1. **Introduction**

One of the enduring historical myths of World War II is that a reasonable and united Britain stood alone in its fight against the threat of an alien fascist tyranny in Europe. Yet latent pacifist feeling in Britain was widespread up until the outbreak of war in 1939, and historical omissions and generalisations since then have become “chief among the habits of forgetfulness which permitted and permit the myth to subsist” (Calder, 1991, p. 90). The standalone myth also precludes the existence of a vibrant fascist movement in Britain throughout the 1930s that co-operated with fascist states in Europe, received funding from Italy and campaigned against war with Germany even after the fighting had started. The founding of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1932 meant that throughout the 1930s, Britain had experienced its own version of the political extremes that emerged in other European countries, and fascist ideas found support among the population at large, the media, and social and political elites.

This historical essay considers the methods, messages and institutional arrangements of the British Union of Fascists’ publicity and propaganda in the years between its foundation in 1932 and the outbreak of World War II in 1939, with a particular focus on the BUF’s campaigning for a universal fascism or “fascist internationalism” (Liburd, 2018, p. 295) in which the rules-based co-operation of the League of Nations was replaced with more casual co-operation between fascist states. So beyond an explication of how the BUF did its public relations (PR) work in the foreign policy field, the article unpacks the BUF’s messaging on themes of peace, transnational co-operation and opposition to war that were as much as part of its proposition as ultra-nationalism and anti-semitism.

1. **Literature review**
2. ***The history of political PR, propaganda and publicity***

In her assessment of the state of public relations history making, L’Etang (2016, p. 69) encouraged some “re-positioning in terms of its historiographical imagination” in order that PR historians might ask “broader questions in relation to a bigger picture” (p. 75). Pursuing a similar line, Fitch and L’Etang (2017, p. 116) gently admonished that scholars contributing on PR history topics “have not always grounded their histories within wider historical literature that contextualises the public relations occupation and its role in a particular societal context”. Mindful of these points, the literature review that follows considers cultural and historical matters related to fascism in Europe in line with the call from Somerville, Edwards and Ihlen in their introduction in a recent edited book of PR history (2020, p.3) for historians in the field to make visible the “specific social, cultural and political conditions that have given rise to the profession in its different forms”. While the terms propaganda and public relations have been considered problematic by themselves, there has also been contestation on the time periods during which they apply and the extent to which they can be used as general descriptors. L’Etang (1998, p. 414) encouraged sensitivity to temporal context and emphasised the importance of using terms in the same way they were used at the time under study, even if the result appeared “either offensive or inaccurate” as it is “historically more authentic to employ terms this way.” Developing this position within political PR and international relations, Kunczik (2003, p. 400) maintained that any attempt to distinguish between public relations and propaganda in these fields was “merely a semantic game”. The terms selected in the title of this paper and which define its scope - publicity and propaganda – were the terms used by the BUF to describe its communications and outreach work between 1932-1939. The word publicity, along with derivatives such as publicist was a descriptor for PR work in the UK and was used to describe PR in France (*publicité*) during this period, especially in government communications. Wring’s (2020, p.148) study of the pre-war “municipal socialism” in Britain showed that the term publicity was used in local government in the 1930s, as well as by prominent Labour Party politicians of the time such as Herbert Morrison. This usage suggests that the term publicity can be considered alongside PR and propaganda, which were themselves used “interchangeably and apparently unproblematically” in the journal of the UK’s Institute of Public Relations and in wider professional discussion until around 1955 (L’Etang, 2004, p. 83).

***ii.. The historiography and propaganda of fascism***

Ernst Nolte (1965, p, 18) argued that the “era of fascism” in Europe from 1919-1945 was defined by six criteria: anti-communism, anti-liberalism, anti-conservatism, strong leadership, the party as army, totalitarian aims. In another contribution on temporal matters, Paxton (1998, p. 2) further explicated the evolution of fascism in time through his proposal of a 5-stage sequence of “fascism in motion” through which movements progressed, consisting of: 1. Formation. 2. Creation of a party that can act. 3. Seizure of power. 4. Exercise of power. 5. Entropy. The question of how far commonalities are valid enough to enable a “generic fascism” as opposed to country-specific variants has been a contended theme in the search for an all-encompassing definition of fascism with Allardyce (1979, p. 370) arguing that “fascism is not a generic concept”. Yet, the term which had no meaning outside Italy was applied widely by other movements keen to identify as fascist, including Mosley’s BUF.

