

Failed Führers:
A History of Britain's Extreme Right
Graham Macklin
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Failed Führers is a volume in the Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right series. At the moment there are almost 60 volumes in the series, already published or forthcoming. The handful that I have so far read have all been extremely useful with Richard Griffiths *What Did You Do During the War?: The Last Throes of the British Pro-Nazi Right, 1940-45* (2017), Dan Stone's *Fascism, Nazism and the Holocaust: Challenging Histories* (2021), Nick Toczek's *Haters, Baiters and Would-Be Dictators: Anti-Semitism and the UK Far Right* (2016) and Joe Mulhall's *British Fascism After the Holocaust: From the Birth of Denial to the Notting Hill Riots 1938-1958* (2021), all impressive books.¹ How does Macklin's volume measure up against these studies?

In *Failed Führers*, he provides a history of the British Far Right through the biographies of no less than six failures. This starts with Arnold Leese and then continues through Oswald Mosley, A. K. Chesterton, Colin Jordan, John Tyndall, and finishing up with Nick Griffin. In reality what the reader is given is six short books for the price of one, well over 500 pages long. This is a book to read and then to keep for reference. His chronicling of the British Far Right is detailed, thorough and insightful and certainly this reader learned a lot. I will, for example, never forget that Colin Jordan was arrested in March 1974 for stealing women's underwear from Tesco's. I mean Tesco's! The *Sun* newspaper proclaimed this 'failed führer' the 'pantie thief'. Jordan, of course, claimed that he was the victim of a Jewish plot. (p. 301) Joking aside, the volume provides a relentless chronicle of the role that the most vicious anti-Semitism played in the propaganda and activism of the British Far Right, at least until quite recently.

Leese

¹ It is also worth drawing attention to an earlier book by Dan Stone, *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), an indispensable volume.

Let us start with Arnold Leese, born in 1878, and who was as Macklin argues, 'a pivotal figure in the development of British racial nationalism'. He became increasingly anti-Semitic over time, convinced that Britain's racial rebirth 'could only be achieved by first segregating and then annihilating "The Jew" – arch nemesis of the white race'. (p 23) He established the Imperial Fascist League (IFL) in 1929, which, although always a small organisation, had a disproportionate propaganda impact and certainly caused Mosley some problems. As far as Leese was concerned, Mosley was a Jew (a Jewish uncle on his mother's side) and he is listed as such in Leese's 1936 publication, *Our Jewish Aristocracy: A Tale of Contamination*. He was a persistent advocate of the Jewish 'blood libel' of Jewish ritual child murder, pushing this particular anti-Semitic slander as late as 1953. (p. 44) He became disillusioned with the Nazi regime at the time of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, a disillusion that was compounded by the German invasion of Norway in April 1940. Nevertheless, as far as he was concerned, the real enemy during World War 2 was the 'Jew'. Leese was interned during the War but was released on the grounds of ill-health in February 1944.

After the War he set up the Jewish Information Bureau and launched a new racist and anti-Semitic magazine, *Gothic Ripples*, with some 1,500 subscribers. One subscriber, Captain Robert Gordon-Canning, also took out subscriptions for the Saudi Arabian Legation in London and the Arab League in Cairo. (p. 60) The magazine had a regular 'Nigger Notes' column. (p. 66) As for the Holocaust, Leese initially defended the Nazi massacres as legitimate acts of war – after all it was the Jews who had started the War. By 1953, though, he was denying the Holocaust, albeit in a peculiarly idiosyncratic manner. Hitler was once again, as far as he was concerned, 'one of the greatest statesmen Europe ever had' and the Nazi regime was to be admired; but the fact was that Hitler had failed to deal with the Jewish problem once and for all. The 6 million victims of the Holocaust were a myth, but, as Leese made clear in *Gothic Ripples*, 'we would have liked Hitler even better if the figure had been larger . . . as long as the destruction was done in a humane manner', even though it never happened anyway. (p. 56) Much of Holocaust denial has always to be a coded way of indicating support for the mass murder of the Jews, but with Leese the compelling viciousness of his anti-Semitism even compromised this. Predictably, he opposed the Nuremberg Trials and was particularly upset by the execution of Julius Streicher. He was 'the best man of the lot . . . murdered for doing the same sort of work that I am now doing'. And as for William Joyce, 'Lord Haw Haw', he was a 'hero'. Leese was particularly critical of Mosley for failing to join the campaign to save Joyce. (p. 57) But Leese was not just a propagandist: in March 1947 he was jailed for twelve months for his part in trying to help two

