

Review

WHEN WE TOUCHED THE SKY: The Anti-Nazi League 1977-1981

David Renton (New Clarion Press)

Reviewed by Leo Zeilig

I was five when the events in David Renton's book started to unfold. I have no memories of them, but I do remember my mother, who was a teacher in the late 1970s, telling me with great pride, almost as though she had been involved in setting up the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) herself, about how they fought the National Front. So in a way this book is part of my family history.

The stories of the ANL were always told to me in context: we beat the fascists in 1936 when Oswald Mosley's black shirts attempted to march on the working class and Jewish community in Cable Street in East London and we had to do the same again in the 1970s. This book tells a vital chapter of the fight against British fascism. It is also, perhaps, most importantly the history of a victory.

Britain in the 1970s was a divided place. The fascists were on the rise again. They were now organised in the National Front (NF). By 1976 they had won more than 44,000 votes in a local election in Leicester and the fascist vote reached 38% in Blackburn.

In 1977 their vote rose again and this time commentators started to talk how the NF could easily replace the Liberals as the third major party in the United Kingdom. The organisation's

membership swelled to 20,000 and they boasted an ability to distribute 5 million leaflets a year. This also meant that they were able to organise racist attacks and demonstrate in their thousands.

It was in the context of the failure of the Labour government that they could make these gains. So under the Tory (Conservative) government in 1970 they had only been able to muster enough resources to stand in ten constituencies, achieving an average of 3.6%. But by 1977 the party had won 19% of the vote in the important working class areas of Hackney South and Bethnal Green in London. The post-war boom had been buried.

Unemployment was growing massively. Almost doubling in the course of 1975 to 1,129,000. Eighteen months later it had risen again to more than 1,609,000. It was twice as high among black people.

When we touched the sky takes these developments as its starting point. It shows the growing anger of the left and anti-racists, which would initially lead to the formation first of all Rock Against Racism (RAR) in 1976 and then the ANL in 1978.

The story is told through the words of the activists, anti-fascists and socialist themselves. Take Ian for example describing the feeling of anxiety on the left: "You felt the



threat, in terms of graffiti, in terms of numbers [the NF] could put on demonstrations, in terms of the results they were getting in elections. They were a significant presence, and they were trying to implant themselves in the localities."

One of the most important events leading to the formation of the ANL was what is known today as the 'Battle of Lewisham'. Before the ANL was formed one of the biggest confrontations took place in Lewisham in South London. On a rising tide the NF were confident that they could organise a demonstration through an

important black community of London. This was a self-assured attempt to intimidate the black population, while mimicking Oswald Mosley's march through Cable Street 40 years earlier.

The anti-racist movement had already gathered momentum, principally through the growth of RAR. Set up in late 1976, RAR was an attempt to confront racism in popular music. Through a series of gigs, local groups and the magazine *Temporary Hoarding* the organisation managed to galvanise thousands of young people into opposing the NF.

On 23 April in Lewisham the NF organised a 1 200 strong march, more than 3 000 anti-racists opposed it. The NF march was advertised as an "anti-mugging" protest. Young black men were presumed to be doing all the muggings in London. The police had launched a campaign against young black men, which was correctly perceived locally as an anti-black operation. The NF wanted to demonstrate their support.

The demonstration erupted into fierce battles, bloodied heads and in the aftermath, the formation of the ANL. Richard, an anti-racist on the counter demonstration, describes a moment on the day: "Someone had the wit to set off a smoke bomb. There were Turkish, Greek and black kids fighting

against the Nazis". The NF was dispersed.

The victory of the counter demonstration was also a victory for a strategy used to fight the Nazis. The question of physically confronting the NF had bedevilled the movement. Lewisham was evidence that this was the only way to face the organised and street-visible presence of the NF. Where the NF organised, anti-fascists had to organise bigger. The strategy had worked.

