from any consideration that they could have a role to play in any fascist movement. Although there were a number of well-known female authors in France at the time, they wrote little on the subject of fascism. Many of the male writers in France argued that as women had not fought in the trenches during the First World War, they had not experienced the level of hardship that drew many young men of France towards fascism when they returned home. It was even claimed that women took advantage of the fact that the men were away fighting for their country, by attempting to gain improved rights and greater independence for women.[144] The Netherlands went down a similar path to Italy and France. Fascism was very much a male dominated movement and women were not really thought to be associated with it at all. Mussert's party had few opportunities for women to take an active role and there was certainly very little chance for them to make a significant difference. It was a male orientated movement. The men involved

[142] Durham, *Women and Fascism*, 15.
[143] Melanie Hawthorne and Richard J. Golsan, *Gender and Fascism in Modern France* (New England 1997) 9-11.
[144] Mary Jean Green, 'The Bouboule Novels: Constructing a French Fascist Woman' in Melanie Hawthorne and Richard J. Golsan (eds.), *Gender and Fascism in Modern France* (New England 1997) 49-68, there 49-51.

appeared to have had a low opinion of the impact that women might have been able to have, preferring them to stay at home and perform the tasks that had originally been considered to be women's jobs.[145]

The attitude of the British Union of Fascists towards women therefore seems to have been profoundly different to that of the Italian, French and Dutch fascist movements. The British Union of Fascists not only allowed women to become members of the party but even helped them to rise to positions of authority, with a number of women standing for election to become members of parliament. Although there were many obvious similarities between fascism in Britain in the inter-war period and fascism in other Western European nations, it also appears that there were a number of differences which goes at least some way to suggesting that fascism was a different movement in each nation where it became a force of any sort. The general political nature of fascist movements was similar across Europe, but in each nation the ideology of fascism was adopted to suit the needs of that particular country.

In the mid to late 1930's the threat of a major war breaking out in Europe was continually looming over the heads of all political parties. Each political organisation therefore had to present its ideas, as to what their foreign policy would be if the continent descended into a mass military conflict once more. They could join the conflict as natural allies to the major right-wing force in Europe, i.e. Nazi Germany, fight in opposition to Hitler or even keep out of the conflict altogether in order to try to protect the independent interests of their particular nation. The British Union of Fascists insisted that it had no interest in being in a second war against Germany.[146] Mosley also stated that despite this, he did not want his party to be allied to Germany either and that if he was in power the party would make sure that Great Britain was never involved in a military conflict that did not directly affect Britain itself. Mosley argued that Britain should fight for Britain only. If the nation was attacked it

[145] Angela Kershaw and Angela Kimyongür, *Women in Europe between the Wars: Politics, Culture and Society* (Aldershot 1988) 9-11.
[146] 'For Britain, Peace and People: No War for Jewish Finance', *Action*, September 2nd 1939.

would defend itself but should not become immersed in a foreign quarrel, unless was likely to have a direct impact on the future security and well-being of the British people.[147]

The situation appears to be a little different when looking at the foreign policies of other fascist groups in Western Europe. All seemed to consider that the Nazis would be their allies if warfare broke out and considered military conflict as something that was almost inevitably going to happen in the climate of Europe in these years. It was argued by many members of fascist organisations that fascists should have a warrior spirit.[148] In Italy it was a natural assumption that it would enter the war on the side of the Germans after Italy's attempt to invade Ethiopia had been opposed by Britain and France.[149] They showed that they would have no qualms whatsoever having the nation embroiled in a large-scale conflict if this did indeed take place. Mussolini considered it natural that men should go to war; he stated: 'war is to men, what maternity is to women'.[150] This suggests that at least as far as he was concerned, there would be no doubt that the men of Italy would be involved in any war that broke out, as he considered warfare one of the most natural things for men to take part in and so that is what they would most certainly do in the event of an outbreak of war. Fascist parties often have a natural affinity to warfare and violence. Nazi Germany and fascists in Italy both used violence and aggression regularly and quite successfully persuaded the public that fascist violence was a necessity to overcome national enemies and communist terrorists for the good of the country.[151] In France, most of the fascism that was to be found there before the Second World War was literary works by prominent writers and authors. Therefore, there was very little realistic chance of a fascist party being able to be in power in order to make the decision as whether their nation should go to war or not. Their main concern on the matter of war was whether a powerful Germany would try to

[147] Phillip Coupland, 'The Blackshirted Utopians', *Journal of Contemporary History,* vol. 33, no. 2, (1998) 255-272, there 257-258.
[148] Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism: 1914-1945* (London 2005) 468-469.
[149] Jeremy Roberts, *Benito Mussolini* (Minneapolis 2006) 69-72.
[150] Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge 2001) 44-45.
[151] Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 84-85.

annex or occupy any part of France.[152] In the Netherlands, Mussert's Nationaal Socialistische Beweging had much closer ties to the German Nazi Party and once again considered itself to be natural allies to the Germans in time of war, although there was a differing of opinion within the party as to what role the Netherlands should have if war did indeed break out. They were consequently never able to establish themselves as enough of a power in Dutch politics to make this happen.[153]

There was evidently a profoundly different attitude within the fascist organisations of Western Europe as to what they would do if war broke out, should they be in a position where they could decide what to do about it. In Great Britain, the British Union of Fascists maintained that it would definitely not become involved in any conflict, unless someone tried to invade British lands or harm the country in any other way. The French fascists seemed to have the most similar opinion to this, as they firmly believed in looking after their own interests. They were therefore worried about the possible ambitions of Germany if it went to war. Both the Italian and Dutch fascists seemed to be in a much clearer cut situation as there appeared to be little doubt that in times of conflict they would join forces with their fellow fascists in Nazi Germany.

4.3. Conclusion

With the ideas of fascism sweeping across Europe in the inter war years, it is not surprising that there were a number of movements across the continent in various countries. It is also natural to assume that as these organisations were all built on the principles of fascism, that there were many similarities between the various groups, no matter which country they were active in. The British Union of Fascists fitted quite neatly into the overall context of European fascism at the period of history in question. They shared a number of key ideas with the

[152] Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism*, 52-54.
[153] Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism*, 57-60.

fascist movements in Italy, France and The Netherlands, at least to a certain degree. Many of the original plans for the structure and policies of the British Union of Fascists had been quite closely based by Mosley on the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. It did so to such an extent that even the uniform, flags and symbols were similar. The policies relating to race, religion, economy and the corporate state also had a great deal in common with at least one of the fascist movements that has been investigated i.e. Nazi Germany or the NSB and quite often with all three. Each organisation also contained a strong sense of nationalism which was used to tie the party together and to appeal to the general public. Nationalism was the core around which the fascist principles were built on, to create the political movements in each country.

Despite these similarities, the British Union of Fascists also had a certain amount of differences to the other fascist organisations, which suggests that they were using a unique brand of fascism, which was only relevant for Great Britain and not the rest of Western Europe. This form would have been out of place in another nation and completely unsuitable for it. The British Union of Fascists was a fascist organisation that was much more open-minded as to the role that women could and did play in the party and it was far more adamant about remaining an independent fascist nation. Although they may have had some similarities to other fascist movements, they were fully intent on putting the interests of Great Britain ahead of fascists abroad. Consequently, they were unwilling to ally themselves too closely with any other group and maintained that they wished to take no part in any conflict that broke out in Europe. They were a British fascist party that would work towards improving and strengthening Great Britain and Britain alone.

Chapter 5

Propaganda and Nationalism

5.1. Introduction

After the creation of the British Union of Fascists in 1932, Mosley was faced with the problem of trying to build up major support for his organisation. It would be difficult to invent a brand new political party and persuade large numbers of the population to turn their hopes for the future towards them. There were already three respectable and established political parties in Great Britain at this time, the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Labour Party. Being able to persuade the public that the British Union of Fascists could offer something different to these organisations and prove that they genuinely could become rivals was always going to be a major challenge for Mosley. However, being a completely new party also held a number of advantages for the British Union of Fascists. The party offered the public something completely you different, it was an alternative form of politics that rejected parliamentary democracy altogether. Mosley could claim that the other political parties had been in power in Great Britain for years, yet had failed to improve the nation. It was time someone else was given the opportunity and that should be the British Union of Fascists.[154] He would first have to make sure that his organisation became well-known, inform the public of exactly what its aims and expectations were and then show that he was capable of building up a huge wave of popularity and support. Potentially, there were possibilities for Mosley in this period of British history as there were high levels of unemployment, which meant that many people were unhappy with their government and therefore perhaps susceptible to conversion to extremism.

