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The Radical Right in Britain

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The radical right has been small, fractious yet persistent in nearly a century of activism at the furthest reaches of the right-wing spectrum. As this collection of primary source documents makes plain, moreover, there are also a number of surprising elements in British fascism that were not observed elsewhere. While there had long been exclusionary, racist, and anti-democratic groups in Britain, as on the continent, it was the carnage and dislocation of the Great War (1914-18) that gave fascism its proper push over the top. Some five years after the 11 November 1918 armistice – a much longer gestation period than on the continent – ‘the first explicitly fascist movement in Britain’ was the British Fascisti (BF).ⁱ Highly unusual for a fascist movement at the time, or since, it was led by a woman, Rotha Linton-Orman. While heavily influenced by the example – if not ideology – of Benito Mussolini’s National Fascist Party, the BF mainly attracted support from ultra-conservatives; often the so-called ‘Die Hards’ in the Conservative Party, leading one later pro-Nazi fascist in Britain, Arnold Leese, to dismissively label them ‘conservatism with knobs on’.ⁱⁱ Yet the BF was more than that, if less than its name implied. Although neither deploying key interwar fascist traits of charismatic leadership or paramilitarism, nor advocating ethnic cleansing – let alone embracing ‘revolutionary rebirth’, which is increasingly seen as the core of fascist ideologyⁱⁱⁱ – it remains the case that leading fascists from the 1930s started out in the movement. Alongside the one-time BF councilor for Stamford, Arnold Leese, the vehemently anti-Semitic leader of the Imperial Fascist League (founded 1929), key ideologues cutting their teeth with the BF included the influential conspiracy theorist Nesta Weber (a short-lived member of the BF’s ‘Grand Council’) and later functionaries for the

British Union of Fascists, including Neil Francis Hawkins, E.G. Mandeville Roe, H.J. Donovan, and William Joyce.^{iv} In 1937, the latter would form one of many small fascist parties in interwar Britain, and perhaps the most extreme: the National Socialist League – in the roiling years to come, Joyce took up the mantle of ‘Lord Haw Haw’ for the Nazi airwaves, for which he would be one of two people hanged for treason in 1946 (the other was John Amery, who tried to recruit British prisoners of war to fight on behalf of the Third Reich). Other tiny and, more often than not, aristocratic fascist movements in interwar Britain included The Link, The Right Club, the Anglo-German Fellowship, The Nordic League, and English Mistry (and its offshoot movement, English Array).^v Yet by far the most credible and successful fascist party of the interwar period was the British Union of Fascists (BUF), who were led by former Labour and Conservative MP Oswald Mosley. The BUF was launched in 1932 after his New Party launched and quickly fizzled out the year before. Mosley’s Blackshirts, as they were called, were immediately successful in terms of recruitment, at one point gaining the support of the Daily Mail, and held a membership of, approximately, 40,000 people.^{vi} While there was doubtless ‘some genuine imitation’ of Mussolini’s and, later, Hitler’s fascists – not least on account of financial support by the National Fascist Party or Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) in the first half of their eight year existence, and by the National Socialist German Workers’ Party or Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) in the second half – the BUF (from October 1936, the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists) was Britain’s most intellectually coherent fascist movement.^{vii} It had well-

considered economic policies, notably 'imperial preference', as well as some forward-looking ideas on women; likewise, in contrast to Italy and Germany, and given that the British empire was at its geographical apogee between the wars, 'the BUF never preached war and expansion, but peace and prosperity'.^{viii} Between Mosley's charismatic leadership and the doldrums of the Great Depression, most of the pieces were in place for the BUF to break into the mainstream. Yet the BUF never won a single parliamentary seat – perhaps owing as much to the British 'first past the post' electoral system as Britain's long-held allergy to extremist movements, whether of left or right. More often than not, Mosley's thugs were a figure of fun more than a threat to power; save for those at the receiving end of his vitriol: Jews, socialists and communists, and of course the geriatric 'establishment' he derided. Indeed, the BUF had early on become synonymous with violence in the public mind after a particularly violent response to protests at a fascist rally held at Olympia in 1934 – costing the support of Harold Harmsworth, Viscount Rothermere's the Daily Mail in its wake – 'which irrevocably tarnished fascism's image in Britain'.^{ix} At Cable Street, on 4 October 1936, tens of thousands turned out to block a BUF march in the East End that, in keeping with fascist praxis, targeted Jews. A melee followed and the event was cancelled by police, redoubling Mosley's reputation as an inciter of hate rather than an inspirer of radical right revolution.