Dutch SS officers escape from Britain to Argentina. (pp. 58-59) Fortunately he died in January 1956, but his poison lived on after him, as Macklin points out, infecting the Far Right not just in Britain, but in Europe, the USA and elsewhere. He was 'increasingly influential upon American anti-Semites after the war'. (p. 61)

Mosley

Which brings us to the second failure: Oswald Mosley. Macklin has already published a study of Mosley's post-War activities: *Very Deeply Dyed in the Black: Sir Oswald Mosley and the Resurrection of British Fascism after 1945* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007). In *Failed Führers*, he devotes some 85 pages of text and notes to Mosley, chronicling his anti-Semitism both before and after the War and his post-War embrace of anti-black racism. The story is too well-known to need rehearsing here, although Macklin's account is still very much worth reading. With right-wing terrorism once again in the headlines today, it is good to be reminded that, for example, in July 1963, three members of Mosley's Union Movement (UM) were jailed (for 2 years, eighteen months and fifteen months respectively) for bombing the *Daily Worker* offices. (p. 143) What is also particularly interesting is how successful Mosley's attempts to rehabilitate himself, and to return to respectability, were in the late 1960s and 1970s. He denied that he had ever been an anti-Semite, even though as late as 1967, when he appeared on the Frost Programme, he combined his denial with a condemnation of the Nuremberg Trials and blaming the Jews for the Second World War and consequently for the Holocaust. It was 'the greatest mistake they ever made when they produced that war'. (p. 147) Mosley began making regular appearances on the TV, becoming a minor celebrity, and he had, we are told, 'numerous meetings' with Cecil King. (p. 148) Very interesting, as they say!

Chesterton

Macklin's third failure is A. K. Chesterton who had joined Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) towards the end of 1933 and had been appointed editor of *The Blackshirt*. He propagated a vicious anti-Semitic message that included championing *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He broke with Mosley in 1938 but continued his advocacy of anti-Semitism, on one occasion telling a meeting of the Nordic League, to considerable applause, that lamp posts were 'the only way to deal with the Jew'. (p. 190) Following the outbreak of War, he somehow avoided internment and instead enlisted, serving as an officer in Kenya and Somaliland, until he was invalided out in 1943. His next step was to go and work for the conservative magazine *Truth*, edited by Collin Brooks, which became a convenient vehicle for his anti-Semitism. As late as 1947, he was

planning to write a book on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, apparently with Brooks' encouragement. (p. 197) Chesterton successfully straddled the worlds of the Far Right and of the British Conservative Party, writing a semi-regular column for the Journal of the Royal United Services Institute and eventually being taken on as a journalist by Lord Beaverbrook. His articles appeared in the *Daily Express*, the *Sunday Express* and the *Evening Standard*, including an October 1953 article sympathetic to William Joyce. This fascist anti-Semite even ghost-wrote Beaverbrook's autobiography, *Don't Trust to Luck*. (1954) He went on to launch his own magazine, *Candour*, and to establish the League of Empire Loyalists. Macklin rejects the view that this organisation was some sort of 'Tory "ginger group"' and notes that as decolonisation got underway and Britain moved to join the European Common Market his relationship with the Conservative Party became increasingly adversarial. Chesterton called for those advocating membership of the Common Market to be hanged just like 'William Joyce was hanged'. (p. 203) Nevertheless, as Macklin acknowledges, the League did have 'support from many grassroots Conservatives', indeed there were many people who held dual membership. The result was often grimly hilarious. At one Conservative Party meeting, the speaker, Geoffrey Stevens MP, accused League hecklers of following a fascist, only for it to be pointed out that the chair of his meeting, Jocelyn Lucas MP, had himself been a BUF member in the 1930s! (p. 203) The League was ferocious in its support for white rule in Africa and in 1964 one of its younger members, Martin Webster, was actually jailed for assaulting Jomo Kenyatta, the prime minister of newly independent Kenya on a visit to London. In 1965, Chesterton published his influential book, *The New Unhappy Lords*, which Macklin sums up as 'an elegantly written anti-Semitic assault upon the subversive and occult conspiracy which was supposedly seeking to replace the British Empire, and subjugate Western civilisation in general, to a "One World" Jewish super-state'. (p. 219) By now Chesterton was acknowledging that *The Protocols* were a fraud, but at the same time insisting that the Jewish conspiracy they exposed was undoubtedly real. (p. 222) In February 1967, the League merged with the then British National Party (BNP) and the Racial Preservation Society (RPS) to form the National Front (NF). Chesterton was its founding chair and remained a leading figure up until 1970. He died in 1973.

