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THESIS DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Luke LeCras
ABSTRACT

Fascist and extreme right-wing political movements in Britain have been the subject of enduring interest to historians since 1945, with the majority of works centring on the British Union of Fascists (BUF), a political party founded and led by Sir Oswald Mosley between 1932 and 1940. Despite the BUF’s failure to achieve levels of support on par with many fascist movements in continental Europe, there is now a sizeable body of historiography dealing with the party as a minor case within the study of European fascism and as a unique phenomenon of radical politics in interwar Britain. By comparison, little interest has been devoted to aspects of British fascism not connected to Mosley or the BUF. Moreover, extreme right movements operating in Britain since 1945 have largely been characterized as either a direct legacy of the interwar movement or an attempt to reform British fascism under a different guise.

This thesis re-examines the continuity between the interwar and the post-war iterations of the extreme right in Britain by focusing on the ideas and activism of Arthur Kenneth (A.K) Chesterton. A high-ranking member of the BUF who made substantial contributions to the party’s propaganda, Chesterton split with Mosley in 1938 to pursue an independent career in extreme right-wing politics that persisted until his death in 1973. Outside of his role in the BUF, Chesterton is best known as a prolific author of conspiratorial nationalist literature, as the head of the League of Empire Loyalists (a small right-wing pressure group active from 1954 to 1967), and as the chairman of the National Front between 1967 and 1971. Using Chesterton as a
focal point, this study examines the problems encountered by Britain’s extreme right in attempting to reconcile the nature and methods of fascism with the prevailing conditions of British politics across seven decades of the twentieth century. While the primary contribution is to the historiography of extreme right-wing movements in Britain, it also expands ongoing theoretical debates regarding the nature and definitional limits of fascism itself.
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Introduction

More than any other movement of the 20th century, fascism defined itself in terms of action, disdaining theory and principle in favour of a violent struggle for national redemption. It has thus proven a vexing subject for historians and political theorists, who have struggled to extract meaning from its bloody, chaotic and contradictory legacy.1 Richard Bosworth, a distinguished figure in the study of Italian Fascism, aptly summarized the problems of trying to draw a static definition of fascism from the ‘moving parts’ of its history: ‘If theorists stop the machine, they may be able to see fascism more clearly and paint it more strikingly. But they simultaneously lose the context in which fascism lived and upon which, despite itself, it was dependent’.2 Analysing the experience of individual fascists provides a useful starting point for understanding fascism, not merely as a set of abstract principles, but as a living movement driven by the actions, ideas and ‘mobilizing passions’ of its adherents.3 In the case of British fascism, studies centred on individual activists are of particular importance, since the movement was sustained through much of its existence by a small coterie of dedicated radicals, who imagined themselves the vanguard of a revolution that never arrived.

Arthur Kenneth (hereafter A.K.) Chesterton was an outstanding figure within Britain’s extreme right, whose life has already served as the basis for David Baker’s

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1 Throughout the course of this thesis, ‘fascism’ is used to denote the generic term, while ‘Fascism’ refers to the Italian or ‘classical’ variety from which the term was originally derived. For an example of this convention elsewhere, see Roger Griffin, The Nature of Fascism (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.
acclaimed political biography, a work focused primarily on the interwar period. Although there is some inherent value in supplementing Baker’s work with the details of Chesterton’s post-war career, this study seeks to move beyond the realm of a biographical inquiry, adopting a broader and more critical approach to the history and definition of British fascism as a whole. Chesterton, for the purposes of this study, serves as a lens for an exploration of the problems that confronted the extreme right in Britain, a nation ill-disposed to the revolutionary ideas and violent methods that were integral to interwar fascism, as well as the esoteric racism and anti-Semitism that buoyed the post-war movements.

Chesterton was never as prominent or influential as Oswald Mosley, the undisputed leader of Britain’s interwar fascist movement and the man who has received the most interest from scholars and the general public. Chesterton also failed to acquire the personal notoriety of William Joyce, a British fascist whose transformation into a Nazi propagandist led to a sensational trial that culminated in his execution for treason. Chesterton is notable among British fascists, not for his political stature or infamy, but for his persistence. The length and breadth of his career on the extreme right saw him play a crucial part in two of the most prominent organizations to be classified under the banner of British fascism: Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF), of which Chesterton was an active member between 1933 and 1938, and the National Front, which he helped found and oversaw as chairman between 1967 and 1971.

Chesterton’s life prior to joining Mosley and the ethos he espoused as a member of the BUF made him an exemplar of a distinctively British variant of fascism. Chesterton’s upbringing, divided between England and South Africa,
impressed upon him a form of patriotism centred on 19th century ideals of imperial Britain. The suffering Chesterton endured as a soldier in the First World War left him preoccupied with military discipline and comradery, which he contrasted with the hollow commercialism of the civilian world. Eventually, Chesterton’s radical nationalism and cultural pessimism led him to a movement that claimed to embody the spirit and sacrifices of the front generation. From 1933 onwards, he embraced the most radical tendencies of interwar fascism, decrying Britain’s decadent state and calling for a national revolution to overhaul all aspects of society. He contributed with enthusiasm to the BUF’s anti-Semitic campaigns, and his written propaganda was marked by constant references to a global Jewish conspiracy. Influenced by the likes of Rudyard Kipling and Thomas Carlyle, Chesterton looked to Mosley as a heroic figure destined to lead a ‘drive against the largest and most strongly entrenched social conspiracies the world has ever known’.4

On occasion, Chesterton’s writing formed a purer expression of the fascist ethos than official BUF doctrine, which encompassed detailed plans for a corporatist state and an autarchic ‘empire economy’. Leaving aside the details of these programs, Chesterton’s fascist creed demanded an immediate and drastic response to the decay brought about by a ‘putrescent’ democracy, and foreshadowed a militant struggle to wrest Britain from its internal enemies. Despite his fiery rhetoric, Chesterton was discomfited by the brutality that accompanied the BUF’s public demonstrations. He became embroiled in the internal struggles that ran beneath the surface of Mosley’s party, a predecessor to the chaotic factionalism that defined the

extreme right in Britain after 1940. After he resigned from the BUF in 1938, Chesterton denounced Mosley for his ‘inertia’ in the face of legal and political challenges to fascism in Britain. In truth, however, Chesterton was subject to the same constraints as his former leader, and the social and political circumstances that rendered British fascism politically impotent.

Chesterton’s dogged commitment to the nationalistic principles underpinning fascism, and his concomitant attachment to conspiratorial anti-Semitism, earned him a just reputation for obsessiveness and inflexibility. But it was this same ‘ideology of obsession’ that allowed Chesterton to survive the collapse of the BUF, and move forward into a new era of extreme right wing activism. His lower profile and steady patriotism, along with a certain amount of luck, spared him from Joyce’s dramatic end, as well as the more banal fate of Mosley and many ex-fascists who fell by wayside as the post-war era progressed. Chesterton’s search for an alternative to the ‘bluff and favouritism’ of Mosley’s endeavours brought him into contact with a wider range of political alliances, and showed the fragmentation and growing ideological diversity of the extreme right. He found financial and political support from the fringes of British conservatism, especially when he turned his attentions to the declining status of the British empire, but the legacies of fascism continued in his unwaveringly radical ideology and his prolific output of conspiratorial literature. Chesterton tried, with little success, to pursue the ideals of national revival while putting aside the violence and populist demagoguery of the ‘fascist epoch’.

As a figure straddling the divide between two different eras, Chesterton was able to carry forth the ideological traditions of the interwar period, and pass on his nationalistic (and unfailingly anti-Semitic) worldview to a new generation. As
immigration became central to extreme right politics in the 1950s, Chesterton was also able to synthesize the pseudo-scientific bigotry of racial nationalism into his overarching conspiracy theories, which envisioned a Jewish plot to destabilize the British empire and flood the nations of the commonwealth with non-white migrants. Chesterton was also an early and vigorous opponent of Britain’s integration with Europe, and his arguments against ‘Common Market Suicide’ resonated into subsequent generations of the British nationalists. While these causes offered a pathway to legitimacy for the extreme right, neither Chesterton nor the young radicals whom he nurtured in the National Front were able to overcome the internal conflicts and external obstacles that kept the movement on the fringes in previous decades. To the end of his life, Chesterton fought, without success, to escape the long shadow cast by Mosley and the dire reputation of British fascism. At the same time, inspired by the violent racialism and faux-sophistication of their Western European counterparts, the new generation turned towards neo-fascism, coming face to face with the same political, legal, and ideological conflicts that had led Chesterton in search of an alternative.

A.K. Chesterton: a biographical overview

A.K. Chesterton was a British soldier, journalist, political activist and a cousin of the famed English writer Gilbert Keith (G.K.) Chesterton. Born in Krugersdorp, South Africa in 1899, Chesterton’s first brush with politics came in 1930 when he founded a ratepayers’ organization in Torquay while working as a newspaper editor. It was not until 1933, however, that Chesterton’s political career began in earnest, when he
joined Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF). Having turned to journalism and theatrical criticism after serving in the First World War between 1915 and 1918, Chesterton’s literary capabilities and considerable work ethic made him a valuable asset to the BUF’s intensive propaganda campaigns. Initially assigned to the Midlands as an administrative officer, Chesterton returned to London in 1934 and was installed as editor of the BUF’s newspaper *Blackshirt*. In 1937, he was appointed Director of Publications by Mosley and put in charge of a second paper, *Action*, which he oversaw until leaving the BUF the following year. During his five years with Mosley, Chesterton penned a number of articles and pamphlets that provided great insight into the ideology of British fascism. Notable examples of his work included *Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary*, a series of short manifestos calling for a patriotic revolution under Mosley, and *The Apotheosis of the Jew*, a notorious anti-Semitic essay that was distributed as a pamphlet during the BUF’s campaigns throughout East London. Chesterton’s *Portrait of a Leader*, a book published in 1937, served as Mosley’s official biography, detailing his righteous struggle against the inertia of British party politics and his triumphant ascent as leader of the BUF. Not long after the book was released, Chesterton became disillusioned with Mosley’s leadership and the direction of the party. He resigned in 1938 and shortly afterward published a pamphlet detailing his grievances with the party leadership, though he remained broadly supportive of Mosley’s political aims.

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After the BUF, Chesterton was involved with a number of small fascist and anti-Semitic organizations that emerged just before the Second World War. He associated with but refrained from joining with the National Socialist League, a group overseen by two of his former colleagues in the BUF, John Beckett and William Joyce. Chesterton also became a regular speaker at meetings of the Nordic League and the Militant Christian Patriots, two primarily middle-class anti-Semitic organizations, and a contributor to Lord Lymington’s *New Pioneer*. Chesterton’s name also appeared on the membership list of Archibald Ramsay’s Right Club, a secretive group of fascists and upper-class anti-Semites in operation between 1939 and 1940, which was later implicated in a plot to overthrow the British government. Frustrated by the lack of progress by many of his affiliates on the extreme right, Chesterton made a brief attempt to establish a new organization known as British Vigil in June 1939. He abandoned this effort on the outbreak of war in September 1939, however, and volunteered to return to the armed forces. Chesterton was among the few high ranking members of the BUF who avoided being imprisoned along with Mosley under the provisions of Security Regulation 18b, a piece of legislation that targeted seditious activity among the fascist movement from May 1940. Chesterton’s record of service in the First World War, coupled with his open criticism of Hitler’s foreign policy and pro-German figures in the fascist movement, helped him overcome suspicions of disloyalty that lingered after his return to uniform. He went on to serve as an officer in the campaigns through East Africa and

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8 The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, London, hereafter TNA, KV2/1345/1k, Chronological list of activities of Chesterton, 26 January 1940.

Somaliland until 1943, when he was invalidated from active duty suffering from malaria and colitis. After recovering and returning to civilian life, he joined an unsuccessful attempt to revive Britain’s fascist movement as part of the After Victory Group, a committee that planned to establish a new party immediately after the end of the war. Despite early hopes that the movement would gain momentum from a wave of post-war patriotism and anti-Semitism, the resulting party (by then known as the National Front) dissipated in 1946, having been thoroughly compromised by infighting, financial woes and government surveillance.10

In the wake of the first National Front’s dissolution, Chesterton turned his energies back towards journalism and freelance writing. In an effort to avoid further controversy, he wrote pseudonymously for radical publications while contributing more circumspect work to sympathetic right-wing papers like *Truth* and *The Weekly Review*. The editor of *Truth*, Collin Brooks, was also involved with plans for the National Front and provided Chesterton with a steady position as sub-editor of the paper between 1944 and 1953. Disillusioned with party politics after the failure of the National Front, Chesterton refrained from fully joining any other extreme right organizations but maintained a personal affiliation with the Duke of Bedford’s British People’s Party. Chesterton’s tenure with *Truth* ended acrimoniously in 1953 when the paper underwent a change of ownership, resulting in his and Brooks’ dismissal from the editorial staff.11 In response, Chesterton appealed for public support and received a generous donation from Robert Key Jeffrey, a British millionaire residing in Chile. These funds allowed Chesterton to begin publishing

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10 TNA KV2/1348/307, Cross reference to report from F.3./1907 to F.3. re the National Front, 26 May 1946.
11 TNA KV2/1349/442, Cutting from World Press News, 10 March 1953.
Candour, a ‘news and views-letter’ which he would continue to produce for the remainder of his life. In 1954, with further support from Jeffrey, Chesterton founded the League of Empire Loyalists (LEL), a non-party organization dedicated to a patriotic revival of British ‘national spirit’ and the preservation of the British Empire.\footnote{12}

Though it retained some ideological connections to fascism, in practice the LEL operated mainly as an extreme right advocacy group that aimed to raise public awareness and influence Conservative policy relating to the empire, national security and immigration. The LEL gained a reputation for unconventional protest tactics, which consisted mainly of heckling politicians and public gatherings, painting slogans and engaging in theatrical stunts that attracted bemused attention from the media. The LEL (along with Candour’s readership) spread beyond England, with local chapters and supporters as far afield as Australia, Rhodesia and New Zealand. Despite its fairly stolid and conservative orientation, the LEL served as a springboard for younger activists who would propel Britain’s extreme right after Chesterton’s death. These included the future National Front leader and British National Party founder John Tyndall, as well as Colin Jordan, a central figure within British neo-Nazism.\footnote{13} Chesterton’s writing also attracted a small international following via The New Unhappy Lords, a book-length expose of ‘international power politics’ which he first published in 1965.


In 1967, Chesterton was appointed as the first Chairman of the National Front, a party formed through a merger of the LEL, the British National Party and the Racial Preservation Society. Despite his experience and seniority, Chesterton was a controversial figure in the National Front, becoming embroiled in a legal battle with another party leader, Andrew Fountaine, and coming under criticism for his long absences spent overseas in South Africa. In 1971, facing pressure from an internal faction within the party, Chesterton resigned from the National Front and was followed out of the organization by many of his followers from the LEL. The majority of Chesterton’s final years were spent writing his memoirs, producing monthly issues of Candour and completing a second book, which would be published posthumously under the title Facing the Abyss. Despite his failing health, Chesterton also maintained an active correspondence with extreme right wing groups in Britain, South Africa and Rhodesia. Throughout 1973, he was involved in negotiations for a new umbrella organization to campaign against Britain’s involvement with the European Common Market. In August that same year, Chesterton was also in talks to return to the National Front and adopt a symbolic role as the party’s president. Before this could be finalized, however, he succumbed to pancreatic cancer on 16 August 1973, survived by his wife of forty years, Doris Terry. After Chesterton’s death, the editorship of Candour passed to his friend and long-time supporter Rosine de Bounevialle, who maintained the position until her death in 1999. To date Candour continues to be published and overseen by the A.K.

14 This iteration of the National Front bore no connection to the one formed by the After Victory Group in 1945, aside from Chesterton’s involvement. The British National Party referred to in this instance was an organization borne from the 1960 merger of John Bean’s National Labour Party and Colin Jordan’s White Defence League, not be confused with the contemporary British National Party founded by John Tyndall in 1982.

Chesterton Trust, a small independent publisher operating from Liss Forest in Hampshire.

The most extensive study of Chesterton’s involvement with British fascism is David Baker’s *Ideology of Obsession*, an analytical biography adapted from the author’s 1980 doctoral thesis.\(^{16}\) Aside from providing a thorough biographical record of Chesterton’s early life, Baker’s study also provided an in-depth analysis of the intellectual and social-psychological aspects of his path towards fascism. Expanding upon a profile of Chesterton by Richard Thurlow in 1974, Baker’s study considered Chesterton as an example of the archetypal British fascist, for whom the appeal of fascism and anti-Semitism was exacerbated by his early experiences of wartime suffering and disillusionment.\(^{17}\) ‘Cultural despair’, a term coined by the German historian Fritz Stern, featured prominently in Baker’s work as an explanation for Chesterton’s transition from theatrical criticism and journalism to radical politics. Stern’s original study focused on the cultural pessimism which took hold in parts of German society in the decades prior to the emergence of Nazism, marked by the belief that modern culture was becoming progressively more corrupt and decadent as it receded from the glory of an idealized past.\(^{18}\)

Baker traced the final stages of Chesterton’s path towards fascism through his correspondence with G. Wilson Knight, a Shakespearean scholar with whom he became friends during his time at Stratford-Upon-Avon in the 1920s.\(^{19}\) From this

correspondence and Chesterton’s work as a critic, Baker traced a connection between literary and theatrical notions and key aspects in Chesterton’s understanding of fascism. In particular, he observed that Chesterton’s idealized vision of Shakespearean England was used as a standard by which he judged modern Britain to be succumbing to decadence. Baker argued that this notion of decadence grew from Chesterton’s aesthetic ideas to become an all-encompassing facet of his political worldview, which in turn led him to support fascism as a revolutionary cure for Britain’s national decline. Like Mosley, Chesterton drew political influence from the works of Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, which explored the themes of human evolution and the Nietzschean idea of the ‘superman’. Along with the ‘great man’ view of history promulgated by Irish historian Thomas Carlyle, Shaw’s work fed into the notions of heroic leadership and the fascist ‘new man’ that would compel Chesterton during his time with the BUF. Another element of comparison used in Baker’s study was the ideas of Oswald Spengler, the German historian and philosopher whose *Decline of the West* offered a ‘heady nationalist optimism’ in response to Western cultural malaise. Baker contrasted Chesterton’s ‘Spenglerian’ ethnocentric anti-Semitism with the ‘brutal mixture of social Darwinism and crude biological racism’ that characterized Hitler’s anti-Semitic ideas.

In *Ideology of Obsession*, Baker updated his work on Chesterton in reference to the ideal-typical definition of generic fascism proposed by Roger Griffin: ‘a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic

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21 Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, p. 92. Griffin noted that outside of Germany, Spengler’s work was mistaken for as an expression of ‘morbid pessimism’ rather than a call for a patriotic revolution.
form of populist ultra-nationalism’. The prevalence of decadence, transcendence and rebirth as themes in Chesterton’s writing for the BUF pointed to the same mythic core identified by Griffin’s definition of fascism. In his conclusions, Baker also stressed the extent to which Chesterton’s fascism was marked by a spiritual utopianism that ‘represented a desire to transcend the banality of the bourgeoisie world, and to give life a new meaning based upon an almost religious mysticism’. Returning to the question of ‘nature versus nurture’ that had preoccupied his earlier inquiries into why Chesterton turned to fascism, Baker once again concluded that circumstances, not pathology, lay at the heart of his radical turn:

The lesson he teaches us, therefore, is that fascists can be made as well as born, and that fascism is a broad church containing a wide variety of palingenetic mythologies… here we have a relatively ‘normal’ individual, of some talent, opened to irrational ideas and dangerous prejudices by virtue of his cultural ideas, social and historical background, and life experiences.

This thesis does not seek to dramatically revise Baker’s conclusions regarding the process by which A.K. Chesterton became a British fascist. It accepts and indeed reinforces the notion that Chesterton’s attraction to fascism was a product of experience and misguided intellectual conviction, rather than some innate psychological defect. Whereas Baker’s work dealt at length with Chesterton’s upbringing and pre-political career, this study is concerned exclusively with his political experience and leaves aside the more granular biographical details of his life. The aim of Chapter 2, which discusses the period between Chesterton’s service

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23 Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, pp. 8-14.
26 Baker, Ideology of Obsession, p. 211.
in World War I and his initial encounter with Mosley in 1933, is to identify which elements of Chesterton’s worldview were distinctively fascist in nature, and examine how these ideas compared to the wider emergence of extreme right politics in the aftermath of World War I. This will serve to illustrate how Chesterton could be intellectually linked with fascism, even prior to his actual encounter with a fascist movement, due to the prevalence of militaristic nationalism, cultural pessimism and heroic essentialism as themes within his writing. The second half of Chapter 2 deals with Chesterton’s involvement with the BUF, providing an in-depth consideration of his ideology as expressed primarily through written propaganda, and considering how his idealistic conception of revolutionary fascism conflicted with the actual experience of the BUF in interwar Britain.

The immediate aftermath of Chesterton’s break with Mosley, which Baker characterized as his growing disillusionment with fascism as a whole, is treated in this study as a transition between conventional interwar fascism and the murkier ‘post-fascist’ era of the British extreme right. One of the key differences between this thesis and Baker’s study is the amount of space dedicated to analysing Chesterton’s ‘post-fascist creed’, which received only a concise summary in *Ideology of Obsession*:

a mixture of right-wing Tory Empire loyalism and conspiratorial anti-Semitism. To which, in the wake of mass immigration into Britain, and black nationalist guerrilla actions against British colonialism, he added the anti-‘coloured’ biological racism which he had carried with him from his childhood in racially divided South Africa.27

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Baker noted all the key elements of Chesterton’s ideology after 1945 but provided little analysis, and offered only partial insight into how this ‘post-fascist creed’ distinguished itself from the revolutionary fascism of the 1930s. One area particularly worth expanding upon is Chesterton’s relationship with conservatism, alluded to by Baker as a brief flirtation with ‘Tory Empire Loyalism’ in the 1950s. Chesterton’s affiliations in the post-war period included a number of notable conservatives, such as Lord Beaverbrook and Collin Brooks, both of whom facilitated his journalistic career prior to Candour. Three of the political organizations which Chesterton oversaw after leaving Mosley – the After Victory Group, the League of Empire Loyalists and the National Front – drew on elements of both conservatism and fascism, and attracted supporters from across the spectrum of extreme right ideology. Chapter 2 of this thesis deals at some length with Chesterton’s unsuccessful attempts to reconcile his commitment to national rebirth and spiritual regeneration with the changed circumstances of post-war Britain – a political landscape that contained varying strains of radical conservatism, anti-immigrant populism and semi-clandestine neo-fascism.

Since the publication of Ideology of Obsession, Chesterton has received only a fraction of the individual attention given to Mosley, due to his comparatively low profile in the history of the BUF. At the same time, Baker’s study has been acknowledged as a seminal contribution to the study of British fascism, with a recent literature review describing it as ‘one of the most accomplished works on the BUF ever written’.  

Baker’s thesis, provided further consideration of Chesterton’s post-war career, depicting his influence on the National Front as part of the ‘grand synthesis’ between conspiratorial anti-Semitism, reactionary nationalism, racial fascism and neo-Nazism. Though acknowledging his role in nurturing a new generation of extreme right activists, Thurlow was generally dismissive of Chesterton’s ideological contributions after 1945, viewing his ideology in this period as a pale reiteration of Mosley’s corporatist doctrine. By contrast, Thurlow depicted Mosley’s evolution after the BUF as a rare example of intellectual growth on the extreme right, which envisioned a pan-European entity governed by policies of racial unity and corporatist economics.

Mosley’s career and ideology after 1945 have now been subject to an intensive study by Graham Macklin, whose 2007 work *Very Deeply Died In Black* explored the history of the Union Movement, a successor to the BUF founded in 1947. Two articles recently published by Macklin have also brought to light Chesterton’s role in the post-war extreme right, focusing on how his influence extended beyond domestic British politics. The first of Macklin’s articles examined Chesterton’s relationship and correspondence with Henrik Ven Der Bergh, head of the South African Bureau of State Security. Macklin’s article raised the troubling extent to which Chesterton’s racist and conspiratorial ideas influenced Ven Der Bergh, whose organization played a direct role in the enforcement of South Africa’s

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apartheid policies. The second article concerned the influence of Chesterton’s *New Unhappy Lords* on the extreme right in the United States. Though noting the pre-existence of many ‘native’ anti-Semitic ideas in America, the article made a further case for how Chesterton’s anti-Semitic conspiracy theories were disseminated among a wider audience of political fringe groups abroad. The international dimensions of Chesterton’s activism, particularly throughout Britain’s former colonies and dominions, is discussed in Chapter 3.

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis deals with Chesterton’s relationship with anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories and racism. In order to properly situate Chesterton within a longer tradition of anti-Semitic thought and practice, this chapter begins by considering the range of prejudice and conspiracy centred around the notion of Jewish ‘aliens’ and international finance. It also explores the historical precedent for the style of pseudo-intellectual or “rational” anti-Semitism that Chesterton practiced during the latter half of his career, and how this influenced his contributions to the revisionist literature of the post-war extreme right. Finally, the latter part of this chapter explores how anti-Semitic conspiracies became intermingled with Chesterton’s responses to immigration and the ‘race issue’ which came to dominate the politics of the extreme right from the 1950s onward. A recurring theme of this chapter, and indeed the discussion of Chesterton’s conspiratorial thinking throughout this thesis as a whole, is the conflicting manner in

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which it affected his political career – providing continuity and ideological reinforcement on some occasions, but broadly limiting his capacity to adapt and take advantage of political opportunities.

Despite the volume and quality of research directed at British fascism, neither Baker’s study nor the subsequent work of Thurlow and Macklin has yet accounted for the full scope of Chesterton’s career, nor the significance of his role as a living link between two distinct eras of extreme right activity in Britain. Rather than treat Chesterton solely as a subject of biographical inquiry, this study aims to utilize his work and experiences as a lens into the nature of British fascism, and the changes that took place in Britain’s extreme right in the decades after 1945. In general, this thesis takes a critical view of two assumptions that underpin much of the literature surrounding Britain’s extreme right. First, that the emergence of extreme right movements in Britain after the Second World War was primarily an attempt to repackage the fascism of the BUF, and second, that the nature and development of fascism in post-war Britain is best understood through the ‘ideal typical’ model of generic fascism proposed by Roger Griffin.

Since both of these assumptions hinge on the definition and interpretation of fascism, the theoretical problems of the extreme right and the specific historiography of British fascism, the first chapter of this thesis acts as an extended literature review. The purpose of this review is partly to provide context and historiographical grounding for the forthcoming discussion of Chesterton’s political career between 1933 and 1973. More importantly, however, it offers an introduction to the debates over the categorization and significance of British fascism, to which this thesis aims to contribute the following arguments. First, that a generic definition of fascism
should incorporate the distinctive methods and political goals of fascist movements alongside their mythical and ideological precepts. Second, that the attempts by British fascists to incorporate fascism into a predominantly liberal, parliamentary tradition of politics resulted in a movement that was both politically unstable and ideologically conflicted. Third, that the transition between the interwar and post-war eras should be understood as a genuine period of ideological and structural diversification within Britain’s extreme right, rather than merely a reincarnation of interwar fascism.

**Primary sources**

The biographical details of A.K. Chesterton’s life before the Second World War are drawn from three main sources: his own memoirs, written (but never published) under the title ‘Blame Not My Lute’, his wife Doris Terry’s notes and recollections (provided to David Baker during his doctoral research between 1978 and 1982) and the work produced by Chesterton during his early career as a journalist in South Africa and England. A large portion of this material is now housed in the Chesterton Collection at Bath University, a collection of primary documents and correspondence donated by David Baker. The most obvious shortcoming of the biographical material in this collection is its reliance on individual reminiscences rather than concrete records. Doris Chesterton’s notes and correspondence with Baker were produced in the period between 1973 and 1982, and in some cases it is

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34 University of Bath Special Collections, Bath (UBA), GB 1128, Catalogue of the papers and correspondence of Arthur Kenneth Chesterton, 1899-1973, hereafter ‘Chesterton Collection’.
impossible to verify the accuracy of her recollection of key events, such as
Chesterton’s reaction to the Olympia meeting in 1934. Doris Chesterton did not
share her husband’s political beliefs and did not shy away from detailing his role in
the BUF, nor his anti-Semitism and racial paternalism. At the same time, however,
she displayed an understandable tendency to sympathize with her husband’s motives,
downplaying or qualifying his affiliation with the violent and hateful aspects of
British fascism.

Chesterton’s autobiography, *Blame Not My Lute*, presents a similar problem
of bias, having naturally been influenced by the author’s memory and self-interest.
Although he was professionally capable of producing an accurate journalistic record,
Chesterton wrote his memoirs with a view towards humorous anecdotes and
interesting personalities rather than historical precision. As a result, dates and
contextual details are frequently lacking in what is otherwise a rare and valuable
account of Chesterton’s early life. 35 For the most part, Chesterton’s memoirs avoid
discussing his political career, making only passing reference to controversies that
accompanied various parts of his life. While this is unfortunate, given the dearth of
sources relating to Chesterton’s interwar career, the resulting account is less inclined
towards the self-serving revisionism that characterized much of Mosley’s
autobiography. There is still a degree of bias to be accounted for in Chesterton’s
recollection of certain events, such as the Rand Revolt, or his relationship with
prominent figures like Lord Beaverbrook. 36 In some cases, it is possible to bolster

36 A good example of this is in Chesterton’s record of interactions with Lord Beaverbrook, which he recounted anecdotally in his unpublished memoir. Although Chesterton suggested that he had spent some time with Beaverbrook in his advisory function, he ranks no mention
the anecdotal accounts of Chesterton and his wife with reference to more concrete information. For example, Chesterton’s discussion of his service in the First World War can be matched by War Office records, the official history of his regiment on the Western Front, and secondary accounts of the war in East Africa.

The Chesterton Collection at Bath contains no examples of his journalistic work prior to the 1930s. A series of articles from the Johannesburg Star written between 1921 and 1923 have instead been sourced from a series of cuttings that reside among the papers of A.K. Chesterton’s cousin, G.K. Chesterton, which are stored among the manuscript collections of the British Library. Only a handful of Chesterton’s personal papers from his time with the BUF remain in existence, with the majority having been destroyed in a fire at his flat in the 1950s. There is, however, an abundance of written material produced by Chesterton in his capacity as a writer and propagandist for the BUF between 1934 and 1938. Several of Chesterton’s most notable and infamous works from the interwar period can be found within the collection at Bath, including the pamphlet *Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary* and an annotated copy of *Portrait of a Leader*.

All of the material produced by Chesterton during his tenure with Mosley can be classed as propaganda, and thus needs to be approached carefully as a historical source. There is ample reason, for example, to doubt the factual claims made within Chesterton’s newspaper articles and his biography of Mosley, particularly when concerning controversial or disputed events involving the Blackshirts. Chesterton in A.J.P. Taylor’s biography – which incidentally mentions its subject’s interaction with both Oswald Mosley and G.K. Chesterton. See A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), pp. 229, 329-330.

himself would lament after leaving the party in 1938 that the fascist press was generally prone to exaggeration. Due to the number of authoritative secondary texts dealing with British fascism in the interwar period, this study has little need to rely on Chesterton’s propaganda as a source for the expository details surrounding the history of the BUF. Instead, the value of these sources lies in their capacity to demonstrate the nature of Chesterton’s ideology, and the manner in which he conceived of a fascist state in Britain.

The primary sources concerning Chesterton’s life between leaving the BUF in 1938 and re-enlisting in the army are varied. Prior to the start of the Second World War, Chesterton contributed to extreme right-wing publications alongside more mainstream outlets like the *Weekly Review*, a paper which printed his denunciation of Hitler following the invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. As a prominent and controversial speaker for organizations like the Nordic League, Chesterton was the subject of reports by the *Jewish Chronicle*, which documented some of his most drastic expressions of anti-Semitism outside of the BUF. Chesterton’s involvement with the Right Club is briefly recorded in the ‘Little Red Book’, a leather bound volume kept by Archibald Ramsay containing a membership list and plans for a forthcoming political campaign. The most significant source relating to Chesterton’s reenlistment are the files of the Security Service, now residing in the National Archives at Kew, which offer some insight into why he was spared from internment. The state scrutiny incurred by Chesterton as a result of his interwar activity is described in ‘Blame Not My Lute’, and briefly mentioned in an unpublished account of his wartime experience in East Africa, titled ‘All Aboard For Addis’. This

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additional memoir, which resides as an incomplete manuscript in the Bath archive, offers important details regarding Chesterton’s motivations for returning to the military in 1939. 39

The observation of Chesterton by the Security Service resumed after his return from East Africa in 1943, and continued in varying degrees of intensity until 1953. The details of this surveillance are now housed within the National Archives at Kew, offering a valuable insight into the resumption of Chesterton’s political activity in the wake of the BUF’s collapse. In the period between 1943 and 1945, these records contain information about Chesterton’s life and ideology in a period where he was reticent to discuss politics openly, for fear of attracting state censure or jeopardizing Britain’s war effort. The outlook of the Security Service itself needs to be taken into account when evaluating the surveillance of Chesterton and other extreme right activists. Agents of the Security Service were primarily concerned with the danger posed by fascist activity during and after the war with Germany. As a consequence, activity or correspondence that hinted at violence or subversion was given the greatest prominence within surveillance reports. The ‘spy scare’ that prevailed in Britain between 1939 and 1940 had diminished by the time that Chesterton returned from the war in 1943. As such, the reports from this period do not overestimate the extent of his political influence or danger to the state, as was the case with some of the surveillance carried out on BUF regional organizers in 1940.40

Although there are occasional errors and inconsistencies in the accounts of security

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service informants, the files provide a comprehensive and detailed record of Chesterton’s role in the After Victory Group and the ill-fated National Front. To supplement these sources, there is also a considerable amount of journalistic material published by Chesterton in the decade following his return from overseas. An editorial position at the weekly newspaper Truth and regular columns for the Weekly Review gave Chesterton a consistent outlet for political expression to a mainstream audience. His more unabashedly radical work appeared under a nom de plume in a range of extreme right publications, a number of which are catalogued in the Chesterton Collection. A small amount of material relating to Chesterton resides in the John Beckett collection at Sheffield University, including his notes and draft work for an extended profile of William Joyce, eventually condensed into a single article for the Sunday Express in 1953. Chesterton’s brief and tempestuous involvement with Lord Beaverbrook, which began shortly after his dismissal from Truth in 1953, is lightly documented through correspondence in the Beaverbrook Papers at the UK Parliamentary Archives.

The most abundant source of material relating to Chesterton after 1953 is Candour, the independent publication he launched in October 1953 and oversaw for the remainder of his life. Issues of Chesterton’s ‘news and views letter’ appeared weekly until March 1962, when a dispute over the will of R.K Jeffery, the financial patron of both Candour and the League of Empire Loyalists, forced it to scale back publication. After March 1962, Candour appeared bi-monthly as a series of ‘interim

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41 Sheffield, Sheffield University Archives, John Beckett Collection MS 238. Hereafter referred to as ‘Beckett Collection’.
reports’, until reader donations allowed Chesterton to resume a monthly publication schedule in May 1965. Both the interim reports and the monthly editions of *Candour* published after 1965 are catalogued in the Chesterton Collection, which also provides a number of issues produced after Chesterton’s death in August 1973.\(^{43}\) Since *Candour* provided Chesterton with an unprecedented level of editorial independence, it provides one of the most valuable sources of insight into his political ideology and assessment of world events after 1945, such as decolonization, immigration and the prospect of European integration.

Notwithstanding its inherent bias, *Candour* provides a consistent record of Chesterton’s political activism between 1953 and 1973, including the international campaigns of the League of Empire Loyalists and the formation of the National Front. Along with a substantial collection of newspaper clippings relating to the LEL’s stunts and electoral campaigns, the Chesterton Collection features a transcribed interview between Baker and Rosine De Bounevialle, which describes the background to Chesterton’s campaigns after 1956. Another interview conducted with John Tyndall offers a view into Chesterton’s influence on a younger generation of extreme right activists in the National Front.\(^{44}\) Although the Chesterton Collection includes a substantial amount of correspondence from Chesterton’s later life, much of the material after 1961 relates to the protracted legal battles surrounding the will and inheritance of R.K. Jeffery. Other letters of note relate to the negotiations leading to the formation of the National Front, the subsequent conflicts arising


\(^{44}\) Chesterton Collection A. 11, Transcript of a taped interview of John Tyndall conducted by David L. Baker, 4 April 1978; Chesterton Collection A. 16, Transcript of a taped interview of Rosine de Bounevialle conducted by David L. Baker, nd. ca. 1978.
between Chesterton and other members of the party, and his eventual resignation in 1971. Thereafter, the letters contained in the collection at Bath provide the sole documentation of Chesterton’s last two years of activism, including his international correspondence, his continuing negotiation with the National Front, and his attempts to rally opposition to the European Common Market.

Much of Chesterton’s written work, including numerous pamphlets issued by the League of Empire Loyalists, has been reissued through the independent publishing efforts of the A.K. Chesterton Trust. Most recently, the trust has issued an official history of the League of Empire Loyalists, written in part by a former member, Kevan Bleach. Copies of Chesterton’s *New Unhappy Lords* also remain in circulation, with a fifth edition featuring a foreword by Andrew Brons, formerly a leading figure in the British National Party who served as a Member of the European Parliament in 2009.\(^5\) The sources surrounding Chesterton and the history of Britain’s extreme right after 1945 are incomplete, with significant documents either lost, classified or in private hands. This inconsistency is partly a reflection of the British extreme right itself, comprised of small movements and individuals disinclined to share records of their activity with potential critics or enemies. Using Chesterton as the basis for a wider inquiry provides a relative abundance of sources, therefore, due to his continuous activism and prolific literary output between 1921 and 1973. Treated with appropriate scepticism, and supported by other empirical records, his body of work provides sufficient material for the forthcoming study.

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Thesis structure

The introductory chapter to this thesis provides a brief overview of A.K. Chesterton’s life between 1915 and 1973, along with a review of the literature and primary material relating to his political career. This section also contains an explanation of how this study distinguishes itself from previous work conducted around Chesterton and the history of British fascism, in terms of scope and methodology. Thereafter, this thesis is broken down into four chapters. Chapter 1 provides an extended literature review pertaining to the historical interpretation of fascism, contemporary understandings of the extreme right, and the specific historiography surrounding British fascism. Chapter 2 concerns Chesterton’s early adulthood spanning from 1915 to 1933, and his involvement with the British fascist movement between 1933 and 1940. Chapter 3 concerns the period from 1940 to 1973, beginning with Chesterton’s service in the Second World War, encompassing his political activism in the three decades after 1943, and ending with his death in 1973. Chapter 4 provides an in-depth analysis of Chesterton’s activism and ideology in relation to anti-Semitism, racism and political conspiracy theories. The concluding chapter of this thesis provides a discussion of A.K. Chesterton’s impact on the post-war extreme right, and the insight his experiences provide into the character and limitations of British fascism.
Chapter 1: Situating and interpreting fascism

Fascism

The number of texts dealing with fascism is substantial enough that, in Robert Paxton’s words, ‘no lone scholar, however diligent, could possibly master all the literature of all the fascisms’.¹ What follows is therefore a selective overview of the major studies and interpretations, encompassing three broad phases of scholarship to emerge since the interwar period. The first phase includes the earliest attempts to understand fascism either as a contemporary phenomenon in the lead-up to the Second World War, or as a subject of recent history in the years between 1945 and 1960. The second phase, otherwise known as the first wave of fascist studies, covers many of the major debates over the history and interpretation of European fascism to emerge since the 1960s. The third and final phase, the second wave of fascist studies, comprises the recent debates over the nature of generic fascism to emerge since the 1990s. For the most part, this thesis relies upon understandings of historical and generic fascism drawn from this most recent group of texts, especially the influential English-language works produced by Stanley Payne, Roger Griffin, Robert Paxton and Michael Mann. It is nonetheless worth considering the longer arc of fascist historiography, which highlights many of the themes, perspectives and methodological problems associated with trying to define fascism or encapsulate its historical meaning. A chronological approach reveals the extent to which wider political and academic trends have influenced how fascism is defined at any given time.

¹ Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism, p. 221.
point. In addition, it demonstrates that the study of fascism has proven to be cyclical, with themes or modes of interpretation falling in and out of favour over time. Both of these tendencies are illustrated by the case of totalitarianism. Once the dominant interpretation of fascism among liberal or conservative thinkers, the concept fell into disrepute after the 1960s, only to slowly re-emerge as a more limited conceptual tool in the comparative study of fascism and dictatorship.

Marxist-Leninist interpretations of fascism first emerged in the 1920s as the European left responded to the movements emerging in Italy and Germany. An official Soviet interpretation of fascism was established at the Seventh World Congress in August 1935, where party chairman Georgi Dimitrov argued that ‘fascism in power is the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital’.\(^2\) Daniel Guérin’s *Fascism and Big Business* (1939) echoed Dimitrov’s attack on the revolutionary and anti-capitalist bonafides of Italian Fascism and German National Socialism, which he described as ‘petty bourgeois “anti-capitalism”’ leveraged in service of a ‘political religion’ of the disaffected middle classes and funded by big business.\(^3\) Guérin, like many other left-wing critics, rejected the notion that fascism was a revolutionary movement, and instead emphasized its role as an agent of reactionary capitalism. This view of fascism, subsequently termed ‘agent theory’, would persist after 1945 in both official communist doctrine and (to a lesser extent) scholarship.

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emanating from the ‘New Left’. The characterization of fascism as ‘bourgeois radicalism’ was also shared by a number of scholars outside the Soviet orthodoxy, who noted the prevalence of the middle-class supporters in the Italian and German fascist movements. American economist and historian David Saposs depicted fascism as ‘the extreme expression of middle-classism or populism’ in 1935, a view echoed after the Second World War by the American political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset.

Studies of fascism produced in the decades after 1939 were, for obvious reasons, shaped by the violent cataclysm of the war and the subsequent revelation of atrocities carried out by the Nazi regime. Their focus reflected an interest in fascism not as an ideology or coherent philosophy but as an outburst of large-scale moral or psychological delinquency. Peter Drucker, a Jewish-American author and management consultant, was among the first Western authors to depict fascism as a response to a moral crisis. Drucker’s *The End of Economic Man* (1939) criticized the inadequacies of ‘agent theory’ and presented fascism as a nihilistic, quasi-religious response by Europeans to the failure of Marxism’s social revolution. Theodore Adorno’s *Authoritarian Personality* (1950) was among the most influential works to interpret fascism on a psychological basis, drawing its conclusions from a survey of adults conducted in the post-war United States. Adorno posited that support for fascism could be tied to a series of traits that comprised the ‘authoritarian

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personality’, marked by an individual’s deference to authority figures, rigid sense of moral judgment and propensity towards ethnic and racial prejudice.

The most prominent interpretation of fascism to emerge against the backdrop of the early Cold War focused on its functional similarities to communism. The term ‘totalitarianism’, embraced by Mussolini in the early stages of the Italian regime, was used to encompass both fascism and communism as variants of a unique form of 20th century despotism. Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950) was the most influential text to explore totalitarianism as a concept, though it afforded the label only to Germany under National Socialism and not to Mussolini’s Italy.\(^7\) Arendt’s specific treatment of fascism was similar Drucker’s, emphasizing moral breakdown and the role of Europe’s irrational ‘amorphous masses’ in bringing Hitler and Mussolini to power.\(^8\) Carl Joachim Friedrich, a German-American political theorist, made a more prosaic attempt to define totalitarianism by identifying five common characteristics of fascist and communist societies: the presence of an official ideology, a single mass party, ‘a system of terroristic police control’ along with a ‘technologically conditioned’ near-monopoly over all forms of military force and mass communication.\(^9\)

Many of the early interpretations of fascism produced either before or immediately after the Second World War have declined in popularity since the growth of fascist studies in the 1960s. Economic or materialist interpretations have fared the worst of all, falling from favour even among left-wing or Marxist scholars.

Few major texts dealing with the history or ideology of fascism rely exclusively on psychological models and have instead tended to treat the ‘psycho-historical’ dimension of fascism as one of several factors driving its emergence in interwar Europe. Other scholars have found psycho-social models a useful point of comparison, as in David Baker’s study of A.K. Chesterton, which depicted his path to fascism as determined by experiences and historical context rather than ‘psychological predisposition’. Totalitarianism has likewise receded as an all-encompassing interpretation of fascism, but remains a popular analytical tool for examining or comparing the dynamics of state power in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.

The 1960s saw the first serious attempts to establish a definition of generic fascism, suitable for use by historians and social scientists as a political category equivalent to liberalism, socialism or conservatism. Ernst Nolte’s *Three Faces of Fascism* (1963) began by noting that the literature surrounding fascism was dominated by memoirs and anti-fascist critiques, rather than historical or philosophical inquiries. In an intentional departure from the scholarship of the post-war era, therefore, Nolte attempted a study of fascism on its own terms: ‘one which does not impose a definition of the phenomenon from the outside but allows that phenomenon to speak for itself in the fullest possible terms and takes its self-image seriously’. He thus interpreted fascism, not as a manifestation of capitalism,

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10 See for example: Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, pp. 182-208.
totalitarianism or mass delusion, but as a unique ‘metapolitical’ phenomenon that emerged in response to the First World War and the spread of Bolshevik communism in Europe.\textsuperscript{14} In practice, this amounted to a radical form of politics that varied according to its national context but shared common characteristics: ‘the “principle of leadership” and the desire for a “new world”, the love of power and the dramatic appeal of youth, elite-consciousness and mass influence, revolutionary ardour and veneration of tradition’.\textsuperscript{15} In a later work entitled The Crisis of the Liberal Systems and the Fascist Movements (1968), Nolte refined this survey into a six-point definition of the ‘fascist minimum’, a set of basic characteristics used to set fascism apart from other political types.\textsuperscript{16}

The more abstruse elements of Nolte’s multilayered analysis of ‘metapolitical’ fascism have largely fallen from favour in recent decades, with much criticism emanating from left-wing perspectives.\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, Nolte’s characterization of fascism as an ‘epochal revolutionary movement’ has been subject to enduring interest and controversy. Some scholars continue to dispute the notion of fascism as a revolutionary movement, while others have sought to focus on the interaction between revolutionary and reactionary (or counterrevolutionary) elements.

\textsuperscript{14} Nolte, Three Faces of Fascism, p. 429.
\textsuperscript{15} Nolte, Three Faces of Fascism, p. 456.
\textsuperscript{16} Ernst Nolte, Die Krise des liberalen Systems und die faschistischen Bewegungen (Munich: Piper, 1968), p. 385, note 64. For a translated and condensed version of Nolte’s six point definition, see Payne, A History of Fascism, p. 5: ‘anti-Marxism, antiliberalism, anticonservatism, the leadership principle, a party army, and the aim of totalitarianism’.
\textsuperscript{17} For an extended critique of Nolte’s Three Faces of Fascism, see Martin Kitchen, Fascism (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 36-45.
within fascist regimes.\(^{18}\) There is also much debate over the epochal European nature
of fascism, with many contemporary scholars positing the existence of fascist
movements beyond the temporal and geographical confines of interwar Europe.
Despite the shortcomings of Nolte’s conclusions, two aspects of his methodology
have proven influential in the work of contemporary theorists: the use of fascists’
texts and programs as a basis for determining their ideology, a method the historical
sociologist Michael Mann described as ‘taking fascists’ values seriously’, and the
search for a fascist minimum.\(^{19}\)

Eugen Weber’s *Varieties of Fascism* (1964) elaborated on many of Nolte’s
ideas while attempting a more accessible and wide ranging analysis of fascist
movements throughout Europe. Weber proposed that the varieties of fascism could
be divided into two broad categories: classical Fascism of the Italian variety, which
showed pragmatic or conservative tendencies, and National Socialism of the German
variety, distinguished by radicalism and a greater emphasis on ideology.\(^{20}\) In tracing
the origins of these two forms, Weber highlighted the role of proto-fascist
intellectuals like Georges Sorel, to whom Mussolini attributed his views on the
necessity and virtue of violence.\(^{21}\) Anticipating the work of scholars like Fritz Stern,
who traced the growth of Nazism to ‘cultural despair’ in Germany, Weber identified
the fear of decline and crisis as a defining characteristic of the fascist worldview:
‘justified or not, Fascism lives and thrives in an atmosphere of crisis. All Fascisms

\(^{18}\) On the debate over fascism and revolution, see Eugen Weber, ‘Revolution?
Counterrevolution? What Revolution?’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 9, No. 2
\(^{19}\) Michael Mann, *Fascists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 3.
\(^{21}\) Weber, *Varieties of Fascism*, p. 32.
see themselves as a last recourse; all are menaced by a hostile world, in a state of 
siege where self-sufficiency – material and ideological – is the only hope’.\textsuperscript{22} Like 
Nolte, Weber accepted fascism as an ideology with genuine revolutionary aims, and 
even suggested that both the National Socialist and Fascist varieties shared a 
‘hostility to capitalism’. Unlike left-wing revolutionaries, however, Weber observed 
that fascist leaders felt little compunction to define the exact shape or trajectory of 
society after their uprising: ‘the Fascists offered an alternative, however vain – “a 
cause” as Degrelle put it, “which transcends the man, asking everything from him 
but promising nothing”’.\textsuperscript{23}

Nolte and Weber’s works served as the major predecessors to the first wave 
of ‘fascist studies’ conducted by non-Marxist historians and political theorists, which 
Began in earnest following the first published issue of the \textit{Journal of Contemporary 
History (JCH)} in 1966. George L. Mosse’s introduction to the inaugural \textit{JCH}, later 
published in book form as \textit{International Fascism}, provided something of a mission 
statement for the scholars seeking an understanding of generic fascism:

\begin{quote}
if we want to get closer to the essence of the fascist revolution we must 
analyse it in a European-wide scale, taking into account important variations, 
but first trying to establish what they had in common. Fascism lacked a 
common founder, but all over Europe it sprang out of a common set of 
problems and proposed a common solution to them.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

The common problems to which Mosse referred arose from the conditions of

\textsuperscript{22} Weber, \textit{Varieties of Fascism}, p. 36. 
\textsuperscript{23} Weber, \textit{Varieties of Fascism}, p. 42. This quote originated from Leon Degrelle, founder of 
the ultra-nationalist Belgian Rexist movement and a collaborator with Nazi Germany during 
WWII. 
\textsuperscript{24} George L. Mosse, ‘Introduction: The Genesis of Fascism’, \textit{Journal of Contemporary 
the fin de siècle (or the beginning of the 20th century): a collapse in traditional structures caused by industrialization and urbanization, the growth of mass politics and cultural alienation that drove European citizens away from liberal modernism towards irrational or ‘instinctual’ philosophies. Fascism emerged from this period as a ‘revolt of the youth’, offering a sense of spiritual redemption and a return to tradition, while simultaneously giving leaders a means to control the crowd and direct it to political effect.\textsuperscript{25} The revolution itself was cultural rather than economic or political, a revolution of the spirit envisioned as overriding class divisions through the creation of a ‘new man’ and a new society governed by ‘hierarchy, not in terms of class but in terms of service to the Volk or nation as exemplified by the leader’.\textsuperscript{26} Mosse’s approach emphasized the romantic, irrational and even quasi-religious nature of fascism, which manifested in public displays of worship: ‘the techniques which went into the taming of the revolution and which made fascism, even that which leaned on a Christian tradition, a new religion with rites long familiar in traditional religious observance’.\textsuperscript{27} Mosse’s analysis of fascism as a cultural revolution has fared the best of all “first wave” interpretations, having been recognized by Roger Griffin as one of the major groundings for his own ‘ideal-typical’ definition and by Stanley Payne as ‘one of the clearest, most forceful, and most cogent interpretations’.\textsuperscript{28}

Weber’s contribution to the JCH symposium considered the Iron Guard, a Romanian fascist movement originally founded by Corneliu Codreanu as the Legion

\textsuperscript{25} Mosse, ‘The Genesis of Fascism’, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{26} Mosse, ‘The Genesis of Fascism’, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{27} Mosse, ‘The Genesis of Fascism’, p. 17.
of the Archangel Michael in 1927. Though much of the article dealt with the distinctive circumstances surrounding the Romanian movement, particularly the absence of an organized Left wing opposition, Weber’s article also noted the extent to which fascist regimes came to differ from the movements that drove them into power:

Success, it seems, is the worst enemy of fascism... This is not because, as has been said, the only aim of fascism is power, but because the true aim of fascists which, in one guise or another, is to effect a national revival and regeneration, contradicts not the means they use to get power but those they use once they are in power. The ruthlessness, the passion, the fierce resolve which mark the struggle for power become poor counsellors when power has been grasped.29

Another notable figure to emerge in the first wave of fascist studies, A. James Gregor, also stressed that fascism was a coherent ideology defined by its radical or revolutionary nature. Unlike Weber or Mosse, however, Gregor showed little interest in developing a generic or universal theory of fascism and instead focused on the ‘paradigmatic Fascism’ of interwar Italy: ‘the only, fully matured ideological rationale for the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century... self-characterized as antiparliamentarian, antimajoritarian, and explicitly totalitarian’.30 Gregor contested the notion that fascist intellectuals had been driven purely by a tradition of nihilism or cultural despair, arguing that its ideology drew upon a new sociological tradition that shared the revolutionary, anti-parliamentarian ideals of Marxism.31 This tradition resulted in what Gregor termed a ‘developmental dictatorship’: a form of

31 Gregor, The Ideology of Fascism, pp. 53-54.
totalitarian government that sought to advance society by synthesizing nationalist myths with the class-conscious economics of socialism.\(^{32}\)

As the popularity of totalitarian explanations declined after the 1960s, many non-Marxist historians sought to develop an understanding of generic fascism based on its intellectual roots in early 20\(^{th}\) century Europe. Alastair Hamilton’s *The Appeal of Fascism* offered a survey of intellectuals who were drawn to fascism throughout Italy, Germany, France and England.\(^{33}\) Though it served to further dispel the notion that fascism was a movement devoid of ideas, Hamilton’s work offered no definitive argument as to why such a diverse range of literary figures and public intellectuals were drawn to support a seemingly anti-intellectual movement. An introduction written by English author Stephen Spender suggested that the subjects of Hamilton’s study were driven by opportunism, aesthetic idealism and the nebulousness of fascism itself: ‘The ambiguity of the ideology allowed those who supported it to read into it what they pleased’.\(^{34}\) The most influential study of fascism’s intellectual roots was undertaken by Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell who looked to the syndicalist movements of pre-war France as a predecessor to the fascist movements in Italy and other parts of Europe. Like Gregor, Sternhell saw fascists as the product of a synthesis between right and left: ‘a synthesis that only became possible in the aftermath of the war, and of course, after the success of the Soviet revolution… it was a politics of fear and crisis, inseparably bound up with the new difficulties

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liberal democracy was encountering’. Borrowing its revolutionary ideas from the left, fascism offered its adherents a ‘comprehensive alternative to liberal bourgeois civilization’ that abolished individualism in favour of nationalistic collectivism. Sternhell observed that fascism’s ties to the revolutionary traditions of the left were in many cases a source of conflict with conservatives, right-wing authoritarians and reactionaries, who had no desire to overthrow the existing order and replace it with an entirely new system. In some countries, such as France, this conflict ultimately led to fascists being marginalized or repressed by their non-revolutionary counterparts on the right.

Responding to the growing specialization of fascist studies, the 1970s and 1980s saw the publication of numerous general works, which attempted to survey ‘international fascism’ and offer a condensed guide to the competing scholarly interpretations. An edited volume overseen by American historian Walter Lacquer included essays from Weber, Sternhell and Mosse, along with an extensive introduction to the comparative study of fascism by political scientist Juan Linz, who dedicated much of his attention to the social bases of European fascist movements. The most lucid and comprehensive general study to emerge prior to the 1990s was Stanley Payne’s *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (1980). Alongside an

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inventory of the existing theories of fascism, Payne presented his own ‘typological’
definition of the term based around three sets of characteristics: the negations of
fascism (anti-liberalism, anti-communism and anti-conservatism); a common
ideology geared towards ‘the creation of a new nationalist authoritarian state based
not merely on traditional principles or models’; and a style and organization that
included mysticism, ritual, masculism, charismatic leadership and the ‘positive
evaluation of violence’. To place his definition in context, Payne grouped fascism
alongside two other derivations of authoritarian nationalism that emerged from the
same conditions of interwar Europe: the radical right, comprising movements such as
Action Française or the German Stahlhelm, and the conservative right,
embracing the likes of the Vichy regime in France or Antonio Salazar’s Estado
Novo in Portugal after 1933. In a concluding chapter, Payne stressed that the
nationalistic roots of fascist movements made it difficult to establish a singular, all-
embracing definition of generic fascism. Instead, he proposed that historical
fascism could be divided into six sub-categories: Alongside paradigmatic Italian
Fascism and National Socialism, Payne listed the Spanish, Hungarian and Romanian
variants, along with a cluster of ‘abortive fascisms’ that emerged from authoritarian
systems in the 1930s.

While Payne’s *Comparison and Definition* reflected the progress in
understandings of fascism since 1945, along with the many productive debates over
its origins, ideology, dynamics and legacy, it also revealed the growing complexity

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40 Stanley Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin
41 Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, pp.16-17.
42 Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, pp. 198-199.
and unwieldiness of fascist studies. Robert Paxton would later describe the survey of fascism’s manifold incarnations as resembling ‘a medieval bestiary, with its woodcut of each creature, classified by external appearances, fixed against a stylized background of branch or rock’. On the other hand, critics of the drive towards generic fascism after 1960 lamented that the search for a universal definition had diluted the concept beyond any usefulness. In 1979, the Canadian historian Gilbert Allardyce called for fascism to be ‘de-modelled, de-ideologized, de-mystified and, above all, de-escalated… Fascism must become a foreign word again, untranslatable outside of a limited period of history’. Likening the conceptual status of fascism to that of romanticism in the 19th century, Allardyce further predicted that the trajectory of historical research was ‘leading toward the disintegration of what remains of “universal fascism” as a generic or ideological concept’.

Allardyce’s pessimistic view prevailed until the 1990s, when a new generation of scholarship emerged to reinvigorate the debate over generic fascism. The first and most influential of these works was Roger Griffin’s *The Nature of Fascism*, whose publication effectively marked the beginning of the ‘second wave’ of fascist studies. Griffin began his analysis by positing that the competing definitions of fascism that had emerged from the 1920s onward were best understood as ‘ideal types’, a term coined by German sociologist Max Weber to describe the broad categories drawn by social scientists in order to ‘exercise conceptual control over aspects of external reality’.

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encompass every permutation of fascism, Griffin thus proposed his own ‘consciously constructed’ ideal type: ‘Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism’. Like most of his predecessors, Griffin recognized fascist ideology as predominantly nationalistic, but made a specific effort to delineate the qualities that distinguished it from the many other variants of nationalism that emerged from the 19th century onwards. Fascist nationalism, according to Griffin was both ‘populist and ‘intolerant’; its adherents sought to gather the masses under a charismatic elite, while placing themselves in opposition to the various external and internal forces threatening to undermine the ‘natural order’. The more novel component of Griffin’s ideal type was the ‘palingenetic myth’, a narrative of crisis and rebirth that could be discerned at the heart of fascism’s ideological core. Though earlier scholars, particularly Mosse and Weber, had noted the prevalence of myths in fascist ideology Griffin identified palingenesis as the theme underlying all other aspects of the fascist worldview: ‘one whose mobilizing vision is that of the national community rising phoenix-like after a period of encroaching decadence which all but destroyed it’.

Griffin’s new fascist minimum was lauded by a number of established theorists, including Mosse and Sternhell, along with specialists like Richard Thurlow, who welcomed the heuristic value of a concise, encapsulated definition of fascist ideology. Payne’s comprehensive history of fascism (published in 1995) recommended Griffin’s text as ‘one of those most worth a complete reading’ among

46 Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, pp. 8-14, 26. On the limits of generic fascism as a concept, see Payne, Fascism: Comparison and Definition, pp. 196-204.
47 Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, pp. 36-37.
48 Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, p. 38.
the many theoretical works on fascism. A more critical response was elicited by Griffin’s assertion in 1998 that fascist studies were finally approaching a consensus regarding the revolutionary, ultra-nationalist character of generic fascism. Revisiting this idea in an article for the *Journal of Contemporary History* in 2002, Griffin argued that the ‘cultural turn’ of this new consensus served to vindicate the once controversial views of George Mosse, the first scholar to interpret fascism as a revolutionary movement driven by culture rather than politics or economics.

Between 2002 and 2005, a ‘forum debate’ initiated by German historian Werner Loh invited both critics and supporters to address Griffin’s proposed consensus and the conceptual value of generic fascism in the study of the interwar and post-war extreme right. The most strident critic among the English-speaking contributors was A. James Gregor, who objected to Griffin’s ‘postmodernist’ appropriation of social scientific terms and the ‘heuristic futility’ of palingenetic-ultra-nationalism, a characteristic which could see both the Khmer Rouge and the Russian Communist movements classified as generically fascist. A more constructive line of criticism came from Roger Eatwell, who highlighted the methodological problems raised by the many competing strains of fascist ideology:

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49 Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*, p. 460. This text incorporated many aspects of Payne’ earlier work, including the typographical definition presented in *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*.  
in practice, fascism was highly opportunistic, varying both between countries and through time even in the inter-war era: how do we discern the ‘true’ fascism which lay behind this protean flux? An even more fundamental difficulty stems from the fact that key themes could be understood in different ways even in the same country at the same time.\footnote{Roger Eatwell, ‘The nature of fascism: Or essentialism by another name?’, Griffin, Loh and Umland eds., *Fascism Past and Present, East and West*, pp. 104-109. For a full overview of Eatwell’s proposals for alternative theory of generic fascism, see the following: ‘Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism’, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 4, no. 2, 1992, pp. 161-194; ‘The Nature of “Generic Fascism”: Complexity and Reflexive Hybridity’, Antonio Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis eds, *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 67-87.}

Rather than do away with Griffin’s fascist minimum altogether, Eatwell proposed to supplement it with a set of additional characteristics (a ‘fascist matrix’) that would take into account how fascists interpreted their own ideals and goals. In addition, Eatwell argued that a ‘full theory of fascism’ could be expanded to incorporate the rational aspects of its ideology, such as the pursuit of ‘third way’ alternative to capitalism and communism, alongside the irrational, mythic and quasi-religious aspects emphasized by Mosse, Griffin and Gentile.\footnote{For a recent collection of works dealing with fascism as a political religion, see Roger Griffin, ed., *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005). See also: A. James Gregor, *Totalitarianism and Political Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).} In general, Griffin’s critics (both within and without the forum debate) have tended to echo the concerns of Gilbert Allardyce some years prior that fascism was being simultaneously reduced to an abstraction and inflated beyond its original proportions.

Robert Paxton’s *Anatomy of Fascism* addressed this problem by retracing the history of ‘fascism in action, from its beginnings to its final cataclysm, within the complex web of interaction it forms with society’.\footnote{Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, pp. 21-22.} Paxton presented his account chronologically, proceeding in stages from the inception and entrenchment of fascist
movements parties throughout Europe, to the acquisition and exercise of power by the two successful movements in Germany and Italy.\textsuperscript{56} The fifth and final stage of this chronology dealt with the long term fate of fascist movements that did not succumb to irrelevance or state repression: the co-option of Spanish and Portuguese fascists by other forms of authoritarianism, the alternating radicalization and normalization of Mussolini’s Italy, and the violent ‘paroxysm’ of extreme radicalization in Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{57} Paxton’s approach to the definition and interpretation of fascism marked his greatest departure from the new consensus. From the beginning, he expressed scepticism toward the notion that fascism could be easily identified as an ideology, given that many of its adherents seemed to vehemently oppose any form of set doctrine. Along with the ‘brutal anti-intellectualism’ displayed in fascist movements, Paxton pointed to the behaviour of fascist leaders who ‘made no secret of having no program’ and the absence of ‘casuistical literature’ written to justify the many abrupt changes in policy.\textsuperscript{58} In light of fascists’ ‘contempt for reason and intellect’, Paxton argued that their underlying ideals were better thought of as ‘mobilizing passions’ discerned from actions rather than words. Alongside a list of these motivating passions, Paxton concluded by offering a definition of fascism that encompassed both ideals and methods:

Fascism may be defined as a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective

\textsuperscript{57} Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism, pp. 148-171.
\textsuperscript{58} Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism, pp. 17-18.
collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.\textsuperscript{59}

Michael Mann’s \textit{Fascists} adopted a similar posture toward the problems of abstraction or idealism associated with Griffin’s fascist minimum. Following in the tradition of Seymour Martin Lipset and Juan Linz, Mann’s study was primarily concerned with the composition and social bases of fascist movements across Europe. Like Paxton, Mann considered fascists not only in terms of their beliefs but in the ways they sought and exercised power. His attempt to define fascism therefore introduced an emphasis on the distinctive methods employed by its followers to defeat opposing factions, gain the support of the masses and pursue their primary goal of ‘a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism’.\textsuperscript{60} Rather than depict paramilitarism as a coincidental feature of interwar European politics, Mann identified violent militancy as ‘key to the radicalism of fascism… Fascism was always uniformed, marching, armed, dangerous, and radically destabilizing of the existing order’.\textsuperscript{61} The other features of Mann’s five point definition were likewise chosen to reflect both the goals and organizational methods of fascism: nationalism, statism, transcendence and cleansing. In a similar fashion to Eatwell’s ‘fascist matrix’, Mann’s five-point definition allowed for the variance between movements that could be ‘could be more or less fascist’ depending on the degree to which each characteristic was on display.\textsuperscript{62}

Within the last five years, a number of attempts to reappraise fascism have

\textsuperscript{59} Paxton, \textit{The Anatomy of Fascism}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{60} Mann, \textit{Fascists}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{61} Mann, \textit{Fascists}, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{62} Mann, \textit{Fascists}, p. 17.
called for an embrace of complexity rather than a search for consensus or a universal definition. Michel Dobry, a political scientist concerned with early French fascism, echoed many of Gilbert Allardyce’s criticisms in the ‘classificatory research posture’ of generic fascism. Rather than call for the concept to be deflated as Allardyce did, however, Dobry recommended that scholars simply ‘accept the element of fluidity or vagueness in the word “fascism”’ and adopt a ‘relational approach’ focused on the interaction between different movements of the interwar Right.  