In an attempt to make his party and its intentions and aspirations well known in as a short a period of time as possible to try to tap into any areas of society that was feeling let down or disenchanted with the government and were consequently potentially ripe for

[154] Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* (West Sussex 2010) 53-55.

converting to fascism, Mosley embarked on a rigorous propaganda campaign. Although the organisation was only in operation for less than eight years, it produced four newspapers and a whole series of books and articles detailing its nationalist and fascist ideas to try to win the support of the nation. The British Union of Fascists also held a whole series of large meetings, mainly in London, but also throughout the United Kingdom, where Mosley could address big audiences and hope to win over as many people as possible with his charisma and ideas very. The party also staged a number of processions and marches through London, which were regularly reported on in the national press and therefore got the attention of much of the British public. The use of these methods was a simple way to get its views heard quickly and regularly by a national audience, which would allow the British Union of Fascists to potentially be able to build a support base that was sizeable enough to challenge the already established political parties. [155] The British Union of Fascists knew that it would be difficult for to defeat the other parties in a British general election. Mosley believed if he could build up a large amount of support for the party, he would be able to put pressure on the government. He hoped that, if a severe crisis afflicted Britain, the British Union of Fascists would be invited by the King to take power and restore order.[156]

This chapter analyses how the British Union of Fascists used nationalist rhetoric through the various forms of propaganda that it produced in order to try to build up this support base. It looks at the main issues that the party targeted in each of its publications and how the ideologies of fascism and nationalism were used in alternative ways to try to target the various sectors of the British nation and convince them to follow Mosley's party. It also investigates how the ideas that were being produced changed over time as the party's policies and the situation in Europe altered. Finally, this chapter analyses how the publications were adjusted to target different groups of people when the Second World War broke out in September 1939.

[155] Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940* (Cambridge 2005) 16-18.
[156] Mosley, *My Life*, 294-295.

5.2. British Union of Fascist Newspapers

The British Union of Fascists published four different newspapers at various points during its years of activity. Each of these was aimed at promoting the ideas of the party, whilst trying to create anger and hostility towards the government. Although each contained articles with a similar nationalist and fascist nature, the newspapers were specifically targeted at certain audiences. These publications were *The Blackshirt, Action, The Fascist Week* and *The East London Pioneer.* Two of these newspapers were only in production for a very short period of time, *The Fascist Week* and *The East London Pioneer.* It was soon felt that it would make more economical sense to incorporate these two newspapers into *The Blackshirt and Action*, as they followed similar themes. Moreover, the production of four newspapers was costly and unnecessary. *The Blackshirt* and *Action*, however, were both in production for a number of years and regularly sold an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 copies a month each, which is significant number considering the membership of the British Union of Fascists fluctuated between 20,000 and 50,000 people.[157] However, this was not a large amount when compared to other national newspapers. The *Daily Express* and the *Daily Herald* were the best sellers by 1935, with more than 150,000 copies being sold each month and nearly 2 million every year.[158]

The *Fascist Week* was first published in November 1933, but only lasted until May 1934.[159] Its main role was to inform the public of the activities that the British Union of Fascists and of the good deeds that it was performing, which the government had neglected. It ran a story in 1933, explaining how Mosley's party had come to the rescue when the local council in London evicted large numbers of working class people from their homes.[160] This was a clear example of the British Union of Fascists trying to project a positive image of itself

[157] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 580.
[158] Tom Jeffrey and Keith McClelland, 'A world fit to live in: the Daily Mail and the middle-classes 1918-39, in James Curran, Anthony Smith and Pauline Wingate (eds.), *Impacts and Influences: Essays on media power in the twentieth century* (London 1987) 27-52, there 28-29.
[159] Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 249.
[160] Rex Tremlett, 'Thrown Out on to the Street: Scandal of the Housing Evictions', *The Fascist Week*, November 17th - 23rd 1933.

to the British public and show that it just wanted to help the average citizen of Great Britain, whilst at the same time portraying the government as an evil and cruel entity that cared little for the working class people of London. *The Fascist Week* also occasionally attempted to outline the party's policy. It produced articles criticising the importing of foreign food to Britain, stating that the government needed to put money into restructuring the agricultural system of the country and help British farmers produce the food that was necessary to sustain the British people.[161] This shows that *The Fascist Week* was following the standard pattern of the party's rhetoric by criticising the government, emphasising how the British Union of Fascists would improve the situation and promoting the idea that it was created with the sole purpose of improving the situation for the British people. It is a tactic that could easily appeal to any people who felt that they had been let down by the government and particularly people who had become unemployed, because goods that they used to produce or manufacture were now being imported from abroad. *The Fascist Week* immediately tried to stress the idea of nationalism to the public, by continually stating that it was the British people who were being neglected by the government, that foreign people were making money at the expense of the British, who were beginning to live in poverty. It was this sense of taking care of British interests and the British people before looking abroad for cheaper products that the British Union of Fascists felt would help to gain enough support to come to power in the nation. This newspaper itself was relatively unsuccessful. It only attracted around 3,000 monthly sales. [162]This was because it was based on a very similar theme to another of the party's papers *The Blackshirt*, which had been in production for longer and so had a greater audience.

The Fascist Week soon ceased to exist however, as it was quickly decided that it should be incorporated into the other main British Union of Fascists newspaper that was in production at the time, *The Blackshirt*.[163] This paper was the only editorial of the party that was in production for almost the entire period of time that the British Union of Fascists was in

[161] 'British Food for British Mouths', *The Fascist Week,* November 10th – 16th 1933.
[162] Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 277.
[163] David Sherner, *The Blackshirts: Fascism in Britain* (London 1971) 51-52.

operation. It was first produced in February 1933, and continued until May 1939. With the brief exception of *The Fascist Week*, it was the only newspaper Mosley's movement produced between 1933 and 1936. During this period it was considered to be the main organ of the party and continued the work of *The Fascist Week* in explaining the policies of the British Union of Fascists and detailing the party's activities.[164] This newspaper was mainly aimed at people who were already members of the British Union of Fascists, or people who had been members of earlier fascist parties i.e. The Imperial Fascist League or the British Fascisti.[165]

The Blackshirt was produced on a weekly basis and contained articles that were clearly aimed to push the party's policies and drive the nationalist ideas of the British Union of Fascists home more forcefully that in any of the other newspapers. It regularly published articles detailing why farmers should support a party that put British interests first.[166] It also contained extracts from speeches by Mosley, such as one he made in 1939 explaining in great detail the British Union of Fascists' idea of Britain for the British.[167] This shows how hard the party was trying to attract support on the idea of developing a keen feeling of a unique British identity in the public. It was very intent throughout the years of its existence in promoting the sense of a united British nation that could and would sustain itself independently from the rest of Europe and indeed the world. The British Union of Fascists was determined to make the populace believe that if Britain cut many of the ties that it had with the rest of Europe, the nation would be able to grow much more stable and prosperous through self-sufficiency and independence. The British Union of Fascists claimed that Britain's economy and wealth was being drained by other countries rather than strengthened. *The Blackshirt* was the main publication that was used every week to try to get these ideas across to as many people as possible, by relentlessly outpouring nationalistic ideas of how the country could be improved if the British Union of Fascists were in power

[164] Skidelsky, *Mosley,* 322-323.
[165] Jones, *Mosley,* 71-73
[166] 'Why Farmers Support Fascism: Blackshirt Policy for British Agriculture', *The Blackshirt*, 3rd July 1934.
[167] 'Britain for the British', *The Blackshirt*, 23rd July 1939.

and trying to point out precisely where and how the current government was failing the British people.

In February 1936, the British Union of Fascists began producing a second publication to compliment *The Blackshirt*. This was simply called *Action*. This is in reference to the fascist idea that continual movement and mobility is essential to developing and improving society. Fascist organisations also, often emphasise their energy and will to act to suggest that democratic parties and governments are old, slow and stagnant.[168] In the end *Action* outlasted *The Blackshirt* as it continued to be produced until June 1940, which was after Mosley and many of the key figures had been detained by the British government.[169] *Action* took a slightly different approach to *The Blackshirt* and *The Fascist Week*, although it did contain many articles relating to nationalist policy ideas and detailing the party's activities, such as the meeting that the party held in Earl's Court, London, where Mosley addressed a large audience.[170] Supporters of Oswald Mosley claimed there were 30,000 people in attendance. Although this is likely to be an exaggeration, the national press confirmed that there was an audience of more than 20,000 people.[171] However it had fewer articles like this than in the other British Union of Fascists' publications and contained more of the general news of events occurring in Britain at the time. It also sometimes contained reviews of films that were being shown at the cinema that week.[172] In this regard, *Action* operated more like a standard magazine than an instrument of propaganda for a fascist party, with a lot less articles relating to fascism and nationalism, although there were always a number of these interspersed throughout the paper. This suggests that *Action* was aimed more at attracting new members to the party or people that had an interest in the party or fascism, but were not yet certain and were not actually members of the British Union of Fascists at that point in time. *Action* was intended to take a much less aggressive approach than *The Blackshirt*, in

[168] Dave Renton, *Fascism: theory and practice* (London 1999) 27-29.
[169] Nicholas Mosley, *Rules of the Game; Beyond the Pale: Memoirs of Sir Oswald Mosley and Family* (Chicago 1991) 427-429.
[170] 'Britons Rally to Earls Court', *Action*, 22nd July, 1939.
[171] Sherner, *The Blackshirts*, 147.
[172] 'Movies of the Week', *Action*, 16th September, 1937.

that it contained less anti-government and political sentiments. It was hoped that people who had little or no prior interest in fascism, would be willing to read it and by doing so might slowly come to support Mosley's organisation or at the very least not be hostile towards it.

