

BLACKSHIRTS AND BRUMMIES

INTERWAR FASCISM IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Tom Gidlow

In 1936 Samuel Lawrence Irvine paid his shilling (the monthly fee) and joined the British Union of Fascists (BUF) main city branch on Corporation Street in Birmingham.¹ Samuel had joined a branch in southern England a few years previously as a 20-year-old, but had moved to Stafford Street, Birmingham, taking his politics with him. Samuel, like so many others at the time, was disillusioned by the world of politics in Britain and overseas. The world was beset by the economic crises that followed the Wall Street Crash, the toothless League of Nations was marked by inaction in response to crises in Manchuria and Abyssinia, and poverty was rife nationwide and further. Samuel sought a solution by

joining the Fascists. The BUF promised a new and revolutionary concept of politics, economics and life itself.² Politically they advocated for a democratically elected government to rule decisively through a small cabinet of just a few people, headed by a strong leader devoid of checks and balances. Economically they pushed for greater government intervention and control to keep pace with a modern economy. They advocated for broad concepts, including youth, energy and dynamism. Their movement repeatedly railed against the so-called 'Old Guard' of politics. Markedly, anti-Semitism was always at minimum a background force, often manifesting itself as a central driver of policy.



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The BUF's logo, known by its opponents as 'The Flash in the Pan'.

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Sir Oswald Mosley

Birmingham's BUF did not simply spring into being in 1936. The BUF operated in Birmingham between October 1932, shortly after the national movement was founded, and 1940 when Defence Regulation 18B outlawed the party. Long before that too, Sir Oswald Mosley, founder of the BUF, had a connection to Birmingham and the Midlands.

Although he began his political career as a Conservative, Mosley fought the seat of Birmingham Ladywood in

1924 for the Independent Labour Party, which brought him head-to-head with Neville Chamberlain himself. As Mosley saw it:

The Chamberlains and their machine had ruled Birmingham for sixty years, first as Liberal-Radicals and then as Conservative-Unionists... We had six weeks in which to smash it... their [Neville and Austen Chamberlain] names and abilities made them a formidable combination.³

After three counts, one putting Mosley ahead, Neville Chamberlain was announced as the victor by just 77 votes. In 1929, Chamberlain abandoned the constituency for the safer seat of Edgbaston. In 1926 Mosley fought for and won Smethwick for the Labour Party, but lost it to the Conservatives in 1931.⁴

By the 1930s Mosley became convinced that his vision of a Britain run under nationalist Keynesian economics could not be achieved through the existing parties. Sometime around 1930 he left the Labour Party, after his 'Birmingham Proposals' for alleviating unemployment were dismissed. Having moved from both the Conservatives and Labour, he founded the New

Party. The New Party became notorious in Birmingham in 1931. There, during a public meeting in the Rag Market in 1931, political disagreements turned to violence which in turn became a full-scale riot involving approximately 15,000 people.



Damage to the city after the 1931 Rag Market Riot.

Filling the Ranks

Following early electoral failure of the New Party, Mosley founded the BUF in October 1932, and much of the New Party membership and leadership transferred. In the same month the Birmingham branch Samuel would join was

opened. Their original headquarters was based cosily in the living room of a 'Mr. Ward'.⁵ The branch's opening was announced by street meeting near the Bullring, a place used to this day by public speakers to preach different political messages. The Fascists claimed that they addressed a crowd of three or four hundred, although self-reported information from the Fascists was not always reliable.⁶ Remarkably, a Fascist hailer (non-electrical megaphone) was discovered on the Chester Road in 2012, suggesting that the BUF may have been addressing large crowds in the city.⁷

Interest in the party grew and by the end of 1933 there were around 200 members across Birmingham, as well as smaller groups in areas including Coventry, Wolverhampton, and Stourbridge.⁸ On 15 January 1934, Lord Rothermere famously came out in support of the BUF, and the front page of the *Daily Mail* read 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts', a nickname given to BUF members due to their distinctive, Italian Fascist-inspired uniforms. With support of a major national newspaper, membership shot up, reaching between forty and fifty thousand in 1934, with around 2,000 members in Birmingham.⁹



The Bullring as it was in the 1930s.