David D. Roberts, a historian of Italian Fascism, made a similar criticism of the ‘teleological thinking’ inherent in the search for lines of distinction between fascism and other branches of the authoritarian or conservative right. ‘The standard approach [also] shades into a quest for clear distinctions, precluding the openness to rough edges, blurring, and uncertainty that may be necessary if we are to make sense of the universe of responses on the new Right’. The recent push to reconsider fascism’s boundaries and interaction with the wider political right has been led, not coincidentally, by scholars of France, Greece, Hungary, Spain and Portugal – countries that fell under the control of semi-fascist or right-authoritarian regimes before 1945.

Despite the resurgence of criticism against the ‘new consensus’ in recent years, this thesis accepts the basic proposition that fascism was a generic phenomenon of 20th century politics, whose emergence was not limited to interwar

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Italy. Moreover, it accepts that a working definition of the term ‘fascism’ is necessary when examining the history of fascist and extreme right movements in Britain. Neither of these positions is controversial, and both fall more or less within the consensus proposed by Griffin in 1998. There are lessons to be drawn, however, from various critiques offered against generic fascism, the cultural turn in fascist studies and the post-1990 consensus. Of particular importance are Renton, Paxton and Mann’s observations that fascism was defined as much by its methods – political violence, paramilitarism and mass politics – as its ideology. The most comprehensive definition of fascism to balance both methods and ideology is still the typography proposed by Stanley Payne in 1980.\[66\] Paxton provides a more concise definition that encompasses the same themes, along with some useful advice on how to navigate between nihilism and idealism in the study of fascist movements: ‘One can steer between two extremes: fascism consisted neither of the uncomplicated application of its program, nor of freewheeling opportunism’.\[67\]

Although they represent different approaches to fascism, Griffin and Mann offer overlapping insights into the most important tenets of the fascist worldview: extreme nationalism, vitalism, the leadership principle, an obsession with decline or decadence and the desire to transcend political and social problems by building a dynamic, reinvigorated nation state and a fascist ‘new man’.\[68\] A final point that bears consideration is whether or not fascism should be classified as revolutionary, reactionary, counter-revolutionary, or something else altogether. While acknowledging the ongoing controversy over this point, this thesis will proceed

under the view put forward by Philip Morgan that ‘by any reasonable definition of ‘revolution’, the usually violent attempt to transform, that is, change fundamentally, political institutions and leadership, social structures and values, fascism was “revolutionary” 69

The Extreme Right and Neo-Fascism

Up until the late 1960s, contemporary political movements that showed either organizational or ideological affinity with fascism were broadly identified with the radical right. This classification became confusing after 1970, however, with the growth of radical conservatism in Britain, the United States and parts of Western Europe. This incarnation of the radical right, represented most prominently in Britain by the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher, embraced nationalism and even showed ‘a willingness to dabble in racist politics’ but bore only a superficial resemblance to the fascist parties of interwar Europe. 70 The trend in academic studies since 1970 has thus been to substitute extreme right for radical right, though there is an ongoing tendency for these terms to be used interchangeably alongside far right, ultra-right, fascist and neo-fascist. 71 This taxonomical confusion reflects the complex, amorphous character of the extreme right itself, which has grown to encompass a wide range of movements, parties and ideological sub-groups since the collapse of European fascism in 1945.

Roger Eatwell noted in 2002 that the extreme right resembled ‘more of an extended family’ than a discrete political category, and that as a consequence, many scholars had eschewed ‘the quest for an essentialist core of extreme right values’ in favour of identifying the general features of the extreme right-wing political family.\(^{72}\) In an example of this approach, political scientist Paul Hainsworth identified xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Marxism (or anti-communism) as the most prominent characteristic of extreme right-wing parties throughout Europe and the United States.\(^{73}\) He later appended this description in to account for the evolution of extreme right parties in the decade since the Soviet Union’s collapse: ‘nationalism, xenophobia, racism, anti-democracy, and support for a strong state. Welfare chauvinism and a strong emphasis upon law and order or security and upon ethnic identification and exclusion are part and parcel of the extreme right’s ideological personality’.\(^{74}\) Most recently, Hainsworth noted the increasing tendency of extreme right movements to position themselves as ‘ populist’ uprisings against a political mainstream seen as ‘elitist’ or ‘out-of-touch’.\(^{75}\) Several parties in Western Europe formerly identified with the extreme right, such as the French National Front or the Austrian Freedom Party (FPO), are now referred to by many commentators as


\(^{73}\) Hainsworth, ‘The Cutting Edge’, pp. 7-12.


\(^{75}\) Paul Hainsworth, The Extreme Right in Western Europe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 19-23.
‘neo-populist’ or ‘right wing populist’, a label that also encompasses the United Kingdom Independence Party.\textsuperscript{76}

A specific definitional problem associated with the extreme right is the tendency for many of its constituents to actively resist classification, by either claiming to exist outside the left-right spectrum altogether, or by obscuring their core ideology in the interests of political expediency. As Eatwell observed, ‘many of the parties, especially those with fascist factions, have good reasons to hide their exact paternity’.\textsuperscript{77} In light of this problem, German political scientist Peter Merkl proposed a straightforward, ‘situational’ approach to defining the extreme right: ‘Given a particular issue of importance to them, for example immigration, or the rights of asylum, a radical right position is likely to be more hostile or punitive than those advanced by all the other parties, movements, or persons’.\textsuperscript{78} Contrary to this approach, Elizabeth Carter’s 2005 study of parties in Western Europe argued against classifying movements as belonging to the extreme right based on their position on the left-right spectrum and instead proposed a ‘dividing line’ between the moderate and extreme right consisting of two core values:

\begin{itemize}
\item [1] a rejection of the fundamental values, procedures and institutions of the democratic state (a feature that makes right-wing extremism extremist);
\item [2] a rejection of the principle of fundamental human equality (a feature that makes right-wing extremism right wing).
\end{itemize}\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} Hainsworth, \textit{The Extreme Right in Western Europe}, pp. 19-23, 82-83.
\textsuperscript{77} Eatwell, ‘The Rebirth of “Extreme Right” in Western Europe’, p. 410.
\textsuperscript{79} Elizabeth Carter, \textit{The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 17, 19-20.
In a more complex typology drawn from this definition, Carter identified ‘neo-fascism’ and ‘neo-Nazism’ as sub-categories within an extreme right family that also encompassed authoritarian xenophobic, neo-liberal xenophobic and neo-liberal populist parties.\(^{80}\) This approach reflected the broad consensus among scholars since the late 1980s that the extreme right could no longer be understood simply as a legacy or attempted parody of interwar fascism. Despite this general agreement regarding the contemporary extreme right, however, there is still considerable debate surrounding the continuation of fascism after 1945 and the parameters of genuine neo-fascism. During the first wave of fascist studies, few texts sought to investigate the period after 1945. Ernst Nolte, for example, was unequivocal in his view that fascism had been an ‘epochal’ phenomenon, irreproducible outside the unique cultural and historical conditions of early 20\(^{th}\) century Europe. Even those theorists and historians who took a more expansive view of ‘universal’ fascism were ill inclined to see fascism as resurgent in the West, where it had been so thoroughly defeated and discredited in 1945. Alongside the many parallels between Nazi totalitarianism and the Soviet Union, those seeking to identify modern reflections of fascism looked either toward the legacy dictatorships in Spain and Portugal, or newer forms of authoritarian rule emerging in the “third world”.

Closing the inaugural *JCH* discussion of fascism in 1966, Hugh Seton-Watson identified the self-proclaimed ‘socialist’ dictatorships in post-colonial Africa and Gamel Abdel Nasser’s Egypt as states showing ‘similarities with fascist

\(^{80}\) Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, pp. 50-54.
totalitarianism’. Though he saw few prospects for a revival in Europe or the United Kingdom, Seton-Watson also identified several currents of fascist potential lurking farther afield in black-nationalist movements of the Northern United states, Quebecois separatists in Canada and the white population of South Africa. Later considerations of post-war fascism showed a similar tendency to look beyond Western Europe and the Anglosphere, with South or Central America and the Middle East yielding the greatest interest. Stanley Payne’s 1980 study included a brief overview of the proposed instances of contemporary fascism to have emerged since 1945, including the ethno-nationalist movements in Israel and various populist or dictatorial regimes in Africa, Asia and the Middle-East. Payne found Muammar el Qaddafi’s ‘quasi-revolutionary’ Libya and Juan Peron’s military dictatorship in Argentina to be ripe for comparison the regimes in interwar Europe, but concluded that ‘the profile of the new groups is on balance distinct from the European fascisms’.

The beginning of the second wave of fascist studies in the 1990s, coincident with a resurgence of extreme right movements throughout Europe, led to a greater interest in neo-fascism (or contemporary fascism) as a subject of comparative study. Insulated from the cultural and political developments of Western Europe, many of the new nations that emerged from the break up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Bloc were seen to possess characteristics consistent with the emergence of fascism in interwar Europe – including strong currents of ethno-nationalism, anti-Semitism and

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83 Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, pp. 207-212.
economic instability, as well as weak traditions of pluralism and democracy.\textsuperscript{84} Walter Lacquer’s \textit{Black Hundred}, first published in 1993, was one of the earliest studies to raise the spectre of a Russian neo-fascism that could be traced back to ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic movements that emerged prior to the Bolshevik revolution.\textsuperscript{85}

From a theoretical perspective, the renewed debate over generic fascism in the second wave has also grown to encompass fascism after 1945. Griffin’s \textit{Nature of Fascism} included an extensive treatment of the post-war era outlining three sub-types of fascist movement to have emerged since 1945. Under the heading of ‘nostalgic fascism’, Griffin grouped post-war organizations (such as Mosley’s Union Movement) alongside various German neo-Nazi movements seeking to resume their activity from the interwar period. Also included under the ‘nostalgic’ banner was the Italian Social Movement (MSI), which Griffin described as a ‘unique example of the resuscitation of an inter-war movement in an electoral party sufficiently durable (though consistently marginalized and now declining) to become a permanent fixture in national life’.\textsuperscript{86} Griffin’s second heading encompassed a broad range of ‘mimetic’ fascist movements, most of whom turned to the Nazi movement for ideological (as opposed to purely aesthetic) inspiration. Examples in this category ranged from minor parties operating in Western democracies, such as the British National Party, to clandestine paramilitary organizations and survivalist

\textsuperscript{84} Many of these characteristics are encompassed by Stanley Payne’s ‘retrodictive theory of fascism’. See Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism}, pp. 487-495.
\textsuperscript{86} Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism}, p. 163.
organizations operating throughout Europe and the United States.\textsuperscript{87} Finally, Griffin concluded his taxonomy by outlining four variants of genuine ‘neo-fascism’, a term he used specifically to delineate movements ‘offering something new’ from those merely seeking to resurrect interwar fascism.\textsuperscript{88} Alongside ‘crypto fascist’ or ‘third position’ political groups (including the ‘Strasserite’ wing of the British National Front), Griffin identified several strains of neo-fascism embedded within the intellectual (or pseudo-intellectual) currents of contemporary Europe. These included historical revisionists in the vein of British holocaust-denier David Irving, as well as more sophisticated proponents of ‘conservative revolution’ such as the French \textit{Nouvelle Droite} or ‘New Right’.\textsuperscript{89}

In recognition of the wide-range of disparate parties, movements and individuals encompassed by his taxonomy, Griffin noted that post-war fascism was defined by both ‘ideological heterogeneity and organizational complexity’. Despite these symptoms of ‘structural weakness’, however, Griffin argued that a ‘neo-fascist minimum’, comprised of the same palingenetic ultra-nationalist core underpinning interwar fascism, could be used to distinguish contemporary fascists from other members of the extreme right family. In addition, Griffin noted an increased tendency among neo-fascist groups to pursue international cooperation with like-minded organizations abroad under the ideological banner of European identity or pan-European nationalism.\textsuperscript{90} In the opening to the 2002-2005 forum debate overseen by Werner Loh, Griffin further articulated his view that palingenetic ultra-

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{87} Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism}, pp. 164-165.
\bibitem{88} Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism}, p. 166.
\bibitem{89} Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism}, pp. 166-168.
\bibitem{90} Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism}, pp. 172-174.
\end{thebibliography}
nationalism had re-emerged in the ‘post-fascist epoch’ after 1945 as a series of ‘groupuscular entities’ akin to a biological organism capable of mutating to survive in hostile conditions.\textsuperscript{91} Even more so than his wider call for consensus, Griffin’s attempt to link so many political, cultural and social groups under his definition of post-war fascism was received with cautious scepticism by many of the forum contributors. Stanley Payne gave an apt summary of the problems raised by including a ‘broad and dangerous neo-fascism’ in the broader conceptualization of generic fascism:

\begin{quote}
Once some of the key values and goals of fascism – such as the most extreme ultra-nationalism, the primacy of vitalist philosophy, and the special valorization of war and violence – have to be renounced in a post-fascist epoch… the resulting political formulations that become candidates for a concept of neofascism can only be included in an historical generic concept at the cost of unacceptable conflation and dilution.\textsuperscript{92}
\end{quote}

Fears of overinflating the concept of generic fascism to include the post-war era have led several scholars, even those generally supportive of the ‘new consensus’ like Payne, to retain Nolte’s view of fascism as an epochal phenomenon of interwar Europe. Nevertheless, many of the most recent and influential studies of fascism have seen fit to include some consideration of neo-fascism or ideological continuities in the contemporary extreme right. Payne’s 1995 history took a decidedly critical view of fascism after 1945, extending the ‘tripartite taxonomy of fascist, radical right, and moderate authoritarian right’ to conclude that ‘few groups which have

\textsuperscript{91} Roger Griffin, ‘Fascism’s new faces (and new facelessness) in the “post-fascist” epoch’, Griffin, Loh and Umland eds., \textit{Fascism Past and Present, East and West}, pp. 29-67.
\textsuperscript{92} Stanley Payne, ‘Commentary on Roger Griffin’s “Fascism’s New Faces”’, Griffin, Loh and Umland eds., \textit{Fascism Past and Present, East and West}, pp. 177-178.
achieved any real electoral success will fit more into a right-ist than into a true neofascist category.  

Roger Eatwell’s brief overview of fascism, published in the same year, linked the pre and post-war movements of Germany, Italy, France and Germany through their common pursuit of a ‘holistic, radical-nationalist third way’. Michael Mann concluded that fascism had largely been quashed by liberal-democratic institutions after 1945 but gestured toward the possibility of ‘fascist-leaning’ movements emerging in a global South beset by economic instability and foreign military intervention. Robert Paxton found ‘the possibilities for a non-European fascism [are] no less great than in the 1930s, and indeed probably greater because of the increase since 1945 of failed experiments with democracy and representative government’. Referring back to his five-stage model of fascism, Paxton warned that ‘something very close to classical fascism has reached Stage Two in a few deeply troubled societies’.

Looking over the last two decades, one can identify two broad trends influencing the literature surrounding fascism and the extreme right. On the one hand, studies of the contemporary extreme right have consciously shifted away from comparisons to the interwar period, in recognition of the fact that many parties operating successfully in Western Europe bear little ideological or organizational connection to fascism. On the other hand, the growing concerns over populist-nationalism fed by the 2008 economic crisis and continuing disputes over immigration have put fascism and neo-fascism back in the Western cultural zeitgeist.

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95 Mann, Fascists, pp. 370-375.
This is reflected to some extent by a blurring of the lines between studies of fascism, once a purely historical phenomenon, and the extreme right, which has now become a permanent and in some cases growing subset of contemporary politics. Some scholars have also sought to apply understandings of the post-1945 extreme right to the interwar years, noting the extent to which that period also saw the proliferation of numerous ideologically and organizationally diverse grouplets with varying degrees of proximity to fascism.97

The term extreme right is used throughout the remainder of this thesis to encompass both the interwar and post-war era, in recognition of the fact that fascism was and remains only one specific subset of a wider political family to have emerged in the early 20th century. One obvious pitfall to this approach is that it risks obscuring the nature of fascism, a political movement which has both self-identified and been categorized by historians as belonging to neither left nor right. It is relatively easy, however, to identify the commonalities between fascism and other right-wing movements before and after the Second World War. In terms of ideology, the anti-materialist, nationalist character of fascism places it in closer proximity to conservatism and other parts of the right than left-wing movements orientated around internationalism, Marxism and class solidarity. The violent opposition to socialist, communist and labour movements by many interwar fascist parties does not itself define fascism, as Renton and other Marxist historians have suggested, since there was also significant conflict between fascists and less radical forms of the authoritarian right. As Paxton argued most forcefully, however, the successful

97 For an example of this approach to the interwar extreme right, see Nicola Kristin Karcher and Anders G. Kjøstvedt eds., *Movements and Ideas of the Extreme right in Europe: Positions and Continuities* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012).
fascist parties of the interwar period needed allies to secure power, and found their most ready allies amongst the conservative elite. In the post-war period, Roger Eatwell noted that fascist groups have appeared as a factional subset within broader parties or coalitions of the nationalist or populist right. Despite the ‘ideological heterogeneity and organizational complexity’ associated with fascism in both its interwar and post-war manifestations, therefore, there is sufficient reason to consider it an offshoot of the extreme (or non-conservative) right rather than an entirely separate phenomenon. Likewise, there is little historical insight or definitional clarity to be gained from considering fascism a movement of the left or radical centre, despite its tendency to appropriate and synthesize ideas from across the political spectrum.

**British Fascism**

In a 1976 overview of Western European fascism, Stanley Payne observed that ‘only the Doriot and Mosley movements [had] been adequately investigated’ in monographic studies.98 Some years later, while reviewing the ‘minor movements’ of interwar fascism, he more pointedly described the historiography surrounding the BUF as ‘inversely proportionate to the group’s significance’.99 Since Payne made this assessment in 1995, the number of works dealing with Mosley, the BUF and the various offshoots of interwar British fascism has only increased. While the historiography of this topic is neither as vast nor contested as that concerning Nazism or Italian Fascism, this review will not seek to offer a comprehensive

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overview of the many organizational, biographical, ideological and demographic studies conducted on many different facets of British fascism. Instead, it will provide an overview of the major themes and interpretations that have emerged from the study of Britain’s fascist and post-war extreme right movements.

As with the earliest examinations of fascism in continental Europe, the first texts to address fascism in Britain emerged contemporaneously with the movement itself. An account of the BUF’s early existence was published in 1934 by W.E.D. Allen, a former Ulster Unionist MP who wrote under the pseudonym ‘James Drennan’. Described by Richard Thurlow as ‘by far the best contemporary account of the movement’, Allen’s work was also the first to publicly suggest that Mussolini was a major financial supporter of Mosley’s party. The BUF’s prolific publishing arm made its own attempts to establish a narrative of the movement’s origins, with A.K. Chesterton’s 1937 biography *Portrait of a Leader* offering a sensational retelling of Mosley’s early career. Though not entirely devoid of factual accuracy, Chesterton’s account is most relevant to this study as a primary source revealing the author’s preoccupation with heroic leadership and other precepts of fascism. Mosley’s 1968 autobiography *My Life* is likewise of little value as an objective account, but offers some insight into how Mosley sought to rationalize his involvement with fascism after the fact.

100 For a recent historiography of the BUF, see Drabik, ‘British Union of Fascists’, pp. 1-19. For an expansive but somewhat outdated bibliography of works and primary documents relating to British fascism see Philip Rees, *Fascism in Britain* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979).
101 For an overview of Allen’s relationship to Mosley and the BUF, see Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 89-90.
The evaluation of British fascism began in earnest in the 1960s, with Colin Cross’ *The Fascists In Britain* (1966) marking the first published account of the BUF’s history. Though written more as a journalistic account than an academic study, Cross’s book marked one of the earliest attempts to fully document the BUF’s history, drawing on the author’s interviews and correspondence with surviving former members. Two monographs on the BUF appeared in print shortly after Cross’ narrative history: W.F. Mandle’s *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists* (1968) and Robert Benewick’s *Political Violence and Public Order* (1969), later republished in a revised form as *The Fascist Movement in Britain* (1972).\(^ {103} \)

Both Mandle and Benewick characterized the BUF as having failed to adapt fascism to the unique conditions of British politics and civil society, highlighting anti-Semitism and political violence as features that limited the party’s appeal. Benewick also drew attention to Mosley’s personal culpability for the BUF’s failure, noting that despite being ‘a leader of many qualities’, he had failed to recognize the ‘strength of institutions and resistance to change’ among Britain’s establishment and proven incapable of managing the turbulent internal politics of his own party.\(^ {104} \) Mandle likewise pointed to Mosley’s personal qualities as having fatally drawn the movement towards anti-Semitism after the BUF’s campaigns faltered in 1934: ‘Rather than blame himself… he acted in his customary fashion by inflating a minor opponent into a major cause of failure’.\(^ {105} \)

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\(^ {104} \) Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, pp. 300-305.

\(^ {105} \) Mandle, *Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists*, p. 34.
In contrast to characterizations offered by Mandle and Benewick, Robert Skidelsky’s expansive biography of Mosley, first published in 1973, depicted a flawed but politically gifted idealist drawn to fascism by its romantic and intellectual appeal rather than opportunism or personal vanity. Unprecedented among texts on British fascism in its scope and detail, Skidelsky’s account was undermined somewhat by his close collaboration with Mosley, which resulted in a sympathetic and in some cases revisionist treatment of fascist violence and anti-Semitism. Despite his work’s controversial reputation, however, Skidelsky made a number of important and highly influential observations regarding the nature and development of an organically British variant of fascist ideology. Tracing the path to fascism back to Mosley’s experiences in the First World War, Skidelsky highlighted the extent to which fictional (or metaphysical) notions of heroism, vitalism and collective action shaped his view of political struggle in the war’s aftermath. According to Skidelsky, Mosley’s career in politics after 1918 was driven by a moral conviction that a new world was needed to honour and reflect the sacrifices made during the war.

Harkening back to his previous analysis of British politicians responses to the ‘slump’ of the 1930s, Skidelsky also emphasized the rational aspects of Mosley’s plans for a corporate state, which he depicted as a radical outgrowth of the Keynesian economic interventionism he advocated as a Labour MP during the 1920s. The would-be leader of Britain’s fascist revolution was thus neither an opportunistic playboy nor a power-hungry demagogue: ‘Mosley wanted power but

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for a definite purpose: to solve the economic problem’.¹¹⁰ Subsequent reappraisals of Mosley shifted the balance back to a more critical treatment of his character and motivations, particularly in regards to the violent, anti-Semitic and authoritarian aspects of the British fascism. The most recent biography of Mosley is Stephen Dorril’s *Blackshirt* (2006), a work with greater narrative flair than many of the denser analytical works concerning British fascism. Dorril’s treatment of Mosley was another valuable corrective to Skidelsky’s ‘revisionist’ tendencies, placing an emphasis on Mosley’s skills as a political operator who made a considerable effort to solicit support from fascists in Germany and Italy. While affirming Skidelsky’s positive appraisal of Mosley’s capabilities as a leader, Dorril’s portrayal of the man himself was considerably more critical, drawing parallels between his promiscuity and haphazard political career.¹¹¹

Despite the controversy associated with Skidelsky’s biography, his analysis of Mosley’s development prior to joining the BUF laid the groundwork for further inquiries into the ideology and significance of British fascism. D.S. Lewis’ *Illusions of Grandeur* (1987) argued against Benewick’s view that fascism was ‘alien’ to British values and instead saw Mosley’s party as advancing an organic form of radical centrism in response to the crisis of interwar politics:

Both as a movement and as an ideology fascism incorporated aspects of its style from abroad but as a whole it was not a foreign import. It developed from British roots to fulfill British needs. In some areas, notably in its economic theory, its analysis went far beyond that of the fascist parties of

¹¹⁰ Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p. 133.
Europe. Its foreign policy was based not upon subservience to foreign fascist nations but upon the maintenance of a strong, independent and autarchic empire: isolationism from a position of strength. As such it was a rational and patriotic programme.\footnote{112}

Like Benewick, Lewis saw the BUF’s failure as a product of both internal and external factors. In addition to Mosley’s errors of judgment, he cited the BUF’s inability to shed its middle class image as a key internal factor that undermined its attempt to form a ‘classless’ movement. Economically, Lewis echoed Skidelsky by highlighting the timing and speed of Britain’s recovery from the depression as an inhibiting factor for fascism’s radical appeal: ‘In short, the BUF had been launched much too late to take advantage of the slump in Britain’.\footnote{113} This conclusion matched the general consensus among historians that the interwar Britain was ill suited to the development of a revolutionary fascist movement. Lewis rebuked the notion that Britain’s liberal-democratic ethos had immunized it from fascism entirely, however, crediting anti-fascists on the left for recognizing and opposing the BUF as a genuine threat to democracy.

As Stuart Rawnsley observed in 1980, early studies of the BUF paid little attention to the ‘rank and file’ of the party and were instead preoccupied with Mosley and his inner circle. W.F. Mandle’s study of the BUF leadership, an early foray into social surveys of the party, found a prevalence of ex-officers and young, middle-class within its upper ranks.\footnote{114} Rawnsley’s critique of the ‘top down’

approach to British fascism included a brief overview of the BUF’s social composition, arguing that the party provided ‘a convenient outlet for many people experiencing the frustration and despair of economic disorder and political bankruptcy, and who would have preferred all that the BUF offered rather than the ideals of communism’. A more detailed study by G.C. Webber published in 1984 found that prior accounts of the BUF had misrepresented both the numbers and distribution of its membership, with numerical estimates and class analysis reliant on the fallible observations of Special Branch officers. Citing a peak membership of around 40,000, Webber concluded that the fascists were able to recover partly from the decline experienced after 1934 without sole reliance on Northern England or the East End. Webber also highlighted a resurgence in the BUF’s membership that took place following Mosley’s ‘peace campaigns’ in 1938 and 1939. This period of growth marked another change in the BUF’s class structure, driving away working class followers who ‘disliked the Germans almost as much as they hated the Jews’ while drawing in members of a ‘predominantly middle class peace movement’.

Inspired by the sociological surveys of continental fascist parties that emerged in the 1980s, a number of scholars also undertook ‘locality based studies’ of the BUF’s recruitment, class composition and impact in specific areas of interwar Britain. Notable examples include Rawnsley’s 1984 study of the BUF in Northern England, as well as J.D. Brewer’s study of the party’s activity in the Midlands. Most

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117 Webber, ‘Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists’, p. 597.  
recently, Thomas Linehan’s *East London For Mosley* (1997) provided an in-depth analysis of the British fascism’s most sizeable and controversial base of support between 1935 and 1939. Supplemented the focus on class and locality, a small but significant group of texts has also sought to consider the distinctive gender dynamics of Britain’s fascist movement. Rotha Linton Orman, a former army nurse, was responsible for establishing the British Fascisti, an early predecessor to the BUF. Mosley’s organization also attracted a considerable number of active female members who modelled themselves on an idealized ‘fascist woman’, a feminine counterpart to the fascist new man.

The most authoritative and widely cited work to emerge on British fascism since Skidelsky’s biography is Richard Thurlow’s *Fascism in Britain*, an account reaching from the early inception of Britain’s extreme right movements to contemporary parties such as the National Front and the British National Party. Relying on a composite of governmental records, surveillance documents and fascist literature, Thurlow’s study traced the organizational traditions of fascism in Britain to early 20th century radical Right associations, such as the British Brothers League, as well as anti-Semitic groups like Henry Beamish’s Britons. Like Skidelsky, Thurlow noted that the First World War served as the defining cultural and historical moment in the mythology of British fascists. Citing the examples of Chesterton,

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122 Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 8-10.
Mosley and another BUF member Henry Williamson, he argued that the war ‘bred a contempt for civilian society and those without direct contact with the nature of modern warfare’. In this regard, as in many others, Thurlow found ready comparison with the ideology of fascists in other parts of Europe, with Mosley’s ethos showing the same preoccupations with heroism, destiny and radical nationalism. The updated 1998 edition of Thurlow’s study made reference to Griffin’s fascist minimum to establish the importance of revolution and modernity as themes within the BUF’s ideology. Mosley’s vision of national resurgence sprung, in Thurlow’s depiction, from a response to Spenglerian predictions of Western decline, and drew inspiration from the writing of George Bernard Shaw and Friedrich Nietzsche to imagine ‘[a] heroic elite who would guide and educate the rest of a society to a higher stage of evolution… each Blackshirt was to become an individual cell of a collective Caesarism’.

In Thurlow’s account, as in those that preceded it, British fascism was a political failure despite the intrinsic talents and advantages of its leadership. Thurlow marked the beginning of the movement’s decline in 1934, only two years after its founding and long prior to the party’s formal dissolution in 1941, citing a combination of financial trouble and organizational mismanagement that undermined Mosley’s ability to draw supporters and open up space for his movement. Like Benewick, Thurlow also identified the BUF’s tactics and aesthetics as deeply incompatible with British society: uniforms, paramilitary spectacle, violence and

123 Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, p. 115.
anti-Semitism served to alienate the fascists from potential supporters and eventually drew them into conflict with state authorities.\textsuperscript{125} Roger Griffin further argued that, in addition to its internal weaknesses and state opposition, British fascists were subject to ‘the structural forces which make fascism a born loser in modern societies, whether hegemony belongs to conservatism, liberalism or communism’.\textsuperscript{126} Griffin offered an important reminder that the impotency of fascism in Britain was not unique: the majority of fascist movements throughout Europe were politically unsuccessful, and only the German and Italian parties were able to form government without the assistance of a foreign power.

Putting aside the wider conditions that limited fascism’s success in Britain, political violence and anti-Semitism have been widely acknowledged as the two characteristics of Mosley’s movement that most hindered its growth and popularity, and have in turn attracted a number of specialist inquiries. An in-depth discussion of literature pertaining to British anti-Semitism is provided in the final chapter of this thesis, which deals at length with the subject in relation to A.K. Chesterton’s writing and activism. In brief, however, the most influential works are Colin Holmes’ \textit{Anti-Semitism in Britain} and Gisela Lebzelter’s \textit{Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-1939}, both of which cast doubt on the political utility of anti-Semitism in interwar Britain. Richard Griffith’s \textit{Patriotism Perverted} (1998) offered a detailed overview of the various anti-Semitic organizations operating just prior to the internment of British fascists in May 1940, while Tony Kushner’s \textit{The Persistence of Prejudice}

\textsuperscript{125} Thurlow, \textit{Fascism in Britain}, pp. 128-131.
noted the surprising extent to which anti-Semitic attitudes manifested themselves in Britain during an anti-Nazi war.\textsuperscript{127}

The most recent and comprehensive account of anti-Semitism in the BUF is Daniel Tilles’ 2015 work \textit{British Fascist Anti-Semitism and Jewish Responses 1932-40}. Tilles study sought to revaluate the nature and prevalence of anti-Semitism within Mosley’s campaigns, employing quantitative methods alongside more traditional forms of historical research. From an analysis of BUF publications between 1932 and 1934, Tilles found that ‘the outline of anti-Jewish-policy was in place at the party’s formation’, well prior to the public clashes at Olympia that were used by Mosley to justify his turn towards anti-Semitism. Tilles’ subsequently identified five distinct phases of anti-Semitism that characterized the BUF’s internal discourse and propaganda: hostility against the Jews became ‘localized’ during the East End campaigns, before reorientating itself around culture and conspiracies during Chesterton’s tenure as the editor of \textit{Blackshirt} in 1937, and finally becoming ‘internationalized’ after 1938 in concert with Mosley’s lobbying against war with Germany. This analysis called into question the ‘interactionist’ view of BUF anti-Semitism, which held (in concert with Benewick’s original thesis) that the party adopted a radical stance towards the Jews in response to the political atrophy and public opposition it faced after 1934.\textsuperscript{128} In contrast, Tilles study presented anti-Semitism as an aspect of the BUF’s ideology and rhetoric that was present from the beginning.

\textsuperscript{128} Daniel Tilles, \textit{British Fascist Anti-Semitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-1940} (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 50-79
party’s inception, but one that could be downplayed or presented in a different fashion to suit the political needs of the moment.\textsuperscript{129}

Compared with most other fascist movements of the interwar period, violence and paramilitarism played a relatively minor role in the BUF’s campaigns. The party’s paramilitary contingent, Mosley’s ‘Defence Force’, comprised only a small portion of its overall membership, and the Blackshirts’ encounters with their communist opponents were neither as frequent nor deadly as the street-fighting that took place throughout continental Europe.\textsuperscript{130} Nevertheless, the nature and extent of the violence associated with the BUF was significant in the context of British politics and civil society during the 1930s. Most importantly, as Benewick first argued in 1969, highly publicized incidents of violence involving the BUF were a defining factor in the political and legal marginalization of the movement as a whole. Much of the historiographical discussion relating to political violence and the BUF has revolved around the Olympia rally of 4 June 1934, where fascist stewards beat and violently ejected hecklers seeking to disrupt Mosley’s speech. Though he concluded that it was ‘impossible to ascertain either the degree of violence or the apportionment of blame’ from records of the meeting, Benewick saw Olympia as the ‘watershed of British fascism’ which ‘signalled a change from defensive to offensive violence’.\textsuperscript{131}

Skidelsky’s account of Olympia was characteristically sympathetic to Mosley, attributing much of the violence to organized anti-fascist demonstrators and ill-disciplined stewards rather than any preordained strategy of ‘maximum violence

\textsuperscript{129} Tilles, \textit{British Fascist Anti-Semitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-1940}, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{131} Benewick, \textit{The Fascist Movement in Britain}, p. 169.
to deter interruptions’. Despite their differing interpretations, however, both Benewick and Skidelsky saw the public debate sparked by Olympia as of greater significance than the meeting itself, with prominent figures and press outlets seeking to either condemn or defend Mosley and his stewards. Many recent accounts of British fascism have concluded that, whether premeditated or not, the violence at Olympia marked the beginning of the end for Mosley’s party. Roger Eatwell observed that public opinion began to turn against British fascism rapidly in mid-1934, under the combined influence of Olympia and the “Night of the Long Knives”, an internal purge carried out by the Nazi regime on 30 June. Thurlow likewise saw the BUF as having ‘lost the propaganda war’ in the wake of Olympia and in turn the support of Lord Rothermere’s *Daily Mail*, its most valuable source of ‘free publicity’. The main voice of dissent in the interpretation of Olympia is Martin Pugh, whose study of the meeting’s aftermath concluded that Mosley was able to successfully weather the controversy surrounding the event and even exploit the laws surrounding public order to his advantage. Contrary to the prevailing narrative, therefore, he argued that the BUF had not been restrained by the laws or political intervention but rather from a mass mobilization that ‘checked the momentum of the movement, especially in London’.

Pugh’s contention that the violence at Olympia had failed to diminish Mosley’s popularity attracted some criticism: Jon Lawrence argued, in a rebuttal to Pugh’s ‘revisionist’ assessment, that public opinion had already set against the

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134 Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 71-72.
BUF’s tactics prior to the meeting and that Mosley’s efforts at reform after June 1934 ‘suggest that Mosley saw the meeting for what it was: a propaganda disaster of the first order’. Despite the critiques offered against his treatment of Olympia, Pugh expanded upon his revision of the BUF’s history in *Hurrah For the Blackshirts*, another extensive account of interwar fascism in Britain. Placing a particular emphasis upon Mosley’s efforts to adapt his party to changing circumstances between 1934 and 1938, Pugh again challenged the narrative of terminal decline following Olympia:

The picture of the British Union of Fascists abandoning its ‘respectable’ phase in 1934 and thereafter marooning itself hopelessly on the lunatic fringe of British politics is a compelling but misleading one… [Mosley] never lost sight of the need to keep in touch with mainstream opinion if he were to have any chance of power.\(^\text{138}\)

With Pugh as a notable exception, much of the historiography surrounding British fascism still echoes the description given by Roger Eatwell of a movement running ‘from farce to failure’.\(^\text{139}\) There are, however, a number of works that confirm Robert Paxton’s observation that it amounted to ‘one of the most interesting failures’ among the numerous iterations of fascism throughout interwar Europe. There is broad consensus that British fascists advanced a distinctly cogent form of political doctrine and philosophy, which appealed to a varied portion of British society including those of an intellectual bent.\(^\text{140}\) Even those sceptical of British


fascism’s overall impact have noted its leaders’ peculiar tendency towards advancing the ‘doctrine and theory’ of fascism. Aside from Mosley, many leading members of the BUF were instrumental in developing and promoting fascism in Britain. Chesterton, William Joyce, John Beckett and Alexander Raven-Thomson each employed considerable intellectual and rhetorical capabilities in expressing the ideas of British fascism.

In the wider context of fascist studies, historians of the British movement have been especially receptive to Griffin’s new fascist minimum and the increasing emphasis upon fascism as a cultural phenomenon. Commenting on Griffin’s renewed call for a culturally orientated definition in 2002, Thomas Linehan argued that British fascists were a distinct embodiment of a revolutionary political movement grounded in a ‘cultural revolt’:

Culture was at the heart of the BUF's mature fascist ideology and doctrine and permeated its rebirth project. It was integral to its revolutionary agenda and provided it with much of its ideological potency and destructive energy. Culture was never a secondary phenomenon, a pale accessory to the BUF's main agenda that supposedly lay elsewhere… Mosleyite fascism was to a large degree a cultural revolt, and culture was so significant because, to the BUF, it was bound up with vital questions of evolution, life and death.


Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, p. 100.


Following in the wake of the cultural turn in fascist studies, British fascism has been subject to a range of new inquiries centred on its visual, auditory and literary expressions, as well as its sporting culture and the BUF’s conception of an the idealized human physique.\(^{145}\) The proliferation of studies concerned with these more esoteric aspects of British fascism, or with the less prominent groups that preceded or shadowed the BUF, does little to dispel Payne’s criticism of a historiography grown beyond its subject’s significance. On the other hand, the continuing interest in British fascism can be seen as merely a reflection of the continued, widespread interest in fascism as a whole. As the debate surrounding the definition, limits and historical dynamics of fascist movements continues to churn, it is reasonable to expect the ongoing reappraisal of the movement in Britain. Bearing in mind David D. Roberts call to engage with the ‘edges, blurring, and uncertainty’ surrounding fascism, the ‘oxymoronic’ quality of the movement in Britain which Payne identified seems to warrant further attention.

**Post-war fascism and the extreme right in Britain**

The historiography of Britain’s post-war extreme right is neither as extensive nor contentious as that dealing with the interwar movement. This can be attributed in part to the general disparity between pre and post-1945 studies of fascism and the extreme right; as with many accounts of fascism in Europe, the emergence of

extreme right movements in Britain is treated broadly as either an ‘aftermath’ of the interwar phenomenon, or a direct attempt by fascists to revive their movement under a different guise. In the most direct example of the second approach, Thurlow’s account cast doubt on the pronouncements of Chesterton, Mosley and other ex-BUF members who claimed to have shed their connection with fascism upon re-entering politics.

Both Mosley and Chesterton vehemently denied they were fascists after 1945... Yet their politics, although they developed in radically different directions, were both rooted in separate aspects of the inter-war tradition, and both reflected developments in the attempt to revive the phenomenon on the continent after the war.147

The most distinctively ‘neo-fascist’ party prior to the National Front, Mosley’s Union Movement, was notable for its rejection of interwar nationalism in favour of its leader’s aspirations for a pan-European federation.148 Likening this evolution to a broader trend of ‘fascist internationalism’, Thurlow drew a parallel between Mosley’s European-fascist ideas and those pursued by Mussolini in the Republic di Salo shortly before his death.149 A more recent work concerning the immediate post-war period is Dave Renton’s Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s (2000). Renton’s treatment of the post-war era reflected his critical, self-

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147 Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, p. 207.
149 Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, p. 209.
consciously Marxist approach to fascism, emphasizing the role of political violence and the shared reactionary posture of conservatives and fascists. Particularly pertinent to this study was Renton’s observation that Chesterton, in his work alongside Collin Brooks at *Truth*, ‘merged the concerns of fascists and capitalist Tories’. Renton also took a critical view of the police tactics adopted towards public meetings in the late 1940s, suggesting that law enforcement acted primarily as stewards on behalf of the fascists rather than as deterrents to violence. These assertions recalled a longer history of criticism directed at British law enforcement for its response to fascist militancy, as well as Pugh’s suggestion that Mosley was able to exploit the laws relating to public order in the 1930s.

Graham Macklin’s 2011 study of Mosley and British Fascism after 1945 adopted a different theoretical approach to the one underpinning Renton’s study, but drew similar conclusions regarding the unbroken link between interwar fascism and the post-war extreme right. Macklin was critical of Skidelsky, in particular, for having credulously accepted Mosley’s claim to that he had moved beyond fascism in the wake of internment.

Roger Griffin’s ‘ideal type’, as well as recent elucidation of ‘political religion’, allows for a more sophisticated conception of manifestations of fascism after 1945, not as products of violent historical disjuncture (though

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150 For the theoretical background to this approach, see Dave Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), pp. 44-54.
152 Renton, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Britain in the 1940s*, pp. 101-130.
154 Macklin, *Very Deeply Died in Black*, p. 50.
the Second World War was certainly that) but as part of a seamless ideological and historical continuity, which anchors British fascism firmly within the generic Fascist tradition.¹⁵⁵

Evoking Griffin’s notion of fascism as a kind of political organism, capable of evolving and adapting to new conditions, Macklin saw Mosley’s main achievements in the post-war eras as ideological rather than organizational. Though the Union Movement itself proved a failure, Mosley’s activism shaped the ‘internationalization, meta-politicization and intellectualization’ of British fascism, ensuring its survival in the hostile conditions of the post-war era and facilitating its transition into the ‘racialized’ immigration politics of the 1970s.¹⁵⁶ Aside from the ideological continuities within post-war fascism, Macklin also noted the many incidents of violence that accompanied Union Movement activity during the late 1940s, a reprisal of the confrontations between fascists and anti-fascists during the interwar period. While Macklin stressed the continuities of British fascism in terms of Griffin’s ideal-type, therefore, the activities of Mosley’s supporters after 1947 suggest a less abstract connection between the BUF and the Union Movement. Both parties sought to recruit a mass base of militant followers, particularly from the East End of London, and the Union Movement made overt attempts to recapture the violent, revolutionary momentum that characterized the BUF in its early stages.¹⁵⁷

Chesterton’s main independent venture after 1945, the League of Empire Loyalists (LEL), has been subject to less focused attention than Mosley’s party and appears more as a novelty in many accounts of the post-war extreme right. Roger

¹⁵⁵ Macklin, Very Deeply Died in Black, pp. 140-141.
¹⁵⁶ Macklin, Very Deeply Died in Black, pp. 140-141.
¹⁵⁷ Macklin, Very Deeply Died in Black, pp. 50-59, 74-75.
Eatwell described the LEL’s membership as being ‘Colonel Blimpish’, an apt description of the older, more conservative and anti-communist membership, most of whom did not represent fascists in any meaningful sense.\textsuperscript{158} Several accounts have noted, however, that the LEL played host to individuals who would later become engaged in white nationalism and neo-Nazism.\textsuperscript{159} Due to its moderate success in attracting conservatives, the LEL was covered from a different perspective in Mark Pitchford’s \textit{The Conservative Party and the Extreme right 1945-1975} (2011). Pitchford’s study gave a number of insights into how the mainstream right thwarted the LEL (and other extreme right groups) in their attempts to co-opt the fringes of conservatism. It also notes correctly that, despite its Tory-loyalists trappings, the LEL was still underpinned by Chesterton’s more esoteric, anti-Semitic ideas, which provided ample reason for the Conservative Party to caution its members against joining.\textsuperscript{160} Pitchford’s book also gave considerable attention to the history of the radical right-wing ‘Monday Club’, an internal Conservative Party faction that considerably hindered the LEL’s progress among disaffected Tories.\textsuperscript{161}

As the National Front represented the most unified and politically effective party of Britain’s extreme right to emerge since the BUF, the literature addressing it is more substantial, though still minor in comparison to the interwar movements. Thurlow provided a sceptical yet incisive account of the National Front’s emergence, portraying the union between Chesterton’s LEL and the younger British National

\textsuperscript{158} Eatwell, \textit{Fascism: A History}, p. 265.
\textsuperscript{159} Lewis, \textit{Illusions of Grandeur} p. 241; Thurlow, \textit{Fascism in Britain}, pp. 228-229.
Party activists as a new chapter in Britain’s fascist tradition:

an attempt to synthesize the mass politics and economic and political programme of the BUF with the ferocious anti-Semitism and racial populism of Arnold Leese which, however, was presented in the more respectable and rational guise of the conservative fascism of the survivors of the Die-hard inheritance.\textsuperscript{162}

A more recent account of the National Front came courtesy of Alan Sykes’ \textit{The Radical Right in Britain} (2005). In a conscious deviation from many other texts on the subject, Sykes’ condensed account made a stated effort to avoid reference to fascism, focusing instead on a distinct tradition of right-wing radicalism spanning from the early twentieth century onwards:

The emphasis is on the radical component of the ‘Radical Right’ because its ‘right-wing’ or ‘conservative’ aspects, seeking to preserve the British empire, the British nation and/or race, and more recently in the context of American led globalization the very idea of nationalism and national identities.\textsuperscript{163}

Like Thurlow, Sykes saw the formation of the National Front as the coming together of two mutually hostile factions: moderates, drawn primarily from the fringes of conservatism, and militants, derived from the ranks of Britain’s neo-fascist and racial nationalist movements. The conflict between these two groups over the National Front’s goals, tactics and orientation served to hinder its early progress, as the party failed to exploit the aftermath of Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in

\textsuperscript{162} Thurlow, \textit{Fascism in Britain}, p. 247.
\textsuperscript{163} Alan Sykes, \textit{The Radical Right in Britain} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 1-2.
1968. Sykes’ discussion of Chesterton’s exit from the National Front identified a peculiar aspect of his orientation between the moderate (or conservative) and militant factions: despite his ideological alignment with John Tyndall, the most prominent voice among the militants, Chesterton broke with the party ‘over far more fundamental issues. The elitist style of the LEL clashed with the rowdiness and scarcely veiled violence of the BNP and GBM’. Despite Chesterton’s role in carrying forward some of the ideological traditions of British fascism, therefore, his reticence to condone violence and pursue militants’ vision for a ‘dynamic movement’ set him awkwardly between two sides of the National Front’s internal schism.

Much of the other literature surrounding the National Front is comprised of contemporary accounts written by social scientists and journalists surrounding the party’s heyday from 1972 to 1979. Martin Walker’s The National Front provided a thorough journalistic account of the National Front that detailed its origins and internal politics throughout the 1970s. Unfortunately, though the lack of citations makes Walker’s account difficult to verify, it remains the sole source of information regarding some parts of the National Front’s history. Stan Taylor’s The National Front in English Politics provided a more rigorously academic study that focused on the party’s electoral experience. Taylor argued that during the 1970s, the National Front was temporarily able to attract voters who felt their interests had been abandoned by conservatives. Although he attributed its success primarily to the

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164 Sykes, The Radical Right in Britain, pp. 105-106.
165 Sykes, The Radical Right in Britain, p. 106.
immigration and white identity politics, Taylor believed that the party’s internal, ‘esoteric’ ideology was essentially fascistic:

The full ideology of the NF was, in a large number of respects, identical to that of the German Nazi party before it achieved power. This was not denied by the NF’s leaders, whose defence against the charge of Nazism was that these doctrines did not imply that the NF, once installed in power, would commit the “excesses” of the Nazis.  

Taylor’s study, along with many produced after the party’s electoral failure in 1979, drew on the conclusions of Michael Billig’s Fascists: A Social-Psychological View of the National Front (1978). Based on interviews with the party’s general membership and analysis of its published material, Billig’s study concluded that the National Front’s membership tended towards the classical authoritarian and anti-Semitic type associated with fascism and Nazism, despite their protestations to the contrary. Nigel Fielding’s The National Front was another sociological study that provided comprehensive overviews of the party’s ideology, policy and membership during the 1970s.  

Fielding’s final chapter also made an attempt to evaluate the National Front in terms of ‘deviance’, the sociological description of action and thought that violates societal norms, as a part of the party’s appeal to those people alienated by conventional politics:

The redemptions of one’s race, the resistance of international conspiracy, the purging of permissiveness are essentially provinces of behavior outside the normal control of democratic government. This partly accounts for the

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desperation with which the NF ideology regards the status quo.\footnote{Fielding, \textit{The National Front}, p. 222.}

Rounding out the triumvirate of major sociological works on the National Front was Christopher T. Husbands’ \textit{Racial Exclusionism and the City} (1983), which investigated the party’s appeals to racial animus within Britain’s urban areas.\footnote{Christopher T. Husbands, \textit{Racial Exclusionism and the City} (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983). On the same subject, see Stan Taylor, ‘The Incidence of Coloured Populations and Support for the National Front’, \textit{British Journal of Political Science} Vol. 9, No. 2 (1979), pp. 250-255.}

Having considered the impacts of both ideology and experience on how individuals responded to the National Front’s appeal, Husbands argued that deviance alone did not account for the party’s success. Instead, his conclusions emphasized the existence of a voting block within Britain whose views on race could not easily be subsumed into the mainstream parties. As such, Husbands contended that a party capable of overcoming the political incompetence that had thwarted many of the National Front’s aspirations could potentially gain a sizeable following in Britain.\footnote{Husbands, \textit{Racial Exclusionism and the City}, p. 147.}

From a contemporary perspective, Husbands’ conclusions appear somewhat prescient given the revival of the British National Party during the 1990s. Due to the National Front’s poor performance in the 1979 general elections, an event followed by numerous internal fractures, the history surrounding Britain’s extreme right in the 1980s is divided between several disparate factions: the remnants of the National Front, the New National Front (rebranded as the British National Party in 1982), and an array of clandestine or unaffiliated groups tied to the violent skinhead culture of working class England or esoteric ‘Strasserite’ neo-fascism.\footnote{Sykes, \textit{The Radical Right in Britain}, pp. 115-140.} As the most successful and politically sophisticated group to emerge from the contemporary

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\begin{enumerate}
\item Fielding, \textit{The National Front}, p. 222.
\item Husbands, \textit{Racial Exclusionism and the City}, p. 147.
\item Sykes, \textit{The Radical Right in Britain}, pp. 115-140.
\end{enumerate}
extreme right, the British National Party has been subject to a number of studies placing it within an ongoing tradition of British fascism. Matthew Goodwin’s *New British Fascism* and Nigel Copsey’s *Contemporary British Fascism* each noted the continuity between earlier iterations of the extreme right and BNP leader Nick Griffin’s attempt at respectable politics as a cover for ‘esoteric fascism’. In general, the characterization of the BNP has been very similar to that of its immediate antecedent, the National Front. This has not been due merely to the organizational links between the two parties but to the sheer similarity of their political experience: both underwent a surge of popularity under a semi-respectable leader figure before subsequently falling back into relative obscurity. Adopting a more moderate posture, the BNP experienced an unsteady growth in electoral performance after 1994 which culminated in Griffin’s election to the European Parliament in 2009. As of 2012, however, the BNP faces an uncertain future. Having failed to progress in the 2010 general elections, it now faces additional competition from the right-populist United Kingdom Independence Party and an array of smaller extreme right parties.

There are limitations to how the historical experience of the post-war extreme right can be related to the more recent fortunes of the BNP and the new generation of right-wing populism in Britain. As Sykes observed, the decade following Chesterton’s departure from the National Front saw the decline of several enduring aspects of Britain’s extreme right tradition, most notably anti-Semitism and the

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veneration of an imperial past. Since 2001, the perceived threat of Islamic terrorism and the effects of Muslim immigration have become dominant themes in the politics of Britain’s extreme right, alongside more general appeals to voter disenfranchisement, ‘law and order’ and economic revival. There are nevertheless a number of thematic continuities that can be found between the extreme right during Chesterton’s lifetime and recent developments. Nationalism, racism and hostility towards European integration each remain prominent aspects of the extreme right’s political platform. The major obstacles to the success of contemporary extreme right parties in Britain are also consistent with those encountered by the post-war movement, particularly the absence of political space and the challenge from mainstream conservatism. Finally, as evidenced by the continued reference to fascism within studies of the National Front and the British National Party, Britain’s extreme right continues to suffer from association with its forebears.

Given the poor record of the extreme right in Britain since 1945, the clearest link between interwar fascism and parties like the BUF may be the common experience of instability, failure and marginalization. The political impotence of British fascism in the 1930s partly accounts for why scholars of the BUF have embraced the more inclusive interpretations of fascism offered by Griffin, Eatwell and Mosse. These interpretations place a greater emphasis on the idealistic, mythic and culturally revolutionary aspects of fascism, and thus lend themselves more readily to a movement like the BUF, which failed to attain political power despite its

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177 Sykes, *The Radical Right in Britain*, pp. 116-117.
178 Matthew J. Goodwin, *New British Fascism*, pp. 68-69; Sykes, *The Radical Right in Britain*, pp. 139-140.
179 On the persistence and failure of the British fascist tradition, see Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 272-277.
ideological sophistication. In contrast, studies and interpretations of fascism concerned primarily with the acquisition and exercise of political power have found less value in the case of British fascism, relegating it to the cluster of minor fascist parties that emerged fruitlessly from the interwar period. A. James Gregor went so far as to doubt the notion of British fascism altogether, declaring in 2002 that ‘Long study of the literature of Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists and National Socialists, together with extensive conversations with some of its principal ideologues, convinced me that there was very little Fascism or National Socialism in the BUF’. 180

Using Chesterton as a centre point allows us to steer between the outright dismissal of groups like the BUF on one hand, and the uncritical treatment (or over-inflation) of British fascism on the other. Gregor’s position, for example, appears overly reductive when comparing Chesterton’s experiences and ideology to fascism on the European continent. As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, Chesterton belonged to the same war-generation that spearheaded fascism in Italy and Germany, and he experienced the same combination of cultural disillusionment, intense nationalism and anti-democratic essentialism that underpinned those movements. Chesterton’s case also supports the idea that the BUF was a genuine upsurge of political radicalism, rather than just an extension of Mosley’s ego, and that the resulting movement contained multiple strands of fascist thought just like its counterparts in the rest of Europe. Even putting aside the idea of generic fascism, it is hard to dispute that the BUF was at least representative of what Payne termed paradigmatic

180 A. James Gregor, ‘Once again on Roger Griffin and the study of “fascism”’, Griffin, Loh and Umland, eds., Fascism Past and Present, West and East, p. 318, note 17.
fascism, a localized attempt to replicate the style and successes of Italian Fascism or German National Socialism.\textsuperscript{181}

Comparing the BUF with similar movements throughout continental Europe tends to highlight the distinct and even contradictory aspects of British fascism: its uniquely detailed proposals for economic reform, its uncertain relationship with paramilitarism and political violence, and its conflicted attempts to marry British traditions with a state-worshipping corporatism adapted from overseas. These features do not necessarily imply, as Gregor suggests, that the BUF was not a genuine fascist party. From a heuristic perspective, at least, it is difficult to grasp the ideology and motivation of figures like Chesterton and Mosley without reference to a broader notion of fascist politics. At the same time, categorizing the BUF purely on the basis of its ideas sets too low a bar for the definition of fascism, failing to account for what truly set fascists apart from the rest of the British polity. As Michael Mann argued:

\begin{quote}
If fascism had concerned only “palingenetic myths of rebirth,” what would be the harm in that? If fascism had been only extreme nationalism, it would have been only unpleasantly xenophobic. But by embracing paramilitarism, fascists coerced each other into extreme action, they destroyed their opponents, and they convinced many bystanders that they could finally bring “order” to modern society.\textsuperscript{182}
\end{quote}

Under Griffin’s formulation, and thus in the general characterization of Britain’s extreme right, paramilitarism, statism and mass party politics were merely a reflection of the context in which parties like the BUF operated, or the result of

\textsuperscript{181} Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism}, p. 466.  
\textsuperscript{182} Mann, \textit{Fascists}, p. 13.
specific decisions by Mosley to emulate the fascists in continental Europe. Hence, after the interwar movement collapsed and figures like Chesterton resumed their political activities, they merely shed the appearance and methods of their early endeavours while perpetuating the same fascist ‘essence’ of palingenetic ultranationalism under a new guise. Given the wholehearted attempts to rekindle the interwar movement in Britain after the Second World War, such as the one undertaken by Mosley and his followers in 1947, there is good reason to be sceptical of the claim made by many ex-BUF members (and some outside observers) that British fascism ceased to exist after the Second World War. We need also consider the possibility that post-war fascism in Britain was not solely the product of nostalgia for a bygone era, despite the fact that some of the overtly fascistic groups that emerged on the extreme right were fixated on the language and symbolism of the 1930s.

Macklin posited the Union Movement as a ‘nodal point’ that allowed fascism to be transferred between these two epochs, and with the aid of Griffin’s ideal type, found a ‘seamless ideological and historical continuity’. In a comparable fashion, this thesis treats Chesterton as a kind of living link, whose experiences can be used to shed light on the shift between the interwar and post-war eras. Where it departs from Macklin’s approach, however, is in its theoretical approach to Britain’s fascism and in the conclusions that it draws about the post-1945 transition. Griffin’s ideal typical approach becomes unwieldy in dealing with organizations like the League of Empire Loyalists, which came to incorporate multiple strands of extreme right-wing ideology and bore no tactical or structural resemblance to a fascist party. To interpret such an organization as representing a kind of neo-fascism, simply on the basis that
it bore a connection to palingenetic ultra-nationalism, is to risk the kind of ‘unacceptable conflation and dilution’ warned against by Stanley Payne. Treating the extreme right after 1945 as comprising a broad family of overlapping factions, rather than just a series of fascist ‘groupuscules’, gives a more realistic picture of how the movement re-emerged in Britain after the collapse of the BUF, and how organizations like the LEL related to British fascism, both old and ‘new’.

One of the objections raised against contemporary studies of the extreme right, particularly those concerned with the populist parties of Western Europe, is a failure to properly engage with the realm of fascist studies. Criticism has also flown in the opposite direction, with scholars of post-war fascism expressing frustration at the unwillingness of traditional fascist scholars to consider the extreme right after 1945. This thesis makes a conscious attempt to draw on the theoretical and historical work conducted in both of these fields, which remain somewhat isolated from one another despite their clearly overlapping interests. Far from ignoring or marginalizing the work of fascist studies, the term extreme right is used throughout the subsequent chapters to preserve the distinctive meaning of fascism: a concept representing more than the ideas and myths encompassed by Griffin’s ideal type, and incorporating the ‘programs, actions and organizations’ highlighted in the work of Payne, Paxton and Mann.

184 See for example Jeffery M. Bale, ‘Fascism and Neo-Fascism: Ideology and “Groupuscularity”’, Griffin, Loh and Umland, eds., Fascism Past and Present, East and West, pp. 78-86.
185 Mann, Fascists, p. 12.
Chapter 2: A.K. Chesterton and British fascism, 1918-1940.

A.K. Chesterton’s life prior to joining the British Union of Fascists was not deeply concerned with politics. Despite a lack of traditional political engagement, his experiences as a young man were to influence the ideas and principles that shaped his understanding of fascism and the political struggle that consumed the remainder of his life. The key events that can be traced to his political ideology began with his involvement in the First World War. His first expressions of political, social and cultural critique came while working as a journalist in Johannesburg until 1924 and then as a critic in Stratford-Upon-Avon until 1928. In the five years between leaving Stratford and joining Mosley, Chesterton pursued an interest in playwriting while working as a newspaper editor in Devon. This was to be the last period of Chesterton’s life spent outside the realm of radical politics. From 1933 onward, Chesterton’s historical profile became intertwined with the story of the British Union of Fascists. Even after denouncing Mosley’s party in 1938, he remained an active and controversial figure within the fascist and anti-Semitic extreme right up until the beginning of the Second World War. Chesterton suspended his political activity voluntarily in September 1939 and, unlike many of his former colleagues, was not subject to imprisonment the following year. The end of Chesterton’s career in interwar politics did not mark the end to his ideological involvement with fascism. As was the case for many of his generation, the ideas underpinning Chesterton’s political radicalism were planted early; the remarkable factor in Chesterton’s case, when compared to many other activists on the extreme right, was his determination
to carry the struggle borne from the First World War into the next half of the century.

**World War I and Life on the Rand, 1915-1924**

Chesterton joined the army in South Africa in 1915 at the age of 16, having returned to his place of birth with his mother and stepfather following a brief, unhappy stint at a boarding school in England. His reasons for enlistment were not in themselves remarkable: he had grown bored and restless in his life as a schoolboy and the war offered a unique opportunity for adventure.¹ Aside from the excitement and physical challenge that military life offered, Chesterton was also drawn by the war’s romantic aspects. He subscribed to an earnest but unreflective patriotism that viewed military service as an act of valour and an expression of Imperial pride.² Though his mother initially reprimanded him for enlisting, Chesterton’s decision to embark upon a military career was broadly encouraged by his family and a surrounding culture which held soldiers in high regard.³ In many respects, Chesterton fits the stereotype of the naïve underage recruit commonly associated with the First World War. The reasons he gave for his enlistment were similar to those that drove thousands of other volunteers for Britain’s armies in the early years of the war: personal circumstances

¹ BNML, Ch. IV, p. 1. Note: This document was left as an unfinished draft and the format used to indicate page numbers is thus inconsistent. The chapter and page references given here refer to the most common style used by the author, with Roman numerals signifying each chapter and Arabic numerals given for the corresponding page number.

² BNML, Ch. IV, p. 17.

that made military service attractive, a thirst for adventure, and a patriotic sense of obligation to ‘King and country’.\(^4\) His first deployment was in German East Africa as a member of the 5\(^{th}\) South African Infantry. This exposed him to a different set of conditions than those commonly associated with the war in Europe. Fighting took place between mobile bands rather than static trench positions, requiring forced marches between encounters with the enemy. ‘By the time I was seventeen’, Chesterton wrote, ‘I had been in the thick of three battles in which men shot to kill’.\(^5\) Two of the engagements named in Chesterton’s unpublished memoirs took place in early 1916, as part of the South African Army’s push southward into German territory: Salaita Hill on 12 February, and Latema Nek on 11 and 12 March.\(^6\) Jungle diseases, including malaria and dysentery, were responsible for most of the casualties incurred by British forces throughout the campaign. Chesterton suffered from the side-effects of the quinine administered to stave off malaria, and endured a period of starvation when his regiment was cut off from supplies by a swollen river during the rainy season.\(^7\) His campaign ended when he collapsed from fever on a march and was left behind by the rest of the battalion, only to be saved by the intervention of two local porters who carried him over the Kipengere mountain range.


\(^5\) BNML, Ch. III, p. 6.


\(^7\) ‘Testimony of the Aunts’, p. 8. There is no specific time frame given for this incident, but this period of starvation was likely caused by the onset of the March-May rainy season in East Africa described in Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, p. 141.
to safety. Although the timeline of this event was not made clear in Chesterton’s memoirs, a series of notes written by his wife in 1973 averred that he was able to return to his family’s house near Johannesburg shortly prior to his 17th birthday and given permission to recuperate there before returning to active duty. 

By the time that he recovered, Chesterton was of sufficient age and experience to train as an officer. He undertook this training as part of an Officer Cadet Battalion in Ireland before transferring to the Western Front as a Lieutenant in the Second/Second London Regiment, Royal Fusiliers. Despite the violence and physical duress he had encountered as a teenager in East Africa, the recollections of the campaign from Chesterton’s memoirs avoided ‘grim reminiscences of battle’ in favour of light-hearted anecdotes. He was more explicit as to the nature of his experiences in France.

