

Cable Street and the defeat of British fascism

By Ruah Carlyle

OCTOBER 1996 marks the 60th anniversary of the memorable day when the workers of East London stopped police-protected fascists marching through the Jewish areas of the East End. The Battle of Cable Street was an epic, and is now a myth-enshrouded, event in British working-class history.

On this sixtieth anniversary, fascism is far more of a force in the world than it was ten years ago. The fight against fascism may once more become a matter of life and death to the labour movement. What lessons for this work can we learn from the anti-fascist struggle in East London sixty years ago? Did "objective conditions" and, after 1934, Establishment disapproval kill off Mosleyism, or was it direct action on the streets? What are the lessons for today?

The 1929 Wall Street Crash lurched the world economy into chaos. Companies collapsed and millions of jobs were lost in the Great Depression which then set in. In Britain, too, conditions were severe though not as cataclysmic as in Germany and the U.S.A. The pound was taken off the Gold Standard in 1931, but, in contrast to many private and state banks in other countries, the Bank of England was never in danger of collapse. British unemployment was high, peaking at 23 percent (nearly four million). Elsewhere, in the USA and Germany, for example, it was much higher.

In May 1930, Sir Oswald Mosley, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster — a Labour minister charged with helping to solve the mushrooming unemployment problem and seen as a possible future party leader — made proposals that were radical for the time. When they were rejected he left the Labour Party to form a "New Party". Within two years the New Party, shedding some of its leaders such as John Strachey, had evolved into a fascist organisation. Mosley, the radical Labour MP, had become the Führer of the British Union of Fascists. Britain's biggest ever fascist party was founded in October 1932.

Mosley's economic proposals had been basically "Keynesian". He thought that the best way out of the economic depression was reflation. The government should spend its way out of the depression. The financial boost to the economy would have a positive knock-on effect. These ideas would be bourgeois economic orthodoxy ten years later.

But, in 1930, the Establishment held to a traditional and conventional view, similar to modern monetarism, demanding strict control of expenditure, deflation and cuts in public services such as the dole. Mosley was thus opposed to what the ruling class saw as its best interests. Mosley's "Keynesian" economics — he was by no means the only person to advocate these ideas — were also rejected by most of the Labour leadership. They too thought it necessary to cut rather than spend.

Despite this comparatively radical stance, Mosley at his best

was an elitist reformer, an aristocrat who had come to Labour from the Tories.¹

COMMITTED to old-style "monetarist" economics, the ruling class as a whole was certain to oppose Mosley, unless it felt, as had the German and Italian Establishments with Hitler and Mussolini, a need for fascism. The mainstream British Establishment never came to that pass.

However, there was indeed a small section of the Establishment who thought, as had the desperate liberal Giolitti in Italy and the Junker monarchist von Schleicher in Germany, that they might have a use for the fascists. Most notable of these were the Tory press lords Rothermere and Camrose, the British Rupert Murdochs of the day, both part of the Empire Free Trade faction of the Tory party. They expected a major social crisis, and hoped to make the rabble-rouser Mosley an auxiliary of the Tory Party: their support for Mosley was in part a gambit in their factional war against the Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin.

They made financial contributions to the British Union of Fascists, and, more importantly, they gave it support in their newspapers — notoriously in Lord Rothermere's personally-written front-page *Daily Mail* article and headline, "Hurrah for the Blackshirts", on 8 January 1934. They were keeping their options open. If the economy worsened and social discontent grew, the fascists could be on hand to silence working-class protest by crushing the labour movement in the most brutal way.

By late 1934, the BUF had lost this ruling-class support. The explanation normally given is that they were horrified by Mosley's Olympia rally of June 1934, where dozens of anti-fascists were publicly beaten up by fascist stewards, while Mosley looked on. These atrocities were no different from numerous previous assaults by fascists at BUF meetings. But Olympia was a deliberate, public display of savage violence. Staged to impress an audience which included many MPs and other well-off middle-class and Establishment figures with the ruthless efficiency of BUF fascism, it had an opposite effect. It seemed gratuitous, and the BUF came to be seen as thugs. Olympia took place at about the time of Hitler's "night of the long knives", in which the "left-wing" Nazis were slaughtered, and this increased the resonance. Mosley had demoted himself from a serious politician to a gutter thug. So the legend goes.

But there were other reasons for people like Lord Rothermere to withdraw their support. Although the public atrocity at Olympia, and the BUF's tentative but increasing anti-semitism, did much to alienate the once sizeable Establishment support, mostly they

Facing page: anti-fascists retreating as police attack a barricade in the "Battle of Cable Street."

withdrew support because now they felt confident that they did not need Mosley.

The economy was steadily improving by 1934. There was mass unemployment and devastation in some areas of the country, and there would be another slump in 1937, but the economic depression was not as bad as people had feared in the early '30s. Politically, too, the crisis of the early 1930s was resolved. The National Government, under the nominal leadership of Ramsay MacDonald but actually dominated by the Conservatives, had created and maintained relative political equilibrium. Rothermere, Camrose, and the car manufacturer William Morris (the future Lord Nuffield) concluded that they were not going to need Mosley's fascists after all.

They may or may not have been horrified by the fascists' violence, but if they felt that they needed the fascists then they would have stomached it, just as the Imperial German politician Kurt von Schleicher was willing to stomach the Nazis. Writing to a friend in March 1932, he stated:

"I am really glad that there is a counterweight [to the Social Democrats] in the form of the Nazis, who are not very decent chaps either and must be stomached with the greatest caution. If they did not exist, we should virtually have to invent them." That is what Rothermere, Camrose, Morris and the others would have said, if necessary. For them it did not prove necessary.

The plebeians Hitler and Mussolini started on the political fringes and, with growing ruling-class support, moved towards government; the "aristocratic coxcomb" Mosley began in government and moved steadily towards the political fringes. The BUF began with seemingly great prospects and the support of a number of national newspapers, and retreated to the margins of politics, becoming primarily a movement of racist demagogues in the East End of London.

It was only in its period of relative decline that the BUF (known after 1936 as the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists) turned its attention to East London and there built the only truly mass base fascism ever built in Britain. It was as late as July 1934 that the first BUF East London Branch was set up in Bow. It was November of that year before the second East End branch was started, in their future stronghold of Bethnal Green. Yet they grew quickly and steadily, until by 1937 they were a powerful force in local government elections.

