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**Fascists behind barbed wire; political internment without trial in
wartime Britain.**

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In the spring and early summer of 1940, the British government carried out a programme of mass internment without trial. On 11th May, the first of thousands of 'enemy aliens' were interned. Many of these internees were refugees from Nazi Germany, often Jews who had fled Germany in fear of their lives. Others were long time residents of Italian or German origin. By July, some 27,000 of these people had been deported to Canada, or interned in makeshift camps in the UK. But another group were also interned without trial, British citizens who were members of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union (BU), and other, smaller, fascist and nazi groups. The historical study of internment has been slow to develop, and most attention has been directed at the internment of 'enemy aliens'. Interestingly, the first overall examination, and condemnation, of the political internment of British citizens came from the Glasgow-based anarchist press, the Strickland Press, with *It Might Have Happened To You!* (December, 1943), by J. Wynn, and the anarchist activist, Guy Aldred. However, it was not until 1980 that Peter and Leni Gillman's account of internment, *'Collar the Lot!'*, was published, although their work focused only on the internment of wartime refugees. Neil Stammers' *Civil Liberties in Britain During the 2nd World War* (1983), was a wider ranging examination of the impact of wartime policy on civil liberties, which looked at some aspects of political internment; while Connery Chappell's *Island of Barbed Wire* (1984) was a non-academic account of the internment experience during the war on the Isle of Man. Not until A. W. Brian Simpson's *In the Highest Degree Odious* (1992) did a clearer picture emerge of the development of internment policy in relation to British fascists. This was followed by David Cesarani's and Tony Kushner's edited volume, *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain* (1993), which set the scene for recent work that has, once more, returned to the issue of the internment of 'enemy aliens'. For example, David Cesarani's article linking memory, the silence surrounding the history of internment in Britain, and concentration and death camps in Nazi Europe, contains only the briefest of mentions of the internment of British fascists¹. However, Graham Macklin's recent account of the revival of Mosleyite fascism in the post-war period, *Very Deeply Dyed in Black* (2007), in which he attributes major significance to the internment experience of Mosleyites during the war for far right politics after the war, and widespread contemporary concern about the use of detention without charge or trial by both Britain and the United States, has made the issue of political internment in the UK once more a key topic.

From the outset of the Second World War, the government possessed extensive emergency powers, under Defence Regulations 18B, to intern people without trial. However, there was much debate within the Home Office and the War Cabinet about the degree to which these powers should be exercised². A number of groups actively opposed the war on philosophical or religious grounds - pacifists in the Peace Pledge Union, Quakers and Jehovah's Witnesses. But the two most significant groups who opposed the war were the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and the fascist British Union (BU). The CPGB had, since the Hitler-Stalin Pact, buried its former opposition to the Nazis, and argued that the war was an 'imperialist war'. The CPGB's enemies, the BU, also opposed the war, arguing for a negotiated peace, with Britain's Empire intact. Both parties were small, the BU, with around 25,000 members in 1939, being the larger of the two, but both were characterised by a history of headline-grabbing activism. The CPGB was seen to be a threat to the war effort because of its industrial organisation and strength, while the BU had notable support in parts of the East End of London, and possessed many committed activists.

At first, the security services, under MI5, maintained a close watching brief on the two organisations. MI5 wished to boost its own role and influence within government by seeking the internment of fascists and communists. This was opposed by the Home Office, which was mindful of Britain's tradition of civil liberties, and was unwilling to inflame the domestic situation, or make martyrs of the two groups. But with the German onslaught on Norway, Denmark and Holland, matters changed. The rapid military successes of the German armed forces in Scandinavia was a shock to the British government and public opinion alike. It seemed that there must be deeper reasons than military tactics alone that explained these defeats for the democratic countries. Foremost among these was the supposed role of the Fifth Column. The self-aggrandising opportunism of the Norwegian nazi leader, Vidkun Quisling, seemed to confirm as fact the suspicion that German victories depended on politically motivated sabotage by traitors in countries attacked by the Nazis. In this context, the BU's anti-war activities appeared to be a potentially serious threat. The fear of Fifth Column activity finally reached a tipping point in terms of government attitudes to internment with the Tyler Kent affair³. Tyler Kent was a cypher clerk at the US Embassy in London, with links to extreme right wingers through his contacts with Anna Wolkoff, a White Russian with British citizenship. Kent was involved in passing secret information to Wolkoff, who, in

turn, had links with other foreign diplomats. This was the breakthrough that MI5 had been waiting for to press its case for widespread internment on political grounds.

