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Source: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Apr., 1998), pp. 241-254
Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/260975
Accessed: 19-11-2024 14:35 UTC

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[0022-0094(199804)33:2;241–54;003902]

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> Together in Britain we have lit a flame that the ages shall not extinguish. Guard that sacred flame my brother Blackshirts until it illumines Britain and lights again the Paths of Mankind. ('Comrades in Struggle', Mosley's message to the Blackshirts, June 1938)

The message of encouragement, in difficult times, with which Mosley raised the morale of embattled members of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1938, is still remembered as a clarion call by the 'Friends of OM', the last flickering ember of the sacred flame. At no time was it more needed by the faithful than in 1945, but the full story behind Mosley's return to politics, and the extent to which he remained within a fascist perspective, has still to be written. The release of Home Office files on Mosley's political activities between 1945 and 1948, and the papers of Robert Saunders at the University of Sheffield, however, have provided much interesting new material to assess Mosley's attempted political resurrection after the second world war.[1]

John Hope has argued that the Union Movement acted as a transmission belt between pre- and postwar British fascism. He points to the significance of the internment camps in the second world war, from which new leaders emerged, who were to play an important role in the revival of neo-fascism in Britain after 1945.[2] This is an interesting argument, but fascism was an inter-war phenomenon and many were devastated by internment. Only the most committed wished to revive the tradition in a new form of nostalgic, mimetic or neo-fascism after the war.[3] Why Mosley tried to adapt his fascism to the new realities, in a political climate well symbolized by the deep freeze of the winter of 1947, is the main focus of this article.

The key to Mosley's return to politics, despite his realization that he would be regarded as a political flat-earther, was provided in an interview he gave to

I should like to thank the British Academy for granting me a small personal research award which funded some of this research.

1 PRO HO 45/24467–70/862171/1–396. Robert Saunders papers, University of Sheffield.

2 J. Hope, 'Reviving the Swastika: Mosley and the Union Movement'. Conference on the Failure of British Fascism, Sheffield Hallam University, 21 May 1994. See also A. Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement: Success or Failure?' in M. Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism* (Basingstoke 1996), 53–80.

3 R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London 1991), 161–9; R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (London 1995); R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History 1918–85* (Oxford 1987), 233–48.

the *Sunday Pictorial* in December 1945. He agreed that he could still be regarded as a national socialist and fascist: 'But you and I have always meant different things by those words.'[4] For Mosley, the BUF had literally been a national socialist party dedicated to pursuing purely British interests; public opinion assumed, wrongly, that he was Hitler's representative in Britain. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more unpopular politician, at any stage of British history, than Sir Oswald Mosley was in 1945. This was made abundantly clear in a Home Office intelligence report following Mosley's release from internment in November 1943, which concluded that this action provoked more hostility to the government than any other since 1939. It stressed that 'a feeling lingers that Mosley represents in this country all those things against which we are fighting'. Reported working-class comment was even more blunt: 'Mosley is a traitor and a symbol of fascism', summed up the general mood.[5]

Public attitudes towards the BUF derived from the internment of 747 fascists under Defence Regulation 18b(1a) in May and June 1940.[6] A large majority of BUF members were 'Britain First' national socialists who suffered the indignity of being smeared as potential fifth columnists. Some members, who were not interned, were decorated for bravery during hostilities. The controversial John Brown, a BUF member, was the key figure in both informing British Intelligence about the attempt to establish the British Free Corps at Genshagen prisoner of war 'holiday' camp, and in sabotaging their activities during the latter stages of the war. The British Free Corps was designed to be a battalion of the Waffen SS, fighting the Soviet army on the eastern front. There were, however, a small number who had been associated with the BUF who were not as patriotic as Mosley wished, of whom William Joyce was the most notorious. The official history of British counter-intelligence has an appendix listing ten such individuals.[7] The National Council for Civil Liberties produced a BUF 'Roll of Honour' in 1946, listing two death sentences for treachery, two commuted death sentences, and details of several long prison sentences for ex-BUF members of the British Free Corps.[8] The fact that Mosley expelled all those found guilty of helping the enemy failed to register with British public opinion, which equated British fascism with nazism.

