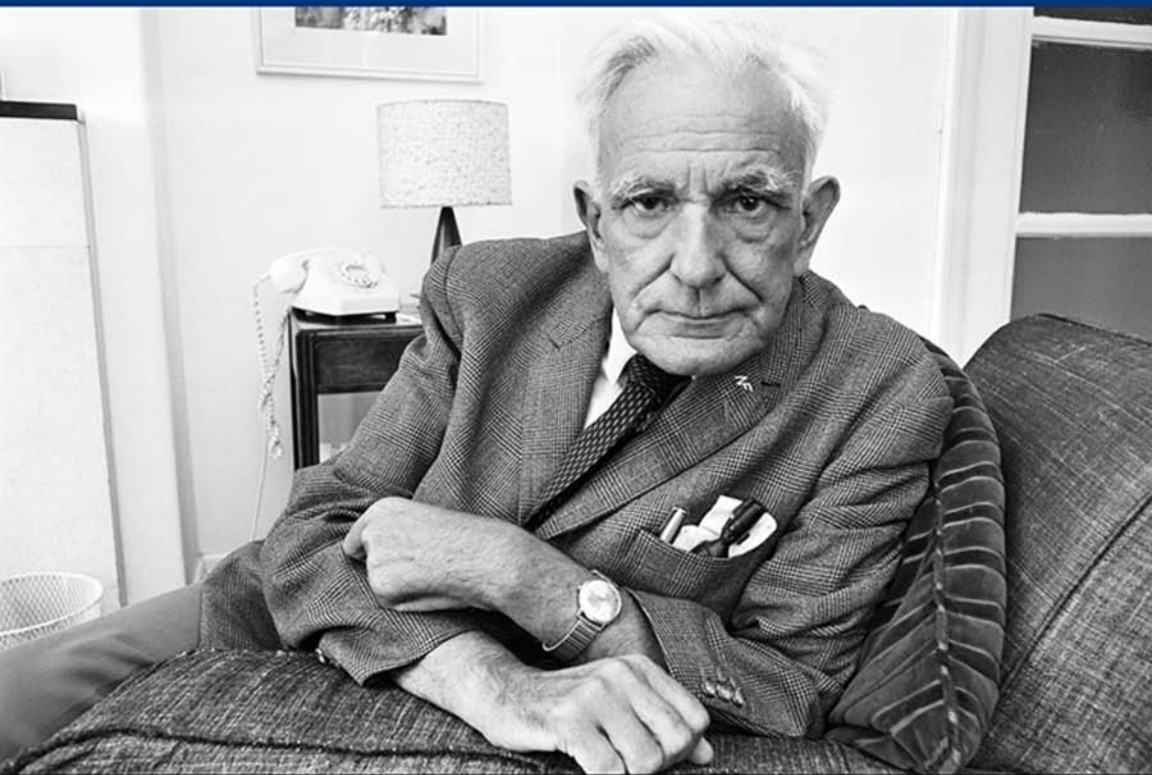


# A.K. CHESTERTON AND THE EVOLUTION OF BRITAIN'S EXTREME RIGHT, 1933–1973



ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN FASCISM AND THE FAR RIGHT

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# A.K. CHESTERTON AND THE EVOLUTION OF BRITAIN'S EXTREME RIGHT, 1933–1973

Arthur Kenneth (A.K.) Chesterton was a soldier, journalist and activist whose involvement with fascist and extreme right-wing politics in Britain spanned four decades. Beginning with his recruitment to Oswald Mosley's 'Blackshirts' in the 1930s, Chesterton's ideological relationship with fascism, nationalism and anti-Semitism would persist far beyond the collapse of the interwar movements, culminating in his role as a founder of the National Front in 1967.

This study examines Chesterton's significance as a bridging figure between two eras of extreme right activity in Britain, and considers the ideological and organizational continuity that existed across the interwar and post-war periods. It further uses Chesterton's life as a means to explore the persistence of racism and anti-Semitism within British society, as well as examining the political conflicts and tactical disputes that shaped the extreme right as it attempted to move 'from the margins to the mainstream'.

This book will appeal to students and researchers with an interest in fascism studies, British political history, extremism and anti-Semitism.

**Luke LeCras** holds a doctorate in history from Murdoch University in Western Australia, where he has taught undergraduate courses in global and modern European history. His research interests include fascism and right-wing extremism, nationalism and populism in contemporary British politics.