The final newspaper that was produced by the British Union of Fascists was *The East London Pioneer* which, like *The Fascist Week*, was very short lived as it only lasted from October 1936 to June 1937. It was generally released on a monthly basis and was only available in a number of towns in the East London area, where the party was already popular. Due to the fact that it was only released in such a small area, its articles tended to be much more specific. East London was the part of the United Kingdom which had offered the most support for Mosley's party, as it was home to a large working class community who were suffering large levels of unemployment. There was much anger from this community towards the Jewish population in the surrounding area, who was largely employed and more affluent, which led to them being blamed by the non-Jewish group for the poverty that they were suffering. Due to this situation, *The East London Pioneer* tended to be much more anti-Semitic in its rhetoric and heavily critical of the government's attitude towards the Jewish community. It featured an article in 1937 that stated that all the tailoring shops in the area were controlled by Jews who refused to sell cheap clothes to British working-class people, as they preferred to send them to Jewish people abroad, meaning the British people were unable to clothe their families as they could not afford to shop at more expensive outlets that were not owned by Jewish families.[173] *The East London Pioneer* was therefore clearly attempting to take advantage of the animosity that was already felt between the two communities that were living side by side in East London. This shows that the British Union of Fascists used the Jewish community as a target. By singling them out as an outside group that was not entirely trusted by the rest of the British population anyway and, suggesting that they were to blame for many of the problems that were afflicting the British people, it gave Mosley's organisation a chance of building a closer connection with many people in the nation, particularly in East London. The Jewish community was an enemy they had in

[173] 'Jew Controlled Tailoring Shops' *The East London Pioneer,* January 1937.

common. Anti-Semitism was therefore tied to the British Union of Fascists' use of nationalism. Although the British Union of Fascists maintained that Jewish people who put Britain ahead of Judaism were welcome in the nation, for many people it seemed that the British Union of Fascists was suggesting that being Jewish meant that you were not British. This anti-Semitic approach, however, alienated many supporters and created very strong opposition from many people, most obviously members of the Jewish community.[174]

5.3. Other British Union of Fascists Publications

In addition to the newspapers that were being printed by the British Union of Fascists every week, the organisation also produced a number of short books. These were mainly used to clearly outline the policies of the British Union of Fascists and to explain to its followers and other people who were interested in the party exactly how and why the party felt that it should be in control of the nation. They also appear to have been used on occasions to justify the actions and activities that the group was undertaking. The books were written by different authors, depending on which particular policy it was relating to and whose area of expertise this fell into. These publications were aimed at members of the population who were already interested in the British Union of Fascists and its ideas.[175]

Two of these books were produced with the aim of giving a general introduction to the aims, ideas and reasoning of the British Union of Fascists, as they lay out exactly what the party hoped to achieve and how it expected to do so. The first of these was published in 1936 and was simply titled *100 Questions*. It was essentially a member of the British Union of Fascists asking Mosley 100 questions which had been designed to allow him to describe in detail the aspirations of the party and also to explain any policies or actions that had been highly criticised by the media and opposition.[176] Mosley put forward his justification for the

[174] Andrew Thorpe, *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter 2003) 70-72.
[175] Richard C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London 1998) 90-91.
[176] Durham, *Women and Fascism,* 13-16.

organisations use of anti-Semitism and attacks on the Jewish population. As the book was written in the form of an interview with questions and answers, it gives the impression that it was conducted by an independent member of the press, whereas in fact it was done by a member of the party.[177] This is known as Socratic questioning, named after the Greek philosopher Socrates. It is often used in law and politics, as it is said to allow the main participant to make their arguments clearer and more succinct.[178] Using this method allowed Mosley to clarify the points he made in order for them to be easily understood by the public. It also meant that he only answer questions that he wanted to be asked and let him fill it with nationalist rhetoric and justification for actions that had been widely condemned by people outside of the British Union of Fascists.

A follow up to *100 questions* was published in 1938 entitled *Tomorrow We Live*. This was produced by Mosley himself and was intended to give greater depth to the ideas that had been put forward in the previous book. It was a 34,000 word document that he wrote during a break from holding meetings and giving speeches in the winter of 1937-1938.[179] *Tomorrow We Live* was to be a detailed introduction into the spirit and policy of the British Union of Fascists. In its introduction Mosley gave a brief description of the basis of the book and policy of the party. He stated: 'So the reader will find in these pages a policy born only of British inspiration, and a character and method suited to Britain alone. We do not borrow ideas from foreign countries and we have no "models" abroad for a plain and simple reason. We are proud enough of our own people to believe that once Britain is awake our people will not follow, but will lead mankind'.[180] This gives a clear indication of the nationalist approach that was considered essential by Mosley and the British Union of Fascists and also how they were determined to indicate how they were different from the Nazi's and Italian fascists. Despite Mosley's attempts to disassociate his party with foreign fascist organisations, it is apparent that a number of ideas that went into creating the British Union of Fascists had

[177] The British Union of Fascists, *100 Questions* (London 1936) 2-6.
[178] Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, *The Philosophers Toolkit*: *A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods* (West Sussex 2010) 196-197.
[179] Jan Dalley, *Diana Mosley: A Life* (London 2000) 242.
[180] Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live: British Union Policy,* 3-7.

come from Hitler and Mussolini. However, these documents clearly show that the party believed that by building a keen sense of British identity using their propaganda would allow it to gain the support of the majority of the population and rise to power. They made every attempt to try to make its policies and ideas available for everyone to get hold of and understand.

The British Union of Fascists also released other short books and documents that were designed to address specific issues and outline what its policy was towards certain problems and how the party felt it would be able to tackle these difficulties. Two very different documents were produced relating to the economic problem of Great Britain and how the British Union of Fascists would solve it. One was entitled *The Coming Corporate State* and was written by A. Raven Thompson. This described how the organisation felt the poor economic situation could be improved by re-forming the various sectors of the British society into a corporate state to all government to have a tighter control of the nation's finances.[181] However, after 1934, the reasoning behind the British Union of Fascists' policies took a more anti-Semitic line. This shift occurred for a combination of reasons, which were intended to try to halt the organisations decline in popularity. There was a great deal of pressure to turn towards anti-Semitism from individuals in the party such as William Joyce who hated Jews with a passion. Also the fact that the Nazi Party in Germany had risen to power using deeply anti-Semitic tactics, played a role.[182] The second document was written by Captain R. Gordon-Canning and given the title *The Holy Land - Arab or Jew?* This book took the much more anti-Semitic approach to the way it suggested Britain should attempt to overcome the financial difficulties it was suffering. Gordon-Canning argued that Jewish businessmen and companies were holding an unfair influence over Britain's finances which allowed them to direct the money towards areas that served their own interests and not those of the British people. He felt that the only way Britain's economy could recover, would

[181] Raven Thompson, *The Coming Corporate State,* 3-5.
[182] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!,* 217-221.

be by breaking the stranglehold of Jewish control.[183] Together these two books incorporated the two main ideological principles that the British Union of Fascists based itself on, fascism and nationalism. The converting of Great Britain into a corporate state as detailed in Raven Thompson's book, was at the heart of fascist ideas and implemented by other fascist organisations in Europe. Gordon-Canning, however, approached the problem from a nationalist approach by suggesting that people who he considered to be foreigners were to blame for the poor economy and that British people should run the finances of Great Britain in order to benefit the general British populace.

Another short book that was published by the British Union of Fascists and relating specifically to one area that the party was very keen to try to improve if it ever came to power, was *The Land and the People* by Jorian Jenks. Jenks was an agricultural scientist, farmer and member of Mosley's organisation.[184] The document explained how the British Union of Fascists would aim to support British farmers and help them to regenerate and increase British agricultural production. It also explained that the organisation would stop importing products from foreign countries and instead purchases everything that could be grown on British soil. It would do so, by putting money back into British agriculture and encouraging farmers to increase the amount of produce that they were growing on their land.[185] Jenks insisted that increasing the amount of agricultural production in Britain would also create more jobs throughout the nation to allow many of those people who were unemployed to get back to work and earn a living.[186] This document again shows how keen the organisation was to emphasise that taking care of the British people was first and foremost in its objectives. With high levels of unemployment throughout the nation, arguments based on the idea that British money was going to foreign labourers abroad, rather than to British workers, was a sensible one to make. It had created a great deal of

[183] Captain R. Gordon-Canning, *The Holy Land – Arab or Jew?* (London 1938) 4-7.
[184] Matthew Reed, *Rebels for the Soil: The Rise of the Global Organic Food and Farming Movement* (London 2010) 57-59.
[185] Jorian Jenks, *The Land and the People: The British Union Policy for Agriculture*, (London 1938) 6-8.
[186] Richard Moore-Colyer, 'Towards 'Mother Earth': Jorian Jenks, Organicism, the Right and the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, vol. 39 (2004) 353-371, there 353-355.

anger from the unemployed towards the British government, which could be a good way of potentially increasing the party's number of supporters.

