

Beating the Fascists

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Review: Socialist History Journal

Published at: 04:10 pm - Wednesday October 03 2012

Full text of review from Issue 41 of the Journal of the Socialist History Society

Sean Birchall, Beating the Fascists: The Untold Story of Anti-Fascist Action (London: Freedom Press, 2010), 416pp., ISBN 9781904491125, £15.00, pbk.

“...they were hit with everything, bars, hammers, baseball bats. Yes it was savage enough I suppose but not gratuitous. We were taking the opportunity to send them a message ...”(p.215)

Beating the Fascists deals with Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), an organisation that engaged in what was, in effect, a quasi-paramilitary conflict with a variety of fascist organisations, principally the BNP and Combat 18, who were intent on pursuing a policy of insurrection by ‘controlling the streets’. This semi-clandestine campaign continued up until 1994 when Nick Griffin ostentatiously declared that his party were to ‘de-commission the boot’ in order to end what John Tyndall had described as ‘a state of war’. AFA had, literally, driven the fascists off the streets and forced them into a comprehensive strategic re-evaluation, and this text provides key anti-fascist activists with a platform to tell their own story in their own words.

AFA was created on 28 July 1985 at Conway Hall in London (although formally launched in Liverpool in the following year) and set out to be a totally non-sectarian and democratic organisation with its only objective being to oppose fascism both physically and ideologically. AFA in fact consisted of people belonging to a range of political groups, including Red Action (communist), the Direct Action Movement (anarcho-syndicalist), Class War (anarchist), Workers’ Power (Trotskyist), and

Communist Action Group (Stalinist)—as the book says, in AFA hunt saboteurs rubbed shoulders with members of the Territorial Army and Irish Republicans! AFA was, indeed, an odd amalgamation but according to the book, ‘one of the reasons AFA was so effective was that it could apparently accommodate recruits from all ideologies and none’ (p.341). Yet the objective of AFA’s principal activists is clearly articulated throughout – physical resistance as a pre-requisite for effective anti-fascism, to clear the fascists out of working-class areas and destroy all semblance of a fascist presence in public spaces.

By 1990 AFA was clearly identified as the militant wing of the anti-fascist movement with a dedicated street-fighting cadre and stewards group. At its peak in the early 90s AFA had four regions and 36 branches with particular areas of strength in London, Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. Yet as the book is at pains to point out, street confrontation was only a part of what AFA set out to do. It was an important tactic (not a principle) and only part of a multi-faceted approach to anti-fascist practice. The magazine *Fighting Talk* was set up in 1991, and an attempt was made to mobilise people via various cultural and leisure activities such as Cable St Beat and Unity Carnivals. Meanwhile football clubs were the focus of considerable AFA activity with teams like Glasgow Celtic, Manchester United and Aston Villa having a visible AFA contingent, determined to halt the colonisation of the game by the extreme right. AFA even produced a BBC Open Space video entitled *Fighting Talk*. So *Beating the Fascists* looks, therefore, in some detail at the ‘roots’ of AFA in the Anti-Nazi League of the late 1970s, the split from the SWP in 1981, the formation of Red Action, the launch of AFA in 1985, and the numerous internal feuds and splits that ensued. It is also replete with detailed and graphic descriptions of extremely violent confrontations with fascists, which will doubtless horrify those anxious to dismiss AFA as the mirror image of the right-wing bullies they were claiming to oppose.

There is no doubt that *Beating the Fascists* is a controversial book, a fact acknowledged by the author(s) as well as the publishers, Freedom Press, who have described it as ‘the most controversial book of the decade’. Its credentials as a source of intense, even acrimonious, debate are reflected in the fact that some people did not actually want the text to see the light of day at all, and the eventual publication has precipitated vociferous ‘discussion’ in various circles, even causing some former comrades to condemn the book in recriminatory tones. It is a book that, seemingly, not only divides opinion but generates deeply felt and contradictory emotions, offending not just right wing reactionaries but a variety of liberals, anarchists, Trotskyists and others. This is quite an accomplishment for a text produced by a small independent publisher, concerning what is, on the face of it, a relatively esoteric element of

left-wing political practice in the 1980s and 90s. The source of the consternation and condemnation is not difficult to discern.

