

Oswald Mosley

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OLYMPIA - 1934

By 1934, British Union had expanded at a remarkable rate, pushing the smaller fascist groups into political oblivion. Mosley had attracted support from all sections of society, from both Left and Right, along with Lord Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mail*, giving favourable publicity to the Blackshirts in his newspaper.

On April 22, 1934, British Union held a large meeting at the Albert Hall in West London attracting an audience of 10,000, with Mosley speaking to this large audience without interruption or any violence.

This was an occasion for demonstrating the propaganda techniques of fascist meetings with the spectacular use of music, processions with banners and standards, spotlights and the chanting of "M.O.S.L.E.Y ... Mosley!" before and after the great speech.

Of course, the most stirring part of these meetings was Mosley's oratorical skill, the strong and modulated voice, along with a reasoned and analytical content flowing with a fluidity that, on this occasion, lasted for an hour and a half without notes.

His powerful peroration could enthuse the most sceptical and had all on their feet, swept along with the mood of spiritual renewal.

Mosley had held several meetings at the Albert Hall throughout 1934 and each was packed without any violence or opposition.

With the growth of British Union and the foundations of a secure base, Mosley arranged for a meeting at Olympia in West London, a venue larger than the Albert Hall with the capacity for an even greater display of fascist progress and the growth in membership strength. The meeting at Olympia was booked for June 7, 1934, with well-publicised notice, a fact that reached the ears of the communists, the militant Left ... and Jewish organisations.

Mosley had only his ability to speak, without the means of the press (Rothermere's support was to be short-lived) or any other form of propaganda medium, and so public meetings were his only method of getting his message across.

His enemies decided that he would be deprived of this means through organised violence and thuggery. The myth of Blackshirt violence was created out of Mosley's determination that, in order to be heard by the people, he would have to defend his meetings from attack. The alternative would have been to surrender to communist violence.

Because the Albert Hall rally had proved successful without any violence, his enemies on the Left were determined that the Olympia meeting would be smashed. Around 2,000 Blackshirts were spread around the meeting at Olympia with a large contingent lined up around the platform. The audience consisted of 12,000 people ... while outside 2,000 anti-fascists were amassed for the purpose of violent protest.

As 2,000 tickets had been given away free, the means of entry by communists and militant Jews was made relatively easy and these organised groups positioned themselves among the audience ready to disrupt Mosley's speech at the first opportunity.

The intention of the anti-fascists was not just to prevent Mosley from speaking but also to create the myth that Mosley was responsible for the violence. This lie has been accepted as truth ever since, even though all the real evidence proves otherwise. The Tory press acquiesced in this myth making and Rothermere withdrew the support of the *Daily Mail* for the acknowledged reason that Jewish advertisers threatened to withdraw revenue if he continued to support Mosley after Olympia.

The meeting started late. The anti-fascists had already caused problems outside with the police.

The Communist Party organ, *The Daily Worker*, began to incite violent disorder at the Olympia meeting with the statement on May 26, "In connection with the great anti-fascist demonstration **which is being organised by the London District Committee of the Communist Party** on June 7, when Mosley's Blackshirts are holding a fascist rally at Olympia, the following are the arrangements. Marches will be organised from five different parts of London in the late afternoon, to arrive in Hammersmith Road, in the vicinity of Olympia, at 6.30pm."

In the *Manchester Guardian* on the same day, "A press statement issued by the **London District Committee of the Communist Party** says the announcement of the decision of Sir Oswald Mosley to follow up his recent Blackshirt rally at the Albert Hall by a demonstration at Olympia on June 7 will be taken as a challenge ... the Communist Party is confident that the workers in the capital city will **resist with all means** the fascist menace".

Then, in the *Daily Worker* again on June 7, "... the counter-demonstration was being enthusiastically discussed by the workers. **Inside the large hall and outside** the challenge of Mosley will be met by the determined workers ... but the workers' counter-action **will cause them to tremble**".

The references to workers suggested the communists were the spokesmen for the working class against another class ... when, in fact, 90 per cent of the Blackshirts were manual workers themselves.

These counter-demonstrations were organised for two principal purposes: to prevent Mosley from being heard and to prevent attendance at the meeting. Police resources were limited and they found difficulty in protecting the public from the tactics of communist

agitation outside. However, when Mosley began speaking an hour late, communists had placed themselves in groups throughout the audience and immediately began interrupting with the intention of preventing Mosley from being heard.

The law makes it clear that the organisers of an indoor meeting have the right to eject those who attempt to prevent the business of that meeting and may use force to do so. That communists came armed made the use of force even more necessary, with Blackshirts receiving the injuries associated with the use of weapons.

