

What Did You Do During the War?
The Last Throes of the British Pro-Nazi Right, 1940-45

Richard Griffiths

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Richard Griffiths is an Emeritus Professor of King's College, London and the author of two previous books on the British pro-Nazi Right: *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-39* and *Patriotism Perverted: Captain Ramsay, the Right Club and British Anti-Semitism 1939-1940*. This third volume is part of a series, Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right.¹ It's an in-depth study of a period that is excluded from some histories of British Fascism, such as Martin Pugh's *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! British Fascism Between the Wars, 1919-1939*, or else included as part of a general history of Fascism up to the present day, such as Richard Thurlow's *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*. It is meticulously footnoted and, in addition to the general bibliography at the back of the book, each chapter also has its own bibliography, including documentary sources. Many of the quotations cited in the text also come from official documents, such as MI5 reports and political correspondence between MPs. There is also a 'rogue's gallery' of potted biographies of some of the Fascists and Nazis who are mentioned in the text.

The book begins by attacking two myths. The first is another piece of self-serving deception by Oswald Mosley, who claimed that he had definitely not instructed his storm troopers to obstruct the British war effort. This comes from the text of one of the wannabe dictator's speeches, as printed in *Action*, the magazine of the British Union of Fascists. In that Mosley ordered his troops to follow orders and cooperate with the war effort. But the text of the speech had been altered before it was printed. In his original speech, Mosley made it

¹ The others include Nigel Copsey and John E. Richardson (eds.), *Cultures of Post-War British Fascism*; Brian Jenkins and Chris Millington, *France and Fascism: February 1934 and the dynamics of political crisis*; Colin Holmes, *Searching for Lord Haw-Haw: The political lives of William Joyce*; Philip M. Coupland, *Farming, Fascism and Ecology: A life of Jorian Jenks*; Francis Beckett, *Fascist in the Family: The tragedy of John Beckett MP*.

clear that only members of the armed forces should cooperate with the authorities, and that the rest of the BUF should carry on their pro-Nazi activities. This is another attack on the very sanitised image of Mosley created by Robert Skidelsky's biography in 1975,² which Stephen Dorril effectively demolished in his biography of the old Fascist, *Blackshirt*.³

The other myth attacked is the belief that the British people, as a whole, were sympathetic to the Jews and their suffering under the Nazis. The publication in January 1940 of Arthur Bryant's paean to Hitler and the Nazis, *Unfinished Victory*, to largely rave reviews from the press, shows that this was not the case. A writer of popular histories, Bryant was a Baldwinite Conservative, who in 1929 became the educational adviser to the Bonar Law Conservative College at Ashridge. His first book had been *The Spirit of Conservatism*. From 1933 onwards he became pro-Nazi. In July 1939 he had traveled to Germany to talk to the Nazi leaders on a mission which had received the unofficial approval of Neville Chamberlain, who afterward offered to pay Bryant's expenses from secret service funds.

Unfinished Victory was bitterly anti-Semitic. It blamed the Jews, and specifically Kurt Eisner, the leader of the revolution in Bavaria, for the Council Revolution that swept through Germany between late 1918 and early 1919.⁴ It declared that the Jews had been gradually seizing power in Germany following the 1929 Wall Street Crash, and that the banks, publishing, the cinema, theatre and 'a large part' of the press were 'virtually controlled' by them. Following Nazi propaganda, Bryant claimed that the Jews were racially discriminating against Aryans, so that it was becoming progressively more difficult for a gentile German to hold any kind of privileged position. Despite this, the book received glowing reviews from the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Public Opinion*, the *Illustrated London News*, the *New English Weekly*, the *Fortnightly Review*, *St. Martin's Review*, the *Church of England Newspaper*, the *Catholic Herald*, and a series of provincial newspapers. It was, however, criticised by the *Spectator*, which had an anti-appeasement line, the *Jewish Chronicle*, *New Statesman* and the *Guardian*, where A. J. P. Taylor entitled his review 'A Nazi Apologist'. Two women writers in *Time and Tide*, Emily Lorimer, the author of *What Hitler Wants*, and Rebecca West, also attacked it. West

² <<https://www.amazon.com/Oswald-Mosley-Robert-Alexander-Skidelsky/dp/0030865808>>

³ See <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/apr/23/biography.features1>>.

