

Proposal for PhD level research

Title: **STRIVING TO PRESERVE THE PEACE!** The police, the campaign for civil liberties and the dynamics of disorder in inter-war Britain.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship the Metropolitan and provincial police forces had with groups fighting for the protection of civil liberties in Britain during the inter-war period, principally the NCCL, the CPGB and NUWM, the Board of Deputies and other Jewish organisations in relation to police mistrust of the political left. Further, its purpose would be to consider how this can illuminate the policing of public order in the period and the introduction of legislation that increased police powers and potentially further curtailed civil liberties.

The study would be of value and interest because little has been written that deals with the policing of political activism in terms of the relationship the police had with groups advocating the preservation of civil liberties in this period. A greater understanding of police relationships with these groups would help explain the policing of disorder.

The involvement of the CPGB and NUWM in labour disputes and unemployment protest engendered Home Office fears of communist infiltration into the trade unions and industrial workforce and a consequential police culture of rooting out communists. This ensured that the strikes, unemployment demonstrations and fascist/anti-fascist activities that characterised the 1920s and 1930s were very aggressively policed. Police ideology may well have determined that they had no political agenda. In the words of Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Philip Game, he was simply ‘Striving with varying success to preserve the peace!’¹ There were, however, real concerns over the infringement of civil liberties arising from perceived violent and partisan policing. The National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) was set up in response to those concerns. Its founder, Ronald Kidd, did have previous communist connections but the organisation included several prominent personalities of the liberal left’s ‘great and good’. Nevertheless, the police regarded it as a front for the CPGB. Similarly anti-fascism was considered by the police to be communist inspired. The activities of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and anti-fascist opposition were the focus of the most serious disorder of the period. The different relationships the police had with fascists and with anti-fascists, which arguably favoured the former, as well as the apparent reluctance of the police to stop the anti-semitic fascist activities, led to allegations of police partiality and objections from Jewish groups.

The project will deal with the relationships the police had with the various groups campaigning for civil liberties and how those relationships influenced police policy and behaviour. It will also be concerned with the extent to which such police behaviour may have contributed to the course of the disorder and influenced perceptions of a need for increased police powers. Successive Commissioners’ of the

¹ PRO, MEPO 3/2490 Letter to Sir Norman Brook from Sir Philip Game 17 June 1938.

Metropolitan Police pressed for legislation throughout the period but the government, cautious of the potential political backlash from the introduction of legislation that would impinge on civil liberties, resisted the pressure until the disorder had escalated to a point where it seemed there was no alternative.

Studies of more recent events, for example, the miners strike and the race riots of the 1980s have suggested that a number of factors relating to police behaviour are significant in the extent and course of disorder. They include partiality, excessive use of violence and a lack of cultural understanding.

Sociologists and criminologists have generated most of the debate on this issue. Waddington, Jones and Critcher have constructed a model of disorder highlighting a number of potential factors including perceptions of partisan policing, police-protester history, liaison between police and protesters.² Gaskell and Benewick have argued that it can be the behaviour and actions of the police that can lead to disorder rather than the nature of the crowd and suggest that different actions by the police can affect a different outcome.³

Current historical debate revolves around police mistrust of the left as the driving force behind police policy and operational behaviour in policing political activism. For example, Stevenson highlights the inclination for the police and government to see all labour protesters as having communist sympathies as significant in the policing of labour disputes and unemployed demonstrations.⁴ He has found, too, that a perceived reluctance of the police to control BUF meetings and marches should be seen as a determination not to be forced into precipitative action by left-wing activity.⁵ Weinberger has found a history of hostility between the police and South Wales miners, which she relates to a background of trade union militancy.⁶ Similarly, Morgan highlights some very disorderly and violent events, which she links to a police preoccupation with 'harassment of militants'.⁷ Perceptions of a pro-fascist bias and tolerance of anti-Jewish activities on the part of the police generates further debate. There is little consensus amongst current research as to the extent of pro-police, pro-fascist, anti-left bias exercised by the police, but even strong advocates of the pro-police argument such as Thurlow⁸ and Benewick⁹ concede that police on the

² D.Waddington, K.Jones and C.Critcher, *Flashpoints: Studies in Public Disorder* (London: Routledge, 1989)

³ George Gaskell and Robert Benewick, *The Crowd in Contemporary Britain*, (London: Sage, 1987)

⁴ John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The Slump, Society and Politics during the Depression*, (London: Cape, 1977)

⁵ John Stevenson, 'The BUF, The Metropolitan Police and Public Order', in Kenneth Lunn and Richard C.Thurlow, (eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-war Britain*, (London: Croom Helm, 1980)