5.4. Meetings and Speeches

The British Union of Fascists regularly held large scale meetings throughout the years of its existence all around the nation. These events gave Mosley the opportunity to address a large number of people and to get his ideas across very quickly to everyone who was interested in hearing what he had to say. Mosley considered himself to be an excellent public speaker. Consequently, he felt that public speeches would be the main way that the organisation would be able to gain supporters.[187] In his speeches Mosley tended to discuss what he felt were the virtues of fascism and explained how the British Union of Fascists could grow and change Britain for the better. At the Olympia rally, Mosley argued that the British Union of Fascists stood for progress and patriotism. He claimed that they were continuing to increase in popularity, as the British public were tired of democracy and other political parties, which were inert and filled with the privileged elite.[188] This speech was given when the British Union of Fascists was at the height of its popularity, before it had begun to seen in too much of a negative light. Mosley was keen to try to persuade his listeners that fascism was the future and that only his party had the energy and enthusiasm to make the nation as prosperous and powerful as it once had been.

Mosley's speeches, although always with the same ideas of nationalism and fascism running through them, regularly varied in terms of their main subject. In a meeting at Earls Court in July 1939, he addressed the audience on the subject of Britain avoiding war with Germany and arguing that unless the German army tried to invade Britain, German activities had nothing to do with the British people. He suggested that Great Britain should not weaken

[187] Mosley, *My Life*, 239-240.
[188] Oswald Mosley, 'Olympia Rally' Speech, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2PpXJeXbeQ&feature=related viewed on 22/05/11.

itself for the sake of other nations, but should only fight a war if it was attacked first.[189] This emphasised the British Union of Fascists' main principle that if Britain was to be a successful country, it should only concern itself with the welfare of Britain. Mosley also partly relied on his own personal charisma and enthusiasm to attempt to gain followers through his speeches as well as his words. A speech he gave at a meeting in Manchester demonstrated this very well. He put a lot off energy and spirit into many of his orations, regularly using hand gestures and raising the tone of his voice to show passion and to emphasise the need for action.[190] A charismatic leader and speaker would clearly be essential, if the British Union of Fascists hoped to gain widespread support through the holding of regular large public meetings throughout Great Britain.

The other media outlet that was potentially available to the British Union of Fascists was the radio. This had been used to great effect by Nazi Germany in its propaganda campaigns and could have been a good way for Mosley to address the British nation quickly and easily. However, in Great Britain, the control of radio broadcasts was monopolised by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), making it very difficult for Mosley to make use of the radio without its permission.[191] The BBC had a close relationship with the British government and was consequently reluctant to grant the British Union of Fascists airtime on any of its stations. These issues meant that Mosley initially concentrated on other means of propaganda, but by 1937 the party's other outlets i.e. political processions and meetings, were beginning to be restricted by the government. Mosley therefore, decided to look into the possibility of broadcasting shows to Britain from a radio station overseas. Initially he planned to use this purely as a money making scheme and only broadcast light entertainment shows rather than propaganda. Although had it proved successful, he would no doubt have used it to broadcast messages aimed at increasing the popularity of the British Union of Fascists. Unfortunately for Mosley, the Second World War started before he

[189] Oswald Mosley, 'Britain First Speech', Exhibition Hall, Earls Court, London, July 16th 1939.
[190] Oswald Mosley giving a Fiery Speech at a Manchester Blackshirt Rally, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPB1jy4vmFA&NR=1&feature=fvwp viewed on 13/06/11.
[191] Graham Macklin, *Very Deeply Dyed in Black: Sir Oswald Mosley and the Resurrection of British Fascism* (London 2007) 97-99.

was able to put this into operation and he was soon detained by the government, curtailing all the ambitions he had for using the radio waves.[192]

5.5. Political Images

Although the British Union of Fascists' decision to wear a political uniform cannot strictly be described as part of its propaganda campaign, it can be argued that it had an impact on the image they portrayed to the public and therefore could have affected the willingness of people to support the party. The wearing of a political uniform also helped the party to increase the public's awareness of them, as it gained a great deal of media coverage and altered the image of the organisation. The uniform was styled on Mosley's fencing tunic, but he decided it should be black to symbolise the fact that his party was a fascist organisation. Black was the colour regularly chosen by fascists including Mussolini's National Fascist Party. The uniform gave the impression that the party was semi-militaristic, highly organised and efficient. It also helped to suggest that it was a serious organisation with a large number of followers, as the Blackshirt uniform was worn by thousands.[193] The uniform made them easily identifiable, as well as gave the party an essence of authority with a large body of trained and uniformed men in attendance at their events.

Political uniforms were used to give the impression of a military force on home soil. Mosley would have hoped that he could have used his Blackshirts in the same way that Mussolini had used his in Italy from 1920 onwards. Here they were used to attack and intimidate political opponents, who were then denounced by Mussolini as being enemies of the Italian nation, suggesting that his Para-military force was a necessity to defend Italy.[194] Therefore if Mosley had been able to portray his Blackshirts as defenders of the British public, he may have been able to sweep away his critics and enemies. This in turn would

[192] Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, 330-331.
[193] National Archives, London, Cabinet Papers Collection, Reference No. CAB/24/249 CP 144 34, 'Wearing of Political Uniforms', 23rd May 1934.
[194] Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 58-61.

have allowed him to increase his own support and potentially move into a position of power in Britain where he might be able to hope to topple the government. However, this had negative effects for the organisation as the combination of uniforms and violent actions gave a very authoritarian and controlling image of the party which alienated and frightened people. The media, communist and the Jewish community were all quick condemn the Blackshirts as a band of violent thugs who were a detriment to the nation.[195]

Political posters were an alternative image that the British Union of Fascists used to appeal to the public and raise awareness of its arguments and to publicise meetings. These posters contained short messages aimed to grab the public's attention. Most of them were produced in 1938 in relation to the party's anti-war campaign. One of these simply reads: 'Britain's youth shall not be massacred'. It is also adorned with the Union Jack flag, the lightning bolt symbol of the British Union of Fascists and a picture of Oswald Mosley.[196] The intended effect of this poster is clear. It is to create fear in the population, that should Britain go to war, their friends and family could get killed. The party symbol and the image of Mosley are there, so that the public are in no doubt as to who wants to prevent this massacre from happening and the Union Jack is present to demonstrate the party's nationalist loyalty to Great Britain. A second poster, which is advertising a public speech being held by Mosley on the subject of peace, contains no imagery, only provocative words. It states: 'save peace' and 'no war for Warsaw', it also contains a quote by Mosley: 'our generation must not die like rats in Polish holes'.[197] The message here is simple, British citizens should not throw their lives away for a war being fought in Poland and the people must stop the government from allowing this to happen. Both of these posters stress the idea that the British Union of Fascists was the political party who was in favour of saving the lives of British people and the government was prepared to sacrifice them in a war that didn't concern Britain.

[195] Andrew Marr, *The Making of Modern Britain: From Queen Victoria to V.E. Day* (London 2009) 316-319.
[196] See http://c-laing0811-cts.blogspot.com/ image 12, viewed on 12/08/11
[197] See http://digitalcollections.mcmaster.ca/british-union-fascists-oswald-mosley-leaflet-30-august-1933, viewed on 12/08/11

5.6. Conclusion

The British Union of Fascists put a great deal of effort and thought into all forms of propaganda that it used. Each part of it was aimed to fully support the party's essential principles and add depth and explanation to their policies and ideas. They also were used to try to stir up nationalistic sentiments and feelings within the British people. The newspapers were aimed at different groups of people, depending on the feelings they had towards fascism, *The Blackshirt* was aimed at those people who were already keenly interested in the organisation, whereas *Action* was aimed at people who were not yet so sure. The British Union of Fascists' other publications sought to clarify and justify the ideology and aspirations behind the activities of the British Union of Fascists, and to specifically target certain groups with policies aimed at improving the situation of these particular groups. Running throughout these articles were anti-government sentiments and continual criticisms of the actions of the incumbent government. This was designed not only try to win supporters to the side of the British Union of Fascists, but also to increase the level of anger and hostility that was felt towards the other political parties of the nation.

These tactics were successful to a certain extent, in that they certainly increased the general public's awareness of the party's existence, although it never managed to generate the level of support that the British Union of Fascists hoped for, as they never had more than 50,000 members. The use of propaganda swiftly led to the organisation becoming a recognised political party in Great Britain, even if they had little electoral success. It also helped the party to gain supporters throughout the nation, particularly in areas like East London, where the unhappiness of the working class population was singled as a viable target for the party to aim its attentions at and they were won over by the organisation's anti-Semitism. However, the British Union of Fascists, use of propaganda and nationalist rhetoric in these areas also had a detrimental effect of the party's hopes, as it also created a large amount of opposition and anger from the Jewish community of the area. Mosley's party set the Jewish population of Great Britain up as being the main threat to the well-being and

prosperity of the British people. It claimed that the Jews were taking jobs and money that should have gone to British workers and using it to benefit other Jewish people abroad and not putting it back into the British economy to benefit the British people. The idea that the Jewish population was putting their religion ahead of the people of the nation they were living in was at the heart of the British Union of Fascists' ideas on nationalism and was regularly used in its propaganda, particularly in the *East London Pioneer*. This newspaper was targeted specifically at the working-class population of London that was living alongside a large Jewish community. This approach naturally created a great deal of open hostility and criticism from many people and especially the Jewish community itself.