Alongside national studies of fascism and fascist propaganda focussed on Germany and other countries with an explicitly “fascist past”, more universal studies have been undertaken into what Schulte-Sasse (1991) called the aesthetics of fascism. This category of historical work included inquiry into the way fascist organisations had used art, film, radio, publishing, fashion/uniform and other mediums in their propaganda outreach. In contrast with the extensive literature on its ideology and political history, the propaganda of the BUF has been the focus of a much smaller body of work. Julie Gottlieb (2006, p. 35) attempted to bring matters of ideology and presentation together in a paper that examined the way Sir Oswald Mosley’s “political leadership became transformed into a form of celebrity” and a publicity approach that embraced the “the marketing of megalomania”. Building on Linehan’s (2004, p.397) consideration of the BUF as both a “totalitarian movement and political religion”, Drabik (2017, p. 214) provided a thorough review of the organisation’s propaganda from a perspective of religiosity in which fascism is faith and the role of propaganda is to spread the faith by promoting the BUF’s “mythic ideological core” of national re-birth at home and through co-operation with other fascist states internationally.

1. **Research method and materials:**

This investigation is based upon scrutiny of original BUF documents relating to the period 1932-1939, which was when the BUF was most active in British politics, with a correspondingly high level of publicity and propaganda activity. Documents were examined in the British Union Collection and The John Beckett Collection, both of which are held in the Special Collections Centre at the library of the University of Sheffield, and the Mosley Collection at the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham. The archival search uncovered three categories of artefacts that form the corpus in the investigation that follows: examples of BUF publicity and propaganda materials such as booklets, posters, newsletters; BUF documents relating to the organisation of PR work (including correspondence with important supporters of the publicity effort, such as Lord Rothermere, Mussolini’s regime in Italy and also with Nazi Germany) and biographies of key actors in BUF publicity.

Analysis of these materials was organised using historical institutionalism, one of several methodological approaches derived from institutionalist theory, which can be traced to Powell and DiMaggio’s (1991) foundational book on *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis.* This work led to new literature and research approaches in offshoot fields such as organizational discourse - see Grand, Hardey, Oswick and Putnam’s (2004) *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse,* for an introduction, as well as Cooreen (2015) - and organizational institutionalism - see Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin and Suddaby’s (2008) *Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*. These approaches have appeared in critical public relations projects (Fredriksson, Pallas and Wehmeier, 2013; Frandsen and Johansen, 2013 and others in the neo-institutionalism special section of *Public Relations Inquiry* in May 2013) while it has also been advocated and used in public relations history by Sandhu (2015) and Bentele and Wiesenburg (2016). As its name suggests, the historical institutionalism variant of institutional studies pays attention to the historical development of institutions, path dependency over time and the role of both “formal and informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy” (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 938). The role of the agents of the institution (such as leaders and supporters) in internalising and transmitting these scripts (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 946) and the assumption of changing relationship between institutions, ideas and agents over time makes this approach relevant to an examination of the BUF and its publicity work. Despite appearing rarely in public relations projects, historical institutionalism has been advocated as a valuable addition to the communication scholar’s theoretical toolbox by Bannerman and Haggart (2015, p. 8) who formulated a useful methodological refinement for communication studies, which they specified as “tracing the interaction of institutions, ideas and agents over time”. This variant of the historical institutionalist method – as summarised below – was adopted as the framework for organising this project:

1. Selection of the institution for study and time period. (BUF from 1932-1939).

2. Identify the institutional ideas. (The core ideology and messages of BUF).

3. Identify agents/actors. (BUF leaders and communications actors)

4. Identify supporting mechanisms. (BUF media supporters and distribution systems).

5. Identify overall institutional effects. (The BUF’s communication and its effects).

**4. Findings**:

***i. The institutional case study: The BUF from 1932-1939***

While the initial British Union of Fascists naming decision can be read as a nationalistic nomenclature for an organisation that offered a single home for all British fascist groups, the union element of the name can also be read as signalling affinity between the BUF and other European fascist movements. When Mosely adopted the term fascist in the BUF’s naming, he was signalling connections, ambitions and foreign policy aspirations that extended beyond Britain As Griffin (1991, p. 1) observed, “When political movements such as Valois’s Faisceau (in France) and Mosley’s British Union of Fascists appropriated the word as a badge of honour, it showed that some political activists at least were convinced that Mussolini’s dictatorship was to be emulated as the manifestation of a positive new force in modern politics, one not confined to the Italian peninsula but supra-national and hence generic.”

With the name change to the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists in 1936, this generic or supranational affinity to European fascism was eclipsed by a more explicit allegiance to Nazi Germany. This allegiance manifested itself in a foreign policy stance that was opposed to war with Germany, as well as a changed logo that mimicked the Nazi swastika and inclusion of nationalism socialism in the name changes of the movement. In 1937, the BUF changed its name again to British Union, omitting the term fascist because it signalled too close an association with other European fascist movements, who by this time were viewed as potential enemies by many in Britain. According to Allardyce (1979, p.370), it was Mosley himself who recognised too late that the tension between the ultranationalist strand of his political proposition and its association with “foreign” ideas of fascism was a reputational risk for the BUF that had led to its message becoming “so confused in the public mind with alien powers that it was denounced as unpatriotic”.