After the defection of the newspaper barons and the end of the BUF's initial burst of support, the East End branches of the BUF became, by spring 1936, the centre of BUF activity. Why? What was it about East London that focused BUF attention? The Jews of the East End provided the fascists with a unique target. East End Jews were concentrated in small areas: in 1929, 43 percent of the national Jewish population were concentrated in Stepney alone. So, too, could the attack on them be geographically concentrated.

Although its population had been declining from the turn of the century, East London in the 30's was still one of the most densely populated areas of England. Shoreditch, Bethnal Green and Stepney were ranked as the second, third and fourth most populated of the London boroughs. The "New Survey of London Life and Labour" found 18 percent of the people of Shoreditch, 17.8 percent of Bethnal Green, and 15.5 percent of Stepney living in poverty.

In East London there was none of the mass unemployment of

the industrial North. Most people had work, but it was insecure work, often in small factories, "sweatshops", prone to disruption and bankruptcy — low pay, long hours and a pervasive sense of insecurity for the lucky, hunger and destitution for the rest.

East London had been an immigrant gateway for centuries. In the 17th century, French Protestants, Huguenots, sought refuge there from Catholic persecution. The mid 19th century saw a big influx of Irish immigrants. After 1881, when systematic pogroms set Russian and Polish Jews to begin their exodus to the west, large numbers of them settled in the East End, first in Whitechapel then fanning out towards Stepney and Mile End.

Anti-Jewish agitation, loud or muted, active or latent, had existed in the East End since the time of the first large Jewish settlements. "The Jews" were long an issue in the East End labour movement. Some labour leaders sometimes joined in agitation against "the Jews", while others attacked the anti-semites. In the early 20th century, the British Brothers' League and the Londoners' League organised systematic anti-semitic campaigning. Although those organisations declined after the passing of the 1905 Aliens Act, which restricted Jewish immigration, anti-semitism continued. In 1917 there were riots in Bethnal Green against recently arrived Jews, who were not subject to conscription.

"The material basis for East End anti-Jewish feeling was the discontent of a materially deprived and angry 'native' population, living side by side with a large number of immigrants and their descendants, whose cultural distinctiveness cast them easily in the role of scapegoat."

In this whole period of British history, liberal humanitarianism did not have the authority it enjoys now. "Bashing" and stereotyping "the Jews" was a common part of social and literary discourse. For example, in 1920, Winston Churchill wrote: "This (Jewish and Communist) world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilisation and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development... has been steadily growing." Anti-Jewish prejudice was deeply ingrained, even on the left.

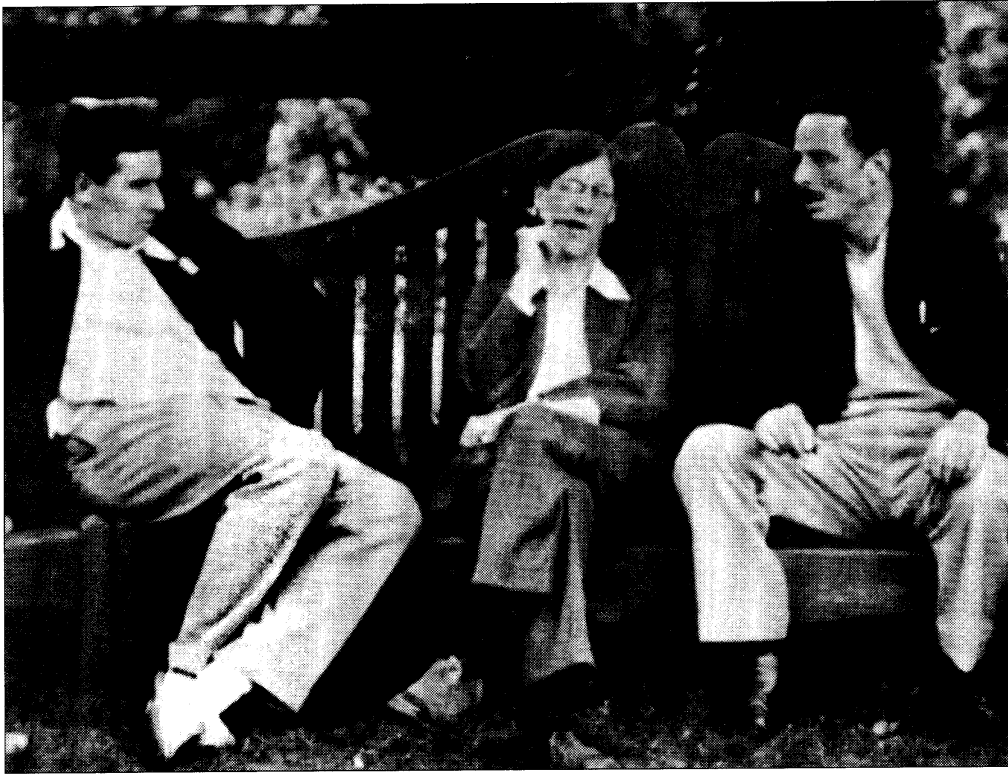
The leading left-wing and anti-fascist periodical, the *New Statesman*, could, while condemning the BUF, write in 1936 of the conflicts in East London:

"The average poorish Jew has a different glandular and emotional make-up... Jews are often much more 'pushful'... there is a widely spread, rough, rarely expressed, smouldering anti-semitic resentment much resembling the feeling our native squirrel might have towards the grey interloper... the shouted insults, window-breaking and beard-pullings to which decent law-abiding-but-money-seeking-at-any-price -to-others Jews have been subjected..." It was a different, pre-Holocaust world.

The material basis for East End anti-Jewish feeling was the discontent of a materially deprived and angry "native" population, living side by side with a large number of immigrants and their descendants, whose cultural distinctiveness cast them easily in the role of scapegoat. All that was needed to make this resentful scapegoating erupt into an aggressive force was a political formation seeking to exploit anti-semitism.

Mosley the ex-minister could speak louder than the traditional East End anti-semitite. What he said was not new, but it struck a strong chord in the East End.

From its inception the BUF had displayed flashes of anti-semitism. In speeches and articles, some of its secondary leaders, such as William Joyce and A K Chesterton, showed themselves as the hard core anti-semites they were. But Mosley himself at first showed signs of wanting to eschew "extreme" anti-semitism. The British Nazi, Arnold Leese, of the Imperial Fascist League, dismissed Mosley as a "kosher fascist".



