

Institution: University of Sheffield

Unit of Assessment: 30 - History

Title of case study: Coming to terms with women's engagement with political extremism in Britain

1. Summary of the impact

Dr Julie Gottlieb's research on women's politicization and gender roles in inter-war British extremist politics has had cultural impact in terms of the understanding of, and the coming to terms with, often uncomfortable and traumatic family memories. The personal and contemporary resonances of this research have led the media and the public, in particular the descendants of those still affected by the much-stigmatized political choices of their immediate ancestors, to become closely engaged with her work, serving to recover and understand overlooked histories. Of the audiences of hundreds who have heard her in person and hundreds of thousands who have listened to her on radio, several have contacted her with information and insights that signify a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted relationship between women and politics in the aftermath of suffrage, in particular during the crisis years between the world wars. Gottlieb's work has provided an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate women who have been sidelined in political history, providing a launching point for public discussion about women's political agency and representation almost a century after suffrage.

2. Underpinning research

Dr Gottlieb's research has focused on women's engagement in political extremism in the inter-war period, both as participants in far right organizations and as anti-fascists mobilizing in response to crises in international politics at home and abroad [R5]. Building on her doctoral and post-doctoral work, her research in Sheffield since 2003 has taken new directions by broadening the range of women's political activism under investigation [R2]. In the 1990s colleagues Prof. Colin Holmes and Richard Thurlow and their many PhD students established the so-called 'Sheffield School' for the study of political marginality and extremism, accompanied by the creation of a rich and unique archive for the subject based in the Special Collections section of the University Library. Gottlieb has built on their insights by providing a vital gender perspective to the study of British political extremism, and she has continued to build the archive. All her work is undergirded by the forceful argument that British women's political agency should not be underestimated, even when exercised in the post-World War I atmosphere of ambivalence and anxiety about women's enfranchisement and alleged undue political influence [R1].

This published research encompasses women in the British Union of Fascists, women's campaigns against fascism, and the relationship between women and foreign affairs and policy, coming to focus on the gendered responses to appeasement in the late 1930s. Her research has contested presumptions and prejudices about the nature of fascist organisation, and the ways in which women enacted their new citizenship rights in the aftermath of suffrage. Where once it was widely believed that fascist organisations were male chauvinist and male supremacist and spurned women's participation, she has shown that the British Union of Fascists (BUF) welcomed female participation, even attracted former suffragettes to leadership positions, and was ambivalent rather than hostile to feminist discourse and aspirations. By corresponding with women who had been members, creating contacts with their descendants, and compiling an ongoing 'who's who of women and British fascism', it has become clear that women joined the movement of their own free will and for their own reasons; in the British context where fascism failed, women were never coerced but exercised their political free will. They were motivated by ideology, xenophobia and racism, a particular take on women's rights (an ultra-patriotic feminism), and sometimes for more personal reasons such as the appeal of the uniform and that of some of the young men donning the blackshirt [R5]. They did not suffer from false consciousness, which was the too-convenient explanation proffered by some socialist and feminist politicians and scholars. Indeed, by examining the construction of masculinity in the movement and the development of innovative political technologies developed to try to circumvent the media blackout of the BUF, Gottlieb has argued that the movement was far from marginal or out-of-step with the mainstream in British politics or the prevalent gender order [R3, R6].

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While breaking new ground by exposing the significance of women's participation in fascist movements, she has also opened up the opposite and adjoining field, namely women's resistance to fascism at home and abroad [R4]. Just as women had been largely left out of the story of the BUF, they have been sidelined in the more heroic narrative of anti-fascism, the Popular Front, and anti-appeasement. Her original contribution demonstrates that political women's deepening interest and engagement in foreign affairs signals the diversification of interwar feminism, rather than its retreat after the heady days of the headline-grabbing suffragettes.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

All of these publications were peer reviewed by at least two academic readers.

