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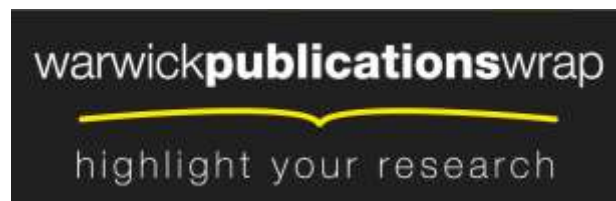
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**Other Politics, Other Prejudices;
the failure of the British Union of Fascists in Scotland**

Stephen M. Cullen

Scotland in the 1930s saw a remarkable proliferation of fascist parties and groups. There were at least ten fascist or quasi-fascist parties operating at various times in the country, most of which were peculiar to Scotland alone. But the most notable was Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF), which was active throughout Britain from October 1932 until it was banned in July 1940. The BUF's career was marked by controversy, conflict, and, ultimately, failure. Much has been written about the movement, but little about the Scottish experience of Mosleyite fascism in the 1930s. The history of the BUF in Scotland possesses some particularly Scottish features, and the movement made, even at its height, a fraction of the progress it did in parts of England. Everywhere, the BUF had to struggle for political space in an already crowded political landscape. But in Scotland there was even less scope for the fascists to put down roots in a political world that was dominated not only by the mainstream parties, but also by nationalist and sectarian concerns that the BUF did not have to face in England.

The BUF in Scotland, 1932-40

Dumfries, Dalbeattie, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Perth all saw their share of fascist activity at different times throughout the period. However, much of this activity was slow in coming, and often of a temporary nature. This was despite Sir Oswald Mosley's earlier contacts in Scotland, both as a Labour Party MP, and as leader of the New Party (NP). During his years in the Labour Party, Mosley was associated with the radical wing of the Labour movement, in particular with several Clydeside MPs. Mosley's economic prescriptions for dealing with capitalism in crisis, as propounded in his famous 'Mosley Manifesto', written while he was still in the Labour Party, and in his fascist, *The Greater Britain* (1932), were similar in many respects to the pre-Marxist ideas of James Maxton.

Equally, Mosley's close Labour colleague, John Wheatley, who was to die before Mosley's move to fascism, shared much of Mosley's analysis of the slump. These strong Scottish connections were partly maintained following the creation of the New Party in February 1931, with two of its MPs coming from Scotland. Yet the NP failed badly in Scotland, as elsewhere, in the October 1931 general election, and the resulting new Mosleyite movement, the BUF, made a weak start in Scotland after its birth in October 1932.

The BUF was slow to get off the ground in Scotland, with little real activity in the year 1932/3. It was not until late in 1933, for instance, that the movement established a branch in Edinburgh. In April 1934, the BUF had 120 branches in England and Wales, with nine regional and area headquarters, but Scotland only had a temporary national headquarters, under Richard Adolph Plathen, who was, at that time seconded to Scotland. In addition, at least one branch was existence in Edinburgh, under H.Duff, and Miss Maire Inglis, while a Dalbeattie branch was operating, led by James 'Laddie' Little. However, 1934 proved to be a period of comparatively rapid growth for the BUF in Scotland. By September, the Special Branch were reporting that there were around 400 BUF members in Dumfriesshire, noting:

'A fairly large percentage of the members are described as "passive" members, mostly "business men, mostly in a small way". This branch is regarded as one of the most flourishing in Scotland'.

The note that most of the passive members were small businessmen gives a clue to the sort of sympathy and support the movement probably enjoyed in Scotland. In terms of the socio-economic profile of the active membership in Scotland, what little is known points to this group having a clear professional, military and middle-class bias. The national organiser for Scotland, Richard Plathen had a background in the Consular Service, and, in 1939, seems to have taken up a business career connected with Empire trade. Another example of an activist was 'CB', a member of the West Edinburgh branch. He was born in 1910, came from

a military family, was educated privately in India, joined the BUF in 1936, and, following internment in 1940, and five years service as an officer in the Royal Artillery, had a successful career in Scottish journalism. His closest friend in the Edinburgh BUF was an Old Etonian advocate from a well-known Scottish family, who was killed at the second battle of El Alamein. Another BUF activist, from the Black Isle, served in the Royal Navy until 1936, joined the BUF, but then travelled to Spain to fight for Franco's nationalists, eventually being commissioned into *Regulares*, the Moroccan troops fighting with the insurgents, before re-joining the BUF in London in 1939.

