# Racism, Resistance and the Making of a Community: A History of Struggle in London's East End

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***In the 1970s, Jalal emerged as the leading youth activist in East London. He was the founding Secretary of the Altab Ali Foundation and is currently a prominent anti-racist campaigner.***

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In the East End of London, extremes have always lived side by side. Within walking distance of the City of London — the richest square mile in the country — generations of working class people, migrants, and refugees have endured poverty, overcrowding, and exclusion. Yet this same area has also produced some of the most powerful examples of community solidarity and anti racist resistance in modern British history.

**Migration, Inequality and the Roots of Division**

For more than a century, the East End has been shaped by waves of migration. Jewish refugees fleeing fascism in Europe, workers from former British colonies, and later Bangladeshi migrants escaping poverty and political turmoil all found themselves in the same overcrowded neighbourhoods. They arrived with hope, but also into hardship.

Many migrant workers were funnelled into the lowest paid jobs — factory work, textiles, restaurant kitchens — roles that kept the British economy running but offered little security. Housing was often dilapidated, damp, and dangerously overcrowded. Public services were inadequate. Yet instead of challenging the elite classes who controlled wealth and resources, sections of the local white working class blamed migrants for their own deprivation.

This pattern — **scapegoating the visible poor instead of confronting the powerful** — has been a recurring feature of British political life.

**"No Jews, No Irish, No Blacks": The 1930s and the Battle of Cable Street**

In the 1930s, Jewish refugees became the primary targets of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), led by Oswald Mosley — a figure whose rhetoric resembles today's right wing populists. Jewish workers in the garment and weaving sweatshops of Whitechapel faced daily intimidation and violence. Some pubs even displayed signs reading: *"No Jews, No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs".*

Mosley's Blackshirts attempted to march through Cable Street in 1936, intending to terrorise the Jewish community. But the people of the East End — Jews, Irish dockers, communists, trade unionists, and local residents — united under the slogan **"They Shall Not Pass".**

Their victory in the **Battle of Cable Street** became a defining moment in British anti fascist history.

**Powellism, the National Front and the Rise of Violent Racism**

By the 1960s, the far right had found a new champion in Conservative MP Enoch Powell. His infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968 legitimised open hostility toward Asian and Black migrants. Instead of challenging Powell's racism, the political establishment largely remained silent.

The consequences were immediate. Britain entered the era of **"Paki-bashing"**, with violent attacks on Asian communities becoming widespread.

In the 1970s, the National Front (NF) — led by Martin Webster and John Tyndall — established its headquarters in Hoxton. Their propaganda targeted the growing British-Bangladeshi community, particularly in Spitalfields and Brick Lane. Skinhead gangs attacked Bengalis in the streets, workplaces, and even in their homes. Police often sided with the perpetrators.

Historical records — including *Blood on the Streets* by Dan Jones and documentation by the Race Today Collective — reveal the scale of this violence.

**Personal Encounters and Community Solidarity**

Even communities who had once been victims of fascism were not immune to prejudice. You describe being physically attacked by a group of elderly Jewish women at a public meeting in the Montefiore Centre — a painful reminder that racism can be internalised by anyone.

Yet there were also powerful allies. Local residents like Cathy Forrester helped build bridges between young Bengalis and progressive white activists. Labour leader of Tower Hamlets Council, Paul Beasley, recognised the parallels between Jewish and Bengali struggles and became a key supporter of anti racist organising.

**The Murder of Altab Ali and the Turning Point of 1978**

The racist murder of Altab Ali in May 1978 marked a watershed moment. His killing symbolised the violence faced by Bengalis in the East End — alongside the murders of Ishaq Ali, Michael Ferreira, Kenneth Singh, and the burning of the Khan family home.

On 11 May 1978, ten thousand British Bengalis marched from St Mary's Churchyard (now Altab Ali Park) to Hyde Park and Downing Street, carrying a symbolic coffin. Their slogans echoed across London:

- **Enough is Enough**
- **Here to Stay, Here to Fight**
- **Black and White Unite and Fight**

This was the beginning of the **Battle of Brick Lane**, a year-long resistance movement that included:

- **Daily community patrols**
- **Support for victims of racist attacks**
- **Legal defence through Tower Hamlets Law Centre**
- **Sit downs and street blockades**
- **Direct confrontation of NF propaganda**

Eventually, the NF were forced to close their Hoxton headquarters and retreat to Welling.

