

Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement 1923-1945*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

British fascism sought to return women to “kitchen-slavery,” according to the leading Communist theoretician, Rajani Palme Dutt. Julie Gottlieb’s well researched and clearly written book suggests that this was not necessarily so. Despite Oswald Mosley suggesting that ‘we want men who are men and women who are women,’ the support the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and other fascist sects in the United Kingdom received from women ensured that such organisations had to allow an active role for feminine fascists. Indeed, Gottlieb goes further arguing that women’s support resulted in, if not feminine fascism, at least a feminized fascism that made the British experience different from that of European forms of the ideology. One issue that Gottlieb does not address is the size of the fascist movement in Britain. At its peak, the BUF had around 40,000 members. It never elected a single member of parliament and its best achievement was around twenty-five per cent of the votes in a limited number of council wards in East London, its greatest heartland. Small parties, even when prospective dictators ran them, had to take account of their members’ desires, or lose them. With a quarter of the low membership being female, the BUF had little choice but to make adjustments to accommodate the aspirations of those who wore black blouses rather than black shirts.

In chapter 1, Gottlieb examines the experience of women in the British Fascists, formed in 1923 as an anti-socialist and patriotic organisation, celebrating the victory of Mussolini in Italy in its choice of name, but claiming native origins. Uniquely among fascist movements in the inter-war years, it was founded and led by a woman, Rotha Lintorn-Orman. In the hostile atmosphere of the 1920s, Lintorn-Orman was easily branded a cranky spinster, and allegations of immorality helped limit the size of the BF, which was never more than a few hundred strong.

Chapter 2 moves the analysis forward to the role of women members in most important inter-war fascist group, the BUF. Women were subordinate in many ways to men within the BUF. They undertook the usual forms of political activity open to women, such as canvassing and fund-raising. But they also undertook the full range of activism taken on by male fascists. For example, female fascists were trained in ju jitsu and acted as stewards at meetings, taking on female anti-fascists. There is a suggestion in this chapter that the role of women, as active fascists engaging in all the deeds that entailed, contributed to the limited growth of fascism in the UK. The paradox was that “the ideology of feminine fascism,” explored by Gottlieb in chapter 3, celebrated women’s activism. Here for the first time, the context of women in a ‘nascent’ movement, essential for the growth of a very weak flower, is discussed. The BUF’s gender ideology was a ragbag of ideas. It celebrated women as “publicists ... temptress-

es ... and vendors of fascism” to a market apprehensive about the machismo of BUF, but also the role of the fascist mother within the home. These contradictions were supplemented by the desire of the BUF to regenerate manhood. Gottlieb suggests that this mixed message further limited fascism’s numerical growth. In this same chapter, the role of fascist women as anti-Semites is usefully explored, with emphasis laid on the feminisation of hatred through the direction of hostility to stereotypes of Jews exploiting, oppressing and abusing “British” women in a variety of work and sexual encounters. However, the chapter concludes that feminine fascism was decidedly weak: it was on (fascist) male terms and women fascists were, in fact, fascists first and women only distantly second.

Chapter 4 is devoted to an examination of the legacy of suffragette activism on British fascism. The trajectory of three prominent suffragette-fascists is described. Suffragettes moved in to all parties and none after 1918 and Gottlieb rather leaves the reader out on a limb as to whether these suffragettes were typical or deviant through their adherence to British fascism.

The focus in chapter 5 turns to the role and attitudes of Oswald Mosley. This is the least satisfying chapter. The comparison of attitudes of Mosley, Hitler and Mussolini rests on the assumption that they were equals or equivalents, but Mosley was fundamentally the failed leader of a failed political movement. In addition in this chapter (p. 205), Gottlieb decides to quote U2’s Bono as an authority, not on the 1930s, but on late twentieth century fascism. Such a device would be frowned upon in an undergraduate essay. The chapter concludes with A.K. Chesterton’s condemnation of the mainstream party leaders, “Mrs Baldwin,” with his pipe, “Mrs MacDonald,” who “talks eternally without saying a word,” and Eden with his “flapper brains.” But such men were electorally popular, adding to the sense that it was Mosley’s manliness that could not pull it off. David Jarvis and others have explained the way in which the Conservatives successfully domesticated their politics after the Great War, taking into account the importance of the female electorate. Baldwin’s fireside chats on the wireless brought Conservatism into the home. Given that the Conservatives won five out of the seven elections between the wars, and indeed gained more votes than the winning party in the two that they lost, this could be suggested as a highly successful strategy. This also fits neatly with Alison Light’s argument in *Forever England* (1991) that ideas of national identity and patriotism were feminised and domesticated in the wake of the Great War. In this sense, the failure of British fascism might be seen as stemming in part from its inability to come to terms with the privatisation of politics.

The final chapter of the book is on much firmer ground. The British state, at least, took some women fascists seriously. Nearly a hundred women BUF members were interned for varying periods once world war broke out. In addition, many fascist women were prosecuted for anti-war statements and agitation.

This was punishment for potential disloyalty rather than pacifism in many cases, although in others internment came about because of that oxymoron, state intelligence, resulting in injustices being done. In prison, it appears that idolisation of Mosley acted as substitute for fascist activity: women fascists in Holloway held a tea dance for OM's 44<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1940. Outside of prison other fascists used charitable efforts for the prisoners as a surrogate for political activity. At this point, fascist women's supporting role to the mainly male detainees was confirmed. Militant fascist women collected comforts for the fascist troops.

In her conclusion, Gottlieb rightly argues that fascist women were "autonomous historical agents." Mosley agreed when he declared that "without the women I could not have got quarter of the way" (267). But of course, he did not get very far. The Labour Party by the end of the 1930s had a female membership of hundreds of thousands and the Conservative Party had more than a million. Some discussion of fascist failure related to other parties' success might have been called for in the conclusion. This might have been more historically appropriate than the attempt to link the Spice Girls and Camille Paglia into the tradition of feminine activism that Gottlieb explores in the rest of the book.

But that is not the finish of this book. It continues with a very useful "Who's who in the history of women and fascism in Britain." It acts to give us some insight into the day-to-day activities of fascist women (and men). Hence Mrs LT Cotton, member of the BUF and interned during the war is described as attending a fascist meeting addressed by her husband in Branscombe, Devon. In response to the rough reception her husband received, Mrs Cotton "struck a member of the audience in the face." The "Who's who" also reveals the variety of ideas within fascism. Mrs Dudley Ward was an anti-Semite and animal lover, publishing a condemnatory book linking the two entitled *Jewish Kosher* (1944). Details are also provided of the huge variety of activities in which fascist women took part, from the organisation of fascist fêtes, running branches, conducting sticker campaigns, cutting telephone cables and seducing sailors for reasons of espionage in wartime. There about 260 women and 30 men described in this section, a notable feat, and it adds generally to the usefulness of this impressively researched and clearly structured book. Gottlieb offers a distinctive interpretation and adds significantly to the existing historiography on British fascism.

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Ellen Messer-Davidow, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

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