

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 374. The Battle of Cable Street: Fascism Defeated

The Battle of Cable Street has a deep personal significance to me, as I learned all about this historic event on the 4th of October 1936 from my mother, who was there herself. 84 years ago she stood alongside many others, and later recalled how tens of thousands of people from an incredibly diverse range of community organisations, faith groups, trade unions, the Labour Party, left-wing groups and others had come together against the planned march by Oswald Mosley's Union of British Fascists and those police guarding it through a heavily Jewish neighbourhood. Communities joined together to support each other with one simple aim, to stop the Fascists from marching through the East End and determinedly say they wouldn't let them pass. Those who stood there in Cable Street all those years ago did so as an act of defiance and an act of principle, and we walk in their shadow. That Dominic was Jeremy Corbyn, the late leader of the Labour Party, writing in the Morning Star in the 1st of October 2020 about one of the mythic episodes in the history of the Labour Party and the history of anti-fascism, what's been come to be called the Battle of Cable Street when, as Jeremy Corbyn put it, left-wing groups and others came together against the planned march by Oswald Mosley's Union of British Fascists through the East End. I'm sure you're going to tell me that this is a hugely mythologised event. Well, who am I to argue is Jeremy Corbyn? Because it wouldn't really be an episode of the rest of history if a famous episode doesn't turn out to be mythologised. But this is the third episode of our series on British Fascism, History of British Fascism in the 20s and 30s, and we left Oswald Mosley at the end of episode two pretty down on his luck. I mean, he'd had a kind of spectacular start. He'd been filling out Olympia Stadium in Kensington, but lots of violence there, and people start to withdraw their support, and it looks as though the British Union of Fascists is going into a decline. It's no sooner arrived than it seems to be departing. So what happens next? Between that, what happens next? How do we get to Cable Street? What's going on? Fill us in. Well, first of all, hello, everybody. And I will say, Tom, I wondered whether you would get a good impression out of that Jeremy Corbyn quotation, because Jeremy Corbyn is a hard man to do. What did you think of it? Well, I thought it was very good. And what you captured, there is a slight nasal quality to Jeremy Corbyn's voice. But also what you captured is an unusual trick of shouting at random words in the middle of a sentence. Yes. Yes. It's kind of a kind of dreary expansive list, then he'll suddenly shout. That's very much what I wanted to convey. So I'm glad you picked up on that. I thought it was beautifully done. And if he is listening, I don't know if he is a member of the Restless History Club. Somehow I'd be quite surprised. But if he is listening, he should get in touch and let us know how much he's enjoyed it. So yes, we ended last time with the Olympia meeting, the violence of the Olympia in Kensington, the great kind of hall there, thousands of people, including more than 100 MPs who watched many of them in horror, as black shirts, stewards beat up headless and demonstrators, of course, more onto demonstrators when we get to cable streets and the events in the East End. But as you say, Tom, the fascist movement, it's very moribund in 1934 and 1935. They've lost a lot of support. Why? Partly because of the violence and partly because the press have withdrawn their backing. But also, I think there's something bigger, which is that Moseley had set up the British Union of Fascists because he thought that British capitalism, British democracy, was heading for a great smash, as he would have said at the time. And the people will want an alternative. And actually, he is quite wrong. We get the story, I think, of the 20s and 30s. And

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this is one reason why British fascism is a really great window into this. I think we get the story of the 20s and 30s wrong in Britain because, frankly, we're a bit too Americanized. So we think of the 20s as cocktail glasses and fast cars and the 30s as men-in-cloth caps, very miserable.

In some ways, it's actually the other way around. The 20s is a really conflicted, difficult, it's the decade of general strike in Britain, very high unemployment. In the 30s, Britain, of course, it's affected by the Great Depression, but it's not as affected as almost any other comparable Western country. I think it's because of the Jarrow March, isn't it? I mean, that looms so vividly. So that's the march of the unemployed from the north all the way down to London?

Yes. And also, Edward VIII becomes going to Wales and meeting the coal miners there and saying, something must be done. And so there's sense we have from those two famous episodes that the whole of Britain is admired in unemployment. Of course, that's to forget the massive housing boom, all those industrial developments, ribbon developments along the roads that are starting to be built. Britain is actually kind of booming in the late 30s, I mean, in the kind of the prosperous heartlands, even as you're getting mass unemployment in the industrial regions.

It is. This is like the lecture that I used to give at the University of Sheffield in the 2000s.