⁴ After Germany's defeat in the First World War, central authority collapsed in many parts of the Reich, and a series of workers', soldiers' and peasants' councils sprang up to take power, spreading from Kiel in the north right down to Bavaria

wrote that it was ' . . . a paean to Hitler so glowing, so infatuated, that it might better have been entitled "Kiss me, Corporal".'

The book's vicious anti-Semitism was largely overlooked by its supporters in the press. Griffiths puts this down to the amount of low-level social anti-Semitism in British culture at the time. Although there wasn't the same level of visceral hatred of Jews that there was in Germany, this social anti-Semitism meant that Jews were excluded from certain circles and the subjects of various jokes and offensive stereotypes. They were portrayed as fixated on money, and as cowards and profiteers during wars. However, by March 1940 official opinion was turning against Bryant. Harold MacMillan, the future Tory PM, and the contact for Bryant in the publishers, dropped him on his return from an official trip to Finland. MacMillan was strongly anti-appeasement, and had probably been made aware just what his fellow anti-appeasers thought of the book. The demise of Chamberlain, and his replacement by Winston Churchill, also brought a new resolve to the anti-appeasement camp, along with the internment of other Fascists and fellow travellers. Bryant himself narrowly avoided this fate, and wound up his Union and Reconstruction movement. He then concentrated on writing the patriotic popular histories, like *English Saga*, which made his reputation. In a later edition of the *Ashridge Review* he described Hitler's seizure of power as 'a terrible calamity'.

In general, discussions of the Nazi regime from this period tended to overlook the persecution of the Jews. Nazi sympathisers frequently defended the regime by acknowledging Nazi maltreatment, before going on to praise what they saw as its positive achievements. Or else they tried to divert the argument, by pointing to alleged British atrocities against the indigenous Arab population in Palestine.

The groups discussed by Griffiths include not only notorious Fascist parties and pro-Nazi groups like the BUF, British Fascists, the Link, the Anglo-German Fellowship, the Constitutional Research Association, the British People's Party, the Right Club, and English Mystery, but also other, lesser-known groups such as English Array. It also discusses aspects of pre-War and wartime British Fascism, that have previously received little attention, such as Rolf Gardiner and the 'Back to the Land' movement. There's an entire chapter on that subject, with seven pages on Rolf Gardiner, one of its major ideological leaders. Gardiner is only mentioned on one page in Thurlow's history.

Griffiths points out that the Brits who supported Nazi Germany did so for a variety of reasons. Some were convinced Nazis, others were Right-leaning pacifists, who wished to avoid another war. Many sympathised with the Nazis

because they genuinely believed that Germany had been unjustly punished by the Treaty of Versailles. Others were impressed with the new German social and political order, and felt that this was what a declining Britain needed in order to regenerate, or simply to combat the economic crisis precipitated by the Crash. Other pro-German sympathisers supported the Nazi regime as they believed it effectively combated the threat of Communism and blocked further Soviet expansion.

Unlike other books on Fascism, which study the movement as a whole, Griffiths' book concentrates on individuals, and how particular British Fascists or fellow-travellers reacted to the war with Germany, surveillance by the state, and the threat of internment. In his conclusion, Griffiths states that the responses to the changed situation after the declaration of war were so varied, that it is impossible to make any generalisations. Nevertheless, the pro-Nazis did react in a number of general ways. Many Fascists, following Ben Greene in the British People's Party and Admiral Domville's The Link, joined the Peace Pledge Union, in order to carry on their agitation against the War. Other British Fascists abandoned their political activities in order to keep their heads down and away from the threat of internment on the Isle of Man. Others decided that their patriotism and love of their homeland outweighed their Fascist beliefs, joining the forces to fight against Hitler, while others tried to carry on as before.

