

**A Political Biography of  
Alexander Raven Thomson**

By

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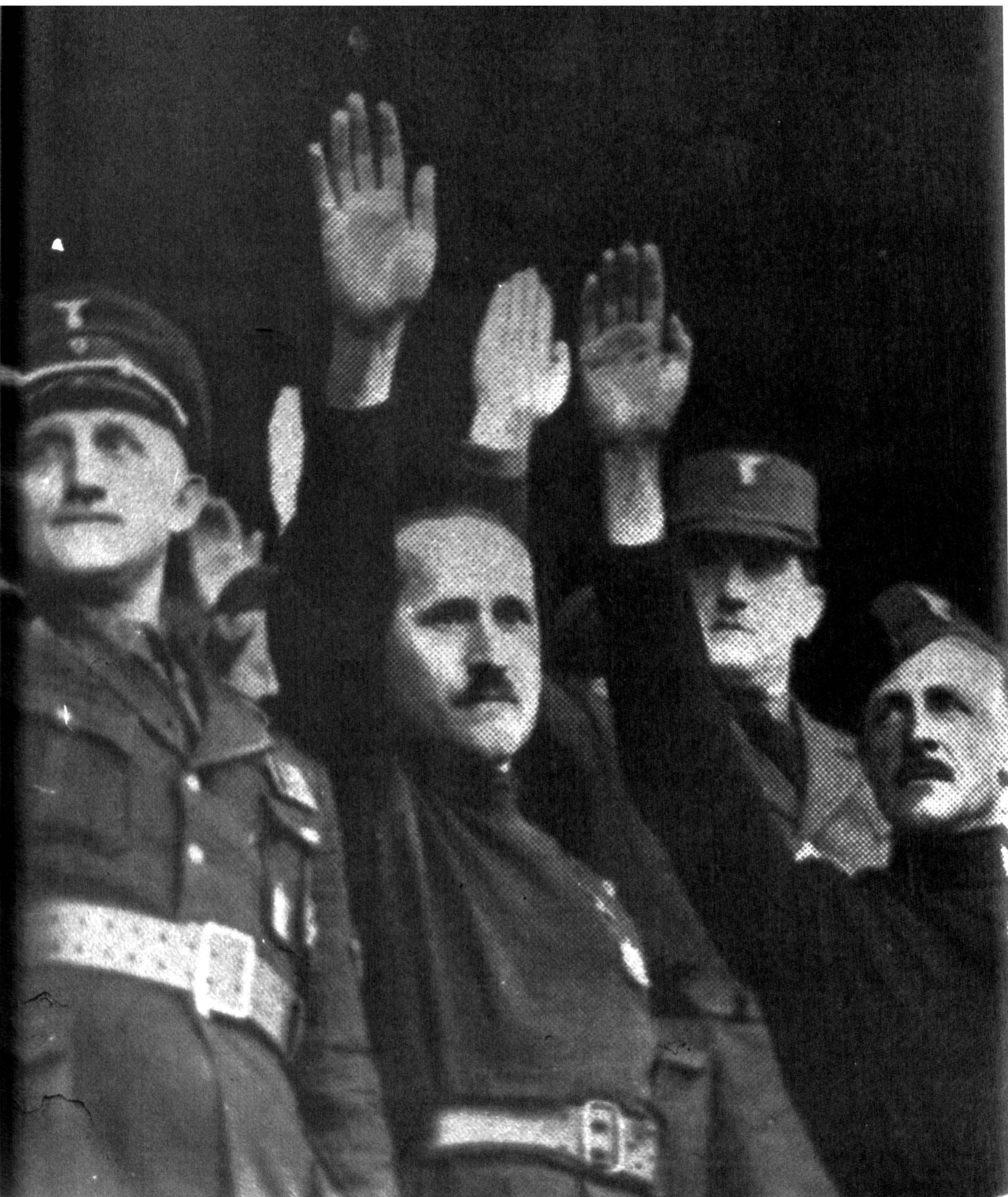
## **Summary**

This thesis has been an attempt to isolate the contribution that was made to the fascist movements of Sir Oswald Mosley by Alexander Raven Thomson. Despite featuring in most studies of Mosley's fascist enterprises, until this study little was known of his life and thus the proper context for his work had been lost. In this attempt to analyse Raven Thomson a chronological structure has been adopted. Special attention has, however, been placed on his developing thought in response to Oswald Spengler's prognosis for the future of Europe, before and after his acceptance of fascism in both its inter-war and post-war incarnations. This has enabled new insights into his Corporate State ideas within fascism and the anti-Semitic campaign within which he was an active participant, both of which had been the source of previous academic interest. Unlike other studies in this field which present the reader with either an examination of Mosley fascism to 1940 or British fascists after the war, this study bridges this artificial gap and thus seeks to illustrate the continuity of fascism in Britain. This longer period of study allows for wartime internment and Raven Thomson's part in the revival of fascism to be fully discussed. The result is a biography that attempts to place the subject within its proper context.

Suddenly another voice spoke, low and melodious, its very sound an enchantment. Those who listened unwarily to that voice could seldom report the words they heard; and if they did, they wondered, for little power remained in them. Mostly they remembered only that it was a delight to hear the voice speaking, all it said seemed wise and reasonable, and desire awoke in them by swift agreement to seem wise themselves. When others spoke they seemed harsh and uncouth by contrast; and if they gainsaid the voice, anger was kindled in the hearts of those under the spell. For some the spell lasted only while the voice spoke to them, and when it spoke to another they smiled, as men do who see through a juggler's trick while other's gape at it. For many the sound of the voice alone was enough to hold them enthralled; but for those who it conquered the spell endured when they were far away, and ever they heard that soft voice whispering and urging them.

J.R.R. Tolkein, *The Lord of the Rings*,  
Guild Publishing edition, London, 1984, 601.







# A Political Biography of Alexander Raven Thomson

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Front page shows Alexander Raven Thomson (bare-headed) at the  
1933 Nazi Party 'Victory of Faith' Rally in Nuremberg.



## Acknowledgements

At the culmination of such a long and involving project the hardest task is to single out those whose contribution to the thesis or its author's welfare have marked them above the countless others without whom this study could not have been completed. Before singling out some of these it should be noted that the writing of this thesis was eased by the kindness of many people, too numerous to name, who I met fleetingly over the last five years.

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## Introduction

Alexander Raven Thomson has been accorded the title of British Fascism's 'warrior poet.'<sup>1</sup> Throughout his long affiliation with the domestic fascist movements of Sir Oswald Mosley, he was continually developing his understanding of the phenomenon and putting the conclusions into practice.<sup>2</sup> This duality is best illustrated by his status as a leading fascist thinker, principally as Director of Policy for Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) and his stature as one of that movement's most successful campaigners.<sup>3</sup> Such was his significance that he was used by the movement as an example of the fascist mentality; 'Raven Thomson is an interesting example of the way in which fascism transforms thoughtful types of men into men of action.'<sup>4</sup> This mixture of the 'thought-deed' man, as Mosley saw him, presents the historian with an individual, whose belief in the force of history and the imminence of European decline, propelled him into fascism.<sup>5</sup> Within the BUF he developed ideas to counter this impending collapse through the creation of a state structure to promote a rejuvenated national community. Yet this same man spent lengthy parts of the 1930s shouting vitriol from fascist podiums about the menace of the Jews and was imprisoned in 1940 as a potential traitor. Despite lengthy incarceration, his commitment to the fascist cause and its leader was so strong that he remained an activist; the only senior BUF lieutenant to weather wartime internment and subsequent public hostility upon release. After the War he played a key part in the revival of Mosley fascism, first as a go-between for the scattered Mosleyite groups that had emerged, then as Secretary for the reunified Mosley led 'Union Movement.' The philosophising and activism for the fascist cause only ceased at his death in 1955. Raven Thomson demonstrates the

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<sup>1</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, Brockingday, London, 1990, 67; 'Raven Thomson exemplified the scholar soldier. He fulfilled in his life in the movement, the vision of Nietzsche, a warrior for truth.' Sheffield University Archive (SUA): *Comrade* (Newsletter of the Friends of Oswald Mosley), October/November 1987, 3.

<sup>2</sup> '[Among Mosley's lieutenants] only Raven Thomson had any claim to recognised intellectual status.' D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, 77.

<sup>3</sup> '[Raven Thomson] was that rare combination of theorist and philosopher and fine open-air speaker, fearless in the face of violent opposition,' E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, Howard Baker, London, 1983, 143. In 1937 Raven Thomson participated in the London County Council elections and secured over 3,000 votes (23%) in the ward where he stood. See R.Thurlow & K.Lunn, 'Introduction,' in *ibid* (eds.), *British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1980, 11.

<sup>4</sup> A.K.Chesterton, *Portrait of a Leader*, Action Press Ltd, London, 1937, 119.



fascinating resolution to an apparent dichotomy: a man whose grand vision was realised in fanciful designs and gutter politics. That these two elements could find cohesion was thanks to the nature of Mosley fascism.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to this biography, Raven Thomson has held a minor place within secondary literature on Mosley fascism, regularly receiving a short examination, usually centring on his work in the BUF and its theory of the state.<sup>7</sup> These studies have followed Mosley's own interpretation of his former comrade, a view encapsulated in the opinion, expressed in 1940 that, 'I should be very surprised if he had any views except those I have expressed.'<sup>8</sup> This thesis is in part an examination of how accurate an assessment that is. It has its origins in a belief that, given his prominence in both pre and post-war Mosley fascism, as the only senior figure apart from the leader to feature in both, the amount of work on his life and thought has been disproportionately small.<sup>9</sup> So little has previously been written on Raven Thomson that there is no historical stance to endorse or disprove. Raven Thomson left no such record of his time within fascism, principally because for 22 years he was at the centre of Mosley fascism, without the time to spend on recollection. A recent study by Thomas Linehan that used Raven Thomson's writings as an example of his argument about the BUF and culture, failed to develop an understanding of the motivations behind the fascist's statements.<sup>10</sup> Yet if we are to believe, as one recent scholar, that 'the men at the forefront of British fascism are vitally important in our use of the term,' then this study of Raven Thomson is long overdue.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 331. See also R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, Macmillan, London, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted before proceeding that British fascism was more than the movements of Oswald Mosley. Domestic fascism existed before Mosley turned to the creed and it has persisted into the present, with racial tensions always heralding a re-appearance of such groups as they attempt to capitalise on the issue of extremist nationalism. As such the use of British fascism to denote specifically Mosley led movements has been avoided.

<sup>7</sup> See R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, Allen Lane, London, 1972, 117; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society, 1931-81*, op. cit., 34; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 346.

<sup>8</sup> Public Record Office (PRO) HO283/11/65: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley's hearing, 1940.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this thesis 'fascist' has been used to denote those committed to its ideological programme, whilst 'Fascist' or 'Fascism' relates to the Italian regime of Benito Mussolini.

<sup>10</sup> See T.Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> 'Introduction,' in M.Cronin (ed.) *The Failure of British Fascism*, Macmillan, London, 1996, 7. See D.Baker 'The Appeal of Fascism: Pathological Fantasy or Ideological Coherence,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol.20 No.3, 1986, 3-12. As Jeffrey Hamm, a leading post war Mosleyite, noted in his autobiography, '[b]ecause the greater part of my life has been spent in the service of political



Before commencing it should be noted that this thesis is a resubmission of one sent to the examiners in the winter of 2000 that failed to fulfil all the criteria for the award of PhD. Both examiners were candid in their criticisms at that time and this new thesis owes much to our discussion at the viva and their subsequent report. It is hoped what follows remedies their concerns, particularly the criticism that I had, in concentrating too closely on Raven Thomson, failed to recognise the milieu of which he was a product. It is also hoped that the result will demark more clearly the key themes that Raven Thomson's life and work illuminates about fascism, both domestically and as a generic phenomenon.

No biography of a fascist activist can be properly understood in a historical vacuum. This thesis has grown within the larger historiography of Mosley fascism and its proper context and significance is within this greater understanding. The conventions within the subject thus provide the background to this presentation of a realistic portrait. One of the chief characteristics of fascism is its concentration of power into one man of destiny, the leader. This has led to a convention within fascist studies to focus most keenly on those few men, to better understand the movements or regimes they led. The history of British fascism is no different. Mosley, the 'Black Knight' of British politics, as founder, chief ideologue and figurehead, has made the most tangible contribution to his movements.<sup>12</sup> Robert Skidelsky's contribution to a collected volume on European fascism, whilst entitled 'Great Britain,' was little more than a Mosley biography, without much reference to the thousands that did much of the fighting and writing in the BUF.<sup>13</sup> Those closest to the 'Blackshirt' leader have largely been dismissed as inconsequential to the experience of domestic fascism; 'Mosley's long-standing lieutenants were in the main persons of little distinction,

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movements founded and led by Sir Oswald Mosley... and because for several years I was closely associated with Sir Oswald,... I believe that my life has a wider interest.' E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, op. cit., 13.

<sup>12</sup> P.Hayes, *Fascism*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1973, 73.

<sup>13</sup> '[BUF] importance was almost entirely due to the outstanding qualities of its leader and founder, Sir Oswald Mosley.' R.Skidelsky, 'Great Britain,' in S.Woolf (ed.) *European Fascism*, Wiedenfield & Nicolson, London, 1968, 257-8. Reprinted in idem., *Interests and Obsessions*, Macmillan, London, 1993, 188-210.



and it seems to have suited his vanity to be surrounded by such persons.'<sup>14</sup> This thesis, by virtue of its topic, must have an uneasy relationship with the traditional 'Mosley-centrism' of the historiography in this area.

In concentrating on Raven Thomson it is difficult to avoid replacing Mosley-centrism with another similar bias. Such distortions are unavoidable when focusing on one individual, with the result that this thesis cannot be read as a general history of Mosley fascism. Here facets of the fascist experience that have been thoroughly analysed in more general studies, receive only a passing mention. Conversely, key elements in Raven Thomson's life and thought that are but minutiae in the study of British fascism are dwelt upon at length.

This biography also has to contend with recent trends within the examination of British fascism.<sup>15</sup> Recent studies of Mosley fascism have concentrated on low-level fascist support, often within a certain geographical area, the role of women in Mosley fascism and the influence of other smaller fascist groups on the history of British fascism.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, this study represents a biographical attempt to understand the life and work of a fascist man, who consistently occupied high positions, exclusively in Mosley's political movements. At a time when academics are calling for even greater variety in studies of British fascism, this study is therefore somewhat of a traditional treatment.<sup>17</sup>

In its defence, whilst women played a key role in the movement, none of them, save perhaps Mosley's wife Diana, had any impact on the type of fascism that emerged. This is also true of the rank-and-file support, with individuals playing a key role locally but making little impact nationally, outside the East

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<sup>14</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1994, 122. Until 1937 the BUF were distinguished by their Blackshirts. Initially a fencing tunic, later a more militaristic style of jacket was adopted. See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Frank Cass, London, 1996, 289-90.

<sup>15</sup> K.Lunn, 'British fascism revisited' in M.Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism*, op. cit., 197; See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit.; S.M.Cullen, 'Another Nationalism: The British Union of Fascists in Glamorgan 1932-40,' *Welsh History Review*, Vol.17, 1994/5, 101-14; D.Turner, *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in the Medway Towns, 1927-1940*, Kent Anti-Fascist Action Committee, Kent, 1993; C.F.J.Morley, 'Fascist Promise, and the Capitalist Alternative: an Analysis of Sussex Coast Fascism Between the Wars,' MA, University of Sussex, 1983; S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s: a case study of Fascism in the North of England in a period of economic and political change,' PhD Thesis, University of Bradford, 1983; M.Durham, 'Gender and the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.27 No.3, 1992, 513-29.

<sup>16</sup> K.Lunn, 'British fascism revisited' op. cit., 192, 195.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-89.



London stronghold of the movement. Despite the arguments of some scholars that, 'the volume of literature on the BUF is inversely proportionate to the group's significance,' the movement is still the single most important domestic fascist movement in terms of both popular appeal and depth of ideology.<sup>18</sup> It is also the one domestic fascist group that has entered public consciousness,

Whenever anyone, looking back over this distance of 50 years, mentions fascism in Britain, the almost universal reaction is: Mosley and his Blackshirts. That's because the razzmatazz of Mosleyism sticks in the memory; his charisma, his rabble-rousing oratory, the uniform and the emblems and the banners, the marches and demonstrations and rallies, above all the violence.<sup>19</sup>

This perception of Mosley fascism's character has also caused the study of Raven Thomson's contribution to fascism in Britain to be neglected. The history of the BUF is captured in the violence witnessed at the movement's May 1934 rally at Olympia, the terrorisation of the East London Jews and internment as possible traitors.<sup>20</sup> As such the importance of the beliefs and thinkers that prompted such action has been minimised.

A further difficulty when producing a biography for such a figure is the emotive nature of the material, with the attendant difficulties arising from a subject that regularly receives 'partisan treatment.'<sup>21</sup> It is all too easy to lapse into either a sustained assault on a fascist's character or to remove their activities so far from the context as to provide an inadvertent hagiography. Mosley's own biographer, Robert Skidelsky, believed that 'a sympathetic stance is more or less inherent in the biographer's special effort to understand and explain the motives and situation of his subject.'<sup>22</sup> As a result he argued against a judgemental stance, believing that 'the role of a biographer, as I conceive it, is not that of prosecutor; it comes some way between counsel for the defence and judge.'<sup>23</sup> This stance

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<sup>18</sup> S.Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, UCL, London, 1995, 305n. See also P.Rees, 'Changing interpretations of British Fascism: A Bibliographical survey,' in R.Thurlow & K.Lunn, (eds.) *British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1980, 187. 'Although almost uniformly unsuccessful in electoral terms, the existence of such an active fascist movement in the industrial world's most stable liberal democracy gave the BUF an importance out of proportion with its size and prospects.' S.M.Cullen, 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.28 No.2, 1993, 245.

<sup>19</sup> *The Guardian*, 11th February 1989.

<sup>20</sup> O.Mosley, *The Greater Britain* 2nd ed., BUF Publications, London, 1934, 11-33.

<sup>21</sup> See P.Rees, 'Changing interpretations of British Fascism: a Bibliographical survey,' op. cit., 196; P.Preston, 'Reading History: Fascism,' *History Today*, Vol.35 No.9, 1985, 46; 'Introduction,' in K.Lunn & R.Thurlow, (eds.) *British Fascism*, op. cit., 9, 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem.*, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 11.



has not been without its detractors.<sup>24</sup> Here, the attempt has been made to present Raven Thomson's life and work critically, but without the dismissive tone used by some in the field. As such, if this thesis had to sit in Skidelsky's courtroom it would function as a court reporter, probably for a liberal newspaper.

The study of Raven Thomson's work has been predominantly achieved through his published output, the vast majority of which is his propaganda work for Mosley fascism, both in newspaper articles or pamphlets. Caution has always been used in the inclusion of this material; as a movement attempting to encourage conversion to fascism, the material is clearly biased. The fascist press, whilst very effective in conveying the policy of the movement, was continually attempting to gain a political advantage from the reporting of domestic and international events. It is also a singularly unhelpful medium when attempting to examine the fortunes of Mosley fascism. Triumphalist even when the movement was suffering setbacks.

This thesis has also taken advantage of the material from the reports of the Police and Home Office held at the Public Records Office. It was particularly helped by the release during the research of two Home Office files relating specifically to Raven Thomson.<sup>25</sup> The first detailed his cross-examination by the authorities in 1940, whilst the other was a report of his subsequent experience of war-time detention. Whilst the material from these records has been invaluable in attempting to assess Raven Thomson in the context of the BUF, his life has not been used as a case study in using intelligence documents as Richard Thurlow envisioned for his history of British fascism.<sup>26</sup> Here such documents have been used in concert with other materials, though the new insights afforded by the files regarding internment have resulted in a reliance on them in that chapter. What information lies in files yet to be released may further revise the conclusions of British fascism and Raven Thomson's contribution, but this thesis represents an understanding based on the most recent evidence. Extensive penetration by the Secret Service has, on the basis of the released information, yielded one operating conclusion about the BUF, namely that its esoteric (internal) and

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<sup>24</sup> See G.Peele, 'Were only the Means bad?' *Government and Opposition*, Vol.11 No.1, 1976, 120-9.

<sup>25</sup> PRO HO283/70: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing and letters written during detention to Home Office; HO45/25701: Raven Thomson's internment record.

<sup>26</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., xi.



exoteric (public) ideology where largely the same.<sup>27</sup> Thus Raven Thomson's writings and speeches can be judged as his genuine beliefs. Such intelligence material is not without its difficulties, with the files representing the concerns of the contemporary authorities to the fascist threat. If we subscribe, as in the work of Thurlow, that the state took an active role in managing fascism to ensure its failure, then such material will have a particular emphasis that proves problematic when writing a cogent biography of a fascist activist.<sup>28</sup> That all the files relating to the period are not in the public domain, also prompts questions as to the integrity of current understanding.<sup>29</sup> There is every possibility that the most sensitive and therefore most important files have been destroyed or will remain withheld.

The aid rendered to this researcher by the Friends of Oswald Mosley has also been a great help in the construction of a convincing biography for a former comrade. Much of the material regarding Raven Thomson's early life originated in the recollections of these Mosley men. The disclosure of a series of manuscripts from 1955, archived by the group, allowed for an examination of Raven Thomson's thought after 22 years in Mosley fascism. An attempt was also made to canvass these former fascists for their views of Mosley fascism, in order to help place Raven Thomson within the reality of those movements. Questionnaires were often used due to the reticence octogenarian Mosley men had of face-to-face interviewing. Yet the disclosure of recollections in such circumstances is a political act, for as Linehan shrewdly noted 'memory can work actively to erase as well as recall.'<sup>30</sup> Whilst interviews and questionnaires were conducted, it became clear that the distortions of 60 years had taken hold. They pointed to new avenues in the study, but in pursuing them, the contemporary written material yielded more valuable insights. Having completed the work, one of the weaknesses within this thesis is the lack of oral history used. This does not detract from the clear need for an oral history project on the remaining Mosley men. This researcher's primary concern was, however,

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<sup>27</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol.4 No.2, 1992, 174.

<sup>28</sup> See R.C.Thurlow, 'The State Management of the British Union of Fascists,' in M.Cronin (ed.) *The Failure of British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1996, 29-52.

<sup>29</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *The Secret State*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, 174.

<sup>30</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 274; See B.Harrison, 'Oral History and Recent Political History,' *Oral History*, Vol.1 No.3, 1973, 30-48.



to obtain information and comment about Raven Thomson and the movements in which he was active. Little was known, or disclosed, about the upper echelons of the BUF and Union Movement where Raven Thomson operated. Without undermining the valuable historical endeavour of canvassing the dwindling numbers of Mosley men, oral history became a subsidiary element of the research.

To balance the material coming from fascist sources, an effort has been made to employ the available material from their contemporary opposition. This has been particularly useful in those chapters not concentrating on ideology but on the experience of fascism. The history of Mosley fascism after the War in particular, relies heavily on the vigilance of the Jewish anti-fascist movements, both the official response of Britain's Jewish population through the Board of Deputies and the more militant 43 Group. Anti-fascist records must be treated with caution however; the material represents those facets of fascism that were judged a threat, with the result that certain areas of the fascist experience were overlooked. Anti-fascists did not want to know what it was like to be a fascist; they wanted the movement stopped.

The result of this attempt to isolate an individual's contribution to Mosley fascism within a biographical format has led to a linear structure within the thesis. Where pertinent, the dominating themes of a particular period have been examined in greater depth. The result will be a comprehensive examination of a key participant in Mosley's fascist experiment. It will illustrate that Raven Thomson's life and thought have a considerable contribution to our understanding of the fascist movements of Sir Oswald Mosley.

The first chapter deals with the period up to Raven Thomson's acceptance of fascism, principally through his evolving understanding of the work of German historian Oswald Spengler. Spengler believed global history was based in the morphology of a few world cultures, all of which underwent a seasonal life cycle, before decaying after a prescribed period. This thesis will particularly concentrate on the development of Raven Thomson's ideas from his 1931 book, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, to those expressed in the BUF. The importance of fascism for him as a historical force will be highlighted, together with an examination of how this understanding could locate itself within Mosley fascism. Finally the contrasting character of this fascism will be compared to



other fascists in the BUF influenced by Spengler, including Mosley. The Blackshirt leader's technocratic antidote to Spengler's prophecy of doom will be contrasted with Raven Thomson's ideas on culture resurgence. This contradicts the conventional view, encapsulated in the view of Lady Mosley; 'I think they [Mosley and Raven Thomson] agreed about Spengler's [*The*] *Decline of the West*, in thinking Spengler was not sufficiently aware of the influence of science and invention in the modern world.'<sup>31</sup>

With the importance of German thought, through Spengler, in Raven Thomson's fascism, arguments about the BUF's isolated status within the continental phenomenon are substantially weakened. The intricacy of the philosophy behind the BUF, as created by its major thinkers, also discredits those who argue that the movement was little more than a stooge for Hitler and Mussolini. As a contribution to the study of generic fascism, Raven Thomson's acceptance of fascism further emphasises the role of crisis across 1930s Europe in generating support for the creed, the importance of a critique that argued an escape from the prevailing climate of decadence. It also highlights the genuine idealism that accompanied the journey of individuals into fascism.<sup>32</sup> Many did believe, as one comrade, that the movement sought to 'create the highest civilisation that man has ever known.'<sup>33</sup>

In the following chapter this meta-historical perception, visible in Raven Thomson's philosophy, is further explored within the context of his ideas on the structure of the fascist state. In conventional historiography this complex state structure has been used to confirm the BUF's place at the rational end of the fascism spectrum, in comparison to the emotive movements found elsewhere across the continent.<sup>34</sup> Raven Thomson has been seen as this state's chief architect, even by Mosley. His work on the development of a detailed state structure has been used in histories of the movement to compliment Mosley's technocratic propaganda output throughout the 1930s.

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<sup>31</sup> Diana Mosley Questionnaire, September 1996. Diana Guinness (née Mitford) married Mosley in 1936 and was widowed in 1980. Her precise role and impact on Mosley fascism throughout its history has yet to be quantified. See D. Mosley, *A Life of Contrasts*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1982.

<sup>32</sup> R. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., xv.

<sup>33</sup> Sheffield University Archive (SUA): R. Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, unpublished manuscript, 718.

<sup>34</sup> S. M. Cullen, 'Leaders and Martyrs: Codreanu, Mosley and Jose Antonio,' *History*, Vol. 71, 1986, 409.



This study into Raven Thomson's corporatist thought reveals the very personal philosophy that underpinned his work. The influence of Spengler's concentration on culture is examined and its implications for Raven Thomson's corporatism are isolated. The cultural dimension to the BUF's programme has been noted before, but it has not been treated as central to the character of Mosley fascism.<sup>35</sup> The result of chapter two will be an understanding of Raven Thomson as a cultural corporatist, committed to the establishment of a state to facilitate a revitalised and unified culture. It will show that his ideas on corporatist planning were fuelled by a cultural imperative to provide the nation's individuals with a revolution in leisure, thereby fostering rebirth through sport, art and crafts. The pinnacle of this regeneration and therefore the ultimate goal of the corporate state was, for Raven Thomson, the creation of individuals to live in this new society. Taken together, the first two chapters dispel the arguments of some historians of British fascism who see the only discernable policies as violence or anti-Semitism.<sup>36</sup> It also argues that with the chief exponent of scientific fascism committed to the esoteric beliefs of Spengler, the conclusion that Mosley fascism lies at the rational end of the fascist spectrum is flawed.<sup>37</sup>

Turning from his contribution to the thought of the BUF, chapter three attempts to understand Raven Thomson within a movement that was, throughout the period, striving for political or paramilitary success.<sup>38</sup> Whilst a comprehensive social history of the BUF is still to be written, the chapter illustrates the nature of the fascist enterprise and the activities of senior members during the period. Raven Thomson's role in attempting to build and train this revolutionary cadre is explored.

The main reason for scholarly interest in inter-War British fascism was its failure. In an environment that saw strong movements and regimes emerge across Europe, Britain acts as a control group, enabling historians to isolate what

<sup>35</sup> 'Mosley's fascist enterprise was a unique political and cultural experience invested with an imagined heroic, spiritual and millenarian dimension.' T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 298; '[T]he BUF sought the radical restructuring of the entire system, embracing a political, social and cultural revolution.' R.Benewick, 'The Threshold of Violence' in R.Benewick & T.Smith, (eds.) *Direct Action and Democratic Politics*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1972, 52.

<sup>36</sup> See H.R.Kedward, *Fascism in Western Europe 1900-1945*, Blackie, Glasgow, 1969, 94. R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 108.

<sup>37</sup> R.Eatwell, *Fascism - A History*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1995, 182.

<sup>38</sup> C.Cook & J.Stevenson, *The Slump*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1977, 215; '[T]o write the history of British fascism from the perspective of its ideology was in some ways misleading and false.' R.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., X.



particular elements were lacking, or present, to prevent the success of a native movement.<sup>39</sup> As one scholar in fascist studies commented, 'Britain provides a case study of fascism in its normal - highly marginalized - state.'<sup>40</sup> The opportunity of examining the experience of fascism, for the fascists, allows for a little studied facet of Mosley fascism to be illuminated: the factions and divisions that detracted from any semblance of internal unity. Whilst it is not maintained that this was a major structural reason for the failure of Mosley fascism, it illustrates that even if the economic and political situations had been conducive, the BUF could not have formed a coherent government.

Whilst the BUF attempted to present itself as a 'grand adventure to a new grandeur of spirit and nationhood,' informed by Christian ethics and a rejection of surrender, it was also the movement that attempted to use anti-Semitism as a political tool.<sup>41</sup> In the historiography of the BUF, this feature of the movement's history has been the most contested. Fascists and some scholars have argued it was not a significant element of the BUF's struggle, others that the movement cannot be understood without it. Amongst those who argue for the importance of anti-Semitism in Mosley fascism, there is disagreement over whether it was an opportunist political stance or a genuine belief, and if the later, where such ideas originated.

In the fourth chapter of this thesis the nature of Raven Thomson's contribution to the BUF's use of anti-Semitism is examined. It indicates how a man, with no discernable animosity towards the Jewish population of Britain upon joining the movement, became a virulent Jew-baiter and active anti-Semitic campaigner in the second half of the 1930s. His acceptance of anti-Semitism indicates several features about Raven Thomson's participation in fascism. The personal loyalty he felt towards Mosley ensured that when the Blackshirt leader opted for explicit racism, his lieutenant followed him. The use of common themes in the discourse over the 'Jewish problem' also indicates that senior fascists were intellectually feeding off each other in the period.<sup>42</sup> Raven

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<sup>39</sup> S.Payne, 'Fascism in Western Europe,' in W.Laquerer, *Fascism a Readers Guide*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979, 309. A.Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism*, Blond, London, 1971, 259; S.M.Cullen, 'Political Violence: The case for the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 245.

<sup>40</sup> R.Griffin, 'The Ugly Duckling,' in M.Cronin, (ed.) *The Failure of British Fascism*, op. cit., 161.

<sup>41</sup> SUA R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, op. cit., 309.

<sup>42</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 277-9.



Thomson, now completely immersed in the BUF struggle, was influenced by the intellectual climate at the top of the movement and, through a slight reinterpretation of his super-organic philosophy, could accommodate race hatred. The conclusion must be that Raven Thomson's anti-Semitism was genuine.

The study of Raven Thomson's anti-Semitism would be incomplete without an examination of its application, chiefly in and around the area where they had most impact, East London. In particular his propaganda output during the BUF's attempt to return candidates in the 1937 London County Council elections is explored. It will indicate a shrewd political movement carefully attempting to be the beneficiary of incitement or public sympathy if challenged. Thus the biography of Raven Thomson illustrates that anti-Semitism was a genuine ideological stance, pragmatically implemented.

Raven Thomson's activism was halted in May 1940 with his imprisonment. After the authorities saw the aid given to the advancing German armies by fascist groups in North West Europe, the BUF was deemed to pose a security risk and a large proportion of the active membership was interned. In many histories of British fascism this marks the end of the study. David Baker's insightful biography of A.K.Chesterton, a contemporary of Raven Thomson in the BUF, by finishing in 1940, avoided discussing his subject's significant contribution to post-war fascism as first chairman of the National Front.<sup>43</sup> This error has been amended in this thesis by the inclusion of three chapters dealing with the period following this arbitrary termination point in the historiography.<sup>44</sup>

Chapter five initially concentrates on the circumstances surrounding Raven Thomson's internment. It corroborates the belief within the secondary literature that it was prompted by a series of ominous meetings amongst the fascist fringe, following the outbreak of war. The particular reasons for incarcerating Raven Thomson, highlighted by the research, indicate that he did indeed pose a threat in 1940, but not to British sovereignty. Rather, a wartime crisis was predicted, that would enable the movement to travel from the political periphery to the centre of government, as a peace party. The remainder of that

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<sup>43</sup> See D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, Taurus, London, 1995.

<sup>44</sup> This premature end to studies of Mosley fascism is still evident. See T.Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture*, op. cit.



chapter details the nature of internment and illustrates the origins of the shape of post-war Mosleyism in the constraints of imprisonment.

Internment was designed to remove fascism from Britain. In this it failed, though it did drastically shrink the numbers of activists still keen to continue with Mosley after the War. This, coupled with public hostility following the impact of the War, forced a much more covert style of operation to appear within fascist activism. Chapter six concentrates upon the history of Mosley fascism between 1945 and 1948. During this period, Mosleyism was sustained through a seemingly disparate collection of 'book clubs' and street groups. With the fascist leader's high profile rendering him too visible to act as a unifying figure, it was Raven Thomson who travelled the country meeting the Mosley faithful. Raven Thomson also helped establish an effective propaganda machine for Mosleyism, fronting the purchase of a printing firm so that fascist material could be produced, and buying a lorry for use in open-air meetings. Whilst the material available is slight, given the secretive nature of Mosley fascism at the time whilst it was being rebuilt, the conclusion must be that the re-establishment of a single movement in 1948 was largely thanks to the efforts of Raven Thomson.

The final chapter deals with the result of those efforts, the emergence of 'Union Movement,' a Mosley led political entity. At present this is a largely ignored facet of Britain's fascist experience, lying as it does between the end of the BUF and the National Front's emergence in the 1970s. Compared with the volume of literature on the BUF, the material on Union Movement is tiny and so this thesis contributes to the initial understanding of the period, prior to any significant source material releases. This lack of material also results in a wider examination of the movement, given the dearth of material specifically related to Raven Thomson. Based on the available information, this study concentrates on the problems that Union Movement encountered and the lengths to which Raven Thomson, as its secretary, had to go to keep the organisation viable. The chapter also examines a new facet in this young field, the intellectual re-evaluation of 'classical' fascist doctrine in the new circumstances of altered global politics after 1945. In Raven Thomson's case this resulted in a renewed interest in a revision of Spengler, founded in his earlier fascism, but integrating Hellenic philosophy and a strain of American Nazism through Francis Parker Yockey, who was for a short time a Union Movement member. Yockey's impact on



Mosleyism had previously been seen as slight. In the wake of the examination of the Raven Thomson's thought, it appears the American thinker profoundly influenced the Secretary of Union Movement. Raven Thomson's resulting philosophy returned to arguments about the underlying historical forces at work in society, though now Spenglerian morphology was replaced by a concept of cultural pathology in the mind of a terminally ill man. The antidote was a new society populated by *Homo Socialis*, the higher man, dedicated to service. With the return to Spenglerian historicism and the construction of a new mankind to combat decline, Raven Thomson finishes his journey in fascism much as he began.

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Before embarking on the biography of a man who spent 22 years in the fascist movements of Sir Oswald Mosley, the definition of what 'fascism' is to mean in this thesis must be isolated.<sup>45</sup> The main difficulty in attempting to present a cohesive theory of fascism is the failure by fascists, their opponents and scholars to propose a single uniform idea of the phenomenon, with the result that a host of competing definitions confront any student.<sup>46</sup> As one scholar in the field began a recent history, '[a]t the end of the twentieth century fascism remains probably the vaguest of the major political terms.'<sup>47</sup> Leading historians of fascism all write of the need for academic consensus, only to propose their own definition as the one that should be universally accepted.

This inability to develop a unified theory is founded in the complex nature of fascism itself. The fascist genus has few common characteristics, particularly at the level of mainstream political parties or regimes.<sup>48</sup> It is

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<sup>45</sup> The perception of fascism at work is crucial. The standard criticism of Lewis's book on British fascism was its conception of fascism as the politics of the hard centre, a position close enough to Mosley's own that it called into question the validity of his ideas. For the political nature of the debate see S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, UCL, London, 1995, 5.

<sup>46</sup> 'Even among academics, no other 'ism' has produced such conflicting interpretations, ranging from the claim that fascism denoted little more than nihilistic violence, to the remarkable assertion that this is 'The Fascist Century,' R.Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol.4 No.2, 1992, 161.

<sup>47</sup> S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 3. In 1976 the eminent historian of Italian Fascism, Renzo De Felice, wrote that the level of understanding about the phenomenon, over fifty years since the founding of a regime, was 'barely out of the polemical period.' See R.De Felice, *Fascism: An informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice*, Transaction, New Jersey, 1976, 36-7.

<sup>48</sup> See S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 462.



susceptible to wide regional variations, as Juan Linz has shown, with the late arrival of fascism in European national politics confining its development to those areas of ideological space that remained.<sup>49</sup> Thus a sated colonial power like Britain produced domestic fascist ideology committed to defending empire, whilst in Italy, imperial frustrations resulted in an ideology with a far more aggressive expansionist foreign policy; both remained fascistic, however.

Attempts to discover a common core, present within all fascism's variations, is further hampered by the lack of a common intellectual founder, a Marx figure for the creed. This in turn compels historians to cast around in the convoluted intellectual milieu surrounding the turn of the century for fascism's origins.<sup>50</sup>

That it has continued to evolve, shedding its outer garments, particularly after 1945, adds complexity to any attempt to confine and study the phenomenon.<sup>51</sup> A further obstacle is the persistence of fascism in the modern world and the incorporation of the histories of fascism into the contemporary development of the creed. In Italy, Renzo De Felice, a biographer of Mussolini, courted controversy with his belief that Nazism, due to its reactionary nature, did not belong to the same political genus as Fascism.<sup>52</sup> In distancing Fascism from the atrocities of Nazism, he was accused of being an apologist for the Mussolini regime.<sup>53</sup> Israeli scholar Zeev Sternhell has been similarly criticised for dismissing Germany from his analysis of fascism.<sup>54</sup> So conscious was American academic Stanley Payne of the problems, that in his 1980 treatise he stated, 'my endeavour has been to disengage this analysis as much as possible from political emotions and overt moralising.'<sup>55</sup> This emotional content is perhaps the single greatest handicap to objective academic studies. Too often 'fascist' is used as a

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<sup>49</sup> See J.Linz, 'Some Notes Toward a Comparative study of Fascism in Sociological Historical Perspective,' in W.Laquerer (ed.) *Fascism: A Reader's Guide*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979, 13-80.

<sup>50</sup> Z.Sternhell, 'Fascism,' in D.Miller (ed.) *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 148-50, reprinted in R.Griffin, *International Fascism*, 1998, 34. See also R.Eatwell, *Fascism – A History*, op. cit., 3-29.

<sup>51</sup> See M.Cronin 'Introduction,' op. cit., 4.

<sup>52</sup> R.De Felice, *Fascism: An Interview with Michael Ledeen*, op. cit., 15.

<sup>53</sup> See E.Gentile, 'Renzo De Felice: A Tribute,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.32 No.2, 1997, 139-151; M.A. Ledeen, 'Renzo De Felice and the Controversy over Italian Fascism,' in G.Mosse (ed.) *International Fascism: New Thoughts and Approaches*, Sage, London, 1979, 126-139.

<sup>54</sup> Z.Sternhell, 'Fascist Ideology' in W.Laquerer (ed.) *Fascism – A Readers Guide*, op. cit., 328.

<sup>55</sup> S.Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, University of Wisconsin, London, 1980, viii.



pejorative description of any authoritarian figure.<sup>56</sup> Any student of fascism must encounter these difficulties, yet the result is a field of research where study must be exacting and conscious of its contemporary role, both characteristics of good historical work.

Any theory proposed here must conform to an understanding of Raven Thomson, with the result that his biographer has been highly selective from the vast academic output relating to this topic.<sup>57</sup> It must also aid in explaining the origins and development of his fascist beliefs. In Raven Thomson, we are confronted with a fascist thinker, whose journey to fascism was informed by his conception of history, where fascism acted as a redemptive force, challenging the decline in civilisation that he believed underscored contemporary society. As such a conceptual, rather than a theoretical analysis of fascism, is required, one that explains this element of rebirth.<sup>58</sup>

The idea of rebirth is bound up with a cultural critique that appeared in the early Twentieth Century. Contemporary society was judged in some quarters, notably on the political right, to have descended into sterile decadence, and had lost its vigour. Across Europe a distinct group of meta-historians all struggled with ideas of a declining historical cycle and proposed paths towards restitution. This intellectual climate is key to any understanding of Raven Thomson's thought. The period following the Great War was one in which the old social structures were failing. The impression that many thinkers had was of a Europe mired in decadence, fatally compromised and in danger of imminent collapse, as had occurred in 1917 with the Communist Revolution in Russia. Amongst them were a substantial body of thinkers who chose to view the crisis as part of an underlying cyclical historical process, where Europe's difficulties illustrated the culmination of the cycle.

It is important to note that the terms 'cyclical historian' and 'fascist' are not interchangeable, but ideas of rebirth provide a bridge between the two. Whilst Spengler was not proposing fascism in *The Decline of the West*, and later stayed aloof from the actualities of Nazi politics in his native Germany, others

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<sup>56</sup> Idem., 'Historical fascism and the Radical Right,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35 No.1, 2000, 111.

<sup>57</sup> 'Ultimately, any 'ism' is a heuristic construction, whose value derives from generating more insights than confusion.' R.Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' op. cit., 166.



did participate in fascist movements. In Italy, senior Fascists Alfredo Rocco and Giovanni Gentile both conceived of Fascism as an antidote to decadence. Rocco saw history as a struggle between order and disintegration, and championed the legislating conqueror.<sup>59</sup> Gentile saw history as a battle of heroes against individualism.<sup>60</sup> In Belgium, Paul De Man also saw contemporary society as the result of an underlying historical collapse. His antidote was an ethical socialism.<sup>61</sup> Raven Thomson thus a British contingent to this small but distinct band of travellers and a theory of fascism must make sense of this journey and the nature of the fascist ideology that he was to disseminate.

With this at the forefront of our understanding, an examination of fascism as a distinct ideology proves most useful. As historian Roger Eatwell writes,

A political ideology is a relatively coherent set of empirical and normative beliefs and thought, focusing on the problems of human nature, the process of history and socio-political arrangements.<sup>62</sup>

In effect ideology is 'a set of basic ideas and policies about the organisation of society.'<sup>63</sup> Defining fascism through the characteristics of the fascist ideology has largely fallen to four academics, each with a different conception of what constitutes the essential core of the fascist genus: Eatwell, Payne, Sternhell and the British academic Roger Griffin. All four develop an understanding of 'generic' or common fascism based in a ideal set of central ideological elements that they argue must be present for an individual, movement, party or regime to be correctly viewed as 'fascist.'<sup>64</sup>

Like all general types and concepts in political analysis, generic fascism is an abstraction, which never existed in pure empirical form, but

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 161. Eatwell described the conceptual approach as one focusing on ideology, in distinction to the theoretical perspective that examines fascism's support.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 176. 185.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>61</sup> 'Here it should be pointed out that the idea of ethical socialism, of an 'eternal socialism was very widespread in the period from 1920 to 1935. De Man could not ignore Spengler who also became a protagonist of an eternal socialism.' Z.Sternhell, 'The 'Anti-materialist' Revision of Marxism as an Aspect of the Rise of Fascist Ideology,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.22 No.3, 1987, 392.

<sup>62</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Ideologies: Approaches and Trends,' in R.Eatwell & A Wright, *Contemporary Political Ideologies*, Pinter, London, 1993, 9-10. Eatwell highlighted the difficulty of concentrating the study of fascism on fascist thinkers or movements, concerned that the former might not necessarily impact upon the latter. With this thesis premised on the impact of a thinker upon a movement, the methodological concern is abrogated. Ibid., 10.

<sup>63</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' op. cit., 172.

<sup>64</sup> '[F]ascism was a genuine ideology and....it is best defined in these terms.' R.Eatwell, 'On Defining the Fascist Minimum: The Centrality of Ideology,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol.1 No.3, 1996, 303.



constitutes a conceptual device, which serves to clarify the analysis of individual political phenomena.<sup>65</sup>

This reliance on a conceptual analysis is made more important by the failure of Mosley fascism to implement any of its ideas. The result is a fascist ideology free from the deformities of compromise within the political mainstream.<sup>66</sup> As one commentator argued '[t]he movement is the idea of reality, the party and the regime are the realisation of this reality with all the objective difficulties that this entails.'<sup>67</sup> Whilst the result of political frustration is grandiose planning, 'the nature of an ideology is always clearer in its aspirations than in its applications.'<sup>68</sup> Yet we must be wary of distancing fascist actuality too far from ideology, for '[i]t is dangerous to confuse the compromises of fascism once in power with actual pragmatism. Fascism was never pragmatic and in power acted in conformity with the spirit of its ideology.'<sup>69</sup>

Stanley Payne, triangulates the location of fascism within three criteria: negations (those things it opposes); ideology and goals; and the prevailing style and organisation presented.<sup>70</sup> Payne argues that the generic model excludes extremes on the periphery of the central beliefs<sup>71</sup> He is also willing to incorporate Linz's idea of fascist as latecomer to explain the national variations in the appearance of fascism.<sup>72</sup> In 1996, compelled by the direction of the historiography within fascist studies, towards single sentence definitions and away from shopping lists of fascist ingredients, Payne proposed his own single sentence definition,

[Fascism is] a form of revolutionary ultra-nationalism for national rebirth that is based on a primarily vitalist philosophy, is structured on elitism, mass mobilisation and the Fuhrurprinzip, positively values violence as an

<sup>65</sup> S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 4.

<sup>66</sup> R De Felice, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice*, op. cit., 43-44. M.A.Ledeen, 'Renzo De Felice and the Controversy over Italian Fascism,' op. cit., 126; See S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 10, 467-8.

<sup>67</sup> R De Felice, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice*, op. cit., 51. See also Z.Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, 193, 249.

<sup>68</sup> A. Costa Pinto, 'Fascist Ideology Revisited: Zeev Sternhell and His Critics,' *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 16, 1986, 467; S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 467.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 477.

<sup>70</sup> S.Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, op. cit., 7.

<sup>71</sup> 'For this reason the typological description may serve as an analytic or heuristic device, but should not be used as a monolithic reified taxonomic category.' S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 465.

<sup>72</sup> S.Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, op. cit., 8.



end as well as a means and tends to normalise war and/or the military values.<sup>73</sup>

It can be argued that Payne's list is merely a series of ideologies and fails to get close enough to the motivating core of the fascistic perspective. The negations, first isolated by Ernst Nolte, are all ideological standpoints, premised in the circumstances which fascism finds itself; the style and organisation of fascist movements are founded on its ideas about man and society.<sup>74</sup> His list approach is unwieldy as a tool for analysis, with a great many attributes competing for prominence and little indication from the author which are central ideas and which peripheral additions. Payne's list approach has also been criticised for its assumptions about fascism, underestimating the subtlety and development of the phenomenon.<sup>75</sup> The cherished fascist idea of 'the movement,' emphasises this point; fascism was a dynamic entity, one unsuited for static examination. The result of the list approach is either an analysis that encompasses all the attributes and is too shallow, or a few and is too biased. His new single sentence approach is clearly a compromise based in Griffin's concept of fascism (see below) with some of the ingredients from his own list used for garnish.

The principle difficulty of utilising the work of Roger Eatwell is his evolving conception of fascism, which has undergone several revisions during the 1990s. Eschewing a single sentence definition until recently, in 1992, he discussed fascism in the context of four characteristics: in 1992: Natural History, Geopolitics, Political economy, and the Movement.<sup>76</sup> By 1996 these had changed to Nationalism, Radicalism, Holism and Third Way thinking.<sup>77</sup> In 1997 Eatwell contributed a single sentence definition of generic fascism as,

[A]n ideology that strives to forge social rebirth based on a holistic national radical Third Way, though this in practise fascism has tended to stress style, especially action and the charismatic leader, more than detailed programme and to engage in a Manichean demonisation of its enemies.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Idem., *A History of Fascism*, op. cit. cited in R.Eatwell, 'On defining the 'Fascist Minimum,' op. cit., 308-9.

<sup>74</sup> R.Eatwell, 'On defining the 'Fascist Minimum,' op. cit., 309: See S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 5.

<sup>75</sup> Idem., 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' op. cit., 166.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 175, 178-80. The 4 elements described fascism as a movement searching for the new man, within a unified community, proposing an alternative to Liberalism and Marxism.

<sup>77</sup> See Idem., 'Fascism,' op. cit.

<sup>78</sup> R.Eatwell, 'On Defining the 'Fascist Minimum,' op. cit., 303, 313.



The main difficulty in using Eatwell is his rejection of the validity of rebirth ideology, so evident throughout Raven Thomson's work, as 'banal', choosing instead to believe that fascism's use of regeneration was merely a tool, legitimising regimes by emphasising the national roots of the creed.<sup>79</sup> It is telling that his idea of fascist rebirth sees it as a destination for fascism rather than the engine itself. He goes on to argue that 'the theme of rebirth was important because it allowed fascist propaganda to fudge whether what was really sought was a radically new society, or essentially a restoration of the old.'<sup>80</sup> Eatwell also believes 'policy should not necessarily be seen as providing the true key to fascist ideology.'<sup>81</sup> Whilst he was referring to fascist regimes rather than movements, this is not a helpful methodology with which to understand the BUF's Director of Policy. He also describes the fascist movements as populated by 'individuals who were mainly lightweight theoretical magpies, borrowing from diverse sources and developing ideas to accommodate both contextual and principled changes.'<sup>82</sup> Yet Raven Thomson is a case study in fidelity to his core ideas.

The perception of fascism as a phenomenon understood by its adherents in historical terms underpins Israeli scholar Zeev Sternhell's concept of fascism.<sup>83</sup> Sternhell proposes that the key aspect of fascist ideology is an anti-materialist revision of Marxism. In his analysis, fascist ideology has its origins in European Socialism's use of psychology and nationalism, following the failure of Marx's materialist conception of history to yield a revolutionary proletariat after the First World War.<sup>84</sup> Sternhell conceives of fascism as a 'synthesis of organic nationalism and anti-Marxist socialism,' striving to forge a third way between right and left wing thought.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' op. cit., 174.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>83</sup> Z.Sternhell, 'Fascism,' op. cit., 31-3; See also Idem., 'The 'Anti-materialist' Revision of Marxism as an Aspect of the Rise of Fascist Ideology,' op. cit., 379-400.

<sup>84</sup> '[I]f one fails to take into account this initially socialistic revolt against materialism, fascist ideology can hardly be understood.' Z.Sternhell, 'Fascism,' op. cit., 31-3.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 'Only a new communal and anti-individualistic civilisation was deemed capable of assuring the permanence of a human collectivity in which all strata and all classes of society would be perfectly integrated, and the natural framework for such a harmonious, organic collectivity was held to be the nation – a nation enjoyed a moral unity which Liberalism and Marxism, both agents of warfare and disunity, could never provide.' Z.Sternhell, 'Fascism,' op.



With an organic philosophy of human society and a brief visit to Communism in 1931, Raven Thomson does appear, at first inspection, to be a strong candidate for an interpretation that adheres to Sternhell's model.<sup>86</sup> Yet despite his political allegiances earlier in the decade, Raven Thomson's fascist philosophy in the 1930s contains little Marxism to revise.<sup>87</sup> Instead Spengler provides the foundation for his outlook, with his unfolding natural series of seasonal elites and events. Sternhell has been criticised for failing to link the mythic and rational elements of fascist intellectual development; this is certainly disproved in the case of Raven Thomson.<sup>88</sup> Sternhell's definition, in common with Eatwell's, is a useful indicator of fascism, but it fails to illuminate the motivation and activism of fascists such as Raven Thomson.

The final conceptual interpretation of fascism is Roger Griffin's. For Griffin, fascism can be succinctly described as a

...genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism.<sup>89</sup>

If we unpack this definition, we uncover a perspective on fascism that sees the phenomenon as one committed at its deepest level to ideas of rebirth.<sup>90</sup> Fascism is here a body of thought drawing its inspiration and dynamism from a conception that in order for a country to survive its present circumstance, there

cit., 31. See also G.Mosse, 'A General Theory of Fascism,' in G.Mosse (ed.), *International Fascism*, op. cit., 10.

<sup>86</sup> R.Eatwell, 'On defining the 'Fascist Minimum,' op. cit., 306.

<sup>87</sup> '[I]t is important to stress that the 'socialism' of fascism was essentially propagandist, or more specifically anti-capitalist. Fascists never held what are usually key socialist ideas, most notably conceptions relating to equality (though there was a strong element of 'welfarism' in fascism) and ownership.' R.Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' op. cit., 181.

<sup>88</sup> Idem., 'On defining the 'Fascist Minimum,' op. cit., 307.

<sup>89</sup> R.Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge, London, 1992, 26. Subsequent studies by Griffin into fascism have since 1992 proceeded on this premise and his concept can be found at the core of all his writings. idem, *Fascism*, OUP, Oxford, 1995; idem 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling,' in M.Cronin (ed.) *The Failure of British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1996, 160-183; idem, ed. *International Fascism*, Arnold, London, 1999; idem, 'Revolution of the Right: Fascism,' in D.Parker (ed.) *Revolutions and Revolutionary Traditions in the West 1560-1989*, Routledge, London, forthcoming. Professor Griffin has placed the majority of his articles on the Oxford Brookes University website: [www. Brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff](http://www.Brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff). He has recently included an organic aspect to fascist nationalism. See idem., *International Fascism*, op. cit., 13

<sup>90</sup> 'It is a myth impervious to historical facts.' R.Griffin 'British Fascism: The Ugly Duckling,' op. cit, 180; See idem., *The Nature of Fascism*, op. cit. Griffin's theory has already received extensive use in the study of British fascism and the scholar has contributed to the debate. David Baker co-opted Griffin into the monograph of his thesis. Thomas Linehan's newest book declares his support for the palingenetic idea. See D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit.; T.Linehan, *British fascism 1918-39*, op. cit., 5.



must be a rebirth of the nation.<sup>91</sup> Griffin argues that this element is crucial to understanding fascism, and that this is the core perception underscoring an emerging consensus amongst conceptual historians.<sup>92</sup>

[Fascism is] a genus of modern, mass politics which, while extremely heterogeneous in its social support and in the specific ideology promoted by its many permutations, draws its internal cohesion and driving force from a core myth that a period of perceived national decline and decadence is giving way to one of rebirth and renewal in a post-liberal new order.<sup>93</sup>

As has been shown ideas of rebirth now informs the concepts of fascism proposed by Payne and Eatwell.<sup>94</sup>

Critics of Griffin's approach argue that the single sentence definition is too broad to be used as an analytic tool. Payne argues that palingenesis covers a great deal of ideological ground, but allows the application of his own definition to 'conform generally to the ideal type.'<sup>95</sup> Eatwell, who as we have seen, views rebirth as a result of other features of fascism, believes palingenesis to be a piece of propaganda, allowing a reactionary regime to retrench itself. Yet fascism is a revolutionary phenomenon, despite the criticisms this stance receives.

The central point being made here is that fascism was never reactionary or conservative in the sense that it sought to simply restore or consolidate old values. It had radical new values of its own that it sought to inculcate, though it realised that in some social systems this might be best achieved through various forms of accommodation.<sup>96</sup>

If it rebirth were indeed merely propaganda, it is to be expected that the use of rebirth ideas would be presented as required by fascists. Yet Raven Thomson is even discussing rebirth when describing state structure, when expressing defiance during internment and promoting a new social order after the War. The question then becomes, where is the divide between a piece of propaganda used all the time and an ideology? If ideology is sincere, and propaganda, is

<sup>91</sup> 'Our myth is the nation; Our myth is the greatness of our nation,' Benito Mussolini cited in J.Weiss, *The Nature of Fascism*, London, 1967.

<sup>92</sup> The idea of a mobilising myth was developed by the French syndicalist George Sorel, in his book, *Reflections on Violence* (1906).

<sup>93</sup> R.Griffin, 'Introduction,' *International Fascism*, op. cit., 14; See idem., 'Revolution from the Right: Fascism,' op. cit.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. See also S.Payne, 'Historical fascism and the Radical Right,' op. cit., 110; R.Eatwell, 'On defining the 'Fascist Minimum,' op. cit., 303.

<sup>95</sup> S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 7. If anthropologist Joseph Campbell is to be believed, then all world cultures are to some degree underpinned by 'The adventure of the hero' myths, which all culminate in a return or resurrection. See J.Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Fontana, London, 1993.

<sup>96</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' op. cit., 188-9.



pragmatic, this biography directs us firmly towards the former conclusion, through Raven Thomson's belief in rebirth. One criticism of Griffin's approach, which is borne out through this research, is the ambiguity surrounding the exact nature of fascist rebirth. For fascists, rebirth was a singular event, experienced collectively, with a discernable destination. Cyclical historians, such as the pre-fascist Raven Thomson, also see growth, decay and re-growth as part of the historical process. For them, rebirth is perpetual. Raven Thomson's fascism is premised on a concept of rebirth that moves from the ever-returning divine superman to the temporal fascist project.

Despite the criticisms levelled at Griffin's work, the importance of rebirth myths to animate fascism is clearly reflected in Raven Thomson's own understanding of the fascist cause. Raven Thomson even mitigates a criticism of Griffin by Eatwell. Eatwell copies his own criticism of Sternhell, by arguing that Griffin's approach doesn't link the rational and mythic elements of fascism.<sup>97</sup> This concept of rebirth, with fascism aware of its significance as a historical force, is one that underlines Raven Thomson's journey towards and his conception of fascism.<sup>98</sup> Griffin writes,

For fascism to have as wide an appeal as possible it is essential that its central myth of the regenerated national community act as a sort of ideological Rorschach test, one which allows revolutionaries of various hues, some even socialist radicals, to read into their own diagnosis of the decadence of the present society and their own remedy for its ills.<sup>99</sup>

Raven Thomson took the test, and saw in it his communal superman reborn.

The concept of fascism looking backwards but aiming into the future, also abrogates some of the conundrums that have beset fascism studies. In particular it bridges Renzo De Felice's division between fascism and Nazism. Now instead of Fascism attempting to create something new, and Nazism engaged on a reactionary attempt to restore the old, both can be accommodated in the same process.<sup>100</sup> Palingenesis also allows for a new examination of fascism's ambiguous relationship with modernity, which has baffled scholars who could not reconcile the aesthetics of the medieval idyll in Nazism with the

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<sup>97</sup> Idem., 'On defining the 'Fascist Minimum,' op. cit., 311.

<sup>98</sup> R. Griffin, 'Introduction' in *International Fascism*, op. cit., 9-10.

<sup>99</sup> Idem., 'British fascism: The Ugly Duckling,' op. cit., 168,

<sup>100</sup> R. De Felice, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice*, op. cit., 55-6.



autobahn programme.<sup>101</sup> Further, the phenomenon is truly revolutionary in its desire to mobilise the nation in a single endeavour of rejuvenation; 'For the first time there was an attempt to mobilise the masses and to involve them in the political life of the country.'<sup>102</sup> The attempt to construct a new state from the blueprint of an old mythic utopia, saw fascists attempting to change the culture of their society and times through a specific vision of a unified utopian past.

The most distinctive way fascism implemented its palingenetic designs was through culture.<sup>103</sup> It is through the management of culture that fascism made its chief bid to regenerate the nation. This facet of fascism's nature is increasingly coming under academic scrutiny. The idea that the fascist regimes merely used culture for social control is losing credibility.<sup>104</sup> In its place comes a realisation that it was through the control of culture that the fascist project took on its most ambitious work, revolutionising its constituent individuals. This new perspective has impacted on the interpretations of Griffin, Payne and Sternhell, the latter writing.

Setting out as it did to create a new civilisation, a new type of human being and a totally new way of life, fascism could not conceive of any sphere of human activity remaining immune from intervention by the state.<sup>105</sup>

Payne, too, has perceived the potency of fascism's use of cultural control,

[D]ecadence could only be overcome through a revolutionary new culture led by new elites....The goal was to envelop the participant in a mystique and community of ritual that appealed to the aesthetic and the spiritual sense as well as the political.<sup>106</sup>

The final aim of the cultural project was the creation of a new type of fascist man.<sup>107</sup>

The goal of metaphysical idealism and vitalism was the creation of a new man, a new style of culture that achieved both physical and artistic excellence, and that prized courage, daring, and the overcoming of

<sup>101</sup> See E.Gentile, 'Impending Modernity: Fascism and the Ambivalent Image of the United States,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 28 No.1, 1993, 7-29.

<sup>102</sup> M.A.Ledeen, 'Renzo De Felice and the Controversy over Italian Fascism,' op .cit., 127.

<sup>103</sup> S.Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, op. cit., 10.

<sup>104</sup> This understanding was the obvious conclusion when fascism was reduced to a creed of nihilism and violence. See H.Kedward, *Fascism in Western Europe*, op. cit., 4.

<sup>105</sup> Z.Sternhell, 'Fascism,' op. cit., 34.

<sup>106</sup> S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 9, 12.

<sup>107</sup> Mosse has argued that this view of cultural management originated with the French revolutionary culture. De Felice too has argued that this fascist view was based in enlightenment view that man perfectible. G.Mosse, 'Fascism and the French Revolution,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.24 No.1, 1989, 5-26; M.Ledeen, 'Renzo De Felice and the controversy over Italian fascism, op. cit., 128; See R.De Felice, *Fascism*, op. cit., 44.



previously established limits in the growth of a superior new culture which engaged the whole man.<sup>108</sup>

This new perspective has informed the study of Raven Thomson's fascism, with the conventional treatment of his corporatism providing an opportunity for a study into the cultural vitality he was attempting to introduce through the system.

The pioneer in this field George Mosse, who saw the cultural aspect of the fascist program as crucial to any understanding of fascism and its appeal.

Cultural history centers [sic] above all upon the perception of man and women and how these are shaped and enlisted at a particular place and time. Quite consciously fascism addressed people's perceptions of their situation in life and their hopes for the future, and therefore it is essential to understand fascist self-representation was so successful in taking up and satisfying these perceptions if we are to gauge the depth of the movement's appeal.<sup>109</sup>

Fascism was attempting to revolutionise how life was lived, and also create the individuals who would live it, through art, music, architecture, film, rallies and the regime itself;<sup>110</sup> 'Fascism considered itself in a permanent war, which in the service of a higher cause, would unleash all the hidden energy of men, foot soldiers of a civic religion.'<sup>111</sup> Whatever the precise origins of the desire to manage national culture to foster national regeneration, Raven Thomson was a fascist who saw fascism's mission very much in these terms.<sup>112</sup>

Before concluding this swift examination of the theories surrounding fascism, it is worthwhile examining two areas of fascist studies that have been avoided in this biography; psychological and Marxist interpretations.<sup>113</sup>

Psychological studies suggest, 'that a particular sort of person, with a definable character structure, will be drawn towards the politics of fascism.'<sup>114</sup> The existence of a particular national or group psyche to explain the acceptance of

<sup>108</sup> S.Payne, *a History of Fascism*, op. cit., 8.

<sup>109</sup> G.L.Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, Howard Fertig, New York, 2000, xi.

<sup>110</sup> R.De Felice, 'Fascism,' in P.Cannistraro (ed. in chief), *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, Greenwood, London, 1982, 214.

<sup>111</sup> G.L.Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., xvi.

<sup>112</sup> The similarities between fascist secular liturgy and religious observance have been noted before. See T.Parsons, 'Some Sociological Aspects of the fascist Movements,' op. cit., 125. Italian academic Emilio Gentile even proposed a theory of fascism that saw it as a political religion. See E.Gentile, 'Fascism as Political Religion,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.25 No.s 2-3, 1990, 229-51.

<sup>113</sup> See S.Payne, 'The Concept of Fascism,' in S. Larsen et al, *Who were the Fascists – Social Roots of European Fascism*, Universitetsforlaget, Bergen, 1980, 15-16.

<sup>114</sup> M.Billig, 'Psychological Aspects of Fascism,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol.24 No.1, 1990, 19.



fascism has largely been discredited as an analytical means of understanding the phenomenon, based primarily on the observation that 'fascists are not all alike.'<sup>115</sup> Any utility in using a psychological understanding of Raven Thomson's fascism is compromised by the lack of information this researcher has gathered about Raven Thomson's personality. At the end of this research, we have few indications of the type of man Raven Thomson actually was. This also impacts on any understanding of the interplay between the personality of this fascist and his ideology. The little we do know contradicts several of the mainstream psychological models for fascism. An affair in the late 1930s seems to indicate against the assertion that sexual frustration was a root cause of a fascist's conversion and commitment.<sup>116</sup> If he was scared of personal freedom and wished to conform, he led a remarkably adventurous life during his twenties, and his decision to join a fascist movement in 1933, after the worst of the depression, make personal insecurity unlikely as a motivator towards fascist activism.<sup>117</sup>

Of greater insight might have been the work of Theodor Adorno on foundation of fascism in an 'authoritarian personality.'<sup>118</sup> This perception of a fascist has already been linked to Raven Thomson's peer, A.K.Chesterton.<sup>119</sup> Raven Thomson's desire to rationalise the world into an understandable framework of authority, through his Spenglerian history and corporatist planning would seem to indicate a desire to simplify life into a series of frameworks, as in the Adorno model. The prevalence across Europe of other visionaries, all on a similar journey to understand contemporary society as part of a mythic process is a clear indication that the path existed.

The main criticism of the psychological branch of fascist studies is the assumptions about fascism they exhibit. Fascism is portrayed as so irrational and beyond conventional society, that to join must indicate a deformed personality. As a thesis founded on a desire to understand Raven Thomson's ideas and

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 21. Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1970). Given Mosley's philandering during the 1920s and 30s concepts of sexual inhibition seem tenuous.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 21. Erich Fromm, *Fear of Freedom* (1960), See T.Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-39: Parties ideology and culture*, op. cit., 3.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>119</sup> D.Baker, 'The Appeal of Fascism,' op. cit., 3.



activism, it would have been unhelpful and tenuous to start from the premise that he was a deficient or damaged person.

How his personality shaped the ideology he proposed is a far subtler question within this branch of historical research, which again founders on a lack of biographical source material. This is in stark comparison to other Blackshirt biographies. Half of the chapters in both Skidelsky's study of Mosley and Baker's book of Chesterton cover their lives prior to fascism. Without personal testimony or an autobiography to ground any such study for Raven Thomson, the impression given is rather as if we have missed the first act of the play, and have been given a hurried synopsis. As a result we can study Raven Thomson, but cannot know him.<sup>120</sup> Once in the fascism it is clear that this environment dominated his understanding, most notably his conversion to a stance of anti-Semitism, and Europeanism after the War. The crucial relationship with Mosley is shrouded in political rhetoric. Raven Thomson was but one voice in the BUF and Union Movement praising Mosley. Mosley in turn wrote warmly, but sparsely, of his lieutenant. Neither presented a personal view of their long relationship. Clearly a friendship existed, yet from the testimonies of other Mosley men, it does appear that many placed 'the Leader' on a pedestal, which works against any idea of close familiarity.<sup>121</sup>

This thesis has also eschewed using Marxist theories of fascism to explain the development of Raven Thomson towards and within the BUF. Without doing the more sophisticated theories an injustice through oversimplification, Marxists believe that in the wake of a severe economic crisis, fascism is used by large capitalist concerns to retain order and suppress the transfer of control over the means of production to the working classes.<sup>122</sup> Fascists, in this understanding of the phenomenon, are predominantly drawn from the part of society that has recently moved out of the working classes, and in the climate of crisis choose to support fascism in order to prevent a return to their old status. Fascism is thus deemed to be reactionary insofar as it prevents

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<sup>120</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the regular character assessments Mosley receives. Skidelsky in 1980 was able to conclude that 'fascism for Mosley was a simultaneous solution to a host of problems both on the political and personal planes,' an equation I cannot calculate for Raven Thomson. R.Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British fascism' in R.Thurlow & K.Lunn, *British Fascism*, op. cit., 96. See also R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 298.

<sup>121</sup> See F.Beckett, 'The Rebel Who Lost His Cause,' *History Today*, Vol.44 No.5, 1994, 42.

<sup>122</sup> See D.Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business*, Monad Press, New York, 1973.



the revolution of the masses. Whilst Marxist theories can be cohesive, they fail to consider that the two main fascist regimes were at different stages of economic development; Germany was heavily industrialised: Italy was largely agrarian. In downplaying the role of ideology within fascism, Marxist theories also fail to note the gathering cultural ingredients of the previous 50 years prior to the establishment of the first regime in Italy. Economic collapse provided the spark that ignited fascism but other materials were the fuel. Finally, to reduce Raven Thomson's belief in fascism to an economic imperative rejects the logical progression of his thought to a subsidiary rather than central role.<sup>123</sup>

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In conclusion, what follows is the establishment of Raven Thomson as a significant member of British fascism. Foremost, it is a political biography of a fascist, where both thought and action were harnessed to the struggle for public support. It is therefore the biography of a political figure, in the context of his politics. Yet the construction of a biography in this area is also a political act. Part intellectual history, it develops certain themes evident in other histories from the area, whilst presenting new avenues for research. It discusses, as conclusively as source material allows, the making and shaping of a fascist, together with an assessment of the movements in which he participated. It is also part cultural history, insofar as it attempts to place Raven Thomson in the context of the Mosley fascist experiment; 'Fascism considered as a cultural movement means seeing fascism as it saw itself and its followers saw it, to attempt to understand the movement in its own terms.'<sup>124</sup> Lastly it is a history of fascism, which however minutely, will inform understanding of the general phenomenon. For if we subscribe to Angelo Tasca's statement 'to define fascism is first and foremost to write its history,' this thesis represents a small step in a far larger journey to isolate and uncover the creed.<sup>125</sup> With the persistence of fascism in

<sup>123</sup> R.Eatwell, 'On defining the 'Fascist Minimum,' 304.

<sup>124</sup> G.L.Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, op. cit., x.

<sup>125</sup> E.Gentile, 'Renzo De Felice: A Tribute,' op. cit., 148.



Britain, the responsibility that has been placed on historians is to 'inoculate the present generation against the fascist virus.'<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> V.Bogdanor, 'A Deeply Flawed Hero,' *Encounter*, June 1975, 69-77 cited in R.Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism' in R.Thurlow & K.Lunn, *British Fascism*, op. cit., 78.



## Chapter One: The Making of a Fascist?

It is symbolic of this modern movement that the intellectual takes his proud place among the rank and file of the Street fighters, while the fighting men begin to think.<sup>1</sup>

Biography is in part an attempt to reconstruct the path of an individual towards the area of significance for which they deserve study. In assessing the development of a fascist within a country that in the main rejected the creed, it is tempting to see this journey as one of descent, out of the recognised body politic and 'beyond the pale.' Fascists failed to view their activism in such terms. For them it was the nation that was in danger of decline. In response, they were participating in an attempt at national rebirth through the medium of fascism.<sup>2</sup> The centrality of this distinctive concept of rebirth in fascist ideology is subjective, with individual fascists perceiving the nature of this rejuvenation differently depending upon their personal experiences.<sup>3</sup>

The precise location and chronology of a discreet point of transition into fascism in such a journey is difficult to isolate. The time and place of the border crossing into accepting enough tenets of the ideology is often hidden.<sup>4</sup> Some individuals may travel across this division many times, though once Alexander Raven Thomson joined Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) he remained with the fascist leader until his death, 22 years later. Involvement in a fascist movement lies some way within this new political geography, so that an individual might be a fascist without ever donning a uniform, paying a subscription or marching with their comrades. The precise method and direction of travel into fascism has been the subject of many debates about its nature. Raven Thomson's reasons for choosing the creed were part of an intellectual decision concerning his perception of contemporary society. Though this view would metamorphose during the early 1930s, it remained at the core of his fascist thought and informed his concept of what fascism was ultimately for.

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<sup>1</sup> J.Drennan, *Oswald Mosley, BUF and British Fascism*, BUF Publications, London, 1934, 203-4.

<sup>2</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Frank Cass, London, 1995, 298.

<sup>3</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol.4 No.2, 1992, 161-94; R.Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge, London, 1992, 26-55; idem., 'General Introduction,' in R.Griffin (ed.) *Fascism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, 1-12.

<sup>4</sup> In this study terms such as proto-, quazi- and pseudo-fascism to indicate partial acceptance of the creed have been avoided as unhelpful.



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Chief among the questions asked of the 1930's in Europe is the attraction of fascism. Numerous studies have attempted to ascertain why individuals in these countries, either in such great or limited numbers were drawn to fascism as a solution to their perceived ills.<sup>5</sup> In studies that concentrate on the leaders of fascist groups, an examination of biography is common, in search of clues to a tendency towards fascism that, it is argued, was only realised within fascist activism. A recent biography of A.K.Chesterton, a leading member of the BUF, endorsed the opinion of his wife; that prior to joining the 'Blackshirt' movement he had been 'a prophet in search of a creed.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed the thesis from which the book was drawn was entitled '[t]he Making of a Fascist.'<sup>7</sup> Studies of Raven Thomson too have not been immune from this trend, with one stating, 'in Mosley, [Raven] Thomson found the leader and in fascism the faith he had been looking for.'<sup>8</sup> Yet to consider Raven Thomson's life prior to his entry into the Mosley movement, a time-span of 33 years, within the narrow confines of a preordained journey to fascism, is too simplistic, and challenged by an affiliation with Communism in 1931.

Previous attempts at examining Raven Thomson's journey to fascism have been basic. In most studies his route into the BUF has consisted of a short note, as in Benewick, that he had been a member of the Communist Party before joining the movement and had in 1932 published a 'pretentious book' called *Civilization as Divine Superman*.<sup>9</sup> Lewis briefly notes this connection with Communism in an argument about left wing thought in the BUF, but does not go into detail.<sup>10</sup> Skidelsky, in a biography of Mosley, noted the influence of the German historian Oswald Spengler on Raven Thomson's book. Mosley's biographer argued that in the 1932 book, Raven Thomson rejected some of Spengler's ideas and this had prompted his turn to Communism, though a rejection of the materialist conception

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<sup>5</sup> See P.Merkl, 'Comparing Fascist Movements,' in S.Larsen et al (eds.) *Who were the Fascists? - Social Roots of European fascism*, Universitetsforlaget, Bergen, 1980, 752-83.

<sup>6</sup> D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, Taurus, London, 1995, 123.

<sup>7</sup> See D.Baker 'The Making of a Fascist: the case of A. K. Chesterton,' PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, Macmillan, London, 1975, 345. Benewick too attempted to illustrate the existence of a 'composite type' when examining the BUF leadership. See R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, Allen Lane, London, 1972, 128.

<sup>9</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 117.



of history made the affiliation a short one.<sup>11</sup> Mosley, in his autobiography, believed that it had been his own ideas at the time, together with his interest in Raven Thomson's book when the two met, that had been crucial to the conversion.<sup>12</sup> The fascist press, a source deemed 'substantially honest' by Mandle in its treatment of BUF biographies, believed that '[s]tudies led him towards the possibilities of evolving a higher form of social order, and finally to Fascism.'<sup>13</sup> Raven Thomson left few detailed explanations for his decision to become a fascist activist in 1933, and thus his biographer must construct a plausible set of conditions to explain the nature of his journey towards, and satisfaction with, Mosley fascism.

This attempt to examine the reasons for Raven Thomson's journey is in keeping with a general academic move away from the stereotyping of individuals that was found in early explanations for the membership of British fascism.<sup>14</sup> In the 1960s, Mandle's study of the BUF leadership noted 'four marked characteristics of the group have so far emerged: youth, a high level of education, a striking proportion of ex-officers and extensive overseas experience.' Whilst Raven Thomson exhibits all of these criteria, so did many of his generation, most of whom did not turn to fascism.<sup>15</sup> Later studies have concluded, as Rawnsley in 1980, that 'the BUF like other fascist organisations, attracted all sorts of people for a variety of reasons.'<sup>16</sup>

This study utilises much of the available information on Raven Thomson's life prior to 1933, but there is little of it. What the available biographical information reveals is a predominantly intellectual acceptance of fascism and the Mosley movement, an ideological stance facilitated by his background.<sup>17</sup> A study of his early life is not, therefore, a gradual acquisition of characteristics to make a

<sup>10</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, 75.

<sup>11</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, Macmillan, London, 1975, 345-6.

<sup>12</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 331-2.

<sup>13</sup> W.F.Mandle, 'The Leadership of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 360; *Fascist Week* 5, 8<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> December 1933.

<sup>14</sup> G.C.Webber, 'The British Isles' in D Muhlburger (ed.) *The Social Basis of the European Fascist Movement*, Croon Helm, London, 1987, 140-1, 148; See also R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 128.

<sup>15</sup> W.F.Mandle, 'The Leadership of the British Union of Fascists' in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 12, December 1966, 366.

<sup>16</sup> S Rawnsley, 'The membership of the British Union of Fascists' in K.Lunn and R.Thurlo (eds.), *British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1980, 164.

<sup>17</sup> D.Baker, 'The Appeal of Fascism: Pathological Fantasy or Ideological Coherence,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 20 No. 3, 1986, 3-4.



fascist, but rather a series of particular events that enabled him in April 1933 to join the BUF.

