Women and fascism in 1930s Britain

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While recently cataloguing a box for the collection at the Searchlight Archive at the University of Northampton, I came across a faded typed-out script for a talk. The talk was one that Martin Durham gave at a History Workshop over 40 years ago – in 1983 – on the topic of women's involvement in the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s. It seems appropriate for it to have emerged now, as we enter a time when questions about how and why people vote for those promising radical right-wing solutions, or themselves become involved in those movements, feel once again pressing.

Durham was a well-known figure in Far Right Studies – in particular for his work on the role of gender within the far right. He spent much of his career at Wolverhampton University and sadly died in 2022. His book *Women and Fascism* (1998) was one of the first academic monographs to examine how women became involved in what had traditionally been viewed as a purely masculine political ideology. It remains a key text. His talk at the History Workshop in 1983 offers us an earlier iteration of the research that came to inform *Women and Fascism*.

Women made up over 20% of the active membership of the British Union of Fascists, and Durham expertly examined the role that women played in such movements. *Women and Fascism* addressed the apparent contradiction of why women would wish to be involved in political movements that seemed determined to reduce their newly-won rights and were focused on development of the "New Man". As his obituary notes, Durham had a particular style – while he was opposed to the far right, he considered them as serious ideologies and tried to dispassionately understand their motivations and movements. This fits into the wider cultural turn of Far Right Studies, examining the internal cultures, ideologies, and dynamics of these movements, rather than treating them as a purely reactionary force.

I discovered Durham's talk to the History Workshop just weeks after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States – and the historical insights it offers feel uncannily relevant today. Though disowned by the Trump Campaign, many key figures around the President were involved in Project 2025 – a plan for a radical transformation of American society, pledging a return to an alleged previous state where America was morally, economically and politically strong. Despite attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, particularly against Trans individuals, Trump was able to derive support from LGBTQ+ individuals. Despite pledges to begin mass deportations and roundups of Latino migrant communities, he was able to win votes from Latino communities in places such as Miami. Despite being a key figure in the rollback of women's Reproductive Rights, he was backed by many women.

Some of the questions we seek to answer as we struggle to understand the rise of Trump once again, including the seeming contradictions we might see in his support, are the same as those questions Durham was seeking to answer in the in 1980s, looking back at the 1930s. The answers to these questions won't always sit easily with our assumptions but will better inform our reactions to – and our analysis of – these movements. It is essential to understand the complexities of these movements, and those that are its activists and supporters, as we strive to create a world where the far right are consigned to the fringes of our society.

The talk has been faithfully transcribed from the original document in the Searchlight Archive at the University of Northampton. The words and ideas are all Martin Durham's – and for any errors, the

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blame I'm sure is my own.

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Women in the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940

In 1932 the former Labour Minister, Oswald Mosley, formed the British Union of Fascists. The organisation enjoys a rapid growth, reaching perhaps 40,000, only to lose most of them again, and for most of the decade the BUF numbered less than 10,000. It continued in existence however until the end of the decade when, shortly after the outbreak of war, Mosley and other fascists were interned and the organisation banned.

The BUF, Britain's largest fascist organisation, has been the subject of a considerable amount of research, so much so that one reviewer at the end of the seventies expressed the view that we knew quite enough about it and that nothing more remained to be said. I want to suggest however that this is not the case and that at least one important question remains to be explored – the BUF and women.

We know very little about BUF policy towards women – what fascists said about women's waged work, about the family, about women's role in society. We know even less about women's opposition to the BUF – their involvement in a variety of organisations campaigning against fascism in the thirties. I intend to touch on both of those areas during this paper. But there is a third issue I want to concentrate on today – one that is the most difficult to think through and the most controversial to discuss. That area is the role of women in the BUF.

At first sight, the very idea seems absurd. If one thing is known about the sexual politics of fascism, it's that such movements are male-dominated and anti-feminist. The Nazi party spoke of pushing women back into the home, of giving women's jobs to unemployed men, of women's place as the mother of a large family, and they tried to implement such policies when they came to power. If we know little or nothing of the BUF's attitude to women, we would expect it was much the same, and almost the only reference I know of by a modern feminist writer supports this interpretation. Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History* has two quotations from Mosley in the thirties. In one he advocates eugenics – a selective reproduction policy, and in the other he voices the sentiments echoed in the seventies in almost the same words by the then-NF leader, John Tyndall – that a healthy society would have men who are men and women who are women. Bearing in mind the policies of the Nazis and those views of Mosley, how can there have been women fascists?