The problem Mosley faced in 1945 was the extent of nazi atrocities during the war. With the BUF being seen as Hitler's potential fifth column, plans for Mosley's political comeback were bound to be seen as far-fetched. Hostility was also engendered by the memory of Mosley's attempt to resurrect the

4 *Sunday Pictorial*, 2 December 1945. Zaidmann papers, University of Sheffield.
5 PRO HO 262/6, Home Office Intelligence Reports.
6 A.W.B. Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious* (Oxford 1992).
7 A. Wheale, *Renegades* (London 1994), 103–13; F.H. Hinsley and C.A.G. Simpkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4, Security and Counter-Intelligence* (London 1990), 319–20.
8 NCCL, 'Roll of Honour', Leaflet in Zaidmann papers. Also in PRO HO 45/24468/862171/319; A. Wheale, op. cit.

movement with a disreputable antisemitic campaign in the east end of London after 1935.

Internment and intense public hostility had devastating effects on BUF members and their families. Many were suspicious of those not interned, who were seen as suspected *agents provocateurs* or MI5 agents. Even the charitable 18b detainees aid fund, set up to help internees and their dependants, was interpreted as dubious in some quarters, and Special Branch reported on petty jealousies between rivals bidding to attract the leader's eye. In the internment camps, some of the junior ranks rebelled against the leadership. Some complained of third degree treatment at the MI5 interrogation centre at Latchmere House, Ham Common. Charlie Watts claimed to have been tortured by the British 'Gestapo', and in response established the 'Hail Mosley and the f*** 'em all association', which he used as a springboard to take over the leadership at the Ascot internment camp.[9] After release in November 1941, he established a network of ex-BUF internees, organized a party on Mosley's birthday at which he dressed up in the illegal Blackshirt uniform, and circulated an underground newspaper, *The Flame*:

> Blackshirts struggle and go through ostracism, ridicule, hate, persecution and punishment in order that by their mutual efforts, the result of which they may not see in their own lives, so that the whole plague-stricken fabric of the Britain of today may die, and the new Greater Britain may arise, a new Phoenix, under our children's hands.[10]

The Home Office argued for the re-detention of Watts and two others who had been released because the authorities believed in the sincerity of their claims to aid the war effort and to undertake national service. None of them had done so by Febuary 1943, and Special Branch suspected them of being responsible for the daubing of the Lenin memorial.

Watts was not the only one to keep the sacred flame burning. An interesting Special Branch report of the ex-18b reunion dinner at the Royal Hotel on 15 December 1945 spoke of the religious veneration in which Mosley was held by his supporters. It commented that the *Daily Worker*'s account, which spoke of the 'wildest hysteria', was not at all exaggerated. Mosley was given a delirious welcome; he said he would confine himself to publishing his ideas, which had been strengthened, not changed, by the war. Special Branch noted the security measures taken to prevent the collection of signatures for an appeal for the commutation of William Joyce's death sentence. Mosley was not going to give the state any excuse for suppressing his publications. At the end of his speech there was a crush of hysterical hero-worshippers, some of whom burst into emotional tears after touching his clothes.[11] As a result of this reunion, the Cabinet established a Committee on Fascism under the chairmanship of Lord Jowitt, the Lord Chancellor, which decided in April 1946 that fascism should not be banned but kept under careful surveillance.

9 C. Watts, 'It has happened here', unpublished manuscript, University of Sheffield, 59.

10 *The Flame*, no. 22, January 1943. Saunders papers, PRO HO 144/21845/865071/15. For the history of internment, see the excellent account in Simpson, op. cit.

11 PRO HO 45/24467/862171/183, PRO CAB 129/8 CP (46) 137.

Other ex-members of the BUF were less enthusiastic to become martyrs. A few, like Nellie Driver, found a new object of veneration, the Roman Catholic faith. Others became followers of 'the comic religious cult claiming Hitler as No. 2 Jesus'.[12] Some deserted in bitter mood. All the most important leaders except Mosley and Raven Thomson left the movement. Many fascist internees found it difficult to obtain permanent employment once it was known that they were ex-members of the BUF. Several of Robert Saunders' correspondents were unenthusiastic about continuing their association with Mosley, despite their commitment to fascism: 'To belong to any organisation which is not in Jewish pay is to court yet further imprisonment . . . I shall with amusement watch the school mam, the Jew and the nancy boy lick up the mess they have made', was one comment made about the new Labour government elected in 1945.[13] Another wrote, 'We were covered with mud to such an extent that I doubt whether we could ever be successful, and when the next war comes, we might all end in jail.' The same correspondent later wrote that she had not 'ratted', was still loyal to the British Union and often wore the badge, but internment meant, 'the Proletariat regard us as Quislings'.[14]

