

## Week Three Posting: The Rise of British Fascism

When we think of Fascism during the Twenties and Thirties, our minds automatically conjure up images of jack-booted Nazi thugs vandalizing synagogues, or Italian legions committing atrocities against innocent Ethiopian tribesmen. One also shudders at the memory of Franco's regime choking out the last remnants of Spanish democracy during the brutal civil war of 1936-1939 and its aftermath. But one rarely, if ever, ponders the possibility of Fascism arising in Merry Old England. Surely our "British Cousins" were simply too civilized, too committed to parliamentary democracy, and too enamored with the spirit of fair play to embrace such a barbaric political philosophy. Great Britain had a long history of liberal legal institutions and a deep seated respect for the citizenry's civil liberties which must have inoculated them from the lure of authoritarianism.

But in fact, Great Britain, like almost every European nation, was at risk of succumbing to the Fascist tide sweeping across the continent. Much of the time, the Fascist threat in England looked very much like the sinister movements abroad: men dressed in menacing black uniforms beating up Jews in London's East End, adoring crowds giving the Fascist salute to a home-grown Fuhrer at mass rallies, street brawls between rightists and radical leftists. But all this was only the obvious side of British Fascism. More important was the fact that much of the nation's media was pro-Fascist—"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!" (the term describing the members of the British Union of Fascists, or B.U.F., resulting from their distinctive dark apparel) blared one *Daily Mail* headline in 1934. Most of England's most popular daily newspapers were supportive of the movement at home, and very sympathetic to Germany and Italy's aggressions in Europe. Respected Members of Parliament and the House of Lords were openly enthusiastic in their support of the growing movement, and even some Cabinet members of the ruling government were quite frank in their admiration of Fascism's core values and methods. "Desperate times call for desperate measures" and all that. While most liberals and leftists fretted about growing Fascist strength in London, where the most dramatic (and heavily publicized) demonstrations, marches, and mass meetings took place, the movement had legions of followers in the agricultural sections of England, and even in the universities and the Church of England. The movement was largely unchecked by the authorities until 1936 when Parliament passed the Public Order Act which banned political uniforms and empowered the police to stop violent harassment of Jewish citizens. But even then, the seriousness of the Fascist danger still wasn't fully recognized by most prominent Britons, in large part because so many influential figures actually *approved* of the Blackshirts' policies. It wasn't until the outbreak of the Second World War that the British public finally grasped the truly subversive nature of the movement, and sensing that it represented a fifth column for the enemy, hundreds of Fascists were arrested and interned in prison. Among the detainees would be Diana Mosley, wife of the B.U.F. Fuhrer Sir Oswald Mosley. (Diana Mosley and her equally enthusiastic Fascist sister Unity will be the topic of next week's talk.)

Why did so many Britons, especially within the ranks of the aristocracy, flock to such an illiberal, cruel, and ultimately intellectually bankrupt political movement? There is no simple answer, but it seems clear that a few key strands of thought drove this malignant impulse. Many wealthy Britons feared

Communism more than Hitler, and worried that the Bolshevik threat was making inroads within the working class. Better a dictator that would preserve the traditional English way of life than fall victim to a Red revolution that would put paid to the Downton Abby fantasy. Others were concerned about the mounting evidence of “national degeneracy,” and the absence of strong principled leadership in Parliament that could presumably arrest this decline. Maybe it would take a modern day King Arthur, or a Cromwell, to clean the Augean Stables and flush away the degrading new morality (or lack of morality) afoot in the land. And this new strongman would have to be quite free of squeamish niceties about due process, natural rights, and constitutional guarantees in order to get the job done.

Perhaps the greatest appeal of Fascism for the millions of men who had gone through the holocaust of 1914-18 was the fact that the movement represented a total rejection of the politics and the “Old Men” who had sent the flower of British manhood into the trenches. “Old Men” became an epithet of contempt during the interwar years. Over 750,000 Britons died in the Great War, and another quarter of a million from the Dominions. And for what, some asked? Many of the survivors felt betrayed by the earlier generation that was responsible for the slaughter. These politicians and their military servants had bungled every aspect of the fight, and then promulgated a harsh and vindictive peace treaty on the vanquished Germans. The Versailles “diktat” almost guaranteed that the Germans would someday rise up and seek revenge for their humiliation at the settlement of 1919. Weary and embittered British veterans muttered that they would be told to take up arms again when the inevitable day of reckoning came. No! Not again! Perhaps a wholesale housecleaning of the British political system was in order. Only Fascist leadership could make a reasonable understanding with Germany, one that would avoid a rerun of the horrors of the Flanders trenches. The “Old Men” had squandered their right to govern; now it was time for a new and altogether more modern regime to rule Whitehall. Dangerous, simplistic thinking—but isn’t that what embittered angry people often do?