The 1930s saw the rise of fascist movements across Europe. Some measure of resistance to fascist ideology was inevitable in all European countries, and Britain was no exception. There, women in particular had their own unique relationship with anti-fascist ideology and action. Practically all politicized women in Britain opposed fascism, but they explained their beliefs in very different ways. There were two major splits among anti-fascist feminists. The first was between those who opposed fascism as communists and those who opposed it on liberal democratic principles. The second split was between advocates of non-violent resistance on the one hand, and those who advocated an interventionist approach on the other. Despite an overall anti-fascist consensus among British feminists, a consolidated anti-fascist movement never came to be because of these two irreconcilable ideological splits.

Feminist activists who engaged in anti-fascist politics were active in a wide variety of activities and organizations. The early 20th century saw the creation of a variety of internationalist and pacifist women’s organizations that into the 1930s focused increasingly on the threat of fascism.¹ One of the most vocal anti-fascist British feminist organizations was called the Six Point Group (SPG). The SPG spoke out against domestic fascism in the form of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), as well as against fascism in continental Europe.² In 1934, another group formed called the Women’s Organizing Committee, and its major purpose was to send a delegation to Germany and the Saar in order to investigate a situation of women hostages there, and to attempt to secure their release.”³ A third group was the British wing of the Women’s International League (WIL).

In terms of particular actions and tactics, women’s continued exclusion from more formal political processes meant that they sometimes resorted to new and creative ways to express their resistance to fascism. The dystopian novel, for example, is one unusual resistance strategy that was popular with some women. In addition to publishing novels, women wrote articles in newspapers and journals and they sometimes contributed to statements released by political parties, which, while within the realm of traditional political activism for men, represented a relatively new

³ Ibid., 110.
departure for women in politics. Likewise, the SPG did a lot of practical work with women victims of the Nazi Regime in Germany.

Other groups worked with refugees from fascist countries. Famous feminist and anti-fascist Sylvia Pankhurst organized a campaign to free the wife of a murdered Italian socialist politician from house arrest.\(^4\) Other tactics included building popular support through campaigns, meetings, conferences, committees, and lectures. One favoured tactic was to sneak into meetings of the BUF in order to unveil oppositional banners. This was a tactic that women were particularly successful at since they tended to arouse less suspicion compared to their male colleagues.\(^5\) Nor were women absent from public protests and anti-fascist demonstrations.\(^6\)

So while feminists were engaged in new and traditional forms of anti-fascist activism, it is worthwhile to consider how they understood their commitment to anti-fascist politics.

Feminists in Britain in the 1930s developed a specific criticism of fascism based on its threat to women generally, but also based on its threat to the women’s movement. They had a common understanding of their resistance to fascism that went beyond just the usual left/right interpretations. Historian Julie Gottlieb argues that, “women from all points on the political spectrum were fully awake to the urgent necessity for women qua women to arm as ideological combatants against the fascist menace.”\(^7\) The SPG specifically stated that its “primary motivation for resisting fascism was not its place on the Left/Right political spectrum, nor its position on the whole question of war, but its feminist principles.”\(^8\) SPG was the most consistently anti-fascist of the feminist organizations but it never allowed its criticism of fascism to be removed from the discussion of the fascist victimization of women. The vast majority of politicized women in Britain supported resistance to fascism and it was commonly accepted that fascism was rooted in a hatred and fear of women.\(^9\)

Part of the feminist concern about fascism was rooted in the belief that women particularly would suffer under it. Sylvia Pankhurst argued that, “as usual when repressive measures are adopted, the first to suffer are those who can offer

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\(^4\) Julie Gottlieb, “Feminism and Anti-Fascism in Britain: Militancy Revived?” *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State*, ed. Nigel Copsey and David Renton (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 76.

\(^5\) Ibid., 86.


\(^7\) Gottlieb, “Feminism,” 73.

\(^8\) Gottlieb, “Varieties,” 107.

least resistance.”

Some feminists believed that opposition to fascism had the potential to revitalize the women’s movement, but the most widely shared concern was that fascism could set back women’s achievements. In 1932, the National Conference of Labour Women released a statement suggesting that fascism was “a menace which especially endangers the political emancipation of women.” Communist feminist Ethel Mannin wrote about the particular danger of fascism to the women’s movement:

Nothing short of a fascist regime can now suppress the feminist movement itself […] all that the long drawn out fight of the Suffrage Movement achieved for women, at its own bitter price, will be swept away in a few months if Fascism comes to this country, and women will have no say in the matter.

Despite the near universal condemnation of fascism by women’s and feminist organizations, women did not succeed in forming a united feminist front against fascism in Britain. It is my contention that a united front did not emerge because of ideological splits on two major issues.

