

FRITZ KUHN'S NAZI AMERICA: KUHN'S GROWTH AND DESTRUCTION OF THE
GERMAN AMERICAN BUND IN THE 1930S

by

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Abstract

The German American Bund was the most influential and dangerous American Nazi organization to exist before the destruction of Hitler's Germany. Building itself from the remnants of two Nazi organizations that failed to establish any kind of true legitimacy, the Bund saw an explosion of its' prestige due to their leader: Fritz Kuhn. This paper will argue that no other group established themselves to the same degree, as a legitimate Nazi Organization within American culture as the German American Bund. Conversely as the perception of the Bund within society grew as a legitimate threat to democracy as Hitler's army moved throughout Europe, the social conditions within the United States during the 1930s exacerbated the attraction to the Bund and inflamed the desire of the government to see the Bund's demise. It is vitally important to understanding how Nazism and political dissidence gains attraction and support as there has been a resurgence of pro-Nazi activity within culture today.

On a typical winter night, New York City streets bustle with wide-eyed spectators enjoying the lights and sounds of the city. The night of February 20, 1939 was no different. Yet instead of the auspicious measure of music, chatter, and the cacophony of automobiles, a different, more sinister sound filled the air. The bellowing “*Sieg Heil!*” of the near 20,000 strong came not from members of the Nazi Party on a visit to the United States, but rather from members of the German American Bund. This was not Berlin. This was not Hitler’s Germany. Rather, thousands of miles away, in the land built upon the promise of freedom and based on the notion that people are created equal and naturally entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the nefarious ideological grip of Nazism, and National Socialism, festered in the center of America’s largest city.

The long tapestry of the Red White and Blue hung from the rafters of Madison Square Garden, conjoined with the ardent red flag with the sharp black edges of the Swastika in the middle.¹ A one-hundred-foot mural of the American founding father George Washington hung in the middle of the convention center.² All around, passionate supporters, members of the Bund sat in their crisp brown uniforms with their Sam Browne belts, desired to replicate the disciplined fatherland. The scene inside was orderly, everyone busting with excitement to listen to the remarks of their American-Furher, Fritz Kuhn. Outside, by contrast, protestors clamored against the thinly spread New York Police force attempting to enforce law and order. The throngs of people outside, a mixture of Jews, Christians, Atheists, and Anti-Nazis, were representative of a larger concern within American society about the rising sun of totalitarianism and extremist

¹ Times Wide World. “22,000 Nazis Hold Rally in Garden; Police Check Foes; Scenes as German-American Bund Held Its ‘Washington Birthday’ Rally Last Night.” *New York Times*. February 21, 1939. New York Times Archive.

² Ibid.

forms of government. The dichotomy of the two scenes were illustrative of a larger taking place within America, and in democracies around the world.

Nearly eighty years after the Second World War, historians connect the rise and fall of Nazism in the United States to a range of variables. Gulie Ne'eman Arad, for instance, argues that a large reason Jews were so easily victimized by Nazism around the world was because of the Jewish community's inadequate response to the Nazi threat. Within America specifically, he says, "With the onset of the Great Depression... provided a catalyst for emotions...[and] therefore [is] not remarkable that in an overwhelmingly Christian society the practice of blaming the Jews for the nation's misfortunes gained popular support."³ Further he argues that within the American-Jewish community they were a fragmented coalition of those refusing to assimilate, further propagating Zionism, against more secular Jews who then were labeled within American culture as "Good Jews".⁴ Arad argues that American-Jewish leaders treaded carefully during the 1930s when fighting against the Nazi problem due to the complexities within the Jewish community, of those wanting to be accepted within American society, against Jews who were committed to the projection of a united community at large.

Coupled against the fragmentation of the Jewish community, Arnie Bernstein's *Swastika Nation*, argues that the German American Bund was a keen political organization that maneuvered their way through the nuanced narratives in American culture, and presented the greatest possibility of establishing Hitlerism in America.⁵ Berstein's largest contribution has come in the manner of introducing the FBI's records on the Bund to the historical discussion

³ Arad, Gulie Ne'eman. *America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 103

⁴ Ibid, 105.

⁵ Bernstein, Arnie. *Swastika Nation*. 1st U.S. edition. St. Martin's Press, 2013. Pg. 302.

about the Bund. Before the release of these FBI files, historian Sander Diamond expertly argues that the origins of National Socialism, Hitlerism, and the rise of American Nazism are to be attributed to many factors, and not simply ideological alignment of some Americans with Nazi principles. While Hitler manifested the biological nationalism theory into a tangible political ideology for himself, he sold the ideology widely by laying out the political issues facing Germany during the 1920s and 30s and showed that the adoption of his principles was the way forward. As Diamond says, “National Socialism was the product of differing conceptions of the perceived social and economic needs of the German people in an era of unprecedented social and economic dislocation.”⁶ Diamond then argues that the fascination with the Bund occurred primarily within the Northeast due to the alertness of that area of the United States to European affairs, and the large Jewish population within the region. This caused the actions of the Bund to reach a larger audience and incite greater emotional reactions and fear from people.