Some of Mosley's followers, however, encouraged him to re-enter politics. To Mosley's enemies, his political return was an expression of his megalomania.[15] Mosley realized that he would have to be extremely careful how he managed his comeback. He relied on the state to uphold the principle of freedom of speech within the law, which had traditionally been of paramount concern — a principle which the Cabinet Committee on Fascism and the Home Office was to confirm in 1946.[16] Mosley was very aware of the pressures to ban fascism; the Home Office had many requests from the Labour movement to outlaw his political activities.[17] Mosley was equally worried about the threat to ban him as a result of public disorder. Not only were communists concerned to prevent Mosley's return, but a new militant Jewish anti-fascist organisation, the 43 Group, demonstrated against Jeffrey Hamm's British League of ex-Servicemen, Victor Burgess's Union of British Freedom and, after 1948, the Union Movement.[18]

Why then, given the depth of political hostility, did Mosley feel duty-bound to return to the political fray? Was he nothing more than a charismatic egomaniac convinced of his own political destiny? No doubt personality factors did play their part, but an ideological obsession drove him. The second world war had destroyed fascism, but for Mosley the reasons for his fascist revolt had been reinforced, not made redundant.

Continued struggle was the order of the day, as both state and society boy-

12 PRO HO 45/24467/862171/211; also Saunders collection.
13 Ralph Jebb to Robert Saunders, 29.5.46.
14 Dr Margaret Vivian to Robert Saunders, 30.12.47, 19.5.50.
15 M. Beckman, *The 43 Group* (London 1993), 11.
16 R. Thurlow, *The Secret State* (Oxford 1994), 276; PRO HO 45/25399/865252/8.
17 PRO HO 45/24469/862171/396.
18 M. Beckman, op. cit.

cotted his message. Not only did the authorities monitor his every move, but no mainstream publisher would market his books; W.H. Smith and other newspaper retailers refused to sell his newspapers, he remained persona non grata at the BBC until 1968, and most local authorities continued the ban on his speaking in council property. Attempts to circumvent these restrictions failed to publicize his message; Mosley published his own books, Mosleyites established book clubs to discuss his new ideas, sold *Union* on street corners and held meetings in public places across London, particularly in Dalston, after the war. A plethora of ingeniously titled front organizations booked meetings in council property. Mosley failed to break the publicity boycott. According to the Home Office, the long-range plan was to amalgamate the local Mosley Book Clubs with the populist street corner groups in a 'spontaneous' demonstration to coax Mosley back into politics. Mosley's impact, however, was summed up in a Home Office minute: 'The response to all Mosley's melodramatic comings and goings is negligible.'[19] Only a ubiquitous graffiti campaign on hoardings all round the country reminded people of the continued existence of Mosley.

Yet Mosley revamped the faith in drastically altered circumstances. His intention was made clear from the outset; his first book, published as soon as he had obtained the necessary paper, was *My Answer* (Ramsbury 1946), which combined a scathing attack on the internment of BUF members with the seventh edition of *Tomorrow We Live*, the most eloquent statement of his fascist beliefs in the 1930s. This was a clear signal to his supporters that he had kept the faith: 'When next together we turn our eyes toward the future, we may discern — rising like a Phoenix from the ashes — the undying soul of England and the European man.'[20] His second book after 1945, *The Alternative* (Ramsbury 1947) argued that only he could save Europe from the 'architects of chaos', as all others with an alternative vision had been 'silenced'.[21] Some of the Mosley Book Clubs had more pronounced links to the past, as well as to 'Modern Thought'. Thus, the Spengler Book Club in Winchester, the Phoenix Book Club (Manchester, Bristol and Croydon) and the Corporate Club in Oxford, were blatant reminders of some of the main themes of the BUF.

The key to Mosley's postwar thought is his reading matter during the second world war.[22] The intellectual diet of Greek philosophy, Goethe's *Faust*, modern psychology and Spengler, reinforced his fascist beliefs. In the postwar era they were adapted to a new synthesis: 'An idea that shall carry men beyond what is called Democracy and even beyond Fascism. From the flames that end an epoch rises the idea of the future.'[23] Mosley's new journal in the 1950s, *The*

19 PRO HO 45/24468/862171/326.
20 O. Mosley, *My Answer* (Ramsbury 1946), 39.
21 O. Mosley, *The Alternative* (Ramsbury 1947), 9.
22 N. Mosley, *Beyond the Pale* (London 1983), 216–27; R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London 1975), 465–80.
23 O. Mosley, *The Alternative*, op. cit., 11; *Union*, 55, 5/3/49.

European, attracted some interesting literary and academic figures, but made little impact; in fact, for some who declared their regard for Mosley's ideas, like the novelist Henry Williamson, it deleteriously affected their reputation.