This is music to my ears because J.B. Priestly, the playwright, author of *In a Spectre Calls*, but a great kind of social commentator in 1930s, 1940s Britain, he wrote a book called *English Journey* and I think about 1936, 37 or so. And he said there are three Englands. There is the England of the kind of tea towel, the National Trust House, Fudge, Cotswold villages. Downton Abbey.

Yeah, there's that England. He said there is the England of the industrial cities of the north.

So people wearing clogs, cobbled streets, coal smoke everywhere, miners. That England is obviously really suffering in the Depression. But he said there's a third England, which is the England of people going swimming, in newly built art deco swimming pools, people buying radios, people living in, as you said, in Stanley Baldwin's Britain, in all these ribbon developments along main roads, red brick, semi-detached buildings. Because to this day, the built up environment of vast swathes of British cities dates from the 30s. It does exactly. It does exactly right.

And for those people, I mean, often those people are better off than they've ever been.

So those are the people who are voting for the national government in the 1931 colossal landslide.

And again, in 1935, they are the people who listened to Stanley Baldwin on the wireless and they say, oh, Mr. Baldwin's a very solid chap, all this sort of thing. There was a resilience there to British capitalism and British democracy in the 1930s that is so often missed by all the stuff about the Jeremiah.

And meanwhile, in Germany, all kinds of terrible things are happening. It's not just that there's a difference in the political and economic arc of Germany and Britain, but that there is some sense of a kind of fundamental cultural difference. That fascism is alien, un-British, not the kind of thing that could put down root in a country governed by Stanley Baldwin.

Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. I think people are looking at what's happening in Germany.

We mentioned the Knights of the Long Knives in the last episode, which takes place, what is it, three weeks after the violence at Olympia? And people say, gosh, you know, that's the last thing we want in Britain. Which obviously is a real problem for Oswald Mosley.

So what does he do? Well, first of all, he moves in interesting ways. He's always been a Keynesian. Anti-Laysay Fair.

Yeah, anti-Laysay Fair. Now he becomes much more aggressively anti-capitalist. So in 1935 or so,

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the BUF, the British Union of Fascists, his party, are much more aggressively denouncing capitalism in industry, industrial magnates, big business and so on, playing up their kind of more socialist elements. People saying this is basically our party is patriotic socialism, all this kind of thing, making a very strong argument for protectionism, for sealing Britain off from the world economy, tariff walls, actually some of these elements that will be taken up by the Labour left in the 1970s and 90s. Right. So Tony Benn is, I mean, that's pretty much what he's asking for in the 80s, isn't it? Tony Benn, yeah, that's a bit of a 80s, isn't it? Although Tony Benn is not a fascist for the avoidance of doubt. But yeah, there is that protectionist element, I mean, that you go back to Joseph Chamberlain and the 19th century and forward to Tony Benn, and then later on, I mean, there are elements of the Labour Party on the very left of the Labour Party now who would say, you know, we should rebuild our manufacturing behind a tariff wall and all this sort of stuff. But there's another element to this. One of the things that mostly attacks, and some of our American listeners will know that there was a similar movement in the United States, is chain stores. So he hates department store chains, Marks and Spencers, Unilever, Woolworths, the Burton's tailoring group. Some of these, by the way, are Jewish-owned. So I was going to ask you about that. So presumably that is the other aspect. So there were two elements to this. One is, I mean, these are new things. They've emerged in recent decades. And there are a lot of people who feel threatened by this. If you're a news agent, if you're a small shopkeeper with a little tailors somewhere in, I don't know, Salisbury. Yeah, in Salisbury, actually, Salisbury is a good example, because that's the kind of place where a chain store might set up and actually put you out of business. You will be burning with resentment. So there's that element to it. So the BUF are really targeting people like news agents and small shopkeepers and taxi drivers in 1934-35. But the other element to this, of course, is anti-Semitism. Because a company like Marx and Spencer, the great British high street retailer, were a company like Montague Burton, founded in Leeds, you know, high street tailors. Or indeed, Slazinger. The sports point. Slazinger. I hadn't thought of Slazinger. So Slazinger Jewish-owned. Well, it was founded by two Jewish immigrants from Germany. But there you go. Perfect. I'd never thought of that, but that's a perfect example. So this allows Mosley to open up a new flank, which has always been there in fascism, but not in his repertoire specifically. And that is anti-Semitism. And at this point, we should probably step back a bit and talk about anti-Semitism in Britain. Now, you mentioned in a previous episode last week that there had been distrust of foreigners, hatred of the Jews in Britain in the Edwardian period, which they had. Because in the 1890s and 1900s, you'd had the influx of, let's say, about 160,000 people from Eastern Europe, from Poland, from what was called the Pale of Settlement in the kind of Belarus and Western Russia, where Jewish villages and towns and communities have been the victim of hideous pogroms. And those Jewish refugees had settled in East End and in Leeds and Manchester in particular. And there had been, you know, populist kind of campaigns against them. And the Tory government in 1905 had passed the Aliens Act trying to restrict immigration, not very successfully, to sort of appease some of this kind of grassroots populist anxiety. Jewish people in Britain were pretty well integrated by and large. And in fact, some Jewish Britons were very well integrated to the extent that they were part of the circle of King Edward VII before the First World War. So you mentioned, we've mentioned the Rothschilds a few times. This assumes another good

