



The British Union of Fascists, 1933–1953

Teaching Pack

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The British Union of Fascists, 1933–1953

Introduction

The British Union of Fascists (BUF) was formed in 1932 and remained a feature of the British political scene until the early years of the Second World War. This was a period in which fascist parties and organisations were enjoying considerable success across Europe: under Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, and Franco in Spain. Sir Oswald Mosley—a chameleonic political populist and rank opportunist—sought to emulate their success in Britain.

Despite attracting some initial interest, and occasional high-profile support (such as from the *Daily Mail* owner, Viscount Rothermere), the BUF always remained confined to the fringes of British political life. Its popularity dipped further when it adopted an increasingly aggressive antisemitic line and sought to align itself more closely with foreign fascist countries, especially Nazi Germany.

As the documents in this teaching pack show, it was the international situation that sounded the ultimate death knell for the British Union of Fascists, and for Mosley's political career. As war between Britain and Germany drew closer, the political space in which the BUF could operate shrank substantially and they struggled to square their supposed patriotism with their allegiance to foreign regimes.

The activities contained within this teaching pack could easily take around **45–50 minutes**, though the exact duration will depend on reading time and the breadth and depth of accompanying discussion.

Learning Objectives

1. Explore how prominent British fascists interpreted and responded to the rapidly-changing international situation of the late 1930s.
2. Understand how fascist rhetoric shifted to reflect changing realities on the ground in Britain, as the Second World War loomed and then erupted.
3. Investigate how Oswald Mosley navigated the British political scene, especially as he came to be seen as a potential threat to the country he professed to love.

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Historical Background and Context

The First World War and its aftermath gave rise to a number of new political ideologies, often occupying the extreme ends of the spectrum, which offered radical change and a vision of a new world order. Through democratic support or military action, or often a combination of the two, these extreme movements were able to seize power in many parts of Europe. By the eve of the Second World War, Russia, Italy, Germany, and Spain were all controlled by radical political groups.

Britain, however, proved surprisingly resistant to the appeal of these extreme parties. The group that enjoyed the most success was the British Union of Fascists. This was formed in 1932 by Sir Oswald Mosley, following the complete electoral defeat of his previous vehicle, the New Party, in 1931. Initially, the BUF offered a platform of intense patriotism, paired with greater state intervention, positioned to help address the effects of the Great Depression which plagued Britain in this period.

At its peak, it claimed a membership of 50,000, but its popularity soon dwindled. This was the result of a number of factors: its messaging became increasingly racist, it engaged in ugly violent clashes with anti-fascist campaigners, it fell afoul of laws against political uniforms, and Mosley's growing closeness with Adolf Hitler (the German dictator was guest of honour at Mosley's 1936 wedding to Diana Mitford) drew increasing public criticism.

As war with Germany approached, and then broke out, Mosley clamoured for peace but his views were no longer considered credible. In 1940, Mosley and several other prominent fascists were detained under Defence Regulation 18B, to prevent them forming a so-called "fifth column" in the event of a German invasion. Mosley was released from prison and placed under house arrest in late 1943 but his political career was essentially over.

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SOURCE ONE

Source Intro

Captain Henry Luttman-Johnson was an avid supporter of the British Union of Fascists and a founding member, and secretary, of the January Club, a discussion group affiliated to the BUF and designed to attract wider establishment support for the nascent party. In this diary, kept between 1937 and 1940, he recorded both events from his day-to-day life, such as his social engagements and the maintenance of his Perthshire estate, as well as reflections on current affairs. Of particular interest is the extract below, written at the end of 1939, looking back over a tumultuous year for Europe.

Source

Extract from Captain H. W. Luttman-Johnson's diary, December 1939.

[IWM, HL-J 5, images 226–228.](#)

Dec. 1939

got 66. Ph. 2 Hares 4. Rabbits
2 woodcock.

This has been a most eventful year. At the end of March came General Franco's magnificent victory over Communism. Prior to that, in March, there had been Hitler's victory over the forces of Communism and Free Masonry in Prague.

Matters went from bad to worse, in other directions, all through the year, and after we had given our fatal pledge to Poland in the Spring war seemed inevitable.