Yet BUF ideas have been seen as one of the more impressive examples of fascist thought, often cited as part of the argument that fascists were more than political thugs, and that 'generic fascism' was a coherent political ideology. For our purposes, fascism can be interpreted as a combination of elements from the definitions of Stanley Payne, Zeev Sternhell, Roger Griffin and Roger Eatwell.

Payne stressed three criteria in a Weberian 'ideal type' list definition: ideology and goals, the 'fascist negations', and style and organization. His one-sentence definition was that fascism was

> . . . a form of revolutionary ultra-nationalism for national rebirth that is based on a primarily vitalist philosophy, is structured on extreme élitism, mass mobilisation, and the Führerprinzip, positively values violence as end as well as means and tends to normatize war and/or the military virtues.[24]

Sternhell saw Mosley as a classic example of Valois' mathematical definition, that nationalism + socialism = fascism. While Mosley's fascism was not a revision of Marxism, and was seen by him as a practical materialist programme, it also included an ethical critique of bourgeois decadence and was perceived as a revolutionary doctrine, a third way, neither right nor left.[25]

For Griffin, Mosley's fascism was steeped in the alleged decadence of British interwar society. Fascism was also at root a manic, revolutionary, palingenetic doctrine, whose mythic core advocated renaissance, or rebirth, through a populist ultra-nationalism; in Mosley's case the development of the 'Greater Britain', the British Empire.[26] The phoenix thus became a prominent symbol of the BUF. Mosley's fascism was much influenced by the 'conservative revolution', of the application of the mythic interpretation of the past as applied to modernity and the future, and Spengler's *Decline of the West*, as perceived by Mosley, Raven Thomson and James Drennan, was interpreted as a gloom and doom philosophy that only fascism could avert.[27]

Eatwell has highlighted the key role of synthesis in Mosley's thought. The dialectical method emphasized the convergence of doctrine within fascism of ideas taken from both the extreme right and the revolutionary left. More recently he has emphasized the national roots of fascism, particularly with the conditions for success or failure of the movement, and has summarized his interpretation of fascism as

24 S. Payne, *The History of Fascism* (London 1996), 24; idem, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison 1980), 3–21.

25 Z. Sternhell, 'Fascist Ideology' in W. Laqueur (ed.), *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* (Harmondsworth 1979), 325–406.

26 Griffin, op. cit.; R. Griffin, *Fascism, A Reader* (Oxford 1995), 1–12.

27 Sir O. Mosley, 'The Philosophy of Fascism', *Fascist Quarterly*, January 1935, 35–46; J. Drennan, *BUF: Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London 1934); R. Thurlow, 'Destiny and Doom: Spengler, Hitler and "British" Fascism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 15.4.1981, 17–26.

> . . . an ideology that strives to achieve national rebirth based on a syncretic holistic-national radical Third Way though in practice fascism has tended to stress style (especially action and the charismatic leader) more than detailed programme, and to employ a manichean demonisation of its enemies.[28]

While Mosley was a self-proclaimed fascist, and seen as such by his enemies and by social scientists, there were unique features to his creed. The BUF, despite left-wing propaganda to the contrary, defended itself against disruption of its activities in the 1930s, and displayed an unwillingness to use offensive violence against the state or anti-fascists.[29] It was also a mainly pacificist movement, in that it was anti-war, particularly a 'brother's war' in Europe against the fascist powers. Mosley conceived his 'political soldiers' as constructive builders of a new civilization as much as destroyers of the old world. He advocated rearmament, but only as deterrence against attacks on the British Empire. *The Greater Britain* was a utopian plan for the construction of a fascist empire. Like other renegade socialists, such as de Man and Déat, Mosley produced a practical plan for his fascist synthesis, envisaged a strong state, an autarkic empire, a managed currency, a planned economy, full employment and the creation of a corporate system. The fact that synthesis was such a core feature of Mosley's fascism meant that the development of his thought was pragmatic and flexible; fresh emphases could be developed according to new political realities, even though the central beliefs of the fascist myth remained unaltered.