- R1. Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye, "Introduction" (pp. 1-18), and "'We were done the moment we gave women the vote': The Female Franchise Factor and the Munich By-Elections, 1938-1939" (pp. 159-180), in eds Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye, *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) [This volume emerged from the June 2011 International Conference "The Aftermath of Suffrage: What Happened After the Vote Was Won?", organised by Dr Gottlieb at the University of Sheffield.]
- R2. "Introduction", pp. 137-140, and "'Broken Friendships and Vanished Loyalties': Gender, Collective (In)Security and Anti-Fascism in Britain in the 1930s," *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, (Special Issue 'Women, Fascism and the Far Right, 1918-2010', ed. Julie V. Gottlieb), 13:2 (2012), pp. 197-219 [This journal was formerly *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* and it remains a leading specialist journal in comparative fascist studies. Gottlieb was invited to guest edit this special issue.]
- R3. "Body Fascism in Britain: Building the Blackshirt in the Inter-war Period," *Contemporary European History*, 20:2 (2011), pp. 111-136 [This is a leading journal in the field]
- R4. "Varieties of Feminist Anti-Fascism", in (eds) Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-war Period* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 101-118
- R5. "A Mosleyite Life Stranger than Fiction: The Making and Remaking of Olive Hawks," in Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds), *Making Reputations: Power, Persuasion and the Individual in Modern British Politics*, (London: I.B Tauris, 2005), pp. 70-91 [Submitted to RAE 2008] As Kevin Jeffreys wrote in his review of *Making Reputations* (*Twentieth Century British History* [2006]): "in arguably the most stimulating article in the collection, Julie Gottlieb writes about the life of a little-known fascist activist, Olive Hawks. As well as adopting an interdisciplinary approach, using literary criticism and psychological analysis to help compensate for a lack of traditional evidence such as memoirs, Gottlieb challenges 'the boundaries of feminist biography', putting the spotlight on 'a woman who does not elicit much sympathy and who does not stand out as an exemplary feminist life'.
- R6. "Women and British Fascism Revisited: Gender, the Far-Right and Resistance," *Journal of Women's History*, 16:3 (2004), pp. 108-123. [Gottlieb was invited to assemble and contribute to this special issue; submitted to RAE 2008]

4. Details of the impact

The impact of Dr Gottlieb's work has resulted from the process of sharing her research with a wide and diverse audience, including: a range of local community groups, regional and national audiences on BBC Radio, the readership of the *BBC History Magazine*, and as a podcast. These activities have resulted in some striking transformations in personal understanding.

This work has had a particularly powerful impact on communities whose identity was forged out of the disruptions caused by fascists in the 1930s. She has been invited to address community-based Jewish historical societies. Speaking on "BUF women" to the Leeds Jewish Historical Society on 7 September 2009, the audience of 40 members was amazed to learn that women were both the purveyors of anti-Semitism and its victims. This stimulated a discussion about the often conflicting

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and contradictory narratives recorded in personal testimony versus scholarly research. She appeared on 'The Jewish Citizen' on BBC Radio Manchester (10,000 listeners) on 7 November 2011 to talk about her research on women and anti-Semitism and to publicise her upcoming talk on behalf of the charity Shaare Zedek UK in November, 2011, speaking on "Blackshirts and Broomsticks" [S2, S9]. As the host and chair at the Shaare Zedek event (audience of c.35) commented in a personal communication to Gottlieb, "*some, as you know were already informed to a degree, but you highlighted details they were not aware of which stimulated not only discussion on the night but I know they shared what they learned with other members of the Manchester Jewish Community. Your talk revived memories of fascism in Britain and provided a forum for the discussion of how to develop strategies to combat present day anti-Semitism*" [S4].

Gottlieb's work has attracted a wider audience and media attention due to public interest, intellectual and often personal, in the participation of politically active women on the far right. About a dozen times she has been contacted by genealogical researchers, such as the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of ex-suffragette fascist Norah Elam. Using Gottlieb's research as a launching pad for their own study of their ancestor, *Mosley's Old Suffragette* (2010/13, ISBN 978-1446699676), the granddaughter first contacted Gottlieb in 2008: "*I am learning about [my grandmother's] activities with great incredulity and some ambiguity given what is coming out, but have to congratulate you on an excellent book, [Feminine Fascism], which is so well written that I can follow, understand and grasp some of the significance of the role of women like Norah in that period of British history*".

Descendants of BUF women have contacted Dr Gottlieb requesting more information, and their confrontations with their fascist family histories have been transformative. One descendant first contacted Gottlieb about her mother and grandmother: "*I have read, with great interest, your powerful and detailed accounts of female fascists in Britain in the 1930's and 40's...My specific interest stems from my own family history. My grandparents... were members of the BUF, and my mother, as a child, was a participant in rally's [sic], campaigns and anti-Semitic activity*". The producer of "My Mother was a Blackshirt" (a half-hour slot which aired midday on BBC Radio 4 on 4 January, 2010) is another case in point. Gottlieb acted as historical consultant and talking head on the programme. She spent many hours in discussion with him, helping him to situate his own mother's experience in a wider context, and she placed him in touch with other descendants of BUF women who then contributed to the programme.

