

“ROUSE YOURSELVES AGAINST FASCISM”: Women’s Writing Tactics and the Antifascist Movement in Interwar Britain

Natalie Tulone
Widener University

After years of fighting in World War I, the interwar period in Europe was a time of great change marked by the rise of new political movements. In her paper *What Suffragettes Should Do*, Sylvia Pankhurst instructed women to “ROUSE YOURSELVES AGAINST FASCISM, it means the destruction of all that women have gained in more than a century of toil... it certainly means war.”¹ Pankhurst used writing to address the growth of new ideologies such as fascism, while also renouncing pacifism, something she was a firm supporter of years before. She was not the only woman who used writing to address the changing times in Europe, many prominent female activists used this tactic in the antifascist movement.

Many women in the interwar period supported antifascism along with other ideologies such as feminism and pacifism. These women entered into a conversation, through writing, to discuss their thoughts, their support for the anti-fascist movement, and their experiences. Although many women used writing as a tactic in their activism, their impact on the success of the antifascist movement is less understood than that of their male counterparts. Women in the interwar period used different genres, including fiction, published nonfiction, and life writing, to enter into discussions of the changing ideological world that was taking place around them. They used writing to react to and educate others about different ideologies, imagine the future with them in place, and relay their own personal experiences in the antifascist movement beyond the writing process.

Even though the discussion of women in the interwar period has grown, scholars continue to focus largely on the fascist movement in Britain and Europe. Many historians analyze how this movement gained

ground in the interwar period and remained powerful throughout World War II. Due to this preoccupation with the fascist movement, the antifascist movement in Britain itself is a smaller subject in the historical scholarship of the interwar period.² By drawing attention to the antifascist movement this paper will contribute to the growing scholarly debate about how the British dealt with the rise of fascism.

In studies of the antifascist and fascist movement, historians have focused more on the work of men and the tactics, like writing, these activists used in order to analyze how the movements operated. When it comes to the antifascist movement in Britain, the contributions of women and the tactics they relied on are relatively new areas of study. Historian Julie V. Gottlieb has made key scholarly contributions to our understanding of the work of both fascist and antifascist women.³ Gottlieb's scholarship pushes past the work of men by spotlighting the contributions of women and women's organizations in the antifascist movement.⁴ Her many articles have centered women in the movement by outlining their tactics and addressing how they fit in the "man's world" of the antifascist movement as "women often played subordinate roles in anti-fascist campaigns."⁵ In order to understand the role of women, historians have begun to investigate the tactics they used. The writing of women and women's organizations have been a continued target within the scholarship of the antifascist movement. Although many different women engaged in antifascist writing, many historians have come to prioritize the work of white European women, in both the middle and upper-class, as the scholarship continues to develop its discussion of the work of black women.⁶

A growing number of historians have worked to understand how women wrote about fascism in the period. The discussion of these women's writing has been centered around the genres of fiction and journalism. This writing has mostly been researched and analyzed using a literary and cultural lens, an approach that has been steadily growing since the 1990s.⁷ Some historians have examined specific genres, like fiction,⁸ or have looked at specific pieces of writing.⁹ Other historians have worked to understand how women used and combined different ideologies in their activism and writing, in a time when many ideologies were present.¹⁰ Using genre as a way to separate the source material provides the opportunity to understand how women incorporated various ideologies, like antifascism, pacifism or feminism, into their writing.

The source material in this paper therefore encompasses a variety of works from different genres and women throughout the period and will focus on the use of ideologies, impact on readers, and visualization of personal experiences. The sources examined here will highlight English

speaking voices, but many other women entered into these various genres and discussed fascism and other ideologies in their writing. From one section to the other, there is some overlap with writers, like Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, and Virginia Woolf, whose works will be analyzed in two different sections. With these authors writing in different genres, their work provides space to highlight changes in their thoughts and writing process depending on the genre. An analysis of these women's writing based on genre illustrates how they imagined and felt about the future. Their writing served as a place to educate a larger audience, while also highlighting their own personal experiences in the changing ideological landscape of Europe.

I. Fiction and Imagining a Frightening Future

During the interwar period, many writers used the genre of fiction to address and critique fascism. While both male and female authors used fiction to discuss fascism in their own way, female writers took it a step further by addressing how fascism specifically affected women. Their work focused on warning readers of what life could look like if fascism continued to spread. Prominent British female authors used different subgenres of fiction to illustrate the dangers fascism posed for women and to highlight other ideologies like pacifism.