When we touched the sky gives a detailed account of the day. Renton describes the aftermath of Lewisham as "a terrible defeat for the Front". The victory, though messy, saw the Nazis fleeing, bedraggled and defeated, for their lives. Jerry Fitzpatrick explained that, "Lewisham was our Cable Street. We had in mind the slogan from 1936, 'They shall not pass.' It was our generation's attempt to stop fascism. It was rugged, scrappy. It got bad publicity. But it was a real success. The NF had been stopped, and their ability to march through black areas had been completely smashed."

In a little over a year the ANL was formerly launched. Central to the formation of the ANL was the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which was key in initiating and coordinating the League. The SWP also provided some of its most dynamic activists. In 1978 one

SWP organiser Pete Alexander (now teaching at Johannesburg University) explained that "we were pretty much the ANL party."

But the league could only be successful by bringing together a much broader left. This broader front included Arthur Scargill of the National Union of Mineworkers, the writer Tariq Ali, then of the International Marxist Group, and about 40 Labour MPs. This ensured a mass base for the ANL. The name "Anti-Nazis" was also chosen intentionally, as one ANLer, Roger Huddle described: "It was necessary to remind people of the history in Germany. No one had said that they were Nazis until we did. If it had been called the Anti-Fascist league, it wouldn't have had the same impact." Renton writes that it was to explicitly call the NF Nazis and to "point to genocide as the goal of their movement."

The reach of the ANL was huge. While some ANL workplace groups did little more than wear the popular yellow and black badges, others did much more. Some trade unions affiliated by setting up their own groups: Rail Against the Nazis, with members of transport unions RMT, ASLEF and TSSA. One activist was Declan, an Irish socialist, who tried to organise Rail Against the Nazis in his workplace: "There were three or four of us in the group, mainly

from the National Union of Railwaymen. We organised fringe meetings at union conferences, and tried to isolate self-declared Nazis in the union.”

WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME?

Renton argues that between 1977 and 1979 “around 9 million leaflets were distributed and 750 000 badges sold. Around 250 ANL branches mobilised some 40 000-50 000 members.” Meanwhile more than 50 labour branches affiliated to the ANL and scores of trade union branches, shop steward committees and trade councils joined up. It was the biggest mass movement in the UK since the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the early 1960s. The NF was broken. As the book concludes: “In the mid-1970s, British fascism was powerful and growing. The ANL gave the NF a defeat from which its successors have not yet recovered.”

By 1980 British fascism was crumbling, the NF split, haemorrhaged members and most importantly lost their popular audience. But perhaps the real proof of the ANL's legacy comes from the radical black journalist Darcus Howe. Howe describes being the father of five children in Britain, how the first four had grown up angry, constantly taking on the racism around them. The last however grew up “black and at ease”. This he attributed to the ANL.

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Not only is the book a superb and important history of a victorious movement, but it is also an invaluable manual for anti-racist action today. The detail the book gives to the organisation of the counter-demonstrations and the politics and arguments involved in forming the ANL are lessons for today's militants and campaigners.

One lesson comes from France. Renton makes the failure to directly and decisively confront the Nazis in France explicit. There was no organisation on the scale of the ANL, and no clear politics that argued unequivocally for a direct confrontation with Le Pen's Front National (FN). The FN is a large and divisive force in many communities in France.

I have only one criticism. The

historical arguments on how to organise against fascism that centre on the united front and the importance in confronting fascists on the street appear in the middle of the book. These arguments should have made their appearance at the start, so the reader could grasp the reasons for the direct confrontations of the NF that are described earlier in the book. Without this context earlier accounts at times seem like the adventurism of small groups on the far left. A cynical (and inaccurate) criticism that was made of these tactics at the time.

But most of all *When we touched the sky* is a superb oral history, told through the words and memories of activists. This gives the book its sense of urgency and exuberance. My favourite interview is a description by one activist on the retreat of the Nazis at Lewisham as they saw thousands of anti-fascists about to charge them: “I remember seeing National Front marchers with green faces. They were so scared. I'd never seen people turn green before.” Some of those interviewed asked to remain anonymous because of the continued threat of racist attacks, a reminder that this book speaks as much to us today as it does to our history. LE

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