1. ***The institutional ideas: BUF’s publicity messages***

Nugent (1977, p.24) identified three themes in the BUF’s policy messaging: 1. Mosley’s economic interpretation of capitalism’s crisis and the solution of the corporate/fascist state. 2.Anti-semitism. 3.Foreign policy. All three themes were infused with and the idea of hyper-patriotism, and unstinting belief in King, Country and Empire and the emphasis between the three varied over time. At the outset, BUF publicity outreach focussed initially on economic matters and the need for national renewal, while from 1935 onwards, the anti-war and peace agenda was given more emphasis. Anti-semitism rose in volume over the years and was co-mingled with the anti-war rhetoric as the prospect of Britain going to war with Germany appeared more likely. Similarly, as the movement developed its policy goals, Mosley’s initial economic claim of putting “Britain First” was extended to foreign policy, where the goal was to avoid entanglements that could lead to war.

1. **“*Universal fascism”: A new order at home and abroad***

Unlike Germany and Italy, Britain already had an extensive empire in the 1930s and the BUF had “no aggressively imperialistic fascist vision” (Griffin, p.138) but rather a belief that beyond Britain’s renewal, co-operation with other fascist nations would be an integral part of the West’s (international) regeneration. Early BUF propaganda emphasised this message of renewal or what Griffin has called the “palingenetic myth” of fascism and messages relating to the promise of a global palingenesis appeared in early BUF propaganda. A year after the foundation of the BUF, the November 1933 edition of *Blackshirt (1933)* announced that a “New Order” was already emerging “Phoenix like from the smouldering ashes of the old”, with anti-war sentiments mixed with anti-semitism in the title “Shall Jews drag Britain to war?” Also in 1933, Mosely envisioned “humanity released from poverty and from many of the horrors and afflictions of disease to the enjoyment of a world reborn” which was the result of “a fascist movement transformed to the purpose of a new and nobler order of mankind” (Mosley, 1968, p. 328). These universalist sentiments were a recurrent theme of the BUF’s fascist proposition in foreign affairs, in which Britain would join with other fascist nations in order to “march together towards a higher and nobler order of civilization” (Mosley, 1936, p. 7).

In the years that followed, the concept of a universal fascism was worked up into solidly argued propaganda by the BUF, that was propagated through articles and public meetings, that featured speeches from Mosely. Posters and banners of the relevant BUF slogans would also be displayed throughout the room, outside the venue and also chalked on walls and pavements outside. Beyond the event, photographs of the meetings with banners on display featured extensively in the BUF’s in-house publications.

In an article entitled “The Immense Majesty of Fascist Peace”, Mosley (1933) argued that the reach of the British Empire and “firm friendship of fascist nations” underpinning the creation of a new Europe and broader co-operation among fascist states would guarantee “peace over at least a quarter of the earth’s surface”. The BUF disapproved of the League of Nations and its principles of mutual support, arguing it should be abolished and replaced with what Mosley called “real League of Nations” that would emerge as a result of this “universal Fascism” (Mosley, 1935). Attacks on the inefficacy of the League of Nations and its collective security goals came from others in the BUF’s publicity operation, including a racialized critique from William Joyce (1935), who described the League as a plot to “surrender white civilization to the Orient” in an article in *Fascist Quarterly*. He argued that imperial power was critical in enabling global peace, and that peace in Abyssinia, China or India would only be possible with “a power strong enough to enforce it.” Joyce returned to the role of empire in a 1937 article in *Action* (p. 6) entitled “Fascist Peace”, in which he argued that co-operation between the fascist empires of Britain, Germany and Italy on matters such as access to natural resources and markets would deliver a “new imperialism” that would prevent “another civil war of the white race”.

***iv. The British Empire and the fascist peace***

The BUF’s presentation of Empire in its publicity and the emphasis on heroic empire builders in creating a global peace adopted a quite distinct tone from the Nazi’s use of Britain’s imperial heritage. Germany sought to gain a new empire through war and was far more aggressive in its use of expansionist propaganda. In contrast, BUF’s messages on global peace and international co-operation were intertwined with claims of superiority derived from Britain’s recent Imperial experience and the prospects of a fascist future that built upon this heritage with co-operation between a the new brotherhood of fascist nations. In this ideological formulation, transnational co-operation amongst the new fascist states would prevent global conflict:

Mosley and his recruits regarded the renewal of the British Empire, led by fascist frontiersmen and supported by fellow fascist Empires in Germany and Italy, as the key to world peace. In the end it was the BUF’s enthusiasm for this kind of fascist internationalism that provoked the government to intern its leading members and outlaw the organisation. (Liburd, 2018, p. 296)

Imperial power, geographical reach and trading ties made the British Empire an important component in the BUF’s peace propaganda. An early issue of *The Blackshirt* (1933b, p. 42) announced, under the banner headline, “Fascism and Peace”, that economic reorganization of Britain and its Empire was the only basis for lasting peace. In another issue of the BUF’s in house publication, the leader pages argued that fascism was “the enemy of chaos” at national and international level and would become “the architect of peace” (*The Blackshirt*, 1933c, p. 12).

