

BRITISH SOCIAL HISTORY



CABLE STREET THE FACTS



By
Keith Thompson

CABLE STREET

The Facts

Author

Keith Thompson (with acknowledgements to "Comrade" magazine edited by the late Johnny Warburton)

"The Government bows down to Red violence and communist intimidation, but since October 4th, British Union have held many meetings at the places where their Leader had planned to meet before the Government proved itself incapable of administrating law and order".

'Mick' Clarke at Victoria Park Square. October 14th 1936

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Cover Photograph. An injured Blackshirt after being attacked by communists while alone.



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AN INTRODUCTION

The events that took place on October 4th 1936 cannot be examined in isolation. Like all history one must begin at the beginning.

Sir Oswald Mosley had served in the First World War. He had been a member of the Royal Flying Corps, and was one of the first 60 airmen to fly on the Western Front. Life expectancy on these operations was six weeks at the most.

After the war he was elected as a member of parliament. First as a Conservative, then an Independent, and later for the Labour Party. Through all these changes of party label Mosley never varied his political ideals or his message.

In the simplest terms his policies can be summed up with the words "*British Socialism*". This was quite different to the international socialists who had then taken over the higher echelons of the Labour Party. Added to this credo was the recognition that the need was for action. After all of Mosley's experiences, within the established political parties, it became painfully obvious to him that nothing would ever be done by them. All action was stifled with endless debate and procrastination. All decisions were delayed by lobby groups and committees and talk, and more talk.

Conditions in Britain for ordinary working folk at that time were a disgrace. Hunger, unemployment, bad housing, and no hope for the future was the reality. All this in a nation that was rich, and had within its empire every foodstuff and raw material it could ever need, was inexcusable.

Mosley was determined that something would be done and to this end he founded in 1932 "The British Union of Fascists". It was known as the BUF. Later it had added to its title "... and National Socialists". It was often referred to as simply British Union.

To advance, without a national press or radio outlet, the BUF held street meetings and propaganda marches with drums and flags, as had the Labour Party previously.

The Communist Party and left wing militants, who openly expounded the policy of the suppression of free speech, formed what was known as "*The Red Front*". They were joined in this by many Jews who were in favour of war with Germany.

Mosley stood for peace unless some British interest was threatened.

This, then, was the background for the clash. The BUF announced a propaganda march through East London on October 4th, 1936. *The Red Front* and their allies were determined to stop it.

PREPARATIONS

On October 4th the following statement was issued to the press by British Union.



*Sir Oswald Mosley.
Leader of the BUF
known as
"The Blackshirts"*

"We have held many meetings in recent months without disorder. Sir Oswald Mosley addressed 100,000 people in Victoria Park without disturbance.

East Londoners are not hostile to our meetings.

An attack on this procession and these meetings, however has been organised for days.

East London has been chalked with the most extreme incitements to violence

Our sole object is to lay our case before the public."

British Union had planned their march through East London to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the foundation of the movement which had begun its life in 1932.

Their plan was to march through areas of East London where they judged that they had the most support. The procession would begin at Royal Mint Street and on to the the first meeting. After a speech here, the march would continue to the second meeting. All in all this involved four

meetings with marches in between.

At the site of each meeting it was necessary to begin the meeting early. This was to stop the Communist opposition from taking over the pitch.

In Aske Street, Shoreditch the platform was set up at 10 am. Lionel Duncan, Jack Bailey, Arthur Nagels and Bill Hunt all took the stand and there was no disorder. There were cries of shame when it was announced that the march had been banned and the meeting was closed at 7.35 pm.

The meeting which had been planned for Victoria Park Square was moved by the police to Chester Street, Bethnal Green. Alf Cooper opened the meeting at 12.15 pm. With about 400 people present. "Mick" Clarke spoke for 30 minutes denouncing the government ban and by the time the meeting ended 1,500 people were in attendance. At 6.05 pm. he closed the meeting and led a march of Blackshirts and supporters back to their district headquarters in Green Street.

In Stafford Road, Bow Alex Brandon and Eddie Turner held the platform for British Union and 300 people were present when the meeting was closed at 5.50 pm.

