

BRITAIN'S FASCIST PUPPET

Blackshirt

Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism

Stephen Dorril

London: Penguin, 2006

£30

717 pp. (cloth)

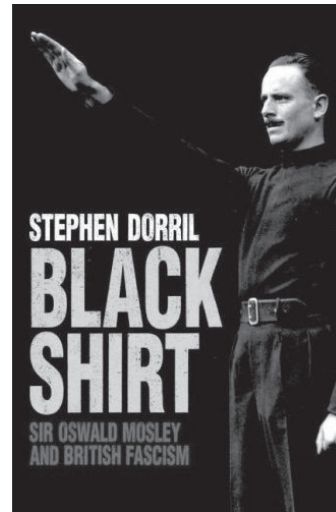
Reviewed by Edward Dutton

Stephen Dorril presents a convincing justification for a new biography of Britain's wartime fascist leader. According to Dorril, the portrayal of Mosley since the 1970s, both in terms of Robert Skidelsky's biography and also a television drama about him in the late 1990s, has been surprisingly – even unjustifiably – sympathetic.¹ This is particularly peculiar when one considers the near-stranglehold that political correctness still retains on much debate, especially surrounding World War II and National Socialism, in the U.K. However, it does appear that a certain nostalgia has developed around Sir Oswald Mosley: the best prime minister that the Labour Party never had, the best prime minister that the Conservative Party never had, a deeply sensitive, principled, and unfortunately impetuous man who was surrounded by nasty Nazi nutcases. Indeed, when his widow died the mainstream British media, at least at first, treated her with extraordinary reverence, a reverence denied to British National Party leader John Tyndall,² for example...such, perhaps, is still the power of aristocracy and "breeding" in the U.K. Elsewhere, the author comments that the Labour Party leaders, who unlike now were generally working class, are always ultimately "entranced by society"³ – beguiled by aristocrats such as Sir Oswald Mosley. Dorril's biography strips away the nostalgic garlands to provide a seemingly far more accurate – if slightly over-condemnatory in places – assessment of Mosley, his character, and his contribution to British politics. If Dorril's assessment is correct, then Mosley's life is almost a textbook lesson for potential leaders – and indeed political movements – on how to not quite get there. The British Union of Fascists did not get there, so it would appear, partly because of Mosley's extremely domineering, arrogant, and narcissistic personality, which Dorril examines

in incredible detail in both his public and private life. Throughout the work, many parallels are drawn, whether overtly or otherwise, between Mosley and Hitler. And at every level – including psychological difficulties – Mosley appears to be a pale, gray imitation.

Having justified that this new biography is worth writing, Dorril immediately takes us into Mosley's world, following roughly the pattern of Mosley's own autobiography *My Life*. Thus, Dorril begins with the history of Mosley's family, who were minor aristocrats, or "gentry" (aristocrats without a title of nobility). From the beginning, Dorril writes in a clear, engaging, and readable style. As his focus is very much on Mosley's psychology, rather than simply his achievements and failures, Sir Oswald's childhood, which can hardly be described as idyllic, is discussed in depth. His father was a distant and unloving figure who was estranged from Mosley's mother, who was something of an eccentric to whom Mosley was extremely close. Dorril comments that Mosley was a "substitute husband" for his mother and she referred to him as "my man-child." Dorril speculates that in consequence of all this Mosley was masochistic, had an inflated sense of his own abilities and also that he never learnt boundaries or was able to deal with authority.

