

The Battle of Cable Street



Riots erupted between anti-Fascists and Blackshirts (British Fascists) when Oswald Mosley's supporters were gathering in Great Mint Street for a march through the East End of London in what is now called the Battle of Cable Street on Oct. 4, 1936.

Fascism = a governmental system led by a dictator having complete power, forcibly suppressing opposition and criticism, regimenting all industry, commerce, etc., and emphasising an aggressive **nationalism** and often **racism**.

Far Right = Far right politics often support segregation; the separation of groups deemed to be **superior** from groups deemed to be **inferior**. Far right politics also commonly include **racism** and **xenophobia**.

Cable Street, in the east end of London, has long reflected the city's diversity. Today it is home to a large South Asian community, a cycle route to the City for London's businessmen, and an up-and-coming residential area for young hipsters. In the early 20th century, however, it was home to a large, mainly Jewish community whose stand against prejudice has become famous.

“Among the impoverished workers of the East End, the British Union of Fascists (BUF) built their movement in a horseshoe shape around the Jewish community,” says author and historian David Rosenberg, whose relatives owned a stationery shop on Cable Street at the time. Throughout the mid-1930s, the BUF moved closer towards Hitler's form of fascism with Mosley himself saying that “fascism can and will win Britain”. The British fascists also took on a more vehemently (strongly) anti-Semitic stance, describing Jews as “rats and vermin from the gutter of Whitechapel”.

On Sunday Oct. 4, 1936, Oswald Mosley led his Blackshirt supporters on a march through the East End, following months of BUF meetings and leafleting in the area designed to intimidate Jewish people and break up the East End's community solidarity. Despite a petition signed by 100,000 people, the British government permitted the march to go ahead and designated 7,000 members of the police force to accompany it. The counter-protest from the Cable Street community involved members from the Jewish and Irish communities, local workers and local Labour and Communist parties, who succeeded in disbanding (breaking up) the BUF march.



The battle took place when fascism seemed to be on the rise in other European cities, led by Hitler (Germany), Franco (Spain) and Mussolini (Italy). “The fact that so many different communities came together and resulted in such huge numbers turning out against such pressures tells us something”, Rosenberg says. “It was a victory for the united people of the East End.”

Little is recognisable from that period on today’s Cable Street, apart from the faded street signs. Since 1936, the demographic of London’s East End has undergone multiple incarnations, yet new residents have faced similar struggles. The area became home to a large Bengali and South Asian community from the 1960s, which has faced racism incited by Britain’s far right. As Baxell understands it, anti-Semitism and racism “resurface in different guises”, evidenced by developments in Britain and Europe over the past year.

British politicians were criticised by the UN for allowing the divisive and anti-immigrant rhetoric (speechmaking) surrounding Brexit to fuel a spike in reports of race hate crimes, a trend that has been replicated across the continent as countries struggle to handle the record influx of migrants from the Middle East and Africa. The increasing intolerance displayed across the European political spectrum show that the same winds that blew across Cable Street eighty years ago still exist today,

Rosenberg says. “We are fortunate that the far right in Britain is small and fragmented, but you just have to look at France, Germany, Austria and Hungary to see echoes of the 1930s in much more powerful and coordinated far right movements.”



The Cable Street mural, commemorating the Battle of Cable Street against Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts in 1936.