

# LOST IMPERIUM

This book examines, for the first time, the role of Britain's Empire in far right thought between 1920 and 1980. Throughout these turbulent decades, upheaval in the Empire, combined with declining British world power, was frequently discussed and reflected upon in far right publications, as were radical policies designed to revitalise British imperialism.

Drawing on the case studies of Ireland, India, Palestine, Kenya and Rhodesia, *Lost Imperium* argues that imperialism provided a frame through which ideas at the core of far right thinking could be advocated: nationalism, racism, conspiracy theory, antisemitism and anti-communism. The far right's opposition to imperial decline ultimately reflected more than just a desire to reverse the fortunes of the British Empire, it was also a crucial means of promoting central ideological values. By analysing far right imperial thought, we are able to understand how they interacted with mainstream ideas of British imperialism during the twentieth century, while also promoting their own uniquely racist, violent and authoritarian vision of Empire.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of British fascism, empire, imperialism, racial and ethnic studies, and political history.

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# LOST IMPERIUM

Far Right Visions of the British  
Empire, c.1920–1980

*Paul Stocker*

First published 2021  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Stocker, Paul (Historian), author.

Title: Lost imperium : far right visions of the British empire, c.1920-1980 / Paul Stocker.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2021. | Series: Routledge studies in fascism and the far right | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020013366 (print) | LCCN 2020013367 (ebook) | ISBN 9780815392569 (hardback) | ISBN 9780367536923 (paperback) | ISBN 9780429468520 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Great Britain--Colonies--History--20th century. | Right and left (Political science)--Great Britain--History--20th century. | Political culture--Great Britain--History--20th century.

Classification: LCC DA16 .S858 2021 (print) | LCC DA16 (ebook) |

DDC 909/.0971241082--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020013366>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020013367>

ISBN: 978-0-8153-9256-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-53692-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-46852-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo  
by Taylor & Francis Books

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research for this book started in 2013 when I began my doctoral studies at Teesside University. Many have assisted in the process of researching and writing since then, yet none more so than my former Director of Studies, Professor Matthew Feldman. Matthew has been hugely supportive of me and this project from the moment I offered my research proposal. Throughout, he has provided first-class support, guidance as well as expert advice. To learn from such a well-established but approachable scholar has been an absolute pleasure. In addition, Matthew, as well as his wife Claire, have been great friends, which has made my time working with him all the more enjoyable.

I would also like to express my gratitude to others who have assisted me. Craig Fowlie at Routledge has always been very supportive of my work and most understanding of my frustratingly 'liberal' approach to deadlines. Professor Nigel Copley provided me with some highly useful feedback and advice during my doctoral studies and Dr Graham Macklin likewise has always been happy to help, in particular when sharing his mammoth knowledge of far right archives. I would also like to thank Dr Charlie McGuire and Dr Neil Fleming for offering their expertise and feedback on individual chapters.

Thanks also go out to the wonderful archivists and librarians who have made this research possible. This includes Lizzie Richmond at the University of Bath and Daniel Jones at the University of Northampton's Searchlight Archives, as well as staff at the British Library and the National Archives.

I must also thank the lecturers and mentors who most positively influenced my academic research and inspired me to progress to doctoral level in the first place. These can be found at West Virginia University, where I had the privilege of undertaking an MA in History between 2012 and 2013. Dr Joshua Arthurs, in particular, offered great advice on my doctoral thesis as well as sparking my interest in the study of fascism originally. Thanks also go to Professor Robert Blobaum,



whose wealth of experience, support, and kindness made my stay in Morgantown such a rich experience. Also, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Joseph Hodge, whose highly stimulating class on the British Empire ignited my interest in examining fascism and imperialism together.

In terms of those outside the academic world, I would like to thank all my friends, both North and South, for their help and companionship as well as for helpful nuggets of advice. I would also like to thank my parents, Keith and Corinne, and my sister Jill, who have supported and encouraged me throughout my life. My biggest thanks are reserved for my fiancée Riina, to whom this book is dedicated, who has been at the coalface putting up with me for nearly nine years now, offering her wisdom and advice – but more importantly her loving support.

February 2020

# ABBREVIATIONS

ARS	Anglo-Rhodesian Society
BF	British Fascisti
BLXS	British League of Ex-Servicemen
BNP	British National Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CAF	Central African Federation
CAS	Capricorn Africa Society
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CTL	Cotton Trade League
FIP	Federal Independence Party
GBM	Greater Britain Movement
GID	Government Information Dept
IDL	India Defence League
IES	Indian Empire Society
IFL	Imperial Fascist League
INC	Indian National Congress
IRA	Irish Republican Army
KADU	Kenyan African Democratic Union
KANU	Kenyan African National Union
LEL	League of Empire Loyalists
MC	Monday Club
NDP	National Democratic Party
NF	National Front
NLP	National Labour Party
NSM	National Socialist Movement
OAS	Organisation Armée Secrète
PF	Patriotic Front

RF	Rhodesian Front
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
UDI	unilateral declaration of independence
UFM	Ulster Fascist Movement
UFP	United Federal Party
UM	Union Movement
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army



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# INTRODUCTION

The spectre of Britain's imperial past haunted the referendum on its European Union membership. The 2016 leave campaign successfully framed Britain's membership of the European Union as a 43-year aberration in British history misguidedly constructed after the trauma of British imperial oblivion. A vote to leave was presented as a chance to return to the buccaneering Britain which once conquered the world and 'take back control' of its destiny, reconnecting with those whom Nigel Farage referred to as 'our real friends' in the Commonwealth.<sup>1</sup> The campaign to leave was saturated with ideas and slogans reminiscent of far right politics, past and present. Marauding hordes from uncivilised, alien lands descending on Britain, enemies within destroying the national will to greatness, decadent and corrupt liberal elites more interested in appeasing foreigners than addressing the issues faced by 'ordinary' Britons. All were caricatured to successful effect, leading Britain to sever its ties with the European Union and wrench it into the unknown. Brexit, despite being framed by the victors merely as the long overdue return of British sovereignty, demonstrated the continuing salience of Empire, particularly on the right of British politics, many of whom never accepted Britain's post-imperial shift to Europe and ultimately, the notion of a post-imperial Britain itself.