This remarkable 1926 picture shows Mosley [right], the future fascist leader, with Fenner Brockway [centre], secretary of the ILP throughout the 1930s, and John Strachey, who would go with Mosley into the New Party and, breaking with him when he turned fascist, be a leading Stalinist propagandist throughout the '30s. After the Hitler-Stalin pact Strachey switched from justifying Stalin's atrocities to doing public relations work for the RAF, Bomber Harris and his obliteration raids on German civilian targets. Strachey was a Minister in the 1945 Labour government.

For Jewish immigrants and their British-born families, refugees from persecution in Russia and Eastern Europe, it meant that the Nazis were coming.

After initial confusion, the Communist Party, the Independent Labour Party, and members of the local Labour Party, together with Jewish anti-fascist organisations, prepared to do battle with the fascists and the police, the defenders of the fascists. Cable Street coincided with the siege of Madrid. The anti-fascists, overwhelmingly working-class, painted the slogan "No Pasaran" ("They Shall Not Pass") all over East London, linking Mosley's march with Franco's rebellion in Spain. They took the workers of Madrid as their model and inspiration. But would they be able to stop Mosley?

THE Labour Party and the trade union movement were against the fascists, but they also opposed direct action — physical force — to

In 1934 anti-semitism became central to both the BUF's propaganda and its activities. Its turn to intense anti-semitic campaigning after October 1934 was an outright "declaration of war" on the Jews. That was central to building BUF support in the East End.

They had a profound effect, but they never "captured the East End". The large Jewish minority which provided them with the opportunity through scapegoating of winning grassroots support, also, by its presence in the neighbourhoods and on the electoral roll, prevented them from winning control of whole districts and confined fascist local street dominance to smaller areas.

The story later propagated by the Communist Party, of an East End united against the anti-semitic Blackshirts, does not tally with election results. Nor do eyewitness accounts — from people unconnected with the BUF — of Mosley on informal evening walks through East End streets surrounded by a "forest" of arms raised in the fascist salute.

In the 1937 LCC elections the fascists stood in Bethnal Green, Stepney and Shoreditch. They lost everywhere but proved the existence of a substantial body of support, coming second in Bethnal Green.

In East London fascism set the agenda for political life. In school playgrounds the game of "cowboys and Indians" was replaced by "Jews and Blackshirts". Streets, estates, and "patches" were marked off as either fascist or anti-fascist (Jewish or Communist or both), and were off limits to members of the other side. Indeed for some time an unofficial state of warfare existed between the two factions. Such a conflict could not have been maintained without substantial local support for the fascists.

It was against this background that, in September 1936, Mosley announced that the BUF would march through the East End on 4 October. It was to be the biggest show of fascist strength ever, in this their strongest area. It could have developed into a pogrom.

stop their activities. Like the Liberals, they instructed people to rely on the police to prevent disorder. But unlike the establishment the labour movement feared destruction at the hands of the Nazis, not just discomfort. Even those who opposed direct action helped arouse the working class. The Labour Party and TUC research departments published many pamphlets and leaflets which compared the BUF to Italian and German Fascism. This was no futile activity. Though it could not prevent fascist activities, this literature, along with meetings, created a climate of educated opposition to the fascists in the labour movement and in the broader working class. Thus it helped prepare a united front in action between labour movement militants, revolutionary socialists and unaffiliated workers. In this climate, the militant "actionist" opponents of fascism gained support for physical opposition, even from normally non-militant Labour Party and trade union members.

Naturally the national leaders of the Jewish community also opposed the fascists. In an area where the "Jewish question" was the very centre of politics, the attitude of the Jewish leadership on what to do about fascist harassment was important. In 1936 the Board of Deputies set up a Jewish Defence Committee. Yet, though the Board vehemently opposed the fascists, it told the East End Jews to rely on the police and on no account to oppose the fascists physically. That, the Jewish leadership insisted, would only add fuel to the fires of anti-semitism.

Individual members of the British Establishment were, of course, sympathetic to the BUF or even its supporters, but the state, the civil servants, the police, and the industrialists, all those elements of British society which held to the social status quo, collectively condemned them. The government consistently opposed the fascists, and this too helped create a powerful climate of resistance to fascism "on the ground".

Yet the National Government, with unconscious irony proclaiming itself custodian of the law and of "traditional British

Britain's fascists

March 1930

Mosley forms New Party. Half the members leave when Mosley likens the New Party to the "continental modern [i.e. fascist] movements."

April 1930

Ashton-under-Lyne by-election — the New Party splits the Labour vote, allowing the Tories to win. Facing an angry post-result Labour crowd, Mosley says to John Strachey: "That is the crowd that has prevented anyone doing anything since the war."

June-July

Proposals for a "youth movement." New Party "Biff Boys" organised, supposedly to keep order at meetings and also to protect law and order "in the event of a Communist uprising." This is the beginning of the Blackshirts.

October 1931

General Election. National Government elected with a majority of 498. All but 2 of the 24 New Party candidates lose their deposit. Even the CP did better.

December

Mosley visits Mussolini. Stands with him on a saluting base during a fascist parade.

Summer 1932

Wearing of Blackshirt uniforms and use of fascist title introduced.

1 October

British Union of Fascists formally launched.

January 1933

Nazis given power in Germany.

Autumn 1933

First signs of BUF anti-semitism.

1934

By summer BUF has 100 branches.

8 January 1934

Media magnate Lord Rothermere begins his campaign in support of the BUF. "Hurrah for the Blackshirts" is the *Daily Mail's* headline.

7 April 1934

BUF Olympia rally. Blackshirts publicly beat up dozens of hecklers, disgust a largely middle-class audience, lose Rothermere's support and are thereafter (accurately) identified with violence.

22 April 1934

First big BUF rally at the Albert Hall.

September 1934

BUF rally in Hyde Park.

October 1934

At Belle Vue, Manchester Mosley makes "what amounted to a declaration of war against the Jews."

Late 1934

British economy largely stabilised following the depths of the Depression. BUFNS branches set up in Bethnal Green and Shoreditch.

1935

Mussolini invades Ethiopia.

June

BUFNS adopts Nazi leather uniforms.

July 1936

Stepney Green branch set up.

4 October

The Battle of Cable Street.

11 October

The Mile End Pogrom.

1 January 1937

Public Order Act bans political uniforms and increases police powers to ban marches.

6 March 1937

LCC elections. BUFNS poll one-fifth of the vote in East London.

Mid 1937

BUFNS plunge into disputes. Leaders Beckett and Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw) split, setting up the National Socialist League.

