Desperate measures or creativity? BUF propaganda techniques

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It is now clear that the fascist propaganda was more than just a synonym for the manipulation, indoctrination, deceit, distortion or lies and that there was more at work in fascist mindset than only the crude will to power and brainwashing. One of the main motives of fascist propagandists was also "propagation of faith" and significant proportion of the BUF's members were convinced that the existential threats to the nation and civilisation are hard facts.[1] For them, adopting fascism as the form of government was an absolute necessity for the survival of the British nation. This faith and devotion to the cause expressed itself in the enthusiasm for the cause, readiness for self-sacrifice and very active propagating of the ideas.

Because of the movement's constant financial problems, BUF would probably not have been able to exist without such activism and devotion of its members. This applies to propaganda as well. Troubled by the lack of finance and resources, BUF members came with a variety of propaganda techniques, which demonstrate their commitment to and enthusiasm for fascism. Some ideas were very creative, some we could consider desperate. This article will focus on the BUF's propaganda machinery and will try to describe some of the not very common propaganda techniques that BUF used.

Some aspects of BUF propaganda techniques have been described before. Julie Gottlieb identified several propaganda techniques developed and used by the BUF in her article *The Marketing of Megalomania*.[2] Gottlieb stressed the importance of the movement's visual culture and its development of a distinctive material culture and innovative political technologies—despite ultimate failure. She focused especially on presenting Mosley as a "celebrity", with his followers as "fans", and his meetings rivalling cinema and theatre. Uniforms and their role in the BUF's propaganda were described by Philip Coupland, who highlighted their importance for conveying the myths of classlessness and dynamism and their central role in the creation of the

1 DRÁBIK, J., *Spreading the faith: the propaganda of the British Union of Fascists*, in: Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 2016, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2016.1219846.

2 GOTTLIEB, J., *The Marketing of Megalomania: Celebrity, Consumption and the Development of Political Technology in the British Union of Fascists*, in: Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2006, pp. 35–55.

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Blackshirt political identity. As he argues, "for many men and women in the fascist movement, the shirt transcended its material form and utilitarian functions to become an honoured and richly symbolic garment".[3]

Moreover, Michael Spurr, while describing several propaganda techniques, clarified that the BUF created a form of subculture and a social movement, with the "Blackshirt" persisting far beyond the dissolution of the BUF in 1940.[4] In his recent article, Graham Macklin highlighted the importance of music in the BUF's palingenetic project for national rebirth.[5] He came to the conclusion that music played an important and integral part in the fascist experience and was more than mere entertainment. The BUF used music's emotional appeal in its propaganda to mobilize the masses and appeal to both spectators and members of the movement alike.

This article builds on the previous scholarship and will attempt to take the next step along this path by focusing on so far ignored or not so well described propaganda techniques of the BUF.

One of the most effective of the BUF's 'weapons' was platform speaking. The Blackshirts had in their ranks several excellent orators, led by Oswald Mosley himself. Mosley is widely considered to have been one of the best speakers of his age. His wife Diana described him as "the finest orator of his generation."[6] MI5 observed that "Mosley's reputation as a speaker stands high."[7] The Westminster Gazette wrote that Mosley was "the most polished literary speaker in the Commons, words flow from him in graceful epigrammatic phrases that have a sting in them for the government and the Conservatives. To listen to him is an education in the English language, also in the art of delicate but deadly repartee. He has human sympathies, courage and brains."[8] Even A. J. P. Taylor admired his abilities as an orator,[9] and his oratory abilities, style and influences had already been noted.[10]

There were other excellent orators apart from Mosley, however. One of them was William Joyce, who was also responsible for training new speakers.[11] The BUF also organized "Speakers' Schools" throughout the country.[12] Also worth mentioning are

3 COUPLAND, P. M., *The Blackshirt in Britain: The Meaning and Functions of Political Uniform*, in: GOTTLIEB, J. — LINEHAN, T. (eds.), The Culture of Fascism. Visions of the Far Right in Britain. London: I. B. Tauris 2004, p. 115.

