

Narratives of collaboration and resistance: Three anti-fascist novels written by women in the 1930s

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Abstract

Throughout the 1930s, the impact of fascism on the role of women in society and in the family was the focus of several anti-fascist novels written by women. In this article I concentrate on three of the most significant and successful of these works in order to explore the way they dramatize the relationship between collaboration with and resistance to fascism. I show how they not only viewed the reactionary transformation of the state by fascist regimes as a historic defeat for women. They also sought to depict the effect this catastrophe had on their personal lives and how they coped with its social and political challenges. I have therefore selected the following novels – Storm Jameson's *In the Second Year* (1936), Murray Constantine's (Katharine Burdekin) *Swastika Night* (1937) and Phyllis Bottome's *The Mortal Storm* (1938), since they address the fundamentally regressive nature of fascism in different ways as well as individual struggles against it. Moreover, they remain outstanding examples of anti-fascist fiction that still resonate with us today when the world is once more faced with the rise of rightwing, populist and neofascist parties.

Key words: Storm Jameson, Murray Constantine, Phyllis Bottome, 1930s, Anti-fascist novels

In one of her last great polemics, *Three Guineas*, published in 1938, Virginia Woolf argued for a united front between the women's movement and the anti-fascist struggle. Woolf showed that there is a natural and necessary correspondence between the continued fight for female emancipation and international resistance to the rise of fascism. The two causes were intrinsically interwoven:

The daughters of educated men who were called, to their resentment, 'feminists' were in fact the advance guard of your own movement. They were fighting the same enemy that you are fighting and for the same reasons. They were fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state as you are fighting the tyranny of the Fascist state [...] The whole iniquity of dictatorship, whether in Oxford or Cambridge, in Whitehall or Downing Street, against Jews or against women, in England, or in Germany, in Italy or in Spain is now apparent to you. But now we are fighting together. (Woolf 1977:118)

Woolf was not alone in realizing the need for unified action as the most effective way of mobilizing people of different political affiliations in a movement to combat fascism. This connection between fascism and the condition of women also reflected a growing awareness that totalitarian regimes, such as those that had recently been installed in Italy, Germany and Spain, posed an existential threat to the lives and prospects of women everywhere. Moreover, the situation demanded a call to arms among writers to use their literary talents to inspire readers to join the struggle. The British novelist, Storm Jameson, was one who also recognized the

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seriousness of the threat when she characterized the options facing women as a battle for individual survival against a fascist world order:

In my lifetime the position of women in the world has altered radically, twice. There was the change which came during the War. There is now this second change, violently negating the first, which we owe to the spread of Fascism in Europe. Women in the democratic countries have their choice plain before them, as never before. Are we to move forward to a position of much greater freedom, or lose what we have gained? To lose does not mean that we shall be back where we were in 1912 with the problems of 1912: it means that our present problems will be solved, in the way which death solves problems. It will be in some sort our deaths. (Quoted in Maslen 2014:170-1)

Throughout the 1930s, the impact of fascism on the role of women in society and in the family was the focus of several anti-fascist novels written by women. In this article I would like to concentrate on three of the most significant and successful of these works in order to explore the way they dramatize the relationship between collaboration with and resistance to fascism. I want to show how they not only viewed the reactionary transformation of the state by fascist regimes as a historic defeat for women. They also sought to depict the effect this catastrophe had on their personal lives and how they coped with its social and political challenges. I have therefore selected the following novels – Storm Jameson’s *In the Second Year* (1936), Murray Constantine’s (Katharine Burdekin) *Swastika Night* (1937) and Phyllis Bottome’s *The Mortal Storm* (1938), since they address the fundamentally regressive nature of fascism in different ways as well as individual struggles against it. Moreover, they remain outstanding examples of anti-fascist fiction that still resonate with us today when the world is once more faced with the rise of rightwing, populist and neofascist parties.¹ It is in this modern context that these narratives have regained their political and moral relevance and retroactive power, not least in the ways they deal with strategies of both accommodation to and confrontation with fascism on an everyday level. Taken together, they also follow a trajectory of fascist power from a political coup d’état in Jameson’s novel, through the consolidation of a fascist regime in Bottome’s work, to Constantine’s depiction of the end of a whole epoch of fascist rule.

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Resistance against fascism was never a simple option. For women in particular, often being at the center of the family, the risks in confronting the system were perilous. Yet, as Jill Stephenson shows in her study, *Women in Nazi Germany*, women did protest in different ways, from simple gestures of non-cooperation to more concerted acts of subversion:

¹ For a fuller discussion of these most recent political developments, see Eatwell & Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (2018).

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While most Germans accepted Hitler's regime as a fact of life and some enthused about it, there were many varieties of dissent, disaffection and opposition, among women as well as men. At its simplest, there were 'women who only reluctantly hung out the Nazi flag, [and] women who carried two shopping bags so as not to have to raise their hand in the so-called German greeting' (Wiggershaus 1984:16). At its most dangerous, there were those who demonstrated, by word or deed, their contempt for Nazism and Nazis. (Stephenson 2001:109)

It is more often the oblique but symbolic protests that one encounters in these anti-fascist novels, although even limited actions have dramatic consequences for both individuals and families. Such moments often represent pivotal points of either personal acquiescence or antagonism towards the structures of fascist control, a critical point I will return to later.

