

Initial Media Responses to the Battle of Cable Street

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Adapted from 'A WARMTH OF FEELING THAT THE LIES OF OUR ENEMIES WILL NEVER ERADICATE': THE BATTLE OF CABLE STREET AND THE EVOLVING MEMORY OF ANTI-FASCISM IN BRITAIN, 1931-1949

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Thesis Abstract: Whereas the function of nostalgia in right-wing politics is readily apparent in contemporary society, nostalgia on the political left is less self-evident. To explore the role of nostalgia in left-wing politics, this thesis considers the evolving memory and meaning of the Battle of Cable Street, a 1936 clash in which anti-fascists descended on the streets of London's East End to block Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) from provocatively marching through the heavily Jewish district. The events at Cable Street are further contextualized by charting the trajectory of the broader anti-fascist discourse in Britain from the rise of the BUF in the early 1930s to Britain's postwar reconstruction under Prime Minister Clement Attlee. In doing so, it is also possible to identify the tension between the left-wing internationalism and the demands of domestic politics, as well as the nature of the relationship between Britain's Labour Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the 1930s and 1940s.

On November 8, 2018, British Labour Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn published a short piece in London's *The Jewish Chronicle* in which he mourned the death of Max Levitas, a so-called "Cable Street veteran."¹ Lamenting Levitas's passing, Corbyn described the events at Cable Street in the following way:

At the Battle of Cable Street he [Levitas], along with tens of thousands of others, stopped Britain's fascists in their tracks. When Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, and 3,000 of his men attempted to march through the largely Jewish part of East London in a display of antisemitic intimidation, they were vastly outnumbered by a mass demonstration of resistance.

Jewish groups, socialists, Communists, anarchists, trade unionists and others filled the streets. Many from the East End Irish community stood in solidarity with their Jewish neighbours, while others poured in from further afield, including my own mother, who remembered that day with pride for the rest of her life.²

Corbyn went on to characterize the Battle of Cable Street as "a crushing practical and symbolic defeat for the fascists" before acknowledging that the threat of fascism and racism persisted in the twenty first-century, requiring the same level of zealous resistance as had been necessary in the interwar period.³ With these words, Corbyn articulated the contemporary left-wing mythology that has emerged regarding the October 4, 1936 clash that resulted from the attempt by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) to march through London's heavily Jewish East End, and the consequent anti-fascist, primarily left-wing opposition to the march. By appealing to the myth of this decisive victory against the past incarnations of British fascism to motivate present-day activism, the sitting leader of Britain's Labour Party underscored the continued resonance of the memory of this episode.

¹ Jeremy Corbyn, "The world is a better place because of my friend Max Levitas," *The Jewish Chronicle*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/the-world-is-a-better-place-because-of-my-friend-max-levitas-cable-street-1.472167?highlight=Corbyn>.

² Corbyn, "Max Levitas."

³ Corbyn, "Max Levitas."

Jeremy Corbyn is far from alone in venerating the Battle of Cable Street. London Mayor Sadiq Khan, on the 84th anniversary of the event, remembered the unrest in the East End as “a reminder of London’s proud history of standing up to hatred and intolerance.”⁴ Labour MP Apsana Begum, representing Poplar and Limehouse in the East End, compared the state opposition to the anti-fascist counter-demonstrators who amassed at Cable Street in 1936 to the “reactionary language” used by Boris Johnson and his Conservative government in describing supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd.⁵ Media outlets ranging from domestic news sources like *The Guardian* and *The Independent* to international news organizations like *Time* and *Al Jazeera* have all invoked the memory of the incident.⁶ In *The New Yorker*, the Battle of Cable Street was discussed as a veritable “North Star” for contemporary adherents of the ANTIFA movement, influencing present-day struggles against perceptions of fascism in Europe and the Americas.⁷ Historian Tony Kushner even went so far as to suggest that the Battle of Cable Street was one of the central events of twentieth-century British history proposing, “the date of 4 October 1936 has become one of the most prominent, if not *the* most prominent, in what might be termed an

⁴ Sadiq Khan (@SadiqKhan), “The Battle of Cable Street, which took place 84 years ago, is an important reminder of London’s proud history of standing up to hatred and intolerance,” Twitter, October 4, 2020, 11:29 a.m., <https://twitter.com/SadiqKhan/status/1312792073620336640?s=20>.

⁵ Apsana Begum, “Why the Battle of Cable Street Still Resonates in the East End,” *Tribune*, October 8, 2020, <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/10/why-the-battle-of-cable-street-still-resonates-in-the-east-end>.

⁶ David Rosenberg, “‘An antidote to the far right’s poison’ – the battle for Cable Street’s mural,” *The Guardian*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/21/battle-cable-street-mural-fascists-east-end>; Paul Bignell, “HOW WE DEFEATED THE BLACKSHIRTS IN THE BATTLE OF CABLE STREET,” *The Independent*, September 18, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/how-we-defeated-blackshirts-battle-cable-street-6132418.html>; Suyin Haynes, “The Enduring Lessons of the Battle of Cable Street, 80 Years On,” *Time*, October 3, 2016, <https://time.com/4516276/cable-street-battle-london-east-end-80-years/>; Josef O’Shea, “Remembering the Battle of Cable Street,” *Al Jazeera*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/10/4/remembering-the-battle-of-cable-street>.

⁷ Daniel Penny, “AN INTIMATE HISTORY OF ANTIFA,” Review of *ANTIFA: The Anti-Fascist Handbook* by Mark Bray, *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/an-intimate-history-of-antifa>.

alternative chronology of Britain during the twentieth century, excluding those events associated with world conflict and the Royal Family.”⁸

While Kushner’s characterization may veer into the realm of hyperbole, it is clear the clashes that transpired between the anti-fascists and the BUF in the East End in October 1936 retain an enduring mystique, with many, especially those on the British left, instrumentalizing the history of the Battle of Cable Street to more immediate political ends. Even so, perhaps what is most striking is the similarity between these recent triumphant remembrances and the views of those present at Cable Street. For example, take Phil Piratin, a Communist Party MP from 1945-1950 and an active participant in the Communist Party of Great Britain’s (CPGB) anti-fascist undertakings throughout the 1930s.⁹ Writing about his prewar experiences in 1948, Piratin recalled a similar sense of victoriousness in the immediate aftermath of the skirmishes, declaring “There was towards the Communist Party who had organized the people a warmth of feeling that the lies of our enemies will never eradicate.”¹⁰ Piratin’s triumphalism demonstrates the degree to which the statements of the likes of Jeremy Corbyn and Sadiq Khan constitute merely one link in a much larger chain of remembrances.

And yet, Piratin’s words also display an anxiety about how the contributions of the Communist Party would be remembered. Piratin was consciously aware that, though the success at the Battle of Cable Street had generated “a warmth of feeling” amongst the residents of East London, there were opponents of the Communist Party who he imagined as seeking to appropriate the memory of the event. Many of Piratin’s contemporaries on the political left also

⁸ Tony Kushner, “‘Long May its Memory Live!’: Writing and Rewriting the Battle of Cable Street,” in *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, ed. by Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 110.

⁹ John Callow, introduction to *Our Flag Stays Red*, by Phil Piratin (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006), x-vii.