Yet there were. Nor was it a matter of a handful or a British oddity. When the Nazis came to power in 1933 only 6% of their number were women. But that percentage meant 56,000 women, and as many again were in an affiliated women's organisation. French fascists too in the thirties recruited women, as did Swedish and Swiss, Italian and Spanish, Danish and Irish. Men fascists outnumbered women, men led fascist movements, but fascist women existed in much of Europe, including Britain.

Nor was it a case of a few women who somehow drifted into a patriarchal organisation that never got round to noticing them. The BUF very much wanted women to join, made a special effort to recruit them and developed structures and policies in an attempt to make fascism attractive to women.

Many of the issues that concerned the BUF directly related to women's lives. It supported the creation of family allowances, for instance, and campaigned against the appalling maternal mortality rate. That it should take up such issues is not perhaps surprising – while they were certainly in the

interest of women, they were connected in fascist policy with the need to raise the birth-rate and strengthen Britain's position in the world. But other British Union policies are more disconcerting. This is starkly illustrated by a pamphlet the BUF published in 1935 in an attempt to recruit women. The cover of the pamphlet, *Women and Fascism*, declared: 'You have the vote – yet are still powerless', and inside the author, Anne Brock Griggs, sets out ten points of a Fascist policy for women. One related to better housing, another to mother and infant welfare, another to the need to improve the national food supply. But the pamphlet also supported equal pay for women, insisted on improved working conditions for women workers, opposed the marriage bar which stopped women from keeping their jobs after they married and advocated the entry of more women into the professions. In fascist Britain, the pamphlet promised, women would be assured an equal status with men and would be able to direct and control the conditions under which they lived.

These policies were not an aberration on the part of Anne Brock Griggs, the BUF's women's organiser. Another prominent BUF woman, Norah Elam, declared in the *Fascist Quarterly* in 1935 that fascists would introduce 'equal pay for equal work'. Nor was it unique to women. The BUF's leading theoretician, Alexander Raven Thomson, also argued for equal pay and opposition to the marriage bar.

It would be misleading to present these positions as the sum total of fascist policies towards women. Other aspects of the BUF's programme were clearly reactionary towards women – its opposition to birth control for example – and others were at least ambiguous, none more perhaps than the BUF's ideas about how a fascist state would represent women's interests. The BUF advocated a corporate state in which employers, workers and consumers in different industries would come together in corporations to represent the interests of their particular industries. One of those corporations, according to both Mosley and Raven Thomson, would represent the interests of married women as mothers and housewives. This notion I want to suggest was plainly ambiguous in its implications for women. While Mosley claimed that professional and working women would be represented in the corporations relevant to their work, his concern with 'the great majority of women who seek the important career of motherhood' easily shifted into a distinction between those whom he called 'normal women, who whom the future of the race depends' and women politicians whose one idea was to escape from the normal sphere of women. While he argued that women had much to contribute to the resolution of political questions, it is clear that he saw women as essentially mothers.

It is also clear that fascist support for higher wages for working people was often seen as a family wage and the "freeing" of women from the need to work, and equal pay too was sometimes argued in terms of how it would stop men losing their jobs to cheaper women. The BUF was quite capable of publishing arguments for women's right to work and an article like 'A Young Man looks at Marriage' (1937) in which the writer bewailed a system that paid women as much or more than him, rather than paying a family wage that would make marriage vital to young women. But if fascist policies were often reactionary or ambiguous, they were not always so. Like almost every other political force in the thirties, the BUF wanted to win newly enfranchised women as supporters and voters, and felt it necessary to put forward policies that would alleviate and improve the conditions of women's lives.