example.

So Ernest Castle, Baron de Hirsch, these are people who they've been given peerages. They're very successful. They're very well connected. And of course, that encourages resentment in itself. So there's always this kind of reservoir there. We talked about the John Buck and stuff. I mean, this is an amazing quote, actually, from the 39 Steps. This guy called Scudder, he's the person who basically tells Hanne the plot, who unveils the plot to Hanne.

He says at one point, these words, capital had no conscience and no fatherland. The Jew was behind it. Yes, sir, he is the man ruling the world just now. And that you would find sentiments like that in all kinds of British fiction and British newspapers in the 1910s, 1920s, and early 1930s.

But politically, it's not really a massive issue, because of course, there aren't loads of Jewish people coming into Britain in the 1920s. And anti-Semitism, it's kind of there. It's in the conversation, but it's obviously never an election issue. It's nothing like it is in Germany, partly because the British population, Jewish population is small and very concentrated, a lot of it in the East End of London. But I think what happens is that in about 1933, 1934, Mosley takes it up for opportunistic reasons. He's obviously influenced by Hitler.

He's obviously looking for an angle. But does he have a burning, fervent, personal anti-Semitism as Hitler did? Do you know what Clive James said about him? No, go on.

So I've mentioned this extraordinary interview that appeared with Mosley. And I do watch on YouTube. It's, I think, very chilling. And Clive James, who was a TV Australian, poet, critic, autobiographer, wrote a review of it where he said, you will never catch Oswald admitting to anti-Semitism. All he does is embody it. Oh, very good. Yeah. Do you think that's fair?

I think Mosley, he turns himself into an anti-Semite almost deliberately, I would say, in the early 1930s. But up to that point, he would have been anti-Semitic in the sense that lots of British people in the upper classes were anti-Semitic. That is to say, after dinner, over the port and cigars, he would have happily joined in conversations about Jews.

But I don't think it was a ruling principle for him as it was for so many Nazis in the 1920s. You know, Hitler and him and the people, Mosley barely mentions it.

Is he being influenced by the influx of anti-Semites into the fascist movement?

So in other words, is he being influenced by the sense that he has to give these people what they want? And the second question is, is anti-Semitism being stirred up by emigration of Jews from Nazi Germany to Britain? The two answers are yes and yes. So he's definitely being influenced.

He's often been criticised at the beginning by people like Arnold Leese, the camel-botherer that we talked about in episode one, who says Mosley is soft on this issue. And there are people around him, let's say William Joyce, the future Lord Haw, who we've talked about a few times, who's this kind of bruiser. He has this huge scar across his face.

Like what do they call it? A Glasgow smile from being stabbed, being someone tried to rip his mouth with a knife. Joyce is fanatically anti-Semitic.

So there are lots of fanatically anti-Semitic people around Mosley who are pushing him in that direction. And it becomes an issue from 1933, because of course, as German Jews begin to get out of Hitler's Germany, most go to the United States, but not all. So at first, in 1933-34, you're talking about hundreds of people, not thousands. I mean, it will become thousands later in the decade. But even that provokes press commentary. People talk about German Jews pouring into Britain. So he sees an issue that he can exploit now. Of course, if you're Jewish, the chances are you will go to an area that already has a Jewish population. So that's

