

Fascism and Anti-Fascism Between the Wars

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Two decades ago, it was possible for historians of fascism in Britain to remark that the literature of their subject was unnecessarily limited. Up to that point, writers had accepted two self-imposed restrictions which were no longer capable of justification. First, historians had kept their research to the inter-war period, neglecting almost entirely such post-war organisations as the National Front (NF) and the British National Party (BNP). Second, the careful studies of the ideas, organisation and activities of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) had been almost entirely unmatched by any comparable interest in those who had campaigned against the BUF. The lack of attention paid to anti-fascists was especially striking. It was

certainly arguable that anti-fascists had been instrumental in Mosley's defeat, and (whether that was accepted or not) it was clear that they had been as well organised, as politically diverse, and more numerous than, Mosley's followers.

In the intervening 20 years, that picture has changed. We now have a few valuable monographs studying the attempted fascist revivals of 1945–51 and 1974–9 (although nothing of detail yet on the also important period of 1958–62). There are also political and sociological studies of the BNP in the last ten years. Of the historical works, the most impressive is Graham Macklin's *Very Deeply Dyed in Black*, which focuses on Mosley and his followers. Macklin's book is complemented by David Baker's *Ideology of Obsession*, looking at A. K. Chesterton, a more direct influence than Mosley on Britain's present-day far right.⁽¹⁾

There have also been at least three major works focussing on anti-fascism: Nigel Copsey's syncretic history of anti-fascism in Britain between c1920 and c1990, my own studies of anti-fascism in 1945-51 and 1974-9, and now an important new collection edited by Copsey and Olechnowicz, to which I will return.⁽²⁾

Before focussing on *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, I want to say something about Matthew Worley's history of the New Party, the interim organisation established by Mosley after leaving Labour and before founding the BUF. Worley's work takes the story of British fascism earlier than was previously considered possible.

The difficulties might be listed at the outset. This is for general readers the best known period of British fascist history, having been at the heart of Channel Four's 1998 mini-series *Mosley*. It is also the part of the story which is most likely to find its ways into textbook histories of Britain. It has, as major and minor players, a number of vivid albeit over-familiar characters, including John Strachey, Harold Nicholson, Winston Churchill and George Bernard Shaw. The New Party left almost no documents, making the task especially difficult for the careful historian determined to say something new, while Mosley's own papers were only recently deposited after systematic weeding had removed anything shedding light on this period. Finally, any writer has to avoid the subterfuges played by Mosley's two memoirs, his autobiography, and the account published by an amanuensis in 1975.

Worley solves the over-familiarity of his subject by taking a collective biographical approach, placing the New Party not merely at a point in Mosley's life, but also in the context of the development of his chief lieutenants. These range from the well-known (Strachey) to the obscure (Arthur Reade, previously best-known as a figure of some exotic importance in the micro-history of the left). Worley eschews a narrative for a thematic approach, focussing on the ideology, the organisation, and the strategies for alliances adopted at different times by the New Party.

There are three original points in particular worth taking from Worley's book. First, that the New Party repeatedly employed in its political language a distinctively 'masculine' rhetoric, in which opponents were dismissed repeatedly as old ladies, crones, or hag-ridden. This misogyny was neither accidental nor occasional, but a key part of the way in which the party attempted to set itself apart from its rivals. The observation reminds us that British fascism was not merely an exaggeratedly racist party but the organised expression of a consistently inegalitarian approach to life. (I would also say in passing that contemporary electoral fascism, a party of retired policemen and working security guards, deserves a similarly gendered analysis).

Second, Worley brings out in new detail the key part played in the persuasion of Mosley towards fascism by a small number of young, male 'hearties', privileged and sporting, without any previous political baggage, and trained in anti-socialism by the certainties of wealth and class. The BUF, it has previously been observed, was the organised successor not so much of the New Party but specifically of its youth wing. Worley names and sets out the history of the youths involved.

Third, Worley shows the part played in the New Party as by individuals who went on to play proud roles on the British left, not just Strachey, but also John Cornford and Esmond Romilly, both of whom went on to volunteer for the Republic during the Civil War in Spain. They were serious converts into and subsequently

away from what might be termed 'Oswald Mosley thought'. I doubt that the part played by guilt in their subsequent biographies has been properly explored.

Before turning to Copsey and Olechnowicz's book, various declarations of interest have to be made: first, the network of British historians of fascism is not wide. I have been published myself by Copsey and Olechnowicz's publisher Palgrave, including in a 2005 collection of essays (3) which I jointly-edited with Copsey, himself. Yet I feel that I am entitled to write critically about their latest work, not least because the editors of the collection use my own studies of anti-fascism in places as a negative reference point, to set out clearly how their work is distinguished from previous accounts.

The purpose of *Varieties of Anti-Fascism* is set out with admirable clarity by its title; 'varieties' because, it is said, previous writers have tended to reduce anti-fascism to a narrative of street confrontations with fascists. But, the editors argue, anti-fascism as a concept must be broad enough to take in practices such as the opposition of Liberals and Conservatives (alongside Labourites and Communists), cultural anti-fascism, and above all the whole story of Winston Churchill's wartime government which in practice marginalised British fascism utterly by employing the cultural and repressive organs of the state, rather than through street protests.