Chapter 6

Failing Fascism: Outbreak of War and the Demise of the Party

6.1. Introduction

Following the German invasion of Poland on 1st September 1939, relations between Great Britain and Germany deteriorated to such an extent, that the British government announced a declaration of war.[198] The continent of Europe, which was still trying to recover from the devastation that had been left by the First World War and the depression of the 1930's was once again plunged into a ferocious conflict that was set to tear the region apart and change the course of history. An event as significant as this could have been hugely important for extremist parties across Europe. It was possible that war would bring about the level of fear, crisis and instability that these organisations craved in order to seize power. However, it was also the time when the government in power was most likely to try to crush any movement or organisation that it considered to pose a threat and might make life difficult for them, or even potentially assist the enemy in years to come. This means that the period shortly after the outbreak of war would be an important time in determining the future of the British Union of Fascists.

By the end of 1940 the British Union of Fascists no longer existed. The party, which had only been created in 1932, had come to its end and ceased all political activity. As soon as Great Britain declared war on the national socialist German state in 1939, it became apparent that it would be incredibly difficult for a fascist organisation in England to keep itself separate from the enemy in the minds of the public and manage to keep gaining support. This chapter analyses the circumstances and factors that led to the demise of the British Union of Fascists to attempt to ascertain the reasons for the party's ultimate failure to gain power and subsequent decline into non-existence.

[198] Joll, *Europe Since 1870,* 376.

There were a number of elements that contributed to the organisations' lack of success. The outbreak of war profoundly changed the circumstances and environment in which the party was operating and government legislation and actions ultimately prevented the party from being able to continue it attempts to gather support, although it could have been that the outbreak of war might have drawn people to the British Union of Fascists as it was the party that was continually promoting nationalism and the British identity. The creation of a common foreign enemy abroad often leads to an increase in national sentiments and could have led to widespread support for the party that had for years promoting itself as a party for the British people. However, a problem for the British Union of Fascists was that, the foreign enemy was a far right-wing party, known for violent tactics and with a dictatorial leader. This bore a resemblance to Mosley's party and made both the public and government fear that the British Union of Fascists might try to assist the invaders.[199] The British Union of Fascists' own actions also alienated much of their potential support. The organisation was operating in a nation that had a long-standing and stable democracy. This would severely limit the chances of an extremist organisation achieving a great deal of success. The party had also created a negative image for itself, which was intensified by criticism that they were receiving from many media outlets and particularly the national press. These factors, combined with the relative stability of Great Britain compared to many other European nations and perhaps a natural distrust for organisations that they associated with the enemy, meant that the British Union of Fascists were always likely to be rapidly swept aside with little protest or criticism shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War.

[199] G. Gordon Betts, *The Twilight of Britain: Cultural Nationalism, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Toleration* (New Jersey 2002) 122-123.

6.2 Democratic Stability

Fascist organisations failed to come to power in the inter-war period in any nation that had survived the First World War with a stable parliamentary democracy in place. Relatively little success was achieved by fascists in all European nations where democratic governments were still in control. The Rex Party in Belgium led by Leon Degrelle was the most successful fascist party in a politically stable European country.[200] This organisation still only managed to achieve 12 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary elections of 1936, far too few to come anywhere near being able to take control of the country.[201] Even in nations that suffered long periods of economic hardship, fascism often failed to pose a serious threat to democratic governments. Democracy survived in the Netherlands despite a severe and extended period of economic crisis. The democratic parties united to make sure that no fascist or extremist organisation was able to develop into a party of any significance in the country.[202] This suggests that the British Union of Fascists had very little chance of rising to power in Great Britain, even if the nation had been in the same economic plight as the Netherlands. Stable democracies tended to be able to stave off the threat of extremism relatively easily in inter-war Europe.

Great Britain had one of the more stable parliamentary democracies in Europe after the First World War. The nation had come through the conflict on the winning side. This meant that the British public felt that the government had protected them and preserved the country's status as a great power. Britain came through the war comparatively unscathed, the empire and monarchy were still intact and strong, consequently so was the parliamentary system.[203] The British government also showed the public that it was capable of adapting its political structure, when it was necessary. In 1918 it extended the vote to all men over the

[200] Payne, *A History of Fascism,* 299-301.
[201] Cyprian Blamires, *World Fascism: A Historical Encyclopedia,* Volume 1 (California 2001) 86-87.
[202] Barry Paul Clarke and Joe Foweraker, *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought* (London 2001) 209-210.
[203] John Stevenson, 'Conservatism and the Failure of Fascism in Inter-War Britain' in Martin Blinkhorn, *Fascists and Conservatives: Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth Century Europe* (Abingdon 1990) 264-282, there 264-265.

age of 18 and all women over the age of 30, as acknowledgement of these people's efforts during the war.[204] The democratic political parties also demonstrated that in times of hardship, they were prepared to work together for the best interests of the country and to maintain the nation's political stability. During both the First World War and the economic depression of the 1930's coalition governments were formed from members of different political organisations to ensure that the Britain would survive any difficulties.[205] This clearly demonstrates how difficult a situation the British Union of Fascists was facing. The British parliamentary system was a stable democratic structure. The nation had encountered periods of hardship, but the government had united and adapted when necessary for the good of the people. It gave the general public little cause to join extremist organisations. This meant that Mosley's party had very little chance of success from the start and were always likely to be destined for failure.

6.3. Negative Public Image

By the end of 1934, the British Union of Fascists appeared to have created a very negative public image. It became to be seen in many areas as an aggressive, thuggish organisation, which had a propensity to violence. The British Union of Fascists appeared to have lost the respect that the majority of political parties enjoyed in Great Britain, as it was looked upon as a party that was more intent on beating up its opponents than defeating them with sound, well thought out and organised policies. This was largely due to the events that occurred at the meeting that the British Union of Fascists held in Olympia, London, in June 1934. The party organised a major rally there, at which Mosley would make a speech to the 15,000 supporters in attendance. However, the crowd was not made up entirely of people who were favourable to Mosley. There were a number of people present who were deeply opposed to Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. They were communists, Jews and others who

[204] Roger Griffin, 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling' in Michael Cronin, *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition* (London 1996) 141-165, there 149-150.
[205] Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 75.

disliked the fascist movement in Britain. These individuals attempted to disrupt Mosley's speech by heckling him whenever he spoke, which led to them being beaten up and forcefully ejected from the hall.[206] This made many people believe that the Blackshirts had gone too far. It became the common public opinion that the British Union of Fascists had been much more aggressive and violent than they had needed to be. It was suggested that more than 10 fascists would attack and then remove a heckler, having severely hurt him first.[207] Reports from journalist afterwards stated that they would be very surprised if there were no fatal injuries from the event.[208] Although the Blackshirts strongly denied that they had behaved inappropriately, it hardly mattered as the damage had already been done.

It was argued that the British Union of Fascists was to an extent the victim of these events. The systematic and organised nature of the interruptions made by anti-fascists suggested that there was a deliberate and planned attempt to incite the Blackshirts to use violent tactics.[209] Up to a thousand people were placed all around the meeting hall, in order to be able to disrupt Mosley's speeches from all sides and make it difficult for his men to subdue them quickly and quietly.[210] It is believed that leaders of the British communist party visited the Olympia venue several days before the event, in order to organise their disruptions to the very last detail. The Blackshirts were also legally within their rights to remove protesters from the hall, so it is likely that these people attended the meeting fully prepared to be met with violence and so perhaps had accepted this in order to later be able to condemn and discredit the British Union of Fascists for violent actions, in which case they were very successful.[211] It was also claimed by some eyewitnesses that the Blackshirts had little choice but to use violence, as the police had failed to keep order inside the meeting

[206] Martin Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate', *The Historical Journal* 2, vol. 41 (1998) 529-542, there 530-532.
[207] Charles Loch Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars, 1918 – 1940* (London 1978) 473-476.
[208] *The Times*, 8th June, 1934.
[209] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 157-159.
[210] Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* 158-159.
[211] Stephen M. Cullen, 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists', *The Journal of Contemporary History* 2, vol. 28 (1993) 245-267, there 256-258.

hall.[212] Whether this was true or not is almost irrelevant. The party was now always likely to be seen as an organisation that wanted to beat up and bully any opposition, rather than try to overcome them on the basis of political policies. The party itself showed no remorse whatsoever. In fact, the British Union of Fascists proclaimed the meeting at Olympia a great success, with the Blackshirts having courageously crushed what it described as the red terror.[213] This was the first in a series of events which made Mosley's organisation seem like a party that could not be supported by respectable members of the public.

The activities of fascist parties abroad reflected badly on the British Union of Fascists. On the 30th June 1934, shortly after the meeting at Olympia, the Nazi Party in Germany executed many of its political enemies and rivals in what became known as the Night of the Long Knives.[214] Many people in Britain began to fear that Mosley may take similar actions, if his fascist party managed to come to power. It reinforced the fact that fascist parties tended to be naturally violent, ruthless and blood-thirsty organisations. This opinion was only enforced when Mosley claimed that his party would meet any crisis with fascist machine guns.[215] The events occurring in such proximity as they did to the meeting at Olympia, made the British Union of Fascists appear to be more closely related to one another than they actually were and created enough public resentment for Lord Rothermere to decide that he had little choice but to withdraw his public support from the British Union of Fascists. He did so in July 1934.[216] This severely damaged any hopes that Mosley had of taking control of Great Britain by force of public support. The control or support of the media would have had a profound impact on the number of people that would flock to Mosley's banner. The loss of press backing and the public condemnation of Blackshirt actions massively depleted the membership of the British Union of Fascists. It dropped from 40,000

[212] *The Times*, 9th June 1934.
[213] A.K. Chesterton, 'Reason's Triumph: Red Terror Smashed at Britain's Biggest Meeting', *The Blackshirt*, 15th June 1934.
[214] Richard Thurlow, 'The Failure of Fascism in Britain', in Andrew Thorpe (ed.) *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain* (Exeter 2003) 67-84, there 73.
[215] *The Times*, January 25th 1933.
[216] Jones, *Mosley,* 93-94.

to just 5,000 from June 1934 to October 1935.[217] This clearly demonstrates how difficult it was for Mosley to create enough support to make a significant difference, without the support of a national newspaper and a public image which appeared destined to be tarnished with an association to violence forever more.