Thus, when Mosley's postwar thought was compared with interwar fascism, it needed to be interpreted through the frank comments that Raven Thomson circulated to Union Movement speakers. In 1949, he argued that the Labour government had made such a mess of the economy, with the introduction of bread rationing and the banning of luxuries, like imported fruit in 1947, that there was no longer any need for soap-box orators to be defensive about fascism, as the long predicted crisis was now imminent.[30]

Indeed, in some ways Mosley's thought became more fascist after 1945. He tried to readjust his brand of national socialism to the realities of the postwar world. The main surface difference was that the projected political unit of Mosley's 'modern thought' was no longer the Greater Britain, but Europe-a-Nation. This was seen as an 'extension of patriotism' rather than a change in the mythic core, although some of the Mosleyite defections were caused by the inability of followers to accept the transmutation of the British fascist empire into a united Europe, as the utopian project for which they were striving. Yet 'eurofascism' was already latent in Mosley's ideas in the 1930s. It was derived from Mosley's article, 'The World Alternative' in the *Fascist Quarterly*, in which he had suggested spheres of interest for the major fascist nations after

28 R. Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 4.2.1992, 161–94; idem, *Fascism: A History* (London 1995); idem, 'On Defining the "Fascist Minimum". The Centrality of Ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 1.3.1996, 303–19.

29 Thurlow, *The Secret State*, op. cit., 182–203.

30 Speakers Notes No. 5, Union Movement 1949. Saunders Collection.

the BUF had come to power.[31] This was a geopolitical delusion, but there were precedents for both 'Europe-a-Nation' and its development, 'Europe–Africa', based on strict apartheid principles suggested by Mosley's South African friend, the ex-Nationalist minister, Oswald Pirow. This would provide the necessary lebensraum for the projected 'third force' between 'Mob' (Soviet communism) and 'Money' (USA). Without unity, Mosley believed that a divided Europe would become a prey to new barbarians and be undermined by communism. This was similar to the 'new order' beliefs of the more idealistic collaborators, like Déat and Doriot, who confused Hitler's version with a prototype European union. 'Europe–Africa' was also not a new idea, being part of the day-dreams of the Salò republic and the German colonial office.

If Mosley's geopolitical analysis after 1945 strengthened his fascist beliefs, the experience of internment and the defeat of nazism led him to modify some of his ideas within a more democratic framework. Like Mussolini, Mosley reverted to his left-wing roots once fascism had failed. European socialism, his new faith, envisaged workers' control in industry, with a syndical organization in the early 1950s, and the managerial revolution extolled in *Europe: Faith and Plan*.[32] This developed from British fascist interwar thought, particularly as expressed in Raven Thomson's *The Coming Corporate State*, but was far less bureaucratic and more decentralized, and extolled individual initiative. A wage–price mechanism, a prices and incomes policy which enabled planned and stable economic growth, would provide the environment in which the conditions for true freedom could be attained. Expanded welfare provision from a strong state harked back to Mosley's concerns with social democracy from his days in the Independent Labour Party, as well as reflecting wartime developments. Similarly, freedom of speech and personal liberty were given greater prominence in Mosley's writings and speeches. While this had also been a theme of BUF propaganda, so had 'leadership' and Mosley's dictatorial powers over the movement.[33] Now the experience of internment led Mosley to pledge himself to the maintenance of habeas corpus in all circumstances, and the diminution of the powers of the executive over the liberties of the individual.

At no stage did Mosley ever feel the need to apologize for the past, for his restless activism was dedicated to the creation of the (fascist) 'new man'. The Lamarckian view of evolution, of the transmission of acquired characteristics, and the Nietzschean 'will to power' of the superman, provided the philosophical justification for Mosley's interwar fascism; a new 'higher type' could evolve from an indoctrinated élite dedicated to the service of the nation through fascism. After 1945, this shadowy belief was further developed with reference to the heroic vitalist tradition, reflecting his internment reading

31 O. Mosley, 'The World Alternative', *Fascist Quarterly*, 2, 4 (October 1936), 377–95.

32 O. Mosley, *European Socialism* (London 1951); O. Mosley, *Europe: Faith and Plan* (London 1958).

33 Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 145–62; Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 259–64.

matter.[34] For Mosley the 'will to achievement' was the 'purpose of God', and only through constant striving could mankind evolve in the modern era. The future was the creation of the new higher type, the Faustian 'Thought–Deed' man. This was the core of *The Alternative*, Mosley's new agenda for the post-fascist world after 1945. Like Faust and Siegfried, Mosley pondered on the dilemma of how 'evil' could be used in the service of the community, how dynamism and action could be harnessed for the benefit of all, without causing harm to individuals.

This was heroic wishful thinking on a vast scale, as Mosley's gloomy prognostication for the future of Europe failed to materialize. The assumption on which it was based was misplaced; the capitalist West under American leadership proved far from decadent, and was even less in terminal decline. Twenty-five years of economic growth for the non-communist states of western Europe resulted, not the collapse of civilization. Mosley's ideological fantasy about defending Europe from 'barbarians' and the 'asiatic hordes' of bolshevism had unfortunate affinities to nazi propaganda. His continued reliance on fascist modes of thought, even if they had been watered down to reflect new realities, made his views questionable and, ultimately, redundant; a political dodo from a bygone age.