**Recognition, Representation and a New Chapter**

The scale of Bengali mobilisation forced the British establishment to acknowledge the community's existence. The Home Affairs Select Committee launched an inquiry into the needs and aspirations of British Bangladeshis, reporting through the mid-1980s.

Political leaders like Ken Livingstone and even King Charles (then Prince of Wales) began engaging with the community. Regeneration funding, improved public services, and greater political participation followed.

A new chapter had begun — but the struggle was far from over.

**From Thatcher to Brexit: Racism Repackaged**

Margaret Thatcher's 1978 claim that Britain was being "swamped by people of different cultures" normalised racist language at the highest levels of government. Decades later, Brexit revived similar narratives. Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage weaponised migration to win political power, making promises that never materialised.

The result:

- a cost of living crisis
- rising racial tension
- emboldened far right groups
- misinformation fuelled street violence

Yet the **silent majority** has repeatedly mobilised against hatred, showing that community resistance remains alive.

**The New Politics of Division**

Today, populist forces — from Reform UK to the EDL — are funded by wealthy interests who benefit from division. Some politicians of Asian and Black heritage have aligned themselves with right wing agendas, acting as spokespeople for policies that harm the very communities they come from.

Kier Starmer the PM of UK in 2025, stated that "we were becoming a community of strangers and legitimised the racist, scapegoating and divisive claims by the far right and the establishment's appeasement of institutionalised racism.

Meanwhile, mainstream media platforms amplify far right narratives while ignoring mass anti racist mobilisations.

**A Broken System and the Need for Change**

The collapse of the traditional two-party system, as seen in recent local and devolved elections, suggests that Britain may need a more pluralistic, proportional political system. Such a system could better represent diverse communities and reduce the dominance of elite interests.

At the same time, global inequality, conflict, and climate change continue to drive migration. Without a fairer international economic order — one without veto powers, exploitative trade systems, and resource hoarding — displacement will continue.

**Returning to the East End: The Struggle Continues**

Despite decades of resistance, the establishment still relies on division, greed, and the manipulation of public opinion to maintain the status quo. But the spirit of Cable Street and **Brick Lane** endures.

Just as previous generations stood firm against fascism, today's communities must continue to resist racism, Islamophobia, and all forms of hatred. The East End's history teaches us that solidarity is not only possible — it is powerful.

**What the slogan means**

The phrase **"Enough is Enough"** expresses three powerful ideas at once:

**1. A refusal to accept further injustice**

It signals that a community has endured racism, violence, or oppression for too long and will no longer remain silent or passive.

**2. A collective turning point**

It marks the moment when people decide to organise, resist, and take action together. It is a declaration of unity and shared purpose.

**3. A demand for immediate change**

It is not a polite request. It is a firm, urgent call for justice, safety, and equality — now, not later.

**Why it mattered in the East End in 1978**

In the context of the British Bangladeshi struggle in Tower Hamlets, **"Enough is Enough"** captured the mood after years of:

- daily racist attacks
- police indifference or hostility
- murders of community members
- National Front intimidation
- political silence from mainstream leaders

The murder of **Altab Ali** was the final trigger. The community had reached its limit. The slogan became the emotional and political spark for the mass mobilisation that followed — the march from Whitechapel to Hyde Park, the Battle of Brick Lane, and the year-long resistance movement.

**Why the slogan still resonates today**

Movements across the world continue to use **"Enough is Enough"** because it captures a universal truth: there comes a moment when injustice becomes unbearable, and ordinary people rise to defend their dignity.

It is a slogan of **boundary-setting**, **self-respect**, and **collective courage**.

**Enough Is Enough: Racism, Resistance and the Long Struggle for Justice in London's East End**

In the East End of London, contradictions sit side by side. The City of London — the richest square mile in the country — stands only minutes away from some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Britain. Here, wealth, poverty, and extraordinary cultural diversity coexist in a landscape shaped by migration, exploitation, and resistance. For more than a century, the East End has been a frontline: a place where working class communities have confronted racism, fascism, and political neglect, and where they have repeatedly declared, in moments of crisis, that **"Enough is Enough"**.

**Migration, Inequality and the Making of a Divided Landscape**

The East End's history is inseparable from the history of migration. Jewish refugees fleeing pogroms and fascism in Europe, Irish labourers escaping poverty, and later migrants from South Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa all found themselves in the same overcrowded streets. Many arrived with hope, but quickly discovered that Britain's welcome was conditional.

