

Fascism in Britain: Political Life of Oswald Mosley

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Abstract

Oswald Mosley is still today one of the most debated politicians in the history of Britain. Mosley was one of the most prominent figures of politics in Britain during the interbellum era. His changing of parties and finally founding and running the New Party and the British Union of Fascists have turned him into a persona non grata in the aftermath of the second World war. However, today his legacy is still debated and there are conflicting conclusions. In this article his political life through textual analysis using written sources has been analyzed.

Keywords: Mosley, Fascism, Britain, England, Paneuropeanism

Britanya'da Faşizm: Oswald Mosley'in Siyasi Hayatı

Öz

Oswald Mosley bugün hala Britanya tarihinin en tartışmalı siyasi figürlerinden biridir. Mosley, iki dünya savaşı arası dönemde İngiltere'deki siyasetin en önemli isimlerinden biriydi. Parti değiştirmesi ve sonunda İngiliz Faşistler Birliği'ni kurup yönetmesi, onu İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrasında istenmeyen adama dönüştürmüştür. Bugün de tartışmalı mirası ve hakkında bilinmeyenler hala Avrupa'da önemli bir gündem maddesi olarak görülmektedir. Bu makalede Mosley'in siyasi yaşamı yazılı kaynak üzerinde yapılan metin inceleme üzerinden anlatılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mosley, Faşizm, Britanya, İngiltere, Panavrupacılık

Introduction

Oswald Mosley was one of the most controversial figures in 20th-century British politics. His life trajectory—from an upper-class aristocratic upbringing to his leadership of the British Union of Fascists (BUF)—is emblematic of the political upheaval that characterized Europe during the interwar years. While Mosley's early career showed exceptional promise within the British establishment, his later disillusionment with the political establishment of Britain which ended with his turn to fascism and the creation of a far-right political movement made him a polarizing figure whose legacy remains much debated. This article explores the life of Oswald Mosley, his political ideology, his rise and fall in the political sphere, and the long-term implications of his fascist ideology for Britain and Europe.

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Early Life and Education

Oswald Ernald Mosley was born on November 16, 1896, in London, to Sir Oswald Mosley, 4th Baronet, and Lady Mary, daughter of a prominent well-known family with deep ties to the British aristocracy and upper classes. Mosley's family was part of the established elite, a class that had significant influence on both British politics and society. His father, a Conservative Member of Parliament, was a landowner who upheld traditional values, while his mother came from a background of wealth and high status but compared to his father was apolitical. Mosley's privileged background, coupled with his family's political connections, positioned him in close proximity to the heart of British political life. (Howell, 2015, p.35)

Mosley was educated at Eton, one of the most prestigious schools in Britain, and then at the University of Oxford. However, despite his elite schooling, Mosley struggled to find success academically. He was an indifferent student, and his time at Oxford was marked by frustration and disillusionment. He did not graduate, leaving Oxford without a degree to join the army during World War I. Serving as an officer in the 16th (Public Schools) Battalion of the London Regiment, Mosley's experiences during the war proved exceptionally formative. The brutal realities of the trenches, combined with the widespread disillusionment that followed, led him to question the legitimacy of the British establishment and its handling of national affairs. It must be noted that this was a common theme for many soldiers returning home after WWI.

The Impact of World War I

It is undeniably that the trauma of World War I had a profound effect on Mosley's political outlook. The war not only left him physically scarred but also catalyzed his skepticism of the traditional political structures in Britain. Like many other veterans of the war, Mosley found himself at odds with the pre-war political elite that had led the country into such devastating conflict. As the post-war years brought widespread economic hardship and social unrest, Mosley grew increasingly critical of both the Conservative and Labour parties for their failure to address the nation's ills. (Mosley, 2019, p.50)

In 1918, Mosley entered politics by becoming the Conservative candidate for Harrow in the House of Commons, winning a seat in the general election. He campaigned hard and was generally well liked in the constituency. Even though his victory marked the start of his political career, it was clear that Mosley was not content to simply adhere to party orthodoxy. His growing dissatisfaction with the mainstream political system led him to seek more radical solutions, ones that would address the underlying economic and social crises facing Britain. (Howell, 2015, p.120)

From the Conservative Party to Radicalism

After briefly serving as a Conservative MP, Mosley began to grow increasingly disillusioned with the conservative establishment. In 1924, he was appointed as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, a post in Stanley Baldwin's Conservative government. Mosley's time in office was brief, and he soon grew frustrated with the Conservative leadership's unwillingness to enact more substantial reforms. (Mosley, 2019, p.67) He was particularly critical of their handling of the economic crisis, which had been exacerbated by the aftermath of the war and the global depression. Mosley believed that Britain needed a more radical approach to economic reform—one that would radically overhaul the system to meet the needs of the people.