The BUF sometimes spoke to women as waged workers but it was probably as mothers that it most frequently addressed them. And part of that appeal was to women's desire for peace and fear of war. Just as it would be mistaken to think of fascists as always masculine, so it is also misconceived to see fascists as always glorifying violence and war. The BUF on the contrary spent much of the thirties campaigning *against* war. In Norah Elam's words, 'most important of all Fascism comes to lay for ever the haunting spectre of war'. It was central to the BUF's ideology that the threat of war came from

international Jewish finance's hatred of Nazi Germany and that these financiers were attempting to use their power over the press, the BBC and politicians to poison the minds of the British people against Nazism and bring about a war in which millions would die. Only Mosley could avert the risk of war, the BUF believed, and it put an immense amount of effort into peace campaigning. An important part of this campaign was oriented to women, as a Mosley speech in early 1939 demonstrates – 'There are thousands of women living here in East London today with their husbands, their brothers, their children who may be doomed by this war conspiracy to the bitterest tears that a woman can shed. What good does it do to such a woman to know that German women, too, are doomed by us striking back at a foreign city? … Is that going to bring the broken body of a child back to life? War is a crime against the people of all lands.'

The BUF's peace campaign reached its peak in the final months of the movement's existence when war, despite its efforts, had broken out, and it was campaigning for a negotiated peace with Germany. A November 1939 issue of the fascist paper reported how the British Union was working harder than ever for peace. We can best serve the memory of those who fell in the First World War, and our country, the article declared, by winning peace for the living. Miss Orrin had spoken for peace at Leyton, Mrs Steele at Victoria Park Square, to the largest crowd since war had broken out, Olive Hawks at Woolwich, Mrs Steele again at Chertsey, Miss Hayes in Bournemouth, Miss Hadaway and Mrs Booth in Manchester. The following year the BUF launched a Women's Peace Campaign, in which fascist women in Hampshire, Sussex, Lancashire, Wales and elsewhere were involved. A Holborn Hall meeting, seating 800, almost all women, was completely stewarded and addressed by women. Thousands of BUF members, the Union claimed, were part of 'the great army of housewives and mothers'. The Union organised a women's poster demonstration in the East End and a women's peace meeting at Friends House, Euston, addressed by Mosley and women speakers. 'before long', the BUF weekly claimed in April 1940, 'this will be a war of mothers against this foul system of democracy that calls upon them every twenty years to sacrifice their sons'. Within weeks, however, the government moved against the BUF, and among the interned were Anne Brock Griggs and Norah Elam.

BUF rhetoric constantly fell back upon sexist presuppositions – effeminate was deployed as an insult, feminine used as a synonym for hysterical and irrational. Its propaganda was run through with ambiguities and contradictions. On equal pay, for instance, there was the frequent implication that its introduction would protect men against the threat of women's cheap labour, that it might function not to improve working women's wages but to deprive them of their jobs. But while the BUF was a patriarchal organisation, it was not so in an uncomplicated way, and part of its complexity was that it *did not* openly oppose feminism. Instead it worked hard to try and present itself as a supporter of women's equality.

I mentioned earlier Raven Thomson's advocacy of a corporation, a special state structure, to represent women as mothers and housewives. He subsequently modified this to a domestic corporation which would represent all those who performed domestic labour, including male servants. This reformulation, argued a BUF reviewer of his book, should dispose 'of the contention that fascism is anti-Feminist'. It was a matter of real concern to the BUF that feminists would not accept that it was not a threat to women's rights. Thus the *Fascist Quarterly* at the beginning of 1936 published a letter drawing attention to a recent book, *Towards Sex Freedom* by Irene Clephane, which had commented on what she called the odd spectacle of young women dressed in black shirts selling fascist literature when fascism would reverse the gains of the women's suffrage movements and enforce their subordination. It was important, the letter-writer said, to make it clear that the BUF stood for women's equality and to distance it from the anti-feminist policies of Nazi Germany. Anne

Brock Griggs, replying, emphasised the Union's opposition to the marriage bar and support for equal pay, and suggested that women's employment in Germany was rising and the regime's early attacks on women's rights were being reversed.