There had been no attempt on our part to see the German point of

The Year 1939.

view. Very few people here realise, as I write, the acts of tyranny & terrorism committed by the Poles on hapless Germans. We had been told all along that Germany was aggressive but it has never yet been explained how Germany ~~had~~ would have threatened us as long as the Maginot Line held, and as long as we held the seas.

These fools and worse who have muddled us into this war, cannot give us these explanations and they cannot justify themselves.

In summing up the world's events for the year one can, from the personal point of view, give thanks to God that one's little son

is not involved in this war; and because one has not the slightest enmity in one's heart against Germany one can thank God that one has not got to play a combatant role against them.

How will it end? No one will make a public prophesy. I think that it is a stale-mate and that in 1941 or 1942 some truce or peace will be patched up. I cannot believe the Italians can afford to have Germany crushed.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What were Luttman-Johnson's views of Germany and of Nazi actions in 1939?
2. To what extent were his views shaped by his personal circumstances and to what extent were they shaped by his political or ideological beliefs?
3. How widely-held would Luttman-Johnson's opinions have been in Britain during this period, or was his distinctly a minority view?

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SOURCE TWO

Source Intro

The outbreak of war between Britain and Germany made life very difficult for Mosley and the BUF. They had long advocated for friendly relations, and ideally a formal alliance, between the two countries, which would have allowed the BUF to sustain their dual ideologies of patriotism and fascism. After September 1939, those ideologies seemed to be set at odds with one another, and Mosley was forced to position himself as a pacifist, while fighting a rearguard action against accusations of treachery and disloyalty to his country. This was somewhat easier when the German war effort was directed eastwards against Poland or north into Scandinavia, and thus felt less directly threatening to Britain. The speech in this source was given just five days before German forces invaded France and the Low Countries.

Source

Report on a speech given by Oswald Mosley at a British Union meeting in Victoria Park Square, 5 May 1940.

[KV 2/884, images 90–93.](#)

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REPORT FILED IN S.F. 96/Brit/2. 1578a. P.F.48909.
Dated 6.5.40. PA 351

Excerpts from shorthand notes taken by Sergeant's Buswell and Carter at a meeting of the British Union at Victoria Park Square, E. on Sunday, 5th May, 1940.

Do not card.

Sir Oswald MOSLEY said:

"Fellow Britons. It is seven years to-day, on May Day in particular, that I have spoken here in a Square that means much to us in British Union, for here many of our early battles for the British people were fought. Often on May Day we have talked together about the Britain that one day we will build together when the system that is enslaving the British people is brought to an end. Now that system that we vowed to bring to an end, in its last effort has brought war to the world and here to-day on the first May Day since the war the British people assemble in East London to demand peace.

"We demand peace! We demand the resignation of the government! We demand a people's government to bring peace, to make Britain strong, bring safety to our people and to bring them happiness at last.

"All those things we could have and should have had soon if they had not managed again to deceive the people by bringing this war, because they knew their system of corruption was doomed and the end of capitalism was not far away, and they preferred world war to the people's rule.

"How often have we heard from the Labour Party that every war was a capitalist war? When the Labour leaders said that they were speaking the truth but where are they to-day? They are lined up with capitalism demanding war and if necessary the end of a million British lives in a financial vendetta. We have said again and again that if the life of Britain was threatened we in British Union would fight because we fought in the last war and we would fight again if the life of Britain were threatened. But this war is nothing to do with the British people! This is no war for the British people but for Jewish finance.

"My friends, you have heard many hard things said about British Union and me. You know here that we have loved our country and yet you have been told that we of British Union are against our country because we would not have a million Britons killed in an alien quarrel and we say 'do something for the British people.'

"When I said that the Polish guarantee was crazy they denounced us as a fifth column. But Lloyd George said to-day the Polish guarantee was crazy. Are they going to say that he is in the fifth column too? What is the difference between us and Lloyd George? We said it yesterday and he said it to-day. They find fresh courage now because this government has made such a muddle that all the world can see it, but we said it months ago. You don't hear much wisdom from the old Parties until they have made a mess. I say this, if we of British Union ever have to fight a war we would never make such a muddle as this, but we are never going to fight unless Britain is attacked and if it is attacked, then we will fight anyone who attacks us.