October 1937

Battle of Bermondsey. Mosley knocked out by a brick in Liverpool.

March 1938

A K Chesterton leaves the BUFNS.

July 1939

In accordance with their anti-war (pro-Nazi) campaign, the BUFNS hold their last major event, a rally in Earls Court, which resembles a leather-clad pacifists' convention.

September 1939

War begins. BUFNS membership and optimism plummet.

May 1940

Mosley nearly lynched at Middleton. BUFNS and other fascist groups' active members interned.



liberties", found itself defending the fascists' right to "free speech", and, in practice, championing their "right" to make life miserable for East London's Jews. To many in the East End, in particular to many Jews faced with fascist harassment, this was indistinguishable from Government defence of the fascists as such. In practice, that is what it was. According to the East End Labour MP George Lansbury, it was widely believed in the East End that "ordinary people" would not have had the same liberty as the fascists. The police were defending the right of people who aped Hitler, who waved his emblems, and were believed to be in receipt of his money, to march through the Jewish areas in a blatant attempt to terrorise Jews.

The fascists would march through markets abusing Jewish store holders and kicking them. They would bellow anti-semitic propaganda over loud-hailers late at night in Jewish areas and chalk foul abuse on the pavement outside Jewish shops, including the slogan "PJ" (Perish Judah). They assaulted and incited assaults on Jews. In the "Mile End Pogrom" of October 1936 — in the week after the battle of Cable Street — Jewish shops had their windows broken, Jews were beaten in the street, and a pre-school aged girl and an old man were thrown through a plate glass window. The list of such incidents is enormous. In this context the fascists' "right to free speech" became something else: police defending the right of pogromists to spread terror in Jewish streets.

To many young Jews, political or not — and large numbers of Jews were members of the Communist Party, the Independent Labour Party, the Labour Party, and of Jewish left-wing groups like Hashomer Hatzair and the Workman's Circles — the proper response to fascists marching through Jewish areas was simple: don't let them! Sign petitions, try to get the marches stopped, but if all else fails, collect the bricks and build the barricades: that was their attitude. It was in this climate that the ground was prepared for the united action by anti-fascists which stopped Mosley at the Battle of Cable Street.

THE two main organisations that practised physical force opposition to the fascists were the Independent Labour Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain, and it was their activities — notably their part in the Battle of Cable Street — which most people today think of as the opposition to the fascists.

A Stalinist myth surrounds the Communist Party's role in the Battle of Cable Street. The CP had a grand anti-fascist reputation, but an increasingly spurious one.

Up to 1934 the CP had been in the throes of the Stalinist policy known as the "third period", when, so they said, revolutions were just about to happen everywhere. This was nonsense, and in Germany led the CP to play into Hitler's hands, but it had meant that the British CP was willing to throw itself physically — as at Olympia in 1934 — into fighting fascism, perceived as the last-ditch defenders of a dying capitalism.

By 1936 this view had changed dramatically. The CP's central concern became "anti-fascism". They were the anti-fascists par excellence. In fact, "anti-fascism" meant opposition to Germany and support for USSR foreign policy, to whose interests the CP was subservient. It would alter its relationship to the fascists, as to everything else, in line with what the rulers of the USSR saw as their needs.

Stalin was pursuing a policy of creating a "democratic anti-fascist front" of the USSR with the capitalist powers France and Britain against the German Nazis; the British CP, like CPs everywhere, was now advocating a Popular Front. This meant allying with non-working-class organisations opposed to German fascism, and in Britain by the late 1930s this would include "progressive Tories".²

The British CP was trying to gain respectability, aping mainstream politicians in the hope of allying with them. As a result, the



Was Mosley *really* an anti-semite? One of the most idiotic of academic pseudo debates was initiated around this question when Robert Skidelsky published a biography of Mosley in 1975. The meanest acquaintance with BUF literature brands such a discussion as unserious. In 1938, in a pamphlet outlining the BUF's policy, Mosley said that he would, on coming to power, immediately deprive all British Jews of citizenship and deport all those considered "undesirable." He wrote of Madagascar as a possible place to which Jews could be exiled. So, at that time, did the German Nazis.

CP did not always oppose Mosley militantly, because they feared that continued militancy would make it impossible to ally with 'respectable' politicians. By 1936 they were shying away from physical confrontations. Abandoning class politics, they more and more attempted to compete with the fascists as British nationalists, and even as protectors of religious freedom against "compulsory idolatry" in Germany. They were loudest in demanding blanket police bans on the fascists, and counterposed campaigning for bans to organising on the streets. That was their initial approach to what became the Battle of Cable Street.

The Stalinists' reputation as the foremost anti-fascists of the 1930's has been glamorised in history as a result of the CP's untruthfully taking almost all the credit for the Battle of Cable Street. The reality was different.

THE CP only threw their considerable weight behind the East End anti-fascist mobilisation when it was clear three days before that they had lost control of their own local members and sympathisers who would follow the Independent Labour Party's call on workers to block the route of the fascist march. At first they told workers not to oppose the fascists in the East End, and instructed CP members to go to the Embankment and then Trafalgar Square instead.

Joe Jacobs, a local CP branch secretary, who later broke with the party, was instructed by his superiors four days before the fascist march not to get involved and instead to build for a demonstration, miles away in Trafalgar Square, in support of the Spanish Republic against the Spanish fascists.

His instructions were clear: "Keep order: no excuse for the Government to say we, like the BUF, are hooligans. If Mosley decides to march, let him... Our biggest trouble tonight will be

to keep order and discipline."

So, while the CP was to concentrate on demonstrating against foreign fascism, Britain's actual fascists were to be allowed to march through Jewish streets unopposed! In his posthumously published autobiography, Jacobs explains the reason for the eventual change of line very clearly: "The pressure from the people of Stepney, who went ahead with their own efforts to oppose Mosley, left no doubt in our minds that the CP would be finished in Stepney if this was allowed to go through as planned by our London leaders."

Thus, as a result of the CP's efforts to gain respectability, the better to serve Russia's foreign policy, anti-fascist mobilisations became disunited and less effective. After Cable Street, they continued on their course. At the July 1937 Mosley rally in Trafalgar Square, the CP refused to help block the way to Mosley, leaving the job to the ILP (along with some CP rank and filers disgusted with their own leadership). They issued ridiculous pseudo-patriotic literature reminiscent of the early 30s German CP's suicidal attempt at mimicking the Nazis by way of "National Bolshevism" [see box].