As 1934 progressed, so the fascist press carried more news about activity in Scotland. Branches were established in Motherwell and Glasgow, an Edinburgh youth section (the 'Greyshirts') was started, while the BUF 'agricultural [propaganda] van' visited Kilbirrie. March saw the publication of the booklet *Fascism and Scotland*, the first BUF meeting in Greenock came in September, and there were increasing incidences of violence at the BUF's meetings, such as that at the Mound in Edinburgh in February, and in Glasgow throughout September and into November. By the end of the year the BUF had even extended its activities into the Highlands, with a meeting at Kingussie, at which fascist agricultural policy was explained. This pattern of activism is borne out by contemporary police and Special Branch reports throughout 1934, which noted BUF activity in Dundee, Lanarkshire, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dumfriesshire, Edinburgh, Renfrewshire, Perth, Paisley, Motherwell, Greenock, Kingussie, and the establishment of a second Edinburgh branch - West Edinburgh - in June. By the end of the year, it might have been the case that the BUF had at the very least 800 members in Scotland, with a likely figure being around 1,000 members. The two Edinburgh branches appear to have had approximately 160 members, there may have been close to 120 in Glasgow, with 400 in Dalbeattie and 120 in Dumfries. If allowance is made for other known branches, in addition to individual, isolated, fascists, then the figure of approximately 1,000 has something to recommend it. To put this in a comparative context, the BUF's Scottish membership figure in 1934 was around double that

of the nationalist Scottish Party (SP), but a good deal less than the approximately 5,000 members of the National Party of Scotland (NPS). In a UK context, the 1,000 Scottish members of the BUF were far outnumbered by their 10,000 comrades in Yorkshire alone. And for the BUF, 800-1,000 members represented the high water mark of the movement in Scotland, whereas the English BUF, and the Scottish nationalists, were to continue to grow.

Although 1935 started with a short speaking tour of Scotland by William Joyce, (later to beak with Mosley, form his own 'National Socialist League', then broadcast for Nazi Germany) the BUF seemed unable to sustain the previous year's level of activity. Matters were made worse when, in March 1935, all paid BUF staff in Scotland were dismissed, saving the movement £500 a year, but, perhaps, fatally undermining any hope of further progress by the fascists in Scotland. Around the same time, the Special Branch also reported that the Glasgow BUF branch was 'on the downward grade', membership having fallen by half from the previous October, to around 60 members. Similarly, the BUF in Edinburgh's two branches could only muster around 80 members, another fall of around half from October 1934. This fairly rapid decline led Special Branch to conclude:

'There has been serious trouble in the Scotland area, where membership has greatly declined, and there has been talk at [London] headquarters of refusing to send financial aid to branches in Scotland'.

This picture of decline in 1935 seems to be corroborated by the lack of coverage, compared with that of 1934, of Scottish fascists' efforts by the London based BUF press. Some new areas of activity were noted by the fascist papers, with a Leith branch being claimed in April, and activity in Midlothian in the same month, but beyond some mention of anti-BUF violence in Edinburgh in August and November, little else was reported. 1935, then, appears to have been a year of decline for the BUF in Scotland, as it was for the rest of the movement.

However, whereas the wider movement recovered from the nadir of 1935, the Scottish fascists were unable to emulate their English comrades.

Some retrenchment was achieved in 1936, but the Scottish BUF became dependent on the vitality of a number of key figures, local leaders who strove to offset the problems that the movement faced. In January 1936, Richard Plathen was made the permanent national organiser in Scotland, but the reorganisation that accompanied his appointment was unable to stem the decline in Scotland. Activity subsequently focused on some dedicated local leaders, such as George Budge in Perth, W.K.A.J. Chambers-Hunter in Aberdeen, and Maire Inglis in Edinburgh. These local leaders, and their supporters, faced determined, and often very violent, opposition from anti-fascists, but it was only the dedication of such BUF activists that kept the BUF alive in Scotland. When these local leaders faded from the picture, the movement shrank to a position where, by 1939, it was almost moribund in Scotland.

Scottish nationalism and the BUF

The late 1920s and the early 1930s was a time of flux for the Scottish nationalist movement, as Scottish nationalism was beginning to find its political feet, although real success was a long way off. Nonetheless, Scottish nationalists certainly provided the BUF with rivals for membership and support – as events among fascists in Edinburgh revealed. The key policy issue which led to a split in the Edinburgh BUF was Scotland's constitutional position. The BUF was firmly Unionist in its stance, although Mosley and other senior figures made statements regarding administrative devolution in a fascist Britain. However, some Edinburgh BUF members were interested in pursuing a Home Rule policy, something that Captain Vincent Collier, national headquarters' representative in Edinburgh, was unlikely to have agreed to. Following the split, early in 1934, the ex-BUF members formed the Scottish Union of Fascists (SUF), with headquarters at 44 Hanover Street, and an initial membership of 70. The SUF established links with Wendy Wood and the Scottish Democratic Self-

Government Association, and presumably pursued a Scottish fascist policy. However, the SUF had a very short life, quickly merging with the Duke of Montrose's Scottish Party (SP), which had been formed in 1932, and, from there, one can suppose, that some, at least, of the ex-SUF members entered the new Scottish National Party (SNP) when it was formed by the merger of the SP and John MacCormick's National Party of Scotland (NPS).