Migrant workers were funnelled into the lowest paid jobs — the factory floors, sweatshops, restaurant kitchens, and textile mills that kept post war Britain functioning. Housing was often damp, unsafe, and overcrowded. Public health services were inadequate. Educational opportunities were limited. Yet instead of challenging the elite classes who controlled wealth and resources, sections of the local white working class blamed migrants for their own deprivation.

This pattern — scapegoating the visible poor instead of confronting the powerful — has been a recurring feature of British political life. It was easier to blame "outsiders" than to challenge the structural inequalities created by capitalism, colonialism, and an entrenched political establishment.

Signs in pub windows once read: *"No Jews, No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs"*. These were not just words — they were a declaration of who belonged and who did not.

**The 1930s: Mosley, the Blackshirts and the Battle of Cable Street**

In the 1930s, Jewish refugees became the primary targets of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), led by Oswald Mosley — a figure whose rhetoric resembles today's right wing populists. Jewish workers in the garment and weaving sweatshops of Whitechapel faced daily intimidation and violence. Mosley's Blackshirts attempted to march through Cable Street in 1936, intending to terrorise the Jewish community and assert fascist dominance.

But the people of the East End — Jews, Irish dockers, communists, trade unionists, and local residents — united under the slogan **"They Shall Not Pass"**. Their victory in the **Battle of Cable Street** became a defining moment in British anti fascist history, proving that ordinary people could defeat organised hatred when they stood together.

Yet even after the Blackshirts were pushed back, the deeper structures of inequality remained intact. The political and economic establishment continued to benefit from division, ensuring that working-class communities remained too fragmented to challenge the status quo.

**Powellism and the Birth of "Paki Bashing"**

By the 1960s, the far right had found a new champion in Conservative MP Enoch Powell. His infamous 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech legitimised open hostility toward Asian and Black migrants. Instead of challenging Powell's racism, the political establishment largely remained silent. The speech triggered a wave of racist violence across the country — the era known as "Paki bashing."

Asian communities, particularly in the East End, became targets of daily harassment. The newly arrived Bangladeshi community — many of whom had fled poverty and political turmoil in East Pakistan and later Bangladesh — faced the brunt of this violence. They were attacked in the streets, in workplaces, in shopping centres, and even in their homes.

The National Front (NF), led by Martin Webster and John Tyndall, established its headquarters in Hoxton. Their propaganda targeted the British Bangladeshi community relentlessly. Skinhead gangs roamed Brick Lane and Bethnal Green, emboldened by a political climate that treated migrants as expendable.

Police often sided with the perpetrators. Victims were criminalised. Complaints were ignored. The message was clear: the state would not protect them.

**Personal Encounters and the Complexity of Prejudice**

Racism in the East End was not confined to one group. Even communities who had once been victims of fascism were not immune to prejudice. You describe being physically attacked by a group of elderly Jewish women at a public meeting in the Montefiore Centre — a painful reminder that racism can be internalised by anyone, regardless of their own history of suffering.

Yet there were also powerful allies. Local residents like Cathy Forrester helped build bridges between young Bengalis and progressive white activists. Paul Beasley, Labour leader of Tower Hamlets Council, recognised the parallels between Jewish and Bengali struggles and became a key supporter of anti racist organising. His solidarity extended beyond London — he even travelled to Sylhet with Dan Jones and Caroline Adams, strengthening ties between communities.

These relationships mattered. They helped transform isolated anger into organised resistance.

**The Murder of Altab Ali and the Turning Point of 1978**

The racist murder of Altab Ali on 4 May 1978 marked a watershed moment. His killing symbolised the violence faced by Bengalis in the East End — alongside the murders of Ishaq Ali, Michael Ferreira, Kenneth Singh, and the burning of the Khan family home in Waltham Forest.

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- **End Police Brutality Now**

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## The New Politics of Division

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The result is a political landscape where racism is repackaged as "concern," and migrants are blamed for crises created by decades of austerity, inequality, and elite mismanagement.

## A Broken System and the Need for Change

The collapse of the traditional two-party system suggests that Britain may need a more pluralistic, proportional political system. Such a system could better represent diverse communities and reduce the dominance of elite interests.

At the same time, global inequality, conflict, and climate change continue to drive migration. Without a fairer international economic order — one without veto powers, exploitative trade systems, and resource hoarding — displacement will continue.

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Just as previous generations stood firm against fascism, today's communities must continue to resist racism, Islamophobia, and all forms of hatred. The East End's history teaches us that solidarity is not only possible — it is powerful.

And when communities stand together and declare **"Enough is Enough",** they change the course of history.