This paper largely confirms what Diamond, and Bernstein, argue. The German American Bund was a popular American Nazi group during the middle to late 1930s as a result of the “social and economic dislocation” of many German nationals, and new American citizens from Germany. This paper will argue that no other group established themselves to the same degree, as a legitimate Nazi Organization within American culture as the German American Bund. Conversely as the perception of the Bund within society grew as a legitimate threat to democracy as Hitler’s army moved throughout Europe, the social conditions within the United States during

⁶ Sander, Diamond. *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*. 1st ed. Cornell University, 1974. 25.

the 1930s exacerbated the attraction to the Bund and inflamed the desire of the government to see that extremist groups like the Bund had no place in the American way of life.

The German American Bund seems to be an isolated anomaly, something of the past that was a strange coincidence that could never happen in America again. However, when contextualized with the frustration of the Great Depression, and the rise of Nazi Germany, politicians like President Franklin Roosevelt understood the potential threat of the message espoused from groups like the Bund and the need to deal with such messages. FDR had the recent history of demagogue's like Huey Long and Father Coughlin to contextualize the flammability of political dissident messages, and the new danger present from mass communication capabilities of radio advances.⁷ Instead of the government and newspapers being the primary source of information, individuals held the power to take their voice and their views and promulgate them across the country quickly. Thus, FDR had excellent foresight to understand the threat that a man like Fritz Kuhn posed when in control of a group like the German American Bund. However, Fritz Kuhn was a double-edged sword for the German American Bund, and the American Nazi movement, as he was uniquely qualified to lead the Bund, but also uniquely susceptible to painting a large target on the back of the group: as Kuhn expanded the groups reach, the attention towards the group also increased, putting Kuhn in the spotlight which then exacerbated people's fears of the group. Many German Americans seemingly did not join the Bund specifically for the Nazi ideology, but rather for the community, culture, and ability to safely express their ideas and opinions.

⁷ In section II of the paper I will discuss the importance of Father Coughlin and Huey Long more.

Fritz Kuhn and the German American Bund

Fritz Julius Kuhn was born May 15, 1896 in Munich, part of a family composed of eleven other children. Karl and Anna Kuhn led a quiet family, which coincided with a quiet childhood for Kuhn, which was nothing indicative of what Kuhn was to become. Much like the thousands of other young men following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, Kuhn joined the German Army and fought during the Great War, earning the highly coveted Iron Cross Medal. Hitler and Kuhn were some of the select few who earned the Iron Cross, which is an award that would allow Kuhn to establish the militant component to the German American Bund twenty years later. Kuhn would recall his early days in the German Army and utilize the same principles when establishing order to the Bund in the 1930s. Ramifications from the international condemnation against Germany in the Treaty of Versailles created stifling economic conditions throughout Germany.⁸ During these hard times, Kuhn and many other veterans of the war joined the *Freikorps*, “a paramilitary force determined to restore honor to the Fatherland. These freelance troops were funded surreptitiously with money funneled into an anti-Bolshevik movement by leaders of German heavy industry.”⁹ These groups ran afoul of public opinion for the chaos they caused, and Kuhn quickly found himself needing a new job. While during Kuhn’s time in the corps, many were captivated by “patriotic broadsides and newspaper advertisements, crying out for men to defend honor of country...”¹⁰ Kuhn was hired away from the *Freikorps* and began working at a textile plant owned by a friend of Kuhn’s father. Kuhn was accused of

⁸ Leo Grebler and Wilhelm Winkler, *The Cost of the World War to Germany and Austria-Hungary* (Yale University Press, 1940).

⁹ Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 14,15.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 16.

stealing material and instead of jail, a deal was worked out where Kuhn would move from Germany to Mexico.¹¹ Kuhn made the move to Mexico, leaving behind his wife and newborn child, and briefly stayed there before gaining admittance to the United States.¹²

Kuhn's childhood created the perfect conditions that sent him on the trajectory to establish himself as the only viable German-American capable of taking over the German American Bund. Kuhn who earned a PhD in chemistry, soon found a home with the anti-Semitic Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit Michigan in the early 1930's. The Ford Hospital was run by Ernest Liebold, Henry Ford's right hand man. While Kuhn was working as an X-ray technician, His stint at Ford allowed for Kuhn to connect with like-minded individuals at the company, and within the Detroit community at large.¹³ His time with the Ford Motor company were important for Kuhn to cement his anti-Semitic views, and to realize that these views held some ground amongst Americans. Beginning with Mr. Ford's purchase of The Dearborn Independent, a newspaper that weekly espoused the bigoted opinions of Mr. Ford, was one way in which the company became an attraction point for anti-Semitic views to grow and prosper. These connections began Kuhn's political network in America that would allow for him to ascend to the highest level of the Bund.¹⁴ Vital to this ascendancy, Kuhn was granted American citizenship in 1934 and thus a well-educated, personable German-war hero, Fritz Kuhn was the cover model of the ideal candidate to lead the growing German-American Bund which was in need of a new leader in 1936.¹⁵ Leaders in Germany saw the negative influence that the previous, completely German, groups had on German-American relations. Thus, they needed someone that was

¹¹ Ibid, 43.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. 82.

¹⁴ Ibid. 132.