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Manchester Leeds in the East End of London. And it's in the East End of London in particular that he and his fellow fascist organisers think, oh, we can profit from this. We can stir this up. So this will bring us back to Cable Streets on. Because in about the end of 1935, so they've had a year or so in the total doldrums after the Olympia in Brolio. And about that point, starting in Bethnal Green in the East End of London, they start to campaign on this issue and this issue specifically. So to say, you know, you've got Jewish neighbours who are taking all your jobs, who are doing all this, the Jews are actually behind all the mess that the economy is in, the Jews are controlling the world capitalist system, all of this sort of stuff. And for the next year or so, there's a lot of this kind of going on in the East End. So in Martin Peasebook, who are for the black shirts, he has a really good quotation from a report in the Evening Standard. So that's London's Evening newspaper for those people who are not British by a journalist called Dudley Barker. And he says, an evening journey east of Aldgate is an astonishing experience. And he says, you know, you go down the streets, there are always these street corner meetings of communists, of fascists and so on. And the meetings are generally orderly, but he says, leading down from the main streets to the deserted side streets where the much discussed terror by night is said to stalk. And where stories are told of safety razor blades, stuck in potatoes and apples, or the peaks of caps, or bits of piping, lengths of railing, torn from the housefronts and knuckle dust as knives and hobnail boots used as weapons against the partisans who wander into opposition territories. So there's a sort of sense of, you know, these are very poor areas of London, where the communists and the British Union of fascists are competing among the same groups of people often. And there's that echo there of Berlin. Yeah, pre Nazi Berlin. Exactly. Red Berlin, but they but the brown shirts are moving in. Exactly, right. Yeah, that's exactly it, Tom. I think there is an echo. But it's so local. I mean, it's never on the same scale, obviously. And it's so localized. And it's against the backdrop, as you said, of Stanley Baldwin's Britain, where basically, in Northampton, this is not going on. And this is the context for this much mythologized moment with Jeremy Corbyn took us so beautifully in with in his article at the Morning Star, which is the Battle of Cable Streets in October, the 4th of October. So Moses decides he will bring this campaign to a peak by launching a march through the East End of London, you could not conceive of something more inflammatory, more likely to provoke violence. Of course, he wants it to be inflammatory. He wants to get the headlines. 77,000 people signed a petition to the Home Secretary saying ban the march. The Home Secretary says, no, we don't ban marches in Britain. You know, we're a country of free speech or liberty. Political parties are free to march. So people who are opposed to Mosley say we will stop him, we will block him. And their slogan, which is borrowed from the Spanish Republicans, Spanish Republican slogan, the Civil War is no power to Iran. And they say they shall not pass. So on the 4th of October, Mosley pitches up, he's got 3000 black shirts. And as they approach the East End, there are, who knows, 100,000, 200,000, maybe even 300,000. I mean, generally, when people estimate crowds, they massively overestimate, let's say 100,000 people blocking the streets. And who are they apart from being Jeremy Corbyn's mum? Jeremy Corbyn never talks about it, of course. They are communists in large part. So the British Communist Party has really... And Jews, presumably? Yes, of course, Jewish groups. So if you are a politically active Jewish Britain in living in East London, this is your moment. This is your chance to make a stand. Left-wing groups of various kinds, anarchists, socialists of various sort of hues, trade unionists. So all these sorts of groups, they form this kind of coalition,

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and they make a stand and they block the road and they make it impossible for the fascists to do their march. Now, if you go back to Jeremy Corbyn's description there, you know, we fought fascism. And this is the kind of thing. So the Antifa movement, the anti-fascist movement in the United States, it's sometimes said of taking inspiration from the Battle of Cable Streets. You know, because it's Britain, it's not America, but it's one of the dates in their kind of litany of victories. And they say, we fought fascism. There are all these descriptions, building barricades, using sticks, using rocks, throwing chair legs, all of this stuff, rolling marbles under the hooves of the horses. But actually, that last thing tells you something. They actually don't fight fascists at all. This is one thing that people get wrong about the Battle of Cable Streets. They actually fight the police. The fascists and the anti-fascists never actually come to blows because the police are in between them. So the fighting is actually between the police and elements of the kind of anti-fascist group. Presumably, though, the communists would say that the police are merely the paramilitary apparatus of the capitalist state

and that the fascists are another expression of capitalists. And it's all much for much. Yeah, they would. I suppose you would say that if you were a card-carrying communist. I mean, if you're a trade unionist, you might not necessarily think that. Or if you're a sort of left-wing fellow traveler. Or indeed, if you're a Jewish activist who just wants to stand up for his community. And we don't forget most people aren't doing this fighting. But the fighting that does happen, it doesn't really actually involve the fascists as much as people think it does. Because they just turn up and the police send them back.

Yeah, and the police say you can't do it.

And they kind of give up.