4 SPURR, M. *'Living the Blackshirt Life': Culture, Community and the British Union of Fascists, 1932–1940*, in: Contemporary European History, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2003, p. 322.

5 MACKLIN, G., *'Onward Blackshirts!' Music and the British Union of Fascists*, in: Patterns of Prejudice, Vol. 47, No 4–5, 2013, pp. 430–457.

6 MOSLEY, D., *A Life of Contrasts: The Autobiography of Diana Mosley*, London: H. Hamilton 1984, p. 96.

7 *Report on the Fascist Movement, 18th June 1934*, The National Archives (TNA), Home Office (HO), 144/20141.

8 Quoted from MOSLEY, D., op. cit., p. 96.

9 *The Observer*, 20th October 1968, p. 13.

10 See particularly GOTTLIEB, J., op. cit., p. 37.

11 *Report on Joyce's political activities*, TNA HO 144/21063.

12 See for example *Police report from 22nd September 1936*, TNA HO 144/21060; *Police report from 17th June 1937*, TNA HO 144/21063; or *Report No. 692, 242: 'B.U.F. Speakers' Schools'*, TNA HO

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the fierce anti-Semites Jock Houston and E. G. "Mick" Clarke, who became especially "famous" in the East End of London. MI5 reported on Houston that it was "to a great extent owing to his influence in these initial stages that the movement secured a foothold in those districts. He combined the qualities of a typical East-Ender with a flair for 'soap-box oratory' and abusive language towards the Jews."[13]

As Michael Spurr noted, the mass meetings of the BUF also exhibited pseudo-religious characteristics.[14] Likewise, Thomas Linehan described "the carefully choreographed pageantry of the BUF mass rally," which "developed a recognisable ritual structure."[15] There is some audio-visual material preserved in archives, so the reconstruction of the look of BUF meetings is partially possible. There are even some materials available on YouTube and also Reuters have some clips too. There are also some photographs available both in the fascist press and archives (Special collections at the University of Sheffield hold some material). We also have numerous descriptions of the movement's gatherings from the press of the day, police reports and the recollections of the participants, all of which allow us to take a closer look at Blackshirt meetings.

In a police report from an Earls Court rally, we find this description of the meeting: "A ceremonial commencement was given with the entry of a body of stewards who lined the central aisle. They were headed by a drum and pipe band. The 'old flag' of the British Union, followed by a group of flags and standards of the London districts of the B.U.F. (some six groups of flags and standards, about forty in each, and one of the groups consisting of Union Jacks), was carried down the aisle to the platform. Each group of flags was greeted with enthusiastic cheers. A fanfare of trumpets then heralded the entry of Sir Oswald MOSLEY, who was escorted down the aisle and to the platform, a raised dais, above which appeared high up "Britain First", below that a large Union Jack and below that again the circle and flash of the British Union. Around the balconies of the hall were displayed slogans in large letters such as "Britons Fight for Britons Only" and "Mind Britain's Business". At 7–55 pp., Sir Oswald MOSLEY commenced his speech."[16]

The Guardian provides us with another description of a BUF meeting: "Sir Oswald, in keeping with a nowadays out-of-date theatrical tradition, kept his audience waiting while the band played patriotic marches and other tunes devised for the British Fascists. Exactly thirty-five minutes after the meeting was due to begin Sir Oswald made his appearance. The lights of the hall flickered, the band dropped into a Low German march of the seventies or thereabouts, the arc-lamps swung round from

144/21060. Similarly, NSDAP placed great emphasis on training Nazi recruits in public speaking in the 'Years of struggle.' MÜHLBERGER, D., *Hitler's Voice. The Völkischer Beobachter 1920–1933. Vol I.: Organization & Development of the Nazi Party*, Bern: Peter Lang AG, European Academic Publishers 2004, p. 65.

13 *Special Branch report, 2nd November 1936: Policy of the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists*, TNA HO 144/21062.

14 SPURR, M., op. cit., p. 312.

15 LINEHAN, T., *The British Union of Fascists as a Totalitarian Movement and political religion*, in: Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2004, p. 410.

16 *16th July 1939 police report — Earls Court meeting*, TNA HO 144/21281.