The period of internment did not last the length of the War, and most of the internees were released by 1942. While internment had a devastating effect on the aristocratic leadership, it had also created a feeling of camaraderie amongst those from lower down the social order, and further cemented them together. On their release, some of the Fascists tried to establish new organisations to carry on their struggle. Thus they founded the British National Party, the Constitutional Research Association, the British League of Ex-Servicemen and Women, and the British People's Party. In the case of the BNP, its leaders decided on a policy of deliberate camouflage. All mention of Fascism and National Socialism was banned, and while the party would still be anti-Jewish, this too would be carefully hidden. Instead the party would position itself as anti-Communist, rather than pro-Nazi.

A few British Nazis travelled to Germany to make propaganda broadcasts on behalf of the Reich. By far the best-known of these is the infamous William Joyce, 'Lord Haw-Haw', but there were also a number of others, much less known. These include Henry William Wicks and his daughter, Margaret. Wicks was a weird individual, possibly suffering from a persecution mania, who

believed that the Sun Alliance Insurance company of Canada was at the centre of a conspiracy against him. In Wormwood Scrubs following his prosecution by the company for libel, Wicks encountered Arnold Leese, the anti-Semitic vet and founder of the Imperial Fascist League. Leese convinced him that his problems were all the fault of the 'International Money Power', i.e the Jews. On his release, Wicks and his daughter moved to Germany to work for the Nazis' foreign language broadcasting service. Wicks' daughter, Margaret, was a successful Nazi propagandist. Although she managed to get a job in the service for her father, Wicks' own broadcasts were so lacklustre, and he was so quarrelsome, that the Nazis grew sick of him. After starting disputes with a number of people in Berlin, the German authorities had him interned as an enemy alien. Following the Allied victory, Wicks was tried and convicted as a collaborator, a fate that his daughter mysteriously escaped.

Social Credit

British Nazis and pro-Nazis also reacted by violently denying their previous beliefs. They cast the blame for them and their former Fascist activities on their former comrades. Thus the previously pro-Nazi Scots Lord and Unionist MP, John McKie, made a series of attacks on Lord Tavistock, later the 12th Duke of Bedford. McKie, in turn, was attacked and deselected in 1945 by the Earl of Galloway, the head of the local Unionist Association. Tavistock was one of the most active of the aristocratic supporters of Nazism, a Christian pacifist and social activist, who had been steered to Nazism by an interest in Major C.H. Douglas' Social Credit economic theories.

Douglas had concluded that the problem with the present economic system was not that goods were scarce, but that people were unable to afford them. He therefore recommended that the government should issue vouchers to the public to allow them to purchase the goods they needed. Many of the other Fascists discussed in the book under review were also influenced by Douglas and his monetary theories. But Douglas was also an anti-Semite, who regarded the modern international financial system as a creation of the Jews to exploit gentiles. Other studies also note the influence of Douglas and his theories, but this book is striking in the emphasis it gives Social Credit. Tavistock was so important a part of the pre-War and wartime pro-Nazi Right, that he gets an entire chapter of his own.

Two aristocrats, Lord Brocket and the Duke of Buccleuch, wrote to Halifax and the British government stating their wish for a negotiated peace between Britain and Germany. They also traveled to Germany and, with others,

arranged meetings in Britain with German officials in the hope of achieving that same goal. Lord Sempill, another Scottish Conservative peer, was guilty of passing on secrets to the Japanese. A pioneering aviator, Sempill served in the Royal Air Force, the Royal Naval Air Service, and the Royal Flying Corps, and in the early 1920s led a British delegation to Japan to help them set up a naval airforce. After the collapse of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1921, he started passing on information about new aircraft being developed to the Japanese. Bizarrely, during the War he was given a post in the department for material, where he still kept up his contacts with the Japanese. Burdened with heavy debts, Sempill also dreamed up various money-making schemes that never actually came to anything, travelling to Canada and trying to establish a commercial mission to Romania.

