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Fascism, War and the British Officer Class: The Case of Robert Gordon-Canning

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The case of Robert Gordon-Canning highlights the crucial role of culture, both national and institutional, on the development of doctrine by the British Union of Fascists in the interwar period. This article aims to explore in depth the career of Gordon-Canning and present the cultural factors that pushed him to adopt apocalyptic visions of war. These visions of war became the mainstay of foreign and defence policies of the BUF, due to Gordon-Canning's influential position within the movement.

KEYWORDS British Army; interwar; fascism; British Union of Fascists; doctrine

‘War has been the main pivot of religion, politics and economics and, unless this undoubted fact is recognised, religion, politics and economics cannot be correctly understood.’¹ These were the words of John Frederick Charles Fuller, in a letter to his friend Basil Liddell Hart in 1927. The idea that war, politics, religion and economics were intertwined and developing in symbiosis was a by-product of the totalisation of war that took place from 1914–1918, when entire nations expounded all national forces in the pursuit of victory. In this article, I will attempt to reverse Fuller's theorem to show that, in the interwar period, one cannot understand the changing nature of war without understanding the momentous socio-political-cultural transformations of the time. To this end, I will highlight the role of cultures – national, institutional and sub-institutional – to the development of visions of future war by military theorists in Britain, the majority of which were either fascists or quasi-fascists.

¹ J.F.C. Fuller letter, to Basil Liddell Hart, 27 December 1927, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), King's College London Liddell Hart (LH) 1/302/122.

These military theorists were over-represented in the membership of British fascist movements in the interwar years because they were drawn from the officer corps – either active or retired – a social body that was, as I will demonstrate, especially favourable to British fascism. Their adherence to this political creed had a tremendous influence on the way they envisioned future war.² Fascism warped their understanding of the role of war in the international system, pushed them to glorify violence for its supposed purifying and regenerative virtues, and led them to elaborate apocalyptic visions of future war. This study focuses on the case of Captain Robert Gordon-Canning, a once well-known fascist theorist and propagandist, now completely forgotten. His adventurous military career, coupled with his rise in the British Union of Fascists (BUF), provides us with a fascinating insight into the dynamics that led some distinguished, established, and intelligent men, most of them disaffected upper-class cosmopolites, to fall prey to an extreme ideology that would define their understanding of war throughout the interwar period.³

This approach, using a politico-cultural analysis as a lens to study doctrine, was pioneered by Elizabeth Kier in her seminal book on the development of French and British military doctrine between the two world wars. It has provided me with the bedrock on which to build my understanding of the relationship between culture, both national and institutional, and the theoretical manifestations of warfare.⁴ For Kier, culture plays a crucial role in the development of doctrine; culture being understood in the context of the military institution as the role of armed forces in society and politics and the prevailing attitude to political questions both in and around the armed forces.⁵

Robert Gordon-Canning: a life of extremes

Robert Gordon-Canning was born in Hartpury in 1888. In 1910, Gordon-Canning was commissioned into the 10th (Prince of Wales's Own) Hussars and went on to serve in South Africa, India and in France during the Great War. He was a popular officer who gained the respect of his men and brother officers,⁶ and received several awards for gallantry.⁷ He would later leave the Army in the mid-twenties to travel.⁸

² Brian Holden Reid, *J.F.C. Fuller: Military Thinker* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 176.

³ Upper-class cosmopolites, especially those with an interest in the East and the Islamic world, had a predilection for anti-liberal political thought. Though they shared a fascination for the East, upper-class cosmopolites had diverse political backgrounds. Alongside Gordon-Canning, one could include Lionel Fielden, director of the Indian BBC and an avowed anti-colonialist: Joselyn Zivin, "'Bent": A colonial Subversive and Indian Broadcasting,' *Past & Present*, 162 (1990), 201-2.

⁴ Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

⁵ Keir, 5.

⁶ 'Home Office File on Gordon-Canning's 18B Detention. Letters from diverse people to ask for Gordon's Canning's release', 1940-1943, The National Archives (TNA) Home Office (HO) 45/25706 840,219/1.

⁷ *Supplement to the London Gazette* (London: The Stationery Office, 18 June 1917).

⁸ Sir Norman Birkett (Chair of the Committee), Transcript of Gordon-Canning's Hearing for Home Office Advisory Committee (HOAC 18B) to Consider Appeals Against Orders of Internment, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

In 1920, he was a business representative, an occasional journalist, and an aspiring poet, though he was hardly devoted to a career, being a man of significant means. From 1920 to 1925, little is known about his activities, though one can confidently assert that he was already a fervent anti-materialist and a reactionary. By 1922, this was easily discernible in his poetry collection, *A Pagan Shrine*, published that year, which was replete with opposition to modern liberalism and capitalism.⁹ The majority of the poems in the collection were stirring ballads against the perceived enslavement of humanity by modernity, which he denounced virulently, often mixing anti-Semitism and hostility to urban dwellers.¹⁰ His remedy against this soulless world was, in true reactionary form, a return to the higher ideals of a bygone age.¹¹

Though politically conscious before, his involvement in the Rif War (1921–6) was the first step of his political journey. Fascinated by the rebellion of the Rifians against the Spanish and French authorities in Morocco, he applied to the War Office in October 1924 to take a Red Cross hospital to the conflict zone and contacted several Rif sympathisers in Europe to prevent the shipment of aeroplanes from Britain to Spain. Both ventures, however, failed.¹² In 1925, to gain support for his activities, he befriended the Rif leaders. He was on good terms with Abd el-Krim, the political and military leader of the rebellion and was a friend of el-Krim's brother, Mehmed.¹³

In late 1925, he visited Tangiers and rapidly became a military advisor, publicist and gunrunner for the rebellion.¹⁴ Though he claimed to act for peace, supposedly with the support of sections of the French government, he was a simple adventurer looking to make his name and acquire lucrative mining concessions should an independent Rif state be created.¹⁵ In the process, he alienated much of the Foreign Office staff in Tangiers, repeatedly violating the clause of neutrality by which British subjects were supposed to abide.¹⁶ Robert H. Clive, the Consul-General in Morocco, was exasperated by his behaviour. He pleaded with Gordon-Canning, numerous times and with increasing forcefulness, to have him leave Morocco. Following reports by French and Spanish intelligence confirming his gun-running activities on behalf of the rebels, Clive had to navigate both increasingly hostile French and Spanish delegations along with the continued pig-headed attitude of Gordon-Canning to prevent a large-scale diplomatic incident. His despatches to the Foreign Office on the matter are a fascinating insight into Gordon-Canning's behaviour:

⁹ Robert Gordon-Canning, *A Pagan Shrine* (London: Erskine MacDonald Ltd., 1922).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15

¹² 'Report on Gordon-Canning for MI5 written by Superintendent Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police,' 7 March 1935, TNA KV2/877.