While the British media ignored his jeremiad and ostracized him, and radicals opposed all manifestations of nostalgic fascism, Mosley, obsessively convinced of the correctness of his prognosis, felt it necessary to warn his countrymen of their impending doom. Nobody listened. The great crisis of western civilization and the British nation, which the BUF had been created to solve, failed to materialize, no matter how many times Mosley, Raven Thomson, Jeffrey Hamm or Robert Row predicted its imminent arrival from the 1930s to the 1990s. The 'old gangs' managed Britain's decline successfully through the transformation of the British Empire into the Commonwealth, and through joining the European Community; the Union Movement proved even more marginal to British politics than the BUF had been.

The story of Mosley's failed political resurrection is quickly told. The Union Movement, created by the merging of 47 book clubs and four political organizations in February 1948, was a fringe element in British political life. It was mainly ignored by the media, apart from the minor problems of political violence resulting from the opposition of the anti-fascists of the 43 Group in 1948–9, and the Yellow Star organization in 1962. Indeed, the Union Movement made little impact outside London. Its most important original contribution to political life was its pioneer role in making immigration an increasingly important factor in British politics during the 1950s. Anti-semitism was toned down for the most part, and black immigrants replaced Jews as scapegoats. Diethelm Prowe has argued that opposition to immigration became the great recruiting sergeant of the new radical right in Europe, and this, together with structural differences between European society in the

34 E. Bentley, *The Cult of the Superman* (New York 1946).

interwar period and post-1945, differentiated classic fascism from the racial populism of contemporary neo-fascism and the far right.[35]

Certainly, the Union Movement was the first significant political organization in Britain to attack the 'coloured invasion'. In 1951, *Union* regaled its readership with alleged tales of the coloured work-shy, dope-pedlars, molesters of white women, and black crime. As early as 1952, the Union Movement was demanding a 'white Brixton'.[36] The Union Movement's most notorious involvement in national politics was when it was falsely accused of being primarily responsible for the Notting Hill riots in 1958, together with the failed campaign in the 1959 general election when Mosley lost his deposit in north Kensington with 8.5 per cent of the poll. As in the 1930s, the association of Mosley with dubious elements such as Teddy boys, and his propensity for attracting violence, proved counter-productive; as Nicholas Mosley commented, 'the right hand dealt with grandiose ideas and glory, the left hand let the rat out of the sewer'.[37] The BUF had failed because of the impossibility of harmonizing its dialectical contradictions. The Union Movement was even more unreal. Unity could not be achieved, nor deeply-rooted class and group differences spirited away by wishful thinking.

Mosley finally retired from active politics in 1966, but the publication of his autobiography, *My Life*, in 1968 led to a partial rehabilitation, as old political opponents were often generous in praise of his less than fully frank memoirs, which more hostile critics saw as the work of an expert forgetter. It had the effect, however, of ending the media boycott. The publication of Robert Skidelsky's biography in 1975 created a degree of controversy, but it provided an intriguing account of Mosley's career, which increased public interest in the reasons for the disastrous failure of his political odyssey. Mosley died in 1980, partially rehabilitated as an occasional journalist in the *Sunday Telegraph*.

The Union Movement, then, failed to register for the most part on any political Richter scale. Indeed, Mosley's new ideas made more impact in Europe than in Britain and he was, like other fascist survivors such as Degrelle and Bardèche, one of the connecting links between 'classic' fascism and the emergence of the neo-fascist New Right in the 1960s. But it would be naive to consider that the Union Movement was the sole political vehicle of Mosley's attempted return to politics. His move to Ireland and then to France in 1949 demonstrated that he was fully aware that he was regarded as a political bad smell in Britain. In spite of Mosley's numerous comebacks, the Union Movement remained a political pariah on the fringe of British society, whose purpose was to provide the vehicle that Mosley could use once the great crisis struck, after which he could offer himself, in the style of de Gaulle, as the

35 D. Prowe, 'Classic Fascism and the New Radical Right in Western Europe: Comparison and Continuity', *Contemporary European History*, 3.3.1994, 289–313.

36 *Union*, 7 July 1951, 5 April 1952, 19 July 1954. See also O. Mosley, 'Decision on Colour Question', 27 February 1952, and Briefing of Speakers, No.13, 5 December 1951, Saunders Collection.

