

Racial Fascism in Britain

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In June, 1945, within just a few months of the discovery of the scale and horrors of the German Nazi extermination camps, and shortly after the conclusion of military hostilities in Europe, the British fascist ideologue and racist activist Arnold Spencer Leese (1878-1956) announced to readers of his new monthly news-sheet *Gothic Ripples* that he had written a book entitled *The Jewish War of Survival*.¹ A month later, Leese revealed to his supporters that he believed that 'the finest civilisation that Europe ever had has been wiped out of existence by the Allies in a Jewish war'.² During the course of the rest of the year, as Britain and other countries across Europe tried to recover from all the destruction and chaos caused by five long years of conflict against Nazi Germany, Leese went on to further develop his highly inflammatory views by criticising the war as the product of the 'Revenge Instinct' of the Jews.³ He also labelled the evidence presented at the Nuremberg War Crimes trial as 'Belsen Bunkum', and dismissed the Nuremberg hearings generally as 'purely a Jewish and Masonic' affair, 'only explicable by the Jewish control of "Democracy" and Bolshevism'.⁴

It was very clear to veteran anti-fascists and to Jewish groups in Britain, and also to officials in both the British Government's Home Office and the domestic Security Service (MI5), that Leese, despite being interned in prison under the 18B Defence Regulations during the war as a possible security risk, had not lost his extreme enthusiasm for fascism and, above all, for the anti-Semitic and racial ideas that had

characterised the Nazi version of the doctrine. Leese was plainly determined to be as outspoken as possible and to provoke public outrage. He planned to continue disseminating his pre-war fascist ideological tenets to anyone who would listen, despite the defeat of Hitler's Germany and all the unequivocal evidence of mass extermination and Nazi war crimes. The London Metropolitan Police's 'Special Branch' communicated to the British Home Office and MI5 that there were also strong indications that Leese might even try to re-launch the fascist organisation he had run in Britain during the 1930s, and was looking for an individual who could possibly become his post-war 'successor'.⁵

Who precisely was Arnold Leese, and why was he so keen to resurrect his very racist version of British fascism? What role did he play in the emergence of interwar fascism in Britain? Leese was born into a middle-class background. He spent six years in India and then two years in East Africa, engaged in service for the British colonial governments and, during the First World War, he then served in the Royal Army Veterinary Corps, developing expertise in camel diseases. After the war, the former camel vet resided in Stamford, in the English county of Lincolnshire, in the 1920s, and later in Guildford, in the county of Surrey, during the 1930s, and is mainly familiar to scholars of British interwar fascism as one of the minor ideological rivals to Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists (BUF). In 1928, Leese was one of three men, along with Major J. Baillie and L.H. Sherrard, who founded the small Imperial Fascist League (IFL) in Britain.

When Mosley formed the BUF in October, 1932, Leese, by then the director-general of the IFL after the resignation of Baillie and Sherrard, firmly resisted Mosley's attempts to unite all the existing fascist groups in Britain into one single

organisation. In fact, Leese was adamant that the IFL should stay fully independent from Mosley's new organisation and remain 'pure' in its adherence to what Leese saw as 'real' fascism, a doctrine which very much placed Nazi-style biological conceptions of race at the centre of all politics. Moreover, Leese strongly believed that Mosley's BUF was a 'counterfeit' form of fascism and was not serious about the 'Jewish Menace'.⁶ As far as Leese and his small band of followers in the IFL were concerned, the BUF was what the IFL leader derisively termed a 'Kosher Fascist' organisation, manipulated by the Jews to discredit fascism in Britain.⁷ Leese viewed Mosley as an egotistical 'adventurer', who was more interested in his own personal career ambitions than in running a serious fascist movement.

This article has three objectives. First, it will provide a general overview of fascism in interwar Britain, and Leese's position in relation to this. Second, it will argue that one of the keys to a better understanding of Leese's ideas and activities in the 1930s can be found in some of the lessons he absorbed from his first taste of local municipal politics in the small market town of Stamford in the 1920s, and in his early attempts to build a local form of fascist activism as a stepping-stone towards greater national recognition in the 1930s, especially in the Guildford and London areas. Third, it will provide some general analysis of Leese's ideological disagreement with Mosley and the BUF, and how Leese tried to put forward an alternative and more 'racial' version of fascism in the 1930s. In the process, we shall explore the nature of the IFL leader's fascist ideas and, in particular, the central importance of race to Leese's politics.

In relation to the 1930s phase of his fascist career, it is important to note that, while

Leese also tried to use his 'local' activities in Guildford and in London (together with memories of his initial fascist years in Stamford) to try to maintain the IFL's 'national' fascist profile, this was something that proved increasingly difficult to achieve given the dominance of extreme rightwing politics in interwar Britain by Mosley's much larger and more successful BUF.

British fascism in the interwar period

The first official fascist organisation to appear in interwar Britain was the British Fascisti (BF), which had been founded in May, 1923, by the young and wealthy Rotha Lintorn-Orman (1895-1935). She had been inspired by Benito Mussolini's so-called 'March on Rome' in 1922 and his apparent success at destroying bolshevism in Italy, and the name 'British Fascisti' sounded very Italian. In addition, the BF had a leadership committee called the 'Grand Council', which was rather similar to the organisational structure of Mussolini's fascist party. In 1924, however, in order to overcome growing accusations that it was borrowing too heavily from a foreign creed, the BF renamed itself with the more Anglicised-sounding title the 'British Fascists'. While Lintorn-Orman remained the 'Founder' of the BF, the organisation also appointed a President, Lord Garvagh, who was quickly succeeded by General R.B.D. Blakeney (1872-1952), a retired soldier and former manager of the railway network in Egypt.

Until they squabbled in mid-1926, Lintorn-Orman, as Founder, and Blakeney, as President, effectively shared the leadership of the BF and strongly emphasised the 'Britishness' of the organisation's interpretation of the fascist creed. After an internal

split in the BF just prior to the May, 1926, General Strike, from that point onwards the leadership of the movement fell very much into the hands of the Founder and her remaining supporters on the Grand Council. However, by the early 1930s Lintorn-Orman was increasingly hampered by ill-health and alcoholism and the BF, in many ways, became largely moribund. There were also other splits and disagreements in the organisation, as we shall see when we discuss Arnold Leese and Sir Oswald Mosley.

At its height in the 1920s, the BF expounded a vigorously anti-socialist and anti-communist position, and saw defence of the British King, empire and constitution as paramount. Writing in *The Socialist Review*, one anonymous commentator, who had made a close study of the BF in the mid-1920s, noted that the 'principal purpose' of the organisation was to fight communism, but communism from the BF perspective included 'a considerable range of opinion which is not Communist at all'. In fact, most of those on the left-wing of the Labour Party and in the trades unions came under such a catch-all category.⁸ As Lionel Hirst, commander of the Western Area of the BF, brusquely put it in 1927: 'A Socialist is the most vile specimen of humanity that has ever been seen'.⁹ Fear of internal subversion and revolution was a major theme running throughout BF ideological publications and speeches. In their campaigns, the BF sought: 'An intensive propaganda against, and efficacious hostility towards, all Bolshevist, Communist, Socialist, and other subversive and anti-Christian movements; to be continued until such time as the Empire is purged of all seditionists, disloyalists and degenerates'.¹⁰

There were some strong links between the BF and what was known as the 'Die-

hard' elements of the rightwing of the Conservative Party, and the people who made up the early membership of the BF were often Die-hard in outlook, quite reactionary, and tended to be landed aristocratic gentry, retired military officers, or independent-minded middle-class women, all united by a fear of social change. The Die-hard perspective was vigorously anti-Socialist, pro-empire, and deeply critical of the rise of mass democracy in Britain. The BF also had some members in its leadership ranks who strongly subscribed to conspiracy theory, such as the writer and self-proclaimed historian Nesta Webster (1876-1960), whose conspiracy books on history are still popular with the extreme right even today. At the same time, the BF were also keen to recruit from the working-classes, and increasingly presented themselves as a non-socialist alternative to the official labour and trades union movements. General Blakeney believed that it was vital to detach the British working man from the control of 'international Bolshevism'.¹¹ The BF wished to promote what they termed 'non-political Trade Unions'.¹² Working-class members were also used as stewards to help protect BF and Conservative Party meetings against attack by socialist opponents, with physical violence employed if necessary.

