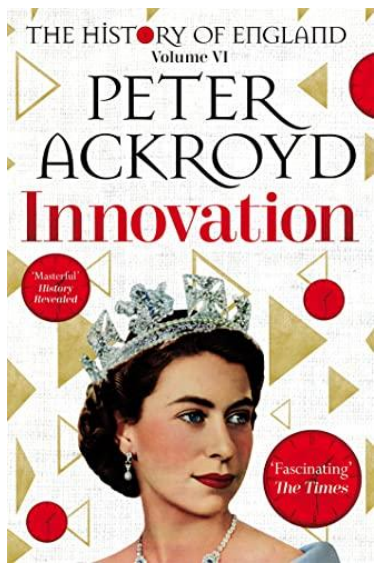




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Innovation: The History of England Volume VI

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After 1900, the English were also forced to confront their economy's diminishing international status. In the Victorian era, English manufacturers had dominated world trade. A combination of technological innovation and cheap labour had allowed goods to be produced inexpensively in England; the availability and expansion of imperial markets, as well as mastery of the seas, had ensured they could be safely sold around the world. Meanwhile, Britain's colonies had commissioned elaborate engineering projects from English firms, with money borrowed from the City of London. The United Kingdom had been responsible for a third of the world's manufacturing in the 1870s, but in the early 1900s this figure fell to 10 per cent.

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By 1900 the United States produced more coal and iron than England, while Germany's mining technology, electrical engineering and chemical industries were superior. Part of England's problem was that it had industrialized long before its rivals, and neither the government nor the representatives of capital and labour had the vision or the will to reinvigorate the manufacturing sector. England was technologically sclerotic, unable to add to its imperial territories and shut out from many international markets by the tariffs of foreign governments. Her staple export industries of iron, wool, shipbuilding and coal had entered their senescence. To compound the problem of declining exports, England was increasingly dependent on foreign imports. After 1900 there was a balance-of-payments deficit, with more money leaving the country than coming in. Over the next fourteen years, economic growth halved. At the beginning of 1901, The Annual Register described the outlook for England

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In contrast to the English politicians, the country's intellectuals celebrated the end of Victorianism, and eagerly devised plans for a brave new world. H. G. Wells compared Queen Victoria to a 'great paper-weight that for half a century [had] sat upon men's minds . . . when she was removed their ideas began to blow about all over the place haphazardly'. Radicals such as Wells used 'Victorian' as a pejorative term; a fairer, more rational era was coming. The Liberal economist J. A. Hobson remarked on the way increasing numbers of people suddenly appeared 'possessed by the duty and desire to put the very questions which their parents thought shocking, and to insist upon plain intelligible answers'. What is the role of the state? What is the purpose of the empire? Why should women and the working classes be excluded from the electoral process? And what are the causes and cures of economic and social inequality? Attempts to answer these questions produced a plethora of political and cultural movements. Socialist, anarchist and feminist groups were founded, while trade unions flourished. Some intellectuals turned to religious philosophies such as theosophy, or took up single-issue political causes including anti-vivisection and anti-vaccination. Many reformers looked to science to point the way to a brighter future. While different radicals promoted different means, the Fabian socialist Beatrice Webb believed they were all working towards the same end: 'The whole nation', she wrote, is 'sliding towards Social Democracy'.

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Just under half of the working classes were officially classified as impoverished. While the national income increased by 20 per cent over Edward's reign, real wages dropped by around 6 per cent. When working husbands failed to bring in enough money to cover their family's needs, their wives were forced to pawn the family's possessions. In the first decade of the new century there were 700 pawn shops within ten miles of the City of London.