You've got to give up and go home. Now, the one thing that Jeremy Corbyn... I mean, I'm not knocking Jeremy Corbyn. God knows I've done enough for that in my professional career. But for once, I'm not knocking Jeremy Corbyn specifically because what he's saying is absolutely typical of the mythology of Cable Street. We stopped them. This was the moment, you know, all that kind of thing. And of course, people want to believe it, but it is completely wrong because it wasn't the moment and it didn't stop them in the long term.

So you are knocking Jeremy Corbyn?

I'm not talking specifically. I mean, he's just saying what everybody else says.

But actually, two things happen. One, there are lots more very, very enthusiastically attended British Union of Fascist meetings in the East End in the aftermath of the Battle of Cable Street. It's actually, in some ways, good publicity for the Fascists. They have loads of meetings, very well attended. The other thing, special branch who are monitoring them for those people who are not British, that's a sort of specialist element of Scotland Yard.

They estimated that actually the London membership of the British Union of Fascists went up after the Battle of Cable Street, actually attracted people to join them.

And there was actually the worst anti-Semitic violence in London happened the weekend after the Battle of Cable Street. In Stepney, 200 black shirts, kind of young men, teenagers, they run amok, smashing Jewish businesses. So in other words, this isn't a moment that makes the Fascists pack up and go home at all. In some ways, it emboldens them.

But I mean, I can understand that, that you can play the free speech card, for instance, even though presumably the Fascists want to get rid of free speech in the long run.

They can say, oh, our free speech has been denied, all that kind of thing. They can play the victim card. And I can understand that people kind of rallying to that. But in the long run, is the air not going out of the Fascist balloon? In that sense, short-term spike, but long-term decline? Yeah, I think that's a good point. I think the thing about the anti-Semitism, it's true of a lot of Mosley's kind of wheezes, his stratagems, is that it will get you a certain amount of support and an amount of attention, but that is necessarily limited. Kind of sugar rush. A sugar rush, exactly. So it gets the sugar rush of an extra few thousand members who love the thought of a punch-up. They're very excited by the violence. They want someone to blame. Frankly, there are not enough people who are in Britain who are motivated primarily by political anti-Semitism. There are lots of people with anti-Semitic prejudices. They've read all these books, but they don't care enough to join the BUF and to work for it. But presumably also, this is happening in what, 1936? Yes. In the years that follow in Germany, the Nazi harassment and persecution of the Jews is becoming more and more obvious. And isn't there a sense in Britain that... I mean, I know, obviously Britain doesn't go to war to defend the Jews. I mean, that's clearly not the case. But there is a sense, isn't there, that people are increasingly, if not horrified, then unsettled by what's happening in Germany? Yes, I agree. I think anti-Semitism, which had been perfectly... This will sound shocking. Anti-Semitism had been respectable in the early 1920s. You could go to a dinner party of the most eminent people in the land and say things about Jews and people wouldn't bat an eyelid. I think by the late 1930s, by association with Nazism and what's been happening in Germany, there is a sense that it is much more toxic. Yeah, because I mean, spoiler for the next episode, but Unity Mitford, she's very overt about her anti-Semitism, and this causes her family huge embarrassment. And it is seen as being unacceptable. And if you were being... If you wanted to make another point about Cable Street, Tom, you could say that it's actually demonstrations like that that help to toxify it. Yeah. You know, that actually it requires people to stand up and to say, this is not acceptable. I think so. So, I think in that sense, Jeremy Corbyn isn't wrong to say that they took a stand. Yeah. Well, I mean, this podcast has really been crafted, Tom, as a way of Corbyn washing ourselves. So, on that note, let's take a break. Very unexpected on the rest of this history. And when we come back, let's look at the build-up to the war and what happens to the fascists in Britain during the phony war and then after.

Splendid.

Hello. Welcome back to the Rest is History. We're continuing our series on British fascism and the Battle of Cable Street has been fought and won by the anti-fascists. Dominic, the storm clouds of war are darkening over Europe. Love the storm cloud of war.

So, we are coming to appeasement and the build-up to war and then the outbreak of war.

What is the role of the fascists in this in Britain?

So, the fascinating thing about this is, whereas, of course, we associate fascism with militarism and with aggressive nationalism and we basically want to invade and conquer.

British fascism is the peace party in the late 1930s. It's the party of ultra appeasement.

It is the party that says we shouldn't go to war over Poland.

But actually, one thing we've quickly skipped over that we should just make a nod to is, there is one crisis that the fascists could conceivably have hoped to profit from and that is the abdication crisis of 1936. So, the most prominent person that people have sometimes

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pointed a finger at and said, could this person have been a fascist is the king, Edward VIII, who reigned from January 1936 to December 1936. He knew Mosley. He had met Mosley in 1935. When Mosley was leader of the British Union of Fascists and had talked to him about fascism, had said, what are you up to? What are you interested in? Edward VIII, he is of that generation. He is one of those people who chafes at the old men who says, you mentioned him earlier,

Tom, saying something must be done. He's impatient. He's mercurial. He has a taste for married women.