Since the vote, debates on the relationship between British imperial history and the vote to leave the EU have burgeoned. For many commentators, majority support for the tub-thumping leave campaign's promises to restore Britain to a position of global power demonstrated the endurance of imperial myths in British political discourse.<sup>2</sup> Others drew a more careful distinction between imperial nostalgia and amnesia, claiming that the selectively plucked historical narratives from the leave side were more reflective of the latter, rather than necessarily desiring a return to imperial glory.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is impossible to disentangle ideas surrounding 'global Britain' – the favoured strapline of leave campaigners and words spoken by Boris Johnson in his first speech as Prime Minister in July 2019 – from the

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intellectual baggage of its imperial context.<sup>4</sup> What is clear is that the victorious campaign – dominated by figures from both the mainstream and fringes – reflected a tradition within right-wing politics of championing Britain’s special right to world power and influence. Talk in Whitehall of ‘Empire 2.0’ following Brexit – likely mischievously – nevertheless hints that such an idea transcends beyond naked electoral jingoism. Put more bluntly by one member of the public, who told a Sky News camera at a pro-Brexit rally in October 2018: ‘Let’s get back to being the British Empire again. That’s what it’s all about, you know? It’s about being the British Empire.’<sup>5</sup> While such anachronistic declarations can often be found uncomfortably close to the mainstream of British politics in the twenty-first century, they have been traditionally restricted to the far right fringes – which this study concerns itself with.

This study examines a feature of British politics both past and present – the utilisation of Empire by the far right – those whose political *raison d’être* is a claim to an authentic and unshakable patriotism. Beginning in the 1920s, when Britain’s Empire was at its height, and finishing in the early 1980s, when Britain’s Empire had disappeared, barring a few scattered outposts, it aims to map the far right’s response to imperial decline and failed attempts to revitalise Britain’s Empire. Encompassing organisations and influencers broadly situated within the far right – fascist and non-fascist – it will be the first major examination of the multiplicity of voices on the right-wing fringes who sought to champion the British Empire during the entire period of twentieth-century decolonisation, beginning in the tumultuous ‘fascist epoch’ which followed the First World War.

Stanley Payne offers this succinct overview of the interwar British Union of Fascists (BUF) in his seminal *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945*: ‘like other fascist movements in satisfied imperial powers, the BUF never preached war and expansion, but peace and prosperity’.<sup>6</sup> According to Payne, Britain had arrived from the First World War victorious and ‘sated’, with its vast Empire intact (and even expanded). Thus, fascism in Britain was effectively dismissed as ‘a sort of political oxymoron’.<sup>7</sup> As this study will demonstrate, fascists, as well as the broader far right, were indeed content with Britain’s vast imperial possessions following the First World War and were mostly uninterested in adding more pink to the map. In contrast to a European continent rampant with instability and upheaval, the political climate in Britain was tepid in comparison and provided little breathing space for a genuine extremist threat to democracy. Yet, this did not render the idea of a political ideology seeking national regeneration an ‘oxymoron’ nor redundant. Britain’s victory in the First World War and the consolidation of its Empire meant it had more to lose than most. The impetus behind British fascism therefore always revolved around protecting national and imperial power rather than constructing it and even more so, highlighting the dangers which were allegedly undermining it.

From its birth in the early 1920s until the modern day, the far right saw threats, subversiveness and conspiracy everywhere. Communist infiltration was deemed to be rampant in left, liberal and mainstream right-wing political circles. Malicious Jewish power was plunging its tentacles in hostile states – both capitalist and

communist – and increasingly pulling the strings of most political, economic and media institutions of significance in Britain and her Empire. The national will to greatness was being undermined and indeed destroyed by a weak-minded, compromising and decadent elite who were either ignorant of the plots which festered within powerful institutions or wholly complicit. Britain's historic role as a global imperial power, on which the sun would never set, was being wilfully and intentionally unravelled by those seeking the end of the nation state as the principal political order of nations and a complicit establishment. According to the far right, Britain would *not* be sated until the malevolent forces seeking its destruction were rooted out and themselves, destroyed. The far right – and only they – possessed the knowledge, strength and ruthlessness to carry it out. This study, therefore, concerns itself with how the far right in Britain constructed narratives of imperial decline from the Empire's height until its end and their attempts to portray themselves as the saviours of the British imperial tradition.

Far right literature and publications were saturated with notions of British imperial glory. Commentary on affairs within the British Empire were ubiquitous from the end of the First World War until Britain's Empire was all but gone in 1980. Yet, this study will demonstrate that while the desire to uphold a strong and revitalised British Empire was a crucial theme in British far right narratives, the quest for an invigorated British imperialism was largely secondary to other aims. Anti-communism, antisemitism, anti-liberalism and the pursuit of domestic objectives, rather than any imperial reawakening lay at the heart of far right ideology. The significance of Empire in far right and fascist ideology is therefore found not in its centrality, but in its ability to be used as a frame through which ideological pursuits of a greater importance could be conducted.