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Given Chamberlain's character and background, it is unsurprising that not all Tories celebrated his defection to their side of the House in 1886, in protest at the Liberal government's Irish Home Rule Bill. The old party of the landed governing class and the Anglican Church ought not, some Tories believed, to ally itself with manufacturers and dissenters, especially when they were as radical, flashy and potentially divisive as Chamberlain. Yet he proved to be a great electoral asset to what became the Unionist Alliance. His Liberal Unionist group contributed seventy-one MPs to the coalition after the 1895 election, while the policies he pursued as colonial secretary from that date had been immensely popular. Chamberlain was a zealous imperialist who believed 'that the British race is the greatest of the governing races that the world has ever seen'. His plan for the empire was the knitting together of 'kindred races' for 'similar objects'; in particular, he aimed to strengthen the 'bonds' linking Britain, Canada and America in a 'Greater Britain'. Yet unifying and integrating the empire were not enough to satisfy Chamberlain; he dreamed of expanding its frontiers. His aggressive policies had helped provoke the conflict with the Boers, which became known as 'Joe's War'. In the early days of the military campaign he had basked in the triumphs of the British troops, which helped secure a decisive electoral victory for the Unionist Alliance in 1900. The speeches and journalism Chamberlain

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The episode undermined Balfour's authority within his party and the Commons, where the Liberals were vociferous in their criticism. He believed in protectionism, they claimed, but knew the policy was unpopular, and had therefore sacrificed his most talented minister, and his own convictions, to pragmatic considerations. Balfour's government was now bereft of an ambitious policy, as well as of its principal source of energy and ideas. Remarkably, Balfour managed to keep the plates spinning for a couple of years, but in November 1905 his fatally weakened government finally resigned. This may have been a ruse to expose divisions within the Liberal shadow cabinet, since it was now incumbent on them to form a government. If that is so, the ruse was a failure. Although he did not command the allegiance of all senior members of his party, the Liberal leader Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman succeeded in forming a Liberal government and led his party united into a general election in January 1906, from which it emerged victorious. Five years into the post-Victorian era, the indolent patrician prime minister had been exposed and forced out of Downing Street; he would never lead the country again.

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But even if victory in that race were possible, would it secure the prize of peace? For however many dreadnoughts England stockpiled, it could no longer command the waves unaided. The country's isolation from continental affairs had once been described by English politicians as 'splendid'; it allowed England to concentrate on global affairs and expand its empire. But with that empire now overstretched, and with England's economy diminished, isolation had become perilous. It was imperative that England now build European alliances, but the country had few friends on the Continent. The widespread distaste for its actions during the Boer War had further alienated potential allies. What had been the point of oppressing the free farmers of the volk apart from a lust for South African gold? The infamous conflict had lent credence to long-standing French suspicions regarding la perfide Albion; the possibility of an Anglo-French alliance seemed remote. Nevertheless, King Edward was determined to improve relations between England and its closest neighbour. He understood the danger of England's isolated position, and preferred the French to the Germans. His state visit to France in 1903 helped create the atmosphere in which an historic 'Entente Cordiale' was signed the following year. That agreement, based on mutual suspicion of Germany, marked the end of centuries of Anglo-French distrust. Meanwhile, Edward's half-hearted attempts to forge more amicable links with the Germans came to nothing. The king soon fell out with the German emperor, and railed against 'lying' German officials; the Kaiser branded the English 'degenerate'. Germany

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Labour's share of seats had increased sharply, from two to twenty-nine. Their success was facilitated by the secret Liberal-Labour pact of 1903, according to which each party allowed representatives of the other to stand unchallenged in selected constituencies. The two parties were united in their commitment to anti-militarism, free trade and social reform, though there were obvious differences in outlook. The Liberals aspired to represent the whole country, whereas Labour's aim was to further the cause of the working class and the unions. Labour MPs also advocated far more extensive social reform than most Liberals.

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Outside the political sphere, the territorial aristocracy had been declining for decades. In 1873 the publication of an official inquiry into English landownership had revealed that all of England was owned by less than 5 per cent of its population. This finding appalled the increasingly powerful middle classes, and landed privilege was attacked on several fronts. The gentry's patronage in the professions was significantly reduced when the purchasing of army positions and ecclesiastical benefices was prohibited by law, and examinations were made compulsory. Open competition for places in the legal professions and the civil service soon followed; the amateurish aristocratic ethos that pervaded these occupations had been dispelled by the beginning of the new century. The late-nineteenth-century agricultural depression further weakened the gentry. The value of land was the same in 1910 as it had been in 1880, during which period rents had fallen by around 40 per cent in the south and east of England. And then there were the death duties imposed by Liberal governments, and denounced by Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895): 'Between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death,' she declared, 'land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up.' Many of the gentry decided to sell off their estates as a result. The additional land taxes that were introduced as part of the 'People's Budget' led to the closure of even more country houses – an unprecedented 800,000 estates were put on the market between 1909 and 1914. Yet even before this surge in sales, the age in which the 'great house' had dominated the countryside had come to an end. The demise of the landed gentry did not