Over time – and specifically as 1939 approached – the BUF promoted a foreign policy stance that was explicitly opposed to entering any new wars. Mosley (1939) retrofitted the “Britain First” slogan which had been used to signify the primacy of Britain’s economic interests to a a policy of avoiding wars that were not in Britain’s interest, publishing a booklet in 1939 entitled *Our peace policy : The policy of British Union was is and will be, Britain First.* The BUF’s campaign against war with Germany was undertaken by a tired and depleted BUF publicity team who were by now reduced to re-using slogans from the Abyssinia campaign including, “Mind Britain’s Business” and “Britain Fights for Britain Only”’ to promote a foreign policy proposition that was distinct from the more bellicose propaganda of fascist movements in Europe, as Cullen (1987, p.128) explained:

One facet of the BUF's developing policy in the 1930s was its adherence to a consistent anti-war outlook […] In this, the BUF must be seen as surprisingly different from other manifestations of fascism.

One field where the BUF was more in step with German and Italian fascism was its increased emphasis on anti-semitism and the way its anti-war PR rhetoric was racialised, as the movement argued that Jewish interests were dragging Britain into a war in which it had no relevant concerns (Rowe, 1998, p.77 ) One author of BUF policy leaflets, A.K. Chesterton, a distant cousin of the writer G.K Chesterton, who had worked as a journalist and public relations officer before joining the BUF, was an active promoter of this linkage between Jewish interests and unnecessary war entanglements. Chesterton was paid £30 (around £1,800 today) for six weeks work (BUF Trust Ltd., 1936) and one of his publicity outputs during this period was a BUF booklet entitled Fascism and the Press, which was sold for threepence. The booklet gives a flavour of the BUF’s messaging of the time, which combined praise for Viscount Rothermere with hostility to Jewish commercial interests. More specifically, Chesterton’s words crystallise how the Britain First foreign policy of opposition to war with German could be combined with anti-semitism in a way that pre-emptively laid the blame for any future wars with international Jewry:

No matter how equivocal may be one’s private feelings towards the Rothermere Press, it would be ungracious to neglect a mention of the sane and magnificent stand made by this group of newspapers against the dangerous maniacs who are intent upon the blasting to pieces of new generations of British manhood in Jewish quarrels remote from our own shores. (Chesterton, 1936, p. 3).

Widespread public aversion to the prospect of another war had been reflected in the emergence of numerous organisations advocating peace and by the late 1930s, groups with diverse origins had come together to campaign against war. Some had religious origins, such as the Christian Quaker Friends Peace Committee, while others had emerged from the political sphere, such as the radical socialist No More War Movement and the anti-war grouping in the Conservative Party. As Daniel Todman (2018, p. 70) has pointed out, while absolute pacifists were “always only a small but vocal minority” there was a “much larger liberal constituency which hoped that international co-operation might eliminate the causes of war.” Mosley sought to appeal to sections of this constituency with his refreshed use of the “Mind Britain’s Business” messaging and public meetings against war, including what one supporter claimed was the “the biggest ever demonstration for peace in the world” at an Earls Court rally in July 1939, which attracted 20,000 (Calder, p. 112).

The BUF supporter, Robert Edwards (n.d.) reported that Mosley’s message at Earls Court was “an appeal from the heart of a soldier from the trenches”:

This is a demonstration of Britain First and, therefore, is a demonstration of world peace. This, the greatest gathering of the English under one roof assembled, tells the Government … ‘At last we have had enough’. We are here to tell them there is something for them to do here in Britain … Enough we have had of alien quarrels, enough threats of foreign war, enough diversions from what matters to the British people, our own land, our own Empire and our problems. We say to the parties tonight, ‘If any country in the world attacks Britain or threatens to attack Britain, then every single member of this great audience of British Union would fight for Britain. (Edwards, n.d.)

After the outbreak of war in September 1939, the BUF’s ex-director of publicity John Beckett, who was now running the British People’s Party (BPP), was at the centre of another attempt to build another broad based alliance against war when he founded the British Council for a Christian Settlement in Europe (BCCSE) with help from the Labour Party activist Ben Greene and others. Alongside members of the pro-Nazi right, senior retired military commanders from World I, the grouping included Christian objectors such as the left wing Methodist minister Donald Soper, the designer Eric Gill and author Laurence Housman. The anti-war faction of the Conservative Party got involved in the group and its views were “faithfully represented” in the monthly magazine, *Truth,* which was secretly controlled by another skilled propagandist and fixer, Sir Joseph Ball of the Conservative Research Department (Beckett, 2017, p.249). The diversity of the alliance was on public view at meetings such as the 3 April 1940 gathering at Kingsway Hall in London, at which vendors for the communists’ Daily Worker stood alongside Peace Pledge Union members and pro-Nazi British fascists who were also selling publications.