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the platform down the Blackshirted aisle, and there in the foggy distance Sir Oswald appeared—announced by a fanfare and preceded by six men carrying Union Jacks and the British Blackshirt flag… with the arc-lamps swung round on him, Sir Oswald began his speech."[17]

Along with the idolisation of the leader, the most obvious evidence of the "political religion" of the BUF was the religious and theatrical nature of BUF meetings. During its meetings, the BUF used British and fascist banners and flags, patriotic slogans, lights, uniforms and music. J. E. Graham, the BUF's director of music,[18] even instructed Blackshirts to learn the lyrics of BUF songs[19] so that they could sing them at the beginning of the meetings, thus giving the impression of enthusiasm and the unity of the movement and increasing the church-like nature of fascist gatherings. Fascist aesthetics, crowned by the Leader's grand entrance, gave the BUF's meetings the appearance of a liturgical mass.

Apart from platform speaking, one of the most common forms of BUF propaganda was printed and published material. The two major BUF newspapers were *The Blackshirt* and *Action*. *The Blackshirt* was a weekly (later a monthly) newspaper published between February 1933 and May 1939. From 1 June 1934 until 7 June 1935, it incorporated the short-lived *The Fascist Week*[20] and was published with the subtitle "The official organ of the British Union of Fascists." From early 1934 until the incorporation of *The Fascist Week, The Blackshirt* also served as a sort of "internal magazine" of the movement, aimed at members of the BUF, informing them about news from the different branches, answering their letters, and so on. Later, with the appearance of *Action*, *The Blackshirt* changed its focus from a paper aimed at a general audience and became "more and more a paper aiming at an appeal to the working classes while Action caters for somewhat more educated readers."[21] Circulation of *The Blackshirt* varied from approximately 12 000 to 24 000 copies per week (and later per month) during the BUF's eight years of existence.

Action, published from 21 February 1936, on the other hand, adopted a popular style of journalism and was aimed at a more educated audience, and at recruiting new members and maintaining links with BUF sympathisers. Apart from the purely propagandistic articles, it contained film, theatre and book reviews. *Action* also provided its readers with "cultural guidance" on matters of "aesthetic taste", while demonizing decadent alien culture and highlighting "true" British art. Circulation varied between 14,000 and 43,500 copies per week. The last issue of *Action* appeared a few days after Mosley's internment on 6 June 1940.

Apart from these two journals, the BUF published other less significant and more short-lived periodicals, such as *The East London Pioneer*, *The Woman Fascist*, and *The*

17 Oswald Mosley circus, *The Guardian*, 8th June 1934, available in: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/1934/jun/08/thefarright.uk [Accessed 10 January 2014].

18 *Special Branch Report 11th March 1935*, TNA HO 144/20144.

19 MACKLIN, G., op. cit., p. 436.

20 Published between 10 November 1933 and 25 May 1934.

21 *The Fascist Movement in the United Kingdom, Excluding Northern Ireland, Report No. VIII, Developments from February 1936 to July 1936*, TNA HO 144/21060.

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Age of Plenty. The BUF also published a quarterly journal with a more "scientific" look, the *Fascist Quarterly* (1935–1936), later renamed the *British Union Quarterly* (1937–1940).

Naturally, the BUF press, with its sharp critique of the government and the "old gang" politicians, soon exceeded the "tolerable limit" and suffered a series of libel actions; the editors clearly had to find ways of evading the libel laws. John Beckett remembers how Mosley quoted Joseph Goebbels, who "fought several hundred libel actions and was bankrupted several times before his Party achieved power," and expressed his belief that there should be a responsible officer in charge of BUF publications, "prepared to make similar sacrifice, and that publishing and printing should be undertaken by companies who, since they had no assets, would not mind being wound up. On receipt of a writ for libel, the editor himself would go into court and make a propaganda speech justifying the libel without fear of increasing the damages by so doing. We should incur no costs, and the paper would appear with another printing and publishing company the following week."[22] Indeed, the BUF followed the Nazi example and there were numerous publishing companies under which label the BUF periodicals were published (such as 'The B.U.F. Trust Limited', 'B.U.F. Publications', 'Fascist Week Limited', 'Blackshirt Limited', 'Sanctuary Press Limited', 'Action Press Limited' and many others).