While there was no evidence at all to suggest that Oswald Mosley and his BU would assist an enemy attack on Britain, something that the movement and its leader repeatedly stressed it would not do under any circumstances, it was not unsurprising in the atmosphere of the time that some could imagine Mosley and his supporters helping their ideological cousins, perhaps in the aftermath of the defeat of Britain. This sort of thinking helped the War Cabinet decide on 18 May, 1940, to amend the Defence Regulations, and begin action against the BU. A new paragraph - 1A - was added to Defence Regulation 18B. This stated that a person could be interned indefinitely, without trial, on the grounds that he or she might be subject to foreign influence or control, or might have sympathy with any system of government or power with which the UK was at war. The addition was aimed clearly at Oswald Mosley and the BU, but could, if necessary, be used against communists. Sir Oswald Mosley was immediately arrested and interned, to be followed within a week by his wife, Lady Diana Mosley, some senior BU members, and some non-BU far right activist, like the Conservative MP, Captain Maule Ramsay, and Sir Barry Domvile, former head of naval intelligence.

The Tyler Kent affair opened the door for mass detention, on political grounds, of British subjects. This was to be the only time, on mainland Britain, that such a policy was put into effect. Graham D. Macklin has recently made a strong case regarding the historical significance of mass internment for the post-war survival of Mosleyite fascism. Macklin argued that the experience of internment had a profound effect on imprisoned fascists, and brought about a change in the leadership of British fascism, a change that saw the 'old guard' eclipsed by younger, more committed, not to say fanatical, fascists. It was these fascists who went on to help Mosley back into political life in the post-war period⁴. In addition, it may be that this wartime mass internment, and the necessary suspension of habeas corpus, has provided, in the British, as opposed to UK/Irish context, a precedent that may yet have a significance given today's security concerns in Britain. This article seeks to examine internment as experienced by three fascists - Richard R. 'Dick' Bellamy, Arthur 'Wakey' Mason, and C.F. 'Charlie' Watts. The author interviewed these three men in the mid-1980s as part of post-graduate research at Nuffield College, Oxford. Their testimonies helps build a picture of how the fascists experienced, and

attempted to make sense of, their internment. Interestingly, Bellamy represented the old guard of BU leaders that Macklin argued were displaced by the younger fascists - including both Watts and Mason. It was fascists like these who helped to convert the ordinary fascists' experience of imprisonment into an heroic martyrdom, shared with their 'Leader', that can be characterised as 'charisma from below'. This concept of charisma from below has been used by Stein Ugelvik Larsen to examine the way in which supporters of Vidkun Quisling, even during their imprisonment following the Liberation of Norway, made their leader the repository of their own hopes and dreams, as much as Quisling created his own charismatic appeal⁵. The shared experience of internment, and the enhancement of Mosley's charismatic status from below, provided a myth that sustained the British fascists' cause into the post-war period.

In the weeks following the 18th May, over 1,000 members of the British Union were arrested and interned⁶, effectively decapitating the fascist movement's leadership. The last step was the total suppression of the BU on the 10 July, accompanied by the final big round of detentions. Two of the approximately 1,000 fascists who were interned were Richard R. 'Dick' Bellamy, and Arthur 'Wakey' Mason. Bellamy was a leading member of the fascist movement, its 'National Inspector' for the North of England and the political agent for the British Union's prospective parliamentary candidate for Canterbury - Lady Pearson. Mason was a longstanding, and totally committed British Union activist, and the Branch Officer (later, District Leader) of its Limehouse branch - one of the key strongholds of the movement in the East End of London, with around 1,500 members in late 1937.