In general, the opening chapter provides numerous, seemingly obscure details that Dorril develops into fascinating – if somewhat speculative – insights into Mosley's character. Thus, the essential lack of a father figure in Mosley's childhood is conjectured to have led to the idealization of the role of the male, which can perhaps be noted in the "Leader" figure at the head of fascist groups. Moreover, when Mosley, as a child, was with his father (he lived with his mother and saw his father only occasionally), the father was apparently a somewhat domineering man. Dorril further notes that Mosley had quite appalling handwriting, which he argues is congruous with Mosley's arrogant character: In the context of school essays and so forth, it shows contempt for the reader. Of course, it might also show a desire to be perceived as a bit arty and quirky; the nuance that is lacking here and elsewhere in Dorril's assessment might well lead the reader to see it as slightly biased against Mosley. But, in the author's defense, it is difficult for a British person not to hold some kind of negative view of a man who was, whatever else he may have been, a supporter of Britain's enemy during World War II. Certainly, Mosley is presented as a complex case and, to be fair, Dorril makes a point, again and again, of demonstrating Mosley's humanity and sensitivity, while concomitantly trying to restore the balance. Thus, we are told of Mosley's "religious experience," that he was a committed Christian, that he survived World War I by pure luck. Here again,



however, he is a kind of pale version of Hitler. Whereas Hitler was a decorated war hero, Mosley was invalidated home fairly quickly.

After the Great War, Mosley used his family connections to get into the House of Commons, at almost the youngest age possible, as a Conservative MP. Throughout *Blackshirt*, Dorril maneuvers quite subtly between Mosley's political career and his private life. Sir Oswald is described as parsimonious and tight-fisted and chooses an aristocratic wife—Cynthia Curzon—who utterly dotes on him. Indeed, Dorril comments on the way in which “most relationships are a repetition of the original relationship with our parents.”⁴ This fascinating point appears as no more than a throwaway, a problem with the book to which I shall return. As we move into the mid-1920s, we find that Mosley's radical, socialist ideas are rejected by the Conservative Party and so he is—again by the pure luck that seemed to be on his side when he was young—re-elected as an Independent before crossing over to the Labour Party, then in the ascendant. In a tantalizing insight into contemporary attitudes, Mosley was accused of being a “class traitor” for this act. But here we see, even more clearly, a fundamental Mosley flaw. He liked being a celebrity and being the center of attention, and he acted impulsively, seemingly loving thrill and risk; these flaws were, perhaps, not quite so great in the other, more successful fascist leaders. However, the personality cults surrounding them were far more impressive than Mosley's.

Following Dorril's portrayal, Mosley obviously had an overwhelming desire to be in charge and to get his own way and, perhaps, an inability to predict the future or to act at the right time, both of which qualities are crucial in successful politicians. Indeed, this is especially true of charismatic leaders, such as Hitler, whom groups generally want to lead them only at times of acute crisis. Mosley's problem, one that he openly admitted, according to Dorril, was that he was always in a hurry. He lacked timing, which is of course a terrible flaw in a politician. This is most obviously seen in the early 1930s, when, rather than stick it out in the Labour Party, Mosley split and formed the New Party, and then, when this was not immediately successful, the British Union of Fascists (BUF), later known as “the Blackshirts.” In marked contrast, Hitler toiled for years and years, facing defeat after defeat, to build up the Nazi Party. In trying to understand the relative failure of Mosley, Dorril has continuous recourse to psychological analysis, with which he is doubtless familiar. Certain anthropological terms might also be fruitful, though these generally relate to groups rather than individuals. We see fairly quickly that Mosley idolizes Mussolini and, later, Hitler. Indeed, most scandalously, Dorril reveals that the Mosley was frequently left going to Mussolini cap in hand.⁵ (New evidence is provided to substantiate this.) This is later demonstrated to be true of his relationship with the Nazis, meaning that, to a certain extent, Mosley really was a puppet in the hands of far more powerful, successful, and politically astute fascist leaders.

In anthropology, there is the concept of “Rank Concession Syndrome,”⁶ whereby inferior groups imitate their superiors but generally manage to do this in an exaggerated and ridiculous way, rather like the middle-class housewife trying to come across as the Lady of the Manor. We can clearly see the like in Dorril’s Mosley, a man who idolizes figures such as Mussolini and Hitler and therefore copies them, even though their innovations might not quite work in his own cultural environment. Moreover, we see a man who would have been a potential British Quisling – a childlike puppet in the hands of the Big Boys of European fascism.