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*Luke LeCras*

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# ABBREVIATIONS

- Chesterton Collection:** University of Bath Special Collections GB 1128, Catalogue of the papers and correspondence of Arthur Kenneth Chesterton (1899–1973)
- BL:** British Library, St. Pancras
- PA:** Parliamentary Archives of the United Kingdom
- TNA:** National Archives of the United Kingdom
- USSC:** University of Sheffield Special Collections
- WCML:** Working Class Movement Library





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# INTRODUCTION

Most political movements of the extreme right have remained on the fringes of history, unable to replicate the disastrous triumphs of interwar fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain. This is especially true in Britain, where the history of fascist and extreme right movements has widely, though not universally, been characterized in terms of failure and marginalization.<sup>1</sup> With so many of its parties resigned to a small and struggling existence, studies of the extreme right in Britain are invariably drawn to individual stories. For several decades after 1945, the history of fascism in interwar Britain was all but synonymous with the biography of Sir Oswald Mosley, its most successful and reviled exponent. Only in the 1980s, with new sources and perspectives, did British fascism develop a historical profile independent from Mosley – though the outsized presence and influence of ‘the Leader’ can still be discerned in recent scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Among the figures who travelled in Mosley’s wake through the political wilderness of right-wing extremism in Britain, A.K. Chesterton was not the most notorious, well-connected or intellectually sophisticated. Nor does he necessarily represent the individual whose ideological legacy weighs heaviest upon right-populist or neo-fascist movements to have emerged in Britain since the Second World War. Instead, Chesterton’s significance derives from the depth and longevity of his career, which encompassed two of the most prominent extreme right parties to arise in 20th-century Britain: the British Union of Fascists, founded by Sir Oswald Mosley in 1932, and the National Front, for which Chesterton served as founding chairman in 1967.

Like many activists of the war generation, Chesterton lived a life parallel to politics that was remarkable in its own right. He was a teenage soldier in East Africa and the Western Front, a decorated veteran of both world wars, an accomplished journalist and playwright, a pugnacious critic and, for many years, an erratic drunkard. A 1996 biography by Dr. David Baker, *Ideology of Obsession*, ties these experiences to Chesterton’s political development, culminating in his involvement

## 2 Introduction

and disillusionment with Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Based on the author's doctoral thesis completed in 1982, Baker's study is rich in biographical and analytical detail but focused primarily on the processes by which Chesterton became an archetypal British fascist. This book builds upon Baker's work regarding the origins of Chesterton's ideology by turning to its development and consequences throughout the post-war era. Beyond simply completing the biographical picture, however, this study emphasizes Chesterton's status as a transitional figure who played a substantial role in the survival and evolution of Britain's extreme right across two distinct periods. With the emergence of a new wave of scholarship concerned with Britain's extreme right after 1945, there is all the more reason to consider the full contributions of a man who sustained the movement during an early stage of its 'long march through the cold-night'.<sup>4</sup>

To properly evaluate Chesterton in this regard, we need to briefly consider some of the historiographical issues that arise from moving between the history of interwar fascism and that of the post-war extreme right. Several early studies of fascism in Europe limited their focus to a discrete 'epoch' which ended with the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1990s, however, a decade that saw renewed growth for parties of the extreme right in Western Europe, the idea of fascism as a limited, purely 'epochal' phenomenon has widely fallen from favour. Roger Griffin's definition of generic fascism – 'a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism' – is the most influential definition among Anglophone scholars, particularly those concerned with fascism after 1945.<sup>6</sup> Griffin's interpretation emphasizes the capacity for fascism to adapt to the different national and historical conditions of the 'post-fascist' era, all the while maintaining the same ideological core of 'palingenetic ultra-nationalism'.<sup>7</sup> An alternative 'fascist minimum' proposed by Roger Eatwell also makes a conscious attempt to account for post-war movements, placing emphasis upon their serious proposals for a 'third-way' between liberalism and socialism.<sup>8</sup> Even Robert Paxton, for whom fascism denotes a series of 'mobilizing passions' more than an ideology, derives a definition from the interwar European movements that can be applied in 'other times and other places'.<sup>9</sup>

