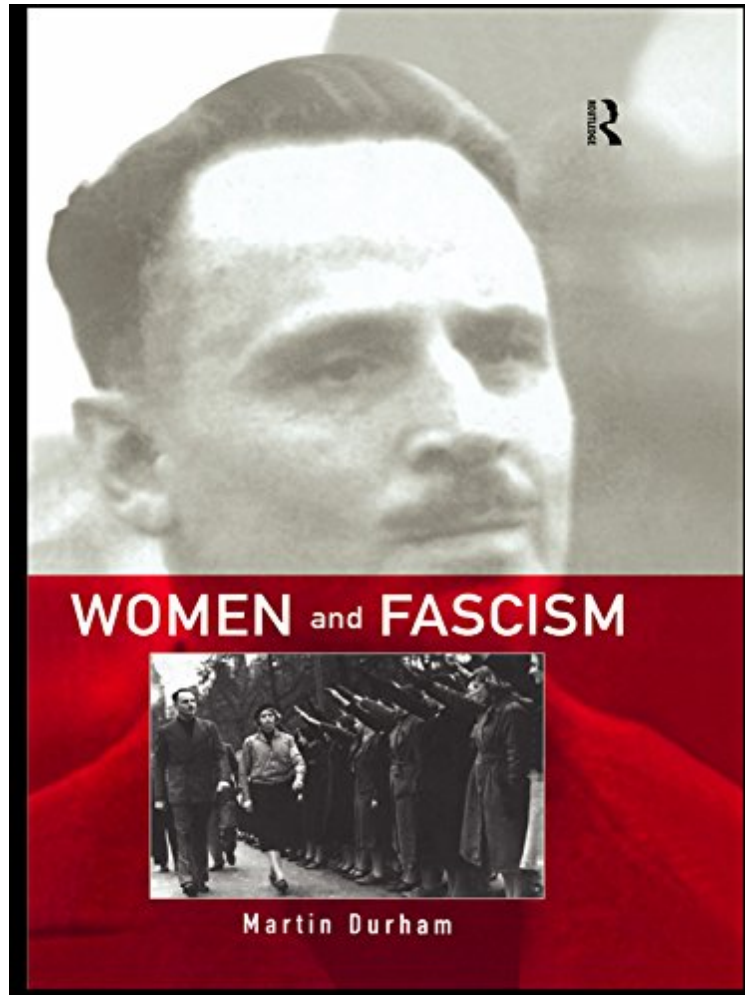


## Women and Fascism

*Martin Durham*

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**Martin Durham : Women and Fascism** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Women and Fascism:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. The British Union of Feminists? By Arnold E. Bjorn It is common received wisdom that Europe's fascist movements were reactionary in their views of women, and even misogynist in their ideologies and policies. If the street fighters and tough-guys hated women and wanted to stay in the kitchen, the eugenicists and scientists viewed them only as breeding stock. Few considered women human beings. So we are told. Like much received wisdom, there is a grain of truth in such ideas. But by all appearances, it is a rather tiny one. In this study, Martin Durham examines the ideas of various fascist movements relating to women. He aspires to a European perspective, but is by far the most thorough and successful in his treatment of the British Union of Fascists (or BUF, for short), Sir Oswald Mosley's British Nazi movement of the 1930s, where he makes extensive use of primary sources. As Durham shows, the BUF's views on women were the very antithesis of reactionary, and indeed

several members of the old "Suffragette" movement were active in the BUF. Taking on one issue at a time, the author contrasts the well-worn clichés with the actual policy statements of Mosley and his cronies, with remarkable revelations as the result. Thus we learn, for example, that the BUF not only did not oppose female employment outside the home, but in fact favored equal pay for equal work, with no regard for sex (p36f). Nor did the BUF oppose birth control measures (p38f) -- And in considering this, we must remember that such were not nearly as commonplace and widely accepted in the 1930s as they are today. (In fact, this permissive position cost the BUF some of its support from Britain's right-wing Roman Catholics.) More familiarly conservative, but still anything but hostile to women, was the BUF's stance on pornography and other sexual immorality, which it vigorously opposed (p42f). As might also be expected, pornography, prostitution and the white slave trade were generally identified with the Jewish element in British society. Further, the BUF mobilized women for its activities: as support staff, but also as speakers and even candidates for the party's tickets for parliament. Sir Oswald is on the record proudly noting that his (comparatively minuscule) movement fielded more female candidacies than did either of the big national parties. The elite corps of the BUF's female cadre was trained in first aid and jujitsu, so they could defend themselves against the violent attacks of the leftist opposition (p50f). If that is not "empowering" (as the current jargon goes), then what is? Of course, none of this means that the BUF were "feminists" as that word is currently understood; the title of this review is largely humorous. But then, ideological "feminism" as of today is quite divorced from the ideas of the old "Women's Rights" movement. These, as we can see, the BUF largely supported (for example, equitable wages for women workers); while this is not what we will tend to expect from a self-styled group of Nazis, their position is nevertheless quite clear from the evidence that Durham adduces. In acknowledging as much, Durham surely has no intention of in any way "rehabilitating" or promoting the BUF; but he professes a need for understanding fascism better, looking to the facts rather than to stereotypes. Drawing a parallel with modern right-wing movements (on which he is apparently an academic expert), he sees a danger that these are increasingly successful in recruiting female supporters. Should society wish to counteract this trend, he argues, it is necessary to understand how and why women are drawn to these groups, and a caricatured view of them is not helpful in this regard. While this reviewer is quite unfamiliar with such matters, and thus unable to comment on these particular facts -- His primary interest being history rather than contemporary political sociology -- the argument as such appears a sound one. In any case, Martin Durham's reappraisal of the (by the standards of its day) quite extraordinarily woman-friendly BUF is a welcome addition to our knowledge of historical Nazism. By and large, the only relevant complaint would be that the book's present title is somewhat misleading; the book focuses overwhelmingly on British matters, rather than women and "fascism" as an international phenomenon. This could have been made clearer. Still, this is quite a minor flaw to a highly original and useful work of historical scholarship. (For more information on women in fascism, and especially in the context of Nazism, a reader not fluent in German may, for example, wish to have a look at the relevant chapter in David Schoenbaum's now quite old but still very useful *Hitler's Social Revolution*.)

This seminal book challenges the common assumption that fascism is a misogynist movement which has tended to exclude women. Using examples from Germany, Italy and France, Durham analyses the rise of women in fascist organizations across Europe from the early twenties to the present. Unusually, however, the author focuses on British fascism and in doing so he offers valuable new perspectives on fascist attitudes to women. Offering interesting examples of women training in armed combat, and more generally as voters and members of fascist organizations, he highlights women's relationship to fascist policies on birth rate, abortion and eugenics.

About the Author Martin Durham is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wolverhampton. He has published extensively on right-wing politics in Europe and America.