Mosley's dissatisfaction with the Conservative Party reached its peak when he resigned in 1920 to pursue an independent political path. He won two elections in 1922 and 1923 as an

independent. In 1924 he joined the Labour Party, however his disillusionment with parliamentary politics led him to embrace more extreme political ideologies. As a final attempt he produced the Mosley Memorandum calling for a more state controlled economy and an extensive public works program to raise employment and improve the economy. Although his ideas gained support from some parts of the society it was rejected by the Labor Party leadership. As a result, Mosley resigned from Labor and then founded the New Party and used it as a platform to promote the ideas presented in his memorandum. Over the next few years, he became fascinated with European fascism, particularly with the successes of Mussolini in Italy and the growing movement of authoritarian and nationalist politics sweeping across the continent. This would set the stage for the creation of his own political movement.

Rise of Extreme Right in Europe

During the interwar years extreme right movements have risen greatly in Europe. Starting from Mussolini's rise to power in 1922, extreme right have gained momentum and by the year 1939 many big nations in Europe such as Germany, Hungary and Spain were ruled by extreme right-wing movements whereas many countries like Norway, Belgium and Poland had strong extreme right-wing movements. (Taylor,2001, p.146)

In order for an ideology to be described as fascist, its ideology must prioritize the existence and interests of the state above all else. In this respect, it should also include populism and aim to ensure the welfare of all members of the nation, not just the rich or workers. In order to achieve this goal, implementing measures such as applying strict state control over the economy, ensuring that workers' wages are sufficient, preventing arbitrary dismissals, and applying price control to prevent the cost of living are among the policies of fascism. Fascism aims to eliminate the contradictions between classes. In this direction, corporative unions are established by the state and an agreement is reached between the employee and the employer. The needs of the poor and middle class in society are met by the state.

Britain was no exception as Fascism and ideologies similar to fascism started become more popular with each day. However, as an idea fascism tends to rely on a strong leader and it did not emerge before 1930s.

The Birth of the British Union of Fascists

In 1932, Mosley founded the British Union of Fascists (BUF). The BUF was heavily influenced by Mussolini's Italian Fascists and the rise of National Socialism in Germany under Adolf Hitler. Mosley sought to bring a similar form of authoritarian governance to Britain, one that rejected liberal democracy and embraced a corporatist state—a system in which the economy would be controlled by state-run corporations representing various sectors of society, from business to labor.

At the heart of Mosley's ideology was the belief that Britain needed a strong, centralized government that could tackle the economic issues of the time—issues such as unemployment, poverty, and class division. His platform was rooted in nationalism, statism, anti-communism, and anti-liberalism, and he called for a total overhaul of British society. He sought the found a third position platform. The BUF rejected the existing party system and sought to create a "new order" that would restore Britain to its former greatness.

One of the BUF's most distinctive features was its paramilitary wing, known as the Blackshirts. Modeled after the fascist groups in Italy and Germany, the Blackshirts were tasked with protecting

party rallies and engaging in street confrontations with political opponents, including communists and left-wing groups. The Blackshirts were organized by groups that predated the founding of The British Union of Fascists and have also clashed with other right-wing groups. The BUF attracted a wide range of supporters, particularly among the working class, many of whom were disillusioned with both the Labour Party and the established political elites. Mosley's rhetoric, which promised a radical transformation of Britain's political and economic systems, resonated with those who felt abandoned by the establishment. (Pugh, 2006, p.124)

The Rise of Fascism in Britain

In the early 1930s, Mosley and the BUF were able to gain a small but increasingly growing following. The Great Depression, which began in 1929, led to mass unemployment, social instability, and a deep sense of disillusionment with traditional political parties. As the public became more hopeless the belief in establishment parties also faltered. In this atmosphere of crisis, Mosley's call for strong, decisive leadership and his promises of a new economic order found a receptive audience among a significant portion of the population. (Charmley, 2008, p.89)

The BUF's rallies, which featured large crowds, military-style displays, and Mosley's fiery speeches, began to attract attention both in Britain and abroad. His speeches emphasized nationalism, the need for social justice, and the creation of a society based on order, discipline, and unity. Mosley's fascist vision appeared to offer a potential solution to the economic and political instability of the time. (Tikhistory, 2023, 0:28:35)

However, the BUF's rise was met with fierce resistance from various political groups. Left-wing organizations, particularly the Labour Party, vehemently opposed Mosley's brand of fascism. Trade unions, which were key supporters of the Labour movement, viewed the BUF as a direct threat to workers' rights and democracy. Mosley's alleged ties to the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany further alienated his movement from the mainstream political establishment, and his unwillingness to discredit totalitarianism or authoritarianism drew increasing hostility from both most of the press and political elites.