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The most recent literary studies of the subject of writers and fascism in the 1930s include Judy Suh's *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth-Century British Fiction* (2009) and Elinor Taylor's *The Popular Front Novel in Britain, 1934-1940* (2017). Taylor's survey is however devoted almost exclusively to novels written by men and mentions Constantine and Jameson only in passing. Suh's study contains extended chapters on Wyndham Lewis, Olive Hawks, Phyllis Bottome, Virginia Woolf, Nancy Mitford, Elizabeth Bowen and Muriel Spark. There is however little or no discussion of either Jameson or Constantine. Suh's short analysis of Bottome's *The Mortal Storm* nevertheless offers a very cogent reading of the misogynist and anti-semitic aspects of fascism. The other points that Suh explores are the elements of 'Romance and Chivalry' that reflect what she describes as Bottome's "consummate middlebrow" point of view (Suh 2009:70): "In line with classic liberal domestic ideology, *The Mortal Storm* advocates sound private families and individualism as the best defenses against fascism" (Suh 2009:77). One of the most comprehensive overviews of the genre is the collection of essays, *Women Writers of the 1930s*, edited by Maroula Joannou. However, the article by Sylvia Vance on Storm Jameson and fascism discusses *In the Second Year* in rather limited ways, concerning primarily the psychoanalytical basis of Jameson's portrayal of the fascist leader:

What Jameson is so successful at portraying is the psychic condition necessary to produce the Fascist mind-set. It is a condition possible in every man, as she demonstrates by giving us the childhoods of the two main characters, Richard Sacker and Frank Hillier. At the same time, the visionary notion elaborated on in *In the Second Year* attempts to elucidate the progressive nature of the Fascist psyche, giving us an almost sympathetic Hillier at the beginning of the novel who exists to do the best for his country to a Hillier near the end of the novel who believes himself to *be* his country. In a sense, Jameson portrays the notions of service and sacrifice as inherently corrupt and those notions themselves as the seeds of Fascism. (Vance 1999:133)

In the same anthology, there is also an article by Keith Williams on the subject of Constantine and science fiction which concentrates however not on *Swastika Night* but on her earlier novel, *Proud Man* (1934). In a way similar to Vance, Williams chooses to elaborate mainly on Constantine's "investigation of the psychological

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link between anxieties inherent in masculine socialization and militarism" (Williams 1999:152). Unfortunately, the work of Phyllis Bottome is not mentioned at all in this otherwise pioneering collection.

In his study of British fiction in the 1930s, *Red Letter Days*, Andy Croft links Jameson and Constantine as part of a group of "forgotten novelists" who "in their analysis of fascism, in the urgency of their vision and in their use of popular literary forms [...] were all unmistakably allies in the developing cultural struggles for a Popular Front in Britain" (Croft 1990:239). Like Woolf, Jameson was herself certainly aware of the need for such a cultural and political alliance, while at the same time insisting that it had to be based on specific anti-capitalist measures that went beyond the reformist agenda of the established parties:

An alliance, on the basis of an exactly defined programme, with the progressive Liberals, I.L.P. and Communist Party, as distinct from a shabby vote-catching agreement between leaders – is a preliminary step towards the only form of Popular Front worth voting for. Apart from a people's front, what indeed is there to hope for in the political future? And without it, what hope of averting the eventual triumph of reaction by the default of the Labour Party? (Quoted in Birkett 2005:154)

Looking back on the victory of fascism in Spain, which was primarily the result of the sectarian politics of the stalinist Communist Party, alerted Jameson to the catastrophic consequences of a divided struggle against the fascist enemy. In her discussion of Jameson's engagement in the Spanish Civil War, Jennifer Birkett points to her anger and frustration at the historic failures of the Left in this context: "Writing in the early 1950s, in the Cold War, Jameson [...] denounces Spanish Communists for betraying and torturing socialists, with the same vehemence as she attacks capitalism, and 'the brutes who destroyed Guernika'" (Birkett 2005:22).² During the Second World War Jameson was constantly preoccupied with the political betrayals of the past, not least how seemingly enlightened European politicians could be lured into collaboration with fascism, a theme she also explores at length in her novel, *Cloudless May* (1945), which is set in a small village during the invasion of France in 1940. Let us turn however to her earlier 1930s work in which she imagines a fascist takeover of Britain and the consequences this would have for the nation. Written under the looming shadow of world war, this novel is clearly meant to be seen as a warning of what might come of the clash between conciliation with fascism and anti-fascist resistance.

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In her novel, *In the Second Year*, Jameson provides a chilling narrative of how Britain could be transformed into a fascist dictatorship within a few months, along the lines of what had happened in Germany in 1933. She shows very clearly that

² In Britain the proposal by the Communist Party to form a Popular Front with the Labour and Liberal Parties in order to stem the growth of the British Union of Fascists was, according to Branson and Heinemann, "firmly outlawed by the Labour Party" (Branson 1973:334). Instead, the Labour Party formed a National Government with the Conservatives and Liberals that initially pursued a policy of open appeasement with Hitler.