The Western Front was no nursery or hot-house for the cultivation of eccentrics, and, even had it been, my memories of its battles are too poignant for me to have sought them out to describe them in this book. When a boy of nineteen, for instance, leads an assault on the outer defences of the Hindenburg line and for the last fifty yards or so reaches his objective scarcely once touching the ground because of a vast carpet of dead German bodies and of British bodies killed in previous attacks, then and in later life he has no urge to dig in his mind for recollections of humorous interludes – of which there were many – between the occasions of butchery.

In this passage, Chesterton alluded to his experiences during the Battle of Épehy, fought over 18 and 19 September 1918 as part of the final effort to break the German defensive line across the Western Front. On the morning of the 19th,

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10 BNML, Ch. V, p. 1.
11 BNML, Ch. V, p. 1.
Chesterton was put in command of a platoon sent to reinforce an assault on a German position known as the ‘Poplar Trench’. For his part in the successful eight-hour assault, conducted at close range with hand-bombs and bayonets, Chesterton was awarded a Military Cross for bravery.\(^{12}\) Years after the battle took place, he recalled suffering from nightmares that reinforced the image of casualties incurred by both sides at Épehy: ‘a carpet of dead bodies stretching to infinity’.\(^{13}\) Many of Chesterton’s more poignant reflections on the war would not emerge till years after the conflict ended, couched within the context of his theatrical criticism or political writing. One of Chesterton’s most candid descriptions of his time at the Western Front appeared in *Candour* a year before his death in August 1973:

> The pessimism was not explicit and it was not morbid. Life welled up in me too strongly for that. Nor was the gaiety forced. No, the pessimism, born in the circumstances of the time, was implicit. Not a single one of my war-time friends survived the war. I never thought I would survive it. Death, its grotesque attitudes and sickly-sweet odours, was familiar to me. I was very far from being in love with it. But I assumed that the next day, or the day after, or the week after, it would catch up with me.\(^{14}\)

> The sense of constant, impending death that Chesterton described was a defining experience for many of the soldiers who fought during the Great War.\(^{15}\) Beyond the raw psychological impacts of wartime trauma, long stretches spent under ‘the all-pervasive atmosphere of death’ altered the way in which Chesterton saw the world in peacetime. In the years before and during his time as a fascist, this worldview often manifested itself in negative terms as Chesterton grew alienated


\(^{13}\) BNML, Ch. XIV, p. 1.

\(^{14}\) ‘There Lies Journey’s End?’, *Candour*, July 1972.

from a politics, culture and civilian society that failed to acknowledge or reflect the sacrifices of those who ensured Britain’s national survival. Yet the experience of having survived the war also left Chesterton with a kind of fatalistic optimism that compelled him to persist in the face of unfavourable odds. Alongside the sense of ‘cultural despair’ which pervaded his thinking after the war and the militaristic themes that manifested themselves in his concept of fascism, this sentiment can be regarded as the most enduring impact of the war on Chesterton’s political career. His lifelong persistence in what would prove to be a marginalized and personally fraught form of politics could thus be attributed to some of the values imparted by the war: ‘pride in the power of the human spirit to endure the unendurable’.  

After the armistice on 11 November 1918, Chesterton remained in Europe as part of the occupying force on the Rhine until he was released from service in 1919. Having survived the war and risen to the rank of 2\textsuperscript{nd} Lieutenant by age 19, Chesterton’s military career was, in many respects, a successful one. Nevertheless, the physical and psychological impacts of the war would mark the remainder of his life. In addition to the effects of illness incurred in East Africa, Chesterton developed emphysema and bronchitis as a result of exposure to a gas attack while fighting in France. Many years later, when he was engaged in political activism with the National Front during the 1960s, lingering respiratory problems forced Chesterton to spend winters in South Africa. Chesterton’s mental state also reflected the experience of combat years after the war ended: though he was reluctant to engage in deep psychological introspection, Chesterton admitted that his decades-long struggle with alcoholism was a direct consequence of ‘taut-strung nerves and a system shaken

\textsuperscript{16} ‘There Lies Journey’s End?’.
by dysentery and malaria incurred in the war. The reoccurrence and severity of Chesterton’s bouts of psychological illness in later decades, referred to by outside observers as either ‘suicidal alcoholism’, ‘neurasthenia’ or (in his own description) ‘jags’ of compulsive drinking, did lead to some later speculation that he was mentally unsound or had been ejected from the BUF due to drunkenness rather than leaving on his own accord. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that Chesterton suffered from any permanent psychological illness, or that his political activism after 1918 was driven by mental illness as opposed to ideology.

As he readjusted to civilian life following 1919, the impact of the war on Chesterton’s ideology and worldview became more apparent. Before returning to South Africa, Chesterton visited relatives in England, where he was struck by the contrast between his wartime experience and the banality of civilian life. While writing for the BUF in 1937, he gave a third-person account of ‘wandering through the infinite labyrinths and waste spaces of the war’s aftermath’, where a former soldier (presumably Chesterton as a young man) encountered a society unable to comprehend his experience.

Back in London he was dragged, bored almost beyond endurance, to see where a bomb had dropped in a neighbouring park and to listen to a dissertation on the privations and dangers suffered by the civilian population… Next day a stockbroker friend of the family called rejoicing at the prospects of the future. ‘You must settle down, young fellow me-lad, and begin to make some money’.

17 BNML, Ch. VIII, p. 1.
18 TNA KV2/1345/8a., Letter from Major-General Sir Vernon Kell, 28 May 1940.
20 1914-1918: British Union Was Born in War’, Action, 13 November 1937.
As his wife later recalled, ‘the lack of comprehension, even among kindly people, of what he and the whole army in France endured daily left him bitter’. 21 Many of those unable to comprehend Chesterton’s experiences had been civilians, isolated from the war altogether, like the elderly uncle who had dragged him to the neighbouring park. Yet the most galling sentiment that Chesterton encountered came from a former army chaplain brought to speak with him ‘one soldier to another’:

‘It is up to you and I,’ he [the chaplain] said, ‘to do what we can to help this country settle down into the good old ways before the war’. He was aghast at the other’s contemptuous gaze. ‘Magnificent! Exactly as though nothing had happened, I suppose?’ 22

The difficulty Chesterton faced in reconciling the memory of war with civilian existence put him in company with many of the other men belonging to the ‘front generation’, a cohort of ex-soldiers whose coming-of-age during the Great War drew them towards radical ideas and movements that rejected traditional notions of order and societal progress. 23 In contrast to those members of the front generation who turned to pacifism or socialism in the wake of the war, Chesterton’s experiences did not drive him to a radical critique of the ideas affiliated with the war itself: militarism, imperialism, or nationalism. 24 On the contrary, memories of the war seemed only to strengthen his belief in the legitimacy of the Empire, the primacy of nationalism and the virtues of the ‘military ethos’ that had emerged on both sides of

22 ‘1914-1918: British Union Was Born in War’.
24 See Frost, In the Wake of War, pp. 51-94 for examples of pacifist and anti-militarist currents within the French veterans’ movement.
the conflict. The ideological impacts of the war upon Chesterton became more evident as he found an outlet for his views in writing after leaving the army. After returning to Johannesburg in April 1920, Chesterton travelled east to Tlaping to work as a diamond prospector. When this venture quickly proved unsuccessful, he returned to the capital and took another job as a mine supervisor, but was forced to resign due to respiratory problems he encountered while working underground. Finally, in 1921, Chesterton secured a position as a reporter for the Johannesburg Star. Though most of Chesterton’s columns for the newspaper were not concerned with politics in the traditional sense, his work explored several of the themes that would later emerge as overt parts of his political agenda as a fascist. In a column published in 1921, for example, Chesterton mounted a defence of ‘war and warriors’ that criticized the ‘petty’ concerns that had arisen in the world since the armistice:

Gone was the infinite camaraderie of the trenches, gone was the glamour of a heroism that was real, gone was the peace and the wide visions of the battlefield – all gone into the dark abyss of the past. The voices of united empires and nations were silenced and in their place arose the babble of the disunified League of Nations. The sanity and straight-issues of the armies ceased to exist, and the world was plunged upon the nightmare laps of the futurists and their raving affiliates. Single steadfast principle stopped dead and handed over to countless legions of poor weak little principles. The thunder of a great dispute was silent, and instead arose the shrill voices of a million million petty little quarrels.

This was an argument that would reoccur throughout Chesterton’s propaganda for the BUF. The brutal simplicity of war had produced ‘a real unity, a real brotherhood’ that exalted virtues of bravery, sacrifice and selflessness.

25 BNML, Ch. V, p. 5.
26 BNML, Ch. VI, p. 1.
27 BL Add MS73480, fo. 21, ‘To The Glory of Mars’, Johannesburg Star, nd. ca. 1921.
Peacetime demanded none of these virtues, encouraging pettiness and complacency, and leaving society to decay into a state of dreary commercialism. ‘The ledger book and the shop counter utter but commonplace melodies’, Chesterton wrote, ‘but the guns of war thunder out the music of the spheres’. While this attitude seemed to suggest an enthusiasm for battle, Chesterton otherwise displayed little interest in military adventurism. Though he briefly resumed a fighting role in the Rand Revolt in 1922, he recalled no desire to return to the army on a permanent basis: ‘It was not that it inspired in me any desire for further military adventures: I had had enough fighting to last a life-time’. Many years later, when justifying his pre-1939 stance against a war with Nazi Germany, Chesterton pointed to his time on the Western Front and a desire to prevent another generation from experiencing the horrors of modern warfare. He was thus drawn to fascism as an ideology that offered to synthesize the heroism, camaraderie and ‘steadfast principles’ of war with the functions of politics and daily life in peacetime.

Several of the movements and ideas that fascism sought to negate also appeared as subjects of criticism in Chesterton’s work during the 1920s. He mocked the pacifist movements that had emerged since 1918 for their naivety in pursuing ‘the obliteration of everything on the face of the earth in any way connected with, or even vaguely reminiscent of the waging of war’. In a precursor to his derision of socialists and liberals during the 1930s, Chesterton cautioned against the wave of

28 ‘To The Glory of Mars’.
29 BNML, Ch. X, p. 1.
30 BNML, Ch. IX, p. 1.
‘pacifist fanaticism’ that threatened to abolish the virtues learned during the war.\footnote{BL Add. MS 73480 B, fo. 12, ‘The Archangel of Peace’, Johannesburg Star, nd. ca. 1922.} Unsurprisingly given his nationalist and Empire-loyalist views, Chesterton was also critical of the attempts to secure peace through the League of Nations, or any other internationalist body that might usurp the British Empire.\footnote{BL Add. MS 73480 B, fo. 6, ‘Not a Superman’, Johannesburg Star, nd. ca. 1921.} The other recurring target of Chesterton’s columns for the \textit{Star} was ‘rationalism’, a philosophy he saw as underpinning the various efforts to constrain human nature in the name of modernizing the world and securing peace. Chesterton’s attacks on rationalism reflected his commitment to those ‘splendid and indispensable’ parts of human society that liberals and communists alike sought to bypass. In some instances, his work revealed a concern that scientific progress and encroaching modernity marked the onset of a particularly dangerous form of ‘despotism’:

Religious despotism, as an example, did in some way strive to make a man feel god-like, military despotism as another example, did at least seek to make a man feel heroic, but this despotism of science, instead of giving to man a feeling that he is the king of creation with an inherent sense of the poetry of life, attempts to make him feel a worm, a parasite…\footnote{BL Add. MS 73480 B, fo. 11, ‘Tyranny of Science’, Johannesburg Star, nd. ca. 1922.}

Criticisms of ‘theory’ and other manifestations of rationalism did not necessarily put Chesterton on an unswerving path towards fascism. The cultural and intellectual currents that fed into European fascism were wide-ranging, and not necessarily appealing to Chesterton’s tastes: in the early 1920s, for example, he expressed contempt for futurism, a movement that had considerable influence on the
development of Italian Fascism.\footnote{Zeev Sternhell, ‘Fascist Ideology’, Walter Laqueur ed., Fascism: A Reader’s Guide (London: Wildwood House, 1976), p. 334.} There was, however, a clear link between Chesterton’s early rejection of rationalism and his gravitation towards the extreme right, a sphere of political thought which emphasized action and passion rather than pure reason.\footnote{See Rab Bennet, Roger King and Neill Nugent, ‘Introduction: the concept of “the Right”’, Neill Nugent and Roger King eds., The British Right (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977), pp. 3-10.} By rejecting the idea that human nature was subject to purely rational explanation, Chesterton also rejected the assumptions of liberalism and Marxism, which regarded human nature as essentially materialistic and subject to change through the application of reason. For all their benefits to humankind, Chesterton argued, scientific and technological progress needed to be cultivated carefully and balanced with a concern for ‘the soul of man’.\footnote{‘Tyranny of Science’.} Rationalism’s failure in this regard was its tendency to marginalize or negate the aspects of culture and society that Chesterton saw as transcending the essence of human life: ‘the thing that liberates our souls and leads us into the realm of the infinite’.\footnote{BL Add. MS 73480 B, fo. 5, ‘Melodies and the Man’, Johannesburg Star, nd. ca. 1922.}

Chesterton’s suspicion of rationalism and other prominent forms of intellectualism also recalled an education which, apart from a brief stint at a preparatory college in London, was marred by boredom and disruption. In England, Chesterton found meaning and enjoyment on the sporting field rather than in the classroom. Likewise, as a child on the Witwatersrand, many of his formative experiences had taken place around the mines or the surrounding wilderness far outside the confines of traditional schooling. It is not surprising, therefore, that he showed disinterest and even contempt towards intellectuals who seemed intent on
reducing life to the ‘volumes of pedantry’ that had driven him from school at age 15. In one telling example of this attitude, Chesterton’s column in *The Star* admonished a South African professor of philosophy whose work explored the psychology of humour:

> is this a fair specimen of the twentieth century wisdom which our pedants are serving out to twentieth century youth? If so, it were better to abandon our Chair of Philosophy and send the students out into the fields to enjoy the vigours of a virile life near to the bosom of nature!  

The same preoccupation with physical and spiritual (rather than purely intellectual) development appeared prominently a decade later in Chesterton’s propaganda for the BUF, where he counselled young fascists to ‘keep fit, physical and mentally… Fascism is the doctrine, not of talk, but of action’. Youthful vigour and vitality were also prominent features of the new social order in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany which British fascists sought to emulate. While travelling through Germany in 1937, Chesterton approvingly described the advances in education that emphasized ‘character’ over pure intellect and cultivated ‘sun-tanned vigorous young men getting down to the tasks of the day with efficiency and joy of life’.

Despite his suspicions of intellectualism and the limits of his formal education, Chesterton maintained an avid interest in culture and aesthetics, with many of his literary, dramatic and artistic partialities appearing in his writing prior to joining the BUF. References to the romantic poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley,

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40 ‘Fascism Calling: To the Youth of the Nation’, *Fascist Week*, 19-25 January 1934.
Homer’s *Iliad* and Shakespeare’s plays appeared throughout his columns for *The Star*, a prelude to his stint as a theatrical critic later in the decade. Besides demonstrating Chesterton’s deep interest in classical Western (particularly English) culture, these articles also showed glimpses of the broader sense of impending crisis and cultural pessimism that would come to dominate his thought prior to joining Mosley. As early as 1921, Chesterton expressed growing concern over the cultural malaise that appeared to have settled over the world since the end of the First World War:

If it is true that the war with Germany and her allies is the greatest in history, it is probably equally true that the reactionary period in which we are living at the present day is the most miserable, the most despondent and the most confused age through which humanity has ever had to pass. Never before perhaps has such a dreary ennui closed over the soul of man, probably never before has such a black night darkened his mind.\(^43\)

In search of an adequate response to the post-war cultural crisis, Chesterton began exploring many of the positive themes that informed his cultural and political thought as a fascist: romanticism, vitalism, a triumphant belief in human destiny and the veneration of individual heroism or artistic genius. He defended Shelley against his modern critics, arguing that ‘we possess no poet living with such a genius’.\(^44\) Chesterton also devoted a number of articles to criticizing the professional critic, a figure he regarded as having become ‘obsessed with the knowledge that he has, metaphorically, to pull everything to pieces’.\(^45\) These attacks seem ironic when

\(^{42}\) See the following: ‘Wanted: A New Iliad’, ‘The Archangel of Peace’, ‘Shelley’s Message’, *Johannesburg Star* nd. ca. 1922, BL Add. MS 73480 B.

\(^{43}\) ‘Towards the Dawn’.

\(^{44}\) ‘Shelley’s Message’, *Johannesburg Star*, nd. ca. 1922, BL Add. MS 73480 B.

\(^{45}\) ‘Art and the Critics’, *Johannesburg Star*, nd. ca. 1922, BL Add. MS 73480 B.
viewed in light of Chesterton’s own subsequent career as a professional critic, which commenced only a couple of years later, but their substance revealed something of his approach to art and criticism. The critic, Chesterton argued, too often privileged their own intellect and interpretation over the inherent meaning of the work under consideration. He contrasted these faults with the approach of a layperson:

The ordinary man… is different. He knows nothing of technique, nothing of criticism. His impulse – a simple, beautiful impulse – is to appreciate, not to find fault… It cannot be denied that the average man has a lot to learn before he will be admitted into the very empyrean of Beauty, and his study of the technique of art must be accompanied, therefore by a profound study of human life, so that his perspective is maintained. But only the great men are fit to guide him, not the little men with vast pretensions.  

By mounting a defence of the masses’ cultural tastes, Chesterton echoed the ideas of his elder relative G.K. Chesterton, whose work exalted the wisdom of everyday existence and the English ‘common man’. He also evoked some of the disdain for intellectual or avant-garde culture that would appear in his theatrical criticism during the late 1920s, and carry over into his fascist polemic during the 1930s. In light of his later preoccupation with dynamic leadership under fascism, however, the most significant aspect of this passage was Chesterton’s reference to ‘great men’, which he drew from another of his classical influences, the Irish historian Thomas Carlyle. In 1840 Carlyle published a work detailing six historical archetypes of Great Men which included the ‘Hero as Poet’, giving as examples

46 ‘Art and the Critics’. 
William Shakespeare and the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. Following this interpretation of history, Chesterton viewed great men as uniquely equipped to guide the masses where ‘little men with vast pretensions’ could not. The political ramifications of this worldview would become clearer when Chesterton became fully invested in fascism and embraced Oswald Mosley as a leader who, in Carlyle’s terms, represented ‘the indispensable saviour of his epoch’.

In the early 1920s, Chesterton did not necessarily envision the decline in cultural standards as originating from malice or conspiracy but rather a lack of imagination: ‘There is nothing inherently vulgar in commerce and if the word “popular” has begun to suggest itself as a synonym for “cheap” or “nasty” it is because the masses are insufficiently educated, and not because they have any fundamental desire for bad things’. By the following decade, Chesterton’s views on popular culture had become far more pessimistic, equating commercial entertainment with the broader assault of Jewish cosmopolitanism upon British society. Rather than attribute cultural decline to technology or modernism in general, Chesterton sought a synthesis between the power of industrial modernity and the ideals of classical British culture: ‘it is difficult to see why a compromise should not be reached between the idealist and the materialist, difficult to realize why they should not come together and agree that both “Paradise Lost” and wireless telegraphy are triumphs of human endeavour’. He remained open to the prospect that that a new system could arise which preserved cultural and spiritual integrity from

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50 Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 16.
51 BL Add MS 73480 B, fo. 11, ‘Futility of the Film’, *Johannesburg Star*, nd. ca. 1923.
52 Chesterton, *Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary*, pp. 24-27.
53 BL Add MS 73480 B, fo. 15, ‘Towards the Dawn’, *Johannesburg Star*, nd. ca. 1921,
commercialism while still taking advantage of the technical capabilities of the 20th century. The vision of fascist corporatism offered by Mosley in 1933 appeared to satisfy these technical requirements, while also fulfilling Chesterton’s desire for an epoch-defining ‘Great Man’ to lead the new order.

Unlike many of those drawn to the early fascist parties in continental Europe, Chesterton had little involvement in the militant street politics of the interwar period prior to 1933. In one exceptional instance in 1922, however, his work as a reporter resulted in his becoming directly involved in revolutionary politics in South Africa through the events of the ‘Rand Revolt’ – a political uprising that grew from industrial action by white mine workers on the Rand between December 1921 and March 1922. The rebellion itself was preceded by a long history of racial and industrial unrest surrounding the lucrative gold mining industry on South Africa’s Witwatersrand. As a child, Chesterton had been witness to one of the early strikes by white miners that prompted the intervention of the military to defend the mine where his step-father worked. This was an early precursor to violent unrest that began in 1920, following a week-long strike by African workers that ended with forceful intervention by the military and police. Discontent among the white trade unions was compounded by a drop in the price of gold, which led the Chamber of Mines to propose a reduction in wages and a loosening of the ‘colour bar’ that prevented African workers from assuming other roles reserved for white miners. This was the initial impetus for a strike by white workers on 28 December 1921, which stopped

54 For a brief overview of paramilitarism in the Italian and German fascist parties, see Mann, Fascists, pp. 98-100, 152-155.
all work on the mines by January the following year. The graduation from industrial action to full-blown rebellion came about as a result of increasingly militant tactics by the strikers, who formed groups of armed resisters known as ‘commandos’.\(^{56}\) This was met by correspondingly aggressive measures by police and local volunteer regiments, who attempted to stave-off the uprising until a proper military response could be launched.

In his memoirs, Chesterton pointed to March 1922 as the start of a ‘terror’ carried out by the rebels against the local population. This claim bore some truth, as the lead-up to that month had seen an ‘eruption of racial killings across the Rand’, carried out by white miners against their African counterparts.\(^{57}\) On 6 March, the miners called for a general strike. The declaration was followed by an outbreak of rioting that prompted the implementation of martial law on 10 March and the arrival of Prime Minister Jan Smuts on the evening of Saturday 11 March. Smuts’ appearance coincided with that of the Durban Light Infantry, the military force deployed to quell the rebellion. In a condensed form, the story Chesterton told of his role in crushing the rebellion was as follows: Instructed by the *Star* to cover the military’s attack on the rebels’ position, Chesterton encountered a contingent of the Durban Light Infantry whose commander (a ‘colonel Molyneaux’) recognized Chesterton from his time as an officer in the First World War. The commander informed him of the need for experienced officers and requested Chesterton’s assistance in the fight against the rebels. Chesterton agreed and took command of a

\(^{56}\) Krikler, *The Rand Revolt*, pp. 50-77.

\(^{57}\) Breckenridge, ‘Fighting for a White South Africa’, p. 235; Lt. Col George Molyneux was the commander of the Durban Light Infantry during the Rand Revolt, according to Krikler, p. 75.
platoon after acquiring a uniform from a local theatre.\textsuperscript{58} On March 14, Chesterton and his platoon carried out an ambush on the rebels’ position, deploying a machine gun in a nearby building and then charging the rebellion’s headquarters, the Fordsburg Trades Hall, with rifles and bayonets.

It is hard to verify whether Chesterton was as deeply involved in the events of 14 March 1922 as he claimed. His name does not appear in contemporary studies of the uprising, such as Jeremy Krikler’s \textit{The Rand Revolt} (2005), which provides a detailed account of how the rebellion was crushed by Smuts’ intervention. Nevertheless, the sequence of events described in Chesterton’s memoirs is roughly corroborated by Krikler’s account, which notes that many white professionals were mobilized as ‘civic guards’ during the course of the revolt. Chesterton’s account is plausible, therefore, even if he played only a small role in the large military effort directed at suppressing the rebellion.\textsuperscript{59} In any case, the most important aspect of Chesterton’s experiences in 1922 is the way in which he interpreted the rebellion, and how this influenced his attitude towards the revolutionary left. During his time as a propagandist for the BUF, Chesterton would invoke his experience on the Rand as a kind of cautionary tale for those who sympathized with the ideas of class warfare advanced by British socialists. In September 1936, he gave a sensationalistic account of the ‘Red Methods’ employed by the rebels, comparing them to the methods employed by anti-fascists in their encounters with the BUF: ‘The same Red types who bathed the Rand in blood are to be found in Britain. They throng

\textsuperscript{58} BNML, Ch. VII, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{59} Krikler, \textit{The Rand Revolt}, pp. 256-289. For Krikler’s account of the attack on Fordsburg, see pp. 269-271.
Blackshirt meetings to try to break them up, knowing that on no condition will
Fascist power tolerate their foulness’. 60

While writing for the Weekly Review in 1943, Chesterton once again alluded
to his experience on the Rand while criticizing Richard Acland, an English MP who
warned of a possible revolution if the government failed to adopt socialist policies:
‘For my part, having seen something of an attempted revolution, I can only salute Sir
Richard’s high courage in pledging himself to the barricades. Especially in these
days of dive-bombers and sixty-ton tanks’. 61 There was a consistent narrative that
ran through Chesterton’s memories of the ‘attempted revolution’. He was
sympathetic to the striking workers’ initial grievances, ‘a very proper step to take,
since white standards of life in Africa must be safeguarded’, but withdrew his
support once the strike evolved into a revolt. Writing for the BUF in 1936, he took
pains to distinguish the bulk of the aggrieved workers’ from the ‘gibbering sub-
humans’ drawn to the strike by the ‘pathology of Communism’. 62 He gave a similar
impression of the strikers in his memoirs:

The miners were well paid and had no manual labour to perform, but it can be
no fun spending one’s working life underground, anything up to three miles
below the fresh air of the surface, and this may be part of the reason for the
outbreaks. But it did not explain the support they invariably received from the
thousands of riff-raff who emerged from the White slums around
Johannesburg and the other Reef towns. 63

60 ‘The Harvest of Class War’, Action, 3 September 1936.
62 ‘The Harvest of Class War’.
63 BNML, Ch. VII, p. 1.
Robert Skidelsky remarked upon the irony of Chesterton, a man later obsessed with the machinations of Jewish international finance, fighting on behalf of mine owners which included J.P. Morgan and Ernest Oppenheimer.\textsuperscript{64} It is important to note, however, that at no point did Chesterton’s anti-capitalism derive from a left wing perspective despite his basic agreement with the objections to capitalist excess offered by the left. On a philosophical level, he could never abide the materialistic precepts of Marxism, which called into question his romanticized beliefs in heroism and national destiny, nor could he abide the class conflict demanded by socialism and communism. Rather than class solidarity, Chesterton cherished the idea of solidarity on the basis of patriotism or, in the case of the Rand strike, racial identity.\textsuperscript{65} His work as a propagandist for the BUF contained some of his most pointed attacks on capitalism and big business, particularly as the movement sought to attract working-class supporters after 1934. Yet even those articles which were written to appeal to a broad audience made clear the limitations of Chesterton’s anti-capitalism:

\begin{quote}
Fascism believes in private enterprise and private property. It sees in the first, when properly coordinated and controlled, a vital stimulus to our national economic life and in the second, when properly distributed, the means of securing maximum happiness and prosperity for all.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

After leaving the BUF, Chesterton maintained the same argument regarding the need to balance the ‘honourable traditions’ of private property and enterprise.

\textsuperscript{64} Skidelsky, \textit{Oswald Mosley}, pp. 333-334.
\textsuperscript{65} On the significance of class as a distinction between left and right, see Rab Bennett, Roger King and Niall Nugent, ‘Introduction: The Concept of the Right’, Neill Nugent and Roger King eds., \textit{The British Right} (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977), pp. 8-9.
\textsuperscript{66} ‘To the Great Army of Labour’, \textit{Fascist Week}, 2-8 February 1934.
with the national interest, while avoiding the unnecessary bureaucratic
entanglements of socialism.\textsuperscript{67} The overall understanding of class, capitalism and the
role of government which Chesterton exhibited at this point might readily have
drawn him towards conservatism, were it not for his hostility towards the laissez-
faire economic posture adopted by many Conservatives. While the actual
relationship between laissez-faire capitalism and British conservatism was more
complex than Chesterton was able to recognize, specific policies (particularly those
relating to trade and finance) fed his perception that many Tories had become
‘smeared with the manifold disgraces of Capitalist misrule’.\textsuperscript{68} His attachment to the
revolutionary aspects of fascist ‘national regeneration’ also made him wary of
reactionary or ‘traditionalist’ conservatives, whose main concern appeared to be the
preservation of political traditions that were easily corrupted by international
finance.\textsuperscript{69} In short, Chesterton’s sympathies lay with neither the anti-capitalist left
nor the pro-capitalist right; he was thus readily inclined towards the ‘third way’ of
fascist corporatism.

\textsuperscript{67} ‘What is wrong with the Right?’, \textit{People’s Post}, June 1946, ‘Cheers for Free Enterprise,
\textsuperscript{68} ‘What is wrong with the Right?’. On the relationship between conservatism and capitalism
in Britain, see Rab Bennett, ‘The Conservative tradition of thought: A right wing
phenomenon?’, Niall Nugent and Roger King eds., \textit{The British Right}, pp. 18-22.
\textsuperscript{69} Many recent interpretations of fascism have emphasized its revolutionary rather than
reactionary nature. See for example: Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism}, pp. 6-14; Griffin, \textit{The
Nature of Fascism}, pp. 47-48; George L. Mosse, \textit{The Fascist Revolution} (New York:
Howard Fertig, 1999), p. 23.
Journalism and Theatrical Criticism, 1924-1933

After the Rand Revolt, Chesterton worked as a reporter for the *Johanessburg Star* for a further year before he resigned over an unspecified quarrel with his editors that arose during one of his alcoholic episodes. He later wrote that the events of March 1922 had ‘unsettled him’ and fed a growing dissatisfaction with Johannesburg, a city that offered little in the way of cultural or artistic interest. After a brief stint on a government work relief program, he travelled to a farm on the Sundays River where his mother and half-sister raised poultry. Chesterton worked on the farm for six months, maintaining a side-career as a freelance journalist until he departed from South Africa and returned to England in 1924. On the advice of his cousin, the poet and author G.K. Chesterton, he then moved from London to Stratford-Upon-Avon where he found work as a reporter for the local newspaper. This position in turn introduced Chesterton to Archibald (or ‘Archie’) Flower, a prominent figure in local politics and Chairman of the Council of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. Life at the heart of the Stratfordian theatre industry proved gratifying for Chesterton who, besides his general craving for literary and artistic stimulation, regarded Shakespeare as unsurpassed in his contribution to English culture: ‘Shakespeare and Shelley, as it happens, had long been my outstanding literary heroes… Nothing in Shakespeare’s poetry has ever become stale for me’.  

With Flower’s assistance, Chesterton was able to parley this enthusiasm into professional criticism published in the *Stratford-Upon-Avon Herald* and the *Shakespeare Review*, a journal he ran from 1926 to 1928.

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70 BNML, Ch. X, p. 1.
As noted in the introductory chapter, the historiography surrounding Chesterton’s involvement with the BUF has placed much emphasis on the connection between his cultural criticism and its connection to fascism. David Baker’s biographical work noted the importance of Chesterton’s relationship with the Shakespearean scholar G. Wilson Knight, with correspondence between the two men providing insight into the development of Chesterton’s cultural pessimism and subsequent radicalization. There were indeed many aspects of Chesterton’s theatrical criticism that hinted at his political development, just as his earlier work as a journalist showed that he was far from ‘apolitical’ before 1930, despite his lack of formal engagement with the political process. Chesterton’s approach to Shakespeare revealed many of the same opinions on culture that he had begun to explore while working for the Star. Where production was concerned Chesterton favoured a traditional approach, and was critical of those who attempted to modernize Shakespeare’s plays in a way that obscured their cultural roots; in the case of Macbeth, for example, he strongly disapproved of any production that removed the play from its Celtic roots. Chesterton also held strong ideas as to the nature of individual characters, often constructed in terms of heroism or weakness. His ideal performance of Hamlet was ‘a man bursting at the seams with lust for action, and yet restrained by the still more powerful forces of Destiny… a great man with

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72 BNML Ch. XII, p. 1.
tremendous force of personality’. Brutus from *Julius Caesar*, on the other hand, he viewed as a ‘blatant prig and humbug and [a] run-to-seed liberal decadent’.

The *Shakespeare Review* ceased publication in 1928 due to a lack of reliable funding, motivating Chesterton to leave Stratford-Upon-Avon and seek work elsewhere. After two years freelancing in London, he found a permanent position in Devon as editor of the *Torquay Times*. In 1932, with encouragement from Wilson-Knight, he published *Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation*, a collection of essays adapted from his work in Stratford. The volume included rare examples of Chesterton reflecting openly on his experiences as a soldier, through a series of essays that considered three literary and theatrical interpretations of the war: R.C. Sherriff’s *Journey’s End*, Lawrence du Garde Peach’s *Home Fires* and Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a novel adapted to film by Lewis Milestone in 1930. In contrast to some of the allusions to war made in Chesterton’s columns for the *Star*, his reflections in this volume made no effort to romanticise or soften the events of 1914 to 1918. As Doris Chesterton would later attest, her husband’s review of *Journey’s End* featured many personal recollections of the war, alluded to mainly through discussion of the play’s protagonist, Captain Stanhope.

Three years voyaging under a sky sick with horror, studded with innumerable streaks and stabs of paralyzing fear… Stanhope, like thousands of others, trod every inch of it with dauntless feet, superbly efficient, sacrificing himself utterly, and drinking whisky so that he could go on journeying long after his normal reserves of endurance had fallen wounded by the wayside!

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73 BNML, Ch. XI, p. 5.  
74 BNML, Ch. XII, p. 4.  
75 Chesterton Collection A. 45, Letter from Doris Chesterton to David Baker, 2 August 1978,  
Alongside its many descriptions of the physical and psychological horrors of trench warfare, Chesterton’s laudatory review of Sherriff’s work concluded with a recrimination of the civilian world that had so quickly forgotten the sacrifices of its defenders: ‘the soaring faiths and heroisms were interred with the corpses on the battlefield, and the civilian world settled down smugly to forget all about them… Advertisement and pretence counted for everything, manhood for very little’. This passage recalled Chesterton’s earlier allusions to the ‘dreary ennui’ of post-war society. His depiction of the crisis afflicting England in peacetime now appeared explicitly political, however, with reference to the ‘self-seekers and skunks’ that had risen to power while former soldiers struggled through ‘long years of suffering’. These sentiments demonstrated the full extent to which proto-fascist sentiment had permeated Chesterton’s thinking since the end of the war, replete with the notion that the men in the trenches had, through their suffering, achieved a kind of unity and transcendence that could never be matched by the existing order of British politics and society.

Though Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation was not commercially successful, the book was praised by Wilson Knight, who lauded Chesterton’s writing style and capacity to engage with both ‘high’ and ‘low’ brow aspects of dramatic criticism. The talent for writing and criticism that Chesterton displayed prior to his time in the BUF led some friends and family to reflect that his life had been derailed into politics: Doris Chesterton recalled surprise and disappointment at her husband’s decision to join Mosley rather than resume work for Archie Flower in 1933. Even

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77 Chesterton, Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, p. 10.
78 Chesterton Collection E. 1, Letter from G. Wilson Knight to A.K. Chesterton, 26 March 1931.
Rosine De Bounevialle, a friend and committed follower of Chesterton’s post-war campaigns, found it ‘astonishing’ that he did not retire from politics after the BUF to pursue a career in journalism or playwriting.\(^79\) Thurlow’s analysis of Chesterton concluded that his cultural and aesthetic ideas became inseparable from his political analysis, resulting in a worldview that was fundamentally detached from political reality.\(^80\) Culture was an indisputably important aspect of Chesterton’s ideology, which rejected materialism from both left and right-wing perspectives. Like many fascist and conservative thinkers, Chesterton saw cultural forms like art, literature and theatre as indicative of the moral and spiritual values of society as a whole.\(^81\)

At the same time, it is important to note that Chesterton did not stumble into fascism without a pre-existing interest in politics or world affairs. This is perhaps best illustrated by how he considered the legacy of his cousins, Gilbert (G.K.) and Cecil Chesterton. G.K’s success as an author and poet far eclipsed that of Cecil, with a body of work that included a series of popular mystery novels (the ‘Father Brown’ books) as well as non-fiction centered around philosophy, theology and Christian apologetics. Cecil’s career was less illustrious but more invested in the sphere of current affairs, a fact that drew the admiration of A.K. Chesterton as a child:

> Gilbert, I reflected, was the genius filled with splendid dreams… but Cecil was the man with his eye on the ball. Soon afterwards, when Cecil’s name became headline news because of his being prosecuted on a charge of criminal libel against Godfrey Isaacs, I became convinced that he was the man I must choose as my own exemplar.\(^82\)

\(^79\) Chesterton Collection A. 16, Baker interview with Rosine de Bounevialle, ca. 1978.  
\(^80\) Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain*, pp. 27-28.  
\(^81\) On the role of culture in the ideology of British fascism, see Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-39*, pp. 201-221.  
\(^82\) BNML, Ch. 9, p. 3.
Chesterton referred in this passage to the ‘Marconi scandal’ that emerged in 1912 after allegations of insider trading between the Marconi telecommunications company and members of Herbert Henry Asquith’s Liberal government. Cecil Chesterton’s investigations into the matter, published in *The New Witness*, implicated several high profile figures, including then Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George. In a court case the following year, Cecil Chesterton was sued for libel by Godfrey Isaacs, the managing director of the Marconi company. Though he lost the case, Cecil maintained that the allegations were a genuine example of conspiracy between figures in government and big business. Later interpretations of the scandal suggested that the Chestertons and Hilaire Belloc, editor of *The New Witness*, pursued the case on the basis of anti-Semitic stereotypes. Although the events of the scandal took place while A.K. Chesterton was still young, his career in journalism and politics followed many of the examples set by Cecil Chesterton’s aggressive and sometimes conspiratorial approach to current affairs. The fact that Gilbert did not pursue his brother’s political cause was a great disappointment to A.K. Chesterton:

I was in the Army of the Rhine when I heard of Cecil’s death in a military hospital in France. Presumptuously, perhaps, I wrote a letter to Gilbert expressing the hope that his brother’s fight against contemporary evils, especially the conspiracies of international finance, would not be allowed to lapse.85

83 A more detailed consideration of the Marconi scandal in relation to the traditions of British anti-Semitism can be found in Chapter 3. For a general overview of the affair and its political context, see Frances Donaldson, *The Marconi Scandal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).
85 BNML, Ch. IX, p. 4.
Whether or not A.K. Chesterton’s concern with financial conspiracies began as early as 1919, it is evident that he had begun to emulate Cecil’s interrogatory approach to world affairs prior to his full envelopment in the conspiracy theories of British fascism. While working in Stratford-Upon-Avon, Chesterton took pride in the idea that his views were independent and ‘not for sale’, gaining a reputation within Stratford-Upon-Avon for his strident and argumentative approach to theatrical criticism. He maintained this sensibility after leaving Stratford for Torquay in 1928, where he became involved in local politics while working as a newspaper editor. A dispute over a Town Council measure relating to public transportation led Chesterton to found the Torquay Citizens Defence League, an organization to ‘safeguard the interests of the ratepayers’ that contested the issue through three years of ‘municipal battles’. Though of little significance compared to his involvement with the BUF, this was the first time that Chesterton had formally engaged with the world of political activism and a minor introduction to the controversy that would follow the rest of his career, ‘the bitter hatred and smearing which such battling always entails’.

Aside from his brief foray into local politics, the most significant part of Chesterton’s time in Torquay was the beginning of his relationship with Doris Terry, a schoolteacher and member of the local theatre group whom he would marry in September 1933. Doris’s recollections of the couple’s early relationship provide

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86 BNML, Ch. X, p. 4.  
87 BNML, Ch. XV, p. 2.  
88 Chesterton Collection A. 19, Doris Chesterton, Untitled manuscript notes re: the life of A.K. Chesterton, ca. 1979.
some further hints as to Chesterton’s political direction in the years just prior to joining the BUF. Shortly after meeting his wife, Chesterton referred to himself as a ‘socialist’ who had voted for Labour in the 1929 general election, voicing his approval that Doris (a Fabian socialist) had done the same.\textsuperscript{89} The fact that Chesterton cast a vote for a left-wing party in 1929 serves as a reminder that his path to fascism was not simply a linear drift towards the right. Many members of the BUF found their way to fascism via the left, including Mosley and ex-Labour MP John Beckett, and left-wing notions of social and economic upheaval were incorporated within the party’s ideology. Chesterton had less formal interaction with left-wing politics but expressed a desire for social reform, showed concern for the working class, and strongly identified with the wartime ideals of collective struggle and sacrifice, otherwise known as ‘blood socialism’.\textsuperscript{90} It is thus not remarkable that, faced with the choice of parties contesting the 1929 election, Chesterton cast his vote for Labour. Against a backdrop of ‘conservative hegemony’ in the early interwar period, Ramsay MacDonald’s party represented the most radical of the three major factions contesting the election. He was thus an understandable choice for Chesterton, whose grievances against the status quo had grown steadily since 1918.\textsuperscript{91} Whether he gave it thoughtfully or on impulse, Chesterton’s vote in 1929 marked the last time that he would lend his support to any of the major political parties operating in Britain. His sympathy for the ‘Old Gangs’ of British politics evaporated completely upon joining

\textsuperscript{89} Chesterton Collection A. 46, David Baker interview with Doris L. Chesterton, 8 February 1980.

\textsuperscript{90} Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism}, p. 73.

Mosley in 1933, to be replaced with contempt for the ‘dodderers’ in British parliament and a lasting disdain for the electoral system as a whole.

Doris admitted that her husband’s deeper political leanings were not readily apparent to her prior the time they lived together prior to their marrying in late 1933. While Chesterton was working at the newspapers in Torquay, Doris was employed at a school in Kingston-Upon-Thames and it was not until the early stages of their married life that he demonstrated any interest in fascism. On their honeymoon in October 1933, the couple met with Archie Flower to discuss the possibility of Chesterton returning to work as editor of the *Stratford Herald*. During the course of his conversation with Flower, Chesterton made ‘a brief defence of Hitler’s record in Germany’, the NSDAP leader having been appointed as Chancellor in January that year. Chesterton did not read Italian or German and, unlike Mosley or John Beckett, had no opportunity to see fascism in practice before encountering the BUF at its headquarters in London. Whatever familiarity he had with fascism overseas was therefore likely to have been acquired in a general fashion through the news media. That Chesterton felt compelled to offer a defence of Hitler’s record in 1933 would suggest that he was aware of the uneasy responses to fascism, Nazism in particular, among the press and political establishment in Britain. At the same time, it is worth noting that Chesterton and others drawn directly into movements like the BUF were far from alone in holding sympathetic or ambiguous attitudes to fascism before 1939.

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92 BNML, Ch. XII, p. 1.
93 Chesterton Collection A. 46, Baker interview with D. Chesterton, 8 February 1980.
94 For a broad introduction to British responses to Nazism in particular, see Dan Stone, *Responses to Nazism in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1-17. Other
There were a number of factors that drove Chesterton to regard fascism in Europe as a potential role model for British nationalists. Chief among them was his sense of identification with other members of the ‘Front Generation’, which made him sympathetic to the displays of militaristic, resurgent nationalism that were emanating from the continent. In his review of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, Chesterton had mused that his own memories seemed to match those of the German soldiers depicted in Erich Remarque’s story: ‘We did not know the war from the German side; we did not guess, even, how pathetically close it was to our own experience’. He was likewise inclined to see the response to the ‘dreary old cupidity and stupidity of civil life’ that emerged from Weimar Germany and as parallel to his own feelings of alienation from interwar Britain, albeit without the same echoes of ‘fundamental emotionalism’ that drove the German military ethos. Although Chesterton’s life after the war made him sympathetic to the generic ideals of fascism, his worldview was always rooted in British nationalism, and did not arise from an infatuation with Italian Fascism or German National Socialism. It thus required the emergence of an authentic British movement, as well as a plausible leader in the form of Oswald Mosley, to turn his abstract sympathy with fascism into a full-blown ideological commitment.

The British Union of Fascists, 1933-1938

Reviewing Chesterton’s life between 1918 and 1933 there is a definite sense of direction in his ideological progression towards fascism, with many proto-fascist ideas and sentiments emerging from the immediate aftermath of World War I. Yet his actual involvement with the British Union of Fascists came about through sheer coincidence. In late 1933 he moved with his wife into an apartment in Chelsea next door to ‘Black House’, a property that had served as headquarters for the BUF since its founding in October 1932. 96 Chesterton’s visits to the house introduced him to many of the men who would serve as his cohorts both during and after his time under Mosley. According to his wife, Chesterton was at first sceptical of the young Blackshirts he encountered, who appeared to lack experience to match their enthusiasm. 97 His attitude changed, however, upon meeting members of the group whose experience and capabilities matched his own. A key figure in his decision to join the party was Rex Tremlett, editor of the Fascist Week and a man with whom Chesterton had much in common. Tremlett also hailed from South Africa, having worked as a prospector and then a newspaper editor in Johannesburg before travelling to England and joining Mosley in early 1933. 98 Early meetings with the Blackshirts also brought Chesterton in touch with John Beckett, a former Labour M.P. who served as Mosley’s director of propaganda. 99 Unsurprisingly given his background, Chesterton was drawn to others in the fascist movement with a flair for

97 ‘Notes re: the life of A.K. Chesterton’.
98 ‘Men in Fascism: Rex Tremlett’, Fascist Week, 9 February 1934.
99 Skidelsky, Oswald Mosley, pp. 342-343. For more on Beckett and British fascism, see: Francis Beckett, Fascist in the Family, (London: Routledge, 2016); Dorril, Blackshirt, p. 252.
journalism and political oratory, as well as those with a military background. Aside from his general observations of ‘naivety’ among the young members at BUF headquarters, there is no exact record of what Chesterton’s early impressions of Mosley were, nor under what circumstances the two men first met. It did not take long, however, for Chesterton’s commitment to the ‘Leader’ to solidify. By November 1933 he had become a fully-fledged member of the BUF and, in a gesture that demonstrated the extent of his commitment, turned down a more lucrative position with the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford to join Mosley at the comparatively meagre salary of £5 per week. 100

Like Chesterton, Oswald Mosley had begun his path towards fascism after the First World War. Enrolled as a cadet at Sandhurst Academy in August 1914, Mosley was initially commissioned as part of a cavalry regiment before applying for the Royal Flying Corps. After suffering an ankle injury from a plane crash, he was recalled to his original regiment, the 16th Lancers, and served from October 1915 when he was removed from active duty in March 1916 due to an injury. 101 Mosley spent the remainder of the war in administrative roles, an experience that biographer Robert Skidelsky noted as a major influence on his enthusiasm for centralized control of the national economy. 102 Although his time spent as a front line soldier was relatively brief, these experiences had notable impact on his attraction to fascism. Like his German and Italian counterparts, Mosley was impressed by the immense potential of collective action and the capacity for the shared struggle of war.

100 Chesterton Collection A. 12, Text of an interview with Mrs Doris Chesterton, 9 May 1978.
101 Skidelsky, pp. 62-63. A concise discussion of Mosley’s war service is also provided by Dorril, pp. 20-35, who notes some of the contrasts between his actual experience of the war and its depiction in BUF propaganda.
102 Skidelsky, Oswald Mosley, pp. 62-63; Dorril, Blackshirt, pp. 34-35.
to override divisions of class. He later claimed, in a similar fashion to Chesterton, to have experienced a bitter reaction to the war’s end: ‘Smooth, smug people who had never fought or suffered, seemed to the eyes of youth – at that moment age-old with sadness, weariness and bitterness – to be eating, drinking, laughing on the graves of our companions’.  

In the years between the end of the war and the founding of the BUF, Mosley moved through a rapid series of political alignments: first as member of the Conservative Party in 1918, then as a Labour MP in 1926, and finally as the leader of his own New Party in 1931. When the New Party electoral efforts floundered, in part due to the opposition of Mosley’s former allies in the Labour party, he grew disillusioned with the ‘Old Gangs’ of the parliamentary system that had stymied his attempts at radical reform. After a final failed attempt to form a cross-party opposition with several other backbenchers, including Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George, Mosley travelled to Italy in 1932 and became convinced of fascism’s potential to be implemented in Britain. On 3 October 1932, he founded the British Union of Fascists and released his manifesto, *The Greater Britain*, which served as the party’s statement of policy.

Chesterton’s decision to join Mosley coincided with what would prove to be the BUF’s brief zenith of popularity. Even at that early stage, there was evidence that fascism in Britain would have limited chances of gaining influence as it had in continental Europe. Many of Mosley’s political efforts prior to establishing the BUF

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had been geared towards radical social programs designed as a response to economic downturn. By 1933, however, Britain had begun to recover from the ‘Slump’ and British fascists could not, like their counterparts in Germany, point to military defeat as the cause of the nation’s economic woes.\textsuperscript{106} Earlier attempts to promote fascism in Britain had also proved unsuccessful during periods of economic and social upheaval. During the General Strike in 1926, members of an early fascist party, Rothen Linton-Orman’s British Fascists (BF), sought to ingratiate themselves with authorities as part of a bid for greater influence.\textsuperscript{107} While members did lend some assistance in running essential services, their offers to supplement police services were rebuffed, denying them any space for paramilitary tactics practiced by the Italian \textit{squadrismo} or German \textit{Friebrps}.\textsuperscript{108} Another problem highlighted by the BF that confronted Mosley in the 1930s was fascism’s reputation among the British public. At the very least, fascism represented a foreign concept with ideas and symbolism that bore little relation to British culture; at worst, members of the public already had reason to fear the outcome of fascists coming to power. As the economic journalist Paul Einzig observed in 1933, the philosophical or economic aspects of fascism were easily overshadowed by its violent and despotic character: ‘To millions of men and women of average intelligence, Fascism means castor oil, violence,

\textsuperscript{106} The effects of the ‘Slump’ persisted in Britain till the end of the decade, with over 2 million unemployed in 1935 despite the number declining from 1933 onwards. See John Stevenson and Chris Cook, \textit{The Slump} (Harlow: Pearson, 2010), pp. 10-11. High rates of unemployment did not necessarily translate into widespread support for fascism, as noted by Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism 1914-1945}, p. 494.
\textsuperscript{107} Pugh, \textit{Hurrah for the Blackshirts!}, pp. 92-109.
\textsuperscript{108} “Manchester Fascisti,’ \textit{The Times}, 8 October 1925. For a brief description of paramilitaries in the early stages of Fascism and National Socialism, see Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism}, pp. 105, 161-162.
political persecution, aggressive nationalism, and rampant reactionary despotism’.  

Finally, the late arrival of Mosley’s party placed it at a tactical disadvantage to its left-wing opponents, which had worked to establish an organized anti-fascist movement since the 1920s. While in retrospect these factors would suggest a movement doomed by circumstances from the beginning, Mosley’s party did possess some momentum in its early stages and attracted an array of capable personnel, along with financial backing from Mussolini’s regime. Most important, when considering Chesterton individually, was the fact that none of the BUF’s structural disadvantages were obvious enough to dissuade him from throwing his considerable energies behind the fascist cause. Mosley’s personal charisma was such that, in the early years, Chesterton was willing to overlook the flaws and internal divisions that would later drive him from the party.

For his first major assignment, Chesterton was sent to Birmingham to organize and oversee the BUF’s operations in the Midlands. Here he was introduced to William Joyce, an enthusiastic supporter of Nazism and Italian Fascism who also served as a speaker and propagandist for the BUF. Joyce was something of a parallel figure to Chesterton, whose skill and energy as a public speaker matched

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110 On the origins and development of Britain’s anti-fascist movement through the interwar period, see Nigel Copsey, Anti-Fascism in Britain (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 5-42. For additional perspective on the left-wing opposition to the BUF, see Keith Hodgson, Fighting Fascism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 125-155.

111 For a brief overview of how the BUF was funded, see Lewis, pp. 80-83. Dorril, Blackshirt, p. 236, puts the figure of Mussolini’s yearly contributions in 1933 at £60,000.

112 On Joyce’s involvement with the BUF, see Holmes, Searching for Lord Haw-Haw, pp. 61-111.
Chesterton’s capabilities in written propaganda. Despite their similarities, Chesterton held no great personal affection for the volatile and violently anti-Semitic Joyce, whose infamous flight to Germany in 1939 would nevertheless haunt him by association for decades after the dissolution of the BUF.\textsuperscript{113} While working in the Midlands, Chesterton was responsible for leading a large number of Blackshirts to hear Mosley’s address at the Olympia meeting on the evening of 10 July 1934. What was intended to be a triumphant display of fascist discipline before the public quickly descended into chaos, as Blackshirt stewards dealt ruthlessly with hecklers attempting to drown out Mosley’s speech.\textsuperscript{114} Collin Brooks, a conservative newspaper editor who would work alongside Chesterton after the war, described the resulting melee as a ‘Roman Circus’ that only served to highlight the violent excess of the fascists’ attempts to maintain order. Though not entirely unsympathetic to Mosley’s ideas, Brooks’ diary entry from the night of the rally captured some of its significance in speeding the downfall of the BUF:

\begin{quote}
Whatever the press may say… the whole thing was a fiasco and has probably done more to rally opinion to the National Government than anything since 1931. As far as the 6000 or 10,000 eye witnesses were concerned the personal appeal of Fascism has been drowned by such a display of un-English (sic) methods.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

Chesterton’s private reaction to Olympia showed a similar sense of alarm at the violence he had witnessed while attending. In an interview with David Baker in

\textsuperscript{114} For general accounts of the Olympia meeting, see: Benewick, \textit{The Fascist Movement in Britain}, pp. 169-193; Pugh, \textit{Hurrah for the Blackshirts!}, pp. 156-176.
1980, Doris Chesterton described her husband arriving home from the rally in the early hours of Monday, 11 June:

He returned in the early hours of the morning exhausted, extremely angry and with his right fist bruised. But it was against the fascists he was fuming. It seems that at one point he had witnessed two fascists holding down a communist while another kicked the prostrate figure. ‘So I hit one of them’ he told me. He would not stop talking about the unnecessary violence until he finally fell asleep vowing ‘I will resign tomorrow’.  

By the next day, Chesterton had reevaluated what had taken place and made the decision to remain in the BUF, maintaining that the two Blackshirts he intercepted had been engaged in a ‘clear breach of fascist discipline’. He made no mention of whether this assessment of disciplinary failure also applied to the other publicized incidents of brutality at Olympia, such as the ‘mass assaults’ described by Brooks, the widely reported use of stage lighting to target hecklers for assault, or the ‘humiliation’ of female hecklers ejected by Blackshirt stewards. His article describing the Blackshirts’ ‘triumph’ at Olympia gave no indication of his unease regarding what had taken place, theatrically detailing how the ‘organized hooliganism had been smashed’ by Mosley’s disciplined ‘Defence Forces’. In the years after 1934, Chesterton’s memory of the violence at Olympia became blurred with the mixture of propaganda and conflicting media narratives that surrounded the event. Aided somewhat by the contingent of genuinely militant anti-fascists within the British left that targeted BUF meetings, he would later insist that self-defence

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116 Chesterton Collection A. 46, Baker interview with D. Chesterton, 8 February 1980.
117 Chesterton Collection A. 46, Baker interview with D. Chesterton, 8 February 1980.
118 Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur, pp. 79-80.
119 ‘Reason’s Triumph’, Blackshirt, 15 June 1934. For background on the formation and training of the BUF Defence Forces, see Lewis, Illusions of Grandeur, pp. 62-64; Pugh, Hurrah for the Blackshirts!, pp. 134-135.
and the protection of free speech was the sole purpose of the Blackshirts’ martial
style of preserving order.¹²⁰ Many years after distancing himself from the BUF, he
reiterated this argument as a criticism of Colin Cross’ *Fascists in Britain*, a book that
predated Robert Skidelsky’s exculpatory account of Olympia from Mosley’s
perspective.¹²¹

There has been some argument among historians as to how Olympia was
perceived by the British public and the political establishment.¹²² Even if certain
spheres of the press and British conservatism were sympathetic to the Blackshirt’s
protestations of self-defence, as Martin Pugh contended, Olympia prompted
noticeable changes within the BUF itself. D.S. Lewis observed that 1934 marked a
shift towards more serious political strategy on Mosley’s part, as he faced the
realization that ‘enthusiasm was sufficient to lead to power’.¹²³ At the same time,
however, the party experienced a degree of internal radicalization after Olympia that
made its progress to legitimate political growth more difficult. Chesterton would
write in 1937 that after the meeting, Mosley had called for an ‘investigation’ into the
connection between Jewish influence and opposition to the BUF. Already leaning
towards anti-Semitism in its membership and internal ideology, the party
subsequently declared Jews to be the unifying presence behind all of the forces
undermining its progress. ‘Mosley thereupon took up the challenge’, Chesterton
declared, ‘and as a result of the Jew daring to come between a great British leader
and the great British people Fascism has gained more than it has lost, while the Jew

¹²¹ Chesterton Collection A. 45, Letter from Colin Cross to David Baker, 27 January 1982;
has lost both on the roundabouts and the swings’. In truth, Mosley and the BUF’s turn toward unabashed anti-Semitism after 1934 served to further alienate the party from its potential supporters. Behind the scenes, the British government grew alarmed by the BUF’s aping of the violent tactics of fascism on the continent. After Hitler carried out an internal purge (dubbed the Night of Long Knives) in June 1934, British authorities privately requested that the media refrain from positive coverage of the Blackshirts. The following month, the Daily Mail owner Lord Rothermere publicly withdrew his support for Mosley, having previously lauded the BUF as a movement of energetic conservatism. For Chesterton, the most significant change came between July and August 1934 following the resignation of Rex Tremlett, who left his position as editor of the BUF weekly Blackshirt (formerly Fascist Week) describing the party as ‘cads, thieves and swine’. Chesterton was appointed as editor in his stead, beginning in earnest his role as one of the BUF’s leading propagandists.

By this time, surveillance of Mosley and the BUF by the Security Service was well underway. Chesterton first came to the attention of authorities in November 1934, described in an informant’s report as a journalist with ‘deep knowledge of the BUF’ and ‘a fine speaker’. Another report from the following month described his address to a BUF gathering: ‘At the meeting Mr. Chesterton dealt with the idealistic aims of the movement. He said that the chief cause of our moral decadence was the Jewish race. He spoke of the hold the Jews had in South Africa which was being

124 Chesterton, Portrait of a Leader, p. 126.
125 Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, p. 101.
126 Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, p. 176.
127 TNA KV2/3328, Agents’ report re. Tremlett, 2 August 1934,
128 TNA KV2/1345/1k, Cross Reference from S.F. 96/Brit/2. Vol. 8, 440a, 18 November 1934.
strengthened by Herzog and Smutts [sic]. As was the case with his commitment to fascism, no single point marked the start of Chesterton’s commitment to anti-Semitism. Its overall prominence within his ideology is substantial enough to warrant focused consideration in Chapter 4. For now, it is important to note the extent to which anti-Semitism came to permeate Chesterton’s ideology and inform his work as a political activist after 1934. From Olympia onwards, international financiers and other permutations of the ‘Jewish menace’ became dominant themes in Chesterton’s propaganda, along with that of other prominent writers within the BUF like Joyce, Beckett and Alexander Raven-Thomson. Jewish influence served as a versatile scapegoat for what Chesterton saw as the pervasive rot eating away at Britain and the wholesale decline of Western civilization. Corruption and cultural decadence, themes which Chesterton used as a justification for the BUF’s impending revolution, played a similar role in fascist movements throughout continental Europe. Eugen Weber described a general tendency among fascists to imagine their doctrine as a ‘last resort’ in the face of insurmountable odds, while Fritz Stern traced the phenomenon of ‘cultural despair’ to Germany prior to the emergence of National Socialism. By way of explaining an increased fixation upon ‘cultural decline’ during the fascist heyday, Roger Griffin noted the extent to which literature and other forms of popular culture made cultural pessimism and narratives of Western

129 TNA KV2/1345/1k, Cross Reference from S.F. 96/Brit/2 Vol. 8 458b, 4 December 1934.
decline accessible to the public at large.\textsuperscript{132} The combined upheavals of the First World War, Bolshevik revolution and the Great Depression lent further plausibility to the notion that civilization itself was in a state of crisis.

Chesterton’s attempts to draw attention to this crisis built upon themes of societal malaise and cultural decline that had been refined throughout his journalism and literary criticism. In a series of articles titled ‘Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary’ published in 1935, Chesterton argued that the dire situation facing Britain was a rebuke to the liberal optimism that had prevailed in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century:

The price to be paid for the revolution entails the sacrifice of many cherished illusions, not least among them the smug notion that progress is inherent in the social scheme of things. We have to face a truth which to many will not be a pleasant truth – that the social tendency is always in the direction of disintegration.\textsuperscript{133}

Although evidence for this disintegration could be found anywhere, according to Chesterton, he drew particular attention to the debasement of history and cultural traditions as a symptom of the ‘spiritual typhus’\textsuperscript{134} afflicting Britain. In the realm of British theatre, for example, he lamented that the works of Shakespeare were being stripped of their meaning and distorted from their original form in modern adaptations.\textsuperscript{135} He similarly accused ‘high brow authors’ like James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence of peddling ‘defeatism and disease’ that reflected their own ‘mental spiritual disorders’.\textsuperscript{136} As the most cosmopolitan form of popular entertainment,

\textsuperscript{132} Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism}, pp. 215-216.
\textsuperscript{133} ‘We Prepare For The Fight Against Decay’, \textit{Blackshirt}, 15 November, 1935.
\textsuperscript{135} ‘Our Cultural Inheritance’, \textit{Action}, 31 October 1936.
\textsuperscript{136} ‘She-Men of Letters’, \textit{Fascist Week}, 9 March 1934.
cinema appeared as a recurring subject of Chesterton’s screeds against cultural degradation. He was especially perturbed by the influx of films from the United States, which he derided as escapist entertainment produced and marketed at the behest of Jewish finance.\(^{137}\) Chesterton’s preoccupation with cultural decadence was rooted in a belief that culture was to be taken seriously as a reflection of deeper values, an assumption shared by fascists both within and beyond the BUF.\(^ {138}\) His diagnosis of Britain’s ills was not limited to culture, however, as more concrete examples of decline were evident in her political institutions. The British Empire, both a symbol of Britain’s national achievement and the source of its economic and national security, faced dissolution at the hands of ‘politicians in consultation with their financial advisors’.\(^ {139}\) Even the people of Britain, a once proud imperial race, had been physically and spiritually depressed by the ‘submergence of a masculine spirit’ and a crisis amidst the nation’s youth:

A world of mental weaklings, cut off from contact with reality lest they should think to learn about that reality… A world of spiritual degenerates seeking annihilation in democratic fantasies because the facts of waking life are too strong for them.\(^ {140}\)

In keeping with the programmatic thrust of Mosley’s fascist-corporatist vision, Chesterton tied the spiritual illness of the British populace to the material crises of mass industrialization and the failures of laissez-faire capitalism: ‘the perilous economic situation in which Britain is placed – a crisis of the system, as

\(^{137}\) ‘Truth about Jews’, Action, 7 November 1936.
\(^{139}\) ‘Should the British Empire be Disestablished?’, Action, 21 February 1936.
\(^{140}\) ‘Return to Manhood’, Action, 9 July 1936.
Mussolini long ago perceived’. The nature of this crisis was explained in great detail throughout *The Greater Britain* as an imbalance between the capacity of industrial society to produce goods and the availability of markets to consume them:

> science, invention, technique have recently increased the power to produce out of the range of all previous experience. In the meantime, our machinery of distribution and of government has remained practically unchanged with the result that the production of industry greatly outstrips effective demand.  

Although Chesterton did not contribute greatly to the theoretical aspects of BUF economics, he proved capable of articulating the concept of economic crisis on Mosley’s behalf. Britain’s economic troubles during the 1930s served as a tangible aspect of a deeper spiritual malaise that, to Chesterton’s frustration, was easily ignored or rationalized by many members of the public. Though he often struggled to comprehend why others did not share his enthusiasm for fascism on its basic merits, Chesterton was acutely aware a revolutionary doctrine could only succeed if the public were made aware of a fundamental crisis within the status quo. Unlike Marxists, however, fascists could not merely attribute this crisis to the internal malfunctions of capitalism or the ruling class, and instead required a crisis that could be tied to the ineptness of democratic government and betrayal by internal enemies. British fascists were thus driven into conflict not only with their revolutionary counterparts on the left but with conservative and liberal ideology as well. Reflecting this, much of Chesterton’s propaganda revolved around the three

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‘negations’ of fascist ideology: anti-liberalism, anti-conservatism and anti-communism.\textsuperscript{144}

Despite the many irrational or essentialist ideas contained within fascism, it is important to note that Chesterton’s work on behalf of the BUF reflected an assumption that both reason and emotion could play a part in converting the masses to fascism. The aim of his attempts to negate other political ideas, therefore, was to persuade the public that fascism was a rational alternative to both the ‘jungle law’ of liberal-capitalism and communism’s ‘Red menace’.\textsuperscript{145} In practice, he argued, both of these systems yielded class inequality, with communism offering only to replace the supremacy of the capitalists with a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. They were also prone to indecisiveness and internal debate, a problem that Chesterton saw evident in both liberal parliaments and leftist trade unions: ‘Talk is one of the curses of national life; it paralyses the will to action. The will to action must be asserted above the desire to talk before any control over the destinies of a nation be made effective’.\textsuperscript{146} While making his early forays into BUF propaganda throughout 1934, Chesterton’s approach towards conservatives, liberals and socialists was fairly conciliatory, as he mounted the positive case for fascism as a political alternative. At least in theory, the fascist worldview shared ideas in common with each of the groups which Chesterton hoped to persuade. Conservatives shared the fascists’ desire for order and national unity, while socialists and liberals shared the drive for a more equitable and collective society. Mosley’s plans for a managed corporatist economy were designed

\textsuperscript{144} Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism}, pp. 7, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{145} ‘The Harvest of Class War’, \textit{Action}, 3 September 1936.
\textsuperscript{146} ‘The Harvest of Class War’.
to integrate each of these principles and remove the need for class antagonism, thus negating the contest between left and right altogether.

