

The 1920s and 1930s were years of acute social, economic and political crisis in Britain. Gangs of Fascist thugs sought to emulate the movements led by Hitler and Mussolini, subjecting the Jewish community to hideous persecution.

Although not known as a Fascist stronghold, the Medway Towns saw frequent visits by Fascist leader Oswald Mosley, organised anti-semitism, and regular Fascist street demonstrations.

They also saw a concerted and often successful anti-Fascist campaign by local Communists and Socialists.

In this book David Turner tells the story of these forgotten episodes of Medway history.

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Fascism and anti-Fascism

in the Medway Towns

1927 - 1940

By David Turner

Erratum

On page 35, second line from the top,
for "He" read "Another speaker".

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On page 11, fourth line from the bottom, for
"Cabinet" read "government".

Table of contents

Introduction 3

Chapter One
"Blimps, Die-hards, and landed gentry"
The British Fascists 6

**Fascism and anti-Fascism
in the Medway Towns** 11

1927 - 1940
- By David Turner

Chapter Three
"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"
The rise of the British Union of Fascists 1932-4 17

Chapter Four
"We must get rid of the rats"
Fighting Fascism in Medway and Spain 1935-6 23

Chapter Five
"Creating as much noise as possible"
Fighting it out on the streets 1937-8 29

Chapter Six
"Mind Britain's Business"
War and the end of the BUF 1939-40 36

Sources 41

Acknowledgements 43

Name index 44

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Table of contents

Introduction	3
Chapter One	
"Blimps, Die-hards, and landed gentry"	
The British Fascists	6
Chapter Two	
"Mosley's Biff Boys"	
The New Party and the 1931 general election	11
Chapter Three	
"Hurrah for the Blackshirts !"	
The rise of the British Union of Fascists 1932-4	17
Chapter Four	
"We must get rid of the rats"	
Fighting Fascism in Medway and Spain 1935-6	23
Chapter Five	
"Creating as much noise as possible"	
Fighting it out on the streets 1937-8	29
Chapter Six	
"Mind Britain's Business"	
War and the end of the BUF 1939-40	36
Sources	41
Acknowledgements	43
Name index	44

Abbreviations used in the text

ARP	Air Raid Precautions
BF	British Fascisti (after 1924 British Fascists)
BUF	British Union of Fascists (after 1936 British Union of Fascists and National Socialists)
CP	Communist Party of Great Britain
ILP	Independent Labour Party
MP	Member of Parliament
NP	New Party
NUPA	New Party youth movement
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
RAF	Royal Air Force
TUC	Trades Union Congress

Introduction

The local history industry

In recent years local history publishing in Kent (as in many other areas) has undergone something of a boom. There is now more being published in the field of local history than ever before. On the face of it this ought to be a very welcome development for those of us who stand on the left of politics. For us history is not about the deeds of "the great and the good", a tedious litany of monarchs and statesmen; we see history as essentially the story of the lives and struggles of the "common people". Local history for us is, therefore, an important opportunity to write "history from below". Local history (much more than many other kinds of history writing) can enable us to see how working-class people have made history for themselves. Crucially, it can also allow us to learn lessons from both the victories and the defeats of working-class history, so that they can be applied in the battles of today and tomorrow.

However, such a view of local history is not shared by the "local history industry". In general local history publications focus overwhelmingly on the twee, the banal, and the stupefyingly irrelevant. Studiously refusing to admit that the past was (just like the present) crammed full of the most bitter social and political struggles, they treat us to yawn-inducing tales of church architecture or deservedly forgotten local eccentrics. If working-class people feature at all it is as cap-doffing and forlock-tugging employees of (allegedly) benevolent and paternalistic local employers.

This type of writing finds its counterpart in the now fashionable "Heritage" industry, with its ludicrous attempts to turn the past into a kind of theme park by sanitising and fictionalising it. In the Medway Towns, for instance, we have seen the works of Charles Dickens (one of the area's most famous sons) used as the basis for an annual tourist "festival". Instead of the bleak picture of

Victorian Britain presented in Dickens' writings (the appalling housing, grinding poverty, dirt, disease, and child-exploitation which were the grim reality of working-class life) we are treated to a fancy dress fairytale straight out of Walt Disney.

This book contains history of an altogether different kind. It is history which is, according to the editor of the main Kent local history journal, "too controversial" and "too political" for publication (and, moreover, "not really local history" at all!).

Such a response from the local history industry comes as no surprise to me: there is much in these pages to upset and embarrass the worthy burgesses of Kent. My description of the connections in the 1920s between the Conservative Party and the British Fascists is an obvious example; so is my exposure of the support given by Gillingham's Conservative MP in the 1930s for Franco's Fascists in the Spanish Civil War; and so too is my quoting of the favourable references to Hitler made by the man who became the Tory MP for Canterbury.

The revelation that the Admiralty was apparently prepared to turn a blind eye to the distribution of Fascist propaganda in Chatham Dockyard will also doubtless cause consternation in some quarters.

Likewise, I am sure that there are those who would prefer some of the facts I have uncovered about the local press to go unpublicised: for instance, the assistance given by the *Chatham Observer* to a recruitment drive by the British Fascists; and the same newspaper's criticism of anti-Fascists for their "blackguardism" in confronting the Mosleyites, coupled with praise for the Blackshirts' "non-violence". (In those days the *Observer* was owned by a local family firm; a descendant of the family is, I believe, still involved in the local publishing industry in a modest way.)

What will be particularly distasteful to some is my description of the fact that, while local publishers and Conservative politicians were expressing their sympathy for the Fascists, mass

mobilisations of working-class people were beating the Fascists off of the streets. Furthermore, this book makes it clear that those who led the local anti-Fascist movement were Communists, people who regarded themselves as revolutionary socialists and Marxists (however dubious the Communist Party's claim to those titles may have been).

The lessons of the past

The lessons of the contents of this book for the present day are obvious. Today, just as in the 1930s, we face a deep economic crisis produced by the failure of the capitalist system, with some three million people thrown onto the dole. The 1930s showed that racism and attempts to make scapegoats of ethnic minorities come to the fore at such times. Then racial hatred was directed at the Jewish community, today it is also directed at the black and asian communities (as shown by the recent horrific racial attack on Avtar Singh Gill in Gravesend).

Against this backdrop the alarming rise of Fascist organisations on the continent has given new heart to the latter day Blackshirts of the British National Party (BNP), "Blood and Honour", and other neo-Nazi groups. The BNP have their headquarters at Welling in Kent and there is evidence that they and other neo-Fascists are increasingly active across the county. Just as Socialists, Communists, the Jewish community, and the Labour movement fought on the streets to stop Mosley's Blackshirts in the 1930s, so today the working class, the Left, and ethnic minorities locally must fight the same battle.

I make no apology for appealing to all those who are inspired by the story of the struggle against Fascism told in this book to join the Kent Anti-Fascist Action Committee and the anti-Fascist movement in waging that battle.

David Turner

May 1993.

Chapter One

“Blimps, Die-hards, and landed gentry”

The British Fascists

The 1920s

The 1920s, like the whole inter-war period, were a time of protracted economic, social, and political crisis. Throughout the decade unemployment in Britain never fell below a million. Although the South East generally escaped the worst ravages of the economic crisis, industrial parts of the region (such as the Medway Towns) were certainly not immune from unemployment. The Towns depended overwhelmingly on Chatham Dockyard for employment, and the 1920s saw large-scale lay-offs by the Admiralty, which were not reversed until the mid-1930s. There were persistent rumours of the Dockyard's impending closure throughout the 1920s.