Some aspects of BUF messaging against war in Germany – even in the late 1930s – were in synch with the public mood against war which manifested itself in the public celebrations after Prime Minister Chamberlin’s final flight to Munich in September 1938. According to studies conducted by Mass Observation in 1938, “the looming prospect of war was terrifying, particularly to those who could look back to the suffering of the last great conflict” (Todman, 2016, p. 144). Even Chamberlin himself had used terms not too far removed from themes propagated by the BUF - and also by peace campaigners - when he broadcast to the nation on 27 September 1938 that it was simply “horrible, fantastic, incredible” that Britain was preparing for war as a result of “a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing” (Self, 2006, p. 321)

1. ***The propaganda actors***

The first two years of the BUF’s existence depended heavily upon the leadership role played by Sir Oswald Mosley as charismatic orator and chief publicity agent for the BUF. According to Pugh’s (2005, p. 132) account of British fascism, “despite his occasional misjudgements, there is no doubt that Mosley was the BUF’s chief asset […] His main weapon proved to be his masterly platform performances, which numbered about two hundred a year”. The combination of speeches in halls and open air venues around the UK coupled with the sale of publications proved a reasonably successful publicity plan in the first stages of the organisation’s evolution with membership rising to a peak of 40,000 (Todman, 2016, p.45). Yet this was still far from success in an era when the Labour Party had 447,000 members, according to Todman, and the Conservative Party was estimated to have over one million members.

The BUF appointed John Beckett as Director of Publicity and Publications in 1934, alongside William Joyce who was appointed Director of Propaganda, according to an organisational chart of the BUF (Scheme A, 1934). Known to colleagues as “the Mighty Atom” and paid £300 a year (Pugh, 2005, p. 133) Joyce was responsible for research and training BUF speakers. Joyce was a speaker for the BUF himself, as well as an organiser and had a reputation for violent and anti-Semitic rhetoric, as well as for orchestrating confrontational street events, including the notorious march in London’s East End that resulted in the Battle of Cable Street on 4 October 1936. In 1939, Joyce moved to Germany and broadcast German propaganda on a radio programme, *Germany Calling*, throughout World War II back to the UK in English as Lord Haw-Haw. After his arrest in 1945 by the British Army, he was returned to England, tried at the Old Bailey and was the last person in the country to be hung for treason.

By the time he joined the BUF in 1934, John Beckett was already a skilled campaigner, publicist and political entrepreneur, in contrast to what he identified on arrival at the BUF headquarters in London’s King’s Road as a “huge staff of badly paid and useless people” (Beckett, 2017, p. 204) that had gathered under Mosely. Beckett had set up the National Union of Ex-Servicemen in 1918 to campaign for veteran welfare, and then worked as election agent and secretary to the future Labour Party Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, sharing his rambling house in London when Attlee was Mayor of Stepney. In this role, John Beckett deployed all his “flair for a phrase, a slogan, a propaganda method” (Beckett, 2017, p. 42) in selling Attlee to the electors of Limehouse in the 1922 general election, after which Attlee was returned as Member of Parliament (MP). Beckett then followed Attlee into the House of Commons as a Labour MP in 1924, as the youngest MP of the time. His competence, experience and talent as a political communicator was recognised by Mosley in his BUF salary of £700 a year, according to a book by his son Francis Beckett (2017, p. 165) although this is contradicted by Nicholas Mosley (1983, p.77) who put the figure at £600.

Beckett’s role was to edit the BUF’s two weekly newspapers *Action* and *The Blackshirt*, as well as *Fascist Quarterly* and to manage publication and distribution of all publicity material, including policy pamphlets. In this role, he proved himself a “talented propagandist […] as Clement Attlee and the Gateshead Labour Party had discovered” and someone who knew how to make the BUF publications “at once a propaganda vehicle and a paper that people really want to read” (Beckett, 2017, pp.207-208).

1. ***The institutional supporters: Viscount Rothermere and Benito Mussolini***

In January 1934, the British Union of Fascists received a publicity boost in the form of an opinion article on the cover of the *Daily Mail*, headlined, “Hurrah for the Blackshirts”. The article was written by the paper’s owner, Viscount Rothermere, who declared that going forward, the BUF would have the support of all papers in the Rothermere Press group, which included the *Daily Mail, Evening News* and *Sunday Dispatch.* The article enthused about the “Blackshirt movement” and praised its organised effort to break the “stranglehold which senile politicians have so long maintained on our public affairs”, in a reference to the old gang of aging politicians and military who were blamed by the BUF in its publicity for Britain’s failings. Alongside nationalistic admiration and encouragement for the Blackshirts, the article placed its support for the BUF and optimism about its future in a European context, praising the quality of governance of Germany and Italy as “the best ruled nations in Europe today”. Rothermere’s written endorsement was important in itself, but more valuable was the practical boost in the form of free editorial publicity in three newspapers. The Rothermere papers were used to promote BUF events in the same way a modern commercial media partnership would work today, as well as allowing Mosely a platform for his policy in the form of opinion articles.

