

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Fascist Faithful

THE SOURCE: “Hail Mosley and F- ‘Em All’: Martyrdom, Transcendence, and the ‘Myth’ of Internment” by Graham D. Macklin, in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, March 2006.

IN NOVEMBER 1945, A CROWD of nearly a thousand hysterically cheering supporters greeted Sir Oswald Mosley at London’s Royal Hotel. What made the event remarkable was that Mosley was Britain’s leading fascist, and that he had just emerged from five years of wartime detention. Amazingly, his political career was not over.

Mosley (1896–1980) formed the British Union of Fascists in 1932 and was interned by the British government along with more than 800 other party activists in the spring of 1940, as British troops faced Hitler’s onslaught on the Continent. The long internment deprived the party of what little mass following it had and broke the spirit of many detained activists, writes Graham D. Macklin, a visiting honorary fellow at the University of Southampton’s Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/Non-Jewish Relations, but it proved a crucible for others. It’s a story “not without contemporary relevance” to the case of today’s interned Taliban and Al Qaeda suspects.

From the start, Mosley’s movement was as much religious as it was political. “The Leader,” as he was called, held out a “powerful redemp-

tive vision of self-sacrifice and of martyrdom to achieve a national and racial rebirth—both drawing heavily upon the metaphors, mysticism, and symbolism of Christianity.”

At one internment camp, Mosley’s followers were allowed to hold a dinner celebrating the anniversary of the founding of their party. When a toast was proposed, one of them wrote later, a life-size portrait of the Leader was unveiled. “The whole audience . . . burst forth with as passionate a cry of salutation—Hail Mosley!—as I have ever heard.”

“Ideological re-dedication was often accompanied by . . . a sense of

spiritual cleansing or personal rebirth for the activist,” says Macklin. Mosley himself said after the war, “We have not lost, we’ve gained, we’ve won.” The fascist leader compared his own captivity with that of Adolf Hitler in 1923—a cathartic purification along the path to ultimate victory. (Hitler himself, a guest at Mosley’s 1936 wedding, said during the war that the British fascists might still help turn the tide in his favor.)

When Mosley went on after 1945 to found a new political party with the unlikely goal of European unification, many followers fell in step. He ran for Parliament twice after being released, and six years after his death a group of his old acolytes started marking his birthday every year.

As the British writer Rebecca West put it, “Only death cures such obstinacy.”



Fascist leader Oswald Mosley is saluted by his followers at a London gathering in the early 1950s, when his Union Movement claimed hundreds of adherents. Mosley twice ran for Parliament after World War II.