fascism is not a temporary political aberration but represents a complete collapse of the democratic system. As in Germany, the novel depicts how a fascist dictator could come to power by legal means, through the capitulation of the Liberal and Labour parties in parliament, and how a national socialist government could be quickly transformed into an entrenched authoritarian regime. Oppositional leaders are either killed or placed in concentration camps. Parliament is abolished and the population is submitted to the rule of paramilitary gangs. However, even under such repressive conditions there are still signs of a fightback. The character that personifies this is Sophie Burt, an oppositional figure whose name recurs throughout the novel. Because she is a prominent writer and critic of the new order (based in part on Storm Jameson herself), she has been arrested and sent to a concentration camp where she is flogged for her continued acts of truculence towards the prison guards. When Andy, a university professor and narrator of the story, meets her on a fact-finding visit to the camp, he recalls her having "a bitter pen [...] honest, incorruptible. It crossed my mind that in Germany they would have boasted of destroying her, but the English are more expert in suppression" (Jameson 2004:42-3). Her incarceration and punishment have however left her a shadow of her former self: "Sophie Burt had splendid red hair and large rounded white arms. I saw a woman with grey hair and a fleshless body cross from the hut to the latrine, but it was the same woman, my soul on it" (Jameson 2004:43). Even though the fascists try to break her will, she still remains an icon of resistance whose reputation resonates as a freedom fighter who refuses to surrender. Another female character that plays a decisive role in the story by eventually helping Andy and others escape the country in her private yacht is Harriet English. As a famous opera singer, she is ostensibly part of the cultural elite that supports the fascist government. However, from her insider position she sees clearer than many others how the fascist leader, Hillier, could be elected by a combination of state-sponsored support and the street violence of his army of volunteers. Once in power, however, Hillier solicits much more the political and economic backing of millionaire industrialists. Harriet correctly predicts that Hillier would also quickly eliminate any potential rivals (just as Hitler did himself during the 'Night of the Long Knives' in June 1934):

'Vanity has been the moving spring of his life. When you gave him a private army you fed it, and he loved you for doing it. Now he no longer needs your army and he resents having to board and feed it, and make unnecessary ridiculous speeches to it about the social revolution. He has other food for his vanity. He grows quietly fat on power, and who feeds him with it. Why, who but Tom Chamberlain? At Chamberlain's house, Hillier meets international financiers who talk to him as if he were one of them. They even ask his advice. I have heard it done, and seen your Hillier licking his lips like a cat for pure pleasure!' (Jameson 2004:55)

These parallels with Nazi Germany recur several times in the novel, not least when Jameson reiterates the political lessons to be drawn from the disastrous split between communist and socialist parties which opened the way for fascism.³ The

³ This refusal by leaders the Communist Party (KPD) to build an anti-fascist united front with the socialdemocrats in Germany was, as David Beetham notes, based on a completely erroneous

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narrator, who is himself a close relative of the fascist leader, functions therefore as a well-informed guide to the different political groupings and their overlapping ideologies. An important oppositional encounter in this context is with Lewis, a grassroots communist, who is a figure Jameson employs on several occasions to articulate a more discerning analysis of the crisis:

'Do you know what you are, my friend? By chattering of peace where there is no peace you have become the ally, the cover for Thomas Chamberlain. You're joined to him, and beyond him to Hebden the bully. You murdered Myers. You keep up the Training Camps. You and your blood brothers in the Labour Party, who fought nobody but the communists, who held back here, and retreated there, who opposed reaction with their tongues and turned their bottoms to it to be kicked, who worked for friendly relations with the owning classes and took their rewards, were decorated, knighted, wore silk breeches, who clothed themselves in righteousness of legality and held the door open for repression to come legally in. Damn them, damn them, damn them.' (Jameson 2004:95)

At this point Jameson transforms her work into a novel of ideas that seeks to expose the narrative gap between what fascist leaders claim and what they actually do. For example, one of their initial strategies is to adopt a populist demagogy in order to attract ordinary people to their cause. Once in power, however, they defend the fundamental interests of the establishment. Jameson had herself seen this happen with Mussolini, Hitler and Franco. She illustrates this political contradiction in a conversation between Andy and Hillier in which the leader mechanically rehearses the anti-capitalist and anti-corruption rhetoric of his public speeches:

'We shall become a self-sufficing and self-contained people again,' said Hillier. He spoke in a monotonous voice, as though he were repeating a lesson, but with a kind of frenzied conviction in it somewhere. If it were only a lesson, he had learned it thoroughly. 'The world was going rotten with greed and looseness, everyone trying to become rich, and cheating and lying, as though money and trade were the be-all and end-all of life on earth. Men selling their manhood, and women losing their womanliness. It had to stop. We are stopping it.' (Jameson 2004:25)

However, this appeal to a more traditional past is quickly counterposed by the reactionary rant of his main henchman Richard Sacker, the head of his stormtroopers. Jameson shows how these men nevertheless represent two sides of the same fascist coin: their so-called people's revolt hides a racist and sexist counterrevolution. This contrastive narrative strategy forms part of Jameson's overall aim to unmask fascist propaganda to reveal what lies behind:

characterisation of the Social Democratic Party as 'social fascist': "To define Social Democracy as itself fascist was to treat it simply as an agent of capitalist reaction, and not as a potential obstacle to, and hence victim of, that reaction. The concept of 'social-fascism' thus helped confirm the series of disastrous tactical errors committed by the KPD". (Beetham 2019:20) As a result, Hitler was able to come to power on the back of a divided workers' movement.