The level of animosity towards the British Union of Fascists didn't seem to diminish in the latter years of their existence and if anything, it may have intensified. This became apparent when the party attempted a march through East London to celebrate the fourth anniversary of its existence on the 4th October 1936. Around a thousand members of the British Union of Fascists gathered in East London in preparation for the march, but they were faced with around 100,000 anti-fascists had deposited themselves on the path of the march in order to try to prevent it being completed.[218] The two opposing groups met on Cable Street, just outside Stepney, and the British Union of Fascists were forced to abandon its procession as they were massively outnumbered and had no chance of being able to wade through such a large number of enemies.[219] This shows that the number of people who were in opposition to Mosley's party far out-weighed the number of members that they were able to draw upon to attend its important events. It seems that the British Union of Fascists were very much on the decline at this stage in their existence so it is unlikely that the outbreak of the Second World War had any impact on the party's eventual failure. It was doomed much earlier than this.

6.4. The Limitations of Oswald Mosley

Some of the responsibility for the failure of the British Union of Fascists must ultimately lie with the leader of the organisation. Although Mosley was credited from all quarters with being a terrific orator and inspiring leader for the party, he also had a number of faults which hindered the party's chances of success. The ability to make good public speeches and stir

[217] Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', 577.
[218] Eric Moonman, *Violent Society*, (London 1987) 22-23.
[219] Dorril, *Blackshirt,* 390-391.

up feelings of nationalism in many areas of the population, was never going to be sufficient to bring the British democratic system to its knees and allow the British Union of Fascists to take control of the country. An issue with Mosley as a leader of the party was that he often tended to get too wrapped in the ideological merits of his organisations policies and generally attacked the government on these grounds. He may have been better served to throw much more energy into criticising the government on issues that were causing the majority of its supporters the most concern.[220] However, it seems that Mosley enjoyed the limelight and attention that the pitting of his intellectual theories against the government's ideas gave him. This suggests that Mosley may have preferred being the showman and public figurehead of the party, rather than getting too involved in the gritty campaigning that was required in the less glamorous areas of the country than London. Although he did occasionally visit the rural areas around the nation's capital, he rarely strayed too far from there for any length of time.[221] This demonstrates that although Mosley may have dreamed about leading a glorious revolution that would take the British Union of Fascists into power and make him the leader of nation, he may at times have got carried away with the idea of power as opposed to going the correct way about achieving it.[222] This may have put a significant hindrance on the party's chances of being successful in the long run. However, it is unlikely that any other member of the party, as most lacked his drive, charisma and idea of the clear ideological merit behind the party's policies, would have achieved more.

6.5. Government Pressure

The British Union of Fascists appeared to be a party that was largely on the decline by 1935. Therefore, it could hardly be considered to pose much of a threat to the stability and security of the British nation. The failure to become a powerful and political party almost seemed complete. However, the British government kept a close watch on the activities of the party

[220] Rebecca West, *The Meaning of Treason* (London 2000) 198-199.
[221] Thomas P. Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester 2000) 98-101.
[222] S. Maccoby, *English Radicalism: The End?* (London 2002) 583-585.

and its leaders in particular. Whitehall seemed to be naturally suspicious of a fascist party in Britain, probably due to the success and actions of other fascist organisations in certain European countries. There were a number of government meetings about the British Union of Fascists, where various different aspects of the party's activities and actions were discussed in detail. On a number of occasions, this led to the introduction of a piece of legislation which would either restrict the activities of the party, reduce their impact or allow government forces such as the police to be able to exert greater control over events. Although these acts were only introduced on a gradual basis and often only imposed minor restrictions on the party, it shows that the government was sufficiently aware and concerned about the British Union of Fascists to want to nullify its influence, whilst not appearing to behave in a manner that would suggest they were abusing their power.[223] These government interventions are therefore contributed significantly to the long-term failure of the British Union of Fascists.

As early as May 1934, the British government was looking closely at the Para-military wing that the British Union of Fascists had created. The Blackshirts were created, according to Mosley, in order to protect him and the other members of the party from the attack of communists and other anti-fascists at public meetings and marches.[224] However, the government rapidly became concerned of the military nature of the Blackshirts. These young men were being trained in combat by former officers of the British armed forces and were even being housed in a form of barracks at the party's headquarters. Initially, the government was willing to let this pass, but their concern increased when the group began wearing the all black uniform that gave them their name. At a meeting in May 1934 several members of the government met to discuss whether all political uniforms should be banned as they felt the semi-military appearance that this gave the group would only increase their aggressive behaviour and project to the public an air of authority and power, which could

[223] Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley,* 415-417.
[224] Mosley, *My Life,* 250-251.

potentially be detrimental to the governments interests.[225] This was a clear sign that their government was at least slightly concerned about the threat that the British Union of Fascists might represent in the future. The party had been in existence for less than two years and yet the nation's political leaders where already thinking of bringing in measures that would reduce the influence the British Union of Fascists might have on the public. The ban on uniforms would apply to all large groups of people; however, it was brought in specifically with the British Union of Fascists in mind. Although the act to ban the British Union of Fascists from wearing their political uniforms was not introduced until 1936, it was evident that the government was closely monitoring the party and was ready and prepared to take action against it if the British Union of Fascists began to pose genuine threat, as would eventually be the case in 1940.[226]

The banning of political uniforms was not the only measure that was brought in using the Public Order Act of 1936. This legislation was brought in to curb the activities of extremist organisations in Great Britain and give the government tighter control over their activities. The act applied to all extremist groups. However, it was introduced in response to the activities of the British Union of Fascists. It was designed to prevent the scenes that occurred at meetings like Olympia, in 1934.[227] The act introduced ways for the government and police force to control and restrict the activities of the British Union of Fascists, particularly in terms of maintaining order and preventing violence at meetings held by Mosley. This was another matter that had been raised in 1934 in a memorandum written by the Home Secretary, the government minister responsible for the internal affairs of Great Britain. It was directly related to the events at Olympia in July of that year. The government was keen to prevent the scenes of antagonism and violence that had occurred at this meeting, where the British Union of Fascists had refused the police entry to the meeting as was their legal right. It was suggested that perhaps it should be made illegal for the police to

[225] National Archives, London, Cabinet Papers Collection, Reference No. CAB/24/249 CP 144 34, 'Wearing of Political Uniforms' 23rd May 1934.
[226] National Archives, London, 1936 Chapter 6 Reference No. 1Edw.8and1Geo.6, 'Public Order Act 1936', 18th December 1936.
[227] Linehan, *East London for Mosley,* 10-11.

be denied entry to such a large-scale gathering if they thought there was a likelihood that people could end up getting hurt. It also gave the government the right to stop open air events, if it was decided that there was a danger that clashes between those holding the meetings and opposition forces would be on too great a scale for the police to be able to contain safely.[228] This is a plausible reason for the police to be at meetings of the British Union of Fascists, but it could equally have been a government tactic to keep an eye on its activities and make sure it wasn't getting out of control. Although it took two years from when this matter was first raised until it was actually put into effect, it shows that the government was concerned by British Union of Fascist activities from an early stage of its existence. It also suggests that although their membership and public support had massively declined after 1934, the British Union of Fascists was not going to go away without direct action against it. The party still managed to draw thousands of people to its meetings and cause enough of a stir to make the government feel that the Public Order Act of 1936 was necessary.[229]

The government also made a concerted effort to prevent Mosley from being seen and heard too often by a national audience. Mosley had been invited by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to record a radio show, where he would outline the merits and aims of the British Union of Fascists in response to a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain's. However, the home office sent a request to the BBC asking it not to air the broadcast on the radio until a later date when the government felt that it would be more suitable. This request was sent in February of 1936 with the reason given being that the British government felt that it could be damaging to the government to allow two extremist organisations to broadcast to the entire nation through the BBC, which was seen as a

[228] National Archives, London, Cabinet Papers Collection, Reference No. CAB/24/250 CP 189 34, 'Preservation of Public Order', 11th July 1934.
[229] National Archives, London, 1936 Chapter 6 Reference No. 1Edw.8and1Geo.6, 'Public Order Act 1936', 18th December 1936.

completely respectable media source.[230] Allowing these shows to be aired, would have given back a sense of respectability to these extremist parties which had been lost, at least by the British Union of Fascists through the debacle of events such as the meeting at Olympia. It would also have allowed them to attempt to gain mass support by appealing to the entire nation over a series of shows on the radio, where they were able to address an audience potentially far greater than would have been possible in any public meeting.