¹⁰ Phil Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1948, 2006), 25.

conceived of the October 4, 1936 clash as a site of memory, such that the repeated invocation of the episode constitutes evidence of a distinctive style of left-wing nostalgia politics. The Battle of Cable Street was a singular event that was referenced again and again in its aftermath by a politically diverse group of individuals representing various segments the British left. Accordingly, the discourse surrounding the memory of the incident came to be defined by other broader left-wing dynamics, such as the tension between internationalism and a strict domestic focus. The process of remembering prewar British anti-fascism therefore not only illustrates that nostalgia is not merely the preserve of the right; it demonstrates, as well, the porous boundary between domestic politics and international developments.

Exploring the origins and emergence of this distinctive memory of the Battle of Cable Street therefore is critical for understanding its present-day significance on the British political left. First, however, it is necessary to trace the course of events on October 4, 1936. Oswald Mosley's fascists had long been harassing the Jewish inhabitants of the East End in an anti-Semitic terror campaign, but it was only in late September 1936 that the local Communists first became aware of the BUF's specific plan to march through the area in early October.¹¹ Mosley and his supporters chose to conduct this march on October 4, 1936, a date that marked the fourth anniversary of the formal creation of Mosley's fascist movement.¹² Though the Home Secretary, Sir John Simon, was under significant pressure to forbid the fascists from marching, the government chose not to do so on free speech grounds and instead deployed a massive police presence to the East End to protect the fascist demonstrators.¹³ In addition to the

¹¹ Joe Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto: My Youth and the East End – Communism and Fascism 1913-1939*, 2nd edition (London: Phoenix Press, 1978, 1991), 235-8.

¹² Frederic Mullally, *Fascism Inside England* (London: Claud Morris 1946), 73.

¹³ Mullally, 73.

thousands of officers, both in uniform and in plain clothes, the Metropolitan police stationed in East London on October 4 used “dozens of wireless vans” and “two planes.”¹⁴ When the anti-fascist counter-demonstrators massed on Cable Street to oppose the BUF’s march, they were thus not only opposing Mosley and his ideology, but were also facing off against this police presence, which vastly outnumbered the ranks of the Mosley’s fascist supporters. This reality has led some scholars to argue that the “‘Battle of Cable Street’ was a demonstration *against* the police, who were widely perceived to have failed in ensuring the safety of the Jewish population of East London from harassment and injury.”¹⁵

By the early afternoon, more than 50,000 anti-fascists had gathered across East London to block the police from clearing a path for Mosley and his uniformed supporters, the Blackshirts.¹⁶ Some of the newspaper reporting from the immediate aftermath of the event indicates that the size of the crowd may have even reached 100,000 people.¹⁷ Though the Communist Party had worked to organized the challenge to the BUF’s march, those present at Cable Street represented the full range of the political left, with many affiliated with the Labour Party, despite Labour’s formal opposition to such direct action.¹⁸ The counter-demonstrators embraced the declaration, “The fascists shall not pass,” drawing inspiration from the anti-fascist defenders of Madrid opposing Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War.¹⁹ Writing about the event ten years later, the journalist Frederic Mullally described the attempts of the police to

¹⁴ “JEW AND GENTILE UNITE: Hundreds of Thousands in Streets,” *The Daily Worker*, October 5, 1936.

¹⁵ Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman, “Introduction: Minorities, Fascism, and Anti-Fascism,” in *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, ed. Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 4. Focusing on the widespread anger at the perception that the police were protecting the perpetrators of anti-Semitism, rather than its victims, Kushner and Valman anachronistically suggest the Battle of Cable Street can even be seen as “a Jewish Stonewall.”

¹⁶ Mullally, *Fascism Inside England*, 74.

¹⁷ “Furious Street Fights,” *Daily Express*, October 5, 1936.

¹⁸ Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red*, 20.

¹⁹ Piratin, 20.

break through the anti-fascist lines at Cable Street as though the street was a site of urban warfare, recalling:

A huge barricade, hastily built with paving stones, hoardings, timber raided from a builder's yard and an overturned lorry, was thrown across the street. The roadway leading up to the barricade was strewn with broken glass as a defense against mounted police charges and, from behind this barricade, thousands of militant anti-fascists roared their slogans of defiance. More than a dozen baton charges were made by hundreds of police before a breach was forced in the barricade. The casualties on both sides mounted alarmingly with each renewed onslaught, but the workers' resistance was not broken. They regrouped in their thousands and prepared new barricades behind the first.²⁰

From the tenements above Cable Street, residents dropped various projectiles down upon the advancing police.²¹ In short, a diverse coalition of Communists, the Labour Party rank-and-file, Irish dock workers, local Orthodox Jewish residents, and an assortment of other anti-fascists collectively rose up to oppose Mosley's effort to parade through the East End.²² In light of this impassioned resistance, the Commissioner of Police, Phillip Game, reversed the decision of the Home Secretary and chose to ban the fascists from marching.²³ Mosley's opponents were able to realize their declaration that "The fascists shall not pass."

Having routed the fascists, many immediately celebrated the anti-fascist victory at Cable Street as a decisive defeat of the BUF and, by extension, a permanent setback for the fortunes of fascism in Britain. However, such a celebratory attitude was quite premature. Immediately following the Battle of Cable Street, there was actually an uptick in fascist activity, much of

²⁰ Mullally, *Fascism Inside England*, 74. Though many of the anti-fascist counter-demonstrators and police officers were injured in the skirmishes, miraculously, none of these "casualties" were killed in the violence.

²¹ Nadia Valman, "Jewish Girls and the Battle of Cable Street," in *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, edited by Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 181-2.

²² Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red*, 20-4.

²³ Piratin, 24.

which continued to target the Jewish community in the East End.²⁴ It was only with the passage of the Public Order Act in December 1934, which clamped down on militia groups like the BUF's Blackshirts by banning the wearing of political uniforms, that British fascism finally suffered a significant long-lasting defeat.²⁵ Still, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Mosley and his fascist allies sought to resurrect the BUF.²⁶ Not even the complete mobilization of the whole of Britain to defeat Continental fascism succeeded in completely eradicating domestic expressions of the same fascist worldview.

Media Responses to the Battle Of Cable Street

Some scholars have suggested that the importance of the Battle of Cable Street within the broader history of British anti-fascism is vastly overstated, privileging events in London over those that occurred elsewhere while also overstating the consequences of the event.²⁷ However, among the most compelling evidence of the significance of the Battle of Cable Street was the amount of coverage the event received in the mainstream British press, which indicates that even contemporary observers recognized the importance of the events that transpired in the East End. Beyond these mass circulation outlets, ideologically and religiously oriented newspapers also wrote voluminous stories regarding the nature of the anti-fascist resistance to British fascism on October 4, 1936.

²⁴ Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 55.

²⁵ Richard C. Thurlow, "The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back: Public Order, Civil Liberties, and the Battle of Cable Street," in *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, edited by Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 90-1.

²⁶ Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, 81.

²⁷ Copsey, 6-7. Though it seems possible that these newspapers are reproducing this metropolitan bias, the sheer volume of this reporting is a sufficient justification for exploring the ways that the press covered and contextualized the Battle of Cable Street.

Looking to this press coverage, it is clear that many of the dynamics that defined the period of the development of British fascism and anti-fascism between 1931 to 1936 persisted in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Cable Street. The activities of both the anti-fascist left and Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) continued to exist in conversation with events that were taking place across the English Channel in Continental Europe. The precise meaning of anti-fascism also remained subject to dispute, with the strategy of directly confronting British fascism, favored by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and other elements of the British left-wing, merely constituting one approach to challenging Mosley's Blackshirts. As had been the case in the early 1930s, other segments of the left-wing, including the formal Labour Party establishment, articulated distinct methods for challenging the BUF, often seeking to leverage the authority of existing institutions to oppose British fascism.