There appears, then, to have been a patriotic potential that the BUF might have benefited from had it adopted a position more sympathetic to Scottish nationalist feeling. The Scottish nationalist movement was, at the time, in a very fluid state, with the more left-wing element following men like MacCormick and the NPS, which had been founded in 1928 from the Scots National League (SNL) and the Scottish National Movement (SNM). However, this left of centre element was matched by the more conservative nationalists, of the sort to be found in the SP, and who dominated the early SNP. The failure of the BUF to articulate a clear Scottish national policy, perhaps some form of Home Rule within the Union, in all probability cost them some support from the right wing elements that were attracted, instead, to the nationalists. Indeed, the SNP were concerned by the possible overlapping appeal of their own nationalism with fascism, and one of the SNP's first actions was to issue a statement condemning fascism and dictatorship. The nationalists felt that there was a particular problem, fearing that some of their members were favourably disposed towards fascism. The most vocal nationalist supporter of the fascist method of politics was, of course, Hugh MacDiarmid, who was actively interested in Mussolini and fascism in the 1920s and early 1930s. MacDiarmid had made a 'Plea for a Scottish Fascism' in the *Scottish Nation*, in June 1923, and as late as May 1930 he was still championing a fascist style of politics with his attempt to create a Scottish Sinn Fein, Clann Albann, which he characterised by saying: 'the whole movement is on a militaristic basis and in this resembles the Fascist movement'.

Scottish nationalism appears to have offered more than a competing claim for loyalty, however, for on at least one occasion, Scottish nationalists helped break up a BUF meeting

in Edinburgh. A BUF meeting at the foot of the Mound on 20 June 1937, which had attracted about 10,000 people, was disrupted by both communists and Scottish nationalists. After the meeting, the small group of BUF supporters were attacked by the opposition, and a number of communists and nationalists were arrested, including Wendy Wood. Clearly, the nationalists could be seen not only as rivals, but also as enemies.

Religious issues

Throughout its history in Scotland, the BUF faced opposition from militant Protestants. This was especially the case in Edinburgh and Leith, where Protestant activists were very successful in the 1930s, winning a number of council seats, and mounting an active, and often violent, anti-Catholic campaign on the streets of Scotland's capital. Indeed, Irish Catholic immigrants living in the Cowgate were subjected, on at least one occasion, to a low level pogrom carried out by Protestant extremists, while the Edinburgh police looked on. On the religious issue, the BUF consistently maintained an impartial line, arguing that both Protestants and Catholics (if not their Jewish compatriots) could be good fascists and loyal Britons. In the sectarian atmosphere that dominated street politics at the time, this was a standpoint that guaranteed problems for the movement, and led to accusations that the BUF was a Catholic front organisation. As one heckler at a BUF meeting in Edinburgh put it, neatly combined anti-Italian prejudice with anti-Catholicism: 'a lot of your Blackshirts are Italians and you're under the Pope of Rome'. The BUF was never able to counter these allegations successfully, and it is clear that by refusing to take a partisan line on the religious issue the BUF was never able to win the support of many Protestants, while Catholics do not seem to have been drawn to the movement in abnormally large numbers, perhaps, in Edinburgh at least, because the BUF were pre-empted by an anti-Catholic party that also claimed to be fascist. This failure to identify with one or other sectarian tendency may well have been a key factor in explaining the failure of the BUF in Scotland, especially in terms of street politics. Indeed, in a slightly different context, Bill Murray has argued that the important

social and religious underpinnings to football support in the period helps explain the failure of both communists and fascists to find any widespread following in Scotland in the 1930s.

