

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 372. The Birth of British Fascism

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Yes. So, Tom, our sister podcast, The Rest is Politics, often plays at the Albert Hall, doesn't it? They're very similar enterprises, actually. And you'd enjoy that.

Well, yes. But before we get on to kind of venue-based jokes, we should probably wait to see whether the British Union of Fascists ever appeared in venues that we have appeared in. So, let's just... That's true.

That's true. So, Sir Thomas Moore, I'll tell you this, he was the MP for AIR. Having written that, he was the MP for AIR until 1964. So, he was the MP for AIR when the Beatles were visiting the United States.

Yeah, but what's even more extraordinary? So, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, spoiler alert, was Oswald Mosley. And he was popping up on British chat shows in the 70s. And his wife, Lady Mosley, former Diana Mitford, she was popping up on interviews as well. And as late as 1989, she was the guest on Desert Island Discs, where one of her eight discs was a white shade of pale. Oh, no. Do you think she did that deliberately?

It's a jaw-dropping, one of the most shocking... I listened to it last night, because we will be coming to the Mitfords in due course. Which certainly will.

Because we're going to be doing four episodes on British fascism.

Yeah.

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So, Dominic, very much your choice.

It was my choice. Yeah, thanks for that, Tom. People can interpret that.

You love the British fascists.

Anyway, they once...

But it's such an interesting topic, isn't it?

It is an interesting topic. I mean, we will be talking about the whole sweep of British fascism through to the end of the Second World War, and with the...

In the persona of Diana Mosley, who you were listening to on Desert Island Discs, beyond, I mean, she is still saying some quite disturbing things in the 1980s.

Yeah, Chloe's so charming.

Yeah, God.

Such beautiful hands.

She doesn't say that Hitler had beautiful hands, does she?

Beautiful hands. The most charming manners.

Oh, no. Oh, God. Right. Well, you've got that to look forward to.

Tom's enormous repertoire of Mittford impersonations.

Do you know what her luxury item was?

Her luxury item...

A soft pillow.

A soft pillow, was that?

Soft pillow.

It wasn't like a mouser or something.

No, it was a soft pillow.

That's good. Okay. I mean, that's actually a pretty...

That's not a fascist luxury necessarily, I wouldn't have said.

Very useful for killing princes at the tower.

Oh, very good. Right.

Now, some of this may think British fascism oxymoron, because fascism could never have worked in Britain.

And I think people who believe that would say, oh, British people have an inherent love of liberty, a reverence of parliamentary democracy.

They have a distrust of uniforms,

going back to the long standing distrust of standing armies in Britain.

And of course, the famous sense of humor,

which means that we would always laugh at paramilitaries and authoritarian groups.

And I think, I'm sure you'll agree with me, Tom,

that that's rubbish, don't you? Do you think that's rubbish?

So the definitive book on this is The Black Shirts by Martin Pugh.

And Herav the Black Shirts was obviously a notorious headline in the Daily Mail, which did back The Black Shirts for what, a six-month period a year?

I can't remember.

Yeah.

And he makes the case that fascism was much more of a threat to Britain

than most people have thought.

I wasn't entirely convinced by it, I have to say.

I do think that British parliamentary democracy,

it may not be that people in Britain have a kind of inherent devotion to parliamentary democracy, but I think the frameworks of it,

the way that it is very hard for people in the first part of the post-system

for kind of radical fringes to seize control of the commanding heights,

I do think that it made it exceedingly unlikely that fascists would ever come to power in Britain.

I think it's unlikely that it would come to power,

but I don't think fascism is inherently un-British.

Because actually, some of the roots of fascism that we talked about,

for example, in our podcast about the rise of the announces, were British.

I mean, one of the authors that Hitler most admired,

Houston Stuart Chamberlain, was British and was writing in part,

his anti-Semitism was driven in part by his hatred of Benjamin Disraeli and the Liberals.

And the fact that Disraeli was Jewish, was that a rootless cosmopolitan?

Was that the kind of part of the vibe?

Exactly. Exactly. I think that is part of the vibe, as you put it.

But also, I think a lot of those ingredients that we talked about in the Nazis episode one

that we did earlier in the year, they were there in Britain,

in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, in just as pronounced,

although slightly different ways, to how they were in Germany.

I mean, so many of the elements of fascism in Germany and Italy are present in Britain.

So, fascism is a generational revolt against the old.

Fascism is an expression of contempt for the failures of parliamentary democracy.

Fascism is a reaction to the First World War.

There are a couple of elements in Britain that I think are distinctive.

So, one is that British fascism very, very strongly emphasizes women.

And that's something that we'll come to when we do the podcast about the Midfords,

because of course, they're so prominent in the movements and in the popular memory of the movement.

I think the other fascinating thing about Britain specifically,

is the way in which British fascism could have been perceived at various points as being,

this will sound so weird to many listeners, as being progressive, as being anti-capitalist,

as appealing to people who would otherwise have voted Labour.

Of course, Oswald Mosley comes to fascism from the Labour Party.

Yes. I mean, you slightly see that in the way that the far right in Europe at the moment,

so Marine Le Pen, I guess would be the obvious example, who has...

I know that she has repudiated much that her father represented, but obviously comes from that French fascist tradition. Those are the wellsprings of her party.

But at the same time, it's clearly appealing to people on the left.

Yeah.

So, there is absolutely that strand.

But another strand within British fascism, and it's definitely there in German fascism as well,

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but I think it's particularly strong in British fascism, is environmentalism, a concern with, I suppose, the blood, but also the soil of Britain, its wildlife, its trees, a sense that there should properly be a communion with the very essence of the natural world. And that's also, I think, a bit unsettling.

You were reminding me that that much loved children's book, Tarka the Otter, one of those classic sort of fictions of the English countryside for children. The author of that, Henry Williamson, who had fought in the First World War, he, of course, flirted with fascism, didn't he?