Women authors used two different types of dystopian writing, dystopian fiction and feminist dystopia, in order to convey their antifascist politics. Katharine Burdekin's novel *Swastika Night*, published under her male pseudonym Murray Constantine, used both. The novel, set seven centuries after Hitler's reign, focuses on what a post-Hitler world would look like, with only two empires, the Nazi and Japanese, controlling the world. In this imagined fascist future, women's roles are reduced to reproduction; Jews are fully eradicated, and many of the men in the Nazi empire begin to engage in homosexuality. As *Swastika Night* is a work of dystopian fiction, many historians compare it to George Orwell's novel *1984* because they both visualize the world that would result from Hitler remaining in power.¹¹ Burdekin's novel works differently than Orwell's, however, as she discusses the horrors of fascism by specifically focusing on gender roles and male supremacy.

Burdekin's opinions of fascism are illustrated in her portrayal of women's roles. The reduction of women's roles to the production of children is a central theme throughout the novel. Women are not the main characters and are described as masculine due to their shaved heads and tight trousers. They are also imagined merely as animals due to the belief that they have no souls.¹² This depiction of the dehumanization of women is a commentary on the very strict and traditional gender roles that this

post-Hitler society faced. The gendered stereotypes of physical appearance are shifted in this story, as women take on traditional male dress and hair, while men take on more traditionally feminine ones. This idea becomes even more complicated as characters, like the Knight, Hermann, and Alfred, discover and attempt to keep a book with original pictures of Hitler safe. These characters grew up never knowing what Hitler looked like, and they commented that he appeared woman-like.¹³ With this discovery, the end of the novel highlights how these characters begin to question the core ideals of fascism, since Hitler was much different than they thought. Their continued questioning showcases what Burdekin believed would happen if fascism's followers began to push back against the ideology they once wholeheartedly supported.

With its focus on fascist male supremacy rather than female characters, Burdekin's novel does not highlight the movements women supported in the interwar period. By spotlighting male supremacy, Burdekin worked to understand how it hypothetically affected the role of women within a future fascist society. This is best illustrated by the main characters Alfred, an Englishman, and Hermann, a Nazi, discussing von Wied, a prominent Nazi thinker, and his theories, to understand the history behind why women look and act the way they do. These theories showcased how men feared female agency, as their physicality was a distraction, and wanted all German women to be submissive like the women they conquered as "the beauty of women was an insult to Manhood."¹⁴ With the inclusion of these theories, Burdekin addresses the main tenets of fascism and how it could harm women and society. She used male supremacy and its beliefs about women's appearances as an example of these theories at work in order to understand the effect they had on the women in the novel.

As a work of dystopian fiction and a feminist dystopia, *Swastika Night* provided space for a discussion of what a world could look like if fascism continued to grow and develop. With Burdekin writing in the late 1930s, as countries were preparing for a second World War, she imagined what life would be like if fascism gained power throughout Europe. As a subgenre within fiction, dystopia "deeply interiorized [a] link between space and power, showing realities in which dystopian delusions are socio-politically and geographically constructed," and feminist dystopias, "exaggerate the differences between men and women."¹⁵ Burdekin illustrates the difference between men and women from the start of the novel by focusing on how male supremacy affected gender roles. By creating these strict lines in order to highlight the reduction of women, the novel can be seen as a call to action for her readers. By emphasizing fascist male supremacy and writing with a male pseudonym, the novel provided

Burdekin with an opportunity to attract more men to fight against fascism. Also, with the discussion of the reduction of women's role, the book also warned female readers about how fascism could affect their lives and called on them to defend against fascist countries.

Nancy Mitford took a different approach in her satirical novel, *Wigs on the Green*, which was published after Hitler had risen to power. The novel was based on Mitford's two sisters, Diana and Unity, as both had interacted with Hitler and took part in the rise of National Socialism in Germany. Mitford used both of her sisters' stories to create the novel, with characters such as Eugenia being modeled after Unity. Mitford's writing criticized the British Union of Fascists, referred to as the Union Jackshirts in the novel, to highlight how fascism spread and became popular in Britain. The novel also critiqued the work of pacifists and used them as the "villains" in the story, with the Union Jackshirts as victims of pacifist attacks.

Like that of Katherine Burdekin, Mitford's discussion of fascism addressed how this ideology affected women. Unlike Burdekin's novel, *Wigs on the Green* includes many female characters, with a strong female, Eugenia, whose name sounds similar to eugenics, at the center of the story. Eugenia is a part of the Union Jackshirts, and works to enlighten other women, like Mrs. Lace and Poppy, about fascism. She educates women by following ideas of eugenics and explaining that they need to reproduce healthy Aryan children, an idea that was central to Hitler's National Socialism. In the novel Eugenia wants Poppy to join as she hopes to have more women be a part of the Union Jackshirts: "Under our regime... women will not have lovers. They will have husbands and great quantities of healthy Aryan children."¹⁶ By having Eugenia explain the role of women in fascism, Mitford uses this conversation as a warning to all women of what would happen if they continued to support the movement. Under Hitler, women would be reduced to mothers whose only job would be to care for the children and the home. By highlighting how fascism treats women, the novel provided awareness for women of their possible future, beyond all the fascist pageantry.