¹⁵ Ibid. 137.

sellable as an American, with roots to Germany: Fritz Kuhn was their answer. Kuhn possessed all the necessary skills required to lead a struggling organization to self-sustained success.

While the United States was roaring through the 1920s, life for German Americans was difficult. During the First World War, Germans were the focal point of attack within American culture, and as a result created a reclusive German-American society which “[German Americans] banded together through national German-American organizations and newspapers, extolling the beauty of their heritage within this adopted homeland.”¹⁶ While many enjoyed the growing economic opportunities extolling themselves within America, there was a “pocket of German-America [resentful] of...persecutions that did not go away. Out of dogmatic and jingoistic discrimination, friends grew, and alliances were forged. And for inspiration they looked back to the Fatherland and Hitler’s expanding Nazi Movement.”¹⁷ Out of this deeply rooted sentiment, the seeds were planted in the soil of German Americans that began to fester over the years of the 1920’s which saw the establishment of the Free Society of Teutonia, which was one of the first National Socialist groups within America.

This group started off more like a small club before it grew into a more sinister organization modeled after the Nazi movement.¹⁸ The Free Society of Teutonia formed in 1924 under the direction of four German Immigrants, two of which were Nazi party members, Fritz Peter and Andrew Gissibl.¹⁹ The society grew to a fairly small gathering, but the leaders

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 19.

¹⁸ Clark, Susan Canedy. “America’s Nazis: The German American Bund.” Ph.D., Texas A&M University, 1987.

¹⁹ Remak, Joachim. “‘Friends of the New Germany’: The Bund and German-American Relations.” *The Journal of Modern History* 29, no. 1 (1957): 38.

maintained connections with the Nazi party throughout its existence.²⁰ The name was changed to Friends of the Hitler Movement in 1933 after Nazi Deputy Fuhrer Rudolf Hess gave permission to establish an American Nazi organization.²¹ Out of this directive the Friends of New Germany was created with the help from the German consul in New York City, which gave the stark perception that the Nazi party had their hands heavily involved in trying to establish a foothold in America.²² Hitler feared that the Friends of New Germany caused fierce backlash to relations between Germany and America and again ordered the group disbanded. The leadership and framework from the Friends of New Germany was the framework in which the Bund grew out of. Coincided with this new directive, the events of Hitler's Germany heightened the fear of many within the United States.

The actions of the Friends of New Germany were alarming to some, the actions that Adolf Hitler was taking in Europe did more to heighten the fears amongst Americans of the capabilities of the aggressive regime. During the "Night of the Long Knives" on which Hitler had prominent leaders in the *Sturmabteilung*, or Browne Shirts, assassinated, many in America and around the world saw this to be the manifestation of Hitler's true colors, and the accurate representation of what a Nazi Germany was really about. These events in Europe created a ripple effect within the United States right when the Friends of New Germany was suffering turmoil and put the future of the group in doubt. Because of these fears, Fritz Gissibl, leader of the Friends, met with Hitler's confidant Ernst Hanfstaengl to discuss how to preserve the group. Through these series of meetings, the conclusion was that the group appeared to be too heavily operated by the German government. Too many German officials had their hands officially in

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. 39.

²² Bernstein, 120.

the operations of the group and gave a strong impression that this was just an extension of the Third Reich. To counter this perception, the two decided that a German-American was needed to lead the group that would present a uniquely American presence.²³ In 1935 a small faction within the Bund, called American Nationalist Socialist Bund, (BANS) headed by Anton Haegele, attempted to receive official designation from Germany as the official Bund party of America.²⁴ Rumors began spreading about the turmoil, as the official leadership, headed by Dr. Hubert Schnuch, fought against this coup. Inter-party squabble continued for several months until Germany ordered all German nationals to withdraw from Friends. This order was given with the intent to create a power vacuum within the group that would cause its' collapse. Instead, the head officials of the group departed, and a conference was held by the group to discuss its future. It was from this conference that Fritz Kuhn presented himself as a man above the squabble of drama and could unite them moving forward. This move appealed to Hanfstaengl and Gissibl, as Kuhn held American citizenship and proved his organizational capabilities in the Midwest region of the Bund.

When Fritz Kuhn took over leadership of the Bund in 1936, he did not revolutionize the structure or actions of the Bund, but simply injected energy into what the predecessor groups had been doing. Fritz Kuhn argued that fascism was the way of the future, and the solution to the issues the United States faced. He argued loudly to many audiences across the country. Kuhn made these speeches at a time when as George Mosse, author of "*The Genesis of Fascism*" argues, "a fascist Europe seemed within the realms of possibility- this even before Germany

²³ Sander, Diamond. *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941*. 1st ed. Cornell University, 1974. 164.