Although the BUF was founded in October 1932, it was not until November 1933 that the first Edinburgh branch of the movement was founded. This delay in founding a branch in the capital may well have been a costly mistake. Ironically, the trouble for the BUF came from the former New Party parliamentary candidate for Coatbridge, William Weir Gilmour, who was later to claim that his short-lived Scottish Democratic Fascist Party (SDFP) prevented the BUF from taking advantage of Catholic support. Gilmour had a varied political career, having been a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), as well as the NP, and was also influenced by Daniel De Leon, Hugh MacDiarmid, Scottish nationalism, and Liberalism. His SDFP was corporatist, Scottish nationalist, and vehemently anti-Catholic. The similarity between the SDFP's economic programme and that of the BUF's, in addition to Gilmour's previous association with Mosley and the NP, may well have been enough to give credence to the idea that the BUF was also anti-Catholic. Furthermore, to make matters worse, and more complex, for the BUF, Gilmour claimed that the Mosley movement was 'run by Roman Catholics, organised by Roman Catholics, in the interests of Roman Catholics', thereby catching the BUF in a double bind. The BUF's response to the policy stance of the SDFP was to issue a disclaimer, which stated, 'We [the BUF] disagree [...] entirely with their [the SDFP] attitudes towards Roman Catholics', and, 'on the matter of Roman Catholicism [...] we state our entire disagreement'. Such an approach, later expanded in a number of more detailed condemnations of religious sectarianism, doubtless prevented the BUF from establishing itself more effectively among groups that might have been potentially fertile ground for the movement. Gilmour's SDFP did not last long, but the legacy remained, and was enhanced by the much more successful anti-Catholic movement in Edinburgh - Protestant Action (PA). The sectarian policies of both the SDFP and PA illustrate that in Edinburgh (as with the Protestant League in Glasgow) extremism and street politics could

not be divorced from religious issues, and that in trying to do so, the BUF handicapped itself in the struggle for support.

By 1935 the BUF had three branches in Edinburgh and Leith, a central branch, an Edinburgh West branch, and a Leith branch. But by then radical politics in Leith and Edinburgh were dominated by John Cormack's PA. Leith was PA's stronghold, with the movement capturing six seats in the 1936 municipal election, but PA also made its presence felt across Edinburgh, in violent attacks on Catholics and with massive street demonstrations. But not only was PA anti-Catholic, it was also anti-fascist, with Cormack telling *The Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* in November 1936, that 'all our energies will be directed against the Fascists. When I get control, I will put a ban on Fascists on the streets'. Against this background of PA activity and anti-BUF hostility, there was little hope for the Leith fascists, and beyond Leith the BUF had to strive to convince Protestants that it was not a Catholic organisation. For example, it was in reply to just such an allegation, made by *Bulwark*, that the Hon. H.M. Upton of Balmaclellan, a former Unionist and a recent convert to the BUF, made a speech at the Orange Hall, Motherwell, in May 1935. Upton said that an inquiry into the number of Catholics in leadership posts in the BUF had revealed that only 12% of such posts were held by Catholics (a figure that may well have been too high for some). The report in *The Blackshirt* that covered Upton's speech also made clear, yet again, the BUF's attitude to Protestant and Catholic rivalry, stating that:

'men of all religions can unite in a Movement [the BUF] which aims to restore the nation's greatness and promote the happiness of the people by abolishing the poverty and social ills of democracy, and that in the classless society of the Blackshirts the loyal citizens of Scotland, both Protestant and Catholic, will find a common purpose.'

That was not a message that would have been well received by the supporters of PA, or many other Protestants concerned about the threat from Rome.

Anti-fascist opposition and violence in Scotland

The history of fascism is closely intertwined with the history of anti-fascism, which took many forms. The Scottish historian Henry Maitles has gathered some interesting oral history testimony which gives a good indication of the aims of some anti-fascists. For example, Maitles cites Morris Smith, who was the secretary of the Glasgow Workers Circle (a grouping of left-wing Jews), to show that this group of anti-fascists had a straightforward policy of preventing the BUF from speaking. Morris Smith commented:

'They [the BUF] never got a chance as they were howled down. They never got a turnout, and I don't think they recruited anyone. That was the line then, we had to stop them appearing on the streets.'

Morris was talking about anti-fascist opposition in Glasgow, but Maitles has also addressed the anti-fascist campaign in Aberdeen:

'Opponents of the BUF responded to the threat [of the BUF], heckling at meetings and trying to break up rallies when they could. Street clashes in Aberdeen attracted widespread press interest.'

The anti-fascist opposition in Aberdeen was certainly very vigorous, and frequently violent.