37 R. Skidelsky, op. cit., 512.

alternative leader, the man who had been right all along and who was not responsible for the decline of Britain. In the meantime, the secret use of infiltration and permeation by Mosleyites into civil society was to be a crucial tactic in bringing Mosley's ideas to the attention of the public.

Mosleyites had learned from methods which the state and the CPGB had used against the BUF; political surveillance and infiltration had damaged the fascists in the 1930s, and the success of the communist 'solar system' in manipulating satellite and front organizations in the 'People's Front' in the 1930s had been noted. Mosley justified the necessity for such underhand methods as a response to 'the repression of our propaganda by a Government which was entrusted with power for other purposes, which they have completely betrayed'.[38] One of the aims of the Union Movement, as Raven Thomson explained in his notes for speakers, was to create the 'no party' state, an updated version of the corporate state, where integral nationalism would replace the divisions of the party game, supposedly guided by the propaganda of Mosleyite activists infiltrated into existing organizations.[39]

Enough of such underground activity has surfaced, however, to suggest that this was an integral part of Mosley's strategy. In November 1953, Robert Row wrote from headquarters to Robert Saunders: 'Incidentally, I understand that permeation is proving highly successful in a number of cases in the movement from the leader downwards. Our success will one day astonish the old gangs.'[40] The contrast with the BUF was marked. While Mosley tried to permeate the establishment through the dining activities of the January Club in the 1930s, its failure led the BUF to concentrate on its low politics campaign. After 1948, the Union Movement reversed this process, increasingly becoming a sideshow to keep the loyal acolytes involved. What was important for Mosley was that his ideas should become a major feature of political discourse. Here, permeation of other organizations was to be the key. In an important circular, written by a 'skilled and experienced observer' in 1949, the Union Movement was viewed as a cadre training-ground for the Mosleyite élite. The aim was for those cadres to convert to Mosley's ideas leading members of other organizations in civil society which they had infiltrated for that purpose.[41]

The chief instigator of the permeation tactic was Charlie Watts, and its origins were pre-war, although it assumed much greater significance after 1945. In 1938, Watts established trade groups, in preparation for the coming of the corporate state. He 'had become thoroughly convinced of the tremendous value and importance of infiltration and permeation into trade unions and, in fact, all existing organisations'. He argued that political meetings were not attended by most British citizens and that non-active converts could be employed in 'genuinely and honestly working for the benefit of the

38 *Union*, 8 May 1948. My thanks to Kate Cross for this reference.
39 Union Movement policy notes, No.15, Saunders Collection.
40 Robert Row to Robert Saunders, 5 November 1953.
41 Circular from the leader, 1949. Saunders Collection.

organisation and their fellows', in positions of trust and responsibility in civil society. Then,

> . . . when the crack-up comes, and you and I know just how inevitable that is; when the masses of the people find that they want a strong lead, these men and women will be in the best position to come out into the open and join forces with this active movement.[42]

At the end of the war, Watts had sent a cyclostyled circular to ex-18b detainees expressing similar sentiments.[43] He became disillusioned — not with his faith in Mosley; he was merely tired of banging his head against a brick wall. The British public, in his view, did not deserve Mosley's inspired leadership, as it continued to scapegoat British fascists for nazi atrocities.[44]

Not all Mosleyites, however, became as disillusioned as Watts. Mosley indefatigably organized seminars in later life, and circulated his *Broadsheet*, outlining his ideas to a larger audience. These were often updates on old themes, calling for closer British integration in Europe, a more rational solution to the Irish problem within a European framework and greater British government executive powers with authority to act. The seminars, too, were shrouded in secrecy; members of the seminars 'will know each other by their Christian names as a considerable proportion will not be known as associated with us'.[45]

An interesting example of permeation was the later career of Robert Saunders, OBE. Saunders was a Mosleyite from the time he joined the BUF in 1933 until his death in 1989. Before 1939, he was parliamentary agent for the BUF in the Dorset West constituency. Interned for a period during the war, he established the Wessex Book Club (1946–7), and was the Union Movement District Organizer in Dorchester from 1948 to 1953. In 1953 he became a non-active member, and resigned from the Union Movement in 1963, so as not to compromise his work in the National Farmers' Union (NFU), of which he had now become a leading figure. From the 1950s, his working life was dedicated to the NFU, and he served on more committees than any other executive committee member from 1963 until the late 1970s.[46]