²⁴ Diamond, 186.

came to exercise its dominance over the movement.”²⁵ Kuhn had the momentum to sell his argument. This leadership and charisma that Kuhn interjected into the Bund was evident when NBC recorded the Night on Madison Square Garden, where much like Hitler’s oratory, Fritz Kuhn had a voice that demanded attention and commanded a room, a voice laden with a German accent. He began his speech by summarizing in his own words how the newspapers described him, “If I am a stranger to you, I am recognizable from the Jewish-controlled press, as a creature with horns, a cloven hove, and a long tail.”²⁶ When Kuhn would enter rooms, everyone’s attention and gaze fell to him, walking down the street he would wear his Nazi uniform drawing the gawking eyes of curious bystanders.²⁷ Fritz Kuhn worked to establish a sensational appetite to know about him and his movement from those in his organization, and those outside. During the 1940s, writer John Roy Carlson wrote a sensationalist best seller, *Under Cover: My Four Years in the Nazi Underworld*.²⁸ During this time movies were dramatizing the predicament of fleeing refugee intellectuals and included spies and saboteurs that increasingly exacerbated fears of these groups. The actions of the entertainment industry and of newspapers coincidentally increased the perceived influence of the Bund far beyond the reality.²⁹ Not only were outside groups dramatically increasing the fear surrounding the Bund’s actions, but the Bund’s own paper publication, “Amerikas Deutsche Post” was utilized to play upon the notion that Jews were

²⁵ Moss, George, “The Genesis of Fascism,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (1966), 14.

²⁶ Nazi Speech at Madison Square Garden Rally. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDJzAAicPfs>

²⁷ Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States*, 207.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Editorial, An. “The Band And Klan.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967); Chicago, Ill.* August 31, 1940.

the cause of America's problems.³⁰ Through this chaotic excitement from media sources, the Bund quickly caught the attention of Federal law enforcement agencies.

While Fritz Kuhn did little to change the administrative structure of the Bund, his biggest impact on the group was his adoption of the Nazi way, from titles to uniforms, he did what he could to replicate the organizational structure of the Nazis. Fritz Kuhn believed himself to be the American Führer and would not accept being called President.³¹ Further, Kuhn constantly wore his tall black boots, with his crisp military uniform, and the Sam Browne belt polishing the German look. When conjoined with his fiery oratory and devotion to the fascist structure created a near sensational presence for Kuhn. As Sander Diamond puts it, "during the Fritz Kuhn years the American Nazi Bund changed from a factionalized and ineffective group to the instrument of an active movement."³² Fritz Kuhn utilized this lively presence effectively with his business acumen. During the three-year stint of his leadership, Kuhn absorbed a number of other groups or institutions into the Bund, the German-American Settlement League, the German-American Bund Auxiliary, the A.V. Publishing Company, among several others. In doing so, he effectively took the Bund from being debt-ridden to self-sustaining. When taking over the Bund, Kuhn also rewrote the Bund's constitution cementing his title as *Bundesführer*, connecting his position to that of Hitler's in Germany. Kuhn further cemented his legitimacy when, after taking a trip to the Berlin Olympics in 1936, he was able to meet Hitler. The reality of the meeting was a very brief handshake, however, Kuhn took this meeting and came back to the United States saying he had sat down with the Führer and that he gave Kuhn his blessings for the work he was doing.³³ By

³⁰ *Amerikas Deutsche Post 1933-1934, Florence Mendheim Collection of Anti-Semitic Propaganda.* Box 17. Folder 182.

³¹ Diamond. *The Nazi Movement in the United States 1924-1941.* 204.

³² Diamond, *The American Nazi Movement 1924-1941.* 205.

³³ *Ibid*, 248.

doing these things, Kuhn effectively re-organized the Bund to a group that could sustain itself, and cemented himself as the heart of the organization, all while bringing rigid adherence and replication to the Nazi party in Germany.

All in all, there were several groups springing up around the country that all professed Nazi sympathies. Some groups, like Friends of Germany, were perceived by the public of holding direct ties to the Nazi government. The Friends of Germany was headquartered in New York City on the same floor as the German Consul-General of New York and was led by an American-citizen named Colonel Emerson.³⁴ This setup created this apparent connection to the Nazi government in action, yet in actuality, there was little organizational help from Germany with these groups. This disconnect from Germany would play into Fritz Kuhn's hands later, because he would work to establish himself as the Americanized version of Hitler. "If "Führer" was good enough for the German Nazi leader, then the U.S. commandant must have the title as well. Still, Kuhn held deep reverence for Adolf Hitler. The title was slightly altered... the duly elected commander-in-chief of the German-American Bund, would be officially known as the "*Bundesführer*."³⁵ Having the diplomatic disassociation from Germany provided ample operating space for a highly charismatic, capable leader like Fritz Kuhn to establish, at least in perception, an *American Swastika Nation*. While Fritz Kuhn operated the Bund with political ingenuity, the political response to the rise of extremist groups, and the larger narrative of political dissidence within America influenced the perceived threat of the Bund.

The German American Bund was the first American Nazi group that was able to project a public image of professionalism and capability that far surpassed their best renowned

³⁴ Ibid, 22.