The BUF also produced numerous pamphlets and books. Mosley himself was a prolific writer, and his three major policy statements, *The Greater Britain* (1932 and 1934), *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered* (1936) and *Tomorrow We Live* (1936 and 1938), formed the basis of BUF ideology and policy throughout its existence. The list of pamphlets and books produced by the BUF consists of dozens of titles. Probably the most significant were A. K. Chesterton's *Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary* (1935) and *Oswald Mosley: Portrait of a Leader* (1937), James Drennan's (W. E. D. Allen's) *B.U.F.: Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (1934) and Alexander Raven-Thomson's *The Coming Corporate State* (1937).

A particularly significant form of propaganda used by BUF was the social clubs. These were, naturally, not an innovation in British politics and existed across entire spectrum of British politics. The most important of such clubs ran by BUF was the January Club, which has been the focus of considerable scholarly attention.[23] In addition, in order to promote its ideas to the widest possible spectrum of listeners, the BUF founded other social and sporting clubs, such as a flying club in Gloucester (which supposedly had 250 members and 5 planes)[24] or boxing[25] and cycling clubs.[26] During 1934, the BUF also founded several clubs for students (for example at the University of

22 BECKETT, J., *After My Fashion: Twenty Post-war Years*, London, unpublished, c. 1940, pp 366–367. Available at Sheffield University Library, Special Collection, British Union Collection (USL SC BUC) 5/1 (MS.188).

23 See, for example, PUGH, M., *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars*, London: Pimlico 2006, p. 146.

24 *Police report from 30th April 1934*, TNA HO 144/20140.

25 See, for example, *The Blackshirt*, No. 37, 5th November 1934, p. 3; *The Blackshirt*, No. 90, 11th January 1935, p. 3; *The Blackshirt*, No. 216, 19th June 1937, p. 7.

26 *The Blackshirt*, No. 229, 18th August 1937, p. 7.

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London and the University of Birmingham)[27] and youth groups (Stowe School Youth Group, Winchester College Youth Group, Beaumont College Youth Group, Worksop College Youth Group).[28]

Apart from these "common" propaganda techniques, the BUF also used unusual and sometimes even somewhat innovative methods and style. Mosley's movement held a totalising perspective on reality,[29] and thus aspired to reach every aspect of human life and activity with its propaganda.

Since the founding of the movement, one of the BUF's most common forms of propaganda was the painting on walls and buildings. *The Blackshirt* and *Action* regularly published pictures of these paintings. For example, during the "Mind Britain's Business" campaign against sanctions on Italy during Mussolini's aggression against Ethiopia, a police report stated that "Blackshirts have been instructed to chalk the streets etc. with slogans 'Mosley Says Peace' and 'Mosley and Peace'. The Communist Party is sending out chalking squads to add to the first slogan, 'But Means War', and to the second, 'Don't Go Together'."[30] According to the *Fascist Quarterly,* "Adventurous spirits in sympathy with the Movement have been active on their own initiative in chalking peace slogans and the Lighting-Circle symbol (Action through Unity) along almost every street and wall and by-way in the country."[31]

Another interesting example of the propaganda techniques used by BUF was a suitcase specially adapted for propaganda purposes. According to a police report, "in order to give publicity to the recently coined slogan: 'Mosley Right — Eden Wrong', one of the officers of the B.U.F. has devised a method of stamping this slogan in the streets, etc. surreptitiously. On the bottom of a suitcase is a rubber stencil, which is capable of making about a dozen impressions with one inking. The suitcase is carried to a selected spot, placed on the ground, pressed down, and, when removed, leaves the impress. On Thursday 7th May it was intended to place the slogan in this manner outside Mr. Anthony EDEN's private residence, but owing to the presence of a police officer the intention was thwarted. Only one 'suitcase stencil' has been constructed up to the present, but it is expected that others will be prepared, as it is considered to be an effective means of doing this work clandestinely. The B.U.F. hopes to be successful in carrying out this activity at such places as Downing Street, the Houses of Parliament, and the residence of Cabinet Ministers."[32]

In May 1935, during the George V Silver Jubilee Procession through the streets of London, BUF members were trying to learn where news cameras were to be posted. They wanted to have "about 50 Blackshirts in uniform at these points. The Blackshirts would give the fascist salute when His Majesty the King passes."[33]

27 THURLOW, R., *Fascism in Britain. From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front*, London: I. B. Tauris 2009, p. 70.