He did, yes, absolutely. He did, yeah.

So, let's talk a little bit about what I mean about the roots of fascism.

So, as you say, Martin Pugh and his book, The Black Shirts, he lists a whole series of things that have analogues in Germany that, in Germany, look like really important ingredients of the rise of Nazism. Of course, in Britain, they don't lead quite to the same place, so we don't notice them so much, so we're forgotten about them.

So, we forget, for example, that Britain before the First World War was, in many ways, not a very democratic country, that only six out of 10 men could vote and no women at all could vote.

So, in other words, the idea that there's this inbuilt reverence for democracy, I don't think quite stands up, that Britain, like Germany, has this deep sense of kind of medieval nostalgia.

You know, this looking back to the vanished past, particularly the Middle Ages, Arthurian fantasies, all of those things that were floating around in Hitler's imagination, they are floating around in the imagination of loads of people in Britain.

I mean, the most obvious example who we've done a podcast about, who is not by any means a fascist and hates fascism, is JRR Tolkien.

So, in his backward-lookingness, he's actually anti-capitalist, isn't he?

He does night development, he loves the countryside, he hates the modern world, he's not an enormous fan of modern mass democracy.

So, this is one of the things that also, it does seem to me, a fascist dog that doesn't bark in the night, is that Tolkien is very into the idea of sacred monarchy, swords, holy swords, all this kind of thing, that with just a nudge of the gear stick could come to seem fascist, because Himmler, of course, is obsessed with all this stuff, all this Arthurian mythology, the Wagnerian things, but Britain, which is the home of King Arthur, actually, it never really seems to have taken a fascist form, that obsession with Arthurian myth.

But there were good reasons for that, Tom. I mean, I don't want to jump ahead too much, but I think there are two very obvious reasons why that dog doesn't bark, and they are contingent. They are that Britain doesn't lose the First World War.

Of course, we'll be coming to that.

And that the Great Depression is nowhere near as intense in Britain as it is in most other Western countries.

And perhaps that it already has a monarchy as well.

Maybe. So, there's something we talked about with the rise of the Nazis was the fascination with hygiene, but with race. I mean, that is absolutely present in Britain.

If you look at periodicals and books from the 1890s and 1900s,

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they're full of stuff about racial rejuvenation, degeneracy.
We've lost a sense of organic national unity.
Cosmopolitan liberalism has undermined the virility of the race.
I mean, that guy used the word virility, didn't he, describing the meeting in the Albert Hall, absolute obsession with that.
And that links to the other element, which is anti-Semitism.
There is quite a lot of anti-Semitism in Britain before the First World War.
We'll come onto this later when we talk about the Battle of Cable Street in the East End, confrontation between fascists and anti-fascists in the 1930s.
But, you know, if you open a book by Ile Belloch or G.K. Chesterton, written in the 1900s, there's loads of stuff there about the cosmopolitan Jews, about Jews in Russia.
So, Chesterton kind of Catholic apologist is, I think, strikingly anti-Semitic.
But at the same time, he is very strong against eugenics, which most people in Britain are... George Bernard Shaw famously.
Kind of obsessed by.
Yes.
And so, Mary Stopes, who becomes one of the kind of the groundbreaking, leading figures in favour of that.
I mean, she becomes a big fan of Hitler.
She's sending him volumes of terrible poetry and all kinds of things.
Well, maybe you should read out some of them.
When you do the Midfords, you could read out some of Mary Stopes' poetry.
We love a bad poem on the rest of history.
We do, we do.
So, the thing is a general culture of all this kind of stuff.
Actually, John Carey, great literary critic in his book, The Intellectuals and the Matters, this was basically a massive dissection of the Bloomsbury group and their kind of predecessors.
The most Sandbrook book not written by Dominic Sandbrook ever written.
He's very good on the ways in which their kind of cultural imagination feels very proto-fascist.
I mean, that doesn't necessarily, of course, mean they are fascists, but it just means that fascism, the ideas of fascism, are not as alien and unfamiliar and unsettling as people might think.
Well, the cooking ingredients are there, but you still need people to make the meal.
You do, exactly.
Well, you need the right circumstances.
And actually, all of this is turbocharged by war, not the Great War, actually, but the Boer War.
So, this is the really interesting thing.
Then, actually, all of these things get a massive boost from Britain's poor performance at the beginning of the Boer War, 1899, 1902.
There's a particular week where the British lose three battles to the Boers called Black Week.
And after that, there's this massive upsurge of columns and sort of self-flagellating

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diatribes about national degeneracy, that basically we have become an industrialized urban people and we've lost our national spirit, our virility, and we need this new spirit and there's this huge cult in the early 1900s of what's called national efficiency.

So, basically, loads of politicians sign up to it.

There's a national service league set up under Lord Roberts, sponsored by Roger Kipling, that has 100,000 members that are calling for a national service, compulsory national service, so that young men, all these deracinated, pallid young men of the cities, will be turned into fighting men for Britain.

And obviously, the most famous example, Tom, is the Boy Scouts.

So, the Boy Scouts set up 1908.

It's inspired by the Mafeking Kedet Corps that Sir Robert Baden Powell had seen in the Boer War.

And so, this I think that British people don't like people marching around in uniforms.

I mean, it's nonsense.

There are lots of people marching around in uniforms in the 1900s.

We talked about this in our episodes on the build-up to the First World War, in the context of our Irish episodes.

Yes, exactly.

Kind of paramilitary bodies in Ireland and starting to cross to Great Britain.

Yeah, they were absolutely rifle clubs.

The Ulster volunteers, as Stan Jackson was telling us in one of our Irish episodes,

there are volunteers in places like Liverpool, Glasgow, Newcastle and so on,

who say that if home rule is forced upon the counties of Ulster,

then they will be justified in taking up arms against what they see as an illegitimate liberal government.