The 39 year old Bellamy was working as the chief clerk at the Canterbury barrack office, when, on June 3rd 1940, officers from the Canterbury Constabulary came to arrest him. This came as a surprise to Bellamy, as a few days before the Canterbury Chief Constable in person had led a raid on the British Union's headquarters in the city. They had taken away files, documents, and the branch's flag - the 'colours' that members carried at big rallies. Bellamy had also been interrogated at that time, and had been told that there was no case of any sort against him. However, when he was arrested, the police, whom he described as 'a very decent, friendly lot'⁷, said that they had since received orders from the Home Office that he should be detained. He was not the only Canterbury fascist to be detained at the time - three others were too. One of these was,

like Bellamy, an ex-serviceman, who owned the King William IV pub, the second was a fascist bus driver, and the third was a Canterbury man enlisted in a local anti-aircraft unit. As with other fascists in the armed forces who were interned, he was first dismissed from service by his commanding officer, and then promptly arrested by the police.

Bellamy was held overnight in police cells. The next day, Bellamy's wife came to the station to say goodbye to her husband. According to Bellamy, the police inspector in charge was apologetic, and commented that he didn't 'join the police to do this sort of work, to arrest people whose bona fides I am absolutely certain of. It makes me wonder if I'll be sent for next'. Bellamy was then taken to Walton Gaol in Liverpool. Having decided to intern hundreds of fascists, in addition to thousands of 'enemy aliens', the government discovered that it did not have places to put them. As a result, the authorities were forced to open abandoned accommodation in places like Brixton Prison and Walton Gaol. Conditions for the detainees in these gaols were very poor, with little in the way of sanitation, or washing facilities. Women fascists held in Holloway Prison had a particularly difficult time, separated from their children, and enduring dirty, unhygienic conditions.

After three months detention in Walton Goal, Bellamy was moved to Prisoner of War Camp No:7, at Ascot. This had been created out of Bertram Mills Circus' winter quarters, and the internees were held in hutted accommodation. At Ascot, Bellamy was in charge of a single hut containing 103 detainees. Most of these men were members of British Union, but also included some German and Italian detainees, and a number of members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which had waged a bombing campaign in England in 1940. Bellamy, who had served in the Royal Irish Constabulary during the Irish War of Independence, 1919-1921, described these men as being 'rather good chaps most of the time'. He said that the BU men and the IRA men, brought together by detention, 'got on famously together'. According to Bellamy, the senior IRA officer in Ascot was a man called Joe Walker. Bellamy later said of the IRA leader: 'I respected Joe, he was a strong man and a good man [although] he might have shot somebody in cold blood if he felt it was his duty'. At first, morale among the fascists held at Ascot PoW camp was very mixed, with some fascists blaming Mosley for their predicament, others wanting revenge, and many just wanting to go home. However, another fascist leader, C.F. 'Charlie' Watts, worked with fascist leaders, like Bellamy, to organise their men, revive morale, and

prepare them for continued political activity once they had been released. It was this revival in the fascists' morale which, according to Macklin's analysis⁸, helped lay the foundations for the post-war return of Mosleyite fascism in Britain.

Charlie Watts left behind a fascinating document from his internment in Ascot PoW camp, and, later, from internment on the Isle of Man. Watts kept a diary of key events among the fascist internees, and gave a copy of the diary to Bellamy when he was released from interment in 1941. Watts' inscribed the copy he gave to Bellamy: 'With thanks for his help and co-operation in our stay at Ascot POW No 7 Camp. C.F. Watts. December 1940'⁹. The Watts manuscript is a small, green-covered notebook, about six by four inches in size, and is just over 4,000 words long. The note book gives details of the BU's organisation in Ascot Camp, and provides an extended account of the fascists' celebration of the eighth anniversary of the founding of their movement, on 1st October 1932. The organisational structure of the BU members in the camp was outlined by Watts in his notebook, with Watts as camp leader, and other BU officers acting as social leader, policy leader, physical leader, and members of the camp advisory board. Watts' diary is headed with a statement of the BU internees' view of the situation in October 1940:

'Now as always, British Union with all patriots says "BRITAIN FIRST". We will fight for Britain because the life of Britain and Empire is attacked. We fought for a negotiated peace with the British People safe, our Armed Forces undefeated and the Empire intact. We still work for such peace, but because Britain is endangered we will do our utmost in her defence. We want our country subservient neither to International Finance Capitalism nor to Nazi Germany or any alien power or influences. We care only for Britain. That is why, come what may, we shall continue to give ourselves to help Britain and our countrymen'¹⁰.