³⁵ Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 50.

predecessor, the Friends of New Germany.³⁶ Such professionalism and capability was vitally important for the Bund to hold credibility when they professed to desire a Nazi flag flying over the White House. American Nazi groups had tried to establish themselves within American culture beginning with the National Socialist Teutonia Association in the 1920s. Leland Bell, a political scientist and author of *The Failure of Nazism in America*, argues that Teutonia too aggressively promoted the tenants of National Socialism which capped their popularity from early on. The Friends of New Germany, which was the second attempt to establish a Nazi group in America fell into the same trap as Teutonia, and an order from Berlin in 1935 forbade all German nationals from being members of Friends.³⁷ As Bernstein puts the matter, “The Nazi Dream, driven by arrogance, ignorance, and fear, seethes in all corners of the United States. But no one has ever come so close or fallen so far as Fritz Kuhn in the inglorious pursuit of an American Swastika Nation.”³⁸ It was out of the troubled endings that the Bund found their beginning. Fritz Kuhn was an intelligent man that understood the importance of not falling into the same traps the predecessors to the Bund had.

Throughout the United States, a number of watchdog councils and groups were established to monitor certain movements within America. One of these councils was The American Council on Public Affairs, which was “dedicated to the belief that the extensive diffusion of information is a profound responsibility of American democracy, the ACPA is designed to promote the spread of authoritative facts and significant opinions concerning

³⁶ Bell, Leland V. “The Failure of Nazism in America: The German American Bund, 1936-1941.” *Political Science Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (1970): 585.

³⁷ Bell, *The Failure of Nazism in America*, 586.

³⁸ Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, 302.

contemporary social and economic problems.”³⁹ In May of 1941, this group published a report on the GAB and sited “In the U.S. the first German society with Nazi sympathies was...called Teutonia...Teutonia’s importance lies in the fact that its ranks included many men who later became the leaders of the Friends of New Germany.”⁴⁰ Here the ACPA understood that the roots of American Nazism was one that traced back to the 1920s, and included Nazi party officials. Such a history increased the fear factor for many, specifically of the fiery leader of the Bund.

Section II: The Response of Government

While the 1920s and 30s America saw the rise of support for extremist alternatives to the prevailing political and economic order, the US federal government was not Weimer, and was not Moscow. As groups like the German American Bund saw a rise in popular attention, they saw a parallel rise in attention from the government. While the Great Depression sent the entire nation into a catastrophic state of instability and despair, the democratic system forced FDR to work within boundaries. One of the restraints in which President Roosevelt, and democracy, had to work under was that “[the government was] ...Unable to solve the riddle of unemployment, the United States writhed under the taunts of dictators who claimed they had provided both guns and butter.”⁴¹ And while “Fascism had little appeal for most Americans... the shadow of depression lengthened, [and] as the streets of Vienna and Prague echoed to the marching boots of fascism triumphant, it was not always possible to overcome the cold fear that democracy might

³⁹ Strong, Donald. *Organized Anti-Semitism In America, The Rise of Group Prejudice During the Decade 1930-40*. Second Edition. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 21.

⁴¹ Leuchtenburg, William. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1963. 275

fail, that fascism might hold the key to the future.”⁴² With the stock market losing nearly 90% of their value over four years, with unemployment hovering around 25%, the economic stagnation and grueling disparity of the demand-economy system left belief in the democratic government in shambles.

The United States was still painstakingly dealing with the Great Depression, American unemployment stagnating at 14%, while the Fascist and authoritarian governments in Europe and Russia had demonstrated their capability of bringing economic and social stability to their countries.⁴³ Alan Brinkley, a former professor of history at Harvard and, author of *Huey Long, Father Coughlin & The Great Depression*, accurately summed up what he refers to as the “American social edifice” when he said “Conditions were better early in 1935 than they had been two years before, when, with banks failing and relief efforts collapsing... only a desperate infusion of federal funds had prevented thousands from starving. But conditions were not good.”⁴⁴ With discontent and unstable market conditions instilling fear within the United States, alternative forms of government provided an ostensibly reasonable alternative. Groups like the German American Bund provided many Americans who were detached from the American system the capability to express their frustration and curiosity of extreme political ideologies; frustration and curiosity that over time grew into a large concern for many Americans.

Out of these ashes the premonitions of fascism were apparent to the country and were exacerbated through demagogues like Father Coughlin, Huey Long, and Fritz Kuhn. Father

⁴² Leuchtenburg, William. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1963. 275

⁴³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to the 1970, Part I*, Series D 85-86 Unemployment: 1890-1970, 135.

⁴⁴ Alan, Brinkley. *Huey Long, Father Coughlin & The Great Depression*. 1st Vintage Books Edition. New York: Vintage Books, 1982. Pg. 3.

Coughlin was one of the first to utilize radio to propagate his message to millions on his pro-fascist and anti-Semitic views; conjoined with Huey Long who was a bombastic American politician who joined with Father Coughlin in an opposition presidential bid in 1936. These men had demonstrated that their extremist, hate-filled, views found some level of refuge in a large enough number of Americans. As historian Alan Brinkley argues, “To their supporters...[they] offered a message of real meaning... they provided an affirmation of threatened values and institutions, and a vision... were those values and institutions could thrive.”⁴⁵ These demagogues worked to create obstacles to their visions in which they could in turn create scapegoats, often the political leaders of the country.⁴⁶ By playing upon fears and existing beliefs that were exacerbated by the economic conditions in the U.S. coupled with the geopolitics of Europe, these groups of people, like Father Coughlin and the Bund, were able to sell their messages to large groups of people.