The effort to communicate the virtues of fascism to an audience from across the political spectrum was part of a wider strategy by Mosley to build up a mass movement with a broad social base, emulating the method through which fascists gained power in Italy and Germany. Unlike their counterparts in central and Eastern Europe, however, British fascists emerged in a stable nation-state with a long tradition of parliamentary democracy and civil society. This was reflected, to some degree, in Mosley’s original proposals for the *Greater Britain*, which promised an orderly fascist revolution suited to a British context. There was a limit to how liberal norms and traditions could be reconciled with fascism’s radical project, however, as Chesterton made clear in his polemics against ‘lovers of democracy’. His criticisms rested on the idea that freedom, like so many of the ‘cherished notions’ fascism sought to dispel, was an ideal rendered meaningless by the conditions of the real world:

> This is the freedom of the people. Freed from their landscape and their soil, from their tradition and their heritage, from personality and from life. And in return for this freedom, they serve as slaves the high priests of commerce and of usury whose fathers did not fight at Agincourt.\(^{147}\)

The fatal flaw of democracy was its inability to navigate a path between the perils of predatory finance on one hand and class conflict on the other. Though Chesterton granted the theoretical virtue of a democratic society, he viewed its practical application as destined to fail in the face of deliberate sabotage and inherent

\(^{147}\) ‘Here is the Heart of an Empire’s Capital’, *Blackshirt*, 5 October 1934.
structural problems and thus concluded that the deeper principles of democracy and liberty would be best achieved under the corporate state. He contrasted this vision of corporate freedom with the bureaucratic order under communism: ‘Human beings are too implacably regimented to lose their initiative, and with their initiative, all sense of the adventure of life. Britons would find this intolerable’. As much as Chesterton and other BUF members were derisive of liberal notions of freedom and individual autonomy, their propaganda appeals contained the tacit admission that these concepts were bound up with British national identity and thus needed to be integrated somehow into the framework of British fascism. The resulting appeals to ‘fascist freedom’ were hardly convincing but provided another example of the contradictions that emerged between the BUF’s ideology, aspirations and political context. For British fascism to make the positive case for a truly ‘British’ movement, it either needed to incorporate traditions from this context, which included notions of liberty, representation and rationalism, or somehow undermine their value in the eyes of the public.

As the fortunes of the BUF declined after mid-1934 and fascists came under attack from opponents across the political spectrum, Chesterton’s work became increasingly focused on the latter approach, launching a series of polemics that attempted to highlight the failures of democracy in action. Underneath Chesterton’s individual articles addressing corrupt politicians and political affairs lay a general attack on democracy and materialism:

148 ‘To Lovers of Democracy’.
149 Skidelsky noted that a number of British fascists sought to depict Olympia as an event that had ‘restored “free speech” in Britain’. See Skideslky, Oswald Mosley, p. 365.
The charge which Fascism brings against democracy is that it neglects and thereby tends to destroy, real values. Its mind is appeased by beautiful words, irrespective of the underlying realities. That is why the poets, and prophets, and sages have always been confounded. Their words have been treasured, but never the fierce yearning for action which those words expressed.150

The key argument running throughout Chesterton’s writing on parliamentary politics was that the system itself had the effect of corrupting those who partook of it. Labour politicians, for example, may have run for office with the intention of bringing about reform but ended up running for the sake of power alone.151 Chesterton’s writing also showed concern that this corrupting influence was capable of spreading to parts of society that would otherwise have remained pure. In an *Action* article attacking the ‘League of Ex-Servicemen against Fascism’, for example, he warned that ‘no one with its [the British Legion] best interests at heart wishes to see it take the political ring’.152 This aversion to the politicization of everyday life also manifested itself in his hostility to the Marxist approach of dialectical-materialism, through which ‘every manifestation of vitality and health appears as decadence’.153 Once again, there was blunt logic in Chesterton’s attacks on establishment politics, which effectively stood in the way of fascism’s success. By relentlessly highlighting the corruption of politics, he not only discredited the idea of democracy but also reinforced the leadership principle underpinning fascism. Mosley was presented as the sole exception to an otherwise corrupt system; a unique, epochal figure that had emerged from a struggle against the Old Gangs capable of leading a movement that would transcend democracy altogether.

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152 ‘Plain Words to the Legion’, *Action*, 10 September 1936.
153 ‘Pathology as a Heresy’, *Action*, 11 June 1936.
The clearest examples of how Chesterton embodied a commitment to fascism’s ‘leadership principle’ lay in his biography of Mosley, published in 1936 as *Portrait of a Leader*. Throughout the book, Chesterton extolled the many virtues of Mosley and his path towards ‘restoring to the land the heroic and historic principle of leadership’. In the book’s final chapter, titled ‘Leader of Men’, he detailed the qualities fitting for the figure that would herald over Britain: ‘his tall athletic frame, with its dynamic force and immense reserves of strength, his unconquerable spirit, with its grandeur of courage and resolve’. The chapter concluded in triumphalist fashion with a gesture towards Mosley’s future at the head of Britain’s revolutionary ascent:

Now he moves forward to a still greater destiny, an implacable figure looming ever more immense against the background of his times; through his own eager spirit, so full of aspiration and boldness, symbolizing the immortal spirit of his race.

Chesterton’s concept of Mosley as the leader of British fascism extended to him many of the qualities of Carlyle’s ‘Great Men’, individuals whose personal aptitude and charisma allowed them to change the course of history. Given Chesterton’s view of parliamentary politics as an intrinsically corrupting environment, one of the heroic traits he ascribed to Mosley most prominently was his unique capacity to resist the temptation to use politics as a means of furthering his own interests. ‘Alone of all the leaders of the age Oswald Mosley has scorned to

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take personal advantage of the system of political chicanery and opportunism’. Alongside integrity, Chesterton argued that Mosley also possessed an inherent genius that allowed him to embody the will of the people. For a time at least, he envisioned the BUF leader as a man capable of leading not through coercion or manipulation but through his ability to command loyalty from those who served under him: a dictator with ‘no need to dictate’. 

The model of governance which Chesterton endorsed was Mosley’s idea of the corporate state, a system whereby the various forms of industry would be organized into corporations headed by a representative. This system was based in part on the theory that the problems of post-1918 Britain, such as unemployment and poverty, were solvable by the application of ‘scientific principles’ to economic management. For his part, Chesterton appears to have made few original or complex contributions to the theory of corporatism. Rather, he lent his propaganda efforts to the promotion of a Britain wherein the various branches of industry would be organized into corporate entities, each serving the needs of a balanced economy and controlling supply and demand through directives issued by the state. These directives of the state would hypothetically be subject to review by a National Council of Corporations, consisting of representatives from each industry. Corporatist principles held that economic planning, being a technical matter, sought input only from those with the technical expertise in specific fields. A special corporation would also be established to handle finance and the maintenance of a central bank, whose interests would be solely directed to domestic concerns.

158 ‘Save Britain from the Jackals’, Blackshirt, 28 February 1936.
159 Chesterton, Portrait of a Leader, p. 159.
160 Chesterton, Portrait of a Leader, pp. 148-149.
As fascism held that such a program of economic planning would be impossible under the existing system of parliamentary governance, Chesterton also favoured a turn towards dictatorship. This entailed the appointment of Mosley as the leader of a fascist government (with the Monarch serving as head of state), the abolition of political parties and a shift towards representation based on industry in the place of local councils.\textsuperscript{161} Cognisant of the fact that many Britons would be discomfited by the dangerous and foreign implications of such an autocratic system, Chesterton assured an audience in March 1935 that ‘Fascism was a British movement legislating for a British people and it was anticipated that the fascists would obtain power by constitutional means and then keep their place in the same manner’.\textsuperscript{162} Regarding the manner in which the system would operate once in power, Chesterton reiterated the abstruse notion of ‘true freedom’ under dictatorship: ‘the true representation of the people by the people for the general welfare and prosperity of the nation’.\textsuperscript{163} Mosley offered a somewhat more direct explanation of how freedom of expression and representation would be preserved under the system of corporations. ‘Real freedom of speech’, he contended, would be provided through the ability of the populace to provide ‘constructive criticism’ in their own areas of expertise while voting to appoint or dismiss the government. ‘The Fascist Movement represents Leadership, not tyranny… Leadership voluntarily accepted and chosen, but armed by the people with power to do what they want done’.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{161} Chesterton, \textit{Portrait of a Leader}, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{162} TNA KV2/1345/1c, S.B. report re a B.U. meeting at which Chesterton spoke, 4 March 1935.
\textsuperscript{163} TNA KV2/1345/1b, S.B. report mentioning that Chesterton spoke at a B.U. Meeting, 28 February 1935.
As was the case with Chesterton’s attempts to persuade socialists and conservatives to the fascist cause, the BUF’s policies on rights and representation were neither convincing nor particularly coherent. Their most interesting feature was not their substance but their presentation, which tacitly acknowledged that even a revolutionary fascist movement in Britain could ill afford to completely disregard notions such as ‘freedom of speech’ from its platform. The clearest indication of how liberty and freedom of expression were actually to be curtailed under the system envisioned by Chesterton appeared as a brief passage in *Portrait of a Leader*:

No liberty will be held forfeit which advances the cause of national well-being and happiness. Liberty that fails to come within this scope will be regarded as license and destroyed. The press will have every freedom except the licence to mislead the public or to create a panic or to offend against national self-respect’.  

While it is difficult to form a complete picture of how Chesterton envisioned the day-to-day function of a fascist state in Britain, his approval of the Italian and German dictatorships in the mid-1930s gives some idea of the manner in which he imagined such a society would operate. While working as a propagandist for the BUF, Chesterton either dismissed or downplayed the stories of political repression and racial persecution filtering in from Europe. Even when he admitted the extent of Hitler’s dictatorial methods after leaving the BUF, Chesterton continued to insist that such practices were never an intended consequence of fascism in Britain. In a philosophical sense, however, the ‘national interest’ took primacy over all other factors in Chesterton’s political worldview. Presumably, therefore, he favoured

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166 ‘Laying the Fascist Ghost’, *Candour*, 26 November 1954.
whatever extent of state control was necessary to achieve that interest. Given his
general disregard for individual rights and the democratic process it seems unlikely
that Chesterton would have objected to a dictatorship in Britain provided that it was
on the country’s own terms rather than imposed by a foreign power.167 As he was to
discover throughout the BUF’s campaigns, however, the notion of a ‘voluntary
dictatorship’ was absurd in the eyes of many Britons. In an anecdote recounted
second hand by his wife, Chesterton described an interaction between ‘the Leader’
and a member of the public in Yorkshire that encapsulated this problem:

a hefty chap… rose to ask a question. He raised an accusing finger. ‘Sir Osley
Mosley, if Fascism comes to power, what’ll thou be lad? Dictator or
summat?’ There was a brief uncomfortable silence. Then Mosley pulled
himself together the bland reply, ‘I shall be whatever my country desires of
me’.168

From late 1934 onward, Mosley faced the prospect of a decline in both
membership and funding. Opinions within the higher-ranking membership of the
party diverged over how to regain momentum.169 Chesterton, along with Beckett and
Joyce, called for a greater emphasis on advocacy and propaganda to draw the public
towards fascism. An opposing faction from the BUF’s administrative wing
meanwhile argued that a combination of electoral campaigning and orderly public
demonstrations would be most likely to garner mass support. In the short run, Joyce
and Chesterton’s faction gained the upper hand by forcing the administrative leader
F.M. Box to resign. In the long term, however, Box’s successor Neil Francis-

167 ‘Germany’s Amok Run’, Weekly Review, 23 March 1939.
168 Chesterton Collection A. 26, Doris Chesterton, ‘Mosley in Yorkshire’ (2 pp. manuscript
notes), nd. ca. 1979.
169 Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, p. 93.
Hawkins would ultimately prove victorious in the internal struggle for the BUF’s direction.  

Chesterton’s alignment with the radical wing of the party reflected the depths of his devotion to fascism, as well as his militant and idealistic approach to politics as a whole. His articles for the BUF frequently invoked military values as a model for political life, demanding an outright rejection of ‘pagan individualism’ which prevented collective progress on the nation’s behalf and encouraged ‘egoism, treachery and greed’.  

Like Mosley, Chesterton fondly recalled the sense of purpose and comradery that had defined his experience in the war, and he hoped to transfer these values to peacetime:

> One of our many discoveries during the war was that in battalions where the discipline was firmest the men were happiest and their morals most sure. There is solid enjoyment in forming part of a community wherein every individual knows his job and does it to the best of his ability; ultimately it is doubtful whether there is any other real social happiness.

Self-sacrifice played a large part Chesterton’s model of the fascist creed. Much as the war had required men to make sacrifices to the greater good, Chesterton argued that the task of political, economic and social reform facing a ‘decadent’ British democracy in peacetime required fascists to make sacrifices and aspire to the ideals of the fascist ‘new man’. Achieving this ideal required the foregoing of material comforts and ‘diversions’, as well as the cultivation of physical, mental and spiritual virtues. Both men and women were required to develop their physical health.

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170 Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, pp. 111-113.
171 ‘Pagan individualism must be smashed’, Blackshirt, 31 August 1934.
172 ‘Pagan individualism must be smashed’.
173 ‘Fascism Begins with the Spirit of the Fascist’, Blackshirt, 19 October, 1934.
in order to ‘make themselves superbly fit for life’s purposes’. Where mental virtues were concerned, Chesterton implored fascists to reject intellectualism, which he saw as unwilling to face reality, and instead adopt a ‘stark realism’ that rendered the world in terms of black and white. Above all else, he called for commitment to the spiritual principles of fascism: a ‘faith in life’ that embraced the challenges of modernity while rejecting ‘catchphrases and mere wish fulfilment in the flabby democratic fashion’.\textsuperscript{174} True to his words, Chesterton readily enforced the high-standards to which he held members of the fascist movement. While inspecting local BUF branches throughout the Midlands in 1935, he closed down several branches and dismissed 300 members of the party for lack of discipline.\textsuperscript{175}

Chesterton’s appeals for fascism sought to emphasize the movement’s embrace of youth, another factor which fed his intolerance for inactive members. Whereas he lambasted politicians as ‘dodderers’ and ‘old women’, Chesterton saw young Britons as having the potential to learn the values that had deserted many of their elders. To this end, he encouraged young men and women to become engaged in politics and local affairs, since fascism’s arrival would offer them the opportunity to spearhead Britain’s regeneration: ‘The plunderer, the coward, the blatherer is being hurled from the field. Henceforth, you will take his place: your cleanness, like a white flame, will scorch out the graft and corruption which he leaves behind him’.\textsuperscript{176} At the same time he counselled youth to avoid those cultural diversions like popular music and cinema, which threatened to distract their attention away from ‘public life’. The veneration of youth throughout Chesterton’s work was in part a

\textsuperscript{174} ‘Return to Manhood’, \textit{Action}, 9 July 1936.
\textsuperscript{175} Cross, \textit{The Fascists in Britain}, pp. 137-138.
\textsuperscript{176} ‘Return to Manhood’, \textit{Action}, 9 July 1936.
reflection of Mosley’s platform and the general emphasis which fascism placed upon vitality and renewal. On a more personal level, however, his concerns with British youth were driven by the belief that his own generation, those who fought and suffered in the Great War, had been led astray by ‘Old men’ who had sent them off to die under the false promise of a better world.\textsuperscript{177} Though he lamented the losses incurred by the Front Generation, he also recognized that the existential struggle of the war had left the survivors with a unique opportunity to redeem the world:

I think that in 1914 most men and women of sensibility were conscious that all was not well with Western civilization… there was everywhere a sense of dishonour – of false values and of an omnipresent spiritual taint, as though some vast conspiracy of black magic had placed the world in a thrall. This was the spell that the marching battalions believed to have been brought to an end by the stern voice of the guns proclaiming the verities.\textsuperscript{178}

Like Mosley, Chesterton regarded his experiences as a soldier as having revealed the practical and spiritual superiority of collective action, ‘the one real value created by the war’. He therefore envisioned the society emerging from the fascist revolution as applying aspects of the military ethos to civilian society, following the example of the regimes under Hitler and Mussolini. The difficulty of communicating this idea to the British public was that many assumed, with good reason, that the militarism of fascists overseas represented a prelude to violent despotism at home and further war overseas. Where the former problem was concerned, Chesterton argued that stories of persecution and violence emanating from the continent as the 1930s progressed were lies or exaggerations peddled by a

\textsuperscript{177} ‘When Daylight Came to the Young Men’, \textit{Action}, 6 August 1936.
\textsuperscript{178} ‘When Daylight Came to the Young Men’.
corrupt press. In August 1935, for example, he ventured that the number of political
detainees in Germany amounted to ‘at most a few thousand people detained in
custody’, leaving the rest of the nation as enthusiastic supporters of Hitler’s
regime. As to whether British fascism would follow the same violent route to
power trod by other nations, he offered the assurance (in concert with Mosley’s
official stance) that such methods would be unnecessary to secure the people’s
support. Though he called openly for the British people to abandon tolerance and
embrace a ‘disciplined anger’ in pursuit of revolution, he fell short of calling openly
for violence: ‘Not that the streets of Merrie England shall flow red with blood: not
that heads will roll in the sand. The fascist revolutionary refuses to regard the lives of
the quacks and jugglers as sufficiently valuable to destroy’. This concession was
not altogether a reassurance, given that Chesterton’s later, more explicit anti-Semitic
propaganda hinted at a ‘reckoning’ for the Jews in Britain, ‘a flash swallowing up
the Yiddish St. George’.  

Even if Mosley and his supporters did not intend to create a forceful
revolution, the subversive message and violence associated with the BUF’s
campaigns in the East End eventually drew further censure from the authorities.
After a particularly violent clash between the Blackshirts, anti-fascist demonstrators
and police at Cable Street in October 1936, the government passed the Public Order
Act which prohibited political groups from assembling in uniform and gave police
the ability to suspend or redirect demonstrations. Events outside of Britain

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179 ‘Hands off the Heroes’ Peace’, Blackshirt, 2 August 1935.
182 On the impact of the Public Order Act on the BUF and British politics, see Lawrence,
compounded the problems of the BUF as both public opinion and the nation’s foreign policy became increasingly concerned with the actions of Fascists and National Socialists abroad. Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia on 3 October 1935 was the ‘first aggressive act by any European state in more than a decade’ that coincided with an internal drive to radicalize the Italian state towards totalitarian rule.\textsuperscript{183} Despite condemnation from the British and French governments, further signs of an aggressive and expansionist tendency amongst the fascist powers emerged in the following year. In March 1936 Nazi Germany remilitarized the Rhineland, once again testing the limits of the Western powers’ desire to preserve peace. Three months later, in July 1936, civil war broke out in Spain between republican supporters of the ‘Popular Front’ and a right-wing coalition led by Francisco Franco.\textsuperscript{184} Following Mosley’s line that Britain should ‘mind its business’, Chesterton lent his propaganda efforts to condemning sanctions on Italy and calling for Britain to embrace friendship with Nazi Germany.\textsuperscript{185}

Chesterton’s personal attitudes toward German and Italian policy were more nuanced than those evinced through his propaganda. Regarding Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia, his views reflected a mindset that was imperialist as much as it was fascist. He was unfazed by the prospect of a European nation holding dominion over part of Africa, so long as this expansion did not threaten Britain’s own colonial enterprise. Imperialism also provided a justification, up to a point, for Germany’s expansion into territory that had previously belonged to it prior to 1918. Even if the

\textsuperscript{183} Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism}, pp. 234-235.  
\textsuperscript{184} Eatwell, \textit{Fascism: A History}, pp. 133-134.  
\textsuperscript{185} ‘Why Not Employ Sanctions Against Britain?’, \textit{Blackshirt}, 27 September 1935; ‘Death is on Thy Drums, Democracy’, \textit{Action}, 27 March 1937.
actions of fascist powers’ abroad showed signs of aggression, Chesterton shared his fellow fascists’ aversions to embarking on another war that appeared driven by abstract international commitments; which he inevitably attributed to the designs of ‘international financiers’. Chesterton was given opportunity to view the progress of the Nazi state first hand after he was sent to Germany in order to receive treatment for alcoholism in early 1937.\(^\text{186}\) The series of articles he produced from the visit describing ‘aspects of the German revolution’ were, for obvious reasons, deeply sanitized and took great pains to dispel the ‘myths’ of a repressive and expansionist Nazi regime. In private, however, Chesterton’s wife described the visit as having ‘raised doubts in his mind about Nazism’:

He was particularly disturbed by listening to one of Goebbels’ speeches in which he attacked the Catholic church and Catholics in general.. he saw through Hitler also.. He was against the death camps and disagreed with the practice of forcing individual Jews to wear the Star of David badge\(^\text{187}\)

Some of these reflections, particularly those relating to the persecution of Jews, most likely originated after Chesterton’s break with Mosley. For example, Jewish citizens were only required to wear a Star of David after September 1939, by which time Chesterton had already denounced Hitler for invading Czechoslovakia.\(^\text{188}\)

While he was still involved in the fascist movement, Chesterton showed little sign of sympathy for those who had suffered as a consequence of fascism either abroad or internally. The only factor that might have excused his failure to acknowledge the dangers arising from Germany and Italy was his role as a propagandist, which

\(^{186}\) TNA KV2/1345/8f, Cross reference to S.F. 96/Brit/2 Vol.18 879 , 1 December 1935,  
necessitated writing on behalf of Mosley and the BUF’s policy rather than expressing his own opinions. He was appointed Director of Publicity Propaganda and made the editor of *Blackshirt* in August 1937 following the departure of Beckett and Joyce, both of whom resigned in the wake of financial downsizing in March the same year. This left Chesterton responsible for a large proportion of the total publishing output of the BUF’s news organs, a factor that likely contributed to his frequent bouts of illness.

**Fascism after Mosley, 1938-1940**

Beckett and Joyce’s departure from the BUF was part of a wider reduction in the movement’s capacity brought about by financial pressures. In effect, the weakening of the ‘propaganda’ faction within the party and the rise in influence of the opposing faction led by Francis-Hawkins marked the beginning of the end for Chesterton’s loyalty to Mosley. Despite his misgivings over the BUF’s direction, which combined Mosley’s moderately successful peace movement with a series of ill fated electoral attempts, Chesterton persisted as editor of *Action* and *Blackshirt* for a year following Beckett and Joyce’s exit. He finally submitted his own letter of resignation on 18 March 1938, promising to work out his notice with ‘complete professional integrity’. Though Chesterton’s initial departure raised little fanfare, in June 1938

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189 TNA KV2/1345/8f, Cross reference to S.F. 96/Brit/2 Vol.21. 1018x, 12 August 1937.
190 Chesterton Collection E. 2, Letter from Oswald Mosley to A.K. Chesterton, 14 April 1937.
he published a pamphlet explaining his reasons for resignation that amounted to a
total denunciation of Mosley and the remaining BUF leadership:

I left because I became convinced that the BUF was playing about with a
great idea and producing in its own organization a parody of Fascist thought
and principle. I might have continued trying to galvanize the unhappy corpse
into a semblance of life had I not come to the conclusion that it was not so
much any particular coterie that stood in the way of revolutionary advance as
blindspots in Mosley’s own mind… ¹⁹²

This comment regarding Mosley’s ‘blindspots’ extended into a broader attack
on his failure to harness the talents of ‘men who could have seen it through to
victory’ while Francis-Hawkins – the ‘ringmaster of the whole circus’— had been
given free rein to expand his power through appealing to the leader’s ego.¹⁹³ Beyond
the personal recriminations directed at Mosley and the party’s internal politics,
Chesterton’s pamphlet also offered insight into the state of his own fascist ideals. In
a rare admission of the movement’s general lack of progress, he noted the frustration
of having had to produce propaganda on behalf of the BUF that distorted its failures
into success to ‘give the impression of strength where there is weakness; of growth
when there is only decline; of influence where there is only indifference’.¹⁹⁴ In spite
of this, however, Chesterton showed no sign of having abandoned his ideological
commitment to fascism, which he continued to pursue through other means after
leaving the BUF.

The emergence in Britain of a multitude of small fascist, nationalist and anti-
Semitic organizations between 1938 and 1940 was in many ways a prelude to the

¹⁹² Chesterton, Why I Left Mosley, p. 1.
¹⁹³ Chesterton, Why I Left Mosley, p. 3.
¹⁹⁴ Chesterton, Why I Left Mosley, p. 2.
numerous small and ideologically diverse parties grouped under the post-1945 extreme right. In the period leading up to the war, as in the years after Chesterton’s return from overseas in 1943, anti-Semitism proved to be the unifying force that brought some of the small, squabbling factions of Britain’s extreme right together. In April 1938, shortly after his resignation from the BUF, Chesterton attended a meeting of Joyce and Beckett’s National Socialist League but expressed his desire to remain, for the time being, independent of the various competing groups in existence. The following month he was among the speakers at a meeting of the Nordic League, an organization of mainly upper-middle class anti-Semites. One of the more pathetic incidents of Chesterton’s post-Mosley activism took place in December 1938 at an event announcing the launch of Lord Lymington’s New Pioneer, an anti-Semitic journal that appointed Beckett as its assistant managing editor. As reported in the Jewish Chronicle, Chesterton’s speech declared the discomfited Lymington – ‘a shortish man in the early forties, with a mildly pugnacious expression’ – to be ‘the man that England needed as a “national saviour”’. As it transpired, neither Lymington nor the New Pioneer would have a discernible impact on the progress of Chesterton’s cause. His decision to contribute articles to the journal would prove fateful, however, when excerpts were broadcast (without Chesterton’s knowledge) over German airwaves.

Chesterton’s half-hearted support for Lymington suggested that he had yet to abandon the principle of heroic leadership that had driven him towards fascism in the

196 TNA KV2/1345/1k, Cross Reference from O.F. 548/2, 32a, S.B. Rep., 11 April 1938.
197 Griffiths, Patriotism Perverted, p. 47. For a comprehensive rundown of the nationalist and anti-Semitic groups operating in Britain at this time, see pp. 35-65.
first place. As he would be forced to realize in the years to come, however, the charismatic qualities of the former BUF were uncommon; for all his flaws and missteps, Mosley had provided a rallying point for different activists and a plausible embodiment of the new man needed to take charge of Britain’s national destiny. Now operating outside the auspices of the BUF, Chesterton found that such figures were in short supply. One of the more hopeful candidates for leadership of Britain’s non-Mosleyite factions was Archibald Ramsay, a Conservative MP who had overseen meetings of the Nordic League and the Militant Christian Patriots. More than individual charisma or political acumen, Ramsay possessed a broad array of contacts, ranging from radicals like Chesterton and Arnold Leese to sympathetic conservative politicians, businessmen, aristocrats and eccentric fellow-travellers of Britain’s extreme right. In May 1939, Ramsay gathered these disparate elements together in a secretive anti-Semitic organization known as the Right Club, whose membership he recorded in a leather bound journal known as the ‘Red Book’. The immediate aims of the club were to prevent Jewish infiltration of the Conservative Party and to campaign against a war with Germany, but the contents of Ramsay’s journal also showed plans for coordination between multiple fascist, nationalist and anti-Semitic groups.¹⁹⁹

Shortly after his name appeared in Ramsay’s journal, in June 1939, Chesterton also took steps to form his own organization known as ‘British Vigil’. While it is uncertain how Chesterton actually intended the organization to function, a security service report suggested that it would seek to ‘counter the propaganda for a

Federal Union of Democratic countries which is now being conducted in certain quarters’. Since the Federal Union represented an early campaign to draw Britain into cooperation with Europe, this foreshadowed many of Chesterton’s preoccupations with European integration after 1945. Like most of the extreme right organizations that branched off from the BUF, however, British Vigil made no discernible impact and languished due to a lack of financial support. The prospect of a war with Germany presented many members of Britain’s extreme right with a stark choice between loyalty to their own country and their ideological attachment to fascism, anti-Semitism or National Socialism. Based on his ready involvement with Ramsay, Lymington and others campaigning against British involvement, it is clear that Chesterton was not enthusiastic about the war. Unlike some of his contemporaries in the fascist movement, however, Chesterton was unerring in his nationalism; dalliances with pacifism or other forms of conscientious objection were unacceptable, as was any attempt to undermine the war effort or aid the enemy. When German forces occupied Czechoslovakia in March 1939, he penned an article condemning Hitler’s violation of national sovereignty which appeared in the Weekly Review. Although Chesterton’s wife observed that this denunciation of Hitler was made ‘more in sorrow than in anger’, it proved to be a timely display of his loyalty to Britain.

There is no fully satisfying explanation for why Chesterton was able to avoid the initial wave of arrests that marked the beginning of internment on 23 May 1940. Despite the fact that he had already been commissioned as an officer in March that

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200 TNA KV2/1345/1k, Cross Reference from O.F. 539/2 Bit. Vigil la., 26 June 1939
201 Chesterton Collection A. 13, Baker interview with D. Chesterton, 9 May 1978.
year, Chesterton still faced the liability of his recent involvement with groups that the authorities viewed as a potentially dangerous ‘fifth column’ within Britain.  

His recent association with Joyce, who had since travelled to Germany to work as a radio propagandist, was also potentially damaging; though the Security Service did intercept a letter written by Chesterton to his former BUF colleague Archie Findlay that recorded his ‘surprise, disappointment and anger’ at Joyce’s having become the voice of ‘Lord Haw Haw’.

In his memoirs, Chesterton suggested that his anti-war articles for the New Pioneer, which were broadcast without his permission on German radio, were the main reason that he came under suspicion despite having distanced himself from Mosley. He made no mention of having been contacted by German sources offering work as a propagandist like Joyce, nor his response (intercepted by the British authorities) which utterly rejected any possibility of working against his own country. The fact that Chesterton was not arrested simply for having held a high position in the BUF may ultimately have hinged on luck: A.W. Brian Simpson noted in his study of wartime internment that some of MI5’s intelligence on the BUF was outdated and erroneously described Chesterton as having been expelled from the party, while other members of the fascist movement were simply overlooked.

Chesterton’s decision to reenlist in the army did not necessarily guarantee his freedom from government scrutiny, as active military personnel were still subject to internment under 18b. He bitterly recalled that his return to uniform took place under a cloud of suspicion:

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202 Simpson, In the Highest Degree Odious, p. 223.
203 TNA KV2/1345/1j, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Archie Findlay, 14 December 1939.
204 BNML, Ch. XIV, p. 1.
206 Simpson, In the Highest Degree Odious, pp. 180, 205-207.
Orders were evidently given for me to be treated with reserve. Secret
documents which had come to me in the normal course of my duties as
training officer were diverted. When pip-squeak subalterns, who had never
heard a shot fired in anger, were discussing troop movements or suchlike
matters my appearance would lead to nudges and the drying up of the
conversation. I had the feeling of being in the Army but not of it – an
appalling sensation and an impossible situation.  

By June 1940, the internment of Mosley and other remaining BUF members had
served its intended purpose in disabling the party and compelling former members to
sever their ties with fascism.  Chesterton was ultimately cleared of suspicion as a
result of testimony from both police and military personnel regarding his political
loyalties and capability as a soldier. Reflecting upon the end of Chesterton’s
interwar activism, it is important to note the distinction between his attitude to
British Fascism as a movement and fascism as a concept. In the former sense, the
intelligence reports concerning his loyalty were correct in noting that his opinion on
the ‘Fascist party’ had been altered completely since the mid-1930s. Nevertheless, it
was never the case that Chesterton abandoned the crucial principles underpinning his
support for fascism. He remained a committed nationalist and retained his belief that
radical change would be necessary to reverse Britain’s declining status. Themes of
cultural decadence would persist in his work for the remainder of his life, along with
an abiding hostility towards liberalism, communism and an implicitly Jewish form of
international capitalism. The decline of Oswald Mosley’s party was enough to cause

207 BNML, Ch. XV, p. 6.
208 TNA KV2/1345/10B, Letter to C.G. Maby Esq., 16 June 1940. A.W. Brian Simpsons’
study of internment under Security Regulation 18b concluded that the law’s primary purpose
was to break up Mosley’s organization. See Simpson, In the Highest Degree Odious, pp.
172-174.
209 TNA KV2/1345/11a, Letter to Major P.C. Boon, 18 June 1940.
Chesterton’s disillusionment with the man himself, but not enough to dissuade him of the need for national revolution.

Chesterton saw the interwar movement as an ideological success but a political failure, whose high ideals and sound policies had been corrupted by egotism, incompetence and the conspiratorial forces arrayed against it. He, along with many other members of the BUF, underestimated the breadth of opposition to fascism in Britain, which extended beyond the active anti-fascist and Labour movements and into a wider segment of the general population. Due to the depth and intensity of his idealism, which traced its roots to the life-altering experiences of the Great War, Chesterton struggled to grasp why many Britons were unswayed by the utopian patriotism and sophisticated corporatism of British fascism: ‘He was so convinced that the message of British Fascism was correct’, Doris Chesterton recalled, ‘that he came away from his first speeches given as a BUF propagandist completely unable to understand why those who had listened to his brave words had not immediately rallied to the cause’. Even when his faith in Mosley was broken in 1938, and he began to recognize the fragility of the BUF as a political enterprise, Chesterton refused to see fascism as grounded in anything other than honest patriotism and sound economic principles. With the partial exception of Robert Skideslky, historians have not shared this naïve view of the BUF, treating it as an ill-fated but serious attempt to implement a radically authoritarian state and overhaul

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210 On the presence of both ‘active and passive’ anti-fascism in Britain, see Nigel Copsey, ‘Preface: Towards a new Anti-Fascist “Minimum”’, Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz eds., Varieties of Anti-Fascism (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. xiv-xxi. The other contributions to this volume offer a broad perspective on the response to fascism in various sectors of British society, directed at both the domestic and continental fascist movements.

211 Chesterton Collection A. 14, Baker interview with Doris Chesterton, 18 July 1978.
British society according to fascist principles. Some recent interpretations of the
BUF have been guilty of overselling British fascism, however, by placing too great
an emphasis on the sophisticated ‘palingenetic mythologies’ espoused by its
followers, and too little emphasis on the qualities that put fascism beyond the pale of
ordinary nationalism – a potent combination of semi-disciplined paramilitary
violence, heroic demagoguery and mass mobilization.\textsuperscript{212}

By the time he first met with Mosley in 1933, Chesterton was well on the way
to developing an ethos that was both ‘authentically British’, relying primarily on
British themes and experiences, and ‘authentically fascist’, in that it satisfied the
fascist minimum proposed by Roger Griffin. Had it not been for the party structure
he encountered at Black House in 1933, however, it is doubtful whether or not
Chesterton could have been considered a genuine fascist, rather than simply an
intellectual fellow traveller. As discussed in Chapter 1, expanding the definitional
parameters of fascism beyond myths and cultural iconography does not lead
inevitably to the conclusion that British fascism did not exist, or that figures like
Chesterton were irrelevant. It does, however, bring us back to Payne’s observation
that interwar Britain ‘had neither the space nor need for revolutionary nationalism’,
and that the BUF was the product of a contradiction between the relatively peaceful,
programmatic traditions of British society and the drastic, invariably violent
militancy of fascism. Even more so than its counterparts on the European continent,
therefore, British fascism was unstable and prone to internal divisions. Chesterton’s
experiences with British fascism after 1938 would attest to the fact that the
movement in Britain relied to a considerable extent on Mosley as a unifying figure,

\textsuperscript{212} Baker, Ideology of Obsession, p. 211.
and the overarching sense of purpose provided by the ‘success’ of fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain. When these factors were destroyed (or diminished in Mosley’s case) after 1945, British fascism ceased to be ‘the creed of the age’ and instead became a radical and often subversive strain within the broader swathe of Britain’s extreme right.\textsuperscript{213}

\textsuperscript{213} Mosley, \textit{Fascism: 100 Questions}, p. 4.
Chapter 3: A.K. Chesterton and the British extreme right, 1940-1973

World War II, 1940-1943

By avoiding internment, Chesterton was spared from the most direct and personally damaging repercussions that faced British fascists and Nazi-sympathizers during the Second World War. Nevertheless, he suffered a number of consequences from his prolonged and public affiliation with fascism, which ‘threatened to become a private and personal hoodoo’ even after he chose to reenlist in September 1939.\(^1\) In March 1940, Chesterton was assigned as an officer to the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) in Liverpool to oversee rail and shipping transport.\(^2\) He retained this position throughout the process of investigation surrounding internment, which reached its height between June and August when the bulk of arrests were made.\(^3\)

Far from eroding Chesterton’s political commitment, the time he spent under investigation served only to further his conviction that the governing authorities that had led Britain into war were rife with hypocrisy and corruption. Although he had campaigned against the war-mongering of political and financial elites in the 1930s, Chesterton had nonetheless remained a strident critic of pacifists and those unwilling to keep Britain ‘spiritually and materially’ prepared for war. In his eyes, many of the

\(^1\) ‘All Aboard for Addis’, p. 4.
\(^2\) TNA KV2/1345/2b, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Archie Findlay, 10 April 1940.
\(^3\) Grant, ‘The Role of MI5 in the Internment of British Fascists during the Second World War’, pp. 499-528, at p. 506.
same men who had preached pacifism or internationalism since 1918 now appeared
to be leading the country ill prepared into another war:

Had my sense of humour been more robust it might have enabled me to enjoy
a situation wherein I, who had wanted Britain strongly armed and
economically organized to take effective part in any struggle that might arise,
should be hounded at the insistence of men who had clamoured for war and at
the same time taken care that we should lack every means to wage it.  

The menial nature of Chesterton’s role with the RASC added to his sense of
alienation with the war as it was being fought on England’s home front, a setting that
offered neither the danger nor the masculine romanticism he associated with the
jungles of East Africa and the battlefields of the Western Front. ‘Having, in the pride
of my youth been trumpeted to battle by Rupert Brooke, it went ill with my
disposition to march to the pipings of Beverly Nicholls, or Godfrey Winn, or the
many apparent eunuchs of the B.B.C. In other words, I aspired to do my own share
of the war in a male world’.  

An opportunity to meet this aspiration arose in
September 1940, when Chesterton responded to a request for officers with
experience in a tropical climate. Having previously been deemed ineligible for
overseas service by the War Office due to his advanced age, Chesterton nonetheless
proved an ideal candidate for Britain’s campaign against Italy in East Africa. In
January 1941 he set sail for South Africa aboard the Winchester Castle, a converted
mail ship which arrived at Cape Town in mid-February. From there, the unit was
transferred to a smaller vessel to travel to Mombasa where he boarded a troop train

\[\text{\footnotesize 4 'All Aboard for Addis', p5.  
5 'All Aboard for Addis', p5.  
6 TNA BT/389/32, Merchant Shipping Movement Card: Winchester Castle, 14 March 1941.}\]
bound for Nairobi. Upon arrival, he was assigned work as a Motor Transport storekeeper; a safe and relatively sedentary role considered suitable for one who had already conducted his share of front-line fighting in the previous war. In his incomplete memoir of the campaign, Chesterton described a conversation with his commanding officer, asking that he be transferred ‘up the line’ so as not to miss out on active service. Whether or not this anecdote was truthful, it sheds further light on Chesterton’s masculine ideal of military service. Only those roles that exposed a man to danger could truly be considered a ‘man’s job’ and fulfil the ambition of a true soldier: ‘The others were happy, as I suppose they had a right to be, if their ambition was to serve as storemen. Besides they became Majors and Captains and prospered exceedingly in the land’. An officer himself, Chesterton did not harbor resentment for the upper-ranks as a general principle, yet he expressed dissatisfaction with the unequal conditions that the soldiers were forced to endure compared to their superiors:

Some difference in the lot of officers and men is doubtless inevitable: to herd them together hugger-mugger would merely be to cause acute embarrassment to both. But it always seems to me that the dissimilarity of their living conditions is out of all true proportion, indeed it harks back to the mediaeval world of privilege. An officer is superior only in his military function; why, then, should he often be better fed than his own men?  

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7 Chesterton’s wartime memoirs do not give any precise date for his arrival but identify the ship which transported his unit from Cape Town to Kenya as the Khedive Ismail. (‘All Aboard for Addis’, p. 21). Shipping records indicate only that this vessel travelled between Bombay and Suez throughout February/March 1941, during which time Chesterton may have disembarked in Mombasa. See: TNA BT/389/17, Merchant Shipping Movement Card: Khedive Ismail, 15 March 1941.


9 ‘All Aboard for Addis’, p. 22.
As he had argued throughout his publications for the BUF, Chesterton saw the structure of military ranks and discipline as a means of overriding class division and providing men with a unified sense of purpose that stripped away more petty political and social concerns. Even while witnessing the extent of militarization in German society in the 1930s, Chesterton had insisted that ‘a love of the warrior virtues need not (and in the present instance does not) embrace a love of war’.\textsuperscript{10} Having returned to war in order to reclaim some of that virtue, perhaps seeking some form of redemption or renewal in the wake of fascism’s failure in Britain, he was therefore disturbed by the lapses in discipline and comradeship among other officers that seemed to undermine his military ideals: ‘the man who is willing to accept all the privileges of commissioned rank (and they are many and real) while being unwilling to shoulder its obligations constitutes a menace to any army and ought not to be tolerated therein’.\textsuperscript{11}

After his request for a more active role was granted, Chesterton was sent toward Thika, the city that served as the British forces’ advanced headquarters facing Italian Somaliland. From here, he was tasked with transporting materials to support the King’s African Rifles in preparation for the invasion of Italian territory. Based on his own recollections of time spent in Kenya and Abyssinia, it is not clear whether or not Chesterton took part in combat while working on behalf of the RASC. His memoirs of the campaign made ample reference to the environmental and physical challenges facing his fellow soldiers but only passing references to combat of the sort he had encountered as a young man. By his own admission, ‘the hardships of the


\textsuperscript{11} ‘All Aboard for Addis’, p. 20.
Somaliland and Abyssinian campaigns were not one tenth as severe as the German East African campaign had been a quarter of a century earlier’. The most striking feature of this war was its distinctively colonial setting. Though it took place in the context of a global conflict against the Axis powers, the war in Somaliland was also a war to defend the Empire against an imperial rival. Furthermore, Chesterton’s recollections of the campaign echoed aspects of 19th century colonial ventures into the ‘dark continent’: long ventures through harsh and inhospitable landscapes (‘safaris sixteen thousand miles in length’), interactions with friendly but culturally exotic native tribespeople, and even time spent trekking with the ‘Camel Corps’, a specialized military unit established in the First War to defend colonial territory.12

**After-Victory and the National Front, 1943-1945**

Chesterton’s second campaign through Africa came to an end when his health collapsed as a result of malaria and gastric illness, forcing his return to England in early 1943.13 The time spent overseas proved insufficient to clear Chesterton of any connection to Mosley, who had been imprisoned alongside his wife Diana since May 1940, or William Joyce, who was now busily engaged as a German radio propagandist.14 In March 1943, Chesterton applied for a position as a sub-editor for the British Broadcasting Corporation but was rejected when a background check

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13 TNA KV2/1345/42a, F.3/483 report re Chesterton’s return to the B.U. scene, 3 September 1943.
revealed his associations with fascism.\textsuperscript{15} As a result, Chesterton was forced to seek work outside London and in May 1943 he left his wife in Croydon to take up a position at a newspaper company in Sheffield.\textsuperscript{16} Chesterton’s correspondence with Alfred Norris, an active serviceman and ex-BUF member, gave the earliest indication of political aspirations after returning from the war. The fragmentary conditions of the British extreme right in 1943 were not dissimilar from those he had encountered after leaving the BUF in 1938, consisting of a small cluster of groups largely devoid of a cogent political program or support base. In a letter to Norris on 26 June 1943, Chesterton described his lack of enthusiasm for this state of affairs:

\begin{quote}
I have a great dislike of crankery and a greater dislike of political futility and I think it best to plough a lone furrow until something emerges which has at least a dog’s chance of doing some good. In any case we have got to win the war first, before we can get on with the winning of the rest.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Chesterton’s capacity to act alone was already limited by the nature of his employment in Sheffield, where editorial restrictions made no allowance for independent political work. Even when he found a more amenable position in August 1943, as an assistant-editor at the \textit{Southport Guardian}, his political writing was confined to other nationalist and right-wing publications. In some instances Chesterton’s work proved too contentious even for sympathetic publications: an open letter addressed to Winston Churchill criticizing the internment of British fascists was rejected by \textit{The Patriot}, an anti-communist right-wing journal, for its\textsuperscript{16} TNA KV2/1345/40b, Copy of Police Report from Sheffield re A.K. Chesterton, 24 August 1943.

\textsuperscript{17} TNA KV2/1345/26a, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Alfred Norris, 26 June 1943.
potentially libellous attacks on Herbert Morrison.\textsuperscript{18} Despite having expressed scepticism about a fascist revival during wartime, Chesterton met with a group of ex-BUF members on 12 August 1943 to discuss the formation of ‘a militant organization for preserving British culture against the Jewish menace’.\textsuperscript{19} The meeting itself was not of great significance but marked the first step towards Chesterton’s direct involvement in the attempted revival of British fascism after internment. Besides their stated desire to promote anti-Semitism, the attendees had all been involved with Mosley. It appeared likely, therefore, that any movement likely to arise from further organizing would be advancing the BUF’s ideology in a different guise. Chesterton’s admission that he had begun re-editing old BUF pamphlets for redistribution after the war lent further credence to this notion, although it did not confirm whether the envisioned ‘militant’ organization would comprise a political party along traditional lines.\textsuperscript{20}

Several important questions hung above the heads of Chesterton and the others attempting a fascist revival in 1943. Would the movement dare operate in the open in the context of ongoing war? Would it seek to promote a negotiated peace with Germany? What role (if any) would be played by Mosley himself and those fascists still interned by the government? Consistent with his earlier statements to Alfred Norris, Chesterton was strongly opposed to any movement that would undermine public morale or otherwise affect Britain’s war effort. Though he shared the view, popular among Britain’s fascist and anti-Semitic circles, that the ‘catastrophe’ of global war had been encouraged by Jewish interests, he was

\textsuperscript{18} TNA KV2/1345/26a, Chesterton to Norris.
\textsuperscript{19} TNA KV2/1345/37b, Special Branch report on Fleet Street meeting, 19 August 1943.
\textsuperscript{20} TNA KV2/1345/37b, Special Branch report.
nevertheless convinced of the war’s necessity and Hitler’s ‘sovereign responsibility’ for the invasion of central Europe. He rebuked any idea of a peace agreement with Germany as not only politically suicidal but detrimental to British interests. Japan now occupied British colonies in South East Asia and could only be removed through a total allied victory. A Security Service report from September 1943 quoted his blunt assessment of ex-BUF members who opposed the war: ‘Anybody who is pro-German is a spiritual traitor, and I won’t touch them with a barge-pole after the war is over’. The same report noted his dim view of the prospects for Mosley’s return and that he ‘[appeared] to visualize a Fascist Movement after the war, but not in the same form as before’. This proved to be consistent with Chesterton’s view of Mosley after 1938 as having exercised bad judgment despite his patriotism and good intentions:

it is one of his [Mosley’s] weaknesses that he habitually exaggerates his own influence and imagines himself to be swaying the thoughts of millions where only a few thousand are listening to him… he firmly believed he could carry the people with him along the only road that appeared to offer them the chance of survival. As events have turned, he was mistaken both as to his own capacity and as to his country’s incapacity, but they were the mistakes of an honest man.

These views put Chesterton at odds with other fascist sympathizers who hoped for a full-blown revival of the BUF, or a movement that would anticipate Mosley’s return. Several figures came to the attention of the authorities in 1943 for planning along these lines: ex-BUF member George Greene held a private meeting on 29 August to

21 TNA KV2/1345/57a, Summary of information re Chesterton’s case, 12 October 1943.
22 TNA KV2/1345/43a, Informant Report on A.K. Chesterton, 4 September 1943.
discuss forming a committee to ‘reorganize the whole of the British Union elements’ and organize a committee to oversee the movement, i.e. ‘Until such time as Sir Oswald Mosley could resume the leadership’. Greene’s lofty aspirations for a revived BUF belied both the material and political difficulties facing British fascists in 1943. Besides the ever-looming problems of funding and internal unity, the potential membership of such a group faced the personal stigma of ideological sympathy with England’s mortal enemies, along with intense scrutiny from both the press and the Security Service. On 20 August, an article in the Daily Worker drew attention to Chesterton’s contributions to Truth and the Weekly Review as evidence of a fascist revival. In response to the article’s depiction of him as the ‘late crony and confederate of “Haw Haw” William Joyce, the traitor broadcaster’, Chesterton threatened to sue the paper for libel and received a statement of apology in response. Although he was relatively successful in defending his political reputation through litigation after 1940, Chesterton did encounter difficulty when seeking testimony from his former colleagues, who were fearful of exposing themselves to further scrutiny. Correspondence between Chesterton and another ex-BUF member, John Clarke Goldthorpe, highlighted the precarious personal circumstances for those connected to the pre-war extreme right. Goldthorpe, who in 1943 was enrolled as a medical student, flatly declined a request to testify in Chesterton’s case against the Daily Worker, citing its likely impact on his family and career: ‘To do as you request would be to take a 90% chance of smashing something

24 TNA KV2/1345/44a, Special Branch report re fascist meeting, 4 September 1943.
26 TNA KV2/1345/54b, Extract from “Truth” re. Chesterton, 8 October 1943.
I have built up; and would ruin, perhaps irretrievably, my own future and that of my wife and children. I would require a mighty cause indeed for me to risk that.’

Despite its misleading description of Chesterton, the Daily Worker was not entirely off base in alleging a current of fascist sympathy within certain Fleet Street publications. Rex Tremlett served as editor for the Weekly Review, a publication that traced its origins to Cecil Chesterton’s Eye-Witness. Throughout the interwar period, the paper was officially geared towards advocating distributism and had no formal ties to the fascist movement in Britain. Nevertheless, the Weekly Review’s editorial line was markedly more sympathetic to fascist, anti-Semitic and authoritarian-right movements than many other British publications shortly before the war. Besides Belloc’s own considerations of the ‘Jewish question’, the journal had featured advertisements for Lord Lymington’s New Pioneer, mounted a defence of the Franco regime in Spain and attributed the outbreak of the war to ‘international finance’. Chesterton’s relatively stable career in journalism in the decade after he returned from the war owed a considerable amount to his skill in refining radical nationalist or anti-Semitic ideas into more palatable fare, a process he explained to another Weekly Review contributor in March 1944:

28 The Eye-Witness came under Hilaire Belloc’s editorship in 1914 as The New-Witness, which lasted until 1923. In 1925, the paper was relaunched as G.K’s Weekly before finally adopting the Weekly Review moniker in 1936 following G.K. Chesterton’s death in June 1936.
The great secret of writing for such a journal, I find, is always to remember that they only come a part of the way with people like you and me… This means that one has to keep within fairly narrow limits, besides toning down everything one writes, but it is worth it.  

The tumultuous state of world affairs in 1943 gave Chesterton ample material for political criticism, relating to the war and its impact on British interests. In particular, the growing importance of the United States fed Chesterton’s concern that a shift was taking place in international politics, at the expense of Britain’s status as a world power. In July 1943, he criticized government plans for Anglo-American cooperation in colonial affairs, arguing that Britain’s foreign territories in Africa and South East Asia were to be effectively handed over to the United States:

…it does not require explicit statements such as this to enable one to read the writing on the wall. The Empire is to be handed over on the installment plan, and the promise that we shall retain administrative control will be no more than the shadow to compensate us for the loss of the substance.

Aside from the alarming prospect of America usurping Britain’s strategic possessions, Chesterton was also concerned about the more subtle economic ramifications of a U.S. expansion: ‘The administrative details will be ours, but the effective masterdom will be vested in the hands of the greatest money-lending power, and the colonies will very soon learn to recognize and obey their master’s voice’. As it had before the war, Chesterton’s fear of political domination by Jewish finance fed his concerns about international trade. Amidst calls for Britain to

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30 TNA KV2/1346/150c, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to W.A. Cathles, 6 March 1944.
31 ‘No Empire in Pawn’, The Weekly Review, 29 July 1943
revive its export trade, which had suffered as a result of the war effort, Chesterton argued that the country should instead pursue self sufficiency to avoid the ‘deluge’ of competition threatened by the growing industrial might of the United States and China. In advocating an autarchic model for Britain’s economy, Chesterton was essentially restating the policies laid out by Mosley in *The Greater Britain*: this model contended that British production could be geared towards the material resources of its 'Empire Economy', balancing supply and demand as well as insulating the country from the political and economic instability of an open market.

While most of Chesterton’s campaigns after 1943 appealed implicitly to a right-wing audience, his consistently anti-capitalist, anti-American sentiments put him at odds with the greater part of the British right. The largest common ground between the extreme right and conservatives was fear of a communist uprising, a prospect that remained threatening during the war despite the temporary alliance with Soviet Russia. Responding to the by-election victories of two socialist candidates in January 1944, Chesterton warned that a genuine ‘bolshevist’ element was rekindling itself in Britain. ‘Let us boldly square up to the truth, which is that revolution is in the air’, he declared to *Weekly Review* readers in 1944, further warning that British conservatives were ill equipped to meet this new challenge from the radical left:

> since the chief motive of Conservatives is still its dedication to big-scale capitalism and the financial rampage, it is manifestly incapable of putting forward what the age demands – an honest alternative to the existing system. There must be new men, new machinery and, above all, a new social concept which will embody and bring up-to-date the old social truths. In other words, the counter-revolution must be itself revolutionary.

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33 ‘No Empire in Pawn’.
In both its rhetoric and implications, this passage bore a striking similarity to fascist propaganda from the 1930s, invoking the same notions of national revolution and transcendent social reorganization that had been used by the BUF. Despite this, Chesterton’s proposals for an ‘honourable solution along distributist-corporative-money reform lines’ bore only a vague resemblance to his outright calls for revolution and dictatorship in the previous decade. Chesterton also acknowledged that Britain’s survival in the post-war era would depend on its ability to counter the ‘stampede to the Left’ that would inevitably lead to the loss of its empire. Despite his ongoing dispute with conservative capitalists, and his ongoing affinity for fascism’s transcendence of conventional politics, Chesterton’s practical hopes for a new campaign for national survival lay with the British right. His first concerted effort to form such a movement came about through cooperation with Collin Brooks, a man whose political interests rested on the intersection of conservatism and the extreme right. Though he never committed himself to the cause of British fascism between the wars, Brooks had met with Mosley on two occasions, in 1935 and 1939, to discuss matters pertaining to national leadership and the right in Britain. In 1939, while working as a journalist Brooks had also briefly entertained the prospect of creating a right-wing newspaper, before his appointment as editor of the weekly journal *Truth* the following year.35 Brooks’ conservative and nationalistic leanings put him in agreement with Chesterton, with whom he began a correspondence in October 1943.36 By late 1943, the two men’s correspondence moved to the subject of

36 TNA KV2/1345/55a, Letter from Collin Brooks to A.K. Chesterton, 6 October 1943.
fascism and the possibilities of a new movement to bring about ‘national regeneration’. Although he had privately expressed admiration for the BUF’s leader in the past, Brooks shared Chesterton’s belief that Mosley was not suited to oversee such a project:

My own emotion towards ‘O.M.’ whose hospitality I occasionally [sic] enjoyed, was always coloured by the political instability of his early career. The swing from Toryism to Labour, from Labour to the New Party, from the New Party to an English Plagiarism of Fascism never seemed to me to imply a right psychology for a great National regenerator. I always consider that he probably blocked the way for the genuine article.37

Brooks’ depiction of the BUF as an ‘English plagiarism’ of Mussolini’s doctrine echoed his criticisms of the party in the 1930s. Upon learning of his employer Lord Rothermere’s expression of support for Mosley in January 1934, Brooks had remarked in his diary that he was ‘too much of a democrat to be a Fascist, though too much of a disciplinarian to be a democrat in any but the vague Walt Whitman sense’.38 The ‘Un-English’ displays of paramilitary violence and demagoguery at Olympia confirmed his suspicion that fascist methods were irreconcilable with the British national character. Despite this aversion to fascism in practice, however, Brooks was sympathetic to many of the ideas underpinning Mosley’s party. In another diary entry from 1938, written in anticipation of another conflict with Germany, he expressed hope that if Britain survived the war, ‘she may at long last adopt a sane standard of life and be herself properly led. The reign of the road house and the cocktail bar and the cheap American cinema may be ended. We

37 TNA KV2/1345/55a, Brooks to Chesterton, 6 October 1943.
38 Crowson ed., Fleet Street, Press Barons and Politics, p. 56.
may return to real values, and the Faith that was once in us’.\(^3\)\(^9\) Aside from a preoccupation with cultural degeneracy and national decline, Brooks shared Chesterton’s commitment to the leadership principle, anticipating the organic emergence of a figure to oversee Britain’s cultural and spiritual regeneration. In combining aspects of radical conservatism, nationalism and authoritarianism, Brooks embodied one plausible alternative to British fascism as it was practiced during the 1930s — a form of British authoritarian conservatism, comparable in a broad sense to the non-fascist authoritarian right of interwar Europe.\(^4\)\(^0\)

Throughout the early part of 1944, Chesterton’s political activity was limited while he oversaw the production of *Leopard Valley*, a play he wrote based on his experiences in Africa, which was staged in Southport in February 1944. In June 1944, he was offered a position as Assistant London Editor of the *Birmingham Post* but was shortly after denied the post due to his prior affiliation with the BUF. Unable to rejoin his wife in London, Chesterton left Southport for Liverpool to take up a position as sub-editor for the *Evening Express*.\(^4\)\(^1\) Alongside his search for more suitable employment, Chesterton continued his freelance work for the *Weekly Review*, putting forward a refined version of the conspiratorial ‘Money Power’ thesis that had underpinned his work before the war: ‘the courtship and impending union of finance-capitalism and socialism in the bonds of unholy matrimony’.\(^4\)\(^2\) Chesterton’s employment woes were ended by Brooks, who offered him a job as an Editorial

\(^3\)\(^9\) Crowson ed., *Fleet Street, Press Barons and Politics*, p. 217.

\(^4\)\(^0\) On the distinction between fascism and authoritarian conservatism see Payne, *Fascism*, pp. 14-22.

\(^4\)\(^1\) TNA KV2/1347/197b, Letter from Southport Police Headquarters to Major F.W. Towns, 11 July 1944.

Assistant for *Truth* on 31 July 1944. Much to the gratification of his wife, the position allowed Chesterton to return to London and pursue a ‘9 to 5’ existence that had been absent throughout much of his married life. In addition to a steady income, the posting also offered Chesterton another outlet for political journalism and placed minimal restrictions on his freelance work, thus serving as an ideal foundation for his political activity.

By mid-September 1944, Chesterton had transferred to London and commenced work for *Truth*. Almost immediately upon returning to the capital, he began meeting with Brooks and a group of ex-BUF members to discuss the formation of a political movement that would in due course come to be known as the National Front. As it never moved significantly beyond the planning stage, historical accounts of Britain’s fascist and extreme right movements have largely dismissed this iteration of the National Front (not to be confused with the 1967 party of the same name) as insignificant and easily compromised by informants. While this reputation is understandable given the group’s abortive nature, its significance in Chesterton’s career is still notable, as it represented his only real attempt to pursue mass politics between his return from the war in 1943 and the union of extreme right parties that took place in 1967. The initial impetus for the National Front came from Brooks, who claimed to have been contacted by unnamed figures within British industry promising financial support if he could build a viable movement. For this reason, the planning of the National Front attracted immediate interest from the

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43 TNA KV2/1347/207a, Letter from Collin Brooks to A.K. Chesterton, 31 July 1944.
45 Not to be confused with the National Front formed in 1967, which Chesterton joined as part of a merger between a number of extreme right organizations including his own League of Empire Loyalists.
Security Service, whose reports noted the importance of stable financial backing to a potential fascist movement’s success after the war.47

Chesterton discussed his initial plans for the group at a meeting on 21 September between himself, Brooks, Ben Greene (formerly of the BUF and the English National Association) and Barney Seale, whose studio provided the venue.48 Although the attendees were broadly committed to establishing some form of nationalistic, anti-Semitic movement within Britain, it was not yet clear what methods this movement would pursue, and whether it would constitute a formal party along the lines of the BUF. In keeping with his earlier views while working for Mosley, Chesterton seemed to place an inordinate faith in the public’s receptiveness to anti-Semitic messaging and the potential for well-timed propaganda to arouse supporters. His proposed campaign in this instance was the mass-distribution of leaflets and chalked slogans to be commenced on the day that Britain’s victory over Hitler was declared. As an example of such a slogan, Chesterton offered the following ‘NOW GERMANY IS DEFEATED, HANG CHURCHILL AND DEAL WITH THE JEWS’.49 He later refined this slogan to the more pointed ‘NOW FOR THE JEWS’, while attending a second meeting on 9 October 1944. Besides Chesterton’s ongoing enthusiasm for ‘chalking and whitewashing campaigns’, more concrete ideas arose from Greene’s suggestion that Archibald Ramsay (who had been imprisoned for his involvement with the Right Club in 1940) should be brought into the fold as a potential leader for the movement. Precise questions of leadership

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47 TNA KV2/1348/296ab, Note on the history of the National Front, 1 November 1945.
48 TNA KV2/1347/227a, P.3. source report re meeting of Chesterton, Greene, Seale, Brooks, 26 September 1944.
49 TNA KV2/1347/227a, P.3. source report.
remained open at this stage, although the ideological importance placed on a leader-figure gave some indication of group’s fascist or authoritarian leanings, as did the consensus among the meeting attendees that the country was waiting for a figure like Ramsay to harness an underlying strain of anti-Semitic, nationalistic fervour that would be unleashed after the war. The first official meeting of the National Front was held on 24 November 1944, bolstering the group’s potential membership with an array of former BUF members and sympathetic figures. Notable new arrivals included Lord Portsmouth (formerly Lord Lymington of the New Pioneer), G.F. Green and Ian Waverly Girvan. As the circle of extreme right activists involved with the National Front expanded, the challenge of unifying different strains within Britain’s extreme right became more pressing. New additions to the movement suggested that Chesterton viewed the immediate task of forming a unified front as more important than ideological consensus. Having expressed a strong aversion to dealing with peace activists the previous year, he was now resolved to work alongside the likes of Green and Girvan, both of whom were resolutely ‘pro-German’ in their attitude to the war.

The movement’s security was also a matter of growing concern for Brooks and Chesterton, who were wary of drawing renewed attention from the Home Office. Unbeknownst to both men, the ongoing surveillance of ex-BUF members made the group’s exposure a foregone conclusion: the After Victory group had already been compromised by informants and intercepted correspondence between

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50 TNA KV2/1347/232, Extract from F3 1178 source report ment. Chesterton, 9 October 1944.
52 TNA KV2/1347/240b, Report from F.3/1260 of the first meeting of the National Front, 25 November 1944.
committee members. In addition to preserving the group’s privacy, Brooks hoped to avoid the failures in leadership that, in his view, were responsible for the BUF’s collapse. Rather than appoint a leader from their own ranks, several members of the National Front hoped that the question of leadership would resolve itself naturally after the war. A letter from Rex Tremlett to Chesterton in December 1943 expressed hope that a new leader would arise from the ranks of ex-servicemen:

I feel with you that not only is a large popular movement after the war most necessary but that it will inevitably rise, led we will hope, by some as yet unknown ex-serviceman with the spark that O.M. [Mosley] once had before it was debased by the squalid minds of his mouthpieces.\(^{53}\)

This idea held currency among several members of the National Front including Brooks, who speculated that the group’s leader would most likely be drawn from the armed forces.\(^{54}\) Chesterton similarly envisioned a candidate emerging from ‘the 8\(^{th}\) Army or the 14\(^{th}\)… someone like a General of the Commandos’. Contrary to Brooks’ earlier turn of phrase, he also stressed that the movement would need to avoid a leader in the vein of Mosley, Hitler or Mussolini, as such a figurehead ‘would never go down in this country’.\(^{55}\) Another ex-BUF figure attending the group’s meetings, Major Harry Edmonds, expressed hope that returning servicemen would be driven into patriotic National Socialist movements when they became disillusioned by government policy after the war.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{53}\) TNA KV2/1346/83a, Copy of int. letter from Rex to Chesterton’, 1 December 1943.
\(^{54}\) TNA KV2/1348/248a, F.3/1325 report mentioning Chesterton, 6 January 1945.
\(^{55}\) TNA KV2/1348/261x, F.3. report re Edmonds and Chesterton, 8 March 1945.
\(^{56}\) TNA KV2/1348/261x, F.3. report re Edmonds and Chesterton.
There was a certain logic to Chesterton’s assumption that an Allied victory would be fertile ground for national revolution: armed conflict and the subsequent disillusionment with civilian life had been the catalysts for his own radicalization after 1918. It therefore stood to reason, at least within Chesterton’s idealistic interpretation of patriotism and military values, that a sizeable portion of the new ‘front generation’ would be driven towards radical nationalism. As Chesterton argued in the *Weekly Review* in September 1944, the growing likelihood of Britain’s victory presented the nation with a ‘second chance’ to avoid the ‘decay of national pride’ that followed its triumph in the First World War.  

