

Who Were the BUF and Why Did They Have Support?

Enquiry Question: *Why did some people support the British Union of Fascists in 1930s Britain?*

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives

- Understand the social and economic problems facing Britain during the 1930s
- Know who the British Union of Fascists (BUF) were
- Explain why some people supported the BUF

Introduction

While this unit focusses on the Battle of Cable Street, this first lesson introduces students to the world in which the Battle happened by asking the enquiry question, **“Who were the BUF and Why Did They Have Support?”** Rather than beginning with the drama of the events of October 4th, students investigate the social, economic and political conditions that made support for the British Union of Fascists (BUF) possible. Britain in the 1930s was marked by economic insecurity, unemployment and distrust of established political parties following the Great Depression. At the same time across Europe, fascist movements were gaining ground and – in Italy, Germany and Nationalist Spain – power. Some people were attracted by ideas of strong leadership, promises of national renewal and simple solutions to complex problems. The East End of London, where Cable Street is located, was a diverse but often impoverished area, home to large Jewish, Irish and working-class communities, making it a focal point for both fascist organising and anti-fascist resistance.

This first lesson deliberately avoids presenting the Battle of Cable Street as a simplistic story of "good versus evil". Students should understand that:

- Fascism was a real threat that promoted racism, antisemitism and authoritarian rule
- Support for the BUF emerged within specific economic and social conditions
- Different groups in Britain responded differently to the BUF
- Historical understanding requires explanation, not sympathy

The lesson also establishes classroom norms for discussing racism, antisemitism, fascism and political extremism.

The Battle of Cable Street itself took place on October 4th, 1936 when Oswald Mosley's BUF attempted to march through the East End. Many local residents, trade unionists, socialists, communists and Jewish organisations viewed the march as a deliberate provocation and swiftly organised to prevent it. Thousands of anti-fascist demonstrators filled the streets, built barricades and resisted police efforts to clear a route for the march. Faced with mass opposition and growing disorder, the authorities ultimately prevented the BUF from marching through the area. The event quickly became one of the most famous confrontations in British political history and is often remembered through the slogan "They Shall Not Pass", a slogan associated with the anti-Franco Republicans in the ongoing Spanish Civil War.

In this year of the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Cable Street students may question why they should study it. Through engagement with this package of lessons – or at least a selection of those lessons if that is all time allows – they will learn that Cable Street remains important because it raises enduring questions about democracy, protest, prejudice, free speech and community action. It has become a powerful symbol of collective resistance to fascism, antisemitism and racism; a resistance which seems to be increasingly important.

However, students should also recognise that the story has acquired a number of myths and simplifications over time. Popular memory can and does present the event as a straightforward victory of a united community against fascism, when in reality the situation was more complex. Different groups participated for different reasons, not everyone in the East End opposed the BUF, and support for fascism in Britain cannot be explained by prejudice alone. Exploring these complexities helps students understand how history is constructed, remembered and used.

This first lesson is not, therefore, framed by the question of whether fascism was wrong, but by the more challenging historical question of **why ordinary people were drawn to the BUF in the first place**. Students are encouraged to examine a range of social, economic and political evidence, consider different motivations and understand the appeal of extremist movements within their historical context. In doing so, they will begin to identify threads that run from the history of Cable Street through the post-war years and right up to the present day: economic insecurity, political disillusionment, the search for scapegoats, debates over immigration and national identity, the growth of extremist movements, the role of protest, and the ways communities respond to intolerance and hatred. These themes will recur throughout the enquiry, helping students make connections between the events of 1936 and issues that continue to shape society today.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 13 and above. It is devised for History classes.

The timings suggested are based on a one-hour lesson and may need adapting based on circumstances. Some adaptations have been suggested where appropriate.

Prior knowledge is not needed. However, the notion that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore and resolve misconceptions.

As far as possible, students should remain in the same small group throughout this course of lessons.

Resources:

- Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan
- Lesson PowerPoint containing:
 - a short video (Slide 7)
- Student worksheet (A4 double-sided; one per student)
- Sources sheet (A4 double-sided; one per pair)

Lesson Plan

Starter (3-5 minutes)

Exactly how this starter activity is run will be dependent on how students enter a lesson in any individual school. Teachers can choose to omit the first starter activity (**Slide 2**) if it is not suitable for how the lesson begins in their school. The second starter activity (**Slide 3**) must not be omitted as this introduces the central theme of the lesson.