While many of FDR’s progressive pieces of legislation were working their way into American life, extremist groups like the German American Bund, used these actions as fuel to fire up their base. President Roosevelt, pushing through fifteen pieces of major legislation within his first 100 days in office, a part of his New Deal, was attempting to mitigate the dissident thread, and plug the gashes in the hull of America’s economic system. FDR was often made the scapegoat of these far-right, and even far-left groups, many of the fascist groups, including the Bund, often referred to the New Deal as his “Jew-Deal,” playing upon the anti-Semitic threads made against the Roosevelt administration. “...many Americans, especially conservatives, while in no way accepting the fascist creed, concurred on this one point: that the real peril to the

⁴⁵ Brinkley, Alan. *Huey Long, Father Coughlin & The Great Depression*. 1st Vintage Books Edition. New York: Vintage Books, 1982. 143.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

country lay not without but within, not in the augmented power of the Axis but in Roosevelt's consular ambitions."⁴⁷ The packing-the-court ambitions in the late 1930s coincided with the rise of the German American Bund, and the creation of specific congressional hearings to investigate the dissident threads.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities, commonly referred to as the Dies Committee, was established originally to investigate the international bankers in May of 1938, but then pivoted to drumming the dangers of the communist and fascist threat. During the late 1930s, the Dies Committee represented the larger conviction that the depression was not an evolution of natural events, but rather a resultant of "conspiratorial elements whose suppression would quickly restore the nation to "a normal condition."⁴⁸ The committee largely ignored Nazi's in the beginning of hearings in 1938, despite the influence of the anti-fascist congressmen who championed the committee's creation.⁴⁹ The Dies committee would continue to champion the anti-communist threat for the next three years, which inflamed fears of communist and fascist grips within American culture. During a committee hearing, Congressman Charles Eaton said, "You talk about dictatorship...Why, Mr. Chairman, it is here now. The advance guard of totalitarianism has enthroned itself in the Government in Washington..."⁵⁰ Here, it is made explicit the charge that the actions Roosevelt was taking were conjoined with the perceived existential threat of alternative forms of government. And rather than fearing the rise of Hitler in Europe, Americans needed to be worried about the totalitarianism-like actions of the Roosevelt Administration. This group, lead by Chairman Dies, would spearhead the federal government

⁴⁷ Leuchtenburg, 277.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Congressional Record*, 75th Cong., 3d Sess., p. 4641.

investigation into the German American Bund, and would collaborate evidence with New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, where Fritz Kuhn would eventually be tried. The Dies committee was instrumental in shaping the trajectory of the style of investigation that these extremist groups would receive. In many ways a precursor to the McCarthy era, the Dies Committee would often bring unsubstantiated claims, and caricatures of people with little to no physical evidence to support their claims. However, once these often-false accusations were made, the implications would follow on a guilty until proven innocent basis. It was under this footing that the Bund was investigated.

The Government's response to both the fascist threat and communist threat was often a give-and-take between Roosevelt, who understood the likelihood of Europe's path becoming intertwined with America's, and the isolationist-oriented Congress and public. Such a tension put groups like the German American Bund in a peculiar position. At the first public meeting of the Bund, Fritz Kuhn shunned the press from being allowed to join inside, which further stoked fears among people, but did come outside to make a statement in which he positioned the Bund as an anti-Communist group, aligning their group publicly against the more sinister public enemy. Kuhn, being a demagogue himself; a charismatic person, well-educated, organizationally gifted, allowed for Kuhn to stoke the pre-existing fears of the American public.

The Bureau of Investigation, later the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), began to dramatically increase its activities as an instrument of political warfare following World War One.⁵¹ Stemming from the last several weeks of the First World War, intelligence agencies charged with protecting the United States during the war all began exhaustive hunts for the

⁵¹ Weiner, Tim. *Enemies: A History of the FBI*. 1st ed.. New York: Random House, 2012.

communists embedded within American culture, which continued long after the guns fell silent in Europe. Beginning with the publication of secret dossiers allegedly showing connection of Germany planting paid agents in the top leadership of the Russian Revolution, documents that were later proven false, Congress joined the fight against the Red Threat.⁵² The U.S. Senate began hearings over the communist threat in January of 1919, which coincided with the millions of soldiers returning from the war, jobless. The growing frustrations of not having jobs created friction between employees and employers in which both parties blamed the communists for their issues, further stoking the flame.⁵³ This caused the Attorney General on August 1st, 1919 to assign J. Edgar Hoover, a rising agent within the Bureau, to eliminate the Red Threat from the United States.⁵⁴ Hoover would take this assignment, and throughout the 1920s would walk a fine line of political maneuvering, and use of his iron clad will to make the Bureau of Investigation the most formidable weapon against political dissidence.

Beginning with the appointment of Homer S. Cummings to be Attorney General in 1933 the Bureau of Investigation saw a dramatic rise as a legitimate law enforcement organization capable of handling the multitude of issues plaguing the United States.⁵⁵ Cummings equipped the Bureau with guns, ability to execute warrants, make arrests, and truly established them as a Federal law enforcement establishment that went on to take down gangsters like John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, all “in the hope that Hoover’s men would enforce the law where corrupt city police and tinhorn county sheriffs failed.”⁵⁶ Cummings worked to utilize Hollywood to glamorize Hoover, and moved to make Hoover the face of the war on crime with movies like *G-*

⁵² Weiner, *Enemies*, 17.