Even prior to the emergence of a 'new consensus' in the understanding of generic fascism, the concept of a persistent and adaptable fascist essence was implicit within many studies of Britain's extreme right.<sup>10</sup> This was true not only for the raft of works concerned with Mosley and the BUF but for analyses and post-mortems of the National Front, both of which burgeoned during the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Fascism, particularly as defined by Griffin's ideal type, now provides the theoretical underpinning for a wide range of studies encompassing the BUF, the 'para-fascist' groups predating Mosley, the contemporary British National Party (BNP) and the small but enduring 'groupuscules' of British neo-Nazism.<sup>12</sup> Scholars of both interwar and post-war British fascism have proved highly receptive to other innovations of the new consensus, with its emphasis on fascist culture and fascism as a 'political religion'.<sup>13</sup> The most notable exceptions to these trends are the small number of works which specifically emphasize the 'rightist' character of the interwar and post-war

movements rather than their generically fascist qualities. Alan Sykes's concise study largely eschews the concept of British fascism and instead focuses on a continuous tradition of the 'radical right' tracing back to the late 19th century.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Martin Pugh's study of interwar fascism in Britain finds its antecedents in the Edwardian Radical Right and emphasizes the extent to which parties like the BUF were shaped by their relationship with conservatism.<sup>15</sup>

As its title connotes, this book considers Chesterton specifically within the framework of the extreme right, yet another term whose definition and parameters are vigorously contested. To the extent that a consensus can be established, the literature dealing with the extreme right describes a 'political family' whose members exhibit the same ideological traits. Nationalism, xenophobia, racism and hostility towards liberal-democracy are among the most commonly identified features of extreme right-wing ideology in Britain and Europe, though as is the case with fascism, there is no universally accepted definition or criteria.<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Carter, for example, dispenses with specific ideological features and focuses on the negative principles of right-wing extremism: a rejection of the democratic state and constitutionalism ('extremism') and a rejection of human equality, 'a feature that makes right-wing extremism right-wing'.<sup>17</sup> Like another leading scholar of the contemporary extreme right, Cas Mudde, Carter rejects the 'reductionist' view of the post-war movements as solely defined by their attempts to resurrect or parody interwar fascism.<sup>18</sup>

There are two questions likely to be raised regarding the terminology used to describe Chesterton's political milieu throughout this study. Firstly, why refer to the evolution of the 'extreme right' in Britain rather than the 'radical right' or 'far right' described in other texts? Secondly, given the prevalence of fascism as an ideological and organizational current in Chesterton's life, why not refer solely to a concept of post-war British fascism? Regarding the first question, there have been many attempts to discretely categorize the far, extreme and radical rights, though these definitions vary according to the national and historical context in question. In the 1980s, the radical right gained currency as a description for radical conservatism and the 'New Right' represented in Britain by Margaret Thatcher. More recently, however, the term has undergone a resurgence in the burgeoning literature surrounding the 'populist radical right', which Mudde defines as yet another political family exhibiting nativist, authoritarian and populist tendencies.<sup>19</sup> In contemporary Britain, the most prominent manifestation of the populist radical right is the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), formed by disaffected members of the Conservative Party in the early 1990s. Unlike its counterparts on the extreme right, UKIP has managed to cultivate an enduring electoral presence while largely avoiding the fascist and neo-Nazi affiliations that have long plagued the BNP.<sup>20</sup>

A formal distinction between the far right and the extreme right is more difficult to ascertain. Demonstrating one way such a distinction can be made, Carter rejects the far right as a category better suited to describing a point on the political spectrum rather than an ideological family.<sup>21</sup> For the most part, however, the far

#### 4 Introduction

and extreme right are referred to by historians and political scientists interchangeably to describe the same broad family of parties and ideological movements. This study's preference for the latter term is mostly pragmatic, therefore, as many of the themes and ideological features described in the literature concerned specifically with the extreme right bear particular relevance to A.K. Chesterton's ideological interests. These not only include the core elements listed in most definitions of the extreme right – nationalism, hard-Euro-scepticism, racism and authoritarianism – but also the more esoteric themes such as anti-communism, anti-Americanism and cultural pessimism.<sup>22</sup> Within historical literature, there is also an established precedent for using the extreme right as a category encompassing both the fascist and 'post-fascist' eras, making it an ideal frame of reference through which to consider Chesterton's career.