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Rothermere's support (unfortunately for the Blackshirts but, perhaps, fortunately for democracy) was short-lived, and the temporary spike in membership was just that. By 1935, one year later, the content of the speeches given in Birmingham and nationally changed. When Samuel arrived in the city in 1936, the BUF's main messages had shifted away from economics towards anti-Semitism and maintaining peace with Germany. Although the BUF struggled to find a large audience for anti-Semitism in Birmingham, the idea of cooperation with Fascist regimes appealed to some Brummies. For example, Bessie Loxton, a Birmingham resident, wrote to *The Blackshirt* (one of the BUF's newspapers) in March 1935 to declare her agreement with the BUF's international solidarity with Germany and Italy.¹⁰ By 1939, recruitment was again high in Birmingham. With war on the horizon, recruitment was comparable to 1934 when Mosely enjoyed the support of a major national newspaper.¹¹

Being a Fascist

The BUF was a sociable place for many, much like other political clubs in the UK. Family units joined the party and life-long relationships formed between members. Birmingham BUF branches did not have bars, as was common elsewhere in the country, so the Old Stone Cross Pub became the favourite hang-out of the local Fascists. It was probably here, not long after joining the branch, that Samuel Irvine met Louise Fisher, who soon became Louise Irvine. Louise herself was originally from Cheshire and had studied English and History at college. She had dreams of attending Royal Holloway College, part of London University, and believed that the world could be changed by books. She had moved to Birmingham to become a teacher, and joined the BUF. Samuel was charismatic and rose quickly to become District Leader in 1938 and Louise became Women's District Leader when the previous position-holder became ill. Between 1936 and 1940 she ran the bookshop in the Birmingham BUF's Corporation Street headquarters. During these years in the later 1930s they ran the Birmingham BUF together.

BLACKSHIRTS AND BRUMMIES: INTERWAR FASCISM IN THE WEST MIDLANDS



An example front page from *The Blackshirt*, the mouthpiece of the Fascists.

The Birmingham BUF Samuel and Louise knew after 1936 was distinctly different from its earlier form. They knew branches where roles were increasingly divided by gender, on the orders of HQ in London. However, between 1932 and 1936 the women's and men's roles in Birmingham's BUF were not that different. There are records of women acting as 'stewards' (more akin to bodyguards) for street meetings in the city, and some were injured in fights to defend the Fascist cause.¹² All of Birmingham's Fascist women were trained in ju-jitsu.¹³ Despite some changes to sex-segregation, according to Louise, there were plenty of female speakers to accompany men on the public platforms throughout the period.¹⁴

Most of Birmingham's Fascists were young men. Samuel himself was 20 when he originally joined, as was his predecessor as District Leader, Roger Corbet, before he defected to the Communist Party.¹⁵ Nationally around 80% of the BUF's membership were men, and this number was probably closer to 90% in Birmingham.¹⁶ Measured by occupation, the Birmingham Branch was diverse. In an interview in the 1980s, Louise claimed that their members included:

... a wide cross-section of the community: One member was a son of the oldest and largest brewers in Birmingham while another was a well-known independent brewer; a well-to-do coal merchant belonged to our Branch, while we also had solicitors, teachers like myself, doctors, bank clerks, newspapermen (both reporters and technical staff), large and small restaurant owners, many small factory owners... office workers, skilled and unskilled factory workers, railway workers... shop keepers and shop assistants and busmen.¹⁷

They had different reasons for joining the party. Mosley himself claimed the main motive for joining was to combat unemployment.¹⁸ In later years the desire for peace certainly drove up membership.¹⁹ Judging by a string of arrests, several members such as brothers Sidney and Walter Arrowsmith of Lennox Street, Wilfred Ford of Nineveh Street, Dennis Whitehall of Earlsbury Gardens, and Samuel himself, harboured a deep anti-Semitism.²⁰ For many this would also have been motivation for joining.