This concept played an integral part in Chesterton’s plans for the National Front’s policy, which he began drafting along with G.F. Green and Ian Waverly Girvan on 4 December 1944. The initial meetings resulted in a ten-point statement of policy that a Security Service informant described as ‘looking like a watered down British Union statement of policy’ that carefully avoided references to corporatism or dictatorship. Chesterton was able to persuade Green that the issue of a negotiated peace was politically untenable and it was agreed the movement should focus exclusively on matters after the war. Reflecting this decision, the National Front’s planning committee later dubbed itself the ‘After-Victory Group’. Chesterton was able to refine the policy document from 4 December into a simplified seven points to minimize the risk of further disagreement among the planning committee.

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58 TNA KV2/1348/243a, F.3./1270 Source report re meeting of initial session of the National Front, 4 December 1944.
A number of the included policies did bear a close resemblance to those adopted by the BUF, including proposals to secure Britain’s economic independence through the Empire, to ‘uphold distinctive British traditions’ and ‘promote the national interest above all sectional interests, thus destroying class-warfare’. Despite echoes of fascist thought and policy, the seven points also contained what appeared to be a direct repudiation of corporatism and dictatorship, calling specifically to reduce ‘to a minimum all forms of bureaucratic interference and to restore the dignity of the individual and the rule of law’.60 Taken at face value, the inclusion of such a clause seemed to suggest a party geared more towards Brooks’ vaguely authoritarian conservatism, a hopeful alternative to the revolutionary fascism of Mosley or the racial fascism of Arnold Leese’s Imperial Fascist League.61 As demonstrated by the After-Victory group’s rapid dissolution after 1945, however, the seven-points drafted by Chesterton were the product of an uneasy compromise rather than a true ideological synthesis between fascists and conservatives. Since it retained several elements of fascist organization and policy that had proved anathema to many interwar conservatives, especially anti-Semitism, Chesterton and Brooks’ new movement was liable to encounter the same problems of political space that had stymied fascism in Britain after 1934. Moreover, without a charismatic leader equivalent to Mosley, the National Front was poorly equipped to weather the ideological divisions that were liable to emerge between its conservative and radical elements. After resigning from the BUF in 1938, Chesterton had blamed the inertia of British fascism on the ‘circus’ surrounding Mosley. Yet the BUF’s longevity

60 TNA KV2/1348/269c, Report re meeting of National Front.
owed much to Mosley, if not in his abilities as a leader, then in his mere presence as an authority figure that could override the competing ideas and contentious personalities that were invariably drawn into revolutionary nationalist politics.\(^\text{62}\)

Mosley’s release from prison in 1943 raised another problem for Chesterton, who (with good reason) feared that a majority of National Front supporters, particularly those he hoped to draw from London’s East End, would abandon the movement and rejoin the ‘Leader’ as soon as he re-entered politics.\(^\text{63}\) Besides the ideological divisions, a general mood of suspicion and competition prevailed throughout smaller factions overlapping with the National Front, including Edmonds’ Constitutional Research Association and Green’s Independent Nationalists.\(^\text{64}\) In theory, Brooks argued that the National Front did not require its members to refrain from joining or forming other organizations. In practice and as far as Chesterton was concerned, however, these offshoots served to undermine the party’s goal of producing a unified front that would be capable of drawing a wider membership and resisting its political enemies.\(^\text{65}\)

Even looking past the ideological and organizational fractures facing the National Front, its proponents faced a deeper-seated question of how it would actually achieve or exercise political influence. In a column for the *Weekly Review*, Chesterton claimed to have accepted the failure of British fascists to restrain their doctrine’s anti-democratic nature.

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\(^\text{62}\) On the importance of strong leadership in determining the relative success of interwar fascist movements, see Payne, *A History of Fascism*, pp. 491-492.

\(^\text{63}\) TNA KV2/1348/261x, F.3. report re Edmonds and Chesterton.

\(^\text{64}\) TNA KV2/1348/266a, Copy of report mentioning Chesterton, 26 April 1945.

\(^\text{65}\) TNA KV2/1348/250a, Letter from Hosken to Chesterton, 19 January 1945.
Many of us in Britain who were attracted to the movement had many qualms on this score, and in so far as we were able to influence its policy we endeavoured to establish safeguards to ensure that suitable checks were forthcoming… At the time most of us, I fancy, persuaded ourselves that these guarantees had been secured but in retrospect it is more than likely we were mistaken. On that account I for one weep no tears to find the Fascists one-party system discredited.66

This was an early example of the revisionism that appeared throughout the literature of Britain’s extreme right after 1945. As Chesterton’s reaction to the Olympia rally suggested, he was disturbed by some aspects of the BUF’s campaigns during the 1930s. He was never a voice of democratic restraint among British fascists, however, having asserted plainly in 1935 that ‘Fascism tolerates no whining about “rights”’.67 Pleading with readers of the Weekly Review that British fascists had also made an effort ‘to expand and purify and even restore the traditional constitution’, Chesterton conceded that the Italian and German dictatorships had now ‘established what some of us before had questioned – the truth that absolute power corrupts’.68 While there is little doubt that he regretted much of his association with the BUF, Chesterton’s claim to have renounced authoritarianism in all forms was questionable. Apart from his continuing disdain for many aspects of the liberal system, Chesterton was an unabashed admirer of authoritarian regimes in Spain and Portugal; his hard-line support for Britain’s imperial status was another sign that Chesterton was still far from embracing democracy. Genuine or not, Chesterton’s reflections on the failures of fascism touched on a question confronting the post-war extreme right in Britain and elsewhere: Could a movement advancing the ‘national

67 Chesterton, Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary, p. 10.
68 ‘After Fascism – What?’.
interest’ replicate the ideals of fascism without replicating its methods of achieving and exercising power?

Both the corporate and the occupational franchise are Fascist concepts but in condemning Fascist method, with its ballyhoo and its repressions, it is not necessary to condemn all Fascist policy as well… such advocacy does not become suspect because some of us were once humourless enough to preach these things in a coloured shirt. ⁶⁹

Based on his plans for a new movement after the war, it was doubtful whether Chesterton had truly put aside ‘fascist methods’ altogether since 1940. Some of his proposed tactics for the National Front carried an implicit connection to subversion, social upheaval and violence. Anticipating the onset of anti-Semitic feeling in the wake of Britain’s victory, he expressed on one occasion a willingness to ‘countenance rioting of a violent nature’ and on another stated his willingness to ‘face up to barricades’ in pursuing the movement’s goals. ⁷⁰ While these comments suggested that the National Front would replicate the violent dynamism of the BUF, Chesterton’s other proposals were more restrained. Along with his continued suggestions for chalking and leafleting campaigns, Chesterton suggested that the movement should attempt to gain the support of a sympathetic but unaffiliated politician, a strategy that Tremlett described as analogous to that of the Ku Klux Klan. ⁷¹ Chesterton’s aspirations for the National Front rested on the assumption that a relatively small number of committed and influential members could leverage enough support to bring about a change in national policy. The problem with this

⁶⁹ ‘After Fascism – What?’,
⁷⁰ TNA KV2/1347/227a, P.3. source report re meeting of Chesterton, Greene, Seale, Brooks, 26 September 1944.
view was that the After Victory movement showed little sign of evolving from a coterie of radicals into a platform for mass recruitment, as a Security Service informant observed in December 1944,

If [the] National Front ever comes to anything at all it will be anything but a revolutionary party; it will be on the contrary a perfect example of drawing-room Fascism and as such will be wide open to infiltration.\(^{72}\)

Chesterton and Brooks continued with their plans for the movement into April 1945 and succeeded in drawing a conservative donor, Captain Granville Soames, to act as its chairman and provide the funds necessary to establish an office.\(^{73}\) One month later, however, their plans unravelled when Soames resigned, declaring that his fears about the fascist tendencies of the movement had been confirmed and that he would be cancelling his financial contribution. Soames’ departure left the group with barely enough funds to cover its expenses and, on 21 May 1945, Brooks expressed a belief that the movement had been ‘completely wrecked’ and should be put to rest.\(^{74}\) With hopes for support from unnamed industrialists now slim and Armistice Day passed, Chesterton’s attempts to salvage the group were stymied by a series of internal crises and suspicions that it had been infiltrated by one or more spies operating on behalf of the government or a rival organization. Although these fears were justified, given the activities of the Security Service, his attempts to uncover the leaker resulted in further discord and two

\(^{72}\) TNA KV2/1348/244b, F.3. Source report re National Front meeting mentioning Chesterton, 15 December 1944.

\(^{73}\) TNA KV2/1348/267a, Copy of F3/1466 Report mentioning Chesterton, 24 April 1945.

\(^{74}\) TNA KV2/1348/274a, Extract from Source F3/1529 report re the National Front Council activities, 21 May 1945.
members resigning from the group.\textsuperscript{75} In November 1945, a surveillance report summarized the grim future prospects for the National Front: ‘the optimism and enthusiasm which characterized the movement in its early stages have given place to a sense of frustration… Even the few faithful adherents recognize that the movement has accomplished and is likely to accomplish nothing’.\textsuperscript{76}

\textit{Truth and the Crisis of Empire, 1945-1953}

The National Front technically remained in existence into the following year, when the group was identified as one of several incipient fascist groups in a House of Lords debate on 12 March 1946.\textsuperscript{77} Having confirmed his fears that the movement had been infiltrated, Chesterton called for a three-month hiatus before formally resigning in August 1946.\textsuperscript{78} Since the end of the war, the most hopeful prospect for the National Front had been a merger with one of the other extreme right groups now active: either Jeffery Hamm’s League of Ex-Servicemen and Women or John Beckett’s British People’s Party, which had the advantage of ongoing funding from the Duke of Bedford. Despite meeting with both men over the course of 1946, Chesterton was never able to negotiate any form of alliance but his personal relationship with Beckett and the Duke of Bedford remained amicable. His articles appeared regularly in the \textit{People’s Post}, a newspaper distributed by the British...

\textsuperscript{75} TNA KV2/1348/296ab, Note on the history of the National Front.
\textsuperscript{76} TNA KV2/1348/296ab, Note on the history of the National Front.
\textsuperscript{77} Lord Vansittart Speech to the House of Lords, 12 March 1946, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, Lords, 5\textsuperscript{th} ser. vol. 140, cols. 40–41.
\textsuperscript{78} TNA KV2/1348/307c, Cross Ref., to F3/1907 report re., National Front, 26 March 1946.
People’s Party, writing under a pseudonym to avoid jeopardizing his position with *Truth*.

Even had he wished to revive the National Front or found a new party after 1946, Chesterton’s efforts during this period would likely have been overshadowed by the reemergence of Oswald Mosley. As Chesterton and other members of the After-Victory group had anticipated, Mosley’s return to politics made an immediate impact on Britain’s extreme-right. In light of his personal notoriety, Mosley refrained from entering politics immediately after his release in 1943, endorsing his supporters’ reorganization efforts through a newsletter and a series of book clubs.79 The most dramatic change heralded by Mosley’s return was his renunciation of nationalism and the Empire-centric politics that had underpinned *The Greater Britain*. In a new work titled *The Alternative* published in 1947, Mosley called for Britain to unite itself with its continental allies and pursue a kind of pan-European nationalism that would provide an economic, strategic and cultural bulwark against external and internal threats.80 On 8 February 1948 he launched the Union Movement, a new party intended to promote his new doctrine and draw together the fragments of the BUF that remained following the war.81

Mosley’s European centric policy placed him at the opposite pole to Chesterton, who remained loyal to the idea of Britain’s complete national and imperial independence. The time spent overseas between 1940 and 1941 had allowed Chesterton to reacquaint himself with Africa, the land of his birth and the source of

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79 Macklin, *Very Deeply Died in Black*, p. 56.
81 Mosley, *My Life*, pp. 432-433. For a general overview of the Union Movement’s founding, see Macklin, *Very Deeply Died in Black*, pp. 49-77.
his Empire loyalism. In spite of his outspoken commitment to British nationalism, a banner which many parts of Britain’s extreme right adopted in lieu of fascism, Chesterton’s own outlook was more aptly described as ‘imperial nationalism’, an ideology that considered every colony and dominion as representative of the Greater Britain and England’s achievement in spreading civilization to the wider world.\(^{82}\) Chesterton’s time in the BUF gave a more radical and consciously political shape to his view of the Empire, due to the prominence of the Empire in Mosley’s fascist program. As described in *The Greater Britain*, an economic revival would entail the creation of an ‘Autarchic Empire’: Britain would export manufactured goods to its colonies and in turn be supplied with raw materials from the colonies. Such a program required strong imperial governance that made no concessions for colonial independence, which Mosley predicted would have dire consequences for both the colonies themselves and the world at large.\(^{83}\)

Whereas Mosley turned away from the Empire in his attempt to revive the movement after the 1945, Chesterton’s Second World War reaffirmed his commitment to a ‘Greater Britain’. His personal connection to the Imperial project, which derived from an ongoing relationship to the white dominions in South Africa, further contributed to his belief that British identity spread far beyond the United Kingdom. He praised the ‘Excellent people of Cape Town and Durban’ for their hospitality during the war: ‘Yours is the Imperial outlook at its best, for not only are

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\(^{83}\) Mosley, *The Greater Britain*, p. 141.
you loyal Britons, but good South Africans'. Chesterton’s admiration of the colonial mindset was political as well as sentimental, since his Empire loyalist campaigns after the war would come to rely on the support of whites living abroad. That these ‘loyal Britons’ living abroad would count among Chesterton’s most ardent supporters reflected the colonial origins of his own political outlook on race and nationalism, which arguably appealed more to those living in settler populations, colonies or dominions than those in the more insular political framework of the United Kingdom.

Though Chesterton’s politics had long been grounded in a concept of impending national and imperial crisis, the end of the Second World War accelerated many of the forces threatening to dismantle Britain’s overseas empire. By the time peace had been declared with Germany, Britain was overshadowed militarily by the United States and faced looming financial problems, which were exacerbated by the costs of maintaining an overseas empire. The onset of the Cold War provided another strategic threat in the form of the Soviet Union, although for Chesterton and others seeking to preserve Britain’s international position, this was not altogether negative: fear of the Soviet menace and communist expansion outside Europe temporarily dampened the United States’ anti-imperialist drive, while giving the British extreme right another platform for popular support. A third threat to the Empire, which proved uniquely alarming for nationalists like Chesterton, was the

84 ‘All Aboard for Addis’, p. 20.
expansion of post-war internationalism in the form of the United Nations or through proposals for an integrated Europe. The prospect of the United Nations acting as a successor to the League of Nations was in itself a concern for Chesterton, who regarded all such bodies as tools of international finance. In a more concrete sense, however, the United Nations posed a threat due to its political goal of replacing imperial hegemony with a more egalitarian community of nations.

The ‘crisis of empire’ between 1945 and 1948 served as the impetus for Chesterton’s turn towards empire loyalism, an ethos that stressed the preservation and reassertion of Britain’s imperial prestige. Over a period of three years Britain suffered successive losses to its overseas empire: February 1947 marked the beginning of Britain’s withdrawal from Palestine and shortly thereafter the independence of India and Pakistan in August 1947.87 The following year saw two additional departures from the Empire, with Burma declaring independence in January 1948 and Ceylon in February 1948. The speed with which decolonization proceeded following the war served to justify Chesterton’s conviction that politicians were incapable of holding the Empire together. Pointing to the 1941 Atlantic Charter as the beginning of the United States’ bid for dominance, he castigated Winston Churchill for having reneged on his promise not to oversee the Empire’s dissolution:

what are we to say of your subsequent attitude once Roosevelt had made clear to you that the British Empire was to be overthrown… Did you not say at Fulton that you would not stop the tide of American conquest if you could? Did you not bid the Mississippi roll on?88

87 See Darwin, Britain and Decolonization, pp. 79-122.
88 ‘Addressing Mr. Churchill’, The People’s Post, December 1952.
Despite his repeated denunciations of Churchill, Chesterton appeared to regard Britain’s wartime leader as a misguided figure, a talented leader who showed ‘something of the swell of destiny, something of authentic greatness’. Ultimately, however, Churchill and his fellow conservatives held a fundamentally different view of the international situation than that possessed by much of Britain’s extreme right. Whereas Chesterton and his conspiratorial ilk viewed Moscow and Wall Street as two manifestations of the same enemy, Britain’s conservatives saw the post-1945 world as an ideological and geopolitical contest between two superpowers, the United States and the U.S.S.R. They thus viewed Britain’s special relationship with the United States as a matter of strategic and economic necessity. To Chesterton, the turn to America by many conservatives was a craven betrayal of British interests, and indisputable evidence of conspiratorial forces at work. Viewing finance as the key mechanism of the conspirators’ power, he pointed to Britain’s war debt to the United States as a sign this new phase of Anglo-American relations was a barely concealed bid for power by international finance. In a 1946 pamphlet he elaborated on his theory by tracing the conspiracy to the aftermath of the First World War:

First fruits of the great victory, for the Wall Street financiers, was the extension of their power to Britain and the Dominions, forcing us to surrender our command of the seas, to break our alliance with Japan, and, in a very short time, to return to the gold-standard.

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89 ‘Addressing Mr. Churchill’.
90 An alliance with the United States also proved to be beneficial for those conservatives seeking to thwart communism and ease the transition of Britain’s Empire into a more manageable modern state. See Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism*, pp. 330-331.
The subsequent changes in the global order that Chesterton attributed to the ‘Money Power’ equated America’s growth with Britain’s decline, placing him further at odds with those in the Conservative Party who hoped a transatlantic alliance might preserve the country’s status as a world power:

If Conservatives are so bewildered and intimidated that their only hope lies in the good-will of the Americans to conserve their own country for them, and are prepared to pay the price of surrendering their Empire to achieve this favour, it is small wonder that in the realm of domestic affairs they have no policy to offer the people whom they are betraying in the larger arena of world politics.  

The ratification of the Bretton-Woods agreement (which Chesterton viewed as a key obstacle to an insulated ‘Empire economy’) tied international currency transfers to the U.S. dollar, a measure based on that currency’s relative strength and stability at the time. This role had previously fallen to the British pound but a slump in British economic performance, coupled with the debts incurred through two world wars, meant that the Empire could simply no longer retain its status as the key arbiter of global trade.

The Soviet Union’s emergence as a major power provided the only counterbalance to the seemingly unstoppable rise of international finance, which, by Chesterton’s own estimate, would otherwise have demolished the Empire only years after the Second World War. The emergence of a global communist superpower added an additional layer of complexity to the way in which Chesterton perceived communism. During the interwar period, communism appeared primarily as an

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92 ‘These Disastrous Tories’, People’s Post, March 1949.
93 For the background of the Bretton Woods agreement in relation to Imperial policy see Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, pp. 272-274.
internal threat of revolution that could be supported through Soviet assistance. In the early stages of the BUF, Mosley had attempted unsuccessfully to position his movement as an extra-governmental line of defence against this threat. In the end, fascism was regarded in Britain as an essentially foreign ideology, just as liable to bring about violence and dictatorship as communism. At the war’s conclusion, however, Chesterton and other members of the extreme right recognized that the fear of the Soviet Union as a military threat would take centre stage following the defeat of Germany and Japan, providing a new opportunity for nationalists to position themselves as a bulwark against encroaching left-wing tyranny.94

From a pragmatic point of view, the rise of the Soviet Union was a boon to Britain’s extreme right. While fears of communism and the overarching sense of crisis associated with the Soviet ‘menace’ were unlikely to foment a revival of fascism, they did provide opportunities for a new movement capable of attracting both conservatives and radical nationalists under a common cause. Chesterton’s understanding of the global order after 1945 was realistic enough to acknowledge the immediate danger posed to British interests by the USSR. In particular, he recognized the potential for a communist superpower to foment and exploit revolutionary movements throughout Britain’s colonies.95 Under the influence of the conspiratorial worldview he had adopted during the 1930s, however, Chesterton saw the greatest threat to British interests in the ‘master revolutionaries’ acting through American finance, rather than their puppets in the Soviet bureaucracy. In some cases,

94 TNA KV2/1348/289a, Extract from Source S.R.63 report mentioning Chesterton, 27 August 1945.
95 On the relationship between the strategic concerns of the Cold War and Britain’s Empire, see Darwin, Britain and Decolonization, pp. 140-146.
he even acknowledged Russia’s hostility to Western capitalism as an inadvertent
hindrance to the spread of the ‘Money Power’. With the proposal of the Marshall
Plan in 1947, Chesterton noted with approval that Stalin was likely to reject an influx
of American money into Europe: ‘Russia alone stands athwart the path of American
Imperialism’.\textsuperscript{96}

Even though anti-Americanism put Chesterton ideologically at odds with
British conservatives, he was equally reticent to embrace their left wing opposition.
During the 1930s accounts of the ‘Red Terror’ overseas had been a staple of BUF
propaganda, a theme which carried into Chesterton’s post-war journalism. In 1946,
he penned an article addressing ‘The Problem with the Left’ that criticized ongoing
sympathies with the Russian experiment among British socialists: ‘When the red star
dawned in the East you were jubilant; even to this day you cannot bear to tell your
followers the truth, which is that the Red Star ushered in the blackest modern
tyranny ever to engulf the working man’.\textsuperscript{97} Chesterton gave a more detailed insight
into his attitude to the left in \textit{No Shelter For Morrison}, a short work of fiction he
published under a pseudonym in 1947. As its title suggested, the book served mainly
as an attack on former Home-Secretary Herbert Morrison (represented as a ‘Mr
Hackney’) but branched into a wider criticism of Labour politicians in the lead-up to
the war. Many of Chesterton’s critiques of socialism, delivered by way of an author
surrogate named the ‘Chairman’, were recognizable from his work in the BUF.
Britain’s socialists had fomented ‘class warfare’ and industrial action, while the
capitalist power wielded by international finance went unchecked. Labour politicians

\textsuperscript{96} ‘Atomic Dictatorship’, \textit{People’s Post}, August 1946.
\textsuperscript{97} ‘Atomic Dictatorship’.
had weakened Britain’s national defence while calling for an escalation of conflict with Italy, Germany and Japan – all the while pursuing a doomed project of global pacifism through the League of Nations. Alongside these old grievances, Chesterton made a renewed attack on Morrison’s role in overseeing the internment of ex-servicemen under 18b. The book’s penultimate chapter concluded with an exchange of dialogue between two characters (‘Tom’ and ‘Dick’) arguing over why fascism had attracted supporters in the first place:

DICK: I detest and abominate Fascism with all the strength of my soul. But in a country where democracy has broken down, and where the people as a whole do not want communism, I see that a problem exists and that there is at least a prima facie case for subordinating sectional interests to the national interest. Thank Heaven there is no such problem in Britain.

TOM: What if there were?

DICK: In that case I should indeed fight at the barricades.

TOM: On whose side?

DICK: On the Communist side of course. Though after a spell of Communism I should doubtless again find myself at the barricades, this time on behalf of the other side.

In David Baker’s Ideology of Obsession, this passage served as an epitaph of sorts to Chesterton’s involvement with fascism after 1940 – a ‘comfortable fiction’ that allowed him to retain the prospect of fascist revival as a ‘last ditch defence against British collapse in the face of a militant international finance-capitalism’. ‘For the rest of his life’, Baker thus concluded, ‘Chesterton was able to persuade

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100 Baker, Ideology of Obsession, p. 199.
himself that the point had not been reached where such radical action was necessary’. 101 In a superficial sense, this was correct, as Chesterton showed no further inclination towards the style of mass-party fascism that he had pursued under Mosley. Yet there is little indication that Chesterton’s understanding of the crisis precipitating fascism in the 1930s had changed significantly by 1945. Cultural decadence, class conflict and the twin perils of international finance and international Bolshevism were still dominant themes in his ideology. A snippet of dialogue between ‘Tom and Dick’ suggested that Chesterton’s critique of liberalism also remained in place: ‘democracy will only work so long as there are no dissident elements sufficiently strong and lawless to prevent it from working’. 102 His proposed solution to the economic and social problems caused by ‘lawless’ capitalism was still essentially corporatist, entailing a system of private enterprise under ‘corporate control by employer, employee and consumer, with the court of law as referees’. 103 While the After-Victory movement was in many respects a failed attempt to rekindle the interwar movement, Chesterton’s tentative efforts to reconcile his views with conservatism showed a greater willingness to work within the existing scope of the British right. In the wake of the National Front’s capitulation, he turned to the empire as the institution capable of resolving Britain’s material and spiritual crises without a full scale revolution.

102 Chesterton, No Shelter For Morrison, p. 65.
The League of Empire Loyalists, 1953-1965

With his prominence in the British extreme right overshadowed by Mosley’s return, Chesterton might well have faded from political activism altogether had his position at *Truth* remained steady. In March 1952, however, Brooks resigned his position as chairman and sold his stake in the paper to Staples Press. As a result, *Truth* underwent an overhaul under the supervision of its new owner, Ronald Staples, who sought to rehabilitate the paper from the radical and anti-Semitic reputation it had garnered in the preceding decade. This naturally brought him into conflict with Chesterton who was dismissed from his position in February 1953 after a series of disputes with Staples and the other editorial staff. In the following month, Chesterton distributed a pamphlet expressing outrage over the paper’s change in policy and appealed to readers for assistance in founding an independent outlet for nationalist news and criticism:

> The old TRUTH was not anti-Semitic when on occasion it criticized certain Jews, any more than it was anti-French when it criticized Frenchmen, or anti-German when it criticized Germans, or anti-Scottish when it criticized extreme Scottish Nationalism. It was pro-British, un-wearingly defending the cause of British interests.\(^{104}\)

Following his departure, Chesterton took up a temporary post in London as the ‘Information and Public Relations Officer’ for the United Central Africa Association – an organization representing Southern Rhodesians who wished to

amalgamate with the British protectorate of Northern Rhodesia. As Chesterton took the position shortly prior to Central African Federation being formed in August 1953, he was soon forced to seek employment yet again. In January 1953, Chesterton sent a letter to Lord Beaverbrook explaining his circumstances at Truth and indicating that his departure from the periodical was imminent and expressing frustration at the ‘Mosley aberration’ that dogged his search for employment. Following Beaverbrook’s return from overseas in April 1953, Chesterton was able to secure an interview – the outcome of which saw him appointed by Beaverbrook ‘to engage in such work as he may designate for you’ on a salary of £100 per month. The precise nature of Chesterton’s role was later described as that of a ‘literary advisor’, drawing on his earlier experience as an author and critic. He also served as a ghost writer for the Beaverbrook’s Don’t Trust To Luck, a book of business advice, and contributed feature articles for the Sunday Express and the Evening Standard.

During the course of his work with Beaverbrook, Chesterton was commissioned to write a piece for the Sunday Express investigating William Joyce, whose trial and execution had recently been documented in Rebecca West’s The Meaning of Treason. In order to supplement his own memories of the late ‘Lord Haw Haw’, Chesterton travelled to Germany to interview Joyce’s widow, as well as Spain, where he drew on the recollections of another ex-BUF member, J.A. Macnab. Hoping to parlay this research into a book, Chesterton compiled an extensive set of

105 Chesterton Collection E. 4, Letter from East Africa Ltd. to A.K. Chesterton, 13 February 1953.
108 Rebecca West, The Meaning of Treason (New York: Viking Books, 1947). West issued a number of revised editions of this work, including one in 1952, shortly prior to when Chesterton embarked upon his study of Joyce. For a brief overview of West’s treatment of Joyce, see Holmes, Searching for Lord Haw-Haw, pp. 438-442.
notes and produced three draft articles examining Joyce’s character and detailing his involvement with the fascist movement in Britain.109 To his immense frustration, however, Chesterton was forced by Beaverbrook to condense his work into a single piece that appeared in the Sunday Express in July 1953. Despite the severe editing imposed by Beaverbrook, Chesterton’s article was cautiously sympathetic towards Joyce, implying that he and his wife had effectively been stranded in Germany at the outbreak of the war after a contact failed to secure them German citizenship. It concluded by imploring readers to consider Joyce’s character in the face of execution: ‘Professing to be British of the British, Joyce left us at the first great crisis and joined our enemies. We owe him no honour. But we not dishonour ourselves by acknowledging that he died as a brave man’.110

With memories of the war still fresh, the sympathetic posture of Chesterton’s article aroused controversy. He faced accusations from the public of trying to whitewash Joyce’s reputation, while at the same time drawing the ire of a member of the Union Movement, Lawrence Flockhart, who alleged that Chesterton’s article was an attempt to curry favour with his employers at Joyce’s expense.111 In the long term, some of the dubious claims in Chesterton’s article found their way into biographies and historical studies of Joyce. Colin Holmes’ Searching for Lord Haw-Haw, the most authoritative work on Joyce to date, dismissed Chesterton’s piece as a ‘hack enterprise’ and suggested that prior accounts had been ‘insufficiently alert to his bias and special pleading’.112 While Chesterton did make a conscious attempt to soften

111 TNA KV2/1350/44b, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Oswald Mosley, 17 July 1953; TNA KV2/1350/44b, Letter from Lawrence Flockhart to Angus Macnab, 12 July 1953.
112 Holmes, Searching for Lord Haw-Haw, pp. 444-447.
Joyce’s reputation, he was not driven to do so by affection for the man himself, or out of sympathy for his actions after 1939. The special pleading that Chesterton undertook was rather indicative of an attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of British fascism, and specifically the party to which he and Joyce had belonged. In the first of his unpublished articles regarding Joyce, Chesterton offered a defence of British fascism similar to the one he had presented to readers of the Weekly Review in 1945: ‘[the] Mosley Fascists had been driven foremost by patriotism’, he implored, ‘and had no thought other than to serve Britain’. In the same article, Chesterton suggested that the events of interwar period could now be considered ‘with historical objectivity because, controversial though the cause was at the time, it is now dead beyond the possibility of resurrection’. Only by properly understanding the patriotic roots of British fascism, Chesterton argued, could one come to grips with ‘how grossly out of character [Joyce’s] defection appeared’.

As he had in the immediate aftermath of the war, Chesterton misjudged the public’s receptiveness to apologia on behalf of fascism. In December 1953, his arrangement with the Express was terminated following repeated disputes with editorial staff, which Chesterton believed to have been exacerbated by ‘political prejudice’. Appealing to Beaverbrook to intervene on his behalf, Chesterton lamented his inability to shed the notoriety he had acquired during his time with Mosley:

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Many years ago when I found that I was going the pace I gave up drinking, and since then have never been troubled by alcohol. Several years ago, when I found that I was smoking too much, I gave up tobacco and since then have never been troubled by nicotine. Fifteen years ago, when I found I was having too much of Oswald Mosley I gave up the habit, but instead of being rid of it the accursed spectre haunts me wherever I go.\textsuperscript{115}

Beaverbrook was not altogether unsympathetic to Chesterton’s politics, having conducted a crusade on behalf of the Empire some years prior. He also appeared to harbour some form of respect for Chesterton’s literary acumen, though their relationship was brief, contentious and lopsided. Chesterton was insignificant in the life and historical profile of Beaverbrook, a man he acknowledged in his memoirs (alongside Bernard Montgomery and George Bernard Shaw) as ‘one of the three authentic men of genius I have known’.\textsuperscript{116} Nevertheless, Chesterton’s encounters with the ‘Beaver’ were another good illustration of the gulf that emerged between the mainstream conservative variant of British nationalism and his own. To conservatives, the loss of national prestige associated with the rise of the United States and Britain’s retreat from empire was balanced by political realities after 1945; chiefly, the need to ensure Britain’s economic and national security against the backdrop of the Cold War while meeting the domestic challenge of populist social-democracy. These considerations were largely irrelevant to Chesterton, who viewed the United States’ financial hegemony as equally (if not more) threatening than communist subversion or military aggression. With nationalism at the heart of his political ideology, Chesterton viewed national prestige as an end unto itself, rather

\textsuperscript{115} PA BBK/C, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Lord Beaverbrook, 1 January 1953.
\textsuperscript{116} BNML, Ch. I, p. 7.
than something to be managed alongside the more banal aspects of economic and social policy.

Chesterton’s ongoing qualms with conservatism and the moderate right made it unlikely that he would secure funding for an independent movement from wealthy industrialists, as Brooks had attempted to do in the 1940s. In a stroke of tremendous fortune, however, another wealthy figure responded out of the blue to Chesterton’s appeal following his departure from *Truth*. Robert Key Jeffery was an eccentric British millionaire residing in Chile whose fortune had been amassed through copper mining. The precise nature of Jeffery’s political views were unclear but his ideological affinity with Chesterton’s ‘pro-British’ appeal was sufficient to prompt a generous donation to support the founding of an independent journal. Jeffery thus became the patron and ‘financial founder’ of *Candour*, a weekly ‘news and views-letter’ that began publication in October 1953 and would continue, in one form or another, until after Chesterton’s death in 1973. The leading article of *Candour*’s debut issue detailed the journal’s mission in drawing attention to the forces acting against the British Empire:

> The British Empire is disintegrating. Whoever denies that fact is a fool or a knave… In place of the British Empire, there arises the Empire of the United States. We have no quarrel on that account with the American people, who are entitled to what their dollars can buy. Our quarrel is with our own abject leadership, of whatever party, which has supinely allowed the Dollar Empire to grow fat at our expense, crowding us off the stage of history.¹¹⁷

As its title suggested, *Candour* drew stylistic inspiration from *Truth*, positioning itself as a mixture of political editorials and investigative journalism.

¹¹⁷ ‘Sound the Alarm!’, *Candour*, 30 October 1953.
offered as an alternative to mainstream reporting of world affairs. Jeffery’s patronage
made no demands on the content of the journal, outside the broad direction that it
advance British interests. Chesterton was thus left with complete editorial
independence, allowing the forthright discussion of matters he had been unable to
address in *Truth*, including the role of Jewish conspiracy in global affairs.118

In an effort to quell the concern among parts of his audience that the journal
was flatly anti-American, Chesterton assured readers that his concern lay with the
forces conspiring within the United States government rather than the people
themselves, ‘but that a nation and its government cannot always be tidily
separated’.119 Chesterton’s insistence on the interchangeable function of U.S.
capitalism and Russian communism put him outside the realm of traditional
conservatism, but *Candour* served as a consistent outlet for anti-communist
literature, opening it up to an audience beyond the die-hard adherents to the ‘Money
Power’ conspiracy. Several of the journal’s early issues gave coverage to Joseph
McCarthy’s investigation into alleged Communist espionage throughout the United
States, promising to bring the U.S. senator’s ‘case’ to a British audience.120 The
journal also lent its attention to racial politics both in Britain and abroad. Intersecting
with Chesterton’s concern over the Empire in Africa was the issue of apartheid in
South Africa, which he firmly defended as a necessary measure to prevent social
disorder. In an early example of how *Candour*’s racist, imperialist and
conspiratorial elements would become intertwined in the following decades,

Chesterton argued for a reassertion of British control to prevent further disintegration:

A strong British Empire is the only protection of hundreds of millions of people against the wholesale putrefaction of their social organisms, the only possible guarantee, indeed, that the world will not become a sort of global brothel run by savages for the benefit of High Finance.\(^{121}\)

Ongoing funding from Jeffery ensured *Candour’s* independent existence for the foreseeable future but made no specifications as to a further political program. Having undertaken a number of unsuccessful attempts at party activism in the past, Chesterton was initially reticent to commit his journal to any particular venture. In considering the possibility for a new party, Chesterton gave an account of the ‘common fate’ of such ventures, offering a thinly veiled allusion to his experiences with Mosley and the After-Victory Group:

Three things are clearly essential. The first, in the special conditions of the day, is a combination of gifts in the leadership amounting to genius. And how rare is genius! The second is tireless dynamism and capacity for self-sacrifice in the led… The third, in one word, is cash. No party can survive the hostility of entrenched financial and political vested interests unless it can lay its hand on large sums of money.\(^{122}\)

Even if these elements could somehow be secured, Chesterton further explained that the trials of the political process would then begin in earnest: a struggle to overcome internal division and disputes over minor policy matters. ‘Should some miracle occur to prevent that final disaster’, he concluded, the party

\(^{121}\) ‘Retreat to Barbarism’, *Candour*, 19 February 1954.  
would be beset by opportunists from the ‘old gangs’ and careerists; ‘so that in the end there will be no spiritual distinction to be drawn between the old parties and the new’. While this assessment seemed to offer no prospect for a new party, Chesterton acknowledged that younger patriots would not be deterred from attempting to forge new movements. Allowing for this possibility, he proposed a new organization whose purpose would be to influence public opinion and advocate for British interests, rather than contest elections or build a mass party.123

It was on this basis that Chesterton founded the League of Empire Loyalists (LEL), which began its formal existence on 13 April 1954, marked by a meeting at Caxton Hall in Westminster. An additional infusion of funds from Jeffery allowed the group to secure an office space in London and hire Leslie Greene, the daughter of Chesterton’s After-Victory colleague Ben Greene, to work full time on its behalf.124 Per Chesterton’s discussion in Candour, the LEL was never intended as a political party in the traditional sense, but rather as a ‘pressure group’ that would engage public opinion and attempt to influence the existing political parties in Britain. A constitution drafted by Chesterton outlined four ‘objects’ of the LEL’s mission but made no prescriptions for policy or campaign tactics:

i) The maintenance and, where necessary, the recovery of the sovereign independence of the British Peoples throughout the world. ii) The strengthening of the spiritual and material bonds between the British Peoples throughout the world. iii) The conscientious development of the British Colonial Empire under British direction and local British leadership. iv) The resurgence at home and abroad of the British spirit.125

123 ‘Is a New Party Needed?’
Aside from ratifying the group’s ultra-nationalist, imperialist orientation, the LEL’s objects also indicated a mission that expanded beyond domestic politics to draw support from Britons living overseas. In organizational terms, Chesterton hoped that the party would function on a decentralized, grass-roots basis: members of the League would establish branches throughout Britain and the empire, acting independently to raise public awareness and put pressure on figures in government that acted contrary to British interests. The formal governing structure of the LEL consisted of an executive committee, charged with appointing a chairman and approving applications for membership, along with a policy committee, comprised of the chairman, an organizing secretary and the editor of Candour – the position formally occupied by Chesterton. Membership of the LEL was not formally restricted by race or nationality, though applicants who did not hold British citizenship were subject to approval by the policy committee. A vote at the LEL’s inaugural meeting also agreed that all sitting members of parliament, ‘Independents as well as Party Men’, were to be excluded from membership to avoid diluting the group’s oppositional stance toward establishment politics.

In theory, were the LEL to achieve its initial goal of 20,000 members worldwide, it would operate without the need for the single, charismatic leader-figure sought by previous iterations of the extreme right. In practice, however, the main activities of the LEL were reliant upon Chesterton’s leadership, aided by an inner-circle of dedicated activists. Apart from Greene, this circle consisted of Aiden

Mackey, a teacher who acted as the group’s public relations officer, and Austen Brooks, the son of Chesterton’s colleague from *Truth* and the After-Victory group. Brooks acted as Chesterton’s ‘right hand man’, directing and participating in the LEL’s campaigns while also serving as the deputy editor of *Candour*. The party’s initial chairman was Martin Burdett-Coutts, descended from the 19th century banking scion Angela Burdett-Coutts.  

Although Chesterton maintained that the LEL was aloof from partisan politics, its appeals to anti-communist, nationalist and pro-Empire sentiment were implicitly geared towards the right. In the first year of its existence, LEL picketing campaigns made an effort to lure disenfranchised members of the Conservative Party. These efforts showed promise in July 1954 when the LEL made contact with Harry Legg-Bourke, a Conservative backbencher who protested against his party’s policy in Suez. Chesterton’s initial optimism was quashed almost immediately, however, when Legg-Bourke reneged on his threat to resign from the party. In *Candour*, Chesterton reaffirmed his belief that ‘Party Men’ were unlikely to abandon their positions: ‘Mother’s wandering boy is restored to the fold and admitted once again to the radiance of the Churchillian smile, while the Tories, their ranks closed, march forward with beaming faces towards the further disasters and surrenders of Tomorrow’.  

As Chesterton anticipated, the Conservative Party establishment made a deliberate effort to undermine the appeal of the LEL, distributing information among its members that highlighted the movement’s anti-Semitism and anti-

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129 ‘Back to the Fold’.
Americanism, as well as Chesterton’s personal connection to fascism. Frustrated by the intransigence of mainstream conservatives, he redirected the LEL’s efforts away from conventional activism and into more disruptive forms of political demonstration. The League’s activities subsequently became something of a novelty in Britain’s political scene, as members painted slogans on public property, interrupted Conservative Party meetings and verbally harangued foreign dignitaries or other public figures seen to be undermining British sovereignty. Although all of these tactics attracted some degree of attention from bemused onlookers, the most effective of the LEL’s demonstrations – insofar as they attracted the most attention from the media – were theatrical stunts that often involved considerable planning by Brooks and other members of the LEL’s dedicated inner-circle.

Some of the LEL’s stunts reflected Chesterton’s penchant for symbolism, such as tearing down the United Nations flag or delivering a ‘scuttle’ to government figures held responsible for the loss of the Empire. In most cases, however, the LEL’s methods revolved around some form of heckling, directed either to the stage at political meetings or in public gatherings by way of a roaming loudspeaker van. While many of the aforementioned methods brought party members in conflict with the law, inviting arrests and small fines, the LEL’s stunts were mostly non-violent and a far cry from the paramilitary violence of interwar fascism. The most serious incidents involving the group took place in 1956, when fighting broke out between

131 Press clippings detailing the League’s stunts between 1957 and 1962 were collated by LEL member Rosine De Bouneville and now reside in a series of scrapbooks stored alongside Chesterton’s papers at Bath University. See: Chesterton Collection C. 1 through C. 5.
LEL activists and members of the Movement for Colonial Freedom. An interruption at Blackpool in October 1958 led the LEL to pursue legal action against the Conservative Party agents alleged to have assaulted two young interrupters. Though the case was unsuccessful, the incident brought criticism from the media, with one columnist in the *Spectator* going so far as to suggest a latent undertone of fascism in the stewards’ rough treatment of hecklers. The forceful response to LEL interrupters was a strange inversion of the situation that Chesterton had faced while campaigning with Mosley. Having once declared the right of BUF stewards to maintain order at their meetings, Chesterton now found his movement on the receiving end of heavy-handed party stewards, while Brooks declared the Movement for Colonial Freedom’s response to LEL heckling an affront to freedom of speech.

The LEL’s confrontational approach proved alienating to some of its more conservative members. In April 1956, Burdett-Coutts resigned his position as chairman following a dispute over ‘the expediency of *Candour*’s approach to world affairs’ and anti-communist slogans used in LEL campaigns. He was replaced by D.S. Fraser Harris, a retired Lieutenant-Colonel residing in Cornwall. Fraser-Harris’ appointment furthered the ‘colonel Blimpish’ image associated with the LEL, whose governing council also included a number of elderly military men. Chesterton made no effort to dispel this reputation, which helped stave-off accusations that the LEL was a disguised attempt to rekindle British fascism. As reflected in the pages of *Candour*, much of the LEL’s membership was reactionary.

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133 McNeile and Black, *History of the League of Empire Loyalists and Candour*, p. 34.
134 ‘Two Cleared of Rally Assault’, *Times*, 2 June 1959.
136 McNeile and Black, *History of the League of Empire Loyalists and Candour*, p. 34.
137 ‘New League Chairman’, *Candour*, 20 April 1956.
138 Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, p. 265
rather than revolutionary. Brooks decried the ‘coloured invasion of Britain’ but made a point of also denouncing racial violence as a response to non-white immigration: ‘The thugs may be serving their own questionable political ends, but they are certainly not helping to preserve British society’. While many of the LEL’s overt activities reflected Chesterton’s desire to tackle large-scale issues of domestic and international intrigue, its politics also included elements of social and economic conservatism; with contributors denouncing the excesses of government bureaucracy, the welfare state and the general trend of moral degradation among Britain’s youth.

There were some notable exceptions to the conservative trend in the LEL’s membership. In November 1955, it incorporated the members of British Resurgence, a small group of young nationalists operating in the North of England under the leadership of John Bean. Before agreeing to join Chesterton as the LEL’s Northern organizer, Bean had been a member of Mosley’s Union Movement and briefly attempted to make headway in the Conservative Party. Bean brought with him a group of dedicated followers that, whilst providing a welcome boost to the LEL’s ranks, showed a greater willingness to engage in the kind of confrontational street politics that Chesterton hoped to avoid. Some of the LEL’s membership also maintained an interest in the esoteric trappings of neo-Nazism and the racial-fascist ideas promulgated in Britain by Arnold Leese. The most drastic proponent of these views to pass through the LEL’s ranks was Colin Jordan, a Cambridge history graduate who also served as a member of the RAF during the Second World War.

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139 ‘Coloured Invasion of Britain’, Candour, 29 October 1954.
Jordan left the LEL in 1956 after unsuccessfully petitioning Chesterton to restrict membership to ‘white Gentile Britons’. 141 In the same year, Jordan inherited a property in Notting Hill from Leese, which served as the headquarters for his newly formed White Defence League.142

Several of the other activists drawn to the LEL were less overt in their radicalism, but would later graduate from the LEL towards the more overtly fascistic politics pursued by Jordan. John Tyndall joined the LEL in late 1956 shortly after completing a period of military service in West Germany. In his autobiography, Tyndall claimed to have considered membership in the Union Movement but refrained due to his disagreement with Mosley’s plans for a federated Europe. Though he was in hearty agreement with both the empire loyalist and conspiratorial aspects of Chesterton’s program, Tyndall quickly grew frustrated with the LEL’s elderly and middle-aged leadership, who seemed unwilling to pursue any form of actual political power. This sentiment was shared by Bean, who began organizing informal discussions among ‘radically-minded’ members of the LEL who hoped to either draw Chesterton’s organization in a more active direction, or branch off into a nationalist party of their own.143

Facing competition from both the mainstream right and the remnants of Mosley’s Union Movement, the LEL struggled to attract a membership numerous or dedicated enough to support Chesterton’s vision of grass-roots British nationalism. A small ray of hope was presented by the escalation of the Suez Crisis, a long recurring subject of the LEL’s activism, which brought Britain’s retreat from empire to the

142 ‘Colin Jordan’, *The Times*, 16 April 2009.
143 Chesterton Collection A. 11, Baker interview with Tyndall, 4 April 1978.
forefront of domestic politics. Throughout 1955 and 1956, Egyptian president Gamal-Abdel Nasser had stymied British efforts to secure its interests in the region through diplomacy, much to the frustration of Prime Minister Anthony Eden who, along with other parts of the British government and public opinion, came to regard Nasser as a dangerous, dictatorial figure akin to Benito Mussolini. Matters were further complicated by the overarching considerations of the Cold War: in contrast to Eden’s desire to reassert Britain’s imperial control, the United States feared alienating Nasser into the hands of the Soviet Union and viewed a nationalist government in Egypt as a preferable bulwark against communism in the Middle East.\(^\text{144}\) The apex of the crisis came after Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal on 30 July 1956, thus setting the stage for an attempted military incursion by Britain acting in concert with French and Israeli Forces. The invasion of Suez launched on 30 October was a military success but an immediate disaster in both domestic and international politics: there was widespread opposition to the war among the British population, with particular criticism originating from the left, as well as Conservatives who feared the blowback from Eden’s failed military adventurism. Diplomatically, the invasion was condemned sharply by the United States who, besides their own strategic aims in the Middle-East, feared that a Western imperial incursion would undermine criticism of the Soviet invasion of Hungary that took place on 4 November 1956. The United States led international condemnation of the

Suez invasion by way of the United Nations, an effort joined by other nations in the British Commonwealth.145

From the LEL’s perspective, Suez represented the brazen culmination of the different forces acting to sabotage Britain. The coalition condemning Eden’s intervention was a real-world incarnation of the conspiracy that Chesterton attributed to Britain’s declining status: American anti-Imperialists, U.N. internationalists, British liberals and ‘defeatists’ on the domestic front, as well as the ‘third world’ leaders who replaced British colonial rule. In light of Chesterton’s wider view of finance-capitalism, Suez was also a particularly galling example of how the United States leveraged its economic might against British interests:

The results of the British Government’s surrender to the Transatlantic blackmailers were catastrophic. Nasser took over the British bases, British property in Egypt was sequestrated and Britain has never recovered from the loss of ‘face’ attendant upon her humiliation, inflicted by a so called ‘friend and ally’.146

The Suez intervention was also a final reminder that, for all Chesterton’s notions of political cowardice and inaction as the root of imperial decline, there had still been concerted efforts by successive British governments to retain Imperial control through the 1950s. Though in many cases these efforts resulted in a ‘hand over’ to favoured local parties, interventions into Malaya and Kenya demonstrated that British government had hardly abandoned its commitment to a presence abroad.147

The extent of U.S. and U.N. opposition to Britain’s feigned ‘diplomatic’ intervention

145 Louis, Ends of British Imperialism, pp. 694-698.
146 Chesterton, The New Unhappy Lords, p. 70.
into Suez was in some way beneficial to Chesterton, since it gave credence to his belief that neither was a true ally of British interests. The LEL gained a small number of dedicated supporters drawn from those who viewed Suez as ‘proof’ of an anti-Empire conspiracy. On the whole, however, the events of 1956 were proof of the redundancy of ‘Empire Loyalism’ as a cause. Much as Mosley’s championing of an ‘Empire economy’ in the 1930s had been proven unrealistic by the limits of tariffs and imperial preference, Suez showed the political and social impracticality of an aggressive reassertion of British Imperial power.

In February 1957, the LEL made its first attempt to engage in electoral politics, submitting Leslie Greene as an ‘Independent Loyalist’ candidate in the North Lewisham by-election. Despite the dismal results of the election itself, which garnered Greene less than five percent of the vote, the LEL’s membership was enthused by the prospect of further campaigns. Chesterton was reticent to engage the LEL in further electoral attempts, however, fearing that its resources would be squandered in attempting to ‘stand toe to toe and slog it out with the giants’. He called instead for a continued emphasis on protest tactics, envisioning the LEL as a kind of political ‘raiding party’. Chesterton’s intransigence on the LEL’s political orientation after Lewisham led to a number of core members resigning. Tyndall and Bean resigned from the movement in April 1958 to establish the National Labour Party, while another long-term supporter Sir Richard Hilton, left to pursue his own ‘Patriotic Front’. The timing of Bean and Tyndall’s departure reflected another current of disagreement within the LEL over how the party should respond to the

149 ‘Raising the Sights’, Candour, 8 March 1957.
150 Chesterton Collection A. 11, Baker interview with Tyndall, 4 April 1978.
growing public concern over immigration. Although Candour and the LEL placed increasing focus on the ‘coloured invasion’ in their campaigns, Chesterton was wary of tarnishing his movement’s reputation with accusations of violence or racial hatred following the riots at Notting Hill in April 1958.

Other parties made an immediate effort to capitalize upon racial resentment in West London, which became contested territory for Britain’s extreme right: Mosley’s Union Movement held meetings and rented a headquarters in Kensington, while Colin Jordan’s ‘White Defence League’ was based nearby and joined Bean’s National Labour Party in public demonstrations calling for restricted immigration.\textsuperscript{151} Notting Hill represented a microcosm of the problems that had beset Britain’s extreme right since the collapse of the BUF. While immigration offered a seemingly viable platform for mass recruitment, progress was hampered by a crowding of ideologically heterogeneous parties unable to resolve their personal and ideological differences. Some of these divisions were a holdover from the interwar period, with an ongoing divide between followers of Mosley, Chesterton and Arnold Leese, the latter of whom was responsible for promulgating neo-Nazism amongst the younger exiles from the LEL.\textsuperscript{152} Another point of division, highlighted clearly by fractures in the LEL, was the generational divide between Chesterton’s “Blimpish” Empire Loyalists, Mosley’s aging inner circle and the younger, more politically aspirational generation represented by Bean and Tyndall.

Even had it proved capable of resolving these ideological and generational fractures, Britain’s extreme right faced the ongoing problem of its connection to

\textsuperscript{151} ‘Election battle’, \textit{Daily Mirror}, 1 October 1958.
\textsuperscript{152} Thurlow, \textit{Fascism in Britain}, pp. 228-229.
fascism. As Chesterton could readily attest, the combined legacies of the war, internment and the Holocaust made the failure of any overt attempt to promote fascism in post-war Britain a foregone conclusion. *Candour* and the LEL were both beset by accusations of harbouring fascist tendencies despite Chesterton and his supporters’ efforts to cultivate a more respectable, conservative image. As he had lamented to Beaverbrook in 1953, Chesterton’s notoriety as a member of the BUF remained in spite of his efforts to combat the fascist label. Besides his aggressive pursuit of legal recourse against any accusation of disloyalty, Chesterton attempted to directly address the ‘fascist smear’ by defending his involvement with Mosley and pointing to the many ‘sincere men and women’ who had joined or otherwise supported the fascists in their heyday.\(^{153}\) As far as accusations that the LEL represented a form of neo-fascism in disguise, Chesterton assured his followers shortly after the movement’s founding in 1954 that the ‘ghost’ of fascism lay firmly in the past:

> neither through *Candour* nor the League, have or will I at any future time, espouse openly or covertly any Fascist or other authoritarian doctrine. This does not mean that I will foreswear myself by denying historical facts which I believe to be incontrovertible, whether they reflect well or ill on any such regime in the past, but it does mean that I have renounced those beliefs which, honourably held though they were, have been outdated by events.\(^{154}\)

Though he held an obvious political incentive to relegate fascism to its interwar context, under Chesterton’s direction the LEL showed few signs of developing into a genuine neo-fascist enterprise. Its core concern lay with the


\(^{154}\) *‘Laying the Fascist Ghost’, Candour*, 26 November 1954.
preservation of the British empire, or Chesterton and his followers’ idealistic conception of the empire, rather than the establishment of a radically new society. Its rhetoric and ideology contained overarching themes of cultural decadence and national regeneration, similar to those that permeated British and European fascism. These elements, coupled with the LEL’s general program of radical nationalism, anti-communism and conspiratorial anti-Semitism, made it appealing to those who did aspire to neo-fascist pursuits, as did the confrontational style of its public demonstrations.¹⁵⁵ Those hoping that the LEL would transform itself into a mass party were inevitably disappointed, however, by Chesterton’s reluctance to wager the group’s reputation and scarce resources on what he dubbed an ‘electoral orgy’.¹⁵⁶

More so than the LEL itself, Candour invited accusations of fascism and even Nazism by virtue of its blatant expressions of anti-Semitism and racial prejudice. Chesterton’s favourable discussion of the authoritarian regimes in Spain and Portugal gave credence to the notion that he harboured an abstract sympathy for dictatorship, but he made no attempt to advocate such a system in Britain. He likewise made no attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of the European fascists since 1939, though he continued to insist that they, along with movements in Britain, had been part of a general ‘revolt’ against international finance and class warfare in the 1930s:

Whether or not these were good ideas it would now be profitless to argue. The regimes which espoused them, turning criminally insane in their final amok-run, left as their memorials the foulness of Ravensbruck, the gas-ovens, and the vile doing to death of gallant British airmen… nobody recoiled with

¹⁵⁵ Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, pp. 219-220.
more horror from such outrages than those of us who had been advocates of the Corporate state, nobody gained a clearer perception than we did of the danger of vesting unbridled power in any one man or set of men.\textsuperscript{157}

\textit{Candour} largely refrained from the crude forms of Nazi-apologia and ‘nostalgic fascism’ that would become hallmarks of neo-fascist literature. On some occasions, however, Chesterton’s conspiratorial analysis blurred into fascist revisionism, which in turn drew him into contact with the wider circles of the extreme right in Western Europe. Chesterton showed no interest in the pan-European ideals put forward by Mosley, but he retained an interest in Germany and political affairs throughout the continent. This interest was encouraged by his relationship with Otto Strasser, the leader of the left-wing ‘Strasserite’ faction within the Nazi party who had fled Germany following Hitler’s rise to power. Shortly after Strasser was granted permission to return to Germany in April 1955, he met with Chesterton in Dublin. The following year, a series of interviews with Strasser appeared in \textit{Candour}, allowing the ‘much persecuted German patriot’ to expound upon his plans for ‘Solidarism’, a new movement ‘equally opposed to Communism and Capitalism’.\textsuperscript{158} Strasser favourably compared his plans to another incipient ‘National Renaissance’ movement in the European extreme right, the French Poujadists, whose nationalist, anti-taxation campaigns drew noteworthy support from rural areas and small shopkeepers.\textsuperscript{159} Pierre Poujade’s movement in turn attracted support from

\textsuperscript{157} ‘Laying the Fascist Ghost’.
\textsuperscript{158} ‘Policy of a Patriot’, \textit{Candour}, 30 March and 6 April 1956.
Candour as emblematic of a populist uprising against corrupt government and Jewish high-finance.  

Chesterton and Strasser held much in common ideologically, sharing a vision of an alternative ‘social order’ to capitalism and communism that drew inspiration from medieval guild systems. In addition, Strasser echoed Chesterton’s frequent denunciations of the United States’ expanding influence in Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This common ground never resulted in any kind of real cooperation or alliance between Chesterton and Strasser, however, with Candour and the LEL’s focus remaining primarily on the Empire and Commonwealth. By contrast, Mosley made an effort after 1947 to ally himself with European neo-fascist organizations: his journal The European served to promote his concept for ‘pan European nationalism’ but remained open to contributions from those, like Strasser, who opposed further European integration. Chesterton’s inflexible concept of nationalism made it difficult for him to move forward from the ideals of the interwar period, and brought him ridicule from Mosley’s followers: ‘He continues to repeat like a parrot the views he learned from Mosley in pre-war days, refusing to face the changed circumstances of the post-war world’.

There is no doubt that Chesterton’s views were slow to change, where they changed at all, on matters of international politics and British national identity. Yet his conception of nationalism and the issue of European integration proved to be among the most prescient and enduring aspects of his political thinking after 1945.

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161 ‘The Role of Europe’, Candour, 8 January 1954.
162 For an overview of Mosley’s relationship with the post-war ‘fascist international’, see Macklin, Very Deeply Died in Black, pp. 97-114.
163 ‘A.K. Chesterton Becomes a Crusader?’, Union, 1 December 1951.
While the war was still in progress, Chesterton noted with alarm the ‘Fashionable Fifth Column’ in Britain that favoured the nation’s entry into a union with Europe. Even proposals that deigned to increase Britain’s sphere of influence, such as Jan Smuts’ proposal that the Empire be integrated with Western Europe, he viewed with suspicion: ‘though absurd, that dream is dangerous. The bait is admirably designed to tickle the British ego, but the hook is no other thing than Federal Union’. While the most pressing concern for Chesterton was the prospect of a union involving Britain, he retained a general hostility towards the idea of a federated Europe, like that proposed between West Germany and France: ‘Friendships can promote common institutions’, he argued, ‘but those institutions cannot promote friendships. If there is to be Franco-German accord upon which the European future depends, it will not be because European federation has paved the way’.

By 1956, renewed proposals for Britain’s entry into a European Common Market led Chesterton to denounce the plans as a form of communist takeover that would allow meddling in its members’ political and administrative affairs. Much as the Suez crisis had appeared as a real world manifestation of Chesterton’s conspiracy theories, so the Common Market served as evidence of the ‘Money Power’ at work: the European Commission would act as a conduit for the financial domination of sovereign nations, whose political direction could be influenced by the control of labour allocation and trade restrictions. The end goal of this ‘evil design’, Chesterton concluded, would be the merger of the Common Market with the Soviet Union and the formation of a world government, thus marking the ultimate abrogation of

165 ‘Notes of the Month’, The People’s Post, December 1952.
The urgency of the Common Market issue grew following the rise of Harold Macmillan as Prime Minister in 1957, with his government applying for membership of the community in 1961. In July 1962, the LEL distributed a pamphlet attacking Macmillan’s ‘treasonous’ attempts to enter the EEC, thus exposing Britain and her dominions to a gradual erosion of independence. Reiterating his earlier attacks on the politically hegemonic aspirations of the European Commission, Chesterton emphasized that Britain’s entry into the market would be an irreversible loss of independence:

The intention, and let there be no doubt about this, is not merely to destroy British (and French and German and Italian) nationhood through the abrogation of national sovereignty, but also to effect so drastic a change in the pattern of world trade that, were a future British Government resolved to opt out of the [EEC], it would be unable to do so.167

Despite its conspiratorial underpinnings, Chesterton’s attack on the EEC predicted many of the arguments used by contemporary movements calling for Britain’s exit from Europe.168 Ironically, given the Wall Street menace behind Chesterton’s conspiracy theories, it was suspicion of the United States’ drive for power that kept Britain out of Europe for a decade after Macmillan’s initial campaign. Fearing that Britain would serve as a conduit for American interests, French leader Charles De Gaulle placed a restriction on new applicants to the community in January 1963.169 The reprieve failed to deter Chesterton, who declared

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166 ‘Common Market is Communism’, Candour, 19 October 1956.
168 For a brief overview of extreme right parties and the issue of European integration, see Hainsworth, The Extreme Right in Western Europe, pp. 83-85.
De Gaulle’s obstruction to be another facet of the elaborate conspiracy at hand: ‘The grand strategy is to leave Britain bare and cringing, sufficiently softened-up for absorption in the European Economic Community without reservations of any kind’.\textsuperscript{170} De Gaulle’s purpose (either as a deliberate conspirator or merely a puppet) was to delay Britain’s entry until the last vestiges of the Empire had been destroyed. Had he been willing to embark on a more populist campaign against the Common Market, or entered into an alliance with the more conservative opponents of European integration, Chesterton might have leveraged the issue into a common cause with nationalists both within Britain and Europe. Ultimately, however, his campaigns against the Common Market remained embedded in a wider form of conspiratorial anti-Semitism that appealed only to a narrower sphere within Britain’s extreme right.