This was a statement of the movement's policy as determined by Oswald Mosley before and after the outbreak of war. Many anti-Semitic BU members would have interpreted 'alien' and 'international finance' as coded terms for the Jewish community.

The anniversary celebration that the fascists held in Ascot Camp is covered in detail in Watts' manuscript, and describes speeches made by BU leaders from around the

country, and the reaction of the detainees to the speeches. Watts opened the 'birthday celebrations' by reminding his fellow fascist detainees that 'it was a great privilege to be there [...] we are the people who are selected to commemorate this 8th anniversary [of the BU's founding] in detention'. Watts reminded the men of the women fascists held in gaol, and of the imprisonment of their 'Leader'. He then read extracts from a letter, written by a fascist still at liberty in the East End of London, about the Blitz, and the people's spirit of resistance to German attacks. Watts used this as an example of the sort of spirit that the BU detainees should attempt to maintain. A makeshift portrait of Oswald Mosley was then revealed, and 'the [fascist] salutes and cheering lasted several minutes'. Local fascist leaders from different parts of England and Wales then made morale-boosting speeches to the assembled men, which were interspersed with the singing of fascist songs - such as 'Britain Awake', and 'The British Battle Song'. The whole event was rounded off by the singing of the National Anthem. What the Watts manuscript reveals is that the fascist leaders in Ascot Camp had to struggle against a degree of demoralisation among their members. The men felt angry and aggrieved that anyone should think that they were traitors, and many were aware that their families were having a difficult time in the communities where they lived. For perhaps the majority of these detainees, their experience of detention without trial would lead to them abandoning politics when they were eventually freed. For some, the consequences would be, personally, difficult. Richard Thurlow has commented: 'Suicide, physical and mental breakdown, divorce, and the splitting of families were some of the results, and many became embittered'¹¹. However, for those who continued to support Mosley, the experience of internment helped to build strong ties between them, and acted as a unifying myth to boost post-war Mosleyite activity. Membership of an informal 18B club was something that bound together many detainees for life. Indeed, Charlie Watts issued some detainees with home-made 'life membership' forms while they were still detained. Featuring a shield quartered with a bed pan, manacles, crossed keys, and a barred window, and boasting the motto "AD SUM ARD LABOR", the HMFEAA - the 'Hail Mosley and Fuck 'Em All Association' was a grimly humorous riposte to the detainees' situation.

Bellamy was later transferred to an internment camp on the Isle of Man, then to another camp at Huyton in Lancashire, before he was finally released, after 400 days detention, on his fortieth birthday, 8th July 1941. Ironically, given his former status in the

government's eyes as a potential Fifth Columnist, Bellamy was then conscripted into the National Fire Service covering Southampton docks. Bellamy commented:

'I was conscripted into the fire service in Southampton, and, what amused me so much there was that within a few days of joining that, I, the "Fifth Columnist", "traitor", was being shown round all sorts of "hush-hush" establishments in Southampton, having their various hazards pointed out to me. And, later on, I was one of the very few people let into the fore-knowledge of D-Day, because they were positive that once D-Day was launched the Germans would saturate the jumping-off places on the South Coast with mustard gas. It didn't happen, thank heavens. Isn't it weird?'

One of Bellamy's fellow fascist detainees in Ascot Camp was the Limehouse fascist leader, 'Wakey' Mason. This fascist, who was arrested at his workplace - Woolwich Arsenal - on the 26th June, 1940, went on to cause the authorities a great deal of trouble. Not only did he escape from detention in Huyton Camp, only to be recaptured after some time on the run and in hiding, but he also escaped from internment on the Isle of Man, only to be caught by the Royal Navy, attempting to row across to neutral Ireland¹².

