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“Peer’s Daughters”: The Mitford Sisters and Aristocratic Female Politics

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A Thesis in the Field of History

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Harvard University

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Abstract

Following the First World War, Britain experienced drastic social and political change. In a period of upheaval, aristocratic women strove to balance social and political changes with centuries of aristocratic tradition. The Mitford sisters provide a unique cross section of female aristocratic life during this changing time and illustrate a variety of female reactions to this balancing act through their varied political views, as well as the role personal relationships played in shaping political beliefs.

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I.

Introduction

If one were to imagine an eccentric aristocratic British family of the 1920s and 1930s, the fictional creation would likely not be far from the reality of the Mitfords. Raised in a series of Cotswold country houses, each house growing smaller in succession as their father, Lord Redesdale, made a series of poor financial decisions, the six Mitford sisters, Nancy, Pamela, Diana, Unity, Jessica, and Deborah, were largely left to their own devices as children and young adults. Their father, Lord Redesdale, proved to be an unreliable political presence in the House of Lords, and both he and his wife in time turned from relative conservatism to fascism, although Lord Redesdale would later recant. Whatever the political inclinations of their parents, the sisters seem primarily to have drawn their own political conclusions from their autodidactic education rather than any real parental influence. Indeed, their political views were largely solidified before Lord and Lady Redesdale showed any support for fascism. Amongst the sisters, self-education and sibling rivalries led to a wide divergence of political beliefs, with Unity and Diana taking the far right, Jessica the far left, and Pamela, Deborah, and Nancy taking various positions in the middle. In this environment so too did their eccentricities flourish. A young Unity Mitford, for example, if upset at dinner, would slowly and

silently slide beneath the table.[1] Similarly, many aspects of Mitford history seem to have slid out of view, leaving behind their scandals and eccentricities.

With this diverted focus, despite the pervasiveness of politics throughout their lives, little study has been made of their political experiences, and most work concerning the Mitford sisters is limited to biography. One Mitford biographer, Mary Lovell, even goes so far as to say of her work, *The Sisters*, that "this is not a political book."[2] And yet it is nearly impossible to separate the lives of the Mitford sisters from their political beliefs, so interwoven were politics with their life choices.

In exploring the political beliefs of aristocratic women through study of the Mitford sisters, this thesis primarily utilizes a microhistorical approach. Microhistory typically focuses on one individual or small group in order to reveal details that might be lost in a broader approach. Perhaps the most famous use of microhistorical analysis is Carlo Ginzburg's study of a sixteenth-century Italian miller in *The Cheese and the Worms*. Ginzburg's approach revealed much about the religious beliefs of peasants during this time period, a group that had largely been silent in the greater historical record.[3] While microhistory is often concerned with underrepresented groups, like Ginzburg's Italian peasantry, microhistorian Giovanni Levi states that "microhistory is not necessarily the history of the excluded, the powerless, and the far away. It needs to be

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[1] Laura Thompson, *The Six: The Lives of the Mitford Sisters* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2016), 123.

[2] Mary S. Lovell, *The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 2.

[3] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

the reconstruction of moments, situations, and people…studied with an analytical eye, in a defined context…as points of reference within the complex contexts in which human beings move."[4]

Ultimately, microhistory is intended to "test grand generalizations", and Giovanni Levi states that "the unifying approach of all micro-historical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved."[5] Critics of microhistory fear that the method leads to sweeping generalizations, and yet more traditional historical methods of "macrohistory" can admittedly lead to generalizations of a different sort, generalizations in which gaps in knowledge are smoothed over by overarching historical trends. Microhistorian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon's study of health in Iceland is one example of how microhistory can fill in the gaps in knowledge left by other historical methods. Statistics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would indicate that general health in Iceland showed steady improvement, but when exploring the same time period through individual experiences, Magnússon revealed a markedly different picture.[6] Through Magnússon's research, microhistory revealed intriguing variations from the established historical narrative.

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[4] Cited in Richard D. Brown, "Micro-history and the Post-Modern Challenge," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, ed. Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (Boston: Brill, 2014), 134.

[5] Cited in Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, "Criticisms of Microhistory," in *What Is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice*, ed. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó (London: Routledge, 2013), 122.

[6] Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, "Refashioning a Famous French Peasant," in *What Is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice*, ed. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó (London: Routledge, 2013), 106-108.

Microhistory, however, is not arguing against context, nor advocating for the exclusion of "known" history. Egyptologist Juan Carlos Moreno García, for example, utilized a microhistorical approach in order to supplement official Egyptian texts written at the behest of the Pharaohs, seeking a better understanding of ancient Egyptian social and cultural values by focusing on individuals often excluded from official records.[7] In his approach, García advocates for multiple small cases to compare against the established historical narrative. This method, García argues, provides the necessary context that fosters historical analysis rather than simply creating a series of anecdotes.[8] Similarly, this thesis seeks to compare the political beliefs and experiences of the Mitford sisters against a selection of their aristocratic contemporaries, while still delving in great detail into their individual experiences, endeavoring to connect the Mitford sisters to the greater historical narrative.

The bulk of primary source material for this thesis is comprised of correspondence written by the Mitford sisters and their individual autobiographical memoirs. Charlotte Mosley's collections of Mitford correspondence, *The Mitfords: Letters between Six Sisters* and *The Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy* have proven instrumental in understanding both the tangled relationships and rivalries of the Mitford sisters, and their political views. Charlotte Mosley's collection, through extensive cataloguing of Mitford correspondence, also captures something of the humor and tone of the sisters, aristocratic yet uniquely Mitford, as much a part of the sisters' vocabulary as their own private language of Boudledidge. Nancy Mitford's novels, *Wigs*

[7] Juan Carlos Moreno García, "Microhistory," *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 1.1 (January 2018), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6fr8p2hb.

[8] Moreno García, "Microhistory," 12.

on the Green, *Pigeon Pie*, and the *Pursuit of Love* also illustrate the Mitford humor used by Nancy and her sisters with varying degrees of success, as well as insight into Nancy's political beliefs.

A scholar researching British politics between the wars is fortunate in that the secondary source material available on the subject is numerous. Despite this wealth of information, discussion of the female political experience is still often peripheral to the overarching historical narratives of party development or political campaigns. Scholars like Julie Gottlieb, however, have endeavored to remedy this lack, focusing on the intersection of gender and politics, and Gottlieb's *Feminine Fascism* in particular has provided critical insight into female support for an often aggressively male political belief system. Martin Pugh also discusses politics between the wars, both in *We Danced All Night,* a broader view of the Interwar period, and *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!*, Pugh's analysis of British fascism. Political scholarship concerning the 1930s in Britain admittedly is heavy on fascism, and by extension its polar opposite of communism, although there is also ample scholarship centered on women in the Conservative and Labour parties. Primarily, this scholarship is concerned with the history of the political parties over individuals, and when individual motivations and experiences are explored, accounts typically highlight the comparatively few women holding political office or key players in political movements, rather than women who might be categorized as political "followers" rather than "leaders." Much of this is necessitated by source material; understandably, more interest would typically be shown to the political beliefs of a female MP than to those of a woman with less political influence and as a result, these are primarily the sources scholars have to work with.

Despite the role politics played in the lives of the Mitford sisters, and their personal connections with political leaders like Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, and Oswald Mosley, they are rarely discussed in a manner that moves beyond biography or a passing reference to their eccentricities and scandals. Although the sisters had personal connections to political leaders, the Mitford sisters did not hold political office or lead political movements themselves, and consequently the historical record has largely remembered them as scandalous oddities rather than any reflection of the greater political experience. However, their prominence in tabloid headlines and personal connections with prominent men like Churchill, Hitler, and Mosley ensured that their lives were well-documented, providing ample material with which to explore the political beliefs of aristocratic women, including those who did not hold positions of political leadership, and as a result may have previously been overlooked. Indeed, the majority of aristocratic women did not hold political office or lead political movements, and yet the expansion of suffrage and increasingly political tone of the 1930s indicates that politics would have played a significant role in their lives.

The Mitford sisters came of age during a time of great change, in a Britain forever altered by one World War and unknowingly heading for another. Politically and socially, Britain had been transformed by the conflict. By 1918, partial women's suffrage had been achieved. That same year saw the first female Member of Parliament take her seat. Other political changes soon followed, including the establishment of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920, extended female suffrage in 1928, and later the British Union of Fascists in 1932. Following the First World War, British politics took a radical turn, and men and women alike explored new political territory. Elements of the old remained,

however, namely for the aristocracy, comprised of Peers of the Realm and their near relations, who clung to the power and influence they felt to be slipping away. In the face of emerging ideologies, what we now think of as the Interwar Period saw a strange new mix of flamboyant exhibitionism and increased political interest. By the end of the 1920s, the wild parties of the Bright Young People had been replaced by political rallies and marches, often equally wild, and the tabloid headlines gleefully mingled scandal with politics.[9] Tabloid scandal served to amplify the political extremes, an illusion of political duality in which communism and fascism dominated, spurred on in competition as fierce as any sibling rivalry amongst the Mitford sisters. Scandals like the so-called "Cliveden Set", reputedly a group of aristocratic fascists plotting to bring Britain under Nazi rule, were largely fictional, and yet they made it all too easy for the public to imagine widespread fascist support amongst the aristocracy.[10] So too could a nebulous "red" threat be regularly imagined as a danger to British society.[11] Soon, communism and fascism were frequently presented as the best means to halt the other. And yet, the scandal generated by tabloid fictions like the "Cliveden Set" indicates overall public disapproval of both extremes, views perceived to be outside of the acceptable spectrum of political beliefs. Here, much like Nancy Mitford's fictional representations of her family fed into the Mitford mythos, political fiction mingled with reality in the public

[9] Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain between the Wars* (London: Bodley Head, 2008), 82.

[10] Julie V. Gottlieb, "Modes and Models of Conservative Women's Leadership in the 1930s," in *Rethinking Right-Wing Women: Gender and the Conservative Party, 1880s to the Present*, ed. Berthezène Clarisse and Julie V. Gottlieb (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 96-98.

[11] Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century* (Bern, Switzerland, Peter Lang UK, 2015), 66-67.

consciousness. Indeed, moderate political behavior generated little interest in the tabloids, and Unity, Diana, and Jessica received far wider press coverage than their more moderate sisters. Nothing sells newspapers like scandal and public outrage.

In this environment, politics seemed omnipresent, and following the two phases of female suffrage, in 1918 and 1928, women were able to participate in politics more than ever before. In the Mitford sisters, we see six aristocratic women from one shared upbringing who all reacted to the widespread changes of the period in markedly different ways. And yet, their motivations were remarkably similar, each sister trying to carve out a place for herself in a changing aristocratic society, one that perceived its power, influence, and very way of life to be slipping away, a society in which women now had more political agency, yet still contended with centuries of class expectation and tradition. The reactions of the Mitford sisters, and of other aristocratic women like them, indicates to what degree these women were willing to accept the expectations put upon them by years of class tradition, or conversely, to what degree they rejected them in their political beliefs. The primacy of personal relationships in the formation of political beliefs is also markedly evident in the lives of the Mitford sisters. Indeed, personal relationships play perhaps the greatest role in influencing the politics of the Mitford sisters, including their sibling relationships and rivalries, as well as, to borrow from Nancy Mitford, through the "pursuit of love" in which political decisions were very much influenced by the men the sisters chose to love. Using the Mitford sisters, this thesis contends that the political beliefs of British aristocratic women were complex and varied, formed primarily through personal relationships and in response both to aristocratic

tradition and to the emerging political ideologies of fascism and communism after the First World War.

II.

No Middle Course: Fascism

By the close of the 1920s, Britain shifted towards radicalization, particularly when it came to politics. While the 1920s had generally been categorized as one of indulgent excess, as the decade drew to a close, as Nancy Mitford wrote in *The Pursuit of Love*, "life had become so serious."[12] With financial and political turmoil looming over Europe, suddenly the fancy dress parties and treasure hunts of the so-called Bright Young People, much a part of 1920s excess, were not viewed by the public with the same degree of amusement and mild disapproval they had elicited in earlier years. With the public's mind shifting toward politics and financial crisis, the performative excesses of the Bright Young People began to rankle. One elaborate "Second Childhood Party" held in London in the late summer of 1929 provided dolls and bottles to partygoers and served drinks in a giant playpen while guests were seen to arrive in oversized baby carriages. Such outrageous antics prompted an onlooker to remark that this was "the type of behavior that leads to communism."[13] With unemployment on the rise, such extreme frivolity seemed wasteful and infuriating in the face of increasing strikes and hunger marches. Although unemployment had been a constant throughout the 1920s, the situation saw no sign of improving as the decade drew to a close, and public dissatisfaction bubbled beneath the

[12] Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love & Love in a Cold Climate* (New York: Random House, 2001), 181.

[13] David John Taylor, *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 147.

surface.[14] Reporting on a Red and White Party held on the same day as an unemployment march, the society magazine the *Bystander* indignantly reported on "ill-bred extravagance...as hungry men were marching on London to get work."[15] By the early 1930s, the British unemployed would number nearly three million, and public opinion no longer seemed willing to indulge misbehavior.[16] To a public who had previously greedily followed their antics and scandals, the Bright Young People no longer seemed so bright.

Increasingly, the views of the general public on the Bright Young People seemed to coincide with that of Lord Metroland, a character in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, published in 1930. Metroland disparaged the young people of the 1920s, saying, "I don't understand them, and I don't want to. They had a chance after the war that no other generation has ever had. There was a whole civilization to be saved and remade – and all they seem to do is play the fool."[17] Even the Bright Young People themselves seemed to feel the impending change, an approaching end to what Nancy Mitford had, in a prospective title for her first novel, deemed, "Our Vile Age." Scandals, too, became more serious and took on a distinctly political tone as Europe headed for another war. Indeed, the scandals concerning the Mitford sisters reflect the strong political tone that emerged in 1930s press coverage, even in the tabloids. Headlines about the sisters showed the political and the scandalous in equal measure, emphasizing Unity's connections to Hitler

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[14] Pugh, *"We Danced All Nigh,", 78.*

[15] Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 255.

[16] Laura Thompson, *The Six: The Lives of the Mitford Sisters* (New York, St Martin's Press, 2016), 6.

[17] Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 157.

with headlines like "Her Heart Crushed by Hitler's Fist" or "Perfect Nordic Woman Fleeing Germany."[18] Diana too was discussed in terms of her Nazi connections with headlines like "Hitler Mosley's Best Man in Wedding to 'the Ideal Nordic.'"[19] Conversely, press coverage also focused on Jessica's opposing political beliefs with headlines like "British Beauty Hates Nazis, So She's Working in the U.S."[20] Press emphasis on Jessica Mitford's "red" tendencies also extended to the coverage of her elopement with "Winston's 'Red' Nephew", Esmond Romilly, and a 1937 *Daily Express* headline of "Peer's Daughter of 17 'Elopes,' Spain Search" incorrectly featuring a photograph of Deborah Mitford earned Deborah £1,000 in a lawsuit.[21] Even on the rare occasion when one of the less-extreme sisters, Nancy, Pam, or Deborah, featured in headlines, their connection to one or more of their radical sisters was generally noted in a bid to sell newspapers. Their mother, Lady Redesdale, highlighted the frequency with which her daughters appeared in the tabloids, sighing, "Whenever I see the words 'Peer's daughter' in a headline, I know it's going to be something about you children."[22] And

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[18] "Jessica Mitford," FBI file for Jessica Mitford, part 1, pg. 4-13. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice, https://vault.fbi.gov/jessica-mitford/jessica-mitford-part-1-of-8/view.

[19] "Hitler Best Man at Mosley's Wedding to 'the Ideal Nordic,'" *Washington Post*, November 28, 1938.

[20] "Jessica Mitford," FBI file for Jessica Mitford, part 1, pg. 21. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice,https://vault.fbi.gov/jessica-mitford/jessica-mitford-part-1-of-8/view.

[21] Charlotte Mosley, *The Mitfords: Letters between Six Sisters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 82.

[22] Nancy Mitford, *The Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy*, ed. Charlotte Mosley (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), 75.

perhaps Lady Redesdale was right to worry. Deborah's lawsuit indicates how powerful scandalous press could be; a headline misidentifying Deborah as Jessica was felt to seriously damage her future, winning her £1,000. Scandal, over events real or imagined, could be powerful.

Politics and tabloid scandal continued to intertwine in the years leading up to the war. Perhaps the most striking example of politics combining with scandal, aside from the extensive coverage given to the Mitford sisters, arose in the relationship of Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson. Although largely repressed in the British press, the affair of Edward VIII with the American divorcee Wallis Simpson eventually attracted the notice of a British public hungry for scandal. The resulting Abdication Crisis of 1936, by which time the relationship could no longer be kept from the British press, in some ways distracted from impending conflict with Germany, but the reality was that politics were very much connected to the scandal surrounding Edward VIII and Simpson. In fact, an increase in Nazi sympathies, rumored or real, on the part of the king had conveniently been blamed on Wallis Simpson.[23] The scandal was imbued with such power that even a young Jessica Mitford, who claimed to take little interest in the personal aspect of the relationship, naively hoped to turn protest over the forced choice between "Wally and the Throne" into a means to overthrow the Tory government.[24]

The performative radicalism shown in the 1920s had, by the 1930s, taken on a political tone. Rather than the pranks and outrageous theme parties of the Bright Young

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[23] Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travelers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany, 1933-9* (London: Constable, 1980), 243-244.

[24] Jessica Mitford, *Hons and Rebels* (New York: New York Review Books, 2004), 111.

People, politics would now dominate the headlines, even in the tabloids. While tabloid headlines might seem superfluous to any historical or political discussion, the reality is that they provide clues to the mentality of the British public, and how their views shifted from the end of the First World War toward the beginning of another. The tabloid press also influenced political feeling, printing sensational political stories, whether true or fictional, that mingled with the political reality.[25] Furthermore, with the Mitford sisters so frequently featured in the tabloid press, it would be impossible, in their case, to separate the political from the scandalous.

Indeed, politics were very much at the forefront of the public consciousness in Britain during the 1930s. According to Diana Mitford, "in 1932 we all – everyone with the slightest intelligence – thought about politics. We believed that our parents' generation had made the war, that by will plus cleverness its horrible legacy could be cancelled out, and the world could be changed."[26] In keeping with this radicalization, this desire to change the world, two polarizing political parties, the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), soon emerged. The two opposing political creeds of communism and fascism, reaching Britain around the time of the First World War, proved to be a dominating political issue in Britain by the 1930s, bleeding into other arenas like unemployment, social stratification, and international relations. The apparent political dominance of communism and fascism, however, was largely symbolic, and both political groups received much of their support through loose

[25] Bingham and Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, 66-67.