Different publications privileged discrete aspects of the episode, highlighting the endurance of these earlier fault lines. Some papers stressed the parliamentary implications of the clash in the East End while others drew attention to the ramifications of the skirmishes on Labour Party policy vis-à-vis the Spanish Civil War. Reports from the streets of London also appeared alongside news stories that provided important domestic and international context, describing contemporaneous French anti-fascist activism and other manifestations of working-class domestic discontent, like the Jarrow March. Moreover, various newspapers emphasized the contributions of different constituencies to the effort to prevent Mosley and the Blackshirts from parading through Cable Street. Thus, individual media narratives spotlighted the participation of groups like British Communists, the East End's Jewish community, and women. This had the effect of elevating divergent understandings of

anti-fascism and disagreement with respect to the most efficacious methods for combatting the BUF. Finally, the newspapers differed in the way their reporting presented the occasion as a decisive moment in the history of British fascism, with some suggesting that the defeat of the BUF at Cable Street constituted a conclusive routing of Mosley and his allies.

Accordingly, this newspaper coverage does not merely demonstrate the continuities between the early 1930s and the aftermath of the Battle of Cable Street, as it also highlights the emergence of incipient memories of the incident in the days following October 4. The event in question served as a blank canvas onto which invested parties could project their partisan and ideological beliefs. Given that these beliefs often came to feature prominently in the memory of the confrontation, beginning the process of mapping the universe of reportage on events in the East End from early October opens the door to analyzing later remembrances of Mosley's abortive march.

Coverage of the Battle of Cable Street in Mass Circulation Papers

A good starting point is the October 5, 1936 edition of *The Times* which, despite matter-of-factly describing the event such that the violence of the confrontation is all-but sanitized, underscores the perceived noteworthiness of the episode. In one of a number of articles covering the implications of the clash, *The Times* unexcitedly reported that, "The proposed march of a contingent of the British Union of Fascists through the streets of the East End of London yesterday, which had given rise to fears of disturbances, was prohibited by the police at the last moment."²⁸ In this formulation, the role of the anti-fascist left at Cable Street is almost completely erased, as the opposition to the BUF is presented merely as a hypothetical

²⁸ "FASCIST MARCH PROHIBITED," *The Times*, October 5, 1936.

source of possible “disturbances.” In the place of the Communist-led resistance, the police are represented as the main force responsible for preventing Mosley’s march through the East End, such that the British State comes to function as a source of anti-fascist opposition to the BUF. As if to further minimize the role of the leftist masses at Cable Street, the coverage of the incident in *The Times* also included the observation that, “the anti-Fascist crowds remained in the streets east of Aldgate until they were fully assured that the Blackshirt march had been canceled.”²⁹ Violent confrontations between the left-wing counterdemonstrators and the police are therefore also absent from this narrative of the course of events on October 4.

Even so, many elements of the coverage of the Battle of Cable Street in *The Times* gesture towards the gravity of the skirmish between the anti-fascist and the police. In a long statement attributed to the BUF that was republished by the newspaper, the fascists attempted to distance themselves from the brawling, declaring “the British Union obeys the law and does not fight the police.”³⁰ Mosley’s BUF thus worked to use the media attention that followed the failed march through the East End to tacitly depict the left, and not the fascists, as a source of mayhem requiring a response from the state. The reportage in *The Times* also included a statement from Scotland Yard, which implicitly placed the actions of the police in opposition to the anti-fascist crowds, rather than in tension with the provocations of the BUF. This police statement published in *The Times* was fairly un-descriptive, explaining that, “Prior to the arrival

²⁹ “FASCIST MARCH PROHIBITED.”

³⁰ “FASCIST MARCH PROHIBITED,” *The Times*, October 5, 1936. Strikingly, the statement provided by the BUF, while clearly castigating Mosley’s left-wing opponents, was arguably more critical of the Government, announcing that, “On this occasion Socialists, Communists, and Jews openly organized not only to attack the meeting but to close the streets of London by violence ... The Government has taken no action against the organizers of this violence and illegality. On the contrary, it has banned the march and the meeting of the British Union.” Thus, just as the actual course of the Battle of Cable Street primarily pitted the anti-fascist counterdemonstrators against the police and not the BUF itself, the BUF’s official narrative of the event placed a premium on opposition to the state, with the actions of its professed rivals merely used as evidence of the supposed failure of the state.

of Sir Oswald Mosley disorder broke out among those who had collected to oppose the Fascist march and resulted in a number of arrests.”³¹ In this way, the account from Scotland Yard also worked to shift the locus of unrest away from the BUF, instead linking the anti-fascist crowds to the clashes and arrests of October 4.

Moreover, the presentation of the Battle of Cable Street in *The Times* highlighted both the international framing of the event and the existence of multiple understandings of what constituted anti-fascism. Immediately next to the newspaper’s reporting regarding the BUF’s abortive demonstration in the East End, *The Times* published an article detailing a confrontation between the French right-wing Parti Social Français and police in Paris, with details remarkably similar to the events that took place in the East End.³² The violence was said to have emanated from “the Government’s decision to allow the Communist meeting after having banned a proposed meeting of the Parti Sociale Français,” which led the right-wing to “at once set up a clamour against what they claimed to be [French Prime Minister] Mr. Blum’s unfair discrimination.”³³ The similarities between these French developments and the disorder in London could not have been lost on contemporary observers, especially considering that these two incidents appeared side-by-side in *The Times*. That these twin narratives of conflict between the extremes on the right and the left mediated by the police were placed next to each other likely indicates a recognition of the international context within which the events of October 4, 1936 transpired.

³¹ “FASCIST MARCH BANNED,” *The Times*, October 5, 1936.

³² “CLASHES IN PARIS,” *The Times*, October 5, 1936.

³³ “CLASHES IN PARIS.” As was the case in Britain this incident was part of a much larger context of perceived anti-fascism. See Joel Colton, *Leon Blum: Humanist in Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 193.

The Times also foreshadowed the way that the Battle of Cable Street helped to motivate Parliament to draft legislation constraining the BUF, thereby establishing the state as a force in opposition to fascism. A separate piece from the newspaper's Parliamentary correspondent noted, "There is a good deal of misunderstanding with regard to the power of the police in controlling public demonstrations, and this is a point on which questions are certain to be put to the Government when the House of Commons meets again."³⁴ The report also pointed out that the recent events had resurrected the impulse to contemplate curbing "the wearing of uniforms," an issue which had previously been considered in the aftermath of the BUF rally at Olympia in 1934.³⁵ Such a newfound willingness to entertain the possibility of bolstering the authority of the state to restrain the BUF, palpable as early as the day following the Battle of Cable Street, therefore serves as evidence of the degree to which, in the words of historian Richard Thurlow, for the Government, "the Battle of Cable Street became the straw that broke the camel's back."³⁶ In fact, an October 5 editorial in *The Times* appears to suggest that this contemporary understanding of the Battle of Cable Street as a turning point was also held by the British public at large, as:

The activities of both Fascists and Communists in this country seem to most people to be a tedious and rather pitiable burlesque; but the law rightly allows them, like other people, to express their opinions and to testify to their beliefs by the methods of procession and public meetings, even though ... these methods are a great nuisance ... It does not conform with their character or with their practice to accept the official advice so often tendered to them and to keep away from rival activities; and indeed, even if processions and meetings are kept apart at a presumably safe distance, it is often impossible to prevent disturbances being created by deliberate stragglers.³⁷

³⁴ "POWERS OF THE POLICE: QUESTIONS TO BE RAISED IN PARLIAMENT," *The Times*, October 5, 1936.