Unlike many of the Fascists lower down the social hierarchy, Sempill was never interned, and a number of other prominent aristocrats, such as Lady Grace Pearson and Viscountess Downe, similarly managed to evade this fate. This seems, in part, to have been due to deference to their elevated social position. But the government was also afraid that prosecuting them would give the Germans the wrong impression of how widespread resistance to the War was. They were also reluctant to prosecute Sempill, lest this reveal that Bletchley Park had cracked the Japanese codes.

In the case of one of the Fascists discussed, John Coast, the War proved to be a redemptive experience. Coast was a former employee of Rothschild's bank, before leaving it to join the Right Club, and worked for a time on Henry Williamson's farm.⁵ He was also an associate and collaborator with Captain George Pitt-Rivers, the viciously anti-Semitic and pro-eugenics descendant of the Victorian archaeologist General Pitt-Rivers. Coast joined up at the outbreak of War. His regiment, the 4th Norfolk, was posted to Singapore three weeks before the Japanese invasion. Captured, Coast and his surviving comrades were interned first in the Changi prison camp, and then the notorious Thailand-Burma railway. Coast's book on it, *Railroad of Death*, is the ultimate source for most other books on the railway, and the film *Bridge on the River Kwai*.⁶ Although he initially continued to hold racist views during his imprisonment, his experience of mixing with people of different races led him to reject his earlier beliefs. He had a profound sympathy for the Indonesian people, marrying a Javanese wife and becoming an expert on Javanese and Balinese music and

⁵ See <<https://www.henrywilliamson.co.uk/>>.

⁶ Coast and a number of other prisoners objected to the film because of its factual inaccuracies.

dance. He had particular sympathy with the 'Indische Jongens', the people of mixed Indonesian and Dutch heritage, who were either sneered at or condescended to by their colonial masters. In the 1950s Coast joined Sukarno and the Indonesia independence movement, becoming one of the Indonesian leader's PR men. After the War, Coast became a noted musical impresario, putting on displays of Javanese and Balinese gamelan music and dance in Britain and America, as well as representing global musical stars like Pavarotti and Bob Dylan. The former anti-Semite also developed close friendships with a number of Jews.

After the War

Griffiths also discusses the fate of the various Fascists and their groups *after* the War. By and large, the leaders of these groups found it difficult to adapt to the changed circumstances after the War. Those who did, by concentrating on Blacks and New Commonwealth Immigrants, were those lower down the ranks in these organisations. Many of them moved away from politics to concentrate on their business, such as Ben Greene and his engineering firm, Kepston, or other interests. Many of the 'Back to the Land' Fascists, like Rolf Gardiner, became pioneers of the nascent Green movement, promoting agricultural reform and ecological awareness. Some became involved in pro-Arab, anti-Zionist activism, particularly following the murder of two British sergeants by the Israeli terrorist group, Irgun, in 1947. Others, such as the Earl of Portsmouth, went to Africa after the War to escape the Welfare State, along with other, Conservative county families. These Fascists were convinced of their racial superiority, and the biological inferiority of the indigenous African peoples. Portsmouth, however, appears to have changed his views gradually over time. Portsmouth became active in Kenyan politics, serving as the chairman of the government's Forestry Advisory Committee and a member of the Legislative Council. Staying on after the country gained its independence, in 1963 he declared his belief in co-operation between races. From that year onwards Portsmouth worked as the vice-chairman of the East African Resources Research Council. Two years later he published his autobiography, in which he stated again his belief in co-operation, and his paternalistic belief that, as an aristocrat, he was contributing more to the country than he got out.