This study will predominantly explore the far right's approach to imperial issues through a series of case studies which focus on crucial events during the time period under examination. First, Chapter 1 will provide an overview of the imperial ideologies of key far right organisations between c.1920 and 1980, including the Britons and Nesta Webster, the British Fascisti (BF), the Imperial Fascist League (IFL), BUF, the Union Movement (UM), the League of Empire Loyalists (LEL) and the National Front (NF). Chapter 2 investigates the trauma which resulted from Ireland being wrenched out of the United Kingdom following the Anglo-Irish Treaty, while Chapter 3 analyses the far right's response to debates around Indian independence in the interwar period and shortly after. Chapter 4 assesses Palestine and anti-Zionism as an important factor in the far right's conception of a global Jewish conspiracy. Chapter 5 investigates the role played by Kenya and the Mau Mau uprising during the 1950s in far right imperial thought and finally, Chapter 6 considers the far right's interaction with Rhodesia before and after its unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) in 1965.

These events have been selected due to their significance for the far right, identified through researching party literature and activist writings, in terms of what they saw as the most important issues. Often, these reflect the most critical imperial issues of the day – such as debates around Indian autonomy in the 1930s

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and the Kenyan Emergency in the 1950s. However, often, debates surround issues which were of more 'specialist' interest to the far right specifically, such as the Palestine question and Zionism, as well as Rhodesia. Such an approach, while to a large extent chronological, therefore, enables the possibility of demonstrating how the far right debated and campaigned on issues which were of concern to the public and politicians more generally as well as how they sought to promote issues they themselves deemed significant. A perhaps surprising amount of time and column inches were spent detailing in some depth the alleged problems afflicting Britain's Empire at different times in different places and the proposed far right solutions for dealing with them in the unlikely event they obtained power. While power to enact such policies was always unlikely, we cannot dismiss ideas written as genuine attempts to solve important issues of the day purely as malicious fantasies. Rather, the far right's commentary on imperial issues is analysed in light of mainstream debates on the subject as a means of understanding their role in British imperial debates more broadly.

As will be shown, far right organisations during both the interwar and postwar periods, principally *reacted* to imperial events – first, in Ireland – and then most significantly in India, Palestine, Kenya and, finally, Rhodesia. In all cases, they sought to use these events of imperial upheaval both as a means of connecting with mainstream policies and promoting the political ideas which formed their *raison d'être*. Ultimately, while the far right swathed themselves in imperial grandeur, their obsession with anti-Jewish conspiracy theory and communist subversion meant that attempts to have a voice in the mainstream arena of imperial politics – where there were plenty of opportunities – were doomed to failure.

Another key argument here is that conspiracy theories were essential to far right imperialism and ideology more generally, despite being largely neglected by historians as a central mode of far right thought and communication throughout their entire existence. 'Conspiracism' pervaded far right discussions of Empire from the outset, acting as a discursive lens through which other important ideological components – such as race, nationalism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism and anti-semitism – could be expressed. Some scholars have noted the importance of conspiracy theory to the far right previously, yet few have truly fleshed out its centrality.<sup>8</sup> A particularly apt quote, which this study will demonstrate, comes from David Edgar, who argued that 'conspiracy theory runs through contemporary British fascist ideology like Blackpool runs through rock'.<sup>9</sup> The same can be said for the far right more broadly, where a widespread belief in a global Jewish conspiracy – either manifested through Bolshevism or an allegedly Jewish dominated world banking system – can be witnessed.

The chronology under scrutiny in this study – c.1920–1980 reflects the far right over the *longue durée*. It therefore places itself among an increasing number of works which have sought to de-ghettoise the British far right from the interwar period and provide similar attention to its longer postwar variants. Rather than viewing the Second World War as *the* key break in the life of the twentieth century for the far right, this study fully brings out the *constantly* changing organisational structure of the



far right, the ever in flux significance of key activists and publications as well as the shifting political issues which they sought to address. Yet, for all the change that can be witnessed in over half a century of far right activism, significant continuity also demonstrates the resilience of core aspects of far right ideology. Conspiracy theory, racism, anti-left and liberal attacks and rampant criticism of mainstream elites all stand the test of time and are exhibited constantly throughout the period under question. Thus, through a long-term examination of the far right vis-à-vis its attitude to Empire, it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the far right's development over time and how it adapted to new challenges.

Why is understanding the obscure and quixotic far right visions of Empire so important? Its key significance lies in how imperial issues were used and manipulated to attract attention to wider ideological goals – notably, conspiracy theory, and thus this offers important insight into far right communication. Yet the far right has never operated in a vacuum, nor are their views and ideas as 'fringe' as their political behaviour would suggest. In fact, many on the far right were products of establishment institutions: parliament, public schools, the civil service, and the military. Understanding far right responses to imperial affairs therefore provides important insight into British imperial political culture which they both operated in and responded to. Furthermore, they reflect a marginal and often forgotten, but important strand in British twentieth-century politics: those who hopelessly sought to turn the tide on British imperial decline and processes of decolonisation.

While this study predominantly situates itself with other examinations of the far right and fascism in Britain, it also holds significance for British imperial history. The study of Britain's Empire is a vast field of enquiry encompassing hundreds, if not thousands of active scholars globally researching centuries of material across a range of disciplines. Yet, no one has attempted to examine Empire's greatest defenders in Britain nor how they responded to repeated 'defeats' as the British imperial project crumbled. This is a surprising omission, the absence of which is worth pondering. One explanation is the relative parochiality of the far right which has rendered them irrelevant to scholars examining the late British Empire who have preferred to focus on instrumental elite actors. Furthermore, it is possible that a cursory glance at the literature of far right groups – blaming imperial decline on Jews and Communists – has led to the assumption that their contribution to the history of imperial ideas is as relevant as flat-earthers to the field of astronomy.