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Richard interrupted him rudely. ‘Right,’ he shouted, merrily and loudly [...] ‘England for the English. No more foreigners allowed, except as envious visitors. No French, Boches, Eyetalians, or Scythians. The women shall spin English wool and the men wear it, and they shall eat English mutton and cabbage, and keep early hours.’ (Jameson 2004:26)

As part of her interrogation of the false consciousness of fascism as a supposedly popular movement, Jameson also includes reports of more spontaneous resistance to the regime. The most serious of these is by the miners of South Wales whose armed rebellion has to be ruthlessly put down: “[F]ive hundred men were forced back into one of those valleys of dead bones over the mines” where they “were bombed out of their place” (Jameson 2004:47). As a result of this repression, there is the renewed threat of a general strike of workers that would lead to civil war. Once again it is Lewis, as the novel’s radical conscience, who points to the intrinsic weakness of dictatorships that rely on brute force to keep the population in check:

‘But I’ll tell you something. Put it in your pocket, my liberal friend. The hangmen and jailers, Metternichs, Thiers, Goerings, Hebdens, Hilliers, come, use their whips, and go. We remain. Kill us and we rise again from the dead. We come again. It couldn’t be any other way. Starvation feeds us. Jails set us free. The ground you fasten us to breeds us. The womb you starve gives us birth. When you choke us, our breath goes into other throats. In the end, in the end – ’ (Jameson 2004:96)

Significantly, Lewis is also the last person the narrator meets before escaping to Norway. It is also him who makes a final desperate appeal to Andy to stay and join the underground resistance. Writing at the start of the Spanish Civil War, which became a fascist trial run for subsequent world war, Jameson projects a dark image in her novel of an apocalyptic confrontation between the forces of fascist barbarity and those of democratic socialism:

‘No, I will tell you what is coming. The well-off and the powerful are like Saturn, they eat their own children to prevent any change taking place that could threaten them. In the past they have always been defeated by new men and new inventions. Either they will be defeated again or they will relapse, dragging us with them, into barbarism and war. That will be the triumph of Saturn. No revolt against them is quite certain of success. There is always another and worse level on to which they can wriggle. But *we* shall always fight, and one day we shall win.’ (Jameson 2004:213-4)

Lewis’s message of a resurgent humanity is what Andy takes with him on the boat as he ponders over the potential re-establishment of the rule of law. He remains doubtful however about fascism ever being overthrown. In many ways the novel is a critique of this political timidity of liberal intellectuals and politicians who seem to fear the radical mobilization of the people more than the reactionary scourge of fascism. The novel ends therefore on a note of political uncertainty, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions about what the struggle may hold:

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I thought of the rat courage of Lewis. I thought of Tower (a prominent socialist professor murdered by the fascists – RP). Was there an underground movement against the destroyers, and was he part of it? Even so quickly after what had happened I was already uncertain and confused in the welter of motives, greeds, fears, ambitions. I reflected that if all the dead of the past week came to life and met together in one room, still the truth of what each of them had hoped would be hard, no, impossible to tell. (Jameson 2004:214-5)

Up until the invasion of France by the Germans, Jameson had herself remained a pacifist. In 1941 however she published a pamphlet, *The End of This War*, in which “she tried to give an honest account of her reasons for abandoning her pacifist position” (Birkett 2009:199). From then on she would describe herself as a “revolutionary conservative, or a conservative revolutionary” (Birkett 2009:191). Fascism, she argued, could not be stopped by diplomatic collusion, such as in the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, which only left people around the world confused and disheartened. Meanwhile, Italian, German and Spanish prisons were filling up with opponents of the regime. Jameson sharpened therefore her political commitment and “pinned her flag to the mast: writers must be against anti-Semitism, class oppression, authoritarianism, the suppression of free speech, and nationalism” (Birkett 2009:186). Europe, she felt, was running out of time.

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It was a similar sense of political urgency that motivated Phyllis Bottome to write her own anti-nazi novel, *The Mortal Storm*. She had already seen at first hand while living in Germany how Jewish people were being transported in their thousands to the concentration camps. According to her biographer, Pam Hirsch, this personal experience placed Bottome at the forefront of those women writers who sought to fuse fiction and fact in order to rouse readers in Britain from their political complacency:

Arguably, *The Mortal Storm* was the most important novel Phyllis ever wrote; certainly it was her most intense and fully worked-through attempt to expose and attack Nazi ideology. She was driven to sounding alarm bells to shake Britain out of what she saw as its bystander paralysis, through efforts both personal and of a literary nature. Her observations in Munich meant that she was absolutely clear that anti-Jewish persecution had begun from the first days of Nazi rule. (Hirsch 2010:215-6)

It was also this awareness of the need to break with the policies of conciliation with the nazis that inspired her to write what was to become one of the most widely read novels of anti-fascist resistance of the whole decade. The murderous intentions of Hitler had to be made unequivocally clear, as did the need for resistance at all levels, even if this might, as her novel shows, mean breaking the closest and most personal ties between parents and children.

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In her article “British Women Write the Story of the Nazis: A Conspiracy of Silence”, Barbara Brothers comments on Phyllis Bottome’s ability to turn a story of “family or domestic tragedy” (Brothers 1993:248) into such a powerful political novel:

While Bottome's characters discuss the ideologies of nazism, communism, Judaism, and feminism, the novel directs our attention to the practice of those ideologies. Ideas are explored through situation and character, both of which are compelling. (Brothers 1993:251)

This is also a point mentioned by Andy Croft: "Love stories like these explained the terrible implications of Nazism at a domestic level, for ordinary German people, including some of the Nazi's most enthusiastic supporters. By casting Nazism as the enemy of love, novelists like [...] Phyllis Bottome were able to make an important emotional appeal to universal human values, traditionally potent against the equally timeless forces of evil and cruelty" (Croft 1990:326). It was this mingling of personal emotion and political conviction that helped explain the story's broad contemporary appeal. The book was for example the first to be reissued as a cheap Penguin Special which "by January 1939 [...] had sold 100,000 copies" (Hirsch 2010:222). It was even turned into a Hollywood film in 1940 starring James Stewart as the resistance leader, Hans Breitner, and Margaret Sullavan as the novel's main character, Freya Roth. The film was also unique in that it was "MGM's first feature film to criticize openly Germany's Nazi regime" (Hirsch 2010:248).