And Dominic, what is the role of sport in this?

The cult of manliness, boxing and...

It's absolutely part of it, Tom, that to me, British fascism, given the abysmal electoral performance of British fascists, it's fascinating how much this subject has opened up.

This window into early 20th century Britain, but it's also that there are so many links with other subjects that we've covered on the rest is history.

So I was thinking about King Solomon's Mines, H. Ryder Haggard, and the fiction of empire, and this obsession with manliness, with proving yourself.

And obviously, sports completely reflects that, doesn't it?

The idea that... I mean, organized sport is conceived to get the workers of the factories and the cities out and breathing the fresh air and being virile young men again, all that sort of stuff.

I mean, that's not necessarily sinister.

I mean, people are still arguing for that today.

The idea that participation in sport is necessarily going to lead to fascism.

Agreed. Just like, Tom, I completely agree with you.

Just like loving the countryside, disliking cities, being a Boy Scout.

All of these other things, none of them are in themselves at all sinister.

I mean, they're perfectly reasonable.

You might not agree with them necessarily.

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You might not want to be a Boy Scout.

You might love cities.

But to have those views is not a sign that you're not on the road that leads to Auschwitz or something.

But as you said, there are lots of interesting ingredients around.

The idea that your enemies, your political opponents are illegitimate, are subversive, are part of an enemy within.

Just to remind people who listened to the Ireland episodes,

in 1912, the leader of the Conservatives, Andrew Bono-Law, described the Liberal Government as a revolutionary committee which is seized by fraud upon despotic power.

And he says, in giving home rule to Ireland, they are destroying the British Constitution.

People will be justified in doing anything to resist them, including force.

So in other words, that could be in different circumstances.

The beginning of a story that would have very bloody consequences in the interwar is, of course, it doesn't, or not as bloody as it could have been, because Britain wins the First World War.

But in different circumstances, I think there would have been a very different kind of outcome, don't you?

Don't you think the ingredients are there?

I do.

We've absolutely agreed that it's defeat in the First World War that is the precondition for what happens in Germany.

And so conversely, you could argue that fact that Britain isn't defeated in the First World War mean that these ingredients, by and large, just remain the ingredients.

Just before we come to the First World War and its aftermath, a question about British attitudes to foreigners.

So obviously, Britain is ruling an enormous empire, and the justification for British rule, particularly of non-white populations, is often couched in overtly racist terms.

So that presumably is a part of the mix.

And also, when people talk about degeneracy in the 30s, what they're talking about there are Jews.

Yeah.

It's Jews, by and large, who are being accused of a degenerate element within the fabric.

They're seen as Baselai as noxious microbes within the body politic of Germany.

Is there anything of that going on in Britain beforehand?

Yes.

I mean, we'll come to this later on in episode three, when we talk about a battle of cable streets in the East End.

But yes, you're absolutely right.

There is an Aliens Act passed in, I think, 1904, 1905.

I can't remember the exact date to try and limit the immigration of Eastern European Jews who are fleeing the pogroms in the Russian Empire.

It's very localized.

So in London, particularly in Leeds in Manchester,

the places where large numbers of Eastern European Jews settle, refugees, where they settle, there are people trying to stir it up.

There are people complaining.

You know, all the language that is so familiar.

People talking about mobs and swarms and using, as you say, that medicalized language about Baselai and all that stuff.

So that is all there.

It's not nationwide, because in most places, they're untouched by this debate.

But it is absolutely there in the kind of national conversation.

So yes.

There's also, in the build-up to the First World War, there's an anxiety about foreign spies, isn't there?

So there's a very funny line in Martin Pugh's Harraf of the Black Shirts.

Again, actually about the Daily Mail.

The press magnate Alfred Harmsworth invited readers of the Daily Mail to report sightings of suspicious foreigners and advertised likely invasion routes, which invariably passed through towns where the mail circulation required a boost.

Well, I mean, we've talked about that before.

So that's about, I can't remember how he pronounced his name.

I think it's William Lequix.

He was this guy who specialized in invasion literature.

And his books, as you say, were serialized in the mail, and they were predicting German invasions and stuff.

He was being stopped at dorking.

Exactly, exactly.

Of course, to increase circulation, to get people excited, the places that were German battles and things were places where there'd be lots of readers.

Because obviously, they would, you know, Serbeten is under attack from German forces.

But yes, there's this sort of,

I think there's the fear of enemies without and enemies within.

And the enemies within fear,

you're absolutely right that this is a dog that doesn't bark.

And I think largely because Britain wins the First World War.

But I think it's remarkable how,

even though Britain wins the First World War, the dog doesn't go away.

So during the First World War,

there was loads of stuff about enemies within.

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But now it's chiefly Germans, isn't it?
This is why the House of Saxe-Coburg changes its name
to the House of Windsor, for instance.
But it's not just Germans.
It's German, especially towards the end of the war.
It becomes what people see as this unholy nexus of Germans,
Jews, Bolsheviks, obviously, after the Russian Revolution,
and sort of fellow travelers.
I don't necessarily want to say the British left,
because that makes it sound like you're talking about people
within the Labour Party.
It's often, there's a famous thing called the Black Book
that is compiled by a guy called Harold Spencer,
who's an anti-Semite who's been thrown out of army intelligence.
And he compiles this book in 1917,
which is a list of 47,000 people.
That's a lot of people, including cabinet ministers,
cabinet ministers, wives, senior liberal politicians, and so on.
And it says, these people are all,
and this is the word they use, these people are all perverts.
And they have been blackmailed by the Germans,
or they're working with the Germans.
And there's this huge conspiracy.
Germans are in it.
The worldwide jury is in it.
The Bolsheviks are in it.
So after 1917, that anxiety must get turbocharged.
Absolutely turbocharged.
It's often blamed on the Jews, isn't it?
The Russian Revolution by conservatives in Britain.
Absolutely it is.
Yeah.
So I think a fascinating thing is how in the early 1920s,
by the way, so much of this story is going to be about the 20s.
If you've got an idea in your head about the roaring 20s,
cocktail bars, great Gatsby, all that stuff,
push it aside.
That is not the case in Britain at all.
Britain is a very, very divided, unhappy,
war-scarred place in the 20s.
Very high unemployment, economy miserable,
politics in a complete and utter mess.
The middle classes are very upset about taxes.
So you mentioned Alfred Harmsworth earlier on this.