Yet, the eccentricity of the far right should not be overstated. Conspiracy theories, for example, as recent studies have shown, are far more popularly believed than is perhaps widely appreciated.<sup>10</sup> The ideas of the far right interrogated in this study are shown to be more mainstream than may appear obvious when taken at face value. Violence, racism, paranoia and draconian solutions pervaded far right discussions of Empire throughout the period. While these exceeded mainstream narratives in their severity and cynicism, they are all themes which are familiar to scholars of British imperialism. Also, while historians should generally avoid the realm of the counter-factual, it remains true that the trajectory of history must always be scrutinised. Few would have believed after the German Federal Election

of 1928, where the Nazi Party achieved 2.6 per cent of the vote, that Hitler would be appointed Chancellor less than five years later. It is surely therefore prudent for historians to examine the potential for historical events to embark on different courses. There was never a crisis of the British state which enabled the far right to seize power, meaning their solutions to the emergencies of the British Empire were thankfully never enacted. Yet, far right imperial plans offer a glimpse into a dystopian alternative reality which may enable us to ponder and reassess what actually happened.

Ultimately, the study of fascism remains more important than ever, especially during an age of increased ‘mainstreaming’ of far right views in Europe.<sup>11</sup> Events in Britain over the past half-century have demonstrated that nationalistic, racist and xenophobic views have continued to spread far beyond the right-wing fringes. The archivally informed history of ideas approach undertaken in this study stresses the importance of ideas rather than solely their literal impact in politics or society. Furthermore, quantifying and fully apprehending the impact of fascist hate speech and violent rhetoric are practically impossible, and nobody really knows its potential implications. As German-Jewish diarist Victor Klemperer, a survivor of the Nazi era in Germany put it, ‘Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.’<sup>12</sup> Thus, while we cannot know the true impact of these far right ‘doses’, we must strive to contextualise them within the wider setting of imperial history, viewing them as a fringe but nonetheless integral part of wider political culture in twentieth-century Britain.

## Defining fascism and the far right

When George Orwell wrote in 1946 that the word fascism’s meaning had been debased to little more than ‘something not desirable’, it may not have appeared evident to him that this would remain a theme within public discourse for decades.<sup>13</sup> Whether it is the West’s *bêtes noires* such as Saddam Hussein, Vladimir Putin or the ideology of Islamism – fascism is regularly deployed by commentators and the media as a description of any political phenomenon or act that is brutal, dictatorial or inhumane.<sup>14</sup> More recently, discourse surrounding the elections of demagogic US reality TV star and entrepreneur Donald Trump as President of the United States and ultra-conservative populist Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil have prompted the widespread (mis)use of the term fascism to describe their hard-line, reactionary and xenophobic pronouncements.<sup>15</sup>

Such misplaced uses of the word tend to exasperate academic scholars of fascism outside of Marxist circles, particularly as, over the past two decades, a basic consensus has been reached on the nature of fascism’s ‘ineliminable core’.<sup>16</sup> In addition, ‘fascist studies’ has broken new ground in distinguishing the relationship between fascism and those non-fascist regimes which bore many of the hallmarks of fascism but which clearly fall short of fully-fledged fascist regimes. Thus, while Roger Griffin spoke of a ‘new consensus’ in 1998, there is little that is new about it

any longer. Griffin himself has recently argued that the ‘new consensus’ is now ‘old hat’.<sup>17</sup> For him, it is now more appropriate to speak of a ‘new wave’ of fascist studies, which has moved beyond attempting to understand the core ideology of fascism. These include studies on political religion; totalitarianism as both a regime and movement; ‘biopolitics’; and the relationship between fascism and modernity. Furthermore, building on Griffin’s core definition, Aristotle Kallis’ work on ‘fascistization’ has fruitfully examined the relationship between fascist regimes and non-fascist far right movements and regimes.

Notwithstanding this ‘new wave’ of fascist studies, it is important to go back to Griffin’s one-sentence definition from 1991 to determine exactly what is meant by ‘fascism’. The ‘new consensus’ is the phrase coined by Roger Griffin to describe scholarship on fascism arriving since the early 1990s, which broadly agreed on the characteristics of fascist ideology.<sup>18</sup> In *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and New Consensus* (1998), utilising the cultural understanding of fascism first advanced by George Mosse, Griffin asserted that fascism could be defined as an ‘ideal-type’ ideological phenomenon by identifying several core aspects, much like liberalism, conservatism or communism.<sup>19</sup> ‘Palingenetic’ ultra-nationalism is at the centre of the ‘new consensus’ definition of fascism.<sup>20</sup>

A revolutionary agenda which targets socialism, liberalism and conservatism as the enemy – with the explicit intention of bringing the country under a single-party hyper-nationalist state – is what separates fascism from seemingly similar authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. A populist, class-transcending rhetoric is undertaken in order to fully mobilise the masses. The social changes brought about by fascism are thus a mass revolution, and not, as many have claimed, a ‘petty-bourgeoisie’, middle-class or ‘top-down’ reaction.<sup>21</sup> Griffin notes that this palingenetic, modernising, aggressively nationalist agenda is often executed through a charismatic leader who rejects conservative dogmas and liberal pragmatism, governing through aesthetic displays of power, ritualistic politics and charismatic leadership of an ‘organic’ nation. In addition to this, the fascist aesthetic often displays militaristic themes while glorifying the use of violence. While the internal political and geo-political context would differ for fascism following the Second World War, ‘neo-fascism’ would maintain the same fundamental ideas as during the interwar period with the exception of an added pan-Europeanism or ‘supranationalism’.