Beyond the discussion of fascism, the novel also includes a discussion of pacifism through a criticism of the violence that pacifists used against the fascists. Characters like Eugenia and Jasper hate pacifists and make it known that they are the enemies of the Union Jackshirts. The headquarters of the Union Jackshirts is set on fire and blamed on the pacifists, and the Jackshirts later put together a pageant where they are attacked by a group of pacifists.¹⁷ This highlights that pacifists sometimes used violence against other groups, while arguing for an end to violence and war. Mitford highlighted how using violence harmed their mission of

keeping peace by taking counterintuitive actions. Since Mitford never trusted ideologies, the novel equally highlighted the flaws of both fascism and pacifism. These flaws showcased her belief that people inside movements will not always believe in the exact same things, and there are bound to be different modes of expressions, some being extreme. Her novel worked to educate readers that there are many different sides to any movement.

As a satire, *Wigs on the Green* highlighted the flaws of both fascism and pacifism. Satire as a type of fiction allows the author to use comedy to critique ideologies. Mitford pokes fun at the extravagance of fascism through Eugenia and the pageant that the Union Jackshirts put on. She also humorously critiques the violence of pacifism, as they supported nonviolence. By addressing the sides of the movement that may not have been as prevalent to outsiders, it provides space for readers to understand the full picture.

Naomi Mitchison's collection of fairy tales and poems, *The Fourth Pig*, represents a different subgenre of fiction compared to *Swastika Night* and *Wigs on the Green*. *The Fourth Pig* uses classic fairy tales that take on a new meaning. Classic stories like the *Three Little Pigs* are reimaged to address conflicts and ideologies of the time. Stories like "The Fourth Pig" address fear about the rise of fascism, while "Grand-Daughter" questions why people sat to the side while fascism grew in Europe.

The story "The Fourth Pig" reimagines the story of the *Three Little Pigs*. The villain in this fairy tale is the wolf, portraying Hitler. Another pig is added to the story, the fourth pig, who has continued fear of Hitler's growing power. The fourth pig fears that the wolf is around, even when he is not there physically.¹⁸ This feeling highlights the continued threat that other European countries felt as Hitler rose to power. Mitchison uses this fear to address fascism, without naming the ideology. By not outright addressing it, this feeling of fear could represent a variety of emotions during the interwar period. She may not mention specific aspects of the ideology, but she conveys a general sense of how people felt during the period.

Another story in the collection, "Grand-Daughter," addresses fascism more directly, as it highlights the feelings of a granddaughter towards her grandmother, a Marxist who worked to further socialism. The granddaughter questions why the people of her grandparents' generation did not work to stop fascism even as they saw it growing in plain sight.¹⁹ This provides insight into the perspectives of people during the interwar period who saw dictators like Hitler and Mussolini rise to power but did little to stop them. With this story, Mitchison comments on the British policy of appeasement, which she opposed because she viewed it as a

failure to act in response to Hitler's rise to power.²⁰ Although Mitchison was writing before World War II began, she imagined a world where younger generations questioned how dictators and ideologies came to power. While her work does not analyze the appeal of fascist ideology or its impact on women, it takes a different approach to capture both the general atmosphere of the period along with the developing and pervasive feelings of fear.

Fiction and its subgenres allowed women to express their thoughts on what the future would look like if fascism continued to spread and how it could harm society and women. By warning their readers of what was possible, each author invited their readers to think critically about the competing political movements of the interwar period such as fascism, pacifism, and socialism. Each of the stories could have been aimed at a variety of audiences, from men to women, due to fiction being an accessible genre for a diverse group of readers. While works of fiction produced by British women gave readers a glimpse at possible fascist futures, other genres, like nonfiction, provided direct insights into how fascism was operating.

II. Individual and Women's Organizations in Published Nonfiction

Women not only wrote fiction, but also nonfiction during the interwar period. Historians have primarily examined source material like media and newspapers in order to assess the journalism of these women.²¹ Women broke boundaries by entering into the male-dominated field of journalism. This section takes on a different approach by focusing on a larger body of published nonfiction by individual women and women's organizations. Women published in a variety of formats, from books, to journalism, to bulletins or pamphlets created by women's organizations. These types of nonfiction highlight how individuals and groups of women reacted to the rise of fascism and discussed other ideological beliefs they supported.