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Like the Tory party, the City of London became an emblem of the marriage of convenience between the old and new aristocracies. Many of the gentry invested the money they had made from the sale of their lands in stocks and shares, sometimes following the advice of recently ennobled financiers. Over the Edwardian era, the value of their investments rose much faster than inflation. Younger members of the older aristocratic families even entered the City as stockbrokers, conferring 'respectability' on a profession previously regarded as middle class. Here was a thoroughly English revolution – a great change had taken place in society so that its fundamental structure might remain the same.

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Grey and Churchill were not the only politicians buoyed up by optimism. Only weeks previously, Lansbury, Hardie and Henderson had publicly denounced all 'capitalist' and 'imperialist' wars; yet now the Labour leadership followed the government line, with the exception of MacDonald, who resigned the chairmanship of the party on pacifist principle. Law and the Unionists offered Asquith's government unhesitating support for the declaration of war and announced the end of active opposition in the Commons, as well as in Unionist Ulster. King George was also cheered by the declaration of war, and would become strongly anti-German over the coming months, despite his numerous German titles and family ties. In fact, he would soon disguise the Teutonic ancestry of the royal family by changing its name from Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to Windsor.

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The endless slaughter prompted English soldiers to ask why they were fighting. The French were defending their homeland, but that wasn't the case for the British. Combatants also questioned the competence of Britain's military hierarchy. Were their current tactics productive of anything other than carnage, as German machine guns mowed down row after row of attacking British privates?

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By the closing months of 1917 there was no prospect of victory in sight. Because of the German submarine blockade, supplies of wheat in England were running low and compulsory rationing was introduced. The terrifying Zeppelins once more appeared in the London skies, where they were joined by Gotha aeroplanes. As the German aircraft rained down bombs on the English capital, 300,000 of its inhabitants took refuge in the Underground every night. Calls for a negotiated settlement with Germany could now be heard among the people; the campaigners for peace were now as vociferous as the propagandists for war. Numerous Labour supporters wanted to follow Soviet Russia and sign a treaty with the Germans, while Henderson resigned from the coalition in protest at its lack of engagement with European socialism. Even Unionist support for the war appeared to be waning; one leading light of the party warned that 'prolongation will spell ruin for the civilised world'. As the war entered its fourth calendar year, there was no enthusiasm for it in England. Events in the spring of 1918 only darkened the mood. The German army, reinforced by soldiers transferred from the Eastern Front as a result of its treaty with Russia, decided to embark on a major offensive to take advantage of its numerical superiority before soldiers from the United States joined the Allies. General Ludendorff's plan was to break through the opposition and then attack its trenches from behind. It enjoyed an excellent start, when the Germans overwhelmed the British at the Somme and advanced forty miles towards Paris. For the retreating Allies, the situation was desperate.

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reform and the post-war economy was buoyant. The war had created a boom, with high government spending and inflation stimulating the manufacturing and agricultural sectors. The army of workers expanded with the return of men from the front, but they were absorbed into the growing economy, and unemployment rarely exceeded 1 million (though the 750,000 women dismissed from their positions to make way for the returning men were not included in the figures). The boom continued after the war, sustained by the lavish spending of people who had saved money during the conflict, and by the 'new men' who had made vast fortunes out of it. An insufficient supply of goods caused a rise in both prices and wages, which encouraged people to spend more, which further boosted wages and profits. The extravagant spending of the population was matched by Lloyd George's government as it attempted to inaugurate its reconstruction projects. In 1918 it introduced an Education Act which raised the school leaving age to fourteen. The following year it passed a Housing Act, through which the state accepted responsibility for housing the working classes. So long as the economy was booming and neither business nor wealth felt oppressed by taxation, the Unionists allowed the prime minister to keep public spending high.