The Independent Labour Party, not the CP, was the most consistently confrontational anti-fascist force in the East End and beyond.

The ILP had been one of the early constituent organisations of the Labour Party.³ It had split from the Labour Party in 1932, moving to the left. By 1936, the ILP, though it was still a hybrid political formation, in which bits of reformism, pacifism, and revolutionary socialism were confusingly mixed, was much nearer to being a communist party in the old sense of the word than the official "Communist Party" was. Some of its members were Trotskyists.

The ILP broke up fascist meetings by way of massing oppo-

sition, heckling and fighting. They barred fascist processions, organised petitions, and defended Jewish areas — particularly in the East End — from attack.⁴

And, of course, not only political anti-fascists were involved. The Jewish community had its own ex-servicemen's anti-fascist militia, the Blue and White Shirts.⁵ British Jews, branching out from their orthodox background, were often attracted to revolutionary politics, many joining the CP. There were also many smaller, local anti fascist bodies.

Many older Jews had memories of the pogroms which had forced them to flee Eastern and Central Europe. Their children knew their people's history. For them physical opposition was not so much a political as a practical matter of life and death in the East End.

ON 4 October, the thousands strong Blackshirt march was to begin in Royal Mint Street, pass along through Gardiners Corner (now the top of Whitechapel Road) and on to four separate street meetings in Shoreditch, Limehouse, Bow and Bethnal Green. It never even got going! The march was stopped dead. As many as a quarter of a million people, East Londoners and outsiders, jammed Gardiners Corner. Only an army would have cleared the way for the Blackshirted thugs. An army of police tried and failed.

Tramdrivers abandoned their vehicles in the middle of the road. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Phillip Game, had drafted in a third of the London police force, 6,000 policemen, the whole of the mounted division and had a primitive helicopter, a gyroscope, flying overhead.

Despite these forces, which made numerous charges at the anti-fascist crowd, breaking many heads, no thoroughway for the fascists could be cut.

The Police Commissioner then proposed a diversion through the dock area around Wapping, and along Cable Street. There a virtual war was fought between the police and the defenders of the anti-fascist barricades. British, Irish and some Somali dockers fought the police. The anti-fascist barricade was constructed of furniture, paving stones and a lorry. Pretending to retreat, the anti-fascists lured the police forwards, and took up positions behind secondary barricades while from the upstairs tenements on either side of the street other anti-fascists threw bricks, stones, bottles, marbles for horses' hooves, and boiling water down on the bewildered police.

While the outnumbered and powerless fascist heroes waited in vain for a path to be cleared for them, the police faced chaos. Rare in British street battles, stray policemen were taken prisoner by the barricaders. For those moments the rule of the British state in East London was suspended.

At about 5pm, after a three hour battle, the Commissioner said to Sir Oswald Mosley that he would no longer be held responsible for the safety of the fascists. Speaking as one knight to another he said: 'If you go ahead sir, it will be a shambles!' The beaten police cancelled the fascist march, and sent them off to the Embankment. They did not pass!

The lessons of Cable Street

YET the reaction in the pro-fascist areas of East London to the fascists' political defeat at Cable Street did not everywhere produce the atmosphere that the CPer (later MP) Phil Piratin depicted in "Our Flag Stays Red", of disgusted BUF residents "tearing up their membership cards." MI5 reported to the Home Office

that as many as 2,000 people — many, no doubt, transient recruits — joined the BUF in East London after Cable Street.

However, despite its distortion by later Stalinist historians and propagandists, Cable Street was tremendously important. It was a great morale booster for the hard pressed East London Jews and for all anti-fascists. While an open war, perceived as the working class versus fascism, was raging abroad in Spain, in London workers, translating the Spanish anti-fascist slogan "No Pasaran" into English as "They shall not pass", had indeed beaten back the fascists. In East London, they had not passed! The fact that the fascists and anti-fascists never came to blows (the street war was entirely between anti-fascists and police) or that the effect on fascist recruitment was favourable for them, was irrelevant to Cable Street's potent political symbolism.

Cable Street entered working-class legend. It is rightly remembered as something the working class and its allies won against the combined might of the state and the fascists.

Any discussion of how well or badly the BUF did must judge it in both a national and local perspective. Nationally, the fascists were an utter failure. The broad opposition to the fascists — the mainstream Establishment after 1934, as well as the labour movement — in combination with the relative economic improvement in Britain, blocked off short-term BUF prospects of taking power.

After 1936, the BUF tended to be the sort of "Foreign Legion" for Berlin that the Stalinist CP was for Moscow. If in the immediate pre-war period it grew steadily — its biggest ever rally occurred in July 1939 — it was as a "peace movement".⁶

In local terms, in East London, however, the fascist failure was a qualified one. Here, even after the defeat at Cable Street, they achieved and sustained a mass base of support which, if it could have been repeated elsewhere, would have given them major political weight and at least the possibility of power.

They polled a fifth of the vote in three districts in the 1937 London County Council elections. On being told this, Mosley is said to have shouted "Better than Hitler!", explaining later that four years prior to gaining power Hitler had consistently polled under 20%. Of course, Hitler achieved that all over Germany, whereas Mosley only managed one fifth of the vote in the three most favourable districts of London. Yet, if war had not come, the East End might have been a base from which fascism could have expanded. Had the ruling class again felt the need for them, as Rothermere had before 1934, East London would have been a strong base from which to expand.

It has been plausibly argued that Mosley captured the support of large numbers of the non-Jewish youth, and had they been old enough to vote he might have won the Bethnal Green council seat. Given the intensity of the opposition mobilised against them, these fascist gains were remarkable.

THE Battle of Cable Street led directly to the Public Order Act. Rushed through the House of Commons, it became law on the 1st of January 1937. The Public Order Act is often and falsely seen by reformists as a significant hindrance to the fascists, and by some as the thing that finally killed off Mosleyism. This is an illusion. The Act banned political uniforms, gave the police added powers to ban marches at will, and strengthened laws against racist abuse. Though it was an annoyance to the fascists, the Act did not cripple them and did not "finish them off" as some too legalistic interpretations of its effect seem to suggest.

It may have deprived the now plainly clothed fascists of some Blackshirt-uniformed glamour and prestige. A handful of anti-semitic speakers were indeed arrested and charged. Where before

“PERSECUTION”

The Mosleyites after 1934 built on a long tradition of anti-semitic agitation, especially in London's East End, by groups such as Arnold Leese's "Imperial Fascist League." This cartoon is one of a number preserved in police files that are now publicly accessible: most of them are so vile that they are unreproducible.