The book is in fact quite explicit from the outset in stating its purpose – it tells the story of AFA, not only from a rank-and-file activists' perspective, but also more specifically from the point of view of those activists that coalesced around the group Red Action (described, incidentally, by BNP HQ as 'the worst of the lot, total scum'). Given that AFA was always a relatively pragmatic amalgamation of various political groupings, there have been rumblings of resentment, particularly from anarchists, who claim that the text is focused too narrowly on those individuals who, although playing a key role in certain cities, did not constitute by any means the entirety of the organisation. Yet such criticism is odd given the fact that those who composed the text have not claimed any definitive or comprehensive purpose. Clearly the book does focus somewhat on those involved in Red Action, who acquired a fearsome reputation for ruthlessness when engaging their political enemies (it is worth remembering that Combat 18 were set up in response to the success of RA), but in many ways the driving force behind AFA was indeed Red Action. Formed in 1982, many of its members having been expelled from the SWP for the venal sin of 'squadismo', Red Action explicitly rejected the liberal-left anti-racist agenda, and criticised the state funded agencies of the multi-culturalist establishment. As the author points out, 'while race awareness took the plaudits, it was a strikingly illiberal militant anti-fascism that did all the heavy lifting' (p.18). Little wonder, then, that the book has caused controversy.

What the text does provide is a fascinating glimpse of the struggle that took place between AFA and the unreconstructed Nazis on the extreme right, and the book is unquestionably authoritative in the sense of emanating from those who were actually engaged in the struggle – but it is much more than that. The strangely dichotomous narrative contains not simply a sometimes chilling account of collective confrontation, but also a concise, calculating analysis of why such methods were deployed, and interestingly, a realistic acknowledgement of the limitations of AFA's strategy – violence of the first resort can never be anything but an artificial and temporary remedy. This is not simply hooligan-porn, and anybody aiming simply to satisfy an urge to experience, vicariously, the thrill of visceral violence, is likely to be somewhat disappointed. Fighting the Fascists has taken upon itself the more ambitious objective of contextualising and examining the strategy of AFA, as well as documenting, in remorseless detail, the various dust-ups that ensued.

Beating the Fascists is, in effect, both an analysis and a micro-historiography of popular resistance against fascism. It documents the fight against the purveyors of an evil political creed which takes place in

the very communities where that grotesque ideology is incubated. It is, more than anything, the story of ordinary people engaged in struggle. The words of Phil Piratin come to mind who, commenting on people remembering their participation in the 'Battle of Cable Street' said, 'the people were changed. Their heads seemed to be held higher, and their shoulders were squarer—and the stories they told! Each one of them was a 'hero'—many of them were' (P. Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red*, 1948, p.25). As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, sometimes it is a good thing to remind ourselves of what the enemy fears most—ordinary working people that are assertive in their own collective working-class identity, self-confident, politically astute and prepared to resist. Read the book and remind yourself.

Dr Mark Hayes, Southampton Solent University

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[Interview Transcript: Red Pepper](#)

Published at: 06:04 am - Thursday April 26 2012

Full transcript from a recent interview with Red Pepper. The full interview on the Red Pepper site can also be viewed [here](#)

On its 75th anniversary, much attention was given to the Battle of Cable Street, where Oswald Mosley's blackshirts were prevented from marching through the predominantly Jewish working class East End of London. But Cable Street itself was the culmination of a wider tradition of direct physical confrontation with fascists both at the time and throughout most of the 20th century.