Jordan

Colin Jordan was a life-long unrepentant Nazi, so much so that following his death on 9 April 2009, his cremation was specifically held back until it could take place on Hitler's birthday of 30 April. While his Nazi proclivities were never in doubt, he focussed a lot of his attention on propagating anti-black racism, trumpeting the 'KEEP BRITAIN WHITE' cause. He did his best to take advantage

of the Notting Hill riots and of the murder of Kelso Cochrane, whipping up hatred. He then went after the former Labour MP, Patrick Gordon Walker, when he lost his Smethwick seat in the 1964 general election, after a viciously racist Tory election campaign in his constituency. When Gordon Walker stood for the Commons in a bye-election in Leyton in January 1965, Jordan and his miniscule National Socialist Movement (NSM) threw themselves into the campaign, harrying Gordon Walker, denouncing him as a 'race traitor', and violently disrupting his meetings. On nomination day, one of the Nazis was blacked up and stood outside Leyton Town Hall claiming to be Gordon Walker, the 'make Britain black' candidate. On another occasion NSM members, dressed in monkey suits, claimed to be immigrant supporters of the Labour candidate. (p. 292) Gordon Walker lost once again, much to the delight of Jordan, who celebrated by watching Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* three times at the National Film Theatre. During the campaign, Jordan's wife, the appalling Françoise Dior, got into an altercation with a Jewish taxi driver who refused to accept her as a fare. His home was later petrol bombed in retaliation, 'precipitating his subsequent emigration to Israel'. The NSM newspaper, *The National Socialist*, proudly proclaimed that 'the Second Expulsion of the Jews has already begun'. (p. 293) Once again, acts of terrorism were very much on the agenda. As Macklin points out, between May and July 1965, one group of NSM members carried out arson attacks on ten synagogues in London while another group carried out further attacks. Police arrested six NSM members who were all found guilty, with the judge ascribing the moral responsibility for the attacks to Jordan. He denied any prior knowledge, but was 'quite happy to pose with the accused outside court for a photograph in which they all gave the Nazi salute'. (p. 293) These arrests, according to Macklin, precipitated the collapse of the NSM. Before this, Jordan had hoped to receive secret subsidies from the United Arab Republic (UAR), including finance for an off-shore pirate radio station to broadcast his racism and anti-Semitism. The military attaché at the UAR embassy was very sympathetic, but nothing came of it. (p. 281)

Jordan was obsessed with Rudolf Hess, urging that he be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He even erected a monument at the site where the man had landed in Scotland back in May 1941. For much of the British Far Right, however, Jordan was something of an embarrassment, proclaiming too loudly and publicly the Nazi politics they privately shared. Indeed, as far as Chesterton was concerned, Jordan's puerilities only played into the hands of the Jews. (p. 280)

Tyndall

John Tyndall, the national secretary of Jordan's NSM, had impeccable Nazi credentials. He regularly praised the SS and denied the Holocaust in the pages