¹³ Gordon-Canning, letter to Mr Berthod, Deputy of French Assembly on his relations with the Rifs and the future of the Rif nation dated 17 October 1925, TNA Foreign Office (FO) 174/305/88; Vol.1.

¹⁴ Robert H. Clive, 25 January 1926, despatch to FO regarding activities of Gordon-Canning, TNA FO 174/305/88, Vol.1.

¹⁵ Clive, despatch to FO, 13 January 1926, TNA FO 174/305/88, Vol.1.

¹⁶ Clive, despatch to FO, 25 January 1926, TNA FO 174/305/88, Vol.1.

Any ideas of Gordon-Canning as a 20th century Lord Byron have been rudely shattered, as there is little doubt now that Gordon-Canning's motives in founding the Rif Committee and pleading the cause of Abdelkrim, far from being disinterested, have had a definite financial profit for himself as a result of mining concessions in the Rif.¹⁷

A further despatch, two weeks later, is even more telling:

I do not, in any official despatch, want to accuse Captain Gordon-Canning of being a madman, but I do not consider he is normal.¹⁸

Faced with mounting pressure from his own government, Clive had secured an order to prevent Gordon-Canning from returning to Tangiers in the spring of 1926, and amid threats from the Spanish and French authorities, Gordon-Canning returned home from Gibraltar.¹⁹

Though Gordon-Canning's illicit adventures in Morocco might seem shocking, they fit within a broader cultural fascination with the figure of the criminal in interwar Britain. As Eloise Moss has pointed out, interwar Britain was enthused by the misdeeds of gentleman thieves and aristocratic criminals.²⁰ Though gunrunning was hardly befitting of Gordon-Canning's station in life, the mystique of the aristocratic criminal, coupled with a certain Orientalist sensibility due to the widely-admired figure of T.E. Lawrence, most likely shielded him from harsh treatment by the authorities.²¹

Fully immersed in Arab culture, Gordon-Canning, at least according to his own recollection, was considered by the Rifs to be one of their own;²² he sought to fashion himself into something of a freelance diplomat and peacemaker in the Middle-East and North Africa.²³ British authorities, however, were quick to dismiss Gordon-Canning's machinations as self-interested and delusional.²⁴ In 1929, he went to Palestine and the Transjordan in a bid to find a solution to the mounting violence between Arab and Jewish inhabitants of the Levant. He ingratiated himself with many prominent Arab leaders, becoming a close associate of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husseini, a fervent anti-Zionist.²⁵ Gordon-Canning was well received in Palestine and Transjordan, Arab leaders showing real respect and even friendship to a man they saw as an unofficial advisor

¹⁷ Clive, despatch to FO, 13 January 1926, TNA FO 174/305/88, Vol.1.

¹⁸ Clive, despatch to FO, 3 February 1926, TNA FO 174/305/88, Vol.1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Eloise Moss, "How I Had Liked this Villain! How I had Admired Him!": A.J. Raffles and the Burglar as British Icon, 1898-1939,' *Journal of British Studies* 53 (2014), 137.

²¹ The parallel with T.E. Lawrence is an interesting one. Lawrence, though he claimed paternity of the Arab Revolt, was, in reality, little more than a participant in it. His adventures became widely popular, not because he had personally turned the tide of the war in the Hejaz, but because he was an excellent self-publicist: Tom Hill, 'Reassessing T.E. Lawrence: Architect of a Guerrilla Campaign?', *RUSI Journal*, 51 (2006), 74.

²² Clive, despatch to FO, 25 January 1926, TNA FO 174/305/88, Vol.1.

²³ Clive, despatch to FO, 17 October 1926, TNA FO 174/305/88, Vol.1.

²⁴ Clive, despatch to FO, 13 January 1926, TNA FO 174/305/88, Vol.1.

²⁵ A.S. Mavrogordate, letter to Chief Secretary Foreign Office on Gordon-Canning's standing Among Arabs, 9 October 1929, TNA FO 371/13755.

to the British authorities. He was perceived as someone who could help them end the flow of Jewish immigration to the mandate.²⁶ Gordon-Canning, however, was no advisor, unofficial or otherwise. His presence in Palestine was an irritant to Sir John Chancellor, High Commissioner of the British Mandate of Palestine, who routinely criticised his activities.²⁷

By the end of 1929, Chancellor had soured on Gordon-Canning's freelance diplomacy, labelling him a security risk.²⁸ Unlike his adventures with the Rifs, his dedication to the Arab cause in Palestine, though ineffectual, was heartfelt. Gordon-Canning genuinely believed he was working for the security and prosperity of the Empire by allying himself with the Arabs in Palestine, arguing in a letter to Sydney Webb, 1st Baron Passfield, the Secretary of State for the Dominions and the Colonies, that:

The chief fact is that not only all the Arabic-speaking world, but the whole world of Islam, are behind the Palestine Arabs in their demands for definite safeguards against the overwhelming danger of political Zionism. [...] In the event of settlement unsatisfactory to the Arabs, there is no telling what expense in blood and in money may be incurred [by the British Empire] in the near future.²⁹

Besides the immediate implications for policing the British Mandate in Palestine, Gordon-Canning was also concerned about the potential repercussions of the Balfour Declaration and the partition of the Ottoman Empire by non-Muslims powers on the Empire at large.³⁰ He argued that with 100 million Muslims living within the Empire, Britain could ill-afford the problems their alienation would raise.³¹

In the end, his support for the Arab cause in Palestine was a failure. He gained many influential contacts among the Arab leaders but was incapable of influencing policy in London; both the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office had time neither for his freelance diplomacy nor his policy prescriptions. His lack of success turned his latent antisemitism, already perceivable in his poems and in his attitude towards Jewish settlers, whom he considered, unlike Jews who had been in Palestine during the Ottoman administration, to be little more than foreign parasites, into a much more rabid and virulent form of hatred.³² He blamed the lack of foresight of the British government on the Palestine question, and ultimately his failure, on a cabal of international Jewish financiers.³³

²⁶ Sir John Chancellor, transcript of speeches by Arab notables on Gordon-Canning, 1930, TNA Commonwealth Office (CO) 733/178/4.