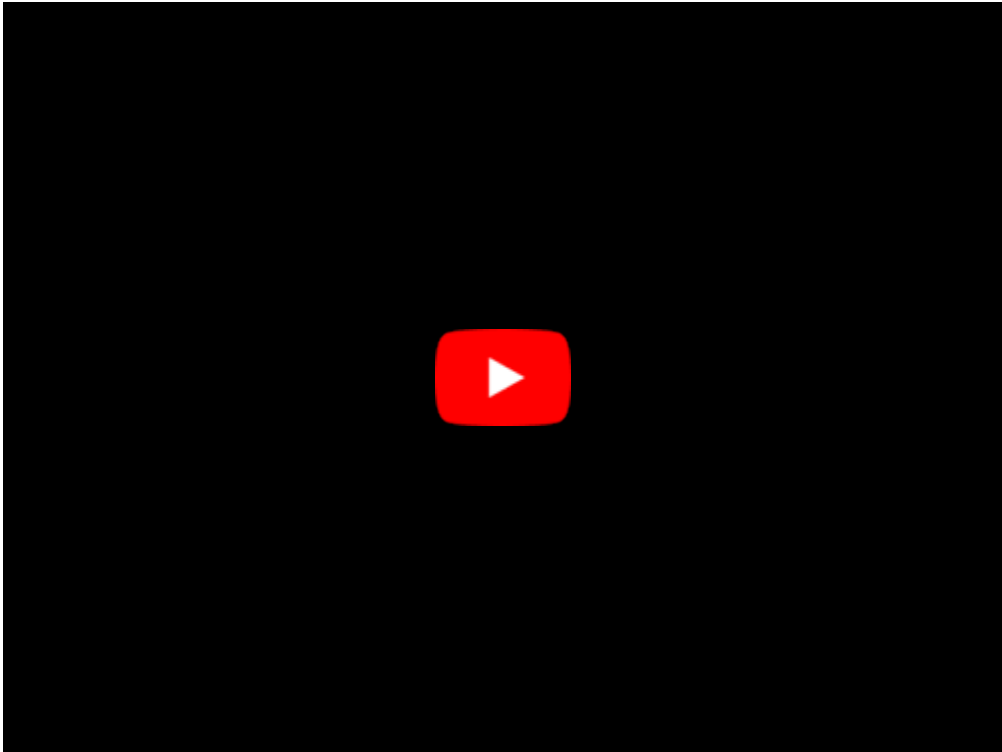
We are happy to praise those who made a stand in the 1930s. But what of those who literally fought the fascists more recently, in the shape of the British Movement, the National Front or the pre-Griffin British National Party?

The publication of *Beating the Fascists: The Untold Story of Anti-Fascist Action* (Freedom Press) has re-asserted the importance of this disparaged and neglected tradition. Michael Calderbank spoke with Gary and Andy, longstanding members of Red Action who helped to initiate AFA, about their controversial new book. ([more...](#))

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Beating The Fascists – Promo Video

Published at: 02:02 pm - Thursday February 02 2012



Posted in: [Anti-Fascist Action](#) by afa-btf [No Comments](#)

Review: Professor Nigel Copsey

Published at: 09:11 pm - Wednesday November 09 2011

Excerpts from a review by Professor Nigel Copsey – read the full review on pages 11 & 12 [here](#)

This book, the ‘official’ history of AntiFascist Action (AFA), chronicles the experience of militant antifascism in Britain from the late 1970s through to mid 1990s. Running to over 400 pages, the text is broken down into a series of sections and subsections that revisit, in graphic detail, a succession of violent encounters between antifascist militants and their opponents. Written from an activist’s perspective, it straddles, if rather awkwardly, both generalist and scholarly audiences.

...the significance of AFA, for Birchall, was that it performed a subterranean ‘holding operation’ that postponed the ‘inevitable’ breakthrough of the British far right for some fifteen years. Whilst Birchall admits that trying to objectively

quantify the impact of antifascism is difficult because 'it is attempting to prove a negative' (p. 23), he makes the more valid point that only after the 'militant foot' was removed from the BNP's 'fascist neck' did 'the latter bloom(s) politically' (p. 23). 'That is to say, the authority previously exerted by militant anti fascism on events becomes that much clearer by what happens after it is no longer the foremost influence' (p. 23)

In the first section of the book, Birchall chronicles the roots of AFA in the antifascist squads of the 1970s AntiNazi League. The story moves on in the second section to AFA's 1985 launch before (interspersed with colourful descriptions of lowlevel clashes with fascist opponents) it recounts internal organisational squabbles between moderate and militant anti-fascists. In the end, the militant wing won out.