The first major ideological difference had to do with whether opposition to fascism, beyond its anti-women attitudes, should be based in a communist or a liberal worldview. Many of the women’s organizations emphasized the safeguarding of liberal democratic principles as the most effective tactic against the spread of fascism in Britain. One member of a liberal feminist organization stated: “the best method of counteracting [the fascists] would be by definite propaganda for democratic ideals.” On the other side of the debate were the communist anti-fascists. The Communist Party of Great Britain regularly raised opposition to fascism on the grounds of misogyny, with party paper headlines declaring that ‘Fascism Degrades Women!’ One significant communist, anti-fascist, feminist activist was Ethel Mannin. She decried the liberal feminist emphasis on strengthening liberal institutions and advocated for a feminist alliance with the struggle of the British working class. Mannin stated, “women alone cannot fight Fascism; the need is not for a new feminist movement, but for the cooperation of women in the general struggle for workers power against

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11 Gottlieb, “Feminism,” 86.
12 Ibid., 73.
15 Gottlieb, “Feminism,” 74.
capitalism, of which Fascism is only an advanced form.\textsuperscript{16} The inability of women from these two ideological positions to unite was made explicit by the refusal of the women’s wing of the Labour party to work with the British communists in a united front against fascism.

The second main ideological split revolved around the support for collective security or pacifism versus a more interventionist approach to anti-fascist politics. While there were differences between those who supported collective security and pure pacifists (collective security advocates eventually came to support rearmament for example), the major disagreement was in fact between the anti-war groups and the individuals who saw an urgent need for intervention against the fascist threat in Europe.

British popular opinion was strongly anti-war. The organization with the strongest pacifist stance was the WIL, to the point that some scholars question whether it could even continue to be labeled anti-fascist.\textsuperscript{17} Some organizations that advocated a stronger anti-fascist stance lost their pacifist members. A report from the SPG stated that in 1940, ‘Miss Hay sent her resignation as she wanted to give all her spare time for peace work, and was no longer entirely in sympathy with us.’\textsuperscript{18} Pacifist Eleanor Rathbone was particularly critical of left-wing activists who claimed a desire for collective security but who spent more time denouncing its failures than actually working to make it happen. “[N]eed they forever be holding inquests on peace before it is finally dead, and what is the justification for assuming that death is inevitable?”\textsuperscript{19}

Women pacifists were much better understood in mainstream British society since women were traditionally associated with a more forgiving and gentler attitude. This attitude was reinforced with journalistic “condescension and even shock once reserved for Suffragette militancy” regarding women in anti-fascist actions.\textsuperscript{20} Such condemnation did not, however, deter one proponent of intervention who stated: “I have come to feel that non-resistance can be a negative, a sterile, even a destructive thing.”\textsuperscript{21} In a specific response to those collective security proponents who admitted to the need for rearmament, another women argued: “Hitler's screaming voice could not penetrate the sand in which our heads were stuck; instead of reading \textit{Mein Kampf}, which even in its shockingly bowdlerized English edition was sufficiently alarming, people chatted

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Gottlieb, \textit{“Varieties,”} 116.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 113.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Gottlieb, \textit{“Feminism,”} 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Gottlieb, \textit{“Broken,”} 214.
\end{itemize}
about ‘moral re-armament.’”

Just as anti-fascist organizations lost pacifist members, those arguing for pacifism lost women who believed in the necessity of intervention. One woman resigned from the WIL stating that she believed that the WIL was wrong on “such an essential and vital issue as that of resistance to Nazi aggression.”

Gottlieb argues that it was much more common over time for feminists to switch from pacifism to an understanding of the need for anti-fascist intervention than the other way around. She states that: “the commitment to anti-fascism was not always straightforward, and in many cases it took an epiphany or a moment of conversion for women's anti-fascism to force a revision of heart-felt pacifism and/or support for the policy of appeasement.” So, while many women did come around to the idea of anti-fascist intervention, many others did not and a rift remained in the movement. This along with the unresolved split between communist and liberal ideology meant a united feminist anti-fascist movement did not emerge in Britain in the 1930s.

However, this ideological disunity was not the only contributing factor to the lack of a strong feminist anti-fascist front. Scholars point to the problem of women’s inequality as a limiting factor on the efficacy of their activism. Women were marginalized within the formal political realm and within the world of political journalism. Gottlieb argues that a favoured tactic among feminist activists such as – the use of petitions – was actually an indicator of their “ultimate powerlessness and continued exclusion from the centers of parliamentary power.”

Women also faced discrimination and dismissal within the larger anti-fascist movement. Scholar Johanna Alberti states: “women often played subordinate roles in anti-fascist campaigns. When they did emerge as campaign leaders, they often confronted sexism from fellow anti-fascists even when men paid lip service to the fact that one of the things that made fascism so repellent was its adherence to reactionary gender roles.”

Clearly activist women faced limitations on their actions and acceptance as political activists in Britain in the 1930s, which contributes to our understanding of why a larger united front against fascism failed to emerge. Sexist oppression alone, however, cannot explain why a feminist front against fascism failed to emerge. A united opposition to fascism did not develop due to fundamental differences on the major political debates around class allegiance and pacifism versus interventionism.

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22 Ibid.
26 Gottlieb, “Feminism,” 85.
Bibliography