He's actually quite Mosley-like, isn't he? I mean, he's not a Nazi. Sometimes it's sort of said, oh, he was a Nazi. He wasn't a Nazi, but he is sympathetic to German aristocrats and people like that, the ambassadors and dignitaries and things who say to him, oh, we've been very hard done by. We just want to regain our pride and all that sort of thing. And actually, that's one of the things that makes Stanley Baldwin distrust Edward VIII and think he's going to be very unreliable

as king. We're going to have to watch him. Then when the Wallace Simpson thing blows up, the abdication, I'm sure one day we'll do an episode about the abdication crisis because it's perennially fascinating to people. So this is the megan of the 1930s.

The megan moment when he decides he wants to get it on with an American divorcee, Wallace Simpson, and Baldwin says to him, the prime minister says, you're going to have to choose between the crown and the American divorcee. Mosley campaigns for the king. So there are Winston Churchill does, of course. Yes. Actually, so it's an interesting moment of alignment between the British union of fascists and Winston Churchill. They're both of the king's party, as it was kind of called. So the BUF actually pay for a loud speaker van to up and down Whitehall, broadcasting, stand by the king. That is the message of Mosley in this time of crisis.

And there's a story that will appeal to our Rest is History guest,

Dan Jackson, a man who loves a bit of Newcastle history. So Newcastle upon time, black shirt, jog around the city, giving out leaflets and chanting, two, four, six, eight, the king must not abdicate. But he does abdicate. And so off he goes. And actually, he's then not part of the equation. And actually, this doesn't really win, mostly, much extra support, which is a much better issue for him. And it's a really good issue for him. This is the shocking and surprising thing for many listeners, I imagine, is the thing about peace with Germany and no war, no to war. So as the storm clouds gather, Tom, the more they gather, the more he hammers home the war issue. Well, it's an anti-war coalition, isn't it? Yeah, stop the war. It's a stop the war coalition. This is a very Jeremy Corbyn themed episode. So they say, you know, absolutely no war for Eastern Europe. In two years, their support goes from 6,000 members to about 30,000. So a five-fold increase by 1939 on this issue, they say the Tories and Labour are warmongers.

We will revise the Treaty of Versailles. Appeasement has not gone far enough, all of this kind of thing. They again, as they've done so often, they make women very prominent in the campaigns. So there will be poster parades of fascist women. The posters carry the slogan, our children were young in 1914. Have we brought them up for war? And you can absolutely see, if they've downplayed the fascist logo, buried that in the small print, a lot of people, you know, you're on the streets of Aberystwyth or whatever, and walking along and you see these characters. Are you in favour of war? No, I'm not. Well, join the fascists.

So I'll tell you what I found so interesting reading up about this. So as you get into 1939,

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they're still making excuses. They make excuses for Hitler. They are saying, well, he's just member Czechoslovakia, but that was never a real country. You know, it was a contrived. And as it gets to Poland, they say Poland is corrupt. It's being used as a puppet for the West. So it's a very Ukraine. Why should Britain shed blood for the sake of this rotting confederacy of cash and corruption? Why do we have to be allied to every little country in the east of Europe? This strangulation policy, they're saying we're trying to strangle Germany, we're making Germany feel embattled. This will throw Europe into war. It's impossible to read this without thinking of all those people who say, why are we throwing this money into the sink of Ukraine? Why, you know, we have actually provoked Russia by expanding. I mean, this is, the rhetoric is, by the way, the points of doubt. I'm not saying these people are fascists in the 21st century necessarily, but I'm saying there's a remarkable similarity in the rhetoric.

No, but I think what you're saying, what you're saying is that because we know what the Nazis do, because we have the association of the word fascist with death camps, with the Holocaust, with unspeakable crimes and horrors, we may close our eyes to aspects of fascism that before the war

would appeal to all kinds of different constituencies. So if you are anti-war, they would appeal to you.

If you're an environmentalist, they might appeal to you. You know, if you're on the left, might appeal to you.

Tom, you were going to mention Scotland.

Yeah. So there are people, there are nationalists in Scotland who are pretty sympathetic. I think, by and large, I mean, the figures in the SMP who are sympathetic to Germany in this period of doing it because they are anti-English rather than because they're pro-fascists.