"We do not run round the world boasting like Churchill who said ten days ago that he was going to cleanse the soil of the Vikings. When I say we will defend Britain, we mean it. I do not care what country attacks Britain. Germany, France, Italy, Russia - we are able to defend Britain against attack from any country. We can always defend Britain but

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cannot interfere in other people's business because modern science has given to the defender such enormous power that any great nation which attacks another is liable to lose. If we feared an attack from the east we would lay a minefield from the north of Scotland to the English Channel which would be protected by our navy. That minefield would be defended and if the transports of any foreign power came towards it our bombers would attack and sink them because our Air Force would be equal to, or stronger than, any in the world.

"There is nothing wrong with our airmen, our Navy, or our soldiers, but only with the government which is directing them. Give us a decent government and we need be afraid of no one. Every Briton would fight to the last. What do you think Hitler or Germany or any country would be like after struggling through our minefield, Navy and Air Force? If Finland could hold Russia for so long we could hold out against anyone. With the power of modern science any great nation in possession of some particular territory could resist attack. We have been told recently that the Germans succeeded in Norway because they got there first. But only six days first! Therefore we could succeed in Great Britain if attacked, because we were there two thousand years beforehand.

"There is not another nation that would have a chance against us; not another nation would dare to attack us. But the government we have now could not be more efficient in war than in peace: they could not solve the unemployment problem. This system was obviously a system so corrupt that it was not fit to exist. Unless we can get rid of it the life of Britain may be endangered in war and also in peace. We must change our system. They ask us to fight to change the German system but if eighty million Germans want to change it and can't they do not deserve anything else. It looks as though they like it, because no great nation can be held down by one man. That is their business anyway. Why should we go and lay down a million lives in order to change another People's system of government. There is an easier way. Not fighting for five years but declaring by the will of the British people to cleanse our system of government. And that is easier than changing another's government.

"If the people join in British Union we would say to the German government 'we have no interest in the east of Europe; we have no interest in the mandated territories; there is therefore nothing to fight about,' and I would say to the Germans 'we are not interested in the places in your sphere but if ever you lay one finger on the British Empire we will defend ourselves and resist you'.

"I would get peace and at once, on those terms and without losing another British life or inch of soil, with absolute security to the British people because no one else would dare to attack us if we were properly organised. The Press have said how could we defend ourselves if the Germans got stronger? We belong to the greatest Empire on earth. We have a far greater manpower than the Germans and ten times the raw materials.

"The system under which we live is so obsolete

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and corrupt that it cannot live in the modern world opposed to any modern system of government, and we have been telling you that for seven years. We have got to get rid of that obsolete system of government.

"What other reason is there to be afraid? Do not think I am asking you to imitate any foreign system of government. We, the British have got to save ourselves in our own way. I said years ago that we of the British Union have no quarrel with anyone. But my friends you cannot go on being misled.

"The government say there is a moral reason for going to war but morality is not a one-way street. It is employed always or not at all. Why is it that we are fighting the Germans and not the other aggressor nations? The British Union could give you the reason. Against Germany there is a blood feud of the Jewish masters. Just ask yourself the question, why is it that when Japan, Russia and Italy indulged in acts of aggression, we did not take and declare war against them? Why did they get off scott-free? Can you find any different reason than that the Jewish financiers do not like Germany but do not mind the others? That is why we are at war with Germany. We are not on a British quarrel but a Jewish quarrel.

"They talk about what they will do for us when the war is over, what a wonderful time they will give us. In the last war they promised us a land fit for heroes to live in. What are they going to promise us this time - a land fit for Hebrews to live in?

"British Union stands for exactly the same policy as for the whole of its seven years. Mind Britain's business, Britons fight for Britain only, and we will build the greatest empire the world has ever seen. We will defend ourselves in arms but we want to say to other nations, 'we have beaten you in the things that are worth while; more houses in this country, and higher wages; shorter hours and a better standard of living; more leisure for our people; we have mobilised the glories of modern science for the benefit of the people and for the good of civilisation.

"English soil and English land gave us our strength, the green of English fields has inspired us, the strength of English heroes who did not ask, 'where can we find an ally to help us?' The men who went out from these little islands to smash the Empire of Spain.