Indeed, as with many other fascist organisations, the BF was organised on strict para-military lines, with a strong emphasis on military-style discipline, ranks, titles, and service awards. By 1925, the British Admiralty had forbidden serving Royal Navy officers from joining or being members the BF; similarly, the Army Council had become so concerned about the issue that they asked the British Government's War Office (WO) for guidance on the matter.¹³ The WO then effectively banned all serving members of His Majesty's armed forces from joining the BF.

The 'militarist' theme in BF ideology was exemplified in an article by BF officer John Cheshire in the movement's journal *The British Lion* in 1928: 'The military aspect of Fascism is one that should appeal to every English man. It should be his privilege and duty to prepare himself to defend from contamination of the mob the honour of his wife and daughter...'.¹⁴

The rise of Mosley's BUF

As we noted earlier, the other major fascist organisation in Britain in the interwar period was the 'British Union of Fascists' (BUF), otherwise known as the 'blackshirts'. Most academic interest in British fascism has tended to focus on the BUF and the rise of Mosleyite fascism in Britain in the 1930s, and there has been a considerable historiography on the BUF.¹⁵ The BUF was founded in 1932 by the wealthy aristocrat and former Member of Parliament Sir Oswald Mosley (1896-1980). In his fervent desire to be the main 'modern man' of post-1918 British politics, Mosley had already carved out a rather turbulent political career path. He moved from the Conservative Party into flirting with the Liberals in the early 1920s, and then into the Labour Party in 1924. At the time, it was seen as quite an achievement for the relatively new Labour Party to recruit such an eminent aristocrat, and Mosley was viewed as a 'rising star' in British leftwing politics.

Mosley served as a Minister in the 1929-31 Labour Government under Ramsay Macdonald, but became disillusioned with what he saw as Labour's 'timidity' over economic policy as the Great Depression hit Britain.¹⁶ Increasingly impatient, Mosley voiced the need for radical Keynesian-style solutions to the problem of mass unemployment, with the state intervening in the economy to finance the construction

of public works and stimulate demand, but others in the Labour Cabinet seemed unwilling to listen. Mosley, who was often seen as a 'man in a hurry' by his critics, then resigned, and tried to appeal over the heads of the Labour leaders to the rank-and-file members of the Party. When this did not work, Mosley broke away from Labour and set up his own rival party in 1931 called the 'New Party' (NP). He passionately hoped the NP would break the 'grip' of the two main parties in the British parliament and be able to offer 'emergency' solutions to the severe economic crisis.¹⁷ When all the NP's 24 parliamentary candidates (including Mosley) were defeated in the 1931 General Election, and the NP spectacularly failed in 1931-32 to win over any significant numbers of Labour or Conservative supporters, Mosley increasingly shifted towards the hard right of the political spectrum. After visiting Fascist Italy in early 1932, where he had been impressed with what he saw as the 'modernity' of Mussolini's regime, during the summer of 1932 Mosley ensured that the NP, especially its youth wing, became the nucleus for the new BUF, which was officially launched in October of that year. The BUF also saw some top BF officials defect to its ranks, who took the BF's membership lists with them, much to the disgust of BF leader Lintorn-Orman, and splitting the BF Grand Council yet again.¹⁸

As with Lintorn-Orman's BF, Mosley's BUF was strongly anti-communist and presented itself as a para-military movement. In contrast to the BF, however, which was notably cautious and generally supportive of the political *status quo* in many ways, the BUF, while also stating that it sought to achieve its aims 'legally and constitutionally', nevertheless liked to portray itself as a 'revolutionary' movement, out to challenge the old order and attain radical change in a time of acute economic and political crisis. As with the Italian Fascists, Mosley emphasised the 'youth' and

'modernity' of the BUF, and he was very critical of what he called the 'Old Gangs', the mainstream British political parties which, he claimed, were out to prevent *any* kind of change in society - economic, political or otherwise. In his book *The Greater Britain* (1932), which served as the first major statement of BUF policy, Mosley emphasised that the BUF would not merely be a conventional 'party' as such, but a new kind of 'movement', fit for the twentieth century; only a 'movement', he claimed, could deal effectively with the unique conditions of the economic emergency in Britain and prevent the rise of Communism. He asserted: 'The Modern Movement, in struggle and in victory, must be ineradicably interwoven with the life of the nation. No ordinary party of the past... can survive in such a struggle. Our hope is centred in vital and determined youth, dedicated to the resurrection of a nation's greatness'.¹⁹

Increasingly, the BUF referred to liberal democracy as 'Financial Democracy', implying that parliamentary democracy was in reality just a shield for the underhand interests of 'international financiers', ruthless (and usually 'alien') capitalists who placed their own profit before the interests of the nation. Modelling itself on Mussolini's version of fascism, the BUF also called for the creation of an Italian-style 'Corporate State' as a solution to Britain's economic problems. This idea was exemplified in the book *The Coming Corporate State* (1938), by Alexander Raven-Thomson, which was arguably one of the most detailed fascist statements of its kind on the topic. Thomson wrote that fascists thought it necessary to substitute 'the new constitutional forms of the Corporate State for those of Financial Democracy', and such a fundamental change (he claimed) would 'amount to no less than a revolution', because democracy had failed, not just in Britain but across the world.²⁰ There were also numerous other statements of BUF policy, together with a quarterly journal of

ideas (*Fascist Quarterly*, which later became *British Union Quarterly*) and also two weekly newspapers, entitled *Blackshirt* and *Action*. Mosley made a point of going on regular speaking tours around the country, as did a number of other BUF officers.

In addition to developing a markedly detailed ideology, historians have viewed the BUF as a much more important and successful mass fascist movement in 1930s Britain compared to what had previously emerged in the 1920s. Mosley created a version of fascism which, at one point in 1934, attracted up to 50,000 members and (albeit for six months only) the backing of Lord Rothermere's influential *Daily Mail* newspaper group. Indeed, the apparent ability of Mosley's BUF to attract a mass membership from across the class spectrum of British society, and also its seeming ambition to employ force if necessary to undermine (and possibly overthrow) parliamentary democracy, became a serious source of concern for the British Home Office. From 1934 onwards, MI5 and Special Branch were instructed to compile regular monitoring reports on the BUF, and various intelligence agents were secretly inserted into blackshirt ranks to keep an eye on Mosley's plans. In May, 1934, for example, MI5 wrote to 150 Police Chief Constables across Britain, asking them to supply at regular intervals details of BUF membership and activities in their local areas, and MI5's first secret full-scale report on 'The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom' was delivered to the Home Office in June, 1934, noting the 'various tendencies' which were giving Mosley and the BUF worrying momentum.²¹

However, in the same month, a mass BUF meeting at the Olympia meeting hall in London saw much violence between the BUF's blackshirt stewards and anti-fascist opponents, and caused a great deal of shock and alarm among parts of the British

electorate, in the media, and among mainstream politicians. Lord Rothermere, wary of public opinion and also worried about advertisers possibly mounting a boycott of his newspapers (denying him crucial advertising revenue), politely wrote to Mosley, saying he was withdrawing the support of his newspapers. Critics argued that the BUF's brutal tactics were 'un-British' and too reminiscent of the violence of the new Nazi movement in Germany, which had assumed power the previous year. The violence served to undermine the credibility of Mosley's movement and, from mid-1934 onwards, BUF membership went into steep decline. By early 1935, it is estimated that the BUF's membership had possibly fallen to as low as 5,000.²²

Which direction for the BUF?

