›Mind Britain's Business‹ Fascist Splinter Groups, British Officers and Resistance to War Against Germany, 1937-1941

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Abstract: Bei der Analyse geheimer militärischer Netzwerke können anhand der Aktivitäten radikaler rechter Splittergruppen in Großbritannien in der Zeit von 1937 bis 1941 Fragestellungen untersucht werden, die man auf den ersten Blick mit vorherigen Jahrhunderten verbindet. Das Geheimnis, welches Antikriegs- und Pro-Deutschland-Gruppen umgab, lässt eine Reihe von wiederkehrenden Themen im Verhältnis zu geheimen militärischen Netzwerken aufscheinen, z.B. wie Offiziere miteinander kommunizierten, welche Motivationen sie hatten und wie einzelne Gruppen operierten. Obgleich die Aktivitäten dieser Gruppen schon untersucht wurden, gibt es bisher noch keine Analyse der spezifischen Rolle der dort vertretenen Offiziere. In der Tat waren Offiziere aller Truppengattungen in diesen Organisationen aktiv und spielten dort auf Grund ihrer Kenntnisse über die Methoden des Geheimdienstes – der diese Gruppen beobachtete – eine wichtige Rolle. Die Existenz eines modernen, gut organisierten Geheimdienstes hat Konspiration sehr erschwert, die Aufrechterhaltung von politischen Überzeugungen, die in der britischen Gesellschaft nicht akzeptiert waren, war nur eine von vielen Charakteristika, welche die Splittergruppen aufwiesen. Georg Simmel hat diese und andere Kennzeichen von geheimen Gesellschaften in seiner »Soziologie des Geheimnisses« beschrieben.

It has already been noted by historians that men from a military background could often be found in fascist organisations in Britain in the interwar period.¹ But how could British officers have had any sort of interest in resisting a declaration of war against Germany? The concern here is not to recapitulate well-known aspects of the history of radical right-wing groups,² but to examine the role and motivation of serving and retired army, naval and air force officers in the most intense period of semi-clandestine activity in the period 1937-1941. As war approached, those officers who had become attracted to radical organisations were faced with a dilemma: to renounce their views or to try and conceal them. As the stakes became higher, and as international tension mount-

¹ See, for example, Martin Pugh, ›Hurrah for the Blackshirts!‹ *Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2005), esp. p. 29.

² Many books and articles have been written on British Fascism, so it would be impossible to mention even a cross-section of the literature, although the following are especially useful: Colin Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (London, 1961); Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain from Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London, 1987); and, Stephen Dorril, *Black-shirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London, 2006).

ed, some were pushed towards secrecy, thus arousing even more suspicions on the part of British intelligence.

In reflecting on the history of ›secret military networks‹, the existence of radical right-wing splinter groups in Britain in the late 1930s presents a useful opportunity to explore questions which might at first glance appear to be more promising if applied to previous centuries. Yet many of the issues relating to secret military networks can be considered within the context of this period: most notably, how officers communicated, what motivated them and how these groups attempted to operate. Moreover, while the monitoring of the activities of British fascists and other groups by the counter-intelligence service MI5 has been studied in some detail,³ there has been no specific consideration of the involvement of military officers and the degree to which they influenced the character of such organisations. Hence, it is still an unresolved question as to whether there was any specifically military dimension to the activities of pro-fascist splinter groups in Britain in the late 1930s.

But to understand the involvement of those officers who were active in these networks, we need to take account of the political thinking which underpinned their participation in pro-fascist groups during the 1930s. In essence, their attitudes consisted of three key elements: first, anti-Bolshevism; second, anti-Semitism; and, third, admiration of fascist states (Germany and Italy in particular), and not just as a bulwark against Communist expansion. Army, naval and air force officers appeared to be especially susceptible to these ideas which, in fact, formed three of the most important pillars of radical right-wing thought. Those officers who continued to be drawn to fascist ideology beyond the period in which such ideas enjoyed a degree of acceptability in military and conservative circles (roughly from 1919 to 1935)⁴ offer a window on some of the questions surrounding the nature of secret military networks and their historical development.

Opinions in Great Britain in the 1930s as to whether the country should, first, go to war with Germany, and, then, whether a compromise peace was possible once war had been declared, were aired in many circles. But until the turn-around in public and parliamentary opinion between the Munich Agreement of September 1938 and the occupation of the rump Czechoslovak state in March 1939,⁵ the discourse on policy towards Germany and the Soviet

³ Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 132-56; Paul Cohen, ›The Police, the Home Office and Surveillance of the British Union of Fascists‹, *Intelligence and National Security*, 1/3 (1986), pp. 416-34; Richard Thurlow, ›British Fascism and State Surveillance, 1934-45‹, *Intelligence and National Security*, 3/1 (1988), pp. 77-99; and, Jennifer Grant, ›The Role of MI5 in the Internment of British Fascists during the Second World War‹, *Intelligence and National Security*, 24/4 (2009), pp. 499-528.

⁴ One army general could write quite openly in 1934 of his ›bias towards Fascism‹, and that he had ›distinct leanings towards Fascist economic theories, regarding them for the most part as sound, and accepting the fact that they can only be enforced in a disciplined state. Maj.-Gen. H. Rowan-Robinson, ›The Military Implications of Fascism‹, *Army, Navy & Air Force Gazette*, 75 (9 Aug. 1934), pp. 630, 632.

⁵ On the mood of the nation at the time, Alexander Macintosh, *Echoes of Big Ben: A Journalist's Parliamentary Diary (1881-1940)* (London, n.d. [1945]), pp. 146-50.

Union in elite circles had largely been anti-Soviet. Yet, even after public opinion turned against Germany, radical right-wing groups experienced a surge in support, especially the British Union of Fascists (BUF), who launched a peace campaign which ran under the slogan, ›Mind Britain's Business‹.⁶ It is against this background that the continued membership of military officers in fascist splinter groups must be investigated.

To provide some direction to this case study, it is worth considering the earliest sociological reflections on secrets and secret societies – and, of course, here the most obvious starting point is the work of the German sociologist, Georg Simmel (1858-1918). In a seminal but nonetheless long-winded and speculative article on ›secret societies‹ of 1906, he emphasized that the reciprocal relations among members of a secret society were governed by the protective function of secrecy (membership, regulations and goals tended to remain secret). He argued secrecy was a ›universal sociological technique‹, and most importantly that the notion of secrecy was closely connected to the employment of knowledge rather than simply conspiracy. Secret societies were a form of ›society‹ and the content of group life was what defined their exclusiveness.⁷ However, a distinction does need to be made between ›secret military networks‹ and ›secret societies‹ since Simmel gave Freemasonry and the Illuminati as examples of the latter.

The ideas which Simmel sketched out on ›secret societies‹ can nonetheless assist in any examination of the contribution which (usually former) military officers made to fascist and fringe right-wing groups. This is because secrecy remained a significant factor in splinter groups through the presence of military officers, who were acutely aware of the attentions and the methods of the security services. This was not only because some military officers had experience of intelligence work, but also since some intelligence officers sympathised with the radical right, or had even colluded with fascist organisations, especially in the 1920s.⁸ In addition, some officers were attracted to the conspiracy theories of the right, which usually involved freemasons, Jews and Bolsheviks, and which were given expression in the books of Nesta Webster, whose ideas were certainly known to naval and military officers.⁹ Their social background (upper class, landed gentry and middle class)¹⁰ and military experience led to a profes-

⁶ See here the important analysis in Pugh, *Fascists and Fascism*, pp. 261-86.