²⁷ Chancellor, letter to Sir John Evelyn Shuckburgh on Gordon-Canning, 28 November 1929, TNA CO 733/178/4.

²⁸ John Chancellor, letter to FO on Gordon-Canning's speech to Arabs, 31 December 1929, TNA CO 733/178/4.

²⁹ Gordon-Canning, letter to Sydney Webb on the situation in Palestine, 1 April 1930, TNA CO 733/178/4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

³² Gordon Canning, report on his travels in Palestine, November 1929, TNA CO 733/178/4.

³³ *Ibid.*

Returning to England in 1930, he devoted himself mainly to intellectual pursuits, publishing a play and several poetry collections, all steeped in reactionary ideas and the need to reform government.³⁴ In January 1934, after having read Oswald Mosley's manifesto, *A Greater Britain*, he approached a mutual friend, William Edward David (Bill) Allen, to set up a meeting between Mosley, the BUF leader, and himself.³⁵ The connection was instantaneous and Gordon-Canning joined the new movement. The BUF was a natural fit, for its politics aligned closely with his, especially regarding foreign and imperial affairs and the need for a corporatist government if Britain was to remain a world power.³⁶ For Gordon-Canning, only the fortifying experience of fascism could rejuvenate an old nation and lift it out of the morass of spiritual decay and class warfare into a new era of unity and peace.³⁷ Corporatist governance would, much like the war, unite the nation in pursuit of a noble goal. As a decorated veteran whose life had been defined by the war, the fascist appeal to soldierly nationalism and the 'spirit of the trenches' resonated with his personal convictions.³⁸ For him, the war had shaped his entire generation and only instrumentalising this wartime spirit of struggle and dynamism could the nation rejuvenate itself.³⁹

Furthermore, the movement and especially its propaganda arm was an excellent way for Gordon-Canning to become the influential man he always had aspired to become.⁴⁰ Ascending rapidly to the inner circle, he became a confidante of Mosley, the director of *Action* – the BUF's newspaper – and a trusted agent to liaise with international partners, namely the Italian Fascists and the German National Socialists.

In the latter capacity, he travelled frequently to Italy and Germany, officially to study the methods of fascism abroad,⁴¹ but the real impetus behind these ventures was to secure financial support for the BUF.⁴² In August 1935, while on a trip to Italy, Gordon-Canning wired Mosley from Naples with guarantees of support from Italian officials.⁴³ Gordon-Canning was also in contact with a known Italian agent in Geneva, Amir Shakib Arslan, the head of the Arab Bureau, who sought to create dissent among Muslims in the British Empire, by pushing for pan-Islamism.⁴⁴

In September 1935, he attended the Nuremberg rally as an official envoy of the BUF and associated closely with several Nazi party officials including Ribbentrop, with whom he was friendly, and even met Hitler.⁴⁵ From 1935 to 1937, he would visit Germany half a dozen times and cultivated close relationships with the Nazi

³⁴ Robert Gordon-Canning, *Saviours of England* (London: C.F. Hodgson & Son Ltd., 1930).

³⁵ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

³⁶ H.J. Wallington, Transcript HOAC 18B, 28 August 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

³⁷ Robert Gordon-Canning, *The Spirit of Fascism* (London, British Union of Fascists, 1937), 4.

³⁸ Gordon-Canning, *Saviours of England*, 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁰ Wallington, Transcript HOAC 18B, 28 August 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

⁴¹ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁴² E.B. Stamp, statement of case by MI5 official against Gordon-Canning, 9 August 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

⁴³ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁴⁴ S.H. Noakes, letter by MI5 agent to HOAC on Gordon-Canning's foreign intelligence contact, 9 November 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

⁴⁵ Stamp, report on Gordon-Canning to HOAC, 19 September 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

leadership.⁴⁶ He was also in contact with several Nazi and Italian Fascist operatives in Britain.⁴⁷

Furthermore, Gordon-Canning received several letters at the BUF's London headquarters from known German operatives with whom he was in regular contact.⁴⁸ He also regularly met and entertained German officials in Britain, passing secret military information in exchange for support for the BUF.⁴⁹

In 1936, Gordon-Canning tried to return to Palestine alongside Mosley, with the view of forming a Blackshirt movement among the Arabs and British security forces stationed there. He was prevented from doing so because his request to visit the mandate was denied by the Home Office due to previous troublesome activities there, along with reports of the High Commissioner in Palestine who had recently received information about BUF propaganda making its way to British constables in Jerusalem.⁵⁰ He also used his contacts among Arab notables to create the impetus for an Arab Blackshirt movement.⁵¹ In the end, these subversive attempts were quashed by the security services who were not duped by Gordon-Canning's narrative of peace-making between Arabs and Jews.⁵²

In May 1938, after several years in the inner circle, Gordon-Canning left the BUF due to a personal dispute between Mosley and himself. Though he remained a fervent National Socialist, he developed an aversion to Mosley's leadership.⁵³ First, he accused Mosley of over-centralising the command apparatus of the BUF, a critique that was made by many at the time and has been extensively discussed by historians since.⁵⁴ Secondly, he disagreed with Mosley's decision to purge the fanatic National-Socialists from the BUF, instead favouring a union of all fascist forces in the country.⁵⁵ Gordon-Canning was one of the many lieutenants of Mosley who left the BUF around that time, alongside William Joyce, the head of propaganda, and John Beckett.⁵⁶ This was the result of an internal power struggle between the 'militarist' faction of the BUF, led by Neil Francis Hawkins, who wanted to preserve the all-encompassing power of Mosley, and the National Socialist faction, who sought to create a broader alliance with other movements, and include hard core anti-Semites in the party.⁵⁷

⁴⁶ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁴⁷ Stamp, statement of case on Gordon-Canning, 9 August 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

⁴⁸ 'B2C' [unnamed MI5 agent], report on Gordon-Canning's correspondence with foreign intelligence agents, 17 May 1938, TNA KV 2/877.

⁴⁹ S.H. Noakes, report by MI5 agent to HOAC on Gordon-Canning's foreign intelligence contacts, 9 November 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁵² Advisory Committee for 18B Releases, Report on Gordon-Canning dated 10 December 1940, TNA HO 283/29, C87/2.

⁵³ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁵⁴ W. F. Mandle, 'The Leadership of the British Union of Fascists,' *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 12 (1966), 360.

⁵⁵ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁵⁶ Robert Skidelsky, 'Reflections on Mosley and British Fascism', in *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Interwar Britain*, Kenneth Lunn and Richard Thurlow (eds), (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 87-88.

⁵⁷ Robert Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order: A Study of British Fascism* (London, Allen Lane, 1969), 273.