⁶ Barbara Weinberger, 'Police perceptions of Labour in the inter-war period: the case of the unemployed and of miners on strike', in Francis Snyder and Douglas Hay (eds.), *Labour, Law and Crime*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

⁷ Jane Morgan, *Conflict and Order: the Police and Labour Disputes in England and Wales 1900-1939*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)

⁸ Richard Thurlow, 'The Straw that Broke the Camels back: Public Order, Civil Liberties and the Battle of Cable Street', in Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (eds.) *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2000)

⁹ Robert Benewick, *Political Violence and Public Order*, (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969)

beat, if not pro-fascist, were anti-left enough to turn a blind eye to anti-semitic activities. Both Weinberger¹⁰ and Lewis¹¹ find examples of partisan policing which did favour fascists. This they see as evidence of institutional bias.

Very little has been written specifically on the relationship the police had with groups defending civil liberties, yet it was arguably the police relationship with the CPGB that informed police policy and dictated methods of policing political activism throughout the inter-war period. All left-wing protesters such as strike leaders, hunger marchers and anti-fascists were regarded by the police as communist sympathisers. Barbara Weinberger has suggested that the police had an exceptional belief in their own ideology and did not see their hunt for communists and extremists as political.¹² Ewing and Gearty take the view that the official response to communism posed an obvious threat to political freedom and civil liberties.¹³

It has been suggested that the civil liberties record of the 1930s reads like a 'battle roll of defeats'. Cox quotes Ronald Kidd's view that much inter-war legislation was reactionary and conferred greatly increased power on the police.¹⁴ The impact a perception of policing as infringing civil liberties may have on the course of disorder has received little attention. The police relationship with the NCCL is particularly significant in that they were set up specifically in response to concerns for civil liberties in relation to policing. Historians have tended to treat them as a radical-left, anti-fascist organisation, too close to the Communist Party to be considered in isolation. For example, Copsey argues that the NCCL's communist connections discredited it in official circles where it was constructed as a front organisation for the CPGB.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the police relationship with the NCCL warrants investigation in its own right. The NCCL's policy of placing observers at CPGB and anti-fascist events and its willingness to stage unofficial enquiries into police actions may well have raised an expectation of trouble that contributed to the disorder, and ultimately legislation. Significantly too, as Barbara Weinberger has suggested, the NCCL rallied a section of the middle-class whose critical attitude was to have serious implications for the reputation of the police in the long term.¹⁶

Similarly, the relationship between the police and Jewish organisations begs further investigation. The Board of Deputies of British Jews continuously advised Jews to avoid anti-fascist demonstrations so as not to give substance to anti-semitic propaganda that Jews were pro-communist. Nevertheless, the Communist Party in the East End of London, the scene of the most serious fascist related disorder of the period, was dominated by Jewish leaders.¹⁷ It has been suggested that Jewish

¹⁰ Barbara Weinberger, *The Best Police in the World: An Oral History of English Policing*, (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995)

¹¹ David Lewis, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British Society, 1931-1981*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987)

¹² Weinberger, 'Police perceptions of Labour in the inter-war period: the case of the unemployed and of miners on strike'.

¹³ K.D.Ewing and C.A.Gearty, *The Struggle for Civil Liberties: Political Freedom and the Rule of Law in Britain, 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.418.

¹⁴ Barry Cox, *Civil Liberties in Britain*, (Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1975), p.24.

¹⁵ Nigel Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p.45.

¹⁶ Barbara, Weinberger, *The Best Police in the World. An Oral History of English Policing*, (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995), p.173.

¹⁷ Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, p.44.

hostility at the 'Battle of Cable' Street was associated as much with anti-police as with anti-fascist feelings.¹⁸

My methodology would be to conduct an in-depth investigation into the developing relationships between the police and the various groups advocating civil liberties. A number of key events would be examined to explore the interaction between the police and protesters. The main focus of the investigation would be the records of the NCCL, the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the CPGB. Home Office and Cabinet records as well as Metropolitan and provincial police records would also be used. Reference would also be made to the local and national newspapers to assess the influence of media perception on the authorities and on public opinion. (Provisional bibliography attached). The project would aim to determine the concerns and objectives of these groups and the response of the police and Home Secretary to representations and complaints relating to police actions. Each event would be considered in relation to a number of issues including the extent and nature of the disorder, the police response to the event, representations and complaints from protesters or their representative organisations, perceptions of police bias, the history of policing the community or political/ethnic group and the extent of negotiation and liaison with protesters. I would hope to show from this investigation the extent to which the relationship of the police with groups advocating civil liberties influenced police policy and operational behaviour and how this may have contributed to the course of the disorder and the introduction of legislation in 1936.