⁷ Georg Simmel, ›The Sociology of Secrecy and of the Secret Societies‹, *American Journal of Sociology*, 11/4 (Jan. 1906), pp. 441-98.

⁸ For an excellent account of the close relationship between MI5, army intelligence and army officers in the emergence of fascist organisations in Britain in the 1920s, see John G. Hope, ›Surveillance or Collusion? Maxwell Knight, MI5 and the British Fascists‹, *Intelligence and National Security*, 9/4 (1994), pp. 651-75.

⁹ See Nesta Webster, *World Revolution* (London, 1921), and idem, *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* (London, 1928). She also published in the pages of the leading British military journal. See Nesta Webster, ›Bolshevism and Secret Societies‹, *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, 67 (Feb. 1922), pp. 1-15.

¹⁰ For the dependency of the upper class on the upper middle class during the period and definitions of both classes, see Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 22-37, 44-62, 90-98.

sional tendency to think in terms of threats to the social order of the country (either military threats from outside, or internal dangers posed by Communist agitators). Thus, there was a dynamic relationship between threats, conspiracies, intelligence agencies and secrecy which lend the ideas of Georg Simmel a continuing relevance – even if the mid-twentieth century context was clearly different to the one in which he was writing.

In approaching these issues, one of the most obvious problems lies in the availability of source material. Groups driven into the shadows, especially after the outbreak of war, seem to have left few traces.¹¹ What we do have are a number of intelligence reports about the activities of these groups, the publications which some groups produced, and other pieces of evidence, in particular Admiral Sir Barry Domville's diary, buried in his garden, just before he was arrested in 1940.¹² In order to make use of this material, the phenomenon of military involvement in right-wing splinter groups in Britain from 1937–41 will be considered via four areas: first, the prerequisites for radical right-wing political activity among officers (their ideological beliefs, previous experience of intelligence work and professional networks); second, the involvement of officers in right-wing organisations in the 1930s; third, the role of military officers in pro-fascist splinter groups; and, fourth, the gradual eclipse of radical, pro-peace, splinter groups between the summer of 1940 and the summer of 1941. The evidence which is available, if analysed carefully, promises to offer some insights into parallels between earlier »secret military networks« and interwar pro-fascist splinter groups.

Ideological Prerequisites

Any attempt to explain military officers' involvement in right-wing splinter groups in the late 1930s must first return to the early 1920s and consider the three main pillars of right-wing thought within the British armed forces: anti-Bolshevism, anti-Semitism and a pro-German outlook (even if this third element only first emerged during the 1930s). Essentially, anti-Bolshevism was the most unifying ideological tendency in the armed services in this era. What gave it such potency was that it was based in the first instance upon traditional military notions of virtue, honour and betrayal. Deep resentment was created among military officers because Lenin had taken Russia out of the war when Britain had, arguably, reached the lowest point in her fortunes due to a

¹¹ Superficially, at least, parallels could be drawn with previous underground organisations of military officers, such as the Black Hand, formed in Serbia in 1911, which deliberately avoided keeping records, as noted in Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012), p. 39.

¹² The importance of this source is noted in Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p. 133, and Arnd Bauerkämper, *Die »radikale Rechte« in Großbritannien 1919–1939. Nationalistische, antisemitische und faschistische Bewegungen vom späten 19. Jahrhundert bis 1945* (Göttingen, 1991), p. 21.

combination of events, including the German submarine campaign and the failure of the Third Ypres offensive. Feelings of betrayal were only intensified when the British forces supporting the White Russian armies were withdrawn: the abandonment of Britain's allies in Russia was equated with providing the Germans with an opportunity to regain control over swathes of Russian territory.¹³ Not least of all, these feelings were further embedded in the army by a number of prominent officers who had served in the military intervention in Russia in 1918/19 and who brought home intense anti-Bolshevik feelings, caused also by mutinies amongst both British and White Russian units.¹⁴

Moreover, the high-brow, public discussion of Bolshevism during the 1920s saw a significant number of authors who signed their articles using their military rank. The articles portrayed Bolshevism as a ›contagion‹, a ›disease of youth‹, which had led to sexual immorality, and as ›an international menace‹.¹⁵ It was also suggested that the Germans had been behind the emergence of Bolshevism, thus making it an even more dangerous phenomenon.¹⁶ In many articles Bolshevism was equated with a form of international anarchy, not least of all as one of the central tenets of its ideology was that the State itself was inherently evil and incapable of reform.¹⁷ For British officers, particularly in the period known as ›the crisis of Empire‹ (1918–22), Bolshevism represented a threat to British interests on three fronts: an expansionist Russia under Lenin meant there was a direct threat to India and Afghanistan; the disturbances in Ireland were seen as part of a wider threat to civilisation; and, there were worries about possible revolutionary activity on the British mainland.¹⁸ The intense sense of insecurity caused by the threat of Bolshevism helps explain officers' later sympathies for Franco's Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War.¹⁹

The second element in British officers' ideological make-up in the interwar period which made them more open to fascist ideas was anti-Semitism. While the anti-Semitism of English society before 1914 never reached the levels which France experienced during the Dreyfus affair, there were latent anti-Jewish sentiments which continued into the interwar period.²⁰ Officers were prone to

¹³ G. le Q. Martel, *The Russian Outlook* (London, 1947), pp. 34–5; Anon., ›The Russian Problem‹, *Army & Navy Gazette*, 60 (11 Jan. 1919), p. 25.

¹⁴ Most prominent among these officers was Edmund Ironside (1880–1959), who was Commander-in-Chief, Allied Troops Archangel. For his own account, see Sir E. Ironside, *Archangel, 1918–19* (London, 1953).

¹⁵ H.H. Spoer, ›The Disease of Bolshevism‹, *Nineteenth Century & After*, 88 (Dec. 1920), pp. 991–1001.

¹⁶ Maj. C. Battine, ›The Wars of the Bolsheviks‹, *Fortnightly Review*, 108 (Dec. 1920), pp. 1042–52; and, Maj. L. Bashford, ›Germany and Bolshevism‹, *Fortnightly Review*, 108 (Sept. 1920), pp. 440–7.

¹⁷ S. Dark, ›The Philosophy of Bolshevism‹, *Quarterly Review*, 250 (Apr. 1928), pp. 303–17.

¹⁸ Important on this coalescence of threats is Keith Jeffrey, *The British Army and the Crisis of Empire 1918–22* (Manchester, 1984).

¹⁹ See here Alaric Searle, ›Ideology and Total War: Military Intellectuals and the Analysis of the Spanish Civil War in Britain, 1936–1943‹, *Militär-geschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 68/2 (2009), pp. 321–44.

