



MAKING SENSE OF HISTORY

1901—PRESENT

DAY

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Was the Battle of Cable Street really a turning point in the fight against British fascism?

On a small street in London's East End, high on a wall there sits a small plaque, testament to an event about which many British people have all but forgotten.

As you learned in Section 3 about the Spanish Civil War, 1936 was an important year in the fight against European fascism. Thousands of volunteers flocked to Spain to fight against the forces of General Franco in defence of the Spanish Republic. However, the fight against fascism was not simply a European phenomenon. Fascism was on the rise in Britain, as well as on the continent. October 1936 saw the East End of London turn into a battleground between the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and an alliance of workers, Jewish residents and communists, in what became known as 'the Battle of Cable Street'.

In this section you will examine the causes and consequences of the Battle of Cable Street and evaluate some interpretations of the battle.

A



↑ The plaque commemorating the 1936 Battle of Cable Street.

What was the Battle of Cable Street?

As you can see from the plaque in Picture A, the Battle of Cable Street was a confrontation between Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF), known as Blackshirts because of their uniform, and anti-fascist protestors. Mosley was inspired by the fascist one-party state of Mussolini's Italy (see page 30).

Mosley wanted to demonstrate the strength of the BUF by marching thousands of uniformed fascists through the East End, which at the time contained a large Jewish population. For their part, the anti-fascists mobilised themselves to stand in the way of the BUF. These anti-fascists, variously estimated as numbering between 100,000–250,000, consisted of ordinary working-class residents, and members of the local Jewish and Irish community, as well as Communists, Socialists and **Anarchists** who had travelled to the area for the showdown.

The result of this showdown was a day of running battles between anti-fascists and the Metropolitan Police, who had been deployed onto the streets to guard the marching route of the BUF.

Some of the action from the Battle of Cable Street can be seen in Picture B.

B



↓ An anti-fascist barricade on Cable Street.

C



↑ A section of the mural in Cable Street showing a scene from the battle.

As you can see in Picture B, the anti-fascists had built barricades to block the fascists' marching route. When the police tried to clear these obstacles, violence erupted. The protestors armed themselves with makeshift weapons such as chair legs and bricks and fought with the police for most of the day. A total of 150 people were arrested, and 175 injured. Mosley was persuaded that it was too dangerous to continue with the march and the fascists were herded out of the East End.

The anti-fascists proclaimed Cable Street a victory over fascism, and it led to the passing of the 1936 Public Order Act. This act made it illegal to wear political uniforms in public. Effectively, the British Union of Fascists was never allowed to march in uniform again.

Think

Look at Picture C. What labels would you add to replace each of the letters? (Suggested answers on page 139.)

Activity

At the end of this enquiry you will be asked to make a judgement on whether the Battle of Cable Street was a turning point in the fight against fascism in Britain. At this point in the enquiry, where would you place yourself on the spectrum of opinion below? Explain why you made that choice.



Interpretations of Cable Street

In the years since 1936, various attempts have been made to offer interpretations of the importance of this event. One such interpretation is the mural on Cable Street. Another section is shown below.

D



Can you find:

- throwing milk bottles
- a jerry pot of urine thrown over the fascists
- police auto-gyro observing the actions
- the fascists, unable to march
- Hitler – stripped and thrown out

↑ Another section of the mural from Cable Street.

Think

What is the message of the mural about the Battle of Cable Street?

As historians we know that interpretations are not always representations of exactly what happened. Another interpretation of Cable Street was offered in 1985 by English folk-punk band The Men They Couldn't Hang, in their song 'The Ghosts of Cable Street'. You can read the lyrics on page 81.

E

England, 1936.
 The grip of the Sabbath day
 In London town the only sound
 Is a whisper in an alleyway
 Men put on their gloves and boots
 Have a smoke before they go
 From the west there is a warning of
 A wind about to blow
 Like Caesar marching to the East
 Marches Mosley with his men
 Dressed in their clothes of deepest black
 Like a gathering hurricane
 This is the British Union
 With its flag of black and red
 A flag that casts a shadow in
 Berlin and in Madrid
 So listen to the sound of marching feet
 And the voices of the ghosts of Cable Street
 Fists and stones and batons and the gun
 With courage we shall beat those blackshirts down
 So mile by mile they come on down

To a place called Cable Street
 And other men are waiting there
 Preparations are complete
 Mosley comes so close
 They now can see his outstretched arm
 A hand raised up that way
 Never took the future in its palm
 The battle broke as the fists and the batons fell
 Through the barricades came the sound of the
 wounded yells
 Jack Spot crept through with a chair leg made of lead
 Brought down a crashing blow on Mosley's head
 And so we learn from history generations have
 to fight
 And those who crave for mastery
 Must be faced down on sight
 And if that means by words, by fists, by stones or by
 the gun
 Remember those who stood up for
 Their daughters and their sons

'The Ghosts of Cable Street' by The Men They Couldn't Hang. Jack 'Spot' Comer was a well-known local gangster.

As you can see, the overall message of the song is very similar to that presented by Mural D, namely that the anti-fascist resistance did serious damage to the British Union of Fascists. This interpretation was also supported by BBC reporter Kurt Barling on the anniversary of the battle, when he said Cable Street was a turning point. Mosley's fascists were not allowed to march in uniform again.

However, this interpretation has been queried by historian Dr Daniel Tilley, who declared that 'the battle of Cable Street still holds a proud place in anti-fascist memory, considered a decisive victory against the far right. In fact, the event boosted domestic fascism and **anti-Semitism** and made life more unpleasant for its Jewish victims'.