In 1989 AFA relaunched as a militant antifascist organisation that specifically targeted the white working class, a constituency that AFA believed formed the recruiting ground for Britain's far right. For sure, as recent studies have revealed, it has been this constituency that has largely comprised the social bases of BNP electoral support. AFA's objective was now essentially twofold: to defeat or contain fascist activity in white working class neighbourhoods through physical confrontation; and to convince this constituency that its interests could not be satisfied through organisations like the BNP. The third and final section covers the period between 1990 and the mid1990s when the BNP finally decided (coming under sustained pressure from AFA) to abandon the streets, which then forced AFA to overhaul its antifascist strategy

At the end of the book Birchall seems to bemoan the absence of militant opposition to the BNP, 'Sooner rather later', he declares, 'a progressive left will have to declare outright war on conservative antifascism too' (p. 397). But what Birchall advocates is not necessarily a return to physical force anti-fascism. Instead he calls on the wider left to ditch the sterile politics of mainstream antiextremism, offer a real (socialist) alternative, and finally bring the 'marginalised working class in from the cold' (p.403).

Whilst one may have some reservations about the book's theoretical and intellectual contribution, in telling the (untold)

story of AFA from the inside, Birchall has nonetheless performed a valuable service. What Birchall's insider account reveals is that militant anti fascism unquestionably had an impact on the BNP's organisational and strategic development – a point that activists from existing antifascist organisations, such as Unite Against Fascism (and indeed some academics), are reluctant to concede.

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Review: Huddersfield University – Journalism and Media Newsroom

Published at: 11:06 am - Saturday June 25 2011

Excerpts from a review by Huddersfield University – read the full review [here](#)

While there is some history that is widely known and even taught in schools, other pieces of history slip behind us almost unnoticed, apart from by the people involved. Until the writing of this book, the story of Anti Fascist Action was one of those types of history. The book tells the story of Anti Fascist Action's longterm street war against the far right.

The author goes into detail not just about where and how, but also why. And puts forward a strong defense of AFA's activities as a vital component in defending democracy. The political analysis in the book is just as detailed and written with no less passion than the more physical parts. Birchall not only makes a strong case for militant antifascism's success on its own terms, he also suggests that AFA were the first to recognise the danger posed by the BNP's move towards electoral politics. And explains how AFA moved to community politics in an effort to counter that.

The book is also an important attempt to chronicle a previously untold historical struggle. Recommended, for both academic and casual readers.

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Review: Red Pepper

Published at: 06:06 pm - Thursday June 23 2011

Excerpts from a review by Red Pepper – read the full review [here](#)

Beating the Fascists is a highly readable and uncompromising account of two decades of militant anti-fascism with important lessons for today.

The book is a real page-turner, but it's not for the faint-hearted. The description of the often brutal treatment of the fascists at the hands of the militants is graphic to the point of absurdity at times

There is a sense of setting the record straight: principally in Birchall's argument that AFA, and the militant anti-fascism it espoused, had the most devastating impact on fascism in mainland Britain in the period and that it directly contributed to the BNP's eventual retreat, in the mid 1990s, from the Mosleyite dogma of the necessity of controlling the streets.

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[Review: Freedom Newspaper](#)

Published at: 06:06 pm - Thursday June 23 2011

Excerpts from a review by Freedom Newspaper- read the full review [here](#)

Previously everything from the Red Action (RA) stable has been crucial to any understanding of both left wing working class politics and politics in general, past and present in the UK, and so this is. Hard to put down, Beating The Fascists is a no-holds-barred account of the Red Action and Anti Fascist Action's practical and ruthless application of their aims, principles and practice, of making space for working class politics to develop unfettered by the threat of fascism

Beating The Fascists stands as THE critical book on post war UK anti-fascism, in the fact it is written by those involved (not academics) and that its conclusions desperately deserve recognition and immediate application by all those who read it and indeed profess to be socialists or anti-fascists in a period when a neo-fascist party gets 1 million votes in a Euro election. If anarchists, Unite Against Fascism (UAF) or whoever fail to read it and listen to it then it is an indictment on them not the authors