In Salmon Lane, Limehouse the platform was erected at midnight. By 11 a.m. 300 people were waiting to hear Mosley speak. Charlie Lewis and Dave Robinson addressed the crowd which by 3.45 am. had grown to 5,000.

At 5 pm. 200 members of the *Red Front* attempted to attack the platform and the police closed the meeting.

These reports come from the Public Record Office and were submitted by Special Branch officers.

THE RED FRONT MOBILISES

In the weeks before the proposed march the communists and their allies set about trying to prevent it. They used the normal technique of putting pressure on Members of Parliament and upon the Home Secretary.

This was accompanied by a campaign in national and local newspapers. *The Daily Worker*, the communist Party newspaper, incited its readers with great exhortations to confront the fascists. "*They Shall Not Pass*" became their slogan. Maps of the assembly point were printed and transport was paid for and organised from all over Britain to bring about a huge presence of violent protesters onto the streets of East London.

According to Pat Devine, one of the anti-fascist organisers, "*one million leaflets were distributed, hundreds of posters were printed and hundred*

weights of chalk were used to paint London white" with slogans

On the day of the British Union demonstration the *Red Front* put its plans into action. Barricades were erected and streets blocked. Police attempts to clear the way were resisted with violence. There were many arrests and any isolated Blackshirts were attacked and beaten. At least there can be no dispute on this point. A great number of participants have boasted about the part they played. Most of the rioters who fought the police were not from East London. Many of them were not even from Britain.

The disorder was such that the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Philip Game, banned the march on the grounds that the police could not clear the way and that the violence was such that people, both police and demonstrators, could be killed. Mosley, who was law abiding to a fault, obeyed these police instructions and his assembled Blackshirts marched west instead of east. The orderly procession, with flags and drum bands ended up on the Thames embankment where they dispersed. Meanwhile the four meetings that had been planned in East London proceeded as mentioned earlier in this article. Some of the returning Blackshirts were involved in fights as they returned home, but these were in the form of only minor scuffles.



*A communist
rioter is taken
away by the
police*

THE BATTLE

This then was the real battle of Cable Street. No Blackshirts were involved. The fighting took place between the police and the left wing militants and Jews. Of course there were isolated incidents of small fights between contingents of the BUF and mobs of anti-fascists, but, these did not take place in Cable Street. Here it was a question of clashes between Blackshirts on their way to their assembly point and marauding bands of communists and Jews who clashed during the course of the day. The police reported, and the file is in the Public Record Office, (MEPOL 2/3043) that *"The general cry that the entire population of East London had risen against Mosley and had declared that he and his followers 'should not pass', and that they did not pass owing to the solid front presented by the workers of East London. This statement, is, however, far from reflecting the true state of affairs ..."*

THE AFTERMATH

On Sunday October 10th, the communists and their allies held a "victory" march through East London, which tuned into a fiasco. Led by police through the back streets, they nevertheless had to cross some of the main thoroughfares where they were met by real East Londoners, whose roars of derision and mocking laughter drowned out the noise of the Reds' bands, and the resounding shouts for Mosley from thousands of lips mocked their pathetic attempts to sing the *International* as they shuffled off to a quick dispersal. There was no violence. They were just laughed off the streets in a good old British way, and East London was reclaimed for the British. They had initiated mob law against the people of East London, and had sparked off a great surge of support for Mosley and his Blackshirts throughout East London.

A week later came the moment of truth. Through the streets of East London the rumour spread like wildfire that Mosley had said that within two weeks he would march at the head of his Blackshirts through East London. The press described the excitement and tension that this had generated. On the second weekend after Mosley's so called defeat, thousands of people turned up to take part in one of the greatest Black-shirt demonstrations ever seen. The site for the first meeting was in Victoria Park Square, where a cheering crowd packed the street from end to end. This was followed with a march to Salmon Lane in Limehouse.

