

## Democracy in Peril: Great Britain Between the Wars      Week 4: The Mitford Family

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In October of 1940 the British government finally initiated legal action against many of the key Fascists in the land who had voiced ardent admiration for Hitler in the years leading up to the war. It was feared that these homegrown Nazi-philies were disloyal, and constituted a security risk in the event of a German invasion. One of the government's main targets was Diana Mosley, formerly Diana Mitford and now wife of British Union of Fascists Fuhrer Sir Oswald Mosley. If any couple in Britain exemplified the pro-German sentiments in the hearts of many aristocrats, it was this pair. During her hearing before the Advisory Committee for Detention she was asked "You apparently have great contempt for democracy—is that right?" Her pithy answer was "Yes." Diana Mitford-Mosley and her husband were sent to prison for two and a half years.

Diana was one of six daughters (there was also one son) of Lord and Lady Redesdale. The family lived with all the aristocratic trappings in the Cotswolds, and the girls became the toast of London during the pre-war years. The children were born with an impeccable pedigree; one cousin was Winston Churchill and another was the famous philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell. The Six, as they were known, were paid up members of "The Bright Young Things," flamboyant high society women who became tabloid celebrities for their beauty, fashionable attire, scandalous behavior, and general rebelliousness. Whatever the Old Order of Things stood for, these Bohemian nonconformists were against it. Most of these young women were rather uninteresting spoiled brats, of no more importance than a modern day Kardashian. But three of the Mitford daughters made notorious reputations for themselves out of more substantial stuff than wild parties, drugs, and promiscuous sexual adventures. Diana and her younger sister Unity became enthusiastic Fascists during the 30s, while Jessica became a member of the Communist Party. A fourth sister, Nancy, became a successful novelist, and avoided the wilder shores of politics. The other two settled for more settled lifestyles, marrying well and living in the country.

It was said of Diana that she was the most beautiful woman in England, a pardonable exaggeration given that she was blessed with extraordinary features. She initially married Bryan Guinness, Baron Moyne, heir to a fabulous fortune established through the family brewing business. The couple had two children, but Diana soon grew restless and threw her marriage over when she met the charismatic Fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley. She became an enthusiastic member of the British Union of Fascists, traveled to Germany many times, and became quite chummy with the Nazi hierarchy. Indeed, she and Mosley would be married in 1936 at the home of the villainous Joseph Goebbels, Nazi propaganda minister. Adolph Hitler himself was guest of honor at the ceremony.

Both Diana and sister Unity attended the first two Nazi Party mass rallies at Nuremburg, and were der Fuhrer's honored guests at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Hitler even arranged for Diana to be chauffeured about Berlin in a Mercedes Benz. One of her prized possessions was an autographed photo of Hitler, and she often sported a diamond swastika pendant. With such a resume, it is little wonder that government officials arrested her and her husband. The wonder is that they were not interned

sooner than they were. MI-5 documents released in 2002 described Lady Mosley as follows: "she is a public danger at the present time. Is said to be far cleverer and more dangerous than her husband and will stick at nothing to achieve her ambitions. She is wildly ambitious."

Diana's younger sister Unity Valkyrie's (really, *Valkyrie*—you can't make this kind of thing up!) dive into the darkness of totalitarianism was even more sensational. Like Diana, she became convinced that Fascism was the wave of the future, and she moved to Munich to see the glories of the Third Reich first hand. There she managed to meet Hitler, and gradually edged her way into his inner circle. Many speculated that she and der Fuhrer were lovers, but that is impossible to prove. Some even believe that she had a male child with Hitler, and that he was still alive as late as the year 2000. Again, impossible to prove, but not out of the question, for Hitler did enjoy her company very much. She met with him privately many times, traveled throughout Germany in his entourage, and spent long holidays at his mountain retreat. Apparently, Hitler just enjoyed having her around—she amused him, and was almost like a pet as far as he was concerned. (Many high ranking Nazis were not happy with the favor conferred upon Unity. They were either jealous of the intimate standing she had with the Fuhrer, or were worried that she might do something foolish that would cast aspersions on the regime.)

When World War II broke out in Sept. 1939, Unity was crestfallen. She was wild with grief that her native England and her adopted home in Nazi Germany were now enemies. In despair, she attempted suicide by shooting herself in the head. The wound was not fatal, but clearly caused great damage, and she would live another seven years in a diminished capacity before dying in 1948.

Jessica Mitford would eventually break with her family over their huge political differences. A fully committed Communist, Jessica would devote her life to writing about matters of racial and social justice. She moved to Oakland, CA., and eventually authored a bestselling book called "The American way of Death," an expose of the funeral industry. The "Mitford Girls," as they were known in those less enlightened times, became the topic of countless biographies and films. Exasperating, maybe even evil, they were never boring.