The difficulty remains that, given the diversity of fascist and right-wing organisations in Britain and across Europe during the period in question, many groups do not fit comfortably within the above definition. During the ‘fascist epoch’, the BUF and the IFL come closest to Griffin’s ‘ideal-type’ definition of fascism, while the first self-proclaimed ‘fascist’ organisation – the BF – does not and reflects more a hybrid of conservative and imported fascist ideas.<sup>22</sup> It was ultimately a period where many ‘fellow travellers’ – uncovered in all their diversity in Richard Griffiths’ timeless *Fellow Travellers of the Right* (1980) – right-wing conservatives, reactionaries and antisemites saw common cause with fascist and Nazi movements and regimes, despite never advocating the implementation of such policies themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The trajectory of fascism following the Second World War further complicates matters. Given the genocidal destruction wrought by fascism during the Second World War, no one seeking political support in Britain or elsewhere publicly referred to themselves as fascist. This has led to a tendency by scholars, particularly in political science, to eschew the term ‘fascist’ when describing postwar movements of a similar hue. This practice has been questioned by historians such as Andrea Mammone and Nigel Copsey, who have argued that movements such as the Front National in France or the Austrian Freedom Party do not represent a complete break with ‘traditional’ fascist movements, but have merely adapted to a post-fascist age. Thus, as Copsey puts it, rather than dying out, following its genocidal failure during the Second World War, ‘Fascist ideological morphology is protean and adapts itself to specific and historical and cultural contexts.’<sup>24</sup> While this is accepted, it remains misleading to refer to the range of movements under discussion in this study as ‘fascist’ with a blanket description. Rather, we will attempt to understand how the far right, as a loosely defined political category with much in common, argued for the revitalisation of Britain’s Empire.

Fascists and other right-wing activists are united by much in terms of ideology: nationalism; anti-communism; anti-liberalism and often, political antisemitism and recourse to conspiracy theories. This allows the expansive term ‘far right’ to characterise a cross-section of illiberal and xenophobic movements. While overlapping, the two nevertheless differ on one crucial issue – the matter of constitutionalism, as Cas Mudde has highlighted. Fascists and the ‘extreme right’ seek to destroy the existing constitution as part of a total overhaul of government and society (even if they are often prepared to work within the system in order to achieve power, such as the Nazi Party in Weimar Germany). The reactionary right (and more recently, the populist far right), while often demonstrating significant scepticism of the constitutional order and liberal democracy, nevertheless seeks to maintain the status quo: ‘put simply, the difference between radicalism and extremism is that the former is *verfassungswidrig* [opposed to the constitution], whereas the latter is *verfassungsfeindlich* [hostile towards the constitution]’.<sup>25</sup>

Yet as the umbrella term ‘far right’ indicates, much more united fascists and the non-fascists on the right-wing fringes, meaning that it is possible to examine them as part of the same, overall phenomenon. Both Roger Griffin and Spanish theorist of totalitarianism Juan Linz were fond of arboreal metaphors. To take this up, it might be said that the constitutional, reactionary ultra-right and the extra-constitutional revolutionary right were less branches from the same tree; rather, they are the same type of tree in a forest with all manner of flora and fauna.

## The British far right and Empire

Scholarship on the British far right has been prolific over the last 20 years, no doubt influenced by the pioneering work on generic fascism in the 1990s and early 2000s, which saw a series of monographs on interwar British fascism published. There has also been a more recent boom in studies examining the far right in

Britain led by Routledge's *Fascism and the Far Right* series, but even more so the greater salience of the subject matter in contemporary British and European politics. Yet, a significant examination of the relationship between the far right and Empire has been left wanting.

Despite a plethora of works on British fascism this century, there remains a significant and important gap in the literature that has failed to address the 'imperial question' within far right ideology adequately. Three of the major volumes published this century have all alluded to the imperialist origins of the far right. Thomas Linehan for example, looking at 'origins and progenitors', argues that British fascism's origins lie in the social imperialists and tariff reform advocates of the late-nineteenth century and Edwardian years before the Great War.<sup>26</sup> Stephen Dorril follows a similar line of enquiry, focusing upon the imperialist precursors to Mosley and the BUF. Like Linehan, he looks at social imperialists, tariff reformers and proponents of 'national efficiency'.<sup>27</sup> Martin Pugh, in turn, while also considering similar themes as Dorril and Linehan,<sup>28</sup> includes a chapter entitled 'Fascism and the Defence of Empire'. Yet it largely amounts to a discussion of Conservative 'diehard' responses to the Government of India Act in the mid-1930s.<sup>29</sup> Not only does this blur the boundaries between Conservative diehards and the non-Tory far right, his chapter leaves the impression that the so-called 'Indian Question', and indeed the British Empire more generally, were of little concern to interwar fascist groups.<sup>30</sup> Tellingly, these three volumes all allude to the imperialist origins and importance of the British Empire in fascist praxis; however, none really interrogates the role of Empire within fascist and far right thinking. Setting the record straight on this neglected issue is a key feature of this study.