³⁵ "POWERS OF THE POLICE," *The Times*, October 5, 1936.

³⁶ Thurlow, "The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back," 74.

³⁷ "A Public Nuisance," *The Times*, October 5, 1936. Notably, the editorial is one of the few places in *The Times* October 5, 1936 edition where Mosley's anti-Semitism and its role in generating the conditions of the Battle of

Thus, the pages of the establishment-friendly *The Times* articulated a position similar to that of Labour's Clement Attlee in 1934, arguing that the Battle of Cable Street represented the political extremism of both the BUF and CPGB run amok. In this presentation, the source of the problem was both the fascists and the Communists, with the Communist-led anti-fascism reduced to "a tedious and rather pitiable burlesque," indistinguishable from the activities of the fascists the CPGB claimed to oppose. The editorial ended by emphasizing the need for the Government to take action to deal with the matter, concluding, "This sort of hooliganism must clearly be ended, even if it requires a special and sustained effort from the police authorities."³⁸

The Battle of Cable Street received even more significant coverage in the *Daily Express*, which published numerous photographs of the clashes in its October 5, 1936 edition and included a headline about the anti-fascist counterdemonstration, "BARRICADES IN THE EAST END" above the fold on the front page.³⁹ Unlike the matter-of-fact description of events in *The Times*, the reportage in the *Daily Express* was intensely dramatic. For example, to set the scene, the correspondent reported with short sentences, "Disorder grew. There were fierce fights. Roadways were littered with bricks, coping stones, pieces of wood, broken bottles."⁴⁰ Furthermore, the *Daily Express* was far more explicit in addressing the way in which the Battle of Cable Street was defined by the skirmishing between the police and left-wing anti-fascists,

Cable Street receives sufficient attention, with the piece observing that the "systematic terrorization of the East End ... is said to arise from the anti-Jewish obsessions of the Fascists."

³⁸ "A Public Nuisance."

³⁹ "BARRICADES IN THE EAST END," *Daily Express*, October 5, 1936. It is worth noting that, like *The Times*, the *Daily Express* included coverage of the disorder in Paris immediately next to its front-page story on the Battle of Cable Street, under the headline "Reds Beat Fascists in Paris." A story regarding the unrest in Paris would also appear alongside a story covering the events in the East End in the Communist Party's newspaper, *The Daily Worker*. See, "PARIS REPELS FASCIST ATTACK," *The Daily Worker*, October 5, 1936.

⁴⁰ "BARRICADES IN THE EAST END."

with the newspaper recording that 100,000 supporters of the Communists and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) gathered in the East End, only to face police “baton charges” and fire hoses.⁴¹ The *Daily Express* also differed from *The Times*, which had only published statements from the BUF and Scotland Yard, in that it included announcements from those on the political left. The CPGB’s statement is especially striking, declaring, “Gentile, Jew, Catholic, Protestant, Labour, and Communist, determined that fascism shall not pass here; have given Mosley the most humiliating defeat ever suffered by any figure in British politics.”⁴² This demonstrates that, before the dust had even settled, the CPGB was working to shape the narrative of October 4 as an example of a “united front” decisively defeating Mosley’s BUF. A statement from the ILP’s General Secretary, Fenner Brockway, was arguably even more extreme, attempting to leverage mainstream press coverage to absolve the left of responsibility for the disorder at Cable Street. Brockway alleged, “During the whole time I only saw one apple thrown, and I was in the thick of the fray.”⁴³ However, despite these clear divergences from the tenor of the reporting in *The Times*, the editorial line of the *Daily Express* was quite similar. Consequently, after acknowledging that Mosley’s activities were legally protected free speech, an October 5, 1936 editorial condemned the CPGB and BUF for being anti-democratic, proclaiming, “Don’t let it be taken from anything written above that the *Daily Express* takes sides in the feud of Fascism and Communism. The *Daily Express* stands on the side of democracy and neither of these two systems fits into democracy.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ “Furious Street Fights,” *Daily Express*, October 5, 1936.

⁴² “Furious Street Fights.”

⁴³ “Furious Street Fights,” *Daily Express*, October 5, 1936.

⁴⁴ “Opinion: Add This,” *Daily Express*, October 5, 1936. This *Daily Express* editorial was quite adamant that Mosley’s activities were within the bounds of legal conduct, stating “He [Mosley] can dress himself as he pleases, and if he can persuade his friends to dress the same way that is nobody else’s business. He is entitled to the protection of the police against hooligans who deny him free speech.”

It is also worth pausing to consider the way in which the coverage of the Battle of Cable Street in the *Daily Express* spotlights important depictions of the intersection of gender and the activities of both fascists and anti-fascists in Britain in the 1930s. The *Daily Express* appeared to go out of its way to emphasize the way in which women participated in the various demonstrations that took place on October 4. Accordingly, a caption to a photograph presenting the clashes between the various belligerents made clear that among the 3,000 “uniformed fascists” amassed in the East End were 400 women, while another photo depicted an anti-fascist “Girl demonstrator” being carried away by three police officers.⁴⁵ Given that the role of women at Cable Street has constituted an important topic of scholarly inquiry, these references are of consequence. Within the British Union of Fascists, women assumed a number of prominent positions and often were at the forefront of violent demonstrations, such that the role of women in the BUF constituted one of the most significant departures of British fascism from the Nazi German model.⁴⁶ In fact, women played an integral role in the BUF’s anti-Semitic activities in the East End, with Julie Gottlieb concluding, “Women were to be the salespersons and soft-sellers of fascism in Britain, and the movement exploited female participation for maximum publicity in the rough street politics of the East End.”⁴⁷ The *Daily Express* caption regarding the participation of 400 women among the ranks of the BUF at Cable Street should therefore be viewed as part of the fascist attempt to leverage gender in its engagement with the press. This should also serve as a counterpoint to studies of the distinctive vision of masculinity

⁴⁵ “BLACKSHIRTS AND ANTI-FASCISTS IN FREE FIGHT,” *Daily Express*, October 5, 1936; “She Wouldn’t Walk—So They Carried Her,” *Daily Express*, October 5, 1936.

⁴⁶ Julie Gottlieb, “Women and Fascism in the East End,” in *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, edited by Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 31.