One of the women who published a large amount of nonfiction during the period was Sylvia Pankhurst. She began her activism through work with the British women's suffrage movement, and after women won the right to vote, she worked to address a variety of issues that occurred across Europe, including fascism. Beyond creating her own newspaper *New Times and Ethiopia News*, she also left behind her own personal papers, a collection called the *Pankhurst Papers*, which includes the drafts of many items she later published. Some historians have claimed that she was the most important woman in print activism, with her journalism highlighting ideas about anti-colonialism and anti-racism.²² Her papers are filled with

her ideas on a wide variety of topics, and she supported political change while also relaying information to the British public about issues of rising fascism in both Italy and Germany.

Pankhurst was both a suffragette and an anti-fascist, and her writing highlighted her frustration with fascism and how it affected women, especially those who had taken strides in securing their own freedoms. Papers like *In Red Twilight: Fascism As It Is* address how fascism was harming women in both Italy and Germany, due to the removal of women's rights and freedoms. Not only did she address women's oppression in terms of motherhood and voting, but Pankhurst also worked to bring to light the penal code in Italy that removed protections for women regarding marriage, birth control, abortion, and rape.²³ With this paper, she expands on the topic of fascism and discusses, at length, the specific downfalls of it. Her paper worked to educate readers on what was going on in these countries, as the British public was unable to see it with their own eyes. Her writing allowed for readers to understand the norms and laws that were being put in place to limit women's freedoms and how harmful they were to women's progress.

Pankhurst's writing did more than inform her readers about how fascism affected women, as many of her other papers provide a warning about fascism and how it operated in Italy. Papers like *New Italy* and *Civil Servants in Italy Censorship and Espionage* focus less on how fascism directly affected women, but instead explain how fascism took root in Italy and describe the suppression of the Italian antifascist press respectively. *New Italy* centers on how fascism grew in Italy by addressing the work of prominent Italian anti-fascists and their later imprisonment. Pankhurst took a forceful stance on how fascism was harming cultural production: "Fascism, for the time being, has suffocated all art and literature, strangled the women's movement, and every other movement for social betterment."²⁴ She noted that fascism was becoming a threat and warned her readers by highlighting that fascist countries would continue to suppress groups until they reach the overall goals of the ideology: a strong dictator, successful empire, and racial purity, especially in Germany's case. This suppression is ever present in the paper *Civil Servants in Italy Censorship and Espionage*. Pankhurst notes that antifascist papers and the antifascist press were mostly present in non-fascist countries, since Italy had suppressed it all. Italians were only able to read antifascist works if they were smuggled in.²⁵ This paper showcases Pankhurst's understanding of this suppression and how the Italian public was unable to push back against the ideology. Pankhurst's readers were given the space to understand the fascist movement from an outsider's perspective and were given insights into how the ideology harmed not only specific groups of

people but also the country as a whole. This warning could have later been used as a call to action for her readers.

Nonfiction gave authors the opportunity to unite their readers as they relayed information as it occurred. Pankhurst's paper *What the Suffragettes Should Do* includes a direct call to action for women to stand against fascism and highlights Pankhurst's push away from her long work with pacifism.²⁶ This paper is similar to others that she had written as it addresses topics like women's employment, but also delves deeper into the impacts of fascism. Pankhurst states, "ROUSE YOURSELVES AGAINST FASCISM, it means the destruction of all that women have gained in more than a century of toil... it certainly means war."²⁷ This paper highlights Pankhurst's shift away from pacifism, to fight back in a war that negates an end through peaceful means. Pankhurst's large body of work brings to light how her politics changed throughout the period and highlights how the nonfiction genre was ever-changing as new events and ideas around fascism appeared in the news.

Sylvia Pankhurst was not the only female writer of nonfiction, other women like Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby were also influential writers during the period. Their use of journalism allowed them to address fascism, as well as other ideas like women's rights and pacifism. Vera Brittain, a pacifist and an antifascist, was not as outspoken against fascism in her writing compared to Pankhurst. Her journalism, especially in her discussion of feminism, maintained a focus on women's rights in marriage and employment opportunities instead of addressing fascism in relation to its effects on feminism. When it came to politics, "writing was for her an intensely political act, her characteristic way of participating in the political process."²⁸ Her politics were felt through her journalism as it highlighted her pacifism. Brittain believed that if women came together they would be able to stop a war from happening and felt that what "the women's peace campaign really needs is the sudden uprising of a movement."²⁹ With such a focus on pacifism, her writing highlighted an indirect way for women to combat fascism without directly addressing the issues with it, such as how fascism viewed women. She may not have been as outspoken as other writers of the period and did not abandon her pacifism like Pankhurst, but instead she used a pacifist stance to allow her readers to challenge fascism from a different lens.