Whenever a Jew is found out and punished he raises the cry of "Persecution."

THE FASCIST MARCHES. JEW'S TACTLESS PETITION.

THE Fascists propose to hold an anniversary rally on Sunday afternoon next, and to afterwards march through the East End and conduct open-air meetings at four different points. The Jewish People's Council against Fascism and Anti-Semitism has organised a petition, to be presented to the Home Secretary today, urging that the proceedings should be banned. Such a request is both stupid and tactless. Jews who enjoy more freedom and rights than their fellows in any other land ought to be the last to attempt to deny them to the nationals of the country which gave them those privileges.

There was also lower-level anti-semitic agitation in the mainstream press. This is the *East London Hackney Gazette* (2 October 1936) commenting on a Jewish petition to the government to stop British Hitlerites marching through their community.

the police had 'defended free speech', and thus the fascists, now they took on the role of regulating and supervising them, within more restrictive laws.

Yet the POA was a broad blanket measure, designed more to help the police control left-wing opposition movements, for example the hunger marchers, than for suppressing the BUF. For decades after Mosleyism had vanished down the great sewer of history, the POA was being used against the labour movement.

The POA did nothing to stop anti-Jewish harassment (despite a few prosecutions). It did not even stop large-scale violence. On

3 October 1937 there was great violence when the Mosleyites, no longer Blackshirted, tried to march through Bermondsey, South London. Despite appeals by Doctor Salter, the much respected local Labour MP, to let the fascists pass and 'respect their free speech', local people erected barricades and there was serious fighting, not far from the scale of Cable Street.

The Public Order Act did not quell the BUF any more than the banning of Nazi uniforms at one point quelled Hitler. If it appears so in retrospect, that is only because the BUF went into decline soon afterwards. The POA played at best a secondary and conditional role in that decline.

WHICH was proved to be the effective method of fighting fascism, direct action as advocated by the ILP and the Trotskyists or the policy of reliance on the police advocated by the LP, CP and trade union leaders?

On the ground, it is virtually certain, insofar as fascist actions were curbed and protection provided for the Jews, that the effective action taken against the BUF was that by local people and labour movement activists, and their supporters from outside. In fact, as we have seen, the POA itself was a product of militant anti-fascist action. Street action forced the authorities, who had at Cable Street tried to assert the right of the pogromists to march into the Jewish ghetto, to go through the motions of curbing them. The truth is that, in the East End, despite the POA, legal fascist harassment of the Jews continued. The BUF was not destroyed until war forced the state to suppress it, in late May 1940, as a Hitlerite agency.

Though the fascists did well in the area, sustaining a fear of pogroms amongst the Jewish population by continual harassment and virtual terrorism, they never came close to physically outnumbering their opponents, and without police protection the would-be marchers — if they had attempted to march — would have been scattered, and many of them possibly lynched.

Their need for police defence was an indication of the fascists' weakness against the "Red Rabble" when it went into action.

CONTRAST Britain and Germany, and you see clearly the "objective" reason why British fascism failed at a national level. In Germany, the choice was: communism or fascism. In Germany, economic collapse led to

political collapse, which effectively by 1930, even before Hitler, marked the death of the country's fledgling Republican constitution. The harsh social conditions polarised politics and society.

In Britain, after the crisis of 1931 and the creation of the so-called National Government, the centre ground in politics held. This political bloc prevented serious political disturbance in the 1930s. Although basically Conservative, it played a roughly similar role to that of the Weimar centre coalition which had ensured the German Republic's survival through the economic crisis of the 1920s.

In retrospect it can be seen that in the broad "National" gov-

Leon Trotsky on fascism

Hatred and despair against the proletariat

THE magnates of finance capital are unable by their force alone to cope with the proletariat. They need the support of the petty bourgeoisie. For this purpose it must be whipped up, put on its feet, mobilised, armed. But this method has its dangers. While it makes use of fascism, the bourgeoisie nevertheless fears it.

Under the conditions of capitalist disintegration and of the impasse in the economic situation, the petty bourgeoisie strives, seeks, attempts to tear itself loose from the fetters of the old masters and rulers of society. It is quite capable of linking up its fate with that of the proletariat.

For that, only one thing is needed: the petty bourgeoisie must acquire faith in the ability of the proletariat to lead society onto a new road. The proletariat can inspire this faith only by its strength, by the firmness of its actions, by a skilful offensive against the enemy, by the success of its revolutionary policy.

But, woe if the revolutionary party does not measure up to the height of the situation!

If the revolutionary party, in spite of a class struggle becoming incessantly more accentuated, proves time and again to be incapable of uniting the working class about it, if it vacillates, becomes confused, contradicts itself, then the petty bourgeoisie loses patience and begins to look upon the revolutionary workers as those responsible for its own misery.

All the bourgeois parties, including the social democracy, turn their thoughts in this very direction. When the social crisis takes on an intolerable acuteness, a

particular party appears on the scene with the direct aim of agitating the petty bourgeoisie to a white heat and of directing its hatred and its despair against the proletariat."

The Only Road for Germany, September 1932

For the workers' united front!

NO matter how true it is that the social democracy by its whole policy prepared the blossoming of fascism, it is no less true that fascism comes forward as a deadly threat primarily to that same social democracy, all of whose magnificence is inextricably bound with parliamentary-democratic-pacifist forms and methods of government...

The policy of a united front of the workers against fascism flows from this situation. It opens up tremendous possibilities to the Communist Party...

The social crisis will inevitably produce cleavages within the social democracy. The radicalisation of the masses will affect the social democrats. We

will inevitably have to make agreements with the various social-democratic organisations and factions against fascism, putting definite conditions in this connection to the leaders, before the eyes of the masses... We must return from the empty official phrase about the united front to the policy of the united front as it was formulated by Lenin and always applied by the



The 1936 Public Order Act was drafted as a comprehensive measure, with the Establishment's need to control hunger marches of the unemployed very much in mind. It continued to be used against the labour movement long after Mosleyism had ceased to matter.

Bolsheviks in 1917."