The decade saw bitter class conflict, epitomised by the General Strike of May 1926. The Strike was called by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) on behalf of the miners, who faced savage cuts in their wages. It ended in defeat when, after nine days, the TUC General Council sounded the retreat (much to the disgust of most strikers). In the Medway Towns engineering workers (at Short Brothers' aircraft works in Rochester, and at Aveling and Porter's factory in Strood), printers (at Mackay's of Chatham), barge workers, stevedores, railwaymen, and tram workers all struck. There was, however, no strike at Chatham Dockyard. The Chatham and District Trades Council reported that overall the strike had still been holding firm locally at the time of the TUC's decision to surrender.

In the political arena too the 1920s were years of upheaval. 1924 saw Britain's first Labour government, which (lacking an overall

majority) lasted less than a year. Nevertheless, the party of the organised working class had at last occupied the government benches and supplanted the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives. A further minority Labour government took office after the 1929 election when, for the first time since 1906, the Medway Towns returned a Labour MP (in the shape of S Frank Markham, the Member for Chatham).

To the left of the Labour Party stood the Communist Party of Great Britain, founded in 1920 under the inspiration of the Russian Revolution. By the late 1920s the Party had begun to establish itself in the Medway Towns, as in other industrial areas, chiefly among the unemployed.

The “British Fascists”

It was against this backdrop of crisis and class conflict that the first British Fascist organisation developed. The “British Fascisti” (their somewhat unfortunate acronym was the “BFs”) were founded in 1923 by Miss Rotha Lintorn-Orman, in emulation of Mussolini's Fascist movement, which had seized power in Italy the previous year. Capitalising on a political and economic crisis Mussolini had promised “discipline” and “order”. He set about destroying democracy, outlawing the trade unions and parties of the Left, and instituting a murderous dictatorship. Miss Lintorn-Orman (the daughter of a Major and granddaughter of a Field Marshall) dreamt of doing the same in Britain.

From the outset the British Fascists (as the Fascisti became to avoid charges of “foreign influence”) were organised along quasi-paramilitary lines. In the 1926 General Strike squads of Fascists undertook organised strike-breaking activities, with the tacit approval of the military and civil authorities.

It was also not unknown for Fascist squads to be found stewarding Conservative Party public meetings. This was due to the significant overlap between the BF's leadership and those on

the extreme right wing of the Conservative Party known as the "Die-hards". (The BF's leadership consisted of, as one historian of British Fascism has put it, "retired military officers of the Colonel Blimp type, Die-hard conservatives, landed gentry and emancipated middle-class women".) The BF's Grand Council included a former Conservative MP (Colonel Sir Charles Burn); and at least one serving Tory MP (Sir Robert Burton Chadwick) was a member of the BF. John Baker White, a member of a prominent east Kent land-owning family and a future Tory MP for Canterbury, was a member of the Fascists' Grand Council (as was his mother). In his memoirs White praised the Fascists for fighting the Communists "with their own methods ... in many bloody and sometimes considerable battles at street corners and public halls". He also described Rotha Lintorn-Orman as "one of the bravest people I have ever met".

The BF in Gillingham - April 1927

Given these connections, it is perhaps not surprising that the BF's first appearance in the local press in the Medway Towns was in connection with a gathering held at the Gillingham Conservative Club and attended by the Conservative mayors of Gillingham (Alderman J Bate) and Rochester (Cllr Bert Ward).

The occasion was a "supper and smoking concert" on Tuesday 5th April 1927, held to inaugurate a new "Vat" (ie branch) of a bizarre organisation known as the "Ancient Order of Frothblowers". The Order was a social organisation which (as the name suggests) was devoted ostensibly to the consumption of alcohol. The Frothblowers were also overtly associated with right-wing politics, specifically those of the Conservative Party. Just how right-wing they were is evident from the reception given to their guest speaker at this particular gathering, Capt. W Turner-Coles "Vice-President and Chief of Staff of the British Fascist movement".

An account of the event, written for the *Chatham Observer* by the secretary of one of the Frothblowers' local branches, related that

Capt. Turner-Coles had been introduced as a fellow Frothblower to the assembly (which included a Captain, a Lieutenant, two RAF Flying Officers, and two local doctors, as well as their worships the mayors). His position within the British Fascists "ensured for him deep attention, and the hope was apparent that he would have something to say about that subject". The Frothblowers were not disappointed. Speaking for ten minutes Turner-Coles explained that the Fascists were "not a group of hooligans who go around in black shirts, looking for trouble", but "a body of loyal Britishers who were prepared to fight the Red menace". (The reference to black shirts is an allusion to the uniform worn by Mussolini's followers.)

He justified the Fascists' paramilitary organisation as necessary to defend the right of free speech for "Constitutional candidates" at elections. In reply to his rhetorical question "were they going to allow free speech to people who ran down the Constitution and all that was held dear?" his audience replied with cries of "No".

Turner-Coles evidently made no attempt to conceal the Fascists' willingness to use violence against their political opponents. "They were prepared, when force was necessary, to meet force with force", he declared. He continued that "whilst there were many organisations that did better work in the way of propaganda than the Fascists did, he was right in saying that the Fascist organisation was the only one in existence prepared to fight real trouble, give sufficient man-power, and really scrap when the scrapping came along".

The chairman of the meeting (who rejoiced in the title "Tornado" W Sandall) tried to link the Fascists' objectives with the Frothblowers' favourite recreation: "Just as I am sure the Frothblowers will beat Prohibition in America, so I am sure the Fascists are going to beat the Socialists in this country".

Turner-Coles' speech apparently had the desired effect, being met throughout with loud applause and cries of "hear, hear". And at its conclusion Frothblower "Blaster" Harry Reader "expressed, amid applause, his intention of joining the Fascist movement after hearing Capt. Turner-Coles' speech, remarking that he was a

King's man, and that they were not doing enough against the Reds". He added that "I am afraid we shall not get them down unless we join an organisation like the Fascists".

The week after publicising Capt. Turner-Coles' speech, the *Chatham Observer*, for the benefit of those who desired to learn more about the organisation, listed the BF's aims. Chief among these were "to oppose Communism and any movement that is calculated to endanger the Throne, the Constitution and the Empire by all the means in our power" and "to foster pride of race". "In brief", concluded the *Observer*, "the British Fascist movement was started to counteract treachery by patriotism".

The *Observer* also obligingly informed its readers that a branch of the BF already existed locally (as well as branches at Maidstone and Gravesend), and printed the name and address of the Gillingham "Recruiting Officer" (Mr W J Bullock, Mezaler House, Beresford Road).

How much progress the BF made as a result of the good offices of the Gillingham Conservative Party and the *Chatham Observer* is not known. Nationally the BF had begun to falter by 1927. It suffered a series of splits, and Miss Lintorn-Orman succumbed to a very bad drink problem. After her mother cut her allowance the BF very quickly slid into bankruptcy.

In truth the BF was something of a joke organisation (although the acts of violence committed by its members against political opponents were far from amusing). The BF effectively collapsed in 1932, when most of its active members defected to Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF). Throughout the 1930s the BUF was to make strenuous efforts to establish a base in the Medway Towns, meeting with some success, but also a great deal of concerted opposition.

Chapter Two

"Mosley's Biff Boys"

The New Party and the 1931 general election

The 1929 Crash

Within months of taking office in June 1929 Britain's second Labour government found itself engulfed by crisis. In October the American stock market crashed, and overnight a decade of economic misery began. In Britain unemployment soared from one million to close on three million in the three years after the crash. Even in the relatively comfortable south east, industrial areas suffered. The impact of the economic disaster was particularly felt in the Medway Towns, which were already reeling under the impact of large-scale job losses at Chatham Dockyard during the 1920s. The number registered as unemployed at Chatham's Employment Exchange rocketed from 3,634 in October 1929 to 6,531 in October 1931.

Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald stuck disastrously to traditional economic policies, keeping the overvalued pound on the Gold Standard, making cuts to balance the budget, and upholding free trade.