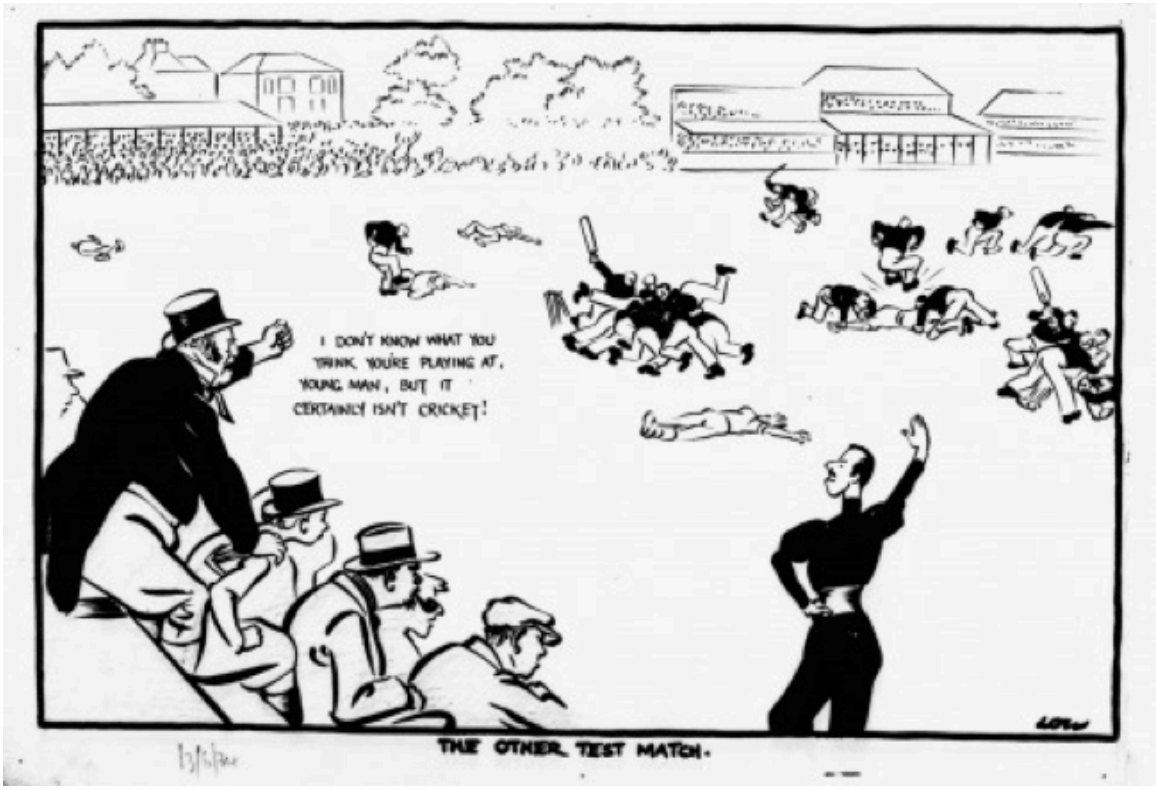
[26] Laura Thompson, *The Six: The Lives of the Mitford Sisters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 119.

affinities rather than genuine conversion or membership. In truth, despite growing membership during the 1930s, both fascism and communism were dwarfed by the Conservatives, Labour, and even the fading Liberal Party.[27] Intriguingly, the polarity of the two political extremes created a false dichotomy, a mindset in which a wide spectrum of political beliefs was often lumped in with either fascism or communism. This false dichotomy stemmed largely from political beliefs defined by opposition, anti-fascism and anti-communism, each understood primarily through their antithesis. The press, too, fed into this false dichotomy, amplifying the extremes in order to sell papers. The fiction of rampant fascism and communism soon became a part of the public's political conciousness, with fiction tangled with reality, and political thought regularly focused on oposition to whatever sensational poltical threat, real or imagined, the papers had put forth at the time.[28] This trend is reflected in the anti-fascist cartoon published in the *Evening Standard* in 1934 in which the viewer of a scuffle involving Mosley's Blackshirts shouts, "I don't know what you think you're playing at, young man, but it

[27] Rodney S. Barker, *Political Ideas in Modern Britain: In and after the Twentieth Century (*London: Routledge, 1997), 168.

[28] Bingham and Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, 66-67.

certainly isn't cricket!"[29]



Opposition, indeed vehement opposition, to a political movement (whether or not the nuances of said movement were fully understood) became a defining aspect of British political thought during this era, and women were fully included in this trend.[30] Indeed, the establishment of fascism and communism as political parties in Britain owed much to women, both having a radical woman central to their foundation in Rotha Lintorn-Orman and Sylvia Pankhurst, respectively. Like Nancy Mitford wrote of the Radletts, her

[29] David Low, "The Other Test Match," *Evening Standard*, June 13, 1934.

[30] Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 149.

family's fictional counterparts, it seems that when it came to fascism and communism, the British of the 1930s "knew no middle course, [they] either loved or [they] hated."[31]

And while this sentiment was true enough in regard to reactions (often an emotional response rather than a considered critique of political ideology) to communist and fascist thought, the political reality was far more diverse for men and women alike. Post-suffrage politics after 1928 meant a shift for women away from a single-minded drive for equal representation, and by the 1930s, women's political interests had diversified. Nevertheless, amongst this diversity, there were many who truly embraced a desire for radical political change. Indeed, it could be argued that for many suffragettes, continued radicalism was political destiny.[32] The call for equal voting rights for women was itself radical, as were many of the methods utilized by suffragettes. The very mythos of the movement called upon the radical martyrdom (whether literal or figurative) of suffragettes like Emily Davison throwing herself under the hooves of a horse, Mary Richardson slashing Titian's Rokeby Venus in the National Gallery in London, or the various other members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) encouraged by Emmeline Pankhurst to carry out various interpretations of militancy, ranging from passive protest to arson.[33] And while militant tactics were largely phased out near the end of the First World War as the leaders of the movement sought more traditional political paths to power in anticipation of gaining the vote, there were certainly some former

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[31] Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love*, 14.

[32] Laura Mayhill, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 48.

[33] Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c.1689-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 66-69.

suffragettes who yearned for the radical militancy of the early 1900s. By the 1930s, Mosley's BUF offered an opportunity for dissatisfied suffragettes longing for a return to their former radicalism.[34]

In attracting followers, Mosley capitalized on dissatisfaction. Primarily, the suffragettes drawn to the Blackshirt movement were those who felt let down by more traditional political paths. Like the most militant of the suffragettes, Blackshirt women primarily operated outside mainstream politics, perfectly willing to engage in violence and illegal acts for the cause.[35] Mary Richardson, the very suffragette who had slashed the Rokeby Venus, was one such example. After nearly a decade of post-suffrage attempts to take public office within the Labour party, Richardson had been thoroughly unsuccessful. For a woman who had once contributed to a piece called "When I am MP" in *The Vote*, the Women's Freedom League paper, during her earlier Labour candidacy of the 1920s, this failure proved thoroughly disheartening and disillusioning.[36] Turning away from Labour politics by the 1930s, Richardson herself identified the appeal of the Blackshirts, stating that "I saw in them the courage, the action, the loyalty, the gift of service, and the ability to serve which I had known in the suffragette movement." Some even believed that the total obedience shown to Emmeline Pankhurst laid the groundwork for the suffragettes who turned to Mosley. For these women, the adventure and drama of

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[34] Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain since 1914* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 33-35.

[35] Julie Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain' Fascist Movement, 1923-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 268.

[36] Hilda Kean, "Some Problems of Constructing and Reconstructing a Suffragette's Life: Mary Richardson, Suffragette, Socialist and Fascist," *Women's History Review* 7, no. 4 (1998): 481.

the Blackshirt movement, coupled with a charismatic leader, represented an appealing alternative to the mainstream politics that caused them such dissatisfaction.[37]

And while former suffragettes were certainly not the only women to gravitate toward Mosley and his movement, indeed they comprised only one small portion of female BUF membership, they do provide an example of a distinct type of adventurous and rebellious woman to whom the Blackshirts appealed. Nancy Mitford herself saw the similarities between the suffragettes and some of fascism's most dedicated female followers, similarities in many ways epitomized by her sister Unity. In Nancy's satirical *Wigs on the Green*, written in early 1934, Eugenia Malmains (a thinly disguised but less dangerous version of Unity) is described as "a fine girl...'If she had been born twenty years sooner she would have been a suffragette.'"[38] Physically large and inherently stubborn, Unity was fond of utilizing shock to gain attention; according to legend she often brought her pet rat or grass snake to parties and stole Buckingham Palace writing paper during her presentation at court. While these antics are somewhat disputed amongst the Mitford sisters themselves, Unity clearly did enjoy attention. Despite her passing resemblance to Diana, she must have realized that she "was not physically equipped to be a great favourite with nervous young Englishmen, who would inevitably prefer something smaller and more conventional." Her attention-seeking behavior seems to reflect this; realizing she would not be paid much attention in more traditional ways, such as being favored by young men at debutante balls, Unity sought notice through other

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[37] Martin Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!": Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 143-144.

[38]Nancy Mitford, *Wigs on the Green* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 129.

means.[39] While each of the Mitford sisters desired attention, their formative years shaped by the celebrity culture of the Bright Young Things, Unity's appearance and her unconventional pranks, a clumsier use of the Mitford humor than Nancy's clever and more socially acceptable "teases", meant a discordance with aristocratic traditions of debutante balls and marriages between titled families. Unity's need for attention, attention that was unlikely to be granted for her looks alone, coupled with her passionate and rebellious nature, would soon move from teenage pranks toward politics.

Although Unity is most connected to Hitler and Nazism, her earliest exposure to fascism occurred closer to home. Unity had dabbled in antisemitic and pseudo-fascist thought as early as 1930, reading *Jew Süss*, a novel used in Germany to promote antisemitism through its stereotypical Jewish characters.[40] However, it seems that more was needed to truly ignite Unity's fanaticism. During the end of Unity's season in London, Unity was introduced to Oswald Mosley in 1932. Mosley was by this point involved with Unity's sister Diana, and Unity immediately idolized him, forever after referring to him reverently as "The Leader."[41] In the following year, Diana and Unity visited Germany, and were invited to attend a rally at Nuremberg by Ernst "Putzi" Hanfstanaegl. Unity was charmed by Hanfstanaegl, a cunning man who no doubt saw Unity and Diana, blonde and aristocratic, as potentially useful to the Nazi cause. While Unity had yet to meet Hitler in 1933, the catalyst who would trigger her undying devotion

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[39] Thompson, The Six, 127-128.

[40] Mary S. Lovell, *The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 121.

[41] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 140.

to fascism, Lord and Lady Redesdale scented danger; knowing their daughter's nature, they wrote to Diana stating angrily that they hoped to keep Unity away from Nazism and were outraged that she had attended the rally.[42] Ironically, Lady Redesdale would herself in time become an ardent supporter of Nazism. Upon her return to England, Unity continued to attend the balls and parties expected of a young aristocratic woman, but also rebelled against this expectation, spending considerable time attending BUF rallies, walking the streets handing out flyers, or at BUF headquarters with Mosley's male followers.[43]

While Julie Gottlieb emphasizes the choice and free-will of female fascists in *Feminine Fascism*, it is impossible to ignore the influence of men on Unity's political experience, and indeed the influence of men on the Mitford political experience more generally.[44] According to Laura Thompson, "something in [the Mitford sisters] responded to the dark power of the times....There was a strong sex element in it, in this willingness to embrace the aggressive and unyielding, and it was obviously connected to individual men."[45] Unity's devotion to fascism certainly followed this model. Her understanding of the political tenets of Mosley's fascism and Hitler's Nazism was vague at best. She had little interest in the more cerebral aspects of the movements she supported, preferring instead the action, drama, and the charismatic magnetism of her revered leaders.

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[42] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 161.

[43] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 163.

[44] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 7.

[45] Laura Thompson, *The Six: The Lives of the Mitford Sisters* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2016), 8.

Fascism's appeal lay more in its "flamboyant political rituals" than in intellectual pursuits.[46] And then there were, as one Mitford nanny put it, "all those men."[47]

Mosley's BUF was, despite female involvement, largely a masculine, militaristic organization. Black House, Mosley's headquarters, was full of young, unmarried men, living and training together in military-style barracks. A fellow debutante recalled Unity sneaking away to play ping pong with "the boys" and reveling in the attention of these uniformed young men, much as she would later enjoy the attentions of SS officers in Nazi Germany.[48] The appeal of a man in uniform was not lost on BUF supporters and detractors alike. According to Wilhelm Reich, "the sexual effect of a uniform...the exhibitionist nature of militaristic procedure, have been more politically comprehended by a salesgirl or an average secretary than by our more erudite politicians."[49] Mosley himself capitalized on his looks and the appeal of the uniform to gain female admirers, spurring comparisons to Rudolph Valentino amongst his female devotees. Between a fascist "Valentino" and scores of athletic, uniformed young men, many critics, namely male critics, grumbled that women were turning to Mosley's brand of fascism simply to find husbands.[50] Such youthful obsession was not to be taken seriously by many, despite the collective voting power of these women. Similar sentiments were expressed in

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[46] Rodney S. Barker, *Political Ideas in Modern Britain: In and after the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1997), 168.

[47] Thompson, *The Six*, 60.

[48] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 163.

[49] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 95.

[50] Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"*, 132.

Nancy's *Wigs on the Green* by the character Mrs. Lace who "pronounced that when you find schoolgirls like Eugenia going mad about something you can be pretty sure it is nonsense."[51] Nonsense or not, Unity's devotion was of a darker, more dangerous tone than typical schoolgirl adoration.

Unity's admiration of Hitler had strong parallels to the film-star level of worship shown to Mosley by many of his female followers. By 1934, Unity had convinced her parents to allow her to move to Munich. Her goal was to meet Hitler, and she set about it in the manner of a teenage girl with a runaway crush, or more sinisterly, in the manner of a stalker, frequenting his favorite restaurants, hoping that her striking blonde looks would catch his eye. Eventually, they did.[52] While Hitler seems to have enjoyed Unity's company for its own sake, her fearless, joking Mitford chatter no doubt a welcome change from his usual interactions, he also saw her as a useful connection. For Unity, however, there were no ulterior motives, simply great joy from the attentions of her adored Führer.[53] And once this attention had been gained, Unity would do anything to keep it. In the summer of 1935, Unity wrote a horrifying letter to *Der Sturmer*, a publication edited by an extremely antisemitic Julius Streicher, saying "If only we had such a newspaper in England! The English have no notion of the Jewish danger. English Jews are described as 'decent.' Perhaps the Jews in England are more clever with their propaganda than in other countries. I cannot tell, but it is a certain fact that our struggle is very hard..." She ended with "If you find room in your newspaper for this letter, please

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[51] Mitford, *Wigs on the Green*, 47.

[52] Thompson, *The Six*, 165.

[53] Thompson, *The Six*, 169-174.

publish my name in full...I want everyone to know I am a Jew hater." Thompson concludes that it is difficult to know if Unity was truthful in expressing her antisemitism. More than anything she wanted to impress Hitler, and hold his attention, and the letter could have been designed to do exactly that. However, it is possible that she meant every word she wrote. In any case, Unity was flaunting her Nazism much as she had previously flaunted her unusual pets during her London season, courting attention through shock and outrage.[54]

Ever the attention-seeker, Unity's flamboyant adoration of Hitler at first glance seems a radical anomaly. However, despite her extreme performance of Nazism, Unity's sentiments were shared by other British women of her class, simply lacking Unity's intensity and signature flair for the shocking. One such woman was Margaret Greville, wife of the Hon. Ronald Greville. Although illegitimate, Greville had married into the aristocracy. A few years after her marriage, Margaret lost both her prosperous father and her husband in short succession, making her an extremely wealthy widow. She never remarried, but became a prominent society hostess, utilizing her royal connections (a carryover from her late husband's friendship with Edward VII) as a means to power. During the 1930s, her influence was great enough to make her potentially dangerous. Greville was determined to use her power to exert influence and was known to forcefully sway the opinions of politicians at her dinner parties. While her true ability to influence policy through her role as a hostess is somewhat ambiguous, her influence was clearly deemed significant enough to be taken seriously by the Germans. When Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador to Britain under Hitler, arrived in England,

[54] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 174.

Margaret Greville was reputedly the first person he went to see. Indeed, Greville seems to have been treated with more deference than von Ribbentrop showed even to the Prime Minister. This deference was repaid and Greville was known to lash out furiously at any guest who dared to criticize the Nazis in her company.[55]

Like Margaret Greville, Lady Emerald Cunard marks another aristocratic woman who favored Hitler's brand of fascism. An American who married into the British aristocracy, Emerald (formerly known as Maud), soon insinuated herself into aristocratic society, becoming a favorite hostess of many of the more intellectual socialites during the 1920s and 30s, and even winning over the future Edward VIII.[56] As a hostess, Lady Cunard enjoyed debate, and her preferred conversational technique was to "drop some bombshell, or make some outrageous statement purposely; that at once flung the guest into seething argument and dispute." She too, like Margaret Greville, courted the attentions of von Ribbentrop and other prominent Nazi officials and expressed her support for Hitler. As a result, Emerald Cunard was rumored to be responsible for exposing Edward VIII to pro-Nazi rhetoric.[57]

Margaret Greville and Lady Cunard were not alone in their interest in Nazism. Other prominent hostesses like Lady Sybil Colefax, Lady Londonderry, and even Nancy Astor courted the attentions of von Ribbentrop and his compatriots in London, making Nazism quite fashionable amongst the upper classes in Britain. Indeed, an entire society,

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[55] Brian Masters, *Great Hostesses* (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1982), 91-101.

[56] Masters, *Great Hostesses*, 115-116.

[57] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 198.

the Anglo-German Fellowship, sprang up to further the connection between Nazi Germany and the British elite. Nazi officials and the British aristocracy mingled at society dinners and shooting parties in the countryside in the company of some of the greatest hostesses of the age. Many of these prominent women also traveled to Germany to attend Nazi rallies and dinner parties as Unity and Diana did.[58] Both Lord and Lady Londonderry publicly praised the Nazis, and Lady Londonderry even went so far as to write to Hermann Goering, asking if she could, in friendship, call him by the more familiar, yet somewhat inexplicable, pet name of "Siegfried."[59] Nancy Mitford criticized this trend, writing in *Pigeon Pie* that "the Germans were told to make a fuss of English people, so of course masses of the English stampeded over there to be made a fuss of. But it never occurred to them that they were doing definite harm to their own country; they just got a kick out of saying 'mein Fuhrer' and being taken round in Mercedes-Benzes."[60] Harold Nicholson agreed, deriding the Anglo-German Fellowship and British visits to Nazi Germany, and the lavish parties thrown in England, saying "the harm theses silly hostesses do is immense!"[61] With these elegant and exclusive parties, Nazism took on an aura of glamour that conveniently masked its brutality.[62]

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[58] Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"*, 271.

