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Introduction

Nigel Copsey and David Renton

The past thirty years have seen an extraordinary growth in the literature on fascism, including British fascism. The leaders of small parties have found themselves the subject of major biographies.¹ Oswald Mosley, the leader of the interwar British Union of Fascists, a party that never gained any representation in Westminster, has been the subject of a major Channel Four drama series.² Consideration has been given to patterns of support³ and ideology⁴ and to explanations for the failure of British fascism.⁵ More recently, attention has turned to the cultural values of Britain's fascists.⁶ In the meantime, the electoral success of the British National Party from 2001 onwards has demonstrated that Britain's contemporary extreme right has hardly gone away.⁷

In seeking to understand the nature of British fascism, interest has tended to focus on the leaders of fascist parties, the character of fascist ideas and the nature of their support. Considerable attention has also been paid to the violence and racism of British fascism. Less interest, however, has been devoted to the context in which fascist parties have operated. For that reason, the focus of this volume is on the relationship between British fascism, the labour movement and the state.

Significantly, by the time that fascism emerged in Britain, the Italian left had already been destroyed. From the very outset, the left and the right responded to each other as antagonists. In the popular consciousness, the story was about fascism and anti-fascism; and historians have slowly begun to catch up with the latter as well.⁸ Where have different anti-fascist traditions come from? Throughout its history, British fascism has experienced waves of growth. Sometimes these have coincided with periods of national or local Labour government. How have Labour Party-controlled institutions responded to the rise of fascism? Was there a difference in police and Home Office policies towards fascism between

1936 and 1948, or indeed between 1958 and 1977? And what has been the relationship between local labour cultures and fascism? Is it true, for example, that the working-class cultures of northern England provided an impenetrable barrier to fascism?

Alternatively, did the far-right parties develop strategies to relate to areas of trade union and labour strength? Have there been times when supporters of the labour movement were sympathetic to specific demands put forward by far-right groups? What has been the role of women or migrant communities who identified with the left: has their activity led to the adoption of distinct anti-fascist strategies? What about labour movement traditions outside the Labour Party? What tensions have there been in local and national labour movement responses to fascism? These were the sort of questions that encouraged the writing of this book.

Several of the chapters in this volume refer to episodes when previous waves of fascism came into contact with the British State. The book opens with Richard Maguire's study of the relationship between the British Fascists (BF), the General Strike and the Home Secretary, Joynson-Hicks. Maguire argues that senior Conservative politicians were able to justify co-operating with groups such as the BF, provided that the latter were not deemed to have over-stretched the limits of constitutional politics. Whereas Maguire tends to emphasise the coercive instincts of British constitutional politics, Richard Thurlow takes the opposite approach, portraying MI5 and Special Branch as a set of disinterested pragmatists responding cautiously to the parallel manoeuvres of left- and right-wing extremists. Meanwhile, Graham Macklin's study of policing in the immediate post-war years, addresses the charge of collusion with fascism that was frequently laid at the time against the officers of the Metropolitan Police.

The chapters that appear in the middle of this volume are concerned with forces outside the state. Julie Gottlieb studies the intellectual and artistic impact of interwar British women on the struggle against fascism, including the radical Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson, the peace activist Winifred Holtby and the writer Virginia Woolf. Gottlieb is concerned with telling the story of feminist anti-fascism, a subject much neglected by historians.⁹ Philip Coupland's chapter addresses several examples of interwar fascists who were recruited to the far right by the promise of revolutionary or egalitarian politics. Such individuals may have attended an individual speech by Oswald Mosley or some other prominent fascist orator. Joining the movement, they were then shocked to discover the elitism of the fascists, their antipathy to any

form of reformist programme. Very quickly, the 'left-wing' fascists were driven out. The contradictions suffered by Coupland's temporary fascists arose from a deep ambivalence within their own heads. Did they see the British labour movement itself (trade unions, co-operatives, peace movements, political parties and their allies) as a source of strength? Could unions deliver the justice in which they believed? Insofar as working-class people continued to identify with their trade unions, they could not remain easily within the political space of fascism and the British extreme right.