Nevertheless, Mosley managed to build up the BUF by combining seemingly rather eccentric and borderline aristocrats with, in particular, support from the London working class, drawing upon people from earlier nationalist and proto-fascist movements such as British Fascisti or the National Party, both of which had operated in the 1920s. The movement, as is well known, rose to some prominence due to Mosley’s electrifying oratory and to unemployment – even after it adopted military uniforms. It gained the support of the tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mail*. However, the BUF began to become associated with violence and thuggery and lost support in the late 1930s. It also effectively lost the *Daily Mail*’s support. Mosley tried increasingly desperate measures to regain support and money. To Mosley’s amazement, the BUF also failed miserably in its attempts to get MPs elected. Throughout Dorril’s treatment, we see the insecurity, self-delusion, and opportunism of Mosley. Dorril demonstrates that Mosley avoided anti-Semitism because this pleased Mussolini, but after Mussolini stopped giving him money, he turned to Hitler and, in return for Nazi money, was happy to turn the BUF into a virulently anti-Semitic movement, exaggerating its success to the Germans. We see the same lack of trustworthiness in Mosley’s private life. He had numerous affairs, including one with the sister of his first wife, Lady Cynthia Mosley, drove Lady Cynthia to despair, and married Lady Diana Guinness (née Mitford) in secret, in Nazi Germany, soon after Lady Cynthia’s death. Both Oswald and Diana were essentially hypnotized by Hitler and the Nazis, who had been unsure about Mosley at first.

Here as elsewhere, Dorril goes into great depth about Mosley’s fraudulent attempts to get money through launching a radio station, his internment and how sharing quarters brought him closer to his wife, his relationship with his children and apparent bad temper, his doomed attempts to re-launch his political career after the war, and once again on the back of mass immigration in the 1950s. This is all extremely interesting and intelligent, but the author has already well and truly demonstrated, by this stage, the most germane point: why Mosley failed. According to Dorril, Mosley was a narcissist, but the ultimate narcissist. He generally surrounded himself with yes men, he was impulsive, he had poor timing and worse political judgement, he loved attention too much for his own good, and, both in public and private life, he

was thoroughly untrustworthy and somewhat cold. Certainly, Mosley seems to have used people for his own ends. Of course, many politicians may well do this, but for Dorril, Mosley is an extreme case, a narcissist. At the same, he comes across as extremely polite and witty, sensitive and occasionally caring, a (relatively) magnetic personality and speaker and a man, in Dorril's view, ahead of his time with regard to his radical policies on unemployment for example.

Perhaps Dorril's greatest insight into the problem with Mosley is through comparison with Hitler that might allow us to understand why some "charismatic leaders" succeed while others, like Mosley, flounder. Both Hitler and Mosley created personality cults. But there was a difference, summed up by Lady Diana herself. Mosley's followers thought that he was "perfection." By contrast, Hitler, "had a very soft side to his nature, so that people felt terribly that they would like to help him...There was something almost vulnerable which made men want to help him and made women want to cherish him." Mosley "had not got all that."⁷ Thus, in a sense, Mosley's problem was that his narcissism and coldness meant that he came across as too confident, too brash, too much the all-powerful leader. Thus, other members didn't feel they had too much to do to help or didn't feel they could ever get any real power themselves. Moreover, this rendered him less attractive to women, making him, perhaps, less obviously the alpha male for men.⁸ Though, in the final chapter, Mosley seems to conform to a model of the successful leader quoted by Dorril, namely the "manipulative self" or "Pathological narcissist," Mosley still failed, perhaps due to the factor Diana noted. Indeed, in speculating on Mosley's place in the "far right" and his narcissism, Dorril compares him to assassinated Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn. Dorril's portrayal made me think of Robert Kilroy-Silk.⁹ Perhaps Fortuyn, but certainly Kilroy-Silk, seems to have lacked that vulnerability that is attractive.