⁴⁷ Gottlieb, “Women and Fascism in the East End,” 41.

espoused by Mosley and the BUF that fail to address the role of women within British fascism.⁴⁸ Additionally, it is critical to point out that, as the photo of the “Girl demonstrator” would suggest, the anti-fascist crowds present at Cable Street included many women, though such participants were generally younger and came from a lower social position.⁴⁹ Finally, the way in which the *Daily Express* spotlights the involvement of women in the events of October 4 foreshadows the way that, in the fallout of the Battle of Cable Street, “the image of women and children was exploited by both fascists and anti-fascists to excite the male protective instinct.”⁵⁰

Religious and Ideological Coverage of the Battle of Cable Street

The news coverage of the Battle of Cable Street in both *The Times* and the *Daily Express* clearly demonstrates that the episode was understood at the time by contemporary observers to be newsworthy. However, these newspapers only provide a glimpse into how the mass-circulation mainstream press responded to events in the East End on October 4, 1936. To gain insight into how many of the specific constituencies affected by the clash framed the event, it is therefore necessary to analyze the reporting in *The Jewish Chronicle* and the Communist Party’s newspaper, *The Daily Worker*.

The depiction of the Battle of Cable Street in *The Jewish Chronicle* is most notable in terms of the divergence between the dramatic narrative presented by the newspaper’s special correspondent and the paper’s far more restrained editorial tone. In a lengthy October 9, 1936 editorial titled “Mosley Receives His Marching Orders,” the newspaper projected a sense of

⁴⁸ For example, see Liam J. Liburd, “Beyond the Pale: Whiteness, Masculinity, and Empire in the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940,” *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 7, no. 2 (2018), 275-96, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00702006>.

⁴⁹ Valman, “Jewish Girls and the Battle of Cable Street, 181-2. Valman also recounts that “When the police attacked the barricades [at Cable Street], women standing at the windows of the tenements threw missiles on them.”

⁵⁰ Gottlieb, 43.

concern that the events in the East End would, rather than undermining Mosley and the BUF, actually bolster the fascist cause.⁵¹ Accordingly, the editorial pronounced, “Much as we detest the campaign that is being waged by the Fascists in this district, we cannot pretend to any feeling of satisfaction with this result. Its chief effect is to enable Mosley to pose as a martyr in the cause of civic liberty, and perhaps to win him new recruits.”⁵² The editorial later succinctly summed up its position by declaring that the actions of the anti-fascists in the East End were “profoundly mistaken.”⁵³ Such a formulation is, of course, diametrically opposed to the notion of the events of October 4 as a decisive victory of anti-fascism that had a debilitating effect on Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. This is a reflection of the general attitudes of the Jewish communal establishment, especially the Board of Deputies of British Jews, which, though primarily situated outside of the hostile East End, was stridently opposed to direct confrontation with the BUF.⁵⁴ This worldview was predicated upon a belief that British liberalism would ultimately serve as a bulwark against the virulent anti-Semitism espoused by the BUF and the dangers of Mosley’s fascism.⁵⁵ *The Jewish Chronicle* had previously articulated this position, with the October 9 editorial even acknowledging the newspaper had hitherto urged its Jewish readership to refrain from participating in confrontational anti-fascism.⁵⁶ In fact, one can even suggest that, for these reasons, *The Jewish Chronicle* sought to downplay the prominence of Jewish demonstrators at the Battle of Cable Street, with the editorial emphasizing “that

⁵¹ “Mosley Receives His Marching Order,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

⁵² “Mosley Receives His Marching Order.”

⁵³ “Mosley Receives His Marching Order.”

⁵⁴ Daniel Tilles, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-40* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 123-41.

⁵⁵ Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, 39.

⁵⁶ “Mosley Receives His Marching Order,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

although the district affected is largely and in some streets overwhelmingly Jewish, the Jews who assembled were vastly out-numbered by non-Jews.”⁵⁷

This principled opposition to the uncouth direct action of the anti-fascist demonstrators in the East End differed markedly from the narrative provided by the newspaper’s special correspondent. Whereas the aforementioned editorial saw the events of October 4 as a possible chance for Mosley to expand the reach of the BUF, the news coverage of the Battle of Cable Street that appeared in the same October 9, 1936 edition of *The Jewish Chronicle* argued for the exact opposite, opening with the claim that “On Sunday, Fascism received the greatest blow that it has yet in this country.”⁵⁸ Moreover, while the editorial had primarily focused on the clash as an element of the conflict between British fascism and its anti-fascist opponents, the news coverage published in *The Jewish Chronicle* made clear that much of the violence of October 4 was the result of anti-fascist demonstrators coming into conflict with the police forces. The article recounted, “Our representative stood among a crowd of other people, but could not see one Blackshirt. Suddenly there was a rush and he was thrown to the ground with a police-horse standing over him. The police had apparently charged without any warning.”⁵⁹ Though this demonstrates a focus on the violence that broke out between the police and the primarily left-wing counterdemonstrators, the report from the newspaper’s special correspondent did address the actions of Mosley and the Blackshirts. This included the republication of Mosley’s comments to the *Daily Sketch*, in which the BUF leader was quoted as

⁵⁷ “Mosley Receives His Marching Order.” The editorial also highlighted that these mostly non-Jewish crowds were predominantly made up of inhabitants of the East End, declaring, “East Enders, in fact were, *in the mass*, in no mood for counsels of moderation and restraint. They came out determined once and for all to read the invaders and enemies of their peace a lesson which they would remember.”

⁵⁸ “THE PEOPLE SAID ‘NO!’” *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

⁵⁹ “THE PEOPLE SAID ‘NO!’” *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

stating, “Hitler and Mussolini suffered similar experiences before they came to power.”⁶⁰

Mosley’s comment further underscores the way that the developments regarding fascism in Britain were couched in terms borrowed from Continental Europe.

Nevertheless, from the above it is evident that within the span of just a few pages, *The Jewish Chronicle* provided two divergent visions of anti-fascism, as well as two divergent narratives of the Battle of Cable Street. For some, especially the communal organizations that formally represented British Jewry, the strategies employed by the anti-fascists at Cable Street were bound to backfire, emboldening Mosley and the BUF to the point where it would be erroneous to label such tactics “anti-fascist.” For others, physically opposing the BUF, as had occurred on October 4, was an effective strategy, having resulted in “the greatest blow” yet to British fascism. Similarly, some groups saw the Battle of Cable Street as one part of a broad campaign of avowed anti-fascists against the Blackshirts, while others conceived of the event as a clash that pitted the anti-fascist demonstrators against the Metropolitan police. In drawing attention to such differences, it is worth observing that the more passive position of the Jewish communal establishment aligned with that of the British state.⁶¹ The President of the Board of Deputies, Neville Laski, had even coordinated with the Home Office in the immediate run-up to the Battle of Cable Street.⁶² As a result, the fact that *The Jewish Chronicle’s* editorial failed to address the degree to which violence was limited to hostilities between the police and

⁶⁰ “THE PEOPLE SAID ‘NO!’”

⁶¹ Tilles, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-40*, 141.

⁶² “Mr Neville Laski,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936. Once again, it should be emphasized that the position of Neville Laski and the Board of Deputies did not necessarily reflect the attitudes of the generally younger Jewish anti-fascists who were present at the Battle of Cable Street. Their attitude is likely better reflected in an additional article that appeared in the same edition of *The Jewish Chronicle* describing the efforts of some within the Jewish community in London’s East End to take defensive actions against the BUF campaign of anti-Semitism into their own hands. See “The Association of Jewish Youth League for Defense to Be Formed,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

anti-fascists can be in part ascribed to the Jewish establishment's comparative closeness to the authorities tasked with maintaining public order in the East End.