In their foreword to a recent reprint of the novel (1998), Phyllis Lassner and Marilyn Hoder-Salmon point to the role played by Freya in bridging the existential divide between individual freedom and moral necessity: "Through her female Jewish hero, the novel also argues that collective responsibility begins with the individual's recognition that her fate is reflected in that of 'Others'" (1998:xxii). As in Jameson's *In the Second Year*, Bottome portrays members of a high-up German family as a microcosm of what was happening after the rise of the nazis to power. In *The Mortal Storm*, Freya becomes the focal point of the cost of fascism in terms of people's lives and loves. Freya's father is a famous Jewish scientist who tries in vain to work in peaceful co-existence with the nazi regime. In contrast, her two brothers are already active nazis. Thus, we see a range of political ruptures between family members that reflect the ideological landscape of the time. Her father is a liberal democrat whose insistence on absolute tolerance, even of his own nazi sons, establishes a moral imperative that has catastrophic consequences:

'You are Nazis! You a Brown Shirt – your brother Emil a Storm Trouper! You know that your mother and I have never by word or deed, objected to this symbolism on your part. We accept it, and what it stands for, without criticism.

'You and Emil have found something that your youth can serve. Serve it well then – with our blessing; but beyond this service there is still more to give, and something that as thinkers, we have the right to demand of you both – this something is tolerance for the opinions of others. Can you not give us this also?' (Bottome 1998:67)

Faced with this growing family estrangement, it is left to Freya to start unravelling both the naïve liberalism of their father and the blind nazi faith of his sons. Her strive for independence begins however quite spontaneously when she refuses to raise her hand in a nazi salute. What appears at first to be an unreflected gesture

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reveals instead a more deeply felt hope that her family will appreciate what this means in terms of her sense of personal and political disaffection:

‘I suppose you must have guessed it – in the *Hütte* – when I didn’t rise to give the Hitler salute? That was when I knew! I knew suddenly – when you all got up –that I couldn’t – and that I *never* could! I don’t believe in Hitler! I don’t know if I’m a Communist or not – but I have a friend who is; and I do believe that to share and share alike working together for the good of the whole people – is better than being a Nazi, with some people keeping a lot of private property in a country where others are nearly starving! [...] I don’t believe in militarism at all, but I could imagine fighting for universal brotherhood, rather than for Germany, although I love my country better than any other. I believe Hitler means war and nothing else but war, and that National Socialism is cruel in itself – and against thought. It leads back into the past – and not on into the future. It’s not just – the way they treat Communists in our university – quite differently from Nazis! And it’s not just – it’s not even decent to persecute Jews! If Father is a Jew, then I am a Jewess. How could I be a Nazi – even if I wanted to be one?’ (Bottome1998:71)

The friend who Freya is referring to is Hans Breitner, a communist who offers a commitment to a more tangible resistance to nazi rule. Hans is a peasant labourer who introduces Freya not only to the idea of class solidarity but also to the experience of physical work on a farm high in the mountains. These fields and forests provide moreover the pastoral setting for their deepening feelings of love and Freya’s subsequent pregnancy. However, Bottome cuts this romantic alpine interlude short when Freya’s brother, Olaf, shoots and kills Hans in a brutal act of betrayal of family loyalties. It is within this narrative of broken personal bonds that Bottome continues to weave the conflict between Freya and the rest of her family about the means and ends of fascism. One of the things that strikes the reader in this context is how deeply politicized people have become at this time despite the intrusive threat of the system. At the same time, Bottome takes every opportunity to discredit the fundamental claim of the Nazis that there would be a social and moral regeneration under their rule. It was this transformatory teleology that lay, as Robert Paxton notes, at the very heart of nazi propaganda: “Fascist regimes set out to make the new man and the new woman (each in his or her proper sphere). It was the challenging task of fascist educational systems to manufacture ‘new’ men and women who were simultaneously fighters and obedient subjects” (Paxton 2004:143). Bottome seeks to show that what this involved was the physical elimination of opposition and the reduction of women to domestic servitude, as one of Freya’s nazi acquaintances candidly admits: “‘Soon you could kick the proletarian riff-raff off the pavements with impunity and see women only where they belonged, at the cooking-stove or in your bed’” (Bottome1998:203). Like Jameson, Bottome uses her novel to expose these widely disseminated political deceptions. Apart from nazi demagogy, Freya has also to confront yet another fatal moral illusion, this time in her father who tries to provide a personal counterbalance to nazi bigotry. When he is arrested, however, Freya is dismayed at his passive acceptance of his fate as a concentration camp martyr who willingly forgives his tormentors: “I must believe as I have always believed, that man should be prepared

to love his brothers – and if need be – to die for them! I have prepared myself – and I am very ready to die" (Bottome 1998:316). It is interesting to note in this context that while Bottome remained, according to her biographer, 'the constant liberal' herself, she harbored no doubts about the need to use force against the nazis. Throughout the war, she toured all round Britain and America arguing for a more concerted military effort, not least to stop the mass murder of the Jews (Hirsch 2010:202-235).