So his brother, Lord Rothermere,
he sets up the Anti-Waste League in the 1920s,
which is a really good example of how a lot of people
on the kind of right of British politics think
that the conservatives have sold out
by getting into bed with Lloyd George.
They're all part of this kind of parliamentary conspiracy
to debauch the currency and fleece the middle classes.
Just to explain that for people,
Lloyd George, liberal war prime minister,
and then after the war,
basically gets into bed with the conservatives
as a way of keeping himself in power.
Yes, and the selling peerages.
So that's another thing that inflames people.
They say, these people are actually,
you know, these crooks are basically flogging off peerages,
places in the House of Lords, to their rich friends.
While we are crippled with the burden of taxes,
strikes have gone through the roof, which they have.
So a massive increase in strikes in 1919, 1920,
which of course further fuels middle class
sort of small C conservative fears of Bolshevism.
And all of this becomes embedded in the British imagination
and focused on the idea of a Jewish conspiracy.
So in 1920, 1921, the pages of newspapers like The Times
are full of reports, particularly about the protocols
of the Elders of Zion, which as you will know, Tom,
is a kind of a racist anti-Semitic fantasy
that has been floating around for 15, 20 years or so.
I mean, people were swapping copies of the protocols
of the Elders of Zion at their first side peace conference.
But which is broadly accepted to be a fake by the 20s?
It is accepted to be a fake.
So in 1921, The Times runs three articles to say
the protocols of the Elders of Zion is a fake.
But by giving it so much airtime, they fuel this idea
that there is this sort of conspiracy that takes in
American financiers, communists, sort of liberal politicians,
trade union militants, you know, Jews in grimy boarding houses.
I'll tell you who's all over this.
Yeah.
It's John Bucking.
I was about to say John Bucking.

Offer of the 39 Steps and Green Mantle
and thrilling spy stories.

But this idea that there are kind of Jewish financiers
behind everything evil that's happening
and that simultaneously American plutocrats
and Soviet Bolsheviks are in cahoots against the British Empire.
I mean, it's the motivating idea that powers his thrillers.

It is.

And not just John Bucking, Tom.

Agatha Christie.

Read on Agatha Christie from the 1920s.

And there's lots of references to Jewish financiers
to the sort of puppet masters who are controlling, you know, strikes
and Stockport, but also stuff going on
in the newly established Soviet Union,
that there's links to Wall Street.

I mean, all of this sort of, all these paranoid fantasies.

So while that's happening, there is one other factor
that you list in the notes that you sent me for this.

Fears of women voters, flappers, lesbians.

You put that down.

Yeah.

And Martin Pugh lists some excellent headlines from the male in the 20s.
Men outnumbered everywhere.

Why socialists want votes for flappers.

Stop the flapper vote folly.

Yes.

So that's another part as well, I guess.

It's absolutely part.

By the way, you quoted in Daily Mail, I mean,
you could have quoted any number of newspapers from the early 1920s.

So the Daily Express.

The Daily Express says,

Britain is full of women with short hair, skirts no longer than kilts,
narrow hips and insignificant breasts.

This change to a more neutral type can only be accomplished
at the expense of the integrity of a woman's sexual organs.

So this sort of weird thing where there's a link in people's minds
between women having been given the vote
and the advent of flappers, flapper kind of fashion.

Yeah.

And that there's this sort of tide of lesbianism
that is sweeping through Britain that is somehow
at the back of all these kind of conspiracy theorist minds,

they think this is somehow connected
with the great Bolshevik Jewish conspiracy
and with the high taxes, the strikes and things
that are afflicting British politics in the 1920s.
Going on.

Yeah.

One thinks of F.A.

Mackiston MP and his view on lesbians,
they are an evil which is capable of sapping the highest
and the best in civilization.

So he wouldn't be welcome on Pride March.

He certainly wouldn't.

You quoted Lieutenant Colonel Sir Thomas Moore.

There's another Tory MP who's a Lieutenant Colonel
called Moore Brabazon.

And he says, he tells the House of Commons,
there are only three ways of dealing with these perverts,
meaning lesbians.

This is 1921.

One of them is to look on them as frankly lunatics
and lock them up for the rest of their lives.

Another one is to leave them entirely alone,
not notice them and don't advertise them,
just pretend they're not there.

And the final one is the death sentence.

So there's a lot of very pungent views floating around
in the 1920s.

And then in 1922, as people look abroad,
they suddenly see the emergence of a character who will be,
I would argue, the single greatest inspiration
to the British fascist movement.

And we'll find out who that is, Tom.

After the break.

See you then.

The Whole Foodie Festival is on at Whole Foods Market
through October 3rd.

Save on hundreds of culinary favorites,
like delectable cheeses, crackers, charcuterie,
olives, and chocolates for that perfectly elevated snack
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Your mom used us in salad dressing.

Her mom's mom used us as glass cleaner.

And while there are many ways to use us, one thing is always the same, our recipe.

It has never changed since we've been putting cabinets.

Brigh, it's not weird if it works.

Statefarm.com for a quote today.

Hello, welcome back to The Rest is History.

We are looking at British fascism and trying to explore the question of whether Britain might ever have turned fascist.

And Dominic, we were talking about the idea that the ingredients are there.