[59] Nigel Todd, *In Excited Times: The People against the Blackshirts* (Whitley Bay: Bewick Press, 1995), 30.

[60] Nancy Mitford, *Pigeon Pie* (Feltham, England: Hamlyn Publishing, 1982), 21.

[61] Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"*, 271.

[62] Judy Suh, *Fascism and Anti-fascism in Twentieth-century British Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 133

In this support of Nazi Germany, these aristocratic hostesses were illustrating a portion of the aristocracy desperately clinging to power as British politics became increasingly populist. In the polarizing political environment of the 1930s, some aristocrats, Lord Redesdale among them, saw fascism as the best means to combat communism, a political ideology that threatened their power and privilege.[63] During the 1930s, many aristocrats, either displaced or feeling their influence slipping away with social and economic changes after the First World War, sympathized with or outright endorsed fascism as a way to sustain what they saw as "authentic forms of Englishness and challenge the institutions of parliamentary democracy that had recently bruised their political dominance."[64] Lord Redesdale epitomized this view, asking, "Has any one of [Hitler's] critics stopped to consider...what Europe would be like today if Germany had gone Red? By holding Bolshevism on the flanks of Western Civilization, a tragedy was averted."[65] Lord Redesdale's statement also illustrates intense fears of a vague "Red Peril", put forward by the press regularly throughout the 1920s with implied threats to property. For the landowning aristocracy, what could be more terrifying?[66] And these fears lingered into the 1930s. In *Wigs on the Green*, "Mitford captures the temptation of fascism for those who saw no end to class decline and simultaneously mythicized the past as a golden age." The political influence of aristocratic society hostesses through dinner party conversation further drew upon this mythical "golden age" of the pre-War

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[63] Thompson, *The Six*, 6.

[64] Suh, *Fascism and Anti-fascism in Twentieth-century British Fiction*, 133.

[65] Quoted in Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"*, 271.

[66] Bingham and Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, 73-74.

aristocracy, with women using social gatherings to influence powerful men, much as women of their class had been doing for decades.[67]

Even amongst the fascists themselves, class created divisions. The British aristocracy, male and female alike, was far more likely to support "foreign fascism" like Hitler's Nazi Germany or Mussolini in Italy than Mosley's BUF. While Mosley initially had many aristocratic supporters, as the movement became more populist and increasingly anti-elite, support from the aristocracy dwindled. Of the upper-class women who had supported the BUF, the majority of those who remained by the late 1930s were Mosley's family.[68] Following Lady Cynthia Mosley's death in 1933, Mosley's mother Maud became the most prominent woman in the BUF, saying, "Now that [Lady Cynthia] is dead there must be somebody to help him in his work and I am going to do my best to fill the gap."[69] And yet when Diana and Mosley married in Germany in 1936, Diana did not subsume Maud Mosley's role within the party.[70] While Cynthia, more commonly known as Cimmie, had been publicly by Mosley's side for much of his career, a relative political equal in his endeavors, by the time he had turned to fascism she had largely retreated from public politics due to ill health, and possibly also due to her misgivings about her husband's turn to fascism.[71] In contrast to his early political efforts with Cimmie, Mosley kept Diana firmly out of the BUF spotlight, and their marriage was not

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[67] Suh, *Fascism and Anti-fascism in Twentieth-century British Fiction,* 144.

[68] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 200.

[69] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 52.

[70] Thompson, *The Six*, 176.

[71] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 52.

even made public until 1938 when their son was born.[72] Mosley claimed that he feared for Diana's health as he was sure Cimme's political involvement had exhausted her and precipitated her death. However, he did allow Diana to travel to Munich with the goal of staying there and learning German, intending her to serve as a valuable link with Hitler. Diana had heard Hitler speak in Nuremberg and was convinced that he and Mosley hoped to accomplish similar things in their respective countries.[73] Despite his assertion of concern over Diana's health, it seems more likely that Mosley felt that Diana would be more useful as a link with Germany than in domestic BUF affairs. Indeed, Diana's aristocratic background, a boon in Nazi Germany, could have proved harmful to Mosley's BUF efforts. By 1938, the BUF was increasingly anti-elite, and Doreen Bell, a member of the BUF women's organization and frequent public speaker, expressed the sentiments of her fellow Blackshirts when she vehemently criticized the "Mayfair Parasites", pampered young aristocrats who contributed nothing to politics or society. To the increasingly populist BUF, Diana, formerly at the center of fashionable London society, would most certainly have warranted this unflattering label.[74] Ironically, Mosley was himself a member of the aristocracy. However, without Diana conspicuously by his side, Mosley could pretend to be a man of the people when it suited him.

In Diana's relationship with Mosley we once again see the influence of men on the Mitford political experience. Diana's political views saw a drastic shift upon her

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[72] Thompson, *The Six*, 176.

[73] Lyndsy Spence, *Mrs. Guinness: The Rise and Fall of Diana Mitford, the Thirties Socialite* (Stroud: History Press, 2015), 156.

[74] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 200.

alliance with Mosley. Previously, Diana had shown an interest in politics as a teenager and had a keen mind. The development of Diana's politics, however, is unique amongst her sisters. Unlike the passionate Unity and Jessica, Diana's early views had a more intellectual bent to them. Although largely self-educated, as were all the women in her family, Diana was fortunate enough to be invited to Chartwell, the home of her relative Winston Churchill, in the 1920s. While Diana's invitation was largely due to her looks, secured at the bequest of Randolph Churchill's unreciprocated crush on his beautiful cousin, her intelligence served her well at Chartwell where intellectual and political conversation reigned.[75] By the end of her visit, Diana had formed strong political opinions. In 1926, during the General Strike, Diana declared herself to be a "Lloyd George Liberal" and against the Tories. She sympathized with the miners and felt unnerved that the government could swoop in and take control of public services like the newspapers. Diana believed that Churchill and other "militant" cabinet members had wanted a strike, knowing full well that they had the means to crush it. By 1930, a year after her marriage to Bryan Guinness, Diana had declared that Churchill had become a warmonger.[76]

However, after her marriage to Bryan, Diana's interest in politics seemingly faded in favor of the glittering world of London's Bright Young People. The young couple began to throw elaborate parties and became a regular feature in society magazines such as the *Tatler* and the *Bystander*.[77] Although Diana would later deny any connection to

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[75] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness,* 20.

[76] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness,* 24.

[77] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness,* 72-73.

this set, "she was, as it were by divine right, placed instantly at the centre of London's artistic life."[78] Feted and adored, Diana was thoroughly bored, despite her lavish life in London in what, in view of aristocratic tradition, was an ideal marriage. In contrast to Bryan's gentle adoration of Diana, Mosley, never meek, was aggressive. Boredom made Diana reckless, and she soon threw herself wholeheartedly into an affair with Mosley. At a costume party, Diana openly danced with Mosley while Bryan, "looking like a shattered white rabbit", watched his wife flaunt her infidelity before their shocked guests. Later, Diana and Mosley snuck off upstairs together. Mosley, ever a bully, knew that Bryan would not have the nerve to intervene, and believed this gave him the right to "carry Diana off as his prize. He had won." Diana was later encouraged by Mosley to leave Bryan, despite Mosley's vow to Diana that he would never divorce or leave Cimmie. Mosley believed doing such would reflect badly on his recently created BUF, and would also alienate powerful connections formed through his wife.[79] Nevertheless, Diana left Bryan, and their divorce was underway by 1932, the year that Diana herself stated was consumed by politics, much as Diana was consumed by her relationship with Mosley.[80]

Under Mosley's influence, Diana's "Lloyd George liberal" attitudes soon faded. Mosley himself had run the gamut of Toryism, Labourite socialism, and finally fascism. "Diana loathed Toryism, and she viewed socialism as a facade which concealed Ramsay

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[78] Thompson, *The Six*, 111.

[79] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness,* 115-116.

[80] Thompson, *The Six*, 119

MacDonald's incompetence as Prime Minister of a Labour government. Fascism, she now surmised, 'had all the answers and sensible ones too.'"[81] Without Mosley, however, it seems unlikely that Diana would have turned so wholeheartedly away from her liberal beliefs. Indeed, in many ways, domestic fascism was a poor fit for Diana. After her prominence in high society, broadcast across the pages of the *Tatler* and the *Bystander*, Diana could hardly become the new female face of the now populist BUF. Even Mosley himself struggled to find ways to reconcile his aristocratic background with his role at the head of the BUF, justifying himself by crafting a narrative of leadership by an "elite of merit" rather than one of heredity. Raven Thomson, a prominent Scottish BUF member, stated that "fascism gains its strength by an alliance of the true aristocrats of action, blood and of character, with the workers of hand and of brain, producers of the nation's wealth…[and] the true aristocrat, the born leader of men, has no need for class distinction to maintain his natural superiority." After her scandalous affair and divorce from Bryan, coupled with her "Mayfair parasite" image in the eyes of the BUF, Diana could hardly be counted amongst this "elite of merit." Even Mosley himself was a problematic BUF leader in many respects; Ellen Wilkinson, a Labour Party politician, recognized this mismatch, stating, "[Mosley] is unpopular with his own class. Yet he is too scornfully aristocratic to be beloved by the masses." While Wilkinson's open dislike of Mosley, and resulting bias, must be considered, her views had merit.[82] Diana, with her golden looks and aristocratic Mitford accent, would never fit in with the BUF.

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[81] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness,* 106

[82] Quoted in Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*,196-197.

Despite Diana's discordance with the BUF image, she could still prove useful to Mosley's political goals in more subtle ways. In fact, Diana's domestic BUF participation was negligible, the most prominent example being a happenstance skirmish with anti-fascists at a communist rally in 1933, in which Diana, throwing up a provocative fascist salute, was only saved from the angry crowd by a young Blackshirt.[83] Where Diana could be of use, however, was in drumming up BUF support abroad, namely in Nazi Germany. Diana, along with her sister Unity, attended the Berlin Olympics in 1936 and stayed with the Goebbelses. Soon, connections with the elite of Nazi Germany were so strong that when Diana married Oswald Mosley, she did so at the home of the Goebbelses, with Hitler in attendance. With a strong dislike of Diana and Mosley, and resenting any outside influence on Hitler, Goebbels wrote of the marriage, "That's not all right with me but the Führer wants it to be so."[84] Despite the disapproval of Goebbels, Diana made frequent visits to Germany, often with BUF ends in mind. Goebbels indicated that Hitler financed the BUF, and that Diana often asked him for more money for the party.[85] As Mosley's favor in Britain fell, he increased his pleas for support from Germany, sending his wife as his emissary. Facing restrictions on the BUF in Britain as the country began to feel more uneasy about fascism at home and abroad, Diana came up with an idea for a radio station, Air Time Limited, which would allow Mosley (now banned from speaking on the BBC) to broadcast. To accomplish this, however, the station would have to be located on foreign soil. While this project was to be used to spread the message of

[83] Thompson, *The Six*, 145-146.

[84] Thompson, *The Six,* 176.

[85] Thompson, *The Six,* 172.

fascism, Diana did not consider her aim to be political. She reputedly hoped to use the station to sell household goods and manufacture a cosmetics line, intending to use the sales to make money for both Germany and for herself and her husband. Unsurprisingly, the controlling Goebbels was against the scheme and it came to nothing.[86]

Despite her close connection with Nazi elites, Diana's political machinations for the BUF more closely resembled the drawing room and dinner party influence exerted by prominent hostesses of her class, like Emerald Cunard and Margaret Greville, than the wild demonstrations of her sister Unity, and in many ways, Diana's tactics were potentially more dangerous. Unlike Unity who was happy simply to bask in the attention of her beloved Führer and was too openly adoring of Nazi Germany to be the recipient of any valuable British intelligence to pass along, Diana was more subtle. Her allegiance was always to her husband, and she did not hesitate to use her charms and influence to support Mosley's goals. And as Mosley's domestic support dwindled by the end of the 1930s, he had dire need of Diana's influence with Hitler. Numerous violent brawls involving the militant Blackshirts drove many big industrialists (who agreed with Mosley's ideals and would have financed him) away from the BUF. Public outcry led to a veritable media ban on Mosley, even alienating the *Daily Mail* (whose owner Lord Rothermere had once actively supported Mosley) after a boycott from advertisers.[87] Although Hitler said of Unity, "she and her sisters are very much in the know, thanks to

[86] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness*, 186-187.

[87] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness*, 151.

their relationship with influential people", it was Diana who made better use of her connections for Mosley's benefit.[88]

By 1939, however, the invasion of Poland spurred both England and France to declare war, and visits to Germany were no longer an option. War with Germany would mark drastic changes for both fascist Mitford sisters. When war was declared, Unity, in signature flamboyant fashion, expressed her despair by attempting suicide in the English Garden in Munich, shooting herself in the head. The shot, however, did not kill her, and instead a bullet lodged in her brain, too dangerous to remove. Unity became even more swayed by wild moods, unsteady, and incontinent, both in speech and in body, as a result. Hitler himself financed her treatment and sent her home to England, but not before she had tried to commit suicide for a second time by swallowing her swastika badge in the hospital.[89] Rumors flew as to Unity's condition; with limited communication between Britain and Germany, by some accounts, Unity was dead, by others arrested and interned in a camp, a fate that, if true, Nancy felt showed "a sort of poetic justice."[90] Fueled by rumor, Unity's return to England in 1940 was met with outrage and an enormous press presence. Lady Redesdale commented that "the Press were certainly very mad. They appear to have lost their senses over the arrival of poor Unity back in England."[91] Such madness likely extended to sabotage of the ambulance intended to convey Unity home; it

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[88] Thompson, *The Six,* 169.

[89] Thompson, *The Six,* 206-210.

[90]Mosley, *The Mitfords*, 83.

[91] Jonathan Guinness and Catherine Guinness, *The House of Mitford* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 436.

broke down almost immediately, followed closely by nearly all of Fleet Street, as did the car containing Unity's luggage. When footage of Unity raising herself from a stretcher upon disembarking in England, wobbling on her father's arm, was shown in cinemas, it was drowned out by angry abuse. After pushing herself into the public eye with her flamboyant and combative Nazism, Unity was well known, and now publicly reviled. Generally, it was believed that Unity's "illness" was an elaborate sham designed to help her avoid imprisonment, and Lady Redesdale's efforts to conceal the true extent of Unity's condition only furthered public suspicion and anger.[92]

Along with public outrage, debate raged in Parliament over Unity's return. Lord Denman addressed the footage of Unity in the House of Lords, saying,

> It seems to me that to magnify the return of Miss Unity Mitford to this country into a matter of national importance, as this film seemed to do, was really absurd. But what I thought far more objectionable than the pictures taken was the running commentary in rather indifferent verse, in which the commentator proceeded to make what I, at all events, thought were rather cheap jokes at the expense of Lord Redesdale and his daughter.[93]

Unity, for all her inflammatory antics, was not dangerous in Lord Denman's eyes, and the press attention given to her arrival was insensitive scandalmongering. Herbert Morrison in the House of Commons, however, disagreed. Morrison demanded to know what the British government had done "to facilitate the return of a British subject who had been openly assisting the cause of an enemy Government."[94] Morrison continued, asking if

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[92] Thompson, *The Six,* 212-213.

[93] United Kingdom, *House of Lords Hansard Sessional Papers*, Fifth ser., vol. 115 (1940), https://parlipapers-proquest-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/parlipapers/docview/t71. d76.lds5lv0115p0-0016?accountid=11311.

[94] United Kingdom, *House of Lords Hansard Sessional Papers*, Fifth ser., vol. 115 (1940), pg. 576,https://parlipapers-proquest-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/parlipapers/docview/t71.d76.lds5lv0115p0-0016?accountid=11311.

such lenience would have been shown to a working-class person in the same predicament. In truth, probably not. Unity's class afforded her protection; Lord Redesdale had asked that Unity not be questioned by the press on her return, and, in a further request that would have been explosive had it been widely known, had asked the Secretary of State for War for a guarantee that Unity would not be arrested. These requests were both granted.[95]

Public outrage only grew when in March of 1940, Unity had recovered enough from her injuries that the Redesdales intended to take her to their home on the remote Scottish Island of Inch Kenneth. Inch Kenneth was part of a prohibited area, and one Scottish MP demanded to know if Unity would be allowed to visit, outraged that "well-known Fascists can live in these islands while perfectly loyal people cannot visit their relatives."[96] While Parliament seemingly had no intention of allowing Unity to make the trip, in response, Lord Redesdale received a flood of anonymous letters, as the potential for further leniency shown to a known associate of Hitler revived public anger.[97] With such strong public resentment, Unity would stay near to her childhood home in the Cotswolds for most of the war, but any public appearances sparked public outrage anew. Herbert Morrison, who had once spoken out against Unity in the House of Commons, had in time discovered Unity's true condition, and softened. If Unity had recovered enough to

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[95] Thompson, *The Six*, 214-215.

[96] Thompson, *The Six*, 215.

[97] Lord Redesdale 'Abused': Unity Mitford's Father Gets 'Flood' of Anonymous Letters, New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 10, 1940, 42. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

appear publicly, should she not then be interned as a known Fascist "who had been openly [assisted] the cause of an enemy Government"? Morrison's reply was that "It is not a special privilege for a British citizen to be at liberty."[98] Unity, despite public opinion, was spared imprisonment.

Public outrage would soon, however, overcome Unity's sister Diana. Mosley, viewed with increasing suspicion as the 1930s drew to a close, and regularly advocating for peace with Germany, was eventually arrested in 1940. In total, 747 members of the BUF were taken in this first wave of arrests, and many Nazi sympathizers frantically backpedaled, desperate to prove their patriotism. Here again, however, class came into play, and few aristocrats were actually arrested under Defense Regulation 18b, which allowed arrest and imprisonment without trial of suspected Nazi sympathizers.[99] While much of this was likely due to privileged connections of the upper classes within the government, some in government felt that the arrest and imprisonment of aristocrats who had shown fascist sympathies or advocated for peace with Germany would eliminate any hope of assistance from the United States. Hastings Russell, the Duke of Bedford, with loose BUF connections and continued advocacy for peace with Germany, himself suspected that his continued freedom (despite rumors of his impending arrest) was a result of the view that "the imprisonment of peers would have created in America so deep an impression of the strength of the anti-war movement in Britain that the task of

[98] Thompson, *The Six*, 221.