Julie Gottlieb's gender-focused study of British fascism, *Feminine Fascism* (2002), broke new ground in terms of its innovation. She was also the first to suggest in 2004 that imperial historians might have much to learn from studying fascism and its relationship to imperial politics. She rightly argued that fascists were 'pre-occupied by imperial policy, spun fantasies of racial purity and the hierarchies of nations, ... obsessed by visions of British imperial decline and its alleged attendant cultural decadence'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, several scholars have noted the tendency of far right organisations to champion the British Empire. For example, the BF were, according to Barbara Farr, 'successors to the missionaries of Empire'.<sup>32</sup> Thomas Linehan, discussing the IFL, notes the strong impact of Empire and race on IFL ideology, arguing that its 'attachment to Empire was underwritten by a belief in the inherent natural propensity of the European Aryan race to supervise and lead the non-white peoples'.<sup>33</sup>

More recent studies have examined Empire and the far right from different but somewhat limited perspectives. Liam Liburd has analysed the imperial attitudes of the BUF in an article in the *Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*, providing valuable insight into how the far right build on mainstream ideas of Empire by drawing 'heavily on earlier constructions of racialized imperial masculinity in building their "new fascist man"'.<sup>34</sup> He also notes how the BUF 'looked to a masculine ideal based on the conviction that the best of British manhood could be found on

Britain's imperial frontiers', a trend this study will demonstrate was not limited to the interwar party alone but can be witnessed among a range of groups. Luke LeCras' recent biography of A. K. Chesterton, like David Baker, notes the significance of Empire for Chesterton, arguably the most important individual in the twentieth-century far right whose political career would span almost the length of this study. LeCras notes, 'from an early age Chesterton was imbued with a sense of "imperial nationalism" – an ideal in which every colony and dominion was representative of the English people's achievement in spreading civilization to the wider world'.<sup>35</sup> Evan Smith's article has also plausibly demonstrated the positive attachment the BUF had for Australia, notably in terms of its 'White Australia Policy' and (mis)treatment of indigenous peoples.<sup>36</sup>

The link between British nationalists and imperialism has therefore often been pointed to and looked at in specific contexts, but rarely fleshed out. Considering that British politics between the 1920s and 1980s, where Britain's Empire was swept out of existence, was dominated at times by anxiety over Britain's role as a world power, it seems curious that few scholars of the far right have sought to situate them within this context. Perhaps based on the misplaced notion that far right attitudes towards a nuanced subject such as this are likely to be single-minded and lacking refinement, this study will deconstruct a wide range of varying attitudes to the British Empire within this relatively small constituency. This will be achieved via analysis of fascists' ideas as expressed by writings, policies, statements and speeches, deriving from print materials, archival papers and a few online references.

With respect to sources, many studies of British fascism have made good use of the substantial surveillance files held at the National Archives in Kew, particularly those assessing fascism's relationship to public order and political violence. In fact, state surveillance documents comprise the largest unpublished source material on British fascism. However, these archival sources take on less importance for this study, which is primarily interested in the ideas of the far right *as they themselves presented them in their own words*. This approach affords the groups in question the requisite 'methodological empathy' needed to take their ideas seriously and as a wider whole. Furthermore, as Richard Thurlow has argued, 'State attitudes towards British fascism viewed it with condescension as an exotic foreign import which created difficulties for the authorities with regard to the maintenance of civil liberties and public order'.<sup>37</sup> Thus, documentary evidence which sees British fascism as little more than an imported nuisance, or that primarily focuses on threats to public order, is of less relevance to this study. Indeed, scholars who have focused on fascism's revolutionary ideology and its socio-political ideas, such as Thomas Linehan, have found far more purchase in the original literature published by the far right themselves.

## History of fascism and Empire

This study, which aims to understand the interplay between far right and imperial ideas, finds itself situated within a rich tradition of studies examining the link between the two, often manifesting in Marxist and anti-colonial polemics. Marxists

were in fact the first scholars to attempt a serious examination of fascism as a unique political movement. The first to identify the relationship between the two were interwar Marxists, who drew heavily upon Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917). Written before the first fascist movements, Lenin's text argued that imperialism and colonialism reflected 'monopoly capitalism' in its final stage. Drawing significantly upon the work of British economist J. A. Hobson, colonial exploitation, Lenin argued, was a cartel of financiers and industrialists seeking to make vast profits on underdeveloped economies in collaboration with the state – making wars between states competing for investment and land inevitable. To quote Lenin, under a system of 'modern monopolist capital on a world-wide scale ... imperialist wars are absolutely inevitable under *such* an economic system, *as long as* private property in the means of production exists'.<sup>38</sup>

If imperialism represented the final stage of capitalism before the inevitable proletarian uprising, according to the interwar Marxist theorist R. Palme Dutt, fascism 'represents an extreme phenomenon of this process of capitalism in decay'.<sup>39</sup> Dutt, following Trotsky, argued that 'the principal aim of Fascism is to destroy the revolutionary labour vanguard' through a 'combination of social demagogy, corruption and [referring to the Russian Civil War] active White terror, in conjunction with extreme imperialist aggression in the sphere of foreign politics'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, fascism and imperialism were intrinsically linked as features of late-capitalism in the minds of (often Marxist) anti-fascists – codified in the Dimitroff definition for communists – with fascists using imperialist aggression in order to prolong capitalist rule and destroy any potential for a working-class uprising.

The subtler Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, saw an inevitable link between fascism and the need for imperial expansion. From prison in 1926, Gramsci wrote prophetically that Mussolini's fascist regime would:

attempt to resolve the crisis of Italian society outside the national field. In this are the germs of a war which will ostensibly be fought for Italian expansion but in which reality fascist Italy will be an instrument in the hands of one of the imperialism groups struggling for domination of the world.<sup>41</sup>

Another influential Marxist, Paul Sweezy, asserted in 1942 that fascism had germinated from the First World War – itself an inter-imperialist war. Thus fascism, while being intrinsically linked to the capitalist system, was made possible in the aftermath of war:

A nation, the economic and social structure of which is seriously disrupted as the result of an imperialist war of re-division, may, failing a successful socialist revolution, enter upon a period of class equilibrium on the basis of capitalist relations of production. Under such conditions, the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism leads to a severe internal crisis which cannot be "solved" by resort to the normal methods of imperialist expansion. This is, so to speak, the soil in which fascism takes root and grows.<sup>42</sup>

