

Who Marched, and Why Cable Street?

Enquiry Question: *Why did the British Union of Fascists choose to march through the East End, and why did people disagree so strongly about how to respond?*

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives

- Understand why the BUF wanted to march through East London.
- Explain why different organisations responded differently.
- Evaluate the significance of location in the events leading to Cable Street.

Introduction

In Lesson 1, students examined why some people in the East End supported the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and considered the social and economic factors that helped fascism gain followers. This lesson moves the story forward to the week before the planned BUF march on October 4th, 1936. Rather than focusing on a single group, students explore the actions, motivations and disagreements of the many different organisations and individuals involved in the dispute.

Students investigate why the BUF selected the East End as the location for its march and why this decision caused such strong opposition. They examine the concerns of local Jewish residents, anti-fascist campaigners and community organisations, many of whom believed the march was deliberately provocative and should be stopped. At the same time, students consider why some political parties, Jewish organisations and community leaders opposed attempts to physically block the march, preferring legal or constitutional methods of protest.

The lesson also explores the role of government and the police. Students consider why the authorities chose not to ban the march despite widespread opposition and growing tensions. Through this, they are introduced to important ideas about freedom of speech, public order and the responsibilities of government. Students are encouraged to recognise that decisions made

by politicians and officials were often influenced by competing priorities rather than simple support for one side or the other.

An important theme running through the lesson is disagreement. Students encounter a range of viewpoints within both the fascist and anti-fascist camps, helping them understand that the events leading up to the Battle of Cable Street were not a straightforward conflict between two clearly defined groups. By analysing different perspectives and the geography of the East End itself, students develop a more nuanced understanding of why tensions escalated and how the events of October 4th, 1936 came to unfold as they did.

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:

- Lesson plan
- Lesson PowerPoint containing:
 - a short video (Slide 3)
- Student worksheet (A4 double-sided; one per student)
- Sources sheet (A4 double-sided; one per pair)

Starter (5 minutes)

Have **Slide 1** showing as students enter the room and settle; the photograph gives a suggestion of housing conditions in the East End, which will bring students back to an aspect of the work they did in the first lesson.

Recap on the previous lesson using the questions on **Slide 2**:

1. Who founded the BUF?
2. Why did people support the BUF? (Ask for more than one reason.)
3. What was fascism?
4. Why was East London important to the BUF?

Video: (5 minutes)

Play the embedded video (**Slide 3**). There is no requirement for discussion or follow-up to the video, unless something flows naturally from it or a relevant question is raised. The content of the video is designed to briefly remind students about the area of London we are looking at and to foreshadow the later content of this lesson. (An approximate script of the video is in Appendix A at the end of this document.)

Activity: Worksheet (15 minutes)

Students will now investigate the planned route, why it was chosen and what the initial response was. Provide pairs of students with a worksheet each and a sources sheet per pair. Ask them to complete **Tasks 1 and 2**.

Source A is quite long, but there is no need to read the entire article. Information to answer questions 1 and 2 can be found in Source A simply by looking at the headlines and subheadings, and of course in Source B. In order to answer question 3 however, it would be helpful to read through the first couple of paragraphs together.

After a suitable period of time, determined by the teacher, take feedback using **Slides 4 and 5**.

Task 1

1. Where was the march due to begin? (*Tower Hill/Royal Mint Street*)
2. Which areas would it pass through? (*Shoreditch; Limehouse; Bow; Bethnal Green*)
3. The BUF was founded in Chelsea (West London) and its headquarters was in Westminster (Central London). Is there anything in these sources which suggest why the march was planned for *East London*? (*Answers may include mention of the perceived "Jewish threat" (as seen in Source A) and that there were large numbers of Jews in the East End.*)

Task 2

1. Who produced it? (*Jewish People's Council*)
2. Why was it written? (*As part of a petition to encourage the Home Secretary to ban the BUF march as it was seen as deliberately provocative.*)
3. What concerns did local people have? (*Answers may include quotes from the petition, such as "malice and hatred" or inference of threats of violence.*)
4. What does the source tell us about support for the BUF? *Answers will probably focus on incitement, hatred and violence, but allow other comments if they can be supported from Source C.)*

Teacher Input: What were the different responses? (5 minutes) (Slides 6 – 8)

Here, we introduce the fact that, although most people opposed the march, there were a variety of views about how to respond to it. Some of the following notes are intended to provide background for teachers and so the notes do not need to be read out verbatim. Rather, teachers should ensure that the salient points are made so that students are able to fully engage with the ensuing activity. Teachers should click on the presentation to reveal the information for each group.