[99] Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"*, 302-304.

dragging the USA into the war would have been made much less easy!"[100] Despite the panic over possible Fifth Columnists, there were few arrests made amongst the aristocracy, even though François Lafitte, the first author to focus on internment in 1940, stated that fewer traitors could be found amongst the refugees sent to the camps than in "Mayfair drawing rooms where Ribbentrop was once welcomed."[101] Leaving these fascist sympathizers free to enjoy the "Mayfair drawing rooms" where they had once publically entertained Nazis did little to combat any press fictions of a fascist aristocracy.[102]

Oswald Mosley, however, would not escape internment like the majority of fascist aristocrats; Mosley was now seen as too dangerous to remain at large, and Joseph Kennedy, the American Ambassador to Britain, stated that he believed that "it is possible some other government, that of Oswald Mosley for example, might turn over anything Hitler wanted to save England from destruction." With Mosley viewed as a potential puppet leader under Hitler, however, improbable, he was promptly arrested.[103] Diana, however, did not immediately face the same fate as her husband. In response, Nancy Astor asked the House of Commons: "Is it wise to lock up the man and leave his wife free when the wife is more notorious than the man?" She was met with applause; popular

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[100] Richard Griffiths, *What Did You Do during the War?: The Last Throes of the British Pro-Nazi Right, 1940-45* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 219.

[101] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*,199.

[102] Bingham and Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, 66-67.

[103] Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"*, 304.

consensus was that Diana was just as bad as Mosley, if not worse.[104] Nancy Mitford was quick to agree, writing to her friend Mark Ogilvie-Grant, "I am thankful Lord Oswald Quisling [a reference connecting Mosley to the Norwegian fascist Vidkun Quisling, a successful Fifth Columnist for the Nazis] has been jugged aren't you but I think it quite useless if Lady Q is still at large."[105] Nancy would soon act on this view, placing a call to Gladwyn Jebb at the Foreign Office to denounce her sister. Lord Moyne, Diana's former father-in-law, drew similar conclusions, and had written to the Chairman of the Defense Security Executive giving details of Diana's visits to Germany, coupled with intelligence from a nanny caring for his grandchildren, whom he had paid to report back on Diana's private conversations. While it is likely that Diana would have soon followed her husband into internment anyway, the damning evidence provided by those close to her only hastened her arrest.[106] According to her file, "Diana Mosley, wife of Sir Oswald Mosley, is reported on the best authority, that of her family and intimate circle, to be a public danger at the present time. [She] is said to be far cleverer and more dangerous than her husband and will stick at nothing to achieve her ambitions. She is wildly ambitious."[107] Two months after her husband's arrest, Diana was in Holloway Prison.

In truth, was Diana any more dangerous, a term used consistently to describe her during the Fifth-Columnist fervor of 1940, than the other society hostesses who had

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[104] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness*, 203.

[105] Mitford, *The Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy*, 97.

[106] Thompson, *The Six*, 229-230.

[107] "Oswald Mosley's Widow Dies," BBC News (BBC, August 13, 2003), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3146225.stm).

entertained the Nazi elite in London or indulged in fascist tourism? On the surface, her frequent visits to Germany at Mosley's behest gave her an air of espionage, but there is no evidence that she obtained information for the Nazis. Diana's motives were in service to her husband, and any danger she held lay in her undying devotion to Mosley.[108] When asked why she had been arrested, Diana stated that she believed she had been detained because she married Oswald Mosley. In many ways this was true, but it also stemmed from her sister, Unity. Unity, the more desirable scapegoat, was now out of reach due to her condition and Diana was substituted in her place. One fascist Mitford could pay for the sins of another. Despite her protestations that she and Mosley had no interest in a German victory over Britain and that the ban of the BUF removed any vehicle for propaganda, Diana would remain in Holloway Prison for much of the war. Even after her release, Diana's loyalty to her husband was so intense that she continued to support his goals long after any chance of a viable political career had dwindled.[109]

While Diana's unapologetic love for Mosley has given her a legacy of villainy, her support for fascism was not unique. Indeed, what is most remarkable about her fascism is Diana's steely unrepentance. Unlike many of her contemporaries who dabbled in fascism and then recanted later, prominent aristocrats and politicians among them, Diana remained completely loyal to her husband, and by extension, to his political views. While her letters, particularly those to Unity, do indicate Diana greatly enjoyed the pageantry of Nazi Germany, they largely focus on social events rather than the political, intimate dinners with Hitler and other Nazi elite over political rallies and speeches,

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[108] Jan Dalley, *Diana Mosley* (Knopf, 2000), 256-257.

[109] Thompson, *The Six*, 231-236.

although she did attend both. Her husband, above all, holds Diana's attention. Much the same is true of Diana's memoirs, with her most lengthy political opinion stating how fruitless the Munich Agreement was toward achieving lasting peace and advocating for pacifism over war to support Britain's own interests, an opinion shared by many non-fascists, although Diana does also serve this view up with an unsavory dose of racism in advocating for the separation of "ethnic groups."[110] While Unity's wholehearted Nazism is fairly straightforward, the enigmatic Diana is slightly different. Despite being regularly held forth as one of the most political of the sisters, along with Unity and "Red Sheep" Decca, Diana wrote far less in her letters about politics than her sister Nancy did, and did not take an active role in Mosley's campaigns as his first wife Cimmie had. Even Diana's memoirs, published much later in 1977, generally shy away from political opinions, providing her thoughts on the aforementioned Munich Agreement and emphasizing Hitler's personal charm over his politics, including the odd throwaway criticism of the Labour government or Winston Churchill but largely focusing on Diana's personal relationships over political views.

For both Diana and Unity, politics were connected to the personal, in many ways as an extension of the men they adored. While their experience of fascist politics was unique, due to the prominence of both Mosley and Hitler, the sisters were not alone amongst the Inter-War aristocracy, male and female alike, in considering fascism, seeking a remedy to what they viewed as a loss of their traditional power.[111] While Unity's flamboyance and Diana's firm unrepentance (unlike the majority of her

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[110] Diana Mosley, *A Life of Contrasts* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977), 157-159.

[111] Suh, *Fascism and Anti-fascism in Twentieth-century British Fiction,* 144.

contemporaries) have long categorized them as political anomalies, they are nevertheless in many ways a reflection of their class, of one section of the aristocracy turning to fascism in reaction to great change. And yet, there are some subtleties to their individual motivations. For Unity, motivation lay in a deep desire for attention that could perhaps not be achieved within polite aristocratic society. The very audacity and non-traditional looks that had made her an anomaly in the aristocratic ballrooms of her debutante season won her the attention she so desired within Hitler's Reich. Diana too had proven herself discontented with her gilded aristocratic life, rejecting her marriage to Bryan Guinness for Mosley, yet still in many ways behaving in accordance with female aristocratic tradition, supporting her second husband unwaveringly. Perhaps the difference between the two fascist Mitford sisters and other aristocratic women who turned to fascism lies in the fabled Mitford inability to do anything by halves. For both Unity and Diana, there could ultimately be no "middle course."[112]

[112] Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love*, 14.

III.

No Middle Course: Communism

Of the two political extremes prevalent during the 1930s, fascism was the ideology favored most by the aristocracy. However, attention must also be paid to the role communism, fascism's antithesis, played in the greater political scene, and the impact the two conflicting ideologies had upon each other. Indeed, many fascist sympathizers argued that their support for fascism came only from their desire to combat communism. The symbolic domination of communism and fascism in tandem must be explored in order to better understand the greater political experience of aristocratic women like the Mitford sisters. While Diana and Unity had turned to fascism, Jessica, more commonly known as Decca, the self-identified communist "Red Sheep" of the family declared herself in direct opposition to the Mitford family's fascist devotees.[113] While extremism was not unusual amongst the Mitfords, a family prone to superlatives in their likes and dislikes, Jessica's political views were unique amongst her family members. Indeed, they were somewhat unusual for members of the aristocracy, male and female alike. And yet, as with her two sisters Unity and Diana with fascism, Jessica was not quite the complete political anomaly she has been made out to be, nor can her declarations be taken fully at face value. The reality of Decca's "Red Sheep" beliefs is far more nuanced, a tangle of rebellion, individualism, and idealism, not quite as "red" as Decca might have supposed.

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[113] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, xviii-xix.

The root of Decca's introduction to communism is somewhat uncertain. Although Jessica herself cites childhood idealism and autodidactic Marxism in *Hons and Rebels*, these remembrances are largely anachronistic, inserted by an older, more political (and arguably moderate) Decca. Between the foundation of the Labour Party in 1900 and the Russian Revolution in 1917, those with communist or Marxist beliefs in Britain generally included themselves in the Labour Party if they aligned with any major organized political group.[114] Until 1918, the Labour Party was much more of a loose movement, a "federation of autonomous organizations", including a wide range of left-leaning political beliefs. After the Russian Revolution, however, the Labour Party began to worry about a communist faction within the party that took both guidance and funding from Moscow. Fearful of outside interference, by the 1930s, the Communist Party of Great Britain had removed itself from association with the Labour Party, and communist influence within the party was at an all-time low.[115] Conversely, Communists in Britain reached their greatest numbers in the late 1930s to early 1940s. According to Annette Rubinstein, a Marxist activist, believing in Soviet Russia "legitimized optimism." Even for those not completely devoted to the idealism of communism, the "dynamism and self-confidence of those who were was sometimes difficult to resist."[116] This mode of thinking is in keeping with the desire for radical change that took hold of Britain in the 1930s. After the extreme exhibitionist stunts of the 1920s, this tendency toward radicalism had moved to

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[114] James Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1982), 18-19

[115] Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain*, 20-24.

[116] Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society, 1920-1991* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007), 26.

politics. In this shifting political atmosphere, one with an emphasis on extremism, emotions, and radical political movements, one Bright Young Person remarked that "If you were going to be politically active, who did you belong to? It only seemed to be the communists who were doing anything."[117]

Indeed, drawing upon idealism, the British Communist Party relied heavily on the young, particularly young intellectuals, for membership during the 1930s. In 1938, Young Communist League membership numbered nearly a third of total Party membership. Many students with leftist leanings joined the University Labour Federation (ULF), a group affiliated with the Labour Party but one that, unlike the Labour Party itself, was happy to include communist students. Although the Labour Party later attempted to remove the communist element from the ULF, by 1937 the communists were dominating the group, despite being outnumbered by their more moderate peers. By 1939, one fifth of undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge, bastions of the educated aristocracy, were members of the ULF.[118] While the bulk of these undergraduates were not, in fact, communists, the figures show that even the Oxbridge elite were exposed to communist rhetoric within these groups. Nevertheless, despite the increase in student political groups during the 1930s, "students" and "workers" remained largely segregated within the Communist Party. The communist student movement gained its own intriguing mythology with the eventual revelation of the Cambridge spy ring; however, the image of the recruits who had been to "the best public schools, 'Eton figuring prominently among them'" is largely a misrepresentation. While student recruits numbered in the hundreds,

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[117] Quoted in Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, 26-27.

[118] Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain*, 99-101.

only seven Old Etonians are numbered among these recruiting statistics, and only three of this group can actually be identified as joining the Communist Party of Great Britain.[119]

Communism was even less prevalent amongst the female elite in Britain. The CPGB partly owed its origins to the suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst, and even though Pankhurst refused to marry, most other women in the movement took on a supporting role while their husbands engaged in more active political work. Men organized union workers and protests while women handled more "domestic" events like fundraising bazaars or childcare and education.[120] According to Florence Keyworth, a *Daily Worker* journalist, communist women were expected to be "wives and mothers, concerned about...nurseries, rents and prices for the sake of their families," as well as recipes and "Mother-craft", concerns that aristocratic women would typically delegate.[121] Although there were many female communists in Britain, with far fewer women attending university than men, the female communist contingent was largely "workers" rather than the idealistic "students" who comprised the greatest portion of upper-class communist recruits, and therefore not typically inclusive of aristocratic women.[122] In truth, communism was not prevalent amongst Britain's elite, male or female.

Nevertheless, there were those within the elites who did actively engage in leftist politics. One prominent Oxbridge communist was Tom Driberg, also a member of the Bright Young People and later a Labour MP. Although a self-identified "card carrying

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[119] Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists and British Society,* 84-85.

[120] Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, 174.

[121] Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists and British Society,* 167.

[122] Quoted in Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, 84-85.

communist", Driberg moved freely amongst the high society parties of the 1920s and after failing his exams at Oxford, became a frequent contributor to gossip columns. A communist friend of Jessica's, Phillip Toynbee, also attended society events and humorously related a story to Decca about attending a country house party and a communist election campaign in the same week, packing clothes for both occasions and guiltily hiding his formalwear while staying in a coal miner's cottage.[123] Like Toynbee, Driberg felt the conflict between his communism and aristocratic connections, and in an attempt to reconcile the two, claimed that his column "became more and more satiric. I described in detail the absurdities and extravagance of the ruling class in a way calculated to annoy any working-class or unemployed people who might chance to read the column; at a time of mass unemployment I felt I was doing something not without value to the Communist Party, to which I was still connected." This view, however, is difficult to believe. While Driberg did include the occasional reference to a hunger march or unemployment during the 1930s, they remained a rarity, and his work is overall very much in keeping with his party-going contemporaries.[124]

Driberg seems to have struggled to reconcile his class with his political beliefs, but the struggle was further exacerbated by his sexuality. Amongst the upper classes, homosexuality was generally tacitly tolerated, with the understanding being that many young men would engage in homosexual relationships while at school or university before eventually returning to heterosexuality and traditional marriage. The Bright Young People took this tolerance even further, and indeed many members of the set were far

[123] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 175.

[124] Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 216-218.

from deceptive regarding their homosexuality. Outside of this set, however, tolerance was less forthcoming. In 1935 Driberg was brought up on a charge of indecently assaulting an unemployed Scottish miner he had invited to stay at his flat. While this could have easily prompted a scandal, Driberg seemingly avoided one thanks to his powerful newspaper connections. Lord Beaverbrook, a prominent newspaper publisher, ensured that no Fleet Street paper wrote on the charges, and Driberg's social connections provided character witnesses.[125] Despite trying to distance himself from his upper-class connections, in the end Driberg was saved by them.

Driberg was not alone in trying to reconcile his communist beliefs with his upper-class background. For those not of the working class who chose to join the communist party, their background was often something to hide. "Gabriel Carritt, son of the Oxford philosopher E. F. Carritt, adopted the name 'Bill', dropped his 'aitches' and on conducting his first party activities in Clay Cross remembered 'trying to talk like the Derbyshire miners.' 'I used to imitate, I used to want to be working class. I couldn't bear the fact that anybody should know what my background was.'"[126] Jessica Mitford's accent, one that she, unlike Gabriel Carritt, did not, and indeed perhaps could not, disguise, was often looked upon with derision and was described by Philip Toynbee as "a curiously cadenced sing-song which would have been grotesquely affected had it not been even more grotesquely natural."[127] The Mitford way of speaking seems to have been particularly distinctively upper-class, very "U" as Nancy teased in an essay she wrote for

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[125] Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 234.

[126] Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, 82.

[127] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 255

Encounter in 1955, an article that would later spawn a collection of essays on aristocratic language and manners, *Noblesse Oblige: An Enquiry Into the Identifiable Characteristics of the English Aristocracy*, published in 1956.[128] Nancy herself, working as a volunteer for the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) during the Second World War was once removed from a series of broadcasts about fire prevention due to her aristocratic voice. When Nancy asked why, she was told that her voice had sparked a series of complaints, including one in which "someone even wrote in and said they wanted to put you on the fire."[129]

Predominantly, those aristocratic and upper-class supporters of communism felt the need to distance themselves from the markers of their class. Jessica Mitford was one such aristocrat, as was her future husband, Esmond Romilly. When Jessica ran away from home to be with Esmond, he made it clear that her class and background was something to disguise. Indeed, in many ways, the couple had rejected their aristocratic background, although removing all trace of their upbringing, informed by centuries of tradition, would prove easier said than done. Jessica recalled that "my quality of what he called upperclassishness irritated him. Esmond had a chameleonlike quality in his relations with people around him; he had an ability to become part of any group he was with."[130] Esmond also had a ruthless side to him. Much like Nancy's Christian Talbot in *The Pursuit of Love*, "he was really only interested in mass wretchedness, and never much

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[128] Nancy Mitford, "The English Aristocracy," *Encounter* September 1955): 5-11.

[129] Quoted in Guinness, *The House of Mitford*, 459.

[130] Jessica Mitford, *Hons and Rebels* (New York: New York Review Books, 2004), 141.

cared for individual cases, however genuine their misery."[131] Esmond seems to have abandoned all individual sensitivity in pursuit of his cause. Upon seeing some boys tormenting a dog, Decca (behaving true to her animal-loving Mitford upbringing) asked him to intervene. Enraged, he told her "what right have you got to impose your beastly upper-class preoccupation with animals on these people?" His reasoning behind allowing the cruelty, and his subsequent anger toward Jessica, was that in England people feed their dogs steak while people starved. In staying with Esmond, Thompson says that Decca was determined that the political should override the personal (and yet, like her sisters, her political views had strong connections to the personal). Nancy stated that there was something in Esmond that changed Decca, fundamentally setting her against her family forever.[132] To be with Esmond, Decca felt she had to reject her family and all the aristocratic trappings it represented.

Jessica's communism, much like the politics of her fascist sisters, needed a nudge to move from a childhood phase into a political calling. In Jessica's case, the impetus was twofold. Decca's first influence seems to have been teenage jealousy over all the attention Unity was getting with her performative Nazism during the 1930s, a view taken by both Debo and Peter Rodd, Jessica's brother-in-law.[133] Shaped by the celebrity culture of the Bright Young People, and in a family of six sisters, a desire for attention and individualism motivated Decca much as it frequently did her siblings. Jealousy and a need for attention combined with Jessica's admiration for her forceful, rebellious second

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[131] Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love*, 129.

[132] Thompson, *The Six*, 185-197.

[133] Thompson, *The Six*, 180.

cousin, Esmond Romilly, to drive her toward communism. As with Unity and Diana, it is likely that Jessica's politics would have taken a different course were it not for the man she chose to follow. Throughout her teenage years, Decca dreamed of Esmond, following press coverage of "Winston's 'Red' Nephew" and wondering how she could surreptitiously meet him.[134] In Jessica's mind, they were remarkably similar, two communists misunderstood by their aristocratic families, and when she finally obtained a copy of Esmond's scandalous autobiographical *Out of Bounds*, she gazed upon his picture inside, longing to meet him much as Unity had longed to meet Hitler.[135] When Jessica finally did meet Esmond at the home of an aunt, she asked him to take her with him when he returned to Spain where he was fighting with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War.[136] Esmond agreed, a decision that would forever alter Jessica's relationship with her family.