Winifred Holtby's writing highlighted different ideas than Brittain's, as she maintained a focus on how fascism had harmed the progress of women. She addressed the issues that women were facing in Britain in comparison to Germany and discussed the role of women in fascism. To understand the relationship between women and fascism, she noted that "In the importance of the sex too often has lain the

unimportance of the citizen, the worker and the human being.”³⁰ Fascism, she argues, is too concerned about the sex of the person instead of what they can bring to society. She highlights how a woman can be a productive citizen or worker. She also contends that women should be viewed as human beings and not as animals for reproduction. Holtby worked to ensure that her readers understood how fascism reduced the status of women and removed the freedoms that every person was entitled to, no matter their sex.

Beyond journalism, women worked to publish books, like Holtby’s *Women and a Changing Civilization*. Her book followed similar ideas to her journalism but made an even greater statement about fascism, specifically in its discussion of the cult of masculinity and pronatalism. Although fascism was not the main message of her book, as many chapters focused on feminism, she directly addressed fascism in her section “Backwards and Forwards.” This section addressed the cult of masculinity and noted that “a world of hero-worshippers is a world in which women are doomed to subordination. Very rare exceptions... may capture men’s imagination.”³¹ She highlights that ideologies like fascism are dependent on strong male leaders. Without the space for women to lead, they will continually be oppressed. She notes that throughout history it is rare to have women in strong positions within a political movement. Holtby adds to the conversation about fascism by focusing on leadership.

Compared to Holtby’s more direct discussion of fascism, Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* takes less of a direct stance while still maintaining a support for antifascism. Woolf used a different approach by not putting fascism at the forefront of her work, but instead focusing more on women’s issues when it comes to education and nationality rights. She addresses that readers should combat fascism but highlights that this fight should be through pacifist and private means.³² This approach is vastly different from other writers who used the nonfiction genre to create a greater call to action for a stop to fascism. Woolf uses indifference as a way of resistance, another method of political activity for women.³³ Although she did not discuss the issues she found with fascism, she instead focused more on the overall topic and highlighted alternative methods for women to push back against fascism without any public display.

Individual women were not the only people publishing nonfiction during the interwar period. Women’s organizations worked to create their own stance against fascism and address other women’s issues. Organizations like the Women’s World Committee Against War and Fascism, a congress of women determined to fight both war and fascism, addressed fascism through group meetings, propaganda articles, pamphlets, and delegate reports. Groups like the Women’s World

Committee embraced a pacifist stance and created, “The biggest United Front effort yet achieved - hundreds of delegates from pacifist, feminist and bourgeois organizations.”³⁴ The organization was able to create a comprehensive viewpoint that included a space for women with a variety of ideological backgrounds to join. They used their power as a group to publish articles and charters that addressed specific concerns about fascism, paying particular attention to how it affected women. This propaganda posed questions such as, “Shall we permit Fascism to extend through the world and plunge the people into the most terrible barbarism?”³⁵ Being an organization, they were able to create a defined stance against issues in order to create a successful group. Without this, women would have difficulty joining, being unsure of where the group stood.

Some women’s organizations were able to expand on their writing through meetings and conferences. The International Council of Women (ICW), a worldwide organization that focuses on women’s rights, agreed to a list of resolutions supporting nationality rights, public health, education, child welfare, and humane methods of war. The organization was represented at a peace conference in Brussels, and their only published work was a pamphlet on the rights of women.³⁶ This organization was different than the Women’s World Committee due to the group’s primary goal of advancing women’s rights rather than combating fascism. The ICW was more focused on women’s issues during the period and executed their work through more personal interactions instead of published works. The work they did publish only reached members of the group rather than engaging a larger audience.

Nonfiction writing as a genre allowed women to reach a large variety of people with their journalism, while women’s organizations used nonfiction works, such as pamphlets, to educate those who were a part of their movement. Compared to journalism, materials like books and organizational writing did not delve as deep into ideologies, like feminism or fascism. Instead, they gave authors the chance to address a variety of issues concerning women and public safety that were also prevalent during the period. This genre gave women the chance to enter into the male-dominated world of writing and created space for them to fight back and broaden their power in activism.

III. A Holistic View of Activism in Life Writing

Fiction and nonfiction were just two of the genres that women published during the interwar period. These genres gave women the chance to enter the publishing world and allowed them to advocate for anti-fascism as well as other ideologies like feminism and pacifism.

Although there were many outspoken women who utilized these genres, some took to a less public platform and discussed these topics through life writing. Life writing is a complex genre which blends history, political science, and journalism while also providing insight into experiences and political participation.³⁷ This section focuses on life writing in the forms of letters and diary entries. These sources, although less pointed in arguments, highlight the personal feelings of women as they reacted to a changing world and showcase a holistic view of their activism during the period.

Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, as mentioned before, were prominent journalists in the interwar period. Both women addressed fascism and feminism in their published works. However, their stances against fascism were not as prevalent in their life writing compared to their journalism; instead, their private letters highlight their personal feelings. Brittain's journalistic writing and letters to Holtby showcased her strong beliefs about marriage by discussing men and women's roles inside of one. The conversation about marriage is not the only topic included in her letter writing as many of her letters focus on the writing process. Her letters to Holtby highlight the writing and publishing process of her book, *Testament of Youth*, and its acceptance in the literary world. Both her letters and this book highlight her personal experiences while rarely mentioning her politics.

Although Brittain did not outright address her politics in her letters, some correspondences between her and Holtby suggest how she addressed her politics through speech. Holtby on one occasion encouraged Brittain to speak in America in order to expand American women's political knowledge as fascism continued to rise in Europe.³⁸ The letter itself may not address what Brittain would have discussed but provides space to understand she was taking strides to educate other women. This was not the only speaking engagement that Brittain discussed in her letters to Holtby, as she described a few others. Brittain spoke to many about how war affected women and spoke to organizations directly about pacifism.³⁹ These letters also showcase that Brittain was taking strides to educate other women about the problems she viewed as inherent to war. She may not have written down the entirety of what she discussed at these speaking engagements, but the letters highlight how women were doing more than writing to further their beliefs.

Although Brittain's letter writing does not fully showcase her political beliefs, a large portion of Holtby's writing has more of a political lens as she includes much of her work in correspondences. The two women were in ongoing conversations about the League of Nations, its formation, and how it was doing. In one instance, Holtby asks Brittain, on behalf of Lady Rhondda, if they would be willing to present with the Six

Point Group in Geneva: “She is anxious for the women’s societies to make themselves felt in the milieu surrounding the League, to prevent as far as possible its tendency to anti-feminism, protective legislation, etc.”⁴⁰ Holtby, like Brittain, explained her work in the public eye beyond her own writing and seemed more eager to engage in this type of setting compared to Brittain. Her letters showcase other tactics that women were able to employ in their activism, like speaking to a broader audience, and they help to connect the work she did in private with the more public work.

Holtby’s letters also showcase that she was more outspoken about fascism since she had more firsthand experiences compared to Brittain. Since Holtby was unmarried, she was able to travel during the interwar period, something that very few women were able to do, and the places she visited influenced her thoughts and feelings.⁴¹ She traveled to Hungary and noted that what she found most troubling was anti-Semitism.⁴² Her discomfort with and opposition to anti-Semitism connected to her critiques of Hitler’s government, as the Nazis were highly anti-Semitic in their expression of fascism. Beyond her thoughts about anti-Semitism, she explained in a letter to Brittain that she had firsthand experience with the Blackshirts, a British fascist organization headed by Oswald Mosley. After passing out Dorothy Woodman’s pamphlets to those leaving a Blackshirts meeting, Holtby said, “I’m not at all brave. I was terrified, and lost two days’ good work through sheer and quite unnecessary funk.”⁴³ She did not explain what was in these pamphlets, but it seems to have addressed antifascism, due to her fear. Holtby does not provide Brittain any reason as to why she did this, but it highlights how she was willing to fight against fascism even if it meant going as close to the source as possible. Although her letters may not have gone into depth about her own political thoughts, the discussion of her experiences highlights the work she was able to do. Her letters can be used to understand her experiences beyond the writing process and highlight the other work she was able to complete in the public eye.

Holtby’s writing provides an insight into her experiences during the period, and Virginia Woolf’s diaries provide a similar understanding. Woolf, like Brittain, did not fully address her politics in her diary but instead used it to express personal accounts. Although she was both an antifascist and pacifist, these ideologies are not overly present in her diary. Many of her diary entries focus on events in Europe and what was going on in her own personal life. In the early to mid-1930s she wrote more about others’ thoughts on Hitler and fascism, and she showcased less of her own voice on the topic. She used her diary to document what life was like in Germany and the people’s overwhelming support of Hitler, even by small children holding signs and flags, as he came down the street.⁴⁴ A

place where she could speak her mind without any fear of repercussions, her diary provides a firsthand account of her experiences while showcasing little of her politics.