of *The National Socialist*, indeed stating that the establishment of an 'SS state' in Britain 'is now our aim'. (p. 254) He eventually broke with Jordan and went on to join Chesterton's National Front, becoming its leader in 1972. As far as his openly espoused politics were concerned, he began to play down his anti-Semitic convictions in order to focus attention on anti-black racism, on hostility to immigrants, which was recognised as the best way to build the Far Right. This strategy was to meet with considerable success in some parts of the country. At the same time, he maintained his contacts with the international Far Right, particularly with the US Far Right. Macklin reveals, for example, that Tyndall assisted the US Far Right in trying to prevent the extradition from the UK of James Earl Ray, the alleged assassin of Martin Luther King. (After the assassination Ray had fled to London, where he was eventually arrested by Special Branch when he tried to fly from Heathrow to Brussels.) (p. 364) Among his American friends and allies was William Pierce, the author of *The Turner Diaries*, a book that had a powerful impact on the Far Right in Britain as well as the USA. Tyndall had 'a close personal relationship with him' and brought his particular brand of 'revolutionary Nazism' to Britain by helping sell his *National Vanguard* magazine. (p. 384) When Tyndall took over the leadership of the NF, the membership had fallen to some 2,000, but it was given a great boost by Idi Amin's expulsion of the Uganda's Asians. As Macklin points out, Amin, ironically, 'espoused a similarly anti-Semitic world-view to Tyndall, regularly quoting from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*'. (p. 367) But, despite its relentless exploitation of the plight of the Ugandan Asians, the NF failed to achieve the hoped for political breakthrough. This saw at least a partial return to openly anti-Semitic politics and in 1979 the organisation lost out heavily in the general election, its hopes dashed. In a subsequent power struggle with Martin Webster, Tyndall condemned Webster's homosexuality and, when Tyndall broke with the NF early in 1980, he went on to condemn it as a 'gay' organisation. According to Macklin, Tyndall then returned to hard core Nazi politics, obsessed 'with SS-style aristocracies of "Aryan blood"', building a cadre rather than a mass movement. (p. 387) This was only a brief turn, however, because in April 1982, he established the British National Party (BNP), 'the fifth party in the history of British fascism to bear the name'. (p. 388)

Griffin

Which brings us to Nick Griffin under whose leadership the British National Party (BNP) was to become 'the most electorally successful extreme right-wing party in British history'. (p. 508) Griffin claimed to have first read *Mein Kampf* when he was only aged 13 and joined the NF two years later, after hearing Martin Webster speak. Macklin provides a masterful account of his subsequent political trajectory, which is essential reading. He highlights, for example, the

fact that the NF regarded some Muslim countries in the Middle East as potential allies against the Jews and 'applauded Iran's reprinting of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. (p. 468) Incredibly, the NF wholeheartedly embraced Gaddafi's Libyan regime. Griffin visited the country as part of an NF delegation in September 1988, hoping for a Libyan subsidy. (p. 471) Later, with his BNP hat on and post-9/11, Griffin was to embrace Islamophobia as a way forward but even then, when debating Abu Hamza in July 2002, he 'found that their views converged'. Hamza actually urged the audience 'to support the BNP'. (p. 491)

Griffin left the NF in 1989 and proceeded to establish 'himself as one of the nation's most aggressive Holocaust deniers'. As far as he was concerned, the 'Holocaust Lie' was just so much nonsense which 'underpins not just the Zionist state of Israel and Jewish power worldwide but the entire edifice of global liberalism'. He was 'an evangelist for Holocaust denial', relentlessly exposing the 'Holofoax' as he called it. (pp. 480-481) After 9/11, the BNP began playing down its anti-Semitism with Griffin denying Holocaust denial so to speak; indeed in 2004 the BNP was to actually elect a Jewish councillor in Epping. The BNP was to achieve considerable electoral success for a Far Right party in the 2000s, electing over fifty local councillors and two MEPs, one of them Griffin himself. The council estate in Essex that I was brought up on briefly went BNP. While he was an MEP he, along with much of the international Far Right, declared their admiration for Vladimir Putin as an enemy of liberalism and the saviour of Christianity. At the same time, he was also supporting the Asad regime in Syria, invited to praise it on *Russia Today* no less. (pp. 508-510) Looking back, there is still something deeply shocking about someone with Griffin's record of Holocaust denial and all the rest of his fascist baggage being elected an MEP. The more than a hundred pages of text and notes on Griffin are on their own worth the price of this book.

Last Points

One point that Macklin makes is that the NF 'served as a model for the French Front National' which obviously raises the question of why, compared with the Front National, the British Far Right is, despite the (limited) success of the BNP, a chronicle of failure. Macklin does not really deal with this, nevertheless his book is still a tremendous achievement that everyone interested in British Fascism needs to read.

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His latest book is *Chosen by God:*

Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,

published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>