Although Jessica did admittedly show an interest in communism, however vaguely she might have understood it as a political theory, prior to Esmond, "much of Jessica's dissatisfaction with her privileged upbringing came after the moment of her leaving it: that she was on the whole a joyful girl until she decided upon a cause that required her to be unhappy."[137] Her initial foray into communism seems to have been largely in reaction to Unity's fascism. Without Esmond, Jessica's politics would likely have mellowed after her teenage years, as indeed they eventually did as she grew older.

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[134] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 76-77.

[135] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 99-100.

[136] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 122.

[137] Thompson, *The Six,* 178.

What did not mellow, however, was Jessica's general animosity toward her family. "Such was the power of the extremist cause, embodied in a man. The man alone might have led her to elope. It was the extremism that led to the swift absolutism with which all else was abandoned."[138]

With Esmond, Jessica hatched a plan to return to Spain with him posing as his secretary. En route, Esmond confessed that he had fallen in love with Jessica. Decca drafted a letter to her mother saying, "Darling Muv: By the time you get this, I shall be married to Esmond Romilly."[139] The letter was then left with a friend, to be handed over at a later date, which it eventually was in February of 1937. By this point, Lady Redesdale had already realized that Decca was not with the friends she had claimed to be traveling with, and the family had been frantically worried; the letter finally ended the family's agonized suspense, although the news of Decca's attachment to the wayward Esmond Romilly was not cause for celebration. Worried about such a hurried and informal engagement, the Mitfords decided to declare Jessica a Ward in Chancery. At nineteen, this declaration would mean that anyone marrying Decca without her family's permission could face legal action and even prison. In the end, this decision proved disastrous.[140] From the beginning, Esmond had declared that an alliance with him meant that Decca would be cut off from her family, whom he viewed as "the enemy." While Jessica initially believed Esmond would soften, indulging in teenage fantasies of him debating (and irritating) her father and sisters on visits to their family home, the move to

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[138] Thompson, *The Six*, 8.

[139] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 136.

[140] Guinness, *The House of Mitford*, 405.

declare Decca a Ward in Chancery fit perfectly into Esmond's narrative which cast the Mitfords as the enemy.[141] In practice, this decision did nothing but drive Jessica away from her family, despite Lady Redesdale's letter telling her that she and Esmond could "certainly marry later if [you] still wish to." Their intentions were to delay the match, giving the impulsive teenagers time to consider their choice, but instead it was perceived by Jessica, swept away by her adventure with Esmond, as a declaration of war against the couple.[142]

In March, the situation was exacerbated when the story broke in the press. In a letter to his mother following their elopement, Esmond threatened to leak "the truth", whatever he believed it to be, about Unity and Hitler if any attempts were made to get Decca to return to London. In spite of Esmond's threats, the family was determined to get Jessica home. Eventually the couple were put on a destroyer (with the admonition from the ambassador that if they did not board, the Spanish refugees would not board either and that they would be blamed). Wedding plans were finally put in place, but only when Decca confessed that she thought she might be pregnant. Lady Redesdale finally organized a wedding, and the vengeful Esmond wrote her a series of letters, alternatively suggesting that he and Decca would not marry at all and then threatening to bar Lady Redesdale from the wedding she had organized. Esmond "would have told himself that [his dislike of the Mitfords] was because they were all Nazis (his loudly expressed view), but it was – as so often – the personal that was guiding him: a hatred of their charm, their correctness, their sense of entitlement; a guilty grudge against their wholly legitimate

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[141] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 140-141.

[142] Guinness, *The House of Mitford*, 405.

distress. It was illogical, yet it became Jessica's view also." Press coverage of Unity and Diana's visits to Germany, no doubt, did little to dissuade Esmond of his beliefs.[143] By May, the couple were married in the British Consulate in Bayonne.[144]

Their honeymoon period was largely spent traveling through France, while Esmond concocted "surefire" strategies for winning at *boule* in the casinos and drafting a list of "Possible Suckers" amongst their acquaintances that they might take advantage of for more of Esmond's schemes. Eventually, they discovered a friend with a furnished house near the London docklands, and despite their earlier resistance to returning to England, they traveled there on a borrowed fare.[145] In London, the couple both worked, although were not particularly successful at the realities of housekeeping. Their friend's house soon fell into disrepair, including a large hole open to the adjacent river.[146] Housekeeping irregularities didn't end there and the couple even resorted to disguises to avoid the bill collector sent to find them when they didn't pay their electric bill.[147] These antics reflect the couple's immaturity and rebellion, and Esmond and Jessica were described by one reviewer of *Hons and Rebels* as "an alarming couple [with] a mutual amorality which at moments approached the sublime."[148] Had their money-making schemes been in service of the Communist Party, perhaps their morals or Marxism would

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[143] Thompson, *The Six*, 185-187.

[144] Guinness, *The House of Mitford*, 406.

[145] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 170-171.

[146] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 174.

[147] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 190.

[148] Thompson, *The Six*, 185-197

not be called into question, but Decca says nothing in her memoirs of putting their earnings, ill-gotten or otherwise, toward a political cause. Both worked erratically, often skipping work to stay indoors and avoid the bill collector, or to attend meetings at the local branch of the Labour Party, which Esmond favored over the London communists, a group he viewed as too intellectual, and not "real" communists like those he had met in Spain.[149]

It is somewhat intriguing that the young couple, self-styled radical communists, would turn toward the Labour Party over their local communist branch. Their disdain for "intellectuals" is not unique; under the influence of Stalin's Soviet Union, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had turned away from the ideological toward a strong emphasis on collective work by the mid 1930s. Many intellectuals, formerly the bastion of communism in Great Britain, had defected (some even taking up fascism), and the general attitude was that intellectualism was something to be overcome, like class.[150] An alternative explanation is that their politics truly had mellowed enough to put aside their strict, idealistic and rebellious communism for a new cause: the fight against fascism. An American friend, questioned in 1943 about Jessica's politics when her family connections aroused the interest of the FBI, stated that "[Jessica] talked fluently of Communist ideals at that time, but has become more conservative." The FBI report continued on to state

[149] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 176-177.

[150] Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 172-173.

that Jessica's "loyalty to the Allied Cause [was] unquestioned."[151] By her own account, Decca favored international communism as a "driving force in the fight against fascism" and the Axis Powers, but saw domestic communism at her local CPGB branch as nothing but "pointless feuds [and] petulant quarrels over real or imagined slights." By softening her political ideals enough to work with the Labour Party, Jessica could still support the true core of her political beliefs: anti-fascism.[152]

In reality, anti-fascist protest was not officially sanctioned by the Labour Party, but "organized from below" with participants of varied backgrounds and political beliefs, unified only by their hatred of fascism. Officially, the party believed that any anti-fascist demonstrations would only "lead to widespread disorder and 'would advertise far and wide the claims of Fascism.'"[153] To a degree, this was true as Mosley frequently tried to use the publicity surrounding these protests in his own favor. As the BUF grew and held more elaborate meetings and rallies, those in opposition to fascism, communists and Labour supporters, amongst others, became determined to stop Mosley. *The Daily Worker* began publishing the schedule of BUF talks along with a map showing the route to the venue and encouraged readers to join in protests. The clash at Olympia escalated into a brawl, and many were removed unconscious. Despite Mosley's efforts to spin these violent clashes in his own favor, the BUF were largely viewed as the aggressors, and the

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[151] "Jessica Mitford", FBI file for Jessica Mitford, part 1, pg. 32. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice, https://vault.fbi.gov/jessica-mitford/
jessica-mitford-part-1-of-8/view.

[152] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 176-179.

[153] Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 60-62.

threat of fascism at home and abroad served as a unifying factor amongst varied political views.[154] Esmond and Decca were not alone in making political compromises to combat the greater enemy of fascism, although their willingness to do so when others refused indicates political nuances that their self-identified communism would belie.

With war between Britain and Germany looming, and perhaps with the goodwill of "Possible Suckers" and employers in London wearing a bit thin, Esmond and Decca decided to move to the United States, and finally obtained papers to do so by 1939. Despite their political assertions, leaving Europe right on the cusp of war hardly highlights the couple's dedication to defeating fascism. In America, the couple worked various jobs, staying with friends along the east coast before opening a bar in Miami. This venture would not last long, however, as Esmond would enlist in 1940, having bided his time until the war effort aligned more closely with his political views. Esmond finished his training and took his post in England as a pilot. Although Nancy had expressed her shock at the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, writing to Decca, "Susan [another Mitford nickname of unknown origin] Stalin how could you let him?", none of the sisters seemed surprised when the pact was eventually broken.[155] When Germany invaded Russia in 1941, one account states that Esmond and Jessica both officially joined the Communist Party, Esmond in Britain and Decca in the United States. In light of Decca's later invitation to join the Communist Party in San Francisco in 1943, this appears to be a bit of fictional embellishment, perhaps on Jessica's part, likely a reflection of the romanticized account of her first marriage in which Esmond and Decca are cast as

[154] Spence, *Mrs. Guinness*, 150.

[155] Quoted in Thompson, *The Six*, 179.

communist star-crossed lovers. Whether or not they truly made their communism official in 1941, soon after, Esmond departed for a mission from which he would never return, leaving Decca a widowed single mother after the birth of their daughter.[156]

After Esmond's disappearance and presumed death, Jessica did not return to England, and instead took a job with the Office of Price Administration (OPA), gleefully feeling she was in some small way thwarting capitalism, and moving with her young daughter, known as Dinky, into a small apartment. Decca's job with the OPA also introduced her to Bob Treuhaft, the lawyer she would later marry. Bob's affection for Decca was evident early on, and while she had feelings for him as well, part of her still hadn't accepted Esmond's death. Perhaps to avoid having to make a decision, and perhaps in keeping with some remnant of aristocratic propriety, Jessica decided to transfer to another post at the San Francisco branch of the OPA away from Treuhaft.[157] Treuhaft was persistent, however, and frequently wrote to Decca. In 1943, he visited her in San Francisco, and asked her to marry him. According to Treuhaft, "she said yes before I had a chance to finish."[158]

Decca and her new husband shared similar political values, and both were soon invited to join the Communist Party in San Francisco. Despite her earlier avoidance of the CPGB in London, Decca seemed eager to join. Here, however, Jessica feared her aristocratic background would bar her from admission, even in America. The application itself asked for "father's occupation," and answering "Peer of the Realm" or "Aristocrat"

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[156] Guinness, *The House of Mitford*, 455-465.

[157] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 365-369.

[158] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 373.

would surely derail any hopes of her acceptance. In the end Decca bent the truth and recalling her father's brief and unsuccessful purchase of a Canadian gold mine, listed his occupation as "miner." Nevertheless, the Communist Party was well aware of Jessica's relations, and she was admitted with the stern admonition to strive to "overcome the handicaps of birth and upbringing."[159] Jessica advanced in the Party, and she seemed to take their admission caveat quite seriously.[160] Decca worked hard to distance herself from her family, whom she had seemingly told Bob were all fascists and had disowned her.[161] The press, however, had discovered Decca's identity, and soon published several articles, many focused on her "Nordic Goddess" sister Unity. Jessica soon fired back a response, seizing the opportunity offered by the breaking news of Diana and Mosley's release from prison in 1943. In an exclusive to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jessica wrote a letter to Churchill stating that "the release of the Mosleys is a slap in the face to antifascists in every country...The fact that Diana is my sister doesn't alter my opinion on this subject."[162]

Decca was determined to assert herself in opposition to her family, and a further opportunity arrived in 1945 when the death of her brother Tom and the intricacies of Scottish inheritance law combined to grant Jessica a partial share of the family's Scottish Island, Inch Kenneth. Jessica hoped to use her share to, in her own words, "advance the

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[159] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 376.

[160] Leslie Brody, *Irrepressible: The Life and Times of Jessica Mitford* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 127.

[161] Lovell, *The Sisters*, 378.

[162] Brody, *Irrepressible*, 127.

cause of World Revolution", but equally hoped to irritate her family.[163] Later, Decca's friend Claud Cockburn summarized her excitement at this opportunity, saying of Jessica, "what could possibly be more delightful to this lifelong enemy of the grown-ups than the mental picture - however unrealistic - of a horde of unbridled Reds cavorting Marxistically on the beaches, rattling the windows of 'The Big House' with nightly renderings of *Hurrah for the Bolshie Boys* and *the Internationale.*"[164] The reality, however, was that the Communist Party had little interest in this "small bit of desolate island somewhere off the coast of Scotland."[165] Here, as Cockburn hints by describing Decca as "the lifelong enemy of the grownups", we see Jessica's communism at its most immature, a means to irritate and injure her family in an act of rebellion. While her sisters had determined to give their shares to their mother, who had been living on Inch Kenneth with the damaged Unity, for the remainder of her lifetime, Jessica could not resist the opportunity to strike back at her family. Instead she wrote to her mother that she wanted the monetary equivalent of her share, worth five-hundred pounds, or more if it could be arranged, because "money is an important political weapon." While her sisters refused contact with Jessica after this futile and petty political statement, her mother seemed to realize that her actions were intended to shock, irritate, and even hurt in order to prove herself on the side of the just, and placidly continued to write to her daughter with no

[163] Jessica Mitford, *A Fine Old Conflict* (London: M. Joseph, 1977), 121.

[164] Brody, *Irrepressible*, 142.

[165] Mitford, *A Fine Old Conflict*, 123.

mention of Inch Kenneth. In reality, Lady Redesdale retained possession of her island residence, although Decca stubbornly kept her own share in her name on principal.[166]

Though she never lost her rebellious streak, especially when it came to interactions with her family, Decca's political views grew to emphasize anti-fascism, and later, anti-racism, over her youthful, rebellious interpretation of communism. Age no doubt helped, and married to a more temperate man than Esmond, so too did Decca's interpretation of communism become more temperate over time. In reality, perhaps her true political views had always tended more along these lines; with hindsight, Decca acknowledged that her early support for communism had been influenced by rebellion and sibling rivalry.[167] Nevertheless, even if her views had changed with age, both she and her husband remained active within the Communist Party, focusing primarily on issues of race in the Bay Area. By 1947, Decca was no longer working for the OPA, which was "all washed up after the war" and after a bout of unemployment and the birth of her second child, returned to work as an assistant to the director of the East Bay Civil Rights Congress.[168] Treuhaft too concentrated on racial and social injustice, providing legal counsel to several unions and eventually defending members of the Black Panther Party.[169] Both Decca and Bob saw communism as a means to correct social and racial injustice, and would remain in the party until disillusionment with Stalin and general

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[166] Thompson, *The Six*, 285.

[167] Leslie Brody, *Irrepressible: The Life and Times of Jessica Mitford* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 313.

[168]Mitford, *A Fine Old Conflict*, 89-91.

[169] "Robert E. Treuhaft Dies at 89; Civil Rights Activist, Attorney." *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)* (Washington, D.C.), 2001.

Party stagnation and inefficiency finally led to their resignation in 1958.[170] Even after this resignation, and under the very real threat of McCarthyism, Jessica still defended her former political beliefs, saying "It wasn't a youthful fling because I was a Communist until a short time ago and I would probably join again in a minute if there was anything doing."[171] As with Diana, there was a degree of refusal to admit to doubt in Jessica's bold assertion; doing so would be to admit that the sacrifices of family and social position made for love, whether for Esmond Romilly, or in Diana's case, Oswald Mosley, could also be wrong.[172] Jessica was determined to remain the family's "Red Sheep" even as her politics and relations with many family members softened. What remained was a strong desire to combat fascism, racism, and social injustice, by communism or by alternative means.

And yet, Jessica's self-declared communism deserves some reconsideration. If Decca's political beliefs are to be judged, in the words of Emmeline Pankhurst, through "deeds, not words," her communism seems somewhat empty in her early, most-fervently communist years, and much of her later activism in the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, her best and most extensive work, came when disillusionment with the Communist Party had already crept in and mellowed her political views, with little to do with communist theory. In contrast to her fascist sisters, and due to her activism, Decca is often glorified, but this interpretation does not acknowledge that the best of Decca, and

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[170] Mitford, *A Fine Old Conflict*, 220.

[171]"Jessica Mitford", FBI file for Jessica Mitford, part 6, pg. 4. *The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation*, US Department of Justice,https://vault.fbi.gov/jessica-mitford/jessica-mitford-part-6-of-8/view.

[172] Thompson, *The Six*, 244.

the core of her political beliefs, has little to do with her self-declared "Red Sheep" reputation. If we measure her by her deeds, her early years are marked by rebellion and very little activism. Teenage Decca's expression of communism largely consisted of rebellion against her family with a dash of amorality in avoiding bills, stealing linens from hotels, and imagining ways to take advantage of "possible suckers" with Esmond. Strip away the rebellion, Decca's need to differentiate herself from her sisters, and the reality of Jessica's political beliefs is far more nuanced than her vehement declaration of communism, more concerned with combatting racism, fascism, and social injustice, commonalities shared across party lines, rather than strict Marxism.

Race and anti-fascism proved dominant issues for another communist aristocrat, Nancy Cunard, who is presented here for comparison. Although significantly older than Jessica Mitford, Nancy Cunard shared many similarities. Like Decca, she never balked at a chance to outrage her family, namely her mother, Lady Emerald Cunard. Intriguingly, Nancy did not attempt to hide her upbringing when she turned to communism, as many did, although she did roundly criticize her own background and was quick to correct anyone granting her any sort of title, whether "Honorable", or the incorrect "Lady Cunard". Residing mainly in Paris during the 1920s, Nancy Cunard moved with an avant garde set comprised mainly of expatriate artists and writers, a peer group which perhaps made class distinctions less significant for her than they might have been had she remained in England. For her mother, however, Nancy's behavior was often enraging. The true breach between them came in 1930, when word reached her that Nancy Cunard had entered into a relationship with a black jazz musician, Henry Crowder, and worse, that she would soon be traveling with him to London. While such a liaison remained in

Paris, Lady Cunard could happily ignore it. London, however, was a different matter. The blow would soon come when a rival socialite, Margot Asquith, reportedly asked publicly of Emerald regarding her daughter, "Hello, Maud, what is it now? - drink, drugs, or niggers?" Lady Cunard was outraged, and explosively threatened to arrest and deport Nancy and Crowder should they set foot in London.[173]

With Lady Cunard's fascist connections and aristocratic social ambitions, it is no wonder the situation outraged her. For Nancy Cunard, however, parental outrage and possible exile from polite London society had no effect in driving her away from Crowder. If anything, it simply intensified Nancy Cunard's devotion to African and African diasporic culture as well as to her lover. In response to her mother, Nancy published an essay entitled, *Black Man and White Ladyship*. The scorching piece mocked Lady Cunard and her social pretensions, noting her "purified-of-that-horrible-American-twang voice", emphasizing both her American background and the emptiness of her life filled with "insipid social events." She further admonished Lady Cunard for her threats against Crowder, indicating that her attitudes would fit in "in the cracker southern states of the U.S.A...at some of the choicer lynchings" rather than in England where you "cannot kill or deport a person...for being a Negro and mixing with white people."[174] Like Jessica, there was a degree of rebellion in Nancy Cunard's activism; one critic and former friend, the Jamaican writer Claude McKay, stated that "the reader gets the impression that the Cunard daughter enjoys taking a Negro stick to beat the Cunard mother." While it

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[173] Anne Chisholm, *Nancy Cunard: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1979),156-159.