Women's writing late in the interwar period highlighted different feelings than in the early part of the period. After World War I, women were dedicated in their work to ensure that a world war could never happen again. As the interwar period ended, and the threat of war became imminent, ideological thinking and the push for popular support of pacifism, for example, was set aside by activists. War filled the thoughts of the British public with fear of what was to come. Although Woolf may have not fully expressed her politics in her diary, the entries leading up to the start of World War II highlight her fear of what was to come. As Hitler rose to power and began to make military advances, Woolf would note what occurred that day at the beginning of each diary entry. She provided herself with a timeline of events that could be easily followed and showcased her feelings at that moment. Her fear of war is ever present in her entries, especially in late 1938 into 1939 when war was around the corner. She discussed that she was not alone in these thoughts as "at supper, we discussed our generation: & the prospects of war. Hitler has his million men now under arms... Harold broadcasting in his man of the world manner hints it may be war. That is the complete ruin not only of civilization, in Europe, but our last lap."⁴⁵ She realized that numerous others felt the same way and were worried about what would happen.

Even though Woolf did not fully go into her thoughts on fascism or pacifism when war was about to break out, she looks to a future where she could continue to help the antifascist cause. In the final hours of peace, she noted that, "Then of course I shall have to work to make money. That's [sic] a comfort. Write articles for America. I suppose take on some writing for some society. Keep the Press going."⁴⁶ Even though war was occurring, she still felt she had the power in writing to keep ideas circulating. The public may have been beginning to believe in similar ideological thoughts like eradicating fascism, but she was hopeful that her own writing and maybe the writing of others would aid in transitioning a majority of the public to antifascism as a new era of war began. She saw the importance of the public being informed of what was going on beyond the battlefields. Woolf understood that ideas could still be spread even during times of war, and although there was no space left for ideas surrounding pacifism, there was now a greater space to push against fascism.

While Brittain, Holtby, and Woolf's writing showcases less discussion of their politics than a holistic view of their tactics, Jessica Mitford's writing highlighted a rather vocal expression of her politics. Jessica Mitford, sister of Nancy Mitford, grew up in a politically active

family. She was close to two of her sisters who were fascists but was an outspoken antifascist and communist herself. Mitford was one of the few women, like Holtby, who got the chance to travel and experience fascism firsthand, as this was mostly done by women of middle to upper-class who did not have children.⁴⁷ She visited Spain after marrying her husband, who was a journalist, and was able to see political prisoners about whom she noted, “they are frightfully well treated, in fact we thought much better than they deserve when you think how the fascists treat their prisoners.”⁴⁸ Her letters present a firsthand account of what she was seeing and provide a space to understand women’s power in having this account. Many women who were writing in Britain did not have personal accounts of what was occurring in fascist countries, so those who had the chance to observe were able to better educate a wider audience if they published what they found. Mitford did not publish her letters, so only the recipient of the letter, Lady Redesdale, would learn about this encounter.

Mitford differed from the other women in this section as her writing had a more defined distaste for fascism and included an expression of her own politics. She was more politically active than other women, and she later moved to America, becoming a part of the American Communist Party. Much of her pushback against fascism and thoughts on communism appeared more as World War II began. She noted in a letter to Nancy Mitford in 1941, for instance, that, “part of the trouble is that here, as in England, people all want to fight for different things; some for the supremacy of the British Empire & America, some for the destruction of Fascism.”⁴⁹ This letter highlights how Mitford saw the beginning of World War II as lacking focus on what cause people should back as war brought about support for multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ideas. The transition to war was difficult due to the many movements during the interwar period. With such variety as war began, many had to switch their focus to combating fascism, a switch that Mitford notes was not easy to complete. Her letter describes how this occurred, warning that fascism could not be defeated without a united front, a nod to her communist politics.

In life writing as a genre, women were able to document their personal experiences in the interwar period. Although many of the women examined here were defined as antifascists, their personal writing showcases less pointed views against combating fascism. Some women, like Holtby, confided in others to explain her experiences and her feelings surrounding them. These experiences highlight how women felt during the period and are also helpful in tracking changes as Europe transitioned into war. By expressing their feelings and experiences, life writing provides a

more holistic view of women's activism during the interwar period than published works alone.

IV. Conclusion

The antifascist movement in Britain was just one movement in the continuously changing ideological landscape of the interwar period. In order to advocate for this ideology, women combined it with other ideologies, like feminism and pacifism, across many types of writing. Women wrote to educate others, discuss the future, and express their own personal experiences. They used different genres of writing to accomplish these goals while also providing insight into the tactics used beyond writing.

Each genre did not accomplish the same task but instead allowed women to navigate between their own politics and the fears of the future. Fiction as a genre provided a place for women to take chances and imagine a future where ideologies like fascism won out. Women used this space to warn their readers of what society and life could look like for women. Similar to fiction, published nonfiction was created by women in order to call their readers to action while also addressing thoughts of individuals and women's organizations. Life writing took on a different task as it allowed women to convey their emotions about the future as war became even more possible. Each genre created space for women to express their thoughts on what was going on around them, and as such, provides historians with insights into their lives and methods of activism.