This gradual tightening of control by the government over activities of the British Union of Fascists, continued throughout the late 1930's, with the Home Secretary's desire to limit Mosley's ambition to gather a larger amount of support than he currently held. Following a procession by the British Union of Fascists in the Bermondsey area of London on 3rd October 1937, which resulted in clashes between them and an anti-fascist group with a high level of violence and injuries, the introduction of an act of legislation was suggested to the Home Secretary by the commissioner of the metropolitan police, which would ban all political marches through London for at least three months. This was due to the strain they were putting on the police force, in their attempts to prevent trouble brewing between the British Union of Fascists and its opponents. The police commissioner stated that, although the British Union of Fascists had been behaving very peacefully and had co-operated with the police on all matters of safety that had been requested of them, he still felt that they very antagonistic in their behaviour and attitude towards their political enemies. He suggested that this would lead to the a level of animosity and aggression from an opposition group which would completely outnumber and overwhelm the fascists, if they were not protected by a number of police officers that his force was unable to release from their normal duties. Therefore, it would make a lot more sense to put a stop to these marches, at least for a short period of time.[231] It seems clear from this request that the police were claiming that safety issues were the reason that they wanted to stop the British Union of Fascists making public

[230] National Archives, London, Cabinet Papers Collection, Reference No. CAB/24/259 CP 29 36, 'Proposed Broadcasts by the British Broadcasting Corporation of a Series of Talks on Fascism and Communism', 7th February 1936.
[231] National Archives, London, Cabinet Papers Collection, Reference No. CAB/24/271 CP 230 37, 'Prohibition of Political Processions in London', 5th October 1937.

processions through the streets of London. However, as meetings and public marches were the main ways Mosley was able to get his party seen in the public eye and getting his opinion of, preventing him to do so was obviously an easy way of nullifying his party's chances of gaining mass support and therefore achieving long-term success.

After the outbreak of war with Germany in September 1939, the British government began to make plans to silence Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists once and for all and remove them from the public eye. A fear began to develop that those groups who had been openly critical of the government would attempt to take advantage of the war-time situation by disrupting the government's plans and activities and potentially assisting the enemies of the nation to invade and defeat Great Britain. An act of legislation called Defence Regulation 18b was introduced, which allowed the arrest and detention of any person without trial, if it was deemed that he or she posed a significant threat to the safety and security of the population.[232] It was initially believed that the British Union of Fascists was no threat, because, although they had taken up a campaign to try to force the government to make peace with Germany, all of their rhetoric was based down a British nationalist theme. The government itself had been under pressure for some time from certain figures, including Lord Londonderry to make peace with Hitler. However, it was felt that Hitler would be unlikely to agree to this unless Great Britain was willing to give in to some of his demands. A totally equal peace treaty would not have been offered by Germany, Britain therefore believed that war was the only viable option.[233] This approach of the British Union of Fascists made it highly unlikely that it would have any involvement in events that might lead to Britain being invaded by another nation in times of war.[234] However, Regulation 18b was now in place, so if the situation changed, the government would legally be able to round up members of the British Union of Fascists and put them in jail for the duration of the war if it was considered necessary.

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[232] Richard A. Posner, *Overcoming Law* (Harvard 1995) 163-165.
[233] Ian Kershaw, *Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry and Britain's Road to War* (London 2005), 186-188
[234] Richard Griffiths, 'A Note on Mosley, the 'Jewish War' and Conscientious Objection', *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, vol. 40 (2005) 675-688, there 675-676.

By the start of 1940, it was beginning to become apparent that the war would not be a short conflict and that the threat of people within the United Kingdom assisting enemy forces to conquer the nation was increasing. In May of that year, the Germany army had invaded and taken control of the Low Countries and it was suggested that they had received a great deal of assistance from Dutch and Belgian fascists to make this happen.[235] Although there was no evidence for this at all, it heightened the belief that the fascist elements in Great Britain had to be forced to cease activity altogether and be arrested, so that it could be guaranteed that they could not have any contact with the enemy. At this stage, however, it was still very difficult for the government to prove any link between the British Union of Fascists and enemy forces in Europe, which would provide a legitimate reason to arrest the leading protagonists of the party. Until this occurred, the government maintained that members of the British Union of Fascists could not be justifiably detained.[236] The government only had to wait until the 22nd May 1940 to receive the evidence they needed that at least some members of the British Union of Fascists were passing government documents to the enemy.

An American citizen called Tyler Kent who worked at the U.S. embassy in London and was a member of the British Union of Fascists, was discovered to have colluded with a conservative member of parliament, Captain Archibald Maule Ramsay and Anna Wolkoff, the daughter of Russian royalists to steal secret documents from the U.S. embassy and pass them to German officials in Berlin.[237] All three were said to be members of the Right Club, an anti-Semitic organisation, which had strong links to the British Union of Fascists and Oswald Mosley. It was thought to be using the pretence of propaganda to supply the enemy with confidential British and American documents. Captain Ramsay was known to have very close connections and a friendship to Mosley, although it could not be proved that Mosley

[235] David Botsford 'British Fascism and the Measures Taken Against it by the British State' *Libertarian Alliance: Historical Notes* 28 (1998) 1-14, there 6-7.
[236] National Archives, London, Cabinet Papers Collection, Reference No. CAB/67/6/31 WP (G) 40 131, 'Invasion of Great Britain: Possible Co-Operation by a Fifth Column' 17th May 1940.
[237] Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 495-499.

had a direct link to these events.[238] However, these incidents provided the government with irrefutable proof that there were at least certain elements and members of the British Union of Fascists and related groups such as the Right Club that had direct contact with Nazi Germany. This meant that the government would be able to justify the arrest of key members of the British Union of Fascists and the Right club and keep them in custody for the duration of the war, or until it appeared that they posed no significant threat to Great Britain. Therefore, the government would be able to shut down Mosley's party and doom the party to ultimate failure.

On 23rd May 1940, the police started arresting the most prominent and outspoken members of the British Union of Fascists, including Mosley. In total, 747 members of the party were arrested and although the organisation briefly continued to be active, it was officially banned and outlawed in July of 1940 for good.[239] Even when a number of members of the party were released later that year, it was only on the condition that they wouldn't re-start or become involved in any activities that related to the British Union of Fascists.[240] A party that had relentlessly used nationalistic rhetoric and proposed putting the British nation above all others, was shut down due to fears that it was a threat to the people of Britain. This brought the role of the British Union of Fascists in the history of British fascism to a close, without it ever managing to take control of the nation or achieve any of the aims that it had hoped to do when formed by Mosley in 1932. It is very clear that the British government played a key role in the failure of the party by continually placing restrictions on what they were legally allowed to do. It also undoubtedly brought the organisation out of existence by eventually banning it altogether.

[238] National Archives, London, Cabinet Papers Collection, Reference No. CAB/65/13/14 CP, 'Conclusions to Confidential Annex to W.M. (40) 133', 22nd May 1940.
[239] Richard C. Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame': The Failed Political Resurrection of Sir Oswald Mosley after 1945', *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, vol. 33 (1998) 241-254, there 243.
[240] National Archives, London, Cabinet Papers Collection, Reference No. CAB/65/10/13, 'Conclusions of War cabinet Meeting 293 in the House of Commons', November 21st 1940.

6.6. Conclusion

The failure of the British Union of Fascists came about for a number of reasons, which were all brought to a head with the outbreak of the Second World War. In many circumstances, war could have been the perfect situation for an extremist organisation to take advantage of. It brings about a period of uncertainty, fear, and instability and normally leads to a governments open encouragement of nationalism within individual nations. This should have been an ideal situation for the British Union of Fascists, as they had been promoting the idea of putting the interests of the British populace above all other issues for a number of years. However, the British Union of Fascists was perhaps doomed to failure in part by the association it was perceived to have by many people with Germany, the nation that Britain had declared war against. This, together with the fact that the British Union of Fascists had declared their approval of the Nazis for some time, meant that the public was likely to be very disapproving and unsupportive of an organisation like Mosley's regardless of its use of nationalism.