During the course of 1934-1935, debates took place within the BUF leadership circle over how to reverse the BUF's decline in membership numbers. The main disagreement was between what might be termed a more 'moderate' group, who wanted the BUF to be more disciplined and adopt a more respectable 'electoral' route, appealing to 'law and order' sentiments and standing BUF candidates in elections, and the 'ideologues', who still envisaged the future of the BUF as a more revolutionary propaganda movement, out to stir up the masses through passionate commitment to ideological principles. The BUF 'ideologues' also wanted a more confrontational and street-based approach, using marches and frequent street-corner meetings in the main cities, and borrowing tactics from the Nazi movement. Mosley appears to have tried to pacify both groups, seeing benefits to both strategies, but lack of resources ruled out mounting an extensive electoral campaign for the time being, and the BUF boycotted the 1935 General Election, using the

rather bland slogan 'Fascism next time'. This gave the 'ideologues' an upper hand. Thus, in 1935-1936, perhaps as a way of reviving the movement and regaining rapid impetus, especially in the main cities, Mosley and his lieutenants turned to placing more emphasis on anti-Semitism and stirring up fears about the powers of 'minority' groups in Britain, and increasingly looked to the German Nazi model of fascism for inspiration. Significantly, the title of the BUF was also altered to become 'The British Union of Fascists and National Socialists' (although this was shortened again to just 'British Union' in the late 1930s). While there had already been criticism at times of 'International Finance' by BUF ideologues (often with anti-Semitic connotations attached to this term), from 1935-1936 onwards this became much more explicit. Moreover, the BUF also began to mount an increased number of provocative military-style marches into areas where there were key ethnic minority communities, such as the East End of London, which had a significant Jewish population.

This culminated in the infamous BUF attempt to march through Cable Street in London's East End in early October, 1936, where Mosley and his lieutenants also appeared in new Nazi-style uniforms for the first time. The Italian-style *fasces* symbol on BUF arm-bands had also been replaced with a new 'lightening flash' symbol, reminiscent of Nazi runic symbols. An alliance of Jews, Socialists, trade unionists, and other anti-fascist activists, inspired by the Republican cry of 'No pasaran!' ('They shall not pass!'), which had been used the same year in the Spanish Civil War, blockaded Cable Street to prevent the BUF's march, and there was considerable public disorder, together with conflict with the London Metropolitan Police. Shocked by the scale of the violence, the British government introduced the Public Order Act (1936), which banned the wearing of uniforms by political organisations from early

1937 and gave the Home Secretary, the Minister responsible for public order, more discretionary power to regulate or ban marches by extremist political movements.

Although the 1936 Act helped to undermine the para-military image of the BUF (they could no longer wear their blackshirt uniforms in public), the marches and mass rallies continued where possible. It would also seem that the BUF's new emphasis on anti-Semitism, together with an increasingly vigorous campaign calling for the avoidance of another 'brother's war' in Europe between Britain and Germany, gradually helped to revive the BUF's membership to about 22,500 by 1939. The anti-war campaign also began to win back some middle-class sympathisers who had dramatically deserted the BUF in the earlier part of the decade. The BUF's peace campaign reached its zenith in the mass Earls Court 'Peace Rally', held in July, 1939, at the Earls Court Exhibition Hall in London, and publicised by the BUF at the time as the world's largest indoor meeting.

Furthermore, Mosley's core message from the early 1930s remained essentially the same: in another key book of ideology, *Tomorrow We Live* (1938), he asserted that the BUF was still the only movement able to save the nation, and that all the struggles undertaken by his blackshirts in the previous few years had merely been 'the first stage in the mission of regeneration', which was 'a necessary preliminary' to the exercise of power.²³ Compared to *The Greater Britain*, Mosley's *Tomorrow We Live* showed clear signs of a more 'Blood and Soil' approach to policy, but the emphasis was also on British identity and protecting the interests of Britain and its empire, and Mosley was evidently keen not to be too closely associated with German doctrine, especially given rising international tension in Europe.

Sitting on the sidelines throughout this period, however, and closely observing the impact of Mosley on British society and the mixed fortunes of the BUF, was Arnold Leese, who remained convinced that Mosley was actually a 'fraud', and that his adoption of anti-Semitism had been mainly about pragmatic political tactics rather than genuine ideological conviction. In particular, Leese was not persuaded that the BUF's apparent conversion to a more 'Nazi' model was sincere. He regarded himself as the only true advocate of Nazi-style 'Racial Fascism' in Britain.

Arnold Leese and British Fascism in the 1920s

We must now turn to Arnold Leese's conversion to fascism in the previous decade. After military service as a veterinary officer in the First World War, Leese returned to civilian life and, in the early 1920s, set up a small private practice as a veterinary surgeon in the largely agricultural town of Stamford and district, in the southern area of the English county of Lincolnshire. It was during this period that he became interested in fascism and joined the British Fascisti (BF). It is not clear precisely when Leese became a convinced fascist, but at one point in 1925 he claimed that he had written 'a short pamphlet on Fascism' in April 1923.²⁴

He certainly shared the BF's acute fear of socialism and claimed that the socialists of Italy 'went about appealing to the lowest instincts of the mob by the same arguments and misrepresentations of facts with which we in Britain are so sickeningly familiar'. According to Leese, there had been a 'rapid degeneration' in Italy and the socialists had succeeded in doing there 'what our so-called Labour Party and its dupes are so anxious to get a chance of doing in Britain'.²⁵ In his memoirs, he pointed to two influences on his adoption of fascism: the ideas of Arthur

Kitson, who ran an engineering firm in Stamford (and was also a monetary reformer with anti-Semitic and conspiratorial views about 'international bankers'), and the dramatic events in Italy: 'I had watched with interest the bloodless revolution of Mussolini, who by sheer determination had ended the chaos into which Liberalism (disguised) had brought his country; it appeared to me that here was a movement which might end political humbug, and his declaration "My Aim is Reality" appealed to me strongly'.²⁶ Leese was also spurred into action by the election in 1924 of the first Labour government in Britain.

In early February, 1924, adverts began to appear in the local Stamford press carrying the words: 'British Fascists (Stamford Branch): Without the Permission of the Sozialistische Arbeiter International'. Potential applicants could obtain information from Leese's home in central Stamford, which also came to function as the local BF office.²⁷ In early March, 1924, the first general meeting of the Stamford branch of the BF was held in the town's Assembly Rooms, when officers and a committee of nine people were elected. Over seventy people were present, which was a surprisingly high number given the size of the town. Leese, described as 'the founder of the branch', was unanimously elected president and, according to one local report: 'During an interval Mr. Leese made a most inspiring and instructive speech, dealing with the necessity of Fascism in this country'.²⁸

A letter by a BF member setting out the objectives of the organisation was published shortly afterwards in the local press, undoubtedly to maximise publicity for the new branch. It gave local residents some clear insights into the BF's national message:

'The British Fascisti is not confined to any one class; it is non-sectarian; it has in its ranks men and women of every rank and profession. Its aims are the preservation of the Throne and the Empire intact from the treacherous designs of the subversive element now so rampant in our midst; the upholding of law and order; and the formation of an organised body of men and women prepared to see these aims carried out and ready to deal with revolutionary activities if and when required'.

The author claimed the BF were already strongly supported 'all over the country' and that branches were in the course of formation 'in most of the large towns and villages, including Stamford and district'. The letter also stated that, in the event of a General Strike, 'instigated by Bolshevist agents, and designed to paralyse the country', the BF would co-operate whole-heartedly with the authorities in the maintenance of food supplies and communications, and warned that any acts of violence would be 'ruthlessly' subdued.²⁹

In May, 1924, the local press described the Stamford BF as 'A Growing Force' and an account of a meeting of the branch revealed that 'a large number was present, all classes of the community being represented'. Leese delivered a report on 'the rapid progress of the movement, both generally and locally, and expressed the opinion that in the near future the movement would be a powerful influence in the country'. He also offered to the meeting a detailed description of the development of corporatism in Italy and how 'industrial democracy' could help simplify a parliamentary and representative system, and 'avoid the creation of interests which corrupt the electorate'.³⁰ Quite what the more Conservative elements of the local BF

thought of this is difficult to say.³¹ According to one witness, local residents in the town apparently came to regard Leese as an 'extrovert and eccentric' character who would have 'done better to stick to camels'.³² However, it would be misleading to assume that everybody viewed Leese solely as a marginal eccentric. In the context of a small British market town like Stamford in the 1920s, where Leese was highly respected for his skills as the local vet, he was plainly part of the mainstream of local society. Moreover, there were plainly some BF members who were beguiled by Leese's unusual personality and political obsessions.