The Battle of Cable Street and the Decline of the BUF

One of the most significant events in the BUF's history occurred in 1936, when Mosley attempted to lead a large fascist rally through the East End of London, an area with a large Jewish population. The march was met with violent resistance from anti-fascist groups, including Jewish organizations, trade unions, and left-wing activists. The event culminated in the Battle of Cable Street, a violent confrontation between fascists and anti-fascists, in which Mosley's Blackshirts were blocked from marching by a mass of protesters. (American Mosleyite, 2024, 00:00:54) The police were forced to intervene, and the BUF's plans were thwarted.

The inability to continue the march at Cable Street was a turning point for the BUF. (BBC News, 2016, 0:00:45) The party's popularity began to wane, and its perceived aggressive tactics alienated large sections of the British public. In 1940, as Britain's involvement in World War II escalated, Mosley's sympathies for Nazi Germany and his growing ties to Hitler's regime made him increasingly suspect. The British government, fearing that Mosley might attempt to undermine the war effort or collaborate with the Axis powers, interned him and other BUF leaders without trial.

With Mosley in prison, the BUF's activities came to a halt, and the organization was effectively disbanded. After the war, Mosley's political career was effectively over. The widespread disdain

for his fascist affiliations, combined with the public's memory of his alleged collaboration with Nazi Germany, made it virtually impossible for him to return to mainstream politics.

Post-War Years and the Attempt to Revive Fascism

Despite his notoriety, Mosley remained determined to revive his political career after World War II. In the years following his release from internment in 1943, Mosley attempted to re-enter the political scene by forming new political organizations, including the Union Movement in 1948 and the British National Party in the 1950s. These groups were smaller in scale compared to the BUF, and Mosley's attempts to rebuild a fascist movement in post-war Britain were largely unsuccessful. His attempts to gain votes or gain a place in parliament were futile as he did not manage to get any meaningful votes.

The British public's memory of Mosley's fascist activities during the war, combined with the rising tide of anti-fascist sentiment in the post-war years, made it difficult for him to regain any significant political influence. He made some television appearances but was not a regular guest. He spent much of his time abroad, particularly in France and Italy, where his association with fascism was less controversial. His marriage to Diana Mitford, a woman with strong ties to Nazi Germany, where he married her, further tarnished his reputation in Britain.

Legacy and Controversy

The legacy of Oswald Mosley is one marked by extreme ideological fervor, political extremism, and an unwavering commitment to authoritarianism. While some argue that Mosley was an advocate for social justice and economic reform, his adherence to fascism and his alleged collaboration with Nazi Germany ultimately overshadowed any positive aspects of his ideology. The BUF's emphasis on violent confrontation, militarism, and its hostility toward Jews and the left left an indelible stain on Mosley's legacy. (Peter Churcher, 2024, 00:15:00)

Today, Mosley's image is often remembered as a traitor to Great Britain, a man who sought to impose foreign ideologies on his own country at a time when Britain was struggling to preserve democracy in the face of totalitarian threats. His association with fascism, particularly his admiration for Mussolini and Hitler, continues to provoke intense debate and reflection on the nature of political extremism.

Despite the failure of the BUF and the axis losing WWII discrediting of Mosley's political vision, the appeal of his ideas to certain segments of society highlights the potential for political radicalization and the fragility of democratic institutions in times of crisis. Mosley's life exists to show how ideologies, when taken to their extreme, can lead to division, violence, and the erosion of democratic principles. (Peter Churcher, 2024, 15:00:00)

Conclusion

Oswald Mosley's life and political career remain a subject of intense scrutiny and controversy. His rise from the British aristocracy to the leadership of a fascist movement, his embrace of authoritarianism, and his alleged collaborations with totalitarian and authoritarian regimes have cemented his place as one of Britain's most notorious political figures. While his ideas may have found a brief moment of resonance during a time of economic and political crisis between the two world wars, his attempts at moving Britain to fascism continues to overshadow his political ambitions. In reflecting on Mosley's life, it can be seen the turbulent times that Europe and Britain went through in the first half of the 20th century.

In many countries where extreme right-wing parties gain traction there were big radical left movements and this played a huge part in attracting masses to authoritarian politics of extreme right. In Great Britain the deeply rooted democracy did not allow both extreme ends of the political spectrum to gain electoral and popular support. Extreme ideologies on both sides of the spectrum have remained on the fringes of popular support both on the streets and the electoral polls.

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