28 *Police report from 15th February 1934*, TNA HO 144/20140.

29 LINEHAN, T., op. cit., p. 400.

30 *Police report from 13th September 1935*, TNA HO 144/20145.

31 'Mind Britain's Business' campaign. *Fascist Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1935), p. 396.

32 *Police report from 8th May 1936*, TNA HO 144/20147.

33 *Special Branch report from 24th April 1935*, TNA HO 144/20144.

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The BUF also opened many fascist bookstores selling their literature and propaganda material. In 1936, the Blackshirt leadership introduced a scheme for provincial bookshops. According to BUF officials, "all Districts should endeavour to open, in the near future, book shops for the sale of all B.U.F. literature. Such book shops should prove a valuable source of propaganda and revenue."[34] Instructions were provided on how to use window space for effective propaganda. J. A. Temple gave the following advice: "Space is essential to the well-dressed window. When you are dressing your branch windows for, say, a drive of 'Fascist Week' and booklets, plan it not on the lines of 'how much can I get in?' but 'how little do I need?' The human eye can only assimilate a small amount at a glance—and a glance is the most that some windows will receive. It follows, therefore, that the impression will be more sharply defined and easily remembered if the window is not cramped with oddments."[35] Temple went on to suggest that the back of the window should be covered in black crepe paper with back copies of BUF newspapers pinned to it from one side of the window to the other.[36]

In his memoirs, John Charley remembers how he was concerned at the lack of publicity for a BUF peace campaign in Hull just before the outbreak of the war. He decided to act: "On the Saturday before the meeting, I would repeatedly tour the town on my motor bike with a suitably inscribed poster on my back, in the nature of a mobile 'sandwich man'. One of our members who had a flair for this work prepared the poster which was pasted on a sheet of hardboard and securely strapped to my back and off I went on my tour. I kept as close to the kerb as I reasonably could, and only travelled in low gears. It was a huge success and created something of a sensation in the town centre, particularly as I was doing a continuous tour, and wearing my Blackshirt uniform."[37]

During a by-election campaign in 1938, W. E. Sherston, a prospective BUF candidate for Woodbridge, fitted his car with loud-speaking apparatus.[38] Another BUF candidate came with the idea of a propaganda trailer covered with posters, banners, flags and loudspeakers.[39] The well-known plans for Mosley's commercial radio station never got off the ground.[40]

The BUF also relied heavily on visual propaganda. After the ban on uniforms in 1937, the movement shifted towards a variety of visual symbols that were not banned and could be used at any time. The movement used badges, cufflinks, bracelets, ear-

34 *Police report from 7th May 1936*, TNA HO 144/20147.

35 *The Blackshirt*, No. 50, 6thApril 1934, pp. 2–3.

36 Ibid.

37 CHARNLEY, J., *Blackshirts and Roses: An Autobiography*, London: Brockingday 1990, pp. 53–54.

38 *Action*, No. 115, 30th April 1938, p. 17.

39 *Action*, No. 103, 5th February 1938, p. 17.

40 For more information see for example WEST, W. J., *The Truth Betrayed*, London: Duckworth 1987. See also the *Correspondence between Captain Wiedermann, Hitler's adjutant and Diana Mosley*, Birmingham University Library, Special Collections, Mosley Papers, XOMN /B/6/3/12-/24; THURLOW, R., op. cit., p. 119; MOSLEY, N. *Beyond the Pale. Sir Oswald Mosley and family 1933–1980*, London: Secker & Warburg 1983, pp. 135–136.