The October 9 edition of *The Jewish Chronicle* also included the publication of a number of statements from elements of the British left-wing that provide a valuable snapshot of the way in which the left reacted to the Battle of Cable Street, often placing the events in question in an international context. The newspaper's reporting on the aftermath of the clash included the publication of a longer version of the same Communist Party of Great Britain statement that had appeared in the *Daily Express*.⁶³ The portions that were absent from the *Daily Express* but were published in *The Jewish Chronicle* are especially incisive, highlighting the Communist Party's conception of the Battle of Cable Street as linked to the Spanish Civil War and the Party's official position vis-à-vis the police:

East London workers have not only defeated Mosley; they have demonstrated that the English People have no time for any sort of toleration of Fascism. The 'stay-at-home' policy has been decisively rejected and victory has been won by united action. On the eve of the Edinburgh Labour Party Conference, East London has torn neutrality to shreds and given a lead to the whole Labour and democratic movement to move into action against Fascism. Neutrality must go! Spanish democracy must be armed! That is the message of the hundreds of thousands who, raising the slogan of Spanish workers, "They shall not pass!" thronged East London's streets and manned the barricades against Mosley. The mass action of the working people has exposed the pro-Fascist attitude of the Home Office, which sought to the last moment to enable Mosley to march and which is responsible for the baton charges and arrests made to-day.⁶⁴

What begins as a statement narrowly addressing the success of the anti-fascist cause in opposing Mosley's British fascism at Cable Street thus transforms into a broader call for the

⁶³ "THE PEOPLE SAID 'NO!,'" *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936. *The Jewish Chronicle* specifically attributed the statement to the London District Committee of the CPGB. This is notable considering that some, especially the Communist Joe Jacobs, later sought to draw attention to the supposed strategic differences between various anti-fascist groups based in the East End that were merely aligned with the Communists and the London District Committee. Even so, others, such as Phil Piratin, disputed this characterization of events as "exaggerating" the differences between these groups. For more, see Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, 49.

⁶⁴ "THE PEOPLE SAID 'NO!,'" *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

whole of the British left to form in a united front in opposing fascism in Continental Europe, specifically in the context of the nascent Spanish Civil War. To achieve such a framing, the CPGB had to allege that the success of the anti-fascists in challenging the BUF constituted a “victory won by united action.” As we have seen, though many individual members of the Labour Party were present at Cable Street, on an institutional level, the Labour Party had refused to take part in the demonstrations, actively encouraging its members to steer clear of the Communist-led confrontations planned for October 4.⁶⁵ The claims that the Battle of Cable Street constituted the realization of a united front are therefore partially false, misrepresenting the role played by the Labour Party. Instead, these assertions can be read as an attempt on the part of the CPGB to exert influence over the proceedings of the Labour Party Conference in Edinburgh, which began on October 5, 1936, the day immediately following the events in the East End. This is especially compelling in light of the prominence of debates regarding the Labour Party’s position on British intervention in the Spanish Civil War over the course of the Conference in Edinburgh.⁶⁶

Beyond serving as further evidence of the way that contemporary domestic developments were discussed as part of a broader conflict between fascism and anti-fascism that was taking place across Europe, the CPGB’s statement published in *The Jewish Chronicle* also underscores the way in which the Communists defined and understood fascism. For certain elements of the Labour Party and the Jewish communal establishment, fascism was exclusively the province of Mosley and the avowedly far-right BUF. However, the CPGB, by explicitly labeling the Home Office as “pro-fascist,” suggests that anti-fascism was understood by the Communists as not merely limited to challenging Mosley and the BUF, but also including opposition to the

⁶⁵ Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, 50.

⁶⁶ Paul Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators: The British Left in the 1930s* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 100-4.

state authorities tasked with maintaining public order and protecting the free speech of the BUF. In this formulation, fascism was not just the shouts of “The Yids, the Yids, we must get rid of the Yids!” and “Hail Mosley” recorded by the special correspondent in *The Jewish Chronicle*, but also comprised the baton charges of the police.⁶⁷ Thus, even if the Battle of Cable Street was chiefly a conflagration between anti-fascists and the police, it nevertheless constituted an example of effective anti-fascist direct action. However, *The Jewish Chronicle’s* news coverage provides some evidence that runs counter to this interpretation of events. Most significantly, the paper recounted that, the moment the BUF march was called off, the hostilities ceased, with the correspondent concluding, “A JEWISH CHRONICLE representative saw lemonade and cigarettes offered to one policeman, and in an area where there had been four baton charges in the last half-hour there was now perfect goodwill.”⁶⁸ Such “goodwill” seems at odds with a vision of the Home Office and the police as irredeemably “pro-Fascist.”

The Jewish Chronicle also included the text of an October 5 resolution that passed unanimously at the Labour Party Conference in Edinburgh. It is especially incisive when contrasted with the address delivered by Labour’s Clement Attlee before the House of Commons in 1934 following the confrontations between the BUF and anti-fascists at Hyde Park in London. The resolution in response to the Battle of Cable Street announced:

This Conference views with grave concern the tragic and deplorable events of yesterday in the East End of London; condemns the Government’s unwillingness to ban the Fascist’s march in spite of the obvious danger of a breach of the peace; condemns the provocative tactics of the Fascists, and records its view that whilst freedom of speech must be preserved, the encouragement of civil disorder and racial strife, the parade of force and militarised politics and the use of political uniforms should be forbidden. The

⁶⁷ “THE PEOPLE SAID ‘NO!’” *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

⁶⁸ “THE PEOPLE SAID ‘NO!’”

Conference calls upon the Government to open an immediate inquiry into the recent disturbances and into the activities and finances of the Fascists' Organization.⁶⁹

Though the thrust of this resolution is clearly aimed at condemning the activities of the BUF, this official statement from the Labour Party also casts blame on the Government for its apparent negligence in the run-up to October 4. The resolution additionally includes a demand for legislative action to curb the activities of Mosley's Blackshirts, a call to action that anticipates the content of the Public Order Act. This demand that the British state should curb fascism by working through the existing institutional framework, by forbidding political uniforms and inquiring into the organizational configuration of the BUF, serves as an additional example of Labour's less confrontational brand of anti-fascism. The call for an investigation of the BUF's finances may even serve as a challenge to the Britishness of the British Union of Fascists, as it seems to comport with contemporary allegations that the BUF was reliant upon foreign funding.⁷⁰ This possible attempt to insinuate that the BUF amounted to a veritable fifth column once again illuminates the way that the Labour Party worked to present Mosley and his brand of fascism as a Continental import completely alien to the British political scene.

