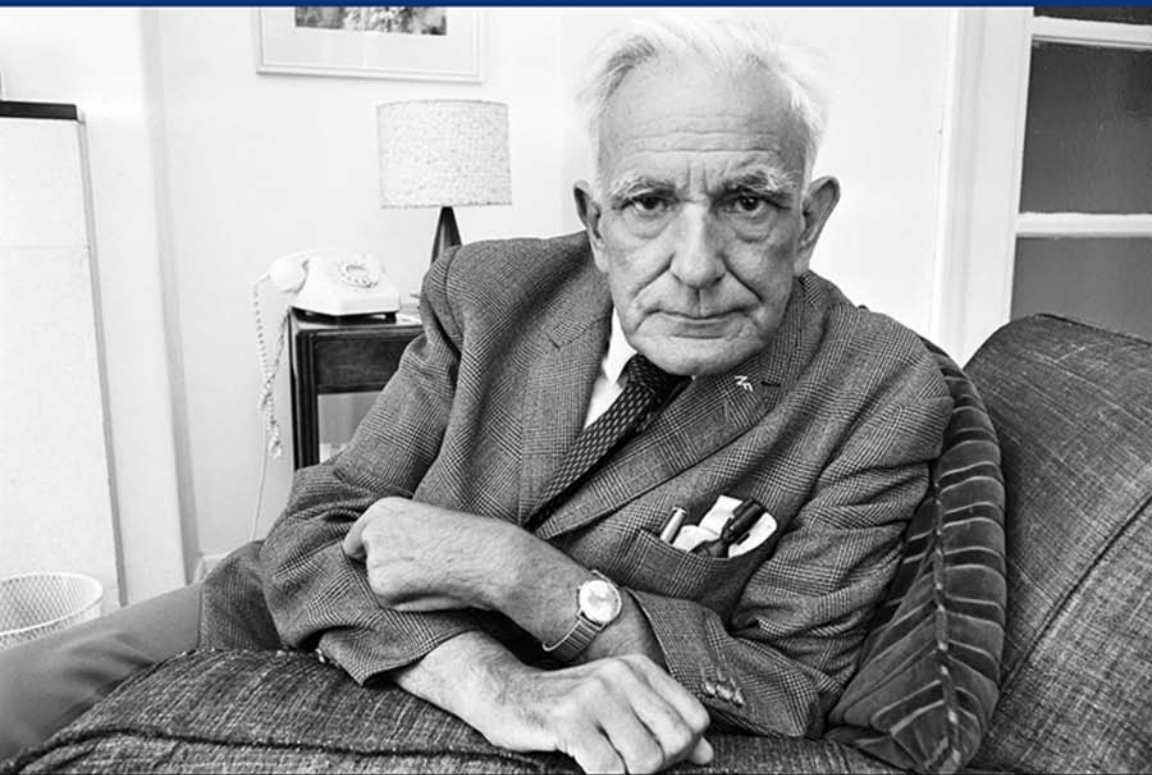


A.K. CHESTERTON AND THE EVOLUTION OF BRITAIN'S EXTREME RIGHT, 1933–1973



ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN FASCISM AND THE FAR RIGHT

LUKE LeCRAS

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.

Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right

Series editors

Nigel Copsey

Teesside University

Graham Macklin

Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), University of Oslo.

This new book series focuses upon fascist, far right and right-wing politics primarily within a historical context but also drawing on insights from other disciplinary perspectives. Its scope also includes radical-right populism, cultural manifestations of the far right and points of convergence and exchange with the mainstream and traditional right.

Titles include:

Latin American Dictatorships in the Era of Fascism

The Corporatist Wave

António Costa Pinto

The Far Right and the Environment

Politics, Discourse and Communication

Edited by Bernhard Forchtner

Vigilantism against Migrant and Minorities

Edited by Tore Bjørgo and Miroslav Mareš

Trumping Democracy

From Ronald Reagan to Alt-Right

Edited by Chip Berlet

A.K. Chesterton and the Evolution of Britain's Extreme Right, 1933–1973

Luke LeCras

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Routledge-Advances-in-Sociology/book-series/SE0511

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

Luke LeCras

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2020 Luke LeCras

The right of Luke LeCras to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: LeCras, Luke, author.

Title: A. K. Chesterton and the evolution of Britain's extreme right, 1933–1973 / Luke LeCras.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2020.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019033680

Subjects: LCSH: Chesterton, A. K. (Arthur Kenneth) | Fascists—Great Britain—Biography. | Right-wing extremists—Great Britain—Biography. | Right-wing extremists—Great Britain—History—20th century. | Fascism—Great Britain—History—20th century. | Racism—Great Britain—History—20th century. | Antisemitism—Great Britain—History—20th century. | Great Britain—Race relations. | Great Britain—Politics and government—20th century.