[174] Quoted in Lois Gordon, *Nancy Cunard: Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 160.

would be unjust to define the activism Nancy Cunard would continue for the rest of her life simply as a means to taunt and humiliate her mother, like Jessica Mitford, rebellion did play a part in the formation of her political views, as did her relationship with Crowder. Nevertheless, the public view that the pamphlet was nothing more than "an impulsive and ungrateful attack against her mother" or a tasteless joke largely overshadowed any political message.[175]

Nancy, however, was undaunted, and realizing she could not avoid the press, made use of her place in tabloid headlines, attempting to harness public scandal to serve her own ends. Determined to broadcast her political views, she stated, "And after my private affairs, I want something in return: I want money for the defense of the nine Negro framed-up boys held under death sentence to be sent immediately for the Scottsboro Defense."[176] Press coverage continued on Nancy's visit to America, where she began gathering material for her 1934 anthology, *Negro*. At nearly 800 pages, *Negro* was intended to record "the struggles and achievements, the persecutions and revolts against them, of the Negro peoples."[177] Within this enormous anthology, Nancy continued to highlight the plight of the Scottsboro Boys, as well as other racial injustices, which she deemed "other Scottsboros."[178] This monumental work, however, was only sporadically

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[175] Renata Morresi, "Black Man and White Ladyship (1931)", in *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 96.

[176] Gordon, 168.

[177] Nancy Cunard, "Forward", in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard and Hugh D. Ford (New York: Ungar, 1979), xxxi.

[178] Nancy Cunard, "Scottsboro – and other Scottsboros," in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard and Hugh D. Ford (New York: Ungar, 1979)155-174.

covered by the press. A brief account in the *New York Times* simply acknowledged the anthology's publication with a brief summary and headlined Nancy as "Daughter of London Hostess."[179] The anthology received no coverage in the London *Times*, although Lady Cunard and her social activities continued to appear regularly. Depressingly, even the left-wing press failed to publish reviews of *Negro*.[180]

Ironically, Crowder, the catalyst for her activism, grew to resent Nancy's efforts as they dominated their relationship. In many ways, Crowder influenced Nancy Cunard's shift from African art and culture more heavily toward activism, and can be viewed not only as Nancy's lover but also, to an extent, her "first cause...of all the human rights causes that consumed the rest of her life.[181] By the time *Negro* had been published, however, Crowder and Nancy had gone their separate ways, partially over money, but also due to conflicting ideologies. Based on his own experience, Crowder feared that there could never truly be "lasting trust and love between the races" and felt that, as a white woman, Nancy could never truly understand his perspective. Crowder's assessment of *Negro*, dedicated to him by Nancy, was also negative. Disliking the book as "communistic," Crowder further criticised the work, stating, "I do not believe that Nancy had the background that a person who attempts to do a great work for a whole race should possess. The book is shallow and empty. It makes a lot of noise, but like a big

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[179]"CUNARD ANTHOLOGY ON NEGRO IS ISSUED" New York Times (1923-Current File), Feb 17, 1934, http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/ 101059675?accountid=11311.

[180]Gordon, *Nancy Cunard: Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist*, 174.

[181]Gordon, *Nancy Cunard: Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist*, 160.

drum it has little inside." Had Nancy ever read Crowder's assessment of her work, she would have been devastated to see that he believed her work as empty and meaningless as Nancy felt her mother's social calendar to be.[182]

Nevertheless, Crowder and *Negro* marked a complete shift to activism, and Nancy Cunard's support for communism came largely as a direct result of her chosen cause, that of Africans and African diasporic peoples. She grew to believe that "it is Communism alone which throws down the barriers of race...The Communist world order is the solution of the race problem for the Negro."[183] Nancy's interpretation of communism is itself intriguing. While Nancy consistently advocated communism, openly socialized with communists, and vocally admired the Soviet Union, she never actually became a member of the Communist Party. Indeed, with her background and temperament, it is fairly unlikely that Nancy would have been accepted had she attempted to join. Nancy "[had] a romantic notion of exploited blacks and workers as people she could help; she could never for an instant have submerged her own identity in a political organization."[184] At one point, Nancy even declared that she was an anarchist. However, similar sentiments were expressed about Esmond Romilly, said to be "too much of an individualist" and "incapable of submitting to discipline", and yet his dedication to communism was not questioned or denied in the same way Nancy's was, although perhaps it should have been.[185] In a later edition of *Negro*, the editor Hugh Ford added a

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[182] Chisholm, *Nancy Cunard: A Biography*, 228-229.

[183] Chisholm, *Nancy Cunard: A Biography*, 214.

[184] Chisholm, *Nancy Cunard: A Biography,* 225.

[185] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 177.

note before an essay on "Marxism and the American Negro" stating that Cunard was never a communist and that her "ideas coincided with the party line of the Communists only when it coincided with her own humanitarian ideas."[186] Even this note, however, could not appease a critic reviewing the anthology in 1970 who wrote that the anthology was fatally flawed, and that Nancy "misses few opportunities in her own essays to try to recruit the reader. Heavy handed propaganda is also evident in the writings of other contributors, and this imposition of one dogmatic solution is annoying in the extreme."[187] Arguably, her consistent support of communism, even if only as a means to advance her own cause, does categorize Nancy as a communist despite protests to the contrary. Indeed, if we judge Nancy Cunard by her deeds, her willingness to personally fund much of her activism, coupled with her continued publication of "heavy handed [communist] propaganda," is certainly in better accordance with Marxism than many of the actions of Decca and Esmond, and marks a sharp contrast to the couple's financial chicanery. Even the assertion that "Nancy herself did not understand what Marxism was or is", is not exclusionary, and Nancy Cunard's support for communism was very much in line with public politics during the 1930s.[188] "What was demanded [during the 1930s] were gesture

[186] Cited in Will Herberg, "Marxism and the American Negro," in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard and Hugh D. Ford (New York: Ungar, 1979), 130-131.

[187] Julius Lester, "When Hatred Was Turning to Pity," *New York Times*, August 30, 1970, p. 274, https://www.nytimes.com/1970/08/30/archives/when-hatred-was-turning-to- pity-negro-negro.html.

[188] Cited in Will Herberg, "Marxism and the American Negro," 130-131.

politics, uncompromising affiliations" and the details of political theory mattered far less to the general public, male and female alike, than the emotional allure of a cause.[189]

Of the two political extremes of the Interwar period, communism and fascism, true communism was something of a rarity amongst aristocratic women. Few openly declared support for communism as Nancy Cunard and Jessica Mitford did, although some were deemed "reds" even if their political beliefs were not strictly communist. Even Jessica Mitford, the self-declared "Red Sheep" requires reevaluation away from a strict communist interpretation, the reality being more nuanced. And yet, in Decca's communism, we see her willingness to embrace the drastic social and poltical change around her to a greater degree than many of her aristocratic contemporaries. In her love for Esmond, and in her politics, Jessica favored idealism and change over many of the traditions of her class. However, although Nancy Cunard was the one criticized for only supporting communism when it aligned with her own goals and ideas, the same could very much be applied to Decca, particularly during her youth and marriage to Esmond. While Jessica did support communism, as evidenced by her later work within the Communist Party in San Francisco, she should certainly not be exempt from the criticism and skepticism shown towards Nancy Cunard, the reality being that an aristocratic upbringing and true belief in communism were difficult to reconcile. Indeed, Decca's desire to combat fascism and social and racial injustice (the core tenets of her political beliefs) had little to do with communism as a political system.

In the polarizing political atmosphere of 1930s Britain, leftist political lines blurred somewhat, united in opposition to fascism. In politics, emotions and personal

[189] Thompson, *The Six*, 7.

relationships had more influence than ideology. Communist "Margaret Cohen, moved to join the party by [the war in] Spain and the experience of helping at holiday camps for the unemployed, was attracted to communism in the same basic 'emotional' way as the 'the most active fighters for socialism'. 'I don't recollect that when I joined the communist party I was desperate to find out more about its ideas', she too recollected. 'I was influenced more by people than by ideas.'"[190] In this, Cohen was not alone; emotions and personal relationships influenced communists, fascists, and moderates alike in their political beliefs during the volatile 1930s in Britain.

[190] Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists and British Society,* 172.

IV.

Moderate and Misidentified Politics

Despite the prevalence of political extremism during the 1930s, a false polarity of communism and fascism, the reality was, as ever, that there remained a full spectrum of political beliefs. Even those adhering to the extremes held nuance. Nancy Mitford herself mocked this false dichotomy, writing in *Pigeon Pie*, "'Of course I don't want to say I told you so, darling, but there's never been a pin to put between the Communists and the Nazis. The Communists torture to death if you're not a worker, and the Nazis torture you to death if you're not a German. If you are, they look at your nose first. Aristocrats are inclined to prefer Nazis while Jews prefer Bolshies."[191] To Nancy, and her sister Deborah, communism and fascism were remarkably similar at their core, although this was not a common opinion during the polarizing 1930s.[192]

As fascism advanced, opposition to the movement had a unifying effect on many political groups, but especially on those inclined toward the left. Suddenly, members of the Liberal, Labour, and Communist Parties, as well as many conservatives, who could agree on little else, had a common enemy in fascism. Nevertheless, despite a common enemy, the majority of members of party leadership held firm along party lines, as for example the Labour Party did in refusing to create a unified Popular Front against

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[191] Mitford, *Pigeon Pie*, 43.

[192] Thompson, *The Six,* 6.

fascism in cooperation with the CPGB.[193] Officially, the Labour Party stood firmly against dictatorship, whether communist or fascist, and believed that the two polarities had developed symbiotically in Germany. Therefore, communists were "to blame for dividing the German working class, for undermining Weimar democracy and for radicalizing the German middle class. The logic that followed: 'To defeat Fascism, root out Communism.'"[194] In many ways, this logic also applied to Britain; many of the staunchest supporters of fascism saw it as the most logical means to prevent the spread of communism. Based on this logic, Labour could never officially endorse any communist affiliation, even in pursuit of a common goal. While party leadership proved uncooperative, there was nevertheless a populist movement against fascism.

There were, however, even amongst Labour Party politicians, those who saw facism as a far greater threat than any alliance with communism could be. Ellen Wilkinson, the outspoken Labour MP who had so deftly expressed Mosley's discordance with his own BUF, had once held both Communist and Labour party membership, until the growing fear of outside influence within Labour forced Wilkinson to choose between the two.[195] Wilkinson, a highly skilled politician, understood the need for cooperation and compromise in the face of the greater threats of social injustice and fascism. Asked in 1942 why she had turned her back on Communism, she replied, enraged, that she had "not only worked with the Communists, but I risked my political career because of them.

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[193] Copsey and Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, 52.

[194] Copsey and Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, 55.

[195] Laura Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 119.

I did this because I saw what Hitler did in Germany in 1933 and I was burning with desire to make people understand the horrors of this beastly thing called fascism."[196]

From the intellectual quarter, the anti-fascist movement formed the Left Book Club in 1936. In illustration of the rising strength of anti-fascism, the club numbered 40,000 members by the end of its first year, spurred on partially by interest in the Spanish Civil War.[197] Membership was diverse, "composed of disgruntled liberals, professional communists, disillusioned Labourites, and a large number of newcomers to the political arena", as well as, reputedly, some "wealthy 'socialist' viscounts", and while the group had no official political allegiance, to most the club was synonymous with communism, despite the organization's attempts to align with the more moderate Labour Party.[198] Here again, we see the anti-fascist movement operating outside of official party parameters, as well as falling prey to the false political dichotomy of the 1930s which thrived on political extremes and misidentification. However, the "Left", a loosely-defined group at best, was not the sole opponent of fascism. The Conservative Party also opposed the BUF but chose to combat Mosley by limiting the attention given to his party. "Denying attention and significance to Mosley's party, which ministers and party officials also recommended to newspapers and the BBC, was politically crippling." While this strategy lacked the drama of the populist rallies against Mosley (organized without the official support of the Labour Party) or the intellectual appeal of the Left Book Club, it was a

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[196] Beers, *Red Ellen*, 399-400.

[197] Stuart Samuels, "The Left Book Club," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 2 (1966): pp. 65-86, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200946600100204, p.65-68.

[198] Samuels, "The Left Book Club", 75-78.

useful one against the attention-seeking Mosley. In this approach, the Conservatives also grouped the Nazis and BUF in with their old enemies of communism and socialism, in many ways feeding into the false political dichotomy that emerged during the 1930s.[199]

Of the two political extremes, communism was more likely than fascism to be applied incorrectly as a label. Nancy Mitford herself often corrected Evelyn Waugh when he called her a communist, avowing, "I don't know why you think I'm a Communist (must clear this up in your mind). I don't like Communism, I am a Socialist...but I've never been a Communist and am less than ever now that I see how cowardly they are…" [200] While a great deal of Waugh's accusations seem to have been a bit of a joke at Nancy's expense, the politically conservative Waugh perhaps did misidentify his friend's political beliefs. And Nancy was not alone in being politically misidentified. One of the most prominent aristocratic "communist" contemporaries of the Mitford sisters was the Duchess of Atholl, nicknamed "Red Kitty" or "The Red Duchess." In truth largely conservative, the Duchess of Atholl received this moniker after speaking out against Franco and fascism in Spain.[201] In keeping with the radicalism and false political dichotomy of the age, the thought process seems to be that if the Duchess did not loathe communism, she must certainly love it. Even the Mitford sisters themselves knew the Duchess by her "Red" reputation, and Debo and Unity met her once on a cruise, an occasion Unity, true to her exhibitionist Nazism, immediately used to broadcast her

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[199] Copsey and Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, 88.

[200] Mitford, *The Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy*, 86.

[201] Susan A. Williams, *Ladies of Influence: Women of the Elite in Interwar Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 107.

political views and attack those of the Duchess.[202] While not a true "Red Duchess" politically, she was against political extremism and human suffering. Indeed, the Duchess was so unwavering in her convictions against the cruelties of fascism that she staked her entire political career on a bid to force a by-election over the Munich Agreement in 1938, and lost, never returning to Parliament.[203] Furthermore, much of her relief work in Spain was directed toward women and children and had little political affiliation. Indeed it was compassion and humanitarianism that finally drove her toward the Republican cause despite her conservative views.[204] Ironically, given her original moniker, the Duchess of Atholl would later be termed a "Fascist Beast " for her campaign against communist brutality during the Cold War, seemingly unable to escape the 1930s determination, fed by the press, to categorize as either fascist or communist even years later.[205]

So great was the influence of this false polarity of communism and fascism that Nancy Mitford was considered to have similar political views as the conservative Duchess of Atholl, who had spoken out against suffrage and rarely strayed away from the right of political center. And yet, they did share similar beliefs when it came to the human suffering in Spain, and both were anti-fascist. Although Nancy was criticized by both Decca and Diana as an inactive socialist or "synthetic cochineal", respectively, and even by later editors and biographers as being unable to take politics seriously, in truth Nancy

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[202] Guinness, House of Mitford, 379.

[203] Gottlieb, "Modes and Models of Conservative Women's Leadership in the 1930s", 95.

[204] Williams, *Ladies of Influence*, 120-122.

[205] Julie V. Gottlieb, '*Guilty Women', Foreign Policy, and Appeasement in Inter-War Britain* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 229.

wrote about political matters with greater regularity (and consideration) than her more straightforwardly political sisters.[206] While filled with characteristically Mitford humor, Nancy's letters and many of her novels reflect her interest in politics. Indeed, nearly everything Nancy wrote, no matter how deeply it affected her, was approached with her signature humor and wit, which often came across as frivolous; as such, Nancy's tone cannot be taken as an indication of how seriously she felt about a topic, politics included.

Nancy's growing political interest coincided with the greater political fervor in 1930s Britain, along with Unity and Diana's affiliation with fascism. The first hints of political criticism come in Nancy's 1934 novel *Wigs on the Green*, which was critical enough in tone to upset both Unity and Diana. While Nancy and her husband Peter Rodd had attended a BUF rally, it seems that neither had fallen under the spell of the movement, and anything complimentary Nancy writes of Mosley, such as her praise of him as a "wonderful" speaker in a letter to Diana seems largely an attempt to appease Diana and Unity.[207] Indeed, she further attempted to soothe her sisters by stating that the novel "is very pro-Fascism…[and] the only nice character is a Feedjist [Fascist in the Mitford language of "Boudledidge"]", although the outrage Diana in particular felt about its publication very much belies this statement.[208] In the end, neither sister was appeased, even if Nancy did attempt to edit out some of her "teases", particularly those aimed at Unity's beloved Führer. Ultimately, Nancy held firm in her decision to publish, more from financial inducement over any true dedication to airing her political views and was

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[206] Mosley, *The Mitfords*, 34.

[207] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 62.

[208] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 63-64.

forced to bemoan being "born into such a family of fanatics" in the face of sisterly displeasure.[209]

While *Wigs on the Green* would indicate that Nancy had already decided against fascism, her views were certainly strengthened when she joined her husband, Peter Rodd, in May of 1939 to assist with refugees fleeing the Spanish Civil War into southern France. She wrote to her mother of the horrific human cost of the spread of fascism, admonishing, "If you could have a look, as I have, at some of the less agreeable results of fascism in a country I think you would be less anxious for the swastika to become a flag on which the sun never sets...the first result is always a horde of unhappy refugees...Personally I would join hands with the devil himself to stop any further extension of the disease."[210] Here, her views chime with those of Ellen Wilkinson, and other anti-fascists across party lines, recognizing the horrific human cost of fascism. Nancy continues to write her views on a proposed wartime alliance between Britain and Russia. These are not the opinions, or actions, of a frivolous woman who could not take politics seriously. Indeed, despite Decca's criticism of Nancy for "never really doing anything about [her socialism]", Nancy later engaged in far more war work than Jessica ever did.[211] After returning to London, Nancy continued the voluntary work she had begun in Spain, driving an Air Raid Protection car and working at a first aid post.[212]

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[209] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 69.

[210] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 80.

[211] Jessica Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 63.

[212] Thompson, *The Six*, 211.