Mason was initially interned in Brixton Prison, but was then transferred to Ascot Camp. Although conditions at the camp were rudimentary, they were not as bad as those at the temporary York race course camp, which Mason went to in place of another detainee with whom he swapped identities. There, detainees, both fascists and 'enemy aliens', were held in hard conditions, underneath the stands of the race course. Mason noted:

'Ascot camp was very cold towards winter, [we had] one blanket and some straw in a sacking bag, food was short, [and] after some months detainees were being sent to other camps. York race course [was] worse than Ascot, snow and living under the grandstands, and locked in most of the time, with [milk] churns for toilets'¹³.

After a few weeks in the camp, the camp authorities realised that Mason had swapped his identity, and sent him back to Ascot, from where he was later transferred to Walton

Gaol, then to Huyton Camp. This camp was an unfinished housing estate converted into a military PoW camp to hold 'enemy aliens' and other detainees, like Mason. But the troublesome fascist soon realised that the military had no real idea how many people they were guarding, and he determined to escape. He did this, along with another London fascist called Markel, by the simple expedient of climbing over the barbed wire fence using a home made ladder, which was removed by other fascists when the pair got free. They lost each other in the darkness, and Mason made his way to a nearby main road, where he continued his escape by catching a bus into Liverpool, and, from there, a train back to London. Once back on home ground, he was given an identity card by another fascist, who then claimed to have lost his, and was quickly integrated into a network of British Union sympathisers. He began to attend illicit, underground meetings of the fascist movement. Walking in the street one day, he met the police officer who had arrested him, but Mason simply told him that he had been released, which satisfied the officer concerned. However, Mason and the other fascists knew that their gatherings and activities were being monitored, and he was not surprised when he was caught in an early morning police raid in the Hackney house of a fascist family who had been hiding him. Mason was returned to Huyton Camp, and the couple who had sheltered him received six weeks hard labour each. From Huyton, he was transferred to Peveril Camp at Peel on the west coast of the Isle of Man. The camp was made up of requisitioned private houses and hotels, and had held detained 'enemy aliens' prior to being used for fascists, IRA men, and Norwegian and Dutch refugees from the Nazis who were waiting for security checks to ensure that they were not German spies.

As in the other camps, Mason found himself detained with fellow fascists and some IRA men, including one Joe Walker, who may well have been the Republican that Bellamy had known in Ascot. Because of his prior history of escape and evasion, Mason was not allowed out on work duties, something that Mason found tedious, and led to his thoughts once more turning to escape. The house in which Mason was billeted looked out over the pavement and road, beyond which was a barbed wire fence. Mason and his fellows decided that a tunnel would be the best way to get beyond the wire, and spent weeks digging. They sunk a shaft ten feet below ground level, then tunnelled under the pavement. Needing wood to shore up the tunnel, the escapees broke into a locked room in the house which contained the furniture of the previous owners, which they turned into timber supports. The tunnellers had problems coping with stale air, and they were

concerned that the spoil which they were spreading over the back gardens of the houses would be noticed.

Six men were chosen to undertake the breakout - Mason, and two IRA men from his house, Walker and Barry, and three other men from another house. The escapees were equipped with a small compass, and had some money sewn into the lining of their jackets. The six made their break out on the night of 22nd September 1941, and headed south down the coast to Glen Maye, where they knew there was a boat locked in a shed. Trying to break into the shed, they were disturbed by men with a dog. The escapees remained undiscovered, but the two groups of three men split up, and Mason and his group decided to make for Castletown on the south of the island. The men lay up in a barn during the day, and entered Castletown the following night. Dodging Home Guard patrols, they quickly realised that all the boats in Castletown's harbour had their sparkplugs removed from their engines, or were without oars. Undeterred, the men eventually discovered a locked store containing oars. They broke in, took the oars then found a small boat, the 'Sunbeam', which they thought would get them to Ireland, despite the fact that none of the men had any small boat experience. Once in the boat, the senior of the two IRA man, Joe Walker, took charge with the compass, while Mason and Barry rowed through the fog which hid them from the town. Once dawn broke, the fog lifted and the three men were challenged by a Scottish fishing boat, the 'Violet Rose'. They said that they were fishing, and the Violet Rose went on its way. Two aircraft passed overhead, and the escapees stopped rowing, and took up 'fishing' positions. This ruse also worked later in the day when they were challenged by a patrol boat, but in the late afternoon another navy vessel, HMS Radiant, stopped them. Mason described his capture years later:

