

**University of
Northampton**

'The Real Ridley Road' – Antifascism in Post-War Britain

Dr Daniel Jones

Searchlight Archivist

**Associate Lecturer in
History**

UoN

Ridley Road

- BBC drama (2021) written by Sarah Solemani based on novel by Jo Bloom (2014) about 62 Group.
- Focuses on story of Vivien Epstein (Agnes O'Casey), Jewish hairdresser who infiltrates Colin Jordan's (Rory Kinnear) National Socialist Movement.
- 62 Group organising this, led by Soly Malinovsky (Eddie Marsan), a black cab driver.
- Fictional but based on real groups, and bundled characters – 62 Group was a real organisation with a legacy that comes to today.
- NSM and Jordan also real – though not quite what was shown in the show.
- Origins though lie further back.



RIDLEY ROAD

BBC one

Going back to the start

- 43 Group – founded in April 1946
- More published on 43 group than 62 Group
- Excellent recent book – *We Fight Fascists* by Daniel Sonabend
- 62 Group more reliant on mentions in other works, one or two autobiographies, oral histories and pieces like Steve Silver's research for *Searchlight*
- 43 Group formed to oppose return of fascism – Notably Jeffrey Hamm's British League of ExServicemen and Women and other Mosleyite factions.
- Activity of these groups focused on Jewish areas, following BUF provocation tactics
- April 46 – 43 people meet in Maccabi house giving the group its name



43 Group Founders



Gerald "Gerry" Flamberg. Photo from the Jewish Lives Project
at: <https://www.jewishlivesproject.com/profiles/gerry-flamberg>



Morris Beckman. Photo from Unite Against Fascism at:
<http://uaf.org.uk/2015/06/morris-beckman-antifascist-fighter-1921-2015/>

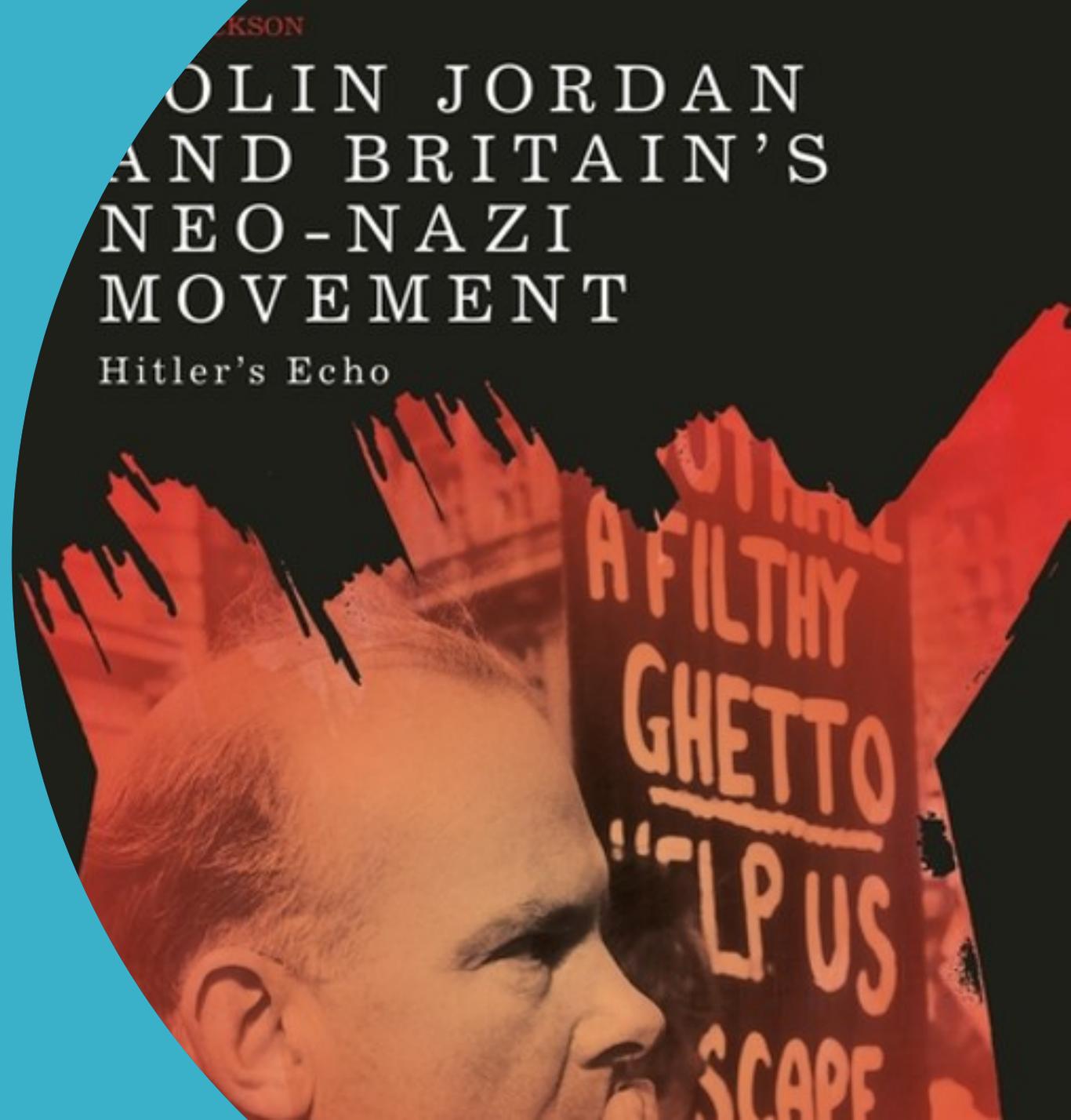
43 Group – Fighting the Return of Fascism