The question of political violence has long been central to the historiography of the BUF. The general consensus has been that the BUF in some way used political violence in order to boost its own position. The BUF always denied this accusation, arguing that it was merely seeking to guarantee free speech by protecting its meetings from anti-fascists whose only

aim was to prevent the fascist case from being heard. The anti-fascists' argument was that the policies and appearance of the BUF were provocative, and that the example of Fascist Italy, then of Nazi Germany, showed that the BUF should not be permitted any sort of platform. As the son of one Scottish anti-fascist (and nationalist) recently remembered, his father went to one of Mosley's two Usher Hall mass meetings 'specifically to shout down Mosley and face head on the threat of the Blackshirts. He saw the fight against fascism as the most important cause of his time.' Many anti-fascists, however, went further than 'shouting down' the BUF's speakers and members, and violence was often seen as being entirely justified in order to enforce a 'no platform' position against the BUF. Historians have, to some extent, accepted this 'no platform' argument, which has informed a number of accounts. It is the case nonetheless, that the approach exacerbated tensions, and often guaranteed anti-fascist versus fascist violence, especially at large meetings, at street meetings, or against fascist newspaper vendors. However, a strong argument can also be made that the BUF did not use violence as a political tactic to close down their opponents' meetings or activities, and that the fascists were far more the victims of political violence than they were the perpetrators of such violence. This is not to say that the BUF did not, in some ways, benefit from attacks upon their organisation, as evidence shows that well-publicised clashes, such as that at Olympia in June 1934, led to an increase in BUF recruitment, although the violence at the Olympia meeting may well have damaged the movement's general image. The violence that the BUF was faced with also helped convince Blackshirts that they were engaged in an historic struggle, and that they were in the process of becoming 'new' fascist men and women. For these militants, being attacked at their meetings and rallies, or when selling newspapers, was evidence that they were on the right track, it was what they expected as activists in the 'modern movement'. It is also possible to say that it was highly unusual for the BUF to attack its opponents' meetings, marches, or rallies, whereas the pattern of attacks on the BUF's events across the whole of Britain indicates that for many anti-fascists, offensive, political violence was a key tactic. It was the BUF's opponents, and in particular the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), its front

organisation, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), and smaller groups of anti-fascists, who consistently used violence as a deliberate political tactic.

The most consistent anti-fascist violence in Scotland came in Aberdeen, where anti-fascists repeatedly broke up the BUF's meetings, and carried out violent assaults on the disabled, one-armed, BUF leader, Chambers-Hunter, and three key women leaders in the city – Jenny Linton, Jane Imlah, and Mrs A Botha. Aberdeen police files give a picture of a broad anti-fascist front, consisting of activists from the CPGB, the ILP, and the NUWM acting in collusion with Labour Party and ILP city councillors to prevent the Aberdeen BUF from holding meetings or selling their propaganda. This anti-fascist front also took advantage of a botched police operation at a BUF meeting in October 1937 to attempt to undermine the position of the Chief Constable by instigating an inquiry into his leadership. This is of interest in that it illustrates the wider agenda of those for whom the anti-fascist struggle was part of a bigger struggle against capitalism and parliamentary democracy. There are echoes here of the famous Battle of Cable Street, 4th October 1936, when almost all of the fighting was between anti-fascists and the police, rather than between anti-fascists and the BUF.

Police records show that it was the NUWM which was responsible for the breaking up of Mosley's New Party meeting on Glasgow Green in September 1931, although they suggest that the razor attacks on Mosley's group may have been exaggerated by the press. Who was responsible for the attacks against the Perth BUF branch leader, George Budge, in the late 1930s is unclear, but he suffered several very violent assaults and was left with lasting facial injuries. The Scottish BUF appear to have made no attempt at all to disrupt non-fascist meetings, or to prevent non-fascists selling newspapers. The only confirmed occasion on which the BUF used violence was during Mosley's two meetings in Edinburgh in 1934 and 1936, and in both cases there were more injuries suffered by fascists, and of a far more serious nature (including a Blackshirt blinded in one eye), than by anti-fascists. It was not unusual for Blackshirts to sustain this level of injury, and head and face wounds seem to

have been common, often inflicted by weapons, including the ubiquitous weapon of the inter-war period – the cut throat razor.

Conclusion

The failure of the BUF in Scotland was graphically emphasized during the spring of 1940, when over 1,000 members of the BUF were interned without charge or trial. Only three of those fascist internees came from Scotland. The troubled history of the Scottish BUF is of interest not just as a small chapter in a larger account of the failure of extremism in Britain, but also because of the light it shines on the complexity of the Scottish political landscape in the 1930s. Elsewhere in mainland Britain, with a few exceptions such as Liverpool, sectarian politics had little purchase. Similarly, only in Wales did the BUF face another form of nationalism that cut across their British nationalism; and in Wales the Welsh nationalists were far weaker, if more clearly influenced by right-wing political thought, than their Scottish counterparts. For the Scottish Blackshirts not only was the bigger political stage, dominated as it was by the Conservative and Labour parties, too crowded for them, but the smaller arena of radical and street politics was even less congenial than it was for their fascist comrades in the England.

Further reading

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