Here he was heard by thousands of people in a great show of approval and support. The march had, in fact been banned, but Mosley said he was going to walk to the Limehouse meeting, and when the crowd followed him the police withdrew the ban. At the meeting Mosley said -

"They tried to stop us. They said we would not pass – but you are seeing tonight that we did pass. Britain belongs to us Britons – and we are going to see that we get it back".

The *Daily Express* reported on October 15th, 1936 *"It was then that I saw a scene that to me was amazing. I would have sworn away my life in defence of a belief that such a spectacle was not even remotely possible in any part of London.*

Thousands of labouring men and women threw up their arms in the German Nazi salute. Not a few here and there, let it be stressed. But five out of every six, not a boo, not a hiss, not even a discordant note of any sort, but much cheering.

I found it difficult to believe my eyes. Not so long ago I watched Hitler ride through miles of Berlin streets to open the Olympic Games. By comparison this, of course relates to the size of the crowds – there were more Nazi salutes near Victoria Park last night than there were on any Berlin corner that summer".

The official report by Britain's secret police, otherwise known as Special Branch, filed the following report which is now available for public examination.

"There is abundant evidence that the Fascist movement has been steadily gaining ground in many parts of East London and has strong support in such districts as Stepney, Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, Hackney and Bow. There can be no doubt that an unruly element in the crowd (at Cable Street) was very largely communist inspired. A number of active communists were seen at, or near, points where actual disorder occurred.

While attempts by the Communist Party to raise enthusiasm over the 'Fascist defeat' were comparative failures, the BUF, during the week following the banning of their march conducted the most successful series of meetings since the beginning of their movement. In Stepney, Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, Stoke Newington and Limehouse crowds estimated at several thousands of the population (the highest being 12,000)

assembled and accorded the speakers an enthusiastic reception; opposition was either non-existent or negligible and no disorder took place.

On 11th October, Sir Oswald Mosley addressed a meeting at Victoria Park Square of 12,000 people. Later at another large meeting at Aske Street, Shoreditch he received similar treatment.

In contrast much opposition has been displayed at meetings held by the communist movement's speakers. On several occasions meetings of the Young Communist League have been accorded an antagonistic reception in different parts of East London; it has been necessary for the police to close some meetings to prevent breaches of the peace; on other occasions meetings of the anti-fascist bodies have been abandoned owing to lack of support.

Briefly, a definite pro-fascist feeling has manifested itself throughout the districts mentioned since the events of 4th October It is reliably reported that the London membership of the BUF has increased by 2,000 new members".

This figure for the number of BUF members is borne out by the report of another secret police agent who gained access to the Limehouse branch premises in 1938 (presumably after it was locked up for the night) and reported that there were 1,700 "names in their book". 800 of these had joined in the weeks following the Cable Street affair.

FACTS

The foregoing is important. It shows that the popular version of events is untrue and that far from the event marking the beginning of the decline of the British Union of Fascists, in fact it began a period of fast growth. This was of course swollen later by Mosley's call for "*Peace with Germany, People Safe and Empire Intact*". What is more important is that right down to the present day, the myth of Cable Street and the decline of the Blackshirt movement is still echoed by the "Court" historians and the mass media.

After the fighting in Cable Street the government did ban the wearing of political uniforms. It mattered little as only a small percentage of the membership actually wore it. The uniform had served its purpose and its abolition in some ways helped integrate the party with the population at large. Six months after Cable Street the people of East London had a chance to show their feelings in the local elections.

In spite of the fact that only householders had the vote, and many of Mosley's supporters were young and lived with their parents, and therefore did not qualify for a vote, the results were as follows. In Limehouse and Shoreditch 18% of the votes cast were for Blackshirts, and in Bethnal Green, 23%. A footnote to this is that during the clearing of the Grand Union canal in recent years it is alleged that dumped ballot boxes were found containing massive votes for the BUF candidates. If this is true it would show conspiracy to defraud the democratic process at a high level.

One June 16th, 1939, 30,000 people came to hear Mosley speak at the Earls Court Exhibition Hall in London. This was the largest political meeting ever held in the world.

