

When Freedom Shrieked and the *Daily Mail* cheered

Reporting on Hitler:

Rothay Reynolds and the British Press in Nazi Germany

Will Wainewright

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In 1939, the leftwing publisher Victor Gollancz issued a powerful indictment of the Nazis, *When Freedom Shrieked*. It quickly sold out, going into a second edition within two weeks. What is surprising is that the book was written by Rothay Reynolds, the man who had been the *Daily Mail's* correspondent in Germany since 1921 and who completely disagreed with the pro-Nazi stand taken throughout the 1930s by the paper's proprietor, Lord Rothermere. Will Wainewright's new book explores this remarkable situation and it's a story made all the more relevant by the revival of the Far Right today.

Reynolds had started out covering Tsarist Russia for the *Daily News*, reporting on the 1905 revolution. He had been sympathetic to Tsar Nicholas, regarding him as a reformer, trying to modernise the country. He left Russia in 1912, working briefly in Berlin for *The Standard*. During the First World War he worked for British Military Intelligence, MI7 (along with A A Milne!) and he eventually ended up in Berlin working for the *Daily Mail*. In October 1923 he had the dubious honour of interviewing the virtually unknown leader of the infant Nazi Party, a certain Adolf Hitler. Reynolds regarded this as notable only because it gave him 'the chance of seeing an odd type of unbalanced fanatic'. (p. 62) It was, he recalled, not really an interview. Hitler subjected him to a 'diatribe', speaking 'almost as if he was addressing a mass meeting'. A month later the Nazis staged their Munich putsch and Hitler was thrown into prison, a hero of the German Far Right.

Throughout the rest of the 1920s, the Nazis were of little account; then the onset of the Great Depression provided them with their great opportunity. Cheered on by Lord Rothermere and the *Daily Mail*, the Nazis began their rise to power. Reynolds interviewed Hitler once again on 26 September 1930. By this time, Hitler's followers were no longer a small band of Nazi thugs in Munich. He was now the leader of a powerful mass party with over a hundred members in the Reichstag. Rothermere had already declared his support for

the Nazis in the *Daily Mail's* pages. His own article celebrating the Nazi electoral success, 'A Nation Reborn', had appeared in the *Daily Mail* on 24 September and was actually reprinted in the Nazi newspaper, the *Volkischer Beobachter*. Hitler told Reynolds that he was amazed that a foreigner like Rothermere 'should understand what we have in our hearts'. The two men were to correspond regularly throughout the 1930s, meeting on a number of occasions, and Rothermere actually sent Hitler a photograph of himself in a solid gold frame as a testimony to their friendship.

Reynolds, meanwhile, was appalled by the Nazi assault on democracy, on civil liberties, and more particularly by the persecution of the churches and of Germany's Jewish population. According to Wainwright, the *Daily Mail's* coverage of the Jewish Boycott that the Nazis unleashed provided 'clear evidence of proprietorial interference in London'. (p. 99) He goes on to observe that the 'easy ride given to Hitler on the Jewish question by the *Daily Mail* gives away the malign influence of Rothermere'. (p. 101) But what of Reynolds himself? He had to continually 'walk the tightrope between Rothermere's overbearing influence and his own journalistic integrity' and Wainwright concludes, as far as the Jewish Boycott was concerned, 'this was impossible and he fell short'. This obviously raises the question of whether or not anyone working for the *Daily Mail*, either then or now, can make any claim to possess journalistic integrity.

Rothermere also threw his support behind Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists (BUF), hoping, albeit briefly, that Mosley could do for Britain what Hitler was doing for Germany. For a while, staff at the *Daily Mail* actually began turning up for work 'wearing black shirts . . . in solidarity' with their proprietor. (p. 133) The most infamous *Daily Mail* pro-fascist headline was, of course, the admirably unambiguous 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' that appeared in the paper on 15 January 1934. The paper urged young people to join the BUF and help change Britain. This alignment with Mosley did not last long and Wainwright repeats the generally accepted view that Rothermere was put off by the BUF's violence and vicious anti-Semitism. This has never seemed terribly convincing. Much more likely is the fact that it was increasingly clear that the British capitalist class did not need to turn to Fascism to save itself, but could rely on the Conservatives to run the country and keep the lower orders down. One can be absolutely certain that, if there had been any real threat from the Left in Britain, Rothermere would have embraced street violence and anti-Semitism without any hesitation whatsoever.

Reynolds was informed of Rothermere's coming break with the BUF when he received a telegram from London telling him that 'The blackshirts are in the wash and the colour is running very fast'. (p. 135) He hoped this might signal a

break with Hitler as well, but this was not to be. Even though Rothermere turned his back on British Fascism, he remained enamoured with the Nazis. All Reynolds' efforts to report on the real nature of Nazi rule came up against the fact that 'his press baron employer was utterly blind to its awful reality'. (p. 136) Indeed, Reynolds was increasingly marginalised and by 1938 there were only 'a handful of articles carrying Reynolds' byline'. (p. 208)

Reynolds seems to have finally reached breaking point with the Nazis' anti-Semitic pogrom, 'Kristallnacht' and the Munich Agreement. He had had enough and resigned. How did he last so long? Wainwright offers one tantalising tidbit that might help explain this, but it was 'a relatively late discovery during the research for this book' (p. 278): Reynolds close friendship with MI6's head of station in Berlin, Frank Foley. He rejects the idea that Reynolds was some sort of spy, but nevertheless this relationship obviously need further exploration and one can only hope that Wainwright digs further.

Reynolds returned to Britain, wrote *When Freedom Shrieked*, and, once war had broken out, went off to Italy as a correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*. When Italy joined the conflict, he sought refuge in the British Middle East and died from the effects of malaria in Jerusalem on 20 August 1940.

Wainwright has written a very useful book. Although this review has focussed on his account of Reynolds, Wainwright also has a great deal of interest to say about his fellow correspondents in Berlin and the various proprietors they worked for. Certainly, Rothermere seems to have been the worst, although Clement Attlee did apparently describe Lord Beaverbrook as 'the only evil man I ever met'. (p. 121)

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foreign, defence and colonial policies.*