Indeed, it quickly became evident that Leese envisaged his local branch of the BF as chiefly an activist organisation, and he was determined to find as many ways as possible to galvanise his supporters and publicise his fascist ideas around the town and local district. He organised, for example, a BF 'Smoking Concert' in the town, which also doubled up as an opportunity for Leese to deliver a short political speech.³³

In addition, he began, as one local newspaper put it, to take his 'Crusade' around the local district and carry 'The Banner Into The Byways'. When visits were made by about thirty BF activists to nearby villages in the summer of 1924, supported by motor transport, it was reported that: 'The Stamford branch of the British Fascisti is not content with a passive existence and has started to spread its "gospel" in the rural districts'. Meetings were held and speeches made in every village visited. Leese and his officers emphasised that fascism 'was constitutional so long as the Government fulfilled its function of maintaining order, and they would use every means to uphold constitutional authority'. Leese claimed that the country 'was in the

hands of political adventurers with no convictions and whose views shifted like the winds'.³⁴ At one of these meetings, in an interesting foretaste of his developing ideas on race, Leese even introduced Social Darwinist themes into his speech.³⁵

Leese as a radical racist

At the same time, however, there is also evidence that Leese was becoming rather frustrated with the BF and desired a more radical stance. In one passage in his memoirs, he revealed that he had even made a special journey down to London to implore the leadership of the British Fascists to change their name, as he thought the initials 'BF' were 'just asking for it!' ('BF' was a common English term at that time for 'Bloody Fools'). To his surprise, the BF leadership rebuffed him. Leese wrote: 'After a while, I found that there was no Fascism, as I understood it, in the organisation which was merely Conservatism with Knobs On; it was justified by the Red attempts to smash up meetings of the Right, but it should never have been misnamed'.³⁶

Leese was also growing uncomfortable with what he viewed as the over-cautious national position of the BF, which was to stand above electoral politics and function mainly as a defence force at the disposal of those who wished to defend the British constitution from communist subversion and revolution.³⁷

In Stamford in November, 1924, Leese was very disappointed to learn that the local Conservatives (possibly due to lack of volunteers prepared to stand) were not going to oppose two Labour Party candidates who were standing in the local municipal elections. This was against a backdrop where the common talk among people in the town was about the threat of socialist revolution.³⁸ Apart from the fact that Leese hated socialism, he appears to have concluded that the publicity and

power afforded by standing in a local election outweighed his loyalty to the more wary national stance of the BF.

Along with young engineer and BF colleague Harry Simpson, Leese decided to run as a fascist candidate, announcing that he was standing 'to contest apathy'.³⁹ It is obvious from his memoirs that Leese took a cynical attitude towards the people who voted for him in the Stamford district; the experience, he wrote, 'impressed' upon him 'what utter humbug the democratic vote really is...'.⁴⁰ To great surprise in the town, Leese and Simpson defeated the Labour candidates and were elected to Stamford Town Council, becoming in the process the first local councillors to be elected on a fascist platform in Britain. The evidence suggests that both Leese and Simpson subsequently made a point of regularly attending council meetings during their three-year term in office, and Leese was especially keen to try to shake up what he saw as the rather closed world of the local Councillors with their traditional and rather 'fusty' town-hall procedures.

However, one important feature of Leese's local version of fascism in Stamford was his growing disaffection with the wariness of the BF national leadership, and this slowly grew into outright rebellion on Leese's part. In fact, a London Metropolitan Police Special Branch report can help illustrate how 'national' developments in the wider BF caused a major crisis at local fascist level in Stamford. In October, 1924, Special Branch reported that a section of the BF who favoured 'a more extreme policy' than that pursued by the BF Grand Council had broken away from the parent body and formed the 'National Fascisti' (NF), with headquarters in Oxford Street, London.⁴¹ The NF, who were the first fascists to wear blackshirts in Britain, adopted

a more confrontational and street-fighting approach to politics and, in particular, expounded a more racial and anti-Semitic variant of fascism.

Already under the influence of the anti-Semitism of Arthur Kitson, who had in turn introduced Leese to the conspiratorial and biological racism of Henry Hamilton Beamish and an anti-Semitic group called 'The Britons', in 1925 Leese decided that the NF's type of fascism mirrored his own embryonic racism more closely. At some stage, Leese had also obtained a copy from The Britons Society of the notorious anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Noting his interest, H.H. Beamish had visited Leese in Stamford and this encounter had also strongly influenced Leese's evolving racial views. In July, 1925, Leese called a special General Meeting in Stamford and, according to Leese, it was 'unanimously decided' to transfer the branch from the BF to the NF. Leese's explanation, as well as emphasising that the NF refused membership to Jews, was characteristically ambitious: 'The fight against Socialism and Bolshevism is a preliminary measure; our ultimate object is the Government of the country by Fascists who face realities, no matter how remote the attainment of this object may seem today'.⁴² On one occasion, Leese even invited the NF's London-based National President, Lieut.-Colonel H. Rippon-Seymour, up to Stamford, and an open-air meeting on 'Fascist Aims', with black-shirted members present, was held. At this meeting, Leese in his speech argued that 'Socialism ended in Communism', and he warned that fascists would fight both those creeds, 'constitutionally or otherwise'.⁴³

In fact, Leese's version of fascism at local level in Stamford remained notably militant in approach. Leese enjoyed baiting and criticising the local League of

Nations Union at their meetings and in the local press.⁴⁴ Likewise, advertisements for recruits to the NF became markedly anti-Semitic in tone, calling for 'Nordic Revival'.⁴⁵ However, by mid-1927 it must have become very apparent to Leese that not even the NF (which had reformed itself as the 'British National Fascists' in late 1925, but closed down after bitter in-fighting at its London Headquarters in 1927) was a suitable vehicle for his markedly ambitious local and national vision. Running his Stamford fascists briefly as the independent 'Fascist League', Leese decided not to seek re-election as a local Councillor, saying he was 'disgusted' with the way things were done in the Town Council.⁴⁶ Simpson, on the other hand, decided to pursue re-election to office in Stamford as a fascist and was successful. Shortly afterwards, Leese left the town and retired to Guildford, in Surrey. Leese's disillusionment at that point is best captured in the words of historian Colin Cross: 'Stamford was a poor base from which to run a national revolution'.⁴⁷ It may be the case that Simpson had been re-elected more for his reputation as a dedicated local councillor than for his fascist stance, but Leese would later portray the result in his propaganda as clear evidence of how fascism could be electorally successful in British municipal politics, given the right personnel, ideology and sheer determination.

Arnold Leese and British fascism in the 1930s

Leese's 'retirement' was far from a conventional retirement. He devoted himself even more to politics. After the creation of the IFL in 1928, Leese continued his outspoken criticism of liberalism and parliamentarianism and, in the launch issue of his new monthly newspaper *The Fascist*, he referred to 'the follies and insincerities

of political democracy'. He said he took comfort from the appearance in the mainstream press of articles 'dealing with the utter incompetence of democratic parties in grappling with the vital problems', and he claimed that the 'Imperial Fascist League and its predecessors have led the revolt against the politicians...'.⁴⁸

The IFL in its early stages clearly owed much to Italian fascism, and included the call for a Corporate State in Britain. Summarising the manifesto of the IFL, Leese wrote that its policy was the 'Recognition of the failure of political democracy' and the 'Formation of a new governing caste of character and service'. Yet, at the same time, Leese also struck an ambivalent tone. He said the IFL realised that before these revolutionary changes could be brought about, 'the goodwill of the British people must be secured for these changes; consequently, the efforts of the League are mainly directed to the education of the British public to the universal aspects of Fascism'.⁴⁹ In other words, Leese knew that he still needed to exploit the 'legitimacy' of democracy in order to subvert it from within and win over more converts, especially at the local level. With this objective in mind, the strategy he developed in Stamford was to be continued by the IFL, and rolled out on a wider scale.