Nancy also worked as a fire-watcher and assisted with Polish evacuees from the East End.[213]

During this time Nancy would also complete her novel *Pigeon Pie*, published in 1940. Here Nancy plays on wartime fears of parachutists, bombs, and Fifth Columnists in her characteristically humorous way, but underneath lies criticism of political fanaticism, particularly in the allure of Nazism for the aristocracy. Sophia, a character in many ways very similar to Nancy herself, criticizes her husband, saying of the Nazis, "they have told a lot of people a lot of things not strictly speaking true, and most of us are beginning to get wise. The day they said they would never use gas against civilians every First Aid Post in London let down its gas-proof flaps, and we have all stifled ever since."[214] Throughout the novel, Sophia's husband foolishly denies that a war will happen and sings Hitler's praises while unwittingly housing a nest of Nazi spies in their London home. After much bumbling, Sophia uncovers the plot while her silly husband is away in America and the Nazi spies are thwarted. *Pigeon Pie* is filled with Mitford humor, but nevertheless explores the danger of Nazi supporters in Britain and mocks attitudes during the so-called Phoney War when many British aristocrats, a mirror of Sophia's husband, seemed convinced that Hitler posed no real danger to Britain. Unfortunately, by the time *Pigeon Pie* was published in 1940, the dangers of war were now all too real, and readers were not inclined to enjoy comparisons of the war to "children in a round game, picking up sides."[215] Nancy would later come to agree, feeling that the tragedies of war were not

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[213] Thompson, *The Six*, 248.

[214] Nancy Mitford, *Pigeon Pie*, 43-44.

[215] Nancy Mitford, *Pigeon Pie*, 27.

acceptable fodder even for the humor she used to talk about everything from her failed love affairs and a dangerous ectopic pregnancy to politics. As a result, she later refused republication of both *Wigs on the Green* and *Pigeon Pie*. Here again, these are not the actions of a frivolous woman ignorant of, or uninterested in, politics. Rather, they suggest that Nancy was deeply impacted by the tragedies of war, having witnessed firsthand its destruction on London as well as on her own family.

Nancy's denunciation of her sister Diana also indicates a more serious view of politics than previously considered. While the tone of Nancy's political discussion in her novels and letters could certainly be interpreted as frivolous mockery by someone unfamiliar with the Mitford sense of humor, the action Nancy took following Oswald Mosley's arrest is not open to similar interpretation. Nor does it support Decca's view of Nancy as a sham socialist who never took any action.[216] While there is certainly a dose of sisterly competition in Nancy's willingness to inform on her sister, as with Decca's reaction to Unity's fascism, competition or jealousy was certainly not the sole influence. Had this been the case, Nancy would simply have written some scathing criticism of Diana to a sibling or friend like Evelyn Waugh (who appreciated her biting wit) rather than make the effort to speak with someone in the Foreign Office. Nancy had always felt twinges of jealousy toward what she felt were the gloriously golden looks and charms of Diana, a contrast to Nancy's sharp, and sometimes cruel, wit, but her desire to halt fascism was genuine.[217] She did ask friends for reassurance that she had behaved

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[216] Mitford, *Hons and Rebels*, 63.

[217] Thompson, *The Six*, 245.

correctly in denouncing Diana, an action she herself deemed "not very sisterly behavior", but there is no indication that Nancy, or the few friends who immediately knew of her actions, felt that this was in service to any motive other than anti-fascism.[218] Intriguingly, Nancy also informed the Foreign Office that her sister Pam, and Pam's husband Derek Jackson, should be put under surveillance for fascist sympathies. Here her motives are more ambiguous, although Nancy's relationship with Pam was not tinged with the same jealous competition often shown toward Diana. It seems that Nancy, despite Derek's heroic war record and Pam's apolitical reputation, truly believed that the couple could be potentially dangerous.[219] Contrary to Decca's critique, Nancy proved more than willing to act on her political beliefs.

In London, Nancy would eventually come to work at a club for French officers. Nancy had been asked to infiltrate the "Free Frog Officers' Club" by a friend at the War Office.[220] Again, this is certainly not a request one would put to someone devoid of political understanding. While put in place to potentially gain information in a club known for leaks, this was likely Nancy's first exposure to the political ideas of Charles de Gaulle, head of the Free French. Although her views were perhaps slightly rose-tinted due to her relationships with two different Frenchmen, first Roy André Desplats-Pilter, codenamed André Roy, and later her beloved Colonel, Gaston Palewski, Nancy did nevertheless support de Gaulle's politics as well as admire his officers.[221]

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[218] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 98.

[219] Thompson, *The Six*, 245.

[220] Thompson, *The Six*, 253.

[221] Thompson, *The Six*, 254.

Nancy's long relationship with Palewski would do much to shape her political beliefs. As with those of her sisters, Nancy's politics were very much intertwined with her object of affection.[222] Palewski himself was a dedicated Gaullist, and his close relationship with de Gaulle led to a prominent political career both during and after the Second World War. Palewski, as a dedicated Anglophile who had been educated at an English boarding school, served as a valuable link between the British and de Gaulle's Free French government during the war, and his frequent visits to London at de Gaulle's behest led him to the club where Nancy worked. Swayed by Palewski's charm, Nancy fell in love with both the man and his politics. She wrote to Decca of her beliefs, saying "what good ideas General de Gaulle has about post war settlements. Actually, I do believe that this war is going to bring about incredible reforms, quite unlike the other, *unless* there is slaughter on a ghastly scale leaving everyone too shattered and exhausted."[223] Like her sisters', Nancy's political views were undoubtedly influenced by the man she loved. Nancy would remain a dedicated socialist and continue to support de Gaulle after a move to France at the end of the war. Her letters from Paris are sprinkled with political chatter, about both France and England, showing excitement in British Labour victories and including one irresistible "tease" in which Nancy wrote to Mark Ogilvie-Grant in 1947 saying, "Huge Gaullist meeting of 40,000 people the other day. I went, feeling awfully like my sisters. It was a wild success…."[224] There can be no

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[222] Lisa Hilton, *The Horror of Love* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2011), 49.

[223] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 112.

[224] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 187.

mistaking which sisters Nancy meant. But for all her humor and teasing, Nancy's letters and novels hint at a consideration of politics that the political fanaticism shown by Unity, and even Decca, lacks. While Jessica does occasionally delve into her political views in *Hons and Rebels*, attributing them to herself in childhood and as a teenager, a comparison of her contemporary correspondence indicated that these views were predominately inserted into the narrative after the fact. The more intellectual Diana too once showed hints of political contemplation, but after she had chosen Mosley such glimmers vanish beneath the mask, replaced only with unwavering and unrepentant loyalty.

Like Nancy's, Deborah's politics are not typically considered by historians. She lacks the drama of her extremist sisters, Decca, Diana, and Unity. Perhaps in reaction to their radicalism, Deborah, more commonly referred to as Debo, seemed largely to avoid politics in her younger years. While she did write to Diana to claim that she argued "for fascism at school as all the girls are Conservatives" she also wrote thanking her for a gift of an evening bag that she liked so much that she even "forgave" Diana for being a fascist; these comments speak more of a young girl trying to gain the approval of her glamorous older sister than a budding fascist, and there is no indication that Debo ever fell under either Mosley or Hitler's spell.[225] Indeed, a letter to Jessica written in 1937 says only of Hitler that "he must be very fond of her [Unity], he never took his eyes off her."[226] Diana later wrote to her younger sister in 1938 that Hitler especially wanted Debo to attend the Parteitag in Germany, but there is no indication that Debo responded

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[225] Mosley, *The Mitfords,* 44-50.

[226] Mosley, *The Mitfords,* 103.

with any interest.[227] Indeed any interest shown in travel, to Germany or elsewhere, on Debo's part seems heavily symptomatic of loneliness as the only child left at home, longing for her sisters. Hitler and his politics held no charm for Deborah, nor did Mosley's BUF.

Soon after, with Unity forever changed by her suicide attempt and Diana imprisoned, politics must have seemed even less palatable to Debo. Radical politics had taken Jessica from her when she ran away with Esmond, and now the Unity she had loved was gone forever and Diana imprisoned. It is no wonder Debo turned away from radicalism, and indeed wrote little of politics in general to her sisters. And yet, Debo was not completely apolitical, despite being categorized as such by numerous biographers, including Charlotte Mosley, one of the largest contributors to Mitford scholarship. While Debo "was never tempted to follow any extreme cause" and was "not interested in Communism or Fascism - [having] had too much of them in [her childhood]", she did selectively participate in politics when a cause chimed with her own sensibilities and interests.[228] One such cause came during the General Election of 1945 when Andrew Cavendish, Debo's husband and the second son of the Duke of Devonshire, had decided he wanted to enter politics. Cavendish had not previously been successful in gaining a constituency, but in 1945 he ran as a candidate for the National Liberal Party, an offshoot of the Liberal Party that would later merge with the Conservatives.[229] The issue of that

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[227] Mosley, *The Mitfords,* 123.

[228] Deborah Vivien Freeman-Mitford Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, *Wait for Me!* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 134.

[229] Devonshire, *Wait for Me!*, 133-134.

particular election, especially in the Derbyshire constituency Cavendish was bidding for, was the nationalization of coal mines. For many aristocrats in the North and Midlands, dependant upon revenue from coal mines on their estates, nationalization presented an enormous threat. Andrew ended up losing that election as Labour swept the region by thousands of votes. But here Debo shows her political views, not just in dedicated support for her husband, for whom she did campaign, but also in her consideration of what a socialist government, despite its promises, had actually done for the miners. In Debo's view, "the way the Socialists presented nationalization to the coal miners was grossly unfair. The miners were led to believe that their lives would be transformed from one day to the next when the National Coal Board took over. In the event they found themselves back underground, the old hierarchy still in place."[230] For the practical Debo, socialism on the whole seemed to make promises it was unable to keep.

Deborah's dislike of socialism was only increased when her father-in-law, the Duke of Devonshire, died in November of 1950. Andrew's older brother, the heir, had died six years before during the war, and now Andrew and Deborah were poised to take on all the duties of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. And they were "duties" in more than one sense of the word, including astronomical death duties that were set, under the Labour government, at a "dizzying eighty per cent." To Debo, it seemed unfair "that the family of a man who had given a lifetime of public service should have to pay such a vast fine on his death", but she, with her signature practicality, collaborated with Andrew in deciding what property should be sold and what should be retained. In total, the death

[230] Deborah Vivien Freeman-Mitford Cavendish Devonshire, *Wait for Me!*, 135.

duties would not be paid off until May of 1967.[231] While this decision would ultimately make Chatsworth House what it is today under Deborah's careful management, open to the public and home to both a working farm and yearly equestrian event, it is nevertheless understandable that Debo would view socialism unfavorably, and as a result, be christened by Decca as a "Conservative policeman."[232]

Despite Decca's criticism and its implied policing, Debo's view of Conservatism stressed relationships over rule enforcement, believing that "time-honoured hierarchies are better than faceless modern conglomerates; the 600 or so people employed at Chatsworth know who they should moan at if things go wrong. 'There's always been access to the top here. There's a human. You can laugh at them, you can dislike them, but they're there.'" Indeed, there is a very human side to Deborah's management of the estate, markedly present in her declaration that "it's really the company of...the people who work on the farms that I like best of all." People would always come before political ideals in Deborah's mind, and notably, Debo seems to have been able to separate the political from the personal in her relationships with her sisters. Throughout the turmoil that rocked her family, Debo maintained relationships with all of her sisters, even if she disagreed with their politics, although her neutrality is at times difficult to understand, particularly in relation to Unity's flamboyant Nazism and antisemitism. As Debo herself

[231] Deborah Vivien Freeman-Mitford Cavendish Devonshire, *Wait for Me!*, 139-141.

[232] Deborah Vivien Freeman-Mitford Cavendish Devonshire, *Wait for Me!*, 134.

said, "their politics were nothing to do with me."[233] Of her sisters, Deborah had perhaps the greatest ability, in close competition with her sister Pam, to put aside the political in favor of the personal. And yet clearly politics were not unimportant to her when an issue she truly cared about arose. Why else would the Duchess, at the age of seventy-seven, organize a group of "game-keepers, river bailiffs, foresters, gardeners, office staff, cleaners, and other field-sports supporters" from Chatsworth to travel to London and march with the Countryside Alliance against the fox-hunting ban in 1997? Debo herself also participated in the march, and her active participation in a political protest certainly indicates that she was not as disinterested in politics as many have supposed.[234]

In her support for conservatism, however, Debo was not unique. In fact, amongst the aristocracy, conservatism was the most common political view, one more supportive of aristocratic tradition, although there was a good deal of variation in the political beliefs of the aristocracy.[235] Variation notwithstanding, many conservatives also contended with the same false dichotomy that had categorized both Nancy Mitford and the Duchess of Atholl as "Reds", despite their divergent political beliefs. Nancy Astor, consistently conservative, did herself face accusations of Nazi sympathies despite her anti-fascist efforts throughout the 1930s and into the war. Astor had supported universal suffrage, and although she did host the German ambassador in 1936, she also actively spoke out

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[233] Stephen Moss, *The Guardian*, September 12, 2010, "The Duchess of Devonshire", https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/sep/12/deborah-duchess-of-devonshire-chatsworth.

[234] Deborah Vivien Freeman-Mitford Cavendish Devonshire, *Wait for Me!*, 273-274.

[235] Martin Pugh, *"We Danced All Night": A Social History of Britain between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009), 360-361.

against Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, a prominent female Nazi leader, and had ultimately concluded that her support for the rights of women could not allow for the spread of fascism due to their inherent opposition. Astor's association with Nazi Germany likely stems from her earlier work with the Woman's Peace Crusade in the 1920s, a group that had advocated for disarmament after the First World War, as well as her support for appeasement through 1939. Appeasement, when combined with Astor's socializing with prominent Nazi officials or other known Nazi sympathizers, however limited, translated into support for the Nazi regime by those predisposed against her. So too did Nancy Astor's ability to influence as a hostess, influence exerted largely behind closed doors, play into this narrative, especially when sensationalized in the press. Astor's detractors hinted at nefarious long weekends full of Nazi schemes at the Astors' country home, Cliveden House. Tarred with a collective brush as a member of "The Cliveden Set", which included several other aristocratic political elites, by the leftist press, Nancy Astor would later be forced to repeatedly deny affiliation with Nazi Germany. While the 1930s "Cliveden Set" is largely considered by historians to be a conspiracy theory at worst and left-wing propaganda at best, Astor was nevertheless viewed with suspicion.[236] Somehow, the Astors' country home, Cliveden, had become synonymous with Nazi apologism, and Nancy's anti-fascist activism only increased as she attempted to prove her loyalty to her conservatism as well as to Britain, stating that she had "a perfect horror of the Nazis...and had chances to meet both Hitler and Mussolini but refused."[237] With

[236] Gottlieb, *Rethinking Right-Wing Women*, 96-98.

[237] "Lady Astor Denies Ties with Germany," *New York Times* (1923-Current file); November 25, 1945; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times, pg. 33.

Nancy Astor, as with Diana, perhaps there was something more that predisposed Astor's detractors against her. While for Diana it was her beauty and privilege, combined with her unrepentant support of her husband, in Astor's case it seems to be both her unique position as a female MP and her American heritage (implying dangerous foreign influence) combined to create a mythos of Astor as a manipulator of powerful men, portrayed in the press and political cartoons as "a Jezebel, Cleopatra, [or] femme fatale."[238]

While Astor's political record taken as a whole is quite distinguished, there is some ambiguity as to what degree she sympathized with Nazi Germany. Astor had been close with Oswald Mosley and his first wife, Cimmie, and had been disappointed when the couple defected to join up, albeit briefly, with the Labour Party. It is possible she retained some personal connection and sympathies with Mosley as a result, therefore vaguely aligning her with fascism, although her willingness to demand Diana's imprisonment with her husband indicates otherwise.[239] Like many of her aristocratic contemporaries, however, the answer seems to lie in connection with foreign fascism rather than the BUF. Indeed, the more likely explanation is that Astor's privileged position combined with anti-communism, as well as a degree of antisemitism, to nudge her toward a more favorable view of Nazi Germany, at least at first. Fascism initially seemed to Nancy Astor to be a possible solution, as it did to many who opposed communism. The appeal of such a solution, however, faded for all but the most dedicated

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[238] Gottlieb, *Rethinking Right-Wing Women*, 97.

[239] Anne De Courcy, *The Viceroy's Daughters the Lives of the Curzon Sisters* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2000), 115.

of fascists as Hitler advanced across Europe. Ultimately, Astor had decided that her political views did not align with those of the Nazis, whatever her initial sympathies had been. Despite the entertaining Astor had done of Nazi officials and Nazi sympathizers, perhaps the deciding factor in favor of her strict definition as a Tory rather than a fascist lies in her inclusion on Heinrich Himmler's "Black List", a document listing those who would immediately be imprisoned should Germany invade Britain.[240] By the Nazi Party's own summation, therefore, Astor was not a Nazi sympathizer.

Lady Londonderry, Edith Vane-Tempest-Stewart, another Tory hostess, faced similar censure to her rival, Nancy Astor. Rather than heading the "Cliveden Set", Lady Londonderry was claimed to host a parallel group of Nazi sympathizers, the Londonderry circle, seemingly matching her rival hostess even in infamy.[241] Although Lady Londonderry did not actively participate in politics in the manner of Nancy Astor by serving as an MP, she utilized all of her charm and intelligence to advance her husband's career. Indeed, Lady Londonderry's charms were so great that she came to be nicknamed "Circe" after the sorceress of Greek mythology. And her charms were inducement to cross party lines. Perhaps Lady Londonderry's greatest conquest, Ramsay MacDonald, the first Labour Prime Minister, was completely charmed by the famed Tory hostess. He came to consider Lady Londonderry a friend, and wrote numerous letters to her, expressing his devotion in somewhat flirtatious tones. His adoration grew to such an extent that he wrote to Lady Londonderry, asking, "What potion did you put in my wine

[240] Julie V. Gottlieb, *Guilty Women, Foreign Policy, and Appeasement in Inter-War Britain* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 73-75.