²⁰ There is an extensive literature on anti-Semitism in England, but see here: Kenneth Lunn, ›Political Anti-Semitism before 1914: Fascism's Heritage?‹ in Kenneth Lunn & Richard C. Thurlow

two further influences – on occasions fuelled by personal experience abroad – which reinforced existing prejudices. On the one hand, there was sympathy with the Arabs in Palestine among those officers posted there. So, according to one colonel writing to a general in June 1921, ›If it wasn't for the Jews this would be quite a good country.‹ On the other hand, as the reply noted, there was an assumption that the groups of Jews entering the country contained many who were ›Bolshevists of the worst type.‹²¹

The final piece in the ideological jigsaw-puzzle was the attitude adopted towards Germany in the 1930s. Military officers were naturally cautious in their public pronouncements; but this caution was helped by the publishing conventions of certain military journals. For instance, the anonymous editorials in the *Army Quarterly*, almost certainly authored by Lieutenant-Colonel Cuthbert Headlam,²² offered views such as, in October 1933, that Hitler had ›displayed a far less bellicose attitude than was expected of him‹, and that if his aim was to wage war on Bolshevism the world might be grateful to him later if he was successful.²³ In April 1935 it was observed that: ›No one who has visited Germany recently can fail to have been impressed by the revival of life and energy among the German people.‹²⁴ It was not until April 1937 that a clear note of criticism was sounded when the editor wrote that Hitler's foreign policy was ›unpleasantly reminiscent of that of Germany before the Great War.‹²⁵

If these ideological elements provide some background to understanding the outlook of officers involved in fascist splinter groups in the late 1930s, some brief explanation is still required of the way in which their military socialisation prepared them for far-right political activities. In the first instance it should be borne in mind that the British armed services consisted of multi-layered networks: this began with regimental ties in the army, which amounted almost to a form of substitute family.²⁶ There were bonds based on shared experience in the Boer War, the Great War and post-1918 conflicts and service abroad; there were groups of military reformers, with connections to political and literary circles; and, there were social groups based on membership of private military clubs. So, in many ways, these multiple, overlapping networks were governed by a military organisational culture, the use of ›protected spaces‹, and secrecy.

(eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain* (New York, 1980), pp. 20–40; Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876–1939* (London, 1979); and, G. Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918–1939* (Basingstoke, 1979).

²¹ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London (LHCMA), Field-Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 8/16, Col. C. Evans to Montgomery-Massingberd, 15 June 1921, and Montgomery-Massingberd to Evans, 12 July 1921.

²² Jim Beach (ed.), *The Military Papers of Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Cuthbert Headlam 1910–1942* (Stroud, 2010), pp. 225–9.

²³ ›Editorial‹, *Army Quarterly*, 27 (Oct. 1933), pp. 5–6.

²⁴ ›Editorial‹, *Army Quarterly*, 30 (Apr. 1935), p. 10.

²⁵ ›Editorial‹, *Army Quarterly*, 34 (Apr. 1937), p. 5.

²⁶ For the role of regiments in officers' identities, see David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, & the British People, c. 1870–2000* (Oxford, 2005).

Some central categories of sociological theory can provide useful pointers here, but they can only go so far in providing insights into secrecy.²⁷

What was crucial was that the presence of military officers in splinter groups provided these associations with knowledge of the way in which intelligence services operated. This also offered access to networks which were already in existence, and which were governed by well-established social conventions and a professional culture of discretion.

Officers and the Radical Right in the 1930s

The appearance of right-wing splinter groups with fascist tendencies in the late 1930s was driven by several developments. The most obvious and important was the founding of the British Union of Fascists by Sir Oswald Mosley on 1 October 1932. It was an organisation which held an obvious attraction for former military men due to its emphasis on uniforms and marching; at the same time it offered a natural home to those disappointed by the Conservative Party under Stanley Baldwin.²⁸ Moreover, the declared military policies of the BUF (support for a strong air force and navy, as well as mechanisation in the army) were perceived by the military as in line with their own thinking and that of the Conservative Party. In fact, Mosley's pronouncements on the Corporate State were considered as compatible with the creation of a Ministry of Defence, a reform proposal which had been hotly debated since the end of the Great War.²⁹

The second development was the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, which caused deep ideological divisions within Britain, and fear of war, with those on the right siding with the Nationalists under Franco; in fact, many members of the upper class, Foreign Office officials and the majority of senior officers in the armed forces did not want to see the Republic win.³⁰ A further dimension was the concern from 1936 onwards of the possibility of a war with

²⁷ Military behaviour was regulated by pressure to conform to the ›norms‹ of ›military society‹, an understanding of the officer corps of each of the three armed services as a caste, as well as through the internal dynamics of the armed services as organisations. See B. Schäfers, ›Die Grundlagen des Handelns: Sinn, Normen, Werte‹, H.L. Gukenbiehl, ›Institution und Organisation‹, and F. Thieme, ›Kaste, Stand, Klasse‹, in H. Korte & B. Schäfers (eds.), *Einführung in die Hauptbegriffe der Soziologie* (Opladen, 4th ed., 1998), pp.17-34, 97-113, 127-43. But the informality of relationships and organisational ties between individuals in the British armed forces, which set them apart from other militaries in Europe, means that sociological concepts can only be a ›blunt instrument‹ in any attempt to understand officers' behaviour.

²⁸ Bauerkämper, *Die »radikale Rechte«*, pp. 159-225; Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 88-113.

²⁹ Rowan-Robinson, ›Military Implications of Fascism‹, p. 630.

³⁰ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilization, 1919-1939* (London, 2010), pp. 314-62; and, Douglas Little, ›Red Scare, 1936: Anti-Bolshevism and the Origins of British Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War‹, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23 (Apr. 1988), pp. 291-311.

Germany; quite apart from ideological considerations, there were worries about the poor state of Britain's defences and the threat to the country's future if she went to war.³¹ For the emergence of fascist splinter groups there can be no doubt, however, that the role of the British Union of Fascists was of central importance.

It was Mosley's organisation which first gathered a number of radicalised military officers, some of whom were later prepared to operate on the fringes of the democratic spectrum; despite some of its pseudo-socialist tendencies, it was anti-Bolshevik; it began to base its platform on anti-Semitism; and, it saw Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy as natural allies. Moreover, it introduced more fascist-style forms of political organisation into Britain, including ›Black House‹ in London where uniformed fascists could live, where members could be schooled in speech-making, and where a range of publications were edited – the newspaper *Blackshirt*, a further newspaper with a more radical tone, *Action*, and a journal, the *British Union Quarterly*. In fact, the BUF inadvertently created a form of ›leadership cadre‹ of individuals who later became involved in other organisations.³²

There were two officers who were active in right-wing splinter groups who stand out most. One was from the army, Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, who joined the BUF in 1934 after his retirement from active service in December 1933. Probably Britain's leading military thinker in the interwar period, he was a well-known writer, journalist and advocate of military reform. He made speeches for the BUF and was a prospective parliamentary candidate in the constituency of the Secretary of State for War, Alfred Duff Cooper, in 1937/8. He wrote for the newspaper *Action*, the *British Union Quarterly*, and advised Mosley on military policy.³³ The other was from the Royal Navy (RN), Admiral Sir Barry Domville, who had previously served as Director of Naval Intelligence, 1927–30. One of Mosley's closest supporters, he believed in a world Judeo-Masonic conspiracy, even after his release from internment in 1943.³⁴ Domville was more fanatical in his ideological outlook than Fuller, although the latter remained consistent in his maintenance of right-wing circles of friends.