The Mosley Memorandum / Manifesto

Amongst MacDonald's Labour critics was Sir Oswald Mosley, an aristocratic defector from the Tories. In the "Mosley Memorandum" he proposed an expansion of credit, increased public spending, and protectionism to revive the economy. When his ideas were rejected Mosley resigned from the Cabinet and wrote his Memorandum up into the "Mosley Manifesto", adding a proposal for government by a pared-down Cabinet of "five dictators". The Member of Parliament for Chatham, S Frank

Markham, was one of seventeen Labour MPs who signed the Manifesto in December 1930.

Mosley at Rochester - January 1931

On Saturday 31st January 1931 Mosley and Markham addressed a meeting at the New Corn Exchange in Rochester, held under the auspices of Chatham Labour Party. In his contribution Markham said little beyond defending the government's record on job creation, and claiming that the Tory policy of running down the Dockyard was being reversed. He said nothing in support of Mosley's proposals, other than to remark that they had also received support from Chatham's previous MP Lt. Col. Moore-Brabazon, a Tory. (Moore-Brabazon had written: "Along the lines of the *Mosley Memorandum* lies the escape for the moment from make-believe into reality".)

Mosley, however, whilst agreeing that the Labour government had done more than the Tories to address the issue of unemployment, thought it inappropriate to judge a Labour government solely by comparison with its Tory predecessor. He regarded the 200,000 jobs created by the government as inadequate, given that over one million had lost their jobs since 1929. Dismissing Socialism as a solution that was unlikely to come for several generations he advocated a comprehensive system of import controls as an immediate means to save jobs.

The New Party

On 28th February 1931, barely a month after the Corn Exchange meeting, Mosley turned his back on the Labour Party and declared the formation of the "New Party", taking five Labour MPs with him. It was soon clear in which direction he was headed when he began to talk about the need for a disciplined body of young men to resist the threat of Communism, and despatched envoys to study the methods of Hitler's Nazi Party.

The National Government

In July 1931 the government's May Committee recommended further cuts, including drastic reductions in unemployment benefit and public sector pay (including that of the armed forces). Amidst uproar in the Labour Party, the Cabinet split and the government disintegrated.

Ramsay MacDonald and other supporters of the cuts deserted to join the "National Government" (effectively a Tory government decorated with the few Labour turncoats). Despite his earlier support of the Mosley Manifesto, Markham too joined the National Government. In so doing he invited the wrath of the Chatham Labour Party, which promptly disowned him.

In September 1931 the cuts in naval pay led to a mutiny of the Atlantic Fleet at Invergordon, in which many Chatham-based ratings were involved. The mutiny led to a run on the pound, and a reluctant devaluation as the Gold Standard was abandoned.

Ramsay MacDonald called a general election for 27th October 1931. Frank Markham was not rewarded for his loyalty to MacDonald: the National Government candidate at Chatham was a Tory, Sir Park Goff. Against him the Labour Party stood Oliver Baldwin, the son of the Tory leader Stanley Baldwin. Baldwin junior has been described by Mosley's biographer as "spoilt, unstable, homosexual, naïve". He was also, as the Labour MP for Dudley, a signatory of the Mosley Manifesto, and a founder member of the New Party. He had left the Party in disgust at its increasingly Fascist direction, sat as an Independent MP, and re-joined the Labour Party in time to be selected to stand at Chatham.

The New Party election campaign

Chatham was also one of the 24 constituencies contested by the New Party in an expensively high-profile campaign. (The Party's funds had been considerably augmented by contributions from

Sir William Morris, the owner of Morris Motors who was later to become Lord Nuffield.) The candidate at Chatham was 20 year-old Martin Francis Woodroffe, a radio engineer from Wimbledon. He was the son of a stained-glass artist from Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire, Oxford-educated, and a well-known rugby player. He had previously been a member of newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook's "Empire Crusade" and of the Conservative Party. He was also the head of the New Party youth movement ("NUPA"), nicknamed Mosley's "Biff Boys" (after Mosley's comment that his followers would "rely on the good old English fist").

At the start of Woodroffe's campaign, on Saturday 3rd October, the famous east London boxer Ted "Kid" Lewis spoke at a New Party open air meeting in Batchelor Street, Chatham. Lewis (a former welterweight boxing champion of the world who was busy training Mosley's "Biff Boys" in the use of their fists) was also a New Party candidate in the election (at Whitechapel, where he managed to get the derisory total of 154 votes). Ironically (in view of the New Party's increasingly Fascist direction) Lewis was Jewish, having previously gone by the name of Gershom Mendeloff.

Whilst there does not appear to have been much "biffing" during the election campaign there was a good deal of verbal fisticuffs between Woodroffe and his opponents. Both Labour and Conservative parties complained to the Returning Officer that Woodroffe, being under 21, was not old enough to stand for election. Addressing a New Party meeting at the New Corn Exchange Woodroffe accused his opponents of "petty quibbling". He noted that Baldwin "was proud at one time to admit to his old constituency that he was a member of the New Party ... Since then his moral courage has failed him. He was afraid to go back to his old constituency and face the music ... "

Mosley spoke alongside Woodroffe at Chatham Town Hall on Sunday 11th October 1931 at a meeting chaired by Peter Howard, a well-known rugby international who became captain of the England team. So well-attended was the meeting that the speakers also had to address an overflow meeting outside. Mosley emphasised the New Party's opposition to cuts in public spending and, once again, demanded protection for British industry from foreign competition. He denied that the New Party was "proposing to set up a dictatorship", arguing that they only wanted to streamline Parliament.

The election result was as follows:

Sir Park Goff (Nat. Con.)	19,991	(62.5 %)
Oliver Baldwin (Lab.)	10,837	(33.9 %)
Martin Woodroffe (NP)	1,135	(3.6 %)
Majority	9,154	(28.6 %)

(At Gillingham the Tory candidate, Sir Robert Gower, also won, with 20,277 votes against 9,103 for the Labour Party.)

The election was a bitter disappointment to the New Party in Chatham (as it was everywhere else they stood). However, the campaign did lead to the establishment of an active branch in the Medway Towns. On 1st December 1931 the Rochester and Chatham Branch of the Party held its annual general meeting at the City Cafe, Rochester Bridge. It was reported that membership stood at 40 (11 women and 29 men), including a NUPA group. A visiting national dignitary of the Party called for a "Corporate State" (the name chosen by Mussolini for his dictatorship) and Martin Woodroffe railed against the "menace of Communism". Among the officers elected was Brian Niall, a prominent local doctor, who became the branch's chair.

On 6th January 1932 the (evidently thriving) Branch held a "carnival ball" at the Rochester Casino (attended by Rochester's

Mayor, Mayoress, and Town Clerk), at which a dancing trophy donated by Oswald Mosley was awarded. The proceeds of the evening were reportedly donated to local charities (half to St Bartholomew's Hospital).

The New Party becomes overtly Fascist

In March 1932 the New Party's Kent and District Secretary, G Victor Smith of Halling, resigned from the Party. In May 1932 it became clear why such resignations were occurring: the New Party held an open air meeting in Batchelor Street, Chatham, at which the "Fascist Hymn" was played through loudspeakers and members of NUPA gave the Fascist salute, attracting boos and jeers from the crowd which had gathered.

A few months earlier Mosley had travelled to Italy and met Mussolini: the effect of this visit on the political direction of his organisation was becoming increasingly evident. In April 1932 he had formally closed down the New Party, but kept in existence NUPA, which rapidly became overtly Fascist (as the Batchelor Street meeting illustrates).