Gordon-Canning also left the BUF over a financial disagreement with Mosley. The former had an unofficial agreement that he would reimburse some of the expenses the latter had incurred while developing the BUF into a proper political movement.⁵⁸ The sums, however, rapidly increased. Mosley spent significant quantities of his own money on the movement and Gordon-Canning felt that he was being duped, forced to pay more than he originally agreed.⁵⁹ As threats of legal action followed, their relationship soured beyond repair.⁶⁰

Even though he left the BUF, Gordon-Canning remained active in defence of National Socialist ideals. He published several pamphlets and, at the outbreak of the war in September 1939, joined the Council for Christian Settlement in Europe, a fascist groupuscule devoted to pressuring the British government to strike a negotiated peace with Hitler.⁶¹ His joining of the Council for Christian Settlement in Europe appears to have been a tactical, and cynical, move to save himself from prosecution while working in the interest of Nazi Germany. During his several interviews with the Home Office Advisory Committee on 18B Detainees, Gordon-Canning went to great lengths, with little success, to convince the board that this peace campaign was meant to save Britain from impending doom.⁶² His efforts were severely curtailed by the revelation that he had expressed treacherous views on many occasions, that agents who had worked on his case were convinced he could not be persuaded to limit his efforts in favour of Nazi Germany,⁶³ and finally that, while in detention, he had formed the closest friendship with Rolf Lyncke, a known German operative.⁶⁴ As such, his peace campaign was labelled as treasonous by the British establishment, and, coupled with some highly contentious remarks at a private gathering concerning Canning's willingness to harbour German soldiers and agents that might find themselves in need of his services, put him squarely in the crosshairs of the security services.⁶⁵ He was interned under Defence Regulation 18B and spent the better part of the war in Brixton prison with Nazi sympathisers.

While in detention, his antisemitism further hardened. He perceived his internment as a plot against patriotic Englishmen who had dared to speak out against 'International Jewry'.⁶⁶ After his release in 1943, he was visited by an MI5 agent, and launched into a deranged diatribe against Jewish infiltration of the Home Office.⁶⁷ This conviction that Britain was infiltrated by 'International Jewry' was a constant feature of his life after the war.⁶⁸

⁵⁸ Secretary of HOAC, report on Gordon-Canning's detention, 14 November 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

⁵⁹ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Stamp, minutes on detention and hearings of Gordon-Canning, 19 December 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁶² Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁶³ Stamp, report on Gordon-Canning to HOAC, 19 September 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

⁶⁴ T.M. Shelford, report of visit by MI5 agent to Gordon-Canning while in house arrest in Hartpury, 31 August 1943, TNA KV 2/877.

⁶⁵ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

⁶⁶ Shelford, report on Gordon-Canning's radical views, 8 October 1943, TNA KV 2/877.

⁶⁷ Shelford, report visit to Gordon-Canning in Hartpury, 31 August 1943, TNA KV 2/877.

⁶⁸ HO Report on Gordon-Canning's post-war activities, 20 June 1946, TNA KV 2/878.

British fascism and the British officer class

The adherence of Gordon-Canning to British fascism reflected his status as the 'ideal type' recruit for the movement. The BUF sought to recruit such 'elite' candidates, with similar backgrounds to Gordon-Canning: privately educated, regular Army officers with a High Tory outlook on life,⁶⁹ and a distinguished service record.⁷⁰ Their background, and their own self-perception, made them fitting recruits for a movement that was anchored on an ethos of action, modernity and elitism.⁷¹

From privileged social backgrounds, they considered themselves part of an elite.⁷² They would provide a new ruling class for the new century, composed of 'modern' men, who were both physically and intellectually superior while also unbound to the social and moral norms of the previous era.⁷³ This elitist clique understood and sought to portray itself as the pioneers of a new political age, a 'higher echelon in the evolutionary development of society'.⁷⁴

Military officers were also desirable candidates because they were not shocked by the militaristic nature of the movement. Their patriotism and sense of duty would make them the natural leaders of a movement devoted to the mystique of the nation and the champions of a new crusade against the materialistic ideology that, they argued, had crippled the moral strength of the British people.⁷⁵ This cult of the warrior was one of the key tenets of the propaganda of the BUF, and served as a rallying cry for many disenfranchised officers who sought to re-appropriate the 'spirit of the trenches' to apply it to the political struggle for the rejuvenation of Britain.⁷⁶

As a group, military officers were also drawn to the BUF because its foreign and defence policy aligned with their own class concerns and comforted them in their preconceived notions of masculinity, a concept central to the ethos of the BUF.⁷⁷ Fears of imperial decline and cuts to the armed forces especially preoccupied them, particularly for the many who had served in India and the Dominions.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the Statute of Westminster enacted in 1931 and the Government of

⁶⁹ H.W. Luttman-Johnson, list of approved founding members of the January Club, January 1934, Imperial War Museum (IWM), 92/32/1, HW Luttman-Johnson (LJ) File 8.

⁷⁰ Kate Imy, 'Fascist Yogis: Martial Bodies and Imperial Impotence,' *Journal of British Studies*, 55 (2016), 322.

⁷¹ Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London, I.B. Tauris, 1998), 116-25.

⁷² One could add to this list several senior officers who had occupied key roles in the British Army during the Great War, along with an Arctic explorer and a notorious British spy: Luttman-Johnson, list members January Club, January 1934, IWM 92/32/1, LJ File 8.

⁷³ J.F.C. Fuller, *What the British Union Has to Offer to Britain* (London: British Union of Fascists, 1938), 4-5.

⁷⁴ David Stephen Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism, and British Society, 1931-1981* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 5.

⁷⁵ Robert Gordon-Canning, *The Inward Strength of a National Socialist* (London: British Union of Fascists, 1938), 2-3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁷ Tony Collins, 'Return to Manhood: The Cult of Masculinity and the British Union of Fascists,' *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 16 (1999), 145.

⁷⁸ Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (London: Random House, 2013), 53.