After Hans's death, Bottome shifts our attention away from these broader political dimensions of the fight against fascism and back to the more private dilemma facing her main character about becoming a mother. Freya's subsequent decision to give her baby to be looked after by Hans's family has far-reaching personal implications, not least that the child will grow up a peasant like his father. At the same time, it confirms Freya's own rejection of the domestic ideal of getting married and becoming a wife and mother. Thus, while she mourns the death of her father in prison, the murder of Hans in the mountains and the treachery of her brothers, there is a nevertheless a sense of closure in her life that helps her become a more independent woman. Of course, it might seem something of a political anticlimax that Bottome counterposes Freya's subsequent pursuit of a research career in the U.S. to her previous role as a resistance fighter in the German alps. However, given Freya's academic background, there is a logic to her return to these more conventional middle-class aspirations. At the same time, there remains an implicit element of political resolve on Freya's part that links her to other women that fascist society has failed to suppress: "She would have to go on alone, until she had taken her degree. She would have to bear her child unfathered and to give him to the Breitners for his own and Hans's sake. She must wait for freedom until she had won the training she needed in order to make her way in the world where there was no freedom without training – no safety without hardship" (Bottome 1998:282).

When war with Germany finally broke out, Bottome was not optimistic about its outcome, not least because of the sort of societies that fought against fascism were not, in her view, a reliable bulwark against totalitarianism, even if the struggle against Hitler were to be won. There had also to be a change towards a system that developed a more robust egalitarian resilience to what was evidently a recurring political threat:

She was skeptical that British democracy as it stood could inspire personal responsibility to become political morality. Although she did not subscribe to socialist critiques of capitalism, she identified a primary flaw in British democracy as its economic and social inequities. Even as she feared the outbreak of a second world war and yet believed it would be fought to save the world for democracy, she also worried that the 'unfair privileges which lead direct to dictatorships ... might make Great Britain – after the war is over – precisely such a slave State as the dictators we are now fighting made of Germany and Italy.' The slaves she imagined were not only Britain's economically oppressed women and men but those who were becoming victims on a world stage. (Lassner 1998:xviii)

Such dystopian fears were also shared by Murray Constantine, whose image of the historic enslavement of women suggested that the post-war world might be

anything but socially emancipated. Indeed, during the late 1940s and 50s, many women were lured back into the home by what Betty Friedan famously called 'the feminine mystique'.⁴ However, Constantine also wanted to show that while women might become the victims of another masculinist tyranny, it would still eventually crumble. As in the novels of Jameson and Bottome, the fascist war against women meant that resistance would also be more obliquely feminized. Despite their complete sexual subjugation, women could in the end bring down even a six-hundred-year-old fascist Reich.

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Critics have tended to view Constantine's novel, *Swastika Night*, as a depiction of a totalitarian state much on a par with Orwell's *1984*, which it inspired.⁵ In Constantine's case, the fascist power she portrays is based on the absolute domination of women by a militaristic male order. Daphne Patai writes for instance that "A 'Reduction of Women' has occurred by which women have been driven to an animal-like state of ignorance and apathy, and are kept purely for their indispensable breeding function" (Patai1985:iv). Michael Dirda characterizes the condition of women in the story in the same brutalized terms:

Women, all women, are kept in pens: their heads are shaved bald, they wear formless gray sacks, and their only purpose in life is to produce sons for their masters. Each little girl grows up knowing that she is but a piece of dirt, a clout, a less than nothing. From an early age, the younger women are taught 'that they must not mind being raped'. (Dirda 2016:1)

In his short discussion of the novel, Andy Croft also reproduces this unmitigated image of women as being totally degraded and demoralized: "Women are kept together in cages, reduced to artificial idiocy, their heads shaved and their male children taken at eighteen months; sexual contact with men is only possible under the cover of darkness. The concept of rape does not exist" (Croft 1990:237). None of the critics seem to detect any sign of defiance or non-compliance on the part of the women.⁶ Instead, everything revolves around the existential doubts of the two main male characters, Alfred and Herman, who begin to investigate the historical roots of the system in a secret book that has been smuggled down through the ages. This not only puts the deification of Hitler into question, but also promotes a more positive view of women as both physically attractive and loveable. As a result, Alfred starts to distance himself intellectually from the misogynist rule of men.

⁴ "Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: 'Occupation: housewife.'" (Freidan 1963:18)

⁵ See further: Daphne Patai, "Orwell's Despair, Burdekin's Hope" (1984).

⁶ Loretta Stec writes for instance: "Women have been reduced to animals used for breeding, and are described in grotesque terms [...] This text presents a dystopia, a 'bad place', perhaps most poignantly for women readers, not only in the allusions to the plight of women in this society, but in fact that the entire book is focused on male characters" (Stec 2001:181).

While not underestimating the significance of Alfred's growing skepticism, to which I will return later, I want nevertheless to shift the critical attention back to the women in order to show that they are not as totally submissive as they seem. On the contrary, I would argue that it is through their repeated acts of disobedience that fundamental cracks have started to appear in the monolithic façade of the fascist regime. What Constantine shows is that even in the most absolute of dictatorships, where the levels of physical and psychological coercion appear to be overwhelming, people nevertheless would still try to destabilize the status quo by small but telling acts of defiance.