The party was definitely finished in 1940, when it was officially banned by the British government. This conclusively brought to a close any aspirations the organisation may still have held at this point in time. It is apparent that government actions and legislation had a profound effect on the hopes the British Union of Fascists had of becoming a powerful and effective force in British politics. However, the crucial factors in its inevitable demise were the stability of the British parliamentary system and the negative light that the party was seen in by the public. The British government came through both the First World War and economic depression without ever giving the public any just cause to believe that it was failing the country. This meant that very few people saw the need to support an extremist organisation like the British Union of Fascists. Also by the end of 1934, the party had lost all open media support and was being castigated from all sides for their violent and unnecessarily aggressive behaviour towards its opposition. The meeting at Olympia led to widespread reports of Blackshirt brutality. Even if this turned out in fact to not be entirely accurate, the

damage that it did to the long-term hopes of the British Union of Fascists was irreversible. Individuals who considered themselves to be respectable, law abiding citizens were loath to be associated with them anymore and the average British citizen perhaps now perceived them to be merely a bunch of vicious thugs. By 1935, the British Union of Fascists' chance of capturing the mood of the nation and being swept in to government had been drastically diminished. Despite this, the rise of a powerful state in Germany kept the government in Britain mindful of the potential threat of the British Union of Fascists.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

The British Union of Fascists used ideas of nationalism in every aspect of their activities and policies. It was used as an attempt to unite the people of Great Britain together behind the British Union of Fascists' aspirations of creating a better Great Britain for all the people who considered themselves to be British. By using nationalism to generate nationwide support, the British Union of Fascists believed that they would be able to challenge and ultimately defeat the other political parties of Great Britain and take control of the country. This belief meant that nationalist ideas were promoted at every possible opportunity. The British Union of Fascists used a combination of ethnic, cultural and political nationalism. The party put strong emphasis on geography and the common sense of identity that these geographical boundaries helped to build. This bears similarities to Anderson and Renan's theories on nationalism. Mosley's party claimed that it considered every individual who lived within the British Isles to be a British citizen, regardless of race or religion. The party never tried to base its nationalist ideas on around a particular historical individual or event. This was unnecessary due to the fact that Great Britain is an Island nation. This means that all the individuals within this geographical area immediately have something in common with each other, which makes them feel separate to anybody else in Europe. Only the people living on this island could be British. However, the British Empire held a great deal of significance for the British Union of Fascists too. It was a symbol of British power and achievements and something that all British people should be proud of. The party was keen to maintain the Empire and preserve the welfare of all the individuals living within it, as long as they put the interests of Great Britain above anything else. The British Union of Fascists would never consider the subjects of the colonies to be truly British, however, as they were not originally from the British Isles.

After 1934, the party's nationalist rhetoric began to take an approach, which was more along ethnic lines. It became ever increasingly more anti-Semitic as the years wore on.

The British Union of Fascists argued that it only opposed the Jewish population of Britain because the Jews considered their religious identity to be more important than their British identity. The party said that it did not simply hate the Jews because they were Jewish, but because they put the interests of other Jewish people abroad ahead of the interests of the other individuals living on the British Isles. This shows that the British Union of Fascists were willing to adapt its nationalist ideas to suit its needs. When the support and membership of the party was beginning to wane, it decided to change its tactics in the hope of reinvigorating the movement. The shift towards anti-Semitism was due to the influence of the Nazi state.

As the British Union of Fascists based their policies around the idea of making Great Britain a better nation, it is clear that they would differ in a number of ways to the other fascist organisations that were in operation in nations across Europe. The party's policies and ideas would come from a similar theoretical background but would be altered to suit the political economic and social situation of Great Britain. Mosley's party considered itself to be loyal to the British people first and foremost and although they may feel a certain affinity with foreign fascist parties due to a shared ideology, there was no direct affiliation between the British Union of Fascists and any of them. It was made clear by Mosley when the party was formed that they were an organisation created particularly for Great Britain and the needs of the British people. Fascist ideas may have been similar in different countries, although the way that these ideas would be interpreted and implemented would be different in each nation. However, the very idea of national improvement and superioty of races was something that was at the heart of all fascist and national socialist parties.

Mosley felt that by having the theme of nationalism running through the British Union of Fascists' activities, he would be able to build on any feelings of disenchantment the public had towards the government and also sentiments, that the British people were being let down by the political leaders of the nation. The strongly nationalist and fascist approach of the organisation did indeed lead to many people becoming members. The idea of improving Britain and attempting to restore it to its former glory by maintaining and stabilising the British Empire appealed to many ex-servicemen who had spent time overseas in British

colonies. These people were unhappy with the suggestion that the British government would grant autonomy to some of these colonies as they felt this would weaken Great Britain. Many of them had developed the feeling that British were superior to the people in the nations that they had been stationed and so made them naturally attracted to a party like the British Union of Fascists. Mosley was happy to accept people such as these into the organisation, as many of them were officers and experienced leaders of men and therefore would be very useful in organising the party. Other members who became leaders in the party joined out of a loyalty to Mosley or, like William Joyce had strong anti-Semitic and racist views and believed that the British Union of Fascists would allow them to act on their opinions.

The British Union of Fascists also used nationalist ideas to try to gain widespread support. Different ideas were used to try to attract different sectors of British society to the organisation. Mosley attempted to win over British farmers by blaming their woes on the British government's purchasing of products from abroad rather than from the British Isles or its dominions. The British Union of Fascists went down a similar path when trying to encourage the working classes to support the party. Mosley criticised the government again for creating a great deal of unemployment by exporting goods from abroad and therefore benefiting foreign workers rather than purchasing products from Britain which would in turn increase the need for British labour. The party regularly tried to simultaneously criticise the government and demonstrate its ideas of putting the needs of the British people above foreign relations to take advantage of feelings of disillusionment of the government whilst trying to increase nationalist sentiments.

The British Union of Fascists' main method of trying to increase their support was through the use of mass propaganda, all of which was laced with nationalist rhetoric. By producing a series of newspapers and documents, holding many meetings and processions and displaying provocative posters, it was able to establish itself as a well-known organisation. They were regularly visibly active and their movements were often reported in the national press as well as in their own publications. As the British Union of Fascists became more established as a political force, its propaganda helped the movement to gain

more and more support, even if it never quite managed to propel the party to the popularity that it hoped for. However despite their continual efforts in this regard, its membership levels reduced significantly after 1934, when the *Daily Mail* withdrew its support and the party developed an association with violence and aggressive and racist behaviour.

Their nationalist approach to politics had a detrimental effect on the party's success in some areas, as it created a large amount of opposition and animosity towards the organisation. The British Union of Fascists singled out the Jewish population of Great Britain as the main enemies of the party and claimed that the Jews were partly responsible for the decline of Great Britain. They argued that the Jewish community put the interests of Jewish people abroad ahead of other British people and they claimed that this was having a negative effect on the prosperity of the nation. This argument led the party to open criticisms and attacks on Britain's Jews as being a drain on society. The British Union of Fascists juxtaposed the Jewish community of Great Britain against their form of British nationalism. This nationalist approach meant that a great deal of opposition developed towards the British Union of Fascists from people who disapproved of anti-Semitism, disagreed with the criticisms that Mosley's party made of Britain's Jews and most obviously from the Jewish community itself who were wary of what this attitude might lead to. It also alienated many people who may have been willing to support the party but felt that this was not a respectable political organisation to be involved in.

The ambitions of the British Union of Fascists finally ended in total failure in 1940, when they were banned by the government and the leading members of the party were detained for a number of years. The party had been at the height of its popularity in 1934, but was unable to sustain this level of support over the next six years. Therefore to some extent it was already in decline when the government ban came in. There were a series of factors that prevented the British Union of Fascists from achieving its aspirations. An important factor was the stability of the British democratic parliamentary system. Fascist organisations throughout Europe failed to achieve a great deal of success in all nations that had a stable democracy. Great Britain came out of the First World War, economically

drained, but politically stable. The nation retained its strong democracy and the government gave the public little cause to turn to extremism. This gave the British Union of Fascists very little chance in being able to rise to power. It meant that the party was always likely to fail in its aims and eventually disappear.

The continual introduction of government sanctions also had an impact on limiting the organisations success. Some of these restrictions had been introduced before the Second World War broke out and were imposed more to prevent the British Union of Fascists from being a nuisance, than because they were considered a threat to the political stability of Great Britain. The activities of the British Union of Fascists often resulted in scenes of violence and aggression, as many of their events were met by large numbers of opponents who were intent on putting a stop to any activity that was taking place. The government merely tried to limit the British Union of Fascists' activities in order to prevent disturbances to the public order and to stop hundreds of police officers needing to attend all of their events to maintain the peace. However, after the beginning of the Second World War, the potential threat that the British Union of Fascists posed to political stability increased considerably in the eyes of the authorities. In May 1940, the Netherlands was invaded by German forces and it was argued that fascist forces in the Netherlands had assisted the Germany army. This made the British government fear that the British Union of Fascists might attempt to provide similar help to the German forces if they tried to invade Great Britain. These events dramatically increased the government's fear of the British Union of Fascists. It meant that the party was certainly now considered to be a threat to the nation. These fears appeared to be confirmed when the Tyler Kent affair emerged and it was discovered that members of the British Union of Fascists had been involved in assisting in the passing of secrets to Nazi Germany. Therefore it was only in 1940 that the British Union of Fascists really appeared to pose a threat to the political stability of Great Britain. This was largely based on the activities of a few individuals and government fear and suspicions as to where the party's allegiances truly lay, now that the country was at war with a fascist nation.

The British Union of Fascists always faced a severely uphill task, from the moment that they were formed. It would have been extraordinary for a fascist organisation to be able to rise to power in Great Britain and sweep away a very stable democratic system. Mosley's party tried to build on British nationalist sentiments and show the public that the party was offering them something new, which would help to restore the country to glory and prosperity. The party used a number of different methods to get its nationalist rhetoric across to the public and gain supporters. However, this was not enough. Great Britain's social and economic situation, although weakened after the First World War, never became drastic enough to make the general populace feel the necessity to turn towards an extremist organisation. The chances of Mosley being able to gain a significant following and challenge the government was therefore, almost impossible. Although, the government felt it was necessary to ban the British Union of Fascists from existence in 1940. This shows that Mosley had managed to raise his party to be at least a slight potential danger to the British government.

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