



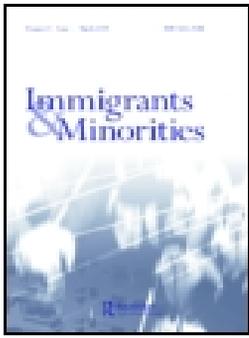
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## Searching for Lord Haw-Haw: The Political Lives of William Joyce

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Searching for Lord Haw-Haw: The Political Lives of William Joyce**, by Colin Holmes, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, 466 pp., £15.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-138-88886-9

William Joyce was without doubt a remarkable figure of twentieth-century British history. He became a leading figure of British fascism and was one of the most fanatical proponents of anti-Semitism in the country. However, he achieved notoriety mainly for his English language propaganda broadcasts for the Nazis during the Second World War, which soon brought him the moniker 'Lord Haw-Haw'. In 1945, Joyce was eventually brought to trial for his role in the Nazi propaganda apparatus and convicted for treason. After a futile attempt to have his death sentence overturned, he was hanged in Wandsworth Prison on 3 January 1946. Joyce was one of only three British subjects executed for treason and collaboration with the Nazi regime after the Second World War. The justification for Joyce's death sentence caused some public controversy. The prosecutors had argued that Joyce was a British subject at the time he had entered German service and had thus committed treason against the king. This was a charge that Joyce always denied on the grounds that he was not in possession of a valid British passport anymore at that time. What might seem as legal minutiae leads us to the most interesting aspect of Joyce's political biography, though. He belonged to a group of political actors in the interwar period that can probably best be described as 'transnational fascists'.<sup>1</sup> Despite being the epitome of hypertrophic nationalism, fascist and national-socialist regimes attracted a motley crew of foreign fellow travellers, such as Ezra Pound in Italy, and Joyce himself in Nazi Germany. This transnational dimension of Joyce's private and political life makes him an interesting case study for the understanding of the wider historical problem.

Born in New York in 1906 to an Irish-Catholic father and an English mother, Joyce moved with his family to Galway in Ireland in the early 1910s. The experience of violence and upheaval in the wake of the Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish War had an undeniable impact on him. His family identified strongly with British unionism and this led the young Joyce to assist the often exceptionally violent suppression of Irish Republicans by the paramilitary Black and Tans. There is sufficient evidence that this made him a target for an attempted assassination by the IRA. Fleeing from Galway, Joyce moved to England in 1922 and enrolled at Birkbeck College of the University of London, where he also joined the Officer Training Corps. He seemed to have shown some academic talent, yet all of his subsequent attempts to establish an academic career failed. During his time at Birkbeck College, Joyce became involved in fascist politics for the first time. This was the starting point of a political journey that would lead him to become one of Oswald Mosley's lieutenants in the

British Union of Fascists in the early 1930s. In 1937, Joyce was expelled from the BUF in an attempt to deflect public criticisms of the rabid anti-Semitism within the party. Joyce moved on to establish himself as the leader of his own fascist sect, the National Socialist League. In August 1939, he moved to Germany where he was soon recruited for the English language propaganda efforts of the Nazis. His recognisable voice and his prominent appearances on the *Reichssender* made 'Lord Haw-Haw' the epitome of the fascist traitor in Britain – to such a degree that even interned BUF activists sought to distance themselves from him.

Colin Holmes' meticulously researched biography of William Joyce offers a fascinating insight into the world of British fascism in the first half of the twentieth century. It is a great merit of the book that it embeds Joyce's life story into the broader history of the far right in Britain. Densely narrated chapters detailing Joyce's personal travails alternate with more general reflections on organisations and politics of the contemporary far right. Holmes presents us with the depiction of an individual on the constant search for personal recognition, often bordering on hubris. This ranged from the desperate attempts to present himself to outsiders as a respected academic to claiming leadership roles in various fascist groups. Joyce is described as a self-aggrandising personality who was all too often confronted with professional and political failure. This craving for recognition was certainly a driving force behind many prominent fascists of the time. However, one aspect made Joyce stand out from other British fascists. Although Holmes convincingly demonstrates that anti-Semitism was virulent in the BUF, Joyce's rabid hatred of Jews was exceptional. His anti-Semitism even provided the material for his very own political foundation myth. Joyce always claimed that the distinctive scar on his right cheek was the result of an attack by a 'Jewish Bolshevik', yet Holmes provides evidence that it was most likely an angry Irish woman in London that caused the mark.

Holmes presents all these aspects of Joyce's life in great detail. The book makes extensive use of a wide range of primary sources. Nonetheless, there are some themes that could have been explored in greater detail. Particularly the fact that Joyce experienced the upheaval of migration several times at formative stages of his life seems significant for understanding his later political career. Holmes discusses and sometimes speculates about Joyce's psyche regarding other events but neglects the impacts of these transformative events on his personality. For instance, Joyce's hyper-patriotic Britishness and his consequent turn towards fascism seem to directly relate to his experiences in Ireland. It could be argued that his emphasis on a racially defined Britishness was at least in parts also an attempt to overcompensate his own Irish-Catholic background.

Overall, Colin Holmes' biography provides the reader with an excellent insight into the different political lives of William Joyce. What is more, it also offers a valuable overview of British fascism in the first half of the twentieth century. Scholars and students alike will find this book a very useful resource for understanding the complex aspect of modern British history.

**Note**

1. Arnd Bauerkämper / Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (eds), *Fascism Without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation Between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (New York, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2017).

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