But of course, you need an oven and you need a recipe and you need someone to make the meal.

I feel this metaphor is spiraling off.

This metaphor was very early, yeah.

Hold with me.

So in the early 1920s, looking abroad, the British see a master chef emerge in Italy, don't they? They do. So that's Mussolini.

So 1922 is when Mussolini, he famously, he doesn't march on Rome.

He lets his supporters march on Rome for him while he stays behind.

But it had already been agreed, hadn't it?

It had been agreed, exactly.

So essentially, it's about showboating.

It's about control of the narrative, all that kind of thing.

Italy, of course, is another democracy with a king.

And there are lots of people in Britain who are Mussolini comes to power.

So first of all, it's really important to emphasize with all of this.

They don't know what we know.
They don't know where the story will lead.
And of course, Mussolini is violent.
They know that Mussolini is violent.
But I mean, there are loads of people who admire
the communists in the Soviet Union.
And they're very violent.
I mean, there are millions of people dying
in the Russian Civil War.
So when people, I think, read the stories
about Mussolini's violence, about, you know,
trade unionists being forced to drink castor oil
or being beaten up or indeed killed,
they may well think, oh, gosh, shocking.
But I don't think they think this is barbarism, you know,
beyond the scope of the human imagination.
Also, there is a war going on in Ireland.
And there have been paramilitary organizations in Ulster
and in the rest of Ireland that have made the running
and have torn a chunk out of the United Kingdom.
So it's not like the idea of political violence
is something alien to the British way of life.
No, no, no. Of course, that's a really,
that's a very good point, actually.
So I mean, one thing we haven't really talked about
is how, you know, a key part of fascism
is paramilitary politics.
But there's been lots of paramilitary politics in Britain
in the last 20 years or so.
The Ulster volunteers, the paramilitary groups
before the First World War, the Black and Tan,
the use of the Black and Tan auxiliaries in Ireland.
There are hundreds of thousands of demobilized
officers, soldiers who miss the First World War,
who feel, you know, bored, listless
in the climate in the 1920s.
This is the plot of the Bulldog Drummond thrillers
that I used to love when I was a boy,
which are very, very anti-Semitic,
very anti-Bolshevik, very paranoid.
And they're about Bulldog Drummond as a guy
who is drifting around looking for a purpose.
I mean, obviously, this is Mussolini's appeal in Italy.
And I think there are lots of people in Britain who think

Mussolini is a tremendously impressive man who has actually given Italy a, you know, direction. He's anti-communist, all this stuff. So Sir Douglas Hague. Sir Commander in the First World War. Commander in the First World War. You know, great celebrity in Britain. Much loved celebrity in Britain in the 1920s. He said of Mussolini, what a man. He really is exceptional. And that's actually typical. Go on, Tommy, itching to say something. Well, I just wanted to put the counterpoint, though, that the British regard the Italians as being somewhat comical and hysterical and prone to jumping up and down and waving their arms about. And in that sense, Mussolini does conform to that very negative stereotype. And fascism, you know, the name that he gives to his movement is a foreign movement. So is there also a sense that one of the reasons why fascism perhaps doesn't take off in Britain is that it's not a British invention. And the British are reluctant to adopt something that, you know, has been taken up by a comical people like the Italians as they see them. I think that's actually a very astute point. And it's one reason why Oswald Mosley in the 1930s was actually quite keen to downplay in public the associations with Italian. So they initially, when he set up his movement in the 1930s, they used the fasces as a symbol and they ditch it for the kind of lightning bolt. And he's always saying, actually, there's nothing alien about our ideas. Our ideas are true British political values. So the emphasis on the king, which obviously is, I mean, there's a king in Italy, but they never talk about scrapping the monarchy. They always say the king will actually have more power in a fascist Britain because they want to reassure Aragorn. Very Aragorn. Yes, very Aragorn. Of course, it's really important two things. One, muscle only comes to power at the point when

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conservative unease about Lloyd George is at its height.
So Lloyd George is presiding over this coalition
with a lot of the Tory bigwigs.
And lots of grassroots Tories think
this is a massive stitch up by corrupt politicians.
Which is obviously the idea that Parliament has become corrupted
and corroded and all of the, you know,
it's just a talking shop of people feathering their own nest.
I mean, you hear that all the time now, don't you?
You do.
Well, and you hear conservatives now say,
you know, we've had a conservative government for however many years,
but it's not real conservatism.
Which is exactly, exactly, Tom.
I was thinking that a lot, actually, when I was reading about this,
that there are parallels from now.
There are lots of conservatives in the early 1920s who say,
we've been in power for yonks,
but actually Lloyd George obviously isn't a conservative.
And our corrupt leaders,
colluding with his selling appearances.
Given the vote to all these flappers.
Yeah, given the vote to all these flappers to keep themselves in office.
Whereas the true voice of the British patriot is being silenced.
So there's that.
And there's also the idea that Mussolini is a bulwark against communism.
You cannot overstate the anxiety on the British right
about Bolshevism in the 1920s.
So you quoted from the mail earlier on.
The mail is typical of lots of papers in Britain in the 1920s.
That look at Mussolini and they say,
you know, a hard man, no doubt,
but a really important shield against the advance of Bolshevism.
I mean, Winston Churchill famously,
Churchill goes to Rome in 1927.
And he says, I could not help being charmed by senior Mussolini's gentle and simple bearing.
And by his calm detached poise in spite of so many burdens and dangers.
And then he says to Mussolini,
if I'd been an Italian,
I'm sure that I should have been wholeheartedly with you
from start to finish in your triumphant struggle
against the bestial appetites and perversions of Leninism.
And there are loads of people who you can sort of see why Churchill
would say that, Tom,

because if you have that late Victorian imperial mindset, you quite like fighting, you like virility and all that stuff.