In another chapter with a pre-1939 focus, Lewis Mates offers us a study of the Aid Spain campaigns that emerged in the north-east of England, a region characterised by a strong, yet traditionally moderate, labour movement. He demonstrates how the defeat of domestic fascism in the region did not weaken anti-fascist activity. On the contrary, he shows how Spain galvanised many. For the majority of those involved, the key factor was a desire for humanitarian relief. Mates makes a case for seeing campaigners' appeals to humanitarianism as diverting from a fully fledged anti-fascism. More precisely, Mates draws our attention to the leadership of the movement and the ambiguous role played by the Communist Party. Nonetheless, it is clear that the labour movement has done more than any other organisation to train a significant number of people in anti-fascist politics. David Renton's study of trade unionists in the 1970s Anti-Nazi League describes some of the mechanisms involved, including national campaigns, local branch meetings, and all the other processes in between. Renton is markedly sceptical about the Labour Party's national response to the threat posed by the National Front and emphasises the tactical gap between the instincts of the Labour leadership, and the movement's rank and file.

In Thomas Linehan's chapter, we see the extent to which British fascism has gathered support from the working-class. He suggests that owing to distinct socio-structural and political change, today's right-wing extremists can make significant inroads into working-class constituencies. Linehan strikes a pessimistic note and takes issue with the 'anti-fascist' practice of the Blair government. The most alarming feature of New Labour, he argues, is its reluctance to use any language of class. This contrasts with some of the activities of the British National Party, and in particular with the fascists' disingenuous claim that racist voting will result in a redistribution of resources to the white working class. The institutions and traditions of the labour movement, which in 1930s Britain existed both inside and outside the Labour Party, are found much more often these days outside than in.

New Labour also features in the final chapter of this volume. Nigel Copley considers the response of the Labour Party to the 1970s National Front and to the British National Party. He covers the period from the early 1970s through to the European and local elections in 2004. At the national level, reflecting the change from old Labour to New Labour, Copley shows how the nature of Labour's response to contemporary British fascism has differed significantly. He also provides a local case study of Labour's response to the British National Party in Burnley, a town that became notorious as a right extremist base, in 2002 when the BNP captured three seats on Burnley council.

This volume began life as a conference organised by the Society for the Study of Labour History and the School of Continuing Education at the University of Leeds. The conference took place in November 2003, when Nick Griffin's British National Party had seventeen elected councillors and was achieving an average of around 20 per cent of the vote in by-elections. For several of the contributors, the purpose of reviewing the history of British fascism and its relationship to the labour movement and the state was no mere historic curiosity, they were motivated as much by a desire to contribute to the forces that could push back present-day fascism.

Yet it would be false to pretend that the book represents any consensus of historians in favour of present-day activism. Rather, this collection is a representative set of diverse essays, containing a plurality of views and politics. Points of difference can frequently be traced between one essay and the next. For both radical and liberal scholars this diversity of opinion is no weakness but a strength. It is a sign of our continuing belief in values such as mutual tolerance and respect, in contrast to the narrow unanimity of thought championed by fascist parties in the past and today.

Notes

1. Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Nicholas Mosley, *Rules of the Game* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982) and *Beyond the Pale* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983); Francis Selwyn, *Hitler's Englishman* (London: Routledge, 1987); Peter Martland, *Lord Haw Haw: The English Voice of Nazi Germany* (London: The National Archives, 2003); Mary Kenny, *Germany Calling* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2003); David Baker, *Ideology of Obsession: A. K. Chesterton and British Fascism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).
2. Screened in 1998 to mixed reviews. It was written by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran with the help of Nicholas Mosley.
3. Gerry. C. Webber, 'Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, 4, 1984, pp. 575–606;

- John D. Brewer, *Mosley's Men: The British Union of Fascists in the West Midlands* (Aldershot: Gower, 1984); Thomas P. Linehan, *East London for Mosley* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003); Michael Billig, *Fascists: A Social Psychological View of the National Front* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981); Stan Taylor, *The National Front in English Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Chris T. Husbands, *Racial Exclusionism and the City* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983).
4. David S. Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998) and *Fascism in Modern Britain* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000); Thomas P. Linehan, *British Fascism 1918–1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
 5. Mike Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).
 6. Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan (eds), *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).
 7. Nigel Copsey, *Contemporary British Fascism: The British National Party and the Quest for Legitimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004).
 8. David Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto, 1999), *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) and *This Rough Game: Fascism and Anti-Fascism* (Stroud: Sutton, 2001); Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).
 9. Notable exceptions are Martin Durham, *Women and Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1998); Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement, 1923–1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); and David Renton, 'Women and Fascism: A Critique', *Socialist History*, 20, 2001, pp. 72–83.

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