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Searchlight: Archiving the Extreme

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The Searchlight Archive at the University of Northampton has, as its main collection, the material collected by the anti-fascist magazine Searchlight over the course of more than 50 years fighting against the extreme right, both in Britain and abroad. It is therefore crucial to understanding the collection to understand the history of the organisation.

Following the Second World War, fascism had been largely discredited – both as an enemy ideology and through the grave crimes of the Holocaust. Still, on their return, Jewish veterans found that on street corners and in town halls, Oswald Mosley (former leader of the British Union of Fascists) was organising with a new group, the Union Movement. In response, in a meeting at Maccabi House, a new defence group was formed, named after the number of people in the room at its foundation: 43 Group.

43 Group engaged in direct action to disrupt extreme right events, but also began to build up an intelligence operation to monitor the extreme right and associated groups, drawing heavily on the military training many of its members had received during the Second World War. It also drew upon the legacy of Jewish defence groups who had opposed fascism in London in the Inter War Period. Eventually however it saw the fortunes of the Union Movement wane, and it slowly disbanded as it saw its work completed at the start of the 1950s.

By the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s, the extreme right was once again on the rise. Groups like John Bean's British National Party, and later breakaways, such as the National Socialist Movement, threatened to bring back overt Nazism to British streets. In response, some members of 43 Group met in the first half of 1962 and decided the threat was sufficient to require the formation of a new defence group: the 62 Group. Again, this organisation mixed

direct action and intelligence; the 62 Group also brought on board a young man called Gerry Gable to work with their intelligence operation, the current owner/editor of Searchlight magazine and owner of our collection.

After two years of activity, it was decided to establish a press agency and newspaper to take the information that they were gathering to a new mass audience rather than constraining its use purely to inform their own activities. Accordingly, in 1964, with money raised via subscription from members, Searchlight was formed under the editorship of Reg Freeson MP. Published for four issues in the mid-to-late 60s, the Searchlight newspaper gradually moved away from its publication into providing information for other news sources. This lasted until 1974 when, with the rise of the National Front, the group published a pamphlet exposing the Nazi past of several leading figures. This pamphlet, *A Well Oiled Nazi Machine*, prompted the raising of new funds, partly from previous donors and partly from the trades union movement, to establish a monthly magazine in 1975.

This new Searchlight, with Maurice Ludmer (a journalist and Trades Unionist with Birmingham Trades Council) as Managing Editor and Gerry Gable as Editor, was first published in February 1975 with the tagline 'Defend Democracy' and referenced the classic anti-fascist slogan with its declaration 'They Shall Not Pass'. After Maurice Ludmer's untimely death in 1981, the magazine went through a few short-term editorships, but settled with Gerry Gable, by then an established journalist, who returned as editor until 1999. In 1999 editorship passed to Nick Lowles, though Gerry Gable remained as owner/publisher and as Research Editor. Searchlight itself modernised, going full colour and glossy at

around the same time as this change in editorship. Over its decades of existence Searchlight worked with groups to help create both replica magazines at home and abroad, supporting the work of people like Stieg Larsson and Expo in Sweden, as well as groups in America, Germany, France, Poland, and across the globe. Within Britain, Searchlight also supported other anti-fascist campaign groups, was involved at various points with Anti-Fascist Action and the Anti-Nazi League, and incorporated the publication of the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism for over a decade from the end of the 1970s through to the early 1990s.

In the year 2004, Searchlight sought to create a campaign that would be fully its own, to put into practice the experience it had gained in opposing the renewed British National Party in the 1990s. Hope Not Hate was therefore created. The campaign became one of the best known anti-fascist activist groups in Britain, and eventually split away from Searchlight by the end of 2011.

By this time the University of Northampton, which hosted a centre researching radicalisation, had begun to work with Searchlight to provide academic advice and consultation for the Magazine, and co-published two small books. Following the split with Hope Not Hate, it was necessary for Searchlight to find a place to store their archives, built up over 50 years of monitoring the extreme right. Due to that relationship, the University of Northampton became a natural home for it and it opened to the public in July 2013. Consisting of around 500 boxes on catalogue, with almost 500 boxes more of material, the Searchlight Archive has become a growing centre for extreme right and anti-fascist research. Though little of the original deposit held anti-fascist and anti-racist

material, reflecting the archive's history as an intelligence archive for combatting the extreme right rather than an institutional archive focused on preserving the memory of the anti-fascist movements, this has slowly changed as more items are added. The majority of the collection however, still remains focused on the activities of the British Far Right, with that series totalling around 200 boxes on its own, as of 2018.

Since its opening the Archive has attracted other collections from anti-fascist groups in Exeter and Kent, and has allowed for the creation of an Oral History Project that has captured the stories of anti-fascist activists, from the 43 Group through to those who have been involved up to the modern day.

The collection has also allowed for the unification of Searchlight's holdings, with the return of a small holding that had been loaned by Gerry Gable to the University of Southampton in the early 1990s.

Previously held as a research archive for private use by Searchlight, its transfer to the University of Northampton represents the first time in its 50-year history that the archive is available for research into extremism. This co-operation with Gale Primary Sources will give this a greater reach, though unfortunately we have only been able to make a small portion of the archive available at this time. The archive is also always growing, with new projects bringing in new collections, but also as investigations into extreme right groups end, allowing Searchlight to transfer more of its intelligence archive up into the main collection.

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