Saunders' papers suggest that this was a planned strategy following the Watts model. In 1952 he wrote that, ever since his internment, he thought the best way to publicize Mosley's message was through personal example and unselfishly serving the local community to the best of his ability, by operating as an 'Independent' in local politics and work for the NFU or the Rural Reconstruction Association.[47]

Saunders' contribution was such that he only lost by one vote to Henry

42 Charlie Watts to Robert Saunders, 7 January 1950.
43 Watts to Saunders, 7 October 1945. See also PRO HO 45/ 24467/862171/211.
44 Watts, 'It has happened here', op. cit., 87.
45 Sir O. Mosley to R. Saunders, 20 July 1960. Saunders Papers, *Broadsheet*, 10, 23 and 26, 1971–4. Nuffield College, Oxford. My thanks to Colin Cook for this material.
46 R. Saunders, OBE, 'A Tiller of Several Soils', Saunders Collection.
47 R. Saunders to Price-Heywood, 15 December 1951.

Plumb (later, Sir Henry, then Lord Plumb), for the national vice-presidency of the NFU in 1963. He saw this defeat as the result of making public his past connection with Mosley. As he made clear in his unpublished autobiography, Saunders' hard work for the NFU had as part of its rationale the political objective of aiding Sir Oswald Mosley. 'The Tiller of Several Soils' lists his aims and how he had influenced the NFU and government. His tireless campaign to make Britain as self-sufficient as possible in agricultural production had become government policy during Peter Walker's tenure at the Department of Agriculture, and his arguments for Britain to join the Common Market had finally become NFU policy. Thus, Mosleyite influence, in however small a way, became incorporated, surreptitiously, into democratic pressure group politics.

The general conclusion must be that permeation was no more successful than the Union Movement. John Charnley also stated that his work in local Chambers of Trade after the war was designed to increase Mosley's influence by permeation tactics. Similarly, it was the object of his work in the local Conservative association, although he failed to become a parliamentary candidate.[48] All this, however, was very small beer. Mosley's secret attempts at infiltration and permeation had negligible influence. The establishment of the National Council of Labour to counter communist influence in the TUC lasted for only three years (1949–52); the work in local parliaments, debating societies and the Rural Reconstruction Association had minimal impact; the general tenor of Labour and Conservative economic policy was not influenced in the slightest by Mosley; any surface similarities derived from other influences. Indeed, Thatcherism was guided by laissez-faire policies which envisaged a very different sort of strong state from Mosley's version.

Yet, despite Mosley's personally catastrophic political failure, and the often unpleasant implications of his fascist and post-fascist political agenda, the power of his thought made him more than an intellectual magpie. A utopian visionary, nevertheless, his concern with action meant the formulation of a pragmatic response to the crises of the twentieth-century world; he became a Keynesian before Keynes and a European before the European movement. For example, the wage–price mechanism was a prices and incomes policy ten years ahead of its time. Unfortunately, the fascist packaging associated with the name of Mosley meant that the *enfant terrible* of interwar British politics was forever condemned to baying in the backwaters of British politics. Ironically, too, he was to play a diminishing role in the revival of the neo-fascist tradition after 1945. In Britain, while stealing the emperor's interwar clothes, the National Front in the 1960s, and the British National Party in the 1980s derided Mosley's postwar Europeanism. Similarly, despite being a leading influence on the development of a pan-European, 'new order' idea, Euro-fascism failed to get off the ground after either the Malmo (1951) or Venice conference (1962). While being a precursor of the intellectual proto-fascist

48 J. Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses* (London 1990), 208.

wing of the 'New Right', Mosley proved to be the antithesis of a Gramsci, or perhaps more appropriately, an Evola of Eurofascism; a revolutionary whose ideas failed to register in the intellectual or cultural mainstream, even if he was a pioneer of the various syntheses of fascist, racial populist and democratic traditions which came to characterize forms of neo-fascism in Europe after 1945, some of whose features Roger Griffin, for example, has detected as recently as the creation of the 'post-fascist' Alleanza Nazionale.[49]

Unfortunately, other aspects of Mosley's political inheritance still reverberate. His pioneering role in nativist and anti-immigrant politics acted as a precursor to its function in reviving a radical right neo-fascist tradition in European politics. His restless Faustian spirit turned him into a political Jeremiah, to whom few listened, and given the regeneration of the decadent West, against which pre-war fascists had railed, Mosley's post-fascist synthesis left him shouting in the political wilderness; like José Antonio Primo de Rivera, a hero in an empty room.

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49 R. Griffin, 'The "Post-Fascism" of the Alleanza Nazionale: A Case Study in Ideological Morphology', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 1.2.1996, 123–45.