In addition to the BUF, another important organisation was the Anglo-German Fellowship, founded on 2 October 1935 by 65 inaugural members. At the end of September 1936, membership had risen to 347; by 1 December 1936, membership stood at 450. The goal of the society was the promotion of Anglo-German relations, which led it to organise banquets for visiting German dignitaries and visits for British students to Germany. In fact, the organisation

³¹ Wesley Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (London, 1985), pp. 59–79, 93–123.

³² Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 114–31; Pugh, *Fascists and Fascism*, pp. 213–34.

³³ A.J. Trythall, ›Boney‹ Fuller: *The Intellectual General 1878–1966* (London, 1977), pp. 180–212; and, for his ideological outlook, see J.F.C. Fuller, *What the British Union Has to Offer Britain* (London, 1937).

³⁴ Barry Domville, *By and Large* (London, 1936), pp. 175–80; and, for his continuing anti-Semitic outlook, see idem, *From Admiral to Cabin Boy* (London, 1947), esp. pp. 14–15.

cooperated with the veterans' welfare organisation, the British Legion, and the Young Men's Christian Association, in entertaining representatives of German ex-servicemen's associations. The apparent cultural nature of the exchanges appeared to have been demonstrated by the foundation of the *Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft* as a sister organisation. The first Annual Report of the Anglo-German Fellowship showed that Major-General Fuller and Admiral Domville were both members. Even though the society grew rapidly, with a dinner held on 15 December 1936 to welcome Joachim von Ribbentrop to London attracting over 600 guests, it soon stood accused of being a vehicle for German propaganda.³⁵

There were other examples of right-wing organisations based on a detestation of the left, combined with a desire to counter left-wing propaganda and what was seen as misleading press reports. The journal edited by Douglas Jerrold, the *English Review*, launched its own 'English Review Luncheon Club' in January 1933, with membership to be limited to 500. From the 229 founding members, 43 were MPs (Members of Parliament), 48 gave military ranks, while 14 MPs gave military rank or decorations.³⁶ In 1937 the Right Book Club was founded as a response to the great success of the Left Book Club, launched the previous year by Victor Gollancz.³⁷ It is interesting that from the five-man committee for the selection of manuscripts, two were military officers (Lieutenant-Colonel Norman G. Thwaites and Captain Anthony Ludovici).³⁸ In January 1937, another right-wing organisation was founded, the Friends of National Spain, which was dedicated to moving the government to a more sympathetic attitude to the Nationalists under General Franco; one of the members of the Committee was the Conservative MP, Major-General Sir Alfred Knox.³⁹

These three organisations provide an interesting insight into the overall air of establishment respectability which such societies were able to enjoy for much of the 1930s. Part of this respectability came from the presence of Conservative MPs and retired officers among the membership. This is illustrated well by the list of patrons of the Right Book Club. Of the 64 patrons of the organisation, there were 29 MPs, 14 individuals who gave military rank, with ten who gave military rank who were also MPs. The officers from the army, navy and air force who were patrons were: Lieutenant-Commander Peter

³⁵ The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew (TNA), KV 5/3, Annual Report 1935-6. The Anglo-German Fellowship. Incorporated, October 1935 (London, 1936), pp. 1-2, 11.

³⁶ LHCMA, Sir Basil Liddell Hart Papers, LH 3/69, circular letter by R. Gresham Cooke, Hon. Secretary, The English Review Luncheon Club, 23 Jan. 1933, and, membership booklet, 'The English Review Luncheon Club', n.d. [Jan. 1933].

³⁷ Terence Rodgers, 'The Right Book Club: Text Wars, Modernity and Cultural Politics in the Late Thirties', *Literature and History*, 12 (Autumn 2003), pp. 1-15. On the Left Book Club, see Stuart Samuels, 'The Left Book Club', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (Apr. 1966), pp. 65-86.

³⁸ See the dust jacket of Hugh Kingsmill (ed.), *The English Genius* (London, 1939).

³⁹ TNA, KV4/122, »B« Division Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 10, Section ii.) The Society of the Friends of Spain, 12 Dec. 1940, p. 4. Alfred Knox (1870-1964) had been the British Army liaison officer to the Imperial Russian Army in the Great War; he recounted his experiences of the war and the Russian Revolution in his memoir, *With the Russian Army, 1914-1917*, 2 vols. (London, 1921); he served as an MP, 1924-1945.

Agnew, RN, MP, Air-Vice Marshal J.E. Baldwin, Rear-Admiral T.P.H. Beamish, MP, Major-General Ian Hay Beith, Brigadier-General Sir Henry Page Croft, MP, Captain Alan Graham, MP, Colonel John Gretton, MP, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir T.C. Moore, MP, Major Ralph Rayner, MP, Rear-Admiral Sir Murray Sueter, MP, Vice-Admiral E.A. Taylor, MP, Admiral Sir Richard Webb, Major Francis Yeats-Brown, and Major Francis Brett Young.⁴⁰ From the list of fourteen officers, Rear-Admiral Sir Murray Sueter and Major Francis Yeats-Brown can be immediately associated with radical right-wing causes in the 1930s, although thoroughly respectable figures, such as Brigadier-General Sir Henry Page Croft had been involved in right-wing groups since the 1920s.⁴¹

This ›roll call‹ of prominent supporters of the Right Book Club does serve to indicate the importance of military, naval and air force officers for the radical right during the late thirties. At the same time, a distinction needs to be made between those paying a subscription to a right-wing organisation, which the majority of its members will not have viewed as extreme, and those few who progressed to more radical groups. Furthermore, it was not until 1937 that more secretive circles emerged, such as the Nordic League, which allegedly had two well-known anti-Semites, Major-General Fuller and Captain Maule Ramsay, a Conservative MP, among its members. This organisation is interesting because in its first year it operated as a genuine secret society, with passwords required for entry to its meetings, and with numbers used to identify its chief office bearers rather than names. Still, towards the end of 1938 it broke cover and started a public campaign to denounce Jews as warmongers, perhaps because it had been so easily infiltrated by intelligence agents.⁴²

In the same year, the Anglo-German Fellowship gave birth to a new, pro-German organisation, run by Admiral Barry Domville. After he had returned from a visit to Italy and a Nuremberg rally in Germany, the editor of the Fellowship's journal, the *Anglo-German Review*, suggested to Domville that he form an organisation called ›The Link‹. According to a later report by British intelligence, it was suspected that Domville had been cultivated by the German propaganda authorities with a view to the founding of an organisation which would promote better Anglo-German relations. It was also recorded that: ›The Home Office Advisory Committee have described him as a man of limited political perceptions, who failed to appreciate the full implications of German policy and who accepted unquestioningly the reliability of German protestations of friendship towards the British Empire.‹⁴³

⁴⁰ List of patrons taken from dust-jacket of Kingsmill (ed.), *The English Genius*. In the same year, a slightly different list of patrons did not contain the name of Major Brett Young, but it did include Brigadier-General R.J. Kentish. See the dust jacket of Count [Carl Erdmann] Pückler, *How Strong is Britain?* (London, 1939).