Passage of the Public Order Act in early 1937 – particularly banning political uniforms and paramilitarism in Britain – did much to further erode BUF visibility and support. The latter only started to recover on the eve of WWII, in part through the 'Mind

Britain's Business Campaign' against confronting the totalitarian Axis. Yet it was too late for either peace or a Mosleyite breakthrough: war broke out in September 1939 and a mere six months later Hitler invaded France and the Low Countries. Fearing a 'fifth column' from within, Britain's leading fascists, including Mosley, Leese, and many hundreds more on the radical right, were interned under Defence Regulations 18(a) and 18(b) in late May 1940. British fascism had been decapitated by the state, and 'destroyed the first major phase of British fascism, but the far right did not die.'^x Yet nor did fascism in Britain thrive thereafter, never winning a parliamentary seat before or after the Second World War, and never commanding the tens of thousands of loyalists necessary to be anything more than a persistent annoyance, rather than a revolutionary threat, to British state or society. After the Second World War, the Holocaust had made it impossible for fascists in Britain to refer to themselves as out-and-out fascists. It also meant that all conservative leaders following the Second World War avoided any overt association with the radical right. The world was very different following the war and both fascist and radical right groups re-shifted their priorities accordingly.

The biggest issue for the postwar radical right, which led to their re-emergence, was the influx of immigration from Commonwealth nations (Caribbean region, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh etc.). This motivated a constellation of radical right groups, from Mosley's relaunched 'Union Movement' – now calling for pan-European unity and African plunder – to his one-time propagandist, A. K. Chesterton, who launched the League of Empire Loyalists (LEL). Other small groups emerging in the later 1950s and 1960s

included those who venerated Nazism, like Colin Jordan's National Socialist Movement and, to a lesser extent, John Tyndall's Greater Britain Movement, through to more traditional British fascist parties, like John Bean's British National Party (the first incarnation of that name from 1960) to a constellation of radical right organisations that were more often elitist reading groups, such as the Racial Preservation Society and the National Democratic Party. Most of these groups came together in 1967 under the neo-fascist umbrella group, the National Front (NF). The movement was initially led by Chesterton, whose LEL was the largest radical right group in Britain at the time. The movement was quickly taken over by the key fascist ideologue John Tyndall, and became the dominant revolutionary fascist group in post-war Britain. The NF capitalised on influxes of migration, in particular, 30,000 Ugandan Asians accepted into Britain. The 1979 general election would devastate this fascist movement as the Conservative Party, led by Margaret Thatcher, would adopt a tougher stance on immigration, which would lead to the 1980s being a particularly difficult decade for the NF and radical right in general.

Following the NF's disintegration, the British National Party (BNP) was formed by Tyndall in 1982. The BNP made a more conscious effort to appear less radical and more respectable than the NF, particularly on issues such as homosexuality and race, as well as in its criticism of democracy. There is a large amount of debate over the extent to which this softening is merely 'window dressing' or whether the BNP has genuinely looked to condemn its extremist roots; a pamphlet ominously entitled 'BNP Language and Concepts Discipline Manual' produced by BNP hierarchy

suggests the former, and that their attempted image change is a PR stunt and not a lot more. The BNP would see success during the 'noughties' when it won 44 council seats in 2006 (most strikingly in Barking and Dagenham) and in 2009, where it won two seats in the European Parliament on the basis of some 900,000 electors in the north of England. The BNP's success has been attributed to a number of factors, and the context for its triumphs were increasing immigration, globalisation, a growing European Union and, most notably, the rise of militant Islam. That said, their decline has been swifter than their ascent, with no councilors at the time of writing.