Regarding the second question, it has been observed that in the recent stampede to define and explicate populism and the contemporary extreme right, scholars have tended to disregard the relevance and conceptual value of generic fascism.<sup>23</sup> Bearing this in mind, it would be absurd to consider Chesterton's involvement with the extreme right without grappling with fascism, both in the generic sense and as an epochal aspect of 20th-century British politics. This is not only because of Chesterton's time as a self-professed fascist revolutionary in the 1930s but because of his subsequent involvement with the first wave of extreme right parties to emerge in the post-fascist era. More so than their populist or 'post-industrial' successors in the 1980s, these movements were ideologically and organizationally entangled with the legacy of interwar fascism.<sup>24</sup> Chesterton's post-war experiences provide a good illustration of how the struggle to transcend the failures and ill-associations of this legacy was central to the development of Britain's extreme right after the BUF's disintegration in mid-1940. My use of the extreme right as a framing concept is not intended to downplay the significance of fascism in Chesterton's ideology, therefore, but to highlight its distinct presence among the various ideological and political forces at work during his lifetime.

Approaching fascism as a subset of the extreme right is not without its own controversies, since various interpretations stress the syncretic, centrist or even left-wing characteristics of fascist ideology. It is common for parties of the extreme right to reject the fascist label while also declaring themselves 'neither left nor right', a strategy adopted by both populists and neo-fascists in search of political legitimacy.<sup>25</sup> While fascism's exact relationship to rightism remains in dispute, there are strong practical reasons to treat fascism and the extreme right as mutually inclusive categories.<sup>26</sup> Robert Paxton has observed that, whatever their initial sympathies with the revolutionary left, fascists were invariably compelled to seek political advancement through alliances with the right – a pattern which Pugh compellingly illustrates in his study of Britain's interwar movement.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the fate of extreme right movements in the post-war era has been heavily determined (often in a negative sense) by their relationship with sympathetic or disenchanted conservatives and their ability to carve out political space alongside the mainstream right.<sup>28</sup> Chesterton's interactions with the outside edges of British conservatism,

primarily during the latter half of his career, provide another important dimension to his influence on the extreme right's reconstruction after 1945.

The discussions of fascism throughout this book are broadly informed by Roger Griffin's ideal type, which, as demonstrated in Baker's study, provides a valuable heuristic tool for understanding Chesterton's revolutionary outlook as a member of the BUF. Moving beyond the interwar period, Griffin's work also proves useful in conceptualizing aspects of Britain's extreme right after 1940: its 'ideological heterogeneity' and 'organizational complexity'; the growing prevalence of transnational networks and pan-European identity; and the persistence of 'nostalgic fascist' groups seeking to resurrect the interwar movement in all but name. In an effort to move beyond the abstract, ideological dimensions of fascism in Chesterton's experience, I have also endeavoured to draw on perspectives not strictly contained within the 'new consensus', particularly those which emphasize the organization and methods of fascist movements seeking political power and influence. Robert Paxton's definition of a dynamic, adaptable fascism, defined by its adherents motivating passions and political behaviours, has been poorly received by some scholars of British fascism.<sup>29</sup> Like the definitions of fascism provided by Stanley Payne and Michael Mann, however, Paxton's approach highlights themes that, although not strictly implied by the pursuit of cultural redemption and national rebirth, were integral to Chesterton's experience as a fascist in Britain: violence, paramilitarism, the leadership principle and the cooption of conservative allies and fellow-travellers.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

- 1 See Mike Cronin ed., *The Failure of British Fascism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).
- 2 The two most extensive accounts of Mosley's life and political career are: Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990); Stephen Dorril, *Blackshirt* (London: Viking, 2006). For some comments on Mosley's influence on the early historiography of British fascism, see Richard Thurlow, 'The Black Knight', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1975), pp. 15–19.
- 3 David L. Baker, *Ideology of Obsession* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996); David L. Baker, 'A.K. Chesterton: The Making of a British Fascist' (PhD Diss., University of Sheffield, 1982). The title for Baker's work is derived from an early consideration of Chesterton by Richard Thurlow, 'Ideology of Obsession: On the Model of A.K. Chesterton', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (1974), pp. 23–29.
- 4 See Nigel Copley and Matthew Worley, 'Introduction', *Tomorrow Belongs to Us: Britain's Far Right Since 1967* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 1–8.
- 5 The earliest and most influential work to posit this interpretation of fascism was Ernst Nolte's *Three Faces of Fascism* (Holt: Reinhart and Winston, 1963).
- 6 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8–14. For later works by Griffin which elaborate on his interpretation, see: *International Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998); Roger Griffin, *Fascism and Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 7 Roger Griffin, 'Fascism's New Faces (and New Facelessness) in the "Post-fascist" Epoch', Roger Griffin, Wener Loh and Andreas Umland eds., *Fascism Past and Present, West and East* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2006), pp. 29–67.
- 8 Roger Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1992), pp. 161–194; Roger Eatwell, 'The Nature of "Generic Fascism": Complexity and Reflexive Hybridity', Antonio Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis eds.,

