**British fascism has never thrived but its failure has been useful for the mainstream**

[Kenan Malik](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/kenanmalik)

This article is more than 5 months old

Conservatives have seen off the far right by being more pragmatic with their policies

Oswald Mosley addresses a crowd in Dalston, east London in 1948. Photograph: Keystone/Getty Images

Sun 3 May 2020 08.00 BST

Last modified on Sun 3 May 2020 09.33 BST

The history of British fascism is a history of failure. In a new book, *Failed Führers*, the historian [Graham Macklin](https://crestresearch.ac.uk/people/graham-macklin/) retells that story through biographies of six fascist leaders, from Arnold Leese and [Oswald Mosley](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/oswald-mosley) in the interwar years, through AK Chesterton, Colin Jordan and [John Tyndall](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/jul/20/guardianobituaries.thefarright), in the postwar years, to [Nick Griffin](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/nick-griffin), whose British National party polled half a million votes in the 2010 election – and [immediately imploded](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/may/14/general-election-2010-fall-bnp). Enoch Powell once mused that all political lives “end in failure”. Macklin observes acidly that the political lives of British fascists “did not simply end in ‘failure’ but began there too”.

British fascism is a story as much of continuity as of change – an ever-present obsession with racial purity, venomous antisemitism and the undertow of violence. It is also, for all the political irrelevance of British fascists, a story whose lessons are worth pondering.

Advertisement

The terms “fascist” or “far right” are liberally dispensed these days, applied to Ukip, the Brexit party, even Boris Johnson’s administration. What *Failed Führers* makes clear is that however reactionary such parties and politicians may be, theirs is a politics far removed from the true toxicity of fascism. We would be foolish to ignore the difference and diminish the meaning of fascism.

One reason for the marginalisation of British fascists is their sheer incompetence, combined with a degree of internecine conflict that makes the fractiousness of the left seem like a bout of tree hugging. Then there’s the unresolved tension between old-style Nazism and modern [identity politics](https://www.theguardian.com/society/identity-politics), a tension that European groups have more adroitly negotiated.

In the 1960s, the French Nouvelle Droite, led by philosopher [Alain de Benoist](https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/the-man-who-gave-white-nationalism-a-new-life), pioneered a reworking of traditional fascist themes, pivoting from claims of racial superiority to arguments about cultural difference. The mixing of cultures through immigration, de Benoist argued, damaged the identity of the host nation. Hence the need to halt immigration, especially of Muslims.

These ideas were taken up assiduously by far-right groups in Europe and the [alt-right](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/27/american-alt-right-playbook-bolsonaro-extremist-tactics-brazil) in America and underpin “[Generation Identity](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/24/generation-identity-uk-far-right-extremists)” movements. In Britain, BNP leader Griffin replaced the Nazi magazine *Spearhead* with a publication called *Identity* to reflect the party’s new “modern nationalism”. The BNP, Griffin insisted, simply wanted Britain “to be left with our own culture and identity intact”.

One reason for the marginalisation of British fascists is their sheer incompetence

Yet the new politics of identity never displaced old-fashioned, biologically based racism and antisemitism. Griffin remained a Holocaust denier and when faced with the rise of the [English Defence League](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/may/28/english-defence-league-guardian-investigation), he tellingly dismissed them as “Zionist puppets”.

Equally importantly, mainstream British parties, the Conservatives in particular, have been better able to meet the challenge of the far right than have their continental equivalents. In the wake of Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968, National Front leader Tyndall declared that “workers will never go Tory despite their respect for Powell”. Instead, “old-guard politics” would be weakened, creating an opening for the NF.

A decade later, the Tories helped destroy Tyndall’s party. In 1978, Margaret Thatcher openly courted NF voters, talking tough on immigration and worrying that “people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture”. She swept to power the following year; the NF faded back into the shadows.

Forty years later, when Labour’s “red wall” came tumbling down in the 2019 general election, the wrecking ball was driven not by the far right, as may have happened in Europe, but by Boris Johnson, with a mixture of bonhomie, Brexiteering and promises of “levelling up”. “Old-guard politics” has eroded, but not in the way that Tyndall imagined.

British conservatives have, for historical reasons, had greater freedom to be pragmatic than their counterparts in Europe. They have been helped in this by the importance to British identity of the Second World War and of the fight against Nazism. Nationalism has become entrenched, but not the far right.

At the same time, the existence of a marginalised fascist milieu provides, in Macklin’s words, “a convenient ‘other’” to assure Britons that “fascism’s racist panaceas are somehow ‘alien’ and far removed from their own ‘liberal’ stance on race and immigration”.

Not being Mosley or Griffin gives mainstream politicians, paradoxically, the space to pursue illiberal policies. It’s striking how many concerns originating in the far right, from the idea that British people had not been given their say on immigration to notions of “white identity”, now nestle in the mainstream. Ironically, it’s in their failure that British fascists may most have shaped politics.

• Kenan Malik is an Observer columnist