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The peace settlement of June 1919, which became known as the Versailles Treaty, restored to France the Alsace-Lorraine region which had been lost to Germany forty years previously, and permitted French soldiers to occupy the mineral-rich Saar region of Germany. It also declared the German city of Danzig a free state. Under the terms of the treaty, Germany lost 13 per cent of its pre-war European territory and 10 per cent of its pre-war population, while the German army was reduced to 100,000 men and the navy to 15,000. Germany was also forced to sign a 'war guilt clause', accepting responsibility for all the loss and damage of the war. The German government regarded this clause as a violation of honour and a lie, while one German official called the treaty 'the continuation of the war by other means'. Over the next decade, the treaty's punitive terms would provide a focus for popular anger in Germany, which would be expressed in support for the ultranationalist Nazi party.

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Since Britain lacked the military and economic capacity to supervise the globe alone, it required the assistance of the world's emerging superpower. In the absence of a transatlantic alliance, Britain would be weaker and more isolated. It is unsurprising that English diplomats returned from Versailles in pessimistic mood. 'If this was a war to make the world safe for democracy, it has failed,' commented Lord Eustace Percy. 'If it was a war to end war, it has left the future of the world more uncertain and more contentious.'

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Yet as the crisis continued into 1921, the prospect of a revolution receded. At the beginning of the year, the resolve of the strikers appeared to weaken; the government enfeebled it further through a combination of threats, empty promises and the offer of slightly higher wages and shorter hours. Lloyd George was in a strong bargaining position; high unemployment meant that no alternative employment was available to the striking workers – the choice was between accepting the employers' terms or semi-starvation on the dole. The prime minister had strengthened his position further at the end of 1920 by introducing an Emergency Powers Act: the coalition was now empowered to govern by decree should there be the threat of industrial action. In the circumstances, the strikers had little choice but to back down, and a general strike in support of the miners planned for 15 April was called off. The date became known as 'Black Friday', because many on the left regarded it as the last day on which a war against the capitalists and the government might have been fought and won. Lloyd George emerged victorious from his battle with the Labour movement, but it was a pyrrhic victory. The alliance he had struck up with the unions during the war was broken beyond repair, and he could no longer pose as a 'man of the people'. What chance did he and his coalition Liberals have of luring working-class voters away from Labour, at a time when they were increasingly disappointed by the government's failure to deliver on its promise to build a 'fit country for heroes to live in'? While some progressive measures had been implemented, the most ambitious government projects were scaled down when the economic slump intervened. The 1919 Housing Act had offered local authorities the funds to build over 200,000 rental homes, yet when the slump arrived the building came to an abrupt halt with only half of the houses constructed.

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The reserved and methodical Chamberlain admired, but did not entirely approve of, the flamboyant aristocrat over at the Exchequer. While the health minister admitted that Churchill was 'brilliant', his 'amorality', 'want of judgement' and 'furious advocacy of half-baked ideas' made him a 'very dangerous man'. Indeed, in many respects Churchill resembled Lloyd George, whom Chamberlain regarded as a false friend to the British nation, and the tempter of its electorate. For his part, Churchill was impressed by Chamberlain's proficiency but regarded him as narrow and unadventurous. Yet while the pair were opposites in terms of character, they often worked in tandem on strategy. Together they also fostered an energetic and ambitious atmosphere within an otherwise undistinguished Tory cabinet.