These developments were too much for the New Party's former parliamentary candidate at Chatham. In August 1932 the *Chatham News* carried a letter from Martin Woodroffe in which he dissociated himself from the remains of the New Party on the grounds of its adoption of "Italo-German Facism" (*sic*), the wearing of uniforms (which was "not only childish but unreasonable"), the adoption of the Corporate State policy, and "the use of the 'Nazi' salute". For Oswald Mosley, however, such things were the music of the future.

Chapter Three

"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"

The rise of the British Union of Fascists

1932-4

The founding of the BUF

On 1st October 1932 Sir Oswald Mosley founded the British Union of Fascists (BUF), merging the remnants of the New Party with other far-right groups. The BUF's founding programme consisted of the New Party's plan for a siege economy, combined with the abolition of "outdated" democracy. The BUF was organised along semi-paramilitary lines, adopting the "Blackshirt" uniform of Mussolini's movement. The Fascists saw themselves as preparing for violent confrontation with the Communist Party as the "old gang" (the Tory and Labour Parties) collapsed under the impact of a deep economic crisis. That crisis meant that by the end of 1932 unemployment nationally stood close on three million, a dire situation which was reflected locally: by November 1932 the number registered as unemployed at Chatham's Employment Exchange stood at 7,687 (which represented a doubling of local unemployment since 1929).

Mosley managed to secure powerful friends for his brainchild: Mussolini provided him with considerable funds and Lord Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mail*, gave his support (in 1934 he was to publish an editorial headlined "Hurrah for the Blackshirts!").

The anti-Fascist movement

In January 1933 Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany, and the minds of the Left, and of the Labour movement in general, came to be more and more concentrated on the menace of Fascism.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CP) underwent a change in its policy. Previously it had denounced the Labour Party as no better than Fascists: now it was decided to make overtures to the ranks of the Labour Party and Independent Labour Party (ILP) for the formation of a "United Front".

In the Medway Towns the CP had built itself a modest base, largely through work amongst the unemployed. The Party's local leading lights, such as Charlie Matthews of Chatham and Fred Thomas of Gillingham, had made a name for themselves as organisers for the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), the national leadership of which was held by the CP.

In the spring of 1933 the Party's new approach began to bear fruit locally. Hugh Gaitskell (the Labour prospective parliamentary candidate for Chatham, and a future national leader of the Labour Party) declared at a Labour eve of May Day meeting that "only by the unity of the working-class ... could attempts at Fascism in this country be stamped out". In May a local Anti-Fascist Campaign Committee was set up with the support of prominent members of Chatham Labour Party, as well as the local branches of the ILP, Communist Party, and NUWM. Gaitskell was happy to speak on the same platform as local Communists, and plans were made for a meeting at the Unitarian Church in Chatham to be addressed by Gaitskell and Tom Mann (a national leader of the Communist Party). On 21st May a large ILP meeting in Gillingham heard Jennie Lee, speaking on "the menace of Fascism", urge working-class unity against Fascism. (The meeting prompted a columnist in the *Chatham Observer* to remark that "up to the moment the only black shirts I have seen in Gillingham have been tinged either with honest sweat and toil or by ordinary common-or-garden dirt, and not by any political dye", although he agreed that complacency about the rise of Fascism would be folly.)

The development of a local anti-Fascist United Front was, however, soon cut across by a bitter faction fight in Chatham

Labour Party. The right wing (led by Secretary Eric Cash) won the day and a decision was made to reject the United Front and ban any further appearances by Gaitskell on the same platform as Communists. Left-wingers George Dexter, Charlie Macey, and Cllr Walter Hollands showed their disapproval by resigning from the Party.

Nevertheless, the CP could still find support amongst some sections of the Labour Party. In 1934 Gordon Clothier, a prominent member of Gillingham Labour Party and the town's Registrar of births and deaths, served as Secretary of the Kent County Committee of the United Front.

The BUF and anti-semitism

On 7th June 1934 the BUF held a rally at the 13,000-seat Olympia stadium in London. At every burst of heckling Mosley paused dramatically as spotlights were trained on the culprits and gangs of Blackshirt thugs removed them one by one, administering savage beatings. The country was swept by a wave of revulsion against the Blackshirts. Lord Rothermere also started to distance himself from Mosley, and the BUF's support began to wane.

Feeling his support slipping, Mosley played a new and repulsive card, that of anti-semitism. The BUF had always had more than its fair share of racists and anti-semites, but anti-semitism was not at first to the fore in its propaganda. The BUF had even on occasion denied any ill-will towards Jews. All that changed in October 1934, when Mosley launched into a demagogic onslaught on an imaginary "international Jewish conspiracy". He had finally dropped every last shred of pretension to orthodox political "respectability", and the Blackshirts were now clearly out for one thing: violent control of the streets.

The battle was now joined in earnest between the BUF and anti-Fascists, particularly in the East End of London. Areas outside of

London, including the Medway Towns, were also treated to flying visits by Mosley, street demonstrations, and organised anti-Jewish campaigns.

Medway's Jewish community

There were Jews living in the Medway Towns as early as the 12th century, and there has been a Jewish community continually resident since at least the 18th century. The synagogue built at Rochester in the mid-18th century was reputedly one of the first to be built in this country. The community's ranks were bolstered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by newcomers from Russia and Poland, escaping anti-semitic pogroms (although the number of Jews living in the area still remained relatively small). The 1930s saw the arrival of further refugees, this time from Nazi Germany. During the 1930s the synagogue in Rochester High Street had a congregation of around forty families, led by Rabbi Samuel Wolfe. (The synagogue also served several Jewish communities in Kent outside the Medway Towns which lacked their own synagogues.) Despite the community's small size, several Jews played a significant part in local public life: a number were prominent in the professions, and Jews owned five or six of the bigger clothing shops in Chatham (such as Solomon Gergel's Ladies' Outfitters in the High Street, and Greenburgh Brothers' Outfitters in Military Road). This was the community which was to provide the target for Mosley's thugs in the Medway Towns.

Mosley at Gillingham - October 1934

On Tuesday 30th October 1934 Mosley paid his first visit to the Medway Towns as the leader of the BUF. He spoke at the Pavilion in Canterbury Street, Gillingham (commonly known as "the Pav" it was a popular local dance hall; today it performs a similar function as the "Ritzy" night club).

From a platform draped with the union jack Mosley addressed an audience of over 1,000 people. Twenty Blackshirts in full uniform stood around the hall, ready to deal with any opposition. Mosley justified the Blackshirts' paramilitary organisation by reference to "Red hooliganism", accused the Tories of wanting to pull out of India and dismantle the Empire, denounced the "humbug" of democracy, and outlined his plan for a "Corporate State". He said that the BUF fought the Jews "because they have opposed the interests of Fascism and the interests of Britain". He argued that they would "have to choose whether they put Britain first or Jewry first". Among the audience were Hugh Gaitskell (who accused Mosley of telling "abominable lies" about the Labour Party), and a Tory member of Gillingham Council (who tried lamely to defend the National Government's record on unemployment).

Outside the Pavilion a crowd estimated at between 3,000 and 5,000 people assembled to oppose Mosley. Early in the evening a group of children occupied the steps of the Pavilion and were forcibly removed by the police. On Mosley's arrival over 30 police linked arms to hold the crowd back and allow him into the hall. While the crowd waited for Mosley to emerge from the meeting Blackshirts guarding the hall were pelted with eggs, the *Red Flag* was sung, and the chant went up "One, two, three, four, five; we want Mosley, dead or alive!" In nearby Skinner Street Communist and other speakers addressed impromptu meetings.

On Mosley's re-appearance he was spat upon and missiles were thrown, including bottles: one Blackshirt was hit in the head and a policeman was cut on the hand by flying glass. An attempt was also made to overturn Mosley's sports car. "There was in this crowd", said a *Chatham Observer* columnist, "an element of sheer blackguardism which had given itself over to the ugly influence of mob fury". By contrast he noted "not the slightest evidence of any act of violence on the part of any of the large contingent of

Blackshirts present, despite the fact that several of them had been pelted with eggs by someone in the crowd whose aim was remarkably accurate”.