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rings, brooches and other jewellery, armbands, brass plaques showing Mosley's portrait, buckles and ties with a flash in a circle, and small flags. There were also playing cards and cutlery with fascist symbols.[41]

One of the most important weapons of propaganda in any campaign is posters. The BUF used many great visual artists, yet—and quite surprisingly—they never fully exploited their potential.[42] Blackshirt posters were visually unattractive, usually consisting only of symbols and occasionally Mosley's portrait or the Union Jack. As John Charnley remembers, posters advertising BUF meetings consisted only of the picture of the "head and shoulders of Mosley with folded arms and a semi-profile head held at a slightly uplifted angle on a background of crossed flags and carrying the simple statement 'Mosley Speaks' with the time and place of the meeting."[43]

This article describes various propaganda techniques of the BUF and serves as an addendum to previous scholarship on the topic. It shows, how even without sufficient funding, the BUF was able to develop its propaganda in its various forms. Emphasis was placed on active work and the enthusiasm of its members. And indeed, even in the most desperate times, the great majority of the BUF membership showed remarkable creativity in developing new propaganda techniques and were ready to sacrifice their time and money in order to propagate the ideas they believed in. Their activism and commitment went often beyond what we know from conventional party politics. In this sense, we need to look on them as a community of believers and activists who genuinely believed they were fighting decadence, corruption and decay, that their country was in danger and that there was an urgent need for fascist revolution.

ABSTRACT

DESPERATE MEASURES OR CREATIVITY? BUF PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES

Significant proportion of the British Union of fascists' (BUF) members were convinced that the existential threats to the nation and civilisation are hard facts and adopting fascism as the form of government was an absolute necessity for the survival of the British nation. This faith and devotion to the cause expressed itself in the enthusiasm for the cause, readiness for self-sacrifice and very active propagating of the ideas. Troubled by the lack of finance and resources, BUF members came with a variety of propaganda techniques, which demonstrate their commitment to and enthusiasm for fascism. Some ideas were very creative, some we could consider desperate. This article focuses on the BUF's propaganda machinery and is describing some of the not very common propaganda techniques that BUF used.

41 See advertisements in *The Blackshirt*, No. 199, 19th December 1936, p. 2; *Action*, 18th June 1938, p. 6, and others; see also, SPURR, M., op. cit., p. 318; and MILICAN, J., *Mosley's Men in Black. Uniforms, Flags and Insignia of the British Union of Fascists 1932–1940 & Union Movement*, London: Brockingday Publications 2005, pp. 107–115.

42 Worthy of mention are John Henry Gilmour (1892–1951), one of the most famous of New Zealand's caricaturists, and Alexander Bowie, another caricaturist. Also well-known is the American-born artist Edward McKnight Kauffer, who designed the cover of Mosley's *The Greater Britain*. See DORRIL, S., *Blackshirt. Sir Oswald Mosley & British Fascism*, London: Penguin Books 2007, p. 217.

43 CHARNLEY, J., op. cit., p. 52.

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Propaganda; fascism; BUF; propaganda techniques

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ABSTRAKT

ZOUFALOST, NEBO KREATIVITA? PROPAGANDISTICKÉ TECHNIKY BUF

Významná část členů Britské unie fašistů (BUF) byla přesvědčena, že existenční hrozby pro národ a celou západní civilizaci jsou tvrdá fakta a že nastolení fašismu jako formy vlády bylo absolutní nevyhnutelností, aby britský národ přežil. Jejich přesvědčení a oddanost těmto myšlenkám se projevila v entuziasmu, připravenosti obětovat se pro prospěch hnutí a velice aktivní propagaci myšlenek fašismu. Hnutí však po celou dobu své existence zápasilo s finančními problémy, a tak byli jeho členové nuceni přijít s různými, často velice inovativními propagandistickými technikami. I to demonstruje jejich entuziasmus a odhodlání. Některé z těchto nápadů a technik byly velice kreativní, jiné naopak zoufalé. Tato studie se zaměřuje na propagandistickou mašinerii BUF a popisuje různé, ne zcela běžné formy propagandistických technik, jaké hnutí používalo

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