Just absolutely emphasize throughout this series that people did not know where it was going to go.

Yeah.

Today, fascism is an absolute bogey word because it is freighted with the blood of 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust and countless million others killed in war and persecution.

But at this point in the 1920s, that is all well in the future.

Yeah.

It's really difficult, I think, when you have to try and kind of think back into the shoes of people who don't know what's happening.

I think, actually, this is really, really difficult because the very word fascism.

Yeah, I agree.

Just seemed, you know, it smolders with sulfur.

I agree.

But presumably, it doesn't have that inherent self-risk quality.

Well, remember that Mussolini, at that point, is not actually especially anti-Semitic.

He's certainly no more anti-Semitic than many of the British people who admire him.

And of course, he is violent.

And of course, we look at Mussolini now and we say, what a disgusting man he was, you know, violent, rapacious, sexually predatory, bombastic, you know, all these kinds of things.

In the 1920s, the world has a lot of dictators.

And if you'd said to people in Britain, well, you know, where is the evil located, which is the most blood-soaked, most frightening, threatening regime, I think a large proportion of them, not all of them, of course,

but a large proportion would have said, unerringly, let's say, Moscow.

And anything that's fighting that, you know, maybe by quite dirty methods, but anything that's fighting that, we should stand with them.

I mean, there would have been a load of people who would have said that about Mussolini.

Loads of the conservative middle classes, obviously lots of people in the aristocracy and so on.

And so you start to get people who want to emulate Mussolini.

And that's when you start to get the first British,

genuine British fascists.

Right. So you mentioned the aristocracy

and we talked about the Mipfords right at the start of the show.

And notoriously, Jessica Mipford becomes a Stalinist
and Unity Mipford becomes a Nazi.

And there is a sense in which there is an appeal on the extremes,
isn't there? Yeah.

And yet in Britain, the center does hold.

Yeah, it does hold.

Obviously, there are communists in Britain.

There's an emergent fascist movement in Britain as well.

But by, you know, the 20s are a kind of terrible decade
marked by strikes and poverty and all kinds of things.

But it doesn't go fascist.

It doesn't go communist.

No. Parliamentary democracy does hold.

I mean, I think always the risk with emphasising,

with doing an episode focused on fascism

is that too big a concentration on it might lead us to over-egg it.

Don't you think?

I do think so.

You could say, Tom,

and lots of people have been calling for this podcast for a long time.

So you could say that actually,

this whole series on British fascism

has actually disguised series about Stanley Baldwin.

Yeah.

So Stanley Baldwin, who becomes conservative leader,
who's the prime minister three times in the interwar years,
who is the man who brings down Lloyd George in 1922.

He makes a speech at the Carlton Club to the Tories
and says, Lloyd George is corrupt.

He is a dynamic force who will crush us,
who will destroy us if we don't, you know, get rid of him.

Baldwin, who sort of presents himself
as the soul of the British middle classes
and of kind of middle England.

He actually, he's an emollient political persona,
the way in which he's prepared actually
to make space for the newly emerging Labour Party
and then actually to work with people
from the Labour Party in the 1930s.

You could argue that the defeat of fascism
is a victory for a very unglamorous, mundane,

suburban, Baldwinism.
And to some extent,
Ramsey McDonald, the leader of the Labour Party.
So the centre does hold, as you say,
and it holds in part because Britain actually has some,
I think, contrary to the stereotype of the interwar years,
Britain actually has some quite good politicians
who know what the public want, who are building houses,
who are doing their best to keep the economy on track,
even though the economy isn't a complete and utter mess.
And of course, Britain hasn't been humiliated
in the First World War.
It's come out of the First World War financially much weaker,
but it actually has more colonies than it started with.
So people don't feel the burning resentment
and victimhood that they do in Germany.
Having said all that, on the fringes,
fascism is taking hold in Britain in this,
I mean, it's a minor,
absolutely a minority pursuit, right?
But it is taking root.
So to go back to what you were saying about
how hard it is to think ourselves back into this moment,
when you look, read about the very first fascist groups,
it's actually very difficult to see them as terribly sinister
because they're just absolutely comical and eccentric.
So the very first one, the British fascisti,
was founded in May 1923 by somebody who,
in such a 1920s way, she was called the Man Woman.
Her name was Rota Lindhorn Orman.
So many of the people in this story,
by the way, have military connections.
So she's the granddaughter of Field Marshal Sir John Linton Simmons.
Before the First World War,
Rota Lindhorn Orman had been absolutely passionate about the scouts.
She'd joined the Girl Scouts in 1909 very early
and she'd founded and led her own troop in Bournemouth.
Come on, girls!
Yeah, South Coast, by the way.
She liked that.
I don't imagine her having that deeper voice.
Like Mrs. Truncheble.
But she was born in 1895, Tom.
So she was a teenager at this point.

So she wouldn't have spoken like that.

Oh, okay.

I think she's...

Come on, girls.

Yes, I think she's posher.

Then in the First World War, she served a tremendous distinction.

She worked in Serbia with the Scottish Women's Hospital Corps.

She's a commandant in the British Red Cross Motor School.

There are lots of women, by the way, who love the First World War, who really get stuck in.

It gives them opportunities, you know, a chance to do things that in normal life they wouldn't be able to do.

She loves wearing military dress.

You know, she loves just hanging around with women, doing stuff, not being high bound by the Edwardian conventions.

She comes back from the war, like so many people, she thinks nothing is going to be as good again.

She goes off to a dairy farm in Somerset.

This is an amazing story.

One day, she's weeding her garden when she has a revelation, Tom, like a divine revelation.

I know you love a divine revelation.

I don't think this is divine, but she has a revelation about the terrible threat being posed to Britain by Bolsheviks, socialists, and foreigners.

And how does this revelation come?

I think she's just weeding.

A weeding is quite boring.