The different sections of the interwar feminist movement were strongly opposed to fascism. The Six Point Group and the National Union of Women Teachers were affiliated to the Women's Committee against War and Fascism, part of an international women's anti-fascist movement which also involved Sylvia Pankhurst and women in the Communist Party and which is discussed in Sue Bruley's thesis on the Communist Party and women between the wars. The Open Door Council, which campaigned against protective legislation, also opposed fascism as a threat to women, while the London and National Society for Women's Service, originally part of the old National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, voted at its 1934 AGM against the Nazi attitude to women, was addressed the following year by a Nazi woman sent by the German regime to dissuade it, and promptly voted against Nazism again. Even the Women's Guild of Empire, a right wing feminist group led by the former suffragette, Flora Drummond, which campaigned for women's equality at the same time as it opposed strikes and Communism, campaigned against the BUF as a threat to women.

But while the feminist Movement opposed fascism, in at least four cases former members of the Women's Social and Political Union, the suffragettes, decided in the thirties to join the BUF.

Mary Richardson, the BUF's women's organiser before Brock Griggs, had been a suffragette, as a Special Branch report in 1934 recently quoted in the *Guardian* reported, and her most notable act of militancy had been a famous axe-attack upon the painting, the Rokeby Venus, at the National Gallery in 1914. She had subsequently been a Labour parliamentary candidate on three occasions but in 1934 joined the BUF. Norah Elam, whom I have mentioned already, was also known as Mrs Dacre Fox, and it is under that name that she can be found referred to in suffragette memoirs, picketing the Archbishop of Canterbury, being arrested while trying to petition the King, a very active WSPU militant. Another lesser-known ex-suffragette, Mercedes Barrington, was like Norah Elms a BUF Prospective Parliamentary Candidate, and both had been Conservatives before joining the Union. The fourth and last to join was Mary Allen, a former suffragette best known for her subsequent organisation of a Women's Police Force in the First World War and after.

Norah Elam in the article I have already cited, 'Fascism, Women and Democracy', published in 1935, actually went so far as to claim that fascism represented the logical development of the suffragette movement, not its contradiction. The suffragettes had fought to fain an equal say for women, she wrote, yet this had proved illusory. Under a phony democracy that was really the rule of financiers, none of the things they had wanted to do with the vote had proved feasible – housing conditions were still terrible, unemployment still made workers' lives insecure, foreign policy proved to be beyond the electorate's control. Not only did corrupt politicians and bankers block the road to the influence and the reforms the suffragettes had fought for but, Elam argued, the WSPU resembled fascism in its form of organisation. Both were hierarchically organised, drew supporters from every class, had been unpopular and persecuted. 'Fascism alone', she wrote, 'will continue the work begun … by militant women from 1906 to 1914'.

In fact the WSPU had been a diverse political movement, whose members came from and went to all points of the political compass, including the radical left. But for Anne Brock Griggs, too, the suffragettes had prefigured fascism. It was the WSPU, she stated, who had first used the term 'Leader' as a reverential title. With this very arguable interpretation of the suffragettes, the BUF claimed to be its inheritor. When Mosley spoke alongside Norah Elam in late 1936 he told the audience that it was a slander that National Socialism proposed putting women back into the home.

The woman beside him, he went on, had fought in the past for women's suffrage. She had been imprisoned and was a great example of the emancipated women of Britain.

Anne Brock Griggs in particular was exercised by the argument that fascism was anti-feminist and she can often be found in print on the question. Thus, for instance, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote a long article in 1936 denouncing fascist policies towards women. Griggs replied, arguing that women's employment was on the rise in Germany and pointing to Leni Riefenstahl's prominence in public life under Nazism. The BUF also took up the argument more directly. Hence in 1939 in an article 'Feminists Duped by Reds' the BUF denounced the Six Point Group's appeal for Spanish women. Instead of dabbling in international politics, the BUF said, the Six Point Group should put its energies into expressing British women's legitimate grievances. The following year an article entitled 'Angry Women Occupy Communist Platform' reported how BUF women had seized the platform at a Women's Committee against War and Fascism meeting and denounced it as a Communist front which supposedly advocated peace but really stood for anti-fascist war. Only the BUF, the women fascists claimed, really stood for peace.