Spreading the Message

Oswald Mosley envisaged his Fascists as an elite vanguard, highly trained and disciplined in their relentless campaign for his new and revolutionary concept of politics,²¹ economics and life itself. Outside of his small circle, the reality was very different. Birmingham never had a skilled political vanguard, but a series of young, energetic and ill-disciplined leaders who rarely stayed long. Certainly, even when not in

BLACKSHIRTS AND BRUMMIES: INTERWAR FASCISM IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

the Old Stone Cross (which was a place of personal irritation for many of the London leadership), the top leadership in Birmingham would cause trouble. Samuel became well acquainted with the courts and was charged along with fellow Blackshirt Roger Gordon of Bills Lane for 'disorderly conduct by fighting' in 1938. They were both fined 5 shillings.²²

Being a Fascist in Birmingham, however, was not all booze and fighting. There was a message to spread, and many members took this seriously. Across the country, including Birmingham, the BUF's preferred methods of communication were via small and large meetings and literature.

From its inception, the Birmingham Branch made a point of hosting a weekly street meeting in the Bullring. The speakers, which included Samuel, varied in their abilities and specialities. Mr. Gough was known for making inflammatory statements about Jews, whereas Miss Harris's speciality was Fascist economics.²³ These speeches unsurprisingly drew a lot of opposition which sometimes led to violence; 'stewards' acted as bodyguards for the speakers and those who handed out leaflets.²⁴ This was a time, nevertheless, when trying to physically deny an opponent a platform was more common than today, and many speakers in mainstream parties had stewards. Some historians have even argued statistically that the Blackshirts were more often the victims of violence from other groups, such as the Communists.²⁵

These meetings eventually began to spread across the city to areas including Aston, Ladywood, Sparkhill, and Selly Oak.²⁶ Birmingham's police force protected the BUF's rights to speak at outdoor meetings in the name of free speech, and many officers had good relations with members.²⁷ This individual police support was not consistent across the country. For example, in Cardiff the police sought to heavily restrict the BUF presence.²⁸

Fascist messages spread through the written word, often via Louise's bookstore on Corporation Street. More notably, during the 1930s *The Blackshirt*, as the mouthpiece of the movement, could be bought in many local newsagents. Birmingham Blackshirts reported that the papers sold especially well outside factory gates, and even claimed to sell copies outside

the *Birmingham Post* building.²⁹ The Birmingham BUF claimed that by 1933 the circulation of the paper was around 2,000 or ten times the then membership numbers.³⁰ Historians disagree on the degree of latent support for Fascism.

There were several times that Mosley himself returned to the Midlands to speak in Bingley Hall and Birmingham Town Hall. He attracted thousands of people: members, sympathisers, journalists, anti-Fascists, and intrigued members of the public. It is difficult to tell exactly what level of sympathy this indicated in the city, but attendance at the pre-meeting rallies was considerably lower. Mosley tended to blame this on poor weather, but Met Office reports suggest that the weather was not a factor.³¹

Lastly, messages were conveyed in illegal ways. In interviews in the 1970s and 80s Samuel claimed that anti-Semitism was confined only to the fringes of Birmingham's movement, who bricked Jewish shops and wrote anti-Semitic graffiti. Samuel's arrest record, which includes 'disfiguring, by certain writings and drawings, a fence and a wall' suggests this was not a fringe activity.³²

The Death of the BUF

The activity of the BUF ended in 1940 with Defence Regulation 18B, which saw the arrests of many members of the party. Samuel was arrested in June and was sent to a camp for political prisoners in Peel on the Isle of Man.³³ His wife Louise was arrested in November, and instead of Royal Holloway College found herself in Holloway prison.³⁴

Whereas the BUF made a considerable mark on the politics of London's East End, Fascism never found a solid footing in Birmingham. Political historian of Birmingham, Roger Ward, calls their presence 'a long and ignominious postscript'³⁵, although this is not to downplay the negative impact these ideas had.

