

The Queen's Nazi salute: Historical revisionism in the service of state censorship

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Footage of the young Queen giving a Nazi salute in the gardens of Balmoral caused a storm of indignation throughout much of Britain's media.

The clip, recorded sometime in 1933, shows the queen mother making an enthusiastic Nazi salute for the cameraman—thought to be the future king, George VI. The young Elizabeth mimics her mother, who then—along with her brother-in-law, Edward, then Prince of Wales—repeats the gesture.

Much commentary centres on the innocence of the six-year-old heir to the throne, too young to appreciate the significance of her action, much less be held accountable. But the aim is to prevent any examination of the motives of the adults the young queen is copying—two future kings, no less—and the sympathies of the ruling elite more broadly.

According to this narrative, there was barely a family in Britain that wasn't goose-stepping around their lawns in the early 1930s. If they weren't parodying Charlie Chaplin in the manner of *The Great Dictator* (it wasn't released until 1940, but no matter), then they were guilty only of ignorance.

Writing in the *Telegraph*, Conservative London mayor Boris Johnson thundered that it “makes my blood boil to think that anyone should use this image in any way to impugn the extraordinary record of service of Her Majesty to this country.”

She was “a tiny child, and she is making that parodic salute long before her family could possibly have grasped what Hitler and Hitlerism was really all about.”

In the *Guardian*, columnist Michael White wrote that the “Queen's Nazi salute [was] a sign of ignorance shared by many in scary times.” The royal family's “wobbly views” were, he claimed, shared by the “great British public.”

Elsewhere, military historian James Holland opined,

“I don't think there was a child in Britain in the 1930s or 40s who has not performed a mock Nazi salute as a bit of a lark. It just shows the Royal Family are as human as the next man.”

The *Sun*, which released the footage, concurred. The clip must be seen “in the context of 1933.”

“Families of all kinds larked around apeing the stiff-armed antics of the faintly comic character with the Charlie Chaplin moustache who won power in Germany,” it continued. “No one knew then what Adolf Hitler was capable of.”

The claim that no one could have foreseen the evils of Hitlerite fascism is a bald-faced lie.

While in 1933 the Final Solution in all its monstrous consequences was some years ahead, Hitler had broadcast his intention to “exterminate” the communists and Jews, whom he blamed for the crisis of German capitalism, in numerous pamphlets and speeches over more than a decade.

The year the clip was made, Hitler had begun the practical implementation of this strategy. Made chancellor of Germany in January, within a month the Nazis had engineered the burning of the Reichstag. The emergency powers that followed were used to consolidate the fascist dictatorship as socialists, communists and trade unionists were imprisoned—Dachau opened in March 1933—and Jews were barred from public service and stripped of citizenship.

Hitler articulated the visceral fear and hatred of the German and European bourgeoisie in response to the October 1917 Russian Revolution. The first successful workers' revolution in the world had not only removed one-sixth of the earth's surface from capitalist exploitation, but had provided a beacon for millions of workers and youth internationally.

He was by no means alone.

It was the threat of communist revolution that, in 1922, had seen Italy's King Victor Emmanuel III invite Benito Mussolini, leader of the National Fascist Party, into power. Under the banner of the "war on socialism", Mussolini's *fascisti* violently suppressed mass working class unrest, with the backing of powerful industrialists and landlords.

In the interest of "context", moreover, one must also look closer to home.

In 1926, Britain had been shaken by a general strike that threatened to develop into a revolutionary crisis. Due to the betrayal carried out by the Trades Union Congress and the disastrous policies of the Communist Party and the Stalinised Comintern, the ruling class held onto power. But the threat was not over. The Wall Street crash of 1929 gave way to the Great Depression and a minority Labour government. Its readiness to implement austerity policies split the Labour Party and led in 1931 to the formation of a deeply unstable National Government.

It was in this situation that, in 1932, Oswald Mosley founded the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Drawing on Mussolini and Hitler, Mosley's blackshirts looked for support from within ruling circles and the upper middle class. Among those who answered this call was the queen's uncle, Edward VIII, who is known to have met with Mosley.

When Edward was forced to abdicate in December 1936, the BUF organised protests and launched a petition to retain him on the throne. Mosley entertained hopes that it would be Edward that would hand him the keys to office and open the way for National Socialism in Britain. After all, Edward had said of Hitler's accession to power, "It is the only thing to do. We will have to come to it, as we are in great danger from communists too."

Boris Johnson inadvertently indicates just what is irking the bourgeoisie when he argues in his *Telegraph* article that to "appreciate the triviality of this play-acting [the Queen's Nazi salute], you must remember that there were adults, grown-up men who continued to make colossal errors of judgment about Hitler right up until the outbreak of the Second World War."

There was, indeed, considerable sympathy for Nazi Germany within Britain's ruling elite, which hoped to secure a quid pro quo with Hitler—allowing him a free

hand in the east so long as he didn't interfere with the British Empire.

The attitude of the working class, especially the most militant and socialist-minded layers, towards Nazism was entirely different. Far from regarding it as a joke, many recognised it as an existential threat, which is why Mosley's efforts to replicate Hitler's Nuremburg rallies and provocative marching displays were met with opposition, most famously in the Battle of Cable Street in 1936.

What makes the royal footage so especially explosive is that there is now ample proof that Edward's pro-Nazi sympathies did not remain purely at the level of admiration. The specific charge is that he intended to head a Vichy-style regime and agitated amongst his Nazi connections in favour of the bombing of British cities so as to cause the collapse of the government and have himself installed as king.

Much of this has come to light through the uncovering of archives in Russia and Spain. In Britain, extraordinary efforts have been made to suppress any such evidence. Access to political records in the royal archives is reportedly barred after 1918, while material from the 1930s is completely out of bounds. Copious amounts of material from the war years are said to have been destroyed.

Calls for the opening of the royal archives are now being vociferously opposed, with some insisting that these are the queen's personal records and that the royals' "right to privacy" is sacrosanct.

As the constitutional head of state, such claims have no democratic legitimacy. They are tantamount to declaring that Britain is little more than the monarch's private fiefdom. Hence the resort to historical revisionism to conceal the true extent of the British elite's support for fascism and to justify state censorship.



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