The most hopeful signs of international support for the LEL appeared outside the European sphere altogether, as Chesterton appealed to the white-minority populations of former British colonies in South Africa, Kenya and Southern Rhodesia. In June 1958, Chesterton embarked on a tour through Africa which yielded a number of new Loyalist branches throughout Southern Rhodesia, the Central African Federation and Kenya, which Chesterton described triumphantly as the ‘Land of Loyalists’.\textsuperscript{171} In the years following his affliction with bronchitis in October 1957, Chesterton would embark on further overseas tours in England’s winter months to avoid the effects of cold weather. The majority of these tours took place in Africa, in proximity to Chesterton’s winter residence in Cape Town, but on

\textsuperscript{171} ‘Land of Loyalists’, \textit{Candour}, 26 September 1957.
occasion he ventured further afield. From February through April 1960 he embarked on a speaking tour of the southern hemisphere, visiting supporters in Australia and members of the LEL’s New Zealand branch in Auckland.172

In the words of Rosine De Bounevialle, who took over the editorship of *Candour* following Chesterton’s death in 1973, the Candour-League movement benefited from a ‘wide but deep’ support base: a broadly distributed group of followers whose dedication to the cause was strong enough to bolster the movement despite an absence of wider popular support.173 The settler-colonial populations of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia were directly confronted by the upheavals of decolonization and racial integration. Chesterton was optimistic that, therefore, white populations in Britain’s former colonies would be more receptive to the LEL’s mission than domestic Britons. This proved true on some occasions, such as Chesterton’s tour of Kenya in 1957, which resulted in eight new branches being established. These advances amounted to little long term progress, however, as did the LEL’s campaigns in South Africa, where Chesterton’s anachronistic vision of a revitalized British empire met with apathy similar to that he encountered in England.174 A tentative figure offered by Chesterton in July 1957 put the overall strength of the LEL at between 8000 and 10,000 individuals spread throughout the Commonwealth, though this figure was likely inflated by the inclusion of supporters alongside active members.175

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172 ‘Mr. A.K. Chesterton Home’, *Candour*, 1 April 1960.
173 Chesterton Collection A. 16, Baker interview with De Bounevialle.
175 For a discussion of Chesterton’s influence on South Africa outside the activities of the LEL, see Macklin, ‘The British Far Right’s South African Connection’, pp. 823-842.
For most of its existence, but particularly during the 1960s, the LEL was beset by the problem of political space. Though the group’s reactionary and anti-communist traits made it potentially attractive to disaffected conservatives, particularly following the Conservative Party’s progressive turn under Harold Macmillan, Chesterton’s ongoing ideological attachment to anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism and esoteric conspiracies ran contrary to this purpose.\textsuperscript{176} Even those conservatives who were driven rightward by decolonization after 1960 sought more respectable confines, such as the Monday Club – a self-professed ‘radical right’ group within the Tory party that was established following Macmillan’s ‘Winds of Change’ speech in February 1960.\textsuperscript{177} The most severe setback for the LEL came in April 1961 with the death of its patron, Robert Key Jeffery, who succumbed to intestinal illness at the age of 91. Having relied on Jeffery for the vast majority of their funding prior to this point, \textit{Candour} and the LEL stood to benefit greatly from his passing, with Chesterton named as the primary inheritor of his patron’s will.\textsuperscript{178} Shortly prior to Jeffery’s death, however, a new will was produced naming a female relative as the recipient of the funds. Adding to the air of suspicion surrounding this turn of events, the new will was marked only with a finger print in lieu of Jeffery’s signature.\textsuperscript{179} Chesterton and his supporters’ immediately began an investigation


\textsuperscript{178} A copy of the original will naming Chesterton as the recipient of Jeffery’s estate resides in the archive of materials held at Bath University. See: Chesterton Collection E. 6, Will of R.K. Jeffery, 2 pp. typescript ca. 1959.

\textsuperscript{179} ‘Will Lawsuit Hits Empire Group’, \textit{The Times}, March 30 1962.
aimed at contesting the new will’s authenticity, marking the start of a protracted, 
expensive and ultimately futile legal battle that lasted for more than a decade.\(^{180}\)

With no other sources of funding beyond individual donations and 
subscriptions, *Candour* was forced to cease regular publication until it was able to 
secure enough donations to resume monthly publication in 1966.\(^{181}\) While the LEL 
was able to continue its public stunts and demonstrations, the fight over Jeffery’s 
will consumed money and time that might otherwise have helped the movement’s 
flagging domestic membership. Appeals for funding became a recurring aspect of the 
‘interim reports’ issued by *Candour* in lieu of a regular publishing schedule, while 
Chesterton was forced to meet many of the LEL’s expenses from his personal 
finances. A report from Brooks (the group’s acting treasurer) in November 1963 
complained that wealthy supporters of *Candour* and the LEL were more readily 
forthcoming with advice than financial support.\(^{182}\) In the absence of a large 
distribution or some other form of patronage, both ventures were forced to rely on 
the generosity of a shrinking support base whose idealism outstripped its means: 
‘There is hope’, Brooks wrote in conclusion to his report, ‘but if it is to be fulfilled 
we must all be prepared to back our hope with our cash’.\(^{183}\)

**The National Front, 1967-1973.**

\(^{183}\) ‘Sense of Priorities’. 
In February 1960, John Bean’s National Labour Party merged with Colin Jordan’s White Defence League to form the British National Party (BNP), under the slogan ‘For Race and Nation’.\(^{184}\) The merger was mutually beneficial, insofar as neither party had experienced any major growth and faced competition from the more established Union Movement. Problems quickly arose, however, from the diverging political visions of the party leadership: Bean was a committed white nationalist but felt that the only chance of such principles gaining political ground was through civil politics and the ballot box. By contrast, Colin Jordan and John Tyndall combined a distaste for democratic politics with a penchant for uniformed demonstrations and violence.\(^{185}\) Bean later claimed to have tolerated these tendencies on the grounds that a certain amount of ‘controlled muscle’ was necessary to fend off attacks from ‘Reds’ who threatened the party’s public demonstrations.\(^{186}\) By 1961, however, Tyndall and Jordan’s militant aspirations had coalesced into a full-blown attempt at paramilitarism. The two men formed an internal faction known as the ‘Spearhead’ -- conceived as a physical means of defending the British National Party’s platform in a similar manner to Mosley’s Defence Force. During the same period, Jordan made contact with an array of right wing groups in Europe and the United States, including Neo-Nazi and neo-fascist groups, hoping to form a coalition of like-minded parties. In May 1961, a five day ‘Northern European’ camp was held in Norfolk with the BNP hosting delegates that Jordan had contacted in the European and North American extreme right.\(^{187}\) Bean jokingly recalled in his memoir that the attendees

\(^{184}\) Bean, *Many Shades of Black*, p. 141.


\(^{186}\) Bean, *Many Shades of Black*, p. 106.

of this camp broke into two factions: the committed ideologues of ‘Spearhead’ led by Jordan and the ‘Beerhead’, consisting of Bean and other members who attended mainly for relaxation and trips to the local pub.\(^{188}\)

Early in the following year, the activities of the ‘Spearhead’ had become disruptive to the point where Jordan and Tyndall were expelled from the BNP. On 20 April 1962, the anniversary of Adolf Hitler’s birth, the two men formed the ‘National Socialist Movement’ (NSM). The NSM took the opposite approach to other groups in the extreme right by embracing and even flaunting its sympathy to fascism and Nazism. At a public demonstration in July 1962, a handful of NSM supporters made the fascist salute and displayed banners bearing the ‘sun-wheel’ insignia and the slogan ‘Britain Awake’.\(^{189}\) For this display they were mobbed by thousands of anti-fascist demonstrators, a number that dwarfed the membership of the NSM itself, estimated to be only in the hundreds.\(^{190}\) The NSM might readily have fallen into obscurity had it not attracted attention from the authorities. In July 1962, Jordan organized a meeting of National Socialists in Gloucestershire, including the leader of the American Nazi Party Lincoln Rockwell, who had illegally entered the country through Ireland.\(^{191}\) By the end of August 1963, Rockwell had been deported back to the United States and four members of the NSM had been charged with violating the Public Order Act. A series of investigations by the police revealed that

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\(^{188}\) Bean, *Many Shades of Black*, pp. 146-147.

\(^{189}\) These two elements were notable as recurring features of extreme right displays between 1945 and 1967. The sun wheel symbol, represented by a circle with a cross, loosely resembled the BUF’s “flash and circle” or the Nazi swastika but was claimed by Bean to be a pagan icon of Northern European origin that predated fascism. The symbol appeared as at the head of the BNP’s newspaper ‘Combat’. ‘Britain Awake’ was a slogan used in Mosley’s campaigns during the 1930s that later gained usage in Union Movement publications.

\(^{190}\) ‘20 Arrested in Clashes’, *Times*, 2 July 1962.

members of the NSM had engaged in training exercises that involved military style drills in uniform. Evidence produced in the subsequent trial included a collection of Nazi memorabilia, as well as several tins of weed killer stored at NSM headquarters that the prosecution argued could be used as explosives.\textsuperscript{192} All four members of the Spearhead were imprisoned, with Jordan and Tyndall receiving sentences of nine and six months respectively.\textsuperscript{193} Not long after their release from prison, in the spring of 1964, Tyndall broke with Jordan and formed his own party, the Greater Britain Movement.\textsuperscript{194}

Since the early days of the LEL, Chesterton had carefully avoided linking the LEL to political activity that could be construed as subversive or terrorist in nature. In 1955, he claimed that several ‘agent provocateurs’ had approached the organization with the aim of discrediting its cause, or bringing it into association with criminal activity. Among the various activities he linked to ‘enemy agents’, Chesterton described a form of paramilitary activity similar to that which saw Jordan and Tyndall imprisoned: ‘cloak and dagger groups, usually containing no more than half-a-dozen young men, all living in a world of fantasy in which they appear to themselves as great conspiratorial heroes dealing with profound affairs of state’.\textsuperscript{195} Some years later, Chesterton launched an attack on the White Defence League and other neo-Nazi groups after Jordan interrupted an LEL protest by letting off firecrackers.

\textsuperscript{192} ‘National Socialist Leaders For Trial’, \textit{The Times}, 29 August 1962.
\textsuperscript{193} Details of the case against the Spearhead members are preserved in the records of the Central Criminal Court. See: TNA CRIM 1/3973, The Queen against John Colin Cambell Jordan, John Hutchyns Thydall, Dennis Pirie and Ian Kerr-Ritchie, 11 September 1962.
\textsuperscript{194} Tyndall, \textit{The Eleventh Hour}, pp. 190-191.
Up and down the country comes news of the proliferation of groups actuated by the same kind of impulse. From all I hear, most of them are re-living at second-hand a played-out (and by now decidedly malodorous) dream of the ‘thirties. The music is by Wagner. The words, very often, are by kind permission of Horst Wessel… such lightweights, shut in their inane little worlds of wish-fulfillment, are Heaven’s own gift to the enemy.  

Along with his rebuke of Jordan and other ‘thunder-flashers’, Chesterton responded to accusations that the restrained approach to direct action adopted by the LEL – whose members were instructed not to fight back against stewards or police – was evidence of ‘flabbiness’. On the contrary, Chesterton argued, LEL activists were required to show ‘steadfast discipline’ in refraining from violence, whereas more militant activity was likely to attract negative publicity, endanger the public and ultimately harm the cause being fought for. As with the other disputes taking place in Britain’s extreme right at this time, arguments over violence reflected a mix of generational and ideological divisions in the movement. Few of the LEL’s mostly elderly and middle-aged membership was likely to support serious breaches of the law, let alone the kind of open brawling which followed other extreme right demonstrations. More importantly, Chesterton had long abandoned any interest in the fascist principles of paramilitary vanguardism or redemptive political violence.

To a some younger members of the extreme right, physically and socially uninhibited like many members of the LEL, these notions were still valid – even if they had to be concealed or synthesized with more respectable forms of party activism. An interview with John Tyndall in 1978 captured some of the divide between Chesterton and the new generation of radicals. In addition to remarking

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197 ‘Thunder-Flashers at Play’.
upon the LEL’s reticence to engage in traditional party activism, Tyndall expressed
disagreement with Chesterton’s perception of fascism in the 1930s:

[Chesterton] had a theory that the British Union of Fascists started on its
downwards slide as a result of the riot at Olympia. I always thought that
rubbish, with due respect to A.K. – absolute rubbish… from all the accounts
I’ve had from people who were there, the reds got no more than they deserved
and there would’ve been no other way to have dealt with it.\footnote{Chesterton Collection A. 11, Baker interview with Tyndall, 4 April 1978.}

Given this difference in outlook between the LEL and the other factions, the
prospects for a unified front of extreme right parties appeared unlikely in 1964. With
the LEL now struggling to maintain its membership and public profile, however,
there was pressure on Chesterton to seek some form of collaboration. At the LEL’s
‘Council of War’ meeting in June 1964, Austen Brooks acknowledged that ‘the two
questions that cropped up at every meeting were those of the League’s title and of
co-operation with other organizations’. Brooks’ response was pessimistic, noting that
past attempts at collaboration had proved troublesome and that members of the LEL
were unable to agree on which organizations should be contacted.\footnote{‘Austen Brook’s Comments’, \textit{Candour Interim Report}, June/July 1964.} Nevertheless,
Chesterton’s address to the council suggested the vague possibility of their cause
receiving ‘reinforcements’ from British youth:

We may look glumly at the youth of the nation, at any rate at its more
flamboyant elements, but there is nothing there that a haircut, a bath, a boot
on the backside and a parade-ground bashing could not put right… It is a
better breed than that of the Wall-St. dollar-jugglers. Give it a chance and it
will assuredly prevail.\footnote{‘Come Silent, Flooding In The Main’, \textit{Candour Interim Report}, June/July 1964.}
Over the next two years, the impetus for a united front grew even stronger, as Tyndall privately encouraged Bean and Chesterton to overcome their differences. By October 1966, negotiations between the LEL, John Bean’s British National Party and the Racial Preservation Society, a group founded to promote repatriation of non-white migrants, had progressed to the point where an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* suggested that a merger of the three organizations was imminent.  

This report proved to be slightly premature. In a letter to Bean the following month, Chesterton expressed dissatisfaction with Bean’s comments on the LEL’s lack of progress and electoral success. Overall, however, Chesterton’s tone in the letter was conciliatory and he expressed to Bean the potential advantages of a merger between the two organizations:

> You also have what we do not have to any extent, an appeal to the working classes, which seemed to us another good reason for a merger. It is not always easy to achieve a blending of different elements of the community – it was a very real difficulty in the pre-war BUF – but given genuine goodwill in the leadership I am sure it can be done.  

Tyndall, who met successively with Chesterton and Bean in 1966, further encouraged plans for a unified nationalist organization. Due to the notoriety of his recent activity, however, recently exacerbated by a conviction for possession of firearms in 1966, it was agreed that Tyndall would remain out of the National Front for the time being; members of the Greater Britain Movement were meanwhile

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encouraged to join the National Front on an individual basis.\textsuperscript{203} Following further negotiations with Bean and the BNP’s leader Andrew Fountaine, Chesterton put forward plans for a merger at the LEL’s annual general meeting in October 1966. After the LEL membership approved the move, the merger was completed in January 1967 thus marking the formal beginning of the National Front, amalgamated from the membership and leadership of the British National Party, the League of Empire Loyalists and parts of the Racial Preservation Society. Chesterton was appointed Chairman of the National Front’s ‘Policy Directorate’, the committee responsible for overseeing policy and the party’s membership, while Fountaine took on a corresponding role as Chairman of the party’s ‘Executive Directorate’.\textsuperscript{204}

In terms of political potential, the formation of the National Front represented an important milestone for Britain’s extreme right, which had otherwise been unable to sustain a unified party of any significance since the collapse of the BUF. Particularly in relation to Chesterton, who had remained aloof from party politics for much of this intervening period, the new party also heralded a return to mass politics and, by extension, a more concerted attempt to revive or reinvent the cause of British fascism. In spite of the National Front’s importance in the broader history of Britain’s extreme right, Chesterton’s involvement – when viewed in the context of his entire political career – was relatively brief and ignominious. The same signs of personal and ideological fractiousness that had beset earlier movements were evident from the National Front’s inception, with the long and cautious negotiation process

\textsuperscript{203} Bean, \textit{Many Shades of Black}, p184. The Greater Britain Movement was formally dissolved in August 1967, though Tyndall refrained from joining the National Front immediately to avoid internal disputes. See: ‘New Strength for National Front’, \textit{Candour}, August 1967.

\textsuperscript{204} For a general overview of the National Front’s founding, see Martin Walker, \textit{The National Front}, pp. 51-68.
giving an early indication of the tenuous relationship between the LEL and BNP factions. Chesterton assured LEL members that the merger had been carefully negotiated to avoid ‘linking the League with past swastika-daubing and similar activities’, a tacit reference to the neo-Nazi affiliation of Tyndall’s Greater Britain Movement. By the same token, he sought to dispel a view, commonly held among younger members of the BNP, that the LEL was ‘old fashioned’ and ill equipped for party politics.\footnote{“Empire Loyalists Vote for United British Front”, \textit{Candour}, November 1966.}

The most pressing issue, as Chesterton had alluded in his letter to Bean, was whether or not the different factions could be united under some form of effective, mutually respected leadership. Chesterton claimed that the LEL harboured no real interest in the debate over who should lead the new organization: ‘We have found in our talks with other bodies a disposition to manoeuvre for the position of leader, but the matter is not one which greatly interests us’. Given that he later assumed a sole position as Chairman of the National Front, it is questionable whether or not Chesterton was actually aloof from the question of leadership. By the time the National Front was being negotiated, he was accustomed to acting as the head of the LEL and the sole editorial voice in \textit{Candour}.\footnote{Chesterton Collection A. 13, Baker interview with D. Chesterton, 9 May 1978.} This experience, coupled with Chesterton’s idealistic view of individual leadership, meant that he was disinclined to relinquish control over the new movement to younger figures that had yet to prove their ‘capacity to lead’.\footnote{“Empire Loyalists Vote for United British Front”.} It was not necessarily the case that Chesterton aspired to any kind of demagogic role at the head of the National Front: at an advanced age and with increasingly fragile health, he recognized that even serving as the head of the

\footnote{“Empire Loyalists Vote for United British Front”.}
‘Policy Committee’ would prove difficult – not least because of his health-mandated absences from England during the winter months. Despite Chesterton’s efforts to cultivate greater initiative within the LEL’s membership, many naturally assumed that he would assume a preeminent position within the new organization. Other participants in the merger like Tyndall ascertained the value in appointing Chesterton as a ‘father figure’ to unite the different factions. An unspoken advantage of this situation was that, in theory, a more mature, stately figurehead would bolster the party against accusations of neo-Nazism or violent extremism.

Despite its structural weaknesses, the period in which the National Front was formed offered a number of tactical advantages to a party of the extreme right. While the circumstances in Britain did not match those prevalent in the ‘Slump’ of the early 1930s, 1968 heralded greater political uncertainty than had prevailed through the prosperous post-war decades following the end of austerity. Internationally, the strikes and demonstrations held throughout Europe coupled with the emergence of a revitalized New Left movement gave additional impetus to those on the right who feared a new coalition of the extreme left: In France, this fear provided the initial impetus for formation of the group eventually known as the Front National, an approximate ideological counterpart to the British movement of the same name. In 1968, the anti-immigration movement received a significant boost from Conservative

208 Chesterton Collection A. 11, Baker interview with John Tyndall, 4 April 1978.
MP Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, an unprecedented public declaration against the influx of non-whites into Britain made by an otherwise respected member of the political establishment. Though the speech was something of a personal debacle for Powell, who was expelled from the Conservative Party, its foregrounding of the immigration debate was a boon to the recently formed National Front.\(^{211}\)

Along with boosting the party’s profile and membership, the positive reaction to Powell’s comments from parts of the public offered to resolve two of the major problems inhibiting Britain’s extreme right: the lack of an independent political space outside the purview of British conservatism, and the absence of a legitimate identity capable of outgrowing interwar fascism.

The international issues that had preoccupied the LEL were of less immediate value to the National Front, but aligned with its overall stance on racial and national sovereignty. National Front policy (circa 1969) dictated that the party would ‘give unremitting support to British and other European communities overseas in their maintenance of civilization in lands threatened with a reversion to barbarism’.\(^{212}\) To this end, the party protested the boycott of apartheid South Africa and declared its support for Ian Smith’s white-minority government in Rhodesia.\(^{213}\) Rather than carry forward the LEL’s somewhat dated references to the maintenance of the British Empire, the National Front proposed that the Commonwealth be replaced with ‘ a

\(^{212}\) ‘Policy of the National Front’, *Candour*, March 1969.  
modern British world system’ based on a cooperation between the United Kingdom and the white dominions. Alongside Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Rhodesia, South Africa and Eire were offered ‘an honoured place’ in the new system, while association with ‘approved Afro-Asian countries’ would be decided ‘on terms acceptable to its foundation members’. Despite its concessions to recent events, the system proposed was effectively the same as that proposed by Chesterton since 1945: a self-sufficient autarchy based on agricultural, economic and military independence from communism and international finance.

There were additional parallels to be made to Mosley’s original plans for an empire economy, though the presentation of the National Front proposals could be credited in part to Tyndall, whose pamphlet *Six Principles of British Nationalism* described an updated system of British cooperation. Some of the National Front’s proposals bore an unmistakable similarity to Mosley’s corporatism, such as the call for the state to mediate relationships between employees and employers while ‘maintaining the principle of private enterprise within a framework of national guidance’. Other elements of the National Front’s fourteen-point policy statement echoed the spirit, if not the letter, of fascist doctrine in the 1930s. A National Front government would create a movement ‘for the healthy mental and physical development of British youth’, a task which had also preoccupied the vitalist, youth-obsessed Blackshirts. The party’s statements regarding its powers of governance were a mixture of fascist sentiment and hard-line conservatism, calling for

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214 ‘Policy of the National Front’.
215 ‘Policy of the National Front’.
firm and democratic government, responsible for and to the British people, with the courage to cure the Nation of the spiritual sickness that generates more sympathy for the murderer, thug and criminal than for their unfortunate victims, and fails to provide society the backing for protection necessary to maintain the rule of law.  

Taken at face value, the National Front’s policy was mostly in line with the broadly authoritarian or ‘tough on crime’ stance adopted by many extreme right parties in Western Europe in lieu of outright fascism. The wording of the policy bore unmistakable signs of fascist influence, however, with Chesterton’s oblique reference to an organic national body afflicted by some kind of spiritual ailment. If this suggested the covert or unconscious resumption of fascism within Chesterton’s political activism, then other parts of the National Front’s policy seemed to suggest a pivot towards radical conservatism. Point five of the party’s program called for constitutional reforms to combat ‘the disturbing trend towards over-centralization and irresponsible bureaucratic dictatorship’ and ‘reaffirming the basic Rights and Freedoms that are the prerogatives of the British people’. Although this could be viewed simply as pseudo-democratic posturing on the part of the National Front, policies of this kind were not without precedent in the recent history of Britain’s extreme right. Measures for constitutional reform had been proposed by members of the After-Victory group circa 1945, and more recently, Candour provided a regular platform for articles criticizing fiscal irresponsibility and other forms of governmental overreach. In a more immediate sense, following the passage of the Race Relations Act in 1965, the National Front and other political opponents of

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216 ‘Policy of the National Front’.
218 ‘Policy of the National Front’.  

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racial integration had renewed incentive to rally behind the principles of free speech and the right to protest. To aid five members of the Racial Preservation Society, charged with violating the Act, Chesterton established a ‘Free Speech Defence Committee’ which raised some £4000 to cover the cost of the successful defence. This sum was, according to the committee’s honourary treasurer, ‘a small price to pay in order to preserve through the courts our cherished constitutional right to freedom of speech’. 219

During the first year of the National Front’s existence, Chesterton trained much of his attention on the affairs of Britain’s former colonies, a tendency encouraged the six months he spent wintering in South Africa for health reasons. His focus returned to domestic affairs in April 1969, with the resignation of French president Charles De Gaulle, which removed a major obstacle to Britain’s entry into European common market. With the Conservative Party under the direction of the pro-European Edward Heath, Chesterton’s dire prediction of a resurgent drive for European integration came true. Not every member of the National Front shared Chesterton and his LEL cohorts’ determination to avoid European entanglements: John Bean had entertained the idea of a more continental focus in the foundation of the BNP and counselled the readers of Spearhead, John Tyndall’s nationalist magazine, on the potential benefits of closer cooperation with Europe. This was an exception to the party’s general preoccupation with a resurgent British nationalism, which in Tyndall’s view required a greater focus on the United Kingdom and the white nations of the Commonwealth. 220 Following De Gaulle’s resignation,

therefore, Chesterton oversaw the launch of a National Front campaign against the Common Market in May 1969, rallying under the slogan of ‘Keep Britain Out’. Although this campaign was of little immediate consequence for the National Front, opposition to European integration remained a permanent fixture of the party’s platform throughout the 1970s and a wider legacy of Chesterton’s influence on the British extreme right.

The National Front’s dual-directorate system was envisioned as a means to prevent leadership disputes and avoid exacerbating the split between the LEL and BNP factions of the new party. Chesterton’s forced absences made the administration of the party difficult, however, and permitted infighting. Following his return from South Africa in the spring of 1968, Chesterton became embroiled in a factional dispute with the Executive Directorate led by Fountaine, who alleged that Chesterton had been incommunicative while overseeing National Front affairs via ‘remote control’ from overseas. Fountaine and his supporters further alleged that Chesterton had invited extremism into the Front’s ranks by his efforts to make Tyndall a formal member, had demanded excessive displays of ‘loyalty’ from other members, and had failed to properly manage the party’s funds. In May 1968, Chesterton clashed with Fountaine again over a directive written by the latter in response to rioting in Paris – which included instructions for members in the event of a ‘revolution’ spreading to Britain. After preventing the directive from being distributed, Chesterton attempted to consolidate the two directorates of the National Front leadership into a single council, prompting further protests from Fountaine and

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222 Chesterton Collection E. 17, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Andrew Fountaine, 27 May 1968.
others who resented the autocratic nature of their chairman’s leadership. This
dispute came to a head in June 1968 when Fountaine was expelled from the National
Front on grounds of ‘insubordination’. Fountaine was reinstated to the party the
following year, after a high court judge ruled that his expulsion had violated the
National Front’s constitution.

Following the spat with Fountaine, Chesterton resolved to simplify the
National Front’s governance by consolidating the two directorates into a single body
with himself at the head. This temporarily resolved the leadership question but
fostered resentment among the members of the party dissatisfied with the dominance
of Chesterton and the LEL faction. Even Tyndall, a supporter of Chesterton’s
leadership and later the party’s leader, acknowledged in retrospect that his position
on the directorate was ‘in a way autocratic’, driving dissident members of the party
to ‘plot against him behind the scenes’. An even deeper source of dissent against
Chesterton was his unwillingness to capitalize more heavily on the backlash against
immigration yielded by Powell’s speech. Besides his general reticence to engage in a
broader campaign of anti-immigration populism, his attitude towards Powell
precluded any notion of an alliance with the former-MP or his supporters. In the
pages of Candour, Chesterton attacked Powell as a ‘fortunate gentleman’ whose late
arrival to the immigration issue was a sign of political opportunism: ‘Never before
has there been a heretic more prized and petted than this heretic.’ Besides his
bitter recrimination of Powell’s rapid rise to notoriety, Chesterton also expressed

223 Chesterton Collection E. 17, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Andrew Fountaine, 19 June 1968.
225 Chesterton Collection A. 11, Interview with John Tyndall, 4 April 1978.
226 ‘The Quintessence of Powellism’, Candour, May 1969. See also: Ken Phillips, ‘The
concern over the now deposed minister’s other political views. Powell took a
decidedly different view of Empire to loyalists like Chesterton, arguing that the
‘myth’ of a lost golden age had limited rather than enabled England’s ability to
flourish culturally and economically.\textsuperscript{227}

In the General Election of June 1970, the National Front ran 10 candidates but
received disappointing returns, with all candidates failing to retrieve their deposit by
exceeding 5 percent of votes cast. In the wake of these results, another rift emerged
within the party leadership, this time in the form of an ‘Action Committee’ made up
of members who regarded Chesterton as out of touch with contemporary politics.
Although he enjoyed general support from prominent NF members like Tyndall and
Bean, the challenge from the Action Committee served as the catalyst for
Chesterton’s exit from the National Front. Following the distribution of a critical
circular written by the Action Committee, Chesterton resigned from the National
Front along with most of the remaining LEL members. In the December issue of
\textit{Candour}, Chesterton outlined the reasons for his departure:

\begin{quote}
There is some fine material in the National Front but too many people of little
minds and meaner souls have been allowed to rise into the higher echelons.
Get rid of them and the movement has a future. Keep them where they are
and so much time will be spent in petty intrigues that none will be left for
fighting the enemies of Britain.\textsuperscript{228}
\end{quote}

Chesterton quickly made arrangements for a new, non-party entity known as
the Candour League to support his publishing efforts and replace the now defunct

\textsuperscript{227} Enoch Powell, ‘The Decline of Britain’, quoted in Frank O’Gorman, \textit{British
\textsuperscript{228} ‘Farewell to the National Front’, \textit{Candour}, December 1970.
LEL. With recent events having confirmed his antipathy towards traditional political organizing, Chesterton determined that the new organization would ‘keep clear of the political market-place, squalid in-fighting’ and ‘do for the Right what the Fabian Society did for the Left’. In a somewhat belated acknowledgement of the LEL’s anachronistic posture, Chesterton also admitted that the new organization would avoid the ‘Empire’ moniker, which had long since ‘come to mean any big (and dubious) financial, commercial or industrial complex’.229 With Chesterton’s resignation, leadership in the National Front had been assumed by John O’Brien, a former Powellite who intended to draw the party towards a more restrained form of right-wing populism. O’Brien saw the National Front through a period of steady growth in 1971, with a report in The Times predicting that the party was poised to reach 15,000 members across the United Kingdom.230 In 1972, however, O’Brien and a number of other moderate leaders resigned following revelations that Tyndall, then vice-chairman of the party, had been in contact with neo-Nazi groups active on the European continent.231 Tyndall’s subsequent ascent to the party’s leadership roughly coincided with the event that would provide its most promising boost in membership and electoral performance to date: the arrival in Britain of thousands of Asian migrants who had been expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin.232

Despite having been responsible for O’Brien’s entry into the National Front in 1970, Chesterton did not appear concerned by his departure and maintained a

232 Regarding the effects of the ‘Ugandan Asians’ issue upon the National Front, see Taylor, The National Front in English Politics, pp. 24-25.
friendly relationship with Tyndall after he assumed the party leadership. On occasions, Chesterton even lent practical support to Tyndall’s party: when a group of National Front members were arrested for protesting the arrival of Asian refugees from Uganda at Heathrow Airport in October 1972, Chesterton appealed for financial support on their behalf in *Candour.* In 1973, Chesterton was contacted by Tyndall regarding the possibility of his being appointed as the National Front’s President, a figurehead position that would facilitate further cooperation between the party and other nationalist organizations. Despite the opposition of Martin Webster, whom Chesterton had once derided as ‘the fat boy from Peckham’, the National Front’s directorate voted in favour of this measure. Chesterton was formally offered the role by Tyndall in June 1973. Having postponed his decision until the National Front’s next annual general meeting, however, Chesterton was unable to assume the role prior to his death in August 1973. Had his health not decided the matter, Chesterton’s willingness to rejoin the National Front may have been influenced by other matters relating to the party’s increasing links to neo-Nazism. In a brief piece of correspondence with Tyndall in May 1973, Chesterton requested information regarding ‘the participation of some N.F. members in an operation called 88’.

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234 ‘Don’t Demonstrate for Britons!’, *Candour*, October 1972.
clandestine factions that would later be implicated in right-wing terrorist activity and
the neo-fascist subcultures of Western Europe.\textsuperscript{238}

Alongside his ongoing dealings with the National Front, Chesterton spent the
final months of his life in pursuit of a unified effort to protest Britain’s membership
of the European Economic Community. In May 1973, he met with Don Bennett, a
former Vice Marshall for the RAF and one-time Liberal MP who had begun
planning an ‘umbrella organization’ to draw together various political groups
opposed to European integration known as the Free British.\textsuperscript{239} In the following
month, Chesterton raised the possibility of seeking Bennett’s direct financial support
for the costs of operating the Candour League. Bennett had recently donated
generous sums to Powell to support his opposition to the Common Market and
Chesterton appeared optimistic that \textit{Candour}, being ‘the first to smell out the plot to
engulf Britain in the EEC’, would also warrant a contribution.\textsuperscript{240} Chesterton further
confided in a letter to Aidan Mackey, a friend and close supporter of the Candour-
League movement, that his motives for seeking financial support were not solely
political: ‘in the event of funds drying up’, he wrote, ‘I would not be able to winter
in South Africa – which, my doctor says, would give me only a fifty-fifty chance of
survival’.\textsuperscript{241}

As events transpired, Chesterton’s health would deteriorate rapidly due to
cancer a short time after this letter was written. Despite the personal and financial

\textsuperscript{238} On the activity and exposure of terrorist and paramilitary factions in the British extreme
right, see Thurlow, \textit{Fascism in Britain}, p. 262.
\textsuperscript{239} Chesterton Collection E. 28, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Don Bennett, 16 May 1973;
\textsuperscript{240} Chesterton Collection E. 29, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Aidan Mackey, 23 June
\textsuperscript{241} Chesterton Collection E. 29, Letter from A.K. Chesterton to Aidan Mackey, 23 June
troubles that dogged Chesterton’s final months he managed to maintain an active correspondence, both domestic and international, while continuing to oversee the publication of *Candour*. In July 1973 he sent a message to the Free British asking its council to consider ‘special activities likely to focus public attention on the anti-Common Market cause’, like those employed by the LEL ‘without violence but with audacity and tremendous panache’. In a fitting summation of his political career up to that point, Chesterton’s final recommendation to the council before his death called on them ‘to disregard the statement of the gentleman who said that the problem has to be approached without emotion. If ever there was a time for appealing to public sentiment it is surely today, when we are faced with the loss of our national identity and our sovereign rights as an historic people’. By the end of July 1973, Chesterton had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and, facing uncertain results in the event of surgery, opted to ‘let events take their course’. He succumbed to his illness on 16 August 1973, and was honoured the following month by a double-issue of *Candour* bearing tribute from his friends and close supporters.

Since leaving the National Front, Chesterton had also drafted his memoirs and was near the completion of a follow-up to his 1965 book, *The New Unhappy Lords*. Published posthumously under the title *Facing the Abyss*, the volume represented another foray into conspiratorial analysis that focused primarily on Britain’s social degeneration. Chesterton’s criticism of the various youth movements

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emerging in Britain, which he took as evidence of its growing spiritual corruption, included a passing reference to ‘skinheads’. This encapsulated the extent to which he had grown detached from the youthful undercurrents of Britain’s extreme right, as skinhead culture would become synonymous with the movement during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{245} In private correspondence shortly before his death, Chesterton had confessed to a friend that his optimism regarding a British revival had begun to wane in light of its entry into the European common market: ‘eventually it must break-down, but what will then be left to us, with our former Dominions pushed into the dollar empire and no longer interested in the British market’.\textsuperscript{246} Between the continued decline of Britain’s international prominence and the fractious ineffectiveness of Britain’s nationalist movement, there was ample reason for Chesterton to opt for a quiet retirement rather than the continued struggle against a malevolent global conspiracy. It appeared, however, that the thought of abandoning the struggle he had traced from the trenches of the First World War was more of a deterrent to Chesterton than accepting the mundane realities of British decline. To do so would have been to acknowledge defeat, an unacceptable outcome for denizens of the British race: ‘Victory is for the brave in heart and the tough in spirit. In these respects we have not the pretext that our fathers left us ill-endowed’.\textsuperscript{247}

\textsuperscript{245} Chesterton, \textit{Facing the Abyss} (Liss Forest: A.K. Chesterton Trust, 1976), p. 51.
\textsuperscript{247} Chesterton, \textit{Facing the Abyss} (Liss Forest: A.K. Chesterton Trust, 1976), p. 118.
Chapter 4: A.K. Chesterton, anti-Semitism and racial nationalism.

A.K. Chesterton was born into a world where racial identity and hierarchy were a part of everyday life. His upbringing in colonial South Africa imparted a concept of nationalism tied to the assumption that white Britons had established themselves, alongside the other European empire builders, as the progenitors of civilization. His understanding of British nationalism was thus defined as much by race and culture as it was by geography, with the colonies representing an extension of white civilization into the ‘dark corners’ of the world. The cultural and technological achievements of Empire served as evidence of British superiority as well as a mandate for white supremacy: the right to maintain a benevolent dominance over ‘lesser’ races of the colonial world. Alongside the intrinsic racial doctrines of British imperialism, the late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw the emergence of scientific racism: a doctrine that viewed race in terms of biological divergence in the human species and made specific judgements as to the consequences of race-mixing. These understandings of race played an integral part in shaping Chesterton’s activism after 1945, as he positioned himself against two correlated trends in world politics: the collapse of colonial race relations in the wake of Britain’s imperial decline and the transformation of domestic racial politics as a result of increasing non-white immigration to Britain.

Although themes of race and immigration are now ubiquitous in their relationship to the extreme right, it is the second theme of this chapter, anti-Semitism, which receives the greatest attention. In part, this can be accounted for by
the general prominence of anti-Semitism as a theme within the history and historiography of interwar British fascism.¹ More specifically, however, it is necessitated by the persistence and ubiquity of anti-Semitism throughout Chesterton’s entire political career, spanning his time with the BUF until his death in 1973. Even after this point, conspiratorial anti-Semitism represented a major part of Chesterton’s legacy in the extreme right. At various points during his career, Chesterton would describe Jewish internationalism as the greatest threat to British interests and an ideological antithesis to his positive concept of national sovereignty and transcendent patriotism. Few parts of his political ideology can be understood without some reference to the history of British anti-Semitism, the rise of political anti-Semitism in the 1930s and the origins of the ‘world Jewish conspiracy’. These subjects contextualize Chesterton’s own ideas within the long history of religious, political and racial anti-Semitism in Britain and Europe.

The final portion of this chapter examines the nature of Chesterton’s views on race relations and immigration after 1945 beneath the overarching concept of an international Jewish conspiracy. In the wider history of the extreme right in Britain, Europe and the United States after 1945, racism and the politics of immigration have been broadly depicted as taking over the role that anti-Semitism served in interwar fascist movements.² As Chesterton and his influence on the League of Empire Loyalists and the National Front demonstrate, however, anti-Semitism (particularly

in its conspiratorial guise) persisted into the decades after the Second World War when these issues began moving to the fore of nationalist and neo-fascist politics. The purpose of this discussion, therefore, is to examine how Chesterton sought to integrate his wider concept of racial nationalism within the framework of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and how this reflected the wider transition between British interwar fascism and the populist, anti-immigration parties of Britain’s contemporary extreme right.

Colonialism, paternalism and biological racism

The colonial settlements of South Africa and Rhodesia where Chesterton spent his early childhood were organized along strict racial lines. Wage and employment disputes were a common source of racial tension on the Rand, with white miners threatened by the influx of cheaper labour in the form of indigenous Africans or imported Chinese workers. To alleviate conflicts, the mine owners turned to measures that either segregated black workers entirely from their European counterparts or implemented an industrial colour bar which restricted them to unskilled labour.3 Under this system, white workers like Chesterton’s father and step-father held supervisory roles overseeing administrative duties and maintaining machinery, while African workers were confined to the manual tasks of extracting and hauling ore. The colour bar was such a prominent feature of Chesterton’s upbringing that, when he first arrived in England aged 11, he was taken aback by the

‘strange sight of white men working with picks and shovels and doing a multiplicity of other jobs with which I had never learned to associate them’. 4

When he returned to the Witwatersrand as an adult after the First World War, Chesterton found himself in a supervisory role, similar to that once occupied by his father, overseeing a group of black manual labourers. The stereotypes that had been implanted from his childhood clearly informed his thinking as an adult: African workers were ‘slack’ in keeping track of administrative duties, and Chesterton insisted that ‘only I was able to keep them up to scratch’. 5 When the Rand Revolt began in 1922, he shared the white miners’ concern that loosening the colour bar would be a risk to their safety: ‘As these [roles] included responsibility for operating some of the safety devices… as I have never been impressed by the Africans’ sense of responsibility and continuity of purpose, I had at first a certain sympathy with the White miners’. 6 Later in life while protesting against decolonization, Chesterton warned that the push to remove colour bars was solely designed to secure cheaper labour at the expense of whites: ‘no firm would dream of employing an African if a European were available for the job at the same wage or salary. What has the European that the African lacks? Superior skill, reliability, continuity’. 7

In his recollections of early childhood, Chesterton described the ease with which he bypassed the race and class divisions of his surroundings, making contact with those his socially conservative mother considered ‘common’. He described fond friendships with the ‘house boy’ who worked as the family’s domestic servant and

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4 BNML, Ch. III, p. 4.
5 BNML, Ch. VI, p. 1.
6 BNML, Ch. VII, p. 2.
the Zulu policeman working on the Rand. Even the friendly interracial dealings of colonial South Africa were governed by a racial hierarchy, however, which manifested in the basic features of day to day life. House servants were a ubiquitous presence in Chesterton’s childhood home where, in his wife’s recollection, ‘coloured labour was cheap’. African servants would also form part of his domestic arrangements while wintering in South Africa until the time of his death, an enduring reminder of how his colonial outlook on race persisted from childhood. In adulthood, Chesterton’s admiration for the culture and indigenous people of Africa persisted incongruously alongside these assumptions of racial superiority and inferiority. While undergoing preparation for the Abyssinian campaign as an officer in the Second World War, he encountered a Signals Colonel whose advice regarding the ‘proper treatment of Africans’ drove him to protest:

I admitted the irresponsibility of many Africans, and the difficulty of coping with many of their traits. But I also tried to express my horror at the perilous and pernicious doctrine which had just been preached – a doctrine all the more pernicious in that it was calculated to prejudice a host of young and inexperienced officers against men upon whose loyalty their own lives would depend, and upon whose faithful shoulders rested the main burden of the defence of British Africa.

. Despite his deeply paternalistic attitude towards non-whites, Chesterton was unabashed in praising the loyalty and service of the colonial forces who aided ejecting the Italian army from British East Africa: ‘those troops who rallied to the

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8 BNML, Ch. II, p. 13.
cause from beyond the frontiers of the Union’.  

He would also adapt his experience of commanding colonial soldiers into a humorous novel, *Juma the Great*, one of his only non-political works published after 1945. Based around the experiences of the titular character of Juma, a Baganda tribal leader turned Motor Transport soldier under the command of an exasperated white officer, the tone of this book was succinctly summarized by Chesterton’s wife as ‘affectionate, but somewhat paternalistic.’ Most of the intended humour in the book derived from Chesterton’s juxtaposition of Juma’s unsuccessful attempts to reconcile his emotional, tribalistic behaviour with the expectations of white military decorum and order. Even within its comedic context, this depiction reflected how Chesterton viewed racial types as having certain innate characteristics that were appropriate to their natural setting. Any attempt to circumvent or alter these natural characteristics was therefore likely to feed, rather than diminish, racial resentment:

> In his own sphere, while still unspoiled, the African is soft-spoken and acts with superb dignity. Most regrettably, when brought into contact with Western ideas… he turns himself into an ersatz European, and as the result is often ridiculous, the European is confirmed in the idea of his own intrinsic superiority.

The political ramifications of Chesterton’s racial paternalism were most evident in his response to decolonization, as he rejected outright the possibility of a society not under white control. Commenting on South Africa in 1957, he warned that ‘The Africans, bereft of good, strong, resolute leadership, will soon lapse into

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barbarism’. He also took great pains to publicize incidents that confirmed his ‘barbaric’ stereotype of colonial independence movements. He developed a gruesome fixation on the Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya, describing it as ‘the most diabolical rebellion of our times’, whose participants ‘were conditioned to engineer or participate in infamies fouler than this century before had ever known’. A supplement issued with Candour in July 1960 gave lascivious details of violent, sexually depraved ‘oath taking’ conducted by Kikuyu tribespeople prior to engaging in violent rebellion. The intent of publishing these oaths was, according to Chesterton’s introduction, a warning to white Britons of ‘the kind of mentality to which their kith and kin in those territories may be sacrificed’. Chesterton was also derisive of the post-colonial states that emerged after British or European administrators withdrew, variously accusing the new leaders of being incompetent, corrupt or otherwise incapable of maintaining stable government. These attacks often rested on the assumption that the independent leaders (not unlike ‘Juma the Great’) were engaged in a futile attempt to mimic white political and social norms; ‘pseudo sophisticates and barbarians who have proved themselves able to emulate the White man only in political trickery’. It was far more considerate, in Chesterton’s view, to maintain the ‘merciful restraints’ of paternal white-rule than permit the ‘so-called independence’ of the colonies, a situation that implied either anarchy or domination by international finance.

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15 A.K. Chesterton, pp. 89-90.
As with the other dimensions of Chesterton’s racial views, this can partly be traced to his having been born into a world where segregation by race was an accepted and legally enforced norm. Far from the racial homogeneity that defined most parts of English society in the early 20th century, Chesterton’s early life in South Africa exposed him to dramatic displays of interracial conflict. In 1903, mine owners on the Rand imported thousands of Chinese ‘coolie’ labourers to supplant Bantu African and white European workers, leading to outbreaks of disorder and violence:

Sunday after Sunday the veld beyond our house was the scene of pitched battles between hundreds of Africans and Chinese, with the mounted police again intervening to disperse the Chinese mobs. It has been my experience in many parts of Africa that in any tense three-cornered racial situation involving Europeans, Africans and Asians, there has been an affinity between Europeans and Africans and a shared hostility towards Asians.  

Chesterton offered no exact explanation for this dynamic but concluded that ‘the reason why must be sought, if not in psychology, then in chemistry’, the implication in either case being that conflict would inevitably arise from the intermingling of different races. The only mechanism capable of preventing racial friction in Chesterton’s view was the enforcement of social, political and industrial segregation by law, which he defended vigorously in South Africa, Rhodesia and the United States during the latter half of his political career. In Britain, these same notions of intrinsic racial incompatibility informed Chesterton’s campaign against immigration and the domestic politics of race relations. Up to a point, the racialist worldview that informed Chesterton’s politics could be attributed to the self-

19 BNML, Ch. II, pp. 17-18.
justifying assumptions of British imperialism that, as Hannah Arendt put it, ‘necessitated the invention of racism as the only possible “explanation” and excuse for its deeds’.  

Particularly after 1945, Chesterton’s political campaigns against desegregation and decolonization became reliant on appeals to pseudo-biological theories of race-mixing and miscegenation, topics which also became prominent in his calls for restricted immigration in Britain. While it is not possible to trace the scientific or biological dimensions of Chesterton’s racism to a single source of inspiration, the idea of race as a deterministic human trait discernible in terms of biology and genetics had risen to prominence before and during his adult life. The first serious attempts to resolve the definition of race came prior to the emergence of Darwinian theory and were thus lacking in the serious scientific auspices of racial theory in the 20th century. French aristocrat Arthur Gobineau’s *The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of Races*, published in English in 1856, posited that the downfall of civilizations could be attributed to the gradual, deleterious effects of racial impurity through interbreeding. Gobineau’s ideas were adapted by a series of French and German scholars, such as the British-born Houston Stewart-Chamberlain, who elaborated on his concept of a superior Aryan race that had cultivated ‘Teutonic’ civilization.

The impact of these ideas in Britain and the Empire was fairly limited, with many liberal sociologists raising objections to the arbitrary, German-centric views...
proposed by Chamberlain. Other forms of biological racism emerged from within Britain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, with the task of administering colonial populations serving as an impetus for more refined, paternalistic methods of conceptualizing race. Social Darwinism, the transference of Charles Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s evolutionary biological theories to sociology and politics, was developed by Herbert Spencer in the 1870s. Leading up to the interwar decades, an increased focus on the transference of human traits through breeding also prompted anthropologists and geneticists to develop theories relating to race mixing, alongside the more philosophically orientated eugenics movements that were concerned with improving the ‘human stock’. The influence of eugenics on the British Empire was relatively minor compared to the movements established in Europe and the United States, yet schools of scientific thought within Britain were slow to adapt their understanding to the political implications of heavily deterministic theories of physical anthropology and race-mixing. By the time scientific racism began to recede from the popular and academic spheres after 1933, therefore, it had already been incorporated within the racial ideologies of British and European fascism.

Biological racism was less prominent in the BUF’s platform than in the distinctly ‘racial fascism’ promoted by Arnold Leese’s Imperial Fascist League. Official BUF policy suggested that a fascist government under Mosley

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24 Mosse, Towards the Final Solution, pp. 72-75.
would not seek to emulate Nazi Germany by formally restricting intermarriage. This did not amount to a rejection of racial theory altogether, however, as Mosley claimed that a unique ‘British genius’ had allowed the Empire to prevent ‘pollution’ despite the many different groups living within its auspices. He also suggested a willingness to enforce ‘racial purity’ through state measures if the need arose:

It should not be necessary to secure British racial purity by act of law. It should only be necessary by education and propaganda to teach the British what racial mixtures are bad… but if legislation was ever necessary to preserve the race, Fascism would not hesitate to introduce it.26

While he did not display any real investment in developing the technical or scientific policies of the BUF in his own right, Chesterton did demonstrate the ability to adapt these ideas in support of his political assumptions. In economics for example, he became an energetic proponent of Mosley’s vision of scientifically attuned economic corporatism, which suited his notion of an independent, self-sufficient Empire that stood apart from internationalist influence. Likewise, while he made no attempt to develop any complex theory of heritable characteristics on his own, Chesterton’s defences of segregation and discrimination after 1945 drew support and inspiration from the work of academic and amateur theorists of race. After 1939, the legitimacy of scientifically racialist ideas declined within both academic and political spheres, as it became linked to inhumane social policies and the persecution of Jews in Germany. Far from deterring Chesterton’s interest, however, the shift in social and political norms regarding race during and after the

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Second World War served only to further his reliance on anthropological and biological theories as a means of legitimizing ideas that were now under heavy scrutiny. As part of a ‘recommended reading’ list accompanying his own New Unhappy Lords, Chesterton recommended a book by Wesley Critz George, an American professor of physical anthropology whose work endeavoured to demonstrate differences in intellectual and physical capacity between racial groups. Though George’s political involvement was primarily associated with anti-segregation campaigns in the American South, his work also considered the racial dynamics of Rhodesia and South Africa, both of which featured prominently in the campaigns of the LEL.  

Chesterton did not strictly ‘eschew all theory’ in his approach to race, as Richard Thurlow suggested, but the references to theories of heredity and biology provided in his work showed a distinctly weak grasp of scientific or sociological principles.  

Even with the supposedly rigorous backing of modern physical anthropology and genetics, the critiques of racial integration and intermarriage appearing in Chesterton’s explanation of the dangers of race-mixing relied on simplistic tropes that echoed imperialist dogma and anti-miscegenation from the 1920s: ‘the mixing of White and Black or Coloured people results in hordes of unhappy half-castes who feel that they belong nowhere, whose tendency is to embrace the vices of both racial stocks and not to strive after the virtues’.  

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29 Chesterton, The New Unhappy Lords, p. 159.
sheer superstition regarding the incompatibility of different racial groups. In a September 1957 edition of *Candour*, he reported on ‘coloured’ members of the American Navy donating blood to a hospital in Auckland: ‘Mixed blood is a phrase which came into use long before blood transfusion began, and transfusion itself does not make the fact of mixing blood of different race groups any the more acceptable’.\(^{30}\) On the whole, Chesterton’s approach to the science of race could best be described as opportunistic: biology, genetics and anthropology were convenient sources of authority and support for views which were not scientifically or empirically sound.

It is difficult to categorize Chesterton neatly as either a cultural or biological racist, since his definition of ‘race’ itself was often inconsistent. The most common example of this inconsistency was his frequent conflation of race and ethnicity, a tendency that the American psychologist Gordon Allport described as ‘confusing what is given by nature and what is acquired through learning’, resulting in ‘an exaggerated belief in the fixity of human characteristics’.\(^{31}\) Chesterton used the term race when referring to different Anglo-Saxon and European ethnicities and ascribed certain fixed characteristics to the English or British ‘race’. As a nationalist, and even more so as a British fascist, he was often inclined to invoke heroic archetypes of the English people, embodied by individuals of particular artistic genius or bravery from Elizabethan legend. Not all of his considerations of the English

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character relied upon outright displays of individual heroism, however, as he described in an article for the *Johannesburg Star* in 1921:

> When all goes well [the Englishman’s] tranquillity is a stupendous thing and the men of other nations come to regard him as harmless, unobtrusive, self-effacing, a person of little or no individuality… Beware of wronging his lover, for should you do so you will at last discover the real Englishman, purposeful, determined -- the man who has fought and dared over all the world.  

The title and inspiration for this article was drawn from ‘The Secret People’, a poem published by G.K. Chesterton in 1915 that described the English character as a combination of humility and modest heroism. For A.K. Chesterton, this character played an important part in their style of benevolent colonial rule that in his mind defined the British Empire. In Ireland, for example, he argued that the Englishman fought not from a desire to ‘rule with the assurance of a despot’ but because ‘he was as proud of Ireland as he was of England; it was because he loved Ireland that he did not want to lose her’. However, the English tendency to shy away from overt demonstrations of pride or patriotism was not always a benefit to their reputation, as Chesterton noted the importance of these displays in other nations: ‘the German has his Kultur and his goose step, and the Portuguese his bull fights and his brave medals, and his other symbols of military make-believe’. The original verse of G.K. Chesterton’s poem emphasized the paradox between the heroic and passive qualities of the English people, who had triumphed over their enemies on the

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32 BL Add. MS 73480 B, fo. 17, ‘A people who have not spoken’, *Johannesburg Star*, nd. ca. 1921.
33 ‘A people who have not spoken’.
battlefield only to be handed over to a different kind of tyranny managed by an implicitly alien bureaucracy:

They have given us into the hand of new unhappy lords,  
Lords without anger and honour, who dare not carry their swords.  
They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes;  
They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.\(^{34}\)

The words and meaning of this poem stuck with Chesterton throughout his political career: its opening lines appeared in the preamble to a *Blackshirt* article in 1935, and another passage yielded the title for his conspiratorial manifesto, *The New Unhappy Lords*, some thirty years later.\(^{35}\) By the time A.K. Chesterton had joined the British Union of Fascists, he had become convinced that British survival depended on his people’s ability to overcome their natural tendency towards passivity and tolerance as described in ‘The Silent People’:

It is argued that the defects which make Britons mighty poor revolutionaries represent sterling qualities in the national character… The peril of our peoples lies in this very toleration in which they are taught to take so large a pride. That we are a temperate people is not to our discredit, except that everywhere our mildness is exploited.\(^{36}\)

After leaving the BUF in 1938, Chesterton continued to muse on the peculiarities of ‘Englishness’ and how this distinguished his people’s behaviour even from other Europeans. In his memoir of the Abyssinian campaign in the Second World War, for example, Chesterton described his experience aboard a British troopship bound for South Africa and how the behaviour of those on board reflected

\(^{35}\) ‘They have spoken – the silent people!’*, Blackshirt*, 13 December 1935.  
\(^{36}\) Chesterton, *Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary*, pp. 3–4.
the English character. Whereas the soldiers in his company were content to pass the voyage with minimal activity, Chesterton speculated that, aboard a German vessel, ‘every hour of the day would have been planned to increase our military efficiency’.  

Whether or not his assumption was correct about the Germans, Chesterton regarded nationality as determining the strengths and weaknesses of a given people. After the First World War war, he observed that as ‘a more reserved race’, the British soldiers had avoided being driven to the emotional and behavioural extremes of their enemy: ‘Very, very rarely did one find a Briton driven hysterical, except with excitement’.  

Some years later, however, he also noted the disadvantages posed by this laconic attitude in a life and death struggle: ‘The English way of life may be much more pleasant than the German, but in the grim modern struggles for survival the comfortable axiom “sufficient unto the day” is certainly no insurance for victory’.  

The distinctions which Chesterton drew between different white ethnicities, such as the English and Germans, were ultimately of less consequence than those he drew on the basis of skin-colour. His general support for imperialism implied that other European cultures had achieved the same right to rule over their colonial subjects, and could be considered equivalent in their racial status to Britons. Chesterton was adamant, however, that the British Isles and the White dominions should maintain a predominantly Anglo-Irish population, to ensure the robustness of the British race as a whole. In September 1957, for example, he cast suspicion on the large intake of ‘cosmopolitan immigrants’ arriving in Australia, the majority of

37 ‘All Aboard for Addis’, p. 18.
38 Chesterton, Adventures in Dramatic Appreciation, p. 19.
which were Southern Europeans rather than the usual Afro-Asian targets of his racial discrimination. For the most part, however, Chesterton was tolerant towards Europeans and discriminatory towards those with a physical appearance that clearly suggested different heritage, arguing in Candour that ‘There could not be a more valid ground for selecting immigrants than that of race. To argue that biological differences which distinguish the main racial groups are as irrelevant as the colour of hair or eyes is, when sincerely stated, silly’.  

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The origins of British anti-Semitism and the ‘Jewish question’.

The historical background to anti-Semitism in Europe and Britain can be traced back to early modernity, although the earliest forms of prejudice against the Jews were often orientated around religion rather than race. Chesterton’s agnosticism was such that he held little genuine interest in the religious component of anti-Semitism, remarking on one occasion that ‘Nobody in his senses dislikes Jews because of what happened at Calvary two thousand years ago’.  

41 While Chesterton’s anti-Semitic outlook was self-consciously secular, the longer tradition of Christian anti-Semitism in Europe and Britain did have some influence upon his thinking. This was due to an overlap between the racial, religious and political traditions of anti-Semitism to which Chesterton owed many of his prejudicial and conspiratorial ideas. Certain aspects of Christian anti-Semitism had a particular resonance among political anti-Semites of Chesterton’s ilk. Old Christian myths concerning sinister Jewish religious

40 ‘Canadian Immigrants’, Candour, 6 September 1957.
41 ‘Why Are People Anti-Jewish’, Candour, 17 April 1959.

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practices, rituals and hidden texts, for example, found easy purchase within Chesterton’s otherwise agnostic vision of a global Jewish conspiracy.\footnote{There are numerous works dealing with the origins and development of anti-Semitism in the Christian tradition. See for example: John G. Gager, \textit{The Origins of Anti-Semitism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Robert S. Wistrich, \textit{Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred} (London: Mandarin, 1992); Rosemary Radford, \textit{Faith and Fratricide} (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).} Racial (or biological) anti-Semitism emerged in the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century parallel to the growth of racist theory in Europe. Despite his subsequent reputation as a the ‘father of racist ideology’, Arthur Gobineau’s work was not anti-Semitic in its own right.\footnote{Mosse, \textit{Towards the Final Solution}, p. 55.} It did provide the groundwork for other influential race-theorists such as Georges de Lapouge, however, who combined Gobineau’s concept of ‘Aryan’ racial purity with the Social Darwinian dictum of ‘survival of the fittest’. From this combination of pseudoscientific theory and racial myth, de Lapouge categorized the Jews not only as a biologically distinct race but as the ‘racial enemy’ of Aryan civilization.\footnote{Mosse, \textit{Towards the Final Solution}, pp. 59-60.} These ideas were further developed by Houston Stewart-Chamberlain and taken to their violent zenith in Germany by Alfred Rosenberg, whose work formed the basis for the racial doctrine of the Nazi state.\footnote{On the translation of anti-Semitic theory to Nazi policy towards the Jews, see Mosse, \textit{Towards the Final Solution}, pp. 191-214.}

Biological anti-Semitism was fairly limited in its impact in Britain, gaining some traction in radical circles but otherwise lacking a strong theoretical or political base.\footnote{Walter Laqueur, \textit{The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 94-95.} The appeal of racial theories to more radically political anti-Semites was the immutability of race as a category. With religious anti-Semitism, Jews were always able to convert to Christianity, thus freeing themselves of the various accusations
levelled against Jewish beliefs and practices. When Jewishness was defined by race, however, anti-Semites could point to a more deep rooted issue that demanded a more drastic response. The broader issue of Jews and their relationship with the wider community, commonly referred to as the ‘Jewish question’, entered British political and social discourse in the late 19th century. Two problems attracted particular interest from writers addressing the subject in the 19th century: First, as the European world became increasingly defined by nationalism and national identity, where did the Jewish people fit? Second, what factors accounted for the violence and unrest that had historically resulted from the interaction of Jewish minorities and the Gentile population?

Considerations of the ‘Jewish question’ in the late 19th and early 20th century were often construed as a legitimate form of social or philosophical inquiry, and did not solely emerge from an anti-Semitic fringe. From a post-1945 perspective, however, it is hard to accept the notion that the ‘Jewish question’ was not an intrinsically anti-Semitic construct. This is especially the case given that the ‘Jewish question’ would later give way to discussions of the ‘Jewish problem’, a term that would reach its full significance as an ideological underpinning for the Holocaust. Even when set apart from the violent, biological anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, the notion of a ‘Jewish question’ implied a fundamental separateness of the Jewish population. More troublingly, it implied the need for some form of solution to resolve the impasse (or ‘problem’) of a Jewish presence in European society.

In Britain, the ‘Jewish question’ became a matter of more widespread concern following a wave of migration that occurred between 1880 and 1914. In

1881, the Czar of Russia Alexander II was assassinated, sparking a wave of pogroms throughout Eastern Europe which drove Jews abroad in search of asylum. The majority of those seeking asylum, an estimated 2.5 million migrants, settled in the United States, while a comparatively small number, somewhere between 100,000-150,000, settled in Britain. In relative terms, this represented a large increase in the total Jewish population, which had previously comprised an Anglo-Jewish community numbering only 60,000.  

The arrival of Eastern European migrants fundamentally altered the character of the Jewish community in Britain. These new arrivals altered the widespread perception of Jews within Britain and thus informed both the character and intensity of anti-Semitism. The distribution of Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe played an important part in shaping the stereotypes that drove anti-Semitism after 1881. Though pockets of migrants settled throughout regional areas of the country, the majority found residence in the East End of London. The street-level resentment of the Jewish minority, which arose from the supposed ‘ghettoization’ of the East End, was a locus point for broader concerns over the ‘alien problem’ in late 19th and early 20th century England. Anti-Semitism in the East End also became a key part the BUF’s recruitment campaigns after 1934, which attempted to convert working-class anti-Semitism into support for fascism. The kind of prejudice which arose in response to Jewish migration from Eastern Europe during this period was similar to that levelled at migrants from Asia and Africa after 1945: new migrants were regarded as unwanted competition for workers, a risk to public health through the

transmission of disease and a generally corrosive force within British institutions.\textsuperscript{49} Most importantly, Jewish migrants were perceived as uniquely incapable of integrating themselves within the wider fabric of British society. Densely populated areas that housed a distinctive Jewish populace (‘ghettos’) were taken as evidence of a tendency to cloister amongst themselves rather than adopt the native culture.\textsuperscript{50}

Organized anti-Semitism emerged in Britain falteringly at first, buoyed by the vague notion of defending ‘Britishness’ and British culture from an alien threat. As in other parts of Europe, however, the blurry definition of British identity did not prevent ethnocentric anti-Semitism from emerging on the fringes of British politics. Colin Holmes observed, in a phrase that seems pertinent to many of Chesterton’s views on race and nationalism, that ‘The elusive nature of such concepts did not deter those who took up the battle on their behalf’.\textsuperscript{51} Public concern over the ‘Alien Problem’, aliens being a general euphemism for Jewish migrants, prompted one of the first legislative attempts to restrict immigration to Britain in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The 1905 Aliens Act made it illegal for migrants to enter the country without satisfying certain conditions relating to their health, employment prospects and past criminal behaviour. Although it made exceptions for those seeking asylum under threat of religious or political persecution, as was the case of those fleeing Russia since 1881, the new law was implicitly targeted at Jewish migrants.

The passing of legislation in response to the Jewish migration also served as an indication that anti-Semitism was not confined to street politics or the lower classes, as a number of prominent intellectuals were drawn into debates over the

\textsuperscript{50} Holmes, \textit{Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939}, p17.  
\textsuperscript{51} Holmes, \textit{Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939}, p. 10.
Jewish problem. Notable figures in this regard included Goldwin Smith, an Oxford professor of history, J.A. Hobson, a liberal economist, as well as G.K. Chesterton, Cecil Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, three prominent figures within England’s literary and journalistic sphere. Smith’s case is arguably the least relevant to a discussion of ideological anti-Semitism, since much of his invective against Jews arose from a personal feud with Benjamin Disraeli. Hobson, on the other hand, was a respected liberal intellectual whose anti-Semitic turn was driven by a concern over the role of European Jews in predatory finance. In an article for the Contemporary Review in January 1900, he alleged that a small group of mostly Jewish capitalists, ‘par excellence the international financiers’, had taken control over the Rand in South Africa and were ‘prepared to fasten upon any other spot upon the globe, in order to exploit it for the attainment of large profits and quick returns’. Of particular relevance to A.K. Chesterton’s life was Hobson’s assertion that these financiers were responsible for the outbreak of the Boer War, largely through the manipulation of the press and the Chamber of Mines. He would present the same argument in The New Unhappy Lords, as part of his ongoing crusade against international finance in South Africa:

The politics of South Africa for upwards of one hundred and fifty years have been bedevilled by a clash between Briton and Boer… Bitterness reached its peak during the turn of the century when the so-called Boer War was being waged, largely through the instigation of the cosmopolitan millionaires on the Witwatersrand.

54 Chesterton, The New Unhappy Lords, p. 122.
Since the remainder of Hobson’s work was not explicitly targeted towards Jews, he did not attain a reputation for deep-rooted anti-Semitic prejudice that was applied to later intellectual figures like Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot. Nevertheless, his ostensibly analytical, investigatory approach to the influence of international finance was a model for what Chesterton would attempt to cultivate in his career after 1945. Before the sinister turn of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, even serious economic and political thinkers were prone to bouts of suspicion regarding the international manoeuvres of Jewish finance. The work of such figures in establishing the groundwork for attacks on international finance provided later radicals like Chesterton a certain veneer of intellectual respectability, that was otherwise lacking in the realm of conspiracy theories.