In the very first chapter of the novel, for instance, there are occasions when the unruliness of the women openly challenges the male order. The first example of this is when women refuse to adhere to the law that demands their complete collective silence. It begins during the weekly church service when women who have had their male babies taken from them start crying out in a rising crescendo of maternal loss, over which the guardian Knights have no control:

All together, women fell into a sort of mass grief. One worked on another, and a woman who had not suffered from a Removal for several years would remember the old pain and start a loud mourning like a recently bereaved animal. The more the Knight told them not to, the harder they would weep. Even the bellowers and stormers among the Knights could not stop women crying at their worship. Nothing could stop them, short of killing them all. (Constantine 2016:10)

Women appear unafraid of their inevitable punishment especially when they are together and can support one another. Another issue that follows directly on from this act of female disobedience is the Knight's sermon in which he reminds the women of their necessary acceptance of rape by men. The very fact that this is mentioned in such terms indicates however that the men, despite their long-established abuse of women as sex slaves, sense that women have never given in to this ultimate humiliation. Rape cannot be normalized. A further sign of the insecurity of the men is the fact that they have had to make a concession in this context by stipulating that there should be an age limit that protects young girls from this form of violent assault. The reason given is one of reproductive suitability. What is really implied however is that the stricter men try to enforce this sexual submission of women, the more their fears about their own physical and moral authority are revealed:

The most important thing was to get it firmly fixed in the heads of the younger women that they must not mind being raped. Naturally the Knight did not call it this, there was no such crime as rape except with children under age. And this, as the Knight knew, was less, far less for the sake of the little girls than for the sake of the race. Very young girls if just adolescent might bear puny babies as the result of rape. Over sixteen, women's bodies were well-grown and womanly, that danger was past, and as rape implies will and choice and a spirit of rejection on the part of women, there could be no such crime. "It is not for you to say, 'I shall have this man or that man', he told them, "or 'I am not ready' or 'It is not convenient,' or to put any womanish whim in opposition to a man's will." (Constantine 2016:12-13)

Moreover, the fact that the Knight brings up this question of women resisting men who would violate them shows not only that the horror of rape remains very much a real one for women. Their refusal to acquiesce to rape is also something that clearly develops from an early age. Indeed, there is a scene in which an underage girl fights back with great ferocity against a youth who tries to rape her. The trauma of such an attack would certainly stay with her for the rest of her life. The revulsion of women to rape represents therefore a damning indictment of the whole violent basis of fascist male power.

Throughout the novel, Constantine traces a deepening crisis of masculinity that flies in the face of the public image of a state of firmly entrenched male domination. The fact that more and more men commit suicide every year is another dramatic indication of this growing malaise. Moreover, despite their infinitely superior status, men still seem to spend a lot of time discussing the 'real' nature of women as though it had not been completely fixed for centuries. They look at old photographs of beautiful German women and contemplate the forbidden idea of falling in love even if this would mean risking rejection by a woman, a thought that troubles both Herman and Arthur: "Men are men. Some are stronger than others, that's all. And this woman business. I must think about women. How does one do that? Do they think about themselves?" (Constantine 2016:98). The most serious threat the survival of male power comes however from the fact that fewer and fewer females are being born. Why the drop in female numbers is not explained although it probably has to do with the harsh physical conditions under which women are forced live together with their female babies. At the same time, this one-sided population decline has become another factor in further destabilizing the balance of power between men and women:

If they once knew that the *Knights*, and even der Fuehrer, wanted girl-children to be born in large quantities; that every fresh statistical paper with its terribly disproportionate male births caused groanings and anxieties and endless secret conferences – if the women once realized all this, what could stop them developing a small thin thread of self-respect? If a woman could rejoice publicly in the birth of a girl, Hitlerdom would start to crumble. Some did, he knew, rejoice secretly, for the girls at least could not be taken away from them. (Constantine 2016:14)

When one of the Knights actually admits that the rule of men is coming to an end, it is blamed on the women even if their room for manoeuvre appears almost non-existent: "We are stagnant. We're not exactly barbarians, we have technical skill and knowledge, we are not afraid of Nature, we do not starve. But in the rich mental and emotional life men live when they are *going somewhere*, aiming at something beyond them, however foolish, we have no part. We can create nothing, we can invent nothing – we have no use for creation, we do not need to invent. We are Germans. We are holy. We are perfect, and we are dead" (Constantine 2016:121). Throughout the novel, Constantine reminds us that the ultimate moral gauge of any society is the way women are treated and that this moral bankruptcy of the fascist order stems directly from its denigration of women.

The final confirmation of the impending fall of men comes when Alfred goes to see his kept woman Ethel, who has just born him a female baby. This would normally be a source of great disappointment to the father and shameful to the mother, but something very unusual occurs when Alfred sees the baby girl for the first time. He makes the unprecedented request to hold the child. The normal arrangement would be for the father to completely abandon the baby to her mother. However, nursing the child in his arms triggers a very different emotional response where he suddenly imagines bringing up the girl as a new kind of empowered female, worthy of love. Although these ideas about such an exclusive father-daughter relationship appear completely illusory, Alfred's concern for the child nevertheless signifies a small but decisive psychological re-orientation:

Alfred was thinking, if I took this baby away from Ethel and from all other women and never let her see a man or a boy and brought her up by myself, and taught her to respect herself more than she respected me, I could turn her into a real woman. Something utterly strange. Beautiful perhaps [...] but something more than just beautiful. I could make a new kind of human being, one there's never been before. She might love me. I might love her (Constantine 2016:160-1).