In truth the Fascists did live up to their violent reputation, beating up a young female member of the Labour League of Youth outside the Pavilion. However, thanks to the anti-Fascists' organisation and sheer weight of numbers this was an isolated incident: there was no repeat of the bloodbath seen at Olympia a few months previously.

The anti-Fascist movement had begun to build in strength and, within two years of Mosley's visit to Gillingham, it was able to deliver the Fascists a crushing blow from which they never fully recovered, at the “Battle of Cable Street” in east London.

Chapter Four

“We must get rid of the rats”

Fighting Fascism in Medway and Spain

1935-6

The BUF re-organises

During 1935 the British Union of Fascists slipped from the headlines somewhat, as the organisation suffered financial troubles, a loss of political momentum, and the diversion of members' energies into an extensive internal re-organisation. A new system was devised of “Units”, teams of six members who were to perform political tasks together. These were organised into Districts under local versions of the “Leader” Oswald Mosley (they were known as “District Leaders” or “District Officers”). Fascists in the Medway Towns were organised into the BUF “Rochester District”, under District Officer William Alfred Robert Thomas, of 12 Damley Road, Strood.

The shadow of war

With Hitler re-arming and pressing his territorial claims, and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935, the shadow of war was starting to fall across Europe. In Britain re-armament was beginning, eroding the unemployment in which the BUF had found such a fertile breeding ground for Fascism. In the Medway Towns the dole queue was at last shrinking as Chatham Dockyard's workforce began to expand: in June 1935 the number registered as unemployed at the Chatham Employment Exchange dropped below 4,000 for the first time since 1930.

For their part, the Fascists were anxious to urge on the National Government the sort of appeasement policy which it was soon to adopt. In the autumn of 1935 the BUF organised a nationwide petition “against war”. Locally, District Officer Thomas wrote to

the *Chatham News*, giving addresses in Rochester and Strood where people could sign "to help in keeping Britain out of war".

The 1935 election

In November 1935 Prime Minister Baldwin went to the country. Fearing an electoral humiliation, Mosley decided that the BUF would not stand any candidates. He denounced the election as a "farce" and pledged to field candidates at the next election. Accordingly, the BUF campaigned for abstention under the slogan "Fascism next time", which was daubed on walls wherever the Fascists were active. At the election the Medway Towns reflected the national pattern by returning two Tory MPs who supported Baldwin's National Government: Sir Robert Gower at Gillingham, and Capt. Plugge at Chatham.

At the beginning of 1936 the BUF was renamed "The British Union of Fascists and National Socialists". Increasingly, however, the name was abbreviated to "The British Union", thereby avoiding any hint of the words "Fascist" or "Nazi" (which were increasingly a liability, in the light of events on the continent).

Mosley at Rochester - June 1936

On Monday 22nd June 1936 Oswald Mosley again visited the Medway Towns, addressing a "British Union" meeting at the Rochester Casino, on the corner of Corporation Street and Blue Boar Lane. (The Casino was then, as now, a popular local nightspot.) The hall was lined with Fascists sporting the infamous Blackshirt uniform. Several of them, with their arms raised in the Fascist salute, formed an archway down the centre gangway, through which Mosley approached the platform to the strains of the Fascist marching song.

In his speech, Mosley claimed that a Fascist government would carry out "the will of the people" and not set up a "tyranny". He tried to justify the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (calling it "the

plague-spot of the world"), and claimed that Hitler (who three months previously had sent troops into the Rhineland) only wanted "development of Germany and peace with England". He also accused the National Government of allying Britain with the Soviet Union against Germany. (In fact the government was rebuffing Soviet offers of a "peace front" against Hitler and embracing a policy of appeasement.) He argued that the government should have allied Britain with the Fascist powers against the Soviet Union, instead of which they "had been the passive dupes of the Jew, Litvinoff [the Soviet Foreign Minister], who sought to get them at rest while the Communist jackals feasted on the ruins of Western civilisation".

The audience contained a good few people hostile to Mosley. A brave young Jew who asked Mosley "why Jews who were prepared to die for England should be penalised because of their race" was vigorously applauded. Considering events in Germany at the time and subsequently Mosley's reply (that Jews who "put the interests of England before the interests of Jewry" had "nothing to fear under a Fascist Government") sounds like a very sick joke.

Outside the Casino several thousand people demonstrated beneath red flags and banners, chanting "we must get rid of the rats" and singing the *Internationale* (the Communist anthem). As well as Rochester City Police, a contingent of Naval pickets was also in attendance (presumably in anticipation of the involvement of Naval ratings in any disorder). When Mosley left the hall by the side entrance the crowd broke through police lines and attempted to rush him, stopping the traffic in Corporation Street. They were prevented from reaching Mosley by a cordon of Blackshirts, who surrounded his car. The *Chatham News* described the ensuing fracas as "a species of all-in wrestling".

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War - July 1936

In July 1936 Fascism in Europe was on the march again, with the revolt of the Spanish army under General Franco against the country's elected government (a "Popular Front" of Liberals, Communists, and Socialists). In the ensuing civil war Franco was provided with considerable military assistance by Hitler and Mussolini.

The defence of the Spanish Republic quickly became a cause célèbre of socialists throughout the world, who rallied to send assistance. Two thousand Britons joined the International Brigade, a multinational volunteer army set up to help defend the Republic. Among them were two Medway Communists: Fred Thomas from Gillingham (a 30 year-old unemployed former Chatham Dockyard labourer), and Fred Felton from Rochester. Both enrolled in the Brigade's British Battalion at its inception, and both were killed at the Battle of Jarama in February 1937. Alan Gilchrist (a local teacher) also fought in the International Brigade for two years until 1938. A Labour Party member from Gillingham, Dick Turner (a 25 year-old merchant seaman), fought in the Spanish Republican Navy, returning home wounded at the end of 1937. And, towards the end of the war, a man identified as "John Danson of Chatham" was among International Brigade volunteers taken prisoner by Franco's army.

Throughout the war in Spain the Labour movement in the Medway Towns (particularly the Communist Party and the Labour League of Youth) made strenuous efforts on behalf of the Spanish Republic. Funds for humanitarian aid were tirelessly collected, and a number of refugees from Spain were housed locally.

A somewhat different view of the Spanish war was taken by the Medway Towns' two Tory MPs (Capt. Plugge at Chatham, and Sir Robert Gower at Gillingham), who both resolutely defended the

government's strict "non-intervention" policy. (Under this policy no British government aid, even of a humanitarian kind, was sent to the Spanish Republic, and a ban was imposed on the sale to the Republic of any kind of arms, even anti-aircraft guns.) In 1937 Sir Robert Gower was to cause a good deal of controversy by expressing openly pro-Franco sentiments (see Chapter Five).

By concentrating attention on the issue of Fascism the Spanish Civil War gave added impetus to the continuing campaign against the home-grown Fascists of the BUF.

The Battle of Cable Street - October 1936

On 4th October 1936 the Fascists suffered a major humiliation at the hands of Communists, the Labour movement and the Jewish community in east London, in what became known as the "Battle of Cable Street". When the BUF tried to march through the East End 250,000 demonstrators thronged the streets, erecting barricades under the slogan of the Spanish Republic: "They shall not pass!" The 7,000 Blackshirts who turned out were hopelessly outnumbered, and were beaten off of the streets. The BUF's morale took a huge knock from which it never fully recovered.

At least one Medway member of the BUF was caught up in these events: the *Chatham News* reported that 23 year-old John William Bailey of St Peter's Street, Rochester had suffered a head wound and needed hospital treatment.