The Marxist understanding of the relationship between fascism and imperialism was revived at the turn of this century in Dave Renton's *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (2000), the most comprehensive survey of Marxist views of fascism to date. Renton, like interwar Marxists, is heavily influenced by Lenin's *Imperialism*, which, he argues 'addressed the question of why it was that capitalism could appear in different forms'.<sup>43</sup> He further explains that, for Marxists, 'why it was that the capitalist economic system could live so easily alongside fascist political rule'.<sup>44</sup> Although differing from scholars like Vinay Lal, who argues that the British Empire was essentially fascist in nature, Renton argues that British imperialism was not the same as Italian Fascism; indeed (citing the British Empire) 'the most imperialist regimes have not actually been fascist'.<sup>45</sup> However, Renton's belief in the nexus between imperialism and fascism is a constant theme in his work. Ultimately, Renton argues that 'fascism was made possible by the experience of colonialism'.<sup>46</sup> The most problematic aspect of the Marxist understanding of fascism and imperialism, surely, lies in the understanding of fascism as little more than militant form of monopoly capitalism. Fascist ideology and aims are largely ignored by Marxists, who see any fascist vision of a 'reborn state' as a smokescreen that merely diverts attention from the main function of fascism: to smash the working class in the interests of capital.

Following the Second World War, many examining the relationship between fascism and Empire moved away from the materialism of Marxism into the realm of ideas, largely surrounding race. As the catalogue of fascist atrocities began to emerge, many anti-imperialist scholars and intellectuals were quick to point out that European civilisation had been engaging in similar acts outside Europe for decades. In 1948, African-American intellectual W. E. Du Bois sought to highlight similarities between Nazi atrocities and European imperialism:

There was no Nazi atrocity – concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood – which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practising against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to the world.<sup>47</sup>

Influenced by the growth of colonial nationalist movements and postwar European decolonisation, other polemical works further sought to explain fascism and the atrocities of the Second World War through the lens of a European imperialist tradition after 1945.<sup>48</sup> One of these was the Martiniquan poet and writer Aimé Césaire. In his essay, 'Discourse on Colonialism', first published in 1950, Césaire first argued that imperialism, under the guise of 'civilising' the native, had *decivilised* the coloniser, meaning 'to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, to violence, race hatred and moral relativism'.<sup>49</sup> Nazism, according to Césaire, was the boomerang effect from a European colonialism based upon racial superiority and unrestrained violence. The shock and indignation expressed by Europeans following Nazi atrocities struck Césaire as ironic, given that



before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples.<sup>50</sup>

Hitler had ‘applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the “coolies” of India and the “niggers” of Africa’.<sup>51</sup>

Hannah Arendt, more sophisticatedly concerned with ‘origins’ rather than ‘causes’, similarly saw the germs of fascism in late-nineteenth-century European colonialism, arguing that ‘some of the fundamental aspects of this time appear so close to totalitarian phenomena of the twentieth century that it may be justifiable to consider the whole period [1884–1914] a preparatory stage for coming catastrophes’.<sup>52</sup> Critical in Arendt’s linking of fascism and imperialism is the role played by the middle class, or *petit bourgeoisie*. Distancing herself from Marxist scholars (despite being influenced by familiar figures such as J. A. Hobson), imperialism ‘must be considered the first stage in political rule of the bourgeoisie rather than the last stage of capitalism’.<sup>53</sup> Fascism, like imperialism, reflected a ‘political emancipation of the bourgeoisie’ which began in the late nineteenth century. This, for her, was a crucial factor in the rise of fascism – what Seymour Lipset referred to as ‘the extremism of the centre’.<sup>54</sup> Arendt argues that the atrocities committed by National Socialism were less to do with German history than the European tradition of colonialism, racism and antisemitism. The main thread Arendt sees in imperialism and Nazi totalitarianism, above all, is a shared emphasis upon racial doctrine. Drawing on Hobson, she argues that European imperialism, particularly in the ‘scramble for Africa’, was driven by economic greed and ‘expansion for expansion’s sake’; furthermore, racism was used to justify this conquest.<sup>55</sup>

The above views, for all their genuine nuances, do share some similar themes. Most importantly, they stress the contextual importance of European racism and violence in the development of fascism. These arguments must be seen within the historical context following the Second World War, which revealed racist violence, murder and genocide on a scale never before witnessed. Violence and racism are certainly important features of fascism. Rightly, these works have been influential within their respective fields; Marxist theories of imperialism were reborn in the late 1970s and 1980s, and have continued to be influential in explaining the ‘new imperialisms’ of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (such as multinational corporations or ‘neoliberal’ globalisation).<sup>56</sup> The work of Césaire, Du Bois and Frantz Fanon in the anti-colonial movements in Africa and elsewhere, no less than the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, were hugely influential in their time. Hannah Arendt remains one of the most eminent intellectuals of the postwar world.<sup>57</sup> Yet all these works, written over half a century ago, reflect older conceptions of fascism and imperialism that merit reconsideration.

Marxist and postwar understandings of the relationship between fascism and Empire demonstrate the importance of not taking the imperial rhetoric of the far

right at face value and critically analysing its relevance to a wider political programme. Yet the most problematic aspects centre upon the way in which they conceptualise fascism and far right political movements. As noted above, Marxist scholarship tends to boil right-wing political movements down to nothing more than über-capitalist dictatorship, with no other purpose than to crush socialism. Renton cites examples of how fascists in Germany and Italy could only come to power with the assistance of conservative elites. This may be true, but it is surely just a fraction of the bigger picture of fascism – which as Emilio Gentile has argued, ‘was the first instance of a modern political religion’ which (in the Italian case) sought to transform the ‘mentality, the character and the customs of Italians’.<sup>58</sup> Nor do these approaches explain working-class support for fascist movements across Europe, or the complexity of fascist ideology too – summarily dismissed as ‘propaganda’ by Marxist scholars.