Raven Thomson was born into a prosperous Edinburgh family on the 3rd December 1899.<sup>18</sup> His maternal grandfather was the renowned Scottish architect, Alexander Thomson.<sup>19</sup> At the Merchiston Academy, an Edinburgh public school, he specialised in sciences, to which he later attributed his interest in theories.<sup>20</sup> In July 1918 he left Merchiston and enlisted in the Royal Engineers.<sup>21</sup> Raven Thomson's military records were destroyed in the blitz of 1940, so a precise picture of his war is unavailable.<sup>22</sup> Unlike some of his later fascist comrades, he little used war recollections in his BUF propaganda work, and therefore leaves no testament to his experiences.<sup>23</sup> As a boy of 17 when entering the War, his swift commissioning as a Second Lieutenant appears to suggest a degree of aptitude for his duties. In his 1932 book he wrote of the conflict as merely a natural part of Europe's historical development.<sup>24</sup> Criticisms percolated through, however, chiefly the placing of commissioned public schoolboys in positions of authority over much more experienced soldiers. Whether he had himself in mind is not intimated.<sup>25</sup>

Upon his return from the War he met Lisbeth Rontgern, a descendant of the discoverer of the X-Ray.<sup>26</sup> Lisbeth was a war widow with a daughter, Helga, who had come to Scotland from Germany in 1912, and had married later that year.<sup>27</sup> Upon the death of his grandfather, Raven Thomson received an inheritance that enabled him to take Lisbeth with Helga to the United States of America in 1919,

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<sup>18</sup> General Register Office for Scotland: Birth Certificate, Newington district of Edinburgh, 1899, No.1557.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with DI, November 1996: DI was a member of the post-war Union Movement and worked with Raven Thomson at that time; The choice of 'Alexander Raven' as a publication name in 1932 may have been an attempt to avoid confusion with his grandfather.

<sup>20</sup> Merchiston Castle School: Register 1833-1914, 234; R.R Questionnaire March 1994: RR was a prominent fascist in Lancashire, both in the BUF and Union Movement; he succeeded Raven Thomson as editor of Mosley paper *Union*, in 1955.

<sup>21</sup> *Action* 219, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1940.

<sup>22</sup> Public Record Office (PRO) WO338/19/108 records the existence of a file (No.255389), whilst WO339 fails to list it amongst the surviving documentation. Approximately 85% of British World War One personnel records still exist, Mosley's amongst them.

<sup>23</sup> See D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit., 153-6.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman: A Superorganic Philosophy of History*, Williams and Norgate Ltd, London, 1932, 85.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>26</sup> Wilhelm Konrad Rontgern (1845-1923) was a German physicist who discovered the rays in 1895, receiving a Noble Prize for his work in 1901.

<sup>27</sup> PRO HO283/70/72 Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.



where they married.<sup>28</sup> There he embarked on a period of private study, concentrating on engineering.<sup>29</sup> The effect of seeing the beginnings of the roaring twenties in the United States gave him, in the opinion of one former comrade, 'strong feelings against capitalism in general.'<sup>30</sup> By 1921 the family had moved to Cologne in Germany, near to the relations of Mrs Rontgern Thomson, where Raven Thomson worked in an engineering firm.<sup>31</sup> At some point during this period he appears to have attended Heidelberg University.<sup>32</sup> In 1926 the family moved back to Britain, where he was to use the techniques learnt in Germany as a partner in a London firm.<sup>33</sup> The business appears to have been his major concern prior to becoming a paid staff officer in the Mosley movement in late 1933. From 1931 the revenue from a domestic service agency run by Lisbeth supplemented the family income.<sup>34</sup>

At some point prior to 1931, Raven Thomson read the book that would radically alter his life, Oswald Spengler's treatise on global history, *The Decline of the West*.<sup>35</sup> Spengler had been raised in Munich and after writing a doctorate on Herodotus, became a schoolteacher.<sup>36</sup> Embarking on a period of private study after 1910 he spent the following 8 years developing the ideas.<sup>37</sup> Spengler believed that Germany would be victorious in the Great War and would dominate Europe in its wake.<sup>38</sup> The defeat of 1918 was thus somewhat of a shock, though it provided the circumstances under which the book became a brief sensation.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In his will, witnessed on the eleventh of December 1920, and implemented at his death, Raven Thomson declared himself to be 'of 5 Mercheston Gardens, Edinburgh, now residing in the United States of America.'

<sup>29</sup> PRO HO283/70/72: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>30</sup> DI Questionnaire, December 1995.

<sup>31</sup> PRO HO283/70/72: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>32</sup> DI Questionnaire, December 1995; See also W.F.Mandle, 'The Leadership of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 378. Claims in the fascist press maintained that Raven Thomson had attended universities in Scotland, America and Germany appear exaggerated. On this research only the latter is corroborated. See R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 345.

<sup>33</sup> PRO HO283/70/72: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid./14, 76-7.

<sup>35</sup> All references to this work are taken from the English language translation of C.F. Atkinson. This translation has formed the foundation for most studies of Spengler's ideas in English. O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Trans. C.F. Atkinson, Allen and Unwin, London, Vol. I 'Form and Actuality,' 1926, Vol. II 'Perspectives of World History,' 1928.

<sup>36</sup> H.S. Hughes, *Oswald Spengler – A Critical Estimate*, op. cit., 4; J. Fennelly *Twilight of the Evening Lands*, Brookdale Press, New York, 1972, 17-26; B. Mazlish *The Riddle of History* op. cit., 310.

<sup>37</sup> B. Mazlish, *The Riddle of History* op. cit., 311.

<sup>38</sup> O. Spengler, (trans. A. Helps), *Spengler: Letters*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1966, 30-1.

<sup>39</sup> A. Hamilton, *The Attraction of Fascism* op. cit., 111-2.



Spengler believed he had made a discovery in historical understanding comparable with the Copernican revolution, which had disproved the medieval concept of the world's location at the centre of the universe.<sup>40</sup> Rejecting historical teleology, Spengler believed he had found the true dynamic of history within the cyclical growth and decline of nature first considered by Goethe.<sup>41</sup> For Hegel and Marx the units of history were the state and class respectively. Spengler, however, believed that history was taking place within a series of 'cultures,' which could be defined as those nations in a geographic area possessed of the same world outlook derived from the surrounding landscape and soil.<sup>42</sup> Each had a different tempo of evolution. For Spengler there had been eight such cultures throughout history, including the 'Magian' or Arabian culture and a 'Faustian' one covering Europe from around 1000AD to the present. A potential ninth culture was, Spengler argued, developing within Russia.<sup>43</sup> Each culture was a separate entity that if not adversely acted upon by another, had a life span of one thousand years.<sup>44</sup>

Within each culture a four-fold schema of development was proposed, analogous to the seasons. Each 'season' was defined by distinct stages in a culture's progression through such diverse areas as art, urbanisation and economics. All developments were unified by the single outlook shared by all individuals within the culture, informing all comprehension.<sup>45</sup> For the Faustian culture such a view was informed by a will to the infinite, typified by the lofty heights of gothic architecture, perspective painting and grasp of history.<sup>46</sup> The triumph of aristocracy was characteristic of the autumnal period, and it was during this time that the culture experienced the zenith of its achievement, in the West

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<sup>40</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West I*, op. cit., 68, 94, 330-1. See E. Heller, *The Disinherited Mind*, Bowes & Bowes, Cambridge, 1952, 153.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 21-2. Such a view was not in itself new, Joachim of Floris had been first to posit such an idea in the twelfth century, whilst Gianbatista Vico had in the nineteenth century popularised a similar theory. Due to the gaps that Spengler places between the emergence of his cultures it is possible to argue that strictly speaking his was not a cyclical history at all. See W. Dray, *Perspectives on History*, Routledge, London, 1980, 103.

<sup>42</sup> W. Dray, *Perspectives on History*, op. cit., 104.

<sup>43</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West II*, op. cit., 27-30. The nine cultures are Babylonian, Chinese, Classical, Egyptian, Faustian, Indian, Magian, Mexican, with an embryonic one in Russia. In practise Spengler concentrates upon only three, the Faustian (European), Classical (Hellenic) and to a lesser extent, Magian (Jewish).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., I 44-6.. The 'Mexican' culture of the Aztecs and Mayans was terminated prematurely by the invasion of the conquistadors, the fledgling Russian culture was being delayed by the influence through Bolshevism of European Marxism. See O. Spengler *The Decline of the West II*, 43-5, 192-6. See W. Dray, *Perspectives in History*, op. cit., 104; R.A. Nicholls, 'Thomas Mann and Spengler,' op. cit., 365.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., II 46.



typified by Mozart, Kant and Goethe.<sup>47</sup> The final stage of civilisation was characterised by increasing urbanisation, the domination of money and the appearance of the world city, the megalopolis, a place of atomised masses divorced from the landscape that informed their understanding.<sup>48</sup> It was a period of great conflicts ending finally with the emergence of a Caesar figure, trained by the experience of war and gifted with intuitive understanding, under whose imperium a fleeting renaissance would appear before final capitulation to external barbarians.<sup>49</sup> The Caesar would reconnect the people with the soul of their culture.<sup>50</sup> The exercise of realpolitik would be his particular gift, making 'definite and unsentimental practical considerations,' ameliorating the urban masses with bread and circuses.<sup>51</sup> With the fall of the Caesar, the culture would complete its millennial cycle and collapse back into its surroundings.

For Spengler, his historical technique allowed comparisons to be made between the relative stages of a culture's development, regardless of the millennia that in some cases separated the cultures. Thus he argued that modern European society, was close to the completion of its allotted span and thus faced unavoidable demise.<sup>52</sup> In particular he used the history of antiquity to discuss the little future left to Faustian culture. Spengler argued that Alexander the Great and Napoleon were analogous, as were the Punic and 1914 -18 wars.<sup>53</sup> For European culture the time of the Caesar approached,

For us, however, whom a Destiny has placed in this culture and at this moment of its development - the moment when money is celebrating its last victories, and Caesarism that is to succeed approaches with quiet, firm steps - our direction, willed and obligatory at once, is set for us within narrow limits, and on any other terms life is not worth living.<sup>54</sup>

Given the inevitability that Spengler attached to his history, which guaranteed decline, he was criticised by contemporaries for his pessimism.<sup>55</sup> So widespread

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., I 174, 183-5, 265; II 122, 123.

<sup>47</sup> W.Dray, *Perspectives in History*, op. cit., 108-9.

<sup>48</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West* II, 99-107.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., II 431-5. See E.Bentley *The Cult of the Superman*, op. cit., 189.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., II 506.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., II 432. See M.Biddis, 'History as destiny' op. cit., 93-4.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., I, 3, 31. This division between healthy 'culture' and sterile 'civilization' can be found in Nietzsche and Spengler's contemporary Thomas Mann. See M.Biddiss, 'History as destiny'; Gobineau, H.S.Chamberlain and Spengler 'paper given to the Royal Historical Society on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1996, reprinted in *The Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6<sup>th</sup> Series Vol.7, 1997, 90.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., I 49, 110, II, 488.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., II 507.

<sup>55</sup> R.A.Nicholls, 'Thomas Mann and Spengler,' op. cit., 361.



became the belief that Spengler wrote a lengthy response to his accusers. A pessimist, he argued, could see no more goals, whilst he saw much work to be done before Europe's collapse.<sup>56</sup>

Criticisms abound of Spengler's theory, most notably that it is not supported by historical evidence. His idea that cultures exist independently of each other, after the imperial expansions of the early modern period in Europe, is untenable. So tenuous are some of his conclusions he had to embark on a series of running repairs to his premise, attempting to explain such anomalies as the noted impact of the Jewish, and therefore Magian, philosopher Spinoza on modern European thought.<sup>57</sup> Whilst he insists that the age of great mathematics is over, Einstein's theory of relativity appears in 1915.<sup>58</sup> Numerous scholars, both contemporary to Spengler and since, have highlighted the implausibility of his methods and conclusions.<sup>59</sup> His impact on contemporary thought was limited to a small group of literary figures, such as T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, who utilised the seasonal imagery in *The Decline of the West*.<sup>60</sup> Spengler's views are of importance here due to their impact upon Raven Thomson, but as a body of historical understanding they have value only as a curio.

It was Raven Thomson's developing attitude towards Spengler's prognosis that formed the background to his acceptance of Mosley fascist ideology. Despite its crucial place in Raven Thomson's development, the location and circumstances surrounding his discovery of *The Decline of the West* is hidden.<sup>61</sup> Whatever the

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<sup>56</sup> See O. Spengler, 'Pessimism?' Trans D.O. White, *Oswald Spengler – Selected Writings*, Gateway, Illinois, 1967.

<sup>57</sup> W. Dray, *Perspectives in History*, op. cit., 118.

<sup>58</sup> H. Mitchell, 'Herr Spengler and Mr Toynbee,' in M.F.A. Montagu (ed.), *Toynbee and History*, Porter Sargent, Boston, 1956, 81.

<sup>59</sup> See R.G. Collingwood, *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, University of Texas, Austin, 1965, 60-75. This chapter is a reprint of a 1927 article responding to Spengler, stressing the reductive nature of a methodology that arranges selective facts to support a conclusion of one central cultural idea. Spengler has, according to Collingwood, mistaken the tool of compartmentalising history for study, with a law of historical periods. See also Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa, 1993, 129, 157, 245-287. The first edition of this book also appeared in 1927.

<sup>60</sup> N. Frye, 'The Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler,' op. cit., 7.

<sup>61</sup> With its popularity in Germany upon the publication of the first volume in 1918, it would appear reasonable to suggest that given his time in that country, it was there that Raven Thomson discovered the book. After an initial surge in popularity, however, Spengler's treatise had become increasingly unfashionable as that decade had progressed, with the 1922 publication of a second volume achieving only a third of its predecessor's one hundred thousand copy sales. Further, whilst the book would help to push Raven Thomson into political activity in 1930s Britain, he later denied that whilst in Germany he engaged in any politics. This denial was, however, in the context of a 1940 hearing to investigate alleged Nazi links within the BUF. It should be noted, however, that the Nazi Party only established a student association in the year he returned to Britain. Alternatively,



exact timing, the effect on Raven Thomson of reading the work was profound. All studies of *The Decline of the West* note the immensity of the scope of the work, its imaginative strength and 'Spengler's power to expand and exhilarate the mind.'<sup>62</sup> Its attempt at a world history and the idea of historical forms is clearly one that fed Raven Thomson's imagination, enough for him to write his book revising Spengler's ideas, *Civilization as Divine Superman*. With a preface dated September 1931, there was insufficient time to reject Communism and write a 232 page book based on Spengler. The conclusion that must be drawn is that, contrary to Skidelsky, Spenglerian ideas influenced Raven Thomson's 6 months sojourn in the Communist Party.<sup>63</sup>

Raven Thomson's short affiliation with Communism has been seen as an example of a fascist's 'political amateurism' whilst awaiting the emergence of a suitable movement.<sup>64</sup> Given Spengler's staunch opposition to Communism in *The Decline of the West*, Raven Thomson's decision to join does appear curious.<sup>65</sup> One former comrade, however, believes that it was a genuine interest in the party's claim to represent 'Scientific Socialism' that first attracted Raven Thomson.<sup>66</sup> Disillusionment with the Communism appears to have originated not in a rejection of the materialist conception of history, as Skidelsky maintained, but rather with his frustration at the prevalence of 'parish pump' politics in the local Battersea branch, with the interests of Bolshevism placed before all other considerations.<sup>67</sup> Soon after his departure from the Communist Party, *Civilization as Divine Superman* was completed.

In this examination of the intellectual journey that had by 1933 led to Mosley and the BUF, Raven Thomson's book is the only significant signpost of his beliefs prior to becoming a fascist activist. At its philosophical core, the study

both volumes of the book were translated into English by 1928, and it may be that it was upon his return from the continent that he discovered Spengler. See PRO HO283/70/72: op. cit.; See W.Zorn, 'Student Politics in the Weimar Republic,' *Journal of contemporary History*, Vol.5 No.1, 1970,130.

<sup>62</sup> N.Frye, 'The Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler,' *Daedalus*, Vol. 103 No.1, 1974, 10. See also H.S.Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, MacGibbon & Kee, London, 1959, 378;

R.A.Nicholls, 'Thomas Mann and Spengler,' *The German Quarterly*, Vol.58 No.3, 1985, 370.

<sup>63</sup> *Daily Herald* 24<sup>th</sup> October 1949; A.Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 9. RR Questionnaire, March 1994.

<sup>64</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 123.

<sup>65</sup> Spengler who had lived through the Munich Soviet remembered it as 'nothing but hunger, looting, filth, danger and rascality without parallel.' A.Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism*, Blond, London, 1971, 110.

<sup>66</sup> RR Questionnaire, March 1994; E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, Howard Baker, London, 1983, 143.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*; DI Questionnaire, December 1995. R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 345.



presents an holistic understanding of life, based in a monist concept of biology, in which all substance is made up of the same material arranged into increasing levels of complexity, or 'integrations.'<sup>68</sup> Such a theory was not a radical departure from the established work of Nineteenth Century biologist, Jean Baptiste Lamarck.<sup>69</sup> Starting from the subatomic level, the apex of the series for Raven Thomson was the 'superorganism,' where vast groups of cells interacted. The characteristic of the superorganism was a high level of internal differentiation 'in which each constituent organism serves the communal whole.'<sup>70</sup> Such a 'being' was visible in the hive society of insects, with its division of function and communal service to the whole. Whilst this social framework can be considered as the beginnings of his later fascist theory of the state, in 1931 the concept of society under the control of a single leader, as in fascism, was dismissed. Rather 'we are compelled to assume some indefinite communal spirit shared by every member of the hive, which is the real arbiter of communal action.'<sup>71</sup>

Derived from this understanding of nature, Raven Thomson proposed an organic philosophy of human history, with various superorganic 'civilisations' all going through a finite life span with distinct developmental stages. It is here that Spengler is incorporated into a theory where the events of world history are linked to the cyclical rise and fall of superorganic civilisations. World history for Raven Thomson is governed by the finite periods of growth and decay within the underlying superorganic communal spirit present in each civilisation.<sup>72</sup>

The book concludes with Raven Thomson's belief that given the 'true' nature of society as a superorganism, morality must be based on considerations for the welfare of civilisation. In this he is attempting to respond to the evolutionary meta-biology in George Bernard Shaw's play 'Back to Methusaleh' and the work of German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche on the superman. Nietzsche, he argues, had been right to draw attention to a philosophy of the superman, but the superhuman qualities that had been endorsed were not resident in any group of individuals, but in society as a whole,

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<sup>68</sup> Alexander Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 13, 15. The basic building block for Raven Thomson was energy-time rising in complexity through charge, atoms, molecules, crystals or protoplasm depending upon the organic or inorganic system. Organic integrations then continued onwards with cells, organisms, and finally the superorganism. See Ibid., 15-24.

<sup>69</sup> See L.J.Jordanova, *Lamarck*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984.

<sup>70</sup> Alexander Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 22.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 23-4



Civilisation itself is the superhuman force that expresses and realises the ideal of the 'superman.' It is futile to seek a superman in personal individual human development at some distant future date, when the real superman, civilization, is already engaged in building towering skyscrapers driving great tunnels, constructing huge liners and vast airships, linking the lands with radio and investing man with the collective attitudes of supermen... The Nietzschean 'superman' and the Shavian 'Methusalehs' are no less monstrous individual perversions in the superorganic world of civilization in being. Civilization is not a biological process in the upward progress of mankind; it is a 'superbiological' force governed by 'superbiological' laws, directing the actions of men to the realization [sic] of its higher aims, the very realization of the 'superman.'<sup>73</sup>

Within this organic conception of society, all individuals are parts of a whole with allotted functions. Trade routes perform as arteries, soldiers are its white blood cells, and the city controls the whole as a brain.<sup>74</sup> Critical of Nietzsche for mistakenly transplanting Darwinist theory into philosophy, Raven Thomson derides the idea of a selfish 'great blond beast' dominating his surroundings through higher ethics, established to facilitate his ascendancy. Rather,

Civilization is not the servant of man. It is his master and tyrant; the superman that directs and enforces his actions to the greater glorification of himself, and grants him the immense advantages of co-operation and specialisation only as a reward for abandoning his freedom of action to the higher aims of the communal spirit.<sup>75</sup>

In such a concept of society as an integrated whole, any division is seen as a pathogen and Raven Thomson criticises Communism believing it to be the equivalent of a cellular rebellion, a superorganic cancer.<sup>76</sup> Despite considering Communism as an anarchic force, Raven Thomson does endorse its emphasis on communal service.<sup>77</sup> Whilst he rejected the practical expediency of an equal division of wealth, he believed Socialism to be the appropriate ethical stance from which a cult of communal service could be fostered.<sup>78</sup> By criticising both Fabian Shaw and elitist Nietzsche, Raven Thomson's superorganic philosophy was traversing the boundaries of left and right wing thought. Yet was *Civilization as Divine Superman* and by extension its author, fascistic in September 1931?

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 33

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 150, 205.



Once he had joined the BUF, the place of *Civilization as Divine Superman* was firmly established within the canon of fascist texts by another fascist influenced by Spengler, W.E.D.Allen.<sup>79</sup> Writing in 1934, Allen conceived of Raven Thomson's book as having 'unconsciously defined the philosophical potentialities of the fascist revolution.'<sup>80</sup> Yet for Allen the rigid cycle of history in the book it was too pessimistic and failed to see the impact of science on Spenglerian determinism,

Fascist thought holds that even if the Raven-Spenglerian analysis be accepted as a relatively incontrovertible interpretation of past history, our present European civilisation, as the master of vast scientific resources which were not available to the men of previous cultures, can overcome the diseases inherent in its hitherto uncontrolled development.<sup>81</sup>

Allen's assessment of the book and thus its author's political and philosophical beliefs in late 1931, has coloured subsequent academic understanding. Both Thurlow and Coupland rely heavily on Allen in their arguments for the book's status as a fascist work.<sup>82</sup> Yet if we are to accurately judge the substance of Raven Thomson's thought in late 1931, we must return to the text itself.

Before this analysis can proceed the definition of a fascist text must be isolated. Such a question is often considered in connection with literary figures outside the fascist mainstream, such as T. S. Elliot and Wyndham Lewis, who contributed to a milieu without joining the vanguard of a movement.<sup>83</sup> As one commentator queried in a study of Lewis, '[w]hat does it mean to be a fascist writer? Is it enough to be a Fascist and to be a writer or must a demonstrable relation exist between one's fascism and one's writing?'<sup>84</sup> It would be easy to simply concede, as other historians, that given his later affiliation, *Civilization as Divine Superman* was a fascist work. Yet whilst it noted the existence of Mussolini's Italian regime, no clear endorsement was made. As has been noted in studies of fascist literature, when biography fails to provide clear answers to the

<sup>79</sup> J.Drennan (pseud.), *Oswald Mosley, BUF and British Fascism*, op. cit., 201-4.; See also W.E.D.Allen, 'The Fascist Idea in Britain,' *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 261, October 1933, 230.

<sup>80</sup> J.Drennan (pseud.), *Oswald Mosley, BUF and British Fascism*, op. cit., 201.

<sup>81</sup> W.E.D.Allen 'The Fascist Idea in Britain,' op. cit., 230.

<sup>82</sup> R.Thurlow, 'Destiny and Doom: Spengler, Hitler and 'British' Fascism,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 15 No. 4, 1977, 25-6; P.Coupland, 'The Blackshirted Utopians,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33 No.2, 1998, 270-1.

<sup>83</sup> A.Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism*, op. cit., 274-6, 280-5.

<sup>84</sup> R.Dasenbrook, 'Wyndham Lewis's Fascist Imagination and the Fiction of Paranoia,' in R.J.Golsan (ed.), *Fascism, Aesthetics and Culture*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 1992, 81.



distinction surrounding an individual writer's affiliations, themes can provide a useful tool for isolating underlying beliefs. Given the impact of Spengler on *Civilization as Divine Superman*, a comparison with *The Decline of the West*, can be used to locate Raven Thomson's ideas in late 1931.

First, however, we must decide what parameters are to be set on the term 'fascism.' The historical and organic dimensions within Raven Thomson's book indicate that the definition and, as such, the border control for repelling or accepting individuals into fascism must be erected in this area. Zeev Sternhell's understanding of fascist ideology as in part an organic nationalism is important.<sup>85</sup> This must be integrated in a vitalist, secular liturgy of struggle centred on a single priest-like leader committed to rejuvenation, from Roger Griffin's ideas.<sup>86</sup>

If this comparison is to aid us to locate Raven Thomson in 1931, the relationship between Spengler and fascism must be established.<sup>87</sup> The extent of any fascism in Spengler's ideas has been difficult to quantify. Commentators on his work have used him as an example for several arguments concerning the intellectual legacy of the Weimar Republic on the subsequent appearance of the Nazi regime, with one arguing that he prepared the way for an acceptance of dictatorship in Germany.<sup>88</sup> Depending upon the observer, Spengler has been seen as a typical example of 'Heroic Vitalism,'<sup>89</sup> 'Reactionary Modernism,'<sup>90</sup> 'Nietzschean Socialism'<sup>91</sup> and 'Palingenesis.'<sup>92</sup> Part of the problem when categorising Spengler comes from inherent contradictions within his work.<sup>93</sup> This is apparent even at the level of methodology. For though his cyclical history and

<sup>85</sup> See Z. Sternhell, 'Fascism,' in D. Miller (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 148-50.

<sup>86</sup> R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, op. cit., 26; E. Gentile, 'Fascism as Political Religion,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 23 No.s 2-3, 1980, 229-51.

<sup>87</sup> In this study concentrates on Spengler's major work. The historian did develop his ideas and later works indicate that he increasingly saw the European culture as the last in human history. See J. Farrenkopf, 'The transformation of Spengler's Philosophy of World History,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 52 No. 3, 1991, 463-485.

<sup>88</sup> H. S. Hughes, *Oswald Spengler, a Critical Estimate*, Charles Scribner's Sons, London, 1952, 132; See also T. Adorno, trans. S. Weber & S. Weber, *Prisms*, Neville Spearman, London, 1967, 53-72.

<sup>89</sup> E. Bentley, *Cult of the Superman*, Robert Hale, London, 1947, 190, 193.

<sup>90</sup> J. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, 49-69; idem., 'The Engineer as Ideologue: Reactionary Modernists in Weimar and Nazi Germany' *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 19 No. 4, 1984, 633; idem., 'Reactionary Modernism - Some ideological Origins in the Primacy of Politics in the Third Reich,' *Theory and Society*, Vol. 10 No. 6, 1981, 813-9.

<sup>91</sup> See S. Aschheim, 'Nietzschean Socialism,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 23 No. 2, 1988, 147-68.

<sup>92</sup> R. Griffin (ed), *Fascism*, op. cit., 112-4.

<sup>93</sup> B. Mazlish *The Riddle of History*, Harper and Row, London, 1966, 321.



attempt to compare different cultures is inherently relativist, he was searching for a distinct logic to historical events. Another difficulty lies in the development of Spengler's thought during the twenties and early thirties. In his later works he appears to be concerned to see world history as a series of cultures each accelerating more rapidly than the last, with the European one at a pace so swift that its end might signal the final act of all world history. This in turn connects with new ideas he was having about pre-history.<sup>94</sup> With the concentration of Raven Thomson and BUF fascism on perpetual cultures and their contemporary significance, it seems clear that when we discuss Spengler in this context it refers to the ideas contained within *The Decline of the West*.

Despite his fascistic sounding Caesar figure, underpinning much of Spengler's work is a profoundly conservative, rather than fascist, political world-view. Whilst his political ideal for Germany carried the distinctly National Socialist sounding combination of 'Prussianism and Socialism,' this was a mixture of aristocratic rule and Socialist concepts of duty.<sup>95</sup> The term 'Socialism' was of indistinct nomenclature in the period between 1890 and 1933. Nietzsche's concept of 'Will' aided the European Right's attempt to utilise the term in order to gather support from the workers, without effecting any change to the prevailing social structure.<sup>96</sup> This 'Socialism' denoted duty and sacrifice within a national Will-to-Power in which both worker and employer, as 'producers' could contribute.<sup>97</sup> His 'Prussianism' was the preserve of these elites who were still, he argued, linked to the culture bearing soil.<sup>98</sup> It was in the proposed leadership of these obedient workers that Spengler betrays his allegiance to the traditional ruling elites of Germany. Spengler's ideal was an emasculated German working class, devoid of Marxist internationalism, ready to serve. His Socialism was bereft of any ethical or egalitarian elements.<sup>99</sup> The clearest example of this came in 1932 when in a period of economic hardship for Germany he proposed a draconian end to the endemic

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<sup>94</sup> See J.Farrenkopf, 'The Transformation of Spengler's Philosophy of World History,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.52 No.3, 1991, 463-85.

<sup>95</sup> O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West I*, op. cit., 138 cited in P.M.Hayes, *Fascism*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1973, 67.

<sup>96</sup> S.E.Aschheim, 'Nietzschean Socialism' op. cit., 147-68.

<sup>97</sup> O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West II*, op. cit., 506. See also H.Lebovics, *Social Conservatism and the Middle Classes in Germany 1914-33*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1969, 159.

<sup>98</sup> O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West II*, op. cit., 444, 475.

<sup>99</sup> J.P.Stern, 'The Welt angst of Oswald Spengler,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1980, 1150.



poverty by lowering wages and ending social security payments.<sup>100</sup> Spengler's use of Socialism is best understood as a technique for implementing and enforcing decisions made by a select aristocratic elite of 'Socialist Mastertypes.'<sup>101</sup>

Thus Spengler, despite outward appearance was not proposing fascist ideas within *The Decline of the West*.<sup>102</sup> Whilst he did exhibit a belief in organic nationalism, his commitment to the traditional political elites rendered it far from populist.<sup>103</sup> Though his work does indeed prophecy the coming of a revitalising Caesarist period, this was to be a brief postponement before inevitable collapse, thereby allowing another culture an opportunity at growth.<sup>104</sup> Despite sending some articles to Mussolini, at the foundation of Spengler's thought was the concept of perpetual historical cycles rather than the *single* rebirth of fascism towards a glorious mythical state where near immortal longevity could be achieved, such as a Reich lasting a thousand years.<sup>105</sup>

Such concepts blurred the precise nature of the relationship he had with the emergent Nazi regime. Though he displayed a concern for the soil as the root of culture his concept of the divisions between cultures was spiritual rather than racial. Nor did he perceive a hierarchy of cultural excellence as the Nazis did, for him the West was not better than any other culture, just different. Whilst he did vote for Hitler in the 1932 presidential election, supporting the Nazi platform on law and order, the alternatives were a liberal or a Communist candidate, so a distinct endorsement is hard to clarify, though he did choose to vote.<sup>106</sup> Gregor Strasser, the leader of the Bavarian branch of the NSDAP, tried to attract Spengler to the cause.<sup>107</sup> An attempt to recruit him into the Nazi ranks by Goebbels collapsed after the Propaganda Minister arranged a private meeting for him with Hitler at which Spengler formed a poor impression of the Fuhrer and refused to

<sup>100</sup> A.Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism*, op. cit., 142.

<sup>101</sup> P.M.Hayes, *Fascism*, op. cit., 67; M.Biddiss, 'History as Destiny,' op. cit., 96; H.Lebovics, *Social Conservatism and the Middle Classes in Germany 1914-33*, op. cit., 161.

<sup>102</sup> R.Griffin, *Fascism*, op. cit., 112. Griffin categorises Spengler as a 'Non Nazi German Fascist.' That his thought later evolved in that direction is granted, however, it is clear Raven Thomson was influenced solely by the non-fascist work of 1918.

<sup>103</sup> W.Struve, *Elites against Democracy*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1973, 269-73. See also K.von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1957, 208.

<sup>104</sup> O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West II*, op. cit., 507.

<sup>105</sup> O.Spengler, *Spengler Letters*, op. cit., 180.

<sup>106</sup> W.Struve, *Elites against Democracy*, op. cit., 270.

<sup>107</sup> O.Spengler, *Spengler Letters*, op. cit., 181, 183-6.



confer upon him the mantle of 'Faustian' Caesar.<sup>108</sup> Spengler believed the Nazi Party to be too plebeian, too prone to street politics and too similar to Bolshevism.<sup>109</sup> The appearance of a book by Spengler in 1933 renouncing biological racism, one of the pillars of the new German State, saw him ostracised from the political scene.<sup>110</sup> Yet as one astute commentator has noted, despite his fall from political favour, which had seen other opponents of the regime violently purged, he died naturally in his bed in 1936.<sup>111</sup>

The precise contribution of Spengler to *Civilization as Divine Superman* was kept ambiguous in the book, which claimed 'the writer developed the conception of a superorganic agency, supported by the similar conclusions of the German philosopher Oswald Spengler.'<sup>112</sup> Later within the fascist ranks, he again placed Spengler as a contemporary, rather than a progenitor; 'my own work a few years ago followed very much the same lines as Spengler.'<sup>113</sup> In truth, *The Decline of the West* profoundly influenced Raven Thomson's ideas in 1931, despite being a direct rebuke to Spengler who had insisted that there was no superorganic system at work in history.<sup>114</sup> For the German historian there was no vehicle for history except the manifest destiny of each culture that had to be comprehended intuitively. A law of historical development would necessarily be founded on idea of a rational understanding that he rejected.

Both men perceived historical development as cyclical. Yet Raven Thomson's emergent superman was allowed significantly longer to exist, between two and three thousand years, unlike Spengler's millennial morphology. This difference resulted in a contrasting perception of timing and speed in historical development. In 1931 Raven Thomson started his western superman in the first century, and placed the demise of European civilisation many centuries away. He also copied the four-stage system of development, each with the separate characteristics within a worldwide history.<sup>115</sup> In Mosley's biography, *Civilization as Divine Superman* was described as a rejection of Spenglerian morphology, an

<sup>108</sup> H.S.Hughes, *Oswald Spengler – A Critical Estimate*, op. cit., 120-36.

<sup>109</sup> W.Struve, *Elites against Democracy*, op. cit., 273.

<sup>110</sup> O.Spengler, *The Hour of Decision* (trans. C.F.Atkinson), Allen & Unwin, London, 1934.

<sup>111</sup> N.Frye, 'The Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler,' op. cit., 9.

<sup>112</sup> Alexander Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 9.

<sup>113</sup> *Fascist Week* 12, 26<sup>th</sup> January- 1<sup>st</sup> February 1934.

<sup>114</sup> N.Frye, 'The Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler,' op. cit., 5.

<sup>115</sup> A. Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 32. O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West* I, Appendix: Tables 1-3.



argument supported by his biographer. Yet Raven Thomson's book agreed with Spengler that the world historical cycles were perpetual with unavoidable stages and a natural time-span. Thus Raven Thomson in 1931 does not fit the rebirth criteria for fascism.

The chief revision of Spengler within Raven Thomson's book, which illustrates the persistence of the more egalitarian ideas of his previous Communist sympathies, was his perception of the elite in society. Unlike Spengler, Raven Thomson favoured a more open elite, in keeping with his idea that everyone in society as an individual unit of the greater superorganism, had significance.<sup>116</sup> In his idealised autocratic period the only criteria for admittance into the elite of 'scribes' was service to the superorganism and its personification in a quasi-religious leader.<sup>117</sup> Such scribes formed the nucleus of the following 'oligarchic' phase of superorganic development, an era of nationhood and monarchy.<sup>118</sup> This more populist approach was, arguably, more in keeping with fascism. This political philosophy of successive elites providing the locomotive of history was based in the work of the Italian sociologist, Vilfredo Pareto.<sup>119</sup> In Pareto's concept of society a clear division lay between the masses and the elite. In an attempt to perpetuate itself, this ruling group recruits from outside its numbers and once these newcomers gain ascendancy a new elite is formed, provoking another cycle. Ironically, despite being a revision of Spengler's aims, it holds with his method where autocracy gives way to rule by aristocracy, which submits to plutocracy. As one commentator noted 'the centre of Spengler's theory, the notion of elites and the necessary rule of a social class, was simply second rate Pareto.'<sup>120</sup>

Despite the best efforts of W.E.D.Allen, *Civilisation as Divine Superman* is not a fascist text. In its acceptance of Spenglerian destiny, it failed crucially to posit any concept of redemption, following its predecessor in the appreciation of perpetual historical rotation. The acceptance of the future as a preordained series of events that merely awaited the appropriate participants exhibited none of the vitalism, the struggle, that informs fascist ideology. Yet the idea of organic

<sup>116</sup> W.Struve, *Elites against Democracy*, op. cit., 248-51, 259-63; A.Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 34

<sup>117</sup> A.Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 81-4.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> V.Pareto, *Treatise of General Sociology* cited in H.S.Hughes, *Oswald Spengler a Critical Estimate*, op. cit., 3,16.

<sup>120</sup> H.S.Hughes, *Oswald Spengler - A Critical Estimate*, op. cit., 117.



nationalism in his philosophy of the communal superorganism is clear, as is a populist rejection of Spenglerian elites in favour of a hive mentality where all participated. The conclusion that must be drawn from the evidence within *Civilization as Divine Superman* is that in September 1931 Raven Thomson was not a fascist. Yet with the revision of certain elements of his superorganic ideas, principally his perpetual historical cycles, a path could be divined into fascism and the ranks of the BUF. As one BUF member wrote of *Civilization as Divine Superman*,

This book, which covers all the most lavish epochs of intellectual productivity, is a tragic essay in futility. The subtle disintegrating influence of Oswald Spengler is evident in its pages - which are embellished with ingenious charts and diagrams of human social development - and its inexorable decline. The work is curious, not merely for the versatility of knowledge, nor as the melancholy hypothesis of intellect - but also as the record of an earnest sociologist who found his inevitable place in the Fascist movement - which is the bearer of social revolution in this age.<sup>121</sup>

Whilst it is arguable how inevitable the journey to fascism was, his early philosophy provided the foundations for the making of a fascist.

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Having examined the intellectual path that brought Raven Thomson within sight of the border into fascism, now we must look at the characteristics of Mosley fascism that allowed him to make the transition and push on into a fascist movement. The biographical information available on him indicates is that between September 1931 and April 1933, when he joined the BUF, he shifted his beliefs. By the time he became a Blackshirt, resignation at the fate of contemporary society from Spenglerian determinism had been replaced by a perception of this as a crisis to be overcome. What prompted this revision in his worldview is conjecture, with no information about this time in his life available. We do not know enough about his environment to be able to propose with any certainty the combination of conditions that prompted the re-evaluation of Spengler and the desire to participate in a struggle for rejuvenation. That the period saw the failure of the Labour administration to deal adequately with the effects of the global depression in Britain and the rise of National Socialism in Germany, as a more radical answer to their domestic problems, cannot be discounted as stimuli.



This journey to fascism was not unique during the period. For commentators on the generic phenomenon, such as Griffin, it is an example of a particular intellectual acceptance of fascism found in many of the cyclical historians of the period.<sup>122</sup> Individuals such as the Italian intellectuals Giovanni Gentile, Sergio Panunzio, Julius Evola, Belgians like Paul De Man and German figures exemplified by Spengler, were historically minded thinkers whose perception of a history as a series of cycles was linked to a critique of contemporary society as decadent and weak.<sup>123</sup> Such historians eulogised a past utopian phase, where all individuals fulfilled their role within a strong cohesive state. These thinkers were drawn at varying speeds to fascism's promise of renewal and national greatness. Payne is keen to demonstrate that these meta-historians were conservative revolutionaries who contributed to the authoritarian nationalism within fascism. They were waiting for an epoch of rejuvenation and authority under a disciplined elite, even if they stayed aloof from the plebeian realities of activism, as Spengler did with Nazism.<sup>124</sup>

Much of this study has been an examination of how a historian, consumed by ideas of resolving the world into a system, could journey into fascism. Raven Thomson's experience was only a rarity within the confines of British fascism, a movement that by continental standards was tiny. On a pan-European level he joined a small but distinct group of thinkers whose desire to understand the mechanisms of history had transformed them into prophets of imminent crisis and evangelists for national rebirth. Where he differed slightly was in his belief that rejuvenation would be conducted on a communal rather than elite level, though this allowed him to participate fully in a fascist movement, rather than standing remote from the struggle. Such a continental style conversion runs counter to conventional interpretations of Mosley fascism. For if Raven Thomson was participating in a European milieu, how can the BUF be an isolated group outside the fascist mainstream?

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<sup>121</sup> *Action* 48, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1937.

<sup>122</sup> R.Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, op. cit., 51, 216.

<sup>123</sup> Evola conceived of a cyclical pattern where the society was organised with priests at the summit, then warriors, followed by merchants and finishing with slaves. He believed that throughout history, martial societies inhabited by warrior-priests had been the bolster against decadence, though he thought Mussolini's Fascism as not elitist enough. See S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 502-3; R.Eatwell, *Fascism – A History*, op. cit., 202; R.Griffin, *Fascism*, op. cit., 47; Z. Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, op. cit., 179.



The precise trigger for Raven Thomson's metamorphosis from determinist to revolutionary is unknown, but the result was the end of the objective acceptance of collapse within *Civilization as Divine Superman* and a new perception of his previous stance as pessimistic and defeatist. This new belief in crisis remained rooted in his understanding of history derived from Spengler. Once within fascism, he radically revised his previous acceptance of Spengler's arguments about cultural demise.<sup>125</sup> Fascism was rationalised as the conscious rejection of the collapse inherent in perpetual cyclical history. As he later wrote of the period after the completion of his book, 'I was so appalled at the pessimism inherent in my conclusions that I turned deliberately to Fascism as a means of restoration and regeneration of Western civilization.'<sup>126</sup>

As the work of Brewer on Mosley fascism has indicated, the fascists considered a perception of crisis as the principle rationalisation for their turn to fascism.<sup>127</sup> These rationalisations were, Brewer found, far from homogeneous, with biographical detail providing subjective variations on the core 'crisis model.'<sup>128</sup> The concept of impending crisis meant that entry into a fascist movement could be justified as the pragmatic choice in the face of catastrophe, whether this was perceived as economic collapse, imperial decline, or the threat of Jewish domination.<sup>129</sup> Mosley, looking back at the BUF, also believed that a perception of crisis was a spur to recruitment.<sup>130</sup> Once Raven Thomson perceived Spengler's history to be pessimistic, he was faced with participating in the revitalisation of his communal superman. In effect his idea of rebirth had been taken from its perpetual moorings in *Civilization as Divine Superman* and applied within the superorganic cycle to a revitalising crusade.

Why then choose fascism over the other alternatives on offer? His contempt for democracy in *Civilization as Divine Superman* precluded his participation in the conventional parties. The experience of local Communism had

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<sup>124</sup> S.Payne, *A History of Fascism*, op. cit., 162. See also R.Eatwell, *Fascism – A History*, op. cit., 202; R.Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, op. cit., 98.

<sup>125</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Why Fascism?,' *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.1 No.2, 1935, 251.

<sup>126</sup> *Fascist Week* 12, 26<sup>th</sup> January -1<sup>st</sup> February 1934.

<sup>127</sup> J.Brewer, 'Looking back at fascism: a phenomenological analysis of BUF membership,' *Sociological Review*, Vol. 32, 1984, 749, 753-7; Idem., 'The British Union of fascists: Some tentative conclusions on its membership' in S.Larsen (ed.) *Who Were The Fascists – Social Roots of European Fascism* op. cit., 548-553. Both works draw heavily from an earlier thesis published in a revised form as *Mosley's Men*, Gower, Aldershot, 1984.

<sup>128</sup> J.Brewer, 'Looking back at fascism,' op. cit., 749-50, 756-7.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 742, 749-50.



left him reticent about that movement and, as we have seen, philosophically he was opposed to its emphasis on division within society. Britain boasted only one significant alternative to Mosley's group, Arnold Leese's Imperial Fascist League. This fascism was founded on a virulent anti-Semitism, to the detriment of a cohesive ideology.

The main reason for the choice of the BUF and the subsequent length of Raven Thomson's participation was its leader, the 'Black Knight' of British politics, Sir Oswald Mosley.<sup>131</sup> Mosley was a member of the landed gentry, his family having ties to the Manchester region since the Seventeenth Century. Serving in the Royal Flying Corps during the Great War, he had returned to Britain and entered parliament after the 1918 General Election as a Conservative.<sup>132</sup> Disagreeing with the government's use of ex-soldiers to quell disturbances in Ireland, he crossed the floor and took the Labour party whip. Elected as a Labour MP he was rewarded by the 1929 administration with a Cabinet post as Chancellor for the Duchy of Lancaster, with special responsibility for formulating a solution to the rising problem of unemployment. Highly influenced by the work of the Cambridge economist John Maynard Keynes, Mosley's conclusions favoured greater economic intervention by the state, with a scheme of public works projects to generate jobs and boost the economy.<sup>133</sup> A radical 'Mosley Memorandum' was however rejected in cabinet, whereupon he resigned and took the proposals to the party's national executive meeting where it was narrowly dismissed. As a result Mosley, together with three other Labour MP's, including his wife Cynthia, formed the 'New Party,' with a programme based on the earlier memorandum. Meeting violent opposition to their ideas, the party instituted a defensive group of stewards to ensure speakers could hold a meeting. The aggressive activities of these men earned them the title 'Biff Boys.'<sup>134</sup>

During this period Mosley became increasingly interested in the new Italian creed of Fascism and upon the failure of the New Party to obtain any measure of electoral success, he journeyed to Italy to witness Mussolini's regime. Returning

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<sup>130</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 303.

<sup>131</sup> See R.Thurlow, 'The Black Knight,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol.9 No.3, 1975, 9-15.

<sup>132</sup> Work on Mosley's early life is limited and as his biographer acknowledged, is neglected in favour of the more emotive study of his fascist record. See R.Skidelsky 'Reflections on Mosley,' R.C.Thurlow and K.Lunn (eds.), *British Fascism*, op. cit., 82.

<sup>133</sup> See R.Skidelsky, 'Oswald Mosley: From Empire to Europe,' *20<sup>th</sup> Century Studies*, Vol.1 No.1, 1969, 38-61.



to Britain, he attempted to incorporate some of the domestic fascist groups, at that time little more than militarist Conservative Italophiles, with the remnants of the New Party stewards into the BUF.<sup>135</sup> The BUF was founded on 1st October 1932, with the simultaneous publication of its main treatise Mosley's *The Greater Britain*. Its size in April 1933 when Raven Thomson joined was still small, prior to a temporary rise in popularity during early 1934. The movement later characterised the period as the 'loose, inchoate and formless association of 1933.'<sup>136</sup> At that time it clashed with the remnants of the British Fascists, an earlier attempt at domestic fascism, and Labour groups.<sup>137</sup> The first BUF government was being confidently predicted within 2 years in the movement's propaganda, it was well funded and had yet to receive the setbacks that were typical of its later development. Life in the movement was characterised as one of close comradeship.<sup>138</sup> The impression that Raven Thomson received upon entering was of a political group embarking on a grand crusade; as Mosley wrote later in the year '[t]he tents of ease are struck and the soul of man is on the march.'<sup>139</sup>

Much of this faith was centred in the movement's figurehead, Mosley. In choosing to follow Mosley, Raven Thomson turned away from the communal leadership of *Civilization as Divine Superman*, choosing instead to be a loyal acolyte to the fascist leader for the rest of his life. Mosley was a highly charismatic character cultivating a persona as a visionary figure, complete with 'lighthouse eyes.'<sup>140</sup> An imposing figure in the early 1930s, he was an international level athlete, a tall man with a commanding platform presence and oratorical style.<sup>141</sup> Harold Nicolson, who joined the New Party only to depart over the issue of fascism neatly summarises the twin enticements for him, 'I joined the party for two reasons 1. Personal affection and belief in Tom [Mosley's nickname] 2. A conviction that a serious crisis was impending and that our economic and parliamentary system

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<sup>134</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 247-282.

<sup>135</sup> 'The Movement is indeed a 'Union of Fascists' and many officials and members drawn from all existing Fascist organisations are now in the ranks of the B.U.F... We appeal for the co-operation of those who have long believed in Fascism, but have been disappointed by the lack of progress and want of constructive policy in former Fascist associations.' Bodlien Library Archive: John Johnson Collection, Box 8: Creeds, Parties, Policies: O.Mosley, circular 7<sup>th</sup> November 1932.

<sup>136</sup> *The Blackshirt* 178, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1936.

<sup>137</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 92-8.

<sup>138</sup> D.Baker, 'The Appeal of Fascism: Pathological Fantasy or Ideological Coherence,' op. cit., 9.

<sup>139</sup> *Fascist Week* 7, 22-28<sup>th</sup> December 1933.

<sup>140</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, Brockingday, London, 1990, 93, 233; N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1983, 39-40.

<sup>141</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 335-7. Mosley fenced epee in the Olympic games of 1932.



must be transformed if a collapse was to be avoided.’<sup>142</sup> That George Bernard Shaw, a figure so clearly revered in *Civilization as Divine Superman*, was impressed with Mosley might also have confirmed the BUF leader’s stature for Raven Thomson.<sup>143</sup>

Mosley’s own view, expressed in his memoirs, was that it was his meeting with Raven Thomson in September 1933 that provided the catalyst for the latter’s fascist activism. Raven Thomson had, however, been in the movement for five months by that time. Mosley also stated in his autobiography that Raven Thomson’s Spenglerian pessimism from *Civilization as Divine Superman* dissipated during their early meetings. Yet Raven Thomson had rejected his determinist philosophy as part of the decision to join the BUF. Discussions with Mosley only re-affirmed his earlier decision to join the fascist movement. In 1940 when Raven Thomson was justifying his reason for joining the movement to an internment committee, it was Mosley’s ideas that had made the difference,

I became very interested in political and economic questions. I have written a book on historical studies of civilisation and I was firmly convinced that the present system was wrong and should be altered. I then came across some writings of Sir Oswald Mosley especially on the Corporate State which interested me very much and I joined for that reason as a result of considerable historical study beforehand.<sup>144</sup>

Jeffrey Hamm, who would succeed Raven Thomson to the post of Secretary to the post-war Mosleyite ‘Union Movement,’ too appeared to have been drawn to Mosley by his writings,

I am always pleased that I joined British Union before I heard Mosley speak, I was not brought into the movement under the spell of his oratory or his personal magnetism, but simply through reading his policies and thinking that they were right.<sup>145</sup>

The Blackshirt leader’s contribution to the making of this fascist was accomplished before the two met.

That there were traces of Spenglerian thinking already in the BUF eased Raven Thomson’s journey into their ranks. Tellingly, Mosley made a speech in March 1933 to the English Speaking Union, in an attempt to legitimise fascism to

<sup>142</sup> Cited in A.Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism*, op. cit., 263-4.

<sup>143</sup> *Action* 130, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1938; A.Raven Thomson, ‘Book Review,’ *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.2 No.3, 1936, 441.

<sup>144</sup> PRO HO283/70/73. Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>145</sup> E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, op. cit., 75.



the establishment, where he used Spengler in his definition of fascism as ‘collective Caesarism.’

The will and talent of the individual alone is replaced by the will and ability of the disciplined thousands, who comprise a Fascist movement. *Every Blackshirt is an individual cell of a collective Caesarism* [my emphasis]. The organised will of devoted masses, subject to a voluntary discipline and inspired by the passionate ideal of national survival, replaces the will to power and a higher order of the individual superman... the only lesson that we can derive from the previous evidence of this doctrine is simply this, that whenever the world, under the influence of Spartacus drifted to complete collapse and chaos, it was always what Spengler termed the ‘great fact men’ who extracted the world from the resultant chaos and gave mankind very often centuries of peace and order in a new system and a new stability.<sup>146</sup>

He continued, ‘[t]his conception may seem to you to suggest, to some extent, a Spenglerian approach, and it is quite true that the great German philosopher has done more than any other to paint in the broad background of Fascist thought.’<sup>147</sup> The cosmetic similarity between Mosley’s collective Caesar and Raven Thomson’s communal superman at such a time made entry into the fascist movement considerably less of a radical departure for the latter. Spengler may even have predisposed Raven Thomson to Mosley with an appreciation of the soldier statesman as the archetype for a Caesar figure.<sup>148</sup> The conclusion that must be drawn from the available information is that it was not personal contact that generated Raven Thomson’s move into the BUF. Rather, Mosley’s early fascist thought that drew him in. That the Blackshirt leader was interested by the ideas in *Civilization as Divine Superman*, served to keep its author there.<sup>149</sup>

The ranks of the BUF also included other former Communists who had moved to fascism. Mandle’s study of the BUF leadership cited a small but distinct group with previous affiliation to Communism.<sup>150</sup> CJ Bradford, ran the ill fated attempt at a BUF industrial trades union the ‘Fascist Union of British Workers.’<sup>151</sup> Charlie Watts, a London Communist, came to the Mosley movement in the hopes that it could help the social conditions of the British people; he subsequently

<sup>146</sup> Oswald Mosley, ‘Philosophy of Fascism,’ *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol. 1 No. 1, 1934, 43.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>148</sup> E.Bentley, *The Cult of the Superman*, op. cit., 189.

<sup>149</sup> PRO HO283/70/73 Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing; O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 331-2.

<sup>150</sup> W.F.Mandle, ‘The Leadership of the British Union of Fascists’ op. cit., 378-9.

<sup>151</sup> G.C.Webber, ‘The British Isles,’ op. cit., 146.



developed a strong BUF cell amongst London taxi drivers.<sup>152</sup> This concern for conditions also appears in Raven Thomson's work where, 'the earnest patriot and the earnest Socialist join hands across the welter of struggling interests in the declining capitalist system to maintain social values.'<sup>153</sup> Mosley later considered such converts as amongst the best BUF members.<sup>154</sup> Communism was also in the political experiences of other fascists. In France, Jacques Doriot, a Communist leader converted, frustrated by the bureaucracy of the party.<sup>155</sup> It is important to note, however, that this 'traffic' was not all one way, with Communists joining the BUF, only to become disillusioned and depart, some firing a parting shot as in the case of A.C.Miles.<sup>156</sup>

Given the traditional position of Communism and fascism at opposing ends of the political spectrum, transition between the two might be considered with some incredulity. Raven Thomson's political journey was not a direct switch from the CPGB to the BUF, for at least eighteen months elapsed between disillusionment with one and activism in the other, yet Communist thought had left its mark on his 1932 book. Neither was the journey from Communism to fascism perceived as a transfer between diametric opposites. In common with the organic holism of fascism, Raven Thomson believed that 'Fascism has no place in the usual grouping of parties from left to right.'<sup>157</sup> Far from being wholly opposed to Communism, he believed liberal individualism to be fascism's main adversary; 'If people desire to know what is the opposite of fascism, they will find the opposite in individualism not "Communism."' <sup>158</sup> In attacking the products of liberal individualism, conceived of as poor conditions and unfair distribution of wealth, he sought to make Communism obsolete, furnished as it was with the doctrines of class war that stood in the way of superorganic co-operation.<sup>159</sup> Indeed he wished

<sup>152</sup> PRO HO283/74/30. Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Charlie Watts hearing.

<sup>153</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Book Review,' *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.2 No.3, 1936, 456.

<sup>154</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 308.

<sup>155</sup> G.D.Allardyce, 'The Political Transformation of Jacques Doriot' in G.Mosse (ed.) *International Fascism: New Thoughts and Approaches*, Sage, London, 1979, 273-92.

<sup>156</sup> Miles cited the financial contributions of industrial leaders to the BUF as proof of the insincerity of its social policy. See A.Miles, *Mosley in Motley*, A.C.Miles, London, 1937. See also PRO HO144/20144/173: Special Branch report 26<sup>th</sup> January 1935; *Jewish Chronicle* 9<sup>th</sup> April 1937.

<sup>157</sup> *Fascist Week* 14, 9<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> February 1934; See R.Eatwell 'On defining the 'Fascist Minimum': the centrality of ideology,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol.1 No.3, 1996, 303.

<sup>158</sup> *Fascist Week* 14, 9<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> February 1934.

<sup>159</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Fascism and the Dialectic,' *British Union Quarterly*, Vol.3 No.3, 1939, 51-2.



to use the Hegelian dialectic against Marxism in his attempt to view fascism as the synthesis of sectional interests and patriotism.<sup>160</sup>

Geography also played its part in the recruitment of Raven Thomson. That he was living in London and thus at the epicentre of BUF activities aided his subsequent relationship with Mosley fascism. Chesterton's path into the Blackshirts had been triggered when he moved to a house close to the movement's Chelsea headquarters, and one day ventured inside.<sup>161</sup> BUF strength in Raven Thomson's native Scotland was weak, with only a handful of branches.<sup>162</sup> Whilst the location of fascist activity cannot be a spur to ideological commitment, had Raven Thomson lived anywhere else in the country the ease of joining and being swept up in fascist life would have been substantially less likely.

Raven Thomson's journey into the BUF was premised on a new concern for Spenglerian decline. What exactly prompted him to view Spengler's destiny as doom laden, lies somewhere between September 1931 and April 1933. Whether this perception of crisis was stimulated by Mosley's work, or merely made Raven Thomson susceptible to the BUF's message is thus unknown. Mosley as leader figure and visionary thinker, however, appears to have been the enticement that drew Raven Thomson across the border into fascism. Once Raven Thomson had accepted Mosley as a leader attempting to engineer national rebirth in defiance of Spengler's historical prophecy for Europe, all the particular facets of the fascist genus were present. Yet so adamant was Raven Thomson that here was the answer to the 'reality' of his contemporary society that he chose a lifetime of activism within a fascist movement.

What turned Raven Thomson from a detached historian, calmly prophesying the inevitable collapse of his 'civilizations' into an agent of regeneration, is unknown. Such was his conviction, that instead of writing a further book revising his ideas, he chose to join the ranks of a fascist movement and fight for the regeneration of his communal superman.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>161</sup> D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit., 123.

<sup>162</sup> See PRO HO144/20140/105: Special Branch report April/May 1934. See E.Kibblewhite & A.Rigby, *Fascism in Aberdeen*, Aberdeen Peoples Press, Aberdeen, 1978.



### III

The impact of Spengler is therefore crucial when attempting to understand the choice of Mosley and fascism as a vehicle for Raven Thomson's political activism. With his entry into the BUF, his fascist philosophy retained a distinct Spenglerian character. This has larger ramifications for studies of the movement if we are to subscribe, as Nugent has argued, to a credible ideological core of the BUF that consisted of Mosley *and* his chief advisors, as Raven Thomson was quickly to become.<sup>163</sup> Thus what we understand as the BUF is in part dictated by Raven Thomson's understanding of Spengler. To put that understanding within its proper context, his ideas must be compared with his peers within the movement, for as the BUF newspaper *Action* noted 'the leaders of the new National Socialist movements are fully aware of the Spenglerian doom overhanging modern civilisation...'<sup>164</sup>

Mosley's understanding of Spengler had begun with his study of *The Decline of the West* in 1931. Without his endorsement it is highly unlikely that it would have become enshrined within BUF thought.<sup>165</sup> Based on the Blackshirt leader's March 1933 speech, Thurlow has argued Spengler was used 'to rationalise Mosley's turn to fascism and that this was more than a pale imitation of Hitler and Mussolini.'<sup>166</sup> In Mosley's thought Spengler provided a context for his fascism, which was presented an amalgamation of Nietzschean philosophy of empowerment, tempered with a Christian service instinct.<sup>167</sup> Later in the decade Mosley again chose to use Spengler as the background in the picture of the fascist struggle,

Above the European scene towers in the menace of Spengler's colossal contribution to modern thought, which taught our new generation that a limit is set to the course of civilisations and Empires, and that the course that once is run is for ever closed. Every indication of decadence and decline, which he observed as a precursor of the downfall of a civilisation, is apparent in the modern scene, and from all history he deduced the sombre conclusion that the effort of Faustian man to renew his youth, and to

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<sup>163</sup> N.Nugent 'The Ideas of the British Union of Fascists' in N.Nugent and R.King (eds.), *The British Right*, Saxon House, Farnborough, 1977, 134-5.

<sup>164</sup> *Action* 178, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1939.

<sup>165</sup> R.Thurlow, 'Destiny and Doom,' op. cit., 24.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>167</sup> Oswald Mosley, 'Philosophy of Fascism,' *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.1 No.1, 1934, 37-9. See also R.C.Thurlow, 'Destiny and Doom,' op. cit., 24.



recapture the dawn of a civilisation must ever fail... We take up that challenge with the radiant optimism born of man's achievements in the realm of science, that the philosopher understood less well than history, and born, above all, of our undying belief in the invincible spirit of that final product of the ages - the modern man.<sup>168</sup>

In his understanding of Spengler, Mosley appears to have been highly selective in his reading of *The Decline of the West*, choosing to base his arguments for fascism upon the final stage of cultural collapse and the rise of the Caesars. As he wrote in his later autobiography, 'it was Spengler's profound understanding of Caesarism which first attracted me to him.'<sup>169</sup> For Mosley, Spengler had neglected the redemptive power of science, and was thus merely a foil for his fascist ideas, a 'great antagonist.'<sup>170</sup>

Mosley's rejection of Spengler's prognosis of collapse was based substantially upon technocratic lines.<sup>171</sup> For Mosley '[m]an for the first time in human history now carries to the crisis of his fate weapons which he will conquer even destiny.'<sup>172</sup> Fascism would overcome the prophecy of decline; '[p]ossibly this is the last great wave of the immortal, the eternally recurring Caesarist movement, but with the aid of science and with the inspiration of the modern mind, this wave shall carry humanity to the father shore.'<sup>173</sup> Fascism would break the historical cycle as 'the supreme effort of modern man to challenge and overcome the human destiny, which in every previous civilisation has ordained irretrievable downfall.'<sup>174</sup> Mosley eschewed cyclical history, the foundation of Spengler's method, in his attempt to illustrate the unique nature of western society, freed from doom by science.<sup>175</sup> For Mosley fascism, broke the cycle of Spengler and, as such, was an *anti*-Spenglerian force.

Another thinker within the early BUF influenced by Spengler was W.E.D.Allen. Allen was a Unionist MP who had joined the New Party and followed Mosley into the BUF, though he remained outside its official hierarchy as

<sup>168</sup> Oswald Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. printed within idem., *My Answer*, Mosley Publications, Ramsbury, 1946, 119-20.

<sup>169</sup> Oswald Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 323.

<sup>170</sup> Oswald Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, op. cit., 120; *Action* 102, 29<sup>th</sup> January 1938.

<sup>171</sup> *Action* 106, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1938.

<sup>172</sup> Oswald Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, op. cit., 121.

<sup>173</sup> Oswald Mosley, 'Philosophy of Fascism' op. cit., 46.

<sup>174</sup> Oswald Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, op. cit., 120.

<sup>175</sup> R.Thurlow, 'The Return of Jeremiah' in K.Lunn & R.Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism*, op. cit., 110.



an advisor to the Blackshirt leader.<sup>176</sup> It may have been Allen that first introduced Spengler's writings to Mosley. Allen also had the distinction of being MI5's highest placed operative in BUF circles.<sup>177</sup> In the book he wrote in 1934, the influence of Spengler is clear, with Allen writing of his 'profound respect' for *The Decline of the West*.<sup>178</sup> Allen closely follows Spengler, citing Russia as an embryonic culture, and quoting extensively from the earlier work.<sup>179</sup> Again the failure of the historicist to comprehend the saving force of fascism is the major criticism, 'at the same time the interpretation of past history remains valid and constitutes a base from which modern man may begin to interpret his own present and modify his own future.'<sup>180</sup> Spengler thus is represented again as the antagonist to be overcome; 'Faustian youth announces that it has found a new soul, which will renew the body.'<sup>181</sup> The method of defeating doom was again science, 'our present European civilisation, as master of vast scientific resources which were not available to the men of previous cultures, can overcome the disease inherent in its hitherto uncontrolled development.'<sup>182</sup>

Allen thus differs from Mosley in his appreciation of cultural morphology writing that, 'each of these cultures have had their own character, their own soul, and their own symbolic forms of expression.'<sup>183</sup> He had reviewed *Civilization as Divine Superman* in 1933, though he rejected the central philosophical premise of the book, declaring 'Civilization is not superman.'<sup>184</sup> Despite his endorsement of Spengler, Allen, like Mosley, believed fascism broke the cycle through the intervention of science.

Spenglerian themes also underpin the assumptions of A.K.Chesterton, whose conception of anti-Semitism was based in part on the cultural isolation that

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<sup>176</sup> Allen was an ex-Ulster Unionist MP. A successful businessman, he was involved in the foreign financing of the BUF and the attempt to establish a commercial radio station for the movement. Whilst not a staff officer, he was an early financial contributor and sat on the BUF's Research Directorate, the inner council of the movement. See W.F.Mandle 'The Leadership of the BUF,' op. cit., 362; R.C.Thurlock, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 43, 120-1; J.&P.Barnes 'Oswald Mosley as Entrepreneur,' *History Today*, Vol.40 No.3, March 1990, 13, 16.

<sup>177</sup> Nicholas Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op. cit., 174-5; Thanks to Allen's efforts a picture of the internal activities of the BUF at its highest levels is possible and after a substantial block of Home Office releases in the early 1980s, subsequent treatments of the Mosley fascism regularly feature the reports.

<sup>178</sup> J.Drennan (pseud.), *Oswald Mosley, BUF and British Fascism*, op. cit., 176.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>182</sup> W.E.D.Allen, 'The Fascist Idea in Britain,' op. cit., 230.

<sup>183</sup> J.Drennan, *Oswald Mosley, BUF and British Fascism*, op. cit., 177.



was endorsed in *The Decline of the West*.<sup>185</sup> Spengler believed that the cultures of the world functioned best without outside interference and cross-cultural contact was potentially damaging. Spengler formed no part of Chesterton's thought prior to joining the Blackshirt ranks. Once involved, Spengler's ideas, alongside a philosophy of cultural nationalism, provided Chesterton with his intellectual framework.<sup>186</sup> Chesterton revised Spengler, believing the British Empire and not Faustian culture was the geopolitical unit in danger.<sup>187</sup> Unlike the relativist Spengler, Chesterton also chose to rank the cultures in terms of their significance, with the European as the most historically important.

Unaltered Spenglerian ideas also pervaded the movement, notably outside the upper echelons of the BUF. Chief amongst these was the fascist vicar Rev H.E.B.Nye, who dwelt on the concept of imminent doom found in Spengler.<sup>188</sup> Nye conceived of fascism as slowing but not changing Spenglerian law, 'we cannot escape our destiny, but we can retard by centuries our fate.'<sup>189</sup> Nye's argument juxtaposed fascism with the accelerator of Spenglerian doom, the 'soulless Frankenstein of Red destruction,' Communism.<sup>190</sup> Spengler's endorsement of the landscape and soil as the root of culture also found favour with those fascists espousing a greater position for agriculture within the fascist state, such as J.B.Fletcher.<sup>191</sup> Given the clear place of Spengler as an adversary in the BUF leader's pronouncements, the membership of these Spenglerites appears curious. It may be that they believed fascism fitted into Spengler's ideas about the appropriate activities to be undertaken in the final stages of a culture's lifecycle.

For Raven Thomson, Spengler continued to inform his conception of what fascism was for. Following the general trend in BUF thought, Spengler's prophecy was now only an imminent certainty if fascism failed to generate rebirth,

'We owe a debt of gratitude to that arch pessimist Oswald Spengler, for even if he expressed his belief in the pre-destination of mankind, he has at least awakened us to the danger of our decay and imminent decline of our culture.'<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>185</sup> D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit., 161-6; idem, 'The Making of a Fascist,' op. cit., 289.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>188</sup> *Action* 97, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1937; 124, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1938.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 97, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1937.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 124, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1938.

<sup>191</sup> *Fascist Week* 20, 23<sup>rd</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> March 1934.

<sup>192</sup> *Fascist Week* 14, 9<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> February 1934.



Raven Thomson, unlike technophile Mosley, kept to his superorganic understanding of society and proposed, through fascism, an organic solution to counter decay and revitalise Britain. Such decay was intrinsically linked to the rise of individualism that atomised the superorganism. This disintegration was exasperated by the workings of Socialism and Communism wherein 'the same urge to the liquidation is common.'<sup>193</sup> By contrast he perceived 'Fascism as a revolutionary movement [that] comes to check this social decay and restore to Western civilisation its deeper cultural purpose.'<sup>194</sup> This will be achieved by the 'drastic antitoxin of centralised autocratic power'<sup>195</sup> Alternatives are eschewed in this Manichean struggle, for 'one can no more cry halt to history than the tide.'<sup>196</sup> The choices left to contemporary society were either to join the culture rejuvenators of fascism or participate in the destruction of the West.

Fascism was thus to provide a centralised authority to society, yet as with his early superorganic ideas, it was the community as a whole that must engage in regeneration, being part of one superhuman entity,

The people must be recalled to a great mutual effort of regeneration, a resurgence of national spirit and national culture, which can never be dictated from above, which must always come from within the people themselves. It must be the duty of fascism to give the inspired leadership to such a national movement, to create conditions favourable to its success and to welcome the revival of a national consciousness.<sup>197</sup>

Spengler provides for Raven Thomson both the warning and the path to restitution, with cultural endeavour checking decay,

I feel sure that when the imminent danger of decay and degeneration is revealed to man he will not be lacking in the courage, foresight and determination to grasp control of his own destiny and remould his civilisation according to his will.<sup>198</sup>

Both in *Civilization as Divine Superman* and his later fascist work, the ultimate purpose of this rejuvenated culture is shrouded. Raven Thomson believed fascism was the appropriate vehicle for the achievement of that goal, combining functional diversity and centralised leadership.<sup>199</sup>

<sup>193</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Why Fascism?' op. cit., 247.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>196</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Fascism and the Dialectic,' op. cit., 56.

<sup>197</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Why Fascism?' op. cit., 251.

<sup>198</sup> *Fascist Week* 12, 26<sup>th</sup> January - 1<sup>st</sup> February 1934.

<sup>199</sup> *Fascist Week* 14, 9<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> February 1934; A.Raven Thomson 'Why Fascism?' op. cit., 252.



Convinced that mankind exists upon earth to fulfil some great divine purpose far beyond the gratification of personal needs, or the attainment of perfect social organisation. Fascism is concerned to develop a healthy organism capable of attaining its natural destiny, as part of this moral purpose.<sup>200</sup>

Such authority would be temporary in Raven Thomson's schema, with a healthy organic state, one wherein all members function for the common good. As the toxin of individualism dissipates, its remedy would become redundant.

Philosophically this state would be organic with a political extension that, as we shall see, was to be corporatist. Thus fascist philosophy was in part the natural progression of Raven Thomson's earlier metaphysic, with his monism and the crowning communal superman in open rebellion against Spenglerian destiny. Now the fascist communal personality would become immortal via functional co-operation, rendering the ant colony immortality he had earlier revered, a possibility to mankind.

The incorporation of Spengler was not just in terms of the underlying philosophy for Raven Thomson. It also informed many of the basic assumptions within his fascism. Fittingly, given the stature of his grandfather in the field, one of the clearest examples of this comes in an article he produced for the *Architects Journal* in April 1934.<sup>201</sup> During this period, prior to middle of the year, which saw considerable setbacks for the movement, fascism was being discussed in various academic and professional journals as a credible political alternative, with senior BUF figures contributing to the debates.<sup>202</sup> In this article, Raven Thomson's opinion of architecture clearly owes much to Spengler, contrasting the cultural heights of the Gothic period in European culture with the present inability to do no more than imitate.<sup>203</sup> His superorganic conceptions also figure as in such statements as 'every great architectural epoch has been the product of communal and not individual inspiration' and attributing the present malaise to 'a lack of communal purpose and the aggrandisement of individual liberty.'<sup>204</sup> Fascism was thus conceived as a spiritual movement giving 'a corporate purpose and a cultural meaning,' providing a regeneration in culture and the foundation of a return to

<sup>200</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Book Review,' *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.2 No.1, 1936, 152.

<sup>201</sup> *Architects Journal*, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>202</sup> W.E.D.Allen contributed to *Political Quarterly*, though the journal was keen to stress that the appearance of the piece did not represent an editorial endorsement of Fascism. Raven Thomson himself contributed articles in *Granta* and the *New English Weekly*.

<sup>203</sup> O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West II*, op. cit., 122-3.



inspirational architecture, not aping the past, but heralding a new corporate era of simplicity in structure. Fascism through its corporatist ethos will revitalise present culture infected as it is with materialism and individualism.

May I add here that Fascists do not accept the pessimistic conclusions of the Spengler school, although we have reason to be grateful to Spengler for emphasizing [sic] the undeniable fact that all civilizations tend to “run down,” when the individual ceases to give to gratify his own desires, to the inevitable detriment of the social organism. It is the purpose of Fascism to give a new impetus to civilization through the regenerative force of youth in revolt against materialistic values.<sup>205</sup>

Concepts of historical parallels also appear in an article predicting events in Russia. Here the Spenglerian idea of a tempo to cultural development, was used to explain the duplication of events from Eighteenth Century France to Russia during the 1930s.<sup>206</sup> Stalin would go the way of Robespierre to be replaced by a military ruler, a Russian Napoleon to threaten Europe.<sup>207</sup>

Thus Raven Thomson’s fascism, whilst rejecting the determinism of Spengler, was keen to use the historian’s schema against itself. Whilst Mosley rejects it as merely an obstacle to be overcome, Raven Thomson wishes to utilise the mechanism. Mosley sees fascism as *anti*-Spenglerian; Raven Thomson believes it to be *post*-Spenglerian in its goals.

This significant area of divergence between Mosley and Raven Thomson is exemplified by the role given to the concept of Caesarism in their respective revisions of Spengler. For Spengler, the Caesar was a unifier, defying decline, a ‘force which manages to destroy existing liberal institutions and to produce a new unity of political form pointing to the future.’<sup>208</sup> There is little doubt that for Spengler in 1918 the role of Caesar would be taken by a German at some point in the early Twenty First Century.<sup>209</sup> Whilst a key facet of Mosley musings on Spengler, Caesarism forms no part of Raven’s understanding of cyclical history in *Civilization as Divine Superman*. In the book, there was no glorious stopgap between democracy and anarchy, indeed the influx of invaders is seen as a

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<sup>204</sup> *Architects Journal* 19<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>205</sup> A.Raven, ‘Correspondence,’ *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol 1 No 4, 513.

<sup>206</sup> A.Raven Thomson, ‘Stalin, Robespierre and the Red Napoleon,’ *British Union Quarterly*, Vol.1 No.1, 1937, 70; O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West I*, op. cit., 108-9.

<sup>207</sup> A.Raven Thomson, ‘Stalin, Robespierre and the Red Napoleon,’ op. cit., 79.

<sup>208</sup> G.Mosse, ‘Caesarism, Circuses and Monuments,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.6 No.2, 1971, 178-9.

<sup>209</sup> R.C.Thurlow, ‘Destiny and Doom’ op. cit., 21-2.



revitalising force preparing the way for another society to arise.<sup>210</sup> For Raven Thomson the unification of leadership and service comes much earlier in the historical cycle, during the autocracy of the semi-divine kings. Thus whilst Mosley believes Caesarism and science will renounce Spengler's destiny, Raven Thomson's ideal rests on an acceptance of the Spenglerian relationship, with a desire to promote society via the autocracy of fascism to a point of cultural virility and strength in a new cycle.

Despite calls for the seminal influence of Raven Thomson on Mosley's Spenglerian rationales, the fascist leader's attitude towards the historicist insulated him from such a contribution.<sup>211</sup> Raven Thomson may have aided the establishment of a Spenglerian discourse within the movement, which in part explains the appearance of such theories in the movement's press during 1934, once he was a senior staff officer and regular contributor to BUF literature.<sup>212</sup> Yet the true Spenglerian contribution of Raven Thomson to Mosley fascism was not so explicit. Few BUF members read *Civilization as Divine Superman* and BUF articles clearly showing its influence are scarce.<sup>213</sup> Neither it, nor *The Decline of the West*, appeared in the BUF lists of recommended fascist reading. Rather than exerting some influence in the realm of fascist philosophy for the movement, it was within his post-Spenglerian vision of the fascist corporate state that Raven Thomson would influence his leader.<sup>214</sup>

#### IV

[B]iographies of fascist individuals have often revealed a wide range of personality types and ideologies coexisting within fascism during the 'classical' period of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>215</sup>

The attempt to explain how Raven Thomson came to fascism has been based on a belief that it formed part of a developing understanding of Oswald Spengler's ideas regarding the destiny of history. His background, therefore, rather

<sup>210</sup> A.Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 122.

<sup>211</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Return of Jeremiah,' op. cit., 110.

<sup>212</sup> Elsewhere this greater emphasis on Spengler had been attributed to the failure of the BUF to get a mass following. Yet one of the reasons for the departure of press lord Rothermere was this concentration on caesarism. Ibid. See also PRO HO144/20142/112: 'The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom including Northern Ireland,' MI5 Report No. 2, June-July 1934.

<sup>213</sup> See A.McKee, 'Psychology of Collective Caesarism,' *British Union Quarterly*, Vol.2 No.2, 1936, 69.

<sup>214</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Why Fascism?' op. cit., 252.

<sup>215</sup> D.Baker, 'The Appeal of Fascism,' op. cit., 3.



than predisposing him to fascism allowed him the education and experiences that enabled him to join the BUF in April 1933. What part his personality played in his particular journey is unclear. This biographer has uncovered little about what drove Raven Thomson, particularly during those crucial eighteen months following the completion of his book. The making of this fascist did not begin at his birth therefore, but after rejecting his own conclusions in *Civilization as Divine Superman*. Once he had rejected the prognosis of Spenglerian decline, his turn to fascism was as a result of a new belief in the communal superman's ability to defy its morphology and make 'a challenge to destiny itself.'<sup>216</sup> Between September 1931 and April 1933 a fundamental revision in his thinking took place in which resignation at the force of cyclical history was replaced by a 'mutiny against destiny.'<sup>217</sup> As another Blackshirt wrote of Spengler's historical understanding,

In this lies the *raison d'être* of Fascism. The Fascist is a man who realises that the state is ceasing to move forward of its own momentum and that only his own personal efforts will prevent it from moving rapidly backward.<sup>218</sup>

Mosley acted as a lightning rod in this process, conducting Raven Thomson's fascist potential into a fascist movement. Here Raven Thomson translated his ideas into activism, fighting against what he saw as the underlying decay of his surroundings.<sup>219</sup> His fascism was the outward expression of a belief that the communal superman could now revolt against its own mortality.

