*Music, Youth and International Links in Post-War British Fascism: The Transformation of Extremism*.

By Ryan Shaffer

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Fascism is not what it used to be. Ryan Shaffer’s study of the history of the National Front (NF) and the British National Party (BNP) tells the story of how extremist right-wing parties in Britain evolved beyond their association with Oswald Mosley and Adolf Hitler, embraced skinhead music and culture, and then sought ‘respectability’ and seats in the European Parliament. Shaffer is not the first historian to examine these movements. His basic narrative will be familiar to readers from historians of the NF such as Stan Taylor and Nigel Fielding, and the BNP such as Nigel Copsey, Alan Sykes, Matthew J. Goodwin, and Nick Lowles. What is new in Shaffer’s book is his emphasis on how music and youth culture shaped both movements. Shaffer argues that skinhead music rejuvenated a flagging British extremism in the late 1970s, influencing and connecting with right-wing movements throughout the world. He shows how movement leaders were consistently wary of the reputations young people were gaining for them and that they worked hard to distance themselves from the skinhead label while simultaneously cultivating the international connections music and youth culture had facilitated.

 The chapter on NF youth and music lies at the heart of the book and is where Shaffer carries out his most original analysis. Shaffer argues that NF youth adopted the strategies and sounds of anti-fascist groups such as the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism, which used punk rock to mobilize people against right-wing extremism. Eddy Morrison and other extremists in Leeds began Rock Against Communism in 1978, out of which emerged a number of fanzines and resulted in the radicalization of internationally successful Oi bands such as Skrewdriver. Given the centrality of music to the book, Shaffer pays remarkably little attention to the music or lyrics of these bands, focusing instead on how NF and BNP leaders instrumentalized the music for political purposes. Skinhead music brought the NF international attention, and in turn NF leaders began collaborating with extremists in Italy during the 1980s as well as the Nation of Islam and Muammar Gaddafi. More ‘traditional’ British voters were not comfortable with this the shift towards internationalism, which Shaffer argues eventually destroyed the NF. Disillusioned by factionalism within the NF, many leading activists followed John Tyndall into the BNP during the 1980s, where they continued hooliganism and youth activism through related groups such as Blood & Honour and Combat 18. Both Tyndall and his successor Nick Griffin nonetheless tried to minimize youth influence on the movement because they felt that it limited the BNP’s ability to contest elections.

 One strength of Shaffer’s book is the extensive interviews he carried out with NF and BNP leaders, including Phil Andrews, Richard Edmonds, Nick Griffin, Martin Webster, and others. Shaffer also draws heavily on rare sources – illegal magazines, albums, and videos that activists have shared with him, allowing him to document factionalism and nuanced changes in policy with detailed footnotes. Throughout the book Shaffer focuses heavily on the opinions and strategies of NF and BNP leaders without seeking to explain their oscillating popularity with British voters. He tells us why the leaders thought that their movements were winning or losing, not why he thinks it happened. The result is a study of a movements and their strategic choices rather than an explanation for the success or failure of the extreme right in Britain, which would have involved discussing mainstream politics and would have required quite a different research agenda.

 Despite describing their spread into youth culture and internationally, Shaffer is careful not to give the impression that the NF and the BNP were large-scale or influential movements. On the contrary, he highlights the amateurism and posturing that have characterized their leadership and policies over the past fifty years. He presents the BNP’s brief period of popularity between 2005 and 2009 as an almost accidental result of the reforms Nick Griffin imposed on the party and is quick to point out how quickly the party’s moment in the sun was eclipsed by other nationalist parties such as the English Defense League (EDL) and UKIP. Even while the parties Shaffer describes had only a marginal impact on British politics the book is valuable for showing how fringe movements function, recruit, and negotiate the difficult waters of local and national politics.

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