The Turn in the Communist International and the German Situation, 1930

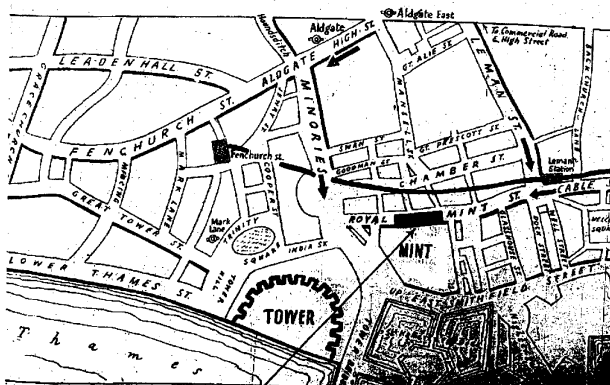
No to state bans!

THE struggle against fascism, the defence of the positions the working class has won within the framework of degenerating democracy, can become a powerful reality since it gives the working class the opportunity to prepare itself for the sharpest struggles and partially to arm itself... to mobilise the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie on the side of the revolution, to create a workers' militia, etc. Anyone who does not take advantage of this situation, who calls on the 'state' i.e. the class enemy, to 'act', in effect sells the proletariat's hide to the Bonapartist reaction.

Therefore, we must vote against all measures that strengthen the capitalist-Bonapartist state, even those measures which may for the moment cause temporary unpleasantness for the fascists.

We have to take strong measures against the abstract 'anti-fascist' mode of thinking that finds entry even into our own ranks at times. 'Anti-fascism' is nothing, an empty concept used to cover up Stalinist skulduggery."

Bourgeois Democracy and the Fight Against Fascism, Writings, 1935-6. 'Bonapartist' here means dictatorial, authoritarian.



THE FASCISTS PLAN TO ASSEMBLE IN ROYAL MINT STREET. MASS IN TENS OF THOUSANDS IN LEMAN STREET, CABLE STREET, GARDINE'S CORNER AND ST. GEORGE STREET. RALLY THERE AT 2PM.

The Daily Worker's map of East London, printed on 4 October 1936



AID FOR SPAIN
YOUTH AT THE SQUARE
Big Preparations For Sunday Demonstration
WIDE ACTIVITY
 A special for support of the Spanish Democracy in the...
YOUTH MUST NOT BE MISLED
 Our Fund Man is in a better mood to-day. Some splendid donations over the week-end. R... more

Jewish Petition To Ban Mosley March
 A march of 10,000 ex-Servicemen through the East End of London.
 A monster petition to the Home Secretary, organised by the Jewish People's Council.
 A demonstration of thousands of workers who will march from a central meeting organised by the London District Committee of the Communist Party to four meetings at key points in the East End.
 These are three of the measures that are being planned to counter elaborate arrangements made by Fascists for a descent on the East End next Sunday.
 A great wave of indignation has been raised by the announcement that the British Union of Fascists will hold meetings at Aske Street, Shoreditch; Salmon Lane, Limehouse; Stafford Road, Bow; and Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green.
 Deputations are being sent to the Mayors of Bethnal Green, Shoreditch, Stepney and Limehouse, asking them to use their influence to prevent the Fascist meetings from being held.

INCITEMENT MUST STOP
 Organised racial incitement must stop, says the Jewish People's Council in a leaflet, "People who lived amicably together in friendship and harmony with their Jewish neighbours are being incited to..."

ANTI-FASCIST RALLY ON SUNDAY
 All anti-Fascists are asked to rally to the Embankment (opposite Temple Station) at 2.30pm on Sunday. There will be a march from the Embankment to Trafalgar Square, where London's youth will vow solidarity with the Spanish people.

THE DAILY WORKER
 WORKERS OF ALL LANDS UNITE
 FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1936
EAST END RALLIES AGAINST FASCISM
Prepares To Answer Mosley March: Four Mayors Protest
YOUTH MEET TRANSFERRED

These excerpts from the Stalinists' *Daily Worker* show that the CP followed where East London workers and the ILP led. The overprinted CP leaflet (top left) shows it too. (The image on the leaflet is of Spanish anti-fascists making their heroic stand against Franco.)

ernment, the Establishment had found the effective bourgeois solution to Britain's political crisis, one year before the BUF was founded. In the General Election of the autumn of 1931, the Labour Party was reduced to under 50 seats, fewer than in 1918. For things to have developed along radically different lines, vast social unrest, or an immense economic catastrophe, or both, would have been needed to destabilise Britain politically. Nothing like that happened. After the crisis of 1931/2 objective conditions slowly turned unfavourable to fascism. The ruling class did not feel threatened; the British Establishment simply didn't need the fascists.

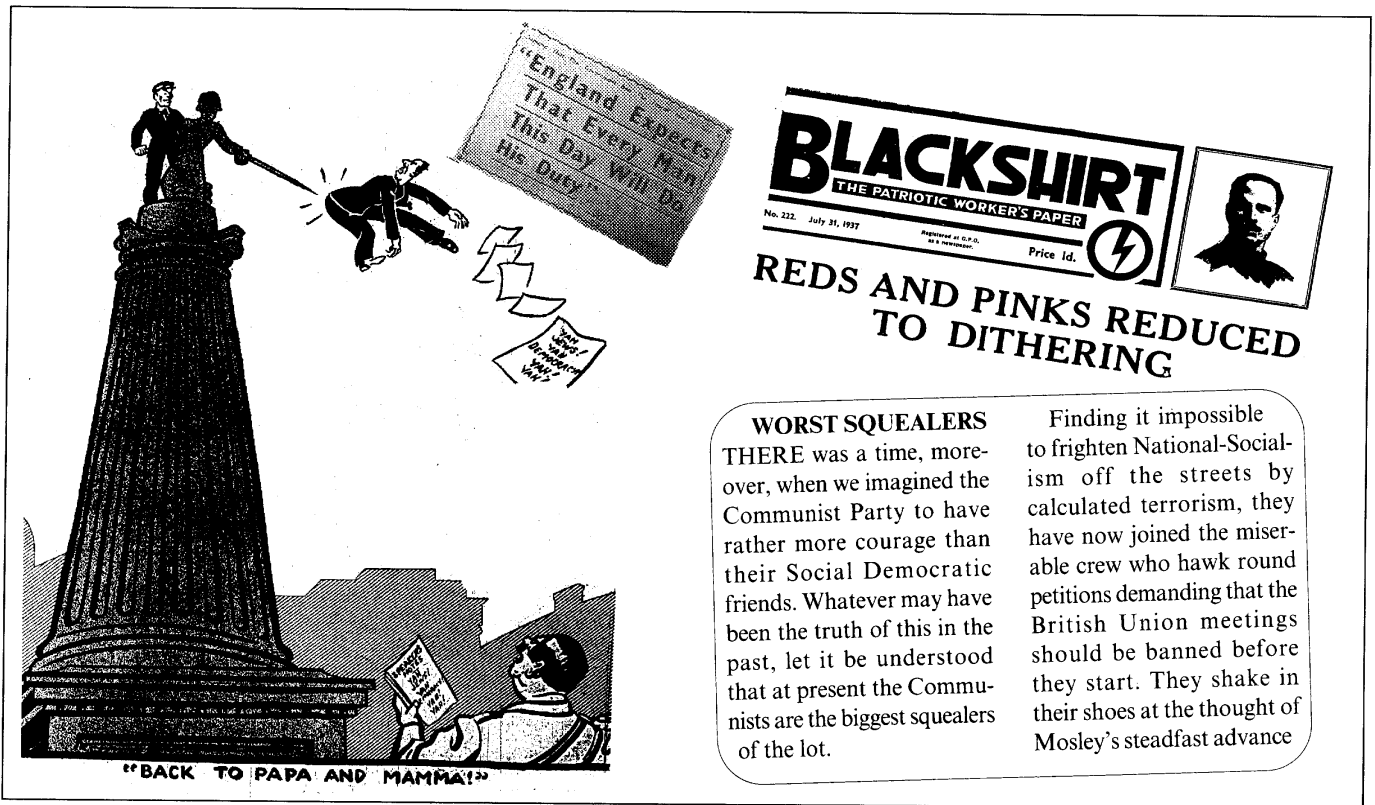
The fundamental determining factors in the BUF's political impotence were that economic conditions and the political relations built on them did not favour a radical bourgeois revolution in Britain: nevertheless, the action of fascism's opponents helped lessen the damage it did to the labour movement and to the Jewish communities.