Well, but a weeding is, you know, you're cleaning your garden.

It's a metaphor there, isn't it?

Yeah, there is a metaphor there.

So she thinks, and she's obviously read about Mussolini, and she thinks, do you know what?

I'll do it. No one else has done it.

I'll do it.

And so she sets up this movement, the British for Shiste.

She gets another ex-military person who's a man, Brigadier General Robert Blakeney.

He'd been the general manager of the Egyptian state railway.

And he comes in, he says,

I'll run the organization for you, Mr. Linda Norman.

He says, this is basically the grown-up version of the Boy Scout movement.

He says, like the scouts, we uphold the same lofty ideals

of brotherhood, service, and duty.

And the people that pile in, I say pile in,
you know, both of the people that pile in, all kind of them,
they are military people or landed gentry or aristocracy.
So they are Brigadier General Sir Ormond Winter,
Brigadier General Erskine Tullock, Colonel Sir Charles Byrne MP,
Admiral John Armstrong.

Is there a sense that often these are people who've come back
from lengthy service, maybe in the war,
or maybe in the colonies, and they come back to Britain,
and they find that it's full of flappers and lesbians?

Yes, there was absolutely that sense, Tom.

That, again, you mentioned John Buckingham.

Country's going to the dogs.

How often does that happen at the beginning
of a John Buckingham book in the 1920s?

Yes, coming back from a towel.

Yeah, I've been out on the Velt.

I sat there in London.

I've been big game hunting.

I've been feeling very seedy.

I looked at the young men walking,
none of them had shot a, you know, an elephant in the eye.
They're all communists and Jews.

Yeah, that is exactly.

Limp-risted.

Exactly.

That is floating around in the popular culture of the 20s.

And all these people, I mean, the Earl of Glasgow,
some of these people, you just think they've been made up,
the Earl Temple of Stowe, the Marquess of Aylesbury,
Lord Declifford.

So a lot of aristocrats.

A lot of aristocrats.

And I suppose the other thing, Dominic,
that's happening with the aristocracy
is that with Lloyd George, who has, you know, famously,
what was it, Dukes cost more than dreadnoughts.

Yes.

That the primordial hold on the land and power
that the aristocracy had always had is now under attack.

Absolutely right.

If you're a Duke, your life, as you see it,
perceive it, is in ruins.

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You can't get good servants anymore.
Your house is crippled by taxes.
Papa died five years ago and the death duties are unbelievable.
You're paying high income tax.
You don't even believe in income tax at all.
You've lost your house in Ireland,
where you used to go fishing.
Your daughter has become a lesbian flapper.
All of this kind of stuff.
It's all very familiar.
Yeah.
And these people just think we've lost our political power forever
because what's, you know, the Tory party,
which is meant to be our party,
is led by this bloody awful middle-class bulldog.
Yeah, bulldog.
Well, he's practically a socialist.
So all these people are joined to the British fascist.
There's also people who are just like fighting.
So the most famous example of that is a man
who we would definitely be talking about a fair bit,
who is a man called William Joyce.
So he will be best known to people as Lord Haw-Haw.
So Lord Haw-Haw was this guy who was broadcasting German propaganda
to Britain during the Second World War
and ended up, spoiler alert, being executed for it.
He was nicknamed Lord Haw-Haw because of the sort of strangled,
faux contrived aristocratic way that he spoke.
But William Joyce was actually born in Ireland
to a kind of a unionist, loyalist family.
He moved to England with his family
after Britain got out of what becomes ultimately the Republic of Ireland.
He had been associated with the Black and Tans.
He comes to Dulwich in South London.
He feels that he's been cheated.
Well, Dulwich, notorious breeding ground of very right-wing people.
Nigel Farage went to school.
Nigel Farage.
I said, PG Woodhouse, Tom.
And PG Woodhouse, of course.
Raymond Shandler.
Really? Did he teach at Dulwich?
He went to Dulwich College.
Did he?

He was there with PG Woodhouse, yeah.

Do you know? I didn't know that.

Yeah, an amazing Dulwich College fact.

That is a very good fact.

I love a public school fact, Tom, as you know.

I know you do.

So William Joyce, he joins the British fascisti
and he likes going and fighting communists in the streets
so breaking up communist meetings and all this kind of thing.

And the British fascisti,
they end up calling themselves the British fascists
because they realize that calling themselves the fascist.

That's a bit foreign, isn't it?

It does sound a little bit foreign.

Yeah.

They hold meetings in Birmingham, in Hyde Park,
and they will draw up to 5,000 people.

So not huge, but not nothing.

What's interesting is that even at this point,
there are particularly strongholds.

So it won't surprise anybody,
given how many retired colonels we've been impersonating.

And the South Coast, South Coast resorts is a good place.

The cities, London, Birmingham, and so on.

What's also interesting is there's a big overlap.

Glasgow as well, I gather.

Glasgow, yeah.

Glasgow has this sectarian politics, doesn't it?

It also has a sizable professional middle class
who might vote Conservative.

And there is a big overlap between British fascists,
actually not just the British fascisti,
but also going right into the 1930s.

There is an absolute overlap with the Conservatives.

So a lot of these people would also be members of the Conservative Party.

Indeed, the British fascisti tell their members at elections,
they don't stand for election.

They say at elections, you should vote Conservative,
and you should always be loyal to King and country.

And there are Tory MPs like this guy at Birmingham MP.

Another MP is an MP till 1950 called Patrick Hannan.

He is on the Fascist Grand Council.

He hosts British Fascist dinners in Birmingham.

He books House of Commons rooms for Fascist meetings.