The first starter invites students to consider their immediate reactions to a range of visual sources. The information below will help teachers when asking for the thoughts of the students. It is unlikely, but not impossible, that students will make all the connections, or even be able to identify the themes of Cable Street, anti-fascism and fascism, but they should be able to identify that there are two opposing viewpoints being shown and that this could erupt into conflict.

Slide 1 images:

1. Cable Street mural, painted between 1979 and 1983 by Dave Binnington, Paul Butler, Ray Walker, and Desmond Rochfort. The mural was completed in March 1983 and officially unveiled on 7 May 1983. It is painted on the side of St George's Town Hall.
2. Police at Cable Street arresting an anti-fascist protestor, possibly Blanche Edwards.
3. A poster advertising a musical stage show (2020) – The Ballad Of Johnny Longstaff – by The Young'uns. Johnny Longstaff was on the Jarrow Hunger March, present at the Battle of Cable Street and joined the International Brigade to fight fascists in Spain during the Spanish Civil War.
4. Police attempting to open a route for the BUF marchers during the Battle of Cable Street.
5. Oswald Moseley inspecting a BUF parade, the date and place cannot be confirmed with certainty, but it is between 1933 and 1937, in East London, possibly Royal Mint Street.
6. Madrid, 1936-37, during the Spanish Civil War. The banner reads: "They shall not pass! The Fascists want to capture Madrid, but Madrid shall be the grave of Fascism."
7. An anti-fascist barricade at the Battle of Cable Street bearing the slogan "They Shall Not Pass" (the English translation of ¡No Pasaarán! and the message "Remember Olympia").

The second starter activity asks students to consider what conditions make people support extreme political movements. Teachers should simply take suggestions at this point, perhaps recording them on the board for later reference. It is likely that students will mention poverty and unemployment, possibly immigration or housing, perhaps even charismatic leaders. As this is a potentially divisive and sensitive topic, the following two slides (**Slides 4 and 5**) are essential.

Challenging Histories and a shared space for learning (5 minutes)

Before the lesson proper begins, it is important to set the foundations for the learning process ahead, including being aware of the potential challenges of discussing elements of British history. Explain that British history can be contentious and cause emotional reactions. Exploring the past can mean we encounter voices, ideas, and interpretations that we may disagree with or even find offensive. It is important to acknowledge this and feel able to express it in an appropriate way.

Encourage students to be open to understanding different perspectives, even if they may not agree with them.

Acknowledge and explain that how we look at the past depends on where we are in the present. Students might have knowledge, ideas, feelings, experiences, heritage related to a given historical person, context, or event which inform or steer their judgements. To ensure a classroom in which historical study can be open and honest invite students to agree to the following guiding principles for historical learning (**Slide 4**):

- To be conscious that we each have a unique perspective based on our own circumstances, but that nobody has more, or less, importance in this class.
- To let the facts inform you and lead your learning, rather than finding facts to support a prior viewpoint.
- Avoid the use terms like 'we' to refer to historical people – as historians it is necessary to be impartial, so the language used is important.
 - i.e. refer to 'the British' rather than 'we'. This helps to separate ourselves from the study and avoids unintentional othering or subconscious bias. (Ask for explanations of what we mean by 'othering' and 'subconscious bias'.)
- Accept that interpretations and feelings about what we study can and will differ. This is ok!
- Discussion should be based on the facts. Use evidence to support your points to avoid making unfair or inaccurate assertions.

It is also important that students show respect and acceptance of one another in the classroom in order for them to feel comfortable sharing thoughts and ideas. To create a space of shared learning in which each member of the class is valued, invite students to agree to the ground rules outlined on **Slide 5**.

The aim is to encourage openness and create space for students to share their ideas and personal experiences, but without obligation and in an environment that comfortable, supportive and non-judgemental.

The points below (**Slide 6**) should, ideally, be included in this discussion:

- We are studying racism, antisemitism and fascism.
- Nobody is expected to defend discriminatory views.
- We study historical beliefs to understand the past.
- Challenge ideas respectfully.

Introduce terminology:

- Fascism - Extreme political system with strong authoritarian control.
- Antisemitism - Prejudice, hostility, hatred or discrimination against Jewish people.
- Democracy - Government where people choose their leaders.
- Propaganda - Information used to influence people's beliefs.
- Extremism - Holding or promoting extreme political views.

Now distribute the Student Worksheet, one per student.