⁵³ Weiner, *Enemies*, 17-18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 69.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

Men. Conjoined with the rise in power of Hoover and his newly named Federal Bureau of Investigation, a new war was brewing on the international stage stemming from the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany. This issue was spotted early on by FDR and he was prepared to call upon the dutiful J. Edgar Hoover to fight the new threat with the powerful FBI.

The FBI's fight against American Fascism began on May 8th, 1934 strictly as an intelligence gathering operation.⁵⁷ FDR wanted information, not prosecutions. While Hitler quickly presented a direct threat to Europe, FDR and Hoover were weary of the "...subvert and sabotage..." Germany had attempted during WWI and wanted to ensure that could not happen again.⁵⁸ Hoover was careful in the approach he took towards Fascism in America and through 1934-1936 the FBI carefully collected newspaper clippings and monitored public rallies.⁵⁹ However, in 1936, seeing the rise of the Communist Party in America, Hoover requested to see FDR in a private meeting.⁶⁰ During this meeting, FDR granted Hoover, through a loophole in a 1916 statute under the State Department, to conduct secret intelligence operations. "The FBI set out to investigate every member of the Communist Party and its affiliates, along with the leaders of American fascist and antifascist movements."⁶¹ Out of this vigorous investigation, Hoover utilized a very broad definition of "subversive activities" that aligned the paths of the German American Bund with the FBI.

With the FBI ramping up their intelligence efforts against communist, and fascist groups, the German American Bund increasingly came under scrutiny as Hitler's war machine began to

⁵⁷ Weiner, 73.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 74.

⁶¹ Ibid, 75.

churn. With the move of Hitler's Germany towards a war setting by moving into Austria in March of 1938, critics of the Bund, and what it stood for, became increasingly harsh and a renewed concern arose within the United States. Within the State of New York, the McNaboe Committee, a committee established to investigate communist activities but found itself analyzing the Bund, released its' report about the Bund and came to the conclusion that "...Kuhn's leadership of the Bund was the engine that sustained the Bund's efforts. He was the unifying force that allowed the Bund to maintain...success it had achieved during the 1937-1938 period."⁶² Further, the McNaboe committee went so far as to state that, "The committee in its work has, for a number of reasons, dealt almost exclusively with the German-American Bund, chiefly because it is the outstanding organization of its type...has reached a higher stage of development...than the other Fascist organizations."⁶³ Clearly the New York legislature understood the severity and influence that the Bund possessed if nothing were done to tamper its influence.

The growing fear within American society of Nazism was stemming from the increasingly anti-Semitic actions of Germany. With the move of Hitler's troops in Austria, followed soon in October of movements into Czechoslovakia, the concern of the Nazi threat within the United States was viewed through the Bund.⁶⁴ When the Nazi government sanctioned the destruction of Jewish synagogues and businesses in Germany, the hysteria continued to grow within the United States and the Dies Committee's mandate to investigate the Nazi threat

⁶² New York. Report of the Joint Legislative Committee To Investigate the Administration and Enforcement of the Law (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1939) 283.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Bell, *The Failure of Nazism*, 589.

heightened.⁶⁵ Kuhn's actions of proclaiming direct support from Hitler held members of the Bund within his sway but did little to stem any fear towards Kuhn's activities.⁶⁶ Overall, the growing concern within the United States was that the "Europe Problem" was festering within the shores of America, and that groups like the Bund represented a nefarious ideology that was gaining support too quickly.

This growing fear of the Bund capitulated itself with the Madison Square Garden event in February of 1939. With the renewed commitment of the Dies committee to investigate the Bund, many members were being questioned about their loyalty to the United States. If they claimed their true loyalty was to Germany and not the United States, then they could be charged with treason.⁶⁷ This caused members of the Bund to begin emigrating back to Germany as fear within the Bund grew concerning the Dies committee.⁶⁸ Despite that seventy-four percent of the American public supported the Dies Committee, it acquired condemnation for the lack of evidence used to support the claims being made in the hearings.⁶⁹ While the Dies Committee was taking a toll on the Bund, the group projected a powerful image when it held the Madison Square Garden rally in February of 1939, with nearly 22,000 people attending the event. Ironically, following such a massive event in which seemingly suggested that the Bund was a powerful organization, Fritz Kuhn would be indicted on charges of embezzlement only three months later signaling the end of the Bund.

⁶⁵ Kopp, Eliot A. "Fritz Kuhn, 'The American Fuehrer' and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund." M.A., Florida Atlantic University, 2010. 89.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Remak, *Friends of New Germany*, 40.