India Act of 1935 were simply unacceptable compromises.⁷⁹ Only a foreign policy based on imperial unity and supported by modern armed forces would do justice to the considerable sacrifices that had been made during the war.⁸⁰ These concerns served as a rallying cry for officers of the armed forces who felt that British foreign policy since the rise of Hitler had been at best misguided, and, at worst, treacherous.⁸¹ The fear of renewed warfare on the continent, magnified by its supposed futuristic and apocalyptic nature,⁸² was used to good effect by the fascists who could portray themselves as the sole champions of rationality and preparedness when faced with a resurgent Germany.⁸³

The predominance of military officers can also be explained by the similarity between the BUF's vision of white masculinity and the self-perception of the officer class at the time. As Kate Imy, Thomas Linehan and Liam Liburd have shown in their work, the BUF's new fascist man was a close copy of the idealised vision of imperial soldiering.⁸⁴ Military officers, the pillars of this romanticised version of imperial history, were thus far more likely to embrace this outdated rhetoric because it conformed to their own self-perception as imperial pioneers. As Liburd argues, the association between British revival through fascism and the creation of the empire in the previous century was extremely well developed in the BUF's propaganda.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the BUF was a self-defined masculine organisation with a platform for virile governance.⁸⁶ For officers educated in the public schools of the late Victorian and Edwardian era, as the majority in the BUF's leadership were,⁸⁷ this program was not only desirable, but reflected their own upbringing.⁸⁸ As such, it was easy to transfer seamlessly from the officers' mess to the BUF's barrack room.

The predominance of military men in BUF circles is evidence of a militarist and anti-democratic intellectual milieu and is well documented in the administrative papers of the organisation. In early 1934, in an effort to gain support from the high echelons of society, Mosley founded the January Club, a private club dedicated to

⁷⁹ Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!*, 277; Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867–1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 277.

⁸⁰ Gordon-Canning, 'Lucifer or Gabriel? Gordon-Canning Explains the Position in Europe,' *Action*, 19 March 1936, 3.

⁸¹ Martin Ceadal, 'Popular Fiction and the Next War, 1918–1939,' in Frank Gloversmith (ed.), *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 164.

⁸² Fuller and Britten-Austin, both fascists, were instrumental in creating and spreading those fears: *ibid.*, 166.

⁸³ Oswald Mosley, 'The War Lords of Labour,' *Action*, 9 April 1936, 1.

⁸⁴ Imy, 322; Liam Liburd, 'Beyond the Pale: Whiteness, Masculinity and Empire in the British Union of Fascists, 1932–1940,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*, 7 (2018), 280; Thomas Linehan, 'The British Union of Fascists as a Totalitarian Movement and Political Religion,' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 5 (2004), 402.

⁸⁵ Liburd, 284.

⁸⁶ Collins, 145.

⁸⁷ In his study of the BUF's leadership, Mandel has shown that 62 men out of 103 in the leadership had served. Furthermore, he has shown that the leadership was disproportionately public school-educated: Mandel, 362.

⁸⁸ Collins, 153.

the study of new forms of government and modern political governance.⁸⁹ This was, however, little more than a gateway to the BUF.⁹⁰ Many senior officers, along with several distinguished personalities, enthusiastically joined. Out of the 82 responses to offers of founding membership received by Captain H.W. Luttmann-Johnson, the Secretary of the club, a little over half came from military officers, either active or retired.⁹¹ Another significant proportion came from intellectuals, aristocrats, and Oxford dons. Sir John Squire, President of the January Club, himself an influential writer and editor of the *London Mercury*, was shocked by the overwhelming presence of officers in the Club, going so far as to suggest to Luttmann-Johnson to restrict their numbers, arguing that it would potentially scare off non-military members from joining.⁹² Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart, one of the most influential military thinkers of the time and an avid socialite, was also dismayed, writing in his diary: 'Too many of our leading officers are sympathetically inclined towards fascism, and therefore, un-British ideals.'⁹³

Furthermore, the security services in Britain were worried by the overwhelming proportion of the BUF's military members.⁹⁴ Reports of gun-smuggling on the coast of Kent, in which Gordon-Canning figured prominently, implied that the loyalty of these officers should not be taken for granted.⁹⁵ In the event of serious political trouble, it was assumed that they would side with Mosley and seek to form a government of national emergency.⁹⁶ The same fear re-emerged in 1939–1940, with the peace campaign led by several fascist groups. It was assumed the fascists would use the civil disorder they orchestrated with their peace campaign to seize power and negotiate a 'fascist' peace with the Axis.⁹⁷ In the end, these fears never materialised, because the crisis the BUF had hoped to instrumentalise never materialised.⁹⁸

Apocalyptic visions of war and fascism

What does this embrace of fascism tell us about the officer corps and their visions of future war? In essence, officers who either joined or were closely associated with the BUF, embraced apocalyptic visions of future war. Gordon-Canning was no exception. His career as an imperial adventurer, coupled with his upbringing and embrace of the fascist worldview, put him at the forefront of the development of

⁸⁹ Luttmann-Johnson, letter to Liddell Hart on the object of the January Club, 23 June 1934, LHCMA LH 5/18.

⁹⁰ Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 50.

⁹¹ Luttmann-Johnson, list members January Club, January 1934, IWM 92/32/1, LJ File 8.

⁹² Sir John Squire, letter to Captain Luttmann-Johnson on membership of January Club, 8 December 1933, IWM 92/32/1, LJ File 8.

⁹³ Liddell Hart, Liddell Hart's Diary: Notes on Fascism, 21 July 1936, LHCMA LH 11/1936/26.

⁹⁴ Report of unnamed MI5 agent on membership of the BUF, July 1938, TNA NA KV 2/877.

⁹⁵ Colonel Sir Vernon Kell, letter to Major H.E. Chapman, Chief Constable Kent Constabulary, about gun-running by Blackshirts, 29 November 1934, TNA KV 2/877.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Wallington, Transcript HOAC 18B, 28 August 1940, TNA KV 2/877.

⁹⁸ Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!*, 195.

apocalyptic visions of war within the BUF. The ethos of the movement and its ideological underpinnings, based on the idea of war as the ultimate arbitrator in international relations and the crucible through which nations could fortify and purify themselves, led him to develop three distinct trends of future apocalyptic warfare: racial, futurist, and imperial.

Before we delve into the specificities of these trends, it is crucial to have a shared understanding of the concept of apocalyptic visions of war. Apocalypse will be understood in its mystical sense, not as a cataclysmic phenomenon but rather as the mark of a new era, utterly divorced from the reality of the previous one. Though it implies disaster and suffering, the focus is on rebirth and radical transformation. In essence, it does not entail the end of the world, but instead the end of the world as we know it.