Video: (5 minutes)

Play the embedded video from the PowerPoint (**Slide 7**). There is no requirement for discussion or follow-up to the video, unless something flows naturally from it or a relevant question is raised, however it may help students to focus by encouraging note taking – for example identifying three key facts or points of interest. The content of the video is designed to set the scene and foreshadow the later content of this lesson. (An approximate script of the video is in Appendix A at the end of the Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan.)

Activity: Think-Pair-Share (7 minutes)

The purpose of this short activity (**Slide 8**) is to ensure that the key points from the video regarding the political effects of poverty and unemployment have been understood. Teachers must ensure that students appreciate that responses could be politically left-wing as well as

right-wing. Rather than blaming immigrants and Jews as the fascists did, people on the left tended to put the responsibility for poverty and unemployment on to the bosses and capitalists.

Introduce the question and ask students to individually note down some thoughts. After a couple of minutes, ask them to pair up and combine their ideas. Allow a couple of minutes for this and then take feedback as a whole class, noting down ideas on the board for later reference. The early suggestions from the second starter activity may be referred to at this point, if they were noted down on the board.

Question. How might unemployment and poverty affect people's political choices?

Students. Think individually – Discuss with partner – Share with class

Whole class feedback. *Likely answers: Anger with government / Looking for simple solutions / Attraction to strong leaders / Desire for change*

Worksheet. Students should now complete **Task 1** of the worksheet. *(Likely answers should include poverty, unemployment, loss of faith in politicians, threat of war)*

Teacher-led content: Fascism across Europe (2-3 minutes)

At this point, we need to pause in our story in order to place what was happening politically in the East End within the context of growing fascism in Europe (**Slide 9**). This is information giving, but teachers should be open to questions about the information given. From the information below, points 1 to 5 are essential.

Explain that:

1. Fascist movements emerged in several countries, by and large, for similar reasons as those we have looked at already, coupled with pre-existing political contexts which were different to that in Britain.
2. They promised national revival, strength and unity.
3. They opposed liberal democracy and communism.
4. Many fascist movements blamed minorities for national problems.
5. Three major European countries were governed by fascist dictators: Italy was the first under Mussolini, followed by Germany under Hitler and then, three days before the Battle of Cable Street, on October 1st, 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, Franco was appointed leader of the Nationalist Government in Spain.

6. Other European countries with significant fascist movements were:

- Austria – Fascist and authoritarian groups became influential, leading to the Austrofascist regime established in 1934.
- Hungary – Various far-right nationalist and fascist movements gained support during the economic crisis.
- Romania – The fascist Iron Guard became a significant political force.
- Belgium – The Rexist Movement emerged as an important far-right movement.
- France – Several large far-right leagues, including Action Française and the Croix-de-Feu, had substantial support, although historians debate whether all were fully fascist.
- Portugal – António Salazar established an authoritarian regime with some similarities to fascist systems

Teacher-led content: Who were the British Union of Fascists? (1-2 minutes)

Now we need to ensure that students know who and what the BUF was. As above, this is teacher-led but be prepared for questions. Ensure that students recognise the similarities between the BUF and the other Fascist movements across Europe. Tell students that the slide **(Slide 10)** is showing images from BUF rallies and meetings, images of Oswald Mosley and so on. (The images will advance automatically; there is no need to click through them.)

Explain that:

1. The British Union of Fascists (BUF) was a political movement founded in 1932 by Sir Oswald Mosley. Its members were known as the "Blackshirts" because they wore black uniforms at meetings, marches and rallies.
2. Mosley had previously been a member of both the Labour and Conservative parties, but became disillusioned with both, so founded the New Party, which became the BUF.
3. The BUF believed that democracy was too slow and ineffective to solve the country's problems and so wanted to replace Britain's parliamentary system with a strong, authoritarian government led by a powerful leader.

4. The BUF promoted nationalism, emphasising loyalty to Britain, and supported economic policies that aimed to make the country more self-sufficient. The BUF also opposed communism and adopted antisemitic policies and ideas.

(At this point, teachers may want to clarify the difference between nationalism and patriotism. Keep this simple. Nationalism is the belief that your nation is superior and more important than others and its needs should always come first. Patriotism is being loyal to, and proud of, your country, whilst recognising that it is not perfect and can be improved.)

5. By the mid-1930s, the BUF had around 40,000 to 50,000 members and was one of the most well-known political movements in Britain during the 1930s.

Question: Why might uniforms, flags and marches attract supporters? *(Likely answers will include a sense of belonging, a feeling of strength, having your views supported by others, spectacle and enjoyment, et cetera.)*

Activity: Source Investigation 1 (15 minutes)

The headline on **Slide 11** is from the Daily Mail. Tell students that the Daily Mail was owned by Lord Rothermere, who publicly supported the BUF, he was also an avid and public supporter of Mussolini and Hitler.