Classification: LCC DA574.C48 L43 2020 | DDC 320.53/3092 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019033680>

ISBN: 978-1-138-62411-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-62412-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-43689-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>vii</i>
Introduction	1
1 Born in war: life before politics, 1899–1933	8
2 The blackshirt life: the British Union of Fascists, 1933–1938	30
3 My country right and wrong: fascism after Mosley, 1938–1939	56
4 Drawing room fascism: the After-Victory Group, 1943–1946	66
5 Sound the alarm: <i>Candour</i> and the League of Empire Loyalists, 1953–1967	90
6 Forward the extremists: the National Front, 1967–1973	115
7 What is behind it all? Racism, anti-Semitism and conspiracy after 1945	131
Conclusion: evolution, stagnation and the ‘fascist ghost’ after 1945	155
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>161</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>167</i>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful first and foremost to Professor Nigel Copsey at Teeside University, Dr. Graham Macklin at the University of Oslo and Craig Fowlie at Routledge for showing interest in my work and allowing me to contribute to the series. I would also like to thank my doctoral supervisors – Dr. James Crossland, Professor Michael Durey, Professor Michael Sturma and especially Dr. Andrew Webster – for their continuing feedback and guidance, as well as my examiners – the aforementioned Nigel Copsey, Professor Emeritus Colin Holmes at the University of Sheffield and Professor Andrew Bonnell at the University of Queensland – for their challenging yet encouraging feedback. Since 2015, I have been fortunate to attend conferences of the Australasian Association for European Historians, which have introduced me to many brilliant colleagues and provided a collegial environment to discuss and develop new ideas. Special thanks are due to Evan Smith, Kylie Galbraith and Lauren Piko for their words of encouragement and welcome insights into contemporary British history.

The primary research for this book was made possible by the many library and archival staff who assisted me throughout the United Kingdom and Australia. Special thanks to Lizzie Richmond at the University of Bath Special Collections, for compiling an excellent catalogue of A.K. Chesterton's papers and for allowing me to photograph a large proportion of the archived material for future reference. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. David Baker and Professor Roger Eatwell for compiling and donating the materials now housed in the Chesterton Collection.

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to all the family and friends who have supported me during the research and writing process. Special thanks must go to Jill Rainnie, who graciously accommodated me during my time overseas; to my brother Caleb for his encouragement; and to Tessia, for her kindness, love and patience. Last but not least, I am forever grateful for the unwavering support of my parents, John and Annette LeCras, to whom I dedicate this book.

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



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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'.⁴

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 1945.⁵ 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 1945.⁶ 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'.⁷ 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.⁸ 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'.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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'.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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'.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.,

6 Introduction

- 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.

1

BORN IN WAR

Life before politics, 1899–1933

Arthur Kenneth (A.K.) Chesterton was born on 1 May 1899 in Krugersdorp, South Africa. His father, Arthur George Chesterton, worked as a mine secretary at the Luipaards Vlei gold mine on the Witwatersrand but descended from a distinguished family that included the acclaimed author and poet G.K. Chesterton.¹ In October 1899, following the outbreak of the Second Boer War, Chesterton and his mother Harriet were forced to flee the country and stay with relatives in England. While attempting to join his family, Arthur Chesterton contracted pneumonia while travelling between Johannesburg and Mozambique, dying at the age of 28. A.K. Chesterton returned to Krugersdorp along with his mother and paternal uncle after the war's conclusion in May 1902. Shortly thereafter, his mother remarried to a Scottish mine administrator named George Horne.² The family eventually resettled back on the Witwatersrand near Johannesburg, where Chesterton began to attend preparatory school. In 1911, at the age of 10, Chesterton was sent abroad by his mother and step-father to stay with his paternal grandfather in Herne Hill, England. He completed his preparatory education at a college in Dulwich, before attending the Berkhamstead School in Hertfordshire. In October 1915, Chesterton was visited in England by his mother and step-father, whom he persuaded to take him back to South Africa. Anticipating his literary and journalistic inclinations, Chesterton's mother had intended for him to find work in a newspaper office upon arriving in Johannesburg. Instead, shortly after disembarking, Chesterton 'slipped away' to join the recruitment drive taking place for the South African army. After overcoming his mother's opposition and gaining the approval of his step-father, Chesterton was accepted into the South African army aged only 16, and within months began taking part in the campaign through German East Africa.³

Taking the full scope of Chesterton's life into account serves to reinforce the argument, made by David Baker some years ago, that his political extremism cannot

be accounted for by a pathology or pattern that developed during his childhood or early adulthood.⁴ Nevertheless, there are several aspects of Chesterton's life before politics that are worth reexamining in light of his post-war career: his experience of formal education and the racial hierarchies of colonial South Africa; his involvement in the Great War and his struggle to readjust to civilian life after 1919; and his brushes with political thinking and activism prior to diving headfirst into fascist activism in the 1930s. These experiences not only provide insight into why Chesterton was drawn towards the extreme right initially, but why he was driven to persist in the movement long after 1940.