Activity

- 2 Now that you know a little more about the events of Cable Street has your opinion changed about whether the Battle of Cable Street was a turning point in the fight against fascism in Britain? Where would you now place yourself on the spectrum of opinion below? Explain why you made that choice.
- 3 Has your opinion changed since earlier in the enquiry? If so, explain why.



Think

As you read the lyrics (E), identify the following and make two lists.

- 1 The parts of the song that match with your factual knowledge of the Battle of Cable Street.
- 2 Places where the song-writer, Paul Simmonds, has used his imagination.



1 **1932:** The British Union of Fascists (BUF) was formed and led by Oswald Mosley. By 1934 it had a total of 50,000 members.

4 By **1935** early signs of Britain's economic recovery from the Great Depression made Mosley's economic plans redundant. Membership of the BUF fell to 5,000.

1932

2 **1934:** The *Daily Mail*, a national newspaper with a wide readership, praised Mosley and the BUF with the headline 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts'.

3 **June 1934:** Blackshirt thugs attacked hecklers at a BUF meeting at London's Olympia – the violence damaged the BUF's reputation as it was easier to portray the party as mindless thugs.

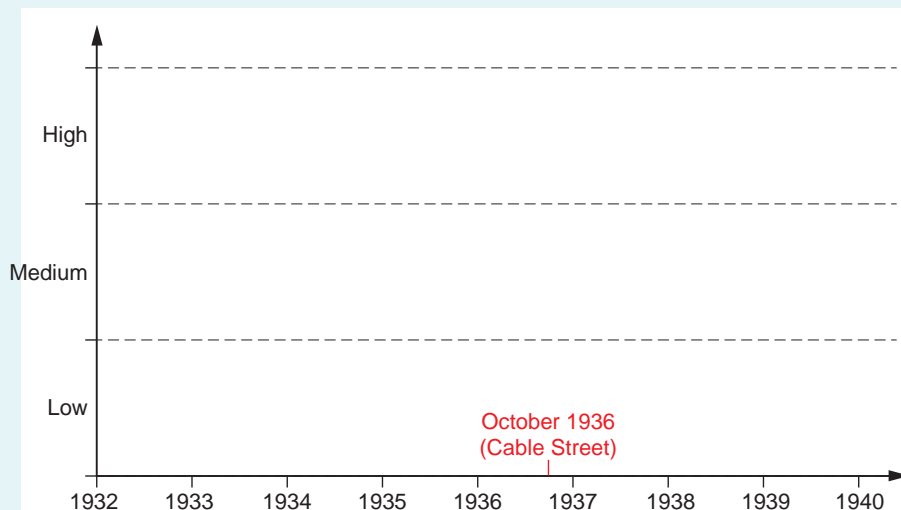
5 **1936:** Following a shift by the BUF to a more anti-Jewish stance, attacks on Jews in the East End began to grow. This growing anti-Semitism was due to the influence of Nazi sympathisers within the party. Membership of the BUF grew by about 10,000 in this period.

↑ Timeline: The rise and fall of the British Union of Fascists

Activity

4 Make a copy of the graph opposite. You will use it to plot the fortunes of the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s.

As you read the timeline of events, plot each one onto the graph to show the degree of success experienced by the British Union of Fascists – from a high degree of success, to a low degree of success.



6 **4 October 1936:**

Tens of thousands of anti-fascist protestors prevented 3,000 BUF Blackshirts from marching through the East End. There were running street battles centred on Cable Street.



SAVE PEACE

"Our Generation must not Die like rats in Polish holes."
— MOSLEY, Earls Court, July 10th

MOSLEY SPEAKS

For
Britain, Peace and People
Upper St. Martin's Lane
(Near LEICESTER SQUARE STATION)

Wednesday, Aug. 30th
at 8 p.m.

NO WAR FOR WARSAW

Join British Union Now
16, GT. SMITH STREET, S.W.1

STOP WAR

Published by J.L. SHEPHERD, 16, Gt. SMITH STREET, S.W.1, and printed by Nelson Press, T.L., Bow, E.1

10 **1940:** With Britain at war with Nazi Germany, the BUF was declared an illegal organisation. Its meetings were banned. Mosley and 740 fascists were interned for the duration of the Second World War.

1940

7 **Mid October, 1936:**

One week after Cable Street, the BUF gained 2,000 new members. Mosley made a speech to 12,000 people at Victoria Park Square in which he blamed Jews and Communists for the violence at Cable Street. According to the *Daily Mail* newspaper the speech was 'enthusiastically received'.

8 Early **1937** saw a significant increase in attacks on Jewish people and property in the East End of London. Local elections in 1937 gave the BUF its biggest ever share of the vote in the East End – it received 7,000 votes, representing an 18 per cent share.

9 **1938:** Membership of the BUF rose to 20,000 as Mosley argued that Britain should stay out of war with Germany. However, Mussolini saw the anti-Semitism of the BUF as a distraction from the real job of winning power and this saw an end to the money the BUF was receiving from Italy. Lack of funds hurt the BUF's ability to campaign effectively.

Activity

- 5 What does the finished graph tell you? Use it to help you answer the following questions:
- Was Cable Street a turning point in the fight against British fascism?
 - What do you think was the main factor that helped to defeat the BUF?
- 6 After finishing the graph, has your opinion changed about whether the Battle of Cable Street was a turning point in the fight against fascism in Britain? Make a final decision where you would place yourself on the spectrum of opinion below. Explain why you made that choice.



- 7 Has your opinion changed since earlier in the enquiry? If so, explain why.
- 8 Write an answer to the question: Was the Battle of Cable Street really a turning point in the fight against British fascism? Make sure you use evidence to support your answer.