Enterprising policies were formulated, such as the establishment of a public Central Electricity Board to oversee electricity generation, distribution and investment. Although it was in effect a proposal for nationalization, the Tories preferred to call it 'rationalization'. The resulting 1926 Electricity (Supply) Act would unify 500 separate generating stations under a state monopoly, prompting a fourfold increase in electricity production over the next decade. Another ambitious act of nationalization was the granting of a Royal Charter, in 1926, for the British Broadcasting Corporation. Run by a director general and a board of governors selected by the prime minister, and funded from licence fees paid by wireless owners, its news bulletins, weather forecasts, children's programmes, variety shows and coverage of national sporting events and state occasions soon reached every county of England. By the end of its first decade, the BBC would speak to people from every class, as technological advances reduced the price of the wireless. Baldwin immediately grasped the possibilities

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Baldwin, an experienced industrialist, understood that a new industrial revolution was taking place, in which the staple export industries of the former industrial revolution were being superseded by new industries serving the home market (over 80 per cent of English cars, for example, were bought in England). The Tory leader hoped that the expansion of the new trades would absorb the displacement of labour from the depressed heavy industries – that jobless miners and shipbuilders would become wireless technicians and electrical engineers. However, Baldwin did not indicate how the government would facilitate this 'transition', which would involve retraining and the relocation of countless communities in the north of England.

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Yet Labour's official attitude to the protests and hunger marches was ambivalent. Under the new leadership of Clement Attlee, the party refused to organize demonstrations with the communist NUWM, and condemned the violence that erupted during some of the protests. It was a classic Labour compromise: the party members expressed solidarity with a popular left-wing movement, while distancing themselves from its revolutionary programme. The communists accused Labour of lacking the boldness to make the most of the revolutionary moment, but the truth was that the Labour leadership wanted to postpone that moment indefinitely. Although Attlee and other leading Labour figures attempted to distance themselves from the conservatism of the MacDonald era with radical economic proposals, they were as committed as their former leader to gradualist socialism, achieved through parliamentary reform.

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party whose territory was threatened. On the armament question, while Labour and Tory governments both advocated arms reductions, their motives differed. MacDonald, a staunch internationalist and former pacifist, favoured disarmament for idealistic reasons; the Conservatives regarded it as an excellent way to save the Treasury money. Throughout the Twenties, defence expenditure was lowered by successive chancellors, including Churchill, until by 1933 it accounted for only 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product. The nascent Royal Air Force received limited funding, and the number of its squadrons was reduced from 187 in 1919 to 18 in 1923, while the army lacked the necessary equipment to fight a large-scale war. Plans were drawn up for a new British naval base in Singapore to counter a potential Japanese threat, but the idea came to nothing. Although a reduction in defence spending was usual in peacetime, some people saw it as a symptom of Britain's economic decline, while others were concerned about the country's capacity to protect its empire.

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The rise of Nazism caused the first significant division between the Tories and Labour over foreign policy since the war. In contrast to the Conservatives, Labour MPs vociferously opposed the Nazis from the outset, on ideological grounds. The party did not advocate rearmament as a means of preparing for a struggle with Fascism, but continued to promote multilateral disarmament. Labour had no faith in the failed diplomatic and military strategies of the pre-1914 era; instead they believed that the collective resolution of disputes through the League of Nations, coupled with disarmament, was the only way of confronting the Fascist dictators and guaranteeing a lasting peace. Conservative MPs were equally enthusiastic about the League, though for more pragmatic reasons. They hoped the organization might maintain continental peace so that Britain could avoid an expensive and unpopular rearmament programme, and concentrate instead upon her pressing domestic and imperial concerns. The League inspired zeal among the population in the early Thirties. To a generation which believed that the senseless carnage of the recent war had been caused, in large part, by a lack of foresight and judgement among the major powers, the attraction of a supranational organization was obvious. It would, they believed, resolve all disputes, at minimal risk to its members. The English saw the League as the answer to potential diplomatic problems, yet its existence begged many questions. How could the organization's authority be backed up by force, in the absence of an army or of rearmament of its most powerful members? The League's supporters appeared to believe that its moral authority made rearmament unnecessary: the mere threat of economic sanctions would, they thought, force an aggressor to back down. But while this may have sounded convincing in theory, it had yet to be proven in practice. Another potential flaw was the question of how the League could settle disputes impartially in cases where the interests of larger and smaller members clashed. In principle all members of the League were equal, but in reality states such as Luxembourg and Lithuania yielded far less influence with the organization than France, Italy, Japan or Britain. It augured ill that powerful nations such as Britain simply ignored the League whenever it was convenient for them to do so; they never, for example, referred disputes within the empire to the League for arbitration. In

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The non-intervention committee lived up to its name by declining to intervene, even though evidence of Fascist and Communist meddling was conspicuous. The obsolete League, meanwhile, played no significant role. The failure of collective security, as well as British and French inaction, gave considerable advantage to Franco. Democratic British and French governments looked on as the democratic Spanish government was eventually defeated, and the influence of Fascism spread further across the continent.