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<sup>216</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Book Review,' *British Union Quarterly*, Vol. 2 No.1, 1938, 86.

<sup>217</sup> J.Drennan (pseud.), *Oswald Mosley, BUF and British Fascism*, op. cit., 200.

<sup>218</sup> *The Blackshirt* 195, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1937.

<sup>219</sup> J.Beckett, 'Foreword,' in A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, BU Publications, London, 1935, 1.



## Chapter Two: Cultural Corporatist

The main objective of a modern and Fascist movement is to establish the corporate state. In our belief it is the greatest constructive conception yet devised by the mind of man.<sup>1</sup>

The continuing search for a generic concept of fascism stems from the diversity of movements which qualify for the title 'fascist.' Fascism, far from presenting a monochromic set of ideas and forms, exhibits a wide spectrum of activism and ideology.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) has been seen as the exemplar for the rational, technocratic side of fascism in contrast to more pseudo-religious forms as found in the Romanian 'League of Archangel Michael.'<sup>3</sup> At the foundation of this 'programmatic' Mosley fascism lies the realisation of 'Blackshirt' policy in the theory of a highly functional 'corporate state.'<sup>4</sup> As a movement that never had to compromise its vision for the practicalities of power, BUF corporatism presents the opportunity to study unadulterated and extravagant fascist state theory. As a leading scholar of Italian corporatism noted:

One must analyse corporativism [corporatism] itself and not the fascist corporations as they finally took shape, because if we do this we shift grounds from fascism as a movement to Fascism as regime...fascism as a regime rejects it and reduces the corporation to a mere administrative instrument that no longer has any importance, even at the level of desires – fascism as movement gave it.<sup>5</sup>

Yet had Mosley established a fascist government in Britain, the corporate state would have been implemented to some degree.<sup>6</sup> Much of the understanding of this state's nature for both contemporary fascists and subsequent scholars is owed to the prolific work of Raven Thomson, who was its chief architect within the movement.<sup>7</sup>

At the centre of corporatist ideology in the BUF was the belief in a state where an efficient capitalist economy would be complimented by a political

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<sup>1</sup> O.Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, BUF Publications, London, 1934, 34.

<sup>2</sup> For the debate on the nature of generic fascism see the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> S.M.Cullen, 'Leaders and Martyrs: Codreanu, Mosley and Jose Antonio,' *History*, Vol. 71, 1986, 409, 415, 430.

<sup>4</sup> See R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1996, 182-6.

<sup>5</sup> R.De Felice, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to Its Theory and Practice*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1976, 49.

<sup>6</sup> See N.Nurgent, 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' in R.King and N.Nugent (eds.), *The British Right*, Saxon House, Farnborough, 1977, 133.



system geared to the swift enactment of government policy. This provided the cornerstone of the BUF's conception of the fascist revolution. Private enterprise would be retained but government would manage the economy with the aim of revitalising the country:

All shall serve the state and none the faction. All shall work and thus enrich their country and themselves. Opportunity shall be open to all, but privilege to none. Great position shall be conceded only to great talent. Reward shall be accorded only to service. Poverty shall be abolished by the power of modern science released within the organized state. The barriers of class shall be destroyed and the energies of every citizen devoted to the service of the British nation which by the effort and sacrifice of our fathers has existed gloriously for centuries before this transient generation, and which by our own exertions shall be raised to its highest destiny – The Greater Britain of Fascism.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to underestimate the significance of corporatism to the canon of Mosley fascism, with one commentator declaring it to be both 'the philosophy and programme of the BUF.'<sup>9</sup> Despite the changes that occurred to the character of the Blackshirt movement during the 1930s, the corporate state was consistently proposed as the panacea for all the nation's ills.<sup>10</sup>

Raven Thomson's contribution to this programme has conventionally been studied to provide greater detail to Mosley's writings, with his most comprehensive work, the pamphlet *The Coming Corporate State* (1935), treated as an authoritative appendix to the latter's, *The Greater Britain* (1932).<sup>11</sup> Such an approach has until now obscured Raven Thomson's own understanding of the corporate state, particularly those areas where his understanding departed from Mosley's. Raven Thomson's concept of the corporate state was bound up with his understanding of Oswald Spengler's predictions for the decline of the Western nations.<sup>12</sup> The underlying concern of his corporatism was thus to build a structure capable of stimulating the cultural endeavour of the British people,

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<sup>7</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 331.

<sup>8</sup> *Action* 2, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1936 cited in D.M.Geiger, 'British Fascism as revealed in the British Union of Fascists' Press,' PhD Thesis, New York University, 1963, 155.

<sup>9</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur - Mosley, Fascism and British Society 1931-81*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, 33.

<sup>10</sup> See O.Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, op. cit., 34-48; idem, *Tomorrow We Live*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed in *My Answer*, Mosley Publications, Ramsbury, 1946, 58-73.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Booklet was an unofficial statement of policy, but was the most ambitious attempt to work out the details of the corporate state.' R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, Allen Lane, London, 1972, 143. See also N.Nurgent, 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 135; S.M.Cullen, 'The Development of the ideas and policy of the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.22 No.1, 1987, 115.



resulting in a revitalised nation strong enough to avert this demise. In this regard the final objective of Raven Thomson's state differed from his blackshirt peers. It consisted of the production of a fascist culture and a new form of man, with the primary concern of creating cultural vigour in the greater national rebirth of fascism.

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Some clarification is needed in this study of corporatism, due to the convention within previous examinations of its BUF derivation to avoid discussing the doctrine, concentrating rather on examinations of the proposed BUF state structure and criticisms of the reality of life in Mosley's Britain. As with the study into the nature of fascism, the debate regarding the nature of corporatism has centred on several 'ideal-typical' definitions.<sup>13</sup> This process has, however, been mainly used to aid in the detection of non-authoritarian 'societal' corporatist undercurrents in mainstream liberal politics since the war, rather than to analyse the strident corporate state endorsements of the fascist movements.<sup>14</sup> There is not the space here to contribute to that discussion and so for the purposes of this study Schmitter's definition provides the most acceptable explanation;

Corporatism can be defined as a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organised into a linked number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognised or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representation monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>13</sup> See L.Panitch, 'Recent theorisations of corporatism: reflections on a growth industry,' *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.31 No.2, 1980, 159-74; A.Cox, 'Corporatism as Reductionism: the Analytic Limits of the Corporatist Thesis,' *Government and Opposition*, Vol.16 No.1, 1981, 78-95. Much work on corporatism in Britain was generated prior to the establishment of the Conservative government in 1979, when a growing corporatist ethic appeared to be influencing economic policy. See C.Crouch & R.Dore, 'Whatever Happened to Corporatism,' in C.Crouch & R.Dore (eds.) *Corporatism and Accountability*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, 1-36; A.Cox, 'The failure of corporatist state forms and policies in post-war Britain,' in A.Cox & N. O'Sullivan (eds.), *The Corporate State*, Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1988, 198-206.

<sup>14</sup> C.Landauer, *Corporate State Ideologies*, Institute of International Affairs, University of California, Berkeley, 1986, ix.

<sup>15</sup> P.C.Schmitter, 'Still the century of Corporatism?' in F.B.Pike & T.Stritch (eds.), *The New Corporatism*, University of Notre Dame, South Bend Ind., 1974, 93-4. Stanley Payne, a leading



In effect this corporatist minimum describes a tripartite system where occupation is the basis for political representation and the state controls the economy, which is divided into a series of industrial groups inclusive of both employers and workers.<sup>16</sup> Private enterprise is retained, subject to the directive role of government. Corporatist doctrine thus contains economic planning reminiscent of Socialism together with a capitalist commitment to private ownership in the belief that workers and employers have a common interest in harmonious co-operation for general prosperity.<sup>17</sup> The social result is the replacement of horizontal groupings, such as classes with the enclosed vertical ranks of the corporations.<sup>18</sup>

The doctrine has its origins in the Nineteenth Century rejection of individualism and the rise of organic philosophies of society stimulated by Social Catholicism, popularised in the work of German Romantic philosophers such as Hegel. These thinkers were drawing upon elements of the medieval guild system, where trade monopolies had been accepted in return for established standards.<sup>19</sup> It was not until the First World War, however, that it was to appear as a body of thought.<sup>20</sup> The disillusionment of many in traditional political and economic forms following the conflict generated an environment where alternative systems of commerce and government were examined.<sup>21</sup> This search was not restricted to those attempting to defend capitalism. As Sternhell has noted, the war forced a crisis in European Socialism, as it illustrated the power of the concept of nation over that of class and the failure of Marxist historicism to yield a revolutionary proletariat.<sup>22</sup> This generated a quest amongst leading Socialists for a new non-Materialist Socialism, with an emphasis on will and

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scholar in generic fascism also endorses this definition. See S.Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-45*, UCL, London, 1995, 38.

<sup>16</sup> G.Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939*, Croon Helm, London, 1986, 74-5.

<sup>17</sup> R.E.Pahl & J.T.Winkler, 'The Coming Corporatism,' *New Society*, 10 October 1974, 74.

<sup>18</sup> G.Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right 1918-39*, op. cit., 100.

<sup>19</sup> 'Gemeinschaft' a concept of organic community was juxtaposed with 'gesellschaft' industrial society. See W.van der Will 'The Body and the Body Politic as Symptom and Metaphor in the Transition of German culture to National Socialism,' in B.Taylor and W.van der Will (eds.), *The Nazification of Art*, Winchester Press, Winchester, 1990, 44. See C.Crouch & R.Dore, 'Whatever happened to Corporatism?' op. cit., 3-4. See W.P.Snavely (ed.), *Theory of Economic Systems, Capitalism, Socialism and Corporatism*, Charles E. Merrill, Ohio, 1969, 8, 166-9.

<sup>20</sup> For the history of the various ideological strands which culminated in corporatist thought see C.Landauer, *Corporate State Ideologies*, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> O.Newman, *The Challenge of Corporatism*, Macmillan, London, 1981, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Z.Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left*, University of California, Berkeley, 1986, 119, 122-4, 132, 162.



vitalism.<sup>23</sup> In Belgium, Henri De Man was to replace the Marxist conception of history with psychology, and the socialist command economy with the regulated capitalism of a corporatist 'planism.'<sup>24</sup> Sternhell argues that the ultimate aim of these neo-Socialists was to use planism to attract support away from fascism by calling for an attack on high finance.<sup>25</sup> However, in the attempt they increasingly became reminiscent of their adversary, and helped in 'moulding the fascist outlook.'<sup>26</sup>

Britain's inter-war experimentation with corporatism was generally societal in character. During the First World War an economic coalition of government, business leaders and trade unions formed to ensure production.<sup>27</sup> As Britain struggled with the effects of diminishing foreign markets and at the end of the 1920's, the depression, corporatist forms were again examined.<sup>28</sup> As future Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan concluded in 1933, '[p]lanning is forced upon us not for idealistic reasons, but because the old mechanism which served us when the markets were expanding naturally and spontaneously is no longer adequate when the tendency is in the opposite direction.'<sup>29</sup> Calls for greater economic planning and industrial self-government were forthcoming from both employer's federations and trades unions, each seeking to extend their share of economic decision making whilst retaining their traditional securities against exploitation.<sup>30</sup> Raven Thomson was unimpressed with this contemporary societal corporatism, believing it to be an attempt to covertly implement fascist reforms.

If Fascism is to come to Britain it will come through those who are men enough to confess their faith openly before the world, and not through those who endeavour to bring in the Corporate State by the back door from a plain van.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 135-8, 149, 183, 186.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 189, 191, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 141, 190, 199, 208, 212.

<sup>27</sup> C.Crouch & R.Dore, 'Whatever Happened to Corporatism,' op. cit., 15.

<sup>28</sup> S.Vickerstaff, *The Limits of Corporatism*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1989, 27-39.

<sup>29</sup> H.Macmillan, *Reconstruction*, Macmillan, London, 1933, 1-23 cited in D.Ritschel, 'A Corporatist Economy in Britain? Capitalist planning for industrial self-government in the 1930s,' *English Historical Review*, Vol.106 No.1, 1991, 47.

<sup>30</sup> D.Ritschel 'A Corporatist Economy in Britain?' op. cit., 50. See L.P.Carpenter, 'Corporatism in Britain 1930-45,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 11 No.1, 1976, 14, 16-17.

<sup>31</sup> A.Raven, 'The Meaning of Fascism,' *Granta*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1934, 487.



He defiantly asserted that 'Mosley, and no other, will bring the Corporate State to Britain.'<sup>32</sup>

Of crucial importance in all mainstream British corporatist models was the absence of any attempts to apply the corporate principle to the machinery of Government. Whilst advisory industrial councils were hesitantly endorsed, there was no inclination to rationalise the political structure of Britain. As one commentator noted of sections within the British political Right, 'few would accept the institutional system that the fascists proposed. They disliked the party system but they did not want to introduce the corporative state with all its authoritarian trappings.'<sup>33</sup> Thus they were in effect attempting to put their own house in order, to their own traditional requirements, though some like the vice-chairman of ICI, Lord Mond, were prepared to pragmatically support the more radical proposals of the BUF.<sup>34</sup> Some corporatists, however, thought the British system needed to be completely remodelled and looked to Fascist Italy for guidance.

Mussolini's Italy was first to establish a corporate state in 1926. The state introduced a series of corporations, numbering 22 by 1934.<sup>35</sup> Whilst the Italian state made much of the renewed vitalism of Italy under Mussolini and the corporations, forced industrial modernisation combined with a political system that allowed little criticism and no direct action, ensured that the corporate state was one where a rigid hierarchy enforced its decisions with only little or no accountability.<sup>36</sup> Though the workers lost their right to strike, large business interest strengthened its position in circumstances approaching cartelisation, in an attempt to engineer prosperity within a capitalist framework.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 487-8.

<sup>33</sup> J.R.Jones, 'England,' in H.Rogger & E.Weber (eds), *The European Right*, University of California, Berkeley, 1965, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Mond was one of a number of industrialists who funded Mosley's movement, seeming to confirm left wing accusations of fascism's true nature as a weapon of capitalism. See A.C.Miles, *Mosley in Motley*, A.C.Miles, London, 1937.

<sup>35</sup> A.J. De Grand, 'Corporativism and the Corporate State' in P.V.Cannistraro (ed. in chief), *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, Greenwood Press, London, 1982, 139; M.Blinkhorn, *Mussolini and Fascist Italy* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, London, 1997, 30.

<sup>36</sup> See W.Snavey (ed.), *Theory of Economic Systems*, op. cit., 169-75.

<sup>37</sup> A.J. De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, Routledge, London, 1995, 43. See also G.Reiman, 'What is a Fascist Economy?' in F.Gross (ed.) *European Ideologies*, Philosophical Library Inc., New York, 1948, 697-710.



Thus corporatism must be removed from its fascist moorings and placed in its proper context as a mechanism that many in the interwar period would develop as their need required. Whether this was to have a societal or statist emphasis had much to do with the viewer's own assessment of the need for political rationalisation on the same corporatist lines. The appearance of great material advances in Italy was enough to interest many British thinkers in the benefits of the statist branch of corporatism. As such, the BUF's corporatism must be seen in its context as an extreme form of a milieu that transcended traditional categories in British politics.

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The Blackshirt revolution was to be both radical and conservative. It was to be radical in that the fascists advocated the corporate state, parliamentary reform and a new morality. On the other hand, Mosley wrote that the Fascist revolution differed from 'Communist anarchy' in that Blackshirts aimed to accept and utilise the useful elements within the state and weave them into the corporate state.<sup>38</sup>

Raven Thomson was the chief exponent of the corporate state in the BUF's literature. In numerous speeches and articles he attempted to illustrate the need for, and the benefits of, establishing a functional state under authoritarian control in Britain.<sup>39</sup> As such, he has been the main source for much of the subsequent academic studies of BUF corporatism.<sup>40</sup> Raven Thomson's vision of the machinery of the Blackshirt state, has been a feature of many studies into BUF corporatism following a convention established in Mosley's 1968 autobiography wherein; '[t]he original corporate thinking belongs to Mussolini, and in England its chief protagonist was Raven Thomson.'<sup>41</sup> This high opinion had earlier been visible in Mosley's 1938 tract on the nature of his fascism, *Tomorrow We Live*. In it Raven Thomson was held in high enough regard by his leader, that the structure of the Corporate state was not dwelt upon and *The*

<sup>38</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 142-3.

<sup>39</sup> See A.Raven Thomson, *The Economics of British Fascism*, BUF publications, London, 1934; idem, 'Corporate Economics' *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.1 No.1, 1935, 20-34; idem, *The Corporate State*, BUF publications, London, 1934; idem, *The Coming Corporate State*, BUF publications, London, 1935. In the fascist press he was responsible for articles promoting and defending the Corporate State. See his series 'The Corporate State and You' in *Action* 13 - 25, 14<sup>th</sup> May - 6<sup>th</sup> August 1936.

<sup>40</sup> See R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 142-50; R.Eatwell, *Fascism a History*, op. cit., 182-4, D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 34-43.



*Coming Corporate State* was cited as the authority that should be examined for more detail.<sup>42</sup>

Certain constraints must be noted before proceeding. The corporate state was to be the incarnation of the spirit of British fascism, and in the BUF literature was the consistently proposed answer to the nation's ills by all contributors. Yet whilst it was one of the key objects of the movement, the BUF was not made up exclusively of supporters of the full ideological programme.<sup>43</sup> As the work of Rawnsley has noted, much of the recruitment in the North of England was done on the basis of single issue campaigning, making a staunch belief in, or even an understanding of, the movement's corporatism secondary or even redundant.<sup>44</sup> Rawnsley, however, fails to note the contribution of corporate state ideas in the framework of the BUF's appeal to Lancashire.<sup>45</sup>

Much of the academic attempt to understand corporatism's relative importance to the BUF originates in the stance of the historian. If we are to look at the BUF from a social perspective, then corporate state ideology seems inconsequential, particularly if we subscribe as Thurlow does, to the notion that BUF policy was an inchoate attempt to justify retrospectively the actions of the movement.<sup>46</sup> Judged as a political entity, as in the work of Lewis, corporatism is crucial to understanding the nature of Mosley fascism.<sup>47</sup> In this intellectual history of a Blackshirt, this latter course thus appears the more prudent since Raven Thomson believed that '[f]ascism and the Corporate State are synonymous.'<sup>48</sup>

The corporate state thinking at the time of Raven Thomson's entry into the BUF was principally the work of Mosley, and many of the Blackshirt leader's ideas fed into Raven Thomson's thought. Mosley's economic thinking between

<sup>41</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 331.

<sup>42</sup> 'To this end any individual with industry, interest, or profession, will be invited to enter into the appropriate corporation, the detailed structure of which is suggested in Mr Raven Thomson's able book on this subject.' O.Mosley, *Tomorrow We Live*, op. cit., 72.

<sup>43</sup> O.Mosley, *10 points of Fascism*, BUF Publication, London, 1933, 4-5; R.C.Thurlow *Fascism in Britain*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 148.

<sup>44</sup> S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and fascists in Britain in the 1930s' PhD Thesis, University of Bradford, 1983,

<sup>45</sup> See A.Raven Thomson, *Cotton - Socialists and Communists Exposed*, BUF Publications, London, 1935.

<sup>46</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., X.

<sup>47</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 33.

<sup>48</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'The Meaning of Fascism,' op. cit., 487.



entering the Labour Government and the war has been the subject of much academic interest, particularly amongst those attempting to isolate common themes in his ideas before and after the acceptance of fascism.<sup>49</sup> These core ideas were, at least in economics, within mainstream thought at that time.<sup>50</sup>

Mosley believed that British commerce was in decline, and that the principle reason for this was underconsumption, rather than the contemporary view that overproduction was the cause.<sup>51</sup> With the results of the Great War shrinking foreign markets for British exports and the diffusion of manufacturing technologies fostering home production in former trading partners, Britain's long term economic prosperity as an exporter was in doubt.<sup>52</sup> This led Mosley, whilst in the Labour Government, to propose a system to end unemployment and stimulate consumption through an extensive public works programme. Together with an enclosed empire acting as a guaranteed market, this would raise domestic purchasing power for British goods, and raise living standards.<sup>53</sup> The programme was rejected by the Labour Party, believing such a policy would divert money from war loan repayments and promote inflation.<sup>54</sup> Mosley then attempted to make his ideas a manifesto for the shortlived New Party, before a trip to fascist Italy confirmed his view that such a planned economic system could only be realised in a corporate state.

This state was at the centre of Mosley's initial treatise on the nature of his fascism, *The Greater Britain* (1932).<sup>55</sup> In such a state, class barriers would be eliminated as all became 'producers' and finance was harnessed to aid production. Employers and workers leaders 'instead of being the general staff of opposing armies... will be joint directors of national enterprise under the general

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<sup>49</sup> R.Skidelsky, 'Oswald Mosley: From Empire to Europe,' *20th Century Studies*, Vol.1 No.1, 1969, 38-61; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 49.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 38. See S.M.Cullen, 'The Development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 116.

<sup>51</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 152-3; G.C.Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right*, op. cit., 78.

<sup>52</sup> N.Nugent, 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 136-7.

<sup>53</sup> The work of the Cambridge economist John Maynard Keynes is clearly visible in such a policy. See R.C.Thurlow, 'The return of Jeremiah,' in K.Lunn and R.Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1980, 101. R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 182-3. The efficacy of the enclosed economic system had been seen by Mosley as early as 1926 when on a visit to the United States he had seen the high wages paid to workers in the factory of car manufacturer Henry Ford. See D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 48.

<sup>54</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 160.

<sup>55</sup> O.Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, op. cit., 34-48.



guidance of corporate government,' collaborating in corporations of industry.<sup>56</sup> The system was perhaps best described in Nicholas Mosley's biography of his father;

Place every industry in the country under the direct control of a self-governing corporation on which will sit representatives of employers, workers and consumers. These will fix by negotiation the rates of wages, hours of work and prices and terms of competition which will be legally binding for an industry as a whole. These corporations will send representatives to a national council of corporations which will function as an industrial parliament. Here matters of general financial policy are settled, and the operation of the industries controlled and regulated in the interests of the nation as a whole.<sup>57</sup>

Mosley's conception of the corporate state saw 'the nation organised as a human body with each performing its individual function,' under a government acting as a 'directive and controlling intelligence.'<sup>58</sup> Countering ideas that the new state would be one for unrestricted capitalism he announced 'capitalism is the system by which capital uses the nation for its own purposes; Fascism is the system by which the nation uses capital for its own purposes.'<sup>59</sup> The state would thus 'mobilise the industrial ability and energy of the country for the purposes of national reconstruction.'<sup>60</sup> Ideas would be utilised regardless of political heritage, with Mosley believing the 'aim is to accept and use the useful elements within the state, and to weave them into the intricate structure of the corporate system.'<sup>61</sup>

What is noticeable about this early corporate state theorising is the degree to which this 'intricate structure' was absent. Mosley in 1932 and again in 1934 presented the system as malleable to events and cited this as one of its strengths.<sup>62</sup> E.Mandeville Roe, an occasional contributor to the BUF newspapers, noted in his own 1934 treatment of the corporate state, 'I do not aim at providing an engineers blueprint of all the working parts but an architects drawing of the finished building.'<sup>63</sup> This reflected a political pragmatism within the early BUF which saw the route to power as either through elections or a contest with

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 37; See G.C.Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right*, op. cit., 98.

<sup>57</sup> N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1983, 50.

<sup>58</sup> *Fascist Week* 4, 2<sup>nd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> December 1933.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> O.Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, op. cit., 38-9.

<sup>62</sup> *Fascist Week* 4, 2<sup>nd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> December 1933.

<sup>63</sup> E.Mandeville Roc, *The Corporate State of Britain*, Alexander Ouseley Ltd, London, 1934, 7.



communism should an economic collapse cause a political vacuum. However, as the movement developed the economy slowly stabilised, diminishing the likelihood of power by paramilitarism. The BUF began to concentrate on the need to win over an electorate through conventional political channels. This required a detailed and cohesive programme, a task that became Raven Thomson's.

The chief work in Raven Thomson's extensive examination of the mechanism of the corporate state was his pamphlet *The Coming Corporate State*. This work has been used extensively in academic studies of BUF policy, but at its initial publication was described as an unofficial and individualistic piece, both by the BUF and the author.<sup>64</sup> In the introduction Raven Thomson wrote that 'it is obviously impossible for even such a close political thinker as the author to postulate successfully every detail of the bones upon which the flesh of the Greater Britain will be erected.'<sup>65</sup> Despite this disclaimer *The Coming Corporate State* soon became an established text in the movement's 'know fascism read...' list of publications for the committed member, and could be obtained easily through the movement. It was to receive widespread endorsement in the movement's press, though this must be qualified by noting that BUF reviews of its own publications were rarely short of enthusiastic. E.D.Hart of the movement's research department was particularly strident in his review articles for its second edition.<sup>66</sup> In the BUF's newspaper, *The Blackshirt*, the work was lauded as 'more comprehensive than any previous statement upon this aspect of policy, it gives a full and complete answer to all questions that can possibly arise.'<sup>67</sup> Perhaps the clearest indication of its popularity came in the form of its rapid sales.<sup>68</sup> It was for one reviewer 'to the National Socialist what a railway guide is to the commercial traveller.'<sup>69</sup> As Cullen later noted 'certainly, the BUF was the most programmatic fascist organisation in Europe, and when Mosley's

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<sup>64</sup> Despite the utility of Nugent's hierarchy of ideological credibility when dealing with the output of the BUF, problems arise for individuals like Raven Thomson who *became* an authoritative figure. Do all his ideas become retrospectively important or merely those from the time of his establishment as the BUF's Director of Policy, a promotion linked to his work as a junior officer? In this study all Raven's work has come under scrutiny. See N.Nugent 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' *op. cit.*, 134-5.

<sup>65</sup> J.Beckett, 'Foreword' in A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Action* 151, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1939. See also *British Union Quarterly*, Vol.1 No.2, 1937, 103-5.

<sup>67</sup> *The Blackshirt* 195, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1937.

<sup>68</sup> *Action* 49, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1937.



initial plan of the Corporate State was further developed by Alexander Raven Thomson in his *The Coming Corporate State* (1935), Mosley's Blackshirts prided themselves on the fact that their vision of the Corporate State was even more complete than that of Fascist Italy,<sup>70</sup>

What then was this vision that Raven Thomson envisaged?

The feature that immediately distinguishes the corporate state from democratic administration is that the Corporate State is based upon industrial organisation in place of regional or geographical methods of government used today...Fascism endows industries and occupations with new powers of self government within the Corporate State. These powers are exercised in the same manner as those of local authorities today.<sup>71</sup>

Each corporation would be responsible for the maintenance of the industries and occupations in its remit, with all decisions being legally enforceable.<sup>72</sup> Within each corporation employers, workers and consumers would be represented, each possessing equal voting strength, with only unanimous decisions implemented. Whilst employer's representatives would be drawn from management and owners, trades union officials would represent the workers.<sup>73</sup> In this Raven Thomson could argue that 'the principle of trades unionism is entirely retained and advanced 100 per cent.'<sup>74</sup> Yet this trade unionism would, in the corporate state, be 'stripped of their obnoxious and irrelevant political activities' and denied the right to strike.<sup>75</sup> Government as the ultimate consumer would appoint the remaining third of delegates. Within the alleged meritocratic system, instead of voting for a candidate in terms of party loyalty, representatives of corporations would only rise up the structure due to the support of their peers, who would vote for them based on their knowledge of the industry, 'this method of representation is superior to any present form; workers and employees will elect delegates who are well acquainted with the industry and are competent to express the views of

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> S.M.Cullen, 'The Development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists' op. cit., 120.

<sup>71</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 6.

<sup>72</sup> The list of the proposed Corporations was; Agriculture and Foodstuffs, Fishing, Mining and Fuel, Iron and Steel, Metal Trade, Engineering, Printing and Paper Trade, Shipbuilding, Textiles, Leather and Rubber, Glass and Pottery, Chemicals, Woodworking and Furnishing, Clothing, Building, Public Utilities, Transport, Shipping and Docks, Wholesale and Retail Trades, Banking and Insurance, the Civil Service, Professional, Domestic and Pensioners (In 1934 this last corporation was also for married women.) See A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Fascist Week* 25, 27<sup>th</sup> April – 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1934.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



those engaged in it.’<sup>76</sup> Within each corporation industrial regulations, planning and social policy would be developed.<sup>77</sup> Terms and conditions would be established, direction given to the development of the industries and occupations, with a social element that provided recreation and amenities. In the corporatist system devised by Raven Thomson, individual industries would elect representatives to councils and then into the appropriate corporations.<sup>78</sup>

At the summit of the industrial system was a national corporation that would act as an economic parliament for Britain and her empire. Here all corporations would be represented proportionately to their importance to the economy as a whole. The national corporation was the final arbiter in cases of discord between industrial blocs. Attached to this body were to be a number of special groups responsible for investment and regulating foreign trade.<sup>79</sup> At the apex of the whole organisation sat a Minister of Corporations who in effect controlled the economy and to whom the national corporation was merely an advisory body.<sup>80</sup> In effect the whole structure yielded to this fascist minister, who had complete control of the system in the national interest. As Cullen noted, ‘although the end of economic chaos through corporatism was argued to be largely an affair of economic self-management in which employers, trade unionists, and consumers would participate, the reality was, a ruthless system in which self-government was conditional upon the acceptance of the basic ground rules as set out by the BUF, rules that would be enforced by the National Corporation.’<sup>81</sup>

With the passing of the liberal economic system, a political change based on the new fascist reality would be implemented.<sup>82</sup> At the centre of this new

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<sup>76</sup> A. Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 9.

<sup>77</sup> *Fascist Week* 27, 11<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> May 1934.

<sup>78</sup> A. Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 10-11. See also *Fascist Week* 26, 4<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> May 1934.

<sup>79</sup> *The Blackshirt* 59, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1934.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> S.M. Cullen, ‘The Development of the ideas and policy of the British Union of Fascists,’ op. cit., 121; A. Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 11.

<sup>82</sup> The BUF had an interesting relationship with the prevailing ‘first-past-the-post’ political system. Whilst it was condemned as unrepresentative and a barrier to minority movements gaining a voice in parliament, it nevertheless meant that a BU government once a mainstream political force could obtain overall power with a smaller popular endorsement than under a scheme of proportional representation. What a BU government would have done in the event of forming an administration in the absence of a clear popular mandate was not discussed in the



form of political participation was to be an occupational franchise. Thus instead of voting as a resident in a particular area, an individual's vote would join others of their industry or occupation to endorse a fascist MP.<sup>83</sup> The result would be a system in which voters would then be represented economically, within their corporations, and politically by a fascist member of parliament to represent them occupationally.<sup>84</sup> The actual work of parliament would be to establish the principles within which government would operate.<sup>85</sup> The franchise in this system would be restricted, with opponents of the regime denied the right to vote. Communists and increasingly as the decade continued, Jews were seen as the two largest groups whose actions had illustrated that they were unfit to participate in this new sanitised state.<sup>86</sup> The upper house of the British parliament was to become a chamber of notables, stocked by the government exclusively with pliant life peers.<sup>87</sup> Entry into this group would be on the basis of service to the nation and expertise, as deemed by government, which was for Raven Thomson, a return to its original form as an advisory body wherein 'there would be greater stress in the upper chamber upon the cultural, philosophical and moral aspects of legislation rather than the primarily material aspects discussed in the lower house.'<sup>88</sup>

Whilst it was claimed that the new state would be more inclusive and geared to team work, authority within the system rested ultimately in the small inner cabinet of Government around the Blackshirt leader; 'the final decision will rest with the Prime Minister and his inner council who will have complete freedom of action unobstructed by administrative red tape. They will form the mental dynamo of the administration, overcoming departmental friction in an

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movement's literature. The assumption was that a fascist government would have enough strength to implement its programme in full.

<sup>83</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 30.

<sup>84</sup> 'The fact that MP's would be elected on an occupational basis, rather than a geographically defined constituency, never bothered Mosley. Raven Thomson and Major General Fuller sought to correct this oversight. They argued that the corporations would assume the function of local government bodies, and that the MP could carry out the executive work of his corporation.'

R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 150.

<sup>85</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 34.

<sup>86</sup> D.M.Geiger, 'British Fascism as revealed in the British Union of Fascists' Press,' op. cit., 158.

<sup>87</sup> In 1932 Mosley endorsed the National Corporation as an upper house of parliament but by 1934 was arguing for a second chamber of parliament. See R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 79.

<sup>88</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 35-6.



irresistible drive for action.’<sup>89</sup> Government could only be unseated by an unfavourable vote in regular plebiscites, but the electorate would then be faced with endorsing another set of fascist ministers chosen by the monarch.<sup>90</sup>

The corporate state would act as the panacea for all of Britain’s contemporary ills. In numerous articles and on BUF platforms throughout the country, Raven Thomson would take a political or economic problem and show how, through the corporations, it could be solved to the benefit of the British people. To Lancashire’s cotton industry he wrote of the results of Japanese competition on the size of exports. Then he criticised the policies of the conventional parties, before endorsing imperial autarky, a clothing corporation to regulate the industry, raise wages and provide an extra 50,000 jobs.<sup>91</sup> To the shopkeeper, Raven Thomson proposed the end of the chain-store in a corporate state, a strengthened though politically neutered co-operative system and a distributive corporation to balance the needs of consumers with those of retailers.<sup>92</sup> To miners, a proposal for extracting oil from coal would rehabilitate the industry, a charter of labour and a ‘mining and fuels’ corporation that would ensure conditions and safeguard their interests.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the common corporatist concern of both Mosley and Raven Thomson, differences in the structure of the state were visible. Mosley wanted the national corporation to be an economic regulator; Raven Thomson was more concerned that it solve overproduction.<sup>94</sup> The Blackshirt leader was against exporting capital, his Director of Policy thought it should be allowed though licensed and regulated. Such minor differences heighten the argument that Raven Thomson merely toyed with Mosley corporatism. The traditional Mosley-centrism in this subject has set the parameters of understanding BUF policy.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>91</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *Cotton, Communists and Socialists Exposed*, op. cit., 6-8; idem, ‘Correspondence,’ *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.2 No.1, 1936, 159-63; *Action* 135, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1938.

<sup>92</sup> *The Blackshirt* 62, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1934; *The Blackshirt* 150, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1936; *Action* 16, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1936. See also J.Beckett & A.Raven Thomson, *Private Trader and Co-operator*, BUF Publications, London, 1935.

<sup>93</sup> *The Blackshirt* 66, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1934; *The Blackshirt* 188, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1936; *Action* 15, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1936.

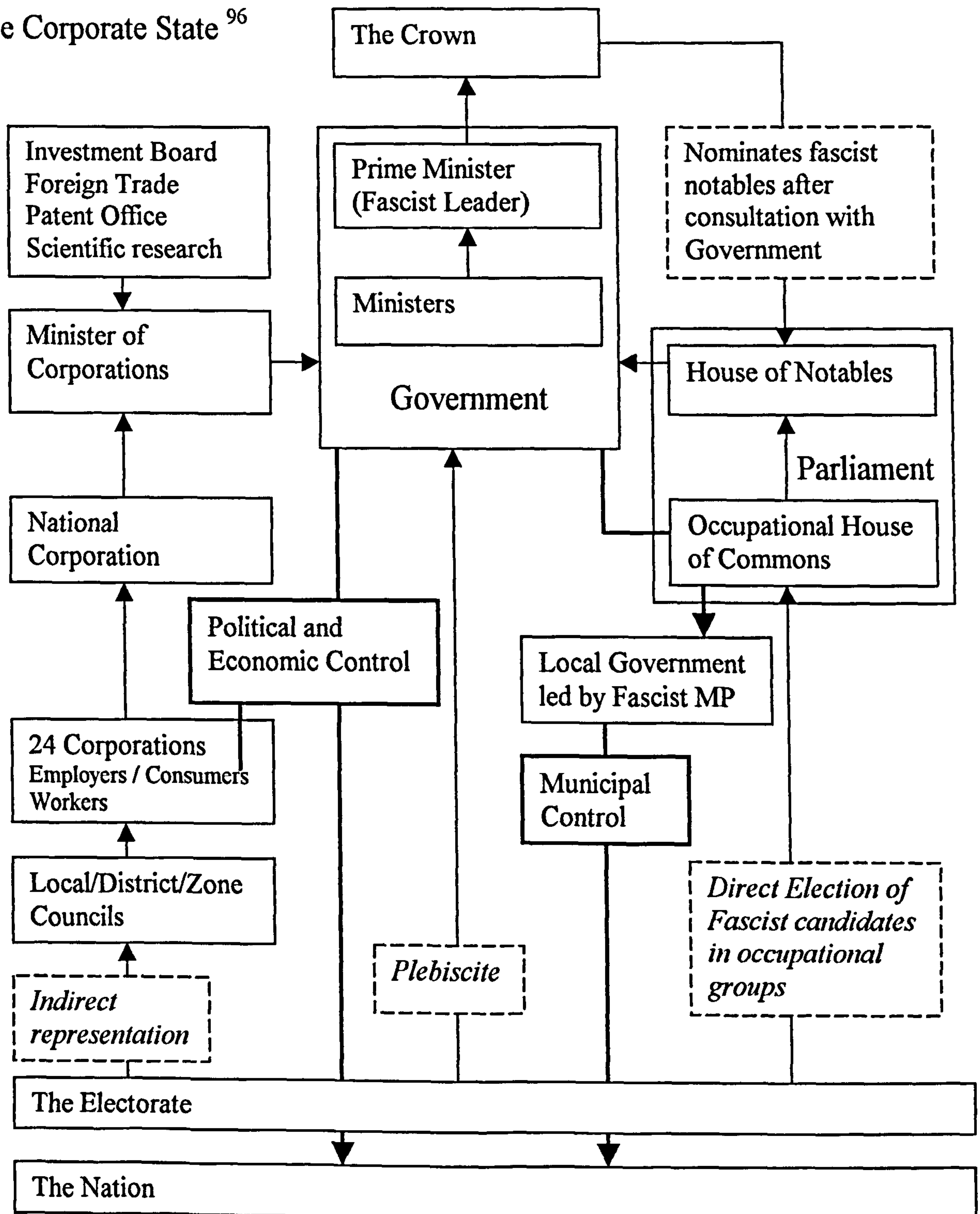
<sup>94</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 146.

<sup>95</sup> See D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 33-60.



What have not been visible with such a tight focus on Mosley are the areas where other BUF thinkers, such as Raven Thomson, extended ideas beyond this boundary.

### The Corporate State <sup>96</sup>



<sup>96</sup> This diagram is an extension of two found in Lewis' thesis. See D.S.Lewis, 'The evolution and development of the British Union of Fascists and its impact upon the relationship with selected areas of British Society 1932-40,' PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1982, 109, 111.



At the core of Raven Thomson's understanding of the need for the corporate state was the legacy of the Nineteenth Century economic system, based on Britain's strength as an exporter. Whilst it had initially solved the problem of scarcity of goods, the opportunity for widespread prosperity in the following century had been stifled by the attendant philosophy of individualism. The result had been the establishment of an oligarchy of wealth where only the rich had liberty,<sup>97</sup> '[w]hatever the advantages of the economic liberty in solving the problem of scarcity, however, it has become a positive menace to social welfare in a dawning age of plenty.'<sup>98</sup> The conventional political parties could not in such circumstances govern because 'they uphold the tenets of individual liberty which deny them the power to rule.'<sup>99</sup> This failure resulted in a situation of poverty in circumstances where improved production could end privation. For Raven Thomson, the domination of liberal economics in politics must end and control be returned to the people through government, '[f]ascism' he wrote 'introduces the Corporate State as a means of effective economic government without which all self government can be no more than an illusion.'<sup>100</sup> Communism and Socialism though similarly critical of individualism were not credible for Raven Thomson due to their class based solutions that went against his holistic ideas of an organic society.

Fascism turns to a third alternative, and insists upon treating the community as a single organised corporate state, controlled and planned by central government empowered with sufficient authority over individual and group to protect the general welfare of the whole and advance the national purpose... This is the corporate concept of the nation as an organism of a higher order, but essentially similar to the human body, with its organs and functions serving a collective purpose.<sup>101</sup>

Both state and individual in society, in such a philosophy, needed each other for,

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<sup>97</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *Economics of British Fascism*, op. cit., 3. See also idem., *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 3; *Fascist Week* 23, 13<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> April 1934. This oligarchy increasing became linked in Raven Thomson's work to Jewish financial interests. See idem., *Economics of British Fascism* op. cit., 6.

<sup>98</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Corporate Economics,' op. cit., 20. The idea that individualism has served a purpose but is no longer in form with present realities belies Raven Thomson's Spenglerian viewpoint.

<sup>99</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>101</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Corporate Economics,' op. cit., 23. Lewis chose to see this repositioning of fascism away from traditional categories of right and left as proof of the political centrality of the creed. It was, however, an authoritarian creed that attempted to place itself beyond politics. See D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 7-8.



[a]n individual withdrawn from the state must lapse into savagery; a state deprived of the loyal support of its members must decline into barbarism. State and individual must learn to live in harmony together without asserting prior rights over the other.<sup>102</sup>

Democracy's central ideas, encapsulated in the French revolutionary call for liberty, fraternity and equality were to be replaced in a fascist Britain with authority, prosperity and freedom.<sup>103</sup> Here the state is maintained and prospers under effective functional reorganisation, 'individual, functional group and nation as a whole, all finding healthy co-relation through the organisation of the Corporate State. It is the perfection of this co-relation, or balance, within the state, that fascism finds scope for unending endeavour.'<sup>104</sup>

With his criticism of privilege, Raven Thomson has been seen as a left wing influence on BUF corporatism, principally derived from a belief that a former member of the Communist Party would present traits of his previous affiliation.<sup>105</sup> Raven Thomson does indeed spend much time looking at the benefits to the poor and unemployed of a corporate state. In Blackshirt Britain there will be a programme of slum clearance, a prosperous economy creating jobs, a charter of labour to ensure rights and a share in the control of industry.<sup>106</sup> As such, he could claim that for the underprivileged, the BUF were 'a new lead in their struggle against capitalist injustice.'<sup>107</sup> Thus BUF leadership was logical for the British worker, after the failures of the General Strike and Labour administrations, to provide tangible improvements in their conditions. Raven Thomson even argued that the BUF was the true inheritor of the principles of the British labour movement;

British Union will vest all industries and occupations with self-governing powers, so that employers and employees, workers in hand and brain, can combine in expert management of their own affairs. This corporate policy is, in fact, an advance far beyond the early thinkers of Guild Socialism and is vastly superior to the State Socialism of the Marxists. It owes its origins to the early thought of the real British Socialists and also to the practical successes of the Trade Unions founded in this country... The Corporate system is the modern development of the Guild Socialist ideal,

<sup>102</sup> *Action* 45, 26<sup>th</sup> December 1936.

<sup>103</sup> *The Blackshirt* 82, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1934.

<sup>104</sup> A. Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 5.

<sup>105</sup> D.S. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 75.

<sup>106</sup> *Fascist Week* 23, 13<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>107</sup> *The Blackshirt* 161, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1936.



bringing organiser and manual worker together in a common industrial and occupational interest.<sup>108</sup>

This concern for the poor may however also be linked to his holistic ideas. In his understanding of capitalism, Raven Thomson perceives that the retrenchment of the early 1930s has resulted in a situation where the poor 'are now threatening to rise in revolt against the whole system of society.'<sup>109</sup>

At the root of the perceived ills afflicting society, Raven Thomson's anti-individualist philosophy was, similar to the continental neo-socialists, an attack on laissez faire finance. Finance in his new state became the servant of the nation, '[f]ascism is determined to restore to banking and finance in this country a proper concept of a functional responsibility towards the community as a whole.'<sup>110</sup> Money in such a system would not be linked to the gold standard, but to the productive capacity of the country.<sup>111</sup> Thus the fight against finance would become a rallying point in Raven Thomson's work, with fascism acting as a pacific force uniting sectional interests in a common good.<sup>112</sup>

Fascism will unite worker, small trader, and honest producer in a common onslaught upon the tyranny of high finance in the realisation that the great majority of employers have common interests with the workers in the attainment and maintenance of a higher standard of life.<sup>113</sup>

Raven Thomson was also quick to criticise any failures in the prevailing economic system and discount any prosperity as momentary. For him 'the so called boom of the capitalist world is an artificial thing and does no more than touch the fringe of the immense material possibilities of the modern world.'<sup>114</sup> In the light of capitalism's failure to secure a lasting prosperity and an improved standard of living for the British population, a fascist government empowered by a surgeons mandate would cut 'the financial cancer from our midst and bring a new life to the British people.'<sup>115</sup>

From the outset BUF corporatism, despite its commitment to social policy and the end of traditional class structures, proved more popular amongst

<sup>108</sup> *The Blackshirt* 255, October 1938.

<sup>109</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 24.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 23; See also idem, 'Corporate Economics,' op. cit., 29.

<sup>111</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Corporate Economics,' op. cit., 31.

<sup>112</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 25.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Action* 2, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1936; *The Blackshirt* 90, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1935.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*



the British Italophile social elite. Whilst a 'Fascist Union of British Workers' collapsed quickly, for a short period until mid 1934 a 'January Club' designed to gain sympathisers, recruits and donations from wealthy and influential patrons enjoyed considerable success.<sup>116</sup> Yet the corporatism that many of the Right envisioned was of an orthodox Conservatism stimulated by strong leadership, as the *Sunday Dispatch* noted;

[The People] have read and heard enough to think that here perhaps is a party with a real British policy - the sort of policy that the Conservative Party ought to stand for but does not, owing to sentimental weak leadership - and a method of making policy effective under the constitution far more speedily and comprehensively than is possible under the present parliamentary regime of endless talk, compromise, procrastination and self-advancement.<sup>117</sup>

Most fell short of the full implications of the fascist state, with Francis Yeats Brown, a leading figure in the January Club, believing in the corporate system but declaring that 'fascism is a foreign culture.'<sup>118</sup> The Right wanted a dynamism that was seen as lacking under Conservative premier Baldwin, with the result that the corporatism proposed was markedly societal, albeit strident. With the down turn in the BUF's fortunes in late 1934, the societal corporatists withdrew their support and the club folded.

Criticisms of the corporate state are considerable. The basic assumption of the BUF, that the economy was enfeebled and prone to collapse if prevailing conditions continued, was misplaced.<sup>119</sup> Despite arguing that it represented true democracy, the system in practice would have been highly elitist, with the alleged meritocracy open only to those capable of working within the structure, outright fascists or sympathisers. The BUF would have, in effect, become the state. Free speech would have been denied to those critical of the new regime, as unconstructive to the fascist project. Adversaries of fascism, real or imagined, would have had their rights curtailed. Those with a vote would have elected a national corporation with no power, a parliament with no legislative function, and in the event of an unfavourable plebiscite, would have had to endorse a new fascist government whose policy would remain little altered, due to the

<sup>116</sup> See Imperial War Museum (IWM) 92/2/1: Luttmann Johnson Papers. See also R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, Constable & Co., London, 1980, 49-56.

<sup>117</sup> *Sunday Dispatch*, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1934.

<sup>118</sup> R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, op. cit., 55.



ideological commitment necessary for a fascist to become a minister. Corporate state prosperity was also based on the fallacy that the empire had all Britain's needs and would be willing to accept secondary status in autarkic commerce.<sup>120</sup> That such developing industrialised nations as Canada and Australia would acquiesce to the role of being Britain's workshop was always far-fetched. Deficiencies in the empire's stocks of flax, potash, and crucially, petroleum would also have forced Britain out of imperial isolation.<sup>121</sup> Within the structure itself, the bureaucracy needed to implement legislation would have been vast. Instead of a state of technicians, Mosley's Britain would have become a country of administrators.

The corporate state was also ideally placed to repress two vast sections of the population, workers and women. In an economic climate where the efficacy of capitalism to provide sufficient impetus to generate prosperity was a central tenet of policy, it was the workers who would have lost out as the government pushed the economy, overriding the concerns of worker's representatives in the corporations. Denied the right to withhold their labour, workers would have been completely vulnerable.<sup>122</sup> By retaining a capitalist system, requiring secured foreign markets and a degree of prosperity before any significant social improvements could be considered, the system clearly favoured large business interests. Socialists and Marxists thus saw the corporate state as a weapon in the hands of big business, with its repression of workers evidence of fascism's true nature as an ill disguised piece of authoritarian capitalism.<sup>123</sup>

The relationship between the Mosley movement and women, both inside the BUF and as a large part of the electorate fascism was appealing to, has been the subject of much work by Martin Durham.<sup>124</sup> In his view, the BUF presented

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<sup>119</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The return of Jeremiah,' op. cit., 106-8.

<sup>120</sup> Idem., *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 160-1.

<sup>121</sup> See National Constitution Defence Movement, *Fascist Fallacies*, NCDM, London, n.d.

<sup>122</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 56.

<sup>123</sup> At the Communist Third international in 1935 fascism was established as the final stage of monopoly capitalism's imperialism. See A.S.Milward, 'Fascism and the Economy,' op. cit., 412-3.

<sup>124</sup> See M.Durham, 'Women and the British Union of Fascists' *Immigrants and Minorities*, Vol. 8, 1989, 3-18. See also idem., 'Gender and the British Union of Fascists' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.27, 1992, 513-29; idem., 'Women in the British Union of Fascists, 1932-40' in S.Oldfield (ed.) *This Working-Day World – Women's Lives and Culture(s)*, Taylor and Francis, London, 1994, 101-110; idem., *Women and Fascism*, Routledge, London, 1998. My thanks to Dr Durham for the last two references. For a markedly sympathetic treatment of the



an enlightened view of women, as reflected in the appearance of ex-suffragettes in the Blackshirt ranks and the significant numbers that chose to support the movement.<sup>125</sup> The BUF did indeed propose that women should receive equal pay to men for equivalent work.<sup>126</sup> In the event of a Mosley regime, the occupational franchise would have made women vote within their corporations or as consumer representatives in the others; the result the movement argued, being 'a substantial improvement in the political and economic status of women.'<sup>127</sup>

In this argument about fascism and women, Raven Thomson's work is often used as an example of this progressive attitude.<sup>128</sup> Yet if we examine his corporate state writings this view is seriously undermined. In 1928 women had received equality of voting rights. Both genders were enfranchised at twenty one years of age, women were now half of the electorate. Raven Thomson's ideas on women's place within the the corporate state would have drastically reduced this share. Political representation under the occupational franchise was wholly linked to trade and profession. It is clear from Raven Thomson's work that equality of pay was a device to hamper women's employment, now that they were as expensive as men.<sup>129</sup> In the attempt to combat unemployment, men were the principle target, 'elementary principles would suggest that if there must be unemployment, it should be the men rather than the women who should be found work.'<sup>130</sup> For Raven Thomson a women's place was in the home and she had been deluded by the media 'into believing exotic sex-appeal and so-called glamour are more desirable than motherhood and family life.'<sup>131</sup> As a result of the prosperity that corporate economics would create, married woman would no longer be forced into work due to the poor pay of their husbands, and could

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issue in S.M.Cullen, 'Four Women for Mosley: Women and the British Union of Fascists, 1932-40' *Oral History*, Spring 1996, 49-59.

<sup>125</sup> The accusation of fascism's poor position for women was clearly one that the BUF were sensitive to, given the political significance of alienating large parts of the electorate. See *The Blackshirt* 72, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1934. In the latter stages of the decade with war appearing imminent, the Mosley movement had some success in targeting women in its peace campaigning. See *Action* 136, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1938; *Action* 177, 15<sup>th</sup> July 1939. As conscription eroded the Blackshirt ranks, women members became essential to maintaining the organisation and its propaganda. See *Action* 202, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1940.

<sup>126</sup> *Fascist Week* 10. 12<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> January 1934.

<sup>127</sup> W.Leaper, *Fascism for the Million*, BUF Publications Ltd, 1936, 30.

<sup>128</sup> M.Durham, *Women and Fascism*, op. cit., 30-2.

<sup>129</sup> *The Blackshirt* 90, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1935.

<sup>130</sup> *Action* 24, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1936.

<sup>131</sup> *Action* 212, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1940.



return to the home.<sup>132</sup> As a housewife, a woman would thus be represented in only one of the twenty-three corporations, the domestic group, with minor influence in other corporations as consumer representatives.<sup>133</sup> Not only did this corporation also contain men, but different corporations received varying strength in national policy making.<sup>134</sup> In the short term at least, the needs of the economy would place greater political importance on the industrial, agricultural and manufacturing corporations leaving married women with little impact upon the state. As Lewis noted '[b]y advocating a programme of full economic rights for employed women, without any genuine commitment to sexual equality, the BUF was proposing the mass unemployment of women,' and thence their political marginalisation.<sup>135</sup>

The investigation into the reasons behind the failure of interwar British fascism and, thereby, better understand what fascism needs in order to flourish continues to fascinate historians.<sup>136</sup> That the economy was improving by the time of the BUF's attempt at power is often cited as the main reason the British electorate failed to endorse fascist corporate measures. Their rejection of the Corporate state ideology is often overlooked. As the work of Booth has noted, in times of economic distress the British public in the Twentieth Century has consistently voted for parties pressing for the traditional economic measures of retrenchment and unemployment.<sup>137</sup> Put simply, all shades of the corporatist model have never been popular enough.

Raven Thomson can be seen as providing the skeleton for the corporeal state of Mosley fascism. As such, he was bound by the core ideas set out by Mosley for 'fascism was a leadership movement, and although members influenced policy it was Mosley who brought the tablets down from the

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<sup>132</sup> *Action* 24, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1936.

<sup>133</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 7; *Action* 24, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1936.

<sup>134</sup> D.M.Geiger, 'British Fascism as revealed in the British Union of Fascists' Press, ' op. cit., 157-8.

<sup>135</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 53-4.

<sup>136</sup> All works on Mosley fascism touch upon the failure of the BUF, with various academics positing rival views as to the chief elements involved. For an outline of the trends within the debate see R.C.Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism' in A.Thorpe (ed) *The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain*, University of Exeter, Exeter, 1987, 58.

<sup>137</sup> A.Booth, 'Corporatism, capitalism and depression in twentieth-century Britain,' *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 33 No.2, 1982, 200.



Mountain.’<sup>138</sup> Yet this was no constraint due to Raven Thomson’s acceptance of Mosley’s beliefs, which after all had precipitated his entry into the movement. There is little doubt that on the surface there is substantial commonality of the corporate state ideas of Mosley and Raven Thomson. As Sternhell noted, however, ideology must be divided into two distinct areas, the fundamental and the operative.<sup>139</sup> Whilst the means of the Corporate state, found both men in agreement, Raven Thomson’s concern for the goals of this functional state were linked to his earlier holistic ideas. For if we are to understand the ‘why’ of his concentration on the corporate state, its role as a producer of fascist culture to nurture the superorganism, civilisation, must be examined.

### III

One area that is consistently avoided in studies of the BUF is its attitude to culture. Yet to understand Raven Thomson’s corporatism it must be with reference to his earlier work on the communal superman, where culture was both the motor and the indicator of superorganic vitality.<sup>140</sup> For him ‘[c]ulture is...by no means an individualist product: it is the attribute of the community as a whole.’<sup>141</sup> The corporate state in such a philosophy was designed to bring about ‘freedom’ which for him ‘is realised by the individual once he is released from political corruption and economic oppression to enjoy leisure for cultural expression.’<sup>142</sup> This ‘release of individual enterprise for the realisation of cultural advancement,’ was the overriding purpose for Raven Thomson’s experimentation with corporatism.<sup>143</sup>

The impact of the fascist regimes on their national cultures has been neglected in most historical studies.<sup>144</sup> In those theories where fascism is portrayed as a form of capitalist terror or political nihilism, the cultural dimension in the fascist project has been dismissed as irrationalist liturgy,

<sup>138</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 147.

<sup>139</sup> Z.Sternhell, ‘Fascist Ideology’ in W.Laquerer (ed) *Fascism a Reader’s Guide*, op. cit., 328-9.

<sup>140</sup> See A.Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, Williams & Norgate, London, 1934.

<sup>141</sup> *Fascist Week* 22, 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>142</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 4.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>144</sup> R.DeFelice, ‘Fascism’ in P.Cannistraro (ed. in chief) *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, op. cit., 211, 214; W.Adamson, ‘Fascism and culture: Avant Gardes and Secular religion in the Italian Case,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.24 No.3, 1989, 411.



concocted to deceive the masses into believing they were participating in the regime.<sup>145</sup> Fascist culture is either discounted or presumed to be a piece of misdirection by fascism to avoid revealing the gaping hole where a cohesive ideology should be.<sup>146</sup> Robert Soucy, a historian of French fascism, went so far as to conclude that fascism resulted in ‘the banalisation of art and the debasement of culture.’<sup>147</sup> Raven Thomson himself was aware of the contemporary critique; ‘our democratic opponents are very fond of accusing us, and fascism in general, of crushing culture and reverting to barbarism.’<sup>148</sup>

One of the chief criticisms levelled at the Marxist school of fascist studies is the inclusion of authoritarian dictatorships in such work. The essential difference between totalitarian regimes, like Fascism and Nazism, and these dictatorships is that unlike the latter, political control of the population was not enough.<sup>149</sup> Both attempted to dominate their home environments, to become in effect the medium through which all experience was viewed by the individual; in an attempt at social engineering in line with the underlying ‘reality’ that the regimes believed they had found.<sup>150</sup> Such cultural attempts were driven by three clear objectives; to reinforce the regime’s legitimacy, to develop a feeling of inclusion and to educate the audience into the requirements of the state.<sup>151</sup> As Mosse noted ‘the aesthetic of fascism should be put into the framework of fascism as a civic religion as a non-traditional faith which used liturgy and symbols to make its belief come alive.’<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> See T.Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*, Everymen Art Library, London, 1997, 52.

<sup>146</sup> R.J.Golsan (ed.), ‘introduction’ in *Fascism, Aesthetics and Culture*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 1992, xi.

<sup>147</sup> R.Soucy, *French fascism: The First Wave, 1924-1933*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986, xi cited in R.J.Golsan ‘Introduction,’ *Fascism, Aesthetics and Culture*, op. cit., ix.

<sup>148</sup> *Fascist Week* 22, 6<sup>th</sup> –12<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>149</sup> ‘...fascism sought to regulate and control almost all spheres of human existence.’ D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 42.

<sup>150</sup> R.Griffin, ‘I am no longer human. I am a Titan. A god!’ The fascist quest to regenerate time,’ *Electronic Seminars in History*; <http://ihinfo.ac.uk/esh/quest.html>. See also idem, ‘Party Time, The Temporal Revolution of the Third Reich,’ *History Today*, Vol.49 No.4, 1999, 44-6.

<sup>151</sup> E.Hobsbawn, ‘Foreword’ in D.Britt (etal.) *Art and Power*, South Bank Centre, London, 1995, 12. See also R.Kuhnl, ‘The Cultural Politics of Fascist Governments’ in G.Berghaus *Fascism and Theatre*, Berghahn books, Oxford, 1996, 30-1.

<sup>152</sup> G.L.Mosse, ‘Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 31 No. 2, 1996, 245; idem., ‘Fascism and the French Revolution,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.24 No.1, 1989, 5.



In Fascist Italy the corporations kept individuals integrated in the state outside the commercial and industrial experience of work, cementing the corporate state and thus Mussolini's personal power.<sup>153</sup> A 'dopolavoro' or after work scheme was created in which corporations established artistic and sporting organisations for their members.<sup>154</sup> The Nazi regime too embarked on a cultural mission of regeneration after years of 'cultural Bolshevism' during the Weimar Republic.<sup>155</sup> It was particularly keen to integrate the industrial environment into the wider volkish project of service to Germany, with the 'Beauty in Labour' movement actively transforming the allegedly darksome factories of Weimar with sunshine and public art.<sup>156</sup> Such renovations were overseen by Goebbels' National Chamber of Culture.<sup>157</sup> Both human and inanimate architecture were features of the Nazis experiment, in the monumental buildings of Albert Speer and the geometry of the marching masses captured by Leni Riefenstahl.<sup>158</sup> As a recent study noted;

Culture had a distinct function in the process of creating a mentality that forced people to submit to the dictates of their fascist government. Furthermore it was instrumental in persuading the masses to give active and enthusiastic support to the regime.<sup>159</sup>

Whilst it is straightforward to examine the character of the totalitarian experiment in Italy or Germany, the precise cultural agenda of a fascist movement that never had an opportunity to realise its vision proves, much more complicated.<sup>160</sup> The Blackshirt press spent little time on an explicit cultural program, concentrating instead on the immediacies of achieving power. Indeed Raven Thomson himself criticised the 'post-fascists' in the movement, concerned only with the character of the Blackshirt state and not the struggle to see it

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<sup>153</sup> V.de Grazia, 'Dopolavoro' in P.Cannistraro (ed) *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, op. cit., 175-6. Intellectuals were also state subsidised. See R.Ben Ghiat, 'Fascism, Writing and Memory: The realist Aesthetic in Italy, 1930-50,' *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 67 No.4, 1995, 629.

<sup>154</sup> M.Blinkhorn, *Mussolini and Fascist Italy*, op. cit., 28.

<sup>155</sup> E.Hobsbawn, 'Foreword' in D.Britt (etal.) *Art and Power*, op. cit., 13.

<sup>156</sup> See A.G.Rabinbach, 'The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 11 No.1, 1976, 43-74.

<sup>157</sup> A.De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, op. cit., 72.

<sup>158</sup> I.Boyd White, 'National Socialism and Modernism' in D.Britt (etal.) *Art and Power*, op. cit., 261. Riefenstahl's films *Olympia* (1936) and *Triumph of the Will* (1935) are full of visual metaphors with a classical sculpture transfigured into a Nazi sportsman and Hitler descending godlike from the clouds to attend a rally.

<sup>159</sup> R.Kuhnl, 'The Cultural Politics of Fascist Governments,' op. cit., 34.



realised.<sup>161</sup> Cultural ideas permeated the BUF ranks however, with some endorsing a ministry for the stimulation (and control) of the arts, committed to the stance that 'our first duty is to culture.'<sup>162</sup> For them fascism was to provide an artistic renaissance to illustrate the greatness of the civilisation behind it.<sup>163</sup> Those fascists concerned with culture saw the movement engaged in 'that much more difficult task of linking once again the material politics of our nation with its cultural power.'<sup>164</sup> The BUF press was keen to comment on the cultural developments of the day, with its weekly newspapers providing a commentary on the latest in film and theatre. Given its commitment to sacrifice and struggle, the films that found most favour were tales of individual heroism and bravery. Theatrically, Shakespearean drama was accorded acclaim as befitted a result of the cultural zenith experienced in Britain during the existence of the perceived quazi-fascist state under Elizabeth I.<sup>165</sup> One area that was roundly criticised was contemporary British sculpture, and in particular its chief exponent Jacob Epstein. Epstein's male bulbous figures were the antithesis of the muscular, virile depiction of men in the Blackshirt press. The image of the blackshirt man, and by extension the ideal for the British male, was of the clean cut adventurer.<sup>166</sup> That Epstein was Jewish also fuelled a cultural critique that deemed such sculpture to be un-British.<sup>167</sup> Indeed much of popular culture was criticised as part of a modern malaise, typified in this editorial;

Culture – in literature bitterness, cynicism and Gertrude Stein; in music sensuality, swing and Stravinsky; in painting introspection and surrealism; in sculpture puerility and Picasso, excesses and Epstein. No longer does the artist seek to capture elusive beauty, rather does he

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<sup>160</sup> An exhibition of totalitarian art at London's Hayward gallery in 1995, provided its visitors with an opportunity to witness the cultural results of the both fascism and Communism in the inter-war period.

<sup>161</sup> 'The group is characterised by a profound dissatisfaction with all modern standards...' *Fascist Week* 21, 30<sup>th</sup> March – 5<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>162</sup> *The Blackshirt* 69, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1934. See *Fascist Week* 23, 13<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>163</sup> *Fascist Week* 23, 13<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>164</sup> *The Blackshirt* 66, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1934.

<sup>165</sup> 'If Fascism had been in power in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Drake and Hawkins would have been amongst the first leaders of the movement.' *The Blackshirt* 111, 7<sup>th</sup> June 1935.

<sup>166</sup> In the fascist cartoons that littered the pages of the Blackshirt press the membership were depicted as young men, immaculately dressed in their shirt, usually in a pose of action, often marching. Such men in these cartoons were often confronted by Communists, and increasingly as the decade wore on by Jews, whose depiction bordered on gruesome caricature. Where the fascists were trim and youthful, opponents were fat old men. There was also a prevalence of images where the faces of Jews were dominated by huge bulbous noses.

<sup>167</sup> *Action* 91, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1937; *Action* 180, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1939.



make it his business to worship the transcendent futilities spewed up by modern life, glorifying the misbegotten and pandering the pervert.<sup>168</sup>

The BUF was keen to illustrate that modern culture was part of the environment sapping the spirit of the British people. A regeneration in culture would be an outward sign that fascism had succeeded in saving the nation.

Some in the BUF however saw cultural activity as a crucial facet of the fascist experiment. In Raven Thomson's work it underpinned much of his corporatist understanding.

[Fascism] is a new and revolutionary creed of national and cultural regeneration, come with a two fold purpose, to check the rapid decay and corruption produced by the illusion of democracy, and to restore a deeper purpose to national life. Its method is the corporate state which is a complete recognition of the essentially organic nature of social intercourse. This corporate organisation is no mere system of administration, through which dictatorial authority may exercise its will upon the people; it is a means of organic expression of the will of the people themselves working together as a united nation. Great is the destiny of man but this destiny can only be maintained by mutual cooperation for the realization of a higher purpose...<sup>169</sup>

Raven Thomson's most important piece of work in this area was his BUF pamphlet *The Coming Corporate State*. In addition to a lengthy examination of the movement's economic and political proposals he attempted to assess the cultural dimension of the BUF's corporate state. He argued that an efficient corporate system would provide for a growth in leisure and recreation, realising, perhaps, that the combination of a rationalised industry and a policy of re-employment would result in a general reduction in the hours of the working week. This free time, if channelled correctly, could he argued, aid the corporate state in its mission of regeneration.<sup>170</sup> The result would be a 'revolutionary urge that restores the national spirit of the British people,' with the appearance of a cultural renaissance similar to the Tudor epoch which produced Shakespeare.<sup>171</sup>

Crucially for Raven Thomson, this cultural purpose would not be completed in a cultural renaissance but would only act as part of 'the means of self expression of the nation as a corporate whole in the attainment of its national

<sup>168</sup> *The Blackshirt* 255, October 1938.

<sup>169</sup> A. Raven Thomson, 'Why Fascism,' *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol. 1 No. 2, 1935, 253.

<sup>170</sup> A. Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 43.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



destiny.’<sup>172</sup> The call to destiny and the need to confront it on a cultural level originate in the work of the German historian Oswald Spengler. Spengler, with his theories of crisis and brief but glorious caesarism, helped define the context within which the philosophy of the BUF was shaped. Raven Thomson’s fascism was a revision of Spengler’s ideas.<sup>173</sup> For Spengler the role of culture was the deciding factor in the cycle of history and its demise was bound up with the destruction of civilisations. Mosley chose to see fascist rebirth in terms of political and economic criteria where the corporate state would produce a nation of technicians developing the scientific means to avert collapse. Raven Thomson saw in culture the ultimate expression of a communal Will-to-Power and through his corporatism wished to restore the deeper national purpose of survival in defiance of Spenglerian morphology. The method for the realisation of this goal was for him the corporate state, but with the emphasis on a reappearance of artists and craftsmen within the scientific society.<sup>174</sup>

The fascist cultural project was to be realised in Britain within the bounds of the corporations that Raven Thomson had crafted. With the age of plenty securing an expansion of leisure periods, after-work associations modelled on the *dopolavoro* system were envisaged to channel the population into cultural and sporting activity;

A serious obligation of the corporate state will be the organisation of leisure. Every corporation will organise recreational facilities. Libraries, playing fields and social clubs supplied by prosperous and progressive firms will be co-ordinated and thrown open to all in the industry... The Fascist regime will not be satisfied until every worker has facilities to enjoy his favourite sport and follow his own recreational hobby.<sup>175</sup>

Sport with its emphasis on athleticism, competition and team work would be particularly encouraged amongst the young in a climate where physical fitness was ‘an obligation which they owe to the nation.’<sup>176</sup> For Raven Thomson the local polytechnic would provide the focal point in regional cultural enterprises, counteracting the ‘drab standardisation of modern civilisation.’<sup>177</sup> Whilst cultural endeavour was to be encouraged, the population would also be expected

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>173</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>174</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 43-4.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-4; *Fascist Week* 27, 11<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> May 1934.

<sup>177</sup> *Fascist Week* 10. 12<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> January 1934.



to improve their cultural education; '[t]he mass, in their recreational hours, will be encouraged, by reduced prices and special facilities, to visit concerts and opera, theatre and exhibitions of picture and sculpture.'<sup>178</sup> All such cultural endeavour must be to the glory of society, for as in the case of art, it 'is an expression of the spirit of the whole community or it is nothing but neurotic self-exhibitionism.'<sup>179</sup> For those artists that met with this standard of cultural advancement in the service of the communal cause, financial security and liberty were the rewards.<sup>180</sup> What would happen to art that failed to meet such criteria is open to speculation.

With corporatism as the main expression of Raven Thomson's fascism, and culture as its intended goal, the origins of such ideas in his thought are unclear. Raven Thomson, clearly, was influenced by Mosley's own work on the doctrine; indeed it prompted his acceptance of BUF ideology and his recruitment into the movement.<sup>181</sup> Yet Raven Thomson's endorsement of corporatism in 1933 was not the result of a dynamic change from his earlier pre-fascist philosophical position. As such, implicit corporatist ideas were to provide the foundation for his entry into, and his understanding of, fascism.

Given the significance of corporatism in Raven Thomson's fascist thought, it is not mentioned in his earlier book *Civilisation as Divine Superman* (1932). Yet in the biological premise behind the work, a degree of interest in the functional deployment of society is present. At the core of Thomson's holistic philosophy is a belief in the progression of differing intergrations in nature, from the building blocks of atoms through more complex combinations, culminating in the supercellular organism. Thus all societies, as communal superorganisms, are innately highly integrated with clear functional divisions, in order to exist in Raven Thomson's beliefs. The result of such a metaphysic is an implicit philosophical perception of the corporatist organisation of society being closest to the underlying organic laws of history.<sup>182</sup> As an example of a highly integrated

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<sup>178</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 45.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> *Fascist Week* 22, 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>181</sup> Public Record Office HO283/70/73: Advisory Committee reports: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>182</sup> A.Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 15.



society Raven Thomson utilised the analogy of an insect colony, rendered practically immortal by the division of activity within its units.

In the insect world, ... the communities of the ants, termites and bees immediately suggest themselves as cases of 'superorganisms' in being, when each ant or bee serves the communal whole as subserviently as a body cell serves the multicellular organism itself, and a very considerable amount of differentiation of function in the service of the community is developed.<sup>183</sup>

The underlying message of the hive in *Civilization as Divine Superman* was of individual duty to a communal autocrat of which each was a unit, collectively providing a further organic integration.<sup>184</sup>

In Raven Thomson's book we are also repeatedly informed that it is with the advent of a surplus generating agricultural society, that the cultural impulse begins, that eventually arises to fulfilment in a civilisation.<sup>185</sup> Civilisation, in effect, only begins when cultural endeavour can be pursued, freed from the constraints of mere subsistence. This feature of Raven Thomson's ideas is realised in his later corporate state thinking, with science providing similar conditions of surplus and a further revolution in leisure.<sup>186</sup> So too was the idea that from this phase an autocracy grew which 'gathers the talent of the community about it in the service of the cultural impulse.'<sup>187</sup> As such he follows Mosley who was adamant that 'not until man has mastered the machine and the machine has mastered material limitations will the soul of man be free to soar beyond the fetters of materialism.'<sup>188</sup> Whilst for the Blackshirt leader, breaking the shackles was enough, the result of the economic freedom for Raven Thomson would allow for a return to cultural endeavour under the new autocracy of Fascism.

That Raven Thomson's philosophy was rooted in the work of Oswald Spengler is clearly mentioned in studies discussing the philosophy motivating the BUF.<sup>189</sup> Yet this component of his thinking has not until now been linked to his

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 23-4.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>186</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 42-9.

<sup>187</sup> A.Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 76.

<sup>188</sup> O.Mosley, *Blackshirt Policy*, op. cit., 70.

<sup>189</sup> R.C.Thurlow 'Destiny and Doom: Spengler. Hitler and British Fascism,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 15 No. 4, 1977, 24; idem, 'Return of Jeremiah,' op. cit., 110. For a revision on the Thurlow stance see Chapter 1.



corporatist thought. Brief examination of Spengler's work illuminates some of the reasoning behind Raven Thomson's later understanding of the corporate state.

Work on the corporatist aspect of Spengler's ideas has been notably scarce.<sup>190</sup> Few studies have gone so far as Mazlish's assessment;

In Spengler's scheme of economics, work is not a commodity but a duty, and the individual seeks not his own selfish betterment but the service of the state. To effect this, the whole national productive force is to be brought under the states control, while leaving a certain amount of scope for personal enterprise.<sup>191</sup>

Mazlish concludes that corporatism is, therefore, the logical conclusion to Spengler's philosophy.<sup>192</sup> This view of corporatism was, however, far from populist in its political character, retaining a significant amount of strong dynastic control, as supplied to Prussia by its Eighteenth Century king, Frederick II. This emphasis on an individual's duty to the state finds resonances within Raven Thomson's fascist corporatism where 'the fact is that the great social organisation which we call civilization must be maintained by conscious effort if it is to survive.'<sup>193</sup> That Mosley's corporatist ideas appealed at all in 1933 was due to the earlier organic metaphysic in Raven Thomson's understanding, derived from Spengler.

Raven Thomson's prime concern for corporatism was its advantageous impact on the communal superman that he retained from his pre-fascist thought. Its chief task was to remove the disease of individualism that he had earlier perceived to be civilisation's pathogen.<sup>194</sup> Such a stance was also held by the eminent sociologist Emile Durkheim who also saw corporatism as the best way of strengthening the bonds of society to the individual and ending the dissolute feeling of 'anomie' that he believed was effecting modern society, bereft of its

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<sup>190</sup> The small number of studies that investigate the statist aspects of Spengler's ideas include; B.Mazlish, *The Riddle of History*, Harper & Row, London, 1966, 314-9; S.Aschheim 'Nietzschean Socialism,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.23 No.2, 1988, 160-1; H.Lebovics *Conservatism and the Middle Classes in Germany 1914-35*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1969; A.Hamilton *The Appeal of Fascism*, Blond, London, 1971; H.S.Hughes, *Oswald Spengler- A Critical Estimate*, Charles Scribner's Sons, London, 1952; P.Haycs, *Fascism*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1973.

<sup>191</sup> B.Mazlish, *The Riddle of History*, op. cit., 317.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Why fascism?' op. cit., 247.

<sup>194</sup> A.Raven, *Civilisation as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 103-117.



traditional institutions.<sup>195</sup> Durkheim interpreted the decline as gradual and thus espoused societal corporatism.<sup>196</sup> Raven Thomson, however, fuelled by Spenglerian ideas of imminent crisis, required a much more radical corporate state ethic.

This organic rationale for corporatism was not confined to Raven Thomson's work. One of the chief architects of the Italian state was equally driven by a desire to confound the life-span of civilisation. The work of Alfredo Rocco, legal academic and Minister for Justice between 1925 and 1932, developed a view of the corporate state founded in an idea of Italian society as a collective organism. Inspired by the cyclical historian Gianbattista Vico, Rocco became convinced that the corporate state was the mechanism by which Italian fascism would defy the inevitable decline of an organism's life-cycle.<sup>197</sup> His pre-fascist 'Politica Manifesto' of December 1918, is in places very similar indeed to the philosophy proposed in *Civilization as Divine Superman*. Rocco writes of society as;

[A] real organism with an existence and a purpose quite distinct from those of its particular members,..its purpose is to contribute, in accordance with its own genius and powers, to the development of world civilization... [T]he human race...is divide into numerous societies, each of which is a distinct organism with its own life and goals, as proved not only by history but by the biological and moral laws governing social life.<sup>198</sup>

Raven Thomson, both in 1931 and once within fascism, would have been in broad agreement with these ideas.<sup>199</sup>

In 1920 Rocco argued that the 'life of every social body is an unceasing struggle between the principle of organization [sic] represented by the state and the principle of disintegration, represented by individuals and groups....'<sup>200</sup> The best form of organisation for him was corporativism 'a natural and irrepressible phenomenon to be found in every age.'<sup>201</sup> He advocated the use of mixed

<sup>195</sup> F.Hearn, 'Durkheim's Political Sociology: Corporatism, State Autonomy and Democracy,' *Social Research*, Vol. 52 No. 1, 1985, 151.

<sup>196</sup> P.C.Schmitter, 'Still the century of Corporatism?,' op. cit., 117; O.Newman, *The Challenge of Corporatism*, op. cit., 6-8.

<sup>197</sup> A.Lyttleton, (ed.) *Italian Fascisms from Pareto to Gentile*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1973, 31-2, 271.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 276.



syndicates of industry to engineer the cohesion of the Italian state. By 1934 he was endorsing corporations as the regulator for industry, with the state as supreme arbiter in the national interest.<sup>202</sup> Whilst there is no evidence to suggest Rocco's journey from meta-history to corporate statism was any influence on Raven Thomson, the parallels between the two indicate that the route was open and more than one thinker developed their fascism in this way.

Thus corporatism was for Raven Thomson a means to engineer social cohesion, with all functioning in the superorganic interest. In its operation it allows for an age of plenty and the necessary restorative of cultural endeavour. At the zenith of this renaissance was his conception of the resulting utopia.<sup>203</sup> For him the Tudor period held the key to Britain's regeneration.<sup>204</sup> As such, the role of the corporate state was to provide the necessary conditions for the restitution of those characteristics of 'Merrie England' deemed lacking in a contemporary society ruined by individualism.