Wilfred Risdon stood down from his paid propaganda role after violence by stewards at the 7 June 1934 BUF rally at Olympia in London led to criticism and a fall-off of support from middle class supporters who were unsettled by the violent approach of the Blackshirts, with its tone providing an unwelcome association with the bloodshed that was unleashed in Germany days later by Adolph Hitler in Germany in the so-called night of the long knives. In the resulting public controversy conducted in the press, “one of the first casualties on the fascist side of the propaganda war was Lord Rothermere” (Mosley, 1983, p. 64) and by July, he had withdrawn his support from the BUF.

Around the same time, Benito Mussolini began providing funds that would total around £120,000 (over seven million pounds in 2019 values) for the BUF between 1933-1937. Evidence of the transfer of funds exists in various communications between the Italian Foreign Office and the Italian Embassy in London, including a telegram of 25 August to the BUF (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1933). The copy of the telegraph in Mosely’s personal papers records the dispatch of bundles of cash in five different currencies which were smuggled in the diplomatic bag from the Foreign Ministry in Rome to London to fund the BUF. The BUF’s Italian sponsors took a keen interest in BUF’s publicity matters. The Italian ambassador to Britain, Count Grandi, reported to Mussolini in favourable terms on the publicity arrangement between Rothermere and the BUF, for example, as well as personally encouraging Mosely to further cultivate the relationship:

In the many conversations I had with Mosley before Christmas I managed to overcome his doubts by pointing out the immediate and practical advantages that would accrue to his movement by suddenly gaining, without effort or expense, the group of newspapers which because of its circulation and influence on the masses in Great Britain (above all in the provinces) is by far the strongest of them all. (Mosley, 1983, p. 43)

1. ***Italy, Abyssinia and the 1935 “Mind Britain’s Business” campaign***

One return on the Italians’ substantial investment in the BUF was the PR campaign organised by the BUF’s Publicity Director, John Beckett, against any military intervention by British forces or other nations in response to Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935. Mosley was in Italy for much of 1935 soliciting further funds from Mussolini and during this period, John Beckett “effectively took control of strategy and propaganda” for the movement (Beckett, 2017, p. 206).

The invasion provided a platform for the BUF to promote its policy cocktail of fascism, racism, and an anti-war “Mind Britain’s Business” stance alongside promotion of what it saw as the right sort of imperialism. Writing in *Action*, the Mosley henchman Alexander Raven Thomson – a philosopher who contributed to the BUF on policy matters - praised the invasion and suppression of the Abyssinians as modern imperial heroism that could be compared to the reconquering of the Sudan in the 1890s by Kitchener. According to Thompson, Mussolini was simply dealing with “barbarism with a strong hand” and courageously taking on “a barbaric enemy with a reputation for bravery and military skill” (Thomson, 1936, p. 3). In another article in *Action,*  Robert Gordon-Canning (1936, p. 13), who wrote on foreign affairs for BUF leaflets, magazines and other publicity outlets, saw the invasion as “carrying the reign of peace to warring tribes and bringing to these backward and barbaric races the science of the West.”

Under the slogan he had created, “Mind Britain’s Business”, Beckett shrewdly judged that the British population had little appetite for a war with a third party in a faraway place and orchestrated a nationwide campaign against any military action. Varied tactics were used, including some which might today be referred to as guerrilla marketing, such as the chalking the slogan “Mind Britain’s Business” on walls in public places, as he recalled in an unpublished biography he wrote while interned during World War II:

We issued several million leaflets, organized meetings throughout the country, and initiated a great chalking campaign which roused considerable press comment. (Beckett, 1940).

“Mind Britain’s Business” was a cannily devised political campaign PR campaign devised to influence British public opinion and put pressure on the government at a time when “ministers faced the prospect that the left and middle wing of public opinion embodied in the Peace Ballot would expect the UK to stick by its responsibilities to a fellow member of the League” (Todman, 2016, p. 77). In propaganda terms, it also represented “a true quid pro quo” in the form of a return on Italy’s investment in funding the BUF (Thurlow, 1986 p.62).

1. **Discussion:  
   The institutional effects of the BUF’s foreign policy publicity and propaganda**

The BUF’s founding message was “Britain First” and in its early propaganda formulation, Britain's enemies were domestic and lay within the “old gang” of politicians, Army Generals and Jewish business interests who had controlled and spoilt the nation, particularly through the large scale of deaths and injuries suffered by the military in World War I. Mosely, himself a World War I veteran, had been motivated in politics by the need to provide employment and security for ex-servicemen after the suffering of World War I and the economic shock of the depression from 1929 onwards. The BUF Director of Publicity John Beckett had been an activist for veteran welfare and the overall ethos of the Great War ex-serviceman was pervasive in the BUF’s ideas, modes of operating and in its foreign policy propositions. One result was large numbers of ex-soldiers being drawn to the BUF’s combination of revolution and a militaristic style, without the prospect of war. In the domestic arena, this perspective led to BUF policy formulations that placed the interests of ex-servicemen against the “old gangs” that controlled politics and the military and who had been responsible for the failings and slaughter of the 1914-1918 war. In the field of international relations, the BUF did not identify and seek confrontation with external threats, but advocated a fascist peace that would result from co-operation with other fascist powers. The content and tone of this messaging was quite distinct from the more bellicose propaganda – and policy ambitions – of Italy and Germany, and did not feature in the thinking or propaganda of Goebbels, for example, nor of Mussolini, who maintained a constant belief in the inherent value of war, even after failing to execute it successfully in Italy.