Right.

Yeah. I mean, but there are aspects of the fascist program that people can identify with in ways that perhaps would be explicable to people today. If you're anti-war, if you're pro-environment, there are aspects of the fascist policies that might appeal to you.

If you think sometimes parliament isn't working, we're really let down by our leaders. I mean, who wouldn't think that?

They're all the same.

They're all the same or they're just self-aggrandizing shits.

Yeah. I absolutely agree with that. I do think they're all the same, absolutely useless. Get rid of the lot of them is a stepping stone of a kind to fascism. However, against that, I mean, we mustn't go to become too revisionist.

No.

Because, of course, it's absolutely evident by this point that Hitler is going to be capable of unspeakable crimes. And so the fascists in Britain must be tarred with association.

Yes. I think they are, although this is why their support doesn't go higher, although they're probably more respectable in 1939 than they were in 1936 or so because they've basically really gone in hard on this issue of peace and an opposition to war. But I agree with you, obviously, for most people, for most sane people in 1939, the British Union are fascists as a poisonous party, the black shirts, the violence, the anti-Semitism.

So war is declared and Mosley is allowed to campaign for peace against the government for nine months.

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Nine months?

I find that amazing. I mean, it's a tribute either to the British traditions of free speech or of complacency or of the sense that, because as we will find out in the next episode, Churchill actually has family links to Mosley by marriage.

Well, it's Churchill who locks him up.

I know, but...

That Churchill's not going soft on him.

But there is a sense, I think, in which perhaps the British government is not going after Mosley because he is still seen as being one of us.

There may be a slight element of that, but I think it's actually more that for the first nine months or so during the so-called phony war, the Chamberlain government just thinks, if you haven't committed treason, we're not going to lock you up.

And the truth of the matter is, and this was a slightly odd thing to think, because we're so used to thinking that the fascist is inherently treasonous, that most of them haven't committed treason. I mean, Mosley has not committed treason. He's not giving secrets to the Germans or anything like that.

Well, again, Dominic, and this is why the mitfits will be so interesting.

This is just a third of a three-part prologue.

Lord and Lady Reesdale, the mother and father of the mitfits sisters, and indeed their one son, their reaction to the outbreak of war is fascinating, because it exemplifies the way in which very far-right figures react to the Declaration of War. I will say no more than that, but it's an intriguing example of the tensions there.

So a few fascists go abroad. William Joyce is the most famous.

He's the man who's cropped up again and again in this podcast.

So he's the guy with the slash across his face, the Joker.

Yeah, he looks like the Joker. He has been always on the more violent, the more extreme wing of Mosley's movement. He goes off, he says, I'm going to go and become a German, and he spends the war broadcasting propaganda into Britain, which is listened to by colossal conscious of people.

Berlin calling. Berlin calling.

It's like we've got him on the podcast, Tom.

Chilling. Chilling resemblance.

But a chilling but instructive resemblance, I would say, Tom.

He's broadcasting to Britain. He's sort of saying, oh, you're all the tools of Jewish finance and all this kind of stuff. And loads and loads of people listen, because they're fascinated, not because they believe him.

But Mosley doesn't go. Mosley says, I'm not going to fight in defense of Poland, but if my members want to defend their country, they're very free to do so.

So he's trying to tread a fine line. He thinks there's going to be a great coup or a collapse and that he can walk in. He has this delusion that the RAF will support him one day to seize power.

But then we get to May 1940. Churchill wants to take a harder line.

Churchill's cabinet amends the Emergency Powers Act, regulation 18b, it's called, and they say we can detain people whose movements have or have had in the past an association with foreign belligerents. So Mosley is arrested.

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In total, I think almost 750 fascists are arrested.

But interestingly, the aristocrats aren't. So all the kind of the Duke of this, the Marquis of Tavistock, the Lord Brockett, all these kind of characters, they're all led off scot-free. You can't arrest an aristocrat.

Now, the funny thing is that people who've written about this, Germany say, Mosley is actually, I mean, this is a weird thing to say, given that basically he's the great villain, he's actually a bit hard done by, because he wasn't actually a traitor. He'd been to Germany.

He was always more drawn to Italy and to Mussolini than he was to Hitler.

But there's no evidence that he has been supporting Germany in the Second World War, or giving them any information or giving them any help or anything.

Well, Dominic, unless his wife, his sister-in-law, perhaps, I mean, we will touch on this in our next episode. But Tom, you're not imprisoned because of what your wife and your sister-in-law have done. Well, you might be in a national emergency.