Some of this contrast of approach, between Copsey and Olechnowicz on the one hand, and previous authors on the other, is illustrated by their critique of the metaphors historians have used. The contributors are critical of my own definitional emphasis on anti-fascism as 'activity', and are not quite satisfied even by Copsey's own previous distinction between 'active' and 'passive' anti-fascisms. (I personally would accept Copsey's distinction as helpful, perhaps combining it with a further distinction between institutional and popular anti-fascist strategies) They settle on a practical consensus that anti-fascism has been various and diverse.

One of the advantages of the editors' inclusive approach is that it enables them to publish as studies in the history of anti-fascism accounts of institutions and organisations that have not previously been analysed in this way. For example, Janet Dack's chapter on the attitude of the national press towards Mosley argues that the bulk of the newspapers were for the majority of the 1930s hostile to the BUF, and that this antagonism was a major factor limiting the fascists' support.

Still more ambitious, although not entirely successful, is Tom Lawson's account of Christian opposition to fascism in the inter-war years. Watson argues that Church anti-fascism would have been unlikely to take a militant form and is therefore closed to historians who are interested only in street demonstrations. The difficulty with Lawson's chapter, frustratingly, is its narrow evidential base, which is essentially the counterpart in the national Christian press of Dack's study. It neglects Mosley's own attempts to reinvent himself, especially in the Roman Catholic newspapers, either (in 1936–8) as Franco's British counterpart, or in (1939) as the country's sole true pacifist. More importantly, I can't help but feel that a still more interesting approach to the same issue would have been to take a committed anti-fascist church (for example, Conrad Noel's at Thaxted) and to have asked how an anti-fascist message was adopted into distinctively Christian forms (sermons, prayers, the iconography of banners, etc). I have no doubt that this was done. Nor do I doubt that it was real and effective anti-fascism, even without a street demonstration in sight.

The limits of Copsey and Olechnowicz's collection are best illustrated by its 'outrider' chapter (my term, not theirs), by Julia Stapleton on the Catholic novelist G. K. Chesterton and the patriotic historian Arthur Bryant. Stapleton gave herself or was given the title 'the limits of pro-fascism and anti-fascism', but if her purpose was to show that the difference between the two terms was mere shades of grey, her examples are badly chosen. Both figures wrote copiously about fascism, and in both cases the majority of their copy was positive. At the cost of simplification, we may say that Chesterton took the view that Mussolini was on balance an unlikeable ruler of Italy, but that he should be defended from his opponents, who (being Bolsheviks) were worse. Mosley also was undesirable, for the reason that he was insufficiently anti-Semitic. As for Bryant, he was not merely a popular journalist but also a leader of Kinship in Husbandry, a modest player in what Stapleton rightly terms the wartime 'fascist fringe'. In a historical context other than the crisis

of the 1930s and 1940s, Bryant might well have found more quickly his ultimate intellectual resting place, which was a nostalgic hostility to both capitalism and communism. Such politics is of course distinct from fascism's reactionary ultra-modernism. In her final sentence, Stapleton defines the anti-fascism of these two figures as having expressed itself in 'doubts' about fascism. It is not mere pedantry to say that if anti-fascism is to mean anything it must surely mean more than an occasional doubt (generally expressed in private) about the historical brilliance of Mosley, Mussolini and Hitler, by writers who spent far more time justifying fascism before the public than they did opposing it.

That said, any reader will find much in this collection to enjoy, from Philip Williamson's spirited (if implausible) defence of the Conservative Party's record as inter-war Britain's most successful and sustained anti-fascist force; to Gottlieb's careful dissection of the differing parts played by different feminist campaigns (the most militant, she shows, were often the most coherently pacifist and the most sustainedly hostile to Versailles, and were not the best equipped to deal with the rise of Hitler) and Olechnowicz's attempt to show that there were in Britain in Laski and A. D. Lindsay anti-fascist theorists of an equal calibre to such Continental names as Gramsci, Thalheimer and Trotsky (in truth, Laski and Lindsay were theorists of a minor rank; but it is still for the good that they have been noticed).

Both books have pushed back the historical boundary. Yet I suspect that it is *Varieties of Anti-Fascism* rather than *Oswald Mosley and the New Party* which will be read most in future years. For having been eclipsed in the 1960s and 1970s by other British fascists, including G. K. Chesterton's nephew A. K. (the first Chairman of the National Front) Oswald Mosley's tradition began to wither and die. The British fascists of the present, and therefore of the future, have different heroes, plebeian rather than aristocratic. They owe little to Mosley's world. Non-Mosley fascism is a force in present day British politics, as (inevitably) is opposition to such fascism. While I do criticise some of the positions taken by the authors of *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, I do not criticise for a second the purpose of their book, which is to open up to scrutiny historical anti-fascism in all its various forms.

There will be more histories of anti-fascism in future. For the historians who write them, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism* will be an important reference point.

Notes

1. Graham Macklin, *Very Deeply Dyed in Black: Sir Oswald Mosley and the Resurrection of British Fascism After 1945* (London, 2007); David Baker, *Ideology of Obsession: A. K. Chesterton and British Fascism* (London, 1996).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (London, 2000); David Renton, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s* (London, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State*, ed. Nigel Copsey and David Renton (Basingstoke, 2005).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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