⁴¹ Sueter was active in the Anglo-German Fellowship and the National League of Airmen, while Yeats-Brown was a member of the British Union of Fascists, a prominent writer and a close friend of Fuller. See the references in Dorril, *Blackshirt*, pp. 52, 256-7, 311, 329, 408.

⁴² Pugh, *Fascists and Fascism*, pp. 231-2.

⁴³ TNA, KV 5/2, Admiral Sir Barry Edward Domville, report, F3c, pp. 1-2. The accuracy of the assessment quoted here is confirmed by his own account of a trip to Germany in 1935, which can be found in the final chapter of his memoir *By and Large*.

The following year there was a waning of support for organisations which could be considered to be pro-German. MI5 reported that, following the *Kristallnacht* of 9 November 1938, the Anglo-German Fellowship had lost over half its members within a few weeks. One source commented that the few remaining members were ›only a lot of useless fanatics.‹⁴⁴ At the same time, these developments led to a further intensification of the propagandistic activities of radical right-wing circles. In the same month, Gerard Wallop (Lord Lymington, the heir to the 8th Earl of Portsmouth), launched a pro-fascist newspaper called *New Pioneer*. It counted Domville, Fuller, Captain Anthony Ludovici (of the Right Book Club), and a well-known veteran fascist, Rolf Gardiner, among its supporters, and published pro-peace and anti-Semitic articles. Lymington had already attracted attention that year through the British Council Against European Commitments, which he had founded.⁴⁵

The ›splinter groups‹ which had emerged by late 1938 had the characteristic that many of their members were also members of the British Union of Fascists, not to mention that they drew generally from the same pool of active fascist propagandists. What turned them into something more than just fringe groups, which were simply literary or discussion circles, was the wish of their core membership to keep their ›movement‹ alive, just at the time when the security services became more determined to monitor their activities. Probably the largest of these new organisations, The Link, was an example of the new tendency towards discretion and secrecy which right-wing splinter groups were increasingly forced to adopt, especially after the outbreak of war. It did not have its own newsletter or journal, rather it communicated through the pages of the *Anglo-German Review*, not least of all as the remaining membership of the Anglo-German Fellowship were obvious targets for recruitment. Yet the drive for new members meant that it was not in its interests to be too secretive.

In the January 1938 issue of the *Anglo-German Review*, the goal of the Link was pronounced: ›Our faith is simple. We believe that peace in Europe can only be attained by the friendly association of the peoples of England and Germany.‹⁴⁶ Membership rose from 2,150 in May 1938 to 4,329 in June 1939. These figures could be seen as suspect, but the rise in membership, especially in 1939 and the first half of 1940, is consistent with trends revealed in the resurgence in membership of the British Union of Fascists, which enjoyed a revival through its peace campaign.⁴⁷ It would also appear to be confirmed by evidence provided in Domville's diary.⁴⁸ But the growing war clouds meant that right-wing splin-

⁴⁴ TNA, KV 5/3, B.2a. Anglo-German Fellowship, B.5b (M/G), 23 Nov. 1938.

⁴⁵ Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-39* (London, 1980), pp. 322-30. For more detail on Gardiner, see Matthew Jeffries & Mike Tyldesley (eds.), *Rolf Gardiner: Folk, Nature and Culture in Interwar Britain* (Farnham, 2010).

⁴⁶ ›The Link: New Year Message from the Chairman, *Anglo-German Review*, 2 (Jan. 1938), p. 38.

⁴⁷ G.C. Webber, ›Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19 (1984), pp. 575-606.

⁴⁸ He noted on 6 Dec. 1937, ›Masses of new members, while on 11 Dec. 1937 he recorded that 1,000 members had been reached. Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, London (NMM), Admiral Sir Barry Domville Papers, DCM/55, Diary, Vol. LV, 8 Nov. 1937 to 2 Feb. 1939.

ter groups needed to become more cautious. It was announced in the final issue of the *Anglo-German Review* that: ›The Link Council hope that Branches will not hold lectures of a controversial political nature for the time being. To do so only provides opponents of the Link with a chance to attack their policy.‹⁴⁹

Officers and Pro-Fascist Splinter Groups

It is not easy to assess questions of secrecy, secretiveness and conspiracy in the period immediately before the outbreak of war and during the phoney war because the evidence is only really to be found in the files of British intelligence, even if there are some clues in the diaries of Fuller and Domville. While Major-General Fuller and Admiral Domville were two former officers who attracted specific attention, a number of (mainly former) military officers often appeared in domestic intelligence reports.⁵⁰ As members of the British Union of Fascists, yet at the same time involved in other splinter groups, some were suspected of connections to German agents. It is the activities of the Link, however, which provide a good example of not only the interest which the security services had started to show in such organisations, but the way in which officers and former officers attempted to avoid leaving too many traces of their political connections and activities.

On 21 March 1939, a meeting of the Link was held in London at the Naval and Military Club at Piccadilly; it was reported by MI5 that a talk was given which presented ›the usual case for German expansion‹. It was added: ›Our agent was amazed at the pro-German attitude of the audience.‹ Those attending had been reinforced by members of the BUF who had been instructed to turn up in numbers to try and increase the sense of enthusiasm. On 31 March another meeting was held at the same venue. While these gatherings were designed to recruit new members, there can have been little sense that these were public events, given the fact that they were held at a private club for officers. Meetings held by the Link were political but with a distinctly military flavour, highlighted by the fact that on 19 May 1939 one gathering was addressed by Major-General Fuller.⁵¹

On 16 June 1939, Captain Maule Ramsay, MP, spoke at a Link meeting on the secret forces working towards war, a talk which dealt with ›international

⁴⁹ ›The Link: Headquarters Notes‹, *Anglo-German Review*, 3 (Aug. 1939), p. 228.

⁵⁰ One such individual was Geoffrey Dorman, who had served with Mosley in the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War; after the war he had been an instructor for the Air Training Corps. He had written for the pro-fascist journal *Aeroplane* until 1930; he was a leading BUF organizer in London, and also wrote for *Blackshirt*. TNA, KV2/1335, for a series of Special Branch reports on Dorman compiled in 1937 and 1938; and, Dorril, *Blackshirt*, pp. 267, 328-9, 340.

⁵¹ TNA, KV 5/2, Admiral Sir Barry Edward Domville, sect. ›The Link as a Vehicle for German Propaganda‹, report, F.3c., dated 6 Mar. 1944, pp. 11-13.