Chesterton's early education was marred by disruption, a result of his stepfather's frequent need to relocate for work.⁵ He recalled having little enthusiasm for most academic pursuits, having concluded at an early age that education was 'a ritual totally irrelevant to my life'.⁶ There is a temptation to speculate, as Chesterton's wife did, that the limits and discontinuities of this education made him vulnerable to fringe politics and obsessive conspiracy theories.⁷ It seems unlikely that further schooling would have inured Chesterton to fascism, however, given that many leading members of the BUF were highly educated and yet found themselves in the same radical firmament.⁸ Likewise, there is little to suggest that formal education would have inoculated Chesterton against racism, and anti-Semitism in later life. This was evident during his time as the head of the League of Empire Loyalists, whose middle- and upper-class members proved highly receptive to Chesterton's conspiratorial, racially determinist worldview.

The circumstances of Chesterton's early life clearly account for his basic understanding of patriotism and national identity, which in turn provided the core of his political ethos as a fascist and British nationalist. Chesterton recalled that his patriotic sentiment was first aroused while attending Brightlands school at the age of 11: 'I fell deeply in love with England, and that passion, despite all disappointments, has increased with every year of my life. England then, I decided, come hell or high water was my country'.⁹ Along with this early infatuation with British culture, Chesterton's sense of nationalism was shaped considerably by the time he spent in South Africa, as he detailed in another volume of memoirs: 'England is the land of my aspiration and my race, as well as most of my adult life, but by birth I belong to Africa'.¹⁰ Hence, from an early age Chesterton was imbued with a sense of 'imperial nationalism' – an ideal in which every colony and dominion was representative of the English people's achievement in spreading civilization to the wider world.¹¹ Colonial experience was something that Chesterton shared with many prominent members of the BUF, who were similarly drawn to Mosley's movement after a period of 'restlessness' spent in Britain's overseas territories.¹² Experience in Southern Africa was strikingly common amongst the upper ranks of the party, with at least five members having served in the Boer War.¹³ Even after his break with Mosley, Chesterton continued to associate primarily with those who shared his affinity for the Empire. After 1953, he maintained a small network of Britons 'at home and abroad' that served as his core base of support for two decades.¹⁴ The idea of the 'greater Britain' acquired by Chesterton at an early age thus remained central to

his political ideology in later life, even as imperialism faded from relevance in both global affairs and the ideology of the extreme right.

Reflecting on Chesterton's colonial upbringing leads inevitably to the question of how race factored in to his worldview from an early age. The colonial settlements of South Africa and Rhodesia, where Chesterton spent most of his early childhood, were organized along strict racial lines. Wage and employment disputes were a common source of racial tension on the Rand, with white miners threatened by the influx of cheaper labour in the form of indigenous Africans or imported Chinese workers. To alleviate conflicts, the mine owners turned to measures that either segregated black workers entirely from their European counterparts or implemented an industrial colour bar which restricted them to unskilled labour. Under this system, white workers like Chesterton's father and step-father held supervisory roles overseeing administrative duties and maintaining machinery, while African workers were confined to the manual tasks of extracting and hauling ore.¹⁵ The ubiquity of the colour bar system in South Africa was such that, when Chesterton first arrived in England aged 11, he was taken aback by the 'strange sight of white men working with picks and shovels and doing a multiplicity of other jobs with which I had never learned to associate them'.¹⁶ On the domestic front, as well, Chesterton's upbringing was skewed along racial lines. Servants were a ubiquitous presence in a childhood home where, in his wife's phrase, 'coloured labour was cheap'.¹⁷

The continuation of such arrangements in the later stages of Chesterton's life are one example of how, like the idea of empire itself, colonial racism remained a feature of his worldview from childhood onwards. Racism accordingly formed an integral part of his political ideology, first as a follower of Mosley in the 1930s and later as a progenitor of Empire loyalist movements in Britain and the Commonwealth. The paternalistic, colonial framework of Chesterton's upbringing also provided a base for the conspiratorial and pseudo-scientific notions of race he developed in later life, though not all aspects of Chesterton's racial thinking can be easily traced back to some facet of childhood experience. Anti-Semitism, the cornerstone of Chesterton's 'ideological obsessions' as an adult, was not readily apparent in his work prior to joining the fascist movement. There was ample opportunity for Chesterton to have been exposed to these notions during his time in South Africa, however, which carried a long and ignominious tradition of anti-Semitism from the 19th century onwards.¹⁸

Unlike the other dimensions of Chesterton's racial thinking, there is little direct evidence to suggest that experiential prejudice lay at the heart of his anti-Semitism. In later life, Chesterton himself dismissed the idea that his thinking on 'the Jewish question' was a legacy of his upbringing, despite acknowledging a social climate of anti-Semitism: 'as a young boy in Johannesburg I went to school with scores of Jews, and, so far from being aware of racial antipathy, I not only had some among my friends but resisted the pressure of elders who tried to make me give them up'.¹⁹ Without evidence to the contrary, there is little reason to doubt Chesterton's assertion that anti-Semitism was not merely a 'hangover' from his early life. Yet it is also