This at least we may say, that the medieval peoples who lived in hovels and built cathedrals were nearer to a realisation of the divine purpose than we are today; that the Tudor period, the high point of our own national life, found its expression, not only in the seafaring and empire building of Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake, but in the philosophy and science of Francis Bacon, and the poetry and drama of William Shakespeare. It will be the recovery of the 'age of faith' of Christendom and the vital energy of Tudor England that we may realise in part the great future of our nation.<sup>205</sup>

This particular utopia was not uncommon in the BUF, but Raven Thomson's reasons for choosing the Tudor idyll were based in his own corporate state philosophy. The Elizabethan period for him becomes more than merely a nationalist rhetoric, but a symbolic point from which to navigate the course of the nation. As he wrote in the fascist press, '[c]ertain people have said that Fascism is a return to Medievalism, if that is so, it would be a good thing, for then people had the real corporate sense and created culture.'<sup>206</sup> In the history of the BUF it also provided a domestic heritage for fascism to combat accusations that it was a

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 292-7.

<sup>203</sup> See M.N.Hagopian, *Ideals and Ideologies of Modern Politics*, Longmans, London, 1985, 79-91.

<sup>204</sup> *Action* 114, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1938

<sup>205</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 48.

<sup>206</sup> *Fascist Week* 21, 30<sup>th</sup> March - 5<sup>th</sup> April 1934.



imitation of the continental movements.<sup>207</sup> Whilst many in the movement saw the BUF as heir to the Tudor outlook, with its authoritarian hierarchy and imperial successes, Raven Thomson established it as the goal in the rejuvenation of British culture, using the corporate state structure to act as benefactor, 'fascism must take over this duty of patronage, and with a generous hand.'<sup>208</sup>

Let us get back again to those days of our national destiny when Britain first rose to world power and Shakespeare reached the greatest heights of English culture.<sup>209</sup>

With the productive power of the nation and empire harnessed through science and a reduction in the hours of labour, the workman had the opportunity to play his part in this cultural fortification of the culture, '[t]hat leisure must be directed by fascist authority into channels will benefit both state and people, improving the physical well-being of an ordered athleticism and developing the cultural standards of the masses by recreational activity.'<sup>210</sup> Raven Thomson envisioned the state, through an artistic corporation, harnessing cultural work on the basis that 'it is only by giving the artist his proper place in the national life and granting him means of protecting his own interests that we can save culture from decades of neglect.' The artist would be the functionary of the state, tasked with restoring the cultural milieu of Tudor times.

This use of a golden age as an image shaped by fascism was not confined to Britain. In Mussolini's Italy, the Roman Empire of antiquity was cultivated as a symbol parallel with the new regime in a cult of 'Romanita,' illustrating the continuity of ideas and legitimacy of the regime.<sup>211</sup> Nazism too was keen to use the imagery of knightly medieval Europe and an aryanised ancient Greece to promote Teutonic unity within the modern order.<sup>212</sup> Such myths were central to these regimes, despite scholarly reservations about the compromises of power placed on fascist visions of utopia.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 185.

<sup>208</sup> *Fascist Week* 22, 6<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> April 1934. '[F]or most people the Tudor period conjured up images of imperial expansion rather than social peace.' R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 182; See R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 151.

<sup>209</sup> *Fascist Week* 13, 2<sup>nd</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> February 1934.

<sup>210</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, op. cit., 44.

<sup>211</sup> See R.Visser, 'Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanita,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.27 No.1, 1992, 5-22.

<sup>212</sup> M.Neocleous, *Fascism*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1997, 67-8.

<sup>213</sup> A.Milward, 'Fascism and the Economy,' op. cit., 430.



Visions of a former greatness were, then, common in fascist thought. Raven Thomson was but one of a number of contributors to the fascist press who eulogised about Tudor England.<sup>214</sup> For E.D.Hart, another culturally minded fascist in the BUF, it symbolised law and order; for Robert Gordon Canning, a frequent contributor to the movements press, a Tudor emphasis on action appealed; for a movement keen to gather the support of women, it was used as a golden age of achievement for that gender.<sup>215</sup> In *Action*, the chief paper of the movement, the progress of the BUF was characterised as moving 'towards Merrie England.'<sup>216</sup> Mosley too used the Tudor age as an indication of the movement's goals. Speaking in East London's May Day rally of 1937, he depicted a contented idyll ruined by industrialisation and the rise of class war.

The Force that might have brought a paradise brought a hell, for with the machines and the power to produce wealth came the greed of usury....British Union shall combine the wonders of science with the heritage of empire and so from the ashes of the past shall rise a Merrie England of gay and serene manhood, resplendant and adorned by the miracle of the modern age and the modern mind.<sup>217</sup>

Where this eulogy to the Tudor period originated is open to speculation. Stephen Cullen, one of the few commentators on Mosley fascism to address this facet of BU ideology, implicates the Merrie England socialists that joined the movement, but why should they join unless they perceived a sympathy already present?<sup>218</sup> Raven Thomson's concern for a particularly 'Merrie England' pre-dates his attraction to fascism. In his *Civilisation as Divine Superman* it is under an autocracy in which all serve the culture, symbolised in a single leader, that provides the most culturally robust period within the historical cycle.

Thus for Raven Thomson, the particularly cultural nature of the fascist rebirth he conceived influenced his perception of what the corporate idyll was to achieve. Raven Thomson's philosophy, espousing as it does a return to the cultural achievements of the Tudor period, is not, however, concerned with a

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<sup>214</sup> See *Fascist Week* 23, 13<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> April 1934; *The Blackshirt* 80, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1934. In one issue a photograph of a Tudor cannon bearing the roman fasces, the BUF's early symbol, on its wheel spokes was prominently displayed.

<sup>215</sup> *Action* 79, 21<sup>st</sup> August 1937; *Action* 98, 30<sup>th</sup> December 1937; *Action* 151, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1939.

<sup>216</sup> *Action* 97, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1937.

<sup>217</sup> *Action* 64, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1937.

<sup>218</sup> S.M.Cullen, 'The development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 123.



reactionary retreat from the modern world.<sup>219</sup> As Roger Griffin has written about these rebirth myths, '[t]he new order will be created within a secular and linear historical time. The arrow of time thus points not backwards but forwards, even when the archer looks over his shoulder for guidance on where to aim.'<sup>220</sup> This is best illustrated by Raven Thomson's enthusiasm for the motorway in corporate Britain.<sup>221</sup> From his earlier work in *Civilization as Divine Superman*, the motorway signifies that the communal superman is still struggling against stagnation and decay.<sup>222</sup> To illustrate this spirit in fascism, he proposed nine three-lane motorways traversing the country. The motorway is therefore significant both as a tangible monument to collective endeavour harnessed by authoritarian government and as a fortifier for superorganic circulation.<sup>223</sup>

At the centre of Raven Thomson's corporatism is the question of what he believed the corporate state was ultimately for. To answer this is to postulate a theory for his conception of fascism's ultimate project, which must again return to his concern for the well being of the communal superman. For Raven Thomson, the terminus for Fascism was an attempt to establish a new kind of individual, a willing cell for superorganic service, a fascist man.<sup>224</sup> Thus, whilst the management of politics, economics and culture were maintained to strengthen this superman, laid low through years of individualism, and Socialist cellular rebellion, such efforts were also controlling the conditions in which this fascist man might appear, to perpetuate the superorganic heights of the community. In the resultant age of fascist plenty, where effective government guarded and guided the national interest, the corporate state also acted as the

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<sup>219</sup> See E. Gentile, 'Impending Modernity: Fascism and the Ambivalent Image of the United States,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.28 No.1, 1994, 7-29.

<sup>220</sup> R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, op. cit., 36.

<sup>221</sup> A. Raven Thomson, *Motorways for Britain*, Sanctuary Press, London, 1938. See also a four part series on the motorway he wrote in *Action* 92-5, 18<sup>th</sup> November 1937 – 9<sup>th</sup> December 1937.

<sup>222</sup> The cultural import of the Nazi constructed autobahn system is only now becoming realised. The traditional view had been that they were a method for swift troop movement, but the system was not capable of such heavy strain. The motorway can thus be seen as a visible link between the provinces, a tangible national project, allowing all access to the virile heartland, the countryside. See I. Boyd Whyte, 'National Socialism and Modernism,' op. cit., 267-9.

<sup>223</sup> A. Raven Thomson, *Motorways for Britain*, op. cit., 2. For the cultural significance of the motorway within fascism see R. Griffin, 'Modernity under the New Order: The Fascist Project for Managing the Future,' *Humanities Research Centre Occasional Papers* No.1, <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff/moderni.txt>, 12.

<sup>224</sup> See G.L. Mosse, *The Image of Man*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996; B. Huppaufer 'The Birth of fascist Man from the Spirit of the Front' in J. Milfull, *The Attractions of Fascism*, Berg, New York, 1990, 45-76.



greenhouse for this crop. Fascism was attempting to construct the very components of its corporate body.<sup>225</sup>

The fascist felt that he (and it generally was a 'he') had been fatefully born at a watershed between national decline and national regeneration, a feeling that alchemically converted all pessimism and cultural despair into a manic sense of purpose and optimism. He knew himself to be one of the 'chosen' of an otherwise lost generation. His task it was to prepare the ground for the new breed of man, the *homo fascistus*, who would instinctively form part of the revitalised national community without having first to purge himself of the selfish reflexes inculcated by a civilization sapped by egotism and materialism.<sup>226</sup>

Such a view sees the fascist man as a 'warrior crusader in the service of the faith.'<sup>227</sup> The conception of this ideal, a complete man, had its blueprint in the war experience, with the perceived valour and sacrifice of the soldiery.<sup>228</sup>

The [fascist] movement never abandoned its erratic struggle towards the creation of a different society. The final justification of both ideology and the revolution could only be the replacement of 'liberal man,' greedy, selfish, and isolated with the 'fascist man,' free from material desires, heroic, noble, and comradely.<sup>229</sup>

In his attempts at recruitment to the fascist ranks, Mosley placed the movement at the centre of the struggle towards the new man; '[i]n our own movement, in fact, we seek to create in advance a microcosm of a national manhood reborn.'<sup>230</sup> A.K.Chesterton saw the Blackshirts as modern day samurai.<sup>231</sup> For the fascist leader, the blueprint for this man was the Spartan warrior of the Hellenic period.<sup>232</sup> This militaristic discipline and severe lifestyle obviously appealed to the Blackshirt leader who wanted the same sombre determination to purpose from his movement, '[i]n our ordered athleticism of life we seek, in fact, a morality of the Spartan pattern.'<sup>233</sup> In such an ethos 'fascism is the creed and the morality of British manhood.'<sup>234</sup> As a staunch believer in the

<sup>225</sup> S.M.Cullen, 'Leaders and Martyrs' op. cit., 426.

<sup>226</sup> R.Griffin, *Fascism*, op. cit., 3-4.

<sup>227</sup> E.Gentile, *Il Culto del littorio*, Rome and Bari, 1993, 119 cited in G.L.Mosse *The Image of Man*, op. cit., 156.

<sup>228</sup> R.DeFelice, 'Fascism' op. cit., 214.

<sup>229</sup> A.S.Milward, 'Fascism and the Economy,' op. cit., 424.

<sup>230</sup> O.Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, op. cit., 53. 'Mankind was to be re-created and the fascist elite was the germ of the new society.' A.S.Milward, 'Fascism and the Economy,' op. cit., 477.

<sup>231</sup> *The Blackshirt* 93, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1935.

<sup>232</sup> See S.M.Cullen, 'The development of the ideas and policy of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 122.

<sup>233</sup> O.Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, op. cit., 52.

<sup>234</sup> Idem., *Fascism in Britain*, BUF Publications, London, 1933 cited by S.M.Cullen, 'The development of the ideas and policy of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 124.



introduction of scientific methods as a solution to all socio-economic ailments, Mosley was also keen to see the establishment of a caste of technocrats in the producers' state that would be the greater Britain.<sup>235</sup> At its root, Mosley believed that the new man should possess the striving will of Nietzsche's supermen, tempered with the Christian service ethic; 'The future is with the strong, the brave, the resolute, who have found themselves by the oblivion of self in a greater cause and destiny.'<sup>236</sup> Such a new morality of service would be no less than a revolution in human affairs; '[f]ascism comes to politics with the force of a new religion, and it draws from its adherents a spirit of sacrifice and self abnegation in the cause, the force that triumphs over all things.'<sup>237</sup>

For Raven Thomson, fascist man had to appreciate his role as a cell of the communal superman and aid in the healthy development of this single superorganic entity, with the result that, '[a]s an athlete, muscles and mind in harmony, shall the nation spring forward.'<sup>238</sup> Corporatism was in form with this underlying metaphysic, providing a framework for contributions to this communal superman. Such a contribution would, for Raven Thomson, have to be taught; 'the real citizens of the future, can only be made by full training in mind and body.'<sup>239</sup> Such an education would 'give the child the opportunity of absorbing the communal culture of his time and enable him to share in the nations cultural heritage.'<sup>240</sup> The corporate state will be the training ground cultivating the fascist ethic; '[h]eroism, courage, self sacrifice, too long condemned as militarist tendencies of which we should be ashamed, shall be recognised once more as the greatest attributes of the British race.'<sup>241</sup> Once a fascist adult, individuals will take their place within corporate society wherein, to

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<sup>235</sup> O.Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, op. cit., 46.

<sup>236</sup> *Action* 46, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1937. See also P.M.Coupland, 'The Blackshirted Utopians,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.33 No.2, 1998, 264.

<sup>237</sup> *Fascist Week* 1, 12<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> November 1933.

<sup>238</sup> *Action* 143, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1938.

<sup>239</sup> *Action* 162, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1939. Such a view finds parallels in Italian Fascism, wherein the true revolution could only occur once the state had educated its citizens in the proper duties of service. See R.C.Thurlow, 'Fascism and Nazism: No Siamese Twins,' *Patterns and Prejudice*, pt1 Vol.14 No.1, 1980, 10.

<sup>240</sup> *Fascist Week* 22, 20<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>241</sup> *The Blackshirt* 29, 11<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> November 1933; 'The hallmark of the fascist mentality is the sense of living though a watershed between two ages and of being engaged in the frontline of the battle to overcome degeneration through the creation of a rejuvenated national community, an event presaged by the appearance of a new 'man' embodying the qualities of the redeemed



quote another BU member with cultural concerns, E.D.Hart, it will be 'the duty of every fascist to see that the part of the national organism under his control... is, and remains, in a healthy condition.'<sup>242</sup> Thus for Raven Thomson science is a redemptive force in terms of its benefit to cultural endeavour. Whilst he would have the fascist man labour at a machine in the shoe factory, at night he would return home and craft a single pair of shoes.<sup>243</sup> In essence he was attempting to revive culture-bearing individuals, transforming the industrial worker after contributing to the economic wellbeing of Britain, into a craftsman in his cultural corporate state.

How Raven Thomson's attempt at cultural engineering would have fared is conjecture. In Italy, the after-work scheme led to the appearance of 'cultural dopolavoristica' a debased set of 'social images, popular and folk rituals, and populist political motifs whose content was escapist rather than overtly propagandist.'<sup>244</sup> In Germany, the Chamber of Culture oversaw the destruction of books and the removal of art it deemed degenerative. In the search to provide what was deemed beneficial to the greater superorganism, a BUF regime with Raven Thomson in a commanding position within the state would doubtless have seen widespread censorship, with innovation carefully monitored. The BUF's 'Merrie England' increasingly would have masked a regime that repressed large sections of society, behind a façade of classless integration. What kind of individuals would have been produced in such a contrived society as Raven Thomson's corporate state, is thankfully conjecture.

#### **IV**

Had the BUF achieved their goal and formed the government of Britain they would have instituted a corporate state.<sup>245</sup> What constraints political reality would have placed on the system will never be known. In Italy, industrial interests circumvented the corporations and appealed directly to a sympathetic

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nation.' R.Griffin, 'Staging the Fascist Rebirth.' in G.Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre*, op. cit., 13.

<sup>242</sup> *Action* 58, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> 'Dopolavoro' in P.Cannistraro, (ed. in chief) *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, op. cit., 176.



government, using this power to repress worker syndicalism. The inevitable compromises that the BUF would have needed to make, in order to maintain the prosperity that ultimately legitimised the fascist regime, might well have contorted the structure out of all recognition.<sup>246</sup> In the absence of electoral success or political crisis the BUF presents an attempt at social engineering without the restraining influence of a critical body politic. Mosley produced the specifications for this model with Raven Thomson designing the blueprint. However this was not simply an amplification of Mosley's views, as has been previously thought.<sup>247</sup> For whilst Raven Thomson's contribution has been seen as cosmetic rather than profound, beneath his corporatist work developing Mosley's ideas he incorporated a cultural dimension within the structure of the corporate state. As Nugent has noted

It is true that the contributions of such people as William Joyce, and Raven Thomson were not outstandingly original, but they were often more than restatements of Mosley's position; they expanded and filled gaps in a number of where Mosley had sketched only Broad outlines.<sup>248</sup>

This extra dimension was necessary for the state to achieve its ultimate goal of contributing to the development of the communal superman, civilization. This calls into question the assertion that the BUF was 'fascism with a rational constructive rather than mythical populist face,' with its chief corporate state exponent motivated by a superorganic view of society.<sup>249</sup> The corporate structure that Raven Thomson envisaged was an attempt to establish a utopia wherein the ills of the modern age would be excluded from an integrated people, freed from poverty and channelled in their lives towards the growth of a newly empowered communal superman. Thus the thinker behind much of the programme of this most programmatic of fascisms must be considered with this cultural element. For Raven Thomson it proved to be the motivation behind his commitment to fascism, realised through the corporate state. Whilst Mosley merely endorsed the benefits of the corporatist system to liberate Britain and produce a modern movement capable of resisting the economic crisis that he considered was imminent, it was Raven Thomson who saw, within the system

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<sup>245</sup> See N.Nugent, 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 133.

<sup>246</sup> See A.S.Milward, 'Fascism and the Economy,' op. cit., 435-7, 446, 448.

<sup>247</sup> N.Nugent 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 138.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>249</sup> R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 182.



itself, the source of Britain's true rebirth. For Raven Thomson fascist culture was not to be an attempt to cover holes in the movement's ideology, but as the pre-eminent project of the BUF state. Given this, the view that the BUF was a purely scientific and programmatic fascism needs to be overturned, with the corporate state's chief architect basing his ideas, not in rational discourse, but in a esoteric world view based in a meta-history derived from Oswald Spengler. The BUF, it can be argued, is thus closer to its irrationalist continental cousins. Its comfortable place on the edge of the European fascist experience seems tenuous, as a result of Raven Thomson's cultural corporatism.



### Chapter Three: Blackshirt Brother - Within Mosley Fascism

This biography of Alexander Raven Thomson now turns to the nature of the seven years that he spent within the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Few biographies of Blackshirts have gone into great depth about the actual experience of fascism within the BUF. In 1975, historian Robert Skidelsky argued that '[w]e really know very little about British fascism,' and this remains true after half a century of scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Whilst many studies have attempted to examine the BUF's effect on a section of British society or a region, little is known of what it was like to be a Blackshirt in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will place Raven Thomson within the phenomenon of pre-War Mosley fascism.<sup>3</sup> It will also explore a neglected facet of the failure of British fascism, the internal weaknesses in the leadership of the movement, which rendered the BUF impotent throughout the period.

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Founded in October 1932, the BUF initially appeared to have the best opportunity of turning fascist potential into popular government.<sup>4</sup> A crisis in the economy seemed imminent and the movement was predicting its rise to power by 1936.<sup>5</sup> What strengthened the BUF, by its own admission 'little more than a propaganda machine' before 1934, was the support of press magnate Lord Rothermere and the endorsement of his newspapers.<sup>6</sup> Rothermere was impressed by Mosley's imperial ideas and believed that its greater support for protectionism

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<sup>1</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, Macmillan, London, 1975, 317.

<sup>2</sup> S.Rawnsley, 'The membership of the British Union of Fascists,' in K.Lunn & R.Thurlo (eds.) *British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1980, 153.

<sup>3</sup> T.Linchan, *East London for Mosley*, Frank Cass, London, 1996, 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, Taurus, London, 1995, 127. It had even inspired a small number of imitative fascist groups within the commonwealth. See *The Blackshirt* 11, 8<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> July 1933; *The Thunderbolt*, Vol.2 No.3 March-April 1938. See also L.R.Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf*, Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Toronto, 1975, 76-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Fascist Week* 17, 2<sup>nd</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> March 1934.

<sup>6</sup> See *Daily Mail*, 15<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> January 1934; *Sunday Dispatch*, 28<sup>th</sup> January & 20<sup>th</sup> May 1934; *The Blackshirt* 75, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1934; K.Martin, 'Public Opinion: Fascism and the 'Daily Mail,' *Political Quarterly*, Vol.2 No. 2, 1934, 273-6; R.Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, Constable & Co, London, 1980, 163-7.



would force the Conservative Party to amend its policies in a similar direction.<sup>7</sup> The result was a BUF membership of 50,000 by mid 1934.<sup>8</sup> This BUF was an eclectic mix, with Rothermere Tories joining a movement that also attracted Socialists, drawn to fascism's claims of tangible social reform.<sup>9</sup>

From this division in the membership two different perceptions of the best route to power emerged. Rising respectability meant a commitment to conventional parliamentary elections. However, the belief that a major economic crisis was approaching, resulted in the acceptance of force as a political tool.<sup>10</sup> Crisis, as a catalyst for change, was a fundamental part of Mosley's fascist thought.<sup>11</sup> Whilst he denied this tendency in his fascism, launching a libel against the *The Star* newspaper for printing such a belief, a confrontation with Communism before gaining control of Britain, was a distinct route to power for the BUF in the period.<sup>12</sup>

To capitalise on the growing popularity and the undeniable oratorical skill of its leader, the BUF scheduled a series of grand meetings throughout the country in the summer of 1934. The culmination of the tour was a rally at London's large indoor arena, Olympia, in May. This meeting descended into violence as interrupters were forcibly ejected from the main hall by Blackshirt stewards and attacked in front of the attending journalists, MPs and newsreel cameras. What was arguably an attempt to illustrate the movement as a potent force in British politics was a publicity disaster with questions asked in the House of Commons about the event.<sup>13</sup> Three weeks later, the Nazi Party's purge of its ranks further enforced the violent reputation of fascism.<sup>14</sup> Rothermere's association with the BUF came to an abrupt end. The size of the membership fell

<sup>7</sup> See P. Addison, 'Patriotism under Pressure: Lord Rothermere and British Foreign Policy,' in G. P. Cole & C. Cook (eds.) *The Politics of Reappraisal 1918-1939*, Macmillan, London, 1975, 197-9.

<sup>8</sup> R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1995, 184.

<sup>9</sup> S. Rawnsley, 'The membership of the British Union of Fascists,' PhD Thesis, University of Bradford, 1983, 160. With an open door policy towards recruits during this time some less desirable elements joined the grand crusade. See N. Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1983, 86; G. C. Webber, 'The British Isles,' in D. Muhlburger (ed.) *The Social Basis of The European Fascist Movements*, Croon Helm, London, 1987, 145.

<sup>10</sup> J. Drennan, *BUF, Mosley and British Fascism*, BUF Publications, London, 1934, 247-8.

<sup>11</sup> J. Brewer, 'Fascism and Crisis,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 13 No. 2, 1979, 1-7.

<sup>12</sup> N. Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op. cit., 90.

<sup>13</sup> C. Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, Barrie & Rockcliffe, London, 1961, 115. Yet as Martin Pugh has shown, Olympia did little to alter the opinions of contemporary newspapers and politicians. See M. Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate,' *Historical Studies*, Vol. 41 No. 2, 1998, 529-31.



dramatically, and as the issue of anti-Semitism began to predominate BUF policy, several high-ranking fascists, including deputy leader Robert Forgan, left the movement.

The setbacks of May 1934 were remote when Raven Thomson joined the BUF in the April of the previous year. His initial role in the movement was as a street vendor for its only BUF newspaper at the time, *The Blackshirt*.<sup>15</sup> This placed him on fascism's front line and it appears that he did not go unscathed, with Mosley later noting an early assault on his comrade.<sup>16</sup> His period as a paper seller lasted at least until the middle of August, when he was included in the BUF delegation at the Nazi Party's 1933 victory rally in Nuremberg.<sup>17</sup> The choice of Raven Thomson as a member of the group, after only five months in the Mosley fascism, was due to his ability to speak German, allowing him to act as an interpreter for other BUF delegates.<sup>18</sup> His presence in the delegation appears to have been on the instructions of Robert Forgan, then the movement's deputy leader, who wanted to discover the Nazi methods that had met with such success.<sup>19</sup> Whilst Raven Thomson later insisted that he did not engage in any direct talks with the Nazi officials during his stay, there exists a photograph, which clearly shows him making the salute at the rally surrounded by other delegates.<sup>20</sup> It was soon after he returned from Germany that his promotions began with an appointment to the movement's headquarters as a staff officer.

Raven Thomson's advancement was also aided by a number of other factors. Crucially, Mosley had formed a favourable opinion of him. For whilst the BUF declared that in the new fascist Britain advancement would be on merit,

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<sup>14</sup> C. Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, op. cit., 116.

<sup>15</sup> Public Record Office (PRO) HO283/70/63: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>16</sup> O. Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 331.

<sup>17</sup> PRO HO144/19069/214-5: Fascist organisations 1925-34: Special Branch report 31<sup>st</sup> August 1933. This Special Branch police report from 31<sup>st</sup> August 1933 noted the departure of Raven Thomson for Germany the day previously. See R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, op. cit., 55, 172. In 1940 Raven Thomson recalled his attendance as a vendor to the Hendon Air Show, where a special edition of *The Blackshirt* was being sold. This special edition appeared between editions 16 & 17 (August 12<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> 1933). See PRO HO283/70/85: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>18</sup> PRO HO283/70/85: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing. The BUF application form contained a question about foreign languages. See HO144/20140/120: Special Branch report, April/May 1934.

<sup>19</sup> PRO HO283/70/88: Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> PRO HO144/19069/215: Special Branch report, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1933. The Police report noted that the BUF delegation was to attend a review of some Nazi soldiers during their visit and the photograph is likely to have been taken at this.



within the movement, patronage was crucial to promotion.<sup>21</sup> That Mosley had met Raven Thomson, and had read *Civilization as Divine Superman* with interest, if not credence, would have been of particular benefit to the Scot's rise.<sup>22</sup> Had the Blackshirt leader taken against Raven Thomson, promotion would not have occurred.

Geography too played a part in allowing Raven Thomson to advance in the BUF's organisation. The erstwhile Director of Policy lived in Battersea and was thus close to the BUF's social and organisational centre, 'The Black House,' in Chelsea.<sup>23</sup> This acquisition of the Whitelands teaching college for their national headquarters also precipitated Raven Thomson's first salaried post within the movement as Director of Research. Later, he recalled that such work involved him 'collecting newspaper cuttings and keeping an eye on political events and studying economic questions....'<sup>24</sup> Had he lived outside the capital, such an easy entry into headquarters and rapid promotion would have been far harder to achieve.

This life in the Black House was one of total immersion in fascism. As a headquarters worker he was now in the centre of the Blackshirt movement. A.K.Chesterton, recalling the atmosphere in a 1937 biography of Mosley, wrote in euphoric tones about the climate through which fascists lived on a daily basis:

It was the centre of [fascism's] gay bunting and in a sense turbulent life – the intellectual and the social as well as organisational centre. Its offices were occupied by men working fourteen and fifteen hours a day; its lecture halls... filled with students eager to learn about this new and exciting crusade, its club rooms rang with laughter and song of men who felt that the advent of fascism had made life again worth living.<sup>25</sup>

Members socialised with other comrades in the bar, read the fascist press, attended meetings, went on holiday together to specially organised camps and even smoked 'Blackshirt' cigarettes.<sup>26</sup> Days at headquarters were highly

<sup>21</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 134.

<sup>22</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 331.

<sup>23</sup> A.Raven, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, Williams & Norgate, London, 1932, Foreword. H.R.Kedward, *Fascism in Western Europe, 1900-1945*, Blackie, Glasgow, 1969, 91; F.L.Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, Batsford, London, 1967, 219; R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 99. R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 321.

<sup>24</sup> PRO HO283/70/73-4: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing; R.Benewick. *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, Allen Lane, London, 1972, 116.

<sup>25</sup> See D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit., 126.

<sup>26</sup> The Black House had offices, a bar, a gym, dormitories and supposedly dungeons. See C.Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, op. cit., 87-8. The Blackshirt cigarettes idea was yet another attempt to gain the Movement an income. For a time the *Daily Mail* journalist G.Ward Price was



regimented, with 7.30am reveille followed by days punctuated with drills and inspections.<sup>27</sup> Staff officers worked six days a week.<sup>28</sup> An elaborate organisational structure ensured all but the lowliest Blackshirt had an official title.<sup>29</sup> Robert Forgan recalled that the movement consumed all his time.<sup>30</sup> In such circumstances it is not unsurprising that for some the strain became too much. A.K.Chesterton had a breakdown later in the decade, through a combination of overwork and alcoholism.<sup>31</sup> Though not a resident at the Black House, given the proximity of his Battersea home, it was through its atmosphere that Raven Thomson moved on a daily basis. This experience of fascism was not confined to London, with a Hull fascist writing in his memoirs,

My seven years in the British Union were years of excitement, almost of adventure, with a commitment of near religious fervour to a man and an ideal that gave me an unforgettable experience of comradeship that perhaps no man can expect to meet with again.<sup>32</sup>

In early January 1934 Raven Thomson became a deputy director in the publicity department.<sup>33</sup> This coincided with the publication of another BUF paper, the *Fascist Week*.<sup>34</sup> Whereas previously, Raven Thomson's articles in *The Blackshirt* had been infrequent, in the new paper he was a regular contributor from the outset.<sup>35</sup> The *Fascist Week* was the main BUF paper during the membership increases fostered by the Rothermere press.<sup>36</sup> Apart from composing articles, he later recalled the period as one wherein '[o]ne was a staff officer and did whatever came to hand.'<sup>37</sup> Raven Thomson's changing role was to stabilise with his acceptance of the position of Director of Policy, after a short

associated with the venture. See *The Blackshirt* 62, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1934; *Action* 160, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1939; *Action* 24, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1936; *Action* 76, 7<sup>th</sup> August 1937.

<sup>27</sup> PRO HO144/20144/222: Special Branch report, 10<sup>th</sup> January 1935; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 96

<sup>28</sup> See PRO HO144/20144/217: Special Branch report, 10<sup>th</sup> January 1935; See /222 for the daily routine.

<sup>29</sup> Sheffield University Archive (SUA) R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, unpublished manuscript, 320-6.

<sup>30</sup> R.Forgan interview 13<sup>th</sup> December 1960 in R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 88

<sup>31</sup> D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit., 130.

<sup>32</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, Brockingday, London, 1990, 233.

<sup>33</sup> *The Blackshirt* 37, 5<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> January 1934.

<sup>34</sup> For details of the new paper see *The Blackshirt* 37 5<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> January 1934 and *Fascist Week* 1, 12<sup>th</sup> –18<sup>th</sup> November 1933.

<sup>35</sup> *The Blackshirt* became the BUF's internal paper. See *The Blackshirt* 37, 5<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> January 1934.

<sup>36</sup> *Fascist Week* 1, 12<sup>th</sup> –18<sup>th</sup> November 1933. It was also hoped that the new paper might provide the Movement with some revenue.

<sup>37</sup> PRO HO283/70/73-4: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of the Raven Thomson hearing.



period as a deputy in the department. It was as the BUF's Director of Policy that he pursued his fascist activism for the next six years.<sup>38</sup>

Until the events of Olympia, the BUF made a serious attempt to court the British establishment.<sup>39</sup> The chief vehicle for this was the 'January Club.'<sup>40</sup> From the outset its links with fascism were hidden. Begun in January 1934 it declared that it was merely a group interested in modern forms of government. Raven Thomson's application to join came via the domestic agency of his wife, with no mention of his position in the BUF.<sup>41</sup> Yet as Mosley wrote to the club's secretary in April, 'I greatly appreciate all that you are doing, and thank you for the considerable help you are giving me.'<sup>42</sup> The January Club's meetings took the form of large dinners at hotels and restaurants, at which Mosley, William Joyce, the movement's Director of Propaganda, and Raven Thomson all regularly spoke.<sup>43</sup> Robert Forgan saw such meetings as a valuable tool for both recruitment and generating revenue. Writing to the club's secretary, he asked that an influential Yorkshire businessman be approached; 'I should be glad if you would send him an invitation from the January Club to attend one of the meetings in the near future, preferably one at which the Leader is present... It is probable that he will join and might be induced later, to give a substantial subscription.'<sup>44</sup> In another attempt to engage the social elite, the BUF also

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<sup>38</sup> A Special Branch report on the BUF's leadership has Raven Thomson as Deputy Director of Policy by 20<sup>th</sup> March, and as Director by the 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1934. See PRO HO144/20140/170: Letter from Raven Thomson, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1934; HO144/20142/78: Special Branch report, 18/19<sup>th</sup> July 1934.

<sup>39</sup> R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 183.

<sup>40</sup> An earlier idea to call it the 'Corporate Club' had been rejected by Sir John Petric, who during late 1933 was the main candidate for the chairmanship of the group, 'It is full, formal, restricted and without appeal.' He rather wanted a name that allowed some latitude and created an air of mystery, and thought the 'November Club' was a suitable name, an argument that appears to have been accepted, with a revision. Imperial War Museum (IWM) 92/2/1: Luttman Johnson Papers Vol.2 letter 3. See also R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, op. cit., 49-56. PRO HO144/20142/218-20: 'The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom including Northern Ireland,' MI5 report No.3: August & September 1934; HO144/20144/102: Special Branch report 19<sup>th</sup> March 1935; /116: Special Branch report 15<sup>th</sup> March 1935; R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 94-5; *Fascist Week* 15, 16<sup>th</sup> -22<sup>nd</sup> February 1934; PRO HO283/11/68: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing, June 1940; Anon, *Who Backs Mosley? - Fascist Promise and Fascist Performance*, Labour Research Department, London, 1934, 11-2.

<sup>41</sup> IWM 92/2/1: Luttman-Johnson Papers Vol.1: Letter from Raven Thomson to Luttman Johnson, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1934.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.: Luttman-Johnson Papers Vol.2: Letter from Oswald Mosley to Luttman Johnson, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1934.

<sup>43</sup> PRO HO144/20140/114-5: Special Branch report April/May 1934.

<sup>44</sup> Forgan was also of the opinion that the club should be opened to small businessmen in the hopes of getting more donations to the Movement. IWM 92/2/1: Luttman-Johnson Papers Vol.2: Forgan to Luttman Johnson 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1933 & 10<sup>th</sup> April 1934. This refutes Griffiths' claim



published a quarterly journal containing a more philosophical treatment of fascism and Blackshirt policy.<sup>45</sup> Of the 2000 copies of the first issue of this *Fascist Quarterly*, 150 were allocated to January Club members.<sup>46</sup> The movement also made some attempts to court the undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge. Both universities had small fascist associations and throughout the thirties leading BUF speakers, including Raven Thomson, gave lectures on fascism.<sup>47</sup> Despite the prevalence of Blackshirts holding degrees, the BUF converted few undergraduates.<sup>48</sup> A cell of fascists within the Civil Service, reminiscent of the strategy employed by Communist infiltrators, was also attempted.<sup>49</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that a significant cell was ever formed.

As a movement attempting to get a mass following, the BUF also tried to win the support of the working classes. An internal bulletin of the period illustrates the movement's attitude,

While no one disputes the fact that the Political section which is responsible for the forming of the Government and thrashing out a sound policy of planned economic control and which is at present represented in this country as the British Union of Fascists, is of first importance, yet it would be courting disaster when the day comes to take over the Government of the country, if a parallel organisation for taking over the control of our industries, had not been developed side by side with the Political Organisation.<sup>50</sup>

Certain fascists, such as William Joyce, were committed to attracting this section of society by concentrating on industrial issues to gain fascist supporters. Writing in 1935 he stressed that '[f]ascism must enter industrial constituencies in order to

that the club was only partially connected to the BUF. See R.Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, op. cit., 51.

<sup>45</sup> SUA: R.Saunders, 'A Tiller of Several Soils,' unpublished autobiography, unpaginated; *The Blackshirt* 92, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1935.

<sup>46</sup> PRO HO144/20144/80: Special Branch report 4<sup>th</sup> April 1935; IWM 92/2/1: Luttmann-Johnson Papers Vol.2: Letter from William Joyce to Luttmann-Johnson, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1935. The BUF also succeeded in bringing the Distributionist journal *Age of Plenty* over to the fascist cause. See PRO HO144/20140/105: Special Branch report April/May 1934.

<sup>47</sup> *The Blackshirt* 239, 27<sup>th</sup> November 1937; IWM 92/2/1: Luttmann-Johnson Papers Vol. 11: Oxford University Fascist Association Handbook, Hilary (Autumn) Term 1934. The University has kept no record of such a group.

<sup>48</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 121-2.

<sup>49</sup> *The Blackshirt* 19, 2<sup>nd</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> September 1933; National Museum of Labour History (NMLH): LP FASC 33/3: Labour Party Research Department, Research Notes 269, 13. J.R.Jones 'England,' in H.Rogger & E.Weber, *The European Right*, University of California, Berkeley, 1965, 67.

<sup>50</sup> Wiener Library Archive, Press Cuttings (PC)2, 315: BUF West London Regional Bulletin, 1934-5.



gain power constitutionally.’<sup>51</sup> The BUF formed a ‘Fascist Union of British Workers’ committed to fight against the means test that also acted as an employment bureau and legal advisor for the unemployed.<sup>52</sup> In December 1933 the movement also attempted to strengthen contacts in the caterer’s guild and amongst bank clerks.<sup>53</sup> In 1934, it engaged in the Tithe war on behalf of East Anglia’s farmers.<sup>54</sup> Mosley eventually suppressed this fascist trades union, over concerns regarding its growing independence from the movement.<sup>55</sup>

The BUF expansion of 1934 allowed Raven Thomson to advance rapidly up the Blackshirt ranks. The reasons for his rapid promotion reflect the needs of the Mosley fascism at that time. How much design and good fortune aided Raven Thomson’s progress is unclear. Notable, however, is the absence of any attempt to decline an offer of promotion. Joining the movement prior to its period of significant growth in 1934, he was already an established headquarters officer as the overt endorsements of the Rothermere press ended and the movement began to contract. With the departure of many high-ranking officials, Raven Thomson and other 1933 recruits filled the vacuum as Mosley’s new cadre.

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The BUF had difficulty recovering in the aftermath of the Olympia meeting.<sup>56</sup> Its membership dwindled to a band of some 5,000 activists.<sup>57</sup> A public outcry at the fascists’ tactics was reflected in a press ban on reporting the movement, instituted by the Government.<sup>58</sup> This pressure on the media also ensured that Mosley was not allowed to speak on the BBC, a situation that

<sup>51</sup> IWM Special Misc S4: Letter from William Joyce to East Islington member, 25<sup>th</sup> April 1935.

<sup>52</sup> PRO HO144/20140/113: Special Branch report, April/May 1934; *The Blackshirt* 1, February 1933; NMLH: LP FASC 33/3: Labour Party Research Department, Research Notes 269, 10-11; *The Blackshirt* 33, 9<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> December 1933.

<sup>53</sup> *The Blackshirt* 37, 5<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> January 1934 cited in S.M.Cullen, ‘Another Nationalism: The British Union of Fascists in Glamorgan, 1932-40,’ *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 15, 1994/5, 108.

<sup>54</sup> PRO HO144/20140/116: Special Branch report, April/May 1934; *Daily Telegraph* 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1934.

<sup>55</sup> A.C.Miles, *Mosley in Motley*, op. cit., 12.

<sup>56</sup> PRO HO144/20142/215: ‘The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom not Northern Ireland,’ MI5 report No.3: 1934; N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op. cit., 86.

<sup>57</sup> R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 189.

<sup>58</sup> C.P.Cook & J.Stevenson, *The Slump*, Quartet books, London, 1979, 203-4; R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 185.



remained until 1968.<sup>59</sup> Amongst the senior officials of the Movement, rival factions appeared supporting different ways to proceed. Raven Thomson was one those who supported the vigorous dissemination of policy and propaganda through populist street campaigning at meetings, together with the distribution of fascist literature.<sup>60</sup> In late 1934, however, it was a group proposing that the BUF deploy itself as a conventional party that was the chief influence on Mosley.<sup>61</sup> In the absence of a crisis to provide the atmosphere for the acceptance of the BUF message, the movement would have to achieve power through the ballot box.<sup>62</sup> Now 'the mass of active and non-active members must be given a political outlook and this outlook must predominate.'<sup>63</sup> In the ensuing reforms of 1935 the BUF districts became constituency formations, ready to return a fascist MP.<sup>64</sup> An organising department reporting to Mosley oversaw the changes within the movement. A political department would furnish activists with the policy and propaganda necessary to convince the electorate to vote fascist.<sup>65</sup> Control of this organisation was maintained through a series of inspectors reporting to headquarters.

Whilst the rapid decline in membership was dismissed as the removal of insincere fascists, the drop in subscriptions and donations forced the BUF to monitor its expenditure.<sup>66</sup> In the movement's newspapers repeated appeals were made for advertisers and donations.<sup>67</sup> Limited print runs resulted in appeals to readers to pass on their copies or buy several to distribute themselves.<sup>68</sup> All

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<sup>59</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 315.

<sup>60</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 5; C.P.Cook & J.Stevenson, *The Slump*, op. cit., 205.

<sup>61</sup> Reproducd in N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op. cit., 88-9. See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 6.

<sup>62</sup> 'It is our task during the next twelve months to build up an electoral machine throughout the whole country.' SUA: Saunders Papers A1: Letter from regional policy officer to Branches, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1934; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 323; R.Skidelsky, 'Great Britain,' op. cit., 268-9; SUA R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, op. cit., 397.

<sup>63</sup> N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op. cit., 89.

<sup>64</sup> *The Blackshirt* 91, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1935; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 68; A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, 127.

<sup>65</sup> PRO HO144/20144/172: Spccial Branch report, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1935; PRO HO144/20145/206: Spccial Branch report, July 1935; See also R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 273.

<sup>66</sup> R.C.ThurLOW, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 133; SUA R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, op. cit., 368.

<sup>67</sup> *Action* 170, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1940; *The Blackshirt* 60, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1934; 153, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1936.

<sup>68</sup> *The Blackshirt* 112, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1935; *The Blackshirt* 160, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1936; *The Blackshirt* 109, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1935; *The Blackshirt* 189, 5<sup>th</sup> December 1936. See also SUA: Saunders' Papers A2: Circular to members, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1936.



districts had to be self-supporting, financing their own propaganda.<sup>69</sup> It is alleged that Mosley put £100,000 of own money into the movement during this time.<sup>70</sup> In an attempt to gain some revenue, a plan to buy a commercial radio station was developed.<sup>71</sup> No longer could the branches be a social venue, '[b]lackshirts must, in all cases, get away from the club atmosphere and get to work.'<sup>72</sup> Should this not occur drastic measures were taken. A.K.Chesterton, sent by headquarters to review the situation in the Midlands, was so dismayed by the Stoke branch that he expelled 300 members.<sup>73</sup> In London the movement vacated its fortress in Chelsea, moving the administration of the BUF into offices in Great Smith Street.<sup>74</sup>

The BUF was reduced to targeting its propaganda carefully. In October 1935, it put forward no candidates for the General Election, campaigning instead under a 'fascism next time,' slogan.<sup>75</sup> Mosley believed that by-elections and the following general election in 1939-40 would offer a better chance for the movement.<sup>76</sup> In the event, the Conservative Party polled over 53% of the total votes and the National Government was returned with 432 of the 615 seats available.<sup>77</sup> When Italy invaded Abyssinia, the BUF deemed it as outside British interest, and financed by Mussolini, ran a short campaign encouraging the country to 'Mind Britain's Business.'<sup>78</sup> Any provincial campaigning was based on regional grievances, as in a short-lived attempt to attract Lancashire cotton

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<sup>69</sup> *Action* 177, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1939; *Action* 154, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1939; See SUA Saunders' Papers A1: BU Circular regarding nation-wide meetings on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1935; *Ibid.*, A4: Letter from BU business manager, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1940; *Ibid.*, A4: Letter from B.D.E.Dovovan, 25<sup>th</sup> August 1939; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 324; *The Blackshirt* 242, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1937.

<sup>70</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 330.

<sup>71</sup> PRO HO283/11/105, 109: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing; HO283/14/20-9: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing; R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 189. See also A.Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, 56.

<sup>72</sup> *The Blackshirt* 91, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1935.

<sup>73</sup> D.Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit., 126; See also S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930's,' op. cit., 123.

<sup>74</sup> SUA R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, op. cit., 398-9.

<sup>75</sup> *The Blackshirt* 131, 25<sup>th</sup> October 1935; O.Mosley, 'Forward in Fascism,' *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol. 2 No. 1, 1936, 31.

<sup>76</sup> PRO HO144/20144/33: Special Branch report, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1935.

<sup>77</sup> C.Cook & J.Paxton, *European Political Facts 1918-84*, Macmillan, London, 1986, 187.

<sup>78</sup> Though the movement rejected claims of foreign funding, it is now clear that during the invasion the BUF was receiving £3,000 pounds a month from Italy. See *The Blackshirt* 187, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1936; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 81.



workers with a policy that would reinstate the trading link to India, by removing its trade barriers and excluding Japanese cotton from the subcontinent.<sup>79</sup>

1936 saw the greater inspiration of Nazism on Mosley fascism, with the movement changing its name, after pressure from the increasingly important and vocal East London fascists, to the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists, or 'British Union' (BU) for short.<sup>80</sup> This more continental shift was accompanied by ardent patriotic campaigning, after the death of George V and the abdication crisis of Edward VIII.<sup>81</sup> A greater emphasis on anti-Semitism emerged as the movement's chief propaganda tool, prompted by the success of the policy in the only area of Britain where BU showed any sign of growth, East London. So important is this aspect of the fascist enterprise and Raven Thomson's part in it, that the following chapter will deal with the issue in detail. The movement used both the March 1937 London County Council (LCC) and November municipal elections to raise publicity, train electoral teams and establish local support strength.<sup>82</sup> Raven Thomson stood first in the LCC for Bethnal Green North East Ward and then later in the year was the BU candidate for South Hackney, in the constituency of popular Labour MP Herbert Morrison.<sup>83</sup> The BU was so poor that candidates had to use their own money to finance their municipal campaigns.<sup>84</sup> In that November election, the BU polled badly across the country.<sup>85</sup> One critic of this conventional ballot tactic, was the originator of the 1935 reforms Major General Fuller. Questioning the attention that the movement had given to East London, Fuller believed Mosley,

[G]oes rampaging in talking of fighting 400 seats. This is absurd. What I want him to do is to establish a virile cell in each constituency and to restrict his fighting to what I call gutter electorates, that is down and out areas both agricultural and industrial...When he has won the gutters he

<sup>79</sup> S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930's,' op. cit., 68-72; M.Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1982, 281; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 72-3. *Action* 135, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1938; PRO HO144/21281/15: Special Branch report 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1938.

<sup>80</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 9; *The Blackshirt* 165, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1936; PRO HO283/11/9, 91: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing; R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 188.

<sup>81</sup> See SUA R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, op. cit., 458-68.

<sup>82</sup> SUA Saunders' Papers A3: Letter from B.D.E.Donovan to districts, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1937; C.P.Cook & J.Stevenson, *The Slump*, op. cit., 209; *Action* 66, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1937; Board of Deputies of British Jews (BOD) C6/7/2/1: 'Constituencies to be fought by BU in next election' JDC (Jewish Defence Committee) report, n.d.; *Action* 206, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1940.

<sup>83</sup> BOD C6/7/2/2: Prospective British Union Parliamentary candidates, JDC report, 1937.

<sup>84</sup> *The Blackshirt* 236, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1937.

<sup>85</sup> BOD C6/7/2/1: JDC report, 1937.



can terrify the pavements; but until he does so; those of the pavements – the bourgeoisie – will remain dead against him.<sup>86</sup>

With the shrinkage of subscriptions, and legislation in 1937 to deny the British Union a uniform, Mosley fascism came to increasingly rely on infiltration and covert dissemination of propaganda.<sup>87</sup> Fascists contributed to the letter pages of local newspapers, endorsing BU policy but concealing their affiliation.<sup>88</sup> Sample letters for raising local press attention were printed in the fascist newspapers.<sup>89</sup> Other tactics involved inserting propaganda into library books.<sup>90</sup> With the outbreak of war, the blackout provided an opportunity to chalk and white wash fascist slogans on walls.<sup>91</sup> Infiltration was also endorsed, with female fascists in particular urged to join non-political economic, cultural and religious groups, introduce the fascist message, with the goal of eventually getting a BU speaker to visit.<sup>92</sup>

The approach of war provided the only opportunity for Mosley fascism to regain some of the popularity it had briefly enjoyed in 1934. The BU stance, based on an idea of a contained strong empire outside of which Britain should have no interest or jurisdiction to intervene, discouraged a war with expansionist Germany.<sup>93</sup> Mosley was convinced that German interest lay to its east, where once its need for control of necessary raw materials had been satisfied it would stop advancing.<sup>94</sup> A strong Britain within her empire had thus nothing to fear.<sup>95</sup> It was also argued, that a series of fraternal fascist governments dominating Europe was the best way to ensure continental peace.<sup>96</sup> Opposing this fascist entente, the BU argued, was the organised forces of Jewry working through their

<sup>86</sup> IWM Luttmann-Johnson Papers Conservation Vol.2: Fuller to Luttmann Johnson 30<sup>th</sup> June 1937.

<sup>87</sup> S.M.Cullen, 'Another Nationalism: The British Union of Fascists in Glamorgan, 1932-40,' op. cit., 112.

<sup>88</sup> SUA Saunders' Papers, A3: BU Circular; Ibid., A4: Letter from Research Department; *Action* 154, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1939. NMLH/LP FASC 33/4-5: Labour Party Research Department, Research Notes 269.

<sup>89</sup> PRO HO144/21281/19-21: Special Branch report 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1938.

<sup>90</sup> *Action* 191, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1939. This practise still continues, with this researcher finding a copy of the Friends of Oswald Mosley newsletter, *Comrade*, in a local library copy of *My Life*.

<sup>91</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3: JDC report 1940.

<sup>92</sup> *Action* 153, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1939; *Action* 159, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1939; *The Blackshirt* 237, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1937; *The Blackshirt* 246, April 1938; PRO HO144/21281/41-2: Copy of the BU constitution and rules; T.Linchan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 295; SUA Saunders' Papers, A3: Letter from senior fascist Clement Bruning 21<sup>st</sup> August 1937.

<sup>93</sup> *Action* 203, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1940; 204, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1940.

<sup>94</sup> O.Mosley, *The British Peace*, Greater Britain Publications, London, 1940, 5.

<sup>95</sup> N.Nugent, 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 156-60.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 157; O.Mosley, *The British Peace*, op. cit., 1-2.



control of international finance to destroy Nazism for its assault on German Jews.<sup>97</sup> As Raven Thomson wrote, '[a]n eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We all know the Jews have a great hatred against the German people and they will try to drag all the nations into a war of revenge.'<sup>98</sup> Based on these ideas, the BU set out to become the political body representing those opposed to the war.<sup>99</sup> In this they were partially successful, going some way to recoup their membership losses after mid 1934.<sup>100</sup> This rise in numbers, however, does hide the departure of fascists who thought the BU's stance was unpatriotic.<sup>101</sup> In an effort to stop this perception, Raven Thomson proposed publicly criticising the openly pro-Nazi group, the Nordic League.<sup>102</sup> Such measures did little to allay the fears of many Britons that the BU was a fifth column for Nazism. Once the phoney war period ended in May 1940, the government acted to remove any potential risk by imprisoning most of the BU's leadership.

Given his 'Director of Policy' title within the movement, the role of Raven Thomson during the majority of the decade would appear obvious. Yet Mosley was in control of both the production of ideology and the organisation of the movement, through the appointment or removal of officials.<sup>103</sup> Many in the British Union were content to accept unconditionally Mosley's ideas, as in the case of Hector McKechnie, a senior movement administrator for London, who expressed the belief, 'I rather accept Sir Oswald Mosley as the average Catholic accepts the Pope.'<sup>104</sup>

An answer to the question of Raven Thomson's role was also sought in 1940, when the authorities were attempting to quantify his part in the British Union's activities and beliefs regarding the War. To the question 'what does Director of Policy mean?' Raven Thomson replied, '[i]t meant if anybody

<sup>97</sup> O.Mosley, *The British Peace*, op. cit., 2; N.Nugent, 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 159.

<sup>98</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3: JDC observer's report, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1938.

<sup>99</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 129-30; *Action* 135, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1938. R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 190.

<sup>100</sup> C.P.Cook & J.Stevenson, *The Slump*, op. cit., 211. R.Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, op. cit., 360; SUA R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, op. cit., 714-20.

<sup>101</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 117. C.P.Cook & J.Stevenson, *The Slump*, op. cit., 216.

<sup>102</sup> PRO HO45/24895/35: Special Branch report, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1940.

<sup>103</sup> PRO HO283/11/16: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 335.

<sup>104</sup> PRO HO283/48/30: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Hector McKechnie hearing; A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 115.

wanted to know anything about the policy of the Movement instead of worrying Sir Oswald Mosley they would write to me and I would give them the answer.’<sup>105</sup> Unconvinced, one of his interviewers probed further: ‘by Director of Policy I would understand maker of policy or controller of policy.’ Raven Thomson believed ‘to some extent that was the case. If anybody wanted to know if they were right or if a speaker was putting something out that he should not, it was my business to correct him and inform him he was deviating from the policy of the movement.’<sup>106</sup> Thus whilst he was involved in the explanation of policy, his was more of a managerial rather than a creative post for; ‘[i]n a movement such as ours policy is not created quite so light heartedly as all that. Naturally there are consultations and a number of people have to decide that.’<sup>107</sup>

These select few largely exercised this power over policy through a top-level committee, the Policy Directorate.<sup>108</sup> This body, comprising many of the chief officials of the movement, has been noted, but never studied, in histories of Mosley fascism. It comprised Mosley’s inner circle and was the intellectual centre of the BU, further diluting Raven Thomson’s participation in policy-making. In the Special Branch and MI5 reports of the time no such directorate is noted, however, they do record the existence of a group that contained all the individuals that at any one time could be described as the leadership of the movement. This ‘Research Directory’ was unlike other BU committees in that Mosley was also a member. Raven Thomson was its executive officer with other directors, such as Joyce and Chesterton, attending its weekly meetings.<sup>109</sup> Opinion on the strength of this directorate is divided. Benewick noted ‘the main function of the policy directorate seems to have been negative in that Mosley would not do anything that was strongly objected to by that body.’<sup>110</sup> Yet John Beckett, a former Director of Publicity, looking back at his time in the BU remarked that ‘[t]he whole council might unanimously have said one thing and

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<sup>105</sup> PRO HO283/70/82: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>106</sup> ‘..I have to see to it that the policy put out by speakers and so forth was the correct one.’ PRO HO283/70/83: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> See R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 112-8; C.Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, op. cit., 75.

<sup>109</sup> PRO HO144/20145/289: Revised List of BUF Directories, 1936.

<sup>110</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 112.



Mosley would have been quite in order in doing the opposite.’<sup>111</sup> Little collaboration was apparent in 1935, however, when Raven Thomson brought a proposal for a pamphlet to help the BU campaign in Lancashire to the directory. Mosley insisted on changes, and these appeared in the published work.<sup>112</sup> In 1936 the change of title to ‘British Union’ generated some opposition from this directorate, but the decision was carried.<sup>113</sup> Four years later, Mosley, responding to allegations of dictatorship, cited Raven Thomson, Neil Francis Hawkins (BU Director General), Bryan Donovan (Assistant Director General) and E.G. Clarke (Leading East London fascist) as ‘[t]hose are the people for instance I would call into conference if there were a big issue to be decided.’<sup>114</sup> The Blackshirt leader went on to say ‘I could not operate even now, for five minutes unless morally and intellectually they accepted my leadership.’<sup>115</sup> The minutes of the Research Directory meetings show high-level decision-making on such topics as the content of the fascist newspapers, campaign strategy and the direction of the movement.<sup>116</sup>

Raven Thomson’s BU title thus appears somewhat misleading in this attempt to understand the part he played in Mosley Fascism before the Second World War. The constitution of the movement provides a clearer view of the type of work in which the Director of Policy was engaged.

To the Policy-Propaganda Department is delegated the task of supervising the Policy and Propaganda of the Movement. It’s [sic] functions are:-

- i The Training and classification of speakers.
- ii The collection and issue of information by the Research Department.
- iii The Dissemination of Policy and Propaganda.<sup>117</sup>

Raven Thomson saw his role as one aiding the development of the political potential of his fellow fascists. For him it was ‘[o]nly through each member becoming a reliable instrument of propaganda can the Movement grow.’<sup>118</sup>

Speeches and meetings were ‘the posters which advertise British

<sup>111</sup> PRO HO283/26/73: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of John Beckett hearing.

<sup>112</sup> PRO HO144/20145/239: Special Branch report, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1935.

<sup>113</sup> F.L.Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, op. cit., 222.

<sup>114</sup> PRO HO283/11/66: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing.

<sup>115</sup> PRO HO283/11/33: Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> PRO HO144/20145/239: Special Branch report, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1935; /289: Revised list of BUF Directories, 1936.

<sup>117</sup> Anon, *BUFNS Constitution and Regulations*, Abbey Supplies Ltd, London, 1936, reg. 8.3.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., reg. 68.



Union.’<sup>119</sup> They were a valuable way, not only of reaching large numbers of people, but also for selling the papers, gaining fresh contacts and of attracting donations.<sup>120</sup> Raven Thomson, as a leading member of the movement, spent a great deal of the decade speaking to meetings across the country, sometimes engaging in specific speaking tours throughout a region, as in Norfolk during March 1936.<sup>121</sup> One Dorset fascist wrote in his memoirs of a meeting where Raven Thomson spoke,

I shall never forget,....Raven’s performance that evening. Of course he was not only a great intellectual, but also had a great personality and great energy...In any case I can picture him now, striding back and forth on the platform, the words pouring from him, a picture of boundless energy.<sup>122</sup>

Raven Thomson’s speaking talents have often been minimised by scholars.<sup>123</sup>

Whilst he was undoubtedly not the platform presence of Mosley or Joyce, his enthusiasm seems to have made up for this shortcoming. *Action*, the movement’s main paper from 1936, noted: ‘[a] meeting a night is Thomson’s delight.’<sup>124</sup> One fascist recalled the impact of such speakers; ‘[they] were Olympian Gods to me, to be glimpsed on a distant platform, at a monster meeting or at the head of the column on a march.’<sup>125</sup> To ensure that a coherent and effective message was delivered at meetings, the BU established ‘speaker schools’ to train its members.<sup>126</sup> To the BU ‘[n]othing is as important to a rising political Movement as to have as many speakers available as possible.’<sup>127</sup> Raven Thomson regularly

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<sup>119</sup> *Action* 182, 19<sup>th</sup> August 1939.

<sup>120</sup> SUA Saunders’ Papers A5: BU Circular; PRO HO144/21281/8: Special Branch report, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1938.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, A2/256: Note on Raven Thomson’s tour of Dorset; C.L.F.Morley, ‘Fascist Promise, and the Capitalist Alliance: An analysis of Sussex Coast Fascism between the Wars,’ MA Thesis, University of Sussex, 1983, 87; PRO HO144/20146/134: Special Branch report 24<sup>th</sup> February 1936; HO144/21063/60: Metropolitan Police report, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1937; PRO HO144/21060/203: Special Branch report, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1936; *The Blackshirt* 153, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1936; *Action* 68, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1937.

<sup>122</sup> See SUA R.Saunders, ‘A Tiller of Several Soils’ *op. cit.*

<sup>123</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, *op. cit.*, 280.

<sup>124</sup> *Action* 89, 30<sup>th</sup> October 1937; SUA R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, *op. cit.*, 470.

<sup>125</sup> E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, Howard Baker Press, London, 1983, 87.

<sup>126</sup> ‘It is essential that those concerned should co-operate in making good use of these schools as you are helping the Movement to build up for your district reliable speakers.’ SUA Saunders’ Papers A1: Letter from an Assistant National Inspector 4<sup>th</sup> April 1936; *Ibid.*, A1: Letter concerning a speakers school in Bath, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1936; *Ibid.*, A2: Notification of a speakers school in Exeter on 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> January 1937; SUA R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, *op. cit.*, 326-8.

<sup>127</sup> *Action* 68, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1937.



participated in these courses.<sup>128</sup> To ensure that speakers were proficient enough to address certain types and sizes of meeting, a grading system was introduced.<sup>129</sup> Raven Thomson also prepared speakers notes, outlining key issues and giving responses to topical questions likely to arise.<sup>130</sup> Under his editorship the British Union's quarterly journal increasingly became a tool for local fascist speakers to become better versed in their theory and propaganda.<sup>131</sup>

The importance to the movement of its papers grew after Olympia. In the wake of the meeting, the support of the Rothermere press was withdrawn and the newspaper wholesalers W.H. Smith refused to handle *The Blackshirt*.<sup>132</sup> Now the BUF press had to function as both propaganda tools and revenue generators. With the demise of *Fascist Week* at the end of May 1934, it became 'the task and duty of every fascist, whether active or non-active, to build up the circulation of 'The Blackshirt' until it is bought by every man and woman, and read by every voter in the land.'<sup>133</sup> The paper was also seen as invaluable in educating members into the spirit of fascism.<sup>134</sup> Raven Thomson's role in these papers was to provide the movement with articles and comment on current affairs.<sup>135</sup> In this he attempted to strike a rational tone, as was noted by Mosley's son Nicholas,

[F]or some time there had been two strands running side by side in the pages of *The Blackshirt* and the *Fascist Week* – on the one hand the virulent tub-thumping of which the chief exponent was William Joyce, and on the other a calm and comparatively civilised effort to explain fascist ideologies and policies of which the chief representative was Raven Thomson.<sup>136</sup>

Yet it was as an editor that Raven Thomson was arguably of most contribution to the Blackshirt papers. As a official report noted in 1935 '*The Blackshirt* has

<sup>128</sup> PRO HO144/21063/7: Special Branch report, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1937; See S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930's,' op. cit., 150.

<sup>129</sup> Robert Saunders was awarded his grade 6 in April 1936, his grade 5 the following February and a grade 4 in October 1938. See SUA Saunders' Papers A1: Letter from William Joyce 14<sup>th</sup> April 1936; Ibid., A2: Letter to Saunders, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1937; Ibid., A3: Letter to Saunders, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1937.

<sup>130</sup> PRO HO144/20145/85: Report on 'Notes for Speakers' 1935. See SUA Saunders' Papers B9; F3:.

<sup>131</sup> *The Blackshirt* 201, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1937; *Action* 68, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1937.

<sup>132</sup> *The Blackshirt* 67, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1934; *The Blackshirt* 106, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1935; *The Blackshirt* 249, April 1938; *The Blackshirt* 37 5<sup>th</sup> –11<sup>th</sup> January 1934; *Action* 164, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1939.

<sup>133</sup> *The Blackshirt* 97, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1935; *The Blackshirt* 33, 9<sup>th</sup> –15<sup>th</sup> December 1933. For the circulation figures of *Action* and *The Blackshirt* during the decade see G.C.Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 580.

<sup>134</sup> *The Blackshirt* 180, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1936; *The Blackshirt* 251, June 1938.

<sup>135</sup> See R.Saunders, 'A Tiller of Scveral Soils' op. cit.

<sup>136</sup> N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op. cit., 94.



improved in tone and hitting power for which A. Raven Thomson [sic] is largely responsible.’<sup>137</sup> This editorial role increased with the publication of a further paper in 1936, *Action*.<sup>138</sup> Raven Thomson became the editor in 1938 and oversaw its content until it was suppressed in May 1940.<sup>139</sup> Given the BU stance on German expansion, the British authorities became concerned about the subversive nature of *Action*.<sup>140</sup> Such was this paper’s reputation by 1940 that John Beckett, a former editor, during his internment hearing urged his captors ‘to believe that the modern ‘Action’ has no relation to the ‘Action’ of my time.’<sup>141</sup> Mosley too as asked to clarify his contribution to the paper,

Q. Are you responsible for all that appears in ‘Action’?

A. I would be consulted and I am consulted on major political articles. I go over the major political statements in ‘Action’ although I am not technically responsible.

Much of Raven Thomson’s own hearing was designed to uncover the intent of information that had appeared in *Action*, for if the Blackshirt Leader was not admitting responsibility for the content, then culpability must lie with him.<sup>142</sup>

During the latter half of the 1930s canvassing became a vital component of the movement’s activities, ‘[f]or it is on the doorstep by individual propaganda that the battle of Fascism will be won.’<sup>143</sup> Canvassing schools were established with Raven Thomson, amongst others, serving as an instructor. For canvassing to be effective a new system of local organisation emerged from the branches. Based on an individual fascist concentrating on a small local area, this ‘street cell’ system was believed to maximise the propaganda strength of the

<sup>137</sup> PRO HO144/20144/263: ‘The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom not Northern Ireland,’ MI5 report No.4: October & November 1934.

<sup>138</sup> *The Blackshirt* 132, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1935; 143, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1936; 144, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1936; 147, 14<sup>th</sup> February 1936; 149, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1936; PRO HO144/20146/113: Special Branch report, January 1936. To motivate a greater distribution of *Action* a special uniform reminiscent of the SS for members with large sales was introduced. Its introduction encouraged elitism and friction within branches. PRO HO283/11/23, 93: Advisory Committee report: Oswald Mosley hearing; T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 291; O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 302-3.

<sup>139</sup> Geoffrey Dorman was to directly succeed Chesterton, but he was heavily chaperoned throughout his editorship and had Raven Thomson as his political editor for much of his tenure. See C.Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, op. cit., 174.

<sup>140</sup> PRO HO283/14/76, 80: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing.

<sup>141</sup> PRO HO283/26/139: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of John Beckett hearing.

<sup>142</sup> A.C.Miles, *Mosley in Motley*, op. cit., 8; PRO HO283/14/66: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing; HO144/20145/282: Special Branch report, June 1936; *Action* 105, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1938; *Action* 124, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1938.

<sup>143</sup> *The Blackshirt* 100, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1935; 98, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1935; *Action* 158, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1939. See W.Risdon, *A Guide to Constituency Organisation*, BUF Publications, London, 1935; *The Blackshirt* 158, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1936.



movement.<sup>144</sup> The scheme would remain a mainstay of the BU's activities.<sup>145</sup> Reforms in May 1935 divided the membership into three divisions, under the control of the administrative side of the movement. Divisions 1 and 2 were active fascists, with the former giving more time to British Union. The third division was made up of supporters not participating openly in fascist activism, but whose function would be to canvas for the movement and be the core of fascism's electoral strength.<sup>146</sup> Such a radical change needed careful explanation and Raven Thomson was involved in scheme of talks to reassure members.<sup>147</sup>

As has been already noted at the top levels of the BUF, influence over the direction of the movement was centralised in the Research Directory. This body whilst the most important, was not the only such committee, nor was Raven Thomson's influence confined to a single group. By 1935 the policy and propaganda side of the movement boasted ten other directories, unified by the appearance on its membership lists by one name, Raven Thomson. Each group had a chairman: five of these were the Director of Policy, including those in charge of press propaganda, publications, and speakers notes.<sup>148</sup> By comparison directors Joyce and Beckett sat on nine such bodies and chaired two and one of those respectively. Raven Thomson's influence was also felt in the BUF/BU companies that were set up to limit the movement's liability.<sup>149</sup> In the case of the movement's newspapers, this ensured that in the event of a successful libel action, the BU was not liable for potentially crippling fines, as occurred when a legal action against the *Daily Telegraph* resulted in a £25,000 charge for damages. In that case Blackshirt Ltd declared itself insolvent and Action Ltd was created to continue publication.<sup>150</sup> Raven Thomson sat on the boards of both companies. Joyce and Beckett, despite their lofty positions within the

<sup>144</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 70. *The Blackshirt* 249, April 1938. PRO HO45/24895/35: Special Branch report, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1940; *Action* 221, 21<sup>st</sup> March 1940.

<sup>145</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 294.

<sup>146</sup> *The Blackshirt* 109, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1935; *The Blackshirt* 183, 24<sup>th</sup> October 1936; *Action* 99, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1938.

<sup>147</sup> *The Blackshirt* 114, 28th June 1935.

<sup>148</sup> In 1935 the directories were for contacts, the research department, leaflets, industry and publications. Given the increasing importance of anti-Semitism in the BU's campaigning there was a Jewish subdirectory, meeting 'as required' fittingly headed by Joyce, with John Macnab as his executive officer. There was also an editorial board for *The Blackshirt*; PRO HO144/20145/289-291: Revised list of BUF directories, June 1936.

<sup>149</sup> See PRO HO144/21063/426-34: Special Branch report, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1937; HO283/6: Advisory Committee report: the BU companies; BOD C6/9/1/6: List of the BU companies.

<sup>150</sup> SUA: J.Beckett, *Out of Step*, unpublished autobiography, n.d., 369.



movement only sat on the BUF publications company. Whilst the extent of Raven Thomson's personal influence on the movement at this time is not easily quantifiable, the impression given is that he had ample opportunity to voice his opinions and influence decision-making.

How important then was Raven Thomson to Mosley fascism at this time? One rather crude but effective way of gauging this is to examine the salaries of the BUF officials. In a Special Branch report in July of 1934, both Raven Thomson and Joyce, who was Director of Propaganda, received £5 a week; deputy Leader Forgan earned twice that sum.<sup>151</sup> Another report in March 1935 had Raven Thomson receiving £350 a year, roughly £7 pounds a week, as was John Beckett, the Canvassing Director, whereas Joyce only received £300, equal to William Leaper who was editing *The Blackshirt*.<sup>152</sup> All were outstripped in this pay review by Major General Fuller who was being paid £400 a year for overseeing the movement's development into a more conventional political party. By the following March, both Joyce and Raven Thomson were on £364 a year, whilst Beckett, who was editing both BUF newspapers, now earned £416.<sup>153</sup> The control of policy thus appears to be a reasonably stable area for the BUF in the early 1930s, with other facets of the movement changing in importance by comparison. Whilst not the least paid of the BUF officials, Raven Thomson's role was not one of the key positions of Forgan, Fuller or Beckett, reflecting the various weight given at different times to recruitment, political reorganisation and publicity. That he was paid more in 1934 than Joyce, reflects a period in the history of British Union when its message was being ably distributed through the Rothermere press and the movement's policy was being sought after. The position of Director of Policy was, however, not so important that it could avoid the cost cutting in the wake of the March 1937 LCC campaign, with many posts in the BU made voluntary.<sup>154</sup> Thereafter, Raven Thomson was paid on a piecemeal basis, with each article he produced earning him about £6 a week.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>151</sup> PRO HO144/20142/79: Special Branch report, 18/19<sup>th</sup> July 1934.

<sup>152</sup> PRO HO144/20144/137: Special Branch report, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1935.

<sup>153</sup> PRO HO144/20147/379: Special Branch report, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1936.

<sup>154</sup> PRO HO144/21063/259: Special Branch report, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*



In a position of little real creative power in the movement, Raven Thomson spread his influence through the various decision-making committees of the BU. Thus as a bureaucrat he, could extend his impact on the BU's development. Such a technique brought him more in line with the thinking of the organisational bloc, strengthened by his association with Neil Francis Hawkins. As the Mosley fascism progressed, schism grew out of two different perceptions of the methods most useful in gaining a fascist victory. Whilst Raven Thomson was a proponent of electioneering to popularise the movement's message, he was a strong believer in the need for structure, as witnessed by his highly developed theory of the corporate state. His overriding confidence in Mosley, and the ambiguity he illustrates towards the two factions in the BU's internal conflict, meant that as division loomed, Raven Thomson could, like the great majority of the BU, simply followed the Leader.

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Much of the interest in Britain's experience of fascism, stems from its failure. Many historians of the generic phenomenon see Britain as a useful lesson in the structural requirements needed for a fascist movement to become a regime. In Britain's case the absence of an economic crisis of sufficient magnitude for the population to question the existing political forms is significant. Yet as Webber wrote, the economy was not the only factor in Mosley fascism's history.<sup>156</sup> The BUF failed to recruit in various social sectors of the population.<sup>157</sup> In particular the social elites were well represented in the National Government and saw Mosley as something of a misfit, aping continental political forms.<sup>158</sup> The activities of the state in managing fascism through monitoring, containment and legislation also contributed to the failure of

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<sup>156</sup> G.C.Webber, 'The British Isles,' op. cit., 152.

<sup>157</sup> S.Rawnsley, 'The membership of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 160. C.P.Cook & J.Stevenson, *The Slump*, op. cit., 213.

<sup>158</sup> J.Stevenson, 'Myth and Reality: Britain in the 1930s,' op. cit., 97. See J.Leighton, 'Power Elites and the British Union of Fascists 1932-40,' MPhil, University of Manchester, 1992, 12,15; idem, 'Why Mosley Failed,' *The Historian*, No 46, Summer 1995, 25-8. R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 184, 188; C.P.Cook & J.Stevenson, *The Slump*, op. cit., 203. M.Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, op. cit., 282.



Mosley's fascist experiment.<sup>159</sup> Arguments about the rejection of fascism by a 'fair-play' British political culture are, however, tenuous.<sup>160</sup>

This study of Raven Thomson's experience of fascism, allows for a less well understood feature of the BUF's failure to be examined; its lack of internal cohesion as 'one relatively large but shifting and unstable coalition.'<sup>161</sup> It should be noted at the outset that this structural weakness in the movement is of minor importance to understanding the failure of domestic fascism in Britain. It remains, however, part of the explanation for its lack of success. Though this deficiency has been briefly examined in histories of the BUF, this biography of a leading Blackshirt allows us to go within Mosley fascism and examine it more closely.

In 1933, Mosley claimed, '[t]he essence of Fascism is team-work, the power to pull together and to sink individual interests in the service of the nation,' however the reality of life within the BUF was somewhat different.<sup>162</sup> Throughout the 1930s, internal conflicts between high-ranking Blackshirts detracted from any semblance of unity, and contributed to a rapid turnover in fascist leaders.<sup>163</sup> The result was a movement 'riddled with personal jealousies and divided jurisdictions.'<sup>164</sup> One former fascist lieutenant described the system as 'palace politics' with the result that even if conditions had been favourable, there was insufficient cohesion to mount a successful challenge to the political mainstream.<sup>165</sup>

Where this weakness originated is unclear. As Nicholas Mosley astutely pointed out, '[i]ntrigue and back-biting are a recognised part of political machines: in the BUF they seem to have become exaggerated probably just on

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<sup>159</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'State Management of the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s,' in M.Cronin (ed.) *The Failure of British Fascism*, op. cit., 29-51. It is now a common feature of the debate on Mosley's failure. See A.Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*, op. cit., 58.

<sup>160</sup> R.Benewick, 'The Threshold of Violence,' *Political Studies*, Vol.17 No.3, 1969, 512; L.Susser, 'fascist and Anti-Fascist Attitudes in Britain between the Wars,' DPhil, University of Oxford, 1988, 1-7.

<sup>161</sup> G.C.Webber, 'The British Isles,' op. cit., 144; R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 125.

<sup>162</sup> O.Mosley, *10 points of Fascism*, BUF Publications, London, 1933, 3.

<sup>163</sup> PRO HO144/19069/486825/208: Special Branch report, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1933; HO144/20144/124: 'The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom not Northern Ireland,' MI5 report No.5, February 1935; HO144/20145/14: Official Letter from Superintendent 24<sup>th</sup> October 1935; HO283/26/139: Advisory Committee report: transcript of John Beckett hearing.

<sup>164</sup> R.Skidelsky, 'Great Britain,' op. cit., 269.

<sup>165</sup> PRO HO283/26/83: Advisory Committee report: John Beckett hearing; See SUA J.Beckett, *Out of Step*, unpublished autobiographical manuscript, 359, 361. See also *Morning Post*, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1937.



account of people dedicated to dynamism having so little chance to exercise real power.’<sup>166</sup> It is also in the nature of fascism to centralise all power in one man of destiny and thus relegate others to a contesting band of ‘courtiers’ each striving to get their particular vision implemented by their leader. The personalities involved also served to aggravate the situation, particularly Mosley’s. The Blackshirt leader fostered competitiveness amongst his staff.<sup>167</sup> It also appears that he was somewhat susceptible to flattery and had his favourites.<sup>168</sup> As A.K.Chesterton wrote after resigning in 1938, ‘I have never known him give a decision against his favourites or fail to come to their help...or maintain any semblance of a judicial attitude where their interests were involved.’<sup>169</sup> This has led to the belief that Mosley ‘tended to select and promote as lieutenants only those prepared to follow him without hesitation or reservation.’<sup>170</sup> Thus he was more inclined to support those who had no ideological view of their own, the movement’s administrators.<sup>171</sup> Coupled with intolerance of mistakes, the character of Mosley, in part, accounts for a high level of organisational instability amongst his immediate subordinates.<sup>172</sup> In his defence, he was attempting to achieve cohesion from a motley collection of pseudo-intellectuals and cranks. He also did take some steps to end the disunity and attempted to stand outside the factions in the movement.<sup>173</sup> Yet such attempts were bound to fail because the same system of power-through-patronage remained. Thus any attempt to enforce a team spirit quickly degenerated back into cliques and favouritism, as the changing fortunes of Mosley fascism resulted in the promotion or removal of individuals.<sup>174</sup>

Distinct groupings within the headquarters staff were a feature of the Mosley movement almost from the BUF’s inception. In 1934 Robert Forgan clashed with the militaristic elements in the BUF.<sup>175</sup> Beckett, Chesterton, Joyce

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<sup>166</sup> N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op. cit., 92.