G.K. Chesterton was another intellectual figure whose reputation was clouded somewhat by anti-Semitism. Though he was never as antagonistic to the Jews as A.K. Chesterton at the height of the BUF, there are some obvious parallels to be drawn between their attitudes to Jewish identity. Neither man was noted for their personal hostility towards Jews: G.K. Chesterton’s friend and authorized biographer, Maisie Ward, described her subject as having been ‘fond of very many Jews’. Outside his personal relationships, however, ‘Gilbert’ appeared to have imbibed the vague stereotypes of a stateless Jewish race that persisted throughout British culture in the early 20th century. Ward paraphrased his views on the ‘real Jewish question’ as presented in an address to the Jewish West-End literary society: ‘They represented

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55 For a description of the ‘wandering Jew’ myth and its religious antecedents, see Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, p. 115-116.
one of the highest of civilised types. But while all other races had local attachments, the Jews were universal and scattered. They could not be expected to have patriotism for the countries in which they made their homes: their patriotism could be only for their race’.\footnote{Maisie Ward, \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton} (London: Sheed and Ward, 1944), pp. 227-228.} As a committed Christian, G.K. Chesterton allowed for the possibility that the Jewish question might be resolved on theological grounds, by way of Jews converting to Roman Catholicism. Even if this was unrealistic, G.K. Chesterton was also an outspoken supporter of Zionism, believing that the establishment of a Zionist state or smaller, Jewish directed communities would alleviate the problems arising from the Jewish question. Outside of politics and theology, G.K. Chesterton’s literary work contained depictions and references to the character of Jewish financiers, with one passage in ‘The Silent People’ depicting a crippled England leaning for support on a lawyer and ‘a cringing Jew’.\footnote{G.K. Chesterton, \textit{Poems}, p. 123.}

In Ward’s sympathetic biography, such turns of phrase were attributed to G.K. Chesterton’s specific dislike of individual wealthy Jews rather than a prejudice that encompassed the people as a whole.\footnote{Ward, \textit{Gilbert Keith Chesterton}, p. 228.} On occasions, however, G.K. Chesterton’s attacks on prominent Jewish figures exceeded this explanation. Following the death of his brother Cecil in December 1918, G.K. Chesterton penned an open letter which attacked Chief Justice Rufus Isaacs, one of the figures accused of corruption in the Marconi scandal. Though it was intended to refute the notion that Cecil Chesterton’s pursuit of the scandal was driven by racial animus, the letter’s criticism of Isaacs...
turned heavily on the issue of his sympathy with the ‘Jewish International’.\(^{59}\) Ian Ker’s more expansive and critical biography of Gilbert Chesterton concluded that, when viewed from a modern perspective, these recriminations of Isaacs appeared ‘utterly anti-Semitic’.\(^{60}\) As he was rarely known to engage in such open antagonism towards Jews, Ker argued, G.K. Chesterton’s anti-Semitic outburst against Isaacs was the result of both historical context and personal grudges: a lifetime spent in a homogenous England with a widespread distrust of ‘foreigners’, which manifested more harshly in reaction to his brother’s death.\(^{61}\)

The evidence for Cecil Chesterton’s anti-Semitism, while no doubt influenced by the same contextual factors that affected his brother, was aired publicly by his role in the Marconi scandal. Despite G.K. Chesterton’s insistence to the contrary, there is little doubt that the spectre of a ‘Jewish International’ played some part in Cecil Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc’s pursuit of the case. Although it implicated a broad swathe of the Liberal government, three prominent Jewish figures lay at the heart of the scandal: Herbert Samuel (the Postmaster General), Godfrey Isaacs (managing director of the Marconi Company) and Godfrey’s brother Rufus Isaacs, who was then serving as Attorney-General. Samuel was accused of leveraging his position, with the assistance of Godfrey Isaacs, to supply the Marconi Corporation with a generous contract for the construction of a wireless telegraph system throughout the British Empire. Simultaneously, it was alleged that the Isaacs family and members of the Liberal Government had purchased shares in the American


\(^{60}\) Ker, *G.K. Chesterton*, p. 570.

Marconi Company shortly after the contract was secured in March 1912, knowing their value was to rise substantially.\textsuperscript{62}

The \textit{Eye Witness}\textsuperscript{63} began its pursuit of the story in August 1912, shortly after Cecil Chesterton took over from Belloc as the journal’s editor, continuing to publish articles demanding Isaacs’ resignation until Chesterton was sued for libel in January 1913. Alongside general accusations of corruption and impropriety levelled by the \textit{Eye Witness}, there were implications of a plot carried out through the familial channels of Jewish internationals: ‘Samuel, the postmaster general, and his cousins in the City, who pulled the wires over Indian silver and Indian loan, the Amsterdam Jews, with whom these cousins maintained such curious and suspicious secret relations’.\textsuperscript{64} More explicit references to the race or nationality of the accused were forthcoming from other parts of the media, with Isaacs and Samuels ‘constantly and contemptuously referred to as “Hebrews” or in some other equivalent term’.\textsuperscript{65} Cecil Chesterton largely refrained from such insults, though his approach to the scandal was unabashedly conspiratorial and made broad allegations as to the reach of international finance. In a fashion that clearly influenced A.K. Chesterton’s work, his campaigns against corruption focused heavily on the role of a financially compromised media: ‘The public is still kept for the most part in ignorance of the whole vile machinery of how these things are negotiated, how the press is alternately

\textsuperscript{62} Donaldson, \textit{The Marconi Scandal}, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{63} See p. 168, note 26 for an explanation of the name and changing editorship of the \textit{Eye Witness}.
\textsuperscript{64} ‘Charge of Libel Against Mr. C. Chesterton’, \textit{Times}, 27 February 1913. For more on the anti-Semitic nature of the scandal, see Bryan Cheyette, ‘\textit{Hilaire Belloc and the “Marconi Scandal” 1913-1914}’, Kenneth Lunn and Tony Kushner, eds., \textit{The Politics of Marginality}, (London: Frank Cass, 1990), pp. 131-143.
\textsuperscript{65} Donaldson, \textit{The Marconi Scandal}, p. 30.
bought and bullied… The responsibility of this lies with the tiny handful of men who control our Press’.

Outside the *New Witness*, Cecil Chesterton showed a similar attitude to the Jewish question as his brother. His *History of the United States*, published posthumously in 1919, observed that the problems arising from the Jewish migration arose ‘perhaps more formidably than elsewhere’ due to the large influx of new arrivals to America. He clarified, however, that this was ‘not because Jews, as such, are worse than other people: only idiots are Anti-Semites in that sense’. Like his brother and many others who subscribed to a deterministic view of the Jewish race, Cecil Chesterton based his discrimination against Jews on an ostensibly empirical evaluation of their history:

To the nationalism of European peoples he is often consciously and almost always subconsciously hostile. In various ways he tends to act as a solvent of such nationalism. Cosmopolitan finance is one example of such a tendency. Another, more morally sympathetic but not much less dangerous to nationalism in such a country as America, is cosmopolitan revolutionary idealism.

Citing the United States as a particular example of the ‘revolutionary idealism’ among Jews, Cecil Chesterton pointed to their prevalence among the ranks of Socialist and Anarchist parties in America. ‘These parties’, he further noted, ‘in contrast to most of the European socialist parties, have shown themselves violently anti-national and what we now call “Bolshevist”’.

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66 ‘Charge of Libel Against Mr. C. Chesterton’, *The Times*, 27 February 1913.
identity and revolutionary politics would form an important part of political anti-Semitism in interwar Britain and Europe, reaching its violent zenith with Hitler’s attacks on ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’. Like many anti-Semitic tropes, this idea gained currency in intellectual circles prior to the rise of fascism, in a fashion that did not always resemble openly conspiratorial paranoia. Hilaire Belloc’s *The Jews*, a book that set out to explain ‘the relation between the Jews and the nations around them’, introduced its chapter on Bolshevism by dismissing the scenario laid out in the *Protocols* as ‘nonsense’ and criticizing the European tendency to ascribe to Jews ‘powers which neither he nor any other poor mortal can ever exercise’.

Though he rejected as myth the idea that Jews had somehow played a role in every incidence of revolution worldwide, Belloc offered the Russian Revolution as a genuine ‘Jewish movement’ driven by racial instinct: ‘in the particular case of Russia, a national feeling stood in the way of an abstract ideal, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to the Jew that the national obstacle should go to the wall in order that *his* ideal of Communism might triumph’.

Belloc’s view of the ‘Jewish problem’ was preoccupied with the notion that the friction between Jews and Europeans arose from their inherently different instincts. The Jews in Russia had seized on communism, therefore, from a failure to understand the nature of European nationalism and private property: ‘The same thing in him which makes him a speculator and a nomad blinds him to, and makes him actually contemptuous of, the European sense of property’.

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resulted in a backlash that placed Russian Jews in peril ‘of the first magnitude’. Rather than see this as evidence for the danger of anti-Semitic stereotypes, however, Belloc encouraged readers to refrain from antagonism towards the Jews on ‘on account of what he [‘the Jew’] has done in Russia, but, on the contrary, to excuse him, especially because he is a Jew’.\textsuperscript{72} Like many the other anti-Semitic intellectuals of his time, Belloc framed his views as a considered response to a long-existing problem, rather than a prejudicial reaction against the Jews:

\begin{quote}
We who saw the gravity of the Jewish problem long before the recognition of it was general, and who studied it under calmer conditions for many years, have a right to be heard now: now that the tide is making against these people and that the fear of anarchy threatens to turn men’s heads.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

As is the case with Cecil and G.K. Chesterton’s views, Belloc’s perspective on the Jewish problem was clearly driven by general assumptions about the nature of race and a specific form of anti-Semitic stereotype. Rather than suggesting a deep racial resentment against the Jews, Belloc’s pontifications on the Jewish problem now appear fatally naïve. In one sense, this naivety expressed itself through Belloc’s casual acceptance of conspiratorial ideas even as he dismissed the validity of a worldwide Jewish plot. In the case of the Russian Revolution, he readily accepted that the Bolshevik movement was driven by Jews and that their racial instinct, rather than ideology and political circumstances, was responsible for the overthrow of the government in 1917. The conflation of Jewish and communist interests proved to be among the most persistent and dangerous elements of anti-Semitic conspiracy theory.

\textsuperscript{72} Belloc, \textit{The Jews}, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{73} Belloc, \textit{The Jews}, p. 184.
in the interwar period. Not only were prominent Jews tied to the revolutionary leadership of Russian communism, the power of Jewish international finance was deemed responsible for funding the Bolshevik movement. As a result, nationalist and fascist anti-Semites were provided with a scapegoat which encompassed both capitalist and socialist internationalism and could be blamed for any of the forces acting to undermine the nation.

Doris Chesterton expressed the belief that her husband was drawn to anti-Semitism under the guise of fascism, as Jews provided the ‘missing link’ between the evils of capitalism and communism. In chronological terms, it does appear that Chesterton only became openly anti-Semitic after joining the BUF, as his work prior to that point made no overt statements regarding the Jews. Yet it is quite possible that he had already come across work linking the Jews with internationalism before falling under the influence of fascist anti-Semitism. As David Baker noted during an interview with Rosine De Bounevialle in 1978, Chesterton cited many influences for his conspiracy theories but was rarely specific as to when he first encountered a particular text. Chesterton’s memoirs implied that his mission to expose international finance was inspired by Cecil Chesterton and that he envisioned Candour as acting in the tradition of the New Witness. Neither Cecil Chesterton nor Belloc’s works appeared in the bibliography of the New Unhappy Lords in 1965, though this may simply have reflected the book’s focus on the ‘policy pattern’ of conspiracy rather than the deeper history of the Jewish question. Since many of the key events Chesterton used as evidence for the Money Power’s drive for power took

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74 Chesterton Collection A. 13, Baker interview with D. Chesterton, 9 May 1978.
75 Chesterton Collection A. 16, Baker interview with Rosine de Bounevialle, ca. 1978.
76 BNML, Ch. IX, p3.
place after 1945, it is understandable that he directed readers to more contemporary works like Douglas Reed’s *Far and Wide* or Denis Fahey’s quasi-religious examinations of Judeo-Masonic conspiracy in the Soviet Union.77

Putting aside the question of which specific works influenced Chesterton, it is evident that his work both before and after 1945 built upon a long-established tradition of conspiratorial anti-Semitism in Britain, Europe and the United States. By the time that Chesterton joined the BUF, the stereotype of Jews as an alien influence within British society and culture had existed for several decades. The specific notion of the Jews as an international force had also gained considerable traction amongst certain British intellectuals by the end of the First World War, while the advent of Russian communism in 1917 provided another facet of anti-Semitic stereotypes in the form of the Jewish revolutionary. This is not to suggest that anti-Semitism was widespread enough to constitute a serious force in British politics at the time Chesterton joined the BUF. Colin Holmes’ authoritative study concluded that, despite the discrimination against Jews after 1881, ‘at no point between 1876 and 1939 was there evidence of official governmental anti-Semitism in Britain’. While noting the real evidence of social, racial and religious prejudice against Jews in Britain, Holmes stressed the consistent failure of those who sought to harness anti-Semitism for political advantage or to import the traditions of wider European anti-Semitism into a British context.78

Jewish international finance and the Protocols conspiracy

Though the idea of secretive plots had permeated anti-Semitic thought for some time, the early twentieth century saw the wide dissemination of popular literature claiming to represent evidence of a global conspiracy to bring the world under Jewish control. The most notorious of these works was and remains the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (hereafter the Protocols), a document forged by the Czarist secret police and distributed in the early 1900s. Many of the tropes that would later become ubiquitous in anti-Semitic thought and literature would appear in the Protocols, which purportedly derived from a meeting of Jewish ‘elders’ plotting to solidify their power over world affairs. The conspiracy it posited was broad enough that it could be adapted and invoked as proof that Jewish influence was the unifying factor behind a range of unrelated ideas and movements, including Marxism, Darwinian theory and Nietzschean philosophy.  

Freemasonry also featured prominently in the Protocols, which described Masonic societies as the conduit through which Jewish plans could be transmitted and inflicted upon the Gentile world. The occult religious aspects of the Protocols provided a hint as to their connection with earlier forms of conspiratorial myth that had grown in connection with religious rather than racial anti-Semitism. In 1921, Anglo-Jewish journalist Lucien Wolf published a book critiquing references to a global conspiracy in the British press, tracing the concept to religious tracts published in the late 18th century. Wolf noted that these earlier works were absent of

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any mention of Jews and instead pointed to a ‘triple conspiracy of Philosophers, Freemasons, and Illuminati, who formed an actual sect aiming deliberately and methodically at the overthrow of the established religions and governments throughout Europe’. Only after the European revolutions in 1848 had the Jews been transplanted into the conspiracies, with the Protocols representing a convenient but highly dubious form of proof for their centrality in the ‘Formidable Sect’ long suspected of driving unrest throughout the world.\textsuperscript{80} Wolf’s book was followed by further investigations into the Protocols which identified them as the most successful in a series of falsified anti-Semitic documents that emerged in the mid-19th century.\textsuperscript{81}

Efforts to debunk the ‘Elders conspiracy’ culminated in legal proceedings carried out by a Swiss court in 1934, which ruled them to be a forgery.\textsuperscript{82} Long prior to this point and even before Wolf’s investigation, however, the Protocol conspiracy had taken root in Britain. An English translation was widely distributed among fascist and anti-Semitic circles in the interwar period, largely through the publishing efforts of the Britons Society, a small but fanatically anti-Jewish organization founded by Henry Harold Beamish in 1919.\textsuperscript{83} Aside from incubating many of the anti-Semitic and fascist ideas that Chesterton would inherit during his time in the BUF, the Britons’ publishing arm persisted long after Beamish’s death. Based in Devon, Britons Publishing was responsible for printing and distributing many of

\textsuperscript{81} Mosse, \textit{Towards the Final Solution}, pp. 115-118.
\textsuperscript{82} Laqueur, \textit{The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism}, p. 96; Mosse, \textit{Towards the Final Solution}, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{83} Lebzelter, \textit{Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-1939}, pp. 50-54.
Chesterton’s books and pamphlets after 1945 alongside a range of other anti-Semitic works that drew their inspiration from the Protocols conspiracy.  

The earliest and most influential interpretation of the Protocols in British circles was produced by Nesta Webster, an author who promoted a vast and esoteric conspiracy that incorporated Masons, the Bavarian Illuminati and the Jews, among many other ‘secret societies’ responsible for the manipulation of world events. Though Webster can undoubtedly be credited with shaping Chesterton’s anti-Semitic ideas, it was her method of approaching world affairs that had the most profound influence on his work as a whole. Webster conducted her study of history and contemporary politics with the assumption that hidden and malevolent forces were responsible for both everyday events and the wholesale upheaval of human society. This worldview was an early example of what Richard Hofstadter described as the ‘Paranoid Style’ in an essay concerning the American radical right in the 1960s:

The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power.

The conspiratorial nature of Webster’s approach to history placed her work in stark contrast to Marxist materialist analysis or liberal empiricism, as it sought to explain the world almost exclusively in terms of deliberate human action rather than natural or economic forces. It also complemented the presumptions of nationalism.

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and fascism, which Webster identified as the ideological model for a movement to combat the subversion of ‘occult’ Jewry.\textsuperscript{86}

Certain aspects of Webster’s conspiracy theory did not transfer directly into A.K. Chesterton’s work, especially those with overtly religious connotations. Rosine De Bounevialle suggested that Chesterton was reticent to discuss or criticize Masonry due to the number of \textit{Candour} supporters who were English Freemasons. Whatever the true nature of his feelings toward Webster and other theorists’ notions of the ‘occult’, Chesterton’s conspiracy theories were never reliant upon a single source of inspiration. He instead constructed the ‘Money Power’ conspiracy from a variety of sources that combined anti-Semitic myth with pseudo-materialist analysis of global politics, economics and social trends. He took considerable inspiration in the latter regard from A.N. Field, author of \textit{The Truth About the Slump}, a book linking the economic depression of the 1930s to conspiracy by international finance. In its initial stages, Field’s investigation took an almost academic tone, which made no mention of the occult traditions detailed by Webster and focused on the dynamics of international markets and central banking. As the book progressed, however, Field turned to an open discussion of a Jewish conspiracy and dedicated a chapter to discussing the ‘Mystery of the Protocols’.\textsuperscript{87} Quite contrary to the stolid economic analysis that introduced the book, Field’s discussion of the \textit{Protocols} bore similarities to Webster’s \textit{Secret Societies}, detailing the same continuous patterns of conspiracy running through Freemasonry and the Bavarian Illuminati.\textsuperscript{88} Despite this

\textsuperscript{86} Nesta Webster, \textit{Secret Societies and Subversive Movements} (Christian Book Club of America, 1964), p. 405.


\textsuperscript{88} Field, \textit{The Truth About the Slump}, pp. 131,139-153.
lurid explanation of the occult forces running behind the conspiracy, the response which Field proposed was considerably less drastic than Webster’s fascistic appeals to a national resurgence. He proposed a broad plan for financial reform that, as a starting point, recommended the work of American economist Irving Fisher. Field was also adamant that his exposure of the predominantly Jewish Money Power not be taken as an incitement for anti-Semitism, insisting that ‘[he] would gladly have omitted from his pages all reference to race and creed had it been in any wise possible for him to have done so. Nothing is further from the author’s desire than to inspire his readers with feelings of hatred or aversion towards Jews because they are Jews’. 89 In his later career, Chesterton would make a similar and equally unconvincing attempt to downplay the anti-Semitic implications of his work, insisting that his critiques applied only to a ‘minority’ of the Jewish population. 90

Objectively speaking, journalistic prudence should have disqualified the Protocols from Chesterton’s serious consideration, despite their popularity among earlier conspiratorial anti-Semites. Like Webster and Field, however, Chesterton’s driving belief in the existence of a conspiracy made it difficult for him to dismiss a document that appeared to have predicted the movements of ‘World Jewry’ so vividly. In 1947, he claimed to have broken a ‘self-imposed rule which hitherto I have always kept’ by quoting from ‘that mysterious and evil document known as the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion’ by citing it in an article for London Tidings. 91 Anticipating backlash from readers, Chesterton echoed Field’s assertion

89 Field, The Truth About the Slump, p. 192.
90 Chesterton, The New Unhappy Lords, pp. 157-158.
91 London Tidings was a newsletter to which Chesterton briefly contributed after the war. Originally founded by Douglas Reed (later of the British social credit movement) in June 1947, its activities came to the attention of the Security Service later the same year. See:
that ‘the enormous significance of the Protocols is in their fulfilment’ rather than their authenticity. 92

If any reader writes to say that I have been quoting from a forgery, I shall not argue with him. The proof of the matter is not in my hands and in any case it does not really greatly interest me. To my mind there is only one relevant question – Is the policy detailed in the Protocols being carried out? 93

Developments in 1947 seem to have sparked in Chesterton a renewed fascination with this question, even prompting him to consider a book on the subject. 94 It is almost certain that Chesterton was versed in the lore of the Protocols well prior to 1947, despite his unwillingness to make mention of them in public before that time. In June 1961, the BBC devoted an hour long radio program to discussing their authenticity, prompting an attack from Chesterton in Candour. In light of the BBC’s pre-existing bias regarding ‘Jewish interests’, ‘nobody should have been surprised to discover the aim of the programme was not merely to present the Protocols as a forgery but to have them uttered as the melodramatic ravings of a maniac’. 95 Putting aside his critique of the BBC’s aesthetic choices, Chesterton’s argument boiled down to a strange defence of the Protocols as a possible forgery that nevertheless gave accurate predictions of the rise of Jewish power:

It is, with submission, impossible for any intelligent person, aware of what is happening in the world, to read or listen to the reading of the Protocols of the

92 Field, The Truth About the Slump, p. 152.
93 ‘Who are the Puppet-Masters?’, London Tidings, 6 September 1947.
Learned Elders of Zion without being astounded by their prophetic insight, their knowledge of the weaknesses in Gentile society, their proposed techniques for exploiting those weaknesses.  96

In a surprising turn, Christopher Sykes (the BBC producer responsible for the program) replied to Chesterton’s criticisms in a letter reprinted for Candour readers two weeks after the original article appeared. After politely assuring Chesterton that neither himself nor those directly overseeing the program were Jewish, Sykes reiterated his case that the Protocols were indeed a forgery, as determined by the ruling of the Swiss courts, and that the conspiracy it alleged was merely an anti-Semitic variation on an age old theme: ‘Many Governments, many parities, many groups of men have been guilty of many of the abominations in which the “Elders” exulted’.  97 Chesterton’s rejoinder was another plea on behalf of the Protocols value, protesting that Sykes’ program ‘never hinted at the undoubted spiritual relationship’ between the real Money Power conspiracy and ‘pretensions attributed to the “Learned Elders”’. He concluded, however, that the historicity of the work itself remained dubious and that ‘we [the Candour League] are the first to dub as lunatics those who attempt to argue our case on the basis of the authenticity of the Protocols, strange, disturbing and well worth reading though they be’.  98

Inevitably, throughout his life on the edges of British political thought, Chesterton came into contact with an even more marginal ‘lunatic fringe’, comprised of individuals whose belief in Jewish world conspiracy seemed driven by deep mental instability. In one memorable encounter described by Doris Chesterton, a

96 ‘Learned Elders and the B.B.C.’
98 ‘Broadcasting House Replies’.
man contacted the couple at their home claiming to have evidence of a Jewish ritual murder plot to be carried out the same night. After being informed by the man of the time and place this murder was to be carried out, Chesterton replied bluntly: ‘In that case my dear fellow ring the police at once. Don’t waste time calling me’. However irrational or prejudicial his concept of the Jewish ‘Money Power’ was, Chesterton maintained certain standards in his approach to world affairs and was often driven to frustration by those who descended into ‘crankery’. He also chided members of the British social-credit movement for proposing that Hitler was ‘an illegitimate descendent of the Rothschilds’ unconsciously carrying out a Jewish plot. Such outlandish claims, Chesterton warned, were likely to do more harm than good in serving to ‘thoroughly discredit all criticism of the financial system’. It is because of his apparent standards of intellectual rigour that Chesterton’s treatment of the Protocols appears so absurd, since their exaggerated and easily falsified claims of a global Jewish conspiracy seemed to undermine his cause. As much as he sought to differentiate himself from ‘lunatic fringe’, therefore, Chesterton’s attachment to anti-Semitic conspiracies prevented his work from disseminating to a wider audience, and evoked the same ‘crankery’ that he derided in other parts of the extreme right.

From a cynical point of view, the existence of documents alleging to offer a peek behind the curtain of Jewish power was of use to Chesterton in attempting to leverage public opinion against the Jews. At a meeting of the National Front Council in July 1945, for example, he produced a letter that had allegedly come into his possession by mistake from a Jewish organization ‘calling on all Jews to vote

Liberal, as the Liberal Party had always made it easy for the Jews to get into this country and prosper’. Chesterton proposed that the letter be published in National Front literature as it ‘would carry great weight with the anti-Jewish’.\footnote{101} In this instance, the document in question may well have been a legitimate piece of political advertising geared toward the interests of Jewish voters. In Chesterton’s eyes, however, even mundane revelations of a common interest among British Jews was evidence of an ever deepening conspiratorial plot. Ultimately, Chesterton was willing to overlook the empirical weakness of the Protocols due to his broader conviction that history had been subject to conspiratorial forces, and his prejudicial belief that ‘the Jewish mind’ was driven to seek ‘a world monopoly of political power’. \footnote{102}

**British fascism and political anti-Semitism**

The history of anti-Semitism in interwar Britain is closely tied with that of British fascism, to the point where major texts on both subjects converge on the same themes, individuals and organizations. It is important to note, however, that neither the British Union of Fascists nor its predecessors, Arnold Leese’s Imperial Fascist League and Rotha Linton-Orman’s British Fascisti, were founded explicitly as anti-Semitic organizations. The conflation of British fascism and anti-Semitism is partly reflective of the broader historiography of fascist and radical right wing movements in Europe. In practical terms, German National Socialism represented

\footnote{101 TNA KV2/1348/279a, ‘F3/1625 report re National Front Council meeting mentioning Chesterton, 11 July 1945.} \footnote{102 Chesterton, *The New Unhappy Lords*, p. 158.}
the most visible, radical and destructive permutation of interwar fascism. Since Nazi ideology was so deeply defined by its conception of race and the Jewish problem, the study of fascism after 1945 thus became entwined with other questions pertaining to the roots of European anti-Semitism, racism, eugenics, as well as the social, political and moral dimensions of the Holocaust. For this reason, an important part of studying and defining fascism as a political phenomenon has been discerning its actual relationship to racism and anti-Semitism.

The original Fascist movement in Italy was not overtly anti-Semitic, and attracted a considerable number of Jewish supporters. Mussolini’s regime would adopt discriminatory policies against Jews as the influence of Nazi Germany progressed throughout the 1930s, however, and Italian fascism was interwoven with concepts of European racial supremacy, a trait that became prominent in the invasion of Abysinnia in 1935.\(^{103}\) As a general rule, taxonomies of fascism have tended to treat biological racism and anti-Semitism as a distinguishing characteristic of Nazism. For some specialist scholars of Germany, as well as sceptics of generic fascism like A. James Gregor, the Volkish racism and intense anti-Semitism of Hitler’s movement rendered it unique.\(^{104}\) Many fascist and extreme right movements of the interwar period, including those in Britain, were influenced by native traditions of anti-Semitism and did not require the example of Nazi Germany to pursue rhetorical or actual violence against Jews. Citing the most extreme case, Stanley Payne identified the Legion of the Archangel Michael as ‘possibly the only

\(^{103}\) For a brief overview of race in the ideology and practice of Italian Fascism, see Aristotle Kallis, Fascist Ideology (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 42-47.

other fascist movement as vehemently anti-Semitic as the German Nazis’, a trait that
could be attributed to the strong tradition of popular anti-Semitism in Romania.\textsuperscript{105}

As Michael Mann observed, the ultra-nationalist roots of fascism made it
highly prone to racial intolerance, with ethnic minorities commonly identified as a
threat to the health of the organic nation-state.\textsuperscript{106} The prevalence of racism or anti-
Semitism in the different incarnations of interwar fascism varied, however, with
Roger Griffin emphasizing that ‘the virulence and object of fascist racism [was
dependent] on contingent factors, especially the prior existence of a tradition of
xenophobic obsessions and racial persecution’.\textsuperscript{107} Racism and anti-Semitism are
better understood, therefore, as traits highly correlated with fascist and extreme right
movements rather than factors integral to the definition of fascism. It is relatively
easy to account for why anti-Semitism played some role in Britain’s interwar
extreme right, due to the submerged but persistent tradition of Jewish stereotypes
and conspiracies that existed in European culture at the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. To
explain the outsized influence of anti-Semitism in the BUF, however, we need to
consider the specific history of political anti-Semitism in Britain, which predated the
emergence of British fascism by over a decade. One of the earliest and most
prominent anti-Semitic groups to emerge prior to fascism was the British Brother’s
League (BBL), which attracted some 45,000 members after its founding in 1902.
Although it adopted a broadly nationalistic stance against ‘alien’ threats to British
identity, anti-Semitism provided the bulk of the BBL’s racial animus, which was

\textsuperscript{105} Payne, A History of Fascism, pp. 277-290.
\textsuperscript{106} Mann, Fascists, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{107} Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, p. 48.
directed at a wave of Jewish migrants who fled to Britain from Eastern Europe after 1881.\textsuperscript{108}

There is some disagreement as to the overall significance of anti-Semitism in the pre-1914 or Edwardian radical right to which the BBL belonged. William Rubenstein’s 2005 history of the Jews in Britain cautioned against the assumption that ‘fringe figures from a wide diversity of otherwise contradictory political stances’ could be taken as representatives of a monolithic anti-Semitic radical right.\textsuperscript{109} Rubenstein’s argument was a worthwhile reminder that anti-Semitism did not attain the same currency in British politics as it did Europe, and that no single political faction held a monopoly on anti-Semitic ideas. At the same time, there was a discernible continuity between the ‘Edwardian anti-Semitism’ of the BBL and the fascist anti-Semitism of parties like the BUF and the Imperial Fascist League. Of the three major, self-identified fascist movements in interwar Britain, the British Fascisti was the least anti-Semitic. The BF’s founder, Rotha Linton Orman, displayed a somewhat limited understanding of fascist doctrine, organizing her movement more along the lines of radical conservatism than revolutionary nationalism. Where race was concerned, therefore, Orman’s movement drew from British imperial tradition rather than European racial anti-Semitism, placing a greater emphasis on the subversive inclinations of colonial subjects rather than domestic ‘aliens’.\textsuperscript{110} Those elements of the BF’s ideology that were genuinely fascistic, insofar as they had been ‘imported’ from Europe, owed more to Italian Fascism than German National

\textsuperscript{108} Lebzelter, Political Anti-Semitism in Britain 1918-1939, pp. 8-9.
Socialism. As a consequence, the movement showed little inclination towards the *Volkish* Aryan supremacist themes which appeared in the IFL, nor the scientific racism that would permeate BUF policy.

The IFL took a general stance against unwanted immigration to Britain at its founding in 1928, making broad assertions as to the undesirable character of European migrants. Explicit anti-Semitism did not appear in the party’s propaganda until 1930, coinciding with Leese’s enthusiastic adoption of the world Jewish conspiracy theory outlined in the *Protocols*.¹¹¹ Thereafter, the IFL promoted a violent and distinctively paranoid form of anti-Semitism, that drew freely from the biologically racist constructs of Nazism. Leese envisioned Britain as part of a ‘League of Aryan Nations’, standing atop a racial hierarchy wherein Jews represented a unique and dangerous ‘species’. Despite his outspoken white supremacy and penchant for the Aryan racial imagery, Leese’s racial views were hardly more sophisticated than those of early racial anti-Semites, as he ‘failed to outline a coherent racial ideology in a systematic fashion’.¹¹² This failed to dull his enthusiasm for public displays of anti-Semitism, including allegations that Mosley and the BUF had been infiltrated by Jews, denouncing them ‘Kosher Fascists’.¹¹³ Accusations of this kind were largely ignored, a product of the IFL’s increasing marginality after 1933 and Leese’s personal notoriety. An anonymous surveillance report on the IFL described him as ‘a man who had a great craving for political

knowledge without the mental balance to make use of it’ and ‘a fanatic who would be a menace to any organization he joined’.\textsuperscript{114}

Valid though this assessment may have been, Leese was not alone in identifying Jews at work within the fascist movement itself. In 1939 Chesterton attacked Alexander Raven Thomson (‘Worm Raven’) for selling gas masks to the public through a BUF bookshop and expressed disbelief that other fascists had not identified him as a Jew.\textsuperscript{115} Fear of infiltration by ‘Jewish stooges’ was also a driving concern throughout the organization of Chesterton and Collin Brooks’ After Victory group and a contributing factor to the paranoia that undermined the 1945 National Front.\textsuperscript{116} In other respects, the Britons and the IFL set a precedent for how anti-Semitism would affect other fascist and extreme right groups in Britain. The Jews initially served as a convenient and tangible target for propaganda, with international finance linking together all the various ‘enemies’ of fascism, the Empire and the British race. As the party floundered, however, ‘world Jewry’ became an obsession unto itself and an unconvincing explanation for why fascism had failed to gain followers. In contrast with the experience of some European fascist movements, where anti-Semitism became the basis of radicalization and recruitment, for British fascists it would become a cause of political and ideological inertia. Chesterton, along with the other members of the interwar extreme right alienated from Mosley, fell victim to this tendency in the lead-up to internment. The result was a myriad of

\textsuperscript{114} TNA KV2/1365, Imperial Fascist League, 22 August 1933.
\textsuperscript{115} TNA KV2/1345/1j, Copy of letter from Chesterton to Archie Findlay, 14 December 1939.
\textsuperscript{116} TNA KV2/1348/296ab, Note on the history of the National Front.
small, insular organizations that functioned, like Beamish’s organization had some years before, as echo-chambers for anti-Semitic rancour and conspiracy. 117

It was the fear of such marginalization, rather than any personal conviction, that led Mosley to downplay his party’s anti-Semitic stance between 1932 and 1934. Even during this period, BUF publications were quick to associate British Jews with the ‘subversive’ elements seen to be driving communist and anti-fascist groups. The renunciations of anti-Semitism that appeared in BUF newspapers throughout 1933 did little to deter anti-Semites from gaining membership, nor did they coincide with a genuine renunciation of anti-Semitic ideas by Mosley and his followers. 118 Indeed, the tight knit radicalism of the party’s ideological core made it an effective incubator for those who had been only vague or noncommittal in their attitude towards the Jews prior to encountering fascism. Chesterton was among the most striking examples of this dynamic: within a year of joining Mosley’s party, he went from showing no signs of overt anti-Semitism to being one of its most virulent and energetic promoters. He became instrumental not only in promoting anti-Semitic ideas but in promulgating the narrative that Mosley had been driven to anti-Semitism by the Jewish community itself:

At the beginning of his [Mosley’s] campaign these views were not very definite one way or the other. While it is probably that he had no deeper an affection for Jews in the mass than any other Englishman, the last thought in his head was that it would prove necessary for him to adopt any attitude towards them, apart from refusing them admittance to the movement – a step made essential by the power of the Jew in an incredibly short time to gain

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118 Tilles, British Fascist Anti-Semitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-1940, pp. 53-54.
control for himself and his fellow racials of organizations with which he becomes associated.¹¹⁹

Contained within this explanation were two anti-Semitic tropes which had long driven British perceptions of the ‘international Jew’: the ability to quickly infiltrate and acquire power through implicitly subversive means, coupled with an intrinsic loyalty to their own group which precluded any other ideological or factional commitments. Despite the negative connotations of this judgement, Chesterton insisted that Mosley remained aloof from racial conflict on the grounds that the Empire, ‘composed of many different races, castes, colours and creeds’, ruled out such behaviour ‘even if persecution were held to be otherwise desirable, which he denies’.¹²⁰ At least within the pages of The Greater Britain, Mosley showed greater influence from Italian Fascism and his own New Party than Hitler’s distinctively anti-Semitic and racially-inflected plans for German revival. As was the case in the British Fascisti, the racial ideas of the early BUF reflected fairly orthodox British imperialism, calling for the maintenance of an existing colonial populace rather than any acquisition of subjects or territory. While Mosley was more explicit in stating that white rule would continue to be enforced in Britain’s colonies, this assumption did not radically distinguish the BUF’s policy from that of the other major political parties where race was concerned.¹²¹

The BUF’s increasing anti-Semitism became evident in November 1933, when an issue of Blackshirt arguing that Jewish interests were conspiring to involve

¹¹⁹ Chesterton, Portrait of a Leader, p. 123.
¹²⁰ Chesterton, Portrait of a Leader, p. 123.
¹²¹ Mosley, The Greater Britain, p. 146.
Britain in a war with Germany. Apart from its specific concern for the prevention of another war, the character of the BUF’s attack on the Jews was a fairly orthodox reiteration of British anti-Semitism since the Marconi scandal: Jewish finance had exerted its control over politicians and the press in order to serve the interests of a ‘nation within a nation’, the minority of Jews whose only loyalty lay with their own people. There were several aspects in which the BUF’s initial salvo against Jewish finance differed from its later attacks: the article took no official stance on ‘whether or not Germany was right in her attitude towards the Jews’, presumably in an attempt to stave off damaging comparisons with the Nazis. It also dismissed the importance of attacks made on the BUF itself by Jewish media or business interests: ‘We are not concerned with the treatment of the British Union of Fascists, for we have learned to laugh at the hatreds over which we triumph’. Finally, it offered an unconvincing assurance that the fascists’ criticism of the Jews was a matter of politics rather than prejudice: ‘We do not fight Jews on racial or religious ground. We oppose them because they have become an organised interest within the State pursuing a policy which threatens British lives and homes’.

This defensive posture, which echoed Mosley’s assurance against ‘racial attacks’ in *The Greater Britain*, highlighted an important but perverse aspect of the BUF’s anti-Semitism. While its members would engage in rhetorical and in some instances physical attacks on Jews or those suspected of Jewish influence, their

122 ‘Shall the Jews Drag Britain to War?’, *Blackshirt*, 4-10 November 1933. Tilles notes that this article was prompted by a *Daily Express* piece commenting on Jewish responses to Nazi Germany, but that the ‘BUF’s analysis took the case much further’ than its mainstream counterpart by invoking an international Jewish conspiracy. See: *British Fascist Anti-Semitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-1940*, p. 55.
124 ‘Shall the Jews Drag Britain to War?’.
ideology insisted that this antagonism was a rational, proportional response to the Jews’ attack on British culture and national sovereignty. For a short period after November 1933, the BUF held true to its ostensible neutrality on racial matters, as the leading article in Blackshirt the following month challenged the government’s failure to act on the Alien Problem but made no overt reference to Jewish migration. In the long term, however, both the frequency and intensity of attacks on Jews increased. The Olympia rally in June 1934, which Chesterton presented as the impetus for Mosley’s turn against the Jews, became a central part in the narrative of persecution used to justify the Blackshirts’ anti-Semitism.

At this and every other rowdy fascist meeting the Jews have taken the lead in stirring up disorder. Funds for the buying of tickets for rowdies, for example, were traced in many instances to Jewish sources, and many Jewish faces were also to be seen among the mob.\(^\text{125}\)

Following this event, Chesterton alleged, Mosley had undertaken an ‘investigation’ of Jewish influence in various commercial, political and cultural spheres to determine the true extent of coordinated antagonism toward British interests. The result was his revelation of a vast conspiracy driven by the overrepresentation of Jewish individuals, ‘whether in person or by proxy’ in positions uniquely detrimental to the national fabric:

The whole capitalist racket, the whole of the national Press, the whole of the “British” cinema, and the whole bunch of purely parasitical occupations were found to be Jew-ridden. Every vitiating and demoralising factor in our national life was Jew-influenced where it was not Jew-controlled.\(^\text{126}\)

\(^{125}\) Chesterton, *Portrait of a Leader*, p. 123.

\(^{126}\) *Portrait of a Leader*, p. 125.
Attacks on Jewish financiers, cultural figures and political activists subsequently became hallmarks of BUF propaganda, while the party embarked on a concerted effort to rally support from London’s East End, which carried its own tradition of anti-Jewish sentiment.\textsuperscript{127} By 1937, the pretence of racial neutrality had ceased to exist within the BUF, to the point where Chesterton made open reference to the physical appearance of Jews in the midst of the wider population. ‘Apotheosis of the Jew’, a notorious essay by Chesterton that appeared in 	extit{British Union Quarterly}, represented the height of his anti-Semitism as a member of the BUF. Echoing a theme that appeared in Belloc’s writing some years prior, ‘Apotheosis’ depicted the Jews as having the dangerous capacity to hide their true nature from society at large:

> Had he stayed to swelter in the place of his origin there would have been no Jewish problem… Unfortunately, his migration to more temperate zones, and the consequent approximation of his skin to the colour of white, has led to his finding himself both at home and not at home.\textsuperscript{128}

Chesterton argued that the physical appearance of Jewish migrants reflected the psychological and ‘spiritual’ process of their infiltration into English society. Arriving in the country ‘poverty stricken and bedraggled’, the Jews had risen in wealth and social standing through nefarious means (‘often they invite closer inspection than the police are able to give them’) and subsequently adopted the

\textsuperscript{127} This local tradition, along with the immediate concerns of the populace, was harnessed by BUF organizers and propagandists. See Tilles, 	extit{British Fascist Anti-Semitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-1940}, pp. 53-54.

\textsuperscript{128} Chesterton, ‘Apotheosis of the Jew’, p. 46.
appearance of the native populace: ‘Now is the Jew arrived at the stage of his
greatest menace to civilisation… Education in the social graces has made of him to
all outward appearances except facially a typical English gentleman’.129 This state of
near-perfect ‘metamorphosis’ allowed Jews to move freely throughout the political
and social spheres while retaining their ‘race consciousness’.

In a harsher and more explicitly racist fashion, this part of the essay
reiterated the sentiment of Belloc and Cecil Chesterton, who fixated on the Jews’
supposed inability to forego loyalty to their own people. Unlike Belloc, who
identified a Jewish sense of cultural superiority as the cause of friction, Chesterton
drew from Nesta Webster’s work in attributing this superiority to a ‘collective
neurosis’: an ‘ever-present sense of insecurity born of the knowledge that his race
and the way of life of his race are inferior things’.130 These neuroses, according to
Chesterton resulted in the decadent, subversive behaviour that appeared in every
sphere of ‘debased’ English society:

Are the films trash? Then the Jew makes a fortune out of them because it is
his natural gift to purvey trash… Have the public manners become as
deplorable as the public taste? Then the Jew walks the world as their perfect
exponent. Financially, socially, politically, culturally, the Jew has brought all
things down to the level on which he feels most at home.131

Though these displays evidently repulsed him, Chesterton’s depiction of the
Jews contained a grudging acknowledgment of the attributes required to succeed in
hostile circumstances. He conceded the Jews’ ‘sound business instincts which are the

130 Webster, Secret Societies and Subversive Movements, pp. 397-399; Chesterton,
‘Apotheosis of the Jew’, p. 46.
heritage he derives from the Oriental bazaar’ or ‘his talent—and even his genius—as an artist’, both of which yielded considerable wealth. These advantages came with a cost, however, which Chesterton identified as the garish and ultimately self-destructive displays of arrogance by the Jews at their ‘apotheosis’:

Because his neurosis produces in him such high tension… he throws caution to the wind as he comes forth to hold his own and to keep the world a fit place for the habitation of parasites. Thus does he eventually show up his entire racket. Thus does he turn anti-Semitism from a mild disdain to a passionate and wholesome rage. Thus does he destroy himself.  

In the final passages of the essay, Chesterton spoke directly to the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. Rather than see such resentment as an irrational or prejudicial response, Chesterton characterized anti-Semitism as a constant, natural occurrence in any society where Jews had become intermingled with the wider population. This assumption was not radical in and of itself, since many prior considerations of the Jewish question in Britain had considered ‘friction’ between Jews and gentiles to be an objective consequence of immigration. Rather than treat the Jewish question in a neutral fashion, however, Chesterton placed the blame for anti-Semitism entirely on the Jews themselves: ‘he has turned the spark into a roaring fire that fortunately for the survival of the superior races will never be extinguished’. More threateningly, Chesterton argued that the growing anger against Jews (the ‘passionate and wholesome rage’) marked a resurgence of the same ‘virile nationalism’ that had erected barriers against Jewish power in the past. He further warned that an alliance was forming, under the guidance of the Blackshirts, between

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the two major branches of anti-Semitism in Britain: the ‘men of research’ (intellectual or ‘rational’ anti-Semites like Chesterton) and the average citizens of London’s East End ‘and many another district where the physical facts of the Jew scarcely escape attention’.  

Some of the racial invective used by Chesterton appeared to have been drawn from his own warped perceptions of encountering Jewish migrants in England: ‘To go to a swimming-pool anywhere near London or the large cities is as efficacious as baptism in the Jordan; one becomes positively anointed with Semitic grease’. More commonly, however, Chesterton’s physical description of Jews fell back on the crude stereotypes that permeated English culture: an amalgamation of the sinister money-lender figure from The Merchant of Venice and the ‘shambling’ or ‘cringing’ figure from G.K. Chesterton’s poetry. His outrage towards the supposed ‘arrogance’ of Jewish public figures seemed to derive in part from how it offended his sense of social conservatism and classical English propriety, associating Jews with ‘loud clothes, loud cars and loud behaviour’ and the use of self-promotion through the media. Yet it also seemed impossible for Jews to ever conduct themselves in a way of which Chesterton would approve. Where they adopted English customs, he accused Jews of adopting a guise for their ‘parasitical’ behaviour. Yet he appeared just as intolerant of Jews who made no attempt to hide

their heritage, ridiculing their poor appearance, manner of speaking and ‘shuffling
gait’. 137

The implications of Chesterton’s anti-Semitism as a fascist were all the more
troubling for what they suggested about the possible resolutions to the Jewish
question. Since fascism did not gain any semblance of power in Britain, there is no
way of knowing with certainty what actions would have been taken against the Jews.
As far as BUF policy towards the Jews was concerned, Mosley was unequivocal:
‘We shall not keep Jews here to bully them. Those who have been guilty of anti-
British conduct will be deported’. 138 Chesterton was even less reserved in calling for
a direct response to the Jewish problem:

In all sorrow, I must advance the opinion that a race capable of so damnably
violating the feelings of their British hosts is a rabble race, and that the sooner
we get rid of the largest possible number of them and break their financial
stranglehold the better will it be for the happiness, the prosperity and the
future greatness of the British people. 139

Chesterton’s assertion (which matched Mosley’s official policy) that a large
proportion of Jews were to be summarily deported was disturbing in and of itself.
But what was to be done about the many Jews who, by his admission, lived ‘quietly
and decently’? According to Mosley, the scrutiny incurred by patriotic Jews was an
unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of their fellows’ misdeeds: ‘they can no
more complain of suffering from the errors of Jewry as a whole, than members of
any other nation can complain of suffering for the mistakes of the majority and the

138 Mosley, Fascism: 100 Questions, p. 47.
139 ‘Truth About the Jews’, Action, 7 November 1936.
blunders of its government’. Chesterton echoed this view in *Blackshirt*, acknowledging the existence of ‘intelligent, decent Jews’ willing to admit the ‘fellow racials’ role in feeding anti-Semitism but concluding that: ‘So long as the Jewish majority is pleased to link itself with either the subversive movements of the political “Left” or with the damnable malpractices of the capitalist “Right” the Jewish minority must suffer from whatever odium their colleagues bring upon them as a race’.

Under BUF policy, those Jews not deported would be allowed to remain as ‘foreigners’ but subject to the same restrictions as all other non-British races: denied the full rights of citizenship and not permitted to become Members of Parliament or government officials. On paper, therefore, the BUF’s policy toward the Jews was one of mass expulsion and abrogation of rights but not one of violence or racial extermination. Other non-British races were also to be classed as ‘foreigners’, with even those naturalized under existing laws to deported ‘unless they have proved themselves valuable citizens of Great Britain’. Despite Mosley’s repeated assurances that his policies on race would never emulate those in Nazi Germany, it was difficult to ignore the similar strains of racist and anti-Semitic thought within the BUF. The BUF’s policy on birth control and sterilization also showed influence from the eugenicist movement that became linked with racial policies in both the United States and Nazi Germany. None were to be forcefully sterilized, but the ‘unfit’ were to be ‘offered alternatives of segregation sufficient to prevent the production of unfit children, or voluntary sterilization’. While it must be granted that such concepts had

140 Mosley, *100 Questions*, p. 47.
141 ‘The Dear Bread Racket’, *Blackshirt*, 29 August 1936.
142 Mosley, *100 Questions*, p. 46.
yet to gain their later notoriety in the wake of Hitler’s ‘racial cleansing’ programs, their acceptance by Mosley was a reminder that scientific racism (as opposed to mere xenophobia) did play a role in the ideology of British fascism. 143 The absence of explicitly violent sentiment within BUF policy would hardly have been reassuring for those noting the similarity to laws passed in Nazi Germany; nor would it have comforted those encountering Chesterton’s suggestion, in the closing paragraph of ‘Apotheosis of the Jew’, that ‘the day of great reckoning is at hand’. 144

As the BUF faltered from 1934 onwards, Mosley and his followers blamed the Jews for undermining the fascist movement in Britain through a combination of political manoeuvring, physical intimidation and propaganda. Chesterton was particularly inflamed by the corruption of the press, as it represented the corruption of his own profession as well as a powerful arm of Jewish power. The most obvious targets for BUF propaganda in this regard were Jewish editors, owners or journalists who could be connected, merely by suggestion, to the vast machinations of ‘international Jewry’. Non-Jews were not excused from accusations of corruption, however, as even they could be subject to a campaign of financial threats and intimidation. Lord Rothermere, owner of the Daily Mail, was described by Chesterton as a ‘great patriot’ whose support for the Blackshirts in 1934 had been ‘repented in haste’ following such a campaign: ‘[Rothermere] celebrated his dropping of the Blackshirts with two leading articles full of ludicrous praise of the Jews – a matter of no small significance’. 145 The same conspiracy encompassed the

143 On the influence of eugenics on BUF policy, see Redvaldsen, “Science must be the Basis”, pp. 373-375.
144 Chesterton, ‘Apotheosis of the Jew’, p. 54.
145 Chesterton, Portrait of a Leader, p. 128.
British press’ treatment of international news, particularly where it cast light on the growing belligerence and authoritarianism of fascist states in Europe. During the Abyssian crisis in 1936, Chesterton identified ‘Alien propaganda’ at work on behalf of Emperor Haile Selassie’s government. ‘It looks as though the whole of the anti-Fascist rampage has been taken under the greasy wing of the Jews’, he informed readers of Blackshirt, citing as further evidence the calls for Britain to boycott the upcoming Olympic games in Berlin.  

Rather than engage with evidence for violence or molestation of Jews under the Nazi regime, Chesterton’s propaganda for the BUF tended to dismiss public opinion on Germany altogether: ‘One must study the reptile Press. Screams of abuse sustained in speech after speech, in article after article… Every achievement of National Socialist Germany misrepresented, ignored or denied’. Even where he acknowledged the reports of ‘concentration camps and castor oil’ that emanated from Europe, Chesterton made no mention of Nazi policy or violence directed towards German Jews, other than to note their ‘grievance in the fact that the German people have decided, after many dark experiences, to enjoy both the sensation and the reality of owning their own country’.

BUF propaganda which aimed at inspiring support for Hitler’s regime toward Germany was largely futile, due to the dwindling influence of the BUF as compared with the anti-Nazi movements led by Anglo-Jewish communities and other elements within British society. Although there were pockets of support for Hitler in Britain outside the ranks of Mosley’s movement, the public at large was not sympathetic to

146 ‘Shot and Shell for Fascists’, Blackshirt, 31 January 1936.
147 ‘Death is on Thy Drums, Democracy’.
148 ‘Death is on Thy Drums, Democracy’.

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Nazism, nor the aggressive expansionism of German foreign policy.\textsuperscript{149} Furthermore, despite Britain absorbing a lower number of refugees than the United States, the country was never ambivalent towards the plight of German Jews, with large sectors of the non-Jewish population engaging in both symbolic and practical demonstrations of support.\textsuperscript{150} Chesterton’s response to the increasing criticism of Hitler’s regime relied on a combination of denial, apologia and appeals to anti-war sentiment, which leaned heavily on the argument that Jews were conspiring to drag Britain into war on their behalf. This notion was to become a key part of fascist propaganda in the lead up to Britain’s declaration of war, gaining currency within pro-Nazi circles of the extreme right as well as the general population. As Richard Griffiths noted, even those who were not swayed by conventional appeals to anti-Semitism became susceptible to the notion of a ‘Jewish war of revenge’ and were drawn to the extremists from a general opposition to the war.\textsuperscript{151}

After he left Mosley’s organization in March 1938, attacks on Jewish ‘warmongers’ within the press remained a dominant theme throughout Chesterton’s writing and public speaking. The escalation in violence against Jews in Europe after 1938, marked by the outbreak of pogroms in Germany and Austria in November, prompted strong criticism from within Britain. Yet this failed to deter anti-Jewish feeling among those in the British population who, as Richard Griffiths observed, viewed such violence as having been brought about by the Jews themselves. Some figures in the anti-Semitic extreme right, such as Archibald Ramsay, went to absurd

\textsuperscript{149} On the awareness and reaction to Nazi Germany’s persecution of Jews among the British population, see Stone, \textit{Responses to Nazism in Britain}, pp. 79-110.
\textsuperscript{151} Griffiths, \textit{Patriotism Perverted}, pp. 28-29.
lengths to rationalize the events transpiring in Europe within the framework of a Jewish conspiracy. At a meeting of the Nordic League in February 1939, Ramsay alleged that the killing of German official Ernst Von Rath (which sparked the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938) was an act of ritual murder, carried out at the behest of a secret Jewish enclave in London. Chesterton’s interpretation of events was somewhat more grounded but no less anti-Semitic. While he held Hitler responsible for the invasion of Czechoslovakia, he maintained that the Jewish press was responsible for stoking tensions in Europe and hindering efforts to secure peace through appeasement.

Far from discouraging expressions of anti-Semitism, Chesterton’s estrangement from the BUF and the prospect of coming war seemed to dangerously intensify his zeal against British Jews. Addressing a meeting of the Nordic League on 11 May 1939, he ‘suggested that using lamp-posts was the “the only way to deal with the Jew”’. Despite the violent implications of this statement, it drew less attention from both the media and the Security Service than another address given by Chesterton to a meeting of the Nordic League and the Militant Christian Patriots later the same month. Speaking to an audience of some 500 attendees, Chesterton attacked prominent Jews within the media for their role in facilitating a ‘slaughter of British youth’. His targets included Sunday Referee correspondent Geneviève Tabouis, the ‘Red Jewess’ whose false reporting on Hitler had ‘kept Europe in a panic state’, as well as Marks and Spencer chairman Israel Moses Sieff, whom he

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152 TNA KV2/667/10a, M. report on speech made by Capt. Ramsay, 8 March 1939.
153 Griffiths, Patriotism Perverted, pp. 136-137.
accused of turning the *Daily Mirror* into a left-wing tabloid.\textsuperscript{154} A report of the meeting published by the *Jewish Chronicle* in June 1939 gave special mention to Chesterton’s contribution, which evoked much of the venomous anti-Semitism featured in ‘Apotheosis of the Jew’: ‘The wildest speech was made by A.K. Chesterton, who gave his delighted audience – mainly middle class – full value for their money by speaking (in Oxford tones) of “greasy little Jewish pornographers”’.\textsuperscript{155}

Given the extent of his anti-Semitism during this period, compounded by his disillusionment with the effort to stave off another war, it is not altogether surprising that Chesterton’s rhetoric against the Jews took on a threatening tone. At the same time, his behavior gave no indication that he would be willing to undertake spontaneous violence against the Jews, nor endorse those who did. Doris Chesterton, who shared few of her husband’s prejudices or political leanings, took pains to describe his cordiality towards her Jewish friends. One incident she recounted from the 1930s served to illustrate the contradiction between Chesterton’s fiery anti-Semitic rhetoric and his treatment of Jews on a personal basis:

I remember he met up by chance with a Jew who was driven to the edge of insanity for fear of what might happen if Fascism came to power in England. K [Chesterton] took infinite pains to soothe him down and actually did comfort him – all but promising him that there was no quarrel with such a Jew as himself.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{154} TNA KV2/1345/11, Extract from S.B. Report re a meeting held at Caxton Hall, 23 May 1939.
\textsuperscript{155} ‘Jew Baiters’ Unity Move’, *Jewish Chronicle*, 2 June 1939.
\textsuperscript{156} Chesterton Collection A. 45, Letter from Doris Chesterton to David Baker, 22 April 1979.
As well as matching the official BUF line, Chesterton’s insistence that only some Jews were deserving of scrutiny echoed a long line of thinking on the Jewish question harkening back to Hobson and G.K. Chesterton. In the tradition of supposedly ‘empirical’ anti-Semitism, such figures had insisted that, even if the Jews as a whole were given to certain characteristics, only those who acted maliciously (as international financiers or revolutionaries) were truly at fault. As illustrated many times throughout history, however, prejudice and violence against Jews rarely confined itself to those directly involved in usury or other acts used to justify their persecution. Even G.K. Chesterton, far more liberal than many other anti-Semites of his period, proposed that Jews in England might be required to don Arabic clothing in order to signify their alien origins.157

For fascist anti-Semites like Chesterton, some form of action against Jews was deemed necessary for the nation to survive and thus something to be carried out unilaterally, with minimal consideration of rights or due process. In his understanding of what would happen to Britain’s Jews under fascism, therefore, Chesterton suffered from the same blinkered idealism that he used to justify dictatorship. He assumed that, through a combination of discipline and sound leadership, the measures carried out to deal with the Jewish problem in Britain would be just. He failed to conceive of how his campaign to free Britain of international financiers and other ‘parasitic’ Jews derived from and fed the same ideology that fed their violent and indiscriminate persecution abroad, as pointedly observed by Leftwich in their 1948 collaboration, The Tragedy of Anti-Semitism: ‘You may take your beliefs wherever you choose, but [their] source is foul, it is corrupt, it is

contaminated. It is the wrong shape, Chesterton’. Like many others drawn into anti-Semitism before 1945, his views would appear both morally abhorrent and dangerously naïve in the wake of the Holocaust. Unlike many of that number, however, Chesterton could not claim to have only dealt with the Jewish question in a purely philosophical fashion; nor could he claim distance from the political factions in Britain which might have implemented similar measures as those in Germany.

If he had any awareness of the Holocaust before 1945, Chesterton did not display it publicly, nor did it have any diminishing effect on his anti-Semitism during the war. While this apparent ambivalence toward the Jews in Europe reflects more harshly upon Chesterton due to both his wider prejudice against the Jews and his pre-1939 apologetics on behalf of Germany, it is important to note that disinterest or disbelief regarding the stories of Nazi atrocities filtering into Britain was not confined to fascists or political anti-Semites. In his study of wartime anti-Semitism, Tony Kushner noted the reticence among some members of the British government to risk ‘sensational’ reports pertaining to Jewish concentration camps. Even as such information became more concrete in the later years of the war, the government maintained a policy of not specifying Jews as the primary victims of concentration camps or other abuses in its propaganda, fearing that such claims would be met with scepticism by the public. This fear proved exaggerated, as Kushner observed, given the general sympathy for European Jews among the general populace, but it

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demonstrated the inconsistency of British responses to Nazi atrocities while the war was still in progress.  

When the full extent of such atrocities was documented in the wake of the Allied victory in Europe, Chesterton’s public response was muted. An article he penned for the *Weekly Review* concerning the news reports emerging from Germany in June 1945 made mention of the ‘abominations’ uncovered in the Buchenwald concentration camp but quickly devolved into a defence of Mussolini’s political record and a general attack on the media, whose war time reporting he regarded as out of touch with ‘the sweat and toil and stark realities of life’. The only significant record of Chesterton’s personal reaction to the killing of Jews was contained in a letter from Colin Cross to David Baker in 1982, where Cross described meeting with Chesterton in 1960 during research for *The Fascists in Britain*.

At one moment, during lunch, I saw tears running down his cheeks; the cause was that he was explaining that his antisemitic [sic] writings during the 1930s had never been meant to lead to gas chambers or anything like that.

Statements made by Chesterton in other contexts suggest he acknowledged the existence of death camps but doubted the scale of the killings that had taken place. In June 1956 he made reference to Otto Strasser’s ‘exposure of the lie about six million Jews being done to death in gas-chambers’. A similar objection was raised in *Candour* regarding the ‘statistical absurdity’ of charges levelled against

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163 ‘Dr. Strasser’, *Candour*, 15 June 1956.
Adolf Eichmann in 1960 that accused him of complicity in millions of Jewish deaths:

The Bonn correspondent from the Times… writes of the mind boggling at this ‘diminished total’. How much more would it boggle if the real total of all the Jews murdered were to be revealed! A computing machine specifically made for the job would be needed to undertake the gigantic labour of subtracting all the bogus deaths. Not that a man or regime engaged in murder is any less abominable because the victims be numbered in thousands rather than millions.164

Further coverage of the affair appeared in subsequent issues, with Chesterton speculating on the shadowy methods through which Israel had kidnapped Eichmann and the propagandistic motives of the upcoming trial.165 He remained aloof from the question of Eichmann’s actual complicity in the murder of Jews, focusing instead on what he perceived to be a vast overreach of Jewish power through his extradition:

to act illegally to secure the “full exposure of the Nazi regime’s atrocious crimes” brings the whole business down from considerations of justice to the expedition of brazen propaganda… Utterly indefensible as were the crimes against innocent Jews (and it is damn nonsense to suppose that none were committed) the fact today is that there is not the slightest danger of the same kind of treatment being meted out to Jewish people.166

When the trial against Eichmann commenced in April 1961, Chesterton mounted a renewed attack with a leading article describing the ‘orgiastic festival’ of media coverage following the proceedings. Again he demurred on the question of Eichmann’s guilt, offering a variation of the defence’s argument that the accused

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164 ‘Eichmann Kidnapped’, Candour, 3-10 June 1960.
may have been forced, under threat of violence, to participate in the murders against his own judgement: ‘I do not even know what Eichmann did, if in fact he did do it, was repugnant to his own conscience’. The remainder of the article devolved into a general disparagement of ‘Jewish arrogance’ as exemplified by the prosecution, with Chesterton concluding that ‘the only acceptable “final solution” of the Jewish problem’ would be the widespread recognition of this tendency. As much as he lamented the ‘din’ of coverage surrounding Nazi atrocities and often paid greater attention to the suffering of Allied airmen in concentration camps than Jews or other victims, Chesterton did seem to acknowledge, at a bare minimum, that Jews had been systematically murdered during the war. To admit the full scale of the Holocaust seems to have been a step too far, however, for him to reconcile with the belief that ‘the horrors of the gas-chamber were instituted by a Germany gone berserk in war’, rather than the foreseeable product of anti-Semitism and Nazi ideology. Chesterton also refused to accept that the legal measures adopted between 1933 and 1939 were anything but the product of an earnest response to a malevolent Jewish element in Germany: ‘Not until the war did the German dislike of the Jews turn into the deplorable frenzy which led to the final abomination of slaughtering them’.170

They [the makers of international policy] prefer to think that the German attitude was based on the race theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, later adopted by Alfred Rosenberg. In truth, however, most Germans – including many “good party members” – ridiculed Rosenberg and refused to swallow the Chamberlain doctrine.171

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167 ‘The Eichmann Affair’.
168 ‘The Eichmann Affair’.
169 Chesterton and Leftwich, The Tragedy of Anti-Semitism, p. 213.
Chesterton was not a Holocaust denier in the literal sense, as he was able to acknowledge that Jews had been subject to a deliberate campaign of extermination by Nazi Germany. He was complicit, however, in the revisionist campaign mounted by numerous elements of the British extreme right after 1945, which sought to minimize, rationalize or otherwise diminish the extent of the Jewish genocide carried out by Hitler’s regime. Unlike some neo-Nazi revisionists and Holocaust deniers, Chesterton was not driven by a desire to rehabilitate Nazi Germany as a whole, and he held little regard for members of the British extreme right who went out of their way to defend Hitler after his ‘amok run’ in 1939: ‘It might seem strange’, he observed in June 1956, ‘that loyalty to Hitler should be recommended to British nationalists as the true measure of a man’. Unable to admit the terrible consequences of fascist anti-Semitism, which he had enthusiastically promoted in his interwar career, Chesterton reverted to a milder form of conspiratorial anti-Semitism to explain away the extent of Holocaust: ‘Nazi atrocities, far from being hushed up, have been dinned into the public ear without ceasing and in the process they have been quite fantastically exaggerated’. In an attempt to salve his conscience, Chesterton contributed to the growing body of ‘revisionist literature’ that spread throughout the post-war extreme right, and provided fuel for neo-fascist and neo-Nazi subcultures throughout Britain, Europe and the United States.