In the correspondence columns of the *Chatham News* a BUF member from Gillingham, William Leslie Williams of 5 Cross Street, whined that the employment of "barbarous methods" by "Communists, Jews, and Socialists" had denied the Fascists' right to free speech. He recalled the rough reception that the Fascists had received when Mosley spoke at the Pavilion in Gillingham in 1934, when "remarks were passed about Sir Oswald Mosley that any decent-minded person would be ashamed to utter".

Strangely, Williams neglected to inform readers of the *News* of his membership of the BUF.

John Beckett at Rochester - November 1936

A few weeks later Chatham Council voted, for the second time, to deny the BUF use of the Town Hall (on November 5th) fearing damage to the premises. Some venues, however, remained open to the Fascists. On Friday 27th November 1936 the BUF held a meeting at the Old Corn Exchange in Rochester, addressed by one of the Fascists' national stars, John Beckett. Beckett was a former Labour MP who had defected to the BUF, becoming editor of their journals *The Blackshirt* and *Action*. He explained the BUF's opposition to the Public Order Bill (then before Parliament), which had been drafted following the Battle of Cable Street, calling it "a Bill to promote disorder" and claiming that the BUF "practised good order". (The Bill banned political uniforms and gave the police powers to ban all demonstrations in a given area for a specified period of time. It was opposed by the Left as much as by the BUF, since it gave the police ample scope to ban left-wing demonstrations and failed to criminalise racist propaganda.) It was also announced at the meeting that the BUF would be fielding a candidate at Chatham in the next general election.

This meeting appears to have escaped the attention of local anti-Fascists. The *Chatham News* reported that "the proceedings were very orderly, and there was not a single interruption during the meeting". Not surprisingly, the local BUF crowed loudly about this fact. W L Williams, writing to the local press, commended the people of the Medway Towns for their "sense of fair play" and "determination to hear the other side". For the most part, however, when the Fascists showed their faces around the Medway Towns they continued to meet with opposition, both verbal and physical.

Chapter Five

"Creating as much noise as possible"

Fighting it out on the streets

1937-8

Fascism in Chatham Dockyard

On 1st January 1937 the Public Order Act came into force. Its provisions were supposedly evidence of a new tough policy against the BUF by Baldwin's National Government. Left-wing anti-Fascists were, however, under no illusions as to whom the government really saw as the enemy.

During the mid-1930s there was a series of scares involving alleged acts of minor sabotage at Naval Dockyards (including Chatham Dockyard). Communists were blamed, and purges of left-wing Dockyard workers followed in 1936 and early 1937 (although none of those dismissed could be linked to any act of sabotage).

In a House of Commons debate on the dismissals in January 1937 Labour MP Sir Stafford Cripps alleged that, while innocent left-wingers were being victimised, "Fascist propaganda was being allowed to proceed freely in Chatham Dockyard, especially by the open sale within the dockyard of copies of the Fascist papers". He reported that he had passed on to the First Lord of the Admiralty the name of a man in the Yard responsible for distributing Fascist literature. Cripps claimed that, although the man was well-known for his political activities, he had gone unmolested. He said that, even though the man had displayed "a large Fascist sign" on his locker, it had not been searched, while those suspected of left-wing sympathies had had their lockers searched "two or three times a week". The First Lord, Sir Samuel Hoare, told the House that he had looked into the allegation and

could find "no evidence". Cripps hinted at a cover-up, stating that "it was clear that there was somebody a good deal higher up than the man who distributed the Fascist papers who was in sympathy with his action". Replying to a further question on the subject a few weeks later, the First Lord claimed that two investigations had been made into Cripps' allegations and that neither had uncovered any evidence.

Whether there were Fascists in the Dockyard or not, the BUF certainly remained very active in the Medway Towns at this time. They maintained a local headquarters at 22b Chatham Hill and were much in evidence around the area.

In the summer of 1937 the Fascists announced that at the next election they would be standing Noel Kennedy (from East Grinstead in Sussex) as their candidate for Chatham. On Sunday 29th August 1937 Kennedy addressed an open air meeting of a thousand people at Batchelor Street in Chatham. He made much play of the BUF's pro-appeasement slogan "Mind Britain's Business"; and he contrasted the supposedly extravagant sums spent on the maintenance of what he called "alien" refugee Basque children (fleeing the Spanish Civil War) with the dole paid to the unemployed. The meeting concluded with the singing of *God Save the King*, accompanied by the Fascist salute, but not before a noisy group of anti-Fascists had done their best to discredit Kennedy.

Sir Robert Gower MP and the Spanish Civil War

The sort of views on the Spanish Civil War expressed by Kennedy were not unique to the BUF. In the summer of 1937 Gillingham's Conservative MP Sir Robert Gower generated a huge controversy by expressing effectively pro-Fascist sentiments about the war. He accused the Republican government of introducing Communism, and repeated Fascist horror stories about the Republic failing to prevent the burning of churches, persecution

of religion, and wholesale rape and murder by government supporters. He even tried to blame the Republic for the massacre of civilians by German dive-bombers at Guernica, as the government "knowing what was impending had failed to remove the civilian population". As far as Gower was concerned, "General Franco and the Spanish revolutionaries are more than justified in the course they have taken". He excused German and Italian involvement in the Civil War as a justified response to the presence of foreign Communist volunteers in the International Brigade. Gower nevertheless maintained that he was resolutely opposed to Fascism, trying to reconcile this with his support for Franco by arguing (absurdly) that "the Spanish Revolution is in no way an attempt by General Franco to establish Fascism in Spain".

In the ensuing outcry Gower was called (among other things) "an agent of the Nazis", a label lent some credence by his keen support of appeasement and his membership of the Anglo-German Fellowship. In 1936 Gower had written to the *Times* as follows: "Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini are the direct outcome of Bolshevism, and there can be no doubt that had it not been for them, Bolshevism would be devastating the greater part of Europe to-day".

Gower's view of events in Spain is contradicted somewhat by the findings of an interdenominational fact-finding mission which the Dean of Rochester, Dr Francis Underhill, had led in February 1937. The mission had found that there was no evidence of any systematic persecution of religion, despite understandable anger at the Catholic Church for its pro-Fascist sympathies in Spain.

Ironically, though, the Spanish Republican government, and the Spanish Communists, **were** carrying out massacres (but not of the sort alleged by Gower). As George Orwell revealed in his book *Homage to Catalonia*, the massacres were of Anarchists and non-Communist Socialists, who criticised the Popular Front government from the left. Such details were, however, lost on both Gower and his pro-Popular Front opponents.

In the summer of 1938 Gower was again courting controversy over the issue of Spain. At that time British-crewed ships were attempting to break the Fascist naval blockade of the Spanish Republic. Gower defended the National Government's policy that such vessels were to be denied the protection of the Royal Navy once they had left the high seas and entered Spanish territorial waters. (Several Chatham-based Naval vessels were among those in the Mediterranean at this time.) Gower argued that to protect British vessels in Spanish waters would be tantamount to a breach of the government's "non-intervention" policy.

Gower found a supporter for his attitude in the person of Noel Kennedy of the BUF. Writing to the local press he commended Gower's "shrewd" judgement and argued that the ships concerned were mostly owned by "alien capitalists" (Fascist code-words for Jews), who were putting the lives of British sailors at risk to make "fortunes" from "Spain's agony". (In truth, most of the ships were taking humanitarian aid, such as food and medicine, to the beleaguered Republic.)