Alfred's reaching out to the baby girl could on the other hand be viewed as the erratic behavior of an English fascist who occupies a minor position in German nazi society. He has on several occasions been made aware of his inferior status as a citizen of an imperial power on the wane, leaving him unsure about his own masculine identity. This neurotic condition now translates into conflicting feelings of jealousy towards Ethel and her maternal bond with the new baby:

Alfred surrendered the baby. He walked up and down the room while Ethel fed her. He could not bear to see this natural process. He was in a fantastically upside-down state of mind. He ought to have taken no notice whatever of Edith; he ought to have been disgusted at her sex. In the morning when he heard she was a girl he had been disappointed, but then in the afternoon he had wanted to see her. And now he was far more advanced in his unmanly doting, for he was furious with Ethel for being able to do something for the baby he could not do himself. Edith, he felt, was entirely his, no one else ought to touch her. For he alone knew what Edith was *now*, not dirt at all, but the embryo of something unimaginably wonderful. (Constantine 2016:163)

The scene is, however, in such complete contrast to everything else that has gone before in the novel that its political significance should not be underestimated. Alfred's sudden expression of emotion is without doubt a reflection of the affective power that mother and child now exert. It is their triumph not only over Alfred but also the whole totalitarian cult of women-hating. Clearly, Constantine wants to show how women have finally begun to prevail over years of fascist misogyny. Emblematically, the novel ends with Alfred dying after being beaten up by a gang of nazis. His son, Fred, is there at the end to hold his hand but it is Edith's name he has on his lips: "Edith," whispered Alfred. "Who's that?" "My baby girl" (Constantine 2016:195). Thus, after what has been an epoch of seemingly irrevocable male hegemony, Constantine closes on a note of female transcendence.

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This defeat of fascism might appear a utopian one, only realizable within the realm of fiction. When these novels were published in the 1930s, a fascist future certainly seemed irreversible. Throughout Europe, women were also being called upon to serve the fascist state as faithful wives and mothers. However, as Robert Paxton shows, this insistence on a return to traditional family values was always contested, not least by women. Fascism was, in the end, not only thwarted by force of arms, but also by the contingencies of everyday life:

In the end, women escaped from the roles Fascism and Nazism projected for them, less by direct resistance than simply by being themselves, aided by modern consumer society. Jazz Age lifestyles proved more powerful than party propaganda [...] The Italian birth rate did not rise on the *Duce's* command. Hitler could not keep his promise to remove women from the workforce when the time came to mobilize fully for war. (Paxton 2004:139)

Today, when there is a new resurgence of right-wing populism, the same reactionary agenda for women is being recycled. The nuclear family is once again promoted as the moral cornerstone of society. Women's control of their own bodies has also been put into question. Judith Orr makes the same disturbing connections today between political reaction and a gender-based backlash. Past and present seem to have come full circle:

There are still those who are committed to the traditional far-right model of a women's role in society being shaped by 'Kinder, Küche, Kirsche' and this doesn't stop at propaganda. Policies that both deny rights to contraception and abortion services have gone alongside inducements to certain women to have large families in Poland, Italy and Hungary. Today, although the ideology on women is not simply lifted from the 1930s, we see ominous echoes of the fascist 'public cult of motherhood' and eugenic fertility policies being revisited. (Orr 2019:13)

In the context of the above, anti-fascist novels written by women provide not only a historical point of reference showing how writers responded in the past to the threat of world fascism. They also sought to dramatize the dilemmas of both resignation and resistance that faced people as immediate existential choices. In doing so, they showed how women formed part of a progressive force in the fight against fascist atavism. Yet, their ability to engage us today comes not only from the fact that these narratives still play on our fears that even the worst in history can repeat itself. Their stories of resistance can also inspire us to make sure that it doesn't. As Caroline Moorhead concludes in her study of 'The Women who Liberated Italy from Fascism':

Things did not turn out as Ada, Silvia, Bianca and Frida dreamt they might. The new Italy looked very like the old one. But what no one could take away from them was one very simple fact: that the impressive number of ordinary Italians had risen up to challenge both the Germans and the Fascists, whose long reign had seemed as if it might last forever, proving what resolve, tenacity and above all exceptional courage could achieve. (Moorhead 2019:344)

Ronald Paul – ” Narratives of collaboration and resistance: Three anti-fascist novels ...”

During the 1930s, fascism gained in strength throughout Europe, even Winston Churchill expressed his initial admiration for both Hitler and Mussolini. However, wherever there was fascism, there was also a growing resistance to it. With the outbreak of the Second World War all the horrors that fascism would unleash on humanity were revealed. Today, we don't have to guess what the real nature of neofascism is and what it will do if it is not combated. History has taught us a terrible lesson.

In the wake of the Covid 19 crisis, many governments around the globe have suspended democratic decision making and rule instead by decree. This is something that Naomi Klein has characterized as part of ‘the shock doctrine’, whereby disasters, fires, floods, famine and pandemic diseases are exploited in order to ‘cash in on chaos’, both politically and economically.⁷ At the same time, there is a long and well established tradition of democratic resistance to dictatorship, fascism and totalitarianism. The novels of Storm Jameson, Phyllis Bottome and Murray Constantine form part of this historic counter-culture of struggle on which new anti-fascist movements can be built.

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⁷ See further, Naomi Klein, *The shock doctrine*, 443-466.

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