Jewish finance'. At the end of the talk, Ramsay appealed for new members for his Right Club, which had been founded the previous month, and which was essentially an anti-war movement, but one infused with anti-Semitic fantasies of a world Jewish conspiracy. (While the membership was kept secret because of the ›all-powerful nature‹ of the Jews, it appears it stood at about 350, although it is known that Admiral Wilmot Nicholson was a member.) After the meeting, Barry Domville was reported as extremely annoyed that Ramsay had used the opportunity to recruit openly for his own organisation, probably because the admiral thought his attempts at discretion had been undermined. Still, Ramsay was mobbed by people who wanted to join his society. In fact, the Right Club continued some of the secretive tendencies of the Nordic League as Ramsay's fears of the ›hidden hand‹ of Jewish influence dominated his political outlook.⁵²

What is interesting about the case of the Link is that as war approached some individuals resigned their membership, but many more joined than left, even though it must have been clear that the association had a clear anti-Semitic colour to its pronouncements. At the same time, the Link was typical for radical right-wing groups in Britain from 1937–41, namely, it was an organisation which came into existence with a membership which overlapped strongly with other similar groups. Indeed, there was some evidence of attempts at cooperation. Thus, it was reported by MI5 in December 1938 that the Anglo-German Fellowship had wished to organise a joint meeting with the Link and the BUF at the Albert Hall, but the management of the venue had refused.⁵³ However, this particular failure provides a clue as to why several different groups emerged: it was perhaps easier to evade the attentions of the security services if a number of organisations were engaged in parallel activities.

However, even if the splinter groups provided a means to dodge the surveillance which was directed increasingly towards the British Union of Fascists, experienced military officers still went to some lengths to conceal their connections. In the case of Fuller, not only did he deliver talks to meetings of the Link, Domville's diary shows that he was present at the launch of the Chelsea branch of the organisation at Chelsea Town Hall in December 1937.⁵⁴ However, although his association was obviously a close one, it is interesting that in a nine-page list of the names and addresses of Link members compiled by MI5, Fuller's name cannot be found.⁵⁵ It can only be presumed that he did not formally join in order to avoid being identified with the group by intelligence officers.

A further indication of the desire of Fuller to avoid the attentions of the security services can be seen if one examines his appointments' diaries. In 1937 he lunched with Mosley once in January and once in February, and he attended no less than eleven BUF meetings in March, May, June, August, No-

⁵² TNA, KV 5/2, Admiral Sir Barry Domville, report F.3c, p. 14; and Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right*, pp. 354–5.

⁵³ TNA, KV 5/3, B.2a, MI5 report, B.5b (M/G), 13 Dec. 1938.

⁵⁴ NMM, Domville Papers, DCM/55, Diary, LV, entry, 1 Dec. 1937.

⁵⁵ TNA, KV 5/3, B.2a, untitled list of Link members' names and addresses, n.d. [1938].

vember and December.⁵⁶ Yet, the following year his appointments' diary records only three meetings, one BUF meeting in February and in November respectively, and a meeting with Mosley in December.⁵⁷ This could be interpreted as a result of Fuller's disillusionment with Mosley as a party strategist.⁵⁸ But in 1939 Fuller attended at least two BUF meetings in February and April, while he dined with the Mosleys, or met Mosley on his own, once in May, twice in July, and once in September.⁵⁹ Thus, in no way did Fuller sever his contacts with Mosley, so that it seems likely that one reason for the dip in his attendance of BUF meetings in 1938 was the increased surveillance of the party by the security services, of which he will have been most likely aware. It would also help explain his involvement in various splinter groups and radical circles.

Nonetheless, Fuller did not allow the increasing suspicion that right-wing radicals were German agents to hamper his activities. On 27 September 1939, he went to see the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), Edmund Ironside, who was interested in re-employing him as the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff.⁶⁰ This was a visit which was potentially explosive from a security point of view. The appointment of Ironside as CIGS on 3 September 1939 had itself apparently worried MI5; rumours continued after his appointment that he was a secret member of the BUF, while in some fascist circles he had been touted as a potential ›strongman‹.⁶¹ Given these rumours, it was perhaps to be anticipated that his attempt to bring Fuller into the War Office would fail (Fuller was known to have fascist connections). Leslie Hore-Belisha, the Jewish Secretary of State for War, acknowledged Fuller's military abilities, but postponed any decision on his re-employment at a War Cabinet discussion of the issue on 19 October 1939.⁶² Yet this may have been, at the same time, the first chapter in the story of the ousting from office of Hore-Belisha on 5 January 1940 due to his unpopularity with the military, the monarchy and upper-class circles.

The precise details of how Hore-Belisha's sacking came about remain unclear. Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, had mentioned ›prejudice‹ in his conversation with the War Minister on 5 January. But while there was no doubt that the upper echelons of the army did not like him, Basil Liddell Hart suggests in his memoirs that Ironside had collaborated with Churchill in the

⁵⁶ LHCMA, Major-General J.F.C. Fuller Papers, IV/4/30, Appointments' Diary 1937, entries, 26 Jan., 5 Feb., 19 Mar., 29 May, 11 & 25 June, 6 & 20 Aug., 10 Sept., 5, 19 & 26 Nov., 16 Dec. 1937.

⁵⁷ LHCMA, Fuller Papers, IV/4/31, Appointments' Diary 1938, entries, 10 Feb., 29 Nov., 6 Dec. 1938.

⁵⁸ Imperial War Museum, London, Capt. H.W. Luttmann-Johnson Papers, file 1, Fuller to Luttmann-Johnson, 30 June 1937, in which Fuller writes that Mosley's talk of fighting 400 seats at the next election was absurd.

⁵⁹ LHCMA, Fuller Papers, IV/3/32, Appointments' Diary 1939, entries, 24 Feb., 13 Apr., 23 May, 16 & 26 July, 26 Sept. 1939.

⁶⁰ LHCMA, Fuller Papers, IV/4/32, Appointments' Diary 1939, entry, 27 Sept. 1939, ›Ironside re DCIGS‹.

⁶¹ Dorril, *Blackshirt*, pp. 449–50, 469–70, 474, 478, 482.

⁶² TNA, CAB 65/1/52, War Cabinet 52 (39), Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, 19 Oct. 1939, pp. 431–2.

›coup‹. To what extent anti-Semitism had driven the de facto sacking, or whether Hore-Belisha's handling of military affairs was part of the reason, cannot be proved one way or the other.⁶³ Conservative circles clearly detested him because he was Jewish, such as the journalist Collin Brooks, who wrote in his diary, ›there is no doubt, from what one knows[,] that the Jew is better out than in‹.⁶⁴ As far back as December 1937, Admiral Domville had recorded a conversation in his diary about the replacement of Sir Cyril Deverell as CIGS by Lord Gort, noting, ›The Jew boy's doing. A 1st class sensation‹.⁶⁵ The removal of Hore-Belisha does, nonetheless, raise the possibility that the links which military officers from radical right-wing circles maintained with the Whitehall machinery may have assisted in the success of the ›coup‹. It suggests, too, that the fringe right-wing groups did not only consist of ineffectual cranks, meeting in small hotels down side-streets: they also contained individuals with strong establishment connections.