Significantly, the same issue of *The Fascist* contained an article entitled 'A Fine Example'. In this piece, the IFL leader told his readers that there was a great need for fascist representation on local authorities. The fascist cause, argued Leese, 'would have been much more advanced had proper attention been given by Fascists to the local councils'. Leese highlighted that in Stamford two fascist councillors were elected to the Borough Council 'in tough contests', and, in 1927, one of these, councillor Simpson, sought re-election and 'headed the poll for his ward'. Leese then

gave advice on how to fight elections following the example of this 'pioneer'. Good council work, Leese reflected cautiously, took up a lot of time, therefore it was 'inadvisable' to put forward the 'most active members' as candidates; canvassers, argued Leese, had to fight 'clean' to 'avoid contamination in handling the unpleasant business of an election'. They had to refrain from making promises that could not be kept and from pandering to sectional interests: 'It is our experience that a man with engineering knowledge has a great advantage over his fellows on a Council'.⁵⁰ Short diatribes on the value of exploiting the electoral route for non-democratic purposes also appeared in subsequent issues of *The Fascist*. In May, 1930, writing on 'Parliamentary Candidates', Leese proclaimed: 'Yes, we want them, if they are genuine, but only as a means to an end; not as an end in itself'.⁵¹

At times, Leese justified this blatantly instrumental approach to parliamentary elections by referring to what he believed was going on in Germany. In October, 1930, writing on 'The German Fascists and Ourselves', Leese demonstrated strong interest in the growing electoral success of the Nazis in Weimar Germany and, in a revealing insight into his thinking, he argued that 'like us, the German Fascists are only interested in Parliament as a means to an end, which is to destroy it and build a competent Fascist State on the ruins'. Leese added that German fascism would 'now get more publicity in our newspapers' and this would help the IFL to demonstrate to the British public that fascism was 'just as natural' to the Germans as it was to the Italians: 'Then it may be more easy to get our own Nordic-Mediterranean Nation to learn that in Fascism lies its rapid salvation'. Moreover, Leese wrote with evident satisfaction that as 'Fascism comes north, it becomes more openly hostile to the Jews', and noted that Hitler had 'worked for years to achieve this success for his

Fascists'. In Leese's estimation, 'dogged determination' had had its reward.⁵² In hindsight, one can detect here some early signs of Leese's later fascination and close identification with Hitler's National Socialist movement and its racist creed, an interest that would very much shape his own thinking during the course of the 1930s and, in particular, how he viewed Mosley's BUF.

After he moved down to Guildford and took up residence in a house that he named the 'White House', with a main IFL office in Craven Street in central London, it was not long before Leese was single-mindedly organising fascist activities in the London suburbs and surrounding countryside. But he noted the IFL's 'great need' was for 'local leaders', able to give time and energy to the 'task of awakening the almost invincibly ignorant public' to both the disaster of democracy and the 'salvation' offered by fascism.⁵³ One form of this local activity was to offer to hold debates with other non-fascist organisations in order to overcome town-hall and local authority objections to the hiring of halls by an openly fascist group.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, even though there were still occasions when the IFL managed to secure halls for hire in the London area, parts of the country outside the capital offered a greater range of opportunities, possibly due to the lack of familiarity in these localities with the IFL's increasingly controversial and highly racist reputation.⁵⁵ Leese was certainly eager to make use of various small towns and their localities in Surrey, including his new home-town of Guildford and the surrounding areas. Again, engaging in debates with other local branches of national organisations was an imperative part of this strategy, which also had the added benefit for Leese of lengthy news coverage and publicity in the local press (a tactic Leese had first

pursued in Stamford). A good example of this occurred in the Surrey village of Great Bookham in November, 1930, when Leese engaged in a debate with Alec Wilson of the League of Nations Union headquarters. According to a local newspaper, the 'hall was crowded' and the debate gave Leese an opportunity to set out his political obsessions. Summarising Leese's arguments, the newspaper reported: 'The crux of the whole affair was that the League of Nations was supposed to have been originated by President Wilson, but it was a Jewish idea. They wanted to rule the world by means of finance, and were nearly doing it'.⁵⁶

Similarly, Leese and his IFL associates made sure they attended meetings of organisations they especially loathed, but where they could also blatantly hijack the 'Questions and Answers' session at the end of the meeting and use it as a platform to proclaim their own fascist message in the locality. A good example of this occurred in September, 1931, when a new branch of the 'Friends of the Soviet Union' was launched in Guildford and held its first meeting. Leese saw this as an ideal event to stir up controversy. As one Guildford newspaper reported: 'There was a good deal of opposition from an anti-Jewish element in the audience'. At one point, employing a classic piece of conspiracy theory, Leese declared that 'Jewish international finance was running not only Russia, but this country. They had the world in pincers, one claw was Moscow and the other the bankers in New York. Bolshevism was due entirely to the machinations of the Jew'.⁵⁷

Fascist rivalry: Leese versus Mosley

As we noted at the outset, the launch of Oswald Mosley's BUF in 1932 was a particular source of anger and frustration to Leese. Although he never seriously

challenged Mosley's domination of the British extreme right at national or local level during the 1930s, and his own fascist organisation remained very small (no more than about 150-200 members) and lacking in funds (a problem he had also experienced in Stamford in the 1920s), Leese nonetheless remained determined to provide an 'alternative' form of fascist politics. Moreover, whereas the BUF tended to draw its main ideas and inspiration from Italian Fascism, Leese and the IFL increasingly turned to German Nazism for their main policies. The IFL not only espoused a creed that was much more preoccupied with 'race' as the basis of *all* politics, but - in terms of political tactics - Leese was also especially prepared to exploit any opportunities presented by local electoral politics in order to convey his general critique of the 'decadence' of liberal parliamentary and local town-hall democracy.

On the question of race, Leese and the IFL tried to make life as difficult as possible for Mosley and the BUF, arguing that Mosley was not a sincere fascist and the BUF's membership were being manipulated by 'unseen' forces, something Leese also suspected had now happened to Mussolini. The Italian leader and the BUF leader were portrayed by Leese as too soft on the Jews.⁵⁸ At one point Leese noted with disgust Mosley's dismissive comment made to a Liverpool newspaper that the IFL was 'one of those little crank societies. They are mad about the Jews'. Leese responded to this by arguing that Sir Oswald had 'married a wife of Jewish blood, grand-daughter of the Jew Leiter...'.⁵⁹ Comments were also made by Leese about the Jewish blood of Mosley's children.⁶⁰ Such remarks created a great deal of anger in the BUF's ranks, and in October, 1933, blackshirt activists from the BUF wrecked the IFL's Headquarters in London. The following month they also attacked an IFL

public meeting in the city, physically assaulting Leese and also General R.B.D. Blakeney (the former BF President, who had now joined the IFL). Predictably, Leese said afterwards that the meeting was attacked by 'supporters of the Judaic Fascism of Mosley' and that the 'Mosleyites seemed to be largely Jewish'.⁶¹

In terms of national strength and profile, while both the IFL and BUF in the 1930s shared a loathing for liberalism and the national party system in Britain, and both movements at times targeted major city centres and the suburbs (especially the London area), Leese remained in a very weak position. Through necessity rather than choice, Leese quickly realised that he could not compete with the BUF's more abundant organisational resources across the country.⁶² Realistically, he could only attempt to raise his profile and try to sustain the morale of the IFL by pursuing a more local version of fascist activism, something he had first experimented with in Stamford in the 1920s.

Ironically, as we noted earlier, Mosley's new BUF initially resisted entering into conventional electoral competition and saw itself, above all, as a *national* movement with 'revolutionary' aims, rather than as a mere political party controlled by the 'Old Gangs'. Apart from one or two unofficial candidates, the Mosleyites generally boycotted national, county and local elections until 1936-37. In 1935, as part of a wholesale reorganisation of the movement to try to reverse the decline in membership, a decision was taken to partly go 'electoral', and in 1935-36 this change of strategy was officially instigated on the advice of F.M. Box, a former Conservative Party electoral agent, and General J.F.C. Fuller.⁶³ But this new approach was slow, intermittent and under-resourced, and the BUF still tended to

place its main hopes in large marches, mass rallies and national propaganda campaigns.

Leese, however, appears to have recognised from early on that if he was to maximise publicity for his own movement, and emerge from the shadow of the much larger BUF, the municipal and neighbourhood levels of small towns, villages and other localities in the provinces still offered a range of options: Leese thus tried to encourage, where possible, a more 'grass-roots' or bottom-up approach to his Nazi-inspired fascism, and IFL publications at various junctures referred to the need to stand candidates in local Council elections, run candidates in Parliamentary by-elections, and attend the meetings of other organisations solely to disseminate the IFL's own distinctive and more 'racial' message.