As for visions of war, it will be understood in the broadest sense, as in the theoretical image that military theorists and practitioners had of future war. These might be utopian or pragmatic, but they all served to inform serious thinking about the nature and character of war in the interwar period.⁹⁹ The visions served as helpful analytical tools to raise questions, highlight problems and identify dilemmas about the conduct of strategy for future war.¹⁰⁰

What were the basis of these new apocalyptic visions of war? They were the product of the interwar society amidst a revolutionised world that had been transformed by mass politics, virulent nationalism and technology.¹⁰¹ Faced with rapidly changing societies and the far-reaching consequences of the Great War, fascists pushed for a third way to modernity that was divorced from the universalistic legacy of the nineteenth century. Instead of the two all-encompassing ideologies of liberalism or socialism, they sought instead to create a new scientific ideology for a new scientific age. By co-opting and modernising all the popular elements of Marxism, liberalism, socialism, Darwinism and the wonders of modern technology, fascism appeared as the universal solution to all the ills of interwar society and promised a new way of life to tackle the cultural malaise of the time.¹⁰² Therefore, fascism was not only a political movement but an ‘attitude towards life based upon a national mystique’¹⁰³ that catered to both middle-class sensibilities and the youth to create mass consensus.

Alongside this radical transformation of society, fascists developed a revolutionary approach to international affairs which encompassed a vision of the international system as a Darwinian struggle for existence between competing racial groups.¹⁰⁴ It became obvious to them that the new international system embodied by the League of Nations was broken and had created an anarchic system in which

⁹⁹ Azar Gat, ‘Ideology, National Policy, Technology, and Strategic Doctrine Between the World Wars,’ *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 24 (2000), 1–2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰¹ Azar Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3–5.

¹⁰² George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolutionaries: Towards a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig Publisher, 1999), 23.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰⁴ Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 161.

states were competing for survival.¹⁰⁵ This meant that the victors of the Great War had ensured that war would break out again in two ways. Firstly, they had discredited the previous guarantor of survival, the dynastic right of kings, through the vindictive peace at Versailles. Secondly, they had created an organisation charged with the abolition of war through liberal internationalism, which was incapable of carrying out such a mandate in practise.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, seeing their nations under attack by the combined forces of liberalism and socialism, and with no guarantee of survival to fall back on, fascists embraced the idea of international relations as a struggle for survival.¹⁰⁷ In an anarchic system, the most direct way of ensuring national survival was by annihilating enemies before they could reciprocate, thus precipitating a Hobbesian war of all against all, until only the strongest nations survived.¹⁰⁸ As such, the capacity to wage war was not only an insurance policy against aggression but became the embodiment of the national will to survive.¹⁰⁹

Apocalyptic visions of war were derived from this Darwinist paradigm of international relations. When faced with such an international situation, British fascists envisioned three possible frameworks to understand future war: racial, futurist, and imperial. Gordon-Canning, in his capacity as editor of the BUF's newspaper *Action* and a self-professed specialist on international affairs, exhibited all three visions in his writings throughout the interwar period.

He was one of the few among the leadership, alongside Fuller, who took such an interest in military matters. Therefore, the evolution of his vision of future war, from imperial to futurist to racial, is a fascinating insight into the development of strategic thinking within the BUF.¹¹⁰ Mosley was no great strategic thinker and therefore relied heavily on both Fuller and Gordon-Canning for the development of a defence policy for his movement.¹¹¹ Though Fuller was the more established and influential military thinker, he was never close to Mosley due to his rather reclusive personality and dislike of social life,¹¹² unlike Gordon-Canning who (before his falling out with Mosley) could be counted on not only as a social equal but as a friend.¹¹³ Through this personal relationship and his official standing as the director of *Action*, Gordon-Canning was therefore in a good position to influence the development of the foreign and defence policies of the movement. As such, the progression of the movement's vision of future war followed his own political and intellectual development.

¹⁰⁵ J.F.C. Fuller, *The First of the League Wars: Its Lessons and Omens* (London Eyre Spottiswoode, 1936), v.

¹⁰⁶ Gordon-Canning, 'The Structure of Europe—Steel or Straw?' *Action*, 26 March 1936, 4.

¹⁰⁷ J.F.C. Fuller, *Towards Armageddon: The Defence Problem and its Solution* (London: Lovat Dickson Limited, 1937), 229.

¹⁰⁸ The Editorial Board, 'Notes on the Quarter,' *The British Union Quarterly*, 2.2 (1938), 9–15.

¹⁰⁹ Gordon-Canning, *The Inward Strength of a National Socialist*, 4–5.

¹¹⁰ Brian Holden Reid, 'Interview of Professor Holden Reid on Fuller and Mosley,' interview by Thomas Heyen-Dubé, 31 January 2019.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Birkett, Transcript HOAC 18B, 14 August 1941, TNA KV 2/877.

Imperial vision of war

Before his adherence to the BUF, Gordon-Canning was already concerned about the future of the Empire. He had gone to considerable extents to secure its position in the Islamic world and had sought to act as a new imperial pioneer, uniting the East with the British Empire.¹¹⁴

Until late 1936, this overarching concern for the fate of the Empire was translated into his early work for the BUF where war was closely linked to imperial grandeur. If the Empire was to survive, it needed to be optimised for the purpose of warfighting, as only strong imperial forces could prevent its breakup and piecemeal annihilation by the combined forces of Bolshevism and International Jewry.

Gordon-Canning's overarching vision was of a world divided, the British Empire and its allies fighting against 'Judeo-Bolshevik' forces attempting to wrestle control of the world away from the hegemony of Britain.¹¹⁵ Seen through this lens, anticolonial movements were a 'Judeo-Bolshevik' plot threatening the very fabric of the imperial community, a vision he shared with Fuller.¹¹⁶ The dominions were left to fend off aggression by opportunistic revisionist powers who sensed the weakness and lack of resolve of Whitehall.¹¹⁷ The key difference between Fuller and Gordon-Canning was, however, to be found in the overwhelming concern the latter had for the Middle-East. Unlike Fuller, who feared weakness across the Empire, Gordon-Canning was terrified at the prospect of the Empire being split in two by anti-colonial struggles in the Middle East, for him the keystone of Empire.¹¹⁸ Gordon-Canning was the brains behind the anti-Semitic and pan-Islamic platform of the BUF.¹¹⁹ His fascination for the Islamic world and his virulent anti-Semitism, much more pronounced than Mosley's or Fuller's, made him the prime candidate for the development of such imperial ideas in his regular column in the BUF press.¹²⁰

Only a resolute show of strength and a genuine commitment to imperial defence would deter these belligerent forces. Imperial unity should also be achieved as soon as possible, using force if necessary, to bring the dominions back into the fold and 'to cement the blood-links of the Empire and to bind the Imperial nations in an unassailable unity.'¹²¹ Independence movements in India should be crushed, and the Baldwin reforms revoked. Finally, the question of Palestine, central to Gordon-Canning's imperial vision of war, should be settled forthwith.¹²²

To achieve this colossal endeavour, total commitment was necessary. Rearmament on a massive scale should begin immediately. The entire effort should

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Gordon-Canning, 'Bolshevism: The Defender of Civilisation?', *Action*, 21 February 1936, 4.