Key themes to be explored would be:

- The history of policing labour disputes, the view of the authorities and the relationship of the Metropolitan and provincial police forces with the CPGB.
- Unemployment protest, the hunger marches and the Metropolitan and provincial police relationships with the NUWM.
- The NCCL, their concerns, aims and objectives, monitoring of police behaviour and the responses of the police.
- Jewish organisations, The BUF, anti-semitism, anti-fascism and perceptions of police bias.
- Escalating disorder, legislation, increased police powers and civil liberties.
- Conclusions in the context of the sociological and historical debate on the policing of disorder.

Maintaining public order continues to present challenges for policing, hence the issues to be analysed are of present as well as historical interest.

¹⁸ Thurlow, 'The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back: Public Order, Civil Liberties and the Battle of Cable Street'.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Cabinet records, e.g.

PRO, CAB 27/29, *War Cabinet and Cabinet miscellaneous committees 1915-1939.*

PRO, CAB 27/80, *Coal Strike Daily Bulletin 4 April to 6 June 1921.*

Home Office records, e.g.,

PRO, HO 144/20729/697140, *Disturbances: Harworth Colliery Trade Dispute, 1936-1937*

PRO, HO 144/1746/417250, *Disturbances at Marsh Lane colliery 21 July 1921*

PRO, HO 45/25388, *Disturbances: Fascist and anti-fascist meetings 1937-1938: police statistics; alleged partiality of police.*

PRO, HO 45/25462, *Disturbances: National Council for Civil Liberties reports on activities, 1934-1936.*

PRO, HO 45/25463, *Disturbances: National Council for Civil Liberties reports on activities, 1936-1940.*

Metropolitan Police records, e.g.,

PRO, MEPO 2/3089, *Fascist meeting at Albert Hall and complaint of Police action in Thurloe Square: investigation and report, 1936.*

PRO, MEPO 3/551, *Fascist march and Communist rally 4 October 1936.*

PRO, MEPO 3/553, *Activities of Ronald Kidd, secretary of the National Council for Civil Liberties*

PRO, MEPO 2/3043, *"Jew-baiting": action to be taken by Police: with memo by Sir John Simon, 1936-1939.*

PRO, MEPO 3/2490, *Fascist and Communist activities: measures to deal with disturbances, 1934-1938.*

PRO, MEPO 2/3120, *Fascist protest at no marches after dusk rule and challenge to Commissioner's direction on processions, 1937-1938.*

The records of the National Council for Civil Liberties records, e.g.:

DCL/74/8, *Minutes on proceedings of an inquiry into disturbances in Thurloe Square, July 1936.*

DCL/8/5, *Public Order Act. Proposed deputation to Home Secretary about fascist activities, 1936-1937.*

DCL/638/2, *From Jarrow to Cable Street.*

DCL/27/2, *Harworth Colliery, police behaviour, 1937.*

The records of the Communist Party of Great Britain, e.g.:

University of Hull DAR/2/13 and 14, *Papers of Robin Page Arnot.*

Manchester University CP/Hist/1/8 'The Communist Party of Great Britain 1920-1943'.

The records of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, e.g.:

ACC3121/A/028-030, *Letter to Jewish Chronicle alleging police apathy and partiality, December 1936.*

ACC3121/C6/1/1/1, *Minutes of Co-ordinating Committee, June 1938.*

ACC3121/C6/5/1/1, *Observers Report for Jewish Defence Committee, October .*

Local and national newspapers, e.g.:

City and East End Advertiser

Jewish Chronicle

News Chronicle

South Wales Echo

Oxford Mail

Oxford Times

The Blackshirt

Daily Mail

The Times

The Daily Worker

The Police Review

Secondary Works

Historical Background

Books

Aldcroft, Derek, *The Inter-war Economy: Britain 1919-1939*, (London: Batsford, 1973).

Pearce, Malcolm and Stewart, Geoffrey, *British Political History 1867-2001 Democracy and Decline*, (London, Routledge 2002).

Robbins, Keith, *The Eclipse of Great Power*, (London: Longman, 1994).

Smith, Malcolm, *Democracy in a Depression: Britain in the 1920s and 1930s*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998).

Policing

Articles

Judge, Tony, Orgreave 1984 were you there?, *Police Magazine*, March 2002, Police Federation website, www.polfed.org/magazine.

Moore, Andrew, 'Sir Philip Game's "other life": the making of the 1936 Public Order Act in Britain', in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol.36, No.1, 1990, 62-72.