As the BUF’s enthusiasm for Mussolini’s intervention in Abyssinia demonstrated, the BUF could not be described as a pacifist movement. However, the movement’s commitment to veterans’ concerns about a repeat of the 1914-1918 war meant it was never bellicose in outlook. The tone and content of BUF publicity was distinct from the way militarism and territorially ambitious aggression was integrated into German and Italian fascist propaganda. German propaganda of this time conveyed a martial outlook that had also been seen on the streets in the form of the violence of its storm troopers, while in Italy, war featured as a desirable inevitability of the fascist project in propaganda that promoted the possibilities of dynamic conflict by the *Arditi* special forces. In contrast, BUF political public relations from the outset emphasised themes of peace, achieved through a combination of economic isolationism within the British Empire combined with comradeship with fellow fascist nations. In the BUF’s propaganda formulations, hyper-patriotism, allied to this insular economic standpoint as a result of a self-contained Empire would ensure peace by leaving other nations free to trade around the revitalized Britain.

The extent to which the BUF should have adopted a distinctly British tone in its publicity or a more internationalist approach – and whether Germany or Italy should be the favoured model to emulate – was discussed and contested within the BUF. One member of the movement reflecting on the efficacy of its publicity and propaganda, was critical of the way the BUF had already “become identified in the public mind with the Hitler Movement, chiefly through the fault of our own speakers and the tone adopted in the *The Blackshirt*” (Guenault, 1934, p.4) rather than the more attractive aspects of Italian fascism and propaganda. Later academic reflection has concurred with these contemporary concerns, with Thorpe (1989) concluding that the BUF suffered from its close identification with the excesses of Italian fascism and German Nazism in the public mind, while various actions by fascist states - e.g night of long knives, support for Franco and Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia.- also rebounded negatively:

In spite of BUF propaganda that its programme and organisation sprang entirely from British traditions, its unfortunate similarities with aspects of foreign movements were obvious to all. The most visible sign of this was the uniform until it was banned by the Public Order Act of 1936. The Blackshirt reminded the public of Mussolini’s Italy and the jackboots of Hitler’s Germany. (Thorpe, 1989)

In 1934, as part of a wide-ranging review of the BUF’s overall operations requested by Mosely, Major General J.F.C. Fuller looked into the workings of the BUF’s publicity and propaganda outputs. Fuller (1934, p. 4), observed that “few things are more disastrous than uncontrolled and divergent propaganda." To some extent at least, the apparent divergence can also be read as a sign of the adaptability of BUF messaging over time, moving on from a well-timed focus on the economy in the 1930s immediately after the depression to an anti-war stance as Britain moved to a war footing in the late 1930s. The BUF appeared to make a distinction between the “mythic ideological core” of its thinking and its “surface ideology” (Drabik, p.216) and this separation of the core from day to day policy choices enabled the Blackshirts to pragmatically amend their political programme, placing emphasis on different propaganda messages over time, while the main goal of national birth remained unchanged.

Sloganeering was very much part of the BUF’s commitment to simple language to promote complex policy propositions and get its message to a mass audience. As already explicated here, John Beckett was a skilled campaigner with a gift for coining an appealing phrase such as the “Mind Britain’s Business” slogan that was used in the campaign against intervening in the war in Abyssinia against Mussolini’s forces. As well as getting these messages distributed through publications, posters and leaflets, another favoured form of propaganda was simply painting the slogans on walls and buildings. The simple, strident nationalistic slogans of the BUF, such as “Britain First”, are reflected in the modern usage of “America First” by President Trump in the 2016 US election and ever since to promote his nationalistic, protectionist, unilateral and isolationist political project (although the phrase dates back to World War I, when used by both President Woodrow Wilson to promote US neutrality). There are also continuities between the BUF slogans of isolationism and the “Take Back Control” slogan and others used by Vote Leave and Leave.EU in the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Beyond shrewd messaging, the BUF displayed a shrewd understanding of the press and of ways to use different media channels in order to maximise distribution. The extensive publishing operation of the BUF at its peak showed its willingness to create and deploy owned media as part of its propaganda and publicity outreach. After his ban from BBC Radio and the effective press boycott, around 1937, Mosley set up a company, Air Time Ltd., which was intended to act as a commercial radio station carrying advertisements that would broadcast to Britain from transmitters outside UK jurisdiction in Sark to the South and the German island of Heligoland to the East. Mosley intended to use the radio station to propagate the BUF message and generate revenue for the movement through advertising. The intention was to offer what is today called a talk radio station, of the type that has proved so popular and effective in building an audience and spreading right-wing ideas in the USA.