<sup>167</sup> S.Rawnsley, ‘The membership of the British Union of Fascists,’ op. cit., 157.

<sup>168</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 272; BOD C6/9/1/3.

<sup>169</sup> A.K.Chesterton, *Why I Left Mosley*, op. cit., 4.

<sup>170</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 341. J.R.Jones, ‘England,’ op. cit., 65.

<sup>171</sup> R.Skidelsky, ‘Great Britain,’ op. cit., 269.

<sup>172</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 342.

<sup>173</sup> PRO HO144/20142/241: Special Branch report, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1934; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 345.

<sup>174</sup> PRO HO144/20145/14: Official Letter from ‘Superintendent,’ 24<sup>th</sup> October 1935.

<sup>175</sup> PRO HO144/20142/315: Special Branch report, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1934 .



and Raven Thomson agitated against his successor, Major Box.<sup>176</sup> By December 1934, Special Branch could perceive four distinct groups within the BUF leadership: one proposing development along conventional political party lines as a Tory ginger group; some ardent Jew-haters; a militarist faction; and one proposing parliamentary elections as a means of disseminating propaganda.<sup>177</sup> It was in this last group, the most influential at the time of the report, that Raven Thomson belonged. By mid 1935 he had been officially reproached by Mosley for failing to come forward 'in a fascist and manly spirit,' over a grievance he held against the treasury department. William Joyce caused dissension from 1934 onwards; first unsuccessfully agitating to be made chief of staff and then later complaining directly to Mosley, when he felt his salary did not reflect his status.<sup>178</sup>

Joyce, together with John Beckett, was an ardent supporter of the wide dissemination of the fascist message, and was implacably opposed to the organisers at the top of the movement.<sup>179</sup> Both were strong supporters of street politics and a campaign of anti-Semitism.<sup>180</sup> They were frustrated in their attempts to push the British Union in this populist propaganda direction by the organisational wing of the movement, led by Neil Francis Hawkins.<sup>181</sup> Hawkins had been a local administrator who had distinguished himself in London, rising swiftly through the ranks to become the movement's Director General in January 1936. His power was only matched by his unpopularity with the more ideologically minded sections within the BUF.<sup>182</sup> With the ascendancy of Hawkins, the internal politics of the movement became a clash between the

<sup>176</sup> PRO HO144/20144/183: Special Branch report, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1935.

<sup>177</sup> PRO HO144/20144/234-236: Special Branch report, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1934.

<sup>178</sup> PRO HO144/20141/84: Special Branch report, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1934.

<sup>179</sup> See A. Weale, *Renegades: Hitler's Englishmen*, Weidenfield & Nicolson, London, 1994, 15-25, 33; T. Charman, "The number one radio personality of the war": Lord Haw Haw and his British audience during the Phoney War," *Imperial War Museum Review*, No. 7, 1992, 74-82. C. Holmes, "Germany Calling": Lord Haw-Haw's Treason,' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 5 No. 1, 1994, 118-21. F. Beckett, 'The Rebel who Lost his Cause,' *History Today* Vol. 44 No. 5, May 1994, 36-42. PRO HO283/26/46-8: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of John Beckett hearing.

<sup>180</sup> R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 186; C. Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, op. cit., 71.

<sup>181</sup> PRO HO45/25700/840188/2; Internment report: N. Francis Hawkins. Francis Hawkins had been a salesman in a medical supply company. As the adjutant for the Movement's National Defence Force his administrative skills saw him promoted first to officer in charge of London, then Chief administrative Officer and finally Director General. See R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 116; R. C. Thurlow, *The Secret State*, op. cit., 178.

<sup>182</sup> PRO HO144/20145/15: 'Letter from superintendent,' 24<sup>th</sup> October 1935.

administrators and the propagandists.<sup>183</sup> Francis Hawkins was opposed to the idea of British Union as a political party, believing that high-profile electoral campaigns, so early in the movement's growth would be an expensive way of gaining unfavourable publicity.<sup>184</sup> With the chances of electoral success appearing more remote as the decade progressed this view began to predominate amongst the top staff officers, many of whom owed their position to Hawkins.<sup>185</sup> The only group outside his control, were the senior propagandists such as Joyce, Beckett and Raven Thomson, who had gained their positions before the Hawkins became Director General. The constitution of the BU gave the administrators, and thus Hawkins, control over all other headquarters departments and though a system of inspectors, the national branch structure.<sup>186</sup> Despite all this emphasis on control, Colin Ross, a Nazi sympathiser in Britain, reported back to Berlin that the BU had no real organisation.<sup>187</sup>

Francis Hawkins was thus in control of the crucially important London County Council election campaign of February and early March 1937, despite being unconvinced of the effectiveness of such elections to the growth of fascism.<sup>188</sup> In the aftermath of the election, cutbacks were made. Mosley called the headquarters staff together, and outlined the need to limit expenditure, by reducing the salary bill of headquarters in order to maintain the newspapers and the organisation.<sup>189</sup> Unfortunate fascists were given envelopes containing their notice together with a week's wages.<sup>190</sup> In it Mosley wrote,

The finances of the Movement must be placed on such a stable and durable foundation that the Movement is assured of staying power throughout the struggle, whether it prove long or short. In this necessity of the Movement we must all make our various sacrifices to ensure the long life and consequently the certain victory of the Movement.<sup>191</sup>

Over one hundred posts were made voluntary, including all on the policy and propaganda side of the movement, which precipitated the departure of Joyce,

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<sup>183</sup> PRO HO144/20142/315: Special Branch report, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1934.

<sup>184</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 9; R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 273.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-7, 273; See also R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 116-7.

<sup>186</sup> *The Blackshirt* 109, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1935; A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 128.

<sup>187</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 132.

<sup>188</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 279.

<sup>189</sup> *The Blackshirt* 201, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>190</sup> PRO HO144/21063/256: Special Branch report, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>191</sup> Weiner Library Archive: PC/2; BOD C6/9/3/F2: BU Circular 12<sup>th</sup> March 1937.



who had been increasingly out of favour with Mosley since the previous November, together with Beckett and a number of their supporters.<sup>192</sup> They founded the short-lived National Socialist League.<sup>193</sup> Beckett later complained that '[t]he real reason [we were expelled] was that we told him [Mosley] the truth.'<sup>194</sup> A year later Chesterton too left, after clashing with the administrators, dismayed that the ideals of fascism seemed to be secondary in the movement.<sup>195</sup> As a propaganda official Raven Thomson's salary too was cut, yet he remained.<sup>196</sup>

The reasons for Raven Thomson's continued presence in Mosley fascism are again linked to personalities. It is clear that whilst Raven Thomson and Joyce were in many cases united on certain issues, they were not friendly.<sup>197</sup> Joyce was from the right wing, a former ultra conservative British Fascist believing, after Carlyle, in the importance of the great individual as the impetus to history. Raven Thomson saw the whole of society as contributors to the realisation a group superman. In the history of the movement, the sum of their collaboration appears to have been to jointly judge a boxing match held at the national headquarters in May 1935.<sup>198</sup> Joyce was a fanatical anti-Semite and differing conceptions of the nature of the Jewish problem also exaggerated their mutual dislike.<sup>199</sup> Raven Thomson's relationship with Beckett appears to have been little better. The two had collaborated on BU pamphlets in the past, but by the time of the split the Beckett saw Raven Thomson as a 'dangerous idiot.'<sup>200</sup> Robert Benewick asserts that Raven Thomson was an associate of Neil Francis Hawkins. If this were the case it would have been an insurmountable obstacle to

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<sup>192</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 11. BOD C6/9/3/2/F2: BU Circular, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>193</sup> SUA: Saunders' Papers A2: BU circular; PRO HO283/26/46: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of John Beckett hearing .

<sup>194</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3: 'Resignations form the BUF,' JDC report, n.d.

<sup>195</sup> See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 14; D.Baker *Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit., 133.

<sup>196</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 311.

<sup>197</sup> A Special branch report for December 1934 noted that Joyce and Raven Thomson were part of a group proposing election campaigns to disseminate the Movement's message rather than waiting for the time to be ideal. PRO HO144/20144/234: Special Branch report, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1934.

<sup>198</sup> PRO HO144/20145/245: Special Branch report, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1935; *The Blackshirt* 107, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1935.

<sup>199</sup> PRO HO283/70/62: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> July 1940.

<sup>200</sup> PRO HO144/21063/244: Special Branch report, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1937.



his inclusion into the new movement.<sup>201</sup> In the wake of the LCC results, arguments over culpability for the perceived failure further charged the hostilities already present.<sup>202</sup> A clear indication that Raven Thomson was not part of the Joyce/Beckett group was his absence from the deliberations of that clique in the days leading up to the announcement of the cuts and their departure.<sup>203</sup> A social gathering of this group on the day before the headquarters meeting contained all the key members of the subsequent league, with no sign of Raven Thomson.<sup>204</sup>

That Raven Thomson stayed was due to the fact that he retained his belief in Mosley and the inevitability of a fascist movement obtaining power. Had he become disenchanted with the struggle, the option was there to diminish his activities or leave altogether. Now he was no longer a salaried official, getting other employment would have been the obvious choice. Instead Raven Thomson quickly got back in his work as Director of Policy. Given his belief, expressed in his numerous articles, that an improvement in the BU fortunes was imminent, perhaps he believed a salaried post and then high office in a fascist Britain was forthcoming. Such a position was, in the wake of March 1937, more likely given the removal of two popular high-ranking Blackshirts. If the internal conflicts that had flowered in March 1937 had been about levels of influence with Mosley, and thus control over the nature of the movement, then with Joyce and Beckett gone, Raven Thomson was in a much stronger position, albeit one without a salary.<sup>205</sup>

The BU's internal divisions were not confined to London headquarters. Whilst the capital did account for at least half the membership in the period, the history of the BUF is not confined within the London boroughs.<sup>206</sup> Regional studies of fascism have emphasised the strong provincial character of BUF branches and their development through local issues.<sup>207</sup> The ethos of competition and the varied backgrounds of the members contributed to the

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<sup>201</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 117. Benewick gives no reference to this claim, though he had interviewed John Beckett in the course of his research.

<sup>202</sup> PRO HO144/21063/12: Special Branch report, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1937; /243: Special Branch report, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., /233: Special Branch report, 24<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., /233-4.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., /234.

<sup>206</sup> G.C.Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 583.

<sup>207</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 302. See R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 327; S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930's,' op. cit., 120



repetition, within local groups, of the personality clashes and rivalry found further up the BU hierarchy.<sup>208</sup> As one member from Birmingham noted after leaving the Movement in 1938,

Fascism has no hope of success with its present district organisation. Men are only human, and favouritism and petty dislikes eventually foster a spirit of jealousy.... I have watched a district deteriorate from a workshop of politics to a washerwoman's gossip-shop. Many district headquarters have become clubs; cards and gambling come before business.<sup>209</sup>

This problem was aggravated by poor communication between London and the regions. After the reduction in subscriptions and donations following Olympia the regional branches received little help from London headquarters.<sup>210</sup> In Manchester, the organisational changes of January 1935 were not explained until October.<sup>211</sup> This disorganised system worsened after the economies in personnel after March 1937.<sup>212</sup> Such was the deluded view of the strength of nation-wide fascism at Headquarters, a grand system of organisation was developed, culminating in a fasces, a brigade of some 750 fascists.<sup>213</sup> Yet outside London by this time, the movement in certain areas was struggling to maintain a viable branch. The lack of a cohesive structure was not all the fault of headquarters however, with the provinces sending false information to London about the state of fascism in their area. A Welsh 'grand' conference in reality only attracted 13 fascists.<sup>214</sup> The result of providing local leaders with little training and considerable autonomy, was a London headquarters unaware of the problems elsewhere.<sup>215</sup> When it did intervene, with the choice of prospective parliamentary candidate or area leader, local branches often responded with hostility.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930's,' op. cit., 138, 164; T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 291.

<sup>209</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3: From R.Corbet a former Deputy District Leader in Birmingham.

<sup>210</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 134-5; J.Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, op. cit., 112.

<sup>211</sup> S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930's,' op. cit., 184.

<sup>212</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 296.

<sup>213</sup> PRO HO144/20144/159-60: Special Branch report 21<sup>st</sup> February 1935. For organisation of the BUF see A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 129; R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 134-5.

<sup>214</sup> S.M.Cullen, 'Another Nationalism: The British Union of Fascists in Glamorgan, 1932-40,' op. cit., 111.

<sup>215</sup> PRO HO283/11/76: Advisory Committee Papers: O.Mosley; T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 297.

<sup>216</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 291; See S.Rawnsley, 'The membership of the British Union of Fascists,' PhD Thesis, op. cit., 102.



Thus Mosley fascism was a diffuse and fractionalised political entity, populated by what a former member called ‘cads, thieves and swine.’<sup>217</sup> The organisational constraints led to the institution of an oversized bureaucracy and thereby financial problems.<sup>218</sup> How culpable Mosley was in this is open to question, for all those who sought to blame him were united by the fact that they had left his enterprise. Raven Thomson appears to have chosen to play the game of BU power politics. This earned him the scorn of the more rebellious lieutenants, with Chesterton describing a ‘Director of Policy who flops around the building like a distressed hen....’<sup>219</sup> Raven Thomson’s belief in Mosley and perhaps the awareness, that outside the BU his influence on his country would be nothing other than marginal, kept him in the Movement. The impression that emerges is of a movement reminiscent of a small, impoverished medieval kingdom, where courtiers vie for the ear of the lord, within a remote castle divorced from the rest of the country.

#### IV

Raven Thomson rose swiftly to meet the need to maintain a uniform message throughout the nation-wide fascist network. Yet his role as Director of Policy comprised of more than just answering the questions of fascists, and extended throughout the various propaganda schemes in place within Mosley fascism. As the 1930s wore on he failed to ally with his intellectual comrades in the political faction, choosing to stand outside any conflict and capitalise on the demise of rivals. This rivalry was a hidden weakness of Mosley fascism, a feature that was concealed due to the movement’s marginalized position, on the political fringe, waiting for a popular support.<sup>220</sup>

<sup>217</sup> PRO HO144/20142/220: ‘The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom not Northern Ireland,’ MI5 report No.3: August & September 1934.

<sup>218</sup> As John Beckett recalled of the Black House, ‘[a] huge staff of badly paid and useless people had been gathered together.’ SUA J.Beckett, *Out of Step*, op. cit., 359; See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 3; C.Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, op. cit., 71.

<sup>219</sup> A.K.Chesterton, *Why I Left Mosley*, op. cit., 3.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. See J.Stevenson, ‘Myth and Reality: Britain in the 1930s’ in A.Sked & C.Cook, *Crisis and Controversy-Essays in Honour of A.J.P.Taylor*, Macmillan, London, 1976, 96.



## Chapter Four: 'Raving Thomson' – Anti-Semitism and East London

The study into Raven Thomson's participation in Mosley Fascism necessarily leads to the infamous feature of the movement's history, one that forms much of the popular perception of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), anti-Semitism.<sup>1</sup> By 1940 he had been a leading figure in the BUF's anti-Jewish campaigning both in the movement's press and as a street orator. The latter activity saw him arrested three times during the previous decade for causing breaches of the peace, following anti-Semitic outbursts in East London.<sup>2</sup> He was in the opinion of one contemporary antifascist 'a sneering vicious anti-Semite.'<sup>3</sup> As a BUF candidate in the 1937 London County Council (LCC) elections, he had urged the electorate to give the Jews 'notice to quit' and, with his running mate, was rewarded with 23% of the vote, the largest electoral endorsement a Blackshirt ever received.<sup>4</sup> This anti-Semitism was not, however, apparent in his thought before entering the BUF, and together with his prominence in the east London campaign, this facet of Raven Thomson's fascist experience requires careful scrutiny, as befits a topic that still arouses strong emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> C.Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF' in K.Lunn and R.C.Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1980, 114. The relationship between Mosley fascism and anti-Semitism is still a source of popular debate. See *Daily Mail*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1996. Studies into the nature of the BUF's anti-Semitism include C.Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939*, Edward Arnold Ltd, London, 1979, 175-189; W.F.Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists*, Longmans, London, 1968; D.M.Geiger, 'Blackshirts as Jew-baiters' *Wiener Library Bulletin*, New Series No. 5, Autumn 1966, 11-14; G.Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-39*, Macmillan Ltd, London, 1978; R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, Allen Lane, London, 1972, 151-158; idem., 'Mosley's Anti-Semitism, A survey of his Record 1933-1939,' *Wiener Library Bulletin*, Vol.13 No.s 3-4, 1959, 33; R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 104-111; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur – Mosley, Fascism and British Society 1931-81*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, 90-113; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, Macmillan, London, 1975, 379-410; J.Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, Gower, Aldershot, 1984, 104-115; N.Nugent and R.King, 'Ethnic minorities, scapegoating and the extreme right,' in R.Miles & A.Phizacklea (eds.), *Racism and Political Action in Britain*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979, 34-37. Most studies of BUF history and ideas deal to some extent with anti-Semitism, the more convincing proposing a mixture of contributing factors for its appearance.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1936; *Daily Herald*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1938; *News Chronicle*, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1940.

<sup>3</sup> William Fishman questionnaire, January 1996. William Fishman was a member of the Young Communist League and subsequently became an academic specialising in the study of London and Antifascism. See G.Alderman and C.Holmes (eds), *Outsiders and Outcasts – Essays in honour of William Fishman*, Duckworth, London, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> National Museum of Labour History (NMLH) CP/ CENT/ SUBJ/ 04/ 10: British Union election Leaflet; Greater London Record Office (GLRO) CL/COUN/1/2: 1937 LCC returns – General Election of County Councillors, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1937, 2-4.



Whilst this study concentrates on an exponent of overt political anti-Semitism, a level of nascent hostility towards the Jewish population in Britain was common throughout the period.<sup>5</sup> This provided the background to political anti-Semitism, for as Kushner noted, 'organised anti-Semitism has cultural and societal roots.'<sup>6</sup> Social anti-Semitism was evident from the Jewish caricatures in popular jokes to their exclusion from social organisations, such as golf clubs.<sup>7</sup> These views crossed the political and social spectrum.<sup>8</sup> When the Nazi regime began its campaign against the Jewish population in Germany, British distaste was tempered by a belief that Jewish practises had caused much of the animosity.<sup>9</sup> By the end of the decade some believed that the Jews in revenge against Nazism had engineered the coming war.<sup>10</sup> Social anti-Semitism was thus 'the bedrock on which more extreme anti-Semitism could flourish.'<sup>11</sup>

At the inception of the BUF, anti-Semitism formed no part of its declared policy, and the movement went to some lengths after the establishment of the Nazi regime to distance their fascism from the German government's racism; '[t]he issue of fascism has been obscured in Germany by the irrelevant Jewish Question.'<sup>12</sup> Anti-Semitism, they argued, was not a product of fascism, but of the German people.<sup>13</sup> The early BUF attracted Jewish recruits and even attempted to court the support of prominent Jews.<sup>14</sup> Such a stance prompted one

<sup>5</sup> '...it has been insufficiently emphasised that there is in British society a tradition of anti-Semitism.' C.Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF,' op. cit., 122.

<sup>6</sup> T.Kushner, 'The Social and Cultural Roots of Contemporary Anti-Semitism' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 25 No. 1, 1991, 20.

<sup>7</sup> R.Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted*, Constable & Company, London, 1998, 12.

<sup>8</sup> See B.Cheyette, 'H.G.Wells and the Jews: Anti-Semitism, Socialism and English Culture,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol.22 No.3, 1988, 23; R.C.Thurlow, 'Anti-Nazi Anti-Semite; The Case of Douglas Reed.' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 18 No.1, 1984, 23-34; See J.A.Morris, 'fascist ideas in English Literature' (Parts 1 and 2) *Patterns of Prejudice* Vol.13 No.s 4 &5, 1979, pt 1, 22-31, pt 2 25-34, 36.

<sup>9</sup> R.Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted*, op. cit., 14-15. See also T.Kushner, 'Beyond the Pale? British Reactions to Nazi Anti-Semitism, 1933-39,' in T.Kushner and K.Lunn (eds.), *The Politics of Marginality*, Frank Cass, London, 1990, 150-2.

<sup>10</sup> R.Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted*, op. cit., 16-17, 21-2, 27-29. See also T.Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989, 2.

<sup>11</sup> R.Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted*, op. cit., 33.

<sup>12</sup> *Blackshirt* 4, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1933.

<sup>13</sup> *Blackshirt* 21, 16<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1933.

<sup>14</sup> Both William Leaper, a prominent BU propagandist, and Kid Lewis, a boxer training the BUF's defence force, were Jews. See S.M.Cullen 'The development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 22 No.1,1988, 127; S.G.Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914 -1945*, UCL press, London, 1995, 305; For the attempt at



scholar in this field to conclude, 'it was by no means certain that the BUF was anti-Semitic to any significant degree at least in the period 1932-3.'<sup>15</sup> Arnold Leese, leader of the explicitly racist Imperial Fascist League, believed that the lack of anti-Semitism belied a false fascism and described the BUF as the 'British Jewnion of Fascists' following a 'kosher' leader.<sup>16</sup> Yet anti-Semitism was tangible from the outset, with Mosley responding to hecklers at a meeting in October 1932 as 'three warriors of the class war – all from Jerusalem.'<sup>17</sup> Rawnsley has best discussed the problem of locating a distinct point when the BUF could be described as anti-Semitic,

The point to be made here is that a political movement does not solely become anti-Semitic when the leader of that movement describes it as such, or when the public at large see the leader attaching himself to that doctrine. A political movement, such as the BUF can be said to have adopted anti-Semitism when the general body of its membership takes part in anti-Semitic acts. It is not enough for the leader of the movement to disown anti-Semites within the movement if such people are allowed to continue their activities, especially when the leader himself states later that he is of a similar frame of mind.<sup>18</sup>

Anti-Semitism began to appear throughout 1933, but with the Jews initially linked to the greater enemy of Communism; '[w]e shall know that any Jew attacking a member of the British Union of Fascists does so not as a Jew but as a Red.'<sup>19</sup> However, as Mandle noted, 'indications of submerged anti-Semitism kept appearing.'<sup>20</sup> The turning point that altered the BUF attitude from implicit antagonism to open hostility was the threat they perceived Jewish pressure would exert on British relations with Germany. As one front page in the fascist press in November 1933 proclaimed, '[s]hall the Jews drag Britain into War?'<sup>21</sup> This threat appeared to signal the start of widespread criticism and the formation of a conspiracy theory, in which the 'international' Jew worked to undermine Britain

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obtaining Jewish support see G.Alderman, 'Dr Robert Forgan's resignation from the British Union of Fascists,' *Labour History Review*, Vol.57 No.1, 1992, 37-8.

<sup>15</sup> See S.M.Cullen, 'The development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 46. The Imperial Fascist League described themselves as completely divorced from 'the pro-Jewish so-called 'Fascism of Sir Oswald Mosley.' Ibid. See also R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 70-77.

<sup>17</sup> W.Mandle, *Antisemitism and the BUF*, op. cit., 2.

<sup>18</sup> S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and fascist in Britain in the 1930s,' PhD Thesis, University of Bradford, 1981, 75.

<sup>19</sup> *Blackshirt* 7, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1933.

<sup>20</sup> W.Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and the BUF*, op. cit., 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Blackshirt* 28, 4<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> November 1933.



and 'nationalist' fascism. Defending an accusation that the movement was now anti-Semitic, it was announced that the BUF did not confront Jews as Jews, but as agents against the national interest.<sup>22</sup> By May 1934, however, Jews were excluded from membership in the BUF. In June of that year the advantageous publicity garnered from the Rothermere newspapers ceased, with the press baron announcing, amongst other concerns, that he could not support the anti-Semitism in the movement.<sup>23</sup> With the movement's numbers diminishing across the rest of the country, the BUF gained a stronghold in East London, an area high in immigrants, where they were able to capitalise on the underlying anti-Semitism of the gentile community.<sup>24</sup> With audiences dwindling elsewhere, in East London crowds of thousands listened to BUF speakers. Such was the support that the BUF fielded six candidates in the 1937 LCC elections, with some degree of success. Whilst anti-Semitism's prominence waned in the movement after the fervour of the LCC campaign, as conflict on the continent approached, the BUF position against British participation was justified as a refusal to participate in a Jewish war of revenge.

The deployment of anti-Semitism as BUF policy, when it was initially avoided, has prompted many scholars to produce theories about its origins. Most eschew mono-causal approaches, though disagreeing over the comparative ingredients within Mosley fascism's anti-Semitic flavour. For some, anti-Semites had been members of the BUF from the outset, and had been stifled during the movement's early period in order to court the establishment.<sup>25</sup> That after this, the remaining wealthy backers of the movement, such as A. C. Scrimgeour, wanted the BUF to be more anti-Semitic, may also have been a factor.<sup>26</sup> Others studies argue that it as an inevitable development of the BUF's

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<sup>22</sup> This argument was to persist into Mosley's autobiography. See O.Mosley *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 341-2.

<sup>23</sup> 'I never could support any movement with an anti-Semitic bias or any movement which had dictatorship as one of its objectives, or any movement which will substitute a 'Corporate State' for the Parliamentary institutions of this country.' *Daily Mail* 19<sup>th</sup> July 1934.

<sup>24</sup> See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Frank Cass, London, 1996, 57-8.

<sup>25</sup> C.Holmes, *Anti-Semitism and British Society*, op. cit., 176; R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 104. Whilst Skidelsky was keen to argue that Mosley first encountered anti-Semites in his attempt to form a union of British fascist groups in autumn 1932, it is notable that members of his pre-fascist New Party had already perpetrated anti-Semitic activities. See R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 379; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 93.

<sup>26</sup> PRO HO144/20147/297: Special Branch report, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1937; *Daily Telegraph*, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1989.



core hyper-patriotism, or the personal insecurities of individual Blackshirts seeking a tangible scapegoat.<sup>27</sup> Anti-Semitism as a later import to the movement, by such notables as William Joyce has also been suggested.<sup>28</sup> The increasing influence of Nazi Germany on the BUF's ideology has featured in many explanations.<sup>29</sup> Germany has also been at the core of an argument where the BUF's turn to anti-Semitism was a reaction to aggression by Jewish anti-fascists, motivated by the persecution of Jews by the Nazi regime.<sup>30</sup> Still more favour an opportunist stance to the appearance of anti-Jewish propaganda within the movement, where the BUF, faced with decreasing membership after 1934, chose to reinvigorate the cause in certain parts of England with racism.<sup>31</sup>

The nature of the resulting anti-Semitism has been variously interpreted, particularly in view of the BUF's admiration for Nazism. Lebzelter believed the BUF to be on a course that would have led to a policy of extermination. Indeed Raven Thomson once announced in July 1936 that 'we shall treat the Jews in England as they were treated in Germany,' though this appeared to consist of depriving Jews of their financial power.<sup>32</sup> Statements in the BUF press defending the Klu Klux Klan as, 'simply American citizens who wish to make [the] USA a country fit for Americans in which to live,' does appear to confirm

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<sup>27</sup> '[T]he initial core elements of BUF ideology played an enabling, rather than a causal function in the later adoption of anti-Semitism by the movement.' S.M.Cullen, 'Leaders and martyrs: Codreanu, Mosley and Jose Antonio,' *History*, Vol. 71, 1986, 422-3; idem., 'The development of the ideas and policy of the British Union of Fascists,' op. cit., 117, 127. Holmes too believes in anti-Semitism as a central belief in BUF ideology, but does not view it as the result of more central ideas. See C.Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF,' op. cit., 128.

<sup>28</sup> C.Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, Barrie & Rockcliffe, London, 1961, 78.

<sup>29</sup> D.M.Geiger, 'Blackshirts as Jew-baiters,' op. cit., 11. This was also the contemporary view of MI5. See Public Record Office (PRO) HO144/20142/111; 'Report on Fascism in the United Kingdom not Northern Ireland' MI5 report 2, June – July 1934: HO45/25385/41-2: 'Report on Fascism in the United Kingdom not Northern Ireland' MI5 report 6, March 1935 – October 1935.

<sup>30</sup> This argument, proposed by Mosley's biographer, proved highly contentious upon its publication, given its similarity to the BUF stance, and precipitated a lengthy rejoinder from the historian. See R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 383-387; idem., 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism,' K.Lunn & R.C.Thurlow, (eds.) *British Fascism*, op. cit., 84, 86. Skidelsky later accepted that he had been somewhat too sympathetic in his whole reading of the fascist leader. See R.Skidelsky, *Interests and Obsessions*, Macmillan, London, 1993, xi-xii.

<sup>31</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 151. An acceptance that the anti-Semitism of the BUF carries shades of opportunism around a more genuine if inchoate set of beliefs is the conclusion of the more significant works in this field. See G.L.Mosse, 'Introduction; the Genesis of Fascism' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.1 No.1, 1966, 24; R.C.Thurlow, 'Blaming the Blackshirts: The authorities and the anti Jewish disturbances in the 1930s,' P.Panayi (ed), *Racial Violence in Britain 1840-1950*, Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1993, 112. See J.Brewer, *Mosley's Men*, op. cit., 105, 112.

<sup>32</sup> PRO HO144/21378/378: Police observer's report, July 1936.



Lebzelter's argument concerning the extremism of their racial stand.<sup>33</sup> In such circumstances, giving Raven Thomson the title of 'the Alfred Rosenberg of British Fascism,' as Benewick did in recognition of his position within the BUF, carries a more racialist overtone.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, information gathered by the authorities of the time, made them conclude that Raven Thomson was 'a fanatical admirer of anything German and advocates copying the German National Socialists in toto.'<sup>35</sup> That he was not a Nazi style racist is, however, the conclusion that must be drawn from an examination of his anti-Semitism.

The history of Raven Thomson's anti-Semitism mirrors that of the Blackshirt movement. No anti-Semitism is visible in his 1932 treatise, *Civilisation as Divine Superman*, where his super-organism is 'quite independent of racial attributes' and 'super-racial.'<sup>36</sup> Once within the BUF, anti-Semitism began to appear, initially in his economic writings, where the role of Jewish financial dominance was emphasised; '..the present controllers of our financial affairs, those alien financiers...are the real rulers of this country.'<sup>37</sup> By 1936 his anti-Semitic outbursts in speeches precipitated a court appearance. In the wake of his candidature for the LCC, in March 1937, he told a sympathetic East London audience;

Believe me, I have the utmost contempt for the Jews and I regard them as the most miserable type of humanity... The Jew is ruining our country and we must get rid of him... The Jew can be no more help being a parasite than a louse can be a louse, we've got to be a healthy people and then we won't need to pick them off... [The Jew] can wrap himself in the folds of the Union Jack as much as he likes, [but] his nose sticks out over the top.<sup>38</sup>

As the decade continued Raven Thomson joined his Blackshirt peers in criticising the Jews for fostering war with Germany; '[a]n eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We all know the Jews have a great hatred against the German people and they will try to drag all the nations into a war of revenge.'<sup>39</sup> That he was, by

<sup>33</sup> *Action* 96, 16<sup>th</sup> December 1937.

<sup>34</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 117.

<sup>35</sup> PRO HO144/21378/223-4: Special Branch report, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1936.

<sup>36</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, Williams & Norgate, London, 1932, 56, 179

<sup>37</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Economics of British Fascism*, BUF Publications, London, 1934, 6.

<sup>38</sup> PRO HO144/21063/77-8,117-8: Police observer's reports, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>39</sup> Board of Deputies of British Jews (BOD) C6/9/1/3: JDC observer's report, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1938.



the middle of the 1930's, vitriolic concerning the Jews is obvious; less clear is how this stance developed.

A key feature of studies into the BUF's anti-Semitism has been the attempt to show the influence of a stance of cultural apartheid in the thought of leading BUF thinkers, in particular Mosley and A.K.Chesterton. This contrasts Nazi biological racism, with its hierarchy of races, with cultural anti-Semites who believed in the need to avoid cross-pollination of 'alien' influences.<sup>40</sup> The origin of this type of racialism has been attributed, chiefly in the work of Thurlow, to Mosley's belief in the work of historian Oswald Spengler, where the modern Jew represented a remnant of a completed 'Magian' culture, and was essentially different in cultural outlook from the 'Faustian' European.<sup>41</sup> In Spengler's thought such intermingling of cultures could have adverse effects on the younger partner in the exchange, a feature he termed 'pseudomorphosis.'<sup>42</sup> Examples of pseudomorphosis, Spengler argued, could be seen in the aberration of the Renaissance with its emphasis on recreating a Hellenic outlook and the delay in the appearance of a distinct Russian culture, as it coped with the influence of essentially foreign European Marxism.<sup>43</sup> Given his ideas on the separateness of cultures, it has been argued that Spengler implicitly promotes a form of anti-Semitism.<sup>44</sup> Yet the historian argued, '[t]he Jews are a peculiar phenomenon in world history only because we insist on treating them as such.'<sup>45</sup>

Raven Thomson has in studies of the BUF's Spenglerian anti-Semitism, been viewed as a seminal influence on Mosley.<sup>46</sup> Cross too saw the 1933 intake as the significant anti-Semitic influence on the BUF.<sup>47</sup> Confirmation of Raven Thomson's decisive impact on this area of BUF policy is hampered by his pre-fascist declarations on Jews. In his 1932 *Civilization as Divine Superman*, Raven

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<sup>40</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'Satan and Sambo: The image of the Immigrant in English Racial Populist thought since the First World War,' in Lunn. K (ed.), *Hosts, Immigrants and Minorities*, Dawson, Folkestone, 1980, 47-9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 47; idem., 'The return of Jeremiah,' in K.Lunn and R.C.Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism*, op. cit., 108-10; idem., 'Fascism and Nazism – No Siamese Twins,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol.14, No.s 1& 2, 1980, pt 1 13, pt 2 17, 23. Linehan accepts this argument. See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 275.

<sup>42</sup> O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. II, trans C.T.Atkinson, Allen & Unwin, London, 1926, 189-91, 317-22.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., II, 58, 192.

<sup>44</sup> B.Mazlish, *The Riddle of History*, Harper & Row, London 1966, 347.

<sup>45</sup> O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. II, op. cit., 205.

<sup>46</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The return of Jeremiah' op. cit., 110.



Thomson was, in keeping with his debt to Spengler, to deem the Jews as a cultural remnant.<sup>48</sup> Raven Thomson's Jewish 'Phoenician civilization' had ended in 50AD, but he was prepared to state that 'there are plenty of traces of Semitic influence to be found in modern European civilization... assimilated relics of the glorious Phoenician past.'<sup>49</sup> The book also fails to endorse pseudomorphosis. This is most clearly displayed in his rejection of Spengler's view of the Renaissance, choosing to see it rather as a inspirational throw back to Roman culture, in form with the 'rules' of his own cyclical history.<sup>50</sup> In 1932 Raven Thomson also maintained that in the democratic period of a culture's life cycle, separate races become an irrelevance as,

[A]ll people of civilization [sic] have become stirred up into one great conglomerate, within which are all the elements of the original civilised race and such barbarian migrations as have revitalised civilization in the past. This conglomerate is in fact a new democratic race.<sup>51</sup>

With his lack of concern for cultural exchange and his uncritical view of Jewish culture, Raven Thomson was, at least on the showing of his book, no anti-Semite. If anti-Semitism had been suppressed in his book or he became a convinced anti-Semite between finishing his book and joining the BUF, then it was not so strong as to feature in any of his early fascist articles. On balance it appears Raven Thomson was not one of the 1933 group that imported anti-Semitism into the BUF. On the contrary, if we subscribe to the view that his later beliefs were genuine, it would appear that he learnt them from the movement.

What is clearly visible in Raven Thomson's fascist work once in the BUF is the growth of a cultural anti-Semitism. In keeping with the vague anti-Semitism of the movement's newspapers in mid 1933, Raven Thomson was soon categorising Jewish behaviour as good or bad depending on a commitment to British interests.<sup>52</sup> In early BUF policy, social Jews would assimilate into British culture, and could remain in the country, whilst the antisocial would be deported. Whilst this concept presupposes a level of implicit pseudomorphosis in its desire

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<sup>47</sup> C. Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, op. cit., 78.

<sup>48</sup> A. Raven Thomson, *Civilization as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 69

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 78, 179, 212, 216-7, 220.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 185, 187.

<sup>52</sup> *The Blackshirt* 23, 30<sup>th</sup> September - 6<sup>th</sup> October 1933.



to divide Jews into assimilated and foreign, it was not until 1939 that Raven Thomson would become more explicit;

[T]he Jews had fully appreciated the advantages of racial solidarity in maintaining their precarious position as a dispersed minority among the nations of the earth. Indeed how are we to account for their survival as a distinct racial and social type for so many thousands of years if they are something more (or less) than human? A merely 'human' community would have long since have disappeared from history absorbed among the other peoples...this survival value of Jewish racialism has not been without influence upon western opinion shaken as it is by growing Spenglerian consciousness of cultural decline and social disintegration.<sup>53</sup>

Pseudomorphosis was clearly now a feature of Raven Thomson's anti-Semitism. Thurlow's argument that it was Raven Thomson who influenced Mosley must in such circumstances be amended to allow for a much more dynamic interaction amongst these cultural anti-Semites. BUF director A.K.Chesterton utilised the analogy of the Jew as a parasite, flourishing in an environment not of its making but ideally suited to its prosperity. This view finds parallels in Raven Thomson's earliest anti-Semitic work where;<sup>54</sup>

Darwinian survival in the realm of nature may have tended to improve the species; economic survival in the realm of commerce would seem to degenerate the race. There attributes of nobility and generosity have no place; only those of cupidity and self-seeking can exist. The predominance of Jews in our present state of decadence is not surprising. They possess the very attributes suitable to survival under these conditions.<sup>55</sup>

Thus Raven Thomson cannot be given sole credit either for importing anti-Semitism or providing a significant stimulus to an anti Jewish Spenglerian critique. In the circumstances, a clear 'seminal' influence on Mosley is unlikely.

The question remains; what caused this re-examination of the Jews that led Raven Thomson to such a pseudomorphic conclusion? The chief impediment he came to believe they posed was to the Corporate State. Society was for Raven Thomson a superorganism that had, in the Nineteenth Century, been weakened due to individualism and its economic manifestation, international finance. It was in connection with this 'financial democracy' that Raven Thomson increasingly associated Jewish interests;

<sup>53</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Book Review,' *British Union Quarterly*, Vol.3 No.2, 1937, 87.

<sup>54</sup> *Action* 75, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1937. Chesterton's biographer also argued his subject learned anti-Semitism from the BUF. See D.Baker, *The Ideology of Obsession*, op. cit., 128.

<sup>55</sup> *The Blackshirt* 34, 16<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1933.



The hidden dictatorship of finance operating from the City of London has been one of the major causes of the economic decline of this country. The great financial houses of the city, controlled as they are by alien forces, have entirely failed to realise their responsibilities towards the British people, and have directed their immense resources into foreign investment.<sup>56</sup>

As such the Jews were attempting to maintain their financial hegemony, whilst the fascists were fighting for the rebirth of a healthy corporate entity. In *Break the Chains that Bind Us* (1936), Raven Thomson argued that finance in reality dominated government and went on to illustrate the control Jewish interests had over the large financial houses through gold bullion.

The Jewish influence is absolutely predominant at this vital central point of financial control.... The chosen race has concentrate its power upon the precious metal itself and the golden key of our financial system is in their hands.<sup>57</sup>

In his assessment of the economic problem Raven Thomson uses imagery that returns to a medieval view of the Jew, in which they possess dark powers;

Our problem must be to get the Jewish genii back into the bottle of the ghetto in which our forefathers in their wisdom kept him, before his money power strangles the world.<sup>58</sup>

Whilst ideas of pseudomorphosis and corporate holism help explain the development of the anti-Semitic critique in Raven Thomson's later fascist work, the trigger for such an inclination is unclear. One possible answer is a perception he had of persecution by the Jews.<sup>59</sup> In a speech in July 1936 he told the audience he thought the Jews wanted his head on a pole.<sup>60</sup> The beginnings of such concern may lie in an incident early in his association with Mosley fascism when, according to his leader's memoirs, Raven Thomson was attacked whilst selling papers for the movement.<sup>61</sup> The ethnicity of his assailants was not

<sup>56</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, Greater Britain Publications, London, 1935, 19.

<sup>57</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *Break the Chains that Bind Us*, Abbey Supplies, London, 1936, 5. He went on to argue that Jewish interests also dominated in the South African gold fields; 'Johannesburg is now known throughout the world not by the abbreviation 'Jo'burg,' but by the more cynical 'Jewburg' on account of the overwhelming Jewish atmosphere in this city.' Ibid., 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Action* 90, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1937.

<sup>59</sup> Whilst this argument relies on a highly conjectural psychological analysis it is not presented as the sole motivation behind Raven Thomson's anti-Semitism. As Holmes noted, '[w]e need to be wary of explaining anti-Semitism in terms of individual personalities without reference to the social context within which an individual has to express himself.' C.Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society*, op. cit., 185.

<sup>60</sup> PRO HO144/21378/377-8: Police observer's report, July 1936.

<sup>61</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 331-2. See also Sheffield University Archive (SUA) R.Bellamy, *We Marched with Mosley*, unpublished manuscript, 387, 412.



mentioned, but the incident happened in the late spring or summer of 1933 when the BU was beginning to equate the Jews with Communism, and a number of vendors had been attacked by Jewish anti-fascists.<sup>62</sup> In such circumstances, he may have believed that the Jews were, directly or indirectly, responsible. Asked at a meeting in October 1934, ‘why are you so bitter against the Jews?’ Raven Thomson replied ‘when people attack you, you don’t exactly get to like them,’ though it may be that he was speaking metaphorically.<sup>63</sup> The influence of Jewish anti-fascism on the development of the BUF’s anti-Semitism has been a highly contentious facet of studies. It was certainly used by the BUF to justify its turn to anti-Semitism. Most scholars in the field give it some credence for hardening the movement’s resolve. In this case it should not be seen as the only catalyst to Raven Thomson’s anti-Semitism, but it may go a little way to explaining why he developed into a virulent Jew hater.

Thus far we have proceeded on the premise that Raven Thomson’s anti-Semitism was genuine. That it was not, however, a key ideological commitment appears to be the conclusion when his business affairs are scrutinised. A domestic servants’ agency run by his wife, and after the loss of his salary in 1937 the family’s regular source of income, had specialised in bringing into British houses foreign maids drawn from Central Europe.<sup>64</sup> As Nazi Germany’s hegemony in the region expanded during the late thirties, so the number of women available to become maids began to shrink, as service in a foreign household became viewed as beneath the Aryan woman. One group in the region was most keen to leave, and so Raven Thomson, the Director of Policy for a movement agitating against the arrival in Britain of Jewish refugees, was the financial beneficiary of the entry into domestic service of over two hundred Jewish women through his wife’s company.<sup>65</sup> That figure represents over one per cent of the total refugee domestic servants in Britain between 1933-39.<sup>66</sup> In 1940 this ‘Anglo German Agency’ came under examination as a questionable link with Nazi Europe. Asked under official interrogation, ‘had you any personal

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<sup>62</sup> R.Skidelsky, ‘Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism’ op. cit., 90.

<sup>63</sup> *The Blackshirt* 77, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1934.

<sup>64</sup> See Chapter four.

<sup>65</sup> T.Kushner, ‘Politics and Race, Gender and Class: Refugees, Fascists and Domestic Service in Britain, 1933-40’ in T.Kushner & K.Lunn (eds.) *The Politics of Marginality*, op. cit., 53; *Action* 155, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1939.



objection to introducing Jewish girls into the country?’ he replied, ‘I cannot say I liked it very much but there were heaps coming at that time and it didn’t seem to make any difference.’<sup>67</sup> Raven Thomson did admit that such a commercial decision had been embarrassing for his comrades.<sup>68</sup> Upon learning of this contradiction in Raven Thomson’s attitudes, one Jewish correspondent to the Board of Deputies of British Jews relished the opportunity to ridicule the hypocrisy,

Those who are acquainted with the speeches and writings of Mr A. Raven Thomson, that distinguished figure in the British Union of Fascists, will be aware how insistent he is on the necessity of keeping aliens out of the economic life of this country, and may have regarded him as somewhat blind to the many benefits this country has derived in the past from its former policy of “the open door.” They will therefore be all the more gratified to know that Mr Raven Thomson (known among his intimates as “Raving Thomson”) is not really so narrow minded as his speeches and writings suggest.<sup>69</sup>

Raven Thomson’s anti-Semitism was then, clearly not as important to him as his finances. The opportunist slant that the evidence of the Anglo German agency gives, must however not be overemphasised, Raven Thomson’s anti-Semitism shows a clear intellectual progression, but he also had to subsist. It must therefore be seen as more of a comic irony than proof of insincerity.

Raven Thomson’s anti-Semitism thus provides a useful commentary to the general ideas of the BUF’s anti-Jewish stance. Raven Thomson was not stifling anti-Semitism upon his entry into the BUF nor during his early association with the movement. His appreciation for the Nazi state does not seem to have influenced the appearance or character of his later anti-Jewish activity. The anti-Semitism that developed was rooted in his earlier work on the superorganism, which now was capable of being undermined by the foreign Jew, chiefly through the device of finance. Whether the Jew as superorganic pathogen was an inevitable development, given Raven Thomson’s theory of society, is reliant on the triggers that pushed any anti-Semitism onward. Whether this originated in a personal insecurity following an incident of Jewish violence is ultimately conjecture. Whilst the evidence of the Anglo German Agency favours

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<sup>66</sup> T.Kushner, ‘Politics and Race, Gender and Class,’ op. cit., 54.

<sup>67</sup> PRO HO283/70/77: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson’s hearing.

<sup>68</sup> PRO HO283/70/77: Ibid.



an opportunist reading of Raven Thomson's anti-Jewish propaganda, the appearance of a credible ideological transition from his pre-fascist work to open anti-Semitism seems to confirm that his expressed beliefs were genuine. By 1936 he was a committed anti-Semite, who participated fully in the BUF's attempt to use the doctrine to greatest advantage in East London.

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With Raven Thomson's complex intellectual relationship with anti-Semitism established, it is pertinent that this be examined within the context where it was to have most impact, the BUF campaign in East London, peaking with his candidature for the movement in the LCC elections of 1937. Here his anti-Semitism developed within East London's narrow streets, as Blackshirts attempted to gather support using an anti-Jewish platform, whilst anti-fascist groups opposed them.<sup>70</sup> The Blackshirt campaign is still shrouded in emotion, though simply describing it as a 'siege of terror' as one commentator has done, adds little to our understanding of the environment within the district between 1934 and 1937.<sup>71</sup> The rising prominence given to East London by the Mosley movement was, in part, due to the decline in support the BUF were experiencing, in the wake of a virtual boycott by the mass media. Whilst the departure of the 'Rothermere Fascists' was rationalised as no great loss, given their frail commitment to the core beliefs of fascism, for a political force attempting to gain power as a mass movement, the BUF by late 1935 was in the doldrums.<sup>72</sup> The end of mass media support also signalled the postponement of any attempt at respectable politics through the conventional political channels. At the same time in East London, Blackshirt orators using anti-Semitism were attracting increasingly large and sympathetic crowds.<sup>73</sup> Fascism, always somewhat of a protean political idea, was in such circumstances compelled to enter the east end

<sup>69</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3/F2: 'Mr A. Raven Thomson – A True Internationalist' from 'A Correspondent,' n.d.

<sup>70</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 223. See M.M.Mullings, 'The Left and fascism in the east End of London, 1932-9' PhD Thesis, Polytechnic of North London, 1985, 3.

<sup>71</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 217.

<sup>72</sup> See G.C.Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.19 No.4, 1984, 575-606.

<sup>73</sup> PRO HO144/20145/14: Letter form 'Superintendent,' 24<sup>th</sup> October 1935; *Daily Worker*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1936. See also R.C.Thurlow, 'Blaming the Blackshirts,' op. cit., 113.



of London for its survival as a tangible entity; 'gentile East Londoners sought out the BUF in order to make it a vehicle for their local grievances. Mosley went where his natural support lay.'<sup>74</sup> Whilst the BUF were active within much of East London, the prominence of the contest in Bethnal Green to the whole campaign and Raven Thomson's particular relationship with the borough requires greater examination.<sup>75</sup>

Bethnal Green was a small borough, which, alongside its neighbouring districts, was confronting the legacy of Nineteenth Century industrialisation in the forms of poverty, unemployment and overcrowding.<sup>76</sup> Already the site of an early Huguenot immigration, it was by 1931 the home for 15% of London's Jewish population.<sup>77</sup> Much of this group retained its Jewish identity, with Yiddish used in common speech and orthodox styles of clothes and grooming.<sup>78</sup> The local gentile community resided increasingly in the northeastern corner of the borough, and it was here that the BU was to enjoy some degree of success in mobilising the population.<sup>79</sup> Whilst local politicians such as George Lansbury and Herbert Morrison presented the East End as a model of social tolerance, as one later scholar noted 'latent anti-Semitism, which pivoted around issues such as access to limited housing stocks and job competition, appeared to be endemic in Bethnal green.'<sup>80</sup> Anti-immigration politics was not new in the borough. In 1902, a branch of the British Brothers League had agitated against the Jewish incursion.<sup>81</sup> As Colin Holmes has pointed out, much of the BUF platform in 1936-7 can be seen in the League's earlier activities, particularly the concern to place the ills of the area solely on the 'small Jews': employers, replacement labour and rentiers.<sup>82</sup> Bethnal Green saw further anti-Jewish activism with a large disturbance in 1917, when gentiles protested at the lack of conscription and

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<sup>74</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 393.

<sup>75</sup> For a detailed analysis of Mosley fascism's campaign see T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit.

<sup>76</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 217.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>78</sup> C.Holmes, 'Anti-Semitism and the BUF,' op. cit., 120.

<sup>79</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 57.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 71, 57-8. 'The local roots of Fascism and the level of its antisemitic violence point towards a cultural traditional of intolerance in the East End.' T.Kushner, 'Jew and Non-Jew in the East End of London: towards an anthropology of 'Everyday' Relations,' in G.Alderman & C.Holmes (eds.), *Outsiders and Outcasts*, op. cit., 47.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>82</sup> C.Holmes, 'Antisemitism and the BUF,' op. cit., 122.



apparent profiteering amongst the local Jews.<sup>83</sup> By the time the movement began its campaign in the area, the Jews were a highly distinct group, with the grounds for local hostility, entrenched.<sup>84</sup> BUF meetings in the borough initially began in November 1934 at Victoria Park Square, a large venue that would become Mosley fascism's chief arena in the East End.<sup>85</sup>

The British Union had increasingly established presence in East London since 1935, when a branch was founded in Bow. Other local branches followed, as the Bow Mosleyites attempted to disseminate fascism into other neighbouring boroughs. Bethnal Green itself had a short-lived branch, from December of 1933 but this folded early the following year. A branch was re-established in July 1935 as Bow fascists, driven from their borough by violent anti-fascist action, joined a small quorum of native Mosleyites, led by the furniture worker, E.G. Clarke.<sup>86</sup> Clarke was to enjoy significant popular support in the area, which would eventually propel him to oversight of the whole of East London and high position within the movement.<sup>87</sup> He was known as the Julius Streicher of the movement, a dubious reference to the Nazi Jew hater and indeed some of his outbursts were ominously extreme, as in a speech in 1938 where the Jews were 'lice of the earth who must be exterminated.'<sup>88</sup> For Clarke 'deep down in the hearts of many Englishmen there has always been distrust and dislike for the Jews.'<sup>89</sup> In a October 1936 speech he told an audience that, '[i]t is about time the British people of the East End knew that East London's big pogrom is not very far away now.'<sup>90</sup> Anti-Semitism was for him the response to such Jewish practices as sweating gentile workers, desire to stay unassimilated and a failure

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<sup>83</sup> C.Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939*, op. cit., 130-6 cited in D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 92.

<sup>84</sup> The Jewish homogeneity in east London was well established. In 1888 Beatrice Webb had noted that there was 'in the midst of our cosmopolitan metropolis a compact Jewish community.' Cited in M.Young and P.Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, Penguin, London, 1986, xiii.

<sup>85</sup> PRO HO144/21060/6: Special Branch report, November 1934.

<sup>86</sup> For the early history of the BU in this area see T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 59-60.

<sup>87</sup> He was in the opinion of one scholar 'the only really important grass roots leader.' See R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 396.

<sup>88</sup> W.F.Mandle, *Antisemitism and the British Union of Fascists*, op. cit., 60.

<sup>89</sup> E.G.Clarke, *The British Union and the Jews*, Abbey Supplies, London, n.d., 2.

<sup>90</sup> PRO HO144/21061/109: Special Branch observer's report, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1936. The policy of the movement never endorsed extermination as a solution to the 'Jewish problem.' Deportation was proposed. See O.Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered*, BUF Publications, London, 1936, Q93, Q95, Q98.



to put Britain first.<sup>91</sup> Under his leadership the area was weekly selling 300 copies of the BUF's paper *The Blackshirt* by August 1935 and playing host to large meetings, some attended by thousands. By 1937 the fascist press were accurately presenting the area as 'that citadel of national socialism.'<sup>92</sup>

Jew-baiting was to become the pervading feature of Bethnal Green fascism, with the provocative establishment of the local headquarters in a predominantly Jewish street setting the tone.<sup>93</sup> It was the issue that surrounds Raven Thomson's arrest and trial in September 1936.<sup>94</sup> On the eleventh of that month he was speaking to a crowd of 800 at Victoria Park Square. What followed was a sustained assault on Jewry particularly with regards to the Empire; 'workers of Britain unite, you have an empire to gain and nothing to lose but your Jews.' Raven Thomson continued,

Our forefathers won the Empire, it is ours, it is yours. The Marxists and the Jews have been telling you to throw it away, give it back to the Negroes, you've to hand it back to them. What should you tell these Jews when they come along? This, that we aren't going to give it away for any damn Jews at all. They think its theirs... You are quite right, they don't own it, but some of the richest of them stole it...<sup>95</sup>

As the meeting progressed there began to be friction from the back of the crowd as Communists, many of them Jews, from a nearby meeting, reacted.<sup>96</sup> Soon a police cordon, to separate the two groups, was required.<sup>97</sup> At 9.10pm Raven Thomson entered the part of his speech that would become his last public words for the evening, where he harked back to the grievances of 1917;

Lawrence of Arabia promised Palestine to the Arabs for fighting on our side [in the First World War]; they fought damn sight better than the Jews did, and the sending of British troops to Palestine to suppress the Arabs is

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<sup>91</sup> 'Englishmen have learnt to be anti-Semitic, the Jews made them so.' E.G. Clarke, *The British Union and the Jews*, op. cit., 2.

<sup>92</sup> *Action* 56, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1937. At the branches general meeting in April 1937, 650 people were present. See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 62.

<sup>93</sup> 'It would be superficial merely to attribute our East End strength to the natural and healthy anti-Semitism which is always to be found in areas thickly populated by Jews.' *The Blackshirt*, 128, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1935.

<sup>94</sup> PRO HO144/21379/64-74: Police observer's report, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1936.

<sup>95</sup> PRO HO144/21379/72: Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> For the Communist response to Fascism in Bethnal Green see NMLH CP/CENT/SUBJ/04/04. The Jewish reply to fascist anti-Semitism was split, with the Board of Deputies attempting to organise a peaceable united front against the BUF and the more militant Jewish Peoples Council committed to smashing fascism. See BOD C6/7/2/1: JDC report 1936; GLRO ACC/3121/E03 /245: Letter from Neil Francis Hawkins to under secretary of state Sir Russell Scott, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1936; Manchester Jewish Museum: JPC pamphlet, 1936.

<sup>97</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1936; PRO HO144/21379/64: Police observer's report, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1936.



an insult to his memory...It is known to many of you that the Jews were not at the war. You know this is true because they were here at home at the East End making money out of munitions and such like.<sup>98</sup>

Police at this point stepped in believing a breach of the peace was imminent and charged him with using insulting words and behaviour, before removing him to Bethnal Green police station. As other speakers continued more police officers were brought. By the time the meeting closed at 10pm, the initial twelve officers had been supplemented with a further one hundred policemen.

Certain points require mention with this case. First, prior to the speech, Raven Thomson had consulted the Police inspector on duty and had been informed what comments would precipitate police intervention.<sup>99</sup> Secondly, despite the vitriol of the earlier portion of the speech, it was allowed by the Police, as the audience was Blackshirt supporters and sympathisers and there appeared no breach of the peace likely, 'The main section of the audience were entirely in sympathy with the fascists.'<sup>100</sup> This legal constraint was also apparent at the subsequent hearing in Old Street magistrate's court on the 26<sup>th</sup> September.<sup>101</sup> The key element of the case was Raven Thomson's attack on Jewish ex-servicemen, which despite police shorthand notes, was inconclusive, prompting the Judge to acquit him. In his summation the judge gave these remarks;

This court holds and expresses no view about fascism and communism, it is not interested in either, but the question of Jew baiting is a matter on which it has to express an opinion. If fascists come down and make wholesale attacks on a law-abiding community of Jews, they will be punished and certainly they will be bound over to discontinue their practises...If on the other hand a coterie of Jews...challenges the [speakers] remarks, Thomson is free to deal with the challenge and comment on Jews in the same way.<sup>102</sup>

This apparent legal loophole, where the Police allowed virulent anti-Semitism if no disturbance was caused, led to an appearance of partiality from the local constabulary.<sup>103</sup> This was coupled with an acceptance of Police instructions by

<sup>98</sup> PRO HO144/21379/64: Ibid ; *The Times*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1936.

<sup>99</sup> *East London Observer*, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1936

<sup>100</sup> PRO HO144/21379/68: Special Branch report, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1936.

<sup>101</sup> See *The Times* and *Daily Herald* 28<sup>th</sup> September 1936.

<sup>102</sup> *Liverpool Post*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1936 cited in R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 401-2; PRO HO144/21379/52-3: Special Branch report, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1936.

<sup>103</sup> See J.Stevenson, 'The BUF, The Metropolitan Police and Public Order,' in K.Lunn & R.ThurLOW, *British Fascism*, op. cit., 136.



the BU in an attempt to avoid bad publicity. Whilst it has been noted that the officers of Bethnal Green's H Division were considerably more inclined towards fascists than anti-fascists, Sir Philip Game, the Police Commissioner for London was at pains to defend his force from accusations of favouritism;

[B]oth the fascists and the Communists were inclined to trail their coats but the fascists being better disciplined did not accept the challenge of their opponents to the same extent of the Communists. The result was that more proceedings were taken against communists than against fascists and there was a superficial appearance of partiality on the part of the police.<sup>104</sup>

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the case was its potential influence on a headquarters staff meeting three days later. At the gathering, held in the absence of Mosley, who was ill, it was decided the BU needed to gain greater publicity.<sup>105</sup> The BUF's Director of Propaganda, William Joyce, proposed the specific courting of arrests to promote a public sympathy for the movement as one under persecution by Jews.<sup>106</sup> Whilst rejecting mere religious anti-Semitism as counterproductive to the furtherance of fascism, he believed that 'to be arrested and fined or imprisoned for correct criticism in correct language furthered the cause of fascism and was right.'<sup>107</sup> This new principle went against earlier concerns that prosecutions would damage the movement, and is visible in the BUF's most famous encounter in East London, on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 1936.

So much folklore surrounds the 'Battle of Cable Street' that academics have had to tread carefully, mindful of the strong emotions that those who participated, still possess.<sup>108</sup> To commemorate the fourth anniversary of the founding of the movement, the Blackshirts proceeded to organise a day of marching and rallies through East London. Anti-fascist concerns saw various deputations visiting the Home Secretary attempting to have the march banned. The Communist Party were initially to hold another rally in competition, but by the 2<sup>nd</sup> October had decided, instead, on a show of strength and solidarity with Republican Spain, similarly afflicted with fascism.<sup>109</sup> By the time the BU ranks

<sup>104</sup> PRO HO144/21378/197-8: Special Branch report, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1936.

<sup>105</sup> GLRO ACC/3121/E03/245/F2: Letter from Neil Francis Hawkins to under secretary of state Sir Russell Scott, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1936.

<sup>106</sup> PRO HO144/21378/101-5: Special Branch report, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1936.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> See P.Catterall, 'The Battle of Cable Street,' *Contemporary Record*, Vol 8 No 1, 1994, 105-32.

<sup>109</sup> R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 225-6.



were massed outside the Royal Mint, a sizeable anti-fascist presence of tens of thousands was in East London ready to ensure that the BU would not pass. Such had been their conviction that in Cable Street a lorry had been overturned and incorporated into a barricade. Fearing a melee Sir Philip Game changed the path of the march away from East London.<sup>110</sup>

The result of the 4<sup>th</sup> October's events was variously interpreted. For the Communists it was a triumph in the international struggle against fascism. The BU chose to see it as an example of weak government.<sup>111</sup> To what extent it represented a failure of Mosley fascism is debatable. A week later the Blackshirt leader spoke to an audience of 12,000 in Bethnal Green, with recruitment numbers temporarily blossoming. Cable Street's status as a success or failure for the movement has much to do with its aims. If the aim was a show of fascist force, then it failed. Yet, what if the march had been designed to gain the BU some publicity through arrests, as Joyce had argued three weeks previously? A letter from Director General Neil Francis Hawkins to the Home Office, made it clear that the aim of the 4<sup>th</sup> October march *was* to cause a disturbance. If the BU speakers were arrested, Mosley would then push the matter through the courts, with the fascists taking the stance, that if they were to be persecuted, why not the Communists?<sup>112</sup> Hawkins' reasons for such an admission may be little more than an attempt to see the Joyce plan fail and, with it, his chief rival within the movement. Had Mosley marched unmolested to the four meeting points he would have only been speaking to the faithful, with little or no publicity value. Thus the 'Battle of Cable Street' can be seen as a calculated manoeuvre to benefit from Communist opposition and had only been frustrated by Game's intervention, precipitated by the sheer numbers that had turned out to prevent the march.

The disorder of the period, typified by the incidents of the 4<sup>th</sup> October helped precipitate legislation against the BU. Whilst the previous Police Commissioner, Lord Trenchard, had as early as February 1934, urged the prohibition of the fascist movement as a paramilitary body and potential threat to

<sup>110</sup> PRO HO144/21061/101: Special Branch report, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1936.

<sup>111</sup> *Action* 34, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1936.

<sup>112</sup> GLRO ACC/3121/EO3/245/F2: Letter from Neil Francis Hawkins to Under Secretary of State Sir Russell Scott, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1936.



the police force, Home Office concerns for civil liberties had prevailed.<sup>113</sup> Game, however, could now present the Home Office with a new dimension to the fascist threat, anti-Semitism and its damage to public order.<sup>114</sup> The government acted swiftly and on the 16<sup>th</sup> November 1936 a bill passed through the Commons. The bill that became law on the first day of 1937 prohibited the wearing of a political uniform in public, and ended activities considered the sole remit of the police. It also gave wider discretionary powers to Police commissioners, allowing them to ban marches in defined areas for periods up to three months. The police were also empowered to respond to breaches of the peace in all public areas, not merely outdoor venues as previously. Whilst the extent of the blow that this Public Order Act dealt the Mosley movement has been debated, it did little to curb the BU in its campaign for the London County Council elections later that year.<sup>115</sup>

The campaign began in January 1937, though an intention to contest the LCC elections is visible within the movement from the previous July.<sup>116</sup> By the time of the formal induction of the campaign, the BU were concentrating on the LCC districts of Shoreditch, Limehouse in the Stepney district, and Bethnal Green,<sup>117</sup>

Sir Oswald Mosley has selected three typical East London constituencies running in a connected belt right through the heart of the area, and is putting forward six typical members of the British Union, in order to challenge the powers of Jewry and reaction in East London, and to give the people who have been maligned in every newspaper in the country the opportunity of making their reply in no uncertain voice.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> A.Moore, 'Sir Philip Game's 'other life': the making of the 1936 public order act in Britain,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol.36, No.1, 1988, 65.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>115</sup> See P.Cohen, 'The Police, the Home Office and the surveillance of the British Union of Fascists,' *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.1, No.3 (1986); A.Moore, 'Sir Philip Game's 'other life,'' *op. cit.*, 68. Richard Thurlow has studied the Act in depth in several pieces, to support his particular view that the eventual failure of Mosley fascism lies with the state management of the movement. See R.C.Thurlow, 'The failure of British Fascism' in A.Thorpe (ed) *The Failure of British Political Extremism in Interwar Britain*, Exeter University Press, Exeter, 1989, 67-84; *idem.*, 'British Fascism and State Surveillance,' *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.3, No.1, 1988, 77-99; *idem.*, 'The State Management of the British Union of Fascists' in M.Cronin, *The Failure of British Fascism*, Macmillan, London, 1995, 29-51; *idem.*, *The Secret State*, Taurus, London, 1995, 182-213.

<sup>116</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, *op. cit.*, 404.

<sup>117</sup> Plans for BU campaigns in the LCC districts of 'Bow and Bromley' and 'Central Hackney' were aborted by January 1937. See T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, *op. cit.*, 92.

<sup>118</sup> BU press release reported in *East End News* 15<sup>th</sup> January 1937.



These candidates were anything but typical, two were directors of the BU, and a further one was its chief women's organiser.<sup>119</sup> Given his local popularity, Clarke was a natural choice for the North East Bethnal Green ward, though his running mate was less obvious, Raven Thomson. The partnership of the men was confidently described in the fascist press as 'a happy blend of fire and experience.'<sup>120</sup> One contemporary commentator was quick to note; 'I gather that one of their candidates is an admirer of the philosopher Oswald Spengler. It is odd that he should go down to East London to demonstrate 'The Decline of the West.'<sup>121</sup> The choice of Raven Thomson may have less to do with his 'experience,' and more relevance to the internal politics of the BU, particularly his candidature in the ward seen as most likely to return a BU councillor, in favour of William Joyce.<sup>122</sup> Joyce, who was standing in the Limehouse ward, had, according to a local fascist interviewed by Thomas Linehan, a great personal following in Bethnal Green, challenging even Mosley's status.<sup>123</sup> Given the belief, held by some in the BU, of the high levels of support in Bethnal Green, perhaps the movement was complacent and felt Joyce was needed elsewhere, despite his own belief that he was wasting his time standing in Limehouse.<sup>124</sup> That the organisational side of the BUF was in control of the campaign must not be discounted, however, with the rivalry of Joyce and Hawkins. In such a light perhaps Hawkins wished to deprive Joyce of a victory, even though a place at county hall would have diminished the Director of Propaganda's role in the running of the movement. Such a position however presupposes a commitment to gaining BU councillors. With such senior candidates, a landslide for the BU would have weakened their important roles within the movement. Had this been the intent surely the BU would also have deployed its chief electoral weapon, Mosley. Had he stood in Bethnal Green, the BU poll would have been far higher. The LCC campaign must in such circumstances be seen as an attempt less to win seats as develop the propaganda machine, as Raven Thomson's speaker's notes for the campaign attest;

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<sup>119</sup> Raven Thomson and Joyce were both directors of the BUF, Anne Brock Griggs was the Women's Chief Officer.

<sup>120</sup> *The Blackshirt* 194, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1937.

<sup>121</sup> *The Star*, 13<sup>th</sup> February 1937

<sup>122</sup> PRO HO144/21063/372: Special Branch report, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1937.

<sup>123</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 283.

<sup>124</sup> PRO HO144/21063/372: Special Branch report, 8<sup>th</sup> February 1937.



As only three constituencies are being fought, it is quite obvious that at this stage we cannot capture the L.C.C., and it is therefore unnecessary to advance a policy for the municipal government of London... In this sense the Election may be regarded as a dress rehearsal for the Parliamentary Election which will later be fought in these same constituencies.<sup>125</sup>

Response to the BU participation in the campaign was not uniform. Herbert Morrison, Labour MP for South Hackney, and later the BU's gaoler during the Second World War, believed it would be 'an amusing experience,' splitting the Tory vote, whilst illustrating fascism's status as a spent force in British politics.<sup>126</sup> Others thought the BU would 'probably not make much difference.'<sup>127</sup> Local press noted a potential benefit of fascist electioneering, helping to influence metropolitan policy; 'if the Fascists, who are direct in aim and speech, take as their slogan 'London, first, last and all the time' they may do useful work apart from winning elections.'<sup>128</sup>

The campaign of the BU in Bethnal Green was, given the character of East End fascism, a six-week attempt at cleansing the area of Jewish influence. As the election pamphlet of the two candidates declared;

We are pledged to fight to the end for the people's cause against the tyranny of Jewish power. So we ask you by your votes to give the parties of Jewry "notice to quit."<sup>129</sup>

This 'Jewish power' had not only weakened the borough, but had lessened its ability to retaliate through conventional channels. All established political parties were alleged to be tied to Jewry; 'Conservative, Liberal and Labour... are all the same... none of these parties can help the people because they are the parties of Jewish finance.'<sup>130</sup> Raven Thomson's notes for campaigning speakers emphasised 'you must show that all the present parties are completely Jew-ridden.'<sup>131</sup> The LCC elections were to provide the first instance of British retaliation. It was 'the first time that the British Union, the new movement of the people challenges the forces of Jewry.'<sup>132</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Working Class Movement Library (WCML) Fascism; Box file No.4, BU Speakers Notes No. 21, February 1937.

<sup>126</sup> *The Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1937.

<sup>127</sup> *New Statesman and Nation*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1937.

<sup>128</sup> *East London Observer*, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1937.

<sup>129</sup> NMLH: BU LCC election leaflet, op. cit., 1.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> WCML: BU Speakers Notes 21, op. cit., 2.

<sup>132</sup> *Action* 51, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1937.



If you return British Union candidates by your votes on March 4<sup>th</sup> next, you will strike the first great blow for British Freedom and will shake alien Jewish power to its foundations.<sup>133</sup>

Legitimate local issues, such as housing and unemployment, were thus co-opted into this Manichean struggle wherein all grievances were reduced to the campaign slogan 'Vote British.'<sup>134</sup>

To whom did the BU address itself? From the outset the movement was clear on its audience 'Bethnal Green is mainly a lower middle class neighbourhood which resisted Socialism until recently, voting Liberal as a compromise.'<sup>135</sup> Lower middle class gentiles, as Linehan has shown, predominantly inhabited the northeastern ward of the borough, and the BU was particularly successful in raising support amongst local shopkeepers.<sup>136</sup> Competition with Jewish retailers had engendered a degree of animosity especially with the introduction of the Sunday Trading Act. The Act allowed for Jewish shopkeepers to open for a limited period on a Sunday in recognition that they closed on their Sabbath, comprising most of Saturday. Gentile resentment arose from apparent circumventions of the law, whereby a Jewish retailer would trade from a market stall on Saturday, effectively gaining an extra trading day in the week. To what extent the act was abused is unclear, but the Bethnal Green candidates used it as a tool in their electioneering,

We believe that the shopkeeper must be saved and that the only way to do it is to abolish the combines that crush him with Jewish and foreign capital aided by the pro-Jewish legislation of the old parties such as the Sunday Trading Act.<sup>137</sup>

As a correspondent for the Evening Standard noted there was 'no doubt that the Blackshirt movement has exploited that latent anti-Semitism to recruit its own strength in certain parts of East London.'<sup>138</sup>

<sup>133</sup> NMLH: BU LCC election leaflet, op. cit., 1.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> WCML: BU Speakers Notes 21, op. cit., 11.

<sup>136</sup> Linehan noted the appearance of shopkeepers willing to become division one members of the movement, a category requiring five nights-a-week service to the BUF, an unequivocal statement of support. T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 73.

<sup>137</sup> NMLH: BU LCC election leaflet, op. cit., 2; As a police report noted 'anti-Jewish propaganda meets with a favourable response in those areas where Jewish commercial activity predominates to the serious detriment of Gentile traders who suffer perhaps through their own lack of enterprise, but blame the Jews for their unscrupulous methods in business.' PRO HO144/21378/225: 'Insider' report on Jew-baiting,' Special Branch report 24<sup>th</sup> June 1936.

<sup>138</sup> *Evening Standard*, 5th February 1937



The great body of the LCC campaigning was held in February. It was principally conducted through an extensive series of meetings, ranging from small street corner gatherings to the vast audiences at venues like Victoria Park Square. Columns of Blackshirts marched through the streets, and fascists urging shoppers 'don't buy from foreigners, buy British' picketed Jewish shops.<sup>139</sup> Jewish retailers found their shops sporting anti-Semitic slogans and in some cases were threatened with arson and murder.<sup>140</sup> The BUF also engaged in acts of political sabotage. In one case, fascists in their own vehicles hampered a Labour candidate in neighbouring Limehouse when travelling in her car, and drowned out her speeches with their motor horns.<sup>141</sup> On the night of the poll in Limehouse a fascist loudspeaker van announced in that ward that polling finished at 8.30pm rather than at 9pm.<sup>142</sup> The violent atmosphere generated did mean that fascists, found alone in certain areas of the East End, risked serious assault.<sup>143</sup>

Raven Thomson's campaign for the LCC was conducted in this atmosphere. In keeping with the other candidates he spoke rarely at a large meeting, and seems to have spent a great deal of the campaign canvassing in the style of the conventional parties. On one occasion he became embroiled in a dispute over the BU's use of the York Hall, a large indoor venue close to Victoria Park Square. The Labour backed Council denied them the use of the hall whilst allowing a Communist Party meeting to be held, a fact capitalised upon in the Blackshirt press.<sup>144</sup>

The result of the March poll came in at midnight on the morning of the fifth and was announced to the 2,000 strong crowd outside Bethnal Green's town hall, half of whom appeared to police to be fascist supporters.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> PRO HO144/21377/320: Letter from J.Jacobs, a local Jewish Anti-fascist, to the Mayor of Bethnal Green, February/March 1936. See J.Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto*, J.Simon, London, 1978.

<sup>140</sup> T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 73; HC Deb 309 5<sup>th</sup> March 1936 c1595-1603, 1633-4 cited in D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 107.

<sup>141</sup> R.Temple, 'The Metropolitan Police and the British Union of Fascists,' MA Dissertation, Queen Margaret and Westfield University, 1989, 8.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> *Evening Standard*, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1936. For a review sympathetic to the predicament of Mosley fascism see S.M.Cullen, 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.28 No.2, 1993, 245-65.

<sup>144</sup> *Action* 53, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1937.

<sup>145</sup> PRO HO144/20710/149: Special Branch report, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1937.



1937 LCC election results - Bethnal Green: North East Ward <sup>146</sup>	
T. Dawson (Labour)	7,777
R.S. Keeling (Labour)	7,756
<b>A. Raven Thomson (British Union)</b>	<b>3,028</b>
<b>E.G. Clarke (British Union)</b>	<b>3,022</b>
A.J. Irvine (Liberal)	2,298
H.K. Sadler (Liberal)	2,228

The BU candidates then spoke to the crowd, expressing the hope of a better result in a general election, and were then carried shoulder-high back to district headquarters.<sup>147</sup> In contrast to the relatively peaceable scenes at the announcement of the count at Shoreditch, Bethnal Green's BU marked their exit from the LCC campaign with the breakage of shop windows in Jewish owned shops along their route.<sup>148</sup>

As Linehan has shown, the size of the BU vote was not solely the result of anti-Semitism in Bethnal Green. It became the recipient of anti-socialist votes that had traditionally gone to a strong Liberal Party presence in the area.<sup>149</sup> Prior to 1934 the Liberal Party had enjoyed considerable support, particularly following a local Labour administration discredited by accusations of nepotism and jobbery. In 1934 Labour were returned, though memories of the earlier mismanagement remained. The fascists were also helped by a number of errors made by local government in the period, such as the intention not to mark the King's 25<sup>th</sup> jubilee, nor to allow the BU to lay a wreath on a local memorial in what they believed was a publicity stunt.<sup>150</sup> A further measure to suppress anti-Semitism, through the council's threat to evict any tenants acting 'unreasonably against other residents,' was also used by the fascists.<sup>151</sup>

<sup>146</sup> R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, op. cit., 281-2. In Limehouse both BU candidates polled 2,086 votes, approximately 16.3% of the total. At Shoreditch, Joyce and his running partner J.A. Bailey received 2,564 and 2,492 respectively, gaining 14.8%. In both districts the movement took third place.

<sup>147</sup> *Action* 56, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1937; PRO HO144/20710/154: Special Branch report, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>148</sup> PRO HO144/20710/146-7, 149-50: Special Branch report, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1937. The proximity of the Shoreditch police station to the Town hall was believed by special branch to have deterred more militant action by local Blackshirts there.

<sup>149</sup> T. Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 64-6.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-9.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



The results of the poll were variously interpreted. For Mosley it was a better showing than the Nazi Party's early attempt for power.<sup>152</sup> Yet despite the LCC election franchise limiting votes to householders and thereby ensuring that many younger fascist sympathisers were excluded from participation, the BU vote did represent the first showing of its popularity in the stronghold of domestic fascism.<sup>153</sup> Turnout in the BU contested boroughs did rise by 10% compared with the 1934 figures, although this was also the case in several areas not contested by the BU. Despite the significant showing at the polls it appears that the result was 'a bitter disappointment to the fascist leaders.'<sup>154</sup> Raven Thomson indeed was reported as 'still rather bewildered at the result, and cannot understand why he had not won by at least 5,000 votes'<sup>155</sup>

Raven Thomson's experience of Bethnal Green was one of calculated Jew-baiting in an attempt to gain 'a mandate to carry through our national socialist policy especially as it concerns the Jewish question.'<sup>156</sup> In this capacity he indulged in vitriolic attacks on the Jewish population. Whilst he was not the originator of the fascist policy of courting arrests, his calculated outburst aided the development of a deliberately inflammatory posture in the movement, which would have profound effect on the Jewish minority in the East End. As the Director of Policy he oversaw the implementation of his speaker's notes, which were faithfully followed in the campaign for the LCC. His candidature marked the height of the BU's electoral success but at the expense of descending into the gutter.