The emergence of the English Defence League in 2009 who, despite there being an academic consensus on them being a radical right street movement, describe themselves as a 'protest group', quickly led to substantial media coverage. This arrival of a new group led many to view it as a direct competitor to the BNP, however, as the EDL has no coherent political programme or ideology and is only a street movement, they should not be compared on the same terms. Moreover, the EDL's leader, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (AKA Tommy Robinson), possesses a street credibility that the BNP's Roger Griffin does not. Despite its successes, the BNP has declined significantly over the past several years, largely by its own hand and on account of internal struggles. The recent success of UKIP in the 2014 European Parliament elections and 2015 General Election underscores this: they ran on an anti-immigration ticket has no doubt seen many supporters of the BNP change their allegiance to what is considered a more mainstream party with higher prospects of success.

The radical right's current disarray does not mean, however, that it is without influence. Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg gave a speech at a dinner held by the esoteric radical right organisation, the Traditional Britain Group, in May 2013. Rees-Mogg immediately distanced himself from the group and its member's extreme views, particularly those on Doreen Lawrence's recent peerage, immigration, and on 'repatriation' of non-Brits. What the incident demonstrated however, was another type of radical right group, one that is anti-populist (unlike the EDL) and has its ideological roots in conservatism. Despite the BNP's decline, it still continually tries to recruit young members in schools. More threatening, there are a number of secretive and violent groups, such as the Aryan Strike Force and Combat 18, who are prepared to perpetrate terrorist atrocities. Anders Breivik's massacre in July 2011 showed the carnage these 'lone-wolf' extremist individuals can inflict. Britain is not immune from such action. In addition to the extensive list of convictions for low-level violence and intimidation, the British radical right has a number of supporters prepared to carry out widespread and extensive violence. These include Neo-Nazis, such as David Copeland, who received a life sentence for killing three people in 1999, and Ian Davison, who in 2009 was the first person convicted under the Chemical Weapons Act for producing a dozen lethal doses of the Weapons of Mass Destruction ricin.

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul Stocker, "'The Imperial Spirit': British Fascism and Empire, 1919-1940," *Religion Compass* 9/2 (2015): 46; see also Paul Stocker, "Importing Fascism: Reappraising the British Fascisti, 1923-1926," *Contemporary British History*, 30/3 (2016), 326-348.

² Arnold Leese, cited in David Baker, "The Extreme Right in the 1920s," in *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition*, ed. Mike Cronin (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1996), 26. See also Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (Pimlico, London: 2006), especially ch. 5.

³ For an overview of fascist ideology, see the "Introduction" in *A Fascist Century: Essays by Roger Griffin*, ed. Matthew Feldman (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); and the "Introduction" in *A Fascism Reader*, ed. Aristotle Kallis (London: Routledge, 2002), which also contains a wide range of primary source extracts on fascist ideology.

⁴ Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1998* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 35.

⁵ Several of these groups, especially English Mistry and English Array, are covered in Dan Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), 30ff; see also the panoramic overview of fascism in interwar Britain by Thomas Linehan, *British Fascism, 1918-1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

⁶ G.C. Webber, "Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists", *Journal of Contemporary History* 19/4 (1984), 575-606.

⁷ Gary Love, "'What's the Big Idea?' Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascism Generic Fascism", *Journal of Contemporary History* 42/3 (2007), 449.

⁸ Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1915-45* (London: UCL Press, 1995), 305.

⁹ Dan Tilles, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-1940* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 7.

¹⁰ Nicholas Hillman, "'Tell me chum, in case I got it wrong. What was it we were fighting during the war?' The Re-emergence of British Fascism, 1945-58", *Contemporary British History* 15/4 (2010), 2.

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