Blackshirt is certainly worth reading. Extremely interesting and well written, it provides an original and trenchant assessment of Mosley's life, and in particular of the reasons for his rise and fall. Yet there are a number of criticisms to be raised, not least that the book is, at seven hundred and seventeen pages, far too long.¹⁰ To be sure, Dorril provides us with such obscure yet fascinating details as the identities of the men who took over the BUF when Mosley was interned and the names of the BUF's main rabble-rousers in the East End of London. But there is so much detail that parts of the book seem to go beyond dense and into the realm of turgid. Why, for example, is an entire chapter on the Mosleys' attempts to launch a radio station necessary? Or one on "the neo-fascist internationals" after World War II? Moreover, *Blackshirt's* chapters are often extremely long; sub-headings would definitely have made them more readable. Its length makes one wonder whether part of the reason for liking the book relates to psychologist Leon Festinger's discovery of the phenomenon of "effort justification," whereby the more effort you put into something the

more you convince yourself that you like it.¹¹ But of course if *Blackshirt* were considerably shorter, Dorril would be accused of oversimplification. So it is perhaps safer to err on the side of detail.

In other areas, however, this reviewer would suggest that Dorril does not go into sufficient detail. First, I would have appreciated a little more on the history of proto-fascism in the UK before Mosley and on parallel movements such as “the Right Club,” although these are discussed. Second, throughout *Blackshirt* Dorril often cites politicians and political commentators without further identifying them. He gives their names and nothing else. This is not problematic for a reader with a detailed grasp of twentieth century British politics, but may well cause difficulties for non-specialists. Sometimes it is very unclear whether the source is another historian, a contemporary journalist, or a politician of some kind. Dorril frequently does not say, which could be especially frustrating for a non-British reader. Similarly, he refers to things like “Ebury Street,” obscure aristocratic titles, or “Speakers’ Corner” without elaborating. Again, this level of assumption may well be irritating to non-Britishers.

It might be countered, of course, that *Blackshirt* is an academic book, for which a certain knowledge of the period can be assumed. Yet in a number of ways this work does not conform to the standards expected of an academic book. Particularly frustrating is *Blackshirt’s* failure to cite its sources. Dorril refers us to a website where the citations can be found. This is presumably to save printing costs, on what would otherwise be an absurdly lengthy book.¹² But if this cut is to be made, then why not tell the reader more than simply the names of many of the people quoted in the text? It would not have added that much to the length.

Moreover, Dorril has a habit, in the style of a journalist, of making rather controversial, or at least contestable, statements without either substantiating them further or pointing the reader in the direction of literature that does. This is clearest in his assertions about human psychology and relationships, but also on the prevalence of racism in fascist movements and so forth. There are throwaway remarks that one would expect to be expanded on upon in academic writing. In some ways the book reads more like a novel — or an autobiography — than an academic work presenting a certain interpretation. I would have expected the author to make quite clear at the beginning of each chapter exactly what he intended to do, and then to pithily summarize that at the end. This is lacking. Thus, in a way, *Blackshirt* is not really for the general reader, nor is it quite for the academic. Yet it is far too academic to fit nicely between the two, in the style of popular science books. While definitely worth reading from the academic perspective, in places it is intellectually shoddy. This may of course be due to an understandable attempt to cut down its intimidating length. There are even words omitted here and there, although it is difficult, not to have some sympathy for the proof-reader — presumably not a Mosley expert — faced with such a mammoth task.

There are also subtle hints of bias on the part of the author. It is as if the author feels that writing a biography that is relatively even-handed and fair about Mosley and the fascists – rather than an anti-Mosley rant – might lead to accusations that he is a Mosley sympathizer of some sort. This is bizarre but certainly not overly paranoid given the, in many respects, hysterical and anti-free-speech climate that prevails in certain parts of British politics and academia. Thus, Dorril insists on distancing himself from any belief that there are different races by always putting the word “coloured” – which would have been perfectly acceptable in the 1950s, about which he is writing at this point – in quotation marks, even though the sentence is his own assessment rather than a paraphrase. For some reason, he also puts the word “von” in quotations as in “Joachim ‘von’ Ribbentrop,”¹³ the German foreign minister. I can only assume that he wants to imply that the “von” is an affectation and that Ribbentrop was not really an aristocrat.¹⁴ But why convey this, in a serious book, with jokey quotation marks, rather than attend to it in an endnote? It makes the author appear biased, but receives no explanation in the online notes. Still, Dorril seems unencumbered by party bias: in his last chapter he compares Mosley – as a relatively unprincipled narcissist desperate for power – to Tony Blair.