### III

The precise nature of the BUF's anti-Semitism will continue to generate debate. Claims by Mosley's biographer of the 'intellectual and moral carelessness' of the stance are thus diminished if the anti-Semitism exhibited

<sup>152</sup> PRO HO144/21063/240: Special Branch report, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>153</sup> An examination of the voting numbers per hour also indicates many voters were employed. Though the polls opened at 8am, over 60% of the votes were cast between 5 and 9pm. See GLRO LCC statistics 1935-7, Vol.40, 21-3.

<sup>154</sup> PRO HO144/21087/355: Special Branch report, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>155</sup> PRO HO144/21063/244: Special Branch report, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1937.

<sup>156</sup> WCML: BU Speakers Notes 21, op. cit., 2.



forms part of a tangible process of scapegoating directed at the British Jews.<sup>157</sup> Raven Thomson's work placed the Jew at the centre of a conspiracy against Britain in general and British fascism in particular, and rationalised the belief through a revision of Oswald Spengler's work. The precise origin of this change in understanding highlights the levels of ideological interchange within the upper ranks of the BUF. Once committed to a concern for British vitality and the conviction that Jewish interests, through money and international trade, were undermining the nation, he participated in a sustained assault on East London. His efforts would see him in the dock on three occasions and earned him the implacable resentment of the Jewish community. Much like his leader, Raven Thomson seems to have wished to grapple with the great ideas of the time whilst engaging in the basest forms of racism.

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<sup>157</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 391; N.Nugent & R.King, 'Ethnic minorities, scapegoating and the extreme right,' op. cit., 34-5.



## Chapter Five: Internment

The activities of Mosley, Raven Thomson and the Blackshirt movement were sharply curtailed in May 1940. Whilst the political establishment was prepared to accept the existence of a small fascist organisation during peacetime, following the outbreak of war the British Union (BU) were under suspicion as a possible ally for the Axis powers. As Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison maintained, '[w]e apprehend that in the case of invasion by Nazi Germany these people might actively assist the enemy.'<sup>1</sup> Following swift advances by the Axis powers in the spring of 1940, a decision was taken that the risk the fascists posed was too great to allow them their freedom, and much of the BU hierarchy was interned. As a senior fascist, Raven Thomson joined his fascist peers in Brixton prison.

It is with the closing of the gates of Brixton Prison behind the Blackshirt leadership that traditional studies of Mosley fascism end.<sup>2</sup> In these histories the general failure of British fascism is compounded by the arrest of Mosley and his lieutenants, to be joined over the coming months, by many of their comrades; the BU itself was outlawed in July.<sup>3</sup> Yet to understand the full history of Mosley's fascist enterprise and Raven Thomson's continued participation, we must pass beyond this threshold. For though the BU ceased in the summer of 1940, Mosley and those who chose to remain with him, such as his Director of Policy, continued in their fascism, overcoming the trials of long internment and public animosity upon release, to establish another movement after the war.<sup>4</sup> In effective control of this new group, whilst Mosley travelled the globe seeking new allies from the remnants of international fascism, was Raven Thomson in the role of movement secretary. That

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<sup>1</sup> Parl Deb HC Vol 367 c 877 10<sup>th</sup> December 1940.

<sup>2</sup> See C.Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, Barrie and Rockcliffe, London, 1961; R.Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, Allen Lane, London, 1972; R.C.Thurlow, 'The Failure of British Fascism, 1932-40,' in A.Thorpe (ed.), *The Failure of British Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain*, Exeter University Press, Exeter, 1987. Even those studies that go beyond the war in their scope tend to classify the period as merely 'the aftermath.' See D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur, Mosley, Fascism and British society, 1931-81*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, 231.

<sup>3</sup> Defence Regulation (DR) 18B (1A) detained the leadership, whilst DR 18B (AA) of July banned the organisation. See A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious, Detention without trial in wartime Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, 172-81, 425-6.

<sup>4</sup> See R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1995, 259-64; A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement: Success or Failure?' in M.Cronin (ed) *The Failure of British Fascism*, Macmillan, London, 1996, 55-80.



other senior colleagues from the pre-war days did not flank him is testament to the rigours of the intervening period.<sup>5</sup> The question thus arises, why did he stay when so many of his peers following internment chose to distance themselves from fascist activism?

An answer to this question would, until recently, have been difficult to obtain. Whilst several Blackshirts wrote memoirs in which lengthy passages were devoted to the experience of internment, Raven Thomson's perception of detention is only available in a single article he wrote for the post war Mosleyite newspaper *Union*.<sup>6</sup> That the history of internment for the Mosleyites can be written at all relies considerably on the files of the movement's gaolers, the Home Office and MI5. Selective files from these official records have only been available to the public since the mid 1980s, and until 1998 Raven Thomson's files were unavailable.<sup>7</sup> The retention of Raven Thomson's files had, before that time, been cited as an example of the gaps in academic understanding that persisted in the study of Blackshirt internment.<sup>8</sup> With the release of two files dealing with Raven Thomson's internment, a biographer now can write with some confidence of his subject between his incarceration in May 1940 and release in October 1944, placing this understanding within the larger history of fascist imprisonment.<sup>9</sup>

The information contained in these Raven Thomson files also provides scope for a new answer to the central question raised by Blackshirt internment; was it necessary? Whilst early histories of the BUF tended to see detention as justified,

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<sup>5</sup> See R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame': The Failed Political Resurrection of Sir Oswald Mosley after 1945,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33 No.2, 1998, 241.

<sup>6</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common,' *Union* 19, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1948. See also O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 398-415; J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, Brockingday, London, 1990, 96-162; J.Battersby, *The Bishop said Amen*, The Kingdom Press, Poynton, 1947, 13-75.

<sup>7</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Mosley Papers and the secret history of British Fascism 1939-40' in T.Kushner and K.Lunn (eds.) *Traditions of Intolerance*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989, 176; See also P.Cohen, 'The Police, the Home Office and the Surveillance of the British Union of Fascists,' *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.1 No.3, 1986, 416-432.

<sup>8</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 209; idem., 'British Fascism and State Surveillance, 1934-45,' *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.3 No.1, 1988, 77.

<sup>9</sup> The two files in question are the record of Raven Thomson's appeals against internment and the remnants of his internment record, Public Records Office (PRO) files HO283/70 and HO45/25701 respectively. At this point it is timely to thank Shirley Clarke of the Home Office's Record Management Service for her help in securing access to these documents.



later more liberal studies, argued that the policy was unwarranted.<sup>10</sup> This argument against detention rests chiefly on the patriotism visible in the movement, preventing all but the most pro-Nazi fringe members from aiding an invasion of Britain. The material from the Raven Thomson files allows for a third interpretation, one between the arbitrary classifications of patriot and traitor. It indicates this high-ranking fascist actively supported a position of revolutionary opportunism, with an imminent invasion providing the necessary conditions for a fascist seizure of power, as conventional politics gave way to a clash between fascism and Communism. Thus the movement, whilst not working for Nazi hegemony across Britain, would still have been a potential threat to British democracy.

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The origins of Raven Thomson's internment on the 23rd of May 1940 lie in the formulation and enactment of the wartime emergency Defence Regulation 18B(1A). Its timing marked the conclusion of a conflict between the traditionally libertarian Home Office and Britain's intelligence community, in particular MI5.<sup>11</sup> Prior to the release of documentation from the Home Office, this facet of Blackshirt internment had been missing from any understanding of Blackshirt detention, with Skidelsky in 1975 citing: concern for public morale; fifth column fever; and the entry of the Labour party into the wartime coalition as the foundations of the decision to opt for imprisonment.<sup>12</sup> Later studies such as Thurlow and Gillman, have stressed MI5's role in manoeuvring the cabinet into accepting extensive repression of domestic fascism, circumventing Home Office opposition.<sup>13</sup>

That internment was under consideration in summer 1940 originated chiefly from the fear of invasion, and the aid that fascists might give to the enemy as a 'fifth

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<sup>10</sup> See R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, Macmillan, London, 1975, 449-55; R.C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 189; D.S. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 232-4.

<sup>11</sup> R.C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 190-1.

<sup>12</sup> R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 447-8. Mosley believed he had been offered up as a inducement, noting that 18B(1A) was enacted four days after the Labour party conference at Bournemouth. See O. Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 399.

<sup>13</sup> R.C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit. 194 - 8; P. & L. Gillman, *'Collar the Lot!' How Britain Interned and Expelled its Wartime Refugees*, Quartet Books, London, 1980, 127-9.



column.<sup>14</sup> The term was first used by a nationalist general in the Spanish Civil War to describe a secret force in position within the besieged Republican held city of Madrid to aid in its capture.<sup>15</sup> With the Nazi blitzkrieg proceeding across North West Europe at alarming speed, the aid provided by domestic fascist movements was perceived as a major factor in the advances.<sup>16</sup> In particular the assistance provided by Vidkun Quisling's Norwegian fascist group 'Nasjonal Samling' prompted a concern that similar aid existed in Britain.<sup>17</sup> The credence given to invasion fears saw South Coast beaches mined and the removal of signposts to confuse invaders.<sup>18</sup> Confirmation that a British Nazi cell existed was provided by the appearance of the New British Broadcasting Station (NBBS), a German run service disseminating propaganda that purported to be sending coded messages to a domestic fifth column.<sup>19</sup> Press coverage appeared describing Mosley as a potential Quisling.<sup>20</sup> As one later study noted 'Fascism was now seen as a potential Nazi Trojan horse within Britain.'<sup>21</sup> In such a climate it is doubtful that the internment of the BU leadership would have been delayed much after the Dunkirk retreat, in late May and early June. Its precise timing and severity was, however, linked to the assault on Home Office policy-making by Military Intelligence.

Whilst this invasion threat provided the circumstances for a re-evaluation of the domestic fascist threat, the issue that in the short term most directly led to the incarceration of Raven Thomson and his comrades, was the association that senior BU members had with the pro-Nazi association, the Right Club. Led by the Conservative MP for Peebles, Archibald Maule Ramsay, this group had links with a

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<sup>14</sup>The principle concern was the perceived help a movement might render to a vanguard assault by paratroops. See N. West, *MI5: British Security Service Operations*, Bodley Head, London, 1981, 121; F.H.Hinsley & C.A.G.Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4: Security and Counter Intelligence*, HMSO, London, 1990, 54.

<sup>15</sup>N. West, *MI5*, op. cit., 118.

<sup>16</sup>L. Burtleton, 'The State, Internment and Public Criticism in the Second World War,' *Immigrants and Minorities*, Vol.11 No.2, 1992, 102.

<sup>17</sup>S.G.Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, UCL, London, 1996, 307-8.

<sup>18</sup>N. West, *MI5*, op. cit., 121-2.

<sup>19</sup>See A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 167-71; W.J. West, *Truth Betrayed*, Duckworth, London, 1987, 211, 224.

<sup>20</sup>*The Times* 10<sup>th</sup> May 1940; R.C.Thurlow 'Internment in the Second World War,' *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.9 No.1, 1994, 125. See also J.Langdon-Davies, *Fifth Column*, John Murray, London, 1940, 42-3.

<sup>21</sup>R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 193-4.



clerk at the United States Embassy in London, Tyler Kent.<sup>22</sup> Following the internment of a BU member in September 1939, it appears that Mosley, fearing more imprisonments, began discussions with fascist sympathisers such as the Right Club.<sup>23</sup> Several meetings took place amongst these groups, one of which Raven Thomson attended. At this gathering Mosley met with senior figures on the fascist fringe: Lord Tavistock, Admiral Barry Domvile, Major General Fuller and Lord Lymington.<sup>24</sup> Ramsay was not present and Raven Thomson later pleaded ignorance about the Right Club, but it is clear that Special Branch and MI5 believed Mosley and he were connected.<sup>25</sup> Such an association was not in itself illegal at the time, nor was the Home Office minded to take action, until the case of Kent was used by MI5 in its call for the suppression of the BU.

As a cypher clerk in the US embassy in London during the early stages of the war, Kent was privy to the secret correspondence between Winston Churchill and US President Roosevelt. Concerned by the private endorsements Churchill was receiving from the publicly isolationist Roosevelt, Kent began making copies of the exchanges, and approached Anna Wolkoff, Organising Secretary of the Right club, who believed she could get material to Berlin via the Italian Embassy in Dublin.<sup>26</sup> Entrapped by MI5 agents in the Right club, the security breach seemed to explain the failure of a British offensive into occupied Scandinavia and provided sufficient evidence that the club was actively attempting to aid the enemy.<sup>27</sup> The BU, as an ally of the group, was guilty by association.

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<sup>22</sup> See P.&L.Gillman, 'Collar the Lot !,' op. cit., 115-29; R.C.Thurlow 'The 'Mosley Papers,' op. cit., 182-7, 190-1; A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 146-71. For a more conspiratorial perspective see P.Henri (alias J.Hope), 'Verge of Treason,' *Searchlight*, September - October 1989. This article is also available on the World Wide Web; <http://www.s-light.demon.co.uk/stories/mosley1.html>

<sup>23</sup> PRO HO283/3/11: Advisory Committee report: The Right Club, n.d. See also A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 140-2, 178, 180; R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 192.

<sup>24</sup> PRO HO283/70/50: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing; Tavistock (British Peoples Party), Domvile (The Link), Fuller (ex-BUF), Lymington (The Right Club and British Council against European Commitments, a group comprising ex BUF, British Peoples Party, and The Link). See A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree*, op. cit., 177, 181; See also R.Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted*, Constable & Co, London 1998.

<sup>25</sup> PRO HO283/70/50: Ibid; HO283/3/11: Advisory Committee report.

<sup>26</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 146-8, 431-3.

<sup>27</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The 'Mosley Papers,' op. cit., 184.



This discovery of a 'tangible' association overcame the Home Office preference for a monitoring policy that had been in operation since November 1933.<sup>28</sup> On the 11th May 1940, MI5, which already had enough information to move against Kent, recommended 500 BU detentions, which the Home Office declined.<sup>29</sup> Ten days later the Home Secretary was stressing the lack of evidence that had been presented for such an extreme measure as incarceration for the BU.<sup>30</sup> MI5's disclosure of the Kent-Ramsay-Mosley link was enough to override these concerns the following day. The crucial cabinet decision of the 22<sup>nd</sup> was, despite the still cautionary Home Secretary, to avoid any risk and intern, using a new Defence Regulation 18B(1A) to 'cripple the organisation.'<sup>31</sup>

To avoid a potential underground movement gravitating to any senior members left free a recommendation of 25-30 detentions was authorised for the following day. As one of the most senior fascists within the movement Raven Thomson featured in the request.<sup>32</sup> Six days later, much of the decision making about internal security was transferred from the Home Office to the Home Defence (Security) Committee, under Lord Swinton. As fear of invasion grew this group authorised the detention of 345 further BU officials. On the 10th July Defence Regulation 18B(AA) banned the organisation outright,<sup>33</sup> 'Britain had, within a few weeks, become, in the name of liberty, a totalitarian state.'<sup>34</sup>

Raven Thomson became one of the first to be detained as a result of the new defence regulation. The 23<sup>rd</sup> July was a publication day for *Action* and as the editor

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<sup>28</sup> PRO HO144/21429/35: Letter to Home Office, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1939.

<sup>29</sup> F.H.Hinsley & C.A.G.Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 49.

<sup>30</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 197.

<sup>31</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 16; PRO CAB65, 133(40)10 cited in D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 233.

<sup>32</sup> Several prominent fascists outside the BU however were to escape 18B, including General Fuller and William Joyce. Fuller, Diana Mosley argued, was too connected for incarceration. See D.Mosley, *A Life of Contrasts*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1977, 172. The case of Joyce is still shrouded. He left the country just prior to the implementation of 18B and spent the war broadcasting for Nazi Germany, his cultured tones earning him the nickname Lord Haw Haw. Several commentators on Joyce's flight have proposed that he had been an MI5 agent since the 1920s and was encouraged by British intelligence to leave. See *The Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1969; W.J.West, *Truth Betrayed*, op. cit., 234; Colin Holmes, *William Joyce: Fascist, Anti-Semite and Traitor*, forthcoming.

<sup>33</sup> PRO HO45/25747/863001/20: Home Office file relating to fascism 1940-43. See R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism In Britain*, op. cit., 198.



he was present at the headquarters of the movement when the police arrived.<sup>35</sup> Subsequent to his detention both his office at the headquarters and his home were searched.<sup>36</sup> Other key detentions at headquarters that day were Director General Neil Francis Hawkins, and Senior London administrator Hector McKechnie.<sup>37</sup> Mosley was detained later in the day upon his return to London from a weekend in the country.<sup>38</sup> In all thirty British Union members of senior standing were arrested.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that some of the leadership had been expecting detention, indeed there is evidence that the BU had been contingency planning since June 1939 about the effect of a war on the movement.<sup>40</sup> Whilst the arrest of leading fascists had been presumed, the movement appears to have underestimated the extent of the detentions. Leading fascists such as Francis Hawkins and McKechnie were both found in possession of an authorisation letter from Mosley granting them control of the BU in the event of his arrest.<sup>41</sup> No such letter was found for Raven Thomson and in his study Simpson argued that the Director of Policy was not part of the BU emergency council.<sup>42</sup> Whether Raven Thomson expected his arrest is unclear, but in May 1940 the fascist thinker who had in March 1934 advocated the use of the concentration camp as a method of dealing with dissenters in the imminent British Fascist State, found himself interned.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 190.

<sup>35</sup> *Action 220*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1940.

<sup>36</sup> PRO HO283/70/8: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing; HO45/24895/9: Report on BU activities, 1940.

<sup>37</sup> See PRO HO45/25700: Internment file: Neil Francis Hawkins; HO45/25699: Internment file: Bryan D.E.Donovan.

<sup>38</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 405; D.Mosley, *A Life of Contrasts*, op. cit., 169.

<sup>39</sup> For a full list of 23<sup>rd</sup> May detentions see A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 176-9.

<sup>40</sup> PRO HO144/21429/18: Special Branch report, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1939; /42: Report on BU, n.d. [September/October 1939]

<sup>41</sup> 'Mr McKechnie has my full confidence and is entitled to do what he thinks fit in the interests of the movement on his own responsibility – O.Mosley.' PRO HO45/25699/840179/2: Internment File: Hector McKechnie; HO283/48/27, 59: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Hector McKechnie hearing.

<sup>42</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 181-2.

<sup>43</sup> PRO HO144/20140/170: Letter from Raven Thomson 20<sup>th</sup> March 1934.



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For the historian and biographer the main question to decide is whether Mosley was in fact a security risk on 23rd May 1940.<sup>44</sup>

Having thus been challenged by Mosley's biographer, Robert Skidelsky, in his study of the Blackshirt leader's internment it falls to Raven Thomson's biographer to assess the utility of imprisoning his subject. Skidelsky concluded that the patriotism of Mosley and the commitment to British interests in the philosophy of the fascist, made it difficult to perceive his subject as a Nazi conspirator.<sup>45</sup> Patriotism would, he argued, have overruled any enthusiasm Mosley felt for the implementation of a National Socialist state on Nazi terms; '[t]he country he loved was fighting against the system he believed in. But the evidence of his record and character suggests that, in this crisis, country would have won out over system by a handsome margin.'<sup>46</sup> Such an argument is readily repeated in most subsequent studies of Blackshirt internment.<sup>47</sup> The newly released material from Raven Thomson's 18B advisory committee hearing, however, illustrates that behind the strident claims of the BU's ultra-nationalism, there was an element of revolutionary opportunism, which calls into question the ardent academic defence of the Mosley movement.<sup>48</sup> For an individual may be a security risk without being a fifth columnist.

A conventional defence of Raven Thomson would be to illustrate, after Skidelsky, the commitment to British interests in his ideology.<sup>49</sup> As editor of *Action*, he was responsible for the dissemination of the BU attitude to the conflict. In articles and editorials he was critical of the government's attempts to interfere in Europe. Instead he advocated that Britain should remove from continental dealings, in favour

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<sup>44</sup>R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 449.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 450-5. See also O.Mosley, *My Life*, op.cit., 399-402.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 455. At his 18B appeal hearing Mosley stated his intention to rejoin his regiment if released. PRO HO283/14/113: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing.

<sup>47</sup> See R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 188-232; A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 145; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 234-5.

<sup>48</sup>PRO HO283/70/7 Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing; The term 'ultra nationalist' was used by Mosley in his advisory committee hearing to illustrate his perception of the difference between *linked* socialist internationalism and *diffuse* cosmopolitan fascism. See HO283/13/7-8: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing.

<sup>49</sup>R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 455.



of the 'armed isolationism' of Empire.<sup>50</sup> Whilst fraternally inclined towards Fascism and Nazism, a BU government would defend Britain and her Empire against any aggressor. Much time was also spent in BU publications explaining Hitler's perception of Britain as Germany's partner in a new world order, one a maritime power, the other leading the continental nations.<sup>51</sup> The authorities, however, were suspicious of the BU's claims, believing '[d]eliberate and calculated encouragement of German propaganda coupled with disparagement of British propaganda, may be regarded in the same light as sabotage.'<sup>52</sup> In his appeal hearing against detention, Mosley asked for Raven Thomson to be given access to the movement's materials, to prove that BU policy was not a copy of Fascism or National Socialism.<sup>53</sup> Once it became clear that Hitler's plans for expansion did not end at the channel coast, Mosley argued many of the BU members joined the military to fight against the Axis. Under questioning by the authorities Mosley stated that three quarters of the movements district leaders had joined up. When Raven Thomson's son asked his father in summer 1940 whether or not he should fight given his mother's nationality, he was told to 'fight to defend Britain.'<sup>54</sup>

One of the most often used pieces of evidence marshalled in support of the BU case against Nazi treachery is Mosley's September 1939 message to the movement, endorsed by Raven Thomson and the Blackshirt lieutenants on the eve of war. Indeed a call by the Blackshirt leader to 'do nothing to injure your country or help any other power' appears conclusive.<sup>55</sup> Yet the Ministry of Information had sanitised the statement that appeared in the press.<sup>56</sup> The full statement, which was circulated amongst the branches, added the significant rejoinder, '[b]ut I ask all members who are free to carry on our work to take every opportunity within your power to awaken

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<sup>50</sup> See PRO HO283/1/9-11: Advisory Committee report: Procedure; D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 233.

<sup>51</sup> O.Mosley, 'The World Alternative,' *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol. 2 No.3, 1936, 377-395; PRO HO144/21429/41-45: BUF meetings and literature 1939-40: Report n.d.

<sup>52</sup> PRO HO283/23/36-7: Advisory Committee report: Procedure.

<sup>53</sup> PRO HO283/15/6: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing.

<sup>54</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 68.

<sup>55</sup> *Action* 185, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1939; A Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 55.

<sup>56</sup> PRO HO144/21429/6: BUF meetings and literature 1940: Copy of Oswald Mosley's message to the movement, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939.



people and demand peace.’<sup>57</sup> It also placed the conflict on the level of a Jewish quarrel in which Britain had no interest.

Defence Regulation 18B (1a) allowed the Home Secretary to ‘exercise control over’ individuals he believed were involved in organisations whose leaders were sympathetic to the Axis powers and represented a danger to the realm.<sup>58</sup> In Raven Thomson’s reasons for order, he was charged with being a member of BU, an organisation subject to foreign influence and/or control, publically sympathetic to the Axis powers, having personal links with Germany and that the movement represented a danger to the country during the conflict.<sup>59</sup> The regulation gave all detainees the right to appeal against detention in front of an advisory committee, whose recommendations were passed to MI5 and subsequently to the Home Secretary.<sup>60</sup> By the time of the BU hearings the Chairman of this body was the formidable KC Norman Birkett, who had been the defence council in Mosley’s libel case against *The Star* newspaper in 1934.<sup>61</sup> Mosley again met Birkett in his hearing, though the large numbers of detainees prompted the establishment of further committees, and it was one of these subsidiary groups that questioned Raven Thomson on the 4th and 5th of July 1940.<sup>62</sup> A decision at the first committee meeting concluded that appellants could not appear with legal counsel, and so Raven Thomson and his fellow Blackshirts faced the four man interviewing panel alone.<sup>63</sup>

The case that Raven Thomson appeared before the panel to answer was hastily concocted to ‘give a semblance of legality to these arbitrary arrests.’<sup>64</sup> Indeed the precise reasons for order were not added to his file until a month after detention.<sup>65</sup> As Home Secretary Herbert Morrison noted ‘...we are often not concerned with

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 434-5.

<sup>59</sup> PRO HO283/70/94-5: Advisory Committee report: Summary of Raven Thomson’s reasons for order. For details of DR 18B (1A) see HO283/1/2: Advisory Committee report: Memorandum from Norman Birkett, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1940.

<sup>60</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *The Secret State: British internal security in the Twentieth Century*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, 252.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>62</sup> PRO HO283/70/1-98 is a verbatim account of both meetings.

<sup>63</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *The Secret State*, op. cit., 252. An MI5 operative was included on each panel. See W.J.West, *Truth Betrayed*, op. cit, 219.

<sup>64</sup> D.Mosley, *A Life of Contrasts*, op. cit., 170; R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism In Britain*, op. cit., 216.

<sup>65</sup> PRO HO283/70/94-5: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.



proving what a man has done. We're more concerned with what in certain circumstance he might do.'<sup>66</sup> In July 1940, Raven Thomson's hearing was never going to result in the release of a man believed to be 'one of the most extreme members of the party, and probably one of the most dangerous.'<sup>67</sup> As Birkett noted, 'activity in the interests of the British Union since the outbreak of war should constitute prima facie ground for detention,' unless the appellant could show a change of belief or a desire to sincerely aid the war effort.<sup>68</sup> Thus, rather than being a forum for an appeal, the hearing represented the attempt by the authorities to justify their action, by outlining their view of his security risk.

Whilst it is not for a biographer to provide retrospectively the defence counsel denied in the hearing, the substance of Raven Thomson's case represents the influence of MI5 in summer 1940, and, as such, is their interpretation of his threat to the country. It should be noted that the reasons for detention were insufficient to form a prosecution under conventional law.<sup>69</sup> They were a catalogue of MI5's concerns about the risk of fascism, acquired during the decade through such dubious channels as agent provocateurs and surveillance.<sup>70</sup> The conditions of the hearing have also been criticised by historians, one believing them to be reminiscent of the Tudor Star Chamber.<sup>71</sup>

The newly released details of Raven Thomson's hearing present a far from clear depiction of a sincere patriot, though in July 1940 with invasion an imminent possibility, all aspects of his activities were scrutinised with a view to possible treachery. Whilst it was irrefutable that Raven Thomson was a leading member of the BU, the committee was keen to examine his precise links to Nazi Germany and spent much time discussing his time there in the 1920s and his later visits as a BU official. The second part of Regulation 18B related to the danger that he posed to the realm

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<sup>66</sup> *Sunday Express*, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1940.

<sup>67</sup> PRO HO283/70/7: Advisory Committee report: Summary of case for Alexander Raven Thomson's internment.

<sup>68</sup> PRO HO283/23/25: Advisory Committee report: Procedure.

<sup>69</sup> 'It must be remembered that these political *detenus* are not persons against whom any offence is alleged, or who are waiting trial or are on remand. They are persons who cannot be proved to have committed any offence known to law, but who because of the public danger and the conditions of war have to be held in custody.' W.Churchill to Home Secretary, 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1940 in W.Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume 2*, op. cit., 627.

<sup>70</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *The Secret State*, op. cit., 254; O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 402.

<sup>71</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 236.



and the winning of the war. It was here that MI5 paranoia was most visible with their eagerness to view all aspects of BU activity as the workings of a British branch of the Nazi Party. The advisory committee provided a buffer to the more outlandish suspicions of Military Intelligence.<sup>72</sup> An allegation that there existed within the BU a suicide squad, concealed from Mosley, but known to Raven Thomson, must be seen in this light.<sup>73</sup> A recovered set of maps from Raven Thomson's home containing motorway plans for the major routes connecting various cities, including the strategically important A2 road connecting the coast at Dover to London, were also initially classed as possibly of 'sinister significance' in MI5's reasons for order.<sup>74</sup> At his hearing Raven Thomson described them as part of the draft for his booklet of BU transport policy *Motorways for Britain* (1937), which had advocated the creation of a continental style motorway system.<sup>75</sup> As the threat of invasion waned, such a view was accepted in the committee's summation.<sup>76</sup>

A favourable committee ruling, however, was not free from MI5 revision in the following reporting stage, particularly when it involved a potential link to Nazi Germany. Ascertaining the precise nature of the domestic service agency run by Raven Thomson's wife took up considerable time in the hearing as the committee attempted to clarify the nature of the enterprise.<sup>77</sup> Founded in January 1931, the Anglo German Domestic Agency specialised in supplying German, Austrian, Czech and Hungarian women as 'reliable foreign maids' to British houses.<sup>78</sup> Capitalising on the various economic hardships in those countries, the agency recruited largely from Germany until the Nazi seizure of power, then in Austria until the Anschluss, finally relying on refugees wishing to flee Central Europe.<sup>79</sup> By 1939 the business had been wound down and replaced with New Era Tours, a company specialising in trips to Germany, which Lisbeth Rontgern Thomson organised and Helga, her daughter from

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<sup>72</sup> F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G.Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 37.

<sup>73</sup> PRO HO283/70/7, 31: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson's hearing.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>75</sup> See A.Raven Thomson, *Motorways for Britain*, Sanctuary Press, London, 1937.

<sup>76</sup> PRO HO283/70/8: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson's hearing.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.,/7,10, 76-9.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.,/76; Board of Deputies of British Jews (BOD) C6/9 Misc.

<sup>79</sup> PRO HO283/70/49: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson's hearing.



a previous marriage, ran.<sup>80</sup> Only two tours were ever undertaken.<sup>81</sup> The Advisory Committee's preliminary finding was to accept Raven Thomson's view that the agency was merely a commercial venture. This opinion failed to appear in the final submitted draft to the Home Office, however, indicating that in the intermediate reporting stage, MI5 were reluctant to see the matter closed.<sup>82</sup>

In its consideration of the Anglo German Domestic Agency the Committee appears unaware of a report on the same company containing official concerns about foreign control of British businesses.<sup>83</sup> In April 1938, a Jewish man lodged a complaint, both with the LCC and the Board of Deputies, when his wife, upon enquiry, was refused a servant by the agency on the grounds that to place a German or Austrian woman with a Jewish household was contrary to orders from the Nazi government.<sup>84</sup> The board appears to have wished to use the information to highlight the hypocrisy of British Union over its anti-immigration policies. The police report was more concerned by the link to the German government's Landesgruppenleiter and Mrs Rontgern Thomson's belief that German women would face disadvantages back in Germany once they had worked in Jewish households in Britain.<sup>85</sup> Such a correspondence with Germany was undoubtedly a commercial requirement, yet it was not addressed in the hearing.

Another curious omission from the hearings was any mention of Raven's time in the Communist Party. MI5's interest in the Communist Party had, up to this point, not resulted in the measures implemented for the BU, though the anti-fascist popular front policy they were to later employ was to trouble them.<sup>86</sup> Probably deeming the matter politically sensitive or embarrassing, Raven Thomson failed to disclose the link in the description of his early life.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> PRO HO283/70/78-9: Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid./10.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid./14.

<sup>83</sup> PRO HO144/21280/806465/67: Police report: Anglo German Agency n.d.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. ; Board of Deputies of British Jews Archive (BOD) C6/9 Misc: Anglo German Agency.

<sup>85</sup> BOD C6/9 Misc: Letter to the Board from a Jewish man denied a domestic servant, n.d.; PRO HO144/21280/806465/67: Police report: Anglo German Agency n.d.

<sup>86</sup> F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G.Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 57, 320.

<sup>87</sup> PRO HO283/70/71-2: Advisory committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.



Other aspects of Raven Thomson's activities scrutinised by the committee could not be so easily dismissed, in particular his links with Nazi Germany and the pro-Nazi fringes of the BU.<sup>88</sup> The hearing was under the impression, from MI5 reports, that Raven Thomson was 'one of the most ardent pro-Germans among the senior headquarters staff.'<sup>89</sup> They also knew, through intercepted information, that Colin Ross, a journalist and Nazi intelligence gatherer, believed him to be a capable man. As the editor of *Action* he had overseen the publication of apologia for Hitlerism, together with criticisms of the British government and an analysis of the War as one fought solely for Jewish interests.

Raven Thomson's potential threat to the war effort seemed confirmed with his connection with the infamous case of William Crowle and Claude Duvivier, one of the three occasions during the war when BU members were prosecuted for serious offences.<sup>90</sup> In January 1940 Crowle, a Devonport dockyard worker, corresponded with Duvivier, sometime District officer for the movement in Exmouth, criticising government propaganda and detailing his surveillance of the deployment and condition of certain navy vessels.<sup>91</sup> Interception of this mail resulted in a police search and the recovery of a letter from Duvivier addressed to Raven Thomson, containing material, relating to shipping in the Plymouth area, obtained by Crowle.<sup>92</sup> Duvivier was arrested on the 8th January and convicted three weeks later in a case that received national press coverage.<sup>93</sup> Thus Raven Thomson was the intended recipient of secret information, potentially damaging to the prosecution of the war, and at his hearing had to explain his relationship with the two men.<sup>94</sup> Raven's defence centred on his personal dislike for Duvivier as an extreme anti-Semite; his position as editor of *Action*, rather than as an interested individual, that had prompted the letter,

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<sup>88</sup> PRO HO283/14/71, 81: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Oswald Mosley hearing.

<sup>89</sup> PRO HO283/70/7: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>90</sup> N. West, *MI5*, op. cit., 129; A. W. B. Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 137.

<sup>91</sup> PRO HO283/70/31-5: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>92</sup> F. H. Hinsley & C. A. G. Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 38n; N. West, *MI5*, op. cit., 129; See PRO HO45/24895/9: Special Branch Report, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1940.

<sup>93</sup> *The Times*, 17<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> January 1940 cited in A. W. B. Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 136.

<sup>94</sup> PRO HO283/70/7, 10, 32-5: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.



and his insistence that he would not have published such material if it had ever reached him.<sup>95</sup>

Equally damning was the similar case of Ryan and Green who had likewise sent information to Raven Thomson. Both were in the government ordinance department in Southampton, and had sent information to him about the special measures being made to produce accurate maps of Switzerland, the Netherlands and Italy.<sup>96</sup> The tactical value of the information was secondary to the hearing's concerns however. More attention was paid to a subsequent letter from Raven Thomson to his wife containing the suspicious phrase,

After all this is great fun, even if it is a little dangerous. We're going to win whatever happens, and the bigger the fight, the greater the satisfaction. We have always lived dangerously and there is nothing like it.<sup>97</sup>

For the authorities in the summer of 1940, such a 'victory' appeared to infer a successful Nazi invasion.

A letter Raven Thomson sent to his fascist colleague, Muriel Whinfield, seemed to confirm this view. Mrs Whinfield had been a BU parliamentary candidate and was, as her 23rd May detention date indicates, a prominent member. Friendly with the Mosley's, her son, also a BU member, had been arrested upon returning from a trip to Switzerland where he had colluded with Nazi agents.<sup>98</sup> Whinfield was a conscientious objector to the war. In this she was not alone in the BU, with Director General Neil Francis Hawkins endorsing the stance and a 'Young Men's Advisory Committee' in operation to help members avoid military service.<sup>99</sup> In his letter, however, Raven Thomson expressed his opinion that it was important to have members in the military.<sup>100</sup> The importance of this for the authorities was further stressed by the discovery of a list of BU members in the armed forces found in his

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<sup>95</sup> PRO HO283/70/32, 34-5: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing. John Hope believes that had the information been received it would have been published for Nazi perusal. See P.Henri (alias) 'Verge of Treason' op. cit., www. 5 of 6.

<sup>96</sup> PRO HO283/70/36-7: Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> PRO HO283/70/39: Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> See A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 179, 200; 78-9.

<sup>99</sup> PRO HO144/21429/100, 102: Special Branch report, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1939; F.H.Hinsley & C.A.G.Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 36.

<sup>100</sup> PRO HO283/70/11: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.



office at BU headquarters.<sup>101</sup> This was of interest to military intelligence, which had traditionally been concerned with such infiltration. They were also aware that, at a meeting in January 1940, the BU leadership had promoted the idea of using the war situation to the movement's benefit.<sup>102</sup> The initial part of the letter did appear rather incriminating, with Raven Thomson asserting that,

I would be glad if you could stress the importance of having members of all ranks of the service in H.M. Forces, and in every section of the community, so that whatever befalls, the influence of the British Union will always be felt, and then action - which cannot be delayed much longer - is necessary, we will have our members in every sphere and walk of life.<sup>103</sup>

Raven Thomson in his cross examination responded to questions about the nature of this action by stating that BU personnel were needed in the military to take advantage of any internal crisis that the War might produce,

I am afraid I may be looking far ahead, but I can envisage conditions in which there might be a complete breakdown of law and order in this country. The danger of Communism is very great indeed.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, the alliance of fascist groups before the War can be seen as the foundation of an anti-Communist fringe, to work in concert in this climate of crisis. Later in the hearing, Raven Thomson was asked to assume that this breakdown did occur and asked what BU action that might result,

If that breakdown takes place there are forces, international forces, subversive forces which, as they tried in other countries, will try to break up this country. Our primary object is to prevent that happening, and if that takes place we intend to have our members as far as possible in all walks of life in order that effective action through our leadership can be taken to preserve order.<sup>105</sup>

Thus action by the BU was to be promoted as the attempt 'to preserve the integrity of this country as a nation.'<sup>106</sup> This penetration tactic appears to have been part of Raven Thomson's thought since at least January 1938, when a special branch report detailed his developing interest in such methods for the

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<sup>101</sup> See PRO HO45/25855: Report on discovered items from the raid.

<sup>102</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Mosley Papers' op. cit., 174; idem, *The Secret State*, op. cit., 252.

<sup>103</sup> PRO HO283/70/41: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing. MI5 was aware of 34 BU sympathisers in the military, potentially from the information in Raven Thomson's list. HO283/23/47 Advisory Committee report: Procedure.

<sup>104</sup> PRO HO283/70/41: Ibid. See also BOD C6/9/1/3/F3: Survey of the Situation 1940.

<sup>105</sup> PRO HO283/70/43: Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.



BU, particularly the infiltration of business and trade groups. BU propaganda in this way could be spread away from police repression and antifascist hostility.<sup>107</sup> With such an inclination towards the use of agent provocateur tactics and its avowed foreign policy stance, the BU in the early days of the War, could be seen as both patriotic *and* a security risk to parliamentary government. On the evidence of the Raven Thomson hearing, continued BU internment, after the potential for a revolutionary climate had waned, was less of a strategic measure and more politically motivated, corroborating academic concerns that continued internment after 1941 was punitive rather than preventative.<sup>108</sup> The infiltration technique was to be an importance strategy in the post-War Mosley movements, but in 1940 the BU's principle concern, on the evidence of Raven Thomson's beliefs, was to utilise war conditions by taking the mantle of law and order in response to a Communist uprising. With a fascist riddled military the BU would either be backed by troops or unhindered in their private paramilitarism.<sup>109</sup> Thus with the insights from the Whinfield letter, it appears that the ideal circumstances for the BU was not Nazi invasion. Rather, the adverse prosecution of the war would leading to a call for a negotiated peace, reinforced by the urgency of wartime privations and social unrest. After a Communist attempt to capitalise on these circumstances, Mosley would come to the fore in the anti-Communist vanguard, backed by a pliant army. As such, the Whinfield information provides a new perspective to academic debate regarding the 'patriotic' involvement of BU members in the armed forces, wherein, '[t]he fascists maintained that BUF members who joined the armed forces did so for patriotic not sinister reasons and this does seem to have been the case for the large majority.'<sup>110</sup> Raven Thomson's letter illustrates a senior BU official endorsing the covert element to this show of patriotism.

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<sup>107</sup> PRO HO144/21281/9: Special Branch report, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1938; /89: Special Branch report, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1938; BOD C6/9/1/3/F3: Survey of the situation, 1940.

<sup>108</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 236.

<sup>109</sup> *Union* 13, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1948.

<sup>110</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Mosley Papers' op. cit., 187.



Such a stance was a clear return to the earlier BUF policy of harnessing a crisis in the promotion of a fascist movement. Prior to organisational reforms in 1935, which reflected a commitment within the BU to achieve power via the electoral system, the efficacy of crisis had been a key part of BUF ideology, with Mosley announcing in 1933,

Great Britain could not recover from the crisis which it was facing under the present system...Long before democracy awakened to [its] situation something like collapse might come to this country. Therefore [the fascists] were additionally organised as movement prepared if necessary to save Britain in a struggle of violence with the Communist Party.<sup>111</sup>

In the same year Mosley continued to propose crisis as beneficial to the movement,

In a state of collapse, the organised force of Fascism alone will stand between the State and the anarchy which a Communist struggle must produce in this highly developed and civilized country.<sup>112</sup>

By 1939 he again returned to the imminence of the struggle, confidently predicting 'our time is approaching.'<sup>113</sup> In the intervening period, fascist success had been postponed, with the BUF failing to contest the 1935 General Election. With the outbreak of war, Mosley was privately talking of the BU's rise to power within two years.<sup>114</sup>

So was Raven Thomson a security risk in the summer of 1940? Unsurprisingly his appeal hearing concluded,

The Committee are of the opinion that in view of Raven Thomson's very prominent position in the movement, his responsibility for policy, his full concurrence with every official view and activity of the movement, the fact that for some reason members of the Union seem to think it appropriate to send him confidential information, and the nature of the advice he is prepared to give, as shown by the terms of the letter to Mrs. Whinfield, it is necessary to exercise control over him. They therefore recommend that his detention be continued.<sup>115</sup>

Yet they had found no evidence to suggest he was under foreign control. In July 1940 these suspicious activities were enough to ensure detention. The evidence

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<sup>111</sup> *The Times* 25<sup>th</sup> January 1933 cited in M.Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate,' *Historical Studies*, Vol.41 No.2, 1998, 530; For the 1935 reforms see T.Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, Frank Cass, London, 6-8.

<sup>112</sup> O.Mosley, *Fascism in Britain*, BUF publications, London, 1933, 8.

<sup>113</sup> PRO HO45/24895/4: Special Branch report, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1940.

<sup>114</sup> PRO HO144/21429/17: Special Branch report, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1939.

<sup>115</sup> PRO HO283/70/11-12: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.



presented was, moreover, insufficient to formally try him. Even the most damaging feature of his reasons for order, the suspected participation of BU members in the military, which could have seen him prosecuted under the more serious Defence Regulation 39B of spreading disaffection in the forces, was never pursued.<sup>116</sup> Thus the real danger he posed was to the system that imprisoned him. Both Mosley and Raven Thomson had fought in the Great War, and believed in the need for rebirth of their country. They also believed that the contemporary political system was operating contrary to the best interests of the nation. As patriots they would defend that *nation*, as revolutionaries they were committed to the end of the liberal *state* and its reconfiguration along corporatist lines. Whilst endorsing Nazism, they saw it as a German solution to a common malaise, unsuitable for Britain, and would not have participated in the establishment of a domestic Nazi system. Thus, though he was no Greek soldier concealed in the Trojan horse, for the government in summer 1940 he was no less of a potential threat.<sup>117</sup>

### III

The experience of internment was to have a dramatic effect on Mosley fascism. In both its activism and ideology the movement that emerged after the war was far more circumscribed. In place of mass rallies and marches, a small low-key group appeared, contriving at power through influence and infiltration, rather than preparing for government with paramilitary displays and grand rhetoric.<sup>118</sup> In positions of leadership within this new group were fascists who had risen to prominence during internment, in the detention centres and the 18B support agencies outside.<sup>119</sup> That vacancies existed in the leadership was a result of the particularly arduous experiences

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<sup>116</sup> F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G.Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 35. See also A.L.Goldman 'Defence Regulation 18B: Emergency Internment of Aliens and Political Dissenters in Great Britain during World War II,' *Journal of British Studies*, No.12, 1973, 134.

<sup>117</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit. 194.

<sup>118</sup> *Union 13*, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1948. See Chapter 6.

<sup>119</sup> J.Hope, 'Reviving the Swastika: Mosley and the Union Movement' conference paper on British Fascism at Sheffield Hallam University, 21 May 1994 cited in R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,' op. cit., 241.



the upper echelon of the movement underwent during internment.<sup>120</sup> By the end of the decade, of the five signatories to Mosley's declaration of policy for the movement in September 1939, Raven Thomson was the only one that remained by his leader, to form a tangible link with the fascist past, and actively work for a reappearance of Mosley fascism in post war Britain.<sup>121</sup> Why then did he stay?

Raven Thomson, was one of the six principal leaders that the security services thought comprised the effective leadership of the movement. Upon detention he was conveyed to Brixton prison in South London.<sup>122</sup> Brixton was one of only two prisons in Britain that could effectively house a large number of detainees in secure conditions, away from both the general prison population and lesser fascists. This separation was deemed advantageous, and in line with the desire to handicap the movement. As the Home Secretary noted 'for the present I think it would be undesirable to send leaders to the same camp [as the ordinary BU] where under the conditions of camp life they would have, opportunities of organising and influencing their followers.'<sup>123</sup> These lesser fascists were increasingly being arrested throughout May and June 1940 to be housed in other prisons and internment camps across the country. Brixton was also close to the site of the initial advisory committee hearings at Burlington Gardens.<sup>124</sup> 18B detainees were first housed in the previously condemned and insect infested 'F' wing of the prison, only transferring to the more habitable 'C' wing after their meeting with the Advisory Committee, thus preventing

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<sup>120</sup>For the purposes of detention the BU was divided into seven categories based on their relationship to the movement at the time of detention: prominent leaders; lesser leaders; minor staff; active members; members who had ceased activities since the outbreak of war; past officers similarly inactive; and past members. PRO HO283/23/35: Advisory Committee report: Procedure.

<sup>121</sup>Of the 'big six' leaders, Francis Hawkins, McKechnie, Donovan and Clarke's appearances all gradually diminished following release.

<sup>122</sup>Simpson, taking evidence from senior London administrator Hector McKechnie's internment file, proposed the concept of the six leaders. This file detailed the six prominent leaders as Mosley, Francis Hawkins, Donovan, McKechnie, Raven Thomson and Clarke. The newly opened Raven Thomson files corroborate this concept of the six leaders but Clarke's name is omitted in favour of Mosley's wife, Diana. Concerned as the security services were about crippling the organisation there appears to have been a realisation in MI5 that, whilst Clarke could unify support in the Blackshirt heartlands of East London, Diana, due to her surname, had national appeal. See A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 176; PRO HO45/25699/2: Internment file: B.D.E.Donovan; HO45/25701/4: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson.

<sup>123</sup>PRO HO283/23/28: Advisory Committee report: Procedure: Letter from Home Secretary John Anderson to Norman Birkett, n.d.; HO45/25753/863024/32: 18B report on Liverpool Prison; J.Battersby, *The Bishop Said Amen*, op. cit., 56.

<sup>124</sup>Damage to the building during the blitz temporarily saw the hearings move to Ascot. See D.Mosley, *A Life of Contrasts*, op. cit., 181.



any forewarning reaching unheard appellants.<sup>125</sup> Following his July hearing Raven Thomson, prisoner 2181, took up residence in cell C2/12.<sup>126</sup> Brixton, with its permanent population of British fascist luminaries, became for one contemporary the 'Mecca of 18B's.'<sup>127</sup>

Conditions in C wing were widely reported by the 18B's as superior to all the other 18B detention centres, particularly in comparison with the long disused and near derelict wing of Liverpool's Walton gaol.<sup>128</sup> 18B prisoners were not convicts and due to the custodial nature of their detention were allowed to buy in food and wear their own clothing.<sup>129</sup> Yet Brixton prison was no holiday venue. A lack of hot water prompted Mosley to grow a beard, and lengthy periods in solitary confinement, sometimes extended during air raids, could result in twenty-three hours a day spent alone.<sup>130</sup> A protest committee was set up comprising senior 18B figures, though Raven Thomson was not among them, and together with Mosley's litigious threats some piecemeal concessions were achieved such as a later 'lights out,' shorter periods locked in cells, and a kettle for drinks.<sup>131</sup> The popular press however represented life for the 18Bs at Brixton as one of comparative luxury to the Wartime privations outside the prison walls. Mosley promptly sued both the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial* for their allegations of high living.<sup>132</sup> Perhaps the most telling insight into the conditions at Brixton were the precautions taken against prisoner suicides, shaving

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<sup>125</sup> B.Domvile, *Admiral to Cabin Boy*, Boswell, London, 1947, 101, 116.

<sup>126</sup> PRO HO45/25752/863022/43: Note on the permanent residents at Brixton, 7<sup>th</sup> April 1943; Imperial War Museum (IWM) Special Misc P6: 18B autograph book of Oliver Gilbert. For the transcript of Gilbert's Advisory Committee hearing see HO283/37.

<sup>127</sup> B.Domvile, *Admiral to Cabin Boy*, op. cit. cited in A.L.Goldman 'Defence Regulation 18B,' op. cit., 134.

<sup>128</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 98-105; B.Domvile, *Admiral to Cabin Boy*, op. cit., 110. An official report on Walton Goal places the blame for the unsanitary conditions onto the detainees. See PRO HO45/25753/863024/32: 18B report on Liverpool Prison.

<sup>129</sup> B.Domvile, *Admiral to Cabin Boy*, op. cit., 103.

<sup>130</sup> D.Mosley, *A Life of Contrasts*, op. cit., 184; For the Brixton daily routine see B.Domvile, *Admiral to Cabin Boy*, op.cit., 104-5.

<sup>131</sup> PRO HO45/25700/6: Internment file: Neil Francis Hawkins; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 456; B.Domvile, *Admiral to Cabin Boy*, op. cit., 110; HO45/25753/863024/24a: 18B report on cooking arrangements for Brixton internees; HO45/24891/169: Letter from Oswald Mosley in Brixton Prison n.d.

<sup>132</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1940; *Sunday Pictorial*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 1940.



razors were carefully monitored, and the electrical wattage in the cells was kept deliberately low.<sup>133</sup>

Inmates reacted differently to detention, some despairing, others believing it to be a test of their fascist faith. In Brixton Mosley learnt German and read extensively, his ruminations upon neo-hellenic philosophy and psychology forming the basis for his later pan-European thought after the war.<sup>134</sup> Neil Francis Hawkins, ever the organiser, created a business manufacturing wooden toys made by 18B prisoners for sale to the outside world.<sup>135</sup> Yet not all were so constructively engaged. At an early detention centre in Stafford Prison, H Luttman-Johnson, erstwhile secretary of the BUF front organisation the January Club, wrote in his diary 'every waking hour is punishment.'<sup>136</sup> Writing to his wife earlier in his detention whilst at Brixton, prior to transfer, a plea came for books and solitaire to alleviate the boredom of twenty hours a day spent in isolation.<sup>137</sup> Another prisoner, Admiral Barry Domvile, leader of the fascist fringe group 'The Link' noted that 'many people found the life intolerable; one long torture. It is mainly a question of temperament and health.'<sup>138</sup>

Raven Thomson's early experiences of Brixton seem to indicate that at that stage in his detention he was coping well. At the second day of his July hearing before the advisory committee, he commented favourably on the previous six weeks. Whilst complaining of the prison environment, he presented a picture of leisure, lazing in the sun, reading the newspapers and conversing with colleagues, 'I am flourishing on it' was his summation.<sup>139</sup> As with Mosley, his attention appears to have turned to

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<sup>133</sup> B.Domvile, *Admiral to Cabin Boy*, op. cit., 102, 108.

<sup>134</sup> *Sunday Chronicle*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1941; N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op. cit., 216-227, 256-8; D.Mosley, *A Life of Contrasts*, op. cit., 193-5; O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 406.

<sup>135</sup> PRO HO283/40/9: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Neil Francis Hawkins hearing.

<sup>136</sup> Imperial War Museum (IWM) 92/32/1 Luttman Johnson papers: Conservation volume 2 letter 3; 'There is nothing to equal the desolation of prison...the nothingness of it...that is why it is near to death.' Ibid., letter 6.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. Also cited in A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 239; During air raids prisoners were locked in their cells, allegedly to prevent them from milling around hysterically. Given, however, official concerns that internment of the BU required greater security due to their ability to work as a group and attempt escapes, this latter reason appears the more likely. See PRO HO45/25753/863024/32: 18B report on Liverpool prison; HO45/25752/863022/4: Report on Home Office conference to discuss the possibility of moving 18B prisoners to camps, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1940.

<sup>138</sup> B.Domvile, *Admiral to Cabin Boy*, op. cit., 123. Infections were common in the internment camps. See IWM 92/31/1: R.Ling Letters: Letter 2, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1941.

<sup>139</sup> PRO HO283/70/67: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.



philosophy, with the expressed intention of writing a book. Mosley later conceived of this enforced period of study in the Platonic tradition of returning to university in later life.<sup>140</sup> Raven Thomson drew a parallel between his plight and that of the Seventeenth Century dissenter, John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrims Progress*, who wrote the book whilst imprisoned for his Nonconformism. For him the situation and potential dividends were analogous; 'I want to write a book on philosophy whilst I am feeling nicely detached from the outside world.'<sup>141</sup>

Whether this philosophical inclination ever resulted in the production of material during detention is unclear. That it was more than idle speculation or bravado in front of the advisory committee is confirmed by Raven Thomson's contribution to an 18B autograph book that provides a record over the period of detention of the thoughts of many prominent fascists. Mick Clarke looked for a Moses figure to lead them out of Egypt, the Imperial Fascist League's Arnold Leese, took his opportunity to spout vitriol at the hidden masters of his captors, the Jews. Raven Thomson's contribution in December 1941 was a sentence from his 1931 book *Civilization as Divine Superman*; 'Communal service is the whole basis and foundation of morality...this communal service must not be animated by any calculation of personal benefit.'<sup>142</sup> This re-examination of his pre-fascist work must be seen as the beginnings of his concept of 'Homo Socialis,' the selfless higher man, dedicated to service and thus suited to leadership that was to inform his thinking after the war.<sup>143</sup>

Brixton was to be Raven Thomson's home for the majority of his internment.<sup>144</sup> Despite his lengthy imprisonment it failed to weaken his allegiances. Perhaps the chief reason for this was that he was cloistered away with his comrades for much of the period. Prior to detention, his life had revolved around the movement. Few

<sup>140</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 237.

<sup>141</sup> PRO HO283/70/66: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Alexander Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>142</sup> IWM ref. Special Misc P6: Oliver Gilbert's 18B autograph book.

<sup>143</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Homo Socialis' unpublished manuscript 1955.

<sup>144</sup> It appears he spent a short period at York camp in late 1940. Oliver Gilbert a member of the BU, Nordic League and the Right Club, was detained in September 1939 and stayed in eight different detention centres, some more than once, before his release in February 1944. See PRO HO45/25703/163: Internment file: Oliver Gilbert; IWM Special Misc P6: O.Gilbert 18B autograph book; See also A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op.cit. 71, 73.



studies of the BUF have captured the inclusive nature of the fascist experience. For, whilst membership turnover was high, there remained a nucleus of committed fascists who joined and stayed through the 1930s. These people lived fascism. In some ways internment merely strengthened the bonds that already existed. For Raven Thomson this bond was to endure even through the most arduous period in his detention, his extended visit to MI5s interrogation centre, Latchmere House.<sup>145</sup>

Raven Thomson was one of a select few to undergo this systematic maltreatment and later commit his recollections to paper, though with the distinct propaganda bias of an article written in the post-War fascist organ *Union*, decrying the power of government over the liberty of the individual.<sup>146</sup> Such primary source testimony is often eschewed in studies of this kind. Simpson provides an extensive footnote on the publications of the fascist veterans of Latchmere House, only to ignore them, relying instead on Home Office records, despite the theme of his study being an examination of the 'experience' of detention.<sup>147</sup> Thurlow, by contrast, uses Raven Thomson's testimony extensively but only in so far as it illustrates the oppression of the BU, and the reticence of the Thatcher government to release files in the area.<sup>148</sup>

If we are to perceive the wartime detention of British subjects without trial as 'in the highest degree odious' to quote Churchill, then the height of this odium resided in a wooded glade on Ham Common near Richmond in Surrey.<sup>149</sup> Concealed from public view behind perimeter fences and official secrets, Latchmere House, a Victorian mansion, provided a wartime home for MI5s chief interrogators and 'a place for the detention and examination of persons suspected of being really dangerous.'<sup>150</sup> Opened in June 1940, it was staffed with military personnel, who later

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<sup>145</sup> See N. West, *MI5*, op. cit., 25-7.

<sup>146</sup> A. Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common,' op. cit., 2.

<sup>147</sup> A.W.B. Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 240 fn77.

<sup>148</sup> R.C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 208-9.

<sup>149</sup> W. Churchill cable to H. Morrison, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1943 cited in A.W.B. Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 391.

<sup>150</sup> PRO HO45/25714/840452/8: Report on Latchmere House. The house had been requisitioned during the First World War and its proximity to London, and its status as a war office building resulted in its swift usage by MI5. See N. West, *MI5*, op. cit., 139, 144.



in the war, interrogated captives suspected of being Nazi spies.<sup>151</sup> It did not appear on the list of camps provided to the neutral inspectors nor the International Red Cross.<sup>152</sup> MI5 had complete control over its prisoners.<sup>153</sup> After pressure from the Home Defence (Security) Committee, a group of 18B detainees, including Raven Thomson was first to sample the conditions there.<sup>154</sup>

For Raven Thomson, languishing since May in Brixton his time at Ham Common began without warning. One morning he was roused and transferred across London in handcuffs.<sup>155</sup> Upon arrival he underwent 'reception' entailing a strip search and medical examination. This inspection was also used to assess the prisoner's state of mind and adjust the psychological techniques to be used accordingly.<sup>156</sup> After this, prison clothing was issued and then a period of softening up began with solitary confinement in cells.<sup>157</sup> Raven Thomson was clearly disturbed by these events. Charlie Watts, another BU arrival, recalling their first day, remembered a pensive looking comrade.<sup>158</sup>

The regime that Raven Thomson experienced did not rely on torture. Instead, a state of isolation and vulnerability was created with deliberately erratic routines. The oppressive threat of imminent violence is a characteristic of many Ham Common memoirs.<sup>159</sup> One BU member noted later 'it was a common thing to be threatened

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<sup>151</sup> F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G. Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 70-1, 184.

<sup>152</sup> N.West, *MI5*, op. cit., 145.

<sup>153</sup> PRO HO45/25111/863048/4: Report on Latchmere House.

<sup>154</sup> For a complete listing of the 18B visitors to Latchmere House see A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 241 fn 84.

<sup>155</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common,' op. cit., 2; F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G. Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War-Volume 4*, op. cit., 341. Watts arrived as part of a group of Blackshirts on the 9th of August and it may be that Raven Thomson was amongst them. See Sheffield University Archive (SUA), C.Watts, *It has Happened Here*, Unpublished Manuscript, 36.

<sup>156</sup> Dr Harold Dearden was both the chief medical officer at the common, and the originator of the psychological expertise at work. See N.West, *MI5*, op. cit., 146, 148; See PRO HO45/25111: Report on Latchmere House.

<sup>157</sup> F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G.Simkins, *Intelligence in the Second World War Volume 4*, op. cit., 341; A.Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common' op. cit., 2.

<sup>158</sup> C.Watts, *It has Happened Here*, op.cit., 41. Watts had been the organiser of a successful BU sponsored 'London Cab Drivers Group.' Previously a largely ununionised body, this taxi drivers' association boasted one thousand members. The mobility that such a large number of vehicles could give to a Nazi vanguard appears to have been the reason for the curiosity of MI5. Since the outbreak of war he had also circulated thinly veiled BU propaganda under the guise of the 'Home Defence Movement.' PRO HO283/74/4: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Charlie Watts' hearing.

<sup>159</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common,' op. cit., 2; J.Battersby, *The Bishop Said Amen*, op. cit., 17-33; C.Watts, *It has Happened Here*, op. cit., 40. An edited version of Watts's manuscript appeared



with being shot.’<sup>160</sup> Starvation rations kept inmates weak.<sup>161</sup> Only two half-hour periods of exercise a day were allowed, involving a single file walk around a lawn at the house, with armed guards ensuring silence. Days were spent alone, without even the diversions of literature and slight periods of association that Brixton had allowed. Another inmate, Compton Domvile, son of Admiral Barry, described the effect of the Latchmere House experience in harrowing terms,

It was not long before my memory began to deteriorate. Certain periods of my life completely disappeared from my mind. Others who shared my experiences at Ham Common have since remarked on similar symptoms in themselves. I...was able to consult the resident doctor. He stated to me plainly that the treatment was intended to produce a state of ‘mental atrophy and unreserved loquacity.’<sup>162</sup>

Another inmate at Ham Common recalled Raven Thomson in the period,

He is absolutely broken. In my opinion, unless he has immediate treatment, he will never come out alive. When at exercise, he walks in a crouching manner and is always looking behind him, starting at the slightest noise.<sup>163</sup>

After five weeks of this environment, an MI5 officer questioned Raven Thomson. In this he seems to have fared better than some of his companions, who recalled boards of interrogators hidden from the prisoner behind bright lights, reminiscent of the gangster films of the period.<sup>164</sup>

Official understanding of the function of the interrogations seems mixed. The Home Office view appears to be that Latchmere afforded another harsher Advisory committee hearing where, ‘[q]uestioning is that of an almost entirely political character, and covers the same ground as that of Mr Birkett’s committee. It is a fishing expedition supported by every adjunct of attempted terrorisation.’<sup>165</sup> Yet in the memorandum for the Advisory Committee itself, Latchmere interviews were outside their scope, ‘interrogations...are conducted in order to obtain information in

in the newsletter of the Friends of Oswald Mosley. See SUA: *Comrade*, June/July & August/September 1990.

<sup>160</sup> J.Battersby, *The Bishop said Amen*, op. cit., 29.

<sup>161</sup> A.Raven Thomson, ‘Ham Common,’ op. cit., 2.

<sup>162</sup> J.Wynne (ed), *It Might Have Happened To You*, 1943, 21. For a copy of this document see IWM 92/32/1/11: Luttmann Johnson papers. The quote was cited, but un-referenced, in A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 242.

<sup>163</sup> PRO HO45/26011: Anonymous memoir of another Latchmere House inmate. My thanks to Richard Thurlow for this reference.

<sup>164</sup> A.Raven Thomson, ‘Ham Common,’ op. cit., 2; PRO HO45/25714/840452/8: Report on Latchmere House.

<sup>165</sup> PRO HO45/24891/254: Letter from Oswald Mosley in Brixton Prison, 25<sup>th</sup> October 1940.

cases which have an espionage background...[and]... are not conducted primarily at any rate, with a view to presentation of the case to the advisory committee, but for intelligence purposes.<sup>166</sup>

The record of Raven Thomson's interrogation at Latchmere House is, like most of his fellow prisoners, still retained by the government; indeed it may be that by accident or design, such files have not survived.<sup>167</sup> Given the concern of MI5 to discover a Nazi fifth column, Raven's links to Germany would doubtless have been scrutinised. Given the weight placed by the advisory committee on the implications of the Whinfield letter, with its implications for the military, it may well have been discussed.<sup>168</sup> The main subject under investigation appears to have been an enquiry into Raven Thomson's knowledge of German radio broadcasting in Britain, and the extent of British Union involvement.<sup>169</sup> This is clearly a reference to the NBBS.<sup>170</sup> During the early stages of the war several British Union members had been convicted of publicising this station, with the most common infraction being the affixing of small sticky backed notes giving the wavelength of transmission in public places, such as telephone boxes.<sup>171</sup> *Action*, which Raven Thomson edited, had published one of the stations wavelengths and had reported it as a British station.<sup>172</sup>

According to Raven Thomson's account, the Latchmere House ordeals only came to an end when Mosley threatened legal action.<sup>173</sup> Given the extraordinary wartime powers of the government however, litigation and exposure could have been overridden. A more likely reason for Raven's departure from Ham Common was MI5's completion of interrogations and the need to use the limited space for more rewarding candidates, such as captured Axis spies.<sup>174</sup> By September 1940 the diminishing threat of invasion placed a greater intelligence bias on the acquisition of

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<sup>166</sup>HO283/23/12-3: 18B Advisory Committee report: Procedure.

<sup>167</sup>PRO HO45/25701/8: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson. This contains a memorandum acknowledging the destruction of subfiles 840189/1-7.

<sup>168</sup>HO283/70/40-1: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>169</sup>A.Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common,' op. cit., 2.

<sup>170</sup>W.J.West *Truth Betrayed*, op. cit., 224-5; A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 167-171, 180, 306-7.

<sup>171</sup>A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 168.

<sup>172</sup>Ibid.

<sup>173</sup>A.Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common,' op. cit., 2.

<sup>174</sup>N.West, *MI5*, op. cit. 147.



information from such captured spies. Interrogations of British fascist personnel were no longer worth the effort. Raven Thomson returned to Brixton the day after his interrogation.<sup>175</sup>

If there was a single point when the authorities could have expected Raven Thomson's fascist resolve to falter it was at Latchmere House. Even the sympathetic official history noted 'the ordeal was formidable,' whilst an inmate described it as 'hell on earth.'<sup>176</sup> An apocryphal story of the period is that Watts' dark hair went grey by the end of his ordeal.<sup>177</sup> Yet Raven Thomson endured the treatment alongside his fascist comrades, and returned to the Blackshirt enclave at Brixton. Eight years later he summated his feelings on the period,

No doubt complete isolation, denial of association and a prolonged low diet was calculated to break our spirit. As it was not a single man broke down in any way, and the whole theatrical display a tawdry imitation of what they presumably conceived to be Gestapo methods, merely exposed the incapacity of men who would never have had the intelligence to find out anything, even if there had been something to find out.<sup>178</sup>

One BU member who experienced the MI5 treatment there, believed the ordeal had given the Blackshirt prisoners 'an increasingly religious fervour.'<sup>179</sup>

Whilst MI5 had failed to break Raven Thomson, his time in detention was complicated by its effect on his private life. On the sixth of August 1941 his son Sergeant Pilot E.A.R. Thomson was reported missing, presumably killed in action.<sup>180</sup> The effect bereavement had on him is unclear. Another, potentially more significant development, was the collapse of a relationship with a married female Blackshirt, the BU's Chief Women's organiser, Olive Burdett.<sup>181</sup> It appears that Raven Thomson's

<sup>175</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common,' op. cit., 2.

<sup>176</sup> F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G. Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 342; PRO HO45/26011: Memoir of another Latchmere House inmate.

<sup>177</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 194.

<sup>178</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Ham Common,' op. cit., 2.

<sup>179</sup> J.Battersby, *The Bishop Said Amen*, op. cit., 29.

<sup>180</sup> PRO HO283/70/124-5: Advisory Committee report: Letters from Raven Thomson to Home Office.

<sup>181</sup> PRO HO45/25701/12, 26: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson; HO283/70/99-102, Advisory Committee report: Letters from Alexander Raven Thomson to Home Office; HO45/25703/76, 163-6: Internment file: Francis Burdett (husband to Olive); HO144/22495/864061/2, 11-12: Report on co-habitation for internees. The existence of this last reference was kindly given to me by Julie Gottlieb.



marriage to Lisbeth Rontgern had crumbled, though whether his liason with Burdett was the cause, or merely the beneficiary of this, is unclear. Burdett, under her maiden name Olive Hawks had been a prominent female member of the movement, a frequent essayist, speaker and poet.<sup>182</sup> As a member of the movement's research department during the mid 1930s she and Raven Thomson worked closely together. The duration of their relationship is unclear but on the eve of internment Raven Thomson clearly believed that his marital obligations to Lisbeth had been dissolved in preparation for a marriage to Olive, once she too was free to wed.<sup>183</sup> Both appeared infatuated with the other, and it is tempting to suggest that a marriage might have occurred were it not for the separation they underwent in detention. Raven Thomson cited this relationship in two appeals to the advisory committee, possibly summarizing, incorrectly, that given the length of time the hearing had spent on questions concerning the Anglo German Agency, his wife was an impediment to release. The Home Office, however, deemed Olive 'too much of a Fascist' for the transference of affection to have any overall bearing.<sup>184</sup>

Olive was senior enough in the movement to warrant inclusion amongst the first wave of detentions on the 23rd of May.<sup>185</sup> Her husband, Fredrick Burdett, was also detained, though the gender segregation of internment parted them; Olive going alongside other prominent Blackshirt women like Mosley's wife Diana, to Holloway Prison. Olive refused the opportunity provided to the married internees by the Home Office for shared quarters.<sup>186</sup> In the period of internment Raven Thomson and Olive corresponded, but met only once for an hour, in strained circumstances following a decision to move her to a camp on the Isle of Man, though this idea was eventually aborted.<sup>187</sup> He had petitioned the Home Office for more regular visits, a request that

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<sup>182</sup> Olive was the BU's prospective parliamentary candidate for Peckham in South London, where her husband was District Leader, and a frequent contributor to the women's pages of the Movement's publications. See *British Union Quarterly*, Vol.4 No.1, Spring 1940, 64. See *Action* 69, 12<sup>th</sup> June 1937; 199, 21<sup>st</sup> December 1939; *The Blackshirt*, 73, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1934; A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 176-7.

<sup>183</sup> PRO HO283/70/101: Advisory Committee report: Letters from Raven Thomson to Home Office.

<sup>184</sup> PRO HO283/70/102: Ibid. Conversely, Olive's infatuation with Raven Thomson was an obstacle to her early release. See HO45/25703/76: Internment file: Francis Burdett.

<sup>185</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 176-7.

<sup>186</sup> PRO HO144/22495/864061/11-12: Report on co-habitation for internees.

<sup>187</sup> PRO HO45/25703/163, 166: Internment file: Francis Burdett; HO45/25701/1: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson. For married couples there appear to have been conjugal visiting



his stepdaughter Helga, writing to intervene, denounced.<sup>188</sup> By early 1943, however, their relationship seems to have soured. After her release in July of that year she did not visit him.<sup>189</sup> It was under this circumstance, with his marriage broken and his affair with Hawks over that his application for a transfer to the Isle of Man and the difficulties he experienced there must be considered.

Despite this domestic strife, conditions for Mrs Rontgern Thomson during the war were better than for other BU dependants. In some cases, the loss of the main source of household income had resulted in the sale of possessions and even eviction.<sup>190</sup> Her estranged husband's diminished earnings, after the BU economies of 1937, had placed greater reliance upon her income from the Anglo-German Agency. Indeed there is some indication that as the 'Haymarket Equipment Company' she did quite a trade in wartime air raid requisites, such as helmets and gas masks.<sup>191</sup> Despite her German origins, Blackshirt husband and questionable commercial endeavours, factors that had seen others detained, she escaped internment.<sup>192</sup>

At Peel camp on the Isle of Man Raven Thomson's personal troubles overtook him. The island itself had been used as the major holding place for the BU detainees since May 1941, with two gender segregated camps.<sup>193</sup> In September 1943 Thomson wrote to the Home Secretary asking for a transfer from Brixton to the men's camp at Peveril on the island, 'to occupy my mind and restore my strength,' citing 'personal

arrangements. See HO144/21995 cited in A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 248.

<sup>188</sup> 'Raven Thomson in the hands of this unscrupulous woman might become a danger to himself and his country...removing her influence he would revert to his old quiet studious self...backed by his family.' PRO HO45/25703/165; 163-6: Internment file: Francis Burdett.

<sup>189</sup> PRO HO45/25701/39: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson. After the war Hawkes became a novelist, her first work, *What Hope For Green Street* (1945) was a study of East London fascism. See A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 248 fn 126.

<sup>190</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 156-7.

<sup>191</sup> PRO HO144/21429/100: Special Branch report, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1939.

<sup>192</sup> Margaret Newitt, another domestic servants agency proprietor was detained in October of 1940 on suspicion that she was aiding spies. See HO45/25739 cited in A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 222.

<sup>193</sup> The female camp was adjoining the town of Port Erin. Peel had been the compromise solution reached between the wish to move possible fifth columnists off mainland Britain and concerns about the legal ramifications of deportation to an overseas colony, though this idea had been seriously discussed. See C.Chappel, *Island of Barbed Wire*, Robert Hale, London, 1984, 42. 98-103; PRO HO45/25752/863022/9: 18B report: Legal ramifications of dominion and colony detention for internees; HO45/24891/75: 18B report: Details of Government consideration of Canada as a potential destination for BU detainees.



troubles' as the cause for his decision.<sup>194</sup> Two months later another request was lodged, with the endorsement of his estranged wife. This second successful request resulted in a transfer on the second of December, joining his comrade from the LCC campaign, E.G. 'Mick' Clarke, who had been elected as BU camp leader, in one of the requisitioned boarding houses that made up much of the 18B accommodation.<sup>195</sup> Clarke had recently spent some time away from the island following his part in a riot at the camp.<sup>196</sup>

Peel camp had by this stage developed into quite a Blackshirt commune, with members each working in some capacity such as a house leader or cook. As a self regulated camp, Peel was much less confining than prison, free association was much easier, monitoring taking the form of only two daily roll calls.<sup>197</sup> A camp university teaching various European and Slavic languages was set up.<sup>198</sup> A BU amateur dramatics society, the 'Peel Players,' was organised and put on performances.<sup>199</sup> The BU internees had a dentist, a plumber and two doctors amongst their numbers.<sup>200</sup> Paid work was available in the farms close by and food restrictions were not so acute, though still far from plentiful.<sup>201</sup> By the time Raven Thomson had arrived, the Metropolitan Police had, in the wake of the riot, replaced the unpopular military control of the camp.<sup>202</sup> Taken together internment at Peel, whilst still confining and

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<sup>194</sup> PRO HO45/25701/6, 37, 43: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson.

<sup>195</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 130, 138, 142; J.Battersby, *The Bishop Said Amen*, op. cit. 37.

<sup>196</sup> The riot had been precipitated by the perceived maltreatment by the authorities of a BU member who had attempted to escape, been captured, and returned to the camp, but not fed. When John Charnley, one of the BU house cooks, prepared a meal, access was denied. The BU camp rioted and 18 men were for a short time transferred off the island. See J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 139; C.Chappell, *Island of Barbed Wire*, op. cit., 103, 120-1; L Burlinson, 'The State, Internment and Public Criticism in the Second World War,' op. cit., 110; *The Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1941.

<sup>197</sup> B.Domvile, *The Bishop Said Amen*, op. cit., 37-8.

<sup>198</sup> See A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 246; J.Battersby, *The Bishop said Amen*, op. cit., 37.

<sup>199</sup> IWM 86/1/1: F.C.Wiseman papers, Two Peel Players programmes; J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op.cit., 155.

<sup>200</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 151.

<sup>201</sup> See PRO HO45/25701/19: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson; J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 130.

<sup>202</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit., 254-5.



monotonous, should have provided a better environment for Raven Thomson, yet within six weeks he was requesting a return to Brixton.<sup>203</sup>

In the intervening time many of his comrades had been released or moved, as in the case of Clarke, who went to Brixton.<sup>204</sup> It may well have been Raven Thomson's arrival at Peel that contributed to his comrade's transfer. The authorities were keen to disrupt the BU by separating the leadership in the more secure environment of prison. Thus the presence of two senior BU leaders, one with trouble making credentials at Peel, with a history of close co-operation as LCC candidates, in the relatively unmonitored conditions of the camp, was unacceptable.<sup>205</sup> Raven Thomson was now part of a small British Union contingent in a camp dominated by foreign nationals, many openly sympathetic to Nazism. Some of the remaining BU comrades were equally fervent, with Thomas St.Barbe Baker and James Battersby openly venerating Hitler as the second coming of Christ.<sup>206</sup> Writing to the Home Office, Raven Thomson complained bitterly at his rehousing in mixed accommodation with Nazi supporters, finding 'it quite intolerable to be forced to associate with people who are continually giving expression to violent anti-British sentiments.'<sup>207</sup>

Isolated from his Blackshirt peers and consumed by the collapse of his relationship with Olive Hawks, Raven Thomson succumbed to a nervous breakdown, the effect of which appears to have remained with him well after his eventual release.<sup>208</sup> Four years to the day after his internment began, he wrote a letter to the Home Office citing a mental condition requiring the ministrations of a psychiatrist cousin in London, and requesting transfer back to Brixton for treatment.<sup>209</sup> In support of his claim, a resident psychiatrist, presumably at his prompting, had written to Hawks and had received a reply indicating her wish not to correspond on the matter.<sup>210</sup> This psychiatrist's report was far from flattering. Raven Thomson was

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<sup>203</sup> PRO HO45/25701/30-2: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson.

<sup>204</sup> PRO HO45/25701/32: Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> PRO Cab 66/20 WP 279 (41)/3 cited in R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 213.

<sup>206</sup> 'For Adolf Hitler is none other than the chosen of God to end the mammon system that has for centuries disgraced and denied God's benevolent purposes for mankind...Adolf Hitler is God's judge and chosen to fulfil the Divine Will.' J.Battersby, *The Bishop said Amen*, op. cit., 43, 106.

<sup>207</sup> PRO HO45/25701/32: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson

<sup>208</sup> Desmond Irvine, 'Raven Present,' *Comrade*, October/November 1987, 3.

<sup>209</sup> PRO HO45/25701/25: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., /26.



described as lazy and dirty, appeared to have difficulty in distinguishing fantasy from reality, and had self diagnosed paranoid schizophrenia.<sup>211</sup> From the tenor of the report it is clear that this psychiatrist believed that he was inventing his symptoms. It was only after a second, more sympathetic evaluation by a different doctor the following month, which concluded that damage would result if the patient stayed at Peel, that he returned to Brixton in July 1944.<sup>212</sup> It could be argued that the initial view of Raven Thomson's mental problems was indeed the correct one, that faced with the authorities' unwillingness to return him to Brixton, he invented, or at least overplayed the persona of tortured lover. Yet he was complaining of his nervous troubles before his move to Peel and reports of his anxieties whilst there were not restricted to the evaluations he underwent.<sup>213</sup> Back at Brixton he failed to make a miraculous recovery, but improvement was noted.<sup>214</sup> Given his resilience throughout the remainder of his detention Peel serves to indicate the repercussions to Raven Thomson's state of mind, once removed from his fellow Blackshirts. The collapse of the Hawks affair was a catalyst for the breakdown, but its severity was due to his separation from his peers at Brixton.