For the BUF, as for Trump, the Tea Party movement in the USA and in the Brexit Party’s Nigel Farage in the UK, meetings and rallies were a focal point of publicity outreach that provided the opportunity for a performance by a charismatic leader and merchandising opportunities – of baseball hats and sweatshirts today, and policy leaflets and expensive tailored black shirts back in the 1930s for the BUF. In all cases, the rallies function as important outreach events in themselves, formed a spectacle for the media to report and enabled a form of political fandom or celebrity based on emotional appeal rather than policy propositions alone, as seen today with Donald Trump and Nigel Farage. Both these modern political entrepreneurs deploy a similar political public relations of performativity to Mosley, that goes beyond their role as political leaders to an emotional and performative style of communication that owes more to the world of celebrity than policy exposition, in a mode of political communication, that Mosley himself alluded to at the outset of the BUF when he stated that his aim was to appeal to those who feel rather than those who think.

1. **Conclusion**

Like the fascist politics it sought to propagate, the publicity and propaganda of the BUF had transnational characteristics and ambitions alongside the nationalist rhetoric of “Britain First”. This essay has presented examples in the historical record of transnational co-ordination, co-operation and funding for BUF messaging that were operated in concert with more local British concerns. In particular, the BUF’s 1935 “Mind Britain’s Business” campaign can be read as an effort to simultaneously undermine the League of Nations’ core principle of collective security at the international level and undermine support for British military involvement in any far away war under its obligation of mutual support, which in this case was the prospect of action against Italy to liberate Abyssinia. The slogan “Mind Britain’s Business” was used continually by the BUF and endured even after the start of World War II, by which time it was appended with the equally nationalistic campaign message that “Britain only Fights Britain’s Wars”.

There is little causal evidence of whether or how the BUF’s publicity and propaganda work contributed to growth and decline of the movement in the 1930s, alongside numerous other factors such as Mosley’s leadership and key decisions, policy propositions and the political climate. The changes in the BUF’s financial position over time and presence of large donors such as Mussolini seem to have been the key driver in determining the level of PR activity, with a corresponding decline once cash flow and membership went down. The undisputed part of the historical record is that the BUF did not make the transition from a movement to a successful party in the UK political system. A combination of the British welfare system, the economic management and political stability offered by the National Governments between 1931-1940 produced living conditions that were not as favourable for fascist messages compared to nations such as Germany, Italy, Spain and others in mainland Europe. As Todman (2016, p. 45) observed: “The National Administration had many faults but it did create a feeling of political stability that limited the attraction of more radical alternatives. The British experience of the 1930’s was not a fertile breeding ground for Fascism of Communism. In international comparison, this was a very fortunate escape”.

In the broader context of national history and cultural memory, any study of the propaganda and publicity of fascism involves questions about the varied understandings of the way fascism manifested itself in different countries and the historical relativity of its importance in national life. This relativity had influenced the historical record in many ways, including in contemporary Britain, where national memory appears to have put aside the years when the country had an active fascist party and has focussed instead on Britain “morally on top of the world, fighting “alone” in what many consider to be the last good war”, (Brendon, 2017). While the BUF archives are extensive, historical relativity has led to limited secondary sources and scrutiny of key propaganda actors. There are multiple biographies of Goebbels, for example, and many studies on Nazi propaganda. One limitation of this study is that it relied on a relatively narrow set of biographical sources. The only biography of John Beckett, for example, was written by his son and the most referenced biography of Sir Oswald Mosley was written by one of his sons. This relative paucity of material on the BUF’s propagandists compared to other European countries is itself perhaps an indication of a careless national memory in Britain on fascist matters in general and on BUF publicity and propaganda in particular.

Despite its institutional volatility as evidenced by frequent changes in personnel and financial precariousness throughout the 1930s, the BUF maintained a degree of consistency in its messages on foreign policy. From the start, patriotic support of empire was consistent with its military veteran ethos and was promoted alongside a vision of a universal fascism in which a new order of fascist states entered into international co-operation. Anti-semitism was progressively added to the anti-war outlook and between 1939-40, as the campaign against war with Germany reached its climax. Mosley’s sustained advocacy of a fascist internationalism of co-operation with foreign fascist states during this time sealed his fate. The BUF’s activism against war with Germany was monitored by the security services but allowed until the intensity of military operations in the Battle of France throughout 1939-1940, which ended with the evacuation of British forces from Dunkirk between 27 May and 4 June 1940. The Emergency Powers Act was rushed into law on 22 May 1940 and Mosley was arrested the next day, never charged with a criminal offence but interned under Defence Regulations until release from prison in November 1943, after which he was confined to house arrest until the end of the war. Despite having left the BUF in 1937, John Beckett’s continued involvement with fascism in Britain led to his arrest in May 1940 also. He was released in October 1943 but confined to a radius of five miles of his house until the end of World War II.

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