Why did women join the BUF? I can only be tentative here as I still have a lot more material to work through, but let me make some suggestions. Some, it is clear, joined because they wanted to improve people's lives. This was the case for the Blackburn women's organiser, interviewed in the seventies by Stuart Rawnsley. Another researcher, John Brewer, found the same motivation in the case of a Birmingham women Blackshirt, and Yolande McShane, women's organiser for Merseyside, in her recent autobiography, *Daughter of Evil*, gives similar reasons: 'I found Mosley's ideas attractive – they seemed to promise a better life for the very poor … Joining the Blackshirts seemed to bring nearer the day when all children would have enough to eat, and also be able to enjoy the country and sea I loved so much'. Others probably joined in a spirit of adolescent rebellion. The *Guardian* in 1978 published an interview with a former Mosleyite woman who had joined the Union as a teenager, partly because of the telling off she received from her mother when she first bought the movement's paper. The telling off determined her to join the movement. 'It was the most exciting period of my life, the feeling of doing something that was secret from everyone in the family'. Further research will no doubt discover other reasons for joining – antisemitism for instance – but two crucial ones were patriotic reform and adolescent rebellion.

The fascist movement gave women a place in its ranks. Certainly, some were restricted to the tasks they carried out in every male-dominated movement of the thirties – bazaar work, fund raising. But some spoke at public meetings – in London, in Manchester, Doncaster, Blackburn, Birmingham, Sheffield and elsewhere. Some sold papers – in Manchester in 1935 one received a special prize for the highest number of papers sold by a woman member in one week – 109. Some were prospective parliamentary candidates and some, as photos remind us, were trained in unarmed combat. There was a women's section, women's branches, women's organisers, women's pamphlets, a women's page in the BUF paper and even an attempt to launch a magazine, the *Woman Fascist*.

Many women stayed for a short while and then left. But others remained fascists for the rest of their lives. Nellie Driver died in 1981, and was the subject of an obituary in *Action*, the paper still issued by the remnants of the Mosleyites. She was, the paper recalled, a dedicated follower of the movement – the only child of a widowed weaver, she had been a trainee weaver, only to give it up to join the British Union in its campaign against foreign textile imports. Women's organiser for the area in which she lived, she had been detained during the war along with other fascist women in Holloway, but had remained a staunch Mosleyite.

The most striking thing about her was not the length or depth of her commitment, but the area in which she was active. In the obituary's words, it was 'a cotton town once known as "Little Moscow"', Nelson. Anyone who has read Jill Liddington's article on Selina Coper, a socialist and feminist who lived in the same area and was active in the Women's Committee against War and Fascism, can hardly fail to be struck by the contrast between the local socialist culture she describes and the local fascist branch described by Stuart Rawnsley, some hundred strong, which Nellie Driver effectively organised despite male prejudice depriving her of the formal position of organiser.

Other women too remained with Mosley for decades. In 1970 the declining remnant of his followers, now the Union Movement, put up candidates in the GLC elections. The results were pitifully low but it is the candidates that are of particular interest. In Hexley, Muriel Marsh had been a follower of Mosley since the early thirties. In Greenwich, Mary Winn had been a supporter of Mosley since 1936, and in Richmond upon Thames, Rosina Prentice had joined the Mosleyites when they reformed in 1948, and was still active 22 years later.

It is important and far more agreeable to study the history of women in the feminist and socialist movements, and much remains to be done. But I hope I've raised the kind of problem that anti-feminist historians could easily monopolise and which a pro-feminist history needs to be able to explore and discuss. Hundreds of women, perhaps thousands, joined Mosley's ranks in the thirties. The BUF claimed to be fighting for the original aspirations of the women's movement, just as it claimed to represent the spirit of the Labour Party of Keir Hardie and the socialism of William Morris. The fascist movement conjured up in many histories is a massed horde of antisemitic thugs, horrifically masculine, uncompromisingly reactionary. But the BUF could be experienced by members in the thirties as an organisation for both sexes which championed the cause of patriotic reform and the equality of women, yet *at the same time* it was a patriarchal and anti-democratic movement. This ability of the extreme right to present itself in different ways, to speak to women in seemingly progressive intonations, represents an important problem for understanding the complicated relationship between politics, gender and patriarchy that needs to be explored and discussed.

Martin Durham.