Whilst a chronicle of physical force anti-fascism, in fact the conclusion of Beating The Fascists is that that is finished and we must move into a door to door strategy. This is a conclusion I believe anarchists should agree with but I, in fact, would go further and say that what is missing from the book is an acknowledgement that what made RA special was not their ability in close combat but their fundamentalism as regards class in politics

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Review: Look Left Magazine

Published at: 06:06 pm - Thursday June 23 2011

Excerpts from a review by Look Left magazine – read the full review [here](#)

For two decades British anti-fascists fought a cold blooded battle for control of the streets against burgeoning far-right movements, Brian Whelan meets the authors of a controversial new book by activists who were there on the frontlines.

Beating the Fascists could be two separate books, appealing to very different audiences. The first a brutally violent story bragging of hard man conquests, the other a vital political analysis of the rise of the BNP and detailed history of the groups that fought them.

The book is an often disturbing read, each chapter switching from graphic details of violent operations with militaristic discipline against fascists to analysis of the political decisions they faced.

Over ten years in the making Beating the Fascists not only chronicles the bloody street battles and political squabbles but also points out how fascists filled a vacuum for a radical alternative that the left has failed to.

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Review: The National

Published at: 06:06 pm - Thursday June 23 2011

Excerpts from an article by The National Newspaper- read the full article

[here](#)

Beating the Fascists is far from an objective history. It does, however, provide something rare: a clear map of the tangled web of activist groups existing on both sides of the fence, from the late 1970s through to the 1990s. On one hand the SWP can be seen splintering into Red Action and AFA. On the other, the NF erupts into a dizzying array of factions, from Blood & Honour and the British Movement to the BNP. But while the chronic disorganisation and endemic squabbling of British radical political groups may dissuade sympathisers from coughing up membership dues, as Birchall notes, such statistics bear little relation to the extent of their ideological spread

Birchall recounts AFA's clashes with nationalist activists in bone-crunchingly vivid prose. From the SWP squadists' routing of the NF in Manchester's city centre in the early 1980s to London's Battle of Waterloo Station in 1992, in which 1,000 anti-fascists assembled to prevent a large group of Blood & Honour supporters attending a concert by the Nazi-punk band Skrewdriver, the tales are also told with discomfiting relish

Rather than a simple memoir of radical thuggery on long-forgotten frontlines, Beating The Fascists: The Untold Story of Anti-Fascist Action offers a conflicting, yet candid analysis of a history that rapidly appears to be repeating itself

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[**Review: Weekly Worker**](#)

Published at: 06:06 pm - Thursday June 23 2011

Excerpts from a review by the Weekly Worker – read the full review [here](#)

[The Book] aims, from the outset, to provide a counterweight to the received wisdom that Britain's political culture, with its traditions of pragmatism and tolerance, is immune to the explosion of far-right populism that blights those excitable continentals

There are three main threads to the narrative – the first is the evolution of fascism and far-right nationalism in the period covered; the second the complex political shifts and intrigues

in the anti-fascist movement; and the third the series of often violent clashes between the two sides

Most of the book is, as noted, taken up by accounts of AFA's – and especially Red Action's – battles with the National Front, British National Party and sundry other fascist factions.....For the author, it is the pursuit of organised, basically paramilitary operations against fascists that, in the end, forced the latter to abandon its notion of controlling the streets.

Beating the fascists is on the whole pretty sniffy about the amateurism of AFA's opponents; AFA could face them down, despite very often being outnumbered, by employing tactical nous and the element of surprise. Tyndall, and then Griffin, had to swap the boots for suits, ultimately because they were the ones getting booted. AFA, under the leadership of Red Action, should be commended for taking note of this change in tack by the BNP, and attempting to readjust accordingly

Whatever else may be said about Red Action, it must be pointed out that....it acknowledged that a political response was needed to the far right that took into account mass alienation from mainstream politics. Its response, ultimately, was the Independent Working Class Association. The IWCA attempts, in the last analysis, to replicate the kind of community work taken up by the BNP, in the same kind of places

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