Students could add notes to the table (**Task 3**) on their worksheets (**Slide 6**); they do not need to copy down verbatim from the slide as they will add more to the table using Sources D – G. Students may ask questions for clarity, or teachers can ask questions to ensure understanding.

Note that the information given in these notes expands on the summary for each group on the slides.

Although most people and organisations opposed the British Union of Fascists there was considerable disagreement over what should be done.

1. The **Board of Deputies of British Jews**, whose views were often reflected in *The Jewish Chronicle*, was established in 1760 and represented the views and interests of most Jewish groups in Britain. They urged Jewish residents to stay indoors, away from direct confrontation. They feared that violence in the streets could lead to injuries, arrests and negative publicity, resulting in even more antisemitic attacks. Instead, they preferred legal and political solutions and hoped the government would prevent the march.

2. The **Labour Party** took a similar position; advising supporters not to attend counter-demonstrations. In their view, the best way to defeat fascism was through democratic politics, not street battles and they feared that protests would create disorder and publicity, allowing Mosley to present himself as a victim of political intolerance.
3. The **Independent Labour Party (ILP)** disagreed. The ILP was integral in creating the Labour Party, and reminded affiliated but independent. The ILP argued that if a fascist organisation deliberately chose to march through an area with a large Jewish population, residents should not simply stand aside; local communities had a right to defend themselves and so people were encouraged to join efforts to block the march.
4. An even stronger position was taken by **local anti-fascists, the Communist Party and the Young Communist League (YCL)**. Looking at events in Italy, Germany and Spain, many communists argued that waiting for governments or elections to solve the problem was too dangerous. However, the Communist Party already had a march organised in support of anti-fascists in Spain and they did not want to adversely affect attendance at that march. The YCL, disagreed and called for people to block the streets. Eventually, the Communist Party agreed to reroute their march so that, in effect, it became a protest against the BUF's march.
5. The **government** was asked by many organisations, including Jewish groups, local politicians and the Mayors of five boroughs in the area of the proposed march, to ban the march altogether. The **Home Secretary, Sir John Simon** refused. There are several possible reasons for this decision: the right of political groups to march legally; concern that banning one march would set a precedent for banning others in future; concern about seeming to be politically biased against a particular movement; or he may simply have believed the Metropolitan Police could maintain order and keep rival groups apart.
6. The job of the **Metropolitan Police** was to maintain public order and uphold the law. Since the Home Secretary had not banned the march, the police believed they had a duty to allow a lawful political procession to take place while preventing violence. As a result, thousands of officers were deployed to escort the BUF and clear a route through the East End. This brought the police into conflict with anti-fascist protesters.

So, these groups opposed the BUF and most opposed the march, but they disagreed over **how** fascism should be resisted: through legal action, through democratic politics, through community self-defence, through mass protest, or through police enforcement of the law. Those different views help explain why events unfolded as they did on October 4th, 1936.

Activity: Worksheet (20 minutes)

Having covered the views of many of the different groups involved, students are now in a position to tackle **Tasks 4 and 5** on their worksheet.

After a suitable period of time, take feedback using **Slide 9** and, if desired, recording answers on the board (or slide).

Plenary: Diamond 9 Exercise (10 minutes)

Give each pair of students a pack of the Diamond 9 cards. Allow students **5 minutes** to rank the reasons the march became controversial, placing them in a diamond shape, with the most important reason at the top, down to the least important at the bottom.

The advantage of a diamond 9 ranking over a linear ranking, is that students don't need to spend time trying to find overly subtle reasons for placing one reason higher or lower than another.

