*Democracy in Peril: Great Britain Between the Wars* Week One Posting Mick Chantler

While the Great Depression of the 1930s did not hit Great Britain quite as ferociously as it did other Western nations, things were still bad enough during “The Slump” in Old Blighty. The world-wide economic downturn wiped out many key industries, and severely impacted the nation’s export trade. At the outset of the Depression the pound was overvalued in comparison with other currencies, resulting in a drastic decline in foreign trade. Agriculture, heavy industry, coal mining, and ship building all experienced a severe decline, resulting in massive unemployment levels, especially in the older cities of the factory belt in northern England, Scotland, and Wales. In many of these formerly prosperous cities, fifty percent (and in some cases even more than that) of the workforce was idled. The Southern counties—Greater London and the southeast—escaped the worst ravages of the worldwide economic storm due to a generous government program of housebuilding and construction of the transportation infrastructure.

Totalitarianism—be it Fascism or Communism or any other dark ‘ism’—can thrive in such desperate times. Unemployed men who cannot care for themselves or their families—especially workers who had once held decent paying jobs, people who thought they were playing by the rules—can become desperate and irrational. A sense of betrayal makes men mean, and willing to listen to demagogues who spout easy answers to terribly complex problems. Hunger on a mass scale is the natural ‘fertilizer’ for extremist politics. Consequently, England’s ruling classes shuddered when they saw signs that triggered fears of some kind of uprising by the ‘lower orders of society,’ and there were plenty of such warnings during the tumultuous 1930s. Half-starved beggars began to rudely demand handouts on the sidewalks outside of Harrods and St. Paul’s, and often hurled insults at the finely dressed members of the upper crust if they were denied sixpence. Even members of the Royal Family were accosted by grimy cockneys demanding “Food! Give us food! We don’t need royal parasites.” Such lese majeste shook the British Establishment to the core.

Worse still, the unemployed began to gather into organized groups of “hunger marchers” parading through the streets and shouting menacing slogans and issuing vague threats if their demands for relief were not met. Many middle class householders and wealthy aristocrats began to fear that some kind of leftist revolution was brewing, and that even Shakespeare’s blessed Albion was not immune to the disease of Bolshevism. Could it really be that the dispossessed field laborer who had once deferentially doffed his cap in respect to the lord of the manor would actually join a Red Uprising, threatening all the pillars of society in the process? The most frightening of these demonstrations—dubbed ‘Hunger Riots’ by the tabloids—took place in October of 1932. Thousands of ragged marchers poured into the City of London, clogging the streets and hurling invectives against the privileged, well-fed onlookers

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 recoiling in horror. The angry mob descended on Lambeth Bridge where they were met by a phalanx of determined Bobbies wielding truncheons. But still the throng of outraged protesters surged forward, and were checked only when the police blocked the bridgehead by placing lorries parked hub to hub. The maneuver forced the exhausted marchers to disperse, but it was only a temporary victory for the authorities.

A second—and much better organized hunger march—took place just days later. Down and out workers from all over the country descended on the capital vowing to present a petition to Parliament bearing the signatures of over a million unemployed men and women calling for government relief. The marchers came from as far as northern Scotland and Wales. Many came by rail, but others literally walked the hundreds of miles to London. In the countryside, churches and local charity organizations fed the marchers. But when they arrived in The City, a cabinet minister told the House of Commons that Bolsheviks were behind the mass demonstration. “So let the Communists feed their comrades,” Conservatives in the House snarled. Clearly the protestors could expect no welcome from Parliament. Predictably, things then got ugly. The mob took over Trafalgar Square, stoning limousines and roughing up well dressed men. Bobbies once again waded in with their billy clubs, forcing the mob back. The march’s leaders then called on their followers to descend on No. 10 Downing Street where they would present their demands directly to the Prime Minister. Amazingly, only a solitary Bobbie guarding the front door was on hand to preserve order. Just a few hundred yards from their objective the rioters sensed victory was at hand. But at that crucial juncture, the tide turned. Mounted cavalrymen in full parade uniform—The Royal Horse Guards—emerged from their stables and formed a line across the entrance to Downing Street. These picked soldiers normally just performed ceremonial duties in front of gawking tourists, but this day they had a real job to do: protect the government. The scarlet clad riders donned their plumbed silver helmets, unsheathed gleaming swords from polished scabbards, and formed a thin red line across the street. The demonstrators outnumbered the Guards by a ratio of 20:1, and probably could have forced their way through, but they stopped, as if thunderstruck by the awesome display of force in their path. All the traditional majesty of panoplied aristocratic power seemed to paralyze the marchers. They halted, milled about disconsolately for a while, and finally dispersed. Their petition with its million names was confiscated by Scotland Yard, and the men were sent packing back to their home towns. The railroad owners, relieved to see the mob disperse, charged only token fares to get rid of “the rabble.”

The march failed, but it rattled the powers that be. Conservative leaders breathed a sigh of relief, but feared that this was just the beginning of a social upheaval that would overturn the prevailing order if left to fester. For many Conservatives, it seemed as though only

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overwhelming force could preserve the once-comfortable status quo. And what kind of government could wield such terrifying might? Surely not a flabby, liberal democracy with its endless pettifogging rules and anxious concern for human rights. No, a tougher approach to maintaining law and order may well be needed, and there was an example of just such a hard headed approach to governance only a few hundred miles to the East. A Nazi regime had just assumed power in Berlin, and they offered a solution that was quite appealing in the minds of Britain’s reactionary upper crust. The seductive lure of Fascism had begun to infect the “Downton Abby” set.