Even so, the ambiguous first sentence of the motion means that the full scope of the Labour Party's condemnation remains unclear. While the rest of the resolution labels the BUF and the police as responsible for "the tragic and deplorable events of yesterday in the East End," there is no indication as to whether or not the anti-fascists are perceived as at fault for the

⁶⁹ "Labour Party Calls for Enquiry," *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

⁷⁰ Gary Love, "'What's the Big Idea?': Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism," 453-7, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/stable/pdf/30036457.pdf>. As was addressed in Chapter 1, Love provides evidence that such accusations were not unfounded, as the BUF did receive financial support from both Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. Though the source and precise amount of such funding shifted over the course of the 1930s, the BUF's adamant denials of this practice underscores what Love terms "the practical difficulties they faced in being true to their own myth of national rebirth."

disorder. This is especially striking considering the fact that, after the demonstrations at Hyde Park in 1934, Attlee's speech before the House of Commons repeatedly emphasized that the Labour Party not only condemned the actions of the BUF, but also denounced the efforts of the CPGB, as it saw the anti-democratic activities of the fascists as no different from those of the Communists.⁷¹ The absence of such rhetoric in this 1936 resolution that emerged from the Labour Party Congress would therefore appear to indicate a shift in the Labour Party's position. It remains unclear, however, whether this marked a softening of the Party's opposition to the formation of a united front with the CPGB or a pragmatic recognition that the participation of elements of the Labour Party in the events in the East End made it impossible to once again distance the institutional backbone of the Labour Party from what Attlee had previously disparaged as "the battle of the streets."⁷²

Additionally, the edition of *The Jewish Chronicle* that appeared on October 9, 1936, by including a letter to the editor from author Joseph Leftwich, provides a reminder that, in the eyes of contemporary observers, the precise implications of the BUF's ideology remained unclear and open to interpretation. Leftwich was a resident of the East End who had come to prominence authoring various works regarding Jewish literature and translating Yiddish literary classics.⁷³ Leftwich's letter, titled "Fascism Not a Jewish Issue," pointed to the case of Mussolini's Italy to propose that "the use of the word Fascism as synonymous with anti-Semitism, or of Jew as synonymous with anti-Fascist is clearly muddled thinking, not unaided perhaps by the desire of some Jews and others in the anti-Fascist front to rally more support."⁷⁴ In Leftwich's view,

⁷¹ Clement Attlee, Speech to the House of Commons, June 14, 1934, *Parliamentary Debates, Commons*, 5th ser., vol. 290 (1934), col. 1929.

⁷² Attlee, Speech to the House of Commons, June 14, 1934, col. 1929.

⁷³ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (2007), s.v. "Leftwich, Joseph."

⁷⁴ Joseph Leftwich, "Fascism Not a Jewish Issue," *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936.

Jewish opposition to Mosley's fascism was rooted in resistance to the BUF's anti-Semitism, which was to be understood as an issue that was ideologically distinct from the BUF's fascism.⁷⁵ Opposition to anti-Semitism was therefore fundamentally distinct from opposition to fascism. By pointing to the Continental example of Mussolini's Italy, avowedly fascist but at the time still devoid of the anti-Semitism that, by 1936, defined the politics of the BUF and Nazi Germany, Leftwich, like so many others, invokes Continental Europe to make a point regarding domestic British politics. In terms of the evolution of the memory of the Battle of Cable Street, we will see that, contrary to Leftwich's desires, "Jewish" and "anti-Fascist" came to be near synonymous. This is not surprising, and given the course of subsequent events, with Mussolini's enactment of Nazi-style anti-Semitic racial laws and the murder of thousands of Italian Jews in the Holocaust, Leftwich's position seems untenable. His attitude towards fascism, which might most generously be described as neutral, was also almost certain to be unwelcome in postwar Britain, especially within his Jewish milieu. Nevertheless, Leftwich's letter to the editor is a reminder that, though Jewish opposition to the BUF at Cable Street is widely understood through the prism of anti-fascism, this construction was not universally accepted within the Jewish community at the time. This also underscores that even in the immediate aftermath of the BUF's anti-Semitic activities in the East End and the clashes at Cable Street, Britain's most prominent Jewish newspaper found it acceptable to publish a likely provocative piece that could easily be construed as fascist apologia.

⁷⁵ Leftwich, "Fascism Not a Jewish Issue," *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 9, 1936. Leftwich argues that "Fascism is a movement to establish a political, social and economic order based on the Corporate State, to which many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, are opposed for various reasons, which, however, have nothing to do with Jews as Jews. Fascism or no Fascism is a question for the country at large, and for individual Jews as individual citizens only, not as Jews. It is not a Jewish issue."

Though *The Jewish Chronicle* provides a glimpse into the immediate reactions of the Jewish community to the episode in the East End, as well as further clarity regarding the response of the left, to better understand the ways in which the Communist Party answered to the events of October 4, it is necessary to look to the CPGB's newspaper, *The Daily Worker*. The top headline on the front page of the October 5, 1936 edition of *The Daily Worker* celebrated what was presented as a conclusive defeat for the BUF, declaring "MOSLEY DID NOT PASS: EAST LONDON ROUTS THE FASCISTS."⁷⁶ The newspaper's coverage of the event emphasized the class composition of the crowds that gathered in the East End, trumpeting "Jew and gentile, docker and garment worker, railwayman and cabinet-maker, turned out in thousands to show that they have no use for Fascism."⁷⁷ David Renton has suggested that it was this multiethnic working-class character of the anti-fascist crowds amassed at Cable Street that made it the "defining location" of the anti-fascist resistance to the BUF, despite the fact that skirmishes took place in many other venues across the East End.⁷⁸ This premium on the class dimensions of the incident also reflects the immediate emergence of a crucial strain of the memory of the Battle of Cable Street, which portrays the event as an instance of ordinary members of the working-class uniting to defeat the primarily middle-class BUF.⁷⁹ As part of this narrative of proletarian heroism, reportage in *The Daily Worker* also took steps to draw attention to the ways that the conditions under which the clashes occurred were characteristic of a "battle." This included descriptions of "the fusillade of stones" lobbed by the anti-fascists at the advancing

⁷⁶ "MOSLEY DID NOT PASS: EAST LONDON ROUTS THE FASCISTS," *The Daily Worker*, October 5, 1936.

⁷⁷ "MOSLEY DID NOT PASS."

⁷⁸ David Renton, "Docker and Garment Worker, Railwayman and Cabinet Maker: The Class Memory of Cable Street," in *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, edited by Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 95.

⁷⁹ Renton, "Docker and Garment Worker, Railwayman and Cabinet Maker," 96-7. Renton does much to challenge this myth of the Battle of Cable Street. For more see Chapter Four.

police, the bloodied heads of the demonstrators, and the deployment of two airplanes to conduct “aerial reconnaissance” on behalf of the police.⁸⁰

The contents of the October 5 edition of *The Daily Worker* additionally contextualizes the mass demonstrations that took place across the East End, demonstrating how they were indicative of the broader political climate in interwar Britain, which was in part characterized by the diffusion of working-class protest disconnected from the struggle against the BUF. The front-page of *The Daily Worker*, beneath its coverage of the Battle of Cable Street and the Labour Party Conference in Edinburgh, published a news story detailing the plight of 5,000 unemployed Scottish workers who were participating in a “hunger march” through Glasgow on their way to London.⁸¹ Elsewhere, an article by the prominent CPGB member George Aitken described the start of the famous Jarrow March, a protest against impoverishment and unemployment that began in Northern England and concluded in London.⁸² Yet another story reported on the arrival in Edinburgh of Scottish hunger marchers opposing the means test.⁸³ In short, at the same moment that the streets of the East End of London were animated by what was presented as working-class anti-fascism, across Britain, unemployed industrial workers were also engaged in demonstrations that gave voice to deep economic grievances rooted in the dislocation brought about by the Great Depression.

⁸⁰ “JEW AND GENTILE UNITE: Hundreds of Thousands in Streets,” *The Daily Worker*, October 5, 1936.

⁸¹ “5,000 Cheer West of Scotland Hunger Marchers,” *The Daily Worker*, October 5, 1936.