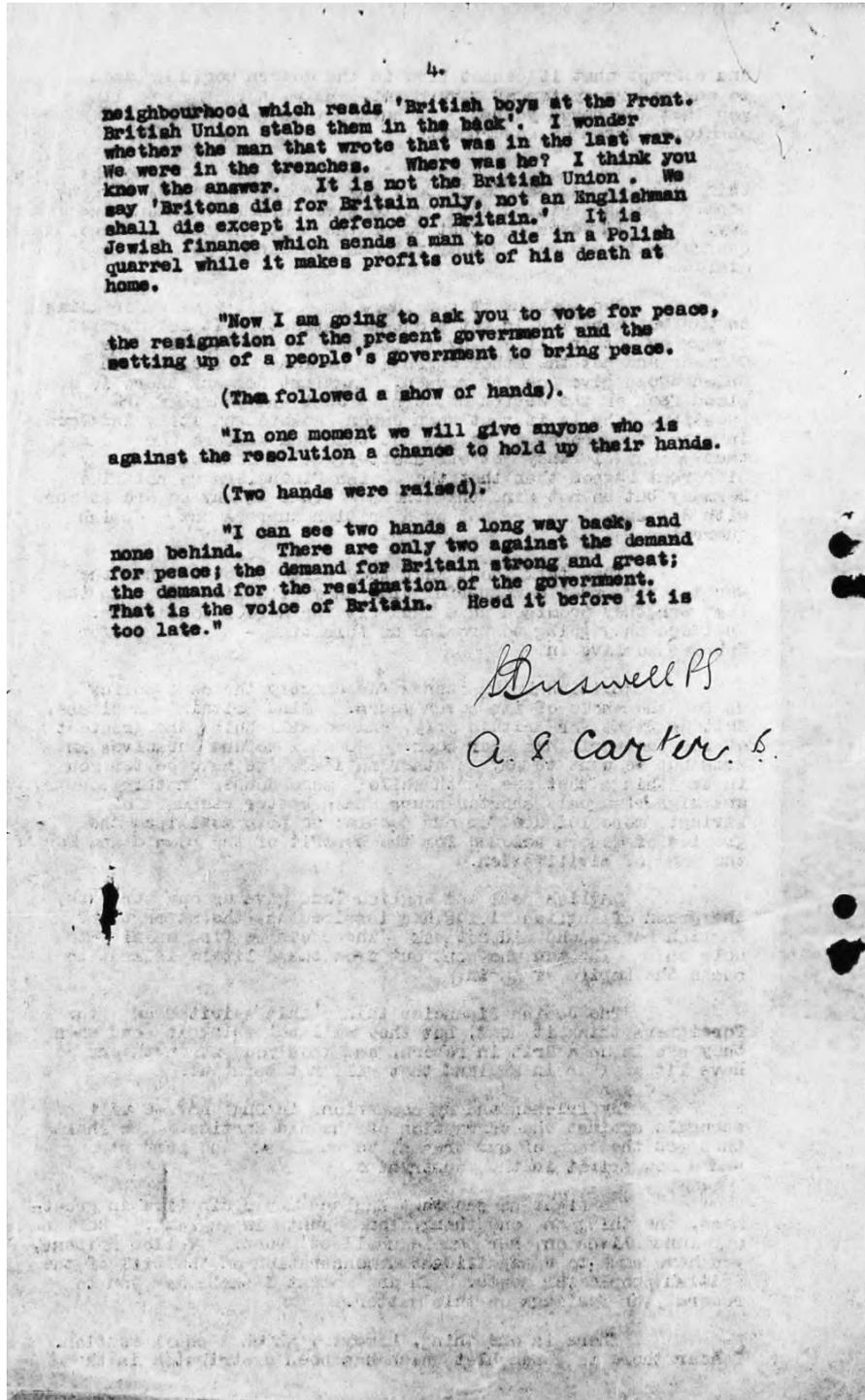
"The Jewish financier thinks this spirit dead; the foreigners think it dead, but they will not think it dead when they see in us a Britain reborn, and know your strength and we have lit a flame in England that will not burn out.

"My friends and my companions in England, we will struggle against the corruption of the old Parties. We shall then see the land of our dreams, we shall see the land strong and a new spirit in the countryside.