Yet the capacity – or even intention – of such groups to engage in effective, subversive activity was decidedly questionable. The arrest on 20 May 1940 of Tyler Kent, a clerk at the American Embassy in London, and Anna Wolkoff, who were both members of the Right Club, spelled the end of an organised radical right in Britain during the war. MI5 had discovered that Kent had been selling sensitive, official embassy documents to the Russians. The fact that Captain Ramsay had left his list of Right Club members in the hands of Kent suggested to MI5 that they had uncovered a spy network; they also appeared to have unearthed evidence that Ramsay was collaborating with Mosley. The significance of this event was that it was then used, two days later, to justify an amendment to Defence Regulation 18B of the Emergency Powers Act. On 23 May 1940, Sir Oswald Mosley was arrested, as was Captain Maule Ramsay. In total 747 BUF members were arrested, including Barry Domville, together with 20 members of the Right Club; but Fuller was not interned.⁶⁶

The Eclipse of Radical Splinter Groups, 1940-1941

The employment of secretiveness among these overlapping groups of radical right-wingers had been brought on by the intense surveillance carried out by MI5, even if this was driven as much by paranoia as it was by a genuine threat of a

⁶³ Maurice Edelman, *The Mirror: A Political History* (London, 1966), pp. 85-94; and, B.H. Liddell Hart, *Memoirs*, Vol. II (London, 1965), pp. 263-74.

⁶⁴ N.J. Crowson (ed.), *The Journals of Collin Brooks, 1932-1940* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 262, entry, 7 Jan. 1940.

⁶⁵ NMM, Domville Papers, DCM/55, Diary, LV, entry, 2 Dec. 1937.

⁶⁶ Pugh, *Fascists and Fascism*, pp. 287-307; Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 157-79. Of those detained under Defence Regulation 18B, 400 out of 455 recommendations for release by the ›Advisory Committee‹ had been officially approved by 6 February 1941. Domville was released in July 1943 and Mosley in November 1943.

German fifth column emerging. The fact that military officers were key figures in these groups – especially Domville (who had experience in intelligence) and Fuller (who had worked closely with military intelligence) – gave them a natural advantage over civilians in taking precautionary measures. They sought to avoid leaving incriminating evidence, but they also attempted after the outbreak of war in September 1939 to reduce their activities to clandestine meetings. They never presented a real threat, though, for two reasons: first of all the majority of officers who supported fringe right-wing groups were retired, so unlikely to engage in serious underground activity due to their age; second, they had pursued military careers in interwar Britain at a time when fascist ideas were seen as largely acceptable within elite circles, so they hoped to exercise influence behind the scenes. They assumed that many in the upper echelons of the state agreed with their views and wanted peace with Germany, too; for those who were essentially patriotic, it took the outbreak of war to lead them to rethink their views.⁶⁷

This interpretation is confirmed when the fate of the group the ›Friends of National Spain‹ is examined. Originally founded to counter left-wing propaganda, and dedicated to educating the British public about ›the real facts‹ relating to the Spanish Civil War, after the victory of Franco's forces it changed its name to ›The Society of the Friends of Spain‹. An Extraordinary Meeting of the society was held at its offices at Cavendish Square in London on 11 July 1940. The Chairman, Lord Philmore, emphasized to the audience the importance of promoting good relations between Britain and Spain; but he also warned of the dangers should Spain become allied with hostile powers. An MI5 report noted that the membership of the society was not more than a few hundred, but it was ›known to be supported by people who formerly showed pro-Fascist tendencies‹. Nonetheless, the report concluded: ›The Secretary has recently been heard to say that in the event of the Spanish Government joining the Axis powers the Society would cease to exist.‹⁶⁸

However, there was still some secret activity after Mosley's arrest: a weekly intelligence summary of 16 October 1940 reported that a small group of former members of the BUF based in Leeds had met to discuss acts of sabotage in factories and the passing of military secrets to the Germans. This group had been considering creating an organisation which would be activated when the Germans invaded. Allegedly, the leader of this shadow underground organisation was to be General Fuller. Still, the report noted:

FULLER has for some time been the subject of close investigation by this office, but he is extremely cautious and astute. We are not yet in a position to say anything regarding the nature of his activities, but we shall probably have obtained valuable information from quite another source within the next week or so.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Such an assumption was not simply wishful thinking, as the former Prime Minister David Lloyd George was just one of several high-ranking figures interested in a compromise peace. See here Paul Addison, ›Lloyd George and Compromise Peace in the Second World War‹, in A.J.P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (New York, 1971), pp. 361–84.

⁶⁸ TNA, KV 4/122, ›B‹ Division Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 10, sect. ii) The Society of the Friends of Spain, 12 Dec. 1940, pp. 4–5.

⁶⁹ TNA, KV 4/122, B. Division Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 2, 16 Oct. 1940, p. 2.

But here considerable caution is required in dealing with Secret Service reports. The atmosphere of the time led to great excitement over the possibility of a German fifth column, so that not all reports can necessarily be taken at face value. Indeed, some intelligence historians have argued strongly that not all the evidence provided by informants was actually very reliable.⁷⁰ It seems unlikely that Fuller was ever aware of his role as the leader of an underground organisation.

Further MI5 investigations after the summer of 1940, extending into 1941, revealed only small private gatherings of right-wingers, some attended by Fuller. A group known as ›Information and Policy‹, which published a newsletter, was identified, and agents were tasked to monitor its activities. In the records of a government investigative committee which had met to discuss the internment status of Barry Domvile, we find an interesting exchange about Fuller between security officials. The general's connection with the Duke of Alba (Francisco Franco's representative in Britain) was raised, as well as his interest in right-wing causes. When the question was posed as to why Fuller had not been interned, the official answered: ›Again this is a matter upon which I must keep my mouth closed. I should like to tell you more about General Fuller; it is not yet within my purview; it may or it may not be.‹⁷¹ This tends to reinforce the hypothesis that Fuller was not arrested because he was protected first by Ironside, then his successor as CIGS, Sir Alan Brooke, or MI5 wished to make use of him, perhaps to convince the Germans there was still a ›fifth column‹ in Britain.⁷²

But after the neutralisation of the BUF, right-wing extremists were mainly to be found among small groups based around aristocrats advocating a negotiated peace. Quite apart from the fact that most officers now found themselves fully engaged in the war effort, those who remained were not the classic conspirators of the secret military networks of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, the internment of a substantial number of members of the BUF in May/June 1940, seen by the intelligence services as an ›injustice which [...] was a small price to pay for the cause of liberty‹,⁷³ largely crippled any prospect of future propagandistic activities by the radical right. The few small groups left revolved around one or two fascist organisers who had not been interned, together with members of the aristocracy, such as Lord Tavistock.⁷⁴

Still, any individual who even discussed the idea of a compromise peace was viewed as suspect. In a report of March 1941, British intelligence noted: ›The activities and opinions of certain Right wing defeatists and appeasers who are not, and never were, connected with Fascist organisations have been under our

⁷⁰ Thurlow, ›British Fascism and State Surveillance‹, pp. 91-3.

⁷¹ TNA, KV 2/834, Mr. Noakes before the Advisory Committee re DOMVILES, 30 Oct. 1940.

⁷² Dorril, *Blacksbird*, pp. 511-2.

⁷³ TNA, KV 4/122, ›B‹ Division Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 5. Part I, sect. ›The Present Position of the British Union of Fascists‹, n.d. [early Nov. 1940], p. 4.