The numbers of BU prisoners had diminished since the waning of the invasion threat during summer 1940.<sup>215</sup> Raven Thomson was eventually released from prison on 4th October 1944, after 52 months of imprisonment.<sup>216</sup> BU releases was highly conditional, fraternising with comrades was banned and a geographical limit of a few miles was placed on travel from the designated home address. Weekly visits to the local police were required, and he was not able to engage in any sphere of employment relating to the war effort.<sup>217</sup> As a senior official Raven Thomson however had always been part of a small clique 'whose release should be considered last,' by the authorities.<sup>218</sup> Individual circumstances seemed not to have altered that ruling, except in one case, the man the authorities would have kept longest,

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., /29.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., /12, 19.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., /25, 27, 41.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., /17.

<sup>215</sup> PRO HO45/24893/234: 18B report: Numbers of detainees held, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1940 to 29<sup>th</sup> November 1943.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., /14-15.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., /14-15.



Mosley.<sup>219</sup> Potentially fatal phlebitis was diagnosed in the fascist leader and, concerned by the ramifications of such a high profile death in custody, Mosley was released in November 1943 to a storm of protest, principally orchestrated by the Communist Party.<sup>220</sup> The scale of the public response may have delayed the release of the remaining BU detainees, who numbered twenty-nine by this time.<sup>221</sup> The intention of the Home Office, reflecting MI5 concerns, had been to stagger the releases of the remaining BU leadership to prevent them leaving as ‘a band of brothers,’ with Raven Thomson as one of the first to be released.<sup>222</sup> In the event, the leadership left within days of each other, after the Home Office made a general decision in September 1944.<sup>223</sup> Due to the lack of information on this period of Raven Thomson's life, his condition on release is unknown, though one comrade described it as feeling ‘like a ship without a rudder in an endless sea and a stormy one at that.’<sup>224</sup>

The experience of internment splintered Mosley Fascism. For some, like veteran fascist Tommy Moran, the European outlook in Mosley's post-war thought was unacceptable and they left activism.<sup>225</sup> For others detention provided the opportunity outside the structure of an organised movement to develop their own idiosyncratic theories, as with one member who reduced Mosley fascism to the equation, Scientific knowledge + Moral values % Men (Truth – Superstition) =  $\sqrt{\text{BU}}$ .<sup>226</sup> James Battersby equated internment with religious enlightenment and saw it as an opportunity to pool fascist knowledge and experience.<sup>227</sup> Charlie Watts was active throughout detention, in an attempt to keep the fascists to the spirit and letter of the BU. He was highly critical of members that appeared to be using the less

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<sup>218</sup> PRO HO45/25699/840179/10: Internment file: B.D.E. Donovan.

<sup>219</sup> PRO HO45/24892/338: 18B report: Discussion of Mosley's release.

<sup>220</sup> PRO HO45/24893/400: 18B report: Numbers and timing of releases.

<sup>221</sup> PRO HO45/24893/234: 18B report: op. cit.

<sup>222</sup> PRO HO45/25701/840189/9: Internment file: Alexander Raven Thomson; F.H. Hinsley and C.A.G. Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 54.

<sup>223</sup> PRO HO45/25701/840189/9: Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> IWM 86/1/1: F.C. Wiseman papers: Letter received n.d.

<sup>225</sup> See J. Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 202.

<sup>226</sup> IWM Special Misc P6: R.A. White in Oliver Gilbert's 18B autograph book.

<sup>227</sup> J. Battersby, *The Bishop Said Amen*, op. cit., 29, 63.



structured environment of internment to criticise Mosley and the movement.<sup>228</sup> Watts is an example of those whose internment deepened their resolve and in detention reconstituted a miniature movement complete with a hierarchy and duties. In the Ascot camp he set out the objectives of Blackshirt fellowship; ‘to keep alive the spirit of “Britain First” through three channels, [d]efine policy as laid down by OM, [e]ncourage physical fitness and discipline..[and]...[p]romote better relations between members from all over Britain.’<sup>229</sup> Watts went on to found a ‘hail Mosley and F\*\*\* them all association’ with ‘the object of upholding the name and tradition of Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union throughout the period of 18B detention and for all time.’<sup>230</sup> One member described the BU comradeship as being ‘bound by a band of steel which will not break because that band of steel is Mosley.’<sup>231</sup> Another at Ascot camp believed ‘truly he [Mosley] is with us, in spirit if not in person.’<sup>232</sup> Released comrades wrote to their still detained friends and attempted to help each other find work.<sup>233</sup>

Whilst for many of those who chose to stay in fascist activism detention merely hardened their attitudes, giving them ‘a friendship born of common suffering and of faith in a great ideal,’ Raven Thomson’s reasons for remaining are less clear.<sup>234</sup> The available material on his detention is as much a catalogue of lost exits out of fascist activism, than of zeal born of persecution. With his marriage seemingly over and his affair with Hawks at an end he had nowhere else to turn. Internment had been much longer for him than most of his comrades with his only support coming from other Blackshirts. All this meant that for him the only place of solace was within the walls of a prison, with his fascist comrades. Small wonder then that at his release he stayed true to the creed and the company that had been the centre of his life for the previous twelve years. Raven Thomson carried on his fascist activism when other comrades drifted not merely out of loyalty to the movement and his leader but also because of the poverty of his alternatives. Whilst Thurlow asserts that ‘only the most committed

<sup>228</sup> IWM 86/1/1: C.Watts, ‘B.U. at Ascot Camp October 1940’ in F.C.Wiseman, ‘Fascist activities and organisation in Ascot Camp June 1941’ Unpublished Notebook, 33.

<sup>229</sup> IWM 86/1/1: C.Watts, ‘B.U. Organisation at Ascot Camp’ in F.C.Wiseman Notebook op. cit., 1

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 35; See also R.C.Thurlow, ‘The Guardian of the ‘Sacred Flame,’ op. cit., 243.

<sup>231</sup> IWM 86/1/1: R.L.George in F.C.Wiseman Notebook op. cit., 18.

<sup>232</sup> IWM 86/1/1: J.L.Battersby, ‘The Spirit of British Union Lives on’ in F.C.Wiseman Notebook, 25.

<sup>233</sup> See SUA Saunders’ Collection, C10/11/12.

<sup>234</sup> J.Battersby, *The Bishop Said Amen*, op. cit., 56.



wished to revive the tradition in a new form of nostalgic, mimetic or neo-fascism after the war' on the showing of Raven Thomson's internment some had nowhere else to go.<sup>235</sup>

#### IV

For some senior and junior members of the BUF, internment hardened their support for Mosley, and they were instrumental in persuading him to re-enter politics through the formation of the Union Movement in 1948.<sup>236</sup>

The internment of the Blackshirts was designed to put an end domestic fascism by breaking their organisation, with the official history of internment confidently stating that 'organised fascism did not survive the detention of the summer of 1940.'<sup>237</sup> In this the policy failed. It may even have saved senior fascists, like Raven Thomson, from public animosity during the adverse war conditions prior to the Battle of Britain. Mosley fascism emerged from the war beaten down, but not broken. Its subsequent history was to a great part influenced by the rigours of internment. For many, incarceration provided the final episode in their fascist experience, but for others, as the history of Raven Thomson's internment shows, it strengthened their resolve. As one commentator shrewdly noted 'there is absolutely nothing to equal persecution for consolidating ideological belief.'<sup>238</sup> Such persecution was not to end on release however, with the stigma of being an '18B' lingering for much of the decade.<sup>239</sup> Internment ensured that after the war Mosley fascism had a familiar face in its infrastructure, one committed to the fascist ideal and familiar with the tactics necessary to preserve the movement ready for the opportunities that another crisis might bring. As a fellow Blackshirt recalled; 'We passed through the fire, scorched but with unbroken spirit, undaunted but awaiting the call to carry on from where we had been interrupted these few but interminable years ago.'<sup>240</sup>

<sup>235</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the Sacred Flame,' op. cit., 241.

<sup>236</sup> Idem., 'British Fascism and State Surveillance' op. cit., 96.

<sup>237</sup> F.H.Hinsley and C.A.G.Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4*, op. cit., 79.

<sup>238</sup> A.W.B.Simpson, *In the Highest Degree Odious*, op. cit.,257; See IWM Special Misc P6: Oliver Gilbert Autograph book: Alf Flockhart inscription.

<sup>239</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 237. See also R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit, 289; J.Wynne (ed.), *It Might Have Happened to You*, op. cit., 35.

<sup>240</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 201.



## Chapter Six: Raven Thomson and the Revival of Mosley Fascism 1945-8

I don't suggest that Sir Oswald Mosley will come to power tomorrow. But I know that in a matter of weeks his movements can bring physical and psychological terror into the lives of thousands. It can corrupt the whole of the nation's political life...Fascists resemble nothing so much as the Death Watch Beetle. Tirelessly they attack the great timbers of our society until the whole fabric is so riddled and honeycombed that the structure crashes on the heads of the people. As long as they are allowed to work, the Death Watch is in our homes and our futures. They are capable of pulling down the whole of our civilisation in their effort to grab power.<sup>1</sup>

For historians the experience of post-war Mosley fascism has been of minor interest. Compared to the pageantry of the BUF, the tiny fascist cliques that formed after the war and the eventual appearance in 1948 of another far smaller Mosley led 'Union Movement,' have been largely ignored. In assessments of British Fascism in the period after 1945, it is the later appearance of the National Front that has interested scholars and journalists. When Mosley does receive a mention, studies invariably concentrate on this Union Movement, with a brief note about the difficulties of forming any fascist organisation so soon after the War. Much of this dearth of historical understanding originates in the lack of conventional sources available. For historians used to looking at the fascist publications or Home Office files, there is little material to examine. Anti-fascist sources are particularly important in filling this gap in understanding, as are the letters and circulars passing between the disparate Mosley supporters at the time.

Yet such rigours are worthwhile in order to understand how fascism survived into the latter half of the Twentieth Century with the revival of a Mosley movement between the final 18B releases to the formal declaration of Union Movement. This period was also the time when Raven Thomson made a significant contribution to maintaining the cohesion of the Mosley faithful. As a liaison man between the various small Mosley groups that had emerged from internment, he helped create the circumstances in which Union Movement could

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<sup>1</sup> E.P.Thompson, *Fascist Threat to Britain*, Communist Party of Great Britain, London, 1947, 3-4.



be formed.<sup>2</sup> As the only senior figure from the British Union to associate with this new fascism, he provided a tangible link to the fascist heritage of the inter-war years for both old members and new supporters.

Organised Mosleyism did not spontaneously appear after the war. That it survived at all was in part due to the efforts of former BUF members to retain a semblance of unity. Whilst the experience of internment prompted many to leave fascist politics, for others the bond of suffering strengthened their commitment. These individuals were united upon release through the 18B Detainees (British) Aid Fund.<sup>3</sup> This wartime fund had been set up ostensibly to support those released to find work and care for the dependants of still interned BU members. It acted as a rallying point for both released fascists and those who had avoided internment. As such, it was the starting point for the attempt to revive a Mosley movement after the war.

With Mosley's release in 1943, the fascists, to prevent the fascist leader being re-imprisoned, adopted a policy of quiet progress until the end of the war.<sup>4</sup> The Fund's personnel maintained this discreet method of operation, fearing of public outrage and government repression should any former Blackshirts return to high profile politics.<sup>5</sup> By the time of its closure, at the end of 1945, £6,000 had been acquired and distributed by the Fund. This money was collected through a series of Christmas appeals and social events.<sup>6</sup> These gatherings also provided a valuable meeting point for released fascists to congregate.<sup>7</sup> It was under the auspices of the Fund that Mosley was able to speak to 600 faithful, Raven Thomson amongst them, in a London hotel at Christmas 1945.<sup>8</sup> A sister organisation to the Fund, the 18B Publicity Council, attempted to promote the internment issue.<sup>9</sup> As the 1945 general election approached, it agitated for a

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<sup>2</sup> *Daily Worker*, 17<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> November 1947; *On Guard* 2, August 1947; *On Guard* 3, September 1947; *On Guard* 6, December 1947.

<sup>3</sup> Public Record Office (PRO) HO45/24467/183: Report on 18B Detainees (British) Aid Fund.

<sup>4</sup> PRO HO45/24894/8: Circular to Mosley supporters.

<sup>5</sup> 'I shall not give my opponents any excuse to suppress ideas in the name of preserving order.' *Manchester Guardian* 21<sup>st</sup> December 1945.

<sup>6</sup> See Sheffield University Archive (SUA): Saunders Papers C10: Correspondence received 1941-6.

<sup>7</sup> A. Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement: Success or Failure,' in M. Cronin (ed.) *The Failure of British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1996, 56

<sup>8</sup> PRO HO45/24467/183: Report on 18B Detainees (British) Aid Fund.

<sup>9</sup> Board of Deputies of British Jews Archive (BOD): Jewish Central Information Office, *Organised Antisemitism in Great Britain 1942-6*, May 1946 Report, 14. See T. Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989, 33.



tribunal into the workings of defence regulation 18B and internment.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the 18B groups helped former British Union members during wartime, their activities were substantially diminished once the conflict was over. Between the end of 1945 and the announcement of Union Movement, Mosley fascists had to find other ways to maintain unity, away from scrutiny.

The greatest obstacle to the revival of any type of fascism following the war was the legacy of the conflict.<sup>11</sup> Allied propaganda had sought to demonise the fascist enemy, a characterisation that seemed justified in the wake of discoveries about the scale of the Nazi atrocities conducted in central Europe. Public opinion of domestic fascism, had over the course of the war, hardened from apathy to hostility.<sup>12</sup> As prominent post-war fascist Jeffrey Hamm wrote ‘[a]fter six years of war ‘against fascism’ it took some moral courage for those of us who had been members of British Union to re-enter active politics...’<sup>13</sup> The concern of the ex-BU, even those who were inactive after the war, to distance themselves from Nazism was best illustrated by their attempts to disassociate themselves from William Joyce. Joyce, a popular fascist speaker and a director of the BU prior to his departure in 1937, had subsequently become infamous as ‘Lord Haw Haw,’ the English language voice of Nazi radio propaganda work. A.K.Chesterton, who separated from Mosley in 1938, sued the *Daily Worker* in 1945 for printing that he was a friend of Joyce. At the 1945 Christmas reunion for the fascist 18Bs, the organisers were at pains to prevent an appeal for Joyce, who following capture on the continent was facing execution for his activities.<sup>14</sup> Even after his execution Joyce’s infamy lingered. At one fascist meeting after 1945 Raven Thomson was harassed from the podium by a heckler who declared ‘[t]hey should have hanged you with William Joyce.’<sup>15</sup> His usual defence to these jibes was to stress his personal dislike of Joyce, the reason he had used in the advisory committee hearings of July 1940.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> SUA: Saunders’ Papers C10: Letter from George Dunlop, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1945; PRO HO45/24467/198: Circular pamphlet for Mosley supporters of questions to ask parliamentary candidates.

<sup>11</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987, 238.

<sup>12</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 234.

<sup>13</sup> E.J.Hamm, *The Evil Good Men Do*, Sanctuary Press, London, 1988, 183.

<sup>14</sup> PRO HO45/24467/183: Report on 18B Detainees (British) Aid Fund.

<sup>15</sup> *On Guard* 1, July 1947.

<sup>16</sup> PRO HO45/24470/407: Special Branch report, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1947; HO283/70/62: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson’s hearing.



The chief organising strategy of the Mosley fascists before 1948 was their participation in a nation-wide network of book clubs.<sup>17</sup> The fascist leader deliberately kept away from public shows of political activism, and had announced after the war that he intended to confine his attentions to publishing. In an interview in a June 1945 he emphasised that 'I am in no way connected with any present party. I have no connection with any of the supposed fascist organisations now in being.'<sup>18</sup> The result was 'Mosley Publications,' but the nature of material produced was far from apolitical. Instead, a stream of books and pamphlets appeared defending the domestic fascist record and proposing the fascist leader's new beliefs in the wake of the settlement of the War. Mosley saw the situation after the war as unsympathetic to his ideas. A crisis was needed, he argued, to make the public accept his leadership.<sup>19</sup> Thus the publishing company must be seen as his attempt to appear disconnected from politics, whilst keeping his 'faithful' on standby for action in a crisis. Meanwhile covert progress was endorsed. To support the venture, and provide a ready market for the literature coming from Mosley's farmhouse base in Wiltshire, a series of book clubs appeared. These clubs concealed their affiliation to Mosley under such innocuous names as the 'Wessex Book Club' or the 'Hampstead Literary Society.' Yet they were all connected to the fascist leader through 'Mosley Publications.'<sup>20</sup> This was principally achieved through a *Mosley Newsletter* that periodically appeared to inform readers of the fascist leaders ruminations on current affairs.<sup>21</sup>

Mosley was sensitive about his relationship to the clubs, stressing the purely commercial nature of his links with them. When he embarked on a speaking tour of the groups, he even wrote to the Home Secretary, Chuter Ede, explaining, 'I have only the status of a guest at these meetings and am not concerned with the management of these book clubs to which I stand in relation of tradesman to customers who have bought, or may buy, books from the publishing concern, which is my business.'<sup>22</sup> The authorities were unmoved by such a defence, and had formed the opinion as early as September 1945 that

<sup>17</sup> O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 432.

<sup>18</sup> *Daily Mirror* 28<sup>th</sup> June 1945

<sup>19</sup> G.Thayer, *The British Political Fringe*, Anthony Blond, London, 1965,42

<sup>20</sup> D.Eisenberg, *The Re-emergence of Fascism*, MacGibbon and Kee Ltd, London, 1967, 38.

<sup>21</sup> PRO HO45/24894/8: Circular from Neil Francis Hawkins: '...we have no desire to give our opponents any grounds whatever for saying that the release of Sir Oswald Mosley has led to any trouble or disturbances.' See also HO45/24469/349: *Mosley Newsletter* 11



Mosley would use seemingly diffuse groups to consolidate what fascist strength remained, before being requested back to active politics by an apparently spontaneous call from various unconnected bodies.<sup>23</sup> Anti-fascists too were unconvinced by Mosley's public statements. The Communist Party, via its organ *The Daily Worker*, argued that the book clubs were merely an attempt to resuscitate the BUF.<sup>24</sup> Frederick Mullally, a veteran antifascist journalist wrote of Mosley in October 1946:

For the next year or two, he is content to construct a nation wide network of fascist 'cells' whose duty will be to form the nucleus of a party for future activities and to inject the bacillus of racial hatred into as wide as possible a section of the British people.<sup>25</sup>

The precise origins of the book club idea are unknown. Mullally, wrote of a circular from Mosley supporter Alf Flockhart urging the formation of local cells to discuss the literature coming from Mosley Publications in October 1946.<sup>26</sup> Earlier Charlie Watts, a prominent member of British Union in London movement, wrote a similar circular proposing the idea of such clubs, '[t]o start such a club, you must first contact old friends living near you, tell them you are organising such a club and it would be to their advantage to become members of it.'<sup>27</sup> It seems likely that Mosley was behind both letters. In line with the apolitical appearance proposed by Mosley, both the Flockhart and Watts circulars are clear that the relationship of such clubs to him should be hidden.

The object of the book clubs was primarily to supply fascist literature to members. They also provided small local libraries of Mosleyite texts and the opportunity for enthusiastic discussion of fascist ideas.<sup>28</sup> The clubs were tied to Mosley Publications, with an agreement to buy at least two of their books every six months. For important statements of policy such as Mosley's *My Answer* (1946) each member had to purchase a copy. Prices were kept low for members, with *The Alternative* (1947) retailing to the general public for 7/6 and 2/6 for

<sup>22</sup> PRO HO45/24468/23-4: Letter from Oswald Mosley to Home Secretary Chuter Ede, n.d.

<sup>23</sup> PRO HO45/24467/202: Special Branch report: Sons of St. George.

<sup>24</sup> *Daily Worker*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1946.

<sup>25</sup> *Sunday Pictorial*, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1946.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* The idea of a mail shot to ex BUF is also found in the *News Chronicle* 24<sup>th</sup> September 1946

<sup>27</sup> SUA: Saunders Papers C10: Charlie Watts to Robert Saunders 1<sup>st</sup> May 1946. Watts became involved with the Central Book Club in London. See *ibid.*, C11

<sup>28</sup> SUA: Saunders Papers C10: Objects of Wessex Book.



club editions.<sup>29</sup> The book clubs were also the main distribution outlet for the *Mosley Newsletter*. Once Union Movement had been formed they became the foundation for its local branch structure.

What was Raven Thomson's role in the clubs? At the local level he and another ex BUF member, Allan T. Smith, founded the 'Chelsea Modern Thought Club and Discussion Group' in South London.<sup>30</sup> This group was seen by some antifascists as the leading Mosleyite club of the period.<sup>31</sup> It had its own newsletter 'Modern Thought' and met on Monday evenings, later obtaining the use of a local schoolroom for a Friday night gathering.<sup>32</sup> It was under the auspices of this group that Mosley went on the speaking tour of the book clubs, which had prompted his letter to Ede.<sup>33</sup> It was also highly involved in the organisation of the 'sales conference' that presented Mosley with the highly orchestrated appeal to resume his leadership of a political organisation in 1947. That anything is known of the 'Modern Thought' is thanks to the successful penetration of the club by two members of the militant antifascist '43 Group.'<sup>34</sup> Their impression of the club was serialised, upon their departure, in that group's paper, *On Guard*. Despite claims by the club of a 500 strong membership, the infiltrators reported on a small, impoverished, group of cranks and fanatics.<sup>35</sup> Raven Thomson's appearance was remarked upon by Cotter at their first meeting with some relish; 'Thomson bore no resemblance to his spruce pre-war self – the blackshirted Director of Propaganda in the B.U.F. Now ageing semi-bald and unshaven, he padded up and down the room, putting over his propaganda, delicately probing to determine my reaction to that awkward word 'Fascist.'<sup>36</sup>

The 43 Group infiltration revealed the techniques employed by club members in their discreet propaganda activities. Everyday conversations with strangers were to be initiated and favourable impressions of Mosley expressed,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Board of Deputies of British Jews (BOD) C6/9/1/3/F8: 'Facts you should know' National Council for Civil Liberties circular 29<sup>th</sup> April 1947.

<sup>31</sup> *Sunday Pictorial*, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1946.

<sup>32</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3/F8: JDC report 16<sup>th</sup> June 1948.

<sup>33</sup> *Daily Worker*, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1946.

<sup>34</sup> For the serialisation of the experiences of James Cotter and Doris Kaye see *On Guard* 1-10: July 1947-May/June 1948. Morris Beckman in his study of the 43 Group used the information extensively. See M.Beckman, *The 43 Group*, op. cit., 155-7, 164-5, 174-6, 190, 195.

<sup>35</sup> See PRO HO45/24468/326 cited in D.Renton, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s*, Macmillan, London, 2000, 58.

<sup>36</sup> *On Guard* 1, July 1947



without admitting any affiliation to him. As Smith was reported as saying 'this is what we have to work for – to make people Mosley minded.'<sup>37</sup> Modern Thought members actively swelled the audience numbers at pro-Mosley street meetings and advertised these in their literature.<sup>38</sup>

In an organisational capacity, Modern Thought's two leaders played key roles in keeping the widely spread book clubs connected, with Raven Thomson gaining quite a reputation as a guest speaker across the country.<sup>39</sup> Smith acted as the secretary to the 'London Book Club Co-ordination Committee.'<sup>40</sup> It was this cohesion that had antifascists concerned, with the potential for these clubs to be 'welded together into a national organisation capable of conducting not only propaganda and Fascist 'education' but also of undertaking political activity generally.'<sup>41</sup>

For this system of propaganda dissemination to work, however, the Mosley groups needed literature to distribute. Given the stigma of the '18B's' few commercial printers wished to print material originating from Mosley. Indeed on one occasion Mosley attempted to sue three members of the National Union of Printing, Book Binding and Paper Workers for refusing to handle his material.<sup>42</sup> What was needed was a supportive printing concern producing fascist propaganda to provide material for the Mosleyite book clubs and aid in the public rehabilitation of the fascist creed.

It was on this most basic, but essential level that Raven Thomson was to facilitate the establishment of a propaganda machine for the Mosley faithful. In December 1946 he approached the anarchist/Trotskyite printers C.A.Brock and Co. in an attempt to secure production of the *Mosley Newsletter*.<sup>43</sup> The following June, he and Allen Smith formed 'Thomson and Smith Ltd,' 'for the purpose of independent printing, publishing and publicity work.'<sup>44</sup> They brought in Leonard

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<sup>37</sup> *On Guard* 3, September 1947

<sup>38</sup> *On Guard* 2, August 1947; *On Guard* 3, September 1947

<sup>39</sup> M.Beckman, *The 43 Group*, op. cit., 85; BOD C/6/9/1/12: Memorandum about the infiltration of the fascist Hampstead Literary Society.

<sup>40</sup> See SUA: Saunders Papers C11

<sup>41</sup> *On Guard* 2, August 1947

<sup>42</sup> *Daily Worker* 21<sup>st</sup> February 1947, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1947. See also M.Beckman, *The 43 Group*, op. cit., 63.

<sup>43</sup> PRO HO45/24469/342: Special branch report, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1946.

<sup>44</sup> SUA: Saunders Papers C11: Thomson and Smith Progress Report n.d.

Wise, a former BUF comrade with experience of editing, to help them.<sup>45</sup> In a circular to the Mosleyites Raven Thomson wrote, 'there is a great need of a free printing establishment to undertake the production of the kind of publication in which we are interested.'<sup>46</sup> To this end the Merton Free Press based in Tooting, South London, was acquired.<sup>47</sup> The £2000 cost of the company was raised through £5 debentures bought by individual Mosleyites.<sup>48</sup> This money was to cause a rift between Raven Thomson and Victor Burgess, another leading post war Mosleyite, whose Union of British Freedom was engaged in public meetings during the period. It appears that the two had been close allies until there was a disagreement regarding some of the money accrued for the purchase of the business.<sup>49</sup> Financial problems appear to have dogged the enterprise. Wise recalls that several hundred pounds was paid to a confidence trickster for some non-existent book paper.<sup>50</sup> Yet the firm had the distinction of being the first to publish Mosley's post war treatise *The Alternative*.

In September 1947 a subsidiary of 'Thomson and Smith' began publication. 'Raven Books,' created 'for the purpose of publishing political pamphlets,' published much of the period's Mosleyite literature including a third edition of *The Coming Corporate State* and a defence of fascist attempts to contest street pitches in the face of antifascist opposition, *The Battle for Ridley Road*.<sup>51</sup> The following month the parent company purchased a large van, once owned by the army, to be used as a mobile loudspeaker system, though there were insufficient funds to equip it immediately. The van was to be used to aid speakers who were finding difficulty projecting their message over the choruses of antifascist disapproval.<sup>52</sup> So important was this enterprise that Raven Thomson urged investors to 'give till it hurts.'<sup>53</sup> Tellingly the van was to be used for 'both commercial and political amplification and recording.' In its financially

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<sup>45</sup> L.F.Wise letters to author, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1996 and 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1999. Wise was the third director of Thomson and Smith Ltd. See SUA: Saunders' Papers C11: letter from Smith to Saunders 17<sup>th</sup> September 1947.

<sup>46</sup> SUA: Saunders Papers C11: Raven Thomson correspondence with 'Mr Forward.'

<sup>47</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3/F8: Copy of a letter from Raven Thomson, requesting investment.

<sup>48</sup> SUA: Saunders Papers C11: Thomson and Smith Debenture

<sup>49</sup> SUA: Saunders Papers C11: Thomson and Smith Progress Report n.d; *On Guard* 2, August 1947

<sup>50</sup> L.F.Wise, letter to author 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1999.

<sup>51</sup> A.Raven Thomson, *The Coming Corporate State*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Raven Books, London, 1947. *The Battle for Ridley Road*. Raven Books, London. 1947

<sup>52</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> February 1948



impoverished state the Mosleyite propaganda machine was also to be a money earning enterprise.<sup>54</sup> In a period of financial stringency, the need for such ventures to be at least self-supporting was paramount. January 1948 saw the establishment within Thomson and Smith of a Literature Sales Organisation for 'organising sales of all publications for the group and developing a mail order business,' together with attempts to raise public awareness through lectures, debates and pamphleteering.<sup>55</sup>

Thus the publishing concern of Thomson and Smith was a cover for the first steps towards the movement that only finally appeared in February 1948. Again Raven Thomson was at the centre of this activity, lending his organisational skills and fascist pedigree to the enterprise. Despite Raven Thomson's attempt to present the companies as commercial interests in order to obscure the underlying attempt to resuscitate domestic fascism, anti-fascist groups were quick to note the familiar name linking all the groups. The 43 group noted in *On Guard*, Raven Thomson's affiliation with these businesses.<sup>56</sup>

The book clubs were not, however, the only home for fascists during this period. Other fascists chose to express their commitment to Mosley and his ideas by continuing the street politics that had been a staple part of British Union activism. These street groups bore much of the brunt of antifascist attention in the revival of fascism. The chief group at this time was the 'British League of Ex-Servicemen and Women.'<sup>57</sup> Whilst the title made the group sound like a derivative of the British Legion it was stocked with many former BU members who, due to internment, had actually avoided military service. The League had been formed in 1937, but only became a potent Mosley force after the war under the leadership of Jeffrey Hamm.<sup>58</sup> Hamm was a Welshman who upon release from imprisonment, set about establishing the League in and around East London.<sup>59</sup> Mosley appears to have endorsed his efforts from an early stage.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> SUA: Saunders Papers: C11: letter from Raven Thomson to Saunders 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1947.

<sup>54</sup> SUA: Saunders Papers C11: Thomson and Smith Progress Report n.d.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. A 'Calling Britain' leaflet published by the group was a thinly veiled endorsement of Mosleyite thinking. Attempts to research the business histories of these commercial interests faltered at Companies House upon the confirmation that the files had been deleted after a review carried out in the 1960s.

<sup>56</sup> *On Guard* 5, November 1947.

<sup>57</sup> G.Thayer, *The British Political Fringe*, Anthony Blond, London, 1965, 42.

<sup>58</sup> E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, Howard Baker, London, 1983, 137.

<sup>59</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3/F8: JDC reports on fascist meetings: 9<sup>th</sup> January 1947, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1947 & 15<sup>th</sup> June 1947.

Hamm's message was one of 'economic nationalism,' which in principle was little different from the imperial autarky policy of the BU, and vitriolic anti-Semitism.<sup>61</sup> In Hamm's view the British League 'served to keep the name of Sir Oswald Mosley before the public at the time when he was restricted by the conditions imposed upon him after his release from the internment.'<sup>62</sup> In a 1944 article, *The Jewish Chronicle*, expressed its concern about a League meeting; 'Mr J. Hamm spoke as if it were 1936 and not 1944. His words, his phrases, his mannerisms, his abuse came straight from the Mosley handbook.'<sup>63</sup> The group's newsletter *British League Review* encapsulated the view; '[w]e advocate a creed of National regeneration and social revival which is bitterly opposed by those who live by anti-national and anti-social activities. Foremost amongst our opponents we find ever and always the Jews.'<sup>64</sup> The anti-Semitism of the League was ardent enough for *Gothic Ripples*, the newspaper of British Nazi group, the Imperial Fascist League, to be scrutinised in policy meetings.<sup>65</sup> Besides verbal attacks the League also sent excessively pro-Jewish letters to the local press, aimed at creating a contrary public response.<sup>66</sup>

The other significant group preaching fascism in London was Victor Burgess's 'Union of British Freedom' (UBF). Burgess had been the British League's director of propaganda, but had split from Hamm to form his own group.<sup>67</sup> Like the League, UBF policy was a thinly veiled revision of the British Union programme, with a principle of 'collective individualism' little different to the BU's economic ideas.<sup>68</sup> As with the book clubs, Mosley attempted to present the British League's street meetings as the work of fellow idealists, rather than part of a formal structure, '[i]t is admitted that this organisation is composed in a large degree of former members of British Union, but it was certainly not instigated or in any way controlled by myself.'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> PRO HO45/24467/209: Special Branch report: British League of Ex-Servicemen and Women.

<sup>61</sup> See PRO HO45/24467/188: Special Branch report, including a copy of E.J.Hamm's pamphlet, *Britain Awake*; *Daily Worker*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 1947.

<sup>62</sup> E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, op. cit., 137.

<sup>63</sup> *Jewish Chronicle* 24<sup>th</sup> November 1944

<sup>64</sup> *British League Review* Vol.1 No.8. See also BOD C6/9/2/1/F1: JDC Misc Papers 1937-69.

<sup>65</sup> PRO HO45/24467/260: Special Branch report: details of British League policy meeting, 8<sup>th</sup> August 1945.

<sup>66</sup> PRO HO45/24467/188: op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> See PRO HO45/24469/349: UBF newsletter *Unity* 1-8, December 1946-October 1947.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*: *Unity* 1

<sup>69</sup> PRO HO45/24469/862171/349: *Mosley Newsletter* 12



The issue from which charged much of the anti-Semitic vitriol of these groups was the issue of Palestine.<sup>70</sup> Britain had the mandate in the region following the War. During the later 1940s militant Jews, seeking the establishment of an Israeli state, clashed with the native Arabic population and the policing British forces. Reports of attacks on these troops created hostility in the British public, which the fascists attempted to develop.<sup>71</sup> As the Jewish anti fascist 43 Group noted; ‘British fascists, no longer able to make blatant anti-Semitism their platform in this country, are turning longing eyes towards troubled Palestine.’<sup>72</sup> Hamm in his memoirs wrote ‘[i]n the immediate post-war years I felt it was my duty as an ex-servicemen to protest against the flogging and hanging of British soldiers in Palestine.’<sup>73</sup> This situation was to ease after the British withdrawal in 1948.

The role of Raven Thomson in the street activities of these groups was to provide a practised voice for the fascist podium as well as a tangible link to the Blackshirt past in the absence of Mosley. So distinctive was his presence that for another Jewish anti-fascist organisation, ‘The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen’ (AJEX) it was a key indicator of fascist meetings. An AJEX survey of the period noted, ‘the presence of Alec Raven Thomson, a prominent pre-war fascist, as a guest speaker for the different organisations.’<sup>74</sup> The appearance of Raven Thomson addressing crowds in London was a potent symbol for all antifascists. Following one such occasion a court case ensued. The defendant’s counsel pertinently enquired of a witness, ‘[d]on’t you agree the Raven Thomson’s presence on the platform would be a provocation?’<sup>75</sup> His performances on the platforms of the League and UBF were flavoured with anti-Semitism, together with anti-Communism.<sup>76</sup> Whilst his anti-Semitic outbursts were not of the crudest kind, he did share the platform with some extreme Jew haters, amongst them Duke Pile who was charged in 1947 for using threatening

<sup>70</sup> BOD C6/9/1/9: JDC report: Anti-Semitic Activities, 1946-47.

<sup>71</sup> R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, op. cit., 260.

<sup>72</sup> *On Guard* 9, April 1948.

<sup>73</sup> E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, op. cit., 140.

<sup>74</sup> See SUA: L.S.Rose, (leading member of AJEX) *Fascism in Britain, Factual Survey No. 2, Survey of open air meetings held by pro-fascist organisations, 1947.*

<sup>75</sup> PRO HO45/24469/383: Special Branch report, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1947.

<sup>76</sup> PRO HO45/24470/407: Special Branch report, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1947.

words including inciting an audience with the words 'burn the synagogues.'<sup>77</sup> When the UBF was attempting to consolidate itself in North London it was to Raven Thomson they turned.<sup>78</sup> He also contributed articles to both the *British League Review* and *Unity* the UBF newspaper.<sup>79</sup> When discord emerged between the local book club and street organisation in Manchester, it was Raven Thomson who mediated.<sup>80</sup> When the League and Modern Thought club together wanted to develop a fascist contingent in Brighton, this co-operation was aided by Raven Thomson's position within both groups.<sup>81</sup> This attempt to establish a Brighton cell was repelled forcibly by anti-fascist forces.

The Government too was not oblivious to the bid to revive fascism. A committee, upon which both the Home secretary and the Lord Chancellor sat was set up to discuss the question of how best to manage fascism, in the face of considerable anti-fascist pressure to see the creed banned. The committee concluded that 'fascism' was too ambiguous a term upon which to proceed in law, that the fascists were too small in number to warrant legislation and that the rights of free speech had to be defended.<sup>82</sup> The monitoring policy in operation since 1933 was continued.

Organised antifascism was to play its part in shaping the development of Mosley fascism after the war. The most militant response of the Jewish community was the formation of the 43 Group as a 'hammer designed to smash the fascists,' and physically remove the menace from the streets. With a pool of 300 'commandos' they disrupted fascist meetings, often violently overrunning platforms. Less confrontational tactics were also employed, such as informing hall proprietors, who had been approached by fascists concealing the nature of the intended meeting, of the real character of the booking. Their successful infiltration of the book club system meant that they had time to prepare counter measures to the fascist plans.

Other Jewish bodies were less inclined to directly smash fascism and believed the activities of the 43 Group were counterproductive, creating publicity

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<sup>77</sup> See PRO HO45/24469/367: Copy of *British League Review*, March 1947. Pile had in his BUF days been prosecuted after an outburst against 'Shylock Moneylenders.' *Manchester Guardian* 25<sup>th</sup> September 1937.

<sup>78</sup> *On Guard* 5, November 1947.

<sup>79</sup> *British League* Vol.2 No.1 July 1947; PRO HO45/24469/349: *Unity* 5, June 1947.

<sup>80</sup> *Daily Worker* 20<sup>th</sup> November 1947.

<sup>81</sup> PRO HO45/24469/367: Special Branch report, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1947.



for the Mosleyites. As in the inter-war period, the Board of Deputies, through its Jewish Defence Council (JDC) encouraged Jews to avoid confrontation with fascists, and let the phenomenon wither away for lack of targets. It also stressed the need for a unified approach to the problem of Jewish defence, and thus wanted the 43 Group to dissolve and bring its strength into the council. Rather than aggressive action, the JDC believed that the successful removal of fascism would be the result of educational initiatives, together with a law for community libel; effectively banning anti-Semitic activities from British streets.<sup>83</sup> Its affiliated body AJEX organised speaking campaigns throughout London, aimed at educating audiences to the nature of fascism.<sup>84</sup>

The Communist Party also played its part in repelling the fascist revival, with its organ *The Daily Worker* particularly adept at destabilising the lives of prominent BU members following the war. When Neil Francis Hawkins re-joined the surgical instruments business he had left to take up a post in the BUF, workers in the business threatened to strike.<sup>85</sup> Hawkins resigned and died shortly after. Elsewhere former BU members attempted to look after each other.<sup>86</sup> Bryan D.E. Donovan, who had been Hawkins' BUF deputy took a position as General Manager of 'London Aero and Motor Services Ltd,' and proceeded to get Raven Thomson a job as the publicity officer. Raven Thomson used the opportunity of contributing to the business's newsletter *Aerial Argosy* to endorse the efficacy of a benign dictatorship.<sup>87</sup> *The Daily Worker* ran a story in February 1947 exposing the involvement of these senior fascists in the business and Raven Thomson was forced to resign.<sup>88</sup> The blow dealt him by the Communists subsequently formed part of his podium speeches.<sup>89</sup>

The result of the anti-fascist response to the Mosleyite bid to establish a presence on the street was violent confrontation, predominantly in North and

<sup>82</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *The Secret State*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, 276.

<sup>83</sup> BOD C6/9/2/F1: *The Jewish Defence Committee of The Board of Deputies 1945-1948*. This report was a general overview of the period. For a regional view on the Board sponsored antifascist activities see, Manchester Central Library, Local Studies Unit, M77/4/1-4: Ministry of Information, Manchester Information Committee

<sup>84</sup> BOD C6/2/9: JDC reports, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1948 & 1<sup>st</sup> May 1948.

<sup>85</sup> *Daily Mirror* 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1945; *Daily Worker*, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1945

<sup>86</sup> There are many instances of the movement looking after its own in the period, particularly with regards to employment opportunities.

<sup>87</sup> 'Handel Press,' a business run by Victor Burgess, printed this paper. See *On Guard* 23, September 1949.

<sup>88</sup> *Daily Worker* 1<sup>st</sup> February 1947.

East London. At Ridley Road in Dalston, a large square became the venue for a series of brawls as fascists and their opponents tried to gain a hearing, whilst subduing their rivals.<sup>90</sup> As a well-known fascist, Raven Thomson was a prominent target, with a police report noting on one occasion his speech at a UBF meeting 'to protest against the murderous attack against my life on the previous evening.'<sup>91</sup> At an early Union Movement meeting his platform was overrun by antifascists.<sup>92</sup> The period was one of great personal danger for him.

Thus Raven Thomson, during the period before the appearance of Union Movement, can be seen as a facilitator for the fascist revival. Mosley needed a printer to produce his philosophy, which Raven Thomson provided. Mosley also had to have his diffuse supporters organised and this role too, Raven Thomson performed. Whilst it would be an error to see the birth of Union Movement as Raven Thomson's doing, his role in keeping Mosley as the central principle of the disjointed groups immediately after the War, meant that in November 1947 a cohesive political organisation was viable. If he failed in any area, it was that the divisions between the intellectuals from the book clubs and the street fighters persisted into Union Movement, a structural weakness that would persist.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> PRO HO45/24469/367: Special branch report, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1947.

<sup>90</sup> *Daily Herald* 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1947.

<sup>91</sup> PRO HO45/24470/407: Special Branch report, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1947.

<sup>92</sup> *Daily Worker* 1<sup>st</sup> March 1948.

<sup>93</sup> G.Thayer, *The British Political Fringe*, op. cit., 49.



## Chapter Seven: Union Movement and Homo Socialis, 1948-55

Union Movement (UM) represented the last attempt of Mosley fascism at political activism.<sup>1</sup> In previous studies of the phenomenon, it has been dismissed as ‘a rather grandiose title for a small coterie of fanatical Mosleyites.’<sup>2</sup> Yet in this study of Raven Thomson’s life and work, to omit his seven years in Union Movement would be to avoid the period when he was secretary to the movement and during the regular absences of Mosley, its substitute leader.<sup>3</sup> Given the constraints on fascism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, this was no small task, particularly as the movement proposed a revision on the pre-war fascistic political philosophy that alienated sections of the already tiny recruiting base.

Historical studies of this period in British fascism are sparse. As Eatwell noted, writing on post-war fascism has predominantly been the remit of journalists and social scientists.<sup>4</sup> These works have concentrated on later attempts at a British fascism such as the National Front and British National Party, with UM used to illustrate the continuity of fascism in Britain.<sup>5</sup> Yet Union Movement was more than a minor repetition of the BUF. Whilst Union Movement’s 1,500 activists could never rival the peaks of BUF membership, it made significant revisions to the earlier movement’s philosophical and tactical template and allowed Mosley’s influence to persist into the latter half of the Twentieth Century.

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst the Mosley supporters their organisation was always referred to as ‘Union Movement,’ not ‘The Union Movement,’ and this convention has been continued through this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> R.Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1995, 260

<sup>3</sup> A.Poole, ‘Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,’ in M.Cronin (ed.) *The Failure of British Fascism*, Macmillan, London, 1995, 68.

<sup>4</sup> R.Eatwell, ‘Fascism and Political Racism in Post-War Britain,’ in T.Kushner and K.Lunn, *Traditions of Intolerance*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989, 220.

<sup>5</sup> Idem., ‘Why has the Extreme Right Failed in Britain,’ in P.Hainsworth, *The Extreme Right in Europe and the USA*, Pinter, London, 1992, 176-7.

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Britain should now join with the other peoples of Europe, just as we English previously joined with the Scottish, Welsh and Irish to make our present civilisation.<sup>6</sup>

The most distinctive element of post-war Mosleyism was its 'extension of patriotism,' beyond the confines of fascistic nationalism to a policy of 'Europe-a-Nation.' British Union had always stood for a policy of Britain first. After the War, Mosley dismissed this belief, arguing that; 'we were all too national, too narrowly concentrated upon securing the interests of our own nations.'<sup>7</sup> As the aeroplane had made Britain's traditional island defences obsolete in the 1930s, in the era of the A-bomb, safety now relied upon the military and political unity of Europe,

The union of Europe is now necessary to the survival of every nation in this continent. The new science presents at once the best opportunity and the worst danger of all history. It has destroyed for ever the island immunity of Britain and compelled the organisation of life in wider areas.<sup>8</sup>

The result of such a policy would be a 'natural brotherhood of Europeans, which derives from a close relationship of blood, culture, tradition, history, thought, art and human achievement.'<sup>9</sup>

We in Europe have deeper roots, a higher culture, a greater tradition, a longer and more tested strength, a harder vitality, a finer purpose and further vision than any other power on earth.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the 'fiery ferment of the European soul,' that had produced Shakespeare and Goethe would be united after the ravages of war.<sup>11</sup> A culturally cohesive Europe, would, in Union Movement proposals, be augmented by political unity, thereby making the continent a third global superpower with the United States and Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> This new unified Europe would have a central government and a single currency, the Europa.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> British Library: Anon 'Policy of Union Movement and what it means,' UM Pamphlet n.d.

<sup>7</sup> O.Mosley, 'The Extension of Patriotism' *Mosley Newsletter* 3, 8

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. cited in O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 433.

<sup>9</sup> *Union* 48, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1949.

<sup>10</sup> O.Mosley, *The European Situation: The Third Force*, Mosley Publications, Ramsbury, 1950, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1948.

<sup>12</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,': The failed political resurrection of Sir Oswald Mosley,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.33 No.2, 1998, 247. The term was first used in East London in 1948. See O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 446.

<sup>13</sup> *Union* 125, 15<sup>th</sup> July 1950.



Mosley's new philosophy, Skidelsky has argued, was part of his ongoing attempt to heal the wounds of the First World War.<sup>14</sup> Whilst Raven Thomson accepted this new geopolitical stance, his key motivation for European nationalism was the threat posed by the Soviet Union to a disunited Europe,

[A]s a conglomerate of independent sovereign states there is no future for European civilisation whatsoever... Unless the European states become combined in one European nation, it is quite inevitable that they must succumb to Soviet Russia, just as the Greek city states were overrun by the Macedonians.<sup>15</sup>

Communism was portrayed as a disease, with a united Europe the cure,

A movement of steel is required to cut out this seditious cancer. Union Movement is such a Movement tempered in the flames of persecution and hardened on the anvil by the blows of destiny.<sup>16</sup>

This overreaching concern for the protection of Europe against Communist invasion, led to a controversial proposal for the reunification and rearmament of Germany only a few years after the War. As Mosley insisted 'Germany belongs to Europe, and without her European union will remain a dream.'<sup>17</sup>

[I]t is absolutely necessary that all elements which are genuinely opposed to Communism throughout Europe should now be united beyond the bitterness and prejudices of the last war to defend our homeland against the pagan barbarism with which we are threatened from the East.<sup>18</sup>

Raven Thomson argued '[y]ou can get peace with the Soviet Union once we are so strong that they dare not attack us.'<sup>19</sup> For him they represented the Mongol threat of the Twentieth Century.<sup>20</sup> In addition to endorsing the deployment of a defensive army, he proposed that Asia should also unite within its own self-contained sphere of interest; '[w]e are by no means of the opinion that European culture ought to dominate the earth, as other peoples, especially in Asia, have just as much right as we to have their own long standing cultural traditions.'<sup>21</sup>

This notion of a single pan-European entity was, for Raven Thomson, a new mutiny against destiny, which without naming Spengler, paid homage to the historian's vision of a unified 'Faustian' Culture in Europe.

<sup>14</sup> R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, Macmillan, London, 1975, 484-5.

<sup>15</sup> A. Raven Thomson, 'World History' op. cit., 137-140.

<sup>16</sup> *Union* 128, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1950.

<sup>17</sup> *Union* 3, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1948.

<sup>18</sup> Sheffield University Archive (SUA) Saunders Papers C13: Union Movement Speakers Notes 9

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Worker* 27<sup>th</sup> August 1951

<sup>20</sup> *Union* 99, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1950.

<sup>21</sup> *Union* 260, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1953.

This union is not in the interest of any class, nor in the interest of any extra-European power, nor in the service of any party-political ideal. It is total, it begins with the spiritual and incorporates the political, national, racial, industrial, legal, economic and military. Its aim is the salvation of the West and the erection of that noble foundation of a Golden Age which will once again make the West – as it was in 1900 – the focal point of world history.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the preservation of a thousand years of European cultural mission appears to have been central. It was particularly important in the post-war world, where Europe was pinioned by the two global superpowers, with Britain used by the United States as an aircraft carrier off the coast of the continental mainland.<sup>23</sup>

Europeans are not so much concerned with any “world conflict” between rival ideologies as they are with the survival of Europe as the cultural centre of the modern world... They are deeply conscious of their own tradition and are not prepared to subordinate its glorious achievements to the crudities of the most backward of all the European peoples [the United States], especially when that people gives expression to its hatred of traditional European values and everywhere appears as the advance guard in a war of revenge against former European domination... Europeans will fight only for Europe. The sooner Americans realise this and show their concern for the preservation of Europe and her values in a world which owes this continent such culture and progress as it now possesses, the sooner it will be possible to build Europe to a position when she will be able to defend herself unaided and join with America in preserving the balance of power in the world as a whole, without the need of another bloodthirsty ideological conflict.<sup>24</sup>

Through Europe-a-Nation, there was the opportunity for modern Europe to recapture the historic unity that had existed before the divisions of the Reformation and French Revolution,<sup>25</sup> ‘That glory of civilisation, which glowed upon the affairs of ancient Greece, and which burst to new life and magnificence in the European Renaissance.’<sup>26</sup> As he wrote in 1948,

Europe, which has led the world as the source of Western Civilisation, would have nothing to fear in modern times from renewed barbarian invasion had she retained some measure of the natural sense of union, which all Europeans recognised in former days.<sup>27</sup>

This unity would be preserved internally by the bonds of common culture, and externally by a high quality European army.<sup>28</sup> The result would be ‘[a] great and

<sup>22</sup> *Union* 6, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1948.

<sup>23</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: Union Movement speakers’ Notes 13

<sup>24</sup> A.Raven Thomson, ‘America and Europe,’ *Nation Europa*, November 1953, 8

<sup>25</sup> *Union* 6, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1948.

<sup>26</sup> *Union* 246, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1953.

<sup>27</sup> *Union* 9, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1948.

<sup>28</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: Union Movement speakers’ notes 14.



mighty age of the ultimate flowering of Western Culture lies ahead, and all that we are suffering today is but the necessary ordeal through which we must pass to fit ourselves for our future greatness.'<sup>29</sup>

The BUF's utopian vision of Britain's economic strength had been founded on the British Empire as the provider both of raw materials and markets for manufactured goods.<sup>30</sup> In Union Movement, the place of Empire began to diminish in importance. Instead, the development of Africa as the 'partner' in European prosperity was increasingly proposed. As one study has noted, 'Mosley's [post-war] thesis was practically identical to his BUF policies except that he expanded them onto an international scale rather than limited them exclusively to Britain.'<sup>31</sup> In *Union*, the movement's paper, an early article developed the African idea.

Nearly the whole of Africa is in the possession of one or another of the Western European States. The success of the Union of Europe depends upon the supply of urgently needed raw materials and food stuffs which a virgin continent can produce in profusion, under the leadership of realist men of action who can inspire European youth to constructive effort to make good the ruin of a totally unnecessary war.<sup>32</sup>

Union Movement did not anticipate needing more than the northern areas of Africa; 'generously' allowing the equatorial zones to be retained by the native populations. In this 'White Africa,' Europe would acquire raw materials and through development of the region, a common European adventure, fostering unity.<sup>33</sup>

The movement's attitude to the continent was heavily mired in racism. The idea of native government in a developed White Africa was sharply criticised as wasting material advances on witch doctors and 'Ju Ju Men.'<sup>34</sup> The movement argued that for a thousand years the Africans had had an opportunity to develop their continent, and had failed to do so, prompting European intervention.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Union* 33, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1948.

<sup>30</sup> Anon, *Objects of 'Union Movement'*, Mosley Publications, Ramsbury, n.d.

<sup>31</sup> G.Thayer, *The British Political Fringe*, Blond, London, 1965, 41.

<sup>32</sup> *Union* 2, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1948.

<sup>33</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 485.

<sup>34</sup> *Union* 2, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1948; *Union* 52, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1949.

<sup>35</sup> *Union* 60, 9<sup>th</sup> April 1949.

Just as the decline of a civilisation encourages the re-appearance of many dark superstitions in Africa, so the resurgence of Union Movement will invigorate the Negro too. But instead of encouraging him in [the] futile pipe dream of "Africa for the Negro," Union Movement instead offers him the reality of economic self reliance and the opportunity of developing his essentially local cultures.<sup>36</sup>

Raven Thomson too engaged in this argument; Africa was for him 'sunk in the superstition of the Ju-Ju man and the ritual murderer.'<sup>37</sup> Writing in 1955, he maintained that Africa was without an indigenous culture south of the Sahara desert, stocked with 'an ignorant and largely barbaric native race.'<sup>38</sup> Segregation was thus a 'humane policy,' for a colonised Africa as 'the only just means of removing the cause of friction which has become so dangerous throughout South and East Africa.'<sup>39</sup>

The idea of using Africa as an insulated economic trading bloc, was an elaborate pipe dream for Union Movement. The sums involved in constructing an industrial infrastructure across the vast continent were beyond the means of the European nations, all of which were attempting to re-stabilise after the War. The grand system also relied upon Africa accepting European control, in an era when independence was becoming a key issue for many African states. The continent was also lacking in raw materials, such as minerals, and so Mosley's Europe would still be required to trade competitively outside its enclosed sphere of interest.<sup>40</sup> The project would also take decades of preparation. This last point seems to have been recognised by Union Movement, which speculated that for a limited period, autarkic trading with South America prior to the establishment of Eurafica would be necessary.<sup>41</sup>

Upon the economic prosperity founded on Africa, Union Movement proposed a new socio-political structure, 'European Socialism.'

European Socialism is the development by a fully united Europe of all the resources in our continent, in white Africa and in South Africa, for the benefit of the peoples of Europe and of those other European lands, with every energy and incentive that the active leadership of European government can give to private enterprise, workers' ownership, or any other method of progress which science and a dynamic system of

<sup>36</sup> *Union* 31, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1948.

<sup>37</sup> *Union* 52, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1949.

<sup>38</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'World History' unpublished manuscript, 1955, 158; 156-61.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>40</sup> *New Statesman and Nation* 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1949.

<sup>41</sup> *Union* 225, 26<sup>th</sup> July 1952.



government finds most effective for the enrichment of all our people and the lifting of European civilisation to ever higher forms of life.<sup>42</sup>

The framework for this new ethos was syndicalism, where workers would participate in the running of industry. As the movement argued, 'Syndicalism not Socialism is the true revolutionary course of British workers to pursue, maintaining and extending the gains achieved by their pioneering forefathers.'<sup>43</sup> The system involved controlling wages and thereby consumption in the management of the economy. Prices would be controlled if a monopoly prompted artificially high prices.<sup>44</sup> As Mosley wrote '[d]evelopments such as automation will also oblige the active leadership of government in a constructive wage-price policy to prevent production outstripping demand and causing an economic crash.'<sup>45</sup> Adequate salaries were promised for all, higher salaries would be used to attract workers into desired industries.<sup>46</sup> European Socialism also attempted to reconcile the need for individual initiative, with worker control of larger businesses, '[i]nitial invention and later the guiding concept is almost invariably the work of some individual...our industrial democracy means that the same incentives to individual initiative are translated into a more collective form and are diffused through all the workers who own, control and can further develop their own industry.'<sup>47</sup> Raven Thomson chose to view this change as a 'management revolution.' Again for him the real benefit of the system was a strong Europe to oppose Communism; 'European Socialism alone, as the faith of Union Movement, possesses the vital spark to ignite the flame, which will yet drive back the Communist menace.'<sup>48</sup>

The system envisaged three types of industry, small private enterprises, medium sized companies, and large concerns.<sup>49</sup> Large companies, that had in Britain undergone nationalisation, a Union Movement government would examine the potential for worker run industries. Mosley, writing in 1954, noted; 'personally I believe that workers' ownership of completely developed industries is an immense possibility which should be given the fairest chance in a series of

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<sup>42</sup> O.Mosley, 'Automation: Problem and Solution,' *The European*, 32, October 1955, 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Union* 19, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1948.

<sup>44</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 494-6.

<sup>45</sup> O.Mosley, 'European Socialism,' *The European* 39, May 1956, 16.

<sup>46</sup> E.J.Hamm, *The Evil Good Men do*, op. cit., 190.

<sup>47</sup> *Union* 145, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1950.

<sup>48</sup> *Union* 124, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1950.

<sup>49</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 495.

well thought out experiments... [the] workers are perfectly capable of acting in union and discipline for great ends which they clearly understand.'<sup>50</sup> The John Lewis Partnership was repeatedly cited as a model for large industry in the future.<sup>51</sup> Corporatism, the policy emblem of the BUF, was dropped as too bureaucratic, and 'failed to admit worker ownership and therefore is a different system.'<sup>52</sup> Small companies would be controlled by their founders, with medium-sized companies run as a partnership of workers and shareholders.<sup>53</sup> In an attempt not to alienate old BU members the new system was described as the 'new sane syndicalism of corporatism.' European Socialism instead proposed a wage/price mechanism for economic planning.<sup>54</sup> Given the vast energies Raven Thomson expended during the 30s on the Corporate State, it is somewhat startling how easily he dropped the idea after the War. One reason for this may have been the experience of internment; enthusiasm for a powerful corporate state was understandably diminished.<sup>55</sup>

One of the principle arguments for this form of syndicalism was the failure of the nationalised industries to provide either greater worker integration or general prosperity. Nationalisation, it was argued, had merely given power to the bureaucrats.<sup>56</sup> It also inhibited progress through its failure to reward initiative and enterprise. The Welfare State was accused of eliminating the impetus for endeavour.<sup>57</sup> The result was that 'instead of the workers giving willing service to the state in the nationalised industries, they have been encouraged to regard the state as a universal provider to protect them from the cradle to the grave without any effort on their part.'<sup>58</sup> In contrast, Union Movement proposals attempted to introduce some social safeguards into a system that in all other respects was unrestrained Capitalism. The result of these proposals would, according to one commentator, have been 'a rather sluggish, high-consumption society, with a small, fast growing sector of advanced

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<sup>50</sup> O.Mosley, 'European Socialism' cited in G.Thayer, *The British Political Fringe*, op. cit., 41; O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 436.

<sup>51</sup> *Union* 63, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1949; *Union* 64, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1949; *Union* 92, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1949.

<sup>52</sup> O.Mosley, 'European Socialism,' op. cit., 24.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

<sup>54</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 238; See O.Mosley, *My Life*, op. cit., 435.

<sup>55</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,'' op. cit., 248.

<sup>56</sup> *Union* 5, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1948.

<sup>57</sup> *Union* 76, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1949.

<sup>58</sup> *Union* 202, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1952.



technology created and run by an elite of creative entrepreneurs; a modern parallel, and at a much higher level of affluence, to a Seventeenth Century mercantilist economy.’<sup>59</sup>

The policy of Union Movement moved away from disgraced fascism, whilst keeping enough of the British Union rationale in place to satisfy older supporters. As a programme built on compromise it failed to attract support from any quarter. In much of his writing, Raven Thomson was attempting to convince the ex-BU contingent within UM of the need for the new European policy, noting later; ‘it was very difficult to persuade people brought up on the policy of “Britain first” that the Union of Europe had become an absolute necessity for our survival.’<sup>60</sup> Much was made in Mosley’s early post-war work, of the continuity of his new ideas from fascism. The chief piece of evidence cited for this was his 1937 article ‘The World Alternative,’ where he proposed a vision of Europe led by the four fascist nations, Britain, Germany, Italy and France.<sup>61</sup> Both Griffin and Thurlow accept the European dimension in Mosley’s inter-war fascism.<sup>62</sup> Poole has noted, however, the significant difference between a fraternity of European fascist states and the integrated system of Europe-a-Nation.<sup>63</sup> In June 1948 a member lost a court case for libel when Union Movement was described as fascist, but old fascists were mystified by the move away from a philosophy of ‘Britain first.’<sup>64</sup> It has been argued, ‘Mosley’s extensive post-1945 writings undoubtedly represent one of the most sophisticated expositions of policy to come from a fascist leader.’<sup>65</sup> However, Mosley’s influence remained in the realm of ideas, with potential recruits discouraged by the new lexicon; ‘The notion of ‘Europe a Nation,’ ‘Eurafrica’ and ‘European Socialism’ was either of no interest or beyond comprehension to the average man or woman.’<sup>66</sup> Eatwell has noted that the working classes appeared alienated by the wage/price system

<sup>59</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 496.

<sup>60</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: Letter from Raven Thomson to R.Saunders, 5 December 1950.

<sup>61</sup> O.Mosley, ‘The World Alternative,’ *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.2 No.3, 1936, 377-95.

<sup>62</sup> R.Griffin, ‘Europe for the Europeans: Fascist Myths of the European New Order, 1922-1992,’ Brookes School of Business, Occasional Paper, <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff/europ.txt>, 22, 24; R.C.Thurlow, ‘The Guardian of the ‘Sacred Flame,’ op. cit., 247.

<sup>63</sup> A.Poole, ‘Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,’ op. cit., 69.

<sup>64</sup> Board of Deputies of British Jews Archive (BOD) C6/9/1/11: Jewish Defence Committee (JDC) report, 24<sup>th</sup> June 1948.

<sup>65</sup> R.Eatwell, ‘Why has the Extreme Right Failed in Britain,’ op. cit., 176.

<sup>66</sup> A.Poole, ‘Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,’ op. cit., 67.

and the new concern with European rather than just British interests.<sup>67</sup> These shortcomings were to result in a movement that remained unpopular, and barely subsisted throughout its lifetime. That it survived at all had much to do with Raven Thomson's contribution as Secretary.

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The history of Union Movement has been written as a chronicle of failure. It has thus been written off as another vehicle for Mosley, 'an ambitious title for what was really little more than a loose organisation to disseminate his ideas.'<sup>68</sup> It was never a serious contender for power in Britain. In all the elections it openly contested it never even came close to securing a seat.<sup>69</sup> Yet political success was not the immediate goal of the movement.

This is the order of nature and of destiny. First comes the idea, then the inspired and dedicated elite who declare that great things shall not die, but strive towards yet higher forms of greatness. Then comes the mass of the people, their eyes opened, by the shock of betrayal and the sad urge of coming suffering, to see a standard raised long since those who had dared all and given all. We now invite men and women to be of that proud company.<sup>70</sup>

As with the BUF, a reliance on economic crisis to generate support remained, with Mosley arguing '[i]deas so great and so decisive as the union of Europe are only fully implemented with the aid of some compulsion from events.'<sup>71</sup> Mosley summed up his vision of Union Movement in similar terms; 'Let them hear a clear voice and let them feel a strong hand. Then in the real crisis they will listen to the voice and reach for the hand. The voice is our idea and the hand is our movement.'<sup>72</sup> Union Movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s was not envisaged as a mass organisation, but a training ground for a cadre of Mosley elite.<sup>73</sup> During Raven Thomson's time as the movement's secretary, his principle task was the development of this strong hand; '[t]he task today is to build our

<sup>67</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Fascism and Political Racism in post-war Britain,' op. cit., 224.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>69</sup> A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 65.

<sup>70</sup> *Union* 209, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1952.

<sup>71</sup> O.Mosley, 'The European Situation,' *The European* 11, January 1954, 15; R.Eatwell, 'Fascism and Political Racism in post-war Britain,' op. cit., 221

<sup>72</sup> *Union* 69, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1949.

<sup>73</sup> SUA Saunders' Papers: Circular from the Leader cited in R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,' op. cit., 251



Movement. The task of tomorrow is to win the whole people to our side.’<sup>74</sup> His position was further strengthened by Mosley’s decision in 1951 to take up residence in Eire.<sup>75</sup> With Mosley away, the task of running Union Movement was left to Raven Thomson. It was he who had to struggle with the constraints that would continually frustrate the movement’s development.

Mosley’s son Nicholas, in the biography he wrote of his father, noted that whilst the fascist leader dealt with high ideals with one hand with the other he let the rats out of the gutter. This Jekyll and Hyde nature was evident in the recruits Union Movement attracted.<sup>76</sup> Two factions were visible, the intellectuals and the street activists;<sup>77</sup> ‘At the top, the Union Movement has as much the air of some eccentric religious sect as it has of a political party. Lower down, racialist propaganda and attacks on coloured immigration are the staple activities of the rank and file.’<sup>78</sup> This second group appeared to hamper the movement as much as bolster the numbers. In 1948 Tommy Moran attempted to recruit some old BUF members, though without much success. Part of the reason for this was highlighted in an anti-fascist report wherein; ‘signs are not lacking that those few of the pre-war high level fascists who were prepared to give Union Movement a chance to prove itself are not being encouraged in their allegiance to their leader by the leeway given to the ‘thug’ elements.’<sup>79</sup> At the other extreme, Union Movement was not enough like BU for former fascist toughs, who wanted militarism, Britain first and anti-Semitism.<sup>80</sup> Victor Burgess, a leading figure in post-war Mosley fascism, encapsulated the difficulty; ‘if the old man say’s we’re not to use the salute then I reckon we’ll lose half the membership, perhaps more.’<sup>81</sup> By 1954, both Mosley and Raven Thomson were concerned by the lack of old comrades who had failed to rally to Union Movement.<sup>82</sup> New recruits failed to produce anyone of great promise or prominence; ‘...UM was to exhibit

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<sup>74</sup> *Union* 100, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1950

<sup>75</sup> D.Eisenberg, *The Re-emergence of Fascism*, MacGibbon and Kee, London, 1967, 39.

<sup>76</sup> R.Eatwell ‘Fascism and Political Racism in post-war Britain,’ op. cit., 222.

<sup>77</sup> BOD C6/2/9: JDC report, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1948. See also G.Thayer, *The British Political Fringe*, op. cit., 47-9; R.C.Thurlow, ‘The Guardian of the ‘Sacred Flame,’’ op. cit., 250;. A.Poole, ‘Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,’ op. cit., 61.

<sup>78</sup> C.Cross, ‘Britain’s Racialists,’ *New Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1965, 10.

<sup>79</sup> BOD C6/10/4/2: Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen report, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1948.

<sup>80</sup> T.Grundy, *Memoirs of a Fascist Childhood*, op. cit., 96; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 491.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

an increasingly elderly profile of ageing revolutionaries amongst its functionaries.<sup>83</sup> Mosley only came out against the street fighters in 1959 declaring, '[w]e have decided... to stop the gangsterism in our party.'<sup>84</sup>

The figure of Mosley was of mixed impact to the fortunes of Union Movement. As the personification of inter-war British fascism, he may have been an attraction for a sympathetic minority, but in general he was a reviled figure. As one commentator on this period has argued; 'UM's image and symbolism and Mosley's style of delivering speeches all smacked of the earlier movement and not enough had been done to convince the public otherwise.'<sup>85</sup> As Thurlow has noted, '[a] new consensus had formed. State and society were hostile to all forms of political activity which would be seen as friendly to or influenced by Nazism.'<sup>86</sup> Thus the movement had the difficult task of both disassociating itself from its past, and retaining its fascist members. Attempts were made to define the movement's position as beyond both fascism and democracy.<sup>87</sup> Raven Thomson's too tried to address this tension within the ranks with an assessment of the new movement as, 'not 'Fascism' in the old sense of the word with its appeal to over-riding, intransigent patriotic sentiments. It lays greater emphasis upon the self-governing institutions which Fascism only developed in its later stages, giving scope for individual initiative within the bounds of national and European well-being.'<sup>88</sup>

Of crucial importance to the frustration of post-war Mosley fascism were the prevailing socio-economic conditions. The period after the war was characterised by prosperity, full employment and a welfare state promising life long care.<sup>89</sup> The first-past-the-post electoral system continued to frustrate the success of small political groups.<sup>90</sup> As Lewis concluded '[a]ssured by Mosley of the imminence of crisis, his minute band of adherents struggled on in the face of

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<sup>82</sup> BOD C6/10/4/2: 'Current Notes' for week ending 31<sup>st</sup> July 1948; SUA Saunders Papers D3: Letter from C.Watts to R.Saunders February 1954.

<sup>83</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 244

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in A.Del Boca and M.Giovana, *Fascism Today – A World Survey*, Pantheon books, New York, 1969, 264.

<sup>85</sup> A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 66.

<sup>86</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 233.

<sup>87</sup> See A.Norris, *Union Movement: is it fascist?*, Raven Books, London, 1948.

<sup>88</sup> *Union 70*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1949.

<sup>89</sup> N.Nugent, 'The political parties of the extreme right,' in N.Nugent and R. King, *The British Right*, Saxon House, London, 1977, 185-6; A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 65



an undesirable wartime legacy, full employment and growing prosperity and competition for membership from other quarters.<sup>91</sup>

The state also aided in the confinement of Union Movement to the political margins, limiting its access to paper stocks for the newspaper *Union*, and stepping in to ban provocative marches that might gather publicity.<sup>92</sup> The lack of media interest the movement received indicates a continuation of the pre-war understanding between government and the press that Mosley was to be denied coverage. The few reports it received were usually dealing with disturbances at meetings.<sup>93</sup> Despite antifascist criticisms to the contrary, police policy appears to have been generally even handed.<sup>94</sup> Local councils, under the guise of concern for damage and disorder, denied them the use of town halls, which also deprived Union Movement of the big venues where Mosley, Raven Thomson and others could effectively use the oratorical style honed in the BUF.<sup>95</sup> The movement was confined to schoolrooms for their gatherings. The only large venue available to them was Kensington Town Hall, which became the location for much conflict as both fascists and their opposition congregated.

Organised anti-fascism also ensured that Union Movement was effectively contained.<sup>96</sup> The Jewish Board of Deputies pursued a policy of liaison with the police, whilst using its influence to limit the movement's use of halls and schools.<sup>97</sup> Board affiliated group AJEX (Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen) through operations 'Morale' and 'Freedom' occupied regular Union Movement speaking pitches across London.<sup>98</sup> Anti-fascist activity also ensured that the movement was contained within the capital. An attempt to establish a presence in Brighton, led to a violent melee as UM clashed with antifascists.<sup>99</sup> Raven Thomson attempted to make light of the opposition, yet at the Brighton

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<sup>90</sup> A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 67.

<sup>91</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 241.

<sup>92</sup> *Worlds Press News* 4<sup>th</sup> March 1948; *Manchester Guardian* 29<sup>th</sup> April 1948; *Daily Herald* 4<sup>th</sup> October 1949.

<sup>93</sup> A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 66. See also R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 245; T.Grundy, *Memoirs of a Fascist Childhood*, op. cit., 92.

<sup>94</sup> *Daily Worker*, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1948.

<sup>95</sup> *Hampstead News* 17<sup>th</sup> February 1949.

<sup>96</sup> A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 66.

<sup>97</sup> BOD C6/2/5: JDC report, May 1949.

<sup>98</sup> BOD C6/6/11: Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen report 1949-56: 'Post War outdoor campaign' n.d.

<sup>99</sup> *Daily Herald* 16<sup>th</sup> February 1948; *Reynolds News*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1948.



meeting he narrowly evaded serious assault. Speaking at a meeting in November 1952 he was drowned out by anti-fascist chanting.<sup>100</sup>

The strategy of the Union Movement altered in response to these new constraints. Instead of relying on marches and meetings, a policy of infiltration into other groups was endorsed. Mosley, writing in 1948, noted that 'for the time being we must adopt the principle of dispersion not concentration.'<sup>101</sup> Infiltration, he argued, was '...a different and less pleasant technique, but it is an effective answer to the repression of our propaganda....'<sup>102</sup> This reflected Mosley's own belief, that in the post war world guerrilla tactics would prevail, 'to hit without being hit,' as he noted in *The European*.<sup>103</sup>

Whilst infiltration had been a feature of Mosley fascism since the January Club of 1933-4, in Union Movement a distinct modification was made.<sup>104</sup> BUF members had not been allowed to join other political groups. Now involvement in other parties was allowed. This led to a short period when the movement appeared to be liasing closely with some younger members of the Liberal Party.<sup>105</sup> Though the movement denied it, this was clearly an attempt to gain influence within the Liberals in the event of a coalition government.<sup>106</sup> The Party quickly suppressed the link. The existence of a Union Movement 'Bow Ratepayers Association' similar to the group used by the Communist Party to frustrate the BUF in the 1937 LCC elections, illustrates further the adopted covert strategy.<sup>107</sup> They also seemed to have attempted to permeate Catholic churches and societies, alongside more conventional propaganda targets such as factories.<sup>108</sup>

The origins of this infiltration policy are unclear. It may have begun with Mosley, as his 1948 statement was the first official endorsement of the policy. Yet both Raven Thomson and prominent ex BU member Charlie Watts may also

<sup>100</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: Union Movement speakers' notes 9; BOD C6/5/2/6: Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen report, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1952.

<sup>101</sup> *Union* 13, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1948.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> O.Mosley, 'The European Situation,' *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>104</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,' *op. cit.*, 251.

<sup>105</sup> *Union* 246, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1953; *Union* 262 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1953.

<sup>106</sup> *Union* 254, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1953.

<sup>107</sup> *Manchester Guardian* 26<sup>th</sup> August 1948.

<sup>108</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3: JDC report, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1948. *Union* noted a rising number of Roman Catholics were buying the paper. See *Union* 24, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1948 & *Union* 27, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1948; *Daily Graphic* 15<sup>th</sup> January 1949.



have contributed to its development. Watts endorsed the principle in his letters to Robert Saunders, a leading Dorset Fascist, shortly after the war.<sup>109</sup> Raven Thomson had been asked by Mosley as early as 1938 to examine Communist infiltration strategy. In speaker's notes for the movement, Raven Thomson saw these infiltrators as preparing for the acceptance of Union Movement policy once crisis had removed support for the traditional political parties.<sup>110</sup> He was convinced that such tactics were temporary, prior to the commencement of more forceful activities.<sup>111</sup>

How successful this strategy proved is unclear. As a covert operation perhaps this in itself indicates a level of success. The technique does provide new insights into the 'departure' of certain Mosleyites after the War. Robert Saunders's attempt to become the president of the National Farmers Union and Hull fascist John Charnley's entry into his local Chamber of Commerce and the Conservative Party, can thus both be seen as part of this strategy of infiltration.<sup>112</sup> In a letter to Saunders in 1955, Mosley endorsed his efforts, writing '[a]s you know I am very much in accord with your recent activities that seem to be leading to good results. The first thing is to build yourself up a strong position which will be important for the movement when the moment comes.'<sup>113</sup>

Perhaps the most dubious element of UM strategy was the connections that it established across the globe with the remnants of Fascism and Nazism, together with a growing appreciation for South Africa's apartheid regime. Yet it was only amongst these groups that Mosley had any credibility.<sup>114</sup> Much of the movement's view of Africa came from a former South African Defence minister, and committed apartheid supporter, Oswald Pirow. Pirow visited Mosley in April 1948, spurred, according to a Raven Thomson editorial in *Union*, by an interest in the ideas within *The Alternative*.<sup>115</sup> At a press conference both men denied any

<sup>109</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,' op. cit., 251-2.

<sup>110</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: Union Movement speakers notes 15 cited in R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,' op. cit., 251.

<sup>111</sup> BOD C6/5/1/5: Observer's report 5<sup>th</sup> March 1948.

<sup>112</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,' op. cit., 252-3; J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 252.

<sup>113</sup> SUA Saunders' Papers D1: Letter from O.Mosley to R.Saunders 21<sup>st</sup> June 1955.

<sup>114</sup> C.Cross, 'Britain's Racialists,' op. cit., 10.

<sup>115</sup> *Union* 10, 17<sup>th</sup> April 1948. See also E.J.Hamm, *The Evil Good Men Do*, Sanctuary Press, London, 1988, 74-6. *Union* described Pirow as 'South Africa's man of destiny. See *Union* 222, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1952.



formal link but clearly were in broad agreement about African policy.<sup>116</sup> Pirow contributed an article to Mosley's intellectual journal, *The European*, in which he developed his ideas for the survival of the white man in Africa. There was even a brief discussion of the emigration to South Africa of a number of the Mosleyites, prior to the emergence of UM.<sup>117</sup> In 1959, Mosley visited the country where he met several government ministers.<sup>118</sup>

More chilling was the affiliation that the movement cultivated amongst international Nazi groups. Whilst it is unlikely the movement was a member of 'Ostara,' the 4<sup>th</sup> Reich organisation, as one anti-fascist commentator argued, the movement endorsed these organisations.<sup>119</sup> In a *Union* editorial, *Der Weg*, the paper of the Nazi enclave in Brazil, was discussed.<sup>120</sup> UM members provided homes for the visiting children of Nazi dignitaries.<sup>121</sup> Mosley expressed support for the Nazi World Alliance meeting in Sweden in 1951, but did not attend.<sup>122</sup> The philosophical forum for much of the neo-fascist politics in the 1950s was the 'monthly of European regeneration,' the journal *Nation Europa*.<sup>123</sup> Run by an ex SS officer, Arthur Ehrhardt, it presented regular contributions from Mosley, Raven Thomson and other Union Movement members. Antifascists called it 'the brains trust of the Fascist international.'<sup>124</sup> Within its pages could be found adverts for other Nazi journals.<sup>125</sup> It has been credited with perpetuating Nazi ideas into the late twentieth century.<sup>126</sup> In the 1960s it engaged in open holocaust revisionism, stating that the concentration camps had been a myth.<sup>127</sup> Raven Thomson represented Britain on the editorial board.<sup>128</sup>

This casting around for the remnants of fascism among the rubble of middle Europe, gained Union Movement some notoriety, particularly in the case

<sup>116</sup> BOD C6/2/9 'Oswald Pirow and the Union Movement' notes from the press conference 16<sup>th</sup> April 1948; *Natal Witness* 30<sup>th</sup> December 1947 cited in *Wiener Library Bulletin* 2, 1947-1948, 8.