"To-night we see that England may again live in greatness, one thing and one thing alone counts in England: England our land, lives on, her people shall be great. Fellow Britons, you have come to a magnificent demonstration of the will of the British people for peace. In one moment I shall ask you to record your feelings on this matter.

"There is one thing, however, which I shall mention. I hear there is a pamphlet which has been distributed in the

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Questions for Discussion

1. Where did Mosley lay the blame for the outbreak of the Second World War?
2. Judging from this source alone, how can the ideology of the British Union of Fascists be defined?
3. Was Oswald Mosley a genuine pacifist?

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SOURCE THREE

Source Intro

On 23 May 1940, Oswald Mosley was arrested and interned, without trial, under the auspices of Defence Regulation 18B. This legislation had been passed into law in August 1939 to help defend Britain from potential internal threats in a time of war, but had only been used very sparingly prior to the German invasion of France. This increased threat to Britain, coinciding with Winston Churchill's accession to the office of Prime Minister, saw a substantial expansion of internment measures. Mosley was one of the first to be detained under this expansion, and he was initially held at Brixton Prison, before being moved to a house in the grounds of Holloway Prison, which he shared with his wife. During this time, Mosley wrote often to senior politicians, including Churchill (as seen in this source), to ask for his release, and that of his fellow BUF detainees. This he was finally granted in November 1943, though he remained under house arrest until the end of the war.

Source

“Statement by Sir Oswald Mosley concerning the continued detention of British Union members”, 5 October 1942.

[PREM 4/39/5, images 185–188.](#)

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C O P Y

STATEMENT BY SIR OSWALD MOSLEY
CONCERNING THE CONTINUED DETENTION
OF "BRITISH UNION" MEMBERS

I write this Statement because some 86% of the British subjects of British origin, arrested under the 18B Regulations, were members of British Union with my leadership (vide figures in Hansard, Vol.376 col. 858/860). For nearly 2½ years many of us have been held in gaols or camps, with the result that a number of people have been led to believe that we have done something disloyal to our country. In fact nothing of the kind has been alleged against us by the Government; because they have never suggested that we have done anything since the war except conduct a political campaign in favour of a negotiated Peace. Further, no one has contended that we have ever broken any law.

Prior to the war we were denounced as an ultra-patriotic organisation. For 7 years before this war we maintained an unceasing campaign to obtain the proper and modern armament of our country, in the air, on the sea and on land. We opposed this war, but we strove for a British Empire strong against any possible attack; we stood for peace but also for strength. If anyone really suspects that we desire to bring about the defeat of our country, it may be replied that a 7 years campaign to secure its armament against defeat is a strange beginning to that design.

To anyone who says that it is disloyal to oppose a war the best reply may be made in the words of Mr. Lloyd-George when he was opposing the Boer War:- "Is every politician who opposes a war during its progress of necessity a traitor? If so, Chatham was a traitor and Burke and Fox especially; and in later times Cobden and Bright".

We can also summon to our aid the whole experience of British History in our reply to the

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insinuation that we may be rendered disloyal to our country by adherence to our National Socialist and Fascist creed, which - in a "character, policy, form and method suited to this country alone" - we have long striven to persuade our fellow countrymen to adopt. The fact that they were fighting the catholic Power of Spain did not render British Catholics disloyal to their country in the age of Queen Elizabeth. The fact that the ideas of the French Revolution were, in many respects, similar to their own ideas, did not make distinguished British Radicals disloyal to their country during the wars with Napoleon. Still less does our creed, whose first tenet is love of country, make us disloyal to our country in the modern age. Those who allege such a change in the character of Englishmen, impute a decline to which denial has been given in practical form by very many of our members who have served throughout the present war in the Forces, and have fought bravely. It should also be stated, that, within my knowledge, all of us in these gaols who were old enough to fight in the last war did in fact fight for our country in that war. For instance, beside me in this gaol is a man who won both the D.S.O. and M.C. in the last war, but has served, with his wife, two and a half years in prisons and camps during this war, because he was a member of British Union.