Two noteworthy examples illustrate this pattern of activity. Leese was aware that the BUF were organising a branch in his home-town of Guildford, and he was determined to persuade local people of all shades of opinion in the town that the IFL were still the 'real' fascists, both locally and nationally. In March, 1934, Leese's movement gained considerable local publicity when the IFL held its first public meeting in the town, at the Ward Street hall, Guildford. According to one report, the 'hall was crowded, and around the walls stood uniformed stewards of the organisation'. After singing the IFL's song, 'St. George, our guide', S.H. Wrigley (of IFL headquarters in London), who presided, told the audience that the 'League came to show the British the way out of their problems', and emphasised the IFL had no connection with Sir Oswald Mosley and his 'so-called Union of British Fascists'.⁶⁴

In fact, the evidence is that the event demonstrated a considerable show of force

by the IFL. Another newspaper reported that 'about 100 supporters and members of the League, including several women, described as stewards, were brought from London and other parts of the country, and sat among the audience or stood around the sides of the hall'. An arm-band of Union Jack with a Swastika in the centre was worn by every IFL member, and: 'Throughout the meeting a Fascist stood with the League's flag – the Union Jack and Swastika – on the platform'.⁶⁵

Leese, the principal speaker at the meeting, delivered a long speech on the history of 'Jewish money power' which contained many archetypal IFL themes, and argued that Britain had been given repeated doses of Conservative 'sleeping draught', which had lured people into a sense of 'pathetic contentment'. He acknowledged that the IFL 'was still a small body, but it was growing rapidly, because they had struck the right type of men'. The majority of people in Guildford, Leese said, were 'a comfortable crowd' and were 'slow to wake up', but he appealed to them for 'a little unselfishness' so that they might come forward. At one stage in the meeting, unable to resist another anti-Semitic jibe at his Mosleyite rivals, Leese argued that the BUF 'will take any man who will sign a form, irrespective of whether he is an Englishman by race'.⁶⁶

Another instance of the way Leese tried to gain the upper hand over the BUF and obtain national as well as local publicity occurred in the 1935 British General Election, which the BUF were boycotting. Leese temporarily lit up the local campaign in Guildford when he made the surprise announcement that he would stand as a fascist parliamentary candidate in the Guildford parliamentary division. This gained him a lengthy interview in the local press, where he commented at one point:

'It is obvious that one Fascist M.P. won't force a Fascist policy on Parliament, but if I am elected it will at least give a chance for Fascism to be thoroughly examined, whereas at the present moment it is simply the subject of hostile criticism from alien sources which control so much of our daily press'.

Unsurprisingly, Leese also used this as an opportunity to take swipes at democracy, to claim that 'Mussolini is being run by Jewish money', and assert that the hope of the world depended on 'Aryan' stock. Questioned on the distinctions between the IFL and the BUF, Leese gleefully told readers that 'Mosley Fascism alters its policy every six months, and will probably continue to do so'.⁶⁷ Just one week later, evidently satisfied that he had obtained valuable publicity for the IFL, Leese announced his withdrawal from the election, alleging in a front-page letter in a local newspaper that it was an 'unfair contest' and that it would be 'a foolish waste of my cash resources to fight at such an acute disadvantage'.⁶⁸

Leese and the centrality of 'race'

Although the IFL still advocated the need for a Corporate State, this idea was increasingly described not just as a new economic system but as a vision of an organic 'Racial Fascist Corporate State', which was another way of trying to put ideological distance between the IFL and the BUF. In many ways, race and Aryan 'superiority' had come to dominate everything Leese did, and was fundamental to the IFL's whole purpose. He regularly described himself as a 'Racial Fascist'. A key influence remained H.H. Beamish of The Britons Society, a dedicated and well-travelled racist who had contacts with leading Nazis, and who also agreed to

become an honorary vice-President of the IFL. Leese also greatly admired the notorious Nazi Jew-baiter Julius Streicher and his newspaper *Der Sturmer*, and probably saw his own paper *The Fascist* as the British equivalent of Streicher's publication. In March, 1934, writing in *The Fascist*, Leese proudly explained to his supporters why the IFL had adopted the new badge consisting of a Nazi swastika symbol superimposed on the British Union Jack: 'The change has been felt necessary since Mussolini has ranged himself with the Jews against Britain's interests in Palestine; we have now to distinguish ourselves from the Kosher Fascist Movements by adopting the racial symbol of the Nordic man'.⁶⁹

In truth, this decision illustrated in many ways the extent to which Arnold Leese increasingly admired, and wished to directly borrow from, the German Nazi model of fascism and its racial philosophy, which he saw as the *only* authentic version of fascism. He had concluded that Mussolini's regime, though starting out on the right road, had now succumbed to 'Jewish' and 'Masonic' influences and interests. Moreover, Italian Fascism, together with Mosley's Italian-style version of fascism in Britain, were in fact being manipulated and financed by Jews, not only to give fascism a bad name, but to undermine the whole of the 'White' race in Europe. In the same issue of *The Fascist*, Leese stated:

'The Imperial Fascist League, which bases its politics on racial study, has no faith in the alleged capability of the brown, black and red races of mankind to contribute much of importance to the world's real progress. History and experience have combined to prove that the Negro, in spite of his strategic position in Africa, is incapable of any important degree of cultural improvement, except when led by the

white man's hand'.⁷⁰

The key to Leese's philosophical view of society and the world thus lay in this preoccupation with 'racial study' and what he claimed was the existence of a series of clear racial groups, each distinguished on the basis of skin colour, facial characteristics, skull size, body shape, intelligence, and 'blood'. This reality, Leese argued, could be demonstrated through the study of history and 'hereditary memory', and also through the full understanding the 'facts' of a scientific and biological view of racial differences. These 'truths', he alleged, were being deliberately suppressed by the Semitic race, and were also not being faced up to by Mussolini and Mosley. As with Hitler's Nazi philosophy, Leese also zealously claimed that there was an inevitable conflict between races in the world, the most important of which was the 'struggle' between 'Aryans' (or 'Nordics') and Jews.

In one typical pamphlet published by the IFL, entitled *Race and Politics* (and illustrated on the inside cover with an image of Saint George slaying the Jewish 'Dragon'), Leese argued that the 'Supreme Political Fact is that Civilisation was established by people of Aryan Race and only by them can it be maintained at its highest level'. He continued: 'The Supreme Political Object is therefore to maintain the strength of this Aryan stock on which the hope of the world depends'. According to Leese, it was 'utterly fatal' for a race to such as the Aryan race to allow itself to mix with another race: 'That is why the Imperial Fascist League works to rid this country of Jews'.⁷¹

One of the most comprehensive and detailed statements of IFL policy was contained in a booklet entitled *Mightier Yet! Back to Reality* (1935), which consisted

of various articles originally printed in *The Fascist* going back to 1931, but with the addition of new material specially written by Leese for the booklet, and 'arranged to make a connected whole'. The publication contained many of the core themes promoted by Leese and his IFL supporters, policies that would broadly remain in place for the rest of the IFL's existence in the 1930s. According to Leese: 'The aim of all politics is to maintain Security for the Racial and National Culture and for its gradual evolution in accordance with native tradition; humanity has no other guide than this'.⁷²

Turning from general points about race to the particular types of races, Leese's regular racial obsessions with the Jews were also very much in evidence again. He warned ominously that 'immediately on the advent of Fascism to power, we would deal ruthlessly with the two and half million Jews who batten on the industry of Britain'. These 'aliens', Leese wrote, would be deprived of British citizenship and made into 'Subjects'. They would be 'gradually segregated' and ultimately deported to a National Home at their own expense.⁷³ Later on in the pamphlet, Leese complained again that: 'The Jews are in our midst, interbreeding with us, dominating our affairs'. He argued that 'some place must be fixed upon' as their future National Home, and pointed to the need for 'a large island' capable of holding all the Jews of the world: 'The most suitable region, as that great anti-Jewish pioneer Mr. H.H. Beamish long ago pointed out, is Madagascar, a French possession, with an area of 226,000 square miles...'. Leese further asserted that the island could be patrolled, probably by a future 'League of Aryan Nations', and, once there, Jews would not be allowed to leave.⁷⁴