Brummies are not somehow magically immune from Fascism, but there were certain characteristics of the city that made it difficult for Fascism to flourish. Birmingham's diverse and interconnected economy isolated it from the worst of the Depression, and so the huge unemployment that drove people to political extremes of right or left were not as prominent in Birmingham as elsewhere.

The Jewish population of Birmingham was also much smaller than in other cities, numbering around 6,000 during the 1930s. They were also heavily anglicised as Jews had assimilated within local society since the early nineteenth century.³⁶ This is not to blame the Jewish people of London

BLACKSHIRTS AND BRUMMIES: INTERWAR FASCISM IN THE WEST MIDLANDS



Sir Oswald Mosley addressing a crowd of Fascist supporters.

and elsewhere for their own suffering, only to state that it was difficult to stir up racial hatred when a minority group was small and largely integrated.

Although Birmingham's police always aimed to maintain free speech by the BUF, the Council banned the BUF from speaking in the City Hall in 1936.³⁷ This was before the passing of the Public Order Act in 1937, which restricted inflammatory speech. The action of the Council was part of a wider trend of restricting Fascist speech around the country, precursory to the Act itself.

The Birmingham organisation was also hit by national restructuring in 1937, which removed most of their funding. Lastly, the membership was mostly young, politically inexperienced, and usually did not stay for long. Samuel himself was one of at least three District Leaders in only eight years. Some Fascists even believed people sometimes joined the movement just to sell the uniform.³⁸

Action taken by Birmingham's Council, citizens, and the government in London killed off the Fascist party, alongside a general economic recovery which drew people away from extremism, and public reaction against Nazism in Europe. This shows that a movement that threatens democracy can be stopped when action is taken against it. However, interviews suggest that Samuel and Louise took their beliefs with them to their deaths in the 1990s, showing that an idea is a lot more difficult to kill. Indeed, ideas and people associated with the BUF continued to be prominent after the war finished.

Samuel and Louise's experiences are a testament to how ordinary people can get caught by extremism, and how looking at the darker side of our own city's history can illuminate its past. ●

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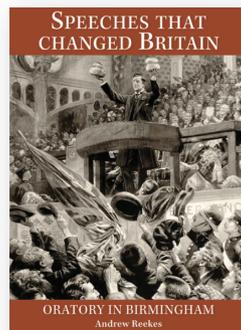
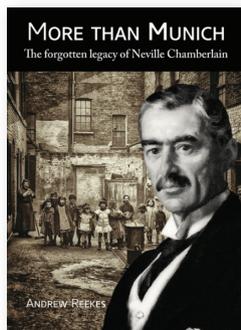
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Recommended Reading

- Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts: Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London, Cape Publishing, 2006).
- John D Brewer, *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands* (Hampshire, Gower Publishing, 1984).
- Craig Morgan, *The British Union of Fascists in the Midlands, 1932-1940* (University of Wolverhampton PhD Thesis, 2008).
- Peter Photiou, *Political Extremism in Birmingham 1930-1939* (University of Sheffield Undergraduate Thesis, 2017).
- Thomas Gidlow, *The British Union of Fascists in Birmingham and South Wales* (University of Birmingham Undergraduate Thesis, 2016).