The loyalty of our members to our country is the natural result both of our creed and of our policy since the conflict began. For instance, after the declaration of war I published the following message to members of British Union:- "Our country is involved in war. Therefore I ask you to do nothing to injure our country, or to help any other Power. Our members should do what the law requires of them, and if they are members of any of the Forces or Services of the Crown, they should obey their orders, and, in every particular, obey the rules of their Services." Such a message was the natural expression of our policy: "On the one hand we wanted Peace; and on the other hand we wanted Peace with Britain undefeated".

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It was never suggested to us in the spring of 1940 that we had no right to exercise full freedom of speech. The Press supporting us did not receive the warning for which provision is made in the present law. Instead, the Government requested Parliament to pass a new Regulation which was apparently designed specifically to enable members of our organisation to be imprisoned (vide Hansard, 21st July, 1940, Col. 1518). On the following day, 23rd May, 1940, we were thrown into gaol by virtue of this new Regulation of whose very existence we were unaware. We were not arrested under the original Regulation 18B(1), which provides inter alia for detention on account of alleged "acts prejudicial to the public safety". We were arrested under the ad hoc Regulation 18B(1)(a), which provided for the detention of anyone who was a member of an organisation whose leaders "have had associations" with the leaders of countries with which this country is now at war. That I had "associations", before the war, of a perfectly legal and proper character, I have certainly never denied. I held it to be my duty, by personal contact or any other proper means, to make whatever contribution I could to the maintenance and building of World Peace. Such "associations" before the war were perfectly legal. I reiterate and emphasise that it has never been suggested by the Government that we have done anything since the war except carry on a political propaganda. Is not 2½ years' imprisonment for entirely legitimate proceedings at least sufficient for my supporters?"

For well over 2 years now our organisation has been banned, and it has been made an offence in law to carry on our propaganda. Anyone continuing such propaganda can consequently be convicted in the courts and sentenced at the most to two years' imprisonment. Our principle has always been to obey the law, as we have often stated. Under present law we can, in effect, be required to do whatever the Government of the day may desire.

Over 80% of our members, who were originally arrested, have since been released and have performed various forms of national service without complaint

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against them. Those still detained are just the same kind of people; who keep them rotting in prison and camps?

In any case it is very wrong that our fellow countrymen should be given any occasion to think that we have done something disloyal to our country during this war; while in fact, during the private Inquiry of the Government, nothing of the kind was suggested against us. No one can show that I or my friends have ever done anything disloyal to our country, and, given the opportunity, I will defend myself at any time before the whole nation from any such suggestion, no matter from what quarter it may come.

To hold political opponents silent in gaol while a gross untruth is circulated against them is a procedure that cannot be justified to History, even if the moment permits it. Yet, that is the situation that has now been created. It should not have arisen, as our detention was frequently described by the Government as "Preventive" in contradiction to the allegation that we have done something disloyal to justify imprisonment. Further, the Prime Minister has himself stated that "he was increasingly sceptical of the existence of a fifth column in this country". But our prolonged imprisonment and the subsequent silence of the Government have since given the unscrupulous and the ignorant an opportunity of which full advantage has been taken. - If we, and through us our dependents, are to suffer not only the miseries but also the slur of further imprisonment I suggest that, in honour, the Government should state publicly whatever they have to say against us, and that I should at least have the right to make a public reply.

I take entire responsibility for the policy of British Union. All my actions and principles I am prepared at any time to defend publicly before my fellow countrymen.

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Questions for Discussion

1. Contrast Mosley's attitude and messaging here with that in Source Two—how far did it change?
2. What arguments did Mosley make for his release and how credible were they, given the circumstances?
3. To what extent was the internment of Mosley and other senior fascists a necessary measure during the Second World War?

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Questions for General Discussion

The following questions are designed to prompt a wider discussion on the events, issues, and themes highlighted in the sources.

1. Why did Oswald Mosley and his ideas enjoy such widespread support in Britain during the first half of the 1930s?
2. Why were the British Union of Fascists not able to translate this support into political power?
3. How British was the BUF's brand of fascism? Was it merely a foreign import, designed to imitate more successful movements in Italy and Germany?
4. To what extent was the policy of long-term detention without trial, authorised by Defence Regulation 18B, justifiable in Second World War Britain?
5. Did the Second World War mark the permanent demise of organised fascism in Britain?

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