Yet it was not "objective conditions" that stopped the police forcing a way for the British Hitlerites into Jewish East London: it was a quarter of a million workers massing on the streets to tell them that they would not pass, and making good the pledge by

erecting barricades and fighting the BUF-shepherding police. A year after Cable Street, it was the working class and the socialist movement which again put up barricades in Bermondsey to stop the fascists marching.

Despite the official opposition of the Labour Parties and trade unions to a "United Front" against Fascism, and their denunciation of anti-fascist direct action, members of the Labour Party and trade unions often, as we have seen, acted locally in unison with CP and Jewish militant anti-fascists, enlarging the physical opposition. As well as that, the denial of halls (private and public) for meetings, and the prohibition of loudspeakers in parks enforced by many Labour councils, did great damage to the fascists, who by 1939-40 were reduced to appealing in their press for rooms. The BUF's relative success in the East End only highlights their manifest failure to create a mass movement anywhere else.

In the 1930s East End their "message" had tapped into exceptionally favourable conditions. Essentially similar conditions allowed fascism to be a force in the East End in the '70s, '80s and now, with the revival of (predominantly anti-Asian) political and street racism organised by the National Front in the 1970s and more recently by



When the BUF marched to Trafalgar Square, the Stalinists left it to the Labour Party to oppose them, and appealed to British nationalism against them. Trafalgar Square? Nelson! The cartoon and quotation from Nelson appeared in the *Daily Worker* and in a pamphlet for mass distribution. Having abandoned class politics, the Stalinists thus reached inspired heights of idiocy, competing with the fascists on British nationalist ground. In both cases, it was pseudo nationalism: if the CP was a conduit for Russian propaganda, by the late '30s the BUF had a similar relationship to Germany. *Blackshirt*, the BUF paper directed at working-class people, sneered at the Stalinists: "There was a time... when we imagined the Communist Party to have rather more courage than their Social-Democratic friends..." A K Chesterton, the writer of this article, was a hard core anti-semite who lived to help found the National Front in the 1960s.

the British National Party. These fascists thrive in the same social conditions which provided the BUF with their unique mass base in the East End: that of chronic poverty, an influx of distinctive and equally poverty-stricken immigrants, and an underlying racist culture.

The great lesson for today is that the determination of the labour movement and Jewish community limited the effects of BUF terror and opened the prospects of defeating the BUF, irrespective of what the Establishment did, including the labour movement Establishment.

Fascism's opponents — ILP, Communist Party, and Labour Party — took note of recent European history and learned the

lessons from the defeats by fascism of foreign labour movements. Their attitude to fascism was "catch it young and kill it quick". That was vitally important then. It is no less important now.

The Second World War really finished off the BUF. 800 fascists were interned. Now fascism abroad was the foreign enemy, and the BUF was increasingly viewed publicly as merely a satellite of the Nazis. They were now incontrovertibly "un-British", an accusation which killed them. Mosley was

seen — if Britain should fall — as an aspirant English stooge of Hitler. The would-be British Nationalist hero had turned into a Quisling in waiting. Hell roast him!

"It was not 'objective conditions' that stopped the police forcing a way for the British Hitlerites into Jewish East London: it was a quarter of a million workers."

Footnotes

- 1 Mosley's wife, Lady Cynthia, the daughter of Lord Curzon, visited Trotsky at Prinkipo in 1931 and provoked Trotsky's reflection in his 1935 diary that it was typical and indicative that Labour Prime Minister MacDonald had put Mosley, the "aristocratic coxcomb", who as a fascist was trying to turn sane old Britain into one more ward in the European lunatic asylum, in the 1929 Labour government.
- 2 In France, the CP leader, Maurice Thorez, advocated a CP alliance with "patriotic", "anti-Nazi" — that is, anti-German — French *fascists*!
- 3 Its founder Keir Hardie, who died in 1915, was ridiculously claimed in *The Blackshirt* to have been "the first British National Socialist"!
- 4 Colin Cross, author of what is still the best narrative about Mosleyism, claims that the ILP as pacifists played a secondary role in physical oppo-

- sition, confining their role at the Battle of Cable Street to filling roads with passively resisting people. I think he is mistaken. The people who answered the ILP call to block the streets in October 1936 did not expect to succeed in stopping the fascists with their hands in their pockets!
- 5 The Blackshirts' political uniforms were not unique: the Young Communist League wore khaki shirts, the ILP Guild of Youth wore red shirts and red blouses, and there were also greenshirts, supporters of the Social Credit party.
- 6 The pro-Berlin and pro-Moscow Peace Parties, the BUF and the CPGB, finally converged after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939 and the joint German-USSR invasion and partition of Poland, when the CP, for a while, made propaganda for German foreign policy.