- 43 initial members, hence the name, but grew into the hundreds. No political affiliations, and distanced from established Jewish groups due to 43 Group policy of direct action.
- Organised with area-based Sections, along with intelligence work. Produced its own newspaper, *On Guard*.
- Most active was East End Section, where Jeffrey Hamm's British League of Ex-Servicemen and Women (and later Union Movement) were active.
- Based around fighting units of men and women, was disrupting 10 far right meetings a week by mid-1946. Began infiltrating far right, under Harry Bidney.
- 1948 recruiters are allowed in to approach members to join forces in the Mandate of Palestine. Members, mostly young members like Vidal Sassoon, take up the offer.
- In 1950 the group votes to disband after it felt the threat from the far right had passed, though this was opposed by many members, notably those returning from Israel.



The Return (?) of Fascism

- Mosley continues to become more marginalised on the far right
- Rise of new figures, more closely linked to Arnold Leese, former leader of Imperial Fascist League and former British Army camel doctor. Promoted idea of 'Jew Wise'
- Colin Jordan, a close disciple of Leese, teams up with John Tyndall within John Bean's British National Party to form paramilitary Spearhead
- Spearhead cadre forms nucleus of new group, National Socialist Movement, led by Jordan
- 1962 sees summer training camp in the Cotswolds with formation of World Union of National Socialists



Soly Malinovsky – A Man Containing Multitudes



Eddie Marsden as Soly Malinovsky. Image from BBC *Ridley Road* (2021).



Harry Bidney during military service in the Second World War. Image from the Searchlight Archive.

62 Group – Antifascism Rises Again

- Created in 1962 by former 43 Group members, but no official connection to previous movement.
- Prompted by resurgence of new wave of far right activism from figures such as Colin Jordan, John Tyndall and continued activity from Mosley.
- Explicitly Jewish-only membership, but worked with other organisations and non-Jewish allies.
- Set up in military sections under Cyril Paskin. Included two intelligence sections under Harry Bidney, involving Gerry Gable.
- Funding difficult after violent clashes with far right hits newspapers – recruiting sergeant Harry Bidney serves as paymaster along with Gerald Ronson.



62 Group (cont.)

- Group democratic – overseen by a committee chaired by Baron Moss.
- Did make use of black cabs for intelligence work – but never parked outside the HQ.
- Membership waned after 1964, but secured conviction of several NSM members over arson attacks – though accused of kidnap in relation to questioning of NSM members.
- Group also accused of breaking into National Front headquarters in 1967 and 1969, and of ramraiding with a lorry.
- Operations continued in 1970s, with 1971 raid against The Northern League meeting in a Brighton hotel.
- Allegedly instructions from Met Police to arrest 62 Group and Searchlight leading activists on site - 1968



Legacies - Broad

- Cyril Paskin – founded Philip Green Memorial Trust (Later the Paskin Children's Trust) supporting sick and disabled children. Worked in Nepal during civil war.
- Jewish Aid Committee of Britain founded, stemming in part from desire of 62 Group members to become more mainstream/legitimate.
- Involved Gerald Ronson, who would become founding Chairman of Community Security Trust
- CST ('Work at all times for the physical protection of British Jews') uses education, training, representation and research to support Jewish community.
- Also acts as inspiration for groups like TellMAMA.



Legacies - *Searchlight*

- 62 Group founds Searchlight Research Associates in 1963/4 from its intelligence sections – aim is to publish material on the international far right and act as a news agency, promoting stories in mainstream media.
- Originally a newspaper (1964-67), drew in an editorial board of MPs – Reg Freeson MP as editor, then Joan Lestor MP.
- In 1974 the group published *A Well Oiled Nazi Machine*, revealing Nazi pasts of several leading members of the National Front. Hugely successful.
- Founded a monthly magazine in 1975 under Gerry Gable and Maurice Ludmer.
- Unified different styles of antifascism – Jewish, labour and hard left.

**“A WELL - OILED
NAZI MACHINE”**



Legacies – Direct Action, Lewisham and Southall

- 21 Black youths arrested in Lewisham (May 1977) – blamed for 90% of London street crime.
- National Front sought to exploit this tension.
- 13 August 1977. March descends into violence, NF beaten back, 200+ arrests – More than Cable Street (1936)
- Anti-Nazi League formed in part from aftermath of Lewisham.
- 23 April 1979 ANL march against use of Southall Town Hall by National Front.
- Police use containment tactics and Special Patrol Group to stop direct confrontations – result are large clashes, with houses raided.
- Blair Peach, white teacher from New Zealand, dies after police beat him around the head.



Legacies – Archives and Beyond

- *Searchlight* still published.
- Has supported creation of domestic groups (including its own Hope not Hate, which split from it in 2011) as well as international (Including Stieg Larsson's Expo)
- ANL disbanded in 1981/82, but relaunched in 1992. Now part of Unite Against Fascism.
- Due to split with Hope not Hate, *Searchlight* donated its substantial archives to the University of Northampton, which document the far right in Britain and internationally, primarily since 1962.
- Archive has its origins in 62 Group intelligence files.
- Ridley Road – is it true? No, but...