¹¹⁶ Stephen Dorril, *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London, Penguin Books, 2007), 196.

¹¹⁷ Gordon-Canning, 'Germany and the Mandates,' *British Union Quarterly*, 1.4 (1937), 23-31.

¹¹⁸ Gordon-Canning, letter to Sir Archibald Wavell, 1st Earl Wavell on his detention and the future of Empire, 20 June 1943, TNA HO 45.25706, 840,219/30.

¹¹⁹ Graham Macklin, 'A Fascist Jihad: Captain Robert Gordon-Canning, British Fascist Antisemitism and Islam,' *Holocaust Studies*, 15 (2009), 85.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Gordon-Canning, 'Vimy Ridge: The Canadian Memorial,' *Action*, 23 July 1936, 4.

¹²² Gordon-Canning, *The Holy Land: Arab or Jew?* (London British Union, 1938), 7.

be centralised in the hands of a few technocrats in a newly created Ministry of Defence. Colossal industrial and agricultural projects should also be launched to ensure imperial autarky.¹²³ To sustain this massive rearmament drive, the lines of communications within the Empire should be secured by expanding the Navy and the Air Force.¹²⁴ Finally, to ensure a steady flow of production and scientific organisation of the Empire, a new political system needed to arise. The corporate state, the product of the scientific mind of the twentieth century, would replace the parliamentary system that had neglected the security of the Empire for too long.¹²⁵

Though this vision of a rejuvenated Empire would not have shocked the social imperialists of Joseph Chamberlain's days, the First World War had changed attitudes and it was, in the thirties, a radical break from the political mainstream.¹²⁶ The consensus among the majority of parliamentarians was for an international approach to global governance. It relied on the principle of collective security embodied in the League of Nations and a slow march to decolonisation.¹²⁷

This was a stark contrast to Gordon-Canning's imperial vision of war. Though less radical than his latter visions, it remained apocalyptic because it entailed a complete transformation of the international order and a return to a mythical golden age where Britain ruled unopposed over much of the world.

Futurist vision of war

Around the end of 1936, with the siege of Madrid raging on, Gordon-Canning's vision of war evolved and became dominated by the futurist trend because of his fascination for the destructive power of technology. The awe-inspiring display of violence converted many in the BUF to this vision of apocalyptic warfare as there was a sense of an approaching new technological age. They hoped for a scientific transformation of war and society that would kick-start the fascist century.¹²⁸

Gordon-Canning, however, had already played with the idea of futurist warfare since at least 1922, though it had remained bound to imperial visions of war. In *Pagan Shrine*, he had embraced futurist aesthetics and associated the rise of the new technological world with the destruction of the old one.¹²⁹

In March 1934, together with Liddell Hart, he met Alexander Korda, the famous British film producer, and Frank Wells, the son of H.G. Wells, to work on an adaptation of *Things to Come*, a fictional account of future war.¹³⁰ Gordon-Canning and Liddell Hart were hired as consultants to inform Korda and Wells as to the probable nature and character of future warfare. They were also to provide designs

¹²³ Gordon-Canning, 'The Rearmament Burlesque,' *Action*, 12 March 1936, 3.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Paul Stocker, 'The Imperial Spirit: British Fascism and Empire, 1919-1940,' *Religion Compass*, 9 (2015), 48.

¹²⁷ Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, 278.

¹²⁸ Holden Reid interview.

¹²⁹ Gordon-Canning, *Pagan Shrine*, 9.

¹³⁰ Liddell Hart, diary of Basil Liddell Hart, 1934, LHCMA LH 11/1934/1

for futuristic weapons that would appear in the science-fiction production.¹³¹ By relying on the authority of experts who shared or informed their apocalyptic visions of war, writers and cinematographers gave authority to their fictional accounts of war and reinforced the already solidly established fear of futurist warfare,¹³² which was wholeheartedly adopted by the British public and its politicians alike.¹³³

This fear, stoked by artists and experts alike, was magnified by war in Abyssinia which provided a glimpse of this new devastating form of war. Gas, tanks, and aeroplanes had swayed the tide in favour of the Italians against an outdated Abyssinian army. According to Gordon-Canning, it was only a matter of time before this futurist form of warfare appeared on the continent.¹³⁴

In late 1936, as the Nationalists in Spain were starting to unleash their offensive against Madrid, the culmination of this vision of futurist apocalyptic war seemed imminent.¹³⁵ It was hoped that air power alongside the mechanised Italian troops would crush Republican resistance and usher in a new era of fascism in the Iberian Peninsula. The offensive on Madrid was also a powerful symbol of fascist unity as Italians, Germans and Spaniards were all working side by side to eliminate the abomination of communism by using the superior weapons of science against the hordes of the proletariat controlled by Moscow.¹³⁶ This focus on the 'fascist Internationale' highlights the transition from imperial to futurist visions of war because the focus was not solely on the Empire, but on global fascism and its struggle for modernity; the 'scientific' government, using futurist weapons, was to eradicate the scourge of communism. The avowed end goal of such an Internationale was a sort of 'fascist nirvana'.¹³⁷ This desired end state was defined by the abolition of class and economic struggle and the advent of a new form of governance, anchored on a new spirituality, the cult of the nation, made possible by the advances of science.¹³⁸

Racial vision of war

In early 1938, Gordon-Canning, disenchanted with Mosley and at odds with much of the remaining leadership over his preference for National Socialism over fascism, gradually drifted away from the BUF. Though the internal power struggle and the personal issues between Mosley and Gordon-Canning were the primary causes of this separation, Gordon-Canning's embrace of an apocalyptic vision of racial war played a role.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Christopher Joel Simer, 'Apocalyptic Visions: Fear of Aerial Attack in Britain 1920-1938,' (PhD diss. University of Minnesota, 1999), 12.

¹³³ David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity and Machines* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 69-70.

¹³⁴ Gordon-Canning, 'Our Rearmament Racket: Preparing for the Last War Instead of for the Next,' *Action*, 13 August 1936, 5.

¹³⁵ Holden Reid interview.

¹³⁶ Gordon-Canning, 'The Soviet Spider: The Truth about Russian Intrigue,' *Action*, 31 October 1936, 4.

¹³⁷ Holden Reid interview.