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- Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 67–87.
- 9 Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Viking, 2004), pp. 172–205.
  - 10 Roger Griffin, ‘The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (Or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2000), pp. 21–43; Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, p. 21.
  - 11 On the historiography of the BUF, see Jakub Drabik, ‘British Union of Fascists’, *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2016), pp. 1–19. For Britain’s extreme right after 1967, see Craig Fowle, ‘Britain’s Far Right Since 1967: A Bibliographical Survey’, Copsy and Worley eds., *Tomorrow Belongs to Us*, pp. 224–267.
  - 12 For a consideration of Mosley’s party in relation to generic fascism, see Gary Love, ‘“What’s the Big Idea?” Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2007), pp. 447–468. The most widely cited work on British fascism is Richard Thurlow’s *Fascism in Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); on the British National Party (1982–present), see Matthew J. Goodwin, *New British Fascism* (London: Routledge, 2011); Nigel Copsy, *Contemporary British Fascism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
  - 13 On the prevalence of culture within the ideology of British fascism, see David D. Roberts, Alexander De Grand, Mark Antliff and Thomas Linehan, ‘Comments on Roger Griffin, “The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (Or Manufacture) of Consensus Within Fascist Studies”’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2002), pp. 259–274. For a wide range of cultural perspectives on interwar and post-war British fascism, see Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas Linehan eds., *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far-Right in Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Nigel Copsy ed., *Cultures of Post-War British Fascism* (London: Routledge, 2015).
  - 14 Alan Sykes, *The Radical Right in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
  - 15 Martin Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!* (London: Pimlico, 2005), pp. 7–20.
  - 16 For an extensive discussion of these methodological and definitional problems, see: Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 5–24; Elizabeth Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 13–63.
  - 17 Elizabeth Carter, ‘Party Ideology’, Mudde ed., *The Populist Radical Right*, p. 61.
  - 18 Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, pp. 17–18.
  - 19 Cas Mudde ed., ‘Introduction to the Populist Radical Right’, *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 22–35.
  - 20 See Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2014).
  - 21 Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, p. 24.
  - 22 Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, pp. 11–12.
  - 23 See the following: Nigel Copsy, ‘“Fascism . . . but with an Open Mind.” Reflections on the Contemporary Far Right in (Western) Europe’, *Fascism*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2013), pp. 1–17; Mark Mazower, ‘Fascism and Democracy Today: What Use Is the Study of History in the Current Crisis?’ *European Law Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2016), pp. 375–385; Andrea Mammone, ‘The *Eternal Return*? Faux Populism and Contemporarization of Neo-Fascism Across Britain, France and Italy’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2009), pp. 171–192.
  - 24 Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, pp. 14–16.
  - 25 Paul Hainsworth, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 13–17; Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, pp. 15–16; Mudde, ‘Introduction to the Populist Radical Right’, p. 25.
  - 26 Hainsworth offers a concise formulation of this idea: ‘It can be argued that although fascist and neo-fascist parties are located on the extreme right, not all right-wing extremist parties or movements are fascist or neo-fascist.’ See *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, p. 17.

- 27 On the broader subject of fascist and Nazi sympathizers within the interwar British right, see Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right* (London: Constable, 1980).
- 28 Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, pp. 102–105.
- 29 David L. Baker, ‘Generic Fascism: An Off-road Vehicle Mired in the Conceptual Mud: Or Speeding Down the Highway Towards a Greater Understanding of Nazism?’ Griffin, Loh and Umland eds., *Fascism Past and Present, West and East*, pp. 285–291, cf. 286.
- 30 Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 3–19; Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, p. 219; Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 5–24.



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