With the slide showing, ask the class the following questions.

1. What message does this headline send? *(Possible answers: Support for the BUF is widespread. The BUF has support in “high places” – newspapers, the gentry. The BUF can solve the problems facing Britain.)*
2. Why might newspaper support matter? *(Possible answers: BUF policies and ideas can be spread to the public in positive ways. Positive stories about the BUF can be made.)*
3. Does this surprise you? *(Answers will be personal and individual.)*

Worksheet. Students should now complete **Tasks 2 and 3** of the worksheet.

After a suitable period of time, take feedback using **Slides 11 and 12**.

Activity: Making a judgement (12-15 minutes)

Worksheet. Students should now complete **Tasks 4 and 5** of the worksheet. **Task 5** can be set as a homework assignment if time is short.

Plenary (2-3 minutes)

Sum up and check learning by returning to the Enquiry Question “Why did some people support the British Union of Fascists in 1930s Britain?” (**Slide 13**)

Ask for:

- One economic reason
- One political reason
- One social reason

Which factor do you think was most important? Explain.

APPENDIX A

Video Script. Lesson 1

Presenter standing next to the Cable Street mural.

Overview: the presenter states where they are and what the mural is, then talks about the area.

Script

I am standing in front of a mural on the side of St George’s Town Hall at 236 Cable Street in Shadwell, which is in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

The mural – a well-known landmark in East London, and more widely – was painted to commemorate an event known as the Battle of Cable Street, which took place on October 4th, 1936. The battle was fought between Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (known as the BUF), anti-fascist protestors from many different sections of working-class society, and the

police who were tasked with clearing a path through this largely Jewish area of the East End of London.

But what was this area like in the 1930s?

Britain was badly affected by the Great Depression. Unemployment exceeded 3 million in the early 1930s, which was just over 20% of the workforce. That meant that 1 in 5 workers had no job, but in some areas it was much worse, rising to 30% unemployment in the East End. Poverty was widespread in many industrial and urban areas and housing conditions were often poor.

London's East End was one of the most crowded and diverse parts of Britain at the time. Around half a million people lived in the districts of Stepney, Poplar and Whitechapel. There was a vibrant mix of long-established London families as well as Irish and Jewish immigrant communities, who had arrived in large numbers from the second half of the 1800s. The Irish migration was largely the result of famine and poverty in Ireland, whilst the Jewish immigrants were fleeing persecution, including violent pogroms, in Eastern Europe, Tsarist Russia and the later Soviet Union.

Many people lived in overcrowded housing, with large families often sharing small flats in decaying tenement buildings. Life was difficult for many residents, struggling on low wages, casual employment or the meagre unemployment benefits of the time.

These economic problems created political tensions, and many people felt traditional politicians were failing. Some people were attracted to extremist groups such as Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, while others joined trade unions, Labour organisations, communist groups and anti-fascist campaigns.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the hardships, the East End was known for its strong sense of community. Neighbours often supported one another when they could, local markets were busy and vibrant, and the whole of the East End had a rich, exciting mix of cultures, traditions and political activism.

The large Jewish population of the East End meant that it was a key target for BUF campaigning but, whilst there were tensions between communities, many residents took pride in standing together against prejudice and injustice.

APPENDIX B

Student Worksheet

Enquiry Question: Why did some people support the British Union of Fascists in 1930s Britain?

Task 1: List three problems facing Britain in the 1930s.

1.
2.
3.

Task 2: Source A – "Hurrah for the Blackshirts" (Daily Mail, January 15th, 1934)

What does this article suggest about attitudes towards the BUF?

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Task 3

On the Source sheet, read Sources B to F from BUF members about their motivations for joining Mosley's Blackshirts and then answer the questions below.

1. What are the reasons given for joining the BUF?
2. Why might these sources from ordinary members be more useful in explaining why people joined than a source from Mosley would be?

Task 4: Complete the table

Reason why someone might support the BUF	Evidence supporting the reason
Economic	
Political	
Social	

Task 5

Making a judgement. **Which reason best explains BUF support?** Write a paragraph answering this question using the structure below:

One reason for support for the British Union of Fascists is ... because ...

Another reason for support is ... because...

Other people had different reasons for their support. For example, ...

In my opinion, the reason that best explains support for the BUF is, ... because... .