It took the war to stop Mosley. This was done by the infamous Regulation 18b which meant imprisonment, without charge or trial, for him and over 1000 of his followers, in 1940. Being accused of potential treason and given no public right of reply would have broken most organisations. But this was not to be. Even in 1944 the beginnings of rebirth began. Myriad organisations were started. 1948 they coalesced into Union Movement with Oswald Mosley again at the helm. East London again heard his voice. At the ballot box support for radical nationalism in East London stayed steady at about 20%, at least in council elections. In Shoreditch during the 1950s they touched 33%. Only the complete displacement of the population by Asians changed this.

MYTHS

Lies about Cable Street have circulated for many years. Most of them were investigated by the police at the time and exposed as groundless.

Here are two. The first concerns the story of how a Jewish baby was thrown through a plate glass window. The true story is that a Blackshirt, finding a small child in the street during some fighting and stone throwing lifted the child up, and placed him inside a shop front where the glass was already broken and in pieces upon the floor. The second example is of a brick thrown through a window into a baby's cot. The police found that the window was about 40 feet from the ground and that examination revealed that only a small stone could have broken it. Whoever threw it could not have taken deliberate aim at the window. The child's father denied having accused the Fascists and it was shown that the National Council for Civil Liberties, a *Red front* organisation, had cooked up the

entire story.

In spite of this the newspaper *Reynolds News* ran the headline "Child nearly killed in cot by fascists". The *Jewish Chronicle* ran the same story.

Plenty of other lies were told. One, in the *Sunday Chronicle* on 16th January, printed a claim by the gangster Jack "Spot" Comer that he had attacked Mosley with a chair leg bound with barbed wire. A retraction appeared one week later. It said "no attack occurred on Sir Oswald, or the procession. The story of Sir Oswald Mosley being attacked is therefore a complete fabrication".

These examples show how a lie is born. Sloppy historians and TV programme makers should show a more professional approach to their trade. As it stands today they follow the old newspaper hack's adage that they should not let the facts get in the way of a good story.

DEPRESSION IN FLEET STREET



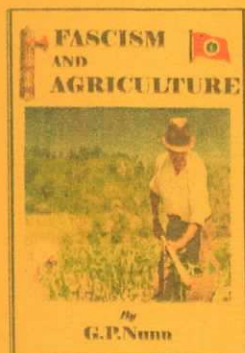
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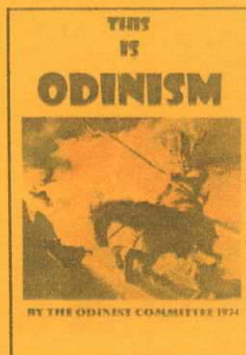
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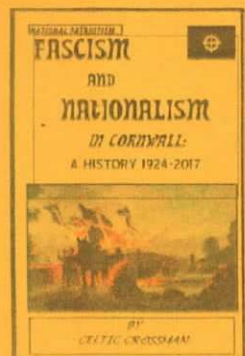
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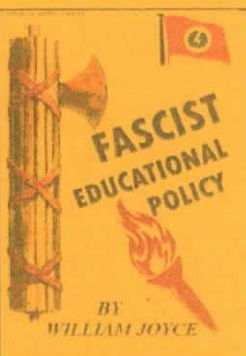
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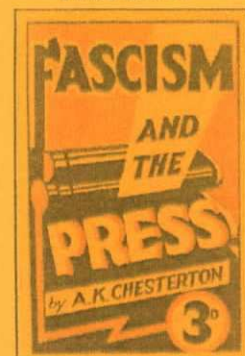
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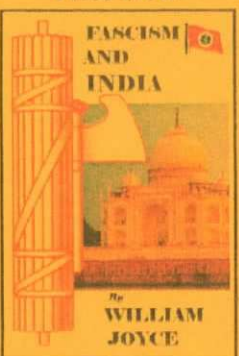
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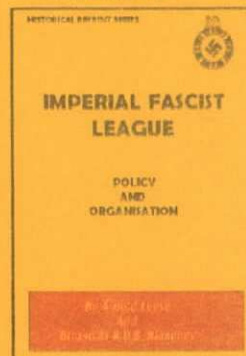
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