The discussion of women's activism in the interwar period is critical in understanding their impact. By looking closely at women's activism and focusing directly on the tactics they employed, it showcases how the ideological landscape began to change in Britain. In understanding women's impact, this study presents another lens into how the British public reacted to a time of competing ideas. Women not only navigated this hectic time but also actively advocated for change in order to stop an alarming future.

Notes

¹ Pankhurst, *Suffragettes*, 9.

² Gottlieb, "Feminism and Anti-fascism," 72.

³ In order to understand how women were pushing back against fascism as an ideology, it is important to understand how others understood and supported it. By understanding how historians have understood these fascist women, the work of antifascist women can be expanded on to address their tactics and other ideological influences. To understand the influence of fascism on women and feminism, see Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism*.

⁴ Gottlieb, "Feminist Responses."

⁵ Gottlieb, "Broken Friendships," 201.

⁶ Works like Suh, *Fascism and Anti-Fascism*, 2, spotlight mainstream and middlebrow literature. Maroula Joannou notes similar ideas about class as each chapter centers on the writing of upper-class women. Joannou, "Woman Writer," 12. Also, for more on the contributions of black women and their inclusion of both antifascism and pan-Africanism in their activism see Umoren, "Anti-fascism and Development," 151-165.

⁷ Gottlieb, 'Guilty Women,' 52.

⁸ Suh, *Fascism and Anti-Fascism*

⁹ Holmes, *Natural Born Rebel* looks specifically at the life of Sylvia Pankhurst and does not focus on her writing as a tactic but instead uses her writing as evidence of Pankhurst's contribution to the period. Other books take on a variety of genres and discuss individual women's impacts with the specific pieces as a focus, see *Women Writers*

¹⁰ Swenson, "Memory, Gender and Antifascism."

¹¹ For comparisons of Burdekin's and Orwell's works see McKay, "Metapropaganda," 302-314.

¹² Burdekin, *Swastika Night*, 9.

¹³ Burdekin, *Swastika Night*, 66-67.

¹⁴ Burdekin, *Swastika Night*, 81.

¹⁵ Di Minico, "Spatial and Psychological Domination," 5.

¹⁶ Mitford, *Wigs*, 36-37.

¹⁷ Mitford, *Wigs*, 157-159

¹⁸ Mitchison, *Fourth Pig*, 24

¹⁹ Mitchison, *Fourth Pig*, 58-59.

²⁰ Suh, *Fascism and Anti-Fascism*, 72.

²¹ Dack, "It certainly isn't cricket."

²² Srivastava, "Intellectual as Partisan," 454.

²³ Pankhurst, "Women Under Fascism," 8-12.

- ²⁴ Pankhurst, *New Italy*, 7.
- ²⁵ Pankhurst, *Civil Servants*, 3.
- ²⁶ Holmes, *Natural Born Rebel*, 658.
- ²⁷ Pankhurst, *Suffragettes*, 9.
- ²⁸ Rintala, "Chronicler of a Generation," 32.
- ²⁹ Brittain and Holtby, *Testament of a Generation*, 218.
- ³⁰ Brittain and Holtby, *Testament of a Generation*, 86.
- ³¹ Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization*, 160.
- ³² Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 109.
- ³³ Hollander, "Indifference as Resistance *Feminist*," 89.
- ³⁴ World Congress of Women against War and Fascism, *Delegates' Report*.
- ³⁵ Against War and Against Fascism, *To the Women of All Countries*, 2.
- ³⁶ International Council of Women, "President's Memorandum," 3.
- ³⁷ Cowman, "Political Autobiographies," 204.
- ³⁸ Holtby to Brittain, *Selected Letters*, 281.
- ³⁹ Brittain to Holtby, *Selected Letters*, 314, 322-323.
- ⁴⁰ Holtby to Brittain, *Selected Letters*, 145.
- ⁴¹ Gottlieb, 'Guilty Women' 39.
- ⁴² Holtby to Brittain, *Selected Letters*, 104.
- ⁴³ Holtby to Brittain, *Selected Letters*, 285.
- ⁴⁴ Woolf, *Diary*, 4, 311.
- ⁴⁵ Woolf, *Diary*, 5, 162.
- ⁴⁶ Woolf, *Diary*, 234.
- ⁴⁷ Gottlieb, 'Guilty Women' 39
- ⁴⁸ Mitford to Redesdale, *Letters*, 24.
- ⁴⁹ Mitford to Mitford, *Letters*, 79.

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