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Some Conservative MPs also espoused pro-Franco views, while more pragmatic Tories, such as Baldwin, were happy to see Fascists and Communists killing each other. The Spanish Civil War undoubtedly spread ideology among English youth in the Thirties, but there are deeper reasons for that generation's engagement in politics. It had, in the words of the poet Edmund Blunden, been in 'the nursery in 1914', and was now confronted with the increasingly real possibility of 'a world roaring with bigger bombs'. It is hardly surprising that the Thirties generation were, in many respects, the opposite of the bright young people. The Twenties cult of the hedonistic rich had been replaced by what Evelyn Waugh called the 'solemn cult of the proletariat'. A sober style of dress – corduroy trousers, woollen jumpers, plain white shirts – was favoured in the Thirties, together with thick moustaches and beards. Even the flamboyant Brian Howard was forced to tone down his appearance, lest the left-wing opinions he now espoused lack persuasiveness.

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Among them were undergraduates, artists and poets, such as Julian Bell and W. H. Auden, who wrote memorably about their experiences. For some of the middle-class soldiers, stretcher bearers, ambulance drivers and nurses, the war was the defining experience of their lives. It provided a mirror image to the defining middle-class political experience of the previous decade – the General Strike, when many volunteers had defended the status quo against the working-class strikers. Other volunteers in Spain, however, were disillusioned by their experience. Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) tells the depressing tale of infighting on the republican side, which the author witnessed during his spell of active service. Communism in action proved a disheartening spectacle, with the Russian soldiers behaving brutally towards their allies as well as their enemies. Orwell's seven months in Spain turned him into a vehement anti-Stalinist; yet some on the left were not interested in his criticisms – the Left Book Club refused to publish *Homage*. Partly because of the famous war literature produced by intellectuals, the English contribution to the republican effort is sometimes regarded as a middle-class affair, yet the largest numbers of English recruits were drawn from the working classes. The first English memorial to one of the fallen volunteers was erected to Percy Williams, a twenty-three-year-old apprentice railway engineer from Swindon, who died two months after joining the International Brigades.

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The Spanish Civil War offered members of the English left their first real encounter with fascism, a political ideology that had failed to flourish in England, despite the best efforts of Sir Oswald Mosley. After Mosley was expelled from Labour in 1931, he had created a 'New Party' to promote his corporatist economic policy. Under the influence of Mussolini's ideas, and in the growing conviction that liberal capitalism and parliamentary democracy were unlikely to survive following the depression, Mosley transformed the party into the British Union of Fascists. The BUF united various Fascist splinter groups under Mosley's leadership. Authoritarian, nationalist, anti-Semitic and rabidly anti-communist, the party offered itself as the only viable alternative to an eventual communist success. Like its policies, the BUF's ethos was Italian – a group of violent and uniformed paramilitary stewards called 'blackshirts' would 'protect' 'The Leader' from anti-fascist protesters during public meetings and marches. Their most notorious march took place in October 1936, through an area with a large Jewish population in London's East End. Around 6,000 police attempted to ensure the safe passage of the 2,500 marchers but they were repulsed by approximately 100,000 anti-fascist protesters, with many women and children among them. After a series of running battles with the police, the anti-fascist protesters forced the BUF to divert their march.

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After the bill passed into law the BUF's membership dwindled to a few thousand, and in the end it was no more successful than the British Communist party. After 1937 mutual vilification was the *raison d'être* of both parties, with communist protesters the largest presence at Fascist meetings.

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The English governing class was allowed to govern by the people, ultimately because it offered them protection, whether actual or perceived, in return for their obedience, according to the traditional social contract.