The battle for Batchelor Street

The disruption by anti-Fascists of Kennedy's street meeting in August 1937 (mentioned above) was by no means an isolated incident. Throughout the mid- and late 1930s there was a running battle between the Fascists and their opponents for possession of the traditional street-meeting location in Batchelor Street (which was something like the Medway Towns' equivalent of Speakers' Corner). At one time there was an agreement between the Labour League of Youth and the Salvation Army whereby on Saturday evenings the Salvationists' band would continue to play after their meeting until the League of Youth had arrived for theirs, thereby preventing the Fascists from occupying the pitch. On at least one other occasion the more direct method of knocking the Fascists' heads together was employed. Another time anti-Fascists

succeeded in silencing the BUF at Batchelor Street by cutting the wires to their loudspeaker. (In August 1939 the Fascists themselves used the same method in an attempt to silence a speech at Batchelor Street by Communist Party General Secretary Harry Pollitt.)

On Saturday 11th June 1938 Batchelor Street played host to a meeting addressed by "Mick" Clarke, the BUF's prospective parliamentary candidate for Bethnal Green, in east London. Clarke (an East End furniture worker in his late 20s) was billed as a "Famous East London Blackshirt Pioneer", having been a key figure in the campaign which had built the BUF's organisation in east London several years earlier. He was something of a hero to the Fascist rank and file, being known as "the Idol of Bethnal Green". He was also known as the "Julius Streicher of the BUF" (Streicher was the Nazis' chief anti-semitic propagandist): this was apparently because Clarke shared both Streicher's rabid anti-semitism and his fondness for wearing full-length black leather great-coats. In the summer of 1937 Clarke had been bound over for twelve months under the Public Order Act for using insulting language, after a speech in Bethnal Green during which he had referred to Jews as "greasy scum", "lice of the earth", "untouchables", and "filthy and licentious".

Following the Chatham meeting at which Clarke spoke an anonymous correspondent wrote to the *Chatham News* that "the so-called champions of Free Speech and Democracy - the Socialists and Communists - turned up in full force, and created enough disturbance to break up a dozen meetings". The complainant took particular exception to the "overgrown children of the [Labour] League of Youth" who had been "distributing Communist literature and creating as much noise as possible". The anonymous writer's conclusion was that "our Socialists are not only making it possible for Britain to go Fascist, but even desirable".

In December 1938 W L Williams of the BUF complained in a letter to the local press that anti-Fascists had used the following tactics to disrupt an open-air meeting at Batchelor Street: "Continuous interruptions, numerous invitations to the speaker to 'come down and fight it out', indulging in spells of singing 'The Lambeth Walk', and 'The Internationale' [the Communist anthem], and a series of enquiries about Germany, Spain, Czechoslovakia, China etc.; in fact, every country but their own. The Union Jack was classed as 'A Boss-class rag', and when the National Anthem was sung at the conclusion of the meeting these 'intellectuals' either sang 'The Internationale' in competition or walked away."

Mosley at Gillingham - April 1938

1938 also saw a further visit to the Medway Towns by Oswald Mosley when, on Sunday 24th April, he spoke on behalf of Noel Kennedy (said to be 32 years old, and now the BUF prospective parliamentary candidate for Gillingham). For an hour and a half Mosley addressed a crowded meeting at the Paget Hall in Paget Street, Gillingham, stewarded by Fascists sporting red, white, and blue armbands (the Blackshirt uniform having been banned under the Public Order Act). Many of those attending the meeting had been brought in on ten or so buses, equipped with wire grilles on the windows to protect them from missiles.

Mosley spoke at length on the threat of war, arguing that Britain was drifting into an alliance with the Soviet Union and would be "dragged into alien wars", when the country's true interests lay in an accommodation with Germany. (At this time, in reality, the policy of appeasement was in full swing, and Soviet offers of an alliance against Hitler were being firmly rebuffed. In March the Nazis had annexed Austria with impunity, and in a few months Prime Minister Chamberlain was to sign the Munich agreement, granting Hitler's territorial claims in Czechoslovakia.)

Mosley also advocated a siege economy, with protective tariffs for British industry and agriculture. He concluded that the BUF had built up a powerful organisation whose members were "prepared to fight and die if necessary in order that our country may have National Socialism". On being heckled Mosley commented "I will address my remarks to the overwhelmingly intelligent among the audience". During question-time George Gilbert (a Gillingham Labour League of Youth member) reminded Mosley of the comment he had made as a Labour MP in 1927 that, in their Blackshirt uniforms, Fascists looked like cheap imitations of ice-cream salesmen. Mosley's only reply was that the questioner was too young to remember the comment having been made. When George Gilbert persisted Mosley retorted that "your questions are as stupid as your personal demeanour". The meeting ended as usual with the Fascist salute and the singing of the National Anthem.

Outside a vociferous display of opposition took place, of the type that habitually accompanied Mosley wherever he went. The Chatham Communist Party had distributed leaflets calling on local people to "make Mosley's visit the occasion of a monster demonstration against Fascism, against the rape of Austria, and against the bombing of civilians in Barcelona". Thousands attended the counter-demonstration, during which a Communist open-air meeting was held. True to form, when they encountered their opponents the Fascists were not fussy who they thumped: Mrs M B (then a 16 year-old Labour League of Youth member) recalls going home that night with a "thick ear" courtesy of Mosley's thugs.

Chapter Six

"Mind Britain's Business"

War and the end of the BUF

1939-40

The build up to war

By the beginning of 1939 a new war in Europe looked inescapable: Hitler had not been satisfied by the territorial concessions which the appeasers heading the British and French governments had granted him. In the spring of 1939 Fascism gained another victory, when Spain's elected government was finally defeated by General Franco's army. At home re-armament was by now well under way: in the Medway Towns many thousands who had spent most of the 1930s on the dole at last found employment in Chatham Dockyard and at Short Brothers' aircraft works in Rochester. There were, nevertheless, in January 1939 still some 3,140 people registered at the Chatham Employment Exchange as unemployed.

Preparations had begun to be made for the eventuality of bombing raids and the Medway Towns became, reputedly, one of the first areas of the country to establish Air Raid Precautions (ARP). Such measures did not meet with approval in all quarters. W L Williams (by now the local District Leader of the BUF) wrote to the *Kent Messenger and Observer* in January 1939 to comment upon an ARP Volunteer conference which had been attended by the Mayor of Gillingham. Williams took strong exception to the Mayor's comments that "a crisis was imminent", maintaining that this was only the case if Britain was intent on "meddling in the affairs of other countries". Williams asserted that it was the policy of the "British Union" to, in the words of their favourite pro-appeasement slogan, "Mind Britain's Business". Replying to

criticism by *Observer* readers, he disingenuously denied that his organisation was in any way modeled on the movements of "Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini". Like the BUF as a whole, Williams sounded increasingly like a gramophone record with the needle stuck, squawking "Mind Britain's Business" as war approached inexorably.

In March 1939 he was at it again, protesting that Gillingham Council's Library Committee had banned the BUF paper *Action* from Gillingham Library as a "Nazi newspaper": the BUF and *Action* were "concerned with Britain's business only" and were in no way connected with Germany, pleaded Williams.

Mosley at Gillingham - March 1939

On 15th March 1939 war came yet another step closer, when Hitler tore up the Munich agreement (which had meant "peace in our time" according to Prime Minister Chamberlain) and sent German troops into Prague. Eleven days later, on Sunday 26th March, Oswald Mosley made his last visit to the Medway Towns as leader of the BUF. At Gillingham's Paget Hall he spoke for an hour and a quarter, concentrating (not surprisingly) on the developments in Europe. Predictably he argued that Hitler's grabbing of territory in eastern Europe was no concern of Britain's and that a BUF government would "Mind Britain's Business". Equally predictably he railed against the Jews, and against refugees from the Fascist dictatorships, accusing them of taking jobs from the two million still unemployed.

This was the most low-key of Mosley's visits to the Medway Towns, judging by the local press, according to which there were "no scenes" and "only a few people" demonstrating outside. The Fascists were by this time a pathetic remnant of what they had been. They were discredited, demoralised, and marginalised. (Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, even at this low-point in their fortunes, the BUF was still able to maintain two premises in the

Medway Towns, namely a District Headquarters at 20 Arden Street, Gillingham, and a bookshop at 48 Luton Road, Chatham, run by one H Doré.)

