

Syllabus for *“Democracy in Peril: England Between the World Wars”* Mick Chantler,
instructor

The interwar years (1918-1939) were a deeply disturbing time for the British upper crust. Radical change was in the air—everything from the rise of the common man in politics to the imminent decline of The Empire seemed to threaten their stranglehold on English society. World Communism was on the march, and no one could be certain that a Red Revolution would not occur even on Albion’s shores. If that were to occur, the booted and spurred of the countryside manors would soon be called “Comrade” instead of “Milord.” (That is, if they weren’t strung up on the nearest lamppost!) Life wasn’t any easier for the working class as well. Labor strife and high unemployment rates stalked the land. The decade of the 30s was particularly trying, as the Depression made hunger marches and the sight of homeless encampments a routine experience for a people that had long prided itself for its relentless optimism and sense of progress. Many intellectuals, writers, and artists feared the imminent collapse of civilization. All in all, it was a “morbid era,” as historian Richard Overy put it. In this course we will trace the origins of this decades-long malaise, and see how British citizens coped with their collective unease.

Week One: English Politics and Economics Between the Wars

The First World War triggered a sea change in British politics. Nearly universal suffrage was established in 1918, giving ordinary men and women a voice in government for the first time in English history. The traditional two party system fractured, and a powerful new force emerged when the Labour (yes, that is how the Brits spell the word) Party won the backing of millions of workingmen. Shockingly, this socialist party came to power as a result of the elections of 1923, and while Labour couldn’t hold on for long, their triumph forever altered the electoral landscape. The period also witnessed seemingly perpetual economic upheaval. The agricultural sector and older industrial cities were hit hardest by the downturn of the 1920s, and things got much worse during the Depression years. While the British economy was not as badly damaged as the German or French economies, the 30s was a time of desperation for many in the U.K. Frightening changes in foreign affairs also bedeviled English sensibilities during this time, with the Irish finally winning their independence, and Gandhi’s Indian independence movement making headway against the Raj. All in all, it was a disturbing time for the British people. In this talk we will attempt to ascertain the possible implications of these radical changes.

Week Two: “The Morbid Age”—British Intellectual Life During the Interwar Years

The Twenties and Thirties was a highly creative period in British intellectual life, but it was also an anxious time for serious thinkers. Striking breakthroughs in science, psychology, and

political theory offered breathtaking vistas for many, but instilled a deeply upsetting sense of uncertainty for others. Modernity held out the hope of progress, but this hope was often dimmed by a sense of dread and decline. In this talk we will discuss the key intellectual trends of the times, from eugenics, psychoanalysis, and utopian thought to apocalyptic visions of “the end times.”

Week Three: Flirting With Fascism: The English Aristocracy Between the Wars

We hear much talk these days about the rising threat of fascism in America. Many pundits are convinced that the menace is very real, while others feel “it can’t happen here.” Those in the latter camp feel that we have sufficient institutional guard rails to prevent a dictator from seizing power; moreover, they assert, fascism can only take root in a society with a deep substratum of authoritarianism and militarism. Surely those conditions are absent in America, with our long track record of liberal democracy. But the history of England during the 1930s shows us that fascism can indeed make dangerous inroads in a free society. Many members of the British upper classes openly admired the Nazi regime, and wanted to install some version of it in England. These pro-German aristocrats felt that Hitler was preferable to Bolshevism, and thus openly embraced a totalitarian ideology, seemingly so alien to traditional English political thought. England’s fox-hunting elites also worried about the decline of aristocratic privilege in the modern world, and hoped that a dictatorial regime might restore their “rightful” place at the apex of society. This lecture/discussion will focus on the emergence of this small but potentially lethal movement in the U.K. We will see that Britain came perilously close to having a swastika sewn onto the Union Jack.

Week Four: The Mitford Family

This aristocratic family provides us with a textbook example of how divided—and fanatical—many members of the English ruling class had become by the mid-1930s. Lord Redesdale, paterfamilias of this extraordinary clan, had six daughters, two of whom were ardent admirers of Adolph Hitler, and another who was a devoted communist. One daughter, Diana, married the fascist leader Oswald Mosley, while Unity Valkyrie Mitford (I’m not kidding here) moved to Germany so she could be near her hero and worship him up close. Redesdale himself was a right-wing reactionary who frequented the pro-German circles within the aristocracy. Jessica, Redesdale’s left wing offspring, eventually moved to Oakland, California, and became a successful writer. Another daughter, Nancy, was also a noted author. While this lecture will focus on Unity—who may have even been Hitler’s lover before the war—we will try to show how the entire family reflected the madness of the times.

Week Five: Treachery in Windsor Castle

The aristocracy was not the only launching pad for upper class English fascism: the royal palace itself was home to a powerful pro-Nazi clique, headed by the King himself, Edward VIII. Edward prided himself on his German ancestry, spoke German fluently, and openly lamented the rising tensions between England and the Third Reich. It was his fondest dream that he could preserve the peace between the two “Teutonic races,” enabling Hitler to devote all his resources to crushing Russian communism. Understandably, such views were highly controversial in England, and when he became determined to marry the pro-Nazi American divorcee Wallis Simpson, the Crown forced him to give up his throne. Bitter at his forced abdication, Edward and Simpson withdrew to the continent where they continued their dalliance with the Nazis. He hoped that someday he would reclaim his throne, and make his commoner wife the Queen. Hitler stoked such fantasies, and planned to make Edward the English version of Petain or Quisling. If Germany forced the English to surrender, the Reich would need a pliant puppet king to carry out the Nazification of the realm. Hitler was convinced that Edward was the man for the job. In this final talk, we will explore the psyche of this disloyal, traitorous monarch.

Week Six: The Politics of Appeasement

The British eyed the troubling developments in Europe with growing disease during the 1930s. The rise of the dictators on the continent threatened to disrupt the balance of power and plunge the world into a second disastrous orgy of bloodletting. For most English men and women, the prospect of going back into the trenches was appalling, and completely unacceptable. At least until 1938, the vast majority of British citizens desperately clung to the hope that Hitler and Mussolini could be “bought off.” The policy of “appeasement” had not yet become a dirty word, and leaders in Parliament, as well as the man in the street, hoped that peace was still possible if their government would give Germany a free hand in Central and Eastern Europe. In this final lecture, we will try to get to the bottom of the strategy of appeasement. Why did English statesmen like Neville Chamberlain believe that this seemingly naïve policy could contain Hitler’s ambitions? What were the alternatives open to foreign policy planners in Parliament? What cultural forces made this obviously hopeless (at least in retrospect) approach to foreign affairs so enticing? And ultimately, what brought this ruinous policy crashing down in 1939 after having been embraced by the majority of English voters?

Suggested Readings:

Week One- England Between the Wars: “Between the Wars 1919-1939” by Phillip Ziegler

Week Two- The Morbid Age: “The Morbid Age” by Richard Overy

Week Three- Flirting With Fascism: “Hurrah for the Blackshirts” by Martin Pugh; “Hitler’s Aristocrats” by Susan Ronald; “Hitler’s Girl” by Lauren Young

Week Four- The Mitford Family: “The Sisters” by Mary Lovell; “The Six: Lives of the Mitford Sisters” by Laura Thompson

Week Five- Treachery in Windsor Castle: “Traitor King” by Andrew Lownie; “The Crown in Crisis” by Alexander Larman

Week Six- The Politics of Appeasement: “Appeasement: Chamberlain, Hitler, Churchill, and the road to War” by Tim Bouverie; “Troublesome Young Men” by Lynne Olson