Unsurprisingly, the same statement of IFL policy also revealed Leese's hatred of Mosley and the BUF once again: 'The Imperial Fascist League is founded on solid rock as regards both policy and personnel. Every attempt has been made to smash it, the methods including attempted assaults, threats to murder, and attempted murder, in which the dupes of the Mosley Movement had their share. Every method has been used to silence it, including the formation of competing Bastard Fascist Movements, Masonic or Judaic; but all in vain'.⁷⁵

But there was an even more extreme side to Leese's calls for the 'segregation' of the Jews and his conspiratorial verdict on other rival fascists. This was his evident contemplation of the need for the forced 'sterilisation' of the Jews, or even their full 'extermination'. At the IFL meeting in Guildford in March, 1934, for example (referred to earlier), Leese had stated at one point in the 'Questions and Answers' session, held near the end of the meeting, that he was 'perfectly prepared' to 'open and shut the lethal chamber all day' if they could get rid of the Jews that way, but he said that he did not think the people of England would 'stand for it'.⁷⁶ Similarly, in 1935, writing on the 'segregation' of the Jews in *The Fascist*, Leese at one stage reflected: 'It has been our lot in the IFL to act as pioneers towards the recovery of British race-consciousness. Our members have only one policy for the Jew in the Empire: that is, he must go'. He continued:

'It must be admitted that the most certain and permanent way of disposing of the Jews would be to exterminate them by some humane method such as the lethal chamber. It is quite practicable, but (some will say unfortunately) in our time it is unlikely that the world will demand the adoption of that drastic procedure'.⁷⁷

While the historian must be very careful not to over-use the benefit of hindsight, Leese's sympathy for 'segregation' or even possible 'extermination' of the Jews in the mid-1930s is very revealing; it can perhaps also help us to understand more fully why, in 1945, Leese approved so strongly of the rhetoric and policies of Hitler and the Nazi movement, even after the conclusion of the Second World War and the revelations of the horrors of the 'Final Solution'.

There is also no doubt that Leese had already decided in the 1930s that Hitler was a great individual, whose fascism was far more important than Mussolini's brand, and who would go down in history as a heroic leader who was preserving the 'Aryan' or 'Nordic' race from contamination and destruction. In July, 1936, writing on 'Hitler's Great Endeavour' and the Fuhrer's 'First Steps in the saving of the Great Race', Leese claimed that the greatest work a man can lay his hand to is to ensure the permanence of 'the Race which made Civilisation'. According to Leese, Hitler was 'making an honest and determined attempt to stop the decline of the Aryan Race within her borders', and Leese argued that the measures being taken in Germany were of 'first class' interest to the IFL. The Germans had recognised that the first step 'in the long undertaking' was 'the elimination of the most alien racial stocks, which are chiefly represented by the Jews'. Leese proclaimed that it had to be realised that the measures put in force in Germany were the first step 'in a process of purification which will continue long after the death of Hitler and as long as his spirit lives, which we pray will be forever'.⁷⁸

Conclusion: Assessing Leese's 'Racial Fascism'

This article has sought to provide a general picture of the nature of fascism in

Britain during the 1920s and 1930s, and has explored the case of Arnold Leese to illustrate just one of the forms that fascism took in the United Kingdom during the interwar period. Most attention by scholars has been given to Mosley's BUF, as Sir Oswald's blackshirts undoubtedly exerted the greatest impact in terms of fascist developments in interwar Britain, and Mosley's ideologues developed some of the most detailed statements of the fascist creed in Western Europe. However, it is important to note that fascism was also espoused by a variety of smaller movements in Britain, such as the groups run by Leese, and there was a plurality of different types of fascist ideology on offer at times to the interwar public. The discussion thus traced the evolution of Leese's fascism over the course of the two decades and provided some analysis of its organisational and ideological nature.

In particular, we noted the extent to which Leese was unwavering in his determination to offer his own 'alternative' and more racist version of fascism ('Racial Fascism'), especially when faced with the existence or rise of other fascist organisations - movements that he felt were insufficiently 'racial' in outlook or were clearly not (to use his term) 'Jew-wise'. Furthermore, as we also saw, Arnold Leese's activities in both Stamford and Guildford provide important clues to his general approach to politics in the 1930s. Leese's formative years in the 1920s, and his attempts to 'awaken' those he viewed as the apathetic provincial masses, assumed a near-mythical status in his resolve to plough on with his racial 'mission' in the 1930s. Even when the IFL slipped into serious decline during the second half of the decade, the former camel-vet's reliance on reassuring stories about his early fascist career stayed in place. When reflecting on attempts by his rivals in the BUF to stand in elections, for example, Leese habitually referred to the Stamford years to reinforce

his critique of Mosley's movement. A good example came in 1937, when Leese was writing about the BUF candidates in the London County Council (LCC) elections.

Leese claimed that the IFL had pushed Oswald Mosley into adopting an anti-Jewish attitude, 'although for obvious reasons, he can never take a racial one'. Leese then stubbornly reproduced the results from the Stamford election in 1924 'to show how Imperial Fascist League members pioneered the above-mentioned results nearly 13 years ago, and before the League itself was born'.⁷⁹

Added to this, the article analysed the nature of Leese's racial ideology and explored the extent to which Leese also came into rivalry and ideological conflict with Mosley and the BUF, and how he was convinced that the BUF leader was actually damaging to the whole fascist cause in Britain. As Leese bitterly put it in his memoirs in 1951, Mosley 'had the money and we had not' and, in his estimation: 'Mosley's advent was a disaster to Fascist development in Britain, for it prevented the best elements in the country from associating themselves with any Fascist movement for some years; Mosley's Koshier Fascism got newspaper publicity, and the special support of the *Daily Mail*, whilst the Imperial Fascist League was left in a position of comparative obscurity'.⁸⁰

This was, of course, Leese's own and highly selective interpretation of history, informed by his continued hatred of Mosley in the post-1945 period, when the former BUF leader had tried to make a political comeback with his neo-fascist 'Union Movement', launched in 1948. However, there was also evidently some rather grudging acknowledgement on Leese's part towards the end of his life that the IFL had exerted very little impact in the Britain of the 1930s. Indeed, it would be a

mistake to exaggerate the role and importance of Leese and his fascism in the interwar period in Britain. Leese and his IFL remained a very small movement, and Leese's virulent and fanatical anti-Semitism (fortunately) appealed to very few people in mainstream British society, while Mosley (more worryingly) was able - for a while, at least - to appeal to a wider range of people.

On the other hand, as both Richard Thurlow and Thomas Linehan have pointed out, the IFL's extreme anti-Semitic propaganda had certainly added to a climate of fear and insecurity within the Jewish community in Britain, while there is evidence that IFL activists had also engaged in acts of physical violence against Jews and other 'enemies' in parts of London in the 1930s.⁸¹ Moreover, as Thurlow has also persuasively suggested, in the long term, while the Mosleyite form of fascism failed to inspire a new generation of far right activists in the post-1945 era, Leese's interwar ideology may have been more of a key influence on the 'racial nationalism' of later British extreme right movements, such as the National Front, the British Movement, and the British National Party.⁸²

It is perhaps worth noting that when Leese died in 1956, *Free Britain*, the post-1945 newspaper of The Britons Society, claimed that 'the country, the British Empire and the whole of the White world have lost a staunch friend'.⁸³ The Britons Society ensured that Leese's highly racist publications remained in circulation for years afterwards. Similarly, Colin Jordan (1923-2009), who was sometimes called the 'godfather' of British neo-Nazism, was a devoted disciple of Leese and, after Leese's death, briefly took over and edited Leese's publication *Gothic Ripples* for a few more issues. Jordan was also left some property in London in Leese's will, which Jordan

then used as a base for his neo-Nazi activities and rabble-rousing anti-immigration propaganda in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Jordan went on to become an influential extreme right ideologue, who was determined to keep alive the anti-Semitic and biologically racist strand of belief within far right circles. Later in life, Jordan even revived *Gothic Ripples* and used it to criticise contemporary society, offering his advice and 'wisdom' to the extreme right in the early 21st century. In fact, the figure of Arnold Leese has remained worryingly attractive to various contemporary neo-Nazis in Britain, such as the 'Blood and Honour' skinhead activists, and also the shadowy British 'League of St. George' organisation.⁸⁴

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Notes

1. *Gothic Ripples* no.1, 22 June, 1945, p.3.
2. *Gothic Ripples* no.3 (27 July, 1945), p.1.