- Antisemitism
- East End poverty
- BUF publicity
- Fear of violence
- Government decisions
- Press coverage
- Jewish community concerns
- Anti-fascist organising
- Location of the route

After 5 minutes take feedback, asking students to justify their top choice. Is there much agreement between pairs?

Assessment Opportunity (8-Mark Enquiry Question)

Explain how and why reactions to the planned BUF march through the East End differed so much in October 1936.

Students should refer to:

- The Home Office
- Jewish organisations
- Trade unions
- Anti-fascist campaigners
- The geographical significance of the East End
- Evidence from maps and eyewitness testimony

APPENDIX A

Video Script. Lesson 2

Overview: Why the BUF chose the East End, the planned route and responses to it.

Script

It's the autumn of 1936, and tension is building across London's East End. In just a few days, thousands of people will take to the streets in one of the most famous street confrontations in British history: the Battle of Cable Street. But before that day arrived, people were arguing about a much bigger question. Should the British Union of Fascists be allowed to march through the East End at all?

The British Union of Fascists, or BUF, was led by Sir Oswald Mosley and, by 1936, had attracted thousands of supporters. But the BUF was not based in the East End, its headquarters were in West London, and the movement had originally been founded there. So, if the East End was not their home, why did they choose to march there? That question became central to the arguments that followed.

Just as it is today, in the 1930s, the East End was one of the most crowded parts of London. It was home to many working-class families and a large Jewish population. Over many years, Jewish families had settled in neighbourhoods such as Whitechapel, Stepney and Spitalfields. When news spread that the BUF intended to march through these areas many local residents became angry. Supporters of the march said that it was just a political demonstration, but local people saw it very differently. They believed the route had been chosen deliberately to intimidate the local Jewish population.

The BUF planned to assemble here, on Royal Mint Street at Tower Hill, near the eastern edge of the City of London, where Mosley would formally review the assembled force, rather like a military parade. From here, the BUF would divide into four columns, each heading for one of four open-air public meetings where Mosley and others would speak.

Opposition grew as people realised that the march appeared to be specifically routed through predominantly Jewish communities. Communities that the BUF had often criticised and attacked in its speeches and newspapers. Where the march would take place was just as controversial as the march itself.

There was considerable disagreement over how to respond. Politicians and community leaders disagreed about the best approach to take and even anti-fascists couldn't agree with one

another. This was not a simple, straightforward tale of two sides facing each other. Each of the many different groups involved had their own ideas about what should happen next.

Faced with growing calls for the march to be banned, the government faced a difficult choice. Ministers worried about setting a dangerous precedent and questioned whether the government should stop a political march just because people disagreed with its message. On the other hand, should the march be allowed to go ahead, even if it risked disorder? In the end, the government chose not to ban the march; a decision which would have major consequences.

As October 4th approached, tensions continued to rise; different groups had different aims; different communities had different fears, and the East London streets were about to become the centre of an historic confrontation.

APPENDIX B

Student Worksheet

Why did the planned BUF march cause such strong reactions?

Work through this worksheet in pairs, each person completing their own worksheet. Discuss each question before writing your answers.

Task 1

Study Sources A and B on your Worksheet Sources sheet and answer the questions below.

1. Where was the march due to begin?
2. Which areas would it pass through?
3. The BUF was founded in Chelsea (West London) and its headquarters was in Westminster (Central London). Is there anything in these sources which suggest why the march was planned for *East* London?

Task 2

Read the petition (Source C) and answer the questions that follow.

1. Who produced it?
2. Why was it written?
3. What concerns did local people have?
4. What does the source tell us about support for the BUF?

Task 3

Using what you have learnt, and sources D – G on your Source sheet, summarise the various responses to the BUF in the table below.

Group	What was their approach towards the BUF?
Board of Deputies of British Jews	
Labour Party	
Independent Labour Party	
Communist Party (& Young Communist League)	
Home Office & Home Secretary	
Metropolitan Police	

Task 4

Write two short paragraphs, one on why the BUF chose to march through the East End, and the other summing up the range of responses. You should mention location, politics, community tensions and use evidence from the sources.