Notes

- ¹ University of Sheffield Special Collections (UoS): BUC 5/2, and UoS: BUC 3L/BRI (PE6).
- ² (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPB1jy4vmFA>, accessed 12/12/18).
- ³ Mosley, O., *My Life* (London, 1968), p.176.
- ⁴ Worley, M., 'Why Fascism? Sir Oswald Mosley and the Conception of the British Union of Fascists,' *The Journal of the Historical Association*, Vol.96, No.321 (2011), pp.68-83, p.74.
- ⁵ University of Birmingham Special Collections (UoB): MS784/3/15.
- ⁶ UoB: MS874/3/48.
- ⁷ *Black Country Bugle*, 8/23/2012, p.16.
- ⁸ UoB: MS784/3/15 and MS784/3/89
- ⁹ Webber, G., 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.19 (1984), pp.575-606, p.577, and Brewer, J. D., *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands* (Hampshire, 1984), p.74.
- ¹⁰ UoB: MS784/3/65.
- ¹¹ Brewer, J. D., *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands* (Hampshire, 1984), p.99.
- ¹² UoB: MS874/3/48.
- ¹³ *Birmingham Post*, 26/1/1934 in UoB: OMD/10/1/6.
- ¹⁴ Irvine, L., in Hamm, J. *Mosley's Blackshirts: The Inside Story of the British Union of Fascists 1932-40* (Black House Publishing, London, 2012), p.47.
- ¹⁵ UoS: BUC 10/BUF and BUC 5/2.
- ¹⁶ Brewer, J., *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands* (Hampshire, 1984), p.74, and *Birmingham Gazette*, 22/1/1934 in UoB: OMD/10/1/6.
- ¹⁷ Irvine, L. 'The Birmingham Schoolteacher' in Hamm, J. *Mosley's Blackshirts: The Inside Story of the British Union of Fascists 1932-1940*, (Black House Publishing, London, 2012), p.74.
- ¹⁸ The Frost Programme - Oswald Mosley (15 Nov 1967), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rd7LcaXZzUs>, accessed 22/9/15.
- ¹⁹ Gidlow, T., 'The British Union of Fascists in Birmingham and South Wales,' *University of Birmingham Undergraduate Thesis*, (University of Birmingham, Birmingham, 2016), pp.8-17.
- ²⁰ *The Times*, Friday 23 December 1938, Issue 48185, p.12, and Morgan, C., 'The British Union of Fascists in the Midlands 1932-1940', *University of Wolverhampton PhD Thesis*, (University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, 2008), p.71.
- ²¹ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPB1jy4vmFA>, accessed 12/12/18).
- ²² *The Times*, Friday 23 December 1938, Issue 48185, p.12.
- ²³ UoB: MS874/3/48.
- ²⁴ UoB: MS874/3/10 and MS874/3/48.
- ²⁵ Cullen, S., 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 28 (April, 1993), pp.245-267, p.247.
- ²⁶ UoB: MS874/3/47, MS874/3/48, and MS784/3/79.
- ²⁷ UoS Special Collections: BUC5/1 and BUC5/2.
- ²⁸ Glamorgan Archives: GD/C.102 M6/819, Cullen, S., 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28 (April, 1993), pp.245-267, and Gidlow, T., 'The British Union of Fascists in Birmingham and South Wales,' *University of Birmingham Undergraduate Thesis*, (University of Birmingham, Birmingham, 2016).
- ²⁹ UoB: MS784/3/79, and *Birmingham Post*, 24/2/1934 in UoB: OMD/10/1/8.
- ³⁰ UoB: MS784/3/15.
- ³¹ UoB: MS784/3/10, and <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/media/pdf/8/9/Jan1934.pdf> (accessed 18/1/2016).
- ³² *The Times*, Friday 23 December 1938, Issue 48185, p.12.
- ³³ UoS: BUC 5/11.
- ³⁴ UoS: BUC 5/11.
- ³⁵ Ward, R., *City-State and Nation: Birmingham's Political History 1830-1940*, (Phillimore, Chichester, 2005), p.214.
- ³⁶ Dick, M., 'Birmingham Anglo-Jewry c.1780 to c.1880: Origins, Experiences and Representation,' *Midland History*, 36 (Autumn 2011), pp.195-214, p.195-6 and Brewer, J., 'The British Union of Fascists and Anti-Semitism in Birmingham,' *Midland History*, 9 (1984), pp.109-22, p.113.
- ³⁷ Cadbury Research Library: MS784/3/107, and *The Times*, 9/11/1936, p.9.
- ³⁸ Brewer, J., *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands* (Hampshire, 1984), pp.80-1, 90.



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