[241] Gottlieb, *Guilty Women*, 74.

that night at Buckingham Palace?"[242] In an age of vehement opposition and dichotomous politics, the adoration of a Labour Prime Minister for a Tory aristocrat must have seemed attributable to witchcraft. While their relationship was the subject of gossip and disapproval, not to mention fodder for the tabloids, it did prove useful in Lady Londonderry's aim of advancing her husband's career. Despite his conservative views, Lord Londonderry was appointed Secretary of State for Air under MacDonald in 1931, a position he would later lose in 1935, although he would continue to sit in the House of Lords. While Lady Londonderry was perhaps not expressly blamed by critics for her husband's dismissal or even for his later amateur ambassadorial efforts in Germany, there was nevertheless a general feeling that she was the stronger personality in the marriage. As Lord Londonderry's support for appeasement and Anglo-German Fellowship grew, the overall consensus was that Lady Londonderry had not been "a happy influence" on her husband in politics.[243]

In pursuit of appeasement, Lord Londonderry made numerous trips to Nazi Germany, and his wife often accompanied him, one of the "silly hostesses" both Harold Nicholson and Nancy Mitford criticized.[244] Indeed when accusations of Nazi sympathies began to plague the couple, Lady Londonderry's "Circe" charm had somewhat backfired. On visits to Germany, Lady Londonderry had completely charmed Hermann Goering, eventually forming an intimate epistolary friendship.[245] But the Londonderrys did not

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[242] Masters, *Great Hostesses*, 49.

[243] Masters, *Great Hostesses,* 51.

[244] Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"*, 271.

[245] Nigel Todd, *In Excited Times*, 30.

limit their support for the Nazis to private letters, or indeed to fascist tourism. In her role as hostess back in Britain, Lady Londonderry had often invited Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Nazi Foreign Minister, to join them at various parties and social events. His visits became frequent enough that Lord Londonderry was christened "The Londonderry Herr" by the press, although the Londonderrys certainly were not alone in playing host to Nazis.[246] Such social events would, however, eventually come to an end as the Nazis decided that many of their aristocratic supporters were perhaps not as influential in British politics as they had hoped, the Londonderrys among them. While Lord Londonderry did continue to advocate for a relationship between Germany and Britain, hoping to avoid war, by 1938 he had "turned on Germany", "condemning German persecution of the Jews."[247] His wife's views, or at very least her interests, likely aligned, as ever, with those of her husband, and her varied collection of admirers from many political backgrounds speaks more to her machinations for power and influence over dedicated support for fascism, despite her familiarity with Goering. Later, Lord Londonderry would fully recant, expressing great sadness in his role in Nazi appeasement and dying a broken man shortly after the war's end in 1949.[248]

As with Nancy Astor, the politics of the Londonderrys are somewhat murky, a tangle of fascism and more traditionally conservative views, of support for Nazis and

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[246] Neil Fleming, "'The Londonderry Herr': Lord Londonderry and the Appeasement of Nazi Germany," *History Ireland* 13, no. 1 (2005), 33.

[247] "Lord Londonderry Turns on Germany," *New York Times (1923-Current File)* (New York), 1938.

[248] Miranda Seymour, *The Pity of War: England and Germany, Bitter Friends, Beloved Foes* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 387.

then recantation. And yet why was Diana viewed with such universal disgust when other sympathizers amongst the aristocracy were able to seek redemption? All at one point advocated for peace with Germany and all had personal relationships with Nazi officials. Of the numerous women who had supported fascism, "silly hostesses" among them, Diana perhaps held the least degree of influence, most certainly in Britain, after her separation from Bryan Guinness to become Mosley's mistress and later, his wife, having effectively removed her from much of the aristocratic social scene. Nevertheless, of Lady Cunard, Margaret Greville, Nancy Astor, and Lady Londonderry, she is arguably the most reviled. The answer, it seems, lies in repentance. While doubts remain for many 1930s aristocrats who participated in fascism or advocated for Nazi appeasement, those who recanted, most vocalizing their support for the Conservatives while denying fascism, have largely been politically categorized according to these declarations. Contrary to the false dichotomy of strict fascism against communism, the political reality was far more nuanced.

As seen with Lady Londonderry, the political beliefs of women during this period, particularly those who did not hold political office, are also difficult to distinguish from those of their husbands. Female MPs have the political record to indicate their views on numerous issues, but those who did not take office often left far less evidence regarding their political beliefs. Nevertheless, for those women who actively participated as MPs, like Lady Astor and the Duchess of Atholl, it would have been impossible to do so against the wishes of their husbands, and women's political views typically ran in a similar direction to those of their husbands or partners, at least publicly, in or out of political office. As such, it is difficult to truly distinguish political divergence, as any

conflicting views likely remained private. Lady Cynthia Mosley, Oswald Mosley's first wife, is one such woman, her political views difficult to differentiate from those of her husband. When the two met, both Cimmie and Mosley were working on Lady Astor's campaign in 1919. The couple married shortly after, in 1920, and almost immediately after defected from the Conservative Party, eventually joining up with Labour in 1924.[249] Cimmie, the daughter of Lord Curzon, a dedicated anti-suffragist and Tory imperialist, had already shown a degree of divergence from her father's political beliefs by campaigning for Nancy Astor, but the move to Labour was seemingly not much of an adjustment for her. In many ways, Cimmie was drawn toward the left as many others were, by idealism and humanitarianism. Her husband's motives, however, seem born of pure ambition. And yet the two worked together in political partnership, with Cimmie eventually becoming one of thirty-six Interwar female MPs, although her time in Parliament would be fairly brief. In 1929, both were elected in the General Election, and served together in the House of Commons.[250] While Cimmie's active participation within the Labour Party seemingly indicates that her views inclined to the political left, she had previously campaigned for the Conservatives, an indication that perhaps her dedication to socialism was not as strong as might be assumed. Furthermore, Cimmie's willingness to follow her husband from Conservative to Labour to the New Party and then finally to fascism, indicates that Cimmie valued her marriage to Mosley above any political ideals. Harold Nicholson mocked this repeated political shift, saying, "Poor Cimmie cannot follow [Mosley's] repudiation of all the things he has taught her to say previously. She

[249] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 185.

[250] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 185-186.

was made for society and the home."[251] While Nicholas unfairly discounts the extensive political work Cimmie had engaged in, he is right in his hint that, within their marriage, Mosley ultimately decided their politics. If Cimmie had been the "angelic figure" who could have limited her "husband's more distasteful fascist excesses" as some have depicted her to have been, relying primarily upon the judgement of Cimmie's son Nicholas, would she not have been able to hold her husband to the Labour Party or make him content with his own New Party?[252] Would she not have been able to prevent his constant adultery and absence from home that upset her so greatly? Truthfully, Cimmie had little influence over her forceful bully of a husband, in either politics or their personal life. While her son supposes that she never would have aligned herself to the fascist movement, nevertheless conceding that she would not have openly opposed Mosley, Cimmie's sister counters with an account of Cynthia, working even in illness, "searching for designs for a Fascist flag" and "devoting many hours daily, in her failing health, to working out an elaborate card-index system in the offices of the Movement."[253] Such dedication is not the mark of a rejection of Mosley's fascism; with her ill health, Cimmie could have easily made excuses to avoid the BUF had she wished to do so. Instead, she chose to support her husband and his BUF. While Harold Nicholson wrote that "Cimmie wants to put a notice in the *Times* to the effect that she disassociates herself from Tom's fascist tendencies", the statement was largely perceived as some sort of joke.[254]

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[251] De Courcey, *The Viceroy's Daughters*, 146.

[252] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 186.

[253] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 188.

[254] De Courcey, *The Viceroy's Daughters*, 164

Ultimately, Cimmie summed up her own views when confronted by the speculative press at a left-wing speech, saying, "I am a member of my husband's Party."[255] She would remain loyal until her death in 1933.

While it is impossible to say what might have been had Cimmie lived past 1933, in all likelihood she would have behaved much as Diana had. Both women had shown previous inclination toward more liberal politics, and yet both had chosen Mosley, with his requisite fascism, over any previously-held political principles. While her son Nicholas indicates that Cimmie would have checked Mosley's fascism, he was only ten when his mother passed away, and is most certainly influenced by the love he had for his mother, by all accounts a far kinder parent than Oswald Mosley. Nevertheless, Cimmie is largely categorized as holding more liberal beliefs than Diana, who has been firmly positioned as a fascist. The reality of their political beliefs, however, is far more nuanced than the simple depiction of an angelic and liberal Cimmie versus her reviled fascist replacement.

Difficulty also arises in categorizing Pam, the Mitford sister seemingly universally declared to be apolitical. Pam wrote far fewer letters than her sisters, and her correspondence focused far more on countryside pursuits like animal husbandry, her numerous dogs and horses, and cooking, than anything else. In the general absence of Pam's voice, particularly in regard to politics, we must perhaps look to her husband, Derek Jackson, for a hint of her political beliefs. While Pam is generally supposed to be apolitical, there remains the intriguing denunciation of Pam and her husband, put forward by Nancy at the same time she declared Diana to be a national threat. When Nancy's

[255] Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*, 189.

denunciation of the Jacksons was ignored by the Foreign Office, she persisted with her beliefs, writing to Violet Hammersley, "Pam and Derek came to London for a few days and talked such Fascism that the whole town is speculating on how they manage to remain OUT."[256] While Nancy loved her "teases", and Mitford jokes could be "run to death" as they were by the fictional representation of the Mitfords, the Radletts, in Nancy's novels, Nancy had viewed her denunciation of her sister as perfectly serious, and seemingly believed, as her continued declarations of Derek and Pam's fascism would attest, that they too posed a threat. A Mitford-style "tease", however, may be at the root of Nancy's beliefs, as Derek by all accounts was quite fond of provoking outrage for his own entertainment. Jackson, while in the RAF working as a navigator, enjoyed giving directions to pilots in German, a "tease" many officers felt to be in poor taste.[257] It is quite possible Derek had simply been provoking Nancy by feigning fascism for his own amusement, although it seems unlikely that Nancy, a consummate user of the "tease" herself, would so thoroughly fail to recognize a joke. Her view of Derek as a fascist, furthermore, was not unique. James Lees-Milne wrote of Jackson in 1942, "Derek is positively pro-Nazi...saying that we can't win the war, that he loathes the British lower classes who have forced him into this unnecessary war (absolute tosh!) and that the Germans know the best way of treating them, which is to crush them under heel."[258]

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[256] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 109.

[257] Selina Hastings, "The Triumph of Hope over Experience," *Spectator* 305, no. 9350 (2007): 53.

[258] Quoted in Richard Griffiths, *What Did You Do during the War?: The Last Throes of the British Pro-Nazi Right, 1940-45* (London: Routledge, 2017), 215-216.

Derek playing the fascist to both Nancy and Lees-Milne so frequently truly would be seeing a joke "run to death", and yet, can he be categorized as such?

Despite his unique personality and provocative behavior, Derek proved his heroism during the war. While initially opposing conflict with Germany, Derek went on to receive numerous medals and accolades for his skilled work as a radar operator and navigator, as well as his later scientific achievements such as a system designed to jam the radio signals of enemy aircraft.[259] Derek's war record perhaps speaks against support for fascism, furthered by the trust shown to him by the Air Ministry, who sent Derek to the United States for "a special job for three weeks on research."[260] The Air Ministry additionally entrusted him with secret papers he carried back to England, flying from America back to England with Pam.[261] Such trust speaks to the unlikelihood of Derek, and by extension Pam, supporting fascism. Had their loyalties been in doubt, it is thoroughly unlikely the Air Ministry would have placed government secrets directly into their hands.

And yet, their close relationship with the Mosleys only increases the ambiguity of their political beliefs. When Diana and her husband were imprisoned, it was to Pam they turned for the care of their children. When the Mosleys were finally released from prison in 1943, they again turned to Pam, who took them in and staunchly deflected the press. Eventually, the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, the same man who had originally

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[259] Diana Alexander, *The Other Mitford: Pamela's Story* (Stroud: History Press, 2012), 64.

[260] Mosley, *The Mitfords*, 153.

[261] Alexander, *The Other Mitford*, 80.

questioned Unity's freedom, became nervous that Derek, still working on various top-secret projects, was housing dangerous Nazi sympathizers. Morrison, however, seems to have questioned Jackson's judgement, rather than his loyalty, in his decision to shelter the Mosleys, and there is no indication he supposed Derek to be a Nazi sympathizer. Derek had protested against Morrison, furious that the government should dictate which guests he was permitted to entertain. By all accounts, Derek refused to back down, but the Mosleys decided to put an end to the stand-off and find their own lodgings.[262] Derek's actions here are somewhat ambiguous. Intimacy with the Mosleys, even after their imprisonment, could indicate fascist sympathies, and yet could also be nothing more than Derek taking issue with government interference in his own home and a friendship in spite of differing political beliefs. Pam was certainly able to maintain such relationships, as is indicated by her remaining on good terms with all five of her sisters throughout the war, and perhaps Derek was too.

With limited political evidence on offer, Derek perhaps presents the greatest opportunity to understand Pam's political beliefs, since women during this period generally espoused similar political views to those of their husbands and partners. And yet there are two intriguing hints that Pam was not, in fact, a fascist, but perhaps a politically uninterested conservative. The first clue stems from a move to Ireland. Like Debo, who bemoaned the high taxes under Labour, Pam and her husband felt that the tax burden was an unfair one. Despite an offer of a prestigious position at Oxford for Derek, the Jacksons decamped to Ireland. While it might have been Derek's idea to move to Ireland, Pam had directed his behavior in the past, as she did in encouraging him to move

[262] Alexander, *The Other Mitford*, 98.

away from active military service toward scientific work far from the front lines. And Pam clearly supported the move, staying there even after she and Derek had divorced in 1951, and may have been a greater influence than previously supposed.[263] Pam's personality too hints at a practical interpretation of conservatism over any brand of fascism. Writing to Debo from Ireland, the frugal and practical Pam wrote of a "perfectly good cot" and "perfectly good blankets which have a few moth holes...cut them into the right size leaving out the eaten parts...put some pretty ribbon to bind them and this would again save the lot."[264] It is difficult to imagine the careful Pam being swayed by fascism's bluster and pageantry, although admittedly others like her were.

Though it has been interpreted as a mark of complete political indifference, Pam's silence on all matters political is very much in keeping with her personality. As a child, she suffered both from infantile paralysis, which left one leg slightly shorter than the other, as well as Nancy's teasing, and must have learned that a placid facade was key to survival, whatever emotions and thoughts lay underneath. Seemingly, she carried this trait into adulthood, and as a result, was able to pass through the political scuffles amongst her sisters unscathed, although to do so required her to exempt herself from political discussion. As a result, Pam's political beliefs are very much open to interpretation, with hints of possible fascism, conservatism, or even a total lack of political thought. One deciding favor, however, firmly against Pam's fascism, comes from a single off-hand statement. Pam, having met Unity's beloved Führer, thought him

[263] Alexander, *The Other Mitford*, 99-100.

[264] Mosley, *The Mitfords*, 304.

thoroughly unimpressive, dropping her placid facade to state that Hitler had been "like a farmer in his old brown suit."[265] No fascist could remain so unmoved.

Despite the tendency to polarize politics, a legacy of the sensationalist press, categorizing beliefs as either fascist or communist, the reality is a tangle of political shifts, nuance, and ambiguity. Conservatives could momentarily align with communists, communists could mellow, and fascists could recant. A political exploration of the Mitford sisters has also fallen prey to this false polarity, along with misidentification, focusing on the dramatic while ignoring the subtleties. However, it is in the nuance that we can truly understand the views held by the Mitford sisters, analyzing them not as the "Red Sheep" or Hitler's "Nordic Goddess", or even taking them wholly at their own political valuation, but rather exploring the tangle of views that connects the Mitford sisters to the greater tapestry of British politics.

[265] Thompson, *The Six,* 48.

VII.

Conclusions and Issues for Further Research

In such a complex tangle of political and social change, what conclusions can be drawn from the six Mitford sisters? While their dramatic exploits at first glance seem nothing more than outrageous, they do have a part to play in the study of the aristocratic female political experience in Interwar Britain. Although it would be impossible to state that one single family group could be representative of the enormous aristocratic whole, the Mitford sisters provide an intriguing cross-section, an example of how extreme social and political change between two wars could collide with aristocratic tradition, all contained within one controlled family group. Through the Mitford sisters, and in comparison with other aristocratic women like them, we see the impact of new ideas and ideologies, like communism, fascism, women's suffrage, and a new brand of celebrity culture, on women brought up with the legacy of centuries of aristocratic tradition.

In reaction to this period of great social and political change, the Mitford sisters behaved in markedly different ways, yet each seeking to establish themselves as an individual in a group of six sisters amongst shifting alliances, jealousies, and sibling rivalries. In a group of sisters roughly tallied as two fascists, one communist, one socialist, and two conservatives, there is nevertheless a common background, and the aristocratic upbringing that imbued the Mitford sisters with their eccentricities and shared humor remained long after their political beliefs diverged. In this way the sisters can also be seen as a reflection of the wide variety of political beliefs aristocratic women held, despite a shared background.

Here too we find common ground between the sisters and other aristocratic women in the connection between politics and personal relationships and "the pursuit of love." While for the Mitford sisters, the political was irreparably and dramatically tangled up with the men they chose to love, other aristocratic women also aligned their political beliefs with those of their husbands and partners. Whether in the ballrooms and Mayfair drawing rooms or on the public stage of Parliament and political rallies, the politics of aristocratic women are difficult to differentiate from their personal lives and relationships, and in the Mitford sisters we see this played out in dramatic, and often scandalous fashion.

While Lady Redesdale's lament, "Whenever I see the words 'Peer's daughter' in a headline, I know it's going to be something about you children" might lead to an impression that a life lived in tabloid headlines can hardly be a representation of the female aristocratic experience, sensationalist press coverage too played a part in shaping political views, mingling fiction with reality, and therefore cannot be discounted.[266] Similarly, radical political beliefs mingled with the moderate, much as they did amongst the Mitford sisters themselves. Although the Mitford political extremes, fascism and communism, have been amplified by tabloid coverage and greater public interest and outrage, the more moderate political beliefs of the sisters are equally significant in better understanding the full political and historical picture.

And yet, admittedly, there is more to be done in understanding aristocratic women as a whole, as well as in study of the Mitford sisters. Overall, the voices of aristocratic women are heard far less than those of their male contemporaries, and hopefully many

[266] Mitford, *Letters of Nancy Mitford: Love from Nancy,* 75.

more illuminating accounts will emerge over time. In regard to the Mitford sisters, while Charlotte Mosley has collected a staggering amount of correspondence between the sisters, she does admit that of "some twelve thousand letters", a relatively small portion by comparison have been published.[267]

While there may be more to be learned about the dramatic lives and beliefs of the Mitford sisters, what we do know is plentiful. In the Mitford sisters we capture a confluence of great social and political change meeting aristocratic tradition, one unique and dramatic cross-section of aristocratic female life during a time of great upheaval, all played out within one controlled family group. In understanding the Mitford sisters, we see not just scandalous "Peer's daughters", but a glimpse into aristocratic female life in the Interwar period, one small piece that can help to illuminate the whole.

[267] Mosley, *The Mitfords*, xiii.

VI.

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