

Review - Music, Youth and International Links in Post-War British Fascism: The Transformation of Extremism

The cultural history of interwar forms of fascism in Britain have been extensively scrutinized by the likes of Richard Thurlow, Thomas Linehan and Julie Gottlieb in recent years, while the equally marginalized groups that grew after the Second World War have been far less well studied. In a welcome revision to this trend, Ryan Shaffer's *Music, Youth and International Links in Post-War British Fascism* offers detailed examination of a milieu that, though on the margins of British politics and society, has helped to shape racist cultures in the second half of the twentieth century, and continues to campaign for extremist ideals in the twenty-first.

Though Shaffer is keen to stress that his volume is an 'empirical', rather than a 'theoretical', contribution to the existing literature, the book opens with an introduction that aligns the study with recent theorists of fascism such as Roger Griffin, who focuses on the need to explore fascism's 'palingenetic' and anti-liberal cultures. It also presents itself as complementary to the work of leading figures in the study of British fascism such as Graham Macklin and Nigel Copsey who, like Shaffer, highlight the need to examine fascism as a complex culturally driven phenomenon. The introduction also comments on source material used, which as well as spanning many magazines and other literatures created by British fascists, encompasses oral history interviews with leading protagonists such as Martin Webster, Joe Pierce and Nick Griffin, as well as other key figures such as Peter Hain and even Garry Bushell.

Shaffer stresses that, while scholars such as the political scientist Matthew Goodwin have explored the recent rise and fall of the British National Party, the preceding story of the National Front has been neglected in recent times. To help address this imbalance, chapter 2 draws out the roots of the National Front, which was founded in 1967 and reached its height in the 1970s. He rightly places its origins in a longer, anti-Semitic tradition in Britain, one that was fostered after the Second World War by the likes of A. K. Chesterton's League of Empire Loyalists. The chapter also examines how, by the 1970s, a hard-line form of coded neo-Nazism was promoted by the National Front's more well-known leader, John Tyndall. He helped to shape the party as a vehicle for street violence as well as contesting elections, before leaving in the wake of a disastrous performance at the 1979 General Election.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the role of young activists within the movement. Given the National Front's failure to achieve its aim of winning national, or even local, elections, younger activists turned to alternative ways to make an impact. Fascist and anti-fascist youth cultures clashed with the growth of the competing Rock Against Racism and Rock Against Communism movements. By the 1980s, young National Front radicals such as Nick Griffin, Patrick Harrington and Derek Holland sought to take the party into new, obscure ideological directions, alienating most of its lingering supporters. This youth milieu also saw the growth of transnational networking, and new organizations steeped in the White Power music

scene, such as Blood & Honour, captured the attention of neo-Nazi sympathizers in America and Europe.

These discussions exemplify one of the key strengths of the volume, namely its precision in detailing the formation and break-up of specific groups, and their interrelationships with one another. However, emphasis on developments among British fascists themselves can lead to unsatisfyingly limited reflections on the wider context of British and European history. While Shaffer develops clearly what happened, he can be weaker on explaining why it happened.

The later 1980s and 1990s were a complex time for British fascist networks, despite their limited wider relevance. Shaffer's fifth chapter examines how the milieu saw further transformations following the collapse of the National Front, while the British National Party (itself founded by Tyndall in 1982) began to consider itself a party capable of achieving elected office. On the one hand, unprecedented success came when the party gained a councillor in 1993; on the other, its activists continued to promote a reputation for street violence and extremism, as did related groups such as Combat 18. Fortunes changed in 1999, when former hardliner and Holocaust denier Nick Griffin took over the British National Party and pushed for a much more family-orientated, 'modernized' image. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the 2000s, a period of unparalleled growth, at least electorally, for British fascism. Shaffer examines how new online tools, a 'softer' style of presentation and continued borrowing from international influences all played a part in this reinvention of British fascism. However, while transnational exchanges led to new ideas, such as the British National Party's Red White and Blue Festival, modelled on a similar initiative by Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National, by the 2010s, Griffin's elevation to MEP resulted in a greater focus on the international rather than the national. Thereafter, the party fell into decline and is now, like the National Front before it, once again politically irrelevant.

Shaffer concludes that post-war British fascism has concentrated on engaging the young, and on establishing international contacts. Certainly, the book successfully tells the story of how many British fascists, especially through youth-orientated music cultures, have been able to reinvent white nationalist, and even neo-Nazi, activism. However, the focus on the young and the transnational ultimately only tells part of the story. Many British fascists have also been older figures, as evidenced by the ongoing activities of interviewees such as Edmonds and Webster, who continue to play a role in their later years. The idealization of 'youth' no longer means that these protagonists are actually 'young' either – as the audience at recent Blood & Honour events amply demonstrates! While this book is an important part of the growing literature examining post-1945 British fascist culture, the focus on (male) youth leaves unanswered questions about those drawn to, or active in, the movement at other points in their life cycle. Nevertheless, Shaffer has made an important contribution to the study of British fascism. His empirical approach provides an invaluable, and very readable, guide to the many, tiny groups and splinter groups, as well as the variegated ideological trends, that have fostered this complex, marginalized movement from the 1960s to the present day.