'About 3pm we spotted another patrol boat, we knew then all was up. They made straight towards us, then started circling around us, all guns trained on us, deck lined with sailors with guns, they put a boat overboard with a dozen crew and took us in tow, hauled us on deck, told us "you're under arrest". I found the officers gentlemen, [they] provided us with food and drink, the crew, or many of them, would have bumped us off'.

The patrol boat took the escapees back to Douglas, from where they were taken back to Peel - their escape over. But existing tensions in the camp spilt over into a riot when the three men were returned, and, it was rumoured, refused food.

The three men were sent for trial in Douglas on 18th November. On the same day some Anglo-Italians also appeared in court accused of fomenting trouble in an internment camp. Three Dutch internees were also on trial, having been caught trying to escape from the island in a stolen yacht. While waiting for his case, Mason met a British sailor, a communist from Wood Green, who was also waiting for trial, but for what, Mason did not find out. Mason was sentenced to six months hard labour, while the two IRA men received 9 months and 12 months. Eventually, Mason was released on 15th November 1943, but, with his record in internment, was required to report to the police until the end of the war in Europe.

Political internment without trial was the most obvious sign that Britain's wartime governments were willing to stifle political opposition to the war. This was a given throughout the European conflict, with, for example, a small number of prominent anarchists being convicted of anti-war activities in the dying days of the war. Interestingly, in this case, too, the imprisoned political activists - John Hewetson, Vernon Richards, and Philip Sansom - became key players in the influential *Freedom* group of anarchists in the post-war period. And it was not only the government that was willing to stifle political opposition, with, for instance, the BBC being involved in banning pacifists from the air waves, especially in the troubled year of 1940¹⁴. In 1940, the Fifth Column myth gave the security services the leverage they needed to insist on the detention of British fascists, and the destruction of the British Union. For the majority of those fascists who were interned, their experiences effectively ended their commitment to extremist politics. But for a minority, their internment merely confirmed that they were right, and they went on to form the hard core around which Oswald Mosley built his return to his old political ways in the post-war period.

FURTHER READING

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⁵ Stein Ugelvik Larsen, 'Charisma from below? The Quisling Case in Norway', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 7, no: 2, 2006, pp. 235-244.

⁶ The Mosleyite group, 'Friends of Oswald Mosley', have compiled a list of interned BU members. The list was originally compiled by John Warburton, and has been updated since Mr Warburton's death by Jeffrey Wallder, who has noted that 'the total numbers of British Union members known to have been detained under Defence Regulation 18b [is] 1,055. This includes 982 "definitely BU" and 73 "probably" BU'; *The Defence Regulation 18B. British Union Detainees List; Second Addition to the Second Issue*, London, 2007, p.2.

⁷ All the quotations from R.R. 'Dick' Bellamy are taken from the recorded interview with the author made on 4th June 1985.

⁸ Macklin, *op cit*, p.19.

⁹ This MS is in the possession of the author. There were, however, other copies made at the time. One of these is held in the special collections of Sheffield University Library.

¹⁰ Watts MS.

¹¹ Thurlow, *op cit*, p.490.

¹² Mason provided the author with an extensive written account of his escapades during internment, which, in Mason's case, lasted until 15th November, 1943.

¹³ Taken from the manuscript account by Arthur Mason, received by the author on 12th September, 1986. All further quotations are from the same MS.

¹⁴ See Robert Mackay, "An Abominable Precedent": the BBC's Ban on Pacifists in the Second World War, *Contemporary British History*, vol. 20, no: 4, December 2006, pp. 491-510.