Gottlieb has supported people interested in inter-war political extremism through her work with Special Collections at the University Library, which has one of the richest collections available for studying this subject. She has facilitated the deposit of new material from private collections, for instance from the holdings of the Friends of Oswald Mosley, and she has directed genealogists and non-professional historians to these collections, which have been consulted by 51 external users during the census period.

Her work on the impact of suffrage has also excited public interest. She organised, together with Prof. Richard Toye (Exeter University), an international conference on "The Aftermath of Suffrage" at the University of Sheffield, 24-25 June 2011. The 50 delegates included 7 or 8 students and interested persons from outside academia. She convinced the producers of BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* that this was a topic that would interest their diverse national listenership, and she was interviewed together with Prof. Pat Thane by Jennie Murray on *Woman's Hour* on the morning of 24 June 2011 (average Friday audience, 1.36 million) [S1]. Sheffield listeners of her *Woman's Hour* appearance contacted her to invite her to give a lecture on "Suffrage—What Happened After the Vote was Won?" to the Time Well Spent Group (a local luncheon discussion group for seniors) in Sheffield on 31 May 2012 to an audience of 60. Through the discussion that followed, it became clear that these women and men, despite having lived through Second Wave Feminism, were surprised to learn about the continuing gender gap in politics and the long campaigns waged by women to be part of the political process. In addition, she was commissioned by the *BBC History Magazine* to write a feature article: "Guilty Women?" that appeared in the Christmas 2011 edition, and she was interviewed by podcast for the Magazine (70,000 copies sold per issue, and a readership of 250,000) [S7]. Placing Margaret Thatcher in a trajectory of women's politicization on the Right, Gottlieb published a blog, "Which Witch is Which: Margaret Thatcher as Lady Politician"

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two days after the death of the former Prime Minister—it had 629 visits by June 2013 [S6].

From her vantage point as a historian of women and Europe in the first half of the 20th century, Gottlieb has also made public appearances speaking about her late mother's Holocaust memoir, published posthumously. In August 2008 she was interviewed about this on BBC Radio Manchester. This led to an invitation to make a 50-minute presentation, with visuals, to the Manchester Jewish Historical Society at the Manchester Jewish Museum (audience c. 40 people) in June 2010 [S5], and she presented a similar paper to Group Sixty-Two in Sheffield on 6 July 2011 (audience c. 30 people). The organiser of the latter wrote to her to express how the talk "*had heightened understanding of the generational effect of involvement in the Shoah*". On both occasions a forum was created for sharing memories of Holocaust experiences and confronting emotional memories of family trauma and mother-daughter relationships. On 8 April 2013, Yom HaShoah, she addressed the Juniors (over 100 pupils) at North Cheshire Jewish Primary School on "The Holocaust Through the Eyes of a Child". On behalf of the pupils, a teacher wrote to her: "*We were drawn in by your mother's moving insights into a child's view of the complex happenings during the terrible period of World War II... Your brilliant presentation for us will be treasured in our minds for the rest of our lives*" [S3].

In sum, Gottlieb's research has provided a forum for intellectual and emotional interaction between diverse communities and across the generations. It has enabled those personally affected by the dislocation and the stark political polarization of the interwar years to come to terms with the past.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Persons to contact:

- S1. Assistant Producer, BBC Radio 4's "Woman's Hour" [Audience figure for programme in which Gottlieb and Thane appeared.]
- S2. Host and associate producer BBC Radio Manchester [Audience figure for 'The Jewish Citizen' and listener response to programme in which Gottlieb appeared.]
- S3. Headteacher, North Cheshire Primary School [Corroborate quote and impact of Gottlieb's visit.]
- S4. Manchester Director, Shaare Zedek UK [Corroborate quote and impact of Gottlieb's talk.]
- S5. Director, Manchester Jewish Historical Society [Audience figure for Gottlieb talk to Jewish Historical Society and impact of her talk.]
- S6. Blog "Which Witch is Which: Margaret Thatcher as Lady Politician," <http://www.historymatters.group.shef.ac.uk/witch-margaret-thatcher-lady-politician/>
- S7. Podcast of "Guilty Women", BBC History Magazine (December, 2011) <http://www.historyextra.com/podcasts>
- S8. <http://historyplanet.wordpress.com/2011/04/29/female-fuhrer/> [In this blog Gottlieb is cited as the expert on Rotha Lintorn-Orman, leader of the British Fascisti] (2011)
- S9. *Jewish Telegraph*, Friday 2 December, 2011. [Re Gottlieb's talk at Shaare Zedek Hospital, which was also cited in the Shaare Zedek's international newsletter.]
- S10. "Children of Blackshirt women live with shame", <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8425252.stm> (2010)