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And he sees no conflict between being a regular Conservative MP and being a member of the British fascists.
So it's a bit like being a freemason or something.
Yeah, I think that's pretty much right.
Now we're going to run out of time.
So just on these very early fascists,
what's really interesting is that it was set up by a woman.
And I think women are, from the very beginning,
very prominent in the Fascist movement.
So like all sort of fringe extremist movements,
it splits quite quickly.
So by 1924, I mean, it's only been going a year.
By 1924, there's another group called the National Fascisti.
They are more militant.
They think of the British fascist sellouts.
Maybe they're part of the conspiracy.
The National Fascisti only have 60 members,
but one of them, Tom, is somebody I know you're very keen to talk about on the podcast.
You're very keen to come back to her,
so we won't give away all her story.
She is a woman called Valerie Arkle-Smith,
who at various points trades as Sir Victor Barker,
Colonel Barker and Captain Barker.
A great enthusiast for boxing.
Yeah, and she likes the name Barker, I think it's fair to say.
So she is a character, it's fair to say.
She's from the Channel Islands.
She ends up marrying a woman called Elfrida,
who believes that she's a man.
Valerie Arkle-Smith tells her,
my name is Victor Barker and I've been very badly injured in the Great War.
War wound.
So if you spot any unexpected physical characteristics,
this is because of my interest in the First World War.
They get married and they live in Brighton.
And at some point in 1926,
Valerie Arkle-Smith, aka Sir Victor Barker,
she sees a letter addressed to somebody called Barker,
and it's actually not to her.
And it's from the National Fascisti.
Thank you for inquiring about membership.
You are a member 6,423 or whatever.
And she thinks, oh, I'll join.
So she ends up joining the National Fascisti.

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So Dominic, I think that that is an amazing teaser for an episode, because a spoiler alert, Colonel Barker ends up as a fairground attraction in Blackpool, alongside the vicar of Stuckey who ends up being eaten by a lion. So we're going to do an episode on Britain's two top fairground attractions. So he, she will be part of that.

All right, Tom.

You're fascinated by this story.

But also, because we're running out of time, I want you to give a chance to talk about this guy who has something to do with camels.

You put down camels.

So one mother Spencer group that is formed is called the Imperial Fascist League.

That was founded in 1928.

Are you familiar with them, Tom?

No.

Great.

So there's a guy called Arnold Spencer-Lease.

He is an experienced vet.

He's an expert on camels.

He'd been investigating camel diseases before the First World War.

He is the world expert on the health of camels.

His book, his masterwork, was published the same year he set up the Imperial Fascist League.

And his masterwork, it's a better read, I think it's fair to say than mine, Camp.

It's called a treatise on the one humped camel in health and disease.

Is it still used?

I mean, he was absolutely the top man in the world on one humped camels.

Wow.

Absolutely.

He was also a fascist.

But he was also a fascist.

He had been reading all of this anti-Semitic stuff.

In the 1910s, 1920s.

He believed that the British aristocracy was being corrupted by Jews because they'd married Jewish heiresses.

I'll give you an example of that.

And this also is relating back to some episodes

that we've just been doing, namely the Oscar Wildtrial
in which the Prime Minister, Lord Roseberry, appeared.
And he had married Hannah Rothschild,
very fabulously wealthy heiress and, of course, Jewish.
And their son, Lord Dalmanie,
when he was born, Roseberry apparently said,
oh, he looks Jewish and hated him from that point on.
But this didn't stop Lord Dalmanie from becoming both an MP
and captain of Surrey County Cricket Club
and leading them to victory in the championship.
Correctly.
And it was Lord Dalmanie who got the Prince of Wales
to agree that they could have the ostrich feathers,
which were the symbol of the Prince of Wales,
which we talked about in our Hundred Years War episode.
So everything connects.
Everything connects.
To serve as the emblem for Surrey County Cricket Club.
I mentioned that because this was an example
of the kind of the paranoia around the aristocracy.
Yeah.
That ancient British titles,
that they were marrying Jewish heiresses,
and therefore the aristocracy was being corrupted
was the point of view of the...
Arnold Lees would not have enjoyed watching Surrey Cricket Club,
then, Tom.
It's fair to say.
No.
Buried himself in his book.
But if you were a Surrey fan, absolutely you would, as I am.
So, Rafa, Lord Dalmanie.
So the imperial fascists, they dress in very extravagant uniforms.
They have a black shirt.
Black shirt, Tom.
That's going to anticipate something to come.
They have khaki breeches and they were putties.
They wear a beret and a cummerbund,
which I think is...
I think no movement would ever come to power in Britain
wearing berets and cummerbunds, personally.
Well, 80, you have your PG Woodhouse.
They're comic.
Yes, I do.

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I mean, they're sinister because they're very anti-Semitic,
the imperial fascist elite.
But there are not many of them.
And I think it's fair to say,
you get to the end of the 1920s,
the general strike has happened,
all kinds of kind of political and economic turbulence.
But they have got absolutely nowhere.
The system is too resilient.
And also, they lack what all successful fascist movements have,
which is a really convincing, charismatic,
articulate, plausible frontman.
So the camel vet is not...
It's not them.
Not going to cut it.
Nor is Sir Victor Barker with his war wound.
Or her war wound.
But then, Tom, at the beginning of the 1930s,
they find an extremely plausible frontman.
In some degree, you might say,
the perfect frontman with a war record,
with aristocratic links, a brilliant speaker,
a man who comes, would you believe,
from the Labour Party.
And that is Sir Oswald Mosley.
And we'll tell that story next time.
Well, that's brilliant, Dominic.
What a cliffhanger.
And if you simply can't bear to wait for that,
and the other two episodes
that we'll be recording after that.
So, Mitford's Cable Street, all kinds of things to come,
then you can listen to them straight away
by joining the Rest is History Club.
But if you don't want to do that, then that's fine.
They will be coming out on Thursday and then next week.
So we will see you either immediately,
if you're a member of the Rest is History Club,
or on Thursday.
Thank you, Dominic.
And thank you all for listening.
Bye-bye.
Bye-bye.