¹³⁸ Gordon-Canning, *The Spirit of Fascism*, 2 and 3.

Mosley, though he was an anti-Semite, did not let it overwhelm his entire political thought, unlike Gordon-Canning who became solely concerned with the 'Jewish Question'. From this obsession, he derived a new vision of war: a mystical rebirth of the Aryan race through warfare against Judeo-Bolshevik ancestral enemies for worldly and spiritual supremacy.

In the BUF, this vision was marginal at best, considered too extreme and alienating to the general electorate. Gordon-Canning, Arthur Kenneth Chesterton, William Joyce and John Beckett adhered to it but they were a minority within the leadership. The rest of the party, remained aloof from this mystical racial obsession and their compulsive, biological hatred of Jews.¹³⁹ Nonetheless, Gordon-Canning found a receptive audience for this vision of war among the most radical anti-Semites in Britain, collaborating with a variety of fascist groupuscules until his internment.

This racial vision of future war was based on the idea of war as the ultimate struggle for survival between competing racial blocks. It posited a world divided: on the one hand, the 'Aryan' world made up of European peoples, and on the other, the racialised 'hordes' who were controlled by international communism and international Jewry. One could not live while the other survived. Thus, the conflict was seen as not only pre-ordained but apocalyptic. Annihilation of one of the blocks would start a new era either of order and spirituality if the 'Aryans' prevailed, or chaos and materialism should the camp of Bolshevism and Jewry survive.¹⁴⁰ This point was constantly reinforced by Gordon-Canning in his writing in the latter stages of his career at the BUF and in independent publications thereafter. He constantly pushed the narrative of a religious war,¹⁴¹ with the decisive battle for the future of European civilisation being waged between two absolutes, light and darkness, good and evil.¹⁴²

This war was inevitable. It was an integral part of the cosmic order. It was thus not to be feared or deplored but fully embraced as a liberator of mankind because only in warfare could men connect with their inner spirituality and transcend their mere physicality by becoming exalted immortal men.¹⁴³ As such, death in battle should be welcomed, embraced as a necessary martyrdom for the creation of a new world.¹⁴⁴

This spiritual awakening in war was not only a means to achieve a complete transformation of the world but an end in itself. It was a necessary part of Gordon-Canning's apocalyptic vision of war and served as a transcendent philosophy of life. It was, therefore, both an integral part of the process of bringing about the

¹³⁹ Janet Dack, 'Conduct Unbecoming? Attitudes towards Jews in the British Fascist and Mainstream Tory Press, 1925-1939,' *Holocaust Studies*, 15 (2015), 111.

¹⁴⁰ Gordon-Canning, *The Inward Strength of a National Socialist*, 3.

¹⁴¹ Gordon-Canning, 'Lucifer or Gabriel?', 19 March 1936, 3.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Gordon-Canning believed that 'Aryan' warriors who sacrificed themselves in battle would be honoured in perpetuity by their brethren and thus live forever in the national popular consciousness: Gordon-Canning, *The Inward Strength of a National Socialist*, 4.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

apocalypse and a defining feature of the permanent revolution in spirituality in this new world.

Though quite close to Fuller's racial vision of war, a few differences do appear. Gordon-Canning, unlike Fuller, had no love for the caste system in India and did not consider them to be 'Aryans' and was a staunch defender of fascism as a racial creed based on 'blood and soil'.¹⁴⁵ He had the strongest disgust for all Indians, unlike Fuller and Yeats-Brown who quite admired the Brahmins and other exalted castes and desired the new 'fascist man' to embrace the ethos of ancient Hindu warrior wisdom.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Gordon-Canning's racial vision of war entailed a permanent spiritual revolution that would continue beyond the fascist triumph.¹⁴⁷ As such, for Gordon-Canning, the need for spiritual resurrection through warfare would never disappear. This is in direct contradiction with Fuller's view on the matter. Fuller believed, like Mosley, that fascism was the endgame. Once the fascist platform had eradicated poverty, racial decay, and spiritual rot, the problem of war would be solved. There would be no war if man felt at ease in his social environment. Solving the underlying causes of war would, by extension, solve the problem of war.¹⁴⁸ Fuller remained, throughout the interwar period, convinced that war could be ended. Once all nations were 'fit in body and in soul', and that 'Money Power' had been destroyed in the apocalyptic conflagration he envisioned, war would become obsolete.¹⁴⁹

Gordon-Canning: an appraisal

Among the fascist intellectuals of the interwar period, Gordon-Canning always played second fiddle to greater names than himself. He was not as charismatic and influential as Mosley, was not as astute a strategic thinker as Fuller and was a minor poet and literary figure compared to Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis.

He was, however, a key figure in the BUF, and though largely unknown today, an adventurer, theorist and propagandist of repute in his days. His contribution to the peculiar understanding of war by British fascists had an influence on the movement's foreign and defence policies. As one of the chief propagandists of the movement, a lieutenant of Mosley, and the editor of *Action*, his work contributed to the public perception of the BUF and the dissemination of their visions of war. His war record and highly-publicised adventures in the early interwar period, alongside his considerable knowledge of foreign and imperial affairs, gave him a certain gravitas that others in the leadership lacked. This enabled him, coupled with his high social standing, to speak with authority on a variety of topics. He was thus instrumental in the development of apocalyptic visions of future war that defined the defence

¹⁴⁵ Gordon-Canning, *The Spirit of Fascism*, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Imy, 338.

¹⁴⁷ Gordon-Canning, *The Spirit of Fascism*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ J.F.C. Fuller, letter to Liddell Hart on Nature and Principles of War, 13 January 1922, LHCMA LH 1/302/10.

¹⁴⁹ Fuller, *What the British Union Has to Offer to Britain*, 11-15.

policies of the BUF and permeated much of the perception of war by officers who were inclined towards fascism.

Much like the movement he devoted himself to, his eccentric and radical ideas were to remain rather obscure, never quite breaking into the mainstream of strategic discourse, a fate he shared with other self-proclaimed eccentrics like Fuller. His apocalyptic prescriptions and dire warning about the superiority of a totalitarian state in total war all crumbled when faced with the gruelling business mass warfare in the Second World War. In the end, his life and work might best be summarised by the assessment General Archibald Wavell made of him: ‘a rather eccentric but passionate man, invariably devoting himself to lost and unpopular causes.’¹⁵⁰

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¹⁵⁰ Archibald Wavell, letter to Rt. Hon. Herbert Morrison (Home Secretary), 29 June 1943, TNA HO 45/25706 840,219/30.