L. Doelberg, a medical student at St Thomas's Hospital, wrote, "I personally dressed twelve Blackshirts, of which four were **serious cases**. The details of these four cases were as follows: Kicked in the stomach and sent to the West London Hospital. Kicked in the head and in the stomach and laid up for three weeks. Kicked in the thigh and unable to stand. A girl who was hit in the eye and had her glasses broken into the eye and was sent to hospital. **I treated one communist only**, who had a black eye ...".

M. Lord, in charge of first aid arrangements at Olympia, reported, "I went to the station in the gallery and found there a fascist in an unconscious state, and I was told he had been kicked in the stomach. **I also found a girl fascist with a scratch commencing under her eye and running down her cheek and neck and finishing on her back, between her shoulder blades**. I do not think that this scratch could have been done with a fingernail, but that some **sharp instrument** must have been used. The last case I attended was a fascist who had the palm of his right hand cut from the thumb to the third finger".

A certified first-aid worker reported, "We treated in our dressing station 63 Blackshirts for injuries, mostly abdominal and injuries **caused by blunt and sharp instruments**, also a few communists were treated at my station with minor injuries".

Sir Leonard Lyle, a former Tory MP, wrote in the press on June 13, "I think it is only fair to place on record the fact that in no case did I see or hear of any violence on the part of the Blackshirts; on the other hand, police were assaulted and at least one mounted officer was unhorsed by organised gangs of Reds ... and people like myself, who had come, in many cases with our wives to listen, were impeded and insulted in every case by violent Red agitators. I do not happen to be a supporter of Sir Oswald Mosley but I went to hear him. I was not allowed to do so, owing to the violence and wrecking methods adopted by the people **who are now defended by Conservative Members of Parliament**".

Hamilton-Fyfe, former editor of the *Daily Herald*, wrote on June 13, "I am not likely to be suspected of any sympathy with fascism ... therefore, I feel free to say how unwise – and even unfair – it was to organise interruptions at the Olympia meeting. It was organised: that is certain. I saw in Oxford Street, in the early evening, bands of young men, **mostly Jews**, on their way to the meeting. Every few minutes they shouted in unison some slogan I could not catch. They were clearly in a fighting mood – and they got what they wanted".

Christopher W. Lowther, another former Tory MP, wrote to Mosley, “ ... I think the agitation which has arisen against the Blackshirt methods of dealing with organised interruptions is wholly unjustified. I was impressed by the fact that all your stewards whom I saw seemed to be very decent folk, a very good type of British youth. I saw no ejections that were not particularly justified. I have suffered at several elections from organised interruptions and I think you have hit upon the proper method of dealing with it”.

Another witness, Vice-Admiral G.B. Powell observed, “The great proportion of the audience resented the interruptions and showed that their sympathies were with the Blackshirt stewards by continually cheering when the rowdies were being removed. There was dangerous hustling outside Olympia by communists attempting to prevent the public who had taken tickets from entering the building. One of the women of my party suffered from it. In fact, if it had not been for the police, I do not think we should have been able to get in”.

In the *Socialist Standard* in an article “Reason or Violence” on July 1: “What is exceedingly curious in the business, however, is the righteous indignation of the communists – who have gloried in meeting smashing for years and promised to suppress all discordant voices if they get power. In our view, those who went to the fascist meeting with the intention of creating disorder and making the meeting impossible **only got what they asked for and have no reason to complain if they were roughly handled.**”

Writing in the *Sunday Pictorial* on June 24, David Lloyd George MP commented on the events at Olympia: “It is difficult to explain why the fury of the champions of free speech should be concentrated so exclusively, not on those who deliberately and resolutely attempted to prevent the public expression of opinion, of which they disapproved, but against those who fought, however roughly, for free speech ... I have an antipathy to that class of interruption and I feel that men who enter meetings with the deliberate intention of suppressing free speech have no right to complain if an exasperated audience handles them rudely”.

The hostility aimed at Mosley from the Conservative press smacked of hypocrisy. Tories had long given up both open air and public indoor meetings by retreating from communist violence. Tory leaders could only be heard at carefully screened indoor meetings where only the party faithful could attend. Being in control of much of the powerful press, they did not care too much for addressing the public in the way that Mosley could, nor did they feel they had to.

The Blackshirts defeated organised communist violence in a way the Tories were incapable of doing. As such, they feared Mosley’s success and sided with the communists in denouncing him as the instigator of the violence at Olympia.

This lie, that he was responsible for the disorder, has stuck ever since.

Robert Edwards

'Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists by Robert Edwards'