The understanding of fascism by postwar intellectuals is similarly incomplete. Fascism is seen as largely economic – the ‘extremism of the middle classes’ argument examined by Lipset. In addition, to focus on fascism merely as racist and violent is again, surely, only part of the picture. Fascism during the Cold War was seen largely as reactionary in nature, and the link with only colonial violence further perpetuates this misplaced notion. Yet fascism was as much, if not more, a cultural movement than it was a political or economic one, as is the focus of much ‘new consensus’ scholarship on fascism. According to the latter, fascism sought to create an ‘alternative modernity’ based on revolutionary ultranationalism. Scholars are now much more willing to grant that fascist movements tended to have a plan for every facet of human life; moreover, their vision was not dystopian but utopian. By way of contribution, imperialism must be similarly viewed within this wider understanding of fascism – both culturally and politically. This study will therefore examine the ideas which underpinned imperialism and their weaponisation by the far right, as they sought to achieve legitimacy as the saviours of Britain’s Empire.

## The British Empire in context

Over the past two decades, research into imperialism and fascism has developed significantly. However, research into the relationship between far right movements in western European imperial countries that bears comparison with the British (e.g., France, the Netherlands, Belgium) is thin. One exception is Jennifer Foray, who convincingly demonstrates the importance of imperial ideology and the Dutch overseas empire to the Dutch Nazi Party.<sup>59</sup> In the case of France, there has been a notable lack of attention. One of the reasons for this is may be that France’s overseas empire was traditionally, throughout the nineteenth century, ‘championed most enthusiastically by liberal or even left-wing voices’.<sup>60</sup> The French right tended to be more concerned with continental foes such as Germany, and were often critical of money spent on far-flung colonies instead of being used to defend the domestic national interest. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the French right gradually rallied around the cause of Empire as it became more aligned

with the military establishment (especially following the Dreyfus Affair). There was a certain amount of Romanticism now attached to France's Empire, which became viewed among the right as 'the natural playground of the masculine hero, whether soldier, explorer or even priest'.<sup>61</sup>

In France during the twentieth century, there was increasingly a growing notion of 'the colonial frontier as a spiritually, morally and physically redemptive environment'.<sup>62</sup> However, as Michael Heffernan has argued, during the interwar period, far right organisations such as Action Française 'had remarkably little of interest or originality to say on the colonial question'.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, as Samuel Kalman has demonstrated in his recent monograph, *French Colonial Fascism*, in French Algeria, fascism and imperialism were deeply intertwined. Accordingly, European settlers eschewed metropolitan fascist branches in favour of a 'uniquely colonial variant of fascism'.<sup>64</sup> The association of the far right in France and Empire becomes more striking after the Second World War, particularly during the Algerian War of Independence, where many members of the volunteerist *Organisation Armée Secrète* (OAS), such as Jean-Marie le Pen, went on to become important figures in the neo-fascist party, the Front National.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, more recent studies have, to some extent examined the imperial ambitions of regimes such as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. In the case of Nazi Germany, they have predominantly focused upon the Second World War expansion and occupation under the short-lived Axis 'New Order'.<sup>66</sup> Shelley Baranowski's *Nazi Empire: German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler* assesses this nuanced parallel which speaks to the *Sonderweg* ['special path'] debate that captivated German historical scholarship for several decades from the 1960s. Baranowski, distancing herself from those identifying Nazism's roots solely within a German tradition, instead argued that there are significant continuities between the German Empire's imperial plans and those of Nazi Germany.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, such a stance has become increasingly common, with Birthe Kundrus similarly arguing that 'Nazi imperial ambitions can indeed be labelled imperialistic', with the caveat that National Socialism was unable to create an Empire, but rather established a 'new system of "foreign rule" that broke with core elements of imperial hegemony'.<sup>68</sup>

Scholarship on the relationship between Italian fascism and imperialism has been less fully explored, particularly in terms of its role in Italian fascist ideology. Over a decade ago, Nicola Labanca lamented the lack of exploration into the relationship between Italian Fascism to colonialism, a fact he found puzzling, given the 'centrality of the imperial myth in the fascist regime, and not only after 1935'.<sup>69</sup> Labanca stresses that, during *il ventennio*, both at a regime and movement level, 'the dimension of the overseas, of the empire and the colonies, was of central relevance at multiple levels: foreign politics, military preparation, organization of consent in the motherland, and administration of power in the conquered African lands'.<sup>70</sup> Since then, other studies examining the relationship between Italian fascism at both an ideological and practical levels have originated.<sup>71</sup> This has most recently been explored by Ruth Ben-Ghiat in relation to cinema.<sup>72</sup>

While this study builds upon these recent works on fascist imperialism, it differs in the key sense that Britain, unlike Germany and Italy, already had a vast, established Empire and small fascist movements who were never close to achieving power. Furthermore, noting this contrast, this study examines how imperialism was used by abortive far right movements in Britain to further their political agenda, a subject generally overlooked in other national contexts. This limits the scope for comparative study, not least given the massive output of British far right groups concerned with the British Empire. Yet by examining the British case, it is still possible to establish ‘native’ and ‘continental’ threads within far right imperial thinking and draw conclusions relevant to both continental far right politics and British imperial history. Of course, neither fascists nor the far right were anywhere near achieving power and imposing their policies for a revitalised Empire, but they contributed to a wide-ranging debate on the future of the British Empire and associated themes such as race and conspiracy theory which were not limited to the UK.

## Notes

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# NOTES

## Introduction

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## Chapter 2

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## Chapter 6

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## Conclusion

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