<sup>117</sup> T.Grundy, *Memoirs of a Fascist Childhood*, op. cit., 22-4.

<sup>118</sup> D.Eisenberg, *The Re-emergence of Fascism* op. cit., 40-41.

<sup>119</sup> M.Beckman, *The 43 Group*, op. cit., 167.

<sup>120</sup> *Union* 221, 28<sup>th</sup> June 1952.

<sup>121</sup> See T.Grundy, *Memoirs of a Fascist Childhood*, op. cit., 84.

<sup>122</sup> *Wiener Library Bulletin* 6, 1952, 21.

<sup>123</sup> See D.Eisenberg, *The Re-emergence of Fascism*, op. cit., 201-2; See A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 75.

<sup>124</sup> *Wiener Library Bulletin* 6, 1952, 21

<sup>125</sup> *Wiener Library Bulletin* 12, 1958, 51

<sup>126</sup> It was 'probably the most potent agency for maintaining contact among the champions and abettors of Nazidom all over the world.' *Wiener Library Bulletin* 9, 1955, 42.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>128</sup> P.Rees, *Bibliography of British Fascism*, Harvester, Sussex, 206.



of *Deutsches Fugblatt*.<sup>129</sup> This was a German language newspaper the movement smuggled into Germany, where the production of fascist literature was banned.<sup>130</sup> With its translation of a *Mosley Newsletter* article entitled, 'Race is the first reality of European Union,' the movement was accused by antifascists of planning to 're-introduce Nazi propaganda into Germany.'<sup>131</sup> *The Daily Worker* accused it of getting recently demobilised fascists in the army to re-enlist for tours in Germany, there to link with hidden Nazi groups.<sup>132</sup> This was strongly denied in *Union*.<sup>133</sup> As has been noted it was also linked to personnel proposing apartheid for South Africa.<sup>134</sup>

Though Union Movement contested the 1949 Municipal Elections under the grandiose of 'Vote Union – Above Parties – Against Communism' much of the movement's overt domestic activities in the period were very minor.<sup>135</sup> It consisted of attempting to get *Portrait of a Leader*, and Mosley's *Tomorrow We Live*, into local libraries, together with a letter writing campaign to local papers proposing Union Movement policy.<sup>136</sup> In preparation for their role as the new elite, speakers' schools were organised, but low attendance saw Raven Thomson close them.<sup>137</sup> This lack of speaking strength was visible in the 1951 General Election campaign when the candidates had to rely on rehearsed questions from sympathisers at meetings.<sup>138</sup> By 1955 UM campaigning was relying largely on nostalgia, fighting the LCC elections as 'Blackshirts.'<sup>139</sup>

Despite the public aversion to the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, though of decreased importance, remained within Union Movement. This continued, even after the removal of the British mandate in Palestine had deprived the movement of a useful propaganda tool. Raven Thomson was to continue to make court appearances and face fines on charges relating to anti-Semitic references in his

<sup>129</sup> *Union* 14, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1948.

<sup>130</sup> *Wiener Library Bulletin*, 2, 1947-8, 32

<sup>131</sup> *On Guard* 12, August 1948. See also *Manchester Guardian* 30<sup>th</sup> July 1948

<sup>132</sup> *Daily Worker*, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1948. See also *New Statesman* 31<sup>st</sup> July 1948

<sup>133</sup> *Union* 26, 7<sup>th</sup> August 1948.

<sup>134</sup> E.J.Hamm, *The Evil Good Men do*, op. cit., 74-6.

<sup>135</sup> BOD C6/7/2/3: JDC report on Municipal elections 1949.

<sup>136</sup> *Union* 84, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1949; *Union* 102, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1950.

<sup>137</sup> *Union* 135, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1950; BOD C6/10/4/2: Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen report, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1948.

<sup>138</sup> SUA Saunders Papers: Raven Thomson circular 11<sup>th</sup> October 1951.

<sup>139</sup> *Union* 356, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1955.

speeches.<sup>140</sup> At a speech in March 1948, he was reported as saying that he couldn't get into the local hall because he didn't have the right nose.<sup>141</sup> His anti-Semitism could also be contrived, as in this excerpt from another speech made in June of the same year, '[i]t may be that the British People will one day deal with the Jews in the same way as the Germans under Hitler did, and although I should abhor it, we have to bow to the will of the people.'<sup>142</sup> Other UM members were not so careful, as in the case of one man who was imprisoned for a month in November 1952 for saying that 6 million dead Jews was not enough.<sup>143</sup>

Whilst anti-Semitism was to wane as a feature of Mosley fascism in the period, UM was far from the 'more moderate crusade,' argued by Skidelsky.<sup>144</sup> In its place came an equally virulent racism, capitalising on domestic hostility aroused by colonial immigration. Indeed one study of the UM has concluded that, '[i]ts most important original contribution to political life was its pioneering role in making immigration an increasingly important factor in British politics during the 1950s.'<sup>145</sup> The pages of *Union* featured articles criticising the Welfare State for attracting immigrants and pieces expressing concern that Brixton was to become a British Harlem.<sup>146</sup> In the 1952 LCC elections the UM campaigned in the area under the slogan 'Keep Brixton White.'<sup>147</sup> Leaflets warned of Pakistani immigrants bringing smallpox into Britain.<sup>148</sup> This stance continued throughout the decade and culminated with Mosley's candidature in the North Kensington constituency in the 1959 General Election, a year after a series of race riots in nearby Notting Hill. In the campaign he depicted Black workers making slaves of white girls and living off cat food.<sup>149</sup> Raven Thomson throughout the early 1950s was equally racist, linking the degeneration of Britain to the influx of

<sup>140</sup> BOD C6/9/3/2: Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen report, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1950.

<sup>141</sup> BOD C6/5/1/5: JDC observer's report, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1948.

<sup>142</sup> BOD C6/9/1/3: JDC report, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1948.

<sup>143</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1952.

<sup>144</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 491.

<sup>145</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,'' op. cit., 249; idem, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 242.

<sup>146</sup> *Union* 276, August 1953.

<sup>147</sup> BOD C6/7/2/3: JDC report, April 1952.

<sup>148</sup> BOD C6/9/2/1: Union Movement leaflet, n.d.

<sup>149</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur*, op. cit., 243. See also G.Thayer, *The British Political Fringe*, op. cit., 44-5.



immigrants.<sup>150</sup> To stem this tide he campaigned for immigration controls under the slogan ‘[g]ive Britain Dominion Status.’<sup>151</sup>

Such views lead to questions about the nature of the racism in Union Movement. Racist statements that concluded, ‘horses go faster than donkeys’ would seem to indicate a distinct biological racism. This would be a distinct deviation from the cultural racism that was prevalent in the BUF’s anti-Semitism in the 1930s.<sup>152</sup> Mosley defended his new stand, writing, ‘we are often accused of believing in an oppressive racialism. That really is not true; what we want is that different peoples should develop their own nationhood.’<sup>153</sup> A *Union* article summarised the movement’s position,

Union Movement has no quarrel with coloured men in their proper places – either Africa or the West Indies – but it is an entirely different matter when they come in droves to these overcrowded islands to take the bread out of the mouths of the British workers who have a hard enough future as it is.<sup>154</sup>

The UM was defending apartheid, though Mosley again defended the stance, ‘[l]et us make clear that in advocating racial segregation we have no intention of adhering to any theory of racial superiority which is imposed by others.’<sup>155</sup> UM wanted an end to Negro immigration, and repatriation for resident immigrants.<sup>156</sup> The attitude on Afro-Caribbean immigration sharply illustrates the division in the movement. For whilst Mosley stressed that there should be no abuse of immigrants, because of the need for good relations to make the Africa policy work, on the street, members engaged in racist confrontations.<sup>157</sup> Much of the strength that Mosley received in his 1959 campaign in North Kensington was from Teddy Boys eager to politicise their violence.

The result of division, suppression and extremism was a minute, deeply unpopular movement. In October 1952 a meeting in Kilburn had to be abandoned due to the lack of an audience.<sup>158</sup> Even Raven Thomson, the most

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<sup>150</sup> *Union* 208, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1952.

<sup>151</sup> *Union* 315, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1954.

<sup>152</sup> *Union* 14, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1948; *Union* 208, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1952.

<sup>153</sup> *Union* 245, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1952.

<sup>154</sup> *Union* 282, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1953.

<sup>155</sup> *Union* 49, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1949.

<sup>156</sup> A.Poole, ‘Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,’ op. cit., 70-2.

<sup>157</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C14: O.Mosley circular 27<sup>th</sup> February 1952.

<sup>158</sup> BOD C6/10/4/1: JDC, Chairman’s statement, November 1952.

senior official in the movement, had to speak at a meeting of 8 people.<sup>159</sup> What success the movement had was very minor. They won a seat on Lakes Urban District Council, but their candidate did not stand as a UM member.<sup>160</sup> At the 1955 LCC elections, where 18 years earlier he had received 3,028 votes he polled just 540.<sup>161</sup>

The result of all the public opposition and private division was a movement that was always close to bankruptcy. The appearance of regular appeals for funds was a feature throughout the period.<sup>162</sup> By the middle of 1950 the finances of headquarters were in a serious state, so much so that there was concern that the movement risked an overdraft.<sup>163</sup> All of the branches had to send a remittance to headquarters at least once a week.<sup>164</sup> Salaries for the skeleton staff came from collections.<sup>165</sup> In 1952 a more devolved system appeared in which the branches were given more autonomy whilst the headquarters provided materials and speakers.<sup>166</sup> Raven Thomson was quick to endorse the scheme,

The general principle of this form of organisation is that it grants the maximum measure of individual and local initiative, which is necessary during a period of expansion, until the whole country or its more populated areas are covered, when a tighter country form of organisation may be reimposed with tested personnel.<sup>167</sup>

The system appears to have worked in the short term, securing the finances, but not allowing for any extra outlays to be made.<sup>168</sup> In 1955 the movement did not contest any seats in the General Election in order to keep *Union* going.<sup>169</sup>

The financial hardships of the movement are no better illustrated than in the case of *Union*. *Union* was at the core of UM propaganda activity, indeed Mosley rated its distribution as the most important work of the movement.<sup>170</sup> For Raven Thomson it was a 'call for a higher and nobler concept of our destiny in

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> *Union* 264, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1953.

<sup>161</sup> BOD C6/7/2/3: JDC, Chairman's Statement, April 1955.

<sup>162</sup> *Union* 17, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1948.

<sup>163</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: L.A.Flockhart to R.Saunders 22nd May 1950 and 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1950.

<sup>164</sup> BOD C6/9/1/12: L.A. Flockhart 'Copy of memorandum issued to Branch Leaders from H.Q. Union Movement,' n.d.

<sup>165</sup> E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, op. cit., 159

<sup>166</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C14: Letter from Raven Thomson to R. Saunders, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1952.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., Circular from Raven Thomson, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1952.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., Letter from Raven Thomson to R.Saunders 11<sup>th</sup> July 1952

<sup>169</sup> BOD C6/7/2/3: JDC, Chairman's Statement, April 1955.



these troubled times.’<sup>171</sup> As he put it elsewhere, ‘[w]e must remember that the paper [is] not merely a commercial proposition, but is the spearhead of a political drive, and that its ultimate purpose is to attract worthwhile people to the movement.’<sup>172</sup> To this end, the sale of *Union* took on great importance. It was sold at meetings and in the winter months vendors went into bus and tube stations, as well as selling door to door.<sup>173</sup> Copies were even sent abroad, though problems with currency often delayed foreign payments, placing a further burden on the movement’s finances.<sup>174</sup> Members were asked to buy twelve copies, and distribute them amongst friends.<sup>175</sup> Sales trophies and free holidays were also offered to boost circulation.<sup>176</sup> The movement tried to dismiss the problems of the paper announcing ‘We are not concerned to build a large circulation by doping our readers with optimistic nonsense... We are satisfied to reach an elite of those who are capable of facing grim truths and of preparing for drastic action.’<sup>177</sup> As its editor, Raven Thomson spent much of his time attempting to keep it running. Initially the government was reticent to provide the paper required for printing, prompting him to buy from private stocks.<sup>178</sup> Cutbacks caused the formation of an appeal to keep the newspaper going, and for a considerable period it subsisted on scarce donations and the proceeds from jumble sales.<sup>179</sup> Various appeals in the paper eventually resulted, with the support of Raven Thomson, in the formation of the ‘Friends of Union,’ a small group of large donators.<sup>180</sup> Privately, however, Raven Thomson believed it to be in serious financial difficulty, as he wrote in October 1950,

The situation is very precarious indeed and we shall be compelled to cease publication very shortly, unless something drastic is done, as we cannot expect the leader to continue to support personally a paper which

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<sup>170</sup> *Union* 13, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1948.

<sup>171</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C14: Circular from Raven Thomson n.d.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter from Raven Thomson to R.Saunders, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1951.

<sup>173</sup> *Union* 48, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1949; SUA Saunders Papers C14: Circular from M.T.Pacey (Acting Secretary (organisation)) 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 1951.

<sup>174</sup> *Union* 73, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1949.

<sup>175</sup> *Union* 89, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1949; *Union* 90, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1949.

<sup>176</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: Circular from D.Peroni, n.d.

<sup>177</sup> *Union* 73, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1949.

<sup>178</sup> *Union* 41, 20<sup>th</sup> November 1948.

<sup>179</sup> *Union* 146, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1950; *Union* 198, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1952.

<sup>180</sup> See *Union* 81, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1949; *Union* 101, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1950; *Union* 109-11, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1950- 8<sup>th</sup> April 1950; *Union* 132, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1950; *Union* 198, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1952; *Union* 230, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1952; See also SUA Saunders Papers C13: Letter from Raven Thomson to R.Saunders 27<sup>th</sup> October 1950.



is incapable of gaining sufficient support through its readers and sympathisers to maintain itself by one means or another.<sup>181</sup>

The picture then is one where the movement had a difficult time meeting even its primary propaganda needs.

Whilst in the preceding period Raven Thomson's role had been to unify the disparate bodies of Mosley fascism, in UM he was to spend much of his time attempting to keep the organisation from dissolving back into factions. This has previously been treated as a failure; '[w]hen Mosley went abroad, Thomson took over leadership of a demoralised and fragmented Union Movement, but failed to revive it.'<sup>182</sup> That he was, however, able to bequeath to his successor Jeffrey Hamm a movement, however rundown, must be seen as his chief contribution in the period.<sup>183</sup> As Secretary he kept the organisation together despite staff shortages at headquarters.<sup>184</sup>

Union Movement, like its predecessor had its nucleus of ardent supporters, but also attracted small numbers of temporary followers.<sup>185</sup> Given this transitory membership, the role of figurehead was crucial. For a good deal of the early years of the movement Mosley was an absentee prophet, leaving Raven Thomson the task of attracting and binding new recruits to UM.<sup>186</sup> Whilst it undoubtedly strengthened Raven Thomson's position in the movement, he lacked his leader's charisma. It may be that Mosley wanted a caretaker leader, one whose ambition wouldn't stretch to gaining greater personal control. Even Raven Thomson believed that Mosley '...has naturally put me in charge of HQ as he knows that I have not the slightest ambition to organise activities.'<sup>187</sup>

As editor of *Union*, Raven Thomson must be held accountable for its poor circulation figures and lack of financial stability. Whilst its potential readership was always small and contributors scarce, the emphasis placed on the role of this paper should have seen it better catered for. As editor he failed in the

<sup>181</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: Letter from Raven Thomson to R.Saunders 27<sup>th</sup> October 1950.

<sup>182</sup> M.Beckman, *The 43 Group*, op. cit., 208.

<sup>183</sup> After Raven Thomson's death the position of secretary went to Alf Flockhart, though upon his conviction for interfering with a man in a public lavatory, it passed to Jeffrey Hamm. See T.Grundy, *Memoirs of a fascist Childhood*, op. cit., 112.

<sup>184</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C13: Raven Thomson to Saunders 5<sup>th</sup> July 1951.

<sup>185</sup> M.Beckman. *The 43 Group*, op. cit., 144.

<sup>186</sup> A.Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement,' op. cit., 68.

<sup>187</sup> SUA Saunders Papers C14: Letter from Raven Thomson to R.Saunders 5<sup>th</sup> May 1952.



central task of 'attracting a political elite to the Movement.'<sup>188</sup> Given its precarious existence, *Union* might well have folded at the moment of economic crisis that was to herald the acceptance of UM as a credible political alternative. It also failed to capitalise on rare propaganda opportunities such as the confrontation between Palestinian Jews and British Forces.<sup>189</sup>

The contribution that Raven Thomson made to this era of Mosleyism, was to keep a Mosley movement going throughout its quietest period. With Mosley often absent, the great centrifugal force of his personality and self-belief was gone.<sup>190</sup> What remained was a diverse group of individuals, with ex-fascists, European utopians and toughs, 'a rather bedraggled self conscious collection of frustrated people who found this as their only expression of resentment against society as a whole,' as an antifascist observer noted.<sup>191</sup> In the circumstances the Union Movement should have gone the way of much of post war British fascism and collapsed into even smaller groups. That it did not was thanks to Raven Thomson's efforts. His successor Jeffrey Hamm is often credited with bridging the gap between the intellectual and street divisions in UM.<sup>192</sup> However this maintenance of unity was merely the continuation of work begun by Raven Thomson. The work of both meant that in 1959, when Mosley deemed the time right to re-enter politics, after the racial tensions generated by the Notting Hill riots, he had a movement to lead. If the infamy of Union Movement was to initiate the colour question in post-War British politics, it could not have done so without an organised movement to disseminate it. That this was not recognised was due to matters outside Raven Thomson's control, principally the social conditions that meant that the vital spark of crisis never forced the public to reassess Mosley and the Union Movement,

In spite of Mosley's numerous comebacks, the Union Movement remained a pariah on the fringe of British society, whose purpose was to provide the vehicle that Mosley could use once the great crisis struck, after which he could offer himself, in the style of de Gaulle, as the alternative leader, the man who had been right all along and who was not responsible for the decline of Britain.<sup>193</sup>

<sup>188</sup> *Union* 51, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1949.

<sup>189</sup> R.Eatwell, *Fascism A History*, op. cit., 260.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> BOD C6/2/9: JDC report, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1948.

<sup>192</sup> G.Thayer, *The British Political Fringe*, op. cit., 49.

<sup>193</sup> R.C.Thurlow, 'The Guardian of the 'Sacred Flame,' op. cit., 250-1.



It has been suggested that Mosley left the UM in hands of activist rather than intellectual deputies. The error in this statement will now be studied in the context of Raven Thomson's continuing examination of history and the potential of man and society.<sup>194</sup>

### III

In 1932, Raven Thomson rejected the opportunity to predict the future through his superorganic philosophy of history, writing '[n]o attempt has been made in this discussion to follow the tempting paths of prophecy that open, where inexorable present shuts off all further investigation of the development of modern civilisation.'<sup>195</sup> This prophetic element, he believed, would need a second volume to adequately explore the future of civilisation.<sup>196</sup> The following years of political activism and prolific propaganda output, postponed such a study. Whilst in the early days of internment he had expressed an intention to write a philosophical treatise, the effect of detention and subsequent activism in the revival of Mosley fascism further delayed any new work.<sup>197</sup> Yet, as a series of articles in the Union Movement's philosophical journal *The European* show, from 1953 his attention was returning to the study of civilisation.<sup>198</sup> Until recently this would have been the sole resource for any discussion of his later thought. That he had in fact attempted to write another treatise on the superorganism was only discovered after his death in the form of a manuscript found in his office at Union Movement headquarters.<sup>199</sup> A note concerning the imminent general election contest for a Conservative government, places the production of this manuscript in 1955, the last year of his life.<sup>200</sup> What had

<sup>194</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Why Has the Extreme Right Failed in Britain,' op. cit., 276.

<sup>195</sup> A.Raven, *Civilisation as Divine Superman*, Williams and Norgate, London, 1932, 9.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 10. In this stylistic division he again follows Spengler's approach with the two volumes of *The Decline of the West*, 'Forms and Actuality' and 'World Historical Perspective.'

<sup>197</sup> PRO HO283/70/66: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson hearing.

<sup>198</sup> A.Raven Thomson 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' *The European* 9, November 1953, 21-7; idem, 'Nemesis of Nonsense,' *The European* 12, February 1954, 10-14; idem, 'Spengler and Marx: A Study in Social Pathology,' *The European* 18, August 1954, 20-4; idem, 'Russia and the West,' *The European* 24, February 1955, 14-18.; See also E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, op. cit., 170.

<sup>199</sup> That this researcher was able to utilise this unique resource is thanks to the friends of Oswald Mosley who archived the manuscript for over forty years. That I was able to research it thoroughly is thanks to the group's chief archivist, whose only request upon allowing me access was his anonymity in this thesis. My grateful thanks then to him for his generosity.

<sup>200</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'World History' op. cit., 30.



prompted his return to philosophy after two decades may have been the discovery that he had cancer, and further postponement was now not an option.

The intervening years saw a dramatic revision of Raven Thomson's earlier treatise. *Civilisation as Divine Superman* endorsed the views of German historicist Oswald Spengler; human history was in 'reality' the workings of a number of cultures all with a distinct life span. Raven Thomson's subsequent turn to fascism had been rationalised in terms of an attempt to use Spengler's mechanism of history against the prediction of decline in his work.<sup>201</sup> The 1955 manuscripts are a continuation of this process of defiance and debt to Spengler. Whilst many of the ideas contained in the collected manuscripts show the workings of an intelligent man, his ruminations on time travel and modern medicine's true nature as a placebo, indicate a high level of eccentricity.<sup>202</sup>

The key revision that Raven Thomson made in his 1955 manuscript was to his perception of world history. Pre-war Raven Thomson had followed Spengler's central idea that world history was the sum of a small number of cultures, and that each of these were tied to a distinct morphology or natural cycle of birth and decay. In his later work Raven Thomson rejected this proscriptive view.

Spengler had a far higher concept of society than the self liquidating socialism of Marx, when he recognised it as a social organism in which the human individual found his satisfaction and his achievement in service to the higher ideals of the whole social purpose. Yet he made the mistake of driving his organic analogy...to the point of assuming that as society was organic, it must be susceptible to the laws of growth, flowering and decay, as any other vegetable organism rooted in the soil of the terrestrial landscape.<sup>203</sup>

In the 1950s he came to believe that the collapse of civilisations was the result of external agents undermining society for '[i]f we reject the morphology of civilisation, then we can only account for the eventual demise of civilisation by such social systems being subject to some form of pathology.'<sup>204</sup> By 1955 Raven Thomson was attributing the collapse of civilisations to the workings of a superorganic disease; unchecked this would result in the historical 'life-span' of

<sup>201</sup> See A.Raven, *Civilisation as Divine Superman*, op. cit., 9-10; A.Raven Thomson 'Why Fascism?' in *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol.1 No.2; Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>202</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Religion' unpublished manuscript 1955, 5; idem 'Science' ibid., 2.

<sup>203</sup> Idem., 'Spengler and Marx' op. cit., 20-1.

<sup>204</sup> Idem., 'World History' unpublished manuscript, 1955, 21. See also Idem., 'Spengler and Marx: A Study in Social Pathology,' op. cit., 20-4.

Spengler. Following this he argued 'it is very evident that all civilisations have declined and eventually collapsed, not because of the advent of natural senility, but because they are all subject to a pathology of decline.'<sup>205</sup> Spengler's historical morphology was now the result if nothing was done to actively safeguard civilisation. This led Raven Thomson to enquire '[i]f civilisations do not die natural deaths, then why should they die at all?'<sup>206</sup>

If civilisations are only 'killed' by the workings of an external pathogen, then social immortality becomes a theoretical possibility. The model for this immortal superorganism was in 1955 the same as in 1932, the insect colony, 'in which the multicellular organism in its turn formed a mere body cell in a higher form of organisation.'<sup>207</sup> Thus mankind 'has even every prospect, once he has grasped the real nature of the social order which he constitutes, to attain that stable immortality which nature has granted to the insect communities.'<sup>208</sup> His work then attempts to understand what characteristics the insect colony possesses, which would ensure the social longevity deficient in human society; '[i]f insects can solve the problem of permanent social equilibrium, then surely this is not impossible to human beings...'<sup>209</sup> With the essence of the colony's longevity discovered, a comparison with human society would make it possible to 'diagnose the disease of civilisation.'<sup>210</sup> Once diagnosed, a treatment can be discovered and implemented,

The knowledge of the existence of the cultural cycle, which has been the last great achievement of the European civilisation of our day, does present the possibility to put it no higher, of a reform of the social system of one or another of the extant civilisations.<sup>211</sup>

The characteristic Raven Thomson decided was the key to social longevity was instinctual service.<sup>212</sup> The establishment of a system that produces such service forms the foundation of his political theorising.

The introduction of this concept of social pathology can be seen as the result of the influence on Raven Thomson of American fascist and early Union

<sup>205</sup> Idem., 'World History' op. cit., 32-4, 74.

<sup>206</sup> See Idem., 'Spengler and Marx,' op. cit., 22.

<sup>207</sup> Idem., 'Philosophy' op. cit., 2.

<sup>208</sup> Idem., 'World History' op. cit., 94, 13-5.

<sup>209</sup> Idem., 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' op. cit., 21.

<sup>210</sup> Idem., 'World History' op. cit., 21.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 74.



Movement member, Francis Parker Yockey.<sup>213</sup> Yockey was a fanatical believer in Nazism, and was actively opposed to American hegemony in Europe. After the war he fled American intelligence and journeyed to Ireland, there to create his revision of Spenglerian morphology, the book *Imperium*. In it he conceived of an integrated Europe, forming a third superpower in world politics.<sup>214</sup> For him the West has ‘the force of the mightiest super-personal destiny that has ever appeared on this earthball.’<sup>215</sup> Such was the threat that America posed to the cultural entity of Europe, that Yockey espoused closer ties with the Soviet Union. Yockey eventually arrived in Britain, where his pan-European ideas brought him, in 1947, into Mosleyite circles. There is some indication that he offered Mosley the *Imperium* manuscript to be published under the latter’s name.<sup>216</sup> This offer was rejected, and after disagreements over Yockey’s particular anti-Semitic and pro-Soviet beliefs he left the group to form the neo-Nazi ‘European Liberation Front.’<sup>217</sup> After spending much of the 1950s avoiding the authorities on both sides of the Atlantic, the FBI arrested him in 1960 on charges of passport fraud. After eleven days in remand, he committed suicide with a concealed cyanide pill, becoming a martyr figure for international neo-Nazism.<sup>218</sup> His work was to have particular impact on British Neo-Nazism, but has been viewed by previous historians as making little impact in Mosleyism.<sup>219</sup>

In *Imperium*, Yockey argued that civilisations were not tied to a strict developmental cycle, as Spengler had argued, and could be reinvigorated through the work of an elite of ‘culture bearers’ writing, ‘[h]eroism alone can liberate that

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<sup>213</sup> Studies of Francis Parker Yockey include, R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 244, 294; idem, ‘Destiny and Doom; Spengler, Hitler and British Fascism’ *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol.15 No.4, 1977, 18-9, 30-2; R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 491, 491n; M.Lee, *The Beast Reawakened*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1997, 91-109, 155-160; K.Coogan, ‘Francis Parker Yockey and the Nazi International – a preliminary report,’ unpublished manuscript held by the Wiener Library, 1982.

<sup>214</sup> ‘...the Western nations are gone, and the Western nation is coming.’ F.Parker Yockey, (pscud. Ultick Varange) *Imperium*, reprint, Noontide Press, Sausalito, 1969, 437, cited in M.Lec, *The Beast Reawakened*, op. cit., 95.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 619.

<sup>216</sup> R.C.Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 244.

<sup>217</sup> Of his departure Yockey intimated that the UM’s pro US and Churchill stances had precipitated his move away from Mosleyism. See K.Coogan, ‘Francis Parker Yockey and the Nazi International – a preliminary report,’ op. cit., Appendix, 2 letters from Yockey’s Chicago FBI file 1946-7.

<sup>218</sup> M.Lee, *The Beast Reawakened*, op. cit., 156.

<sup>219</sup> R.C.Thurlow, ‘Destiny and Doom,’ op. cit., 32. See also idem, *Fascism in Britain*, op. cit., 294.

integrated soul of Europe.’<sup>220</sup> The undermining of these ‘heroes’ was the cause of social demise. For Yockey, Spengler’s cultures declined in three different ways.<sup>221</sup> ‘Parasitism’ was the misdirection of cultural energies into alien groups in society, thereby diminishing the power of the remaining cultural participators to invigorate the community.<sup>222</sup> Here, Yockey illustrates his biological racism, seeing Jews as such parasites, wherein; ‘Anti-Semitism is precisely analogous in cultural pathology to the formation of antibodies in the bloodstream in human pathology.’<sup>223</sup> ‘Distortion,’ the second type of decline, might occur where ‘outer life forms are warping the culture from its true life path.’<sup>224</sup> This again led him to oppose the Jews. The third area, and the one that influenced Raven Thomson was cultural ‘retardation,’ where a loss of unity causes collapse.<sup>225</sup> For Yockey, Liberalism was the political manifestation of the retardation that had aided the decline of the European culture.

Raven Thomson’s opinion of Yockey, is most clearly expressed in a letter he wrote to the American fascist H. Keith Thompson. Dated in March 1953 it notes the ‘unmistakable forms of style and expression’ of *Imperium* and goes on to give a sketch of Yockey to Thompson,

Yockey is a brilliant young intellectual American ex-patriate with a strong anti-American phobia...taking the view that the present American influence in Europe is more damaging to European culture than the direct but alien threat of Communism from the East. He joined our Movement (sic) at the time of its formation in 1948, obviously in the hope of getting our Chief to finance his book, which he refused to do because it was full of Spenglerian pessimism and was quite unnecessarily offensive to America. He then broke with us, and has been generally found to be so conceited and unstable in personal relations...that it is almost impossible to work with him even allowing for his extremist views, which are however, stated in most brilliant terms.<sup>226</sup>

On the evidence of this letter Raven Thomson had clearly read Yockey by 1953, indeed as both were activists within the diminutive Union Movement, and given their common intellectual heritage, it seems unlikely that the two did not discuss

<sup>220</sup> F.P.Yockey, *Imperium*, op. cit., xlvi, 245-9.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 374.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 376-401.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 391; See also R.C.Thurlow, ‘Destiny and Doom,’ op. cit., 32; M.Lee, *The Beast Reawakened*, op. cit., 96.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 402-9.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 410-5.

<sup>226</sup> FBI files Hoover Institution Archive: Letter From A.Raven Thomson to H. Keith Thompson, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1953. Many thanks to Graham Macklin for this reference.



their work during 1947-8. Yet Yockey is not referenced nor alluded to in Raven Thomson's work, though given his unpopularity within UM, this is not surprising. Raven Thomson also was obviously opposed to Yockey's appreciation of the Soviet Union. Writing in early 1955 he argued, 'so long as Russia is regarded as a 'progressive' extension of the European tradition our whole European civilisation is in danger.'<sup>227</sup> What made elements of Yockey's ideas so attractive to Raven Thomson was undoubtedly the common Spenglerian core. That he was proposing a mutiny against destiny that allowed for Spengler's ideas, also fitted into Raven Thomson's own understanding. That Raven Thomson was suffering with cancer during the formulation of these ideas cannot be discounted. The theory of a pathology of decline, undermining a potentially much longer life span for a superorganism, had a telling parallel in his terminal illness at 56.

Raven Thomson wastes little time in his treatise casting around for a candidate as superorganic pathogen. Similar to his work on the nature of Fascism, the antagonist in 1955 was individualism, '[i]t may indeed be said that, owing to the defective social instinct of man, society, like man himself, begins to die as soon as it is born, carrying with it the seeds of its own destruction.'<sup>228</sup> Self interest is the equivalent of a cancer, with cells not fulfilling their allotted service to the community, thus the '[m]orphology of civilisation, upon which Oswald Spengler laid so much stress, is stunted and frustrated by the failure of the instinctual service to the community which is the essential basis of the cultural process.'<sup>229</sup> An individual's greed is a poison within civilisation, whilst service is portrayed as a 'health-giving ideal.'<sup>230</sup>

Raven Thomson chooses to see the development of civilisation as the result of a synthesis between reason and instinct. Both have their part to play, and whilst it is the decline of instinctive service that he wishes to combat, reason is essential for the progress of society. The process of forming a civilisation is for Raven Thomson, as it was in 1932, the result of a rational decision by primitive farmers to band together for protection in order to retain their land and crops.<sup>231</sup> Yet because it was a reasoned rather than emotive decision, the

<sup>227</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Russia and the West,' op. cit., 16.

<sup>228</sup> Idem., 'Spengler and Marx,' op. cit., 23.

<sup>229</sup> Idem., 'World History,' op. cit., 74.

<sup>230</sup> Idem., 'Spengler and Marx,' op. cit., 24.

<sup>231</sup> Idem., 'Homo Socialis,' unpublished manuscript, 1955, 3-4.

resulting community was undermined for '[u]nquestionably this disease of culture is caused by the fact that unlike the gradually evolved insect communities, human societies have come much more rapidly into existence by the exercise of the powers of reason by individual men.'<sup>232</sup>

The goal for Raven Thomson was to instil by reason the service that under 'natural' circumstances would have originated instinctively. This led him to a philosophical justification for functional society,

It is only through effective self government that the instinctive urge to communal service can be given a rational basis, so that each individual can see clearly the part he plays in the life of the nation, and express his own opinion as to how best his particular form of service may be integrated into the communal welfare.<sup>233</sup>

In a functional society, an individual, through personal endeavour in a specific area, benefits the whole. Specialisation of function also demanded a level of reliance upon other parts of the system. Unemployment becomes 'the disintegration and frustration of the cultural impulses of the people.'<sup>234</sup> Rational service for Raven Thomson must also be premised on freedom of thought, allowing for unorthodox ideas to fuel progress.

The ultimate resolution of this conflict between reason and instinct in society was the appearance of a higher man, a 'Homo Socialis.'<sup>235</sup> Indeed Raven Thomson believes that the glorification of the common man has been the 'nemesis of nonsense' causing harm to civilisation.<sup>236</sup> It is in the description of the common man that Raven Thomson's racist assumptions are apparent,

This we are told is the 'Age of the Common Man,' an age when the brotherhood of man shall be realised in complete equality throughout the globe with the final objective of the creation of a conglomerate, kinky haired, slit eyed, sallow complexioned hybrid race, which shall dominate the earth.<sup>237</sup>

Within an ideal society, Homo Socialis would provide the leadership he believed was vital for a harmonious and perpetuating society; '[l]eadership is essential and complete stagnation and even chaos would ensue if such leadership was not

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<sup>232</sup> Idem., 'World History,' op. cit., 73.

<sup>233</sup> Idem., 'Homo Socialis,' op. cit., 33. Raven Thomson goes to some lengths to reaffirm the tenets of corporatism, plebiscites and government by a small cabinet. See Ibid., 26-33.

<sup>234</sup> Idem., 'Employment,' unpublished manuscript, 1955, 5.

<sup>235</sup> Idem., 'Homo Socialis,' op. cit., 1-48.

<sup>236</sup> Idem., 'Nemesis of Nonsense' op. cit., 14



encouraged.<sup>238</sup> The powers of Homo Socialis would be offset by strict codes of conduct, which put the good of the community ahead of personal gain. The resulting innate honour was 'the most effective antidote to the pathology of self seeking greed.'<sup>239</sup> Honour would be upheld in a code of conduct too stringent for the normal people,

The 'superman' must show his superiority, not by renouncing social obligation, but by undertaking a code of social service, more onerous and self-sacrificing than that which is imposed upon other men.<sup>240</sup>

It was this, Raven Thomson argued, that marked Homo Socialis apart from the superficially similar conclusions of Nietzsche's Superman.<sup>241</sup> It also marked him apart from Spengler, whose great fact men were, in the style of Nietzsche, limited only by their will. Raven Thomson's message was repeatedly emphasised throughout his work with the analogy of the sheep and the goats,

The 'goat' in return for his freedom to question everything must impose upon himself an even more rigorous code of social service than which the 'sheep' adhered by blind instinct.<sup>242</sup>

That Raven Thomson was thinking in terms of a higher man, follows Mosley's own developing conception of a thought-deed man.<sup>243</sup> Mosley too saw his new man as 'dedicated in whole life and purpose to the service of the people and the State.'<sup>244</sup> In his conception of the will-to-achievement, Mosley sees this higher man embodied in Wagner's hero, Parsifal.

Here is the beginning of the will to power and the will to beauty in the mystical union which is all-achieving: the man comes who weeps because he has killed a swan rather than exults because he has killed a dragon, who holds the all powerful spear on condition that he does not use it.<sup>245</sup>

Mosley believed that such a man could be produced by the careful husbandry of society. As Nicholas his son noted however, Mosley failed to dwell on how his thought deed men would be cultivated.<sup>246</sup>

<sup>237</sup> Idem., 'Politics,' op. cit., 34. 'The cultures of the world are each unique products of the racial characteristics of the various races, and they will only be lost if they are mixed, because of any spurious belief in equality.' Ibid., 8.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>239</sup> A.Raven Thomson 'World History' op. cit., 102-6?

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>241</sup> A.Raven Thomson 'Homo Socialis' op. cit., 46

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>243</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op cit., 465-80.

<sup>244</sup> N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op cit., 285

<sup>245</sup> O.Mosley, 'Wagner and Shaw,' Sanctuary Press, London, n.d, 12. This pamphlet was a reprint of an article from *The European* 37, March 1956.

<sup>246</sup> N.Mosley, *Beyond the Pale*, op cit., 285

Contrary to Mosley, the mechanism needed to produce this higher man was the main concern of Raven Thomson's philosophical work. Unlike Spengler, whose great fact men would appear at the appropriate moment in a culture's historical destiny, he believed that 'the greatest problem of our time is the emergence of 'Homo Socialis' as a higher form of the species Homo Sapiens.'<sup>247</sup> As such, a degree of social engineering would be required to ensure that these higher individuals would appear. To this end, Raven Thomson proposed that an 'Order of Merit' should be established.<sup>248</sup>

[O]nly when such a directing intelligence exists, combining a full appreciation of the external world with a complete realisation of the nature of society, can the social order survive as the requisite environment for the development of Homo Socialis.<sup>249</sup>

This group would be selected for their selflessness and cloistered away from the rest of society in rural academies, would be exposed to the cultural heritage of their civilisation.

Homo Sapiens can never gain a true picture of external reality, subject as he is to continual subjective illusion; but Homo Socialis can approximate more and more closely to an appreciation of such reality through his records of repeated experiments which reduce the possibility of error to a vanishing point.<sup>250</sup>

Within the Order the essential freedom of thought was to be allowed,<sup>251</sup>

As freedom of thought is essential to the progress of society the bestowal of a title of honour is not enough to preserve this highest of all functions. It must be accompanied by...the 'freedom of the nation,' that is to say complete removal of all restrictions upon the development of the personality of the individual so distinguished from his fellowmen.<sup>252</sup>

The result was to be social harmony,

When society is strong enough to provide a sanctuary for the individual, but not so strong that it exerts a frustrating influence over his development reason becomes capable of interpreting instinct and replacing blind obedience by a rational appreciation of the laws of society.<sup>253</sup>

The possibility of entry into the Order would be available to all. Order members could interbreed in the hope of perpetuating their higher characteristics. Children

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>248</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Homo Socialis,' op. cit., 42-3.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 42; A.Raven Thomson, 'Philosophy' unpublished manuscript 1955, 11.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 11.



of the Order would be educated but not allowed to enter the Order until they had proven their worth.<sup>254</sup>

Every member of the order will recognise any other by his integrity and character, by his respect for truth, by his love of beauty, by his striving for harmony within the social order, which is in the essence of justice and can be our only criterior [sic] for goodness.<sup>255</sup>

Homo Socialis would thus become both the embodiment and the preservers of civilisation. Their responsibility was to take society from infancy to adulthood.<sup>256</sup> In a society run by the Homo Socialis, faith, reason and action will be harmonised, for 'in no other way can the cycle of civilisation be finally brought to an end.'<sup>257</sup>

The historical rationale behind this 'order' owed its origins to the work of the Russian historian Nicholas Berdyaev. Spengler too had influenced Berdyaev.<sup>258</sup> Where he differed from Spenglerian morphology was in his perception of the 'dark age' between the demise of one culture and the rise of another. Spengler saw this period as a barren one, with Fellahin peasants experiencing a second religiosity and subsisting amongst the ruins of the departed civilisation.<sup>259</sup> Berdyaev saw the era characterised in a reaction to decadence and materialism through inner contemplation that allowed for cultural advancement.<sup>260</sup> Due to his idea of a period of introspection, he had written into the Spenglerian cycle a possible escape from the total collapse. Raven Thomson had known of Berdyaev's work by 1934, having written an enthusiastic review in the fascist press of the latter's book *The End of Our Time*.<sup>261</sup> In 1953 an article devoted to Berdyaev's ideas, described the theory of an 'inner light' era as 'a very great advance on classical Spenglerism.'<sup>262</sup>

For Raven Thomson this contemplative period of inner light provided an opportunity for the best in society to provide succeeding civilisations with a cultural impulse;<sup>263</sup> 'Berdyaev's contribution to the argument disposes once and

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>256</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Politics' unpublished manuscript 1955, 13.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>258</sup> N.Berdyaev, (trans. G.Reavey) *The Meaning of History*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1936, 194, 207-9.

<sup>259</sup> O.Spengler, *The Decline of the West* Vol.II, Allen & Unwin, London, 1928, 105.

<sup>260</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' op. cit., 23.

<sup>261</sup> *Fascist Week* 12, 26<sup>th</sup> Jan - 1<sup>st</sup> Feb 1934.

<sup>262</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' op. cit., 23.

<sup>263</sup> Idem., 'World History' op. cit., 44-50; idem 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' op. cit., 23.



for all of the Spenglerian myth of the relapse of culture into weary centuries of Fellahin stagnation, until some new culture springs to life.'<sup>264</sup> In the aftermath of the Second World War he saw the 'possibility of another dark age, darker and more sinister than that which followed the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.'<sup>265</sup> This age would, for Raven Thomson, be ushered in 'should barbarism overrun European civilisation.'<sup>266</sup> Thus the Order would store the Europe's cultural knowledge in the event of Communist invasion. It would be both a repository of cultural knowledge and the forum for the development of new ideas based on the combined information wherein,'[a]ll thought, especially unorthodox, progressive thought is the product of individual inspiration[,] to produce which the human individual must withdraw into solitude and commune with his own spirit.'<sup>267</sup> The Order was there to prevent 'introversion [which] is essentially subjective and thus subject to all the illusions and superstitions which result from an egocentric view of the universe.'<sup>268</sup> Though it was not explicitly mentioned, the idea of the cloistered elite preparing for leadership has direct parallels with Blackshirt internment. Thus, whilst Raven Thomson had read Berdyaev in the 1930s, the concept did not resonate with him until such a contemplative life was imposed. It represented a response to those who had attempted to smother fascism by imprisonment.

Whilst Berdyaev provided the argument for the establishment of the Order, Raven Thomson based the nature of this group on Plato's utopian treatise *The Republic*, writing,

If we wish to have a stable order, which shall be as those of the insect communities, then we must seek that balance between the noblest characteristics of man, which was the unceasing quest of the Hellenic mind.<sup>269</sup>

Whilst the precise origins of Raven Thomson's interest in Plato are not discussed in the 1955 treatise, it seems likely that Mosley's study of the Hellenists during internment was influential.<sup>270</sup> That Goethe, who in turn had been interested in

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<sup>264</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' op. cit., 23-4.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>267</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Philosophy,' op. cit., 11.

<sup>268</sup> Idem., 'Homo Socialis,' op. cit., 13.

<sup>269</sup> Idem., 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' op. cit., 25.

<sup>270</sup> R.Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, op. cit., 468-71.



ancient Greece, influenced Spengler also may have been a stimulus.<sup>271</sup> Raven Thomson refers to *The Republic* several times in his work and admitted that the ancient Greeks 'seem to have done all our thinking for us in advance.'<sup>272</sup> For Plato, the government of the ideal republic consisted of a select group of 'wardens.'<sup>273</sup> As Raven Thomson noted,

The art of government, the science of administration, is one of the highest functions of mankind, which Plato in his Republic only believed it possible for his Warden's of the City to undertake late in life, after an exhaustive study of this all important function.<sup>274</sup>

Divinely gifted, these wardens would be drawn from the people, after years of careful monitoring to ensure instinctual service to the community rather than their own interests.<sup>275</sup> Raven Thomson's Homo Socialis is in essence, a translation of Plato's wardens into modern Europe.

Both thinkers endorsed a meritocratic system for the selection of the state's governors. Homo Socialis could be drawn from any strata of society, though the assumption was made that children of the Order would be more likely to possess the traits required. Exclusive interbreeding was rejected amongst the new aristocracy of worth, believing it would foster degeneration of stock.<sup>276</sup> For Plato too, membership of the Wardens was open to all in society,

It follows that we should select from among the guardians men who particularly strike us, on investigation, as being the type to devote their lives to wholeheartedly doing what they regard as advantageous to the community, and to completely refuse to do anything they regard as disadvantageous to it.<sup>277</sup>

Both believe that the order should be set away from the corrupting influence of the cities.<sup>278</sup> Raven Thomson's argument in favour of the functional state also utilises the Hellenic city-state as a model to copy, believing it to be truly democratic. He is also taken with Plato's use of myth to encourage good conduct and a moral code within the whole of society.<sup>279</sup> His work even proceeds from a

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 468.

<sup>272</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Philosophy,' op. cit., 1.

<sup>273</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. R. Waterfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993,

<sup>274</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'Politics,' op. cit., 31.

<sup>275</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, op. cit., 119.

<sup>276</sup> A.Raven Thomson, 'World History' op. cit., 27-8.

<sup>277</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, op. cit., 116.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid. ; idem., 'Homo Socialis,' op. cit., 44.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 115, 118-9; idem., 'Homo Socialis,' op. cit., 16, 19.



Platonic assumption that a society of individuals all possessing inner harmony will manifest in a smoothly running state.<sup>280</sup>

Perhaps one of the most telling differences between the Wardens and Homo Socialis, was the confidence with which the respective authors held them and thus the extent of the safeguards in place to stop self-interest and corruption. Plato was keen to preserve the ethical purity of his Wardens by limiting their ownership of private property, making them live communally and denying them the use of money.<sup>281</sup> In this way they were forced to perpetuate the good of the state, which they simultaneously led and were at the mercy of. Raven Thomson argued that Homo Socialis needed no such constraints, indeed it was only through extensive freedoms that civilisation could be saved from decline.

By 1955, Raven Thomson was calling for a science of history to be established.<sup>282</sup> Society would shape its development and thus avoid collapse into barbarism.<sup>283</sup> As in 1932 the goal was shrouded in mysticism, '[i]t is well that we should perfect the best possible social instrument for the self revelatory process, which is our best definition of the divine purpose.'<sup>284</sup>

The manifestation of this instrument was undoubtedly UM itself. The movement was designed to be an elite cadre, providing leadership in the inevitable crisis and battle with Communism. Raven Thomson's beliefs were therefore binding Union Movement policy and outlook to an organic philosophy where Europe would unite and unorthodox fascist enclaves would provide the personnel to develop civilisation to a new age beyond Spengler's philosophy. This was precisely his point whilst in the BUF, and as such must be seen as a last attempt to get his superorganic Spenglerian revision into the British fascist mainstream.

All this grand theorising was far removed from the reality of Union Movement. Raven Thomson's pristine Order of Merit was unlikely to emerge from their frustrated ranks. As Trevor Grundy's candid autobiography illustrates, Mosley fascism in the 1950s was a small group of committed fascists riddled with personal grievances, shortages of revenue and strongly flavoured

<sup>280</sup> Idem., 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' op. cit., 26.

<sup>281</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, op. cit., 121

<sup>282</sup> A. Raven Thomson, 'Philosophy,' op. cit., 10.

<sup>283</sup> Idem., 'History and Foreign affairs' unpublished manuscript 1955, 40.

<sup>284</sup> Idem., 'Ethics,' unpublished manuscript, 1955, 10.



with anti-Semitism.<sup>285</sup> Many of the street activists would have been ill suited to a life of rural contemplation and altruistic philosophising. Mosley may well have looked forward to the appearance of a holy crusader as the higher man, but the life of the celibate warrior priest would not have been easily integrated into his own hedonistic lifestyle.

Raven Thomson's post-war philosophical discourse was based on his original fascist ideas with the addition of a bizarre mixture of new thought from such diverse sources as American neo-Nazism, Russian historicism, and Hellenic philosophy. The result was a belief that civilisation was already beset with disease, but with the hope of cure, in the appearance and work of Homo Socialis.

Only within this social organism has Homo Socialis attained the ability to escape from the blind workings of instinct, and to open his eyes to the reality of the world about him. Reason must supplement instinct and bring progress through individual endeavour to add unceasingly to that heritage of culture which is the highest reward of civilised existence.<sup>286</sup>

Homo Socialis, drawing upon their knowledge, would direct society and replace failing instinctive service with the perpetuating force of rational socialism.<sup>287</sup>

The result of this 'natural functioning in the biological, social and spiritual sphere,' would be individual happiness.<sup>288</sup> Such a harmonious society would be too strong to succumb to Communist invasion. This fear was at the root of all Raven Thomson's understanding.<sup>289</sup> His attitude to Russia oscillates between seeing it as a culture on the ascendant or a barbaric threat to all world civilisations, where '[t]he passing of our European civilisation might mean an end to all cultural impulse on earth for an indefinite period since, according to [Spengler's] theories, there is no other 'high culture' in existence in the world at the present time.'<sup>290</sup> As such the goal of his world philosophy and daily political work in Union Movement was the same.

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<sup>285</sup> See T. Grundy, *Memoirs of a Fascist Childhood*, op. cit.

<sup>286</sup> Idem., 'Homo Socialis,' op. cit., 25.

<sup>287</sup> Idem., 'World History,' op. cit., 142-3.

<sup>288</sup> Idem., 'Philosophy,' op. cit., 16.

<sup>289</sup> Idem., 'Russia and the West,' op. cit., 14.

<sup>290</sup> Idem., 'Dark Ages and Inner Light,' op. cit., 22-3.

## IV

Alexander Raven Thomson died on the 30<sup>th</sup> October 1955 at St. George's Hospital, Westminster.<sup>291</sup> He had been at work editing *Union*, and was found collapsed in UM headquarters.<sup>292</sup> His death certificate noted the cause of his demise as bowel cancer. The disease appears to have been with him for the previous 18 months, with him undergoing an operation to remove an obstruction in November of 1954.<sup>293</sup> As Robert Saunders a Dorset fascist wrote to Robert Row, a headquarters member, 'Raven's death is certainly a terrible blow although not unexpected.'<sup>294</sup> A memorial service was quickly arranged for the 8<sup>th</sup> November, where tributes were paid to 'a comrade, a friend and a fighter.'<sup>295</sup> Following cremation his ashes were scattered at a tree in a London park.<sup>296</sup> He left £ 261/11s/11d in probate at his death which all went to his family.<sup>297</sup>

Though the movement was clearly saddened by the loss of their comrade it attempted to capitalise on the event, '[a] donation to 'Union' is the most fitting tribute to Raven Thomson, and one which we feel sure would be his wholehearted wish as well.'<sup>298</sup> A Raven Thomson Tribute Fund was set up.<sup>299</sup> In the wake of the death various tributes appeared in *Union*,<sup>300</sup>

For 22 years Raven Thomson worked hard for the fulfilment of a great concept and idea – his death has robbed him when events are bringing that fulfilment near... But his life was a triumph: members of Union Movement and readers of "Union" knew his greatness of spirit, his kindness and his Scottish sense of humour... His death leaves a wide gap in our ranks, but he will always be with us in spirit.<sup>301</sup>

His leader since April 1933 also contributed a eulogy,

Raven Thomson had a great heart and a fine head. He led a dedicated life... This great spirit has passed before its time, which is our time – the coming time of England and of Europe for which he gave his life. Let us honour his memory by giving all of ourselves again to his struggle, until the things that he dreamed and for which he strove throughout all the

<sup>291</sup> Death certificate, 1955 Sub-district Westminster North West.

<sup>292</sup> E.J.Hamm, *Action Replay*, Howard Baker Press, London, 1983, 143.

<sup>293</sup> SUA Saunders Papers D2: Letter from A.Raven Thomson to R.Saunders, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1954.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., Letter from R.Row to R.Saunders 4<sup>th</sup> November 1955. See also reply 6<sup>th</sup> November 1955.

<sup>295</sup> At St.Columba's Church Shoreditch. *Union* 387, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1955.

<sup>296</sup> This tree was blown over in the great gale of 1988.

<sup>297</sup> Principle Probate Registry 24<sup>th</sup> July 1957.

<sup>298</sup> *Union* 387, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1955.

<sup>299</sup> *Union* 388, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1955.

<sup>300</sup> *Union* 387, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1955.

<sup>301</sup> *Union* 386, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1955.



hardships of his life have become a reality which he would so much have loved and within which he would have lived and served so greatly.<sup>302</sup>

Mosley's UM has been dismissed as a minor repetition of the BUF. As this study has attempted to show both its size and programme are deceptive. A distinct move towards a strategy of infiltration hides the real size and influence of the UM. Its programme showed a distinctive progression, based in inter-War fascism, but different in outlook. This new thought is exemplified in Raven Thomson's development of Homo Socialis. Thus the perception that '[t]he Union Movement's main activity...was a continuation of the old street politics of the BUF: small meetings, pub drinking, isolated harassment of Jews, and clashes with antifascists, occasionally interspersed with a local election campaign,' is superficial.<sup>303</sup>

For Raven Thomson this period was to see his attempt to keep the small movement from dissolution. With Mosley on a global tour to gather allies, Raven Thomson had to maintain cohesion within the UM, edit the paper, speak at meetings, and keep the organisation financially viable. Yet despite this, his thoughts were able to turn to philosophy, where in the final year of his life he again grappled with Spengler's prognosis for the West. A minor political movement UM may have been but it serves to complete any understanding of Raven Thomson's contribution to fascism in Britain.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> R.Eatwell, 'Why has the Extreme Right Failed in Britain,' op. cit., 176.

## Conclusion

[W]ith a dozen more like Raven it might have been a different story.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis has focused on the life and work of a key member of Sir Oswald Mosley's fascist experiment. It has illustrated and explained how Alexander Raven Thomson journeyed to fascism, and his choice of the Mosley movement. In examining his Spenglerian influenced thought, new insights have been exposed on the nature of his fascism, as separate from that of his leader, and the implications of his thought on the programme of the BUF, both in terms of anti-Semitism and corporate state theory. The study has also developed an understanding of Raven Thomson within the movement, as an example of how fascist's advanced through the organisation, as a participant in headquarters intrigue and as a loyal lieutenant to Mosley. The experience of internment and its role in shaping the fascism that appeared after the war has been isolated, to indicate the reasons for Raven Thomson's continuing fidelity to the cause. The impact on him of imprisonment has also been examined, both in terms of his work as a unifying force amongst fascist enclaves after the war and as Secretary of the Union Movement from 1948. The history of post 1945 fascism in Britain, between the pomp of the BUF and the emergence of the National Front, so long a barren period in historical understanding, has been highlighted. Whilst this is a neat summation of the narrative structure of this biography, the question of what we have learnt, must be addressed.

It should be emphasised, before this, that Raven Thomson's life, though over in 1955, is still very much a living history, with some of his comrades, through the medium of the Friends of Oswald Mosley, still using him as an example of the calibre of the membership, in an ongoing attempt to justify the stand they took.<sup>2</sup> In 1987, their newsletter noted that, '[o]n this 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Raven Thomson's death, we salute a very special comrade, still in spirit with us, urging us ever onward in pursuit of Mosley's higher purpose.'<sup>3</sup> One comrade's memoirs went even further in the assessment of Raven Thomson,

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<sup>1</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, Brockingday, London, 1990, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Mosley too used Raven Thomson as an example of the fascists in his movements. Writing in his autobiography he argued that Raven Thomson 'towered' over the people he had known in Labour's 1929 administration. O.Mosley, *My Life*, Nelson, London, 1968, 331.

<sup>3</sup> *Comrade*, October/November 1987, 3.



recalling a comrade that ‘breathed political and philosophical truth.’<sup>4</sup> On the Internet his work is still available. In the mid 1980s, the fascist National Front attempted to use Raven Thomson as an example of the contribution of a left wing thought to British fascism and their creed.<sup>5</sup> It falls to Raven Thomson’s biographer to answer this appropriation of his subject. Despite his background as a quickly disillusioned Communist and the apparent concern to improve the social conditions of the working classes and the poor, his concern was primarily linked to the super-organic philosophy he cherished; a philosophy anchored firmly in a right-wing cultural critique, which required that all parts of society were ‘healthy.’ As the examination of the fate of workers in the corporate state and the later elite of Homo Socialis has shown, egalitarian concerns were never high in his priorities.

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As a biography of a leading figure within Mosley fascism, this study’s chief contribution has been to develop new perspectives of this movement in the context of British history and the greater generic phenomenon. It is important to note, however, that outside the movement, anti-fascist circles and the small coterie of scholars engaged in research, Raven Thomson is an unknown figure. Had Mosley achieved power in Britain, Raven Thomson would have held a position of high office and a biography would have long since been available.<sup>6</sup> As the contemporary anti-fascist 43 Group concluded in 1947, ‘[e]ver since 1932 when Mosley formed his BUF, Thomson has been one of the big boys at the top. Under different circumstances he would presumably have been the Goering, Himmler or Hess of Fascist Britain.’<sup>7</sup> The failure of Mosley fascism to break out of the constraints of fringe politics has resulted in Raven Thomson’s obscurity. The single most tangible result of this study is to remedy this. With the oversight remedied, some conclusions about Mosley fascism from one of its leading participants can be made.

<sup>4</sup> J. Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 67.

<sup>5</sup> *Searchlight* 103, January 1984; *Searchlight* 109, July 1984.

<sup>6</sup> In 1940 the authorities believed that his rank in the BU would gain him the role of Home Secretary in a fascist state. See Public Record Office (PRO) HO283/70/45: Advisory Committee report: Transcript of Raven Thomson’s hearing.

<sup>7</sup> *On Guard* 5, November 1947.

Though not the intention of this study, the findings from Raven Thomson's life and work, perpetuate the Mosley-centrism of British fascist studies. The Blackshirt leader cannot be removed very far from any facet of his movement. Despite the great satisfaction and prestige it would have been to be able to close this study with a conclusive argument that Raven Thomson had been the real ideological drive within the BUF and Union Movement, Mosley would not be moved. In attempting to isolate Raven Thomson's contribution to the BUF and later movements, Mosley was always the most useful comparison. For Raven Thomson, the Blackshirt leader was the main factor in his decision to join the BUF and personal loyalty ensured his continued fidelity to the fascist cause for the remainder of his life. Mosley also provided the materials for Raven Thomson's intellectual development: Italian corporatism, cultural anti-Semitism and Hellenic philosophy. Yet, as the study has also shown, Raven Thomson was more than an extrapolator from Mosley, a feature that had been overlooked in traditional examinations of the BUF. If this thesis has achieved anything it should be a re-evaluation of the strict hierarchy of ideological credibility established for Mosley fascism in the work of Nugent and endorsed by Cullen, with a less rigid application of that framework, allowing for the closer examination of the diversity amongst senior fascists.<sup>8</sup>

The popular perception of the BUF is of a movement, led by a disgruntled baronet, consumed by anti-Semitism, committed to violence as a means of achieving their aims and potentially a treacherous.<sup>9</sup> Even the major pieces of academic work on the subject, have failed to inform this view. It is hoped that in this explanation of Raven Thomson's reasoning, behind fascist activities such as his participation in the East London campaign, there has been no hint of special pleading from his biographer.<sup>10</sup> As a thinker he needed the movement to succeed, if his ideas were ever to move from theory into reality, the movement

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<sup>8</sup> See N.Nugent, 'The ideas of the British Union of Fascists,' in R.King and N.Nugent (eds), *The British Right*, Saxon House, Farnborough, 1977, 133-64; S.M.Cullen, 'The Development of the ideas and policy of the British Union of Fascists,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 22 No. 1, 1987, 115-36.

<sup>9</sup> See C.Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939*, Arnold, London, 1979; R.Benewick, 'The Threshold of Violence,' in R.Benewick & T.Smith (eds.) *Direct Action and Democratic Politics*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1972.

<sup>10</sup> Arguments from former comrades that Raven Thomson was someone who 'retained in common with many learned men an unexpected innocence of mind,' falter when confronted with the vitriol of the 1937 LCC campaign. See Sheffield University Archive: R.Bellamy *We Marched with Mosley*, op. cit., 399-400.



helped define him, especially his anti-Semitism. The other popular view is of a domestic fascism, as a close-knit group of activists, all dedicated to the same ideal. Raven Thomson's biography has revealed the instability that pervaded the Mosley movements both before and after the War. Far from being a cohesive cadre, the upper echelon of Mosley fascism was deeply divided, with even the most loyal members having a different conception of fascism's role than the leader. That the fragile grouping persisted was thanks to the personal loyalty that Mosley commanded. This loyalty cannot be underemphasized, with one comrade writing in his memoirs '[t]here's never been a man like OM. I would have died for him.'<sup>11</sup> It ensured that whilst many fascists could promote their own agendas, they were to some degree held in place by the centrifugal force of Mosley's charisma, intellect and dynamism.

This thesis has greater impact on scholarly interpretations of Mosley fascism. In particular the assumption that the BUF was the exemplar of the rational, programmatic end of the fascist spectrum, has been challenged.<sup>12</sup> The corporate state, with its scientific management of national life, has often been used to corroborate this view. The study of Raven Thomson has illustrated the centrality of meta-politics and a mythic superorganic struggle against decadence at the intellectual core of the BUF's corporate state architect. Raven Thomson's world philosophy places him within a small pan-European group of intellectuals, all struggling with the ideas of decadence and restitution. Individuals such as the Belgian Paul de Man, Italians Alfredo Rocco and Giovanni Gentile, together with post-war thinkers such as Francis Parker Yockey, were all attempting to locate the mechanism for rejuvenation in a contemporary society locked in a predetermined road to ruin. As such Raven Thomson ties BUF ideology considerably closer to continental fascism, at least on the level of the basic operating assumptions he was making about society and how it could be saved. This is particularly evident in his work on corporatism. As a fascism, that based its attempt at mass appeal on a detailed programme, he helped define what can be understood as the Mosley movement. That within the structure of the Corporate

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<sup>11</sup> J.Charnley, *Blackshirts and Roses*, op. cit., 93.

<sup>12</sup> S.M.Cullen, 'Leaders and Martyrs: Codreanu, Mosley and Jose Antonio,' *History*, Vol. 71, 1986, 115-36.

State he wove a mechanism to stimulate the cultural vitality of the nation had been overlooked.

This continental aspect to Raven Thomson's fascist thought also calls into question how insular the Mosley movement was. One of the key arguments within the study of Mosley fascism, especially during the inter-war period, is the extent to which it was a movement merely copying the regimes of Italy and Germany. In the aftermath of the Holocaust some historians are trying to overemphasise the link to Germany, with other scholars and the fascists themselves understandably keen to stand apart from the implications of anything more than a fraternal relationship with continental fascism. Now it appears that a re-examination of Mosley fascism is required, recognising its differences with Europe, but conscious of its continental heritage.

The central role of Oswald Spengler has been a feature of previous studies into BUF ideology, principally as part of the 'rejected knowledge' that Mosley accepted, once he had left conventional politics. For Mosley, Spengler's Caesar provided a convenient reason for his turn to fascism. For Raven Thomson, his whole personal philosophy was underpinned by the belief that contemporary society was a communal entity, on Spengler's cyclical journey towards collapse. This premise is evident from *Civilization as Divine Superman* onwards, and the choice of fascist activism must be seen as part of a decision to move from a passive acceptance of superorganic laws of growth and decay to open rebellion through fascism. Spengler's work was the foundation of the concept of the cyclical development of historical groups, and Raven Thomson kept the framework in his understanding of the place and potential of fascism. As such, Spengler's role in shaping Mosley fascism, is clearer as a result of this research.

A further addition to studies of Mosley fascism has been made in widening the focus of academic interest beyond 1940. The BUF has overshadowed the history of British fascism. This biography has enabled the history of Mosley fascism to progress into the post-War era, first as a small but loyal band of fascists and then as 'Union Movement.' Raven Thomson's roles, initially as unifier for the fragmented remnants of Mosley fascism, and then as a figurehead for the tiny Union Movement had gone almost unnoticed. That he has the dubious privilege of presiding over the revival of Mosley fascism in post-War



Britain, is now clear. Raven Thomson's prominence after 1945 also makes him a more important figure in the history of British fascism.

This biography has also examined the development of a new intellectual discourse within fascism after the War. Once he had successfully re-combined the fragments of Mosley fascism with the launch of Union Movement in 1948, Raven Thomson, under the guidance of Mosley, spent much of the early 1950s formulating a revision of fascist theory that avoided the now poisonous term. In a bizarre combination of Plato, mixed with the contorted Spenglerian ideas from Russian Berdyaev and American Yockey, Raven Thomson tried to create in 'Homo Socialis' a new legitimisation for fascistic forms. Here the protean nature of fascism is visible, as is the attempt following the War to adapt to the new hostile environment.

In terms of the greater generic phenomenon, Raven Thomson's experience of fascism indicates some important facets in the nature of the creed. The study vindicates the concept of fascism proposed by Roger Griffin, particularly the role of rebirth to the fascists' perception of their surroundings and mission. The intellectual process and ultimate conversion of Raven Thomson fits Griffin's perception of 'Palingenesis' well. Fascism's concept of time and the belief that it could be harnessed in a national rebirth are evident in Raven Thomson's thought. The prominence of fascist concerns for culture has also been reinforced. This field of fascist studies is a new one, though it owes much to the pioneering work of George Mosse. Indeed the BUF's concern with the ideas of Spenglerian decline informs an understanding of fascism from Mosse of the phenomenon as part of a European cultural and intellectual process, rather than an historical aberration. Mosse's interest in fascism's attempt to manage national culture is also justified in Raven Thomson's cultural corporatism. The significance of culture to British fascism has only recently resulted in a book that in part addresses some of these issues.<sup>13</sup> As such this thesis is in the fortunate position of being at the forefront of a new wave of historiography in the field.

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<sup>13</sup> T.Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-30: Parties, ideology and culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000.

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Despite the length of this thesis, it is still an insufficient tool to attempt anything more than a fleeting impression of Raven Thomson. There is much that remains to be studied in this area that the constraints of space and the availability of sources have only touched upon.

The crucial omission from this piece is any tangible explanation for the conversion to fascism. *Civilization as Divine Superman* gives clues to the later journey, but the important period between September 1931 and April 1933, remains a hole in our understanding. The research has discovered little information about what Raven Thomson was actually like. As such the impact of his personality in the resulting ideology is lost.<sup>14</sup> This biography can explain the journey into and within fascism, but it can only speculate on the reasons why Raven Thomson travelled it.<sup>15</sup> Richard Thurlow gives a standard response to the phenomenon of fascist recruitment;

The basic appeal of the BUF was to those with initiative who had for some reason experienced bottlenecks in mobility patterns in society; this included cranks, criminals, alcoholics and worse... [T]he leadership of the BUF ...were outsiders; for reasons of personality or ideological opposition they were alienated from conventional establishment values.<sup>16</sup>

This biography cannot present any tangible evidence as to why the force of history, from Spengler, fascinated Raven Thomson so much, nor how he was able to follow Mosley so far beyond the pale for so long. The biographical portrait that emerges in the circumstances, is a thus only a sketch of Raven Thomson with certain features picked out in greater detail.

The history of British fascism continues to evolve. This biography has suggested new avenues in this field. The cultural aspect of the fascist programme still requires far more examination than has presently been attempted. More work is required on the intellectual rationales that propelled individuals into fascism, particularly the Raven Thomson type of visionary, planning the architecture of society, in the midst of a increasingly doomed

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<sup>14</sup> In a study of William Joyce enough was known about the man to conclude that he blamed others for his misfortunes and compensated for his lack of British citizenship with ardent patriotism. A. Weale, *Renegades – Hitler's Englishmen*, Weidenfield & Nicolson, London, 1994, 17

<sup>15</sup> 'The fascist mentality was complex and contradictory.' T. Linehan, *East London for Mosley*, op. cit., 304.

<sup>16</sup> R.C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 130-1.



crusade; seeking the divine superman and finding only the realities of politics at the margins. A social history of the BUF still remains unwritten and though a brief attempt was made at amending this deficit in chapter 3, little is known about the experience of Mosley's faithful. The immediate post-War period as a distinct phase in the history of British fascism is only now gaining academic interest. This thesis has generated more questions than it has answered. It is for other historians, less constrained by so sharp a focus on one character in the Mosley drama, to pursue them.

### III

To recognise that someone committed bad actions is not sufficient basis for condemning his entire personality, aims and accomplishments. It is the final balance sheet that counts.<sup>17</sup>

It is appropriate to conclude this biographical thesis with a brief assessment of Alexander Raven Thomson's 'final balance sheet.' Mosley fascism has rightly been described as having 'illusions of grandeur.'<sup>18</sup> Throughout its life it simultaneously reached towards high ideals and base actions; 'British fascism's pretensions were massive: its performance, dismal and squalid.'<sup>19</sup> For Raven Thomson this is best illustrated by his years attempting to construct a sophisticated and cohesive state structure to combat the force of history whilst resorting to the crudest racist abuse. He is major figure in a movement that features as a postscript to British political life in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

As a fascist intellectual, his ideas shaped what we understand as Mosley fascism. Yet his philosophy regarding the mythic communal superman was ultimately derived from the greater intellects of Spengler, Nietzsche, Pareto and Lamarck. How viable his corporate state would have been, is conjecture. Some scholars believe that it was too complex to be implemented fully.<sup>20</sup> It is highly likely that the rigours of functioning, outside the sanitised conditions of the

<sup>17</sup> R.Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism,' in R.Thurlow & K.Lunn (eds.) *British Fascism*, Croon Helm, London, 1980, 83.

<sup>18</sup> D.S.Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur – Mosley, Fascism and British Society*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> A.Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*, op. cit., 58.

<sup>20</sup> S.Rawnsley, 'Fascism and Fascists in Britain in the 1930s: a case study of fascism in the north of England in a period of economic and political change,' PhD Thesis, University of Bradford, 1982, 72.

BUF's expectation, would have deformed the structure. As an activist, Raven Thomson entered into a movement where the atmosphere was, at its best, the excitement of a common quest towards a Greater Britain, and at its worst, the chicanery of a small group of people angling for advancement and prestige. Once inside the movement, the encompassing nature of the struggle isolated him from the outside world; '[t]he BUF became a closet existence for many, from which they could observe the outside world whilst living out their fantasy roles...' <sup>21</sup> As such Raven Thomson was locked into the movement long before the incarcerations of 1940 made the bars real.

As a Mosley man his most tangible contribution to that form of British fascism was his unwavering commitment to the cause. His belief that Mosley was the answer to Britain's troubles never slackened, even when it led to imprisonment. Whatever the criticisms levelled at the fascist, this loyalty that emerged in 1933, and lasted for 22 years in the face of public animosity, is extraordinary. If Mosley was the Don Quixote of British politics, tilting at windmills in the belief they were giants, then Raven Thomson was his Sancho Panza. <sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> A. Weale, *Renegades – Hitler's Englishmen*, op. cit., 19.

<sup>22</sup> T. Grundy, *Memoirs of a Fascist Childhood*, Heinemann, London, 1998, 175.



## Appendix One: Chronology

3 <sup>rd</sup> December 1899	Raven Thomson born in Edinburgh.
1908	Begins education at Mercheston Public School.
1917	Enlists in the Royal Engineers.
1918	Discharged from the army as Second Lieutenant. Meets Lisbeth Rontgern.
1919	Visits United States and marries Lisbeth.
1921-6	Lives in Germany.
1926-33	Works in a London engineering firm.
1931	Spends 6 months in the Communist Party of Great Britain.
September 1931	Finishes <i>Civilization as Divine Superman</i> .
April 1933	Joins the BUF, becomes a regular speaker and contributor to the movement's press and publications.
1935	Writes <i>The Coming Corporate State</i> . Becomes BUF Director of Policy.
March 1937	Stands as a BUF candidate in the London County Council election. After cuts in expenditure remains as a voluntary worker.
1938	Becomes editor of <i>Action</i> .
23 <sup>rd</sup> May 1940	Interned.
4 <sup>th</sup> & 5 <sup>th</sup> July 1940	Cross Examined by 18B Advisory Committee.
Summer 1940	Interrogated at Latchmere House.
4 <sup>th</sup> October 1944	Released from imprisonment.
1946-1947	Acts as a central figure in the attempt to revive Mosley fascism through Mosley Book Clubs and street meetings. Works to establish a propaganda machine for Mosleyism.
February 1948	Formation of Union Movement, Raven Thomson becomes Secretary and editor of its paper <i>Union</i> .
1953	Begins a renewed interest in philosophy and the historical development of civilisations.
1955	Writes a world-history manuscript and develops the idea of a higher man, <i>Homo Socialis</i> .
12 <sup>th</sup> November 1955	Dies of cancer.

Appendix Two: 1996 Home Office reply to an application for  
access to closed files



QUEEN ANNE'S GATE LONDON SW1H 9AT

22 AUG 1996

Our Ref: RS/96 2/196/6  
PO 12860/96

*Dear Mr Pugh*

You wrote on 27 June to Tony Benn MP about access to Home Office papers relating to Alexander Raven Thomson. Mr Benn has asked me to reply to you direct.

As you know, the two files which you wish to see have been withheld under section 3(4) of the Public Records Act 1958 on grounds of national security. Material that falls into this category is held in the Department under a Lord Chancellor's Instrument on condition that it is re-reviewed at least every ten years enabling the level of sensitivity to be reassessed. The files were recently reviewed in accordance with Cabinet Office guidelines for the periodic re-review of all withheld material but it was decided that they should continue to be withheld. The nature of the material contained in them is such that after careful consideration we have had to conclude that it is not possible to allow access to it at present.

I understand that you have received full replies to your enquiries from my officials on 14 December 1995 and 12 February 1996 and that you have been sent lists of files already open at the Public Record Office containing references to Alexander Raven Thomson. I hope you were able to make use of them.

I am copying this letter to Tony Benn, together with his original enclosures, at his request.

*Yours sincerely  
Michael Howard*

MICHAEL HOWARD



## References

### Primary Sources

#### Archives

##### British Library

The Bloomsbury, Kings Cross and Colindale branches were invaluable in the completion of this thesis.

##### Public Records Office

The PRO at Kew now holds a large collection of documents detailing official surveillance and management of Mosley fascism from 1933 until 1949. As yet little material has been released on Union Movement.

The files of most help in this thesis were contained in the Home Office (HO) subsections, 45, 144 & 283. The latter houses the majority of material concerning Blackshirt internment. For ease of use the PRO has a list of the main files for researchers.

##### Imperial War Museum

A greatly underused archive. The museum houses several collections of interest, including the papers of Luttmann Johnson, the secretary for the BUF's January Club. It also holds some papers of fascist internees.

##### Board of Deputies of British Jews

Housed at the Board's London offices, the archive gives details of the official response by British Jews to Mosley fascism, particularly after the war. Certain of the Board's files reside in the Greater London Record Office, where inspection is allowed with written permission.

##### Wiener Library

Has a comprehensive library, and an extensive collection of press cuttings for both pre and post war fascism.

##### Sheffield University Archive

The fascism collection is centred on the files of correspondence to and from Robert Saunders, a leading Dorset fascist.

##### Other Archives

The following archives and libraries were also helpful in the preparation of this thesis:

Working Class Movement Library, Salford.

National Museum of Labour History, Manchester.

London Museum of Jewish Life, London.

Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Tower Hamlets Public Library, London.

The British Library of Political and Social Science, London School of Economics, London.

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<i>British Union Quarterly</i>	Vol. 1- 4, (No.s 1-4)1937-40.
<i>The European Action</i>	No. 1-39 1953-56: The series ran until No.72 in 1958 No.s 1-222, 21 <sup>st</sup> February 1936 - 6 <sup>th</sup> June 1940
<i>The Blackshirt</i>	No.s 1- 261, February 1933 – May 1939  Though it started and finished as a monthly, this publication was a weekly for a large part of the BUF period, and the internal paper for the Movement during the appearance of the <i>Fascist Week</i> .
<i>Fascist Week</i>	No.s 1-29, 12 <sup>th</sup> November 1933 - 31 <sup>st</sup> May 1934
<i>Union</i>	No.s 1- 391, 14 <sup>th</sup> February 1948 - 24 <sup>th</sup> December 1955.

Where applicable national and local newspapers have also been used. The Weiner library's press cuttings archive was particularly helpful in this regard.

## Questionnaires

Whilst few former Blackshirts and UM members remain who recall Raven Thomson as anything more than a remote figure in their fascism, this thesis has benefited from the contributions of some senior figures within the Friends of Oswald Mosley.

Diana Mosley	Lady Mosley
'DI'	A former comrade of Raven Thomson's.
'RR'	A leading figure in the post war Union Movement.
Leonard Wise	A junior officer in the BUF who helped in the creation of printing facilities for Mosley supporters after the war.
John Warburton	A senior member of 'The Friends of Oswald Mosley,' and editor of its newsletter <i>Comrade</i> .

## Autobiography

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