⁸² George Aitken, “When four children die in England, Wales – Seven die in Jarrow,” *The Daily Worker*, October 5, 1936. Aitken provides a devastating portrait of the Depression-era conditions of Jarrow, describing the town as “a place of the dead,” a reflection of the locale’s status as then having the highest death rate in all of England. As a result of these circumstances, Aitken records that “Drastic action is necessary to demonstrate Jarrow’s plight to the world at large and force the National Government to grant assistance.”

⁸³ “Town’s Welcome to Hunger Marchers,” *The Daily Worker*, October 5, 1936.

This reality of widespread working-class protest has numerous implications for the study of the Battle of Cable Street. It suggests that too much of a focus on the role of international influences in shaping the opposition to British fascism ignores important domestic forces, while also indicating that exclusively approaching the events of October 4 through the rubric of anti-fascism overlooks their position within a larger narrative of contemporary working-class frustration and malaise. This is not to deny the tremendous impact of Continental politics, specifically expressions of fascism and anti-fascism across the British Channel, in shaping early perceptions of the Battle of Cable Street, but to recognize that apparently unconnected domestic crises also constituted an important influence on the trajectory of early understandings of British anti-fascist activity. Considering these concurrent developments also sheds additional light on the state response to the clashes in the East End. Scholars have previously identified the hunger marches of the 1920s and 1930s, along with other forms of protest by the unemployed, as crucial in motivating the authorities, most notably in London, to take steps to more effectively maintain public order.⁸⁴ Given that the unrest at Cable Street occurred against the backdrop of these additional manifestations of left-wing discontent, it seems apparent that the subsequent curtailment of certain civil liberties with the passage of the Public Order Act was not merely motivated by the actions of the BUF or the behavior of the anti-fascist counterdemonstrators in the East End, but also by more general concerns regarding the activities of Britain's unemployed industrial workers.⁸⁵ Put differently, such dissent indicates

⁸⁴ Thurlow, "The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back," 75-6.

⁸⁵ This is all the more compelling when one considers that, in addition to the marches recorded in *The Daily Worker*, many other working-class protests took place throughout October 1936. These included a noteworthy march on London that was organized by the National League of the Blind. For more, see Matthias Reiss, "Forgotten Pioneers of the National Protest March: The National League of the Blind's Marches to London, 1920 & 1936," *Labour History Review* 70, no. 2 (August 2005), 149-53,

that the Battle of Cable Street was not the only input shaping the decision making regarding the maintenance of public order in late-1936, especially at the same time that the crusading Jarrow March gripped the nation.⁸⁶

Conclusion

The newspaper reporting that was published in the days immediately following the Battle of Cable Street demonstrates that journalists had a variety of possible ways of reading the event, selecting interpretations that emphasized certain aspects and overlooked others.

Different reports pointed to the contributions of specific groups, like the Communist Party of Great Britain, the BUF, the Metropolitan Police, East End Jewry, and women in facilitating the clash on October 4, 1936. These news sources also varied in their assessments of the incident's international context, with some stressing the reverberations of the clash upon domestic British politics while others looked to the international consequences of the violence in East London. This tensions was further evident in the articles that appeared alongside the reporting from the East End, which both detailed the results of similar anti-fascist actions in Continental Europe and drew attention to other examples of Depression-era working-class protest in Britain.

However, in light of the trajectory of events in the final months of 1936, perhaps the most notable of these editorial decisions was the choice in some publications to present the Battle of Cable Street as a decisive defeat of British fascism. The weeks that followed would prove that this was decidedly not the case, and "the impression conveyed in Metropolitan Police reports is that in East London the fascists 'gained rather than lost prestige' in the week

<https://search-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=18024525&site=ehost-live>.

⁸⁶ Reiss, "Forgotten Pioneers of the National Protest March," 154.

following Cable Street.”⁸⁷ Just a few days after the Battle of Cable Street the BUF instigated “The Mile End Pogrom,” in which fascists attacked many homes and businesses belonging to the residents of the East End’s Jewish community.⁸⁸ The fascist threat was perceived as serious enough that London Police Commissioner, Phillip Game, subsequently advised the Cabinet to take legislative action to restrict the activities of Mosley and the BUF.⁸⁹

The result of Game’s recommendation was the Public Order Act, which hastily passed through Parliament in December 1936, with the aim of providing the police with additional powers to curb the activities of Mosley and the BUF.⁹⁰ Specifically, the legislation prohibited the wearing of political uniforms, banned paramilitary groups like the Blackshirts, and constrained the freedom of assembly.⁹¹ Each of these limitations quite clearly constitute a reaction to the conduct and methods of the British fascists at Cable Street on October 4, 1936. However, when the Labour Party backed the passage of the Public Order Act, it did so with the aim of protecting British democracy against all forms of political “extremism,” including Communism.⁹² The actual implementation of the legislation reflected the Labour Party’s view, and in practice, the Public Order Act “somewhat ironically, affected anti-fascist politics . . . more than fascist politics.”⁹³

This is not to say, however, that the Public Order Act did not also undermine British fascism, as it played a major role in the decline of the BUF in the years leading up to the

⁸⁷ Copey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*,” 54.

⁸⁸ Andrew Moore, “Sir Phillip Game’s ‘Other Life’: The Making of the 1936 Public Order Act in Britain,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 36, no. 1 (April 1990): 67, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.1111/j.1467-8497.1990.tb00644.x>.

⁸⁹ Moore, “Sir Phillip Game’s ‘Other Life,’” 68.

⁹⁰ Thurlow, “The Straw that Broke the Camel’s Back,” 90-1.

⁹¹ Thurlow, 91.

⁹² Michael Newman, “Democracy versus Dictatorship: Labour’s Role in the Struggle against British Fascism, 1933-1936,” *Historical Workshop Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 72.

⁹³ Thurlow, 91.

outbreak of the Second World War.⁹⁴ For example, the new police powers granted by the Public Order Act allowed the state to block a July 1937 attempt by the BUF to parade through the East End.⁹⁵ Some of the most compelling evidence of the effectiveness of the Public Order Act in undermining Mosley and his political party can be found in the form of the Communist Party's insistence that it was the Battle of Cable Street, rather than this Labour-supported legislation, that effectively defeated the BUF.⁹⁶ Had this legislation not been so successful in restricting fascist activism (as well as that of the anti-fascists), the Communist Party would likely not have been as steadfast in affirming this view regarding the events at Cable Street. All the same, these dueling diagnoses of the cause of the BUF's decline further demonstrate the contested meaning of anti-fascism on the British left and the gulf between the Communist focus upon direct action and the Labour Party's belief in the necessity of confronting all forms of illiberalism through the tools available to the British state.

These disagreements underscore the stakes of the editorial choices of some newspapers to immediately present October 4, 1936 as a decisive turning point in the struggle against fascism in Britain. Additionally, because the degree to which the BUF constituted a threat to British democracy later became a point of dispute, the tension between the initial framings favored by a number of journalists and the subsequent state response provides further evidence of the emergence of important fault lines in the memory of the Battle of Cable Street in late 1936. As the event drifted into the realm of historical memory, these differences of opinion regarding the meaning of anti-fascism would become all the more evident.

⁹⁴ Moore, "Sir Phillip Game's 'Other Life,'" 68. Other important factors in the prewar decline of the BUF included the increasingly tenuous Anglo-German diplomatic relationship and the BUF's financial difficulties.

⁹⁵ Thurlow, 91.

⁹⁶ Newman, "Democracy versus Dictatorship," 73.

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