Books

Ascoli, David, *The Queens Peace: The Origins and Development of the Metropolitan Police 1929-1979*, (London: Hamilton, 1979).

Boyle, Andrew, *Trenchard*, (London: Collins, 1962).

Critchley, T.A., *A History of Police in England and Wales*, (London: Constable, 1978).

Emsley, Clive, and Weinberger, Barbara, (eds), *The English Police: A Political and Social History*, (London: Longman 1996).

Emsley, Clive, *Policing Western Europe: Politics, Professionalism and Public Order, 1850-1940*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1991).

Macabe, Sarah and Wallington, Peter, *The Police, Public Order and Civil Liberties*, (London: Routledge, 1988).

Rawlings, Philip, *Crime and Power. A History of Criminal Justice 1699-1998*, (London: Longman 1999).

Reith, Charles, *British Police and the Democratic Ideal*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1943).

Weinberger, Barbara, *The Best Police in the World. An Oral History of English Policing*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995).

Williams, David, *Keeping the Peace: The Police and Public Order*, (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967).

Public Order Theory

Books

Gaskell, George and Benewick, Robert, (eds.), *The Crowd in Contemporary Britain*, (London: Sage Publications, 1987).

Gurr, Ted Robert, *Why Men Rebel*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

Jefferson, Tony, *The Case Against Paramilitary Policing*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990).

Waddington, David, Jones, Karen and Critcher, Chas, *Flashpoints. Studies in Public Disorder*, (London: Routledge, 1989).

Waddington, David and Critcher, Chas, (eds.), *Policing Public Order: Theoretical and practical issues*, (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996).

Waddington, P.A.J, *The Strong Arm of the Law*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

Labour Disputes

Books

Geary, Roger, *Policing Industrial Disputes: 1893 to 1985*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Hannington, Wal, *Unemployed Struggles 1919-1936: My life and struggles amongst the unemployed*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977).

May, William Charles, *Recollections and Reflections of a County Policeman*, (Ilfracombe: Stockwell, 1979).

Morgan, Jane, *Conflict and Order: The Police and Labour Disputes in England and Wales, 1900-1939*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Snyder, Francis and Hay, Douglas, (eds.), *Labour, Law and Crime*, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987).

Fascism and Anti-Fascism

Articles

Cullen, Stephen, 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.28, (1993), 245-67.

Hope, John, 'Blackshirts, Knuckle-Dusters & Lawyers: Documentary Essay on the Mosley versus Marchbanks Papers' in *Labour History Review*, Vol. 65, (2000), Issue 1, 41-58

Books

Anderson Gerald D., *Fascists Communists and the National Government. Civil Liberties in Great Britain 1931-1937*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983).

Benewick, Robert, *Political Violence and Public Order*, (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969).

Copsey, Nigel, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).

Cross, Colin, *The Fascists in Britain*, (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1961).

Jacobs, Joe, *Out of the Ghetto, My Youth in the East End: Communism and Fascism, 1913-1939*, (London: Janet Simon 1978).

Kushner, Tony and Valman, Nadia, (eds.), *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2000).

Lebselter, Gisela C, *Political Anti-semitism in England 1918-1939*, (London: Macmillan 1978).

Lewis, David, *Illusions of Grandeur: Mosley, Fascism and British society, 1931-1981*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

Linehan, Thomas, *British Fascism, 1918-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

Linehan, Thomas, *East London for Mosley: The British Union of Fascists in East London and South West Essex, 1933-1940*, (London: Cass, 1996).

Lunn, Kenneth and Thurlow, Richard, (eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-war Britain*, (London: Croom Helm, 1980).

Panayi, Panikos, *Radical Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).

Renton, Dave, *Redshirts and Black: Fascists and Anti-fascists in Oxford in the 1930s*, (Oxford: Ruskin College, 1996).

Skidelsky, Robert, *Oswald Mosley*, (London: Macmillan, 1990).

Stevenson, John and Cook, Chris, *The Slump, Society and Politics during the Depression*, (London: Cape 1977).

Thornton, Peter, *Public Order Act 1936*, (London: Financial Training, 1987).

Thurlow, Richard, *Fascism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Thurlow, Richard, *Fascism in Britain A History 1918-1985*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

Thurlow, Richard, *Fascism in Modern Britain*, (Stroud: Sutton, 2000).

Civil Liberties

Books

Cox, Barry, *Civil Liberties in Britain*, (Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1975)

Ewing, K.D. and Gearty, C.A., *The Struggle for Civil Liberties: Political Freedom and the Rule of Law in Britain, 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Kidd, Ronald, *British Liberty in Danger: An introduction to the Study of Civil Rights*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1940).