3. *Gothic Ripples* no.3 (27 July, 1945), pp.2-3.

4. See *Gothic Ripples* no.4 (13 October, 1945), p.1, and no.6 (11th November, 1945), p.1.

5. See the various HO Minutes in file number TNA HO45/24968 (1945-1954), The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London.

6. See, for example, *The Fascist* no.57 (February, 1934), p.3, and no.64 (September, 1934), p.4.

7. *The Fascist* no.57 (February, 1934), p.1, and no.60 (May, 1934), p.1.

8. Investigator: 'The Fascist Movement in Britain', *The Socialist Review*, New Series no.1 (February, 1926), p.27.

9. *Brentford and Chiswick Times*, 4 November, 1927, p.7.

10. 'British Fascists Policy and Practice', *The British Lion* no.1 (June, 1926), p.7.

11. R.B.D. Blakeney, 'British Labour Organisations and Revolution', *The Fascist Bulletin*, vol.2, no.5 (11 July, 1925), p.1.
12. 'British Fascists Policy and Practice', p.7.
13. 'Minutes of Proceedings', 9 February, 1925, pp.25-27, in: TNA WO33/1105 (1926).
14. John Cheshire, 'A Defence of Militant Fascism', *The British Lion* no.28 (1928), p.2.
15. Some of the main studies of British interwar fascism have included: Richard Thurlow: *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London, 1987; 2nd ed., 1998); Richard Thurlow: *Fascism in Modern Britain* (Stroud, 2000); Thomas Linehan: *British Fascism 1918-1939: Parties, ideology and culture* (Manchester, 2000); Martin Pugh: *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! Fascists and fascism in Britain between the wars* (London, 2005); Stephen Dorril: *Black Shirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British fascism*

(London, 2006).

16. On these aspects of Mosley's career, see Robert Skidelsky: *Oswald Mosley* (London, 1975), Thurlow: *Fascism in Britain*, 2nd ed., and Dorril: *Blackshirt*.
17. The best discussion of this is Matthew Worley: *Oswald Mosley and the New Party* (Basingstoke, 2010).
18. Steven Woodbridge: 'Fraudulent Fascism: The Attitude of Early British Fascists towards Mosley and the New Party', *Contemporary British History*, vol.23, no.4 (December, 2009), pp.493-507.
19. Oswald Mosley: *The Greater Britain* (Bungay, 1932), p.25.
20. Alexander Raven Thomson: *The Coming Corporate State* (London, 1938), p.1.
21. See: TNA HO144/20141 (1934).
22. Thurlow: *Fascism in Britain*, pp.91-92.

23. Oswald Mosley: *Tomorrow We Live* (London, 1938; 5th ed., 1939), p.11.
24. Arnold Leese: *Fascism* (Stamford, 1925), p.3.
25. Leese: *Fascism*, p.4.
26. Arnold Leese: *Out of Step: Events in the Two Lives of an Anti-Jewish Camel-Doctor* (Guildford, 1951), p.49.
27. *Stamford and Rutland News*, 6 February, 1924, p.4.
28. *Stamford and Rutland News*, 5 March, 1924, p.5.
29. *Stamford and Rutland News*, 5 March, 1924, p.3.
30. *Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 9 May, 1924, p.4.
31. A number of members held joint membership of the local Conservative Party and Stamford BF. Interview with 'H.I.', Stamford, 30 March, 1991.
32. Interview with 'A.E.', Stamford, 5 April, 1991.

33. *Stamford and Rutland News*, 28 May, 1924, p.3.

34. *Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 20 June, 1924, p.4.

35. *Stamford and Rutland News*, 18 June, 1924, p.5.

36. Leese: *Out Of Step*, p.49.

37. This was also expressed in his letter to *The Patriot*, 16 July, 1925, pp.214-15.

See also his comments in *The Fascist* no.26 (July 1931), p.2.

38. Interview with 'A.E.', Stamford, 5 April, 1991.

39. *Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 31 October, 1924, p.1.

40. Leese: *Out Of Step*, pp.49-50.

41. Special Branch report no.278, 30 October, 1924, pp.10-11, in PRO (Ramsay MacDonald Papers): TNA PRO 30/69/220 (1924).

42. Leaflet: *National Fascisti (Stamford Branch)*, 31 July 1925.

43. *Stamford and Rutland News*, 8 September, 1926, p.5.

44. *Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 7 January, 1927, p.4; *Stamford and Rutland News*, 12 January, 1927, p.2.

45. *Stamford and Rutland News*, 23 June, 1926, p.4.

46. *Stamford and Rutland News*, 12 October, 1927, p.5.

47. Colin Cross: *The Fascists in Britain* (London, 1961), p.63.

48. *The Fascist* no.1 (March, 1929), p.1.

49. *The Fascist* no.1 (March, 1929), p.2.

50. *The Fascist* no.1 (March, 1929), p.4.

51. *The Fascist* no.13 (May, 1930), p.2.

52. *The Fascist* no.17 (October, 1930), pp.1-2.

53. *The Fascist* no.3 (May, 1929), p.2.

54. For example, a debate with the local branch of the League of Nations Union was held in Hillingdon, London, in October, 1930. See: *The Fascist* no.18 (November, 1930), p.4. Similarly, in December, 1930, the IFL engaged in a debate on the League of Nations with the Debating Society at University College, London. See: *The Fascist* no.20 (January, 1931), p.3.

55. In London, for example, an IFL meeting took place at Hampstead Town Hall in May, 1931. See: *The Fascist* no.25 (June, 1931), p.2. However, by May, 1932, Hampstead Town Council had banned the letting of the hall to the IFL. See: *The Fascist* no.36 (May, 1932), p.1.

56. *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser*, 1 November, 1930, p.5.

57. *Surrey Advertiser*, 30 September, 1931, p.4.

58. See: *The Fascist* no.24 (May, 1931), p.2; no.27 (August, 1931), p.3; and no.45 (February, 1933), p.4.

59. *The Fascist* no.47 (April, 1933), p.3.

60. *The Fascist* no.53 (October, 1933), p.2.

61. See: *The Fascist* no.54 (October, 1933), p.2, and no.55 (December, 1933), p.4.

62. Leese often referred to Mosley's 'Big Money' fascism. See, for example, *The Fascist* no.44 (January, 1933), p.4.

63. Pugh: *Hurrah For The Blackshirts!*, pp.221-24.

64. *Surrey Advertiser*, 14 March, 1934, p.4.

65. *Surrey Weekly Press*, 16 March, 1934, p.3.

66. *Surrey Advertiser*, 14 March, 1934, p.4.

67. *Surrey Advertiser*, 16 October, 1935, p.4.

68. *Surrey Advertiser*, 23 October, 1935, p.1.

69. *The Fascist* no.58 (March, 1934), p.3.

70. *The Fascist* no.58 (March, 1934), p.4.

71. *Race and Politics* (London, 1938 ed.), p.3.

72. *Mightier Yet! Back to Reality: The Policy of the Imperial Fascist League*
(London, 1935), p.3.

73. *Mightier Yet!*, p.17.

74. *Mightier Yet!*, pp.20-21.

75. *Mightier Yet!*, p.6.

76. *The Woking Observer*, 14 March, 1934, p.3.

77. *The Fascist* no.69 (February, 1935), p.2.

78. *The Fascist* no.86 (July, 1936), p.1.

79. *The Fascist* no.95 (April, 1937), p.3.

80. Leese: *Out of Step*, p.52.

81. See: Thurlow: *Fascism in Britain*, 2nd ed., p.58, and Linehan: *British fascism 1918-39*, p.79.

82. Thurlow: *Fascism in Britain*, 2nd ed., p.85, p.292, and p.302.

83. *Free Britain* no.165 (February, 1956), p.1.

84. See, for example: *Blood and Honour* no.18 (2000), pp.20-22, and the League of St. George's publication *League Sentinel* no. 87 (2011), pp.8-9.

Biographical note

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