The Nazi-Soviet Pact and the outbreak of war

The eventual onset of the long awaited war on 1st September 1939 finally set the seal on the BUF's isolation. They quickly came to be reviled and mistrusted as agents of the enemy and a possible "fifth column" in the event of invasion. A belated attempt by the Medway BUF to rekindle local support in February 1940, by holding a meeting with Oswald Mosley as the speaker, failed to get off the ground when Chatham Council refused to allow the Town Hall to be used as a venue.

By an irony of history the former mainstay of the anti-Fascist movement, the Communist Party, found itself in a similar situation to the BUF. In August 1939 Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had concluded a "non-aggression pact", which involved the partition of Poland between them. (The subsequent occupation by Germany of the western segment of Poland was the event which finally sparked off the war.) Stalin, in signing the pact with Hitler, had reasoned that, since Britain and France would not agree to a "peace front" against Germany (which the Soviet Union had been proposing since the mid-1930s), he would have to reach an accommodation with Germany. (Having a slice of Poland as a "buffer zone" was an added bonus.)

The Communist Party of Great Britain was thrown into confusion by this turn of events, first supporting what it regarded as an "anti-Fascist" war and then (on orders from Moscow) opposing it as an "imperialist" war. In November the Soviet Union invaded Finland, helping to isolate the CP still further.

Thus Communists and Fascists found themselves accused of being in league as agents of the enemy. In the columns of the local press W L Williams bemoaned the fact that as a Fascist he

was now "often told that I am not far removed from a Communist". Williams pleaded that Germany was not to blame for the War, and that Russia was "the real enemy of Great Britain and the Empire".

The message that Fascists and Communists were all the same was rammed home at Short Brothers' in February 1940, when staff were addressed by a speaker from the right-wing Economic League. He accused Fascists, Communists, and Pacifists of all "assisting the efforts of the Nazi propaganda machine" and being effectively indistinguishable from one another.

The leading lights of the Economic League had not always been such keen anti-Fascists before the War. The League's Director-General was John Baker White, a Kent land-owner who had been a member of the British Fascists' Grand Council in the 1920s (see Chapter One). While visiting Germany in the 1930s White had been much impressed by Hitler. In his 1937 book *Dover-Nuremberg Return* White had written of the Führer as follows: "He looks, speaks and behaves like a national leader, using the word in its highest sense, and he has natural dignity ... He has made promises and fulfilled them. When and where he has failed or made mistakes he has admitted failure. He has had placed in his hands enormous power, and so far he has not misused it nor sought to exploit his position for personal ends ... He is without question a very great man".

The end of the BUF

The final blow for the BUF came in the spring of 1940. The so-called "phoney war" ended with the advent of the Nazi "Blitzkrieg", which brought German troops right up to the French side of the English Channel. As invasion fears grew, the new coalition government which had been formed under Churchill decided to act against Britain's Fascists as potential "fifth columnists".

In late May the Police began rounding up key BUF members under Defence Regulation 18B(1A), which permitted the detention of those who could reasonably be suspected of sympathising with the enemy. On Monday 3rd June the Police in Gillingham arrested District Leader Williams, his brother (living in Arden Street), and another BUF officer named Richardson (from Napier Road). The three men were immediately sent to Walton Gaol in Liverpool. A fourth Fascist was arrested at Borstal, a 29 year-old school teacher named Norman Holloway. Up and down the country around 750 leading BUF members were receiving the same treatment. Some were released to fight in the War, others (such as Mosley) were kept in detention "for the duration". On 10th July 1940 the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists ceased to exist, as the government forcibly dissolved it under a new war-time Defence Regulation (18AA).

The Communist Party and the War

As for the Communist Party, its members were subjected to a degree of harassment and the Party's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, was banned in January 1941. The Party did, however, remain a legal organisation, despite calls for tougher action.

On 22nd June 1941 the CP's situation changed abruptly, with the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Overnight the Party switched to supporting what it now once again regarded as an "anti-Fascist" war, becoming eager to prove its patriotic credentials as a loyal supporter of Churchill's government. Party members in industry (such as those at Short Brothers' aircraft works) now sought to maximise war production and avoid strikes or any other kind of industrial strife. The Party's fortunes changed dramatically, as the new super-patriotic policy brought a boom in recruitment that (ironically for a party claiming revolutionary credentials) easily put into the shade anything achieved by the Communists' tireless anti-Fascist campaigning in the 1930s.

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Name index

"Mrs M B" 35
 Bailey, J W 27
 Baldwin, O 13-15
 Baldwin, S, MP 13, 24, 29
 Bate, Ald. J 8
 Lord Beaverbrook 14
 Beckett, J 28
 Bullock, W J 10
 Burn, Col. Sir C 8
 Cash, E F 19
 Chadwick, Sir R B, MP 8
 Chamberlain, N, MP 34, 37
 Churchill, W, MP 39, 40
 Clarke, E G "Mick" 33
 Clothier, G D 19
 Cripps, Sir S, MP 29-30
 Danson, J 26
 Dexter, G 19
 Doré, H 38
 Felton, F 26
 Franco, Gen. F 26, 27, 31, 36
 Gaitskell, H 18, 19, 21
 Gilbert, G A 35
 Gilchrist, A 26
 Goff, Sir P, MP 13, 15
 Gower, Sir R, MP 15, 24, 26, 27, 30-32
 Hitler, A 12, 17, 23, 25, 26, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39

Hoare, Sir S, MP 29-30
 Hollands, Cllr. W F 19
 Holloway, N 40
 Howard, P 15
 Kennedy, N 30, 32, 34
 Lee, J 18
 Lewis, T "Kid", (Gershom Mendeloff) 14
 Lintorn-Orman, R 7, 8, 10
 Litvinoff, M 25
 MacDonald, J R, MP 11, 13
 Macey, H C 19
 Mann, T 18
 Markham, S F, MP 7, 11-12, 13
 Matthews, C H 18
 Moore-Brabazon, Lt. Col. J T C 12
 Morris, Sir W, (Lord Nuffield) 14
 Mosley, Sir O 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20-22,
 23, 24-25, 27, 34-35, 37, 38, 40
 Mussolini, B 7, 9, 15, 16, 17, 26, 31, 37
 Niall, Dr B J 15
 Orwell, G 31
 Plugge, Capt. L F, MP 24, 26
 Pollitt, H 33
 Reader, H 9
 Richardson 40
 Lord Rothermere 17, 19
 Sandall, W 9
 Smith, G V 16
 Stalin, J V 38

Streicher, J	33
Thomas, F E J	18, 26
Thomas, W A R	23
Turner, R	26
Turner-Coles, Capt. W	8-10
Underhill, Dr F	31
Ward, Cllr. A E	8
White, J B	8, 39
Williams, W L	27-28, 34, 36-37, 38-39, 40
Wolfe, Rabbi S	20
Woodroffe, M F	14-16
Cash, E F	19
Chadwick, Sir R B, MP	8
Chamberlain, N, MP	34, 37
Churchill, W, MP	39, 40
Clarke, E G "Mick"	33
Clother, G D	19
Cripps, Sir S, MP	29-30
Danson, J	26
Dexter, G	19
Dore, H	38
Elton, F	26
Franco, Gen. F	26, 27, 31, 36
Gaitskell, H	12, 17, 23, 25, 26, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39
Gilbert, G A	35
Gilchrist, A	26
Goff, Sir P, MP	13, 15
Gower, Sir R, MP	15, 24, 26, 27, 30-32
Hitler, A	12, 17, 23, 25, 26, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39