Well, exactly in a national emergency. So there's some argument that Churchill does this to frighten the Americans. So that Churchill insists on this being done because he wants to promote, you know, there's a new start after Chamberlain has gone, more dynamic leadership, and that actually he wants to say, look, we have this terrible fifth column in Britain.

Well, yes, because he does say, doesn't he, that if the Germans occupy Britain, then probably they'll set up some Vichy-type government run by Mosley.

Yeah, which is actually not true. It would have been Lloyd George or someone like that.

Exactly. So have the Germans arrived in Britain? I think there are a couple of possibilities. One is they pick a sort of a weedy, tweedy kind of Tory. Lord Halifax.

Lord Halifax. The other is they go for a more martial pay-town kind of scenario, in which case Lloyd George does seem like the obvious person. Lloyd George, who had, you know, who had certain sympathies with Hitler. Well, Lloyd George, who had sometimes said, you know, suspicious things. Lloyd George, who of course, you know, had been perfectly happy to work with the Conservatives in the First World War, had flogged all his peerages, had been very corrupt. It's possible to see a scenario in which Lloyd George thinks I'm the safer of my country. I will put us back together.

You know, I will do what has to be done, all that kind of thing. Anyway, I think it is unlikely that Mosley would have been, it's not impossible. I mean, quizzing in Norway. Anyway.

But the thing, I mean, the thing is, is that actually, Hitler doesn't really respect Mosley.

Yes. He sees him as a loser. However, Dominic, there are people in Mosley's immediate family circle on whom Hitler is considerably keener. Right. This is another trailer for your next episode.

In our next episode, we will look at two of those in particular. One of them, Diana, Lady Mosley, who had been Diana Mitford, is his wife. And the other, Unity Mitford, is his sister-in-law.

And they get up very close to Hitler. Unity, perhaps, exceptionally close to Hitler. And so, in our final episode, Dominic, we will be looking at the Mitford specifically and seeing what kind of mirror they hold up. Tom, I find it absolutely bizarre that in all the episodes we've done in the rest of this history, the one that you've put more effort into is the Milfits. I'm just

teeing up. More than Gladiators, more than the Rubicon, more than Muhammad, more than all your other enthusiasts, and more than dinosaurs, Tom, who would have thought it? And all you care about is the Mitfords. I'm just teeing it up because I think it is a brilliant way to look at what is going on in the relationship of British fascists and the Nazis in Hitler specifically. And then,

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into the war, what happens to not just Mosley, but to his wife, and then what happens to the fascists during the war, after the war, and how British fascism is remembered and commemorated right the way up to the present day. Tom, I don't want to upset you, but Theo, our producer, says that your episode on the Mitfords sounds way more fun, he writes, than all the other episodes you've done in the rest of this history.

Well, I'm not entirely going to disagree with that. I think it is. I mean, it is an amazing story. I know that lots and lots of people will be familiar with the story, but if you're not, it's an incredible way, I think, to finish off this series on British fascism.

So, we leave Oswald Mosley. He and the male fascists, where are they all put? They're all put in Brixton. The women are generally sent to Holloway. Some of them go on hunger strike. Most of them are actually released by 1942, but Mosley is still there. So, we'll leave him there, Tom, in prison behind bars. British fascism has been dissipated. It's completely lost its momentum, because of course, Britain is now fighting a great crusade against international fascism.

But we will return in a few minutes for those of you who are members of our own club. I don't know where I was going to go with that. I considered for a moment embarking on a risky parallel. No, don't. And then I thought, no, I won't. If you're part of our great Cable Street anti-fascist movement, the Restis History Club, then you can listen to Tom talking about the Mitfords. It's going to be such fun. You're just doing it for that impersonation, aren't you? Tragic. But also, I think you have a long-established torn dress for kind of very, very partial women. Yeah, horsey women. No, they're not horsey. Are they not horsey? I bet they ride, don't they? Yeah, of course they ride, but they're not... Well, we will discuss.

Okay. Well, so if you're not a member of the Restis History Club, if you're not joining us on the barricades at Cable Street, if you are off in your suburban semi-detached house listening to Stanley Baldwin on the wireless, we'll be back for you on Thursday with the final, the crowning moment, not just in this series, but as far as Tom Holland is concerned in his entire professional career as he talks us through the story of the Mitfords. The women who loved Hitler, what are you going to call it? The girl who stalked Hitler. I mean, you know, the headlines write themselves. Okay, very good. We'll see you next time. Bye-bye. Bye-bye.