⁷⁴ TNA, KV 4/122, ›B‹ Division Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 21, Part I, 27 Feb. 1941, pp. 74-6.

observation for some time.⁷⁵ While under the pressures of war caution was understandable, at the same time officials tended to exaggerate the threat posed by such groups. This can be seen in the following assessment:

These people are drawn from the well to do classes and their toadies, and will undoubtedly prove increasingly harmful as the war continues, and in the event of things going badly such people might provide a nucleus of support for a would-be English Vichyism of the future. While not strictly unpatriotic, they would prefer, and are working for, a patched up peace which to them appears preferable to the prospect of a long struggle from which »Bolshevism« might be gainer but from which they expect to lose their fortunes, their titles and their influence.⁷⁶

What is revealed here is the inherently class-based nature of these small circles which had taken on some of the characteristics of secret networks, as well as the involvement of such circles in championing peace proposals. After 22 June 1941, however, there was no chance of a compromise peace with Germany – and there was no opportunity for any involvement by well-connected groups of officers in radical right-wing groups.

Conclusion

In order to reach some conclusions to this specific case study of radical, right-wing splinter groups in Britain in the late 1930s, it is worth returning to some of the propositions offered by Georg Simmel in his seminal article on secrecy and secret societies. This is useful precisely because the organisations and circles under discussion here are not easily comparable with the secret societies, or the secret military networks, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The mid-twentieth century was very different from Simmel's characterisation of the nineteenth century as an era in which secrecy became lost due to the publication of official data: this was because intelligence services had emerged as modern, bureaucratic organisations.⁷⁷ In other words, the combination of secrecy *and* secret services was now the key factor which regulated the battle between the political extremes and any challenges to state authority. There were two implications to this: on the one hand, conspiracy became far more difficult; but, on the other, the entire conception of conspiracy, secret societies and treason was turned on its head because it was now viewed as a phenomenon of the extreme left by military officers.

Nevertheless, despite the differences in the historical context in this case study, Simmel's arguments still provide some characteristics of the secret society which can be observed in British right-wing splinter groups twenty-five years after his article was published. According to him, reciprocal confidence

⁷⁵ TNA, KV 4/122, »B« Division Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 22, 6 Mar. 1941, p. 85.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Simmel, »Sociology of Secrecy«, pp. 468-9.

is essential to members of a secret society, it can exist to maintain a body of doctrine which cannot be expressed in public, ›the society‹ contains an element of freedom not available in the surrounding society, and it maintains hostility towards wider society which it cannot express openly; finally, by virtue of its secrecy, the secret society appears related to treachery.⁷⁸ The splinter groups of the late 1930s, although neither secret societies nor typical examples of ›secret military networks‹ did, when taken as a ›collective movement‹, display in one form or another all of these characteristics. This coalition of right-wing splinter groups flirted ideologically with treachery in their support for Germany, they felt that their pro-fascist views required ›protected spaces‹ in which they could be voiced, while at the same time they sought to maintain and propagate their views as a form of political doctrine.

A further question is, however, in what way did these splinter groups display similarities with the secret military networks of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? If the Serbian Black Hand organisation, founded in 1911, is taken as an example,⁷⁹ some parallels can be found: there was a tension in both cases between the employment of secrecy and the need for publicity; and, military officers in both contexts saw certain political parties as a threat to the nation. In the case of the Black Hand, it managed to extend its network into the structures of the state, where it enjoyed considerable sympathy, suggesting a further parallel with British officers' networks. Traditional military networks, which overlapped with groups sympathetic to the BUF, could be used to gain access to Whitehall (Ironside's attempt to re-employ Fuller, for example), while their links to the establishment suggest that even in January 1940 sympathy with their outlook allows a loose connection to be made between the splinter groups and the ousting of Hore-Belisha as Secretary of State for War.⁸⁰ The apparent similarities should not be taken too far, though. The Black Hand was a radical group, which sought to use (and rejoiced in) violent means, and drew its membership principally from the army. While it did show signs of a proto-fascist ideology, the role of intelligence organisations was completely different in the Serbian context to that of post-1918 Britain.

While in England a significant military presence could be found in fascist splinter groups, none of these organisations sought to recruit specifically in the armed forces. The radical right in Britain felt most comfortable in its own ›protected spaces‹, whether these were exclusive hotels, such as Claridge's or the Dorchester, or the clubs which officers and the rich frequented.⁸¹ In the period under discussion, the principles of military discretion made conversations about radical right-wing politics ideally suited to the enclosed world of the private members' club. There were many different clubs in the centre of

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 470, 476–7, 482, 490, 498.

⁷⁹ For background, see Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 38–41, 94–9.

⁸⁰ It should not be forgotten that Hore-Belisha had been smeared in an anti-Semitic fashion in BUF publications. B.D.E. Donovan, ›Retraining Trained Men‹, *Action*, 21 Aug. 1937; and, ›What is Corruption?‹ *Action*, 18 Sept. 1937, p. 8.

⁸¹ See the references to a lunch at Claridge's, and a meeting about National Spain at the Dorchester, at NMM, Domville Papers, DCM/55, Diary, LV, entries, 7 Dec. 1937 & 21 Feb. 1938.

London, so that secure places for conversations could easily be found. To give just one example, Admiral Domville noted in his diary in November 1937 how much he liked the Authors' Club after having had lunch there and a conversation about ›The Link‹: ›I am speaking there later, & I liked the look of the place – just suit me, I think, quiet, small & cosy‹. He added that he might join if he gave up his membership of the Army and Navy Club.⁸²

What is perhaps most interesting is that the class attitudes in the radical right-wing circles overlapped with those of many of the intelligence officers keeping watch on them. In a Home Office report on a BUF lunch at an expensive London hotel, held shortly before Sir Oswald Mosley's arrest and internment, it was noted: ›The lunchers, about 500 in number, were all middle or upper class, as was to be expected, except of one or two vociferous yes-men of a type unlikely to find the necessary 5/-‹.⁸³ What distinguished the pro-fascist splinter groups was the way in which between 1938 and early 1940 the ›movement‹ became a form of alliance between the upper and the ›traditional middle classes‹.⁸⁴ What unified them was the belief that war with Germany would destroy Britain and their position in society – hence the appeal of the BUF slogan, ›Mind Britain's Business‹.

While these splinter groups were united by specific ideological precepts, it is difficult to imagine their existence without the presence of retired officers. Military officers were essential to the identity and methods of the radical, pro-fascist circles. While the activities and pronouncements of this ›movement‹ were in many ways more sedate than possible historical precursors, the role which secrecy played in relation to the ideology, communication techniques and the goals of the splinter groups suggests, nonetheless, more than a few parallels with earlier secret military networks.

⁸² NMM, Domville Papers, DCM/55, Diary, LV, entry, 22 Nov. 1937, while references can be found to Buck's Club, entry, 2 Dec. 1937, and the United University Club, entry, 1 Feb. 1938.

⁸³ TNA, HO 262/7, Ministry of Information, Home Intelligence, Report of Mosley's Lunch at the Criterion, 26 Apr. 1940.

⁸⁴ McKibbin makes the point that the ›traditional middle classes‹ drew their identity from social stability, which was expressed through ›associational life‹. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 90–98. In some respects, some of the splinter groups displayed the characteristics of middle-class associations.