This reviewer would have liked to have seen more of an examination of Mosley’s legendary oratory. This, after all, was the talent that defined Mosley and, at least to a degree, prompted comparisons between him and Hitler. Mosley was, by all accounts, a compelling speaker, a “charismatic” in the Weberian sense of the term.¹⁵ Mosley was a person with “certain qualities” (such as his gift for oratory) who appeared at a time of crisis, even though he wasn’t quite a success. Yet apart from a few dissected quotes from Mosley’s speeches, there is very little on this in *Blackshirt* other than summaries from contemporary newspapers. In an academic book, one might have expected to be directed toward the relevant literature, but no such direction is forthcoming.

These really are minor gripes, however, and should not discourage one from reading the book. Stephen Dorril’s *Blackshirt*, though perhaps not a masterpiece, is eminently readable and often fascinating – it is definitely worth taking the time to finish it. A relatively unbiased examination of Mosley’s life, *Blackshirt* dissects his rise and fall. Offering original and insightful explanations, the book reflects painstaking, cutting-edge research and, moreover, reveals new information. For anybody interested in why the BUF, and other charismatically led groups, have not succeeded, *Blackshirt* should definitely be high on the reading list. ■

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The Occidental Quarterly.*

ENDNOTES

1. *Mosley*, a 1997 drama series on Channel 4 (a British terrestrial commercial channel with a remit to be controversial) that looked at the period from 1918 to the early 1940s, was criticized in some quarters at the time as too sympathetic.
2. Neither renounced their views and, if anything, Diana Mosley was more openly Nazi than Tyndall. Compare, for example, the obituaries in *The Guardian*, Britain's leading left-wing broadsheet (www.guardian.co.uk) Tyndall's summary was "Far right fantasist" ("John Tyndall," July 20, 2005), while Lady Mosley – who was, according to Dorril's sources, seen as far more dangerous, intelligent, and fanatical than her husband, was summarized thus: "The third of the Mitford sisters, she married fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley and counted Hitler as a friend." ("Diana Mosley," August 14, 2003).
3. Dorril, 83.
4. Dorril, 52.
5. Dorril, 198.
6. Martin Orans, *The Santal* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1965).
7. Dorril, 336.
8. For further discussion of this area see F. Roger Devlin, "Sexual Utopia in Power," *Occidental Quarterly* 6:2 (Summer 2006).
9. Kilroy-Silk was a Labour MP and then a BBC chat-show host. He was sacked in 2004 and joined the U.K. Independence Party, forming his own personality cult – Veritas – when UKIP would not let him be leader, then withdrawing from politics when this party was unsuccessful in the 2005 general election. For a comparison between Fortuyn and Kilroy-Silk see Edward Dutton, "Kilroy, Europe and the Limelight" in *Right Now!* 47 (August 2004). Accessible online at <http://www.right-now.org/>.
10. It is officially 717 pages, not including acknowledgements, etc. Not counting the index, abridged notes, etc., the book has 647 pages.
11. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (New York: Row, 1957).
12. It should be said that the web-notes, though doubtless comprehensive, are presented so densely that they are hardly easy or enticing to read. See, for example, <http://www.phollo.com/hosted/stephendorril/mosleynotes/mosleynotespt4.pdf>.
13. Dorril, 330.
14. This seemingly was the case. According to his *Wikipedia* entry, Ribbentrop persuaded his aunt – who was married to a "knight" – to adopt him when he was over thirty, in order that he could add the aristocratic "von" to his name. This was, apparently, because his wife was something of a social climber. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joachim_von_Ribbentrop.
15. Max Weber, "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991).