Back in Britain, other aristocrats provoked confrontations with their tenants through their high-handed behaviour. In the late 1940s Lord Brocket tried to turn over his 52,000 acre Knoydart estate completely to shooting, evicting many of the crofters and tenants from their homes. This was particularly resented as this was a period of acute land hunger in Scotland,

when many would-be crofters were denied the land they needed. Brocket was also personally unpopular because of his pro-Nazi beliefs and lack of National Service during the War. In 1948 he prosecuted seven ex-servicemen, who had invaded and staked out crofts for themselves on the Knoydart estate. They had done so following the spirit behind legislation passed after the First World War which saw a number of farming communities created for ex-servicemen.⁷ The decision to prosecute made him yet more unpopular. Writing in the *National Weekly*, the Scots poet and nationalist, Hugh MacDiarmid, commented that the dispute would bring to a head all the subterranean anger at the way large parts of Scotland had been depopulated by absentee landlords. The former soldiers' cause was also celebrated by the poet and folk musician, Hamish Henderson, in his 'Ballad of the Men of Knoydart'. Brocket won the case, but the situation on his estate had become so uncomfortable for him that the following year, 1949, Brocket sold the estate and purchased the Carton House Estate in Ireland, which had formerly been the residence of the Dukes of Leinster.

In the conclusion, Griffiths discusses the possibility that some of the Fascists, who vehemently denied that they had ever held Nazi or pro-Nazi views, were genuinely misremembering their pasts, rather than consciously lying. He also points out that the activities of British Fascists, and especially the experience of Fascist aristocrats, shows the immense difference between then and now. Theirs was a much more class-based society, in which great deference and power was wielded by the aristocracy simply because of their social status. It was also one where there was considerable social anti-Semitism, which he believes has now largely disappeared.

But he also takes the opportunity to correct his optimistic conclusion in one of his previous books on Fascism, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Fascism* published in 2000. He then considered that the Britain of the early Fascist movements was so different from that of today, that Fascism no longer presented a threat to modern Britain. This prompted the Marxist writer Ian Birchall to send him a letter, pointing out that this could all change through

⁷ None of these farms were a success. See, for example, the brief account of one such created at Sunk Island in East Yorkshire in Howard Peach's *Curious Tales of Old East Yorkshire* at <<https://tinyurl.com/ycm8l74d>> or <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=twW00FpGzJAC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=sunk+island+farmers+World+War+1&source=bl&ots=ltIeB2RH1v&sig=keVCF1rKMQ5JQeVBWISu6chwLoo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj08JvT3_jYAhWPh7QKHf69C4gQ6AEIUTAF#v=onepage&q=sunk%20island%20farmers%20World%20War%201&f=false>ff

alterations in the fabric of society, created by crises such as climate change or economic hardship, including mass unemployment. Birchall warned that Fascist and Nationalist rhetoric would be particularly appealing, if global warming produces mass movements of populations. Griffiths ends with the statement that 'Ian's warning is, in our present situation, a timely one.' (p. 310). In fact, some climatologists are predicting that, by the middle of this century, global warming will have made the Middle East uninhabitable. The mass influx of refugees and asylum-seekers from Syria, along with the West's colonial wars in the Middle East, has already produced a far Right reaction in much of the continent. This boosted the Alternative fuer Deutschland in Germany, the Front National in France, and for a brief time, Farage's UKIP here in Britain. The BNP, which a few years ago seemed set to break into mainstream British politics, has declined to insignificance. But in America there has been a populist revival of the Alt-Right, described as 'the Klan with keyboards' around Donald Trump. And in eastern Europe there are a number of extreme Right-wing, anti-Semitic parties (like Fidesz and more extreme groups in Hungary) that have declared that their intention, like the AfD, is to preserve their nations from the threat of Islamic immigration. Over here, the Tories' austerity policy is forcing increasing numbers of working people into poverty, unemployment and job insecurity. Xenophobic Tory papers like the *Daily Mail* then blame the usual scapegoats – the poor themselves, the disabled and asylum-seekers. The threat of a renewed Fascism in British politics is very real.

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