⁶⁸ Kopp, 90.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

As Fritz Kuhn built the German American Bund into the most successful American Nazi organization, the leader of the Bund was both the strength and the weakness. February 20th, 1939 was the infamous Madison Square garden rally, and on May 25th, 1939 Fritz Kuhn was indicted for allegedly stealing over \$14,000 of the Bund's money.⁷⁰ These charges came about from an idea by New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia who professed strong anti-Nazi sentiments.⁷¹ He saw the media buzz that was created following the event in Madison Square Garden and he correctly assumed that taking Kuhn down would also mean taking the Bund down. Mayor La Guardia utilized the previous investigative intelligence gathered from the FBI New York field office to establish a new "Special Tax Emergency Investigation" Unit that raided Bund headquarters and found erroneous financial records.⁷² The New York District Attorney utilized these files to press the charges of embezzlement of over \$14,000 of Bund money but ultimately this number would drop to a meek \$1,000 because they could not prove that he stole the remaining \$13,000.⁷³ Kuhn was found guilty of embezzling the money and would sit in prison until 1943. Interestingly however, some of the Bund members adhering to their American-Furher principle, proclaimed that Kuhn had the right to "throw money down the sewer" if he pleased and that they did not want any charges pressed.⁷⁴ Within the German American Bund some saw Kuhn as damaged goods and was now doing more harm than good to their cause and moved quickly to secure leadership away from Kuhn.⁷⁵ With Kuhn behind bars the Bund quickly began

⁷⁰ "Kuhn Found Guilty on All Five Counts; He Faces 30 Years." *The New York Times*, November 30, 1939.

⁷¹ Kopp, 93.

⁷² Kopp, 94.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Kuhn Found Guilty on All Five Counts; He Faces 30 Years." *The New York Times*, November 30, 1939.

⁷⁵ Diamond, 340.

to fall into disorganization as the new leader, Gerhard Kunze, failed to consolidate the same adherence to the Furher principle that Kuhn had. The decline of the Bund displayed the conception that Kuhn was the Bund and that without Kuhn at the helm the Bund would not have been as successful of a Nazi organization within America.

Conclusion:

America during the 1920s and 30s was a country that experienced the extremes of prosperity, and the extremes of poverty. Through these turbulent years, exploration of people's values, beliefs and needs fluctuated as much as the economy. Many increasingly lost faith in the democratic process, and created the conditions for groups like the Bund to look appealing. Looking for groups, and faith in a process recently emigrated Germans found that comfort in the German American Bund. Culturally the Bund was a safe haven, and while ideology played a small factor in membership, the larger attraction was the safe haven for German Americans to escape to. And while America undergoing dramatic social change, the stitches of peace used to suture the violence of The Great War were rapidly coming undone. Europe and the rest of the world was apathetic to the rise of the Third Reich and with it the inevitable calamity of the Second World War. While isolationism was the name of the game for America, political leaders like FDR had the foresight to recognize the threat that the ideology of Nazism presented to the West and cautiously began to steer the American people towards the reality of war. While it may be hard for us today to understand the fear surrounding a group whose membership probably never surpassed 10,000 people, the parallels between Hitler's Germany and Kuhn's America was all-too-real for Americans at the time. Thus, it was through this foggy political climate that the German American Bund was able to grow. It would not have grown as successfully, however, if

it were not for the American Fuhrer, Fritz Kuhn. A man of intelligence and charisma, and with a determination to replicate the success of the Third Reich in America, Fritz Kuhn was the engine of success, but also the engine of destruction. Fritz Kuhn took the nucleus that was American fascination with Nazism and made aggressive moves much like Hitler to seize prominence. It was out of this growth that the group received serious attention from the federal and state governments.

Ultimately, the German American Bund would not escape the grasp of the justice system and the agency of their success, Fritz Kuhn, took the brunt of it. Serving several years in prison for embezzling funds, he had his citizenship stripped, and was deported to Germany in 1945, where he was in and out of prison until his death in 1951. As the New York Times obituary stated, he died a “a poor and obscure chemist, unheralded and unsung.”⁷⁶ Kuhn died in obscurity, and disgraced, and with the Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, so did the German American Bund. Throughout the war, extremist groups fell silent and it was not until late in the 1940s that these groups began to expose themselves once more, leading to the McCarthy era. The history of Nazism within America is long, and nuanced. Stretching first to the Society of Teutonia, the tenants of National Socialism still fester in the minds of many. Just recently in Charlottesville, and professors’ offices at universities, Anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi sentiments are alive. The Nazi ideology is one based on rudimentary principles that somehow a specific race is superior genetically to another, and when politicized this racist idea is weaponized to explain the cause of certain societal issues. It is an ideology that will not easily go away and is a history that is still being written today.

⁷⁶ “Fritz Kuhn Death In 1951 Revealed; Lawyer Says Former Leader of German-American Bund Succumbed in Munich.” *The New York Times*, February 2, 1953, sec. Archives.

This journey of research was a long and bumpy road. Looking back there are many avenues I wish I had the time to explore. The FBI files used to put Fritz Kuhn behind bars are over 10,000 pages in length and would be a task that would take several weeks of complete dedication to work through, I did my best to take the most important aspects out that I could, but there is still work to be done there. Secondly, the language barrier has hampered my ability to drive to a central question I wanted to answer which was: why the average German American joined the Bund. The answer I have given is based on the extrapolation from varying sources, but a large portion of the Bund's files are in German. Overall, the work presented before you was never the intention, but rather a reflection of a long journey, and one in which I will look fondly upon for many years to come.

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