172 For an overview of Holocaust denial and revisionism on Britain’s extreme right after 1945, see Macklin, Very Deeply Died in Black, pp. 115-134.
173 ‘Dr. Strasser’, Candour, 15 June 1956.
174 ‘Jewish Propaganda Motive’.
175 On ‘historical revisionism’ and Holocaust denial as a subset of neo-fascist activity after 1945, see Roger Eatwell, ‘How to revise history (and influence people?)’, neo-Fascist style’.
Racism, anti-Semitism and conspiracy after 1945.

Much as he did not consider support for fascism incompatible with loyalty to Britain, Chesterton saw no incompatibility between his attitude to Jews and his willingness to fight a war with Germany. In both cases, nationalism framed Chesterton’s views: his commitment to fascism was always rooted in patriotism, while his antagonism towards Jews rested primarily on the assumption that the Jewish race had proved itself hostile to Britain and her people. While he undoubtedly harbored sympathy for the Nazi case against the Jews, therefore, this could never suffice as a reason for turning against his own country. Chesterton’s later interpretation of the war kept its roots in anti-Semitic conspiracy but did not entertain the notion, proposed in some quarters of the extreme right, that the Nazis themselves represented an arm of the conspiracy. Instead, he focused on the role played by Jewish finance in manipulating the nations of Europe into another war. This had been no easy task since, as Chesterton explained in *The New Unhappy Lords*, it required convincing Hitler to turn his attention from East to West and persuading the wary Allied governments to commit their nations to another war. Despite the forces allayed against this plot, Chesterton argued, ‘so far as immediate objectives were concerned, International Finance won the day’.¹⁷⁶ He made only a vague admission of Hitler’s stated intent to pursue a war with the West in *Mein Kampf* ‘many years before’, emphasizing that the Reich had been established as a ‘rebellion’ against International Finance and the

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danger posed to Germany by ‘upwards of a million communists whose salutation was “Heil Moskow”’.  

While the aftermath of the war and the Holocaust did little to alter Chesterton’s basic commitment to anti-Semitism, it did herald a change in his stylistic approach to the Jewish problem. His columns for the *Weekly Review* provided several examples of the more covert approach adopted by political anti-Semites after 1939, as demonstrated in a column regarding ownership of the press in December 1943:

> There is nothing to prevent wealthy foreigners from stepping into buy British papers… Research reveals the presence on several newspaper directorates of men with names difficult to pronounce, names which certainly were not found on the muster-roll of the English Army of Agincourt!  

Although coded language of this sort was not sufficient to stave off allegations of anti-Semitism or fascism altogether, it provided a greater legal standing on the occasions when Chesterton or his editors were driven to pursue libel action against accusations of disloyalty, incitement or ‘Jew-baiting’. In December 1943, for example, the *Weekly Review* reported its successful prosecution of such a case against the *Jewish Chronicle* for allegations that it advanced ‘covert defeatism and anti-Semitism’. Legal technicalities aside, the *Jewish Chronicle*’s accusation of anti-Semitism can be granted in retrospect when considering the lightly veiled disparagement of Jews that appeared in Chesterton’s columns alone. His critique of a

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177 Chesterton, *The New Unhappy Lords*, p. 22.  
pamphlet issued by Jewish secularist Chapman Cohen examining Christianity returned to some of the themes that had preoccupied anti-Semites in the BUF:

there are scores of cases wherein Mr. Cohen’s kinsmen have found asylum here after persecution abroad, a fact which nevertheless has not prevented them, after mastering the barest rudiments of our language, from standing upon soap boxes and inveighing against British institutions.180

This passage demonstrated yet another rhetorical method for the subtle advancement of anti-Semitic ideas: By couching his criticism of Jewish practices in religious terms, Chesterton was able to avoid (or at any rate deny) association with racial antagonism towards Jews. Given his own lack of religiosity, this was not a method which Chesterton employed with great regularity. In the wider context of Britain’s interwar extreme right, however, Christianity was sometimes used as a banner for nationalist or anti-Semitic ideology, as in the case of the Militant Christian Patriots.181 In a similar vein, an early draft of the 1945 National Front’s policy included the following provision among its seven points: ‘To ensure that what the late Archbishop of Canterbury [Dr. William Temple] called “the real Jewish problem” is recognized without rancour and an honourable, just and lasting solution found for it’. While it was unpopular among many of those planning the National Front itself, a Security Service report remarked that this phrasing was ‘a rather ingenious [sic] attempt to make anti-Semitism look respectable’.182 A more straightforward approach to concealing anti-Semitism was to simply avoid any

180 ‘Christianity and Mr. Cohen’, The Weekly Review, 4 May 1944.
181 See Griffiths, Patriotism Perverted, p. 48.
182 TNA KV2/1348/296ab, National Front, 1 November 1945.
reference to Jews whatsoever, a method employed in Chesterton’s 1946 pamphlet *Menace of the Money Power*.

Although the concept of a Jewish problem was tainted after the war by its affiliation with violent anti-Semitism in Germany, the large number of refugees seeking asylum from Europe after 1933 prompted a renewed interest in the solution of permanent Jewish resettlement in Palestine. Despite his interest in an ‘honourable, just and lasting solution’ to problems arising from Jewish migration, Chesterton had a longstanding opposition to the Zionist project in Palestine, which he perceived as an open attack on the British Empire by World Jewry. Following the Peel Commission in 1937, which recommended that the British government partition Palestine in order to establish a Jewish state, Chesterton took to the pages of *Blackshirt* to protest: ‘At long last Jewry has had the blind folly to come out into the open, boasting to the British people of its power to smash to pieces the British Empire’.⁴³ The emergence of a violent insurgency against the British mandate in 1945 further inflamed Chesterton’s hostility towards Zionism, while also appearing to turn public opinion against the Jews. ‘The British Press is to be congratulated’, he wrote in December 1946, ‘for putting an end to the embargo which, until recently, prevented the word “Jew” from appearing in any but the most favourable context’⁴⁴.

From a political standpoint, ‘Zionism’ provided another useful cover for passages which would otherwise have appeared blatantly anti-Semitic. In *Truth*, for example, Chesterton gestured openly towards a ‘Zionist conspiracy – surely the most tremendous in the world’s history’ that had enlisted the cooperation of the United

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¹⁸³ ‘Jews Threaten the British Empire’, *Blackshirt*, 14 August 1937.
¹⁸⁴ ‘Why Create Anti-Semitism?’, *The People’s Post*, December 1946.
States and Soviet Russia to facilitate mass Jewish migration to Palestine. By way of explaining this ‘happy accord’ between the two opposing world powers, Chesterton launched into a conspiratorial explanation of the Jews’ influence over the Soviet Union:

New York financiers found the money for the Czar’s overthrow. They supplied Trotsky with funds. They championed the Bolshevik cause at Versailles. They fed the Soviet Union with loans. Is it possible that Russia repaid some of the debt when she furnished the Jews for the great trek of 1945-46 and required Czechoslovakia to supply them with heavy armaments in 1948?\(^{185}\)

The actions of the Zionist insurgency leading up to 1948 also provided ample fodder for general attacks on ‘Jewish terrorists’.\(^{186}\) In an odd contradiction of his imperialist tendencies, Chesterton also turned to the plight of Palestinians (who had previously sought independence from the British) as a further indictment of Zionism and the record of world Jewry: ‘the reign of terror begun by the massacre of 300 Arab men, women and children at Deir Yassin had made possible the Jewish occupation of the country, because the panic-stricken flight of 1,000,000 refugees enabled the Jews to seize their deserted farms’.\(^{187}\)

In a vague sense, Chesterton did entertain the idea that a permanent settlement for Jews might be established in a more agreeable fashion. One proposal of his own, inspired by Joseph Leftwich’s suggestion of a Jewish community in Northern Australia, involved ‘damming the Webi Shebeli and the Juba [rivers] in

\(^{185}\) ‘The Mystery of Palestine’, Truth, 4 February 1949.
\(^{186}\) ‘Why Create Anti-Semitism?’.
Somaliland and turning the desert into quite a fertile land for the Jews’. He made no serious attempt to develop or promote such ideas, however, nor did he propose any other peaceful solution to the conflict in Palestine. Although spurred initially by concerns over British territory, Chesterton’s anti-Zionism was mainly a product of his anti-Semitism. The forcible establishment of a Jewish state in the Middle East appeared to Chesterton as an overt incarnation of the world conspiracy that operated in more subtle forms throughout other parts of the world. After 1948, Zionism and the state of Israel became woven into the fabric of Chesterton’s conspiracy theories, representing a manifestation of Jewish power with ‘ambitions far beyond the creation of a Jewish State in the Levant’. Quite contrary to those anti-Semites that hoped Zionism would eventually resolve the problem of Jewish rootlessness, Chesterton saw only an additional arm of the drive for world government.

What then, did Chesterton see as the resolution to the Jewish problem after 1945? In the absence of an overriding political organization equivalent to the BUF, it became even more difficult to discern what action he deemed necessary in regard to the Jews or the wider ‘menace’ of international finance. No doubt acutely aware of the greater scrutiny applied to anti-Semitism after 1945, Chesterton insisted that the onus arising from the conspiracy of World Jewry lay equally, if not primarily, with non-Jews: ‘Had we of the Gentile nations stood firm in defence of our own values… the Jews would have remained what they ought to be – a small sect living contentedly and at peace with their neighbours’. The appropriate response was therefore ‘to make a determined stand for our own legitimate and distinctive

188 TNA KV2/1348/261x, F.3. report re Edmonds and Chesterton, 8 March 1945.
190 ‘The Mystery of Palestine’.
interests’ rather than focus a movement on the persecution of the Jews.\textsuperscript{191} In Chesterton’s argument, therefore, the response to Jewish internationalism was the positive expression of national pride rather than the purely negative sentiment of racial or religious prejudice:

I am what is called an anti-semite mainly because I am a nationalist – a nationalist in the sense that I believe every nation to have its own guiding star which it must follow, its own ideal pattern which it must trace, its own integration which it must maintain ….Whether I am right or wrong, that is my belief, and my further belief – no less firmly held – is that Jewry at almost every level of contact exerts an influence hostile to this national ideal.\textsuperscript{192}

Despite nesting his hostility toward the Jews within a positive concept of nationalism, theoretically separate from the destructive or authoritarian drives of fascism, Chesterton was still faced with how to manage anti-Semitism within the context of his political aims. Was it permissible, for example, to encourage or tolerate violence against ‘aliens’ so long as those actions sparked a resurgence in national pride and an influx of electoral support for nationalist parties? In 1945, Chesterton explained his practical objection to such actions in a meeting with League of Ex-Serviceman leader Jeffery Hamm: ‘to raise a riot against the Aliens in the East End might give the participants a little well deserved pleasure but the Englishman living in the country usually reacted by feeling sympathy for the Aliens and disgust for the people responsible for the riot’. Better, he argued, to conduct campaigns raising awareness of the ‘vast Alien International Finance plot’. ‘Persuade a man in the country that his standard of life, his customs and his Government were to be

\textsuperscript{191} Chesterton, \textit{The New Unhappy Lords}, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{192} Chesterton and Leftwich, \textit{The Tragedy of Anti-Semitism}, p. 10.
dependent on a World Security Council ruled in reality by Alien International

Finance and he would be the first to hunt down the Aliens in his area’. Chesterton made no attempt to explain why this spontaneous uprising against ‘Aliens’ was to be any more judicious than the alternative. Two years later, he revisited the subject of anti-Semitic violence, once again considering its undesired consequences to those opposing international finance:

He who hopes to avert it [the Jewish plot for world power] by going into side-streets to smash the windows of Jewish shops or to stir up racial prejudices not only acts against people innocent of all knowledge of the great World Plan, but shows himself to be a moron who behaves exactly as the plotters want him to behave.194

There was a practical motivation for Chesterton to tone down his language in order to broaden his audience and avoid the social consequences of blatant ‘Jew-baiting’ like that practiced in the 1930s. As he demonstrated in Menace of the Money Power, Chesterton was capable of presenting his political ideas entirely stripped of any mention of the Jews while maintaining the implication of a Jewish conspiracy. Had he wished to abandon subtlety altogether, he could also have adopted another pseudonym or full anonymity for the purposes of distributing virulently anti-Semitic literature with relative impunity. There is good reason to believe, however, that Chesterton did moderate his approach to anti-Semitism after 1945 in earnest rather than just to avoid the social or political consequences of encouraging violence or other forms of persecution. He displayed a greater consideration of the innocent Jews

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193 TNA KV2/1348/289a, Extract from Source S.R.63 report mentioning Chesterton, 8 September 1945.
194 ‘Who are the Puppet-Masters?’.
who were liable to suffer from a general wave of hostility against their race, something that was often conspicuously absent from the anti-Semitic propaganda in the 1930s. He also refrained from invoking or denigrating the physical appearance of Jews, having come to regret such attacks as an unfair, emotionally driven form of prejudice that ultimately ran counter to his ideas.\textsuperscript{195} Chesterton was convinced that the intellectually and politically honest course of action was to engage with the Jewish problem directly and openly. This rested on his conviction that his anti-Semitism (if others needed to call it such) did not arise from personal prejudice. In childhood, he claimed to have gone through school with ‘scores of Jews’: ‘I not only had some among my friends but resisted the pressure of elders who tried to make me give them up’. He counted Jewish soldiers among his ‘comrades-in-arms’ from his service in both world wars and, most surprisingly of all, recalled no great contention with those Jews he encountered between 1918 and 1939: ‘[I] liked some of them, disliked none so much as I dislike some Gentiles, received kindnesses from several and am happy to think that I was sometimes able to do them kindnesses in return’. He therefore protested against the notion that his attitude towards the Jews was based on ‘personal prejudice’, going so far as to suggest that, ‘if personal prejudice were involved, my own would clearly be on the Jewish side’.\textsuperscript{196}

This was not an entirely convincing argument, since Chesterton made clear on several occasions that the problems he associated with ‘World Jewry’ could be traced back to their innate qualities. Furthermore, despite his muddled conceptions

\textsuperscript{195} Chesterton Collection A. 16, Baker interview with Rosine de Bounevialle, ca. 1978. 
\textsuperscript{196} Chesterton and Leftwich, \textit{The Tragedy of Anti-Semitism}, p. 10.
of culture, ethnicity and nationality, Chesterton’s own work argued that the Jews
were best understood as a race rather than a religious grouping:

the Jews derive from two main stocks—the Sephardim, who are true Semites,
and the Ashkenazim, who come of Turco-Mongoloid stock and who
embraced Judaism long after the birth of Christ. But when it came to the
creation of the State of Israel no difference was recognized between the two
stocks, and we have thus to regard World Jewry as one race, just as the
British, with their Anglo-Saxon and Celtic components, are recognized as
being one nation.\textsuperscript{197}

There was a more granular distinction to be made between Chesterton’s
concept of the Jewish race and that of other anti-Semites, particularly those who
subscribed to the ideas associated with Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Alfred
Rosenberg and other Aryan or Nordic supremacists. The chief concern in this form
of anti-Semitic ideology, infamously demonstrated in Germany in the lead-up to the
Holocaust, was the ‘purge’ of Jewish blood from the racial stock.\textsuperscript{198} Chesterton did
not appear to regard the biological threat of Jews amidst the wider population with
any real seriousness, instead concerning himself with the actions of particular Jewish
figures and the attraction of Jews by nature to certain forms of subversive or
decadent activity. His prejudice against coloured migrants was, by contrast, deeply
bound up with an aversion to race-mixing as a biological threat to the survival of the
white race. The key difference, therefore, was that Chesterton was largely prejudiced
against Jews because of their actions (or their perceived actions), whereas his

\textsuperscript{197} Chesterton, \textit{The New Unhappy Lords}, p. 201.
\textsuperscript{198} Dalia Ofer, ‘Nazi Anti-Semitism’, Berel Lang ed., \textit{Race and Racism in Theory and
prejudice against coloured migrants was expressed mostly against the demographic and biological threat posed by their increasing numbers in Britain.

These two forms of prejudice also developed under different circumstances and at different points during Chesterton’s life. His views on racial integration and coloured immigration can be directly tied back to the ambient racism of his childhood; it was only during the later stages of his life that Chesterton was driven to seek intellectual or theoretical justification for his understanding of white superiority and racial difference. With anti-Semitism, however, Chesterton developed his ideas as an adult under the assumption that he was making a rational judgement about the Jewish race and its members’ involvement in global politics. Though he appeared to have adopted anti-Semitic attitudes impulsively, under the heady influence of Mosley’s fascism, Chesterton was able to buttress his ideas against a wide range of anti-Semitic culture, intellectual tropes and even his family legacy. The result was a form of quasi-intellectual prejudice that Chesterton expressed in a noticeably different fashion to the colonial paternalism and biological racism which characterized his attitude toward migrants, minorities or colonized peoples in Africa and Asia. Jews represented an overarching presence within the international sphere, possessing many of the attributes that Hofstadter used to describe the generic ‘enemy’ of political conspiracy theorists: ‘sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving… He wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history himself, or deflects the normal course of history in an evil way’. People of colour, by contrast, were associated with the qualities which Chesterton ascribed to colonized Africans: rarely evil by nature but prone to violence, sexual misconduct

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and other ‘barbarous’ behaviours when not guided by the benevolent strictures of white rule.

The interplay between anti-Semitism and Chesterton’s other racial views became significant during the final decades of his life, as he sought an explanation for the two forces threatening his assumptions about race, decolonization and immigration. Up until the end of the Second World War, these ideas had largely been supported by the policies of both domestic and colonial authorities, who maintained the discriminatory order overseas and enacted policies that amounted to ‘an undeclared immigration policy aimed at restricting non-white settlement’ in Britain itself.\(^{200}\) It was only after the process of decolonization begun that these norms began to shift, in an interconnected fashion that would serve to bolster Chesterton’s conspiratorial interpretation of racial disorder. The shift to self-governance or independence within parts of the Empire previously under central administration, such as India and the Caribbean territories, resulted in more relaxed immigration policies; this in turn led to an increase in the number of Commonwealth subjects migrating from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean to settle in the United Kingdom after 1945.\(^{201}\) For Chesterton, the influx of non-white migrants was not only a risk to the racial order and social structure of Britain itself but a symptom and reminder of the Empire’s disintegration.\(^{202}\)

As the dissolution of Britain’s colonial presence grew more rapid and widespread in the 1950s, Chesterton endeavoured to establish a link between the


\(^{202}\) On the perception of non-white immigration as a sign of British decline, see: Robert Miles and Annie Phizacklea, *Racism and Political Action in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 5.
disestablishment of white supremacy and hegemonic aspirations of the Jews. He turned to various sources from overseas to support his view that, rather than an organic movement, the push to desegregate was part of a worldwide process being driven by Jewish international interests. As the United States was undergoing the process of integrating public schools in late 1957, for example, *Candour* reprinted an article from a U.S. anti-Semitic newsletter *Common Sense* arguing that ‘Jewish communists and their gentile stooges from New York’ were responsible for indoctrinating black Americans in the South into agitating against their interests for desegregation. In South Africa, Chesterton and other *Candour* contributors alleged that Jews were overwhelmingly represented among those supplying arms to anti-apartheid ‘terrorist’ groups or otherwise engaged in ‘communist subversion’.

Chesterton also warned that ‘Rothschild finance’ was mounting a simultaneous bid to infiltrate the ‘Afrikaner business world’: ‘we may be certain that the financial infiltration is not to uphold White rule but to undermine and eventually eliminate it’.

Chesterton’s analysis of decolonization and integration in British Africa reflected his two, mutually supporting prejudices: Jews were depicted as an opportunistic and subversive minority attempting to leverage the situation and foment dissent among native Africans, who in turn were depicted as a dangerous, unruly mass, vulnerable to the lure of communism and predatory capitalism.

The same dynamic applied to how Chesterton and his followers in the LEL viewed the ‘coloured invasion’ of post-war immigration to Britain, which became a

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recurring focus in *Candour* from late 1954. From the beginning, Chesterton was concerned with the deeper implications of immigration as a subset of the global conspiracy. He was initially sceptical of the notion that immigrants from the West Indies and Africa were being encouraged in order to weaken Britain’s economy: ‘the numbers of migrants concerned, although too large for our national health, is not large enough to accomplish an aim of that kind’. 206 He posited instead that the ‘coloured mob’ being transported to Britain was part of a worldwide scheme to foment revolution:

> Taken in conjunction with the mass migrations of West Indians to Great Britain, of Puerto Ricans to the United States, and (illegally) of the Chinese to Australia, such pacts certainly suggest that there is a deliberate world policy to infiltrate the White nations with people of African and Asian blood. The purpose, I am convinced, is the creation of an international revolutionary proletariat ready for action when the hour strikes. 207

In some ways, this argument was a reformulation of the anti-Semitic tropes that Chesterton had leveraged during the interwar period, suggesting that Jewish agitators were part of a deliberate campaign to foment communism in an otherwise disinterested British populace. 208 ‘Karl Marx said that as the British were too stupid to make their own revolution, foreigners would have to do the job for them. There is no question of the Blacks thus acting in the Briton’s despite’. 209 Wider events in Britain throughout the late 1950s also gave credence to the idea that coloured migration had come to represent a new incarnation of the ‘Alien Problem’ associated

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207 ‘Coloured migrations’, *Candour*, 7-14 June 1957.
with Jews in the pre-war and interwar periods. The ‘race riots’ at Notting Hill between August and September 1958 brought widespread attention to the problems that accompanied the influx of coloured migrants, despite the fact that much of the violence could be attributed to whites. Familiar themes emerged in the subsequent depiction of the migrants who, much like the Eastern European Jewish migrants after 1880, were affiliated with crime, crowded housing conditions and the spread of disease. Some stereotypes were less transferrable between the two periods: Whereas Jews had been affiliated with the unscrupulous accumulation of wealth and shady business practices, African and Asian migrants were now tarred with accusations of idleness and depicted as a drain on the modern welfare state. Lingering imperial ideas also affected the stereotypical depiction of migrants, with Candour suggesting in August 1961 that a series of disturbances in Brixton were evidence of ‘tribal warfare’ and other forms of foreign ‘barbarism’ having been imported to Britain through coloured immigration.

The widespread use of the ‘race issue’ as a campaign platform for extreme right parties (including the LEL, the Union Movement and the National Labour Party) also fed the perception that recent immigrants now found themselves in the same position as Jews had several decades prior. Though sceptical (if not actively derisive) of many of the other groups campaigning against coloured migrants, Chesterton argued that the same ‘smear-techniques’ employed by the media against anti-Semites in the 1930s were now being used ‘to make objects of ridicule, if not

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211 Chesterton, The New Unhappy Lords, p. 158.
212 Solomos, Race and Racism in Britain, pp. 60-61.
infamous figures, of people who insist that the White man is not a Black man and
should not be encouraged to act as though racial differences did not exist’.
Unlike many of the younger elements within the extreme right, however, Chesterton was
both tactically and ideologically opposed to abandoning his wider crusade against
the international Jewish conspiracy and decolonization in favour of the immigration
issue. In his mind, the two issues were effectively inseparable from one another,
since the conspiratorial aims of Jewish finance could be directly traced to the failure
of the government to effectively bar the influx of immigrants:

So disastrous has been the flooding of the country by the sea of coloured
immigrants that one wonders what economic motives have prompted its
sponsors… The dominating motive may well have been not economic but
political – the conspiratorial plan, everywhere being carried out, of securing
the mongrelisation of mankind.

The conspiratorial explanation satisfied two problems with the influx of non-
white migrants which, in Chesterton’s mode of thought, could not be satisfactorily
accounted for by economic factors. First, due to the deterministic nature of his views
on race, it was difficult for Chesterton to accept that African, West Indian and other
populations would willingly leave their natural homes for places to which they were
intrinsically unsuited. Though he acknowledged that some of the British
government’s interwar policies had created economic and political conditions that
drove migrants in search of better prospects, Chesterton was sceptical that so many
could be induced ‘to leave their sunny lands and shiver in misery throughout the

long English winters’. Second, he questioned why British politicians had been unwilling to take more strident action to reduce the ‘flood’ of migrants despite the clear political advantages in doing so. The mainstream impact of the ‘race issue’ in British politics became more obvious after the passing of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which represented the first major attempt by the Conservative government to restrict the number of coloured migrants settling in Britain. This was followed by a General Election in 1964 which, in Chesterton’s eyes, seemed to suggest that politicians (‘to whom votes are all-important’) would be driven to a harder stance on immigration, if not by their own convictions, then by sheer self-interest. That the responses to immigration continued to be so mild and practically ineffective, he argued, was evidence of deeper forces at work within the political system: ‘that the vested interests sponsoring coloured immigration had become so strong that anybody rash enough to offer real opposition might well be committing political suicide’.

Who then was ultimately responsible for the ‘deeper forces’ behind immigration and racial integration? Chesterton pointed to the same culprit with whom he had associated the erosion of British pride and interests since the 1930s, Jewish internationalists, who had now been driven to abolish the concept of race in a backlash against German racial fascism:

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218 Chesterton, *The New Unhappy Lords*, p. 156.
Hitler’s Germany had to some extent been founded on a concept of race – not a very clear concept in its positive aspect but exceedingly clear in its negative aspect. It was anti-Jewish. If the Gentiles were not allowed to attach value to race, obviously all racial concepts had to be eradicated and – not only that – the races themselves had to become so inter-mixed, so “integrated”, that no further pride in them would be possible.\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{The New Unhappy Lords}, p. 209.}

The evidence for this Jewish campaign to abolish ‘pride of race’ lay throughout all parts of the world where the traditional order was being dismantled: the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the drive to abolish the White Australia Policy and in Britain, the efforts to outlaw racial discrimination. Each of these movements had been accompanied by ‘the cry for integration everywhere on earth – except among the Jews’.\footnote{Chesterton, \textit{The New Unhappy Lords}, p. 209.} The great injustice and irony of this conspiracy for racial integration, Chesterton argued, was that the Jews themselves maintained an integrated racial identity that could be freely expressed through Zionism, while supporting ‘measures [that] are intended to safeguard the one race which claims exclusion, and claims it not on racial grounds but on grounds of religion’.\footnote{‘War on the Whiteman’.}

As with many of the adjustments and additions to Chesterton’s conspiracy after 1945, this theory had its roots in anti-Semitic tropes from the interwar period; the most relevant in this case being that Jews were associated with any force working to undermine British ‘national pride’. The political ramifications of Chesterton’s argument for a Jewish hand in shaping the politics of race and immigration were significant therefore, in drawing an ideological link between interwar anti-Semitism and the anti-immigrant racial nationalism of the post-1945 extreme right. Although not attributable to Chesterton alone, this dual form of racial nationalism and anti-
Semitic conspiracy would find expression within elements of the National Front during the 1970s, whose position on race could be described bluntly as ‘[blaming] the Jews for the blacks’. Chesterton’s influence could also discerned in the begrudging respect afforded by some members of the anti-Semitic extreme right to Jewish and Zionist communities for managing to maintain their homogeneity and sovereignty far more effectively than many white nations.

There were some advantages to the continuation of Jewish conspiracy theories within Britain’s extreme right, despite the demonstrated weakness of anti-Semitism as a political platform after 1933. For one, the overarching premise of a global conspiracy driven by a cosmopolitan enemy was more conducive to the ideological assumptions of fascists and ultra-nationalists than immigration alone. Whereas the latter presented a problem theoretically solvable through conventional politics, the grand nature of a conspiracy demanded a wholesale revival of national values and the transcendence of politics. Hofstadter summarized this as the moral logic adopted by conspiracy theorists: ‘Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Nothing but complete victory will do.’ Another factor with specific relevance to the National Front was the utility of conspiracy theories in supporting more virulent, politically repellent forms

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223 David Edgar, ‘Racism, Fascism and the politics of the National Front’, Race and Class, Vol.19, No. 1 (1977), pp. 111-121, at p. 120.
of racism and anti-Semitism that followed in the tradition of neo-Nazism or Leese’s racial fascism. Chesterton himself did not view the conspiracy as validation of these ideas, as he made clear during the planning stages of the National Front in 1966. A suggestion made by a British National Party member that membership ‘should be confined to people of Natural British/European descent’ was immediately quashed by Chesterton, who argued that any effort ‘to reproduce such discredited Rosenberg nonsense’ would rule out the involvement of his organization. Following his departure from the organization, however, Chesterton’s conspiratorial anti-Semitism did become interwoven with the Leese tradition under the guidance of the ‘hard line’ faction of the National Front’s leadership, represented by John Tyndall and Martin Webster.

As much as Chesterton’s concept of an international conspiracy proved to be persistent and adaptable to the shift of political circumstances after 1945, his uncompromising and Manichean approach to politics ultimately hindered his ability to make any political progress against the changing racial dynamics in Britain and the wider world. This was especially evident in the way he reacted to the otherwise promising signs of mainstream support for immigration control after the issue came to prominence in the 1950s. It was not enough, in the eyes of Chesterton and his dedicated supporters, to pursue policies that screened migrants based on their health or financial security. Nor was it acceptable to implement legislation that restricted immigration on a general basis, like the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, since

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227 ‘National Front Formed’, Candour, February 1967. For his part, Chesterton argued that the LEL should be open to ‘coloured’ members who were loyal to the empire. See ‘Loyalists Debate Coloured Membership’, Candour, 26 October 1956.
228 Thurlow, Fascism in Britain, p. 282.
this would result in the exclusion of migrants from the former white dominions and in turn isolate them further from British influence.\textsuperscript{230} That these measures amounted to a tacit enforcement of racial discrimination mattered little to Chesterton, who demanded an ideological as well as practical campaign to preserve racial order. As a result, he was dismissive even of Enoch Powell, whose pronouncements against immigration heralded both controversy and an upwelling of popular support for directly addressing race. Rather than see Powell as the herald of a white resurgence, as some National Front members did to Chesterton’s chagrin, Powell appeared instead as a beacon of false hope and a symbol of political opportunism:\textsuperscript{231}

One or two dramatic speeches, perhaps a letter or two to \textit{The Times}, and they consider their annual stint handsomely performed. But although he keeps quiet on race relations, the publicity attracted by his Wolverhampton speech has led to a ready demand for White Champion Powell to write and speak on finance, economics, philosophy, the classics and everything in the world except coloured immigration\textsuperscript{232}

While he did not abandon the cause of white Britain after leaving the National Front in 1971, Chesterton’s final years were, in many respects, a retreat from politics into the quasi-intellectual mire of global conspiracy. In the final issue of \textit{Candour} published before his death, Chesterton warned of the potential for a respectable figurehead to act as a ‘safety valve’, thus releasing the pressure that might otherwise have driven a more revolutionary revival of white nationalism: ‘The function of a safety valve, let us remember, is not to bring about change but to ensure that

\textsuperscript{230}‘Emergency Immigration Law Needed’, \textit{Candour},
\textsuperscript{232}‘Cut and Thrust’, \textit{Candour}, August 1968.
dynamism which could cause change is allowed to escape into the desert air. 233 This assessment would prove prescient in the years that followed, as the feted revival of Britain’s extreme right under the guise of the anti-immigrant populism was thwarted, not by a grand conspiracy, but by the gradual adaptation of the political establishment.

Conclusion

A.K. Chesterton’s career with the extreme right lasted nearly forty years, spanning several continents and incorporating two of the most controversial political parties ever to emerge in 20th century Britain. The most tangible legacy of this long and taxing struggle for national revival was a substantial body of written work, much of it produced in the decades following the dissolution of the BUF. In Richard Thurlow’s view, the mass of conspiratorial literature left in the wake of Chesterton’s death was a kind of monument to the fruitless delusions that underpinned British fascism as a whole: ‘This is the story of how the obsessions of an able man led him down the wrong track, and how acres of forest were pulped to carry the prolific literary output of his fantasy politics’.1 Chesterton’s supporters and fellow travellers viewed the obsessive nature of his political worldview as a patriotic virtue rather than a dangerous fixation. A reprint of Chesterton’s 1938 pamphlet *Why I Left Mosley*, issued by the A.K. Chesterton Trust in 2010, was introduced accordingly:

> it should not be forgotten that whilst A.K. continued to write, speak, organise and fight *in the frontline* until his death – a struggle that was fraught, painful, but manly – Mosley, ‘the Leader’, took himself off into exile to await “the call of the English people”, a call that *never* came and was *never seriously expected*.2

Given that his preoccupations often ran contrary to both historical accuracy and practical politics, there is merit to the idea that Chesterton was ultimately a victim of his own convictions. It is entirely possible, for example, that he could have

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2 *Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary*/*Why I Left Mosley* (London: BM Candour, 2010. Originally published in London by the National Socialist League, 1939), p. 16. This version was issued by the A.K. Chesterton Trust as part of a combined reprint of two pamphlets produced by Chesterton in the 1930s. Italics in original.
pursued political activism with greater success, had he been willing to abandon anti-Semitic conspiracies and reconcile himself to a world where Britain played a more minor role in international affairs. Had he acceded to his wife’s wishes and left aside politics altogether, Chesterton would no doubt have enjoyed a more stable and remunerative career as a journalist after returning from overseas in 1943. From a biographical standpoint, it easy to characterize Chesterton as either a tragic figure, led astray by misguided patriotism and utopianism, or a pathetic one, driven to bigoted fantasies by a lack of imagination and intellectual rigour.

What both of these interpretations overlook is the extent to which Chesterton’s unwavering, single-minded approach to politics was both an intrinsic product of his ideology and a defining feature of his influence on the extreme right. Chesterton’s style of political writing mellowed somewhat after his time with the BUF, but he retained an affinity for military terminology and imagery until his death. More than acting as rhetorical flourishes, or incitements to actual paramilitarism, the references to battlefield tactics and soldiering that appeared throughout Chesterton’s work emphasized the need for discipline and commitment among British patriots. The political struggle for national survival was thus presented as requiring all the bravery and steadfastness that had been demanded of Chesterton as a teenage soldier in the wartime struggle for East Africa and the Western Front. The use of martial analogies within Chesterton’s post-war career did little to distance him from the taint of the BUF, and later fed into the ‘Colonel Blimp’ reputation of the League of Empire Loyalists. Nevertheless, it highlighted the ongoing prevalence of struggle and self-sacrifice as themes within the ideology of the extreme right after 1945. It bears noting that one of the more influential works of neo-fascist literature that
appeared in Britain after Chesterton’s death depicted the ‘political soldier’ as a model for aspiring activists.³

Chesterton’s personality and intellectual disposition, the ‘ideology of obsession’ that Baker and Thurlow highlighted, are only part of the reason why he was able to persist in extreme right activism long after many of his former comrades had fallen away. Luck and circumstance played a role in allowing Chesterton to avoid some of the more dire consequences that befell British fascists after 1940, though it is doubtful whether internment would have deterred him from further political activity. Several prominent 18b detainees, including Mosley and John Beckett, renewed their movements after 1945, and Chesterton’s own brush with the authorities seemed only to cement his radical outlook on Britain’s political establishment. The deviation between the post-BUF experiences of Chesterton and William Joyce can be better explained on ideological grounds. Whatever affinity the two men shared for radical fascism and anti-Semitism, Chesterton was patriotic to a fault, viewing Joyce’s flight to Germany and transformation into ‘Lord Haw Haw’ as a bizarre perversion of the ideals that had underpinned the BUF.

Although the formation of the Union Movement in 1947 provided a rallying point for former BUF members, there were few incentives for extreme right activists outside Mosley’s circle to continue their political struggle into the post-war era. J.A. MacNab, who worked alongside Chesterton in the BUF’s propaganda wing, left Britain for Spain following Joyce’s execution in 1945. Rex Tremlett, another former Blackshirt and a supporter of the After-Victory group, returned to his original calling

³ ‘The Political Soldier’ was a 1984 political tract written by Derek Holland, a longstanding member of the National Front. For details see: Sykes, The Radical Right in Britain, pp. 122-123; Copsey, Contemporary British Fascism, pp. 33-34.
as a farmer when the new movement floundered. Beckett remained active the longest, working with the British People’s Party until 1953 when the death of his friend and financial patron, the Duke of Bedford, prompted him to turn to religion rather than politics as a source of meaning.\(^4\) As his wife often lamented, Chesterton did not lack the means or opportunity to leave politics aside and focus solely on literary or journalistic pursuits. In addition to his strong ideological motives, however, Chesterton was presented with circumstances that facilitated his lifelong engagement with radical politics. Partly because of the reputation he had acquired from the BUF, Chesterton found it difficult to maintain a satisfying career in journalism outside of sympathetic publications like *Truth*. The unexpected arrival of a generous and undemanding patron, R.K. Jeffery, made political activism a viable (if not lucrative or successful) vocation for Chesterton in the latter half of his life.

After 1945, Chesterton established himself as a senior figure within the extreme right, first as the de facto head of the LEL, and eventually as the sole chairman of the National Front. Despite coming to hold such a position, however, Chesterton never came close to attaining the prominence that Mosley acquired in the 1930s, nor did he attempt to replicate the charismatic or semi-mythical profile of the man he once touted as Britain’s saviour. This was a disadvantage in the immediate aftermath of the war, when Mosley’s return to politics easily overshadowed any other extreme right movement, but Chesterton’s more prosaic style of political leadership was more durable in the long term. Though neither he nor Mosley ever fully transcended their connection to interwar fascism, Chesterton was spared the

\(^4\) For details of Beckett’s turn towards Roman Catholicism, see Beckett, *Fascist in the Family*, pp.
brunt of the anti-fascist backlash encountered by the Union Movement and the British People’s Party. By positioning himself as an advocate for grassroots patriotism rather than a would-be leader, Chesterton maintained a lower profile and provided a more fundamental link between the interwar and post-war eras than Mosley, who grew increasingly aloof from the movement he had founded as time progressed.

‘A political oxymoron’: the problem of fascism in Britain.

Stanley Payne’s description of fascism in Britain as a ‘contradiction in terms’ referred to the mismatch between the qualities of fascism as a violent revolutionary movement, and the context of interwar Britain as a stable nation-state with long traditions of civil society and parliamentary democracy. Even without the benefit of hindsight that Payne possessed, contemporary observers of the BUF were able to sense that the bombastic militarism and violence employed by Mosley’s party were ill-suited to British conditions. In 1937, the author George Orwell found it ‘doubtful whether a Gilbert and Sullivan heavy dragoon of Mosley’s stamp would ever be much more than a joke to the majority of English people’. Many interpretations of the BUF have concluded, in line with this assessment, that Mosley’s party was simply out of place in Britain. Yet the scholarship concerned with British fascism has also repudiated the idea that Mosley’s party was ideologically incoherent or simply a plagiarism of the Italian and German movements. Following the example

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set by Robert Skidelsky’s study of Mosley, historians have been generous in their assessment of British fascism as a sophisticated ideological tradition paralleling the one that emerged in other parts of Europe.

The experiences and intellectual processes which led Chesterton towards the BUF were much the same as the ones that engendered fascist movements on the continent. His military values and intense, transcendental nationalism had British roots, but were cemented by the experience of suffering, comradery and disillusionment associated with the front generation throughout Europe. Chesterton’s intellectual convictions regarding the decay of Western culture and civilization bore a close resemblance to the notions of Spengarian decline and cultural despair which fed German fascism. Yet the icons of cultural achievement and heroism which Chesterton invoked as a remedy for this despair were part of a British pantheon, with Shakespeare as the crowning figure. Likewise, the transcendent nationalism which he embraced was grounded in a distinctive notion of a greater Britain spanning the globe at the height of its imperial flourishing. The fact that Chesterton was able to arrive at this worldview independently, prior to having contact with an existing fascist movement, lends itself to the interpretation of generic fascism put forward by theorists like Roger Griffin: an essentially universal ideology, not bound to any particular national context or institution, that coalesced around myths of national decline and rebirth in the early 20th century.

Interpreting Chesterton’s ideology as a variant of Griffin’s palingenetic ultra-nationalism demonstrates the similarities between fascism in Britain and in other parts of Europe. To understand the limitations and contradictions of British fascism, however, we need to look beyond the similarities highlighted by the fascist minimum.
and consider how the BUF diverged from the general characteristics of European fascism. Chesterton’s experiences with Mosley between 1933 and 1938 provide insight into several of the peculiarities that arose from an attempt to instigate a fascist revolution in a well-established democracy. From the beginning, the BUF’s campaigns rested upon a set of economic and political proposals that was uncommonly sophisticated. *The Greater Britain* was something of an oddity among the literature produced by fascist movements, many of whom disdained detailed policy proposals in favour of broad, emotionally resonant calls for national revolution. Chesterton’s writing as a BUF propagandist, represented at its fullest by *Creed of a Fascist Revolutionary*, was far more typical in its fascist sentiment, offering denunciations of individualism, cosmopolitan culture and parliamentary democracy alongside the demand for an immediate and drastic national revolution. Within the framework of the BUF, however, even a radical polemicist like Chesterton was compelled to present British fascism as an essentially reasonable, intellectually sound alternative to the existing order. ‘Not that the streets of Merrie England shall flow red with blood’, he reassured the readers of *Blackshirt* in 1934. ‘Not that heads will roll in the sand’.  

The programmatic nature of the BUF was understandable, given Mosley’s prevailing interest in economic planning and the political context of interwar Britain, which was naturally more suited to a fascism offering ‘peace and prosperity’ than one offering ‘war and expansion’. Whether genuine or merely a concession to political realities, the BUF’s calls for an orderly form of national revival often

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seemed to contradict the revolutionary dynamic that set fascism apart in the first place. In Chesterton’s case, this contradiction was evident in the gap between words and actions, or propaganda and reality. On paper, the fascist revolution led by Mosley was to be a rebuke to decadent liberalism and a parliamentary system paralysed by talk. Yet as the BUF was unable to gain the street-level momentum of fascist parties on the continent, and proved unwilling to challenge many of the social and legal norms constraining it, British fascism itself amounted primarily to bluster. When the BUF did engage in the kind of violent action that was integral to the fascist campaigns in other parts of Europe, it disturbed even the professedly revolutionary Chesterton, who was repelled by what he saw as unnecessary and undisciplined brutality at the Olympia meeting.

The brief crisis of conscience that Chesterton experienced after Olympia is insufficient reason to exculpate him from the wider pattern of political violence associated with British fascism. As discussed in Chapter 3, Chesterton’s anti-Semitic pronouncements after his break with Mosley in 1938 strayed on at least one occasion into incitement against British Jews. His continued association with the party even after witnessing the Defence Force in action, not to mention his enthusiastic participation in the campaigns in East London, made him complicit in the violence that inevitably accompanied BUF activity. On an ideological level, however, there is little to suggest that violence played any significant role in Chesterton’s concept of a fascist revolution. At most, he regarded the BUF’s paramilitary aspect as a practical necessity, as well as a product of its commitment to discipline and patriotism, values that set the Blackshirts apart from their anarchic, internationalist opponents. While this view encompassed some of the relationship between fascism and paramilitary
violence, Chesterton fell short of Michael Mann’s observation that ‘violence was key to the “radicalism” of fascism’. The radicalism of Chesterton’s fascism lay instead in its call for a new society capable of transcending materialism, restoring Britain’s cultural values and incorporating the lessons of the First World War. It bears reiterating that, despite his professed disdain for talk and theory, Chesterton’s fascism was defined almost entirely by ideas and the nebulous concept of spiritual revolution.

In using Chesterton to draw broader conclusions about the nature of British fascism in the interwar period, we need to contend with the fact that he was but one aspect of a multifaceted movement. Much like its counterparts throughout Europe, Britain’s fascist movement contained both radical and conservative elements. Robert Skidelsky was among the first to note that Mosley, wielding the most direct influence over the BUF’s policy and direction, brought a combination of rational and romantic ideas to fascism. While idealistic notions of heroism and spiritual renewal played an important part in Mosley’s fascist program, his vision of a fascist revolution was premised on the idea that scientific corporatism would resolve the material impediments to Britain’s national revival. Some figures within the BUF leadership, such as Chesterton’s long-time rival Neil Frances-Hawkins, brought a decidedly pragmatic approach to the task of organizing the BUF as a political machine. Others, like William Joyce, were driven by a commitment to fascism and anti-Semitism that eventually overrode their commitment to Britain altogether. The most outwardly extreme figure within Britain’s interwar fascist movement, Arnold

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10 Mann, Fascists, p. 16.
Leese, rejected the BUF outright and compensated for his lack of political sophistication through sheer racist fanaticism.

Due to his disdain for the conventions of Britain’s decadent political institutions, and his enthusiastic embrace of anti-Semitic conspiracies, Chesterton was drawn towards the more radical, idealistic circles within the BUF, occupied by ‘real revolutionaries’ like Joyce and John Beckett.11 His ideology provided a good illustration of the sense in which British fascism was revolutionary in a manner that distinguished it from the radical left. Apart from the corporatist ideas he adopted from Mosley, Chesterton had no broad critique of capitalism akin to Marxist theory. Anti-Semitism provided the rationale for a more limited attack on financiers, while he simultaneously denounced the left’s materialism, pacifism, internationalism and willingness to stoke class conflict. Chesterton’s interwar ideology was revolutionary because it sought to abolish rather than preserve the status quo and replace Britain’s liberal democratic system with a corporatist one. It was also consistently anti-conservative, attacking hypocritical Tories as often as it pilloried decadent liberals and the menace of bolshevism.

The radical and utopian qualities of Chesterton’s ideology resulted in some of the clearest and most unadulterated expressions of fascist thought to emerge from a British perspective. It must be noted, however, that the pure, idealistic nature of Chesterton’s fascism often proved difficult to reconcile with the reality of establishing a popular movement in 1930s Britain. He denounced compromise as a symptom of liberal decadence, despite the fact that the BUF was already compelled to water down or obscure aspects of fascism that proved unpalatable for British

11 Chesterton, Why I Left Mosley, p. 4.
audiences. After the war, in an article discussing William Joyce’s flight to Germany, Chesterton insisted that British fascists had consciously sought to separate their movement from the violent, despotic nature of continental fascism: ‘[the Mosley fascists] were sure that the Fascism they were to build would differ from continental brands as radically as the Reform Act differed from the French Revolution’. This echoed an early statement made by Mosley during the 1930s that likened the nature of British fascism to 19th century liberalism, an orderly and ‘perfected’ version of a creed that had ‘bathed the continent in blood’.

After dismissing the BUF as grossly unsuited to British conditions, George Orwell raised the possibility of a more refined fascist movement emerging in the future that would avoid Mosley’s missteps: ‘English Fascism, when it arrives, is likely to be of a sedate and subtle kind (presumably, at any rate at first, it won’t be called Fascism)’. This was a prescient observation in one sense, as later iterations of the British extreme right did scrupulously avoid labelling themselves fascists. What Orwell overlooked, however, was that the BUF had already been shaped by concessions to the British character. As the mass departure of conservative “Rothermere fascists” in 1934 demonstrated, there was a limit to how far this process of moderation and adaptation could be carried before the whole concept of British fascism began to unravel. For the BUF to completely abandon a violent, revolutionary dynamic and embrace some more ‘sedate and subtle’ form of politics was to acknowledge that fascism was an essentially unstable form of politics with no real place in Britain. It was to admit, in some sense, that the kind of economic,

13 Mosley, Fascism: 100 Questions, p. 4.
14 Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 197.
political or cultural crises necessitating a fascist revolution had failed to manifest themselves. Rather than acknowledge either of these possibilities, Mosley and his followers persisted with fascism until the British government intervened. Chesterton’s most resounding indictment of the BUF after his departure in 1938 described what remained of the party as ‘pursuing a parody of fascism in thought and principle’.¹⁵ In actuality, however, thought and principle were the main areas in which the BUF could be considered a success. British fascists retained their ideological integrity at the cost of political progress; in Robert Paxton’s phrase, ‘They remained pure – and insignificant’.¹⁶

Two of the characteristics which defined the BUF as a fascist party, paramilitarism and revolutionary nationalism, proved alienating to much of British society. Anti-Semitism, the other quality which kept the BUF on the margins of British politics, was never a necessary component of fascist ideology, a fact often obscured by the centrality of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany and the fascist movements of Central Europe. Chesterton’s interwar experience provides some explanation as to why anti-Semitism became such a defining feature of British fascism, despite the damage it caused to the movement. International finance conspiracies provided both a rationale for fascism’s fledgling status in Britain and a monolithic enemy for its followers to rally against. Chesterton’s obsession with malevolent conspiracies was a natural consequence of the Manichean view of politics and history to which he subscribed, and internal enemies were a universal

¹⁵ Chesterton, Why I Left Mosley, p. 4.
¹⁶ Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism, p. 75.
aspect of European fascism.\textsuperscript{17} The BUF’s belligerent campaigns through East London attracted vigorous opposition and failed to replicate the party’s early success in attracting a mass membership. They were fruitful enough, however, to persuade Chesterton and other radicals that a groundswell of nationalistic, anti-Jewish sentiment lay just below the surface of British society, waiting to be harnessed for political ends. This assumption, ill-founded though it was, would prove central to the reformation of Britain’s extreme right after 1940. During the brief period between Chesterton’s departure from the BUF and the beginning of the Second World War, anti-Semitism provided a degree of unity in a movement that, outside of Mosley, was desperately lacking in leadership. Conspiracy theories of a calculated Jewish campaign against Germany offered a perversely comforting explanation for why Britain was being drawn into another European conflict. For Chesterton, disillusioned with Mosley after years of loyal service, the crusade against Jewish money power was a continuing thread to be followed after the failure of the BUF. Even as he denounced Hitler’s invasion of Czechoslovakia, and prepared for the possibility of fighting another war, Chesterton warned against ‘that still more devastating and frightful thing, the menace of cosmopolitan gold’.\textsuperscript{18}

The outbreak of war in September 1939, followed by the start of internment in May 1940, did not mark the end of fascism in Britain. Instead, these events represented the end of an era during which fascism represented the main organizational and ideological rallying point for activists of the extreme right. The tendency to view British fascism as a monolithic, unbroken continuity spanning the

\textsuperscript{17} Paxton, \textit{The Anatomy of Fascism}, p. 36; Mann, \textit{Fascists}, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{18} ‘Germany’s Amok Run’, \textit{Weekly Review}, 23 March 1939.
pre and post-war eras has been encouraged by interpretations of fascism that place their sole emphasis on myths and ideas. Since movements of the extreme right in Britain after 1945 were occupied primarily with national rebirth, it follows under Griffin’s interpretation that they were just another manifestation of the same fascist essence that propelled the BUF. It is hard to dispute the basic notion of an ideological and hereditary link between interwar fascism and post-war nationalism in Britain. Along with his obsession with decadence and national regeneration, Chesterton maintained an interest in specific aspects of BUF policy after returning from overseas in 1943. His proposed alternative for post-war Britain, presented to the public as an ‘Empire Economy’, was essentially a rehashing of the corporatist autarchy described by Mosley in *The Greater Britain*. These enduring proposals for a nationalistic alternative to capitalism and communism tie Chesterton’s post-war ideology to yet another definition of generic fascism, the holistic, radically nationalist third-way described by Roger Eatwell.

Both Griffin and Eatwell’s theories are useful for discerning the continuing prevalence of certain themes within extreme right ideology, but they cannot be used to encompass the entirety of the movement after 1945. The breadth and simplicity of Griffin’s fascist minimum, while of value in assessing fascism as an ideology, starts to obscure rather than enlighten when applied uncritically to the whole of the post-war extreme right. Ideological heterogeneity and organizational complexity, the qualities which Griffin attributed to post-war fascism, take on a greater significance when viewed as more than just mutations of the fascist organism, or different factions arguing over the interpretation of national rebirth. This is especially the case when, per the suggestions of Robert Paxton and Michael Mann, we understand
fascism as a movement defined by as much its actions and organization as its ideas. Rather than viewing Chesterton and other activists as engaged in a monolithic neo-fascist project, it is more enlightening to consider fascism as only one aspect of a wider political family that coalesced in Britain after the end of the Second World War. This family comprised several overlapping factions, including the remnants of the interwar fascist movement, the fringes of the conservative movement, newer strands of racial nationalism, and an array of other esoteric right-wing factions, some of which contained strains of unabashed neo-Nazism or ‘nostalgic fascism’.¹⁹

Having made a case against the notion of a ubiquitous ‘British fascism’ after 1945, it must be acknowledged that, contrary to the protestations of ex-BUF figures like Chesterton, fascism did play a significant and perhaps outsized role in parts of the extreme right. Mosley’s Union Movement stands as the most straightforward example of a British neo-fascist party, in the sense that Mosley sought to recapture the momentum of his earlier party, albeit in the service of a radical new program based around pan-European identity.

Chesterton and the After-Victory Group’s aspirations for a National Front party between 1943 and 1946 also qualified, in many respects, as a fascist enterprise. Chesterton and other ex-BUF members in the planning committee had every intention of harnessing a populist, grassroots nationalism and anti-Semitism to support their movement, and made repeated reference to a leader of military background emerging organically to spearhead the process of national regeneration. Chesterton anticipated that the aftermath of the Second World War would be a repeat of the years after 1918, and that a new wave of veterans would embrace nationalism

¹⁹ Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, p. 163.
and anti-Semitism, just as he had in the 1930s. His fixation on ‘winning the peace’
and accomplishing tasks that had eluded the BUF implied that the party debuting in
1945 was to be a fairly orthodox attempt to revive British fascism, stripped of its
foreign overtones and the personality cult surrounding Mosley. In other respects,
however, the After-Victory Group gave a preview of the ideological and
organizational ambiguity that would characterize the extreme right after 1945. Collin
Brooks, Chesterton’s closest ally in planning the National Front, spent much of the
interwar period vacillating between conservatism and the extreme right. The party’s
platform also incorporated conservative principles, promising to combat the growth
of state bureaucracy and affirm the dignity of individual British citizens. Such ideas
were hardly typical of ‘state worshipping’ interwar fascist parties, and bore closer
resemblance to the quasi-libertarian platforms of the contemporary extreme right in
Western Europe.\textsuperscript{20}

Given that the 1945 National Front hardly came to fruition as a party, its
political orientation was mostly a matter of speculation and argument among various
members of the planning committee, rather than a definite set of policies. Even so,
Chesterton’s proposals for mass chalking and leafleting campaigns gave a small
insight into the direction his political activism was headed, towards the
confrontational but mostly non-violent protest tactics of the LEL. In organizational
terms, the After-Victory Group itself was something of a predecessor to the small,
non-party entities which comprised much of the extreme right after 1945: an
overlapping cluster of pressure groups, reading circles and clandestine paramilitaries
that bore varying degrees of ideological and methodological proximity to fascism.

\textsuperscript{20} Mann, \textit{Fascists}, pp. 367-368.
Despite the weathering of internment and the flourishing of small extreme right groups that took place during this period, Chesterton’s experience after 1943 brought much of the same failure and disillusionment he encountered with Mosley. New circumstances, ideas and alliances on the extreme right were accompanied by an array of old and new problems. The absence of a clearly appointed leader exacerbated the internal divisions which had beset the movement even under Mosley’s stewardship. Reconciling the revolutionary, anti-Semitic aspects of British fascism with the more conservative tendencies of the British right proved difficult, as illustrated by the abrupt departure of the After-Victory group’s patron, Granville Soames, in 1945. Chesterton’s experiences with the After-Victory Group, and later with the LEL, confirm Mark Pitchford’s observation that relations between conservatives and the extreme right became far more circumspect after the collapse of interwar fascism in Britain. Ironically, just as Chesterton and other radicals were becoming more open to conservative ideas, the establishment circles of British conservatism were becoming more unified and diligent in their opposition to fascism and anti-Semitism.21 Financing and other mundane necessities of political organizing subsequently proved a constant struggle for Britain’s post-war extreme right, which was forced to rely on the generosity of aristocrats like the Duke of Bedford, eccentric businessmen like R.K. Jeffery, or an audience of followers endlessly harangued for small donations.

Just like its predecessors, the After-Victory group was brought down by circumstances largely outside its control. Instead of the surge of nationalism and anti-Semitism which Chesterton and Brooks anticipated, the end of the war in 1945

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brought renewed antipathy towards any group that bore a resemblance to the BUF. John Beckett’s British People’s Party and Mosley’s Union Movement each encountered fierce public opposition, while the After-Victory group’s planned National Front was rendered impotent by constant infighting and state infiltration. In some ways, Chesterton’s resignation from the National Front in 1946 represented a more definitive end to his involvement with fascism than his resignation from the BUF. That event signalled Chesterton’s disillusionment with Mosley as a heroic figure, rather than fascism as a whole. The failure of the first National Front, on the other hand, marked his disillusionment with mass politics, and the idea that a national revolution could be easily reignited along traditional party lines. The intellectual or “spiritual” remnants of fascism – cultural despair, anti-Semitic conspiracy and palingenetic ultra-nationalism – remained integral to Chesterton’s worldview after 1945, but were diluted and separated from the violent, grassroots populism that made fascism such a distinctively dangerous and unstable force in interwar politics.

The clearest demonstration of Chesterton’s altered relationship with fascism after 1945 was the LEL. Reading through the issues of Candour, which consistently featured overt anti-Semitism, strident nationalism and vague authoritarianism, opponents could plausibly accuse Chesterton and his followers of harbouring fascist or ‘semi-fascist’ inclinations. Yet the membership, platform and tactics of the LEL were both consciously and unconsciously out of step with the methods and ideals of fascism. Chesterton opted for a selective membership, eschewing populism and electioneering in favour of publicity stunts and a constant stream of quasi-intellectual literature. What little violence did accompany LEL activities often appeared in a
bizarre inversion of the situation that had accompanied BUF meetings the 1930s. Having once protested the BUF’s right to forcefully maintain order at its meetings, Chesterton now defended the LEL’s right to heckle and protest without rough treatment. While ‘Colonel Blimpish’ stereotypes may not have been universally applicable among the group’s membership, which included a cadre of young reactionaries and budding neo-fascists, the LEL’s platform reflected Chesterton’s anachronistic view of British identity and world affairs. Rather than exulting in youth and modernity, therefore, the LEL was focused on restoring traditional British values and recapturing a faded sense of imperial glory. While Chesterton’s influence brought echoes of the fascist tradition, along with a form of conspiratorial anti-Semitism that traced back to the early 20th century, the LEL was more reactionary than fascist.

Chesterton’s partial success in ‘laying the fascist ghost’ after 1953 did not spare his endeavours from the problems that had beset Britain’s extreme right since 1940. Once again, most of these problems were circumstantial and stemmed from a lack of political space on the right which was exacerbated by the arrival of radical conservative groups like the Monday Club. Chesterton’s unwillingness to re-examine aspects of the “Money Power” conspiracy also limited the LEL’s ability to capitalize on new developments. Anti-communism, an issue which fed the growth of extreme right groups in the United States, was often overlooked by Chesterton in favour of a broader assault on the ‘capitalist communist nexus’. However much he protested against the notion that the LEL was anti-American, Chesterton’s esoteric view of the Cold War limited his engagement with sympathetic (and wealthy) members of the conservative establishment. At the other end of the spectrum, a new
generation of neo-fascists and racial nationalists attracted to the LEL chafed against its elitist posture and tactical restraint. Under Chesterton’s leadership, the movement suffered from a similar problem to the one that beset interwar British fascism: it was too radical to attract mainstream support, but not dangerous or populist enough to pose a real challenge to the established order.

For most of Chesterton’s post-war career, this problem was overshadowed by the general redundancy of extreme right politics after 1945. In Britain, as in most other parts of Western Europe, the decades following the Second World War were for the most part stable and prosperous, offering little purchase to a movement preoccupied with societal disintegration, grand conspiracies and the failures of the political centre. The crisis which lay at the centre of Chesterton’s politics after 1945, the collapse of the British imperial hegemony, gained little traction in Britain and other parts of the Anglosphere, gaining a modicum of support among the threatened white minorities of post-colonial Africa. It was only towards the very end of his life that Chesterton encountered two issues capable of reinvigorating Britain’s extreme right. The first, European integration, had little short term impact on the growth or development of the National Front during the 1970s. In the long term, however, Chesterton’s opposition to the Common Market proved a more enduring and fruitful platform for extreme right parties than the pan-European ideas put forward by Mosley. Although the alternatives that Chesterton proposed were fundamentally unrealistic, and relied more on imperial nostalgia than sound political or economic theories, his opposition to the Common Market tapped into deeper currents of nationalism and fears of bureaucratic overreach that underpin contemporary British arguments against the European Union.
The second issue, immigration, had a far more immediate effect on the fortunes of Britain’s extreme right and served as the basis for a general resurgence of right-wing parties throughout Western Europe. Public concern over immigration provided an ideal platform for the extreme right, since it created political space for a popular movement outside the mainstream consensus, along with an ostensibly respectable platform with no explicit ties to fascism or authoritarianism. While the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment was a positive development for the extreme right as a whole, it highlighted the fact that Chesterton occupied an awkward and increasingly untenable position within the extreme right family. Despite the stolid reputation that the LEL faction carried within the National Front upon its formation in 1967, Chesterton was wary of figures like Enoch Powell, whose stance on immigration derived from parochial racism and Little England conservatism rather than British nationalism. Chesterton’s outlook on immigration, the product of a synthesis between pseudo-biological racism and conspiratorial anti-Semitism, did have a discernible influence on younger members of the extreme right. In many respects, however, Chesterton’s political instincts put him at odds with the faction that would take control of the National Front after his resignation in 1971. Along with his general distaste for electoral politics, Chesterton was averse to the confrontational and intermittently violent style of racial nationalism that became synonymous with Britain’s extreme right during the 1970s and 1980s.

Having spent decades attempting to transcend his affiliation with the BUF, Chesterton viewed tactics that invited comparisons to fascism as both counterproductive and contrary to the principles of the movement he was hoping to build. He correctly assumed that street violence, covert paramilitaries and overt
displays of racial hatred were a hindrance to the political fortunes of Britain’s extreme right, which struggled to attain the legitimate reputation or electoral success garnered by some of its counterparts in Western Europe after 1970. During his brief tenure at the head of the National Front, Chesterton maintained the cautious approach he had adopted with the LEL, and attempted (without complete success) to keep the party free of undesirable elements. At the same time, however, he rejected calls to moderate the policies or ideological platform of the National Front in order to court more conservative followers. Just months before his resignation from the National Front, Chesterton appealed to the readers of *Candour* to embrace the mantle of right-wing extremism:

> Whoever thinks that this task can be undertaken without extreme activity, without getting mud bespattered on hands and cuffs and without being called many nasty names, is a weakling, a political flaneur whose only service is to keep a hundred miles away from the battlefield. Forward the Extremists!  

The combination of ideological radicalism, elitism and organizational discipline which Chesterton imposed on the National Front was the culmination of his efforts, dating back to the After-Victory Group, to marry transcendent nationalism and conspiratorial anti-Semitism with social conservatism and political restraint. Chesterton’s final attempt to unify and synthesize the post-war extreme right proved, much like its predecessors, to be contradictory and politically inert. On this occasion, however, it also provided a legitimation of younger extremists within the National Front like John Tyndall, who were more willing than Chesterton to harness currents of anti-immigrant populism and racial hatred to further the goals of the movement.

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The combination of populist ultra-nationalism, veiled authoritarianism and racial violence that characterized the National Front after Chesterton’s death made for a party that was more authentically fascist than either the League of Empire Loyalists or its successor, the short lived Candour-League movement. It also made a virtue of the ideological and organizational heterogeneity on the extreme right, by temporarily obscuring the more egregiously hateful and fascistic elements of the party under a banner of ethnocentric populism. This style of politics proved more energizing for the movement’s base than Chesterton’s conservative approach, and briefly threatened to cement the National Front as a minor force within British politics. After the 1979 electoral collapse, however, the newest and most hopeful party of the British extreme right succumbed to the same combination of internal conflict, external opposition and political space that had doomed its predecessors. A new generation of radicals willing to follow in Chesterton’s footsteps found themselves facing different circumstances but the same unpleasant choice: pursue moderation, and face an uphill battle against the established parties, or embrace extremism, and face a lifetime of marginalization, failure and disillusionment.  

For much of his career, Chesterton was unable to choose between these two alternatives, and attempted to bridge the divide between respectable politics and radical ideology. This was not a path to political success, but it afforded him a unique perspective on the evolution of Britain’s extreme right, and the practical difficulty encountered by those seeking a national revolution against the backdrop of British democracy. Chesterton’s time with the BUF captured some of the essence of the ‘political oxymoron’ that was British fascism between the wars. In aspiring to overthrow a decadent old order beset by internal squabbles and intellectual dithering,
Chesterton became representative of a movement beset by internal problems, whose greatest achievements (on the scale of European-wide fascism) were in the realm of culture and intellect. Much of Chesterton’s time after 1945 was spent navigating and seeking alliances between the different factions of the extreme right; this reflected the increasing diversity of the movement, as well as its political weakness, which was compounded by a lack of definite leaders and a clear ideological vision. Along with some semblance of political unity, Chesterton sought a new praxis for Britain’s extreme right, one that was capable of achieving national regeneration without the violent, revolutionary upheaval demanded by fascism. As was the case with interwar British fascism, however, this vision of ‘post-fascist’ British nationalism proved more workable in theory than in practice.
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